

Foreword to The Chancellorsville Campaign Papers, Volumes 3 & 4

by historian John J. Hennessy

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In the 1980s and 1990s—largely thanks to the proliferation of microfilm readers and the miracle of interlibrary loan—historians discovered the wonders and value of the Civil War’s many “Soldier Correspondents.” These were usually enlisted men or low-grade officers who signed on with their local newspaper to provide updates from the front—news from “our boys.” Some of these correspondents were already known in their community, even if they left their missives unsigned. Some adopted pen-names that gave them at least a thin veil of anonymity or a memorable persona: “Ironsides,” “Anti-Rebel,” “Pine Burr,” “Eye-Glass,” “Toodles,” or the mysterious “X” (his letters appear herein, and his identity is now known). A few had a background in printing or journalism, but most did not. They carried two qualifications in common: they served at the front, and they could write. Most also shared the editorial bent of the newspaper they wrote for (newspapers of the period were no less partisan than today’s; the business of carving out a niche audience by abiding a certain political regimen is nothing new).

In the mid-1980s, I stood in the visitor center at Manassas Battlefield with the late Brian Pohanka, one of our generation’s great historians and preservationists. His mind’s eye saw the landscape of 20th century Virginia as if it were still 1863 (the modern intrusions pained him beyond expression). His mind swam in the words of the Civil War’s participants. Brian was then deep into his work on the widely popular 27-volume Time-Life series *The Civil War* and, eventually, the beautiful and indispensable 18-volume *Voices of the Civil War*. We talked about the emerging mass of manuscript material written not by generals, but by common soldiers (much of this genre appeared in volumes 1 and 2 of the present work). We also spoke of the unparalleled value of letters written by soldiers and civilian observers published in local newspapers, North and South. That day at Manassas, Brian said to me, “We should do a compilation—something like the *Official Records* but written by soldiers.” He suggested calling it the “Un-Official Records.”

We, along with a few others, batted the idea around for a while (I think I even compiled a list of what might be included in Manassas-related volumes), but the immensity of any such undertaking eventually overawed our aspirations. We all got busy on other things, and nothing came of it—at least not then, and not by any of the original conspirators. But good ideas have a way of hanging around. Though I am quite sure Theodore P. Savas and editor/compiler M. Chris Bryan had no idea of these 1980s ruminations, these volumes on Chancellorsville are a realization of what Brian Pohanka had in mind that day at Manassas. We can only hope these volumes are the first of many to come over the next generation.

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These volumes are full of vivid, first-person accounts of the Battle of Chancellorsville, often peppered with intensely personal reactions to a horror most of these men, three years before, never imagined would be part of their life story. On May 10, 1863, five days after the guns of Chancellorsville fell silent, a soldier in the 2nd Georgia Battalion of Ambrose Wright’s Confederate brigade wrote his father that describing his days at Chancellorsville “in all their terrific grandeur” was “beyond my power.” Neither could he articulate “the intense strain upon mind and body incident to so long a struggle—the hopes and fears” and “the exulting joy” that attended victory (and his survival). Then, in the 2,500 words that followed, he accomplished, with power and specificity, all that he claimed was beyond his abilities.¹

That soldier (he signed his letter simply “G”) understood that his was but a small part in an immense and complicated drama—like a bit member of a Broadway chorus, essential only in the cumulative effect of its collective voice. Each of the letters or memoirs in these two volumes tells a story—not of the whole battle, but of an increment of it, for a battle is the cumulative story of hundreds, even thousands of increments. Sometimes a soldier’s or a regiment’s task on a battlefield entailed gaining or defending just a few feet of farmland. Sometimes it involved buying, with blood and toil, nothing more tangible than time—time that might allow others to do something more substantial. The men knew this and usually acted without hesitation, confident that even though they may not have understood the “why” of their assignment, their commanders did. The wave of a company commander’s

¹ See “2nd Georgia Battalion,” v4, 198-202.

arm or a single sentence from a general could instantly redefine a place—a ridge top, a river crossing, an earthwork, or a mere fence line—as worthy of an individual soldier's complete bodily sacrifice. This remarkable act of faith led men to attempt to do things that in retrospect seem nearly suicidal or awe inspiring, and often both. In the process, they rendered otherwise unremarkable places, like Fairview or Talley's farm, worthy of perpetual preservation, iconic landmarks in America's story.

More than 300 letters published in wartime newspapers are the heart of these volumes. Rare will be the reader or historian who has ever laid eyes on even a fraction of these. Written as most of them were with publication in mind, they are more self-aware than most letters written to loved ones, but they have a major advantage: they were written with the intent to describe and, occasionally, opine upon what the authors knew would be momentous events orchestrated by men destined for fame. These letters are raw descriptions of and reflections on recent trauma.

The two volumes also include a healthy immersion in the post-war world of staking claim to a place in the history books. Memory is an odd thing, and memoirs are a tricky tool for historians. With each passing day, we forget more of our personal past (the cataloging of our memories includes as much forgetting as remembering). At the same time, our certitude about our memories—*our* version of *our* personal experience—hardens into a selective narrative that, eventually, no one will be around to dispute. By the time the memoirists included in these volumes sat down to write, their wartime memories had certainly faded; the confusion and uncertainty so evident in their wartime letters had cleared (or been forgotten). But their certitude about *what* they remembered had only increased. Veterans' publications like the *National Tribune*, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, and *Confederate Veteran* often hosted tedious debates about trivial things—debates that often resolved little but constitute a goldmine for historians and sometimes humorous reading for casual consumers. Memories and memoirs are tricky things.

Which brings me to an essential part of these volumes: they not mere compilations of whatever might come easily to hand; they are curated. Their creation involved the review of probably twice the amount of material actually presented here. Compiler/editor Bryan and associate editors Sheritta Bitikofer and Gordy Morgan have the instinct and knowledge to comb through that mass of material, clearing away the redundant, the unimportant

(relatively speaking), and unreadable. The result is both a substantial contribution to history and an unfailingly interesting read.

Take, for example, the letters that open Volume 4: thirty-seven missives from two civilians writing from Fredericksburg—one the correspondent “X” (James Beverley Sener) and the other almost certainly local lawyer George Henry Clay Rowe. These letters, full of details about Fredericksburg, its people, the Army of Northern Virginia and its leaders are worthy of a book of their own. Just 24 in 1861, James Sener was a graduate of the University of Virginia and the law school at Washington College who returned to his hometown, Fredericksburg, to practice law and, in late 1861, purchase the weekly *Democratic Recorder*. After the Yankees arrived and the *Recorder* ceased publication in the spring of 1862, Sener wrote for whoever would pay him—the *Richmond Dispatch*, the Richmond Press Association, and, eventually, the *Richmond Enquirer*. Before the Battle of Fredericksburg, he embedded himself with the Army of Northern Virginia, which happened to be operating in and around his hometown. To the paper’s readers, he became “X.”

“Clay Rowe,” as he was known to friends, 33 at the war’s outset, was a remarkably active attorney, political operator, and (eventually) secessionist. He came from a household seeped in tragedy—his own and his wife’s alcoholism, her infidelity, the death of a child, divorce, arrest and confinement by the Yankees, and eventually a mental collapse that led to his long-term hospitalization. But in 1863, he anonymously took up the pen as the *Richmond Examiner’s* “Fredericksburg correspondent.” Deeply entwined with the prominent families of Fredericksburg (Rowe descendants still live there), his letters are an intimate portrait of a town simply ravaged by the war. “The love-making season of Saint Valentine finds Fredericksburg a barren field,” he wrote on February 14, 1863, after giving a description of a child’s funeral and the funereal landscape of a battered town. The writings of Sener and Rowe constitute one of the most useful records of life in wartime Fredericksburg and in the Army of Northern Virginia in early 1863.

Why, you might ask, in this day of ready access to online collections, do we need this as a book? There are several great sites that compile source material on various regiments or battles—Harry Smeltzer’s *Bull Runnings* and Brett Schulte’s *Siege of Petersburg Online* come to mind. But, have you ever gone looking for something you *know* you saw online in 2005? It’s likely gone. And with online searches increasingly co-opted by (when it comes to

history) decidedly unintelligent forms of AI, finding anything online gets harder every day. These volumes will become a permanent, tangible, curated resource for generations to come. Kudos to Ted Savas and Savas Beatie for taking on this project. And praise to Chris Bryan for conceiving it.

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