

Writer's comments:

In 1994, a ten year labor of love came to fruition when “Letters to Mary: the Civil War Diary of Dr. John Kennerly Farris” rolled off the press. What had begun in the mid-1980's as an interesting way to spend time with my father who was in declining health, had suddenly turned into the most exciting project of my life. John Kennerly Farris was my great-grandfather. Reading the journal he kept in the form of letters to his wife, Mary, of his war-time experiences more than 130 years ago (at that time) had seemed almost an invasion of their privacy. But how very fortunate I was to have this legacy and to be able to share his joys, his sorrows, his loneliness and despair, but most of all his honor and commitment, to a Cause he knew was lost, during this most difficult time in our nation's history. The following is an excerpt from “Letters to Mary” and tells of his experiences at Fort Donelson ... as he saw it, as he wrote it, as he lived it! SFJ

FORT DONELSON

One Soldier's Story

by Shirley Farris Jones

February 1862 was not a good month for the Confederacy! One hundred and forty-six years ago two major battles of the War Between the States were fought and both would have devastating effects upon the South. On February 16, 1862 Fort Donelson was surrendered and the gateway to the Confederacy was literally opened. The fall of Fort Donelson set the stage for the Battle of Shiloh, which would occur less than two months later. Three long years and many battles later, on April 9, 1865, General Lee would surrender his army and it would all be history! Why and how could the

implications from the Battle of Fort Donelson be so far-reaching and have such devastating consequences for the men of the South?

When Fort Donelson fell, bells rang jubilantly throughout the North since it was their first major victory of the war, but things were still pretty quiet in Dixie. Just a month before the Confederates had seemed invincible. With the fall of Fort Henry just days before, the necessity of maintaining control of the Cumberland River at Fort Donelson became an even greater risk. The Confederates' position here was much stronger than at Fort Henry, and Union ironclad forces would have to face two river batteries with 12 heavy guns. Grant's troops coming overland from Fort Henry arrived on February 13 and Fort Donelson found itself literally encircled with some 15,000 Union troops. The weather the day before had been unseasonably warm and many Union men mistakenly believed that this was typical of the South and threw away their heavy winter gear – an act they would soon regret! There were sporadic clashes on that day, but neither side gained ground. Nightfall brought bitter cold weather – sleet and snow that caused great suffering. The morning of February 14 dawned cold and quiet. Early in the afternoon the stillness was broken by a furious roar and the earth began to shake. The Union gunboats were exchanging “iron valentines” with the eleven big guns in the Southern batteries. During this one and a half hour duel the Confederate guns inflicted such extensive damage that the gunboats were forced to retreat. The hills and hollows echoed with cheers from the Southern

soldiers. The Confederate generals, John Floyd, Gideon Pillow, Simon Buckner, and Bushrod Johnson, also rejoiced but at the same time they recognized the reality of the situation with Grant receiving reinforcements daily. They were almost entirely encircled by Union troops and the danger of being starved into submission was not a pleasant thought. Accordingly, they massed their troops against the Union right, hoping to clear a route to Nashville and safety. The battle on February 15 raged all morning, the Union army grudgingly retreating step by step. Just as it seemed the way was clear, the Southern troops were ordered to return to their entrenchments – a result of confusion and indecision among the Confederate commanders. Grant immediately launched a vigorous counter-attack, retaking most of the lost ground and gaining new positions as well. The way of escape was closed once more. With this development, Floyd and Pillow turned over command of Fort Donelson to Buckner and slipped away to Nashville with about 2,000 men. The next morning, Buckner surrendered. Within a week of Fort Donelson's takeover, Nashville, the first Confederate capitol and industrial center to fall, would be surrendered and within a month, the Union line would extend all of the way from Bowling Green, Kentucky to Huntsville, Alabama. Federal forces first made their way into Murfreesboro on March 10, 1862.

This was a very demoralizing time indeed for Southerners. Albert Sidney Johnston, the highest ranking field officer in the Confederacy, had a major

problem with his forces being split 200 miles apart and a victorious enemy in control of the rivers and railroads in between. He withdrew further south, and reestablished his line of command at Corinth, Mississippi with about 44,000 men. These men would soon see action on April 6, 1862 at Shiloh. Two names would emerge from the fight at Fort Donelson – one being a cavalryman by the name of Nathan Bedford Forrest, who defied the philosophy of surrender dictated by Generals Floyd, Buckner and Pillow, when he stated that he “had not brought these men here just to be prisoners of war” so he led the way and 700 followed, never once encountering the enemy. Forrest stated, “Boys, these people are talking about surrendering and I am going out of this place or bust hell wide open!” The other name belonged to a more or less unknown Union general by the name of Ulysses S. Grant, and a new term was born with his reply to General Buckner's request for terms of capitulation when Grant responded that “No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted.”

Among those affected by this “unconditional and immediate surrender” was Dr. John Kennerly Farris, Co. I., 41st Tennessee, my great-grandfather. Here is his story, his version of what happened, and his fate thereafter.

John Kennerly Farris, Sr. served the Confederacy as a doctor in the 41st Tennessee

Infantry from the beginning of the War until the end. He was born

on April 18,

1836 in Franklin County, Tennessee. The Farris family was among the earliest

settlers in Franklin County when they came there from Virginia in 1811.

John Farris began the study of medicine under Dr. J. E. Hough of Pleasant Hill. He married Mary Elisabeth Austell on August 27, 1857 and furthered his studies in Arkansas the following year. When it appeared war was imminent, he returned to his home in Franklin County, and along with his two brothers, G. S. (Bud) and Samuel Jackson (Sam), enlisted for a period of twelve months in the Tennessee Volunteer Army on November 26, 1861. He was a private in Company I of the 41st Tennessee Infantry at the time of his enlistment at Winchester, and was promoted to Hospital Steward on January 4, 1862.

Dr. Farris was an avid record-keeper and began an accounting of his daily experiences on the day of his enlistment. After leaving Winchester, his company arrived in Nashville, where he remained until early 1862. In a diary entry on Thursday, February 13, 1862, he notes that most of his regiment had already gone on to Fort Donelson, where it was rumored that "a big fight was about to begin." He was quite anxious to take part in this first battle, but was denied permission to join his regiment by Lieutenant Wilhoit as he was the only physician in his command. However, there were no sick or wounded in Nashville and he wanted to go where the action was, so he pulled rank and got an order from the Commander of the Post, allowing him to go immediately to Fort Donelson. He arrived finally after a very cold and

uncomfortable riverboat journey on Friday, February 14, 1862. He did indeed participate in the battle and was nearly killed while enroute to the hospital to help the wounded. The following is an excerpt from 'LETTERS TO MARY: The Civil War Diary of Dr. John Kennerly Farris" where he recalls the events in a letter written almost eight months later:

(Camp Cold Water, Miss. Friday Oct. 31st 1862)

"Well, Mary I have several times thought I would give you a brief history of my time at Ft. Donnelson, and how I happened to get there.

Thursday, Feb. 13th 1862, I was in the City of Nashville with some 16 or 20 of our Regt. when I heard the fight had begun at Ft. Donelson and knowing our Regt. was there, I was very anxious to be with them; - so I went to Lieut. Wilhoit who was in command of the detachment of our Regt. and I believe the detachment of all the Regts. which belonged to Gen. Buckners command, and asked him for an order to rejoin the Regt. He told me he could not give me one without laying himself liable as I was the only Physician with him, or under his command.

This troubled me a good deal and I became anxious to be with them, and studied about an hour how I would manage to get to the Regt. and the propriety of leaving without an order. Suddenly an idea struck me that I might get an order from the Commander of the Post at Nashville, who I allowed would outrank Lieut. Wilhoit and make me safe in leaving. By enquiring for his quarters, I found him without any difficulty, and told him how I was situated there, and further, that I had sent all the sick under my charge to the Hospital, and was there idle and thought my services might be demanded at Ft. Donnelson, and I desired to go there. Without returning a word he wrote me a pass down there, and told me to take the first boat. I

immediately returned to my quarters, took my napsack from my trunk, with a suit of clothes, went down to the River and got aboard of a little job boat preparing to leave for Ft. Donnelson. This was 8 O'clock A.M. The boat was soon ready to start, but was found to be fast upon a pile of iron which the water had covered. They worked to get it off until two O'clock apparently to no effect. I grew tired, got off the boat and gave out going, for I was suffering considerably with Rheumatic pains in my shoulders, and concluded that I might be more in the way than otherwise. I strolled over town until nearly sun set, when I again concluded that I would go down to the Ft. any way if I could get off. So I went down to the River again and found the boat off the iron and about ready to start. I got aboard and in a very short time the boat began its move but unfortunately washed down against an old boat which was under repair and lodged against it. There we remained until 8 O'clock P.M., when we got clear and started down the River. The little thing was so crowded with passengers that her cabin would not hold over one fourth of us. So the remainder had to take passage on her decks where we had liked to have frozen during the night; could get neither supper or breakfast Friday morning. Friday about 1 O'clock P.M. we got down to Clarksville. There I got off the uncomfortable little job Boat, and got on the Runion, a nice and comfortable boat. We there learned that they were still fighting at Dover. This made all apparently anxious to get on down.

We did not stay there long but went on down the River. When we got in some ten or twelve miles of Dover, we stopped, and took on wood enough to pile all round on lower deck to protect the hands from the balls of the enemy, as we did not know but what the boat would be shot into. About dark we landed at Dover. Everything was quiet. The two contending forces were as still as though they had been friends almost. About 10 O'clock in the night I

found our Regt. and found the boys nearly worn out with fasting, fatigue, and cold. They had not a tent and scarcely a fire. Some were lying on the snow wrapt in their blankets asleep. Some were sitting round a few coals of fire, and some at one thing and some an other.

I was very hungry, and asked them for something to eat, as I had eaten but a snack since Thursday morning. They told me they had nothing, nor had had in some time. But one of the boys had a little parched coffee in his pocket, which he gave to me, and which I pounded in a tin cup the best I could with an old chunk, and borrowed a coffee pot and made it full of coffee, for five of us, who had constructed a little fire barely sufficient to boil a coffee pot of water. We drank the coffee which seemed to do us a good deal of good, though it was barely fit to drink, and would not at all been used under ordinary circumstances. We five sit around the same little fire untill 3 O'clock A.M. of Saturday talking of the previous and expected fight. All through the night we could once and a while hear the pickets shooting at each other, and some very close to us. At 3 O'clock the Officers came round and gave orders for the men to get in line, for it was thought we might be attacked in a short time. Notwithstanding the ground was covered with snow and the weather very cold I felt pretty lively, and was ancious for the coming conflict, though I knew, and told the boys that that day would not close without some as hard fightin as had been done dureing the war. Just at day break the Regt. was ordered forward. It was generally known that we were going round on our left wing and engage the enemy, and I never felt more contented in my life.

During the night every thing had been quite still, with the exception of an occasional fire by the pickets, and so remained untill we had gone near a half a mile, and by which time the sun had just begun to show itself peeping as it were over the hills, and mountains of the east. At that time we were

moving on in line, I keeping with the file closers, and watching the appearance of the boys particularly which I was enabled to do as I had my gun to carry. We struck the foot of a large hill, marched rather across the point, but to my great surprise, just as we got barely on top of the hill the enemy discovered us, & turned loose at us with a cannon; the first that I had ever heard fire in battle. The boys all dropped to the ground, and I followed suit, but we rose in an instant, and were ordered to double quick. The ball passed immediate over us. When I got up I felt considerably confused, & must acknowledge a little fear. The first thing in my mind was that I had got myself voluntarily into a devil of a snap; but at the same moment I thought of you and Sammy & determined not to disgrace you & him if my head was shot off, so I braced myself up & marched strate forward as resolute as death itself, but not without feeling somewhat uncomfortable. I looked at every man in the Regt. to see how they looked. None looked like they were scared & I argued to myself that it did not look reasonable that God Almighty had so constituted me as to make me more of a coward than any of the Regt. We had not doubled quicked over fifty yards, untill they cut loose again with a shell. The boys being used to them droped to the ground again, and at the same moment I accidently sliped down, hurting my knee on the frozen ground slightly. The shell pased immediately over me, and I think would have cut me into had I not been on the ground. It burst in about 20 yards of us but done us no harm. I rose instantly, and the first thing; said to myself, - well, I will not get hurt to day for providence has saved my life, and God is on my side. We went down the hill at a double quick; then followed a hollow some thing like a quarter or half- a mile; the enemy not molesting us. At length we struck the foot of an other high hill at which place, a good many of us droped our napsacks, and left them on account of fatigue.

It was a good piece to the top and about half way up, a battery had stalled, and the enemy was pouring it to them, with ball and shell rapidly. We marched up to it and stopped for it to get out of the way, some of our men assisting in pushing it. At this moment Gen. Floyd rode up and ordered us onward. Our Col. told him we were waiting for the Artillery to get out of the way. He said wait for nothing but go ahead. We started, the enemy giving us grape, canister and shell heavily. At that point I got used to the things, and feared them no more. We moved on to the top of the Hill or almost, and was ordered to lie down in a little hollow to the right of the road, just behind one of our batteries which was playing upon the enemy. But was soon ordered to recross the road, and lie on the breast of the hill at the termination of a large hollow, in the rear of the battery and to the right, - also in rear of the 14th Misp. Regt. and a short distance behind them; who were, and had been for some time fighting like fury. The enemy endeavored to shell us out of the Hollow but failed in doing so, as their shells passed generally over us. They tried us with grape and canister, but with no effect. We lay there until eleven O'clock with the exception of 3 companies, which had been ordered off to drive the sharp shooters from some of our batteries, and defend them. Gen. Floyd, and our Brigade Surgeon took their position just behind us. About 11 O'clock there came a man running down to us and asked for a Physician to go up to the 14th Misp. Regt. The cries of the wounded at this time was horrible. The roar of the cannon and the noise of the musketry was deafening. The Brigade surgeon ordered me to go to them. I rose and started, as fast as I could to them, having to cross a heavy cannon fire, before I reached them, and immediately after crossing that I was in range of the musket balls, which fell all around me and passed over my head so thick that it looked like I could have held up my hat and caught it full. The Mississippi

boys fell fast, but fought like men. I went to work on them, as best I could, and had at length to tear up my havorsack for bandages. I found a fellow with two wounds in the breast and saw he was bleeding from an artery. I carried him down in the hollow to get assistance in dressing his wounds. The brigade surgeon assisted me and ordered me to accompany him to the hospittal, and told me to report myself to the medicle director which I did. The boats by this time had arrived, - (I suppose it was 11 1/2 O'clock) to take off the wounded. I was ordered to service in a hospittal, which was in a vacated Hotel, but about the time I got warm Dr. Clopton sent for me to assist him in the Hospittal he had charge of, which was just across the road. I went over and went to work, but did not work long untill the Yankeys turned loose at the Hospittals, and struck ours with several grape loads, and passed two cannon balls through. We went to work to raise the flags higher, and I suppose brought them in to notice in about an hour and a half. At about half after one J. K. Buckner was brought in. Poor fellow. I was so sorry for him. I got Dr. Clopton to dress his wound immediatly and started him to the boat, telling him never to stop untill he got home. Clopton, myself, and an other Physician, with occasional help from others worked on untill 8 O'clock in the night, at which time we got through with all that were sent to our hospittal, and got most of them on the boats. The fighting stoped when darkness forbid farther action. We got our instruments cleaned & sit down to rest at 9 O clock, & I do not think I was ever tireder in my life. Several Physicians & officers came in, & we talked over some of what we had seen. I told them that we who lived would all be prisoners of war by 3 hours by sun Sunday morning. I felt very much like it. I had seen all day that the enemy had 4 or 5 to one & had us surrounded. I thought we would fight next morning, but knew we would be over powered. At ten o clock p.m. we lay

down on the floor to take a nap for the first in a long time. At 3 O'clock some fellow came and told us that our forces were going to retreat; and ordered us to have the remainder of our wounded put upon the boat and then make our escape if we could, and if not to surrender as prisoners of war, and we would soon be released. As the order came from the surgeon General we went to work, and after a while got most of them off. I kept asking every one that I would see coming from our Regt. what had gone with it; at length a gentleman told me that it had cut its way through and was retreating. I ran in and told Dr. Clopton the same and told him I thought we had better go also. So we bundled up and started down to the boats to try to get aboard, but could not get nigh them for the guards. Dr. Clopton asked me what we could do. It was near day light. I told him we must foot it up the River bank. He did not believe it practicable. I insisted on trying, so we put out only taking one blanket. I suppose we went a half mile when we saw, as it was getting a little light 5 men coming meeting us, and who we took to be Yankeys. There said he look yander. What shall we do. Says I march strait forward for if we run they will shoot us. We met them. They asked us where we were going. We told them into the Country a little piece. Said they the enemy is just before us out here and you cannot get out. We found that they were our men been trying just what we were going to try. It was then proposed that we cross the River on some logs and agreed to, but before we could find any daylight came upon us, & to our surprise no Regt. but Forest Cavalry had gone, & the white flags were visable upon our works, so we were all prisoners."

John Farris spent the next seven months as a prisoner of war at Camp Morton, Indiana and was finally exchanged, along with several thousand other Confederate prisoners, near Vicksburg, Mississippi on September 17,

1862. He survived the war, participated in the major battles of Vicksburg, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Atlanta , Franklin, and Nashville. After the war, he practiced medicine in Coffee County until 1901. He died there in 1910.