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Fort Randall, Little River Neck
Horry County, South Carolina

by

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Located on the eastern end of Little River Neck on property currently known as Tilghman Point are the remains of a Confederate battery/fort built to protect Little River Inlet from invading Union forces. During the War Between the States, the United States government's North Atlantic Blockading Squadron was very active in this area. As a result of this activity the need for such protection was deemed necessary by the Confederate authorities.

The Confederate battery, or fort, as it became to be called, served a dual purpose of protecting the village of Little River and the surrounding countryside from invasion and of providing a safe haven for blockade runners.¹ As the Union's blockade was tightened around Charleston, SC and Wilmington, NC, Little River Inlet served as an alternative port for the blockade runners which were bringing in valuable supplies for the besieged Confederacy.

Fort Randall was in existence by March, 1861, for at that time Captain Thomas West Daggett, who was in command of the Waccamaw Light Artillery, was trying to lodge his men in Fort Randall and in Fort Ward.² Captain Daggett, a native of Massachusetts, was an engineer who had moved to South Carolina. He used his skills to build and operate rice mills on the Waccamaw Neck. When war broke out, he joined the Confederate forces and was put in charge of the coastal defenses from Winyah Bay to Little River Inlet. Like Battery White, which is located on Belle Isle on Winyah Bay just outside of Georgetown, Battery Randall used earthen works for fortification. Records indicate that the battery consisted of an approximately 10' broad x 5' deep ditch with parapet and a blockhouse pierced so that the defenders might fire without being exposed.³ Captain Daggett armed Fort Randall with two 6-pounder cannons and inquired about whether he should also add the 12-pounders which were in the mill yard at Laurel Hill Plantation. In addition to the blockhouse he also built a magazine in which to store ammunition and arms.⁴

The fort received its name from Capt. Thomas Randall. Thomas Randall was born in Rochester, Massachusetts on 25 Nov 1791. He became a large landowner in the Little River community and owned 85 slaves in 1860.⁵ He is buried at Cedar Creek Cemetery.⁶

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Federal naval records tell us that there was considerable blockade running activity in the Little River Inlet area. Acting Volunteer Lieutenant George W. Browne, commander of the *U.S. Bark Fernandina* off Wilmington on 14 Dec 1861 reported, “*Sir: I have to report that on the evening of the 13th instant, off Little River Inlet, North [sic] Carolina, I observed numerous fires. Some forty were counted in one place, and several others in scattered positions of from 1 to 2 miles apart along the coast. At 7 p.m. I tacked and stood in to reconnoiter. On nearing the shore I observed several bodies of men, which caused me to believe there was an encampment of Confederate troops and the distant fires were their picket guard. After having burned a preparatory signal and receiving no answer, I opened fire with my starboard battery on the men and fired, several of the shots being heard to strike some hard substance very distinctly. At this time the vessel was within 700 yards of the beach in 4 fathoms of water; could see the men on shore running plainly. After firing three rounds with the starboard battery, tacked ship and fired one round of shot and one shell from port battery. By this time the fires were mostly extinguished. Secured the batteries and proceeded on our course. From the appearance of things, I am now led to believe the fires were signals for some vessel endeavoring to run a cargo. Having stood close in during the morning, and seen several men on the beach, they perhaps supposed I was the vessel expected, or one wishing to run the blockade*”⁷ It should be mentioned that some U.S. naval reports erroneously referred to Little River Inlet as being in NC instead of SC. The state line is located just north of the mouth of the inlet.

Lieutenant E. Hooker, Commanding the *USS Victoria*, while on an expedition to Little River in search of blockade runners, reported on January 2, 1863, “*Sir: I have to report my coal as reduced to 10 tons. I have also to report that I have received information by contrabands, four of whom came to my ship December 30, that there were two schooners in Little River, nearly or quite loaded for sea, and also one in Shallotte in the same condition. On the afternoon of the 31st a sail was discovered inside, which we thought was working down to Little River Bar. We soon, however, lost sight of her. At sunset I got underway and proceeded to Little River and lay off and on for a while. At 8 p.m. I came to anchor and sent a boat on shore. At the first point of landing they were met by cavalry pickets and retired. They then entered the river and proceeded several miles up the river without, however, discovering anything except more cavalry pickets. The boat returned to the ship at 7 o’clock a.m., January 1, and I returned to my anchorage. The schooners in Little River are the *Argyle* and *James Bailey*. At high water there is about 9 feet on Little River Bar.*”⁸

It is clear from the surviving records of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron that Little River was used by blockade runners. A captured Confederate document from Major A.B. Magruder of Wilmington, NC states, “*Run into the mouth of Little River, a small stream of _feet water, near the boundary line of North and South Carolina, emptying into the Atlantic about 30 or 40 miles below Cape Fear. It is not down on the charts nor on the coast survey, and its existence even – certainly its harbor and anchorage ground – is hardly known to any Yankee. Communications from a little village or post-office called Little River, about 4 or 6 miles from the mouth, are readily had with the interior by country roads, etc., with Charleston and Wilmington. A pilot can*

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*be had at Wilmington to meet and bring in vessels from the coast, and rosin and turpentine in any quantity can be procured for return cargo; also cotton, lumber, etc.”*⁹

Another report in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* tells us of how Lt. William Barker Cushing (1842-1875), commanding a captured schooner, the *Home*, which he had disguised as an English blockade runner, attempted to capture some pilots in Wilmington but failed. Having heard of a pilot station at Little River, he then sailed there to try his luck. This venture resulted in an attack on Fort Randall. In his report dated January 8, 1863, he states, “*Sir: I have the honor to report that I failed to capture the Wilmington pilots where I desired to act. Having learned, however, that there was a pilot station at Little River, 30 miles below Fort Caswell, I made sail for that point and reached it on the morning of the 5th. At 8 o’clock at night I crossed the bar with three cutters and twenty-five men, and proceeded up the river. My object was to look for pilots, and also to find some schooners supposed to be inside. About a mile from the mouth the enemy gave us a volley of musketry from a bluff on the left. I beached the boats at once, formed my men about 200 yards from the enemy’s position, and gave the order, “forward; double quick; charge.” Without firing a musket the men moved forward, and when we got clear of the woods I saw a fort in front and the light of the camp fires. Knowing that the rebels were ignorant of our numbers, I charged with the bayonet and captured their works, going over one side as they escaped over the other. I found the fort an earthwork, surrounded by a ditch about 10 feet broad by 5 deep. Inside was a blockhouse pierced for musketry. No guns were mounted. I learn that it was held by one company of infantry. The enemy left in such haste that their stores, clothing, ammunition, and a portion of their arms were captured. I destroyed all that I could not bring away. I went a short distance farther up the river; had another skirmish; did not see the schooners; got out of ammunition and returned with the loss of but one man shot in the leg. In conclusion, I beg leave to state that officers and men behaved nobly. Acting Master’s Mates Valentine and Hicks were with me. Acting Master Savage, commanding mortar schooner *Matthew Vassar*, furnished me with two boats and a portion of the men...P.S. – The fort was in South Carolina, 1 mile from the border line”*¹⁰ Apparently, the cannons that had been mounted in 1861 had later been removed to more strategic locations as the war worsened as per General Lee’s plan for coastal defense, leaving Little River without the benefit of the protection of heavy artillery.¹¹

According to Cushing’s biography, years after the altercation he supposedly wrote, “*At the enemy we went, yelling like demons, and coming out into the open space saw, by the light of a camp fire, an earthwork looming up in front. It was no time to turn back, another yell and we were through the ditch and over the parapet, sole possessors of a fort and blockhouse, from which the frightened garrison five times our numbers, had run away deceived by our boldness into the belief that they not we were the surprised party.*”¹²

One month and five days after Cushing’s attack on Fort Randall, another incident is reported in the area which mentions Fort Randall and gives us a picture of the activities there. James C. Gibney and George Smith, both Acting Ensigns aboard the *USS Maratanza* off Little River reported, “*Sir: In obedience to your order to make*

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reconnaissance up Little River, and to ascertain if there were any vessels up the river, on the 9th instant at 7:30 p.m. we left the ship in the launch, the crew properly armed and equipped for such an enterprise, and accompanied by a boat and crew from the schooner Matthew Vassar, moved inshore in a northeasterly direction. After some delay in finding the channel we eventually succeeded and crossed the bar, on which we found 6 feet of water, it being about mid tide. After crossing the bar, and depending on the officer in charge of the boat from the Matthew Vassar (who had been up the river before) for instructions how to proceed, we found him totally deficient of any knowledge of the course of the channel, and consequently had to depend wholly on our own resources; in doing so, we got into a false channel, and in retracing our way we discovered a boat with five men in her, pulling up the river. When about 100 yards off we hailed them and ordered them to come alongside, but they being near the shore, and taking the alarm, three of them jumped overboard and succeeded in making their escape. We immediately landed a party and sent them in pursuit, but owing to the facilities the place afforded for secreting themselves, we failed in capturing them. In the captured boat were two men named, respectively, G.W. Hewett and Stephen Hewett, natives of North Carolina, who surrendered as prisoners without resistance. We found also in the boat 5 muskets, 23 each of jackets, caps, drawers, shirts, stockings, 23 pair of shoes and 1 dozen blankets, intended for the use of a company of infantry stationed at this place. From what appeared to us to be very reliable statements, made by the prisoners (that there was on company of infantry and one of cavalry, about 175 men in all, stationed at a small fort about one-half mile up the river from where we were then, the fugitives having alarmed the garrison, as we saw by their firing muskets and rockets), we did not deem it prudent to proceed up the river any farther, so started on our return. In running out of the inlet, sounding as we came, we found from 2 to 3 fathoms of water in mid-channel, and on the bar at 11 o'clock, it being high tide, we found 10 feet of water. We returned to the ship at 12 midnight, not being entirely successful in accomplishing the object of our enterprise.”¹³

In 2009, all that remains of Fort Randall is a clearly defined footprint of the fortification. The site has been respected and well preserved although a portion of the earthen works has begun to erode. The site still commands a spectacular view of Little River Inlet as it meets the Atlantic Ocean.

¹ C.B. Berry, *The Sun News*, Area History column, June 27, 1992.

² Daggett to Col. Charles Alston, Jr., March 23, 1861, Board of Ordnance Papers, S.C. Archives.

³ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 8, p. 403, 404.

⁴ Daggett to Col. Charles Alston, Jr., March 23, 1861, Board of Ordnance Papers, S.C. Archives.

⁵ 1860 Slave Schedules of Horry County, South Carolina.

⁶ C.B. Berry, *IRQ*, V. 4, No. 4, p. 13.

⁷ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 6, p. 473, 474.

⁸ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 8, p. 397.

⁹ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 8, p. 441.

¹⁰ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 8, p. 403, 404.

¹¹ *The History of Georgetown County, S.C.*, by George C. Rogers, Jr., 1970, p. 393.

¹² *Lincoln's Commando, The Biography of Commander W.B. Cushing*, U.S.N., by Ralph J. Roske and Charles Van Doren, Harper and Brothers, N.Y., 1957, p. 144.

¹³ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, Series I, Vol. 8, p. 529, 530.