

Recollections of My Boyhood
S. Graham Howison

I was ten years old when Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States and I distinctly remember the excitement in Richmond (Virginia). Even the boys of my age could realize that a critical time had been reached though we could not understand fully what it was; we did understand that there was a great difference of opinion among the older people. I would notice groups of men standing on the street corners hotly discussing some question. As the days went by the interest grew more and more intense up to March 4th, the Inauguration Day.

In April we heard of the bombardment of Ft. Sumpter, S.C. and then the question everybody was discussing was "Will Virginia follow South Carolina out of the Union?". I can remember very well the sharp difference of opinions which arose among intimate friends as to what was the best thing to do. We boys, of course, took sides as our elders did, and many hot discussions resulted. I can remember very well how the excitement increased up to the meeting of the State Convention which was to decide whether or not Virginia was to secede. The discussion and argument in the Convention did not lessen the excitement, because many of the leading men of Virginia were strongly opposed to secession. Again and again the Act of Secession was proposed, again and again it was defeated. Finally President Lincoln called for 70,000 men to prosecute war against the southern states which had seceded, and Virginia was called on for over 2,000 troops. This brought matters to a climax, and on April 17, 1861, the Convention decided by an overwhelming vote that Virginia should secede from the Union.

On the same day my father (Robert Reid Howison) was walking along on Bank Street, and met Mr. Lawrence Marye near the corner of 10th, where Goddin's Hall stood. On the top of Goddin's Hall a United States flag was flying. Another friend joined them, and said "I suppose your voice is still for war." "Yes," said Mr. Marye's, "Perfectly still".

Another friend of my father was Mr. William F. Wickham of Hickory Hill. He was a large slave holder, owning I think, about four hundred. He met my father the next day and said, "Mr. Howison, Slavery is doomed." Yet despite Mr. Wickham's foresight, he never undertook to realize money on his slaves, but kept them to the end and took care of them.

Then began the raising of troops and all necessary preparations for war, greatly to the delight of the boys. Being a boy, I did not realize that the South was utterly unprepared for war, and I looked upon the training camp, which was promptly established at the old Fair Grounds, more as a place of entertainment than anything else. I took great delight in the parades and I soon learned to know the various commands as they arrived at the camp. I was especially interested in two companies from New Orleans. One was the Washington Artillery and the other the New Orleans Zouaves. Two or three times a week I would be out there to see the dress parades,

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and to hear the music. There were a number of bands on the ground, and the "Bonnie Blue Flag", "Dixie", "The Marseillaise Hymn", "Maryland" and a few others became very familiar.

As the months went by, I was conscious that familiar regiments had disappeared from the field, and others had taken their places, then in a short time I began to hear more serious echoes of real war.

First came the news of the Battle of Bethel Church, bringing not only enthusiasm, but also sadness. A song was soon heard on the streets and we boys promptly caught it up. Here is the first stanza:

"The Yankees came to Bethel Church, Upon the tenth of June,
They thought to give the southern boys a trainin';
But we gave 'em such a beatin', That they never stopped
retreatin'
Till they get to the happy land of Canaan."

A short time after that came the news of the First Battle of Manassas which, while adding to the sadness, brought also undoubted enthusiasm.

As it seemed impossible to reach Richmond by that route, a large body of Federal troops under command of General George B. McClellan was sent by transport in the spring of 1862 to force its way to Richmond up the Peninsular. I can remember very well the excitement in Richmond when this news came to us, which was increased by the constant passing of Gen. Joseph E. Johnson's troops through the city. Johnson's command, known as the "Army of Northern Virginia" was hastening to meet the advance of McClellan up the Peninsular. McClellan pressed Johnson's men back until within a few miles of Richmond they reached the batteries and breastworks which had been prepared for them, and there they made their final stand.

Then began "The Seven Days Battles" around Richmond, then too, began the period when we commenced to realize what war was. The constant passing of ambulances with wounded men through the streets, the heavy, continuous roar of the guns, and the flashes of the artillery which were plainly visible as night came on, to the crowds standing at the corner of 12th and Clay Streets on the hill known as "President's Hill", produced conditions which made a twelve year old boy grow to fifteen in a very few days.

To add to the anxiety, which was unavoidable, a rumor began to spread through the city that our trusted Commander, Joseph E. Johnson, had been wounded, and a new untried man had been put in his place. From that time on the Army of Northern Virginia was commanded by Robert E. Lee. Almost as soon as he took command he

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ordered Gen. Thomas J. Jackson, who had been operating his army in the Valley of Virginia, to join him with his troops which he did with his usual promptness and secrecy. In a short time McClellan was obliged to withdraw, reporting to President Lincoln that he had determined to "change his base". In a few days the following appeared in the papers:

"Henceforth, when a rascal is kicked out of doors,
He need not resent the disgrace;
But say, "My dear Sir, I'm eternally yours,
For you kindness in changing my base.'"

In the summer of 1864, I paid a week's visit to Uncle Sam Graham, whose company was encamped at Chapin's Bluff. The camp had been built the year before of log houses for winter quarters. The houses were set in rows facing on what the soldiers called streets and the soldiers had names for them. Boylike, I wanted to see and know everything and I was conducted all through the camp. The path along the river was in a body of woods. At one point I noticed that a plank had been nailed to a tree, and a nail had been driven into it at each end. The river had been mined at different places for the purpose of stopping hostile vessels. All these things had been explained to me, but I still wanted to know why that plank was nailed there. I was told that a large mine was in the river just opposite to this plank, and if any enemy vessel came up the river, the sentry who was stationed to watch would sight by the two nails, and when the vessel came into line, he would touch the key of an electric battery, fire the mine, blow all the water out of the river, then the soldiers would charge and capture the vessel.

In camp the men entertained themselves with games, but the great game of baseball had not been heard of, so more quiet games were in use; cards, dominoes, backgammon, checkers and chess, and for outside games quoits and marbles. I never cared for cards, dominoes or checkers and I wasn't as efficient at quoits as some of the men, but at marbles I could win from most of them, and at chess from any of them! One interesting thing about these games was that the men made all of the equipment but the marbles and horseshoes.

The rest of the summer and up to Christmas I spent at my grandmother's in North Carolina. [Graham side of family per Ann Stephens]. Sometimes I would visit other relatives in nearby homes.

At that time the mail facilities were very poor. Everybody was anxious to hear news from the front, and the neighbors would take turns in getting mail from the post office. I remember once I was at Mr. Samuel Booker's and a number of gentlemen were there waiting for the mail which was to be distributed that day by Mr. Field who lived about a mile away. An old colored man, Uncle Frank, had been

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sent over to Mr. Field's to get the mail. He stayed a long time and the waiting gentlemen became very impatient. Presently he came in sight, and as he came up the walk, my Uncle, Mr. James Daniel, rose from his seat and started down the walk to meet him. This conversation took place when they met: Uncle James said "Frank, what made you so long coming?" "Marse James, the mail hadn't come". "Well, why in the world didn't you wait for it?" "Cause I thought you gentlemen was in a hurry for it." To show you the workings of Uncle Frank's mind I put in this incident. Once he and two other men were on an ox cart, going to my grandmother's, a distance of about twelve miles. These ox carts had wooden axles, and when they were about half way one of axles broke. One of the men in the party was an excellent carpenter but he had no tools with him. After careful examination of the trouble Uncle Frank remarked: "What a lucky thing it is that we got a carpenter along." After a further, more critical examination he made this remark; "All we lack is a augur".

When the fall came on, I attended the first term of the country school. Every Friday afternoon we would cover the chunks in the open fireplace, certain boys were detailed to keep the water bucket full, others to keep a good supply of wood on hand and were sure to have on Fridays afternoon a good supply of dry wood and kindlings. The first boy to arrive Monday morning had to uncover the chunks and start the fire. The first girl who came found a fairly comfortable room, her work was to sweep up and dust the room.

The first term closed at Christmas, and after Christmas, two cousins and I drove over to Halifax county in a family carriage and I got transportation and bought a ticket at Scottsburg, got on a train packed with soldiers and went to Richmond. I had grown so in those six months that my pants were too short and my sleeves ended half was between my elbow and wrist. This was in January 1865.

I have no vivid recollection of anything in the next three months except the scarcity of everything and the high prices. The last barrel of flour my father bought was at Columbia, up the James River and it cost him \$1200. This was captured by the Yankees on a canal boat and never reached us.

We attended the Second Presbyterian Church, and I recollect well on the second day of April how beautifully the green was coming on the trees. I noticed them as we walked along to church. The congregation as usual was a full one, and while Dr. Hoge was preaching, the sexton walked quietly up the aisle and handed him a note. He soon brought his sermon to a close and in the dead hush that settled on his congregation, he quietly announced that he had just received information that General Lee's lines had been broken at Petersburg and it would be necessary for General Lee to retreat, and for the government to evacuate Richmond. He then said he

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would leave Richmond at once and probably not see them again.

Unusual excitement was evident on the street as we walked home. An uncle of mine [Samuel Howison] who had been an officer in the Fredericksburg bank, was living in our home, and was working for the Confederate Government in the Treasury Department. When Fredericksburg was evacuated, he had removed his family and transferred them to Buckingham County. By order of the Board of Directors of the Fredericksburg Bank of Commerce he had taken charge of several thousand dollars in gold and silver and brought it to Richmond for safekeeping. On the 2nd day of April 1865 it was evident that nothing would be safe in Richmond but to make this specie as safe as possible it would have to be hidden. The question at once came up: "Where and how?" It was determined to secrete as much as possible in belts to be worn under the clothing. My mother, sister and cousin Helen Howison spent the rest of Sunday making these belts of strong cotton. I myself spent Sunday afternoon helping Uncle Sam to transfer a number of bags of gold from Mr. James Ficklen's store to our house, a distance uphill of five blocks. I don't know how much I carried, but I know it was heavy. This gold was rapidly transferred to the belts which were to be quickly put on our bodies when needful.

That night, Sam Graham who was on wounded furlough at our house, was making necessary arrangements to take the last troop train out of Richmond. The quartermaster had issued him among other things, a new pair of shoes. I went downstairs to get the shoes for him out of our store room, along with some eatables which he could not get in his regular rations. I got the shoes and eatables, locked the store room door, and for convenience dropped the key into one of the shoes slung over my shoulder. All these things were gratefully received by my uncle who walked off and caught one of the last trains which carried out the sick and the wounded. Of course, when we wanted to go into the store room we missed the key, and a hurried search was made for it in every direction. I was the last person known to have had the key, and after awhile I remembered that I had dropped it into the shoes which by this time were miles away. It was up to me then to open the door. I had some mechanical skill and some tools. I took another key, filed it to fit and unlocked the door. We unlocked all the doors, so if the house were sacked, the doors need not be broken.

On Monday April 3, I got up early, dressed and boylike went down the street to see what was going on. The streets were crowded with hurrying people, dense clouds of black smoke were arising in the south and I soon discovered the source of the smoke. By order of the Confederate Authorities the two railroad bridges spanning the James River had been set afire. They had also set fire to Seabrook's Warehouse which was heavily stocked with tobacco. The fire spread rapidly because all the fire hoses had been cut. By

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eight o'clock that morning Gallige Mills were on fire. These were large brick buildings ten stories high. The owner of the mills opened the doors giving anyone flour who could get access to the mills. I was on Cary Street and someone had rolled a barrel of flour from the mills to this street. The head of the barrel was knocked in and three or four colored women were trying to scoop flour from the barrel with one hand while with the other they held their aprons. The final result was a catastrophe, and I couldn't help seeing something funny in it. They got, I think, in ten or fifteen minutes all the flour out of the barrel and most of it was on the ground or on their faces. The fire hose which was lying on the ground had leaked enough to make the street very muddy.

I thought there was nothing more for me to see, so I had better go home and report. I walked up Main Street and saw another sight. There was a squad of Confederate Soldiers, cavalymen, four; they had all dismounted, two of them were holding a whiskey barrel up above their shoulders, the third one was drinking out of the bunghole, the fourth was holding the horses. I suppose there was not over a pint of whiskey in the barrel and most of that was spilled into the face of the man who was drinking. This was on the corner of 18th and Main. I looked down the street and I could see it was empty nearly to Rockets where the street curves. While I was looking a small compact group of cavalry came in sight; the fresh southerly wind spread out the flag they carried and I was surprised to see that it was a United States flag. The Confederate Cavalry with the whiskey barrel saw it too. They dropped the barrel, seized the reins of their horses, mounted, and rapidly rode out of sight. The Yankee Cavalry were about a half mile off. They soon reach the corner of 12th and Main where I was. An officer rode rapidly up to me and called out "Where is the Capitol?" I answered "Straight ahead." If they continued up Main Street they would never reach the Capital!

I then went back home on Governor Street just below the "Mansion". By this time it was about nine o'clock and I think I had some breakfast, though I don't remember it. A fresh southerly breeze was drifting the fire rapidly from the river front over the city. Across from our house the street was filling with furniture, brought from houses which were in the path of the fire. The intense heat from the fire created currents that carried burning brands high into the air, shingled roofs half a mile away were set on fire by these burning brands, and during the height of the fire, the steeple of the United Presbyterian Church at the corner of 8th and Franklin caught fire near the top, and the Church was consumed.

While I was looking from one of our upstairs windows, I saw a small column of smoke rising from the shingled kitchen roof of the Governor's Mansion. Gus Conway, my playmate next door, and I rushed over to see if we could do anything about putting it out.

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We found a ladder by which we could reach the eaves of the burning kitchen. The next question was water; we could get no water, it had been cut off. We found though a bucket with some pig slops in it, and in some way, I in front, Gus behind, we got that pig slops up to the top of the ladder. Fortunately the fire had made little progress, and being near the eaves, I could throw the pig slops on it from the top of the ladder. The Mansion door was unlocked and Uncle Tom Watkins, Aunt Dicey's husband, went to the top and got through the skylight out on the roof where he sat for several hours watching the fire. Fortunately that roof did not catch fire. I had come down from the ladder, and had taken my place on the stable roof which was covered with tin, to watch for other fires on the kitchen roof.

I was greatly interested in watching the accumulation of furniture in the Capitol Square, brought there by people driven by the fire from their homes. Soon there was a mass of tables, chairs, mattresses, feather beds, etc. I don't know how long I stayed on the roof, but by this time the Confederate Arsenal was on fire. This building was on Belle Isle in the river, just above 8th Street.

Quantities of loaded shells and other ammunition were in the building, and of course the heat soon exploded them. That interested me very much, but in a short time fragments of exploded shell began to fall on the tin roof on which was standing. I concluded that I better go over home and get some dinner, so I left. Sometime in the afternoon the wind shifted to the northwest, driving all fire brands back over the burnt district. By this time the Federal troops in force had entered Richmond, and put all idle men they found to work fighting fire, giving the freshly freed negroes their first experience of freedom. The shift of the wind saved the city.

Before this time we thought our house would be in the line of the fire and had made all necessary preparations to move over to Church Hill into the home of the Austrian Consul, Mr. Von Groning, who had kindly offered us a refuge. After the change of wind we saw that our house was safe from fire, but if left unoccupied, we did not think it would be safe from the Federal troops.

My father was sitting at his office desk on the basement floor, and glancing through the window he saw a Naval Officer come into the gate. My father rose and went to the door to meet him. The officer said, "Passing up the street I saw your office sign, and having the same name I have come in to offer any help that I can give you. I am Captain Henry Howison of the U. S. Navy and my vessel lies at anchor near Rockets. The shelter of my vessel is at your service and I shall be very glad to have you and your family to come on board." My father thanked him for his offer, but very

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cooly declined it. Later in life Captain Howison rose to the rank of Admiral in the U. S. Navy. In the summer of 1865 we had in our yard an apricot tree which bore beautiful fruit and when the fruit was at its best my mother asked me to gather a basketful to take to General Lee, who was then living on Franklin Street between 7th and 8th. As I went out with the apricots my sister Helen called me and gave me a photograph of General Lee on which she wished him to write his name. I gladly carried the fruit and rang the bell of the house. General Lee himself opened the door. I handed him the basket and made my request. His grave and sad face brightened up at once and he said "Certainly", taking the photograph from me. This was the days before fountain pens so he took it to his desk and returned it to me with this written on it "For Miss Helen Howison, R. E. Lee."