

Fort Monroe remembers Simon Bernard

By

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Fort Monroe was designed by General Simon Bernard, a brilliant French engineer and a former aide-de-camp to Napoleon. Bernard was born in Dole, France on April 22, 1779 and at a very young age was recognized for his intelligence and aptitude for the physical sciences. He attended college in Dole and went to Paris to continue his studies at Ecole Polytechnique, which



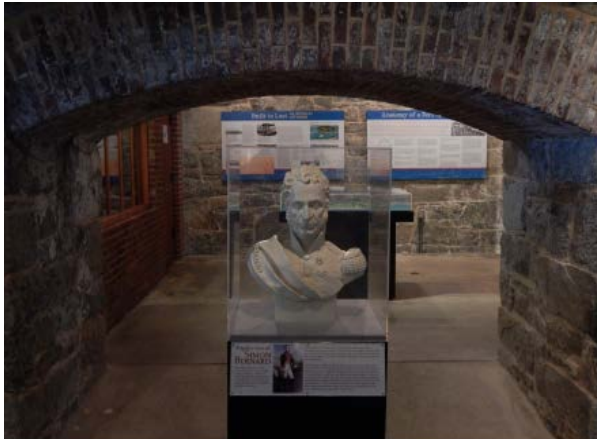
Portrait of Simon Bernard
Casemate Museum

remains as one of the most prestigious science and engineering schools in France. Bernard graduated second in his class and entered the Engineer Corps of the French Army in 1797. He was immediately engaged in military conflict as France was at war for much of the early 19th century. He was wounded several times including at the Battle of Manheim, the Battle of Montebello and during passage of the River Mincio in December 1800. His bravery under fire was recognized by Napoleon himself. Bernard's early engineering accomplishments would include the design of the fortifications of Antwerp, Belgium in 1809 and the distinction of becoming Napoleon's aide-de-camp in 1813. Remaining loyal to Napoleon until the end, the 36-year-old Bernard was with the Emperor at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Following Napoleon's abdication, Bernard was banished from public life in France, but was soon to find lasting fame in America.

Across the Atlantic Ocean in the United States, the War of 1812 had exposed America's lack of coastal defenses indisputably when the British fleet sailed past Old Point Comfort and up the Chesapeake Bay unopposed and burned Washington, DC. President James Madison desired an experienced military engineer to lead the fortifications project that would protect America's shores from future enemy attack. Madison looked to France, America's ally from the Revolutionary War and home to many experienced military engineers. The Marquis de Lafayette wrote to President Madison and recommended that he employ Bernard to oversee the construction and design of coastal defenses in the United States. Thus, Bernard's career as an Army engineer was resurrected in 1816. He arrived in America and was designated brevet brigadier general in the Army and placed at the head of a Board of Engineers charged with the construction of coastal defenses, forts, roads and canals. Madison's appointment of Bernard was not without controversy. The officers of the Engineer Board were not pleased that an American had not been chosen and one high-ranking officer resigned in protest. Fort Monroe was designed by Bernard and to this day, has the distinction as being the largest stone fort in North America. The road that circles the interior of the Fort was named Bernard Road in his honor. He went on to design many other American forts including Adams, Macon and Morgan. Additionally, he oversaw much of the design of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal and the Delaware breakwater. Fort Monroe however, was Bernard's true masterpiece and it has often been called "the Gibraltar of the Chesapeake Bay."

Bernard would return to France in 1831 and resume his service in the French army. Napoleon was dead and the monarchy had been restored. Serving as aide-de-camp to King Louis Philippe, and twice as the Minister of War, Bernard was designated a Peer of France in 1834, a title only held by the greatest, highest-ranking members of the French nobility. Having begun his life in a humble household, Simon Bernard died on November 5, 1839 at the age of 60 in a palace in France. Bernard's funeral was impressive and included eloquent speeches from his comrades and other high officials within the French aristocracy. When the news of Bernard's death reached the United States, President Martin Van Buren directed the officers of the army to wear military mourning for 30 days.

Fort Monroe at Old Point Comfort remains, almost 200 years later, a monument to Simon Bernard's greatness as a military engineer and friend of America. The stone Fort also stands as a testament to enduring freedom, sacrifice and prosperity of American democracy. Successful in its mission to protect the Chesapeake Bay from foreign naval attack, Fort Monroe would also protect those seeking refuge from the bondage of slavery during the American Civil War, becoming a significant place in the story of the African American struggle for freedom in our nation. On November 5, 2014, the 175th anniversary of Simon Bernard's death let us honor his legacy and again recognize Fort Monroe as a place *Where Freedom Lives*.



A bust of Simon Bernard donated to the Casemate Museum in 1959 by the citizens of Dole, France