

Camp 7th Rg. Conn. Vol. [Regiment Connecticut Volunteers] Hilton Head, S.C., October 10, 1862

My dear Friends,

If you are of the mind you may take a ramble with me— in fact go on an “expedition.” It is several days since I wrote you and then I think that I stated that the expedition to St. Johns River had been abandoned, but it seems such, very fortunately, was not the case. On Tuesday, September 30th, about 8 A.M. the company commanders had orders to have their men in readiness to march at ½ past 2 P.M. with two days cooked rations, more if possible. Immediately all were hurrying their preparations. At the time appointed the regiment was in line and soon on the march for the wharf. We embarked on the Ben Deford, a fine seagoing steamer. In the stream was the steamer Boston with the 47th Rg., Penn. Vol. [47th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers], a good regiment from Beaufort. The steamer Cosmopolitan was there also with a section— two guns— of the 1st Conn. Light Artillery, and 60 of the 1st Mass. [Massachusetts] Cavalry. Before our departure, Gen. [General] Mitchell and staff came aboard. The General made one of his characteristic speeches, full of life and spirit. He told us that we might not get a great deal of glory if we did succeed, but if we failed we should have any amount of disgrace. He spoke approvingly of the Emancipation Proclamation which is, I believe, well recd. [received] in this Department.

At 4 P.M. we were underway. There was just swell enough to make sailing a little unpleasant. But before going further I must mention what I have omitted- that we recd. our mail just before leaving the dock. Of course we enjoyed the perusal of our letters, reading the papers, &c [etc.]. I was glad to hear you were well. Wednesday morning we found ourselves just off the bar of St. Johns River, Florida. The gunboats were inside waiting our arrival. They sent out pilots. About noon or a little after we crossed the bar and ran up the river three or four miles opposite Mayport Mills. Here were five gun boats, the Paul Jones, Cimerone, Waterwitch, Uncas, and Hale. Here let me say something about our surroundings & what we were expected to do. The St. Johns River is at this point not far from three-quarters of a mile in width. The water is fresh and of a dark saffron color, the color said to be caused by the kind of mud that lines the bank in the interior. On the left bank, as you ascend, is Mayport Mills, consisting of one steam saw mill, the machinery being now on this Island, I believe. A store close by the bank a few houses nearly covered by the ever drifting sand which surrounds these houses just as you have often seen snow banks around our houses in New England. There is also a Catholic Church and two Lighthouses, one of them a very beautiful and costly structure, nearly new, apparently never having been used. There were no inhabitants there. Just opposite there is a house or two occupied now by a refugee from up the river. His son acts as pilot on the boats. The houses are situated on a sort of island and under the protection of the Gunboats. The former inhabitants have been mostly pilots and I dare say wreckers, but I am saying too much about what is of no great consequence. Just at night we landed in small boats at Mayport Mills. We all knew what we were expected to do before leaving the head [Hilton Head] and now we could see the object of our desires. About four miles up the river the bank on the left rises into a high bluff. This bluff forms

an arc of a circle around which the St. John's finds its way. So that all boats are brought close under the bluff, the channel running here close by the bluff shore. On the bluff is—or was—the rebel battery. Before we left the transports three of the gun boats made a reconnaissance of the enemy's position. After steaming up towards the battery and firing a few shell[s], the crest of the bluff spurted forth a volume of smoke, lower down the bank but farther up the river, behind the trees on the opposite shore, which owing to the curvature of [the] river obstructed our vision, another gun was soon fired and the rebel rag run up, soon another gun still nearer our position. "They are there," was the remark. "Guns, they mean to fight." Our boats soon retired and awaited the action of the land forces. The object of the expedition was to put a land force in the rear of the battery, then the gun boats to shell the rebels from their works for the land forces to capture, if not the men certainly the guns, and to destroy the works. This was Wednesday night. The boys and all hands made themselves as comfortable as possible. There was a beautiful spring close by, good water for coffee. It rained some but there were houses for most. One of my men brought me a large camel-skin covered rocking chair in which I passed the night. Some of the boys got into the back room of the Catholic Church or somewhere else, and appeared in the faded coats of the priests.

But while we were so occupied the Gen.— Brig. Gen. Brannon [Brigadier General John M. Brannon], was considerably troubled in his mind. For landing his troops where he wished to, the rebels if determined to hold the place could annoy us excessively. Between us and the battery were two or three creeks, the largest of which extended into the country about 17 miles. To go around this creek would be a tedious march requiring two or three days; we had no means of transportation, the men would therefore be obliged to carry their provisions. Yet this apparently almost fatal experiment was decided upon. Against this, "Israel," our faithful negro guide who ran away from Jacksonville a few weeks since and is thoroughly acquainted with all the county, earnestly protested. He claimed that the rebels would offer no resistance, that they would run away. The "poor negro's" advice at the last moment was heeded. When I went to sleep I expected to be called at three, supposing that we were to march around, but I slept on until six of Thursday morning. It was about midnight that the change in the programme [*sic*] was made. The 47th Penn. Vol. [Pennsylvania Volunteers] had gone- in rather fine companies. The rest of the regiment was embarking when I went down to the dock. The right wing and one company of the left of our regiment got off about 10 or 11. In the first place we went aboard the steamer Neptune, a small craft which brought down boats, sailed up the river about a mile, embarked again in small boats manned mostly by sailors from the Man of War, and started up a small & narrow creek which found its way among the tall grass of the swamp. Say a mile up this we disembarked on an oyster shell bank, started across the swamp, from whence after a quarter of a mile march we came upon hard ground. Here we waited for the remainder of the regiment. All being up we pressed on after the 47th. The object of our march now was to go about 5 miles around a creek and back to within some two miles from where we landed from the small boats- here the artillery and cavalry could be landed provided we were able to protect them. The 47th did the skirmishing. They saw some rebel cavalry but did not get very near them. We had a boat Howitzer from the Paul Jones, a few shots were fired from that. This piece gave us some trouble in crossing two causeways. About the time we turned to go down the creek

we came upon two rebel camps. The occupants had fled in great haste, leaving unfinished meals, camp equipage, and several fine breech-loading rifles and pistols. It was now nearly dark. We hurried on, following the 47th. We got behind waiting to get the Howitzer over a creek. The first we knew the 47th was gone entirely from sight. They had the guides. We halted— sent out scouts. One of them fell in with some of our men of the 47th. Each took the other for secesh— report came back that the enemy was coming— dark— in a swamp. Some confusion but soon all right. Not long after we met a party from the 47th to show us the way. Pushing on we came at last to the creek, close under a hill, having had no difficulty with the enemy. Here we bivouacked for the night. Artillery was landed during the night and forenoon of Friday. No trouble from the rebels. Early in the afternoon of Friday the gun boats went up to feel out the rebels, but they would not answer our fire. The boats ran by the battery fuming with guns but silent- the rebels had fled. Our people landed & ran up the Stars and Stripes. So all that was left for us was to march directly by the shortest route for the battery. We did so, and arrived there without molestation. It was long after dark when we reached them. Although only a march of four or five miles, it was late when we started and we were obliged to wait some for the artillery. The cavalry had not landed. I wandered around among the guns in the clear moonlight. It was certainly a strong place and well protected in the rear by thick undergrowth and commanding hills. But they had left. Well, we were glad. We could probably have taken the place, but if compelled to storm it we must have lost heavily. The rebels took off their light artillery, but left their big guns in good condition. Nine in all, I think. Saturday morning a wharf was built and we commenced to bring down the shot & shell and to dismount the guns and bring them down. They have now all arrived at this port. Saturday night just after getting into bed, or on my blanket under a flag which I had picked up, Col. Hawley [Colonel Joseph Roswell Hawley] came to me & told me to prepare one day's rations and be ready at ½ past 6 Sunday morning to go with the Gen. to Jacksonville, twenty miles up the river on the opposite side. One other company— "K"— of our regiment and two from the 47th were ordered to go also. At the appointed time I was at the appointed place. We were put aboard the Ben Deford where the Gen. was. We had gone about two miles when we ran aground and had to send back for another steamer— the Boston. About noon the Boston started with us again. We reached the city without further incident or accident of importance. After a short delay, three companies were thrown out as pickets. The negro guide directing, we went about a mile from the wharf, two companies on the left and one on the right. I send a plot of our position & we had hardly got stationed, and were just about to send the negro and a party of men for his family a few miles further on, when the pickets gave the alarm that the rebel cavalry was coming. The reserve was very speedily in line to receive them. We were on the railroad but the cavalry came down the plank road. The outpost men fired and fell back on the reserve. How the seceshers did yell. I looked for them to come through the small timber. I heard one of my Sergeants calling me. I looked behind and saw the Capt. [Captain] in command— of the 47th- falling. I at first supposed him shot but he had only fainted. He was quite fatigued, and had never been in any muss before. He seemed to be a very nice sort of a fellow, brave for aught I know. The command now of course came upon me. I had the men fix bayonets and retired slowly for a better position to resist a charge. I very soon heard them coming around my rear. All the roads & avenues were strange to me. I did not know the force of the enemy. I could not see

him only hear the clatter of his horses' hoofs. But I had no intention of being cut off so I moved in two ranks down the track. We had not gone but a few steps before I saw them come out of the woods and sweeping around the depot. Now was our chance. The boys gave a yell and poured a volley into the advance of the enemy, consisting of some 15 horsemen. I supposed about 50 started for us. They brought up in a hurry, took a hasty glance and retreated. We saw no more of theirs in any force. They fired only a few shots. Many of our pieces refused on account of poor caps. I could track them by the blood in the road from at least one horse. The negroes afterwards told us that the rebels lost two men and three horses. They died after they got back, but they also- the rebels I mean- claimed that they killed three of our men. None of us got even a scratch. Parts of two companies were engaged. Drawing in our picket lines nearer to the village or city, formerly about 3,000 inhabitants, we remained until 11 P.M when we were ordered back to the wharf where we remained during the night. We had no further trouble while we were in this place. The gunboats threw a few shells in the direction of the rebels- two boat howitzers were also brought ashore. Monday morning was a gala time with the boys before the General found out what was going on. Almost every store and shop on the street was broken into. Most of them had been closed for a long time, but there were goods in a few. A drug store was the best place. The boys pulled everything open and such a medley as they brought away. You can imagine, perhaps, a drug store with most of the articles packed, opened and overhauled by soldiers, and then imagine them on their way back to their bivouac with their plunder. I leave, at any rate, to your imagination. The general soon put a stop to much of this indiscriminate plundering. In the afternoon he gave me instructions to fire the printing office of the Secesh paper and to gut it. I did both and more too. I found some of the type up so I added some to the matter, having printers in my company, and printed a few copies. It proved quite a sell. The General thought it was genuinely the last paper printed by the retreating editor. After we got home the printers of the New South got hold of a copy and they supposed it was real Secesh. So they went to work and set it up anew and are making, I suppose, quite a speck, as they sell the paper for five cts. [cents]. After printing, as I have said, I had my company take down the press and carry it to the boat. We staid [stayed] here until Tuesday afternoon when our regiment was ordered to go aboard the Boston to start for Port Royal. We rejoiced at the order. I did not mention that all of our regiment came up Monday. One company of the 47th on the steamer "Darlington," the pictures of which you saw in the pictorials some time since- she was taken from the rebels- and two gun boats went further up the river, the purpose being to catch some of the rebel steamers if possible and get the families of some Union men. They had not all returned when we came away. What was the result of that expedition I do not know. One gun boat came back with some Unionists while the others went on.

If you could see Jacksonville you could thoroughly realize what secession has done for the South. Desolation and distress are before you. Before reaching the city you see the ruins of a large number of steam saw mills- they were burned before our people reached them last season. The work was done by the rebels to keep them from our possession. I believe they were owned mostly by Northern capital. Grass and weeds grow rank and tall in the principal streets. Houses with blinds closed attest the absence of inmates. Stores with shelves but no goods. Churches deserted and gloomy. Depot but no cars. Such is

the general look of the city. There are a few places where the people stay through Secesh and Union rule. Some of them look very well. About the streets you see darkies, a few women, a very few men. The men, you are told, are away up the county, but you know they are in the rebel army. Provisions are very scarce and consequently dear. The prices range about with those of Savannah. Corn and sweet potatoes are the chief dependence. One Dutchman that we brought away says that, "he eats no more hominy for ten years." In this place I saw for the first time a woman chewing snuff or "dipping." It was while on picket close by when we fired upon the cavalry. By the way, the women in that region were frightened some. We fired directly towards the town, right in among the houses. We were forced to it by the presence of the enemy in that locality. The women folk complained bitterly of the rebel soldiers for leaving the Bluff and coming into the town to fight. But I was speaking of the "dipping." After the skirmish with the enemy was fairly over I stepped on to the piazza of one of the houses close by to talk with the ladies. There they were. One quite decent looking young woman- married- husband gone, she said he was not in the rebel army. She sat in a rocking chair with a tin box, looking like one of my old worm boxes, in one hand and a stick in the other. The stick she plunged into the box, in which was snuff, then into her mouth; after a little she would spit from her mouth the collected saliva black with tobacco. How do you like the picture of the Jacksonville lady? We lost one man in this place, Mr. Woodford, Quartermaster Sergeant, he was a new recruit. We buried him just back of the Episcopal Church. Before dark of Tuesday we were on our way back. Stopped at the mouth of the river and took off provisions from the Cosmopolitan which had struck on the bar. She had a huge hole in her. Lost another man coming down, Mr. Wayland, our Chaplain. Endeavored to bury him at Mayport Mills but thought we saw rebel pickets and did not, so we buried him the next day in the deep waters of the ocean. It matters little after all where the body goes. Wednesday we were coming home- you see I call Port Royal home- I have not forgotten another and dearer one. It was rather rough & rainy- a bad time for the sick or the well. Thursday morning came up to the dock and were soon in camp. And thus it happened in the "Florida War."

As ever
Valentine

Transcribed by Nicole J. Milano, University of Florida, 2009