HOMEBOUND CHRONICLER

This image of Leloy W. Gresham was taken circa 1857-58 after an accident had crushed his leg and left him an invalid. His healthy mind, however, could not be confined.
Almost no one had ever heard of LeRoy Wiley Gresham until the Library of Congress featured his “little-known diary” in 2012. LeRoy was an invalid teenager from a wealthy slave-holding family in Macon, Ga., crippled when a chimney collapsed and crushed his left leg in 1856. In 1860, his mother, Mary, gave the 12-year-old a blank journal to record his experiences with his father, John Gresham, on their trip to Philadelphia to see a medical specialist. Sadly, the doctor could not help him. ¶ Once home he continued writing, putting pen to paper with a vim and often tongue-in-cheek vigor that impresses even now. LeRoy was a voracious reader who debated social and military topics with his parents, older brother Thomas, and friends. A slave his own age pulled him in a small custom-built wagon for brief trips out of his sickbed. ¶ He wrote nearly every day, and could be termed a “19th-century blogger” for the way he discusses and analyzes the Civil War. He handled major events concisely and crisply, and learned to temper his hopes because initial military reports were often wrong. The Gresham family had everything at stake when the war began. His grandmother had six sons fighting in the war. His father was a plantation owner. His older brother served in the Army of Northern Virginia. ¶ LeRoy also offers readers a horrifying account of his daily suffering. Surgeon Dennis Rasbach studied the diary and private letters and believes LeRoy suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis that spread to his spine. His condition worsened with each passing year. Unbeknownst to LeRoy, he was chronicling his own slow and painful descent toward death in tandem with the demise of the Confederacy. ¶ The last diary entry was June 8, 1865, when he wrote, “I have read nothing at all for the last ten days and consequently know little of the outside world....” LeRoy died eight days later at age 17.
THE FOLLOWING SELECTED ENTRIES from the spring and summer of 1863 exemplify LeRoy’s keen interest in the war (and sweet seasonal fruit that temporarily diverted him from his pain), and illustrate the rise and fall of his hopes based on battlefield events. It is clear he was a remarkably well-informed and intelligent young man. For a full review of publisher Savas Beatie’s edited version of his diary, go to http://bit.ly/greshamreview. Some of LeRoy’s passages in this article have been shortened, as indicated by ellipses, and the format of the datelines has been standardized. Otherwise, they are reprinted as he wrote them. There is no other published account remotely like this in the Civil War field.

TUESDAY, MAY 5: Clear and warm. Suffered a great deal till after midnight when Mother + Father got up, removed the poultice + dressed my back. After that I was a great deal more comfortable. The news is that a great fight has been fought at Fredericksburg. Gen Lee telegraphs “that Almighty God had given us another victory. Stonewall Jackson + A.P. Hill wounded. General Paxton killed. Heath wounded. I am so sorry about Gen Jackson. Hooker flanked us or rather turned our position and in doing so got himself into a bad position. Jackson as usual got into his rear and two of Longstreet’s divisions in front. The fight lasted two days. Hooker at last acts was retreating across the river… The new Flag is the “Battleflag for the Union.” White field without bars. O Horrid….

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6:… Gen Lee says the Battle occurred at Chancellorsville. Gen Jackson’s left arm has been amputated below the shoulder. Gen Sedgwick attempted to come up in our rear [at Fredericksburg] but was handsomely repulsed by McLaws and afterwards driven across the river by Gen Lee himself. Mother has gone down town. It is a great bother to dress my back and takes 2 to do it.

FRIDAY, MAY 8:… List of killed + wounded in the Macon Volunteers. 1700 nasty, stinkin’ Yankee raiders have arrived in Atlanta. The Yanks made a raid and came within sight of Richmond. No authentic account of the Battle of Chancellorsville. The Yankee loss was 3 to our 1, “mostly foreigners.” It was a very bloody fight.

SATURDAY, MAY 9: Very cool. Slept well. The bloody fight is over. Hooker is repulsed, but Stonewall Jackson, the pride and the glory of the people, is disabled and worst of all by his own command. He and his staff rode out unknown to the men to reconnoiter and, being taken for Yankees, was fired upon; 1 of his staff killed, 1 wounded. 1 ball shattered the Gen’s left arm and another passed through his right hand. 9 men were wounded in the Macon Volunteers, only 1 killed out right….

SUNDAY, MAY 10:… My abscess on the right ran a little. Lincoln has called out 500000 men! Our loss at Chancellorsville was 8 or 10000. I don’t think the Yankees lost less than 30000 for we took 8000 prisoners. The Yankees are very proud of their escape. The attack was well planned. A terrible storm prevented pursuit. I hope Gen Lee will cross the river himself as soon as the 28 regiments whose term is out leave for home. The army of Tennessee is reported on the advance?? Nary time. Gen Lee has issued congratulatory orders and this is a day of thanksgiving in the army. Gen
Van Dorn has been murdered by a Dr. Peters out west. A personal affair entirely.

MONDAY, MAY 11: Clear + pleasant. Had strawberries for dinner... Brave, gallant Stonewall Jackson is dead. He, the pride of the nation, is gone. Dearly was the victory won at such a price. He died from the combined effect of his wounds + an attack of pneumonia. As a commander, it may be said that he never committed an error!... I never in my life saw peaches so defective wormy + rotten everywhere the hail hit them....

MONDAY, MAY 18: Clear and pleasant. Jackson, Miss. is in the enemy’s hands and gloomy forebodings are entertained for Vicksburg. Gen Joe Johnston was cut off this side. We fought all day. The 46th Ga. was in the fight. Gloomy times certain. I am quite unwell. Took paregoric last night. Had strawberries for dinner....

TUESDAY, MAY 19: Clear and pleasant. The news from the west is bad. The Yanks after sacking Jackson have evacuated it marching towards Vicksburg. Gen Johnston with 9000 men fought 20000 all day and then being overpowered fell back to Canton. Port Hudson has been attacked! Heavy firing; no other particulars. Halleck has gone down to overlook Hooker. Gen Tilghman is killed. Had dewberries for dinner.... The itching of my back at times is intolerable. If the Yanks ain’t working us now, you may take my hat. All looks threatening and dark around us. I wish Gen Pemberton was in Guinea or anywhere else but in the place he is. Minnie lost a ring. Hooker’s loss in Stragglers, deserters, killed, and wounded is not estimated at less than 40000. They acknowledge officially only 17000. Our loss was about 9000. They captured about 1500 of our men.

FRIDAY, MAY 22: The news is poor. Vicksburg is closely invested and will probably fall. The news is unsatisfactory in the extreme. Thomas arrived in the evening. Ate a wormy ripe plum, the first of the season.
MISSISSIPPI FRETTERING

Gresham kept tabs on all theaters of the war, and understood the importance of Vicksburg and the Mississippi River to the Confederacy. This lithograph shows a May 14, 1863, Union attack at Jackson, Miss., during the Vicksburg Campaign.

SATURDAY, MAY 23: …Not a drop of news....I hope its so that Gen Johnston has put Old Pemberton under arrest and taken away his sword....

SUNDAY, MAY 24: Clear and warm Vicksburg had not fallen at last accts and the condition, though extremely critical, was not at all desperate, and I am strongly in hopes that Grant will yet meet with a stunning defeat. He it is stated was repulsed in 3 attacks on Vicksburg and “Jo Johnston” is pushing in his rear and constantly receiving reinforce- ments....

MONDAY, MAY 25: Clear and warm. Had strawberries, custard, + cake, for dinner. No news. The anxiety about our army out West and doubt is freely expressed of Pemberton’s loyalty....Reed relic from battlefield sent by Uncle Dick: a fancy roll of the Burnside Guards, a company of the 124th Pa.

TUESDAY, MAY 26: Cloudy and cool. The news is a drop more encouraging from Vicksburg. The Yanks have been repulsed 6 times and with very heavy loss. Grant says he has taken the first line of entrenchments. Johnson is fortifying at Jackson. Breckinridge + Bragg have come to an open rupture and the former has called a court of inquiry. [Governor Joe] Brown is announced for a 4th term and there will be no opposition. Howard returned with Allen....Mrs. Hug[uenin] sent me honey, butter and sug berries.

FRIDAY, MAY 29: …The situation is gloomy in the extreme. Vicksburg is one. It is said that the Yanks have lost heavier than in any previous battle. Rotten Yankees are piled up in such numbers before our intrenchments that the effluvia [smell] is awful. Tar is burnt to prevent sickness....Banks is crossing the Mississippi to aid Grant. Farragut is bombarding Port Hudson. Gunboats have passed Vicksburg going up. They’ll take it certain. No news of Gen Johnston. Father has no hope of our holding out longer than a week. It is awful.

SATURDAY, MAY 30: …Nothing definite from the west. Grant’s loss must be enormous. Pemberton’s address to the army is received. I can but hope. Grant can get any amount of reinforcements + supplies. Yazoo River and all our river batteries are in their hands. Our Warrenton batteries also. Up to the 27th, our men were cheerful and hopeful. On the 27th, The Feds made a grand attack + were repulsed with loss....
TUESDAY, JUNE 2: Clear and warm. The news is on the whole encouraging. Vicksburg holds out heroically! Gen Grant demanded a surrender, but Pemberton replied that he would die in the trenches. There are some heavy rumors. One is that the enemy made a grand assault and were mown down by thousands, nearly all of them killed or captured. The Yankees say we rolled shells down the hill at them causing immense havoc....If Vicksburg does pass this fiery ordeal in safety, how thankful we ought to be!....The college girls have formed a company and drill regularly....It is rumored and credited that Lee's army is in motion. Had strawberries for dinner.

THURSDAY, JUNE 4: ...Vicksburg is still ours. Grant is heavily reinforced. Pemberton's address to his troops is a defense of himself, not a harangue to the troops. The Yanks have had it captured twice....Higglety pigglety pop! O La.

FRIDAY, JUNE 5: The "Situation" is on the whole encouraging....Grant may yet skedaddle. It says Banks has been handsomely thrashed by Gen Gardner near to Port Hudson and that Kirby Smith is opposite ready to cross. Gen Johnston is on the move to cut off Grant. Grant is moving to prevent it and a great fight is pending on the Yazoo. The stench of rotten Yanks can be smelt 6 miles off. Pemberton calls on Grant to bury them. Contrabands were put in the front of the fight on every occasion. It is rumored Rosencrans is falling back [in Tenn]....I eat June apples every eve and they are very nice + ripe.

SATURDAY, JUNE 6: Rained nearly all night and it is still cloudy. Read The Laird of Norlan. Banks was not in the fight at Port Hudson. Sherman commanded and was killed. Out of a regiment of 900 "nigs" only 100 escaped. "Bully for that." A great fight is ere this going on between Johnston + Grant. "Terrific firing heard," and it must be them. Now we must wait patiently for news, but if we don't lick them - well....Father arrived at dinner-time sick and weary. He brought some apples for pies and about half-bushel of plums....My strawberries + a little bottle of May cherries arrived from Athens.

SUNDAY, JUNE 7: Clear and warm....Had strawberries for dinner. Cherry preserves I mean, and they were real splendid....Prayer meeting for Vicksburg in the eve.

MONDAY, JUNE 8: ...Bought Whortleberries at 50 cents a quart. My back runs a great deal now. Willis came up bringing Dewberries....Had the first apple pie of the season and enjoyed it very much. Received a letter from Uncle Richard. He is in A. P. Hill's 3d army corps.

THURSDAY, JUNE 11: ...Well, if things do not look gloomy at Vicksburg, there a'int no snakes. Grant has called for 50000 reinforcements and he will get them. Alas! We have none to send without exposing an important point. So as it has come to a question of reinforcements, we are gone....Father thinks it. It is a gloomy prospect. There are some wild rumors too. One is that you can walk on dead yankees for 10 acres and not touch the earth. Another says that the blood is shoe deep!! The slain are 60 + 70,000. Ours 600. Another says Pemberton boasts he can hold Vicksburg indefinitely and tells Johnston to take his time. The Yanky exaggeration's are equally wild. They say Pemberton has been hung by our men....I did not sleep well. I had such a binding pain across...
the chest and I think it comes from overexertion. My leg 
distresses me greatly and worse than all, folks say it’s my own 
fault, I can straiten it if I would try. Well~...Fried apples are 
good and so is pig. There has been a heavy cavalry fight on 
the Rappahannock. Gen Lee says “Gen Stuart after a ‘severe 
contest’ of 12 hrs. drove the Yanks ‘across the river.’” I reckon 
it was a hard fight.

FRIDAY, JUNE 12: ...Gen Lee is moving but in what direction 
one knows. Our loss was 400 in the late cavalry fight. We 
got the new stove up and it is very nice....

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17: ...Early’s division has stormed the 
entrenchments at Winchester and in the language of Gen 
Lee, God has again crowned the Valor of our troops with 
success....

SATURDAY, JUNE 20: Clear and warm. Ewell's victory at 
“Winchester” is confirmed. 7000 prisoners + 3000 horses. 
It is rumored that our army is pushing into Maryland. The 
Yankees are under the influence of a grand scare or “upris-
ings.” Lincoln calls for 100000 6 months men and the Gov-
[error]r are calling too. Our loss at Brandy Station was 483; 
Yanks twice that....

TUESDAY, JUNE 23: ...The June apples are love to the sight 
and pleasant to the taste. The Yanks have made a cavalry 
raid into E. Tenn. and after burning a factory and damaging 
the R.R. were repulsed by the 54th Va. at Knoxville—Gen-
eral Ewell is in Mld. Hooker is near Bull run and “Manassas 
Plains.” Where the grand collision will occur or whither Gen 
Lee intends to fight, no one knows. I can’t see what object 
we can have in entering Maryland except to get provision or 
attract attention from Vicksburg. I feel confident that our 
army can whip Hooker’s anywhere—Blackberries do not fall 
below 25 cents a quart....

THURSDAY, JUNE 25: ...Peaches are getting ripe but they are 
watery and mean on acct of so much rain. The movements 
of Gen Lee are shrouded in complete mystery as are Gen 
Johnston's [in Mississippi]. Hooker is over the Potomac and 
the fight will be in Mld....

FRIDAY, JUNE 26: Clear and hot. Last night was the warmest 
of the season....Gen Longstreet has crossed the Potomac at 
Leesburg; Ewell at Harpers Ferry. A.P. Hill is behind....

TUESDAY, JUNE 30: ...The Yanks have made a raid around 
Richmond, kicked up a dust! Captured Gen W.H. Lee + 
left. Richmond is menaced by a large force via the Peninsula. 
Confident is felt as to our ability to repulse them. No Gen-
eral engagement is anticipated in Tennessee. 2 [rail] car-loads 
of wounded in the late skirmish have come down to Chatt[a-
nooga]. Commencement day at the college. Thomas had to 
dress my back. The “new un” [abscess] has not run a drop in a 
day and night. I hope it’ll heal up.
THURSDAY, JULY 2: Gen. Ewell is reported in “Harrisburg” [Pa.]. Battle imminent in Tenn. “Vicksburg is gone,” some people say; others think it not so bad as that.

FRIDAY, JULY 3: I have felt inexpressibly weary all day, and have had a slight pain in my leg too. Rosencrans, it is said, has flanked our right and Bragg is retreating. Before he is done I reckon we’ll be at Chattanooga again. D.H. Hill is in Richmond and Gen. Dix is advancing on the city.

SATURDAY, JULY 4: Hot and clear. Well! Well! This is the glorious but “played out” 4th....3 years ago I laid down and it has not done me any good. My left leg is worse drawn up than ever....Father is desponding about Vicksburg.

TUESDAY, JULY 7: The most sanguinary battle of the war has been fought at Gettysburg, Pa. Barksdale, Kemper, Garnett, Armistead, Semmes Killed. Hood, Trimble, Pickett, Pender—Hampton, Anderson, Robinson, Jenkins, Jones, Heth, Scales, Pettigrew + c. 50 field officers besides these disabled; our whole loss probably 15000 in killed, wounded, and prisoners, certainly not less for nearly all our wounded, who were not able to move or be carried, were left behind. General Lee’s army is crossing the Potomac at Williamsport where a severe fight is probably going on with our rear guard. The Potomac is very high and our men are crossing in flats. The loss is appalling and for nothing too. What a host of men have been slain at just such an affair; at Shiloh, Murfreesboro + Sharpsburg! Our army went into Maryland declaring themselves invincible and with an utter contempt for the foe they had so often whipped......Every officer in the [Macon] Volunteers was disabled....

General Hooker has been superseded by Gen. “G.G. Meade” a “brave and accomplished officer” which is a capital thing for us. Gen. Wadsworth + Reynolds U.S.A. are reported killed. Our army is reported as living “in clover.” When a town is entered, a contribution of supplies is levied. Gen. Ewell forbids all individual interference with private property. When our cavalry comes across fine horses, they take them and put their jaded ones in their place....

WEDNESDAY, JULY 8: Great and glorious news! Grand defeat of the Yankees. 40000 prisoners. All of both sides engaged. The Yankees massed their forces and attacked Gen. Hill in the centre. He fell back and the enemy following our wings under Longstreet and Ewell closed on them, and thus completely defeated them, killing it is said Gens Meade, Wadsworth, Reynolds, Barlow, + Meredith. The prisoners refused to be paroled and Pickett’s division was guarding them to Martinsburg. Our loss it is supposed is tremendous. Vicksburg is taken....I hope that Gen. Lee will take Washington. I cannot believe that heroic little Vicksburg is actually gone, but “lack-a-day.” I reckon it is so....

THURSDAY, JULY 9: An official dispatch says—“Vicksburg capitulated on the 4th inst. The men were immediately paroled; the officers retaining their side arms + baggage.” The cause of the surrender was famine. General Grant had a boatload of provisions brought for our poor men. We had only 7000 effective men. The “Victory” in Pa. grows beautifully less....

Janet E. Croon is a retired teacher living in northern Virginia. The War Outside My Window is her first book. Theodore P. Savas is the owner and managing director of Savas Beatie publishing company.

Young LeRoy Gresham’s remarkable, 155,000-word, 7-volume diary was recently published as The War Outside My Window: The Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Gresham, 1860-1865 (Savas Beatie, 2018).