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DEPRIVATION, DISAFFECTION, AND DESERTION IN CONFEDERATE FLORIDA

by JOHN F. REIGER *

THE FEDERAL BLOCKADE, departure of most breadwinners for the military, removal of large quantities of food, clothing, and supplies for troops on every southern battlefield, disregard of desperate appeals of Confederate and state officials urging the planting of food rather than money crops, and great speculation, caused widespread suffering for most Florida families during the Civil War.

Many Floridians consistently ignored the advice of Confederate political and military officials. There appeared to be a propensity on the part of too large a percentage of the people to pursue a course clearly contrary to the best interests of the South and Florida. Governor John Milton and others repeatedly appealed to planters and farmers to discontinue planting cotton in favor of food crops, especially corn and wheat, to provide food for the armies. Their pleas fell on deaf ears; people seemed to be more interested in profits than in feeding Confederate soldiers. When Major General John C. Pemberton visited Tallahassee in March 1862, he found that in spite of attempts to get planters in that area to sow food crops, many had "a disposition to plant cotton the coming season."¹ Similarly, a Tallahassee newspaper the following winter, reported that there is a dangerous propensity "founded upon the supposition of early peace, to plant less corn and more cotton this year than last." The paper warned: "Look at the present prices of meat and bread and only imagine what would be the condition of things if the crop of last year had been divided between corn and cotton. Obviously, the result would have been famine in the land. As it is, meat is almost denied to the poor and even the rich have

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1. John C. Pemberton to Samuel Cooper, March 18, 1862, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. I, VI, 409. Hereinafter cited as *Official Records*.

none to spare. . . . Plant corn, raise provisions, make cloth and the fight will go on.”² This matter of planter indifference to both the Confederate war effort and the general well-being of Floridians reached ominous proportions. J. M. Doty, a resident of Lake City, wrote a friend outside Florida that “You can expect to hear of trouble in the State if the planters persist in their determination to plant cotton. There is strong excitement on the subject.”³

Because of the combination of an efficient Federal blockade and the Confederate impressment of provisions, prices of most goods - necessities and luxuries alike - were exorbitant. As early as January 1862, a blockade runner reported, “the whole country is greatly distressed by the blockade; coffee, \$1; tea, \$2 per pound; pork, \$60 per barrel, and other articles in proportion and extremely difficult to procure at even these prices.”⁴ The situation had worsened considerably by the next year. Medicine, soda, molasses, and rice were almost impossible to obtain; as for alcoholic beverages, “delicacies,” mustard, black pepper, sugar, and tea, there were none at all. Typical prices in Confederate currency were quinine, twenty dollars an ounce; castor oil, twenty dollars a gallon; a reel of cotton, fifty cents.⁵

Those who had goods to sell, either because they produced them themselves or had run the blockade, were in a position to demand inordinate prices. This is just what many Floridians did. While high prices prevailed and conditions in the state worsened, unscrupulous blockade runners were buying rum for seventeen cents per gallon in Cuba and selling it for twenty-five dollars a gallon in Florida.⁶

Speculation in necessities of life was a major problem in Florida throughout the war. Like all manifestations of indifference toward Confederate war aims, this evil increased and

2. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, January 6, 1863.

3. J. M. Doty to George R. Fairbanks, March 8, 1863 (xerox copy), mss. box 32, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

4. Samuel Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, January 6, 1962 (Coral Gables, 1960-1965).

5. For a description of the rapid increase in commodity prices in the Confederacy, see John Beauchamp Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1866), I, 47-172; II, 5-349.

6. Joseph Finegan to John Milton, May 8, 1863, John Milton Papers, Florida Historical Society Collection, University of South Florida Library, Tampa. Hereinafter cited as Milton Papers.

spread as it became more and more obvious that the South was headed for defeat. By the fall of 1862, the problem had already reached vast proportions:

Speculation and extortion are the great enemies of the Confederate cause. The rage to run up prices is going to ruin us if anything does. It is impossible to overrate the degree of uncertainty, insecurity and alarm felt by the masses of the people from this cause alone. . . . Who can do business unless he happens to be among the infamous crew of harpies who boast of making their thousands out of universal scarcity and distress. . . . The unholy thirst for money making seems to render men deaf alike to the voice of public opinion [or] the calls of patriotism. . . . If, as seems too probable, our people prefer heaping up gains in Treasury notes to their own self-preservation from a cruel, licentious, rapacious, and remorseless foe, the great God himself will and must say to such a people: "THY MONEY PERISH WITH THEE!"⁷

Speculation and extortion were indeed "the great enemies of of the Confederate cause" simply because they increased privation. The latter was one item Florida had in great abundance. When the Federals visited Apalachicola on May 10, 1862, they found the inhabitants in an "almost starving condition." By autumn, 1863, the situation had worsened to the point that Governor Milton had to inform General Beauregard that if for any reason communication with Apalachicola were stopped, "it will expose to famine nearly 500 loyal citizens who are suffering for bread."⁸

The conditions under which most Floridians lived were appalling, and suffering was not restricted to any one region. After Baldwin was taken by the Federals in early 1864, a *New York Herald* correspondent reported that "wretched desolation is written over the face of the country,"⁹ and a Federal officer stationed in the same area wrote his mother: "The whites who are living here are *wretchedly poor*. They are women and children -hardly enough clothing to cover their backs-and food, I cannot tell you what they live on. It is a pitiful sight, I assure

7. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, November 18, 1862.

8. Milton to G. T. Beauregard, October 15, 1863, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXVIII, Pt. 2, 452.

9. *New York Herald*, February 9, 1864.

you.”¹⁰ The *New York Tribune* on February 20, 1864, reported that wherever Federal naval forces landed, “the inhabitants throw into our camp, asking for food.”

Conditions were probably worst of all in South Florida. Milton wrote Confederate Secretary of War Seddon that in this region many “families of soldiers in Virginia are threatened with starvation.” In his efforts to help these people, the governor was hampered by profiteers. Milton told Seddon that even though the state had purchased supplies for those suffering in South Florida, “we cannot get teams to haul [them]. The speculators interested in the blockade are using these teams.”¹¹ Florida’s upper class suffered along with the “poor whites.” On April 7, 1864, Miss Susan Bradford Eppes, of one of Tallahassee’s leading families, noted in her diary: “Today, I have no shoes to put on. All my life I have never wanted to go bare-footed, as most Southern children do.”¹²

In January 1863, Governor Milton began a conscientious campaign to relieve the widespread misery. He ordered judges of probate and justices of the peace in each county to compile lists of soldiers’ families in need of state aid.¹³ After receiving these compilations, he ordered county commissioners to “secure immediately, by purchase, the amount of corn, syrup, potatoes and peas which will be needed for the soldiers’ families.”¹⁴

In 1863, of Florida’s total free population of 78,679, 3,398 soldiers’ families or about 11,673 persons were found to need state support.¹⁵ By 1864, the number of those needing relief rose to over 13,000.¹⁶ The state’s attempts to aid these families were never very successful. On January 11, 1864, Governor Milton wrote Secretary Seddon, informing him that in several

10. Charles M. Duren to mother, February 15, 1864, Duren Letters, mss. box 6, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

11. Milton to Seddon, September 6, 1863, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, September 6, 1963.

12. Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, 1926; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1968), 238.

13. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, January 13, 1863.

14. Proclamation of Governor Milton to “Citizens of Florida,” October 21, 1863, Milton Papers.

15. *American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1863* (New York, 1864), III, 413.

16. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Senate of the General Assembly of the State of Florida, 1855-1865* (Tallahassee, 1855-1866), 1864, 31, cited in William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 262.

counties “the corn necessary to support the soldiers’ families” could not be procured. Milton asked for permission to obtain “10,000 or 12,000 bushels of corn” from the Confederate government.¹⁷ Three months later, it was reported that the situation of these families had continued to worsen—Major C. C. Yonge, chief Confederate quartermaster for Florida, informed Governor Milton in April that many families in the state were “perilously near starvation.”¹⁸

Thus, citizens of Confederate Florida had to endure acute suffering, and this widespread privation greatly increased both anti-war and pro-Union sentiment. Three factors - high taxes, impressment, and conscription - would bring this disaffection almost to the point of revolt. Floridians heartily disliked taxes and particularly the three imposed by the Confederate government: War Tax of August 19, 1861;¹⁹ Impressment Act of March 26, 1863; and General Tax Act (Confederate tithe) of April 24, 1863. Collection of imposts was entrusted to state tax collectors and Confederate commissary agents. Many Floridians considered all of them “speculators” and resented the fact that though of conscript age, they were exempt from military service.²⁰

The tithe caused great indignation, and for good reason. To people who often went hungry and who needed everything they produced to keep themselves at subsistence level, this tax was looked on as nothing less than oppression. In May 1864, the citizens of Marianna were bitterly complaining to the governor that in addition to the tithe, they were being called on to

17. Milton to James A. Seddon, January 11, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. IV, III, 15.

18. C. C. Yonge to Milton, April 2, 1864, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, April 2, 1964.

19. The Confederate war tax levied an impost of one-half of one per cent on all real and personal property, a yearly levy of eight per cent on the value of naval stores, salt, wines, liquor, wool, sugar, cotton, tobacco, molasses, syrup, and other agricultural products; an annual license tax of from \$50 to \$500 on occupations such as butchers, bakers, bankers, innkeepers, lawyers, and doctors; an income tax of one to fifteen per cent on all incomes; a ten per cent tax on profits from the sale of provisions, iron, shoes, blankets, and cotton cloth; and a tax in kind of one-tenth of all agricultural products that became known as the Confederate tithe. See John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 109.

20. Jones, *Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, II, 132.

supply an amount of meat equal to one-half the usual amount needed by farm families.²¹

The law that caused the greatest disaffection was the Impressment Act. It authorized seizure of food and other property useful to the military at prices arbitrarily fixed by "boards" created by the war department and governors.²² Impressment agents and quartermasters took anything they thought useful to further the war effort - which, by 1865, included just about everything. Though the fixed prices were usually substantially below market price, owners had no other choice but to sell. Payment was in depreciated Confederate currency which many Floridians disliked accepting. Confederate refugees streaming into Jacksonville in February 1864, informed the Federals that Confederate money had always been held in ill repute, never passing at par. According to a New York paper: "Those who had gold and silver at the commencement of the Rebellion have held on to it, only selling occasionally a little at an enormous rate of premium to blockade-runners. The latest sale quoted in Jacksonville was on the 5th of February . . . when \$100 in gold brought \$2,400 in Confederate money."²³

Opposition to impressment can scarcely be overemphasized. Even though impressment had not been legally sanctioned until March 1863, it had become common much earlier. In November 1862 President Davis received several irate letters from citizens in West Florida. One complained that "the most immediate enemy . . . is starvation, and unless there can be some changes in the administration of the military authority here, the people must suffer. No one will bring wood for fear his boat will be seized; no one corn or meal."²⁴ Unscrupulous men who posed as real impressment agents were another problem. Governor Milton, in a letter to Major P. W. White, chief commissary of Florida, predicted "the deleterious effect upon the Army, if during their absence in military service, their families shall be made to suffer by impressments unnecessarily or illegally made."²⁵

21. Nich. A. Long and others to Milton, May 3, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LIII, 349.

22. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 186.

23. *New York Tribune*, February 20, 1864.

24. Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, November 23, 1962.

25. Milton to Pleasant White, December 12, 1863, *Official Records*, Ser. IV, III, 20.

When other sources of beef in the Confederacy had been cut off by the enemy, Florida's herds became crucial, and impressment of cattle increased apace. On December 20, 1863, the Reverend John R. Richards inquired of the governor, "if it is law for these 'pressmen' to take the cows from the soldiers' families and leave them to starve." He wrote: "Colonel Coker has just left my house with a drove for Marianna of about 200 or 300 head. Some of my neighbors went after him and begged him to give them their milch cows, which he . . . refused to do, and [he] took them on. . . . There are soldiers' families in my neighborhood that the last head of cattle have been taken from them and drove off, and unless this pressing of cows is stopped speedily, there won't be a cow left in Calhoun County. . . . Several soldiers' families in this county . . . haven't had one grain of corn in the last 3 weeks, nor any likelihood of their getting any in the next three months; their few cows taken away and they left to starve; their husbands slain on the battlefield at Chattanooga." Richards indicated increasing hostility for the Confederacy and called for an end to the cattle seizures.²⁶ Similar situations existed elsewhere in the state. From Hernando County came the report that starving soldiers' families "are becoming clamorous for meat, and are killing people's cows where ever they can get hold of them."²⁷

Anti-war and pro-Union sentiment reached great proportions. Governor Milton informed Secretary of War Seddon that "The wave of indignation concerning impressment will drive even greater numbers into the enemy camp if the evils of the system are not immediately corrected."²⁸ According to Milton, "The effect of the impressment made in West Florida was the desertion of a large number of the troops in that part of the State, a portion of whom have joined the enemy. From one company, which was considered the best drilled and most reliable company in West Florida, fifty-two men deserted with their arms, some of whom were known to be brave men, who, indignant at the heartless treatment of the rights of citizens, have joined the enemy. . . . The citizens . . . in many parts of the State are indignant at the unnecessary abuse of their rights . . ., and the

26. John R. Richards to Milton, December 20, 1863, *ibid.*, 47.

27. P. G. Wall to Milton, January 12, 1864, *ibid.*, 48.

28. Milton to Seddon, January 26, 1864, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, January 26, 1964.

lawless and wicked conduct of Government agents in this State has produced serious dissatisfaction" ²⁹

The Confederate Conscription Act (April 16, 1862), the first draft law in American history, authorized the enrollment of all white men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years for a period of three years. ³⁰ On September 27, 1862, conscription was extended to include all between the ages of eighteen and forty-five; in early 1864, the law was further revised to include men between the ages of seventeen and fifty. ³¹

The majority of Floridians loathed conscription. ³² On October 5, 1862, the governor informed the secretary of war that the act "cannot be wisely or successfully enforced in this State." ³³ Florida's "poor whites" were angered by the substitution system which allowed an affluent man to hire someone to do his fighting for him. In a letter to Jefferson Davis, Milton argued that substitution was also being opposed because the \$500 to \$5,000 bounty substitutes received lured overseers away from the plantation regions, making the possibility of slave revolt a grim reality. ³⁴ John S. Preston, superintendent of the Bureau of Conscription, admitted that the act tended to favor "wealthy farmers, enterprising manufacturers and mechanics," and that Florida was one of the states from which came many "complaints of the evils and failures of conscription." ³⁵

The exemption of large slaveholders was objectionable to the small farmers ³⁶ and was regarded as another piece of evidence that the effort mainly benefitted the rich. Many Floridians resented, not merely exemption of slaveholders, but the very notion that exemption would be allowed at all. There were others, however, all too glad to take advantage of it when it served their own purposes. For instance, when salt workers were given exemption from military service, employment in that industry suddenly became immensely popular. In September 1862, Gov-

29. Milton to Seddon, January 26, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. IV, III, 46.

30. *Ibid.*, Ser. III, V, 694.

31. *Ibid.*, 695.

32. Milton to John H. Forney, October 11, 1862, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LII, Pt. 2, 373.

33. Milton to George W. Randolph, October 5, 1862, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LIII, 258-59.

34. Milton to Davis, May 23, 1863, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, May 23, 1963.

35. Preston to Seddon, April 30, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. III, V, 697.

36. James Garfield Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1937), 265.

ernor Milton noted that “Since the enactment of the conscript act, many able-bodied men from adjacent states and this State have repaired to the coast of Florida, under the pretense of making salt, and to be secure in their labor some have been treacherous enough to hold intercourse with the enemy; others have been lazy loungers, more anxious to avoid military service than to make salt.”³⁷

Even those who legitimately made salt did so with the idea of selling it at exorbitant prices. The Tallahassee paper complained that manufacturers were often selling their product at twice the legitimate price.³⁸ In February 1863, Michael Raysor, a Florida soldier, wrote his wife that he disliked the idea of her able-bodied relatives making salt, especially “when they sell it as high as they do. The conscript officer ought to go down there and take all of them between eighteen and forty-five. If they were up here [in Tennessee], I’ll insure they would be conscripted and that soon.”³⁹

There were other reasons for opposition to conscription. The *Tallahassee Sentinel* complained that in spite of the “inalienable” right of Floridians to enter regiments of their own state and their own choosing, conscript officers under General Howell Cobb were drafting men from Taylor, Madison, and Lafayette counties and refusing to let them join Florida units, insisting instead that they enlist in the First Georgia Regulars. The paper called such treatment “an outrage upon the rights of Floridians, not to be submitted to quietly.”⁴⁰

One aspect of conscription that caused great disaffection was the order requiring the sick to be brought to the camp of instruction to ascertain whether they were fit for any sort of military duty. Governor Milton complained of this in a letter to President Davis: “They never will be able to render efficient service upon the field, in hospitals, or in any of the departments of the Government, but [at home they] would be of some service in taking care of and comforting women and children. The

37. Milton to “Honorable Senators and Representatives of the State of Florida at Richmond,” September 11, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. IV, II, 94.

38. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, August 18, 1863.

39. Raysor to wife, February 5, 1863, Michael O. Raysor Civil War Letters, mss. box 6, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

40. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, April 28, 1863.

camp of instruction has more the appearance of a camp provided for those afflicted with lameness and disease than a military camp.”⁴¹

Opposition encountered by Confederate enrolling officers increased⁴² Floridians began “laying-out,” hiding when the “conscript officer” came around.⁴³ Not all who tried to evade conscription were pro-Union, though some in bitterness would later become ardent Unionists. At first, most of them, besides obviously being anti-war, were more interested in being with and providing for their families than in fighting. The ease of one George Carter, a citizen of Alachua County, was typical. He was the father of “15 or 16 children, none of them old enough to properly provide for the others.” Because he thought his family came before the war effort, “he was hunted by conscription parties, and had to hide in the woods at night without fire, despite the inclemency of the weather. . . . Mr. Carter always spoke of his experience with great bitterness.”⁴⁴

At an early date, “lay-outs” began organizing against the Confederacy. The *Quincy Semi-Weekly Dispatch* in 1862, denounced “some 50 or 60 men [in Calhoun County] who need their necks stretched with stout ropes.” Hoping to avoid conscription, “they have armed and organized themselves to resist those who may attempt their arrest.” They were in communication with the blockaders from whom they received arms.⁴⁵

With Florida in “far greater danger of being overwhelmed from the want of food and a viciated [*sic*] currency than by Lincoln’s Armies,”⁴⁶ many Floridians sympathized with the predicament of the conscription evader, particularly if he was trying to provide for his family. Even the “lay-outs” who actively opposed the Confederacy were often tolerated or even aided. The governor of Alabama, in a letter to the Confederate commander at Quincy, noted the numerous “lay-outs” inhabiting the area around the Chattahoochee River: “The impunity of these men, and the extension of the age of conscription, will tend to in-

41. Milton to Davis, September 23, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. IV, II, 92-93.

42. Milton to Forney, October 11, 1862, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LII, Pt. 2, 373.

43. Henry D. Capers to J. L. Cross, March 27, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LIII, 316-18.

44. John Francis Tenney, *Slavery Secession, and Success: The Memoirs of a Florida Pioneer* (San Antonio, 1934), 21.

45. *Quincy Semi-Weekly Dispatch*, September 2, 1862.

46. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, November 3, 1863.

crease their numbers.”⁴⁷ General Cobb was also concerned over this “disloyal feeling” and felt that it “should be crushed.” Cobb’s admission, based on past experience, that “to turn them over to the civil authorities, is simply to provide for a farcical trial,” goes a long way towards revealing the extent of anti-war and pro-Union sentiment in West Florida.⁴⁸

After 1863, opposition to conscription accelerated even further in Florida. A Jacksonville newspaper claimed in the spring of 1864 that “nearly half the soldiers in the Confederate army . . . whose term of service will expire this spring, have not re-enlisted, and will not do so. . . . They hold the measure [conscription] to be unjust, and will suffer no chances of escape to pass unproved.”⁴⁹

As one observer put it, the most dramatic manifestation of disloyalty in Florida came from “an enemy . . . with whom we were unable to cope, *the diabolical deserter.*”⁵⁰ The reasons for large scale desertion in the state were many and complex. Many probably had little real love for the Union, but they did have a sense of responsibility for their families. When soldiers became aware of the awful conditions under which their families lived, they often chose to desert in order to help them. Soldiers frequently received letters like the following:

My dear Mike, I think of little else but your selfe. . . . I have looked at [every] sound to see you coming. I was so confident you would use every means to come to see your deare wife. I have been sick for the last month [and] have seen scarcely a well day. . . . Mike, you must come home. I can not, I will not, stande it no longer. If you do not come, I will come down there [to the Florida coast] to see you if I know all the Yankees was down there. . . . I do not expect to be well, not again till you come home, Mike.⁵¹

In other letters, Mrs. Raysor repeatedly tried to get her husband to desert and return home. His wife’s pleading had a distinct effect on Raysor as seen by the letter he wrote from a Confederate hospital in Chatanooga:

47. John G. Shorter to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1863, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXVIII, Pt. 2, 273.

48. Cobb to Thomas Jordan, August 11, 1863, *ibid.*

49. Jacksonville *Peninsula*, April 7, 1864.

50. Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, 221-22.

51. Sallie Raysor to husband, December 26, 1861, Raysor Civil War Letters.

Oh how I wish I could be at home, but it is no use. I believe furlough is stoped [*sic*]. I believe I could run away but I do not care to do it, but if I am not exchanged [to a Florida hospital] in two or three months, I will.⁵²

Wives were often incredibly naive about military procedures. Elizabeth Ward wrote her husband at Pensacola: "I have got no corn nor no meel, nor any way of giting of hit. . . . I want you to send sum corn soon or fetch hit." In a postscript she added: "Let your Captain reade this."⁵³ Obviously she thought the captain would feel sufficient sympathy to release Ward temporarily from military duty. James J. Nixon summed up the feelings of thousands of Confederate soldiers when, in a letter to his Florida wife, he asked: "What must I do, my country calls me on one hand, my *dear family* and interest on the other."⁵⁴ Probably a majority of the desertions from the Confederate army were caused by wives' letters describing dire circumstances at home.⁵⁵

Some soldiers were undoubtedly influenced by friends at home who advised them to give up a lost cause and return to their families. In the closing weeks of the war, General Lee complained that Confederate soldiers, "are influenced . . . by the representations of their friends at home, who appear to have become very despondent as to our success. They think the cause desperate and write to the soldiers, advising them to take care of themselves, assuring them that if they will return home, the bands of deserters so far outnumber the home guards that they will be in no danger of arrest."⁵⁶

Many Confederate soldiers, especially in frontier areas like Florida, had thought they would only have to serve in their home states, even their home districts. When told they would have to leave the state, many who had never been away from

52. Raysor to wife, September 3, 1863, *ibid.* Rather than deserting, Raysor "died in [the] service." Board of State Institutions, *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indian, Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Tallahassee, 1903), 115.

53. Mrs. Ward to husband, June 2, 1861, mss. box 6, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

54. Nixon to wife, February 19, 1862, James J. Nixon Letters, 1861-1863, mss. box 28, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

55. Gainesville Cotton States, April 16, 1864.

56. R. E. Lee to Secretary of War, February 24, 1865, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XLVI, Pt. 2, 1254.

home before panicked and thought desertion preferable to forced "emigration." One officer admitted that he doubted whether half the Florida troops would obey orders to leave the state.⁵⁷

To serve in the region of their own choosing was an "inalienable right" that large numbers of Confederate soldiers insisted upon. They also wanted to elect their own officers and receive adequate pay, decent food and clothing, and furloughs of specified length - regardless of the necessities of war. Brigadier General Richard F. Floyd, in command at Apalachicola, advised Tallahassee in 1862 that his troops considered a thirty-day furlough "their right."⁵⁸

For men who looked to their government for help and found that it was not available there was disillusionment. The war was hardly a month old when a soldier stationed at Pensacola found that the men's horses were suffering for lack of feed.⁵⁹ This situation grew steadily worse, not only for the soldiers' horses, but for the soldiers themselves. It is not surprising that General Bragg informed Richmond in December 1861, that he was having great difficulty in persuading his men to re-enlist.⁶⁰

A similar disenchantment with military life appeared elsewhere in Florida. In March 1862, Major Pemberton reported that his troops were "in a state of mutiny, positively refusing . . . to move [out of the state] until the arrearages [*sic*] of pay due are received and until satisfied that a sufficient army is left in Florida for the protection of their families."⁶¹

Life for the Florida soldier became increasingly intolerable. An officer of the First Florida Infantry reported in March 1864; "My men have no shoes; their rations consist of Florida beef and corn. The beef is so poor that the men cannot eat it The spirit of the army is in favor of peace. The men re-enlist only to get furloughs and never return."⁶²

Conditions under which the Florida soldier had to live and

57. Samuel Jones to Cooper, May 17, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 1, 118.

58. Richard F. Floyd to Milton, February 9, 1862, *ibid.*, Ser. I, VI, 378.

59. Joseph Dill Alison Civil War Diary, May, 1861-July, 1863 (typescript copy), mss. box 26, p.2, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

60. Bragg to Confederate War Department, December 10, 1861, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, December 10, 1961.

61. Pemberton to Cooper, March 18, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. I, VI, 408.

62. Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, March 8, 1964.

fight continued to worsen. Many men reached a breaking point and decided to desert. Curiously enough, the soldier did not always consider this action a drastic step. As the soldier was rather naive about his supposed rights, he was even more unsophisticated as to the seriousness of desertion. In the early years of the war Governor Milton stressed the need for moderation in apprehending deserters and conscription evaders, because he knew that few of these men had any real conception of the enormity of their crimes.⁶³

The *Tallahassee Sentinel* in 1862 complained that “thousands of stragglers and deserters are permitted to skulk about the country and hide themselves about their homes.” The paper reminded its readers that “the soldier who is absent without a furlough, or who allows his furlough to expire without joining his company, is a *deserter*.”⁶⁴ In Confederate Florida, deserters, often joined by conscription evaders, refugees, and sometimes fugitive slaves, were numerous in every locality. In 1863 a citizen wrote Brigadier General Joseph Finegan that something had to be done “to check the accumulation of deserters in Taylor County. . . . Disloyalty is very general in that county, and they are not disposed to disguise their sentiments The immunity enjoyed by the deserters in producing a very bad effect, and if not checked soon, will be difficult to deal with.”⁶⁵

Anti-war deserters threatened to overrun Taylor County where they organized into bands and terrorized all who differed with them.⁶⁶ By 1864, they had effectively disrupted the functioning of local government, the sheriff had defected, and the new sheriff, Edward Jordon, was soon reporting to the comptroller: “I am driven to the necessity of informing you that I am compelled to stop collecting or assessing Taxes for the present, in consequence of the Enemy . . . and having rece’d a message from a Squad of Persons that call themselves *Union men*. I have thought it best to desist . . . until there is a force in the county to check them, if not I shall have to leave, I

63. Governor’s message, November 1862, cited in Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 264. Also, Milton to Randolph, August 5, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LII, Pt. 2, 337.

64. *Tallahassee Florida Sentinel*, December 9, 1862.

65. John C. McGehee to Finegan, October 5, 1863, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXVIII, Pt. 2, 403.

66. John F. Lay to Jordan, February 16, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LIII, 309.

cannot say how soon for safety, for I have rece'd orders to join them or I cannot stay in the County." ⁶⁷

Deserters also existed in large numbers in Lafayette and Levy counties. In the latter county a Confederate officer promised local citizens "to clear your locality of Yankees, deserters, and outlaws" at an early date. ⁶⁸ Organized deserter bands often raided plantations in Jefferson and Madison counties. ⁶⁹ Deserters, sometimes from as far away as Virginia, "collected in the swamps and fastnesses of Taylor, LaFayette [*sic*], Levy, and other counties, and . . . organized, with runaway negroes [*sic*], bands of the purpose for committing depredations upon the plantations and crops of loyal citizens and running off their slaves. These depredatory bands have even threatened the cities of Tallahassee, Madison, and Marianna." ⁷⁰

In the area west of the Apalachicola River, deserters were still more numerous. Governor Shorter of Alabama found that the swamps of the Chipola River and its tributaries were being used as hideouts. ⁷¹ Governor Milton noted in a letter to Richmond in 1864 that deserters in West Florida "had contaminated a large portion of the citizens," including the sheriff of Washington County. The deserters were "in constant communication with the enemy," Milton said, and will "pilot . . . [them] in any raid which may be attempted." ⁷² In the Chattahoochee area, a band of forty-three deserters "surrounded and disarmed part of a [Confederate] cavalry company." Milton argued that without drastic action to free the western region "from traitors and deserters, it will be in the possession of the enemy, and the lives and property of loyal citizens will be sacrificed." ⁷³

Though South Florida was sparsely settled, it also had its bands of deserters. They were especially numerous in the

67. Jordon to Walter Gwynn, February 12, 1864. Comptroller's Letter Book, Letters Received, 1860-1865, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee. Hereinafter cited as Comptroller's Letter Book.

68. Patton Anderson to J. M. Mills, May 15, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LIII, 337.

69. Anderson to H. W. Feilden, May 14, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 368-69.

70. John K. Jackson to Cooper, August 12, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 2, 607.

71. Shorter to Cobb, August 4, 1863, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXVIII, Pt. 2, 273.

72. Milton to Seddon, January 11, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. IV, III, 16.

73. Milton to Beauregard, February 5, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 1, 564.

triangle formed by Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and Lake Okeechobee.⁷⁴ Sheriff J. J. Addison of Manatee County reported, "There is over half the Taxpayers of this County gone to the Yankee. . . . One of our County commissioners has gone to the Yankees, two of the others taken and Prisoners [*sic*]." ⁷⁵ A Confederate courier, Thomas Benton Ellis, had to travel at night in South Florida "so as to dodge the sneaking deserters."⁷⁶ At first the problem was not quite as great in East Florida as elsewhere in the state. However, after the Union army gained control of the coast and the region east of the St. Johns River down to Lake George in 1862, deserters crossed into Federal lines and generally became members of the large pro-Union minority.

The deserters not only exerted a demoralizing influence upon the civilian population, but also acted as a "fifth column" against the Confederacy. They helped the Federals by giving them important military information, acting as guides, stealing supplies meant for the Confederates (10,000 blankets and 6,000 pairs of shoes were captured in May 1864), and by destroying railroad trestles, burning bridges, and cutting telegraph lines in an attempt to disrupt communications.⁷⁷

Some deserters enlisted in the United States army. As early as December 1861, Federal commanders agreed to accept into service any who enlisted according to United States military regulations under the volunteer system.⁷⁸ Two years later, a Federal commander claimed that if given proper assistance to come within the Union lines, "not only one but several regiments could be raised in Western Florida."⁷⁹ Deserters trying to reach Federal lines to enlist were often intercepted by Confederate guerrilla bands, who meted out savage punishment to

74. Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, December 14, 1963.

75. J. J. Addison to Gwynn, July 5, 1864, Comptroller's Letter Book.

76. Thomas Benton Ellis Diary, July, 1861-April, 1865 (typescript copy), p. 11, mss. box 26, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

77. *New York Times*, April 2, 1862; Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, November 11, 1862; Gainesville *Cotton States*, March 19, June 18, 1864; Alexander Asboth to Charles P. Stone, April 22, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 2, 64; John P. Hatch to J. G. Foster, August 4, 1864, *ibid.*, 215; Lay to Jordan, February 16, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, LIII, 308; Capers to Cross, March 27, 1864, *ibid.*, 316-19; and Anderson to Mills, May 15, 1864, *ibid.*, 336-37.

78. Lorenzo Thomas to John W. Butler, December 6, 1861, *ibid.*, Ser. III, I, 730.

79. Asboth to Stone, December 27, 1863, quoted in Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, December 27, 1963.

captured Unionists. Union General Alexander Asboth, in command at Barrancas, wrote a fellow officer in April 1864: "Very few recruits can reach our lines at present, as all West Florida is swarming with rebel cavalry hunting refugees and deserters. In Walton County seven citizens were hung last week for entertaining Union sentiments, and a woman, refusing to give information about her husband's whereabouts, was killed in a shocking manner, and two of her children caught and torn to pieces by bloodhounds."⁸⁰

The Federals were fairly successful in recruiting deserters. For example, late in the war they landed a company in South Florida composed entirely of deserters, and sent it on a raid in the direction of Brooksville.⁸¹ At the same time that Florida was furnishing the United States army with 1,290 white recruits, 2,219 Floridians, officers and men—a figure probably too low—were recorded as deserting from the Confederate army.⁸²

The boldness of the "diabolical deserter" reached incredible heights. In early February 1864, about 100 of them, learning of Governor Milton's travel plans, hid themselves in ambush along the road leading out of Tallahassee. They hoped to capture Milton and turn him over to one of the blockading vessels in the Gulf. A pro-Confederate citizen of Calhoun County, one Luke Lott, happened to learn of the deserters' scheme and, at the last moment, was able to warn the governor. To keep from being captured or killed, Milton stayed in Tallahassee.⁸³

It was not long before Confederate authorities and other loyal Southerners in Florida decided that unless the evil of desertion was wiped out, internal collapse would be imminent. At first, moderation was tried. Newspapers defined the term "desertion" and warned their readers of the consequences for anyone committing the offense. When this tactic failed to produce

80. Asboth to Stone, April 22, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 2, 64.

81. Thomas Benton Ellis Diary, p. 9-11.

82. *Official Records*, Ser. III, IV, 1269; *House Executive Documents*, Cong., 1st Sess., No. 1, IV, Pt. I, p. 141, cited in Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (New York, 1928), 231. Probably there is some overlapping between these two categories.

83. Milton to Beauregard, February 5, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 1, 564; Luke Lott to Milton, February 3, 1864, *ibid.*, 566; Proctor, *Florida A Hundred Years Ago*, February 3, 4, 1964.

results, papers began running notices of rewards for information leading to the apprehension of deserters or conscription evaders.⁸⁴

State and Confederate authorities soon decided to employ harsher methods. One was use of guerrilla companies composed of loyal Southerners. Though not part of the regular army, these forces were countenanced by Confederate military authorities to whom the leader of the guerrilla band reported. In April 1862, the chief of the "Ochlawaha Rangers" reported to the Confederate commander at Lake City: "I am now a guerrilla in every sense of the word; we neither tell where we stay nor where we are going, nor when we shall return; [we] assemble the Company at the sound of a cow's horn. We have made some arrests of both white and black, and hung one negro [*sic*] last week belonging to Mays. . . . I regret very much to have to report to you that at least three-fourths of the people on the Saint Johns River and east of it are aiding and abeting [*sic*] the enemy; we could see them at all times through the day communicating with the [Federal] vessel in their small boats. It is not safe for a small [Confederate] force to be on the east side of the river; there is great danger of being betrayed into the hands of the enemy."⁸⁵

The job of the guerrilla forces was not easy, for deserters also organized disciplined companies. One of the strongest bands was the "Independent Union Rangers" of Taylor County, led by William W. Strickland. Its constitution demanded that members "cheerfully obey all orders given by the officers we elect over us; that we will bear true allegiance to the United States of America; that we will not . . . give any information or speak in the presence of anyone, even though it be our wives and families, of any expedition, raid, or attack that we may be about to undertake; that we agree to shoot or in some other way destroy any person or persons who are proven to be spies of the enemy, or any person who . . . may desert or entice others to do so."⁸⁶

Deserters were often successful in their efforts to elude the Confederate military and help Federals who supplied them with

84. Gainesville *Cotton States*, May 7, 1864.

85. John W. Pearson to Floyd, April 8, 1862, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LIII, 234.

86. Capers to Cross, March 27, 1864, *ibid.*, 318-19.

food and arms. They knew their regions perfectly, and could hide in the most impenetrable tangles and swamps. Because deserters in East Florida and the coastal areas were difficult to approach due to the nearness of Federal forces, the Confederates decided to concentrate on Middle Florida, especially Taylor County. Lieutenant Colonel Henry D. Capers and his men proceeded to the heart of deserter territory. Finding them gone, he ordered all houses on both banks of the Econfina and Fenholloway rivers put to the torch. At William Strickland's house, the Confederates found the "Rangers" constitution and "2,000 rounds of fixed ammunition for the Springfield musket, several barrels of flour from the United States Subsistence Department, and several other articles which evidenced the regularity of their communication with the enemy's gunboats." ⁸⁷

Capers' raid netted two deserters and sixteen women and children, dependents of some of the hiding deserters. It is uncertain what happened to the captured deserters, but the others were taken to a "camp," just outside Tallahassee, where they were "housed" in nine, crude, "double-pen log houses." ⁸⁸ Other such raids were made. One involved a train of wagons, dubbed "the wagon brigade," which traversed four counties, forcing women and children to evacuate their homes, which were put to the torch, and to move in to the "deserters' camp" in Leon County. ⁸⁹

Colonel Capers was the master huntsman of deserters. He thought the best way to get the job done was "with dogs and mounted men under the command of an experienced woodsman . . . familiar with the country." ⁹⁰ This was nasty business; one Confederate soldier from Florida, James M. Dancy, remembered that "the most disagreeable service I was called upon to render was hunting deserters." ⁹¹ The harsh methods used in apprehending deserters helped to build up sympathy for them among the general population. Governor Milton wrote Secretary of War Seddon that the "lawless and cruel violence" exerted against deserters and their families has "increased the number

87. *Ibid.*, 317.

88. Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, 223-24.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Capers to Cross, March 27, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LIII, 318.

91. James M. Dancy *Memoirs of the War and Reconstruction* (typescript copy), p. 9, box 27, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

of deserters and prevented many from returning to their commands." ⁹² Milton had learned that the number of deserters in East, South, and part of Middle Florida had increased, and that they sought revenge for the cruel methods used against them: "An increased force [is] necessary to protect the lives and property of loyal citizens from the retaliation threatened and now being executed by deserters and by those . . . in the immediate localities where the injuries were inflicted, [who] sympathize with or fear them." ⁹³

In their efforts to stamp out or control the problem of desertion, Confederate authorities failed miserably. Of the more than 2,219 Florida soldiers recorded as deserters, only 220 were ever returned to the army. ⁹⁴ In fact, the situation in Florida had become rather ludicrous by 1864. One Confederate general promised the chief commissary of the state that the next group of soldiers sent to South Florida to fight deserters would be Confederate regulars; the last force was composed of local irregulars and when they were given arms to fight deserters and Federals, fifty-seven of the eighty immediately deserted themselves and joined the Union forces. ⁹⁵

In the spring of 1865, the internal collapse of Confederate Florida was fast approaching. Much of East Florida was already in Federal hands, and here Union sentiment prevailed. West, South, and Middle Florida were overrun with deserters, conscription evaders, refugees, and fugitive slaves. Throughout the state, the desire for peace - even without victory - was dominant. The events at Appomattox Courthouse would soon mean the fulfillment of that desire.

92. Milton to Seddon, June 30, 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. I, LIII, 349-51.

93. Milton to Anderson, June 20, 1864, *ibid.*, 343.

94. *Official Records*, Ser. IV, III, 1109.

95. William G. Barth to P. W. White, April 19, 1864, *ibid.*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. 2, 444.