

The turbubulent past of a tranquil island

Today, Spring Island is a tranquil place -- known for its high bluffs, stunning views, nurturing breezes, majestic oak forests teeming with wildlife, saltwater estuaries with an abundance of seafood, and fresh water from dozens of natural springs. Hence the island's name. But this tranquility has been shaken by many conflicts throught the ages -- some that we may never be aware of since it was first inhabited as early as 10,000 B.C. But we did discover the 1862 diary of a federal soldier, John Frederick Holahan in the Bluffton Historical Society Archive, which brings to life a small chapter of the conflicts that took place on the island -- and we will have more to come in future editions.

-- Randolph Stewart

From the diary of John Frederick Holahan, 1862

Tuesday 4th

A large foraging party under Capt. John I. and Austin Curtin went today to Spring Island, about 15 miles up Broad River and adjoining the main land. We were about 40 strong, and went well armed, as the rebels are often on the Island and might give us trouble. About 20 negroes went as guides and rowers making our party number 60 in all. We look like a small fleet and formed a merry party. Many a joke was cracked and song sung as we went gliding along the smooth surface of the water that presented scarcely a ripple on its glassy surface! Everyone who could sing sang, and the rest applauded. Finally we rounded the Devils Elbow entered Callawashee Sound, followed an armlet in by Buzzard Island and landed on Spring Island at the mansion of Dr. Edwards, who is away with his rebel brethren. Sending our boats around to Barnashore Landing we scouted across the Island on foot. The Island is about 3 miles long and at least one in width, rich and fertile. It is covered with unplucked corn and unpicked cotton. Herds of cattle, half wild, roam about at will and we had

much difficulty in hunting down one or tow for our use. It is almost as exciting as a buffalo chase, and fully as dangerous, as we came near shooting our companions half a mile off on the level plain she we made a miss shot.

Dwelling houses for overseers and larger buildings for the storage of cotton were at intervals along the shore where landings were made. Giant mules, larger than any horses I had even seen, went galloping about at safe distances, and the prairie scene was complete. The usual made roads were present, and if we tried to leave the we had to return to them to get across a causeway which last is a road across a swamp. Hogs ran in droves,

fattening on the corn, and were very fierce. We killed what we could carry, and drove others ahead of us to Barnashore where we succeeded in penning them.

We wanted chickens but the cunning darkies knew we were coming and hid all except one old setting hen and a blind rooster. A long row of beehives attracted our attention.,



and we quickly smashed them up and despite the angry bees, we got an abundance of their treasured sweets. Some of the boats finally arrived, but others could not reach us as they drew so much water that would have been compelled to approach too close to the mainland, and the rebels began firing on them. Killing cattle and hogs began in earnest and the boats were soon laden. Capt. Austin Curtin, being advised of certain treasures on Callawashee Island, took Sergeant VanVallin, Sergeant Muffley, myself and some others

afterward that he could not get up to us, but our private was, and still is that he purposely left us lest we might lay claim to some of the valuables in the boxes before he could bet an opportunity to dispose of them. We got nothing of value, but some silver plate suddenly appeared at his home up North).

As the tide went out, we began to feel the gnawings of hunger, and going to a negro hut, got an old woman to cook us some hominy. She gave us some butter to put on it, but although I managed to use some of it, Muffley thought there was too much dirt among it. About 2'



and started for them. Muffley and I found a small skiff, and thinking it might prove useful we got into it and paddled it along with some strips of board. We got behind, and did not get to the landing until dark. Curtin had left a man to tell us to wait for him and we could do no better. After waiting a long time, our party returned and brought a cart-load of boxes which they had dug up from concealment.

Loaded our plunder into the boats and set out for home. At Barnshore, Muffley and I got out and walked across the island, so that our laden boats could get over the bar without capture by the rebels. We were thoroughly exhausted by the time we reached Dr. Edward's landing, and we sat down and waited for Capt. Curtin and the boats, but waited in vain. (He told us

o'clock we lay down to sleep, with Josh's pants and Dinah's petticoat for a bed, and Sam's coat for a pillow. We slept some, knowing that our colored friends would keep faithful watch. Our slumbers were not peaceful, however, for an old rooster on the rafter above us kept crowing away a fearful rate, a we feared he might split his throat.

In the morning we crawled forth carefully, but seeing no enemy, we set about inspecting the Edward's mansion.

Wednesday 5th

The building was large, roomy and imposing externally, and had been furnished with elegance and taste by the opulent proprietor of the Island. But vandals had smashed the grand piano, cut and mutilated the costly paintings and furniture and carried off the best carpets



and other articles capable of removal. It made one sick to witness what utter want of decency and taste some of our bummers had displayed—I say bummers, for me no true soldier would so far forget himself as to thus destroy ruthlessly, what could not harm us. Magnificent avenues of live oaks led away in three directions at least for half a mile, and the immediate grounds were enclosed by a fence of osage, orange, trimmed as rectangular as a stone wall and ornamental shrubbery adorned the grounds.

Flowers grew everywhere in profusion and everything about us was calculated to delight the eye and overpower the senses with beauty and fragrance! Buried near a cotton warehouse we found a lot of articles useless to us, except for some old Georgia and Carolina bank bills and a few dollars in silver coin.



We confiscated the money and reburied the rest. Some of the bills were of the odd denomination of four and three dollars; new to us.

I forgot to say that I appropriated some books from the extensive library and a “love of a writing stand”. I knew they would only be destroyed if left behind.

About noon, the tide came in, and with two boats, one the “Silver Cup” our best sail-boat manned by some of our boys, the other containing a government agent who was over-seeing the picking of the cotton on the different islands. After loading what we wanted, we started out the armlet toward Callawashee Sound, but stood ready to repel and attack from some rebels that we saw land a half hour before on Buzzard Island. Fearing our number, they let us pass in safety without molestations.

Just in our wake followed a large flat loaded with negroes and all their household goods, who took the opportunity to flee to the protection of our flag. We noticed that the wind was blowing strong from the sea, but felt not danger until the last pull of the oars sent us out into the Sound and there—we four our boat tossing wildly about in the rolling billows and the “white-caps” dashing into our boat and threatening to swamp us! We shouted to the negroes in the flat to go back, and they just saved themselves, for their flat could not have lived a moment outside the creek.

We were waged past the mouth of the creek and all our effort to reenter were unavailing! Our four negro rowers would have dropped the oars and certain destruction have come upon us if I had not placed my rifle to their heads and bade them pull for their lives! Oh!

What slow progress we made! It kept 3 workers busy bailing out the water from our boat, and all my skill as pilot was needed to quarter the waves that seemed so greedy to devour us! The negroes nearly dead, begged for relief at the oars, but we could not stop pulling for a moment or we were lost! At last we got just past Devil’s Elbow, “where many poor men drown”, the negroes said, a few moments lull in the storm—up went our sail! We were safe! Along came the breeze on our quarter and away sped the gallant Silver Cup!

How she rushed along over the angry waters and seemed to laugh at their efforts to harm her! Every seam in the canvas was stretched, but nothing tore or broke, and in less time than I can write this, we dropped anchor at Seabrook, proud of the gallant boat that brought us so safely through our perils! She was more than a Golden Cup to us!