RAIDS ON SOUTHERN SALT WORKS HASTENED THE WAR'S END

By Steven Bernstein
Abandoning the Works

As troops from USS Kingfisher row toward the shore of St. Joseph's Bay, Fla., laborers flee with as much salt as they can carry. Kingfisher's crew leveled the works there on September 8, 1862.
he Union’s ability to deny basic necessities to the rebelling states played a big role in the Northern victory. One critical commodity was salt, which we take for granted today.

During the 1860s, city residents purchased much of their meat in dried, salted, smoked or pickled form from local grocers. But most Americans still lived on farms, where they relied on those same methods of preserving meat in home kitchens. Not only was salting likely the quickest and most popular method of food preservation, salted meat tended to last longer and taste better than dried meat. Salt was also used in fertilizer and to tan leather and dye clothing.

The United States used more salt than any other nation in the 19th century, and the South used more than any other region. The antebellum South used about 450 million pounds of salt annually, very little of which was actually produced in the Southern states. Most of it had been imported from England and Wales, arriving in the United States as ballast in ships that had carried cotton to England. The onset of the Civil War signaled a huge challenge for the fledgling Confederacy: how to supply its military and civilian population with enough foodstuffs as well as salt.

At the conflict’s beginning, only five Southern regions had sufficient deposits to produce enough salt to replace imports: the Great Kanawha River salt works, near Charleston, Va. (now West Virginia); along Goose Creek, near Manchester, Ky.; Clarke, Washington and Mobile counties in Alabama; the saline wells of New Iberia, La.; and those at Saltville, in southwestern Virginia’s remote highlands. The onset of the Union blockade, however, inspired Southerners to get creative. It soon became common to see the glow of fires beneath boiling kettles of brine around St. Andrews Bay, Fla., as well as near Tampa and Pensacola. A huge rock salt deposit was also discovered and developed during the war years at Avery Island in southern Louisiana, 140 miles west of New Orleans—home today to McIlhenny Co., makers of Tabasco Sauce.

After President Abraham Lincoln’s April 1861 declaration of a blockade, the Confederacy abandoned large areas of the Atlantic Coast to the Union. Between April 27, 1861, and February 8, 1862, Cape Hatteras, N.C., Port Royal, S.C., and Roanoke Island fell to the Federals. With the Roanoke Island victory, Yankees assumed control over North Carolina’s entire coast aside from Wilmington. By midsummer 1862, the North and South Atlantic blockading squadrons were raiding salt works on Florida’s Atlantic Coast. Union naval raids also intensified along Florida’s Gulf Coast that September.

Through a series of early defeats, the South lost control of western Virginia, and with it the salt works on the Kanawha River. But in September 1862, Rebels under Maj. Gen. William Loring chased the Federals out of the Kanawha Valley and briefly occupied Charleston. Loring’s troops controlled the valley for six weeks, confiscating salt stores and destroying area works. On October 21, 1862, Union Colonel Joseph A.J. Lightburn launched a counterattack, and by November 10 Loring’s troops had departed the valley with all the salt they could carry, leaving the works in ruins for the war’s remainder.

Also in October 1862, Union forces destroyed the Goose Creek works near Manchester, Ky. Avery Island’s works met a similar fate after the fall of Vicksburg in July 1863. Meanwhile, three salt-producing sites along the Tombigbee River in Clarke County, Ala.—82 miles north of Mobile—were inaccessible from January to March annually because of high water.
Appalachian Treasury
The works at Saltville, where two-thirds of the Confederacy's yearly requirement of sodium chloride originated, was situated in the remote highlands of Smyth County, Va.

No area along Florida's coastline had nearly as many salt works as St. Andrews Bay, on the Gulf of Mexico, and no other place in that region was raided as often. St. Andrews Bay has three arms: East Bay, West Bay and North Bay, each with inlets adjacent to swamps and bayous. Salt produced at St. Andrews Bay was especially popular during the war years because a three-year long drought had evaporated nearly all the freshwater in the area, leaving the seawater containing 75 percent salt. By 1862, hundreds of works had sprung up from one end of the bay to the other, with an estimated 2,500 workers employed in salt production.

The U.S. Navy raided the St. Andrews Bay works at least nine times, with the most destructive attack taking place between December 7 and 15, 1863. An additional 90 works were destroyed on December 18. Property damage totaled $3,787,698, with 380 salt works and 1,000 kettles destroyed—this despite the fact that Acting Master W.R. Browne, who commanded the Union gunboat USS Restless, estimated there were 689 gray-clad militiamen near St. Andrews, while his own force numbered just 92 sailors and Marines. Locals sometimes burned their own works after removing the salt, and Confederate militiamen guarding the facility occasionally surrendered and took the Federal oath of allegiance. At St. Andrews Bay three militiamen apparently surrendered to the Federals because they were tired of fighting. Those same men reported that their commander, Captain William Anderson, and several of his troops had already resigned and returned home.

But, like the fabled Phoenix, some of the destroyed salt manufacturers rose from the ashes. Works that had been destroyed in December 1863 at St. Andrews were operating again by February 1864. Knocking them out for good would require multiple raids.

The works at Saltville, Va., were considered the South's most productive. Those deposits run for 17 miles along a great fissure in the earth's crust, appropriately called the Saltville Fault. Ringed by hills and ridges near
the Holston River's north fork, in the remote Appalachian highlands of Smyth County, Saltville produced 4 million bushels of salt (200 million pounds) annually, two-thirds of the South's yearly wartime requirement.

The Campbell family began commercial salt production there in 1782, but by April 1861 the works were owned by Stuart, Buchanan & Co., which contracted with the Confederate government to supply 22,000 bushels of salt each month to the Army. The quality was excellent, and soon eight Confederate states, including Virginia, had arranged to purchase salt or were conducting their own operations at Saltville. Since the enormous daily output was too much for the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad to transport, wagons clogged the roads for miles around the works, bringing in firewood for the furnaces and making deliveries on return trips. Saltville's importance to the Confederacy increased after other works had been destroyed.

By 1863, Union commanders had Saltville in their sights. On July 17 a Federal raid led by Colonel John Toland was repulsed after the colonel was killed at nearby Wytheville. In May 1864 another raid, led by Brig. Gen. George Crook and Brig. Gen. William Averell, was repulsed near Wytheville by Rebel Brig. Gen. John Hunt Morgan's cavalry. The Confederates anticipated a major attack soon thereafter, particularly since the works were situated on the boundary between two military districts, which meant one officer was responsible for defending the works while another was responsible for defending the approach routes. In fact, no raids materialized until September 1864.

Early on September 20, a force of 5,200 Union cavalrymen led by Maj. Gen. Stephen G. Burbridge left Mount Sterling, Ky., for Saltville. Burbridge owned many slaves, and included in his raiding force were 600 men of the still-organizing 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry, and some from the 6th USCC, the 12th Ohio Cavalry, the 11th Michigan Cavalry and various Kentucky units. As Kentucky's military administrator, Burbridge had earned the enmity of state residents by forcing farmers to sell produce at below-market prices and also making them pay for depredations by local guerrillas and arresting anyone suspected of opposing Lincoln's reelection.

Anticipating a visit by Adj. Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, who organized black Union units in the Mississippi Valley, Burbridge believed capturing Saltville would redeem his tarnished reputation. Meanwhile Burbridge's superior, Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield, ordered Brig. Gen. Jacob Ammen to hold the southwestern ap-
proach to Saltville—Bull’s Gap, Tenn.—while another Federal force led by Brig. Gen. Alvan Gillem was to attack Jonesborough, Tenn. Both were then to advance on Saltville.

Opposing Burbridge were 400 troops under Colonel Henry L. Giltner, augmented by a few hundred men from the 13th Battalion, Virginia Reserves. Guerrillas attacked the rear of Burbridge’s column as it made its way toward Saltville, interfering with communications from Ammen and Gillem—and also causing Burbridge to miss Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s order to abandon the raid and head to Nashville to fight Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry.

Burbridge’s force spent a harrowing night crossing Laurel Mountain on September 29. As they followed a narrow, winding trail in a thunderstorm in the dark, the mounts of eight troopers plunged off the path, killing horses and riders. At that point 4,300-foot-high Clinch Mountain and Low Gap still lay before them. During that difficult march, Burbridge’s white troops mercilessly harassed the 5th USCC troops traveling with them, but the black soldiers did not respond in kind.

Early on October 1, Burbridge’s force met the main body of Giltner’s Brigade, forcing the Confederates to retreat. The Federals made their way through Low Gap, where towering cliffs dominated the road. At sunset, when they were fewer than five miles from Saltville, Burbridge opted to make camp. Had he advanced at that point, he might have easily captured the lightly defended salt works. But early the next morning, Confederate Brig. Gen. John S. Williams’ 1,700 cavalrymen, 400 local militia led by Lt. Col. Robert T. Preston, along with 300 raw recruits from Abingdon—joined the defenders. Among them was an unaffiliated partisan ranger company led by a notorious guerrilla, Captain Champ Ferguson.

Thus when morning came, Burbridge’s 5,200 troops on the Holston River’s north bank faced 2,800 Rebels on the south bank. Fierce fighting ensued for several hours, some hand-to-hand, and an artillery duel also took place between the Union batteries and guns on the Confederate left. Immediately after crossing the Holston, the Federals halted to re-form. Rebel pickets overheard a high-ranking Union officer tell members of the 5th USCC to “fight well, in this, your first battle,” adding that “the destruction of the salt works was worth more to them than the capture of Richmond.”

Burbridge sent Colonel Robert W. Ratliff’s 1,500-man 4th Brigade against the enemy right, in pursuit of Giltner’s pickets. Advancing in three lines and fighting their way up 2,170-foot-high Sanders Hill, the 4th consisted of the 12th Ohio, 11th Michigan and 5th USCC regiments. They encountered elements of the 8th and 11th Texas Cavalry, led by Brig. Gen. Felix Robertson, and Colonel George Dibrell’s Tennessee cavalry. After resisting for a time, the Confederates retreated up the hill and across Cedar Creek, a tributary of the Holston. With the 5th USCC in the lead, Ratliff’s men charged uphill toward the Rebel breastworks. A few of Dibrell’s troops, enraged at the sight of the black troops, paid with their lives as they leapt over the breast...
works, pistols in hand. Three hours of fierce fighting ensued, with the Confederates concentrating their fire on the 5th USCC. The black troops distinguished themselves in that fight, winning accolades from their officers.

Shortly thereafter, Robertson withdrew farther up the hill without telling Dibrell, creating a gap in the Rebel line. When the 12th Ohio, perhaps assisted by the 5th USCC, charged through the gap, Dibrell's Tennesseans, by that time low on ammunition, were forced back to the ridgetop. Ratliff's troops, who were cut off from supplies across the river, had also nearly run out of bullets. At 5 p.m. the Confederates retreated close to the perimeter of the salt works as Ratliff's troopers gained the ridgetop, with 38 killed and 213 wounded and missing. An earlier attack by Colonel E.H. Hobson's brigade on the Confederate center had been repulsed, and Hobson retreated across the Holston.

The works were now tantalizingly close, if only the Federals had brought more ammunition and rations. But in his hasty departure from Kentucky, Burbridge failed to secure enough of either. Soon the firing from both sides stopped. Despite having forced the Confederates back to Saltville's perimeter, Burbridge was beaten. Just before the fighting ended, he finally received Sherman's recall order.

Once again hurrying to leave—though late-arriving Rebel units were then threatening his forces—Burbridge headed for Nashville, leaving his wounded on the battlefield and Hobson facing a difficult retreat. By that time, however, Brig. Gen. John Echols, the Confederate department commander, and his replacement, Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge—who had served as U.S. vice president from 1857-61—were on their way to Saltville.

Early on the foggy morning of October 3, Private George D. Mosgrove heard gunfire. The Federals were long gone, but he recalled that the firing swelled "to the volume of that of a skirmish line." Mosgrove made his way to the front of Robertson's and Dibrell's brigades, where he witnessed the Tennesseans killing wounded black troops who had been abandoned by Burbridge. Few of those men escaped, and neither Robertson nor Dibrell tried to put an end to the executions. When Breckinridge arrived on the battlefield with Brig. Gen. Basil W. Duke, the former vice president was enraged to hear about the murdered enemy troops, ordering the killing to stop. But when Breckinridge rode away, in search of whoever was in command, the slaughter resumed.

Because of conflicting evidence, exactly how many troops were massacred will likely never be known. One account claimed, "it is reasonably safe to say that 100 or more were slaughtered." Another said that five, and probably seven more, were murdered, while a third report put the number killed at 46. On October 12 and October 30, 1864, the Richmond Daily Dispatch claimed that 150 black soldiers were buried on the battlefield the next day. But while the claim of five seems much too low, 150 is also likely an exaggeration.

Recently uncovered evidence supports the claim that 46 men were massacred. A research team led by David Brown, great-great-grandson of 5th USCC trooper Samuel Truehart, examined previously unknown records, including the report of 5th USCC surgeon William Egle, which records the names of 28 previously unknown troops listed as missing at war's end. Along with other documents, Egle's report supports the conclusion that there may have been "as many as 93 Saltville MIA," and that "at least 45 to 50" 5th USCC troops "were never accounted for after the battle and are presumed to have been murdered by Confederate renegades." Twenty white troops were unaccounted for after the battle as well. One white soldier from the 12th Ohio Cavalry, Private Crawford Hinshilwood, was reportedly killed by Champ Ferguson, and another man from the 11th Michigan Cavalry was also killed that morning. Other men from the 12th Ohio and 11th Michigan may have met that same fate.

Ferguson was the most conspicuous butcher at Saltville. After murdering a number of wounded African-American troops, he rode to the hospital at Emory and Henry College in nearby Abingdon, where he killed two more black soldiers. Ferguson also returned the next day (October 8) and killed a white officer, Lieutenant Elza C. Smith. Ferguson would eventually be arrested by Federal authorities and charged with murdering 14 black troops and Lieutenant Smith. He was convicted of Smith's murder and hanged in Nashville on October 20, 1865. But Breckinridge had determined that Brig. Gen. Robertson was also responsible for the murders and might have participated in the killing spree. The Confederate Senate refused to confirm Robertson's long-pending nomination to brigadier general, but he managed to evade justice during the Confederacy's chaotic last days.

Breckinridge's defeat at the First Battle of Saltville left the salt works safe until about mid-December. Despite having fewer than 2,000 troops to defend a 35,000 square-mile area, Breckinridge managed to consolidate his grip on southwestern Virginia. But the Federal occupation of Bull's Gap, Tenn., an approach to Saltville, led the Confederate general to launch an offensive on November 9. Breckinridge's daring maneuvers drove a superior Federal force under General Gillem entirely out of eastern Tennessee and nearly to Knoxville—a victory that convinced the Federals the Rebel general must have had between 3,000 and
8,000 men, though in fact he had fewer than 1,500.

In Knoxville Union officials planned a new offensive, this time led by Maj. Gen. George Stoneman. With more than 6,000 troops under him, Stoneman boasted, “I will have him [Breckinridge] out of Tennessee in less than a week.”

On December 12, when Breckinridge learned that Stoneman’s army was only 20 miles from Bristol, Va., he ordered the scattered Rebel units to concentrate, in order to mount a defense. But this time the Confederate forces suffered a reverse when Brig. Gen. John C. Vaughn’s regiments, attempting to reach Saltville, were driven back beyond Wytheville by Gillem. Breckinridge, cut off from communication with distant units, was reassured by salt works supervisor William A. Stuart that should he need to leave the facility, any damage done by the Federals could be quickly repaired.

Perhaps hoping to duplicate his earlier success against Gillem, Breckinridge planned to strike Stoneman from behind. Leaving 400 reserves at Saltville, the Rebel general headed south toward Marion. On December 17, his 1,000-man force collided with two Union brigades at a covered bridge on the Holston River. Though they were outnumbered nearly 4-to-1, the Confederates held Stoneman’s force at bay for the entire day. But with his men exhausted and nearly out of ammunition at day’s end, Breckinridge had to face an unpleasant choice. In danger of being surrounded and captured, he ordered a rapid retreat around Stoneman’s flank toward Wytheville, thus ending the Battle of Marion.

During that fighting, Stoneman sent the 13th Tennessee (Union) Cavalry to destroy the salt works. They arrived late on the evening of December 20 and scattered the gray-clad reserves, burned the town and started destroying the works. All through the next day and night, the Federals reportedly demolished “buildings, kettles, machinery, pumps, wells, stores...and a more desolate looking sight can hardly be conceived than was presented...on the morning of the 22nd of December, by the salt works in ruins.” Eight cannons, two locomotives and considerable munitions were captured, with 92,000 bushels of salt destroyed and 788 kettles broken. Breckinridge had clearly made a big mistake in leaving Saltville. In fact, General Stoneman admitted that had Breckinridge’s force remained in Saltville, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the Federals to take the works.

In the wake of this Second Battle of Saltville, however, 128 kettles remained intact, and within a few months the site was once again producing salt. But the South’s most productive works had received a devastating blow. For the remainder of the war, production remained below previous levels. Starved for salt, as well as manpower and other vital necessities, the Confederacy staggered toward final defeat four months later.

Supply and Demand

At the outset of the war, many Confederates didn’t appreciate the consequences of what they derided as “Lincoln’s humbug blockade.” They had no concept of the inflationary effects it would have on the availability and cost of food. By the end of 1861, apples from Massachusetts, butter and cheese from New England, vegetables from tropical latitudes and salt from Wales were scarce in the South, while luxury items such as coffee, tea, spices and wine had all but disappeared.

Scarcity resulted in drastic price increases. In prewar New Orleans, salt had sold for 50 cents a sack (commonly containing three 50-pound bushels), or one-third cent per pound. In August 1861, salt was selling for $1 a sack, and by the end of September it went for $6 a sack in Richmond and $8 a bushel in Raleigh, N.C. By January 1862, salt cost $25 a sack in Savannah. In November 1862, salt sold by the Richmond city council commanded 50 cents a pound, while private stores auctioned it for $1.30 a pound. By 1864, the price had increased to $10 a bushel in Georgia and to $35 per bushel in Mississippi. By September 1863, salt had become so scarce that La Salle Corbell, describing her wedding to Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett, wrote that “little bags of salt and sugar were sent as presents.”

Moreover, the sharply declining value of Confederate currency caused the advent of a barter economy, in which salt itself became currency. At various works around the South, supplies, equipment and labor were all paid for in salt. North Carolina residents offered five bushels of grain for a bushel of salt, and in Mississippi in October 1862 the rate of exchange was one sack of salt for 40 sides of bacon. -S.B.