

*Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls –
The Civil War Letters of Richard and Mary Watkins, 1861-1865*

BOOK REVIEW - “CONFEDERATE NOTES” – Elizabeth D. Wilson

EYEWITNESS TO WAR
Wartime Letters Between a Husband and Wife

This book is the second in a series that the author calls the “Butternut Series.” His first book was titled *No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery & Desertion: A Composite Diary of the Last 16 Months of the Confederacy from 1864 to 1865*. If you enjoy reading diaries, journals, and letters written during the War Between the States time period you will definitely enjoy Mr. Toalson’s books. In *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots*, he has done an excellent job of introducing you to Richard and Mary Watkins. They lived in Prince Edward County, Virginia; Richard was a member of Co. K, 3rd Virginia Cavalry and eventually became a Captain. When the War started they were the parents of two little girls, Emily (called Emmie) and Mildred (called Minnie). Richard and Mary saved all of their letters to each other. Richard would send his letters from Mary home for safekeeping or return them to her when he was able to get a furlough.

Richard writes to Mary about the day-to-day events in camp. There are many times when he seems bored with nothing to do but drill. The soldiers are anxious to engage in battle. He tells her about his food supplies, which seem quite good a lot of the time, at least compared to what some soldiers had during the War. At one point he is the quartermaster for his company and is rather pleased with the items he is able to procure for the men. Mary relates the goings on at home. Typhoid Fever sweeps through Prince Edward County, killing large numbers of adults and children. Thankfully their daughters are spared. Richard is able to help Mary run their plantation and care for their slaves through their letters. He instructs her on how and when to plant and harvest and when to sell their tobacco. She in turn lets him know how their crops fare and what prices they receive when things are sold. Mary is quite worried about how they are going to provide blankets and shoes for the slaves in the winter of 1862; leather is scarce and very expensive so shoes seem out of reach. Wool for blankets is almost impossible to find. Even their daughters are without proper shoes in the winter.

When Richard’s company is involved in combat, when they ride into Maryland with JEB Stuart, when he happens to see Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, he tells Mary about all of it in detail. She, of course, worries more about his safety when she hears of these things.

Mary moves from their plantation to live with her mother during the War. She feels safer and her mother is able to help her with caring for her daughters and she in turn is able to help care for her mother. In reading their letters one gets an inside view of their love and devotion to each other. Richard closed most of his letters by telling Mary to kiss his little girls. When he is in need of boots Mary finds a way to get some to him. Richard always lets Mary know how wonderful it is to receive the boxes of food from home.

During the War Richard has some “horse problems.” Several become sick and he has to send them home to recuperate and has someone at home, generally his overseer or a slave, bring him a new mount and return home with the sick one. However, on a couple of occasions his horses desert him and run off with the Federals during battle. Once Richard is wounded on his head, from a Union saber blow, and is able to recover at home on furlough. This must have really impressed little Minnie. For months after Richard returned to his company, Minnie was telling her mother (and anyone else who would listen) that her “Papa got cut on the side of the head with a Yankee knife.” Perhaps she was just worried about her Papa.

This book is more than four years of letters between a husband and wife. It is a firsthand look into the day-to-day lives of a very close family during a terrible time in our country’s history and also a real love story.

Also included in the book are letters written to and by Richard to other family members. Mr. Toalson also provides some information about the lives of Richard, Mary and their children after the War. There were more children, but not all of them survived to adulthood. Truly, it is a very touching story.
