

Battle of Port Royal



Cutting the Lifeline

At the outset of the Civil War, Federal strategists knew that a naval blockade of southern ports was crucial to stop the influx of supplies from abroad which the South depended upon to conduct a war. It would also slow the exportation of goods funding the South.

Situated between the seaports of Savannah and Charleston, Port Royal Sound was an excellent base from which to carry out a naval blockade.

Confederate planners knew the importance of Port Royal Sound. To defend it they constructed two large, earthen forts at its entrance; Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island and Fort Beauregard on Bay Point.



The Battle of Port Royal

On the morning of November 7, 1861, Du Pont's flagship, the *Wabash* led the fleet into action. As the Union vessels neared the sound, Confederate batteries at Forts Walker and Beauregard opened fire. Du Pont, having sent ships to test the enemy's capabilities the day before, concentrated most of his fire on the more heavily armed Fort Walker.

For several hours Union warships duelled with the Confederate forts. Shells ripped through Fort Walker, dismounting guns, and killing or wounding some of the garrison. Though valiantly served, the Confederate guns did little harm to the constantly moving ships.



Fort Beauregard Bay Point



Fort Walker Hilton Head Island

A Difficult Passage

On October 29, 1861 the largest fleet yet assembled by the United States, under the command of Flag Officer Samuel F. Du Pont, set sail from Hampton Roads, Virginia.



Samuel F. Du Pont

Nearly 13,000 soldiers and a battalion of Marines accompanied the 17 warships, 25 coaling schooners and 33 transports, but their destination had been kept secret.

Three days out to sea, a tremendous gale off Cape Hatteras scattered the fleet and four ships were lost. Opening sealed orders provided in the event the convoy was dispersed, each vessel plotted its own course to a rendezvous point off Port Royal Sound. By November 3, the majority of the squadron had arrived.



Commander Percival Drayton

Preparing the Attack

As the Union fleet assembled, it was first challenged by four Confederate vessels commanded by Josiah Tattnall. Vastly out-armed, the Southern gunboats continued to contest the advance Union warships for two days while Du Pont positioned the fleet against General Thomas Drayton's coastal fortifications.



General Thomas F. Drayton

Du Pont's innovative plan divided his warships into two parallel squadrons. The vessels would sail into Port Royal Sound between the two enemy forts. Once past the defenses, one column would guard against Confederate gunboats while the other circled back in an elliptical maneuver, bombarding the forts into submission.

Brother Against Brother

In a war of divided loyalties, sometimes brother did face brother in battle. Thomas Drayton's younger brother, Percival Drayton, commanded the *Pocahontas*, which fired more than 70 rounds in one hour at his brother's troops on shore.



Wabash Du Pont's Flagship



Susquehanna



Mohican



Pawnee



Unadilla



Bienville



Augusta



Pocahontas



Confederate Colonel John A. Wagener described the battle from his vantage point at Fort Walker:

The enemy had chosen a day which was entirely propitious to him. The water was as smooth as glass. The air was just sufficient to blow the smoke of his guns into our faces, where it would meet the column of our own smoke and prevent our sight excepting by glimpses... No sooner did we obtain his range when it would be changed, and time after time recharged, while the deep water permitted him to choose his own position and fire shot after shot and shell after shell with the precision of target practice.

Southern resistance continued until mid afternoon when their ammunition ran low, and little damage had been inflicted on the attacking fleet. With many of their guns dismounted, and in danger of being trapped, the decision was made to abandon Forts Walker and Beauregard and retreat inland. Port Royal Sound had been secured by the Union.

For the remainder of the war the area served as Union headquarters for the army's Department of the South and the navy's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, which patrolled the South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida coast.