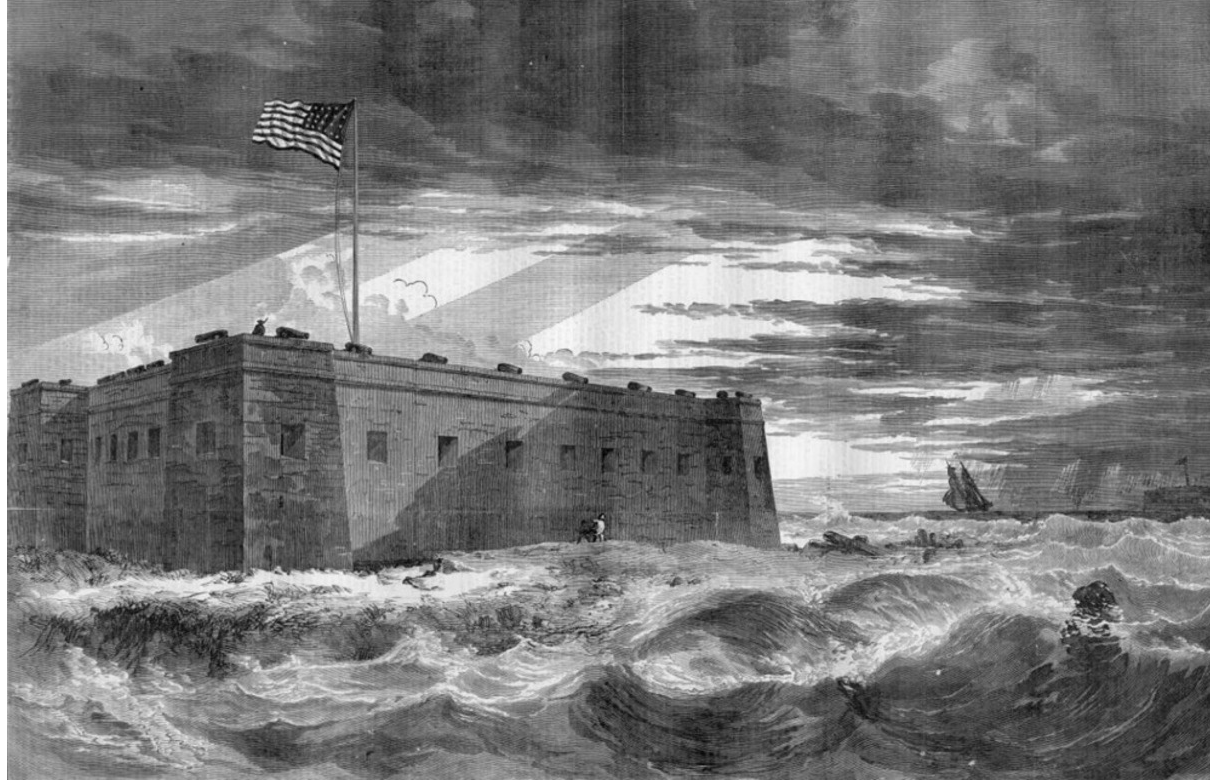




For a Want of a Virus: Pensacola in 1861

By Chris McIlwain, May 1, 2020

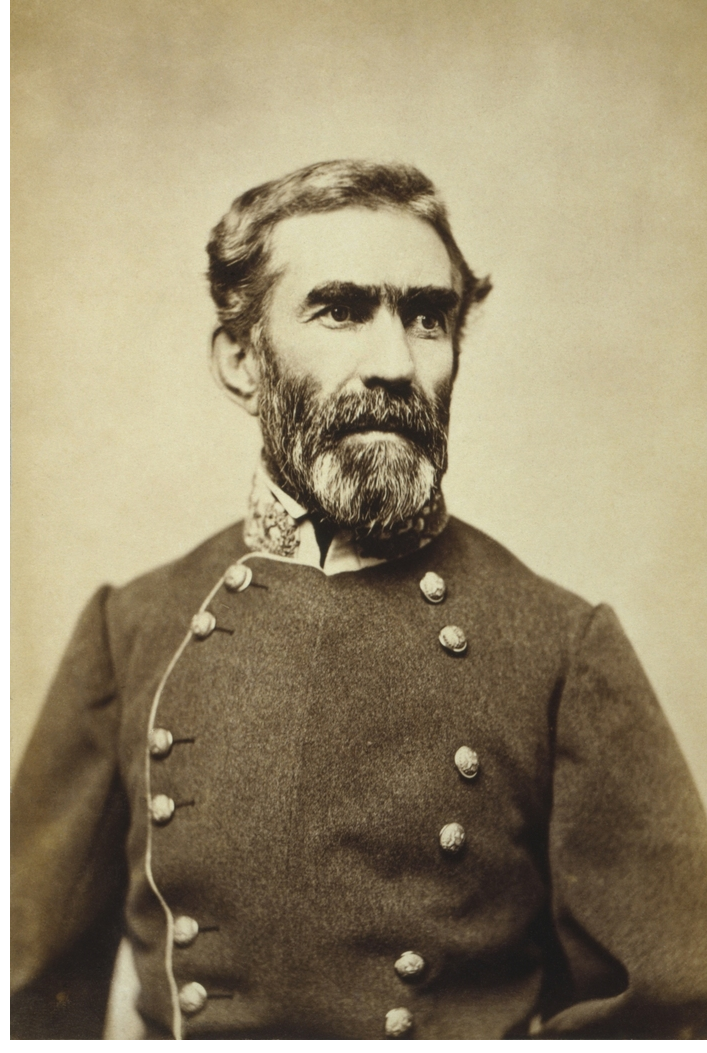
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Fort Pickens 1861 | Harper's Weekly

We all know that Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor was forced to surrender in April 1861 following a huge Confederate bombardment. Why not Pensacola Harbor, which remained in Union hands throughout the war and thereby denied the Confederates the use of one of the best harbors in the South? It wasn't for lack of trying.

Gen. Braxton Bragg, who was in command of the Confederate siege troops in the Pensacola area in 1861, was determined to take the Union-held Fort Pickens, but unlike the situation in Charleston, there were an insufficient number of siege guns available. So he planned a nighttime attack by a select number of men to row across the bay, climb the walls of the fort, and overwhelm the Union forces inside. This plan was to be executed on the night before the bombardment of Fort Sumter. As fate would have it, a reporter for the local Pensacola newspaper revealed the plot, and the Union forces inside the fort were augmented from nearby ships and the attack was called off. (Yes, Bragg had the reporter thrown into jail.)



Gen. Braxton Bragg | Library of Congress

To successfully take the fort would now require many more troops than Bragg had. But this was a period in which the Confederate high command was focused on defending Virginia as preparations were being made to move the capital to Richmond. Rather than gaining new troops, Bragg actually lost a portion of his own men when they were transferred to Virginia. Bragg complained to President Jefferson Davis but to no avail.

The President had a different idea. On May 23, 1861, he wrote to Bragg of his belief that the Union forces at Fort Pickens would surrender during the upcoming summer due to fears of a deadly virus for which there was no cure at that time: yellow fever. As Davis knew, the Gulf Coast was struck on an annual basis by this merciless killer. He had no doubt recalled the thousands of deaths that had occurred in 1853 during an epidemic known as the "Harvest of Death." In his letter to Bragg, Davis predicted that "panic may seize on the garrison" if yellow fever appeared. Bragg's response to this unorthodox strategy is unknown, but we do know it did not work.



Yellow fever mosquito | CDC

There was no significant yellow fever epidemic that summer, and Bragg eventually was transferred with a large portion of his men to Corinth, Mississippi, in preparation for the expected invasion of Union troops under Gen. U.S. Grant from Tennessee. Ultimately, the Confederates abandoned Pensacola in 1862, and it was eventually used as a major staging area by Union forces for the final invasion of Alabama in 1865.



Fort Pickens today | NPS



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