

# George Fearing Hollis Papers

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**"Battle for Roanoke Island" - Handwritten account of difficulties of finding vessels to navigate shallow North Carolina rivers to participate in the battle (February 7-8, 1862) where Brigadier General Ambrose E. Burnside landed an amphibious force and took the Confederate fort. Also includes an account of a storm encountered as the convoy sailed to the battle site**



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Before touching upon the part taken  
by the Naval Force in the reduction  
of the fortifications at Roanoke  
Island it will be interesting  
to briefly review the contingent  
of — what shall I call them?  
war ships, but Craft which  
the peculiar character of the  
scene of operation placed  
upon the Chief of the Navy Dept.  
Not as much was known of  
the inland waters of the N. C.  
Carolina at our arrival  
as was known upon our depar-  
ture; but it was evident  
enough that only vessels of  
very shallow draft could  
cross the "Backs" and "Swash".  
There was not a vessel in  
the whole navy that could meet  
the requirement of the occasion, and  
we were forced to buy eight  
and left for the vessels suitable  
to the work in hand. You all remem-  
ber was a sharp incursion made by

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Considering the character of the vessel  
which the efficacy of the occasion  
faced upon us we need not wonder  
at the dismal prophecies foretold,  
Well might soldiers and sailors,  
too look aghast as they gazed  
upon what were appropiately, if not  
cheerfully, characterized as Coffins.  
Our truth, there was far more  
chance of death by drowning,  
than there was of injury from  
the shot and shell of the foe,  
One can hardly but smile at the  
notion of sending a modern  
Ferry boat, built like an ad-  
vanced meeting house, with  
engines and boilers at the mercy  
of any stray missile, and a large  
to bombard a sand fort, with  
the most invulnerable battery  
immovable. And that the ferry  
boat with its Saloon Cabin  
was a target for a blind man,  
Our guns being mostly smooth bore  
& 32 lbs we were obliged to get to  
close quarters to make any fire  
effective.

We pressed into use Ferry boats &  
that timid people hardly considered  
seaworthy for the dangerous trip from  
N.Y. to Brooklyn; Tug boats of all  
ages and fashions, side wheel  
and screw; little coasting and  
river steamers hardly fit to  
voyage from Boston Cape Cod.  
Thus strangely gathered together  
this concourse flew set out  
from its northern rendezvous  
officers and men ignorant  
of its destination, with sealed  
instructions to be opened on the  
high seas.

It was the lot of the Louisiana  
& which I was attached, to command  
one of the ferry boats, the  
and I will remember the difficulty  
that beset us when we encountered  
the heavy sea in the neighborhood  
of Nahant. Then times we found  
our peace without fearing lest  
the heavy seas would demolish a  
craft so completely unpitted for such  
encounters

We experienced a feeling of great relief when we finally left the barometer water of the Cape Astor of us, and returned upon the passage of the inlet. With a channel continually shifting the passage through the channel was a task of no ordinary difficulty to a pilot in daily acquaintance with its varying phases. Here we met our first misfortune by running over the fluke of another ship's anchor and having a leak in a plate. We discovered an accident when we found the ship resting quietly in the sand. But we found our troubles had only begun. You all must have a lively recollection of the severe storm that came down upon us. A portion of the fleet was still outside the beam with several transports. As the storm progressed in fury it seemed as if the expedition was destined to destruction before it had by the fury of the elements rather than by the power of the enemy. Gloom was every depicted in the faces of ashing matchers matchers. On every hand could be seen the evidence of the buffeting we were receiving, the water on all sides was strewn with wreckage of every conceivable kind. Signals of distress were flying

from two thirds of the fleet. On all sides of  
suffering and want met the eye; and  
the more fortunate were unable, by  
reason of the heavy sea, to carry the  
succor and relief so much desired.  
It was amid such wild scenes  
and in consequence of them that  
confidence in our gallant Comman-  
der grew up in our hearts, and the  
name of Buenside <sup>became</sup> ~~was~~ as dear  
to us as to those ~~with~~ under his name  
immediate command. Therefore  
our faith in him grew stronger and  
our pride in him grew stronger  
as he led us on from victory to  
victory.

The storm used all our energies  
were directed to the work of repairing  
damages, a work of no common  
difficulty with the limited means  
at hand. But our New England  
equal to the occasion and all hands  
had able representations.  
We found our loss by the storm  
to be

It had early been discovered that many  
of our vessels drew too much water to pass  
the Bulthead, and how to construct a  
suitable channel was <sup>unprofitably</sup> not easily obtained.  
Without dredging machines it seemed  
an impossible task. It was found  
however, that by running a vessel  
firmly ashore at high water the rising  
ebbing tide would speedily eat away  
the sand from under her bottom and  
thus by degrees deepen the channel.  
By continuing this operation and the  
frequent passage of craft with as  
heavy a draught as possible a  
passage was finally constructed that  
would allow the fleet to proceed in its  
way.

Bulletin of Roanoke Island