

# *Introduction*

## I

OUR SOUTHERN FRONTIER, boisterous and lawless, was the scene of more bloody strife between the red man and the white man than any other section east of the Mississippi River. From the days of the American Revolution the Creek Indians, a strong, feared, and highly civilized confederation in Georgia and Alabama, and the Seminoles, a Creek offshoot in Florida, had seen their lands constantly encroached upon by the steady advance of white men who coveted the rich undeveloped soil of the deep South. Little by little, as the red man was forced to sign treaties and land cessions, he saw his tribal domains and hunting grounds disappear. The bloody Creek War of 1813-1814 and the Seminole uprising in 1817 were only more violent eruptions in the constant strife and bush fighting that went on for decades.

Early in the 1830's came the decree from Washington that all Indians east of the Mississippi would be removed to lands in the West. In spite of formal treaties signed with the Creeks and Seminoles guaranteeing this removal, large segments of both tribes were adamant in their refusal to leave their ancestral homes. They refused to listen to talk of leaving and vowed to resist any attempt at removal by force.

By the middle of the 1830's ill feeling between the keyed-up Creeks and Seminoles and the frontier settlers had reached the pitch of open hostilities. The United States government, determined to carry out its policy of Indian removal, ordered large numbers of regular and volunteer troops to move against the Creek and Seminole Nations. The elusive, musket-armed Indians, skilled in the art of guerilla warfare, proved no easy target for unwieldy columns of marching troops. Though the red man fought for survival, whatever moral and tactical advantages he possessed were eventually overcome by the sheer weight of numbers and the

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superior equipment of his foe. The wars for him were wars of attrition. Regardless, however, of the odds he faced and the quick submission he made in Georgia and Alabama, he fought for seven long years in Florida.

This clash of arms on one of America's wildest and least known frontiers provides the setting for the tales of primitive frontier life—"how fields were fought and won,"\* "hair-breadth scapes by flood and field," and the "deadly breach and the cannons mouth"—which the author of this Journal vividly narrates.

### II

Jacob Rhett Motte, a versatile army surgeon with a literary flair, was a proud, Chesterfieldian, Harvard-educated, self-styled Southern gentleman who one day suddenly found himself transported from the gay, aristocratic social circles of Charleston into a wild frontier. This unknown world proved a rare experience for a man of distinguished bearing who was descended from two colorful South Carolinian families of Huguenot origin.†

Motte was proud of his lineage. On his father's side, as far as available sources reveal, it went back to the Comte de la Motte of seventeenth-century France. His great-grandfather, the second generation of his family in this country, served thirty years as public treasurer of the colony of South Carolina. His grandfather, Isaac Motte, rose to the rank of colonel in the Continental Army and became known as a Revolutionary War hero through his seizure of Fort Johnson and his gallant defense of Fort Moultrie. An equally enviable lineage is found on his mother's side. Abraham Motte,

\* Quotations used in this introduction and not otherwise annotated are taken from the original Motte manuscript.

† Sources used in sketching the author's life and background include *The Christian Register*, July 24, 1869; *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, IV, 1903; materials in the War Records Division, National Archives; and Arthur H. Cole (ed.), *Charleston Goes to Harvard, Diary of a Harvard Student of 1831* (Cambridge, 1940). The information embodied in the first three mentioned was furnished through correspondence with Clifford K. Shipton, custodian of the Harvard University Archives; E. G. Campbell, director, War Records Division, National Archives, Washington, D. C.; and Margaret D. Mosimann, reference librarian, Charleston Free Library, Charleston, South Carolina.

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J. Rhett's father, married Sarah Washington Quince, the daughter of Colonel William Rhett, an outstanding figure in the early history of South Carolina. The pride young Motte felt in his family heritage often prompted him to drop his first name and use the initial only. He registered at Harvard as Rhett J. Motte.

Motte was born in Charleston, September 22, 1811, and lived there during his formative years. After attending Charleston College the seventeen-year-old lad entered Harvard College in 1828, following a precedent set by his older and only brother, Mellish Irving, who had been graduated from Harvard in 1821.

Perhaps the philosophic style and the frequent intellectual approach in his writings are traceable to his Harvard background. The courses he studied there covered a wide range. In the program of his junior year alone, the humanities were represented by Latin, Greek, German, and "universal grammar," while his courses in architecture and the sciences included natural philosophy, chemistry, and electricity. Several of his required themes were on abstract topics. One he entitled "Whether genius be an innate and irresistible propensity to some particular pursuit, or merely general superiority owing to accidental circumstances?" Another bore an even more unusual title: "Crime, conscience, self-deception, worldliness, God's judgement of us and the world's judgement, etc., as exhibited in the King's soliloquy in *Hamlet*—'O my offence is rank,' etc."

His Harvard years held enjoyments as well as hard work. He was an average student—neither exceptionally enthusiastic about his courses nor prone to complain.\* His friends were few, a circumstance which he himself deplored. He led a plain, moral existence, marked by abstention from dances, parties with fellow students, and other festivities. The only sports he enjoyed were riding his velocipede, swimming, and walking, the last being his favorite.

\* During the latter part of his junior year at Harvard, Motte kept a diary in which he recorded his student activities, thoughts, and emotions. This diary, edited by Arthur H. Cole, librarian, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, affords many valuable glimpses into the early life of the author.

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In reading his *Journal* one cannot doubt that his Harvard background shaped a mind which flourished on wide reading, for he exhibits a familiarity with the classics, and with the music, art, and literature of his day. In passages of reflective musing, which appear frequently throughout his writings, he quotes from writers whom we today consider among the greatest in our literary heritage. One of his recurring laments is the total absence of reading material on the frontier, the lack of which he believes produces a group of people whom he characterizes as the "dumbest . . . in the world." Never in history, he laconically observes, has there existed a class of individuals who stood in more earnest need of schoolmasters.

In August of 1832 Motte was graduated from Harvard with the degree of Bachelor of Arts. He may have remained in New England from his matriculation until graduation, for his brother was then serving as Unitarian minister of the South Congregational Church in Boston. His only sister, Anna Maria, was living at the time in New London, Connecticut, where her husband, Colonel William Lindsay of the United States Army, was stationed.

The ties between Jacob and Anna Maria were very close. He speaks of her affectionately in his *Journal*, in which he does not even mention his brother. In 1836 Anna Maria was living at the United States Arsenal in Augusta, Georgia, conveniently located for Motte to visit on his journey to the theater of war in Alabama. His parents were undoubtedly dead, for he often laments the fact that he has no permanent home. In his writing can be detected the maturity which only permanent bereavement can produce in a young mind. Reflecting upon the joyful anticipation exhibited by his homeward-bound army friends, he writes: "Home no longer exists for me; it is only to be found in the memory of past times and joyous youth, when hopes were bright, and the very air I breathed seemed impregnated with delight. There is no hearthstone to which I may turn . . . meeting those loved faces which render home so dear."

Upon his graduation from Harvard, Motte failed to receive a desired appointment to the United States Military Academy and returned to Charleston. There he studied at the medical college

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and served his apprenticeship under Dr. J. E. Holbrook. Apart from mentioning service as a citizen medical doctor at the Augusta, Georgia, Arsenal in 1835, he tells little of his life and activities before his entry into the United States Army.

Leanings toward a military career had been evident during his college days. The failure of his attempt to win an appointment to West Point only postponed his desire for a "try" at the army. Hence, in March of 1836 he journeyed to Baltimore, where he was examined by the Army Medical Board. His application for admission to the medical staff was approved on March 21, and about the first of June he received orders placing him on active duty with the rank of assistant surgeon.\*

His enlistment doubtless was prompted by a youthful admiration for the service. Army life in that day was not attractive, least of all in salary. One disgruntled army surgeon characterized the financial remuneration as follows: "Although I had, at my own expense, obtained through a course of eight years study and attendance on medical lectures, the degrees of A.M. and M.D., and added five or six years' experience in private practice, I found, that after expending some \$300 in prerequisites, and joining the army, I would receive only \$30 per month pay, and \$24 for subsistence. . . . Respectable board, lodging and washing cannot be obtained at any southern station, which are the only ones with which I am acquainted, for less than \$28 or \$30 per month: leaving \$24 for clothing, incidental expenses, and the laying up for a wet day."†

The Journal picks up the record of Motte's life, travels, and observations early on the morning of June 3, 1836, as he rode down the deserted streets of Charleston on his way to the railroad depot. He was inspired by the fact that he "was now enrolled among the elite few, the brave and honorable spirits of our small but unsurpassed Army." A year later the blunt reality of army life on a wild

\* *Army and Navy Chronicle*, May 5, 1836. An assistant surgeon in the Army Medical Corps at this time had the rank of either first lieutenant or captain; a surgeon, that of major. By an act of Congress, April 23, 1908, titles of assistant surgeon and surgeon were abolished, and medical officers were ranked by purely military titles, such as lieutenant, captain, major, and colonel.

† *Ibid.*, January 21, 1836.

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frontier had dampened the thrill and enchantment which his army career had originally promised. It was then he issued a warning to those of his profession who were "strongly tempted by the allurements of a military life," stating, "if you possess an impatient temper, or a character honorably proud and finely sensitive, as you value your peace of mind, do not think of taking such a step."

The quaint little Charleston-Hamburg express carried the proud new army surgeon to Augusta in a little over twelve hours. From Augusta he proceeded by stagecoach across the state to Columbus, where he reported for duty with the army opposed to the Creek Nation.

The first eleven of the thirty-six chapters of the Journal deal with the Creek Indian hostilities in Georgia and Alabama. In the winter of 1836-1837 Motte was ordered to Florida and accompanied a detachment of troops from Lowndes County, Georgia, to the Mineral Springs on the Suwannee River in Florida. The remaining twenty-five chapters relate his experiences, observations, and itinerary in Florida during the first years of the Seminole Indian hostilities. His travels with the troops in Florida took him throughout the peninsula from the Georgia border to the Everglades and as far south as Key Largo, and enabled him to tuck into the pages of his Journal a wide range of material on territorial Florida. In April of 1838, while stationed at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, he received orders transferring him back to Charleston, where the narrative of his Journal ends.

From Charleston he was ordered to Major General Winfield Scott's headquarters at Athens, Tennessee, and took part in the campaign which forcibly removed the Cherokee Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi. After a period of service in the Cherokee country, Motte was transferred to the Michigan territory and, later, in 1840 to Huntsville, Alabama. In 1843 he was stationed at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri, where he drew up several interesting reports for the Surgeon General on conditions in the Missouri Valley.\*

\* Allen S. Deas, collector of manuscripts, to James F. Sunderman, August 26, 1950, MS in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.