

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

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Historical Notes

Studying history is sometimes a glorious and uplifting spiritual experience; at other times it is a difficult and disturbing subject. At all times it forces its students to examine themselves and their culture's stories and consider the real events. Reading history in a textbook is useful; reading original documents and sources such as Cyrus Hardaway's letters causes popular history to be reconsidered.

This letter is easily the most confusing letter encountered so far in the collection of Civil War letters sent home by New Berin/Pittsfield's Cyrus Hardaway to his mother. It is disturbing in that it uses terms that are considered so incendiary and perjorative that they are virtually forbidden in current social conversation. The letter is perplexing in that it suggests that the causation of the Civil War was infinitely more complicated than the standard textbook analysis as a war against slavery, slave culture, and the economics supporting slavery.

Most Americans would suggest that at least one of the primary causes of the Civil War related to the issue of abolition, or the freeing of slaves in the South. Historians would also raise other social causes, as well as economic and political agendas of both the South and the North. But the description and presence of Black soldiers fiercely fighting for the South, and against their freedom loving Union liberators is a startling inclusion within this letter.

After spending two days looking over the Yorktown fortifications, Berdan's Sharpshooters steamed north on the York river and landed at West Point where the Mattaponi river enters the York. Hardaway's revelation that the Southern army was comprised of some African-Americans and that they fought for the Confederacy is astonishing to moderns. It is also apparent that they not only fight with ferocity but that they were feared by the Union soldiery.

Hardaway's reference to Williamsburg as a "heavy battle" is correct. After the Confederates withdrew from Yorktown on May 3-4, a major rear-guard action occurred on May 5th as Generals James Longstreet and D.D.Hill held off the Union advance under General McClellan. In all 1703 Southern soldiers are lost during the engagement; 403 Union soldiers are killed with 373 listed as missing.