

Mary Emily Boyd's Finest Day's Work

Michael Boyd

Mary Emily Dunham Boyd, my great-great-grandmother and the daughter of David Dunham and Mary Caroline Gibbs, was born in Scituate, Rhode Island, on December 5, 1830. Her father died while she was quite young. The summer of 1850 found her mother in poor health. That fall, to avoid another New England winter, Mary Emily moved with her mother and brother, David A. Dunham, to Palatka, Florida, where her aunt Emily Gibbs was a teacher. They made the trip by coastal schooner, their voyage recounted in Mary Emily's 1903 memoir [1].

Soon after their arrival, Mary Emily met her future husband, Robert Talbot Boyd, a lumberman from Telfair County, Georgia, who at that time was also both the Sheriff and Tax Collector of Putnam County. They were married October 16, 1851. Their life together was filled with tempest and adventure, fortune and hardship, some of it recorded in the memoir, which now resides in a box of personal and business papers in the Special Collections section of the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, part of the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida.

The memoir's main feature is her account of an incident in October of 1862, in which she saved Palatka from being shelled and burned by a Union "gunboat" during the Civil War. This event has been retold periodically in Palatka newspapers and also in many books and research publications devoted to Florida history. Here are Mary Emily Boyd's own words as she recalled that adventure, four decades later. No attempt has been made to edit her work. The occasional misspellings (including dual spellings of the surname of Florida ex-Governor William Dunn

Moseley), as well as the numerous dashes, strike-throughs, underlinings, and punctuation mistakes are reproduced exactly as they appear in the handwritten account:

—We lived at this place until the War was declared – renting the home place in town. On April 19th 1860 my second daughter was born and we still remained at the “Elwood Grove” M^r Boyd during the first of the year 1861 had cut and hauled to the river bank in front of our house a large lot of fine Cedar, As he had about finished War was declared, and we gave our tenants in town notice that we needed the house and we moved back here in April 1861 Most of the residents moved away from the town all the stores were closed, and a lonesome look — pervaded the town — Companies of soldiers were rapidly raised, The Gunboats began to come up and down the river, and we began to live as we had never before lived — Sleeping in our clothes, ready to run if need be _____ The last of April 1862 it was thought unsafe for me to remain here as another baby was expected and so we went, temporarily, to M^r Munroe’s home where we remained for ~~more than~~ about a month, my third daughter being born there on the 5th of May — As soon as I was able we came back and soon after that there came a day of great excitement — A family from the north who had been living at Johnston — and whose name was Blood had come in town, and in some way let the Federal’s know that they wished to be taken away, The Gunboat was sent to take them off — There was great excitement among those who were still in the town and it was rumored that the town was to be burned – Judge Houghton whose wife was a daughter of Ex Gov Mosely came running up the street “screaming at the top of his voice “They are “going to burn the town. Get out and “save yourselves as fast as you can.” And nearly every one who could left their homes taking with them children & what few things they could carry in their arms — It

had happened that we were told early in the morning that the Gun Boat was coming up the river and also that Lieut Reddick had sworn to pick a man off the boat with his rifle, and when first asked not to do it, because it would bring sure death to some who were too sick to be removed to a place of safety, besides destroying much property. In reply he said he had neither friends or property in Palatka and he did not care, but later M^{rs} Lynch and myself went again to find him where he had taken his position on the bank of the river nearly in front of the place where the Presbyterian church now stands and though we could not see him we found his man servant and sent a message to him describing the helpless condition of the women the children, and the sick, and afterward he sent us word he would comply with our request and get on his horse & leave town which he did —

This happened before the gunboat had come up opposite the town and before M^r Houghton warned us all to leave and we were therefore surprised when he said the town was to be burned for we did not know of any provocation, But negro's had gone on board and told of Lieut Reddicks threat and the officer in command had given orders to burn the town if a single gun was fired by accident or otherwise while they were engaged removing the family for whom they had made the trip _____ Ex Gov Mosely was not in favor of secession & and so he went on the gunboat and talked with the officers telling them there were no confederate troops in the town, and making a friendly call on them _____

The cry “they are going to burn the town still continued and great fear and excitement existed — I asked if there was no man there that would go and beg them to spare the town for the sake of the sick and helpless and was answered that any man who would go there would be carried off a prisoner Then I said “if no man can go I will see what a woman can do.” So I left my babes with M^r Boyd and the servants and started to

save the town, I did not know how. After trying to have them come to me at the foot of Lemon Street, I found they were sending small boats to the shore at the foot of Madison St and I went there hoping to be able to speak to some one in authority, — The Sargeant in charge of the removal of goods was hurrying the men and would neither look at me or reply to my questions for a long time but at last he said quite impatiently that they were likely to be fired on at any minute and that if they were they were ordered to fire the town. I told him that there would not be an attack & that no one wished or intended it. He said he would not believe any of the damned rebels on their oath they would say anything to get them into a trap — I said to him than, that I was born & raised in Rhode Island & asked him if he would not believe me. He said yes he would, & I told him what I have written above in regard to Lieut Reddick but he said he could do nothing as his part was to obey orders and not to give any. I then asked him how I could see some one in authority & he said he would take me aboard the gunboat & after I had spoken to the officers he would bring me back — I told him that would be impossible, as even those I was looking to save, would not understand my motives so as to believe that I was unselfish in my efforts to save the town and the people there and I asked him if he would not tell the commanding officer that a lady wished to speak to him — He told me he would take my message, but, though the officer might come ashore as a courtesy to me, he was not obliged to.” but in a short time a boat load of fine looking soldiers came & the commander after asking if I was the lady who wished to speak to him said he would hear what I had to say I then asked if he had given orders for the town to be burned & he said the orders were conditional – That threats of an attack had been made and that if a gun should be fired by accident or otherwise the town, or any thing else that stood in the

way of the free use “of the St Johns river by the U.S Gunboats “would be destroyed — It was not their “wish to destroy property needlessly, but they “would go up and down the river and any “obstacle in their way would be destroyed He spoke of the threat of Lieut Reddick and I told him he was the only one ~~there~~ that had threatened to fire on them and that there was not any organized company of soldiers in Palatka at that time, and that Lieut Reddick by my urgent request had left town and that I knew he was several miles in the country. He asked who the soldiers were that were in Palatka now, and I told him they were men whose families lived in Palatka and that they had crossed the river during the night before, having been driven from their post at St Johns Bluff some day’s before by the Northern troop’s. The men are on their way to headquarters to report and had been here only a few hours to visit their families This seemed to be a satisfactory explanation of the condition of things and the Commanding Officer then said “M^{ts} Boyd you have saved your town by being able to explain matters that had been reported to us, and, M^{ts} Boyd, he said, if you live a hundred years you can look back on this day’s work as the best you have ever done — You were fortunate in knowing these things, and in being able to explain them you have saved much property and probably several lives — ” Then turning to Gov Moseley who was near “he said you thought to get us in ambush when you went on board the gunboat and said there were no soldiers in the town, when while you were telling it our men were watching them with our glasses galloping back and forth over the hill side It was on them our guns were aimed. Why did you tell us such a lie? What can you say for yourself? Gov Moseley was almost over come with surprise and could scarcely speak — but said, turning to me “M^{ts} Boyd for God’s sake tell them how it is.” I then told them that the Gov lived quite a distance from the center of the ~~town~~ city

and came down town very seldom and usually by the street bordering on the river and he had not likely heard of the soldiers crossing the river the night before _____. The Com accepted my explanation and told Gov Mosely that he had come ashore with “the full determination of taking him off a prisoner, and you sir, should be very thankful that there was some one who could explain things so that we would not believe you had intended to deceive us for the purpose of having us taken prisoners _____” Soon after that the gunboat left taking quite a number of negroes and the Blood family for whom they had chiefly made the trip _____. Strange to say that many of those whose lives and property had been saved by what I had done for them spoke very unkindly of me as soon as they were saved from the threatened trouble, calling me an old Yankee &c —

Nowhere in her memoir does Mary Emily Boyd refer to the Union gunboat by its name, nor does she provide the date of her encounter or the name of the naval officer with whom she spoke. These omissions are forgivable in view of the many years that had passed before her attempt to reconstruct that day. But among trained historians and other researchers and writers, there are occasional wrong answers to these questions that tend to circulate as fact. I would like to correct these errors.

According to official U.S. Navy records [5], the event took place on Monday, October 6, 1862. The vessel involved was the steamer *U.S.S. E. B. Hale*, under the command of Lt. Alfred T. Snell, though the senior officer present—and the object of Mary Boyd’s entreaty—was Cdr. Maxwell Woodhull. (Snell did go ashore that morning, not to meet with Mrs. Boyd, but to destroy some small boats and scows.) Cdr. Woodhull was captain of the *U.S. Gunboat Cimarron*, and perhaps it is for this reason that some have been led to think it was the *Cimarron* that threatened Palatka (see [3], e.g.). But this would have been impossible, for Woodhull’s

ship, an 860-ton, 205-foot-long, sidewheel “double-ender,” was at that moment sitting idle in Jacksonville with a defective steering system.

A careful reading of Woodhull’s report dated October 7th, along with the October 14th report of his immediate superior, Cdr. Charles Steedman, reveals that he had been ordered upriver from his current base at Mayport Mills, leaving there at 4 p.m. on Saturday, the 4th, in the company of a second gunboat, the *Water Witch*, to join with the *E. B. Hale* at Jacksonville before continuing south “as far as possible beyond Palatka . . . for the purpose of destroying all the boats and flats on the river, to prevent the enemy crossing.” (These words of Steedman, who commanded the St. Johns River blockading flotilla, clearly deflate Mary Boyd’s assertion that the gunboat’s chief mission was to evacuate the Blood family.) By 9 p.m. Woodhull finally reached Jacksonville, having to anchor five times on the short journey and making most of it stern-first. The morning of the 5th, he continued his trip, not on the *Cimarron*, but aboard the *Water Witch*, accompanied by the *E. B. Hale*. That night they anchored at Madison’s Point, below Orange Mills. Woodhull estimated that during that leg, the pair of vessels destroyed between two and three hundred rebel boats of various description.

The next day, as they prepared to resume their mission, the officers determined that the tidal flats near Orange Mills were too shallow for the *Water Witch* to cross, so Woodhull left that boat and continued on the *Hale* unaccompanied, arriving at Palatka at 10 o’clock in the morning. Woodhull’s report makes it clear that it was the *Hale* that, upon his orders to Lt. Snell, fired its guns to create airbursts over the town in response to sighted rebel activity, and the *Hale* that evacuated the Blood family, along with a number of slave refugees. This chronology is confirmed by the abstract log of the *Hale* [5]. Woodhull also states that it was he who negotiated the uneasy truce with Mrs. Boyd.

At 220 tons and 117 feet long, the *E. B. Hale*, classified as a screw steamer and not a gunboat, was much smaller and more lightly armed than the *Cimarron*—though certainly able to inflict her share of damage. Some accounts say she was actually used as a tugboat (see [2]. e.g.). But for those on shore watching the shells explode above their heads, the distinction must have been one of little importance.

Navy records also show that there was a second Union vessel at Palatka on the 6th, the *U.S.S. Darlington*, a captured rebel steamer under temporary command of LCdr. E. P. Williams [5]. She was not part of Cdr. Woodhull's three-boat mission. Rather, she was on a joint mission with an army infantry company to capture another Confederate steamer, the *Governor Milton*. But after going downstream to Orange Mills the afternoon of the 6th to transfer the Blood family and other refugees to the *Water Witch* (presumably along with Cdr. Woodhull—for he was back in Jacksonville the following day, writing his report), the *Hale* returned to Palatka and joined the *Darlington*. The two boats anchored there for the night, then headed south at 8 o'clock the next morning to search for the *Governor Milton*. Though smaller than *Cimarron*, the *Darlington* was still bigger than the *Hale*—and like Cdr. Woodhull's absent gunboat, she was a sidewheeler. It is quite possible that observers of this scene, knowing Woodhull had recently been in the area, mistook the *Darlington* for the *Cimarron*.

Even more curious than the confusion about the boat is a controversy regarding the date. Unfortunately, this issue might have been started by Mary Emily Boyd, herself. In an 1897 letter she wrote to the Navy Department regarding the incident, she says she thought the boat was the "*Dale*" and that it had happened around the first of July 1862 [3]. Clearly her memory for certain details was beginning to slip. Twenty years later, an article in the *Palatka News and Advertiser* chronicled the event, giving its date as sometime in late June, an error, as we now

know, of over three months. The facts of the article were attributed to a story Mrs. Boyd “read before the Woman’s Club of Palatka at a meeting last week” [6]. Since then, the erroneous date has appeared in other accounts that rely heavily on that first newspaper article [see 2,4, e.g.]. The ones I’ve seen are at least correct in identifying the boat as the *Hale* (as is the original news story, although it misspells it “*Hail*”). Most of these “June” proponents make no attempt to name the officer who met with Mrs. Boyd. One, however, creatively if mistakenly assumes the *Hale*’s then-acting master, a Lt. W. J. Foster, to have been her contact [2].

Despite its shortcomings, I was pleased to find Mary Boyd’s firsthand account of such a noteworthy event. Our ancestor’s bravery had been handed down in my family as oral history, and not surprisingly embellished along the way. The version I heard as a child had her actually rowing out to the gunboat to confront its captain—and the captain coincidentally being from her native Rhode Island! Her own words dismantle that first notion, while doing nothing to support the second. (Today Cdr. Woodhull is easily identified—thanks to Google—as having been born in New York City, where he now rests in Lower Manhattan’s Trinity Churchyard.) But even without familial overstatement, Mary Emily Boyd’s contribution to Palatka is worth remembering.

At 28 handwritten pages, her memoir is the longest document in the Boyd files at the P. K. Yonge Library. I do not know if she titled it “Reminiscences of Palatka” or if that name was given to it by the library staff who catalogued the papers. (Probably the latter, since it appears on the folder containing the manuscript but not on the work itself.)

While nearly a third of the memoir is devoted to the gunboat adventure, it touches upon other interesting aspects of life in the Boyd household, as well. Unfortunately, it stops in a disappointingly abrupt fashion: The Civil War has just ended, the family’s fortunes have been

lost, but there is anticipation of new business deals to come. We know from other documents and letters that Mary fought stubbornly for the next several decades to have the federal government undo the wrong she felt had been done to her family in a cedar log confiscation incident of 1855. She does mention the initial event in her memoir—as well as the financial hardship it brought—but only briefly. It would have been interesting to see a detailed account of her long, unsuccessful struggle for vindication.

She also spent a lot of time and energy trying—again in vain—to locate the titles to any properties in Georgia that her husband may have owned at the time of his death, in order to protect the interests of their children. But no record of that search is to be found here either.

Finally, we know from several passages in the memoir that Robert T. Boyd was an angry and often abusive husband. What we don't know—except from court documents—is that in 1876, Mary finally divorced him (an uncommon event in those days!). What a thoroughly revealing work this memoir could have been if only she had finished it. But I suspect that in trying to revisit her hard life, her unhappy marriage, and her sour dealings with the U. S. government, Mary simply lost her enthusiasm for the project.

Michael Boyd
2625 Burgoyne Road
DeLand, FL 32720
mike@michaelboyd.us

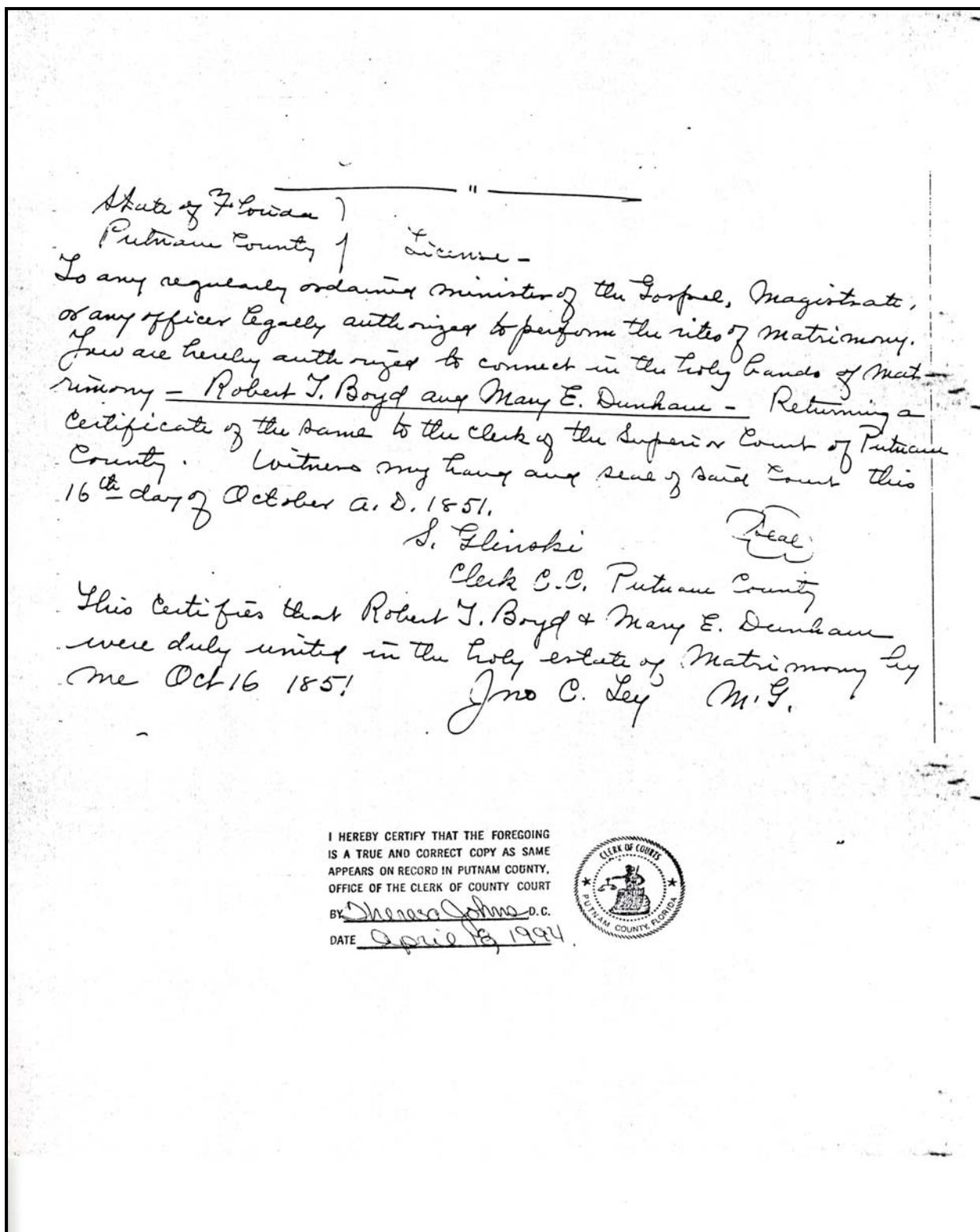
Sources

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4. Miley, Robert, “She Saved Palatka From Destructive Gunfire By Outtalkin’ The Yankees,” Palatka, FL: *Palatka Daily News* (May 2, 1962).
5. Rawson, Edward K., et al., *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series I – Volume 13: South Atlantic Blockading Squadron From May 14, 1862 to April 7, 1863*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (1901).
6. “The Story Of How A Woman Saved Palatka,” Palatka, FL: *Palatka News and Advertiser* (April 27, 1917).

Appendix

1. Robert T. Boyd and Mary E. Dunham’s marriage license.
2. The first page of Mary Emily Boyd’s handwritten memoir.
3. The only known picture of Mary Emily Boyd.



1. Robert T. Boyd and Mary E. Dunham's marriage license, dated October 16, 1851. The couple became friends of the court clerk, Stanislaus Glinoski, and five years later named their third child (my great-grandfather) George Stanislaus Boyd in his honor.

Palatka Florida August 21st 1903

As I have promised my daughter that I would write ^{of some} of the event of my life as I remember them - My father was David Dunham of Westminster Vt. My mother was the ^{Mary Caroline} daughter of Col David Gibbs of Coontry R. I. I do not know the year that they were married. but from what I have heard think it was in 1829 or thereabout - I was born in Scituate R. I. - My father died when I was quite a young child - I remember him only very slightly on two or three occasions - He died away from home leaving my mother myself, and a brother 1 & half years younger than I, dependent on my mother for support he having badly managed the property left her by his father - We moved to Providence while I was still quite a child and I attended the public school until I was nearly fifteen when

2. The first page of Mary Emily Boyd's memoir.



3. Picture of Mary Emily Boyd that appeared in Robert Miley's 1962 *Palatka Daily News* story, "She Saved Palatka From Destructive Gunfire By Outtalkin' The Yankees." The oval-framed portrait from which the photo was made probably dates to the early 1900s. I have been unable to locate it.