

The Battle of Marianna 1864

On September 27th 1864, the most tragic as well as the most memorable event in the history of Jackson County, Florida occurred, “The Battle of Marianna”. It wasn't, however, a battle of great historic importance, but it was a typical example of the South's spirit, against tremendous odds, that kept the Confederacy going through the years of the Civil War.

The Federals' raid on Marianna was not a surprise, for Governor John Milton had anticipated it for many months. He had warned the Confederate military officials of the defenseless position of northwest Florida. This part of Florida was important to the Confederacy since it was one of the chief sources of food supplies and salt remaining. Salt was indispensable for curing pork and beef and in curing eggs, butter and other foods. Large amounts of badly needed food had already been lost to the South because of the inability of farmers to get enough of this preservative. Sherman himself had said in 1862 that without salt the Confederates could not move their armies in mass. Governor Milton knew all this, and he realized that the salt works on the nearby coast were defenseless. At the beginning of the war the Southern States had been able to obtain enough salt from large brine lakes in western Virginia and Kentucky. But after these were captured by the Federals, never to be recovered, the south was left with only a few salt works around the country. Salt was even smuggled in from foreign countries, and blockade runners brought in quite a lot, but there still was never enough. Some salt was also mined near Mobile, Alabama, and in other parts of the south, but there was seldom enough to take care of their surrounding communities. Consequently, the salt works at St. Andrews, located near Marianna, was very Important.

This was not, however, the only reason this area was important to the South. Marianna was on a direct route between Pensacola and Tallahassee, the Capital of Florida. When the war opened, Marianna had no railroad connections. The nearest railway station at that time was Quincy, about 50 miles east of Marianna and 24 miles west from Tallahassee. It was the key to Northwest Florida. Thus the Confederate military leaders saw that to capture both the railroad and Tallahassee, they must capture Marianna. During the late period of the war, Marianna became most necessary to the Confederates,

especially since it was also the center for the home troops left in Florida to defend the State Capital. This was headquarters for the district between the Apalachicola and the Choctaw Rivers. The Marianna troops were manned by Colonel A.B. Montgomery and his Cavalry of 300 men. Located here were Companies: I, G, and E of Colonel George W. Scott's 5th Florida Battalion. One Company was Commanded by Capt. Robert Chisholm, with a second Company led by Major W.H. Milton located 25 miles south and a third under Capt. William A. Jeter 20 miles west at Hickory Hill.

In the fall of 1864, prior to the Battle of Marianna, the Federal forces operating from Pensacola made several raids in Northwest Florida and Southern Alabama. A small detachment of the New York Cavalry on April 2nd 1864 fought an engagement with a detachment of the 7th Alabama Cavalry. The Confederates were beaten with a loss of ten prisoners and several horses. The Federal loss was three wounded and nine horses. Then General Alexander Asboth left Fort Barrancas in Pensacola on July 21st 1864, with 1100 men to raid the country at "15 mile house" to the west, where he heard Confederate reinforcements were coming, causing him to hasten back to his defenses. On August 13th he again left Barrancas with a raiding party, this time 1400 strong. He got as far as Baldwin County in Alabama when he learned that a force of 5000 Confederate troops were coming, again he hurried back. Asboth was very persistent however. He began his most damaging expedition on September 18th, ending it the first week in October. On this raid the Federals did much looting in the Eucheeanna neighborhood of Walton County. Then Asboth received instructions that brought about the Battle of Marianna. The General's objectives were to destroy the salt works at St. Andrews Bay, to capture the isolated Rebel Cavalry and Infantry in Washington and Jackson Counties, to liberate the Union prisoners at Marianna, to collect white and black recruits and to secure as many horses and mules as possible.

The forces Asboth commanded consisted of three battalions, the 2nd Maine Cavalry with Lt. C.O. Spaulding in command, one battalion made of Confederate deserters led by Major Rutkey, and two companies of mounted Negro Infantry from the 56th and 82nd Louisiana regiments. In all there were about 900 well armed men. The people had received word of Asboth's raid in Eucheeanna about a week before he appeared in Marianna. Then on September 26th the Yankees were at Campbellton, only 18 miles away. The

appearance of the Federals in Marianna was only hours away. Immediately a call was sent all over the county for all men able to bear arms to report to Marianna at once. The following morning, the day of the raid, the town was filled with volunteers, mostly old men and boys who paraded the streets with their old rifles and squirrel guns, anxious to fight.

On the morning of the raid, Colonel Montgomery left town with his staff and two companies of Cavalry to intercept the raiders. When he discovered the enemies superior size, he fell back to Marianna, arriving about an hour ahead of Asboth's mounted infantry and cavalry. He immediately gave an order to his troops to retire across the Chipola River bridge to comparative safety on the east bank, leaving the old men and boys to defend the town with their old guns as best they could. This, however, was a sound move from a military standpoint, for if the Federal troops attempted to cross the river and advance on the railroad at Quincy and from there to Tallahassee, the Confederate forces could hold them back until the reinforcements Montgomery had sent for had arrived. If Montgomery had set his men to defend the town with the old men and boys, they probably would have been captured with the rest, leaving a clear path to the objectives Asboth had set out to gain. Even though Colonel Montgomery's forces probably would have inflicted heavy losses on the Federals, it is doubtful that they could have beaten them. Obviously Montgomery had made the only decision possible.

Meanwhile the volunteer defenders had been hastily forming their organization. The guard consisted of old men between 50 and 75, young boys under 16, and several Confederate veterans who were home on sick leave or furlough. Their total strength was 95, according to available records. This volunteer force included members of Captain Jesse Norwood's Marianna Guards, Captain Henry Robinson's Greenwood Guards and several members of Captain A.R. Godwin's Cavalry at Campbellton. Captain Norwood was chosen to command the defenders. Captain Norwood deployed his little army behind trees, fences and other coverage along the road from Elys Corner (where the Marianna Hotel now stands) east to the Episcopal Church. As the Yankees arrived from the west by the Campbellton road, they were thrown into confusion at Ely's Corner by a blast from the southern forces. The Federal lines were quickly reformed and personally led by General Asboth. They charged back down the road actually running their horses over the old men and boys, forcing them to retreat to the Episcopal Church. A detachment

of Federals had skirted the northern part of town and then turned south to outflank the home guard. At this point the Union troops halted, many dismounted, and appeared to be watching the church. The home guard had taken position in and around the church and continued firing upon the Federals. At this point Asboth was far from happy, for he had been told there would be no resistance in Marianna, instead he had been shot in the jaw and the arm, several of his officers had been killed, and many casualties had occurred among his troops. After about one half hour, he ordered the church and surrounding buildings the home guard was depending upon for protection to be burned. He also ordered the town to be burned, but someone intervened and the orders were countermanded. As the church burned, the defenders were forced to leave the building. Even though they surrendered as soon as they stepped from the church, they were shot instantly. Their bodies were burned almost beyond recognition. One record of the day's battle stated:

“When the Musketry was still and the flames had died down, a ghastly spectacle was presented. The charred remains of some of the boys who had fought at the barricade were found among the ruins. About 60 soldiers and citizens were casualties. Many of the victims were buried in the cemetery of the St. Lukes Episcopal Church around which the battle raged.

The destruction of the church was an act of vandalism committed by the Negro troops on an order of General Asboth. All the church records were destroyed except the church Bible, which was saved by Major Cutler of the Union Army, who at the time was painfully wounded. This act endeared him to the citizens of Marianna, who cared for him tenderly.

After the church was burned, some of the confederates fell back to the Chipola River Bridge, where according to the Asboth report, the Confederates set up a barricade on the other side of the river. They burned the bridge and the Federals were stopped by the Confederates savage fighting, ending the battle. Colonel Montgomery was thrown from his horse while trying to escape and was captured.

There are official records of the Confederate and Union losses in the Battle of Marianna. General Asboth's official record list two officers killed and six wounded. He made no report of the killed and wounded among his troops. Asboth's report is called by one record a “Happy mixture of fact and fiction”, designed to substantiate his claim of a brilliant victory. In the same

report he mentioned a rebel cavalry in the front line and sharpshooters who ambushed his troops. All of this is entirely false since the home guard had no Cavalry or sharpshooters. He also said that he took 81 prisoners and 95 stands of arms, but the Confederates had no such amounts to be captured. He listed 60 killed and wounded.

According to local and more accurate records, the home guards had nine killed, 16 wounded and 54 taken prisoner. The Union losses were 15 killed, 40 wounded and six taken prisoner. Five of the defenders were killed in the Marianna church yard after they had surrendered. They were Woody Nickles 17, Littleton Myrick, the Rev. Frank Allen, John Carter and Dr. M.A. Butler. The youngest defender wounded was Frank Baltzell 14, the oldest John Davis 60.

Major W.H. Milton had telegraphed Tallahassee asking for reinforcements. The telegraph operator, Charlie Phillips, turned over to the enemy copies of all the telegrams. After finding out about the coming reinforcements and because of their losses, the Federals left later that night. The next day reinforcements arrived under the command of Colonel G.W. Scott taking possession of Marianna. Scott was unable to overtake the Federals.

The Battle of Marianna was ended, but the home guard had not been completely defeated. Two battle results were a moral, if not an actual victory for the home group. They had stopped the Federals from going on to Quincy to capture the railroad, and to St. Andrews to destroy the salt works and probably to Tallahassee to capture the Capital. Later a historian said, "The quite little town was undeserving of such a visitation", for it had been noted before secession as a center of unionist sentiment.... But Marianna had conducted itself in a manner of all southern towns, doing what it could in a cause in which many of its citizens believed. It was a typical example of the spirit which kept the South going as long as it did.