

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

BOOKS in STYLE - Review by Jean C. Keating

Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls

The Civil War letters of Richard and Mary Watkins are a rare treasure that preserves the flavor of life in Virginia during the difficult War years of 1861 to 1865, providing a rare first hand account of a love story between two young adults of the period as well as defining the struggles at home and in the camps of war.

With the sesquicentennial just a few years away, the numbers of published memoirs of people involved with the war are numerous. Although the letters *from* soldiers were often preserved, those from the home front, from wives and families went for toilet paper, camp fires or were destroyed for fear they would fall into enemy hands if the soldier were captured.

The Watkins collection represents only the fourth known one where the letters from both the husband and wife survived to be shared and enjoyed.

Editor/author Jeff Toalson has done an outstanding job of presenting this unusual find of more than 300 letters between Captain Richard Watkins, Company K of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry and his wife Mary as well as some from his family members and business associates back home. His book, *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* takes its name from Captain Watkins' usual closing lines for his letters.

Richard and Mary Watkins had been married three years and had two little girls when Virginia seceded in 1861. Along with many of his neighbors, he enlisted as a private in the Prince Edward Dragoons, which would become Company K of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry. Richard quickly rose to the rank of Captain of the company. Richard and Mary were exceptionally fluent and faithful letter writers and the rich, flowing dialogue between them provides readers with an enchanting and exceptionally intimate look at the minute details of life during these times.

Typical of women's position in the family of that time nearly 150 years ago, Mary always writes about household business to Richard in terms of "his tobacco" and "his corn" although she is the one managing, harvesting and selling the crops. She is certainly very analytical minded and in one of her letters in 1862, she comments that, "the firing of so many guns is the cause of so much rain."

It is one thing to read in some dry text that Confederate cavalry members were responsible for furnishing their own horses and tack. That situation becomes much more graphic as you read letter after letter between Richard and Mary which document Richard's struggles to exchange worn out and starving horses with those still on his farm in order to keep himself mounted as he fights this war. His trials at keeping mounted are humorously underscored as not one but two of his mounts succeed in throwing him during battle engagements in late 1863 and run off at the head of the retreating Union forces.

Toalson does a superb job of retaining the flavor of these near-150-year-old letters. In his Editor's notes he comments that "documents lose their historical flavor and feeling if the spelling, punctuation, and wording is modified." Thankfully he fought and won his battle with modern day computer packages that insist on trying to provide corrected versions of English usages. The reader can enjoy both the content and the style of the 1860's. Paper was scarce in this period and room was not wasted on paragraphs. Toalson has inserted editorial help after some words for clarity but kept the original spelling and flavoring. One amusing point of the letters was Watkins' early misspelling of Magruder who he admired greatly. Richard got the spelling correct by 1862 and named one of his horses after the general. Said horse was one of the two that threw Captain Watkins and ran off at the head of the retreating Union forces.

In mid-October of 1864, Richard was wounded for the second time, a permanent disability that ended his field service as well as most of the correspondence. Thanks to the Watkins heirs, these remarkable letters were preserved and donated to the Virginia Historical Society. In Toalson's words, they have "journeyed from haversack to trunk to archival folders and finally . . . to you."

You can continue your visit back in time by sending an e-mail to troon24@widomaker.com with a subject line of *Old Boots and Little Girls* and request a personalized and autographed copy of this delightful book.

Go to www.Chesapeakestyle.com to view the complete August, 2010 issue of *Chesapeake Style*.