

Hempstead Inquirer

August 29th, 1863

"From Major B.A. Willis, headquarters 119th Regiment, NY, Brentsville, VA.,
8/11/1863"

My Dear Friend,

Tiresome marches, the countless fatigues of an almost unparalleled campaign, the excitement that attends the immanency of conflict, the heart rending scenes of carnage, shattered and mutilated victims of unholy war, the sighs and groans of departing spirits as they take their flights from an unhallowed earth, the artillery's fierce crash and musketry's inharmonious rattle, the cheers of heroes as by impetuous passion they are borne irresistibly onward to the foe, pressed as it were into the very fulf of death; all these experiences, scenes and noises are buried in the sepulcher of the past, and instead, we are here in this beautiful, ancient village of Brentsville, the capitol of Prince William County, enjoying a repose disturbed only by the unvarying routing of picket and fatigue, tattoo and reveille, drill and inspector.

The same waste and desolation that greets the eye where our army has hitherto encamped is not apparent here. The fields are richly laden with corn and wheat and grass; the hill tops are covered with grazing herds, whose presence gives intelligence, welcome to every soldier - a plentitude of milk and butter.

There is only one regiment besides our located here, the 68th NY, who together with us are guarding the country here about to secure the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, the line of government supply for rebel raids.

The weather here is extremely hot. We cannot like Long Islanders, breathe freshness from the Atlantic waves, refresh ourselves by taking a sail in some beautiful bay, nor yet get relief form delicate ice creams and cooling drinks; we cannot even wear linen and straw hats but bundled in uniform prescribed by army regulations, we have to reconcile ourselves to the torrid heat, drown our complaints or curses, and patiently endure, with an endurance rendered tolerable only by the happy consciousness that we are here doing duty's bidding.

We take almost daily baths in the streams that wind about us, and which lose their poetic force by the muddy tincture of their waves; but experience teaches us that even these baths are better than none.

Our army a few days since barefooted covered with dirt and rags, officers as well as privates, has been newly classed and thoroughly cleaned. A few days since they received their pay for the months of May and June. Sutlers, very leeches, that as such dry the resources of the poor soldier and rob many a widow and helpless family of their mite, nor swarm everywhere around, carrying on their countenance a profusion of smiles, that to the observer tokens clearly hypocrisy and betrayal. Yet do they, so well-versed in the poor soldier's weaknesses and knowing his manifold wants, coil their snaky folds around him, afflict him with poverty and want, and having wrought his ruin, mock him his distresses. but enough! Why should I speak of this curse? The government knows of its existence; the people see it; the commanders of the army daily witness its sad results and yet nothing is doing to suppress or move it. Alas! Count the poor soldier be befriended how many souls would be saved from shipwreck? How many families would be spared lives of lamentation, misery and woe? To this cause more than any other is attributable the sad fact that here religion and morality are so deadened, and the influences of social life to such a sorrowful extent forgotten and lost. May the future beget a magic change, is my earnest prayer.

There are several public buildings here vary ancient and quite unpretentious. I have my headquarters in the courtroom within whose walls have often, in times past, echoed the voices of Virginia's proudest orators and statesmen. Here upon a table that was once covered with briefs, I am penning this communication. On my right as I sit, looking southward, stands the jail, in whose cruel cells Union martyrs have suffered tortures unparalleled, at least in the 19th century, save where the demoniac secession has held sway. Had I time how many instances of cruelty and barbarism might I recite; of insults, taunts, murder! Can we yield to such a foe? Must the wrongs of these sufferers be unavenged, and our glorious nationality die for want of defenders, when menaced by a foe so lost to justice, humanity and religious? Heaven thou wilt not permit the consummation of such ignominy! Smite with ruin him who dare breathe the odious, accused word "surrender."

Rejoice, my country, that in thy armies thou canst see safety and victory. Rejoice that in the heroes of Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Port Hudson, together with those under the sturdy Rosecrans there still burns the unconquerable spirit never to submit; the same steady purpose never to leave the field, through disaster and defeats, misgeneralship and quarrels in the public counsels, thwart , satanic spirit of copperheadism postpone for a time their triumph, until they have accomplished their mission and saved from destruction the ancient temple of liberties.

But you know my sentiments; you know full well the sentiment of every true soldier; you know the solemn oaths engrossed by us in the register of Heaven; why then should we doubt the issue? And you would not, could you have witnessed their sublime devotion

to the laws of the country, that was evinced upon receiving intelligence of the riots that for so many days, held ruthless sway in the noblest city of our land. They regarded them as ebullitions of treason, and ached with patriotic desire to participate in their suppression. None more so than the gallant company from Queens County that I formerly had the honor to command. I was always proud of them - that made me prouder still.

The actors in these mobs, notwithstanding the long list of cruelties they enacted, excite my sympathy. They have been driven to madness by misrepresentations and falsehoods as vile as though forged in the mitts of Hell itself. You well know the instigators who have brought dishonor and shame upon our fair name; who have aided and abetted the enemy by creating discontent and furnishing pretexts to foreign powers, envious of our greatness and splendor, breathing vengeance against the government because it is the only freedom-loving government on earth - to intermeddle in our affairs in behalf of a rebellious portion of our people, and thus contribute to our overthrow. Their names I will not mention, but they are public enemies, and if you are friends of human liberty, of a Christian civilization; if you cherish and grateful remembrance the name of Washington and his compatriots; if you have tears to shed over the graves of thousands murdered by a causeless, heartless rebellion - cease to regard them as allies, regard them as traitors, and in the name of outraged justice, betrayed patriotism, treat them as such.

Now I confess I dislike Conscription. I have that abiding confidence in the loyal-hearted North, confirmed by the experience of the past, that any call whatever for men or money would be responded to with a promptitude becoming a free people. I cannot believe I misjudge my native county when I saw that she at least is equal to any demand either on her patriotism or resources. But notwithstanding I oppose it as a principle; it has been adopted as a policy by the representatives of my country - it is the law, and as such every citizen either expressly or impliedly is sworn. To render it inoperative by mobs or otherwise, is a traitor to his country. Let a draft be made upon the generosity of our people that has never been appealed to me - to rob the conscription of its harshness, instead of expending it in courts, to harass the government and delay ultimate victory while your country is bleeding at every pore.

But the planet star of victory is shining brighter. The whole heavens are becoming illumined. The star of the republic is about to re-arise and I drive away with its effulgence, the gathered clouds that have darkened our fair land, but have never disheartened the true patriot, who inspired by confidence, believing in the words of our own Bryant that "truth crushed to earth shall rise again" have through all this darkness beheld a glorious future, more glorious even than the past.

When destruction has frowned upon my country, when defeats and disaster have crowded upon each other, I have never lost my faith. I have always been assured of the justice of our cause and I have therefore always felt that God would give us the victory. Well-founded hopes have always mirrored to my soul a-restored to the Union, rejoicing in the establishment of the great truths embodied in the Declaration of Independence, taught in the great laws of nature and nature's God, and inculcated by the undoubted facts of history, as also the unvarying voice of religion, not only established and professed, but practically enforced and respected, as the fathers of the Republic intended, and you can imagine how heartfelt my joy becomes as we approximate gradually towards the realization of my hopes.

The country is safe! Let all do their duty without complaint. When the day of jubilee doth come, let every man, woman and child have it in their power to exclaim: I have assisted in preserving from death this noble, happy country; I have aided in the vindication of the heroic dead whose memories unhallowed traitors have dared to pollute; I have lent my help in the creation of a future whose sublime grandeur, whose devotion to truth, and immovable adherence to what is right, will cause the very angels to bless us with their smiles, while all good men will rejoice at the happy issue of our struggle.

Do your duty, now - you can participate in the glory of that hour; then.

Company H fought as bravely as usual at Gettysburg, and were in the battle from beginning to end. For the sake of their families you will please to give publicity to the following statement which I know to be correct:

Killed:

Henry Camps, color sergeant

Walter W. Carpenter

Wounded:

Thomas B. Mott, corporal; John Smith; John W. Albrow; Charles Wilson; Edwin Southward; Joseph H. Denton; David Wilson; Chas. E. Roseville.

Prisoners:

John F. Speedlin; Henry Radford; Treadwell Bedell; George T. Warring; Theodore Tupper; Walter Plumb.

We have heard from all the prisoners and know them to be safe.

I trust that the citizens of Hempstead will remember those families rendered unfortunate by the untimely fall of husband, brother, and friend. If they are allowed to be borne down by poverty and draw out lives of penury and woe those who made so many fair promises of protection when urging these patriots forward to save themselves from the dishonor, fear of inconvenience of a draft, will be covered with inexpressible shame and guilty of the most heinous of crimes.

But this is a contingency that I cannot anticipate. I too well know the character of the people to expect from them such cruel indifference to the promptings of humanity, or such a willful disregard for repeated pledges.

Yours truly,

Benjamin A. Willis