

A True 'Eyewitness to War'

On the other side of Route 50, and within site of Historic Mount Zion Church (Herndon, Virginia), was the home of Alexander G. Davis, a native of Connecticut, better known as 'Yankee Davis'. Although his daughter's husband, Edmund A. Tyler, was in the Confederate Service, 47-year-old Davis strongly sided with the Union. Too old to serve in the Union army, he was still an excellent rider and pistol shooter, and knew the local area very well. He became a civilian scout assigned to the headquarters of Colonel Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., USA. Davis was hated by many of his neighbors but his murder no doubt would have brought great retaliation from the Union army against his Confederate neighbors. Davis, with Lowell, planned different schemes to capture the elusive Colonel John Singleton Mosby, CSA, called by some the 'inventor of guerilla warfare'. Under Lowell served Major William Hathaway Forbes, USA. Before the war, Lowell had been a tutor to Forbes. Davis was at Lowell's headquarters when the July 6, 1864 fight occurred between Forbes and Mosby. After the war the Davis family moved to Maryland and lived quiet lives until their deaths around 1901. The letter below, with some misspelled words corrected, was written by Davis' wife, Eliza, to her mother. The original is now in the collection of the Balch Library in Leesburg, Virginia.

Feb the (smudged)

Dear Mother, it is a long time since I have seen or heard anything from you. I sometimes hear from Henry that you are well. How are you enjoying yourself in old age? I hope that you are getting along comfortably in these times of War and Calamity that you know of in the land, but you only know war by rumor. I have lived on the battlefield for the last four years, have seen the dead and dying all around me, the wounded brought in numbers to die, or with amputated limbs to recover crippled for life.

Just as the all wise Providence would see for our barn on one side and the church on the other, for, as hospitals, both have been full of wounded, dead and dying at the same time. An army of men encamped about on every side in every direction as far as the eyes can see – now at the present time, while I am writing, everything is quiet.

But it may be in less than an hour a band of guerillas or Squad of Yankees may come in large numbers, perhaps both meet within a few yards of the house and if they happen to meet, a skirmish must ensue and some be wounded and killed. Both horses and men are left on the side. It has often been the case under my own eyes.

One that died in the barn said when he was dying, "Oh, my poor wife and child". I don't know who he was or where his wife and child are, but his body is buried in a grave with two others just back of our barn, all three buried without coffins, two more are buried the same way back of the house so you see I live along on a battlefield with the Brave and Dead all around me.

Ellen saw eleven all buried in one grave last summer without coffins. They were buried a little over a mile from here where they fell. They belonged to Colonel Lowell's Command, fellow soldiers in the same Reg. with your son and my husband that was in a skirmish with Mosby's guerillas. Alexander was not out at that time. I have seen one place in Fairfax where 37 soldiers lie in one grave, Yankee and Rebel both lie side by side just as their animosity and hatred are over and bayonets and sabers laid aside, and they sleep the quiet sleep of Death that knows no waking. Four soldiers came here the other night and said they were going to drive off my cows and burn the barn. They did not care or frighten me much. I am too much accustomed to such threats. They did not put their threat into execution.

You would ask if I am not afraid. I was at the beginning of the War as timid and nervous as most people, but now since I have seen and realize so much of War, I have become hardened and almost fearless – I am not much afraid of anything. I have an opportunity of seeing and knowing more of War living here on the border and amongst (unreadable) and guerillas than the soldiers in the field the art and deception that is practiced. None but an eye witness has an idea.

I have been writing about War. I suppose you would like to know the health of the family. Ellen has been sick for the last four weeks. She is better now but not well. Able to be about the house again. Josie is staying with her. Alexander, I suppose you hear from him nearly as often as I do. The Command he is with is stationed at Fairfax Courthouse and now I intend to go down and see him in a day or so and then I will carry this letter and mail it. We have no mail here and I seldom hear from any of my relatives in the North.

I have generally found enough to eat in Dixie and learned to be content as anyone could expect. More so than I would have believed four years ago. If the War should end perhaps I should see you once more. I don't know when or where it will end. The South will hold out four years longer if it can, I am satisfied of that. Jeff will never give up if he can help it so long as he can find men to fight for him.

From your daughter Eliza

To Mother

From William Etue, SMHS member.