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Museum of Southern History

Freshman

“12 lb Shell with Fuse, ca. 1861”

1013 Words

A Lonely Cannonball and the Battle of Galveston

A Lonely Cannonball and the Battle of Galveston

As most people know, Texas (and Houston) did not see much action on the homefront of the American Civil War. John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade¹ was (in)famous and fought in several major battles, as well as the home grown Terry's Texas Rangers². But Houston itself did not see too many of these large-scale battles. However, Houston was one of the most important ports to the Confederacy,³ especially after the Union took control of the Mississippi. The artifact I chose was a twelve pound cast iron cannon shell that was recovered from a sunken ship in Buffalo Bayou, Houston, and after doing some research on my own I concluded that the cannon shell must have originated from the Battle of Galveston. The cannonball is almost certainly of Confederate origin, due to the design of its fuse. The cannon shell immediately stood out to me as a Houston resident and someone who has lived all his life here precisely because I had never heard of any Civil War battles occurring in Houston itself.

The cannon shell is made of cast iron, which is the cheapest and easiest to mold⁴, hence why both the Union and Confederacy used it to make as many cannon shells as possible. Its fuse was marked for up to five and half seconds, which did not give the gunner much time to aim. This shell was unfired, as the fuse would have exploded once the cannonball breached an enemy ship. One would load a large bag of gunpowder into the cannon, followed by a cannon shell much like this one on display, and then puncture and light the powder. The resulting explosion could send the shell up to a distance of a mile, and the gun itself would recoil eight feet⁵.

Newton's laws and whatnot. I believe this shell was one of many aboard the confederate ships

¹ Anonymous, "Hood's Texas Brigade," *Handbook of Texas Online*,

² Thomas W. Cutrer, "Eighth Texas Cavalry [Terry's Texas Rangers]," *Handbook of Texas Online*

³ Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/video/195082/types-artillery-American-Civil-War>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/video/195082/types-artillery-American-Civil-War>

docked in Houston, and it may likely have come from the *Neptune*, a confederate ship that was sunk in the Battle of Galveston⁶.

This particular twelve pound cannon shell, given that it was recovered from a sunken vessel in Galveston Bay and how it matches the confederate design of cannonball, seems to more than likely originate in the Battle of Galveston.

Galveston had been originally taken by the men and ships of Union Commander William B. Renshaw on October 4th, 1862, after a close range firefight and the subsequent Confederate retreat by Col. Joseph J. Cook.⁷ The Union held Galveston and the harbor by the strength of their six ships, and were reinforced by 264 men of the 42nd Massachusetts Infantry, who arrived on Christmas day to occupy Galveston.

But Texas had a new overall military leader, Maj. Gen. John B. Magruder, who planned to take back the city of Galveston⁸ with a couple thousand men, twenty cannons, and two ships.

In the early morning hours of January 1, 1863, with the new year having barely begun, Gen. Magruder led a New Year's invasion of Galveston, taking the Union garrison by surprise. But the Confederate forces were driven back from the wharf by Renshaw's naval guns despite outnumbering the Mass. Infantry. Then with all the attention on coastal invasion, the two Confederate "cottonclads"(a ship protected from cannonfire by bales of cotton pinned to the hull of the ship, and also a play on the "ironclad" warships used by both sides) the *Neptune* and the

⁶ Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

⁷ Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

⁸ https://www.tsl.texas.gov/exhibits/civilwar/1863_1.html

Bayou City attacked the Union ships from behind⁹. The *Neptune* ran aground, crippled by heavy cannonfire. The *Bayou City*'s cannon overheated and exploded, but her captain Henry Lubbock rammed his limping ship into the USS *Harriet Lane*, seizing the ship and killing most of the Union officers¹⁰. After the capture of the *Harriet Lane*, Lubbock demanded the surrender of the rest of the Union fleet. Union Commander Renshaw refused, and prepared to scuttle his flagship, the *Westfield*, which had run aground during the battle. Unfortunately for Renshaw, his explosives ignited prematurely, killing him and many others on board and leaving the ship a burning wreck in the harbor¹¹. After the death of their commander, the remaining Union ships sailed away, ignoring the demand of surrender and leaving the 264 Union men surrounded in Galveston.

Major General Magruder had won a great victory, capturing 260 odd Union troops and the *Harriet Lane*, killing 150 or so Union men aboard the ships and the destruction of the *Westfield*, while only losing 26 men and 117 wounded.¹² The port remained under Confederate control for the remainder of the war and Maj. Gen. Magruder was celebrated as a hero with parades and balls in Houston, and commendation by Governor Lubbock (the brother of Captain Henry Lubbock)¹³

While this twelve pound cannonball may not seem like much at first glance, it drew me in, and what I found was a great story and some history of my hometown that I had not known before our visit to the museum. And I think it goes to show that behind even the smallest, most

⁹ Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

¹⁰ https://www.tsl.texas.gov/exhibits/civilwar/1863_1.html

¹¹ Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

¹² Alwyn Barr, "Galveston, Battle Of," *Handbook of Texas Online*

¹³ https://www.tsl.texas.gov/exhibits/civilwar/1863_1.html

minute artifacts of history is a wealth of knowledge and discovery. I learned all of this from a single cannon shell, and I can not help but think of all the other stories out there, waiting to be discovered, sitting in a museum or a town hall or emblazoned on a statue. Keep an open mind, and you'll never know what you might find.

Works Cited:

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