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## STATE AID FOR INDIGENT SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN FLORIDA, 1861-65

by WILLIAM FRANK ZORNOW

Historians have long noted the economic weaknesses of the Confederate states as compared with those of the North. From the very beginning of the war the Southern economy seemed to become increasingly stagnant. In whole areas of the Confederacy there was actual privation and an economic decline which often bore no relationship whatsoever to the proximity of the Union army. These economic deficiencies unquestionably were one of the principal reasons for its collapse.

At no point is this economic stagnation more apparent than in the problem of how to care for the families of soldiers.<sup>1</sup> The Southern economy was burdened from the start with this additional question. In each of the states it demanded a solution, and a considerable amount of legislation and organized effort was devoted to this purpose. Although it was a problem of nation-wide magnitude, the Confederate government was inclined to regard it as one entirely in the province of state concern, and at first the states were equally willing to consider it a local matter.

Charles Ramsdell pointed out that when considering how this problem was handled some generalizations were permissible.<sup>2</sup> At first it was regarded as a local matter, but when it grew too extensive, state intervention became necessary. A second trend was to give first monetary relief to these families, and as the currency system collapsed this was replaced by a system of relief-in-kind. Clothing, food, and other necessities were laboriously distributed. As home-front morale became more demoralized it

1. The general situation among the people of the Confederacy can be conveniently surveyed in Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Plain People of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, 1944).
2. Charles W. Ramsdell, *Behind the Lines in the Southern Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, 1944), 62-68.

became necessary to resort to impressment and requisition in order to obtain the necessary provisions.

A thorough study of the care of the indigent families of soldiers is necessary if we are to acquire a better understanding of the economic problems confronting the Confederacy. Many questions must be answered. How much money was actually available for this purpose, and how many people were receiving aid? How much goods was distributed? What local taxes were levied to supply funds, and how successful were county agents and officials in collecting them? How many persons were diverted from other duties in order to meet the problems of collection and distribution?

In this article an attempt has been made to describe briefly the various methods instituted in Florida for the collection and distribution of goods and money for indigent families of soldiers. It is not a complete study for it does not treat with local efforts to solve the problem. The scope and administration of the system instituted by the state legislature has been examined, and an effort has been made to note similarities and differences between the Florida system and those established elsewhere.

Even before the Florida legislature took cognizance of the problem, several boards of county commissioners had taken it upon themselves to use the unappropriated balances in their county treasuries for relieving these people. The legislature took interest in the problem in December 1861. The first enactment placed the problem squarely in the laps of local officials. It authorized the collection of a special county levy for relief. The law provided that all boards of county commissioners could levy annually a separate tax not to exceed fifty percent on the state tax upon all property in their respective counties then subject to taxation. The fund raised by means of this tax was to be distributed for the relief and support of the indigent families

of any soldier in the county who had been or was in the armed forces of either the state or the Confederacy. The same act legalized all such expenditures from county treasuries made by local officials who had acted upon their own initiative.<sup>3</sup>

This system of local taxation and distribution continued in operation for approximately one year, but as was true in all the states it eventually proved to be inadequate. Tax collectors were dilatory, evasion was frequent, fraud was notoriously common, several county boards failed or refused to act, and the deterioration of the financial system added to the seriousness of the situation. The legislature eventually acted to correct it.

Under the provisions of a law enacted in December 1862, \$200,000 was appropriated for the relief of disabled soldiers and the indigent families of those then in service. The administration of the law was entrusted to the county officials. The justices of the peace were authorized to prepare lists of persons entitled to such assistance, including also those who had fled from the county because of the enemy but who intended to return later. These lists were then to be forwarded to the judges of the probate court, who in turn were to send them to the state comptroller. The governor was to distribute the appropriation to each county, taking into consideration the number of names on the list and the price of commodities in each community. The comptroller was to issue warrants for the money in favor of the county commissioners (or trustees appointed by the governor if the boards did not act). They would use it to purchase necessary supplies.

So pressing was the need for immediate relief that the new law provided for the advancement of funds in each county to persons designated by the governor. They would be entrusted with its distribution until such time as the justices and commis-

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3. *The Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the General Assembly of Florida, 11th Session*, c. 1263, 12-13. Cited hereinafter as *Acts*.

sioners could prepare their correct lists. Such sums advanced were to be deducted from those funds allocated to the county by the governor after the lists were prepared. This first appropriation of \$200,000 was to be used to supplement the local collection made by the county commissioners under the act of 1861: the county tax was still to be collected.<sup>4</sup>

One year later an additional appropriation of \$500,000 was made. This act provided for a considerable extension of the list of those eligible to receive state funds. The act of 1862 had specified that the money was to be used for aiding disabled soldiers and their families and the families of men in service who were needy. The later act made assistance available to families of soldiers in service, and to soldiers and their families if the latter had been killed or disabled. Presumably the local agents administering the act of 1862 had been somewhat restrictive in their interpretation of the word "family" and confined aid primarily to the wives, widows, and children of soldiers. The new law included mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters of all soldiers who were serving or who had died or been disabled while on duty.<sup>5</sup>

Before June 1, 1864, new revised lists were to be forwarded to the comptroller. These were to be prepared by the county commissioners and justices of the peace. The judges of the probate court and the county commissioners were then to prepare a composite list of all needy person in the county as defined in the act. This final county list was then to be sent to the state comptroller. The governor was to arrange a semi-annual distribution of the allotted funds the first as soon as practicable and the second by August 1, 1864. The money allotted each county would depend upon the number of persons

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4. *Acts, 12th Session, 1st Session*, c. 1337, 19-22.

5. The law excluded the families of deserters, but those who had fled the county because of the enemy were still to be included if it was their intention to return home later.

on the list and the local prices of commodities. The funds were to be spent by the board of commissioners for clothing, provisions, cards, spinning wheels, and other necessities, or a monetary grant could be made. The county commissioners were further authorized to continue the collection of local taxes under the act of 1861.<sup>6</sup>

In December 1864, the legislature appropriated an additional \$500,000 to be distributed in accordance with the procedure outlined in the act of 1863. To circumvent the fraud which often attended the distribution of this fund, the new law provided that all county officials involved in its distribution were to make quarterly sworn statements to the governor. Because of the increasingly large number of persons requiring assistance and because of the growing difficulty encountered in obtaining supplies, the justices of the peace were also required to supplement their duties of preparing lists by also helping the county commissioners with the actual distribution of goods. They, too, were required to make quarterly sworn reports to the county commissioners. So serious was the need for persons to carry out this act, that it was now made a misdemeanor for any county official who refused or failed to carry out his duties.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the money appropriated for supplying indigent families of soldiers with food and clothing a joint resolution was adopted on December 8, 1862 appropriating \$20,000 to be used by the governor for the purpose of purchasing cotton and wool cards for distribution gratis among the poor in each county.<sup>8</sup> The act of December 3, 1863 (c.1420), provided for the purchase of 3,000 cotton and 500 wool cards for distribution among the poor soldiers' families, and an act of December 1864 appro-

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6. *Acts, 12th Session, 2nd Session*, c. 1420, 38-41.

7. *Acts, 13th Session, 1st Session*, c. 1461, 30-31.

8. *Acts, 12th Session, 1st Session*, resolution 6, p. 65. This act did not confine distribution only to soldiers' families.

priated \$50,000 for the purchase of 3,000 cards.<sup>9</sup>

Two other efforts were made in Florida to assist these indigent soldiers and their families. An act of 1862, exempted anyone who had served three years as a private from paying the poll tax and his property to the amount of one thousand dollars was exempted from taxation.<sup>10</sup> A joint resolution was adopted the following year urging the Confederate government to exempt from the national tax-in-kind all women on farms whose husbands or sons were in service providing they had no slaves.<sup>11</sup>

The last attempt to assist the poor families of veterans came in the form of a provision that the board of commissioners in each county was to prepare lists of soldiers' orphans and of the children of disabled soldiers who could not afford an education for them. Schools were to be provided for such children to be paid for by a special levy.<sup>12</sup>

When local collections by the county commissioners had proved unable to yield sufficient revenue to care for the indigent soldiers' families, the state legislature had appropriated a total of \$1,270,000 to supplement this dole. Even this proved insufficient. Dishonesty on the part of officials, fraudulent claims by many families not really in need unquestionably siphoned off much money, but this was not the real trouble. There was just not enough goods to go around. In 1864, the legislature had to report reluctantly that the county agents were unable to purchase enough food and other goods for all the persons in need. Most of the goods, complained the legislators, had been taken as tax-in-kind by agents of the Confederate government.<sup>13</sup> There was not enough to meet the needs of both national and

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9. Acts, 13th Session, 1st Session, c. 1454, 26-27.

10. Acts, 12th Session 1st Session, c. 1329, 14.

11. Acts, 12th Session, 2nd Session, resolution 5, 53.

12. Acts, 13th Session, 1st Session, c. 1443, 19-20.

13. Acts, 13th Session, 1st Session, resolution 5, 37. The tax in kind is described in John Schwab, *The Confederate States of America* (New York, 1904), 292-93, 298-99, 301-302.

state governments, and the agents of the former took the disproportionate share. After the Confederate agents had collected the tax-in-kind, there was not enough for state use. When more money was appropriated by the legislature, prices soared higher; this merely made the problem more acute. More goods fell into the hands of speculators, and some states were forced ultimately to resort to requisitions and impressments. This was not done in Florida although the situation was critical.

In Florida the legislature attempted by means of supplementary appropriations to aid the indigent families whose care at first was entrusted solely to local means. Throughout the entire war both monetary and grants-in-kind were extended to the people, and the form the grant would take was left entirely to the discretion of the boards of county commissioners. It was only late in the war that a degree of state supervision was exerted over the distribution of the goods, and this was necessary to prevent recurring frauds. Tax exemption for soldiers and the provisions for free education for the children of deceased or needy soldiers were relief devices utilized in Florida which were not in common use in the other states.