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CONTENTS

THE CHARLESTON FIRE OF 1861 AS DESCRIBED IN THE EMMA E. HOLMES DIARY

Edited by

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Emma E. Holmes was born on December 17, 1838, the daughter of Dr. Henry McCall Holmes and Eliza Ford Gibbes Holmes. Dr. Holmes practiced medicine and was the owner of Washington Plantation, South Carolina. His wife was a descendant of two famous South Carolina families: DeSaussure and Gibbes. They were the parents of eleven children, of whom Emma was the sixth born. When Dr. Holmes died in 1854, his widow leased Washington Plantation and the family lived in Charleston on that income.

Beginning in January 1861 and continuing until 1866, Emma Holmes kept a detailed diary. Here she recorded events of the turbulent Civil War period. She commented on the war, its battles, the literature of the day, life in Charleston and Camden during the war and early Reconstruction period, and family matters.

In the selection that follows, Emma Holmes describes the great Charleston fire of December 11 and 12, 1861, including a detailed inventory of the terrible damage as she saw it. Her description is factual and minute, yet it gives the reader a graphic picture of the disaster. The tone is one of awe rather than fear, surmising that perhaps God had used this conflagration to harden Charlestonians for the coming rigors of civil war. It is one of the fullest accounts of this important event.

As a result of this holocaust, the Holmes family (and many others) were burned out. The Holmes, after considerable indecision attendant in any such personal calamity, (further intensified by the war inflation) moved to Camden for the remainder of the war years. When the fighting was over, they returned to Charleston where Emma lived until her death in January of 1910. She never married and spent much of her life in teaching.

This selection is taken from Volume Two of the three volume Emma E. Holmes Diary. The first two volumes are deposited in the William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, while volume three is in the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. Literary rights to the

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American people would once again attempt to create a society devoted to "the public good." [88] It was after the election of 1796, during the quasi-war with France and the exacerbated political tensions it produced, that the Federalist-Republican division became so vehement that a chance of compromise between the parties was rendered hopeless. So long as Pinckney had a chance of being elected, the possibility remained that a reconciliation and eventual disappearance of parties under his leadership might take place, and the American Revolution's republican ideal of a nonparty government in which the good of the community was the sole criterion of political action, attained. Perhaps had Pinckney been elected to the presidency, both Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians would have united behind him and more sincerely attempted to resolve their differences. His defeat in the election of 1796 meant that Jeffersonian-Hamiltonian antagonism would persist and worsen in the future, and thus was one of the causes of the final crystallization of the Federalist and Republican parties into two polarized, intensely competitive partisan organizations. Herein lies the significance of his candidacy in the election of 1796, a turning point in the evolution of the American party system.

[88] *Ibid.*, 48-65, 162-196; Goodman, "First American Party System," 86-89.

entire diary belong to the Mississippi State University Development Foundation with whose kind permission this selection is here printed. In the near future, the entire diary, covering the years 1861-1866, will be published in book form.

December 16, 1861 The past week will never be erased from the memory of Charlestonians. The terror! the misery, & desolation which has swept like a hurricane over our once fair city will never be forgotton as long as it stands. On Monday, Willie [Holmes] came up on business & was to have returned on Wednesday but was twice prevented by accidents. Those three days were as warm and balmy as if it were June, with scarce a breath of air to ripple the calm waters of the Ashley. All was fair and smiling till a quarter before nine at night when the mournful sound of the alarm bell fell on our ears, followed by the cries of fire. At first we thought it was at Rosa's [Bull],[1] so near was the cry, but soon found it was high up town and raging fiercely. Till then, the wind was still, but, as the fire rose, so did the wind, showering sparks & flakes around or bearing them far aloft in the air where they floated like falling stars. Edward [Holmes] went to see where it was, returned to change his clothes, and at eleven went out again. Even then the sparks were falling so near us that Willie would not let Dudley go, as he might be needed at home. Then Willie himself went to see after the fire, before deciding whether he would go, all his baggage being on the steamer. Willie Guerard had just come to town & was with Rosa, who came over to us while he went also. Hour after hour of anxiety passed, while flames raged more fiercely and the heavens were illuminated as if it were an Aurora Borealis—it was terrifically beautiful. The tide was rising & every wave crested with foam, while beyond the rosy clouds floating overhead was the intense blue of the sky & Sirius sparkling like a brilliant diamond. As time passed, the sparks were so thick that we had water thrown on the shed & servants watching it. About one, W. Guerard returned & reported the Institute Hall & Circular [Congregational] Church as burning & cousin Henry's [DeSaussure] in danger. A light rain was then falling & we earnestly prayed for more, but it only lasted a short time & Rosa went home. We heard the roaring & crackling of the flames, the crashing of the roofs falling in, & occasionally the report of an explosion as a house was

[1] The daughter of William Izard Bull (mentioned later in this selection). Mr. Bull was a descendant of Stephen Bull, who as Lord Ashley's deputy, was one of the Carolinas' first settlers. He established Ashley Hall which was still in the family's possession during the Civil War. Mr. Bull was, during the war, a State Senator and a special aide to General P.G.T. Beauregard. Rosa Bull and Emma Holmes were very close friends.

blown up to try and stop the ravages of the fire. But God had decreed that we should be purified through fire as well as blood, & still the flames swept on with inconceivable rapidity & fierceness, notwithstanding the almost superhuman efforts of the firemen. At two-o'clock, Willie returned and told mother it was time to pack and move. We had already commenced to put up our jewelry, silver & money &, by three [A.M.], we had packed all our clothing and started for uncle James [Holmes], each laden with what they could carry & leaving the servants to see after their own things. The scenes all along the streets were indescribably sad. The pavements [were] loaded with the furniture, clothing, & bedding of refugees who cowered beside them in despair, while others were hurrying with articles for safety to the side from whence we came. When we reached the Battery, the wind was so high we could scarcely breast it. The heavens [were] black as midnight while the waves were white with foam and all [was] illuminated by the intense lurid lights. The boys all returned & soon came cousins Liz. & Mary [Bacot], their aunts having gone with the children up town to Mr. [John] Harleston. Mrs. Paul Gervais with her four children & cousin Mary Bacot had also gone to Uncle James. . . . Throughout that awful night, we watched the weary hours at the windows and still the flames leaped madly on with demoniac fury, & now the spire of our beautiful Cathedral [St. John and St. Finbar] is wrapped in flames. There it towered above everything the grandest sight I've ever beheld: arch after arch fell in & still the cross glittered & burned high over all. Then the roof caught & we saw that too fall in. At five [A.M.], the city was wrapped in a living wall of fire from the Cooper to the Ashley without a single gap to break its dread uniformity. It seemed as if the day would never dawn. Oh, it was the longest weariest night I ever spent. No one felt fatigue or thought of sleep, and, when the sun rose, the fire was still raging so fiercely that its glare almost overpowered that of the sun.

The fire, evidently the work of an incendiary, broke out in a shed next to [H. P.] Russell's extensive machine shop & soon spread to Cameron's foundry, where an immense amount of Confederate work was destroyed, in rifled cannon, shot & shell. It swept all the upper part of Hasell & many small streets near, down East Bay where Miss Harriet Pinckney's splendid mansion, once the palace of the Royal Governors & for long successive years the residence of her forefathers, was destroyed. Just one year ago, I went with mother to see her on the 17th, her 85th birthday and my 22nd, but principally to see the interior of the house, which was hung with tapestry, in antique style. Fortunately almost everything was saved through the strenuous exertions of Captain [John]

Rutledge and the crew of the *Lady Davis*. All the small streets between that & the Charleston Hotel were destroyed. Fortunately that & Hayne Street were saved, but the fire leapt across to the south side of Market Street which was swept away in a few moments; consisting of small wooden tenements—down Meeting on both sides to Queen—destroying the Theatre, Apprentices Library, Art Gallery, & Savings Institution, Drs. [B.A.] Rodriquez, [Edward] North & [Henry] DeSaussure, Southern Express Office, Circular Church, and, more regretted than all, the Institute Hall, one of the largest in the South [and] the scene for many years of almost every public event. There were held all our fairs, concerts, presentation of flags, The Democratic or National Convention of 1860, and, above all, there was signed our Ordinance of Secession, the instrument which broke the fetters with which the North is seeking to bind us down to everlasting slavery and disgrace. That loss can never be replaced, those hallowed associations will linger around the ruined walls. The Circular [Congregational] Church is where all my ancestors worshipped and are buried for 175 years [sic]. That pulpit has been filled upon the same spot though not in the same church. This was built in 1806, and a few years ago thoroughly done up & refurnished, making it the largest and one of the handsomest churches in the city. Uncle James saved the Bible & Hymn Book. The fine collection of our art gallery was entirely destroyed, but the Savings Institution fortunately saved most of its papers. Cousin Henry Des[aussure], by the exertions of his friends, saved almost every thing except his heavy furniture, but Dr. [Edward] North lost immensely. The square on which the Mills House is built was saved, but the whole other side of Queen was burnt down to the Roper Hospital, fourteen houses being blown up to save the latter & the Medical College, Marine Hospital, Jail, Workhouse, & other public houses which otherwise must inevitably have been destroyed. For the wind circled in eddies, driving the flames in every direction & carrying showers of flakes to an immense distance. Horlbeck's Alley is burnt and the greater part of Kings' St. on both sides below Enslow's as far as the Quaker Church, on the east side, & nearly to the corner of Broad on the west side. In Broad, where were some of the finest private residences in the city, were burnt on one side. The Cathedral, which was filled to overflowing with the silver, clothing, furniture and valuables of scores of people, believing it to be fire proof [was lost]. Bishop [Patrick N.] Lynch's splendid library was also lost there. The residence of the Sisters of Charity was partially burnt. Mr. Coffin's, Mr. Isaac Porcher's, Mr. James Heyward's, Mr. Alfred Huger's, the latter [house] quite an antique & for very many years oc-

cupied by the same family, Miss Bowman's, Mr. John Laurens', Mr. G. Manigault's, Mrs. Ben Rutledge's & another fine brick house, Dr. Wragg's, & just back of his, Rev. Mr. Campbell's. On the south side of Broad, Miss Marshall's, an old crazy wreck a century old [and] a nuisance to the city, was destroyed. The fine residences of Mr. Belin & Mr. Smith were spared but all below burnt, including Mr. Petigru's & Mr. James Legare's. The whole of Friend St., from Queen, was burnt, including the very new Public School, nearly to Tradd. The whole of Logan St., including St. Peter's Church, was burnt, except Mr. Tom Frost's & Judge [Edward] Frost's—down Tradd it swept destroying everything on the north side—on the south, sparing Mr. Winthrop's old wooden timber house & destroying the old Rutledge house from which poor old Miss Pinckney had to be moved a second time. Skipped Mr. Sol Legare's next door, but swept everything below it but the lower part of Limehouse St. on both sides below the fine brick houses of Messrs. Shingle's and Addison, on either side. Col. Edward White's fine new house was destroyed. The whole of Council St. is gone. Mr. Lucus' & Mr. Bull's [were lost], but Mrs. Alston's spared. The whole of New St. commencing with Mr. Cordes Harleston on one side, Mr. Gibbon, Mr. James Wilson, Miss Torre, Dr. Sam Wilson's occupied by Mr. Stevenson, Mr. [Aaron S.] Willington, Mr. A. H. Brown, Mr. Otis Philips, Mr. Geo. Reid, Mr. Paul & his daughter & Mr. James Elliott, on the other side from Mr. O. Middleton's, Mr. Kerrison's, Mr. Gibbons, Misses Muir, Mr. Richard Bacot, Mr. Gibbons' daughter & Mr. Flinn, all are gone. But Mr. Charles Edwards' [is] left standing at the corner, while everything on every side was burnt. The whole of Savage Street is gone and all above & below the Huguenins' on Broad St. Our brothers & cousins, after working at Dr. [Henry] Des[aussure] & other friends, went to our houses and, with our servants who worked most zealously, tried to save what they could. But the flames were so fierce and rapid that they were soon cut off from communication with the rest of the city &, as the water was on the other side from our house, they were only able to save *all* our clothing which was packed & all our beddings. . . . They opened mother's work press & linen press and swept everything into blankets, which were safely brought round—our sewing machine & the antique mahogany round table, about a century old, our clock, & a nest of card tables, most of the books from our chamber & all the china ornaments, most of the books from the bookcase & many from the étagèrs. The knives & forks & some of the dinner set that was in use, everybody's desk except Willie's, which he valued very much as it was father's, & many other minor things, each with its own

peculiar value, but no other furniture—some pieces were taken out but burnt in the street. Our carriage was also saved & the mirror from the drawing room. As the Burnets had already sent away most of their things to Camden, they saved a great deal. Cousin Willie [Holmes] saved almost all their clothing and the furniture from his chamber & the drawing room, carpets also. [He also saved] their machine, silver and a good deal of fine old china & cut glass of great value—not only for their beauty but because the china had been brought on by Mr. Charles Deas & the glass belonged to their great grandfather, old Mr. Humphrey Somers—a few mattresses & some bed linen. At Rosa's almost everything was saved, as her house did not burn till much later than ours, & numbers of gentlemen went to help, after their own or relatives' houses were gone. All their clothing, even to ball dresses, elegant drawing furniture, curtains, three immense mirrors, piano, sideboard & even Rosa's sweetmeats were saved. Most of the silver had been sent off to Columbia by Express that very day. From St. Andrew's Hall, many of the portraits were saved, and the walls now stand in their strength, swept bare within. The Cathedral & Circular Church are beautiful, though melancholy, ruins. But the shock has been so great in extent, so sudden & so awful, that private feeling seemed merged into public feeling, and each one seems to forget their own losses to regret that of their friends. On Friday, I walked out to inquire after cousin Mary Des.[assure], found her bright & cheerful & thinking of our loss, while we had feared so much for her in her situation, everyday looking for an addition to her family circle, as is Mrs. James Elliott. . . . Mrs. Dan Vincent's infant was but three days old & her husband away, [so] she was carried off to Mr. Hugh Vincent's when the house was burning, but has not felt any ill effects. Afterward I met Mr. Louis Robertson & we walked down what was once Broad & New Sts., but, oh, so changed that I could not realize where I was. All seemed a frightful dream, though I stood among a forest of chimneys. I went home to dine with him &, though his family had been obliged to move, they were at home again and everything was so handsome and so comfortable that it was impossible [to] feel that their house looked upon the ruins of ours, a few hundred yards off. Mr. R[obertson]'s niece, Pamila Joyner, is staying with them & after dinner we went out walking amidst the scene of desolation and smouldering ruins. For the week before the fire I had been so unwell and so prostrated as well as in so much pain, from having taken too much exercise previously, that I was scarcely able to walk across the floor, and the doctor had made me begin to take a tonic again. But that memorable night, I was on my

feet almost from nine o'clock until Thursday night. For, during the days, throngs of friends came with offers of houses or rooms in their houses, clothing or anything else they could offer, with their heartfelt sympathy and condolence. Girls who are merely friends as well as relatives came & ever since we have had numbers of kind offers from all the Gadsdens, DeSaussures, Gibbes, Mrs. Leo Walker, Miss Bates, Mr. Frederick Porcher [and] Jimmie Davis who offered his whole house. The Gatewoods offered clothing, & Mrs. Kirkpatrick offered two chambers & some dresses. Our troubles have indeed shown who were friends, and "The milk of human kindness" seems to overflow for the suffering Charlestonians from every part of the Confederacy, as well as our own state. By Friday $30,000 were subscribed in the city for the sufferers, & numbers of societies & committees formed to feed, shelter, & clothe the poor & destitute, as well as hundreds of the better class who had lost everything. President [Jefferson] Davis proposed, & Congress voted, $250,000 to South Carolina in part payment of the national debt to her. Savannah has voted $10,000—Augusta sent nearly $7,000 already, & intends to make $15,000—Georgia voted $100,000—Columbia $30,000 & numbers of the most munificient donations from $1,000 down, from private individuals all over the state. How sweet in adversity to feel that the bond of sisterhood is drawn even closer between the states of our glorious Confederacy by our sorrow. I look beyond to brighter times & firmly believe that God has permitted this to unite us still more closely than before & to prepare and purify us through suffering for the great position he means us to occupy. On Sunday Mr. [W.B.W.] Howe[2] gave us a most beautiful & appropriate sermon. The text [was] the most appropriate that could have been chosen: Job's reply to his wife, "We have received good from the Lord & shall we not receive evil also." Many of the congregation had lost their homes & almost everything. . . . It was only by great exertion that the church itself was saved. There were but few dry eyes when he finished & the hymn "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord!", seemed to soothe and strengthen all in their trials. . . .

December 17th [1861] My birthday was spent very quietly writing & seeing friends & after tea . . . [several of us] walked among the ruins principally to see the Circular [Congregational] Church & the Cathedral [of St. John and St. Finbar]. The walls of the former are perfect & part of the steeple [is] still standing, and, with the moonlight streaming

[2] William Bell White Howe was during the Civil War the Rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Charleston. From 1871 to his death in 1892, he served as the sixth bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina.

through the windows & the monuments gleaming beyond, the effect was beautiful & reminded us of the Coliseum. While the front view, with the row of Ionic columns standing as if to guard the sanctuary, brought the ruins of the old Grecian temples vividly before us, as did the broken arches of the Institute Hall. The Cathedral is also very beautiful, the walls all standing and the spires all along the side reminded me of the statues on the Vatican while the general offices was that of some old Gothic minister [sic]—indeed everything is so transformed by the work of a single night that it seems as if we were carried centuries back and stood among the ruins of some ancient city. . . .

THE REPUBLICANISM OF HENRY LAURENS

LAURA P. FRECH *

The thought of Henry Laurens, wealthy eighteenth-century South Carolina merchant, planter, and patriot leader, merits closer study than it has heretofore received. While Laurens was not of the stature of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, or Benjamin Franklin, he participated in many important events of the American Revolution and helped make decisions which affected the course of the war and the development of the new nation. Being more than a man of action than a philosopher, he did not contribute to the more formal literature of the Revolution. He did, however, write thousands of letters, many of which have survived to provide the historian an insight into the mind of this unusual American republican.

In January, 1777, after having helped establish South Carolina's revolutionary government, Laurens was named a delegate to the Continental Congress. He attended the Congress continuously from July 22, 1777, to some time in late October or early November, 1779, serving as its president from November 1, 1777, to December 9, 1778. In 1780, while *en route* to Europe to negotiate a loan and treaty with the Dutch, he was captured by the British and confined in the Tower of London, suspected of having committed high treason. In 1781 Congress named Laurens, who was still in the Tower, to its commission to negotiate a treaty of peace with Britain. After being released Laurens played a small part in the negotiation of the preliminary peace treaty signed on November 30, 1782. Although more study is needed in this area, it appears likely that by his conversations with various ministers of the Crown and other influential people in England in 1782, 1783, and 1784, Laurens may have influenced Britain's policies towards the United States.

A contemporary described Henry Laurens as being of "swarthy complexion . . . medium size, and slender form,"[1] and so this grandson of French Huguenot immigrants appears in John Singleton Copley's portrait of him, now hanging in the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. Copley seems to have caught much of Laurens's character as well as his physical traits. His Laurens looks much as John

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[1] Elkanah Watson, *Men and Times of the Revolution; . . .* ed., Winslow C. Watson (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 139.