

*The Civil War Diary of Emma Mordecai,
April 1864–May 1865*

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This text derives from a transcript of the copy that Emma Mordecai made in 1886 of her own 1864–1865 diary. Parts of the diary had been destroyed by insects, mice, and the ravages of time, as Emma noted in her copy. Both the 1886 handwritten copy of the diary and the typed transcript are part of the Mordecai Family Papers (Collection #00847) at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The transcript preserves spelling, punctuation, syntax, and grammatical idiosyncrasies found in the 1886 diary copy, as does the text reproduced here; questionable text from the transcript was checked against the 1886 diary copy. Apparent dating inconsistencies have been indicated in brackets. As Emma copied her diary, she added parenthetical comments of explanation or identification of people and places, which are italicized here for clarity.

DIARY. MAY 1864. KEPT BY EMMA MORDECAI
AT ROSEWOOD. NEAR RICHMOND.

On *Thursday, April 18th* I left our house on 6th street, for the last time. Sister Ellen & Brother George had departed early that morning, leaving my nephew George, alone at the house. There were still remaining a few articles of furniture to be sent away, after attending

to which George & I came away & at 3½ came out to Rosewood in the cars with Augusta when her school was out. I felt strange without a home anymore, and very still & quiet, tho' not overcome with depression—the reverse, however, of all excitement. Rose had prepared most kindly for my reception, and my room was the picture of neatness & comfort. She received me very kindly, but we made no demonstration or professions to each other. I only know that my inward resolve and humble prayer was & is that I may make my residence with her, for as-long as it may last, a blessing & not a torment or inconvenience to her. There was a time when I should not have doubted this, but the longer we live, the more we doubt ourselves, & now I am not certain—I only hope.

The following week I went to town to spend the Passover with my kind cousins, returning at the close of the festival, the time having been spent very satisfactorily, attending the services at the synagogue, and visiting many of our friends whom circumstances had prevented my seeing before we broke up. By all I was most kindly greeted, & I was gratified at the unvarying regret expressed at our family having left Richmond, & at the kind invitations I received from various friends to pass days or nights with them whenever I could. I returned to Rosewood on Friday 30th. George, meantime had returned to the Army, & Gusta (who went out with me, after school) & I found Rose alone, & pretty well, considering she had been exerting herself over much in many ways. I was soon resettled. The weather continues as it has been all the spring, very cold for the season, making fires necessary except for a few days while I was in town. This brings me to the beginning of my Diary, which in spite of some experience and all resolutions to the contrary, I have concluded to commence.

May 1st

Brother George arrived—having come on to attend to some business—He looks well and considering the times, seems very cheerful. He spent a quiet, resting evening after his journey, & went in the next

May 28th

A most beautiful morning, took a sweet little ramble in the woods about Laurel Branch, after breakfast. Got honeysuckle, laurel, lupin & other flowers. Grape vines not quite in bloom yet. How tranquil it was in the wooded pasture, where the cows look as if they would tire themselves with grazing, so uncommonly luxuriant is the growth of grass & clover in the woods around. The negro boys who mind them are happy, careless little beings—as free as Robin Hood’s men “under the green wood tree”. How much better off will they be in the North? Our ruthless invaders do full as much injury to the poor negroes, as to their owners. Spent the day in quiet, grateful rest. It turned very cool and rained in the afternoon. Ate the first strawberries—a few out of the Garden, & some that Fanny Young sent George, but ladies have brought me some to the Hospital all the week.

May 29th

Another most beautiful day; so cool as to make our wood fires quite acceptable if not necessary. Rose & Gusta went to church. George & I staid at home, he reading & I writing all the morning, a very long letter to Peggy Mordecai in Raleigh, in answer to one from her rec’d yesterday. When Rose came from Church, she told us that Lee’s Army is very near Richmond. There has been a Cavalry skirmish at Atlee’s Station, about six miles from here. Ewell’s wagon train was passing Mr. Stuart’s, for hours yesterday, going down on the Meadow-Bridge road. The Battle grounds of 1861 seem to be selected by Grant for his next failure, & Genl. Lee is arranging to meet him in his new position. Hear that much of our artillery is in Atlee’s Station, & we may see Willie & John here at any moment. Had an excellent dinner of nice fried chicken, asparagus, boiled onions & rice, with a desert of cool clauber. After dinner George drove Rose and me in to see Lawrence Young & take buttermilk to the Hospital. I carried my favorite patient, Mr. Horton, of Georgia, a breast of chicken, & a slice

of bread & butter. Found him less well than when I left him Friday. He ate part of it, & seemed to relish it, but has little appetite. He has much to contend with. Has lost his left foot, and was severely wounded in the right leg. Poor fellow! so brave & so handsome!—with his white forehead, soft chestnut hair, clear steel blue eyes—strait nose & expressive mouth.

Lawrence Young is not thought to be improving. His surgeon, Dr. Montague (*who afterwards married Rosa Young—Lawrence's sister, with whom he fell in love around her brother's cot*), thinks his condition very discouraging. George saw his wound, & thinks it looks dreadfully. He is said to be the idol of his mother. Several of the men had died since I was there on Friday—all were hopeless cases. Many ladies visited the Hospital this P.M. One brought a large basket of strawberries & dispensed them. The poor invalids enjoy them much. On our way to town we saw several families moving with their servants, cattle, horses, and sheep &c to take refuge within the lines of fortification, as we returned, some were preparing to camp out a common, near the road. Ladies & children seated round a camp-fire, while their carts, wagons and a carriage were drawn up round them, with counterpanes arranged so as to make a sort of tent. Families east of the turnpike, (we are a mile to the west of it) have sent everything they can dispense with, to the City, for safety.

May 30th

Beautiful, cool morning, cars not running yet on Fredsbg. Rd. Gusta went in with her uncle John, to school. I could not get to the Hospital. Took a walk in the woods after breakfast. Sewed all the morning mending clothes. Rose felt poorly & lay down most of the time. A perfectly quiet day. No sounds of War. After dinner read a little & took a long nap. Got up & dressed. Mrs. Young sent a large bowl of strawberries, and in the cool of the evening, walked over with the children. Gusta could not get home from school. Willie came about 8 o'clock from Mechanicsville, having ridden ten miles since sunset. He

constant expression of his countenance. He had no one to attend to him except at stated periods. No one to keep off the swarming flies, or to answer the many urgent requirements of such a sufferer. Comfortless & perhaps without any one's knowing it, he will die. The sisters do not allow any outsiders to remain with a patient but 15 minutes, so I had to leave him after this short time. I shall probably not find him there when I go again. I have prayed for him—May God pardon and take him to Himself.

June 10th

I had intended visiting the Hospitals to day, but on consulting my Heb. Calendar, I found it was the 1st day of Pentecost, so I remained at home to observe the day as well as I could by reading the services, and reminding myself of my peculiar duties as an Inheritor of law given to us by Him who said "I, the Lord, change not". Blind & foolish are those children of Israel, who persuade themselves that the laws given to them by the Unchanging One, for them & their descendants to observe forever, are not binding on them.

I omitted to mention yesterday that Willie took us by surprise yesterday at Westbrook. He came home & finding we were at his uncle's he dressed himself decently & went over. Rose sent for Gusta who was still in town, & Mary Chiles, with whom she was staying, came out with her to stay until Monday. Willie spent the night at home, & returned to camp after breakfast. A wagon train camped in the woods in front of the house today—the headquarter train of Stuart's, now Hampton's Cavalry. Horses are constantly passing on their way to & from the horse-recruiting camp up the river.

June 11th

The weather continues remarkably cool for this season. There has nothing of remarkable interest occurred today, tho' a very disagreeable affair with the servants has disturbed us much. Rose's little

Nov. 28th

Spent the morning repairing old clothes. Got into an immoderate fit of laughter recalling an anecdote that John told us yesterday. It made me laugh after going to bed last night, all by myself—such a laugh is worth recording. (*Wish I had recorded the joke—wonder I didn't 1886.*) Gusta returned from school triumphant having had the courage with the help of some of her schoolmates, to have two teeth extracted which have long tormented her. I went to see Fanny Young late in the afternoon. Had an interesting visit. She seems truly affected by her poor brother's violent death, and gave me the interesting particulars. He lived twelve hours after receiving the mortal wound, & was most kindly attended by the ladies near whose house the terrible affair occurred. Spent the evening reading aloud by fire-light, (all other light is too expensive,) Miss Edgeworth's *Belinda*, with which we are delighted on re-reading.

Nov. 29th

Went to town with Mr. Young who took me to the Penitentiary to have my measure taken for a pair of Calf skin shoes. The price will be 95 dollars, & I shall not get them for six weeks; the shoes made there, being so much cheaper & better than those to be got elsewhere, they are overrun with orders. Spent the rest of the day attending to all kinds of matters—saw several old acquaintances, and fell in with Frank Cameron, now stationed at Drury's Bluff, whom I seized upon and took to see Caroline. The poor fellow is in wretched health and spirits, has withdrawn himself from Ladies' society (so he says,) & I hope my accidental meeting with him, will result in doing him some good. Dined with my 12th St. cousins, and staid all night with Caroline. Had some long talks with her. She had much that was interesting, to tell me about her several admirers. We talked until one o'clock after going to bed. Mr. Cohen removal to So. Carolina is much regretted by all his friends. Got letters from

1865. JOURNAL RESUMED.

April 13th

Last Wednesday afternoon I completed in a letter to Edward Cohen, for the benefit of all my relatives in N. Carolina an account of all that had befallen us since the evacuation of Richmond up to that time, including only three days.

Thinking I may here after regret it, if I yield to my aversion to the task, I resolved to continue my narrative. We spent days and nights in such apprehension, that I resolved to make an attempt on Thursday 6th, to get to some headquarters to try to obtain a guard. Having been so grossly insulted by the negro picket on the Camp Lee Road, I concluded to try the Brook turnpike this time, so I took Mary & Georgiana & set forth. In the lane I found Cyrus & one of Mr. Young's men, sitting idle under the hedge. I asked Cy. if he was not going to work anymore? He answered, "Not until I know who I gwine to work for". I said, "Why hadn't you as lief work for your mistress as for any one else if she compensates you for it?" He said I onderstand she an't got nothin' to compensate me wid. "But" I rejoined "if you work the place, she will have something". "No," he couldn't work on dem terms. He informed me there was to be no more Master & Mistress now, all was equal, he "done hear dat read from the Court House Steps". I asked if he expected "to continue to live on 'Mrs. Mordecai' without working for her?" "Yes" he said, "until I see how things is gwine to work. All the land belongs to the Yankees now & they gwine divide it out 'mong de coloured people". I listened with perfect self command: there was no redress, no refutation—so I left him and walked on, asking Mary if she was mighty glad to hear she was free?—She replied "No m' I just as leave be slave as not". (George who had professed so much joy at getting home with the mule and cart Tuesday night, took himself off with all his effects the next morning.) I found some mounted negro

pickets on the turnpike at the entrance of the Lane. They were quite civil, but could not let me pass, so I went to Westbrook & paid a visit. Mr. Young met me at the door—a picture of woe and despair. He had been grossly insulted by some negro soldiers the evening before, who forced him, by putting their carbines to his head, to disclose where he had buried his silver. They had expected to find specie, not plate, and, wonderful to say took off only portions of it, which, still more wonderful fact, was returned by an officer, an hour or two afterwards. But the humiliation could not be obliterated, and almost crazed him. Fanny was more composed than I thought possible. While I was there, Cy sent for his two daughters, Martha & Caroline, who belonged to Mr. Young. Little Fanny came in to her mother's room, terribly distressed that Caroline's father was going to take her away, and she wasn't coming back any more. She cried as if her little heart would break, for Caroline was her little playmate. Her Mother told her it could not be helped, and she must not cry so much about it. So these two, in addition to all the rest of Cy's family have been here, at Rosewood ever since—doing nothing. When I got sight of home on my return from my unsuccessful attempt, all looked so tranquil, that I was surprised to learn from Gusta who met me at the door, that nine of the most ruffianly black demons had been here during my absence, and under pretense of searching for arms, had been all over the house—upturning everything, going into smoke-house, dairy, closets—drawers &c!! Still we had escaped in such a way as to make us thankful for God's protection. They had not torn or destroyed anything in the house. They took off my little work-box, with all its valued contents, gold thimble, little log-cabin which I valued particularly as, with the box itself, they were mementoes of past times and departed loved ones. Also some valuable trinkets—sacred things, from a little trunk in the closet of my room, finding a key on my bench which unlocked it. These things belonged to Mr. Young, and Rose had kept them for him ever since his marriage. We passed the rest of the day & the night in apprehension of further outrages—but nothing happened.