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## Army Surgeon's Notes on Frontier Service

Nathan S. Jarvis

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# Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

## Nathan S. Jarvis, Army Surgeon's Notes on Frontier Service

*Nathan S. Jarvis' Army Surgeon's Notes records the experiences and adventures—rather than medical duties—of an army appointed doctor during the Second Seminole War. The notes are staggered and incoherent at times. Judging from the stories contained herein, explaining in detail the severe conditions Jarvis and his comrades endured, it is likely Jarvis's opportunities to write were limited. There are nuggets of text that tell stories of struggle, survival, and treachery on both sides of the fight. In addition, his unique perspective of the Indians, enemy or friendly, is brief and poignant. Much of what is recorded center around his own travels, but also provide commentary of the conflict and attempted treaty with the Seminoles, including rich geographic descriptions of the region granted to the enemy by the U.S.A. and its border locations. There is also a compelling recollection of an incident involving General Harney, and his attempts at "rounding up the Indians" and establishing a trade post just outside the Seminoles' new Borders—the borders, of course, being allotted to the Seminoles by the U.S.A. as part of a treaty agreement. However, many Seminoles were still in the fight—scattered and either completely unaware of such treaty, or simply choosing to ignore it. The text tells the story of Harney's escape and survival during an attack made on his camp. Furthermore, the text offers some minimal, but valuable insight on the discourse between U.S. soldiers and the Indians, and their reluctance to trust each other. The selections below, from a copy text at the University of South Florida Library's Special Collections, includes portraits of St. Augustine, Tampa, Manatee, and Sarasota.*

Edited by Christopher Wood, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

### Further Reading

Denham, James M. "Some Prefer the Seminoles': Violence and Disorder among Soldiers and Settlers in the Second Seminole War. 1835-1842." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 70.1 (1991): 38-54.

Harris, David. "The Lure of Medical History: Medicine in Colonial America." *Science* 50.6 (1927): 415-18.

Strang, Cameron B. "Violence, Ethnicity, and Human Remains during the Second Seminole War." *The Journal of American History* 100.4 (2014): 973-94.

Warren, Robin O. "Hamlet Rides Among The Seminoles." *Southern Cultures* 7.4 (2001): 31-63.

## AN ARMY SURGEON'S NOTES OF FRONTIER SERVICE, 1833-48

Contributed by Captain Nathan S. Jarvis, U.S.A.

(Lieutenant-Colonel N.G.N.Y.)

Dr. Nathan Jarvis, Surgeon for the U.S. Army, was appointed to the army from New York State in 1833, was promoted to the grade of surgeon in 1838, and died during the Civil War while acting as Medical Director of the Department of Maryland. He was a native of New York, where he was, for a time, a student in the office of the famous surgeon, Dr. Valentine Mott.

Dr. Jarvis was a veteran of the Seminole and Mexican Wars and saw much service among the wild Indian tribes in the Northwest and the Southwest. Jarvis left a lasting impression upon the old army by his genial and kind heart, his sterling rectitude and devotion to duty. Veterans of the Rebellion will recall the Jarvis General Hospital in Baltimore named by the War Department, after him as a tribute to his faithful service.

Fort Snelling, Upper Mississippi,

October 10, 1833—

As to news, little can occur in this distant region, secluded from the world. We pass our time something in the way of exiles, banished from the pleasures and I may add follies of civilized life. Still there are charms even in the savage life and the wilderness, as proof of which there are many men in this country acting as Indian traders and possessing talent who after accumulating fortunes by the profits of the trade, marry Indian wives and settle themselves down for life, abandoning any idea of ever returning to the places of their birth or their friends. If we have but little news here we occasionally, although rarely see a straggler in this distant region, not travelers nor traders, but those idle wandering fellows who have no home and going they know not where (nor do they care) and without any earthly motive.

AFFAIR OF THE LOCHEE HATCHEE. Jupiter Inlet. January 27, 1838. We arrived at this place this morning, after one of the most extraordinary marches ever made in this or any other country, considering the obstacles to overcome. For nearly two hundred miles we have passed through an unknown region, cutting roads through dense hammocks, passing innumerable cypress swamps and pine barrens, interspersed with a nearly impassable growth of saw palmetto, and for the last

three days wading nearly the whole time up to the mens' waists in water. Our privations have not been less than our fatigue, the men being nearly naked, and one-third of them destitute of shoes. We arrived on the Lochee Hatchee, which empties into Jupiter Inlet. Word was brought that the enemy were posted there in a dense hammock, on both sides of the stream, and had fired upon our advanced guard. The Dragoons and mounted men, mostly *Tennesseans*, immediately set off, and the artillery advanced as quickly as possible. When I came up, I found them hotly engaged.

The main body of the Indians were posted on the opposite side of the stream, which, when our men came to it, the Indians fled up and down the Hammock, and in a few minutes totally disappeared. We had lost in the engagement two, seven wounded of the artillery. Of the *Tennesseans*, five were killed and twenty-three wounded—four of the latter have since died. General Jessup was wounded in the early part of the action, the ball laying open his left cheek, just below the eye. That same day, we built a bridge across the stream and passed the next day to Jupiter Inlet for supplies. I could tell you much of the country had I time, ink, and paper. But I have very little of the former and none of the latter. All I can say is that it is a most hideous region, in which nothing but serpents and frogs can exist. The Indians themselves admit they cannot live here after March. While you are freezing we are melting with the heat, which equals that of July in New York.

Beyond March no human no human being could live in this country. The Indians are evidently becoming scattered. A party of Delawares, in scouting the other day, came on the recent trail of several of the enemy, which they pursued, and presently overtook one of the party. He quickly hid himself in a small cypress swamp, which they searched thoroughly in every direction, without success. On a second search one of the party came up to a large cypress tree, under the root of which the fugitive had entirely concealed himself, but imagining he was discovered, he suddenly jumped up, which frightened the Delaware's horse in such a manner that it threw him. He quickly recovered his feet, however, and was in the act of firing, when the Seminole leveled and shot him through the left hand, the ball exiting through the wrist. The Delaware, although severely wounded, supported his rifle with his arm shot the other through his body and bore his scalp in triumph.

ROUNDING UP THE INDIANS. March 18, 19, 20. On the two former days the Indians had a great ball play, and at night a dance. This last they kept up on both occasions until past midnight, yelling and hooping in a manner to render the night hideous. The officers contributed a large quantity of tobacco to be played for at their ball game. I never saw Indians so extravagantly fond of this article, men, women, and children using it on all occasions. It is not uncommon to see a little fellow strutting along with a cigar in his mouth. At their dance, they had several gallons of whiskey given to them, and of course got gloriously drunk. The Indians make a regular practice of going around to all the officers' tents and raising a contribution of brandy, whiskey, gin or any other liqueur, apparently disregarding the advice not to mix different types of liqueurs.

A SEMINOLE BALL GAME. April 4. In the afternoon I visited the Dragoon camp and witnessed the Indians at a ball game I had not before seen. They had a large ball resembling a football which they caught with their hands and endeavored to throw through a couple of sticks crossed and stuck in the ground. There were two of these wickets about 30 yards apart, each side striving to get the ball through the opposite side, occupied by the opponent. Both men and women engaged in the sport and the women appeared to play with more earnestness than the men. Two or three of

the squaws would get along side of the wicket and resist with all their strength the endeavor of the men to pass through, while the latter would not hesitate to catch them by the arms or legs (tackling) and draw them down. Other squaws would, however, belabor them with sticks on their fists and compel them to let go. Then men had nothing on but their breech clouts and some of the women only their petticoats. The Women I believe won the game.

A HARD MARCH. April 16. We were up and had our breakfast by four o'clock a.m. By five o'clock we were on our march. The early part of the morning was cool and pleasant and the men marched rapidly on. But, by eleven, the heat became intense. Our design was to march until 12 o'clock and then halt until three in the afternoon to avoid the heat of the day and allow the men time to refresh themselves, but unfortunately no water could be found. This may seem strange that a country over which we had passed three months ago covered with water should be now perfectly dry. Every clump woods and every hollow we searched for the indispensable resource, as both men and horses were now suffering from want of it, but not a drop could be found. The men began to lag and then drop by the roadside completely exhausted by heat and thirst. The heat was greater than I have ever experienced in Florida. We kept pushing on mile after mile in hopes of at last finding water and halting, but were unsuccessful. Our objective now was, if possible, to reach Fort Van Swearingen which was about three miles distant. This we accomplished by carrying the exhausted men in our already overburdened wagons, relieving others of their knapsacks and arms, and putting others on officers' horses, they dismounted for that purpose. Never were a body of men more completely done up than our command on our arrival at the fort.

ARRIVAL AT TAMPA. April 24. We left camp at four o'clock and travelled through much of the same country as the day before. Our distance from Tampa is about seventeen miles. On many parts of the road the travelling was extremely fatiguing from the heavy sand. About 13 miles from Tampa we met a train going out of Fort Frazer. A few miles farther on we came across an extensive Indian encampment or village previously occupied. We halted and encamped about one mile from Tampa on the side of a small stream. A body of Tennessee volunteers had encamped on the opposite side.

April 25. Barracks are now erecting here sufficient to accommodate a regimen. Most of the officers live in tents covered with sheds and large live oak. Many of these magnificent trees were cut down after *Dade's massacre* from fear of their affording cover to the Indians in an attack. Most of the buildings were likewise burnt for the same reasons. A number of abandoned vessels were lying in the bay.

April 26. I visited the hospital which is nearly filled up with sick, many of them from wounds. The sick are ordered to Fort Monroe and will leave on Tuesday. Little enclosures constructed of slight palings painted white and black are quite numerous in the neighborhood indicating the resting places of officers who have died in Florida.

PUNISHMENT OF WHISKEY SMUGGLERS. July 6. An amusing exhibition took place at the retreat this evening. Three whiskey smugglers who were taken on the fourth were compelled to undergo their punishment. This was as follows. A plank about six feet in length was pierced with three holes large enough to accommodate the neck of each smuggler. Into this they were put, thus yoked together their heads surmounted with high paper caps and a large rope tied around the

waist of each, some feet dragging on the ground. Their faces were blacked and attached to their yoke, suspended to some degree, were a number of empty bottles—in significance of their trade. They were marched around the camp to the tune of the Rogue's March. The most amusing part of the affair was the ludicrous and somewhat painful condition of one of the party. He happened to be a small man, while the two others were men of gigantic size. They had placed the small one in between the two. In consequence, he had to walk on his toes to keep his neck level with the others. And, whenever they came to any inequality of the ground he would be suspended completely until they passed over it—in constant danger of dislocating his neck. After passing around the camp they were marched down to the ferry and landed on the opposite bank of the river. One of the fellows was of herculean size and strength. It was rumored he had formerly been a pirate, and some fearful story of murder was told as having been committed by him in Georgia, his native state, from which he fled. He was captain of the vessel that had the whiskey on board, which was a small clipper and had sailed from Key West.

A HUNTING PARTY. July 12. An excursion which had been contemplated some time now by the officers, down the bay for the purpose of fishing and hunting was undertaken today. We anchored at dark at Passage Key, one of the little islands stretching across the mouth of the bay, and forty five miles from Fort Brooke. We discovered a light on shore and upon landing found three Spanish fishermen there occupying a palmetto hut. There were several of these and had formerly constituted a fishing rancho which had been abandoned some time. Our fishing party took their nets to shore and caught great numbers of pompano, mullet, and bass. The former is considered the finest flavored fish on the Florida coast, in fact in the Gulf of Mexico. They are only caught on the coast, very rarely entering the bays and rivers. We also obtained from the Spaniards abundance of turtle eggs. I went on shore in the morning and found the beach strewn with beautiful shells, many of which I collected. Immense numbers of sea-fowl covered the island and were hovering over it. These consisted of mostly pelicans, flamingoes, curlew, cormorant, ibis, and many I did not know. We left the Key about eight o'clock and proceeded directly to sea intending to go south as far as Sarasota, distant about fifty miles. Shortly after getting to sea we discovered three sails in opposite direction. One of them we boarded— a small schooner from Havana for Tampa with fruit. After obtaining a supply of pine apples, bananas, plantains, and oranges, we proceeded on our voyage. We reached Sarasota early in the day and anchored a short distance inside the inlet. Our hunting and fishing party immediately made preparations for their respective sports. The water appeared alive with multitudes of fish of every kind and little exertion was required to take as many as we wished. Sharks were very numerous here, actually swimming about in schools. Any quantity of shell-fish was to be had. Myriads of sea-fowl lined the beach and the bars of sand that stretched in different directions shown brilliantly in the sun from the red plumage of the flamingoes and pink curlew. Our hunters returned in the evening with two fine deer. One more they left behind, the Indian who shot him also shot another and was unable to bring more than one in, designing to go after the other in the morning, but our going out at midnight prevented this.

July 16. There were no admixture of earth, but composed of one solid body of shells. The hills extend about a hundred yards back from the shore and were covered with a thick growth of myrtle, juniper, prickly pear, the Spanish bayonet, and other plants. A short distance back was a considerable growth of live oak. I never saw before such immense numbers of the fiddler crab as lined the shore here as far as the eye could extend. Their color which was red gave the strand the

appearance of being paved with broken bricks. In the course of my walk I picked up a number of the sea urchin or porcupine which was alive. I also collected a great variety of handsome shells most of which were still inhabited by the animal. Our fisherman also caught a number of fish I had never seen. Among these were the trunk fish, golden fish, and horned fish. Our hunters returned in two to three hours. They had started a deer, but did not succeed in killing him. Having got all on board we started for home where we arrived some time before dark after a delightful excursion and an absence of part of three days. Nothing of note occurred during our absence.

PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. May 25. Intelligence arrived of a treaty made between the U.S. and the Seminoles. By the treaty the Indians are to occupy a district of country on the south western coast embraced in a line drawn north and south from a point of the Kissimmee through the center of Lake Okeechobee to Shark River, from thence upwards along the coast to Charlotte harbor, thence along Peace Creek to the point of beginning. Sixty days are given to them to assemble within their limits and no white persons or intruders of any description will be suffered to enter this territory. All that country south of a line drawn from the Withlacoochii to Smyrna will be considered a neutral ground. The Indians will be permitted to have a trading house established near the center of their territory. Two regiments will remain to garrison the line of posts from this place to Smyrna on the opposite side to prevent any encroachment on the Indians and the latter from passing beyond the limits of their boundary. None of the Indians north including the Talahassees, Creeks, and others were represented at this council or treaty. Colonel Harney at the solicitation of the Indians will proceed to Key Biscayne from whence he will accompany them to their locations and point out its boundaries.

COLONEL HARNEY'S DISASTER. July 28. Shortly after dark two dragoons arrived and reported to the General the melancholy intelligence of the attack and murder committed by the Indians on the party of Colonel Harney on the Sanibel. These two men with two more of the same regiment who were wounded at the time came up in a small sloop. The circumstances of this bloody and treacherous conduct of the Indians are thus related by them:

The Indians had all along manifested a friendly spirit, daily visiting the Colonel's camp and trading. Such was the confidence of the Colonel and everyone in their intentions that not the least precautions were used to guard against the possibility of such treachery and surprise. The men lay scattered along the bank of the river. No sentinel was posted and in fact not a man had his arms prepared. On the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> at daybreak they commenced their attack in two parties, one on the camp and one on the sutler's store. Those men not instantly butchered aroused by the firing and whooping of the Indians fled to the river naked from which they were a few yards distant, and plunged in, down which they swam and waded to some fishing smacks that lay at anchor (which had been detained the day before by Colonel Harney under suspicion of clandestinely trading with the Indians). Colonel Harney himself on being awakened by the noise opened his tent and discovered himself surrounded by Indians. He immediately fled up the river to where he recollected having seen during the day a canoe. This he found and together with one other man paddled down the stream to one of the smacks that lay at anchor. He had previously, having on only his shirt and drawers, rolled in the mud to conceal as much as possible his appearance rendered conspicuous by his white dress.

August 1. An Irishman named Hugh McCarthy arrived this morning, having escaped from the massacre of the Sanibel. The particulars are related by him as follows:

He was sleeping near Colonel Harney at the time of the alarm and fled to the river which he crossed by swimming and secreted himself in a hammock. The next day, seeing a boat in the river, he ventured out on a point of land the persons in it when he was discovered by some Indians who pursued him nearly three miles when he fled into a mangrove thicket where they were unable to find him. He afterwards re-crossed the river by swimming and directed his course for Tampa.

After proceeding as far as Peace Creek he was met in the open pine barrens by two Indians mounted on Dragoons' horses which he supposed were those of Colonel Harney. He immediately approached one of the Indians to shake hands with him when the latter caught him by the hair and pushed him from him. He then dismounted, took a deer's thong with which he firmly bound his hands together behind his back. They then took to near their camp and tied him to a tree and left him. At the time it was near dark, and from where he was he could distinctly hear the Indians dancing and singing. During the night a heavy rain came up which so softened the thong with which he was bound that he was enabled to disengage himself, when he immediately fled to the river and after some time discovered a canoe with which he paddled down the stream. In searching for clams he discovered a small sloop called the *Tiger* from Key West which brought him to this place. His body was blistered all over from the effects of exposure to the sun, being nearly naked. If the Irishman's story be true as to his being taken prisoner by the Indians and not being murdered on the spot, it is owing to their having taken him for a Spaniard. He had a long time resided among the Spanish fisherman whom he somewhat resembled in appearance and spoke a few words of their language.

August 12. Corporal Haywood and Private Luther were discovered on the bank of the Sanibel not more than two miles apart and totally unconscious of each other's safety or near vicinity. Haywood on the night of the attack fled into the water, wading and swimming in the river until he took to land and escaped into a hammock where he continued that day and the next night. While there he distinctly heard and saw Indians passing by apparently in search of those who had escaped. Next day he attempted to get to the sea coast, but was unable to do so by intervening marshes and inlets. He then again struck for the river lower down with the faint hope that some vessel which had not heard of the attack might be passing by. Here he remained sixteen or seventeen days existing alone on a few small oysters that he was able occasionally to pick up. Luther was severely wounded on the night of the murder, while in the water, a ball passed into his hip. He was consequentially unable to move but very little, and entertained the same notion as Haywood, that some vessel might pass and take him up.

Harney's Account of the Trading Camp Surprise (St. Augustine, E.F., August 1, 1839).

Dear Sir—During the session of Congress of 1838-39 an appropriation of \$5,000 was made with a view of defraying the expenses of a treaty to be entered into with the Seminole Indians. General Macomb, receiving orders from the head of his department, met the Indians in council at Fort King, E.F., in May last, where it was agreed, on the part of the United States that a trading house should be established in the Indian nation. I was charged by General Macomb with the execution of this duty, as also all the arrangements regarding the Indians within the limits assigned to them. My first

instructions were, however, to proceed to Tampa Bay and call upon General Taylor for such force, etc, as I might deem necessary. I informed the General commending the Army of the South of the instructions I had received from General Macomb and called on him for two companies to aid me in the duty to which I was assigned; but, to my surprise, the General refused to aid me by furnishing a single officer or soldier, declaring that he had none disposable; that a disposition of the troops had already been made, and he would make no alterations until the Indians evinced a disposition to regard the treaty by removing into the limits assigned. From this and other conversations held by me with General Taylor, I clearly perceived that if any advancement in the provisions of the Treaty was to be made, it would be accomplished without his assistance. Agreeably to my instructions from General Macomb, I told General Taylor that a trading house was absolutely necessary for carrying out the views of the Government, and that I should endeavor to procure a suitable person to go with me and commence a trade with the Indians. Pursuant to this plan, I selected Mr. Dalham, and instructed him as regards the wishes of the Government. He accompanied me to the Caloosahatchee, and selected a site for a trading house within about 400 yards of a camp of twenty-eight Dragoons, who were armed with Colt's patent rifles. Having all these matters in proper train, I proceeded to Bay Biscayne, where a detachment of dragoons was then stationed. As I had no commissioned officer with me, I was compelled to leave the camp at Caloosahatchee in charge of Sergeant Bigelow, who, by his former conduct had evinced himself worthy of the most implicit confidence. Unfortunately, by his ill-placed reliance on Indians' integrity, he has fallen a victim of Indian treachery, dying, as he had lived, a brave soldier. When I left the Sergeant, I instructed him never to place himself nor any of his party in the power of the Indian, and, however confident he might feel of their friendship, to use at all times the same precautions as if they were enemy. On my return from Bay Biscayne to the Caloosahatchee, bringing with me the detachment of dragoons, one of the chiefs informed me that all the chiefs were coming to have a talk with me within a few days. I replied that, being then on my way to Tampa, I would see them on my return, in about ten days. I returned from Tampa in six or seven days and found the chiefs had not as yet come in, but might be expected in two or three days. I therefore resolved to await their arrival before I made any further movement. Having ordered my tent to be pitched and my luggage put ashore, I remained on board the steamboat on her return towards Cape Florida, stopping at the mouth of the river, about twelve miles distant. I returned to the camp near the trading house about ten o'clock in the night of the next day, this being in fact, the first time I had been there. Greatly fatigued, I threw myself down without undressing, intending to rise again in a few moments, but slept until I was awakened by the firing of the Indians. The sequel you are already acquainted with. Thus you have a plain, unvarnished statement of the facts; and this made to rebut the assertions which a letter from General Taylor's staff officer is likely to cast upon me as a military man. That letter was published in the News at St. Augustine, and I have not replied to it, looking for justice from the proper quarter, but, I regret to say, looking in vain. You will perceive I was entrusted with the execution of arrangements entered into with the Indians that it could not be expected of me to attend to the minutiae of inspecting sentinels and posting guards; and that if any censure was attributal to any one, it should be laid to the authority which refused me the proper means of guarding the trading house by not complying with my requisition for an officer.

W.S. Harney

Lieutenant-Colonel Second Dragoons

Commanding, East St. John's.