The Diary of James Dickson, Jr.

The diary, the subject of this paper, was purchased last July from Lawrence B. Romaine, a dealer in Americana of Middleboro, Massachusetts. According to Mr. Romaine, the author of the diary, James Dickson, Jr., met an accidental death on the coast of Georgia early in 1862 and was buried here while serving as a member of the crew of a blockade runner.

Most of my information concerning Dickson, the provenance of the diary, and the ship he sailed on has been obtained from Mr. Romaine. Apparently, if it had not been for a considerate captain, a sentimental family, a faithful caretaker and a bookman of Halifax, Nova Scotia, there would be neither diary nor memory of James Dickson extant today. Mr. Romaine says that what little he knows about James Dickson came to him from this bookman friend who got the diary from the caretaker of the Dickson estate. There are no members of the Dickson family living but the old homestead still stands about ten miles from Halifax. The story of the return of the blockade runner to Hantsport, short one of its crew, and the captain's tale of the accidental shooting in the excitement of trying to escape up a river in Georgia and the return of the leather bound diary were handed down by family memory only.

So far my researches, and I have had time to do very little, have unearthed no additional information about Dickson. However, I have established the existence of the ship. It was as Dickson wrote, the Standard of Windsor, Nova Scotia, a brigantine of 112 tons, with the signal letters S.G.Q.V., sailing under British registry. There is also a record of it having entered and cleared the Brunswick District four times (two round trips) in 1862. I am still working on the project and hope to learn more about both the ship and Dickson.

It may be surmised that Dickson, together with his mother and perhaps, his immediate family, went to New York before the War to seek his fortune. The fortune did not come as easily as he had hoped. I shall give you a sketchy summary of the diary, using numerous excerpts from it in order for you to get the flavor of Dickson's style and descriptive ability.
and in the late fall of 1861, he had the idea of improving his condition by helping to run contraband goods into the Confederacy. Accordingly he made plans to join the crew of the Standard in Nova Scotia and the diary begins in New York a few days before he boards a ship for Nova Scotia to begin the adventure which ended in his death.

He and an unnamed companion boarded the British Brigantine Lilly Dale in New York harbor on December 17, 1861 for the voyage to Hantsport, N. S. At 7:00 a.m. the Lilly Dale weighed anchor and stood down with ebb to the Battery where it had to anchor under the guns of a revenue cutter until the Lilly Dale's papers could be examined. Dickson and his companion went below concealing themselves in the forecastle because they did not have pass ports.

"After some little time," Dickson wrote, "our skipper, a huge specimen from Nova Scotia, half potato, half codfish kind of fellow, put his bullet head, encased in a huge seal skin cap, down the companion way, and roared out "All right now!" The ship then sailed safely out of the Sound, up around Nantucket Shoals and then ran into bad weather in which their bearings were lost completely. All on board had planned to have Christmas dinner in Nova Scotia but on Christmas Day they were still lost and had to eat dinner on board ship. Dickson gives this description of it: "A fine dish indeed for a party of Esquimaux consisting of fat salt pork and salt codfish minced and then fried in a sea of hog oil." He continued by saying, "Poor old cook had been rather imprudent in eating too freely of his 'duff', imitating no doubt the Royal Beef-Eaters of Old, by way of restoring the confidence of all hands in the sanitary qualities of his bread." As a result the cook came down with "a severe indisposition somewhere in the gastric regions." In order to cure him, his mates mixed castor oil, rhubarb and another equally obnoxious remedy and poured the concoction in him - that treatment really put him "hors de combat" for some time.

Finally, they sighted Baker Island Light and ran in behind Mount Desert Rock (near Bar Harbor, Maine) in order to replenish their water supply. After
that they encountered a gale in Frenchman's Bay, were blown ashore, and almost destroyed by the tremendous waves. At last, on January 4th, 1862, the Lilly Dale reached Hantsport - a pretty rough voyage which might have discouraged a less stout-hearted fellow than our hero Mr. Dickson.

From Hantsport Dickson and his friends travelled by sleigh the fifty miles to Halifax in a blizzard. He stayed with relatives until the ship sailed. There the holiday activities were in full swing and teas, dinners, and dances were the order of the day. His descriptions of the festivities are excellent.

These care-free and enjoyable days came to an end on Friday, February 21, 1862 when the voyage South was begun. Dickson described their departure thus: "I bid Uncle Peter good-bye and once again we are afloat, this time on the Brigantine Standard of Windsor, N. S., ten all told on board, drawing 9 feet tonnage 110 - assorted cargo of groceries, medicines, boots, dry goods, lead & gun caps and cleared for Matamoros, Mexico - however as none expect to see, nor wish to see at least this voyage it is reasonable to suppose we are to run the blockade on the Georgia coast unless wrecked or captured." A day later he wrote, "We have a first rate cook and plenty of everything on board and anticipate making a quick run Somewhere. Our crew are just the lads, all good sailors but are just a little the worst of for too much 'rum' however today is 'tapering off' and by Sunday they will be in as good trim as the Standard."

On the 25th the prospects were not so bright, for the Standard encountered foul weather - weather that was really foul. I shall let Dickson tell you what happened. "No fire in the galley today that is very evident, shipped another sea over the bulwarks, stove in the galley doors, water cask got adrift and considerable trouble in securing it, after securing the gall doors and planking == Ben called all hands below in the Cabin as the forecastle was untenable == had some hard tack and raw ham served out and water, our crew where cold, wet and
hungry but even amongst these trials the joke would pass around, the pipe pass around, the Captain gave us all hands a good pull out of his own demijohn to keep us all our spirits - The poor fellow was lying in his buncck sick - it was evident that the brig was either not making as good weather of it or the seas where stil rising - Ben had just come down below from securing his things in the galley and was about going up the Companionway to take the man at the wheel his grog when we heard him sing out, in a moment she rolled heavily down to windward, our cabin became dark as midnight and a fearful Sea broke right upon us, thank God all where below but the man lashed to the wheel, our sky light was dashed in and torrents of water came down upon us in bunccks, amongst clothes, bread, saturating everything. Our brig had been completely swept all our bulwarks gone, boate stove to atoms, galley torn up from the decks and swept overboard with stove, coppers, barrel beef and pork torn from lashings on deck, chain cable all adrift, water washing down hatch ways forecastle..."

This was only the beginning, for they soon lost all bearings and were driven off their course (as they later learned) some 400 miles into the Atlantic. Not knowing where the Federal Blockaders might be stationed, they were afraid to sail west until they could ascertain their position. At this rather disheartening moment, the inmates of the cabin were merry despite their trials and tribulations and Dickson records an amusing incident. "Charley, 2nd mate, a hugh looking specimen of salt water fraternity from New Foundland, his feet hid by a pair of hugh cow skin boots, his body enveloped in oil clothes, a long white cap sourmounts his head, a tassel of rope yarn hangs from and falls on the side resting on a most piratical looking beard as he braces himself to meet the sudden roll of the Brig, his head enveloped with a blue cloud of smoke from an outrageous pipe, filled with the most villainous quality of Pig tail, asks with a knowing look - well boys, who the H- would sell a farm and to Sea, hard compliments and rough jokes that would give a Frenchman the staggers are given
and received..."

With the stove smashed beyond repair and his pots and pans gone, the cook built a fire on the chain cable forward and fried flap-jacks on an old iron coal shovel. Flap-jacks seem to have been their sole food for several weeks, sometimes hot, but more often cold.

Finally, a schooner from New Brunswick was sighted. From it, they managed to get their bearings, an old coffee pot, and some dry rations. They then set a course for the coast.

Even a second storm failed to dampen our hero's spirits and he relates amusingly his and Tom's efforts to exterminate the vermin in the cabin and particularly in their bunk.

"We turned in to fight the vermin, hungry, half-famished with cold and half starved for want of a decent meal—Tom and myself had up to within a week slept in same bunks but the vermin were rapidly increasing as we got down in this Latitude, they swarmed from every seam in the ship and as our bunks seemed to be their rendezvous before they started on their foraging expeditions everything that Lyons, the Bed-bug exterminator ever saw, heard, or dreamed of, tortured us—bedbugs like snapping turtles, 'grey-backs' that would almost walk away with your shirt and all—fleas running and jumping the Zouave drill in battalions over us, cockroaches in squadrons charging to the right and left with a noise that was equal to the tramp of cavalry; there name was legion and they were as savage as if they all had the hydrophobia... We set to work burning dom Kum to smoke them out and nearly smothered ourselves, after scratching and killing to very little purpose, we fell asleep on our wet couch to be aroused in a most unceremonious and uncomfortable manner—a sea most unfortunately broke over our quarters, washing the boards and canvas off and dashing in the glass of the skylight over us, in an instant deluging us with the icy cold water of the Atlantic almost strangling us whilst thousands of fleas, bedbugs, cockroaches, etc., etc., went into that land from which no traveller ever returns."
During this second storm the brig was visited by St. Elmo's Fire. Dickson called it St. Enoch's Fire and described the visitation as follows: "... at 10:00 p.m. the man at the wheel reported a ball of fire on the top-gallant yard, it was like the flame of a large lamp, of a pale yellow it ran out and back upon the yard several times, ran down the mast to the foreyard arm, ran out on the yard as if directed by a Supernatural being and then as suddenly disappeared as it came; of course, after that there curious things going to happen each knew what was going to occur, all smacking very strongly of salt and superstitions to which I must say, I was not altogether proof against; the Captain accounted as a warning that the gale was nearly at its height the nearer the deck the Sooner it will be over, the higher up towards the truck the farther off is the breaking of the gale, these meteors are called St. Enoch's Fire and are among the most curious things in nature."

The storm subsided on March 20 and on the 21st Dickson wrote "if we can hold on for several days at this rate, we will be in the Gulf, after which a few hours will decide whether we shall arrive on the coast of the Confederate States or be taken by the Yankees as a prize." Encouraging signs of gulf weed were seen on March 22nd and several dolphins and porpoises were caught. On this same date, the 22nd, Dickson relates another amusing incident. "All hands had run out of tobacco nearly a week ago, consequently many things are substituted, coffee is smoked (ground), oakum is smoked and chewed. Tea, however, is more in favor and for smoking as well as chewing is considered almost equal to tobacco, an amusing incident took place today [Saturday, the 22nd] the 1st mate, Hutchinson, it appears had been in the habit for a week past every day after dinner of re-chewing an old cud of tobacco and always after re-hiding it away in the binacle for future use, as was found out afterwards Charley, 2nd mate, had watched him and found where the coveted prize was hid, accordingly when Hutchinson went below to turn IN, Charley removed the oft chewed veteran cud from the binacle to his own mouth, the
following day he dried it and smoked it in his pipe, so today Hutchinson stole slyly to the binacle for his valued morsel, the treasure was gone. Charley had been seen smoking real tobacco instead of rope yearns so the mystery was explained and a big row between the mates was the result."

On March 23 the crew began mending sails and putting "everything in readiness for running in or running away from the Blockaders." They opened the hatches to dry things below and found that almost everything was more or less damaged except the medicines which were stored aft under the half deck.

During the night of Monday, March 24, the Standard almost collided with a large ship—missing it by inches. Dickson said "Our yards nearly touched as we passed each other. We could see the rays of light from the binacle light shine full on the face of the man at the wheel in another, we were fast leaving each other astern, a few seconds delay in seeing her and no doubt all would have met a watery grave. As I turned in I felt more than every my dependence on the Giver of all good."

Wednesday, 26th, both water and spirits were low and they tried to catch rain water in mainsail. Still did not know where they were. Another storm carried away the main stay sail. Coal and wood given out and everyone was wondering what would happen to them if the storm drove them out to sea again. Dickson wrote despairingly, "our coal and wood have given out and if we are again driven out God only knows what will become of us, in fact we are so driven, so reduced, so completely knocked-up with our continued privations that the main object of all on board is now to get succor and relief if we have even to ask it from our enemies, our disabled and forlorn condition would certainly compel them to alleviate our distress banish their suspicions as to the real motives of our voyage and our papers compel them to allow us to depart after supplying our wants. Only determination where the results of despair all fear of capture where banished as starvation and thirst where staring us straight in the face. All
were reduced by the labor and hardships of the voyage. At night we would seek our comfortless and frequently wet beds hungry, our throats nearly parched for want of water; this night in particular, from drinking the saline water that we caught from the main sail during the rain squall, I thought my throat would burst, I was in a perfect fever."

On Thursday, the 27th the weather cleared and they were able to take their bearings and decided they were 30 miles South of Fernandino, Florida. They made plans to run in either to Fernandino or Brunswick but about 2:00 p.m., heavy cannon fire was heard toward the shore. The crew thought it to be action between Confederate shore batteries and federal warships. About half past three p.m., the weather became slightly hazy and soon thereafter a cry from the lookout called their attention to a large steamer bearing right down on them through the haze. It was a blockading steamer. The Standard turned and fled but for some reason the steamer paid no attention to her although the crew of the Standard were expecting shots from her at any moment. She finally disappeared in the haze and Dickson says that "it was now evident that those on board were asleep, or that she must have been disabled on the coast with some of the batteries..."

This incident put the fear of the Blockaders in the crew of the Standard and all hands kept watch that night from "aloft and below for the lights of the blockading fleet or for any gun boats prowling about" --- All orders were given in a suppressed voice, boards and canvas were nailed over all the lights, companion way closed and covered to exclude a darkened lantern burning in the cabin, no lighted pipe was allowed on deck, etc. During all this time they were drifting northward along the coast and, according to reckonings, would be opposite Brunswick when day broke the following morning. Land was sighted as night faded and at 7:00 a.m., they "made in for the North end of an island." Here Dickson observed that "the tide was again on the ebb and the wind quite light, here we saw the absolute necessity of steamers alone attempting to run the blockade as most frequently
the very time you need the wind and its direction from the right quarter of the most vital importance it fails you, and a sailing vessel under such circumstances falls an easy prey to the enemy."

If the reckonings made the previous day were correct the Island was Sapelo and "we would be at the entrance of the Altamaha and not far from Darien, Georgia!" Although it was Sunday, there was no rest for the crew because the Standard went aground. All efforts to free the ship were of no avail and the decision was made to take as much of the most valuable cargo ashore at once as it was feared that the ship would go to pieces on the flood tide if not gotten off. Chests of medicine, drugs, tea, and men's clothes together with two double barrelled guns and ammunition were loaded into the boat and waving a white handkerchief from a hand spike the boat shoved off for the island's shore 4½ miles distant. The boat was unloaded hurriedly and shoved off the brig, leaving our hero and two others to carry the goods higher up the beach where they would be out of reach of the waves. This being done, the three men made a search for water but found only "a wild and rank vegetation rising from a bed of sand as unforbidding to us as the Great African desert." Found the Island to be uninhabited and decided they must be on guard against run away negroes "who undoubtedly swarmed all the islands and would perhaps have more occasion to dread them than the Yankees."

When they returned to the beach they found the boat coming through the surf with its second load. This was unloaded and the boat returned to the brig, leaving John Day on shore with the other three. "It was also made known to us," Dickson wrote, "that if the brig could not be gotten off they would remain on board until she went to pieces which she would soon do if the wind now North East increased, and save all that was possible, if surprised by any of the Blockaders they would set fire to the vessel and attempt to join us - they where not to delay sending us food and water a moment longer than was absolutely necessary - it was now Sunday afternoon and all we had eaten or drank since our frugal and scanty meal Saturday night was the small allowance of water now being dealt out, we had had no rest since
friday night, having all hands been on deck the entire night, had worked all day and where all but broke down, stil we where cheerful as long as the brig remained in sight."

The people on shore collected wood and made a roaring fire as the sailors on ship put up the sails in attempt to clear the reef. The diary tells of the despair of the group on shore as they saw the Brig shake herself loose and sail away. They wonder why - if Yankees were approaching, or what. The account of the miserable night on land is detailed and fascinating. They dropped off to sleep despite their anxiety but was awakened by the rising tide invading their beds and threatening to carry away the goods brought by the boat on its last trip. They succeeded in moving them to higher ground despite their fear of rattlesnakes and centipedes. Then they almost froze, Dickson says of it "I think I never felt it so severe even on Cranberry Island, the dew or mist was so heavy that it rolled off in big drops from my Mackintosh in spite of the great fire near us and heavy clothing we all shivered as if we had the ague. John during the night was our main-stay, either walking around us or renewing the fire. John poor fellow made us all laugh by one of his quaint rude remarks I have fight de ingins in Canada the nigers in de West Ingies cheated them chaps de Esquimos but I be damned if ever I seed such bloody place as this before at sea or on land no, no I'll keep my weather eye open never fear me sleeping." When day broke and no brig was in sight the depth of their despair was reached "strange, dark foreboding thoughts of impending evil rushed upon us all - our fate seemed already written, to its fullest depths we now felt the sad, dreary, and alone; yet we had been so often placed in extreme peril, we had become innured to danger, a philosophical fortitude to brave it out soared above despondency, thus it seemed we had become schooled even in our severest trials to struggle seemingly even against fate." Two men set out to hunt food and the others considered building a raft to reach the mainland. Action on the raft was postponed in favor of sleep and Dickson was suddenly awakened by
Tom calling "Jim, Jim heres the brigs boat, rouse up, quick. ... Tom was
deleirious with joy, I was nearly, if not quite crazy ... Dugan and John came
up to the camp almost at the very moment the boat touched the beach, at that
instant I verily believe we were more like escaped lunatics, than sane people,
men hugging one another, tears of joy actually coursing down weather beaten cheeks.
Stern nature had given away and we had for awhile become children again."

The ship had sailed away the evening before because of the Blockaders. When the
boat had returned to the brig it was about the time of high tide, they threw some
barrels of salt overboard to lighten the craft, put up all sail and succeeded in
dragging over the outer sand bar into deeper water. This was done just in time
for the Blockaders were in sight. They escaped by sailing north in shallow water
along the island because it was almost night and darkness soon fell. Two of the men
came back down the coast next morning in the boat and found the marooned part of
the crew with the effects already described.

Everyone began reloading the most valuable part of the goods, leaving behind
some of the less valuable and more bulky articles. They reached the brig about
2 p.m. with "the sun sending its rays down on us like a mid summers day." They
found that Ben, the Cook, had a large pile of slap jacks cooked for them.

With the crew reunited, a council of war was held and Tom Hernandez, a Savannah
pilot and a member of the Standard's crew, decided they were off St. Simon's, the
mouth of the Altamaha River and about thirty or thirty-five miles from Darien.

His opinion was accepted and preparations were made to proceed up the river and
procure a pilot to take the Standard to a place of safety. A white flag was placed
in the bow and the English flag a sevenpence half-penny cotton Union Jack handker-
chief in the stern, a tin pan of slap jacks, a valise and small carpet bag of Dickson's
and a small trunk of Tom's were put in the "leakey" boat. Six of the crew, including
Dickson, got into it and started up the river. The end of the diary is near and I
shall allow Dickson to tell the rest of it.

"We came into the river which like all the streams on the Georgia coast was
very circuteous, as far as the eye could reach marsh, marsh not a house, boat or anything betoking an inhabited country could be seen; but on we kept releiving each other at the oars, faithfully during our duty, after some two hours hard toil, questions were put to Tom who acted as our pilot and steersman if he Knew or not, where we where as we evidently Come into a cross stream or branch on which was part of a "beacon" We had passed some time before, a very unsatisfactory reply having been given by Tom the men tired out as they were lost there patients as well as their tempers one of them attempted to strike Tom down with an oar on his refusing afterwards to releive Dugan or myself at the oar and trouble we soon could have had but for my interference and Dugans entreaties; A long pull and it seemed as if we would have to sleep in the marsh all night Salt water every where and our slap jacks gone, the sun had now set and as I stood up in the stern of the boat the rank marsh grass moved gently backward and forwards nothing to the west but an unbroken Sea of Cane and grass until bound by the golden Sunsett sky, to the left a small "Hammock" releiving the dreary wast, here and there a few ducks rose before us and flew beyond our gaze and now in coming sharply around one of the bends in the river a large white painted house partly hid in the dense foliage opened upon our delighted eyes. on we pulled, the stream our guide at one time on the starboard quarter another bend in the river and soon the "Mansion" would be off the opposite quarter of the boat, again we would apparently be pulling directly from it and it right over the stern, about dusk we came up to a wharf & opposite the house, which lay apparently inland about a mile, making fast the boat we jumped ashore taking two flags with us, I going ahead with Dugan, carring them a few hundred yards over a kind of Causway, we came to a stream, a small "bridge"

There the diary ends abruptly in the middle of a sentence on the page describing the events for Monday, March 31, 1862. We can only conjecture as to how its author met death. Did he have the diary with him and was writing it that night in the "Mansion" when death accidentally struck him? Had they been successful in
their mission, returned to the Brig and he was writing aboard it when he came to his untimely end? I do not now know and probably never will. It is a historical record, however, that the Standard made two trips to Georgia in 1862 and this was the first. The boat returned to Nova Scotia, leaving the body of one of its crew behind. Was he buried in the grounds of the big white mansion where his bones still lie or was he buried in the nearest most convenient unmarked spot?

The writing and care of the diary on ship board also raises a few questions. The volume is in excellent condition, showing no water stains at all. Dickson must have kept it wrapped in oil skins and stored in his trunk or some equally dry place. The writing is unbelievably uniform and regular to have been written on board a small-storm-tossed ship. Some of it was written on the stormiest days. How could he have written so well while the ship was being tossed like a nut shell?

The contents vividly portray the physical hardships and the mental anxiety that the crew of a sailing ship underwent in running the blockade. It also shows that the blockade was in effect early in 1862 although it is generally believed that the blockade did not amount to much until near the end of 1862. Judging from the experiences of the Standard there were numerous blockade ships plying the Georgia Coastal waters early in 1862. I am sure the Federal steamers described by Dickson were not creations of his imagination.

The diary is well-written and the style entertaining. Dickson gave vivid descriptions of storms, landscapes, festivities, or whatever else he set his pen to. His descriptive powers were much better than his ability to spell. Some words he misspells consistently, for example, "were" is always "where", "bunk" is "bunck", "their" is "there", "huge" is "hugh", and many other words are misspelled throughout the diary. There are no paragraphs and precious little punctuation. Sentences are not indicated by either punctuation or capitalization of the initial letter of the first word. Despite its defects it makes engrossing reading and is an interesting if not valuable unpublished chapter in the Civil War story. It has double interest for us - Civil War and Georgia.
September 5, 1956

Mr. G. W. Jacobs  
233 Kings Highway  
Decatur, Georgia

Dear Mr. Jacobs:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to the DeKalb Historical Society. I have not progressed very far in my investigation of the diary kept during the winter of 1861-62 by a sailor on The Standard, a blockade runner sailing out of Windsor, Nova Scotia. However, the diary is interesting and I believe you might enjoy hearing about it. If you wish a specific title, we might call the talk "A Blockade Runner Who Remained in Georgia."

I shall be at the Decatur-DeKalb Library at 7:30 p.m. on September 27.

With good wishes, I am

Sincerely yours,

W. P. Kellam  
Director of Libraries

WPK:md
Decatur, Georgia, 
Sept. 1, 1956.

Dr. W. P. Kellam, 
Director of Libraries, 
University of Georgia, 
Athens, Georgia.

Dear Doctor Kellam:

The President of our DeKalb Historical Society, Mr. David Ansley, has told me of his recent pleasant contacts with you in connection with the microfilming of files of the DeKalb New Era, recently acquired by our Society. He also reports that you have been engaged in the interesting project of editing and preparing for publication "The Diary of a Confederate Blockade Runner", or similar title.

As Vice-President and Program Chairman for the DeKalb Historical Society, I feel certain that I am expressing the wishes of the other officers and our entire membership, in extending to you a cordial invitation to be our guest speaker for the first meeting of the fall season. The title and subject matter we leave to you, hoping that you will be able to give us some of the highlights from the Confederate Diary mentioned above. A small but very much interested and history-minded group like ours will appreciate a presentation as "folksy" and informal as you may choose to make it, not expecting in any wise that you will prepare a formal "Paper" or "Dissertation", on this short notice at any rate.

We will meet Thursday, September 27th, at 7:30 P.M., at the Decatur-DeKalb Library on Sycamore Street, just east of the Presbyterian Church, and one block east of the Court-house. The entrance to the Audio-visual Room, where we meet, faces the driveway alongside the Library, and is near the rear of the building. Kindly notify me as soon as you can whether you will be with us on that date, and the title to be announced.

Very truly yours,

GEORGE WILLIAM JACOBS, II, 
First Vice President, 
DeKalb Historical Society.

233 Kings Highway, 
Decatur, Georgia.