

Letter from John W.B. Thompson to the editor of the Charleston, S.C. Courier

On the 23d of July last, about four P. M., as I was going from the kitchen to the dwelling-house, I discovered a large body of Indians within twenty yards of me, back of the kitchen. I ran for the lighthouse, and called out to the old negro man that was with me to run, for the Indians were near; at that moment they discharged a volley of rifle balls, which cut my clothes and hat, and perforated the door in many places. We got in, and as I was turning the key the savages had hold of the door. I stationed the negro at the door, with orders to let me know if they attempted to break in; I then took my three muskets, which were loaded with ball and buck-shot, and went to the second window. Seeing a large body of them opposite the dwelling-house, I discharged my muskets in succession among them, which put them in some confusion; they then, for the second time, began their horrid yells, and in a minute no sash or glass was left at the window, for they vented their rage at that spot. I fired at them from some of the other windows, and from the top of the house; in fact, I fired when ever I could get an Indian for a mark. I kept them from the house until dark.

They then poured in a heavy fire at all the windows and lantern; that was the time they set fire to the door and window even with the ground. The window was boarded up with plank and filled up with stone inside; but the flames spread fast, being fed with yellow pine wood. Their balls had perforated the tin tanks of oil, consisting of two hundred and twenty-five gallons; my bedding, clothing, and in fact every thing I had, was soaked in oil. I stopped at the door until driven away by the flames. I then took a keg of gunpowder, my balls, and one musket to the top of the house, then went below, and began to cut away the stairs about half way up from the bottom. I had difficulty in getting the old negro up the space I had already cut; but the flames now drove me from my labor, and I retreated to the top of the house. I covered over the scuttle that leads to the lantern, which kept the fire from me for some time; at last the awful moment arrived, the crackling flames burnt around me, the savages at the same time began their hellish yells. My poor old negro looked to me with tears in his eyes, but could not speak; we went out of the lantern, and lay down on the edge of the platform, two feet wide; the lantern now was full of flame, the lamps and glasses bursting and flying in all directions, my clothes on fire, and to move from the place where I was would be instant death from their rifles. My flesh was roasting and to put an end to my horrible suffering, I got up, threw the keg of gunpowder down the scuttle—instantly it exploded, and shook the tower from the top to the bottom. It had not the desired effect of blowing me into eternity, but it threw down the stairs and all the wooden work near the top of the house; it damped the fire for a moment, but it soon blazed as fierce as ever; the negro man said he was wounded, which was the last word he spoke.

By this time I had received some wounds myself; and finding no chance for my life, for I was roasting alive, I took the determination to jump off. I got up, went outside the iron railing, recommending my soul to God, and was on the point of going head foremost on the rocks below,

when something dictated to me to return and lie down again. I did so, and in two minutes the fire fell to the bottom of the house. It is a remarkable circumstance, that not one ball struck me when I stood up outside the railing, although they were flying all around me like hail-stones. I found the old negro man dead being shot in several places, and literally roasted. A few minutes after the fire fell, a stiff breeze sprung up from the southward, which was a great blessing to me. I had to lie where I was, for I could not walk, having received six rifle balls, three in each foot. The Indians, thinking me dead, left the lighthouse, and set fire to the dwelling-house, kitchen and other out-houses, and began to carry their plunder to the beach; they took all the empty barrels, the drawers of the bureaus, and in fact every thing that would act as a vessel to hold any thing; my provisions were in the lighthouse, except a barrel of flour, which they took off. The next morning they hauled out of the lighthouse, by means of a pole, the tin that composed the oil tanks, no doubt to make grates to manufacture the county root into what we call arrow root. After loading my little sloop, about ten or twelve went into her; the rest took to the beach to meet at the other end of the island. This happened, as I judge, about ten, A. M. My eyes being much affected, prevented me from knowing their actual force, but I judge there were from forty to fifty, perhaps more. I was now almost as bad off as before; a burning fever on me, my feet shot to pieces, no clothes to cover me, nothing to eat or drink, a hot sun overhead, a dead man by my side, no friend near or any to expect, and placed between seventy and eighty feet from the earth, and no chance of getting down, my situation was truly horrible. About twelve o'clock, I thought I could perceive a vessel not far off; I took a piece of the old negro's trowsers that had escaped the flames by being wet with blood, and made a signal.

Some time in the afternoon, I saw two boats with my sloop in tow coming to the landing. I had no doubt but they were Indians, having seen my signal, and had returned to finish their murderous design; but it proved to be boats of the United States schooner *Motto*, Capt. Armstrong, with a detachment of seamen and marines, under the command of Lieut. Lloyd, of the sloop-of-war *Concord*. They had retaken my sloop, after the Indians had stripped her of her sails and rigging, and every thing of consequence belonging to her; they informed me they heard my explosion twelve miles off, and ran down to my assistance, but did not expect to find me alive. Those gentlemen did all in their power to relieve me, but, night coming on, they returned on board the *Motto*, after assuring me of their assistance in the morning.

Next morning, Monday, July 5, three boats landed, among them Capt. Cole, of the schooner *Pee Dee*, from New York

They had made a kite during the night, to get a line to me, but without effect; they then fired twine from their muskets, made fast to a ramrod, which I received, and hauled up a tailblock and made fast round an iron stanchion, rove the twine through the block, and they below, by that means, rove a two-inch rope, and hoisted up two men, who soon landed me on terra firma. I must state here, that the Indians had made a ladder, by lashing pieces of wood across the lightning rod, near forty feet from the ground, as if to have my scalp, nolens volens. This happened on the

fourth. After I got on board the Motto, every man, from the captain to the cook, tried to alleviate my sufferings. On the seventh, I was received in the military hospital, through the politeness of Lieut. Alvord, of the fourth regiment of United States Infantry. He has done every thing to make my situation as comfortable as possible.

I must not omit here to return my thanks to the citizens of Key West, generally, for their sympathy and kind offers of any thing I would wish, that it was in their power to bestow. Before I left Key West, two balls were extracted, and one remains in my right leg; but, since I am under the care of Dr. Ramsey, who has paid every attention to me, he will know best whether to extract it or not.

These lines are written to let my friends know that I am still in the land of the living, and am now in Charleston, S. C, where every attention is paid me. Although a cripple, I can eat my allowance, and walk about without the use of a cane. Respectfully yours,

JOHN W. B. THOMPSON