

1863 return to Chester perilous

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Woman held family together while Confederacy crumbled

On Sept. 1, 1863, Margaret McCalla, 33, with her mother, three young children, at least three slaves, two wagons and a buggy, set out from Morristown in eastern Tennessee for their former home in Chester District, a place called "Lewis's Turnout." Eastern Tennessee had been captured by Union troops. Margaret McCalla's husband, Richard McCalla, was an engineer in the Confederate Army.

The party traveled through the Great Smokies over rough roads. It took 16 days to cover about 200 miles.

Surviving correspondence of Margaret and Richard McCalla reveals details of the journey and the problems that Margaret faced as she attempted to house, feed, and clothe her dependents.

Margaret McCalla was able to bring all of her trunks, bedding, clothing and a good deal of kitchen items, including all of the meat and lard in the pantry. Two cows and their calves followed behind the wagons. She left behind her wheat, the bedsteads and bureaus, her husband's books and her piano.

Margaret's mother, Narcissa Gaston Lewis, 71, drove the buggy most of the way. In her first letter to her husband, Margaret reported that they all arrived in good health but in her Oct. 7 letter she feared for the survival of their son Brown who was very ill with a sore throat. Brown died Oct. 11.

Shelter was not easy to find but finally Margaret located a small house "sadly out of repairs." With the help of neighbors and with the carpentry skills of the servant Dennis, the house was enlarged and several outbuildings constructed.

Enough food, other than meat, was available for those who could afford the inflated prices and were willing to ride about and locate it.



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At different places she found enough flour, salt, molasses and corn to satisfy their needs. A neighbor, Mr. Gilmer, allowed the children to pick peas in his field.

Margaret's brother, Samuel Joseph Lewis, came on furlough in November and found a small piece of land that he purchased for his mother. This provided them with enough land for Margaret to farm, a venture she entered with great enthusiasm.

Always there were family and neighbors willing to help. Margaret's aunt, Jane Crawford, sent the family a wagon load of corn and a bale of fodder with the horses as a Christmas present. But prices kept going up.

In January Margaret wrote that she spent \$900 on meat, \$600 on corn, \$100 or more for molasses and other little items. She hired out two of the slaves, Martha and Monroe.

Farm tools proved impossible to secure but Dennis managed to construct a number, including a plow. The spring of 1864 was cold and wet, but they managed to plant a turnip patch and a garden. Dennis plowed the bottom lands for corn.

The oldest child, Lewis, started school on April 18. Two days later Margaret's third son was born. She wrote her husband, "you must excuse me for being selfish enough to name him without even consulting you . . . I call him Richard Calvin."

The farming venture proved to be more disaster than not. The weather was bad, the wheat crop failed, the corn crop was slim and one of the calves died in August.

From July on, Confederate morale dropped with news of defeat after defeat. When Atlanta fell and word came to Chester that General Sherman was in Savannah, Margaret asked her husband where she should go if the federal army came to Chester District.

Capt. McCalla replied, "Indeed if Chester is not secure, I don't know where you could go for security."

Margaret McCalla remained at home, where Capt. McCalla soon joined her. In 1868 they returned to Morristown, Tenn., and in 1872 moved to Tuscaloosa, Ala., where McCalla became "one of the distinguished engineers of the South."