

# Besieged

Mobile 1865



Russell W. Blount, Jr.

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“A particular strength of Blount’s confident narrative is its measured, thorough explanation of the events. . . . Blount’s research is strong and his style lively . . . a genuinely enjoyable battle-book.”

—*Blue & Gray Magazine*, in praise of  
***The Battles of New Hope Church***

Considered the last major battle of the Civil War, the campaign for the city of Mobile, Alabama, is defined by many historians as a punitive action by Union commanders who were loath to leave such a prize unconquered. Mobile’s value as a blockade-running port for the South was no longer a threat to the Union. By this time in the war, the city known as the “Paris of the South” remained primarily as a refuge for those who were exhausted by deprivation and hardship; their defenders were a ragtag band of soldiers holding on with fading strength, determined to protect the city against all odds. Their poignant defense of what was not only a battlefield but also their home is as tragic as it was courageous. Blount provides an eyewitness account that brings us into Mobile in the last months of the conflict and allows a glimpse of what it must have been like for both civilians and the soldiers charged with defending them.

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*For my parents, Emma Jean and Big Daddy,  
who loved Mobile and made it their home*

*There was a little city, and a few men within it;  
And there came a great king against it;  
And built great bulwarks against it.*

—Ecclesiastes 9:14



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# Preface

The campaign for Mobile, Alabama, in 1865 represented the last major military battle of the American Civil War. It was the culmination of a long and bloody war, full of hardships and almost unbearable for the people who endured it. The issue of which side was going to win the war was hardly in doubt at the time the first shots were fired at Fort Blakeley on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. In fact, the fight took place only hours after Gen. Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant's Federal army. What's more, after the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864, the city had lost its strategic value as a blockade-running port. Nevertheless, as a political consideration, Mobile was simply too attractive a prize for the Union commanders to leave unconquered and unoccupied. So the battle was fought and men suffered and died in one last fury, one last episode in a great and tragic war.

And a great and tragic war it was. Thousands of battles raged over the huge landscape of the American South. Mobile, of course, was just one of them, and compared to some Civil War battles losses were light and the fight had very little, if any, effect on the war's outcome. But as time goes by and the war continues to be studied, we are beginning to focus on some of the lesser ingredients that made up the epic event.

Now one hundred and fifty years have passed, marking the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War. Perhaps, though, the passing of time is what is needed to finally gain a better perspective and understanding of the war. As Walker Percy, the Southern novelist, so eloquently points out in a collection of his essays, *Signposts in a Strange Land*: "The thing was too big and too bloody, too full of suffering and hatred, too closely knit into the fabric of our meaning as a people, to be held off and looked at—until now. It is like a man walking away from a mountain. The bigger it is, the farther he's got to go before he can see it. Then one day he looks back and there it is, this colossal thing lying across

his past.” Percy wrote that in 1957, more than half a century ago. I suppose, then, we will never stop looking back, seeing and gaining a better understanding of the great national trauma of the Civil War.

Although my other books have dealt with the Atlanta Campaign, writing about Mobile seemed only natural. After all, it is my home. For me, many of the places mentioned in this book are daily sights. The city is old, older than New Orleans. Homes laced in wrought iron and columned verandas still stand under the giant live oaks. Built before the Civil War, they are reminders of an antebellum community drenched in history and proud of its identity. Some of the families have lived here more than two hundred years, and the city is almost haunted with their ancestors. But no one seems to mind the ghosts. There is, and always has been, a special serenity, an easygoing flavor, consistent with and typical of so many other old, conservative Southern cities.

And yet Mobile is an anomalous place. Because it has always been a port city, it has always had somewhat of a cosmopolitan character, a bit detached from the rest of the South. As a shipping and merchant center, it followed that sooner or later a gumbo of cultures would emerge. Such diversity existed even before the Civil War. The old families were joined by many people of all backgrounds: black and white, free and slave, rich and poor, native and immigrant, Southern farmers and Northern traders. Needless to say, there were a variety of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, and Mobilians, having little choice, developed into a tolerant people. They also became a people intent on maintaining a carefree, happy lifestyle, as evidenced by boasting the oldest Mardi Gras in the nation. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*, as the French would say. Oddly enough, it was this exotic attitude towards life that sustained the citizens of Mobile throughout the four long years of the Civil War. And it was this attitude that the rest of the South found so intriguing while the war raged around them. Still and all, Mobile experienced much sorrow and suffering brought on by the war, so much in fact that the city found its character torn apart by ambiguity and pretentious deception as it struggled to put a good face on a wretched situation.

By 1865, the last year of the war, the situation was especially woeful. Any feigning of good times was becoming impossible to

maintain. Mobile's civilians were exhausted from hardship and deprivation. The economy was ruined. The army defending the city, by this time, was decimated, reduced to a thin line of ragged scarecrows. And yet, it's these same tragic conditions that, I believe, make this time and place so interesting but at the same time difficult for us, as twenty-first-century Americans, to understand. How, for example, could Southerners continue fighting through those final months of the war when the writing was on the wall? I think the answer may lie in the character and spirit of the American soldier, Union and Confederate. That is, he refused to be beaten. He would fight until he was killed, captured, or until he could simply fight no longer. For the Confederate soldier, that is exactly what came to pass. Those who were not killed or captured fought on until they could fight no more. Mobile was their last fight, and the subject of this book.

At the time men began killing each other in this last campaign there had been many changes in the tactics of Civil War soldiers and the weapons they used. By this time, they had learned how to protect themselves and stay alive. Instead of the headlong frontal attacks over open ground, soldiers fought behind earthen fortifications. Digging became almost an art as shovels and spades carved out elaborate bunkers with connecting trenches. As technology continued improving during the war, superior weapons began to appear. By the end of the struggle, huge siege guns, rifled artillery, torpedoes, land mines, and hand grenades had all made their debut as new killing machines. The campaign for Mobile also included amphibious operations, combining the efforts of the navies with those of the armies. This, too, represented another evolution in warfare as wooden boats disappeared, replaced with iron-plated vessels. And although they weren't used in the campaign, submarines were built and tested in Mobile. None of this, it seems, escaped the eyes of bellicose Europeans who were carefully studying this new technology in warfare. Fifty years later, they succeeded in perfecting and employing the same tactics and weapons used during the Mobile Campaign in the slaughter and bloodbath of the First World War.

But the purpose of this book is to tell the story of Mobile during the last few months of the Civil War. In doing so, I have tried to give an adequate account of the siege, the fighting—along with the

events leading up to it—as well as the aftermath. Such a history, of course, would not be nearly as interesting without considering the people who experienced it. They lend a colorful fascination to the past, and without them this or any other history would be nothing more than an empty stage, devoid of the actors.

Throughout the pages of the book, I have introduced a number of characters: soldiers, civilians, men, and women. All of them, soldiers and non-combatants, were forced into the fray because in the Civil War, especially in the South, boundaries separating the home front from the war front were blurred or simply didn't exist. Many of the people mentioned are lesser-known or unknown in mainstream Civil War literature, and the reader may not be familiar with their lives. But through their voices, I have attempted to tell the story of Mobile struggling through a crucial piece of our past. For me, bringing to life forgotten people like St. John Richardson Liddell, Kate Cumming, Philip Stevenson, and Christopher Andrews, to name a few, made this possible. Their diaries, letters, and journals give us more than just a glimpse at the horrors of war in a time of extreme duress. In an effort to make the reader a bystander or eyewitness to this time, much of the book is written in the present tense, a style, I believe, that lends an essence of reality to the past.

When I began work on this book it was only with the intention of presenting an account of the military operations of the Mobile Campaign in the last year of the war. And I assumed that the majority of readers would be primarily interested in increasing their knowledge about Civil War combat in this particular time and place. I believe I've given an adequate account of the campaign; but along the way I also found myself telling the story of life in a city surrounded by the drama of war in mid-nineteenth-century America. I did not foresee that I would end up writing about such things as the everyday miseries of the citizens, their attitudes about the war, or the tragic magazine explosion that occurred after the city had already surrendered, destroying property and ruining so many lives. But again, there was no clear distinction between the Southern home front and the battle grounds of the Civil War, and it was obvious, to me at least, one story could not be told without the other. I hope, then, the reader will like this approach.

# Acknowledgments

It seems to me that there's a curious paradox in play when writing about historical events. On one hand, it's an extremely lonesome business. One spends endless hours alone, rummaging through the verbal thickets of reports, diaries, letters, old newspapers on faded microfilm, and mountains of other dusty minutia, gathering information about some long-forgotten event. And yet, at the same time, one must develop a strong dependency on a multitude of people—people who, for the most part, belong to that communal body of literati commonly known as librarians, archivists, historians, and writers. And to them I owe a special debt of gratitude, one I'm sure I can never repay.

It's only appropriate that I should first acknowledge those historians who have already plowed this ground. They are the ones who supplied the paper trail that pointed me in the right direction. Beginning with C. C. Andrews, a Union general who was actually present during the siege of Mobile and later chronicled the event in his 1889 publication *History of the Campaign of Mobile*, down through Sean Michael O'Brien, who, I believe, was the most recent historian to recount the last year of the war in Mobile, their work gave me solid information together with perspective. A number of other eminent historians such as Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr., Noah Trudeau, Chester G. Hearn, and Jack Friend have all contributed some very good and scholarly books on Mobile during the Civil War.

Looking back on the tremendous amount of help and cooperation I received while attempting to collect the information for this story, much of it was provided by the Local History and Genealogy Division of the Mobile Public Library. Indispensable sources such as the voluminous *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and the *Southern Historical Society Papers* were made available to me, together with books, historical reviews, and the treasure of some unpublished letters on file there. Specifically, I would like to thank Amy Raley, the manager and historian of the library, along

with her knowledgeable staff: Janie L. Daugherty, Roy Tucker, Iras Smith, and Ann Briggs.

A number of others, along the way, contributed advice, direction, and materials that helped me in completing this book. Here I would especially like to thank Donnie Barrett, director of the Fairhope Museum of History, for his time and the wealth of information he provided. Donnie has a superb knowledge of both Spanish Fort and Blakeley during the war years. Also a gracious thank you goes out to several others who either furnished me with much needed material or offered invaluable advice and direction. So, in no special order, they are: Meredith McDonough, archivist with the Alabama Department of Archives and History; Gary L. Johnson, archivist with the Military Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Jo Ann Flirt, director at Blakeley Historic Park; Russ Adams, proprietor of Bienville Books in Mobile; Barry Cowan, archivist at Louisiana State University; Julie Stoner with the Library of Congress; and David Bagwell, a true gentleman lawyer and wise counsel on the history of Baldwin County, Alabama.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Lindsey Gilder. It's with some degree of shame that I admit to being technically impaired in the bewildering world of word processors and computers. Thus I constantly find myself relying on the skills of another. So, thanks, Lindsey, for all the times you saved me from myself.

The list of people I'm indebted to seems endless. To my publisher, Kathleen C. Nettleton, and editor-in-chief, Nina Kooij, with Pelican Publishing, I am grateful that they not only accepted the book for publishing but produced a first-rate work from my manuscript. I must give a special thanks here to Erin Classen, the copy editor whose efforts made valuable improvements to the text. Erin is truly a talented wordsmith.

And finally, I owe more than I can say to my family, especially my wife, Elaine Hartley Blount, and my son, Trip, or more distinctly Russell W. Blount III, not only for their technical assistance in computer support; proofreading; indexing; procuring photographs, illustrations, and permissions; and mapping but also most importantly for their love and encouragement in completing the work.

To these and countless others go my heartfelt thanks for their contributions in trying to make this a better book. What remains in the way of faults and errors is clearly my responsibility, which I fully accept.



Besieged



*Mobile, Alabama, and Defenses, 1865* (Courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama)

## Chapter One

# This Fearful Scourge

On New Year's Day 1865 the people of the South mark the advent of a fifth calendar year in their revolt against the government of the United States of America. Although it's a holiday, there is no celebration. It's also a Sunday, but while the church bells are ringing there are few giving thanks. From Virginia to Texas the mood is the same: despair and desperation, and all share in it. Kate Cumming, a volunteer nurse in the Confederate army, sums it up this way: "The past year has equaled any of its predecessors for carnage and bloodshed . . . woe and desolation stare at us every way we turn."<sup>1</sup>

News of the war, all of which is bad, continues to crush their spirits. Near Richmond, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, once thought invincible, is now clinging to the long, miserable miles of filthy ditches around Petersburg in a last stand to defend the Confederate capital against Ulysses Grant's powerful Federal army. The Army of Tennessee, the South's only other army of importance, has nearly been annihilated in the cold hills surrounding Nashville, and the ragged survivors are now retreating through Mississippi, clattering south on dilapidated railroad cars toward the Gulf Coast. Since the fall of Vicksburg, the Mississippi River is completely under Union control, cutting the South in half and leaving the starving Rebel armies without the vital means of supplies and food. The economy is in shambles. Every Southern port east of the Mississippi has been blockaded and most large cities are now in Federal hands. Moreover, any hope of foreign intervention or aid from England or France has long since disappeared.

Along with the grim news of the war, recounting the loss of battles and geography, Southerners are dealing with personal losses. Well over a quarter million of their soldiers have died and many thousands more have been crippled or maimed in the

fighting. Others are just missing, languishing in Northern prisons, lost through desertion, or lying forgotten in some unmarked grave. In Columbia, South Carolina, Mary Chesnut, having no recent word from her husband, curls up on her sofa, wraps herself in a shawl, and worries. “Yesterday I broke down—gave way to abject terror,” she tells her diary, feeling “too dismal for moaning, even.”<sup>2</sup>

She has reason to worry. The South has become a somber land of widows dressed in black, hungry orphans, and wandering refugees. One of every five Southern men of military age has simply perished from the earth. Rare is the Southern family that has not felt the loss or pain of a loved one: a husband, a brother, a son, or all three, who have been killed, captured, or wounded. The dead, though, are perhaps the fortunate ones since so many of the survivors lie in hospitals wishing they could die. Some are disfigured with hideous wounds or incapacitated by illness or disease. Many men have been sent home without arms, legs, or eyes. But the women, as Mary Chesnut knows, suffer too. “Does anybody wonder,” she asks, “[why] so many women die? Grief and constant anxiety kill nearly as many women as men die on the battlefield.”<sup>3</sup>

But even with the defeats, deprivations, and personal miseries, many Southerners still cling to the hope that they can somehow achieve victory. Rather than admit defeat, they are willing to continue sacrificing and suffering for what they refuse to recognize is a lost cause. After all, there are still armies in the field with front-line soldiers who, by now, are hardened veterans. And there are still a few cities, strongholds, that have not yet fallen into Yankee hands.



Mobile, Alabama, is among those cities yet to be taken. It’s a charming, deep-South city with an abundance of beautiful antebellum homes shaded by stately oaks and tall, swaying pines, all tucked away on the Gulf Coast at the northwest corner of Mobile Bay. Dating back to 1711 and influenced by the French, Spanish, and British, the town has grown to a population of some

thirty thousand. The rapid growth is due mainly to its importance as a deep-water port, second only to New Orleans in the South. Before the war, trade and commerce had flourished, moving to and from the port by way of the Alabama and Tombigbee river systems, and over the important railroad connections spawning from the Mobile and Ohio Railroad.<sup>4</sup>

During most of the war years, Mobile has served the Confederacy as a blockade-running port, taking out cotton and bringing in military supplies along with other goods sought by civilians. But throughout this time, the Federal government has continued to tighten the naval blockade around Mobile, making the business of slipping through the Union fleet increasingly more difficult and dangerous. The last steamer to run the blockade was the *Denbigh*, escaping on the night of July 27, 1864. Just days later, on August 5, Adm. David Farragut damned the torpedoes, steamed his fleet into Mobile Bay, and defeated a small Confederate naval force led by Adm. Franklin Buchanan and the ironclad ram CSS *Tennessee*. Before the end of the month, Farragut's ships, together with Union land forces, forced the surrender of Forts Morgan, Gaines, and Powell guarding the entrance to the harbor.<sup>5</sup>

The city of Mobile, however, has not been taken and remains under Confederate control. But without the means to access any supplies through its port, together with the foreboding presence of Union land and sea forces on its doorstep, Mobile has become a city under siege. That realization, along with the effects of nearly four miserable years of war, leaves the citizens of Mobile, like the rest of the South, with little to celebrate on New Year's Day of 1865. "The occasion is not propitious for holiday rhetoric," complains the editor of the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, "for even our seasons of festival are tinged with the gloom of war clouds which overshadows the land."<sup>6</sup>

But despite the despair and sorrow affecting their city, Mobilians do their best to maintain a normal, if not festive, lifestyle. Throughout the war, the city has maintained its municipal government and courts. Public schools, churches, hospitals, and the Catholic college at Spring Hill have continued to function. Police and fire protection remain in operation. What's more, visitors and soldiers are always surprised at the bright social life that goes on in a city surrounded by war. Dances, parties,

parades, concerts, and plays have all continued. Since the fall of New Orleans early in the war, Mobile has become the social center of the South, and some go so far as to call it “the Paris of the Confederacy.”<sup>7</sup>

Agreeing with this sentiment is Mobilian Robert Tarleton, who had served as an artillery officer at Fort Morgan until late in the war when the fort surrendered and he was captured. Later, after escaping from a prison camp in New Orleans, he makes his way home and finds things much the same as before the Battle of Mobile Bay. “Our city is not at all changed in appearance,” he writes in a letter to his sweetheart, Sallie Lightfoot, “the band plays in the square as usual and to judge from the display on such festive occasions, you would never suppose it is in a state of siege.”<sup>8</sup>

At the Battle House Hotel on Royal Street, there is a continuous festive atmosphere that lures Confederate army officers, many of whom are high-ranking generals, to come from faraway places of duty to enjoy their furloughs “on a diet of whiskey, music, and women.” Besides the soldiers staying at the hotel, there are visiting Southern politicians, including Pres. Jefferson Davis, as well as other dignitaries, like the celebrated British observer Col. Arthur Fremantle. Even such notorious names as Belle Boyd, the Confederate spy, appear on the guest register. As far away as Richmond there is news of Mobile’s social life. An acquaintance of Mary Chesnut, having just returned to the Confederate capital after visiting Mobile, describes the city as a place of “peace and plenty” where he attended “sixteen weddings and twenty-seven tea parties.”<sup>9</sup>

Officers and sailors in the Confederate navy also join in the social diversions of the city whenever their vessels are able to slip into the harbor and anchor near the center of town. As soon as they get shore liberty, the sailors roam the streets taking advantage of the cosmopolitan setting. A correspondent for the *Times* (London) remarks in his diary, “The city . . . abounds in oyster saloons, drinking houses, lager-beer and wine-shops, and gambling and dancing places . . . the most foreign looking city I have yet seen in the States.” Naval officers pass their time calling on some of the town’s prominent females, such as author Augusta Jane Evans and socialite Madame Octavia LeVert. The hospitality

of the ladies is of course repaid by invitations to balls, dinners, and moonlight cruises aboard the ships.<sup>10</sup>

Even as the war drags on into its final few months, Kate Cumming writes in her journal, "Mobile never was as gay as it is at present; not a night passes but some large ball or party is given. Same old excuse: that they are for the benefit of the soldiers; and indeed the soldiers seem to enjoy them." But the hardships of the war are never far from her mind: "Notwithstanding the gayety," she continues, "nearly all the churches are daily opened for special prayers, imploring the Most High to look down in pity on us, and free us from this fearful scourge." And because it is such a fearful scourge, there are those who prefer a more stoic approach to the war and have little patience with the frivolities taking place in Mobile. One stalwart objector to all the social festivities is Augusta Jane Evans, who scolds her lady friends with the question: "Are Southern women so completely oblivious of the claims of patriotism and humanity, that in this season of direst extremity, they tread the airy mazes of the dance, while the matchless champions of freedom are shivering in bloody trenches or lying stark on frozen fields of glory?"<sup>11</sup>

Such desperate and conflicting feelings as those expressed by Cumming and Evans are becoming the norm for a city torn apart and worn down by war. While the majority of Mobilians supported the rest of the state and the entire South in favoring secession in 1861, war weariness and deprivation have caused more and more citizens to feel that continuing to resist is futile, and many are now only interested in ending the war. Others, of course, want to fight on at all costs. "Never give up," writes a Mobile wife to her soldier husband, "I would rather die than submit." And a hundred die-hard Mobile secessionists, expressing their confidence in victory late in the war, form the League of Loyal Confederates and announce their intentions of expanding the society to every corner of the South.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that the level of discontent with the war is in direct proportion to the wealth of the people experiencing it. Despair and grumbling is, of course, more widespread among the poorer classes since they are the ones most likely to suffer from shortages of food and other supplies. But as the war moves into its fourth bloody year, the ranks of the indigent begin to swell. Prices for all goods

continue to rise while Confederate currency falls in value. Men are fighting miles away from their families, unable to help them through what has become a desperate economy. Many men begin to desert when they receive letters from their wives containing pitiful pleadings such as *Can't you please come home? There is no money and our children are hungry*. Some troops stationed near Mobile form a so-called Peace Society and are promptly arrested when they threaten a mutiny. Such dissatisfaction becomes so prevalent among the soldiers and citizens of Mobile that even the enemy besieging their city is aware of it. In a letter to his parents during the siege, a Union soldier from Wisconsin says that Confederate prisoners they have taken near Mobile "seem to be heartily sick of the war; some of them go so far as to say that the principal portion of the inhabitants of Mobile are praying for our success."<sup>13</sup>

Even before the siege had gripped the city there was mounting dissatisfaction of the war, especially among the poorer classes. In September of 1863, hundreds of poor Mobile women, desperate for food and supplies for their families, armed themselves with hatchets, axes, and frying pans and stormed down Dauphin Street looting the stores of food and clothing in what became known as the Bread Riot. But now, with the siege in place and the abrupt end of goods being brought in by blockade runners, matters have become much worse. Merchants' shelves are empty, and what supplies are available are priced so exorbitantly high that few can afford them. Nothing is plentiful except Confederate money and, because it's nearly worthless, very few can get enough of that to buy the necessities.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of these conditions, crime is rampant, mostly incidents of petty theft and violence. Mayor R. H. Slough, who presides over the municipal court known as the Mayor's Court, finds that he is dealing with an increasing number of people arrested and brought before him for punishment or fines. As usual, many of the offenders are women who have become violent and disorderly in an effort to provide for their families. One woman, a certain Mary Conley, brought before the court is described by a local paper as someone "good with her fists as well as her tongue, and [who] made free use of both." And for using both in a brawl, the mayor fines her twenty-five dollars.<sup>15</sup>



Adding to the civilian problem is that of the soldiers stationed here. They are quartered throughout the city and out in the suburbs as far as Hall's Mill, a place that has been used as a camping and drill ground for troops since the beginning of the war. Rows of dilapidated barracks, mostly log huts, house Confederate soldiers defending fortifications at the western approaches of the city, "and to look at it," according to a Louisiana soldier stationed here, "gives one the blues." From campgrounds such as this there is an increasing number of soldiers marauding about in search of something to eat. Civilians raising vegetable gardens to sell at market find that "it is useless to attempt to raise vegetables for the Mobile market, for the soldiers will allow nothing green to sprout without pouncing on it." The raids become so "frequent," according to a local paper, that the market gardeners "are unable to supply the ordinary demands of the city."<sup>16</sup>

Gardens, though, are not the only places being plundered by hungry soldiers. "Scarcely a day passes," complains a newspaper, "without our hearing of some chicken coup [*sic*], pig pen, or larder being robbed." There is, of course, very little to steal in the last months of the war. Nevertheless, the soldiers steal it anyway. In a noble effort to provide for them, and eliminate some of the looting, the better-off ladies of the town begin forming aid societies to collect and distribute food and other supplies to the Confederate soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

The ladies who make up such aid societies and service organizations are not without problems and miseries of their own. "There is nothing cheap," says Mobilian Kate Cumming, who claims that the "all-absorbing topic" on meeting with a friend is about "something to eat" or "How do you manage to live?" or "What have you got to wear?" Without the benefit of the blockade runners, material to make clothing has become almost impossible to come by. "Dyeing old clothes is about the most fashionable thing done," and women have become most resourceful. "All the rag-bags have been emptied," brags Cumming about their ingenuity, "and dresses turned and cut into all kinds of shapes. Any and every thing is the fashion; nothing is lost."<sup>18</sup>

Fashion, however, is the last thing concerning many of Mobile's women. They are the ones dressed in black and mourning the loss of a loved one. Susan Tarleton, for instance, is still in a "state of

shock” over the loss of Patrick Cleburne, a general of considerable fame, to whom she was engaged to be married. For weeks now she has been in “deep mourning” after learning of Cleburne’s death from a newsboy hawking his papers on St. Louis Street. As it so often happens, “Miss Sue,” as Cleburne called her, was not expecting such tragic news while strolling through the garden at the family home. It was there, though, that a newsboy out on the street called out the headlines that her fiancé had been killed at the battle of Franklin, and she immediately fainted.<sup>19</sup>

Such tales of woe become even more frequent as the war slowly passes into its final bloody year. But for all the sorrow and hardships brought on by the war and voiced in so many historical documents there are still those voices that remain silent. They belong to the slaves. For them, too, there is little to rejoice over as the New Year dawns on Mobile. Since the beginning of the struggle, large numbers of black male slaves have been forced to endure the arduous misery of building the miles of defensive fortifications and earthen forts around the city and the surrounding areas. Now, as the enemy draws near, the demand for slave labor only increases.

In 1865, slaves in Mobile make up about 25 percent of the population, or roughly 7,500 individuals, with a little over half that number being black females. In addition to the slaves, there are about 1,200 free blacks or “Creoles” within the county. The black experience during this time is, of course, much worse than that of the poorest class of whites. They too are plagued by the shortage of food and other necessities and, as a result, there is an increase in black crime, especially among the slave population. Like the hungry whites, petty theft is the most frequent of their offenses; but unlike the punishment for a white, slave punishment is swift and severe. Whippings are typical, with the number of lashes increasing with the level of the crime. A stolen watermelon, for instance, will bring some poor wretch thirty-nine lashes. Murder, though rare, will cost him his life.<sup>20</sup>

In the waning days of the war, as the Union army tightens its grip around Mobile, there is a growing uneasiness among the slave owners over the possibility of an insurrection. This worry causes a tighter control over all blacks, slave and free. Curfews and other restrictive ordinances are rigorously enforced until, finally,

the military authorities order all slaves to either be enlisted as laborers for the fortifications or removed from the city. This, of course, does not please many of the owners who can't afford to lose their workers and don't want their slaves subjected to the exhausting work of digging the defensive breastworks that are supposedly going to protect them.<sup>21</sup>

Such, then, is the situation in Mobile as her people prepare themselves for another year in what they privately fear may be a hopeless fight. And through it all, it's almost as though the city has developed a split personality. At first glance, there is a jovial impression of "peace and plenty" with an abundance of balls, parties, concerts, and plays. Citizens pretend to be confident of victory, going about their business as if their routines have not been disturbed at all. There is no sense of urgency. Schools, hospitals, churches, and the local government operate as normal. But it is, in fact, only a misleading façade. Behind the town's closed doors, we find something entirely different, something desperate. Here we find people shuddering with anxiety, hungry, destitute, mourning over death, fearful of the enemy waiting outside the city and the slaves waiting within, and angry to be a part of this great national drama called war.

So it seems only reasonable that Kate Cumming, in a woeful but prophetic declaration, writes in her journal, "God alone knows what may be the fate of Mobile ere many days have elapsed; for it is no feint this time. The enemy means something now; of that all are confident."<sup>22</sup>