

HIGH-WATER MARK

GALEN T. PICKETT

Letter of Capt. R. W. Douthat, 11th Virginia, KIA Battle of York, PA., July 9, 1863:

July 5, 1863, Gettysburg, PA

Dearest Mabel,

If my life has been delivered so as to be able to return to you, I credit it to the Providence that has led our people to this point. Sunday last I had my orders to wait with the men undercover of the treeline south of Gettysburg town, just west of the low ridge the Federals had occupied. We, each of us, were prepared for the ordered duty, to march in close formation out in the open under the terrible eyes of those guns stretched out all along the line from the cemetery on our left up to the little rocky hill to our right. Ahead of us where the Yanks were massed, right in the center of the line, a small copse of trees and a low stone wall were our particular objective. I hope you do not hold me a coward for thinking back to the wall we held at Fredericksburg, against the very same attack we were about to make and wishing this bitter cup could be taken from our lips.

Our own guns were lined up, almost hub to hub across that entire front, just waiting an order to open across the line. We guessed it was to silence the Yanks, and confuse their command, but we'd never been in a fight yet that the artillery did what was required of the infantry – to go out and take what we needed from an enemy wholly bent upon destroying us. I know I have written many times that it takes a dozen Yanks to equal any one of us, but that was bravado and hope. Come down to cases, they stand a volley as well as any of us. And fighting from behind a stone wall – I'd have given a lot to have a wall of my own that day.

We knew death was in the air. It was all over but for the letters home and the praying to the Almighty and the wounds and the pain. I hate to admit it, but in that quiet moment I couldn't even take it upon myself to write you a farewell. The trembling of my hand would have given away the shame of my cowardice.

It is over now, a respite only I am sure, and I will keep the bargain I made in that quiet green shade waiting for the knell. We still have many a fight in front of us, but the fighting here is over. The signal was never given, we

never stepped out from those trees, and we spent the Fourth warily eyeing our opponents across the open fields. And then last night, we were ordered South, around the right of the front. I do not know what fight is in front of us, but it can't be as bad as what we have just escaped.

I will write again, soon, I promise, whatever it may be that a loving Providence lays in front of me before we are to be reunited.

Your loving husband,

Robert

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George Hanbury, Diary, July 6, 1863, Mt. Pleasant, PA

There are the wildest stories about. There was a great battle down the road to Gettysburg they say, might be on two days ago, and now the armies are coming this way they say. Mrs. Johnson and her five young ones arrived by cart this morning. She'd been riding all the night and would only stop to water and feed the horses. What a terrible state they were in. She said that Asa had sent them forward, so he could gather some supplies, and she was not to stop until they had the Susquehanna between them and the terrible men. She teared up, knowing what the tall column of smoke meant behind them. She asked about Asa. Had he been through here? They lost track of Asa when the terrible men in gray overran their farm. She would not rest here with us, she had to get the children out of reach of those evil men. She warned us all that hiding would not profit us at all. Her children were weeping, and calling for Papa, except Amos, the oldest. He did not say a single word, but his eyes were afire with hatred. The men were coming. She still hoped Asa was alive, had somehow escaped. But she feared that he had been captured as spoils of war and had been sent south. I can hardly credit any of this.

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Orders, July 9, 1863

Army of Northern Virginia, I Corps Hq, Acting Corps Commander, Genl. George Edward Pickett

A general retreat is ordered. Wagon wheels to be muffled, movement to commence at midnight. Pickets will maintain a sharp presence across the front of the corps, while the wounded and the train will proceed in division brigade order, Cavalry to screen the road to Hanover then on to Taneytown.

The defensive line will be held *at all costs* until word the train is well on the road.

Gentlemen, I blame only myself for the failure we experienced at the Battle of York. Our favorable position, between Washington and the Yankee Army could in the end not be held in the face of both the Federals and the sabotage of our communication by the citizenry. And I am sure we all miss our dear Corps commander, warhorse to our Army Commander. Your valiant attack upon the union lines will live in the glorious annals of our history!

After the wounded, your next priority is to secure all *contraband* as the Yankees call them, as laid out in verbal orders at the start of the campaign. Once safely across the Potomac, this property is to be sent as far from the field of active conflict as possible. Coordination with Quartermaster HQ will be essential to supply necessary labor in bringing this year's harvest in, as well as to provide the necessary engineering improvements to our material defense. The deeper South these assets sent the better.

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Letter of George E. Pickett to LaSalle Corbet

Tayneytown, MD, July 10, 1863

My dearest Miss Sallie,

Already there is muttering and ignoble rumor-mongering of the disaster that came in the wake of my order at York to attack all along the front of the Corps. They are calling it "Pickett's Folly" and "Pickett's Bumbling" and simply "the Disaster" and laying the blame all at my feet. When my dear friend Genl. Longstreet was felled, there was not time to send back to the General Commanding, but I knew well that he was as anxious to get at the Yanks as I. I saw the opening of a grand and total victory. Marse Robert did not need to give the order to attack – the opportunity was clear and I took it. I was determined to not be robbed of my chance to lead this Corps in a gallant and glorious charge, as I was at Gettysburg. Five enemy Minnie balls have holed my uniform, and even still I am the victim of the worst calumny imaginable! There is even a rumor about that I was absent from the field, attending a gathering of the genteel society and worthies of York! The actual fact is that my absence was only momentary, barely enough to avoid giving insult to our hosts, and upon my return I *saved* this army by ordering the attack. I am sure history and providence will endorse my decision.

The army command is filled with vipers, but I doubt I will be with the army much longer.

Your loving soldier

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Letter, Captain Horace Wilkins to Abraham Myers, August 14, 1863, Huntsville, AL

My dear Col. Myers,

I am in receipt of 29 laborers here in the Huntsville Quartermasters Depot. They are all runaways recaptured in the recent Pennsylvania campaign. I protest most vehemently that they are in no fit condition for the necessary labor of the department. It is doubtful that many will live out the month after their evidently rough handling. Quite apart from being unable to perform duty, they are singularly *unwilling* to do so, and I fear this mutinous attitude is beyond the disciplinary measures at my command. The laborers in this consignment – each of them – subscribe to the fiction that they are citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and have farmed the lands in and round the County of York for scores of years. Some claim to own – yes *own* – property. The necessities of our military situation in the Huntsville military district are well known to the Colonel, and I appreciate the expediency of this delivery of so valuable a consignment of the spoils of war, but these are hardly sufficient to our need.

With respect, it seems to me the more time a runaway spends in the North, the more these outrageous fictions take root and spread, contaminating the otherwise contented bondsmen attached to this department. I fear mutiny is a significant probability. Of particular note is one Asa Johnson, so called. Continual rebellion from this one has required the gag be applied, and we laid on with the strap liberally. This one will provide useful service if he can be broken to the bit. And should he survive.

Separating these consignments before travel might go a long way towards crushing what I have found to be a persistent and perverse tendency toward telling untruths, even in the face and fact of just punishment.

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Letter, Asa Johnson to Senator Amos Johnson, June 19, 1893, Mt. Pleasant, PA

To my dearest son, Amos, or should I say, Senator Johnson,

We are taught that pride in this world can bring even the righteous and patient Job down low, and I hope the Lord will forgive an old father an honest pride in the accomplishments of a son. When you were but a boy, my only ambition in this life was to work our land, have an even chance to bring the fruit of our labor to market, and to one day leave what my father wrought in your hands.

But, man supposes, and the Lord disposes as you dear Mother would say.

We have never talked of the day that saw our old house burned, every memento of our family trampled under filthy feet, and everything – not even sparing our old broken Bay – either destroyed or taken by the people who came from the South and bore me back with them.

There was pain and terrible thirst over those next few weeks as our gang in chains was driven on foot across what seemed the length of the world.

Every morning, a brutish man with sergeant's stripes asked us who were our masters, and where we ran from, and how we could go back to a comfortable life of labor if we would just tell *who we were belonged to*. The man with the stripes gave me mine, and more beside.

How I hated them all, and how afraid of me they were, even hobbled in chains and bleeding in the sun.

The worst of it was I had no idea what happened to Mother and the rest of you. I can bear almost any burden of torment in this world, if only I know you and your sisters are safe and Mother is well. They never did believe that I was a free man, or that I owned our farm, but they gave out that they had captured you all, and you had been dispersed and sent as field hands down Mississippi way. Those lies stung deepest of all.

I have no curse to hurl equal of the sin of these men. They meant us all, born free in these United States, to live our lives as *property*, as *their* property to the last generation. I will never forgive them what they intended for us. If the price of revenge is hellfire itself, I'd still reach out from the flames and drag them all by the heels down on top of me.

You are your own man, my son. And while I know old Lincoln wrote from his deathbed in Springfield to let them up easy, I can't find it in my heart to forgive a single one of them a single one of those sins against the free people of our United States.

Mr. Senator, I know you have a heart of fire, and a forged spine of steel, and a fine edge to your tongue. Use it. Use them. I'm not a Senator, so you can forgive me my desire for revenge. But you have a bigger job than satisfying me.

I guess all I can say is, I trust you, dearest Amos, with the freedom of your children and your grandchildren. I saw that freedom won by arms of our country, as the gunboats were firing and the Federals were landing at Galveston. This is the anniversary, twenty and seven years thence from the end of the war to now, the date we can reckon as the birthday of our new country – from the quickening of the Revolution to the last shot at Galveston was a long labor. I know you will keep the child borne in that pain and blood safe to the last days of our Republic.

Your loving father,

Asa

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Commencement Address, Howard University, June 19, 1905

My Fellow Americans:

Six-score and nine years ago, our forefathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. I stand here before you as a humble vehicle of the simple grace which providence has seen fit to award in recognition of their efforts.

As a mere boy of no more than eight years of age, I saw the smoke of my father's and my grandfather's labors destroyed in the wake of the Great War in which this nation was forged. Formerly a mere collection of shards of iron rooted in section and Slave or Free, we forged and hammered our Republic into a single bright thing, reconstructed, reconstituted, and rededicated to the promise of our great founding principle. Our edge has been honed sharp as a people, and the strength of our steel is matched only by our remarkable flexibility.

We can be bent, but we cannot ever more be broken.

Like many of yours, my family itself was shattered under the blows of that forging. As you may well know, my father, born a free man of York County in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was taken from us in the wake and wreck of Southern defeat, and sent into labor by the men who would have shattered our glorious Union to create a great slave-holding empire extending

from the Rio Grande down into the Central and Southern Americas. My father was captured and faced what was intended to be the inauguration of a lifetime of chattel bondhoo under a cruel sun. A master was put over him. He was a free man, a free American, and nevertheless, he was scarred with the whip, hobbled with the chain. Worst of all was not knowing where his children or dearest wife might be, whether they might be toiling under the same sun under a different master. And what of the grandchildren? And their grandchildren?

The judgement of God is not ours to deem. But the victory of the armies of the Republic has made that judgement manifest.

In our newly forged nation, reconstructed these last ten years, here I stand before you. Who could credit such a thing possible? Let me be clear. No one of us, no one of any of the creatures of a great and merciful God, has been or will be given the dominion. Let there be no masters, evermore.

The men who fought to establish my family in servitude, they fought on until their final defeat in the eighteen-hundred-and-sixty-sixth year of our Lord, at the Battle of Galveston Harbor, on this date a mere thirty-nine years ago. But, their tide of ungodly ignobility was turned back at York, in the summer in which I count my first year of manhood.

Their tide has come and gone, seeping into the brackish swamps of the coastal backwaters of hate and malicious, narrow greed. Our tide as a free people, ever guided by that Providence which delivered my father back to us, our fathers back to all of us, is still on the rise, my fellow Americans. Today, here and now where we stand, equal to the great and glorious work before us, our tide has reached its highest mark – to date! Tomorrow, the waters of freedom will lap upon what is now only dry and barren land. Let the high-water mark of our Republic ever advance, until no one anywhere need bow nor scrape nor answer to any master save that quiet still voice in which our sincere prayers are answered in whispers.

And so, it is with great pride, that by Presidential Proclamation I dedicate these weeks from Juneteenth through Independence Day to be the national and annual season of celebration for our great nation, in thanksgiving to the great and merciful almighty who has seen fit to bless this, our shining city upon the hill.

God bless the United States, and God bless my father, and God bless you graduates of this great university.

- Amos Johnson, 24th President of the United States, *The 'Howard' Address*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure.