The “Louisiana” and the Fort Fisher Fiasco of 1864

By MICHAEL D. BONNER

This is the paper that Mr. Bonner presented for his Senior Seminar in Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, May 1971.

The port of Wilmington was the chief Confederate center of blockade-running in the American Civil War. Defended by powerful Fort Fisher at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, the commercial center was thought invulnerable to attack. Via the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, known as “the lifeline of the Confederacy,” Wilmington supplied General Robert Edward Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia until the closing days of the war. As early as the winter of 1862 the Union Navy Department became interested in “a joint attack upon the defenses of [the] Cape Fear river[sic]”; however, the War Department “decided that no troops could be spared for the operation” and no serious plans were made for the attack until early September, 1864.1

By the first of November, 1864, Admiral David Porter had taken command of the naval forces for the proposed expedition and General Ulysses Grant “had detailed General Weitzel as commander of the expedition” for the army. In the following days, a “powerful fleet was as-

(Continued on Page 2)
The Louisiana . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

ssembled—the most powerful ever known, at least upon the continent” and an army of “6,500 infantry, two batteries of artillery, and a few cavalry” were all assembled at Hampton Roads, Virginia. As commander of the Department of Virginia and North Carolina, the Massachusetts politician, General Benjamin Franklin Butler, was in a position to supervise the expedition. In early October Butler received a report “of the great destruction for many miles around made by an explosion of gunpowder at Erith, England.” His reputation as a military hero had been flagging and the general’s shrewd mind saw in the report an opportunity to recoup his losses. He believed that “by bringing within four or five hundred yards of Fort Fisher a large mass of explosives, and firing the whole in every part at the same moment” he could effectively paralyze the fort.3

On November 1, 1864, General Butler was ordered to Washington for a conference with President Lincoln. While there, he explained his idea of the powder boat experiment to the President and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Seemingly sound, the idea was readily embraced by the Secretary of the Navy and with more caution by the President. Two weeks later, when Butler was again in Washington, he “found that the idea had received so much favor . . . that it was determined it should be tried.”4

Shortly before the expedition started, General Grant was informed of the “gunpowder plot.” He referred the matter to his chief engineer, General Delafield. The engineer “thought it would have the same effect on the fort that firing feathers from muskets would have on the enemy.” The opinions of Grant’s staff not withstanding, Butler set out to procure a suitable craft. He had some difficulty in getting the right kind . . . one of light draught,” but he found “one in the sounds of North Carolina”—the gunboat Louisiana.5

The iron gunboat Louisiana was 150 feet long, twenty-two feet wide, had a capacity of 295 tons, and had a “8 to 8½ feet draught when loaded.” Previously used in the Southern cotton trade, the ship was removed from Beaufort, N. C., to Norfolk. There the navy removed the “masts and part of the deck-houses” and all other unnecessary weight. A canvas-covered house was built on deck in which powder was to be stored. With this added space, the Louisiana could carry far more bulk—but no more weight—of powder.6

Most of the powder placed aboard the Louisiana was naval cannon powder, each grain of which is nearly an inch cube; some was army powder—“part of this . . . was partially damaged”; and the remainder was blasting powder.7 While in Norfolk the navy placed most of this powder above the water-line “to produce the greatest possible effect in a lateral direction.” The berth-deck was filled with four thousand fifty pound bags (totaling one hundred tons). The coal bunker was filled “with two tiers of full barrels with their upper heads out, and the stowage completed with bags.” The remaining powder placed aboard at Norfolk “was stowed against the after bulkhead of the deck-house . . . over the boiler.” One hundred eighty-five tons of powder were placed on board at Norfolk8 and another thirty tons were loaded onto the ship after it reached Beaufort.9

Meeting

Time: September 23, 1971, 8:00 p.m.
Place: St. James Great Hall
Speaker: Mrs. James F. Dreher
Subject: Historic Columbia, S. C. Foundation

Mrs. Dreher (Jennie Taber Clarkson) grew up in an old house on the corner of Bull and Blanding streets in Columbia and says that “I guess I just grew up expecting old things to be important and that each generation should save a little more of them.” She was the first and is the current president of the Historic Columbia Foundation. She recently received an award from the Garden Club of America for outstanding civic achievement. Mrs. Dreher has been and is on numerous committees in her city, her state and presently is on the Board of Advisors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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Once the powder was placed on board the ship, a mode of exploding it had to be devised. Naval ordnance experts agreed "that, to produce the maximum effect, the fire should be communicated and the explosion take place in many points simultaneously." In order to accomplish this, several methods of igniting the powder were devised. Electricity appeared to be the quickest method so the navy obtained the services of George W. Beardslee who had invented an electro-magnetic machine to send a charge through a wire which would arc when the charge reached the naked end. The navy devised a secondary method of ignition since the electric one was "known to be very unreliable in action." An ordnance officer, Major T. J. Rodman developed a clock-work arrangement by which several "eight-inch grape-shot" could be fired inside the powder mass within two minutes of each other. In the event that both methods failed a system of six "slow matches" would set off the powder; however, if all of these "fuse methods" failed the ordnance officers—determined that such a cache of powder not fall into the hands of the Confederates—decided to set the ship afire when they abandoned ship.

Although Beardslee was ordered to follow the ship and install his electrical ignition system, apparently he never did. The clock mechanisms were installed; however, when Commander A. C. Rhind took command of the Louisiana on December 13, 1864, he "found the cargo stowed full up to the tops of the hatches," thereby, rendering it impossible to interlace the fuse through the powder properly. Moreover, "no part of the fuse was circulated through the parts of the vessel already stowed." Nevertheless, the ship was forced to sail with the fleet that same day.

Although General Grant "never dreamed of [Butler's] going until he passed by [Grant's] headquarters on his way," General Butler was commanding the department and followed his powder boat on the expedition. He "reached the blockading fleet off Fort Fisher . . . the evening of the fifteenth" of December and waited for Admiral Porter. The Admiral arrived from Beaufort two days later and surveyed the fort; however, by that time Butler's "supplies were getting rather short" and it became "evident that a northeasterly gale was coming on" and Butler returned to Beaufort for water, coal, and to sit out the bad weather.

On the twenty-third of December, while Butler and his army were still in Beaufort, "Admiral Porter gave orders that the powder vessel be sent in as near Fort Fisher as possible and exploded that night at one o'clock." The explosion of the Louisiana was expected to wreck the fort but Fort Fisher was an extremely large and sturdy structure. It was "an earthen fort, of an irregular, quadrilateral trace, with bastions at four angles." The exterior mounds of the fort averaged about 250 yards. The Louisiana was towed to within three hundred yards of the fort. There ignition mechanisms were set and the rear of the ship set ablaze. Apparently neither of the fused devices worked because not until "one hour and fifty-two minutes from the time of first setting the fire, and at about 2 o'clock on the morning of December 24," 1864, did the explosion take place. The concussion and thundering "noise of this explosion were apparent at points from 60 to 100 miles removed from it." Nevertheless, after a close examination of the fort later in the morning, the Federals could see "no perceptible effects . . . upon the work." Evidently the Confederates had no idea of what had transpired. On the day of the explosion, the Wilmington Daily Journal reported:

A heavy report resembling an earthquake was heard and felt in this town about half past one o'clock last night. We learn that the report was caused by one of the Yankee Steamers off Fort Fisher getting aground, and being unable to get off the enemy blew her up. Moreover, in their official reports of the battle which followed the explosion of the Louisiana—submitted to Assistant Adjutant General Archer Anderson—neither General William H. C. Whiting, commanding the Third Military District, Department of North Carolina, nor Colonel William Lamb, commanding Fort Fisher, mentioned the powder boat incident.

Obviously, the explosion had not done the extensive damage General Butler thought it would; however, when Admiral Porter saw that Butler's scheme had failed, he began such a heavy bombardment of the fort that his fire "resembled the roll of musketry rather than the distinct and separate reports of cannon." Butler and his army returned while the bombardment was in progress and he appointed General Weitzel to command the troops ashore. After Weitzel had reported back to him that "it would be murder to order an attack on that work with that force," Butler noticed "that a storm was coming on," the fort had received re-enforcements, and "the rebel skirmishers had begun to fire on his beach party. Known for his caution under fire, Butler "ordered that everything should be done to get the men off the shore." The commanders of the Union forces believed they faced an impregnable fort filled with excellent soldiers; however, one of their subordinate officers later reported "that a horse had been taken out of the fort, and that the flag had been taken off the parapet by one of his men; and that there were not more than twenty rebels inside of the work." Many more Confederates were inside bomb-proofs but they could have easily been overwhelmed by a massive rush of Union troops. The Federal retreat led the editor of the Daily Journal to comment: "Either there is something mysterious behind it, or Butler's part in the show has turned out to be the most ridiculous 'fiasco' of the war."

The Carolinian editor had correctly assessed the engagement. As on previous occasions where Butler was required to share command, the primadonna general was at odds with the commander of the other force in the action. In the conquest of New Orleans, in 1862, Butler had stolen the glory from Admiral Porter for an essentially naval action and had later insulted his family. At Fort Fisher, Porter was certain that this would not happen again. It is highly improbable that Porter accidently exploded the Louisiana while Butler was away. It appears far more likely that had the experiment worked, the navy would have taken credit; when it did not, the blame fell on the originator of the idea. Porter had collected a debt with dear interest—after New Orleans he was still an admiral but after Fort Fisher, the general was a civilian.

On January 8, 1865, Butler received a presidential order relieving him of his command. His removal brought about a great deal of comment from the public and on January 12, 1865, the "Committee on the Conduct of the War [was] directed to inquire into the causes of the failure of the late expedition against Wilmington, North Carolina, and to report the facts to the Senate." Butler testi-
fied before the committee on January 17, 1865, and the other principals in the expedition appeared throughout the winter and into the spring of 1865. The previous summer, General Grant had made a half-hearted effort to have Butler removed from his command of the Army of the James but when he testified before the committee Grant attacked Butler in earnest. In February, 1865, Grant testified that Butler disobeyed orders by not entrusting his forces on the beach, and charged him with perjury, and denying the right of habeas corpus. Admiral Porter testified in March, 1865, that Butler could have easily established his troops on the beach and supplied them—or taken the fort if he had had the nerve to do so. Although Grant had not originally protested the use of army stores to try the powder boat scheme and, as noted above, the Navy Department had liked the idea, Grant and Porter both inferred to the committee that Butler was responsible for the entire affair. Commander Rhind testified that if the fuse “had been circulated as it should have been through the cargo of the hold or berth-deck, the effect of the explosion would doubtless have been increased.” Ordnance officers William N. Jeffers and T. J. Rodman also indicated before the committee that “no results of value were to be expected” from unconfined powder ignited by a fire. Even General Weitzel testified in Butler’s behalf; nevertheless, Grant and Porter refused to relent their attack on Butler and his scheme. In a report to General Richard Delafield dated December 29, 1864, Major Thomas Lincoln Casey drew up a long list of precedential explosions dating from 1585 which supported Butler’s theory. The members of the committee understood fully the implications brought out in the testimony before it. Like Butler, they were politicians. They observed that “there was a want of cordiality and co-operation between the two arms of the service which . . . impaired the efficiency of their joint action.” They concluded “that the determination of General Butler not to assault the fort [had] been fully justified by all the facts and circumstances.”

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Governor Gabriel Johnston

By MORTIMER W. GLOVER

Address given by the Rev. Mortimer W. Glover at the dedication of the monument erected in memory of Governor Gabriel Johnston, in Innis Park, Wilmington, N. C.—April 15, 1971.

It is generally agreed that Gabriel Johnston, Royal Governor of North Carolina, 1734-1752, owed his appointment to the influence of Spencer Compton, Earl of Wilmington, a rather ineffectual political figure, who held many high posts in the British government but distinguished himself in none of them. His backing of Johnston proved a more constructive move than most of his political acts.

Gabriel Johnston was born in Annendale, Scotland, in 1699. He was a man of scholarly attainments, having been educated in medicine and the classics, and held the post of Professor of Oriental languages in St. Andrew’s University. He was enterprising and forthright. His loyalty to the crown and its policies, even when his sympathies lay rather with the colonists, led him into many misunderstandings and caused many difficulties. His term as governor was not only the longest served by any man in colony or state, but was marked by great advances in industry, population and prosperity, which, if not wholly due to the governor, were heartily encouraged by him. In his prosperity the governor himself shared liberally. He was a Scot; and although he had to borrow the money for his passage and establishing a home, he soon amassed a fortune, including six large plantations in as many different counties; although at his death his salary was some thirteen years in arrears. He was bitterly criticized on occasions, but no charge was ever made against his personal honesty or official probity.

Some of the issues to which he addressed himself have a very contemporary sound: port development, tax reform, reapportionment of the legislature, revision of the legal code, court re-organization, education, tax concessions to attract new industry and workers, and conservation (although in this field his efforts were chiefly directed to protecting crops and live stock from marauding animals).

One of his first accomplishments was the settlement of the boundary between North and South Carolina. In pro-
print the laws, and in order to do this he was instrumental in having established in New Bern the first printing press in North Carolina, which in 1751 published "The Collection of Public Acts," which is considered the first book published in North Carolina.

In 1734 the colonial courts were in terrible disorder. Some had held no sessions for years, while members of the Superior Court had even been forced to leave the colony, and their places filled by successors whose titles to office were very dubious. The governor applied himself diligently to this question, and in a few years had the courts again properly constituted and operating as effectually as courts usually do.

Johnston's proposals to establish a public educational system and to secure more orderly administration of the Established Church were opposed. However, this was not the case with the matter of public education. Johnston proposed to establish a public educational system and to secure more orderly administration of the Established Church, which was approved by the legislature. However, it is noted that the proposal was opposed by some members of the assembly, who saw it as a threat to their authority.

Certainly there can be no question about the efficacy of the movement during this administration to attract immigration to the colony and develop its commerce, agriculture and industry. Settlers were induced to come in large numbers from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Germany and Switzerland, and Johnston was instrumental in introducing new crops and products that had not been tried before. In his governorship the population increased from 30,000 to over 90,000, and the foundation was laid for the later progress and prosperity of North Carolina.

Not all our historians are enthusiastic in praise of Governor Johnston and his achievements. For instance, Col. Wm. L. Saunders (of the University of North Carolina), in his preface to Volume IV of the Colonial Records, points out that he did not succeed in many of his attempted programs, he used irregular and questionable methods to achieve his ends, and he spent much time in pursuit of his private affairs that might have been given to public service.

But political results are often very long in coming, and surely credit is due him who initiates useful programs as well as those who at last bring them to fruition. Most people will probably be inclined to agree with the judgment of Dr. Kemp P. Battle who said: "While he was not always wise, I think he was on the whole a good Governor according to the political ideas of that day and under the difficulties of being compelled to act in accordance with the views of distant directors, not one of whom had ever visited the Province. He came to the government under the most adverse circumstances . . . Everything was in dis-order and confusion . . . The Governor should certainly have credit for evolving order out of this chaos . . . he certainly was in favor of education and the advancement of religion, and was of a humane disposition. There must have been confidence in his character and purity of intention. It is fitting that his name should be honorably perpetuated by one of our central counties."

And certainly it is right and proper that the name of Gabriel Johnston should be permanently recorded on the monument erected to his memory in this port city that he first developed, to which he gave its name, and where prosperity and enterprise he did so much to initiate and foster.

FOOTNOTES


2Report of the Conduct of the War, pp. ii, 120.


4Butler, Butler's Book, p. 775.


6Ibid., p. 244.

7Butler, Butler's Book, p. 776.

8Report on the Conduct of the War, pp. 244, 249.

9Butler, Butler's Book, p. 787.

10Report of the Conduct of the War, pp. 249, 250, 256.

11Ibid., pp. 250, 252, 256.

12Report on the Conduct of the War, pp. 17, 18, 19, 52.

13Ibid., p. ii.


18Report on the Conduct of the War, pp. iii, iv, 24, 25, 71-73.


20Butler, Butler's Book, pp. 370, 484.

21Report on the Conduct of the War, pp. i, 1, 33.


23Report on the Conduct of the War, pp. i, 1, 33, 73, 94, 250, 251.


†Gov. Morehead (1841-45) "It's a damn long time between drinks."— Editor.