

The Battle of Augusta

September 27, 1862

by Rev. W. G. Bradford

The following account of the Augusta fight is by Rev. W. G. Bradford, who as a twelve year old boy, followed his father, Colonel Bradford, that day not realizing his danger, and he has a vivid recollection of that day's carnage.

When the Confederates fired on Ft. Sumpter, and Lincoln called for volunteers, my father, Dr. J. Bradford, though a slave-holder by inheritance, said to my mother in the presence of my sister and myself, "I must go to the front to defend the Union." The ring of decision in his voice is thrilling to remember. He was not a military man, by profession, but a physician and surgeon, and received commission as a surgeon of Nelson's Brigade, with Mr. Lincoln's signature, which we now possess. Though a boy of but 11 years, I well remember the parting scene . . . He was in the vigor of robust manhood. Then after a lapse of approximately a year or more he returned skeletonized by fever, contracted in the Southern swamps, from which he ultimately died October 31, 1871. So when the rebels invaded Kentucky in 1862, he was at home on furlough or some other official permit for recovery of his health. Then he was made Colonel of the Home Guards. How that was I do not know, except that it was dictated by fitness and that he had won distinction on fields of battle by such incidents as that at Pittsburgh Landing when a body of Federal troops that had lost its officers became panic stricken and broke into disorderly retreat, and he rallied them and led them back into battle. It was well known that General Nelson, (with many noble traits my father said) was a man of unruly temper and intemperate speech. One day he said to my father, "Bradford, why don't you wear pistols on dress parade. I believe you are too damned stingy!" "General," said my father, "You are the reason why I do not wear pistols, I fear you might be the first man on whom I would use them." There was never a break between them. They were warm personal friends - brave men in a common cause. They rode together from the steamboat that bore the vanguard of Nelson's brigade across the river to the reinforcement of the hard pressed Federals at Pittsburgh Landing. What I am writing I heard from his lips, charmed as many a small boy has been by recital of the perils in which his father was an actor. At Brooksville, when the Home Guards were recruited he was too weak to walk at the head of the recruiting squad. Before the sudden attack was made on Augusta, my father had (I think) about 200 men, but a day or so before the battle he had sent Captain Reagan with 125 men on some expedition from which they had not returned, leaving him but 75 men to defend the town. He had anticipated that Augusta might be the object of a raid and had asked General Wright to send him reinforcements, but Wright replied they could not have them. I heard my father say that they offered him 4,000 men and to make him a Brigadier General, but that he declined. When it became known that the rebels were marching on Augusta, my father went out to the gunboats (I watched him going out in a skiff and heard his report on returning) and instructed Captain Simms, that he would have the women and children placed in the cellars for protection, and the men in the houses for defense and that when the rebels entered the town streets, the gun boats should sweep the streets with canister and grape shot and his men would pick them off with their rifles and they would whip the rebels. He confidently expected that by this method the Federals would win. This plan of battle was graven on my memory, repeated by his own lips. Accordingly, my mother, sister and I were placed in the cellar of our home on Front street, the window of which commanded a view of the gun boats. When the rebels appeared on the hill back of the town, and planted a cannon (This I saw before going to the cellar) the gun boats fired twice or thrice and as was reported after the battle as the second shot killed a rebel on the hill right by the side of his cannon. I am not sure that a third shot was fired by a gun boat. But when a rebel shell burst near one of the gun boats (I can see the white globe of smoke in

memory from the window) and the rebels ran down the hill and into the town the gun boats without firing a single shot at them in the streets weighed the anchors and fled up the river. I came up out of the cellar at that juncture to the hall where my father was and was with him until the close of the battle.

It is a wonder to me that my mother permitted it, but I recall no objection from her. Few have been the hours in life so absorbingly interesting. The drama was so captivating that I do not remember having felt any sense of danger. That may have been because I was only 12 years old, consciously exempt from the perils that menace men. Also, I felt safe in the company of my father. I mentioned the fact to indicate that a battle doubtless so engages the minds of men that small room is left for fear in normal men. The rebels ran out on the bank east of town, (the river was low) and fired their muskets at the fleeing gun boats, but not doing any damage and when a discharge of canister would have left slain assailants on the bar.

When the boats deserted my father, his forces were too small to keep the rebels from firing all the houses in which his men were stationed. When the heroic defense became hopeless (how different it might have been with the 125 expeditionary Home Guards present) he had the same reason for surrendering that Grant urged upon Lee at Appotomax, and which Lee gracefully accepted – the useless further sacrifice of life. I heard my father cry the surrender in a loud voice. He had a Smith & Wesson breech loading rifle in his hand and stepped out briskly in the rear of the house after crying the surrender. I was in our front door. Then Major Morgan, who was in immediate command of the Confederates, came walking down Front Street 3 or 4 doors east of ours. For a moment I had a good look at him. I have never seen his like. He had evidently heard the cry of surrender though he had appeared suddenly. He wore an Indian head dress decked with feathers standing outward at the top and carried the largest pistol-half a rifle- I ever saw. He was just emerging from the presence of death in fury of battle and with the fighting passion on his face. I thought him to be the finest looking man I had ever seen. That he was a brave man may be evident, yet he must have been more manly than simply brave, for as a boy I felt no shrinking from his presence. I never thought of him then or since as being vicious. (I am sure) and in the light of what followed, even my first impression of this fierceness yielded to a far better view of him. For just the words, "Where is the Colonel," fell from the lips of the Major for the second time. My father returning without his gun and without side arms heard the Major before he saw him, and stepping quickly to the middle of the pavement and facing the grim looking warrior said, "Here he is! I would have whipped you had the gun boats stood by us!" I have never seen, except in sudden conversions to the Spirit of God, a more complete change in the countenance, manner and voice of a man that took place in Major Morgan. He knew at once that he had met a man like himself who was fearless of death in devotion to his cause. He rushed up to my father, embraced him fully, and said with tears in his voice if not in his eyes, "I love a brave man where ever I find him." Now it occurs to me, as I had not thought of before, that I saw no more of that big pistol! He who coined the phrase, "the bravest are always the tenderest" must have witnessed some such scene as that two chieftains, of martyr spirit after intensest conflict had met in brotherly love and in peace. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of Life."

Moffat has it, "be faithful thou you have to die, and I will give you the crown of Life." Doubtless many an honest man having been loyal to the best he knew has gone up from a battle field death had to be crowned with Everlasting Life. I am sure that Morgan embracing my father in manly admiration because he believes him to have been faithful to his cause was a scene which the white angels applauded. I think perhaps an orderly brought him a horse. Immediately after that James Weldon stepped out of a house four doors east of ours and having a musket in his hand and belligerency in his face, a Confederate who had just appeared challenged him to surrender. "I won't surrender," said Weldon. The rebel knew he meant it and started toward him with a fixed bayonet to run through him. My father stepped between them and said, "Jim, you must surrender." So far from dictating to father not to surrender, as has been reported, good soldier that he was, he obeyed his commander without a protest. But it makes me chuckle even

now to vividly remember that I clearly saw that Jim would have preferred to fight. I wish that he was alive so that I could talk to him about that almost tragic incident.

While these scenes were being enacted two of the brick buildings on this Front street square were burning. Our home was in the middle of the square. A steam boat appeared in the west offing of the river, meaning to the rebels, a gun boat, not fleeing from, but approaching musketeers. The battle had been more sanguinary to the rebels than for the number of the Home Guards. They were far from their base, close to the teeming population of the Northland and they evacuated the town as quickly as they had descended upon it, taking the Home Guards and my father with them.

He told us after returning that as he went over the hill he looked back thinking that his home would be in flames. At Lexington, he wrote General Kirby Smith a note asking that his men might be paroled and returned to their homes, adding that he had nothing to ask of himself. But he was paroled too. He said that the rebels were so embittered toward him for the loss of their men at Augusta that when he rode out of their lines in the dusk of the evening he expected every moment that they would shoot him.

An Eastern Editor once visited Augusta because he said that the "Battle of Augusta was one of the finest instances of citizen defense in the history of the War."