

Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville

A SCDNR Heritage Preserve



Fort Lamar Heritage Preserve

This South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Cultural Heritage Preserve is 14 acres in size and includes the remnants of Tower Battery, later renamed Battery Lamar, a Confederate earthwork defensive structure from the American Civil War. It was the site of a battle on June 16, 1862, where 5,000 men fought for control of the "back door to Charleston." Historians theorize that the outcome of this battle, later known as the Battle of Secessionville, named for the community on the peninsula, potentially lengthened the American Civil War by two years when the Union failed to take Charleston by a method other than invading the harbor.

It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Secessionville Historic District in 1979. The site was acquired in 1996 by SCDNR with funds from the Heritage Trust Land Fund and was dedicated as a Heritage Preserve.

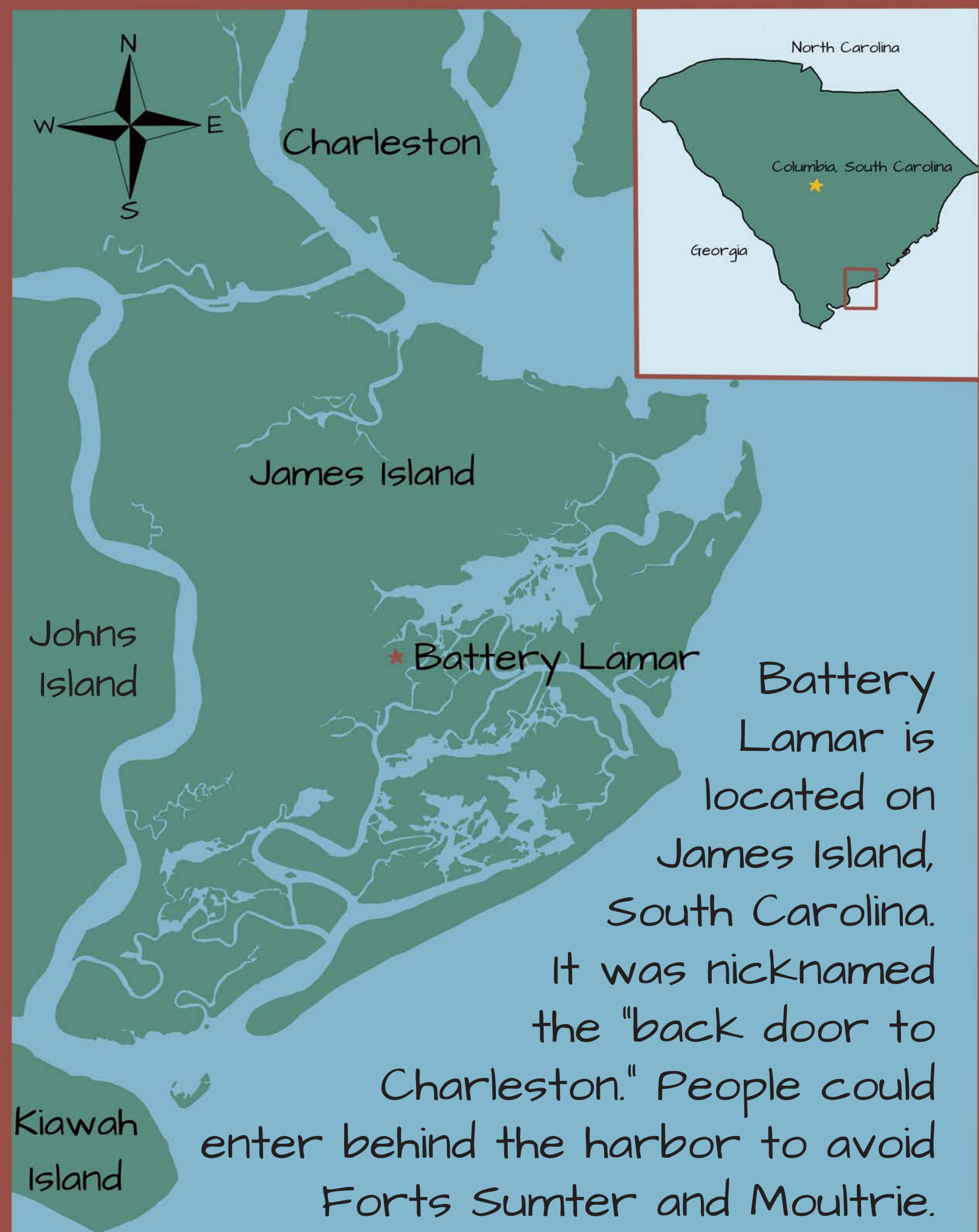
Fort Lamar Heritage Preserve
1231 Fort Lamar Road
Charleston, SC 29412

This preserve is open from one hour before sunset until one hour after sunset.

Visit the SCDNR's Heritage Trust website <https://heritagetrust.dnr.sc.gov/> to learn more about Fort Lamar and other preserves, view documentary films, and download lessons plans and activities.

Greetings! Welcome to Fort Lamar Heritage Preserve. My name is Captain and I'll be your guide today. It may look like a hill now, but this was once the location of a fort known as "Battery Lamar" and "Tower Battery" that defended Charleston during the American Civil War.



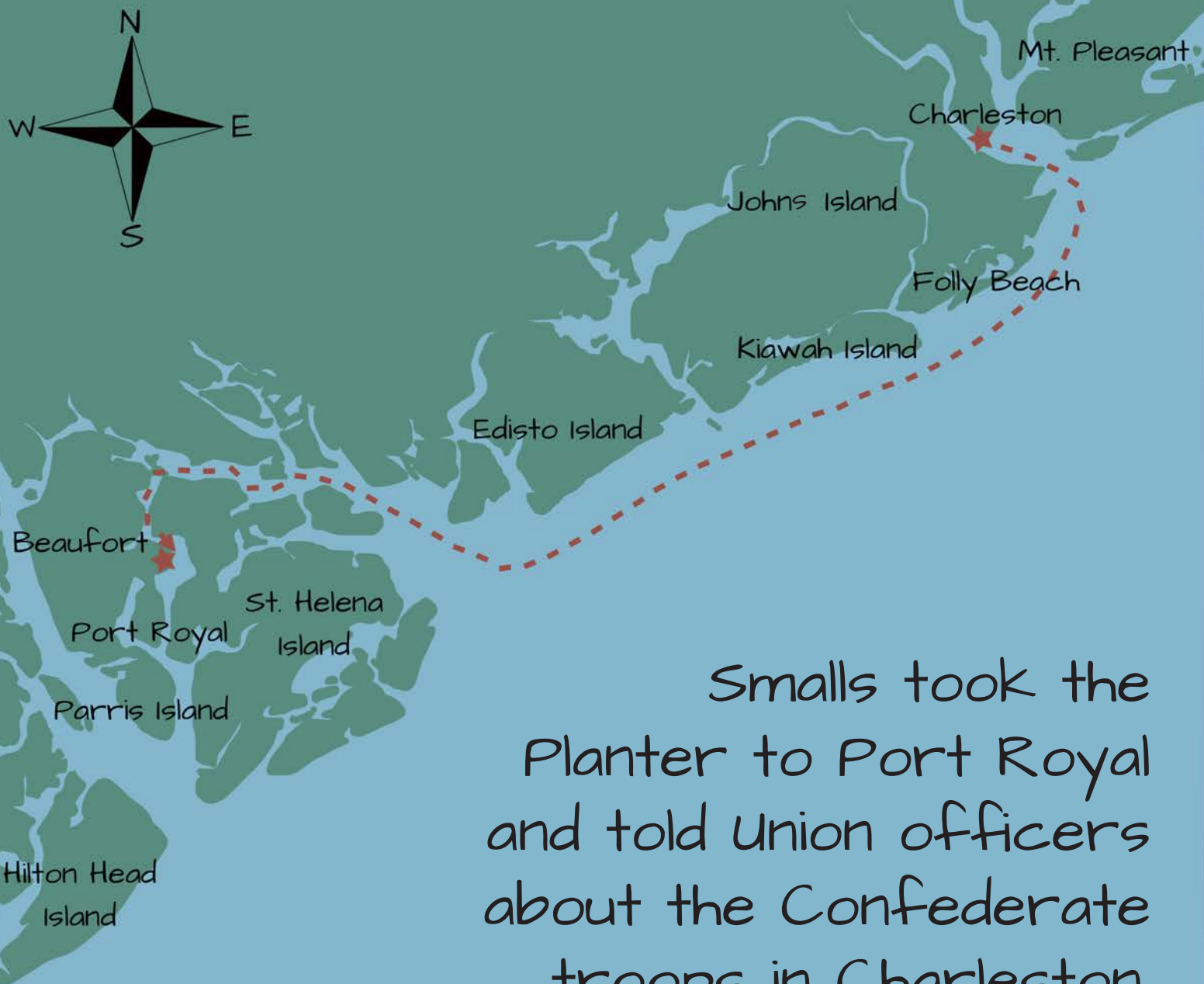


Battery Lamar is located on James Island, South Carolina. It was nicknamed the "back door to Charleston." People could enter behind the harbor to avoid Forts Sumter and Moultrie.

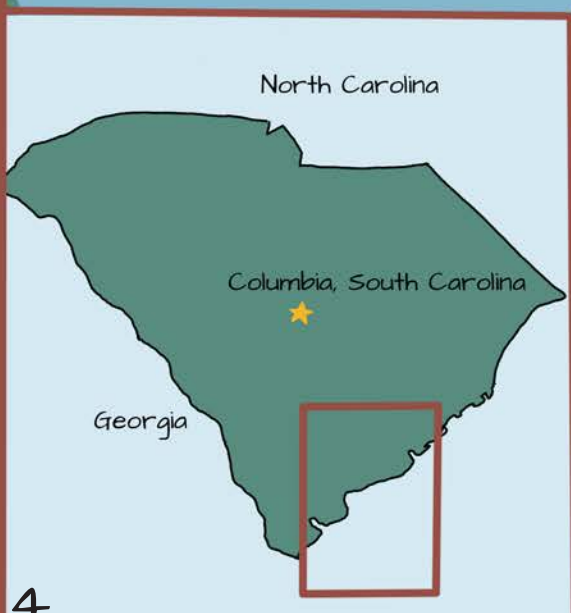
The story of Battery Lamar begins on May 12, 1862, in Charleston. In the dark of night, an enslaved man named Robert Smalls working on a steamship called "The Planter," took control of the boat.

He dressed like the captain and sailed past the Confederate watchmen to the Union blockade and to freedom.





Smalls took the Planter to Port Royal and told Union officers about the Confederate troops in Charleston. What Smalls shared convinced Union General Hunter that it was time to start moving the Union Army toward Charleston.



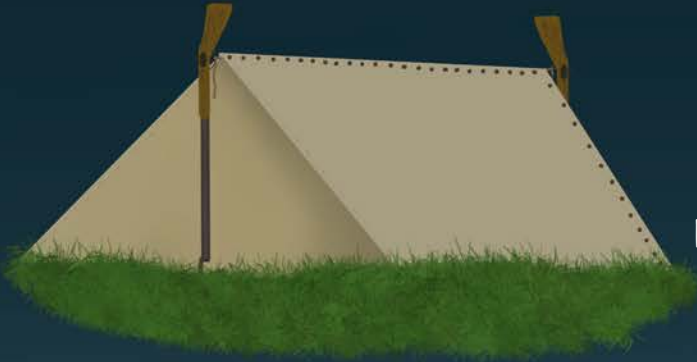
One week later, General Hunter landed the first of his troops on James Island. Both Confederate and Union armies knew something big was coming.



The Union soldiers set up camp. They slept on the ground, or in tents if they were lucky. Many used their haversacks - bags used to carry food - as pillows. The weather was very rainy, and the soldiers were often wet and hungry.

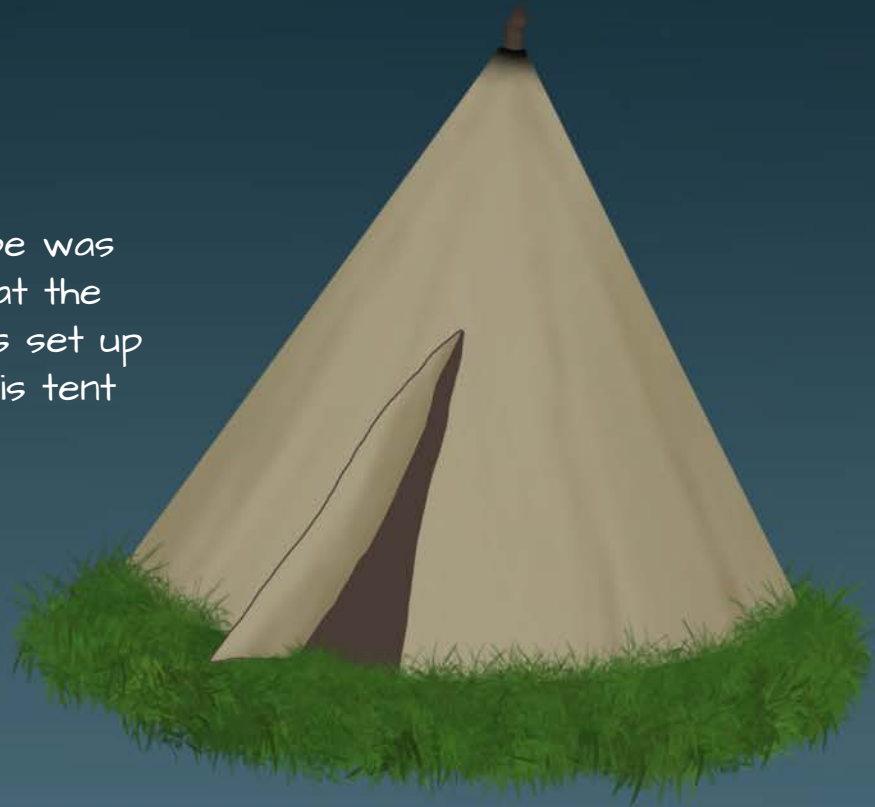


These are a few types of tents that were common during the American Civil War.

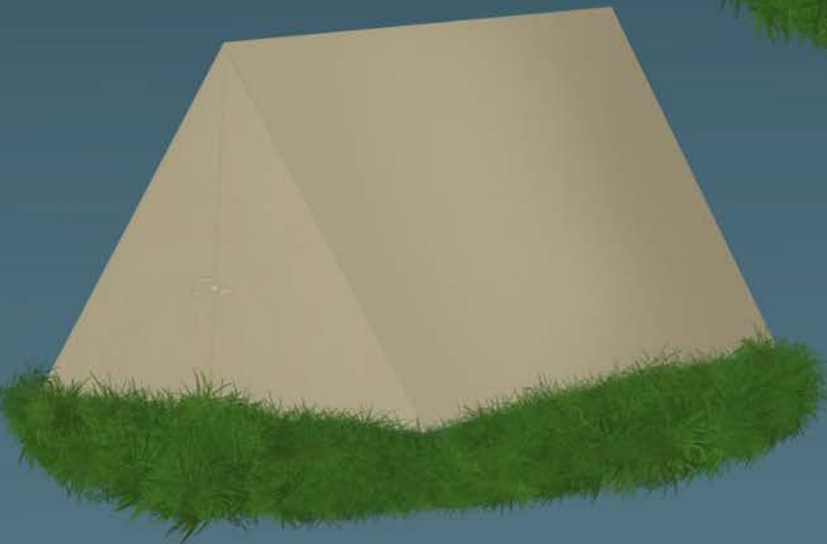


Dog Tent - Two soldiers buttoned together their half tents to make a shelter hung on a string that was tied on two sticks. Sometimes they used their guns with bayonets as sticks. This was a common tent since it was easy to carry and set up.

Sibley or Bell Tent - This tent type was less common but was used more at the start of the war. A single pole was set up with a cloth over it like a "tipi." This tent housed 12 men or more.



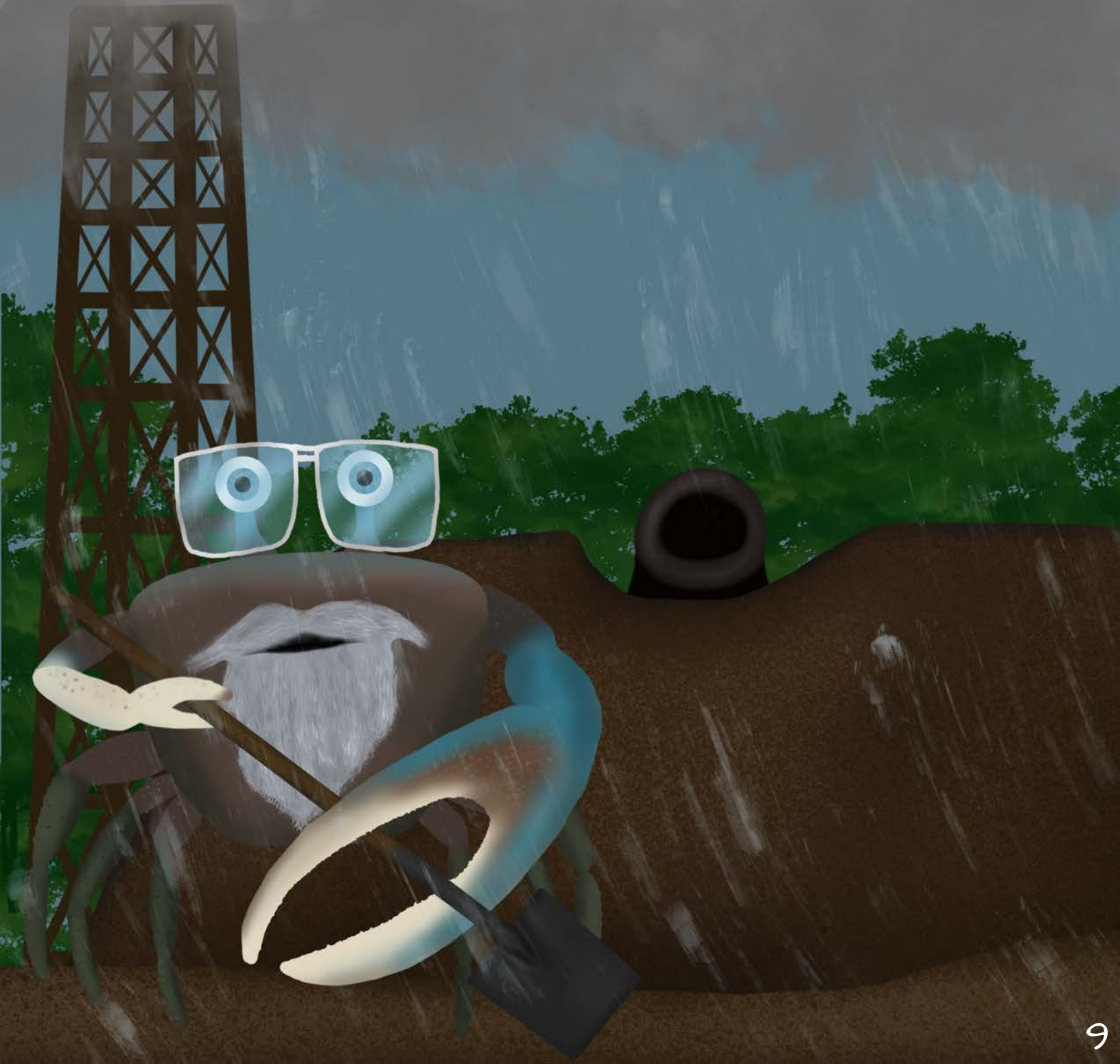
Wedge or A-Frame Tent - This tent type was common in camps but not common in the field. Heavy poles held up the fabric which made an A, or wedge, shape. Up to six men could sleep in this tent.



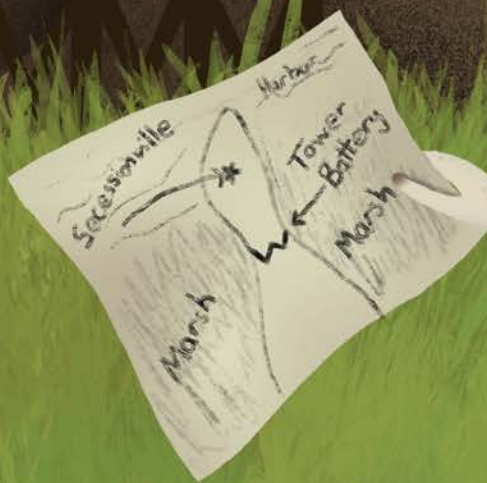
For over two weeks, the Union Army camped on James Island where the rain soaked their tents and created lots of mud. They skirmished, or had small fights, with the Confederate soldiers. They tried to find out where Confederate soldiers were camped and how many soldiers were there.



Meanwhile, the Confederate soldiers were building an earthwork to house an artillery battery, which is a special group of soldiers that fire big guns such as cannons and mortars.



The Confederates picked the smallest part of the Secessionville peninsula for the battery, because the Union soldiers could not get to the Confederate camps behind it. Marsh land on both sides made it very hard to sneak around. The battery was also called "Tower Battery" for the tall observation tower built inside.



The soldiers all wore uniforms. The Confederates wore gray, and the Union wore dark blue. Both sides gave the men jackets, pants, and shoes. Some of these uniforms even had special buttons like these, which were worn by men who fought at Fort Lamar.



The left is a South Carolina button, and the right is a 79th New York Highlander button.



The men carried their food in waterproof bags called haversacks. They kept personal items in knapsacks, which held things like extra clothes, photos, paper and ink, letters, playing cards, and books.

One of the most common foods that the men in the Union Army ate was hardtack, a baked cracker made by mixing water with flour. Confederate soldiers had Johnny Cakes, which were made with cornmeal and water. Both sides had rations of coffee, beans, and occasionally vegetables or meat such as salted pork that the men called "salt-horse."





At 3 a.m. on June 16, 1862, the Confederate soldiers stopped building the battery for the night and went to sleep in the unfinished Tower Battery. They trusted that their lookout "pickets" would wake them up if they sensed trouble.

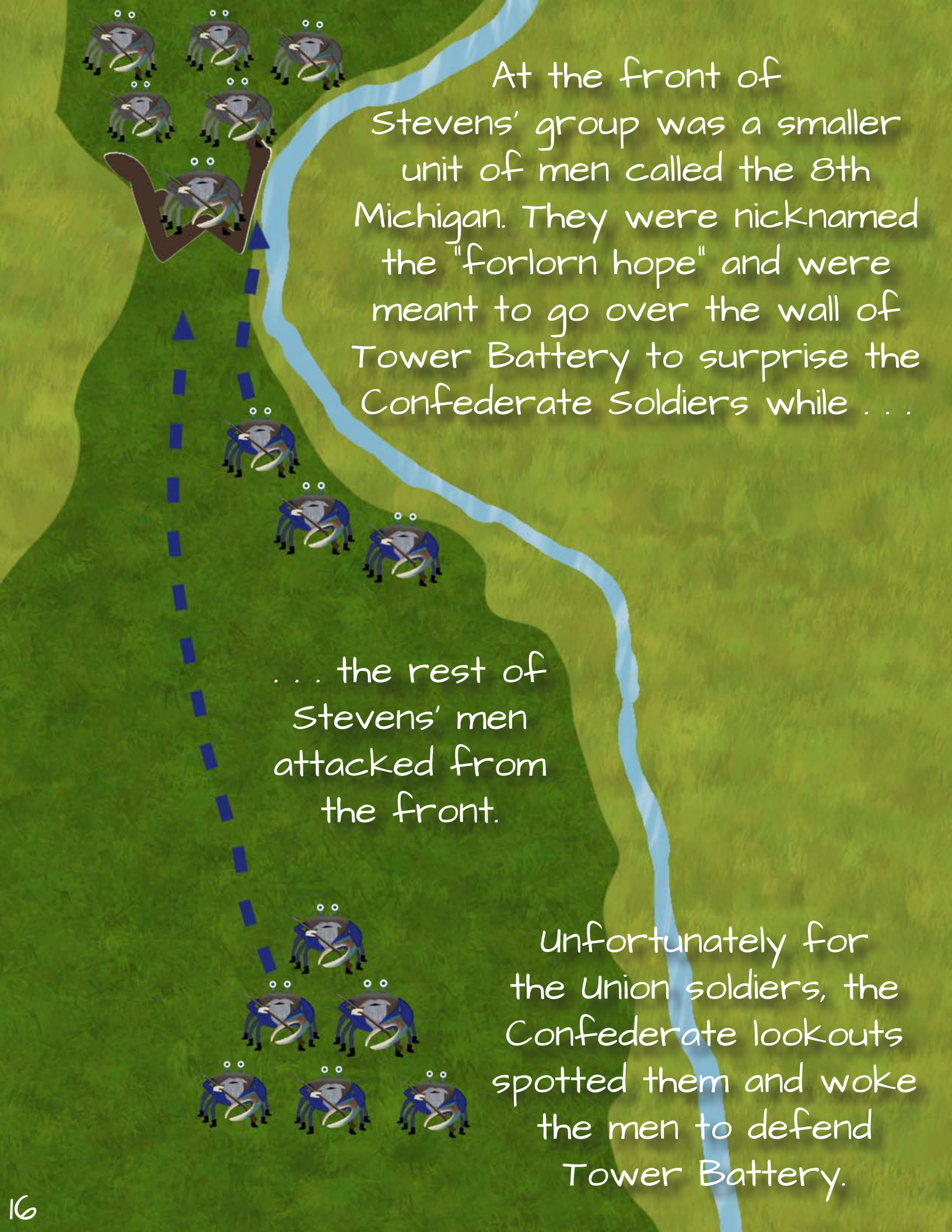
Across the island, Union General Benham ordered his army to march toward Tower Battery in two groups.

One group, under Union General Wright, would sneak around the back of Tower Battery, while

. . . the second group, under Union General Stevens would attack from the front!

Map Key

-  - Union Movement
-  - Water
-  - Land
-  - Marsh
-  Confederate Position
-  Union Position
-  Tower Battery

An illustration of a military unit marching along a path. The path is a dashed blue line with arrowheads pointing upwards, set against a green, hilly background. A light blue river flows along the right side of the path. The soldiers are depicted as stylized figures with blue bodies, white faces, and white eyes. They are carrying rifles. At the top of the path, a group of seven soldiers is shown in a dark brown, irregular shape that resembles a trench or a fortification. Below this group, the path continues with several more soldiers marching in a line. The text is written in a white, handwritten-style font.

At the front of Stevens' group was a smaller unit of men called the 8th Michigan. They were nicknamed the "forlorn hope" and were meant to go over the wall of Tower Battery to surprise the Confederate soldiers while . . .

. . . the rest of Stevens' men attacked from the front.

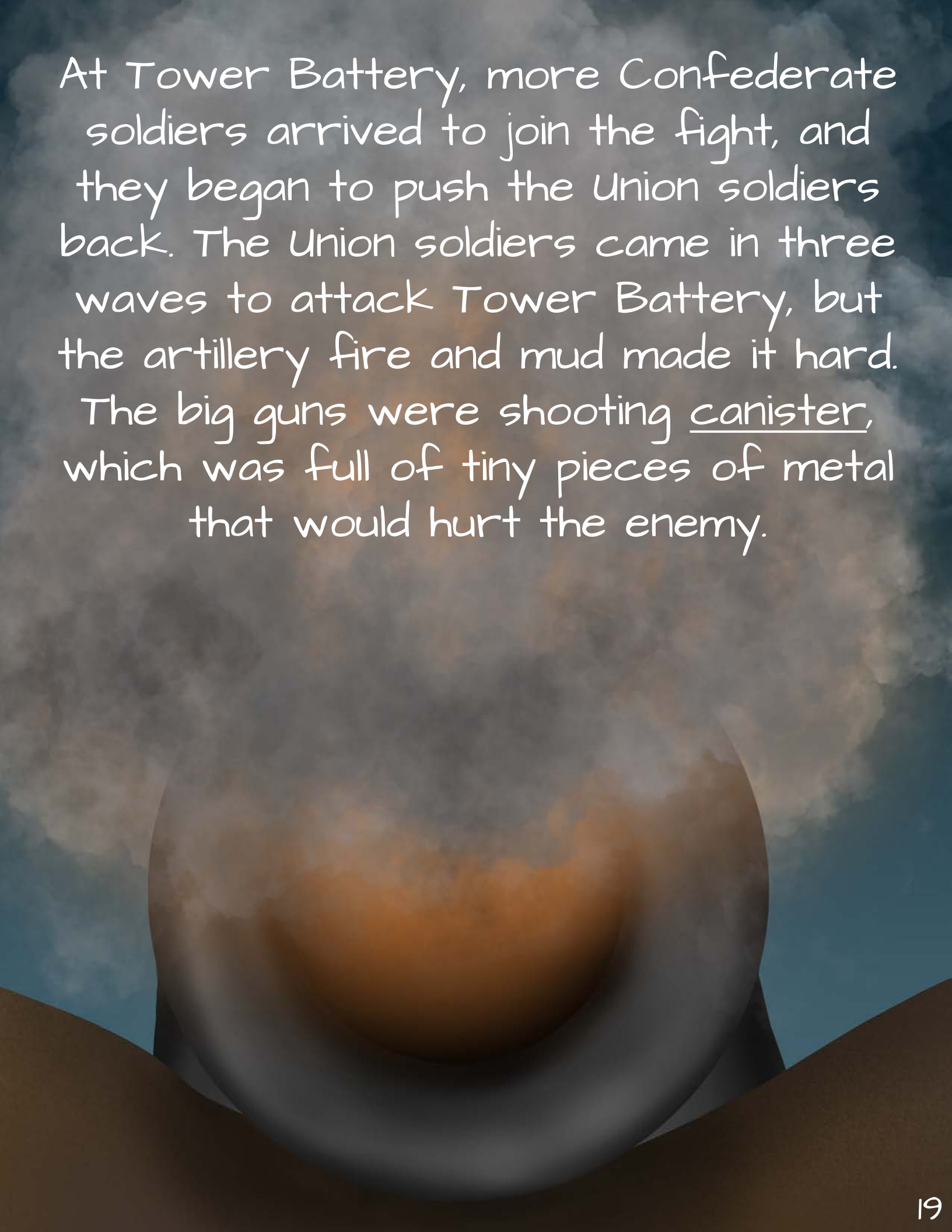
Unfortunately for the Union soldiers, the Confederate lookouts spotted them and woke the men to defend Tower Battery.

The Union soldiers attacked using bayonets like this one, which were sharp, knife-like pieces attached to the end of a gun. Now awake, the Confederate soldiers fought back and fired their artillery at the rest of General Stevens' men running toward the battery. Many men died in Tower Battery and on the field.





Meanwhile, General Wright's men tried to flank, or get behind Tower Battery. In the dark, they marched right into the marsh "pluff mud" and got stuck knee deep.



At Tower Battery, more Confederate soldiers arrived to join the fight, and they began to push the Union soldiers back. The Union soldiers came in three waves to attack Tower Battery, but the artillery fire and mud made it hard. The big guns were shooting canister, which was full of tiny pieces of metal that would hurt the enemy.



General Benham realized that he had lost too many men and called for the Union soldiers to retreat. They gathered their hurt friends and began moving back from Tower Battery into the safety of the bushes that lined the field.

The Confederates won the battle and kept the Union from taking over Charleston - at least for the day.



As the men on both sides of the fight remembered the battle, they realized how scary it had been and how lucky they were to be alive.

After the battle, two brothers realized that they were on different sides of the same fight that day. Alexander Campbell on the Union side, and James Campbell on the Confederate side.



Both survived and sent each other letters under a white flag after the fighting stopped. Many brothers fought on different sides during the war.

General Benham was told not to attack Tower Battery. He did it anyway and said it was a "reconnaissance in force,"

which means he was trying to get information about the battery by testing its strength with a battle, not trying to take it over. No one believed him, and he was later arrested.



The Tower Battery was later renamed Battery Lamar, and eventually Fort Lamar, after Colonel Thomas Lamar, who took charge of the Confederate soldiers during the battle. He fired the big guns and fought on even after he was hurt. Men even said he seemed to be everywhere at once!



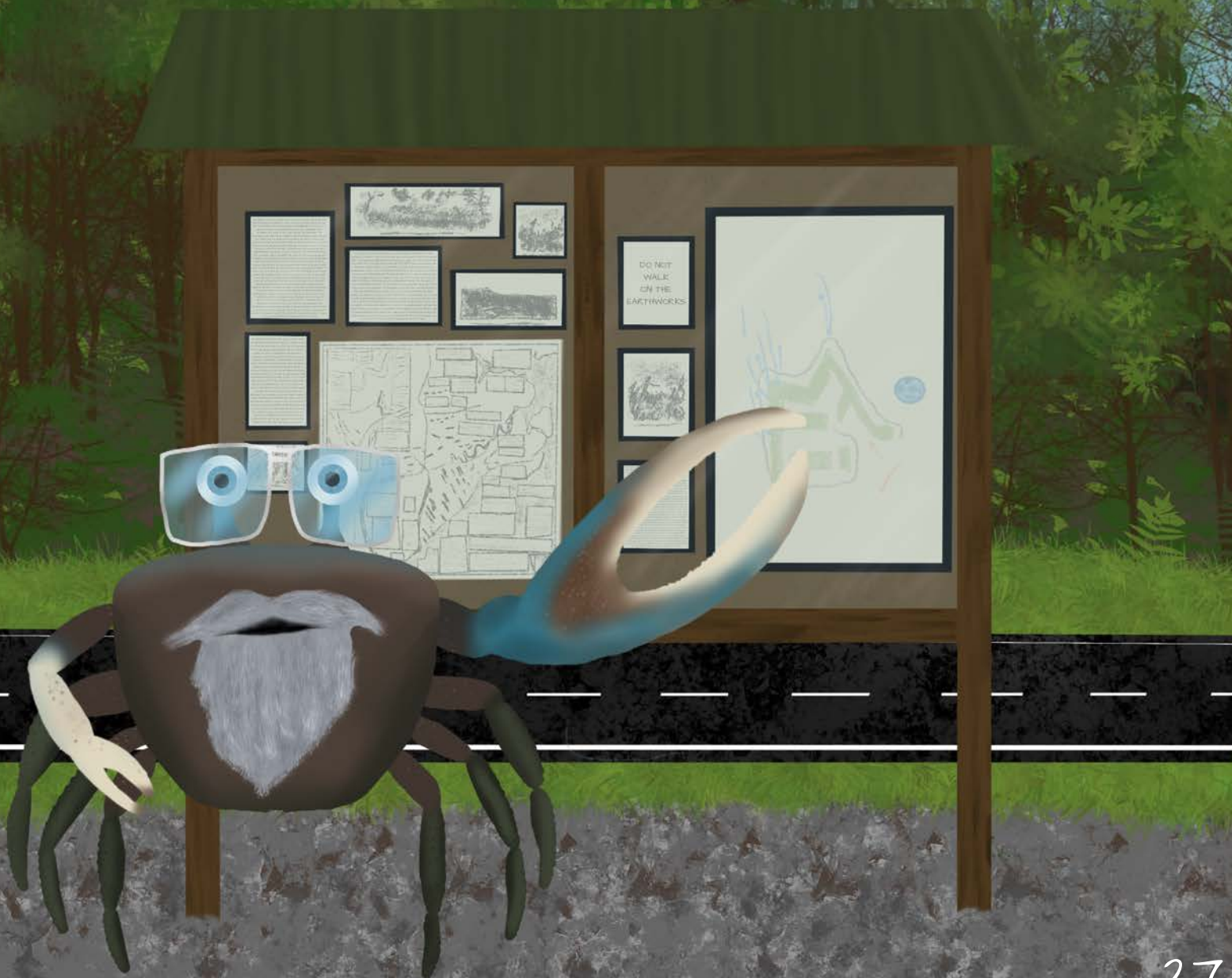
Battery Lamar was used until the end of the American Civil War. After the war, it became farmland, and eventually a road was cut through the middle of the fort. Today, this land is protected by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Heritage Trust Program and is open for the public to visit.



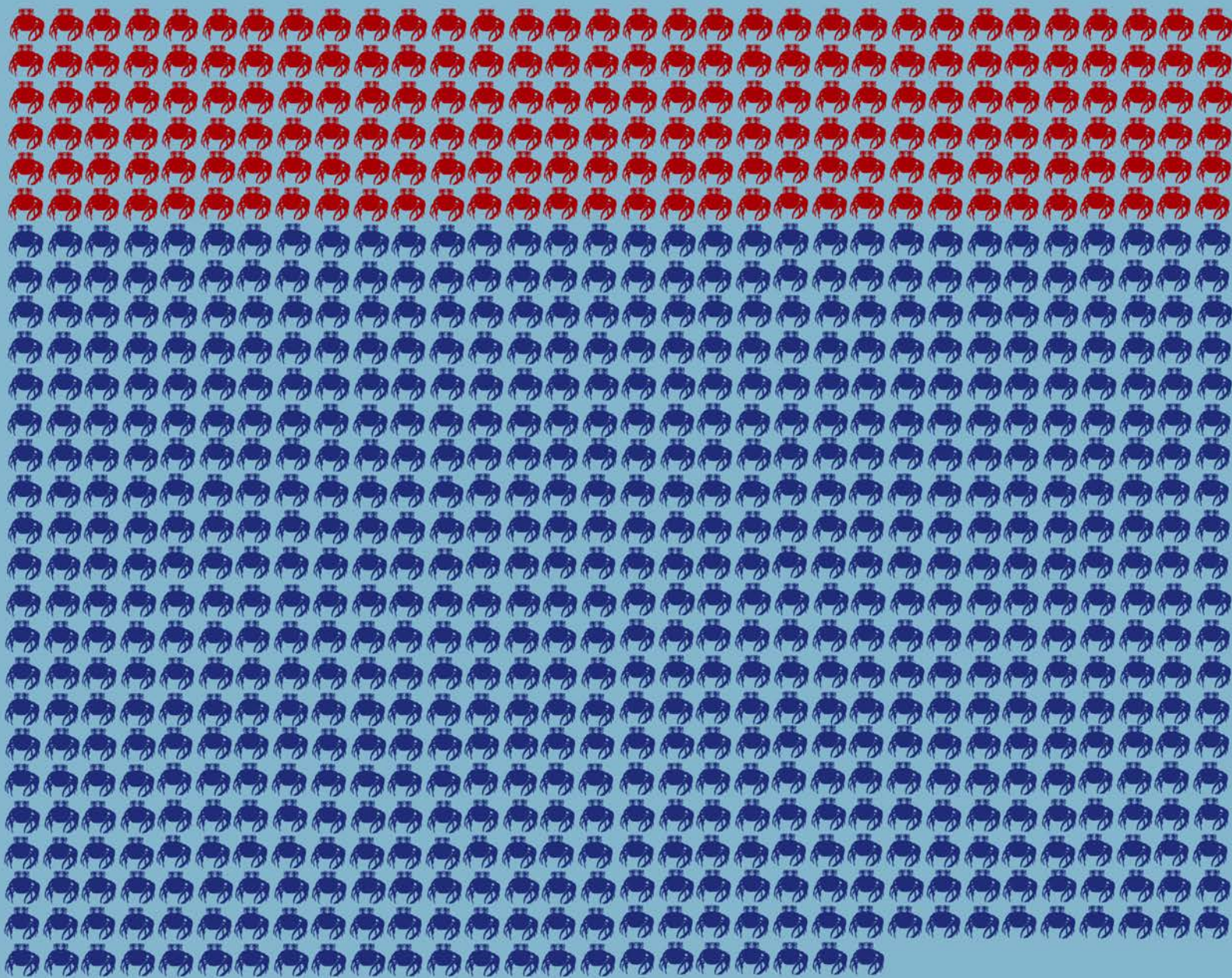
Since 1996, the Heritage Trust Program has preserved what remains of the battery. Archaeologists have learned more about the history of Fort Lamar through excavations. Fort Lamar has been heavily impacted by both erosion and looting.



This site, and others like it, hold the hidden pieces of our past. This history is not always easy to talk about and is never simple. In the end, what matters is remembering the people who experienced something big here, and the lessons learned from that event.



Almost 5,000 men participated in the Battle of Secessionville. The graphic below shows that 887 men were hurt, killed, or went missing on each side of the battle.



Confederate
Casualty



Union
Casualty

Glossary

American Civil War - The war between the Union and the Confederacy over state's rights, including the political and economic impacts of enslavement and the existence of the practice.

Artillery Battery - A special unit, or group, of soldiers in an army that work together to fire artillery (big guns) like cannons and mortars.

Bayonet - A knifelike piece that attaches to the end of a musket or rifle that can be used to stab the enemy.

Canister - A type of shot that was filled with tiny pieces of metal and loaded into a cannon. When shot, the metal pieces would scatter to injure the enemy.

Confederacy - The states that split from the Union during the American Civil War, fighting for the state's rights to keep enslavement.

Earthwork - A type of structure made out of earth or dirt. During the American Civil War, earthworks could be forts or batteries like Battery Lamar.

Enslavement - The keeping of a person against their will and forcing them to work without pay. In the United States this meant the enslaved were viewed as property and not people who had rights and deserved freedom.

Excavation - The systematic scientific digging of a cultural (archaeological) site.

Flank - To move around the side and attack the enemy.

Hardtack - A baked cracker made of water mixed with flour and sometimes salt. It was known for being very hard and solid, almost like a rock.

Haversack - A waterproof bag where soldiers often kept their food.

Johnny Cakes - A baked cracker much like hardtack that consisted of cornmeal and water.

Looting - Theft of cultural resources.

Pickets - Soldiers who were used as lookouts guarding the main group of soldiers. Their job was to spot the enemy if they came close and warn the rest of their men.

Pluff Mud - A dark brown mud made of fine silt that is thick and easy to get stuck in. It is found in salt water marshes and has a distinctive smell.

Reconnaissance in force - An attack using a lot of men to see how strong the enemy is and where they are. It is used to find out information, not to take over a position.

Salt-Horse - Chunks of salted pork that were given out as rations to soldiers during the Civil War.

Skirmish - A small fight.

Union - The states that stayed part of the United States during the American Civil War, fighting against the states' rights to secede and later against enslavement.

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A Note on Accuracy and Detail

The history surrounding the Battle of Secessionville is a complicated one, including the history of enslavement in the United States. The land surrounding the battery would have been a site of enslavement on James Island. This issue is explored further in the book Fort Frederick: A SCDNR Heritage Preserve and the World It Changed, while Fort Lamar focuses on the battle and daily life of soldiers on both sides of the conflict.

The battle was far more complex than the simplified version in this book, with more than 25 regiments participating and Union gunboats firing at Battery Lamar from the Stono River. The telling here is simplified for a young audience, but more detail can be found in Patrick Brennan's book "Secessionville: Assault on Charleston."

Acknowledgments

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to remain anonymous.



Name: Captain

Birthday: June 16, 1962

Species: Fiddler Crab
(*Uca pugnax*)

Home: Fort Lamar
Heritage Preserve,
Charleston County,
South Carolina



Hobbies: Living history, conserving metal,
guiding tours, and sharing history and
culture

Your Visit to Fort Lamar

Date: _____ Time: _____

Who are you with? _____

What is the weather like? _____

What plants and animals do you see? _____

What did you learn? How do you feel? _____



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