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George F. Pearce. *Pensacola during the Civil War: A Thorn in the Side of the Confederacy.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xii + 286 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1770-9.

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Published on H-Florida (July, 2004)

The Civil War Started Here (Almost)

Do we really need another book about the Civil War? Considering that each year sees the publication of at least one hundred new titles on some aspect of the battle of Gettysburg, we surely can make room for a book that examines the war in northwest Florida. George Pearce's volume details the overlooked Pensacola theater of the war, and makes a convincing case that operations there were an important (though by no means crucial) part of the overall conflict. Meticulously researched and written more for the Civil War buff than an academic audience, this book exhibits both the positives and the pitfalls of the Civil War genre. That said, academic historians have much to gain from reading this book.

On the eve of Civil War conflict, Pensacola was a sleepy Southern town, blessed with a fine harbor and protected by a series of federal forts. Tied more closely to the Gulf Coast region of Alabama than to the rest of Florida, Pensacola was nonetheless Florida's most populous city in 1860. With Abraham Lincoln's victory in the 1860 presidential election, it became obvious that a sectional crisis would quickly occur. On January 10, 1861, Florida seceded from the Union, joining South Carolina and Mississippi. Attention quickly turned to the question of the disposition of the remaining federal military installations in the seceded states. In Florida, that placed the spotlight squarely on Pensacola and its forts. Poorly maintained, inadequately staffed, and designed to prevent attacks from the sea and not overland, Pensacola's harbor defenses seemed ripe for a quick Confederate takeover. By the time Florida seceded, Union forces had abandoned mainland defense positions and moved to the more defensible Fort Pickens, located on Santa Rosa Island at the mouth of Pensacola Bay. Newly formed Confederate militia units quickly occupied the navy yard and adjacent fortifications near the city. The stage was now set for military confrontation between an outnumbered federal garrison increasingly reliant on supplies available only by ship and a growing force of Confederate soldiers determined to remove the Union impediment to the use of this important port facility.

The Pensacola confrontation was very analogous to the standoff in Charleston harbor. The first shots of the Civil War were fired in Charleston, however, and thousands of tourists now crowd the parapets of Fort Sumter, while Fort Pickens snoozes drowsily in relative obscurity. Pearce is at his best when he explains why Charleston and not Pensacola witnessed the start of the Civil War. He credits Florida Senator Stephen Mallory (a Pensacola native and future Confederate Secretary of the Navy) with brokering and helping to keep a tenuous truce between federal troops and Confederates during the first months of 1861. As it became clear with Lincoln's inauguration that compromise was not possible, Northern reinforcements reached Fort Pickens as the guns boomed in Charleston harbor. Pearce recounts in detail the confusing efforts of both sides to simultaneously avoid conflict in Pensacola while reinforcing their military presence there for the inevitable battle. He concludes that "if Secretary Welles's message to Captain Adams [concerning the landing of Union troops at Fort Pickens] had arrived in Pensacola thirty-six hours earlier, the war would have likely commenced at Fort Pickens" (p. 67). Federal troops remained at the fort as the situation reverted to a stalemate, with Confederate troops not strong enough to risk an attack on the fort and Union naval vessels protecting it. Certainly Pensacola lost its claim to fifteen minutes of fame with the opening salvos at Fort Sumter. Yet Pearce cogently reminds the reader that it did not revert to the inconsequential backwater most historians have placed it in. It remained a symbol of federal presence in the South, "a conspicuous federal stronghold." More importantly, Fort Pickens prevented the use of Pensacola harbor as a significant port for blockade runners, a major loss for the Southern cause since "the channel there is far more accessible, deep, and protected than those of New Orleans or Mobile" (p. 67).

With the beginning of overt hostilities, both sides rushed reinforcements to the Pensacola region. By mid-April 1861, close to 5,000 Confederate soldiers were stationed in the area and slowly tightening the noose around Fort Pickens. Meanwhile, federal troops and naval vessels reinforced the fort, enlarging existing gun emplacements and building new batteries. Larger strategic decisions dictated that major military operations would not take place there. In the summer of 1861, both opposing forces were reduced in size as troops were moved to more pressing locations, particularly the Virginia theater. For the remainder of 1861, both sides engaged in a series of small battles, with Confederates probing the outer defenses of Fort Pickens, and Union bombardments in retaliation. While no changes occurred regarding the Union presence, these battles saw the first fatal casualties of the war on Florida soil. With Union victories in western Tennessee in the spring of 1862 and Admiral Farragut's capture of New Orleans, pressing needs demanded the removal of Confederate troops from the Pensacola region. On May 12, 1962, Union troops from Fort Pickens took control of Pensacola.

Union troops stayed in control of the city for the remainder of the war, even though troops were evacuated to surrounding forts in March 1863. Sporadic raids and skirmishes took place in the vicinity of Pensacola, but no major battles occurred. Union soldiers periodically marched into the surrounding countryside, destroying and confiscating "agricultural products and farm animals, timber and lumber, and household furnishings" (p. 237). Pensacola became an important port city for ships of the Northern blockade squadrons, as its harbor and navy yard provided docking, coaling, and refitting stations for Union vessels. Though few battles occurred in the region, Pearce concludes that the strong Union presence there was a factor in the overall Northern victory. In order to block Union incursions from the Pensacola enclave, "a fairly large troop concentration that could have been used in other places in the Confederacy to better advantage had to be maintained in the Pensacola military district" (p. 237). Part of the plan to stretch the Confederacy thin and force it to allocate scarce resources over a wide geographic area, the Union occupation of Pensacola was a successful, yet unappreciated, piece of the larger Union strategy.

While Pearce has written the definitive book on this theater of Civil War operations, its real success and shortcoming lie in its discussion of the social aspects of the conflict. No one (not even Pearce, and to his credit he does not even try) can say Pensacola was crucial to the outcome of the Civil War. Therefore, the military and strategic aspects of war in Pensacola appeal mainly to antiquarians and Civil War buffs. But Pearce is concerned with more than battlefield tactics. Using a wide array of diaries, letters, and newspapers, he makes the daily lives of soldiers and civilians come alive. The reader is reminded of the frontier nature of northwest Florida and the primitive conditions under which troops had to operate. Poor food, unsanitary camp facilities, and the ever-present mosquitoes made sickness a constant companion to soldiers of both sides. Pearce is especially good at telling the stories of soldiers in the 6th New York and the 15th Maine, Northern regiments far from home stuck in a dead end backwater with little but guard duty to keep them occupied. While Northern regiments chafed under the primitive conditions and constant boredom, residents of Pensacola and its surrounding areas had to adjust to living under Northern occupation. While Union control was hardly draconian, Southern sympathizers who stayed behind in Pensacola under the the rule of the hated Yankees and refused to take an oath of allegiance to the United States were either imprisoned for short periods or forced to "immediately go to Confederate territory" (p. 172). While civility remained the norm in the contact between Northern troops and Pensacola residents, most on both sides recognized the tenuous nature of this relationship. An 1862 quote from a Northern major in the forces occupying Pensacola expressed cogently those feelings. "The secessionists hate us," he stated, " … it would hardly be honest to cultivate intimacy with one whose duty it would be tomorrow to slay his sons" (quoted, p. 170).

Pearce does a good job examining the quotidian lives of soldiers and civilians in the Pensacola area but he says little about the issue of race and the plight of Pensacola's black residents. Obviously, the lack of written primary materials relating to this subject makes a thorough examination of the plight of black Pensacolans difficult, but Pearce needs to do more digging to examine how the war and notions of freedom affected the nearly 40 percent of Pensacolans who happened to be black. Pearce also gets bogged down at times in military minutiae, with too much detail regarding regiments, weaponry, and military protocol. There are other nagging problems as well, most regarding the book's presentation. Maps, so important in the telling of military history, are not listed by page number. A map of Union operations in the spring of 1865 is placed in a chapter dealing with military events taking place two years earlier. In spite of those small concerns, George Pearce has written a fine book that will probably not get the audience it deserves. Civil War enthusiasts will surely forsake it for another book on Grant's campaign in Virginia. Academic historians may see it as

just another local history, with little wider implications. Pearce, however, makes the case that this is an important story. After all, the Civil War started in Pensacola (almost).

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Citation: Steven G. Noll. Review of Pearce, George F., *Pensacola during the Civil War: A Thorn in the Side of the Confederacy*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. July, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9583

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