



A Pathway into the Heart of East Florida

“When the news came to Jacksonville that the gunboats were off Fernandina great excitement prevailed in our city,” Calvin Robinson recalled. The excitement continued for days as refugees streamed into the city. Refugees had been quietly settling in the town since February 1862, but the numbers had increased sharply when dozens of families escaping aboard the last train out of Fernandina arrived in Jacksonville. They had boarded cars of the Florida Railroad that normally traveled between Fernandina and Cedar Key, but on this run passengers disembarked at Baldwin to transfer to cars of the Florida, Atlantic and Gulf Central Railroad and continue on to Jacksonville. They had barely alighted from the cars before soldiers straggled into the city with tales of narrow escapes from Union gunboats that reportedly could “run anywhere there was a heavy dew.” The stories were so alarming that “many families at once commenced leaving Jacksonville, hurrying their effects toward Lake City and other points along the railroad.”¹

On March 5, 1862, Washington Ives wrote in his diary of “the Great Excitement” in Lake City “when about 2 hundred persons came up from Jacksonville and Fernandina.” Before breakfast the next morning Ives watched as another trainload of frightened migrants arrived and filled the town to capacity. Many of those in flight traveled with the slaves they owned. Five days later Ives wrote that Governor Milton had come to Lake City to give cheering speeches to the town’s beleaguered citizens and to the disheartened souls fleeing from the Yankee invaders.²

Most Duval County residents, including the Confederates, decided to re-

main at home on the chance the Yankees would not move up the St. Johns River. Union supporters made it clear they had no intention of leaving, even if the Union gunboats steamed all the way to the Jacksonville wharves. According to Robinson, Unionists stayed in town, waiting quietly, “their very souls . . . ready to burst with joy at the thought” of nearby Union forces.³

Rooms at Jacksonville’s Judson House filled quickly as refugees and Confederate staff officers and couriers arrived. Manager Otis Keene noted in the hotel’s register that Brigadier General James Heyward Trapier was among the new guests. Trapier, a West Point graduate, had served for a decade as an artillerist and engineer before leaving the U.S. Army in 1848. Later, as a South Carolina militia officer, he supervised construction of the batteries in Charleston Harbor that fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861. Appointed to command of Confederate troops in the Department of Middle and East Florida in late 1861, Trapier had encountered needless conflict with Governor Milton over military policy and suffered from a severe shortage of men and arms. As late as January 30, 1862, his command had consisted of only 2,127 infantry, 1,126 cavalry, and fewer than a hundred artillerists spread along the entire eastern coast of Florida.

Trapier had been in the process of moving his command to the west when the unexpected Yankee attack on Fernandina commenced. He was in Jacksonville to see that all military supplies that could aid the enemy cause were disposed of before Confederate troops departed, and, following General Lee’s orders, to consider the feasibility of concentrating military forces “at the point liable to be attacked.” It appeared to Trapier that Jacksonville was to be that point, but it was not clear that the town could be held.⁴ To clarify that issue, he met at the Judson House with Commander Ebenezer Farrand of the Confederate navy, Colonel Edward Hopkins and Lieutenant Colonel M. Whit Smith of the 4th Florida Infantry Regiment, and Brigadier General Samuel R. Pyles and Colonel Oscar Hart of the 16th Regiment of Florida Militia.

Jacksonville’s mayor, Halsted Hoeg, was also involved in the strategy sessions. Hoeg was a native of Burlington, New York, who had moved to Duval County in 1840 and prospered as a merchant and sawmill owner. After the war commenced, his pro-secession critics complained that the city was “cursed with a Mayor who will do nothing but oppose what others suggest” and that under his leadership “at least one half of the population of the city would tamely submit to Lincoln.”⁵ Hoeg did not bother responding to his critics. He had to deal with the fact that nearby Fernandina had been invaded and that Jacksonville would probably be attacked next. There was little he

could do but cooperate with the military and call on residents to maintain law and order. On March 6 he coordinated an emergency meeting of civil and military authorities to determine a policy to “best promote the safety, comfort and happiness of the people.” Attending the meeting at city offices at the Sammis Building on Bay Street were the military officers, members of the town council, and the town’s leading citizens. On May 7 Hoeg published a proclamation to his “fellow citizens” informing them that it had been the “unanimous decision” of those attending the meeting that, because “all the Confederate troops, arms, and munitions of war upon the St. John’s River and in east and south Florida generally are ordered away, and that the east and south are to be abandoned, it is useless to attempt a defense of the city of Jacksonville.” He urged residents to remain at home, to maintain good order, and to follow the advice of Jacksonville’s “most experienced and intelligent citizens . . . that if the enemy meet with no resistance, private property will be respected, and unarmed citizens will be allowed to pursue their usual occupations.”⁶

That same evening, General Wright, commanding the 3rd Brigade, Expeditionary Corps, and Admiral Du Pont, in charge of the naval flotilla, issued orders for “an expedition to the Saint John’s River . . . to start tomorrow morning.”⁷ Under the command of Colonel T. J. Whipple, eight companies of the 4th New Hampshire Regiment received orders to accompany the naval vessels. Wright warned his officers to watch for “a battery at the mouth of the river, another at Saint John’s Bluff, and a third . . . at Dames Point. To destroy these batteries, take possession of the guns, and to capture Jacksonville are the objects of the expedition.”⁸ He informed Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas that he planned to occupy “some of the most important harbor outlets” in order to stop blockade runners from bringing guns and supplies to Confederate troops. “St. Simon’s, Fernandina, the mouth of the Saint John’s, and possibly Saint Augustine, would I think, be sufficient,” he wrote Thomas. “Other places of some little importance could be blockaded by the Navy.”⁹

The agreement reached between Wright and Du Pont specified that Union forces were “to land and occupy Jacksonville or other points for a few hours for purposes of reconnaissance or other necessary service,” after which “the troops shall be withdrawn and return with the gunboats when this shall have been accomplished.”¹⁰ Du Pont had ordered the man in charge of naval operations, Lieutenant Thomas Holdup Stevens, “to examine the condition of things in Jacksonville, taking any public property that may be of military

importance to the rebels, but respecting to the utmost private property.”¹¹ Du Pont emphasized that the expedition was “a reconnaissance in force” and that he did not intend to permanently “occupy any point on St. John’s River.”¹²

On March 8 the Union flotilla arrived off the entrance to the St. Johns River. Entry was delayed when even the “light vessels” were unable to cross the treacherous sandbars and shallow water at the entrance. For the next three days Stevens fretted while soundings were conducted to find a channel deep enough to permit the vessels to cross. He had no way of knowing that Confederate scouts had sighted his vessels as soon as they arrived at the bar and had immediately transmitted the news to Jacksonville over a temporary telegraph line.¹³ Town residents knew that once the gunboats crossed into the river, they would need only a few hours to steam upriver and trap them behind Union lines. Residents with valuable property, especially human property, began hurriedly moving to safe locations in the interior of the state.

No one left with greater style than John P. Sanderson. Having previously closed his local law office while serving as a legislator in Tallahassee, Sanderson returned to put his house in order. Standing three stories tall at the northeast corner of Ocean and Forsyth, Sanderson’s mansion was one of the most impressive structures in Jacksonville. Bowing to the inevitable, Sanderson strolled through his rose gardens, made sure a supply of fine wines was available, and instructed his house servants to seek out the Federal commander when the troops landed and offer him the comforts of the mansion.¹⁴

South of Jacksonville at Millwood, James M. Daniel was joined by Francis F. L’Engle in boarding up windows and doors and packing personal belongings on wagons and carriages for a journey to Madison, Florida. L’Engle then moved to his own home to repeat the experience. Items that would not be damaged by the experience were buried, and the house was boarded up and abandoned. It was a scene being repeated throughout Jacksonville and along the lower St. Johns River. For most residents preparing to depart, their self-imposed exile would last for the duration of the war.¹⁵

Attorney Rodney Dorman, mayor of Jacksonville in 1851, buried several hundred dollars in a jar under his Bay Street home. When he returned four years later the money was still there, well concealed by the pile of charred debris that had once been the Dorman home. Arthur M. Reed, the founder and president of Jacksonville’s Bank of St. Johns, hurried to his plantation at

Mulberry Grove (today at Jacksonville Naval Air Station on the St. Johns) to bury the family silver and other valuables. With his treasures safely concealed, Reed remained at Mulberry Grove.¹⁶

Colonel John Broward had already decided to make a spirited fight if the Federals ever advanced up the river. Although most of his sons had enlisted in the Confederate service and were no longer at home to assist him, the old colonel recruited his neighbors in a plan to delay the approaching gunboats and give people more time to move their slaves and other property to safe locations in the interior of the state. Logs were mounted on a waterfront promontory to resemble cannons, forcing the gunboats to halt their advance and shell the supposed fortification. One of the Broward sons, Napoleon Sr., rode from Fernandina to the St. Johns with the first warnings of the Federal presence and then carried out orders from his brother, Montgomery, to take men to Yellow Bluff and “fire into the first Yankee vessel that should come within range.”¹⁷

Lucius Hardee and the Duval Cowboys were engaged in another kind of work with authentic artillery at St. Johns Bluff. Having been ordered to evacuate, the men were doing their best to conceal or bury the cannons they could not cart away. They finished on March 9 and marched to Jacksonville to join men of the Jacksonville Light Infantry, who had finished similar work at Fort Steele. Otis Keene had already noted the arrival of the latter company with a brief entry in the Judson House register: “Jacksonville Light Infantry came from Fort Steele and took cars for Lake City.”¹⁸

Calvin Robinson claimed that the “ruffian portion” of the town, “members of the Vigilant Committee” who had “little or no property of their own . . . insisted on burning the town, and that everybody should flee to the country. Now the wildest excitement prevailed. Every sort of vehicle was pressed into service hurrying household goods and merchandise towards the depot.” Robinson noticed that nearly all of the town’s residents who supported the Confederacy were desperately seeking a means to depart. “Most of the Northern citizens and some of the large property holders among the Southern people objected to leaving the city. . . . There was no terror in those gunboats or the Old Flag to them.”¹⁹

On the same fateful night, a grim drama was being enacted at the East Bay Street shipyard, where Commander Farrand and his men had been rushing their gunboat to completion. With machinery newly installed and decking almost completed, the gunboat was only three weeks from launching. Sitting away from the water, high on her stocks on the banks of the river,

the unnamed vessel could not be scuttled and sunk. As darkness settled over Jacksonville, torches were applied to the gunboat's hull.²⁰

It would be three days before the gunboats reached Jacksonville. On March 9, the same evening the flames from Farrand's ill-fated gunboat rose above Jacksonville, Lieutenant Stevens placed his ships in formation off Mayport to await sufficient daylight before risking a crossing of the treacherous sandbars at the entrance to the river. Stevens had decided to proceed cautiously upriver after receiving reports that "the St. Johns River was strongly defended and that the gunboats would have all the fighting they wanted."²¹

At daybreak Stevens sent a landing party under direction of Lieutenant Daniel Ammen to inspect locations near the mouth of the river. Ammen returned with the four black men who had informed him that all Confederate troops had been evacuated from Florida and that no defense would be made on the river. The citizens of Jacksonville who remained were reportedly anxious to send a flag of truce to greet Stevens's fleet.²²

At age forty-two, Stevens was a veteran of a quarter-century of naval service. With a flotilla consisting of four gunboats (*Ottawa*, *Seneca*, *Pembina*, and *Huron*), two small armed steamers (*Isaac Smith* and *Ellen*), the armed transport *Boston*, and assorted armed launches and cutters for amphibious operations, he was in charge of a formidable force. The gunboats were less than six months old and armed with a variety of ordnance, from large-caliber Dahlgren smoothbores, to 20-pounder Parrott rifles, to 24-pounder howitzers. The *Ellen* was a diminutive side-wheeler, but it carried heavy ordnance, and its launches and cutters were armed with small but effective swivel guns.²³

On the afternoon of March 10, Stevens sent a shore party to occupy the abandoned Fort Steele. An accompanying correspondent for the *New York Tribune* reported the capture of four 32-pounders with cartridges and shot, along with evidence in the camps located to the rear of the fort indicating the battery had only recently been evacuated. One of the departing Confederates left a note "in chalk on the door of one of the huts record[ing] that the Rebels had left 'from force of circumstances,' but [they] hoped to meet the Yankee . . . at another point."²⁴ Undeterred by the challenge, the men of the shore party crossed to the north of the St. Johns seeking shelter for the night in "four ruinous old houses, rejoicing in the name Pilot Town." The *Tribune* reporter said the men were so tormented by mosquitoes that they "gave up the notion of sleeping after one or two attempts, and bestowed their undivided attention on [the pesky critters]."²⁵