

Salt and Beef - The Ignored Importance of Confederate Florida

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The outcome of the American Civil War is perhaps the events that most often evokes the question “What if?”. From novels like Turtledove’s fanciful *The Guns of the South* to scholarly debates amongst historians, the Civil War has had people asking the question since Reconstruction. Many times, this question is asked in relation to the big decisions or seminal events that are instantly recognizable to casual students of the war. There are dozens of variables in the battle of Gettysburg alone that beg debate. The outcome of that bloody battle could have changed the face of the war as well as the world we know today. Had Chamberlain failed, Stuart been more timely or Picket succeeded, perhaps Washington DC would have been threatened and the outcome of the war less of a foregone conclusion. More often than not, these events get the most attention and are hotly debated.

While the glory of the battlefield seems to be the most popular subject for debate, another issue that has captured the attention of historians is the logistical and economic facet of the war. This author has heard hours of debate rage over the effect that proper European backing would have had on the fiscal situation the Confederacy faced. The situation was desperate to begin with and only became worse as the conflict wore on. The South could not keep clothes on the backs of its soldiers or food in the pots of its citizens. The Federal blockade was working well enough, and there was little in the way of industry to generate revenue for foreign purchases at any rate. However, there was a state

that is not usually associated with the Confederacy. This state had a great impact on the duration of the war in spite of being largely ignored by both Washington and Richmond. Florida arguably kept the boys in gray in the fight much longer than they would have been otherwise.

## THESIS

Florida, third state to secede from the Union, became the proverbial breadbasket of the Confederacy and a ready route for the importation of contraband. Amazingly, Florida supplied up to sixteen thousand troops on the side of the Confederacy and two thousand to the Union, a proportionally huge sum. Florida fought a small war of its own to stay off the limited encroachments of Union forces, while both Richmond and Washington appeared to pay little attention to the Sunshine State<sup>1</sup>. Both Jacksonville and Pensacola were held by Federals early in the war and for the most part stayed in Union possession for the duration. The coast was patrolled and harassed by Union gunboats bent on enforcing the blockade and destroying Confederate infrastructure. However, the interior was largely under the control of the state government, and those areas that were not, were bitterly contested. Had the Union committed significant forces to the subjugation and occupation of the rebellious peninsula, it could have truncated the war. Perhaps President Davis could have been more committed to the defense of the major ports and directed blockade-runners to more effectively use the 1100 miles of coastline to evade union gunboats, thus giving the war effort more breathing room. Had either side of

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<sup>1</sup> *Exploring Florida: A Social Studies Resource For Students And Teachers*, 2009, "Florida's Role In The Civil War: "Supplier Of The Confederacy", [http://fcit.usf.edu/Florida/lessons/cv1\\_war/cv1\\_war1.htm](http://fcit.usf.edu/Florida/lessons/cv1_war/cv1_war1.htm). (accessed April 24, 2009).

the contest been a bit more cognizant of the possible impact of fully controlling Florida, the conduct of the war may have been significantly different.

## ANALYSIS

Just before Florida officially seceded from the Union on January 10, 1861, militia members attempted to take Fort Barrancas in Pensacola, by force<sup>2</sup>. These shots were fired months before the famous conflagration at Fort Sumter. Senator David Yulee decreed that the military installations in Florida, including the emplacements and stores at Forts Pickens, Barrancas and McRee, all of which formed the protection for the harbor in Pensacola, were to be seized from the Federals<sup>3</sup>. After destroying what his forces could not carry, the Federal commander, Lieutenant Adam Slemmer, holed up in Fort Pickens with about 80 troops. As Fort Pickens dominated the harbor, it effectively took the port out of use for the rebels. Colonel William Chase of Florida started his campaign to occupy Fort Pickens on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January. By June, the Federals had reinforced by sea and the Confederates attempted to take the fort in a series of sharp engagements over the next year. In return, Federal artillery pounded the Confederate held areas, eventually leading to a rebel withdrawal. Pensacola remained a small speck of blue, in a sea of Confederate gray, for the duration of the war<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Rodgers, "Florida's War of Nerves," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 38, no. 3 (June 1999): 30-41.

<sup>3</sup> J.J Dickison, *Confederate Military History - Military History of Florida* (Wilmington, North Carolina: Broadfoot, 1989), 21,22.

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, 30-41.

Similarly, Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Fernandina were occupied by rebel forces early on, before the state officially seceded. While Fort Clinch and Fort Marion were soon abandoned to Federals, General Robert Lee ordered the construction of fortifications on the bluffs overlooking the St. Johns River to protect Jacksonville. However, by spring of 1862, he ordered the withdrawal of all significant forces from the protective installations on Florida's coast. These forces were ordered north to bolster the bloodied Army of Tennessee. Only the Apalachicola River was deemed important enough to warrant protection, as it led to the interior of Georgia. Florida was effectively abandoned by Richmond, and would largely be left to fend for itself for the duration of the conflict<sup>5</sup>.

In spite of previous orders, Jacksonville changed hands several times. In spring of 1863 as Florida's General Finnegan was driving Union forces from the city, the Federals burned it much of it to the ground<sup>6</sup>. These skirmishes culminated in Federal occupation in early 1864 by approximately six thousand troops who soon pushed inland in a bid to capture Tallahassee and squash the Floridian insurrection. This invasion stopped cold near Olustee in a bloody battle that would be the largest fought in Florida. The Confederate Army's victory sent the Union forces limping back to Jacksonville, and ended any hope of a major Federal push toward Florida's capital<sup>7</sup>. This defeat coupled

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<sup>5</sup> William W. Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University, 1913), 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> *Exploring Florida: A Social Studies Resource For Students And Teachers*, 2009, "Civil War, Jacksonville," <http://fcit.usf.edu/FLORIDA/docs/c/civatjax.htm>. (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 280-284.

with losses at Marianna and Natural Bridge ended the Union's attempts to occupy Tallahassee, which remained un-captured at the close of the war<sup>8</sup>.

The Confederate forces in Florida were stretched so thin that the engagements in Marianna and Natural Bridge were largely fought by militia units composed of young boys, old men and convalescing regulars that were home recovering from wounds. The Confederate Army showed up late to the vicious fight in Marianna<sup>9</sup> and later the cadets from West Florida Seminary and geriatrics of the "Gadsden Grays" were touted as the heroes of Natural Bridge, in spite of the presence of regulars<sup>10</sup>. This was indicative of the lack of support that Richmond offered to Florida. The hundreds of men who formed the militias collectively known as the "Cowboy Cavalry" were nearly all that stood between Federal raiders and the rich foodstuffs that kept the Confederate Army fed<sup>11,12</sup>. The Cowboy Cavalry was aptly named, as Florida "Crackers" (named for the cracking of their bullwhips) were able cattlemen from the piney woods of North Florida<sup>13</sup>. Conversely, by the end of 1863, the Union was able to raise at least three regiments and several independent companies in Florida, filling ranks with deserters, loyalists and runaway

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<sup>8</sup> "Florida's Role In The Civil War: "Supplier Of The Confederacy"

<sup>9</sup> Dale Cox, *The Battle of Marianna, Florida* (Two Egg, Florida: Dale Cox, 2007), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick L. Cooney, "Chapter 10: The Civil War," *Vernon Johns Society*, Unknown, <http://www.vernonjohns.org/nonracists/jxcivwar.html>. (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> "Florida's Role In The Civil War: "Supplier Of The Confederacy"

<sup>12</sup> Lewis L. Zervas, "Confederate Blockade Runner Conflagration," *America's Civil War* 14, no. 5 (November 2001)

<sup>13</sup> Rick Tonyan, "Cracking Up Cracker Myths," *Halifax Magazine*, September, 1997.

slaves<sup>14,15,16,17</sup>. Nonetheless, Washington still showed little apparent interest in actually finishing the fight for Florida.

Throughout the war the Union Army and Navy was harassed mercilessly by indigenous Confederates, most notably J.J. Dickison of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Florida Cavalry. His exploits up and down the St. Johns basin and throughout North Florida kept both the Federal ground forces and gunboats guessing where he would strike next. Throughout dozens of small engagements, he and his men effectively kept the small expeditions of Federals confined to the coastal areas north of Palatka and Gainesville<sup>18,19</sup>. On the panhandle, near Cedar Key and down to Tampa the rebels were in similar tit-for-tat engagements throughout the war<sup>20</sup>. The Union forces in both cases were never strong enough to take and hold significant portions of the interior for any time, and the Confederacy never showed any interest in strongly fortifying the coastline. Even the major salt-works at St. Andrews Bay and other areas were left to their own devices

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<sup>14</sup> *The Civil War Archive*, January 17, 2009, "Union Regimental Index: Florida," <http://www.civilwararchive.com/unionfl.htm>. (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *The War for Southern Independence in Florida*, 2009, "Military Units Formed in Florida," <http://www.researchonline.net/flcw/flunits.htm>. (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> *The Civil War Gazette*, April 9, 2009, "First Union Black Regiment Was Not The 54th Massachusetts," <http://civilwargazette.wordpress.com/2009/04/09/first-union-black-regiment-was-not-the-54th-massachusetts/> (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Clarence L. Mohr, "Black Troops in Civil War Georgia," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, December 10, 2007, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-783/> (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Dickison

<sup>19</sup> Davis, 301, 314, 314.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, 300,309.

without so much as an infantry squad permanently stationed to protect them. The Federals burned St. Andrews to the ground in 1864 in spite of the presence of several companies of Confederate Cavalry in the area<sup>21</sup>.

The state continued to supply the majority of salt, fish, beef, pork and sugar to the Confederacy, as well as cotton and other food supplies. Small salt-works dotted the coastline and sugarcane grew in abundance. Without these resources that were the fuel that kept the rebel war machine in the field, the Confederate army would soon wither to combat ineffectiveness. It seems that Floridians were worried, but optimistic about their own physical survival as fish and other stocks were abundant enough to keep in plentiful stocks. Yulee wrote to his wife late in 1863 that in spite of the Confederate government's procurement of nearly all of the beef and pork in Florida, they should be able to catch fish aplenty – enough to fill 100 barrels<sup>22</sup>! Notwithstanding harassment by Federals and limited support from the Confederate government, Florida continued to provide more than its fair share to the Southern cause until war's end, even though some contributions were imports.

Blockade-runners hailing from Florida tended to be very shallow draft in order to navigate the treacherous coasts that are protected by both sandbars and reefs. These daring sailors were forced to use the small inlets and river mouths as the major ports were

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<sup>21</sup> "OPERATIONS ON THE FLORIDA COAST; Salt Works near St. Andrew's Sound Destroyed," *New York Times*, May 1 1864.

<sup>22</sup> David L. Yulee, Gainesville, Florida, to Nan Yulee, March 5, 1863, *The House Divided: Florida's Civil War Letters*, George A. Smathers, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, Transcript <http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/yuleemar5.html>. (accessed April 24, 2009).



consistently occupied or blockaded<sup>23</sup>. Thanks to men like Yulee and others, Florida had railheads to most ports and the rail was extensive enough to ship goods north in support of the major actions there<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, shipping from those major ports, with some notable exceptions, was virtually nil. Had the rebels captured and held the deep water harbors and used them to move trade goods out and supplies in, they may have been able to hold on long enough to negotiate a peace with the North. However, it can be argued that the lack of major shipping drove the disposition of the blockade. Thus, the blockade may have grown in strength as the Union Navy learned of increased activity sourced in Florida.

This is evidenced by the escalation in activity surrounding Tampa Bay. While there was some success in running the Federal blockade with shallow draft ships making runs to the Caribbean with cotton, the fact is that the effort was a small one. Tampa was held inland by the rebels, but Federal forces held the strategically located Egmont Key in the mouth of the bay and were accompanied by Union loyal civilians who often paid dearly when they ventured to Tampa for supplies. The Union only committed small squadrons of ships to keep watch on major ports in Florida, generally one or two ships at a time<sup>25</sup>. As rebel activity increased, Federal incursions inland and watchfulness at sea increased. These actions resulted in the limited disruption of contraband shipment and several skirmishes with the Confederate Army and local militias.

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<sup>23</sup> Zerfas

<sup>24</sup> Cooney

<sup>25</sup> Zerfas

There is no doubt that the blockade aided in the strangulation of the Confederacy. However, the Union was hard pressed - especially early on - to field enough ships to patrol such vast areas<sup>26</sup>. As Florida was in close proximity to smuggler friendly ports such as Nassau and Havana, as well as having the rail to transport goods north, it would have been a natural candidate for expansion of the smuggling effort<sup>27</sup>. Had President Davis let more cotton be shipped to Britain, perhaps the positive cash flow needed to build a more able navy could have been the result. Those ports in Florida, properly supplied and fortified, could have sent raw materials to Europe, bringing back the stocks of war as well as food, not to mention generating revenue<sup>28</sup>. Additionally the Union would have had to overcome the gargantuan task of major amphibious invasions to regain control of heavily fortified ports.

## CONCLUSION

The Civil War is often thought of as having a result that no act of man or God could have changed. However, the exercise of debating the “what if” of specific situations has been of keen interest to most historians throughout the years. The bountiful foodstuffs that were supplied to the Confederacy from and through Florida undoubtedly allowed those men in gray and butternut to fight for much longer than they could have had the state been captured and held early on by Union forces. The seemingly endless

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<sup>26</sup> Zerfas

<sup>27</sup> Thomas P. Lowry, "The Big Business of Bahamian BLOCKADE RUNNING," *Civil War Times* 46, no. 2 (May 2007)

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth J. Blume, "Blockade: American Civil War," *United States at War: Understanding Conflict and Society* (2009)

coastline with ready access to the interior via hundreds of waterways was a ready maze that could have been exploited to the great benefit of blockade-runners, had they repositioned from the closely guarded ports on the east coast of other states. Yet President Davis and the rest of those executing the war failed to take advantage of this. Nor did Lincoln or the war planners in Washington recognize that they could have choked the confederacy into submission much sooner than they did, perhaps saving untold thousands of lives.

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