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Florida Frontiers Radio Program #455

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Florida Historical Society

Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont Fund, and by the Historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history. Available for weddings and events at rossiterhousemuseum.org.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle, and coming up on the program, after a break last year for COVID the 45th annual Battle of the Lusty reenactment will be held February 18th through 20th at a Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park.

Mitch Morgan

My great, great grandfather died on the battlefield here. I came out here for many years. I've been here about 18 years now, and for the first ten years or so, I didn't know that.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss a series of special issues of the Florida Historical Quarterly covering 500 years of Florida history.

Connie Lester

We published 6 special issues in five years, one to cover each century of Florida's documented history.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas, all that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

The loud booming of cannon fire rips through the North Florida Pine Forest, 15 miles east of Lake City, as startled cavalry horses, winning repeated rifle fire rings through the trees as more than 10,000 soldiers confront each other. On February 20th, 1864, near Ocean Pond, the Battle of Olustee was the largest conflict of the American Civil War fought on Florida soil. Each side began with about 5000 troops, when the three-hour battle was over, nearly 3000 soldiers were dead, 2/3 of them from the Union forces. Three new U.S. colored troop regiments bravely fought as Union soldiers at the Battle of Olustee, some even before they had an opportunity to complete their training. An annual reenactment of the bloody fight is held at the Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park. Sean Adams is associate professor of history at the University of Florida.

Sean Adams

Olustee is important for a number of political reasons. It is significant because it comes at a time when the United States is attempting to swing Southern states back into the Union and there was an attempt, for example, to reconstruct Louisiana in 1863. The notion is that you're going to also then swing Florida into the Union. So, this is after also the Emancipation Proclamation had made it possible for African American soldiers to. And so, the combination of those factors, the presence of black soldiers, but also

the idea of reconstructing Florida, create the impetus for this campaign to secure Florida comes out of the east going towards the West. And it kind of, the Confederate and Union forces meet right here at Olustee. And so, the significance of this battle is that what it does is it means that Florida is not going to be one those kinds of early states to be reconstructed. And the presence of black soldiers is significant, not only in its meaning for African American citizenship, but also in the unfortunate events that occurred at the end of the battle when many wounded black soldiers were summarily executed by Confederate troops.

Ben Brotemarkle

The Union lost the Battle of Olustee but won the Civil War. Fourteen months later, Florida was the 3rd state to secede from the Union in January 1861, behind only South Carolina and Mississippi. Sean Adams.

Sean Adams

Florida was very significant to the Confederate war effort in that it supplied beef, it supplied salt. It was an area where supplies could come in. You know the United States sets up a blockade of the Confederate coast, but of course Florida has a massive coast. There's no way those Union ships are going to be able to keep all activity away from Florida. Now the one thing that's interesting and significant about Florida is that it had no rail connection with the South at the beginning of the war. And so, there's an internal struggle within Florida to set up a kind of rail connection. Railroads were in many ways the lifelines for Civil War armies. And so, without that lifeline, Florida's impact on the Confederate army could be limited. And so that's why that was in many ways so contested. And that's why control over the state was so contested because the Confederacy was trying to run a war on frankly limited resources, and Florida beef and Florida salt were really, really significant parts of that kind of logistical aspect of the war.

Ben Brotemarkle

The Olustee Battlefield Historic Site is Florida's first state park, established in 1909. Since 1977, an annual reenactment of the Battle of the Olustee has been staged here. Gary Dickinson is president of the Olustee Battlefield Citizen Support organization. The CSO is the not-for-profit group that presents the reenactment.

Gary Dickinson

Planning for this actually takes place starting right after the battle for the following year. The CSO has a reenactment committee that's made up of every aspect out here, from the medical, to the artillery, to the settlers, to the State Park service, and the U.S. Forestry Service. We are blessed that we're able to have this on this, and on actual battlefield because it's under the U.S. Forestry service. We will start the planning phase immediately after this by looking at any problems that we had. We want to make sure those are straightened out for the next year to make sure it's an enjoyable experience. Typically, we're going to plan for about 2000 reenactors to be out here. We will have this weekend 21 cannons, those are full size artillery pieces. We'll have between 50 and 75 mounted cavalry units. So, we'll start talking about our logistical plans, changes that may need to be made to the camp area, where the authentic Confederates are at, the authentic union camps are at. We also have areas for modern campers. We also have areas for civilians to come in and camp, so we'll look at that if there's any improvements that

need to be made, we'll make them for next year. We look at our settler area. We have probably the finest group of settlers with Civil War era items for sale that exist. We have national companies that come in here, so you can show up here and you can buy everything to become a private to a general or if you'd just like to be a lady at the tea or the ball, everything you need is right here.

Ben Brotemarkle

Authentic Union and Confederate camps are part of the reenactment weekend, with small groups of people in Civil War era costumes sitting around campfires among hundreds of small canvas tents. Food vendors are on hand nearby, along with informational displays and people selling Civil War memorabilia. A variety of public programs addressing various civil war topics are presented along with performances of period music.

Joel Fears is a longtime participant in the Battle of Olustee annual reenactment weekend. Fears says he had graduated from college and was nearly an old man when he first discovered that African Americans were not just slaves, but actually fought and died in the Civil War. He wants to share this information with the public. Fears is dressed as a particular African American Union soldier.

Joel Fears

I'm representing James Henry Gooding. He was one of the people who fought here. Again, they were all educated. He was also, he wrote dispatches to the New Bedford Mercury newspaper. And he also was writing the story of this battle. So, he was a writer and well educated, but he was captured here. In this battle he was wounded, he was taken to Andersonville. He was in prison there and later on died there. If you go to Andersonville, that's a historic site, you'll see a grave marker there with his name.

Ben Brotemarkle

Mitch Morgan has been participating in the Battle of Olustee reenactment for nearly two decades, portraying a Confederate soldier. He explains that reenactors have an active weekend at the Olustee event.

Mitch Morgan

Every year is a little bit different, but yet there's some similarities too. We're really pretty busy most of the time we're here, but it's what we enjoy doing. We go to colors every morning, really early around six o'clock they blow regularly. So, you don't have a lot of time for breakfast because you have to get some coffee down. If you drink coffee and get on the line really early, we go down to color. That's where we honor our ancestors, and we raise the flags of both the federal and confederate camps and listen to any announcements for the day. They remind us of what time the battle is, then generally, such as today, we come back and try to grab something quick because we go to a drill that lasts about an hour and a half. Then we got back from the drill. We have maybe another hour, an hour and a half to light it for. The battle so Saturdays are very, very busy. Sundays are a little bit better. We try to go to church on Sunday. We have a church service out here. We go to colors Sunday morning, come back, go to church and battle again on Sunday. So, it's a fairly busy weekend, but it's something that we enjoy.

Ben Brotemarkle

Participating in the annual Battle of Olustee reenactment has special meaning for Morgan.

Mitch Morgan

My great, great grandfather died on the battlefield here, and it was, I came out here many years. I've been here about 18 years now and for the first ten years or so, I didn't know that until I just did my genealogy and family history. And I've always got kind of one of those feelings here that there was something more to this than just being in Florida's biggest battle. And I'm a native Floridian, but I said something more going on. I found out through my research that my great, great grandfather died right here. He was the first unit to step on the field the day of the battle and perished, and I don't know where he's buried, possibly right where we're standing somewhere because they're buried all over the area here. So, it's really personal for me, now even more so because I have an ancestor here.

Ben Brotemarkle

While the thousands of people who participated in the annual Battle of a Olustee reenactment do so on a voluntary basis, not all of the soldiers who took part in the actual battle were so fortunate, historian Sean Adams.

Sean Adams

The Confederacy is actually the first in among the Union, the Confederacy to set up conscription. They do so pretty early. There's an initial wave of volunteerism, but then as the Confederacy runs, runs low on potential troops, they enact a draft, enact conscription, and of course the most controversial part of that draft was the idea that you could buy a substitute. Which many people considered unpatriotic, but the idea was that you could, if you got drafted, you could basically pay someone to serve in your state. And so, some historians it's a little bit contested, but some historians have argued that actually the bulk of this war, and the bulk of the armies in both the Union and the Confederacy were willing to fight that that conscription is an important, certainly important political point. But those conscripted soldiers tended to not dominate higher ranks, either the ranks of the Union, or the Confederate armies.

Ben Brotemarkle

At least one set of conflicting viewpoints survives from the American Civil War. There is still disagreement over what exactly the war was all about. The Confederate view is that the war was about states' rights versus federal rights. While the Union perspective is that the war was fought because the South wanted to maintain slavery.

Sean Adams

What many southern politicians believed secession was about was preserving the right to own slaves, which in fact is a kind of right, that's held in the states because slavery is something that is not universally, you know, legalized in the United States. It's only in those in those states that actively allow for slavery, and so it is a state right to a certain extent, but the major, major expression of that state right was the continuation of racial slavery, and so the secession commissioners are a big part of that. And we look at the speeches Charles do has written a book where he reproduces a lot of those speeches and sees what they're saying and. And as I mentioned, they're talking about a new Haiti. They're talking about an apocalyptic vision of Lincoln's abolitionists freeing the slaves and what that would mean for the South. The South was 1/3 enslaved people, and so there's a lot of anxiety. There are a lot, are a lot of kinds of probably well-earned anxiety about what any end to slavery would look like in the South. And

so, I think that's really the kind of major thrust of the civil war. It's kind of a hedge to say that I realized to say it's both and famously the immigration service, if you ask whether the Civil War is about slavery or states' rights, apparently both answers are correct. So, it's, it's tough, you know, you get asked to answer that question and you're supposed to provide a really brief answer, I would say it's complicated, but the bulk of it was really about the preservation of slavery.

Ben Brotemarkle

Event organizer Gary Dickinson says that it's important for us to remember this difficult period in our history and that the battle of a Olustee reenactment helps us to do that.

Gary Dickinson

This was a significant battle for the state of Florida. The Union was going to come in and eventually go all the way over to Tallahassee, capture the capital didn't happen. In fact, after the Battle of Olustee, they went and stayed pretty much on the coast. They didn't venture back in again. We learn from our history. We'd never want anything like this to ever happen again. But it's good to explore the history of what did happen. From battle tactics to the humanities, what happened to the citizens? What happened to the farmers and ranchers that were in the area? So, it's as much about remembrance is understanding our history and how this great country was formed. Even under conflict we see lasting relationships that have endured. Over the years, we can see that even as the veterans of this conflict actually came together with reunions after the battle to show that we had reunited as a country.

Ben Brotemarkle

The Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park is east of Lake City. The annual reenactment held there commemorates Florida's largest civil war battle, which happened on February 20th, 1864. The 2022 Battle of Olustee reenactment will be held February 18th through 20th.

(Music Break)

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle. Visit us anytime on the web at myfloridahistory.org to find great books on Florida history and culture. Watch our public television series Florida Frontiers and much more. That's myfloridahistory.org.

(Music Break)

Joining us now is Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, 2013 was the 500th anniversary of the naming of our state by Juan Ponce de Leon. Tell us about the special issues that were published during the celebration of the 500 years of documented Florida history.

Connie Lester

What was interesting, this was really a big challenge, Doctor Daniel Murphy, who at that time was assistant editor to the Quarterly, and Doctor Robert Cassanello at UCF, came up with the plan for this project. We published 6 special issues in five years, one to cover each century of Florida's documented history, with two issues for the long 19th century, one that went from 1800 to 1877 and the second

went from 1877 to 1920. What were we thinking when I think back on it, I can't imagine how we thought we could pull this off, but we did the whole project including 860 pages of text and we had dozens of authors contributing to it. Undertaking such a large project with our small staff was daunting, and when I say small staff, I mean myself, Doctor Murphy, and an intern. It was really overwhelming at times. The special issues were published in the winter issue of each year from 2013 to 2017, with the two special issues in 2016.

Ben Brotemarkle

Now, there of course was a lot of information in each of these issues, and even the covers of these special issues of the Florida Historical Quarterly were part of telling the story right.

Connie Lester

Yes, they were. So, we decided early on that the cover of each issue would be a representation of a map of Florida from that. So, in the beginning, the maps don't really draw Florida as it is, but you can get the idea it is Florida. You can see the transformation as a conceptual transformation of what Florida is in addition to the physical properties of Florida. So, by the time you're in the 19th century, we begin to see railroads crossing Florida, and the 20th century map is an image that NASA provided from space, and we presented that one in color too so that it really popped out when you picked up the Quarterly.

Ben Brotemarkle

The editor of each of these special issues wrote a historiographic essay for non-history majors. Explain what that is.

Connie Lester

Well, the simplest way to explain a historiographic essay, or historiography, is to say that it is the history of the writing of history. The editor of that issue had to be someone who was so well versed in the in the writing of history about that time as to be able to understand what was out there and to be able to explain it and to be able to help us see the way in which the writing of history changes over time. The topics that are approached the methodologies that are used in various ways history, the writing of history does change over time, and I think it's really important to have those historiographic essays because it influences the way in which future scholars will write about history. We also had people contributing to those special issues who were pointing us in the direction of what future writing about Florida history will feel like.

Ben Brotemarkle

Great, well, those are great issues to go back and read again even now.

Connie Lester

Yes, indeed. And as the editor, I owe many, many thanks to those who conceptualize and work on special issues of the Quarterly, and particularly this group of special issues. The projects are labor intensive, and they require an enormous amount of coordination to meet the deadlines. We had an absolute deadline. It had to be ready in September before the special issue came out in the winter issue of the Quarterly and I appreciate all the hard work that people did.

Ben Brotemarkle

Great as always, to talk with you. Connie, thanks.

Connie Lester

You're welcome.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie Lester is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICEHS Digital archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

(Music Break)

This is Florida Frontiers. Visitors to Key West often travel even farther South through the Dry Tortugas to see Fort Jefferson. Holly Baker is public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and Archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa. Holly discusses Fort Jefferson with a historian you may recognize.

Holly Baker

Fort Jefferson, named after President Thomas Jefferson, was the largest coastal fortress built in the 19th century. Ben DiBiase is a historian who focuses on Florida history. He recently talked to me about Fort Jefferson, located on Garden Key in the Lower Florida Keys.

Ben DiBiase

Fort Jefferson is actually the largest brick masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. It is this enormous fortress that's really just sitting in in the middle of nowhere in the Gulf of Mexico, right in the Florida Straits, between Cuba and mainland Florida, and it's about 70 miles west of Key West in a small group of islands called the Dry Tortugas. And this Fort was originally constructed and really conceived in the early 19th century shortly after Florida was acquired by the United States in 1821. The decision was made to extend really throughout the country these this system of coastal defenses and that was really in response to the War of 1812 and attacks by the British on coastal ports.

Holly Baker

Most of those tasked with building Fort Jefferson were slaves purchased through the Key West slave trade market. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Fort was still being constructed.

Ben DiBiase

And the Fort itself was actually unfinished, so it was a very, very slow process because, you know, Garden Key being kind of so far away, it was, it was like building on a on another planet. You had to bring in absolutely everything, so the Key itself had a small lighthouse that was built there in the 1820s. So, they really built the Fort, which is 6 sided, 2-tiered, brick masonry structure with these bastions at each corner, and the design was really impressive and kind of revolutionary for the time period. But even when they started construction, the technology had progressed so quickly by the time they got to the Civil War period, the rifled guns could blast right through a Fort like this. So, it was really obsolete by the time the Civil War came about in the 1860s and the Fort wasn't even finished so over the course of

that 30 some odd years, the federal government poured a ton of money into building this giant Fort, and there was a lot of opposition.

Holly Baker

As Ben DiBiasi explains during the Civil War, the federal government began using the Fort as a prison.

Ben DiBiase

The Fort really functioned as a prison, and not necessarily just for prisoners of war, Confederates, but mostly for federal prisoners. So, these were soldiers that were charged with, you know, desertion, stealing, and sometimes, you know, capital offenses, murder, and things like that. And they were sentenced to 10, 20 life terms at Fort Jefferson, which is, you know, again in the middle of nowhere. So, if you got this sentence, it must have been must have been just devastating. And on top of that, you weren't just sitting at the Fort, the Fort wasn't finished. So, what did they do? The guards had you building the Fort. So, these convicts were not only stuck down here in the middle of nowhere, but they were also working in this, you know subtropical heat, with hurricanes blowing through every year trying to finish the fortification, and it was actually during the Civil War period. That construction really ramped up because they had all of these laborers, they had free labor, they had convicts who were being shipped in daily.

Holly Baker

More than 1500 people lived and worked at Fort Jefferson during the Civil War. One of the most famous prisoners, a doctor named Samuel Mudd, arrived at the Fort in July of 1865.

Ben DiBiase

One of the most famous prisoners was a guy named Samuel Mudd, Dr. Samuel Mudd, and he was one of the, well, he's convicted of being a co-conspirator in the assassination of President Lincoln. He was the one, the doctor who unknowingly set the bone, the broken bone of John Wilkes Booth, he'd broken his bone when he jumped out of the balcony in Ford's Theater after shooting President Lincoln. Well, Doctor Mudd didn't know that he had just shot the president, but he was still convicted of being a co-conspirator, and he was sentenced to a very lengthy term at Jefferson, and he was there for several years. What ended up happening is that the food itself, again being in this subtropical climate, you crammed all these people together, fresh water was very hard to come by. So, you had a lot diseases and yellow fever came through in the mid-1860s, and really wiped out the garrison and the fort. And the surgeon, the army surgeon who was in charge there, actually died. Doctor Mudd took over and treated a lot of these people. He actually treated some of the guards who were keeping him there at the fort site, and because of that sentence was commuted, and he was able to leave the island eventually, but he's probably the most famous, and most people really want to see when they visit the fort today. Everybody wants to see Doctor Mudd’s cell.

Holly Baker

Fort Jefferson was part of the U.S. Army until the 1870s. When it was turned over to the Treasury Department, who created a quarantine station there in the 1880s. The quarantine station operated by the Marine Hospital Service treated smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera. During the Spanish American

War of 1898, the Fort was used by the U.S. Navy as a coal fueling station for ships. A decade later, Fort Jefferson was transferred to the Department of Agriculture as a sanctuary for native birds; Ben DiBiase.

Ben DiBiase

The Fort was just falling apart by that point, you know the weather was just taking its toll. So, by 1914, the Navy had essentially given up, a hurricane came through 1910, just blew apart a lot of the cooling infrastructure. So, nothing happened, and then in the First World War, they set up a seaplane base. The Navy sort of came back in, in a wireless station. So, it was connected to the mainland and sort of, you know, kept track of what was happening in the Caribbean. And in the 1920s, it was just kind of this abandoned Fort. In 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt actually signed over the legislation that turned Fort Jefferson into a National Monument, so it became part of the National Park system in 1935. This is right in the middle of the Great Depression and the New Deal period. So here we have this Fort that's falling apart, you need people that, you know, were looking for work. Now you have this National Monument that's part of the federal, the federal infrastructure. So a lot of workers, the PWA, the WPA and the Emergency Release Administration sent people down to Fort Jefferson to clean it up, to rebuild the keepers cottages and some of the housing areas and, you know, mow the grass, that sort of thing, and just kind of do historical assessments, some of the first assessments were done in the 1930s to kind of look at the historic significance of this structure. And it was a National Monument until 1992, when it was rolled into the Dry Tortugas National Park. So today, if you go down there at Fort Jefferson as part of the broader National Park Dry Tortugas National Park, it's been in NPS control and in federal control as a as a park as part of the park system since 1935.

Holly Baker

Fort Jefferson is part of the Dry Tortugas National Park, only accessible by seaplane, boat, or ferry, it's a popular tourist destination for snorkelers, bird watchers, history buffs, and shipwreck enthusiasts. For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and archivist at the Library of Florida History and Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then, find us anytime at myfloridahistory.org and on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Connie Lester and Holly Baker. Our web extras are produced by Jerry Kline. The program is edited by Jon White. Stay safe and have a great week. I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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