

“OUR BELEAGUERED CITY”:
VIRGINIA, JUNE 1862

Judith W. McGuire: Diary, June 27–30, 1862

Judith W. McGuire and her husband, John, had fled their home in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1861 when the Yankees came. In her diary she narrated the scene in Richmond during the Seven Days, beginning with the battle at Mechanicsville. Her journal was published in 1867 as *Diary of a Southern Refugee, During the War*, with the author identified as “A Lady of Virginia.”

June 27th.—Yesterday was a day of intense excitement in the city and its surroundings. Early in the morning it was whispered about that some great movement was on foot. Large numbers of troops were seen under arms, evidently waiting for orders to march against the enemy. A. P. Hill’s Division occupied the range of hills near “Strawberry Hill,” the cherished home of my childhood, overlooking the old “Meadow Bridges.” About three o’clock the order *to move*, so long expected, was given. The Division marched steadily and rapidly to the attack—the Fortieth Regiment, under command of my relative, Colonel J. M. Brockenbrough, in which are so many of our dear boys, leading the advance. The enemy’s pickets were just across the river, and the men supposed they were in heavy force of infantry and artillery, and that the passage of the bridge would be hazardous in the extreme; yet their courage did not falter. The gallant Fortieth, followed by Pegram’s Battery, rushed across the bridge at double-quick, and with exultant shouts drove the enemy’s pickets from their posts. The enemy was driven rapidly down the river to Mechanicsville, where the battle raged long and fiercely. At nine o’clock all was quiet; the bloody struggle over for the day. Our victory is said to be glorious, but not complete. The fighting is even now renewed, for I hear the firing of heavy artillery. Last night our streets were thronged until a late hour to catch the last accounts from couriers and spectators returning from the field. A bulletin from the Assistant Surgeon of the Fortieth, sent to his anxious

father, assured me of the safety of some of those most dear to me; but the sickening sight of the ambulances bringing in the wounded met my eye at every turn. The President, and many others, were on the surrounding hills during the fight, deeply interested spectators. The calmness of the people during the progress of the battle was marvellous. The balloons of the enemy hovering over the battle-field could be distinctly seen from the outskirts of the city, and the sound of musketry as distinctly heard. All were anxious, but none alarmed for the safety of the city. From the firing of the first gun till the close of the battle every spot favourable for observation was crowded. The tops of the Exchange, the Ballard House, the Capitol, and almost every other tall house were covered with human beings; and after nightfall the commanding hills from the President's house to the Alms-House were covered, like a vast amphitheatre, with men, women and children, witnessing the grand display of fireworks—beautiful, yet awful—and sending death amid those whom our hearts hold so dear. I am told (for I did not witness it) that it was a scene of unsurpassed magnificence. The brilliant light of bombs bursting in the air and passing to the ground, the innumerable lesser lights, emitted by thousands and thousands of muskets, together with the roar of artillery and the rattling of small-arms, constituted a scene terrifically grand and imposing. What spell has bound our people? Is their trust in God, and in the valour of our troops, so great that they are unmoved by these terrible demonstrations of our powerful foe? It would seem so, for when the battle was over the crowd dispersed and retired to their respective homes with the seeming tranquility of persons who had been witnessing a panorama of transactions in a far-off country, in which they felt no personal interest; though they knew that their countrymen slept on their arms, only awaiting the dawn to renew the deadly conflict, on the success of which depended not only the fate of our capital, but of that splendid army, containing the material on which our happiness depends. Ah! many full, sorrowful hearts were at home, breathing out prayers for our success; or else were busy in the hospitals, administering to the wounded. Those on the hill-sides and house-tops were too nervous and anxious to stay at home—not that they were apprehensive for the city, but for the fate of those who were defending it, and

their feeling was too deep for expression. The same feeling, perhaps, which makes me write so much this morning. But I must go to other duties.

Ten o'Clock at Night.—Another day of great excitement in our beleaguered city. From early dawn the cannon has been roaring around us. Our success has been glorious! The citizens—gentlemen as well as ladies—have been fully occupied in the hospitals. Kent, Paine & Co. have thrown open their spacious building for the use of the wounded. General C., of Texas, volunteer aid to General Hood, came in from the field covered with dust, and slightly wounded; he represents the fight as terrible beyond example. The carnage is frightful. General Jackson has joined General Lee, and nearly the whole army on both sides were engaged. The enemy had retired before our troops to their strong works near Gaines's Mill. Brigade after brigade of our brave men were hurled against them, and repulsed in disorder. General Lee was heard to say to General Jackson, "The fighting is desperate; can our men stand it?" Jackson replied, "General, I know our boys—they will never give back." In a short time a large part of our force was brought up in one grand attack, and then the enemy was utterly routed. General C. represents the valour of Hood and his brigade in the liveliest colours, and attributes the grand success at the close of the day greatly to their extraordinary gallantry. The works were the strongest ever seen in this country, and General C. says that the armies of the world could not have driven our men from them.

Another bulletin from the young surgeon of the Fortieth. That noble regiment has lost heavily—several of the "Potomac Rifles" among the slain—sons of old friends and acquaintances. Edward Brockenbrough, dreadfully wounded, has been brought in, and is tenderly nursed. Our own boys are mercifully spared. Visions of the battle-field have haunted me all day. Our loved ones, whether friends or strangers—all Southern soldiers are dear to us—lying dead and dying; the wounded in the hot sun, the dead being hastily buried. McClellan is said to be retreating. "Praise the Lord, O my soul!"

28th.—The casualties among our friends, so far, not very numerous. My dear Raleigh T. Colston is here, slightly wounded; he hopes to return to his command in a few days. Colonel Allen,

of the Second Virginia, killed. Major Jones, of the same regiment, desperately wounded. Wood McDonald killed. But what touches me most nearly is the death of my young friend, Clarence Warwick, of this city. Dearly have I loved that warm-hearted, high-minded, brave boy, since his early childhood. To-night I have been indulging sad memories of his earnest manner and affectionate tones, from his boyhood up; and now what must be the shock to his father and brothers, and to those tender sisters, when to-morrow the telegraph shall tell them of their loss! His cousin, Lieutenant-Colonel Warwick, is desperately wounded. Oh, I pray that his life may be spared to his poor father and mother! He is so brave and skilful an officer that we cannot spare him, and how can they? The booming of cannon still heard distinctly, but the sound is more distant.

June 30.—McClellan certainly retreating. We begin to breathe more freely; but he fights as he goes. Oh, that he may be surrounded before he gets to his gun-boats! Rumours are flying about that he is surrounded; but we do not believe it—only hope that he may be before he reaches the river. The city is sad, because of the dead and dying, but our hearts are filled with gratitude and love. The end is not yet—oh that it were!