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NEW LIGHT ON BATTLE OF MANSFIELD

by Max S. Lale

Discovery of a Civil War battle diary in one of East Texas' most notable antebellum plantation homes has revealed hitherto unknown details about the Battle of Mansfield. This was the climactic struggle in April 1864 which thwarted a federal thrust to capture Shreveport and to overrun Northeast Texas.

The diary is one kept by Captain Nathaniel Sykes Allen,\(^1\) commander of Company A, Fourteenth Texas Infantry, Walker's Texas Division. After the war Allen became one of the South's most successful architects. Commanded by Colonel Edward Clark of Marshall, who succeeded to the governor's chair in 1861 when Sam Houston refused to declare his allegiance to the Confederacy, the Fourteenth was organized on February 28, 1862. With infrequent omissions, Allen kept his diary from September 2, 1863, when he left Marshall for the army, apparently following a leave at home, until December 2, 1864. A final entry notes that "No diary from above [final] date to close of war — Was in command of the Regt at Hempstead, Tex, when the Dept. was surrendered — war promoted to Major Oct 19th, 1864. Arrived home in Marshall June 10th 1865.'"

As a record of events between the opening and closing dates, the diary is an unusually revealing picture of life in the field. Written in pencil in straightforward soldier's prose, it details without undue sentimentality the vicissitudes of marches, camp life, illnesses, weather, homesickness, the loss of comrades, the frustrations of constantly changing campaign plans, even an observation that "feet full of blisters . . . Big [borrowed] Shoes are worse than little ones.'"

Now deposited in an Allen collection at Louisiana State University-Shreveport by a great-grandson, Douglass Blocker of Marshall, the diary was discovered in June 1962 in an antique desk at Mimosa Hall,\(^1\) the Webster-Blocker family seat in eastern Harrison County. It is contained in a small (2¼ x 3¼ inch) "Daily Miniature Diary for 1858," printed by Kiggins & Kellogg of 123 and 125 William Street, New York City. The reverse of the title page notes that the book contains "Almanac — Banking Table — Counting House Calendar — A blank space for memoranda for every day of the Year.'"

An inscription shows that the book was owned originally by an H.F. Spybey and was presented by a Dr. R.F. Scruggs of Sweetwater, Tennessee, on January 27, 1858, in Philadelphia. The first seven pages of the book contain notations in ink, perhaps in Dr. Scruggs' handwriting, of treatments for a variety of ills, including sour stomach, itching of the skin, whooping cough, hiccups, itch, gonorrhea, inflammatory rheumatism, "commencement of typhoid fever," offensive feet, and corns.

On the contents page has been drawn a cartoon — no doubt by Allen,

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an accomplished artist — of a hairy soldier seated on a rock or overturned cooking vessel and feeding himself with both hands. In a balloon above the figure is the comment: “Help yourself to biscuits, Genl.” At the back of the book, occupying a full page, is a more artistic drawing, also in pencil, of a military camp scene.

In a small pocket at the back of the book when discovered were two newspaper clippings. One is an obituary of a Mrs. Catherine Brown of Allegheny who had died at the home of a son with whom she lived. One wonders from all of the above circumstances if the little leather-bound book may be one which Captain Allen picked up on the battlefield or perhaps was given to him by a captured federal soldier.

The second clipping also is an obituary. Obviously from the Marshall Texas Republican, it reports the death of Captain Allen’s brother, a member of Company E, Texas Infantry, Hood’s Texas Brigade: “Died June the 4th, 1864, in the Hospital at Gordonsville, Va., of a wound received in the Wilderness battle of May the 6th, Lt. E.A. Allen, aged 28 years and 7 months.” The newspaper story noted that E.A. Allen had entered the Army on June 1, 1861, and had fought in all the hard battles along the Potomac, before Richmond, at Sharpsburg, and in all the engagements in Virginia in which Hood’s Brigade bore so conspicuous a part. The obituary commented that “Leonidas like, they [Hood’s Brigade] have been in the front and heat of battle, fighting overwhelming numbers, and like that brave Grecians (sic) company, few remain to tell the story.”

Captain Allen was ill the day following Mansfield and eventually was evacuated to Shreveport, where it was found the Army hospital was full, then to the hospital in Marshall. On the way home he arrived in Jefferson by river boat on April 17. His father “came after me today [April 18] & after terrible suffering I arrived at home about midnight.” A Dr. Madison, the post surgeon at Marshall, began treating Allen the next day. He was not well enough to return to the Army until July 12, and it seems probable that he clipped his brother’s obituary while recovering from his illness at home in Marshall.

Having carried the diary with him throughout the remainder of the war, Allen continued to use it for business prior to moving from Marshall to Shreveport in 1870. These entries reveal that he worked at a variety of tasks: sign painting, glazing, construction, roofing, varnishing, lettering, paper hanging, “striping carriages,” engraving, repairing pictures, “painting fence at Cumberland Church,” “labeling drawers” and other similar endeavors, many of which would seem to be related to, if not leading up to, his later career as an architect.

Transactions in this section of the diary are listed under such names, many of them prominent in the early history of Marshall, as Captain DeLisle, A. Evers, David McPhail, F. Long, “Mr. Hudgins,” A.R. Woodall,

Near the back of the book, under printed date of Monday, December 27, 1858, is a penciled holograph dated October 5, 1863: "Capt N.S. Allen, Co A, being very sick of the ______ fever, being away, I hereby give him permission to stop until morning. Ed Clark, Col. Cmdg Reg." Allen's entry for this date recounted that "Felt very bad in the morning, commenced taking quinine. Orders to march at 12 o'clock — everything ready, started towards Simsport, marched 3 miles and order countermanded, countermarched — came on through Evergreen & towards Big Cane — felt very bad, fever all the time, got permission to stop at Mr. Allen's — felt very bad, went to bed as soon as I got there — rested very badly all night."

In the meticulous manner which characterized his later business entries, Allen also recorded a list of names and amounts of money for loans made to members of his wartime command. The list begins with a date of July 18, 1864, when he had returned to his company in the field following the battle at Mansfield and his illness at Marshall. The list ends on September 15. The amounts range from $2 to $30. Some of the entries are lined through, apparently indicating repayment. Others are not.

Although deserving of publication in full, the entire diary is too long to be printed here. The entries for the days leading up to the battle at Mansfield and immediately following it require a full reproduction for the new details revealed, however.

After retreating northward following a series of defeats in south Louisiana, General Dick Taylor's small army, of which Walker's was one division, found itself in early April in the vicinity of Shreveport. Under date of April 3, 1864, Allen had recorded that "Slept very little last night — windy and cold this morning — drew some bacon last night — but no bread stuff — get plenty of meat but no bread — marched 10 miles in the direction of Mansfield and Bivouacked — the Enemy Cavalry made a flank movement out from Natchitoches on the Manna Road to get in rear of our Pickets and destroy what we had at Pleasant Hill, but one of Gen Green's Regts of Cavalry and the Val Verd [sic] Battery* were on the road coming to join us and the Yankees were driven back."

The next day, April 4, the command "Marched in the direction of Mansfield, passed through that place and camped 7 miles on the Kingston
and Shreveport Road, making 18 miles — very warm & dusty and water very scarce today — suffered a great deal with my feet."

The next three days were quiet. On April 5 Allen recorded that "Lay in camp — Reserve Baggage Train came in today — ordered that one trunk to the company officers would be taken with the Command and that 1 Blanket and a change of clothing would be hauled for each man — Train sent to the rear — no news from the front." On April 6 he recorded simply that "Lay in Camp today — no news from the front." And the next day: "Lay in Camp today — nothing of interest going on — heard cannonading in front late in the Evng."

All this changed the next day, however: "Ordered to move at Day break — moved in the direction of Mansfield, passed through Mansfield on the road to Pleasant Hill, marched about 3 miles from Mansfield when we found our Cavalry and the Enemy skirmishing, formed in line of battle behind a fence — waited some time — then moved further to the left — stood some time and was then ordered forward & and the Engagement now becoming pretty general — Scurry on the right and Polignac on the left and Randal in the center. About 3 o'clock Charged the Enemy and drove them from their position — kept on charging at double quick through the bushes and thick woods for nearly five miles — where we came up with their train. One Regt charged and Captured it. I was ordered by Genl Taylor to take charge of the train and get it to Mansfield as soon as possible and turn it over to Maj Sanders, Chf Qt Master, went into Mansfield with 182 wagons and ambulances, 2 pieces of artillery and a number of mules and horses. The Command kept on driving the Enemy before them until night, making about 16 miles travel. Lt Rain and F. Wolz of my company wounded — only one man (W.L. Barrett) in the Regt killed as far as heard from."

The day following, April 9, Allen wrote: "Left Mansfield for the Regt this morning early, reported that they were about getting another fight near Pleasant Hill, find dead & wounded all along the road. The Enemy suffered trippe [sic] as much as we did yesterday, terrible fight came off just before night — a great many killed and wounded on both sides, drove the enemy from their position. John Wale (?) was killed and we thought that Peter Richardson was killed too, he having been shot in the head but he came too [sic] again — John Muntz and the fore finger the right hand taken off — we were drawn off the field and marched back to Steam Mill 7 miles for water — our forces still holding the Battle ground. The Enemy destroyed a great deal and made a precipitate retreat this Evng, our Cav on their heels — felt very bad after getting to camp. As Col Clark was wounded I was in command of the Regt — had to turn the Comd over to Capt. Lyle."

After the engagement at Pleasant Hill, the 14th Texas Infantry moved the morning of April 10 toward Mansfield. Allen wrote that: "Very sick today — rode Col Clark's horse — camped near Mansfield — reports
from the front say that Enemy are still retreating." The regiment con­
tinued through Mansfield on April 11 and camped four miles on the
Shreveport Road, "where our Train was then in camp. Prisoners still com­
ing in — very sick still — no surgeon present — all busy at the Hospitals
with the wounded."

Allen’s illness was worse the next day: "Had to lie in bed all the time
— nothing of interest transpiring today." On April 13 he recorded that
"Father and Mr. Locke arrived this morning — still very sick — Mr. Locke
is anxious to get the body of his son. They will start after him in the
morning." By the next day Allen was so ill that he was moved in an am­
bulance, "almost shaking me to pieces," and camped with his company.
The following day, one week after the fight at Mansfield, the division
moved through Shreveport and crossed the pontoon bridge to a camp one
mile up the river, Allen "still very sick."

Allen’s company moved with the regiment in the direction of Monroe on April 16, but he and other sick were separated from the regiment and
dispatched to hospitals. "I was sent to Shreveport, but the Hospital be­
ing full I was transferred to the Hospital at Marshall — took passage on
a Steam Boat for Jefferson." As previously noted, Allen arrived in that
river port on April 17, "very sick and worn out — went to the Hospital
and went to bed. Telegraphed Father to come after me." This his father
did the following day, April 18, accompanying his son the remaining six­
ten miles to his Marshall home.

The spare language with which Allen recorded his actions in remov­
ing the captured Yankee spoils on the personal command of the army com­
mander belies the tactical and strategic importance of the victory at
Mansfield. In his second attempt at invading Texas, General Nathaniel
Banks had been thwarted in his plan to capture Shreveport and to sub­
jugate the rich agricultural lands of Northeast Texas, to the severe disap­
pointment of his presidential ambitions. At Marshall one of the most im­
portant ordnance facilities in the Trans-Mississippi Department continued
to operate until the end of the war a year later, repairing weapons and
manufacturing black powder. Federal forces lost manpower heavily, and
the riverine naval flotilla which had accompanied Banks barely escaped
complete capture when it found low water at the Red River rapids when
it returned to Alexandria.

More distantly, Banks’ failure caused a ten-month postponement of
the attempt to capture Mobile, permitting Leonidas Polk to reinforce J.E.
Johnston with 15,000 troops who otherwise would have been required to
defend that important city. The effect was to delay Sherman in North
Georgia and therefore his march to the sea and into the Carolinas. One
writer believes the war may have been lengthened by two months or longer
as a result of the victory at Mansfield. ¹⁸

Having played a central role in these events, Captain Allen probably
felt too ill to savor the victory fully. Certainly, good soldier that he was, he would have been gratified to succeed to command of his regiment had his health permitted.

As it was, Allen continued to lead a full and productive life for fifty-nine years after Mansfield. After moving to Shreveport he “literally shaped the skyline” of that city as one of Louisiana’s first truly professional architects and “a Renaissance Man” of his day. Allen’s residential work was done in the late Victorian “Queen Ann” style which had a few features in common with the Romanesque style. Other commissions in which he excelled were typical of the “Richardson Romanesque,” a style made famous by Louisiana born H.H. Richardson. Between 1870 and 1898 he designed more than 300 buildings and earned distinction as a fellow of the American Institute of Architects. There is strong evidence that he was Shreveport’s first serious musician, organizing that city’s first orchestra and several brass bands. He also composed music, of which a number of scores, including “Shreveport Rag,” were discovered at Mimosa Hall by his great-grandson Douglass Blocker. Discovered at the same time were rolls of architectural drawings on fragile, yellowed paper which had been stored for nearly a century. “It was almost like finding the Dead Sea Scrolls,” declared Bill Weiner, a Shreveport architect. Allen also was a portrait painter, violinist, landscape artist, and wood carver.

Still hale and spry at the age of ninety-one, Allen cast his last vote for president in 1920. A Shreveport newspaper, noting that he was the oldest Odd Fellow in the United States and “probably the oldest Democrat in Louisiana,” reported that he marked his ballot unassisted at the Caddo Parish courthouse. Afterward he was quoted by the newspaper as saying “Well, boys, I have been voting for 70 years. I cast my first vote for Franklin Pierce in 1852, the fourteenth president of the United States and the fifth Democrat to be elected to that office, and have just deposited my vote for James M. Cox, the next Democratic president of the United States. This may be my last vote for a presidential candidate, but I shall have the consolation that I voted right.”

The indomitable rebel died at his home in Shreveport on Friday, July 6, 1922. He and his wife, Martha Ann Carroll, are buried in Forrest Park Cemetery in Shreveport.

NOTES

1 N.S. Allen was born in Maryland on August 7, 1829, the son of William Allen and Ciscelia Burris Rhodes Allen. As a boy of ten, at one of the estates of the numerous Carroll family of Maryland, into which he later married, he was a bowling partner of Henry Clay. He and Martha Ann Carroll (1833-1906) eloped and were married December 23, 1852. The couple moved to Marshall, Texas, in the spring of 1860 because a sister of Allen’s, who earlier had moved to Marshall as a governess and subsequently was married there, was then living in the city. In a brief commentary dictated in his later years to a daughter, Mattie Allen, the former Confederate major recalled that his great-grandfather was an English sea captain named Nathaniel Sykes. On one of his voyages he had aboard as a passenger an Irish
gentle woman who was lost overboard. Sykes rescued her, an act which was the beginning of a romance. In defiance of her family she became Mrs. Sykes.

1A two-story home built in the 1840s by slave labor of brick fired on the property, Mimosa Hall is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

2For details of the campaign leading up to the Battle of Mansfield, see Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics & Cotton in the Civil War, (Baltimore, 1958), pp. 110-124.

3Thomas Green became the colonel of the Fifth Mounted Texas Volunteers on August 20, 1861, and was promoted to brigadier general on May 12, 1863. He was given command of a brigade of cavalry composed of the Fourth, Fifth and Seventh Regiments of Texas Cavalry and the Texas regiments of Phillips and Stone in June 1863, and in early 1864 was assigned as commander of the cavalry of the Trans-Mississippi Department. He was killed in the fighting at Bayou Pierre (Blair's Landing) on April 12, 1864, during Banks' retreat from Mansfield. Harold B. Simpson, ed., Marcus J. Wright, Texas in the War, 1861-1865, (Hillsboro, Tx, 1965), pp. 5-6. The Valverde Battery was organized in early 1862 and was commanded originally by Captain Joseph D. Sayers, later governor of Texas, but when Sayers was promoted to assistant adjutant of the Fifth Texas Cavalry he was succeeded in command by T.D. Nettles. The battery was assigned to the First Artillery Battalion in 1864. Texas in the War, p. 137.

4Fred Smith of the Nineteenth Texas Infantry also found the situation quiet, but non-threatening as well. In a letter written April 7 to his father in Harrison County from camp near Mansfield he said that “From present indications I think we will stay here some little time. Gen'l [Kirby] Smith we hear is at Mansfield and no doubt that alone will scare off the Yanks.” Original on deposit in the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania; copy in author's possession.

5William Read Scurry entered the Confederate army as a lieutenant colonel in the Fourth Texas Cavalry regiment. After service with Sibley at Valverde and Glorieta Pass on the New Mexico campaign, he was promoted to brigadier general in September 1862 and commanded troops under McGruder when Galveston was recaptured. He commanded a brigade in Walker's Division at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill. After Banks' defeat, his brigade accompanied the division to Arkansas to oppose the other pincer of the threat against Northeast Texas, commanded by Frederick Steele. Scurry was mortally wounded at Jenkins' Ferry in Arkansas, April 30, 1864, three weeks after Pleasant Hill. Texas in the War, pp. 92-93.

6Thomas Neville Waul organized Waul's Legion and was commissioned its colonel in the spring of 1862. The infantry companies of the Legion were surrendered at Vicksburg in July 1863. After being exchanged, Waul was promoted to brigadier general and commanded a brigade in Walker's Division. After Mansfield and Pleasant Hill he also participated at Jenkins' Ferry in the Arkansas campaign. An official Texas marker at his grave in Oakwood Cemetery, Fort Worth, was dedicated on June 10, 1984.

7Camille Armand Jules Marie, Prince de Polignac, a member of the Grimaldi family which rules the principality of Monaco, commanded a brigade of General Mouton's Louisiana Division and succeeded to the command when Mouton was killed in the first day's fighting on the extreme left of the position at Mansfield. Polignac was critical of General Green, "who was intoxicated and caused our troops to fire on one another." A vain and ambitious officer, Polignac noted in his journal entry for April 13 that "Thus owing to these two untimely deaths [Mouton and Green], I have had a most extraordinary preferment, as on the 8th, I was the 6th or 7th Brig. Gen. in this army, of which I am now the 3d Major General." Polignac's diary is deposited in the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania; a copy of the April entries is in the author's possession.

8Horace Randal, the first Texas graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, resigned his U.S. Army commission in 1861 after assignments in the Southwest, and fought as a private in Virginia before organizing the Twenty-eighth Dismounted Texas Infantry at Marshall in 1862. He participated in the Vicksburg campaign in 1863 and was promoted to brigadier general in Walker's Division the day of Mansfield. He died of wounds received at Jenkins'
Ferry three weeks later, as did Scurry. He is buried in Marshall Cemetery in Marshall. Texas in the War, p. 89.

10General Richard Taylor, son of President Zachary Taylor, was in command of the field army at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill.

11John C. Williams, a member of the Thirty-fourth Texas Cavalry, in a letter describing the day's action, reported to relatives at home that "They [the Federal troops] had evidently not expected an engagement, for the road was filled and blocked with long trains of baggage wagons, ammunition and provisions. The country being heavily wooded, the drivers could not turn out and retreat with their wagons; they just left them standing in the road." Original on deposit in the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania; copy in the author's possession.

12Clark having been wounded at Mansfield, the use of his horse apparently was an assistance to Allen as well as a means of securing the animal.

13W.W. Heartsill of Marshall was assigned to prison duty at Camp Ford, near Tyler, in 1864 after a long and multifaceted career in the service. His Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army is one of the classic diaries of the war. He recorded on April 13 that the unit guarding the prison had received orders to expect "three or four thousand more prisoners." The following day he noted that "ELEVEN HUNDRED prisoners arrives (sic) from Mansfield," and on April 18 that "FIVE HUNDRED prisoners arrive." Heartsill noted also that among casualties from home of whom he had learned, Capt. Gil McKay of Marshall was killed and Lt. Ben Rain wounded. Others he listed from Harrison County included George B. Adkins, Jr., and Clinton Locke killed and R. Watkins, R.W. Jennings, R. Wilson, F. Wolz and T.P. Hawley wounded. W.W. Heartsill, Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army (Jackson, Tennessee, reissued in facsimile in 1953), p. 200.

14See Note 13 above. It was not unusual, especially if the battlefield were nearby, for family members to search for their sons and brothers and to return them or their bodies home. It was reported that General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson suffered similarly when he was removed from the battlefield after being wounded.

15In Red River Campaign, pp. 170-180, Johnson narrates the threat from Arkansas, the second pincer which General Edmund Kirby Smith was moving to block. This campaign ended at Jenkins' Ferry in Arkansas.

16His father was William Allen. He was born January 22, 1805, and was married November 16, 1828, to Ciscelia Burris Rhodes, who was born May 25, 1805. While residents of Marshall they lived in a house at the corner of Franklin Street and Grand Avenue. Both are buried in Marshall Cemetery.

17Red River Campaign, p. 279.

18Undated and unattributed Shreveport newspaper clipping in the possession of Douglass Blocker.

19The Shreveport Times, April 15, 1979.


21The Shreveport Times, April 15, 1979.

22The Shreveport Times, April 15, 1979.

23Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army, p. 4, notes that Allen painted the words "Semper Paratus" on one side of the flag presented to the Lane Rangers cavalry company when the unit was mustered for service on the courthouse square in Marshall on April 19, 1861. The unit became Company F, Second Regiment of Texas Cavalry, commanded by Colonel John B. (Rip) Ford, on May 23.


25Blocker family records.