

Dickison a Confederate Hero

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It was quickly growing dark on a warm May evening, and the men were alone with their thoughts.

In a moment that only a man about to go into battle knows, a ragtag group of farmers-turned-soldiers waited in the bush beneath a row of pine trees next to the St. Johns River. It was quiet, except for the sounds of the insects and the water, a sharp contrast to the noise and confusion to follow. Did the men fear? Were they worried their plan might fail?

At least one man on the riverbank exuded confidence. It was all over his face; he wore it like a mask. He was dashing and handsome, with a rich, dark beard. He had played his hand and made his move. Now it was up to his soldiers to execute.

The evening was May 23, 1864, and the man was John J. Dickison. Dickison was just moments away from making his own personal history. But things were bad for his beloved South. The war had turned the previous summer on a rolling, blood-soaked, Pennsylvania field a thousand miles away. The Confederacy was still struggling on, but the momentum had tipped toward the North.

But this moment, this day, was a culmination for Dickison, a name found in few Civil War history books but respected by his contemporaries as one of the best. He was the hero of Florida. His legacy in the state began only a decade before.

Dickison had grown into manhood in the rich farmlands of the South. In 1856, he struck out to the Promised Land of middle Florida, its rolling hills and fertile soil providing a welcome home for King Cotton. Dickison settled in Ocala, and, with the help of slaves, set about his agricultural life.

When civil war descended on the fledgling country, Dickison, like everyone, found himself jostled from his cozy existence. Within a matter of months, he ascended from ordinary to extraordinary to the point where he was considered the protector of Florida, and it became his land.

At the start of the conflict, Dickison was instrumental in organizing an artillery force from Marion County. It was that band of farmers that served impressively on faraway fields. When his artillery work was done, Dickison patched together a cavalry and went off to make trouble in the Florida countryside.

During the Civil War in Florida, the St. Johns River was the most sought-after waterway in the state. Its welcoming waters provided perfect transportation for Florida supplies to head north to aid besieged Southern cities. Federal forces attempted to seal off this

Southern advantage, and the river became a point of contention.

For the most part, Union forces occupied the narrow swath of land on the river's east bank from St. Augustine to Jacksonville. The west bank, however, was firmly in Dickison's hands.

Dickison patrolled the land. He knew it and he loved it. Based in Waldo, he would attack Northern forces using guerilla tactics. Like a ghost, he would emerge from the swamp, strike brutally and quickly, then fade away. He was as troublesome for Union forces as his famous cavalry colleague J.E.B. Stuart was farther to the north. His ability to maneuver in a harsh swamp environment led some to call him the Civil War's Swamp Fox. If he'd operated in any state other than Florida, he probably would have been noted as one of the great leaders of the war. But thus was the anonymity of fighting in a state neither side wanted to bother with but both sides needed.

Union forces so feared Dickison that they looked warily upon the west bank of the St. Johns and referred to it as Dickison's land. Except in their common speech, the troops used Dickison's nickname. Legend has it they called it Dixie's Land, a term that was later molded to represent the entire South.

As the war farther north raged ever closer to its conclusion, Dickison continued to keep the Union locked on the east bank. Finally, Union commanders were fed up with their inability to capture this ghostly figure and penetrate the state. They sent gunboats and troop transports up the St. Johns to capture him.

But Dickison learned of the plot. Over the years in Florida's back country he'd developed a loyal following, and a clandestine string of informers kept him abreast of the situation. Near Palatka, he set up his ambush - two artillery pieces and a small band of his men, all handy with a rifle.

And that's where they stood on that warm May evening. They waited patiently as the Union force approached. The ship Columbine anchored for the night near to Dickison's position. He waited until all was settled, then ordered his artillery to open fire.

In a matter of minutes, the Columbine was disabled. Dickison's sharpshooters laid waste to Union forces who, in a mass confusion, attempted to mount a resistance. The Columbine moved helplessly down the river until it stopped. Dickison's men pounced, and the Union casualties were high. As quickly as it began, it was over. The Columbine belonged to Dickison. That moment marked the first time during the Civil War that an Army unit captured a ship.

Less than a year later, it was all over. Some Florida soldiers wanted to head west and join a resistance force, but when they saw their leaders retire, most also gave up. But Dickison's forces proudly proclaimed that they were discharged without ever being captured or suffering defeat. After the war, Dickison returned to his life in Central Florida. In 1899, he wrote the "Military History of Florida." He died in 1902.

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