

Florida's Unionists

Taking Sides during the Civil War

When Florida seceded from the United States and joined the Confederacy in 1861, many residents remained faithful to the U.S. government. Various names were given to them by the Confederates. They also gave themselves names. For the purpose of this report, we will use the following distinctions:

- Rebels – Confederate military forces (mostly home guards and army).
- Federals – U.S. military forces (army and navy).
- Secessionists – Southern civilians in favor of the Confederacy.
- Unionists – Florida civilians in favor of the United States.

This report will be on the general state of the Unionists, not delving into any particular person or persons, but rather how they were treated (by both sides) and survived the Civil War years (1861-5).

Florida Secedes and the War Starts

On December 20, 1860, the Confederacy was born when South Carolina seceded from the United States. Florida signed a formal Ordinance of Secession and withdrew from the Union.

When the war began, south Florida was the most remote area in the eastern United States. People were engaged in farming and cattle ranching was on the rise.

At the beginning of the Civil War Florida was a Confederate. The United States had considerable force in Key West. The Union Navy operated out of Key West. Fortifications were at Fort Taylor and nearby Fort Jefferson, in Dry Tortugas. Martial law was declared in Key West and the secessionists left, returning to mainland Florida. The Unionists were now in control of Key West and order prevailed.

Establishing Federal Strongholds

In other areas around the state, many Unionists moved to areas that were under control of the Federals. All of these areas were on Florida's coastline. The Federal Navy either provide the protection, or they brought in Federal Army troops to garrison such places. It was primarily the Federal Navy's responsible for transportation and supply of various posts along the coast.

While Key West was considered to be the first Federal stronghold (from the beginning of the war), as time when on other areas around the state fell into Federal hands. In some instances such as Jacksonville, the Federals left and returned several

times causing the area to be controlled by both sides at various times during the war.

But, as the war progress and the Federal Navy was able to build itself up with more ships and men, more areas fell into Federal control.

Early in the war (late 1861) Egmont Key was taken over by the Federals. It and adjacent Mullet Key remained in Federal hands throughout the remainder of the Civil War.

Unionists Seek Protection

While a number of Unionists moved to the safety of coastal fortifications, many others tried to remain at their homes, some inland, many miles from the coast. Eventually, most were driven from their homes while in fear of their lives.

This is documented in a letter from Lt. Howell, commander of the *U.S. S. Tahoma*, to Gideon Wells, Secretary of the U.S. Navy, on September 3, 1862:

These guerrillas are scouring the woods, looking after deserters and conscripts; they rob, murder, and steal indiscriminately, if the reports of the refugees are to be credited; Union men they threaten to hang, and do shoot, as we have lamentable proof.

It is said that every man capable of bearing arms has been forced to join the rebels in this part of Florida.

It was neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother, and even father against son in Florida. Being a Unionist in this state was life threatening.

The Lives of the Unionists

Virtually all Unionists that left their home lost much of the belongings. Many had their home destroyed, usually robbed and set on fire by their Secessionist and Rebel enemy. When the Unionists left their home, many packed what they could into wagons while others basically escaped with their lives.

In some areas of the state, Unionists were evacuated by Federal troops. It was not uncommon to see "wagon trains" several miles in length escorted by Federal troops moving down the trails to safety.

Other Unionists were on their own. Many families barely escaped their enemies, usually people

they knew and lived amongst before the war. These Unionists were treated like escaped criminals, and were hunted by the Secessionists and Rebels. Some witnessed their homes being destroyed while being hidden in the woods. Some were captured by their enemy and their fate was pre-determined.

White Unionists were not the only residents of Florida relocated to Federally held areas. With a very high ratio of Blacks to Whites, many slaves were relocated as well. Often was the case that "contrabands" were seen along the water, and the Navy would send in ship's launches to bring them back to the ship then transport them to a safe area.

There is at least one incidence where the Rebels donned women's clothing and darkened their faces then sat on the shore to entice the Federal Navy to pick them up.

**"We have met the enemy
and they are us."**

Ironic as it may seem, a number of Unionists thought they were in protective hands when they had Federal troops around. The Federal Navy was often very helpful and compassionate. However, the Federal Army was quite different. The difference being the Navy was composed of "professional" officers, men that received much training and looked upon the Navy as a career. Sailors were of a different caliber when compared to Army troops.

Most (not all) of the Federal Army troops in Florida appeared to be rather rowdy and pugnacious. The officers were not professional to say the least. Their officers, in many instances, did not want to be bothered with problems caused by their men, and often turned their backs. Some officers not only would allow crime, but encourage or even be a party to it.

The Federal Army has to bear the brunt of the blame for the poor behavior of the soldiers. Many of the troops were "contrabands" – former slaves that were taken in as soldiers, and given minimal training. Perhaps they were meant to be a thorn in the back of the Rebels and Secessionists, but it documented instances, they also caused problems from within. These type of soldiers (and pathetic white officers) were even portrayed in the movie "Glory."

Many of the Unionists fell victim to the Federal officers and their men. Theft from Unionist men and their families and rape of their women was not unheard of. Evidence is documented through personal diaries and letters.

When Unionists complained to the Navy about their treatment by the soldiers, they often found a deaf ear. The Navy had an enemy to confront, and any civilian problems with the Army was left up to the civilian authorities. The civilian authorities would often turn their backs, often believing that the civilians were just complainers.

Life on the Islands

As many of the Unionists moved to coastal islands that were Federal strongholds, life was not simple and easy. Along with the crime previously mentioned, the Unionists used up what savings they had. Some men were able to get to Federal occupied population centers (such as Key West) and get a job to support their families. Where possible, they would buy, or most likely rent homes and eventually move their families.

But life on the small coastal islands was difficult. Disease was rampant. Settlements were often the size of small towns. Records indicate that numbers of people died every day. Fever was a big killer.

Life for the single or widowed Unionist woman was probably the most difficult. Assaults were not uncommon. Some women were wooed by Federal officers and told that they were not married. A bogus wedding was performed, so the officers could have their "pleasures" while away from their real wives.

For many, shelter from the elements was minimal. Families often were given small tents to live in. People foraged for food and firewood. Medical help, to various degrees, was at times available.

Transportation

The U.S. Navy was responsible for most of the movement of troops as well as civilians. Some people were transported on warships, but for the most part, transports that were used to move supplies also moved people.

Transportation followed no schedule. Ships moved according to the need of the squadron and needs of the troops. Weather played a factor, especially for the sailing ships that were used to move supplies. Lack of wind could cause delays taking days. Steam powered ships often had mechanical problems.

Direct passage from one point to another was not always possible. Trips often required changing ships at other islands and ports.

Opportunity to Fight

Early on in the war, the Federals needed local civilian guides and pilots. They helped guide the ships through various waterways, and troops in various combat areas.

As Florida's Secessionists maintained cattle herds to help feed the Confederacy, the Federals presence attracted Unionists in Florida, who formed a company size unit called the "Florida Rangers." In 1864, it expanded to become the Second Florida Cavalry (U.S.), and mounted raids against Confederate positions along the Gulf Coast and against Confederate cattle operations. The Confederates then organized local citizens, herdsman and cowmen into

the "1st Battalion Florida Special Cavalry" known as the "Cow Cavalry."

Returning Home

The Cow Cavalry surrendered on June 5, 1865 in Bay Port, Florida, formally ending the Civil War in South Florida. The end of the war for many Unionists and Secessionists meant starting over. Homes had to be rebuilt, livestock and farming restarted. The era of reconstruction had begun.