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N. H. SMITH'S LETTERS FROM SABINE PASS, 1863*Edited by*

ALWYN BARR

Sabine Pass, which separates the coasts of Texas and Louisiana and provides access to the Sabine and the Neches rivers, was a pivotal point throughout the American Civil War. The Texas Secession Convention voted to fortify the pass in March, 1861. A local citizens' committee soon thereafter erected temporary works and provided the first artillery for the post, two antiquated twelve-pounders. A battalion of Confederate troops was raised by Lieutenant Colonel James B. Likens in 1861 for defense of the pass, and was reorganized in 1862 under Lieutenant Colonel Ashley W. Spaight. Confederate control continued until the fall of 1862, when a yellow fever epidemic and inadequate artillery forced the garrison to spike its guns and retreat before Federal warships which entered the pass. In January, 1863, a surprise attack by improvised Confederate cottonclad gunboats captured two Union blockaders off Sabine Pass and regained control of the estuary.¹

Major General John B. Magruder, commander of the Confederate military district of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, then sent his engineers to lay out new defenses for the protection of the pass. New works were drawn up and heavier cannon were brought in by Colonel Valery Sulakowski and Major Getulius Kellersberger. Once construction was underway, its completion was left to Lieutenant N. H. Smith who arrived in early August to assume command of a detachment of heavy artillery, formerly sappers and miners, which had been on temporary engineering duty at Sabine Pass since May, 1863.² They were probably assisted by the garrison and possibly by slave labor.

Before the project was finished, a Federal invasion force appeared on September 7. In the battle of Sabine Pass which followed on September 8, Lieutenant Dick Dowling assigned Smith to command the section of thirty-two-pounders in the fort's six-gun battery. The Confederate cannoners then proceeded to disable and capture two Union gunboats while driving the remainder of the invasion fleet out to sea. In his report, Dowling said that Smith, "by his coolness and bravery, won the respect and admiration of the whole command." Following the victory, Magruder concentrated additional troops in the area, and Sulakowski and Kellersberger made extensive improvements and additions to the fortifications at the pass.³

Naturally, Smith from time to time wrote to his commanding officer in Galveston, Captain M. G. Howe, both before and after the battle. Four of the lieutenant's letters have been preserved in the Howe Collection in the Archives of the University of Texas Library. Although Smith left no account of the battle itself, the letters provide a some-

times humorous suggestion of conditions at Sabine Pass in August and September, 1863.

Smith's spelling has been changed only in the case of proper names, since it is otherwise generally understandable. Periods and commas have been added to clarify his statements since he used almost no punctuation. All changes are in brackets.

Engineers Office
Sabine Pass Aug 26⁴/63

Capt M G Howe
Commndg S[appers] and Miners

Dear Capt

Yours of the 15th came to hand Two days Since and Should have been answered byt that I awated this oportunity[.] If the name of [Sergeant F.] Weinberg does not appear on the power of attourney sent you it is verry Strange for I was sure he had Signed, his intention was to have signed— I have payed the whole party here nine in number for two months Extra duty amounting to forty five Dols pr man for all except Weinberg and him I paid fifty one which I think you will find correct by the Rolls of last month[.]

I send Corp [August] Pau[ts]che after clothing for the detachment here[.] you will please furnish him, some of the men are naked and others barefooted[.] all want something[.]

Yours Truly
N H Smith
Lt Hvy Art on Eng
Service and in chg Sabine

Eng Office
Sabine Pass Aug 26th/63

Capt M G Howe
Dear Capt

You will please send me by Corp Pau[ts]che one of my horses[.] I would prefer you sent the mustang unless Capt Kossy wishes to buy him at the price I offered Say \$250.00[.] in case you send him let the Capt use the sorell, the musquetoos are so bad here that it is almost impossible for a man or horse to live and I do not wish to have the sorel suffer if I can prevent it[.] if Capt Kossy wants the mustang send the other and oblige[.]

Your True friend
N H Smith

I wish to God you would relieve me at this place[.]

Head Qr Army Musquetoos⁵
Sabine Pass Aug 26th/63

Capt M G Howe

You will perceive my letter is from the general Hd Qr of this post[.] would to God that I had not been so much honored but it is two late[.] Should you unfortunately be obliged to stick your nose out from under the bar after the sun goes down you can then have a practical demonstration of what I mean[.] in otherwords should it ever

be your misfortune to be sent to this accursed of all places bring with you a bar sufficiently larg for you to lay with your feet strached out for I am just out of bed and my feet are so badly swolen that I can hardly wear a shoe— I am here Capt for God knows how long[,] you Know what it is to finish up a piece of work like this and have no material to do it with[,] I have the quarters of the troops to build yet[,] some where near one Thousand feet of piling to drive[,] the fort to palisade[,] four Guns yet to Mount with God Knows how much more[,] to comcce with I have not one pile[,] about fifty palisades[,] no lumber for quarters[,] with an order just recvd to send the best man Corp [George] Rube to Niblets Bluff[.]⁶ oh curse the Luck[,] I wish I was back in Galveston— Write me by Pau[ts]ch and give me all the news[.]⁷

Your friend (in suffering)*

N H Smith

*My hands are blistered writing this letter[,] allow for the imagination[,] Capt. M G Howe
Sappers and Miners
Capt

You will please send me to this place by first safe opportunity four suits of clothing for our men at this place as I had that number Stolen during the late engagement[.]

Eng Office
Sabine Pass Sept 16th 1863

Respectfully Yours
N H Smith
Lt Sappers and Miners

P S

This place is hell[,] I wish you were here to help me[,] I have none and the Col [Sulakowski] is in more of a hurry than he was in Galveston in Feby—⁸ I am working now about 18 hours in 24[.]

(Write me a long friendly letter)

Your Sincere friend
N H Smith

FOOTNOTES

¹Ernest W. Winkler (ed.), *Journal of the Secession Convention of Texas, 1861* (Austin, 1912), 133; K. D. Keith, "Military Operations: Sabine Pass, 1861-63," *Burke's Texas Almanac and Immigrants Handbook for 1883* (Houston, 1883), 65-68; Alwyn Barr, "Texas Coastal Defense, 1861-1865," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXV, 4, 6, 12-13, 18-19.

²Getulius Kellersberger (Helen Sundstrom, trans.), *Memoirs of an Engineer in the Confederate Army in Texas* (Austin, 1957), 29-31; V. Sulakowski to Captain Edmund P. Turner, August 2, 1863, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (70 vols. in 128; Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. XXVI, Pt. 2, 133; Muster Roll of Captain M. G. Howe's Company of Heavy Artillery Assigned to Engineer Service, from 30 June, 1863 to 31 August, 1863 (M. G. Howe Collection, Archives, University of Texas Library).

³Report of Lieutenant R. W. Dowling, September 9, 1863, *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, Pt. 1, 311; Frank X. Tolbert, *Dick Dowling at Sabine Pass* (New York, 1962); Andrew Forest Muir, "Dick Dowling and the Battle of Sabine Pass," *Civil War History*, IV, 394-428; Jo Young, "The Battle of Sabine Pass," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LII, 398-409; Alwyn Barr, "Sabine Pass, September, 1863," *Texas Military History*, II, 17-22.

⁴The number 6 was written over the number 3 at this point.

⁵Kellersberger, *Memoirs*, 31, confirms Smith's constant references to the near plague of mosquitoes in the Sabine Pass area.

⁶Niblett's Bluff, on the Louisiana side of the Sabine River a few miles above Orange, was a major Confederate supply center for goods being sent from Texas to the Southern troops in Louisiana.

⁷This is perhaps the only statement of Confederate preparedness written in the days immediately preceding the battle. Apparently only the four cannon were mounted in the interval before September 8, 1863. V. Sulakowski to J. Kellersberger, October 5, 1863, *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, Pt. 2, 298-299.

⁸Sulakowski also had been in charge of the construction of fortifications in Galveston after the recapture of the port city by Magruder on January 1, 1863.