

Rebel General Smitten by Virginia Beauty's Charm

Confederate Brig. Gen. James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart had hoped to have Christmas dinner with Laura Ratcliffe, a renowned beauty in Fairfax, but at the last minute duty called and it was not to be. It was made up for, at least in part, by a jolly Twelfth Night dinner arranged by the general, which included not only the dazzling Ratcliffe, but another 25-year-old and ardent Southern sympathizer, Antonia Ford.

Stuart had been severely disappointed on Christmas Day, and summoning all the gallantry his ebullient spirit could command, he wrote:

"Camp Qui Vive Dec. 25, 1861

"A very merry Christmas to you this bright morning!

"I deeply regret that duty will prevent me from enjoying the pleasure I so much anticipated of taking my Christmas dinner with you. It so happens that I am obliged to go in the opposite direction; but in heart and best wishes for your happiness, I will be with you.

"Yours truly

"J.E.B. Stuart"

The 28-year-old Stuart had first met Ratcliffe at Camp Qui Vive, the cavalry's snug winter quarters near Fairfax Court House. As the romantic poem he later wrote to her shows, her inner and outer beauty more or less knocked his boots off as he watched her ministering to wounded soldiers.

As for Antonia Ford, she was also a beauty, and a source of military intelligence as well. So it was that after Christmas a still gallant but now sheepish Stuart, hoping to reingratiate himself with the young ladies, wrote from Camp Qui Vive once again as follows:

"Jan. 6, 1862

"A happy New Year.

"I send you a nice beau Capt. Rosser (Miss Antonia's friend) he will escort you to here to dinner, and hence to the C.H. (Court House) to spend a night with Mrs. Ford. Be assured I sacrifice a great personal pleasure in foregoing this visit for your sake and Capt. R's.

"With sincere regards,

Yours J.E.B. Stuart"

Ratcliffe was the 25-year-old daughter of a prominent Fairfax family that had lived near the Court House in what is now Fairfax City but had moved while she was still a schoolgirl to her family's plantation near Frying Pan Church, between Chantilly and Herndon on the western edge of Fairfax County. The letter was in an envelope addressed to "Miss Laura Ratcliffe, Beauty's Bower, Fairfax".

Less than a month later (Jan. 30, 1862), the general was sending his regrets again to both Ratcliffe and Ford:

"My Dear Ladies –

"It is such a muddy day that I refrain from visiting you because I would dislike to appear in such an unrepresentable a costume as the roads would give me.

"Nevertheless, you may expect me soon, rain or shine.

"Yours,

J.E.B."

This time, the envelope was to "Miss Laura Ratcliffe & Miss Antonia Ford, Frying Pan".

Excuse followed excuse as Stuart again wrote to the ladies, who could have included not only Antonia Ford but also Laura and her sisters and her mother; for all we know:

"Soldier's Lodge

"Feb'y 3d, 1862

"Ladies:

“It is snowing too hard for you to think of traveling to-day, but look out for a sleigh-ride tomorrow.

“Yours, J.E.B.”

The relationship between Stuart and Ratcliffe was deeper than a few dinner engagements. The missed opportunities, ironically, are those that have so much on the written record. On March 3, 1862, Stuart remembered being smitten when he first made Ratcliffe’s acquaintance at the hospital at Camp Qui Vive, and he sat down and penned an exceedingly romantic and patriotic poem:

“To Laura

“We met by chance, yet in that ventful chance/The mystic web of destiny was woven/I saw thy beauteous image bending o’er/The prostrate form of one that day had proven/A hero...

“I saw thee soothe the soldier’s aching brow - /And ardent wished his lot were mine - /To be carressed (sic) with care like thine...

“And when this page shall meet your glance/Forget not him, you met by chance.

“Mar. 3, 1862 J.E.B.”

We don’t know whether Ratcliffe saw that poem at the time, since the only known copy of it in Stuart’s handwriting was in a leather-bound, gold-embossed album that he presented to her sometime after 1862. We can be sure that there was more contact between the Fairfax farm girl and the heroic general, who by now was surely one of the most romantic figures in the entire Confederacy. He most indiscreetly sent another letter, this time a long one. Despite some frustrating and tantalizing passages that are illegible, it gives all sorts of information, from military to personal and even psychological. Dated Camp Laura, March 17, 1862, and too long to set forth fully here, it is a priceless window into romantic social relationships in the mid-Victorian Confederacy.

“My Dear Laura,

“I have thoughts of you long and anxiously since my last tidings from you...

“You will no doubt find opportunities to send me an occasional note, I need not say how much it will be prized – don’t you know. Have it well secreted and let it tell me your thoughts, freely and without reserve. Can I ever forget that (words illegible), that never to be forgotten good-bye? Will you forget it? Will you forget me? I am vain enough Laura to be flattered with the hope that you are among the few of mankind that neither time, place, or circumstances can alter – that your regard, which I dearly prize, will not wane with yon moon, that saw our last parting, but endures to the end. That whatever betides...you will to the corner of your heart...find a place in which to stow away from worldly view the ‘young Brigadier’.

“If you know how I would prize a letter you would write me every opportunity. Have you forgotten?

“J.E.B.”

Something serious was going on here, at least from the general’s side. What did Ratcliffe think? We do not know that the young general, except for the inconvenient fact of being married, was the one beau that most girls in the Confederacy would have done virtually anything to have.

Ratcliffe was more than a pretty companion and a romantic obsession. She served Stuart and the Confederacy in significant ways, putting her life on the line by delivering valuable military intelligence. In 1863, Stuart introduced her to John Singleton Mosby, whose partisan command would come to rely on her for shelter and intelligence during most of the rest of the war.

In his memoirs, Mosby related how he had been about to attack a Union cavalry picket at Frying Pan, not knowing it was a trap that would surely have led to his death or capture. A talkative Yankee lieutenant however, shared the clever plan with Ratcliffe. He even told her that he knew she would like to warn Mosby but could never walk through the snow and foul weather

to do so. She did, of course, and Mosby lived to gobble up many picket posts in the Herndon area in the next few years.

As for the future Maj. Gen. Jeb Stuart, commander of all cavalry in Gen. Robert E. Lee's army by the time of Gettysburg, he wrote a second poem addressed to Ratcliffe that he dated Dec. 29, 1862, while stationed at a camp that he called 'Headquarters Grand Round'. It ends:

"When friends are false save one whose heart beats/constantly for thee/Tis then I ask that thou wouldst turn confidingly/to me. J.E.B."

Whether or not Laura was ignoring his romantic advances, Stuart was definitely still trying. Things came to such a pass that his attentions to young women in Fairfax, Herndon and elsewhere began to generate rumors that could no longer be ignored. In a letter to his wife, Flora, he attempted to explain, with all the brilliant eloquence and humor, and all the boldness and urbanity he could command.

"As to being laughed at about your husband's fondness for society and the ladies," he wrote to her on Oct. 5, 1863, "all I can say is that you are better off in that than you would be if I were fonder of some other things, that excite no remark in others." This was clever, as Stuart was universally known to abstain from alcohol, tobacco and gambling, in sharp contrast to most young Southern gentlemen of his day. "The society of ladies will never injure your husband and ought to receive your encouragement," Stuart continued.

His explanation grows a bit more obscure, if no less ingenious, as he concludes. "My correspondence with the ladies is that kind of correspondence which pertains to the position I hold, and which never could obtain with me were I a subordinate officer, such as no doubt as you hear insinuations from." This was probably an honest reference to the kind of flamboyant public life a general was expected to get away with, cleverly turned to patriotic military purposes. Stuart's most eloquent and shrewdest biographers, such as his staff officer, Maj. W.W. Blackford, served to corroborate this view of the great general's innocence:

"Those who saw him only in his hours of recreation could form no true estimate of his character, and from such as these the impression prevailed with some that he was frivolous and indeed, it was even charged, dissipated and licentious. On the contrary, though he dearly loved, as any good soldier should, to kiss a pretty girl, and the pretty girls dearly loved to kiss him, he was as pure as they."

Others saw Stuart putting his public persona to serious work, making mercenary use of romantic dalliances and relationships cultivated with pretty young women for purposes that were strictly business.

Thomas Low observed something like this in his 1992 Civil War Times Illustrated article, saying that Stuart "constantly prodded his officers to enlist the aid of females wherever they could" and "promised that 'funds will be placed at your disposal' with which to purchase military intelligence."

As for Ratcliffe, we will never know exactly how much help she was to the Confederate cause during the rest of the war. But we do know that Stuart's album with the poems was found among her personal effects after her death in 1923.

She had continued to live with her widowed mother and one of her sisters on the farm at Frying Pan after the war. Milton Hanna, a Union veteran from the area, was so impressed with her hard work, intelligence and beauty, and her devotion to her aging mother, that he built a home near the old Frying Pan Church for her.

After her mother died, Ratcliffe married him, and they continued as pillars of the community at Brookside for the rest of their lives.