

The Hillsborough River Raid and the Battle of Ballast Point at Tampa Bay

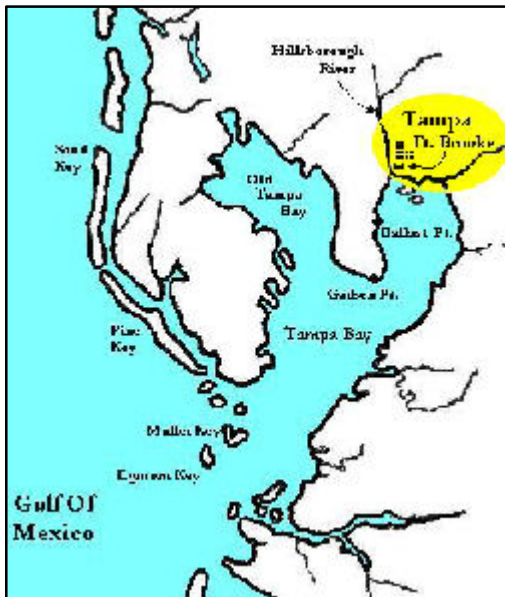
By Lewis L. Zervas

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Leading up to confrontation

During the Civil War, Florida's sparse population and the many rivers and bays along its long Gulf of Mexico and ocean coastlines enabled resourceful blockade-running captains with small ships to get cargo through the picket ships of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron. To combat the problem, the U.S. Navy not only watched Florida's ports and patrolled its waters, but also sent armed expeditions ashore to destroy Confederate facilities. Tampa, on Florida's West Coast, was one such port city that commanded the Union's attention.



Some of the initial confrontations in the Tampa Bay area could be more accurately characterized as squabbles between Union sympathizers and Confederate troops. Things turned more serious, however, when the crewmembers of Federal ships began to go ashore to raid Rebel saltworks. Such manufactories were built in the shallow salt waters along Florida's Gulf Coast, where seawater was boiled in large kettles, evaporating the liquid and leaving the salt. After a few of the Yankee shore parties were ambushed by Confederates, the Navy changed its raiding procedures and began to shell the salt-rendering plants before sending men ashore to complete the destruction.

Established in 1824, Fort Brooke and located where the Hillsborough River empties into Tampa Bay (currently downtown Tampa). The fort had protected Tampa during the Seminole wars and served as a marshaling point for troops heading to Mexico during the Mexican War. After the Civil War broke out, Confederates garrisoned the stronghold, and the old cannons that once had protected Tampa from Chief Osceola's Seminoles were aimed toward the river in anticipation of a Federal invasion. Directly south of Fort Brooke was Big Grassy Island. Ships coming in from the bay had to pass the island to get to the narrow Hillsborough River.

First Federal attack on Tampa

It would not be easy for the North to reduce Fort Brooke and capture Tampa, since the Confederates controlled the mainland in the area, forcing the Union to launch an amphibious invasion. The first Federal attacks on Tampa took place on June 30 and July 1, 1862. The morning of the 30th a single Federal gunboat had appeared and its captain demanded the town's surrender. When the Confederate commander of the post, Captain J.W. Pearson, refused, the Federals warned that shelling would commence at 6 p.m. Little damage was done in the ensuing exchange of artillery fire, which Pearson termed "a spirited little engagement."

To help support the blockade and the efforts to gain control of Tampa Bay, the U.S. Navy maintained a base of operations and a coaling station on Egmont Key, which was located about 35 miles from Fort Brooke, where the broad width of Tampa Bay meets the Gulf of Mexico. The key's small civilian population was mostly made up of northern sympathizers who had been relocated to the relative safety of the island.

Rebels and Unionists in the Bay Area

The Unionists, however, sometimes ventured back to the mainland, where they were inviting targets for bushwhackers. On September 3, 1862, J.C. Howell, captain of USS *Tahoma*, wrote to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles: "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 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." He continued, "The third man, named Arnold, is supposed to have been murdered during the day."

Howell explained the situation on the mainland. "These guerrillas are scouring the woods, looking after deserters and conscripts;" he wrote. "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"

James McKay, Tampa businessman

The majority of the local population sided with the Confederacy, and one of the most prominent of them was Captain James McKay, the owner of two blockade runners. A master seaman from Thurso, Scotland, McKay had originally immigrated to St. Louis, where he was married. Shortly thereafter, James and Matilda McKay moved to Mobile, Ala. McKay brought along a considerable amount of cash from prior business ventures and eventually became a Tampa-area businessman, city mayor and local hero.

In 1859, McKay purchased several ships and began shipping cattle from Tampa to Havana. The Cubans paid him in gold, enabling the entrepreneur to expand into other businesses. He continued to operate these businesses during the Civil War while also handling supplies for the Confederacy. It was not uncommon for the sailor turned cowboy to lead herds of cattle northward to supply Southern troops with much-needed beef.

On October 14, 1861, McKay was traveling from Havana to Tampa aboard his steamer *Salvor*, which was flying the British flag, when the vessel was captured by USS *Keystone State*. A search of the ship found rifles, pistols, percussion caps, coffee, cigars and clothing. *Salvor* was sent to New York and sold, and McKay and his son Donald were imprisoned on Governor's Island in New York. It was only after several months and at a considerable cost that the Scotsman managed to obtain a personal parole from President Abraham Lincoln.

Confederate officials eventually chartered another of McKay's ships, the side-wheel steamer *Scottish Chief*, and set about stopping sailing vessels with "illegal fishing contracts" along the lower west coast of Florida. Those boats were supplying Federal-controlled Key West not only with food, but also with information. Armed with a 6-pounder cannon, *Scottish Chief* captured 24 small boats and their crews.

McKay, however, drifted back into blockade running and made six more successful runs past Union vessels with *Scottish Chief*. His Florida-bound cargo included guns, ammunition, wine and cigars. By October 1863, McKay was ready to make another run with *Scottish Chief* and his new vessel *Kate Dale*, a small sailing sloop. Neither ship drew more than 4 feet of water. The outbound cargo was cotton.

Plans for the attack on McKay's ships

Acting Rear Admiral Theodorus Bailey, commanding the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, learned of McKay's planned run. Eager to destroy the troublesome vessels, Bailey and Lt. Commander Alexander A. Semmes, now captain of USS *Tahoma*, made plans to destroy McKay's two ships before they left their moorings at Bayonet Point, a few miles south of Tampa. They decided to stage a diversion by shelling Tampa and Fort Brooke so that a landing force, assembled to march overland and find and destroy McKay's ships, could come ashore undetected.

Bailey wisely picked two local men, Henry A. Crane and James H. Thompson, to act as guides for the raiding party. Crane had moved to Florida during the Second Seminole War and had served in the Army during that conflict. When the Civil War broke out, both men sided with the Union. In late 1862 they joined the Union Navy, Crane serving as an acting volunteer master's mate and Thompson as a first-class fireman. They had quickly been put to use guiding Federal forces throughout central Florida.

The Hillsborough River Raid

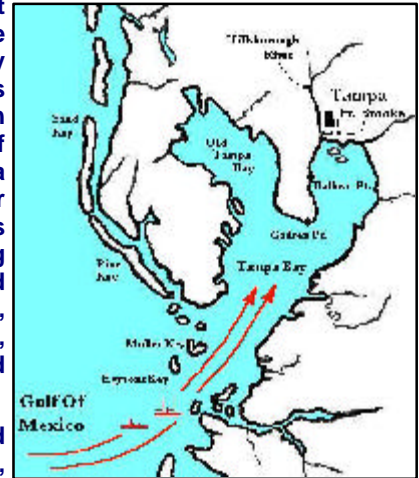
Semmes put the Union plan into action by sailing toward Tampa Bay with two ships, USS *Tahoma* (*right*) and USS *Adela*. *Tahoma* was one of the "90-day gunboat" class of ships, a schooner-rigged, wood-hulled, steam-driven screw gunboat built under contract by W & A. Thatcher of Wilmington, Del., for \$100,000. Launched on October 2, 1861, she was commissioned on December 20, 1861, at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. The steamer was 158 feet long and displaced 507 tons. Manned by a crew of about 100 sailors, she carried an 11-inch Dahlgren (200-pounder) pivot gun, two 20-pounder Parrotts and two 24-pounder smoothbore guns. No strangers to the area, *Tahoma's* crew had captured seven blockade-runners in and around Tampa Bay during the first six months of 1863.



The second ship, *Adela*, originally flew the British flag. An unidentified Southern agent purchased the ship, which was soon put to use carrying arms and other contraband through the U.S. blockade. USS *Quaker City*

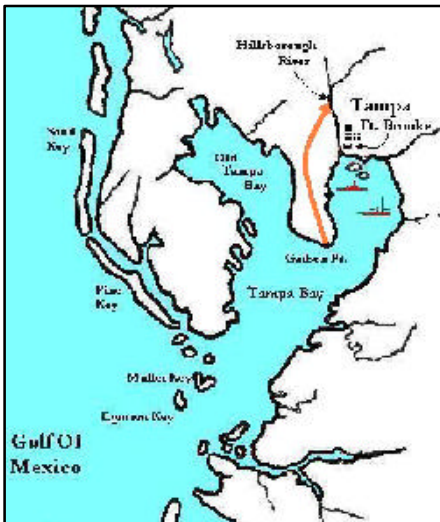
captured Adela on July 7, 1862, while she was en route from Bermuda to Nassau. Because she was carrying British mail, Adela's capture drew much protest from the British government. The U.S. Navy purchased the ship from the prize court in Key West for \$58,000, and in June 1863 Adela was commissioned and armed as a Union gunboat. A crew of about 70 men under Acting Lt. Louis N. Stodder manned the iron-hulled, steam-driven side-wheeler. The 585-ton, 211-foot-long vessel was formidably armed with two 20-pounder Parrott guns, one 12-pounder rifle and four 24-pounder smoothbores.

Before he began the attack, Semmes learned that McKay, worried that barnacles encrusting his ships' hulls were causing them to lose speed, had the vessels moved from Ballast Point into the Hillsborough River (near current day Lowery Park) so that the bottoms of their hulls could be cleaned. Semmes accordingly changed the location of the landing from Tampa Bay to Gadsden Point (tip of peninsula of current day MacDill AFB), about eight miles south of Tampa. On the morning of October 16, the two Federal gunboats entered Tampa Bay, moved into position south of Big Grassy Island and began their diversionary bombardment of Fort Brooke. Tahoma and Adela fired their guns over the island from a distance of about 2,000 yards, sending shots crashing into Tampa and the batteries at Fort Brooke. Adela, of lighter draft, moved closer to Fort Brooke and sent a number of rounds into the fort's batteries, barracks and adjoining buildings. On board Tahoma, Captain Semmes reported, "The practice with the 200-pounder Parrott was beautiful, but the fuzes acted badly."



The intense bombardment drove Confederate soldiers from the fort and civilians from their homes and the town. While Henry Crane, aboard Tahoma, was making plans to guide the landing force, one of the 11-inch shells from the gunboat struck his own house. A 40-pound fragment entered the home and flew across the dining room table where Crane's daughters were sitting. Luckily, no injuries were reported.

The Rebel guns at Fort Brooke offered no return fire, and the gunboats reduced their activity to intermittent shelling throughout the day. To disguise the real landing site, boat crews were sent out to bay areas north and northeast of where the Federal ships were situated. The crews placed navigation stakes in the shallow water to make the enemy think the landings would take place at those points. The ruse apparently worked, as a significant Southern force was seen moving into the area to oppose the bogus landing.



By late afternoon, the two Union vessels had stopped firing and headed south to deeper water in the bay. When it was dark, officers and men from Adela transferred to Tahoma to prepare for the landing. The Federal force consisted of about 100 men, 60 from Tahoma and 40 from Adela, plus six officers and the two guides. Acting Master Thomas R. Harris, Tahoma's executive officer, was the expedition's leader. The other officers were Acting Ensigns J.P. Randall and R.G. Koehler of Tahoma and Acting Ensigns E.A. Stranberg and E. Balch and Acting Asst. Engineer G.M. Bennet from Adela. Six small boats departed from Tahoma as the moon went down. At 11 p.m., they beached at Gadsden Point, and the force, divided into two divisions, set off to find the Confederate steamers. The landing boats returned immediately to the ships, and at about midnight Tahoma and Adela moved closer to Fort Brooke.

Under cover of darkness, while the gunboats moved into position near the fort, the group under Acting Master Harris proceeded as planned. Avoiding roads and houses, the men moved through the darkness across the flat peninsula, which was covered with sharp-pointed palmettos and pine trees. Thompson, one of the force's guides, became ill and was unable to

keep up. Eventually, he had to be carried on a litter. Adding to their burden, Federal sailors carried a small boat in case they needed to cross water. About four or five miles into the trek, they left the boat concealed under some bushes about a quarter-mile off the path, which allowed the force to move much faster.

After a 14-mile hike, the ground-pounding sailors finally arrived at the west bank of the Hillsborough River at 4 a.m. Lookouts were posted as the party rested and waited for daylight. Shortly after dawn on October 17, scouts located the two Confederate blockade runners about two miles upstream on the opposite shore. Harris moved the men up to a point on the riverbank opposite the ships and demanded that the Confederate crews send a boat across to them. The surprised Rebels followed the orders. Harris sent the boat back with two officers and "a suitable number of men" to make prisoners of the crews. The Federals knew that two of the Southern sailors had escaped and headed toward Tampa, where they probably would spread the alarm to Fort Brooke. The Federals did not know that Scottish Chief's captain had also escaped.

At daybreak, Adela and Tahoma opened fire on the fort's batteries to distract the Confederates while the landing force carried out its mission. Tahoma fired her 200-pounder while Adela moved closer to the batteries before running aground and experiencing difficulty in getting off.

While the gunboats bombarded the fort, the landing party set fire to Scottish Chief and Kate Dale, destroying both ships and the 167 bales of cotton on board them. Captain McKay watched in horror as his ships burned. He knew that he could not afford to replace them and that his blockade-running days were over.

The landing party, meanwhile, saw another steamer about five miles upriver but realized that that it was "too far gone to be repaired." They also noted the schooner Neptune, which had been sunk downriver near Tampa. Knowing the enemy had been alerted by the destruction of Scottish Chief and Kate Dale, Harris decided to make a run for Ballast Point, the designated pick-up spot, and the safety of the gunboats. To avoid a confrontation, the Federal expedition took a direct route to the beach, with five crewmen from Scottish Chief and Kate Dale as prisoners. After the Federals left, local residents were able to save some of Scottish Chief's furnishings.

Confederates give chase

Unknown to the fleeing Yankee tars, about 40 members of Confederate General Braxton Bragg's cavalry had arrived in Tampa that same day to get cattle for the Army of Tennessee. Nicknamed the "Cowboy Cavalry" for their cattle-driving abilities, the troopers headed south to intercept the enemy force. Captain John Westcott of Company A, 2nd Florida Infantry Battalion, was also a recent arrival in the Tampa area, having taken command of Confederate forces at Fort Brooke on October 14.

Some of the exhausted Federals had to be carried during the last leg of their difficult march. As it neared the beach, the landing party encountered enemy troops, perhaps home guardsmen or militiamen. Harris later reported that "a scouting party was discovered in citizens' dress, on foot and armed, and upon whom we immediately charged, capturing two."

Battle of Ballast Point

The sailors finally reached the beach at Ballast Point (near current day intersection of Bay Shore Blvd and Gandy Blvd) and posted pickets while they waited to embark. Shortly thereafter, Harris received word that a party of cavalry was lurking about the woods. A company of Rebel infantry was also reportedly advancing. Upon learning of the enemy's presence, Harris ordered his party to prepare for a fight in case they were attacked before the boats arrived.

At 10 a.m. from aboard Adela, Lieutenant Stodder saw sailors clustered about the beach. He immediately signaled Tahoma, and boats from both ships were dispatched to recover the men. Harris ordered all but about 20 men, including officers, to depart.

As the embarkation began, Confederates in the woods opened fire on the Federals. The Southerners brought a fieldpiece manufactured in Tampa from a bored-out engine shaft and used it to blast buckshot at the tars, who were no doubt cursing the fact they had ever left their ships. Gunners aboard Adela, meanwhile, caught glimpses of the Confederates lurking in the tree line, upon which they opened fire so as to cover the landing party's escape.

Admiral Bailey later reported that while most of the landing party, along with seven prisoners, headed for the boats in an orderly manner, the rear guard spread out and returned the Confederates' fire "energetically and with great coolness and bravery." But one young Confederate, Dick Robels, noted that some of the Federals "threw away their heavy guns" so they could effect a quick withdrawal.

Harris and the rear guard were under heavy fire for 20 minutes until the landing boats returned and the acting master gave the command to withdraw with the wounded. As the last of the sailors waded out to their boats, the Confederates continued their fusillade. One sailor was killed in the water while six more were captured. Of those captured, two were severely wounded; one of them died the following day at the hospital in Tampa.

By 2 p.m., all the boats had returned to Adela with the wounded. A short time later, an observer on board Adela saw a man swimming out to the gunboats as the Confederates shot at him. A boat was sent to pick him up. The man turned out to be Tahoma's pilot, who had landed with the expedition. He had hidden in the underbrush when he was unable to make it to the boats with the others.

As the two gunboats were preparing to leave Tampa Bay, Semmes sent another raiding party to Frazier's Beach at the head of Tampa Bay (near east end of current day Courtney-Campbell Causeway), where it destroyed a large saltworks factory that was also owned by McKay. In operation since early in the war, the works was equipped with large boilers, giant kettles, vats and barrels. Losing this facility was a devastating blow to the people of Tampa, as salt from the works was locally used to preserve food.

Returning to Egmont Key, the wounded Federals were taken ashore for treatment in a small building located near the lighthouse. Assistant Surgeon J.H. Gunning of Tahoma and Acting Asst. Surgeon William Gale of

Adela attended to the wounded. A sailor who had been wounded on the beach died. Gale took a four-ounce lead ball from another of the wounded that apparently had come from the homemade, but effective, Rebel fieldpiece.

Aftermath

Semmes and Westcott met the next day under a flag of truce to discuss the status of the prisoners. Although no decision was made about the captives, negotiations continued for more than a month as noncombatants were exchanged.

The Federals considered the mission a success, since the goal of destroying the two steamers and their cargo had been achieved. Five Southern boatmen and two militiamen were captured, six killed and a significant number wounded. The Federals, too, paid a price. Three sailors--Joseph O'Donnell, James Worrall and John B. Roddy - were killed, 10 were wounded and five others were taken prisoner.

Confederate commander Westcott, on the other hand, considered the engagement at Ballast Point a Southern victory. He reported that before the Federals returned to their boats, "they were badly whipped.... If I had had more men I could have captured the whole concern."

After the loss of his ships, McKay accepted an assignment as head of the Fifth Commissary District for the Confederacy and continued to provide the Confederate Army with cattle for meat, tallow and hides. At the request of Federal Brig. Gen. Daniel P. Woodbury, Crane was transferred to the U.S. Army. Admiral Bailey wrote a letter to Woodbury stating that Crane was "well known and popular among the people of lower Florida, and will, no doubt, be useful in recruiting."

As the war progressed, both McKay and Crane continued to lead troops against each other between the coastal areas of Tampa Bay and Fort Myers and inland toward Fort Thompson. Most of those actions revolved around Federal efforts to prevent the Confederates from driving cattle northward to supply their armies. Despite the annoying Union harassment, however, McKay managed to keep a steady flow of cattle moving north almost to the end of the war. Late in the conflict, McKay organized his own Cowboy Cavalry from ranchers and cowboys who were exempted from other Confederate military service.

Just after the end of the war, McKay was involved in a dramatic episode in which he helped Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin--known as "the brains of the Confederacy"--escape from his Union pursuers. McKay brought Benjamin through the Tampa Bay area and helped hide him at a mansion along the Manatee River. Benjamin subsequently moved on to the Bahamas and then to England.

Tampa had fallen into Northern hands on May 5, 1864. Under the overall command of General Woodbury three vessels--Sunflower, Honduras and James L. Davis--landed several companies of troops and 54 naval personnel. Five-year-old Darwin B. Givens ran home screaming to his parents, "The devils are coming!" as the Federals moved swiftly into the half-deserted town and took Fort Brooke uncontested.

Final devastation of Tampa

The fort had been lightly garrisoned because the home guard was out rounding up cattle and raiding Unionists' farms. The Federals destroyed the fort, spiking and scattering the old cannons along the banks of the Hillsborough River. The bluecoats hauled away several smaller cannons, arrested about 40 citizens, destroyed buildings and machine shops, and even stole ritual items from the Masonic Hall. (About a year later, those items were found by Union officers in Key West and returned to Tampa.) The Federals left after Tampa was rendered defenseless and no longer a threat to the North.

When Westcott and his Confederate soldiers returned, they immediately saw the damage done to the fort. Westcott decided that the outpost was no longer worth manning and departed after only a few days. On May 15, a Federal force commanded by Captain D.B. Westbury came back to Tampa and stayed about a month. The Federals soon left after also deciding that the town had no further military importance.

Along with many other ships that fought in the Civil War, Adela and Tahoma were decommissioned after the war and auctioned off by the Navy in New York. Adela brought \$21,000 on November 30, 1865, and Tahoma was sold for \$3,000 on October 1, 1867.