By Morris Raphael

Not long after the War Between the States broke out, the Confederate government found itself in desperate need of salt. This was perhaps the most valuable commodity, since salt was used extensively in the preservation of meat, and was an essential ingredient in the seasoning of foods. It was even used in the manufacture of ammunition.

Prior to the War most of the salt consumed in the South came from England through the Port of New Orleans. But this access was eliminated when the city fell, and too, as a result of Union Flag Officer David Farragut's coastal blockade. During this period a most important salt mine was being developed at Petite Anse Island (now known as Avery Island) located about 10 miles southwest of New Iberia. The small island rises to a height of about 170 feet in the midst of a wide spreading sea swamp. Bayou Petite Anse takes a crooked course from the island to Vermilion Bay.

Judge Daniel D. Avery, a prominent Southerner, who was married to Sarah Marsh, owner of most of the island, was developing an elaborate salt evaporating plant, utilizing brine springs which had been discovered on the island before the turn of the 19th century. Judge Avery was dedicated to Dixie's cause and began developing the plant primarily to supply salt to the Confederate States and Army. In fact he allowed a number of Southern States to establish their own salt works on the island.

However, after a number of operations had gotten underway, it was learned that the amount of brine from the wells was insufficient to accommodate the various operators.

Later in May of 1862, young John Avery, who was the son of the judge and in charge of production, made a most important discovery. While his slaves were cleaning out and deepening one of the salt springs, they suddenly ran across a tremendous rock salt bed. It was the first rock salt discovery in the continental U.S.A., and the vein was only 15 to 20 feet below ground level. Confederate General Richard Taylor, who was in command of the forces in the District of Western Louisiana, learned about the new find through his intelligence and consequently Judge Avery placed the mine at Taylor's disposal.

A great many black workmen were then assembled to extract the salt from the mine and a packing establishment was organized at New Iberia to cure beef. During the preceding months large quantities of salt and salt beef were transported by steamers to Vicksburg, Port Hudson, and other ports east of the Mississippi River.

By November, the Federal gunboats, after several engagements, succeeded in reaching Berwick Bay, thereby cutting off Rebel shipments. But Union General Benjamin Butler, who was in command of the Department of the Gulf, was anxious to destroy the Avery Island Salt Works. So he ordered the gunboats Diana and Grey Cloud, along with the steamer transport St. Marys, which was loaded with the 21st Indiana Regiment, to proceed via the Gulf of Mexico, Vermillion Bay and then up Bayou Petite Anse to destroy the salt works.

The Confederate command received word of the enemy movement and dispatched T. A. Faries' Louisiana Artillery Units to the island. Faries loaded two 3-inch rifles and two 12-pound howitzers aboard the gunboat Hart at Camp Bisland on November 19th and began to proceed to the island by way of the Bayou Teche. Camp Bisland was located about 5 miles east of Center-ville. They reached New Iberia later that day and managed to bivouac 9 miles beyond that town near the end of a causeway which connected the mainland with the island.

Immediately, Second Lieutenant Oscar Gaudet took position on a narrow strip of woods on the sea front of the island with his howitzer section, while First Lieutenant B.F. Winchester stationed his 3-inch rifles on the elevated part of the island.

The causeway was constructed through a sea marsh and was subject to tidal action. This condition,
coupled with the frequent rainfall, caused the road bed to become unusually soft and boggy and presented a problem for the transfer of field units to the island. The following day, after much trouble and delay, Captain Fairies succeeded in making the crossing only after he substituted oxen for the six-horse teams in each carriage.

On Friday the 21st, Union soldiers began landing by means of little boats. As they approached Gaudet's position, “five spherical case” were fired at the invaders causing them to disperse and retire rapidly towards their boats, “dragging with them” a number of their dead and wounded.

The following day Winchester’s units also began firing away at the enemy gunboats which were visible in the bayou about a mile and a half away. After firing thirty-three shots, the battery commander realized that only a few of shells managed to reach the target area so he ordered the section to cease fire and secure a closer position at the bottom of the hill. At this time Lieutenant Winchester, who was chief of the section, experienced a close call. As the units began to move downhill, a shell from one of the gunboats struck the ground just where the Lieutenant had been posted.

Satisfied that the Union invaders were repulsed, the Confederate command ordered Faries’ battery to return to Bisland. On the 24th the units marched back to New Iberia where the sections were placed aboard the steamers Darby and Hart and routed back down the Teche.

The Union flotilla, while withdrawing southwardly through East Cote Blanche Bay, encountered severe difficulties. An extreme low tide which resulted from a strong norther, caused the vessels to run aground on a shell reef. The vessels were grounded for over two weeks. In order to obtain flotation the crew had to finally toss tons of heavy supplies and ammunition overboard. These included coal, chain, cannon balls, Parrot shells and cannister shot.

The Confederate victory at Avery Island, small that it was, was short lived. Union General Nathaniel Banks, who relieved Butler of his command, continued the invasion of the Bayou Country with a powerful army of three divisions numbering approximately 18,000 men and 4 gunboats. Taylor’s 4,000 men fought gallantly at the Battle of Bisland, the Battle of Irish Bend, and skirmishes along the way.

When the Union forces occupied the New Iberia area in April of 1863, they destroyed the salt works at Avery Island. But apparently it was a stupid thing to do because they had to rebuild it later in order to utilize it for their own purposes. (For a detailed account of the Civil War as it occurred in South Louisiana read Morris Raphael’s book “The Battle in the Bayou Country” and Dave Edmonds’ “Yankee Autumn in Acadiana.”)