

MARITIME MUSEUM EAST INDIA COMPANY MUSEUM



Musée national
de la Marine

Port-Louis
Citadelle



THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CITADEL

Perched on a rocky peak at the entrance of Lorient's harbour, the citadel of Port-Louis is an imposing building which has been marked by Brittany's varied history, especially during the 16th and 17th. When the Duke of Mercoeur (then Governor of Brittany) realised after the murder of Henri de Guise that the French throne would come under the succession of the protestant Henri of Navarre, he threw himself wholeheartedly into a revolt against this "impostor".

Thus representing the Breton League, the Duke of Mercoeur called upon Philippe II of Spain to help him. In 1590, 3000 Spaniards arrived at Port-Louis, then known as the "Blavet". Don Juan del Aguila became the new Governor of Port-Louis, and began the construction of the fortifications. This new citadel, called "Fuerta del Aguila" was completed in 1591 under the direction of Cristobal de Rojas, (engineer of the Cadix fortifications), who simultaneously directed the construction of the fortress at Roscanvel, near Brest.

At the end of the Spanish occupation in 1598, the Breton States and the Marshal of Brissac ordered the total demolition of the citadel. However, two bastions, a curtain wall, the bridge support, two guardrooms, the barracks and the chapel were conserved. From 1610 onwards, bearing in mind its strategic position, Louis XIII decided in 1616 to resume works, which were entrusted to the architect Jacques Corbineau, who had designed the castle at Brissac.

The realisation of the half-moon, and the establishment of a plan of action in the event of a siege, were not realised until 1641 (despite prior demand), when Cardinal Richelieu ordered the completion of the works under Nicolas Gilles, and also ordered the construction of the bastion and the Saint-Nicolas postern near the edge of the town.

Fourty years later in 1683 on a visit to Port-Louis, Vauban criticised several aspects of the citadel, especially the bastions. However, in spite of its defects, the great engineer judged that "the position of the citadel is so good that nothing may prevent one from considering Port-Louis as an excellent fortified town.

The citadel is in the shape of a rectangle, fortified on the angles and the sides. The part facing the town is protected by a half moon, which could only be crossed by a small fixed stone bridge, rebuilt in 1779.

THE HALF MOON :

The work of Cardinal Richelieu, the half moon was constructed by the engineer Destouches in 1636. It forms a large triangle, surrounded by water, and commands the access to the fortified town.

THE MAIN BRIDGE :

Originally built in wood, it is now composed of a drawbridge and a fixed stone bridge set upon three granite arches. Designed by Henri de Palys in 1792, it crosses a 46 meter wide moat, dug by the Spanish in 1591.

THE KEEP :

The keep may be found at the extremity of the main bridge, and was built by the Spanish engineer Cristobal de Rojas in 1591. The central part of the Royal Entrance, decorated with a triangular pediment wall topped with canons, flags and coats of arms surrounding the opening, was rebuilt in Saint-Savinien stone in 1793. The "Maison Mazarine" coat of arms was destroyed in 1790. A guardroom and a prison were built on the first floor of this building.

THE COMMANDING OFFICERS QUARTERS AND THE SAINT LOUIS CHAPEL :

On the left, past the keep and the vault, one may see the old quarters of the Commanding Officer, which was home for the Major in charge of the fortifications and the king's lieutenants. Transformed several times since the Spanish occupation, it was here that the Duke of Marzarin received Madame de Sévigné during her visit to Lorient in 1689. At the far right side of the building stood the chapel dedicated to Saint-Louis, topped by a small dome, although nothing remains of this today. The prince Napoléon Bonaparte, captured in Strasbourg, was imprisoned here in November 1836, before being sent to America.

THE LOURMEL COURTYARD AND THE BARRACKS :

The army barracks are situated around a square parade ground, which became known as the Lourmel Courtyard during the second empire in memory of the General Lourmel, who was killed in 1854 in Sebastopol. The southern part of the barracks was constructed under the rule of Louis XIII, the northern part being completed under Anne of Austria. They usually housed three infantry companies. The Chouans captured at Quiberon in 1795 were imprisoned here. Under the courtyard, two large water tanks were dug-out in 1675. The buildings today house the Naval Museum and the East India Company Museum of Lorient.

THE POWDER ROOM AND THE CANNONBALL DEPOT :

At the bottom of the ramparts near the sea, one can spot the arsenal, which may be reached via two lateral walkways along the ramparts, or by a staircase which leads to the parade ground (built in 1761). The powder room was built in the axe of the large stronghold. The entrance to this building is surrounded by a broken archway. A high wall protects the powder room, which housed gun powder for the land army as well for the navy. Situated on the right of the powder room stands the cannonball depot, on the place of the former military hospital. The large doors at the axe of the Camus stronghold mark the entrance to the warehouses (one of which contains a magnificent bread oven), built in 1662 and later restored in Saint-Savinien stone in 1704.

THE WING OF THE ARSENAL :

This large building was constructed alongside the ramparts in the 18th. It was used as an arms warehouse for the infantry companies installed in the citadel during the old regime. Today it houses a part of the Naval Museum.

THE DESMOURIER AND THE GROIX STRONGHOLDS :

Built in 1591 by Cristobel de Rojas, these two strongholds situated towards the town, are a reminder of the Spanish presence in Port-Louis. Originally named the Cossé stronghold in honour of the Duke of Brissac, it took on the name Desmourier after Pierre Desmourier, a royal solicitor at Port-Louis whose property could be seen from here. The other stronghold is named after the island of Groix, which may be seen from the ramparts.

THE BRECHE AND THE CHAMBER STRONGHOLDS :

Built in 1616, the stronghold is named after the breach which was formed by the cannons of "La Vierge", which the Duke of Soubise took possession of during the siege of Port-Louis in 1625. The Chamber stronghold owes its name to the proximity of the barracks, which were built at the bottom of the ramparts, and is built in the form of an ace on a plane symmetrical to the Breche stronghold.

THE CAMUS AND THE MAIN STRONGHOLDS :

These strongholds, built above the warehouses do not possess watchtowers. The following stronghold, called "the irregular" still boasts a sentry-box, whose cui-de-lampe dates from 1744.

*This document was compiled using information found in the works of
Henri-François Buffet on Port-Louis and its citadel,
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