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## The Editor's Corner--Key West in the Summer of 1864

Millicent Todd Bingham  
membership@myfloridahistory.org



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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

KEY WEST IN THE SUMMER OF 1864

*Edited by* MILLICENT TODD BINGHAM

From 1918 until her death in 1932, my mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, was a prominent resident of Coconut Grove Florida. Her home, "Matsuba," was a center of cultural life in the community. Recently I have been reading the letters of her mother's brother, Colonel John Augustus Wilder, written to his family during the Civil War. Stationed at Key West in February 1864, he remained there until August 28, 1865, when he was appointed Judge Advocate General of the Department of Florida and left for Tallahassee, his post until December 9, 1865. He was mustered out of the United States Army on January 5, 1866. Four years later, on March 9, 1870, he was assassinated in Kansas City, Missouri.

Born in Concord, Massachusetts, January 17, 1834, John Wilder was graduated from the Harvard Law School in 1857, and began the practice of law in Boston in December of that year. In 1862, he became assistant to the Superintendent of Contrabands, War Department, and was commissioned second lieutenant, 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, February 10, 1863. Stationed at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, he was engaged in recruiting Negro troops for the Union army. Commissioned captain, Company A, Second Regiment, U. S. Colored Troops, June 23, 1863 (major, May 18, 1864), he arrived at Fort Taylor, Key West, in February 1864.

John Wilder's letters during his stay in Key West portray the appalling conditions there and supply a vivid and little-known chapter in Civil War history. They enable us to follow, month by month, the ravages of the yellow fever epidemic which, one by one, removed his superior officers until, on July 20, 1865, Colonel Wilder found himself in command of Fort Taylor. The unpublished Wilder papers are at Yale University. The following are excerpts from those letters.

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[To His Mother]      Key West  
                                  Sunday 19th 1864.  
                                  (June)

I write you a few lines to inform you of my continued health tho yellow fever rages fearfully around. We this morning attended the funeral of Capt Hook of the regular army - on the staff of Gen Woodbury, a fine noble young man. His wife is here with him & is a sister of Gen Warren of the Potomac Army. She is very much prostrated & overcome. She is a lovely woman. Last week Capt Martin of our regiment died, & Lieut Kuhl also - both fine officers. We have thus far lost about half of our officers who were on duty at the Fort. I do not have much apprehension of the disease & look upon myself as somewhat proof against it. One soon becomes accustomed to it & is not startled or surprised to hear of any one being sick or dead. There are sometimes 30 or 40 new cases a day among the sailors & others. We have been joined today by Lieut Thompson of New York (son of Dr I. P. Thompson) who has been home on sick leave. I fear he will not go through safely - tho he has one advantage - a plentiful diarrhoea which enables the system to throw off the poison. As soon as one is taken, every effort is made to throw off the poison which is of the most malignant character. A profuse perspiration, open bowels and kidneys are the only safety. The most prompt treatment only, will save life, from 20 to 40 grains of calomel, half a tumbler of castor oil, & hot mustard baths *taken at once* are the only things which are found successful. This disease doesn't tolerate fooling, 3 or 4 days generally settles it, & frequently less time. It is the most treacherous disease in the world. A man feels all right at one time, & in 5 hours is dead. Sometimes a man is stricken down without one moment's warning - getting out of a carriage, or going up stairs. I write you this not perhaps as interesting news, but because it is the most natural thing now to do. I feel like one who has had it & regard it with more interest than fear tho its rather depressing to one's spirits. Its astonishing how ever how soon one gets used to it. I'm sure now from this & other experiences that the eels can get used to skinning. The army does wonders for a man. . . .

[To his Mother]

Key West Fla

Monday July 25 1864.

The last week has been one of the saddest & most painful weeks of my army life. My dear friend Jackson of whom you have heard me speak - Lieut in my old company, died last Monday after an illness of only a few days. He had a severe attack of yellow fever from which he appeared to be recovering until the morning of Sunday when hemorrhage of the bowels set in & he died in a few hours. He was a young man of far more than average truth and loveliness of character, gentleness, & firmness, & a sincere Christian. I felt his loss deeply. Col Townsend who had watched with him the night before, was suddenly taken sick - the second time - so violently that he could not attend the funeral. It was a sad funeral. We could hardly get officers enough for pall bearers. Two of the officers were taken sick the same morning. Col T. continued to get rapidly worse & the next day I gave him up for lost, & began to read up the regulations & ceremonies necessary for his funeral, as he is Commander of the Post & has to be buried with ceremony and honor. The Doctor pronounced his chance of life one in five. No case considered by him so desperate has recovered. The prospect before me was startling. . . . Fortunately the prospect improved. Judge Bethel a recent Secessionist but whom I forgive with all my heart for his humanity - a man much experienced in such cases - with other friends watched the case with care & assiduity. They saved the Colonel's life - humanly speaking and though I have been and am in command of the regiment, I am saved the responsibility of Fort Taylor, at least at present. . . .

We are of course suffering for lack of officers, but it would be downright murder to send men here from the North at this season & we must wait for cooler weather. I am all right as yet. Two officers of my old company have died & the third lies sick in the adjoining room. I have escaped wonderfully & my hopes to go thro' clear are improving. I have been *much* exposed watching by the sick and dying, but have yet so far escaped any serious attack. . . .

[To his brother-in-law]

Aug. 2nd 1864.

Key West, Fla

. . . Indeed, the summer is not oppressive to me - physically, altho' I dislike to see so many poor fellows worsted in an unequal fight with "the pestilence which destroyeth at noon day." It seems hard to realize that so delightful & sunny a land on which the smile of God seems visibly to rest should be so deadly & deceitful. I sit in the balcony of our barracks low-roofed & shaded - doors & windows open, thro which pours a flood of genial breezes, delicious & cool. Outside, the land-scape is all "green & gold" - verdure & sunlight; further out, is the water, glassy & cool shining like polished steel. It seems pleasant as the Gardens of Paradise. Suddenly away down by the deserted wharves a boat puts out, & begins a weary pull in the tropical sun to some ship anchored dimly off on the waters - for safety. The touch of the beautiful land is deadly to the stranger, & iron clad that brave Columbiad & Parrott hover diffidently in the offing. Is this indeed Paradise or is it Hell?

I am happy to say however that the fever is abating. I herad yesterday that the Quartermaster had 14 coffins *ahead*. The fever seems doubtless to be scared at the odds and I hope has retired from the race. Seriously the easterly trade winds have begun and I think the worst is over. I hardly expect to be taken sick. As I write, the wind blows right through a room in which is Lieut. Janney just recovering from the fever. And yet, one ship which went North from here to Portsmouth, N. H. has carried fever there, & it is said the engineer of the Yard who came on board to examine the engines had died from the contagion - with quite a number of others since. You probably know more of the facts than I do. . . .