A trip across Hampton Roads  
Feb. 6 1864  

While we were stationed at " Getty’s" near Portsmouth Va., in the spring of ’64 it was my pleasure one beautiful morning to take a trip to Newport News across the waters of Hampton Roads. We went on Brigade business, Capt. W. H. Abel A. A. G. Lieut. J. E. McDougall A. A. Qm. & myself. We waited quite a while for the Lieut. To secure transportation. I quote from one of my letters:--

"Directly across the river one mile distant is Norfolk containing before the war 20,000 inhabitants. It is built almost entirely of brick. Streets are narrow and badly kept. The crookedness of its streets remind one of Boston. A great deal of business entirely foreign to anything warlike is transacted here. Portsmouth on the other hand reminds one of Salem.

The streets are cleaner and more regular. The houses are built mainly of wood and it seems to be a quiet old fashioned sort of a place. Two old ferry-boats called respectively "Union" and "Portsmouth," of antique build and weakly [?] frame connect the 2 places. Right before us a French vessel of war flies her national emblem. Above the town on this side of the river -- where that forest of crests [?] seem to rise out of the water – is the Gosport [?] Navy Yard.

But here comes our tug, with "J. E. Milford" painted upon her Pilot house, and we are soon steaming down the "Elizabeth." That fine white building on the left with extensive grounds and fine shade trees is the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. We pass Fort Norfolk on the right, a large flag flying from one corner of the parapet. Sentinels pace to and fro upon the walls and heavy ordnance, shot and shell lie in bountiful profusion upon the landing. We are now passing the Gater[?] -grounds. At this point every fine morning may be seen boats with one, two or three men, close to the high bank and over the shoals dredging for the delicious bivalves. Craney island which we are passing at the left is of some note in the history of the war. Rebel batteries extend its entire length, now manned by U.S. Colored troops. Off that point is where the rebel "Merrimac" went down after its raid upon our fleet in 1862. That far-reaching point on our right is "Sewall’s" where we first saw the rebel flag in January 1862.

But we are now out of the river and begin to feel the waves from the open sea. And our little craft bounds along as if indeed "a thing of life." Wild ducks skim over the surface of the water and screaming sea-gulls soar high and low, quarreling over bits of food that improvident hands have "cast upon the waters," ever and anon passing themselves in mid-air for a sudden descent upon some fish they see beneath them.

A good half-hour’s sail from us is the Fortress Monroe and at almost an equal distance the "Rif-Rafs" loom up out of the water. When the Burnside Expedition was here two years ago, these same "Rif-Rafs" looked like an immense pile of stone just dropped into the harbor.

Numerous derricks were erected upon it and men were busy shaping and forming the entire mass. Now the shapeless mass has assumed a form. Where before we beheld chaos, we now see a fortress. Big, black muzzles protrude over the walls as if warning us to keep off; and still it is not finished. But our little craft is threading its way through the fleet. We are passing the only Russian vessel of war left in the harbor, the last of the fleet which so lately made an amicable visit to our shores. Her national flag—a blue cross on a white field—flies from the peak. On our right is another vessel bearing the red cross of England.

But the massive walls of the fort loom up before us, through whose open ports and
over whose solid masonry peer guns of heavy calibre. Sentinels keep vigilant watch and ward upon the parapet, and our beautiful flag flies from the tall flagstaff inside the fortress. Outside the walls is the town "Old Point Comfort." The houses are of one story, those cottages with green blinds and the porch so common in the South. Nearly all the buildings are occupied by government officials. We make but a short stay here and cast off for Newport News. We pass the Hospital on our right and the 3 turreted monitor "Roanoke" a little further on. The frigate "Minnesota" anchored near at hand is the flagship of Admiral Lee commanding the No. Atlantic blockading squadron. That black mass protruding from the water near the shore, is all that remains of the gallant frigate "Congress"

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sunk on the 8th March 1862 under the fire of the Merrimac, whose grave we passed an hour and a half ago. That little ripple further out tells where the "Cumberland" went down with its living freight.

But the bells tinkle "slow her" and casting a line to the wharf we are soon made fast. The bluff at this point is 20 to 25 feet high above the river. That one-story house on the bank was occupied by Genl. C. A. Heckman when he commanded here. During the engagement Mar. 8, 1862 a shot from the Merrimac passed through the room we used to use as an office and the marks are still visible. A line of works some distance back of the house was built by the 3 mos [?] troops in 1861 when Genl. Butler commanded here.

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All the buildings at this post were built and occupied by Govt. officials, except a few shanties occupied by many "Contrabands." Two or three times a week a flag of truce boat goes by up the James bound for City Point with rebel prisoners, buying from thence our own poor fellows just released from "Libby" or "Belle Isle." Sometimes through very faintly they can be heard to cheer as they come in sight of the flags flying in the fleet and see the camps at the "News" where are the first Union soldiers they have seen for many long weary months.

But a whistle from the tug recalls us and hastening to the wharf we jump aboard and are soon steaming down the river. Leaving the Fortress on our left we make a short run across the "flats" and entering the

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Elizabeth river are soon at our starting point. The places at which we have touched, and the incidents to which we have referred are matters of history."

As Parton says in his "History of the Battle at New Orleans" "whoever holds Ft. Monroe and knows how to use it, is master of Virginia and No. Carolina." At the commencement of the war, Col. Dimmick kept the rebels from taking possession of it, and it was well for our cause. May it never fall into the hands of the enemies of our government.

H. E. Valentine