

The 1865 Red River Forts

SCUTTLEBUTT

Issue 2

The Official Newsletter of Friends of Forts Randolph & Buhlow, Inc.

December, 2024

Libby Custer's View of the Forts

Eleven years before he would gain eternal fame for "Custer's Last Stand," General George Armstrong Custer was stationed in Alexandria. It was shortly after the Civil War ended, and Custer was Commanding Officer of the Union occupation troops in central Louisiana. He brought his wife, Elizabeth ("Libby"), here with him. They lived in a house on Jackson Street, a few blocks from the river, where the Emmanuel Baptist Church now stands. His wife wrote several books about their life together, and one of them (*Tenting on the Plains*, available for perusal in the Fort DeRussy Library at the Visitor Center) discussed life in Alexandria. She went into some detail about Forts Randolph and Buhlow:

"Once the staff crossed with us to the other side of the river, and rode out through more beautiful country roads, to what was still called Sherman Institute. General Sherman had been at the head of this military school before the war, but it was subsequently converted into a hospital. It was in a lonely and deserted district, and the great empty stone building, with its turreted corners and modern architecture, seemed utterly incongruous in the wild pine forest that surrounded it. We returned to the river, and visited two forts on the bank opposite Alexandria. They were built by a Confederate officer who used his Federal prisoners for workmen. The General took in at once the admirable situation selected, which commanded the river for many miles. He thoroughly appreciated, and endeavored carefully to explain to me, how cleverly the few materials at the disposal of the impoverished South had been utilized. The moat about the forts was the deepest our officers had ever seen. Closely as my husband

studied the plan and formation, he said it would have added greatly to his appreciation, had he then known, what he afterward learned, that the Confederate engineer who planned this admirable fortification was one of his classmates at West Point, of whom he was very fond. In 1864 an immense expedition of our forces was sent up the Red River, to capture Shreveport and open up the great cotton districts of Texas. It was unsuccessful, and the retreat was rendered impossible by low water, while much damage was done to our fleet by the very Confederate forts we were now visiting. A dam was constructed near Alexandria, and the squadron was saved from capture or annihilation by this timely conception of a quick-witted Western man, Colonel Joseph Bailey. The dam was visible from the walls of the forts, where we climbed for a view."

Very interesting, but from a historical viewpoint, very inaccurate. Forts Randolph and Buhlow were built by slaves and Confederate soldiers, not Yankee prisoners. The forts do not command the river for "many miles." None of the Confederate engineers, David Boyd, Alfonso Buhlow or Christopher Randolph, ever attended West Point, so Custer never knew any of them. And no damage was done by the forts to the Yankee fleet in 1864 – the forts were not built until 1865.

George Custer was not popular when he was in Alexandria. He was disliked by the locals, and hated by his own troops. After his death in 1876, Libby defended her husband with a fiery passion. None of his fellow officers dared offend her, and they waited for her death before denouncing him. She outlived all of his detractors, dying in 1933, four days before her 91st birthday, and his legend remains intact to this day.

“The Only Baseball in Alexandria”

An excerpt from *Memories of My Youth: 1844-1865*, by George Haven Putnam.

“When the fortifications were completed, our rear-guard had some leisure on its hands and took up certain things in the way of amusements. I remember helping to organise for our own regiment a baseball nine which won the championship of the rear-guard, defeating some active nines from Connecticut and Massachusetts. For our regimental team I served as pitcher and I believe as captain.

The baseball contests were, however, brought suddenly to a close through an unfortunate misunderstanding with the Rebels, upon whose considerateness in this matter of sports we had, it appeared, placed too much confidence. We found no really satisfactory ground for baseball within the lines of our fortifications and, after experimenting with a field just outside of the earthworks, we concluded to take the risk of using a better field which was entirely contrary not only to ordinary regulations but to special orders prohibiting any men from going through the picket lines. It was particularly absurd for men without arms to run any such risk. I do not now understand how the officers of the 176th [New York], including the major commanding, could have permitted themselves to incur such a breach of discipline, but the thing was done and trouble resulted therefrom.

We were winning a really beautiful game from the 13th Connecticut, a game in which our own pickets, who were the only spectators, found themselves much interested. Suddenly there came a scattering fire of which the three fielders caught the brunt: the centre field was hit and was captured, the left and right field managed to get into our lines. Our pickets fell forward with all possible promptness as the players fell back. The Rebel attack, which was made with merely a skirmish line, was repelled without serious difficulty, but we had lost not only our centre field but our baseball and it was the only baseball in Alexandria.”



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The Friends of Forts Randolph and Buhlow was organized for the purpose of assisting the FR&B State Historic Site staff with fundraising and other projects around the forts, as needed. All funds generated by the group go to improvements and programs at the forts. Dues and donations can be sent to the above address, or can be deposited in the donation box at the Visitor Center.