

CHARLES BLACKER VIGNOLES IN SOUTH  
CAROLINA AND FLORIDA, 1817-1823

K. H. VIGNOLES\*

On Christmas Day in the year 1817 a young Englishman wrote to his wife in England from Charleston to tell her that he had acquired a new job:

Know then that the State of South Carolina, intending to improve their internal Communications, have just selected a Gentleman to the Office of Civil Engineer, whose duties are to survey the Country, project and construct Canals, Improvements, &c, &c, . . . It was necessary that the officer thus appointed should have somebody to assist him, and just as this point was agitating I arrived . . . and was recommended for that purpose.

His salary was to be \$1,000 per annum, plus expenses, with permission to work in private practice as a surveyor, which he estimated might add a further \$500.

The young man, whose name was Charles Blacker Vignoles, was then in his 25th year. He was destined to spend more than five years in the United States, after which he would return to England to enjoy a distinguished career in civil engineering, culminating in his election as President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, five years before his death in 1875. Vignoles built railways in England, Ireland, Germany, Spain and Brazil, and gave his name to the flat-bottomed rail widely used in Europe and ultimately adopted as standard by British Railways in 1947.<sup>1</sup> His greatest engineering achievement was a five span suspension bridge across the River Dnieper at Kiev, Russia, which at the time of its completion, in 1853, was the largest construction of its kind in the world.

Vignoles was born in Ireland, at Woodbrook, County Wexford, on May 31, 1793, though the Irish nationality to which he often laid claim arose merely from the fact that his father's regiment was

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<sup>1</sup>The Vignoles Rail was similar in cross-section to the one introduced in 1831 on the Camden & Amboy Railroad by Robert Livingston Stevens, after a visit to the U.K., where he had rails rolled to his design at the Welsh foundry of John Guest. There is good evidence to suggest that Stevens and Vignoles met in 1830, and it is interesting to speculate as to whether Vignoles got the idea from Stevens or Stevens from Vignoles.

stationed in that country at the time of his birth. His father, Captain Charles Henry Vignoles, of the 43rd Regiment of Foot, was a descendant of Huguenot *émigrés*, several of whom had served in the Huguenot regiments of the British army. His mother was a daughter of Dr. Charles Hutton, F.R.S., Professor of Mathematics at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, the British army's school for artillery and engineer officers. Before he was six months old the infant Charles accompanied his parents to the West Indies, where he became an orphan at the age of twelve months, when both his parents perished of yellow fever in the island of Guadeloupe, after his father had been seriously wounded in action. The circumstances of his survival were remarkable. England was at war with France, and Pointe-à-Pitre, capital of Guadeloupe, had just been recaptured by the French. The baby and his Irish nurse were left in the care of a kindly French merchant who had given shelter to Captain Vignoles and his wife, and tended them in their last hours. By great good fortune, young Charles's uncle, Captain Henry Hutton, Royal Artillery, who was also serving in the West Indies, managed to rescue his nephew, and brought him home to England.

In the meantime young Vignoles had been granted an ensign's commission in his father's regiment, and immediately put on half-pay, 'being too young to serve'. Surprising as it may seem, such a procedure was not without precedent, as a means whereby the War Office compensated the family of a deceased officer. In this case it made Charles Vignoles the youngest officer in the British army.

On arrival in England he was entrusted to the care of his maternal grandfather, who undertook to bring him up, and saw that he was well grounded in mathematics, classics and modern languages. For some reason Dr. Hutton wished his grandson to become a lawyer rather than a soldier, but before his legal training was finished, Charles quarrelled violently with his grandfather — probably over some youthful debts — and was banished from the house. The Doctor never spoke to his grandson again, though he allowed his influence to be used for Charles to take up his commission in the Royal Scots regiment, with which he saw active service at the siege of Bergen-op-Zoom, Holland, in March 1814. Subsequently he served in Canada and, after Napoleon's defeat, in the army of occupation in France.

The coming of peace brought wholesale reductions in the army and navy, and with the prospect of being relegated to half-pay, and small hope of employment at home, Vignoles decided to seek his fortune overseas. He was anxious to marry Mary Griffiths, a young Welsh woman to whom he had been secretly engaged for four years,

during which time the couple had only met on three or four occasions, though they had exchanged long and passionate letters. Opportunity for his ambitious and adventurous spirit seemed to offer in the Spanish dominions of Central America, where British guerilla forces were supporting the cause of revolution led by Simon Bolívar. Mary hesitated at the idea of accompanying Charles overseas, though she finally consented to marry him on July 13, 1817. A fortnight later he sailed from Portsmouth without her, one of an ill-assorted company of volunteers attracted by the prospect of active and lucrative employment in the rebel forces in Central America. The result of this early separation between Vignoles and his wife was the continuance of the correspondence which is the prime source of information about his early life.

By the time the expedition had reached the Danish island of St. Thomas, disillusion with Bolívar's organization had set in among the volunteers, and Vignoles and some of his companions were glad to accept the United States consul's offer of a passage to Amelia Island to join the Scottish adventurer General Sir Gregor McGregor, who was planning to invade the Spanish possessions of East and West Florida with an army of American volunteers unofficially backed by the United States. In fact McGregor had already left Amelia Island for a new command in Nassau, and at the end of November Vignoles arrived in Charleston, having finally abandoned all ambitions to a revolutionary career, and set on finding agreeable civilian employment.

He did not have to wait long; and on Christmas Day he wrote to his wife the letter from which we have already quoted. His qualifications for the post he had obtained were of the slenderest. Though he liked to call himself a military engineer, he was in fact an infantry officer, and his only recorded military engineering achievement was the making of an outline map of the Dutch town of Willemstatt with an old pair of compasses as his only instrument and his feet as measures. This earned him a very brief attachment to the army engineering branch.<sup>2</sup> Of his appointment at Charleston he wrote: "This has been effected through my being the Grandson of Dr. Hutton, and an Irishman . . . and through the friendship of a Gentleman in this City called Bee, who introduced me to those who have effected this for me." Major W. Hasell Wilson, Vignoles' new chief, was a military engineer, who was later to become a leading figure in American

<sup>2</sup>His education may have included a study of surveying, as Hutton was an experienced cartographer and surveyor. Vignoles had worked in 1816 as a draftsman and mathematician when A.D.C. to Gen. Sir Thomas Brisbane, commanding the Army of Occupation in France.

railway construction. It seems that Dr. Hutton's name was a talisman in military and engineering circles, even across the Atlantic. For the rest we can only assign Vignoles' success to ebullient self-confidence and personal charm. What advantage he may have gained from his claim to be an Irishman is not clear.

His first care after his establishment in Charleston was to have his wife join him as soon as possible. He had planned that she should travel out from England with Mrs. Hannam, the wife of one of his fellow volunteers; as he indicated in his letter to Mary:

As Mrs. Hannam is to accompany you to this Country your first Step will be to communicate with her. . . . The Vessel which brings this will arrive in England the first week in February and will sail the latter end of that Month or the beginning of March from Liverpool: she is called the *Ceres* and Capt. Callender is the Master. I have agreed with the owners that You are to have the State Room on the *Starboard* side of the Cabin to yourselves and you are to pay Forty Pounds Stg each and in the event of your bringing a Young Person with you as a Maid or Humble Companion her Passage is to be Ten Pounds, all three of you sleeping in the same State Room, which is quite large enough for that Purpose, and is to be neatly fitted up for your accomodation. Every thing you wish will be provided for you *except* Wine, and of that you will find two dozen sufficient for yourself and Maid.

The letter continues with a substantial list of Charles' own requirements and advice to Mary about her health on the voyage:

I could have wished you to have brought out for me Materials for my own Dress, such as Blue Coat, Silk for linings, Cassimires for Pantaloons and Waistcoats, Buttons etc. but I am afraid you will not be able to do that, more particularly as you must pay half your own Passage; . . . Shirts, Neck and Pocket Handkerchiefs, Cotton and Lambs Wool Socks or Half Hose, Silk Stockings and two pair of Knee and Shoe Buckles I must have if possible; also a Writing Desk and neat portable Dressing Case, Gloves and two Hats! I want you to think of some elegant present for Mr. Bee, who is not overstocked with Money! If you can possibly spare the money . . . go personally to Brookman & Langdon's, I believe in Great Russell St., Bloomsbury, and get Six Dozen of their very best HH *Sketching* Black Lead Pencils, the Stocks such as they send to the R.M. College for the Fortification Plans. . . . Moreover 20 Sheets of that kind of tracing paper I got from Ackermann's



just before I went to France: moreover a plain Box of Colors and two or three dozen of their best Camel's Hair Pencils. A couple of the best Pen knives London produces! A super excellent Razor Strop and as much of the best Drawing Paper and Stationary for general use as you can afford to get; as every thing here of that kind is 5 times the London ready money price and in fact so are articles of all descriptions. . . . Will my dear Wife now allow me to give her Directions for the regulation of her health on board; at first going to sea the Stomach is apt to become *costive*, which must be removed by gentle opening Medicine, and when you are within a Week's Sail of Charleston you ought to repeat this operation in order to prepare yourself for a change of Climate; you will arrive at the most delightful Season of the Year, about the middle or latter end of April. You must be very particular in keeping a free Circulation of Air through your Cabin, leaving it open in fine Weather, and in cleaning it remember that *scraping* and *not washing* is to be employed. Take a good deal of exercise particularly in the Morning and never go on Deck after Sun Set without being well guarded from the Dew which at Sea in the Latitudes you will pass over is heavy and dangerous.

After exhorting her to follow his instructions exactly Charles touched on a point which must have been very much in his mind since leaving Mary:

I find in *calculations* that you will arrive in Carolina exactly *nine* months after our Marriage; *you alone* can judge whether Circumstances will enable you to venture to Sea at so critical a period. . . . Major Wilson the Gentleman with whom I am associated is about two & thirty — with a Wife and two Boys; his Mother and a Brace of Sisters are living with him and they are all anxious to see you and will receive my dear Mary with open Arms.

There follow some interesting details about postal arrangements:

The moment you get this, reply to it by Post, paying the Inland Postage — and write to Capt. Callender to the care of Messrs. Morrell & Watson, Liverpool, telling him you are coming and requesting to have a Week's Notice of the Ship's Sailing; enclose to his care a Duplicate of your letter by post and desire he will forward it to the United States by the very first Vessel that goes not merely to Charleston but the United States: Vessels sail every day from Liverpool to America . . . . Pay the Postage or

frank the Letter to Captn. Callender enclosing the one to me directed simply to Charleston, South Carolina.

Final instructions emphasized Charles' opinion that it would be unwise to arrive in Charleston during the hot summer months:

no Circumstances must induce you to quit home for this part of the World after the first Week in April: except you go to New York, Boston, Philadelphia or some other Northern Port . . . I must conclude - May every favoring Gale convey you to my Arms, and may Neptune send you as gentle a Voyage as we had without any of the disagreeable accompaniments.<sup>3</sup>

To guard against this first letter going astray, Vignoles repeated his instructions in a second, equally long letter despatched by a different ship. A month later, on 21 January 1818, after reminding Mary not to forget the drawing materials, especially the black lead pencils, he gave some details about their prospects in Charleston:

I cannot my dear Girl but consider myself *peculiarly* fortunate in having so quickly and unexpectedly obtained a permanent Situation which unites so many advantages. In introducing my beloved Partner to a Circle of Acquaintances whose Rank in this Country is preeminent as far as is possible in a Republic, and whose Talents and Influence give them decidedly the first Class in Society; as my Prospects open we must enter more deeply into the Stream of Dissipation, and it will be to the skilful hand of my Mary that I shall commit the helm of the Bark that conveys our little fortunes. . . . I have lately begun a mode of life which fully occupies my time so that of late I have not had any adventures worthy of relating. I am settled now in a Private Boarding House, the Mistress of which has two daughters, Sophia and Statira! They will supply the place of the Jessy, Maria, Suzette, Annette, Emilie, etc. which at various periods of my *Rambles* have amused my vacant hours. . . . But do not my Angel for an instant imagine that the Impression is anything but [as] evanescent as their

<sup>3</sup> The Vignoles Correspondence is lodged in the Portsmouth City Record Office, Hants, U.K. More than 120 items date from the 1817-1823 period.

The above letter covers both sides of a sheet of foolscap paper, closely and neatly written with a fine pen, and like many others in this correspondence "crossed over," i.e., inscribed from left to right and then from top to bottom of the page. It was folded and sealed (no envelopes were used at this time), a small space being left for the address: "Mrs. Vignoles" and "Charleston Decr. 25th. 1817" and for the seal, which bears no particular impress.

charms. . . . You *remember* you *promised* me a *little* liberty and indeed, indeed this is the first time I have availed myself of the Indulgence.

Mary was six years older than Charles, and was fully aware of the weakness in his character which inclined him towards extravagance and good living, a weakness that both of them hoped that marriage would cure. But by this time she was pregnant, which Charles was only to learn at the end of February, from a letter written by her ten weeks before. Nor was he aware of her fears and misgivings at the prospect of a sea voyage with a young baby, to say nothing of the ordeal of childbirth itself, with no husband at hand to help her. At the same time she was desperately short of money. Unknown to Charles the War Office had suspended payment of his half-pay, on the assumption that he had joined Bolívar's army. There was little hope of her being able to fulfil Charles' many commissions, even though in some respects they were in the interests of economy: "If you could get a good Stock of your own Articles of Dress it will be *very desirable* as London things are 400 or 500 p. Cent above the *London ready money prices*. Leghorn Bonnet for instance 14 Guineas & most things in proportion. I have just paid Ten Pounds for a Blue Coat."

His letters continued in optimistic vein. On his 25th birthday he gave some further details of his life at Charleston, preceded by a page of philosophical reflection:

I assure you with the most heartfelt satisfaction that the path of Independence is thrown open wide to my eager Steps, . . . I have but to pursue the way with a steady undeviating determination, guided and protected by the darling Partner of my Journey, and Wealth, aye *Wealth*, and Reputation await me! . . . I require your presence to confirm me in my Resolutions. . . .

The nature of my Occupations here I believe I have before explained to you, but of the mode in which my Summer is to be passed I have said nothing. . . . During the time the Sun is up I shall be constantly employed in compiling and drawing such parts of the State of South Carolina of which accurate and recent Surveys have been made: some were done by myself this Spring: the portion of Map I have engaged to finish is about fifty square feet, and I hope by the time you arrive I shall have nearly completed it: the Evenings I give Lessons in Mathematics and French to some young Gentlemen who pay me a handsome price, or rather who are to pay me, for with all the advantages that will attend I must submit *in my turn* to wait for my *Money*.





Charles Blacker Vignoles

Engraved c. 1831 by R. Rolfe from a miniature by unknown artist

Such trifling financial difficulties he was prepared to gloss over. In the same letter he returned to the subject of Mary's wardrobe. He wished her to be a credit to him in Charleston society. Simplicity was to be the keynote:

The Ladies here dress very plain: principally black and white. Their taste in dress is good, and the English Women who come out in the *Country Fashions* are laughed at, for I cannot persuade the Carolinians that the London Belles are not fond of colored Dresses and gay Apparel, but that they dress *as simply and more elegantly* than themselves. I greatly depend on my charming Wife as a Model to the Girls here in every respect. I hope by the bye that you have not got any damned long waists, which are an abomination.

He added a list of prices in the Charleston shops supplied "by a Lady in the habit of buying a good deal." For example, linen at 5/- to 10/- per yard, cambric, jaconnett, coloured crapes and gauzes at 5/- to 8/-, silk gloves at 5/- to 7/6 a pair, kid gloves at 2/6 to 3/6, ostrich feathers a guinea apiece and Leghorn hats from 2 to 20 guineas. On the recommendation of the same lady, Mary was to bring out "Linen of all kinds particularly for the Table and Bed Room," also muslins, stock

ings and shoes; and returning to his own requirements, "If you could get me a couple of pieces of Irish linen, *tant mieux*. . . They charge here 12/- to 15/- for making a Shirt. Also a dozen pair of Doe Skin Gloves, *the smallest Men's size*, and two pair of Leather Braces." Clearly Charles intended that his own wardrobe should be of a standard to match that of his wife.

It is not hard to imagine the impatience, even the despair, with which Mary must have read Charles' requests and instructions. A month before the date of this last letter she had given birth to a daughter, after a long and difficult labour, from which mother and child were fortunate to survive. Meanwhile, ignorant of his wife's plight, Charles had struck a bargain with a certain Captain Sherburne, master of the *Robert Edwards*, to bring her out to Charleston on his return from England, her passage to be paid on arrival. He had also moved out of the city to avoid the danger of fever prevalent in the summer months. On June 4, 1818, he wrote:

I have just now made a fresh arrangement for my Summer; viz: By the kindness of my friends I have had Quarters given me in the Fort on Sullivan's Island consisting of two Rooms, gratis. Here I shall be healthy and at much less Expence: my other arrangements are the same. From the Ramparts I shall see the *Robert Edwards* many miles off ere she arrives, and shall have Scouts on the Watch and a Boat ready to conduct me to your arms.

Further details are given in a letter dated June 26.

I have just finished my Preparations for taking Possession of my Quarters in Fort Moultrie upon Sullivan's Island; my *logement* consists of two Rooms; I have fitted them up comfortably, and the only addition requisite on the arrival of my Molly will be a *larger* Bed: when my present *truckle* as Mercutio calls it will be assigned to some one else: the Nurse for instance: as I suppose you will bring a Cradle for your infant.

It was probably about this time that Vignoles made the sketch which was the basis for William Keenan's aquatint of Charleston Harbour and waterfront.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The aquatint is to be found in the I.N. Phelps Stokes Collection of American Historical Views, New York Public Library. The inscription states that the drawing was "in the possession of Henry Ogilby Esq., His B.M. Consul, Charleston, So. Ca.," but it has not been possible to trace it. The Keenan engraving is pictured in Francis W. Bilodeau, *Art in South Carolina, 1670-1970* (Charleston, 1970), p. 109.

On August 9, 1818, Mary Vignoles and her baby daughter embarked on the *Robert Edwards* as her husband had planned. Her departure was recorded in a letter to Charles by a friend:

I have the pleasure of informing you that I saw Mrs. Vignoles and her dear little Girl safe on board the *Robert Edwards* at Gravesend last night. God send you may receive them safe and be *very Happy long with each other*. She has got a Maid Servant from Sandhurst who is well recommended to her, and I hope she will suit. . . . I am much delighted to hear your prospects of success are so good. I daresay with *your* abilities there can be no doubt; prudence is all that is required. Mrs. V is very much so therefore there is nothing to fear. . . . I was quite pleased to find that they were to take out a cow for the use of the Ship, so very fortunate for the Babe.<sup>5</sup>

With the reunion of husband and wife there is a gap of nearly twenty months in the correspondence. During this time a son was born. From the tone of the next letters it seems that Mary's prudence had not had the effect her friend had foretold, and that married life with two children, in a difficult climate and with a somewhat irregular income, was not the bliss the couple had expected it to be. On March 16, 1820, Mary wrote from Charleston to her husband who was away on a survey in the interior. There is a significant touch of irony in her opening sentence.

I am much pleased to hear by your Letter that you are going on so much to your *own satisfaction* I sincerely hope I shall *not* be disappointed, in the anticipation that you will be enabled to return to your Family early in *May*. I shall be truly glad when this Month is over. The dear Babies have been very unwell and of course very fretful, I have been obliged to call in the attendance of Doctor Prioleau. My dear little Boy has been a great sufferer: one tooth has made its appearance, he has a very bad cough, and his Bowells have been affected to a complete dysentery. You may suppose, my dear Charles, I have not had *a little* to struggle with – still without a Nurse; and Jane for the last days has been very ill, she has returned today. . . . I hope in God the worst is over. Camilla has still a very bad cough and looks very pale, very restless at nights and very fretful in the day. I impute their

<sup>5</sup> The letter is addressed to Chas. Vignoles Esq. care of T. Haslett Esq., Charleston and inscribed St. Anne's via New York. It is also stamped SHIP, and NEW YORK 9 OCT, imprinted with a circular rubber stamp.

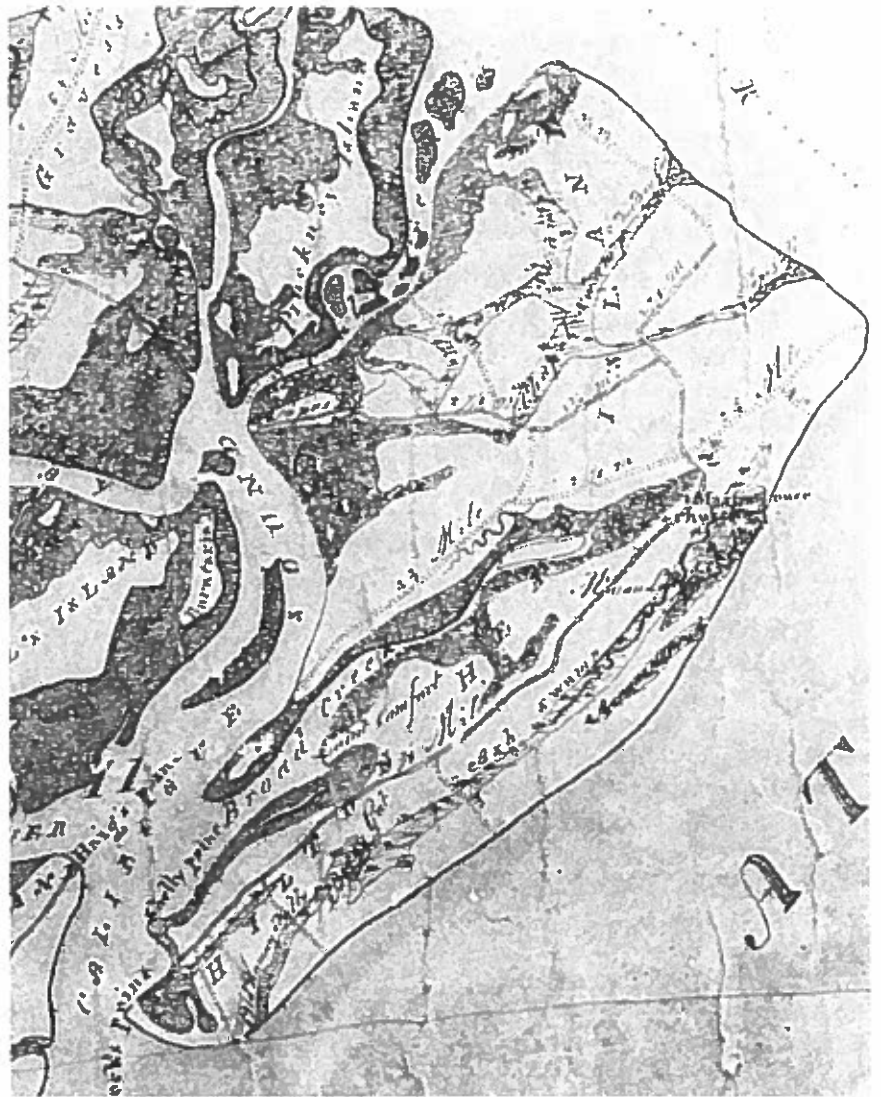
sickening in some degree to the very changeable Weather, I pray to Heaven I may keep well for their sake.

She was short of money and their landlady was pressing her for the rent. Letters from Charles, from Hilton Head Island and the Savannah River, also speak of pecuniary difficulties. He had not yet paid Capt. Sherburne for Mary's passage, but this was by no means the only sum he was owing. In fairness to him it must be said that if he found it hard to live within his means, much of his difficulty arose from the fact that his clients – and even the state and city authorities – were months in arrears with their payments to him. On April 2, 1820, he wrote from Hilton Head Island:

I wrote to you last Monday from Coosawatchie: this is to acquaint you with a circumstance I have most unaccountably forgotten till this moment. Mr. Philip B. Martin on Edisto promised me on his word of honor that the Sum of Money due for the plan of his plantation should without fail be left for me on *this day at latest* at the Counting Room of North, Webb and Osborne, Factors. The sum I agreed with him was \$55; and he assured me that if you sent a Receipt it would be ready for you. Pray do so by John immediately or if you choose by Susan or anyone else. I have scrawled this in a hurry and have only time to say that I have paid a visit to General and the Misses Pinckney by whom I was received with unbounded kindness and a thousand kind enquiries after you and your babes.

It is significant that on the back of the following letter is scrawled the draft of a letter from Mary appealing to a Mr. Graves for a loan. Charles was at this time engaged on a survey of the Beaufort District for the state authorities, while accepting private commissions also where possible.

I have been these last two days travelling up this [Savannah] River in a Steam Boat, surveying as I go along. You will, I doubt not, be happy to learn that it is the last of my exterior operations in this part of the world, and that I hope by next Saturday to be on Edisto Island, for the purposes of completing my public surveys there and at the same time of coming to a final settlement with Captn. Meggett. I hope you attended to the explanations in my last letter, and have paid Mr. Ravenel \$30: I would not on any account have that undone. As for Mr. Price I have lost all patience with him, and if he has refused to take the \$100 on account of his Bill, he may sue me for the Money. Indeed when I



Survey of Hilton Head Island

Detail from *Mills' Atlas*. Collections of South Carolina Archives, Columbia

reflect for a moment on the ungenerous mode of his pursuit I am half tempted to go off without paying him a penny: to know that I am hourly striving my best to gain a sufficiency to pay him and every one else fills me with rage; particularly when I know it lies so fully in my power to pay every body if they will only have the patience to wait till my Contract for the Survey of these Parishes I am now doing be completed which will be in June.

Two months later, April 23, Vignoles wrote from Beaufort.

I was on my way to Edisto, when tempted by a bribe I have stopped here to make the Survey of a large Tract or Island. It will I believe occupy two or three days of my time here and as much at home. I have contracted to furnish it for \$100 *more or less*. This Island is a very essential one in my Survey, and I shall from the known character of the Individual be paid *immediately* my work is finished; and you may be certain I shall not be long about it. This odd hundred Dollars will assist us at a pinch in carrying on our House keeping until my private Bills are collected.

The names of Ravenel and Vignoles appear jointly as surveyors on maps of the Charleston and Beaufort Districts in the *Atlas* published in 1825 by Robert Mills.<sup>6</sup> Ravenel was also of Huguenot descent, as was Vignoles' other partner, Colonel J.B. Petitval, who always wrote to Charles in French. Petitval seems to have been the stable factor in the partnership, while having no illusions about Charles' character. It must have been with his agreement that Charles suddenly decided to return to England with his family, in the summer of 1820, leaving his affairs in Petitval's hands. He seems to have been in a mood of disillusion with the country and his future prospects of success. In England he could clear up the misunderstanding about his half-pay, and perhaps be reconciled with his grandfather.

While there he managed to persuade the War Office to restore his half-pay, together with two years of arrears due to him. But his hopes of a reconciliation with Dr. Hutton, and the financial advantage he might hope to get from it, came to nothing. By the beginning of

<sup>6</sup> The *Atlas of South Carolina* was engraved by H.S. Tanner in 1825. A recent printing of the *Atlas* assesses Vignoles as being among the four surveyors "significantly more professional than the others," and credits him with the map of Charleston District and most of Beaufort. Gene Waddell, "Robert Mills, Cartographer" in S. E. Lucas, *Mills' Atlas 1825* (Easley, 1980), pp. iii, viii.

Vignoles' name also appears as sole or joint surveyor on 11 private plats of plantation property recorded in the McCrady Plat Book. See, Index, McCrady Plat Book, Mesne Conveyance Office, Charleston County Court House.

October he had resolved to return to Charleston. Mary was again pregnant, and it was decided that she and the children should remain in England for the time being, living on the restored halfpay (£18 a quarter) and such money as Charles hoped to send them. On November 14, 1820, he set sail from Gravesend, and on January 2 he was once more in Charleston.

We have just arrived after a long Passage of Seven Weeks and no opportunity of sending this Letter off before. I shall send off the Half Pay Affidavit in a day or two and write you a long Letter. I found M. Petitval keeping Bachelor's Hall in a snug little house and every thing arranged as if I had not left Charleston an hour ago. The little Mare and Chaise in good order and every thing ready to begin work: I shall probably leave this in a day or two to go and survey. There is plenty of work ready for me: and I shall make money fast. Major Wilson is quite recovered and well. I have seen almost all my old acquaintances.

Prospects seemed promising and Charles was once more full of optimism. He wrote on January 18, 1821:

... I had not been three days in Town before Mr. Graves came to see me and sent me to one of his Plantations which he is selling to make a division and Survey: and I am only returned this Morning after 5 or 6 days absence. I am preparing the plans and shall have a Bill of about 140 Dollars against him which I shall turn into a Bill of Exchange and send to you. Independent of that Mr. Poinsett and Major Wilson have spoken to me about considerable Undertakings and there is yet much to be done. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Hannam are in Carolina, but not in Charleston; they are expected every day. I understand they have picked up several hundred dollars; so that the moment they return I shall press them for money.<sup>7</sup> . . . A great many old planters are dead, many plantations for Sale, and many Surveys to be made. So courage, dearest wife; there is much to be gained. With regard to our Correspondence I would recommend you to write (P.Paid) to Mr. Davies, New England Coffee House near the Bank, London, and tell him you have small parcels to send occasionally to Charleston South Carolina; and that you understand he is in the

<sup>7</sup> Vignoles had lent Mrs. Hannam a considerable sum of money on her arrival in Charleston, to enable her to join her husband in New York.

habit of making up a Bag for every Vessel that sails to America. . . . I believe it is only 6d. on each letter.\*

His three letters in February speak of further orders:

I have already surveyed to the amount of \$500: viz 300 for Mr. Graves who has given me his word to pay me this day week, 150 for a Gentleman on John's Island who is also to pay the next Week; and 50 for the Jockey Club for a fine plan of Charleston Race Course, about which I have been very busy this day or two, as the Races begin tomorrow. . . . I shall send you an order on *Baring's* the London Banker *at Sight*.

I have concluded a Bargain with the City of Charleston for the complete Plans for \$500 Dollars. . . .

Such has been my run of business that I have entered above \$1000 Dollars in my Bill Book and although it is not all Cash yet in the course of a few months it will be paid. . . . Hannam and his wife are gone to New York. They gave a Concert here, at which General Pinckney's family and all the genteel People of Charleston attended; but her singing was so infamous that every body laughed at her; I was not in Charleston (indeed I am almost always in the Country) but Petitval told me they cleared above \$80.

Letters written during May and June refer to "immense" surveys for Mr. Graves, whose father Admiral Graves had also commissioned a survey of his plantation, to the plan of the city which Vignoles and Petitval were working on together, and to a possible coastal survey. But despite plentiful orders, clients were slow in paying their fees, and much of what did come in was at once swallowed up in settling Vignoles' extensive debts. During the spring and summer his letters became less hopeful in tone, and his spirits were only partially revived by the news of the birth of a second son. Restless and always ready to break fresh ground, he once more left his long-suffering partners, having decided to try his luck for three months in East Florida, recently acquired by the United States, where claims to new land offered considerable scope for surveyors and engineers. To Mary he assigned the reasons for his move to the climate:

The heavy rains which have fallen since the latter end of May, will probably have the effect of making Charleston unhealthy, and I embark this day for St. Augustine in Florida,

\* The letter has a red seal, which bears the imprint CV, one of the few occasions when Vignoles used a seal in this correspondence.



where I shall be able to pass the next three months in perfect safety and at the same time gain some pecuniary advantages that Carolina does not afford at this Season of the Year. I am sorry that in consequence of being disappointed in Payment of the Survey for Admiral Graves that I shall not be able to send you any more remittances at present. . . . Be assured that if you do not receive regular supplies, that I am then much worse off than yourself.

To judge from a letter of Mary's dated July 3, this was hardly the case; but Charles was not to receive it until the end of September. Meanwhile he ended his own letter with a promise: "Adieu! If the Floridas succeed I shall establish you all at St. Augustine, where you can live all the year round in an Orange Grove. Kiss the Babies and believe me, dear love, ever your faithful and affectionate husband."

The Minutes of the City of St. Augustine for July 30, 1821, record his appointment as City Surveyor.

A letter was presented by Chs. Vignoles soliciting the place of City Surveyor offering his services *gratis* to this corporation until the change of the present laws occasion other regulations — to form (should there be an occasion for one) a map of the town and bay, asking solely a reimbursement of the most necessary expenses attending it. . . .<sup>9</sup>

It seems typical of Vignoles' happy-go-lucky nature that he should have offered his services *gratis*, an offer which the City Council were no doubt only too ready to accept. No doubt he hoped that his official position would enable him to take advantage of the many opportunities of private work offered in the new State.

His application seems to have been supported by a testimonial from his former employers, of which there is a copy in the correspondence, written in Vignoles' hand, and dated presumably by him *after* his appointment: Saint Augustine, East Florida, August 28th 1821. The document bears witness to his employment as engineer, surveyor and draftsman in 1817 and 1818 by Andrew Pickens, Governor of South Carolina; by John Geddes, Governor of South Carolina during 1819 (to survey the sea coast); and during 1820 by special contract to survey the south western section of the state from the mouth of the Combahee River, including the harbours of Port Republican, Daufuskie and Tybee, the left bank of the Savannah River, and sixty miles

<sup>9</sup> The author is indebted to the St. Augustine Historical Society for the text of this document.

into the interior of the country. Mention is also made of his work as a private surveyor. Vignoles records in his copy the signatures of Colonel Chambers, John Geddes, Charles Robious and the French Consul.<sup>10</sup>

In the archives of the St. Augustine Historical Society is a faded copy of a 'Plan of the Harbour Town & Fortifications of St. Augustine, East Florida', signed by Vignoles and dated 1821. There is also an entry in the *East Florida Gazette* for December 22, 1821, which records his appointment as Public Translator and Interpreter.<sup>11</sup> He was an excellent linguist and had been studying Spanish since his arrival in Charleston.

Further evidence of his work during the autumn of 1821 occurs in a letter dated New Year's Day 1822, in which he wishes "many happy New Years to my sweet Mary: happier let us hope than those which have latterly passed over our heads." He also sent her a copy of a letter lately received from the Indian Agent in St. Augustine, Captain J. R. Bell, who was clerk to the City Council:

In acknowledging the receipt of your letter of Yesterday accompanied by a Map of East Florida from the Georgia Line to the 27th. and a half degree of Latitude with a report on the Geography and Soil of the Country which at this time is very interesting and important information for the Government Authorities at Washington, permit me, Sir, for myself and in behalf of the head of the War Department before whom these papers will be placed to tender you thanks for the signal services you have rendered me in the discharge of the various duties I have been called upon to perform in the Affairs of the Province and to express to you the sense I feel of the Importance of your talents and accomplished acquirements thus rendered to the Government of your adopted Country with the sincere hope on my part that a more solid remuneration may be offered you for those Services, by the liberality of the Secretary of War, who I believe is not slow to reward the meritorious who devote their Services to the State.

More than a year later Vignoles was writing urgently to Captain Bell to request his support for an application to receive this "more solid remuneration," but there is no record of the Secretary of War ever having paid it.

<sup>10</sup>These surveys were the basis of the maps of the Charleston and Beaufort Districts published in *Atlas of South Carolina*.

<sup>11</sup>Information supplied by St. Augustine Historical Society is gratefully acknowledged.

However, the work done with Captain Bell was a foretaste of a bigger project to come. During the winter an epidemic of yellow fever swept through St. Augustine. Charles wrote to Mary that "the dreadful Malady which devastated this City, so long the abode of health, had the effect of stopping all business," and he was glad to tell her that he was to set out on February 6 to Capes Sable, thence to the Tortugas and up to Tampas Bay and back overland. "I shall be accompanied in my Journey by General [Winfield] Scott of the U.S. Army and his Staff: the Surveying part is under my control. All this is part of my original plan of making a new Map of Florida to be published with a Memoir in June next." It is not clear what part the army was to play in this expedition, and it may well have been that Vignoles accompanied Scott rather than the other way round. And it seemed that Vignoles was to bear the expenses of publication. This did not deter him however.

Meanwhile a gratifying testimonial came out of Charleston, which could have affected Charles' relationship with his grandfather. Admiral Graves had been on a visit to England, and had promised to call on Dr. Hutton and deliver a letter from Charles to him. Being unable to call in person he had sent the letter with a covering one of his own, but there is no record of the letter having been acknowledged in any way.

For some months Vignoles was busy surveying and preparing the drafts of his map and book. It was on his return from a survey expedition that he heard the sad news of the death from scarlet fever of the baby Thomas, whom he had never seen. On July 2, 1822, he wrote to Mary from St. Augustine:

My ever beloved Mary

Your last melancholy epistle reached me about a month ago and you may be *fully assured* that something *extraordinary* must have prevented my immediate reply. . . . adding to the great hardships I had to undergo in travelling through the Wild Woods and uninhabited regions, I was immediately on my return seized with a very severe bilious fever from the effects of which I am scarcely yet recovered. . . . Dearest partner of my life and happiness! How can feeble language weakened by distance endeavour to console the distracted Mother for the loss of her babe! Let me trust, my darling Mary, that the soft hand of time will by this have soothed the first keen anguish of your aching heart . . . and taught you the value of the blessings yet left. Thank also on your bended knee the great Creator of the Universe that a deeper affliction has been spared you; twice since I last wrote I have

miraculously escaped the hand of destruction. In swimming my horse across a rapid river, the restive animal plunged me into the Current; encumbered with a heavy Shot Pouch and other articles, and all my Clothes, I could scarcely keep afloat to gain a mud bank in the middle of the river; here with the waves beating against my breast and scarce able to maintain my footing, I had to endure for an hour the pelting of a pitiless hail storm, accompanied by a gust of wind so furious that the attendant Indians could not stem the blast and rapids to relieve me. . . . The following night I had to pass without fire, provisions or covering, having in the confusion lost everything but our Saddles. The fine strong Chain I had sunk to the bottom; my own Compass was left in Town. The fever was only the natural Consequence of this exposure; it was severe and for some time I was delirious. Praise be to the God of Nature I am again strong and able to attend to my business. . . . Console yourself therefore, best beloved object of my existence. . . .

My other plan goes on well. I shall as soon as I shall have received some Money proceed on to New York and Philadelphia to publish my Map of Florida and the accompanying pamphlet . . . . Should my pecuniary affairs prosper I shall make all arrangements for your coming out this fall. . . . If I find that I cannot have you time enough to avoid the Cold Seasons, we must endeavour to bring you to Charleston or Savannah. . . .

Later in this letter, having given up all hope of reconciliation with his grandfather, Charles declared his intention of settling in the United States, though in terms which would hardly have endeared him to her citizens:

I have long debated the Subject and I have fully resolved to abandon England: I do so with regret: those who like myself have drunk from her Cup of Refinement . . . can best judge how sincerely I deplore the necessity which drives me from her smiling land. I have not yet learned to be an American . . . the Society here, though kind, are not polished and I am obliged to shrink from them lest the unguarded expression of my Sentiments might find offence. . . .

Whatever Vignoles' opinions of the lack of culture of his American friends may have been, he seems to have enjoyed their good opinion and respect. Mr. R. Brown of Brown & Tunis, Charleston, offered to subscribe for a copy of Vignoles' book and map:

We notice your advertizement in our papers, & as far as our influence extends will forward your views. . . We think it would be advisable for you to appoint agents in this place to receive subscriptions to your work. It is one that is much wanted, for the world is much in the dark respecting the interesting Country which you propose to delineate and describe. . . .

The letter had an interesting reference to civil disturbance caused by the Denmark Vesey plot in Charleston July 1822:

We are at present in a state of great ferment, occasioned by an attempt on the part of the Negroes in this City to revolt. It was happily discovered in the nick of time, after having been for several years in contemplation and regularly progressing. It was of a most atrocious stamp, and conducted with unexampled secrecy and consummate ability. It will, we fear, tend to lessen the value of that species of property, and affect, generally, the interest of this State. It does not appear to have extended among the negroes in the Country, but had the Capital fallen the country would soon have followed.

Colonel Abraham Eustis, an important figure in St. Augustine, wrote to Charles in New York on September 6 (marked received by Charles on 1 October) that:

"It is impossible for me at present to form any idea of the probable sale of your Map here. The attention of the good citizens of St. Augustine is at present engaged and exclusively occupied with the important question, Who shall be the delegate to Congress?"

Not only did Colonel Eustis provide Vignoles with letters of introduction in Boston, but enclosed with them bills of exchange in his favour with the comment: "If they are not accepted and paid at sight for the honor of the drawer, I can only say I have mistaken my men."

Meanwhile Vignoles was not letting the grass grow under his feet in New York. Writing to Mary on September 16, he said:

A proposal was made to me the other day to take the levels of an intended Canal between this City and Philadelphia. . . . The manner in which this was done was gratifying inasmuch as I thereby find that my Name is beginning to be known and I have vanity enough to believe that if once I could get the good folks at the North to allow me to do something for them I shall be able to convince them (from what I have seen of the Works of their first Characters) that I am able to do them better Justice than those they have hitherto employed! . . . You will be pleased to know that the Manuscript Copy of my Map of Florida was approved of

by the best Judges here particularly an ex-General of Engineers who is a man of much influence and who has already afforded me his good offices on more than one occasion.

Two days later he forwarded the drawing of his map, finished except for some minor details, to H.S. Tanner of Philadelphia, with a long covering letter suggesting how he would like the work to be carried out. On the financial side:

If I have rightly understood our arrangement it was as follows: I was to pay you for the engraving of the Plate, the Papers, Expences of printing, coloring, mounting, publishing, etc. Instead of your receiving the usual per centage for your trouble in attending to the entire publication and Sale, you were to have free use of the Map for the purpose of your Atlas. This I am willing, if you are, to agree to. . . . The Legislature of Florida are dividing the Territory into Counties, the boundaries of which I have written for to Major Ware at Pensacola.'

Major Nathaniel Ware was a member of the Florida Lands Commission, responsible for allotting grants of land in the new territory. He answered Charles' query about the county boundaries on September 26, writing from Pensacola, where yellow fever was raging: ". . . I can not now: nor will I be able to give you any certain information time enough for your Book: for the head of the Engineers here is dead and the paper all locked up so I cant get them for you. The Territory now by the Act of the Council is divided into 4 Counties."

Some material for Vignoles' book seems to have been supplied by George I.F. Clarke, surveyor-general of East Florida, who wrote from St. Mary's on 6 November 1822:

. . . I lament not having heard from you on this subject two or three months sooner. . . . But a few days ago I sent to St. Augustine the copy of a letter, about sixty pages of letter paper, that I wrote to the Rev. Jedediah Morse, D.D., corresponding secretary of the Indian Civilisation Society, that would have afforded you some extracts, or clews to better matter. I assure you it would give me pleasure to add, however little, to your very commendable undertaking. . . .

He added, in a postscript, a few lines for Vignoles' information:

. . . . Its proportion of good lands is greater [than that of Georgia], and they will afford superior productions, and in a more desirable climate; its fisheries; its Coasts and Keys, hitherto but a source of wealth to the Bahama wreckers; its salubrity and

other comforts; its susceptibility of a covered intercourse between the Atlantic shores and the western basin of the United States, etc. . . . And no less than a Gibraltar gained, and a Gibraltar averted, over the important Mississippi and the Mexican gulf, stands manifest among its political advantages.

Permit me here, Sir, to refer you to a letter "from a gentleman in Florida to his friend in Charleston" published in the Charleston Courier, and copied into Darby's Memoirs of Florida. That letter was wrote by me, but not intended for publication. It will afford you further particulars of this province.

About this time Vignoles was applying for the post of Civil Engineer to the Board of Public Works of Virginia, supported by testimonials from Colonel Abraham Eustis, 4th Regt. Artillery, John Geddes, formerly governor of South Carolina, General H.A.S. Dearborn of the Boston Custom House, and from Col. Petitval, now described as Principal Engineer to the City of Charleston. In fact the good Petitval had grave misgivings about his partner's prospects in the North, and was anxious for him to return to Charleston, where a new contract had been signed by the Lands committee for a plan of the City. In letters in French dated November 13 and 15 and December 7 he urged Vignoles to return to Charleston.

Charles does not seem to have paid much heed. On December 1 he was writing to Mary about a possible claim he might have to land in Florida: ". . . I believe there is or was among my mother's papers the documents relative to a grant of land in West Florida on the River Mississippi to my father; and as there is some probability of the land being recovered I wish to obtain the papers. . . ." the grant – if it ever existed – must have been to Charles' *grandfather*, Francis Vignoles, who served with the British army in Florida and is believed to have died in Pensacola. Two months later, however, Charles had lost faith in possibilities in the South:

. . . To have continued in Florida would have answered no end: nothing has been done there nor will be for some time to come. The business in South Carolina is in consequence of the fall in the price of Cotton so entirely broken up that Major Wilson has given up and Mr. Ravenel and others cannot get anything like a remuneration. . . .

Charles now pinned all his hopes on his map and book. The latter was published at the beginning of March 1823, under the title of *Observations upon the Floridas*, by Bliss and White of New York. It was an octavo volume of 153 pages, with 42 pages of appendices. A

notice printed on the back cover announced the publication of "A New Map of Florida" by Charles Vignoles, Civil & Topographical Engineer, engraved by H.S. Tanner, of Philadelphia. The *Observations* relate to such topics as the history, topography, soil, and climate of the territory, with separate sections on the Florida Keys, the Indians and Land Titles. In an introduction Vignoles admits that he has more to say on the Atlantic than the Mexican coast, and that he gives no satisfactory account of West Florida, since it had proved impracticable to get there; but gleanings from former accounts showed that the soil and climate resembled those of Mississippi and Alabama. He acknowledges his debt for historical information to George Clarke; to Major Ware, who first suggested the publication of the map and pamphlet; and, in laying out the map, to many previous charts and surveys, including British and Spanish charts, and for the interior of the country to the manuscript map of the late Joseph Purcell, formerly of South Carolina, in the topographical bureau at Washington. He adds, in unusually modest vein: "Sensible of all possible respect for the opinions of an enlightened public, the work is offered to them, with all its imperfections on its head; but conscious that some account was desirable of Florida, the author has in the following pages, and upon the map, used his humble endeavours to collect facts and describe realities."

Some rough calculations on the back of one of his letters suggest that Vignoles could not have hoped to do more than break even by his publishing venture. It was more likely that he would be out of pocket. Meanwhile his hopes of a grant of land were dashed by a letter from J.M. Hernandez, now Congress delegate for East Florida. In a recent Act, concerning titles of settlement in Florida, the Senate had struck out all the section which related to English claims, and it was unlikely that they could be revived. Hernandez told Charles that he had recommended him for the post of surveyor-general in East Florida; but this did not prevent him from once more thinking it might be better to return to England and his family. He was disappointed in his land claims; business in South Carolina was badly affected by a world slump in cotton; and nothing had come of his hopes of an appointment in the north.

But what was the most pressing reason for returning home was the news that Dr. Hutton had died in January 1823; and though, as Charles expected, he had not left his grandson a penny, a letter from Mary suggested that his aunt might be more kindly disposed towards him.

On April 21, 1823, Charles booked his passage on a ship for Liverpool. Colonel Petitval advised that many creditors were on his



track and he should not return to Charleston until he had raised enough money to pay his debts. He never did return. What we do not know is what was the final balance between his debts and the fees for his work which were still unpaid.

Life in the United States laid sound foundations of experience for Charles Vignoles in his subsequent engineering career. He learned surveying the hard way, by practicing it in the open, during long hours in the saddle or on foot in wild and undeveloped country. This gave him the hard physical toughness and the capacity for long sustained effort which characterized his working life. If an inability to live within his income continued to be a handicap, it was the natural concomitant of the enthusiasm and the imaginative vision which inspired his work, and which enabled him to take his place among his engineering peers within a very short time after his return to his native land.

"It Will Be Many a Day Before Charleston Falls":  
Letters of a Union Sergeant on Folly Island,  
August 1863-April 1864

Edited by Edward G. Longacre

From the spring of 1863 until February 1865 Charleston underwent one of the longest and most debilitating sieges in the history of warfare. The city's harshest period of trial began in mid-August 1863, when Union Major General Quincy A. Gillmore decided to shell the Charleston defenses, including Forts Sumter and Moultrie, with an awesome array of long-range ordnance. From their bases of operations on Morris and Folly Islands, south of the city, Gillmore's cannoners quickly turned Sumter, the principal defensive work in Charleston harbor, into "a shapeless and harmless mass of ruins." During the first week alone, the besiegers fired over 5,000 rounds (more than half a million pounds of ammunition) into the fortress. Then came several attacks against the city works by members of Gillmore's X Army Corps, aided by a fleet of warships under Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren. These movements forced the evacuation of Battery Wagner, at the northern tip of Morris Island, on September 7, culminating two months of warfare in that sector.

In August, too, Gillmore began to shell Charleston itself with batteries erected on Morris and Black Islands, firing incendiary shells known as "Greek Fire," as well as more conventional munitions. Within days the lower environs of the city lay in rubble and many inhabitants had been reduced to panic and misery. But, despite Gillmore's expectations, the Charlestonians held out, ensuring that their city would remain in Confederate hands until the closing weeks of the war. With grudging admiration for the inhabitants' tenacity, many of the Federals foresaw a long, protracted campaign that would wreak hardship and suffering on besiegers as well as besieged.

One such realist was twenty-eight-year-old Sergeant Edward King Wightman of the 3rd New York Volunteer Infantry. In letters to his parents, three brothers, and two sisters in Manhattan, he left a graphic and articulate account of the siege—one that (in contrast to most writings by Civil War participants) also abounds in levity and wit. Wightman's facility with the pen stemmed from an unusually extensive education for his day, including postgraduate study at a New York university, and his pre-war profession as a trade journalist. In addition to being a man of letters, the sergeant was a brave and