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Battery Hamilton and the Seige of Fort Pulaski

The opening shots of the Civil War, the shelling of Fort Sumter, South Carolina, took place on April 12, 1861. In Savannah, four months earlier (January 3rd), Confederate forces took control of Fort Pulaski before it could be occupied by Union troops. Fort Pulaski was constructed between 1829-1847 but had not been garrisoned by Federal troops. The Confederates promptly readied the fort for battle by repairing the few existing cannons and mounting others in the casemates and on the ramparts above.

In the summer of 1861 the North enacted a plan to recapture the coastal fortifications and blockade Southern rivers and harbors. A convoy of 51 naval vessels sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia to Port Royal Sound, South Carolina. On November 7th the Union fleet sailed into the mouth of the Port Royal River and, after bombarding the defenders, captured the port. In Georgia, less than 20 miles away, Confederate positions on Tybee Island were abandoned and reinforcements were sent to Fort Pulaski. Many Savannah citizens panicked and fled the city.

As the first step in the assault on Fort Pulaski, the Federals had to prevent ships from coming down the Savannah River that could resupply the garrison or attack Union positions. Consequently, two six-gun batteries were constructed upstream from the fort. During the second week of February, Battery Vulcan



was constructed at Venus Point, on the South Carolina side of the river. Within a day or two Battery Hamilton was built on the northern end of Bird Island, about three miles upstream from Fort Pulaski. To avoid detection by Confederate gunboats both batteries were erected under the cover of



darkness, with the ordnance and supplies smuggled in from Daufuskie Island on large flatboats. Despite being made of marsh mud, sand bags and wooden planking, the batteries were well engineered field fortifications.

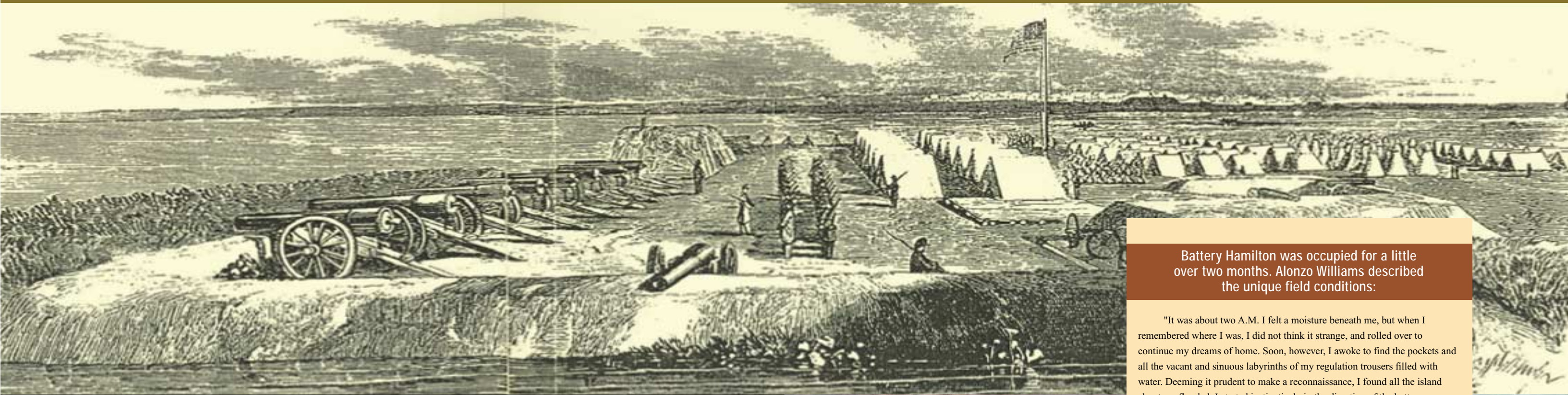
One of the largest obstacles was getting the guns in place:

"We arrived at the upper end of the island at about two o'clock. The platforms and magazines were constructed by the engineers during the remainder of the night, and at day-light an 8- inch howitzer was in position. The rest of the pieces were placed in the battery during the day, and by three o'clock could have opened fire. A hundred yards of marsh had to be crossed by the same method as that used on Jones' Island."



"The work was done in the following manner: The pieces, mounted on their carriages and limbered up, were moved forward on shifting runways of planks about 15 feet long, 1 foot wide, and 3 inches thick, laid end to end..."

"Each party had one pair of planks in excess of the number required for the guns and limbers to rest upon.... This extra pair of planks being placed in front, ...the pieces were then drawn forward with drag-ropes one after the other the length of a plank, thus freeing the two planks in the rear, which in their turn was carried to the front. This labor is the most fatiguing kind. In most places the men sank to their knees in the mud, in some places much deeper. This mud being of the most slippery and slimy kind and perfectly free from grit and sand, the planks soon became entirely smeared over with it. Many delays and much exhausting labor were occasioned by the gun-carriages slipping off the planks. When this occurred the wheels would suddenly sink to the hubs, and powerful levers had to be devised to raise them up again. I authorized the men to encase their feet in [empty] sand bags to keep the mud out of their shoes. Many did this, tying the strings just below the knees."



Battery Hamilton was occupied for a little over two months. Alonzo Williams described the unique field conditions:

"It was about two A.M. I felt a moisture beneath me, but when I remembered where I was, I did not think it strange, and rolled over to continue my dreams of home. Soon, however, I awoke to find the pockets and all the vacant and sinuous labyrinths of my regulation trousers filled with water. Deeming it prudent to make a reconnaissance, I found all the island about me flooded. I started instinctively in the direction of the battery, forgetting that a ditch had been begun there until I landed at the bottom of it up to my neck in water."

The Archeology of Battery Hamilton

The site of Battery Hamilton was first visited by archeologists in 1999, and in 2002 was studied in more detail. The earthworks, originally about five feet high, have been greatly reduced by tidal action and gravity--they were constructed of waterlogged marsh mud. Today, they are low berms that rise about a foot above the surrounding marsh. Remnants of the powder magazine are located along the west wall of the earthworks. Although the earthworks have mostly been reclaimed by marsh, they are readily identifiable on aerial photographs.

After the fortifications were mapped, the interior was metal detected but no Civil War period artifacts were found. Then, the same area was probed, which located a layer of sand and timbers buried beneath a foot and a half of marsh mud adjacent to the earthworks. The sand lens represents the remnants of sand bags that formed the base of the gun platforms. The buried timbers are up to 20 ft long, and were placed parallel to one another on the sand bags, forming the remainder of the gun platforms. Four small test pits were excavated to expose and record portions of the buried wooden platforms. The wood, consisting of wide boards, is remarkably well preserved. Documentary sources indicate that the boards were obtained from houses on Daufuskie Island, and also that the sand bags were also filled on Daufuskie Island.

Battery Hamilton, because of its location on an island and buried by the accumulation of marsh mud, is best preserved Federal gun battery associated with the bombardment of Fort Pulaski. Although the battery did not actually fire on the fort, it effectively bottled-up the river, a necessary first step in retaking Pulaski.

