



CEDAR POINT IN THE CIVIL WAR CEDAR POINT BATTERY GAVE UNION SOLDIERS CLEAR VIEW OF BAY

BY JOHN HILDEBRANDT



Provided photo/JOHN HILDEBRANDT

The Cedar Point Lighthouse was the site of the Cedar Point Battery during the Civil War. The battery allowed soldiers a clear view of the entrance of Sandusky Bay, where Rebel soldiers often tried to invade.

SANDUSKY

The Civil War seems far removed from Top Thrill Dragster, Maverick, Luminosity and Snoopy on Ice. But 150 years ago, U.S. soldiers manned a gun battery at the tip of the Cedar Point Peninsula, where they nervously scanned the horizon for Rebel raiders.

The Confederate prison on Johnson's Island, home to several thousand Rebel officers from 1862 until the summer of 1865, is the best known and most significant Civil War site in our area, and perhaps in the state.

Islands make good locations for prisons for obvious reasons; Alcatraz and Devil's Island come immediately to mind. Johnson's Island was relatively easy to secure and was close enough to Sandusky for convenient supply. In the 1860s, Sandusky was a railroad town and a busy port. The prison's main vulnerability was an attack from the lake.

Canada claimed a position of neutrality in the war. Although no friend to slavery, Canada was still a part of Great Britain in the 1860s, which had decidedly mixed feelings about the war due to its dependence on Southern cotton to feed its textile industry.

Only 50 years earlier, U.S. troops had invaded Canada during the War of 1812. U.S. military officials worried that any serious escape attempt from Johnson's Island would involve ferrying prisoners to Canada by boat. The Canadian border is only 13 miles from the mouth of Sandusky Bay. There was only one armed warship on the Great Lakes: the USS *Michigan*. It was widely assumed, with some justification, that Canada had more Confederate spies than maple trees.

Great Lakes ports were routinely subject to scares and rumors of Confederate attacks. The newspapers of the day often fanned the flames.

A mile to the east of Johnson's Island was the Cedar Point Peninsula, essentially a barrier island that framed the eastern side of Sandusky Bay. In the 1860s it was a wild and empty place, covered in groves of cedar trees, sand dunes and thick woods. Largely if not completely uninhabited, especially in the winter months, it was mostly used by fishermen as a place to dry and repair nets. Construction on the Cedar Point Battery began in the fall of 1863. Most of the work was done by soldiers of the 124th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, popularly known as the Hoffman Battalion, named after William Hoffman, the Commissary-General of Prisoners. This

unit was primarily engaged in guarding the prisoners on Johnson's Island. Most of the soldiers hailed from the Sandusky area and northwest Ohio.

The battery was manned by the Ohio 24th Independent Battery, a Cincinnati unit that also manned the guns on Johnson's Island. The spot chosen for the battery was the area immediately surrounding the Cedar Point Lighthouse, which had been built a short time earlier in 1862. The location offered a commanding view of the entrance to Sandusky Bay. The Lighthouse still stands, now surrounded by the cottages of Lighthouse Point, filled with vacationing families.

Unfortunately, even if they exist, no photographs of the battery site have ever been discovered. There is, however, a copy of the layout of the Cedar Point Battery — thanks to the efforts of Professor David Bush, of Heidelberg University, who has led an archeological investigation of the Johnson's Island prison site for many years.

In the layout of the battery, the location of a lighthouse is clearly shown. The layout also shows the positions of the guns, barracks, laundry, storehouse, shanty and even the privy, which today is covered by blacktop in the cul-de-sac across from Cottages No. 1 to No. 3. The works around the guns were certainly made of sand and wood, and largely built by human hands employing shovels and picks. Horses may have been employed to haul trees and heavier objects. Sand was plentiful and, in fact, is an excellent material for constructing a fort, as it's easily worked and will absorb artillery shells quite well. Most of the forts built in the Civil War were made of earth and sand, not concrete or brick.

The guns were 32-pounders, but rifled, so they could fire a solid shot approximately two miles. Staffing levels are unknown, but may have been as high as 25 to 30 soldiers.

On Nov. 18, 1863 — the day before the delivery of the Gettysburg Address — the Sandusky Register reported “the garrison on Johnson's Island has been greatly strengthened, and Cedar Point has been occupied by the 24th Battery with four of their guns, with proper support. They completely command the channel.”

In 1864, the battery was strengthened by order of the War Department and under the direction of the U.S. Army Engineer Corps. The impetus to upgrade the battery was the so-called “Lake Erie Conspiracy,” an abortive attempt in the fall of 1864 by Confederate spies in Canada to commandeer a ship at Middle Bass Island and then steam into Sandusky Bay and release the prisoners and transport them to Canada. The attempt failed, but it understandably raised security concerns for those responsible for guarding the prison. The battery guns were never fired in combat.

Lake Erie was effectively closed for shipping from mid to late December through mid to late March, so the battery was very inactive during the winter months. Sandusky was an active port with many vessels entering and leaving the harbor. At night, the soldiers manning the fort would have probably gazed a bit wistfully at the lights of Sandusky.

The war ended in April 1865, with the last prisoners leaving Johnson's Island in July. The battery guns were removed and the fort quickly decayed, swallowed up by the Cedar trees. The lighthouse probably utilized some of the buildings for a period of time.

One thing has not changed in 150 years. On Dec. 10, 1864, the Sandusky Register reported “the stars and stripes were displayed from Cedar Point today.” The flagpole today is in very close position to where it would have stood in 1864. And the flag is still proudly displayed.

John Hildebrandt is a member of the Erie County Civil War 150 Committee.