

## A Confederate Camp Site in Russellville, Tennessee

Camp Site  
of the  
Army of Tennessee  
C.S.A.  
1863-1864  
Commanded by  
Lieut. Gen. James A. Longstreet  
Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws  
Brig. Gen. J.B. Kershaw  
Erected by  
Sam Davis Chapter  
U.D.C.<sup>1</sup>



Along Tennessee Highway 63 in Claiborne County, stands a rather unassuming memorial to a winter encampment of the Confederate Army of Tennessee. The structure is a plain slab of roughly hewn limestone with an attached plaque that lists the commanding officers and when they were there. But who were the soldiers? What did the men do? What was their state of mind? What were the conditions like? Some of these questions are answered, at least from one man's perspective, in *A Southern Soldier's Letters Home: The Civil War Letters of Samuel Burney, Army of Northern Virginia*, edited by Nat Turner. The complete text of each letter can be found in the appendix.

Samuel A. Burney was a member of Cobb's Georgia Legion of the Army of Northern Virginia. He rejoined his unit in East Tennessee in January 1864 after he recovered from the loss of his left eye to a bullet near Chancellorsville, Virginia. He was among the 135 men from his infantry regiment injured during that engagement. Cobb's Legion was now part of General James Longstreet's army and along with McLaws' and Hood's Divisions, fortified

<sup>1</sup> Text from marker dedicated to the Army of Tennessee in Claiborne County, Tennessee

the Army of Tennessee, whose ever-changing leadership and internal strife led to many frustrating losses.<sup>2</sup> In November 1863, the Army of Tennessee had headed toward home in hopes of recapturing Knoxville. When Burney rejoined the legion, he found it in a place foreign to him, and in his letters home he depicted the conditions of his new surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

Samuel Burney arrived in Russellville at night on January 25, 1864. His first impression of the area was positive, and he noted the beauty of the rich landscape. The camp there was quite comfortable and timber for building was abundant. In his second letter home, dated February 6, 1864, Burney described the “rough but comfortable log huts” in which the men lived. In a subsequent letter, he wrote of a straw bed, a fireplace, and even a mantelpiece inside the cabin.<sup>4</sup> The living situation was surprisingly pleasant for Burney and his comrades.

In contrast, the opposing forces were having considerable difficulties. In a report dated February 21, 1864, Union Major General J.G. Foster stated, “the country between the two armies is entirely exhausted of forage and all kinds of supplies, which it is impossible to haul... in consequence of the bad roads of the winter and spring.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, his men and animals were tired. For these reasons, Foster concluded that any attempt at offensive movement would be impossible before April without losing East Tennessee completely. The reports from Burney and Foster seem to conflict, but in a letter dated February 19, 1864, Samuel Burney did complain of the extreme cold and lack of rations. Fortunately for Burney and a friend, a local family fed them, and their snug log huts kept them warm.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Burney’s mood was somber but hopeful. He missed his wife and young son, Sammie. The war dragged on, and the loss of life saddened him. Deserters were a major problem for the Confederate Army at this stage in the war. Burney wrote his wife about the shock and horror of watching a deserter march behind his own coffin to his death by shooting. This was the first time he had seen such an event, and he was clearly shaken; however, in a later letter he described a similar scene with less concern:

Yesterday we were called to witness the execution of three more deserters. It was a horrible spectacle, but I was not as much moved as I was on the former occasion of the same kind at Russellville. Constant familiarity with such things soon blunts a man’s feelings. Soon after the executions yesterday some men were after a rabbit,

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley F.Horn, *The Army of Tennessee*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), xi-xii.

<sup>3</sup> Nat Turner, ed., [*A Southern Soldier’s Letters Home: The Civil War Letters of Samuel Burney, Army of Northern Virginia*], (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002) 253-256.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-269.

<sup>5</sup> “Report of Major General J.G. Foster to the Committee on the Conduct of the War,” in *Supplemental Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War, in two volumes*, Supplemental to Senate Report no. 142, 38<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, vol.II, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1866), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, ed., *A Southern Soldier’s Letters Home*, 270.

and one man was seen peddling out tobacco as a death scene was being enacted in his sight.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the cold, the men of the Army of Tennessee probably had a more agreeable stay in East Tennessee than their Federal counterparts. Nevertheless, worries about matters at home plagued the men as they would any traveler far from home, and soldiers like Samuel Burney tried to accept their fates. He prayed earnestly and sent love and affection to his family by letter.

Sarah Jane Murray  
15 May 2004

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 270.

## Further Reading

Horn, Stanley F. *The Army of Tennessee*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952.

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Confederate Armies*. Series I. vol. 31. Part III. Harrisburg: The National Historical Society,  
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## Appendix

Russellville, TN  
Camp Cobb's Ga. Legion  
Jan. 26<sup>th</sup> 1864

My Dearest Wife,

This is to inform you that I have arrived safe, but much worn and exhausted, at the camp yesterday near night. I have been from home two weeks to-morrow. I was on the way to the Company just twelve days. I was never so tired of a trip in all my life. We had to walk some 45 miles-my valise was very heavy to be carried that distance, but with the assistance of some three or four we contrived to get it here.

I wrote to you from Petersburg and from Bristol, which letters I hope you received in due time. You must feel no alarm if weeks should intervene between letters, for they have to be carried on the cars. I am very well, except for a cold which was contracted by sleeping out in the night in the woods. I think I was never so exhausted as I was on my arrival here yesterday. We marched 30 miles the last two days over the railroad on crossties. My feet are very sore.

The Virginia and Tennessee Rail Road from Bristol to Knoxville is 130 miles long. We are in 45 miles of Knoxville. I think the Yankees destroyed 40 bridges between here and Bristol. The road around and through the mountains has necessitated us to cross every little stream. We crossed one creek 22 times. This is a very fertile and beautiful country. I never saw so many fine flocks of sheep. The Yankees, during their occupation, appropriated all they could-beef, cattle, horses, &c to their own use, and the people found it very difficult to live in many cases. It is amazing country and will be worth our efforts to defend on the part of the Confederate Government, to hold & occupy. The people in East Tennessee are more than half farmers as you have no doubt heard, but the wealth and intelligence of the country is in the main soundly Southern. The cars run to Greenville, the home of the traitor Andrew Johnson. The Union people are generally of the lower class, uneducated, squalid looking creatures, who have been led captive by the insidious wiles of Brownlow, Nelson, Johnson & [?].

I must tell you of a little affair of which I was a party. I called at a home to have something to eat. The lady told me she had a brother in Georgia, but had never been able to find a Georgian that knew him. She said he was a conductor on the Georgia Rail Road. I guessed his name on the second guess. The lady was a sister of Oscar Dillworth. She was so much pleased that I knew her brother that she said she would bake my bread for nothing. Pretty soon her father came in. She had previously told me she was a true Southern woman, and I presumed her father was, of course, so I began to pour forth my philosophies against the Union people, denouncing them bitterly; saying that no Union family could cook my bread, &c. Pretty soon her father went out and she told me he was the strongest union man in Tennessee. But it was too late; my words had been spoken and could not be withdrawn. She blushed heartily at my predicament. She had another brother in the Yankee army.

You must not conclude that I have forgotten you & Sammie because I have said nothing about you. I have thought about you day & night. In the night, when I was on the march my mind would wonder far back to home. The stars kept watch and seemed a companion to me for when I would wake my comrades would be asleep, but the bright stars would look down on me and would greet me with their brightness. There I would lie for hours and think of my absent wife and boy. I would fairly hope an honest soldier's prayer found its way through the night stars to that good God, in whom I trust would be my deliverer, would be the same kind Father to my wife & boy that He has ever been to me. That, in His ever-good time, He would bring me back to you & my boy. This is my prayer. In this I find joyous solace; for truly when I look out at the cold cheerless world, see its sorrows, dread its dares, I can say there is no comfort here. This is a fleeting life beginning to day with an infant's cry, and ending to-morrow with dust falling on the hollow grave. Let us be wise while we may. Call this our day of probation, for soon the glorious gospel of Salvation will soon be followed up at the great enduring Death.

I found the Company all on foot; in many cases literally, for some are barefooted. Martin has not arrived. The boys have all provided themselves with comfortable houses, and are not suffering while they remain in them. This is uncommon mild weather for this season. We have a beautiful camp. One could walk for miles upon miles and never get out of the woods. Every company has a fighting cock, which is the principal sport. They can be heard at dawn heralding the approaching day. I am in a mess with Frank Smith, & Bro. Ross, besides Bill Whitley & George Pierce. We are rather crowded and I shall begin to build me a house because timber is more than abundant.

John O'Neal told me in Augusta that Old John was sold for 2250 dollars, but after examination by a physician he refused to take him. He said he would not allow him to be sold again. What did he bring?

I think we are resting here for the winter, but you can never tell. As soon as spring comes to the material world in beauty, the crimson tide of human blood will flow again & the Angel of Death will pass over the door at many a household now rejoicing in our unbroken family circle. Ah! Me, this sad war. When will it close? It has devastated the country and thrown upon its charity too many for proper care and education.

Well, I have written you a long letter; send it up to Pa & Ma. I will write often. Address me at Russellville, Tennessee, in full. Give my love to all and write me all the news, for I need long letters in these woods. May God bless you, my dear wife.

Aff. Your husband,  
S. A. Burney

Camp Cobb's Legion  
Near Russellville, Tenn.  
February 6<sup>th</sup> 1864

My Dearest Wife,

This leaves me in pretty good health. We are still now quietly quartered in our rough but comfortable log huts. The hearth for my mess will be completed today and we will move in it. We have been staying with the quartermaster sergeant, Frank Lumpkin, and the commissary sergeant, Bill Whiting, but I thought it was best that we should have a house of our own - for one feels more independent in his own house. At least this is true of myself.

We have had the most beautiful weather for the past two weeks that I ever knew for this season of the year. It has been clear, mild and calm. To day it is raining and the boys are in their houses; some writing home, some playing at games, some at one thing, some at another. The prevailing wish of all is that the war would come to a close and all go home.

I witnessed yesterday one of the most solemn and shocking scenes that is to be seen in the army. It was the execution of a deserter. His name was W.H. Roberts of the 21<sup>st</sup> Mississippi. He was arraigned before and tried by a board of court martial for desertion. He was found guilty and sentenced to be shot to death with musketry. The whole division was present to witness the tragic end of the doomed man. The division was placed in line on the two large hillsides, and the deserter was shot in the valley between where all could see. Before the execution he was marched in front of the division just behind his coffin with a strong guard before and behind him accompanied by his chaplain. At the head of the procession was a brass band which played the death march. It was a solemn sight. After they had finished marching around, they read out the order for his execution. The chaplain then prayed with him, and after that they bound up his eyes with a handkerchief, shook hands with him and left him to his fate. Some six or eight men stood before him with guns, and the poor fellow was on his knees, his hands resting on his legs - ready, aim, fire, and the ball sped through him and he fell on his face. I looked at him until he was blindfolded and shook hands with the chaplain, then I turned my back and closed my ears. He had a negro with him that was much disturbed. This looks hard, but it is necessary to keep men in their place, to make them stand to do their part.

Give my love to all. I hope that you & Sammie may get on well. I hope the days will soon come when we can live together happily as we have here-to-fore. I pray God that His spirit may be given both of us for patience, strength, and consolation. Write often. With much love.

Your aff. Husband,  
S. A. Burney

[near Russellville, Tennessee]  
Camp Georgia Legion  
Feby. 8<sup>th</sup> 1864

My Dearest Wife,

Lucius leaves to morrow for home with Mr. Lumpkin the gentleman that hired him. I cannot allow such a good opportunity to pass by without writing to you. Baldwin has just arrives and I have just read yours & Pa's letters. The reading of them has afforded me great pleasure. I have received three letters from you since I left home.

This leaves me in my usual health. I am troubled occasionally with my bowels but not to complain much. I am glad to hear that Sammie keeps well. I cannot express my deep sorrow at hearing that you suffer so much with your eyes. I seriously hope that you may soon get better and lose the pain you have suffered from so long.

The selling of Old John for \$900 was an outrage. I told John O'Neal in Augusta that he had better take John back, for I knew if he was refused by one man it would get out that he was unsound & he would truly bring but little. But I had no authority to order him to carry him back.

It is a matter of certainty that if Annie should marry we must draw our part out of the estate and make some distribution of it. Your mother has been troubled a long time with the negroes, and if we can get such repay or will hire, I think that we had best save a division.

Tell Annie that I hope she will not so far forget her brother Sam as to marry when I am not there. I wish her all the pleasure incidents to a union of happy hearts. May her married life prove as happy a one as ours has so far.

We had our houses finished a few days ago and moved in yesterday. We have a good bed of wheat straw, a good fireplace, mantelpiece, &c. You must pardon this letter. I am writing in an unpleasant situation; our man is making us some stools and there are about 20 around Charley talking to him.

If you can get to take a trip to Florida and spend a short while with Mrs. Fitzpatrick perhaps it would be of great benefit to you. But do not think of traveling on cars without going with some gentleman.

I shall use all efforts to secure a position in the Commissary Dept. or any other place that will secure for me a place of quieter ease and safety. You must not be despondent. The day of good luck may come when you least expect it. God has blessed us so far above my deserves that I cannot complain at what may seem a hard fate.

A word as to Sammie. You must make him mind you. As he grows impress on his mind to be truthful, honest, obedient, and affectionate. I want you or Annie or Florence or someone to teach him to repeat the prayer – commencing “now I lay me down to sleep.” Tell him his daddy sends a kiss & howdy.

Love to all. Write me often.

With great affection your own dear husband,  
S. A. Burney



Cobb's Legion  
February 19, 1864  
Friday morning  
[near New Market, Tennessee]

My Dearest Wife,

I was just remarking to one of the boys that I thought there was no better way of spending time than in writing to the loved ones at home. Certainly there is nothing more agreeable to me at best. I have just finished reading your letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> of Feby. and was glad to hear that all kept well. I was very glad to hear that your spell of headaches are growing less severe. I am in strong hopes that Dr. A's medicine will work a radical change in your system for the better.

This leaves me in very good health. We are pleasantly situated in our log house and the weather has been so very cold. It is nearly as cold as it was on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Jan. last. We are seeing a bad time in the way of rations, but Baldwin and myself have been eating at a house near by and have not felt the pinch as keenly as most have.

Yesterday we were called to witness the execution of three more deserters. It was a horrible spectacle, but I was not as much moved as I was on the former occasion of the same kind at Russellville. Constant familiarity with such things soon blunts a man's feelings. Soon after the executions yesterday some men were after a rabbit, and one man was seen peddling out tobacco as a death scene was being enacted in his sight.

I know it will do you good to hear that your husband sleeps warm and comfortable in this cold country, and have plenty to eat where some may suffer for it. I do thank the God that maketh me differ from others – for I am by nature the same as they.

I wrote you that I was acting adjutant for the Legion. This gives me employment, and as a matter of course entertainment. I have not finished arranging my papers.

Last night Charlie Sanders left to go home. He will marry Miss Celestia Broughton while he is at home.

I wish you could speak to Pa to have me the best pair of shoes made that Wilson can put up. He has my measure. I want a No. 1 pair. Mallory will bring them to me if he goes home. I have not worn out my others yet, but they are breaking.

What has become of Annie's marriage? I would like to be at home on that occasion, and perhaps may if it happens in March. When Pierce comes back I will make application for leave of absence, if the order is not revoked. I have not heard from my paper sent up to the Sec. of War. It has been gone 17 days. I hope for a favorable result.

I would be glad if I could hear from you often. I think some of the family might write to me. Julia ought to remember me; I have had one letter from Pa, all the rest are yours.

Be sure to make Sam obey you. He is sweet and very smart; if he respects & obeys his parents he will be more so. Give my love to your mother and the children, and to the family and all friends. May the God of Providence shield and keep you and me are my prayers.

Your aff. Husband,  
S. A. Burney