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To the Memory of Lieutenant John W.S. McNeil ...

"H."

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

H., “To the memory of Lieutenant John W. S. McNeil, of the United States Army, who fell in an engagement with the Seminole Indians, near St. Augustine, Florida, September 10, 1837.”

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The following, from the New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette (19 May 1842), was presumably written by a family member or loved one but not published until five years after the referenced date of McNeil’s death. The later date corresponds with the conclusion of the Second Seminole War.

In that wild land drench’d by our bravest blood,

Poured out in torrents like the Autumn rain,

Of all the young and gallant multitude

Whose bunts whitened many a fatal plain,

Repose no nobler relics of the slain

Than thine, McNeil, the generous, mild, and brave!

Why should we mourn his early fate in vain?

Far he has gone into a glorious grave,

Wet by the grateful tears of those he died to save.

And when the turf was laid upon his breast,

His country's cannon thunder'd o'er his head

A requiem fitting for the Soldier's rest—

There sleeps he on his glory-mantled bed

Among his nation's unforgotten dead;

Fain would I rest where he is sleeping now!

The patriot's life-blood for his country shed

Blooms up afresh in the perennial glow

Of laurels twined by Fame around his glittering brow.

The generous flame that burned within his soul

Was lit by nature: at a kindred fire:

Sprung from a race that never brook'd control,

Rightly to glorious deeds he might aspire,

The high-born offspring of a noble sire!

And see who, with a mother's untold grim;

Years o'er his early tomb with vain d-sire,
War daughter of New Hampshire's bravest chief,
Late gather'd to his rest like the o'erripened sheaf.

And as the Spartan ma'rons search'd of yore

The bodies of their sons in battle slain,

And when they found the mortal wounds *before*,

Knew they fell bravely, and in gladsom train,

Exulting bore them from the bloody plain,

With proud though bitter joy; so now may they

Lament his loss with no complaining strain—

Though pierced, he sank out through the well-fought day,

Till Victory's joyous shout wafted his soul away!

May 3, 1842

H.

Lieutenant McNeil was the son of General John McNeil of Boston, Massachusetts, and grandson on his mother's side, of the late Gen. Benjamin Pierce of Hillsborough, New Hampshire. He was born on the Island of Mackinaw, Michigan Territory, February 17, 1817. He remained several years with his parents at Chicago, Illinois, while his father was commandant of the United States troops at that station. In 1824 he returned with his parents to New England – was educated at West Point – spent some time in the office of the Hon. Franklin Pierce, at Hillsborough, New Hampshire, and entered the United States Army in the spring of 1836, as Lieutenant at a company in the 2d regiment of Dragoons. He recruited through the summer, and in the following winter was ordered to Florida. He continued in the service, and was out in several skirmishes till the fall of 1837, when he fell in a fight with the Seminole Indians on the morning of September 10.

The circumstances of that encounter were these. General Hernandez on the 7th set out on an expedition from headquarters, at Picolata, in the vicinity of St. Augustine, against a body of Indians that had taken a position about sixty miles to the southwest. In the absence of their superior

officers, the command of the battalion, under the direction of General Hernandez, was given to Lieutenants McNeil and Peyton. On the evening of the 9th the battalion approached the Indians, who occupied a position deemed almost impregnable by reason of a swamp and thicket that surrounded them. The battalion halted till dawn of day, (Sabbath morning,) when the attack was made in two columns, commanded severally by Lieutenants McNeil and Peyton. The savages had time to give but one fire before they were surrounded and taken. While McNeil was advancing at the head of his column, he saw their chief, Uchee Billy, level his rifle at him; and at the moment he drew his pistol, the rifle or the chief was discharged, the bullet passing through his pistol-hand and taking effect in the abdomen. McNeil remained on the field through the action; and when the Indians were secured, he was carried on a litter to the camp, about ten miles distance. The next day the battalion set out for St. Augustine, but McNeil died on the way, Monday night at 10 o'clock. His remains were carried to St Augustine, and buried with the honors of war; after which the officers of the army met and passed resolutions expressive of their sense of his character as a soldier and as a man. Though only about twenty years of age when he fell, he was as brave an officer as ever commanded troops. Had he lived, and circumstances concurred, there is every reason for believing that he would have worthily emulated the bravery and generalship of his distinguished father.