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Letters from Pensacola About Confederate Nitre Bureau Operations in Florida

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Letters pertaining to the Confederate Nitre Bureau Operations In Florida

transcribed by THOMAS S. MUIR

The following letters dealing with the Confederate Nitre Bureau's Florida operations were discovered in the T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Collection of the Historic Pensacola Preservation Board. Both letters deal with the subject of the foregoing article by Marion O. Smith. The second casts light on the Civil War activities of two prominent Pensacola citizens. Cox Chandler Yonge was a district attorney in Florida for the Confederate States of America. Augustus E. Maxwell, who had once represented Florida in the U.S. House of Representatives, was a Confederate Senator.

Ogelthorpe University
Milledgeville, Geo
June 27th, 1862

J. M. St. John
Major and Supt. Nitre Bureau
Augusta, Geo

Sir,

I have just returned from my exploration of the State of Florida, at which work I consumed just four weeks. I write this as a preliminary, unofficial communication—simply to inform you of general results—and to make inquiries. My report will be made as soon as I shall have completed the analysis of specimens—on which I am now engaged.

I traveled through Western, Middle and Eastern Florida and examined many cases, especially in Jackson, Alachua, and Marion counties—the caves are *all small* the largest not over 400 yards long and from 10 to 20 feet wide, with few lateral expansions or apartments. The floors are generally rocky. Earthy floors when found of

Mr. Muir is Museum Administrator, Historic Pensacola Preservation Board.

large extent, generally shallow; these are kept *wet* by water rushing in at the mouth or by excessive dripping from the porous ceiling above, so that nitre either is not formed or if formed is subject to constant lixiviation. Deficiency of earth or excessive wetness will describe all the caves of Florida that I examined and I consider these a sample of all as they occur in the same "Rottru" porous, white limestone, of the Meiocine Tertiary-In one cave however in an apartment subject to favorable conditions I found an earth quite rich-I estimate however not more than 600 cubic feet. In all such caves Lt. Latrobe who accompanied me, directed or rather advised private individuals or owners to work them out. From the cave above mentioned, tho, I have not yet examined the sample, I think from 500 to 1000 lbs might be made. I may say though in few words, the caves of Florida do not contain sufficient nitre to justify the erection of works by the government, though I believe that much can be made on the plantations by the planters themselves.

Very Respectfully Yours
N. A. Pratt, M.D.
Chem. & Min. C. L. Nitre Bureau

C. L. Nitre & Mining Bureau
Augusta July 3 d, 1862

Hon. A. E. Maxwell
Evergreen, Ala.

Sir

I write to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 29th ult, and to thank you for the information regarding the limestone caves of Florida. You will perhaps remember that the bill organizing the nitre service passed in May last-about the close of the same month, upon such imperfect information as I could command, I directed a survey of the limestone counties of Florida, and especially of Jackson Co-under Lieut. Latrobe detailed from the provisional Army Engr. Corps-& Prof. N. A. Pratt, Ogelthorpe University, Geo. Had I then known Col. Yonge, I should have requested his service, for the survey.

From the enclosed extract of a letter from Prof. Pratt, you will perceive that the results are not altogether what we could wish. Yet to leave no stone unturned, I have desired Lieut. Latrobe to com-

municate with Col. Yonge-and have directed a second examination of any locality specified by Col. Y. I have also instructed Lieut. Latrobe, to secure the services of Col. Yonge, if the public interests and his own inclination permit. From what I heard of Col. Yonge's high standing, public and professional, the low rates of compensation allowed to agents of this Bureau would not justify his acceptance of a permanent position, especially when there are other positions in the Government service much more worthy of his attention. In arranging the survey of Florida-I was fully prepared for Prof. Pratt's report-knowing the caves to be generally wet and with no very large nitrous deposits; but I had strong hopes of finding sufficient quantities of nitrous earth under old buildings and stable yards to justify government work. In this view I applied for Lieut. Latrobe's detail. He is a civil engineer of many years experience-and for the last three years has served on the Pensacola and Ga. Railroad as Asst. and Chief Engineer. Combined with local knowledge, I expect from Lieut. Latrobe an efficient organization of work and rapid results-where possible.

From your official position, I feel free to request you to communicate to this office any suggestions or advice bearing upon the Nitre service.

Very Respectfully Yours
J. M. St. John, Majr.
and Supt.