

A CHAPLAIN GOES TO THE BATTLEFIELD
Reverend John H. Simpson's Journey to Manassas
Two Days after the First Battle of Bull Run

Edited By

Mary Law McCormick

The following excerpts are from the Diary of Reverend John Hemphill Simpson of Chester, South Carolina, written in the early days of the War and during the time he served as a volunteer chaplain with South Carolina Regiments encamped near Manassas Junction in the summer of 1861.

They describe events that influenced his decision to serve in the Confederate Army, his farewell to family and friends at home, his journey via railroad from Chester, South Carolina, to Manassas Junction, and his later return to Chester.

The men in these Regiments were from Chester, Fairfield, York, and Abbeville Counties in South Carolina and many were old friends and/or college classmates at Erskine College and Theological Seminary (Associate Reformed Presbyterian institutions at Due West, South Carolina,) which he had also attended.

When the first shots of the War were fired, Grandfather was supplying the pulpit of New Lebanon Church near Second Creek, Virginia, not far from the Allegheny Mountains.

“Diary 1861:

April 19 - Prepared sermon on the shortest verse in the Bible. Heard of Virginia seceding and Ft. Sumter taken with bloodshed.

April 21 - The holy Sabbath has come again. Prepared to preach as best I could in the exciting times. Civil War has come at last. Preached from John 11:35. Received letter from home requesting me to come. William and Elihu have left for Charleston.

April 22 - O, how I long to get home; my brothers have left for the bloody battlefield. Packed up my trunk for home, sweet home.

April 23 - Settled with Mr. Dickson (for board and room), dined, played “Dixie” on violin, and took leave of my friends and set out for home.

April 24 - Slept well last night at White Sulphur. Left on the Stage at 4 o'clock. Boarded Cars at Covington C.H., reached Staunton at 6 P.M.

April 25 - Rose early, ate breakfast and left Staunton (via Va. Central R.R.) bound for Richmond. Great excitement about the war on the road. Reached Richmond at 3; passed on to Petersburg then Weldon; travelled all night.

April 26 - Reached Wilmington (N.C.) this morning; passed soldiers going to Richmond. Left Wilmington for Columbia (S.C.); passed more soldiers en route to Richmond; reached Columbia at 4 p.m.

April 27 - My health is good - crowned with mercies. Left Columbia, reached Chester at 1 P.M. “Home Again.”

April 28 - Sabbath has come again and I am at home. Went to church at Union. Glad to see my friends at the old sacred Church of my youth. Mr. McDonald preached two sermons; I sung for him.

Travelled all night. Oh for "nature's sweet restorer".² Oh that God would give us peace again.

July 21 - The Holy Sabbath has come again but it has not the appearance of the Sabbath. I hear no church bell. Wickedness abounds in our country. Sabbath breaking and profanity and drunkenness prevail to a mournful extent. Stopped at Petersburg at 5 AM; arrived in Richmond at noon. Put up at American Hotel. Walked to Square; lay on the grass. Tried to find a preaching service. Held prayers in room at night.

July 22 - Rose early and in good health. Left hotel in heavy rain. Went to Depot at 7 AM; waited on train for 4 hours. Went on train with Alabama Regiment. Travelled all day and night. Slept very little - Oh for rest.

July 23 - Reached Manassas Junction at 6 AM. God has preserved me from all danger on the way. Saw thousands of soldiers from all parts of the South. Met with Rev. Bryson and Joe Polhill. Saw the prisoners taken by Southern troops on last Sabbath and Sherman's battery taken from the North. Met with Isaiah (brother).

July 24 - Camp life is one of privation. Saw a battlefield in all its horrors. Moffat Grier,³ Isaiah and I saw men lying here and there crumbling into dust. Man is made of dust and will return to dust.

July 25 - A vast amount of labor, time and talent is lost on account of the war. Oh for deliverance from such a curse. God have mercy upon us. Thou art our only hope. Took a walk with Moffatt and Joe, my dear friends. Camp life is a dull place. There is no place like home, sweet home.

July 26 - Time is carrying us on to eternity. Where shall I spend its endless cycles? There is no pleasure or peace in this world. Read Bible this morning. Camp is unfit for religious duties. May God put a stop to the war.

July 27 - Man's days are like a shadow which swiftly passes. Moffatt and Joe and I took a walk as we often have done in Due West (S.C.), a place dear to me.

July 28 - The Lord has preserved my life and permitted me to see His Holy day. Oh that I could spend the day as it should be spent. Took a walk with Joe Moffatt. The Regiment struck tents and took up a line of march for 8 miles, passed through Centreville; wet by heavy rain. Very tired. Isaiah and I spent night with Sam Barron in Jenkins' Regiment.

July 29 - Called on Rev. Bryson. Returned to 6th Regiment; fixed up tent. Thankful for health. Wrote letter home.

July 30 - Read Bible; had prayer at Capt White's tent. Soldiers need the prayers of a Christian. May God preserve their bodies and souls from suffering and death. Called on W. W. East in 5th Regiment; talked with Rev. Bryson.

July 31 - The last day of July - farewell thou month of fruits and melons! May the God of heaven bless the land with peace before another month rolls away. Read Bible. Moffatt and Joe and I had our private meeting in the woods. Oh, what a delightful privilege to join my friends in prayer when far from home. Went with Bryson to Kinchelow's and spent the night.

August 1 - Played the piano

O Music! thou has power to awaken the
deepest emotions of my soul;

April 30 - I spend most of my time reading and thinking about the war.

May 13 - Played piano; learning "Marseilles" Hymn.

June 5 - Went down to Chester Depot to salute the Volunteers of 7th Regiment. Saw many of my friends from Abbeville and Due West.

June 6 - Went to Depot to see the 5th Regiment of CSA Volunteers. May God deliver us from war!

June 12 - To Depot to see Isaiah (younger brother) leave for the army. May he be preserved in the day of battle. Read papers. O, that God would smile on us again and send us peace!

June 15 - Saw 12 cannons go down on train.

June 18 - Man's days are like a weaver's shuttle that swift doth pass.¹ Read Bible, man's only guide and comfort in this world . . . Fixed pistol; made a ladle for bullets.

June 19 - Oh that God would return in mercy and visit the land with peace once more. Went to the funeral of Fowler, S.C. volunteer.

June 21 - Another S.C. Volunteer, one Wixes, died and was buried today.

June 23 - The holy Sabbath has come again. O that I could serve my Master. I have no place to preach on account of the War.

June 25 - Went to R.R. Played guitar in Depot. Had my hair shaved.

June 26 - June will soon be gone. O that the War would close with it. God is our only hope; he holds the hearts of kings; may he influence Lincoln to make peace . . . Went to Depot to see Hampton's legion pass.

June 27 - Went up town; saw troops pass Chester.

June 29 - Went to Post Office. Saw more soldiers pass up to Virginia.

June 30 - Went with Father to Union Church. Mr. McDonald lectured in morning; I preached in evening from John 14:27.

July 2 - Sent letter to brother Isaiah. Saw Volunteers of Hampton's legion pass up . . . Saw a magnificent comet at night.

July 12 - Moffatt Grier left home for the army. The family was filled with sorrow.

July 14 - Fixed up and went down to Summerville Camp to see the soldiers before they left for Virginia.

July 15 - Rose early at the roll of the drum - something new in my life - ate breakfast with brother Isaiah in Camp . . . Moffatt Grier and I went down to see the Ocean for the first time; it filled me with wonder.

July 16 - Arrived back in Chester at noon. The 6th Regiment left Camp today for Virginia.

July 18 - Made arrangements to go to Virginia with Joe Moffatt. Fixed up my outfit for the Camp.

July 19 - Called on Mr. Brawley's family and Mr. Alexander's; sorry to tell the girls farewell. Took leave of the loved ones at home. Miss Virgie Melton gave me some geranium leaves. Reached Charlotte (N.C.) at 3 pm. Took Cars for Raleigh at 10 PM.

July 20 - Rode all night on the Cars. Slept but little. Travelled all day, heavy rain. Reached Weldon at 1 PM. Lay over 10 hours; very wearisome. Left Weldon at 11 PM with a Regiment from Florida. Two of them were killed near Weldon.

By thee fond recollections and the
sweetest pleasures are brought to mind!

Anon

Bryson left for Fredericksburg after dinner. I returned to camp with corn-bread and ham.

August 3 - This is my birthday. God has lengthened out my life another year I am 27 years old. Joe, Moffatt, and I had prayer in the woods. There we have our Bethel⁴. Joe and I took dinner at Kinchelow's, 1 mile from camp.

August 4 - Went with Joe to Sloan's Regiment to hear Rev. Craig preach. Joe treated me with some sweet cakes. I did spend the Sabbath - visited some tents, etc.

August 5 - Joe, Moffatt Grier and I retired to our Bethel, a place of prayer in the silent woods. Walked with Joe and R. R. Hemphill to Centreville. Robert and I bought some bread and milk. Joe and Robert left for their homes.

August 6 - Moffat and I retired to our "Bethel" in the woods, northwest of Camp Pettus. There we have sweet communion with God. I went out to Kinchelow's for buttermilk. Had my hair shaved very closely - short hair is necessary in camp.

August 7 - Rose in good health. Moffatt and I resorted to our Bethel; read 12th chapter of Matthew and, in turns, engaged in prayer. Conducted prayer meeting in C. Blues.

August 8 - Rose early - camp life required it. Took a walk with L. Gaston. Listened to a funeral dirge. One soldier in Jenkins' Regiment died last night. O take me home to die! Went to my Bethel and engaged in prayer.

August 9 - Rose early but not in very good health. Had an attack of dysentery. Received letter from Sister Sarah at home, good news.

August 10 - Third Brigade went to Centreville to see Prince Napoleon⁵. Took a walk with Moffatt to our place of prayer. We have built our Ebenezer⁶.

August 11 - Moffatt Grier had to prepare for Inspection drill. Heard the chaplain preach. Rain prevented me from preaching in the evening. Regiment prepared to march. The Sabbath is too much profaned in Camp.

August 12 - Regiment struck tents and marched 6 miles to Germantown. Heavy rain - very muddy march. Had to lie on the cold wet ground. Moffatt stood on picket guard for the first time.

August 13 - Our campground is low and muddy. Lay down on leaves for a bed. Heavy rains very unpleasant and cool.

August 14 - Read Bible - heard heavy firing. Took a walk with Moffatt Grier in the morning. Walked with Isaiah and John Hemphill to see the ruins of Germantown. (See Map)

August 15 - Rose with a slight cold. Went after damsons. John Hemphill left for Due West (S.C.) I wanted to go with him. Nothing new in camp. Oh that we all were permitted to go home.

August 16 - This camp is enough to cause one to love a home ever so homely. Rose with a pain in my head. May God give me health while far from home. Took a walk with Charles Brice who advised me to go home.

August 17 - Not well this morning - rain and very disagreeable; took a walk and

bought one-half bushel of irish potatoes for \$1.00. Read some; visited the sick.

August 18 - The Sabbath has come once more but I have no opportunity to spend the day in a proper manner. Rose in delicate health. Read Bible; called on the sick; talked with the chaplain.

August 19 - The Regiment moved to a new camp. Carried our tents &c.

August 20 - Took a walk with Charles Brice towards Fairfax; he advised me to go home. O, that all could go home and peace was made over all the land.

August 21 - Took a walk. Visited the sick, had prayers with the sick. Talked with Pink Crawford who was very low and died at 11 PM. Heard newspapers read. O that our enemies would make peace with us.

August 22 - Rose early this morning. Prepared to take the remains of Crawford to Chester, S.C. Isaiah left for Manassas to get discharged. Left camp near Germantown, Va., with corpse of Crawford.

August 23 - Had a lonely ride last night; reached Beaugard's headquarters at sunrise. Met Isaiah at Manassas. Received transportation papers for myself and bodies of Crawford and Robinson. Isaiah and I walked out to battleground. Very tired; slept in a boxcar.

August 24 - Rose early and prepared to leave for Richmond. Left at quarter to seven A.M. in company with Robert Pagan. Reached Richmond at 4 P.M. Stopped at American Hotel. Walked around and received transportation. Very weary.

August 25 - Walked with one Morris of N.C. to see the corpse at depot. Saw Cadets drilling. Ate some watermelon. Left for Petersburg at 3 P.M.; arrived Weldon at 8 P.M.

August 26 - Sent despatch to Chester (S.C.) and Winnsboro. Left Weldon 11 A.M.; arrived at Raleigh at 5 P.M. Took train for Charlotte; traveled all night.

August 27 - Reached Charlotte in safety at 2 A.M.; left for Chester at 6 A.M. Arrived at 9 A.M. and delivered my sad charge to Robert Crawford, brother of the deceased. Went up home; spoke to friends, etc. Then went on with Robert Crawford to Waxaw Church. Filled with grief to see his mother; it was mournful.

August 28 - Slept very soundly last night and was refreshed. Have a slight cold caught in camp. Had prayers with the family. Chalmers Gaston took me to his father's and spent the night.

August 29 - Set out on horseback for home. Ate dinner at Aunt Linda Martin's; reached home at dusk.

August 30 - Rose with a dullness in my head.

September 1 - Another month has dawned with the light of the glorious Sabbath morn. But I am unable to go to the house of God. Lay in parlor all day; felt dull, took medicine.

September 2 - Still my head is heavy and dizzy. Heard sad news from Camp - the death of Isaac Gaston.

September 3 - Our land is in mourning on account of the direful curse, "war".

September 5 - Still unwell and taking medicine; no one appreciates health aright until he is confined to a bed of sickness.

September 9 - Went to bed with typhoid fever and began to take medicine.

September 11 - It is wearisome to be in all the day. But I am thankful that I

am not troubled with severe pains. Thankful that I am at home: Want to die at home if it is God's will.

September 25 - I have been confined to the house nearly one month. Hope to be out in a few days if I do not relapse through intemperance in eating - ate too much supper.

(The family was obviously trying to hasten his recovery by feeding him well.

MLM)

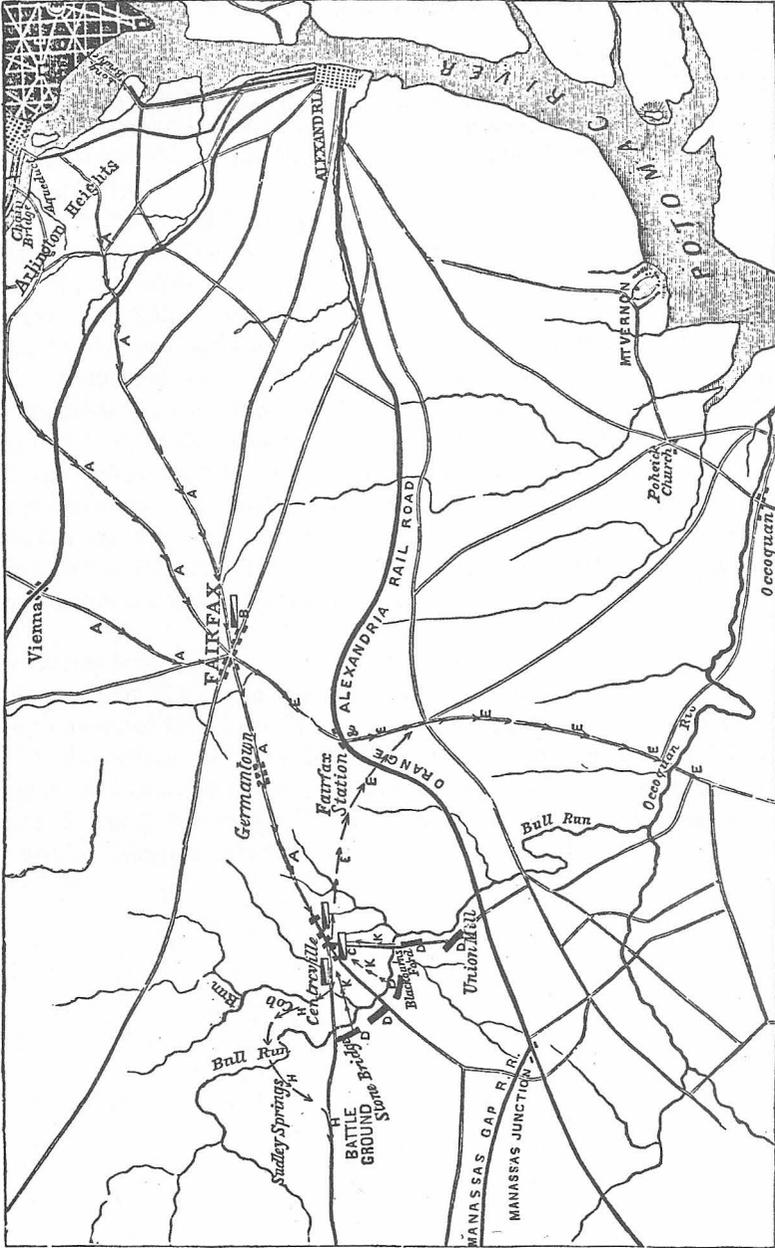
It was good that Grandfather was advised to return home from camp, otherwise, he might not have won his fight with typhoid fever. Even at home it took several months for him to recover from it.

He continued his ministry to his friends in the C.S.A. Army throughout the War and also kept his journal to the end of the conflict, although his 1864 record is unaccounted for.

He was married in 1866 and returned to the pulpit of New Lebanon Church on a permanent basis in 1867 and served that congregation for over twenty-four years. He enjoyed a long and active life. He lived to see his children's children (though not long enough to see me) and died within a month of his eightieth birthday.

These highlights were gleaned from the original diary of Rev. John H. Simpson by his granddaughter, Mary Law McCormick of Arlington, Virginia.

THE BATTLE OF BULL RUN



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Job 7:6.
- ² "Tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep!" from *Night Thoughts* by Edw. Young (1683-1765).
- ³ Wm. Moffatt Grier was with 6th Regiment of S.C. Cf. "Sketches of Ministers," *The Centennial History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1803-1903*, p. 149.
- ⁴ Genesis 28:18, 19.
- ⁵ Prince Napoleon Jerome Bonaparte visited Washington and the encampments of both the Federal and the Confederate forces in the summer of 1861. In spite of a startling resemblance to his uncle, Napoleon I, he was known to have advanced political ideas and the capital was agreeably fluttered by his visit. Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington*. Harper, 1941, p. 289.
- ⁶ 1 Samuel 7:12.