

Union Occupation of Saluria, Texas

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Many of you know the name Indianola and at least a partial history of that once vibrant town just south of Port Lavaca. But there was another town even closer to the actual Texas Gulf that we need to remember. In March 1847 on the northeast end of Matagorda Island, 640 acres were sectioned off into 300 lots to form the town site of Saluria, Texas. Warehouses were built alongside wharfs and the renowned Morgan Ship line, among others, docked there. The ocean going ships would unload at Saluria; merchandise would be put onto smaller ships called lighters and taken up Matagorda Bay. The Saluria Post Office was opened in 1848.

By the time of the 1850 census there were 120 free people as well as 44 slaves living in the town. In 1854 a railroad from San Antonio was being built to carry goods inland that had been brought in by ships. The Texas Coast was regarded as a vacation and hunter's paradise -- just as it is today. The *Victoria Weekly Advocate* ran an advertisement on September 27, 1856, for the Sea Breeze Hotel which contained these attractions: "Saluria presents great inducements to invalids for sea bathing and to pleasure parties for hunting, fishing, etc." By the time of the next census, 1860, the free population had grown to 200 residents. Occupations ranged from sailors, carpenters, attorneys, merchants, and one physician. They came from the Carolinas, Kentucky, Virginia, Maine, and Tennessee as well as Ireland and England. People were drawn to Saluria.

You may never have heard of Saluria. I had not either until I learned that my great grandfather's second wife was born in the town. Her name was Pattie Dallam Taylor Biggs, and she was born January 27, 1857, in Saluria, according to the Taylor Family Bible. Her father was Thomas Charles Taylor, a merchant in the town who also served as Post Master in 1861.

Learning that my step-great-grandmother was born in a town I never heard of set me off to learn all I could about that seacoast town.

The *San Antonio Daily Ledger* ran an announcement in April of 1861 that the newest wharf was ready for business in Saluria. The shipping rates from New Orleans were 65 cents per barrel. All evidence pointed to Saluria becoming the most prominent seaport on the Texas Coast.

But then the sounds of war came. The young men of Texas went hurrying off to Virginia and other places to fight. And apprehension was growing among those left behind -- that Texas might be a target of the Union forces. From the Louisiana border to Brownsville, Texas, there were 600 miles of coastline and very little in the way of protection. Col. Earl Van Dorn was concerned and asked Texas Governor Edward Clark to station troops near Saluria and Indianola, but he received no response. Van Dorn went to Matagorda Bay in April and found a steamer from New York called *The Star of the West* loaded with 450 Union troops awaiting evacuation out of Texas. They had been here not to fight but to protect the western borders of the United States and a number of the men had their wives and children with them. They had gathered together at Indianola and Saluria waiting for transport back north. They did not want to be caught in Texas should fighting break out there. Van Dorn seized the ship, made an offer that any who wished to join the Confederacy could sign up (he did not get any takers) and then allowed them to return north to their homes. Van Dorn was then sent to Virginia where he led Texas troops on the battlefield.

Col. Henry E. McCulloch, headquartered in San Antonio, had concerns about the Saluria area and sent Lt. A.C. Buchel to inspect the town. Buchel found that Captain Shea had a battery of men camped near the Saluria lighthouse and had only four 24- pounders as defense. Shea had been ordered to not construct any earthworks but to wait for a qualified engineer. Shea kept a

close eye out for Union ships and in December of 1861 fired upon two that passed within range of Saluria.

Texas's new governor, Francis Lubbock, sent the requests from Van Dorn and Henry McCulloch to provide fortification against possible Union invasion of Matagorda Island. But the funding was not available. So the population in Saluria and all of Matagorda Island had little for protection.

In February of 1862, a Union ship came into Aransas Pass, and Captain Shea took troops from Saluria and engaged in fighting but the action ended in a stalemate. Soon after, Fort Esperanza was built. The name appears for the first time in the records in February of 1862 when Major Caleb Forshey supervised its construction. It was only an earthen fortification, not a fort with spiked poles forming the walls and cannons mounted ready for action.

On March 14 orders were received in Texas from Confederate Headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, to forward all available troops in the state to General Earl Van Dorn who was then at Little Rock, Arkansas. Fort Henry and Fort Donalson had fallen, and Nashville had been evacuated. Every man still in Texas was needed. In April, Hamilton Bee was placed in charge of Saluria from his headquarters in San Antonio.

July and August of 1862 brought the Union troops into Texas through Corpus Christi. Captain J. W. Kittredge came ashore at Corpus, causing panic to reign in the region. The residents of Saluria fled inland to towns like Lavaca, Texana, Victoria, Goliad, Cuero, and San Antonio. The Confederates at nearby Fort Esperanza dismantled the lighthouse and then burned the town of Saluria to prevent Union occupation. They drove all the cattle off the island, but they remained there at the fort. Major General John B. Magruder realized the importance of defending

the Texas coastline and sent a letter to the Adjutant General stating, “Saluria must be defended, otherwise Galveston will be turned.”

In 1862 Galveston fell to the Union, but General Magruder retook the city in January of 1863 for the Confederacy, but the Union had a water blockade on the city preventing Confederate ships from entering Galveston Bay.

On November 26, 1863, General Bee received information that the enemy was moving towards Saluria, and he was ordered to move all Confederate troops inland. The Achilles heel of Fort Esperanza and Saluria was the thirty miles of open land to its rear. The Union had moved into the inner passage and reportedly were planning on marching up Matagorda Island.

Confederate troops spiked the guns and blew up the magazines before evacuating Saluria. They retreated to Lavaca. Very little fighting took place between the Union and the Confederates at Saluria, but the loss of Saluria was significant for the Confederacy in holding the Texas Coast. One officer reported to President Lincoln that the Union taking control of Matagorda Bay placed the **entire state of** Texas under Federal control: quite an exaggeration! General Magruder believed that the Union was planning, “for a formidable invasion of the State from Matagorda Island.” He sent orders to destroy the railroad into Saluria. He believed that the Union was outfitting a fleet of ships to bring troops to Matagorda Bay from New Orleans and invade the state through Saluria.

The big invasion of Saluria and into the Texas interior never came, but the Union troops used Saluria as a base along the coastline until June of 1864 when they moved out. A small force of Confederates troops returned right away, and the citizens of the town also began returning and rebuilding their homes. The threat of war in Saluria was over.

By 1869 the town had once again grown and life went on for the people still holding on to the vision of becoming a great seaport, but in September 1875, a strong hurricane hit dead center on Matagorda Bay. The town of Saluria was hit the hardest, losing 90 percent of its population. A few hardy souls rebuilt, but 1886 brought another hurricane. This time the storm completely destroyed the town. By 1936 it was not even shown on the map. Today, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has charge of the area where Saluria once stood.

What was once a thriving town with the promise of being a leading seaport for Texas having the potential to be the gateway for the Union Army to take control of Texas, was wiped off of Matagorda Island.

- *Pat Parsons*