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Journalist's Perspective on the Invasion of Huntsville

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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A JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE
ON THE INVASION OF HUNTSVILLE

John Withers Clay, editor of The Huntsville Democrat, gave the following account of the invasion of Huntsville in a letter to his brother, Clement Claiborne Clay, who was serving at the time as a senator in the Confederate Congress in Richmond, Virginia. After he fled from Huntsville, he joined another brother, Hugh Lawson Clay, at Knoxville, Tennessee, where he secured a position as agent to make contracts for saltpeter for the Confederate government. Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Lawson Clay was serving as assistant adjutant general to Major General E. Kirby Smith.

Knoxville, Tnn., May 15, 1862

Hon. C. C. Clay, Jr.,
At Large.

My dear brother: I should have written to you, ere this, to relieve your mind as to my status & locus, but did not know how to direct my letter & brother Lawson was unable to inform me. I was, probably, the first man who left Huntsville after the Federals came in. You may be astonished that I should not have been fully apprised of their advance & did not leave sooner, but you would not have been, probably, if you had been there. For weeks, we had had rumors of the approach of the enemy--that they were in such & such numbers at Pulaski, at Elkton, at Madison X Roads, at Fayetteville, at Winchester &c.--would be in Huntsville on a certain day, at a certain hour--& facts had as often contradicted rumors. So, we only illustrated the old fable of the shepherd's boy & the wolf, when the enemy did come. On the 10th of April, the reported arrival of the enemy at Fayetteville en route to Huntsville assumed more plausibility than previous reports. At dark, several citizens from

the neighborhood of Fayetteville reached Huntsville & reported that they saw several regiments of them marching on the Shelbyville Road, within a few miles of Fayetteville, in the afternoon of the 9th. We took for granted that the bridge across Elk would be burnt & the necessity of rebuilding it & the bad condition of the roads would retard their progress, if they really intended coming to Huntsville & were not merely making a diversion in our direction, with a view of going by a different route to Savannah, Tenn., from that pursued by the rest of Buell's Army, for greater convenience of supplies. About 11 o'clock the night of the 10th a courier arrived from Meridianville, stating that the enemy had encamped two miles North of that place. I was at home, having just returned from a visit to Bishop & Mrs. Lay, who had arrived at Mrs. Rice's, the day before; & was summoned to the door by one of the hands in my Office knocking at it, having come to report to me the news. I went up town & found a number of persons--among them John Bell & Sam Morgan, of Nashville, Joe Bradley & Zeb Davis, who were desiring to get away before the enemy arrived--all consulting as to the probable truth of the courier's report. It was, finally, concluded that Bob. Brickell, Joe Bradley, Jr. & Blanton [page torn] should ride toward Meridianville & ascertain the truth of the report. Bell & the others went home to their beds. I went to my Office & before day, with the aid of my Office hands, Guilford, Charles & Campbell, stowed about 3/4th of my type & material in the cuddy in the Attic of your Office building, put my job press (the one with a wheel) in Dr. Wilkinson's basement, carried my two desks to my residence & packed my Office books & accts in my trunk, with my clothes, intending to take my trunk with me to Guntersville; where, also, I proposed moving my newspaper press & enough type to continue the publication of my paper. I had obtained from Dr. Burritt the loan of Guilford & his buggy & horse, to take me to Whitesburg, & had hired John

Robinson's wagon, to be ready at a moments notice, to carry down my press, type, paper, ink &c. About 4 A.M., April 11, I went down home to make arrangements there for leaving & ordered breakfast, intending to leave directly after it. About 5 I returned to my Office, expecting to find the newspaper press taken down & type put up ready for shipment, but, on the contrary, found my foreman, Cauthers, had dismissed my hands without taking down the press &c. He excused himself on the ground that it could all be done in an hour, & our scouts would certainly give us that much notice of the enemy's approach--& if the enemy did not come, the setting-up of the press would be a very hard job, which he wished to avoid, if possible. Every one seemed so incredulous of the enemy's approach & so unconcerned that I yielded to the general fatuity--but concluded I would go over to Mr. Fackler's, where Sam Morgan & his two nephews (brothers of Capt. John, wounded at Shiloh) were staying & learn what news a courier from Winchester had brought him. Arriving there, I found all apparently wrapt in sleep & so quiet that I concluded not to arouse them, & returned homeward & just as I turned Pope Walker's corner, I saw great commotion among a number of negroes on the Street as far down as Mr. Erskine's corner--& several running toward me. I accosted the first & he exclaimed--"Dey done come, sir! deys done come!" "Who?" "De Yankees, sir!" "How do you know?" "I seed 'em myself. Dey at the telegraph Office & all over de Square." "Did they have on blue coats?" "Yes, sir." "Well, then, I reckon they are the Yankees"--and I walked quietly back to Fackler's & rang the door-bell violently. Sally Pynchon (nee Fackler) thrust her head & nearly half her body out of an upper window & asked excitedly, "Who's that?" "Mr. Clay--the Yankees are on the Square & have the telegraph office." "Lord have mercy upon us!"--& back she dropped.



Fackler House, 518 Adams Street, now home of the
Dudley Powell family.



William McDowell Home, 517 Adams Street, chosen as
headquarters for General Mitchell, now home
of Nancy Gentry Fisher.

I went into the Street &, seeing Mr. McDowell's Alfred running home, almost breathless & eyes looking as though they wd pop out of the sockets, I told him to run back & tell Guilford to meet me at Coltart's with [page torn] & then go & tell my wife that I was off. "Lord, let me go & tell my master, first, sir!" "Well, go and tell him, first." I waited for him to return & started Bob Fearn's Elliott on the same errands, to ensure their delivery, & walked out toward Coltart's. After crossing Dry Creek, I saw four men riding rapidly down the parallel street toward Coltart's--& thinking they might be Yankees, I stepped into a deep ditch & walked in it till they disappeared & then took the open road for Coltart's. Getting there, I saw Mrs. C., told her the Yankees had the telegraph office & enquired who those men were, dismounted at her well. She reckoned they were the Yankees & I had better run. I ran about 100 yards, having Coltart's house between me & the enemy, & then quietly walked over to North Ala. College, & after waiting awhile there, went into the mountain & soon found myself at old Jimmy Hall's place, between old Andy Drake's place & town, & occupied by a Mr. Crenshaw. I ate breakfast there &, while sitting by the fire after breakfast, in popped A. R. Wiggs ("Hal")--each of us greatly surprised. He knew nothing of the enemy's arrival until after usual breakfast time at Mrs. Fleming's--& then had out his horse & was about leaving when a detachmt of the enemy appeared. He ordered his horse to be put up &, lighting his pipe, walked carelessly along up the Street to the Masonic Hall & down Adams St., dodging into Trotman's to avoid another detachmt of the enemy & made his way through the fields into the mountain. Sam Morgan & one nephew escaped--the other was captured & put on parole. Col. Jno. G. Coltart, slighted [sic] wounded in the heel at Shiloh, & Lieut. Col. Russell, with his left arm broken by a minie ball, were at Old Sammy Coltart's, but left the night before. Old

Sammy had ridden to town to see Robert about sending John's clothes &, on the appearance of the Yankees, rode hurriedly homeward. This caused him to be pursued & captured--&, 'tis said, he was made to take the oath of allegiance, but, it may be, he was only put on his parole. Joe Bradley was aroused from sleep by servants, & then wife & children, clamoring for him to run, for the Yankees were all over the Streets about his house. He succeeded in getting out of town about 12 o'clock M., by slipping from lot to lot. He got to George Beirne's--& the Feds. appearing in the lane between Beirne's & Bob Fearn's, the Beirne girls locked him in the cellar.



George P. Beirne's home, 300 Williams Street, now home of Dr. Eleanor Hutchens.

Getting to Fackler's, a horse was brought to him, & he attempted to get off--but his heart failed him & he returned. Again he started & Feds on horseback appeared about Pope Walker's corner.

He had no alternative but to assume a bold front & move toward them--they turned off--& he went by Lawrence Watkin's to California St. & thence through the fields to the mountain & over the Tenn. River to Buck's. As he passed Jim Ward's, Jim's children halloed--"Run, Mr. Bradley, run! the Yankees'll catch you." He implored them to keep quiet & got off. I met with no refugees but Wiggs in the mountain, but numbers, who were or had been soldiers, found their way out, that day & for several days after. Old Jno. Bell & Zeb Davis made their way on foot, through the Grove, & in a round about way through mud & water, to Whitesburg & over to Buck's--'Tis said, that Bob Brickell & his party sent out as scouts, met the enemy's advance on the brow of a hill unexpectedly, & Bob accosted them--"Gentlemen, you are riding rather late." "Yes--& so are you. Where are you going?" Blanton replied--"We're looking for a fellow that stole a buggy & horse in town & came out this way." "And we are looking for some fellows that stole some States out of the Union, & we think we've found some of them. Turn back with us." So, our scouts, were brought back as prisoners & were released on parole not to leave the town. -- It is most astonishing that 13 or 14 locomotives & a number of cars should have been kept at the Huntsville Depot, with the assurance that the enemy might be expected any day--& that the passenger train from the West, with wounded soldiers & others should have been allowed to come to the Depot without warning, as is said to be the fact. Coincident with these facts are the further facts that the R. R. Superintendent of Transportation at Huntsville, Hooper, is a Pennsylvanian, & the telegraph operators are Yankees. They may be all right, but the coincidences are unfortunate. 'Tis said that when the train was approaching Huntsville, efforts were made by persons, down towards Pinhook, to warn it to go back, the Federals having arrived two hours before, but the conductor & engineer did not heed--perhaps, did

not understand, the warning--& when the train reached the Depot, the engineer, seeing the Feds, attempted to back, but had only 8 lbs. of steam on, & besides, was threatened with sundry Federal guns in dangerous proximity, which, doubtless, exercised some control over his will. -- Four locomotives were fired up at the Machine Shop & started off Eastward, & the Feds rushed to arrest their progress. A negro was ordered to throw a rail on the track, to throw the locomotives off, but Pres. Yeatman, the conductor on the locomotive in front with the engineer, presented a five-shooter at the negro & he allowed them to pass, & 'tis said, they opened every valve & put on all steam & sped, with lightning rapidity almost, heedless of the cannon shot sent after them & striking the single box-car attached. The first locomotive got to Stevenson & prevented the Chattanooga train with a regiment of soldiers--23 Ala. Frank Beck, Colonel--or 20 Ala., J. W. Garrott, Col.--from going down. The other locomotives were captured. -- Wiggs & I remained at Crenshaw's till 1 or 2 o'clock Saturday, April 12--a day & a half--eating & sleeping there, but spending most of our time roaming about the mountain, watching the Feds--mostly Dutch--walking or riding about the fields between us & town. With long range guns, we might have picked some of them off. I got Crenshaw to go to town, on the morning of my arrival at his house, & carry a note to my wife, telling her my whereabouts, & encouraging her with words of advice & comfort, without, however, putting any names in the note--& bidding wife, children, mother, &c. farewell. She was thoughtful enough to send me a heavy pair of pants, which was all the extra clothing, except my great coat, that I had & all I could get, except by borrowing, until I reached Chattanooga, & then I could get nothing but a coarse domestic shirt, with coarse linen or Marseilles, bosom, such as formerly sold for \$1.25, for which I paid \$2.50--& I had to borrow an undershirt from bro. L. & he had to send by

telegraph to Lynchburg for it to be sent by Express, there being no such shirts here. My wife sent me word by Crenshaw that two Feds. had called at my house for breakfast, that morning--she gave it to them & they left, thanking her for it & their conduct was unexceptionable. -- Bob Coltart, as mayor was called on by Gen. Mitchell to provide breakfast, in two hours, for 5,000 soldiers (as we were told by several)--otherwise, it would be taken from private houses--& Bob, accordingly (& properly, I think--to prevent private pillage) bought at City expense \$500's worth of bacon, beef, flour, meal &c., for the Vandals--& had them cooked by distribution, I understood. -- Mrs. Pope Walker, who was staying at Gov. Chapman's, was riding on the turnpike to town, on the 11th, (probably fearing to remain in the country) & soldiers jumped upon the box with the driver & behind the carriage, & so frightened her, that she asked them to let her get out. They permitted her to do so & then jumped in the carriage & rode off to town, leaving her on the pike. -- They went to Jos. B. Robinson's, pressed his horses & wagons & carried off all his provender, & killed all his poultry. Some of them rode into town with dead turkies swinging to their saddle bows. -- They went to Mr. Fackler's & asked Mrs. F. where her son, Willie, was. "Thank God, he's in the Southern Army at Corinth." "And where's your son, Calvin," "Thank God, he's there too." -- They arrested Fackler for aiding "rebel soldiers" to escape, & asked him if he had not done so. He said he had & wd. do so again. -- They called for breakfast at Tom White's. It was furnished. Some remark was made about the rye coffee. Mrs. W. told them she gave them what she had for herself. They told her she wd soon be able to get coffee at 15c--& went away, returning with 5 lbs. for her. They asked her if she was not Mrs. Thos. W. White. She said--"Yes, but how did you learn my husband's name?" "Oh, we have a little bird



Thomas White Home, 315 White Street, now home of Mrs. Jane Scott, descendent of Mrs. White.

about our camp that tells us these things. Where are your sons, Willie & Sandy?" "They are in the Confederate Army in Virginia, & I wish I had 36 more there." -- As some of the Federal cavalry rode by Tom Burton's (living where Lawrie lived) his wife (nee Bel Brandon) ran out, waived a Confederate flag & shouted -- "Hurra for Jeff. Davis & the Southern Confederacy!" They merely tipped her the military salute & passed on. It was very hazardous conduct, however brave, for, besides subjecting herself to danger of insult, her brother--who distinguished himself for bravery in Tracy's Co. at Manassas & was wounded at Shiloh--was then confined with his wound, in the arm or shoulder, I believe, at her house. -- Her Uncle, Jere Clemens, &, also, Nick Davis, I am informed, remain in Huntsville, & drink & get drunk with the "flop-eared Dutch"--&, I'm told, Nick got badly bruised in a drunken brawl with

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one of them. -- To drop the relation of--perhaps, tedious--details, on the day after our flight, Wiggs & I sent Crenshaw into town--he sending a note to Mrs. Fleming for his horse, accoutred & saddle-bags with his clothes--& I sending a note to my wife for clothes. Crenshaw went afoot, but took his little son on a mule with a bag of peas--& getting Wigg's saddle bags, placed them in the pea-bag, on the mule, & mounting Wigg's horse, he & his son rode across the Square, where, meeting with Billy McCoy, Billy, in his oracular way, told him the enemy were going to extend their pickets 4 miles into the country & he had better hasten out of town, or he might not be able to get out at all. That very circumstance wd. have placed Crenshaw's house within the Federal lines & then have facilitated his ingress & egress to & from town, but he did not understand it so, & hastened out, & sent my note to my wife by McCoy, & I failed to get my clothes & an answer. I have heard nothing directly from my family or any of our kin since, although I have seen several persons who left Huntsville within 8 or 10 days after; & I have been unable to find any one going to Huntsville, who could bear a letter from me. Wiggs & I left Crenshaw's about 1 or 2 o'clock, Apl. 12--he riding half way, I, the other half, to Jack Esslinger's in the Little Cove. There I borrowed a mule, saddle & bridle, & we rode over to Mr. Bill Robinson's plantation, stayed there that night & went, next day, to Col. Fleming's, where we found the Col., the two Christians, John Young, & a Judge Everett, a Kentuckian, but a refugee from Cincinnati. In the evening late, Erskine Russell & Ned Mastin arrived & told us, the enemy's cavalry were to be over at Vienna, the next day--& then Wiggs, Harry Christian, & I mounted our steeds & crossed Paint Rock, that night, put up at farm-houses at 1 o'clock &, in the morning, crossed the Tennessee to Gunter-ville, where we (Wiggs & I) stayed till the 19th, cut off from mail communications & hearing nothing except from rumor. I, then, left on the

steamer Paint Rock for Chattanooga--or rather Bridgeport--a detachmt. of soldiers having been sent down to take the boat up. I heard there were 3,000 Confederate troops at Bridgeport & the 5 to 7,000 Feds. extended from Stevenson to Tusculumbia, the most of them having crossed the River at Decatur, leaving only 5 or 600 at Huntsville & I wanted the Confederates to re-occupy Huntsville. But Frank Beck had parts of two regiments, about 700 effective men only besides a Company of artillery. -- So I went to Chattanooga, to see Leadbetter, & found that he had only part of another regimt. He & Reynolds, both, requested me to come to Knoxville to represent the state of affairs & seek the sending of 2 or 3 regimts to them, with orders to proceed to Huntsville; but Genl. Smith couldn't spare the forces from E. Tenn. & the Cumberland Gap--& so my mission was fruitless, unless it resulted in Genl. Lee ordering the 30th Ala., Col. Shelby--Lieut Col., Saul Bradford & 31st Ala. Col. Hundley--Lieut. Col. Tom Arrington--to this place. These regmts have arrived. They bring rumors of depredations of the enemy about Huntsville--among others that they have taken 100 of Pope Walker's negroes, 30 of Chapman's mules & some of your negroes, besides committing other depredations on other personal property of yours--what not stated--& some on Father's property, what not stated--& that they had gone to Ben. Pattersen's, broken his doors & windows, piano, furniture &c. &c. (eased themselves in his house) & taken horses, provender & everything they could make use of. Brother L. thinks they have mistaken your name for his--& it was not your property but his, because of its proximity to Pattersen's. I think accounts are exaggerated if there be any truth in them--for I saw Sam. Moore (Judge) here, week before last, from Jackson Co. & he had seen Dr. Jordan, who told him of the depredations--in part--at Pattersen's, but nothing of the seizing of Walker's negroes or Chapman's mules, or interruption of your or Father's

property, whilst he did tell that Chapman was held in custody as a hostage for the good behaviour of the people of Jackson. [page torn] ...Sam Moore came up to get ammunition for troops organizing in Jackson--250 were already armed & ready--to operate against the Federal incursions. He expected to be able to get 1000 men there & in Madison, Marshall &c. he said. Lieut. Col. Pettus told Moore that he had married a niece of Gov. Chapman & liked the old fellow very well, but hoped he wd.n't let Chapman's arrest interfere with the killing of a single Yankee. Pettus says, he wants to be Provost Marshal of Huntsville, when recovered, just to have the pleasure of hanging George Lane.



Judge George W. Lane's home, 511 Adams Street, a strong Union supporter throughout the war, now owned by John M. Shaver.

By the way--I had liked to have forgotten to tell you that Lane sits in the Provost Marshal's

office--& approves or disapproves applications for passports--giving them as to proper persons to be trusted--&, 'tis said, he said that he had been requested (by Mitchell, I suppose) to accept the office of Provost Marshal, & I am told that Sam Browne (acting as State Agent for distributing clothes to Sheffield's Regt. at Gadsden) says Bob. Smith (Jack Fariss's son-in-law) told him a petition (or recommendation) for Judge Lane's appointmt. had been circulated & recd. a number of signatures--among others, Smiths. -- Before leaving Guntersville I learned that two of B. S. Clapp's (of Marshall Co) sons got passports from Huntsville on the recommendation of D. B. Turner, Ben. Jolly & W. B. Figures. I asked Wiggs how far he tho't my recommendation wd. have carried them. He promptly replied -- "To jail." He said he'd bet Figures wd. make money out of the Federal's visit to Huntsville--& I think it likely. I have not heard whether he publishes the Advocate or not, but, if I mistake not, the passports I saw given by the Pro. Mars. at H'v'lle, were printed at his Office. I took Celeste, Comer & Amelia to Atlanta on the 1st May, bro. L. having started, that day, to Cumberland Gap with Genl Smith, the enemy having approached the Gap several thousand in number [page torn] ...Smith & Staff, with Genl Barton's command, some 2 or 3000 strong crossed at Woodson's Gap--between the other two--intending to attack those at Big Creek in the rear, by surprise--while Genl. Stevenson, at Cumberland Gap advanced toward Cumberland Fort with some 2 or 3000 more. Gen. Smith's project failed on acct. of the heavy rain & darkness--so dark they could only follow one another over the mountain by the front men giving a low whistle, which was imitated by all the rest successively to the rear. After passing over the mountain, they lay on the ground without tents (except a fly)--each officer holding his own horse &, after day, returned. Gen. Stevenson succeeded in driving the enemy's pickets over the river,

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capturing one & some wagons loaded with telegraph wire & poles, intended to be put up as far as the Cumberland Gap. He destroyed what he captured, except the teams--& returned. The expedition has caused the enemy to retire to London, Ky., spies report. -- Celeste has had ulcerated sore throat, Jno. Comer telegraphs--& night before last, she telegraphed to bro. L. "Comer exceedingly ill, -- come and comfort me." She had previously written that Comer had the scarlet fever. Of course, bro. L. was greatly distressed & left, yesterday morning, for Macon. For want of something better to do, I am engaged as Agent to make contracts for saltpetre for the Confederate Govmt. at \$100 per month, with the understanding that I am to be released as soon as the way is open for my return to Huntsville. I was appointed by Lieut. R. H. Temple, Supt. of 7th Nitre District, which embraces most of the counties of E. Tenn. For the present & probably all the time, Knoxville will be my place of business--& my occupation filling up contracts, writing letters & explaining matters to those desirous of engaging in the manufacture. I have much more to say, but have probably wearied you & must close. Best love to Sister, Cousin Tom & other kin. May God bless us all, rid our country ... [page torn] ...

SOURCE: The original of this letter is housed in the Clay Collection, Manuscript Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

[Editor's note: J. Withers Clay, whose Huntsville residence was at the corner of Gates and Henry Streets, pursued an adventurous career as a journalist despite the trials and tribulations of wartimes. In order to support a rather large family, he struggled to continue the publication of his newspaper. In October of 1862 he returned to Huntsville and began publication of The Huntsville Confederate. In May 1863 he decided

to publish The Daily Confederate, but with the second occupation of Huntsville in July 1863, he was forced to suspend this operation. After sending his presses to Chattanooga, he published there until August when, under pressure of Union forces, he had to move to Marietta and thence to Dalton, Georgia (often only one step ahead of General Sherman's march) until he finally had to suspend publication for the remainder of the war. As an ardent democrat, he continued the weekly publication of his paper until his death in 1896. After suffering a stroke in 1884, his two daughters, Susanne and Virginia, assumed major responsibility for The Huntsville Democrat and conducted its affairs until its demise in 1919.]