Autobiography of Thomas Gregory Dabney
(15 December 1844 – 5 March 1929)

My father was Augustine Lee Dabney, my mother was Elizabeth Osborne Smith. My father was born in the year 1800, in King and Queen County, Virginia, his boyhood spent at the family seat, Elmington, in Gloucester County.

My mother was born at Snowden, near Fredericksburg, Virginia, and was the daughter of Yeamens Smith and [Ann Osborne] Marye, the latter the daughter of the Rev. James Marye, Rector of St. John's Parish in Fredericksburg. My mother was born about the year 1810.

George Washington passed his boyhood in Fredericksburg and was a pupil of Rev. James Marye. My father and his elder brother, Thomas Smith Dabney, attended old William and Mary College, and at the age of sixteen my father and his brother were sent to New York City, to the home of Mr. Augustine Smith, a near cousin, where their education was completed.

The children of my parents were:

Frederick Yeamens
Augustine Lee (died in infancy)
Anne Robinson
Elizabeth Osborne
Martha Chamberlayne
Mary Smith
Thomas Gregory
Marye
John Davis
Letitia

My brother Augustine Lee died some years before I was born. My sister Martha, Chamberlayne died, unmarried, in San Francisco, while undergoing a surgical operation for the removal of a tumor. My recollection is that her death occured in the late eighties of the last century.

My elder brother, Frederick Yeamens, died in Crystal Springs, Miss, about the middle of March in the year 1900. My other brothers and sisters, two of the former and four of the latter, are living at this time, to wit, April, 1910.

My parents migrated to Mississippi from Virginia in the early 30's of the last century. My father's only brother, Col. Thomas S. Dabney, and a brother of my mother's, Mr. Samuel Smith, as well as other connections and friends, came to Mississippi at about the same time, and all settled in Hinds County. My father located in Raymond, the county seat, where he practiced law, and sat on the bench, for many years.

He and my mother moved to California in 1878, where they lived with my sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Dabney Porter, at Santa Rosa, and here both died at advanced ages, my father over 80 and my mother in her 96th year.

I was born in the early morning of December 15, 1844, in Raymond, in Hinds County, Mississippi.

My earliest conscious recollection presents a small isolated picture of a childish impression, in a situation of infantile distress. I suppose that I was between two and three years old, when I found myself alone in the upper hall of my uncle's house "Burleigh," and was in great distress because I had lost sight of my mother. The hall seemed very long to my childish imagination, with a bewildering array of closed doors on either side. The hall was actually of ordinary length, with two doors on each side opening into it. My distress was relieved by someone's discovering me and conducting me to my mother. This little episode is mentioned only as being the earliest conscious impression that I can recall.

A startling and memorable event happened to me when I was about five years old, or perhaps a little younger. My brother Marye (two years my junior) and I were sleeping in a room occupied by my father and mother. Early one morning the servant came in and kindled the log fire in the old fashioned fireplace. My brother and I got out of our bed and and went to the fire, our parents being still asleep. I was sitting in a little chair in front of the fire, while Marye in childish sport was throwing the end of a handkerchief on to the fire, and jerking it back. The handkerchief caught fire, and when dropped, ignited the lower edge of my cotton nightgown. My father was instantly aroused by my screams, and jumping from bed speedily put out the burning gown, but not quickly enough to prevent the burning of my left leg, from the ankle to near the knee.

I have no recollection of my experiences immediately following this accident, my mind probably being too bewildered to receive lasting impressions. But I retain a lively memory of what seems a very long period during which I was laid up by the burn, and of the daily recurring ordeal of having the poultice soaked off the sore with warm water and castile soap, and a fresh one applied, while I was held on my mother's lap. I was rewarded for my suffering with a new calico dress, having a white ground with blue spots, and a shiny leather belt around the middle.

I was taught to spell and read at home, before I was sent to school. My sister Lizzie took upon herself the task of assisting my mother in the care of the younger children, and among other cares played the part of teacher in our early education. She was always kind and motherly, and most helpful to us.

My father was in moderate circumstances throughout this period of my career. He was a lawyer of much learning, and a successful practitioner, and while always diligent in his practice, and to his duties while on the bench, he was too modest and considerate to reap large emoluments from his labors. Having a large family to bring up and educate, close economy was the normal state in our family life, though our house was the scene of

modest hospitality. Our opportunities for education were limited to the village schools, except as to my eldest brother. My uncle, Thomas Dabney, advanced the money to enable my brother Fred to take a three year course at the Troy Polytechnic School, in Troy, New York which was then the only institution in the United States where civil engineering was taught. He graduated from there as an accomplished civil engineer, and afterwards repaid my uncle the money advanced for his college courses.

As this is intended as an autobiography, written especially for the information of my children and grandchildren, I will confine myself henceforth mainly to a recital of the principal events of my own life, which is now resumed after a long period of interruption, on November first, 1922.

In my eighth year I was sent to the village school—there were no public schools in those days. This was a rather large school for the time, taking in the boys from the surrounding countryside. It was a boys' school exclusively. Many of the country boys rode to school, bringing their dinners in tin buckets, riding horseback of course. Many of the town boys also brought their dinners to school, as the school was outside the town limits. The playgrounds were ample, as fields and woods were adjacent to the schoolhouse. There were three teachers, a principal and two assistants, one of whom taught latin.

Before going to school I was in great dread of the experience as I was to meet with, as I had heard on all sides that whipping the boys was the chief business of the teachers. I learned that my fears were largely unfounded. It now seems to me that during my childhood and early boyhood, the influence exerted upon me by playmates and those around me, were of a depressing nature. My "turned up" nose and unruly hair were objects of ridicule, and being of a very sensitive nature, I conceived the idea that I was the exception to the rule, and was a very inferior person. This acted as a serious handicap upon me in my early years. But, I found much relief in a circumstance I will now relate.

In my eighth year my father gave me a gun. It was a long singlebarreled shotgun. My father said that it was too long for me to shoot myself with, and he required me to go hunting alone. His idea in giving me a gun was to send me into the woods and fields, instead of my playing in the streets with the town boys, and it was a wise arrangement.

I will here make some observations upon the attitude of my father towards his children, which I omitted to do earlier. My father was a very studious man, and seemed generally engrossed in serious affairs. Moreover, he had a large family to support, with limited means, and was obliged to observe strict economy. We had however sufficient and good food, and other things necessary to our comfort. My father always maintained a grave aspect toward his younger children, though never a severe one. He never unbent, nor relaxed into a playful mood, and did not invite a feeling of fellowship with us. And while his reign was mild and benign, his commands were regarded by us as inexorable law, and binding on us whereever we might be. My father had little to do, however, with the details of child management, leaving them to my mother. My mother was a rather

rigid disciplinarian, and did not hesitate to apply the switch in season. But she was our refuge in our childish troubles, where we always found sympathy.

I early contracted a fondness for the woods and fields, for the gun and the fishing pole, and generally, all the time I could spare from school was devoted to hunting and fishing in the creeks that meandered in the neighborhood of our home. I was a sickly child, and the reminiscences of my childhood are filled with impressions of sickness and the taking of nauseous doses. But these unhappy episodes probably assumed undue magnitude in memory's retrospect, because of the deep impression they left on my mind. When I was nine or ten years old, my health was so bad I was taken from school and sent into the country, to the house of Cousin Olivia Campbell, who was then the wife of Doctor Smart. This was a plantation called "Auburn," about sixteen miles from Raymond. I believe that Doctor Smart advised my father to send me to his house to recover my health. I may here describe the series of plantations that were situated around Dry Grove as a focus, upon which resided the Virginia "Colonists," all of whom were related to me by blood or by marriage.

First was "Burleigh," home of my father's brother, Col. Thomas S. Dabney. "Burleigh," was a large plantation, nearly four thousand acres, and my uncle was then considered a very rich man, owning about 200 negro slaves. His wife was Aunt Sophia, nee Hill. My uncle's family consisted of ten children—sons and daughters; my father's of nine, living children. The two families were very intimately associated, and were "paired off" according to ages. We were known as the "Raymond Dabneys," and the "Burleigh Dabneys." A very old lady came occasionally into my view, when I was a child, whom we called Grand Ma Hill. She was the mother of Aunt Sophia, of Aunt Coates Moncure (wife of Doctor Moncure), and of Cousin Olivia Campbell Smart, and Dr. Campbell Smith, who were half-sisters and brothers.

"Burleigh," was ten miles from Raymond; next came "Midway," two and a half miles from "Burleigh." There lived Cousin Cam Smith. Next to "Midway," came "Woodburne," and there lived Dr. Moncure, husband of Aunt Coates Moncure. They had three children, Charley, Agatha, and Bob. Charley was four years older than I, and Bob several years younger. In later years,Agatha married my oldest brother, Frederick Y. Dabney. Next to "Woodburne," came "Auburn," about three miles distant, and this completed the series of Virginians in the "colony." Dr. Smart and Cousin Olivia lived at "Auburn." All of these families were so closely associated that the children knew no distinctions as to kinship, and so were all equally related.

I was allowed to remain at Dr. Smart's for I think about a year. There were no white children to associate with, only Negroes. Most of my time was spent alone in the woods and fields, with my gun. Dr. Smart was an enthusiastic fox hunter, keeping a large pack of hounds for this purpose. There were twenty-seven hounds in his pack. He generally hunted alone, except for my companionship. On many a cold winter morning, I was obliged to get up at four o'clock, and mount a mule to ride with Dr. Smart on a fox hunt. He generally returned about 10 or 11 o'clock. On one of these occasions I was mounted on a tall mule and we rode forth. When we were about two miles from the

house—I was following behind the Doctor in the dark—a grapevine caught me under the chin, and the next moment I was on the ground at the mule's heels. The mule took the back track for home and I was unable to catch it until we reached the stable, and so I lost the hunt that day. On another hunt, the main pack of hounds failed to start a fox. But one of the dogs strayed off by himself, soon after we started, and got up a fox on his own account, which he alone chased for several hours. Finally, this single dog brought his game to the vicinity of the main pack, and the fox was soon forced by them to climb a tree, being nearly run down. Dr. Smart wished to have a chaseout of the fox, so made me climb the tree, while he called off the dogs as far away as he could. I made the fox jump to the ground, but the pack soon got behind him, and forced the poor beast up another tree in a few minutes. I had to climb that tree, also, and was obliged to catch the tired fox by the tail and throw him down among the pack of dogs, who soon made an end of him. However, he died with his teeth in the ear of one of the hounds.

I will here relate an incident of slight importance, but the starting point of a lifetime habit. On Cousin Olivia's plantation there was an old time water mill for grinding corn, built by an early settler long before she came into possession of the place. The mill was operated by an old Negro, Uncle Ben Holmes. Passing the mill one day, on my way to the house, Uncle Ben asked me to see his wife, old Aunt Grace, and get a piece of tobacco for him, and bring it to him as I went out hunting. I got the tobacco and while on my way to the mill, I smelt it and it smelt good to me. I then put a piece of it in my mouth, and it tasted good. By the time I got in sight of the mill I was over powered by the tobacco and was obliged to lie down on the ground. I was so prostrated that I could not raise my head, and thought I was going to die. After some little time I vomited all the contents of my stomach, and that gave me relief, so I got up and continued my way to the mill, and delivered the rest of the tobacco to Uncle Ben. It might be supposed that one such experience in childhood would create great repugnance for tobacco, but such is not the case, for the seemingly unnatural appetite for the stimulation of tobacco still asserts itself. The kind of acute nausea produced by the initial effect of tobacco, appears to me to be exactly similar to that of seasickness—and I have experienced both sensations.

During my sojourn at Cousin Olivia's, I wrote a letter to my mother, asking—her to send me some clothes, and my letter went by Negro messenger then being sent to Raymond. I had never before attempted to write a letter, and knew nothing of the usual form. After I had stated my need of clothes, it occured to me that unless my name appeared somewhere in the letter my mother could not know who had written it, so I put my name, Thomas Dabney," at the top of the sheet. My mother preserved this letter for a long time.

When I returned to my home in Raymond, after a year's isolation in the country, where I had lacked the companionship of white children, I cut up so many wild capers that I was pronounced uncivilized. I was completely restored to health, and was soon returned to school, and after mingling for a while with the other boys, and being again part of the home circle, I was also restored to civilization.

I do not remember any incidents of importance in my life, until I was between thirteen and fourteen years old, when my brother Marye and I were sent to board in the home of Mr. John C. Williams, on a plantation about two miles from Burleigh, and a half mile from Dry Grove. This was to enable us to attend school at Burleigh with my uncle's younger children, under a New England teacher, a Mr. Thomas, who had been employed by my uncle for his children. Bob Moncure also went with us, riding back and forth everyday on a pony. Marye and I walked the two miles both ways, daily, accompanied by Calvin Williams, taking our dinners with us. Occasionally we shot a rabbit, or a squirrel, or a bird or two, on the way to school, which old "Aunt Ginny," who cooked for the overseer, cooked for us. The school-house was about a quarter of a mile from the Burleigh house, with a rather low valley between. The house was a double cabin, with two large rooms and a wide passage between. One of the rooms was used as our school room, the other was occupied by the plantation overseer whose name was Quint Lee. I believe this arrangement lasted for a year or longer, or until the political situation which preceded Civil War, when Mr. Thomas, by my uncle's advice, left us to return to New England.

This period I recall as perhaps the happiest of my whole life.

I will here select what was to me a notable episode of my boyhood. In August, 1858, my brother Fred, then a civil engineer with several years experience, was in charge of a railroad survey, a preliminary survey of the Gulf and Ship Island R.R. Major G. H. Green was his chief engineer. This road was originally projected from Canton, Mississippi, to Mississippi City on the Gulf coast. My brother took me with him as a "stake marker." I joined the camp seven miles north of Canton. This was a novel experience for me, as I slept in a tent for the first time in my life. The life on survey was hard and rough; that is, we had a great deal of hard walking to do, and suffered much at times from heat and thirst. I was then approaching fourteen. Notwithstanding the occasional hardships, this camping experience, and the tramping through the virgin pine forests, with my vigorous appetite and a zest for all adventure, stands in my memory as a bright picture of my boyhood days, with a glamor of romantic interest investing it.

The party consisted of: my brother as Chief; a Mr. Wiley, a Georgian and a gentleman, who was assistant engineer and levelman; Henry Brown, a rough and tumble young man of good intelligence but doubtful antecedents, who had been a fireman in New Orleans, where his associates had been wild and rough. He was good natured and very friendly.

I was the fourth member of the white contingent of the party. Major Green visited the camp occasionally as the survey progressed. My duty was to mark the stakes, or stations, with a piece of keil, that was driven into the ground every two hundred feet, as the line was measured.

Wiley, Brown and I occupied one tent, and had cots to sleep on. My brother had a tent alone, which was also a "field office." We had an ox wagon to haul our camp outfit, a long, old-fashioned "schooner"-shaped wagon. There was a Negro cook, an ox driver,

chainmen and axmen. Camp was moved generally every day, as the the survey progressed. The cook, an intelligent mulatto, was directed where to pitch the next camp. All the Negroes were slaves. When we reached the end of a day's work, a distance of about four miles, or less, according to the character of the ground, we walked to camp, and although we carried dinner along, we had enormous appetites when we got there. The cooking was good and I greatly relished our camp fare. Our line of survey passed four miles east of Jackson, through Rankin and Smith Counties, and when we entered the primeval long-leaf pine region, which was then thinly populated; and the farther we progressed the wilder was the country. There seemed to be an interminable forest of large pine trees, with clean trunks, and no undergrowth; so, through long vistas of big tree bodies, the view was unobstructed. The ground was thickly covered with long pine needles, with red sand beneath, so that there was no dirtying of clothes through wallowing on the ground. The streams were beautifully clear, and schools of trout could be seen in the clear water. But we had no time for fishing. One day the cook missed his direction for pitching camp, and when we quit work just before dark, we walked eleven miles before finding camp, and had to walk that distance back next morning. But we were well inured to walking.

When we were about twenty-five miles from the Gulf Coast, we camped near the home of a farmer, and a young man from the house came to our camp. He told us that a month before then his father had been killed by a rattlesnake, morning. Hearing a noise in the hog pen, his father got his gun, thinking a bear was after the hogs. The young man followed him out to the hogpen. The father climbed over a fence and jumped to the ground but did not get up. The young man found him dead; a large rattlesnake had struck him in the jugular vein as he jumped to the ground.

A singular coincidence, two years ago I learned that a man had just been killed by a rattlesnake, about five miles from the same spot.

In the same neighborhood, we camped on the main road to Pass Christian, near a farmer's house. He came to our camp and told us that Charles Dabney, my uncle Tom's oldest son, had died in his house of yellow fever, three years before, and that his hat was still hanging in his hall. In those days my uncle had a summer residence in Pass Christian, and he took his family there every summer, traveling through the country with their servants. In 1855 there was an epidemic of yellow fever, and Charles Dabney, who had just returned home after graduating from college, contracted the fever. His father and mother undertook to carry him home, not then knowing much about the nature of that disease. When they had proceeded about twenty-five miles, they were obliged to stop at this farmer's house, where Charles died. My uncle abandoned his summer house after that.

We completed our survey before getting to the Gulf, by connecting with another survey previously made, and we turned our faces homeward, it then being October. We took the road westward, aiming to strike the rail road between New Orleans and Jackson, that had recently been completed. The distance was about 150 miles. We tramped through the pine woods, the road in places only being discernable by blazes on the trees.

We sometimes traveled a whole day without seeing a human habitation. We could not travel farther in a day than our ox cart could go, and at night we camped on the roadside. I had never been sick, until we began the homeward march, and then I had a severe attack of bilious fever. I rode one day on Major Green's horse, suffering greatly. The next day I rode in the wagon, bumping over pine roots, my head aching violently. We then came to the house of a Mr. Battson, not far from the site of the present town of Hattiesburg, then a wilderness. The name Battson is now prominent in that region. Mr. Battson, was considered very well to do, having about 400 head of cattle roaming through the woods. The people lived for the most part on beef and sweet potatoes. Mr. Battson and his wife had fourteen children, thirteen sons and one daughter. They were divided into seven pairs of twins. The daughter was grown up and married. There was also a Yankee teacher in the house. They very kindly took in my brother and me, though I don't know where they all slept, and I was too sick to take notice. But the married daughter slept in the room with the old couple and myself. There was no physician the house, except a bottle of campfire, and no doctor within 40 miles. But in two days I was well enough to travel. Mr. Battson lent me a horse to ride to camp. He would accept no pay for all that was done for us, but my brother gave the Negro woman cook two dollars in silver, probably more money than she had ever seen before.

In those days fever patients were forbidden to drink water. When I was able to get out of the house, I went to a well with a long pole over it, balanced on a high post. From one end of the pole hung a bucket, made of an inverted cypress knee. I let it down into the well, drew it up full of cool water, and drank my fill.

We at last reached Summit on the railroad, took the train and went home, my brother and I getting off at Terry.

[Thus ends the autobiography. The version above was handed down from TGD's sister Letitia. It is the same—but typed differently—as the version in the "Dabney, Thomas Gregory," collection at McCain Library and Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi. A comparison of the two suggests that they were separate transcriptions of a common handwritten document. In the USM version, a number of misprints in the above text are correctly typed, for example, a few instances of repeated words such as "the the." The family name "Yeamans" is correct in the USM version, but incorrectly spelled "Yeamens" in the text above. The Benjamin Dabney house in Virginia (which still stands) is correctly spelled "Elmington" in the text above, incorrectly in the USM version. Likewise "Gloucester." "Maj. G. H. Green" appears in the above text, but is given as "Maj. B. H. Green" in the USM version. And so forth.

At age 16, TGD enlisted as a private in the "Raymond Fencibles," under Capt. William H. Taylor, on 13 March 1861. They became Co. A of the 12th Mississippi Regiment (Infantry). The 12th, under Col. Richard Griffith, was sent to Virginia, but arrived too late for the Battle of Manassas, but witnessed the "novel spectacle of bloody dismembered limbs about the field hospitals." TGD was reported "sick in hospital at Manassas." At some point he was discharged as being underage and was sent back to

Mississippi. He enlisted in Co. F of the 1st Mississippi Light Artillery in November of 1862 at Port Hudson, La. CSA records show him a corporal when captured at Port Hudson on 9 July 1863 and paroled on 12-13 July. He was a sergeant when exchanged on 9 January 1864 and rejoined the 1st Mississippi Light Artillery. (Prisoners of war in the Civil War were routinely paroled to their homes on pledge not to take up arms until properly exchanged.) At the war's end, his unit surrendered at Fort Blakely on Mobile Bay in Alabama. Like his brother F. Y. Dabney, TGD became a civil engineer, and is credited with the system of levees along the Mississippi River. TGD died as a result of an automobile accident, probably at Memphis, Tenn., where his home was at the time. He is buried in Sect. C of Cedar Hill Cemetery in Vicksburg, Miss.]

Finally, here follows a letter written by TGD to *The Confederate Veteran* magazine for May 1901. The letter was found by Rebecca Drake of Raymond, Mississippi.

TWELFTH MISSISSIPPI REGIMENT.

T. G, Dabney, of Clarksdale, Miss., writes of its first service:

The communication from Comrade J. B. K. Smith in the March VETERAN, correcting an error in relation to Col. W. M. Inge in the January number, reminds me of other errors in that sketch. The Twelfth Mississippi Regiment did not lie at Lynchburg during Sunday, July 21, while the battle of Manassas was being fought, but was traveling all that day between Lynchburg and Manassas. During the day we passed through Charlottesville, where many bright-eyed schoolgirls came to the depot and supplied sandwiches, pies, etc., to the half-famished soldiers—I wonder where all those bright eyes are at this writing. We reached Manassas junction about 9 P.M., after the battle had been fought, where we had a novel spectacle of bloody dismembered limbs about the field hospitals.

In March or April, 1861, the Raymond Fencibles, from Raymond, Miss., under Capt. William H. Taylor, was the first military company to arrive at Corinth. When we left the train Capt. (afterwards lieutenant colonel) Taylor ranged us up to the hotel bar, and gave us all drinks. We then had dinner at the hotel, after which we were marched out to the suburbs of the little town and went into our first camp. In the course of a few weeks other companies arrived, and the Twelfth Regiment was organized, with Col. Richard Griffith commander. The Raymond Fencibles were accorded the position o£ Company A, by virtue of being the first to arrive on the ground.

In May or June we went to Union City, Tenn. A week before the battle of Manassas we were ordered to prepare three days' rations, and embarked for Virginia in box cars, on plank seats extended across the cars without any backs. We occupied a week on the journey, more than half the time being without food, except an occasional supply of bread that was telegraphed for ahead. And yet we traveled along merrily singing in cheerful mood, looking upon the whole business as a great joke.

The Twelfth Mississippi was then full and strong, of light-hearted lads. The sad remnant, a mere handful, were captured by assault after a desperate defense in Fort Gregg, near Petersburg, at the final windup. This writer had been transferred to the Western Army in 1862, and ended his military career at the artillery service in Fort Blakely, on Mobile Bay, April 9, 1865.