

Percival Drayton Article

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Excerpt from Trinity Church, New York Vestry Minutes – Sept. 26, 1865

A communication was received from Messrs. Alexander Hamilton, Jr. and John Jacob Astor, Jr. asking on the behalf of many admirers and friends of Percival Drayton, late of the U. S. Navy, permission to place in Trinity Church a monument to his memory. The application was granted, and it was referred to a Special Committee to consist of the Rector and Messrs. Astor and Strong to select a place for the monument and to approve the design.

A Tale of Two Monuments

Many Heritage Library *Observer* readers are familiar with the Drayton Brothers Monument at Fort Walker that was dedicated in 1961 for the centennial commemoration of the Battle of Port Royal fought on Nov. 7, 1861. But, how many are aware of the far more impressive memorial to Percival Dayton in Trinity Church, Manhattan, dedicated in 1867?

Our tale should begin with William Drayton, father of the Drayton brothers. William (1776-1846) was a prominent politician, lawyer, banker and writer in Charleston until the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. He was a four-term Congressman serving the 1st. District (that included Hilton Head) but as a Jacksonian and Unionist he was at odds with most of his constituents who sided with John C. Calhoun during the Crisis as did the eight other SC Congressmen. The Nullification Crisis has been described as the prelude to the Civil War.

In 1833 William relocated to Philadelphia with his family except for Thomas and Percival who were adults. William apparently never visited Charleston again. While in Philadelphia, he served as the President of the Second Bank of America during a critical period after the Panic of 1837.

Both William's eldest sons, Thomas Fenwick (1809-1890) and Percival (1812-1865) received superior educations and both decided to pursue military careers.

Thomas attended West Point where he was a classmate and close friend of Jefferson Davis, the future President of CSA. After a few years, Thomas became dissatisfied with his military career and resigned his commission. He was employed in the construction of railroads and after his marriage to Emma Catherine Pope, actively managed plantations including the Fish Haul Plantation on Hilton Head. He eventually owned over 100 slaves and was President and major shareholder of the Charleston-Savannah Railroad

Percival entered The Naval Academy at age 15, to begin what was to become an illustrious 38-year career. As a junior officer he served on the Constitution, the Flagship of the Mediterranean fleet. He was fluent in French and German and served as an interpreter for senior officers. This allowed him to travel widely on shore assignments in Europe. He later served in the Mexican war and on the eve of the Civil War was the Chief Ordnance Officer at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. He attained the rank of Commander in 1855.

In 1860 and into 1861, Thomas conducted a relentless campaign to convince Percival to resign his Commission in the US Navy and take up the cause of their native state, South Carolina. Regrettably, Percival's letters written during this period have not survived.

(The following excerpts are gleaned from a few of Thomas' letters written to Percival at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. They reflect his anxiety and dread, as a military man, at the coming conflict.)

Nov. 7, 1860 "Well Lincoln is elected and now for the end.....we are now resolved to seek (peace and prosperity) out of the Union.....None deplored it more than I do, particularly as it will involve.....what I hoped never to have lived to see - division between brothers.....The present and approaching visitation of sorrow, (illegible) and suffering are due to the corruption of the land.....and unworthy sons of the founding fathers. The whole people are to blame and must suffer together."

Nov. 14, 1860 "Tomorrow I leave for Washington. Try and come to me when I telegram to you."

Dec. 16, 1860 *"The Convention (on Secession) meets tomorrow and the State of SC will probably have seceded from the Confederacy (the Union) before the beginning of the next year.....You and I Percival differ on this subject.....I am fully aware of the importance of your Commission (in the US Navy).....The weak part of our (SC's) frontiers is the Coast and will no doubt be invaded....."*

Dec. 19, 1860 *"The Convention met yesterday.....The South will have to make a navy and you would only change your Commission from one Confederacy to another."*

(Some Washington officials questioned the loyalty of native Southerners who were suspected of harboring sympathy for the Southern cause. Thomas' 'valueless commission' argument in the following Jan. 7 letter was presumably based on his view that Percival would be barred from sea duty thereby spoiling Percival's chances for promotion to senior rank.)

Jan. 7, 1861 *"(illegible) has at last resigned. I wish you had done the same. I am satisfied the Union is dissolved. In this event your Commission is valueless. In a Southern Confederacy, a navy will have to be provided and where you might have assumed your rank. Should such a thing as a compromise get (illegible) and the Union, excepting New England, be preserved, you would of course be allowed toresume your rank (in the US Navy).*

Mar. 5, 1861 *"We have Mr. Lincoln's Inaugural and although it certainly has a double meaning I cannot but regard it belligerent and to all intents a declaration of war. The Southern Confederate States can surely be brought back into the old Union by force.....(but)I have make up my mind to continue – with God's help – separate and independent of the non-holding slave States."*

On Apr. 12, 1861, war broke out with the bombardment of Ft. Sumter. Lincoln immediately called for 75,000 volunteers. Percival Drayton wrote two letters to the Secretary of War. The first restates his officer's pledge to defend the Union against 'enemies both domestic and foreign' and the second letter requests sea duty to take a more active role in putting down the rebellion. A few months later, through the insistent efforts of his naval friend, Commodore Samuel DuPont, Commander Percival Drayton was given command of the Gunboat Pocahontas.

Apr. 17, 1861 “.....You say I don’t understand the position you have taken. I do fully – but certainly differ from you when you say that to side with us – would be “battling for slavery against freedom” On the contrary, by siding with us, you likewise defend yourself (illegible) the North – against a far greater danger than we are threatened with which is the enslavement of the whites, for the tendency with you is toward consolidation and the abrogation of States rights, under the apprehension of the (illegible) and anarchy which is cropping out in every direction.”

July 11, 1861 “However much it is to be lamented, I think we may now find..... these United States are now divided into two – Northern and Southern – not again to be reconstructed.”

July 12, 1861 “.....I regret you had not offered your services to the State that gave you birth....You could have by your knowledge of ordnance have saved the State many thousands, and (illegible) many blunders now perhaps too late to repair.....I assure you I am very sick at heart and full of anguish that our American nation has proved both untrue and unequal to the high destiny before it. May God defend the right, and meet (out?) justice to whom it is due.”

In Sept. 1861, President Jefferson Davis commissioned Thomas Drayton as a Brigadier General in the Confederate army and assigned him command of the Port Royal District. Thomas commenced fortifying the area including Fort Walker on Hilton Head and Fort Beauregard on Bay Point. Slaves made up most of the labor force. Communication ceased between Thomas and Percival sometime in 1861 presumably because both were actively serving in opposing military forces.

On Nov. 7, 1861, Thomas’ dire prediction came true and Commodore DuPont’s massive invasion fleet attacked both Ft. Walker and Ft. Beauregard. The Pocahontas arrived late having been delayed both by a storm and also because they had to tow a disabled vessel. However, when DuPont noticed the gunboat’s tardy arrival, he shouted from the deck of the flagship, “Drayton, I knew you would be here!” The Pocahontas played an important role in the battle, approaching Ft. Walker to gain close range and pouring devastating fire into the Fort with its swivel gun.

Although, Thomas spent little time in the Fort, he led the heroic but doomed defense of Hilton Head and after about five hours, learning that Ft. Walker’s

ammunition had been depleted, he ordered the abandonment of the Fort and organized the evacuation to the Mainland. He was unable to take his slaves so they became the responsibility of the Union occupying force.

After the battle one of Percival's fellow officers asked him whether he was aware that Thomas was on the Island during the Battle. Percival said yes, but showed little emotion and no inclination to comment further so the officer dropped the subject.

After the Battle, Commander Percival Drayton was promoted to the rank of Captain and given command of the sloop Pawnee and was active in operations to gather up slaves on abandoned plantations and transport them to Union occupied areas.

(When the Union forces took over large portion of the Lowcountry, the Fugitive Slave Act was still in effect. The Act stated that escaped slaves be returned to their owners. The following is an excerpt from a letter to his younger half-brother William Heyward Drayton, a lawyer in Philadelphia, who presumably questioned the legality of Percival's actions. Despite Percival's oath to uphold Congress's laws his conscience dictated more humanitarian measures. This letter also showcases Percival's fierce determination to put down, in his words, the "unholy" rebellion.)

"You seem to think that I am not sound on the nigger, from my reports.....The fact is that when the poor creatures come in to me, frightened to death from having been hunted down and shot at, and I know if I send them away it will be merely to expose them to a continuation of the same treatment. I cannot coolly enter into a discussion of the legal points of the question, and am obliged when in the sight of a mother wailing over the loss of her child to look upon them as persons not things.....in all these things although not truer to the Union than yourself, I belong I think to a more advanced party. And one which perhaps considers many means justifiable, which you would not.

"If my relations persist in this unholy rebellion, I am only doing a duty to my country, which should be higher than that even to my family, in assisting to put it down."

(This second excerpt is from a letter to a friend reiterating his evolving attitude as to the humanity of enslaved persons.)

"My brother (Unionist William Heyward)....thinks that they cannot be looked upon as persons, my answer to him was, that when a poor woman comes crying to me for the

loss of her children or husband, but whom she could join by returning to a state of slavery, of which I have had many instances, I cannot but think that at least she has two of the distinctive attributes of the rest of the human race, love of liberty and offspring."

(This final excerpt from a subsequent letter to a friend reflects Percival's hardening attitude to the 'peculiar institution'.)

"I must confess that after what I have seen here (Port Royal area), of the horrors of the institution, I would be willing to do anything except to destroy the constitution to force the end to slavery."

Percival went on to serve with distinction throughout the Civil War. He commanded the ironclad Passaic in the unsuccessful 1863 attempt to capture Charleston and was Fleet Captain of Farragut's flagship Hartford during the Battle of Mobile Bay.

(Farragut's famous order, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" is a paraphrase of two orders which most likely were "Four bells. Captain Drayton, go ahead!" and "Jouett, full speed. Damn the torpedoes." Jouett was Captain of the warship Metacomet that was lashed to the starboard side of the flagship to shield the Hartford from the Rebel fort's cannon fire.)

In 1865 Captain Percival Drayton was appointed Chief of Naval Bureau of Navigation, a position of great responsibility and prestige. Sadly, he died prematurely on August 4, 1865 of a bowel obstruction. Shortly before his death, Percival added a provision to his will. He bequeathed his brother \$30,000 in trust to be administered by Alexander Hamilton Jr., a prominent New York attorney. Percival had learned from his half-brother that Thomas was struggling financially having lost all of his considerable property, including slaves and land, during the war. His attempts to regain ownership of his plantations were unsuccessful.

About one month after Percival's death, Hamilton and his friend John Jacob Astor, Jr. approached the vestry of Trinity Church in New York to propose a memorial to Percival Drayton. The vestry approved and a memorial was designed by Samuel Hunt, a distinguished American architect, and the memorial was completed and dedicated in 1867.

Thomas died at the age of 81 and was the last surviving member of his West Point class.

As evidenced by the Trinity Church memorial, Percival was considered a hero and patriot in the North. However, his southern relatives were disheartened by his decision to take an active role in combating his native state and the confederacy but there is no hint that they ever ostracized him.

John Witherspoon, May 31, 2016

Sources:

Drayton Family Papers, Collection 1584, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Samuel F. DuPont collection, The Hagley museum and Library, Wilmington, DL
Archives of Trinity Church, New York, NY

Photograph of Trinity Church memorial to Percival Drayton courtesy of David Witherspoon

Photograph of sesquicentennial commemoration of the Battle of Port Royal courtesy of David Girvan

N.Y. Monument Honors Charleston's Union Hero

By JANE E. ALLEN
Post-Courier Reporter

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Do You Know Your Charleston?

Trinity Church, an Anglican church in the heart of New York City's Wall Street financial district, is an unlikely location for a monument to a Charleston native who became a Union hero.

Inside the nave of the 1846 neo-Gothic structure designed by American architect Richard Upjohn lies an elaborate stone memorial to Percival Drayton, captain of the U.S. Navy. Engraved in the stone are the names of the places he commanded: Port Royal, Sumter, Mobile. The memorial honors Drayton's virtues, as perceived by his friends: "Loyalty, Truth, Charity."

Born in Charleston Aug. 26, 1812, to a prominent South Carolina family, he died in Washington, D.C., Aug. 4, 1865, after attaining the highest Naval office a Southerner had reached, chief of the Bureau of Navigation.

Not only did this Southerner climb the Union ranks, he fought the battle of Port Royal opposite his brother, Thomas Fenwick Drayton, a general in the Confederate Army.

Percival Drayton left Charleston at 15 for the life of a Navy midshipman, and by the outbreak of the Civil War had become a commander of the Pocahontas in the Port Royal expedition.

Thomas Fenwick Drayton ventured North for an education at West Point Military Academy but returned South where he was a civil en-

gineer and supervised the building of the Charleston and Savannah Railroad, serving as its president from 1853-1861. By 1861, he was commissioned a brigadier general and commanded Confederate troops at Hilton Head, near Port Royal.

Both men survived the battle at Port Royal, after which Percival was promoted to captain and transferred to the monitor Passaic, which led a first attack on Sumter under Admiral DuPont. He later commanded the flagship Hartford in the battle of Mobile Bay. He had no direct heirs.

After the war, Thomas retired to the farming life in Georgia.

According to a family letter dating to June 26, 1865, the Yankee and Rebel sides of the family did not sever ties. Percival's nephew, William Seabrook Drayton, also fought at Port Royal. He wrote his uncle that "if I recollect right, I was against you. When you gave me such a thrashing at Port Royal. Bygones are bygones, Uncle. The past is the past. Thank God there is a future."

And he described his uncle's namesake: "Percy is a very fine looking boy. He is in his 17th year. If anyone ever asked him if he was ashamed to be named after you, he always said no he was not."

The Trinity Church Drayton memorial, which weighs six to eight tons, was erected in 1867 on the request of two prominent church members and New Yorkers. Vestry minutes of Sept. 26, 1865, released by the Trinity Church Corp., show

that John Jacob Astor Jr. and Alexander Hamilton Jr. requested a monument to Drayton's memory on behalf of his many admirers and friends. Astor was a scion of one of New York's most prominent and wealthy families. Hamilton was a son of Alexander Hamilton — the first secretary of the treasury in George Washington's cabinet who fell in an infamous 1804 duel with Vice President Aaron Burr. The elder Hamilton lies buried in Trinity churchyard.

The relationship between Astor, Hamilton and Drayton is defined by Hamilton's nephew in a letter dated March 10, 1918. T. Schuyler wrote that his uncle, Alexander Hamilton Jr., who was born in 1816 and who died in 1889, was a warm friend of Percival Drayton, USN. Drayton, he wrote, was "one of thousands in his devotion to the Union during the Civil War." The John Jacob Astor of that day was "Uncle's contemporary and friend."

A handwritten letter signed by Astor and Hamilton described Drayton's dedication and his handling of the conflict between Southern roots and loyalty to the Union cause:

"During the late rebellion as a native of South Carolina where his nearest relatives resided his position was especially trying, but his devotion to his country and flag did not permit the slightest hesitation as to his course and throughout the war under Admirals Dupont and Farragut and on detached duty at Port Royal, Charleston and Mobile he rendered most efficient and distinguished services in the many gallant operations

of the Navy."

The memorial to Drayton commends him as a Naval officer for 38 years: "Without a Superior, above all sectional feeling, he distinguished himself in the service of the Union in command of" a frigate at Port Royal, a monitor at Sumter and as fleet captain at Mobile Bay and commander of the flagship Hartford. "A Just Man, A True Patriot and a Good Christian."

Correspondence in the church archives includes a letter from the Rev. Morgan Dix, rector of Trinity from 1862-1908, to Astor, indicating times the church would be available for installation of the monument.

A receipt from May 9, 1867, shows that \$1,625 was received from Alexander M. Hamilton Jr. Esquire for work and material for the monument. On May 9, 1887, Astor wrote to Hamilton, who was confined to his home, suggesting that he contact Samuel M. Hunt, the architect, and have a nice article written about the monument. He said that as for remuneration, he would do "the handsome thing towards Hunt."

Hunt, a distinguished American architect, designed the main portion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the base of the Statue of Liberty, and the National Observatory in Washington. He also proposed the general design for three bronze sculptured portals of Trinity Church.

According to vestry minutes of March 1946, the church rector suggested moving the tablet outside the church, where other military and naval heroes were honored. But its weight and the cost of securing it outside on a foundation were too high. He noted that the church records do not disclose that Drayton's remains are buried at Trinity Churchyard.



Photo Courtesy Parish of Trinity Church

Drayton Memorial.