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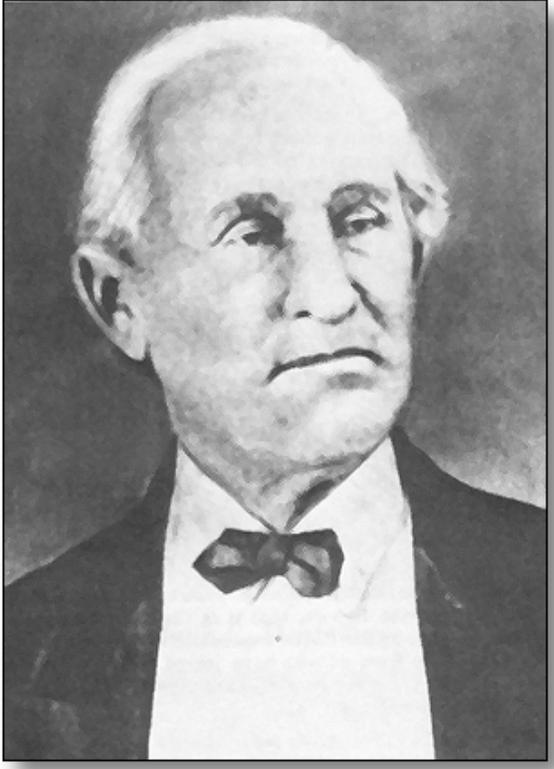
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A Civil War Letter From Capt. James McKay

By ROBERT A. TAYLOR



Capt. James McKay at a later age

The winter of 1864 was a grim time for the embattled people of the Confederacy. Their armies were slowly being pushed back into the heartland of the fledgling nation, from which there could be no retreat. Dreams of a collapse of the North's will to continue the contest, along with foreign intervention or the breaking of the stranglehold of the Union naval blockade, were growing dim.

But the South still had powerful armies in the field, and with them the hope that they could provide the victories that would secure independence. No campaigns or great battles

loomed in January of 1864; the respective -armies remained inactive. Only the scattered raids of guerrilla bands disturbed the brief respite. South Florida also enjoyed what passed for a lull in the bitter struggle being waged there.

Capt. James McKay took advantage of the moment to write to his superior officer and bring him up-to-date on the activities in the region. McKay, a prominent resident of Tampa, commanded the Fifth Confederate Commissary District. This area encompassed the bulk of South Florida and included Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Polk, Brevard, Dade, and Monroe counties. McKay was concerned with the production, collection, and shipment of foodstuffs for the use of the southern armies.

The primary product of this region was beef cattle, on which the armies of Generals Braxton Bragg and P.G.T. Beauregard depended. With the loss of beef from Texas after the fall of Vicksburg, South Florida became the largest single source of cattle in the Confederacy east of the Mississippi. Florida beef fed Southerners in Savannah and Charleston, and sustained Union prisoners-of-war in camps like Andersonville.

No one knew better how vital the work of James McKay was than the Chief Commissary of Florida, Pleasant. W. White. White had been a lawyer in Quincy before the war and now held one of the most important posts in the entire Confederacy.

He was the government's chief purchasing agent for farm products in Florida.

White picked McKay in the summer of 1863 for his knowledge of the cattle business, gained in the pre-war trade with Cuba. The Scottish immigrant had proven his loyalty to the South when he had been captured trying to smuggle arms and ammunition through the blockade in 1861.

Major White knew that the man chosen for this assignment would have to use his own initiative in many instances, the lines of communication with South Florida being tenuous at best. The man would have to be a leader and have the respect of the community at large. No one fit the bill better than Capt. James McKay.

McKay's letter of Jan. 7, 1864, gives us a capsule glimpse of what the Civil War in South Florida was like. The constant threat of Federal raids from the sea and the disruption of a frontier society by internecine warfare are evident. The problems of moving supplies in a state that lacked both roads and rail lines plagued both men until the end of the war.

Bureaucratic snarls and personality clashes hampered operations upon which thousands of Southern soldiers depended for their meager rations. Despite all the obstacles, South Florida beef remained a part of those rations until the guns fell silent in 1865. And men like James McKay would survive to build a new Florida from the ashes of the old.

The letter follows.

Office of 5th Dist
Commissary Dept Tampa
Fla January 7th 1864

Major P.W. White

Dear Sir

We have pretty good authority that the enemy is to make an attack upon us at Charlotte Harbor and Tampa and that soon, from all accounts their determination is to break up our Cattle business. Now from the poor Condition of the cattle, as also the poor pasture on the way to be had, I thought it wrong to continue operations longer than those now on the way are delivered.

The party of 15 hands I had on the Kissimee to try and obtain some fine Cattle there returned last night, without effecting anything owing to the Kissimee being so high, they tried for some time to make them swim and drowned 9 Head in the attempt and had to leave them, which I will do until the River is sufficiently low. And then probably get them now as the enemy is threatening us and the government is unable to lend us assistance.

I mean to give what help I can of men for Pickett duty to Capt. Westcott, he also has sent some men to Peas Creek and the Miaka River. He was to Recontre and Report if any appeared. Last week a party of some 20 of the enemy headed by one Enoch Daniels, a Floridian, Came ashore with a Boat or Boats at the Miaka River for the purpose of Killing or Capturing our Cow Boys, fortunately five of the enemy deserted and Came and informed our Cow Boys who returned with the deserters and before day break fired and little doubt killed some of them, but our Men had to Retire' with one wounded in the arm.

The 5 deserters from the enemy called to see me yesterday in their way to Tampa to Report to Capt. Westcott. They confirm the Report, that it is the intention of the enemy

to destroy the Cattle business with the assistance of the traitors from us who have joined them, under the Circumstances, I must give with my men all the aid I can and is now carrying out that.

Genl. Finnegan had wrote me in answer to a letter I sent you some time ago in relation to more protection for the frontier. I sent through the country a copy of Genl. Finnegan's letter that is on Peas Creek, the few people left are alive to their interests and duty, so that I think with the assistance of my Men we will be able to give them a bold front, should they appear. If they are to show themselves at all I would prefer them doing so now when we might be operating with the cattle business. The powder, lead and caps for Indians have never got this length yet, which prevents my sending driving teams until all go together.

It is really too bad the negligence of those R.R. Agents. Mr. Baldwin sent me 4 times Rice, one of which received and is perfectly Rotten musty and worthless. It is really too bad to pay transportation on such, he sent me invoices and receipts as being in good order and of course believing so signed his receipts and sent them as stated quality good. This is perfect 'robbery. The ordnance officer from Quincy sent me Receipts for Powder, lead, and caps. But when I receive them I will receipt for them, as I do not intend to be asleep again and believe every one.

In the Hog business you requested me to forward them to Col. Summers to Bacons Agent there who would Receipt for them to me, as no one could be had to keep up and feed them until a good many was obtained. I had to heard them as best I could and did so. Now to My surprise I have to go and look for my Receipts from Quitman Ga. this is what Summers tells me.

Such conduct is really too bad, if so told at first I would properly prepare for it. Summers has acted so in matters with me. If Stubbs is continued and retained in person at Madison, I can I think get things arranged satisfactorily with him, and in future will not like to deliver any property at any other point except Madison out of my District, unless having an Agent of my own to act at such place.

As for instance Major Malloy only receipts to me for the cattle he received at Charleston the Cattle is sent by contract to Stockton, No Agent. I pay the Contractor for number delivered there, and before they arrive at Charleston several dies or is killed and no one to take charge interested. Now in a lot of 407 Head delivered at Stockton I only receive Receipts from Malloy for 400, My son is on his way up to Charleston and may trace it up, probably.

It is true in the hurry of our organization that every thing required could not be done - But in obeying orders and deficiencies of this kind arise on me (it wont do). If my health would have permitted and the business allow me I would have been glad to have gone up the Country and taken My few Negroes with me and place them in some safer place than this.

I have given an order on you in favor of my son for \$100,000 which please honor. He will call at Tallahassee on his way back from Charleston, S.C. and will see you or Major Noyes either will do I presume. With Kind Regards

I am Major
Your most ob. servant
James McKay Agt
5th Dist Comm Dept
Tampa Fla

PS-Our Mail from Gainsville to Tampa is badly conducted, it is made up of 3 Contractors. Now if the mail from Gainsville is not in at scedule at Ocala the Contractor leaves for Brooksville and then the same act is committed and our Mails lay over to the injury of the different depts as also the Public at large. I think a Representation of this by yourself or Genl. Finnegan to the P.O. dept at Richmond so the matter would be corrected.