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Documents and Notes: Civil War Letters

In the Aftermath of the Battle of Olustee: A Beecher's Surprise Visit to Florida

By Sarah Whitmer Foster and John T. Foster, Jr.

Isabella Beecher Hooker spent March 12-14, 1864, visiting senior army officers in Jacksonville. The timing was auspicious, given that her visit came just weeks after the only significant Civil War battle in Florida. The Federal defeat at Olustee had occurred on February 20. Moreover, she had access to regimental and brigade commanders through her brother, James C. Beecher, and her Hartford friend and neighbor, Joseph R. Hawley.¹ At the end of her visit Isabella wrote to her husband offering observations about the battle and the Federal officer who led Northern troops in this engagement. The source of her information about General Truman Seymour, significantly, was the general's own cousin, Caroline Seymour Severance.²

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1. Joseph R. Hawley and his wife, Harriet Foote Hawley, lived in the same small community, Nook Farm, that Isabella and John Hooker established in West Hartford. The residents of the neighborhood eventually included Harriet Beecher Stowe and Samuel Clemens. Kenneth R. Andrews, *Nook Farm: Mark Twain's Hartford Circle* (Cambridge, 1950), 2. Before Olustee, General Truman Seymour organized a number of brigades. Joseph Hawley commanded one of these that included three regiments: the 7th Connecticut, 7th New Hampshire, and the 8th United States Colored Infantry. James Beecher's 1st North Carolina Volunteers, aka 35th United States Colored Infantry, was like the famous Massachusetts 54th under the leadership of James Montgomery.

Isabella Beecher Hooker is a historical figure in her own right. Of Lyman Beecher's children, several earned enduring fame. Among them were Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Henry Ward Beecher, known for his remarkable ministry at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York. Of the remaining children, two daughters received widespread recognition in their lifetime. The eldest, Catharine, pioneered in the education of women and the youngest, Isabella, became a national figure in the women's rights movement.³

In the period after the Civil War the most famous siblings in the Beecher family appeared in Florida. Foremost, of course, was Harriet Beecher Stowe who purchased an orange grove and cottage in Mandarin, Florida, in 1867. She wintered there until her husband's health collapsed in 1884. Early in this period, the late 1860s, she joined a group of Yankee strangers in the Jacksonville area and began promoting the development of modern Florida. Stowe wrote sixteen articles about the state that appeared in New York newspapers. She then, in turn, selected many of them for her book, *Palmetto Leaves*, before writing an additional sixteen articles.⁴ Henry Ward Beecher's wife, Eunice, also wrote a book about Florida. She and her famous husband wintered in the state, especially in the last years of their lives.⁵

The origins of the Beechers' involvement in Florida are less well known. Mary Graff's *Mandarin on the St. Johns* (1953) traced the beginning of Harriet Beecher Stowe's connections to the state to the period after the Civil War. More recently, the book, *Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: the Transformation of Florida* (1999), notes that the youngest of Lyman Beecher's children, James C. Beecher, followed his regiment to Florida, arriving in the state on March 11, 1864. His First North Carolina Colored Volunteers, or the 35th U.S. Colored Infantry, was

2. Caroline Seymour Severance was well-known in feminist circles and converted Isabella Beecher Hooker to the views held by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In an autobiography, Isabella wrote, "Mrs. Caroline Severance...unfolded to me the whole philosophy of the suffrage movement." *Connecticut Magazine* 9 (May 1905).
3. "Lyman's daughters were even more remarkable. Catharine Beecher was a pioneering educator of women and author of more than a dozen books. Isabella Beecher Hooker was a women's rights activist. But the celebrity of his daughter Harriet outstripped them all. "Harriet Beecher Stowe was the most famous woman in the English-speaking world, having sold millions of copies of her novels in dozens of languages." Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York, 2006), 12.
4. John T. Foster, Jr., and Sarah Whitmer Foster, *Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: The Transformation of Florida* (Gainesville, 1999), 88-97.
5. *Ibid.*, 110-111.

ordered to Florida while he was on leave. Catching up with his unit after the Battle of Olustee, James found himself with few duties. Making the most of the next seven months in the state, James Beecher brought his fiancée to Jacksonville where they were married in July 1864. Olav Thulesius in his *Harriet Beecher Stowe in Florida, 1867 to 1884*, (2001) agrees with this idea: "The person who first drew Harriet's attention to Florida was her youngest half-brother, James Beecher."⁶

More recently, the authors (2005) documented that Harriet Beecher Stowe's first cousin, Harriet Ward Foote Hawley, resided during 1863 in both Fernandina and St. Augustine. Her husband, Joseph R. Hawley, was on garrison duty as the commander of the 7th Connecticut Infantry. While in the state, Harriet Hawley wrote a series of articles about Florida that were published in the newspaper owned by her and her husband. The publication of her articles about the Civil War was very unusual at the time. According to various sources only seven other women are known to have served as journalists during the conflict.⁷

The discovery of Isabella's letter grew out of an interest in the correspondence of Harriet and Joseph Hawley. In March 1864, Joseph Hawley wrote to the manager of his family's newspaper that he was very surprised to find Isabella Hooker in Jacksonville. Or as he put it, "Imagine my astonishment at seeing Mrs. Hooker here the other day! She came Saturday, the 12th, and staid till the 14th. It was really quite refreshing to hear her voice and see the great pleasure with which she looked upon all these novel sights."⁸ Not content in expressing his amazement at her presence, he returned to the topic and offered an observation: "Fancy Col. Jim Beecher, Col. Jim Montgomery, Col. Joe Hawley and Mrs. Hooker sitting on a pleasant Sunday afternoon...in a pine wood with the camps of four negro regiments in view."⁹

In the same period, Joseph Hawley was frustrated by newspaper accounts of the Battle of Olustee. Published reports had both

6. Graff wrote, "Harriet Beecher Stowe first became interested in Florida through her son Frederick." With a desire to help him recover from alcoholism and war wounds, she rented a cotton plantation near Orange Park. Graff (Gainesville, 1984), 44. See Foster and Foster, *Beechers, Stowes*, 22; Olav Thulesius, *Harriet Beecher Stowe in Florida, 1867-1884* (Jefferson, NC, 2001), 44.
7. Sarah Whitmer Foster and John T. Foster, "Historic Notes and Documents: Harriet Ward Foote Hawley: Civil War Journalist," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 83 (Spring 2005), 448-67.
8. Joseph R. Hawley to Charles Dudley Warner, March 16, 1864. "Letters of Joseph R. Hawley: Covering the Period from 1847 to 1896," 201. This is an unpublished typed manuscript, The Connecticut Historical Society.
9. *Ibid.*, 202.

the famous Massachusetts 54th and the 35th U.S. Colored Infantry covering the withdrawal of the Federal army. Today he would be even more concerned with Robert Broadwater's recent book-length study which had the Massachusetts 54th as the "rear guard" from Lake City to Sanderson, Florida, where it was replaced by the 7th Connecticut.¹⁰ On the 16th Hawley wrote Charles Dudley Warner the editor of his and his wife's newspaper:

Don't publish the damned lie that anybody on foot but the 7th Conn. covered the entire retreat from Olustee. The "officer" who wrote the lie that the 54th Mass. and 1st Nor. Car. [North Carolina Volunteers or 35th Colored Infantry] "saved the day" and "covered the retreat" deserves to be shot. All the 15 mile march that night, all the next day, Sunday and Monday, up 2 o'clock when we were substantially back here the 7th Conn. was the regiment on foot nearest the enemy and expressly detailed to cover the rear—the mounted force accompanying or following it. Seymour did have skirmishers out—plenty of them—the 7th Conn., first in and last out. He did not use flankers. The 8th U.S. Colored was not ordered to "file to the right" and join the 7th Conn. and did not try to do so. It [the 8th] was simply whipped thoroughly by a superior force and compelled to fall back with a loss of over 300 out of about 575 and being a new regiment it could not stand that "fire of hell" any more than veterans could. It did not disgracefully break up; it was there at the close of the fight, ready for orders.¹¹

The inaccuracy of the newspaper coverage left Joseph Hawley frustrated. "The papers are so full of lies that I know that no true history of any event ever was or ever will be written—I give up in hopeless despair."¹²

For the 7th Connecticut to have been present at the beginning of the Battle of Olustee, on the south side of the Union army during part of the conflict, and to cover the retreat requires an explanation. Armed with Spencer repeating rifles it fought as many American soldiers did in World War II. Here is Hawley's account:

10. Robert P. Broadwater, *The Battle of Olustee, 1864* (Jefferson, NC, 2006), 142.

11. Hawley to Warner, 16 March 1864. "Letters of Joseph," 201.

12. *Ibid*

The 7th Connecticut suffered less in proportion ...because [it fought] 1st as skirmishers ... and according to instructions dodged from tree to tree in firing and advancing; 2nd, they kept together and when the rebels fired our way we blazed away and checked it; 3rd, I kept the line lying down nearly all the time even when it was firing, —for one can do quite as well if not better with the Spencer rifles lying down. Only one officer of the 7th Conn.—it had but 8 or 10—was hit to hurt much and he, Lt. Dempsey, was killed. “I’m going to die here.” “Let me die on my side” was all he said—the blood spurting from his breast.¹³

While Joseph Hawley was expressing his utter frustration, Isabella Beecher Hooker turned her attention to the wounded who had been abandoned during the retreat. She reported that Southern troops had killed wounded soldiers—a topic noted by historian David Coles.¹⁴ Broadwater’s recent book about Olustee describes the slaughter of black soldiers at length.¹⁵ Here is Isabella Beecher Hooker’s own statement:

If their cavalry had been worth a dime they could have distressed our retreat [from Olustee]—[It was] beyond description—as it was, we might have retreated more slowly & saved all our wounded but that we could not know [this] at the time. Dr. Marcy has suffered intensely.¹⁶ (Mrs. [Caroline] Severance saw him at Folly Island [South Carolina] & hardly knew him now—he seemed so much older now and changed.) [He has] sympathy with his men & regret at being obliged to leave some behind. He could not endure it to see the cars [railway cars] moving off at the first stand & no possible clinging place for his poor men—But he encouraged them to try & keep up to Barber’s [plantation] promising them rest there—& so

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13. Joseph R. Hawley to his father, 28 February 1864, “Letters of Joseph,” 195.
 14. See David James Coles, “A Fight, A Licking, and a Footrace: the 1864 Florida Campaign and the Battle of Olustee.” Thesis, (Tallahassee, 1985).
 15. Broadwater, *The Battle of Olustee*, 142-7.
 16. Henry O. Marcy was “assigned to the regiment [1st North Carolina Volunteers] On October 1, 1863, and reported for duty on November 24.” He was a “white physician from Boston” who had “previously served as assistant surgeon in the 43rd Massachusetts Volunteers.” “The African-American’s Civil War: A History of the 1st North Carolina Colored Volunteers,” <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ncusct/1stnccv2.htm>.

they hobbled along, dropping & rallying again the whole 12 miles—only to see our forces just retreating from there. Still many of them kept on—even to Jacksonville—severely wounded as some were & some dropped down by the way. I have heard since that these [men] were all left to die or [to be] taken care of themselves by the rebels—none of them being taken prisoner. And I cannot but hope friendly negroes may have taken some off & cared for them. One man came in three days after the regiment—having lain out in the woods all of the time. Poor Marcy could not tell me much about it for the tears & he is evidently oppressed beyond endurance by the remembrance of those days.¹⁷

Major Bogle's fate is yet uncertain.¹⁸ I cannot conceive anything more distressing for his family... Major Bogle had two severe wounds in the abdomen and thigh as seen by Eugene [Burton?] and others—so the uncertainty is terrible. A capt. of Hawley's [staff] described Lieutenant Col. Reed—his appearance before the fight. It was remarkable, so impressive, he could scarce take his eyes from him—eagerness—impatience—fire & the moment the word was given, he was off like an arrow—poor man or poor wife.¹⁹ I cannot help feeling that he has fallen in my

17. Isabella Beecher Hooker to John Hooker, 12 March 1864. H.B. Stowe Center, Hartford, CT. As the senior officer overseeing the retreat, Joseph R. Hawley wrote his own account of the end of the battle. "The 1st North [Carolina] was suffering severely and slowly stepping back. The 7th Connecticut stood till the 54th [Massachusetts] and 1st N. C. [North Carolina Volunteer or the 35th U.S. Colored Infantry] had both got back of our line and then I faced it about and we retreated about 300 yards to where Gen. Seymour had formed a new line. The rebels advanced slowly (it was getting dark) and met a fierce but brief cannonade and were checked. So we formed a new line several times and the rebels went back. We halted half an hour by the crowd of the wounded in the "field hospital" and finally Gen. Seymour ordered them left with a surgeon."

"Oh! It was a weary march. Poor wounded fellows lined the road dragging along on foot, bstriding mules, supported by comrades, or groaned as they jolted in rough wagons and cars. I took charge of the wagon train, with the 7th New Hampshire and we were all about 8 hours in marching the 16 miles back to Barber's [Plantation]. There we had some cars [railway cars] drawn by horses to carry back wounded and stores and we all stopped for 6 or 8 hours and rested." Joseph Hawley to his father, 28 February 1864.

18. Archibald Bogle was a major in the 1st North Carolina Colored Volunteers. Amazingly, he survived his wounds and the prison at Andersonville. See <http://extlab1.entnem.ufl.edu/Olustee/letters/bogle.htm>.

brother's place—and I long to comfort her—if I can. I shall try to see her in New York as I return. There are 131 wounded and 6 officers (not severely usually)—68 missing & 2 officers. This includes dead as they mean to put the burden of proof on the rebels as to what has become of the missing.²⁰

Isabella Beecher Hooker, having described her concern for the wounded, also expressed alarm to her husband about the quality of leadership offered by General Truman Seymour. As mentioned earlier, she traveled to Florida with the general's cousin, Caroline Seymour Severance, and from the interaction with the latter, she reported characteristics of the officer's personality. While members of the general's staff such as Col. Joseph R. Hawley held Truman Seymour in low regard for his bungling at Olustee, Mrs. Severance despised him for additional reasons. Her animosity towards him, as reported by Isabella, was far stronger than that of historians such as David Coles and Robert Broadwater.²¹ The following comes from Isabella:

But time falls me to tell you all I know about him [General Truman Seymour]. He is cousin to Mrs. Severance & she has had several talks with him down here and elsewhere & cannot express her abhorrence of his principles & conduct in regard to the blacks. Even in her presence he scarce[ly] refrains from calling the black solders, the

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19. Since James C. Beecher was on leave, William N. Reed led Beecher's regiment—only to be killed at Olustee. He served as "lieutenant colonel of the regiment [1st North Carolina Volunteers]. Reed graduated from the military school at Keil, Germany, and later served in an imperial army where he received the rank of major. Some records indicate that Reed was a mulatto; if so, he was the highest ranking African-American in the Civil War." "The African-American's Civil War: A History of the 1st North Carolina Colored Volunteers," <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ncusct/1stnccv2.htm>.
20. Isabella to John Hooker, 12-14 March 1864.
21. Broadwater says that "General Seymour ...came under fire from abolitionists for the part his black regiments had played in the battle." *The Battle of Olustee*, 172-3. David Coles never documented Seymour's racist tendencies. He writes, "Seymour was accused during and after the war of having a very low opinion of black units in general; but whether his seeming naive attitude stems from a deliberate lack of concern for black troops or simply a mistaken estimate of the situation [of wounded soldiers] is not known." "A Fight, A Licking," 161. The same statement appears in his chapter in *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* a work edited by Gregory J.W. Urwin (Carbondale, 2004), 82.

“damn n——” [authors’ change] & just before the second attack on Wagner [Fort Wagner, South Carolina] N. Paige of the Tribune heard him in consultation with Gillmore [General Quincy A. Gillmore] where the latter said, “Well General S. do you think you can take Wagner....” & Seymour replied, “ Yes, I will try & we will put those damned n—— [authors’ change] in front.” [Isabella continues,] But I have no time to tell you the half I have heard from reliable quarters of him. Gillmore is only a good engineer—irresolute—misanthropic & nearly as oblivious of the moral questions at stake as Seymour. I have serious thoughts of trying my mite to persuade Stanton [Secretary of War] to put General Terry in command in Florida—for there is no apparent intention to give up operations here—& there is room for much service, judiciously managed—but no hope of accomplishing anything under [these]...generals.²²

It is not known if Isabella took her complaints to the Secretary of War. She was, of course, capable of doing so. In any case, Truman Seymour would continue in the army, serving in the Wilderness and other battles in Virginia.

While Isabella Beecher Hooker interacted with senior officers, her descriptions suggest the war was taking a toll on them. This was especially true of Col. James Montgomery whose brigade included the 54th Massachusetts:

Arriving at the camp [near Jacksonville], there sat our Col. [James C. Beecher] smiling & cheerful outside his tent door & Col. Montgomery of Kansas notoriety. I forget whether I have mentioned him before—he was here yesterday & is a sight of himself. How you would like to meet him & hear him talk in these circumstances. This war is child’s play to him. Yet his voice is gentle & subdued—his manner quiet—gentlemanly—his accent uncommonly pleasing—but his hands are worn? and thin beyond comparison—& so is his face. Mummy like he

22. Isabella to John Hooker, 12-14 March 1864. The Nathaniel Paige quotation also appears in Joseph T. Glatthaar’s *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York, 1990), 137.

looks—lines everywhere—Yet he talks cheerfully & enjoys a joke keenly— deep seriousness is the prevailing expression.²³

At various intervals in her letter, Isabella Beecher Hooker turned to the beauty of Florida. In April 1864, her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe moved to a community that Isabella and John Hooker had established at Nook Farm in West Hartford.²⁴ Not only did Stowe have a very close relationship with Isabella at the time, she would have Harriet and Joseph Hawley as neighbors in the same closely knit community after the war.²⁵ It is inevitable that Isabella and Harriet Beecher Stowe talked about Florida, Olustee, and the state's charm. The combination implies that Harriet Beecher Stowe, as she gave thought to Florida, had multiple sources at hand. She could have interacted with her brother James when he was on leave or with James' wife. With a marriage that took place in Jacksonville, there was much to talk about using the backdrop of Florida. Here is a selection of remembrances from Isabella's letter:

Such a sail my dear husband—you would have gone crazy over it. Here the fresh green foliage was everywhere to be seen in mixed contrast with the dark—dingy oaks.

I was more than satisfied with my Jacksonville trip... I brought away a quantity of this long moss, enough to hang ...in the summer parlor. I mean to bring it home to keep a great while in memoriam of our great fight [at Olustee] & the beautiful little city [Jacksonville] where our troops now lie—I saw orange trees here—enough to give one quite an idea of their beautiful foliage mingled with other trees & the climate is perfectly lovely.

Our sail back was delightful—down the river I saw the hammocks rising from the marsh or everglades —& palmettos & pines that in the distance looked like royal palms.²⁶

23. Ibid.

24. Andrews, *Nook Farm: Mark Twain's Hartford Circle*, 8.

25. Ibid., 2.

26. Isabella to John Hooker, 12-14 March 1864

Just as suddenly as Isabella arrived in Jacksonville, the medical transport *Cosmopolitan* returned quickly under orders to leave for Hilton Head.²⁷ Rather than waiting and seeing St. Augustine as she had originally hoped, Isabella traveled on it to the Carolinas and then back to New York. As a response to the change in plan, she offered an explanation to her husband: "Col. Hall has just been in & says the boat was sent for because there were people on board without passes & the Dr. had no business to take them on the boat. However—there was no harm done...so it is great luck that we here had our splendid trip."²⁸

Before leaving, she saw her neighbor and her brother one more time. Not typical of some Victorians, Isabella expressed her affections warmly, "...at last we kissed all round, Hawley, Jim and I—a good many times and we sailed off."²⁹

27. The *Cosmopolitan* had earlier carried much of the wounded from Jacksonville to the Carolinas. See Broadwater, *The Battle of Olustee*, 158-9.

28. Isabella to John Hooker, 12-14 March 1864.

29. *Ibid.*