



By Mark E. Johnson

# Porter's war

A Maury County farmer's journal sheds light on America's darkest moment

The farm and homestead of Maury County farmer Nimrod Porter (inset, above) remain very much the way they were when he lived there in the 19th century. Porter's Civil War-era daily journal has become a valuable historical document since being published in a local newspaper in the 1920s and is stirring new interest with the approaching 150th anniversary of the area's large battles.

**T**here was nothing Nimrod Porter could do.

At first, he expressed outrage with the soldiers. Then, he tried compromise. Then, outright begging.

None of it mattered, and over the four interminable years of the American Civil War, the 500-acre Maury County farm Porter had worked so hard to make productive was picked clean and left in ruin.

The initial culprits, the Confederates who came in 1861, were fairly sympathetic and only

took a couple of cows. It's likely they even apologized and left Porter a few dollars in Confederate money.

But by 1864, the tug-of-war nature of the Tennessee campaigns had resulted in Columbia changing from Confederate to Union control multiple times, and the farms of Maury County were open game for beleaguered soldiers from both sides. Porter and his neighbors bore the brunt.

His story was typical in the region and would've been forgotten forever were it not for the 1927 publication of excerpts from his remarkable daily journal in Columbia's *The Daily Herald* newspaper. Area historians quickly realized the journal's value, and it has since become a prized document for both agriculture and Civil War scholars, gathering new momentum with the approaching 150th anniversaries of Tennessee's major battles. Though the political and moral significance of the Civil War is well documented, Porter's journal is a rare, personal look at the conflict's effect on an average Southern farmer.

"There is great tribulation in the country, [with soldiers] stealing horses, mules, hogs, breaking

in houses," Porter, a former sheriff of Maury County, wrote in December 1864. "The soldiers are very insulting and impose on everybody, stealing and encouraging the blacks to steal, and do every manner of rascality. Nothing is safe, no help is anywhere for our unfortunate condition. All, *all* that we have is nearly gone. How will we live? What will we eat?"



Bob Duncan, director of the Maury County Archives, says Porter's experience was representative of many in the area. Nestled in the heart of the most productive agricultural region of the war's "border" states, Maury County was understandably brutalized by the processes of the conflict, says Duncan. Somehow, though, not only did Porter's detailed journal survive over time, but his original log cabin, home, and outbuildings avoided destruction and still exist today.

"The property has not been inhabited for some time," says Duncan, who has written extensively about Porter and other prominent farmers of his time. "His antebellum home is in rela-

tively good shape, and its owners are planning some type of renovation. Even more amazing is the fact that Porter's cabin, which probably dates back to the 1820s, is also still standing and fairly sturdy. The land and hayfields that surround the living quarters continue in agricultural production and are pretty much as they were in the 1860s."

Having physical access to Porter's actual farm and buildings makes it easier to appreciate the tone and content of his writings, says Duncan. He points out that the entries are an interesting mix of matter-of-fact reporting, record-keeping, and philosophical musings.

"Especially in the early days of the war, he was more apt to list the recipe for some type of livestock medicine or calculate how much seed corn he needed to plant a field," says Duncan. "As the war drug on, he became more emotional and started writing his feelings and fears. It's fascinating and sad at the same time."

Indeed, Porter appeared to struggle with the moral questions of secession with the first salvos of the war at Fort Sumter, S.C., in April 1861.



Bob Duncan, director of the Maury County Archives, reads a volume of Porter's journal entries.

*The Southern Confederacy destroyed and shelled Fort Sumter, a fort built by the Gov. of the U.S. to protect [against] foreign enemies, and killed and wounded the soldiers therein that was placed there by the Government and was not doing them any harm. This was the commencement of this awful condition of our country. Was this right or wrong?*

On Dec. 16, 1861, well before the majority of the largest Civil War battles, Porter seemed to already know what was in store for the country. After mentioning that his two sons, B.W. and Thomas, had joined a Confederate cavalry company, the farmer left no doubt about his opinion of the young war.

*May God with his infinite wisdom severely punish those, North and South, who were instrumental in bringing on this dreadful calamity upon our once beloved and prosperous country.*

After the Battle of Stones River on New Year's Day 1863, Confederate troops began moving en masse through much of Middle Tennessee, and damage to farmland began to increase. On Jan 17, Porter discovered a Confederate encampment on his farm. Thus began his encounters with wartime destruction.

*...Passing through my woods lot, I find the Southern soldiers had burned up my fence... All our picketing not put up and a great deal of it pulled up and burned, the timber cut, and very much destroyed. I felt much distressed to see it.*

In April, Porter, who raised corn, barley, vegetables, grains, and various livestock, writes that only two days of troop movement through his farm have caused damages assessed at more than \$2,500. His entry from Thursday, March 26, 1863, shows that farmers also faced challenges simply preparing and planting their fields.

*I commenced trying to plow with three plows leading up in the new ground... It is impossible to keep the soldiers from pulling down the fences and riding and driving through the field unless I am present.*

There are numerous entries in Porter's journal that document widespread theft by both armies, often referred to as "foraging." In May 1863, he wrote:

*I have been much annoyed*

*with the Southern soldiers ever since they came back to the south side of the river... We have had hard work to keep them from taking everything they can get their hands on, horses, mules, and cattle...*

Duncan points out that although Porter was clearly unhappy with the conduct of the Confederates, he understood that the citizenry would be largely responsible in helping to supply the Southern army. But from 1863 to the war's conclusion, the "foraging" of farms became a systematic dismantling of the area's resources. On the Union side, Maj. Gen. James Negley's Army of the Ohio was particularly brutal, says Duncan.

"In the first occupation, Negley's army sought to supply itself," explains Duncan. "But in the second occupation, it becomes an economic war. The occupiers were looking for contraband, horses, supplies, and they start the process of stripping the country clean. People had to learn to hide their stock, food, and valuables."

In 1864, Confederate Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee, ironically, may have done the most damage of all to the Middle Tennessee agricultural industry. By this time, Porter was carefully detailing the damages, likely as a matter of record-keeping in hopes of reimbursement, says Duncan. On Dec. 11, 1864, Porter itemized his recent damages.

*The Southern army has done me great damage the five days they were here. They have taken 150 acres of corn, burned 30,000 [fence] rails, mostly cedar, cut and destroyed over 25,000 trees that will average over two feet across at the stump, took 30 fattening hogs..., took two horses and the Otey filly worth \$1,000 in gold, took off five or six head of cattle...*

His entry of the same day also took on a more personal tone as he noted that his son, Thomas, was rejoining the army after a short leave period.

*It was a sad time. The parting was heart rending. I am not able to describe it — it speaks for itself in silence.*

Two weeks later, on Christmas Eve, Porter's entry reflected the desperation of all parties involved, including the relatively small number of slaves the farmer kept. Duncan says Porter was known to be a compassionate, if not reluctant, slave owner and recorded multiple entries expressing concern over the treatment of his slaves.

*[The soldiers] broke the weather boarding off the house for fires, burnt the yard fence, went in our smoke house and took the meat. They cooked the last old gobbler. They even took the boots off the blacks. Considerable fuss over that. They should not rob the blacks. Last night, they took all black Sukey's money, all my corn, and what little oats I have left.*

On occasion, through all of the hardships Porter faced, his sense of humor appeared in his writing.

*Dec. 14, 1864: Confederates*

*are conscripting all between 18 and 45... The next call will be between 16 and 50. They may get me yet, at 74!*

But in one of his last statements before the war's end, Porter's anguish was evident.

*I wish there was a river of fire a mile wide between the North and the South that would burn with unquenchable fury forever more and that it could never be passed to the endless ages of eternity by any living creature.*

He was never forced to fight for the Confederacy, but Porter would only live eight more years, dying at age 80 in 1872. Though his journal actually spanned some 52 years — 1819-1871 — Porter could never have guessed that his vivid and tragic descriptions of the Civil War and Reconstruction would still be studied 150 years later.

"He was just a good, honest farmer trying to make his way through difficult times," says Duncan. "I think he did the best he could."

Porter's complete papers can be viewed at the Maury County Archives, 201 East Sixth Street, in Columbia. For more information, call the Archives at 931-375-1501.



Duncan examines the workmanship of the cut stone used to build the chimney of Porter's original cabin, dated roughly between 1820 and 1830. In addition to the cabin, several other outbuildings still stand on the Porter farm.



In a sketch by Henry Mosler, Federal forces led by Gen. Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio cross the Duck River into Columbia in December 1864. This was one of the most brutal time frames of occupation for the residents of Maury County.