

DELIVERING THE MAIL DURING THE CIVIL WAR

by Louise Pettus

Confederate soldiers didn't need stamps, or money for that matter, to send a letter home. All that was required was for the soldier to endorse the envelope with his name, rank, company and regiment.

The Confederate government was not always efficient, but in the matter of delivering the mail there were very few complaints and not one claim of robbery. Not only did the soldiers have franking privileges, they were allowed to send small items to the folks back home. These small items included finger rings, brooches, lockets, etc. Many items were carved from beef bones and gutta percha (a rubbery substance used for insulation).

Every town in York, Lancaster and Chester counties had a post office. So did many rural communities, often located in a country store or perhaps an inn. Even remote areas, such as western York County, would receive mail once a week at a minimum. The usual pattern was to deliver to the larger towns on one of the railroads and from there the mail was distributed by riders to the post offices.

Chesterville was not only the largest town in the area, it was the only town in the three counties served by two railroads. The Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta Railway (CC&A) was on the major north-south route, thereby bringing the mail in from Virginia camps. The Kings Mountain Railroad also served Chester. Since 1854 Chesterville had had telegraph service connecting the town with Charlotte and Columbia.

The people were so eager to get the news from the front that they organized themselves in a network that could deliver daily mail. Arrangements were made among individuals to go to the county seats on a set schedule to pick up the mail. Thus, mail picked up in Yorkville would be taken to Hickory Grove where the post master would hand over the mail destined for Smith's Ford, Hopewell, etc., to someone from those communities for distribution. John R. Alexander, the Yorkville postmaster, was lauded for his "attention to business and official courtesy, in promptly forwarding mail to its destination."

Some of the Confederate memoirs tell of soldiers who were illiterate when they entered the service who became so motivated to read and write in order to communicate with their families, that they sought instruction. Many a former school teacher found himself "drafted" to teach during his leisure time. Some officers organized classes. Years later, one of the former teacher-soldiers remarked that the war was a "great public educator."

The civilians were equally eager for news from the battlefield. "When the clicking telegraph at Chester would announce that a fight was going on, or that the army was moving, the news would spread like electricity over the whole country." Couriers on the fastest horses available would take the news in all directions.

It appears that the most exciting time of the war was the "Seven Day's Battle" in defense of Richmond, the Confederate capital. Gen. Robert E. Lee's victory over Gen. George McClellan was loudly cheered across the countryside. On other days and after other battles, gloom lay heavily.

Another source of information was the reports made by officers of the companies to the newspapers back home. Companies were recruited from local communities and likely to be known by the readers of the newspaper. While some reports were descriptive of the battles, others only identified the company and regiment followed by the casualties listed in three categories: killed, wounded and missing.

Following the losses at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July 1863, the casualty lists became longer and longer.