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## Southern Extremities: The Significance of Fort Myers in the Civil War

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SOUTHERN EXTREMITIES:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORT MYERS IN  
THE CIVIL WAR

by IRVIN D. SOLOMON

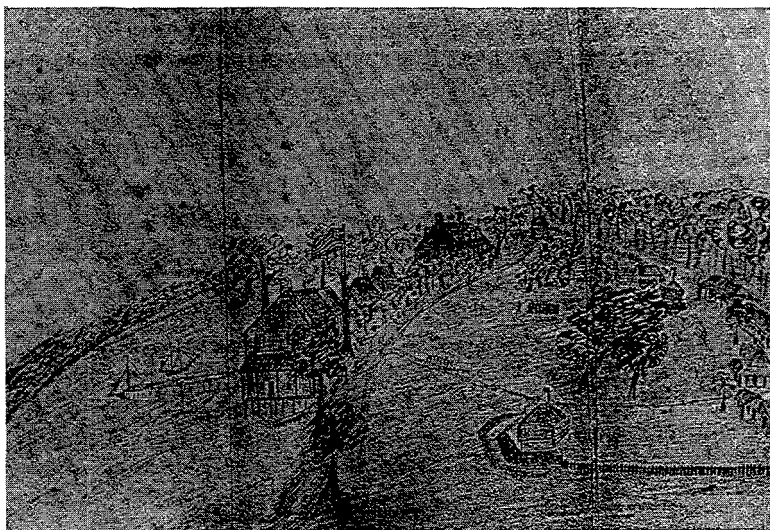
**A**LTHOUGH critical to American military operations in the Third Seminole War, Fort Myers would have probably faded into history after its abandonment in 1858 if not for the Civil War. Towards the end of that bloody conflict the post took on a new significance for both sides. Not only did the Union reactivate the fort in the very midst of a presumed Confederate stronghold, but it staffed the garrison with black troops— the ultimate insult to those Southerners who stubbornly remained true to the Stars and Bars. Consequently, the recommissioning of Fort Myers resulted in the largest military action of the Civil War in southwest Florida as well as numerous other wartime events that would prove important for state and nation.

From its reoccupation in January 1864, the former Seminole War garrison at Fort Myers proved to be a special irritant to both Confederate officials and local inhabitants. Most secessionists had resigned themselves to the embargo enforced by the superior Union East Gulf Blockading Squadron and periodic Union raids along the west coast, but few Florida Confederates were willing to tolerate a permanent Union post on the south Florida mainland. Furthermore, the Union garrison represented a serious threat to the extensive cattle industry of south Florida, an important source of food for the Confederate army in the eastern theater.

On February 20, 1850, Companies A and D of the Fourth United States Artillery under the command of Brevet Major L.

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Drawing of Fort Myers in 1864 by an unknown soldier. *Courtesy District of Key West and the Tortugas, Department of the Gulf, Letters Received, RG 393, National Archives.*

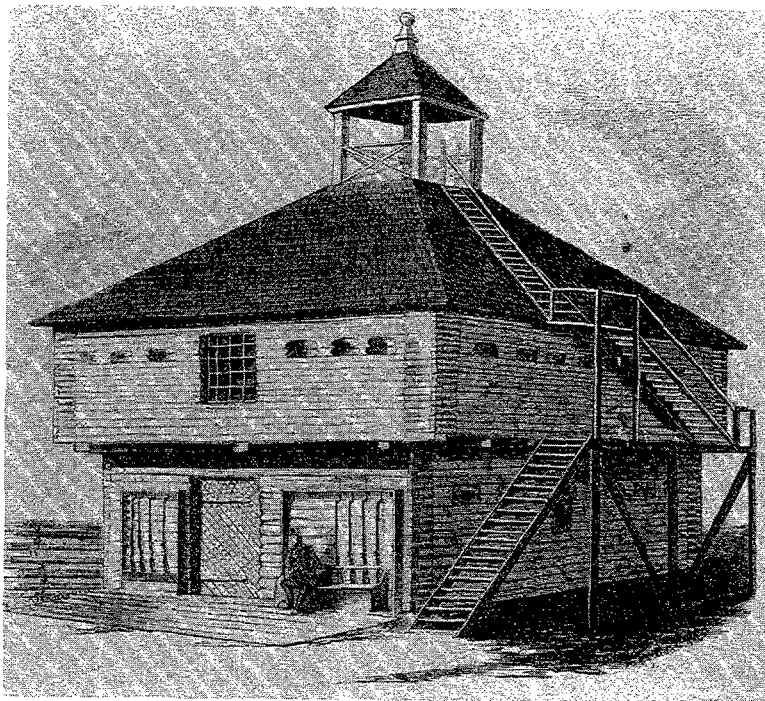
C. Ridgely established Fort Myers. The federal government was increasing its presence in south Florida at that time in an attempt to solve permanently the decades-old problem of Indian disruptions in that region of the state. Located twenty miles from the Gulf of Mexico for better protection from hurricanes, the fort stood on roughly 139 acres on the south bank of the Caloosahatchee River. The new post received its name in honor of Brevet Colonel Abraham C. Myers, chief quartermaster for the Department of Florida and later a nominee for the position of quartermaster general of the Confederate States Army. The compound replaced the former Fort Harvie which had gained prominence during the Seminole campaigns of 1841-1842. Post records indicate the abandonment of Fort Myers by May 1858 after the final phase of the Third Seminole, or "Billy Bowlegs," War. In its brief history the fort gained distinction as one of the principal posts in the campaign to subdue and remove the indigenous Native Americans. Indeed, the famous Billy Bowlegs (Holatter Micco) himself unsuccessfully harassed the fort's in-

habitants on a number of occasions even though he subsequently surrendered to Federal troops at that same station.<sup>1</sup>

Although not an elaborate post, Fort Myers was congenial to its garrison and strategic in its location. Almira Russel Hancock, wife of famous Civil War general Winfield Scott Hancock, remembered with “much happiness” the couple’s stay in 1856 at the pleasant site on the Caloosahatchee where their first child was born. The fort was composed of fifty-seven yellow-pine structures, including officers’ quarters and enlisted men’s barracks, an administration building, three-story hospital, blacksmith shop, two stores, drilling and exercising grounds, a large commissary and sutler’s stores, a bakery, stockade, wagon yard and stables, and a 1,000-foot-long wharf to receive vessels. It was noted for its well-kept appearance, unusual sea shell walk, and architecturally impressive two-story blockhouse, a sketch of which appeared in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1858. Moreover, the fort stood only a short distance up the Caloosahatchee from Punta Rassa, an outpost which at that time supplied most of the troops for the southwest Florida Indian campaigns. Together, the satellite post of Punta Rassa and the Fort Myers compound controlled the entire Caloosahatchee River, an area that stretched some 100 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Okeechobee near the geographical center of south Florida. In June 1857 a Florida editor visiting Fort Myers noted its special significance as the preeminent military post in

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Returns from U.S. Military Posts: 1800-1916, Fort Myers, February 1850-January 1865, .M617-R827, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereinafter, NA). See G. Davis to J. A. Seddon. April 26, 1864. United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereinafter, *ORA*), 128 vols. (Washington, 1880-1901), ser. 4, III, 319; F. A. Hendry, “A History of the Early Days in Fort Myers,” manuscript, 1908, reprinted by the Captain F. A. Hendry Reunion Committee, April 12, 1985, Fort Myers Historical Museum, Fort Myers, FL, 1-2,10-11; James W. Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War, 1855-1858: The Final Stand of the Seminoles Against the Whites* (Chuluota, FL, 1982), 14-17, 20-81; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, 2 vols. (New York, 1957), I, 131. The spelling of proper names and places throughout this study follow that of the original document citation.



Blockhouse at Fort Myers. *Courtesy Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 2, 1858.*

Florida. Others described the fort as one of the “finest and largest” forts of the Seminole wars.<sup>2</sup>

Local Confederate supporters and sympathizers could have occupied the fort easily in the early years of the Civil War. The Confederacy, however, chose to concentrate its efforts farther up the coast of Florida, and the old site of Fort Myers remained little more than a way station for refugees until Federal troops

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2. Almira R. Hancock, *Reminiscences of Winfield Scott Hancock* (New York, 1887), 26-34; Hendry, “Early Days in Fort Myers,” 7, 9-10; Robert B. Roberts, *Encyclopedia of Historic Forts: The Military, Pioneers, and Trading Posts of the United States* (New York, 1988), 190; “Block-House at Fort Myers,” *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 2, 1858; D. B. McKay, ed., *Pioneer Florida*, 3 vols. (Tampa, 1959), I, 177; Simon B. Turman, Jr., “Military in Florida,” [*Tampa*] *Florida Peninsular*, June 13, 1857.

moved to reoccupy it in January 1864.<sup>3</sup> At that time General D. P. Woodbury, commander of the District of Key West and the Tortugas in the Department of the Gulf, decided to reactivate Fort Myers, ostensibly as a haven for Confederate refugees and Union supporters and sympathizers.

Isolated from the war by geography and the Union blockade and alienated from the Confederate cause by conscription, taxation, and conscript "interlopers," the loyalty of south Florida citizens remained a persistent concern for Confederate officials. Woodbury estimated that there were up to 800 such "peaceable citizens" in the area, many of whom were rumored to be stockmen overseeing the sizable cattle herds of the Caloosahatchee ranges. The general set secondary goals of gathering cattle from the numerous wild and domesticated herds in the area, launching regular forays into the countryside and up the coast as far as Tampa and Bay Port, assisting the Union navy in its blockade of the Gulf coast, and attracting escaped slaves from the small numbers of such in south Florida.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Woodbury's actions were to transform this former outpost on the Caloosahatchee into a site of strategic concern for both Union and Confederate forces.

Woodbury's plan to use the reactivated fort as a strategic dagger made good military sense, as did his desire to have the fort supply much-needed beef to northern forces. Yet Woodbury's actions at this late stage of the war perhaps masked a less obvious goal. Woodbury probably sought to demonstrate the futility of the Confederate cause by garrisoning the fort with soldiers of the newly mobilized U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). Woodbury knew that such an action would humiliate Confederates in Florida and add the most ignoble of insults by placing

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3. There was a Union report that refugees were using Fort Myers in 1863. See I. B. Baxter to senior officer, August 10, 1863, United States War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (hereinafter, *ORN*), 30 vols. (Washington, 1894-1922), ser. 1, XVII, 528.
  4. D. P. Woodbury to Headquarters District of Key West and the Tortugas, Woodbury to C. P. Stone, December 17, 23, 1863, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXVI, pt. 1, 873-75; Woodbury to Stone, January 22, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. 1, 460-61. See Samuel Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago* (Coral Gables, FL, December 1963), 3-4; Rodney E. Dillon, "The Battle of Fort Myers," *Tampa Bay History* 5 (Fall/Winter 1983), 28.

the slavocracy's greatest fear—armed blacks—in the very heart of south Florida. Woodbury often hinted at this motive in his correspondence. The almost immediate deployment of black troops to Fort Myers from their station in Key West adds credence to this interpretation, as does the fact that black troops both comprised the nucleus of most Union raids into Confederate territory in Florida and remained permanent fixtures at the fort until its abandonment. In the words of one writer, Woodbury took particular pleasure in placing this “prickly pear cactus under the Confederate saddle.”<sup>5</sup>

Predictably, state and local Confederate officials and supporters were outraged when Woodbury repositioned a small group of the 47th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers at Fort Myers in early 1864. Accompanied by General Woodbury and guided by Captain Henry A. Crane— a Union man and former newspaper editor from Tampa— and a contingent of men from the 2nd Regiment of Florida Rangers (soon to become the 2nd Florida Union Cavalry), the 47th departed Punta Rassa on the schooner *Matchless* and the steamer U.S.S. *Honduras* for the old fort site on the afternoon of January 6, 1864. The party of twenty men and two officers arrived at Fort Myers near midnight on January 7 and quickly “arrested” three Confederate loyalists— John Griffin, George Lewis, and George Tompkins— who had orders to burn the old fort if the Union attempted reoccupation.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly thereafter a second detachment of the 47th, accompanied by a small number of refugee families and rangers, sailed from the Charlotte Harbor area and joined the other troops at Fort Myers, all of whom came under the command of Captain Richard A. Graeffe of the 47th Volunteers. By February, however, Graeffe and the 47th were ordered to Key West in anti-

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5. The author wishes to credit Vernon Peebles as the source of this quotation.

6. Lewis G. Schmidt, *A Civil War History of the 47th Regiment of Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: The Wrong Place at the Wrong Time* (Allentown, PA, 1986), 400-05; Log of the U.S. Steamer *Honduras*, January 6, 1864, Logs of the U.S.S. *Honduras*, September 8, 1863-August 5, 1865, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24, NA (hereinafter, RBNP); T. Bailey to T. R. Harris, January 4, 1864, Bailey to G. Welles, January 6, 19, 1864, H. B. Carter to C. K. Stribling, January 20, 1865, *ORN*, ser. 1, XVII, 620-22, 630-31, 801; Henry A. Crane to Woodbury, January 7, 1864, District of Key West and the Tortugas, Department of the Gulf, Letters Received, RG 393, NA (hereinafter, DOG, Letters Received).



Former slave serving in the U.S. Colored Troops. *Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.*



pation of joining the Red River Campaign in Louisiana. Captain Crane assumed command of the recommissioned fort, fifty-one men, a nearby cattle pen at Twelve-Mile Swamp, and the refitted wharf and buildings at Punta Rassa— all of which had to be constantly defended from “attacking parties [of] Confederate Cavalry on reconnaissance.”<sup>7</sup> The fort was at this time the Union’s only permanent mainland station between Tampa and the inhospitable environs of the Great Cypress Swamp and the Everglades on the southern tip of the peninsula.

Contemporaries described the fort in the spring of 1864 as improved with breastworks some seven feet tall and fifteen feet wide, which extended in a crescent 500 feet from the parade grounds to the wharf. A drawing of the reactivated fort by an unknown Union soldier shows about a dozen buildings, most of which bordered the river about 100 yards behind the parade ground and perimeter fortifications. Captain Graeffe reported to General Woodbury that he had repaired the blockhouse and intended to “fit up a schoolroom and church as soon as possible.”<sup>8</sup> The fort also contained a hospital, commissary, numerous billets, two guardhouses, and a new two-story log house patterned after the blockhouse remaining from the late Seminole campaign. Expecting guerrilla attacks, the men of the 47th fortified the post with three more blockhouses enclosed by earth bastions. They also enclosed six nearby acres with a fortified picket fence.<sup>9</sup>

Graeffe’s attention to these matters proved necessary since the fort had filled quickly with a motley assortment of over 400 civilian “lay-outs,” including Union refugees, Union sympathizers, Confederate army deserters, conscription resisters, and escaped slaves. Many of the refugees found it prudent to sign up with the newly created 2nd Florida Union Cavalry at the fort, and the unit itself quickly reflected the varied interests and back-

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7. Log of the U.S.S. *Gem of the Sea*, January 11, 12, 1864, Logs of the U.S.S. *Gem of the Sea*, January 1863-February 1865, Log of the U.S. Steamer *Honduras*, January 11, 15, 1864, RBNP; Schmidt, *47th Regiment*, 402-04; Abstract from Returns of the Department of the Gulf, Major General N. P. Banks, U.S. Army Commanding, for the Month of January 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXIV, pt. 2, 199; Woodbury to Stone, February 19, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, vt. 1, 485-86; Samuel Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago* (Coral Gables, FL, January 1964), 1.
  8. Richard A. Graeffe to Woodbury, February n.d., 1864, DOG, Letters Received; Graeffe quoted in Schmidt, *47th Regiment*, 404.
  9. Schmidt, *47th Regiment*, 405.

grounds of the recruits. After observing the 2nd a field commander visiting Fort Myers in the summer of 1864 remarked: "Cavalry they were called, and as cavalry they were paid, but they never were mounted, much to their disgust. This was a regiment not to be lumped. Each man had a history of his own, sometimes more startling than fiction."<sup>10</sup> The new fort offered a strong attraction for local Floridians like the men of the 2nd Cavalry who wished to reside with their families in a secure Union post. In retrospect, it appears that many of the refugees who gravitated to Fort Myers under the strain of this peculiarly "personal" war in southern Florida were generally better off than their neighbors who remained loyal to the state and Confederacy."

Fort Myers and its support operation at Punta Rassa gave the East Gulf Blockading Squadron a strong base of communication and coordination with its fleet, which came to be arrayed around the fort and nearby Charlotte Harbor like the spokes of a wheel. Early in the war Confederate officials had conceded coastal control to the superior Union navy which established a particularly effective blockade in the Gulf coast region from Cedar Key in the north to Key West in the south. Beginning in July 1861 the Union steamer *R. R. Cuyler* began a successful blockade of Tampa Bay, after which, as the navy strengthened its position at Egmont Key near the mouth of Tampa Bay, blockade running shifted noticeably to the Charlotte Harbor area on the southwest coast. Charlotte Harbor, located just north of Fort Myers, proved troublesome for Union forces because of frequent Confederate attempts to slip shipments of cattle and, to a lesser

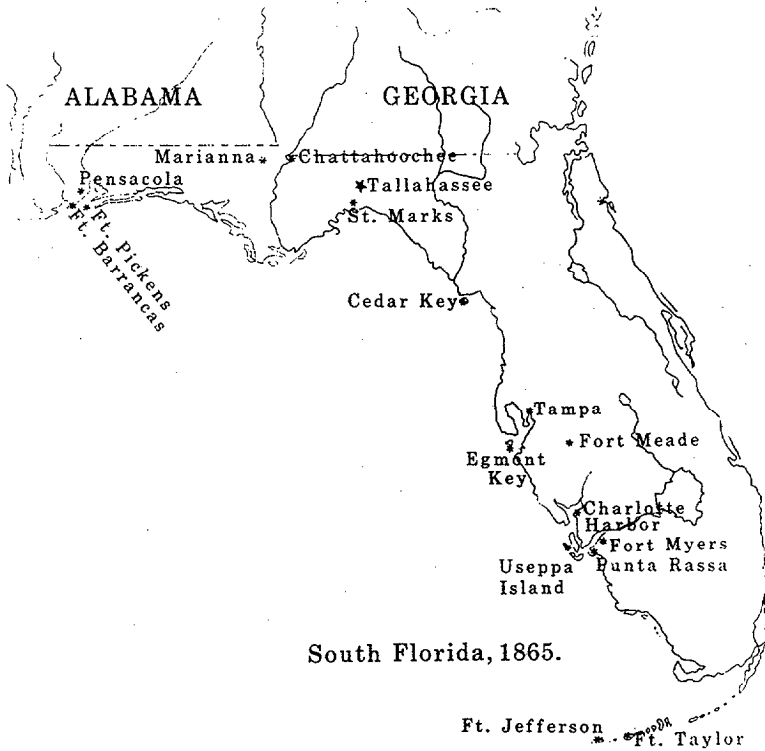
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10. John Wilder, "The Wedding at the Parker House," *Putnam's Magazine* (August 1868), 165.
  11. Graeffe to Woodbury, February n.d., 1864; Covington, *Story of Southwestern Florida*, I, 145; Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers: The History of the Land of the Caloosahatchee and Southwest Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1949; facsimile ed., Fort Myers Beach, 1982), 80; Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 170; John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 160-63; W. G. Barth to P. W. White, April 19, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXIV, pt. 2, 444. On the question of deserters' intent to keep their families intact see J. Milton to P. G. T. Beauregard, January 29, 1864, Milton Letterbook, John Milton Papers, Florida Historical Society Collection, University of South Florida, Tampa (hereinafter, Milton Papers). In February 1864 Florida repealed its draft exemption for cattlemen, which instigated more defections to the Union in south Florida.

extent, cotton through the blockade. In fact, the nearby estuary of the Peace River became one of the most effective rendezvous points for would-be Confederate blockade runners.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, the Union command moved dramatically to end the blockade's hemorrhaging through the Charlotte Harbor/Peace River region. The navy first repositioned the steamer U.S.S. *Penguin* at Charlotte Harbor to increase Federal surveillance of the area. Union commanders then sent *The Wanderer* (reputed to be the last slave-running ship captured by Federal forces), the *J. S. Chambers*, *The Restless*, and later the command bark *Gem of the Sea* to secure the coast. Eventually, the navy constructed a supply base on nearby Useppa Island from which large blockade ships sailed, and smaller shallow-draft tender sloops like the *Rosalie* and the *Georgia* departed on search-and-destroy missions up the Peace and Caloosahatchee rivers.<sup>13</sup>

The new flurry of Union naval activity in southwest Florida proved nettlesome to local Confederates. For example, Union ships and the small base on Useppa attracted numerous refugees and Union sympathizers, many of whom were coastal subsistence fishermen or poor whites from the backcountry. To these hard-scrabble locals the exigencies of day-to-day survival and the determination to keep families and economic interests intact far overshadowed the idealism of the southern cause. Although some were willing to serve in local "Home Guard" units in south

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12. Welles to F. B. Ellison, May 17, 1861, W. Mervine to Welles, June 12, 14, 1861, Ellison to Mervine, August 17, 1861, *ORN*, ser. 1, XVI, 524-25, 545-46, 548, 667-68. See Milton to J. W. Baker, October 17, 1861, Milton Papers; Frank Falero, Jr., "Naval Engagements in Tampa Bay, 1862," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46 (October 1967), 134-40; David J. Coles, "Unpretending Service: The *James L. Davis*, the *Tahoma*, and the East Gulf Blockading Squadron," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 71 (July 1992), 41-62; Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, 1902), I, 250-60, 269-71; Canter Brown, Jr., "Tampa's James McKay and the Frustration of Confederate Cattle-Supply Operations in South Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 70 (April 1992), 415,418.
  13. Log of the U.S.S. *Gem of the Sea*, August 8-December 13, 1863, RBNP; J. L. Lardner to Welles, September 15, 1862, Stations of Vessels Composing the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, January 15, February 1, July 15, 1863, C. P. Clark to W. R. Browne, July 8, 1863, Browne to Bailey, July 10, 1863, Baxter to senior officer, August 10, 1863, *ORN*, ser. 1, XVII, 312, 352-53, 361, 487-89, 502, 527-28.



Florida, few submitted to visiting Confederate conscript officers, being well aware that they would be torn from their families and livelihoods and shipped to the armies in Virginia and Georgia.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the defection of locals in south Florida proved such a concern for the Confederacy that both General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, commander of the military department in south Florida, and Florida governor John Milton issued conditional proclamations of pardon to those Floridians in the region who had evaded conscript officers. Nevertheless, efforts to woo back

14. Samuel Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago* (Coral Gables, FL, December 1963), 5; *New York Herald*, May 20, 1864.

the increasing number of “deserters and skulkers” proved largely futile.<sup>15</sup>

Union efforts to accommodate the steady stream of evacuees proved only partially successful, and many would-be refugees and sympathizers began to drift south to the Caloosahatchee River basin in search of a reprieve from Confederate persecution and harassment. What some refugees failed to recognize, however, was that Union activities near Charlotte Harbor also dislodged Confederate soldiers and sympathizers, many of whom were cattle runners whose herds went to the Confederacy or to any others willing to pay in cash. A number of these privateers soon began to challenge the Union blockade south of Charlotte Harbor; others gravitated in increasing numbers to the Confederate stronghold at Fort Meade.

Union and Confederate concerns over transshipment of the numerous cattle herds in southwest Florida proved a pivotal matter for both sides. By the end of 1863 south Florida represented the Confederacy’s major source of foodstuffs for its hungry forces. In fact, after the fall of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, and the cessation of shipments of trans-Mississippi beef supplies to the east, Florida became the main supplier of cattle for Confederate troops serving at Charleston and with the Army of Tennessee.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the issue of feeding the armies in the field, one Florida newspaper stated in November 1863 that “Florida is now . . . the most productive state remaining to the Confederacy.”<sup>17</sup>

A Union commander meanwhile estimated that as many as 1,500 head of cattle per week found their way from the outlying

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15. P. A. Anderson to H. W. Feilden, May 14, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. I, 369, 371. See Milton to Richmond (VA) quoted in Samuel Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago* (Coral Gables, FL, May 1964), 3; John F. Reiger, “Deprivation, Disaffection, and Desertion in Confederate Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 48 (January 1970), 279-98.
  16. Robert A. Taylor, “Rebel Beef: Florida Cattle and the Confederate Army, 1862-1864,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (July 1988), 15, 18; Taylor, “Cow Cavalry: Munnerlyn’s Battalion in Florida, 1864-1865,” *Ibid.* 70 (October 1986), 196; Taylor, “A Problem of Supply: Pleasant White and Florida’s Cow Cavalry,” in John M. Belohlavek and Lewis N. Wynne, eds., *Divided We Fall: Essays on Confederate Nation Building* (Saint Leo, FL, 1991), 178, 180; Richard D. Goff, *Confederate Supply* (Durham, NC, 1969), 202.
  17. Quoted in Woodbury to Stone, December 23, 1863, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXVI, pt. 1, 873.

Fort Myers area to the northern Confederates. General Braxton Bragg's army, which requisitioned 1,000 head of cattle per week, reportedly depended almost entirely on Florida beef by mid 1863. General Woodbury gave Florida even more credit, estimating that 2,000 contraband cattle a week found their way north. Governor Milton often lamented that his state had few men to send north but conversely bragged that Florida was "the principal source of meat supply for the Confederate forces."<sup>18</sup>

Milton put such a premium on protecting the supply of "beeves" in Florida that he appointed Quincy lawyer Pleasant W. White as special commissary agent in charge of cattle operations. The new cattle agent quickly focused his attention on south Florida. The zealous White boasted he would secure Confederate cattle "at the rate of three to four thousand a month," mostly acquired from herds of 40,000 or more east and south of Tampa Bay. By March 1864, however, White's commissary agent in south Florida, James McKay, Sr., informed his superior that "no cattle may be expected from this District until the enemy is got Rid off [sic], hoping you will urge the necessity of immediate action by those whose duty it is to do so."<sup>19</sup>

Frequent raids from Fort Myers directed at disrupting Confederate cattle supplies lent an enormous significance to the small outpost on the Caloosahatchee. Local rancher and Confederate captain F. A. Hendry spoke succinctly to the southern view of the reactivated post: "Federal soldiers took possession of Fort Myers and made it headquarters for all manner of mischief common to warfare. Frequent and destructive raids were made

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18. Pleasant W. White to J. F. Cummins, August 25, 1863, White to A. S. Summer, August 25, 1863, Pleasant Woodson White Papers, Letterbook I, box 2, Florida Historical Society Collection (hereinafter, White Papers). See Thomas Benton Ellis, Sr., "Confederate Diary of Thomas Benton Ellis, Sr., Company C, Hernando Guards, 3rd Florida Infantry, July 1861-April 1865," manuscript collection, box 26, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville, 8-9; Charlton Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, FL, 1971), 232; Woodbury to Stone, December 23, 1863; Milton to S. R. Mallory, May 23, 1864, quoted in Proctor, ed., *Florida A Hundred Years Ago* (May 1964), 3.
  19. White to Milton, December 9, 1863, Milton Papers; White to B. French, August 5, 1863, White to Lucius B. Northrop, August 29, 1863, White Papers; James McKay to White, March 25, 1864, box 1, White Papers.

far into the interior and into Confederate lines, causing much distress to the devotees of the Southern cause. Large herds of cattle were rounded up by Federal cavalry and driven to Fort Myers and there slaughtered for use by the garrison, and the blockading squadron . . . and a large number carried on transports.<sup>20</sup>

The “mischief” to which Hendry alluded included the effective interdiction of the cattle trade in south Florida by the end of 1864. In this respect, Fort Myers took on a new national significance as it ensured Federal disruption of sorely needed Florida beef supplies to southern soldiers in the field. One unforeseen Union side effect was that fewer foodstuffs were now being allotted to feed Union prisoners in the expanding camps of Georgia, including the infamous station at Andersonville.<sup>21</sup>

Understandably, rapidly changing military circumstances in south Florida captured the attention of the Confederacy. Major General Patton Anderson, Confederate commander of the District of Florida, noted with consternation that the Union fort stemmed the flow of cattle to the blockade runners and conversely “carried to the enemy from those counties in South Florida . . . a large proportion of the beef supplied by our commissaries of subsistence.” On the other side, a Union commander in commenting on the acquisition of cattle, much of which was allegedly furnished by local cattle profiteers, noted during his visit to Fort Myers that northern troops “waxed fat on the spoils of the land.”<sup>22</sup>

Confederate authorities were so determined to reduce the fort that they ordered light cavalry officer J. J. Dickison to Fort Meade in preparation for an attack on Fort Myers in early February 1864. The urgency of the mission rested on, in Dickison’s words, the immediate quashing of “the destructive raiding parties that were continually alarming the citizens [of south Florida] by ruthless invasion of their homes—plundering the plantations, carrying off slaves and destroying valuable property.” Dickison noted that “the enemy was in considerable force in the neighbor-

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20. Hendry, “Early Days in Fort Myers,” 2-3.

21. Taylor, “Rebel Beef,” 27-31.

22. Anderson to Feilden, May 14, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. I, 368-74; Wilder, “Wedding at Parker House,” 170.

hood of Fort Myers."<sup>23</sup> Just prior to undertaking their mission, however, the Confederate regulars received orders commanding their return to north Florida in anticipation of the Battle of Olustee on February 20, 1864. In April the Confederate military ordered Colonel T. W. Brevard, then in command of the Sixty-fourth Regiment of Georgia Volunteers, to Fort Meade some forty-six miles southeast of Tampa on a similar mission. He too was recalled because of impending actions in north Florida.<sup>24</sup>

Fort commander Henry Crane requested troops of the 2nd USCT from their station at Key West in a move to bring in disciplined soldiers to shore up the fort's defense amid persistent rumors of impending attacks. It appears that Crane also wanted to curry favor with General Woodbury, who wanted black troops stationed in south Florida. On April 20, 1864, Companies D and I under Captains John Bartholf and J. W. Childs, respectively, moved from Key West. Shortly after April 20 the seasoned Childs assumed temporary command at Fort Myers. Almost simultaneously Company G of the 2nd USCT moved farther up the coast to a new station at Cedar Key, the western terminus of the only trans-Florida railroad.<sup>25</sup> The new visibility of black troops in this theater did, indeed, place Woodbury's "prickly pear cactus under the Confederate saddle."

Deployment of the USCT to Fort Myers dramatically changed the conduct of the war in Florida. Prior to this action Confederate officials in Florida had for the most part grudgingly acknowledged the Union's superiority in south Florida, largely because of their own inability to counteract the long tentacles of the Union blockade along the Gulf coastline. Now, however, the Confederates bridled at the audacity of the Union's move to

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23. Mary Elizabeth Dickison, *Dickison and His Men: Reminiscences of the War in Florida* (Louisville, 1890; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1962), 48; J. J. Dickison, "Military History of Florida," in Clement A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History*, 13 vols. (Atlanta, 1899; reprint ed., Secaucus, NJ, 1970), 89-90.
  24. Barth to Brevard, April 24, May 11, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. 2, 448-49, 481; Anderson to Feilden, May 14, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. 1, 372-73.
  25. H. R. Crane to W. M. Bowers, April 15, 25, August 15, 1864, DOG, Letters Received; D Company USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, 1864, M594-R206, Companies D and I USCT, Annual Returns, 1864, Companies D and I 2nd USCT, Annual Returns, 1864, RG 94, NA. All subsequent references to muster rolls may be found in M594-R206; for all succeeding company and regimental citations see RG 94, NA.



station African-American troops at the very heart of the southwest theater. Moreover, fear that the USCT would both attract and forcibly free the small numbers of slaves in the south peninsula loomed large in the minds of white Floridians.

Fear and anxiety caused by approaching Union operations caused many slaveholders to move their chattel far from the seacoast, to strengthen white patrols, and to reassert the powers of special "slave courts" charged with punishing any "indolent" slave, free black, or mulatto. Even though the North had no official plan to free slaves at the war's outset, Floridians realized early in the conflict that a Union victory would certainly destroy their "peculiar institution." Like other southern states, Florida cut off all news of the war from its black population. As northern troops probed ever deeper into the state, however, inevitable slave escapes and individual acts of rebellion occurred.

At first the Union command in Florida vacillated on a set policy to free the slaves, but eventually Congress, in its Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862, ordered all slaves belonging to "disloyal" masters classified as "free captives of war."<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, many of these blacks found their way to Union lines, especially after learning of Lincoln's January 1, 1863, Emancipation Proclamation. Others were freed by Union troops, like the USCT, which eventually enlisted large numbers of freedmen as former "farmers" or "contraband." The record of black companies at Fort Myers reflects this experience.

Companies D and I of the 2nd USCT lost little time in acclimating to life in the heart of enemy territory. The units, which usually numbered about ninety men each, sent detachments on patrols as early as April 1864. Skirmishes occurred at Cedar Key, Brooksville, Bay Port, Clearwater, Tampa, and the Manatee and Peace rivers areas.<sup>27</sup> One Confederate observer noted how events changed after the placement of the USCT at Fort Myers: "It was a war . . . for possession of this country. The Federal troops mostly negroes . . . made a move to go through

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26. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War*, 146-53.

27. Companies D and I USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, 1864; Companies D and I USCT, Annual Returns, 1864. See Bowers to G. B. Drake, August 6, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXXV, pt. 1, 405-06.

the country to burn, destroy, and capture everything from Ft. Myers.<sup>28</sup>

So many raids occurred in 1864 that the Confederates created the First Battalion, Florida Special Cavalry—commonly called the Cow Cavalry or Cattle Guard Battalion—to repulse Union forays, protect Confederate cattle herds from Union raiders and privateers, and stem the rising tide of desertion. Composed primarily of veterans from the south Florida Seminole wars, returning Confederate soldiers, stockmen, and “renegades,” and patterned after the former regional “cracker cavalries” of Florida, this colorful unit gained “soldier status” as nine companies mustered under the leadership of former Georgia lawyer and member of the Confederate Congress Major Charles J. Munnerlyn. Munnerlyn centered his command near Brooksville and extended his activities south to the outlying Fort Myers area, inland to Lake Okeechobee, and north to Lafayette County.<sup>29</sup> The Cow Cavalry formed the nucleus of the local militia for that region and through a quasi-guerrilla and vigilante campaign remained the primary threat to both Union forces in south Florida and Confederate turncoats until the Battle of Fort Myers. After this event the unit dissolved into a band of disparate, independent-minded units of local rather than regional orientation.<sup>30</sup>

As Confederate forces continued to wrestle with the vexing situation of black Union raiders, the commander of Fort Myers observed escalating tensions between the men of Companies D and I and the other fort inhabitants. The post had filled with hundreds of area deserters, draft evaders, and Union sympathizers who carried their concepts of race relations with them. The

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28. Frances C. M. Boggess, *A Veteran of Four Wars: The Autobiography of F. C. M. Boggess* (Arcadia, FL, 1900), 69. See E. G. Wilder, “Escapade in Southern Florida,” *Confederate Veteran* 19 (February 1911), 75.

29. L. B. Northrop to J. A. Seddon, October 13, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 4, III, 730-31; F. W. Marston to C. T. Christensen, December 9, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, XLI, pt. 4, 808; 1st Battalion, Special Cavalry, Charles J. Munnerlyn, Department of War, M251-R14, RG 94, NA; D. B. McKay, “My Memoirs of Pioneer Florida,” *Tampa Tribune*, August 24, 1958; Taylor, “Cow Cavalry,” 198-99; Taylor, “A Problem of Supply,” 192-93.

30. Taylor, “Cow Cavalry,” 196-214; Taylor, “A Problem of Supply,” 199; Tebeau, *History of Florida*, 229.

fact that Fort Myers attracted escaped slaves— many of whom enlisted in the 2nd USCT— greatly inflamed this racially tense situation.<sup>31</sup> Captain Crane even considered separating the black troops from all contact with the locals in order to diffuse the potentially explosive situation. In Crane's words, "The ignorance of the one and the sensitiveness of the other tends to make every duty unpleasant."<sup>32</sup> Despite the constant harassment and accusations of chicanery by local whites, the men of the 2nd continued to prove themselves in their duties at the fort. In fact, their exemplary behavior led the commander of the 2nd USCT, Colonel John Wilder, to comment that the men of Companies D and I "looked the very *beau ideal* of black soldiery." Wilder later remarked that the 2nd "attained such proficiency and exactness [in drilling], that perhaps not a regiment in the service, regular or volunteer, surpassed it."<sup>33</sup>

The discipline and dedication of the two companies showed on the battlefield as well. Post returns and military records reflect an explosion of Union activity after the arrival at Fort Myers of the 2nd USCT. Companies D and I comprised the bulk of these fighting units. Black troops participated in large actions, like the attacks on Tampa Bay and Fort Brooke in May 1864 and in minor actions, like the raid at Rialls Creek in August 1864.<sup>34</sup> It was, however, the bold sacking of the stronghold at Fort Meade southeast of Tampa and the attendant destruction of Confederate property throughout that summer that ultimately convinced both Confederate officials and local sympathizers that Fort Myers and its black troops had to be destroyed. As one local partisan noted, "In consequence of the operation of the enemy [at Fort Myers] every man who could use a musket was placed in Service." The official further acknowledged that a major concern for secessionists in the area was "running Negroes from reach" of the

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31. Crane to Bowers, August 15, 1864; *Ibid.*, September 4, 1864, *ORA*, ser. 1, LII, pt. 1, 614; 2nd Infantry USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, 1863-1864. Former slaves frequently appear in these rolls as "contraband."
  32. Crane to H. W. Braun, August 20, 1864, Crane to Bowers, September 4, 1864, *DOG*, Letters Received.
  33. Wilder, "Wedding at Parker House," 164-65.
  34. Companies D and I USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, 1863-1864.

black Union troops.<sup>35</sup> Another Confederate observer, sensing the USCT's determination to free slaves, wrote how he saw men "running helter skelter . . . back to their plantations to run off their negroes. I saw at once that we could do nothing to check the advance."<sup>36</sup> For in southwest Florida, as in all theaters in which the USCT served, the black soldiers of the 2nd ranked freeing slaves as one of their highest priorities.

The long-planned attack on Fort Myers finally materialized in the winter of 1865. In January Colonel Munnerlyn received a communique ordering the Cow Cavalry to destroy the irksome post. Almost simultaneously James McKay, Sr., received orders to forward all beef captured in the operation, since his was the only district left in Florida with accessible cattle. Under the command of executive officer Major William Footman— a hero of the Confederate Kentucky campaigns of 1863— and company commanders Francis A. Hendry, John T. Lesley, and James McKay, Jr., a Confederate force of some 275 men marched out of Tampa in early February on the Fort Thompson trail. The attack force, composed primarily of cavalry officers and men from the Tampa Bay and Peace River regions, planned on catching the fort's defenders off guard through a surprise late evening or early morning attack.<sup>37</sup>

For its part, the garrison at Fort Myers appeared vulnerable. Numerous men were away on detachment, leaving primarily soldiers of the 2nd USCT and the 2nd Florida Cavalry to protect the post under its newly appointed commander, Captain James Doyle of the 110th New York Volunteers. Doyle had come to

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35. J. L. Peterson to W. Gwynn, May 28, 1864, Correspondence, 1845-1906, Comptroller's Office, RG 350, ser. 554, Florida State Archives, Division of Library and Information Services, Florida Department of State, Tallahassee.

36. Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 9.

37. McKay, Sr., to White, July 4, 1864, box 1, White to McKay, Sr., January 14, 1864, Letterbook II, box 2, White Papers; Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 9; Boggess, *Veteran of Four Wars*, 68-71; Wilder, "Escapade in Southern Florida," 75; James McKay [Jr.], "History of Tampa of the Olden Days: Capt. James McKay Tells of Town from 40's to 70's," *The Tampa Daily Times*, December 18, 1923; Taylor, "Cow Cavalry," 211; Hendry, "Early Days in Fort Myers," 3-4; J. Pegram to J. G. Martin, *ORA*, ser. 1, XXIII, pt. 1, 173. Munnerlyn had been promoted to colonel in December 1864. Some accounts place Footman's forces at over 400 men.

the fort from the prison fortress of Fort Jefferson at the Dry Tortugas. Furthermore, the 250 men at the fort were short of ammunition and arms; the approximately 180 men of Companies D and I, for instance, held only seventy-five serviceable muskets and fewer than thirty rounds apiece. The USCT soldiers had also returned tired and hungry from sustained skirmishes only two days earlier.<sup>38</sup>

Although interpretations of the ensuing battle remain contentious, the engagement itself represents perhaps the most notable event of the Civil War in southwestern Florida. The Confederates located their field command at Fort Thompson, the abandoned Indian-campaign garrison about thirty miles up the Caloosahatchee from Fort Myers. By the morning of February 29 Footman's soldiers drew near to Fort Myers. Although Footman planned a surprise attack, it had been postponed because, as Lieutenant Frances Boggess of his force later recalled, "On that night . . . it rained until the water was knee deep over the entire country."<sup>39</sup> Not to be deterred by these conditions, Footman's forces advanced down the Fort Thompson trail until they encountered their first sign of Union blues at Billy (Bowlegs) Creek, about four miles northeast of the fort. There, a Confederate party of ten, under the command of Lieutenant William M. Hendry, took prisoner four enlisted men of the 2nd Florida Cavalry serving as advanced pickets.<sup>40</sup>

On the morning of February 20—fifteen years to the day after the original establishment of Fort Myers—Footman's men approached the fort and met a laundry detail at a small pond frequented by the fort's inhabitants. Hoping to retain the element of surprise, Confederate forces swiftly fired upon the men, killing a black private and capturing five enlisted troopers and a

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38. Companies D and I USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, January-February 1865; Companies D and I 2nd USCT, Returns, February 1886; Doyle to E. B. Tracy, February 21, 1865, *ORA*, ser. I, XLIX, pt. I, 53-54; *New York Times*, March 18, 1865.

39. Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10; Boggess, *Veteran of Four Wars*, 67.

40. Wilder, "Escapade in Southern Florida," 75 (Wilder served in John J. Lesley's company at the Battle of Fort Myers); Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10; McKay, "Tampa of the Olden Days"; Hendry, "Early Days of Fort Myers," 4-5; *New York Times*, March 18, 1865. Contemporaries often referred to Billy Creek as Billy's Branch.

number of grazing cattle. Although the Confederate forces succeeded in winning this engagement, they had alerted the fort. Captain Doyle later reported that despite the party's attempted stealth, "we discovered the enemy approaching," and the fort was "instantly under arms and posted."<sup>41</sup>

Now dissuaded from his original plan, Footman decided to demand the surrender of the fort. The Confederate commander later claimed that the presence of women and children in the garrison discouraged him from a direct attack; however, the loss of surprise and Footman's own history of vacillation in the face of fire probably more accurately accounts for this action.<sup>42</sup> Thus, brazenly but not altogether convincingly, Footman's courier approached the fort and demanded a Union surrender within the half hour. Captain Bartholf of the 2nd USCT, who served as intermediary between Footman's forces and Doyle's command, barked out the Union response, "Surrender when you make us."<sup>43</sup> As a result of Footman's tactics, the Confederate forces now found themselves in the unenviable position of having to attack an alerted and fortified post manned by a determined, though tired and ill-equipped, garrison of Union forces.

Left with no honorable alternative, Footman opened fire with his lone artillery piece at 1:10 P.M. at a distance of 1,400 yards. The ensuing eleven-hour battle turned on the accurate firepower of the Federal cannon (two brass six-pounders) manned by men of the 2nd USCT. Also crucial was a forward skirmish line in the bushes and trees on the south side of the fort manned by the "volunteer" refugee- and deserter-soldiers of Companies A and B of the 2nd Florida Cavalry.<sup>44</sup> The Confederates answered Union fire with an ineffective twenty or so volleys. An officer

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41. Doyle to Tracy, February 21, 1865; *New York Times*, March 18, 1865; Boggess, *Veteran of Four Wars*, 68-70 (Boggess erroneously reported Private Saunders as a sergeant); Companies D and I USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, January-February 1865; Company D 2nd USCT, February 1865, box 5323; Dillon, "Battle of Fort Myers," 33; Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10.

42. Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10; McKay, "Tampa of the Olden Days."

43. Diary of L. G. Lesley, in the possession of Vernon Peeples. The Reverend Leroy G. Lesley was the father of Captain John T. Lesley. Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10; Wilder, "Escapade in Southern Florida," 75.

44. Reports of Companies A and B 2nd Florida Cavalry, February 20, 1865; Companies A and B 2nd Florida Cavalry, Morning Reports, February 1865; Wilder, "Escapade in Southern Florida," 75.

of Company D recorded in his notes that the enemy “appeared in strong force before Fort Myers and initiated Artillery action maintained for about four hours when he retired.”<sup>45</sup> Lieutenant Boggess recalled about the Confederate cannon response, “It was seen that nothing was accomplished.” Another eyewitness, a reporter from the *New York Times*, saw things a little differently: “The colored soldiers . . . were in the thickest of the fight. Their impetuosity could hardly be restrained; they seemed totally unconscious of danger, or regardless of it and their constant cry was to ‘get at them.’”<sup>46</sup>

Subsequent records indicate that the battle resulted in perhaps forty Confederate casualties and four Union losses— all members of the black troops stationed at the fort. Additionally, the Confederates captured a number of African-American troops— probably cattle and horse herdsman working outside the fort— and some members of Companies A and B of the 2nd Florida Cavalry. Ex-slave John Wallace, who would later gain fame as a Florida legislator and presumed author of the Reconstruction classic *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, was seriously wounded.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Company D 2nd USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Roll, February 20, 1865.
46. Boggess, *Veteran of Four Wars*, 68; *New York Times*, March 18, 1865.
47. Companies D and I 2nd USCT, Regimental Returns, Muster Rolls, January-February 1865; Companies D and I 2nd USCT, Annual Returns, February 1865; 2nd USCT, Regimental Records, Descriptive Book, 1863-1865; 110th New York Volunteers, Descriptive Book, 1864-1865; 110th New York Volunteers, Quarterly Return of Deceased Soldiers, First Quarter 1865; Companies A and B 2nd Florida Cavalry, Muster Rolls, February 1865; Doyle to Tracy, February 21, 1865; Vernon Peeples, “Florida Men Who Served in the Union Forces During the Civil War,” *South Florida Pioneers* 5 (July 1975), 12-16; *Ibid.* 6 (October 1975), 10-14; Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, 3 vols. (New York, 1959), II, 584; McKay, “Tampa of the Olden Days”; Hendry, “Early Days in Fort Myers,” 3-4; Ellis, “Confederate Diary,” 10; *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 22, 1967; John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida: The Inside Workings of the Reconstruction of Civil Government in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1888; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1964), 3. There are conflicting statements in the secondary literature as to the casualties sustained by both sides at the Battle of Fort Myers. The figures are typically based on Doyle’s hasty report to his commanders rather than on the subsequent, more detailed, military records found in RG 94 and RG 393 of the National Archives. Moreover, only the 2nd USCT records reflect actual tallied deaths for the action under review.

By nightfall Footman's troops sensed the futility of the situation and withdrew through the woods. Footman himself justified the rather ignoble retreat by telling his troops, some of whom openly questioned the decision, that no "good general" would unnecessarily risk the lives of his men.<sup>48</sup> Because Doyle did not have a cavalry contingent sufficiently strong to pursue the Confederates, the enemy forces marched unimpeded to the north. A member of Footman's band later commented on the retreat, "We returned to Fort Meade the most worn out and dilapidated looking set of soldiers you ever saw."<sup>49</sup>

Thus ended the southernmost mainland battle of the Civil War. Whereas only days earlier the Confederates had dreamed of expelling Union forces from south Florida, they now had only a handful of unruly prisoners, several hundred head of scrawny cattle, and a bedraggled force to show for their efforts. In reality, this military engagement simply verified Union superiority in the region, a condition that continued until war's end. Confederate captain F. A. Hendry perhaps best summed up the southern view of the entire affair when he observed: "Two hundred and seventy-five men, poorly armed, with one field piece, attacking five companies of well-armed men [sic], with block houses, breastworks and three field pieces, mounted at commanding points, could not be expected to succeed. While the Confederates could not hurt the enemy much, they gave it a terrible fright."<sup>50</sup> What was left of the Confederate forces in southwestern Florida eventually surrendered formally to the Union on June 8, 1865.

Despite the heroism of both black and white Union troops in defending Fort Myers, the post itself was soon abandoned. Confederate veterans of the battle later claimed that their bold actions resulted in the fort's evacuation. One participant proudly noted, "The next morning the nest was warm but the bird had flown."<sup>51</sup> Military records indicate, however, that the process of withdrawal had been planned well before the battle.

By March 14, 1865, the last contingent of Union forces had departed the small fort for Punta Rassa, leaving the proud, battle-

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48. Boggess, *Veteran of Four Wars*, 69-70; Ellis, "Confederate Diary," 10.

49. Doyle to Tracy, February 21, 1865; McKay, "Tampa of the Olden Days."

50. Hendry, "Early Days in Fort Myers," 3.

51. *Ibid.*



scarred post to the sun, alligators, mosquitoes, and future inhabitants. All the refugees at Punta Rassa were eventually transferred by the navy to Key West. As this evacuation occurred, the troopers of the 99th USCT joined veterans of the Battle of Fort Myers at Punta Rassa. Most of these soldiers were assigned to northern sections of Florida until the end of the war.<sup>52</sup>

Although not counted among the war's memorable battles, the engagement at Fort Myers demonstrated the inability of Confederate troops to dislodge Union forces from the lower peninsula, thus shifting the locus of subsequent battles to the northern reaches of the state until the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes over Tallahassee on May 20, 1865. The history of Fort Myers also affirmed the Union's ability to disrupt Confederate activity throughout south Florida's interior. In this respect, actions carried out by Union troops took on a degree of national significance, as they confirmed the validity of the Federal strategy of blockading the coast, raiding the hinterland, and interdicting the critical cattle trade in south Florida. To be sure, these actions were not pivotal to Union victory, but they are worthy of note because they contributed in a special way to the decline of the Confederacy and its ultimate defeat.

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52. Doyle to (illegible), A. T. Pearsall to A. Ransom, March 15, 1865, DOG, Letters Received.