

History of Fort Wimberly

A Civil War Battery

Lewis H. Strickland –
lewisstrickland@comcast.net

Revised 3-26-14, 7/14/21

August 1992, Dr. Lawrence E. Babits, then of Armstrong State College, prepared a report entitled "Battery Wimberly A Preliminary Topographic and Documentary Survey Wormsloe State Historical Site Savannah, Georgia". In his opening abstract he states the "site represents a number of different occupations which have remained relatively intact over the last 125 years The confederate earthworks are an excellent example of Civil War earthenwork construction consisting of parapets, traverses and terrepleins Since that time, the site has been abandoned. It represents, along with the nearby Rose Due earthworks, Fort Screven on Green Island and portions of the Fort Bartow works on Causton's Bluff, the finest extant remaining examples of Confederate earthen fortifications." Green Island's shoreline is rapidly eroding and the Fort Screven embankment is falling into the Vernon River. As one of the "finest extant remaining examples of Confederate earthen fortifications" serious Civil War historians are compelled to notice.

Introduction. Massive embankments have towered over the south end of Isle of Hope for generations. They cover an area larger than a football field. The ground adjacent is several feet lower than the natural ground. Mature trees cover the embankment and surrounding areas. Access is gained via a narrow woods road beginning at the Wormsloe Historic Site parking lot. These embankments are what remain of Fort Wimberly. But this obscure fortification is not really a fort. One body of water it faces has changed names; the other has been filled with dredged spoil. The fortification has been known by several names. Though built by the Confederates, more is known about the Union's occupation than that of the Confederates. A gunner never fired a shot from its protective earthen walls, nor was it ever fired upon. It was probably not manned by a permanent garrison, but maintained as a picket/signal station. Field pieces were likely its only armament. All of the other fortifications located on Isle of Hope overlooked deep water and were equipped with large bore guns. Deep draft vessels could access the Isle of Hope from the south but the path was hazardous. Seen as a prime entry point for Union forces to engage Savannah from the north and east, Isle of Hope was heavily fortified, so well so that it was considered impregnable.

Description. Today the battery is a series of imposing mounds of earth approximately 400 feet long, 100 feet wide and 15 feet high. It is located on lands owned by the State of Georgia. As part of the Wormsloe Historic Site, the site is administered by the Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites. It is a division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The Wormsloe Historic Site traces its rich history to Native American occupations and to early colonialization. Noble Jones, coming to

Savannah with James Oglethorpe in 1733, established the estate. One of the Sites' several trails lead to the fort. The trail begins at the Visitors Center thus controlling access to the site. This unimproved woods road that skirts the marsh in many areas provides several imposing vistas. Scenic fresh water ponds, views of the Intracoastal Waterway, destroyed whiskey stills and atypical coastal woodlands greet the hiker. Access is not presently open to the public but arrangements can be made for groups to visit the fort. Widening of Diamond Causeway (connecting Skidaway Island and the mainland) is a threat to the integrity of the fortification.

Name. Fort Wimberly is an intriguing anomaly. It isn't really a fort, but more appropriately fits the definition of a battery. A "Map of the environs of Savannah, Georgia, 186_", drawn by A. Lindenkoh identifies "Bat Wimberly." Two fortifications are located on the Wormsloe Plantation-Fort Wymberly and Fort Wimberly. General Sherman referred to it as: Wimberley. Wymberly, with the "y," was a fortified house built of tabby during the colonial period, to protect the Jones family from Indian attack. Wimberly, with the "i," was quite likely started in 1861, construction continuing in 1862 and perhaps added to in 1864. Though shown on most Union maps of the area published during the war as Fort Wimberly, time has allowed it to slip into obscurity. One of many handwritten annotations to a draft copy of Union Gen. Orlando Poe's Map of Savannah shows "Fort Jones". The words "Fort Wimberly" are also printed; it is therefore unclear if this is recognition of two names for the same fortification or for some other rationale. Confederate Colonel Charles C. Jones, CSA, in October 1864, referred to the fortification on the south end of Isle of Hope as: Jones Point, bearing South 7 degrees 15 minutes East at a distance of 14,666 yards from Oglethorpe Barracks. (Oglethorpe Barracks was located on Bull and Liberty Streets in downtown Savannah where the DeSoto now stands). A map "Plan of the southern part of the Isle of Hope known as the Wormsloe plantation also Long Island and the adjoining hammock owned by Mr. GWJ DeRenne and surveyed April 30, 1870 by John R. Tebeau" identifies the feature as "CONFEDERATE". The battery is located at Longitude: 81.0434 and Latitude: 31.99245.

Construction Plans. No known drawings of the fortification have survived, adding to the mystery of exactly how its builders originally configured the huge mounds of earth remaining today. The battery lies in partial disarray attesting to the thoroughness of the dismantling efforts of the 63rd Illinois. An additional cause of the disarray may have been construction was ongoing when the order to leave the Island was given. William C. Grimes in his article "Confederate Defenses of Savannah 1861~1864" tells us Col. Edward C. Anderson was highly critical of Capt. McCrady's engineering efforts. Engineering talent was scarce and largely inept. Therefore, it is possible engineering drawings were never prepared for the Wimberly fortification. Plantation records for the war years are also sparse. The New Georgia Encyclopedia: "Confederate authorities constructed massive earthworks at the southern tip of the Isle of Hope" leads to speculation that the Army may not have been responsible for construction. It is not known whether Wymberley Jones, owner of Wormsloe Plantation, used any of his considerable workforces to assist in the building of the battery. It is likely that Jones used his abundance of slave workers to assist in fort construction.

The likelihood of able-bodied soldiers being available to construct earthworks is remote. In the late winter of 1861-62, when construction likely began, soldiers had been sent north and west to fight.

Preparing for the War. Isle of Hope was an armed camp in late 1861 and early 1862. Confederate soldiers established batteries on Grimball's Creek and along the bluff overlooking the Skidaway and Isle of Hope Rivers. "Near Skidaway bridge was a tete du pont, prepared for the reception of siege pieces or light artillery." The bridge was located less than 1500 yards northeast of Fort Wimberly. Camp Claghorn (present day Wimberly subdivision) was bustling with troops making preparations for repelling the Union invasion. The sounds of battle emanating from Port Royal and Fort Pulaski could be heard in the distance. Scores of Union gunboats and steamers were in Ossabaw and Wassaw Sounds as well as the Savannah River. Wymberley Jones, owner of the Wormsloe Plantation, had more at stake than any other resident of the Island. He had the resources-money and manpower-to use to help protect his property. Jones supplied food for the Confederate Army and their animals. He planted and harvested 400 acres of crops in 1865. "Slaves worked his fields for sea island cotton as a money crop and harvested a large variety of edible crops as well, including seafood, poultry, fruits, nuts, and vegetables." Chronic nephritis kept Jones from service in the Confederate Army. As was the case with some of his counterparts, his dedication to the Confederate cause may have been based largely on economic exigency. Construction of a battery at the south end of his Wormsloe Plantation would not duplicate other defenses provided to guard against the enemy coming from the north. Though shallow water and limited navigating space were natural defenses, still there was a danger of Union forces attacking from Ossabaw Sound. Landing a force at Beaulieu on the Vernon River and proceeding north along Shell Road was a lesson the French had taught nearly a hundred years earlier.

O. E. Hunt, Captain United States Army, in his essay Entrenchments and Fortifications published in 1911 makes several observations directly applicable to Fort Wimberly. "At the beginning of the Civil War, the opinion in the North and South was adverse to the use of field-works, for the manual labor required to throw them up was thought to detract from the dignity of a soldier. The opinion prevailed in some quarters that masked batteries were not devices of civilized warfare, and the epithet of "dirt-diggers" was applied to the advocates of entrenchments." Captain Hunt goes on to say: ""Self-preservation" as a law of nature, and "necessity," as the mother of invention, soon impressed themselves, however, on the officers and men confronting one another in the field-the first maxim dictating that it was better to dig dirt than to stand up and be shot at, and the second quickly pointed the way to make dirt digging effective. "

In the absence of records to the contrary, it is easy to conclude that the Confederate soldiers assigned to Isle of Hope did not throw up the huge piles of dirt at Fort Wimberly. Early in the war it would "detract from their dignity" and late in the war the manpower was not available. Therefore, the only other source of manpower was the Wormsloe slave. Early in the war, three hundred slaves provided the manpower needed to erect Fort Screven on Green Island. Farther, if the fortification was not officially sanctioned and the engineering expertise at a premium, drawings were not used during construction.

No discussion of the construction of Fort Wimberly would be complete without speculating about the two parallel primary embankments extending nearly the length of the fort. This configuration was certainly unique, breaking with past traditional brick and mortar designs. Did the two parallel embankments result from a lack of design skill or no design at all? Long Island and Jones Narrows offered a bit more natural protection on the east than the Back River did from the west. Low embankment/skirmish lines are still visible on Long Island thus giving credence to an awareness of a potential threat from the east. The north ends of the two embankments are unconnected which probably result from Union dismantling efforts. Dismantling is particularly evident at each of the gun emplacements. The issue of a bombproof remains unanswered with the need for a bombproof being questionable. The two shallow wells within the confines of the structure may have been water sources for the soldiers or for the moonshiners who frequented the site some 80 years after the Confederates.

Shots Fired None of Isle of Hope's garrison engaged Union forces, though E. Merton Coulter in his *Wormsloe Two Centuries of a Georgia Family* gave Fort Wimberly credit that rightfully belong to the Green Island Battery. Mr. Coulter states "Federals feeling their way up the Jones's Narrows soon felt the fire from this battery (Fort Wimberly) and beat a quick retreat". First of all, Fort Wimberly is located at the south end of Jones Narrows and vessels could not have entered the narrows from the south. Secondly, even very small boats would rarely consider navigating the narrows. The event Mr. Coulter may allude to occurred on December 11, 1861, when a Union flotilla of four U.S. Navy vessels was on a reconnaissance mission in Ossabaw Sound near the mouth of the Vernon River. These vessels were more than 5000 yards south of Fort Wimberly. The Fort Screven battery, on Green Island, fired two shots at these Union gunboats (USS Ottawa, Seneca, Pembina and steamer Mary Andrew). The first shot landed 200 yards from the Seneca, the Seneca turned and the second shot missed by a larger margin. Upon realizing that the area was fortified, the Union vessels withdrew. The incident garnered national attention when a line engraving depicting the incident was published in the January 1862 *Harper's Review*. Mr. William Harris Bragg in his *Three Generations of a Georgia Family* apparently refers to the same incident when he states "Farther southward at Jones Point, massive earthworks were constructed to help guard the approach from the Vernon River, and their guns repulsed probing Federal gunboats on at least one occasion." No Official record can be found to substantiate a shot being fired from Fort Wimberly or that any Isle of Hope gun fired at Union forces.

Lawton E. Merton Coulter in his book *Wormsloe - Two Centuries of a Georgia Family* states: " In September Colonel A. R. Lawton had been ordered to organize forces to defend the coast and the next month the Department of Georgia had been erected with Lawton, now Brigadier General in command. The Federals, ignorant of the topography and with insufficient maps, were threading their way among the "rivers" of saltwater which made a latticework of the lands below Savannah. Worm sloe, on the Isle of Hope, in the of all this network, received the immediate attention of General Lawton, who posted nearby a battery of six pieces of field artillery, commanded by two officers and 50 men, first called Battery Lawton, but later called Fort Wimberly .. ". Early in the twentieth century, authors continued to refer to Fort Wimberly as Battery Lawton.

Battery Lawton with six guns assigned was located on the Savannah River, directly across the Savannah River from Fort Jackson. Early in the war, a Camp Lawton could be found on Skidaway Island. Captain Cornelius R. Hanleiter, CSA, a native Savannahian records in his War Diary: "Camp Lawton, Monday, Dec. 16th (1861) This is regarded one of the most exposed points on our Coast. It is in full view of the Ocean, over a wide marsh, and the River to this point is navigable by vessels of heavy draft. Fort Screven is about 10 miles West of us, across an arm of the sea, on Green Island. Our tents are pitched in an old field about 300 yards from the River." The next day: " ... "I bestrode my horse and reconnoitered that portion of the Island on which we are encamped, alonecrossing Delegal Creek, visited Fort Screven, on Green Island." The following day: "I paid a visit to the Pickets on Adams Creek." Captain Hanleiter precisely describes today's Seawatch, a residential street adjacent to Delegal Creek Marina in The Landings community on Skidaway Island. A straight line distance from this location to Fort Wimberly is 5 miles; by road significantly longer, and by water nine miles. Though weak, an argument could be made that the Confederate's abandonment of Skidaway Island in Mid-March of 1862, opened up the name "Camp Lawton" for use elsewhere. With the significant "Fort Lawton" already on the Savannah River, transferring the name to an emplacement only a short distance away is problematic.

Islands Abandoned. In March 1862, the Confederate troops were removed from the Skidaway Island batteries. The guiding principle for a new defense line was stated on February 19th 1862, by General Robert E. Lee in a letter to General Trapier: " ... The force that the enemy can bring against any position where he can concentrate his floating batteries renders it prudent and proper to withdraw from the island to the mainland and to prepare to contest his advance into the interior. Where an island offers the best point of defense, and is so connected with the main that its communication cannot be cut off, it may be retained. Otherwise it should be abandoned." The evacuation came virtually without a shot being fired. A significant amount of money and manpower had been allocated to fortifying the island, and the withdrawal had a demoralizing effect on the Confederate troops. Union forces never occupied Skidaway Island, adding credence to the decision to leave the island undefended. Without Skidaway acting as a buffer, Fort Wimberly became part of the inner line of defense against vessels approaching from Ossabaw Sound.

Isle of Hope Headquarters. Confederate General George A. Mercer was in command of troops on Skidaway Island and adjacent mainland areas. His Diary (1862-1863) contains an entry of interest dated April 23, 1862. "We moved over yesterday to this place - - Judge DeLyon's house on the main land. Genl. Mercer had been contemplating a change of Head Quarters for some time, as Troops were removed from the Isle of Hope, and the Island exposed to the enemy. We moved rather suddenly in consequence of a visit the Yankees paid night before last to Mr. Waite's place, on the Isle of Hope, only a short distance from Head Quarters. The Louisiana Battalion was removed from the Island several days before the occurrence. About 30 Yankees - - marines seemingly - - in a large eight-oared boat, with a howitzer in the bow, came to Mr. Waite's place at two o'clock in the morning, waked him up, and attempted to gain information about the locality, troops etc. They were only about a quarter of a mile from

Headquarters, and there were no troops between us and them. Under these circumstances the General deemed it proper to remove from so exposed a position, and we came over to Harrack. Our present position is still very exposed - - being only a quarter of a mile from Waits, and on the same creek that runs by his house - - and tomorrow we will probably move to a better and more central position, where all the Troops in the Brigade will be more accessible." Mr. Wait's memory lives on; today there is a Wait Rd. leading to the Herb River on the north end of Isle of Hope. The Herb River separates the Isle of Hope and Harrack Hall which is on the mainland. Herb River and Moon River (Back River) merge at the causeway bridge and were presumably one body of water before the causeway was built.

The Environs. River Protection Fort McAllister guarded the Great Ogeechee, Rosedew the Little Ogeechee, Beaulieu the Vernon and Wimberly guarded the Burnside and Back River approaches. In a letter to Colonel I. Gorgas, CSA, Chief of Ordnance, Richmond, Va., dated March 31, 1863, the following report is given:

"To prevent landings on the water-courses to the southward and eastward of the city batteries at Genesis Point, Fort McAllister, south side of Ogeechee River (seven guns and one mortar), Rosedew (Rosedhu) Battery (two guns), Beaulieu Battery (nine guns), line of Isle of Hope, siege train (seven guns), Thunderbolt Battery (fourteen guns), Greenwich Battery (three guns), Fort Bartow, at Carston's Bluff, within range of Fort Jackson (seven guns, two mortars, and a park of twelve field pieces) were established. In total, there were forty-nine guns, three 1 G-inch mortars, and twelve field guns-sixty-four pieces."

Narrows Fortifications far less prominent than Wimberly, on Isle of Hope, were assigned major armament. These fortifications offered protection from an assault by gun boats from Wassaw Sound and St. Augustine (Wilmington River). Deep water with adequate room to maneuver dictated that the defenses, north of the narrows, be equipped with large guns. Jones Narrows (separating Isle of Hope from Long Island) and Skidaway Narrows (separating Long Island from Skidaway Island) were only deep enough to allow passage of smaller boats (a draft less than 8 feet). When unable to run the Union blockade of Ossabaw Sound, it is recorded that a sailing sloop had sufficiently shallow draft to consider making the passage from Ossabaw to Warsaw Sounds. Today, Jones Narrows no longer exists, as the building of the Diamond Causeway blocks the entrance to it. Skidaway Narrows has been straightened, widened and deepened to become the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. The narrows is a naturally occurring phenomenon resulting from low water velocities. The narrows is the area in which the water north of the narrows flows to Wassaw Sound and the water to the south flows to Ossabaw Sound.

River East of the Fort. The fort is located on what was once known as the West Fork, later known as the Back River and now known as Moon River. The Mercer family owned property on the river. When Johnny Mercer's song Moon River became famous his memory was honored by renaming the river. The fort is approximately 1500 yards west of Bethesda Orphanage, directly across the river. Bethesda fronts on Shell Road, now known as Ferguson Avenue. Moon River is not a river in the conventional sense, but a dead end tidal estuary. The upper reaches of Moon River, though not navigable, separate Isle of Hope from the mainland.

Life of the Soldier. Foraging One of the first things Captain Hanleiter's Company (CSA) did upon arrival at the coast was to enjoy the plentiful supply of oysters. Fort Wimberly's south shore has ample evidence of the widespread usage of oysters as a food source. Shell middens remain from previous inhabitants, perhaps Native Americans, colonists or even the Confederates. Wimberly's shoreline was literally covered by oyster beds that could easily be harvested by simply walking out at low tide and picking them up. The oysters were opened and eaten raw or roasted over an open fire. Shrimp were caught with hand-woven cast nets and used as a food or as fish bait. Captain Hanleiter records the theft, by Confederate soldiers, of two cast nets belonging to a Negro man. As they are today, blue crabs were prized by the soldiers. Sometimes 10 to 12 dozen crabs would be caught on an outing. Diamond Back terrapin were highly prized in the preparation of turtle soup. Trout (spotted weakfish) were the catch of choice. During the war 30 pound bass (red fish) would warrant comment, today a fish 1/10th the size qualifies for mention. The battery garrisons would sometimes share their harvests with Headquarters Units located in Savannah as well as the community sharing their catches with the soldiers. Trout were filleted, salted and shipped by train to family members in Atlanta. Soldiers from the upcountry knew nothing of boats and coastal waters and were referred to as "crackers" by the local populace.

Discipline. Alcohol and prostitution took their toll on discipline. Rarely would a day pass without one or more soldiers being confined for drunkenness. A major road today, Whitebluff Road, was then known as "lovers' lane." Preventing the manufacture and sale of whiskey was an ongoing mission. Months stretched into years of merciless summer sun, the hordes of mosquitoes, sickness, fear, boredom, loneliness, the biting cold wind, the soaking rain, frustration with inept fellow soldiers, sand gnats that would make a grown man scream, endless drills and many missed meals drove some men to desert their units. These challenges strengthened others' resolve that Georgia and the rest of the Confederacy had the right to remove themselves from the Union. They were absolutely convinced their cause was just and were willing to give their lives in defense of this principle.

Illness. The massive Union forces threatening Savannah from the sea completely outgunned the Confederate defenses. Perhaps the silent threat of disease was even more ominous than the Union guns. Disease was responsible for far more deaths during the war than did enemy fire. With the dawn of each new day, illness confined the soldiers to their tent or they were taken to either the camp hospital or to the hospital in Savannah. The Harrison Regimental Hospital was located on the Isle of Hope, likely the Isle of Hope Methodist Church. The pews were thought to have been turned facing each other to form beds. Today the churchyard contains graves of many soldiers who died. The ladies of the community would visit the sick bringing food and encouragement. The community would take soldiers into their homes and care for them. Wives would come and care for the sick soldier and stay in the homes as well. Medical care was usually limited to keeping the soldier as comfortable as the conditions would permit. More often than not keeping the flies brushed away from his face or feeding him soup brought by the community was all that could be done. The staff seemingly consisted of untrained

stewards. Some soldiers were sent home, being too ill for further service. Some came home to Isle of Hope to be cared for by their families. Other soldiers' wives who came to care for their sick husbands often would stay in their tent with them. Some homes were opened to soldiers who were ill and sometimes the owner would receive compensation. This compensation was probably paid by the soldiers' family. Many men died and were shipped home or buried near their encampments. The variety of ailments was legion: yellow fever, measles, mumps, tuberculosis ("hemorrhage of the lungs"), typhus, jaundice, spotted fever, "catarrhal fever" and the list continues. "Malarial poisoning/southern fever/miasmas" was not to be associated with mosquitoes for another forty years. It was observed that soldiers on the islands were not as likely to contract malaria as those billeted further inland. The measures taken to combat the maladies were obviously totally ineffective in that medicine had not yet evolved to understand infectious disease. The Peruvian bark quinine was effective in reducing fever but other remedies were ineffective at best. An entire legion would be stricken with diarrhea and the diagnosis would be the soldiers had been drenched by the previous day's rainstorm and had become ill. Or, the yellow fever was the result of a "relapse from the measles". One glimmer of understanding may have been the regular Saturday cleaning of body, tents and campsite to combat sickness. Another glimmer of understanding came from a husband whose wife often visited the soldiers in the hospitals "stay clear of those sick soldiers, lest you be taken sick".

Salt Works. "Salt Works" was a term that described a facility at which river water was evaporated and the salt remaining in a specially built metal pan was harvested. Salt was an indispensable commodity before refrigeration was available. The importance of these Salt Works is evidenced by the "Map illustrating the defense of Savannah, Ga. . . ." published under the direction of Bvt. Brig. Genl. O.M. Poe identifies the location of each of Savannah's fortifications as well as the Salt Works. During the warm seasons, an army was forced to eat an entire animal to prevent the meat from going to waste, unless it could be salted and preserved. The Confederates established several salt works near Isle of Hope. In addition to providing salt for preservation of its food, they could barter it for other essentials. An equally important benefit to the army was that the processing added a diversion from the boredom of camp life.

Water Witch. Deeper draft gunboats such as the USS Water Witch could not navigate the "Narrows" passages. Late in the afternoon of May 31, 1864, the Confederate Steam Tender Firefly proceeded as far south as water depths would allow. She was towing seven boatloads of Confederate Naval personnel. At Isle of Hope, the Skidaway River split into several smaller streams. The small boats were cast loose.

They continued on their mission to find the Water Witch unassisted. That evening, the sailors rowed their craft through the Skidaway Narrows and camped at Fort Beaulieu. As the boats passed through the Skidaway Narrows, they were less than a 1000 yards east of Fort Wimberly. After searching in vain for two nights, the Confederate expedition located, boarded and captured the USS Water Witch. It was a major coup for a war weary Confederacy.

Durand. Having suffered a major embarrassment, the U. S. Navy was desperate to destroy the USS Water Witch. John Durand was a master seaman aboard the USS Paul Jones. He and a small force had been dispatched to burn the captured vessel. Their guide failed them and they became lost. At sunrise, on July 13, 1864, Durand climbed a tree on Pigeon Island (less than a 1000 yards south of Wimberly). He wrote, "We were close to a Rebel earthwork, which had no armament, but was occupied by a picket station". Durand was captured the next day by Confederate forces. Durand's words confirm Fort Wimberly was not fortified and was manned only by pickets in July of 1864. Five months after Durand's aborted mission, the crew of the Water Witch would set fire to her to prevent her falling into Federal hands. She came to rest a hundred yards downstream of the horseshoe bend in the headwaters of the Vernon River.

Gunboat attack. An attack from Union gunboats was unlikely. Shovels were cheap, farm labor was plentiful and the south end of Isle of Hope was unprotected. Since the Isle of Hope siege train was available to man the battery should the alarm be sounded, prudence would have demanded the preparation of some defenses. Further evaluation may identify a signal tower site. If a signal tower existed, it would be the logical link between the Isle of Hope Causeway tower and Fort Beaulieu. It is likely a permanent

Confederate garrison may not have manned the battery and that it functioned only as a picket station and signal post. Planned surveys may soon shed light on some of these vexing questions.

Commando Raid. The southwestern corner of Wormsloe, Isle of Hope, was less than nine miles from downtown Savannah. Steam powered vessels could have landed troops there, but considerable local knowledge would have been required to maneuver around the numerous sandbars in the Back (Moon) River. A mission, with more potential for success, would have been a "commando" force similar to the tactics used in the successful raid and capture of the Union gunboat USS Water Witch. Union personnel could have rowed, under cover of darkness, landing a force and established a beachhead. It is often asked why Wimberly was not equipped with heavy guns. Field pieces were the type of weapon needed for the repelling of small boats loaded with troops. Repulsing large vessels requires heavier weapons, and large vessels were not a realistic threat. Since the possible absence of a "bombproof" further leads to speculation, that the Confederates did not anticipate Wimberly being attacked by gunboats. Wimberly's armament was likely limited to field pieces, probably three.

War's Impact. The government started seizing horses for the Artillery in Savannah on Saturday, October 17, 1863. The people were furious. Many of the animals were the only source of transportation. Even before the Impressment Act of the Confederate Congress, March 26, 1863 a policy of impressment was followed. By the act of April 16, 1863, all white men from 18 to 35 years of age were drafted for military service for three years. (By February 1864 the age was expanded from 17 to 50) President Davis wrote Governor Brown on November 26, 1863 urging Georgia to let the Confederate Army have all supplies "in excess of the quantity indispensable for the support of the people at home". This policy along with the shortages of food and other

things created such a stir that the Georgia Legislature passed an Act on Dec 14, 1863, providing for punishment of from one to ten years of imprisonment for illegal impressment of property. Currency was quickly losing its value; by the fall of 1863 eggs were \$1.50 per dozen, butter \$5.00 and \$6.00 per pound. The cost of manufactured goods had increased ten to twenty fold as only ships running the blockade were bringing in supplies.

Siege Train. The Isle of Hope defensive positions were manned by a mobile garrison known as the Line of Isle of Hope Siege Train. Manpower was at a premium in 1862-64. The mobility of the siege train allowed rapid movement to the threatened position(s). The large guns were already in place so the Island garrison and its field pieces could be rapidly deployed. In early 1864, when the Federals were reported to be attacking Whitmarsh Island, (between Isle of Hope and Savannah) a detachment of 40 cavalry was ordered from the Isle of Hope to defend the position. Nothing came of the attack.

Invasion Route. The Union troops would outflank Savannah's line of defenses including Fort Wimberly and its Isle of Hope defenders. About the 10th of July 1863, three companies and their Regiments left Isle of Hope for Pocatigo, SC. On August 4, 1863, a "report" circulated in the community that Union forces had landed in force at Montgomery and would march and seize Savannah. The report was a false alarm. Should Fort Beaulieu fall, little more than ten miles separated Savannah and the Union forces. An advancing Army would have little trouble moving along the well-traveled Shell Road which had been used earlier by the French during the Revolution. Moving along this road (today's Ferguson Ave) would have literally taken them past Bethesda Orphanage's doorstep. Bethesda was less than 1500 yards from Fort Wimberly's guns. Allowing the Isle of Hope defenders to remain in position would have subjected them to certain capture as their escape route to the mainland would have been severed. Isle of Hope and Fort Wimberly's formidable defenses, designed to repel water born assault could be bypassed.

Defenses Crumble. July 19th 1864 dawned a stormy, blustery day. The Union naval presence became more ominous. Five blockading gunboats could be seen off Beaulieu. When USS Sonoma and USS Winona began shelling the forts at Rose Dhu and Beaulieu in December of 1864, the deafening noise of the bombardment signaled Savannah's southern defenses could soon crumble. The forts were an important part of the inner line of defense for Savannah and were less than 5000 yards from Fort Wimberly. The hoisting of the American Ensign above Fort Beaulieu signaled the beginning of the crumbling of Savannah's inner lines of defense. The Isle of Hope defenders realized an advancing army could move along Shell Road to Savannah. Fort Wimberly's guns were within range of Shell Road and could rain fire on the enemy. Less than 1500 yards separated Wimberly and the Shell Road running past Bethesda Orphanage. But with General Sherman's Army near the city's western outskirts, the Beaulieu scenario would not play out. The mission of the Isle of Hope defenders, preventing Union forces access to Savannah from the south, was accomplished and they were at liberty to leave and fight another day. Therefore, on the 19th of December, the guns in fixed batteries were completely disabled as the nature of the case permitted. Their

ammunition and equipment was destroyed. At nightfall, on December 19th, 1864, the 176 Confederates stationed on Isle of Hope were ordered by General Hardee to evacuate the island. On December 21, 1864, the forts at Rosedew (Rosedhu) and Beaulieu (Bewlie) had been reduced to rubble; the Confederate garrison had already been evacuated.

Forces Withdraw. General William J. Hardee was in command of the Department of Georgia, South Carolina and Florida, with headquarters at Savannah. General Hardee's force consisted of 15,000 Confederate soldiers and 2,000 members of the Georgia militia. The Confederate forces were ordered to evacuate the night of the 19th but a heavy fog delayed the departure until the next night. Confederate Lt. Col. T.B. Roy writes: "Having executed the order for the destruction of the carriages and ammunition and spiking the guns, the garrisons of the Isle of Hope, Beaulieu, and Rosedew batteries repaired to Savannah and crossed the pontoon bridges on the night of the 20th. The troops from the Isle of Hope being dismounted cavalry were to report for duty to General Wheeler on the Carolina shore." The artillerists from Beaulieu and Rosedew marched forward to Hardeeville. Withdrawing under cover of darkness was essential to keep the Union forces unaware of the troop movements.

The Evacuation. The night of the 20th was a night of terror, for no one knew what the morning would bring. Sherman had burned Atlanta and what he would do to Savannah no one knew. "The Negroes had a half-scared, half expectant look, the trouble the rear guard had was not with the Negroes but with a certain class of whites ... the white scum of the city came out of their dens like nocturnal beast to the work of pillage. . . Men, women and children would force open a door like hungry dogs after a bone, each for himself, indifferent to the property to the right of others, they would grab, smash, pull, tear, anything, everything, shoes, meat clothes, soap, hats, whatever came to hand."

During the day the long lines of army wagons and the soldiers marched through Savannah and crossed the Savannah River and Back River on pontoon bridges. The bridges were built of rice field flats, fastened end to end, anchored in place by wheels of railroad cars. The flats were connected by planking taken up from the Savannah River wharves. The planks were laid across the flats to form a bridge. Great care was taken to move silently. Straw was spread on the planks and the axles plied liberally with grease. The city end of the bridge rested near the foot of Barnard Street, then known as Market Dock. The troops, along with their light guns, moved on to Hardeeville, South Carolina to remain ahead of the advancing Union force. Letting these forces slip through his fingers was a great source of consternation to General Grant.

Destroy Ft. Wimberly. Union strategists theorized the Confederates may try to retake Savannah. To counter this treat they drew up a plan to defend Savannah. Those fortifications that were not part of this plan were to be destroyed. On the December 23, 1864, General Sherman, with Special Field Order 139, instructed Major General Oliver O. Howard to keep a small guard at Fort Wimberl(e)y and to "examine very closely, with a view to finding many and convenient points for the embarkation of troops and wagons on seagoing vessels." Major General Peter Joseph Osterhaus responded to Gen. Howard's instructions by assigning 100 Fifteenth Army Corps troops to occupy

Wimberly. Colonel James T. Conklin, Howard's chief quartermaster, was ordered to select "officers who may be authorized to dismantle the fortifications". Today, ample evidence can be seen of the efforts to destroy portions of these embankments. The fort site would not have been "a convenient point for the embarkation of troops and wagons". Since troops and wagons were to be transported to positions in South Carolina, a terminal would need to have convenient access to the north, and Wimberly fails this test. The transports would have had to navigate the treacherous shoals of the Back River, move on the Burnside River, to the Vernon River, Green Island and Wassaw Sounds to get to the open sea. A totally impracticable, if not impossible journey would have faced these Union forces. However, 1500 yards to the northeast, the Skidaway Island Ferry site provided a viable point of embarkation. An existing abutment, adequate water depth north of the narrows, established road access and a straight forward path to the open sea were all readily available at the ferry terminus.

Sherman and Dahlgren Meet. If an event could epitomize the manner in which the Union waged its war against Savannah's earthen fortifications, then a meeting of the top military leaders (Operations in S.C., GA and FLA) gives us a rare insight. Aid Gershom Bradford was able to observe first-hand a meeting between Rear Admiral John Dahlgren and General William Tecumseh Sherman on January 3, 1865. After Sherman had completed his celebrated (or infamous depending on the viewpoint) march to the sea. The USS Bibb was used as the official site for the two men to meet and discuss strategy and Bradford described the scene:

". . . After dinner the two commanders were on the quarter deck conversing, and I had an excellent opportunity to observe them. The Admiral was dressed in a carefully brushed uniform, buttoned to the chin, and looked exceedingly trim, not to say stiff "The General wore a faded and rather unkempt uniform, unbuttoned, and was of a slouchy bearing. He leaned on the rail watching a gunboat firing shells at a Confederate battery, which shells fell invariably short. Several of us knew something of the captain of the gunboat and guessed why he was so far from the battery. The Admiral, uninterested in the doings of a small gunboat, pressed the important question of their conversation, but Sherman was not diverted. 'Admiral, what is that fellow trying to do?' 'He is reducing that battery, General,' was the abstracted reply. 'If! were you, Admiral, I would order him up where he would get hurt. ,,,

Union Plans. The fortification continued to be a factor in the post capture scenario. The Union was concerned the Confederate forces would try to retake Savannah. A plan of defense was prepared and the Confederate fortifications that were not to be incorporated in the Federal system were to be leveled or otherwise destroyed. General Sherman's new Chief Engineer at Savannah, Capt. Charles R. Suter, was tasked with guarding and dismantling Fort Wimberly and three other nearby forts.

63rd Illinois. At 8:30 A.M. on January 19, 1865, the Sixty-third Illinois Volunteer Infantry and the rest of the Third Division, 15th Army Corps crossed the Savannah River on pontoon bridges. Thus began their Carolina campaign. The rain began to fall at 10:00 AM and continued all day. The Division was making its way along a levee through a South Carolina rice field. The field and levee were soon covered with water. About two miles north of Savannah, forty-six wagons of the First Brigade became hopelessly mired

in the mud. At dark all efforts to proceed were abandoned. The frustration generated by being thwarted by the weather was all too evident in the January report of First Lieutenant Chas. H. Warren, Company F. Three weeks earlier, Brigadier-General Smith, US Army, Third Division Commander, directed the 63rd to detach 100 of its men to guard and dismantle Fort Wimberly. The inability to successfully free the wagons was an apparent anomaly, frustrating Lt. Warren and his men. Lt. Warren had earlier been selected for the dismantling of Wimberly. The ability to tackle the Wimberly assignment attested to his abilities. Gen. Smith had stipulated: "great care is recommended in the selection of commanding officers for these detachments; they must be zealous and energetic".

Navy's Reluctance to Engage. The US Navy blockading the Georgia coast, with all of its "spit and polish", well drilled sailors and dominant numbers always seemed reluctant to engage their enemy ashore. Perhaps the Navy's discipline and focus on its primary mission of enforcing the embargo and overestimating the effectiveness of the shore defenses discouraged engagement. On those rare occasions when fire was exchanged, the Navy's gunboats would maintain a position just out of range of the shore's guns thus making their own guns ineffective. The Army and its General Sherman often left the impression that smartness of appearance came second to engaging the enemy ... at close quarters. The Confederate Navy in the local area seemed to be cut of the same cloth and was almost a non-factor in the conflict. No real zeal for engaging the enemy afloat was evident. The capture of the *Water Witch* was one of the rare occasions when Confederate Naval personnel took offensive action against the Union counterparts. With the *Water Watch*'s capture the Confederates failed to engage the enemy when surprise was on their side. Furthermore, allowing the *Water Witch* to be bottled up in the Vernon River until her crew finally put the torch to her to prevent recapture by the Union was final proof of their ineffectiveness.

Conclusion. Both gray and blue clad soldiers labored countless hours on the Wimberly's embankments which continue to be imposing even today. Perhaps the real credit for the embankment construction should go to the farm labors from nearby fields. Since more Union records have survived, the time and duration of Union activity is well documented. One hundred Union soldiers, under carefully selected leadership, spent the second week of January 1865, dismantling Fort Wimberly. Since brick and mortar were not used in the construction, all that remained to dismantle were perhaps a bomb proof, gun emplacements and embankments. Even today, the thoroughness of the 63rd Illinois can be appreciated. The very fact that Fort Wimberly appears on a score of Civil War Union Army and Confederate maps and General Sherman ordered it dismantled, demonstrates the importance the Union placed on the fortification. Perception is often reality. Savannah's chain of defenses was perceived by the Union as impregnable. Fort Wimberly was an integral link in this impregnable chain.