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Technology Afloat

By William N. Still, Jr. 4

Shiloh: A Woman's Ordeal

By Wiley Sword 10

Lew Wallace's "Mexican Project"

By G. A. Schultz 20

Fort Johnson

By Willis J. Keith 32

Book Reviews 48

THE COVER: "Sharpshooting, Petersburg, Virginia," by Alfred R. Waud (1828-1891). Waud, noted "Special Artist" for *Harper's Weekly* during the war, obviously painted this canvas from sketches he made at the Petersburg front in 1864. The painting is here reproduced through the courtesy of David David, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

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On the morning of April 12, 1861, a signal shot, initiating the bombardment of Fort Sumter, was fired from Fort Johnson on James Island, and the Civil War had officially started.

Before the war, Fort Johnson had been deemed of secondary importance and had been allowed to decay. When South Carolina troops occupied it in late December 1860, they found its fortifications unsuitable for the anticipated reduction of Fort Sumter and began construction on three separate emplacements. Before April 12 two 10-inch mortar batteries of two mortars each and one three-gun battery had been completed.

The loss of Morris Island at the entrance of Charleston Harbor in September 1863 to Federal forces had further stimulated Confederate efforts in improving and constructing additional fortifications around Charleston. By mid-1864 Fort Johnson and its outworks had been developed into a strongly fortified camp mounting some fifteen heavy guns and mortars protected by extensive earthworks.

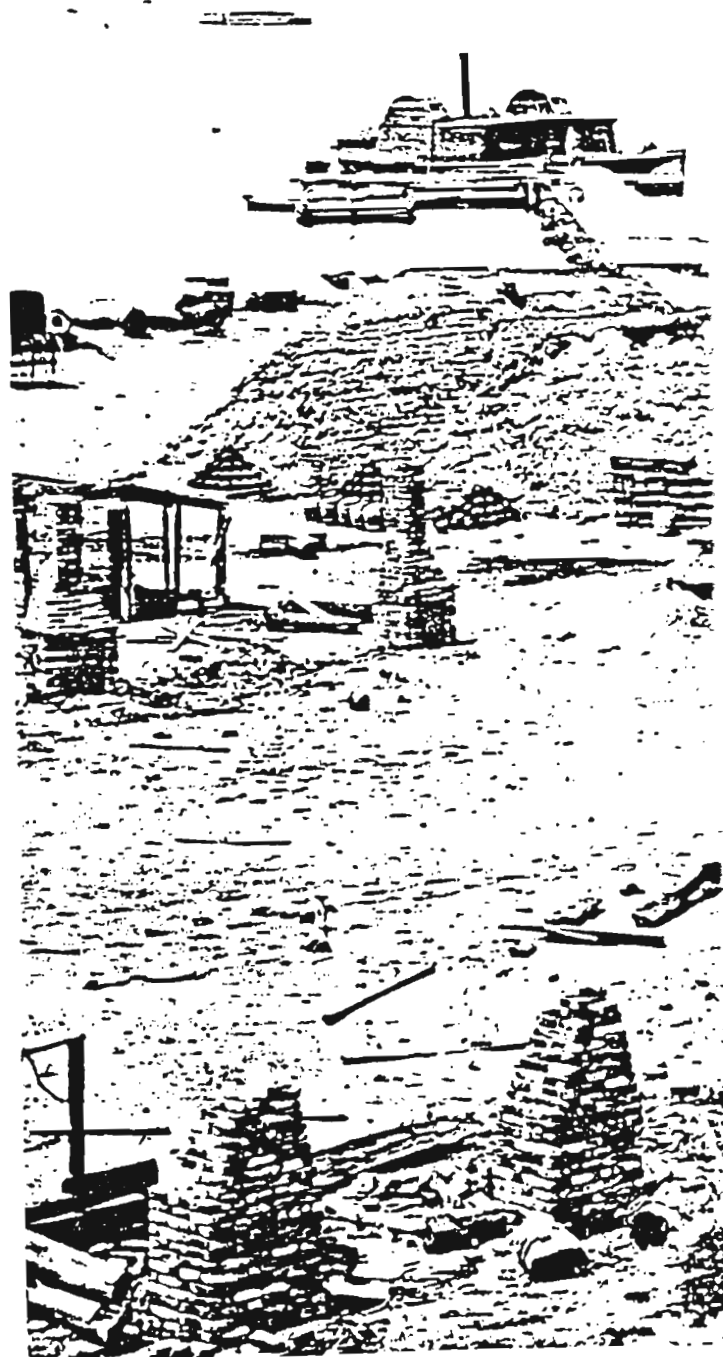
The military value of James Island and Fort Johnson had been recognized by both North and South. Appraising the Confederate defense of Charleston Harbor in 1863, the chief of engineering at Fort Sumter, Captain John Johnson, wrote: "The position of Fort Johnson and its adjoining works was on the southern shore of the [Charleston] harbor, which, if occupied by the Union army, would give it at once the key to the whole military situation."

In July 1864 Federal Major General John G. Foster resolved to initiate a serious attempt on the strengthened defenses of Charleston. His plan of operation involved five concerted attacks against Confederate coastal defenses: the first, a naval bombardment of Battery Pringle, situated on the western shore of James Island, commanding the middle reaches of the Stono River; the second, an army attack of 5,000 men on Johns Island, immediately west and across the Stono River from James Island; the third, an amphibious assault by 2,000 men on James Island below Battery Pringle; the fourth, the destruction by a 1,200-man force of a portion of the Charleston & Savannah Railroad where it ran near North Edisto River, to prevent sending reinforcements by rail to Charleston; and the fifth and final element, a 1,000-man assault directed against Fort Johnson and its outworks to the southeast known collectively as Battery Simkins. Success of this assault would have placed most of Charleston Harbor under Federal guns and for all practical purposes closed it to Confederate shipping regardless of whether the city was captured.

The first four attacks planned by General Foster were either successfully repelled or contained. However, although halted near the landing site, the attack below Battery Pringle did accomplish one of its objectives: the withdrawal of 100 men from Fort Johnson to strengthen the western defense lines of James Island.

NORTH

By WILLIS J. KEITH

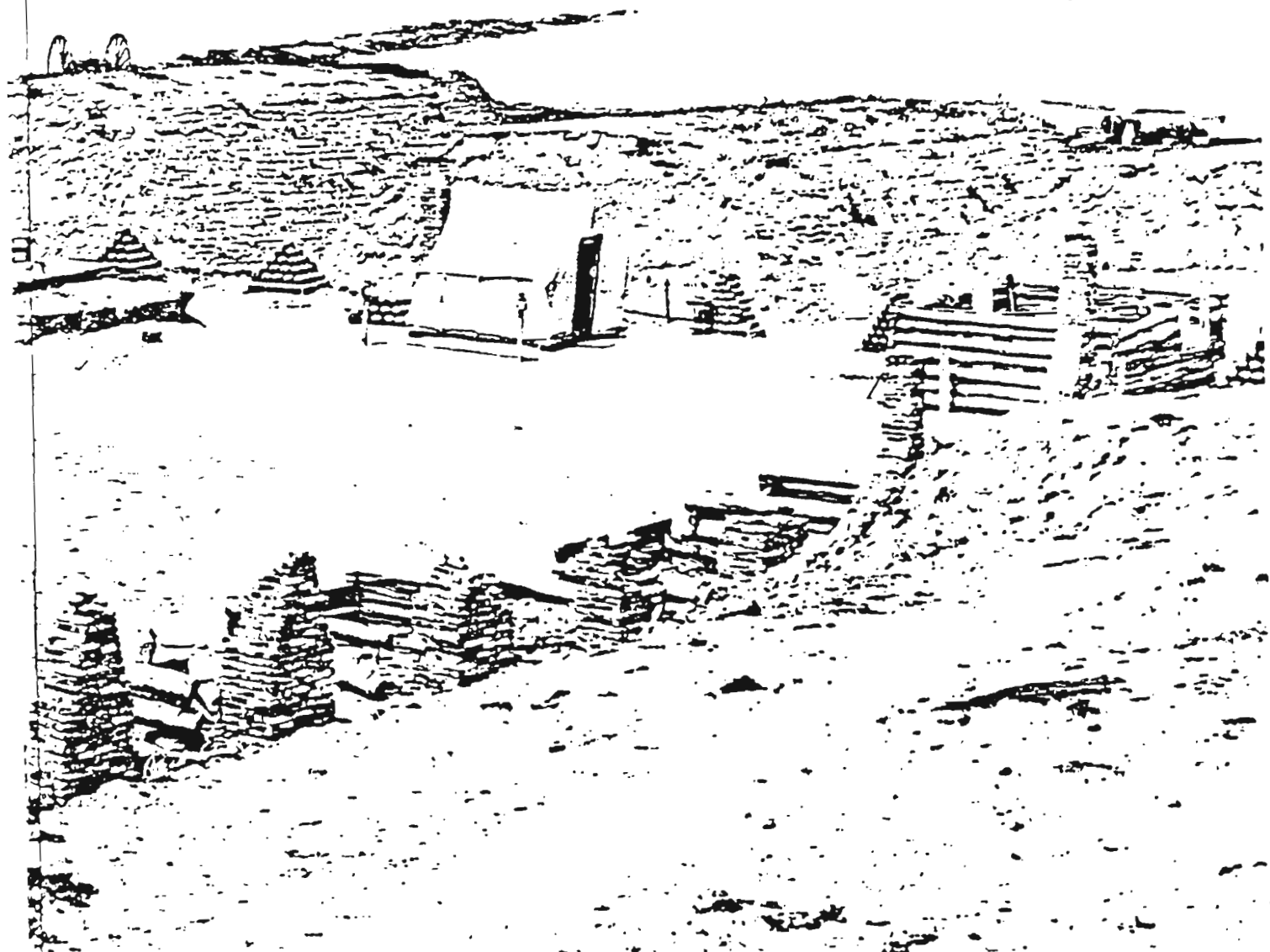


Fort Johnson, Charleston Harbor, 1865. This is the rear of the

JOHNSON

Its position on the southern shore of Charleston Harbor

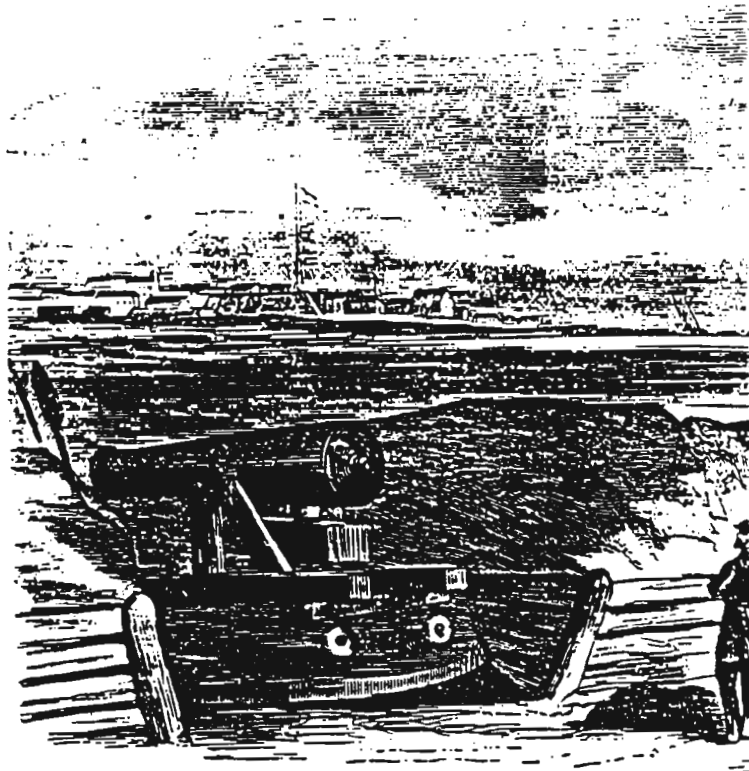
“would give it at once the key to the whole military situation.”



er battery." The photograph was made after Union capture of the fort. The photographer's wagon appears at extreme left.

Confederate defenses of Charleston, looking seaward. Drawn in 1863 by an English artist.

Occupied as they were with the Stono River attacks, the defenders of James Island were called away from the point of attack at Fort Johnson. Federal troops scheduled for the assault were embarked from Morris Island on the night of July 2d. From the command of Brigadier General Alexander Schimmelfennig, the following were assembled: the 52d Pennsylvania, Colonel H. M. Hoyt; the 127th New York, Major E. H. Little; and sixty men of the 3d Rhode Island Heavy Artillery to serve any captured artillery pieces. Colonel William Gurney of the 127th New York was designated expedi-



National Archives

Major General John G. Foster planned a five-pronged attack on the defenses of Charleston in July 1864.

tion commander and Colonel Hoyt, his deputy. The attack began about 1 a.m. on July 3d from the rendezvous at Payne's Wharf, located in the saltwater marsh just west of Morris Island. The boats were to proceed to a channel through a sandbar located between Fort Johnson and Morris Island. In single file they were to emerge into deeper water east of Fort Johnson and execute a left flank movement which would place them abreast of each other for a short pull to a sand shell beach that ran between Fort Johnson and its outwork, Battery Simkins. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph A. Yates, 1st South Carolina Artillery, was in command of the fort. Elements of both the 1st and 2d South Carolina Artillery composed the garrison. Reduced by the 100-man withdrawal of the previous day, Colonel Yates had only about 130 men left for the defense of the post. One hundred were left sleeping at the guns and thirty were on picket duty at Shell Point, the site of Battery Simkins. The main power of the fort was in its "water-battery" of four heavy guns, one of which was a 10-inch banded and rifled Columbiad, the largest piece of artillery on James Island. Although these guns were to be the final objective of the Federal attack they bore only on the inner-harbor and could take no part in their own defense. On the flank about to be attacked were some parapets for infantry and several emplacements for field artillery pieces; two 30-pounder Parrott rifles were also mounted on this flank.

With the weakened garrison the planned attack promised every chance of success, but misadventure attended it from the beginning. Colonel Gurney, the expedition's commander, inexplicably decided to remain behind at



Payne's Wharf. The chief boat pilot, personally selected by Gurney, was unable to locate the unmarked passage through the sand bar, seemingly "lost his head," and caused some delay by refusing to proceed: subsequent investigations failed to reveal if the pilot "was merely ignorant or was guilty of willful misconduct."

Colonel Hoyt, the senior officer who did land, described the attack:

During the delay which occurred here [at the sandbar], the barges had all closed well up upon each other, and the expedition was substantially together and well in hand. We were then lying close to the marsh in front of Simkins, and not more than 1,000 yards from Fort Johnson. . . . Accident put us at once in possession of a practicable passage close to this marsh, deep, but only admitting one boat at a time, and speedily opening into a much wider expanse. Not more than ten minutes elapsed after the refusal of the pilot to proceed before the whole expedition was under orders, . . . and promptly filing through the channel. From this point there was no obstacle to encounter except the enemy. It was becoming daylight and the designated point of landing was in view. . . .

With the sun rising at the attackers' backs they were quickly discovered by a sentinel on the beach. Firing commenced almost at once upon the advancing boats from both artillery and small arms. Although the boats were thrown into some confusion, little physical damage was done. Colonel Hoyt described the assault: "A landing was immediately and successfully effected by the leading boats at the Brooke gun battery [located between Johnson and Simkins], which was readily carried, and no halt whatever occurred at it." Five boats landed carrying a total of six officers and 135 men, all of whom belonged to the 52d Pennsylvania Volunteers.

No other boats effected a landing. The remainder of the expedition was in retreat, despite the fact that the only signal for withdrawal, a bugle in Colonel Hoyt's possession, had not been sounded.

Text continued on page 38

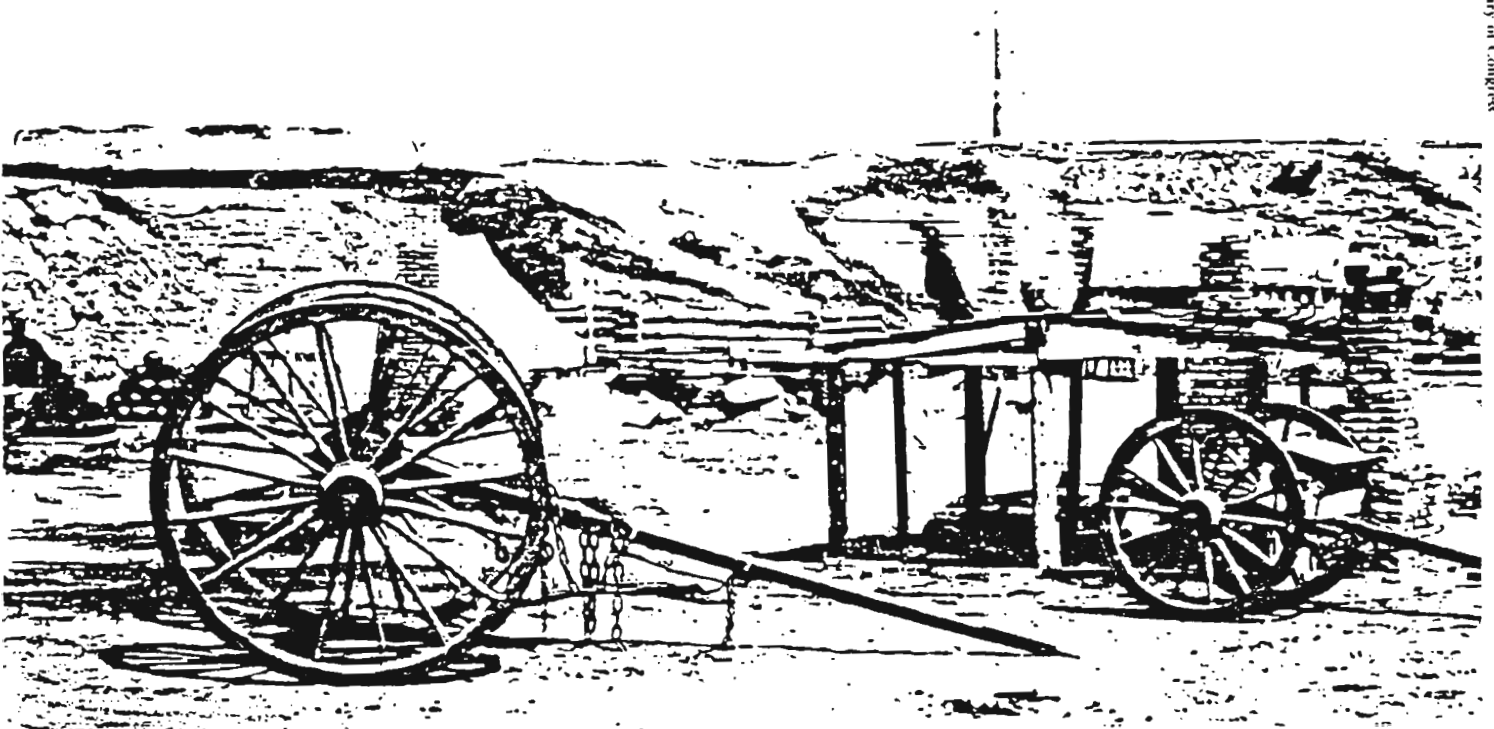


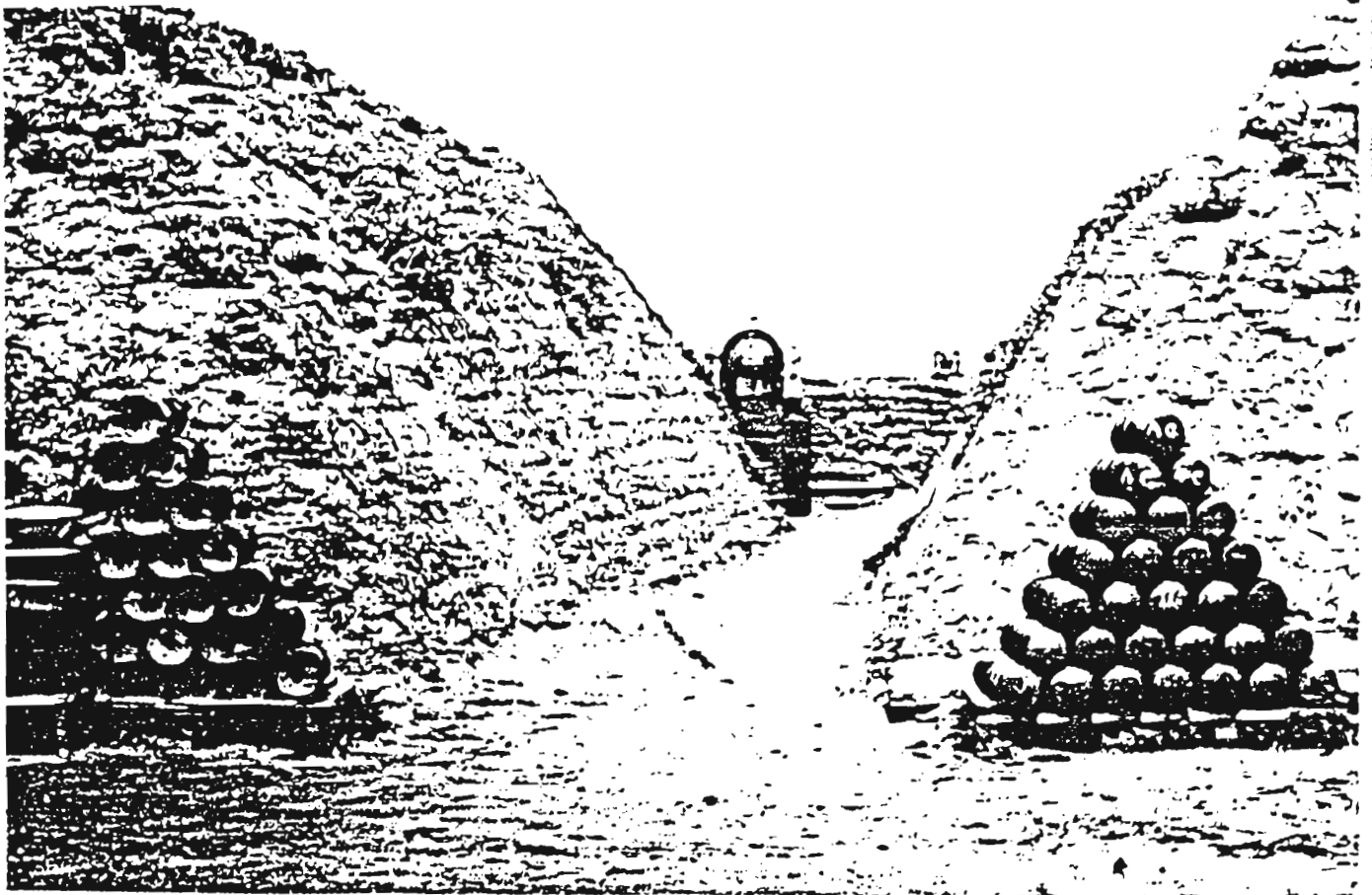
Brigadier General Alexander Schimmelfennig, commander of some of the troops in Foster's attack on the Charleston defenses.



Above: Interior rear of the four-gun "water battery." Bomb-proof rear right under flag; guns are at left behind revetments.

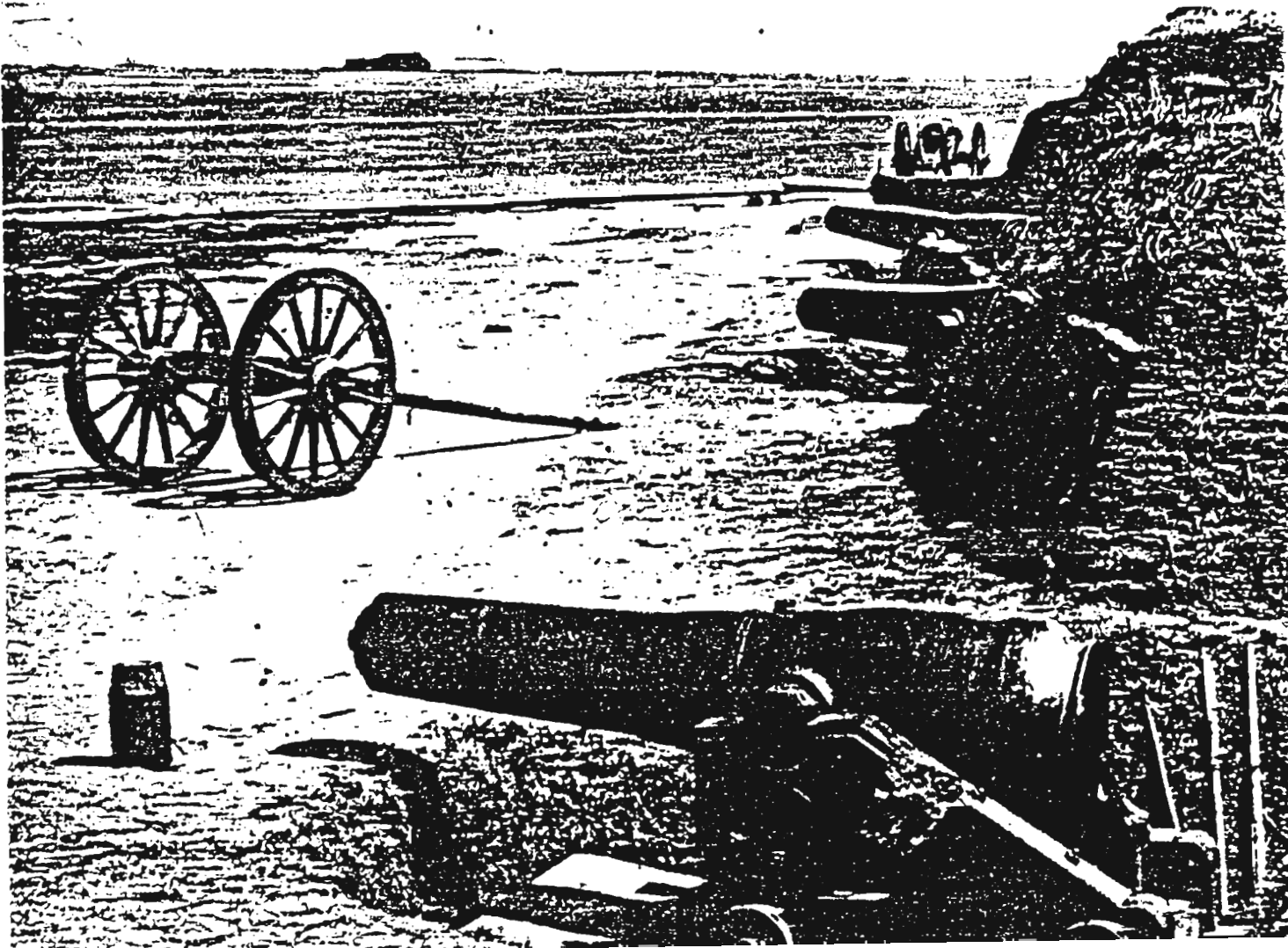
Below: Another view of the "water battery." At left is a sling cart; at right, a field limber; in rear, a bomb-proof.





Above: Rear view of the Brooke double-banded 7-inch rifle in the "water battery." In foreground are either Brooke or Mulane projectiles. Below: Front of the four-gun "water battery."

First two guns in foreground are 10-inch smoothbore Columbiads. Fort Sumter shows on the horizon. All photographs taken in 1865.



Continued from page 35

The attack was continued with the men at hand. Colonel Hoyt went on:

So much of the expedition as disembarked pushed with all vigor possible upon Fort Johnson and its connected line of high earthen parapets. The parapet was entered near the main fort with a brisk movement of about 30 [men] of the advance, who exchanged shots within the work, but were compelled to retire. The whole of our force was then conducted along the entire line, from the rebel left to the right, with repeated efforts to enter it, until at the extreme right another assault was attempted. . . .

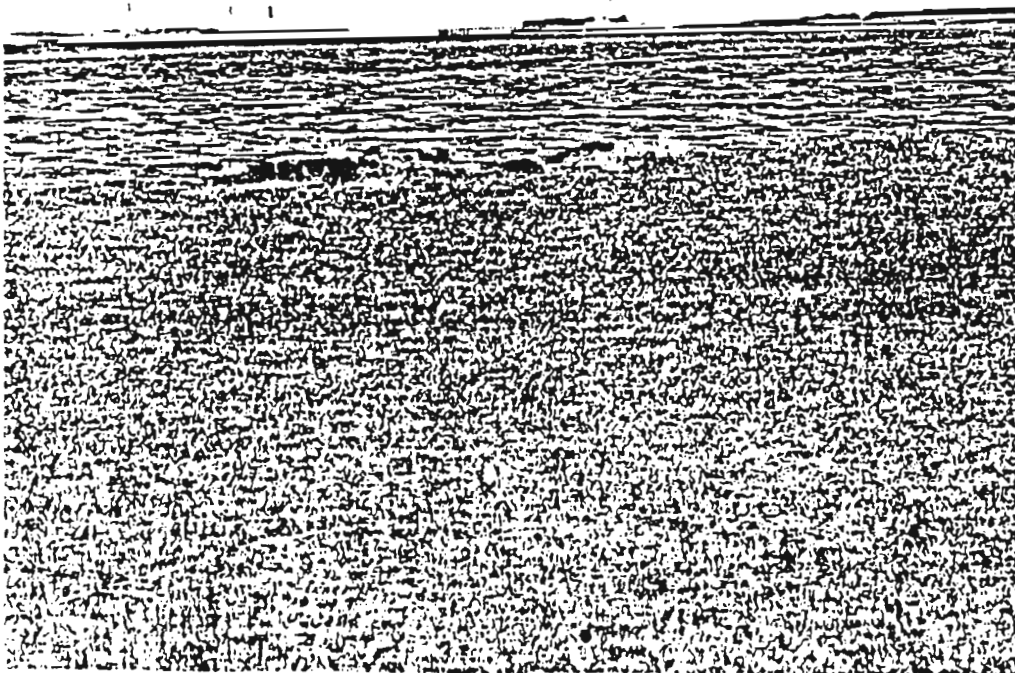
This second assault on the parapet also failed, resulting in the capture of most of the troops joining it. The remainder continued the action for a short time and then, under fire from the



Photograph by W. J. Keith

Above: Remains of the earthworks at the extreme right of the Confederate line where the last of the attacking Federal troops surrendered on July 3, 1864. Below: View of Fort Sumter from the site of the four-gun "water battery" at Fort Johnson. High ground to the right of Fort Sumter was not there during the war: It is the result of "spoil" dredged from Charleston Harbor.

Photograph by W. J. Keith



pickets at Battery Simkins in the rear and the rest of the garrison in the front, they surrendered.

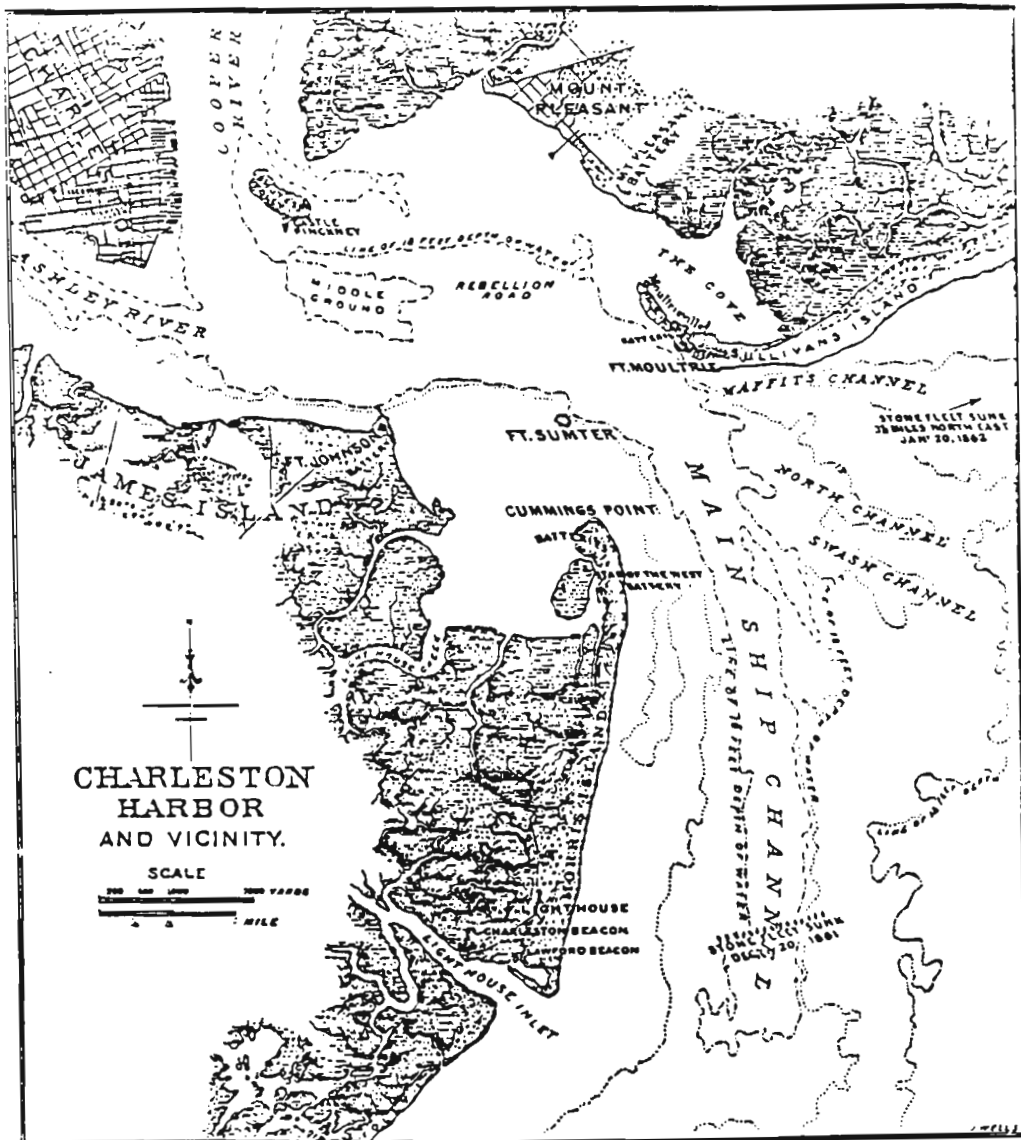
The Confederates surveyed the results. Approximately 130 men had defeated a force of 1,000 at a cost to the defenders of one killed and three wounded. On shore seven attackers had been killed and sixteen wounded. The remainder of those who had landed, including Colonel Hoyt, were made prisoners; most of their arms and equipment were secured and five or six boats captured. Victorious though they were, the Confederates were still faced with a problem: The prisoners almost outnumbered their captors. To offset this disadvantage the captured Federals were placed in one of the fort's bomb-proofs where comparatively few

men could effectively watch the narrow entrances until a guard detail could be sent from Charleston.

While the Confederates measured their success, the Federals investigated their failure. No one admitted to having started the retreat. Occupants of each boat claimed that they had retreated only after the other boats had begun the withdrawal.

The judge advocate of the Department of the South, Major John C. Gray, Jr., was charged with the official investigation. In his report of October 26, 1864 he stated that the expedition was "well-planned, and notwithstanding hinderances and delays would have succeeded had it not been for the absence of the commanding officer and the want of spirit and energy on the part of many of his subordinates." Colonel Gurney was castigated for his absence; the same report stated that he "certainly committed at least a great error of judgment." However, the chief cause of failure was assigned to the "... want of dash, energy, and authority on the part of the subordinate officers. . . . It is upon them that the main responsibility must rest, and the evidence shows that many of them were totally unequal to this occasion."

On July 10th, the first anniversary of the Federal descent on Morris Island, a second assault was made upon Fort Johnson. Preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment from the Federal batteries on Morris Island, another small boat attack was attempted. The garrison, alerted by the bombardment, was ready and the assault repulsed after what appeared to have been only a half-hearted effort. Reports of this second attack are scant and not much importance seemed to have been placed on it. The James Island commander, Brigadier General W. B. Taliaferro, reported that the attack "... was met by the same gallant garrison of the 3rd instant, with the addition of Captain Le Gardem's section of light artillery, and a company of Confederate States Marines and promptly repulsed." Captain Johnson summed up the attack "... the work was heavily shelled and attacked



by troops in small boats; but only three of these effected a landing, while the affair was speedily ended by small-arms and field-pieces. . . ."

The second attack on Fort Johnson was the final effort in extensive Federal operations on the South Carolina coast that had involved some 9,000 men. The success of the James Island and Fort Johnson attacks could have brought about an earlier fall of Charleston. However, each phase of General Foster's plan had been signally marked by one common factor—failure. The Charleston defenses were held for another six months.

Fort Johnson was never assaulted again. It was evacuated along with the other harbor defenses on the night of February 17, 1865 when Sherman threatened to cut off communications with Charleston.

With this article we welcome Willis J. Keith to the pages of CWTI. A staff member of the South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department in Charleston, of which Fort Johnson is now a part, he lists The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865, by E. Milby Burton, among his sources for this article.