

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

1/11/63: 061

Historical Notes

Cyrus Hardaway's letter home from "near Fredericksburg" dated January 11, 1863 contains a Pittsfield farmboy's observation about those weather conditions that caused Hardaway, Berdan's Sharpshooters, and the entire Army of the Potomac to participate in the celebrated "Mud March" ordered by General Ambrose Burnside in January of 1863. Hardaway's comment regarding unseasonably and "remarkably fine" weather was the basis for General Ambrose Burnside to consider a winter campaign in late January of 1863.

Frustrated by the catastrophic results at the *Battle of Fredericksburg*, Burnside clearly overreacted by his consideration of a winter offensive commencing January 20, 1862. Unusually pleasant weather convinced Burnside that the Army of the Potomac could cross the Rapahannock at river crossings north of Falmouth and Fredericksburg. If accomplished with rapidity and deception, Burnside thought he could outflank Lee and force the Confederates into a climactic fight in the open country between Fredericksburg and Richmond.

Hardaway's letter also evidences his continuing and great loyalty to his hero and former commander of the Army of the Potomac, George B. McClellan. A grand review of troops by General Burnside, brought forth none of the usual cheers McClellan had received. The "brilliant" defeat at Fredericksburg could hardly justify acclamation by soldiers who had seen the useless slaughter and carnage at the base of Marye's Heights. Burnside, who clearly considered himself unworthy of his commander in chief status, could not have avoided hearing the deafening silence during his review of troops.

Among those most critical of Burnside's capacities were several of his own Army of the Potomac generals. At least four generals went public with their complaints. One of Burnside's "grand division" commanders, "Fighting Joe" Hooker, told reporters that the military and country needed a dictator.

There is significant historical irony in Hardaway's January 11, 1863 letter. His observation that "The weather has been remarkably fine for the last six weeks," was followed by an astute commentary one might expect from any Pittsfield/New Berlin farmboy that, "I suppose now though it is getting to be time for pretty rough weather. . ." Why a poor 2nd Sergeant in Berdan's Sharpshooters could anticipate the probability of winter weather, and not General Ambrose Burnside, is exemplary of Union army leadership in early 1863.