THE ALABAMA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

MARIE BANKHEAD OWEN, Editor
EMMETT KILPATRICK, Co-Editor

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EDITORIAL

This issue of the ALABAMA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY, Volume 14, Numbers 1 and 2, will be followed by Numbers 3 and 4, which will bring the magazine up to date. Previous issues carrying local history relating to towns and counties have proven of widespread interest and that policy will be resumed from time to time. The current issue is made up of a great variety of subjects which the Editors feel sure will prove equally interesting.

Editor

THE NAVAL BATTLE OF MOBILE BAY

by

Francis X. Walter

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of English 2A at Spring Hill College, Spring Hill, Alabama

April, 1951

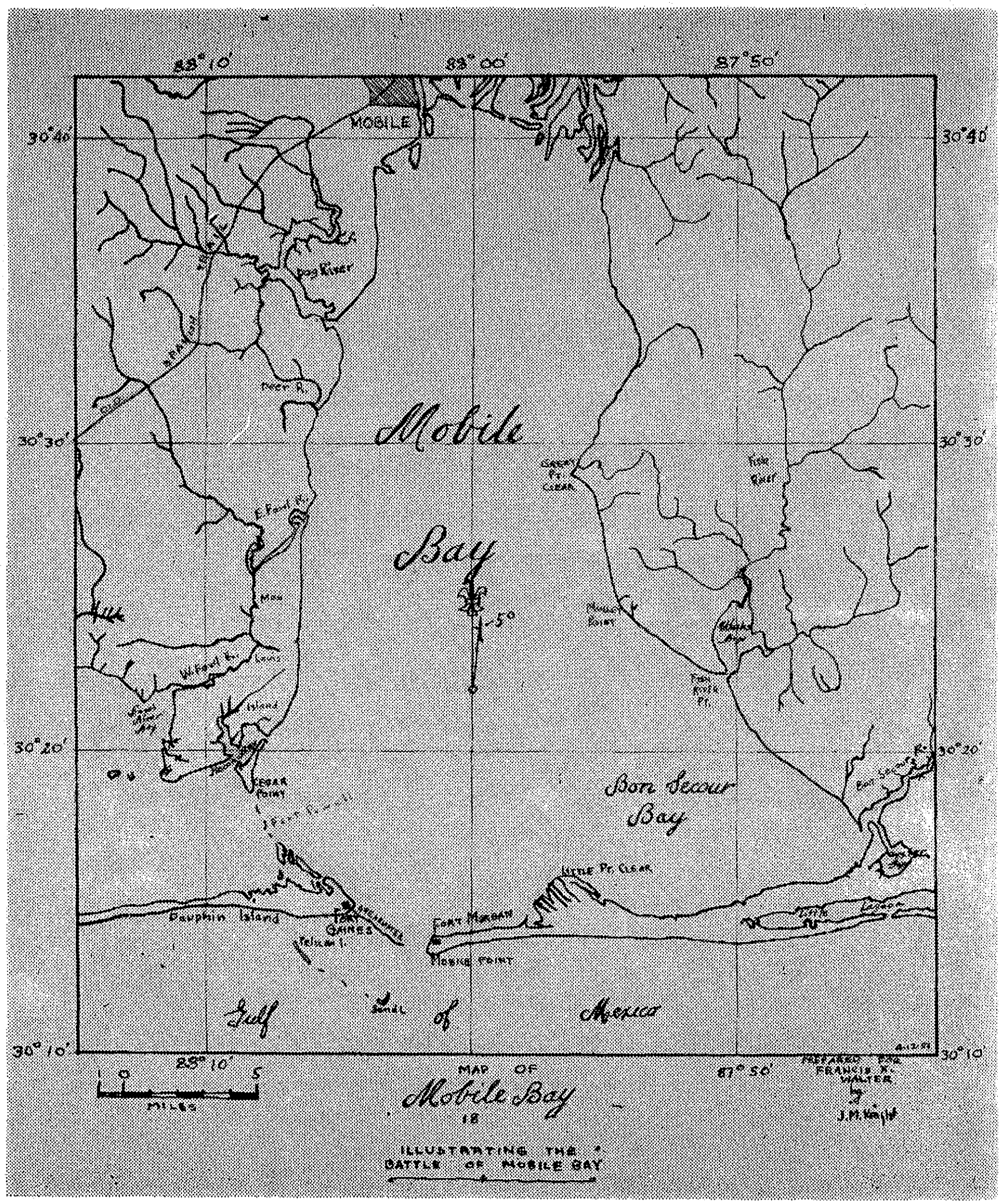
DEDICATED

to

HATCHETT CHANDLER

The Historian of Fort Morgan whose interest in history has prompted my own and caused me to write this paper.

SECTION I.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MOBILE
Mobile
Bay
Bon Secour
Bay
Dauphin Island
Fort Gaines
Fort Morgan
Little Pt. Clear
Gulf of Mexico
1 0 5
MILES
MAP OF
Mobile Bay
IN
ILLUSTRATING THE
BATTLE OF MOBILE BAY
PREPARED FOR
FRANCIS X.
WALTER
BY
J. M. Kaufman

The position of Mobile and her defences toward the close of the War between the States made her reduction very necessary to the North. Second to New Orleans, she was the largest and most prosperous city on the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans was captive. Mobile stood alone, the largest open seaport on the Gulf Coast.

It was true that she was tightly blockaded by the Federal fleet, but there were still blockade runners that would slip into the Bay much to the embarrassment of the large and powerful blockade fleet.

The runners were few and far between, however, and it was actually Northern public opinion and not the fact itself that hastened the battle. Mobile newspapers gave the United States Navy Department many a headache when they would jubilantly announce to all, the arrival of another blockade runner in the city. They patriotically neglected to mention the size of most of the ships (under 50 tons); and by the time the Northern newspapers hit upon the story, they would rise in righteous indignation severely censuring the Naval Department for its gross neglect and inefficiency.[1]

Another urgent reason for the battle (also aided by patriotic newspapermen) was the reputed iron-clad fleet building at Selma, a town above Mobile and connected by river to the Bay.[2]

The Yankees realized that Mobile was a potential iron-clad base, and the Southern Confederacy was also aware of this. However, due to its financial embarrassment and the lack of material, the few ships begun lay half-finished on the ways at Selma never to be completed.

The newspapers, though, did their best to cover up the deficiencies, and when the Confederacy did get one iron-clad built,

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[1]Richard S. West, *Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Navy Department*, p. 276.
[2]Ibid., p. 271.

the "Tennessee", to serve in Mobile Bay, it was, thanks to the press, the most feared engine of war afloat.[3]

It was said, up North, that if she ever got out of Mobile Bay every port in the North would be at her mercy. Armchair admirals entreated the Navy Department to send every possible iron-clad not absolutely needed elsewhere straight to Mobile Bay,

> .... and Secretary Welles of the Navy Department was scorched and slashed with criticism because of his seeming indifference to the portentous possibilities to the North threatened by this solitary Confederate ship.[4]

Thus it was that the destruction of the "solitary Confederate ship" was another big reason for the reduction of Mobile. There was another reason, also; this one perhaps less known to the Northern public but well understood by the leaders of that day and certainly well worried about.

They knew that if the "Tennessee" or any other force ever broke the Gulf blockade and opened a few cities to trade and commerce, England and France, who favored the South anyway, would enter the fight on the side of the South and destroy the whole blockade and the North, too, for the sake of commerce.[5] Fearing as they did the grossly exaggerated prowess of the "Ten-

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[3]"We are informed from pretty good authority that Admiral Buchanan, who has just returned from a trip of observation down the bay, determined upon an order which will materially add to the strength of the fleet which has been built and equipped to aid in the defence of Mobile. A crack raft, with a powerful battery and picked crew, ably and gallantly commanded in the *addendum*. This is the *avant courier of the* four other floating engines of war which will soon take their stations in the bay, and oppose their iron sides to the iron shot of the Federal Navy. The Federals will find out, after a while, 'that some things can be done as well as others', and that Southern men may develop a genius for naval construction and warfare, as they have a splendid aptitude for fighting on *terra-firma*. Whether we gain these additions to our navy through cracks in the enemy's blockade, or by oother means, we leave to him to find out or infer." – Mobile *Advertiser*, Dec. 27th, 1862.

[4]West, op. cit., p. 271.

[5]Scharf, op. cit., p. 557.

nessee", they thought it quite likely that she could do this thing. They were therefore very very anxious to defeat Mobile and especially the "Tennessee", the accomplishment of which would greatly boost the morale of the North and perhaps shock the tottering South into submission.

For the undertaking of this gigantic task, public opinion and Washington authorities selected Admiral David Glassgow Farragut. He had won the public eye at New Orleans and had been selected by the Northern authorities because of his genius in naval affairs. He was an able and capable leader for the job.[6]

[6]Scharf, op. cit., p. 557.

SECTION II.

Mobile Bay itself is a large, triangular body of water some thirty miles long, Mobile being situated at its head. The width of it varies from about six miles in the upper end to about fifteen miles at the mouth.

Entrance of an enemy fleet into the Bay was made difficult by Mobile Point, a long penisular on the eastern side which juts out into the Bay, and Dauphine Island, three miles distant from it, on the western side. There was, of course, room for an entrance on the western side between Dauphine Island and the mainland. This was, however, so shallow that only the lightest draft vessels could get through. Thus, the entrance to the spacious Bay was narrowed to a three mile strait and even less than that due to the shallowness of the water at most points. In the final analysis, then, the only entrance to the Bay for deep draft warships was the comparatively narrow Swash Channel closely skirting the end of Mobile Point. These natural defensive advantages had been greatly strengthened by forts, torpedoes, and wooden pilings.

On the tip of Mobile Point, stood Fort Morgan commanding the channel entrance which passed beneath the sweep of its guns. It was a large, star-shaped, brick fortress, strongly built, one of the famous type designed by Michelangelo in the 1500's.[7] Besides its intended fortications, it had been heavily reinforced with sandbags placed there by the Confederates. It carried a fairly large battery, though none of the complement were of heavy calibre. There were in the Fort:

7	10-inch smooth bore guns
3	8-inch smooth bore guns
22	32-pounder smooth bore guns
2	8-inch rifled cannon
2	6.5-inch rifled cannon
4	5.82-inch rifled cannon

Twenty-nine more guns were mounted on exterior batteries, the

[7]Hatchett Chandler, *Little Gems from Fort Morgan,* p. 4.

most formidable of which was the water battery mounting 4, 10-inch Columbiads; 1, 8-inch rifled gun; 2, rifled 32-pounders.[8] Fort Morgan was under the command of General Richard L. Page.

On the eastern point of Dauphine Island stood Fort Gaines, three miles from the tip of Mobile Point and Fort Morgan. It was of secondary importance as a defence of Mobile since its guns could never effectively reach the Swash Channel. It played no important part in the battle. Its defences consisted of some twenty-seven guns of which 3 were 10-inch Columbiads; 4 were rifled 32-pounders; the remainder being smooth-bore 32's, 24's, and 18's.

The Confederates had also begun construction of a small battery, Fort Powell, to keep light draft gunboats from slipping into the Bay through Grant's Pass, the shallow channel between Dauphine Island and the mainland. It was never completed but mounted at the time of the battle a ten-inch and an 8-inch Columbiad and four rifled guns.[9]

In addition to this, the Confederate Army supplied a protective system of pilings and that famous Confederate invention, the torpedo.[10] From Fort Gaines southeasterly toward Fort Morgan, there stretched a row of ugly pilings, set low in the water, visable only at low tide, like the jaws of some fish ready to gouge the bottom out of any boat attempting to pass them. Where a sand reef formed the western edge of the channel skirting Fort Morgan, the piling left off, being supplanted by a triple row of torpedoes[11] stretching across the channel to a red bouy just 800 feet from Fort Morgan. This left an open way of only 100 yards of safe water which was used by friendly blockade runners. All

[8]Scharf, op. cit., p. 552.

[9]Ibid., p. 553.

[10]C. L. Lewis, *Admiral Franklin Buchanan, Fearless Man of Action*, p. 221.

[11]Confederate torpedoes varied widely, but most of the ones in Mobile Bay were tarred beer kegs set off by fulminate caps, or glass vials of sulphuric acid which would break and fall on sugar causing a spark and subsequent explosion.

in all, 180 torpedoes were set out.[12] The majority of them, however, were made ineffective by the corrosive action of salt water on the priming caps.

For a naval defence, there was in the Bay a squadron of three gunboats and the iron-clad ram "Tennessee". Commanding the squadron was Admiral Buchanan, the fearless commander of the "Merrimac" in the battle of the "Monitor" and the "Merrimac". He was now stationed aboard his flagship, the "Tennessee", in Mobile Bay. The three gunboats (if they could be graced by that term) were the "Selma", the "Gaines", and the "Morgan". The "Gaines" and the "Morgan" were hastily built by the Confederacy to aid in the Mobile defenses. They were constructed of unseasoned wood, and their engines were entirely too small for them. The "Selma" was little better, being a converted open-deck river steamer fitted with guns.[13] They were completely unarmored except for a little sheet iron around the boiler and carried these guns:

"Morgan": 2 7-inch rifle; 4 32-pounders.
"Gaines": 1 8-inch rifle; 5 32-pounders.
"Selma": 3 8-inch old-fashion Paixhan shell gun;
1 ancient, smooth bore 33-pounder.

The iron-clad "Tennessee", though called by the Yankees a "monster" and "the most formidable vessel afloat", was, due to lack of finances and materials, not so terrible after all. She was built in the general Confederate class of iron-clads, somewhat like the "Merrimac", essentially a sunken hull with an iron casement or shield projecting from it, with a cannon battery placed inside. Confederates, knowing that an iron-clad was necessary for the defence of the Bay, had done everything in their power to expedite its completion.

> ... She was built at the naval station at Selma, in the winter of 1863-64, and so expeditiously was the work done upon her that when her keel was laid, some of the timbers to be used in her were still standing and much of what was to be her plating was ore in the mines.[14]

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[12]Scharf, op. cit., p. 556.
[13]Ibid., p. 556.
[14]Ibid., p. 555.

For a nation in the state the Confederacy found itself at the close of the war, the building of so complex a machine, even with its deficiencies, was remarkable. It is estimated she cost the South $883,880.00.[15] This is a small estimate, however, as much of her labor was never paid for. The patriotic men of Selma worked through the whole day, and at night fires and torches lit the labor of the crews working over the huge hulk.

The 'Tennessee' was 209 feet in length, with an extreme beam of 48 feet and carried her battery in a casemate or shield amidships 79 feet long and 29 feet wide, inside dimensions. Her frame was composed of yellow pine beams, 13 inches thick, set close together vertically and planked with 5½ inches of yellow pine in verticle courses. Within, the yellow pine frames were sheathed with 2½ inches of oak. The outer walls of the casemates were inclined at an angle of 45 degrees from the deck and on this 25 inches of wood backing was laid plate armor, which was 6 inches thick on the forward wall, and elsewhere 5 inches thick, and was fastened to the wood with bolts 1¼ inches in diameter that went entirely through the wall and were secured by nuts and washers on the inside. The outside deck was plated with 2 inches of iron. A curious arrangement of the casemate was that its sloping sides were carried down two feet below the waterline, and then reversed at the same angle so that they met the hull seven feet under water. This projection was carried out around the bow, where it was fashioned into a spur or ram. The pilot house stood on the forward edge of the casemate and was in fact made by building it up some three feet. There were ten ports, two on each side, three forward and three aft, so arranged that the pivot guns could be fought in broadside, sharpe on the bow and quarter and on a direct line with the keel, but the ship never had more than six guns. At each end she carried a Brooke 7⅛-inch rifled gun on pivots, capable of throwing a solid projectile of 110 pounds weight. There were also four Brooke 6-inch rifles in broadside, each firing a 95-pound solid shot. ... One avoidable defect was the manner of constructing the port shutters which revolved upon a pivot and were fatally apt to be jammed in an engagement. Another and greater blunder was that the rudder chains were exposed upon the after deck, where they were at any moment liable to be shot away. Of the defects that could not be avoided the worst was her lack of speed. Her engines were not built for the ship, but were taken from the high-pressure river steamboat 'Alonzo Child'; and though on her trial trip, in March, 1864, her

[15]Published under the direction of C. J. Bonaparte, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion,* Series I, Vol. 21, p. 567.

speed was set down at 8 nautical miles per hour she could not make more than six with her battery, ammunition and fuel on board.[16]

Such she was, in all a fighting machine of which the South could be justly proud. The Northern fleet, riding at anchor outside the Bay in the choppy Gulf was certainly a worthy adversary for the meager Confederate squadron. The Northern fleet was mainly wooden screw-steamers, but they had four monitor-class iron-clads, any of which was the better of the "Tennessee" in construction, engines, and equipment.

Many northern history books make as much over the "Tennessee" and her sister ships as the patriotic Southern newspapers of that day did. This confuses the issue for one cannot intelligently evaluate the battle unless he realizes the huge odds in ships and guns the Federal fleet held over the Confederate fleet.

... Commodore Foxhall A. Parker, of the U. S. navy states in his paper upon the battle of Mobile Bay, read before the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, December 10th, 1877, that their (the Federal fleet's) total weight of metal was 14,246 pounds, and that they threw at a broadside 9,288 pounds. The total weight of metal that could be thrown from all the "Tennessee's' guns at one discharge was but 600 pounds, while 900 pounds is a large allowance for a single round from the three other Confederate craft. Thus it will be seen that the difference between the concentrated fire of the Federal fleet, and that of Buchanan's squadron, was nearly ten pounds to one in favor of the former. Each of Farragut's ships had been built for the naval service, and they constituted the pick of the fighting force of the U. S. government. His Monitors were the most powerful iron-clads that had been built. The 'Tecumseh' and the 'Manhattan' were armored with ten inches of iron on their turrets, as against the six inches of the 'Tennessee's' casemate, and each carried in her turret two 15-inch guns, the heaviest that in those days had been put on shipboard.

The 'Chickasaw' and 'Winnebago' were double turret monitors, clad in eight and one-half inches of iron, and firing from each turret two 11-inch guns. The 'Hartford', 'Brooklyn', and 'Richmond' were second-class wooden screw-steamers carrying nine-inch Dahlgren guns, and 100-pounder Parrott rifles, and these very effective pieces of ordnance were common throughout the fleet even the smallest ships mounting at least one nine or eleven-inch gun in addition to the

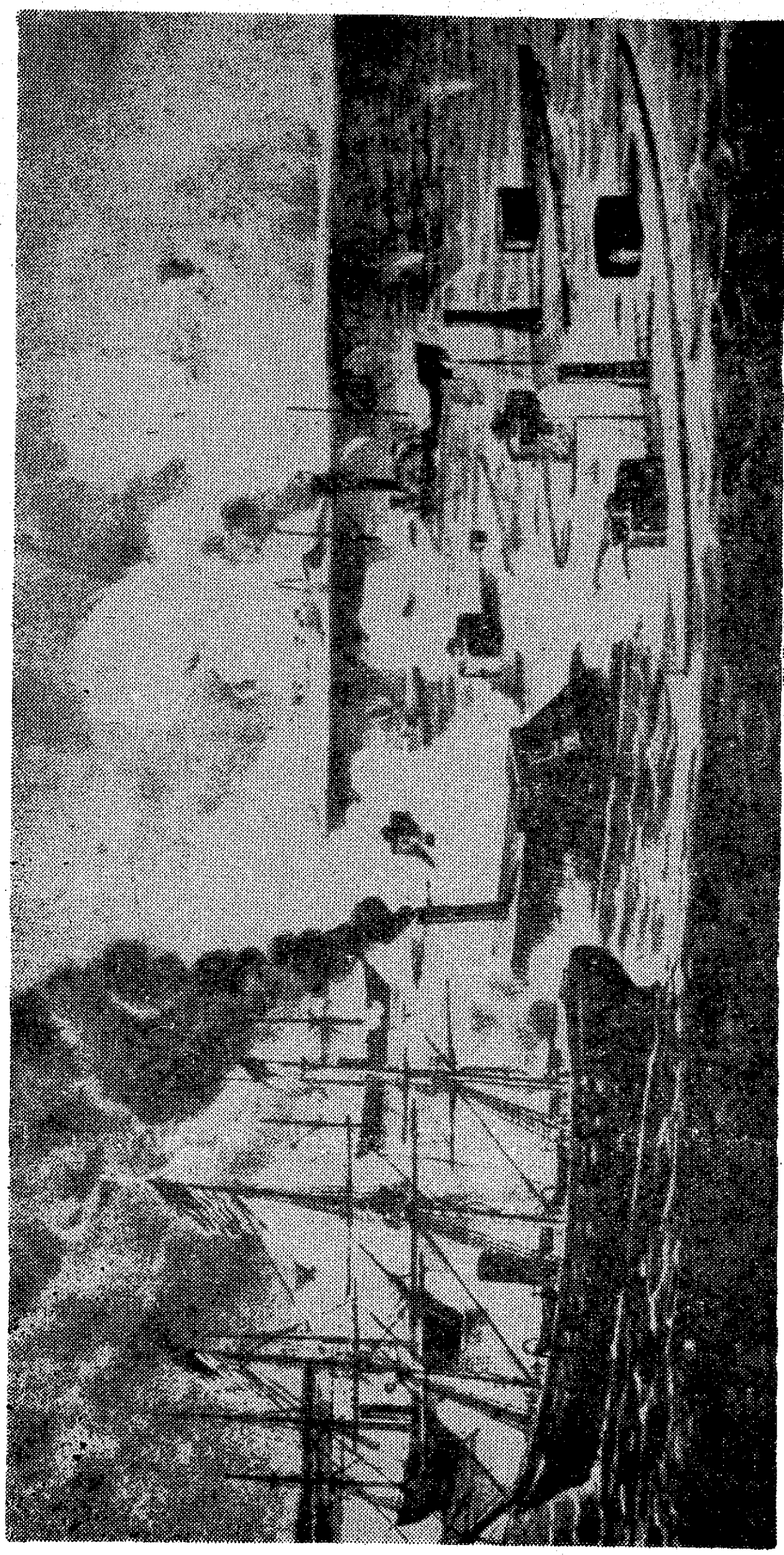
[16]Scharf, op. cid., pp. 553-554.

most approved form of rifled cannon and howitzers. There were few such obsolete guns on board of them as the thirty-two pounders of the 'Gaines', 'Morgan'. and 'Selma'. By far the most valuable guns in possession of the Confederates were the Brooke rifles, which were manufactured at Richmond, under the direction of their inventor, Commander John M. Brooke, of the C. S. Navy; but the largest of them were but little over eight inches calibre, his facilities being too restricted to allow him to turn out pieces like the eleven and fifteen-inch cannon that the Federals placed so great a reliance upon.[17]

It has been estimated that, in fact, Admiral Buchanan had only 14 heavy calibre guns with which to contend against 113 of the enemy.[18] Such were the odds for the coming battle.

The only advantages that the South had were the fort and the torpedoes. The North had an unlimited potential fleet, quantity and quality of arms, and the advantage of choosing the time of attack. The Confederates fully realized that they could never begin an offensive.

[17]Ibid., p. 559, (footnote).
[18]Lewis, op. cit., p. 225.



"THE TENNESSEE"

SECTION III.