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## “Finding Captain Dickson: The Archivist as Researcher”

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### Abstract

Item-level description is a luxury few archivists can afford to indulge in as processing has adopted the MPLP model and eliminating backlogs has become a clarion call. But there are instances when only research done by the archivist will allow the significance of a document to be recognized and no longer hidden in a collection. An account of an incident before the Civil War Battle of Chickamauga written by Mississippi soldier Captain Thomas Hyde Dickson is one example of why there is still a place for item-level description and how the role of archivist as researcher is critical to making collections more accessible.

### Article

Processing manuscript collections calls upon a number of skills of the archivist, such as organization, description, cataloging and research. In this era of “more product, less process,” archivists are not encouraged to dig too deeply into collections to understand them better, or to spend time identifying items of potential importance. But, occasionally, a document catches our attention, perhaps serendipitously, or because its content makes it shine like a gold nugget in a prospector’s pan, encouraging the archivist to find out a little more in order to bring the subject or creator to life, or simply to explain its presence in the collection. One example is an account of an incident which occurred days before the Civil War Battle of Chickamauga in early September 1863 witnessed by Captain Thomas Dickson of the 9<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry Regiment, which was discovered while working in Special Collections at Mississippi State University Libraries. Written in pencil with corrections in ink on nine crumbling sheets of paper, Dickson’s account was found in the papers of Brodie S. Crump, a columnist for the *Delta Democrat-Times* newspaper in Greenville from 1946 to 1980.<sup>1</sup> Clearly Crump thought it important enough to save but there was no information on who Dickson was or how Crump obtained it. The piece is striking because it relates what happened to the regiment as Confederate General Braxton Bragg maneuvered his Army of Tennessee in northern Georgia after its withdrawal from Chattanooga as Union General William Rosecrans’ Army of the Cumberland moved east. Rosecrans divided his forces and one division crossed Lookout Mountain and was nearly trapped in McLemore’s Cove on September 11 by the brigade which included Dickson’s regiment. Unfortunately, Confederate caution and miscommunication among the commanders let the opportunity slip away and the exhausted Confederate forces in the cove crossed Pigeon Mountain that night to regroup at La Fayette. A week later the two sides would meet at Chickamauga.<sup>2</sup> The following is a transcription of Dickson’s account and the first page of the document can be seen in Figure 2 below.

<sup>1</sup> MSS.654. Brodie S. Crump family papers, Box 3, Folder 9.

<sup>2</sup> The causes of the lost opportunity at McLemore’s Cove have been extensively debated by historians. See Woodworth, Steven E. (1999), *No Band of Brothers: Problems in the Rebel High Command*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, chapter 6; Woodworth, Stephen E. (ed.) (2010), *The Chickamauga Campaign*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, chapters 2 & 3; Robertson, William G. (Spring 2007), “The Chickamauga Campaign: McLemore’s Cove: Rosecrans’ Gamble, Bragg’s Lost Opportunity”, *Blue & Gray Magazine*, 23:6, 6-26, 42-50; Cozzens, Peter (1992), *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 74-75; Martin, Samuel J. (2011), *General Braxton Bragg, C.S.A.*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 475.

“[page 1] Thousands of incidents happened during the war that will never be known except by the parties to whom they happened. The following is probably one of them. Whether any scientific reason can be given for the episode or not, it has nevertheless clung to the minds of the actors, with the tenacity of death and double the years which have [sic, corrected in ink, word in pencil is unreadable (has?)] may pass, without eradicating it from the memory of its participants. When the southern army was being confronted at Chattanooga and the armies were maneuvering for position, which afterwards culminated in the battle of [page 2] Chickamauga, Tuckers Mississippi Brigade received marching orders late in the afternoon, To pack up, cook six days rations, (corn bread) & be ready to march at a moments notice. All was stir & expectation ran high, as to what was going to happen. It was useless to try to sleep. The cook fires were burning brightly, wagons loading & the camp in a turmoil until about daylight the next morning, when the bugle sounded the assembly, regiments formed and the march south taken up. The route was east of Lookout Mountain, with occasional rests for an hour or more; we formed line of battle about dark, with orders to expect hot [page 3] work during the night or early next day. Wild rumors were current during the night. Bush whackers had shot into our pickets, a member of the advance picket had been waylaid & his finger had been shot off. All sorts of stories were afloat, so much so, that little or no sleep was to be had. So passed the second night. The next day line of battle was formed, some fighting in our front was going on throughout the day, with a momentary expectation of getting into it ourselves. It afterwards transpired that Genl McCooks corps of U.S. troops had gone down on the western side of Lookout Mountain & has crossed [page 4] into McLemores Cove where we then were & some fighting had occurred [sic] between their and our own troops.

Darkness came again but with it no orders to rest or bivouac. We had then marched one day expected a battle the next day, with the nights intervening devoid of a chance to rest even on the bare ground. Marching orders came at last; possibly 9 pm, what direction or where, none knew or cared; worn down with 2 days & nights, only sleep would relieve the tension. A little narrow country road was all we saw, through hills & hollows [page 5] and through the woods, about 12 oclock we came to a halt as ~~at the foot of two hills, rising~~ a deep gully ditch had been washed out of the earth on one side of the road; while the hills or mountains rose slantingly on each side. Flat shale rocks were scattered all over these hills. The night was moonless, though the stars furnished in this little valley sufficient light to see the forms of men some feet away. As soon as the column stopped every man threw his blanket on the ground, laid down & in a moment was asleep.

Genl Tucker & his staff. [sic] The [page 6] mounted officers of the regiment dismounted and joined the brigade of sleepers. How long this lasted no one could say, Possibly only a few minutes. Someone at the rear of the line yelled “whoa” The cry was picked up by every man and jumping up, pandemonium commenced. Every soldier saw something. Some saw the Yankee cavalry sweeping over the hills [corrected in ink] towards us, others their infantry all among us others cows horses and wagons running at break neck speed among us. One of the Vicksburg cadets, as brave a soldier as ever fired a gun, says he saw a long horned bull running at him. He jumped that [page 7] ditch and ran up the hill to get behind a tree. Just as he reached it, he stepped on one of the many flat stones which slipped under him & he fell, cursing the bull & telling him to take him. One man clubbed his gun to knock down a Yankee cavalry man whom he saw. No two saw the same thing. The writer of this glanced at the top of the hill & saw a herd

of the longest & (?) shortest horn Texas cows, all running as if wild & coming directly at him. The surge of the regiment had dismounted, thrown his bridle rein over his arm & gone to sleep. The horse a gentle creature took fright, reared & whiled [sic] around [page 8] carrying the doctor with him into the ditch, where his hoofs came very near killing him. He poor fellow wore the scars of that night to his ~~grave~~ death, which occurred only a few years ago. This fright, stampede or whatever you may call it lasted not over two minutes, when everyone came back to his senses & resumed a normal condition.

It developed that an artillery train was in our front & did not move for hours. We were there until about 8 o'clock the next morning and though when we halted, every man was nearly dead for sleep, there was scarcely a man in the brigade [page 9] who thought or felt like lying down again. This was one of the strangest things that ever happened to us and one that has never appeared in print.<sup>3</sup>

The next day we took our position in the line of battle, getting into action late in the afternoon & in front of Genl W H Little's northern troops, where he was killed. Genl Little's body was delivered that night under flag of truce to his friends. He was the author of that beautiful poem  
I am dying Egypt, dying<sup>4</sup>

T. H. Dickson Capt Co. E. 9<sup>th</sup> Miss. Reg." [in ink]

Though written long after the event, the incident was so other-worldly and frightening for Dickson that it remained burned in his memory even when the actual details of time and place had become much less clear. His war experience, like that of many others, was one of long periods of tedium, interspersed with marches, illness and occasional moments of actual battle. Those moments were undoubtedly frightening also but they were expected and explainable. The incident on Pigeon Mountain was nightmarish precisely because it was so random and without explanation, exacerbated undoubtedly by the participants' hunger and weariness.

<sup>3</sup> Dickson's account is confirmed by the diary of Sergeant William J. Bass of the 7th Mississippi Infantry Regiment: "Came back to our former camp at McFarland Springs [south of Chattanooga] Sept 1st. On Sept 6th we were ordered to cook three days rations and to be ready to move at a moments warning. On the morning of the 7th our brigade was formed in a parallel line across an old field near our camp. General Hindman, our Division commander, rode out into the arena he was introduced to the brigade by General Anderson, our Brigadier General, after which he delivered a short and patriotic address informing us that we were soon to march against the enemy who flushed with victory would make a desperate resistance but relying upon Southern Armies used a consciousness of invincibility we would press forward and victory would perch upon our banners. Left our camp on the 8th taking the Rome GA Road camped near Lee & Gordon's Mill. Left this place about 11 o'clock PM, marched about 8 Miles. Stopped formed line of battle where we stayed for the remainder of the day. On the 11th inst we drove the Yankees back into a cove or valley carrying our wagon trains About dark fell back in the direction of Lafayette marched in rear of our wagon trains being wearied from marching we would fall asleep waiting for our wagon train to move on. From some cause I know not a noise started from the rear of our Army and a general stampede taken place. A great many were unable to march or do duty from falling and running against trees and rocks. In this stampede every fellow having an idea of his own, some believing that the enemy were on them. We reached Fayette sometimes that night, next morning the 13th we were formed in line of battle near Rock Springs Church, some skirmishing on our front." Skellie, Ron (ed.) (2012), *Lest We Forget: The Immortal Seventh Mississippi*, Vol. 2, Birmingham: Skellie, 558, 563. See <http://7miss.org>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Army Brigadier General William Haines Lytle, a well-known poet before the war, was killed at Chickamauga on September 20, 1863. "I am dying, Egypt, dying" is the first line of Lytle's poem *Antony and Cleopatra*, published in 1858.

Crump's papers contained little from his newspaper career apart from copies of his columns, so there was no context to the Dickson account. A search of the columns revealed that Crump knew Madeleine Dickson Bell, Dickson's granddaughter who lived in Greenville, and that is probably how he obtained the document. Any further information would require some digging. The Internet gave some genealogical information, regimental histories and background on the Army of Tennessee's campaign in eastern Tennessee. A search of the muster rolls and census records gave further details and quite quickly a word picture of Dickson formed. So what do we know of the author? Thomas Hyde Dickson (1841-1908) was a 20 year old assistant to druggist L.W. Gray in Yazoo City, Mississippi,<sup>5</sup> when he enlisted on March 2, 1861, for a year's service with the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Mississippi Volunteers.<sup>6</sup> The new second sergeant came from a prominent Mississippi family which had roots in Georgia and the Carolinas.<sup>7</sup> His great-grandfathers, David Dickson and Buckner Harris, were Georgia legislators and soldiers. David Dickson's son, Dr. David C. Dickson, moved to Mississippi around 1814 and became a prominent citizen of the new state, serving as a brigadier general in the territorial militia, a member of the first Mississippi senate, and the state's third lieutenant governor. When the capital moved to Jackson in 1822, he bought one of the first ten lots in the new town and became the first postmaster. He was also Mississippi secretary of state and a U.S. congressman from 1835 until his premature death the following year.

David's widow, Leticia, was left with a block of land in Jackson on which stood their large house on the corner of West and Pearl Streets. She turned this into a boarding house known as Dickson House, which became a center of antebellum social and political life in the town.<sup>8</sup> Two of her sons became active in politics. Thomas Hyde Dickson was the first president of selectmen, or mayor, of Jackson from 1834 until his death in 1836. Christopher Rankin Dickson was postmaster of Jackson from 1846 through the Civil War and also served as a town selectman in those years.<sup>9</sup> From 1850 he was treasurer of the Southern Rights Association, a states' rights organization headed by Governor John Quitman, and was very active in the secessionist movement in Mississippi. Leticia's second son, David Harris was Captain Dickson's father. He was a planter living near Jackson who fought in the Mexican War and in 1837 married Marion Robb, the daughter of a prosperous stone mason. Thomas Hyde was their second child and first son.<sup>10</sup> After serving with the 10<sup>th</sup> Mississippi in Florida, Thomas joined the 9<sup>th</sup> Mississippi in 1862, was elected captain, and went on to fight in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia before

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census, 1860, Yazoo City, Miss., Microfilm 653\_594, 120, Image 530, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

<sup>6</sup> Muster Roll, Co. D, 10th Mississippi Infantry, April 17, 1861, Roll 185, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, Washington, 1959 (Roll 219, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson); Howell, H. Grady (1998), *For Dixie Land I'll take My Stand!: A Muster Listing of All Known Mississippi Confederate Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines*, vol. 1, Madison, Miss.: Chickasaw Bayou Press, 952-953.

<sup>7</sup> For information on the Dickson family see Early, Ruth H. (1920), *The Family of Early, Which Settled Upon the Eastern Shore of Virginia and Its Connection With Other Families*, Lynchburg, VA: Early, 236-240; David Dickson Bible, [http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gaclayt2/church\\_records/General\\_David\\_Dickson\\_bible.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gaclayt2/church_records/General_David_Dickson_bible.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Mattie Dickson, "Now the Dicksons", Harris Dickson vertical file, MDAH.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Elliott, Jr. wrote a series of articles on the Dickson family for the *Concordia Sentinel* in 2010.

<sup>10</sup> United States Census, 1850, Hinds, Miss., NARA microfilm M432, roll 372, 184A, Image 373. <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M4LC-13L>.

being paroled in Greensboro, North Carolina, on May 1, 1865.<sup>11</sup> At war's end, Thomas returned to Mississippi and his former work as a druggist in Yazoo City. In 1866 he married Harriet Hardenstein, the daughter of a prominent doctor, and two years later they had their first child, Harris, who became a judge and well-known writer. Dickson moved to Vicksburg and then found work as a railroad agent in Meridian. By 1870 he was again living in Jackson and working as a druggist before moving back to Vicksburg during the 1870s and becoming postmaster there.<sup>12</sup> The Dicksons had two more sons: Augustus Otto Helion and Thomas Hyde, Jr. In his later years, Thomas Dickson was in the insurance business with his two younger sons.<sup>13</sup> He died in Vicksburg on June 21, 1908.

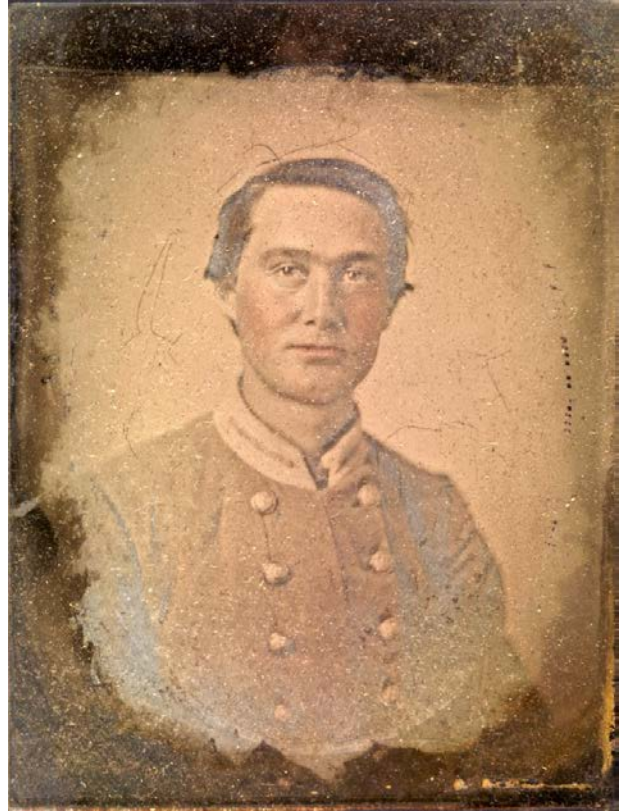


Figure 1. Thomas Hyde Dickson.  
Courtesy of Catherine Ann Hirn.

The last piece of the puzzle was the hardest to find. Was there an image of Captain Dickson out there? The genealogical investigation unearthed some leads among Dickson's descendants and one led to Catherine Ann Hirn, a great-great granddaughter living in Virginia, who had a daguerreotype of Dickson taken during the war. Mrs. Hirn kindly agreed to have the image digitized and now it is possible to put a face to the man who wrote a short remembrance of an incident before Chickamauga which Brodie Crump thought important enough to save in his papers.

Archivists know they have to be more than just good custodians of the materials entrusted to their care. To provide access to these materials, they must be described and increasingly, digitized. But, confronted with backlogs of collections and the pressure to make them available, archivists often have to confine their descriptions to the collection or series level which may mean that many items still remain hidden. It is no wonder that from time to time that a "lost" letter written by Abraham Lincoln, for example, is discovered in an archival collection. In fact, the letter is rarely truly lost but because the descriptions are not to the item level, it is simply overlooked. Archivists as researchers have a vital role in revealing the importance of particular items within collections and finding out a little more about their provenance to enhance their usability to patrons and to broaden the possibilities for research of those collections. Recognizing

<sup>11</sup> Muster Roll, Co. E, 9th Mississippi Infantry, 1863-1865, Roll 175, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, Washington, 1959 (Roll 289, MDAH).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census, 1870, NARA microfilm M593, FHL microfilm 552238, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MFSN-ZDX>; (Thomas H. Dixon) NARA microfilm M593, FHL microfilm 552229, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MF3H-KLX>; U.S. Census, 1880, T. M. Dixon, Vicksburg, Warren, Miss., NARA microfilm T9-0667, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M4P4-CW9>.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census, 1900, Vicksburg, Miss., Ward 4, NARA microfilm 831, 13A, Image 623.

the value of items in a collection and using them to highlight the importance of the whole collection is justification for judicious item-level descriptions.

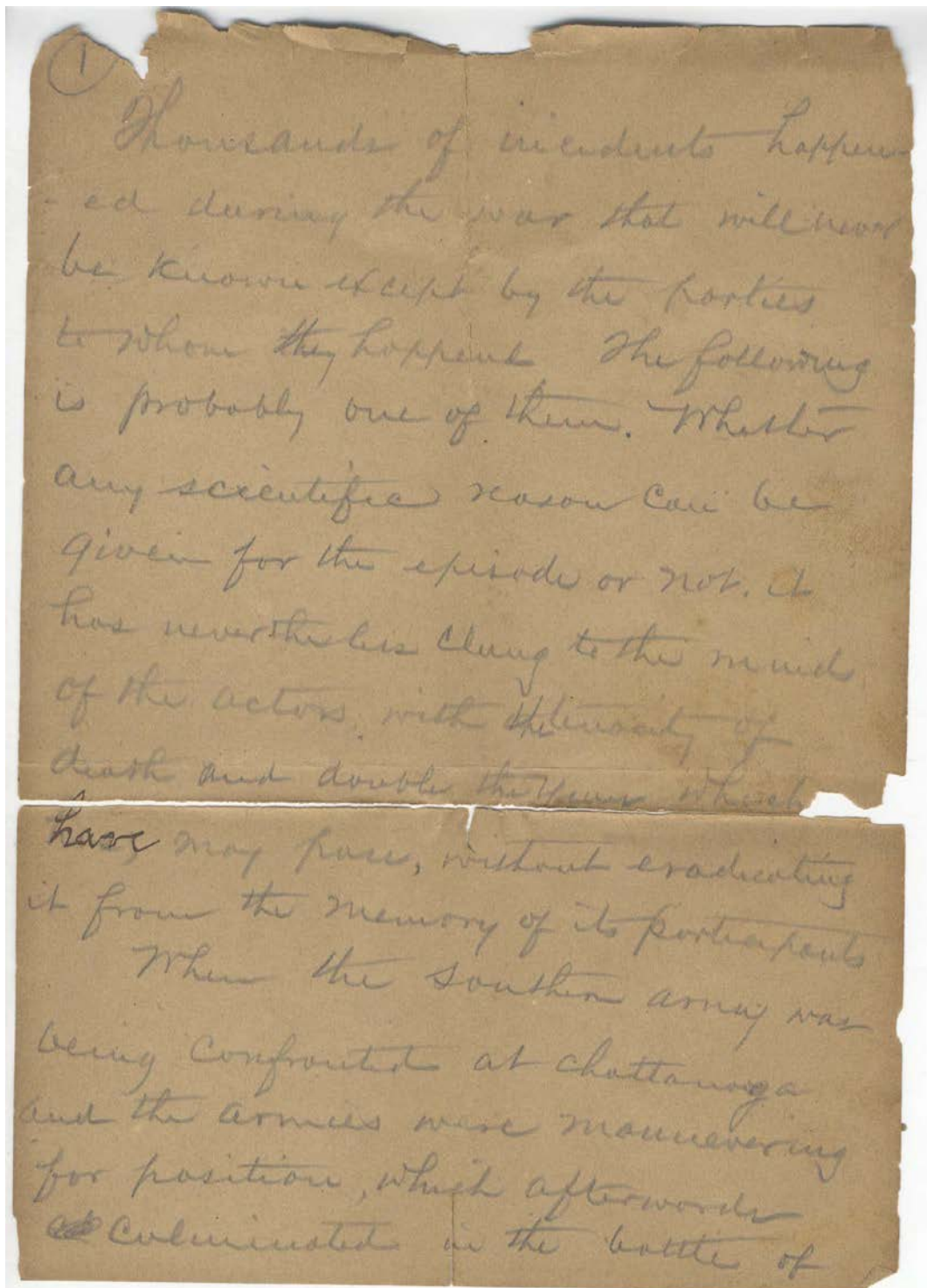


Figure 2. Thomas Hyde Dickson document, page 1.

Courtesy of the Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries.