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FLORIDA PREPARES FOR WAR, 1860-1861

by GEORGE C. BITTLE*

Florida in 1860 cast a peculiar aura. On the fourth of July, Susan Bradford Eppes, daughter of a prominent Tallahassee area planter, was “so proud of the Star-Spangled Banner” carried in a holiday parade by the Governor’s Guards.¹ Yet, members of the same militia unit may already have been contemplating the possibility of secession from the Union. West of Tallahassee, in Calhoun County, Florida’s most serious military event of the year was taking shape this same day. Despite ominous political tensions, North and South, local people seemed most concerned with their own immediate problems.² A few years earlier two county families had been involved in a feud which left only one, the Durdens, resident. Old social wounds were reopened when a group of anti-Durden people held a fish fry at which petitions were circulated requesting their enemy’s physical removal or extermination. The Durdens did not leave, and in time one member of their family was found dead from twenty gunshot wounds. After this incident, there followed a pitched battle on the courthouse square in Blountstown. The anti-Durdens won and then proceeded to ride over the countryside hunting down their enemy.³

Law and order completely broke down. Roaming gangs in the next few weeks made life and property in Calhoun County unsafe. The county judge and solicitor tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a peace agreement before requesting aid from the Fifth Florida Militia Regiment commander. One battalion of 150 militiamen scouted throughout the county for “a few days” and successfully broke the outlaw bands. A group of Tallahassee soldiers returned in November with twenty-seven prisoners and the “new” Apalachicola Rifle Company “made a very respectable

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1. Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventual Years* (Macon, 1926; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1968), 126.
2. Tampa *Florida Peninsula*, November 10, 1860.
3. *Ibid.*

appearance" while guarding twenty-four "war" prisoners at their hometown jail.⁴

Calhoun County's apathy toward military preparation in the closing months of 1860 was generally shared by the rest of the state. Between late June and December, available Florida newspapers carried only a few military notices, all of which concerned regular enrolled militia musters in addition to accounts of the Calhoun County "war."⁵ St. Augustine experienced "a large turnout" at its mid-November area brigade exercise. According to reports, "the citizen soldiery appeared well, performing . . . in a creditable manner," and the local Independent Blues were described as an "elegant and gallant corps." In December the St. Augustine Milton Guards and Independent Blues offered their services to the city as "minute men" companies. Also, at this time James Patton Anderson, a future Confederate general, was serving as captain of the Jefferson Rifles.⁶

Apparently a segment of the Florida population was becoming more military-minded. In the closing weeks of 1860 many local companies, which in most cases had no legal basis, came into existence. Most of these units were poorly armed at best; and it is likely that they had more effect on the development of a militant political attitude than they did on the organization of an effective militia. Most Floridians remained more interested in their homes and farms than in military affairs.⁷ In his message to the legislature, November 27, 1860, Governor Madison Starke Perry requested a \$100,000 military fund and a new militia law. The money was appropriated, but no law was enacted. With the funds, the governor made a trip to South Carolina in order to buy arms and to confer with secessionist leaders.⁸ However, by the end of the year, Florida was no more ready for war than were most other states, both North and

4. *Ibid.*, November 3, 10, 1860.

5. *Ibid.*, June 23, 1860 to January 13, 1861, *passim*; *St. Augustine Examiner*, October 29, 1859 to November 17, 1860, *passim*.

6. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1860; J. J. Dickison, "Military History of Florida," in Clement A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History: A Library of Confederate States History*, 12 vols. (Atlanta, 1899), XI, 195-96.

7. William W. Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 45, 53, 88.

8. John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 12.

South. The various state militias generally were in an unorganized condition.⁹

Florida's white population felt so strongly about slavery and the other sectional issues of the day that on January 10, 1861, she became the third of eleven southern states to leave the union.¹⁰ The Civil War was to be different from any other struggle in which the Florida militia had been involved; state soldiers would now be forced to leave their home soil and to fight for a central government. Only skirmishes and a few battles of minor importance were fought in Florida during the Civil War.

It is impossible to assume that the events of early 1861 would suddenly transform paper militia organizations into living military machines. Governor John Milton delivered a special war problems message to his legislature in November 1861, which confirmed the view that all had not gone smoothly in the state's military planning. Milton stated that Florida's militia organization was imperfect because laws governing that body were "inconsistent . . . with any known system based upon the science of war." He faced the "humiliating fact" that there was not a completely equipped company in the state force. The governor blamed this deplorable condition on the manner in which Confederate service volunteer companies and regiments had been raised. There was virtually no company area in the state which had the minimum number of men required by law to meet its quota.¹¹

Companies and regiments seeking active duty in 1861 "had destroyed the organized militia, and in their turn, they have been broken up by the formation of volunteer" Confederate army organizations. The governor criticized the Confederate recruiters who had come into Florida, ignoring state military officials. He considered this an illegal intrusion into Florida's internal affairs. The confusion did not result in an increased number of fighting men; it more than doubled the officer corps size so that in many cases men holding field grades, major and above, did not command enough troops to warrant their rank.

9. William A. Ganoe, *The History of the United States Army* (New York, 1924), 247.

10. Dickison, "Military History of Florida," 10.

11. "Governor's Message," in *Florida Senate Journal* (1861), 77-78.

When Milton delivered his message, there were only four volunteer militia companies on active state duty, and the governor acknowledged he could not explain what had happened to two cavalry regiments and ten infantry companies that earlier had been mustered into Florida service. The four companies on active state duty were not properly equipped, and there were no means to provide them with what they needed. Milton indicated if weapons became available he would first arm Florida soldiers on coast defense duty.¹² The governor noted that a Confederate requisition for 1,000 infantrymen made on June 30, five months before, still had not been met. Yet, while these troops could not be mustered, many units of so-called cavalry waited around without being able to equip themselves.¹³ Despite his acknowledgment that Florida cavalymen could not be armed, Milton argued that the state needed ten more independent cavalry companies.¹⁴ It is not surprising that the governor's message presented a confused military affairs picture. The state was in a turmoil. Augustus Henry Mathers, Florida Fourth Confederate Regiment, received a letter in December from his wife in Micanopy. She wrote that everything was in a state of great disorder. Civil authority had broken down to the point that it was not safe to send her husband anything by stage-coach.¹⁵

The first months in 1861 brought Florida's military problems to a crux. Governor Milton opposed Confederate interference with his soldier procurement process. Nevertheless, this seemed to be the only relatively efficient way to field a unified southern states army. Milton admitted that he did not know where to find the equivalent of three lost state regiments. In conditions such as these, the probability is that there was no effective state central military authority.

After leaving the Union, the Florida secession convention demonstrated what appeared to be a rather naive attitude toward military affairs. While Joseph Finegan, the defense committee chairman and a future Confederate brigadier, predicted

12. *Ibid.*, 77-78, 80.

13. *Ibid.*, 79-82.

14. *Ibid.*, 79-82.

15. Franklin A. Doty, ed., "The Civil War Letters of Augustus Henry Mathers, Assistant Surgeon, Fourth Florida Regiment, C.S.A.," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (October 1957), 107.

on January 14, 1861, that there was virtually no chance of a federal attack against any Florida seaport, he did recommend that artillery batteries be placed at major ports as a preventive measure.¹⁶ On the same day the defense committee recommended that the state legislature, not the convention, be responsible for militia laws. This was confirmed by ordinance fifteen. Previous to this declaration, the convention, by ordinance twelve, had allowed legislative appointment of necessary state general officers, and then ordinance thirteen had specifically requested that William H. Chase of Pensacola be made a major general. In addition Governor Perry was ordered to extend Florida's jurisdiction over "all forts, arsenals, docks, yards" and other federal property within the state. Not until April 22, 1861, did the convention authorize Perry to defend critical seacoast points, and then it was recognized that state forces would be used only until the Confederate government replaced them.¹⁷

On February 14, 1861, the state legislature enacted a new militia law. General duty liability was not changed, however, there were major officer class revisions. These grades were now ranked according to the numbers of men commanded, and the governor could create a seven-member active service rule-making board. The state adjutant general, a captain, was to serve a two-year tour. In addition to his other administrative duties, this official was to keep enrollment lists of units which agreed to muster within five days notice for up to six months active state duty. A special election was to be held in order that this new volunteer class might elect company and regimental officers. Old law volunteer organizations had the option of joining this state army branch as a unit. Administratively, a state ordinance department was to be established.¹⁸

Volunteer companies not on active state duty were allowed to write their own codes which could be used besides the basic legal requisites. Provisions were made for the formation of independent artillery and cavalry companies. All militia companies not on active state duty could be made to muster four times a year, but did not have to meet at all unless ordered to

16. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Florida, Begun and Held at the Capital in the City of Tallahassee on Thursday, January 3, A.D. 1861* (Tallahassee, 1861), 51-52.

17. *Ibid.*, 42, 51-52, 63, 103-05.

18. *Florida Session Laws, 1860*, 16-17, 19-21.

do so by a higher command level. Interestingly, militia disciplinary matters were handled under 1845 standards rather than those of the 1859 law.¹⁹ This may have been done because under the 1859 act, civil courts collected fines and in wartime it was presumably thought desirable to retain discipline within the military framework.²⁰

Secession convention military authority was once again used in April 1861, seemingly as a reaction to the February legislative effort. The governor was authorized to activate as many state units as necessary, and these troops were to serve under current Confederate army rules.²¹ Then, the governor-appointed board of state officers decided that the 1857 United States army rules would be Florida's standard and that an organized volunteer cavalry company could not be called on to furnish infantry troops.²² Governor Milton later demonstrated his dissatisfaction with the numerous inadequately armed cavalry units that came into existence and could not be used as infantry.

Mrs. Susan Bradford Eppes left an account of how two volunteer companies were formed in the Tallahassee area during the spring of 1861. On March 17 her brother-in-law, Junius Taylor, informed his family that he was helping raise a unit called Dixie Yeomen. One month later at a picnic, local ladies presented the new group with a flag. After dinner the affair concluded with boat rides and target practice. Mrs. Eppes rightly sensed that "this does not seem like war." The Dixie Yeomen were apparently held in stand-by status under the February state law until September 15, 1861, when they were sent to Palatka where they were "drilled." During March 1862, the company was incorporated into the Fifth Florida Confederate Regiment.²³ The Howell Guards, another Tallahassee area unit, requested active state duty in March 1861, but not until the end of July were they in camp "drilling every day." The company left Tallahassee by train August 12 amid a crowd of "mothers, wives, sisters, sweethearts, friends . . . all there . . . women with

19. *Ibid.*, 19, 22, 24, 62.

20. *Florida Session Laws, 1859, Adjourned Session*, 9-11; *Florida Session Laws, 1845*, 90-103.

21. *Secession Convention Journal, Called Session*, 61-62.

22. *Tampa Florida Peninsula*, May 11, 1861.

23. Eppes, *Through Some Eventual Years*, 151, 158-59.

bright smiling faces which changed to tears as soon as the train was out of sight."²⁴

A March 6, 1861, Confederate draft law signaled the beginning of the end for state militia systems as a major southern war force. This was quickly followed on March 9 by a call for 500 Florida men to serve the central government's needs at Pensacola.²⁵ Badly needed direction had been given to the state's soldier procurement. The governor was bound by his legislature, secession convention ordinances, and the board of officers created under the April 1861 militia law. There would seem to be some question as to who was running Florida militia affairs.

State control was further diminished on June 30, 1861, when Confederate military districts were placed within the state. Each area's commanding officer was empowered to requisition troops from the governor.²⁶ Milton opposed this Confederate authority expansion; he feared central government officers might be able to override state authority and destroy "the last vestige of human liberty."²⁷ The governor believed that Floridians wanted him personally in charge of their state's defense, and he called for a clear distinction between militia and Confederate troops.²⁸ Milton did not seem able to grasp the importance of unifying the southern army.

Governor Milton after he assumed office in October 1861, faced many military problems not of his own making. He complained that former Governor Perry had intervened in militia affairs to insure that Edward Hopkins would be elected Fourth Regiment colonel. The governor felt that Hopkins was unfit for the post and that his opponent, D. P. Holland, was the only man that Hopkins could defeat in the regimental election.²⁹ Hopkins had been Milton's political rival in the last governor's race.³⁰

24. *Ibid.*, 150, 157-58.

25. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, 90-91.

26. *Ibid.*, 95-96.

27. John Milton to Jefferson Davis, December 9, 1861, Index to "Governor John Milton Letterbook, 1861-1863," 58-60, Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa; microfilm copy, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

28. Milton to Davis, November 10, 1861, *ibid.*, 58-60.

29. Milton to Davis, October 29, 1861, John Milton Letters, mss, box 27, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

30. Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., "The Blockade and Fall of Apalachicola, 1861-1862," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLI (July 1962), 41.

Milton was likely pleased that Hopkins lost his position during the Fourth Florida's 1862 reorganization.³¹ Governor Perry again antagonized Milton in connection with the Fifth Regiment's organization. This unit came into being more slowly than expected because Perry had illegally appointed Holland lieutenant colonel of five artillery companies which should have been part of the new regiment.³²

Another of Governor Milton's problems was the excessive number of cavalry companies formed. For Florida's defense, the governor felt that cavalymen were "perhaps less efficient" than any other type troops, and he refused recognition to ten such prospective volunteer companies during the first half of October 1861. Milton advocated that small Confederate cavalry groups located at key points serve as defense cadres. This force was to be supported by a large number of militia infantrymen and light artillerymen who would pursue their normal occupations and yet be ready to respond when needed.³³ The same technique had already proved unsuccessful during the Third Seminole War of the 1850s.³⁴

On December 9, 1861, the governor declared that too many Florida men had been mustered into the Confederate cavalry service. Most of these soldiers did not have proper horses or arms and were merely sitting in camps eating food needed elsewhere.³⁵ At this time W. G. M. Davis was raising an officially recognized Confederate cavalry regiment which Milton believed hindered needed infantry recruiting efforts. The governor now felt that no Florida defense cavalry units were needed. Judah P. Benjamin, Confederate secretary of war, settled the issue by allowing Davis to raise his regiment, but the secretary ordered that no more troops of this type were to be accepted from Florida.³⁶ In a sense, Milton had won his point, and yet, he really had not.

31. Board of State Institutions, *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indian, Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Tallahassee, 1903), 118.

32. Milton to Stephen R. Mallory, October 2, 1861, Stephen R. Mallory Letters, mss. box 27, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

33. Milton to Davis, October 18, 1861, *ibid.*

34. "Governor's Message," *Florida House Journal* (1856), 15-17; J. Broome to Jesse Carter, March 18, 1856, *ibid.*, appendix, Correspondence Relating to Indian Affairs, 44-45, 58-59.

35. Milton to Davis, December 9, 1861, Milton Letterbook, 86-90.

36. *Ibid.*, Milton to Davis, October 18, 1861, *ibid.*, 12-16; J. P. Benjamin

Artillery units presented still another serious case. By the end of 1861 there were very few ordnance pieces available. The Confederate government did accept self-equipped artillery companies.³⁷ Milton pointed out that howitzers provided for Tallahassee defense lacked necessary equipment and that empty shells comprised the only available ammunition. He also noted that two thirty-two pounders at St. Marks Lighthouse had only eight rounds between them.³⁸ On the St. Johns River during 1861, a lack of Confederate artillery enabled the federals to move freely.³⁹

In early November 1861, the state's major defense burden rested with the Third and Fourth Confederate Florida Infantry Regiments. Four other companies of state troops were at Fernandina and nine were at Apalachicola.⁴⁰ Pensacola was defended by a Confederate force. Third and Fourth Regiment men did not fare well merely because they were in the Confederate Army. Captain Charles A. Gee, Fourth Regiment, reported that "my men are really suffering because they have not been paid." In addition, most of his men lacked adequate clothing.⁴¹ On December 17, the Florida quartermaster general was ordered to pay all troop expenses except salaries incurred during active state service.⁴² Not every man was willing to accept the inconveniences of a soldier's life. Positions such as railroad conductor, which exempted the holder from military duty, sold for high prices even in 1861. As one contemporary noted, "the towns are filled with idlers . . . who will prate by the hour of patriotism . . . and of the cowardly Yankees."⁴³

By January 1862, Florida could not "furnish 'armed and equipped' even the Infantry, Artillery, and Coast Guards necessary to the defense of the State."⁴⁴ This was the ultimate military

Circular Letter, 1861, in *ibid.*, 66-69; Milton to Mallory, November 2, 1861, *ibid.*, 44-48; Milton to Benjamin, January 3, 1862, *ibid.*, 93-97.

37. J. P. Benjamin Circular Letter, 1861, in *ibid.*, 66-69; Milton to Benjamin, January 9, 1862, *ibid.*, 93-97.

38. Milton to James H. Trapier, October 29, 1861, *ibid.*, 31.

39. Mary E. Dickison, *Dickison and His Men, Reminiscences of the War in Florida* (Louisville, 1890; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1962), 173.

40. Milton to Trapier, November 6, 1861, Milton Letterbook, 52-54.

41. *Florida House Journal* (1861), appendix, 38.

42. *Florida Session Laws* (1861), 70.

43. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes or Florida New and Old* (Jacksonville, 1883, facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1962), 360-61.

44. Milton to Benjamin, January 3, 1862, Milton Letterbook, 93-97.

problem, short of complete defeat. Without proper arms these soldiers were almost totally useless for Florida's defense, yet they had to be maintained. When the crisis came with Federal invasions of both the east and gulf coasts of Florida there was little resistance that could be offered.