



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Confederate Attempts to Capture Fort Pickens, Pensacola, Florida in 1864

By the Rev. Dr. Robert G Carroon, Past Chaplain General, MOSB, July 17, 2020
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Fort Pickens by Currier & Ives | LOC

In the spring of 1864, two brothers developed a plan to attack and seize Fort Pickens, which guarded the harbor and navy yard at Pensacola. The two brothers, Lt. James M. Baker (age 27), was the executive officer of the CSS *Huntsville*, and Acting Master Page M. Baker (age 25) was also serving in the Confederate States Navy. They were natives of Pensacola and at the time of devising their plan were stationed at Mobile Bay, Alabama. It was the knowledge of their home town and the Union-held fort that led to their suggestion that it was possible for the Confederate Navy to seize this post.

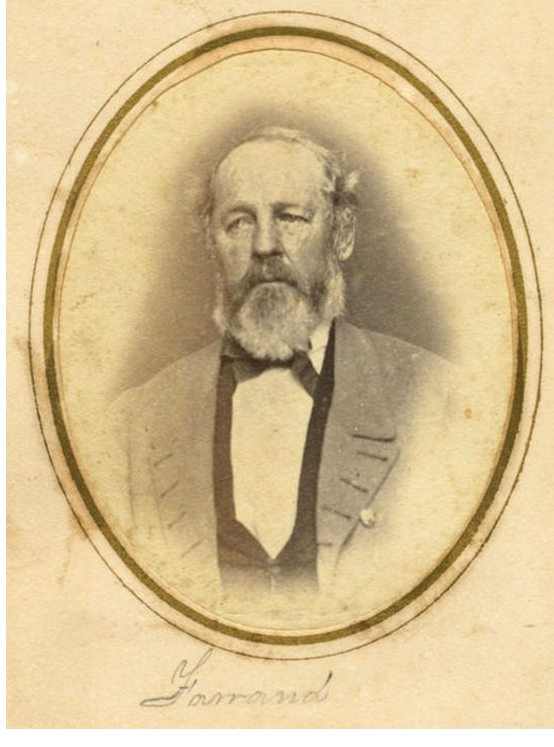
On August 4, 1864, Lieutenant Baker wrote to Gen. Edward Higgins, who commanded the Confederate military forces at Mobile proposing an immediate attack on Fort Pickens:

"Sir: In April last a proposition was submitted by Mr. P. M. Baker to General (Dabney) Maury for the capture of Fort Pickens. The general approved it and consulted with Admiral Buchanan, who concluded to send me in a small boat with a crew of eight men together with [my brother] P. M. Baker on a reconnaissance. . . (Following this expedition) It was proposed to send a force of 100 to 150 men in small boats, they to effect a landing near the fort and make an entrance through the sally ports or by scaling . . . There are in the fort for garrison duty three companies of the Seventh Vermont numbering in all 100 men . . . The enemy now having withdrawn all their large vessels for an attack on Mobile and their attention is wholly diverted from Pensacola . . . with the immense amount of ammunition, stores, etc. there and at the (Navy) yard, the force of the blow here would be broken, as the enemy (now at Mobile) obtain all their supplies from that point."



Gen. Edward Higgins

Perhaps, surprisingly, Lieutenant Baker had received all the permission required and was ready to begin. However, he had not counted on a bean-counting bureaucrat who commanded the naval forces at Mobile, Ebenzer Farrand. Lieutenant Baker's good friend and ally in the Naval Commandant's Office, Lt. William T. Key, warned him that any opposition from the Flag Officer could sink the expedition before it ever got underway. Key wrote: "Tis no further use, I am sorry to say, to push this matter with Commodore Farrand as he is now decided that we cannot go."



Commodore Ebenezer Farrand

Lieutenant Baker was determined that the expedition devised by himself and his brother would not fail, especially at the hands of some bureaucrat, and so he wrote Stephen Mallory, the Secretary of the Confederate Navy, on August 18, 1864:

"I am convinced that the capture of the fort can be readily accomplished . . . I enclose herewith a proposition which I submitted to Generals Maury and Higgins which they highly approved, proffering me all the men and arms necessary. Commodore Farrand also approved of the project and indeed ordered me to make the necessary preparations but afterwards concluded he could not well spare my services at this juncture. As a Floridian [This was a nice touch as Mallory himself was a native of Florida] I am particularly anxious to recapture Fort Pickens and believe the way is now open to us . . . In the event of our succeeding General Maury would send a cooperating force by land against the [Navy] yard, which being assailed in front and rear must surrender . . . Believing, sir, that the capture of this place would be of incalculable advantage to us at this time, giving us as it would an open port and distracting the attention of the enemy from more vital points."

Evidently subscribing to the theory that it is better to ask forgiveness after taking action rather than permission to take it, Lieutenant Baker wrote Commodore Farrand, two days after writing Secretary Mallory: "I would not again trouble you did I not feel assured that in my last interview you misunderstood the nature of the undertaking. If it is not asking too much, I would like to know where the plan considered in this light does not meet with your approval."

These communications met with dead silence. The Baker brothers and William Key might be forgiven if they felt that all had come to naught, when after over a month had passed Lieutenant Baker received a startling communication:

"Confidential: Confederate States of America, Navy Department, Richmond, September 26, 1864. Sir . . . your plan for capturing Fort Pickens has been precluded by its reference to the President and to General Bragg. Your plan is approved." S. R. Mallory, Secretary of the Navy

After 100 volunteers from the 15th Alabama Cavalry were ordered to assist, Lieutenant Baker reported to Commodore Farrand on October 24, 1864:

"Sir . . . I take pleasure in making the following report: With five launches and 100 men I propose to leave Blakely, Alabama, transporting boats and wagons to . . . the Perdido River. From this point I will pull under cover of night to Pensacola Bay and effect a landing near Ft Pickens. I will then endeavor to enter the fort . . . Once in possession, I will signal the land forces who are to cooperate with us."



Gen. Dabney Maury

Lieutenant Baker's plan, however, soon began to unravel. On November 1, he received an order commanding him to suspend the expedition, temporarily, by General Maury, who had heard of a heavy force of the enemy's was being landed at the navy yard. [Later this was found out not to be accurate.] Baker was compelled to acquiesce, and per Maury's directive, he advised the men to return to their respective companies, so as to give the impression of the move (to capture Fort Pickens) being abandoned. Perhaps this might allow for a resumption of operations if this perceived threat were to vanish.

On November 24, Lieutenant Baker received the following from Secretary Mallory:

"I regret that circumstances beyond the control of this Department or yourself should have thus terminated an enterprise which seemed to promise good results."

Thus ended the expedition to capture Fort Pickens and the enterprise conceived and led by the Baker brothers. Why did it not go forward? Timing, possibly, being one reason. Attention had been on Mobile in the summer of 1864 and success then might have been possible. By the fall, Pensacola had been included as part of a campaign to finally capture Mobile and troops and ships were more abundant in and around the town. Also, leadership, possibly, being another reason for its ultimate failure. The Bakers were junior grade officers. Did Richmond really have high confidence that these unknown brothers could coordinate and lead a combined Army-Navy offensive?

One final note: The Bakers moved to New Orleans after the war. James became captain of various ships owned by the Morgan Steam Ship Line and the Atlantic Line of the Pacific Company. Page became the publisher of the New Orleans *Times Democrat* newspaper. In 1914 the *Democrat* merged with the *Picayune* to become what we today know as the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*.



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