

1962

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Recommended Citation

Cushman, Jr., Joseph D. (1962) "The Blockade and Fall of Apalachicola, 1861-1862," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol41/iss1/8>

THE BLOCKADE AND FALL OF APALACHICOLA, 1861-1862

by JOSEPH D. CUSHMAN, JR.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN PROCLAIMED the blockade of all Confederate ports on April 19, 1861. In order to make the blockade effective, the United States Navy was split into two squadrons: the Atlantic Squadron which was to guard the entire Atlantic coast as far south as Cape Florida; and the Gulf Squadron which was responsible for the vast Gulf coast, an area which extended from Cape Florida to the Mexican border. Early in 1862 the Gulf Squadron was divided again into a West Gulf Squadron and an East Gulf Squadron. The area guarded by the East Gulf Squadron extended from Cape Canaveral on the Atlantic to St. Andrew's Bay on the Gulf. It was this command, with its headquarters in Key West, to which the approaches of Apalachicola were assigned.

Although the census of 1860 lists the population of Apalachicola at slightly less than 2,000 persons, the commercial and strategic value of the city was of greater importance than the population figures indicate. Incorporated in 1831, the town grew rapidly and developed a flourishing trade with the valleys of the Apalachicola, the Flint, and the Chattahoochee rivers. River steamers plied these waters as far north as Columbus, Georgia, and the docks of Apalachicola were crowded with bales of cotton and timber from Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. The harbor and channel had been dredged to accommodate the ocean-going ships which carried these products abroad or to markets in the North. By 1840 the town had become the third most important cotton port on the Gulf and it boasted a daily newspaper which had a wide circulation in three states. Its business section and warehouses were the most impressive in the state.¹

It was not likely that a city of such prominence should escape the surveillance of the Federal blockade for long. On June 8, 1861, Flag-Officer William Mervine, commanding the Gulf

1. William Watson Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 24-25.

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Blockading Squadron, ordered the steamer the *U.S.S. Montgomery*, under Commander T. Darrah Shaw, to proceed "with all practicable dispatch, to the port of Apalachicola . . . for the purpose of establishing, and maintaining an effective blockage."² On June 11 the *Montgomery* stood close off West Pass, the most used inlet to Apalachicola Bay, between the two extinguished light-houses. On the following day a delegation of a pilot and "three gentlemen" in a pilot boat bearing a flag of truce was sent out from Apalachicola to the *Montgomery*. To them Shaw delivered the following proclamation, copies of which were to go to the mayor, the postmaster, the collector of customs, and to all commercial reading rooms:

I, T. Darrah Shaw, commanding the *U.S.S. Montgomery*, now off the port of Apalachicola, do hereby promulgate the enclosed declaration of blockade of the said port, made by William Mervine, esq., flag-officer, commanding the *U.S.* blockading forces in the Gulf of Mexico, under the following terms . . . No American coasting vessels are to be allowed to enter or depart from said port from the time of your arrival on the station. All foreign or neutral vessels now in the port of Apalachicola will be allowed ten days from the 11th of June, instant, for their departure.³

The proclamation naturally created considerable stir and apprehension in Apalachicola. There was over a million dollars worth of cotton in the city's warehouses and its fate might determine the economic future of a number of Apalachicola businesses. It was also feared that Federal forces, once in possession of Apalachicola, might ascend the Apalachicola River and its tributaries and bring these fertile regions under the heel of the Lincoln government. Also, the capture of the port would endanger the vast concentration of arms at the former federal arsenal at Chattahoochee.

With these alarming possibilities in mind, the citizens of Apalachicola immediately began to fortify the city. They had anticipated the arrival of the *Montgomery* by several weeks by erecting a battery of two old guns (32-pounders) procured from the state and delivered at the town's expense. These guns were

2. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, 1894-1927), Ser. 1, XVI, 530-531. (Cited hereafter as ORN).

3. *Ibid.*, 544-546.

placed on the waterfront "in the most eligible position to command the several approaches to the town."⁴ Later an additional number of guns was obtained from the Confederate Navy Department in Richmond and they were placed in a battery on St. Vincent's Island to command the entrance of West Pass.

The defenses were further boosted by the arrival of the Florida Fourth Infantry, a state regiment recently taken into Confederate service. At one time there were over 1,200 soldiers in and around the city. Military discipline, however, was apparently lax. The commander of the regiment, Colonel Edward Hopkins, did not institute regular drill periods and the troops had much spare time. As a result there was a considerable amount of intemperance, dissipation, and disorder. A Methodist chaplain, the Rev. Mr. Richardson, gives a partial picture of garrison duty in the vicinity.⁵

All the field officers drank. We had fine bands and they frequently serenaded us. . . . One day the Lieut.-Col. came to me and said that I loved music and that the band had to be treated. I told him that I would not treat my father if he were to rise from the dead; but to show him that it was not money but principle with me, I said that if he would serenade me as a Christian I would treat them as Christians. . . . About nine o'clock the band and singers came. They opened up at my room at full blast with that grand hymn, "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne Ye Nations Bow with Sacred Awe." The moon was bright. Our headquarters were on the Bay. The sound of the many instruments and fine voices swept over the Bay, and all the air seemed alive with music.

The sound of the music was as potent as the spirits that had been consumed by the singers. It melted the heart of the puritanical chaplain. He had promised to treat the musicians as Christians, and his judgment was demonstrated by his choice - delicious Apalachicola oysters. "There are no songs like the songs of Zion."⁶

The security engendered by the presence of the troops soon gave way to insecurity and anxiety. Only three companies of the Florida Fourth Infantry were kept in the Apalachicola area.

4. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, VI, 286. (Cited hereafter as *ORA*).

5. Davis, 161. Also see *ORA*, 1, VI, 286-287.

6. Davis, 161-162.

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Two were placed at St. Mark's, two at Cedar Keys, and one at Tampa.⁷ The Florida coast line was long, and defense forces had to be spread thinly. On top of this, a deep antagonism developed between the citizens of Apalachicola and the Confederate commander, Colonel Hopkins. Hopkins angered the village fathers when he stripped the battery in the city and transferred its ordinance across the bay to St. Vincent's Island. There he constructed a second battery. The relations between Governor Milton and Colonel Hopkins were also strained by a personal antagonism. Edward Hopkins had run against Milton for governor in the hotly contested election of 1860. In the dispute between Hopkins and the citizens of the town, it was not unnatural for the governor to side against his old political adversary. Both the Governor and the townspeople conspired to have the Colonel removed from his command. When Hopkins moved the majority of his forces and his headquarters to St. Vincent's Island, the city was separated from its defending forces by almost twelve miles of water. The citizens complained to the Confederate Secretary of War.

The approaches to our town by land, as also from the East Pass, are entirely unguarded, and it would not require a large number of such boats as are now being constructed by the enemy to capture the city before any intelligence of an attack could reach Saint Vincent or assistance be rendered by the forces there.⁸

By the end of 1861, three miles of breastworks and shallow entrenchments had been thrown up around the land and sea approaches of the city, but to man them properly it was estimated that it would take at least 5,000 soldiers. The number of troops in the city and on the adjacent islands, however, never numbered over 1,200.⁹

Governor Milton's plantation, "Sylvania," was located in the valley of the Apalachicola near Marianna, and that fact no doubt sharpened his interest in the town. He tried desperately to procure aid from the Confederate War Department, but his letters to J. P. Benjamin brought him little more than the Secretary's sympathy. Milton did succeed, however, in getting Col.

7. *ORA*, 1, VI, 288.

8. *Ibid.*, 286-287.

9. *Ibid.*, 287-288, 355-356.

Hopkins transferred, and in having his aide-de-camp, Colonel Richard F. Floyd, appointed a brigadier and put in charge of the troops in the city. The heavy guns were dismantled on St. Vincent's and brought back to Apalachicola by permission of the War Department and new batteries were constructed with them on the mainland.¹⁰

The concern of the citizens of Apalachicola was directed more at the possibility of a Federal landing expedition than at the Federal blockade. In fact the blockade of the city was a comic attempt from the beginning. There were two main passes into the bay, two shallow channels, and only one Federal warship. Commander Shaw immediately realized that he needed two additional steamers with light drafts to watch the other sea approaches, but being a realist he requested one.¹¹ An Apalachicola woman writing to relatives in Lansingburgh, New York, graphically describes the situation. A summary of her letter was forwarded to Secretary of State Seward.

She states that there are four passages to the sea, and that they are guarded by only one small vessel; that while the vessel is near the mouth of one passage there is not any difficulty about effecting ingress or egress at some one of the other passages. . . . The lady directs her uncle to forward his reply to a firm in New York City, by whom it will be forwarded, and this intimates that there is still communication by sea.¹²

As late as the fall of 1862, Florida grocers were still advertising "Java and Rio coffees" among their choicest merchandise.¹³

As ships were added to the East Gulf Squadron, the blockade tightened. The *Montgomery* and Commander Shaw were replaced by the *Mercedita* under Commander H. S. Stellwagon, and a second vessel, the *Sagamore*, was assigned to watch the passes of Apalachicola Bay.¹⁴ But still the blockade runners, though less frequently, escaped from the bay with cargoes of cotton, turpentine, and tar, and returned to Apalachicola with such items as medicine, shoe thread, spool cotton, soap, tourniquet, barrels of oranges, coffee, and bunches of bananas.

10. *Ibid.*, 288, 319, 326, 354-355.

11. *ORN*, 1, XVI, 547.

12. *Ibid.*, 613.

13. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, 1862, *passim*.

14. *ORN*, 1, XVI, *passim*.

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Occasionally ladies' shoes, fans, hats, parasols, and children's dolls were also smuggled into the port.¹⁵

Duty in the Apalachicola area bordered on dullness. Both sides were immersed in the aged military routine of doing nothing in particular and doing it very well. Seldom was there any contact between the opposing forces. On one rare occasion, a Federal landing party under a flag of truce approached the shore in search of fresh water and oysters. A Confederate detachment under Lt. R. H. Randolph lay in waiting on the shore. But instead of a sharp skirmish, a wordy parley took place in which the Federals came within one hundred yards of the shore. Young Randolph's military reputation was smeared by rumors of cowardice, and accusations that he had had a treasonable interview with the enemy. At Randolph's insistence, a Court of Enquiry was convened which declared these charges to be without foundation.¹⁶ So uneventful were military operations that the Randolph affair occupied much space in the military records and press notices concerning the Apalachicola area.

The city continued to wait nervously for assault from the sea, little realizing that it was ill-starred for a peculiar, inglorious destiny in this continental war. Apalachicola's fate was not determined by the increasing strength of the Federal blockade, nor by a bold Union assault on her recently constructed breastworks, nor by the ordeal of a long, nerve-racking siege in which her defenders and her commercial oligarchy would be weighed in the balance and found wanting. Her fate was sealed by the Confederate reverses in far off Tennessee, for her defenders were drawn off to meet the dagger thrust of the Union forces aimed at the very heart of the South. In February of 1862, on orders from Secretary Benjamin, Bragg began withdrawing his troops for service under General Johnson in Tennessee. When Fort Donelson fell the withdrawals were accelerated, and Apalachicola was soon abandoned to the mercy of the enemy. By the end of March her batteries were totally dismantled, her entrenchments vacant, her shops and warehouses closed, and three quarters of her inhabitants refugees scattered throughout

15. Dorothy Dodd, "Florida in the War, 1861-1865," *The Florida Handbook 1961-1962*, comp. Allen Morris (Tallahassee, 1961), 270-273.

16. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, February 11, 1862.

three states.¹⁷ The city was destined to fall not with a bang, but a whimper.

Rumors of the evacuation of the city reached the Federal blockading forces and a reconnaissance mission was sent to determine their validity. On March 24, 1862, following orders from Commander H. S. Stellwagon, Lieutenant Trevett Abbot in charge of a cutter, a whaleboat, and a fully armed crew, landed on a wharf under a flag of truce. He was met by the principal citizens of the town: Mr. Hancock, the mayor; Mr. Benezet; Mr. Porter; and Father Miller, the Roman Catholic priest. Pursuant to orders, Lieutenant Abbot verified the Confederate evacuation, demanded the surrender of the city, and offered as alternative bombardment by the large naval force in the neighborhood. He also stated that any persons who would take the oath of allegiance to the U.S. government could remain securely in town with their property rights assured as long as they were faithful to their oaths.¹⁸ The delegation informed Abbot that the city had been evacuated on Confederate orders, that some troops had taken up positions several miles up the river, that they did not know whether the troops would return, and that the town was in a defenseless state. The delegation further informed the naval officer that there was "no one in the place willing, under any circumstances to take the oath of allegiance, excepting perhaps . . . a few miserable foreigners."¹⁹ With this intelligence Abbot returned to the *Mercedita*. The civilian exodus which followed the Confederate evacuation was reported by Abbot. Hundreds fled up the river in small boats, ran into a violent rain storm, and were thrown ashore on the low bluffs many miles up the river with their household goods, furniture, and everything they could snatch up. The party, composed mainly of women, children, and old men, spent the night on the shore in a deluge of rain,

the river rising and threatening to carry them away, with scarcely any shelter for the weak and sick, they most of them laid in the mud, almost perishing with cold, until the

17. *ORA*, 1, VI, *passim*. For a newspaper account of the withdrawal of Florida troops to the West, see the Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, March 4, March 18, 1862.

18. *ORN*, 1, XVII, 194-195.

19. *Ibid.*, 195. The "foreigners" were probably a part of the Latin fishing colony located in the town.

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latter part of the next day, when they were taken away by rafts and flats over the deluged country.²⁰

With the information which Abbott brought back, Commander Stellwagon made preparations to capture Apalachicola. On the night of April 2, an expedition of eight armed boats from the *Mercedita* and the *Sagamore* entered the bay via West Pass, crossed it, and landed on the main wharf late in the afternoon of the following day. Less than 500 people were left in town, and most of them were on hand to receive the landing party. Since no one had the authority to surrender the town, Stellwagon proclaimed it captured and proceeded to address the people:

My countrymen, for even you who are engaged in this unholy, unnatural war against our Government are my fellow-countrymen, we come not to injure the defenseless, or women and children; I like the people of the South, though I hate secession and rebellion, which have brought such calamities and misery upon all parts of our late happy land.²¹

There were cries from the crowd: "We have had no part in it." "The innocent suffer with the guilty" - to which the Commander replied, "That is true, here and everywhere; it is the result of civil war and your leaders should have thought of it."

It was obvious that this was the great triumph in the life of H. S. Stellwagon, Commander, U.S.N., but in his hour of glory he exhibited startling magnanimity. He granted the people permission to fish in what had been their own bay and allowed them to use their own fishing boats as long as they did not give aid to the blockade-runners. These privileges were to remain in effect as long as no hostile act was committed by the town. But Stellwagon warned that "any direct or indirect act, such as firing our boats, helping a vessel to run the blockade, bringing soldiers to town, or any thing of the sort will be severely punished." Stellwagon concluded his speech, the expedition boarded its eight armed boats, fired a salvo of shrapnel into the air to impress the people, and returned to the ships. Thus was Apalachicola captured and abandoned simultaneously.²²

Another part of the expedition under Lieutenant A. J. Drake captured without resistance several schooners and pilot boats

20. *Ibid.*, 193-194.

21. *Ibid.*, 202-203.

22. *Ibid.*, 204-205.

a few miles up the river. Stellwagon reported smugly to the commander of the East Gulf Squadron at Key West: "The boats were gone from twenty-four to thirty-six hours. The men behaved admirably."²³

From this time until the end of the war, Apalachicola was to remain in a twilight zone. It was occupied by neither the Federals nor the Confederates, but it was occasionally visited by southern guerillas and northern landing parties, neither of whom were welcome. No town in Florida had more material, men, or effort concentrated on its defense, and no town received less reward for its efforts than the city of Apalachicola, the most valuable seaport in ante-bellum Florida.

23. *Ibid.*, 204.