

George Fearing Hollis Papers

1852 - 1903

MSS.471

"How I Opened Communication with Sherman's Army and Became a Southern Planter" - Handwritten account of how Hollis helped to establish a freedman's colony on St. Catherine's Island after rescuing over two hundred slaves hiding in a rice swamp. Includes a narration of an expedition Hollis made on the mainland to distribute directions for Sherman's Army to signal the fleet from Kilkenny Bluff when and if they should arrive



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How I opened communication with Sherman's Army
and became a Southern Planter.

At the time when General Sherman was check-
mating the movements of General Hood in the region
about Chattanooga, he easily saw how useless and
unprofitable was the game, nothing decisive being gained,
he ^{and} wrote to General Grant giving details of his plan of splitting
the Confederacy, and outlining his probable course when he should
draw connections with his other base of operations and set out on
his famous and ever memorable march to the sea.

In this dispatch he said: "I must have alternatives xxx I can
take so essential a course that no general can guess at my
objective. Therefore, when you hear that I am off, have lookouts
at Morris Island S.C.; Ossabun Sound Ga.; Pensaola and
Mobile Bay. I will turn up somewhere."

How the people of the North held their breath when the news
came to them that he was really off, and they
knew not where to look for his reappearance, or even if the
fortunes of war would ever give him back to them is not yet forgotten.
I suppose the same thought has come to many of those who
were at the front during the stirring times of '61 to '65 - that they
wished they could have been at home and participated in
these mingled feelings of elation and despondency which were
evoked by the varying events of those faithful years.

We, who were on blockade duty off the Southern coast, could not
fully ^{share these experiences} ~~enter such feelings~~ as the faithful channels of our mail brought
us news in blocks and it was difficult to correlate what had
happened with what had been expected or hoped for.

The ^{ship} vessel to which I was attached was stationed in St. Catherine
Sound just below ^{Ossabun Sound} one of the objective points named in the letter
quoted from. She was a bark taken from the merchant service,
and

and was given a battery of four 32 lbs. broadside, and a 6 lbs. 2
howitzer on top-guttout forecath and another abaft the deck cabin,
and carried a crew of about 125 men.

We were the only ship on the station; but, the channel being nar-
row, she commanded the only route through St. Catherine Sound
formed by the island of the same name on the south, near which
she lay at anchor, and Ossabaw Island on the north. We had
surveyed the channel and properly buoyed it, and occasionally
ran out to sea for practice.

Like the crews of many of our vessels on blockade duty we were
harassed and kept in ^a more or less state of nervous tension by the
rumors that occasionally reached us of boat and torpedo flot-
tilles being organized to compass our destruction. To guard
against this we had constructed torpedo nettings by rigging
out spars twelve or fifteen feet long, connected by a rope
through their outer extremities from which depended a strong
rope netting; and this was always lowered at night. Many
were the torpedoes the bright lookouts discovered which proved
on closer acquaintance to be sea birds or other objects equally
harmless, but which, nevertheless, served to rouse us out of our
trunks and hammocks to man the battery.

St. Catherine Island was a thriving plantation before the war
sent the owner with all his able-bodied slaves to the mainland
leaving behind him a dozen or more men and women whose
days of usefulness as slaves were passed. The various fields
for the cultivation of cotton were separated by the finest groves

of live oaks I had ever seen, and the
planter's house and negro cabins were in
good condition. Cattle and hogs that were left
behind had run wild, deer were plenty
and the island was a hunter's paradise.
There were several interesting characters
among these deserted slaves particularly
"Uncle" Cudjo, a centurion and "young"
Cudjo who was parish minister.

By the 10th Dec. 64 Sherman had driven the enemy's force within
the defenses of Savannah, his line of investment reaching from
Savannah river to the Ogeechee. The swampy nature of the land
made an attack from the land side extremely difficult. Kilpat-
rick ~~was sent across the Ogeechee river~~ ^{by portable bridge} to reconnoiter Fort Mc Allister
on the southern side of the river. From here he must have
sent a dispatch to Sherman, after an inspection of the situation,
asking permission to attack the fort with his division
of cavalry, for Sherman's reply - on the blank half-page of which
Kilpatrick wrote a dispatch for me to forward to the fleet at
Asasabaw Sound - ~~refusing~~ ^{replying} his request for the reason
that he couldn't afford any loss of his cavalry force and
stated that he would send Hagen's division to make the
assault on the fort. The burned bridge over the Ogeechee was
replaced very speedily and Hagen's division crossed on the
13th of Dec. Sherman himself being at Chew's river with on
the opposite side where a battery ~~of~~ was posted firing
occasionally at the fort at long range. About noon of
that day they saw from the inland fire from the fort that Hagen
had begun his operations. It was feared that the carrying
of the fort would be difficult and perhaps delayed for, besides
its armament of 22 pieces it was protected by generous abattis
and ~~mines~~ the approaches mined with torpedoes. Just as
Sherman had signalled Hagen that it was important that the
fort should be captured that day one of our armed troops of the fleet
guarding the mouth of the Ogeechee with which Sherman at once
opened communication by signals. As the tug signalled: "McAllister
ours?" Hagen's men could be seen pouring over the parapet of
the fort and the reply in the affirmation was not long delayed
Sherman soon after crossed the river in a boat to the fort and
then was rowed to the tug "Dandelion". In his dispatch sent
that night he said: "I regard Savannah as already gained."

Head Quarters Military Division of the Mississippi,

Boston July 15. 1866.

Mr. Geo. F. Hollis -

Dear Sir - I have rec^d? your note of this morning, and regret that I cannot see and talk with you. Probably before the receipt of this you will have learned that we are off for Portsmouth N. H. I notice what you state in regard to your part of operations connected with Sherman's Campaigns. If you happen to be in N. Y. within a short time please call and see me at my house at No 19. West 26th St. At all events write to me there and give me all your facts and the evidence and I will make note of the same.

Very respectfully

Your obt. st.

S. M. Bowman

N A V Y D E P A R T M E N T

Office of Naval War Records,

Washington, May 26, 1891.

Mr. George F. Hollis,

U.S. Consul, Capetown,

South Africa.

Sir:

Your letter of April 21st to the Secretary of the Navy, referring to your having been the first to communicate with General Sherman's army before the capture of Fort McAllister, and asking whether such a fact is on record in the Department, has been sent to me for search and reply.

I find a report from Admiral Dahlgren from which it appears that he had been in communication with General Sherman previous to the date you mention. The log book of the Fernandina has been consulted and shows the date of your leaving her, apparently for the purpose mentioned in your letter, although it is not distinctly so stated.

There is no report from your commanding officer in regard to it.

I enclose you copies of the documents referred to .

Respectfully,

J. M. Wise

Flag-Steamer Philadelphia,

Port Royal Harbor, S.C., December 12, 1864.

Sir: It is my happiness to apprise the department that General Sherman, with his army, is near Savannah, and I am in communication with him. In view of his probable arrival, I had stationed several steamers at different points, and have come down from the Tulifinny yesterday in order to be at hand. I had not to wait many hours.

This morning, about 8 o'clock, the Dandelion arrived with Captain Duncan and two scouts, Sergeant Myron J. Emmick, and George W. Quimby, bearing the following lines from General Howard:

Headquarters Department of Army of Tennessee,

Near Savannah Canal Georgia.

Sir: We have met with perfect success thus far. Troops in fine spirits and near by.

Respectfully,

O.O.Howard,

Major General, Commanding.

Commander U.S.Naval Forces,

In vicinity of Savannah, Georgia."

Captain Duncan states that our forces were in contact with the rebels a few miles outside of Savannah. He says they are not in want of anything.

Perhaps no event could give greater satisfaction to the

country than that which I announce, and I beg leave to congratulate the United States government on its occurrence.

It may perhaps, be exceeding my province, but I cannot refrain from expressing the ~~hope~~ that the department will command Captain Duncan and his companions to the honorable Secretary of War for some mark of approbation for the success in establishing communication between General Sherman and the fleet. It was an enterprise that required both skill and courage.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient
J.A.Dahlgren, ^{servant,} [^]

Rear-Admiral,

Commanding S.A. Blockading Squadron.

Hon. Gideon Wells,

Secretary of the Navy.

Extract from the log book of the U.S. bark Fernandina,
Commanded by Acting Master Lewis West.

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Monday, Dec. 12, 1864. At 6 p.m. the 1st and 3d cutters, with armed crews, in charge of Acting Master Geo. F. Hollis and Acting Master's Mate, W.C. King, left the ship on a reconnoitering expedition.

Tuesday, Dec. 13, 1864. At 7 a.m. the 1st and 3d cutters returned. From meridian to 4 p.m. Seven U.S. army officers came from Kilkenny to Ossabaw Point. 2d cutter, B.H. Chadwick in charge, was sent to communicate with them. All went back to Kilkenny at 2 p.m. At 3:30 p.m. 1st cutter Acting Master Geo. F. Hollis in charge, left the ship for Kilkenny. At 8 p.m. the 1st cutter, Acting Ensign B.H. Chadwick in charge, returned to the ship.

Wednesday, Dec. 14, 1864. From 8 to meridian. 1st cutter in charge of Acting Ensign C. Sawyer. left for Ossabaw with despatches. 1st cutter, Acting Master G.F. Hollis, returned to the ship.

U.S.S. Fernandina
St. Catherine's Land, Gu. March 22/465

Sir:

I have the honor to submit the following Monthly Report of the Condition and Efficiency of this vessel:

The ship continues tight and makes no water.

Her upper masts are quite rotten as has been previously reported; but the progress of the rot is slow.

Our sails have remained bent and exposed to the weather all winter; and the heavy sails - topsails and courses - can not be considered trustworthy. They will, however, answer for summer weather.

By the arrival of a draft of twenty (20) men per U.S.S. Massachusetts, the ship is now placed on an efficient footing. The men appear strong and healthy.

The sanitary condition of the ship is,

and has been, most excellent. The
Surgeon has no cases on his list.

The tender "Lightning" has arrived
and will prove a great convenience.

I am building a road across the
island so as to communicate more
readily with the "Foclonia."

I have to honor to be

Very respectfully

Your obed^t serv^t

Geo. F. Hallis.

Act^y Master Comd^y at sea.

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Rear Admiral

J. A. Dahlgren

Comd^y S. A. B. Squadron,

Consulate of the United States

Sir:

I have your letter of the 26th May inclos-
ing copy of letter of Rear Admiral Dabryen
and extract from log of "U.S. Steamer" "
You say that this report from the Admiral
shows he had been in communication
with Gen. Sherman previous to the date
you mention.

I conclude that it simply shows that the
account (Duncan whom I know) had succeeded
in reaching the Admiral, not that the latter
had succeeded in finding Sherman.

When I left the ship I determined to find
the Army if possible. The only landing
place was a little shell beach some 20 yds
long.

I crawled under cover of the rocks, and
found deserted, which at any rate on
the idea that the guerrillas had been called in
to fight the Union.

My letters from Mexico were written
on an autograph paper of Gen. Sherman
(which was a reply to an offer of the former to
return the fort with his force) saying that
he should designate Taylor to attack the fort.

My contribution in this matter the spring
commotion, attended with no inconsiderable
risk, which the Admiral simply received on
account.

Respectfully,
Yours,

Geo. F. Hollis,

Lieut. F. M. Wins,

U.S. Consul

Library & Naval War Record,

Washington D.C.

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Now we opened communication
with Sherman's Army and became
Southern Planters.

At the time ~~when~~ General Sherman
was checkmating the movements
of the Confederate General Hood in the
region about Chattanooga, nothing
decisive being ^{gained}, he easily saw how
unprofitable was the game, and wrote
to General Grant giving details of his
plan of splitting the Confederacy, and
outlining his probable course when
he should have severed his connec-
tion with his then base of operation
and have set out on his famous and
ever-memorable march to the sea.

In this dispatch he says: "I must have
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ric a course that no general can
guess at my objective. Therefore, ~~when~~
when you hear that I am off, have
lookouts at Morris Island, S.C.;
Oceabow

Ossabaw Sound, Ga.; Pensacola and
Mobile Bay, I will turn up somewhere."

How the people of the North held their
breath when the news ~~reached them~~
that he was really off reached them,
and they knew not where to look for
his reappearance, or, even if the fur-
ture of war would ever give him back
to them, is not yet forgotten.

I suppose the same thought has come
to many of those who were "at the front"
during the stirring times of '61 to '65 - that
they wished they could have been at home
and participated in those mingled feelings
of elation and depression which were
evoked by the varying events of those
fateful years. We, who were on block-
ade duty off the southern coast, could
not fully share in these experiences as
the fitful chances of our mail service
brought us news in blocks, and it was
often difficult to differentiate what had
happened

happened with what had been expected or hoped for.

The ship to which I was attached at that time was the "Fernandina", stationed in St. Catherine Sound, Gu., some forty miles below Suvauala, just south of Asabow Sound, one of the objective points named in Sherman's dispatch.

The "Fernandina" was a ^{Sailing} bark taken from the merchant service and fitted for war purposes with a battery of four 32 pdrs. broadside, and a 6 pdr. howitzer on the top-gallant fore-castle and another abaft the deck cabin, and carried a crew of about 125 men, a harmless sort of craft as naval matters now run.

We were the only ship on the station; but the channel, ^{was narrow and intricate,} and we, ^{laying on the inside,} commanded the only entrance to the sound between Asabow and St. Catherine Islands. We had surveyed the channel and properly buoyed it, and occasionally ran out to sea to practice our crew in seamanship.

Like the crews of most of our vessels
 on blockade duty we were harassed and
 kept in a more or less state of nervous
 tension by the rumors that occasionally
 reached ^{us} of boat and torpedo flotillas
 being organized to compass our des-
 truction. To guard against attacks
 of this nature we had constructed
 torpedo nettings by rigging out spar
 booms twelve or fifteen feet long, con-
 nected by a strong rope through their
 outer extremities from which depend-
 ed a ~~strong~~ ^{close} rope netting; and this
 was always lowered into the water
 when the watch was set for the night.
 Many were the torpedoes the bright
 lookouts discovered which proved on
 closer acquaintance to be sea birds or
 other objects equally harmless, but
 which, nevertheless, served to rouse us
 out of our bunks and hammocks
 to man the batteries - and made some sense.

St. Catharine's Island was a thriving ⁵ plantation before ^{the war} sent the owner with all his able-bodied slaves to the main-land, leaving behind a dozen or more men and women whose days of usefulness as slaves, in his eyes at least, had passed. The various fields for the cultivation of cotton were separated by the finest groves of live oaks I have ever seen, and the planter's house and the negro cabins were in good condition. Cattle and hogs that were left behind in the planter's flight had run wild, deer were plenty, and the island was a hunter's paradise. There were several interesting characters among these abandoned slaves, particularly Uncle Cudjo, a centurion; "young" Cudjo, ^{"parishi" ^{minishi}} nearly as old, and the old "Cuntree" from long acquaintance seemed to belong to our ship's family. They stored up money enough by their sales of truck and washing to set their old master on his feet at the close of the war when he was in sore straits.

Sketching along the banks of the channel separating the islands from the mainland was a wide marsh with an occasional creek by which one could reach the mainland. The one nearest our station lead up to a place called ~~Hil~~ Kenney Bluff, which was well protected by confederate rifle pits. All about it was deep mud. Through our orders to keep us keep a sharp look-out for Sherman's army we were cautioned against assisting a boat's crew to the risk of capture, several of which had been so lost by venturing too far away from support of their ships. One morning late in Nov. '64 we were surprised to see a boat coming down this creek and soon made out she was a "dugout" with two men at the paddles. The boat was soon alongside and the two negro occupants brought to the deck. The tale they had to tell us was to this effect;

That the rebels were impressing all the negroes to work on Fort McAllister and that some two hundred men, women and children had collected in a swamp, in which they had secured a big rice scow, which could be reached by boats from the creek down which they had come. They had come down to the ships to beg that we would send boats up that night to tow the rice scow, which would hold them all, down the creek to land them on one of the islands.

This looked reasonable and seemed to be a plausible story. Sherman's army might be approaching and the necessity of strengthening Fort McAllister would call for the imprisonment of all the negroes of the neighborhood. Then again it might be a clever plan to entrap three or four of our boats' crews. But they declared their willingness to stand the risk of being shot at the first evidence of foul play, and I finally decided to undertake the job and discharged one of our big guns which was the

the signal they had agreed should be made in case we consented to attempt their rescue.

As night closed in the crews were selected and four boats manned, under two officers, started forth under cover of the darkness.

Of all the anxious nights of four years service on blockade duty this, I think, was the worst. The capture of the boats' crews would surely be my undoing, and I walked the deck all night anxiously awaiting the coming of the dawn.

As the morning light broke glasses were glued to the eyes of the watchers on deck, and soon we made out four little black specks with a larger one in the rear showing on the lawney surface of the marsh, and knew that our boats' crews were safe and that the expedition was successful.

It was a ~~the~~ bright Sunday morning when the boats with their tow of a couple of hundred "Contrabands"

"Contrabands" pulled by the ship on their way to the landing on the Island. The refugees were voicing their joy of emancipation in a stirring song of which the refrain was: "It's a Sunday mornning, a Sunday mornning,

and will all go to heavin on a Sunday mornning." They were speedily housed, and land was alloted to the various families. My recollection is that we only issued to them from the ship one bbl. biscuit and one bbl. condensed (salty) pork.

Following up the idea first entertained that the near approach of Sherman's Army was causing anxiety to the garrison of Fort Mc Allister I took two boats crews of five men each, with one officer and set out for a night scout. Upon approaching the fortified landing place previously noted, I left the boats in the tall grass and crawled through the mud to the rifle pit, instructing the officer in the boat to await my signal of an oval's boat before moving up.

Finding the place deserted, the boats were

called up. Loading two boat keepers in each boat securely hidden in the bushes, we set out on our march into the country.

One house stood alone at the landing and was apparently deserted, though we did not make any careful examination.

At the few plantations that we passed we got into communication with some of the slaves, told them of their approaching liberation and left written directions to be given to any of our forces how signals could be made to us from Rillkeny Bluff, our landing place.

Several times we caught sight of rocket signals but could not determine whether they proceeded ^{from} our forces or ^{from} Confederates.

The last place visited was the plantation of a Dr. Johnson, and, as his boys said he was inclined somewhat our way, we routed him out and had a chat before day-break. He proved to be quite friendly, which led me to regret, when discovery was made

made, that the man had cleaned out his poultry house. The doctor told me afterward that he was glad we got the fowls before the army reached his plantation, but was awfully sorry to lose the ancient gamecocks that were among the lot.

From remarks overheard later the men also wished they had left them behind. As we approached the deserted house where we had left our boats we had a disagreeable feeling that we were trapped after all for we noticed a dim light shining through the lower windows.

Without looking to see whether our boats were safe I passed King, my companion, at the front of the house bidding him to break and enter at my signal. But the sight that greeted my eyes when I peered through the rear window was anything but warlike. Crouched before the fire in the open fireplace, ~~around~~ which were lying

three or four half-dressed children, in the evening to light her pipe with a live coal, was a white woman, as haggard and dirty creature as my eyes had ever seen. The sudden revulsion of feeling can be imagined. She said she had heard nothing from her husband since he went to the war, and if her conversation with him was like unto that with which she regaled us, there was little to call him home. She was a tough specimen of the poor white and could have given points in profanity to any of the troopers.

Hardly had we reached the ship on our return, than the quartermaster corduly reported that signals were being made from Killybeggy Bluffs, and fresh crews were hustled into the boats, which pulled with a will when told that we would probably meet our comrades of the army. We found, sure enough, that they were waving our flag; and soon we made out the uniforms, and knew for certain that the long suspense was over, and that Sherman's march to the sea was an accomplished fact.

The men proved to ^{be} part of Kilpatrick's division of cavalry, and we soon had ^{the}

the pleasure of grasping him by the
hand amid mutual congratulations.

The first thing necessary was to send a
dispatch to ~~the~~ Admiral Dahlgren who
was at Charleston, which could only be
done by sending one of our boats to the
next steamer up the coast. No paper
could be found, but finally Kilpatrick
wrote a brief dispatch on the unwritten
page of a dispatch he had just received
from Sherman. How well I remember
Sherman's dispatch. It was evidently
a reply ^{in pencil} to a request from Kilpatrick
to be allowed to storm Fort McAllister;
for Sherman wrote that he could not
afford to lose cavalry and would assign
the duty to Gen. Hazens division
Sherman had already driven the enemy
within the defenses of Savannah, his line
of investment reaching from the Savannah
river to the Ogeechee on which was McAllister.

The swampy nature of the land made an
attacks

attack from the landside extremely difficult. Ripputrick had crossed the Oguchee on a pontoon bridge in an endeavor to find means to communicate with the navy and, finding one of the written directions we had left, had come to Kiskunmy Bluffs Dec. 12-'64.

~~On the next~~ The next day, Hagen's division having replaced the burned bridge over the Oguchee, crossed the river and proceeded to invest the Fort ^{the mill} Thurman at the time being at Chevie on the opposite side, where a battery was posted which fired occasionally at long range, and from which a view of the field of operation could be had. It was feared that the carrying of the fort would be difficult and perhaps delayed for beside its armament of 22 pieces, it was protected by generous abuttes and the approaches mined with torpedoes. Just as
Thurman

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Sherman had signalled Hagen that it was important that the fort should be captured that day one of the small steamers of the Apache station was in sight with which Sherman at once opened communication. As the tug signalled: "De M^e Allister ours", Hagen's men could be seen pouring over the parapets of the fort; and the question was answered almost as soon as asked. With an open sea connection Sherman could then say to Washington: "I regard Savannah as already gained."

With nothing to worry us our attention was now wholly given up to our colon & wards. We got information that nearly a thousand bushels of corn were concealed ~~in~~ on an island in the swamp, and thanks to our big scow we ^{gathered it in} ~~secured it~~ and made the success of the settlement secure. Landing word to Boston friends soon brought us a great quantity of garden vegetable seed and

and ^{we} soon had every one at work in the field, each family cultivating its own particular tract, and great rivalry existing as to which would show best results.

We remained on the station till the latter part of March and all hands felt keen regret at leaving our experimental farm under nautical supervision.

I believe this was the first sea island settlement of refugee negroes, and I am quite sure it was the least expensive to the government which was out, as I have said, one bbl. condensed pork and one bbl. biscuit.

During our "sojourn" not a single case ever came up before us for settlement, and all worked together for the common weal.

The old boat flag that met Sherman's army and brought a people out of bondage is now one of my most cherished possessions.

Geo. F. Hollie