

## **The Burning of Bluffton**

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**President**

**Lowcountry Civil War Roundtable**

**Bluffton, South Carolina**

By the fall of 1861, the Civil War had gone badly for the Union. The bombardment of Fort Sumter in April of that year was followed by a resounding defeat at the First Battle of Manassas in Virginia. To stem the Confederate momentum, United States President Abraham Lincoln ordered a naval blockade of Southern coastal cities and ports in an effort to halt southern trade with European markets and disrupt its communications.

For the blockade to work, the North needed a southern base of operations for U.S. naval ships. Port Royal Sound was selected as an ideal location with its large harbor and ample space for anchorage. Thus on October 29, 1861, a massive Federal naval force of over seventy ships and 12,000 soldiers under the command of Admiral Samuel Du Pont was dispatched to capture Port Royal Sound and its surrounding islands.

Defending the harbor were two Confederate forts: Fort Walker on the north shore of Hilton Head Island, and Fort Beauregard on Bay Point across the channel to the north. These forts were soon overwhelmed by the massive firepower of the Federal fleet and surrendered on November 7, 1861. Although Beaufort and Hilton Head Island were captured, the town of Bluffton remained in the Confederate hands. 1

Soon after Beaufort and Hilton Head Island were captured and secured by Union forces, it became clear to Union General Thomas W. Sherman, commander of the Department of the South, and his replacement in March 1862, Major General David Hunter, that the Charleston and Savannah Railroad

located inland from Bluffton was of the highest strategic importance. 2 Indeed, Robert E. Lee, while serving as commander of the Department of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida prior to his reassignment to command the Army of Northern Virginia constructed earthworks and breastworks designed to protect the Railroad from amphibious assault. 3

The Railroad was a critical supply link between Charleston and Savannah, but more importantly from the military standpoint, provided rapid troop transport capabilities to the Confederates to mass troops quickly to defend against Union amphibious operations and infantry attacks from the nearby islands. General Sherman understood that in the effort to secure and destroy the railroad link, gaining footholds Bluffton and Hardeeville were necessary, and as early as March, 1862, he considered making an amphibious assault on Bluffton. 4

As a result, beginning in March of 1862, a series of back and forth military engagements and skirmishes between Union and Confederate forces took place in and around the Bluffton area as Union Forces probed Confederate defenses for weaknesses; Confederates likewise launched counterattacks and raids on Union positions.

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, Union forces of the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Hampshire Regiment conducted a reconnaissance in force expedition to Bluffton to gather intelligence on Confederate troop strength in the area. 5 On August 21, 1862, Company E of the 11<sup>th</sup> South Carolina Infantry under the command of Captain John Mickler and men of the Beaufort Volunteer Infantry under the command of Captain Stephen Elliott made an early morning raid on the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Hampshire camped on Pinckney Island. Fifteen Union troops were killed four wounded and 36 captured in this guerrilla style attack.

A full scale battle between Union and Confederate forces erupted on the morning of October 22. Troops of the 48<sup>th</sup> New York Regiment under the command of Brigadier General J. M. Brannan were transported up the Broad River with the objective of destroying the Savannah Charleston Railroad at the town of Pocotaligo. After receiving intelligence on the movements of the 48<sup>th</sup>, General P.G.T. Beauregard, the newly appointed commander of the Department

of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida dispatched confederate troops to find and engage the Federals sending soldiers stationed in Hardeeville via the Charleston Savannah Railroad. After heavy fighting, Brannan's troops were forced to withdraw suffering 337 casualties. The Confederate losses totaled 163 casualties. 6

To help break this stalemate, Major General Hunter focused his attention on Bluffton. 7 Bluffton was a hub of the Confederate's intelligence network with its lookouts, couriers and pickets moving freely in and out of the town providing valuable reports to Confederate commanders on enemy movements in the Lowcountry. 8 Thus on May 27, 1863, Hunter made a request to Rear Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont for naval assistance in mounting an attack on Bluffton that would include the destruction of the town by fire.

At this stage of the war, the military destruction of civilian property was not a generally accepted practice. Although Hunter's motives in ordering this action are not clear, it was the belief among some of his troops that this drastic action was in retaliation for the unorthodox guerrilla attacks on Federal forces like the raid on Pinckney Island. 9

Hunter's reputation as an ardent abolitionist may have been a factor as well. He would have been very aware of Bluffton as the location where the Bluffton Movement was launched in 1844 in support of South Carolina's secession from the Union by secessionist Robert Barnwell Rhett, a movement that received national attention. Prior to the war Bluffton was also the summer residence of many of the Sea Island plantation owners. While there is no documentary evidence to suggest that this aspect of Bluffton's history played a role in his decision to burn Bluffton, its destruction would not have been an event likely to generate much criticism in the north or by his military superiors. In addition, Bluffton was largely uninhabited, deserted by the plantation owners after the Union's victory at Port Royal Sound and the Federal occupation of nearby Hilton Head Island.

His plan called for 1,000 infantry troops to be transported on four naval vessels that would also provide artillery support. The force was made up of six

companies from the 48<sup>th</sup> New York Regiment, and 50 infantrymen each from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rhode Island Artillery and the New York Volunteer Engineers, and three companies from the 115<sup>th</sup> New York regiment. 10 The troops would be landed at Hunting Island Plantation that was not actually an island, but part of the mainland two miles downstream from Bluffton. 10

In the early morning hours of June 4, the Federal troops disembarked from the ships and began to make their way north to Bluffton. The convoy then proceeded on and ultimately anchored at a point about a half mile from Bluffton where they could provide artillery support to the infantry units. 11

Confederate troops in the area were stationed Camp Pritchard located near present day Pritchardville, approximately eight miles from Bluffton. These troops included companies A, B, and G, 3<sup>rd</sup> South Carolina Cavalry, and company B, 4<sup>th</sup> South Carolina Cavalry. Company E of the 11<sup>th</sup> South Carolina was camped in Bluffton near the wharf.

Three Confederate lookouts stationed on the May River sighted the convoy sometime in the early hours of the morning. One of them left immediately to alert the 11<sup>th</sup> South Carolina in Bluffton. Unfortunately, for reasons that continue to be unclear, he never made it to the South Carolina unit to warn them. At 6:15 am, one of the two remaining soldiers, a private Savage of company B, mounted his horse to notify the Confederate cavalry units at Fort Pritchard. 12 He reached the Fort at about 7:00 am, and the bugler sounded the call to arms.

As late as 7:15 am, Lt. Wilson Smith, acting commander of Company E of the 11<sup>th</sup> South Carolina was still unaware of the approaching Federals. Then, one of his infantrymen sounded the alarm: enemy gunboats had been spotted on the May River.

Federal troops landed without opposition at Hunting Island Plantation, quickly formed and entered Bluffton at approximately 7:30 am. As they swarmed through the abandoned town they set fire to several homes on the east side of Heyward Cove near the bank of the May River. They were unopposed in Bluffton because the 11<sup>th</sup> had left the town to take a defensive position west of

the town about one mile away. However, Colonel Barton of the 48<sup>th</sup> New York had no intention of moving west of the town to engage Confederate troops. Thus, as Smith's Confederate troop were filing out of town, Barton's 48<sup>th</sup> were streaming in unopposed. 13

Federal troops fanned out through the town in squads with specific orders to torch specific homes. Soon the entire town was engulfed in flames.

Lt. Colonel Thomas Johnson, commander of the South Carolina cavalry units arrived about this time just ahead of his units, met Lt. Smith, and directed him to return to Bluffton and engage the enemy with forward elements of the cavalry. The confederate force amounted to 238 men opposing 1,000 Federals and gunboats. Throughout the morning Confederate and Union troops exchanged fire, but the artillery salvos from the Federal gunboats proved decisive. The intensity of the bombardment of the Confederate troops severely hampered their ability to make headway against the Federals. Lieutenant – Commander Bacon aboard the largest gunboats described the scene and the rout of the Confederate troops.

*The enemy advanced down the street leading to the wharf through the town, expecting no doubt to sweep off in the general rush the (rear guard) who were covering the embarkation, as they were in considerable force by that time. They charged with cheers to within a short distance of the steamers, when, from their repeated volleys, we got their position. . . when we opened with shrapnel and shell in the direction of the enemy, and the effect was instantaneous, as I have since been assured by the commander of the land forces that our shrapnel and shell passed directly over the heads of our men, exploding in front of the ranks of the enemy, causing them to break and retreat in disorder. 14*

By 12:00 pm, all of the Federal troops had been loaded on the boats and were on their way for offloading at Ft. Pulaski and Hilton Head Island.

Estimates vary, but most of the approximately 60 buildings standing in Bluffton at the time of the attack were destroyed. The *Charleston Mercury* newspaper

reported that approximately 40 private homes and additional outbuildings were destroyed. 15

Federal operations would continue in the Sea Islands throughout the war including efforts to destroy the Charleston Savannah Railroad. These efforts would not be successful until General William Tecumseh Sherman's march through the Carolinas in 1865.

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1 Lawrence Rowland, Alexander Moore, George C. Rogers, Jr. *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina, Volume 1, 1514-1861* (Columbia, S.C., University of South Carolina Press, 1996) 443-458.

2 Jeff Fulghum. *The Bluffton Expedition* (Bluffton, S.C., 2012), 79.

3 H. David Stone. *Vital Rails: The Charleston & Savannah Railroad and the Civil War in Coastal South Carolina*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 81-82.

4 Jeff Fulghum. *The Bluffton Expedition* (Bluffton, S.C., 2012), 79.

5 *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Volume 6.* ( Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), 117.

6 Frank Moore. *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events. Volume 6.* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1863), 35.