

Southern Historical Society Papers.

Vol. XIX.

Richmond, Va., January.

1891.

THE VIRGINIA, OR MERRIMAC :

HER REAL PROJECTOR.

In the Richmond *Dispatch* of March 29th appeared an article, written by Mr J. W. H. Porter, under the supervision of Constructor John L. Porter, purporting to be a "correct version of the converting of the *Merrimac* into an iron-clad." Mr Porter says :

"In your issue of Sunday last, in the communication of Mr. Virginus Newton, headed 'The *Merrimac's* Men', there appears the following :

"Upon this hulk, according to plans furnished by Lieutenant John M. Brooke, of the Confederate States Navy (though the merit of the design is also claimed for Naval Constructor John L. Porter), was built a house or shield,' &c.

"This does a grave injustice to a gallant old Confederate and Virginian, who sacrificed his all upon the altar of his country; and had Mr. Newton known fully the facts it is believed that he would have published his article with the names above reversed."

The following dispassionate statement of Colonel Brooke of the facts connected with the conversion of the *Merrimac* is conclusive:

In October, 1887, I was requested by the editor of the *Century* to prepare a note stating what my relations were to the construction of the *Merrimac*. This note, containing the only public reference to Mr. Porter or his claim that I have ever made, will be found in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. I, p. 715; and on the following page a similar note by Constructor John L. Porter as to his relations. To these notes the attention of the reader is invited. But as the

CAUSE OF YANCEY'S DEATH.

"It has been several times stated since Mr. Yancey's death that it resulted from injuries received in this rencounter; but such is not the fact, as he died from a disease that could in no way have been superinduced by this cause."

Mr. Yancey died at Montgomery, 28th July, 1863, and B. H. Hill died in Atlanta, 19th August, 1882. O.

RICHMOND, VA., 16th March, 1891.

[From the *Richmond Dispatch*, January 2 and 13, 1891.]

THE TRUTH OF HISTORY.

[The following "open" correspondence is here connectedly presented in justice to all concerned.]

An Open Letter from Dr. R. L. Dabney to Dr. J. William Jones.

[For the *Richmond Dispatch*, January 2, 1892.]

AUSTIN, TEX., *December 15, 1891.*

To the Rev. Dr. John William Jones:

REV. AND DEAR SIR: My home is now nearly 2,000 miles from Virginia. I am an old man, infirm and totally blind. I have been recently told that you make me figure in the following mode in one of your published books of war reminiscences. I am told that your scene is laid at the battle of Malvern Hill in 1862, when I was chief-of-staff to General Jackson's corps, that I am represented as crouching behind a large gate-post as a shelter from artillery fire, and that I was twitted with the inconsistency between this act and that doctrine of a protecting Providence which I had preached to the soldiers. I am also told that this fiction is actually illustrated by a picture representing my face and person. This can add only a very stinging point to the story.

I have to assure you that the whole story is absolutely false, and never had even a pretext of fact to palliate its invention. You were not present on the spot yourself, and, of course, do not assert the

story on your personal knowledge. You have evidently been imposed on by one of those baseless canards of which the idle gossip of the camps was so prolific. You and I both endeavor to live by that Divine rule: "Do unto others as you wish they should do to you." I request you to apply this question to yourself: Had your connection with the Confederate armies been like mine—brief and modest—how would you like to have it made known to posterity by the pen of the popular historian so as to leave you standing in the attitude of a skulker, and a butt for quite a "silly and scurvy jest?" You would not feel reconciled to the attitude by the two facts that the whole picture was and is utterly fictitious, and that at this late day only one in ten of those who have read the story will ever see its correction.

The authentic facts of the case are these: General Jackson was himself present during that terrible artillery fire, having dismounted, as all the officers of his staff were advised to do, and was standing much nearer those noted gate-posts than I was. At last, when the fire became very terrible, he flung himself upon his horse and galloped to the rear, but I was under orders from him to remain near the spot in order to direct movements. This I did until my tasks were finished. The interval between his retirement and mine I spent partly in conference with General Hood, who was standing dismounted in front of his brigade, some forty or fifty yards east of the gate-posts.

Very respectfully yours, etc.,

R. L. DABNEY.

Dr. J. William Jones' Reply to the "Open Letter" of Rev. Dr. R. L. Dabney.

ATLANTA, GA., *January 5, 1892.*

Rev. Dr. R. L. Dabney:

MY DEAR BROTHER,—I have just seen your "open letter" to me, published in the *Richmond Dispatch* of the 2d instant, and I hasten to assure you of my deep regret that I have connected your name with an anecdote which you pronounce without foundation, and especially that you regard it (or at least the version of it you have heard) as reflecting upon you, and placing you in a false and discreditable light.

Let me assure you that nothing was further from my purpose than to publish an incident of even doubtful authenticity, or to publish even what seemed to me authentic, if it should wound you, or seem to you or to any one to reflect upon you in the least degree.

The facts in the case are simply these :

I had heard this anecdote told a number of times in the camp and since the war, and had seen it in print probably five or six times. I had never heard it denied, or seen its authenticity questioned, and I really believed, until I saw your "open letter," that it was entirely authentic. Your statement, of course, settled the matter, and I shall never repeat the anecdote again; shall ask my publishers to suppress it in future editions of my book, and shall do everything in my power to correct it. But when I used it to illustrate a point in my "Christ in the Camp," it was in the full assurance of its authenticity.

Yet I would never have used a well-authenticated anecdote had I supposed for a moment that it either placed you "in the attitude of a skulker," or that any one would so regard it, or that it would in any way wound you; but I would respectfully submit that the friend who told you of it has, unintentionally, of course, misrepresented the tone and spirit of my publication, and made it mean what the language does not imply.

And in order that this may be seen, I feel constrained to quote the passage from "Christ in the Camp" in full, although I am loth to do so, as the anecdote proved to be a "baseless canard."

In speaking of the faithful workers, who preached to the soldiers under the most adverse circumstances, I say :

"Rev. Dr. R. L. Dabney was a gallant and efficient officer on Jackson's staff, and often preached to the men at headquarters and in their camps and bivouacs as opportunity offered. On this march he preached a very able sermon on 'Special Providence,' and in the course of which he used this emphatic language: 'Men, you need not be trying to dodge shot, or shell, or minnie. Every one of these strikes *just where the Lord permits it to strike, and nowhere else*, and you are perfectly safe where the missiles of death fly thickest until Jehovah permits you to be stricken.'

"Major Nelson, of General Ewell's staff, one of the bravest of the brave, and an humble Christian and devout churchman, heard that sermon, and did not fully endorse what he called its 'extreme Calvinism.'

"During the battle of Malvern Hill General Jackson rode, as was his wont, into the very hottest fire, and for some time he and his staff sat on their horses at a point at which there was a converging fire, but 'old Stonewall' seemed to be entirely oblivious of it until one of his couriers was killed, when he turned to his staff and told

them to dismount and shelter themselves. Dr. Dabney chanced to be near a very large, thick oak gate-post, and he very wisely got behind that, sitting bolt upright with his back against it. Soon after he had assumed this position Major Nelson rode up to bring some message from General Ewell to General Jackson, and with a soldier's keen eye at once took in the situation. Delivering his message, he at once rode straight to Dr. Dabney, and, with a graceful military salute, said: 'Major Dabney, every shot and shell and minnie strikes *just where the Lord permits*, and you must excuse me, sir, for expressing my surprise that you are seeking to *put an oak gate-post between you and Special Providence.*'

"But the great theologian was fully equal to the occasion, and at once replied: 'Why Major, you do not understand the doctrine of "Special Providence." I believe and teach it with all my heart, and *I look upon this thick gate-post as a very "Special Providence" just at this juncture.*'"

It will thus be seen that I alluded to you as "a gallant and efficient officer on General Jackson's staff"; that I say that General Jackson *ordered* his staff "to dismount and shelter themselves"; that I say that "Dr. Dabney chanced to be near a very large, thick oak gate-post, and he very wisely got behind that, sitting bolt upright, with his back against it"; and that I say that "the great theologian was fully equal to the occasion," and report him as getting decidedly the best of the *repartee* between two gallant soldiers under terrific fire.

Pardon me for adding just this: In writing a great deal, as I have done, to vindicate at the bar of history the name and fame of the Confederate soldier, I have never knowingly penned a sentence which did injustice to the humblest private in the ranks. Far less am I capable of intentionally wronging one whose devoted and life-long service to our evangelical Christianity—whose gallant and efficient service on the staff of Stonewall Jackson, and whose admirable biography of his chief, and able and unanswerable "Vindication of Virginia and the South," have won my highest respect and warmest admiration.

Again expressing my profound regret that I have inadvertently wounded one whom for many years I have counted my personal friend, with sincere sympathy for you in your affliction, and with the earnest prayer that God may long spare you for the noble work you are now doing, I am yours fraternally,

J. WILLIAM JONES.