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1862 letter offers clues on soldier's identity, fate

Young Confederate wrote to say he hoped he'd see Mary again



NEAR BY HISTORY

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Back in 1987, a Rock Hill buyer of an old home found a discarded letter that was written on July 25, 1862, headed "Camp Near Richmond, Va."

At a casual glance, the letter is of no significance other than it is representative of the type of letter a young Confederate soldier might send to a girlfriend.

On the other hand, if we pursue all of the clues and use our powers of inference, we can discover a good bit about the young soldier.

In carefully formed script, but with minimal punctuation, the soldier begins: "Dear Friend I seat myself again to rite you a few lines in order to inform you that I am well and hope these few lines may find you well. I have nothing new to rite." Nothing important there.

The stiff beginning and misspelling only indicate that the young man did not have a great deal of education.

He continued, "I landed safe at Richmond Va." Landed? Perhaps by ship from Charleston?

"I like the place tolerable well. The 5th Regt. of S.C.V. [South Carolina Volunteers] are camped in 4 miles of us." The 5th Regiment was commanded by Micah Jenkins, one of the two officers (along with Asbury Coward) who before the war, operated the Kings Mountain Military Academy at Yorkville. Many, perhaps most, of the regiment's members were from York County.

The soldier continues: "I saw Bony Campbell he looks tolerable well." A search of "Confederate Veterans Enrollment Book of York County, S.C. - 1902" compiled by Jo Roberts Owens and Ruth Dickson Thomas (1983) does not turn up a Campbell named "Bony."

But there is N.B. Campbell of Bethel Township of Company H, 5th S.C.V., Jenkins Infantry, private, age 20. Guessing that "N.B." stands for Napoleon Bonaparte, a not unusual name of the time, it is likely that his nickname was "Bony." It is only a conjecture, but it makes sense. According to the pension enrollment book, N.B. Campbell was still living in 1902. "There is no prospect of a fight here soon. I expect we will be in Longstreets Division."

Civil War histories confirm that the reference is to Gen. James Longstreet.

The soldier further writes: "The 17th Regt. of S.C.V. came in last knight they are Camped in 1/4 of a mile of us." The 17th Regiment was part of Evans Infantry.

"We get tolerable good water to Drink." Finding clean water was always a problem. Typhoid and other bacterial diseases killed more Confederates than did enemy bullets.

For the first time the soldier calls his "friend" by name. He writes: "Mary I hated to leave soon after you came that morning but I hope we will meet again. I would have liked to have stayed a while longer, but we were Pushed it was but little Pleasure to meet and Part so soon. I want you to rite to me and let me know how soon"

At the end of the one sheet of paper, used back and front, the soldier wrote: "B. B. Currence to M.E. Boyd. Direct your letters to Richmond Va 18th Regiment of S.C.V. Company H." Again, the Confederate Veterans Enrollment Book of York County is helpful. While there is no "B.B. Currence," there is a "Bisop (Bishop?) Currence." "M.E. Boyd" is obviously Mary E. Boyd.

The unstamped letter may have been hand-delivered by a fellow soldier returning to York County. Sometimes a civilian volunteer gathered up a wagonload of goods and set forth to Virginia to deliver the supplies to York County fighting men. Returning home, the wagoner would bring letters to the families. Sometimes he would bring coffins, too.

What happened to B.B. Currence? If the writer of this letter was Bishop Currence of Bethel Township, his fate is clear. Bishop Currence of Company H, 18th S.C.V., Evans Infantry, private, age 20, was killed at the second battle of Manassas in Virginia in late August 1862, a little more than a month after this letter was written to Mary E. Boyd.

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