

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

12/11/61:001

Historical Notes

The Civil War letters of Lt. Cyrus J. Hardaway provide an interesting glimpse into the life of a New Berlin/Pittsfield farmboy and his participation in the most important event in 19th century American history. The "Letters Home" are dated from December 1861-May 1865 and were sent home to Hardaway's mother, Mary Ann Chadwick Hardaway Beardslee. Clearly intended to provide his mother with details about his "soldier life," they were also written to memorialize Hardaway's involvement in the American Civil War. Indicative of this appreciation of the historical nature of the war, is the fact that the letters were not only saved by her, but also by four successive generations of her family.

Hardaway was born in Utica, New York in 1838. His parents were Joshua and Mary Ann Chadwick Hardaway. He moved to Pittsfield and the Beardslee homestead (currently owned by the Benson family) in 1843 upon the remarriage of his widowed mother to the widower Jesse Beardslee. In November of 1861 he enlisted in the famous Berdan's United States Sharpshooters and was soon appointed a non-commissioned officer. In 1863 he transferred and was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the 114th New York Infantry Regiment. During this phase of his letters he participated in the battles of Yorktown, Malvern Hill, Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Manassas Gap. After his transfer to the NYS 114th Regiment in 1863, the letters mention the lesser known engagements near New Orleans and Louisiana. In 1864 Hardaway and the 114th were transferred to Virginia and the concluding battles of the American Civil War.

Civil War diaries, journals, and other "letters home" are not historically rare. Many such collections exist and have been published. This collection of letters is important and unique to the modern inhabitants of the Unadilla, Butternuts, and Wharton Valleys because in its four years of letters, many people, places, and events are mentioned that reflect Hardaway's New Berlin/Pittsfield roots.

The Hardaway letters were written on a fairly regular (7-10 day) schedule. They illustrate the long periods of tedium in soldier life, followed by longer weeks of boredom, only concluded by intense periods of battlefield terror and death. As the war progresses Hardaway provides an interesting and alternative view of historical persons and events.

The letters are exceptionally well preserved. Approximately half are written in ink with the remainder written in pencil. Hardaway's penmanship, syntax, spelling, and sentence structure indicate that 19th century country schools were reasonably proficient at teaching the rudiments of reading and writing. We can assume that Hardaway attended the local Pittsfield school located north and east of the Pittsfield's Wharton Creek bridge on the East River Road. Almost all are written on a higher quality of cotton stationery approximately 5x8 inches in size and are neatly folded. Each letter conveniently indicates the date of writing and the location from which the letter is sent. By the time of Hardaway's discharge in 1865, he will have been exposed to the bigger world of New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington D.C., New Orleans, and several major battles of the Civil War.