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Sabine Pass in the Civil War

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In extreme Southeast Texas, where the confluence of the Sabine-Neches-Angelina waterways meets the sea, lies historic Sabine Pass. Th ecade before the Civil War witnessed the beginnings of all export commerce there that would eventually rank it, for a time, as the second-largest seaport on the Texas coast. It was the southern terminus for a fleet of six river steamers that freighted the timber and farm products along our East Texas river roads. Today, it is reduced by economics to a sh dow of its former self, subsisting principally upon the seafood and off-shore drilling in tries.

Sabine Pass had its beginnings in 1832 when Thomas Cor of England and John McGaffey of New Hampshire settled there.[1] In 1837, a Republic of Texas custom house was established at Sabine. Shortly afterward, the United S tes built its custom house across the channel in Louisiana, following Secretary of the T ury Levi Woodbury's report to Congress that smuggling and contraband slave trade operations were being conducted there.[2]

In 1839, Sam Houston, Philip Sublette, and associates laid out the first townsite of Sabine, containing 2,060 lots, issuing $250 denomination stock ertificates, and employing as their local agent an early Sabine Pass settler named Niles F. Smith. In 1844, Smith and McGaffey entered into a partnership to develop the second towns e of Sabine Pass.[3]

However, neither promotion resulted in rapid growth. E st Texas speculators rushed south to purchase lots or to stake out land claims, bu few remained as settlers. The 1850 census lists about 150 inhabitants at Sabine, and an enumeration made in 1857 showed an increase in population of only thirty-five.[4]

The census lists for 1860, however, indicate that a bo ranspired during the intervening years. By then, Sabine Pass (officially, S bine City) had acquired a population of more than 500, exclusive of slaves, and a probable total nearing one thousand. The frontier settlement began to take on the trappings of civilization, boasting of a doctor, three lawyers, two hotels, two churches, three large e orting firms, a weekly newspaper, The Sabine Times, schools and music teachers, and a nu of wholesale and retail merchant establishments. Fashionable Goble Academy was erated by the Presbyterian minister there.[5]

In 1850, Judge D. R. Wingate built one of the first mo rn steam sawmills in Texas at Sabine Pass, followed shortly thereafter by another steam mill owned by J. M. Long. By 1860, a cotton gin and a large sugar mill had been loc ted there. Along the shores of Sabine Lake, contractor John Stamps was laying the fir railroad trackage south of Beaumont.[6]

The Morgan Line of steam packets docked frequently at the three large wharves, providing regular freight, passenger, and mail service to New Or ans and Galveston. Sabine had increased its cotton exports from eighty-four bales in 1838 to more than 15,000 bales in 1858. The river steamer Uncle Ben had carried 5,000 of se, making five 800-mile roundtrips up the Sabine River, two of which reached Belzora, west of Longview in Smith County. Other exports in that year included 1,000,000 et of lumber, 6,000,000 shingles, 200,000 barrel staves, and 115,000 pounds of tobacco. By 1859, more than forty vessels were regularly engaged in trade at the port.[7]

E. I. Kellie, founder in 1865 of the Jasper Newsboy an ng-time steamboat captain and politician, confirmed in his memoirs that Sabine Pass was a boomtown in 1861, and estimated its population at 3,000. He was a sixteen-ye r-old printer's devil for the Sabine Times when its publisher, J. T. Fuller, died in the fall of 1860. Kellie continued publication alone until he enlisted in the local Confederate company in May of 1861.[8]

The outbreak of war shook the local citizenry to its r ts for the town was acutely aware of its exposed position to guns of the Union Navy. Citizen sympathies were divided as well for a large percentage of them had been reared in the North. A letter of Colonel X. B. DeBray of Houston refers to the suspected disloyalties ng the residents there.[9]

In the spring of 1861, Sabine Pass citizens organized a committee to prepare for the town's defense, electing the sawmill operator, Judge Wingate, its chairman and K. D. Keith, an export merchant, as his assistant. Keith organized an infantry company, eventually designated as Company B, Spaight's 21st Regiment. He a umed its command as captain along with Lieutenants Niles H. Smith, son of Sam Houston's former agent, Joseph O. Cassidy, and Joseph Chastaine.

Keith drilled his company endlessly to the chagrin of its teenage recruits, and used them to construct a crude, earthwork fort in the marshland along the channel. This fortress, known as Fort Sabine, guarded the two channel entrances of a ng oyster reef that lay in the Pass. Keith mounted two 12-pounder Mexican field guns there along with a battery of 18-pounder smoothbores loaned from the defenses of Galveston. Later, he received two 32-pounder smoothbores to bolster the mudfort's armame giving it an effective range of about 1,200 yards.[10]

In this early period, the story of Sabine Pass is gene ally one of considerable apathy on the part of the Confederate command. Its value as a haven for blockade runners is attested to in at least two letters. Colonel DeBray, commanding the Houston Sub-Military District, noted in one that Sabine Pass "has proven to be our mo important seaport." The Confederate chief engineer for East Texas, Colonel Julius Kellersberger, added in another that "the Pass at Sabine is certainly a very important oint, and in fact the only port from where we receive our powder and other articles."[11]

In July of 1862, Kellersberger was ordered to Sabine C ty to inspect the condition of defenses there. He reported their total inadequacy, stating that the guns were too small to be effective, and that the crude earthworks were subje o overflow. He recommended that a new fort be built on higher ground near the channels' exits from the reef, and that five guns of adequate size be installed there. Three months later, Colonel DeBray chided the Trans-Mississippi Headquarters for its failure to act on this recommendation, stating that one of two current disasters might have been aver d. At that moment, Union Lieutenant Frederick Crocker's squadron was in Sabine Lake, and another Union Fleet had captured Galveston.[12]

A third disaster had overtaken Sabine City, which, in effect, made DeBray's chiding pointless. In July of 1862, the British steamer Victoria ran the blockade, carrying both munitions and the dreaded yellow fever. Within days, soldiers and civilians alike were dying, and a general panic ensued with much of the populace fleeing the city. Colonel Ashley Spaight, of Beaumont, furloughed most of his battalion to counteract spread of the contagion. A general quarantine was ordered at Sabine, and guards were posted south of Beaumont and Orange to prevent entry of Sabine City's refugees.[13]

Except for thirty effectives, Captain Keith's gunners ere all furloughed or convalescent when Crocker's squadron attacked on September 24, 1862 ocker's cannon pummeled the fort at will while all of the Confederate shells f ll short. Colonel Spaight recorded that the defenders could do nothing except mount the breastwork and shake their fists in defiance.

At nightfall, Keith spiked and buried the guns, then retreated inland on Spaight's orders with his supplies and stores. For three weeks, Crocker's guns and launches depredated the area, burning Sabine's sawmills, railway station and roundhouse, many residences, and the railroad bridge over Taylor's Bayou, altogether mo 00,000 worth of damage.[14]

Despairing of holding Sabine due to epidemic, transportation problems, and Crocker's presence in the Lake, Spaight prepared to defend only eaumont and Orange. He hastily reassembled his battalion, and on October 2, 1862, dispatched an urgent request for guns, men, and Colonel Kellersberger's services. Kellersberger left Houston the following day with men and supplies, and by October 18 could report that the lower Neches and Sabine River defenses were shipshape.

At Port Neches, he built Fort Grigsby, one of five erected by the engineer in the Sabine Lake region, and armed it with a battery of 24-pounders, an arsenal, and a bombproof. He remarked of this fort that "this battery, if ably manned and defended, can blow anything out of the water that can cross the bar." On the lower Sabine River, he built another on a high shellbank, and armed it with three 32-pounder brass howitzers. On the bars of both

rivers, he scuttled 80-foot barges loaded with clamshe l, so designed that the rivers could admit only the shallow-draft, Confederate river steamers.[15]

In the end, Kellersberger's labors proved to he little more than an exercise in futility. Crocker's squadron went all out for harassment, but he made no attempt to ascend the rivers. He lacked the land troops needed for a holding operation, and, being waterborne, had even less reason than the Confederates for exposing his men to the yellow fever contagion. After three weeks, he sailed his squadron through the Pass, and left, but the river forts remained as the Sabine area's only defense for many months to come.

Following the loss of Galveston, a new commander, General J. B. Magruder, was transferred to Texas, and an immediate change in Confe rate tactics was visible. One of his first acts was to gather what forces he could muster, and, with a motley assortment of cottonclad river craft, to drive the Federals from Gal eston Bay.

Two of Magruder's units at Galveston were to play a ma or role in the defense of Sabine for the remainder of the war. One was Company F, of th irst Texas Heavy Artillery, of which Lieutenant Richard Dowling was second in command. The other was Colonel W. H. Griffin's 21st Infantry Battalion, who had helped spearhead the attack on Kuhn's Wharf.[16]

Magruder then moved to destroy the blockading ships of ine City, which action had been recommended earlier by Colonel DeBray. Magruder sent Company F, better known as the Davis Guards, to Orange, where two steamboats, the Josiah Bell and Uncle Ben, were being outfitted with cannon, cotton bales, and heavy oak timbers. Dowling's Guards were assigned to the cottonclad Bell whose main armament was a single 6-inch Columbiad rifle. Company B, Keith's command, served as artillerists for the Uncle Ben's three 12-pounder guns, all assignment they retained until the war ended.

Loaded with sharpshooters from other companies as well, the two cottonclads left Orange on January 20, 1863, hopeful of finding the blockade ships at anchor offshore. Forewarned by columns of black smoke, the blockaders Morning Light and Velocity hoisted sail in an effort to escape. After a thirty-mile chase at sea, the steamboats came within range, and, in an amazing display of gunnery, Dowling's crew scored a irect hit, which destroyed a gun and its crew aboard the Morning Light. When their othe gun crews were forced below decks by the Confederate musketry, both ships surrende ed.[17]

For some months, Magruder had planned to rebuild Sabin s defenses. In March, 1863, he ordered Kellersberger and a work force of 500 slaves to begin construction on a new Fort Sabine, later renamed Fort Griffin. The engineer recorded in his memoirs that, upon arrival there, he found Sabine City "a deserted village." This not entirely a correct assessment for the writer knows of many families who remained the e throughout the war, particularly among the farmers in the countryside.[18]

For six months, the engineers continued work on the ne rt, and it was still unfinished when a Federal invasion force attacked on September 8. Fort Griffin was somewhat triangular in shape, and about 100-yards long on each g. It had a sawtooth front, where six guns were mounted, sloping walls ten feet high, and a parapet twenty-feet wide at the top, beneath which six underground arsenals and bombproofs were built. Construction materials were primarily dirt, logs, crossties, and railroad iron.[19]

For armament, Kellersberger dug up the spiked 32-pounder guns at old Fort Sabine, and rebuilt them at the Confederate foundry in Galveston. e also abandoned the river forts, transferring all of their weapons and supplies to Fort Griffin.[20]

Early in 1863, Magruder had begun the gradual transfer of Griffin's Battalion to Sabine Pass, which action was completed in June. This battalion consisted primarily of West Texas frontiersmen, who, by late summer, were threaten ng mutiny because of Comanche raids on their homes. At the same time, Magruder was forewarned of an impending Union attack on the Texas Coast, but he nevertheless ordered Griffin's mutinous element, all but two companies, to West Texas around September 1. This n reduced Confederate manpower in the Sabine area to about 300 men when the Union fleet arrived.[21]

The story of Dick Dowling's small but signal triumph i oo well-recorded to require repetition here. Its effects, however, were momentous for both sides. It lulled the Union navy into believing that the defenses at Sabine were impregnable. It kept an occupation army out of East Texas. It kept the port open to blockade-runners, whose supplies helped curb the Union's Red River Campaign. And expressly for abine, it instilled in General Magruder a morbid fear that a second attack at Sabine was impending.

Magruder temporarily transferred his Houston headquarters and one-third of his command to Sabine Pass. On paper, this was 3,600 men, t one thousand of these were on detached service elsewhere. He ordered construction f extensive outer fortifications, wagon, roads and rail construction, channel obstructio s, and the building of a four-gun redoubt at Taylor's Bayou near Port Arthur.

In addition, he ordered construction of a major fortif ation of five redoubts seven miles west of Sabine City to guard the western approaches of the town. At this point, Sabine's two high-land ridges form a juncture near the beach, where Union troops could have debarked with ease. By October 15, Fort Manhassett neared completion with 500 troops and a number of guns in position there.[22]

It was the Union stab at Brownsville, Texas that ended Sabine's primacy among Magruder's plans. By late November, he had transferred half of Sabine's defense force southward. Gradually, Federal soldiers occupied most of Texas' southern coastline, and Magruder retreated inland and north, determined to hold his Brazos-to-Sabine Pass position at all costs. And in this respect, he succeed , for the Northern stretch of Texas coast remained unchanged until the war ended. With the exception of Galveston, Sabine's two forts were among the last in the confederacy to lower the Rebel emblem on May 20, 1865.

Only one other action marked Sabine's Confederate history in the last year of the war. The Calcasieu River in Louisiana was oftentimes friendly territory for the Federal navy. A number of Union sympathizers lived along its Pass, and a 200-man band of Jayhawkers depredated Cameron Parish and sold stolen livestock to Union blockaders. On April 15, 1864, two West Gulf blockaders, the ironclads Granite ity and Wave were ordered from New Orleans to Calcasieu Pass to buy cattle and horses, and to enlist disgruntled sympathizers for the Union navy.

Magruder misinterpreted their mission, believing it to be a prelude for invasion. He ordered Colonel Griffin to attack, and, at daylight on May 6, the Sabine garrison caught

the ironclads at anchor in the Pass, awaiting coal. Cr uzbauer's Battery of artillery scored 65 hits on the two vessels, while 300 Confederate sharpshooters maintained a steady musket fire at the gun crews. The Granite City surrendered after firing thirty rounds, but the Wave put up a gallant defense for two hours, strik g her colors only after her steam drum exploded.[23]

The remainder of the war at Sabine Pass was typical of throughout the South—soured corn meal, no pay, no provisions, inflated currency, and low morale—all of which provoked mutinies and mass desertions. Following Lee's rrender, General Kirby-Smith and Magruder voiced blatant appeals for patriotism, but to no avail. By May 20, 1865, Sabine's defenders had abandoned their posts, and retu d to their farms. On May 25, Union Lieutenant Pennington's detachment came ashore at Sabine and raised the Stars and Stripes over both forts.[24]

If the 1866 exports are any gauge for measure, Sabine Pass must have bounced back quickly during the Reconstruction Era. Although her co on and shingle exports for that year were cut in half, her lumber shipments trebled from one to three million board feet. By 1900, at the height of the port's supremacy, lumber shipments would reach 75,000,000 board feet annually.[25]

Although Sabine Pass has long, and with justifiable pr e, celebrated Dick Dowling's victory, this forty minutes of battle has come to be s us with its four years of Confederate history. All else has been consigned to historic obscurity, and myth and legend have often replaced fact. By 1890, all traces o ort Griffin had disappeared, and the very existence and location of Fort Manhassett had long been forgotten.

In the summer of 1970, this writer became aware that a st Confederate fort may have existed at the west end of Sabine Ridge. Research verified this, and with the aid of Confederate maps in National Archives, he was able to identify the five redoubts that once comprised Fort Manhassett. Traces of eroded embankments still outline two of the fortifications exactly. During the summer of 1970, exc vation at one of them uncovered an entrenchment where more than two hundred 32-pounder Confederate shells lay encrusted and well-preserved in black gunpowder along with many other artifacts. The other four sites are still untouched. Since this excavation revealed the abandoning soldiers' deliberate intent to hide everything from the victors, Fort Manhassett's fourteen cannons (several of them being brass howitzers) may well be buried somewhe e in the vicinity, for no primary source of evidence indicates otherwise.

Although it is much too early to beat the drums, there is a current drive on to restore the Fort Griffin Battle site into a state-owned recreation park complete with a restored fort, museum, boating ramps, and other facilities. State arc ogists and Parks and Wildlife officials have investigated both sites thoroughly in r cent weeks, and with their reports as a basis, funds for land purchase and restoration will be included as a line item appropriation in the Texas Parks and Wildlife budget f 1971. It is true that all these efforts may fail, but, whatever the outcome, the Sabin ea of Texas has become acutely conscious of its Civil War heritage in recent months, which this writer, of course, hopes will continue.

Endnotes

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4. Texas GLO Map of Jefferson County, 1918; Jefferson County, Texas census, 1850; Texas Almanac, 1859.

5. Census Records, 1860; Jasper Newsboy, January 12, 19 .

6. Beaumont Enterprise, January 8, 1933; Census Records, 1860; Jefferson County Marriage Record A-B, 139.

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8. Jasper Newsboy, January 12, 1923.

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11. Official Records, Armies, Series I, Vol. XV, 143; se es I, Vol. IX, 729.

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13. "Military Operations, Sabine Pass, 1861-63," 1.

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16. Ibid., 214-20.

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19. Confederate maps and drawings Nos. Z-51-2, Z-54-11, Z-54-6, Z-298. Z-54-2, and

Z-54-7, all in Record Group 77, National Archives.

20. Kellersberger, Memoirs, 30-31; Port Arthur News, August 30, 1970.

21. Official Records, Armies, Series I, Vol. XXVI, Part I, 73, 248; ibid., Vol. XXVI, Part I, 303.

22. Ibid., 281, 298-99, 318-21; Map 3, Plate XXXII, "Official Atlas of the Civil War."

23. "History of Spaight's Texas Regiment"; Beaumont Ente prise, May 9, 1909; Official Records, Armies, Series I, Vol. XXXIV, Part I, 912-14; Official Records, Navies, Series I, Vol. XXI, 746-61; Alwyn Barr, "Battle of Calcasieu Pass," Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. LXVI (July, 1962), 59-68.

24. Scharf, History of the Confederate States, Navy, 529.

25. Texas Almanac, 1867.