

Charles H. Rockwell, Admiral, U.S.N.

A book entitled Chatham's Admiral Charles H. Rockwell 1840 - 1908, was published in 2002. It is based on Admiral Rockwell's *The Autobiography Of a Seaman*, written after his retirement in 1902 to his home in Chatham, Massachusetts, on lower Cape Cod. Charles Rockwell was a descendant of the Colebrook Rockwells, being the son of Charles and grandson of Martin Rockwell, whose house "Rockwell Hall" stands across the road from the Colebrook Congregational Church. In reading this book, I was thunderstruck when I read chapter four, which covers his service in the Union Navy during the Civil War. Half way through the chapter is a sub-heading reading "At Twilight, the Final Battle", where the details of a little-known battle that took place one month before the end of the war are given. Neither the author nor Rockwell was aware of the fact that there was a Union officer from Colebrook who fought and died in the battle of Natural Bridge, Florida. Given the relatively few participants in this battle, Rockwell and Lt. Edward Carrington in all likelihood spent part of the time fighting shoulder to shoulder, but never realized their common bond.

In February 1865, Captain Rockwell had sent a landing party ashore on the Florida panhandle with the intent to destroy a salt works, but were met by southern cavalry and repulsed. However, this failed attempt had revealed that a more important effort could be made in the same general area, and he sent a recommendation to General John Newton supplying details on the condition of the countryside, its general resources and defenses, probable distribution of forces, and all the facts that he could gather.

That information, in addition to other bits of intelligence already known to Newton, led him to make plans to commit one thousand troops on an expedition twenty-five miles south of Tallahassee. He felt that if they moved with speed, they might be able to capture the Florida capital, the only one east of the Mississippi River to remain under Confederate control.

Because of Rockwell's contributions, Gen. Newton requested that he go along as naval aide on his staff and be in charge of transportation. Among Gen. Newton's soldiers were white Florida unionists, Confederate deserters, and elements of the 2nd and 99th Colored regiments. Led by white officers, these two units consisted of contraband slaves, freedmen, and former slaves from Louisiana. Captain Rockwell took with him six men, described by him in his autobiography as "devoted to me, who were worth their weight in gold in any emergency."

An advance party was to land at night on March 3 on Light House Island and take the bridge to the mainland. The main body of troops would go ashore to march north at daylight on March 4. Those men were to move on Newport, north of St. Marks, then take that community from the rear, destroying property as they went. Two small Federal commando groups were to demolish railroad and other bridges leading to Tallahassee, while the naval force had the objectives of joining in the capture of St. Marks and covering the land expedition. As it turned out, neither commando group succeeded in eliminating the railroad facilities, and as Captain Rockwell observed "The failure of these two parties had a serious bearing on the expedition later."

As the attackers deployed toward Newport, above St. Marks, the defense stiffened. The Union attack seemed to be going nowhere, so Capt. Rockwell broke into a sawmill and took a squad of men to the second floor, where they proceeded to break

holes in the siding, allowing them to shoot down into the rifle pits below. On Rockwell's signal, the Federals delivered a withering fire.

Meanwhile, enemy weapons had opened up from a small house. Again, the tall, muscular ship captain came up with an answer. "I took one of our howitzers to the place," he recalled, "and, cutting the fuse of a shell to burst in one second, fired point blank at the house." The round burst on impact, the enemy ran off, and the house was left in ruins.

Unable to get his units over the St. Marks River, Gen. Newton determined to cross a natural land bridge at a point where the river ran underground, eight miles north of Newport. Soon that bridge became the focal point of all the fighting. By then, consternation was sweeping through Tallahassee; the home guards came in from stores, farms and other places of employment and, hooking up with 25 cadets from West Florida Seminary, boarded a train and headed south.

At the natural bridge, Rockwell was in the thick of it. Artillery firing was at point blank range, and the fighting surged back and forth across the roadway. Late in the afternoon of the third day, exhaustion began to set in. With Southern reinforcements arriving on the scene, and the Confederates readying to attack once again, General Newton ordered a retreat south to Newport and back onto the ships.

The four-day Federal expedition and the Battle of Natural Bridge were over. Charles Rockwell recalled later that it had been "disastrous", but it could have been worse than it turned out to be; Union losses amounted to 21 killed, 89 wounded and 38 missing – a total of 148. As for the southerners, three of their men were killed and 23 suffered wounds. Because of their stand, Tallahassee ended the war as the only Southern capital east of the Mississippi to avoid capture.

In the days that followed the failed raid, Charles Rockwell worked to gain official commendations for his team of six blue jackets. They had been invaluable, he knew. Another officer told him "Captain, if I had a regiment of men like those sailors of yours, I could go anywhere in this country and lick anything they have got." Rockwell managed to secure the new Medal of Honor – it had just been established in 1861 – and \$100 for each man. Rockwell himself was promoted to the rank of acting volunteer lieutenant commander; he was one month shy of his 25th birthday.

Then word came of Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Courthouse. Under a flag of truce, Rockwell sailed into Tampa's harbor to seek out Confederate officers there. He found them "sore and surly, but after some talk they listened to reason and removed their troops from the town to the suburbs." Then the ship captain moved his vessel as close to dockside as he could and invited the few Tampa area Unionists aboard. Those who needed medical attention were cared for. "And those who were poor and destitute we fed, and in some cases clothed." Bitterness softened, trading began for some of Florida's natural goods, and genteel ladies stepped aboard and expressed delight at finding stationery, pens, needles, thread and many simple articles of which they had long been deprived. Seeing their reaction gave Charles Rockwell "genuine pleasure." More than that: "In restoring peace, I think we found more satisfaction than we had in the prosecution of war; I know I did."

And so ends the saga of two prominent Colebrook families whose paths had crossed like ships in the night, each unknown to the other.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg