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THE WASHINGTON CLAY GUARDS

A valuable manuscript of twenty-two closely written pages which has recently been acquired by the Lincoln Historical Research Foundation throws much light on the unrest in Washington during the month of April, 1861.

It is a paper read before a Chicago group in 1862 by W. M. Zearing shortly after his return from an extended sojourn in Washington during the beginning of hostilities between the states.

Accompanying this manuscript is a signed statement showing that Zearing was a member of the Washington Clay Guards. The certificate reads as follows:

Headquarters of the Washington Clay Guards.

April 29th, 1861.

This is to certify that W. M. Zearing is honorably discharged from further service in the above corps.

James W. Nye,
Commander.

The introductory remarks in the manuscript read by Mr. Zearing review the events which led to the opening of hostilities and the part played by the Knights of the Golden Circle. He said:

"They concluded that when the fourth of March message of President Lincoln came, they would know how far they could go, from its tone. President Lincoln informed me before that time, in his office at Springfield, what his views were in case any portion of the South disturbed United States property. The message came and John C. Breckenridge and other traitors inspected it closely and argued over all its points and came to the conclusion they were much perplexed and desired light upon the subject. The giant Douglas assured and reassured them that it admitted of no other interpretation than that of peace and security to every law abiding citizen."

Mr. Zearing then recited some of the incidents in Washington that led to the forming of the Washington Clay Guards, and continued that "early in the month of April it was obvious that the South designed to possess Washington. Men who were willing to maintain their loyalty to the Government, were held at discount and could not give utterance on the streets of Washington to loyal sentiments without being liable to attack. Secession was in the ascendancy. In the beginning of the month of April Cassius M. Clay was stopping at the same hotel with myself, at Willard's, and he suggested to the administration the propriety of declaring military law over the city—and, they replied, it would not be politic owing to the position we were then in. Mr. Clay then organized our company of Washington Clay Guards, composed of several ex-governors. Governor Bell of Tennessee, General Nye of New York and others, and all true, tried and loyal men."

Mr. William Townsend in his book "Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town" says that the group which was organized by Clay was called the Clay Battalion, and gave its first demonstration on April 18, 1861, when it marched to the defense of the navy yard.

Zearing then relates some of the adventures of the newly organized company. He says:

"On the night of April 26th some Germans saw pistols fired in the rear of the President's house—and we soon found ourselves lodging in the White House and as we fled into the magnificent rooms of the Executive Mansion, every man registered a vow that so long as he had a drop of blood in his veins, not one hair of the Chief Magistrate of the land should be injured."

This occasion seemed to have paved the way for an audience with the president which is reviewed by Zearing as follows:

"We received an invitation to visit the President in a body in the East room of the White House. Col. Vaughan of the company addressed the President, saying that we had been in situations of trial and in this dark hour, had responded to our country's call and were there to pledge our lives and fortunes to the support of the constitution and the vindication of the

majesty of the law. Col. Vaughan said there were many in his own native state of South Carolina that yet love this Union, which has nourished and fostered them through so many years, but who dare not speak, for treason and disunion were abroad in the land, and they were powerless. That every man there had instructed him to say, so far as they are concerned, 'No compromise with rebels.' The President replied in substance, 'I have desired as sincerely as any man, and I sometimes think more than any other man, that our present difficulties might be settled without the shedding of blood. I will not say that all hope has yet gone, but if the alternative is presented whether the Union is to be broken in fragments and the liberties of the people lost, or blood be shed, you will probably make the choice with which I shall not be dissatisfied.'"

The company was evidently a short lived organization as it was soon disbanded to give its members an opportunity to join regular military companies then in the process of organization. The company seems to have been disbanded on April 29 as indicated by the certificate of Zearing's discharge and the following reminiscence which appears in the manuscript:

"About the 29th of April the government photographer took a daguerreotype of our company as we stood at the south front of the President's Mansion and also changed our position and were taken with trees in the rear—the range of our guns appear too irregular, like cornstalks in a field, to appear well. We received for services, etc., only about five hundred dollars, which scarcely paid expenses, and the war department said though it was in the United States service, there were technical objections to paying it, and the President said if it was not paid he would pay it himself, and it was allowed. We received lengthy discharges signed by our commander and the Secretary of War and President Lincoln which are very full in the recital of our labors against a horde of traitors within and without the city."

Mr. Cassius Clay of Kentucky, who organized the Washington Clay Guards is said to have been called to the White House by the President who presented him with a Colt's revolver as a testimonial of his regards for services rendered with this company.