

Ariel Kelley
Interviewed by Barry Watson
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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Barry Watson

Barry (0:00)

Hello, everybody. I'm Barry Watson. Uh, I'm joined with Dr. Ariel Kelly today. It is September 17 2020. And we are in Corpus Christi, Texas discussing the Battle of Corpus Christi.

Dr. Kelley (0:13)

How are you doing Dr. Kelly?

Dr. Kelley (0:17)

I am well. Thank you for having me.

Barry (0:19)

Yes, ma'am. Do I have permission to record you?

Dr. Kelley (0:22)

Yes, you do.

Barry (0:23)

Alright, so before we get started, can you give us some background like, you know how you got started teaching and your like, your specialty and everything?

Dr. Kelley (0:36)

Um, I've been teaching at the collegiate level about 10 years I got my masters and my bachelor's from A&M Corpus. So I'm a local girl. Taught freshmen for a while then transitioned into teaching college history, and I have just completed my PhD at the University of North Texas, and I specialize in 19th century military and Borderlands history, predominantly in the US, Mexico Borderlands area.

Barry (1:02)

So how did you get interested in doing that?

Dr. Kelley (1:07)

Um, It was kind of a surprise, I was doing a local history project for um, a paper and I stumbled upon the army. And as I kind of followed it down, and its interactions with politics, and how people acted, it really fascinated me. And so I pursued that through my master's degree. And then when I went on to work on my PhD, I changed topics a little bit, but I'm still working on kind of the war, society politic, and kind of fluidity of identity that can go with it in terms of nationally.

Barry (1:40)

Alright. So, we'll go ahead and get into it. So can you give us like how the state or how the country was at the time?

Dr. Kelley (1:53)

So following Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, um we know that the South was very hesitant about Lincoln. There was a lot of speculation that he was, quote, unquote, a black Republican who wanted to end slavery and even promote things like racial equality. And so the South believed that the best way to safeguard slavery was to secede. And so beginning with South Carolina, that December, all the way until February of 1861, the seven first States did secede and then following the firing on Fort Sumter, four additional slave states that we call the upper South will join them. As part of this, Lincoln responded to the situation by calling for 75,000 volunteers making it clear that there was going to be army engagement. He also instituted a naval blockade, and he declared the South in rebellion.

Barry (2:51)

So how did this relate to Corpus itself? How was corpus involved in all this?

Dr. Kelley (2:57)

Corpus is going to be subjected to the blockade like many other areas, um, Corpus has a history as a military depot during the 1850s. Corpus had military presence pretty continuously and from 1852 to about 1856, we actually are the headquarters for the eighth military department, which included Texas, and so residents were convinced that their location is both a port, and that historical connection to the army would make them an at risk target.

Barry (3:31)

So the Union, how did they become interested in Corpus itself?

Dr. Kelley (3:38)

Corpus was connected to a larger um desire to blockade the Texas coastline. Galveston, of course, and Indianola were the two primary ports at the time, but Corpus, um, still provided valuable ways of getting cotton out of the Confederacy and into other areas. We are also a progression towards the border where a lot of cotton is being exchanged across the border with Mexico because Mexico is neutral in this conflict. And so when the union decided to blockade the coast, they detached an officer in this case, Lieutenant John W. Kittredge to control the areas from just slightly north of us at Paseo Cavallo down Corpus itself as part of breaking up that trade, and potentially disheartening the residents in the area.

Barry (4:29)

So, when the union arrived, how were they received by the Confederacy and citizens of Corpus Christi?

Dr. Kelley (4:40)

The Union arrives technically in early 1862 in January when Kittredge and USS Arthur appear off the coast. The Arthur is a former merchant vessel has been converted to a blockading vessel. And as part of this local residents were quite concerned residents had been fearful since the beginning and after supporting things like secession, they had gone on to ask for arms from the president. Um, and also to ask for arms from the department commander Earl Van Dorn. Both of those had been denied, and residents had had to take care of themselves, and so they will allow like a voluntary tax to provide arms. for local units. They'll form several units of Minutemen as well as a light infantry to protect Corpus and an artillery battery to protect Aransas Pass and the entry into Corpus Christi Bay, as well as kind of that connection with Copano Bay. When the Union showed up, it brought that reality home and it made them very convinced that they could be a target. Now in the early part of the year, Corpus itself will not see action, but there will be small engagements between Kittredge's forces and the Confederate station on the barrier island, San Jose Island and Mustang Island um, in particular. And this will often lead to things in instances where Kittredge will shell, um those, those coastal residents or burn down a couple of their homes in one particular engagement. So that threat was very much there.

Barry (6:22)

Okay, so what was the Union's like weaponry? What were they using to enforce their blockade on the Corpus Christi?

Dr. Kelley (6:34)

Um, initially, Kittredge is working predominantly with the um, Arthur. That vessel is coming to Corpus Christi Bay, um it draws about 14 feet of water and the bay is far too shallow to allow a vessel of that size. Corpus, until the ship channel is built really remains very shallow, murky, very difficult to navigate because of the sandbars and so Kittredge could not get in and out that way. And much of his targets were trying to stop the um, vessels that were kind of escaping out from the intercoastal to the actual gulf. And he was able to capture on occasion, some Confederate sloops and other small craft. Eventually, though, he will get his forces augmented when he receives two ships from New Orleans. One of these is a steamer it's called the Sachin, and then a yacht called the Corypheus. And both of these vessels are shallow enough to enter the bay. They will capture a couple of additional sloops from the Confederate blockade runners, and these would be the Reindeer and the Bella Italia. These will give him the ability then to enter the bay. And so in August, he makes the decision to come after Corpus. This was his way of kind of shutting down the area, Corpus versus the big settlement in the region, and kind of the seat of commerce for Nueces County. And so he was hoping if he could come in, he didn't intend to occupy the city because he's only got about 100 men with him. But he was hoping if he had dishearten the population, or spook them, that maybe the local unionists, because there is a fairly strong unionist population, might rise up and assume control. And he is also certainly carrying enough guns to make that happen. Between his various vessels, he's going to have a parrot gun, 8 32 pound cannons and 12 pound howitzer. So he has the ability to launch quite a bit of firepower at the residents. In comparison, the Confederates are not nearly equipped. The Confederates are working with about three cannons, an 18 pounder and then 2 12 pounders that are pretty old. They're both, they're all smooth war weapons and the 12 pounders originally came from a trading post up on the bluff that Henry Lawrence Kinney had had during his early days when Corpus was more of a illicit settlement than a town.

Barry (9:02)

So, the Union, how did they launch their attack? How did that lead up happen?

Dr. Kelley (9:10)

Kittredge begins that attack by coming in on August 12th. He and uh his small little flotilla of four ships will come in. Um as they are entering the bay, they will also capture a schooner, the Breaker from the Confederates and so that will give them kind of a five ship force that he will then on August 13th, sail and land in Corpus to talk to local officials. In this case, uh, the local Confederates in terms of defense, have got augmented by the Eighth Infantry under major Alfred Hobby, and he will be there to receive Kittredge along with the Chief Justice Henry Gilpin. When Kittredge comes ashore, he is demanding to see all federal holdings. So he says "I want to see your federal courthouses. I want to take control of these." And the two Confederates, stop them and say, we are not part of the Union. There is no federal territory, you have no permission to do this. And when they decline, Kittredge threatens to shell the city. He says "I'm going to show you, you need to evacuate your woman and children, I will give you 24 hours." The

residents then complained that that was not enough and Kittridge offered to extend it to 48 hours with the assumption that there would be no additional fortifications created in that time period. He then dismisses himself and goes back to the boats to await the end of that truce. Uh, residents that start to prepare. And the first thing they do is they certainly evacuate all of the women and children. The residents themselves had already gone through the process of forming the local units. People like the local Provost Marshal, Charles G. Lovenskiold had actually gone and collected taxes and done things to provide arms for the men. And so what they were really doing was trying to figure out where do they stationed their few artillery pieces, and they got some assistance from a couple of local residents who had a little bit of combat knowledge. Realize no one in Corpus has got the same kind of military knowledge that somebody maybe like Kittredge does, who was a very experienced mariner and knew the coastline quite well from transversing it as part of commercial and transport missions. Here we have a lot of folks who are very eager to defend their homes but not necessarily very knowledgeable. So William, or Billy man as he is usually called, was home from Isle number 10, where he [inaudible] at an artillery background from some previous service, and they too step up to provide assistance. Billy man is really the one that takes kind of the, brunt part of this and says "I will take the direction", and he actually decides where to station the cannons, and moves them from the bluff, to behind the earthen works that were created by Zachary Taylor's Army of Occupation in 1840. But Von Luckner will do his best to train the men.

Barry (12:15)

So we're, how did the Confederates uh defend Corpus Christi?

Dr. Kelley (12:22)

By setting up behind the earthen works, they screened their artillery quite well, as well as their men. They're also working with about 700 or so troops with the various local units combined with the Eighth Infantry. And so they have the ability to repel a land assault if needed, but they were realizing that this was going to be predominantly an artillery bombardment. And so they're relying on the local artillery battery under the control of Ben Neal to really provide most of that assistance. And so when the truce expires, that period expires, um they waited for the battle to commence, and when it did not, the Confederates took the initiative. And so on the 16th of August, um, they [inaudible] and they're actually able as part of that process to fire multiple times according to local sources, before Kittredge was able to respond in kind. Through the course of the day Kittredge fires about 400 shells, most of which do explode. Those that strike the city do quite a bit of damage in the form of damaging homes and businesses. So like William Shaw recorded that his saloon was hit and that his Puppy was killed. And the markers and things like the old baby cemetery were also shattered as part of that process. Once it becomes evident, though, that showing the city is not effective Kittredge will redirect to the earth and works where his guns will not be very effective. The Confederates in comparison will hit two of his vessels, both the Sachim and the Corepheyus will both be struck and that will eventually convince Kittredge to pull back and retire for the day.

Barry (14:06)

So the Confederates effectively defended Corpus Christi from almost impossible odds with the Union?

Dr. Kelley (14:15)

Yes.

Barry (14:16)

So the Union underestimated, greatly, the Confederate power?

Dr. Kelley (14:20)

Yes, they did. Kittredge was convinced that this was going to be a fairly easy victory and it was not.

Barry (14:28)

So

Dr. Kelley (14:28)

Now, on his, oh sorry.

Barry (14:30)

No, no, you're fine. You go ahead.

Dr. Kelley (14:33)

On his second day, Kittredge will actually make a bigger blunder though. So the 16th includes no more fighting that day, the 17th, Kittredge remains off the coast. Again, no engagement. But the next day, he made the decision to try, instead of a direct route, he would try a flanking maneuver and so he decided to land south of the city, and use his men and his guns to move up into the city that way. He did not count on encountering as many of Hobbe's men as he did. So Hobbe, along with the local defenders, were able to fire at Kittredge, causing him to essentially scurry back to his vessels. And that will effectively end the battle that we call the Battle of Corpus Christi.

Barry (15:16)

So how did this victory effect Corpus itself?

Dr. Kelley (15:22)

In the aftermath of the victory, residents were very excited. They will liken Corpus as the "Vicksburg of Texas," saying that, you know, it was absolutely essential for protecting things like the cotton trade. And they will feel very confident and proud of themselves, especially since they hadn't been given defenders by the Confederacy. Many of these were local men truly defending their homes. But the reality is, is that victory though won and appreciated, does not solve the larger issue. Kittredge and the blockade continue. And with him in the vicinity, there is always a potential that the shelling could resume.

Barry (16:04)

So, how did the victory in Corpus affect the war itself?

Dr. Kelley (16:12)

In the long run, Corpus itself does not dramatically alter the course of the war, but it will eventually affect the locals and their relationship with different nations. We, even though we do provide mass assistance to things like the cotton trade, the cotton trade will continue even when it's pushed off the coast. It will just move to wagons and transport and Mexico kind of further back from that area. And so saving Corpus doesn't necessarily save a massive trading route, like something like New Orleans might have. It also means that it's kind of the height of support for the Confederacy within this area as well. Following this victory, we will have one other small victory where Kittredge will come ashore again to make some demands. He's specifically attempting to take Edmund J. Davis's wife, to him, to take with him to New Orleans so that she can join her husband. Um, she had stayed behind when her husband fled the state and actually formed a Union cavalry unit. But he was told no, he was told that it would take time for a superior to comply with the request. And he, because of weather, was not able to return to the Arthur that night, ended up having to moor closer to Flour Bluff. A couple of residents realize what was up, located the local defenders, and they were actually able to capture Kittredge the next day when he made the mistake of shelling the buildings assuming that they were empty and going ashore. And the local units rushed in and captured him and his force. So they did continue on kind of that progression. But again, taking out Kittridge doesn't truly end or necessarily affect the large reward as a whole.

Barry (18:06)

Yeah, so we only had a small input on the war, essentially?

Dr. Kelley (18:07)

That is accurate.

Barry (18:17)

So how was Corpus affected after the battle and throughout the Civil War?

Dr. Kelley (18:24)

Following the battle, Corpus will start to face a period of hard times. In the early part of the war, the economy had remained stable, thanks in part to a new emerging salt trade, where we were providing salt by using the Laguna Madre actually, and drying sea salt. We were providing salt to other areas and we were using the intercoastal waterways to transport it to places like Houston and Galveston where it could be taken inland to Austin. But following that, as the blockade tightens it becomes more difficult to use those waterways. It also becomes more difficult to get supplies from places like New Orleans. Corpus was dependent upon groceries coming in from other places. And so by early 1863, that combined with a rising drought will lead to a lot of people being very hungry in this area, a lot of the animals are going to start to die off. In fact, a lot of residents talk about kind of the wretched stench in the western part of the county. We know that the river got very low and some residents described that it was too salty to drink. And some residents even talked about how to do things like kill rattlesnakes for food. Um, within the city itself, it was just as bad. Residents like Maria von Blücher, so Felix von Blüchers' wife, recorded subsisting on things like moldy bacon and acorn coffee because she wasn't able to get other supplies. And so by 1863, the population is very much suffering. They don't have access to the supplies they need and even if they did, because of the inflation of Confederate money, it was too hard to purchase things. And so when the Union shows up, as part of Nathaniel Bank's invasions of Texas, so there are multiple invasions of Texas. Initially, he'll start down at the Rio Grande, but eventually Corpus will fall into that. He'll start with the barrier islands much like Kittredge had done, because the ships were too big to get into the bay. But once Port Sims falls, um, they will make a presence in the city. And the Union will realize the problems the population is having and offer them food.

Barry (20:34)

So the Confederate civilians, were able to find food with the Union officers?

Dr. Kelley (20:42)

Yes, many of them report getting food packages. Others that were willing to do things like step up and help the Union track down other blockaders were often given additional things like coffee as kind of an incentive as part of that, but many residents did a lot better. And a lot of times people will ask, "well, why did the Union feed the enemy?" and the argument made by the commander at the time was that "I know they support the Confederates, but I can't watch them

starve to death. So I'm going to provide that assistance.” And as a result, it does shift some loyalty. And it also makes people kind of question why they were in that situation. The Confederacy abandoned the coast when they saw the Union coming back. The local commanders were told to burn the cotton and pull back, and the residents are going “okay, the you are supposed to protect us from the Yankees, and you left us, but the Yankees are giving us food.

Barry (21:36)

So the union were able to turn civilians against the confederate, the Confederacy?

Dr. Kelley (21:42)

Yes, they were. Now, it will not be everyone. Corpus does maintain still a few that are very diehard, loyal to the Confederacy. And when the Union leaves, they will actually attempt to kind of crack down on this dissent. But for the most part, the Union was able to sway opinions.

Barry (22:02)

Okay, well, thank you. I appreciate you being here and taking your time today to give us this interview.

Dr. Kelley (22:09)

Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Barry (22:11)

Yes, ma'am. Thank you.