

Fort Johnson, Powder Magazine
James Island, Charleston Harbor
Charleston Vicinity
Charleston County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-387

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FORT JOHNSON - POWDER MAGAZINE

HABS No. SC-387

LOCATION: James Island in Charleston Harbor, three miles southeast of Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina.

PRESENT OWNER: College of Charleston

PRESENT USE: None

SIGNIFICANCE: The structure is possibly of Pre-Revolutionary War Construction and was used during the Civil War. The "magazine" is the oldest surviving building at the site of Fort Johnson, and is designated as a National Historic Landmark Site.

PART I - HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Some uncertainty still exists as to the period of origin and the function of this structure. No rectangular structure such as this is shown on the Moultrie Fort map of 1800. However, there is the possibility that the building may have been a prison or a magazine shown on that map, structures that stood about twenty feet apart. However, the structure may have been built after the 1800 map was made. It became known as a "powder magazine" during such use in the Civil War. The narrow slits for ventilation and the single window might indicate that it served as a magazine, but it could have served equally as well as a jail. Further archeology at this site should determine conclusively the origin and function of this building.
2. Alterations: The interior has had a thick lining of brick added to strengthen and thicken the walls. During the Civil War the building was buried beneath a sand embankment to further protect the powder stores, the additional interior brick courses may have been added at this time for wall strength. The buttresses on the exterior were added at a later time after the original building was built, apparently to further strengthen the walls against the sand embankment.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure

1. Fort Johnson was the first defensive work constructed to protect the harbor of Charleston against naval attack. The initial structure was built by the British from 1704 to 1708 to guard against the French fleet during the Queen Anne War. It was named for Sir Nathaniel Johnson, Proprietary Governor of the Carolinas (1703-1709).

From 1704 through 1865 the fort was alternately destroyed or damaged by storms and rebuilt and enlarged as new military conditions arose.

In 1765, Fort Johnson became the object of the colonists' displeasure with the British Stamp Act of the same year. A cargo of the stamped paper was stored in Fort Johnson under guard of the British Garrison.

In 1775 Colonel William Moultrie, was ordered to attack Fort Johnson by the Council of Safety. Moultrie took the fort and raised the South Carolina flag for the first time.

Subsequent to this event, Fort Johnson was manned but played no major role during the Revolutionary War. Nor was it of significance during the years up to the Civil War.

In 1861, with the attack on Fort Sumter imminent, a mortar battery was located at Fort Johnson and at four o'clock on the morning of April 12, a shell from the mortar exploded over Fort Sumter, signaling the beginning of the Civil War. Fort Johnson did not come under fire during the remainder of the War. It was evacuated February 17, 1865, and the works have been allowed to deteriorate.

C. Sources of Information

1. Moultrie Fort Map, 1800.
2. Proposal for Archeological and Historic Research by the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S. C.
3. From information compiled by the History Section of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

PART II - ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Description of Exterior

1. This rectangular building approximately 27 ft. x 19 ft. is constructed of brick in various English bond styles and the brick roof is capped with mortar.

2. Openings: One door, one window, and two ventilation slits.
The window and door are arched with radiating voussoirs.

B. Description of Interior:

1. One room with a semi-circular ceiling.

Edited by:
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