

# Last Letters of Pvt. James W. Shelton

*Submitted by Glenn L. Chrisman*

This is the third from last letter Pvt. James Shelton wrote before he was killed on Apr 1, 1865 at Five Forks, VA. The following letter is rather significant because it refers to General Warren's (some would say infamous) raid of Dec 7-12, 1864 south from Petersburg, VA along the Weldon RR almost to the N. Carolina border to sever the Confederacy's supply lifeline to Petersburg, was also known as the "Apple Jack Raid". The weather was wet but relatively mild when the Union force left their positions near Petersburg and headed south. Unfortunately, many of the soldiers discarded their overcoats and other heavy garments along the way early in the march. the weather turned to a very cold rain and even snow, making things miserable for the under-provisioned and war-weary soldiers. number of sick, fatigued, and probably wounded soldiers dropped by the wayside on the way south.



Let us remember that at this point the 7th MD had been on duty for about 28 months and had seen a great deal of combat. The main force accomplished their mission and tore up miles of the Weldon rail line, thus severing the all-important supply line to Petersburg which had been under siege for almost seven months. Union foragers had been busy supplementing their slim rations on the way south, but were especially busy on the way back. of course served to further embitter the beleaguered residents of the area who resented their presence and the privations and destruction of the long war. the way back, Union soldiers discovered an ample hidden store of hard cider, Apple Jack, indulged themselves fully. , they also discovered that many of their bone-weary comrades who had fallen out on the march south had been captured and murdered by residents and Confederate bushwhackers. of the bodies had been mutilated. in turn triggered an outrage of destruction, looting, and burning by some of the Union troops. Little has been written about this episode and other similar incidents during the war for understandable reasons.

**Dec 29th, 1864**

**Camp on the Weldon Railroad**

**My Dear Wife,**

I received your affectionate and welcome letter and I now take this present opportunity inform you that I am well at present and I hope these few lines may find you all enjoying the Blessing. have been on Raid almost to North Carolina and destroyed about 30-35 miles of Railroad for the Rebbles which will doubtless make it very unhandy for the Rebs to get supplies to their Army but we had a very hard time of it while we were gone for we were scarce of rations and marched a day and a night with out any thing to eat.

We were only gone six days and the rained all the time and so we had plenty of mud to travel through and when we returned we had to build houses to stay in. are now lying in the rear line and the Rebs are not very close to us. are getting the Rebs in a very close place as they have but one Railroad to get supplies to Petersburg and Richmond and I think we will soon get that one and then I think the war will soon be over. Haines is well and sends his love to you all. will get a Furlough as soon as possible for I would like very much to see you all. had a very dull Christmas down here. must bring my letter to a close no more but remain you true husband .

**James W.**

*[Eds. notes: W. Haines, Pvt. to V.R.C. date unknown. had enlisted on Dec 1, 1862. Also, other references say that less than ten miles of the rail line was destroyed, but it must have felt like 30-35 miles to James Shelton and his comrades.]*

Here is the next to last letter my great-great-grandfather wrote before his death. I've made some corrections in spelling, punctuation, etc simply for ease of reading. The action he refers to was the intense firefight at Dabney's Mill. Accounts that I've read indicate there was a great deal of confusion, units out of position, close quarters fighting against a very determined Confederate force, etc, etc. The "fog of war" must have been pretty thick.

However, it's downright inspiring to read the "Maryland pride" and esprit de corps reflected in his letter.

**From 138 years ago:**

**Camp Hatchers Run, Va 16th 65**

**Dear Wife,**

Yours of the 1st inst was received by me & kindly appreciated after being carefully read. I am glad that you have written to Washington in my behalf as Lt Harn will not give me a Furlough under any considerations. I am enjoying good health except cold we are now engaged in putting up new winter quarters & they are the 3rd we have gone into this season. The fight we were in on the 6th inst was the severest in musketry of the Campaign. Although our loss was small as usual we were compelled to bare the brunt & then get no credit. But there is a day coming when the old Md Line will stand out in bold relief in the rebellion as it did in 76 and 1812-13-&14. We are but few in number but formidable. Outside of this I have no news except a matter of curiosity to many, it is the work of Beavers in cutting off timber adjoining our camp. They cut off trees a foot through as smooth as if it had been cut with an axe. This is the 6th fight I have been in. We made the charge & fought the Enemy until our ammunition gave out then fixed our Bayonets before we were relieved by the 6th Corps and they fired into us but thank God they done but little injury to our line. I think we have the Enemy in a close place if they do not sue for mercy we will drive them to it. Tell Mrs. Bowers that the last I heard of Christ was that he was in Andersonville, Georgia. He was well. One of our boys was just from there who saw him. I must close on account of time and news.

I remain your affectionate until Death,

**Jas W Shelton Co. B. 7th Md. Vol  
2 Brig - 2 Div<sup>5</sup>th Corps Army of Potomoc (sic)**

*[Ed Notes: 1. The Lt Harn referred to was 1st Lt Thomas W. Harn the second in command of Co. B under Capt John McKechney. Lt Harn was wounded at Five Forks, Apr 1, 1865, the same day Pvt. Shelton was killed. 2. Pvt. Christian Bowers was captured at the Wilderness, May 5, 1864. He survived his imprisonment at Andersonville, GA and was mustered out on June 9, 1865. He had enlisted in the 7th Md. at Frederick, MD on Aug 16, 1862, the same day as Pvt. James Shelton.]*

138 yrs. ago March 3rd, Pvt. James W. Shelton of Unionville, Md. wrote what is believed to be his last letter home. Three weeks later this grandson of an English emigrant gave the last full measure of devotion to his country during an attack on the Confederate defensive position at Five Forks. He was the only member of the 7th Md. killed that day and one of only about 115 Union soldiers killed out of a combined Union force of perhaps 15,000 troops under the command of Gen Philip "Little Phil" Sheridan. It was at the right angle turn, "the Return", in the Confederate line where Gen Sheridan jumped his famous dapple grey horse, Rienzi, over the revetment into a Confederate artillery position and demanded their surrender. One poignant line in this letter which reflects a soldier's yearning for peace always gives me pause (and a lump in my throat) to reflect on the loss of nearly 620,000 lives in the great conflict which defined us as the nation we are today. Their suffering and that of their families is simply incalculable.

**Near Hatcher's Run, Va March 3rd 1865**

**My Dear Wife,**

To give you a hearing of my health situation & I will once try and send you a few lines. In the first place I must tell you that I am in a very good state of health and we now are encamped close to Hatcher's Run and have got up very good quarters but I do not think that we will be left here very long to enjoy the comfort of them. We were paid off last Sunday and

I sent you forty five dollars which I guess will reach you before this does. I hope that you may get it safely. It was expressed to Frederick City and sent from there by Mail. I hope that this letter may find you all well and doing well. There is no news for me to write to you of any importance. There is a great many rebels coming into our lines every day and I hope that they may all soon come over that peace may rest upon us again. It has been very rainy and disagreeable for the past week and it has not altogether cleared off yet. Nothing more at present but my love to you all.

**James W Shelton**  
Co B 7th Md. Vol.  
Washington, DC

Some time in May 1865 my great grandmother, Rachel Shelton, received the following letter from a family friend, D. Danner, concerning her husband. She had previously received word from someone that James Shelton was missing and had written to Mr. Danner seeking information.  
What a terrible time that must have been for Mrs. Shelton and her eight children.

**Unionville,**  
**April 22 '65**

I have not heard anything from Edward since the last Great Battles that have taken place. All I know about your husband is from your own letter. No one else has written anything about it as far as I have heard. I would be very glad indeed to hear the correct news from the Army. If I should hear anything from them I will let you know. Perhaps he was wounded and left behind if so the other boys do not know anything about him. If he is dead it is strange the papers do not say anything about him. Be contented a few days perhaps we may hear something.

**Yours,**  
**D. Danner**

*(postscript on reverse side of letter)* Mr. Harn has just come in the store and states that Luther wrote that Mr. Shelton was badly wounded in the Breast. But did not know what was done with him. He was wounded the same day Thos. Harn was --- this is all I know. Yours, D D

*[Eds. Notes: "Edward" was probably Mr. Danner's son who was mustered out June 12, 1865. "Mr. Harn" would probably have been the father of Lt Thomas Harn, second in command of Co B, who was wounded at Five Forks. "Luther" was likely Cpl. Luther E. Harn, brother of Lt. Harn. Luther Harn was mustered out May 31, 1865 as was Pvt. John A. Harn, possibly another brother. Luther and John Harn had both enlisted on Aug 16, 1862, as had James Shelton. Thomas Harn enlisted Aug 20, 1862.]*

It is believed that James W. Shelton may be buried at Poplar Grove National Military Cemetery, just a few miles from Five Forks. Poplar Grove contains the remains of 4,039 unknown Union soldiers plus a small number of Confederate soldiers. It is a very humbling experience to visit Poplar Grove. In the summers of 1865 and 1866, search parties combed over a very wide area of "southside" Virginia looking for remains of fallen soldiers, both Union and Confederate. A large number of the recovered remains of Union soldiers were interred at Poplar Grove. Many remains of Confederate soldiers were interred in the Revolutionary War era Blandford Church cemetery in Petersburg, VA.

After her husband was killed at Five Forks, Rachel Shelton was left to care for their eight children in Unionville, Md. On June 29, 1865 she applied for a widow's pension. For some reason, payments were not forthcoming. She applied again and submitted affidavits on Feb. 26, 1867. At some point her patience wore thin with government bureaucracy and, attempting to take matters into her own hands, she traveled to Washington, D.C. She then went directly to the White House, pounded



on the front door, demanding to see President Andrew Johnson. While there's no record that she was successful in seeing the President, she finally did begin collecting her meager pension. In 1871, Rachel Shelton and her children moved to Marion Township, Marshall Co., Iowa.

Her homestead is still open farm land directly across from the Iowa River Church of the Brethren Cemetery. She never remarried and passed away on Dec 27, 1902 at age 74 years, 11 months. Rachel's last pension check was sent on Oct. 4, 1902. It was for \$12.

She and several of her children and grandchildren are buried in that cemetery. Rachel Wilhelmina Sauer-  
mann had emigrated to this country with her parents from Hanover, Germany in 1841.  
She married James W. Shelton in Frederick Co., Md. on Feb 27, 1846.