

Letter to Soldier

Kim Menard

When faced with obstacles in life, people rely on their family and friends to give them support and encouragement. Sometimes, family members can seem harsh and unkind, but their intentions are sincerely good. Mothers will always disapprove of their son's choice in girlfriends, but she will shed tears of joy at the wedding. Fathers will never like their sons-in-law, but they still tell their daughters that they will find the perfect man. Thirty-year old men will always be treated as if they were ten by their mothers. It has been this way for centuries in our society. A letter from a worried mother to her son, a soldier in the Confederate Army, proved this point. While this young man was, by that time's standard, an adult, his mother still felt the need to keep her child safe.

Aside from the content and ideas relayed in the letter, the document itself is a powerful item from American in history. Reading about a person or event in history is a good experience; a powerful experience, however, is to hold history in your hand and listen to people in their own words. Discovering the story and history behind this letter proved to be even more rewarding than holding and reading the letter itself. Expecting to find a few, uninteresting facts about this Civil War Era, I found that this letter brought to life five southern boys that were thrown off the farm and into battle. The letter also helps to illuminate the way a society lived while it told a story of a mother, her sons, and several friends

On January 6, 1863, a mother sat down and wrote her son a letter. The author of the letter was a forty-five year old woman named Kerney A. Stocks. She was writing to her son, John, who was a soldier in the Civil War. From what she mentioned in the letter, she was a very

passionate woman. She made some very blatant remarks concerning her feelings toward her son's behavior. For example, Mrs. Stocks says, "I feel [sort of] mad this morning because I did not get no letter from you yesterday," expressing her displeasure to her son. Kerney Stocks was more than likely a middle class woman, since she could read and write. She also spoke of attending a party, which would not be done by a struggling family who had more productive things to do with their time. Kerney was also a very concerned mother. She asked her son what he needed, and she told him that she "will do for [him] as long as [she] can." While she did not end the letter by giving him her love, she did tell him to remember her and to "be a good boy." The mother in Kerney still sees him as a little boy, even when he is fighting in a man's war.

This little boy was the focus of this letter. Luckily, his name was not difficult to find since he replied to his mother's letter within two weeks of receiving it. His name, oddly enough, was not John Stocks, but John Pearce. John Pearce's mother left the impression in her letter that he was close to his friends and family back home. Had he been estranged from them, she would not have included details that she did, like a party at Bill Williams, or all of the "gals" that missed him back home. He was also either preoccupied with "war business" or irresponsible, since his mother's letter scolded him for not writing her. Given the fact that he had written a letter to a friend called "the Captain" in the letter, he was probably not irresponsible, but a little busy fighting the "Yankees."

Now that I had a name and a brief story behind it, I had to find his family. By looking at several census records from before the Civil War, I found that the family of John Pearce was listed under the name of Stockes rather than Stocks. It is odd that his Mother did not share his last name, but remarriages were a common occurrence even then. In the census she was listed as Rearnly Stockes, a change that made locating them a difficult task. Completing the family were

John's brothers, Charles and Lewis, and sisters, Arienda and Rebecca. The father of the Stocks children, Wilie Stockes, was a farmer and cooper in Greene County (Murphy). At the time of the census, John was ten years old and Kerney was thirty. Unfortunately, no information could be found about John's biological father.

After discovering the family history, it was easier to identify another person in the letter. Kerney Stocks writes to John that "Lewis is flying around to all the parties." Lewis was his brother, who was listed as "Luis" in the census taken thirteen years earlier. The letter would lead one to believe that Lewis had been injured in the War and was at home recuperating. His return home made Kerney happy as she wished that John "had let the Yankees get [him] and then [he] could be [at home] to fly around with the gals too" (letter). John's letter sheds new light unto this mystery as well. He tells his mother that she had better tell Lewis to return to camp.

Both John and Lewis, along with the third brother, Charles, enlisted in the Confederate Army on July 15, 1863. They were all torn from their farm lives and thrown on the battlefield together. Records from a Civil War roster reveal that the three boys served together in Company E of the North Carolina Sixty-first Infantry (Jordan 695-703). Another document places the regiment in Wilmington at the time the letter was written stating,

"From Goldsboro we tramped every step of the way right down the railroad track to Wilmington, reaching that lovely city by the sea on 2 January, 1863, remaining there until 6 February, when we pitched our tents on Masonboro Sound-- returning on 16 February" (Clark 509).

Along with the three brothers were several of their friends, who were all mentioned in the letter: Henry Grizzle, his brother, John Grizzle, and William "Bill" Byrd. The latter three men

enlisted together on May 13, 1863 (Jordan 695-703). They were also farmers in Greene County, and they were well thought of by Mrs. Kerney Stocks. She mentioned Henry and John, whom I discovered with amusement shared the last name “Frizzle” rather than “Grizzle,” with great affection and concern, saying to John:

“[T]ell them I want to see them both am glad to know that they have not forgotten me tell them if we never see each other in this world I hope to meet them in heaven.”

She clearly felt very strongly for them and their family. William Byrd, referred to as Bill “Bird” in the letter, was home when the letter was written. According to the letter and other sources, Bill Byrd was at home recovering from an illness. He went home on December 15 and would not return to Company E until February (Jordan 695).

After discovering where these men were during the war, one in which they were being bitterly defeated, I was curious to find out what happened to them in during and after their service in the military. I questioned whether they lived through the war or fell in one of the later battles of the war. Given the fact that they had joined the army in the middle of the war, I assumed that they had a good chance of making it through.

The North Carolina 61st Regiment saw a lot of the action in the Civil War. Based on the records I found, Company E was not involved in any major battles. The company, including the Stocks and Frizzle boys, spent much of their time around eastern North Carolina and South Carolina. They were present in the battles of Kinston, Wilmington, and New Bern. Also, they spent some time fighting around Charleston, South Carolina. The conditions under which these soldiers lived while involved in these campaigns were horrendous. While in Charleston, the Tar

Heel troops were treated as though they were the enemy. One soldier's accounts described it was a place where they,

“had sink holes here and there and everywhere to get a supply of tadpole water-- at the same time there being a well of good water at Fort Pemberton, which no Tar Heel was allowed to sample (Clark 510).

To add to the squabble between the neighboring states, the South Carolinian people would not recognize North Carolinian currency. The same soldier from above states, “Our money was refused at the postoffice, in the market, in the stores, and on the streets” (Clark 510). The 61st Regiment, as well as North Carolinian troops in general, had a rough time during the war. Even so, the letter that John wrote to his mother was pleasant and reserved, showing that even war cannot destroy the chivalrous nature of the traditional southern man. Of course, he had only been in the war for a few months when he wrote the letter, and he may not have realized the horrible conditions that would ensue in the years ahead.

Another amazing fact, given the conditions that these men were subjected to on a daily basis, is that only nine men from Company E died of either illness or in battle (Clark 505). Unfortunately, Lewis Stocks, John's brother, was one of these fallen soldiers. He was captured at Kinston in December of 1862; upon his release, he went home to Greene county (Jordan 703). His winter break from the War explains his presence in Kerney's letter. He had been given a few weeks to recuperate, which he did, with the help of all of the “gals” at the parties he was attending (Stocks). He returned to Wilmington in late January or early February 1863, just before the 61st departed for South Carolina. He died in Charleston, South Carolina on April 6, 1863

(Jordan 703). Although the cause of his death is not given, one can assume that he died from the poor conditions at the camp.

Lewis was easy to find since he died during the war. His brothers, John and Charles, however, were not as easy to locate. John Pearce, along with Henry Frizzle, was taken prisoner on August 26, 1863. From there John was transported up the Union territory and kept for close to a year and a half. After fifteen months in captivity, he was traded for a union soldier in Georgia, in November of 1864. From that point on, there are no more records of John Pearce. I found no records indicating that he returned to North Carolina after the war. He may have died in Georgia from being kept prisoner for so many months. Charles, on the other hand, disappeared after the war. Records indicate that he did survive the war (Jordan 704).

Fortunately, two of the soldiers in Kerney's letter went on to live full lives. While looking through the register for voters in Greene county, I came across a familiar name, Frizzle. The man was listed as H.H. Frizzle, so I knew that there was a good chance that it was Henry Frizzle. I went back to the Civil War records and discovered that, surely enough, Henry's middle initial was "H." The voter registration document was dated 1902, meaning that Henry was 61 years old. I also stumbled upon Bill Byrd, Kerney Stocks' favorite "fidler," while looking through a record of the pension recipients for those injured during the Civil War. Next to his name were his age and disability. He was disabled by "disease" according to the pension records in 1905 (Confederate). He too, was 61 years old at the time of the document's production.

Although I looked through what seemed like thousands of records, I never found any information on Kerney Stocks, other than her existence. I was also unable to find any death announcements or notices for any of the people mentioned in the letter. I was saddened when I

realized that I was not going to find out what these people were like after the war. I am now left with more questions that I had when I began my research. I know virtually nothing about the author and very little about the men that were her friends and family. Oddly, I feel somewhat connected to them all now. When I read that Lewis had died, I was sad for Kerney; when I learned that Bill Byrd lived past the ripe old age of 61, I was overjoyed. Discovering the story behind the letter has been more rewarding than it was to actually touch an historic document. It was almost impossible for me to finally stop and accept that this was all the information I needed to find. This experience has taught me that holding an historical document becomes all the more rewarding when you finally realize that you are holding a piece of someone's life.

Works Cited

- Clark, Walter. ed. North Carolina Regiments 1861-1865: First at Bethel, Farthest to the Front at Gettysburg and Chicamauga, Last at Appomattox. vol. 4. Wendell: Avera, 1982.
- “Confederate Greene County North Carolina and the ‘Grandfather Clause.’” Clark’s Regimental Histories. 26 April 1901.
- Jordan, Weymout T. Jr. North Carolina Troops 1861-1865: A Roster. Vol. 14. Division of Archives and History, NC History Commission: Raleigh, 1998.
- Pearce, John. Letter to Mother. 19 January 1863. Ellis Family Papers. Collection No 261 East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.
- Stocks, Kerny. Letter to Son. 6 January 1863. Ellis Family Papers. Collection No 261 East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.