

Southern Sentiments: A Look at Attitudes of Civil War Soldiers

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The guns fired at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, echoed throughout central Pennsylvania. The citizens of the Cumberland and Susquehanna valleys answered this call with a ready response. Such large numbers of men volunteered that companies were turned away from enlisting in the Army. Early in the war, Leo Faller of Carlisle wrote his family about this response of Pennsylvanians to the call to arms: "The people in Washington seem to think the Soldiers grow like Musarooms in Pennsylvania for we have a terrible lot of men here—more than any other state but still they come."¹ Why were Pennsylvanians so ready to join? What was their reaction to the war? What were the feelings of these soldiers and their communities towards the South and Southerners? Were the same feelings universally shared by all of the local citizens? This paper will examine these attitudes, concentrating on the actual words of soldiers from central Pennsylvania.

The southern portion of Pennsylvania lies within easy access of Virginia. General Robert E. Lee made use of this fact during the Civil War. Even before the war began, slaves fleeing from the South used the Cumberland Valley as an escape route. Residents of the Cumberland Valley came into contact with Southerners on many other occasions. The Cumberland Valley itself was part of a central trade route between North and South. Many travelers between North and South passed through the mid-state area. Resorts such as Doubling Gap, close to Newville, and Mt. Holly Springs were popular tourist attractions, frequented by Southerners. Nearly one half of the student population at Dickinson College at the dawn of the Civil War were students from the South.² Carlisle Barracks had been home to countless southern officers, who formed lasting friendships with local residents. The commander of the garrison at Carlisle Barracks in the beginning of 1861 resigned from the Army in June 1861 to accept a commission in the Confederate Army.

The people of the Cumberland Valley and the Susquehanna Valley had more exposure to Southerners and southern views than many other Northerners. This sharing of friendship and activities created varying degrees of sympathy for each side of the issues that severed the country in April 1861.³

The Cumberland Valley area harbored an active pro-Southern element. During the 1860 election period local southern sympathizers molested soldiers at Carlisle Barracks and fought in the nearby community. When the threat of war became more imminent, their actions escalated; a soldier from the garrison at Carlisle Barracks was killed on the evening of 28 February 1861.⁴ The Democrats won the election of 1860 in Carlisle.⁵ Many local residents supported the pro-slavery stand of the southern states. Private Thomas Crowl from York bluntly stated such a point of view: "This negrow freedom is what is playing hell this is a rong thing this will destroy our army we never enlisted to fight for Negrows."⁶ Benjamin Ashenfelter echoed this view when he wrote:

Thomas Crowl found that: "The People here is very wild looking anamels. It aperes to me as they dont look like human beings only in shape for they are nearly all irish and as dirty and as slomicking [?] a looking creature as ever I seen."¹⁹

After having fought for two years, Ashenfelter voiced some frustration and anger in this letter: "Mother these Rebbles are guilty of some very mean tricks. And yet they call us vandals and other barberous names. When they are Really the Barbarians of the Deepest Die."²⁰

While the feelings of Pennsylvania soldiers might waver between admiration and scorn, an editorial in *The Carlisle Herald* succinctly stated what northern soldiers felt in their heart: "In this contest, the rebels have found to their sorrow that Northern courage and patriotism are more than a match for Southern bluster and bragadocia."²¹

The citizens of the Cumberland Valley met firsthand more Confederate soldiers than did most of their northern colleagues. Lee's army marched through the Cumberland Valley during its June/July 1863 campaign, and residents of Carlisle recorded their impressions:

The Band at the head of the column playing "Dixie" as it passed down the streets and the emotions awakened by the incident were of the most humiliating character. The men of the command presented a sorry appearance. Many were barefooted, others hatless, numbers of them ragged, and all dirty. But they exhibited a cheerfulness which was indicative of great spirit and endurance. They had marched twenty miles on that day, yet none of them appeared to be fogged or tired. They went along shouting, laughing and singing "Dixie" and other camp airs. A few by their manner, showed insolence but the reins of discipline were drawn so tight upon them that they could not gratify the latent desire, which they no doubt felt, to inflict injuries on those whom they asserted were the authors of their troubles.

An hour after their arrival the town was filled with officers, who thronged the hotels and rode quietly through the town. The most of them were gentlemanly in manners, evidently educated, and carefully guarded against any expression calculated to evince the real bitterness which they felt for our people. Occasionally one was to be found who laid aside his restraint and was unmeasured in his abuse of Northern people, their manners, customs and habits. It was only necessary to use the slightest insinuation that they were intruders to elicit a glowing, in some instances eloquent, description of the desolation which had swept over parts of the South, and the suffering which their people had undergone.²²

Children from the area found the soldiers rather exciting. A fifteen year old boy wrote that he saw: "Big men, wearing broad hats, and mounted on good horses, they had a picturesque air of confidence and readiness for action . . . From the soldiers came civil, even gentle replies [to comments from bystanders]."²³

As the soldiers were leaving Carlisle for Gettysburg, some of them stopped at the toll house one mile east of town, The young daughter of the gatekeeper recorded that

The first men came into the house and asked for something to eat . . . Then the commanding general came along and he seeing what was happening told his men to desist; it was not a stern, harsh command, but given in soft, gentle tones, and we saw a soldier's instant obedience in action . . . What a picture the General made with his military cloak and his broad military hat, and how well he sat on his horse!²⁴

This young woman sensed what others also observed: "... no other soldiers are so completely under the control of their officers as those of the South, who are compelled to act in complete deference to the rule of their upper classes."²⁵

If the "upper classes" carried such importance in the South, what were northern reactions to this group? Mary Logan, the wife of a newly elected Congressman from Illinois voiced a common view:

This city [Washington, D.C.] was then [1861] dominated by the aristocratic slaveholders of the South, who looked upon the North and West as "mudsills and drudges," quite unworthy of much consideration; and far too often a swaggering manner and a retinue of colored slaves gave a man a prestige over others of scholarly attainment, simple habits, and no attendants.²⁶

George Shuman, a cavalryman in the western campaign, echoed Mrs. Logan: "We were in the city of [Louisville] all day yesterday pressing horses. There was

quite an excitement as it was Sunday. We took the \$2000 pairs of carriage horses from the wealthy Secesh that think themselves so much better than a northern Yankee.”²⁷

A correspondent for *The Carlisle Herald* serving at Hilton Head, South Carolina, felt strongly that the upper and lower classes in the South were not of one mind. He reported:

As for the unanimity of the south, the blacks declare that many of the whites who enlisted here, in South Carolina, were forced to do so—that some of the soldiers were bro’t to Fort Walker, chained refusing to fight, saying they had no cause to fight, no slaves to defend; and among the handful of prisoners taken one had already petitioned to be allowed to take the oath of allegiance and go North; which several others admitted that they had no interest in the quarrel with the North. They say they were told if they did not volunteer they would be drafted and so they volunteered.²⁸

The newspaper continued: “We emphasize this passage because it has historical interest and value. It reaches the very tap-root of the rebellion, the Slave Oligarchy forcing the non-slave whites to fight for them when they had nothing to fight for.”²⁹

I understand they have concluded not to arm the Niggers it is so I tell you I Will Never fight by the side of a Nigger & that is the feeling of the Army where ever I have been & the sooner the Drop the Nigger Question the Better it will be for us all.⁷

An opposite view was expressed later in a book written in 1904 at the dedication of the monument to the 130th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment at Antietam:

The primary cause of the Civil War was the bondage of the Black Man, whose emancipation from the shackles of slavery has thrown upon the American people a weight of responsibility second to no other question.⁸

“Typo,” a correspondent for *The Shippensburg News* from the 36th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment, who was in reality D. D. Curriden from Carlisle, expressed a much more realistic attitude:

I most earnestly hope that before the weapons employed in this deplorable war shall be “beat into ploughshares” the accursed institution of slavery, which indisputably has brought about the disastrous

events which afflict our country, will have been extinguished, blotted out. Since soldiers of the "Army of the Potomac" have left their northern homes and seen the "homes of the slaves" they have been convinced of the evils of the "peculiar institution" more effectively than they could have ever been by the denunciations of its enemies or "seeing is believing."⁹

Although the issue of slavery may or may not have been a factor in a soldier's enlisting for service, a patriotic attitude does pervade much of the thinking of the time. The press expressed this with a bombastic flair:

When the Government is assailed, its laws set at defiance, its property seized and destroyed, its flag insulted, and the capitol of the country menaced by armed traitors, every true patriot will take his stand under the Stars and Stripes . . . while we may deplore the evils of civil war, we must sustain the Government.¹⁰

Lieutenant George Shuman simply and eloquently voiced the reason for his enlisting:

I thought it my duty & I still think so & if the war should continue after my time is out & my life & health be spared I shall still continue to serve my country although no person could want home to see the loved ones more than I do. yet my country first is my motto.¹¹

Matthew Bracken Black, a resident of Harrisburg and a member of the 4th Cumberland County Militia Regiment, carried a soldier's prayer book which contained the following petition:

Almighty God, who art a strong tower of defense to those who put their trust in thee . . . we make our humble cry to thee in this hour of our country's need . . . Have pity upon our brethren who are in arms against the constituted authorities of the land and show them the error of their way . . . hasten the return of unity and concord to our borders . . . ¹²

Who then were these traitors who had been so disloyal to their government? How were southern soldiers viewed by their Pennsylvanian counterparts? Was the reputation of southern military prowess deserved? Some Northerners were impressed.

Leo Faller's brother, John, also a member of the 36th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment, wrote his mother in Carlisle: "We passed three rebels prisoners that our fellows took and they were mighty looking soldiers. Two of them had their guns and one was a desperate looking fellow."¹³

John Weiser, another Carlisle resident, paid a perhaps backhanded compliment to the rebels. He told his parents: "We was within one mile of the Enemy but could not overtake them they being fast afoot and accustomed to running."¹⁴

Henry Zinn, the commander of the 130th Pennsylvania Regiment, and a Native of Cumberland county related this incident to his wife, Mary:

Whilst on picket duty a few days ago, a flag of truce was sent in by the rebels who were about to return four paroled prisoners. I accompanied the party that went to meet them, and found the rebels quite a fine looking, gentlemanly set of fellows.¹⁵

The harsher reality of war caught up with Colonel Zinn: he was killed in action about two months later.

William Devinney, a compatriot of the Faller brothers, wrote in late 1861 from Camp Pierpont, Virginia: "We also took five prisoners two of wich was supposed where spies they where dressed in the finest clothes and where good looking fellows."¹⁶

Benjamin Ashenfelter, who was also stationed in Virginia at the same time, made a different observation in a letter to his mother. He wrote: "Of the rebbels I seen about 60 killed and I am satisfied that I did not see the half of them they was all very Poorly Clad they left food blankets guns in short everything and run for their lives."¹⁷

Other soldiers were equally unimpressed. After the Battle of Antietam, John Weiser described this scene:

After the Union Men were all gathered up and Buried we commenced gathering up the Rebs we buried over five Rebs to every one Union Men we seen among the rebels Boys of fifteen & sixteen and old Gray headed men there was not to the best of my knowledge in all that was buried two dressed alike.¹⁸

If the southern upper classes evoked such scorn from most Northerners, what did mid-state Pennsylvanians think of the paragons of that class, the southern ladies? Did northern soldiers fall victim to the famous southern charms? Apparently some did. Shuman wrote his wife at home in Perry County: "I saw some very handsome women in the city [Savannah] and they dress very well."³⁰

Benjamin Ashenfelter might not have pleased his mother when he told her: "Mother, I have a Virginia Lassie Down here. She is secesh but that makes no difference. She is a fine Girl. I am quite a favorite with the Family."³¹

Joseph Helker from York was not as open-minded as Ashenfelter. He wrote his cousin: "We had a nice time with the girls in Baltimore but here we have not for there is but a few of them and they are secesh."³²

Jacob Smith from Lebanon summed up what must have surely been a common problem for a northern soldier: "... the last young lady I have seen was when we were in Fredericksburg and she said. Everything is lovely when the yankeys ant about. So you can see how welcome we were."³³

The chaplain of the 5th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment, irate over the involvement of some women shooting at soldiers, sent *The Carlisle Herald* a scathing indictment of southern women:

When in 1611 a cargo of girls were sent to Virginia as wives for the planters, the price of a wife was at first one hundred pounds of tobacco; but as the supply was unequal to the demand some brought as high as one hundred and fifty pounds. These were the primal mothers of the southern chivalry.³⁴

While southern women did not entice a great many soldiers, the beautiful scenery of the south captivated many of them. In this letter written nine months before he met his "Virginia Lassie," Benjamin Ashenfelter showed a greater interest in gardens than young ladies.

I was over at Fredericksburg last Week. it is a Beautiful Place. Most of the Houses are Built of Brick With Slate Roofs. the yards and gardens are the Grandest I have ver seen. I wish Mother could see the Beautiful White and yellow Roses that are here.³⁵

As a cavalryman, George Shuman traveled far distances and was able to observe more scenery than many infantrymen. He wrote his wife: "... this is as pretty a country as I would wish to see ... Huntsville is the prettiest place I have seen in any of the Southern States."³⁶

Later he sent this description: "Savannah is a pretty place not as large as Harrisburg. It has the nicest warf I ever saw & the revolutionary forts that surround it present a very imposing appearance."³⁸

Colonel Zinn saw some of the south during his all too brief military career, and he wrote his wife that "Warrenton is the finest town I have seen on the sacred soil of Virginia, but the place is intensely 'secesh.'"³⁸

Shuman gave voice to the homesickness he felt after his long absence from home in these two excerpts from his letters:

This is a very nice county and seems very much like Penna more so than any place we have ever been. the land is generally of a very good quality but it is not farmed half & the difficulty is they have no lime, but I think some of our farmers could bring it up by other means.³⁹

The county here put me in mind of old Perry. Oh how I would like to see the dear old Co . . .⁴⁰

At times it is difficult to tell whether some critiques were made sarcastically. John Weiser wrote: "This is a pretty country to fight for nothing but hills and ravines in the Sacred Soil of Virginia."⁴¹

Perhaps the experiences of Samuel Conrad of Hummelstown shed a new light on this assessment: "... we cant find a level Spt in virginia big enough to Place our regiment an we are camped on a hill if we lay out Side of our Shantiers to Sleep which we must when we are on guard we must drive Stakes in to keep us from rolling down hill."³⁴

Shuman must have grown tired of being away from home and seeing too many new places. He wrote:

I have saw a great deel of the Sunny South & pronounce it a grand humbug. I never had any Idea that the South was so poor, why Georgia is nothing but Sand & woods & swamps. I dont think there is more than about 1/4 of the state cleared the ballance is Pine woods and Cyprus swamps.⁴³

A common theme in many civil war letters written by northern soldiers is the great destruction of property that occurred.

The country here is Beautiful. But there is no houses they have all been Tom Down or Burned.⁴⁴

The country here is Beautiful. But like all other Parts of Va that we have been in Deserted by and Desolate. There has been no grain of any kind raised here since the War began except Corn and not mutch of that. The present crop is now being Destroyed by our army. I walked all through the Town of Culpepper on Sunday. I saw very few Natives. What fue is her is old and feeble Men & Women. Some small Children. I seen 3 young Ladies. Town shows the marks of War. Several houses are pierced with Shot & Steel.⁴⁵

George Shuman was a part of Sherman's fabled March to the Sea and graphically described the conditions he saw:

I had often heard of Shermans army Stripping the county as they went through but never had any idea that men would strip a county so bare you cant conceive of the desolation that the army spreads. I was down to Corps HdQrs yesterday 18 miles below here & you cant see a fence rail a hog a cow beef sheep chicken a potato or anything else that would sustain life but that is Sherman's order to devastate the Country so that no person can live in it. I pity the poor women & children but we cant help it. if we dont do it the Rebs will gather in our rear again & our object is to prevent that.⁴⁶

While being far from home and seeing the destruction of poverty all around them made Pennsylvania soldiers yearn to have the war come to an end and return to their families, nothing brought to mind the true horror of war more than seeing the terrible casualties caused by it. Following the Battle of Antietam, John Turner wrote his family in Carlisle:

... oh what a day I hope I may not see or here tell of such another the dead & wounded & dying is crushing to look at poor fellow lying on straw or by stacks and sheds with leg some arm off others apparently in the agonies of death away from home and kind & dear friends how hard I think the men that brought on this war ought to be doubly or twice dammed for they have brought of so much pain & suffering & distress so many homes made desolate & 1000s maimed for life oh my it makes my head swim to contemplate.⁴⁷

Another witness to Antietam wrote his family two months later: "Mother, now is the trying time. this is the Dark hour. I hope and Pray God to help us in this Death struggle for liberty & union. If the Union is saved it will be Provential."⁴⁸

Pennsylvania soldiers were justly proud of their contribution to the war. Leo Failor felt that: "... the Rebels are terribly down on us for they think the troops from the good Old Keystone State fight them harder than any other state troops."⁴⁹ Yet over and over again their letters cry out for an end to a terrible war. The harshest attitude that they express is not so much against the individual southern soldier but about the leaders who brought this war to a head and the politicians who seemed so inept at bringing it to a close.

I am sorry there is so much contention at home amongst the Politicians. Why Dont they Reason together as sensible men should. We in the Army are united & are Determined to save the Country & they should help us all they can & settle other matters afterwards. Would to

God they could see the needcesity of being united so that we can bring this Bloody War to a close. If the North was united as it should be this struggle would soon end.⁵⁰

Civil War soldiers from south central Pennsylvania fought for many different reasons and saw their foe in many different lights. Their attitudes toward the South and Southerners were varied, ranging from compassion to outrage. The one unifying theme found continually in their letters was the desire to end the terrible death and destruction of war soon, but to end it with an honorable victory. For some that victory was a repudiation of slavery; for most it was a reaffirmation of the Union.

ENDNOTES

¹ Milton E. Flower (ed.), *Dear Folks At Home: The Civil War Letters of Leo W. and John I. Failor* (Harrisburg: The Telegraph Press, 1963), p. 17.

² Charles Coleman Sellers, *Dickinson College: A History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 251.

³ Cynthia A. Pickel, *Carlisle and "The Big Scare" of 1863: An Account of the Invasion of Carlisle, June-July, 1863* (unpublished articles dated 4 December 1972 and located at the Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, PA), p.

⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Thomas G. Tousey, *Military History of Carlisle and Carlisle Barracks* (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1939), p. 220.

⁵ Lincoln's popularity grew no greater after four years of war. McClellan was the 1864 presidential election victor in Harrisburg and Cumberland County.

⁶ Thomas Crowl letter to his sister, 28 January 1863. Civil War Miscellaneous Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

⁷ Benjamin Ashenfelter letter to Father Churchman, 1 March 1863. Harrisburg Civil War Round Table Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

⁸ *In Memoriam*. One Hundred and Thirtieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry: Ceremonies and Addresses at Dedication of Monument at Bloody Lane, Antietam Battlefield, 1904, p. 15.

⁹ *The Shippensburg News*, 22 March 1862.

¹⁰ *The Carlisle Herald*, 26 April 1861.

¹¹ George Shuman letter to his wife, Fannie, 21 June 1863. Harrisburg Civil War Round Table Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

¹² Matthew Bracken Black prayer book. Civil War Miscellaneous Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

¹³ Flower, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁴ John Weiser letter to his parents, 12 September 1862. Civil War Miscellaneous Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

¹⁵ The letters of Colonel Henry I. Zinn, the commander of the 130th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment are reprinted in *In Memoriam*, previously cited. This excerpt is taken from a letter to his wife, Mary, dated 12 October 1872, p. 68.

¹⁶ William Devinney letter to his family, 8 December 1861. Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, PA.

¹⁷ Ashenfelter letter to his mother, 31 December 1861.

¹⁸ Weiser letter to his sisters and brothers, 11 October 1862.

¹⁹ Crowl letter to his sister, 20 July 1862.

²⁰ Ashenfelter letter to his mother, 22 September 1863.

²¹ *The Carlisle Herald* 16 May 1862.

²² *Ibid.*, 31 July 1863.

²³ D. W. Thompson et al. (ed.), *Two Hundred Years in Cumberland County* (Harrisburg: The Telegraph Press, 1951), pp. 210 & 221.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁵ *The Shippensburg News*, 24 May 1862.

²⁶ Mary Logan, *Reminiscences of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. George Worthington Adams (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 16.

²⁷ Shuman letter to his wife, 25 July 1863.

²⁸ *The Carlisle Herald*, 20 December 1861.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 December 1861.

³⁰ Shuman letter to his wife, 15 January 1865.

³¹ Ashenfelter letter to his mother, 3 March 1863.

³² Joseph Helker letter to his cousin, George, 13 July 1862. George Miller Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

³³ Jacob F. Smith letter to Callie, 5 February 1862. Civil War Miscellaneous Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

³⁴ *The Carlisle Herald*, 27 June 1862.

³⁵ Ashenfelter letter to Father Churchman, 4 June 1862.

³⁶ Shuman letter to his wife, 15 July 1863.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 January 1865.

- ³⁸ Zinn letter to his wife, 9 November 1862. In *Memoriam*, p. 72.
- ³⁹ Shuman letter to his wife, 16 May 1865.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11 February 1864.
- ⁴¹ Weiser letter to his parents, 15 February 1863.
- ⁴² Samuel P. Conrad letter to a friend, Lewis Strickler, 3 October 1862. Save the Flag Collection, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.
- ⁴³ Shuman letter to his wife, 17 December 1864.
- ⁴⁴ Ashenfelter letter to his mother, 15 April 1862.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22 September 22 1863.
- ⁴⁶ Shuman letter to his wife, 26 October 1864.
- ⁴⁸ John Turner letter to his family, 18 September 1862. Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, PA.
- ⁴⁸ Ashenfelter letter to his mother, 12 November 1862.
- ⁴⁹ Flower, op. cit., p. 88.
- ⁵⁰ Ashenfelter letter to Father Churchman, 23 August 1863.