

# FLORIDA'S BATTLE AT NATURAL BRIDGE by Thomas Lera

Florida's last significant battle of the war took place near St. Marks at Apalachee Bay when, on March 4, 1865, nine blockade ships and nearly 1,000 Union soldiers and naval forces landed at the St. Marks lighthouse. Their plan was to capture Fort Ward (now San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park), then move north to Tallahassee, the state capital, which was the only Confederate state capital east of the Mississippi not captured nor burned by Union forces during the Civil War.<sup>i</sup>

St. Marks (St. Mark or Saint Marks), was established in March 1718 as a small Spanish town on the Gulf of Mexico where Fort San Marco de Apalache and the Spanish mission of Santa Maria de Apalache were built. St. Marks was a major port and supply depot in support of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) and became the 17<sup>th</sup> Florida post office. It was also Tallahassee's seaport, connected by a 22-mile (Route No. 3529) and 24-mile post wagon road (Route No. 2462). In 1836, it became the terminus of the first railroad in Florida.

Postal route 2462 went 3 times a week from Tallahassee to St. Marks, a 48-mile roundtrip. Proposals to carry the mail by horse were to be considered. The mail left Tallahassee every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, by covered wagon at 7 a.m. and arrived at St. Marks the same day by 10 a.m. The return trip left St. Marks the same days at 4 p.m. and arrived by 7 p.m. at Tallahassee.

Postal route 3529 ran the 22-miles from Tallahassee to St. Marks at 7 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, arriving by 12 noon, with return between 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. the same day. P. A. Stockton's \$430 proposal was accepted April 14, 1851. Interestingly, Tallahassee Railroad Company's bid for \$600 using railroad cars was not accepted. [Maps: **(Figure 1)** Northern Part of Florida. Compiled and Published at the United States Coast Survey Office, A. D. Bache, Superintendent. 1864. Drawn by H. Lindenkohl. 1 inch to 10 miles. <sup>ii</sup> **(Figure 2)** Map in San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park Museum (Photographs by Thomas Lera)

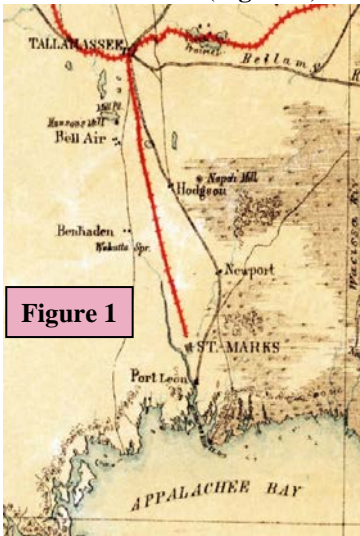


Figure 1

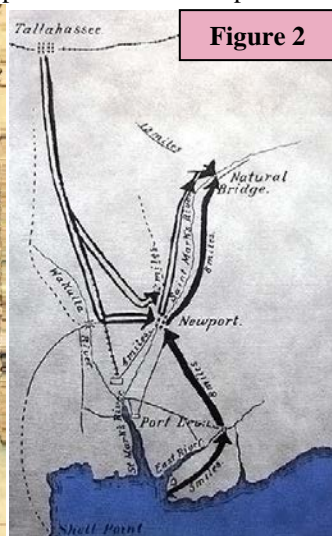


Figure 2

During the Civil War, a Confederate post office existed but no postmaster appointment was recorded. Mail was dispatched by postal route 6556 from St. Marks to Tallahassee at 2:15 p.m. daily, except Sunday, via Hodgson's Distillery, arriving at 3:30 p.m., return daily except Sunday at 10 a.m., arriving at 11:25 a.m. in St. Marks. The distance was 21.75 miles each way. Tallahassee Rail Road Company's bid of \$3,269.44 per annum was accepted and service commenced presumably in June 1861. The route was not advertised in 1862. <sup>iii</sup> **Figure 3: ST MARKS FLA Feb 20**

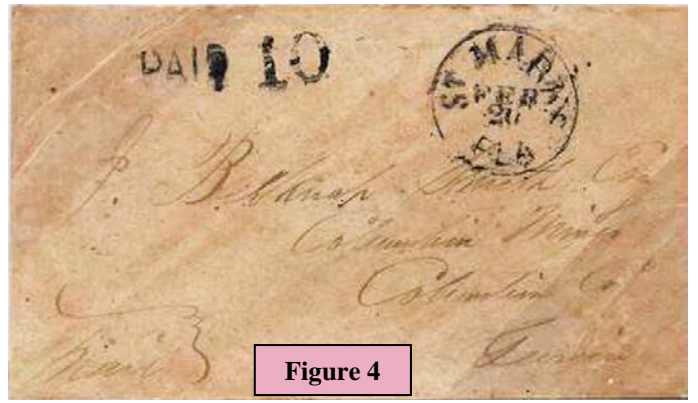


Figure 3

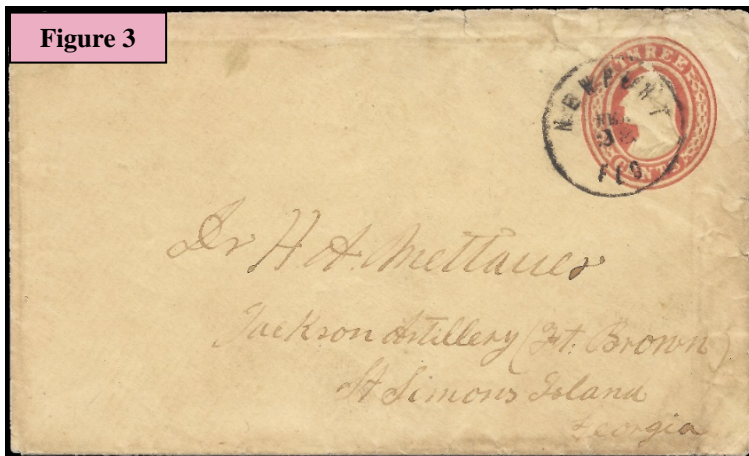


Figure 4

postmark with "PAID 10" (Type C) on cover to Columbia Co. GA.<sup>iv</sup> (Courtesy of the Deane R. Briggs, M.D. Collection) **Figure 4: NEWPORT FLO Feb 20** Confederate State usage on U.S #10 3¢ envelope.<sup>v</sup> (Courtesy of the Deane R. Briggs, M.D. Collection)

Brigadier General John Newton and 800 Union troops marched to Newport with the intention of crossing the St. Marks River and attacking the town of St. Marks. However, two miles above St Marks a bridge had been destroyed by the

Confederates, as well as part of the town of Newport, preventing a Union crossing.

The next day, General Newton and his forces marched to Natural Bridge (**Figure 5**, Natural Bridge Monument, Photograph by Thomas Lera). where they hoped to cross the river, and proceed south to St. Marks and Fort Ward to capture the Confederate artillery,<sup>vi</sup> then north to Tallahassee FL and Thomasville GA to release the Union prisoners. Union commanders, however, did not know the prison had been evacuated and the prisoners moved to Andersonville. They planned to return by the way they came, or

reembark at St Marks if the Union war vessels succeeded in getting far enough up the river with their heavy guns to protect them. On the morning of March 6<sup>th</sup>, Newton tried to move across the river at Natural Bridge, but was blocked by a Confederate force, hidden in the woods between the swamp and the St. Marks River on the opposite bank.<sup>vii</sup>

Commanded by Brigadier General William Miller, the Confederate troops, composed of soldiers, old men, young boys, and a complement of 25 men from the *CSS Spray*<sup>viii</sup>, met the Union forces at East River Bridge and Natural Bridge. Miller's troops prevented several Union attempts to flank their position.

They successfully repelled three major attacks, forcing the Union troops to retreat to St. Marks Lighthouse on the coast, (**Figure 6**, St. Marks Lighthouse, Photograph by Thomas Lera) where the Union flotilla evacuated them.<sup>ix</sup>



**Figure 5**

Although the Confederates proclaimed Natural Bridge a great victory, celebration in Tallahassee was short-lived. Three weeks after the battle, on April 1, 1865, Governor John Milton passed away at his plantation home in Jackson County.



**Figure 6**

Dale Cox, a Southern Historian and author, found in an Extra edition of the *West Florida News*, a Marianna newspaper, on April 3, 1865: "A TRAGIC ACCIDENT! Gov. Milton has been killed by the accidental discharge of a gun. The Governor was in his home when he retrieved a shotgun in expectation of an expedition to shoot birds. The gun discharged and the Governor was killed."

This explains why the Governor was buried in the cemetery of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Marianna, since in those days' suicide victims were not allowed to be interred on sacred ground. Governor John Milton rests in sacred ground.<sup>x</sup>

On April 9<sup>th</sup>, a week after Milton's death, General Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant following the Union general's capture of Richmond and Petersburg Virginia. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, Union Brigadier General Edward M. McCook arrived in Tallahassee to accept Confederate Major General Samuel Jones' surrender of all Confederate forces in Florida. In a formal ceremony held in Tallahassee May 20, 1865, McCook ordered the United States flag to be raised over the Capitol.

<sup>i</sup> Florida's Role in the Civil War: "Supplier of the Confederacy" [http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/cvl\\_war/cvl\\_war1.htm](http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/cvl_war/cvl_war1.htm). Accessed November 20, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Northern Part of Florida. Compiled and Published at the United States Coast Survey Office, A. D. Bache, Superintendent. 1864. Drawn by H. Lindenkohl. 1 inch to 10 miles. 19 x 25. Published. Railroad lines and State boundary in red; drainage features in blue. Roads, swamps, lighthouses, forts, towns, and smaller settlements are shown, and scattered comments describe the vegetation. RG 23: Special Maps.

<sup>iii</sup> Jaronski, Stefan T. "The Postal Routes of Confederate Florida Part 2." *The Confederate Philatelist*, 37:2 (1992) pp. 63-65.

<sup>iv</sup> A Confederate post office was present at St. Marks during the war but no postmaster appointment is recorded. It is not known who cancelled the letter.

<sup>v</sup> Newport (or New Port) is located on the St. Marks River on a post road connecting Tallahassee and St. Marks. The post office was established on January 18, 1844, as a name change from the one at Port Leon. Newport was the "new port" built two to three miles further up river after a yellow fever epidemic and a September 13, 1843 hurricane wiped out Port Leon. Mail was likely handled on Confederate route 6556, St. Marks to Tallahassee with daily service except Sunday. Peter H. Swain was appointed Confederate postmaster on July 25, 1861.

<sup>vi</sup> The fort guarded the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla Rivers and the southern terminus of the Tallahassee - St. Marks Railroad. This was the first railroad built in Florida.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://churbuck.com/the-reminiscences-of-captain-thomas-chatfield/part-10-the-reminiscences-of-captain-thomas-chatfield/> accessed November 28, 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> De Quesada, A. M., *A history of Florida forts: Florida's Lonely Outposts*, History Press, 2006. The *CSS Spray* was said to be the only Confederate States Navy vessel to operate exclusively in Florida waters.

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Natural-Bridge>. accessed June 13, 2016

<sup>x</sup> Dale Cox, Wednesday, April 9, 2014, <http://www.civilwarfl.com/2014/04/floridas-confederate-governor-did-not.html> accessed December 30, 2016.