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RALPH WALDO EMERSON IN FLORIDA

By MRS. HENRY L. RICHMOND

And Emerson's largely unpublished
LITTLE JOURNAL AT ST. AUGUSTINE
JANUARY-MARCH 1827

In the 1820's Ralph Waldo Emerson was a young Unitarian minister living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As one of six children of a widowed mother in meagre circumstances, his twenty-three years had been a struggle of ambition over privation. His health had never been robust and in the autumn of 1826 he developed a bronchial ailment that demanded a change from the rigors of a New England winter. He was persuaded by family and friends to leave his ministerial duties and, his good uncle Samuel Ripley assisting with travel expenses, on November 25 Emerson sailed in the ship *Clematis* for Charleston, South Carolina, where he remained until January.¹

The youthful philosopher was already keenly observing men and places. He writes in his journal that climate affects manners, that "no man has travelled in the United States from the North to the South without observing the change and amelioration of manners ;" that there are in Charleston the most delightful courtesies and conventions, even among the negroes. "Indeed," he writes, "I have never seen an awkward Carolinian."²

By January the cold weather sent him farther south and he sought health and recreation in St. Augustine as many before him and since have done, for Florida even at that time was a well-known

1. James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Boston & New York, 1887) Vol. I. p. 119.

2. *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820-1872* (edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, (Houghton, Mifflin & Company, Cambridge, 1909.) Vol. II, p. 142.

through distant health and travel resort. Arriving in St. Augustine in mid-January he took a room in "a Spanish street"³ for his stay of ten weeks. Not only sea-sickness but home-sickness beset him, and naturally enough-being young, ill, alone and far from home for the first time.

Emerson was never a traveller for travel's sake. Much later in life he says "Travel is a fool's paradise."⁴ It was always with him but a means to an end-that of his absorbing life-study of men, their minds, and their relation to spiritual law.

We can well imagine the tall, frail, forlorn youth in these first days there, alone and in an utterly foreign atmosphere. Only the hardships and seamy side of travel impress him and he writes to his brothers Charles and William from St. Augustine, East Florida, January 27, 29, 1827:

Whosoever is in St. Augustine resembles what may be also seen in St. Augustine,-the barnacles on a ledge of rock which the tide has deserted ; move they cannot ; very uncomfortable they surely are; but they can hear from afar the roaring of the waters, and imagine the joy of the barnacles that are bathed thereby.

The entertainments of the place are two,-billiards and the sea-beach, but those whose cloth abhors the billiards,-why, theirs is the sea-beach. I stroll on the sea-beach and drive a green orange over the sand with a stick. Sometimes I sail in a boat, sometimes I sit in a chair.⁵

Soon, however, his natural cheerfulness and philosophy return, probably with an improvement

3. Emerson's "Little Journal at St. Augustine."

4. Emerson's *Essays*, "Self Reliance."

5. Cabot, *Memoir*, Vol. I. p. 122.

in health; also his characteristic interest in men, their customs and surroundings. He looks about, St. Augustine grows on him, and he writes at intervals in his pocket note-book.⁶

Home-sickness is apparent in the lines with a heading "Dark Hours":

And woe is me that I forsook
My little home, my lamp, my book,
To find across the foaming seas
This cheerless fen.

and among minor irritations:

And dulcimer mosquitoes in the woods
Hum their sly secrets in unwilling ears
Which like all gossip, leave a smart
behind.⁷

Even in his first days of strangeness and depression, Emerson wrote his brother William that "The air and sky of this ancient sand-bank of a town are really delicious,"⁸ and later he says in his journal: "There is something wonderfully piquant in the manners of the place, theological or civil."⁹

The note-book now becomes very full. Emerson feels the romance of St. Augustine with "its 1100 of motley population," sees the masking at Carnival before Ash Wednesday, which came on March 7 that year, and watches the lazy but delightful people.

6. The St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science possesses a photostat copy of the "Little Journal at St. Augustine, January, February, March, 1827," a gift in 1929 through the kindness of the Emerson heirs. The writer of this article, Mrs. Henry L. Richmond, and the editor, for himself and for the Florida Historical Society, express their appreciation of and their thanks for the use of this copy both in the narrative and in the reproduction of the Journal which follows.

7. Journal at St. Augustine.

8. Cabot, Memoir, Vol. I. p. 121.

9. Journal at St. Augustine.

"Two sloops" he says "make all the shipping of this port; [their] regular arrival and departure are the only events that agitate our provincial circle."¹⁰ He explores the "Castle" and the ruined monastery, interviews Indians selling venison, Minorcans "sad and separate," sees the narrow streets and the terrible gibbet where, under Spanish rule, criminals were suspended in an iron cage, he says, and starved to death. He could find no one but a professional interpreter, a Mr. Gay, to decipher the old inscription over the entrance of Fort St. Mark.¹¹

He is very practical, remarking that "the Spaniards and the Yankees, colonist-like, dig cellars in Florida ; the cellars overflow, ruin the houses and are unhealthy, but cellars are dug, just the same, because they are dug in Madrid and Boston ; that hay is imported and is "intolerably dear" while an abundance of grass grows not far from the town and no one will bother to cut it; that, in fact, there is not a scythe in St. Augustine. Much penetrating, good-natured irony is in many of his comments, especially some spicy ones on religion, the subject near his heart, and he deals with Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist alike.¹²

The climate continues to benefit his health. He writes his aunt and confidante, Miss Mary Moody Emerson, in March: "I find myself better lately through the blessing of God and the use of this fine air." ¹³ Later he reported that he had gained twelve pounds and now weighed 152 pounds.¹⁴

Another entry in the journal reads: [St. Augustine is] "the oldest town of Europeans in America; 1564 ; full of ruins, chimneyless houses ;" and a poem

10. Letter to William Emerson, Cabot, *Memoir*, Vol. I. p. 121.

11. Journal at St. Augustine.

12. Journal at St. Augustine.

13. *Journals of Emerson*, Vol. II. p. 179.

14. Cabot, *Memoir*, Vol. I. p. 127.

in the same vein, feelingly written, the last line of which is strikingly prophetic of our country's present-day status in the world:

Here is the old land of America
And in this sea-girt nook, the infant steps
First foot-prints of that Genius giant grown
That daunts the nations with his power today. ¹⁵

EMERSON AND MURAT

The principal happening of Emerson's Florida visit, and one of lasting importance, was his meeting with Prince Achille Murat, a young nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, the eldest son of Napoleon's sister Caroline and Joachim Murat, King of Naples. After the downfall of that regime and Murat's execution in 1815, Queen Caroline and her children took refuge at the court of Austria and Achille came to join his uncle, Joseph Bonaparte, already a refugee in America. ¹⁶ In Washington in the winter of 1824, Murat met General R. K. Call, then a delegate to Congress from Florida, who interested him in this new land ¹⁷ and so Achille, the soldier and lover of adventure, came to Florida to make his home. He became an American citizen, took much interest in public affairs, was a planter, practiced law, and married Catherine Willis Gray, a widow and grand-niece of George Washington. ¹⁸ Both are buried in a Tallahassee cemetery.

Murat was two years older than Emerson ¹⁹ and about the time of their meeting was living on his plantation, Econchattie, some sixteen miles from

15. Journal at St. Augustine.

16. Cabot, *Memoir*, Vol. 1, p. 126.

17. *A History of Florida*, Caroline M. Brevard, (DeLand, Florida, 1924), Vol. I. p. 196.

18. *Ibid.* p. 196.

19. Achille Murat: born 1801, died 1847. Murat collection, Rollins College library.

Tallahassee.²⁰ How and when the eventful meeting of these two occurred we do not know. Perhaps the young men were fellow-lodgers in "the Spanish street",* for Murat must have visited St. Augustine at times, and it was not until later, in 1834, that the Murats, according to tradition, lived in the charming and picturesque small stone house on the corner of St. George and Bridge streets which is still preserved intact.

A remarkable friendship sprung up immediately between these brilliant but very different minds. Theirs was the same eager, youthful interest in life and philosophy, but Murat was admittedly an atheist and skeptical of religion and immortality, while "my faith in these points is strong, and, I trust, indestructible", writes Emerson in his journal.²¹ "Meantime" he says "I love and honor this intrepid doubter for his truth, uprightness and candor."

Many and long must have been the conversations of these two young enthusiasts. Besides their the-

20. *Journals of Emerson*, Vol. II. p. 182.

21. *Journals of Emerson*, Vol. II. p. 183.

*Since the above was written this supposition has been confirmed by the publication of a letter of Emerson's to his brother William, written from Charleston on April 7. (**Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson**, Ralph L. Rusk, editor, Columbia University Press, New York, 1939.) Vol. I. p. 193:

Charleston April 7. I arrived here yesterday after a direful passage of 9 days from Augustine;-the ordinary one is one or two days. We were becalmed tempest tossed and at last well nigh starved. The barrel of meal & the cruse of oil were nearly exhausted in a calm; but "Caesarem vehis" that we, the wind blew, & we put into St. Mary's for supplies. All this did vex the vulgar mind, for we had five & twenty passengers on board but your beloved brother bore it not only with equanimity but pleasure for my kind genius had sent for my shipmate, Achilles [!] Murat, the eldest son of the old king Joachim, who is now a planter at Tallahassee and is at this time on his way to visit his uncle at Bordentown. We boarded together in St. Augustine but I did not become much acquainted with him till we went to sea. He is a philosopher, a scholar, a man of the world very sceptical but very candid & an ardent lover of truth. I blessed my stars for my fine companion & we talked incessantly. Much more of him when I see you. . .

ological debates, they talked of a projected Monograph of Truth, of which Murat wrote to Emerson afterwards and referred to their discussions of it.²² Murat admitted to Emerson that his skeptical frame of mind had changed since their discussions—that Emerson's system of good and evil had acquired as much in probability as his own had lost in certainty. Murat even urges Emerson, in a letter of September 1827, to come to Tallahassee to preach:

Your church is increasing very rapidly in Georgia. Why should it not extend to Tallahassee and you come there to substitute reason, learning and morality for nonsense, ignorance and fanaticism? Even those who do not think as you do would be glad of it.²³

While in St. Augustine Emerson refers briefly in his journal to Tallahassee: ". . . 200 miles west of St. Augustine, and in the journey there you sleep three nights under the pine trees. The land in its neighborhood is rich. Here is the township of Lafayette." He mentions having seen there a marble copy of Canova's bust of Queen Caroline, which "did not strike me as at all wonderful."²⁴ It is evident from this that Emerson was in Tallahassee also during his stay in Florida.

Emerson and Murat left St. Augustine together about March 29 and sailed as far as Charleston on the same ship; Emerson returning home by way of Charleston and Philadelphia, and Murat going to Bordentown, New Jersey, to visit his uncle Joseph Bonaparte there. According to Emerson, this dire voyage required nine days instead of the usual two:

22. *Ibid.* p. 188. Letter from Achille Murat to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Point Breeze [New Jersey] Sept. 3, 1827."

23. *Ibid.* p. 189.

24. Journal at St. Augustine.

there were calms, then tempests, and at the last they were nearly starved ; but he bore it all, he says, not only with equanimity but with pleasure because of the fine companionship of his friend, for whom he "blessed his stars", and that they "talked incessantly".²⁵ What a tribute to a congenial spirit!

After this brief but close association these friends never met again and Emerson did not come back to Tallahassee, but the friendship was continued by letters. Murat wrote: "Mrs. Murat appreciates your kind remembrances and has not forgotten to threaten me with your name whenever a harsh expression finds its way up my throat"²⁶ and Emerson never forgot Murat, but alludes to him in his writings of later years. In *Society and Solitude* the recollection of Murat and the inspirations of their friendship are particularly marked in a passage making a double reference to them:

If we recall the rare hours when we encountered the best persons, we there found ourselves, and then first society seemed to exist. That was society; though in the transom of a brig or on the Florida Keys.

The visit of this famous and honored scholar and countryman to our State in his youth is pleasing to recall. It may have given the young Emerson other benefits as well as health. Perhaps a suggestion might be read in his journal that his thought and life work were influenced by this first excursion into a distant and strikingly different

25. Cabot, *Memoir*; Vol. I. p. 126; Letter to William Emerson, Charleston, April 7, 1827.

26. *Journals of Emerson*, Vol. II. p. 191. (See also letter of Achille Murat to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Point Breeze, Sept. 3, 1827).

world and by the development which he himself remembered as resulting from the meeting of mind and mind with Murat. That our beloved little St. Augustine also found a place in the young Emerson's affections may be judged from his:

" . . .Farewell ; & fair befall thee, gentle town! . . ."

The journal which follows is printed *literatim*.

The Florida Historical Society is grateful to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and to its president, Mr. Edward W. Forbes, grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, for permission to publish these pages from the journal. All must be of the greatest interest to Floridians and the farewell to St. Augustine will touch them deeply.