

SEA ISLAND AND WILMINGTON:
TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF CIVIL WAR CAMPAIGNS

COMMENTS

Stephen Davis, Blue and Gray Magazine

Through Dr. Iobst's and Professor Schwartz's papers we have seen two different kinds of Civil War campaigns. One (the capture of Wilmington) is the military kind, in which Northern soldiers conquer Confederate territory. The other is the civilian kind in which, after occupation, Northern humanitarians, physicians and educators came South to aid the newly-freed slave population. Both are significant aspects of the Federal government's conquest of the slave-holding South, and together they remind us of the complexity of the Civil War era in American history.

Chronologically, I don't think it matter that Dr. Hawks' post-occupation project on Sea Island antedated the fall of Wilmington by three years. Rather, I see our two presenters' papers as providing a nice time-line bracketing the War. Port Royal was, after all, one of the first major Confederate seaports to be captured by Union forces; Wilmington was the very last. In a larger sense, both events which we have touched on this morning led the way to Appomattox and beyond. The fall of Wilmington in early 1865 deprived Lee's army of foreign supplies and further weakened his already weak army. The famous Port Royal experiment, in which Dr. Hawks participated, set the mold for abolitionists' aspirations after Lee surrendered.

I am impressed with Professor Schwartz's modesty in not telling us about his recent book, A Woman Doctor's Civil War, published by the University of South Carolina Press. He might otherwise have shared with us how he came upon Dr. Esther Hawks' papers. Found in an attic in Amesbury, Massachusetts ten years ago, they were very nearly tossed into a garbage dump. Fortunately, a North Carolina family recognized their worth and placed them at Professor's Schwartz's disposal. A Woman Doctor's Civil War was the result.

In the book we see how Dr. Esther Hawks and her husband, also a physician, assisted the newly freed slaves of Sea Island. Had he more time with us today, I would have wished for him to tell us more about Milton and Esther, and what he has inferred about their private lives. In a review of the book, for instance, Professor Drew Faust has perceived their relationship as "troubled, yet largely mysterious." This tantalizes me.

Also welcome would have been an effort to place the Hawks' service at Sea Island in a fuller perspective of the "Port Royal experiment." Willie Lee Rose's noted Rehearsal for Reconstruction (1964) refers to Dr. Milton Hawks as "perhaps the most fanatical missionary at Port Royal." It would have been intriguing to hear about how this man's views conformed to the reality of freedmen's life in the occupied South.

Finally, I had hoped we would hear how Esther Hawks' diary fit into the context of women's literature of the Civil War. One point of comparison would have been The Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne (1912). Miss Towne was an ardent Philadelphia abolitionist who wrote of her experiences in the Sea Islands during 1862 and '64.

We regret that Professor Schwartz had to withhold some of this interesting material to save time for Dick Iobst's paper, but we are grateful also that he did. In this close and careful examination of the Union campaign to capture Wilmington, January-February 1865, Dr. Iobst has explained the reasons for the Federal's success not only in North Carolina, but also, by implication on other fronts in the closing months of the War.

First, there was the matter of morale. Confederates charged with defending Wilmington after the fall of Fort Fisher were aware that their own defeat was only a matter of time. Moreover, they must have known what we know today: that Confederate possession of Wilmington as a seaport was virtually useless so long as Federals held the huge fortification down the Cape Fear River.

Secondly, Union numbers helped decide the issue. Between them, Generals Terry and Schofield had 20,000 troops, compared to Hoke's 6,000 Confederates. This factor alone would have likely brought Northern success, but added to it was the Federals' apparent superiority in leadership. Major General Schofield, who arrived with his XXIII Corps to take charge of Federal forces in the area, was battle-tested and capable, a veteran of Sherman's victorious Atlanta campaign. Serving with him were two energetic subordinates. Dr. Iobst has characterized General Terry as a "hell-for-leather" sort, and his fellow officer Adelbert Ames as also "one of those young rash men." These aggressive commanders were sure to exploit the Rebels' weaknesses. Unfortunately for the South, the Confederate commander at Wilmington was Braxton Bragg, whose record as leader of the Army of Tennessee was marked by repeated failures. After the fall of Fort Fisher, General Whiting and other Confederates criticized Bragg for lethargy, even timidity. If the Southerners were to have had any chance at all against the superior enemy forces, they would have required a much more resourceful and vigorous leader than Bragg.

Richard Iobst began studying the Fort Fisher and Wilmington campaign almost twenty-five years ago. When he first began writing on the subject--which work forms the nucleus of this paper--he didn't have the advantage of several secondary works that are worth looking at today. An example of this recent scholarship is Rowena Reed's Combined Operations of the Civil War (1978). Dr. Reed's examination of how Union infantry and navy worked together to take Fort Fisher provides a stimulating analysis of the amphibious combined operation--a commonplace of modern military theory but, in the 1860's, a tactical concept still being developed. On the other hand, Reed, like most writers on the campaign against Wilmington, emphasizes the fall of Fort Fisher as tantamount to the loss of the city. Dr. Iobst is right in reminding us that the Union capture of the city itself constitutes a separate campaign, one that is "little known, even among historians." I'm glad to have gotten this reminder today.

And so we have it: two different kinds of Northern operations in the Carolinas. Thanks to Dr. Schwartz and to Dr. Iobst, we have learned more about the enormity of the Union effort to subjugate the South. So enormous was the effort, and still so fascinating, that I suspect the Civil War will yet provide more sessions for us to enjoy at future meetings of the GAH.