

Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston

Andrew Duppstadt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Duppstadt, Andrew (2007) "Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss1/8>

Review

Duppstadt, Andrew

Winter 2007

Cotham, Edward T., Jr. *Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston*. University of Texas Press, \$18.95 paper ISBN 292712057

The Civil War in Texas

A Look at the Battle of Galveston

Battle on the Bay is a delightful and entertaining book that will appeal to professional historians and general readers alike. Written in an engaging style, Cotham's work is at times humorous while also maintaining a certain level of solemnity and seriousness. The author sets Galveston as the focal point in the Confederate District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Pre-war Galveston was a location that was quickly on the rise in the pantheon of southern cities. In its home state it was second only to San Antonio in size, and had a rather large immigrant population. It also had the largest professional population west of New Orleans and had become a center of trade and wealth on the Gulf Coast. Cotham portrays the struggle for control of Galveston not so much as a struggle, but rather a series of bungled operations. Confederates in Texas were constantly concerned about the threat of a Union attack and/or invasion at Galveston. Likewise, the capture and closing of Galveston as a blockade running port persistently loomed over the heads of the Union naval officers in the Gulf of Mexico. However, it seems that even the most intelligent and capable Union forces were continually placed in bad situations regarding operations against the city. After Confederate forces recaptured the city on January 1, 1863, following a brief Union occupation, no Union forces would set foot in Galveston until the end of the war. In the aftermath, Galveston proved that its rising importance and status in the pre-war period was no fluke, as it returned to prosperity fairly quickly.

Part of this book's success lies in its organization. Most of the chapters are brief, which is a very nice feature for those who have trouble blocking out large amounts of time for reading. Many of the chapters can be completed in a fairly

short sitting, and upon returning to the book later, one will not feel that they have lost focus. Each chapter reads like a separate narrative or vignette, yet all are inarguably connected to the entire story.

The introduction and first few chapters of the book discuss the secession of Texas and its organization as a state within the Confederacy. This is very useful background information for readers not familiar with the role of Texas in the formation of the Confederate States of America. This is also where the placing of Galveston at the center of the story begins. After offering this context, Cotham sets the stage for drama at Galveston. The Union Navy is on blockade, at least in theory, and the watchful citizens of the city are diligently keeping tabs on activity outside the harbor.

Battle on the Bay has no shortage of characters. One of the more humorous incidents is the capture of the *Royal Yacht* and its owner and captain, Thomas Chubb. Chubb was a pre-war friend of Sam Houston, former slave trader, circus owner, and merchant mariner. Upon the outbreak of the war, he offered the services of his ship to the Confederacy and was chartered to begin policing Galveston harbor with the *Royal Yacht*, a small schooner with only one gun and a fourteen-man crew. In November 1861, Union Lieutenant James Jouett led a small expedition into the harbor intent on capturing or destroying the Confederate steamer *General Rusk*. When it became obvious that his target could not be obtained, he turned the attention of his operation to the *Royal Yacht*. The action that ensued, while deadly serious for the sailors involved, became one of the most amusing incidents of the war in Galveston. It also constituted one of those blundering moments that seemed to plague the Union navy around the city. Nonetheless, the ship was captured and partially burned, Chubb and the entire crew were captured and later exchanged (which only fueled Chubb's already larger than life self-image), and Lt. Jouett, though injured in the action, went on to a long and distinguished career in the service.

Though the Union was able to take control of Galveston and the harbor in the fall of 1862, the Confederates were able to right themselves, launch a counterattack, and retake the city on New Year's Day, 1863. The Battle of Galveston becomes the climax of the book. This part of Cotham's narrative also contains many smaller stories, from the flamboyant Confederate commander, General John Bankhead Magruder, to the infamous cotton clad ships of the makeshift Confederate Navy in Texas. Magruder had been sent to Texas as a sort of punishment for angering the Confederate administration in Richmond, but

proved to be a fairly capable commander. He seemed able to do as much as possible with limited supplies and manpower, and can be credited as the primary organizer and leader of the Confederate attack on Union forces at Galveston. Alongside Magruder was Leon Smith, an experienced merchant seaman who was tapped by the general to lead the naval portion of the assault. Smith was given the honorary ranks of Major and Commodore, depending on the situation, and lived up to the expectations of Magruder. Throw in various other officers who wanted their input in the operation, and what could have been a disastrous mix was pulled together rather nicely by Magruder and Smith, culminating in a very important Confederate victory, which included not only taking back control of the city and harbor, but the capture of the U.S. steamer *Harriet Lane* as well. The Battle of Galveston solidified Confederate control of the area for the rest of the war and shook the confidence of the Union navy in its ability to control the western Gulf of Mexico.

Out of the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Galveston, the Union navy began planning anew to assault the city and retake control. However, only ten days after losing Galveston the blockading squadron was shaken by a frightening development — the appearance of the Confederate cruiser *CSS Alabama*. On January 11, 1863, the blockading fleet spotted a sail in the distance and Commodore Henry Bell sent the *Hatteras* to investigate. The Confederate cruiser lured in the Union ship and promptly sent it to the bottom. News of this development sent a wave of fear through the Union naval command. The trepidation caused by the purely coincidental appearance of the *Alabama* forced the navy to rethink its plans for another assault on Galveston, giving General Magruder time to strengthen his defenses on the island. By January 20, Union naval commanders in the Gulf, including Admiral David Farragut, conceded the impracticability of another attack on Galveston.

Throughout the rest of the war, Galveston experienced the depredations experienced in much of the rest of the South. The city became an armed camp rife with lawlessness. Constant tension existed between the military and civilians, as well as within the military itself. All of this was made worse by a bitterly cold winter, food shortages, and other hardships. The Union navy undertook a number of small boat expeditions into the harbor, but engaged in no more major action. By the spring of 1865, most of the troops that occupied Galveston were siphoned off to other areas of the Confederacy as the war effort, and the fledgling nation, began to crumble. Word of Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox reached Texas promptly, but many in the Trans-Mississippi were

still denying the fact a month after Lee's defeat. The last Confederate blockade runner to enter Galveston harbor was the *Lark* on May 24, 1865. A mob of people stormed the ship and began looting her cargo, forcing the captain of the vessel to run back out of the harbor and return to Havana. It was one last, now-humorous episode in this story. Galveston was officially brought into Union control by the U.S. Navy on June 5, 1865, and the period of Reconstruction began.

Cotham is to be commended for writing an entertaining, superbly researched, and compellingly written book. Readers who find *Battle on the Bay* interesting may also want to consult the author's two other works, *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopyl* and *The Southern Journey of a Civil War Marine: The Illustrated Note-Book of Henry O. Gusley*. If *Battle on the Bay* is any indication, this trilogy of books should be a must read for anyone interested in the Civil War.

Andrew Duppstadt holds a BA and MA in History from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. He is Assistant Curator of Education for the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites and serves as an Adjunct Instructor of History at two community colleges. He can be reached at andrew.duppstadt@yahoo.com.