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TALLAHASSEE AND ST. MARKS IN 1841

A LETTER OF JOHN S. TAPPAN

on board of Ship "Geneva" lying
at Mobile Bay Decr. 13. 1841.

My very dear Cousin,

Your good and Kind letter of the 5th ultimo was duly received for which you must accept my thanks for the punctuality you exhibited. I have not had an opportunity to reply to it and you will I know attribute my silence to the right cause instead of any other. As you may be interested I will give you a Brief of my Adventures, but if you would like a full account I refer you to My Journal I sent home. I would send you one also but its length (16 pages thickly written foolscap) prevents my doing so. We sailed from N. Y. on Sunday the 7th Nov. 1841, but we may be censured for sailing on that day so I will say only that we were obliged to, and leave the explanation for some future time. I was more Sea Sick than I have ever been before, but only two days. We had remarkably pleasant weather and made "Alaco Light" the 13th day out. Our run across the Banks and round Tortugas was performed in 3 days and then we began to have head winds and were off St. Marks 6 days before we went in, which we did on the 18th day out. The appearance of the Land is very low, marshy & covered with pine trees. The water is also very shallow and the Ships when they load have to lay about 18 miles from the town, and six miles from the Light which is almost as bad as being at anchor off Cape Ann. In speaking of the place every one calls it St. Marks. But now the business is removed about 3 miles down the river to a place called Port Leon. (18 miles from there the Ship lay but even Pt. Leon is only a Depot for the cotton that comes down the river from Talla-

hassee by Rail Road about 24 miles. Pt. Leon is a new town but the houses (about 20 in number) are about the meanest kind, the best and finest in the place is not to be compared with Mrs. Connors that black house on the corner of "Hog Lane" where Uncle Josiah used to live. Why Benny your Father's Barn is handsomer than any house in Tallahassee altho' I suppose it did not cost 1/16 part as much as some there for they get all their things from the north and of course labor is very scarce and very high. The people oh my! The "ruff scuff" of civilization, and as to Law. they dont know what it means for Law and Justice are not in their vocabularies. I was asked to drink about 500 times and when I refused they would turn round and look as tho they were shot one man told me that I was the only person in Pt. Leon but what would drink and that he had heard of Temperance folk and he wanted to see how they looked so he begged the liberty of staring me in the face for 1/2 an hour. There is no church in Port Leon and Sunday they spent in playing Billiards, Drinking, Swearing, Smoking &c. We went up to Tallahassee the 2nd day after we arrived but did not get there until the cars had run off three times. It presents a much better appearance than Pt. Leon having a 1/2 finished capitol, two churches and a *Jail!!* A year ago you could not walk the Streets without being armed to the teeth. now its different for during the last summer out of a population of 1600 inhabitants God had seen fit to take away 450 of them composing most all the Gamblers & Blacklegs of the place and now they have a chance to begin anew. It was really shocking to hear the account of the fever. we, at the north can form no idea of the suffering and distress for those that *lived* fared the worse & almost wished for death. 8 & 9 a day (for they all died in a very short time) was a common thing. and then who was to bury them

for almost every one was sick and the only way they kept alive was by taking Calomel by the ounces and now they look like walking skeletons more than like live persons. There was nothing in the place to interest one and Captain Hale finding that he could get no business for the Ship concluded to go to Mobile. We left Tallahassee on the cars drawn with mules for the Engine had run down a bank 20 feet into the Bushes and was totally unfit for service. We were 5 hours going 24 miles and after various adventures which you can read if you see the Journal we arrived at Port Leon. Found the Ships Boat in waiting for us and we went down, weighed anchor, clapped the rags on to her and shaped our course for Mobile. It Blew quite hard the two first days out and we got to far to the Southward. 2nd day out the wind hauled to the NW dead a head and we did not get in until the 6th day out. MOBILE is 27 miles up the river from where the Ships anchor and as soon as the Mud Hook was down the Captain and myself left our good Ship and went in the Sloop Virillia up to town. We did not get there until the next day at 10c as it was, stark calm most of the time. The ground here is also very low and marshy, and the trees in great abundance. Mobile is quite a large city with 15 or 20,000 inhabitants, 6 churches, court house &c &c. It looks finely coming up the bay and the large brick cotton presses and slate roofs make it appear like a very rich place. 2 years ago there was a tremendous fire here which burnt 14 squares, several large buildings, Banks &c. this has most all been built up and now the city is in a flourishing condition. We put up at the "Mansion House" the best Hotel by far in the Southern country not excepting New Orleans. but as I could not find anything to do I came down the Bay to live. I shall probably go up again soon and then I will write you again and the only reason I do not give you a fuller description of

men and things is because the postage would be so much I am afraid you would wish me and my Journal on the coast of Arabia. I am longing to hear from home but I suppose all of my letters have gone to St. Marks and therefore I shall not get them. It takes the mail three weeks to get from St. Marks to Mobile and when we were at Tallahassee there were 8 mails wanting. So much for the Reform in the New Administration ha ha worse than it ever was. I want you to write me a long letter and tell me *all* the news. put on the outside care of John Phillips Esq. & say "If gone please forward." We have not engaged a Freight yet but will soon, where I know not, but probably to Havre. Wish you a Merry Christmas. Happy New Year next time. I suppose you had a grand Thanksgiving, did you go to Nport? and did you give my love to all hands & Good Bye God Bless you I have not time to write any more, and will write again before I leave. Love to All from Your ever aff. cos.

JNO. S. TAPPAN

[endorsed:]

Mr. Benj. French
At Merchants Ins. Co.
Boston
Mass

* * *

We are grateful to Mr. W. T. Cash and the Florida State Library for a copy of the above letter and permission to publish it. Mr. Cash, Florida State Librarian, writes :

"Recently the Florida State Library acquired a letter dated December 13, 1841, a portion of whose contents throws some light on conditions in Tallahassee and Port Leon at the time.

"The author of the letter, John S. Tappan, we may with some reason believe, was a member of the noted Tappan family of Massachusetts, who were

great reformers, and, therefore, we need not be surprised at his references to the drinking and smoking habits of Floridians.

“Although we are certain that the letter contains exaggerations, such as the statement that 450 persons in Tallahassee, out of a population of 1600 died during an epidemic of 1841, and that the people of the town were the ‘ruff scuff’ of civilization, it is not likely that the writer was intentionally untruthful. It is too often a tendency of reformers to exaggerate conditions.

“We know that Tappan’s statement as to the population of Tallahassee was substantially correct, as it is borne out by the United States census of 1840. Undoubtedly most Tallahasseeans, despite Tappan’s statements as to their habits of going constantly armed, were peaceful and inoffensive ; but there had been enough violence during several years prior to his visit to lend some color to the letter’s charges. Political excitement was high. Charges of mismanagement of the Indian War then going on were common and the territorial banks furnished a subject of many belligerent arguments. As a result of all these, several duels had been fought and a lot of ill feeling had been aroused.

“The number of houses the writer gives Port Leon probably referred to the stores, hotel, taverns and warehouses and not to the homes. However, we know that Port Leon was never a very large town, probably never reaching 500 inhabitants.

“There has been much uncertainty about when locomotive engines were first used on the Tallahassee-St. Marks railroad. Tappan’s letter seems to sustain the argument that the locomotive was used at a very early date, but was so often a failure that horse or mule power was frequently substituted.”