

"Letters Home"

The Civil War Letters of Lt. Cyrus J. Hardaway
Historical Notes

01/17/62: 005

A distinctly different feeling is evident in Lt. Cyrus Hardaway's January 17th, 1862, letter to his mother in New Berlin/Pittsfield. There is clearly a change of mood, and an air of adjustment towards the military and his soldier's life. It has been only thirty days since his "first of a genuine soldier life" but there appears in his letter the beginnings of a soldier's sense of humor. He has been to church and "felt well for going", to the Patent Office, the Smithsonian Institute, and has seen the Secretary of State, William Seward. He can joke that he has "not been to call on Abe yet but expect to soon. . ." In short, it seems that the farmboy from Pittsfield has adapted to his new life and its surroundings in a remarkably short time.

As is customary in all of his letters, Hardaway shares these happenings in this new Berdan's Sharpshooter community with his mother. He comments, perhaps falsely, as if he were an older sophisticated skeptic, about "military law" and the politics of the army. His pay is delayed and the paymaster has made the usual "mistake"; he sees George Beardslee (a relation of his step father, Jesse Beardslee) and assures his mother that, "you said in your letter that you thought camp life could not be much worse than New Berlin. You are right as far as I have seen it is a heaven by the side of New Berlin."

It is also obvious that Hardaway enjoys the camp location assigned to Berdan's two regiments. This "splendid" camp was located approximately 3 miles north of Washington, D.C. and adjacent to Prospect Hill Cemetery. Today this site would be east of North Capitol Street and Rhode Island Avenue. Referred to as the "Instruction Camp," the two regiments soon became something of a public sensation with their amazing marksmanship contests, displays, and sharpshooter exhibitions. Politicians, government officials, and the press soon became common visitors and participants in camp activities. Individual sharpshooters were soon seen as celebrities and provided great material for newspapers and government officials. Some sharpshooters, such as Truman Head of California, aka "California Joe," became legends and icons of the Union's alleged military superiority. The two regiments were publicly characterized as filled with highly individualistic, troublesome, and dangerous characters.

An individual, Ed Nelson, is prominently mentioned in this letter and will appear in several more, usually in connection with his expected death at the hands of the army's medical hospitals. Anyone with information about this person is encouraged to contact the authors:

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