

CA2
Handout from
Mr. Sheeley

Bon Secour Salt Works
Destroyed by Union Forces

Salt. A most essential commodity which we hardly give a second thought today, because of its abundance. However, this was not always true. During the War Between The States salt was a very scarce and precious necessity of life. In addition to preserving meats and other foods, salt is as much needed by domestic animals as is food and water. Without it horses, mules, cows and other animals will weaken and possibly die. Salt was cheaply imported into the South prior to the war, but because of the naval blockade of the Confederacy, salt soon became a valuable prize.

To overcome this shortage, many areas of the Confederacy began extracting salt from seawater by boiling the water until only the salt remained. Because of the great need for large amounts of salt many large salt works were constructed. The process required the construction of a brick furnace. The furnace resembled a giant sized barbeque pit. Over the open fire were suspended large cast iron pans to hold the salty sea water. Groups of furnaces were placed in a close proximity to the salty water, and were called a salt works.

In Baldwin County, Alabama the mouth of the Bon Secour River is located on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. This is about 20 miles northeast of Fort Morgan, as the crow flies. The Confederates assembled a large salt work there to take advantage of the tides which provided brackish water every day. The works covered a rather large area, and is described in the Official U. S. Navy Records, as being "a square mile".

To describe how the salt water was obtained, a local historian, the late Bernice Miller wrote in 1931 that "round holes about 8 feet deep and 12 feet wide or wider were dug near the edge of the river. The sides of the wells were reinforced with logs. On the edges were built platforms or shelves for the workers to stand on. The water seeped through the ground from the bottom into the wells. Then the water was left standing for about a day and then bailed out by large dippers, placed into the pans and boiled until only the salt crystals remained. Sometimes, salt water was hauled overland directly from the Gulf."

As the water boiled out and evaporated, salt crystals were left in the bottom, and were scooped out. These large pans were made out of "boiler iron", probably at the Selma iron works. They were 2 inches thick and 3 feet in diameter.

U. S. Navy Admiral David Farragut ordered Acting Volunteer Lieutenant George Wiggins to destroy the "extensive salt works." On 8 September 1864, Wiggins left the Fort Morgan anchorage in company with the USS RODOLPH, the USS STOCKDALE and an army transport ship. According to the Wiggin report, in the Official U. S. Navy Records he states, "We found 55 furnaces, averaging 18 pans or pots each, making a total of near 1,000 and capable of making 2 bushels of salt to a pan per day." That is a capacity of 2,000 bushels per day.

The Yankees "commenced the destruction" of the pans and furnaces by breaking them up, "cutting the pumps, and tearing the brickwork." It took all day and they did not finish their destructive work until near 5 o'clock in the evening. At that time they set fire to all the sheds covering the works and the quarters, "some 200 buildings altogether". In his report Wiggin states "the destruction was complete".

Wiggin found "some of the works well built and very strong." He cites one known as the Memphis Works, reputed to have cost \$60,000, which had to be blown up "before we could get at the pans. Another work, which was very strong and well built, was said to have cost \$50,000. These works were the largest, having 28 pans each."

A raid of this type, with the destruction it wrought, is an example of Mr. Lincoln's policy of "total war" on the people of the South. These salt works were not a legitimate military target. They were not part of the Confederate war machine. It was not necessary to destroy these salt works, as they did not make any weapons, and salt was used by all local civilians in one way or another.