

1942

## Yellow Fever on the Blockade of Indian River

John F. Van Nest

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YELLOW FEVER ON THE BLOCKADE  
OF INDIAN. RIVER

A TRAGEDY OF 1864

Letters of Acting Master's Mate John F. Van Nest

United States Schooner *J. S. Chambers*

At Sea Friday, July 8th, 1864

Dear Mother:

I received your kind and welcome letter dated May 21st and was very much pleased to hear from you and as I knew that you would be pleased to hear from me I thought that I would write you a few lines and let you know that I am still well and in the land of the living. We are now on our way to Indian River on the East Coast of Florida to blockade there. We have captured about fifty Bales of Cotton which will bring a little prise money for me. We have also a share in a small sloop with sixteen bales of cotton captured by the Steamer Merrimac, we being in signal distance are entitled to share also, The weather is very warm and makes me feel very uncomfortable and millions of Mosquitoes, and they almost eat me up and I can scarcely sleep at night for them. I hope that I shall not have to spend another summer down on this coast for it will use me up for I can not stand this weather.

I think of you all the time and hope that we will all meet again and that you will be completely restored to health and that you will live to a good old age. I shall always be pleased to hear from you and I will always write you. I have written to father and will send this letter to him and he will forward this letter to you. I shall never forget you, dear mother. I cannot tell when I will come home, but I hope this war will soon be over and that I will get off Blockade duty for it is a very dull lazy life and I am sick of it. The vessel is very comfortable and

the accommodations are better than in any other vessel in the squadron.

Well I will bid you good Bye for the present. I hope that you will write and let me know how you are. So farewell dear Mother until I meet again with you. I send my love to you

from your affectionate son  
John

[In pencil]

My dear wife, I am just in receipt of the foregoing letter from John and knowing your anxiety endorse it to you at once. I wrote you two days since. We are all as well as usual but busy packing up. It is a miserable job and I wish it was over. We hope to get through this week or Monday. All join in much love to you.

Your affectionate husband

N. Y., August 4.

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Off Indian River, Sunday, Aug. 7th, 1864

Dear Father,

The last few days have been terrible on board this vessel, between twenty-five and thirty men down sick with some kind of fever. The doctor has been sick over a week with it and he says it is not the yellow fever, but does not know what to call it. The Purser Steward died with it on Friday morning, a Seaman at night, and another died at 6. A. M. Saturday morning. They are sick but a few days. The Captain has sent word to the Admiral at Key West, and possibly he may send the ship home. She is no use now, hardly men enough, well, to man one gun. This vessel is badly ventilated, no air ports on her berth deck, and he ought to send her home. I am pretty well, thank God. Some of the officers are complaining but as yet, none of us are down. I

think the men are better today and hope the worst is over. The weather is very changeable. It rains hard for a few minutes, then the sun shines again. The men who are and have been sick, receive the best of care; their messmates, who are well, nurse them as a mother would her own child. I never saw the like of it. I think it is owing to the care taken of them that they are getting over it. I was away on an expedition, in a boat, for a week, inside and was taken sick. I was unwell for four days. I suppose it was the same fever, but I held out for a week and when I came on board I felt pretty well and have been so ever since, and hope I may continue so. I hardly know what to write about and will bring my letter to a close. Hoping to see you all again in health and happiness, I send my love to you all at home and mother, Grandpa and Aunt Kate. Good bye until I hear from you

Your affectionate son  
John

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Sunday eve Aug. 7th

No change. Thirty three men down with the fever, but I think they are rather better tonight. I am still well, thank God. We are anxiously looking for a vessel with assistance. No one has died thus far today.

Your son  
John

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Monday, August 8th

Fever still increasing. More than two thirds of this ship's company down, but no more fatality as yet. I am still well, thank God. Some of the sick are better.

Your affectionate son  
John

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Tuesday, August 9th

I am still very well, thank God. The fever is better I think. Love to all. One of the boys died this morning. Three officers are down with the fever but are getting better.

Your affectionate son  
John

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Wednesday, Aug. 10

Two more of the men died this morning and I think more will die. I am still well, thank God. No assistance yet. It is hard to see the men die and still this vessel lies here on the Blockade. I hope God will send us assistance soon.

Your affectionate son  
John

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Thursday, Aug. 11th

I am still well, thank God. Two more of the men died last night. Some of the rest are better. The officers I think are getting better. Love to all at home and mother.

Your affectionate son  
John

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Friday, August 12th

Two more dead with the fever. I am still well, thank God, and I hope God will preserve me through this sickness. Some are getting better. No more new cases, thank God. Love to all.

Your affectionate son  
John

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Saturday, August 13th

A Steamer has just arrived from Key West bringing another doctor and some ice. She will return im-

mediately. I am still well, thank God. An officer and two men died yesterday and last night. *Pray for your wayward son.* I hope that God will preserve me. The Captain is down. There are but two watch officers well, myself and one other. I send my love to you all. God bless you.

from your affectionate son

John

P. S. I expect we will come home in a short time. Do not worry about me. I hope God will spare me to see you again.

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Indian River  
Saturday, Aug. 13/64

Dear Brother,

We are in great trouble. We have the Yellow fever on this vessel. Have lost one officer and twelve men. There are twelve down sick now. The Captain and three other officers are also sick. I am still well, thank God and God only Knows if I will be permitted to go clear or not, but I hope he will spare me and if I live I think I will be home before long for this vessel will not be left here. Tell father not to worry about me. I hope God will spare me and permit us to meet again on earth. I am well, thank God. I cannot write much and you must excuse me. I send my love to all. God bless you.

Your affect. brother

John

Aug. 13 P. S. We are bound home. If I live I will see you soon. Tell father.

(Excerpt from an official report made August 24th, 1864, by Acting Ensign William J. Eldredge who commanded the *J. S. Chambers* after the death of her commanding officer:)

“Our captain and executive officer being down sick, the command devolved on myself.

There remained but one other officer fit for duty, Acting Master's Mate, J. F. VanNest . . . . At sea at 1 p.m. on the 15th instant, Acting Assistant Surgeon Williams was seized with nervous debility and insanity, brought on by over exertion, anxiety, and attention to the sick for many days and nights previous.

At 6 p.m. on the 18th instant, Acting Master's Mate J. F. Van Nest in, it is supposed, a fit of derangement jumped overboard and was drowned in spite of every effort made to save him\*

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\**Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I. v. 17, pp. 748, 749.

John Field Van Nest (1838-1864) was the son of John Van Nest and Elizabeth Leiper Janeway Van Nest. The above letters are published with the Bind permission of Sarah Hayes Van Nest and Niel W. Upham, relatives of the writer. They are in the possession of Mr. Upham.