

**MEXICAN WAR LETTERS OF COL. WILLIAM
BOWEN CAMPBELL OF TENNESSEE,
WRITTEN TO GOVERNOR DAVID CAMPBELL
OF VIRGINIA, 1846-1847. REPRINTED FROM
THE TENNESSEE HISTORICAL MAGAZINE,
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WILLIAM BOWEN CAMPBELL & ST. GEORGE L. SIOUSSAT

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Mexican War Letters
of Col. William Bowen Campbell of Tennessee,
Written to Governor David Campbell
of Virginia, 1846-1847

With Introduction and Notes by
ST. GEORGE L. SIOUSSAT.

(Reprinted from the Tennessee Historical Magazine, June, 1925.)



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DOCUMENTS.

INTRODUCTION.

David Campbell (1779-1859) of Washington County, Virginia, was the grandson of "White" David Campbell, noted in the Indian fights in western Virginia in colonial times, and the son of John Campbell, prominent in Lord Dunmore's War and in the Revolutionary warfare in Virginia. After service in the War of 1812 David Campbell filled successively in Virginia the offices of state senator, clerk of the county court of Washington County, and major-general of the militia. From 1837 to 1840 he was governor of Virginia. On his retirement from this office he lived at his estate, "Montcalm," near Abingdon, Virginia, where he died in 1859.

Governor David Campbell, in many ways a remarkable man, possessed among other virtues an appreciation of the value of historical materials. He carefully preserved his papers, and it is to this fact that we owe the correspondence now printed. This is part of a long series of letters written to Governor David Campbell by his wife's nephew, William Bowen Campbell, of Tennessee,—who was also a cousin of Governor Campbell by descent from "White" David through a female line. These letters are now the property of William B. Campbell's son, Mr. Lemuel R. Campbell, of Nashville, who has kindly consented to the publication of this group in the MAGAZINE.¹

Between Governor David Campbell and William B. Campbell there was a deep and lasting friendship. Governor Campbell had early interested himself in the education of his young relative from Tennessee and had assisted

¹The genealogy and much of the history of the Campbells of Virginia is to be found in the extensive and valuable work by Mrs. J. S. (Margaret Campbell) Pilcher of Nashville, entitled *Historical Sketches of the Campbell, Pilcher, and Kindred Families*. . . . (Nashville, Tennessee, 1911, pp. 444.) Included in this volume is a sketch of William Bowen Campbell, written by his son, Lemuel R. Campbell, of Nashville, from which have been taken most of the facts set forth above. In the possession of Mrs. Pilcher are other interesting and valuable papers of her father, William B. Campbell, a considerable group of which also relate to the Mexican War.

him towards the study of the law under Henry St. George Tucker, of Winchester, Virginia. Thus William B. Campbell, who was born in Tennessee in 1807, spent part of his young manhood in Virginia. On his return to Tennessee he entered upon the practice of law at Carthage. In 1831 he was elected by the Legislature to his first office, that of one of the attorney-generalships of the state. This led him to move to White County, where for some years he made his home at Sparta. He left this place to return to Carthage, and in 1835 was elected representative for Smith County. In the same year he married Miss Frances I. Owen, daughter of Dr. John Owen, of Carthage. Next year he served with distinction in the Florida War. A series of letters written this year to Governor David Campbell we hope to publish in a later number of the MAGAZINE.

On his return he was elected to Congress from his district, and continued in the house of representatives for two terms. He preferred his life at home, and in 1843 declined reelection. For a few years he was in private life; then, on the outbreak of the Mexican War, he was elected Colonel of the First Tennessee Regiment, and served as a volunteer for the term of twelve months. Of the campaign in Mexico we shall have more to say below.

The later career of William B. Campbell, well-known to Tennesseans, must be summarized briefly. On his return from the Mexican service he was elected a judge of the circuit court in his section of Tennessee. In 1851, after the exciting year of the Nashville Convention and the Compromise, he was nominated by the Whigs for the governorship and was triumphantly elected, the last governor to be chosen by that party. At the close of one term he refused to run again, and entered into business. After a sojourn in New Orleans he became president of the Bank of Middle Tennessee at Lebanon, in which town he thereafter made his home. As a private citizen he followed the Whig party to its downfall, and in 1860 supported the candidacy of John Bell. Strenuously opposing secession, he declined a high military command offered by President Davis, and in 1862 accepted a brigadier-generalship in the Federal army upon the understanding that he should not be assigned to active duty in the field. In 1864 he gave his support to the McClellan ticket, but through the interference of Andrew Johnson, the military governor, the electors on this ticket withdrew their names.

William B. Campbell was one of the representatives elected to the Thirty-ninth Congress, but was not permitted

to take his seat until 1866. He now gave his adherence to Johnson's administration and was frequently called into consultation by the President. On August 9, 1867, he died at his home near Lebanon, Tennessee. Few men have been more loved in Tennessee, and none have passed through political life with more unsullied reputation.

It is now proper briefly to describe the political and military situation which existed at the time that William B. Campbell volunteered his services and was elected colonel of his regiment.

The month of February, 1846, found General Zachary Taylor with United States troops at Corpus Christi, upon the Nueces River in Texas near the Gulf Coast, at which point he had been encamped for several months. On February 4 he received orders from Washington to occupy a position on the east bank of the Rio Grande. Preparing without haste his plans for carrying out these orders, Taylor established a base at Point Isabel, a bluff which commanded one of the shallow bays that are found on this part of the Texas coast. Opposite Point Isabel was a channel or arm (Brazo) of the sea which the Mexicans called *El Brazo de Santiago*, and which the American soldiers chose to name *The Brazos*. The channel lay between islands, of which that immediately to the south bore the name of Santiago, to which also by the Army of the United States the word *Brazos* was applied. A few miles farther to the south the Rio Grande emptied into the Gulf. Here in the last days of March Taylor took up his quarters, opposite the Mexican town of Matamoros. A month later, on April 24, a scouting party of American dragoons under Captain Thornton was ambushed and sixteen were killed or wounded. Upon this Taylor called upon the governors of Texas and Louisiana for volunteers. On May 3 the fort at Point Isabel was unsuccessfully bombarded by the Mexicans under General Arista. Within a week came the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de Guerrero. The latter name marked a ravine or former river bed, and this or one nearby was called by the Americans Resaca de la Palma. Victorious in both of these encounters the Americans soon forced the Mexican army to evacuate Matamoros, and thus by May 18 gained control of the lower Rio Grande.

The news of the outbreak of hostilities had reached Washington on May 9, and on the eleventh the President had sent in his war message. Within two days the declaration of war by Congress was ready for Polk's signature. There followed a period of delay in which the administration, em-

barrassed by difficulties with General Winfield Scott, endeavor to plan a campaign. Meanwhile Taylor impatiently waited at Matamoros. The volunteer troops, which began to pour in upon him far more rapidly than his means of subsistence and transportation could accommodate, included some of which had been raised as a result of a call issued by General Edmund Pendleton Gaines, who now, as on former occasions, had undertaken without authority to anticipate directions from the War Department. As indicated above, Taylor, acting under orders from Washington, had requisitioned volunteers from Louisiana and Texas. It was supposed that these soldiers had enlisted for six months, but it soon developed that under the Act of 1795 they could be held for but three months. Some of these short-time troops were the first to reach Taylor, and in August large numbers of them returned. Meanwhile early in June the twelve-month volunteers authorized by the war act began to arrive at Santiago Island, coming by the Gulf from New Orleans. It is stated that "with the exception of two regiments, one from Georgia and one from Alabama, and a battalion raised in and near Baltimore, the troops were all from the Mississippi Valley—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana."

Justly distrustful of the legality of General Gaines's requisition, the governor of Tennessee, Aaron V. Brown, a political and personal friend of Polk, merely issued a proclamation calling upon the citizens to be ready in case a summons from the War Department should come. May 16 this official requisition was issued from Washington, and obedient to it, Governor Brown called for the enlistment in Tennessee of three regiments, one of cavalry and two of infantry, to serve for twelve months unless sooner discharged. The total number of men desired was about three thousand; more than thirty thousand volunteered. The Union and Planters' Banks advanced the funds necessary for financing the mustering in of the troops. Because of the great numbers a choice had to be made by election, and the successful competitors were ordered to rendezvous at Camp Taylor near Nashville. By June 3 twelve companies had been mustered in and were organized into one regiment. Thus was established the First Regiment of Tennessee Volunteers. The field officers were then chosen by election.

At this point we leave the story to Colonel Campbell's own words. In the foot-notes, however, it will be attempted to add a few necessary explanations and to indicate the correct spelling of persons and places. For assistance in the

latter regard the editor is under great obligations to Dr. Justin H. Smith, of Boston, Massachusetts, who has shared with the MAGAZINE the expense of copying these letters. General accounts of the Mexican War are readily accessible in the histories of Schouler and McMaster, and a more detailed narrative in the second volume of Mr. G. L. Rives's work, *The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848* (New York, 1913.) Appended to the latter is a considerable bibliography in which will be found the titles of most of the older works upon the Mexican War, such for example as that of Ripley. Not listed by Rives, but of some interest as describing closely the Monterey Campaign, is a little book by T. B. Thorpe, *Our Army at Monterey*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1847). Besides this another work deserves special mention. In the *Nashville Union*, in 1846 and 1847, was published a series of letters or articles entitled *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico; by a Member of "The Bloody First."* These sketches with an historical introduction were republished in book form (Nashville, 1849). No author's name appears upon the title page, but the preface is signed by J. B. Robinson. This is apparently a misprint, for it is likely that the author was J. B. Robertson. The writer was one of the soldiers in Colonel Campbell's regiment, and the book covers about the same period as the *Letters*. From it has been taken in part our account of the organization of the First Tennessee Regiment.

With the following exceptions the letters are reproduced as Colonel Campbell wrote them: (1) The abbreviation "&", used consistently by Colonel Campbell, has in every case been expanded to "and;" (2) omissions of punctuation obviously due to haste or carelessness have been supplied; (3) except in the first letter the usual words of farewell have been omitted; (4) a few purely personal allusions have been omitted, the omission being indicated in every case by the usual sign.

ST. GEORGE L. SIOUSSAT.

Wm. B. Campbell to Governor David Campbell.

1.

NASHVILLE, June 4, 1846.

I write you a few lines in haste today that you may know that I was on yesterday elected the Col. Commandant of the 1st Regt. Ten.² Volunteers. It is a noble command being composed of 12 companies of about 90 men each, each company having 80 privates. I shall be off myself with the remainder of the command on the morning of the 6th inst. to report to Genl. Gaines at New Orleans. I left home on Saturday last and did not then believe that I would be elected the Col., and my wife will be in deep affliction when she is informed that she will not see me again for twelve months. Her health is not very good and I have great uneasiness for her, but I could not get out of this business with honor, and must now trust in a kind providence for the protection and support of my dear wife and dear children. I shall expect to hear from you often and particularly on the subject of my duties as Col., the etiquette, etc., of the army. Do write often to my wife, for she is now nearly heart-broken and will need all the consolation and comfort your letters always give. The old political companies were those called for by the Govr. and it so happlened that 3-4 of those in my Regt are democratic officers, but there is a majority of 200 Democrats of the rank and file, yet I beat a Major Genl. and a Democrat 169 votes. So you see I out ran the Whig strength. I will in a hour take quarters with my Regt. from which I expect not to be separated until we end the service. James Campbell is in good health. Present my truest affection to my dear Aunt and believe me to be your affectionate and devoted nephew.

2. STEAMBOAT TENNESSEE, 50 MILES ABOVE MEMPHIS, June 8, 1846.

I am now on my way to the Rio Grande and have with me five companies of my Regiment, the other seven having gone on ahead. I will join them on Saturday in New Orleans. The boat will touch at Memphis and I will write you a few lines to keep you advised of my whereabouts and condition. All my affairs are moving on very well and I think I shall have a very fine Regiment when I get to Matamoras.³ I go directly on to Genl. Taylor's camp and shall remain no longer in New Orleans than the transports can be had, which I hope will be ready on my arrival there. I have now such a crowd and so much confusion yet that I cannot write much now. My men seem willing to obey and to be governed and all are getting on well. I will write you from New Orleans. Direct your letters to me at New Orleans to the care of Messrs. Allison, Allen and Co., who will forward them to me.

3.

NEW ORLEANS, June 14, 1846.

I have just time to write you a word or two to let you know that I arrived here yesterday and have my Regiment of 43 officers and 1,000 non-commissioned officers and privates, encamped in the lower part of this city. I have transports engaged and shall be off on to-morrow or the next day with the whole force for Point Isabel. We have fine weather and but little sickness amongst the men. My own health is very fine and I have great confidence that I shall stand the campaign well. If we

²Tennessee.³Matamoros; but Colonel Campbell's spelling was widely used in contemporary American publications.