

1986

The Seymour Decision: An Appraisal of the Olustee Campaign

William N. Nulty

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Nulty, William N. (1986) "The Seymour Decision: An Appraisal of the Olustee Campaign," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 65 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol65/iss3/4>

THE SEYMOUR DECISION: AN APPRAISAL
OF THE OLUSTEE CAMPAIGN

by WILLIAM H. NULTY

JUST before seven A.M. on February 20, 1864, Colonel Guy V. Henry's mounted brigade, the advance guard of the Union forces commanded by Brigadier General Truman Seymour, departed Barber's Ford, Florida, heading west on the Lake City and Jacksonville Road. Composed of the Fortieth Massachusetts Mounted Infantry with the First Massachusetts Independent Cavalry attached and Captain Samuel S. Elder's Horse Battery with four pieces of artillery, the mounted men soon outdistanced those marching in brigade columns. The sky was clear and gold sunlight was just starting to filter down through the pines.¹ In a report written two days later, Seymour stated that his objectives were to make contact with a Confederate force (he estimated it between 4,000 and 5,000) at or near Lake City, and then to push his mounted force on to the Suwannee River and destroy the railroad bridge crossing that stream.² General Seymour's force included, in addition to the mounted force, eight infantry regiments and two artillery batteries, a total of 5,115 men and sixteen pieces of artillery. By dawn the following day, 1,355 men, a little over twenty-six per cent of the Union force involved, would be killed or wounded, and 506 would be missing or captured. The battle that took place that day was proportionately the third bloodiest battle of the entire Civil War for the Union Army and the bloodiest of any of the Federal defeats.³

William H. Nulty is a history teacher at Orange Park High School, Orange Park, Florida. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Florida, Gainesville.

1. *New York Herald*, March 1, 1864.
2. Truman Seymour to John Wesley Turner, February 22, 1864, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 53 vols. (Washington, 1880-1901), (hereinafter cited as *OR*), Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 286-87.
3. Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die* (University, AL, 1982), 10; Thomas Leonard Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War* (Bloomington, 1957), 75, 109.

General Seymour's decision to advance that morning, precipitating the Battle of Olustee, was made in direct disobedience to a plan of operations given him by his immediate superior, General Quincy A. Gillmore, commander of the Federal Department of the South headquartered at Hilton Head, South Carolina. It also demonstrated the complete contradiction of Seymour's intentions as he had conveyed them the previous week to General Gillmore. The decision was a crucial one, it was responsible for the failure of the Federal expedition into Florida that had been so far highly successful. At the time of General Seymour's decision to advance, the Federals possessed great potential for both taking Florida out of the Confederacy and severing a subsistence supply line upon which both General Braxton Bragg's Army of the Tennessee and General P. G. T. Beauregard's Confederate forces, located on the South Atlantic coast, were dependent. While the reasoning behind Seymour's decision to confront the Confederates is not known, an examination of the events surrounding his changed plan may help explain it.

In Florida Seymour was in charge of a mobile maneuver force that was part of a larger expedition led by General Gillmore. On December 15, 1863, Gillmore had suggested a Florida expedition to Henry Wager Halleck, commanding general of the Army. General Gillmore believed that he could recover a valuable part of the state, cut off a rich source of the enemy's supplies, and recruit colored troops.⁴

The Union forces laying siege to Charleston and Savannah had been stalemated for some time, and the possibility of successful raids into Florida had been demonstrated in 1862 and 1863, although not on as large a scale as the expedition now contemplated. On December 22, 1863, General Halleck granted general approval for a military expedition into Florida as long as Federal positions at Charleston remained secure.⁵

Coincidentally, President Lincoln had written to Gillmore on January 13, 1864, requesting that he give what assistance he could to Major John Hay, Lincoln's private secretary, who was being sent to Florida to enroll voters loyal to the Union. No

4. Quincy A. Gillmore to Henry Wager Halleck, December 15, 1863, *OR*, Ser. I, XXVIII, Pt. II, 129.
5. Halleck to Gillmore, December 22, 1863, *ibid.*, 134.

mention was made in Lincoln's letter of any proposed military operation. Major Hay, who arrived at General Gillmore's headquarters at Hilton Head, South Carolina, on January 20, 1864, was en route to Florida in response to the urgent requests of Union supporters who believed that the state could be reconstructed.⁶

General Gillmore responded after more than a week's delay to General Halleck's request for a clarification of the objectives for the proposed Florida expedition. In his report, Gillmore added the political goal to the three he had listed in his December 15 request. He stated that this additional objective was "in accordance with instructions which I have received from the President."⁷ Gillmore, in order to gain Halleck's approval for the proposed expedition, was not being completely candid in his statement. In a subsequent inquiry by the United States Senate Joint Committee on the Conduct and Expenditures of the War into the origin, progress, and results of the Florida expedition, Gillmore's chief of staff, Brigadier General John W. Turner, was asked: "Did Major Hay bring down any orders or directions of a military character, or were his instructions entirely of a civil nature?" Turner answered: "My understanding was that Major Hay's instructions were entirely of a civil nature; that General Gillmore was simply to afford him facilities for taking a register of the names of the qualified legal voters of the State of Florida."⁸

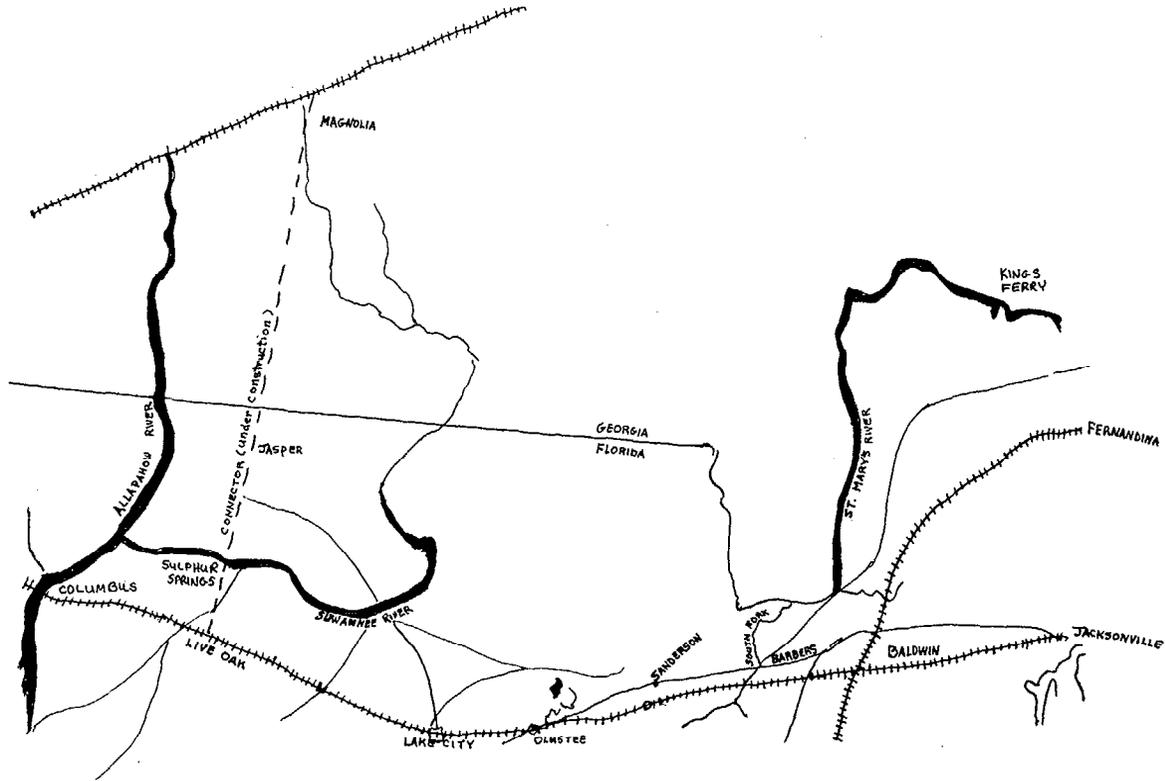
Under cover of a diversionary attack against Confederate forces at Charleston, the Federal expedition sailed on February 6, 1864, for Florida, and made a surprise landing at Jacksonville, the following day. The plan was to push rapidly inland to the rail junction at Baldwin and to seize a train if one was there.⁹ There was a delay in crossing the bar at the mouth of the St. Johns River, and the full Union force was not ashore until noon on February 8. Before sundown, a portion of the invading force left Jacksonville in three columns heading west. Camp Finegan, a Confederate installation some ten to twelve miles distant, was

6. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York, 1939), III, 6.

7. Gillmore to Halleck, January 31, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 279.

8. U. S. Congress. Senate. *Conduct of the War*, 38th Cong., 1st sess., S.R. 47, 1864, 9.

9. Seymour to Gillmore, February 5, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, 280-81.



Drawn from an 1870 Surveyor General's map, state of Georgia.

surprised and seized although a number of its southern defenders escaped. The Union mounted force under Colonel Henry bypassed the camp and captured four pieces of artillery belonging to the Milton Light Artillery. Baldwin was reached about sunrise on February 9. Three railroad cars were captured, one containing a gun belonging to the Milton Light Artillery, and a large quantity of supplies—cotton, rice, tobacco, pistols, and other property valued at a half million dollars.¹⁰ The Baldwin junction connected the rail line from Fernandina to Cedar Key with the road running from Jacksonville to the area west of Tallahassee. It was a key point, important to the flow of subsistence supplies for the Confederacy.

General Seymour reported the capture of Baldwin to General Gillmore but expressed disappointment over the failure to seize a train. A locomotive was essential to resupply his troops moving westward beyond Baldwin. Using wagons would not be a very satisfactory alternative.¹¹ Gillmore assured Seymour that a locomotive would be available within a day and instructed him to push forward towards the Suwannee River.¹² Colonel Henry's mounted force had already left Baldwin on the morning of February 10, capturing thirteen bales of cotton about four miles from the town. Upon approaching Barber's Ford the Federals found 1,000 barrels of turpentine and 500 pounds of bacon in a building next to the railroad.¹³ Colonel Henry's troops continued through Barber's Ford, cautiously approaching the South Fork of the St. Mary's River where the advance guard ran into an ambush manned by elements of the Second Florida Cavalry. Both sides lost several men, but the much stronger Union force continued through to Sanderson, arriving about six in the evening. Here they found several buildings in flames, one which reportedly held 3,000 bushels of corn and another some 2,000 barrels of turpentine and resin.¹⁴ The Federals captured 200 bags of salt, fifty bushels of oats, and other commissary supplies.¹⁵

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

11. Seymour to Gillmore, February 10, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, LIII, 99.

12. Gillmore to Seymour, *ibid.*, XXXV, Pt. I, 473.

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

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

The mounted Union raiding force left Sanderson about two the following morning, moving west towards Lake City. Within a mile and one-half from Lake City the horsemen encountered a Confederate force deployed in a line of skirmishers in a belt of woods. After some initial sparring by both sides, Colonel Henry decided to pull back until such time as the infantry, now some thirty-four miles to the rear at Sanderson, had reached him. Henry also had to take into consideration the approaching darkness, the condition of the horses, and an impending rainstorm.¹⁶

Reporting to Gillmore from Baldwin on the morning of February 11, and prior to Colonel Henry's contact with the Confederate forces at Lake City, General Seymour assessed the status of the operation.¹⁷ Without adequate transportation for resupply, any move towards Lake City, he felt, was impractical. Moreover, he believed that the Confederates there had more infantry and artillery than he currently had available. Furthermore, Seymour agreed that, "the backbone of rebeldom is not here" in Florida; he did not believe that Florida would rejoin the Union until there were other Federal victories. He suggested a possible political motive for the operation, noting that it was "in opposition to sound strategy" and would have not been permitted had General Halleck been directing the operation.¹⁸ He recommended that the advance force be withdrawn, that only Jacksonville and Palatka be held, and that the St. Johns River

16. *Ibid.*; Benjamin W. Crowninshield, *A History of the First Regiment of Massachusetts Cavalry Volunteers* (New York, 1891), 261.

17. Seymour to Gillmore, February 11, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 281-82.

18. *Ibid.* In September 1863, L. D. Stickney, federal tax commissioner for Florida, suggested to Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury and a potential Republican candidate for president in 1864, that a Florida military expedition was needed and that General Gillmore was favorable to the idea. In December of the same year Stickney wrote to Chase again promoting an expedition and suggesting that Gillmore might be confirmed as a major general for his "services" in such an operation. Since federal tax commissioners could only function in occupied territory, Stickney, obviously, would profit from expanded federal control in Florida. Seymour was also bringing up the fact that approval for the Florida expedition had come from a higher source than the commander in chief of the army. See Ovid L. Futch, "Salmon P. Chase and Civil War Politics in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 32 (January 1954), 169-70; Stickney to Chase, December 11, 1863, quoted in David Herbert Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York, 1954), 190.

be used as the base for a cavalry assault into the middle of the state. Any movement forward, Seymour noted, would have to be predicated upon what Colonel Henry encountered at Lake City. He indicated that he would "regret being compelled to go beyond the Saint Mary's South Fork with my infantry."¹⁹

Gillmore and Seymour conferred together at Baldwin the night before the latter's letter was written. Captain Gustavas Sullivan Dana, chief signal officer on Seymour's staff, recorded that the two men had spent most of the night talking while "us poor staff officers were trying to catch 40 winks on the floor."²⁰ According to Captain Dana, "neither general had much faith in the success of the expedition and that it was purely a political move, intending to drive the rebels to the west side of the Suwannee River giving us the whole east side of the State which was to be protected by gunboats patrolling the Suwannee and Saint Mary's Rivers, and thus enabling the large part of the State to have a vote in the coming presidential election."²¹ If Dana's observations were accurate, both Gillmore and Seymour were taking a much more limited view of the expeditions' objectives than had been originally proposed. It would also seem that Gillmore had not really understood, or was deliberately disregarding, the instructions given him by President Lincoln and John Hay, and was elevating the political purpose to top priority over the other objectives.

Apparently apprehensive about the advance of Union forces past Sanderson, Gillmore ordered eight companies of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts to Baldwin and directed Seymour not to "risk a repulse in advancing on Lake City, but hold Sanderson unless there are reasons for falling back which I don't know."²² Gillmore followed this message with another advising Seymour that if his advance met serious opposition, he should concentrate at Sanderson and at the South Fork of the Saint Mary's.²³ Seymour replied by telegraph (it had just been installed that day) from Baldwin to Jacksonville that there was no news from

19. Seymour to Gillmore, February 11, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 281-82.

20. Lester L. Swift, ed., "Captain Dana in Florida: A Narrative of the Seymour Expedition," *Civil War History* 11 (September 1965), 248.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Gillmore to Seymour, February 11, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 282-83.

23. *Ibid.*

Colonel Henry and that his command had already left for Sanderson. One regiment, the Third U. S. Colored Troops, remained at Baldwin, and another, the Eighth U. S. Colored Troops, at Pickett's (Ten Mile Station).²⁴

From Sanderson, on the morning of February 12, General Seymour informed General Gillmore that although he still had not heard from Colonel Henry, he was ordering the advance force back to Sanderson and was sending a regiment out to meet them. Seymour planned to destroy public property at Sanderson, and to return with Colonel Henry's force to the South Fork of the Saint Mary's.²⁵ Gillmore warned Seymour of a possible mounted force that might be approaching from the north, and he ordered him to concentrate his forces at Baldwin. He also informed Seymour that the expected locomotive had not yet arrived.²⁶

Although neither Gillmore nor Seymour had anything concrete indicating the presence of any formidable opposition, they appeared to be warning each other to be cautious. Seymour's loss of contact for a time with his advance force left him without specific information on the enemy situation. At the same time, General Gillmore assumed that if Seymour was ordering Colonel Henry back it was because he knew the Confederates were too strong.²⁷ Gillmore took additional precautions by ordering the Twenty-fourth Massachusetts regiment which had been garrisoning St. Augustine to Palatka. Elements of the Third U. S. Colored Troops were to scout the South Ford of the St. Mary's River.²⁸

When Henry returned to Sanderson in the early afternoon on February 12, Seymour apparently became less cautious. He informed General Gillmore that while both Colonel Henry and Captain Elder agreed with him on the need of only holding the South Fork of the Saint Mary's for the present, he was dispatching Henry on a raid to Gainesville to try to intercept the trains that were supposed to be there. Seymour asked that the reinforcements he had requested, including another artillery bat-

24. Seymour to Gillmore, *ibid.*, 283.

25. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1864, 283.

26. Gillmore to Seymour, *ibid.*, 283-84.

27. *Ibid.*, LIII, 100.

28. *Ibid.*

tery, be sent to Baldwin. He also wanted troops concentrated at a point where they could be supplied in anticipation of being called up to Barber's Ford before the next advance. Seymour ordered all ferry boats on the St. Mary's River destroyed and suggested that there be a naval demonstration at Savannah prior to or during his next advance.²⁹

General Gillmore apparently was satisfied with the progress of the expedition, although he wondered about its future potential for greater success. In a report, February 13, to General Halleck, he noted that the military operations necessary to achieve the objectives of the expedition "promise to be of no great magnitude." General Seymour, he reported, was holding Baldwin and the crossing at Saint Mary's South Fork. Gillmore planned to construct small works "capable of resisting a *coup de main*" at Jacksonville, Baldwin, Palatka, and perhaps other places, each holding some 200 to 300 men. He felt that 2,500 men, in addition to the two infantry regiments currently in garrison at Fernandina and St. Augustine, together with captured artillery, would be sufficient for his operation. Gillmore intended to occupy the St. Johns River permanently, and he hoped "the lumber and turpentine trade" would be revived by "loyal" men. He informed General Halleck that he would be leaving Florida the following day, February 14, for Hilton Head, and that General Seymour would be temporarily in command.³⁰ A letter from General Halleck, written on February 26, apparently before news of the defeat at Olustee had reached Washington, accepted Gillmore's assessment. Halleck requested information on the number of men that could be freed for use against some "other point of the Atlantic or Gulf coast," mentioning Mobile and North Carolina.³¹

General Seymour conducted a series of small raids with his advance force. A fifty-man unit from the Fortieth Massachusetts moved out of Sanderson on February 13 for the raid on Gainesville. The instructions were that no private property was to be destroyed or molested. Federal General Order Number Twenty-four, issued a few days later, threatened dismissal to

29. Seymour to Gillmore, *ibid.*

30. Gillmore to Halleck, February 13, 1864, *ibid.*, XXXV, Pt. I, 293.

31. Halleck to Gillmore, February 26, 1864, *ibid.*, 493-94.

any officer involved in the destruction or pillage of private property.³² The idea was to create good will and encourage more Floridians to support the Union. The Gainesville raid resulted in the capture of property estimated to be worth \$1,000,000, including cotton, turpentine, rosin, sugar, tobacco, and subsistence stores. In accordance with the new policy this property was neither removed nor destroyed, but the subsistence stores were distributed among the residents.³³ No railroad locomotive was captured, although some thirty-six blacks were brought to Jacksonville. Thirty-three enlisted in the Union army.³⁴

A second Federal raid was conducted by Colonel Guy Henry who left Barber's Ford on February 14 with three mounted companies from the Massachusetts Independent Battalion, the 115th New York Infantry regiment, and one gun from Elder's horse battery. The plan was to advance towards Callahan Station near the Georgia border, scour the country, destroy the railroad, and burn ferry boats.³⁵ On February 15, Major Galusha Pennypacker, with 300 men from the Ninety-seventh Pennsylvania and supported by gun-boats, departed Fernandina and moved towards Woodstock Mills and Kings Ferry Mills on the St. Mary's River. He was to seize lumber and a mill gear both of which were needed.³⁶ An additional 200 men from the Ninety-seventh joined the Pennypacker raiders on February 16. Some 1,500,000 board feet of lumber was captured, one-half of which was transported to Fernandina.³⁷ Pennypacker also brought in two deserters, four refugees, and twenty-five blacks.³⁸

Perhaps encouraged by their successes, General Seymour notified General Gillmore on February 16 that he was advancing

32. Federal Order Number Twenty-four issued by Ed. W. Smith, February 15, 1864, *Ibid.*, 481.

33. Seymour to headquarters (J. W. Turner), February 17, 1864, *ibid.*, 296-97.

34. *New York Herald*, March 1, 1864.

35. James H. Clark, *The Iron Hearted Regiment: Being An Account of the Battles, Marches, and Gallant Deeds Performed by the 115th Regiment N.Y. Volunteers* (New York, 1865), 79-80.

36. Isaiah Price, *History of the Ninety-Seventh Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers Infantry During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865, With Biographical Sketches of Its Field and Staff Officers and a Complete Record of Each Officer and Enlisted Man* (Philadelphia, 1875), 234-35.

37. *Ibid.*, 238.

38. Galusha Pennypacker to Henry R. Guss, February 23, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 359-60.

from Baldwin with three additional infantry regiments. He requested that elements of three other regiments be sent from Jacksonville.³⁹ On February 16, Seymour, in a message sent to General Gillmore at his Hilton Head headquarters, demonstrated his knowledge and understanding of the plan of operations that Gillmore had described to Halleck. Referring to a "strong movable column to push well in advance and to be kept constantly active," Seymour asked who was to be commander of these forces.⁴⁰ Although no displeasure with Colonel Henry had been officially recorded, General Seymour believed that the command position should go to an officer of "approved judgement and experience," and he suggested Colonel M. R. Morgan from the Subsistence Department.⁴¹ General Seymour reversed a belief he had held earlier when he stated that the "people of this State, kindly treated by us, will soon be ready to return to the Union." He needed a printing press so that he could communicate with the local populace.⁴²

Later that day, February 16, Seymour informed Gillmore that he would no longer wait for a locomotive or additional supplies and that he was planning to advance, "with the object of destroying the railroad near the Suwannee that there will be no danger of carrying away any portion of the track."⁴³ Seymour urged that a demonstration be made at or near Savannah to deter Confederate troops being dispatched from there. He reported on the troop dispositions he had made to support his own movement, and noted again his critical need for both a locomotive and a printing press. He stated in his letter that he expected to be underway by the time Gillmore received his message.⁴⁴

Upon receiving General Seymour's communications, General Gillmore immediately sent him a note, hand-delivered by his chief of staff, Brigadier General J. W. Turner, suspending the forward movement and ordering the troops back to Baldwin. General Gillmore called attention to his plan of oper-

39. Seymour to Gillmore, February 16, 1864, *ibid.*, 482.

40. *Ibid.*, LIII, 101.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Seymour to Turner, *ibid.*

43. Seymour to Gillmore, *ibid.*, XXXV, Pt. I, 284-85.

44. *Ibid.*

ations and to his last instructions to Seymour. He was to “hold Baldwin and the Saint Mary’s South Fork, as your outposts to the westward of Jacksonville, and to occupy Palatka, Magnolia, on the Saint John’s.” Colonel Henry’s mounted force would be kept in motion “as circumstances might justify or require.”⁴⁵ Gillmore cited Seymour’s earlier statements about the futility of the operation and the poor chances of restoring Florida to the Union. Gillmore indicated that he was confused over what Seymour was doing, and he was ordered to comply with the instructions he had received before General Gillmore had left Florida.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, General Turner’s ship ran into bad weather, and he did not arrive in Florida with General Gillmore’s letter until after the Battle of Olustee had been fought and lost.

General Seymour’s decision to advance is highly controversial and is shrouded in mystery. When General Turner was later questioned by the Senate Committee on the Conduct of the War, and was asked if this advance was considered a breach of orders, he replied: “General Gillmore did not intend or expect to have General Seymour advance.”⁴⁷ Seymour had made that decision, according to Turner, because he believed the population was ready to return to the Union. He did not anticipate a large Confederate force in front of him, and he believed the destruction of the Suwannee River railroad bridge would prevent enemy forces from coming into Florida.⁴⁸

Colonel Joseph W. Hawley, regimental commander of the Seventh Connecticut and acting commander of one of General Seymour’s four brigades at the Battle of Olustee, later wrote of a meeting “a night or two before the battle” that General Seymour had held with “six or eight” of his officers.⁴⁹ According to Hawley, the officers felt that it would be impossible to hold a position in the middle of the state “having for its line of communication a rickety railroad with one engine running sixty

45. Gillmore to Seymour, February 18, 1864, *ibid.*, 285-86.

46. *Ibid.*

47. U. S. Congress. Senate. *Conduct of the War*, 38th Cong., 1st sess., S.R. 47, 1864, 9.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Joseph Hawley, “The Battle of Olustee or Ocean Pond,” Johnson and Buell, eds., *Battles and Leaders*, 4 vols. (New York, 1888), IV, 79.

miles back to the base at Jacksonville.⁵⁰ They believed that the Confederates could both trap the Union forces by allowing them to advance one more day and then interdict the railroad that connected to Jacksonville. Most officers favored using the St. Johns River as the main western line, but Seymour, according to Colonel Hawley, “thought it his duty to go on.”⁵¹

Another theory as to why Seymour changed his mind so suddenly has to do with a plan for a military action in South Carolina that he had submitted to United States Senator Ira Harris from New York on January 12, 1864, one month before the Florida expedition.⁵² The plan suggested an amphibious landing on the South Carolina coast, a march inland of some forty miles, and an attack on the key railroad junction at Branchville, South Carolina. The operation would divide the Confederacy by driving a wedge between Generals Robert E. Lee and Joe Johnston.⁵³ The Branchville rail junction would be fortified, and if the Confederates attacked they would be at a disadvantage. General Seymour was echoing the offensive–defensive strategy envisioned by the former railroad executive, Union General George C. McClellan, who foresaw the importance of rail junctions as strategic targets and the advantage that rifled guns had given to the defense. The plan had a good probability of success at the time of the Port Royal attack in 1862, but it would have been more difficult in 1864. General Lee and General P. G. T. Beauregard, commander of the Confederate forces in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, had reorganized the southern coastal defenses into mobile defenses, giving special attention to the use of railroads and their defense.

When he sent his plan to Senator Harris, General Seymour suggested that General Gillmore would favor it. Since there was no endorsement by Gillmore, apparently Seymour was acting without official approval. Seymour did suggest that Harris bring the plan to the attention of President Lincoln, but asked that “these views might, if you please, be expressed as your own.”⁵⁴

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Seymour to Ira Harris, January 12, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, LIII, 95-98.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

It would seem that General Seymour was being motivated to some extent by his own personal ambitions.

Assigned to the Florida expedition, General Seymour may have become disenchanted with the prospect of being involved with an operation that was smaller in scale and less strategically important than the one that he was proposing for South Carolina. In his letter to Senator Harris, he belittled a Florida expedition, claiming that the state would fall by itself into Union hands when General Johnston was defeated.⁵⁵ He also expressed this opinion later in substance to General Gillmore. Finding himself in Florida with no immediate prospect for more glorious fields of battle, General Seymour seemed to be applying the same strategic reasoning that he had used in his Branchville operation proposal to the situation in Florida. If the railroad bridge over the Suwannee at Columbus could be destroyed, it would separate east and west Florida. Seymour may also have heard that there was a possible second bridge crossing the Suwannee River in the vicinity of Sulphur Springs. Supposedly it was not complete, but was on the proposed rail connector line between Lawton, Georgia, and Live Oak, Florida. The connector line route had been graded and cross-ties laid, but it needed rails. If rail iron became available to the Confederates, the connector line could have been in operation within six weeks.⁵⁶ The existence of even an incomplete connector line bridge, particularly one crossing the Suwannee River relatively close to the bridge at Columbus, may also have tempted General Seymour to risk an advance. The opportunity not only to separate east and west Florida, but to insure the separation of Florida from Georgia by rail made that area of the Suwannee strategically important.

Whether Seymour was aware of the existence of the connector line is not known, but General Gillmore had mentioned to General Halleck that one objective for the Florida expedition would be to prevent the Confederates from moving rail to the connector point.⁵⁷ Seymour did believe that some rail for Florida might be removed to Virginia and used to repair lines there.

55. *Ibid.*

56. C. McClenaghan to H. C. Guerin, October 29, 1863, *ibid.*, XXVIII, Pt. II, 461.

57. Gillmore to Halleck, January 31, 1864, *ibid.*, XXXV, Pt. I, 279.

That had to be prevented. General Seymour may also have felt that his career was languishing in comparison to his fellow officers. Although he had graduated from West Point in 1846, he was subordinate in command to General Gillmore who had graduated from West Point three years later. Seymour had served with distinction as an artillery officer in the Mexican War and against the Seminoles in Florida in 1856-1858. He was at Fort Sumter during the bombardment in April 1861. He commanded a division at Malvern Hill in the Peninsula Campaign, and was brevetted a lieutenant colonel for his actions at Second Manassas. He also distinguished himself at the Battle of South Mountain, and was brevetted a colonel for his performance at Sharpsburg.⁵⁸ He was transferred to Charleston harbor in November 1862, where, under a master plan conceived by General Gillmore, he was the field commander charged with the abortive attack on Battery Wagner in July 1863. In that engagement, the North lost 1,515 men, the South only 181. Military analysts have charged Seymour with being too slow to order supporting units into the attack, a charge that would be repeated in relation to his conduct at Olustee.⁵⁹ If Union battles were listed in terms of losses by percentages of men killed and wounded against the number that participated, Olustee would rank third and Battery Wagner sixth. The percentage of casualties (wounded and killed) for Olustee was 26.5 and for Battery Wagner, 21.4.⁶⁰ One analyst ranking assaults on fortified positions listed Olustee first among the bloodiest defeats for the Union and Battery Wagner second.⁶¹ What is appalling is that the same man, General Seymour, commanded at both battles. Perhaps after a series of distinguishing performances early in the war, General Seymour found himself bogged down for two years, performing the tedious requirements of siege duty in a military area that was a side show to more momentous events and with only a bloody failure to show for his efforts. Anxious

58. Ezra J. Warner, *Generals In Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge, 1959), 176-77, 432-33.
59. Peter Burchard, *One Gallant Rush: Robert Gordon Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment* (Battleboro, VT, 1965), 133, 181.
60. Thomas Leonard Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-1865* (Bloomington, 1957), 75.
61. *Ibid.*; McWhiney and Jamieson, *Attack and Die*, 11.

to recoup his personal career fortunes after the disaster at Battery Wagner, he blundered into an even worse one in Florida.

The decision to advance was made rather suddenly. Despite General Seymour's statement on February 17 that he would be on the move by the time General Gillmore received his letter, it would appear that the final decision to advance was made some time during the night of February 19. George Whittemore, a newspaper correspondent accompanying General Seymour's forces, noted that on Friday, the nineteenth, no one, including General Seymour, supposed that an advance would be made for a few days.⁶² This was evidenced by the activities of men and officers in constructing shelters and other conveniences to provide additional comfort. This probably would not have been done had an immediate move been expected.⁶³ Whittemore reported: "Sometime during the night General Seymour received information of the enemy's whereabouts and plans which led him to believe that by pushing rapidly forward his column, he would be able to defeat the enemy's designs and secure important immediate advantages. Whatever that information may have been, the events of Saturday would indicate it was by no means reliable, or that General Seymour acted upon it with too much haste."⁶⁴

Except for the raids on Gainesville and Callahan Station, Seymour's forces, concentrated in the vicinity of Baldwin and Barber's Ford, had been relatively inactive for nine days after the skirmish at Lake City on February 11. By contrast, the Confederate forces were moving quickly to meet the threat. When Colonel Henry was repulsed at Lake City, General Joseph Finegan, commanding the Confederate troops facing the Federal expedition, reported having 600 infantry and cavalry and two guns.⁶⁵ By February 13, Finegan reported 2,250 infantry and cavalry and ten guns, and by the time General Seymour made his move, he had amassed 5,200 infantry and cavalry and three batteries containing twelve guns.⁶⁶ Most of these troops were

62. *New York Times*, March 1, 1864.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. George Baltzell, "The Battle of Olustee," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 9 (April 1931), 207.

66. *Ibid.*

from the now weakened Charleston and Savannah defenses, but General Beauregard considered the threat to his subsistence supply line from Florida critical.⁶⁷ Beauregard also realized the possible potential of the Federal expedition which apparently the Union commanders had not comprehended. He warned General Finegan to be careful of a second landing from the Gulf of Mexico.⁶⁸ A Federal invasion of the Florida Gulf coast, combined with the one at Jacksonville, could have been very successful. Finegan had concentrated all of his forces at Lake City and the rest of the state was almost completely undefended.

General Beauregard was taking a calculated risk by concentrating such a large force in Florida. He was not only risking the weakened coastal defenses before Charleston and Savannah, but he was also placing troops in Florida that the war department in Richmond was pressuring him to send to the relief of the Army of the Tennessee. Beauregard made several attempts to secure a replacement for himself so that he could go to Florida and take charge of the Confederate defense, but he was not successful.⁶⁸ It was an indication, however, of how strongly he felt the threat posed by the Federal expedition. More than 10,000 Confederate troops were eventually diverted from other areas to Florida. The 4,000 or so that fought in the Battle of Olustee traveled by rail through southern Georgia to a point north of Madison, Florida, and then marched overland to the railroad at Madison. Although this massive movement of troops and equipment had to pass relatively close to the Union positions, nowhere is there any indication that General Seymour was either aware of the movement or the number of troops involved during the nine days of his inactivity. He had the means to obtain this information with his mounted units and to do something about it. He also had the means to feel out the Confederate strength in front of him, but there is no indication that he took any such precautions.

Up until the time of General Seymour's command decision

67. *Ibid.*

68. P. G. T. Beauregard to Joseph Finegan, February 11, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, XXXV, Pt. I, 600.

69. Beauregard to Samuel Cooper, February 9, 1864; Beauregard to D. H. Hill, February 9, 1864; Beauregard to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1864, *ibid.*, 581.

to move forward, the Federal expedition into Florida in 1864 was an unqualified success. The landing at Jacksonville had been a surprise, and the rapid movement inland had produced notable results in the capture of men and materials and disruption of Confederate defenses. At the Lake City skirmish on February 11, Colonel Henry had the advantage in men and mobility. Had he been able to push on to Lake City, and then to the Suwannee, he could have captured a locomotive and destroyed the bridge or bridges. Even after the Union troops pulled back, they were successful in conducting raids. General Gillmore conceived of creating a Federal enclave extending from Fernandina to Baldwin to Palatka to St. Augustine and using it to control the central part of the state. It would have significantly reduced Florida as a base for Confederate supplies. Also it would have provided a source of recruits for the Union's black regiments and helped restore Florida to the Union. General Seymour was a combat-experienced officer, yet he made his decision to move forward after more than a week's inactivity in the middle of enemy-occupied territory with little knowledge of the strength or location of his opponent and with inadequate logistic support. Within a few days he had completely reversed his assessment of the expedition and disregarded the advice he had sought from his immediate subordinates. Although informing General Gillmore that he would be on the move on or about February 17, he did not begin until three days later and from all indications that move was the result of a quick decision.

Whatever compelling reason or reasons caused General Seymour to override prudent military judgement and make his fateful decision will never be known. One can only speculate on his strange behavior the week prior to Olustee and the factors that contributed to that decision. His defeat at Olustee ended further Federal interest in Florida and the relatively moderate treatment of the enemy's civilian population as General William T. Sherman would shortly demonstrate. Surprisingly, General Seymour's military career managed to survive both Battery Wagner and Olustee. He was transferred to the Army of the Potomac where he was captured at the Wilderness. After being exchanged, he commanded a division in the Shenandoah Valley, at the siege of Petersburg, and in the Appomattox campaign. He was brevetted a major general in both the regular army and the volunteers at the end of the war. He was promoted to the

substantive rank of major in the Fifth Artillery in 1866, and he served in that position until he voluntarily retired in 1876. He then moved to Florence, Italy, where he died in 1891.⁷⁰

The Federal expedition into Florida in 1864 was not a total failure. It forced the Confederates to divert manpower badly needed elsewhere, it disrupted for a while, and diminished thereafter, subsistence supplies from Florida, and it demonstrated the ability of black soldiers, such as those in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, to perform under fire. Union forces continued to occupy coastal portions of Florida and conduct raids into the interior until the end of the war in the spring of 1865.

70. Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 432-33.