

BETWEEN THE COVERS RARE BOOKS

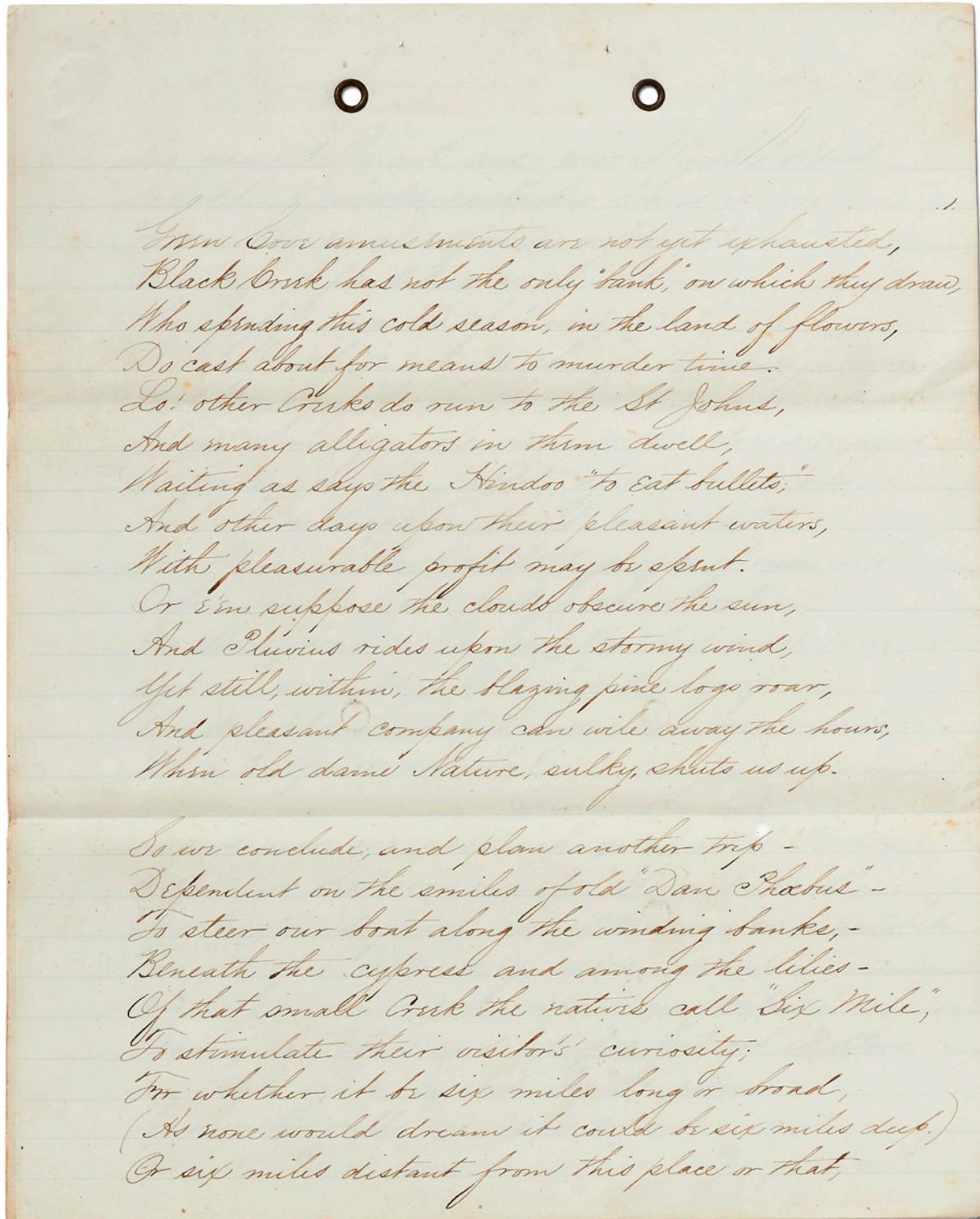
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William Sturgis

[Manuscript]: William Sturgis's Narrative Account of a "Sail & Ball" at Green Cove Springs, Florida: 21 February 1869

Green Cove Springs, Florida: 1869

\$2600



Handwritten manuscript in ink. Quarto. pp. 1-13. Fastened together with two contemporary eyelets at the top margin, two horizontal folds, near fine. A rare, narrative account of a sailboat trip on the St. John's River followed by an evening Ball at Hibernia on Fleming Island in Central Florida. The day-long holiday trip was undertaken by William Sturgis of New York and a party of friends from Green Cove Springs to the nearby ruins of an "ancient" Spanish fort at Picolata. Written in poetic verse, the narrative consists of 13 manuscript pages written for the amusement his invalid sister.

It is both a humorous, accurate, and detailed account of the party's outing on the "Cutter Nansemond ... Beneath the cypress and among the lilies - Of that small Creek the natives call "Six Mile." The Cutter's Captain was to pick-up a party of his friends due to arrive at Picolata from St. Augustine, whereupon both parties would together sail back up St. John's River to attend the Ball.

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Sturgis, a New York native and civil war veteran in his mid-20s, was a successful prospector for the West Columbia Coal & Salt Company, which had considerable mining interests in West Virginia and in the commercial oil wells at Oil Springs, Ontario. He thus begins his narrative by drawing a vivid contrast between Green Cove Springs and Oil Springs (also known as "Black Creek" for its vast oil fields), thereby indicating where the money for the Florida vacation comes from:

"Green Cove amusements are not yet exhausted,
Black Creek has not the only "bank" on which they draw,
Who spending this cold season, in the land of flowers,
Do cast about for means to murder time."

Of particular interest is his description and account of Fort Picolata (built and garrisoned by the Spanish, it was later the setting for important meetings between Creek and Seminole chiefs and British colonial officials); the arrival of the Captain's friends by stages from St. Augustine; and of the band that performed at the Ball. Also included is a detailed description of the Cutter, along with descriptions of the landscape (flora and fauna) and the sparse settlements along the St. Johns River. Sturgis here describes their visit at Picolata:

Here then we waited the arrival of the stage,
And our friends coming from St. Augustine,
And waiting spread ourselves in groups about,
Giving an air of life, to what seemed else deserted.

... The only feature of the place presenting
Interest, in the eyes of passing tourists,
... seemed the ruins,
... Of an old stockade fort – an ancient place
... walls partly burned, and partly,
Cut down by settlers for their use elsewhere
... the old doorposts bleaching in the wind ...

And soon the looked for stages drove in sight ...
The Captain next held consultation deep,
With the black pilot, whose intelligent face,
Showed knowledge of his work – "Where should we go
To spend the next three hours?" "How's Six Mile Creek?"
"Too little water for the boat is there."
"Then let us to Hibernia down the stream."
So casting off we left the small "town" lying
Under our lee, and gaily sailed away ...

Upon their arrival to the Ball at Hibernia, Sturgis gives vivid, detailed descriptions of the guests, and again delights in drawing a contrast between them and the band performing at the Ball:

The band, comprised of five dark hued musicians,
All clothed in black, stood out in bold relief,
In contrast with the many colored walls,
But ah, the music was in contrast too.
Twas not Helmsmuller's spirit stirring notes,
That used to keep feet moving till the dawn,
And almost made the paralytic dance,
That issued from those sable sons of Ham.
Two violins that oft required tuning –
The while the dancers waited – a triangle,
A tambourine, and bones, such was our band;
The best that could be gathered on the River.

A relatively early account of a tourists' venture into Florida's vanished frontier. [BTC#407043]