

# Pinellas During the Civil War

Pinellas County (on Florida's West Coast) was part of Hillsborough County during the Civil War (1861-65). The peninsula on which Pinellas is located had virtually no military significance during the war. With a small population consisting primarily of farms, the peninsula had no deep water ports and no manufacturing..

About the only concern the Federal government had was that of the safety of "Unionists" – those that wanted Florida to remain part of the United States. Most of the Unionists in the Tampa Bay area were located to several barrier islands at the mouth of Tampa Bay. Here they were under the protection of the U.S. military as the Navy had a supply station on Egmont Key (see story).

There are official reports of blockade runners<sup>1</sup> being chased by blockaders<sup>2</sup> and driven on the beaches. None of the blockade runners have been identified to be based on the peninsula, but were more likely passing by when caught by the Federal Navy.

## The Mirandas

One of the families of the peninsula was that of Abel Miranda. He had a farm located in the Big Bayou area, a settlement in southern part of current Pinellas County. Miranda was a mullet (fish) rancher, raised stock, and fruit culture until the Civil War started. A Confederate who ran the Union blockade at Egmont Key, it is believed he attacked those who were bringing provisions to the Unionists there. Eventually the Union Navy came to end his harassment. They fired several cannon rounds at his house and removed his boats and possessions, eventually burning his home. (This is the only known battle of the Civil War in this area.) Miranda and his family fled to Tampa.

## Moving the Unionists to Egmont

On February 17, 1862, The *bark U.S.S. Ethan Allen* was anchored off Egmont Key. Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Eaton, commanding the ship, sent acting Master George Frost (executive officer of the *U.S.S. Ethan Allen*) in the sloop *Mary Nevis* along with a cutter<sup>3</sup> with the intention to proceed to Clearwater Bay [Harbor], and stop along the way at Mr. Girard's house, to secure his services as a pilot. Gross brought with him John Whitehurst, George Faxton, the ship's surgeon, and ten well armed men.

(The sloop *Mary Nevis*, originally of Tampa, was captured by the U.S. Navy. It displaced about 12 tons burden, and was engaged in carrying the mails, freight, and passengers between Fort Brooke, Manatee River, and intermediate points.)

Due to bad weather, the landing at Girard's location had to be the next day. By noon they had Girard aboard. Later that afternoon, the small

expedition entered Clearwater Bay. Frost had a Rebel flag hoisted to avoid suspicion. He left Whitehurst, Faxton and an armed man on the sloop. Frost took the remainder in the cutter to check the bay.

Gross found the schooner *Spitfire*, of Clearwater; the sloop *Atlanta*, of *Cedar Keys*, and the sloop *Caroline*, of Bayport. With no personal on board the vessels, he captured them without difficulty. Gross distributed his men on them and them all to sea, proceeding down the coast to Egmont Key.

At 10 a.m. Wednesday, February 19, the expedition arrived at Bayes Pass, and the wind increased to gale force with a very rough sea, the vessels went in for safety. After anchoring inside the bay, they moored the vessels together. The *Mary Nevis* was damaged severely in the storm. Frost landed Mr. Girard, the pilot, and at 4 p.m. took off the Whitehurst family (consisting of eight persons), one Spaniard, and a man by the name of Arnold, a violent secessionist, who he took prisoner while he was spying round Mr. Girard's house.



Unable to salvage the *Mary Nevis*, Frost had to set her afire to prevent capture by the Rebels. After seeing her burned to the water's edge, they again got underway for the Northwest Channel with a fair wind. Arrived at the *U.S.S. Ethan Allen* at 4 p.m. and landed the Whitehurst family on Egmont Key, with their baggage.

Brothers John and Scott Whitehurst, and their family were now under the protection of the U.S. Navy at Egmont Key. On occasions, the Unionist civilians would go to the mainland in search of provisions. Like many of the barrier islands, there was little foodstuffs to support human life.

## Attack on Miranda

On or slightly before March 16, 1862, the commander of the area's blockading ships at Egmont Key sent well armed men aboard a captured fishing smack to attack Abel Miranda's home. The raiding party of sailors and Unionists also carried with them a cannon and plenty of ammunition.

Miranda saw the Union force arriving before sunrise. He observed the cannon on board and two barges loaded with men heading toward the shore. He then fled with his wife and son to safety of another residence.

The Union force opened fire at 7 AM delivering three round solid shots toward Miranda's house, but missed and landed in the woods. About an hour later the Union force opened with exploding shell.

Miranda cautiously returned to his home later that afternoon. He found his home burned to the ground and the forty nearby "fine" orange trees sharing the same fate. Miranda's boats were damaged, destroyed or taken by the Union men. The Union men carried off many chickens and hogs, cured bacon, corn, syrup, pumpkins, and potatoes. What they didn't take they tried to destroy, leaving several wounded animals.

## Whitehurst Brothers Shot

On Aug 26, 1862, crew members of the *U.S.S. Tahoma* recovered the body of Scott Whitehurst and buried it, and the next day his brother, John Whitehurst died on September 3, and was buried.

What is believed to have happened to the Whitehurst brothers is in the September 3, 1862 report of Lieutenant J.C. Howell, commanding the *U.S.S. Tahoma* as follows:

"I have the honor to report that on the 26th August, ultimo, while three of the refugees who have been for some months at the light-house on Egmont Key under the protection of the United States were on the main land endeavoring to procure potatoes, beef, etc., from their own farms near Old Tampa for the support of themselves and families, two of them, John and Scott Whitehurst, while shoving from the shore in their boat were barbarously set upon by guerrillas, and Scott Whitehurst was immediately killed and John Whitehurst mortally wounded. The latter had strength enough to pull the boat out of fire, then fell and laid two days in the boat exposed to the rays of an August sun, and was at last discovered by another refugee named Clay and brought to this place. The third man, named Arnold, is supposed to have been murdered during the day.

All these men were Union men, and only a short time ago John Whitehurst offered to raise a company of loyal Floridians if he could be assured it would be accepted.

I sent a boat and recovered the body of Scott Whitehurst and buried it. John Whitehurst died

last night, and was decently interred by us this morning. His dying request was that his three little sons should be received into the United States naval service. I have no vacancies for them, but will take them on board and ration them (which I shall be obliged to do under any circumstances) until I receive permission to ship them, which I am confident will be granted. The boys are quite young - the eldest, I should think, about 12 years of age, the youngest about 7 or 8.

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 is assumed that Scott Whitehurst was buried at Mullet Key (site of later day Fort De Soto) and John was buried at Egmont Key, in an old cemetery near the lighthouse.

## Young Whitehurst Sailors

As for John Whitehurst's two older sons, the muster rolls of the *U.S.S. Tahoma* shows that Christopher Columbus Whitehurst and Winfield Scott Whitehurst had been enlisted on October 4, 1862. Christopher signed as a First Class Boy who said he was 16 (actually 13). Winfield said he was 12 (actually 10). The third son Harney, was too young



for the Navy. Whitehurst also had three daughters, Georgina and Susana, being the oldest of the siblings, and the youngest child was Francis. (The period photo depicts another young sailor.)

Both served on the *U.S.S. Tahoma* in this area until the ship was relieved by *the U.S.S. Sagamore*. They sailed about the Gulf for some time were transferred three times, to the schooner *Wanderer*, to the Sloop of War *San Jacinto*, and to the *Ariel*. Winfield was discharged on the ship *Ino*. Christopher was thought to have been killed before the end of the war, as he was listed as "lost to USN but not by death."

The 1870 Census for Hillsborough show Elizabeth as head of household with Winfield being 18 and Harney 16.

Miranda returned to Pinellas after the war. With memories of the war on his mind, he purchased a place inland so the U.S. Navy could not bombard his new home.

<sup>1</sup> Blockade runners are Confederate ships or ships from other countries that exported or imported goods to support the Confederacy.

<sup>2</sup> Blockaders were U.S. Navy ships that enforced the North's blockade around the south.

<sup>3</sup> Cutters were the smaller oar powered boats, also known as launches.

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