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JAMES MURRAY MASON

AND

JOHN SLIDELL

IN FORT WARREN, BOSTON HARBOR

WITH OTHER MATTER RELATING TO
THE WAR OF THE REBELLION

BY

SAMUEL ABBOTT GREEN



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SAMUEL ABBOTT GREEN

CAMBRIDGE

JOHN WILSON AND SON

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FROM THE
PROCEEDINGS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY
FOR DECEMBER, 1911

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JAMES MURRAY MASON AND JOHN SLIDELL

IN FORT WARREN, BOSTON HARBOR

WITH OTHER MATTER RELATING TO THE WAR OF THE REBELLION



At a meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY held in Boston on Thursday, December 14, 1911, DR. SAMUEL A. GREEN read the following paper:

Agreeably to the suggestion of Mr. Adams that I should give at this meeting my recollections of Messrs. James Murray Mason and John Slidell, and other prisoners confined at Fort Warren, near the beginning of the War of the Rebellion, I will try to do so, though they are dimmed by the mists of time. These reminiscences, in the main sifted through the lapse of half a century, are both few and faint, but certain incidents were impressed in detail so deep in my memory that a life-time is not long enough to forget them.

During the War I witnessed many events that have become of historic interest, but from the want on my part of a due appreciation of their influence on the great questions of the day, I paid little attention to them at the time of their occurrence. But not so in my intercourse with the two commissioners of the South, whom I met several times a day in a social and informal manner. They both were gentlemen of education, and of great political prominence in their section of the country. While I could not smooth the roughness nor in any way soften the asperities of the situation, I had it in my power

in some slight degree to relieve the friction that necessarily existed. All parcels sent from this city to the Fort, particularly such packages as were supposed to contain bottles, were examined by a proper officer at the landing where the steamer came twice a day, bringing food and other necessary articles for a large number of men. Anything addressed to me or the Medical Department — of which I was then at the head — was passed without delay or examination. I knew that the commissioners, while leading their customary life, used stimulants which cheer but not inebriate, when taken in moderation; and I felt it to be my social duty, as well as professional, to keep them in their usual and regular habits.

In going my rounds each morning I used to make a long visit in their quarters, as I took much pleasure in talking with them. Often I would spend an hour there. They both had been United States Senators and had seen much of public life in Washington and elsewhere, and were familiar with the great questions of the day. While they were rampant rebels, and never ceased in their violent denunciations of the government, for unaccountable reasons I enjoyed my relations with them. Perhaps it was the fascination exerted by two men, then very much in the public eye, over a young man who had never before heard treason talked so openly and who at that time was studying the question from a student's or a psychological point of view.

I remember that Mr. Slidell once mentioned to me that he was a Northern man by birth, and that he was educated at a Northern college, at which I was somewhat astonished. This statement I found, later, to be strictly correct; though a few years after graduation he removed to Louisiana, where he became eminent as a lawyer and prominent as a politician. He was always an ardent supporter of the doctrines of State-rights, and he declined a cabinet appointment under President Buchanan. I remember well he told me one morning that, just as soon as the English government heard of the "outrage" — as he called it — on the steamer *Trent*, the authorities in London would demand the immediate surrender of the two commissioners with an apology from the American government for the act. If this demand was not complied with at once by the authorities here, war would be declared by Great Britain.

He said furthermore that he expected by the beginning of the new year to be on his way to England, together with Mr. Mason, his colleague, after being released from the Fort by orders from Washington. If war was declared by England, a naval force would be sent to our shores, and the blockade along the Southern coast would be raised in less than six weeks; and then the Confederacy would become an acknowledged fact. He thought that Mr. Lincoln's administration would foresee this state of affairs and release them at once.

To all this I listened attentively and respectfully, but made no reply. I had no knowledge of international law, and I could give no satisfactory answer to his statements. The newspapers, however, were discussing the question freely, and their columns were full of leaders on the subject. So far as I had any opinion on the law, it was gained from the public prints; and, of course, that was not the view taken by the commissioners.

The newspapers hereabouts very generally, unanimously so far as my recollection goes, upheld the stand taken by Captain Wilkes, of the *San Jacinto*; and they reflected accurately public sentiment in the matter. A complimentary dinner was given at the Revere House to Captain Wilkes and his officers, at which the Governor of the Commonwealth, the Mayor of the city, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, together with other prominent citizens, spoke and all warmly applauded the act of Captain Wilkes. They seemed to vie with each other in giving praise to the daring naval officer and in bestowing compliments on him.

During the next few weeks, however, I noticed that Mr. Slidell's prediction came true. This was owing to the foresight of Mr. Seward, which involved a master stroke of diplomacy on his part. When the demand was made by the English government for the surrender of the commissioners, the Secretary of State in substance replied, that they should be liberated most readily, and that our action in this matter was in accordance with principles which the United States had always held and long maintained. He furthermore said that it was a matter of special congratulation that the British government had disavowed its former claims, namely, the right of search of foreign vessels in time of peace; and that it was now contending for what the United States had always insisted upon.

At this juncture the United States was in a tight fix. If Mr. Seward had not taken the course he did, the alternative was war with England, and the raising of the blockade of the Southern ports. This meant success for the seceding States. He displayed great wisdom in his policy. He showed that his action in this matter was entirely consistent with the great underlying principles long held by the American government; and thus he forestalled the criticism that was sure to be made by his own countrymen.

It so happened that some years previously I had known Mr. Slidell's secretary, George Eustis, in Washington, when he was a member of Congress from Louisiana. His father was a native of Boston and a nephew of Governor William Eustis. As George Eustis was now held in military custody, I tried to make his position as agreeable as possible under existing circumstances. We talked of our former acquaintanceship; and our present relations under unforeseen conditions were mutually respected.

It also happened that I had had a slight bowing acquaintance with Mr. Mason's secretary, James Edward Macfarland, who was a student in the Harvard Law School, where he took his LL.B. in the Class of 1849, while I was an undergraduate in college. It seemed to me very odd and strange that the exigencies of war should have brought together, now under vastly different circumstances, three chance acquaintances of a former period within the solid walls of a strong fort, but such is the whirligig of Time, and the irony of Fate!

The membership of the college as well as of the professional schools then was much smaller than it is now, and the intercourse between the young men of the various communities correspondingly closer than at present. The classes nowadays are more than ten times as large as in my day; and the disparity in numbers accounts for the greater intercourse at that period. Under the present circumstances it was my pleasure as well as duty to smooth the rough places and to soften the hard spots that lay in the paths of these two young men. They were fresh from Cuba, and well supplied with cigars — genuine Havanas — and I could supplement an evening's entertainment with other luxuries in keeping with the occasion. It was pleasant for me to do so, and presumably for them also.

So far as my knowledge goes, these prisoners never complained of the restraints under which they were held. They were allowed opportunity to take air and exercise as their health required; and they were permitted to write and receive unsealed letters, which were examined by proper officers, who were to see that they did not contain seditious sentiments. Personal intercourse with outsiders was not allowed except by permission from the authorities in Washington.

Less than two years later I was brought often into personal contact with Lieutenant D. M. Fairfax,¹ who had taken the two rebel commissioners from the English steamer *Trent*. In the early spring of 1863 my regiment (the 24th Massachusetts) had occupied Seabrook Island which commanded Seabrook Inlet, sometimes called North Edisto Inlet, very near Charleston harbor, subsequently a place of rendezvous for half a dozen monitors which were to take part in the assault on Fort Wagner and Fort Sumter. During the month of June, a hot season off the coast of South Carolina, life on an iron-clad was as uncomfortable as it could well be, and in any description of the weather it might be compared to what Sherman said war was. In consequence of this extreme heat the naval officers passed much of their time ashore, where I met them often. Of the several commanders one was Fairfax, now in charge of a monitor. In our frequent intercourse we spoke of the *Trent* episode, but never spent much time on the subject, as it was then a back number.

On another occasion I dined at the same table with Charles Bunker Dahlgren,² eldest son of Rear Admiral Dahlgren, who in a ship's cutter accompanied Lieutenant Fairfax, going from the *San Jacinto*. In this way I heard anew the description of the scene which took place aboard the *Trent* when the commissioners were transferred.

After all, the world is rather small, and in any quarter of the globe one is apt to run across somebody he has met somewhere or has known before. But Mason and Slidell were not the only men of distinction who were in custody at the Fort. There was Mr. Charles James Faulkner, who had been United States Minister to France, where he was appointed by President Buchanan. He had been prominent as a politician in Virginia

¹ Donald MacNeill Fairfax.

² Died, January 10, 1912.

and a member of Congress from that Commonwealth. He was a man of education and refinement, and an agreeable person to meet. It was said that he had influenced the French emperor to sympathize with the South in their struggle, for which reason he was recalled by President Lincoln. On his return to this country he was arrested as a disloyal citizen and confined in Fort Warren. At a later period he was exchanged for a member of Congress, Alfred Ely, of New York, who had been confined in Libby Prison, at Richmond, after his capture at the first Battle of Bull Run.

Other political prisoners were George W. Brown,¹ Mayor of Baltimore, Governor Charles S. Morehead,² of Kentucky, and Marshal George P. Kane,³ of Baltimore, all prominent in the early days of the Rebellion as sympathizers with the South, but who lived to see their hopes crushed. There were also a thousand men, more or less, who had been captured at Hatteras Inlet, when the two forts there had been taken. They were about as motley a crew as could easily be collected, varying in their ages from sixteen to sixty years. Their clothing was anything but uniform, and in their appearance might well be compared to Falstaff's soldiers near Coventry. These men, I remember, were very proud of the name "rebel," and wished to be known as rebels. They never would give up the struggle and were ready to die in the last ditch. During the campaign of the next year in North Carolina, after some of the battles and skirmishes in that State, I met several of these men again who had been duly exchanged for Union soldiers held by the rebels as prisoners.

During the time of my service at the Fort I received a note from a distinguished citizen of Boston,⁴ and a member of this Society, whose loyalty to the government was undoubted and whose liberality was unlimited, authorizing me to buy for Mr. Eustis anything needed for his comfort or pleasure. After

¹ George William Brown, who served as mayor less than one year, having been elected on a "reform" ticket. He was one of the Founders of the Maryland Historical Society in 1844.

² Charles Slaughter Morehead (1802-1868). He lived in England during the war, and passed his last years on his plantation near Greenville, Mississippi.

³ George Proctor Kane (1817-1878), a merchant, who had been collector of customs at Baltimore. He was mayor of the city at the time of his death.

⁴ William Appleton.

the receipt of the note I called on the writer and told him what in my opinion would be most acceptable to the gentleman in question, who in this matter represented the group from the *Trent*. I was then given a *carte blanche* to procure whatever was wanted by them and to distribute the articles as I saw fit. In accordance with these liberal instructions I bought fruit, flowers and other luxuries that were conducive to their comfort or pleasure; and at the same time I was careful to let the recipients know the source of the bounty.

While there was not one drop of blood in my veins sympathizing with the attempt to break up the Union, I did feel a sort of compassion and pity for these prisoners, — they were men of education and refinement, and now bereft of all the pleasures that go with Thanksgiving cheer; and I tried to treat them as I would have wished my friends to be treated in a similar situation. It was a source of some satisfaction to me that I was able to enliven in a slight degree the tedious hours of their monotonous life. When I took my leave of them, they wished me health and happiness; and I watched the outcome of the arrest with much interest. The two commissioners died within a few weeks of each other some years after the end of the war.

The two following papers are copied from the Executive Letter Files at the State House; and they give the reasons why the 24th Massachusetts Volunteers were ordered to Fort Warren:

September 28, [1861.]

Colonel Thomas A. Scott,
Assistant Secretary of War, Washington, D. C.

SIR, — I am instructed by His Excellency Governor Andrew to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of 24th inst., and to state that Massachusetts is now organizing eight regiments of infantry, one of cavalry and three batteries of artillery, besides which recruiting is going on here for the regular army to fill vacancies in the regiments from this State now in the field and for the regiments of other States.

The Governor is therefore anxious to avoid any steps which might delay the filling up of these regiments by starting any new organization at present, and if a company is to be raised especially to guard the prisoners at Fort Warren it would in effect take so many men from these regiments.

It would seem to him moreover that raw recruits entirely undrilled and undisciplined ought hardly to be entrusted with this delicate duty. And again one company could not furnish a sufficient guard, with the proper relief, for so large a work: as when it was garrisoned by Massachusetts volunteers a whole company was required for the guard each day.

The Governor therefore would suggest that instead of raising a new company for this duty he should be allowed to place in Fort Warren one of the regiments he is now raising. The 24th Mass. Volunteers, Colonel Thomas G. Stevenson, would answer admirably for this duty. Colonel Stevenson was in command of Fort Independence, Boston Harbor, for two months last spring, and distinguished himself by the neatness, order and discipline he enforced as well as by the drill of his battalion. This battalion is being now increased to a regiment — it numbers at present but 400 men; but these are well uniformed, equipped and drilled, and commanded by officers who are gentlemen of education and experience. The regiment while guarding the prisoners could go on with its own organization, and when ready to march its place might be supplied by another.

By this plan the expense of a new company would also be saved.

I am further to request that if this plan meets your approval you will please answer by telegraph. Very respectfully,

HARRISON RITCHIE,
*Lt. Col. and A. D. C.*¹

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT.
BOSTON, Oct. 16, 1861.

Telegram.

To Lieut. General [Winfield] Scott,
Washington, D. C.

Failing to receive authority for muster of Colonel Stevenson into service, have ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Francis A. Osborn, Twenty-fourth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers, with two hundred men, into Fort Warren, where he will be ready to receive prisoners on and after Saturday [the nineteenth]. Have also notified Col. Loomis.

A. G. BROWNE, JR.,
*Lieut. Col. and Military Sec'y.*²

The following letter will explain itself. When I called on the writer, as already mentioned, I found him in feeble health, and he lived only a short time afterward. He died at

¹ Executive Letter Files, v. 481-483.

² *Ib.*, vi. 318.

Longwood, on February 15, 1862, at the age of seventy-five years.

BOSTON Nov 23rd 1861

DEAR SIR, — I asked you to ascertain what was required and essential to the comfort of those confined at Fort Warren. My son Charles tells me, you said that fruit would be very acceptable. The season for fruit, as you are aware, has not been good; and we have almost none at this time except apples.

Among the prisoners daily expected, is Mr. Eustis in whom I have much interest from personal acquaintance and a long intimacy with his family to whom I am under many obligations. I wrote him some days since, proffering my services in any way consistent with our position, and the unhappy state of our Country. I have no knowledge of what is allowed to be communicated between those once intimate, and now severed and struggling for the destruction of each other.

It must be very troublesome to the Commander to examine so many communications as must be brought to his eye; but lest I aggravate the evil, I will to the point.

When attending Congress in July, as I was told, Mr. Eustis and wife were on their way to Washington, and again that he was detained in Alabama by fever, and that afterwards they were at the White Sulphur Springs in Virginia, for his health; whatever may have been his success in gaining health the transition to our climate must be fearful. Please see him, and inform me on the subject. I have said to him, that he would want some warm clothing &c., and to send to me for it and it should be attended to. I sent him some wine, and newspapers, some days since. The periodicals, such as the London Westminster and Edinboro Reviews, I would cheerfully send him if desired. You are aware my health would not allow me to visit the Fort were I permitted so to do.

Should you get this in time to write me in reply on Monday, I wish you particularly so to do, as I expect to be absent from Boston for some days. Sincerely yours

WM. APPLETON.

D^r Green, Fort Warren.

I am tempted to add to this paper a bit of personal matter which has no connection with the Mason and Slidell affair, though it relates to the War of the Rebellion. I was among the last persons that ever had any long conversation with

Robert Gould Shaw, the brave and fearless Colonel of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers (a colored regiment), who lost his life in the assault on Fort Wagner. His regiment was drawn up on the beach, together with other troops, directly in front of my tent on Morris Island. Having known Bob Shaw and his father's family for many years, I stepped down to the beach and had a long talk with him. He was moving about at random among his officers and men, some of whom I knew; and the subject of conversation among them was anything but what was uppermost in their minds. Everybody knew that there was to be a fearful fight, and that each one stood on the edge of a perilous battle; but this was not talked about. Each one tried to be cheerful, but the clouds hung low. Soon the column started to march up the beach; and it was not long before the roar of cannon and the rattle of musketry proclaimed the fact that the battle had begun in good earnest. In due time we had visible proof of it by the arrival of the wounded at the Post Hospital which was under my charge as Chief Medical Officer of the Island.

To me July 18, the day of attack on Fort Wagner, was a memorable anniversary, as a sharp skirmish just two years before took place in Virginia, which is now known as the fight at Blackburn's Ford, the forerunner of the first Bull Run, where I was present. A few days after the assault I accompanied Dr. John J. Craven, Medical Director of the Department of the South, aboard the hospital ship *Cosmopolitan*, under a flag of truce, which sailed up under the guns of Fort Sumter, where we were met by another steamer coming from Charleston, with surgeons in charge of our wounded, when we exchanged prisoners. On that occasion we received more men than we gave, as so many of ours had fallen in Fort Wagner that the defenders had the advantage of us in the numbers captured. While engaged in this exchange of prisoners I improved the opportunity to swap late New York newspapers for those of Charleston with the Southern medical officers. In going back to Morris Island I examined with much interest the account there given of the assault on the Fort. One account said that a young officer with Colonel's shoulder straps was killed, and undoubtedly he was Colonel Shaw; and it added that they had buried him *with his niggers*. This ex-

pression seemed to me, for various reasons, to be in bad taste. On my return to the Island I took this newspaper to General Gillmore and gave it to him.

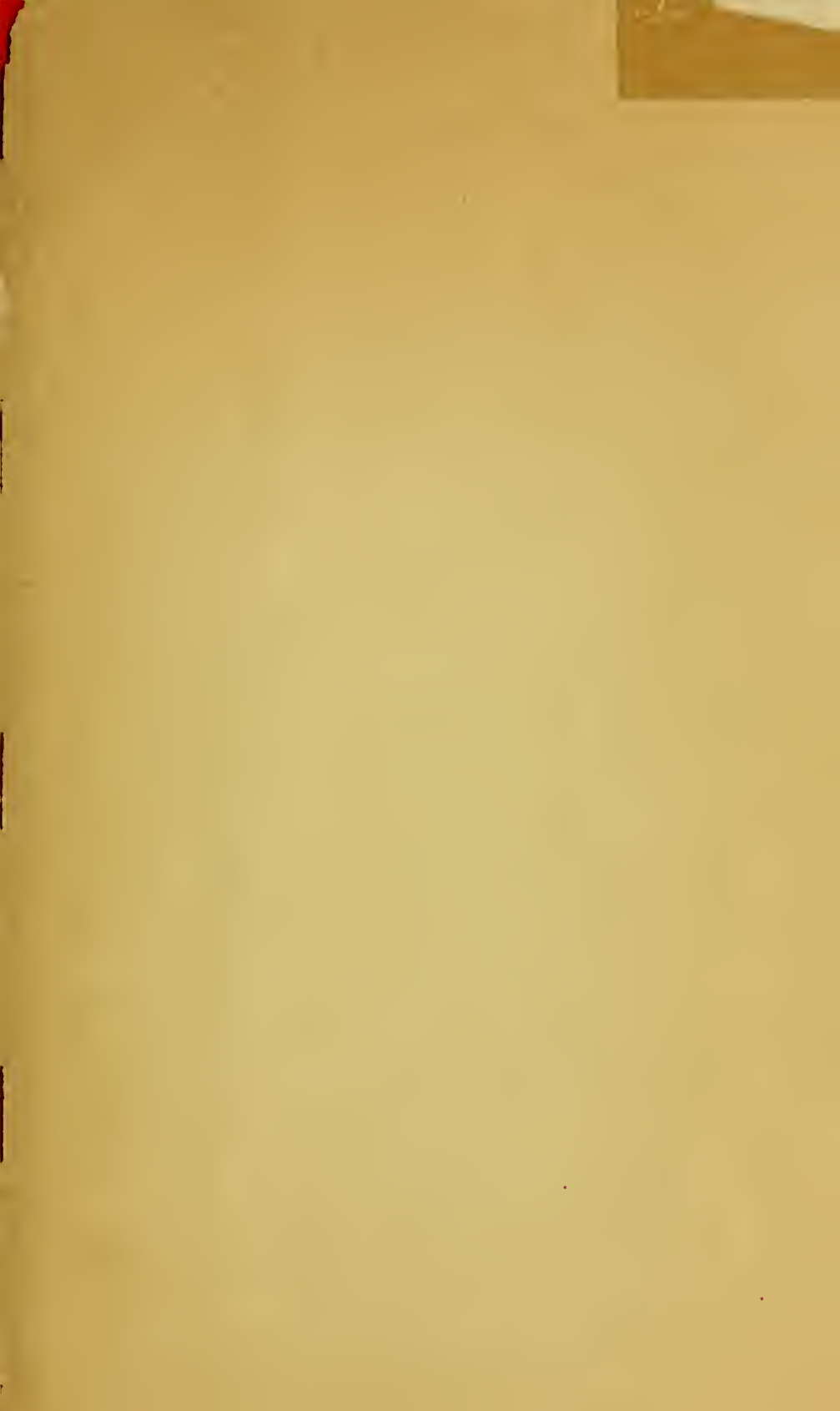
Two or three days before the attack on Wagner there was a skirmish on James Island in which Shaw's men met with some loss. It was the first time that this colored regiment had ever been in action, and they received great credit for their conduct under fire. The engagement was commanded by General Terry, on whose staff I was then serving.

The skirmish was fought over a low piece of sandy land near the coast, covered with marsh grass of considerable height; and the ground was honeycombed with the holes of fiddler-crabs. Word came to me that the bodies of some of the colored men killed in this fight had been mutilated by the enemy; and I felt it to be my duty to look into the matter and find out the truth. With that object in view, after the action I walked over the field, examining carefully the ground and looking for the mutilated remains of soldiers. As a result I found several bodies, which were almost wholly concealed by the tall marsh grass; and, sure enough, the small crabs had eaten away the cuticle in spots off the faces of the dead men, leaving a gruesome sight. The little wretches had attacked parts under the eyes, behind the ears, and other tender places; and there were scores of the ravenous crustaceans still at work when I found them, which disappeared as if by magic, as soon as they were disturbed. This discovery explained satisfactorily the rumors then circulating among the men. I went at once to Colonel Shaw and reported to him the facts, telling him at the same time that he had better return with me and see the exact state of affairs for himself, which he promptly did. The Colonel was soon satisfied that my statement was correct. I was afraid that some exaggerated account would get into the partisan newspapers of the North, and make a mountain out of a mole-hill. My only object was to settle the matter aright. So far as my knowledge goes, the subject was never mentioned in the public prints.

Shaw was a brave officer and was buried where he fell; and today he fills an unknown grave. His memory, however, is preserved both in bronze and marble elsewhere, and it is of little moment where his mortal remains lie. His name has been

given to schools in different parts of the country, where it is cherished by the rising generation. He never thought of fame, but only of duty; and in his death he gained the one and did the other.

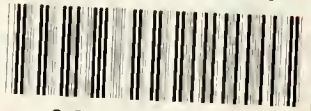
Facts lie at the foundations of history, and they are the raw material of all narrative writing; and this is my excuse for adding a bit of personal matter.







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