

Ink, Dirt and Powder Smoke:
The Civil War Letters of
William F. Keeler,
Paymaster
on the USS *Monitor*

edited by
Charles W. McLandress

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*My father was the son of a New York merchant, and was a merchant himself part of his life, but he was of a roving disposition, and, partly on this account, and partly through heavy losses by fire, he left but a small property at his death. He served as Paymaster in the U.S. Navy during the civil war, and afterwards moved to Florida, where he lived until his death, some six years ago. He was an active and highly cultivated man and I acquired from him my liking for scientific matters.**

— James Edward Keeler

* Portion of James E. Keeler's letter to his future father-in-law W. Wilson Matthews asking for his daughter's hand in marriage. Original letter is in the possession of the editor; a photocopy of the letter is in the James E. Keeler Papers (MS 271), Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA.

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PREFACE

In November 1962 my grandmother received a letter from Robert W. Daly, a history professor at the United States Naval Academy, asking for information about her grandfather, William F. Keeler, who had served as paymaster on the legendary Union ironclad the USS *Monitor* during the American Civil War. Six years earlier Daly had begun editing Keeler's wartime letters from the *Monitor* for publication in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the start of the Civil War. While he could build a complete picture of Keeler's life during the war, Daly knew virtually nothing about the rest of his life and had been searching for his descendants in hopes they could flesh out the bare bones of what he had learned about the Paymaster. He had been drawing blanks until he learned of the whereabouts of my grandmother, who was living in San Antonio, Texas with my grandfather, a retired U.S. Army colonel. Daly explained to her the importance of Keeler's "superbly vivid letters" and apologized for any seeming impertinences, stating that he felt like a friend of the family, having been "shipmates with your fine grandfather for so long." My grandmother, unfortunately, was unable to furnish him with much information, since she had never known her grandfather, who died before she was born, and would probably have remembered little about him from her astronomer father who died when she was six. Moreover, fire had destroyed almost all of the family records in her mother's house in Berkeley, California, in 1923. All she could provide him with was a handful of meagre crumbs: three of her grandfather's business cards, a family tree drawn by her father, and excerpts from a journal her father kept as a teenager in Mayport, Florida where Keeler and his family settled after the war. In Daly's second letter to my grandmother he laments that

fire absolutely haunts the Paymaster. All the back copies of the La Salle newspaper for his era (he contributed letters at the height of his Monitor fame) vanished in a fire in the 1880's. A single file was somehow preserved in the State Library at Albany, and that building, too, wisped away in smoke. Fire struck at Bridgeport and Utica, wiping out leads, and time has eroded away all traces of his presence at Mayport, Florida. And now I hear from you about the 1923 fire at Berkeley. He was a very modest man, and I have an uneasy feeling that he may be covering his tracks.

The correspondence between Daly and my grandmother continued intermittently for the next six years until the two volumes of her grandfather's letters were published: *Aboard the U.S.S. Monitor, 1862: The Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to His Wife, Anna* and *Aboard the U.S.S. Florida, 1863-1865: The Letters of Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to His Wife, Anna*. After my grandmother's death in 1986, her papers found their way to my parents' home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. These included

her correspondence with Daly, copies of the two volumes of letters, photocopies of the original letters, Keeler's business cards, a gold nugget he had brought back from the California Gold Rush, and a silver fork he had made after the Civil War on which was engraved "Paymaster United States Steamer Monitor."

My grandmother's papers sat untouched until a few years ago when I decided to read the letters, not from Daly's books but from the somewhat grainy photocopies of Keeler's letter book. Finding the original letters far more compelling than the abridged ones in Daly's books, I realized that a revised and updated version of Keeler's letters would be a valuable contribution to Civil War literature which would bring his vivid writing and keen observations to a new generation of readers. And so, with the photocopies of the original letters, I set out to transcribe my great-great grandfather's letters in their entirety and delved deeply into his remarkable life. I reached out to several leading Civil War historians who affirmed the importance and historical significance of the letters and the value of a complete and unabridged version of them. This book is the culmination of those efforts.

By the spring of 2019 I had nearly completed a first draft of the book, I made a trip to the James River area with my great-great grandfather's letters in hand and visited the places he so vividly wrote about nearly 160 years ago. My amiable and knowledgeable tour guide, Civil War historian John Quarstein, took me to the Monitor Overlook to see where the USS *Monitor* and her foe, the Confederate ironclad CSS *Virginia*, battled it out on March 9, 1862 on the second day of the Battle of Hampton Roads. Gazing out over the wide expanse, I imagined the smoke-covered waters, the roar of the big guns, and the hundreds of Union soldiers on shore cheering on their little ironclad. As I stood there reading the short note Keeler wrote to his family two hours after the battle, in which he stated that his hands were "all dirt & powder smoke as you will discover by the paper," his letters sprung to life. That vivid quote epitomizes the beauty of his writing and inspired the title of this book.

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“Another chapter has been added to my eventful life. The *Monitor* is no more. What the fire of the enemy failed to do, the elements have accomplished.” And thus opens William Frederick Keeler’s letter to his wife Anna written a week after the Union Navy’s most famous ironclad slipped below the waves in a violent gale off Cape Hatteras on December 31, 1862. Ten months earlier the USS *Monitor* had fought the Confederate ironclad CSS *Virginia* to a standstill at Hampton Roads, Virginia in a four-hour battle that revolutionized naval warfare and electrified the North. Over the course of his twelve months as paymaster on the *Monitor*, Keeler wrote 87 vividly detailed letters to Anna. For the remainder of the war he served on the side-wheel steamer USS *Florida* doing blockade duty off the Confederate port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. Those experiences are described in 83 equally vivid letters.

William Keeler’s letters from the *Monitor* provide the most complete picture of life on board a Civil War ironclad. His riveting accounts of the battle with the *Virginia*, naval expeditions up the James River, the Peninsula Campaign, and the sinking of the *Monitor* bring an immediacy to events that makes the 21st century reader feel part of the action. His equally colorful letters from the *Florida* provide one of the most compelling pictures of life on board a vessel on the Union blockade, a hugely important, but largely overlooked, chapter of the war. Pulitzer-Prize-winning Civil War historian James M. McPherson considers Keeler’s letters to be “among the very best of naval letters.”* Distinguished naval historian Craig L. Symonds says that of “the many collections of Civil War letters, both published and unpublished, few of them are as vivid and pertinent as Keeler’s.”†

The abridged versions of Keeler’s letters that were edited by Robert W. Daly and published in the 1960s have been a staple for scholars for two

* Email correspondence (July 22, 2019).

† Email correspondence (August 2, 2019).

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generations.* Starting with William C. Davis' *Duel Between the First Ironclads* written more than four decades ago, through to David A. Mindell's *War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*, and up to John V. Quarstein's more recent *The Monitor Boys: The Crew of the Union's First Ironclad*, Keeler's graphic prose has taken a front-row seat. William Keeler himself plays a starring role at the USS *Monitor* Center at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia where a life-size model of the be-spectacled Paymaster can be seen seated in his cabin writing a letter to "Dear Anna," while in another part of the museum he can be overheard reading from his nail-biting last letter as the clank of chains, the crash of waves, and the frantic cries of sailors can be heard in an exhibit depicting the sinking of the ironclad.

Since Daly's primary focus was on the naval aspects of the letters, many of the passages pertaining to personal matters were omitted. Not only does this render the letters disjointed and difficult to read, which is compounded by editorial notes that break up individual letters, it also leaves the reader with an incomplete picture of William Keeler, the husband, father and friend. Daly also paid scant attention to many of the people mentioned in the letters. These include not only Keeler's family and friends, but also navy and army officers he encountered along the way, many of whom are interesting characters and unsung heroes of the Civil War. Daly also provided little contextual information about the military situation, making it difficult for all but the expert reader to easily follow the letters. All of this is remedied in this book which is a complete and unabridged version of Keeler's letters from the *Monitor* and the *Florida*, as well as a more in-depth story of the Paymaster's fascinating, adventure-filled and eclectic life.

In Part 1 Keeler's life up to the Civil War is discussed. This includes a discussion of his "yankee parentage, pure and unadulterated," as he proudly referred to it, his growing up in Brooklyn and Michigan, his days as a dry-goods merchant in Bridgeport, Connecticut, his ill-fated trip to the gold fields of California in 1849, and his life in La Salle, Illinois. Family members and friends who are frequently mentioned in his letters are introduced here. Additional information about these people and others mentioned in the letters is provided in the Biographical Notes at the end of the book. The bulk of the book is found in Part 2 which covers the Civil War years and includes all of his letters from the *Monitor* and the *Florida*. The letters are divided into subsections, with each subsection commencing with a short introduction to provide the reader with the necessary information to follow the story. Part 3 delves into Keeler's life in Mayport, Florida where he and his family moved

* *Aboard the USS Monitor: 1862: The Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to his Wife, Anna*, ed. Robert W. Daly, U. S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD, 1964; *Aboard the USS Florida: 1863-65: The Letters of Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to his Wife, Anna*, ed. Robert W. Daly, U. S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD, 1968.

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to after the war. Included here is Keeler's short-lived correspondence with Connecticut collector Frank H. Pierce who was gathering information about the *Monitor* in the 1880s. These previously unpublished letters contain Keeler's final thoughts on the battle with the *Virginia*, the sinking of the *Monitor*, and his friend and messmate, the *Monitor's* executive officer, Samuel Dana Greene who had tragically committed suicide the year before. Keeler's last letters also serve to round out his life story, for they were written while he was dying of heart disease. Although none of Anna's letters from the Civil War have survived, her voice is briefly heard when she takes up the pen and continues the correspondence with Pierce when her husband was too ill to write. Her last letter to him was penned several weeks after Keeler's death.

Scattered throughout Keeler's letter book are photographs of some, but not all, of the officers Keeler served with on the *Monitor* and *Florida*. He enclosed those photographs in his letters to Anna and pasted them into his letter book when he had it bound after the Civil War. In keeping with this book's attention to the personal side of the letters, copies of those photos are included at the beginning of the book, along with Keeler's descriptions of those officers. Also found in the letter book are group photos of the *Monitor's* officers and crew which were taken in July 1862 by Civil War photographer James F. Gibson. For those photos, the high-resolution digital images from the Library of Congress are reproduced here instead of Keeler's poorer quality ones. Keeler annotated his letters with a number of sketches. Shown here are reproductions of those sketches from Daly's two books, which are identical to those in the letter book but without the distraction of the ink which has bled through from the reverse side of the letter.

PART 1

EARLY YEARS

Tho' not yankee born I pride myself upon my yankee parentage, pure & unadulterated. My mother (still living) being a native of old Branford & related to the Plants & Frisbees of that region, & my father from near Danbury. Mr. Watrous & myself married sisters, daughters of the late Gov. Dutton. I was born in Pearl Street, New York City some 60 odd years ago & lived there & in Brooklyn the first 13 years of my life. There's my pedigree — you know all about me now. (15 November 1885)

William Frederick Keeler was born on June 9, 1821 above his father's dry goods store at 398 Pearl Street in the heart of Manhattan's dry goods district and baptized a few blocks away at the Brick Presbyterian Church at the corner of Beekman and Nassau Streets. He traced his name to an English carpenter named Ralph Keeler who immigrated to Hartford, Connecticut in the 1630s and settled in southwestern Connecticut in the town of Norwalk. Ralph's son Samuel fought at the Great Swamp Massacre in Rhode Island in 1675, a brutal lop-sided victory for the New England colonists during a bloody Indian uprising known as King Philip's War. Thirty-four years later, Samuel and a group of Norwalk residents founded the town of Ridgefield located 14 miles north of Norwalk on land they purchased from the Ramapo Indians for one hundred pounds. Four generations of Keelers down to William's father Roswell were born and raised there. They lived a short distance north of the town in the tiny parish of Ridgebury. Most were farmers, none were famous. The only interruption to their quiet and uneventful lives appears to have been during the American Revolution when in 1777 a force of 1,800 British redcoats marched past the tavern of William's great grandfather Ensign Samuel Keeler on their way to Ridgefield where they skirmished with 700 militia commanded by Benedict Arnold. Later in the Revolutionary War

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Ensign Keeler was reputed to have hosted two distinguished guests: George Washington, who was on his way to meet French general le Comte de Rochambeau in Hartford in 1780, and Rochambeau himself, when he celebrated his 56th birthday at the tavern on his way to meeting Washington and the Continental Army at Yorktown in 1781.

Keeler's mother Mary Eliza Plant also descended from solid Yankee stock. Her 4th great grandfather was an Englishman named John Potter who was one of the first settlers of New Haven, Connecticut. Her great-great grandfather John Plant and his descendants hailed from Branford, Connecticut. In the 1790s, her father Benjamin Plant, a farmer, and her grandfather Stephen Potter, also a farmer, as well as a deacon of the Presbyterian Church and a captain of a Connecticut militia company during the Revolutionary War, settled in Utica, New York. Benjamin Plant's house, where Keeler's mother was born and raised, was located at the corner of State and Genesee Streets. Nearby Plant Street is presumably named in his honor. Captain Potter's house was one mile north of Benjamin's at the corner of Potter and Whitesboro Streets. His only son William Frederick Potter, who inherited his farm, was Keeler's namesake great uncle.

Keeler's parents probably met at the First Presbyterian Church in Utica, where the Plants were members and where his father taught Sunday school after moving there from Ridgebury in 1815. They were married at the church in 1820 and settled in New York City where Roswell Keeler had been working for the past year. In 1825 they moved to Brooklyn, a bedroom community of New York City. They lived on Cranberry Street near Willow Street in a part of the village now called Brooklyn Heights. By then they were a family of four, for Keeler's brother James was born in 1823 in Utica, presumably at his grandparents' home. Roswell Keeler continued his work as a dry goods merchant in Manhattan, commuting there on the Fulton ferry which docked a short distance from their house. A short way up their street was the First Presbyterian Church, which William's parents joined and where his father later served as deacon. William and his brother James probably received their early schooling at the Classical Hall, a schoolhouse on Washington Street a five-minute walk from their house, which opened in 1831. That same year Edward Keeler, the youngest of the three brothers, was born.

In 1834 the Keelers moved to Auburn, Michigan, a tiny village about five miles north east of the town of Pontiac. Although the reasons for moving to this seemingly remote outpost have long since been forgotten, something of their life there can be pieced together. Roswell and Mary Keeler joined the First Presbyterian Church of Pontiac (then located in Auburn), where Roswell served as a church elder. He also opened a general store which sold an assortment of fancy and staple dry goods, groceries, hardware, and crockery. There, young William Keeler would have honed his skills as a bookkeeper and storekeeper, skills he put to good use later in life, and helped

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look after his baby sister Frances (Fannie) who was born in Auburn in 1834. In the spring of 1837 Roswell retired from the dry goods business and sold off his merchandise. Included in the list of items for sale was also “a good pair of horses, harness, waggon and sleigh” and “a first rate cow.”* Following that, he purchased land in several nearby counties, some of which was sold off at a sheriff’s sale in 1841. However, by then the Keelers had moved to Utica, New York, and were living on Genesee Street, a half mile from downtown and close to the farm of Keeler’s uncle James Plant where his mother had grown up. The fact that the Utica city directories do not mention Roswell Keeler’s occupation suggests that he was still retired. In 1841, Sarah Emma, the last of Roswell and Mary’s five children, was born. In 1846 the Keelers (minus William) moved to Newtown, Connecticut where they lived for eight years.

In the early 1840s William Keeler struck out on his own and headed to Bridgeport, Connecticut where he followed in his father’s footsteps and went into the dry goods business. In 1845 he formed a partnership with Hiram Olmstead and opened the Empire Store at the corner of Bank and Water Streets in the city’s downtown. Their merchandise ranged from “plain and fancy beaver and pilot cloths” and the “latest and most fashionable styles of Ladies’ Dress Goods ” to “fans in great variety, warranted, if well used, to blow a perfect hurricane.”† The ads, which no doubt were penned by Keeler, reveal his flare for words, and one, in which he warns a customer about an unpaid bill, reveals the offbeat sense of humor seen in the journal he kept in Mayport, Florida in the 1880s: “That lame man who came with tears in his eyes to borrow \$1.50, to pay for mending a wagon, Sept. 13th 1844, is notified that his *three* weeks was up about 18 months ago.”‡ However, misfortune struck in December 1845, only six months after the launch of their business, when a fire swept through downtown Bridgeport, destroying their store and most of their merchandise. Although they were back in business two months later at a new location, fire struck again the following year. In 1847 they threw in the towel and dissolved the partnership. Following that, Keeler dealt in “wharfage” and “storage for articles of every description” at the “old steamboat dock” near the bridge crossing the Pequonnock River.§

It was in Bridgeport that Anna Eliza Dutton came into his life. Where they met is lost to time, but it was probably at the Second Congregational Church, a short walk from Keeler’s dry goods store, where he would have attended Sunday services to hear the church’s eloquent minister Nathaniel Hewitt preach about moral reform and temperance. There he would have met Anna and her parents who were distinguished members of the church.

* *Pontiac Courier*, Pontiac, MI (March 13, 1837).

† *Republican Farmer*, Bridgeport, CT (October 28, 1845; July 1, 1845; June 24, 1845).

‡ *Republican Farmer*, Bridgeport, CT (June 9, 1846).

§ *Republican Farmer*, Bridgeport, CT (April 1, 1847).

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They were married on October 5, 1846. The following year their first child, Henry Dutton Keeler, was born.

Anna Keeler was the eldest of four children of Henry and Eliza Dutton. She was born on October 15, 1824 in Newtown, Connecticut where her father had started practicing law the year before. She spent her childhood in Newtown, and moved to Bridgeport with her family in 1837. By the time she and William met, her father was one of Bridgeport's leading lawyers, as well as a seasoned politician, having been elected four times to the Connecticut House of Representatives. In 1847 her parents and two youngest siblings*, 12-year-old Hattie and 8-year-old Melzar, moved to New Haven, where her father had been appointed a professor of law at Yale College. His star still rising, Henry Dutton went on to become a one-term governor of Connecticut from 1854 to 1855 and a judge on the Connecticut Supreme Court from 1861 to 1866.

By the late 1840s William Keeler's business ventures in Bridgeport were doing poorly. And so, with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in January 1848, he decided to try his luck and head to California, leaving behind Anna and 16-month-old son Henry. Joining Keeler were his younger brothers James and Edward, who were living in Newtown, Connecticut with his parents and two sisters. In January 1849 the three Keelers and 48 other men from Connecticut formed the New Haven and California Joint Stock Company. They purchased an old sailing bark, the *Anna Reynolds*, hired an old sea captain to sail her, and set sail from New Haven on March 12, 1849. A newspaper advertisement undersigned by Keeler two months before their departure spelled out the type of man they were after: "The Association goes out on strict temperance principles — gambling is forbidden, and the sanctity of the Sabbath is to be observed . . . references will be required as to good moral character."[†]

Although none of Keeler's letters to Anna from the Gold Rush have survived, his brother James' diary[‡], as well as the journal of fellow Forty-Niner Nelson Kingsley[§], help to fill in some of the gaps. James' diary covers the voyage to San Francisco in which he notes the weather, the ship's coordinates, and places they visited along the way. Kingsley's journal covers both the voyage and their time in California.

Their grueling 256-day trip to San Francisco took them as far east as Cape Verde off the west coast of North Africa and from there south westward to

* Anna's other sister Mary married in 1847 and was living in Litchfield, CT in 1850.

[†] *Republican Farmer*, Bridgeport, CT (January 16, 1849).

[‡] *James P. Keeler Diary*, 1849-50, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA. The journal was donated to the historical society in 1935 by Mrs. T. F. Trumbull, namely William Keeler's niece Elizabeth (Lida) P. Brown.

[§] *Diary of Nelson Kingsley, A California Argonaut of 1849*, Publications of the Academy of Pacific Coast History, ed. Frederick J. Teggart, Vol. 3, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1914.

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the Falkland Islands where they encountered the huge storms of Southern winter. James' diary and Kingsley's journal describe those dreadful conditions, which would have made life on board the *Anna Reynolds* not only miserable but also terrifying. On July 11, 1849 when they were about 180 miles north of the Falkland Islands, James wrote:

Have been hove to ever since 4 o'clock this morning in the heaviest Gale of wind we have yet had. Shipped several seas. A most tremendous sea running. 9 o'clock at night. A most dismal night, drear & dark as pitch, & nothing to be heard but the roar of the angry elements & the shrill whistling of the wind through the rigging, the groaning of the timbers & bulkheads and the swashing of the water across the deck & every sea that strikes her makes her tremble from Truck to Keel.

Around Cape Horn, the bitter cold froze the ocean spray onto the masts, sails and rigging, and huge seas rocked the vessel. Describing their passage around the Horn on August 20, 1849 Kingsley penned:

Last night is a most memorable night. The wind increased at night so that they were obliged to take in the Main Sail but notwithstanding the frequent heavy squalls and heavy wind they kept double reefed top sails and fore sail & stay sail, and it seemed at times as if the vessel must certainly be torn in pieces, but our bark stands it well yet and why we carry sail is that we may not make to[o] much lee-way and get foul of land. The rigging is hard to look upon being cover[ed] with nearly its own weight in solid ice and where the spray has come over forward leaves a huge quantity of ice on deck ... we shall soon get her pointed North ...

After rounding the Horn the remainder of their trip was smooth sailing, although it took them another three months before they reached San Francisco, which they did on November 22, 1849.

The men remained in San Francisco for several weeks before heading up the Sacramento River. Having decided to go into the wood and timber business before heading to the gold fields in the spring, they set up camp along the river about forty miles downstream of Sacramento City. The winter of 1849-50, however, proved to be a very wet one. The river rose above its bank, flooding the camp. Many of the men, including Keeler*, fell sick with dysentery and other diseases, five of them died. One of those who perished was Keeler's 18-year-old brother, whose death on January 28, 1850 Kingsley noted as follows:

This morning about 8 oclock Mr Edward Keeler died after about 10 days illness of a sort of brain fever. At first he was entirely deranged and was not at times all through his sickness in his right mind. His loss will be

* A newspaper advertisement in the *Sacramento Transcript* (May 28, 1850, Sacramento, CA, p. 2) lists Keeler as having been cured by "Dr. Dow's Dysentery Cordial."

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deeply felt by his two brothers William & James, and not a little among many of the company. He was of steady good habits, and on the voyage displayed considerable ingenuity in the way of tinkering. He the youngest of the brothers was the first to be taken away from dear parents whome he had left at home to come to this country. Went to work this morning and made the coffin and commenced a skiff to take the corpse down to the mound where we have good dry ground to use as a burrying place.

By the time spring arrived, the company had been dissolved and the men had gone their separate ways. Kingsley briefly mentioned working with Keeler at Roses Bar on the Yuba River in early June 1850 but gave no particulars. Kingsley's final mention of Keeler concerned his suspicion that he had stolen money from the company safe, an accusation based solely on his observation that Keeler appeared to have had "plenty of money by him of late," and had left for home not long before the robbery was discovered. Based on Kingsley's flimsy evidence and the picture one draws of Keeler from his Civil War letters, it is extremely unlikely that he was the guilty party.

On June 13, 1850 Keeler and his brother James had had enough and set sail for home on the *Samuel Russell*, a clipper ship used in the China trade that was making its maiden voyage around the world. Tragedy befell Keeler once more when his brother died the day after their departure from San Francisco. Although James' death notice in the *New York Daily Tribune* does not name the ship he sailed on, it was no doubt the *Samuel Russell* since the two brothers would have been travelling together.

Although little is known about James Plant Keeler's short life, Kingsley's journal indicates that he was a well-educated young man. Not only did he serve as the company secretary, he also taught the men logarithms and geometry, read sermons at prayer meetings, and led the debating club during their long voyage to California. A talented artist, James' diary is filled with pencil sketches and watercolors of people, ships and places seen along the way, including one small sketch depicting their camp along the Sacramento River, with a tent and a stack of firewood in front, an axe buried in a log and a small boat pulled up upon the bank, and the grim caption: "The lower camp at which Edward lived till he was taken sick." Placed loose in the journal is also a clipping from an unnamed newspaper (dated 1851), with a poem written by a person identified only as "E." Entitled *Lines: On the death of J. P. Keeler, who died at sea, on his passage from San Francisco to the Sandwich Islands*, the poem expresses the grief felt by his loss: ". . . Sleep sweetly in thy dreamless rest upon the ocean's bed, there ne'er again will aught disturb till it gives up its dead. . . . Sleep sweetly now, tho' parents' hearts with grief are rent in twain, no more on Earth will come to them their darling boy again. . . ."

At the California Historical Society are cartes de visite of James and Edward Keeler, which were taken in Brooklyn shortly before they sailed for

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California. Although the images are tiny and the facial features therefore hard to clearly see, both are clean-shaven and nattily dressed in jacket and tie.

Keeler's voyage home on the *Samuel Russell* took him by way of Singapore and Hong Kong where they stopped for three months taking on teas and silks, and finally to New York City where they arrived on January 28, 1851, a trip of more than seven months. He returned to Bridgeport and reunited with Anna and his young son after an absence of nearly two years. Although the Gold Rush was a personal tragedy for him, he appears to have been moderately successful based on the comments of the captain of the *Samuel Russell*, Charles P. Low, with whom Keeler and the five other passengers passed their evenings in conversation on their long voyage home.* In his reminiscences of his sea-faring days written more than 50 years later, Captain Low stated that Keeler was "very successful" after his arrival in California and had made "quite a little 'pile'" and "was going home by the way of China on business."

Not long after his return, Keeler got itchy feet again. With little chance of business success in Bridgeport, he looked elsewhere for opportunities, and set his sights on northern Illinois where New Englanders had been settling since the 1820s. In 1853 he and his family headed to La Salle, a recently incorporated city of several thousand on the Illinois River at the terminus of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Business opportunities arising from the development of canals and railways were likely what brought him there. Keeler probably went first, followed by Anna and Henry, and not long after by his parents and sisters Fannie and Sarah. Between 1853 and 1855 he purchased five lots of land in the city. Their house was located at the corner of Seventh and Gooding Streets, a little north of downtown. They appear to have been moderately self-sufficient, for out back of their house was a barn with a milk cow, a hen roost, and an extensive garden containing vegetables, strawberries, grapes, cherry and plum trees, and numerous ornamental plants. Anna stayed at home and raised the children, which by the eve of the Civil War numbered three: 13-year-old Henry (Hen), 3-year-old James Edward (Eddie) who was named after his two dead uncles, and 9-month-old Elizabeth (Tibbie) Eliot. They had a fourth child, Mary Ann (Minnie), who was born in 1854, but died several months before James Edward's arrival. Living with them was Keeler's youngest sister Sarah. In 1856 his sister Fannie married a grocer named David Brown, and raised a family of her own. They lived on Wright Street just north of Fourth, a few blocks away from the Keelers. Living next to Fannie and Dave were Keeler's parents.

In 1853 Keeler opened up a watch and jewelry shop at the corner of First and Wright Streets opposite the Hardy House, the largest hotel in the city. In 1857 he sold that business to one of his employees and opened the La Salle

* *Some Recollections by Captain Charles P. Low, Commanding the Clipper Ships Houqua, Jacob Bell, Samuel Russell, and N. B. Palmer, in the China Trade, 1847-1873*, Charles P. Low, Boston, MA, 1906, pp. 113-14.

EARLY YEARS

Iron Works, a foundry and machinist operation located on the steamboat basin. Anna joined the First Congregational Church, as did Keeler's parents and sisters. The independent-minded Keeler, however, appears never to have been a member of any church, preferring it would seem to keep his options open. The church's first pastor William Collins was a friend of the Keelers and later an infantry captain in the Civil War. Present at Collins' first sermon in June 1854 and taking an active part was Reverend Owen Lovejoy, who had organized dozens of anti-slavery Congregational churches across northern Illinois in the 1850s. The First Congregational Church of La Salle was presumably one of those churches. Lovejoy was also instrumental in helping to organize the Republican Party in Illinois and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Keeler's district in 1857. It was thanks to him that Keeler got his commission in the Union Navy.

The Keelers closest group of friends in La Salle, which he referred to as "our little circle," included David and Elizabeth Hough, and John and Anne Rockwell. A native of Vermont, Hough was a lawyer for the trustees of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and Keeler's business partner at the La Salle Iron Works. A graduate of Yale College in New Haven, Rockwell was a banker in La Salle. His father was Charles Rockwell, the wealthy land developer and banker from Norwich, Connecticut who in 1836 founded the town of Rockwell, Illinois located a mile east of La Salle on the Illinois River (the town was abandoned two years later due to disease).

Keeler had more than watchmaking and iron founding to keep him busy in La Salle. Although his formal education did not extend beyond grade school, he was well read and an excellent writer. He was also mechanically gifted and had a deep and abiding interest in science and the natural world, which he passed on to his two sons, one of whom became one of America's leading astrophysicists. His work as a machinist led him to devise an improvement to the device that regulated the speed of a steam engine, which he patented in 1865. He was an avid reader of *Scientific American* and published several short letters in that magazine over the years. His detailed description of a meteor in the *Chicago Press and Tribune* (October 10, 1860) reveals those supreme powers of observation that make his Civil War letters so riveting:

A very brilliant meteor was observed from here last Tuesday afternoon, the 2d inst., at about a quarter past five, of which I have as yet seen no published account. It was observed in the northeast, and when first seen was about 39 degrees above the horizon, and descending rapidly, at nearly right angles with it. The nucleus was a clear, intense white light, leaving a scintillating train behind of the same color, the whole having some resemblance to a rocket. No report was heard on its disappearance, which took place just before reaching the horizon. Notwithstanding the sun was shining brightly at the time, it was distinctly visible; had it occurred a few hours later, its brilliancy must have attracted general observation.

PART 2

CIVIL WAR YEARS

*We were quite surprised yesterday at finding William Keeler in our parlor when we returned from the breakfast hall. He spent the sabbath and went back to New York this morning. I suppose your father told you about his appointment. He expects to come up again as he does not know when they will leave. He appeared very well. He felt sad of course at leaving his family but he says all kinds of business is very dull in La Salle. He thinks he has got one of the most amiable and best of wives. He said she felt badly to have him go but with her characteristic good sense she went to work to get him ready. She has had the trial before when he went to California. (Keeler's mother-in-law Eliza Dutton to her son Melzar, a lieutenant in the 5th Connecticut Infantry, 13 January 1862)**

By the early 1860s William Keeler's iron works was doing poorly. His timing could not have been worse, for the Panic of 1857 had brought the country's economy to a standstill. In 1859 one of his partners sold out and a commercial reporting agency rated the business as doubtful. The Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 provided the change he needed. Viewing Confederates as traitorous, villainous souls and slavery as a hideous deformity, he saw the war as an opportunity to put down treason and stamp out slavery. And so, with the aid of his Republican Congressman Owen Lovejoy, he obtained a commission in the Union Navy. On December 17, 1861 he was appointed Acting Assistant Paymaster and Clerk, and three weeks later ordered to the New York Navy Yard in Brooklyn to await assignment. In early January 1862 the 40-year-old father of three packed his bags and headed East to an uncertain future.

* Henry Dutton Family Letters.

CIVIL WAR YEARS

The date Keeler was assigned to the USS *Monitor* has not been found. According to Daly it would have been in the second or third week of January. Keeler served on the *Monitor* until the vessel sank off Cape Hatteras on December 31, 1862. Having proved his worth, he was asked by the *Monitor*'s last captain, John Bankhead, to serve with him on the USS *Florida*. He served on the *Florida* from March 1863 to several months after the end of the war. A neophyte when he first arrived at the New York Navy Yard, he was unsure whether he needed to wear a uniform. A year later he was an "old salt" and clear as to what his responsibilities were. As the war dragged on, he yearned to be back home, but unlike many of his fellow volunteer officers refused to resign, telling Anna that he meant to stay until he received an honorable discharge.

Well-liked by the many captains under whom he served, he was often invited to join them for dinner in their cabin. When they were transferred to other vessels or sent home on sick leave they would often write to him, inviting him to come visit. His way with words was why the *Monitor*'s first captain, John Worden, asked him to transmit verbal messages between the pilot house and the turret during the fight with the *Virginia*, why he was asked by one of his captains to help draft official correspondence, and why he was designated the *Monitor*'s unofficial tour guide for the multitude of generals, politicians and foreign dignitaries who visited the vessel. On their trip down to Hampton Roads on March 6-7, 1862, it was his mechanical ability that enabled him to man the *Monitor*'s engines until the engineers recovered from smoke inhalation. Several days after the fight with the *Virginia* he was even promised a more active role in the next fight: operating the machinery that turned the turret. And it was his machinist's eye that enabled him to suggest an improvement to the *Monitor*'s turret that was approved by the Admiral and acted on. Although he was an Acting Assistant Paymaster and Clerk, he was clearly much much more.

A man of strong opinions, he ranted about issues he felt strongly about. A tea-totaler, he railed against the evils of alcohol, which he believed was the ruin of many a good officer. A hater of red-tape, he fumed against the inefficiencies of the regular Navy and many of its aged and ineffective commanders, whom he referred to as "old fogies," and praised the officers in the volunteer Navy, "whose well earned laurels have in most cases been appropriated by the "nobility" of the [regular] service." He chafed at the rose water war that was being waged by the Union forces on the Virginia Peninsula in 1862, which left the James River planters' crops and animals untouched, stating "Let these wealthy rebels bear the penalty of the war they have brought upon them & be made to feel its pressure & presence in the severist possible manner." In 1862 he was a strong defender of George McClellan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, but like most was unaware of the general's failings. Two years later when McClellan ran as a Democrat against Lincoln and lost, he viewed the general as a traitor, stating that he

CIVIL WAR YEARS

respected him “when he led our armies against the armed foes of the country, but when he comes to marshall the secret foes of the country against it he has my utter loathing & contempt.” Although he was an abolitionist and yearned for the end of slavery, like virtually all white Americans at that time he was racially prejudiced and viewed African-Americans as socially inferior.

Since none of Anna’s letters to William have survived, the reader is left to imagine the hardships she must have endured. Glimpses of her state of mind can be gleaned from Keeler’s letters and to some extent from those of her mother. His bellicose words and his desire to see action must have filled her with dread. In a letter to her mother she stated that she feared that if the *Monitor* and *Virginia* had another engagement that the *Monitor* would not fare so well.* In addition to her constant worry for his safety, she also had to contend with raising their three young children (two of whom were under four years old when the war started), which was compounded by the ever-rising price of consumer goods. As the war dragged on with no end in sight, her letters grew more despondent in spite of the comforting words of her eternally optimistic husband. Although William returned home safely, Anna suffered two huge losses during the war: Her brother Melzar was killed at the Battle of Cedar Mountain in Virginia in August 1862. Her sister Mary died of cancer in Litchfield, Connecticut in February 1865.

* Eliza E. Dutton to H. Melzar Dutton (May 2, 1862; Henry Dutton Family Letters).

USS *Monitor* (1862)

*Sir: In accordance with your request, I now submit for your approbation a name for the floating battery at Greenpoint. The impregnable and aggressive character of this structure will admonish the leaders of the Southern Rebellion that the batteries on the banks of their rivers will no longer present barriers to the entrance of the Union forces. The iron-clad intruder will thus prove a severe monitor to those leaders. But there are other leaders who will also be startled and admonished by the booming of the guns from the impregnable iron turret. "Downing Street" will hardly view with indifference this last "Yankee notion," this monitor. To the Lords of the Admiralty the new craft will be a monitor, suggesting doubts as to the propriety of completing those four steel clad ships at three and a half million apiece. On these and many similar grounds, I propose to name the new battery Monitor. (John Ericsson to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox, 20 January 1862)**

Five days after the fall of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 and President Lincoln's call three days later for 75,000 troops to put down the rebellion, Virginia seceded from the Union and joined the seven other states that had already left. Fearing that the Virginia militia would seize the Gosport Navy Yard at Portsmouth, the yard's commander ordered the buildings burned, the cannons spiked and the warships laid up there scuttled. However, the hull of one of those ships, the steam frigate USS *Merrimack*, survived intact. Undaunted by the damage to the vessel and lacking a navy of their own, the Confederates set about fashioning an ironclad warship from the burned hulk. By early summer the carpenters had cut away the charred timbers of the *Merrimack* and had begun building the wooden frame that would house the iron casemate. Progress was slow because they had to rummage through scrap yards and rip up miles of unused railroad track to secure the 800 tons of iron needed to clad the vessel. The vessel's broadside battery included six IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbores (two of which fired hot shot) and two 6.4-inch rifled guns, while at the bow and stern were placed two 7-inch rifles, which served as pivot guns. On the deck was a pair of howitzers. The final touch was a 4-foot long 1,500-pound iron ram at the bow. When finally completed the ironclad was a fearsome looking thing: iron sides sloping upward at an angle of 36 degrees to deflect shot, 263 feet from bow to stern, twelve powerful guns and a massive battering ram—a destroyer of wooden warships. On February 17, 1862 she was commissioned the CSS *Virginia*.

By the summer of 1861 the Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had realized that the Union Navy had to develop its own ironclad warships to counter the threat posed by the *Virginia*. In early August Welles received \$1.5

* *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. 1, New York, NY, 1887, p. 731.

NEW YORK NAVY YARD (JANUARY TO MARCH 1862)

I am sorry that Miss Woods' school is deteriorating. If Henry is so dissatisfied I should think you had better take him out as soon as his quarter expires as there is no use in paying money for nothing. Henry can pursue his studies at home till there is an opening.

Yours, William

[Marginalia] My love to Fan & Dave. Will write to them soon. Here are 4 sheets. I hope to receive one as long.

Hampton Roads (March to May 1862)

I have but a few moments to spare just to say that I am safe. We have had an engagement with the Merrimac continuing for three hours & have driven her off, we think in a sinking condition. We have three men disabled, among them & the worst is our noble Captain who has lost his sight, I hope only temporarily. . . . We fought her at 20 feet distance a part of the time, the two vessels were touching. My hands are all dirt & powder smoke as you will discover by the paper. (9 March 1862)

On March 6, after a week's delay resulting from loading coal and ammunition, faulty steering and a storm in the Atlantic, the *Monitor* departed for Hampton Roads under tow of the tug USS *Seth Low*. Accompanying them was Ericsson's right-hand man in the Navy, 34-year-old Chief Engineer Alban Stimers, who served as an official observer and was responsible for operating the turret in the upcoming battle with the *Virginia*. Their trip down was nearly disastrous. On the second day they encountered a gale that nearly sank the vessel. To compound matters, seas poured down the blower pipes, causing the ventilator fan belts to stretch and slip, depriving the furnaces of draft. This caused smoke and gas to fill the vessel, which suffocated the men in the engine room. However, by next morning the storm's fury had abated, the blowers were working again, and the gas cleared out. While the men overcome by the fumes were recuperating in the top of the turret, Keeler, the ever-versatile paymaster, took charge of the engines until morning when the engineers were sufficiently recovered to attend to their duties. They muddled through and reached Fort Monroe around 9 pm on March 8.

The scene before them was one of utter chaos and destruction. Off in the distance lay the sunken 24-gun USS *Cumberland*, the burning and about-to-explode 50-gun USS *Congress*, the grounded 47-gun USS *Minnesota* with her crew frantically throwing heavy items overboard in a futile attempt to get her afloat, and dozens of smaller craft scurrying back to the protection of Fort Monroe. Earlier in the day the *Virginia* had steamed out of the Elizabeth River and over to Newport News where the *Cumberland* and *Congress* lay anchored. With their guns ablaze, they rammed the *Cumberland*, sending the big wooden ship to the bottom of the river. They then turned their attention

Cape Hatteras (November to December 1862)

The telegraph has probably informed you before this of the loss of the Monitor & also of my safety. My escape was a very narrow one. My personal effects at this time may be summed up thus — 1 pr. pants, 1 do. stockings, 1 shirt. In fact I lost everything but the few clothes I kept on, most of them having been thrown off for a swim. I have been through a night of horrors that would have appalled the stoutest heart. (4 January 1863)

When Keeler returned to the Washington Navy Yard after his four-week furlough, he found everything in disarray on board the *Monitor*. Workmen were madly putting the finishing touches on the alterations. Fresh white paint covered the once dark woodwork in the officers' quarters. Tools, lumber and machinery lay scattered about. The engine had been completely overhauled and was working like new. To help ensure that water did not enter the vessel from heavy seas, a 30-foot tall telescopic smoke pipe had been installed over the low smokestack boxes. To make the vessel more livable, the berth deck had been widened and a large blower had been installed to improve ventilation.

In addition to the changes in the vessel, there were also changes in personnel. Keeler's friend Acting Volunteer Lieutenant William Flye, who joined the *Monitor* immediately after the fight with the *Virginia*, had been detached and given a separate command. The two would remain in touch for the remainder of the war. Acting Assistant Surgeon Daniel Logue had resigned and was replaced by 24-year-old Grenville Weeks. Like his predecessor, Weeks would also share with Keeler his correspondence with his "lady love" back home. Two new officers who would not survive the *Monitor*'s final voyage were Third Assistant Engineer Samuel Lewis and New Haven resident Acting Ensign Norman Atwater.

On November 8, with the repairs completed, the *Monitor* left for Hampton Roads. While stationed at their old anchorage off Newport News on the lookout for the CSS *Richmond*, the first of Ericsson's new monitors, the USS *Passaic*, arrived. They waited anxiously for another of those monitors, the USS *Montauk*, commanded by their esteemed first captain John Worden, which arrived only after they departed. The *Monitor* and the new monitors were to be towed south for an attack on Charleston, South Carolina. On their way down the *Monitor*, *Passaic* and *Montauk* were also to shell out the forts guarding the mouth of the Cape Fear River, the entrance to the Confederacy's vital port city of Wilmington, but that attack never materialized.

On December 29 the *Monitor* left Hampton Roads in tow of the USS *Rhode Island*. Although the day began clear and pleasant, by the time they reached Cape Hatteras two days later, a ferocious gale was blowing. Huge waves rolled over the deck, crashing against the pilot house and turret. As the *Monitor* plowed headfirst into the storm, the bottom of the hull smashed with

CAPE HATTERAS (NOVEMBER TO DECEMBER 1862)

[This note was appended to the bottom of the previous letter]

New Haven
Jan'y 14th, 1863

Friend Webster*,

The accompanying sheets were intended for my wife, but find she is on her way here to join me, so place them at your disposal if you see fit to publish them. Had I intended them for print they would have been more carefully written, so when you see a gross error (as no doubt you will, many) please correct & when through with the Ms. [manuscript] please return to Mr. Brown† as I desire to preserve it.

Yours truly,
W. F. Keeler

USS *Florida* (1863-1865)

In the dusk of evening and early dark the blockade is run by steamers (perhaps not showing black smoke), who thus get a safe and long run off the coast. At morning twilight and at night, guided by shore signals, the runners get in under the batteries. When a runner is seen coming out, it is desirable not to make the signal until his retreat can be cut off by getting between him and the bar or coast. It is best to capture or destroy runners when discovered, but not to throw away the chance of doing one or the other by prematurely alarming them and causing their retreat over the bar, or under the batteries, to escape under more favorable circumstances. (Part of Acting Rear-Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee's detailed instructions to the commanding officers of the blockading vessels off Wilmington, 16 December 1863)‡

Four days after the *Monitor* was lost, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles granted the officers and crew who had served on her from the date of muster to the sinking, two-weeks' leave of absence, along with a portion of the pay due to them. As paymaster, Keeler had to remain at the Washington Navy Yard to reconstruct the crew's pay accounts which had gone down with the vessel. Unable to return home, he was joined by Anna who made the long trip east, leaving their two youngest children Eddie and Tibbie at home in La Salle with his parents. Keeler divided his time between Washington and New Haven where their 15-year old son Henry had been living and studying for the past few months.

* Edward C. Webster, editor of the *La Salle Press*.

† Keeler's brother-in-law in La Salle.

‡ ORN, I:9, pp. 355-56.

Off Wilmington (March to September 1863)

The officers stood grouped about the deck with glasses to their eyes watching the chase & speculating as to the probability of our catching her. A thousand surmises & opinions were passing around as to her speed, character, cargo &c &c, & when our first shot tore howling through the air & we saw by the splash of the falling missile that we had her in range we knew that she was ours & there was a lot of light, happy hearts on board. (12 June 1863)

When Keeler arrived at the New York Navy Yard on February 10, 1863 he was surprised to learn that three of his fellow officers from the *Monitor* would also be serving with him on the *Florida*. Lieutenant Samuel Dana Greene, who pulled Bankhead from the frigid waters off Cape Hatteras, served again as executive officer. Peter Williams, who steered the *Monitor* in the fight with the *Virginia* and was praised by Bankhead for his actions during the sinking of the *Monitor*, was an acting ensign. Like Keeler, both men were assigned at Bankhead's request. Grenville Weeks, whose fingers were crushed during the rescue operation, served again as acting assistant surgeon, but at his own request. The four other wardroom officers were transferred from other vessels. Acting Ensign Samuel Crafts, an inventor's son from Woodbury, Connecticut, eschewed a college education for a life at sea. It was when he was captain of a merchant ship that he first met Keeler when they went on a hunt for peaches at Newport News in the summer of 1862. He enlisted and received his appointment in December 1862. Acting Ensign Robert Wagstaff, son of a Great Lakes steamer captain, began his career as a salt water sailor at the age of seven. He was appointed acting master's mate in December 1861 and served on one of the mortar schooners in the attack on the forts guarding New Orleans in April 1862. Acting Chief Engineer John Ziegler, son of a Philadelphia shoemaker, enlisted in February 1862 and had been serving on the *Florida* since that time. Acting Master John McGowan, the youngest of the officers at only 19 years of age, was a sea captain's son. He was appointed an acting master's mate in March 1862 and commanded a gunboat on the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers before joining the *Florida*.

On March 9 the *Florida* steamed out of the New York Navy Yard bound for Beaufort, South Carolina towing one of Ericsson's new monitors for the upcoming ironclad attack on Charleston. After delivering the monitor they returned to Hampton Roads where they were ordered to the Wilmington blockade. They spent their first three months on the north side of the Frying Pan Shoals, guarding the New Inlet entrance to Cape Fear River. In June they were ordered to the south side of the shoals. There they made their first capture, the iron-hulled British-built screw steamer *Calypso* which was making its seventh trip through the blockade, running in from Nassau with cases of wines and liquors, barrels of fruit, butter and cheese, stores for fine living, as

CIVIL WAR YEARS: USS *FLORIDA* (1863-1865)

I shall write you every opportunity & hope to find something to make my letters interesting to yourself & our friends. Good bye & good night.

W—

[Marginalia] Your Mother sent me a fine photograph of “Lila.”* Direct to me as heretofore “via New York.” I wish I could get one more letter from you before we leave but don’t expect it.

Cruising (October to December 1863)

We were between her & Nassau, her destination, & she has vainly endeavoured all day to cross our bows & we have been gradually crowding her on towards the coast. At times we would seem to gain on her & then in turn she would gain on us & so it has kept on all day, the excitement at times increasing as we seemed to gain & then dying away as the space between us widened & now night has hidden the pursuer & pursued & each is ignorant of the other’s intentions. (30 November 1863)

On October 20 the *Florida* left Hampton Roads and arrived among the fleet off Wilmington with orders to serve on the outer tier of the blockade. With the exception of several trips to Beaufort and a brief stint on the blockade, they roamed the seas from early November to mid-December. Expecting more prizes to come their way, they cruised as far away as the Bahamas. However, despite several exciting chases, the “black smokes” eluded them, a result which Keeler attributed to their captain (Queen) who was “as vacillating as the wind” and who, if “dressed up in petticoats,” “would make a very good grandmother to an infant school.”

Queen was relieved in mid-November and replaced by 39-year old Commander Peirce Crosby, a veteran of 25 years in the Navy who was well-liked by all on board. Keeler described him as “a still, quiet man of very few words.” Another departure was Samuel Crafts, who also left in mid-November when ordered to the USS *Newbern*. Joining them at Norfolk was 34-year old Acting Ensign Cornelius Washburn whose company Keeler much enjoyed. The New Yorker had served in the Navy as a seaman from 1855 to the first year of the war when he received his commission. Prior to joining the *Florida* he was on the USS *Commodore Barney*, where he was praised for “good shooting” at the Battle of Roanoke Island in February 1862.

Letters of special note: October 24 (Colonel Dutton’s stomach); November 3 (description of some of the steerage officers); November 6 (a blockade runner gets away; criticism of Captain Queen; observing porpoises); November 26 (a sailor drowns); November 30 (cruising north of the Bahamas); December 10 (supper at Fort Macon; an oyster roast).

* Keeler’s two-year old niece, Elizabeth E. Watrous.

Gulf of Mexico (March to November 1865)

We have on board the President's murderers (the unbung ones), taking them to the Dry Tortugas where government is to furnish them (except Spangler) with a residence for the rest of their lives. Spangler goes for six years. I only regret that these didn't go with Mrs. Surratt to keep her company. We should have been saved this trip down here. (17 July 1865)

On January 15, 1865 while Keeler was out East with Anna on his four-month furlough, Fort Fisher was captured, closing the port of Wilmington for good. The attack commenced with a massive bombardment by Union warships, followed by a ground assault by marines, sailors and infantry. Keeler, no doubt, was greatly disappointed not to have been able to participate in the ground assault, for he would surely have volunteered. However, he could count himself lucky, for the sailors were beaten back with heavy casualties.

The land war, too, was winding down. Grant was close to breaking through Petersburg's ever weakening defenses. Sherman had devastated Georgia in his March to the Sea and was rolling through the Carolinas where he planned to join up with Grant for a final assault on Lee.

With the dangers of the blockade finally over, Anna agreed to letting Henry join his father on board the *Florida*. Henry served as Paymaster's Clerk. Quiet, still and unobtrusive, he gained the esteem of all on board. Always addressing his father as Paymaster, it was some time before others knew there was a relationship between the two. With most of the ship's officers little to their liking and a brute of a captain, William Budd, the two spent most of their free time in Keeler's cabin.

From March to June, the *Florida* delivered sailors and fresh beef, vegetables and fruit to the squadrons along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In April, while they were on their way to New Orleans where Keeler was tasked with delivering more than one million dollars to the Gulf Squadron, he learned of the fall of Richmond and the assassination of President Lincoln. After delivering the greenbacks to the treasury in New Orleans he witnessed the rebel ram CSS *Webb* steam down the Mississippi past New Orleans in an attempt to get into the Gulf of Mexico and on to Havana, Cuba where they hoped to continue the war. In July the *Florida* was tasked with transporting four of the Lincoln assassination conspirators to the Dry Tortugas, a desolate island off the south tip of Florida, where they would serve out their long prison terms. One of the prisoners whom Keeler had ample time to observe and talk with was Samuel Mudd, the doctor who treated John Wilkes Booth's broken leg when he was on the run after shooting the president.

Upon returning to New York, Keeler expected that the *Florida* would be put out of commission and the officers and crew discharged. However, Navy Secretary Welles had other plans, and it was three more months before Keeler saw home. After towing two light-draft monitors from New York to the

PART 3

MAYPORT YEARS

*On the opposite shore are the cottages of Mayport, around which the eddying winds pile up huge banks of sea sand, which at night have a strange resemblance to snow-covered hills. The name of this settlement commemorates the original name of the river, which was the River of May, afterwards changed to St. Matthias, and again to St. John's. It is associated, too, with the memory of the young and promising botanist, Henry D. Keeler, who found an untimely grave beneath the snows of New England. His father, Major Wm. F. Keeler, has a fine mansion a mile out on the old road to St. Augustine. It is a sylvan home embosomed in grand forests of palmetto, which open eastward and allow a fine view of the ocean. Great natural beauties and art skillfully directed conspire to render it a home worthy of its cultured occupants. (botanist Allen H. Curtiss, 11 August 1884)**

The Keelers remained in La Salle for five years after the end of the Civil War. Ed and Lizzie attended public school there. (Henry was in Chicago where he kept the books for his uncle Dave Brown's wholesale tea business.) Living with the Keelers were also his sister Sarah and his mother—his father had died in 1864 when Keeler was on the USS *Florida*. Anna's father too was gone. He retired from the bench of the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1866, but was still active at Yale law school at the time of his death in 1869.

By 1870 Keeler's business ventures were doing poorly. His iron works had long since closed, and he was a partner in his brother-in-law's tea

* Clipping from the *The Florida Dispatch* (Jacksonville, FL, August 11, 1884) in Keeler's *Mayport Journal*. Allen H. Curtiss (1845-1907) was a botanist from Jacksonville, FL and a friend of Keeler's son.

MAYPORT YEARS

business. The 1870 census lists his occupation as “miscellaneous dealer.” In November 1870 the Keelers packed their bags once more and headed to Mayport, Florida, a tiny village at the mouth of the St. John’s River thirty-five miles downstream of Jacksonville. What led them to this backwater is lost to time, but one could imagine it was Keeler’s love of warm weather, tropical vegetation, pristine beaches, and “old ocean.” His sister Fannie and her family also moved to Florida in 1870, settling near Jacksonville where Dave was a dairy farmer. Six years later they moved to Lake Worth near West Palm Beach.

Keeler built a two-story house a mile east of Mayport on the old road to St. Augustine, and named it Thalassa after the Greek goddess of the sea. Scattered nearby and also with a fine view of the ocean were a dozen or so summer cottages which were used by Jacksonville residents and Northerners. Standing tall among the cottages was Thalassa, which by all accounts was a majestic place. Many years after they were gone, the “Keeler place,” as it was called by the locals, was purchased by a wealthy Northerner who was developing a tourist resort nearby. While looking for a place to stable her horses she came upon the abandoned property, which she described as “a perfect paradise . . . huge oak trees with branches hanging to the ground, cedars, bay, magnolia and holly. . . . On a hill stood an old two-story mansion house, down below a tenant house and off to the other side, large roomy stables.”* The house and the outbuildings are long gone, presumably demolished by the Navy when they built a naval base there in the 1940s, but its location, at least its latitude accurate down to 100 feet (30°23’35”), is noted in the astronomical journal Ed Keeler kept in the 1870s. This places the house on a line due east of the old Mayport lighthouse (located on the east side of the village and still standing) and close to Ribault Bay (now Mayport Basin).

Keeler served as the deputy collector of customs from 1871 to 1880 and on occasion inspector of elections. For reasons long forgotten, he referred to himself by the military honorific, Major, preferring to keep his naval background secret. Commencing in 1883 he was the Mayport correspondent for the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper in Jacksonville. His short, offbeat weekly column entitled “Mayport Mention,” written under a variety of different pseudonyms (Leslie, Silex, Monitor and K) reported on ship arrivals and other happenings in Mayport.† Most of his time, however, was spent working around the house, in his shop, and tending his orange groves, the latter being his primary occupation. The peak yield was in 1884 with 6,664 fruit from 59 trees, with one tree producing a whopping 550 oranges. Regarded as an authority on orange growing, he was also an expert in budding pecans on hickory trees, as seen by the newspaper clipping of a letter he wrote on the subject which is pasted into his journal.

* *Story of Mayport, Site of the Great Modern Naval Station*, Elizabeth Stark, 1961, p. 27.

† Appendix C contains several of Keeler’s “Mayport Mention” columns.

Final Letters

Although it is a matter of small consequence I would like to correct a slight error of Green's in his Century article where he speaks of Toffey & myself as landsmen &c. I had seen two years of sea life before being ordered to the Monitor, having gone to California around "the Horn" in /49, a passage of 255 days. From thence home as a passenger in one of our clipper ships around the Cape of Good Hope, so that I was familiar with all sea terms & phrases. (15 November 1885)

As soon as the smoke of battle cleared from Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862 questions arose as to why the *Monitor* had not vanquished the *Virginia*. Since Worden never wrote an official report of the battle, blame had fallen squarely on the lap of executive officer Samuel Dana Greene who was accused of cowardice for breaking off the fight after Worden was injured. Two years after the end of the Civil War, Worden tried to remedy the situation in a letter to then Navy Secretary Gideon Welles in which he defended Greene. However, the war of words was reignited six years later when Catesby ap R. Jones, the commanding officer of the *Virginia* in the fight with the *Monitor*, stated in a letter to former Assistant Navy Secretary Gustavus Fox that the *Monitor* had run away in defeat. John Ericsson, the proud and prickly inventor of the *Monitor*, then jumped into the fray and placed the blame entirely on Greene, whom he referred to in a letter to Fox as a "miserable executive officer who in place of jumping into the pilot house when Worden was blinded ran away with his impregnable vessel."* Ericsson did not stop there but also blamed the sinking of the *Monitor* on alcohol and questioned whether an executive officer older and more experienced than Greene could have saved the vessel. Greene, who by then had risen to the rank of Commander, defended himself in a letter to Fox in 1875 and in an article in the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* a decade later.† However, the damage to Greene's psyche could not be undone and he killed himself with a bullet to the head at the Portsmouth Navy Yard in December 1884 soon after preparing his article, which was published posthumously.

Not long after Greene's death, Connecticut collector of *Monitor* memorabilia Frank H. Pierce began a correspondence with the officers and crew of the *Monitor*. In late September 1885, Keeler's first letter from Pierce arrived at the Mayport post office, along with a note from his brother-in-law George Watrous in New Haven endorsing Pierce. Although Pierce's letters have not

* *War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*, David A. Mindell, Baltimore, MD, 2000, p. 138.

† In the *Monitor Turret*, S. D. Greene, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 29, New York, NY, March 1885, pp. 754-63.

MAYPORT YEARS

survived, his main point of enquiry appears to have been Greene's actions during the fight with the *Virginia*.

In his typically clean and crisp prose Keeler defended his old friend Greene and questioned the veracity of statements made by several *Monitor* crew members who had written to Pierce. He also touched on the subject of drunkenness, stating that it was not the cause of the vessel's loss. In his last letter, which he never finished, he countered the criticism of poor gunnery levelled by John T. Wood, a lieutenant on the *Virginia*,* by giving a clear and detailed explanation of the difficulty in aiming and firing the *Monitor*'s guns. That letter closes with an amusing anecdote about Greene's request for leave to go home to get married when he was serving with Keeler on the *Florida*.

By late November Keeler was too ill to write, and Anna continued the correspondence. Realizing that the end was near, he decided to send Pierce a box of artifacts that he had collected after the Battle of Hampton Roads, with the request that the contents be donated to a historical society. This was in addition to a scrapbook of newspaper and magazine clippings, much of it pertaining to the *Monitor*, which was destined for his daughter Lizzie. In Anna's last letter to Pierce, dated a month after Keeler's death, she wrote:

The packing of the box was the last work Mr. Keeler ever did. The letter announcing its safe arrival reached him a day or two before his death and I told him of its contents. The keys of the safe of the Monitor that he had in his pocket when the vessel went down he left to our son and son in law.

The key to the safe that was given to their son is long gone, lost perhaps in the fire at my great-grandmother's house in Berkeley, California in 1923. The whereabouts of the scrapbook, which was presumably returned to Lizzie, and the relics that were sent to Pierce are also unknown.

Mayport, Fla.
Sept. 27/[18]85

F. H. Pierce, Esqr.

Dear Sir,

Yours of the 22nd inst. accompanied by one from Mr. Watrous is rec'd. The latter I return herewith as you requested.

I have not had a photograph taken since the war. I send you two taken during war times, not very good ones however. If Brady's† photograph rooms are still in existence in New York, you should find there a number of views of the *Monitor* taken shortly after the fight, which may be of interest to you. The engravings in the March number of the *Century* [*Magazine*] pages 755 & 760 were taken from some of them.

* The First Fight of Ironclads, J. T. Wood, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 29, New York, NY, March 1885, pp. 738-54.

† Civil War photographer Matthew Brady.

EPILOGUE

Anna Keeler remained in Mayport for eight months after William's death, busying herself writing letters to family and friends, and arranging for the sale of their property. A bright spot in her bereavement was daughter Lizzie's marriage to Ed's best friend and classmate at Johns Hopkins, David Talbot Day. The wedding took place at the Keelers' house in Mayport.

Anna's last entry in William's journal is dated October 25, 1886. Not long after that, she left for her daughter's home in Washington, DC where she lived for the rest of her life. She enjoyed the company of Lizzie's children Elizabeth and David, as well as Ed's children Henry and Cora when they visited from Pittsburgh where Ed was the director of Allegheny Observatory. However, in 1900 tragedy struck one more time when Ed died of a massive stroke in San Francisco. He was only 42 and was director of Lick Observatory at the time of his death.

For the last few years of her life Anna suffered from severe facial neuralgia. To relieve the pain, she sought treatment in Philadelphia, but died there on January 19, 1901 from complications arising from the operation. Her body was brought back to Washington and a private funeral service was held at Lizzie's home.

Found among Anna's possessions shortly after her death was a handwritten will dated three days before her death. Opening with "as I may be taken away at this time," she goes on to direct that money from the sale of land in Mayport be used to pay for the removal of William's body from the cemetery in Mayport and its interment at Arlington National Cemetery.* Together once again, Anna and William are buried in plot 784 of Section 1 at Arlington. The epitaph on their black granite gravestone reads:

WILLIAM FREDERICK KEELER,
ASSISTANT PAYMASTER U.S.S. "MONITOR"
BORN JUNE 9, 1821, DIED FEBRUARY 27, 1886.

ANNE ELIZA KEELER,
WIFE OF WILLIAM F. KEELER,
BORN OCTOBER 15, 1824, DIED JANUARY 19, 1901.

* Probate Records (District of Columbia), 1801-1930, Register of Wills, Washington, DC.

Biographical Notes

The information about the people listed here and in the footnotes was compiled from a variety of different sources. These include Navy pension applications, muster rolls, Navy registers, court martial records, regimental histories, military records, census records, church records, city directories, newspaper obituaries, college records (catalogues, obituaries) and genealogies. The following websites were also of great help: ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, Fold3.com, readex.com.

Adams, Orville N. (1823-1882) – Merchant and coal agent in La Salle, IL. Engaged in lead mining in Galena, IL before moving to La Salle where he helped develop the region's coal deposits.

Atwater, Norman K. (1830-1862) – Born in New Haven, CT, son of a shipmaster. Mariner before Civil War. Appointed acting ensign in September 1862. Assigned to *Monitor* in November 1862. Drowned when the vessel sank. A landsman on the *Monitor* described the scene: "I hung dangling in the air over the bow of the *Rhode Island*, with Ensign Norman Atwater hanging to the cat-head, three or four feet from me, like myself, with both hands clinching a rope and shouting for someone to save him. Our hands grew painful and all the time weaker, until I saw his strength give way. He slipped a foot, caught again, and with his last prayer, "O God!" I saw him fall and sink, to rise no more."^{*}

Bankhead, John P. (1821-1867) – Born at Fort Johnston, SC. Entered Navy as midshipman in 1838. Chief of staff for his father Brigadier General John Bankhead in Mexican-American War. Served in Mediterranean Squadron from 1855-58. Commanded a schooner in U.S. Coast Survey from 1858 to start of Civil War. As executive officer on USS *Susquehanna*, participated in bombardment of forts guarding Hatteras Inlet, NC in August 1861. Subsequently commanded USS *Pembina* in attack on Port Royal Sound, SC in November 1861. Commanded *Monitor* from September 10, 1862 to December 31, 1862. Suffered from exposure when *Monitor* sank. Commanded *Florida* from March 1863 to August 9, 1863, and three other vessels for remainder of the war. Later served in East India Squadron. Resigned due to poor health and died at sea off coast of Yemen on his way home.

Beecher, James C. (1828-1886) – Born in Boston, MA, son of a Presbyterian minister. His half-brother was the famous Congregational minister and anti-slavery activist Henry Ward Beecher. His half-sister Harriet Beecher Stowe was the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the anti-slavery novel that

^{*} The Loss of the *Monitor*, Francis B. Butts, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 31, New York, NY, December 1885, p. 302.

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