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Letters of Lieutenant John W. Phelps, U.S.A., 1837-1838

John W. Phelps



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LETTERS OF LIEUTENANT JOHN W. PHELPS,
U. S. A., 1837-1838

[Lieut. John Walcott Phelps (Brig.-Gen., Vols. 1861) of Vermont, served in the Seminole War during 1837, 1838 and 1839. Following these, a score of letters will be published here written by Samuel Forry, Surgeon, U. S. A., to Lieut. Phelps from various forts in Florida during the campaigns of 1837 and 1838. The originals of both series are in the possession of John W. Phelps, of Northfield, Massachusetts, a son of General Phelps; who, through Mrs. Roy V. Ott, of Ocala, has given The Florida Historical Society copies and permission to publish them. A biographical sketch of Lieut. Phelps will appear in an early number of the Quarterly.]

*[Written to John Phelps, Esq., at Brattleboro, Vermont]
Fort Heileman, July 10, 1837*

Dear Father,

I don't know whether you have been interested enough in our affairs to wish for their history; but having some leisure which without books I should find intolerable were it not for writing, I have resolved to give you a sketch of the recent campaign.

Previously to the present war, our government were so ignorant of the intellectual and physical strength of the Seminoles that the general with whom they had entrusted the conduct of the first campaign, was recalled in astonishment to account for its failure. The cause of this ignorance, which has been the source of all the failures that have happened, is to be attributed to the misrepresentations of the Governmental agents with the Seminoles, together with the prejudice that has somehow strangely obtained that a Sergeant's guard might drive the whole nation, from the Floridas. Let any intelligent person pass thro' this country and see how admirably adapted it is to the life of the Indian, how it teems for him with an almost spontaneous subsistence, how easily he can

shelter himself from storm or light up a **fire** from innumerable prostrate pines to dry or warm him when wet or cold, how secure from aggressions of hostile tribes, in fine, how completely he might realize the **golden** age, and he will conclude that the Seminole never wished to leave the soil of his fathers. He **never** wished it, and did any sub-chief or chief ever intimate such, he was led into it by the fawning machinations of unprincipled agents upon whose probity the government were wrong in relying. But when the treaty was once made, the dignity of the body ratifying it required that it should be carried into execution, and against this, with a determination of purpose strengthened by oft repeated wrongs of their agents and the vampire-like pioneers of civilization who have been fast crowding upon them, the Seminoles have now contended for two successive campaigns. The first has already been made the subject of history, of the second we propose to give the leading events. It was conducted by Generals Call and Jesup.

Call, the present Governor of Florida, and formerly Aid to Gen. Jackson in his war with the Seminoles, was in command of the 500 Floridians who witnessed from across the river Clinch's battle of Ouithlacoche of December 1836. About a fortnight after this, he wrote to his quondam General saying that he should be gratified with the command of the army, and in course of time it was given him. Believing that troops **could** operate here in all seasons, he applied for a summer's campaign, but not being able to raise forces for this purpose, he was obliged to remain inactive till September when a body of volunteers from middle Florida **coming** to his assistance, he dispatched them under Gen. Read to establish a depot as far up the Ouithlacoche as would be practicable for Steam Boat navigation. The object of this was to have such a supply of provisions near the strongholds of the

enemy as to maintain troops there until he was either routed from them or compelled to surrender. With this preliminary he placed himself at the head of the Tennessee brigade and took the field.

Col. Lane, not long since a 2nd Lieut. of the 4th Regiment of Artillery, having attracted the attention of President Jackson by flogging Ewing of Indiana in the streets of Washington, for some alleged obloquies which the representative had thrown out against his father in a speech before the House, was rapidly promoted to a captaincy in the 2nd Regiment of Dragoons, in which rank he served under Jesup in the Creek Campaign. By the first of September this Gen. had terminated the difficulties in Georgia and Alabama in such a manner as to excite the admiration of the people whom he had conquered. In consequence 800 of them volunteered their services to assist him in Florida. These, together with about 80 regulars, he organized into a regiment, officered it with officers from the Army, citizens and chiefs, gave the command to Lane with rank of Col. and sent him to treat, or if circumstances required it, to fight with the Seminoles. This force descended the Chattahoochie and immediately embarked for Tampa Bay. The cantonment upon this Bay had been closely invested by the Indians throughout the summer, and on the night preceding the Colonel's arrival they burnt a house in the immediate vicinity. Learning this, without delaying to disembark any but the regulars, he sallied out and soon fell in with the enemy. An engagement ensued in which two of his men only were wounded. The enemy were repulsed with what loss as usual it was impossible to ascertain. He remained here several days, making occasional excursions of fifteen and twenty miles into the surrounding country, while waiting for Ichu Hadjo, an intelligent chief whom he had sent out with proposals of peace. This chief returning

with an insulting message from the hostiles, about the 10th of October, with ten days' provisions in haversacks, he took up the line of march for the Outhla-coochee.

We have now two separate commanders in the field, rushing into a strange country, and either apparently fearful that the other might deprive him of the crown that irradiated over the region where Clinch was repulsed, Gaines penned up, and Izzard fell. The consequences of this were, as might perhaps have been expected, disastrous. Call was checked in attempting to cross the river, he was brought to a stand at the edge of a hammock which contained all the women and children of the nation; failing in provisions, he sent a detachment in quest of Gen. Read, which returned without finding either him or his depot, and he was finally obliged to retire for subsistence upon Fort Drane. Finding but a short allowance here, he continued on to Black Creek, 90 miles from the Outhla-coochee, strewing the way with five or six hundred dead and dying horses. It was affecting to witness the manner in which these famished animals implored their masters for food. Let loose in order that they might pick up what they could find, they would come, sometimes thrusting their heads into the tents, and stand before them in mute silence. Tents, shoes, saddles, harness, wagon covers, and even wagon bodies were devoured by them. Were one so unfortunate as to leave his coat out at night, nothing could be found of it in the morning but the buttons.

Lane crossed the river, had a slight skirmish, and also fell back upon Fort Drane for provisions. And here, finding his rare chance of distinguishment at an end, and being withal affected in the brain from an extreme mental and bodily excitement, he ended his career by self-extermination. No one had observed anything peculiar in him, having finished a long con-

versation with an officer at the Post, he retired to his tent and apparently posed the hilt of his sword upon the ground, kneeled down, and brought his eye to its point, which by thrusting his head, entered his brain. On the occasion of his funeral the Creeks behaved with great decorum. They all assembled neatly dressed, appeared much affected with the loss of their commander, and Jim Boy addressed them in a speech which was strongly imbued with principles of predestination. He said that it was to be regretted that their white brother had left them so soon, but there was no use in lamenting his decease, for all here below, the white man as well as the red, had a certain race set for them to run, certain destinies to be fulfilled, and these must be accomplished. Their white brother had fulfilled his, and now the Great Spirit had called him away from among them. Such was the end of Colonel Lane, a young man who, had there been a field as ample as his ambition, would have probably ranked high among the great ones in the annals of our history.

[Signed] J. W. P.

[Continuation of above letter]

Meanwhile Jesup, after making the necessary arrangements for securing the inhabitants of Georgia and Alabama against any hostile Creeks that might be still lurking in the country, descended the Chattahoochie with 700 troops consisting of Artillery, Marines, and mounted volunteers from Alabama, and arrived at Tampa Bay about the 20th of October. Ascertaining here that Col. Lane, having taken only ten days' provisions, was shortly expected back, he remained in the harbor several days, when, receiving no information of him, he raised steam for the mouth of the Ouithlacoche. Here were vessels employed in provisioning Read's depot, but no intelligence could be obtained of the Army. He continued on to St.

Marks, whence, receiving news of Call's disastrous expedition, he returned to Tampa Bay and commenced preparations for active operations.

The Port here being destitute of supplies, he was obliged to await the arrival of those which he had ordered from New Orleans, Mobile and Appalachicola. Some time was necessary for unloading them when arrived, and building store houses for their reception ; and the delay was still protracted by the wildness of the mules that had been purchased for transportation. A term of three weeks was required to render these animals manageable. While Jesup was thus engaged, Call, having been joined by 300 regulars under Col. Pierce, returned from Black Creek to Fort Drane. Incorporating here the Regiment of Creeks with his command, he took up the line of march on the 11th, and reached the Ouithlacoche on the 12th of November at the head of 3000 men. There he deployed into one extended line the flanks occupied by the Creeks and Tennesseans, and marched towards the bank, with at least a display calculated to promise the second attempt at a passage more success than accompanied the first. On arriving within about 100 yards of the ford, he came to a halt, and after a considerable pause, ordered down a company of regulars to reconnoitre. Lieut. Hale, commanding the one chosen for this purpose, proceeded to the stream, swam it and commenced his investigation on the opposite side. Recent signs having been reported, Col. Pierce with his regulars and the main body of the Creeks was ordered to cross. The river at this point is about 200 yards wide, and fordable only in a path-not much wider than an Indian trail. This being difficult to ascertain, and the current having a considerable velocity, the passage was effected with much difficulty, and danger, even, to those who could not swim,

three of whom were borne from the track and drowned, crying most piteously for help in the deep water below.

Call followed up the right bank, and Pierce thus crossed proceeded up the left. Me recrossed where Fort Dade now stands, and on the night of the 20th, without any occurrence worthy of note, encamped with Call near Dade's Battle Ground. Call in the meantime had had several indecisive engagements, the last of which was in the Wahoo Swamp where the enemy still were, five miles from the encampment. For this swamp the combined forces on the morning of the 21st took up the line of march with scarcely a day's provisions for themselves or forage for their horses. They engaged the enemy and pursued him till brought to a stand at a small stream whose waters on the right and left expanded into two long marshes, covered with a tall sedge grass and averaging about 75 yards in width.

This pass, as it is called, is in one of those vast hammocks that skirt without much interruption, or other than that of marshes, the banks of the Outhla-cooche from its origin to its mouth. Here Yahaloochee, or The Cloud, lived, nurtured by the genius of the place into that spirit of freedom and daring by which he was so strongly characterized. Here were Indian plantations exhibiting truncated oaks pointing their shivered summits wildly in every direction, and tho' assailed by axe, fire and time, still shewed how unrestrained was the exuberance of their growth, and appearing like huge masses of inorganic vegetable matter left here when order was first established amidst the heteroclism of Chaos. Such a rank vegetation as this, supported by a humid soil and rendered lugubrious by a prevailing darkness and the twilight umbrage of an abundant foliage, could not but have an unfavorable moral effect upon the soldiery. Besides this, Nature seems to have employed here the same

principles that are used in modern systems of defense. The stream, itself an intrenchment, was filled with latent cypress knees almost as pointed and dreadful as the stakes of war pits, and numerous vines interwoven with the underbrush, together with quagmires, formed such, entanglements and impediments as the most harassed body of infantry might wish to protect them from the attacks of a pursuing cavalry.

The strategy that led to the choice of this point, and the tactic displayed in its defense reflect much credit upon the skill of the Seminoles. Making at first a demonstration upon the right of our line by which they drew it into an impassible quagmire, and drawing on our left by fleeing before it, they rushed thro' the stream, rendering it so turpid that it was impossible to discover its depth. A few of the most courageous Creeks were first engaged, then a company led by Lieut. R. W. Lee who was fortunate enough to strike the trail, and lastly the regulars and two companies of Tennesseans who had been led by the demonstration into the quagmire. The action now became general, and what with the yelling and whooping of the Indians, the crack of rifles, the peal of musquetry and the groans of the dying, there was an uproar which, from its peculiarity, was perhaps never before surpassed. Cloud, apparently exulting in his element, could every now and then be heard to thunder forth ; "Never mind the dead-carry off the wounded or defend the pass." He bore the brunt of battle with a handful of warriors during the engagement, receiving the direct and cross fires from our whole line, while Jumper, having learnt from experience that our tactics were to out-flank the enemy, and meaning to secure Cloud against such an event, couched his warriors in ambush along on the edges of the marshes. When he had waited for two hours and saw that the whites were not going to cross, he said that he felt

sick. Had they attempted a passage, it is probable that *it* would have proved very destructive, for Jumper had a sufficient force to have cut them all down at a discharge.

Of the 3000 troops in the vicinity, only about 300 were engaged. Gen. Armstrong refused to charge the hammock with his command because it embraced a large number of young men of the choice families of Tennessee. In consequence of this, a large majority remained behind, 500 guarding the person of Call, two miles from the scene of battle, and the remainder with the baggage train, at the encampment of the preceding night.

It was growing late, and most of the ammunition had been expended, when some proposals were made to force the pass. The policy of such a step was under consideration, when Call settled all doubts by sending an order to retreat. This was accomplished with bringing off all the dead and wounded excepting Capt. Moniac, a Creek, who, falling in the stream, was covered by the water. Some of the Seminoles followed the retiring troops, discharging their rifles in triumph, and groaning in derision of our wounded. The loss in killed on our side was nine. That of the enemy could not be ascertained, but from the great number of shots made, and from their having been generally well directed, the presumption is that it must have been considerable. Thus ended the Battle of the Wahoo, which, were it worthy of its name, would irradiate with brilliancy. The next morning Call commenced his march for Volusia on the St. John's 60 miles distant, and at the same time, as tho' there were malignant spirits in the Swamp hostile to both parties, the Indians dispersed and moved towards the south. Our dead were borne about 15 miles, where they were buried in the road, and the waggons passed over their graves. Had they been buried within 5

miles of the battle ground, it is probable that they would have been discovered and exhumed.

As this was the last expedition that Call made, it may be well to remark here that he made no use of the depot which he had ordered Gen. Read to establish on the Outhlacoche a short time previously to his taking the field. Had he assured himself before commencing operations that his depot was well supplied with provisions, he never would have been obliged to retire upon Black Creek and Volusia, indicating his way with famished horses, and instead of ranking low as a General he might now have stood high in the public estimation. Having been joined by Gen. Read before the battle, he knew that at this depot and still 16 miles farther on at the mouth of the river, there were provisions in abundance ; but the news of his first expedition had reached Washington, and the command had been given to Jesup, and it is probable that he intended to avoid this General, in order to gain time to make a last attempt with the view of retrieving his character.

[Another continuation]

Jesup had thus far been obliged to render his plans subordinate to those of Call. He had sent many vessels laden with army stores to Read's Depot (Fort Clinch) and on the 27th of Nov. he commenced crossing the Hillsboro' with the view of following Clinch's trail to the Outhlacoche. But all the troops had not yet crossed when the Steamer Merchant arrived in the Bay with the intelligence that the command had devolved upon Jesup and that Call had retired from the Wahoo upon Volusia.

The troops were immediately countermarched. Col. Foster, who had arrived the day previous from New Orleans, was ordered with three hundred men to re-establish Fort Alabama on the Hillsboro' about twenty miles from its mouth, and the troops left at

Tampa Bay, amounting to between four and five hundred, were to provision it with 30,000 rations. These arrangements made, Jesup, at the head of four hundred mounted men under Col. Callfield of the Alabama Volunteers, proceeded to Volusia and assumed the command. He found Call busily engaged in fitting out an expedition against King Philip whose tribe inhabited the region about the upper waters of the St. Johns. As the term of service of the Tennesseans would expire on the 31st of December, he soon returned to the vicinity of the Wahoo Swamp. Here he sent out detachments to scour the surrounding country, engaged the Tennesseans in establishing a fort, and in the meantime, ordered Col. Foster twenty miles farther into the interior to erect a fortification on the Big Ouithlacoche. After completing their work the Tennesseans requested permission to name it, and altho' it is situated on Dade's Battle Ground, they called it Fort Armstrong after their leader. They then moved to Tampa where they were discharged by the 1st of January.

Altho' their departure was not much to be regretted, yet Jesup's prospects at this time were anything but flattering. It was in the most favorable **season** for operations, and he had not a sufficient force to warrant success if he took the field. The Creek Regiment, tho' very serviceable in securing camps and convoys against sudden attacks and coups de main, could not be relied upon in a general engagement; the four Regiments of Artillery, no longer anything but a name, could not muster five hundred effective men; the 4th Infantry and the corps of Marines were in equally as bad a state, and besides these, the only available force in the field was about three hundred mounted Alabamians under Col. Callfield. Jesup had issued orders

for the troops which he had left in the Creek country, and had written to Gaines for the 6th Infantry, but these farces had not yet arrived.

Crews from the Navy had been engaged among the keyes and lagoons along the coast in ascending rivers and occasionally in making land expeditions into the country. They could now be employed to more advantage in defending posts. Jesup therefore effected such arrangements with Corn. Dallas that three important posts were garrisoned by sailors. By this means, the field force was augmented by 150 regulars.

Thus circumstanced, having been joined by 200 mounted Georgians under Maj. Nelson, on the 2nd of January he took up the line of march for the north. He assisted Col. Foster in the completion of Fort Dade, crossed the Ouithlacoochee, and on the 10th encamped under Fort Armstrong. Having received expresses during the night from Maj. Norris, who, in scouring the Panasofski Swamp, had captured a party of negroes under Primus, he marched early the next morning and incoated the scouring of the Ouithlacooche. By maintaining a force in the Wahoo, and ordering Col. Foster with five hundred men down the left bank, and passing the troops under his immediate command through the hammocks on the right, he effectually scoured this stream from its branches to its mouth. The result of this was a knowledge that the enemy were not in force in their favorite haunts-their boasted fastnesses. He therefore ordered Col. Fanning who was in the eastern part of Florida, to ascend the St. Johns as far as practicable with what dragoons and recruits he had under his command, and there to establish a depot on the left bank, with the view that he might have a well provisioned post to fall back upon in his intended expedition to the south. He then

returned to Fort Armstrong after having been out, ten days, during which he captured only two children and a few head of cattle.

These children, a boy of ten and his sister of five years, were of a party that had been frightened from one place to another by the approach of Col. Foster, who, it appeared, marched thro' in the true military style, awaking the silence of those vast solitudes to the music of his fifes and drums. The father and mother made their escape by swimming the river.

On his return, Jesup found Maj. Thompson in command of seven companies of the 6th Infantry, amounting to one hundred and eighty men. He immediately organized his forces into two brigades, each about five hundred strong, the whole consisting of Artillery, Infantry, Marines, Volunteers, and Indians, and leaving Col. Foster to beat up the hammocks about the Outhlacoche, on the 23d of January he proceeded south. He marched thro' Pilaklikaha, the former residence of Miconope, thro' Cooper's town, crossed the Oclawaha, destroyed Cooper, capturing his household, and finally had an engagement with a party of the enemy on the western shore of Lake Tohopkaliga.

Among the prisoners taken in this engagement was an intelligent negro by the name of Ben. He was sent out with proposals of peace, which resulted in an interview with Abraham, and subsequently in one with Miconope's ministers, Alligator and Jumper. After much delay and circumlocution they agreed to a suspension of hostilities, and to meet the General at Fort Dade on the 18th of February, where a council of the chiefs of the nation would decide upon what was to be done. Jesup then returned to Fort Amstrong.

[Signed] J. W. P.

* * *

[written to Miss Helen M. Phelps, 401 Hudson St., New York]

Fort Heileman, Sept. 19, 1837

Dear Sister :

I received yours of the 1st inst. day before yesterday. Not having heard from home for a long time, it relieved me of a great deal of anxiety. I had had dismal dreams and forebodings concerning the family, and I felt very uneasy until you assured me of their well being and prosperity. Lib's return with Ann gave me almost as much pleasure as tho' I had been there to enjoy it. She will experience good effects from her journey, while you, I fear, before the next vacation, will regret that you remained at home. You say that pleasure is to be derived from the performance of duty, but unless it be varied an active mind would become so morbid that it could not be sensible of pleasure. It is impossible for me to say what I would wish upon this subject, but it amounts to this, that seclusion and inaction have a very injurious effect upon an active mind. In proof of which I would refer you to Lib's case last winter. Having remained a long time idle myself, I at last fell into precisely her situation, and my mind carried on its operations in the strangest manner, so that I began to doubt, and (the impression was so deep) do still, the validity of human reason. When the mind has no other resource than the memory, it loses its coldness and becomes softened down into the most tender susceptibility. It is then that there steals thro' it the conviction of the existence of a God, - of a God who treats in silent scorn that light philosophy which we vainly believe to have been lighted up by a spark from his intelligence. But I am metaphysical.

Our situation, relatively to the Indians, for the past summer, you must have remarked, has been very singular. *On* the elopement of Miconope last June, it

was expected that hostilities would be renewed, but nothing of the kind occurred, and both parties seemed tacitly to agree in an armistice. It was policy undoubtedly on both sides; our troops were sickly, and the enemy, reduced in their supplies by a long campaign, evidently needed and desired time to recuperate. They came in at Fort King frequently, and at first appeared so friendly that hopes were entertained that they would be ready to go in the fall. But at last, the rampant Micasookies began to act so impudently that the Gen. was induced to go there to discover, if possible, their intentions. He found several chiefs to whom he talked very plainly, and concluded by telling them that he would extend their time for emigration to the first of October. He however gave Gen. Hernandez orders to scout.

Gen. Hernandez, a militia general in the U. S. service, is descended from the first European settlers of this territory. He lives in St. Augustine near which he has a large plantation. Hearing that the enemy had been seen some miles to the south of him, he collected all the regulars and volunteers he could, and about a fortnight since, sallied forth at their head, animated with the same chivalric feeling that led De Soto through these wilds three hundred years ago. Fortune smiled upon him ; he surrounded and captured between 30 and 40 hostiles, among whom were two important persons-King Philip and Euchee Billy, who have never agreed to **any** treaty. Euchee Billy, when surprised, donned his equipments like a hero, took fatal aim at Lieut. McNeil, and shot him thro' the body. McNeil saw him aiming at him, and he clapped his hand to his pistol; at that instant the ball came and carried away his little finger with it. He died 36 hours after-the only one on our side wounded. The enemy fired but two guns-their loss was two or

three killed. So Gen. Hernandez returned to town with his prisoners. Handbills minutely detailing the affair were immediately posted up, balls and fetes were given, the Gen. got drunk, the captured property was disposed of at a high rate, the officers concerned were astonished at their own chivalry, and there was such rejoicing as was perhaps never surpassed.

Lieut. McNeil was the son of Gen. McNeil, formerly of our Army. What will be the effect of this it is impossible to conjecture. It may provoke immediate retaliation on our defenceless baggage trains, or it may have a favorable effect. If it prove the means of recommencing hostilities so early, we shall be the losers by it. We have not well men enough to escort our provisions, and the preliminaries for the next campaign could not be made so well were we at war as they could otherwise.

Gen. Jesup has just left this post for St. Augustine. This is the second time that he has been here from Tampa this summer; he rides thro' the country, sometimes forty and fifty miles a day, as tho' it were his profession.

Yours ever,
John W. Phelps

* * *

[Written to Miss Helen M. Phelps, 401 Hudson St., New York]

St. Augustine, Nov. 12th, 1838

Dear Sister,

My company is now at the Old Fort St. Marks, being detained by a north east wind from Sailing to Smyrna, a place near the coast, seventy miles south of this, where it has been ordered to re-establish an old Post. The wind is yet strong, and we have the prospectus of remaining here several days longer, since we cannot well venture out in a river steam-boat till the ocean becomes nearly calm. In the mean time,

having brought no books, and not being able to obtain any of interest, we amuse ourselves as well as we can, and fill up all intervals by yawns and snatches of such songs as we may remember-particularly "Love not!" ; tho' there does not appear to be any necessity for such caution here. Notwithstanding, there are a great many young women here, and marriage with its appliances is of frequent occurrence, and a topic of open, most free, and not unoften of indelicate conversation. A young man who is apparently admitted into the first society, tells a woman of the same caste with himself that such and such young women are beautiful, and confirms his assertion with an emphatic oath. He descants upon their ankles, eyes, lips, and so on, going how much farther into details I do not know. The young women themselves are pleased with this, and they manifest a readiness to throw themselves in the way of such men, which would tend, one might suppose, to immoral consequences ; but, I believe, it does not, at least as far as appearances are concerned, and otherwise I have no Armsdens to show me the contrary, provided even that it did exist.

The Doctor, attached to our command, went into a shop the other day, where was kept a small circulating library of old volumes, the only public collection of books in town, and asked if they had any books to sell. Yes, they had works of deep interest-Robinson Crusoe, Children of the Abbey. "Have you Crabbes' Synonyms?" "Crabs' what!-naw." And yet, St. Augustine, they say, contains 2600 inhabitants. A large number of these, however, are Minorcans, descendants of those who were enslaved some 50 or 60 years ago by Dr. Turnbull-and they, apparently, do not think it any discredit not to know either how to read or write.

They are turning their attention here more to schools than they have done formerly. There are sev-

eral, one of which is a Catholic institution under the charge of some Sisters of Charity from France.

The war remains the same as ever, so far as regards the probability of its termination. Every one appears to think that the affair is near its end; but if they be asked why, they think that Sam Jones will come in, - the contingency on which the war has hung for 15 months.

Yours ever,
John W. Phelps