AN UNTOLD INCIDENT OF McCLELLAN'S PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN

C. Rosser James

"SOMEONE played traitor to the Union cause and revealed to General Joseph E. Johnston, the Confederate General in command at Yorktown, Virginia, the information that General McClellan, commanding the Union army, would begin his attack on Tuesday morning. This information caused General Johnston to evacuate the town on the preceding Saturday night, which movement was a surprise to General McClellan."

Sometime ago I read this statement in a history written by a northern writer and it set me to thinking about this event in our nation's history. I happen to know a great deal about the truth of this affair. Before I reveal this knowledge I think it will be interesting to give a description of some of the occurrences that caused me to acquire this knowledge.

I was born and reared about five miles east of Yorktown. Between my father's home and York River there was a large farm of 640 acres. From the gate on the main road to the York River it was a measured mile in a straight line. This farm was owned by the Farinholt family. There were five sons, Richard, Benjamin, William, Lee and Wyatt. Their father had died in the early spring of 1857. He owned a large number of slaves and left the farm to his children in splendid condition. Four of these sons joined the Confederate army. Richard was too old to do this, so he was left in charge of the farm and the slaves when the War commenced.

A few days before General McClellan marched his army from Fortress Monroe on the way to Richmond, Mr. Farinholt and my father went to West Point, Virginia, on a business trip. This left Mrs. Farinholt and a niece in charge of her home and my mother and two children in charge of hers, with no one but the slaves in either case. General McClellan marched up the Peninsula on Thursday and the battle of Yorktown was fought on Friday. It was a

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lovely day and I stood by my mother's side in our front door and listened to the cannons' roar. We could not hear the small arms. There were only a few thousand Confederates within the fort, but they made such a gallant resistance that General McClellan decided to retire until more of his army arrived. The armies were reasonably quiet on Saturday, but it was a day of great suspense to the people of York county.

The Confederates had established a picket station on the Chesapeake Bay shore about four miles east of our home. The two pickets stationed there did not hear of the battle until Saturday night. General McClellan then had his lines established across the Peninsula from the York River to the James River. It was impossible to break through, so these pickets decided to try to reach Yorktown by crossing Wormley's Creek, which bounded the Farinholt farm and the west, and passing up the river shore—sheltered by the bluffs from being seen by the enemy.

Early on Sunday morning they ran their horses by our home and turned down the long lane that led to the Farinholt home. They left their saddles with Mrs. Farinholt, swam their horses across the creek and started up the river shore to Yorktown. I have never known whether or not they reached their destination. A few minutes after they passed our gate, just as we finished breakfast, Rachel, our colored cook, came in, very much excited, and said, "Oh! Miss Ann, the funniest thing you ever did see is taking place outdoors. The full moon is rising in the northwest." Mother said, "Rachel, you have gone crazy. The full moon cannot rise anywhere except in the east." "I cannot help it," Rachel said, "if you do not believe it, just come out in the yard." So we rushed to the front door and looked toward Yorktown. About half way a balloon was in the air. It was painted yellow and appeared to be about the size of the full moon and about as high above the horizon as the moon would be one hour and a half after rising. It was the first ever seen in our county. Mother said, "Rachel, that is not the full moon, it is a balloon."

The Confederates had built a large fort about four hundred yards above our home. Mother and I and Rachel and her children walked to the fort and stood on the parapet where we could get a good view of the balloon.

Mother said, "Rachel, the Yankees will be here before 10 o'clock." "Why do you think so?" says Rachel. "Because that man up there is looking down at us with a spy glass and I can almost
see the whites of his eyes,” said mother. After looking awhile we went home.

About 10 o’clock one of the slave boys came running in and said, “A Yankee is coming to the house.” All that kept me from running to the woods was I could not find my hat. Mother sent me above stairs and I shut the door and lay down on the floor. Mother met the soldier at the door and asked him from whence he came. “From Michigan, madam.” “Then I suppose you are one of them we call Yankees.” “Yes, I guess you are right,” said he. Then he said, “A man went up in the balloon this morning and he thought he saw soldiers walking on the walls of the fort close by.” “They were myself and son and these slaves you see. There are no Confederate soldiers below Yorktown,” said mother.

He thanked her and went away to join his comrades who had remained at the fort.

That afternoon eight soldiers came and walked about our yard. They were very hungry, as the wagon trains had not brought sufficient food for the army. Rachel had a nice ham hanging above the room in which she lived. The soldiers saw the ham and one of them said, “Let us take that ham.” But one, a gentleman, said, “No, that is the only ham the old colored woman has. We must not trouble that.”

Our year’s supply of bacon was in a room of that house but neither Rachel nor her children told these soldiers about this fact. I write this to give them credit for their loyalty to us. That night after dark they brought this bacon into our dwelling and hid it beneath our beds and wherever they could find a good hiding place. About sunset a finely dressed officer on a splendid looking horse rode up to our door. Mother met him. He asked her name. She told him and asked his. He answered, “I am Major H. A. Barnum of General McClellan’s staff. I have called to see if you can let me have some supper.” Mother told him supper was over but she would do the best she could for him, so he dismounted, tied his horse and, after asking the slaves some questions, came in and was invited to take a seat. Mother called Rachel and told her to prepare supper for the major.

I had been hiding under the teaster bed, but after hearing him talk I lost my fear and crawled out where I could see him. He was a fine looking man. In a little while supper was served and when he had finished eating he said, “Mrs. James, I am going to do something I never thought I would do. I belong to an officers’ mess
and none of us has had anything to eat for 36 hours. Would you
care to wrap the remainder of this food and let me take it to camp?"
"Certainly I will," said mother. When he was about to leave, mother
said, "Major, I have tried to do the best I can for you. I would
like to know if you can help me. My husband is away and I am
here alone with my children and these slaves. This afternoon eight
of your men were here. It seemed to me they were on a marauding
expedition. Can you send me a guard to protect us?" The major
replied, "Everything is in a state of confusion at the camp. I cannot
send you a guard before Thursday, but I will see that you have one
then." He took from his pocket his photograph and gave it to
mother, saying, "If any of our soldiers come here to disturb you,
show them this picture. Perhaps it may protect you some." Mother
thanked him and he returned to camp. His picture was on one side
of the card and on the other was written, "Major H. A. Barnum,
17th New York Volunteers." We kept that picture many years.

The next day two soldiers came into the yard and went to the
door of the store house and with a bunch of keys tried to unfasten
the lock. Mother watched them awhile and then went out, showed
them the photograph and asked them if they knew that man. They
looked at the picture and said, "Yes, that is Major Barnum of
General McClellan's staff." Then one said to the other that they
would better go. And soon they left.

The guards came Thursday morning. They were from Rochester,
New York, one named Kellogg and the other Stearns. They pro-
tected us until the army moved on to Richmond. We soon found
out that they were gentlemen. We invited them to sleep in our
home and eat at our table. I can never forget their kindness in
protecting us and our property in those trying days.

A few days after the guards came, one morning about 10 o'clock,
one of the slave boys came to the door and said in great excitement,
"De balloon is flyin' away." We went out to look and about one
mile west of our home, high in the air, the balloon was drifting
southeast with a man sitting quietly in the apartment underneath
with the long ropes dangling in the breeze. That man was Major
General Fitzjohn Porter. He had gone up in the balloon to try to
see what was going on inside the fort at Yorktown.

The Albemarle Virginia Artillery that had garrisoned the fort
close to our house during the autumn of 1861 was then at Yorktown.
They began firing at the balloon and acquired the range so quickly
the Union soldiers dared not take the time to pull it down. They
cut the ropes and let it drift away before the northwest wind. Near the boundary of Elizabeth City county, the ropes caught in some trees and the balloon came down and General Porter was unhurt.

General McClellan took weeks to prepare for the battle which he expected to fight at Yorktown. He built a large mortar battery at the mouth of Wormley's Creek close to the Farinholt home. (A photograph of this can be seen in Lawson's Illustrated History.) He moved some of his army and a large part of his supplies in front of our home. These had been landed at Belvin's Point on Chisman's Creek. He had two roads made through our farm. I remember he rode up to our gate to see if our home was in the line of fire. We were all very glad when he decided it was not necessary for us to move. But he ordered Mrs. Farinholt and her niece to move and mother had to take them into our home and let them stay until Yorktown was evacuated.

During this time Union officers would come to inspect the work being done on the battery and on the roads. They would come into our home and chat about the War and other matters. I remember well when General Couch paid us a visit. Major Barnum would call sometimes to inspect the guards. We were always glad to see him because he had done so much for us.

Thursday before General Johnston left Yorktown, mother invited Major Barnum and another officer to take supper with us. Mrs. Farinholt presided and mother waited on the guests. I was standing by on the lookout, I suppose, to see if there would be any chicken left. I remember so well that Major Barnum, while eating, looked at mother and said, "Mrs. James, I never have been as sad as I am today." "Why? What troubles you?" He replied, "My wife and children are in Washington and the battle at Yorktown will commence next Tuesday morning. I would give all I am worth just to see them before the fight begins." Mother said, "Major, I do not think you need to worry about that. It is my opinion that you will never have to fire a shot at Yorktown." He looked up into her face and said, "You make me think you are a spy." She said, "No, I am not a spy but that is my deliberate opinion." And then he said, "I shall never see you again after tonight, but I shall always think you are a prophetess or the daughter of a prophet if I march into Yorktown without firing a gun." After supper he rode away and we never saw him again.

The following Saturday night General Johnston marched his army away from Yorktown. General McClellan gave to Major
Barnum the post of honor and he marched through the gate at the head of "The Seventh" New York Volunteers. Some of them were blown up by torpedoes that had been planted in the street but he was not hurt.

Now, having given this record of facts, I wish to say that Major Barnum was not a traitor. He was too grand a man for that. When he gave the time set for the battle he thought he was with true friends, and he was, so far as our family was concerned, but he forgot about Mrs. Farinholt. She was an ardent friend of the Confederacy. She, doubtless, did not feel under any obligation to keep this information about the time of the battle a secret.

"How did she succeed in getting this information to General Johnston?" is an important question. I cannot speak positively, but my impression is the two pickets who left their saddles with her also gave her their signal code. I remember that about once a week one of the slave boys on her farm (they were not moved) would come and have a long private talk with Mrs. Farinholt. I think she had instructed him how to send and receive messages. The bend in the river gave a clear line of vision. My mother may have known of this but, of course, she would not tell me, a boy not quite seven years old. This view is strengthened by the fact that a few days after my father and Mr. Farinholt returned from West Point, where they had been detained during the siege of Yorktown, Mr. Farinholt was arrested and taken to the Union camp to be tried by court-martial as a spy. When brought before this tribunal he told the officers to send and bring Mr. Wesley James; that he could prove by him that they had been in West Point the whole time and therefore he could not have been a spy. They sent soldiers for my father and carried him before the court-martial. He testified that Mr. Farinholt had been with him all the time at West Point. This testimony cleared Mr. Farinholt at once.

I have never known exactly why suspicion rested upon Mr. Farinholt. It is entirely probable that some of the slaves at the Farinholt farm found out what the boy had been doing and talked about it until the Union soldiers heard the news.

Many years have passed since I stood by that supper table and heard Major Barnum divulge that secret, but I have never thought he was a traitor. I have always cherished his memory. He loved his family so well that thinking of them caused him to make this "slip of the tongue." He rose to the rank of Major General in the
Union army before the close of the War. After the War he was Harbormaster of New York City for thirty years.

I am the only one of that company at the supper table now alive. If he has any relatives now living I would like for them to know that down here in Virginia there is one who still cherishes the memory of a true friend who was a Christian gentleman as well as a great soldier.

N.B. There may have been others who carried the information to General Johnston, but I have never heard of them and I have given the facts as I know them.

C. R. J.