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Elijah Swift's Travel Journal from Massachusetts to Florida, 1857

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ELIJAH SWIFT'S TRAVEL JOURNAL FROM MASSACHUSETTS TO FLORIDA, 1857

edited by VIRGINIA STEELE WOOD*

"**F**ROM A WRETCHED PLACE. . . in a wretched car we commenced our wretched ride." Elijah Swift's remark summarized precisely the way he perceived his journey by rail from New England to Tallahassee-eight days of erratic schedules, lengthy delays, unpredictable hotel accommodations, questionable food, and fatigue. Swift had travelled this same route the year before, and the prospect of making another excursion to Florida could hardly have been attractive. The trip seemed interminable as one was jolted forward in railway car, steamboat, wagon, or stagecoach, and fortunate was the passenger who could doze or enjoy conversation with his companions.

Travel in the nineteenth century was tedious and difficult. By 1857 there were many private rail lines, some barely a dozen miles long, which necessitated numerous changes for the traveller; at each terminus connections had to be made and tickets purchased. There were no Pullman cars, so one slept sitting up or spent the night in a hotel, continuing his journey the next day. Passengers provided their own food which they ate picnic style on short trips or took dinner when the train made scheduled stops at inns, hotels, or boarding houses. With the engine belching smoke, and cinders blowing in through open windows, grime was simply another discomfort which had to be tolerated.

Planning a long journey by train was itself an exercise requiring considerable patience. There were railway maps and schedules, but with so many different lines, one had to discover which went where in order to make an agenda. And strange as it may seem, there was no standard railroad time in the United States in 1857. Each rail company adopted independently the time of its

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locality or the time of its home office. With a certain disdain, *Dinsmore's American Railroad and Steam Navigation Guide* called attention to this phenomenon noting that the "inconvenience of such a system, if system it can be called, must be apparent to all." It had been the cause of "many miscalculations and misconnections," and was particularly "annoying to persons strangers to the fact." Since many rail guides listed local times for scheduled arrivals and departures, Dinsmore published a timetable for the principal American cities as compared with noon at the nation's capital. For example, when it was twelve noon in Washington, D.C., it was 11:42 AM at St. Augustine; 11:30 AM in Tallahassee; 12:24 PM in Boston; and 12:12 PM in New York City.¹ Clearly, one had to be on the alert to plan a trip of any great distance.

Of course physical stamina was essential. When Elijah Swift set out on the ten-mile drive from Falmouth to Monument station by carriage in October 1857 he was twenty-five years old, and he needed all the vigor his youth could command. Ahead of him were eight days of riding on eleven different railroad lines, two connecting steamboat lines, a wagon, and assorted stagecoaches in order to reach Tallahassee. On the last leg of this journey, the ninth day, his final destination by rail was St. Marks. The twenty-one miles from Tallahassee cost him \$1.00 and required two hours instead of the scheduled ninety minutes. Following this, there was a two-mile ride by hack to Newport. Although his journal ends abruptly in Savannah, Georgia, on November 2, Elijah Swift wrote an account of a mid-nineteenth century businessman's trip to Florida. His observations concerning places, his feelings about events during the trip, his comments on some of the people he encountered, combined with his good humor, provide a readable account of an otherwise prolonged and dull journey.

Born in Falmouth, Massachusetts, November 19, 1831, Swift came from a family of shipbuilders. His grandfather Elijah Swift had started his career as a house carpenter, and later made a fortune building whaleships and supplying the government with live oak timber for the frames of naval vessels. His father, Oliver C. Swift, was also active in the family business. Elijah, after graduating from Harvard in 1852 and touring Europe, became a part-

1. Richard F. Fisher, ed., *Dinsmore's American Railroad and Steam Navigation Guide For The United States & Canada* (New York, 1857), 257.

ner of John J. Swift, Jr., in the live oaking business, and for the next few years he worked in South Carolina and Florida.² While much of the firm's lumbering operation was centered in New Smyrna and the present site of Daytona Beach, the St. Marks area on the Gulf coast was dense with live oak. Elijah's responsibility in this journey to Florida was to join his cousin Rodolphus Swift to contract for supplies and to purchase timber lands or cutting rights from property owners in Tallahassee, St. Marks, and Newport.

The original manuscript of the journal is owned by Oliver S. Chute of Milton, Massachusetts, Elijah Swift's grandson, who kindly permitted its publication. It is being published exactly as writ ten, except for bracketed additions.

Boston Oct. 19th 1857

Completed my business in the city and bade all the good people at No 8 Allston a hearty farewell (Memo) Left in the afternoon train for Monument where I found father in waiting & reached home at 9 1/2 o'clock P.M. in time to receive a cup of hot tea and the surroundings from Mothers provident hand

Falmouth Oct 20

A confused day till 12 M. Business transactions, saying last words & eating Hattie's pears filled the morning & noon found us letting the final good wishes. Father carried me to Monument & set me off upon the journey toward the land of "Hog meat & Hommony."

Did not find cousin Rhodh.³ when on the Fall River Boat &

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2. Sources for information on Elijah Swift, his family, and their business include Falmouth, Massachusetts, Vital Records, 2: 101, 200; 3: 87-330; Falmouth Births, Marriages, Deaths, 1855-1892, 39, 56; Falmouth Deaths, 1893-1934, 30; Falmouth Deaths, 1935-1957, 2, Falmouth Town Hall, Falmouth, Massachusetts; gravestone inscriptions in Oak Grove Cemetery, Falmouth, Massachusetts; Katharine Whitin Swift, comp., *The Swift Family* (Whitinsville, Massachusetts, 1955), 2-7; Grace Williamson Edes, *Annals of the Harvard Class of 1852* (Cambridge, 1922), 174-76, 367, 384-85; Naval Records, Contracts, 1794-1827, Records Group 45, Entry 235, National Archives.
 3. Rodolphus Nye Swift (1810-1901), son of Reuben Swift and a nephew of Elijah Swift. As a young boy he spent two years in the South with his father and uncle in the live oak business. At the age of seventeen he shipped out as a whaleman and eventually became master of the

so alone in an after stateroom shut my eyes upon Oct 20th while the boat was bracing a heavy head sea

Wednesday Oct 22nd [21st] (New York)

The heavy sea of yesternight delayed the Boat beyond the time of departure of the Southern trains & consequently I was obliged to spend the day in New York

Left at 6 o'clock P.M. en route for Washington D.C. & "snoozed" famously in the cars.

Thursday Oct. 23rd [22nd] (Washington D.C.)

The grey of this cool morning overtook the traveller stepping on board of the Potomac boat (name unknown) bound for Acquia Creek. Reminiscences of a former sail on the same river and of a bright eyed & fair haired stranger, were pleasant & refreshing. Blessed be memory when hope decayeth!

Passed through Richmond dinnerless & tarried in Petersburg long enough to buy a pair of gloves & to peep into a ladies' fair. Night soon came apace and we tried to beguile its weary hours by sleep while jolting on to Weldon & thence to Wilmington N.C.

Observed during the day one of the most graceful combinations of curves in the waves caused by the swift motion of the boat up Acquia Creek where the water was very shallow & where undisturbed by our keel very placid

Friday Oct 24th [23rd] (Wilmington N.C.)

I have a long & heavy black mark against Wilmington, registered in the calendar of memory a year ago, & so was glad to leave, after an hours stay for a more Southern latitude. From a wretched place on the opposite side of Cape Fear River in a wretched car we commenced our wretched ride, which same wretched car despite its wretchedness saved us, by the gracious providence of God, from the horrid wreck which befel the *new* car which passed over the road just after us.⁴ We arrived Kings-

Lancaster. Years later he also returned to the live oak trade, together with his brother, William C. N. Swift.

4. The Wilmington & Weldon Railroad was undergoing extensive physical repairs during the fall of 1857, but neither Wilmington's weekly *Journal* nor *Daily Herald* mentioned this "horrid wreck." However, suppression of news detrimental to powerful interests was no less common in the

ville at 6 PM. and at Branchville a few hours after where we entered the most comfortable of comfortable cars & slept away the night. (Memo *Ole Virginia*)

Saturday Oct 25th [24th]

On through South Carolina & through Georgia over well built roads as far as Macon a beautiful inland city, where I intend spending the Sabbath

Rained in the afternoon & had but little opportunity of making extensive explorations (Memo Mr. Miller & daughter)

Sunday October 25th 1857 Macon, Geo.

Have spent a most interesting day; attending the morning service of the Presbyterian church & an evening exercise of the same society in their new lecture-room. The text of the morning discourse was Agrippa's confession to the apostle: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian"

The remarks of the Evening were founded upon the 14th Chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, bearing Especially upon the 17th verse: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness & peace and joy in the Holy Ghost".

The spirit manifested & doctrines advanced reminded me of Mt. Vernon Church.

Hotel; the Lanier House

Monday Oct 26th 1857

Was roused at 1 1/2 AM by sundry thumps and the announcement "De omnibus is waitin at de door"! and after a hasty toilet found "de omnibus" in the form of a baggage wagon with a chair in it. Leaving Macon at an early hour reached Wooten at about nine A.M. where we commenced a most wretched stage ride towards Tallahassee via Albany Newton (where we supped) Quincy &c.

Tuesday Oct 27th

Among my companions of yesterday were a Doct. Monroe & lady with 3 children of his sister all of whom were agreeable as

1850s than in our own era. See Earl Heydinger, "Suppression of 'Bad News' About the Early Railroads," *Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin No. 119* (October 1968), 63-66.

fellow travellers, although but little conversation proceeded from any excepting the Doct who was an intelligent planter.

The stage left them at Quincy where we breakfasted at a late hour, but their loss was alleviated by the accession at the same place of an elderly lady, who was a staunch Methodist, and a Mr. Cox & wife both young people & not by any means uncomfortable companions

Five o'clock found us in Tallahassee safely housed in Godbold's hotel.⁵

This same Godbold appears to be a rascal. Having run through his property in So. Ca. by a career of gambling & other dissipations he opened a hotel in this place. Here a year since he murdered a man in a drunken brawl & was tried for his life The fact of his being a mason is said to have affected his acquital, since which time he is said to spend most of his miserable life in liquor

Wednesday Oct. 28th (Tallahassee)

Started at an early hour in the morning by rail for St. Marks.⁶ Arrived there after a two hour's ride, and after seeing my elderly travelling companion of yesterday safely housed in the hotel, left by hack for Newport where I found Dan'l Ladd Esq. to whom I had introductory letters.⁷

Leaving Newport after dinner in a private conveyance took a 30 miles drive among the proprietors of the Halifax timber, lead with Major Ward & reached Tallahassee just before 11 o'clock in the evening where I learned that Cousin R. had just arrived⁸

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5. Major Cade Godbold, a native of South Carolina, served for several years as a proprietor of the City Hotel in Tallahassee. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, April 10, 1858.
 6. The Tallahassee Rail Road Company, incorporated by an act of February 10, 1834, connected Tallahassee and the St. Marks River. It served to carry cotton to the river for transshipment to sailing vessels. Dorothy Dodd, "The Tallahassee Railroad and the Town of St. Marks," *Apalachee*, IV (1956), 1-12; George W. Pettengill, Jr., "The Story of the Florida Railroads, 1834-1903," *The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc., Bulletin No. 86* (1952), 11-15, 24-26.
 7. Daniel Ladd (1817-1872), a native of Augusta, Maine, and a wealthy businessman and lumberman in pre-Civil War Florida, represented Wakulla County in the 1861 Florida secession convention. Ladd Journals and Papers (1848-1887), Special Collections, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee, pp. 252, 322-23; Ralph A. Wooster, "The Florida Secession Convention," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (April 1958), 385.
 8. George Taliafero Ward (1810), a Kentucky native, settled in Leon

Thursday Oct. 29th (Tallahassee)

Passed a very pleasant day in company with Cousin Rhodolphus

Major Ward drove in during the forenoon and after an extended colloquy and a whisky toddy in which I did not indulge we effected a purchase of the timber subject to the approval of Col^{nel} Sanderson of Jacksonville.⁹ Major W. treated me to a very pleasant drive about Tallahassee & vicinity, showing up "the lions" & his fine Vermont horses. (Memo Agassiz) Introduced to General Bailey¹⁰ Doct Barnard¹¹ Mr. Walker¹² Mr Geniskey &c.

Friday Oct 30. (From Tallahassee)

Took early stage for Albany at 5 A.M. The first 3 hours of our ride was rendered uncomfortable by a drunken farmer who persisted in shaking me by the arm & calling me "old coon"! all of which annoyance I tried to endure with forbearance, although the point was not far off where such conduct "ceases to be a virtue."

County, Florida, and prospered as a slave and plantation owner. He later served in the secession convention of Florida in 1861, in the Confederate Congress, and died in action in 1862 while a colonel of the Second Florida Infantry. Ezra J. Warner and W. Buck Yearns, *Biographical Register of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge, 1975), 248-49.

9. John Pease (Philip?) Sanderson (1816-1871), an 1839 Amherst graduate from Vermont, became a successful attorney, planter, and slave owner in Fernandina, Lake City, and Jacksonville. An early investor in Florida railroads, he supported secession and replaced George Ward for thirteen days in 1862 in the Provisional Confederate Congress. *Ibid.*, 213-14. *From Cotton to Quail: An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1967* (Gainesville, 1968), 8-9.
10. William Bailey (1790-1867), born at St. Mary's, Georgia, fought in the War of 1812, the Second Seminole War, and at the Battle of Natural Bridge (March 6, 1865) in his seventy-fifth year. A wealthy planter, Bailey's Jefferson County cotton factory was the only such facility in Florida to remain in operation throughout the Civil War, [Harry Gardner Cutler], *History of Florida, Past and Present: Historical and Biographical*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1923), III, 156; John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1973), 126.
11. Edward B. Barnard, a druggist, operated his business at the corner of Clinton and Monroe streets. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, January 19, 1856.
12. "Mr. Walker" may have been David Shelby Walker (1815-1891), who had settled in Leon County in 1837. An attorney, Walker served in the Florida legislature, as state registrar of public lands and superintendent of public instruction, mayor of Tallahassee, supreme court justice, and as Florida's governor from 1865 to 1868. Walker returned to the practice of law in 1868, but received an appointment as a circuit judge from 1876 until his death on July 20, 1891. Allen Morris, comp., *The Florida Handbook, 1975-1976* (Tallahassee, 1975), 83.

Breakfasted at 11 A.M. at Quincy and continued the jolting ride to Newton where we supped, having dined at Bainbridge.

Newton added to the number of our passengers after which the night was spent in talking of Banks, Cotton, Money pressure & Runaways and in vain endeavors to sleep

Saturday Oct. 31st

Morning discovered us at Albany (Memo. Scoundrel from Kentucky) Reached Wooten about noon & night saw us on the road between Macon & Savannah

Sunday Nov. 1st (Savannah)

Attended the Independent Presbyterian Church through the day & evening hearing two good sermons. Text in the morning Isaiah 53rd 1st "Who hath believed our report" the negative & positive reasons of the opposition to the gospel were commented upon with practical ability. Text in the afternoon 1 Cor 15/58. The preacher treated at length of the influences which the hope of resurrection was suited to exert upon the character & life of Christians. In the evening the monthly concert for Missions was held but failed in awaking that interest which is manifested in similar meetings at the North, or rather at home.

Monday Nov. 2nd Savannah