Civil War Letter Provides Close Look at Military Life

While Civil War history is dominated by pivotal battles and campaigns like the Battle of Gettysburg or Sherman's March through Georgia, the greater part of the War efforts of both the Union and Confederate armies were expended in sustaining and moving large armies, in jockeying for position and in preparing for battle. It has been estimated that in the course of a year's service, the average soldier experienced less than two weeks' worth of actual fighting. The gist of soldiering rested in marching, camping, and above all, waiting.

A lengthy letter recently acquired by the Regional History Collection affords a detailed chronicle of 15 days in a soldier's life. Attributed to Lieutenant George L. Murdock of the 34th Massachusetts Infantry, the letter describes a diversionary Union expedition from Harpers Ferry into the Valley of Virginia during December of 1863.

The expedition was part of one of the cleverest and most daring Union raids into enemy territory during the course of the War. Masterminded by General William W. Averell of the West Virginia Brigade, the object of the raid was to sever the Confederacy's primary line of communication and supplies between Richmond and the Tennessee front—the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. Ordered to interrupt service at all costs, Averell devised a plan that kept a half-dozen Confederate commanders, each with equal or larger forces than his own, guessing long enough for the general to get in, do the job and get out almost unscathed.

In brief, Averell's plan was to obscure his real objective by simultaneously threatening other strategic points held by the Confederacy. On December 8, 1863, Averell's brigade left its New Creek (now Keyser) headquarters, and headed south towards Franklin. Simultaneously, General E.P. Scammon started east from Charleston with another brigade in the direction of Lewisburg, and Colonel George D. Wells headed a third from Harpers Ferry towards Harrisonburg. A fourth brigade, under Colonel Joseph Thoburn was detached from Monterey to patrol the Parkersburg-Staunton Turnpike.

Convinced that the Staunton stronghold was the object of these elaborate maneuvers, the Confederates were caught completely off-guard by Averell's attack upon Salem Depot on December the 16th. And following a brief skirmish for control, Averell's troops methodically leveled every strategic facility in town, burned five railroad bridges and tore up sixteen miles of track. Eight days later, Averell was safely back in West Virginia, having eluded a handful of Confederate armies and a pride of the War's greatest military strategists for two weeks in their own backyard.

Written on Christmas Day, Lieutenant Murdock's lengthy description of Colonel Wells' feint on Staunton makes for fascinating reading. Though Wells' force was too small to actually engage the enemy, the brigade successfully preoccupied and eluded Generals Jubal Early and Thomas Rosser through a series of false advances and retreats. In describing the brigade's movements and activities in depth, Murdock's letter offers significant commentary upon the circumstances of the expedition's participants and on the economic conditions and attitudes of the locales encountered along the way. Above all, however, the letter affords a keen look at the common hardships of military life.

(Continued)
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Dear Fannie:  

Harpers Ferry, Va.  
Dec. 25, 1863

I wish you a Merry Christmas. So you see that I am safely back to Harpers Ferry once more. Having been gone fifteen days from camp and travelled two hundred miles. I suppose that you are very anxious to hear from me and I take the very first leisure moment that I have after getting into camp and getting cleaned up to write to you. I presume that you will want to know all about the Expedition and the best way that I can tell you about it is to send you the contents of my diary that I kept while gone. I will send you an account of each day's doings from the day of starting until we got back to camp again.

Thursday, Dec. 30th - Started from Harpers Ferry at eight o'clock this morning. Passed through Boliven (Bolivar), Halltown, Charlestown and Ripon (Rippon). Marched very slowly indeed, and made long halts. Halted at four o'clock pm for the night. We are in a beautiful grove about two miles from Berryville which is the county seat of Clark County. Having marched twenty miles the first day, I am not at all fatigued. Could have marched ten miles further, but twenty miles is a pretty good day's march when on a long march. Took supper at a Virginia farm house. Tents were then pitched for the officers. They were pitched in a circle around a large campfire which makes it very pleasant. The idea however of camping out on the ground in December is not very pleasant, but with a plenty of fire wood and any quantity of blankets we are in hopes to keep comfortable. We have with us the 12th Va. Rgt., 1st Va. Artillery, 17th Indiana Artillery and about six hundred cavalry, in all a force of about sixteen hundred. Our wagon train is very large consisting of nearly one hundred wagons.

Friday, Dec. 31st - Nine o'clock am. Once more we are on our way. I am feeling very finely this morning. A good many of the officers and men are pretty stiff and lame, at ten am we passed through Berryville, which is quite a place. At twelve pm we halted for our dinner. At three pm we reached Winchester which is a very large place, and a pretty place too, although war has made it look rather desolate. We marched out about two miles from the place and camped for the night. The first question which arises in my mind is "where are we going?" and "what are we a going for?". It is said that we are to meet General Averell (Averell) with his force somewhere today. I hear that Strasburg is to be our halting place tomorrow night, which is twenty miles from here. We have marched only 15 miles today. I do stand it admirably, not a sore or a lame spot on me. I am very thankful that it is so. How different I feel from what I did the day of the Berryville fight. I am now enabled to prove to all that all that ailed me that day was new boots. I never saw the Regiment march any better in my life. We passed through Kemtown, Martinsville, Newtown, and Middletown. Most of these towns that we pass through are like the towns out west. Not more than a half dozen houses in them. The people in these places are mostly Secesh and are not backwood in showing it by their sour looks and their refusing to sell soldiers anything to eat. We have our way to get over that. What they won't sell, the boys steal, so that they gain nothing by their ugliness. At half past three pm, we halted a half a mile this side of Strasburg where we camped for the night. It has rained a good deal today making it very unpleasant traveling. It was expected yesterday that we would be joined by other troops today, but as yet we have not seen anything of them. I hear that we are to lie here tomorrow. I hope that it is so for a good many of the men need a day's rest. Nobody knows yet where we are a going or the object of the expedition. We have fifteen days' rations with us. A very large mad came tonight from Harpers Ferry but nothing for me. Thus far I have stood the march grandly. Not a sore spot on me or a lame cord or muscle.

Sunday, Dec. 31st - It rained very hard all night and notwithstanding we have tents we got nicely wet. We busily engaged today in drying our blankets, Colonel Wells having concluded not to march today, much to the joy of the men who are glad to have a day of rest. As for me I am destined not to rest today having been detailed as brigade officer of the guard, I have to see that our sorry wagon train is properly guarded and it keeps me a running all of the time. We have not seen any Rebel force yet. Our pickets brought in three or four prisoners this morning. I presume that it is quite likely that we shall have a brush with some of them before we get out of it.

Monday, Dec. 14th - No marching today, the reason I know not. I suppose, however, that Colonel Wells knows what he is about. None of us yet know why we are out here. I think, however, that we are sent out to divert the attention of the Rebels from General Averell (Averell), who, I have learned, is down Staunton way with a large force. Our cavalry are out nearly all of the time a scouting. They brought in forty-five Rebels this morning which we have sent on to the Ferry. I have been out among the people some today. I find them nearly all Secesh, and very ignorant too. They are all very anxious to get hold of our Green-backs. Confederate Shin-plasters they have plenty of. They have to pay three hundred dollars in Confederate money for a barrel of flour. One of my men sold a bunch of matches for five dollars. They charge five dollars for a meal of victuals, fifty cents in our money. They are a poor ignorant set of people and are more to be pitied than despised. I hope that we shall march tomorrow as I have got tired of lying here in the woods.

Gen. Averell's Headquarters at New Creek (now Keyser), WV, circa 1863.
Tuesday, Dec. 15th - I was in hopes yesterday that we should have marched today but we have waited in vain for marching orders. I do hate to lie still when I am put out on such an errand. I want to keep on the move all of the time - we are now a little more than fifty miles from the Ferry. If we stay out here much longer I know of somebody that will need some clean clothes. I have just been down through the Regiment. I find any quantity of pigs and chickens. The Boys are great on foraging and the farm yards have to suffer. There are strict orders against it but the thing of it is to find out who does it. They are mighty sly and will forage in spite of all.

Wednesday, Dec. 16th - Still on the same camping ground. I don't think that I will make any more surmises of when we will move as they invariably prove to the contrary. Today our Mess have been having a barbecue. We got five turkeys and a fifty-pound pig which we had dressed in good style. Then arose the question “How shall we manage to cook them?” But Yankee ingenuity soon overcame the obstacles. We took and strung them on a long pole the ends of which rested on two crotchéd sticks stuck into the ground before a large fire. We then put dishes under them to catch the fat with which we basted them and kept them turning before the fire until they were completely cooked. And I say that I never saw any turkeys cooked any better than in my life. All that they lacked was dressing. We were enabled to pass the time very quickly in performing all of this operation. Thus ends our seventh day out. I will not venture to say whether we shall march tomorrow or not.

Thursday, Dec. 17th - It rains very hard today but notwithstanding the rain and mud we are on the march. We started at ten am, keeping right along down the valley. After marching five hours in the mud and fording streams we reached Woodstock where we are to camp for the night. It is thirteen miles from Strasburg. Such a wet set of fellows I never saw. I have not a dry thread on me and if I don't take cold I shall be lucky, fortunate for me I have kept my blankets dry. We are camped close by a large straw stack and I shall take care that I have a goodly supply for my bed tonight and with a huge campfire I guess that I shall keep comfortable.

Friday, Dec. 18th - Wet. Wet. What an awful wet night it has been. Notwithstanding I was in a tent and had a plenty of straw, the water ran in all over me and made me uncomfortable enough. It has been very pleasant today and we have got nicely dried once more. As yet I feel no ill effects from my wetting. We started on our march again this morning about ten am. We passed through the towns of Edinburg and Hawkinsburg. We marched until three pm, when we halted, having reached the town of Mount Jackson where we camp for the night. I am officer of the guard tonight and do not expect to get much sleep. Thus far during the march I have felt finely and have not suffered at all. We have not seen any Rebels yet excepting a few scuttering ones. We have only two prisoners on our hands now. One was brought in tonight. The other last night.

Saturday, Dec. 19th - Started on our journey again this morning. It is very cold indeed. I have charge of the cattle today and have added nine head to my herd today by foraging from the farm yards. We are camped tonight at a place called Lazy Springs, which is about ten miles this side of Harrisonburg, to which we are to march tomorrow. We are now ninety miles from Harpers Ferry. We cannot go much further for we have rations enough to get back on if we do. We have taken ten prisoners today. The Cavalry have had a skirmish, we did not get near enough to be engaged. The country here is full of guerrillas but they do not trouble us as our force is too large for them.

Sunday, Dec. 20th - Broke camp this morning at nine am. It was a bitter cold night and all day today the weather has been very severe. How I do envy those that have got heavy army overcoats. We reached Harrisonburg at two pm where we camped as we suffered for the night but about dark we found that we had better be getting out of that place for the Cavalry brought us in word that the Rebel General Early, with a whole corps was only three miles out of town. Of course we could not expect to cope with such a force, so we picked up our things and took the back track, the Cavalry staying behind to watch their movements and to protect our rear. We marched until three am in the morning and reached the town of Newmarket where we bivouacked for a few hours, having marched twenty miles on the back track. I never saw such a worn set of men as we were. I was so tired that whenever they halted ten minutes for a rest, I would drop right in the road and the minute that I dropped I would be so asleep and when they started on, the boys would have to wake me up. It is now ascertained that the Rebel General Rosser is in our front somewhere with a large force. So that we are in a trap and shall (probably) have to fight our way back to Harpers Ferry. I am not the least sore or lame yet. I think that I do stand it admirably.

Monday, Dec. 21st - Started from our camp again this morning at ten am. Am feeling a great deal better for a few hours' rest. At noon we halted two hours at Mount Jackson for dinner. We had not left them more than twenty minutes when the Rebel Cavalry charged on our rear guard of Cavalry, but they were driven back. We marched about fifteen miles today and are now camped for a few hours. We start again at three o'clock tomorrow morning. As yet we have not heard anything from the force in our front. I have a great deal of confidence in Colonel Wells and believe that he will engineer us through safely. Although it is a very bold undertaking for so small a force to penetrate so far into an enemy's country.

Tuesday, Dec. 22nd - It is very cold this morning. We left our camp at three am. I have been trying to get warm a walking but find it impossible. Today I have the advance guard. Am in (Continued)
Dear Fannie (Continued)

advance of everything but the Cavalry. We have got about fifty prisoners along with us and any quantity of contrabands who are taking this opportunity to escape to the north. We also have a large number of Union refugees (sic) with us who for a long time have been trying to get out of Rebeldom and are now improving their chance. At two pm we reached our old camping ground in Strasburg where we halted for the night.

Wednesday, Dec. 23rd - Awoke this morning and found ourselves covered with snow. Not a very pleasant thing, but soldiers have to put up with a great many unpleasant things. Broke camp at seven am and started on our way. I, with my company, are guarding the wagon train today and it is hard work. There is so much running to do. We are halted tonight about half way between Winchester and Berryville, having marched twenty-five miles today. Tomorrow, if nothing happens, we shall reach Harpers Ferry and a happy set of fellows we shall be. At Winchester today we met a train of supplies coming out to meet us. By the account that they give I should judge that General Sullivan was very much alarmed about us and never expected to behold us again. And well he might be, for it was a bold thing for so small a force to go so far and for days have all communication cut off. However, if we have to fight, we will fight to death before we will be taken and suffer the horrors of Richmond Libey (sic) Prison. Thus far we have eluded General Rosser and his force. The last that we heard of him, he was at Front Royal. And it is probably owing to the recent heavy rains which have swollen the rivers so that it renders them impassable, that we escaped him. I hear the pickets firing occasionally tonight, probably a few guerrillas are about.

Thursday, Dec. 24th - Started on our way this morning at five am. It is very cold indeed. Forded several small streams today. Nothing especial has occurred today. The boys are feeling finely for they know that they will be at Harpers Ferry tonight and for all it is such a cold, bleak, ruined place it seems like home to us after being out on such a march. At sundown we marched into the Ferry with our colors allying. Tired were we but we were happy notwithstanding sore feet and lame legs. Such a shouting and cheering I never before heard. Captain Pratt, ever mindful of our wants, had a nice warm supper all ready for the officers, which we fell to with a right good will. We have had a very hard day's march, having marched twenty-seven miles. I have stood the whole march finely and have not rode a single step either going out or coming in, making a march of two hundred miles out and in; being gone from Camp fifteen days. Four days we laid in camp at Strasburg. The other eleven we have been on the tramp all of the time. Thus ends one of the Sauciest Little expeditions that ever was known. The Valley Expedition.

There, I think that I have given you a pretty full account of our expedition and I guess that you will be tired of reading before you get all of these large sheets read over. The object of the expedition was as I supposed, to divert attention from General Averill while he was making a raid up through Staunton and it was very successful. The best thing that I know of was the Sunday night that we left Harrisonburg so speedily. General Early thought that he had got us sure. Several hours after we had left (we by the way had built some large campfires that would last all night on purpose to deceive them), he very carefully threw out a line of skirmishes two miles long, and approached our campfires very carefully intending to surprise us. When they got up to the camp, they found the nest but the birds had flown. Our Cavalry, who had been left there to protect our retreat, lay back, hid in the woods watching their movements. It must have been laughable to have seen their rage and disappointment on finding us gone. But Colonel Wells outwitted General Early that time. I found two letters from you when I got back and was glad enough to get them. It seems as though it were an age since I had heard from you. I should have written to you while we were gone if there had been any chance to send it. Nearly all of the time that we were gone, communication was cut off between us and the Ferry. However, I think that I have wrote enough this time to make up for two or three letters. In regard to a leave of absence, I think now that I can get one, how soon it will be I cannot tell as there are three or four officers in ahead of me. I see that there is an order issued from War Department giving leave to commanders of departments to grant leaves of absence and one of our captains has just got a leave of twenty days. I think now that I can get one the last of January. But I would not have you anticipate too much for I may be disappointed. I wish that there was some way for you folks at home to get an overcoat out here to me. I need one sadly. Tonight it was bitter cold at dress-parade. All the officers wore out their overcoats. I had to go out without one and like to have froze to death besides not being in uniform with the rest. If I can get one in Worcester for forty or forty-five dollars, I think that I had better have one. I think that I told you that Melville's tailor's name was Eames. It was a mistake. His name is Avery Davis. I think that he offered to make Melville one for forty dollars. I wish that you would have father inquire about it. I see by the papers that there is a bill before Congress which if it passes, will increase my pay up to between a hundred and forty and fifty dollars a month. Of course, I hope that it will pass. I feel quite proud of my achievement in walking two hundred miles without riding a step or getting a bit sore or lame. There are only three officers in the Regiment that done it and I am one of them. They all predicted that I would fall out the first day, judging from the day of the Berryville fight, but they found themselves a little mistaken. I had made up my mind before I started, that go I would and go I did. But I must bid you goodnight. I have already written more than you will have patience to read. I am afraid. I don't think that I shall get time to write again before Wednesday as I have a great deal of company writing to do between now and New Year's. Our being off so has brought it all into a very few days and I have an immense sight of it to do. Give my love to all. Kiss the children for me. Write soon as you possibly can.

From your own, George

A little bit of a note to you, my own sweet Fannie, and I am done. I have written so much already that my hand aches but I cannot send you a letter without this appendage. If you only knew how much I have thought of you for the last two weeks as I have been marching. And when night came on, and I lay down in the cold, hard, frozen ground how much I thought of you in our cozy little cottage home. What would I have given for home comforts then. Ask any soldier, he can tell you. I have missed your letters so much. Little did I know how much comfort they were to me until I was deprived of them. I would not miss of having them for worlds. They are always such sweet darling letters (too), so full of assurances of love and confidence. Darling, Fannie, what would this world be to me without you? I do love you so dearly and truly. Oh! But won't we be happy when we meet. I do so hope that I can get a leave next month. And you dearest? It almost makes me tremble to think of the happiness. If I can only get leave to come home and stay fifteen or twenty days I will be contented, although I should prefer to come home and stay forever still if they will grant me this favor I will be content and bear another parting for the sake of seeing you and my dear children. But I must say goodnight. I love you so dearly, my own Fannie. Kiss the children for me. Please don't laugh at my large sheets of paper. They are very convenient to write accounts of expeditions on. Goodbye, I love you.

From Your own darling true, George
Guide to Dayton-Woods Papers in Preparation

Thanks to a grant from the Daywood Foundation, Inc., of Charleston, West Virginia, in January the Regional History Collection embarked upon an effort to catalog and preserve the family papers of two of West Virginia's most noted philanthropists, Arthur S. and Ruth Woods Dayton.

Acquired in segments over half a century, the Dayton-Woods Family papers document the careers and contributions of a pair of prominent Barbour County families that were joined by Ruth Woods and Arthur Dayton's marriage in 1916.

Arthur and Ruth's grandfathers, Spencer Dayton and Samuel Woods, were close friends and colleagues in the legal profession until opposing views ended their relationship as the Civil War approached. A confirmed Unionist and Republican, Dayton was elected as a representative to the First Wheeling Convention during a secret meeting of Union sympathizers. He left to attend the convention during the dead of night, barely managing to elude secessionist patrols. Woods, a Democrat, represented Philippi at the Richmond Convention of Secession in 1861, and later served as a captain in Stonewall Jackson's army. After the War, both men continued legal practice. Dayton was elected to the State Senate for a single term in 1869. Woods attended the 1872 Constitutional Convention and subsequently served on the State's Supreme Court.

The next generation of Daytons and Woods followed their fathers' lead in pursuing law. Spencer's son (and Arthur's father), Alston G. Dayton, graduated with a law degree from West Virginia University in 1878. Six years later he embarked upon over twenty years' service as one of the state's most effective legislators. All of Samuel Woods' three sons attended law school at West Virginia University and achieved distinction in the legal profession. The youngest, Samuel Van Horn Woods (Ruth Woods' father), was elected to the State Senate in 1910, despite being a Democrat, by an overwhelmingly Republican district. He was chosen by his fellow senators to serve as President of the Senate, making him in effect Lieutenant Governor of West Virginia.

Arthur S. Dayton continued family tradition by graduating from West Virginia University with a law degree in 1908. He received a master's degree in law from Yale two years later. During his lengthy career he made substantial contributions to the literature of the legal profession and was one of the leaders of the state's Republican party.

A graduate of the Lewisburg Seminary (later Greenbrier College), Ruth Woods Dayton achieved distinction as a local historian. Her works include several books and dozens of articles regarding the history and genealogy of West Virginia's early settlers.

Ruth and Arthur shared a love of art and literature. Together they promoted and endowed a variety of cultural programs and organizations within West Virginia, including the Charleston Art Association, the Lewisburg Library, the Daywood Art Gallery and the Daywood Foundation, the Dayton Rare Book Collection at the West Virginia University Library, and the Huntington Museum of Art.

As the combined Dayton-Woods Papers document virtually every aspect of activity and service of these important families, the potential for scholarly use is tremendous. Thanks to the Daywood Foundation's assistance, access to the collection's 50,000 item contents will soon be greatly improved.
Regional History Association News

A warm “welcome,” or alternately a warm “welcome back,” is extended to all readers who either joined or renewed their membership in the Regional History Association during our 1987/88 membership drive. As the list below attests, the Association gained a considerable number of recruits, in addition to receiving a hearty show of support from the existing membership. We sincerely hope that 1988 is a rewarding year for all. Those who have not yet renewed are asked to do so at this time!

Plans for the Association’s second Annual Meeting and West Virginia Collection open house are well underway. Members are urged to start planning for their attendance now as June 20th will be here before we know it. Focusing upon West Virginia’s 125th birthday, highlights of this year’s program will include a seminar regarding the state’s formation, featuring a variety of distinguished speakers, and a West Virginia birthday reception. The two-day affair will of course also provide members with ample opportunity to mingle and to pursue their research with the dedicated assistance of the Regional History Collection staff. We hope to see you there!

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John Wallencheck, Strongsville, OH
Joyce Wanger, Morgantown, WV
Ms. Beatrice Watkins, Morgantown, WV
Miss Virginia D. West, Troy, WV
Gary M. Williams, Waverly, VA
Theodore M. Wolfe, Jr., Clarksburg, WV

**Selected Accessions List**


The records of the Arthurdale Homesteaders and their efforts at self-government, especially in establishing a working relationship with the federal government. There is also a diary kept by one of the early members about the founding days in which is mentioned construction efforts, weather conditions, and a visit by Eleanor Roosevelt.


A letter attributed to Lieutenant George C. Murdock of the 34th Massachusetts Infantry stationed at Harpers Ferry to his wife describing, in the form of a diary, a diversionary campaign into the Shenandoah Valley in December, 1863. The purpose of their maneuver, which he calls the Valley Expedition, was "to divert attention from General Averell while he was making a raid up through Staunton, Virginia." The expeditionary force of about 1,600 was large enough not to fall prey to guerrillas but too small to actively engage the regular Confederate army locally under the command of General Early. They successfully preoccupied and eluded the forces of General Early and his diary gives details of how this was accomplished, the social conditions and attitudes of the Valley's inhabitants and the common hardships of military camps. He had not written sooner because the expedition had been under command to cut off its communication lines to headquarters, and they were not expected to return from what was considered a suicide mission.


Correspondence from Howard M. Gore, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, who was the most prominent West Virginian in the Coolidge administration, and who was soon
to return to his native state to become its governor. Gore, in response to Congressman Ernest R. Ackerman, justifies the work of U.S.D.A. representatives in foreign countries to study agricultural conditions, its further research in pest control, and to determine the product standards of other nations to be met by American exporters of raw and processed agricultural products.


A letter by genealogist Helen Wesp, including a family tree of the Major David Scott family and allied families: Hess, Chipps, and Pindall. There are also examples of nineteenth century clothing.


An 1853 Preston County land grant of 47 acres to Thomas Trickett. Also an 1858 tax receipt of Thomas Trickett with assessments for personal and real property.


An article by a West Virginia University service organization Alpha Phi Omega about the armored cruiser and the story behind the ship's bell which was donated to West Virginia University in 1967. Also photographs of a museum model of the ship with an accompanying letter promoting renewal of research about the U.S.S. West Virginia and the men who served on it, and the clapper from the ship's bell.


A documented interpretation of the architectural and physical history of the West Virginia Independence Hall touching upon those persons who have had an impact upon its design, construction, maintenance, and preservation. Most prominent of these are two architects: its original designer, Ami B. Young, and the man primarily responsible for its restoration, Tracy R. Stephens. Included are floor plans, section views, photographs, and specifications of the building itself and of other similarly designed buildings.