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FRANCIS COLLINS, PP. 37-109**

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MARIA CLINTON COLLINS

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Vol. X, 1915, Nos. 2 & 3
APRIL AND JULY

Journal of Francis Collins

An Artillery Officer in the Mexican War

Edited by

MARIA CLINTON COLLINS

CINCINNATI

THE ABINGDON PRESS

Francis Collins, the writer of the following Journal, was born 1820, in Lowville, Lewis Co., New York. His parents were Ela Collins and Maria Clinton, the children of General Oliver Collins and the Rev. Isaac Clinton. Both families had been long known and respected in connection with the early history and settlement of New England. Francis Collins received his early education at the Lowville Academy, and in 1841, he was appointed to and entered West Point, as a member of the class of 1845. Being graduated with the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Fourth Artillery, he was employed in the recruiting service in Virginia and North Carolina. On the breaking out of the Mexican War, he engaged in active service. According to the record of the Army Register, Mr. Collins was Second Lieutenant, August 18, 1846; First Lieutenant, September 13, 1847; resigned December 11, 1850. Brevet rank; Brevet First Lieutenant, August 20, 1850 for gallant and meritorious conduct at Contreras and Churubusco.

At the close of the war Lieutenant Collins was put in charge of a ship conveying troops to the North. Yellow fever broke out among the men and made terrible ravages. Amidst the horrors of such a situation, Mr. Collins displayed heroic qualities in nursing. Although stricken with the disease himself, he did not give way until he had landed his men at Fortress Monroe. He lay then at the point of death for many days, and probably never recovered entirely from the effects of the disease. After two more years of service he resigned, and studied law in the office of the Hon. William S. Groesbeck of Cincinnati. Being admitted to the bar in 1851, he took up his residence in Dayton, O. In 1852, he married Helen, a daughter of the Hon. Alfred Kelley of Columbus, O. In 1853, Mr. Collins removed to Columbus, where he resided until his death. In 1856, he

was elected to the City Council and served two years. During the many years of his residence in this city he filled many public and responsible positions with marked ability and integrity.

Francis Collins was a brother of William Collins of Cleveland and of Isaac Clinton Collins of Cincinnati, both well-known Ohio lawyers. Colonel J. T. Holmes of Columbus, O., says of Mr. Collins in his Memorial printed in the reports of the Ohio State Bar Association, Vol. 9, 1888:

"Of medium height, sturdy build, dark-featured, black hair and eyes, courtly manners, kind-hearted, he remained through his work in our profession, his travels and decline, to the end what his early education made him, a scholarly, accomplished, and thorough soldier and gentleman." Compiled from Obituary notices in the Columbus, O., papers, 1882.

THE JOURNAL OF FRANCIS COLLINS, AN ARTILLERY OFFICER IN THE MEXICAN WAR.¹

The following notes of incidents in my life and experience, were mostly written down at the time of their occurrence. Sometimes circumstances would not permit this; but in all cases they were made while the incidents were fresh in my mind. It was my custom to carry in my pocket a little note book and pencil, during the time I was an actor in the scenes herein narrated, and when anything occurred which I thought it would be pleasant to recall when time would have obliterated it from my memory, I made a note of it. At the first it was my intention to have kept a regular journal of such events, connected with the operations of our Army in Mexico, as fell under my immediate observation; but for many reasons some good, and some bad, I greatly neglected the matter, and in consequence the following meager and barren notes are all I have preserved. Such as they are, however, they are interesting to me, because almost every incident narrated recalls others to my mind with which it is associated.

It could not happen often that anyone, however heedless and unobserving of passing events, could go through two years of campaign life in active service in an enemy's country, engaging in battles, and performing the varied duties of a subaltern officer, subject to the hardships and dangers of such a position as well as enjoying in a careless and happy way everything that had fun in it; working hard, and getting little credit for it; but generally relieved from much responsibility—it could not often happen but that one would see much which was worth remembering and pleasant to recall. Such an experience, too is not wanting in lessons of useful knowledge, and subjects of philosophic reflection. If I was such a charming old gossip as Montaigne, I would sit down in my idle moments (of which I

¹ The original MSS. is in the possession of his niece, Maria Clinton Collins, Cincinnati, Ohio. The transcript thereof is exact with the exception of a few changes made in orthography and punctuation for the sake of clearness.

am thankful, I have not many) and write out all these thoughts in such a familiar way as would make it like talking with an old friend of the almost forgotten incidents of our by-gone years. But as I cannot do this in so quaint and pleasant a way as the delightful Frenchman has done, in giving us the fruit of his experience, I will content myself with saving from forgetfulness what will, perhaps, in time to come reward me for my labors.

In the month of June, in the year 1841, I was entered a cadet in the United States Military Academy at West Point. I remained through the regular term of four years, and was duly graduated in June 1845, when I received a commission as Brevet Second Lieutenant in the U. S. Army, and was attached for duty to the Fourth Regiment of Artillery. After receiving my diploma at West Point, a furlough of three months was granted me. At the expiration of my furlough October 1, 1845, I joined the army at Old Point Comfort, Va., and was assigned for duty to Company F. commanded by Brevet Major John L. Gardner. The Fourth Regiment of Artillery was commanded at that time by Col. John B. Walbach and had its Head Quarters at Fort Monroe, Va.

I remained in this garrison until May 1846, when war being declared against Mexico,² all our small force was sent into the field. The regiments were mere skeletons, and in order to fill them up as rapidly as possible all the officers which could be spared were distributed through the different states on the Recruiting Service. I was sent first to Raleigh, North Carolina, where I remained about two months, and then visited different towns west of Raleigh.

In the early part of the month of October of the same year, I received orders to close my rendezvous and join my company at Fort Monroe, Va., preparatory to embarking for the seat of war. This was what I had long been anticipating with great

² President Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor, who had been sent to Texas with about four thousand men, to cross the Nueces River, and later ordered him to advance to the Rio Grande. The Mexicans, regarding this forward movement as an invasion of their rights, attacked and defeated a small detachment of Taylor's army. When the report of the conflict reached Washington (May, 1846), the President informed Congress that "Mexico has shed American blood upon American soil. War exists, and exists by the act of Mexico herself." Congress accepted the issue thus raised, and war followed. The Mexican War was in reality an attack on a weak nation by a strong one. —*Channing: Students' History of the United States, p. 447.*

pleasure. I was at this time in the dull, uninteresting town of Greensboro in Guilford, Co., N. C., which was so inaccessible to all news that I was utterly ignorant of what I was most desirous to know, Viz., how my comrades were getting on in the field, and whether they were not advancing their promotion, while I was vegetating in that remote and insignificant village. A few days sufficed to enable me to close my rendezvous, and, with such recruits as I had on hand, join my company at Old Point Comfort. No sooner had I reached there, however, than I was seized with a violent attack of bilious fever which had been accumulating for months in my system during my sojourn in the unhealthy regions of North Carolina. It went very hard with me, and when I finally recovered my company had sailed for Texas. Colonel Walbach being upward of eighty years of age though still vigorous, was not allowed to accompany his regiment into the field, and remaining behind in an empty garrison, he tried hard to detain me on nominal duty with him. To this I very much objected, and at last succeeded in getting orders to join my company on the Rio Grande, Texas. I was not yet quite strong enough to travel, but fearful lest the old Colonel might succeed in his efforts to detain me in his command, composed for the most part of innumerable fat, lazy dogs, and wives and children, which the soldiers were obliged to leave behind them, I was determined to start for my post.

Traveling by way of Baltimore and Wheeling, down the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers, I arrived at New Orleans on November 7, and on the 10th sailed for Brazas, Santiago, where I arrived on the 15th. Here I learned that my Regiment was at Camp Belknap on the Rio Grande opposite the Mexican village of Berita.

Owing to the complete failure of our Navy to obtain possession of any important sea-port town on the Gulf, it was in contemplation at this time to attack Tampico by land, and with this in view it was designed to concentrate a force at Fort Belknap, or some other point on the river to march on Tampico, under the command of Major General Patterson. Patterson did not belong to the regular army but was appointed for the war by President Polk, and was one of the poorest of his appointments. The expedition against Tampico progressed slowly. Only four or five companies of Artillery, serving as infantry, had been collected at Camp Belknap, when Commodore Conner

arrived off the mouth of the Rio Grande with the intelligence that Tampico had been evacuated by the Mexican troops, and that the city was ready to surrender to our troops. Our whole force amounting in all to not more than four hundred men, under command of Lieut. Colonel Francis Beltan was immediately embarked with a small supply of ordinance, and on the 21st of November sailed for Tampico, where we arrived on the 23rd. When we reached sight of the city there were Mexicans enough gathered on the landing to have driven us back with clubs and stones, if they had had the spirit to have done so, but they offered no resistance and we boldly disembarked and took the town.

Tampico is regularly laid out and substantially built, without much pretension to beauty of architecture. It contains a population of about five thousand inhabitants. Its situation is very favorable to defense, being in an elbow of the Pemico River, which on the opposite side is marshy and inaccessible. In the rear of the city is Lake Carpentero, so situated as to make the only approaches by land, over two narrow necks lying between either extremity of the lake and the river above and below the city. As soon as we obtained possession and had time to look about us and see the nature of our position, we immediately began the construction of fortifications at the necks, and made such a disposition of our small force as would enable us best to defend ourselves from any outward attacks or risings of the people in the town. This being done, we began to feel a little more secure, but still our situation was so inviting of attack, owing to our limited numbers, that we looked for an arrival of reinforcements with more than ordinary anxiety. In the course of a week, or ten days they began to arrive, and it was not long after, before we felt strong enough to defend ourselves and the city from any force that the enemy could have brought against us.

Not long after Brig. General James Shields arrived at the post with two regiments of Illinois Volunteers. He had been appointed civil and military governor of the city, and immediately on his arrival assumed command. I was, on his application, appointed his aid de camp. This appointment was much more agreeable to me than doing duty with my company, which I never much liked. At this time we had almost daily rumors of what the Mexican government was preparing to do. One day it would be said peace was soon to be made; the next day,