

From Carlisle and Fort Couch The War of Corporal John Cantilion

James A. Holechek

John Cantilion was a tall, handsome soldier when he stepped into Ordnance Sergeant Lewis Leffman's office at Fort Niagara. The old sergeant was somewhat of a legend in the Niagara area. He had fought with Wellington's Hanovian forces at Waterloo in 1815. Shortly after he joined the British army and shipped to Canada. His next assignment was to have been the disease-plagued islands in the south, so he arranged an early departure to Hancock Barracks, Sackets Harbor, New York, where he enlisted at twenty-seven in the United States Army, 30 August 1829. He was a tough disciplinarian. Among other achievements, he was reputed to be the best drill sergeant in the entire army.

Cantilion, in awe of Sergeant Leffman, was even more nervous than usual on that spring morning in 1862. He was about to ask Leffman for his only daughter's hand in marriage. Sarah Leffman was a lovely woman at age 37. Her Irish and German heritage had blended into a tall willowy person. In her youth, she had married John Ledget and had two daughters by him before he died.

John Cantilion held a strong appeal for Sarah. Except for fiery brown eyes and tall stature, he reminded her of her father. They were both attractive men and they both seemed to have the military in their blood. Maybe that was why Leffman embraced his future son-in-law, and now Sarah and the children would move out.

John was a private in the 4th Regiment of the United States Cavalry, dashing in his dark-blue uniform with its yellow trim and polished riding boots. His five-year enlistment was coming to an end. Sarah wanted him to get out of the

army and get a job in the area. In fact, there had been talk that the 1678 fort was about to get some much needed renovations and, with her father commanding the installation, John could look forward to a good construction job.

The marriage took place 22 May up the Niagara River in the tiny hamlet of Lewiston. Under the eye of the Reverend Mr. Page.

Even as they greeted friends in the bright sunshine outside St. Paul's Episcopal Church, there was an uneasiness in John's stomach. He loved his wife, but he was not sure of his built-in family. Young Sarah was four, and Hetty was just a baby. Almost suddenly he had responsibilities and he was not sure how that would compare with the derring-do of life in the cavalry should he remain. He had made some strong friends during his first enlistment, and there were signs the excitement of battle would soon be on them again. John had tasted the fury of combat during fifteen engagements with the Mexicans and Rebels over the years. He had "seen the elephant" and he liked the smell of black powder, sweaty horseflesh and the total confusion of battle. In the last fight, he had taken a Mini ball in his leg. It was a glancing shot, but his shinbone was still sore enough to cause a slight limp whenever he thought about it. John was not a complainer however, and he considered his wound just another experience expected of a career soldier.

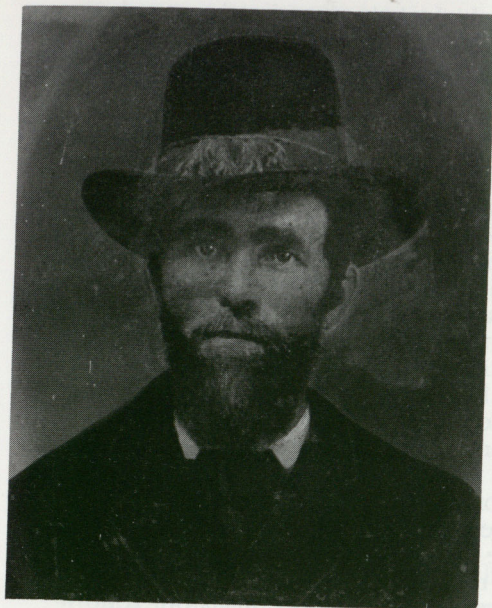
Sent to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to muster out, Cantilion then took the train down to Baltimore. It was a wild place and fun for young men. Several of his friends joined him later. The bawdy houses beckoned and the music from the gin mills along Baltimore Street were a break from barrack life.

No one had imagined that the Civil War would have lasted as long as it had. John had just heard from his father that his brother had been killed fighting for the Union. John had said that no Rebel shot or shell had his name on it. Yet in the old boarding house where he and his friends had flopped for the night, he did consider his own mortality. And he considered the prospect of becoming a civilian and settling down in the village of Youngstown, just outside the gates of Fort Niagara. He thought of his wife and her two young daughters and her recent letter that informed him that they could expect their own baby in February.

There would be much to miss outside the army. John made his decision to re-enlist as he walked the harbor waterfront the next morning. He would sign on for another five years and spare himself by not telling Sarah until he had done so.

He found himself back at the Carlisle Barracks mustered in for another hitch. His buddies were happy to hear the news and kidded him about his late-in-life marriage.

John did not like the jokes and told them so, but the barrack humor continued until John personally put a stop to it physically.



CORPORAL John Cantilion
before the Civil War. From the
author's collection.

Sarah had wanted to visit him, and he thought it was the best of a bad time to show her off to his friends. It would also satisfy Sarah and what seemed to be a constant whining in her weekly letters.

He made arrangements to have her ship her luggage to the barracks where he could look after it. If he was to be stationed at Carlisle, she and the children could live in one of the rooming houses in town.

At that time, he wrote a concerned letter to his father:

Carlisle, June 19th 1863

My dear father

i half just set down to write a few lines to let you know that i am back in the land of the living. i am hoping that these few lines may find you and all the family injoying the Same blessing. i received a letter from you when i was in mexicow. i was a soldier and am still one. i half served five years and am on my second five. For the last five years i have seen some very hard times and some very hot times. i half rode for miles where there was nothing but a mass of dead boddies. i now belong to the general mounted Calvary. Father you may talk about your european wars but this war is one of the cruelest and worst wars that was ever since William drove James over the Boyne. McClellan and hooker rode thear horses as gay as William wrode his gray. Father you know my first reason for enlisting. When i received your letter in mexicow it grieved me very much to heare the death of my brother. You mentioned to me that Mary Ann Churchill was married to Albert [illegible] which pleased me very much for taking her off my hands. if he knew as much about her as i did he never would have married her. The third child that you wrote about i denigh knowing any thing about and for those lessons you can't blame me for doing what I half done.

When i herd that she was married i think that i was at Liberty to do the same and now i half got as fine a woman as [illegible] on the American ground. i buried too as pretty twin children last October as you ever see. i buried them at fort Niagara [illegible] a boy and a girl. at the same time i was a parole prisoner waiting too be exchanged. i am now writing this letter at the house at twelve oclock at night under Marching orders with foure hundred recruits to go too the field to join thear regiment. i half been a Littell of every thing in the army from a drum beater too a privat and could have had a comisheon a great many times only that my education wouldn't alow it. i have been in fifteen generell ingagements and never got a wound but one on my Shin bone. Jeff Davis seems to hurry and my opinion is that he whill soon half to come to terms for his army is in terrible condition for they are hungry and filthy. It will give me great pleasher to heare from my brothers and sisters and i hope father that you while not forget to answer this letter and let me know all particulars since i left home when you recieve another letter from me which whill be as soon as i get a proper Chance to give you my directions. If you don't recieve a letter from me hereafter you May consider that i half fallen a soldier on the field. i whill half to conclude by giving my best respects to all inquiring friends if we never meet in this world. i hope that we whill meet in the world to come. No more this time from your affectionate son John Cantilion good by.

It was mid-June and the Confederate troops of Robert E. Lee were on the move north after a brilliant victory at Chancellorsville, Virginia. Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell, the one-legged leader of II Corps, was rumored to be crossing the mountains separating the Shenandoah Valley in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile Major General Joseph Hooker was trying to explain himself to President Abraham Lincoln for the disaster at Chancellorsville for which he concluded "we lost no honor," but Hooker had lost his credibility. So much so that his senior corp commander, Major General Darius Nash Couch, resigned and was assigned to command the Department of the Susquehanna, a 250-man force with headquarters at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

On 19 June 1863, Ewell was being pushed by Lee toward Chambersburg with orders to capture Harrisburg if the "development of circumstances . . . comes within your means." Ewell's lead division under Major General Robert Rodes, on June 25, had split off two brigades under Major General Edward Johnson who was to drive through Carlisle east to Harrisburg. On June 27, Ewell raised the Confederate flag over the United States Army Cavalry Barracks where he had been stationed before the war.

In the meantime, John Cantilion was promoted to corporal and assigned to instructing the troops on firing the cavalry cannon. He felt as if he were finally being appreciated and that his destiny was being fulfilled. Just a few days earlier, most of the troops from the Carlisle Barracks had been hurried east to future Lemoyne to man three quickly constructed forts surrounding the



SARAH LEFFMAN Cantilion
from the author's collection.

bridgeheads to the capital. Still there was the perplexing problem of Sarah's determination to come to the area to live. This just was not the time, and he wrote to her from his muddy tent overlooking the bank of the Susquehanna River.

Fort Couch, Pa.
June 23, 1863

My dear Sarah

Your very kind and tender letter of yesterday I received this moment and I hasten without a delay to inform that I am happy to learn that you my dearest is well. But my dear Sarah how can I convey to you even the least idea of my suffering on your account. Oh! how heart rending to know that you my faithful & true wife ar in such dilemma far from me and your parents are not having it in my power to help you. God knows this is true. I hope that ere you receive this that you will have the pleasure of receiving father's letter but if not write him again immediately & hide nothing from him. I hope that your letter from him has not as you fear it has been misled. I have seen your baggage several times generally when off duty for I call when Opportunity allows for I expect you daily. Your baggage is safe. You say that you were told that I did not get you letters. I got three which I answered at the receipt of each. I don't see why you have not received as many. There must be something wrong in regards to your letters. I am dear Sarah in good health but very unhappy and as I said above entirely on your account. We are still as you see by the heading On this letter at Fort Couch. A very pretty hill right across the river from Harrisburgh. I was appointed Corporal on our arrival here and I am artillery instructor. Our detachment drills at the Field Battery twice a day. We do not know how long we may remain here. there is no certainty.

all my ambition is to see you & to know that you are safely through this difficulty. Dearest Sarah answer this immediately. God grant that you may have good news.

I thank Etty for her kind remembrances & tell her that I enjoyed all the kisses and send in return many thousands.

Captain Fletcher wishes to be kindly remembered to you. he thanks kindly for your remembrance of him.

No more at present from your
Ever faithful husband
John Cantilon

Direct as follows
Corpl. John Cantilon
4th U. S. Cavalry
Camp Couch, Harrisburgh, Pa.

In care of Lieut. McDonald

Corporal Cantilon and his buddies had been put to work digging the earthworks and rifle pits of Fort Couch, one of three forts built in Bridgeport (Lemoyne) to repulse a Confederate attack on the capital.

Earlier on 16 June, beleaguered troops from Milroy's command which had retreated from defeat at Winchester, Virginia, reinforced the soldiers.

One 20 June, engineer Captain J. B. Wheeler was ordered by General Couch to inspect the breastwork forts. Besides the soldiers, a number of civilians had been employed to complete four block houses. They were the best that could be built but to a practiced eye insufficient to stop the Confederates from seizing Harrisburg.

Ewell sent a cavalry brigade under Brigadier General Albert Gallatin Jenkins to reconnoiter the approach to Harrisburg. On 28 June Jenkins camped just west of Camp Hill three miles from the Susquehanna River, opposite the Pennsylvania capital. He sent out troops who made contact and skirmished with Couch's pickets. The next day, there was a larger fight at Oyster's Point in Camp Hill and again at Sporting Hill on the Carlisle Pike.

The Confederates never reached the fortifications before they were recalled to Gettysburg. It was the farthest north that the invasion was carried.

It is doubtful that Cantilon ever left Fort Couch for the battlefield at Gettysburg. By the time the site had been chosen to fight that battle, there would have been little time to organize the relatively green troops for the thirty-mile march south.

Not long after the Confederates fled south, duty for Cantilon and his 4th U. S. Cavalry was over. In a few days, troops were herded onto a train and shipped to the western front at Nashville. Once the city had been won the 4th U. S. fought well in frays, at Franklin and Murfreesboro, and John Cantilon had done well in battle.



ORDNANCE SERGEANT Lewis Leffman wearing a New York Militia uniform in a photograph taken just after the Civil War. From the author's collection.

Nashville reminded John Cantalion of Baltimore, Maryland. He found much to do between missions. There was continuing training for all the horse soldiers. He spent many hours getting his men ready to ride and handle the Sharps rifle, sword and six-shot Colt pistol.

John had additional duties. As a corporal, he was sent to check on a private Frederic Schaefer. The soldier had been acting strangely and had tendencies to straggle. Upon reaching Schaeffer's tent, he was accosted by the young man who seemed crazier than Cantalion had been told.

Within seconds after Cantalion had seen the pistol, he was lying on his back struggling to get away from the deranged private and screaming that he had been shot!

The wound was nasty . . . in the fleshy part of his abdomen. He was rescued by other members of Company H, who subdued Schaefer and put him into chains.

Cantalion was bandaged, and, placed in a horse-drawn ambulance was taken to Cumberland Hospital outside the city. The bouncing ride was difficult for Cantalion, but he did not complain. He knew no Rebel "Mini" would ever take his life. Perhaps, on the other hand, he mused that this was neither a Mini nor a Rebel shot that put him down.

After making what the doctors had said was a fine recovery, suddenly Corporal John Cantalion died on 12 November 1863. According to the doctor's final report, he had contracted tetanus.

Four days earlier on a cold Sunday evening in Youngstown, New York, John's wife Sarah was writing a letter pleading for some information about the wound he had written about before his strength ebbed. Her letter was never delivered, but when it was received at the hospital, it was simply returned to the sender marked "Dead."

Her undelivered letter explains some of the further fears, pains and hopes of a soldier's wife waiting and waiting.

Fort Niagara, youngstown, N. y. November 8th 1863
Sunday evning

My deare husband

i thought as i felt very lonsom and i had nothing to ocupy my mind and you was laing in the hospitall and you would like to hear how i was geting along i would write to you a few Lines. i sent you a Letter last Wednesday and since i sent it i read in the papers that the gureleus had captured two maile trains neare Nashville and i was afraid that you wouldnt get my letter. it is too bad that Little comfort is deprived from us if whe cant See each other that oure letters must be destroyed by them miserable wretches. i want you to write every week to me so that if one letter is Lost prehaps i whill be abbell get the other i will make it abusness every Sunday to write one so that you whill be shure to heare from one or the other. i feel very uneasy about you ever Since i herd you was in the hospitall wounded. You never menchend wether you was wounded bad or not. i am afraid that you are. Let me know if you are and what part of your body is and How long you whill remaine in the hospitall. dont you keep one thing from me for if you do you know what the result whill be if ever I lay eys on you. i am very anches to See you my deare. you may imagen my feelings many a time and espechily Since I herd that you was wounded. i know that you dont get things as you are ust to [illegible] and if i was close to you you Would get many a littell thing that would Nurish you. i often think of you and how you are geting along. you have Seen hard times My Deare and sence you left me i know nothing about it. i half read some very very hard accounts in the papers concernig the troops in Tenesee and you was amongst them. when you answer this Let me know how you half got along theare. Father would Like to get a Letter from you. Let me know what camp and the officers name and the Regiment you belong to how you Like your camp and officers. cant you draw rashings for me. i wish that you could and then i would go into a room by myself. i would be more comfortable. i dont feel very well satisfied the way that i am Living. it was all very well for the first too months after i come home but i am getting to be an old Story. you must naturally guess that i am not as well able to work now as i was when i first come home and that makes a great deale of difference. with me in the home that you know it makes me feell very bad to See how things is a going on. Sometimes i wish if you Could get me rashinggs that you would. Soon with what Mony you could send me i could get along untill spring and then if the god Spare me my health and Life i will be abble to earn Something. Father is very sory that you inlisted that you didnt come home when you left Baltimore. He would half got you a chance to earn twelf chilings a day. the ingineere department is heare stationed and while be for five years. they half been working ever Since Lewis came home. next Spring theare is to be three hundred men to work heare. they are building a doubble wall all around the fort and quarters. Father Says that i can Make money keeping borders. the Capt. Says that i may half the companyquarters and Bord as many as I like. I am not abbell at present to do so or i would go rightinto it. i am so sorry

my deare Can that you inlisted. We could be so Comfortable living here. Cant you [ineligible] your discharge. try. i wish that you could get a furlough to come home next Month. i shall miss you very much. But at that time if you can send me Some mony i wish you would. I dont want to be without. Then do try. i wish that i could Send you some tobaco in a packey. Let me know if it would be Safe and i whill Send you Some or anything els you want. there is nothing new here. it is the same as when you Left. it is Snowing Like fun while i am writing. Let me know if it is cold wheare you are. my health is as good as can be expected. Just now the children is well and often ask me when you are coming home. i cant tell them. i hope soon. You are often spoken off. dont fret my deare Can, i hope that god whill spure you to come home to me once more for i need you very much. it is hard to be parted this way and dont know wether we whill ever See each other again i hope that you whill send me your likeness. you half got mign. i want you to try and do So as soon as you can. i Shall look for it. you Stay in the hospittill as long as you can. You whill miss some battels by so doing and when you do Leave Let me know the directions to you. you told me thear was never a ball made to hit you you cant tell what is ahead of you. i hope that if anything does happen to you theare whill be Some way for me to heare. Sarah whill soon be abbel to write you a letter. She improoves very fast. She is getting a large girl. hetty is a wild girl. She sends you twelf big kisses and wants you come home. She has lots to tell you when you come home. When you direct my letters direct them to Mrs. Meufary in the care of Father. i think they whill come safer. We dont think much [of] our post master. i half nothing more to write this time. the famely all Sends theare love to you and hops to Soon see you home. Answer this by return of maile. dont faile. Nothing more this time My dear Can from youre ever true and affectionate wife.

Sarah Cantilion

Send me directions to
your fathers. i sent
that letter and i think
it wasent directed.

i whill try again and Let
you know the result. Bony
is still living and well.

Farewell this time.

Corporal John Cantilion's burial site was not known to his family until August 1993, when it was discovered by his great, great grand son-in-law, the author. He had begun his search two years earlier. A ranger historian at Chickamauga, Georgia suggested a visit to the Nashville National Cemetery.

It took cemetery officials less than five minutes to locate a "Cpl. John Cantelion," 4th U. S. Cavalry in Section E, grave 109. In a week, all the documentation arrived with a color photograph of the gravestone.

Four generations of wondering had ended.

Sarah Cantilion had her baby, Mary Elizabeth, on January 16, 1864, in the "castle" at Fort Niagara. Two years after the death of her husband, she received an \$8 pension. She died on January 12, 1893, just six months after her aged mother. Both are buried in the "1812 Cemetery" outside the old fort. They lay next to Sergeant Leffman, who in 1991 was inducted into the Ordnance Hall of Fame at Aberdeen, Maryland, and in 1993 had a home park named after him at the installation.



**IRVING COLLEGE
AND MUSIC CONSERVATORY
MECHANICSBURG, PA.**



"IRVING GIRL"

1905 IRVING COLLEGE calendar featuring Mary lenore Embick.
Courtesy of Alize Z. Flower.