



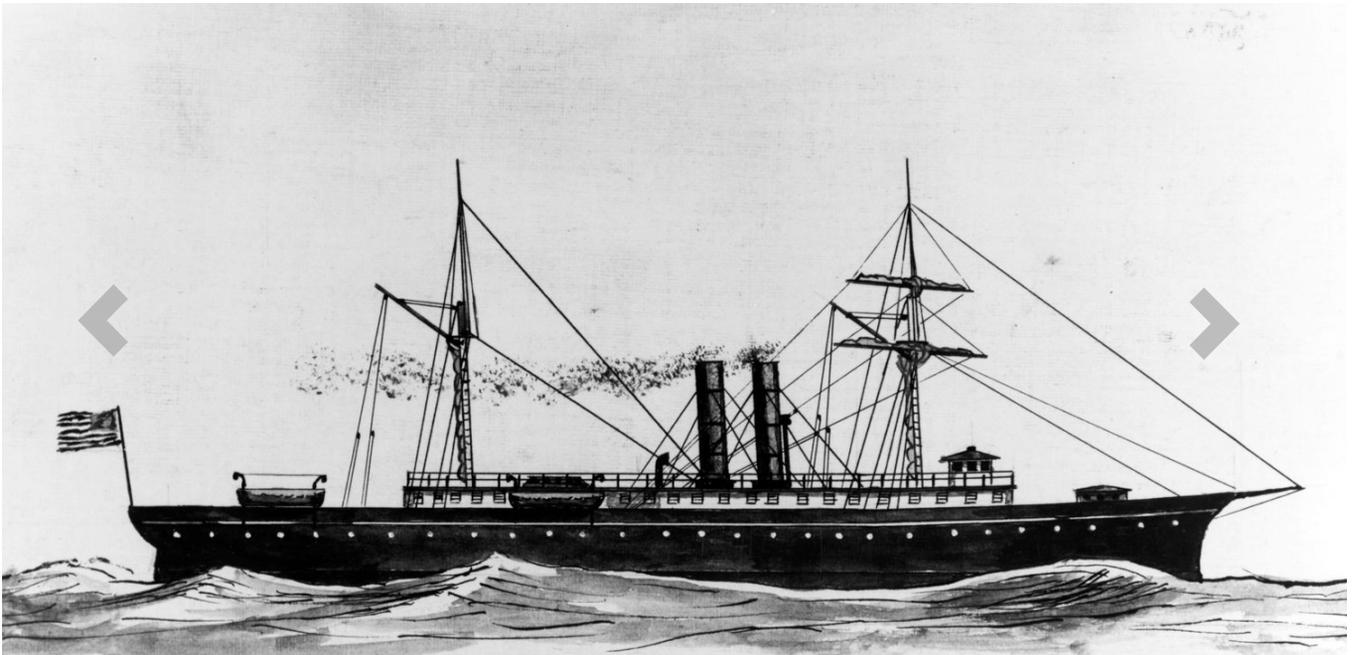
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THE APALACHICOLA TIMES

Chasing Shadows: Blockade running and 'the abominable Old Hag'



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The USS Cuyler was a steamboat positioned in the Gulf of Mexico during the Civil War.

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By Mark Curenton Special to the Times, The Apalachicola Times

Apalachicola's reason for existence prior to the Civil War was as a shipping port for the Apalachicola River and its tributaries. The produce of the interior, mainly cotton, was shipped out of Apalachicola, and manufactured goods and necessities were shipped in. Apalachicola was the point where the cargoes were transferred between the seagoing vessels and the steamboats that plied the riverways, and the town grew rich from the commerce that flowed through it.

With the coming of the Civil War and the imposition of a federal naval blockade of the port in June 1861, this source of wealth and livelihood vanished. There was still cotton that needed to be shipped out, and Apalachicola and upriver ports were soon starved for goods and commodities not available in the South. Since the South provided the majority of the world's cotton, the price of this commodity rose as the available supply dwindled. In 1860, prior to the war, cotton averaged 11 cents a pound. By 1862 the price had nearly tripled to 31 cents per pound. If someone could manage to evade the Union blockade there was a lot of money to be made by taking out a cargo of cotton.

Running the blockade was no simple matter. In addition to the vessels posted at the entrances to Apalachicola Bay, the Union Navy also regularly patrolled the Florida Straits and the Yucatan Channel. Havana, Cuba was the most practical port for blockade runners leaving Apalachicola. It was the nearest to Apalachicola, but it was also very near the headquarters of the Union's East Gulf Blockading Squadron at Key West.

While the town of Apalachicola was still garrisoned by Southern troops, at least five schooners tried to run the blockade. Four of them were captured, either on the outbound voyage or trying to return to Apalachicola. Only one of them, the *W. P. Benson*, made a successful round trip, carrying out a cargo of naval stores and returning with an assorted cargo of manufactured goods. When it tried to run the blockade a second time it also was captured.

Even vessels in the bay were not safe. In August 1861 the merchant ship *Finland*, which had been caught in Apalachicola Bay when the blockade was imposed, was anchored in St. George Sound fitting out to run the blockade. Seeing the isolated vessel from their position in the Gulf, the *USS Montgomery* and the *USS Cuyler* sent five boats through East Pass to investigate. They captured the *Finland* and her crew without opposition. The ship had its yards and rigging partially dismantled, but before the Union sailors could put her in sailing condition and exit East Pass, a steam boat appeared from Apalachicola towing a schooner loaded with Southern soldiers intent on recapturing the *Finland*. The Union sailors set the *Finland* on fire and retreated to their warships in the Gulf, bringing with them the entire crew of the *Finland* except the captain who was released to return to his home in the city. The crew, including 10 free Black sailors, preferred to go north, fearing they would be drafted into the Army if they returned to Apalachicola.

Blockade runners carried expensive cargo

More than a sense of patriotic duty inspired the Union sailors to do their utmost to stop the blockade runners. They had a financial interest. Any enemy vessel that was captured would be sold along with its cargo, and the money distributed among the crew of the ship or ships involved in the capture. With the rise in the value of cotton, blockade runners carrying this expensive commodity were especially sought.

The Union blockading vessels were kept well-informed of conditions in Apalachicola by sympathizers onshore. In February 1862 four slaves from the city escaped to the *USS Marion* off West Pass and gave an intelligence report on what was happening in the city, its defenses and the vessels in port and on the river.

In early 1862 the Florida State Troops that were garrisoning the town were disbanded by the state legislature. Since there were no Confederate troops available that could be spared to take over these duties, Apalachicola was evacuated and abandoned by Southern forces. It was two escaped slaves who first informed the Union Navy of the evacuation of the town by Southern forces.

The abandonment of Apalachicola by the Confederacy did not end attempts to run the blockade at the town. The financial enticements were just too great to be ignored. In October 1862 Acting Lieutenant Edward Y. McCauley, commanding the *U.S.S. Fort Henry* on blockade duty off Apalachicola, learned from two slaves who rowed out from Apalachicola that the sloop *G. L. Brockenborough* was hidden in a creek upriver from town, being loaded with cotton in preparation to running the blockade. An expedition was quickly organized of boats from the *Fort Henry* and the *U.S.S. Sagamore*, another blockading vessel. Rowing up the Apalachicola River on Oct. 15, they soon located the sloop and captured it without a fight.

It is uncertain which creek the *Brockenborough* was hiding in. It was probably either Scipio Creek or Poor House Creek. In his letter to the governor about the incident, Thomas Orman suggested it was Scipio Creek, writing that "... she was brought down in front of the City at a wharf at the upper end preparatory to her running the blockade." Mr. Orman was not present in Apalachicola when all this happened though, so all of his information was second hand.

The owner and the captain were captured on the vessel, owned by an Englishman named Saylor from Columbus, Georgia. He had come downriver and bought the sloop to run the blockade as a speculative venture. To command her he employed Charles Ferdinand Marks, a local ship's captain. Reportedly, Captain Marks had attempted to run the blockade a few months previously but had lost both the ship and the cargo.

Getting the vessel downriver and out to the safety of the Union fleet was a different matter after the easy capture. By chance, eight members of Capt. Clinton Thigpen's Company A, 2nd Florida Cavalry were in town with the body of Lt. Frederick Fuller, who had died of disease two days earlier at Fort Gadsden. His men had brought the body home to Apalachicola for burial in Chestnut Street Cemetery.

Gunfire in the Gulf

When the alarm was raised of enemy boats ascending the river, the soldiers rallied to repel the invaders. They peppered the rowboats towing the *Brockenborough* downriver. Some of the citizens left in Apalachicola joined in the gunfire, only to be met with replies from the Union sailors. The Northerners seriously outgunned the Southerners since one of their boats mounted a small cannon. Several discharges from this gun certainly caught the attention of the townspeople and Confederate soldiers and encouraged them to keep their heads down. It was reported the two people on the Southern side were wounded, but no Northern sailors were reported hurt, although their boats were struck repeatedly.

The expedition netted 64 bales of cotton and the sloop. The Union Navy purchased the *Brockenborough* for \$900 to reinforce the blockading fleet off Apalachicola. Armed with a rifled howitzer and outfitted with a galley, its shallow draft made it a valuable addition to the blockade in the shoal waters of Franklin County. In May of the next year, it was wrecked on St. Vincent's Island during the early season hurricane that struck.

Both Captain Marks and Saylor reportedly accompanied the *Brockenborough* downstream and out into the bay. After being interviewed by the Union commander, they were returned to Apalachicola. The Northern officer suspected them of being emissaries of the Southern government trying to reach Havana.

In retaliation for the capture of the G. L. *Brockenborough*, the soldiers from Thigpen's company took Margaret Reynolds into custody and exiled her upriver. She was suspected of giving information to the blockaders. In his report to the governor, Thomas Orman referred to her as "this abominable Old Hag" and stated that the town should get rid of her and that she had been of no advantage to Apalachicola for years.

There is no indication on what Thomas Orman based his low opinion of Reynolds. She was an illiterate Irish immigrant who had been a resident of Apalachicola since at least 1850. She was living alone in the 1850 census with two children. Her house was located on Commerce Street between Leslie and Pantan Streets. While Orman probably knew of Mrs. Reynolds since Apalachicola was a small town, it is doubtful that they traveled in the same social circles, so the source of his antagonism toward her is unknown.

It could have partially been based on the actions of her son, Richard Reynolds. After having served in the Franklin Guards at Pensacola along with Orman's son, William T., during the first year of the war, Richard Reynolds had switched sides and was serving as a pilot on one of the Union blockading vessels. If Mrs. Reynolds did pass information about the *Brockenborough* to the Union, it could have been through her son. He stood to benefit financially from any capture made by the Union sailors.

When the Union commander afloat learned of the removal of Mrs. Reynolds, he returned to town and took three hostages: John G. Ruan, John F. Benezet and Dominick Cattanetti, for her safe return. The record is silent about the outcome of this standoff, but evidently Mrs. Reynolds returned to Apalachicola and the three hostages were released. Dominick Cattanetti later served in the Confederate Navy on the *C.S.S. Spray* in the St. Marks River.

Fires off letters to the governor

As a result of all this activity, Orman wrote two highly incensed letters to Gov. John Milton complaining about the attempts to run the blockade from Apalachicola. He felt they did not accomplish any good and just inflamed passions on both sides. As one of the major property owners in Apalachicola he was concerned the Union Navy might retaliate for the shots fired at the Union boats by bombarding and burning the town. He had a lot to lose by making the Union Navy angry.

Of course, Orman was not in Apalachicola when all this took place. His letters to the governor were written from what he called "Lake House Plantation." It is unsure exactly where this was located, but the letters indicate it was in Franklin County. He owned property around Black Creek near Sumatra, so it could have been there.

Sixteen months later in the war, the outcome of another confrontation between the Union Navy and Captain Thigpen's cavalry company did not have such a benign outcome. In Jan. 1864, the Union Navy sent an expedition to Apalachicola and burned Captain Marks's home in retaliation for him being a blockade runner. A few weeks later a Confederate patrol, of which Marks was reportedly a member, discovered two men, Stillman Smith and William Marr, rustling cattle to feed the sailors on blockade duty. Accounts vary on what happened, but the end result was Smith and Marr were killed. When they went missing the Northern commander, afloat once again, resorted to taking hostages. This time Orman and Ruan were selected, only to be released when the deaths of Smith and Marr were discovered.

Margaret Reynolds continued to live in Apalachicola after the war. She died in 1880 and is buried in an unmarked grave in Chestnut Street Cemetery, possibly near her grandson, Richard T. Reynolds, close to the intersection of Avenue E and 8th Street. Orman died in 1880 also, and is buried in the same cemetery, only a stone's throw from the "abominable old hag" he so despised.

This article originally appeared on The Apalachicola Times: Chasing Shadows: Blockade running and 'the abominable Old Hag' (<https://www.apalachiatimes.com/story/news/2020/11/21/chasing-shadows-blockade-running-and-the-abominable-old-hag/6336537002/>)

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