

Alexander Sterrett Paxton Diaries: Volume Three

November 2, 1861 – November 21, 1861

Transcribed Spring 2012

[Small leatherbound journal with pencil inscriptions. Inside front cover is a crude pencil drawn map of the battlefield at Manassas – landmarks are identified, placement of soldiers, descriptions of specifics including where “Bee fell”, where “Beauregard’s horse shot,” etc...]

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Nov. 2nd 1861

The weather looks stormy and no doubt the elements will soon war against each other. On last Wednesday morning, the 30th of Oct - we sent one of our company - Billy Thompson of Rockbridge – away to the hospital and if ‘twere possible to try and get home. He was sick with the typhoid fever. He looked very badly indeed when he left. And behold! Here on this day comes a messenger telling us he is dead! He died on Friday evening Nov. 1st. He was at times flighty in is mind. Walked about until the last. And just before his death he read a chapter in his bible and made a long prayer. But ‘tis consoling to...

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...his friends and relations to know that his immortal spirit has winged its way to a place of peace and safety beyond the reach of the canon’s roar or the tumult of a sinful world! His premature death threw a shadow of gloom over the whole company. For he was universally beloved by his comrades, was a noble hearted boy, and a true Christian. He was a classmate of mine at College. We had often studied together, walked, visited, and had played with each other, had together shared the toils of the march, etc..., and now he is gone! A P and his remaining comrades have only to drop the tear of sympathy and regret on his tomb, and pass on in the great caravan that is also_____...

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..._____ on to the mouth of the dark and common tomb! Thus it is. A friend dies, we pause, lay him beneath the clods of the valley, plant the Cyprus over his grave and then sweep on in the crowded throng of the world's noise and tumult.

Nov. 3rd 1861

Last night the storm of wind and rain increased in a frightful manner. Our tent reeled and rocked like a drunken man, threatening every minute to fall on us, as we lay snoozing in our bunks. Daylight was a welcome visitor, for it allowed us to reconnoiter our new and stormy position.

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{the captain was completely flooded and run out of his tent by the inroads of the elements }

Behold! The wind and rain was blowing in our open tent door and halfway across. Then commenced a search after our outer garments which in camp as here we lay aside before retiring. I found my cap submerged in a pool of water in the corner of (the) tent and one sock had to fished up from another giant pool of mud and water. A stream was innocently winding its way thro' the middle of the tent. Chester (Joseph T. Chester), my bed fellow, allowed that we were completely flanked by the water if not by the Yankees. He found our boot [?] upset and full of water. Jones (John H.B. Jones) found his hat full to the rim with mud and water and one leg of his pants wet thoroughly. Cub's shoes too were disposed to leave on the stream and Godwin (Thomas J. Godwin)...

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...had some mishaps too. Yet soon all articles of clothing were found and in possession of the rightful owner. Then what was to be done? We had for the most part fasted the day before on account of the storm. Now starvation loomed up before us! A consultation was held, in the midst of which in comes Jim, our cook with bread, butter, and hot coffee, obtained in spite of the warring elements. This was soon dispatched to each one's private mess chest. Then came the work of

fixing up the crazy tent, etc..During which our feelings were considerably dampened. Toward night the rain ceased, and the stars shone out as bright and beautiful as ever.

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Nov. 4th 1861

Something got wrong with the guard duty last night. The horses around the Head Quarters many of them got loose and owing to the intense darkness took many liberties not granted them. One managed to get into the telegraph operations tent at H –Quarters and considerably damaged the machines, etc...Doubtless his horseship desired to telegraph to Jeff Davis a true account of his limited fare and hard times. Also some rails were taken off fences by some unknown hand and burnt against orders. So Major Whiting – commander of the guard - was in no good humor in the morning. However no sentinel was shot and all things went on as usual.

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Nov. 8th 1861

Well, heard this morning that the 1st Brigade (ours) was destined to go over to the valley under their old Gen Jackson who had been assigned to the command of the valley district. And soon the artillery (6 guns) went by on their way over to the valley. My brother Mac (Joseph McClung Paxton) came over to our company as he had been transferred to it from Capt. Updike's company (Co. H 4th Va. Inf.) by the Sec. of War. Also heard that we would have to leave Head Qr's and go along with the Reg. Which didn't fancy much as only two or three desired the change. We had good times at H-Qr's. And the Gen.'s had a high opinion of our company too, as we always conducted ourselves with becoming decorum around the place. Besides we were nicely quartered there with good beds, flues to our tents, etc...got plenty to eat, etc.

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So you may well imagine we didn't fancy a return to the Reg – and a return to the Valley with all the marching, etc...under Jackson. Gen Smith said he'd rather have our company than any other in the army. In the evening orders came for us to be ready to join the Reg soon in the morning. So we made up our minds to be satisfied and prepared to leave the plains of Manassas with both feelings of sorrow and regret. Those plains had been to us scenes of sadness and pleasure. Scenes of sorrow, as there were the graves of some of our comrades. Scenes of pleasure as there we had enjoyed ourselves in the camp and on the march too.

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Nov. 9 1861

Rose early in the morning and breakfasted before daylight. By 6 ½ were packed up and ready to go over to Reg- All ready, into ranks we fell and forward we went. Passed by Head Qr's and gave three hearty cheers for Gens Johnston and Smith, Maj's Milton and Whiting and Lieut. Lane. Mays, Milton, and Whiting were Gen Smith's (Gustavus Woodson Smith) Adjts. Gens and Lieut. Lane (son of Joe Lane) was one of Gen. Johnston's aids. Maj. Whiting and Lt. Lane had charge of our company and rest of the guard there. Maj. Whiting is a very kind and nice man. He wrote a letter to General Jackson giving us a high recommendation and requested him to detail us as his body guard. Got to Reg and off it started to the Junction. Passed by the battleground of July 18th. Got to the junction about 10 a.m., but found no cars ready for us.

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It then commenced raining and blowing cold. And we had to wait there with no shelter _____ the bare trees above us, until the next morning. Rained until the evening and then cleared off cold; and was a large frost. Slept on the cold wet ground by a fire, but in the morning the front (?) was white around us. The mud was four inches deep all around and all things made it quite disagreeable.

Nov. 10th 1861

All aboard, the cars started at 9 ½ am for Strasburg. 'Twas Sunday and tolerable cool. As we thundered on up towards Strasburg, we were cheered as usual. For we were welcomed to the Valley as the citizens of Winchester all sent...

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...us a petition to come over or rather to Johnston to send troops over to keep the plundering Yankees away from their homes and firesides. Arrived in Strasburg about sunset, and were as hungry as wolves. For had eaten nothing of any consequence since _____left Centerville . However our cook (Jim Lewis?) had come on a previous train and prepared supper for 16 of us. So we had a good supper and slept on the cars as thick as hops on a pea pole.

Nov. 11th 1861

Slept until Adj. Wade (of the Reg) came around and told us "lazy dogs" to get up and get breakfast and get ready to start off.

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Started from the town about 9 ½ down road towards Winchester, a splendid road, well graded and macadamized too. Strasburg is not a large town nor a pretty place either. Yet the scenery around is pretty. The north branch of the Shenandoah river runs by south and a mt. juts up to its south bank, reminding me of the scenery at Balcony Falls by the old James. We jogged along the road and came to our camp ground, 2 miles this side of Winchester, in a very nice place. Here all the rest of our brigade are encamped in the prettiest country I ever saw. It really looks like coming once more into civilization coming from the desolate plains...

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...of Manassas, into this garden spot of Virginia. There we only saw level barren fields and thickets of pine trees. But here the country is rolling, varying from hill to meadow, whilst splendid looking mansions meet the eye in every direction. And too have seen more pretty girls on our march to this camp from Strasburg than saw

the whole months over at Manassas. So we are pretty well satisfied with our change of country.

Nov. 21st 1861

Well this day four months ago we fought and won the battle of Manassas. It scarcely seems 4 months have rolled around since then. We have not moved our regt but part of the brigade has gone below the town two miles or so.

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So guess we'll go tomorrow. But we think the company ought to be "on to winter quarters" For the cold wind howls around these old tents in pitiful tones and they are not sufficient for the rigors of winter.'Twas but the other morn when we arose, and the Mts both north and south of us were white with snow. And the cold blasts as they swept to us from the tops of the Alleghaney, brought drops of snow and only told us too plainly that the rigors of the winter were coming. We would like very well to get into Winchester to quarter this winter. The "dark-eyed beauties" there would tend to cheer us up. To remind us of those we have left behind. W'dn't be surprised if some of our boys didn't spark some of the lasses there, etc...

End Volume 3

*Inside the back cover is a pencil drawn map of "Camp Harmon" ... "Where we staid for 6 weeks after the battle of 21st July 1861"