

"A Belated Thank You Letter"

Carroll County Times article for 6 July 1997

By Jay A. Graybeal

Following the Battle of Gettysburg, Westminster became the supply depot for the Union Army. The community was filled to overflowing as the army attempted to supply the troops in the field and transport the wounded and Confederate prisoners of war to Baltimore. The task required locating thousands of soldiers, army wagons and 10,000 army mules in and around Westminster. Not surprisingly numerous soldiers took the opportunity to supplement their rations by acquiring fresh food from the local inhabitants. One successful officer, Capt. Harry M. Morgan, wrote a somewhat belated thank you letter to Mrs. Sarah Gehr in the fall of 1863:

Camp near Brandy Station, Va.
November 25th 1863

Mrs. Gehr
Westminster, Md.
Respected Madam:

You will without doubt, be much surprised to receive a letter from a stranger and I really hope you will not be offended at the liberty I take in addressing you.

You will surely recollect the eventful days of July 1st to the 5th or 6th. Time nor distance can efface the memory of those sadly - glorious days from the minds of the kind hearted loyal mothers, the generous maidens, nor the benevolent, patriotic fathers of "Maryland, My Maryland." Neither can the destroying hand of time wipe out from the Soldier's minds pleasant personal recollections of the kind-heartedness loyalty, generosity, benevolence and patriotism shown as they marched, counter-marched and fought to preserve the honor of our dear flag and the integrity of our loved County.

Although but one I am thankful that I am permitted to be one among the recipient of so many generous impartial exhibitions of love for a Country's defenders.

As my duties took me with the baggage trains that were parked around Westminster, I found myself on the morning of the 4th of July, 1863, in the streets of your pretty town searching for a place where I might be able to purchase a loaf of bread.

After searching sometime I passed your residence, and as I passed I asked a young lady who was seated upon your door step - and whom I judged to be your daughter - "If she would be kind enough to sell me a loaf of bread". She looked up and raising her glasses said with a pleasant emphasis "No Sir, I can't sell any bread to soldiers" but, at the same time invited me to the kitchen, where I met Mrs. Gehr and was very kindly pressed to seat my self at the breakfast table and between visiting and eating I passed a very pleasant half-hour.

Since that day when I have thought of the Glorious 4th of July - Birthday of our Nation's Freedom - I have thought of the 4th as spent in Westminster, Maryland, and asked God of the Good and True to bless Mrs. Gehr and family, and all patriotic mothers and daughters of our Common Country.

The recollection of the sympathy expressed in acts by the true hearted ladies of Maryland has served weak arms to deeds of daring and faint hearts to hush their fluttering when the roar of Artillery and the zip of the bullet deafens the ear.

Be assured, dear Madam, that the kind deeds of those days were better than Brigades of men to ensure us the Victory gained on the hills of Gettysburg.

Our brave boys fought for their Country, but, I believe, that extra exertions were made to drive the foe from the doors of our friends."

Accept for yourself and your daughter my kindly wishes and earnest thanks for a fourth of July breakfast, and words of cheerful encouragement.

I gave you my full name and address so that should you desire to chide me for my delay in acknowledging your kindness or my presumption in addressing you - a stranger - you may know where I may be found.

Again assuring you of the earnest thanks of a soldier for your kind words and deeds.

I subscribe myself

Yours Truly - For the War

Henry M. Morgan

Capt. Ames Battery, 2d Army Corps

Washington, D. C.

Local residents long remembered the occupation as did veterans who were well received by local Unionists. In addition to revealing the specific act of kindness by the Gehr family, Capt. Morgan's letter suggests that the Army's warm reception in Maryland had boosted morale on the eve of the battle. A number of other Union soldiers later wrote that their treatment had been a positive factor in the outcome of the battle. Their recollections will be the subject of one of next month's columns.

Photo caption: Westminster's W. Main St. had changed little by the late 1860s since the Union Army occupied the town in July 1863 during the Gettysburg Campaign. One notable addition was the newly built three-story brick Montour House (now 59 W. Main). Historical Society of Carroll County collection, from a retouched copy courtesy of Porterfield's Photography.