

South Texas Stories Podcast

Barry Watson

Battle of Corpus Christi

Introduction

Barry- Barry- Hello everyone, I am Barry Watson, and you're listening to South Texas Stories. This episode is going to be covering the Civil War battle, the Battle of Corpus Christi. The Battle of Corpus Christi was a battle that occurred during the Civil War in Corpus Christi, TX. During this battle, John Kittredge, the officer in charge of Union forces, attempted to inspect government buildings in Corpus Christi as well as enforce the naval blockade placed on the Confederacy. Met by Alfred Hobbe, the officer in charge of Confederate forces, Kittredge was denied access to the buildings. This disagreement would snowball into what we now know as the Battle of Corpus Christi. For this episode, I conducted a web interview with Civil War expert Dr. Ariel Kelley. I asked Dr. Kelley to do the interview because of her immense Civil War knowledge and her ability to articulate her thoughts.

Dr. Kelley: Um, I've been teaching at the collegiate level about 10 years I got my masters and my bachelor's from A&M Corpus. So I'm a local girl. Taught freshmen for a while then transitioned into teaching college history, and I have just completed my PhD at the University of North Texas, and I specialize in 19th century military and Borderlands history, predominantly in the US, Mexico Borderlands area.

Barry: A nation divided and a city against the wall, sit back, relax, and enjoy the story of the Battle of Corpus Christi

<<waves crashing on beach>

Chapter One: A Nation Divided, War Finds Corpus Christi, TX

Barry: In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. This election came at a very unstable time in American society as the northern and southern states grappled over whether slavery was morally and constitutionally correct. Elected by the people and backed by the abolition favoring Republican party, Abraham Lincoln looked set to carry out the northern mission in settling the debate of slavery once and for all. This, in turn, furthered the divide between the North and South.

Noted451, "OceanWaves.wav by Noted451," Freesound, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://freesound.org/people/Noted451/sounds/531015/>.

Dr. Kelley: So following Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, um we know that the South was very hesitant about Lincoln. There was a lot of speculation that he was, quote, unquote, a black Republican who wanted to end slavery and even promote things like racial equality. And so the South believed that the best way to safeguard slavery was to secede. And so beginning with South Carolina, that December, all the way until February of 1861, the seven first States did secede and then following the firing on Fort Sumter, four additional slave states that we call the upper South will join them. As part of this, Lincoln responded to the situation by calling for 75,000 volunteers making it clear that there was going to be army engagement. He also instituted a naval blockade, and he declared the South in rebellion.

Barry: This blockade would eventually find it's way down to our cozy coastal city, Corpus Christi. Not only was Corpus an important military depo for Texas and the Confederate Military, it served as a port that was crucial to the Corpus economy.

Dr. Kelley: Corpus is going to be subjected to the blockade like many other areas, um, Corpus has a history as a military depot during the 1850s. Corpus had military presence pretty continuously and from 1852 to about 1856, we actually are the headquarters for the eighth military department, which included Texas, and so residents were convinced that their location is both a port, and that historical connection to the army would make them an at risk target. Corpus was connected to a larger um desire to blockade the Texas coastline. Galveston, of course, and Indianola were the two primary ports at the time, but Corpus, um, still provided valuable ways of getting cotton out of the Confederacy and into other areas. We are also a progression towards the border where a lot of cotton is being exchanged across the border with Mexico because Mexico is neutral in this conflict. And so when the union decided to blockade the coast, they detached an officer in this case, Lieutenant John W. Kittredge to control the areas from just slightly north of us at Paseo Cavalo down Corpus itself as part of breaking up that trade, and potentially disheartening the residents in the area.

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Chapter Two: The Union Arrives, the Battle Begins

Barry: The Union Navy, lead by John Kittredge, makes it's way to Corpus Christi to enforce a naval blockade on the area. As they arrive, they are met with hostility from the locals and Confederate personnel.

Dr. Kelley: The Union arrives technically in early 1862 in January when Kittredge and USS Arthur appear off the coast. The Arthur is a former merchant vessel has been converted to a blockading vessel. And as part of this local residents were quite concerned residents had been fearful since the beginning and after supporting things like secession, they had gone on to ask for arms from the president. Um, and also to ask for arms from the department commander

Andrew Duke, "fiddle melody 01.wav by Andrew Duke." Freesound.com, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://freesound.org/people/Andrew%20Duke/sounds/2432/#>

Earl Van Dorn. Both of those had been denied, and residents had had to take care of themselves, and so they will allow like a voluntary tax to provide arms. For local units. They'll form several units of Minutemen as well as a light infantry to protect Corpus and an artillery battery to protect Aransas Pass and the entry into Corpus Christi Bay, as well as kind of that connection with Copano Bay. When the Union showed up, it brought that reality home and it made them very convinced that they could be a target. Now in the early part of the year, Corpus itself will not see action, but there will be small engagements between Kittredge's forces and the Confederate station on the barrier island, San Jose Island and Mustang Island um, in particular. And this will often lead to things in instances where Kittredge will shell, um those, those coastal residents or burn down a couple of their homes in one particular engagement. So that threat was very much there.

Barry: The Union come prepared and ready for an engagement. They plan on enforcing the blockade and strangling the South so the war does not last long. Upon arrival, the Union find it troublesome as the Corpus bay waters were too shallow for the Union's large ships.

Dr. Kelley: Um, initially, Kittredge is working predominantly with the um, Arthur. That vessel is coming to Corpus Christi Bay, um it draws about 14 feet of water and the bay is far too shallow to allow a vessel of that size. Corpus, until the ship channel is built really remains very shallow, murky, very difficult to navigate because of the sandbars and so Kittredge could not get in and out that way. And much of his targets were trying to stop the um, vessels that were kind of escaping out from the intercoastal to the actual gulf. And he was able to capture on occasion, some Confederate sloops and other small craft. Eventually, though, he will get his forces augmented when he receives two ships from New Orleans. One of these is a steamer it's called the Sachin, and then a yacht called the Corypheus. And both of these vessels are shallow enough to enter the bay. They will capture a couple of additional sloops from the Confederate blockade runners, and these would be the Reindeer and the Bella Italia. These will give him the ability then to enter the bay.

Barry: With the Union's ability to now enter the bay, the threat of battle is now upon the city.

Dr. Kelley: And so in August, he makes the decision to come after Corpus. This was his way of kind of shutting down the area, Corpus versus the big settlement in the region, and kind of the seat of commerce for Nueces County. And so he was hoping if he could come in, he didn't intend to occupy the city because he's only got about 100 men with him. But he was hoping if he had dishearten the population, or spook them, that maybe the local unionists, because there is a fairly strong unionist population, might rise up and assume control. And he is also certainly carrying enough guns to make that happen. Between his various vessels, he's going to have a parrot gun, 8 32 pound cannons and 12 pound howitzer. So he has the ability to launch quite a bit of firepower at the residents. In comparison, the Confederates are not nearly equipped. The Confederates are working with about three cannons, an 18 pounder and then 2 12 pounders that are pretty old. They're both, they're all smooth war weapons and the 12 pounders

originally came from a trading post up on the bluff that Henry Lawrence Kinney had had during his early days when Corpus was more of a illicit settlement.

Barry: Kittredge, after failed negotiations to inspect federal buildings with major Alfred Hobby, will commence his attack on Corpus Christi.

Dr. Kelley: Kittredge begins that attack by coming in on August 12th. He and uh his small little flotilla of four ships will come in. Um as they are entering the bay, they will also capture a schooner, the Breaker from the Confederates and so that will give them kind of a five ship force that he will then on August 13th, sail and land in Corpus to talk to local officials. In this case, uh, the local Confederates in terms of defense, have got augmented by the Eighth Infantry under major Alfred Hobby, and he will be there to receive Kittredge along with the Chief Justice Henry Gilpin. When Kittredge comes ashore, he is demanding to see all federal holdings. So he says "I want to see your federal courthouses. I want to take control of these." And the two Confederates, stop them and say, we are not part of the Union. There is no federal territory, you have no permission to do this. And when they decline, Kittredge threatens to shell the city. He says "I'm going to show you, you need to evacuate your woman and children, I will give you 24 hours." The residents then complained that that was not enough and Kittredge offered to extend it to 48 hours with the assumption that there would be no additional fortifications created in that time period. He then dismisses himself and goes back to the boats to await the end of that truce. Uh, residents that start to prepare. And the first thing they do is they certainly evacuate all of the women and children. The residents themselves had already gone through the process of forming the local units. People like the local Provost Marshal, Charles G. Lovenskiold had actually gone and collected taxes and done things to provide arms for the men. And so what they were really doing was trying to figure out where do they stationed their few artillery pieces, and they got some assistance from a couple of local residents who had a little bit of combat knowledge. Realize no one in Corpus has got the same kind of military knowledge that somebody maybe like Kittredge does, who was a very experienced mariner and knew the coastline quite well from traversing it as part of commercial and transport missions. Here we have a lot of folks who are very eager to defend their homes but not necessarily very knowledgeable. So William, or Billy man as he is usually called, was home from Isle number 10, where he [inaudible] at an artillery background from some previous service, and they too step up to provide assistance. Billy man is really the one that takes kind of the, brunt part of this and says "I will take the direction", and he actually decides where to station the cannons, and moves them from the bluff, to behind the earthen works that were created by Zachary Taylor's Army of Occupation in 1840. But Von Blucher will do his best to train the men.

Barry: During this time of evacuation, the Eighth Infantry took the time to move their weaponry to behind previously constructed earthen works. In doing so, the Confederates had positioned themselves to defend a land attack but they realized the battle would be mostly fought with artillery.

Dr. Kelley: By setting up behind the earthen works, they screened their artillery quite well, as well as their men. They're also working with about 700 or so troops with the various local units combined with the Eighth Infantry. And so they have the ability to repel a land assault if needed, but they were realizing that this was going to be predominantly an artillery bombardment. And

so they're relying on the local artillery battery under the control of Ben Neal to really provide most of that assistance. And so when the truce expires, that period expires, um they waited for the battle to commence, and when it did not, the Confederates took the initiative. And so on the 16th of August, um, they [inaudible] and they're actually able as part of that process to fire multiple times according to local sources, before Kittredge was able to respond in time. Through the course of the day Kittredge fires about 400 shells, most of which do explode. Those that strike the city do quite a bit of damage in the form of damaging homes and businesses. So like William Shaw recorded that his saloon was hit and that his Puppy was killed. And the markers and things like the old baby cemetery were also shattered as part of that process. Once it becomes evident, though, that showing the city is not effective Kittredge will redirect to the earth and works where his guns will not be very effective. The Confederates in comparison will hit two of his vessels, both the Sachim and the Corepheyus will both be struck and that will eventually convince Kittredge to pull back and retire for the day.

<< civil war music >>

Barry: Following this, Kittredge would lead attacks the following two days on Corpus Christi.

Dr. Kelley: On his second day, Kittredge will actually make a bigger blunder though. So the 16th includes no more fighting that day, the 17th, Kittredge remains off the coast. Again, no engagement. But the next day, he made the decision to try, instead of a direct route, he would try a flanking maneuver and so he decided to land south of the city, and use his men and his guns to move up into the city that way. He did not count on encountering as many of Hobbe's men as he did. So Hobbe, along with the local defenders, were able to fire at Kittredge, causing him to essentially scurry back to his vessels. And that will effectively end the battle that we call the Battle of Corpus Christi.

Chapter Three: Conclusion and the Aftermath of the Battle

Barry: Following the victory, the military men and civilians of Corpus Christi celebrated as if they had won the war. Some would even go as far as to call it the "Vicksburg of Texas." This enthusiasm would soon run out, as they were faced with the reality; Kittredge and the blockade continued on. Corpus Christi would be faced with economic hardships and shortages of supplies as the blockade worked its course.

Dr. Kelley: Following the battle, Corpus will start to face a period of hard times. In the early part of the war, the economy had remained stable, thanks in part to a new emerging salt trade, where we were providing salt by using the Laguna Madre actually, and drying sea salt. We were providing salt to other areas and we were using the intercoastal waterways to transport it to places like Houston and Galveston where it could be taken inland to Austin. But following that, as the blockade tightens it becomes more difficult to use those waterways. It also becomes more difficult to get supplies from places like New Orleans. Corpus was dependent upon groceries coming in from other places. And so by early 1863, that combined with a rising drought will lead to a lot of people being very hungry in this area, a lot of the animals are going to start to die off. In fact, a lot of residents talk about kind of the wretched stench in the western part of the county. We know that the river got very low and some residents described that it was too salty to drink.

adeluc4, "Civil War Music .Wav by adeluc4," Freesound, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://freesound.org/people/adeluc4/sounds/125347/>.

And some residents even talked about how to do things like kill rattlesnakes for food. Um, within the city itself, it was just as bad. Residents like Maria von Blucher, so Felix von Bluchers' wife, recorded subsisting on things like moldy bacon and acorn coffee because she wasn't able to get other supplies. And so by 1863, the population is very much suffering. They don't have access to the supplies they need and even if they did, because of the inflation of Confederate money, it was too hard to purchase things. And so when the Union shows up, as part of Nathaniel Bank's invasions of Texas, so there are multiple invasions of Texas. Initially, he'll start down at the Rio Grande, but eventually Corpus will fall into that. He'll start with the barrier islands much like Kittredge had done, because the ships were too big to get into the bay. But once Port Sims falls, um, they will make a presence in the city. And the Union will realize the problems the population is having and offer them food.

Outro

Barry: Although the Battle of Corpus Christi did not have any significant or long term effects on the Civil War, it is interesting to revisit and relive a historical moment that occurred on our doorsteps. The Battle of Corpus Christi showed the grit of the men protecting their homes and families alongside the grit of the officers and soldiers following the orders of their superiors. This battle tells the story of a population with it's back against the wall, who stood up and fought a force threatening their homes and livelihoods.

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