

Union Blockades and the Sarasota Bay Raid

Part I (March 23-27, 1864)

As the Civil War escalated, the Union Navy increasingly blocked the ports of the east coast of Florida, and moved to intensify the blockage of Gulf Coast ports.

Union ships were assigned to both the east and Gulf Coasts of Florida by 1864.

The East Gulf Blockading Squadron had 34 vessels responsible for guarding the coast from St. Andrew's Bay to Cape Canaveral, Cuba and the Bahamas.

At the beginning of the War, it was thought that the Florida Gulf coast from **Cape Sable** to **Cedar Key** was one of the least populated sections of the coast, and "one or more gunboats plying up and down the coast... would amply suffice to maintain a blockade," according to historian **Jere Parker**, who was included in a Sarasota County Historical Society book "Sarasota Origins."

Later, Union officials could see that cotton and turpentine shipments were being moved from Bayport up Peace River making a handsome profit for the Confederacy, as well as supplies like armaments, gunpowder, salt, coffee, and liquor were able to be imported from **Havana** and **Nassau** to their Confederate customers.

The Union set up nine ships to guard the Gulf waters.

The **Sagamore** was a steamer with five guns which was active in the Cedar

Keys area.

Two Sisters was a one-gun schooner which sailed between Cedar Keys and Tampa Bay.

Two ships — the **James L. Davis** with four guns, and the **Sunflower** — sat in Tampa Bay. The **Stonewall**, a one-gun schooner, sailed between Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor.

The five-gun **Gem of the Sea** and its tender **Rosalie**, a sloop with one gun, stayed in Charlotte Harbor.

The one-gun schooner, **Ariel**, was formerly owned by **Capt. John Curry** of Manatee. It had been sold to the Confederates for blockade running, but was captured by the Union Navy and pressed into service, traveling between **Estero Bay** and **Cape Sable**.

The six-gun **Hendrick Hudson** traveled the entire Gulf coast between longitudes 84 and 86 degrees West on a line at latitude 27 degrees North.

Parker explained that the Confederates would evade this Union net by following an "inside route."

Capt. Frederick Tresca of Manatee, who was a native of France and brother-in-law to **William Henry Whitaker** of Sarasota, was primary in this clever ruse.

"Sailing ships by night except when inland bay or passage of shallow depth allowed them to proceed behind the shelter of some well-wooded line of islands. If there was a break in these

inland waterways and they had to go outside into the Gulf or across some large body of water, he stopped in some secluded creek or bayou near a pass until night made it safe without lights, keeping close to shore where a large boat could not venture. Occasionally getting water from wells among the islands where fishermen formerly had fishing ranches, and fish for their food supply.

When they reached the Pass of **Big Marco** they were comparatively safe for a time and proceeded with little trouble, for all along the south there were many and devious passages known as the Ten Thousand Islands. So well did the guides know these waters they could travel mostly by day, safely hidden from all Federal boats, for even if seen it is dangerous for a stranger to venture into the winding, crossing, blind and shallow waterways," wrote Parker about Tresca's voyage to get **Judah Benjamin**, Confederate secretary to the state, out of the country to safety in June and July 1865.

"They rounded Cape Sable, crossed the bays...to the outside chain of keys, which face the waters of the Florida Strait, leaving the Federal Naval Base at Key West many miles to the west. Along this stretch they were still safe for the island bays still extended behind the palm covered islands. Along here also were a few settlements of spongers

and wreckers who might help but they were afraid to ask often, not knowing friend from foe. When well up to where Miami now stands and about opposite the Bahamas...across the open Atlantic to the shelter of the English Harbors of the West Indies."

Before this voyage, it is estimated that Tresca had used this route between 10 to 30 times as a blockade runner. It is important to bear in mind that he was not the only blockade runner who traveled this route during the War Between the States.

One of the Union Navy routes blockaded in the Gulf of Mexico ran down Sarasota Bay in Sarasota County. Blockade runners could enter the Bay from **Palma Sola Pass**. In those days, the channel had not been dredged, so the larger Union ships could not navigate the Pass as could the Confederate runners.

After they entered the Pass, they continued past **Whitaker Bayou** and then out **Big Pass**.

Parker remarked that sailing south through Robert's Bay was impossible because the area around the mouth of Phillip Creek was choked with mangroves and mudflats and was not navigable.

Next week, Part II will relate what happened when the Navy chased the Confederate sloop as it traveled in Sarasota Bay.

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