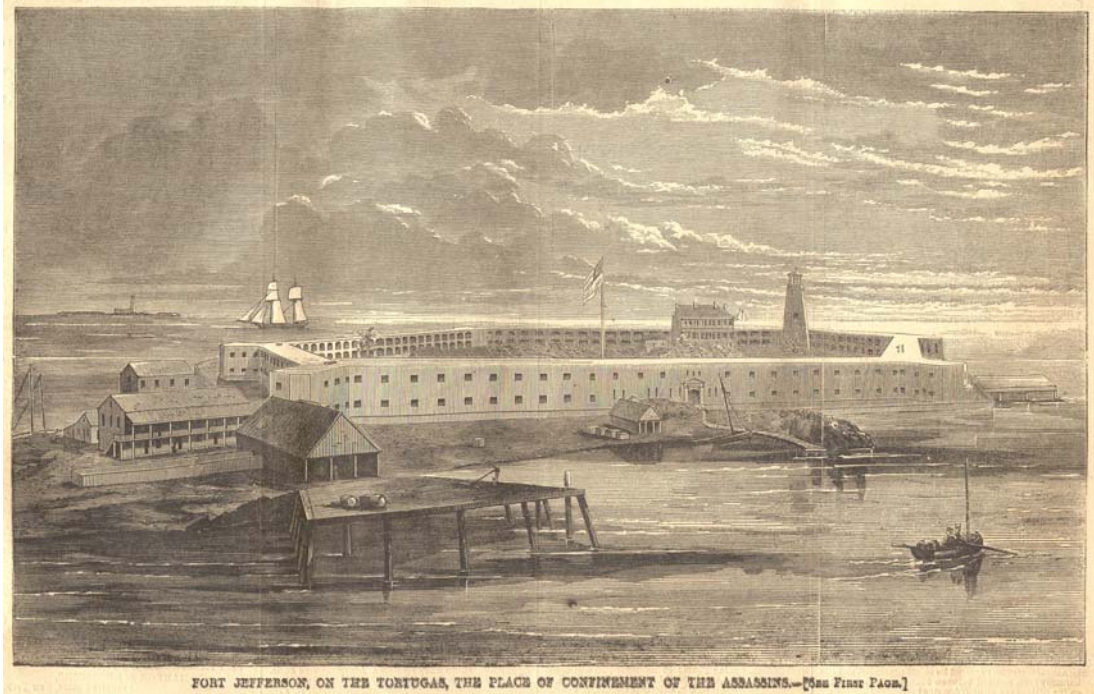


A Letter From Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas in 1862

By Corey Malcom

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A sketch of Fort Jefferson, Harper's Weekly Aug.26,1865

Nearly 70 miles to the west of Key West, Florida, lie the Dry Tortugas, a cluster of seven small islands surrounded by crystal clear water and pristine coral reefs. Historically, Juan Ponce de Leon first noted these islands during his explorations of the Florida coast in 1513. He recorded taking a large number of sea turtles, and the absence of any fresh water at the islands, the combination of which led to their current name. For many years after, the islands served as an important reference point for mariners traversing the Florida Straits.

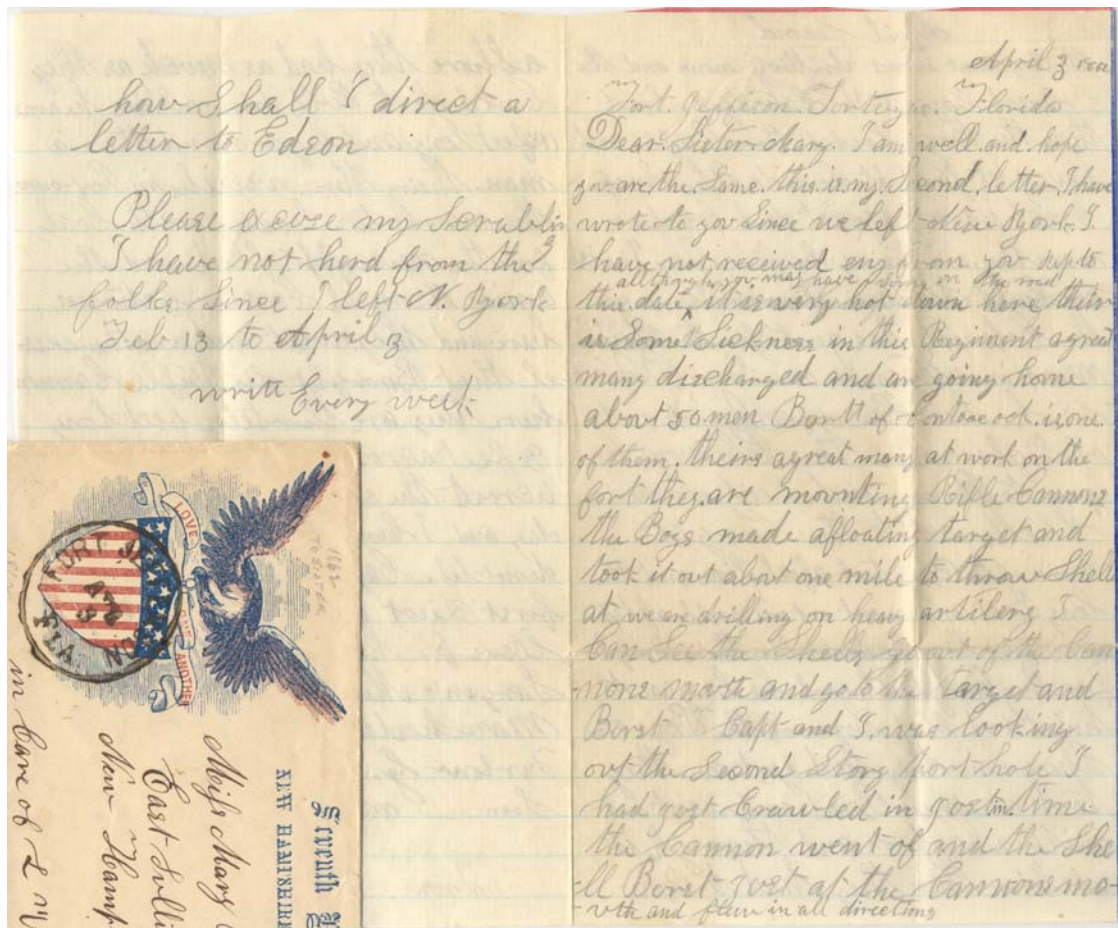
Soon after taking control of Florida in 1821, the United States began to develop these remote islands by building a lighthouse on Garden Key. The strategic importance of the Tortugas as sentinels at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico also became apparent and led the military to begin construction of Fort Jefferson in 1846. This monumental project, using mostly slave and prison laborers, was worked on for the next 30 years, but was never completed. Despite this, it is still one of the largest masonry structures in the western hemisphere, incorporating 16 million bricks and encompassing 11 acres.

The massive fort in the middle of the ocean did have its time, though, as an important military facility. As talk of secession began to spread throughout the southern states in late 1860, Lt. T.A. Craven, an officer in the Home Squadron patrolling the waters of the Florida Straits for illegal slavers, took it upon himself to station the US Steamer *Mohawk* at Fort Jefferson to prevent its seizure by "Bands of lawless men." When Major Lewis

Arnold arrived from Boston in January of 1861 with orders to take control of the fort, he found it occupied only by the lighthouse keeper and construction workers. He quickly set out to fortify it with men and guns. Through the early part of the Civil War Fort Jefferson served as a Union depot, strategically important in the naval blockade of the Confederacy and for distributing supplies to Union troops fighting in the southern campaign.

At its peak, the fort housed 450 guns and 1500 men. The majority of these troops lived in wooden barracks and tents in a makeshift camp set up on the large parade grounds. A rapidly advancing military technology caught up with the structure, and with the invention of rifled cannon in 1862, the fort's massive brick walls became penetrable. Also, some of the fort's engineering began to show flaws; the system of cisterns installed beneath the floors of the fort to hold freshwater, cracked as the structure settled. They became contaminated with seawater, making it impossible to effectively sustain large numbers of troops.

Fort Jefferson made a transition in emphasis from fortress to prison as the war continued. Four men convicted as conspirators in the assassination of President Lincoln were held there, the most well-known of them being Dr. Samuel Mudd. Prison laborers continued with construction until 1874, when the fort's moat was completed. The same year, there was a damaging setback by a hurricane. The Army essentially abandoned the facility after this, and turned it over to the Navy in 1882.



The original, handwritten copy of Upton's letter showing the first and last pages.

Orville Upton wrote the following letter on April 3, 1862 from Fort Jefferson to his sister Mar in East Sullivan, New Hampshire. Upton was a member of the 7th Volunteer Regiment of New Hampshire. They had been sent to the Tortugas on February 13th, 1862, and they stayed there until June 16th, when they were ordered to South Carolina. Upton's words offer a glimpse into what life was like at fort Jefferson for a Civil War soldier. It is written with an upbeat, even playful, tone, and reflects a place where the men saw no direct conflict, spending their days working on the fort, firing artillery, conducting drills, provisioning Union vessels, fishing, worrying about illness, and gossiping about their officers. Despite the tone of Upton's letter, serving at the Tortugas was generally regarded as hot and boring, and though a violent death was unlikely there, the threat of contracting Yellow Fever was constant. Most men stationed there were happy when it was time to leave.

A line-by-line transcript of Upton's letter follows. His original punctuation and spelling have been left intact.

April 3 1862

Fort Jefferson. Tortugas. Florida

Dear Sister Mary. I am well. and. hope.

*you. are. the. Same. this. is. my. Second. letter. I have
wrote to you Since we left New York. I.*

Have not received eny from you Hope to

All though you may have Some on the road

this date.^ it is very hot down here & their

is Some Sick-ness in the Regiment a great

many discharged and are going home

about 50 men Burt of Contoocook is. one.

of them. Theirs a great many at work on the

fort they are mounting Rifle Cannons

the Boys made a floating target and

took it out about one mile to throw Shells

at we are drilling on heavy artillery I

can see the shells go out of the Can

-nons mouth and go to the target and

Burst Capt and I was looking

out the Second Story port hole I

had just crawled in just in time

the Cannon went of and the She

-ll Burst just at the Cannons mo

-outh and flew in all directions.

-p.2-

April Second

The Regiment is out drilling now and the

Coloneol Says with Cartridges load

then the boys loaded there rifles and

have just fired. It sounds like Snap

April Second
 The Regiment is out drilling now and the
 Colonel says with cartridges load
 them the Boys loaded there Rifles and
 have got fired it sounds like Snap
 Crackers only a great deal louder
 now they are firing by file. Oh. I wish
 you could see them. it is now after noon
 the Coloneol has just Gon to Key -
 West in a Steamer on Some Busine
 -ss he has scarcely got out
 of Sight when the Cannons Be
 gan to Roar and Sent Some
 shells out to the target
 8 or 10 of the Boys took a fish line and the
 long Boat and went out one mile after
 some fish they had not been there long be
 -fore they caught a shark he began to
 twist and flop some of the Boys on
 Shore saw they had got one they
 took another Boat and went out
 with a harpoon and through it
 at him then they had to Row
 ashore they had as much as they
 could do to Pull him ashore he was
 10 feet long and bigger round than a
 man. thing three vessels in Port now
 the Mary Porter. loading with Coal
 for the mississippi fleet. and the
 Union the mail Carrier between
 here and Key west. and another ves-
 sel that Brought six Rifle Cannon
 here they are thirteen feet long
 3 feet across one end and 2 1/2 feet
 across the other. the mail goes out to
 day and I can send this letter. the boys
 dont like Capt. he is crowding the
 first Lieut one or the other will
 leave for home before long. the
 Sargent Magon goes home to
 Manchester to day on 2 months
 Furlow G. H. Elliott. write
 soon my love to all
 From Onwill

The second and third pages of Upton's letter.

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-p.3-

*aShore they had as much as they
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man. theirs three vessels in Port now
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Sargent-Major goes home to
Manchester to day on 2 months
Furlow G.H. Elliott. write
Soon my love to all*

From Orville

-p.4-

*how shall I direct a
letter to Edson*

*Please excuse my Scrabbling
I have not heard from the
Folks Since I left N. York
Feb 13 to April 3*

write Every week

Note:

The Orville Upton letter, and print of Fort Jefferson were purchased for the MFMHS collection through a gift from Herbert and Ruth Schimmel. An additional, related resource that is well worth consulting is a series of letters written by fellow 7th New Hampshire soldier Calvin Shedd. His many letters to home provide an even more in-depth record of life at Civil War-era Fort Jefferson. Transcripts of Shedd's letters can be seen at:

<http://www.library.miami.edu/archives/shedd/letters.htm>