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A LETTER FROM BLEAK HALL, 1861

The following letter is among a group of family letters (1852-1881) recently presented this Society by Mrs. Dunbar Robb of Charleston.

The writer is the daughter of Mrs. John Townsend of Bleak Hall, Edisto, who apparently used to accompany her husband, a member of the Legislature, on his trips to Columbia, where she met Mrs. Thomas N. Dawkins (Mary Poulton). The latter was the wife of Judge Dawkins of Union District, who at times held court in Columbia.

Bleak Hall May 3 1861

Dearest Mrs. Dawkins,

I have just returned home after six or seven weeks absence in Charleston, and among other delights which greet my arrival I find a charming letter from our dear English friend whose kind and affectionate words are so much prized by us.

.
But my visit to Charleston: like others this winter it was a most eventful one. We went down in a snow storm when Papa was just recovering from a severe fit of sickness. Shortly after came the Convention and you can imagine the interest with which we gathered from the gentlemen all they were privileged to tell of their debates on the Constitution and of their other business. Then the Telegraphic news for which we looked the first thing in the morning, which we again inquired for at dinner; without which tea lost its relish at night and again to sit up until the very last moment for the latest Papa could bring; even should a day of anxiety and excitement drive some up stairs to rest—the sound of the street gate as it slammed and Papas step would bring to the top of the stairs the weary ones and heads would lean over the bannisters, “The last news, the news” until Papa opened his budget and satisfied the anxious ears. . . .

But last though not least was the Battle of Fort Sumter: which I with hundreds of others witnessed at its commencement, through its progress, to its close with anxiety and interest most intense. The history of the world does not contain such a battle. From early dawn till long after dark the Battery and wharves were thronged with mothers, wives, sisters, daughters watching each shell or ball falling on Sumter and the flash which told of the coming of each missile. Such scenes I never imagined before. The highest and lowliest met on common ground. All had similar feelings, interests at heart and stranger spoke to stranger as to one well known. The bulletins which arrived; can you imagine how we strained our ears, how our hearts throbbed while we listened to hear if no one was hurt. The war vessels outside of the harbour too at which we spied, watched, conjectured what their intentions might

be. You can think with what expression of countenances we eyed them. How we would say "I do believe they are coming in". The rush to verify the remark. Friday was a gloomy day, the sky overcast, the wind howling and now and then a gust of rain. Our hearts were in unison with the gloom. We said some must fall: Who will they be? and so we watched until the darkness hid the Islands and we could but see the flashes and hear the reports.

All through the night we heard cannon at long intervals. Then we thought the fleet might try to enter, and thus listened for quicker reports; but Saturday morning dawned brilliant and beautiful and the first news that reached our ears was that Fort Sumter was on fire! How we hastened to the Battery! Yes! it was true; volumes of smoke and now and then the flame burst out: and so we watched; then the cry "The flag is down!" Every glass up, every eye strained. "The White Flag!" The steamer was then seen coming up to the City. The officers waved their handkerchiefs. We saw the glitter of the sword they bore (Major Anderson's) and then came the news "unconditional surrender!" and "Nobody hurt." The shout following cannot be described. The smiles, the congratulations, embraces, and kisses! My Aunts and Uncles in the midst of it, Papa embracing and kissing each and then all. Should I live a thousand years the Battle of Fort Sumter will live with me!

A week or two ago I visited all the Batteries in the harbour, brought with me from Sumter a piece of "Major Anderson's Marble Mantle piece" in fragments from the shells and was also presented with a fragment of his flagstaff shot to pieces. Will they not be relics fifty years hence? So much for Charleston: The first sight which filled my eyes today as the steamer neared the point of Botany Bay (you know it) was a line of tents on the edge of the Beach, the blockhouse and Fort on which Papa spent weeks this winter while he was occupied with the barracks. The Confederate Flag floats among the oaks, pine, Palmettoes and hills of Botany Bay, and we are expecting shortly a visit from General Beauregard who will inspect Mullers dam there while here.

Papa is also planting a vegetable garden there for the benefit of the soldiers. Some of our soldiers are longing most ardently for a Yankee vessel on which to test their skill. The greatest race at present is for Virginia. Poor old Virginia. Poor old Virginia. She has got herself into a nice place by her cowardly vacillating policy, and will pay dearly for it. What a letter I have written you. . . .

Your affectionate little Friend

PHOEBE TOWNSEND