

# The Civil War and Dutchess County, New York

## Part II

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Candace J. Lewis, *Editor*



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# Maintaining the Link

## The Letters of Platt C. Curtiss

### 150th Regiment, New York Volunteers

### “The Dutchess Regiment”

by Eileen Mylod Hayden

*In this issue, as in the 2015 issue devoted to the Civil War and Dutchess County, we begin with letters from the front. In the previous volume, a father wrote home with sad news about the illness and death of his young soldier son soon after the battle of Gettysburg, the first engagement of the 150th Regiment in the war. In this issue, we hear from a soldier himself in letters that covered the entire war. ....C. Lewis, editor*

In every military conflict, probably from the earliest wars fought to the present, there have been letters from the front to the folks back home. Whatever the format, whether cuneiform etched in clay, missives written in ink on tissue-thin V-Mail or current video messaging from the battle-front, such communications reveal the daily life, the thrills and boredom of a soldier trying to maintain a link with family and friends. They are also an important resource for historians. The Civil War was no exception.

In 1862, twenty-six year old Platt C. Curtiss, a young Dutchess County farmer from the Town of Stanford, stirred by the patriotic fervor of recruiters forming a regiment, signed the enlistment papers and was mustered into the 150th New York Volunteers as a private in Company I. With his comrades, he boarded the steamer *Oregon*<sup>1</sup>, leaving Poughkeepsie for New York City, entrained from New York to Baltimore, Maryland and settled into duty in that city. His surviving letters home begin with a dateline of Camp Belger, Baltimore, February 10, 1863. In this early letter, he replies to a recent letter from his brother:

Dear Brother,

I received your letter dated February 1st. I am well and so are the rest of the boys. The weather is very nice here now. Today has been like a spring day. A person would be comfortable with his coat off. I am glad to hear you are all well and have received the box I sent to you.

Waddall said he did not know if the box would go through safe or not on account of the peculiar shape. We have had some right sharp cold weather here. Two days and nights were the coldest we have had here in years. I was on guard one of those nights in one of the halls of the hospital and did not feel the cold much there. There was a good carpet on the floor and a gas light burning all night. We are having good times. I don't know where my axe is. The last I used it was in chopping down the old apple tree back of the house. I heard that Martina fell out of the wagon. I tell you to prevent such accidents. Form a semicircle with the left arm. That is the way I used to do when I rode out with the girls. I had some sleigh shoes sawed last winter but I guess they were all used up. I got a letter from Sarah to say she saw William Sutton in town today with Ben Smart's daughter. What is Charley Ingraham going to name his boy? I guess the ox chain belongs to Andrew Sleight. I had none of my own. I am going to send another box by express to Poughkeepsie. I will write when I start it. How is Bert getting along? I have not heard from him in six months. Have you used that rifle any. I think it would carry shot very well. Give my regards to all the neighbors. We are going to stay here a good while I guess from appearances. The Colonel says so.

Yours truly,

Platt C. Curtiss

There is no mention of the war, even though he was not very far from the battlefield.

For the next three years, a series of letters to his brother or his mother covered his travels from Poughkeepsie to Baltimore, Gettysburg, Tullahoma, Tennessee; Atlanta, the Carolinas, and Virginia. A short stay in a hospital in Indiana for a head wound<sup>2</sup> was about the only time Curtiss spent apart from his regiment and in that time his regiment advanced only twenty miles. The contents of his letters covered a farmer's view of the soil they marched on, the vegetation, the lack of food or the foraged excess, weather (always the weather), harsh living conditions in the field that included rats, sleeping in the rain, mud and malaria.

One of his last letters home was dated May 22, 1865 from Alexandria, Virginia and commented on an upcoming review of the victorious troops:

Dear Brother,

Sherman's army is here waiting to be mustered out of service, which event will probably take place within two weeks. We arrived here three days ago and the rain has been falling steadily all of the time so that our camps are like unto a vast brickyard. Wood is very

scarce. We are obliged to grub out stumps to get enough to cook our rations. Grant's army lies between here and Washington. We are to have a grand review of both armies next Wednesday. It is estimated that 250,000 troops will be present. It will be a big thing. As soon as the review is ended the mustering out commences and will be hurried forward as rapidly as possible...

Indeed, there was a grand review in Washington, so large that it was scheduled for two days. It was President Johnson's decision to honor the troops for their sacrifice and their valor with a military parade and perhaps change the mood of the still mournful citizens following the death of Lincoln. So it happened that Union Army units marched the streets of Washington on May 23 and 24. Four reviewing stands had been constructed in front of the White House. President Johnson, his cabinet, government officials, governors, diplomats, foreign dignitaries, and General Ulysses S. Grant were on hand to witness the event. Meade's Army of the Potomac, 145,000 men, who fought under Grant at Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg, were first to march on that clear and sunny day. They marched seven across, in perfect step, weapons gleaming. They marched under arches, past bunting, banners, regimental flags, and floral embellishments. One banner read: THE ONLY NATIONAL DEBT WE CAN NOT REPAY IS TO OUR VICTORIOUS SOLDIERS.<sup>3</sup>

General William T. Sherman's units numbering 65,000 strong, the now-Sergeant Curtiss among them in Company I of the 150th, followed the next morning, also a beautiful spring day. Prior to the march, General Sherman, not to be outshone by Meade's men, had kept his force, somewhat ragged following their recent march north from Georgia and the Carolinas, as well-drilled and disciplined as possible.<sup>4</sup> What they lacked in polish, they made up for with crowd pleasing bravado.

The army set out down Pennsylvania Avenue at 9 o'clock with General Sherman on horseback in the lead. In his memoirs, Sherman recalls "When I reached the Treasury Building, I looked back and the sight was simply magnificent."<sup>5</sup> It took six hours for the soldiers to march past the reviewing stand where they saluted the president and his guests. Charles Benton wrote:

Column after column passed the reviewing stand...with the far reaching stride which carried the men through and over the Confederacy, from the Mississippi to the Atlantic and north to Washington. The cavalry, with horses' manes clipped rode stirrup to stirrup, aligned as perfect as the infantry.<sup>6</sup>

All along the route, crowds, purported to number over 100,000, cheered, waved banners and sang patriotic songs as they viewed the men who were trailed by an entourage of equipment, ambulances, medical workers, laborers, families of freed slaves, “bummers” who scavenged what they could and a herd of cattle and livestock “removed” from Carolina farms along the way. It was surely a thrilling scene! For Sherman, the grand review was “...a splendid success and was a fitting conclusion to the campaign and the war.”<sup>7</sup>

The final letter from Curtiss to his brother William is dated May 29, 1865, Washington, D.C.:

Dear Brother,

I am well and hardy. We are not yet discharged...

Now the official report is that we will be on the way for home within ten days.

I was in the city yesterday and went all through the Capitol, Patent Office & c., and saw more sights than I can tell you about in two weeks. I expect you will be in town (Poughkeepsie) when we arrive, won’t you? Be sure and come and “see the soldiers”.

Discharge for the 150th was June 8, 1865, just as Curtiss had anticipated. The regiment arrived in New York City on June 9th and immediately boarded the steamer *Mary Benton*<sup>8</sup> for Poughkeepsie. The boat arrived in Poughkeepsie, close to midnight on June 10.<sup>9</sup> A crowd of over a thousand were at the wharf to greet them but the official welcome was set for Monday, June 12. The procession of firemen, military units and dignitaries marched through the principal streets of the city, past school children who sang and presented each soldier with a flower, past wildly waving handkerchiefs; past homes decorated with banners and flowers and finally ending at Mansion Square. The event at Mansion Square included speeches by Judge James Emott, commander of the regiment, A.B Smith and General John H. Ketcham, followed by “a splendid dinner” for the troops.<sup>10</sup> The festivities ended by evening with a full dress parade. The 150th New York Volunteers were finally home.

The regiment had an overall enrollment of 1,300 men and played an important role at Culps Hill, Gettysburg; Kennesaw Mountain; Tullahoma, Tennessee and the siege of Atlanta. All but 132 men returned to Dutchess County. Fifty-one of those were killed in battle; eighty-one died of disease and other causes.<sup>11</sup>

Platt Curtiss left a comprehensive diary<sup>12</sup> and a series of letters home as an invaluable record of the service of his regiment. He married and moved to New York City where he was engaged in the trucking business. He and his wife Josephine raised a family of four. Curtiss, who died at seventy-nine in 1915,<sup>13</sup> loved the annual reunion of his comrades but realized sadly as the years went by, that the reunions would ultimately end and the last survivor would be “mustered out.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward O. Bartlett. *The Dutchess County Regiment*, Edited by S. G. Cook and Charles Benton ( Danbury, Connecticut: Danbury Medical Printing Company, Inc. 1907), p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Platt C. Curtiss. *Letters*, Collection of Dutchess County Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> “The Grand Review: The Union Army Victory Parade,” *Literary Digest Magazine* (May 17, 1919), p.68.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Benton. *As Seen from the Ranks: A Boy in the Civil War* ( New York: G.P.Putnam, 1902 ), p.285.

<sup>5</sup> William T. Sherman. *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, Vol.11 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), p.377.

<sup>6</sup> Benton, *As Seen from the Ranks*, p.286.

<sup>7</sup> Sherman, p.378.

<sup>8</sup> Benton, *As Seen from the Ranks*, p.290.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Platt. *History of Poughkeepsie: From the Earliest Settlements, 1683–1905* (Poughkeepsie: Heart of the Lakes Publishing 1987), p.197.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund P. Platt, *Diaries*, Vol.1-29, 1856–1886, p.369.

<sup>11</sup> Bartlett, p.164.

<sup>12</sup> The diary kept by Curtiss provided a comprehensive, accurate and reliable account of the regiment for the Bartlett history, but can no longer be located.

<sup>13</sup> Bartlett, p.334.

<sup>14</sup> Bartlett, p.334.

