

The Letters

The yellowing bundle of letters went unnoticed and untouched in an old trunk in my grandmother's attic for over 50 years. They were dated 1862-1866 and told the story of a young Union soldier and the part he played in the American Civil War, 16th Regiment Army, New York.

The writer's cursive hand is beautifully elaborate and the writing style very formal, often stilted, to our modern ear. As family members painstakingly deciphered the words in these letters, an interesting puzzle piece in our family history fell into place.

The letters were written by my great-great grandfather, William H. Watson, Jr. The following are excerpts from his letters.

This is his story:

When the American Civil War was declared in 1861, many young men eagerly took up arms to join the ranks of soldiers to fight. Many were committed to doing their patriotic duty. Some went to war in search of glory and excitement. Some felt a sense of responsibility as citizens to do what was expected of them. I would wager that most of these young men went to war to fight for a cause and a country that they loved.

William H. Watson, Jr. went to war for a different reason.

He was late to join the war and had no interest in a quest for fame and glory on the battlefield. William H. Watson did not even live in America.

This Canadian citizen joined the Union war effort for a different reason—he desperately needed the money.

William's father had immigrated to Canada from Scotland in 1820 on the ship "Prompt" with a group called the "Lesmahago Immigration Society". Each member of the society was offered 100 acres of land in this new country and 10 pounds sterling per person. The family acreage was located in what is still today called Watson's Corners, Lanark County, Ontario, Canada.

In a report dated 1834, William H. Watson, Sr. wrote,
"Here with family. Lot worthless."

After failing to farm the rocky land, the Watson family built and ran a "stopping place", the first hotel or tavern in the area.

William Jr. was born in 1834 and grew up in this rural area of Ontario, eventually marrying Sarah MacArthur. Sarah and William had three children, two girls, Anna and Mary and a boy they named William H. Watson, III.

Life was difficult for the young family and late in the summer of 1862, William wrote a letter to his parents giving them the sad news that his son William had died.

"It gives me trouble to inform you that I have lost my dear little boy. He was running about yesterday afternoon and died this morning of the scarlet fever."

Again, a few short months later, in April of 1863, William wrote to his parents and sister to inform them of the death of his wife, Sarah. Sarah was 33 years old. In this letter, he desperately begged his sister to come live with him and help to care for his two little girls, Mary, age 6 and Anna just shy of her 3rd birthday, while he found work to support them all.

April the 30, 1863

"I find it (Sarah's death) has left me in a very lonely situation....If it is in your power to come and keep house for me for awhile I will give you as much as you can get anywhere in Lanark, or anywhere else, as I do not like to give my children to strangers...I hope that you will oblige me if it is in your power to do so. Dear sister, I hope that you will think of my lonely situation and spare a little feeling..."

Despite the help that his sister offered by caring for the young family, it was not enough. William saw an opportunity to provide income when none was available in Canada. He quietly left his home and children in Watson's Corners, traveling south to Oswego, NY. Once there, he accepted an offer from a wealthy banker to become a "volunteer substitute" in his stead. He was paid \$545 to take the place of this man and enlisted for a period of 3 years to fight for the Union Army. It was often said at the time that the Civil War was "A rich man's war, but a poor man's fight." William Watson was a poor man willing to fight in exchange for this rich man's money.

In a letter dated, September 15, 1864, William H. Watson wrote:

Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain

September the 15, 1864

“Dear Father and Mother, as I embrace the opportunity of writing to you a few lines to let you know that I am in good health and I hope this finds you enjoying the same blessing of good health. No doubt you will be surprised to hear of the step that I have taken but you must forgive me as I done it for the best. I sent you 500 and 45 dollars by the express from Oswego. I did not have enough money to pay for my passage over to Oswego and the clerk took the two watches out of my pocket and I hope that you will try to get them.” He goes on to say, “...The war is over for the winter so there is no danger here now. It is pleasant weather be sure and take care of Mary and Anna...”

Lookout Mountain

October the 13,1864

“... You must be kind to father and yourself, mother. I trust you will be kind to my two little girls until such time as I come home again, if that should ever be. But we must trust to God and pray to Him for our preservation. Three years seems a long time to look forward to but it will soon roll around. If that we can only keep our health... Do not be downhearted as you will never want for anything while I live, as you are my care in the world.”

Most of William’s letters inquired about his little girls.

“Please let me know how the children are getting along.”

“Tell Mary to be a good little girl. Kiss Anna for me.”

When his father-in-law offered to take the girls into his care, William wrote,

“That is a thing that I will never do while there is life in my body.”

All of his letters to his parents ended...

“I remain your affectionate son.” or

*"I remain your affectionate son until death,
William H. Watson"*

William reassured his family that he saw very little of the horrors of war and that he was in no danger. He got no closer to the enemy, he said, than 50-100 miles. The only mention of military action was included in the following letter.

"December the 26,

Lookout Mountain 1864

"No doubt you will be surprised at not getting a letter from me before this time, but the rebel general Hood got on the railroad about one hundred miles ahead of us and tore up the track so that we have not been able to have any communication out or in for this last month. We see by the papers that our men drove the rebels back and cut them up terribly and took about thirty thousand prisoners. We are laying still in the same position as when I last wrote to you and I expect we will for some time as we are guarding hospitals and doing garrison duty."

The following April, 1865, he wrote,

"I think the war will soon be over and that peace will be restored in the country, as Richmond is in our hands, there is every prospect of peace soon."

He was correct. Confederate troops surrendered to the north in April, 1865. Many soldiers deserted the Army at this time, William reported. They merely walked away from their duties and found their way back home. William chose to honor his enlistment oath to serve for 3 years and remained a soldier with the US Army in Tennessee.

He also was happy to be able to continue sending his wages back home to support his family.

In one letter he wrote,

"I do not see that I could have done as well at anything else that I could have gone at to make a livelihood for us all, but I trust God that we will meet again."

Unfortunately, William H. Watson never returned again to Canada to see his parents or little girls.

By January of 1866, William had contracted smallpox and died shortly afterwards at Cumberland Hospital, Nashville, Tennessee.

* The Civil War letters to which I have referred here, were written by William H. Watson, Jr. to his parents. During interpretation of the letters, we have been mindful to preserve the letters as they were written. William was a simple man having little formal education and we strived to make these letters an authentic representation of our ancestor and of this time in history.

We assume that the number of letters that were saved by his parents was only a small portion of those that were written by William. We have learned that if a soldier's dependents could prove that his salary was sent back home to care for them, only then was a pension granted to the family after death.

All of these letters found in that attic truck have references to money sent by William to his dependent family, hence, the reason for saving these particular letters.

His parents, being the custodians of his two little girls, were able to submit these letters to the Adjutant General Office in Washington, D.C after William's death.

After careful review, a pension was granted to the survivor's family in June of 1869.