

The Engineers at Camp Parapet

The summer of 1861 found New Orleans defended from an attack and invasion by a Federal navy from the Gulf of Mexico and lower Mississippi River by the massive fortifications of Forts Jackson and St Phillip, fifty miles below the city. With this approach considered safe from a Yankee assault, the citizens of New Orleans turned their eyes to what they believed the most likely direction of an attack.... by United States gunboats coming down the Mississippi River from St Louis and beyond.

To protect New Orleans, the city's Committee of defense determined to construct fortifications upriver from New Orleans. The proposed site was adjacent to Carrollton, Louisiana, which was at that time the seat of government for Jefferson Parish. Entrusted with the responsibility for designing the fortifications was Benjamin Buisson.

Pierre Benjamin Buisson was born May 20, 1793 in Paris, France. His father Claude Buisson was a soldier in the French Army. He graduated from the L'Ecole Polytechnique military academy of Paris in 1813, received further education at the fortress of Metz, and served in the Sixth Artillery of Napoleon's Grande Armee. For his services in the emperor's army, he was awarded the Legion of Honor in 1815.

Buisson immigrated to New Orleans in 1817, and soon became prominent as a civil engineer and architect, laying out Lafayette Cemetery and many of the streets in New Orleans as well as a new Customs House for the city. From 1832 until 1855, he served as principal surveyor for Jefferson Parish. He also joined the Orleans Battalion of Artillery in 1824, and eventually rose to the commanding rank of Major.

When Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon, became Emperor of France, Buisson was awarded the medal of the Order of Saint Helena in recognition for his service to the great Napoleon. Many street names in New Orleans bear Buisson's choices: Napoleon Avenue, Cadiz, Marengo, Jena, Milan, Austerlitz, Cambonne, Ney, Murat and Elba streets.

When Louisiana seceded from the United States in January of 1861, New Orleans selected the former artillery officer to construct the defensive line. Buisson's original line was relocated slightly upriver to meet the concerns of Carrollton residents. The work on this repositioned line commenced on August 22, 1861, under the overall supervision of Major Martin Luther Smith.

On February 17, 1862, Buisson was commissioned a brigadier general in the Louisiana State Militia and assigned to lead the First Brigade of the First Division of the Louisiana state militia. Buisson's brigade was assigned the defense of the Chalmette line downriver from New Orleans. When the brigade expended all of its ammunition in trying to stop the advance of Farragut's fleet up the Mississippi River, the militia was ordered by Buisson to disperse.

General Buisson retired to his home in New Orleans, where he died at eight-one years of age on May 31, 1874. Buisson is buried in St Louis Cemetery Number 2.

Martin Luther Smith was born in Danby, New York, on September 9, 1819. In 1838 Smith entered West Point and in 1842 graduated 16th in his class of fifty-six, and was commissioned a second lieutenant with the Army Topographical Engineers. Smith served under General Winfield Scott during the Mexican War and was brevetted a first lieutenant. After the war, he served as chief engineer of the Fernandina & Cedar Keys Railroad in Florida. Although northern by birth, his wife was from Athens, Georgia, and on April 1, 1861, he resigned his commission as captain in the United States army and was appointed a major of engineers in the army of the Confederate States of America.

Smith was assigned as chief engineer to General David Twiggs, the then commanding officer in New Orleans. It fell to Smith to oversee the construction of the inner defenses for the city of New Orleans, including the Carrollton and Chalmette lines on the east bank of the Mississippi River, and the Baratavia and McGehee lines on the west bank of the river. The Carrollton defenses were given the name “the Victor Smith Line”, in honor of Major Smith’s young son, who was staying with Major Smith and his wife in New Orleans.

Smith was commissioned a brigadier general on April 11, 1862, and during the attack of Farragut’s fleet below New Orleans, he directed the Confederate troops on the west bank. With the fall of New Orleans, Smith was assigned to the defenses of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and his engineering skills prevented the capture of that city from the many assaults of the Union Army under Ulysses Grant in 1862 and 1863. Smith received the rank of Major General on November 4, 1862.

When Vicksburg was finally starved into surrender on July 4, 1863, Smith became a prisoner of war, and was not exchanged until early 1864. He then served as Chief Engineer for Robert E Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and then later holding the same position with the Army of Tennessee. He was then assigned to prepare defenses at Mobile, Alabama, and served there until the capture of the city. He returned to his wife’s home in Athens, Georgia in May 1865 to surrender to Union authorities.

Smith moved to Savannah, Georgia, where he served as chief engineer for the Selma, Rome and Dalton Railroad. Smith died at forty-six years of age on July 29, 1866, and was buried in the Oconne Hill Cemetery in Athens, Georgia.

Because Smith was responsible for the construction of all fortifications protecting the inner defenses of New Orleans, local direction of the construction was assigned to various officers under Smith’s command. In charge of constructing and completing the Carrollton /Victor Smith Line was Lieutenant Benjamin Morgan Harrod.

Benjamin Morgan Harrod was born in New Orleans on February 19, 1837. He was the son of Charles Harrod and Mary Morgan. His father served as a Lieutenant in the Louisiana Militia and was acting Assistant Quartermaster General to General Andrew Jackson's army at the Battle of New Orleans, while his maternal grandfather was a prominent businessman and banker in New Orleans when Louisiana was purchased from France in 1803. He was connected by marriage to the families of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams.

Harrod attended Harvard University, and graduated from Harvard College in 1856 and received his master-of-arts degree from Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School in 1859. Trained as an engineer and architect, young Harrod worked briefly in Galveston Texas for Major Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, rising from draftsman to assistant engineer.

Although Harrod was a strong Union man, he enlisted in 1861 as a private in Company C of the Crescent Rifles. He received a commission as a second lieutenant in the 1st Louisiana Heavy Artillery on July 5, 1861. With his skills as an engineer and his New Orleans connections, it was only natural that he came to the attention of Major Smith, who secured the services of the young officer and tasked him with the responsibility for constructing and completing the Carrollton defenses along the Victor Smith Line.

With the upriver approach of Farragut's invasion fleet, Harrod served with the heavy artillery on the west bank under the command of then General Smith. When New Orleans fell to the Union Navy, Harrod followed Smith to Vicksburg, where he assisted in the construction of the city's Mississippi river batteries that proved too strong to capture by assault. Harrod rose to the rank of captain as an aide to Smith. Taken prisoner when Vicksburg fell, Harrod spent the next fourteen months in Alabama awaiting exchange.

On October 18, 1864, when finally exchanged, Harrod was appointed captain of Company G in the Second Confederate Engineering Troops, in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Harrod remained with Lee's army until its final surrender on April 9, 1865.

Harrod returned home to New Orleans. From 1877 to 1880 he was chief engineer for the state of Louisiana. He was a member of the Louisiana River Commission from 1879 to 1904. From 1888 to 1902 he was chief engineer of the city of New Orleans and directed the city's water and sewerage construction projects. He then served as a commissioner on the Panama Canal Commission from 1904 to 1907. He was responsible for the design and construction of many of the educational buildings on the campus of Tulane University. His extensive art collection was willed to the New Orleans Museum of Art and placed in the Delgado Art Museum, of which he was the consulting engineer. Harrod was a strong supporter of the Audubon Society, and purchased and donated to the Society one of the Mississippi coastal barrier islands. He helped design Metairie Cemetery, and upon his death on September 7, 1912, was buried there.