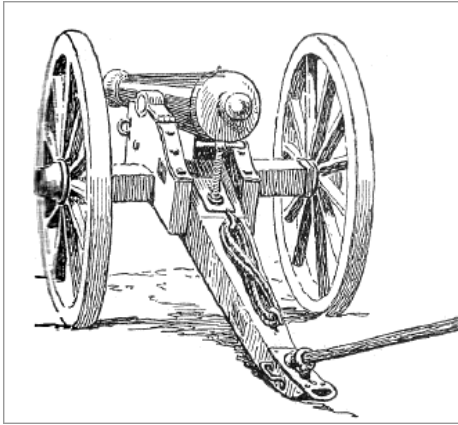




The River War: The Timucuan Preserve in the Civil War



In 1861, Florida voted to leave the Union and to join with other Southern states in the Confederacy. Although few actual battles were fought in Florida during the Civil War, the state nonetheless played an important part for both sides in the conflict. Florida sent more than 14,000 troops to fight for the Confederacy, while 1,200 white men and almost as many black men fought for the Union army. The rivers and harbors of northeast Florida were important for ships trying to get supplies in and out of the state. The state also served as an important source for lumber, salt, cattle, hogs and other food for the Confederate army.

Before the end of the war, the area of the Preserve would be the scene of one major battle and months of entrenchment, occupation, and skirmishing, as Federal gunboats patrolled the river and its tributaries to enforce the blockade and Confederate forces sought to keep supply lines open and to harass Union forces. Area residents, both free and enslaved, endured tremendous hardship and privation during the years of the war.

Jacksonville

Jacksonville was a divided city during the Civil War. With a population of 2,100 in the period leading up to the war – a mix of southern, northern and foreign-born whites, free blacks and slaves – Jacksonville was a cosmopolitan environment. Large hotels built for a growing tourist trade enhanced this image. Thriving businesses owned mainly by northern and foreign-born residents crowded the waterfront. Though compatible in peacetime, this regionally and racially diverse population proved volatile when war was declared and hostilities began.

Secession signaled cataclysmic change for Jacksonville. Although located on the edge of actual conflict, Jacksonville endured violence and devastation as control of the city changed

hands repeatedly between Confederate and Union forces. Each army burned lumberyards and destroyed mills and railroads that they thought would be of use to their opponents. Troops also confiscated and occupied homes.

The first Federal occupation of Jacksonville began on March 12, 1862. When Union troops finally returned to the deserted city in 1864 for the 4th and final time, they found Jacksonville in bad shape. Much of the city had been burned. One commander reported the city was “pathetically dilapidated, a mere skeleton of its former self, a victim of war.” Only one sawmill was left with which to begin to rebuild the city when the war finally ended.

Mayport Mills/ Fort Steele

Soon after Florida seceded from the Union, Confederate troops established a fort near the mouth of the St. Johns River at the site of the small fishing village of Mayport Mills, the site of today’s Mayport Naval Station. Called Fort Steele, the fort was built of palmetto logs and fortified with seven heavy guns. Faced with superior numbers of Union troops, however, the fort was soon considered indefensible, its guns were buried, and the fort abandoned.

In March 1862, after a Federal naval expedition easily captured Fernandina to the north and St.

Augustine to the south, Federal gunboats landed at Mayport Mills and henceforth used it as a base from which to patrol the St. Johns River, and periodically re-occupy Jacksonville, for the duration of the war. The town often found itself in the middle of skirmishes between Confederate guerillas and Union gunboats.

As Union gunboats became increasingly active in taking aboard escaped slaves, freedmen, and Union supporters, a small temporary settlement of refugees also developed at Mayport Mills.

St. Johns Bluff

The Civil War was less than a year and a half old when Confederates under the command of Brigadier General Joseph Finegan first occupied St. Johns Bluff, on the south side of the St. Johns River, in order to protect their access to Jacksonville, 18 miles upriver. On September 9, 1862, guns were positioned atop hastily erected fortifications.

On September 17, acting on a tip from a runaway slave that the Confederates had occupied the bluff, six Federal gunboats under the command of Charles Steedman assembled at Mayport Mills, approached to within 600 yards of the bluff, and quickly opened fire on the fortifications, raining shot and shell on the fixed positions atop the bluff for the next five hours.

Steedman soon realized that the rebels could “not be dislodged except by a combined land and naval attack.” On October 1, the Federal

gunboat squadron once again approached the bluff, while a force of 1500 Federal troops landed and began advancing on the rebels through the almost impassable swamp-like terrain. Outflanked, the Confederates on top of the bluff hastily evacuated, leaving their camp fully intact. While the gunboats waited on the river, Federal soldiers entered the Confederate camp, removed the guns, razed the fortifications, and raised the Stars and Stripes over the bluff. The Federals had taken the bluff without a fight.

The abandonment of St. Johns Bluff by the Confederates opened the way for Federal gunboats to move up the St. Johns River and for Federal troops to once again occupy Jacksonville. While the city changed hands several more times during the war, Federal gunboats maintained control of the bluff and the river for the rest of the war.

Yellow Bluff

Located on the north and opposite side of the St. Johns River from St. Johns Bluff, the site known as Yellow Bluff was 5 miles further upriver, closer to Jacksonville, and also important in protecting access to that city. Yellow Bluff Fort was constructed in 1862 by the Confederate army to “relieve the valley of the Saint John’s from the marauding incursions of the enemy (Union army).” There was never an actual fort on Yellow Bluff, but a fortified encampment with T-shaped earthworks and equipped with large guns for protection. Federal troops seized it from the Confederates in 1862 and held it for the remainder of the war.

After a Confederate victory in the Battle of Olustee west of Jacksonville in February 1864, and in anticipation of a possible Confederate attack on Jacksonville, Federal forces re-fortified Yellow Bluff, strengthening the existing earthworks and building new ones amid “the almost impenetrable jungle” that covered the Dames Point peninsula. A signal station was built and all ships operating on the

St. Johns River were ordered to anchor only at Yellow Bluff. By the end of March, 1864, Yellow Bluff was home to 346 enlisted men and 10 officers, mostly from the 55 Massachusetts Regiment (Colored). Federal troops maintained control of Jacksonville for the remainder of the war and continued to be stationed at Yellow Bluff until hostilities ceased.



Pilot Town, Kingsley Plantation/Fort George Island

Across the mouth of the St. Johns River from Mayport Mills was the historic settlement of Pilot Town on Bratton Island, which derived its name from the resident river pilots who navigated the shifting currents of the bar at the mouth of the St. Johns River. These skilled pilots played a crucial role during the Civil War in guiding the Union gunboats who patrolled the coast and river across the dangerous bar.

A large refugee colony also grew up at Pilot Town, as a growing number of runaway slaves, free blacks, and white Union supporters took refuge there under the protection of Union troops. The refugee colony grew to at least 100 people, dependent for provisions and transportation on the Union gunboats.

Fort George Island, adjacent to Batton Island on the north side of the mouth of the St. Johns River and which included the sea island cotton plantation previously owned by

Zephaniah Kingsley, was owned and lived on by Charles H. Barnwell, his family, and his slaves at the outbreak of the Civil War. In the early years of the war, the coastal islands saw little activity beyond the erection of weak Confederate defenses on Amelia and Talbot Islands. Nonetheless, Barnwell undoubtedly moved his family and slaves away from this vulnerable location, perhaps back to South Carolina, when he entered Confederate service in December 1863 for the duration of the war, leaving the plantation essentially abandoned.

For many slaves in the area, freedom became as close as the St. Johns River once Federal control of the river was established. Although many slaveowners began to move their slave property inland, away from the river and Union forces, more than 1,000 slaves and free blacks from northeast Florida joined the Union forces or escaped to refugee camps like Pilot Town; others, young and old alike, fled north to Union lines and freedom.

“We have the nucleus(sic) of a white colony at Pilot Town...and a number of blacks, fugitives escaping from the despotism of the Rebel Leader in these parts.”

Union Commander
Maxwell Woodhull
November 8, 1862

Cedar Point

Cedar Point on the St. Johns River was the site of the Broward Plantation in the years leading up to the Civil War. Staunch Confederates, members of the Broward family were repeatedly implicated in harrassment of Union supporters in the Jacksonville area once war broke out.

Consequently, in July 1862, the Broward Plantation was shelled and burned by Union forces, completely destroying it.

However by the fall of 1862, a salt works had been developed at Cedar Point to help produce the salt which was so critical to the preservation of food for the Confederate army. The records of the Union Gunboat U.S.S. Cimerone tell of destroying that salt works at Cedar Point in October 1862.

By war’s end, Florida’s production of salt would prove to be its greatest contribution in terms of monetary value to the Confederate economy.

“Nothing I can conceive would strike a heavier blow at the Confederate forces, than the total destruction of all salt works on the coast, and in its neighborhood.”

Woodhull
November 1862

Visiting These Sites:

Mayport Mills/Fort Steele was located at the current site of the Mayport Naval Station. There are no historic remains of the village or the fort.

St. Johns Bluff is the present location of Fort Caroline National Memorial, 13 miles east of downtown Jacksonville, and is open daily. Occasionally, Civil War reenactments are held at the park.

Yellow Bluff Fort is located in north Jacksonville on New Berlin Road. From 9A, exit to Heckscher Drive east. Take New Berlin road south from Heckscher Drive. Yellow Bluff Fort is approximately 2 miles on the right. There is a marker and picnic tables. The site is open daily.

Pilot Town was located on the north side of the St. Johns River along present-day Heckscher Drive and near the northern terminus of the St. Johns River Ferry.

Fort George Island and Kingsley Plantation are located off Heckscher Drive (Fla. AIA/105) just north of the ferry landing. The plantation is open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cedar Point is located at the south end of Black Hammock Island and can be reached from Heckscher Drive. Take New Berlin Road to Cedar Point Road which ends at the park in 7 miles. Open dawn to dusk.

St. Johns Bluff, Yellow Bluff, Kingsley Plantation, and Cedar Point can be visited daily. For more information, visit: www.nps.gov/timu