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A MASSACHUSETTS MECHANIC IN FLORIDA  
AND MEXICO - 1847

by ARTHUR W. THOMPSON

The growing tension between the United States and Mexico during the early part of 1846 found Florida singularly unenthusiastic for war. For one thing, she had only achieved statehood the year before. Then, too, she still felt the adverse impact not only of the 1837-43 depression, but also - more important - the devastation of the Seminole War. <sup>1</sup> Despite these feelings, when Congress actually declared war on May 13, 1846, there was general support for the cause throughout the state. Ultimately, five Florida companies were called into service and three saw action in Mexico. <sup>2</sup>

So far as the nation as a whole was concerned, Florida was of significance to the war effort mainly because of the important Navy Yard at Pensacola. The naval installation had been established there in 1825. It was not until 1837, however, that an extensive program of construction was undertaken with the erection of additional buildings, a floating drydock, and facilities for docking, repairing and building ships. During the early 1840's, appropriations for the Pensacola station declined; but the onset of the Mexican crisis brought a revival of activity in 1846 because, despite the fact that the town was about nine hundred miles from Vera Cruz, it was the nearest station for provisions and supplies.

Though hardly what one would call today a thriving metropolis, Pensacola was still one of the largest communities in Florida at the time. Its population was not very large; indeed, according to the 1845 census, the entire county of Escambia

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1. T. Frederick Davis, "Florida's Part in the War with Mexico," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XX (January, 1942), 235.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 237; Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York, 1919), I, 537, II, 364-65.

had only 2,088 white residents.<sup>3</sup> The influx of sailors and workmen at the Navy Yard and of soldiers at Fort Pickens temporarily swelled the town's population. After normal working hours, there was little in the way of any social life for the men. As a result, groups of individuals could be seen everywhere - drinking, smoking, singing, joking and fighting; fishing parties were organized and, from time to time, hardier souls went after the dreaded shark.<sup>4</sup>

Among those who reached Pensacola in February 1847 was Alfred N. Proctor, a mechanic from Boston, Massachusetts. A brief record of his stay in Florida, together with some of his experiences while in Mexico, are revealed in the following letters which he wrote to his brother and a friend in Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup>

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Navy Yard Pensacola April 11th 1847  
Sunday

Dear Brother

It is with pleasure that I sit down to write you a few lines in answer to yours which I recd on the 7th. Although it is but a few days since I wrote, yet as I am in want of some things I thought I would scribble a few lines. I want you to go to my trunk at Mrs Severance and look in the little trunk and take out the receipt for making fireworks. I am pretty confident that it is there although not sure, but if not, look the trunk over

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3. Dorothy Dodd, "Florida's Population in 1845," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIV (July, 1945), 29; Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Florida in the Union" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1951), p. 161.
  4. *The Mexican War, by an English Soldier, Comprising Incidents and Adventures in the United States and Mexico with the American Army* (New York, 1860), p. 88-89, 92-93, 97.
  5. The letters reproduced here are from the manuscript collection in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida. For the sake of clarity, occasional changes have been made in punctuation and spelling. The editor wishes to thank Dr. Lyle N. McAlister, a specialist in Mexican history, for his assistance in the reading and identification of certain references in the following letters.

from top to bottom, and if you do not find it then look in the leather trunk that I left in the store, for I want it very much. I suppose that you have got the news long before this of the capture of Vera Cruz.<sup>6</sup> We recd the news on the Morn of the 3rd of April from the Steamer Princeton.<sup>7</sup> She came up the harbour in fine style with flags flying, guns firing, &&cc. She was only four days coming from that place. We had a grand illumination on that evening, every house was bright with candles and there were several large bon fires lighted, and every gun that could be raised was cracked off in honor of the victory. I had three guns to take care of, and the latter part of the eve we each of us took a gun, formed a company of about 20 (the most of which had double barrel guns) and marched around to the different houses and gave them a salute. We kept it till 10 and half past. They then went to a house, raised a fiddler and danced till broad day light, although Saturday night; I went to bed at 11 oclock or eleven to be better understood as there was to[o] much liquor used for me. On Monday they had another grand illumination, and having found out that I knew how to make fire works, they came to me to make some rockets. I told them I would undertake it although I had not time enough to make but half a doz or so. I made my cases and mixed my composition but as I had no receipt to go by, I did not succeed in making my rockets go but did make some wheels and used them the next night. I want now that you should copy my receipts off and send them on to me. Copy

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6. On November 7, 1846, Senator Thomas Hart Benton urged President James K. Polk to adopt a bolder strategy in prosecuting the war with Mexico. The unfavorable Congressional returns of that month, Hart insisted, called for more immediate action. He proposed the capture of Vera Cruz, and later of Mexico City itself. In this he was supported by General Winfield Scott. By November 14th, after repeated pressure, Polk decided on the capture of Vera Cruz. By the following March, Scott landed near the town and on March 29, 1847, Vera Cruz was occupied by American forces.
7. "The *Princeton* was the earliest naval steam propeller," and during March 1847 assisted in the bombardment and landing of troops at Vera Cruz; Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 25-26, 441.

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# PENSACOLA.

April 3, 1847.

✪ We are requested to say that M. Carrune declines running for the Mayorality.

Preparations are making by our patriotic citizens for another grand illumination, to-night, in honor of the brilliant achievement of our gallant Army and Navy at Vera Cruz. The excitement caused by the glorious news brought by the *Princeton* is very properly at high ebb.



## Glorious News!

**AMERICAN ARMS AGAIN VICTORIOUS!!**

**San Juan D'Ulloa is ours!!!**

The U. S. war steamer *Princeton*, bearing the broad pennant of Commodore Conner, arrived at this port this morning, and came to anchor off our wharf, at half-past nine o'clock—exchanging salutes with the Navy Yard as she passed. The *Princeton* sailed from Vera Cruz on the 29th ultimo, and brings the glorious intelligence of the reduction of that city with the Castle of San Juan D'Ulloa, and their entire, unconditional surrender to our arms.

We are indebted to one of the officers of the *P.* for the following summary of the proceedings in this most brilliant a-

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From *Pensacola Gazette*, April 3, 1847

them correct and as they are, and get all further information you can, for I intend to have a grand display at some future day. I wish you would sell my type to Thomas Truworthy at the most that he will give for they will be good for nothing bye and bye. Also tell him that there is no chance of doing anything in a [restaurant?] here because there is but a few people that come here and the place is very small. I should like to see him very much. Mr Mayhen is well and sends his respts to Truworthy. I am glad to hear that John is getting better and hope he will get well soon. Mr. Mayhen is coming on in July next. About the first he will make some arrangements about getting watchmen for the Yard. . . <sup>8</sup> You may sell my lathe as the man that talked of buying it has backed out. He offered me 65 dollars for it delivered here. He thinks now of going away. Tell father that I would like to have a letter from him, and tell Bill to write me and write more distinct so that I can read it. We have very warm weather here, the mercury stands at 85 in the shade and tis pretty warm working I tell you. Mulberry's are ripe. Bela's potatoes are about 2 ft high and in full blossom. Give my best to Culln Brown, Miss Swallow, Denton Scott and the rest of my girls. I wish you would write oftener, do not wait until I write, but write two to my one, and always write as soon as you receive mine, for every two or three days I run to my dates of letters and count the days that have passed since I wrote and calculate when I shall receive one in return, as regular as you would calculate on a setting hen . . . <sup>9</sup> I am all run out for news and must close. My love to Nicholson [?] &c

from your ever affectionate brother

ALFRED N. PROCTOR

I have just recd yours of the 1st of April. It gives me great

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8. Original letter torn at this point.

9. Original letter torn at this point.

pleasure I assure you to receive them and to find your letters so well filled. Keep on brother and write often. I will not send anything on yet until I hear more about how you get along in raising the rest but will send it is as soon as they succeed in raising the rest, positively. I hope the old bill will be settled now that it is agitated, and never be again brought before the company. I am willing to do my part whatever it is. . . . Dear brother I am troubled with the canker in the mouth the same as you. I have not been without two days since I have been here. Take sulphur and cream tarter every three days, then jump three days. Take it before eating in the morning with molasses, three tea spoonfulls and you will find it beneficial. Try it now.

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Pensacola Navy Yard June 9th 1847

Dear Brother

Although I dont care anything about it, yet I feel as if you would expect something from me by this time, so I will scribble a few lines to let you know that I think of you, if I dont of the rest. I have received one or two from you since I wrote you and I have thought I would not write again for some months, but as circumstances are I attempt it once more. We are well here and I hope will continue so. There are but one or two cases of fever here now. The U.S. Ship Relief left here for Vera Cruz a few days ago.<sup>10</sup> The Schooner Flint arrived day before yesterday from Norfolk.<sup>11</sup> She is a beautiful little craft; leaves tomorrow for Vera Cruz. We have plenty of news from the seat of war all the time. The Massachusetts Reg. leave for Monterey in a few days. I suppose you have heard of Sen

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10. The advent of the yellow fever season always posed, at this time, a problem for those engaged in military planning. Frequently, the fever proved to be more deadly than enemy ammunition.

11. The schooner *Flint* was attached to the Home Squadron of the United States Navy under Commodore David Conner. During the better part of that year, the *Flint* spent considerable time in the vicinity of both Vera Cruz and Pensacola; Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 197.

Cushing[’s] accident. He was walking in the front Plaza with a lady and fell off the end into a ditch and broke his ankle - he is recovering fast.<sup>12</sup> There has been a small number of desertions since their arrival.<sup>13</sup> Three men ran away the other day and after they had crossed the River and proceeded a short distance down the River, they were attacked by a party of Comanche Indians and all three murdered.<sup>14</sup> So much for proving traitors to their country. How I wish I was with them. The Lord knows that I would never leave them (the Regiment) as long as I drew the breath of life. I recd your double and very interesting letter a few days ago, 27th I think. You seem to indulge in a long train of imaginations and vain thoughts. I could not help laughing through the whole of it, but as I disagree with you on the subject I will say no more about it. We were paid off last Wednesday in hard coin silver.<sup>15</sup> It would have done you good to have seen the men toteing it along on their shoulders with as much load as they could stagger under, for you know two or three hundred dollars in silver weighs a great deal. We have not been paid since the 15th of March and we had quite a pile. I had some fine fun this morning with

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12. Caleb C. Cushing, Massachusetts Congressional Representative, served as colonel of a Massachusetts regiment and was appointed brigadier general by President Polk on April 14, 1847. He later led a brigade.
  13. Of the approximately 90,000 regular army and volunteer troops who served during the Mexican War, some 6,750 deserted; Smith, *op. cit.*, I, 160, 262.
  14. The writer is probably in error as there were no Comanche Indians in the Pensacola area at this time. Since there were, however, a number of different Indian groups in that region, it is almost impossible to identify the particular group referred to.
  15. The national government had considerable difficulty in raising money to finance the Mexican War. This was aggravated by the absence of a national banking system between 1836 and 1863. The use of "hard coin silver" was prompted by a number of reasons, among them the fact that paper money depreciated too quickly. The Secretary of the Treasury in his report for 1847 indicated that ". . . the credit of the government was in truth enhanced by receiving and disbursing nothing but coin; thus placing all its transactions upon a basis more sound and entitled to higher credit than when it held no specie, had no money in its possession, and none even in the banks to pay its creditors but bank paper." Davis R. Dewey, *Financial History of the United States* (New York, 1907), p. 256; Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 258-60.



an alligator. He was quite small, not more than 3 1/2 ft long but quite smart. He was caught by a Nigger and brought before our house. I took hold of his tail and was pulling him a little when he turned very suddenly around and made a snap at my hand. I let go and just cleared him and thats all. I took particular care not to approach too near his honor after that, but let a stick play with him for a long time. They are very ugly looking animals. I tell you his mouth looks like your hand when you clap the wrist together and open it. I have no more news except that it is hot as mustard here. I saw the mercury up to 95 in the shade the other day. You may write back or not as you like but I think you had better wait till you hear from me again. Love to all inquiring friends

from your

true brother

ALFRED N. PROCTOR

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Navy Yard Pensacola Dec 19 1847

Friend Stevens

Although I have not written you before, I hope you will not think it is because I have not thought of you, for I have often had you in my mind, but have had so many to write to, that I have not taken a pen in hand to scribble a few lines to you until now; which I hope may be acceptable. I will commence back to my arrival at this place from Charleston. I arrived on 25 of Feb and went to work on the first day of March. I worked until the 3d of June when I left for Mexico.<sup>16</sup> I believe I was very well liked in the Yard by every body except the master blacksmith under whose immediate direction I worked. He is a man of very limited abilities (and dont know enough to

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16. There is an obvious discrepancy between the previous letter, dated June 9, 1847, and this statement of departure on June 3rd. Alfred Proctor's familiarity with obscure Mexican towns as well as the feasibility of his itinerary probably indicates a lapse of memory rather than his having concocted the entire story for the benefit of friend Stevens.

go in when it rains) in mechanical point of view, but I will say no more of him except that he was jealous and tried his best to get me out of the Yard. How he succeeded you will see soon. Before I left I went to the Commodore to see if he was satisfied with me and would give me work again if I should return. He told me yes and would give me work when I came back if my place was not filled, so I started on the 4th of June. I went in five days to Mexico from New Orleans. I landed at the splendid town of Bag Day [?]; at the mouth of the Rio Grande.<sup>17</sup> I immediately left for Matamoros where I arrived in two days. Judge of my disappointment on arriving there to find that the Mass Regiment had been gone 10 or 12 days. I did not know what to [do], for I had received a letter from Capt Walsh of Company I just before I left stating that they were to stop there a long time in garrison, but I very quick made up my mind to follow on and catch them. Therefore I took up line of march for Monterey where I learned they were bound. On the night after leaving Matamoros I went to a fandango, which was the greatest place I ever saw.<sup>18</sup> There were about 100 Mexicans, men and women, and but 5 of us Yankees to stand them, but I had a good six barrel revolver well loaded and capped and I had no great fear although they might have ate us if they had been disposed, but they were fortunately very peaceable, thinking perhaps that it was better to make money off of us and others, rather than to kill us and run the chance of being butchered themselves. After enjoying myself by seeing the dancing by the Senoritas and some of our crowd until about two oclock, I went back to the boat, and turned in. But that night played the devil with me, for I was taken down with the Mexican or bilous fever the

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17. Present atlases do not indicate any evidence of such a town. An 1847 map reveals a Burita and a Boca Chica in the vicinity of the mouth of the Rio Grande, but none at the mouth itself.

18. Fandango-a Mexican dance.

next day, and was obliged to keep my berth until I arrived at Camargo about 4,00 (?)<sup>19</sup> miles up the [Rio Grande] River where I went to the hospital. I thought it was a very poor beginning on going into a strange country but I had to bear it after being sick about 14 days. I left the hospital the very day that the fever left me, and tried to see if I could get a chance to get on to Monterey but I found there was no train to leave for the next 14 days to come which was very dark to me. But getting on a boat we tried to get to Mier but the water was too low so we had to give that up. Having been greatly reduced in flesh and strength by my sickness and still being under the effects of the severe headache, I began to think of returning to *Amerika*. In three or four days I took a train through the inland country for Reynosa and although still sick I enjoyed myself much. If I had room I would give you a full account of it but I will defer it until some other time (suffice it to say I arrived in New Orleans after being gone two months, satisfied with seeing the elephants track for the present). While I was gone Mr Fell reported to the Commodore that I was no mechanic and could do nothing but a little brass filling, &c, consequently when I returned I was refused work by the Commodore. It being then very sickly in N[ew] Orleans I thought best to remain here through the sickly season. On the last of Oct the Civil Engineer had a falling out with the Comdt of the Yard and having seen some of my work, engaged me to put an engine in the Yard, he being authorized by the Government to employ his own help. I took hope and put it up in first rate shape and set it running. He was very much pleased with my success, and there being another engine under his charge on a new dredge boat which was built since I came here, he asked me if I thought I could run it. I told him yes. He had

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19. The distance to Camargo is actually about one hundred and twenty five miles.

me get up steam and run her half a day. I did it and have run both engines once a week for the last two months. He has now recommended me to the Department as head engineer of his department. He has gone on to Washington and I expect him in three or four weeks. As soon as he returns we are to commence on the permanent wharf and dock So you see how much Mr Fell has made by his opposition to me. And in a short time he will have to leave the premises altogether for some better man from the North I hope He being born and brought up here, he hates a Northern man worse than the devil. We have received a splendid lathe from the North, the same pattern of the double-lathe in your shop. It is not put up yet and will not be until our new shop is finished which is now going up. We are to have a fine steam engine to drive the machinery as we have nothing but Nigger power.<sup>20</sup> The new shop is 280 ft long and 50 or 60 ft wide. At some further day there will be a great deal of work done at this place. I am very sorry to hear through my dear brother that there is some trouble with my friend Hiram Howard in relation to a pistol which I received from him as a token of friendship. He spoke to me of making me a present of it one night at the Melodeon at my brothers concert and said he had a fine pistol to give me if I would accept of it as I would probably have good use of it in Mexico as I then was full determined to go with the Regiment. The next night I saw him he had it and gave it to me wishing me to keep his name secret. I told him I would not learning that it came from Uncle Sam. I made no secret of showing the pistol to everyone of my acquaintance but with held the name. I am very sorry on his account be-

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20. During the ante bellum era, white labor in Florida was exceedingly scarce. Negro slaves were used in the Navy Yard as mechanics, joiners and for the construction of docks; Arthur W. Thompson, "Political Nativism in Florida, 1848-1860: A Phase of Antiseccessionism," *Journal of Southern History*, XV (February, 1949), 54; J. E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary* (New York, 1953), I, 342.

cause I think him my friend and I think that he was prompted to it by the fact that I was going to Mexico in the service of Uncle Sam and thought it no harm. I really feel bad about it for if I had known the fact I never would have received it. It is now about time to close and I will say that I expect to be at home next May or first of June. I may return in the fall and I may stop in the North altogether. I hope you will send me an answer to this as soon as you get this. I will direct this to the care of Mr. Allen in case that you should be gone from the yard that he may forward it to you. My best respects to him and Mr Craig, &c, &c,      Your friend

ALFRED N PROCTOR