

A Reconnaissance up York River

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Transcribed and Annotated by William A. Palmer, Jr.

Gen. Van Alen¹ goes upon a cruise—a visit to West Point—Reception of our people there

Yorktown, Sunday, August 10, 1862

The York River of to-day presents as strong a contrast to the York River of a month ago, as New-York Harbor of 1662 to 1862. Now all is quiet and peaceful, as though its waters had never been howled over by screeching shot and shell, or its depths plowed by the vast fleet of the army of the Potomac; now, as we look from the commanding bluffs of old York off towards the broad Chesapeake, not an object can be seen to obstruct the view, not one sail to whiten the horizon. The grim and solemn hull of the gunboat *Chocura*² keeps hourly watch over the waters of the river and the works of Gloucester Point, and but little transpires day or night but what the careful scrutiny of Capt. Patterson³ brings to light.

Gen. Van Alen, being desirous of ascertaining the situation of matters up the river, on Friday last planned a little trip with Capt. Patterson, of the *Chocura*, as far as West Point. Friday morning opened bright and beautiful; a fresh breeze from the west lightened the atmosphere, and filled all hands with new life and vigor. At 8 o'clock the Captain's gig and first cutter of the gunboat took the party, consisting of Gen. Van Alen, Capt. Revere,⁴

¹ James H. Van Alen (August 17, 1819–July 22, 1886) organized the 3rd New York Volunteer Cavalry Regiment at the outset of the Civil War. Promoted to Brigadier General of Volunteers on April 15, 1862, he was appointed Military Governor of Yorktown following the fall of that town to Union forces during McClellan's Peninsula Campaign. He served as Major General Joseph Hooker's Chief of Staff at Chancellorsville, resigning from the army on July 14, 1863, due to ill health. In the postwar period he was active in Republican Party politics. While a passenger aboard the Cunard steamship *Umbria* in 1886, he mysteriously disappeared on the transatlantic passage from Liverpool to New York. Van Alen had been ill during the journey, and the seas were rough. It is surmised that, going out on deck in the middle of the night, he fell overboard.

² U.S.S. *Chocura*, a screw steam gunboat, was launched in Boston, October 5, 1861, and commissioned February 15, 1862, with Commander T. H. Patterson at the helm. *Chocura* was 158 feet long, with a beam of 28 feet. It was initially armed with an 11-inch Dahlgren gun, two smoothbore 24-pounder guns, and a 20-pounder rifled gun. The article suggests that it carried an additional 20-pounder rifle on its visit to West Point.

³ Thomas Harmon Patterson (May 10, 1820–April 9, 1889) was born in New Orleans, where his father was then serving as a career naval officer. During the Civil War his commands included U.S.S. *Chocura*, *Currituck*, *James Adger*, and *Richmond*. From 1873 to 1876 he was commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, a position his father had held from 1836 to 1839. He advanced to command the U.S. Asiatic Squadron, and accompanied former President U. S. Grant on his tour of Japan in 1879. He retired as a rear admiral in 1883.

⁴ William H. Revere, Jr. briefly served as first lieutenant of the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry, resigning June 1, 1861. He then enrolled, August 8, 1861, at age 26, in the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry; he was elected captain of Company C on October 5, 1861. While at Yorktown during the

Provost-Marshal, and Lieut. Pease, Aide-de-Camp,⁵ on board the *Chocura*, which lay ready with steam up; the boats were soon on the “davies,” when the shrill whistle of the boatswain called attention, while his melodious voice, which must have arisen from the depths of his boots, summoned all hands forward to raise anchor as the pilot takes his position and we are fairly under weigh. The look-out from aloft is seen peering in every direction with his glass as if he would gather the rebel hoards [*sic*] even from the bowels of the earth, but none could be found on the right or the left and no occasion offered for awakening the echoes of the surrounding hills by the deep-mouthed tones of our 11-inch Dahlgrens⁶ or pet 20-pound rifles.⁷

Nothing of interest occurred on the way up, and the time was passed in watching the sailors at their different occupations. Here would be found a party squatted on the spotless deck deeply engaged in the mysteries of checkers; there another absorbed in dominoes; and, again, another in backgammon, while others were reading, writing, “fixing up” their clothes—but all busy and all happy. It would be hard to realize from the picture there presented that the same participants could be roused to the fury of demons, and send forth death-dealing missiles with as little thought as was given to their games.

Shortly after noon anchor was dropped abreast of the West Point wharf, when the party, led by Gen. Van Alen and Capt. Patterson, and accompanied by an armed escort of the Eighth Regiment New-York Militia,⁸ disembarked at the wharf on the Mattapony, where everything looked deserted and dilapidated. But two individuals greeted our vision; they were duly hailed and invited to a conference, when the General and Capt. Patterson seated themselves beneath the inviting shade of some neighboring trees and gathered

Peninsula Campaign he served as General Van Alen’s Provost-Marshal, doing commendable work in repairing combat damage, burying the dead, and disarming booby traps that had been left by retreating Confederates. He served as colonel of the 10th Maryland Volunteer Infantry from July 30, 1863, to January 29, 1864, and then became colonel of the 107th Regiment, United States Colored Troops, serving under General Sherman. He was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General of Volunteers for war service on August 17, 1865, but died shortly afterward, on September 20, 1865.

⁵ Charles Elliott Pease (August 16, 1838–March 25, 1886) was born in Albany, New York, and graduated from Union College in Schenectady. He joined the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry September 25, 1861, and was elected first lieutenant of Company G. He was promoted to captain and Assistant Adjutant General of Volunteers, May 27, 1863, rising to Brevet Major, August 1, 1864. He served as a staff officer under General Van Alen and Major Generals Hooker and Meade. His horse was shot out from under him at Gettysburg. At Appomattox he acted as a go-between in the initial overtures made by General Robert E. Lee to General U. S. Grant. Following the war he served as secretary of the United States Life Insurance Company. Because the article is signed only with the initials A.D.C., and Pease was serving as aide-de-camp to General Van Alen during his West Point visit, it is likely that he is the author.

⁶ Designed by Admiral John A. Dahlgren in 1851, the 11-inch gun, weighing 15,700 pounds, was an iron smoothbore that had become a standard weapon in the Navy’s arsenal by the time of the Civil War. It was capable of throwing a 127-pound shell or 170-pound solid shot a distance of two miles.

⁷ Used both on land and sea, the Parrott rifle had been developed by Robert Parker Parrott, superintendent of the West Point (N.Y.) Foundry. The twenty-pounder version of this weapon had a 3.67-inch bore and weighed 1750 pounds. It was capable of throwing shells 4400 yards.

⁸ This National Guard unit, based in New York City, was federalized for three periods of service during the Civil War. During its first tour of duty (April 25, 1861–August 2, 1861) it fought at First Bull Run, where it suffered 38 casualties. It was on its second tour of duty, in garrison at Yorktown (May 29, 1862–September 10, 1862), when a detachment accompanied General Van Alen to West Point. During its final tour (June 17, 1863–July 23, 1863) it participated in the Gettysburg campaign.

what news they could. The party either knew very little or too much, as nothing could be gleaned from them of the operations of the rebels; one was asked whether he was a rebel; he demanded what was meant by a rebel. Capt. Patterson explained, when Secesh remarked that one was bound to go with one's native State; but he had always been in favor of the Union.

While this group was thus engaged, the boys took a stroll through the town, dropping into the various houses, in most of which numerous women and children were found, who generally treated the Yankees with sullen silence—but no men were there. We finally all brought up at the hotel,⁹ a substantial, capacious building, kept by Mrs. New.¹⁰ In it were domiciled some half a dozen of the fair sex, one or two of whom were well favored by Dame Nature. They informed us, during the conversation, that they were Virginia *ladies*, and, as they treated us in an unexceptional manner, we had no reason to doubt their words. The pleasure of passing a few moments in the society of ladies, albeit they were inimical to our cause, detained us at the hotel for a half-hour or more, and it was time not altogether thrown away, as we learned from them that there had been no vessels trading between the Mattaponi and the Pamunkey, as was reported to Capt. Patterson, since our fleets left the latter river. They said they had had no coffee or sugar for weeks, and they had almost forgotten the taste of salt. They do not, however, seem to know the value of good U.S. coin, as they charged fabulous prices for some vegetables, and appeared quite indifferent as to whether they sold them or not.

Considering our mission accomplished, we took our departure about three o'clock, rather pleased to get once more on the water, as the sun poured down its rays with most tropical heat, throwing the mercury close to the hundreds. We had been aboard but a few minutes when everything was whistled ready for a start, and soon the gallant craft was steaming down the river at the rate of ten knots—homeward bound.

A.D.C.

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⁹ Later known as the Grove Hotel, this two-story, federal-style building served as the residence of Carter Braxton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, after his home "Chericoke" in King William County burned in 1776. It was located on what is now the west side of Main, between Seventh and Eighth streets, and was destroyed in the fire of 1903.

¹⁰ Margaret Carlton New and her husband, James Frank New, were among the handful of permanent residents in the town of West Point at the time of the Civil War. Following the war, Mr. New operated a sawmill in the town.

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