

LETTERS OF CHARLES W. FORTNER

MEMBER OF THE COLUMBIA GUARDS IN THE MEXICAN WAR

George A. Turner

A hundred and fifty-five years ago, two months into President James K. Polk's presidency, the Congress passed a declaration of war authorizing the United States to fight a war with Mexico. There would be men from Columbia County who volunteered to fight in this conflict. War between Mexico and the United States erupted over the issue of Texas. Mexico had long refused to accept the independence of Texas that it won by defeating Santa Anna's army in the battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. Despite this fact, the Mexican government refused to acquiesce in allowing Texas to become part of the United States when the Congress adopted a resolution to annex it on March 1, 1845. Relations between the two countries quickly deteriorated. Two years earlier the Mexican minister of foreign relations warned the American government that if Texas became part of the United States, it would mean war. Mexico's bitterness intensified when the Americans claimed the Rio Grande River, rather than the Nueces River, as Texas' southern boundary. These disagreements prompted Mexico to sever diplomatic relations with the United States on March 28, 1845. Hostilities soon broke out between American and Mexican troops in the disputed territory along the Rio Grande River on May 1, 1846. President Polk, who favored territorial expansion, immediately sent a message to Congress on May 11 asking for a declaration of war. Two days later, Congress concurred, voting overwhelmingly to declare war against Mexico.

The regular United States army was too small to wage a successful war against Mexico. Therefore, it was necessary for President Polk to call upon the states to provide 75,000 volunteer troops. Pennsylvania quickly responded by raising two regiments or 2,000 men. At this time, Columbia County included what is today Montour County, and Danville was the county seat. A number of the citizens at a public meeting in Danville on May 30, 1846, readily endorsed the government's decision to go to war with Mexico. Citizens adopted resolutions reflecting a patriotic zeal that expressed the view that Mexico was solely responsible for hostilities and that it was ". . . the duty of every freeman to assist his country in the hour of danger by every means in his power." In addition, the people declared: "We view with pride and pleasure, the prompt steps taken by the Columbia Guards, in offering their services to their country in the present emergency." The enthusiastic response in Columbia County of support for the war against Mexico was typical throughout the state. Pennsylvania's Assistant Adjutant General H. Petriken reported on July 11 that there were 2,717 more volunteers than the state needed to meet the national government's request for troops.

The Columbia Guards were the oldest infantry unit in northern Pennsylvania dating back to its organization in 1817. After much waiting, it finally received the induction order into military service in the middle of December. It instructed Captain John S. Wilson to have his company at Pittsburgh by January 5, 1847, so it could be incorporated into the second Pennsylvania regiment. Work began immediately to recruit additional volunteers to bring the company to full strength and complete the necessary arrangements for the men to leave on December 28. Not all of the men were from Columbia County; some came from surrounding counties such as Northumberland, Luzerne, and Union. Their ages varied between eighteen and forty with the average age around twenty-five. They came from a variety of occupations; many worked in jobs connected with the canal, iron industry, farming and various trades like blacksmith,

carpenter, mason, miller, printer, and shoemaker. Before leaving they spent much of their time drilling.

The Danville community rallied behind the volunteers. Some of the ladies made clothing for the men and served them a Christmas dinner. The *Danville Intelligencer* observed: "Our whole town is animated — and the necessary arrangements for starting the Guards on their march to the place of rendezvous, in a comfortable manner, are going forward in commendable order and with alacrity." From a public meeting at the courthouse on December 19, a campaign began to raise funds to meet the various expenses of the Columbia Guards. In less than two weeks, private contributions came to \$600, and in addition, the County Commissioners provided \$700 to pay for clothing and the troops' transportation to Pittsburgh.

On the day before they left, the soldiers attended religious services on Sunday morning conducted by Rev. Lightner at the Episcopal Church. His remarks encased in a nationalistic spirit fully supported the country's decision to go to war against Mexico. Noting that war at times became inevitable since ". . . there is no superior earthly power whence redress for public injuries may be obtained, an appeal to arms in defense of national rights is clearly sanctioned even by the religion of Him, who is "the Prince of Peace." At one point, Rev. Lightner declared that when a nation has a justifiable cause for going to war, then in such a conflict, ". . . the very angels of God themselves are heavenly soldiers." In the afternoon the Guards attended another sermon preached by Rev. Yeoman at the Methodist Church. His remarks supported the cause that the men were about to undertake. Referring to the Mexicans, he told his audience: "We must show them we regard the violations of right with which they are chargeable, as outrages against justice and law; and that we hold ourselves bound and resolved to procure redress." In addition, he reminded the citizens it was their duty to pray for the success of the soldiers, secure their "sustenance and comfort," bestow honor and reward upon them for their services, and cherish their memory. On this same day, the ladies of the Danville Bible Society presented the men with New Testaments.

The next day on December 28, around eight o'clock in the morning, the Columbia Guards, numbering ninety-five, left Danville in wagons for Pittsburgh. Several citizens and the Danville Band accompanied them as far as Hartleton, a community fifteen miles southwest of Lewisburg. They arrived in Pittsburgh on January 3, and six days later took the steamboat *Wisconsin* to descend the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to reach New Orleans on January 16. From there they sailed to Mexico on January 29. The Columbia Guards appreciated the outpouring of support. Appearing in three Columbia County newspapers a week after their departure was a note of thanks for the many acts of kindness from the citizens. In addition, it stated: "They will ever hold their memories in grateful remembrance, pledging themselves — one and all — never to disgrace the county whose name they bear, in whatever situation they may be placed, be it in the hour of battle or in their peaceful intercourse with the citizens of another clime."

One of these volunteers was Charles W. Fortner, a thirty-seven year old school teacher from Rohrsburg, Columbia County. He and his wife, Ann, were the parents of two young children, James and Matilda. Before going off to war, Fortner agreed to write Henry Webb, editor of *The Columbia Democrat*, a Bloomsburg newspaper, letters recounting his experiences and those of the Columbia Guards. Seven of his letters appeared in the newspaper from January 9 to March 6, 1847. There may have been additional letters, but it is impossible to know since there are no issues of *The Columbia Democrat* in existence for 1847 after March 20.

Fortner never returned home. He became ill in Mexico and died on August 27, 1847, at a hospital in Perote, halfway between Mexico City and Veracruz. Fortner was one of the thirty-eight who lost their lives while serving in the Columbia Guards from either disease or battle wounds. With his death and unpaid debts, it became necessary to settle his estate. Samuel White acted as the administrator and received court permission in April 1848 to sell Fortner's eight-acre property in Rohrsburg. It is possible that Ann Fortner was a relative of Samuel White. The 1850 U.S. census for Orange Township reported that she and her two children lived with the Samuel White family.

In the following three letters, Fortner commented on the Columbia Guards' trip from Danville to Pittsburgh which required seven days to complete. Their route took them through the towns of Lewisburg, Mifflinburg, Hartleton, Boalsburg, Pine Grove, Water Street, Hollidaysburg, Summit, Ebensburg, Armagh, Blairsville, and New Alexandria before reaching their destination. The road that the Columbia Guards traveled from Danville to Pittsburgh would be similar to following today's Pennsylvania Route 45 to where it intersects with U.S. Route 22 at Barre. From this junction, U.S. Route 22 goes west through Hollidaysburg to Pittsburgh.

Letter #1

His first letter written most likely from Hartleton, remarked about their departure from Danville, reception in Lewisburg, his fellow soldiers, and two new recruits joining the company at Yonkmanstown [sic] Youngmanstown which was the earlier name for Mifflinburg. There are some spelling and grammar mistakes in the letters. The errors have not be corrected in order to retain the writer's syle.

Col. Webb:

I embrace the first opportunity to redeem my pledge to you, of an explanation for my refusing to bid my friends farewell in parting with them on the solemn occasion which we have just passed through. In parting with friends on any occasion, it awakens every tender emotion of the heart, and this at all time completely unmans me, and I feel that I am but a child — and for this reason, in parting with those for whom I have an affection, I do it with a waive of the hand or a nod of the head.

Now for a word with regard to the citizens of Rohrsburg, Orangeville, Bloomsburg, Lightstreet and Danville. I feel that I am under many obligations to you. I have received every mark of kindness from you. The Ladies of Danville, I must speak of more particularly. Their kindness and attention manifested towards the members of the Volunteer Company which left Danville this morning, has been of the most agreeable and considerate kind. They presented each member of the Company with a copy of the New Testament, for which may they be rewarded by Heavens richest blessings. And notwithstanding the morning was of the most disagreeable kind when the Volunteers started on their journey, the doors, windows and even many parts of the street, were filled with them. And the expression "Good Bless you," and "God Almighty protect you," fell from the lips of many, while others filled with tender emotions, and their eyes swimming with tears, waived their handkerchiefs in token of respect. And surely, if the prayers and tears of such angelic creatures will be regarded by the God of battles, our arms cannot be otherwise than victorious. The Guards were escorted from Danville to Lewisburg by a number of the most respectable citizens of Danville and we were cheered every where on the way. At Moorsburg we were saluted by the firing of cannon. At Lewisburg we were received in true militia-style by the soldiers and citizens of the town and vicinity, and escorted into town, and after parading the principle street, we

were appropriately addressed by Gen. Green, followed by Col. McFadden, who presented the company with a most beautiful flag, which was received by, Capt. Wilson of the Columbia Guards, when 2d Lieut. E. E. LaClerc replied to Col. McFadden on behalf of the Guards, in the most spirited and appropriate manner. After these proceedings, the patriotic song of the Guards was sung by a number of gentlemen, after which we partook of a most sumptuous dinner which had been provided by the citizens of Lewisburg. After which there was another very able and appropriate address, and then the Volunteers were escorted out of town by the Lewisburg Soldiers and band, and there as elsewhere we were cheered by the Ladies.

At Yonkmanstown we were also received in true military style, and were ably addressed by one of its citizens — after which we partook of a very good supper, and then drove on to this place. The whole days travel being thirty miles, every step of which we have received smiles, cheers and blessings. The members of the Guards appearing very cheerful. I am in squad number ten, my messmates, are as follows: — Alvin M. Allen and Benjamin J. Martin of Wysox, Bradford county — Robert Lyon and Charles Evans of Danville, Col. co. — Jerome Walker of Liberty township Col. co. — A. B. Bowman, Huntington township Luzerne co.. — Charles W. Fortner, of Rohrsburg, Columbia co. and Charles C. Baldy, of Danville, has charge of the team by which we are conveyed, and I think that we have every prospect of a very agreeable squad. We have some very good singers in the squad, and they occasionally cheer us with a good patriotic song. The whole number of the company I believe is about ninety-four — eighty-two privates, four Commissioned and eight noncommissioned officers. Thus, friends you have a hasty sketch of our first day march, and the acquaintance I have made with these who are to be my partners in toil and danger. We took in two new recruits at Yonkmanstown.

My best respect to all with a fond wish that those of us who have started to brave the dangers of war will not be forgotten.

Yours

Charles W. Fortner

The Columbia Democrat, January 9, 1847

Letter #2

Fortner's second letter written on the fifth day of their journey commented about the generous expressions of support from of citizens as they passed through different towns, staying at Boalsburg, and the Huntingdon and Cambria Turnpike charging them a toll.

Summitville, January 1, 1847

Col. Webb:

The Guards left Hartleton on Tuesday morning last, and bid adieu to the citizens of Danville who had accompanied them to that place, and the citizens of Hartleton giving the Guards three hearty cheers. At Liberty Mills the Guards were received with loud acclamation by the citizens, and of the military style by the Centre Cavalry and Pennsylvania Troop, who escorted the Guards to Aaronsburg a distance of five miles, where we were welcomed by the citizens of that flourishing town, and after having dined

very sumptuously we were escorted by the above mentioned companies several miles. At Millheim we were received in the most flattering manner by the military and citizens, who met us a half mile out of town, where they had their cannon and gave us several salutes, and upon a bridge over a small stream they had erected a splendidly decorated arch, in resemblance of the Ancient triumphal arches. This arch had the following motto, "A grateful country will honor her defenders." At this place we were also complimented by being presented with a most beautiful and splendidly wrought wreath; many of the houses were decorated with evergreens and here again we were escorted out of town by the citizens. We this day arrived at Boalsburg, where we met with the most enthusiastic reception by the citizens of this place. Squad No. 10, was quartered at the house of Col. James Johnson, a short distance out of town, and here we were feasted on every delicacy that earth, air or water could produce, and after we had supped, we were cheered by having several spirited airs played on the Piano by one of Mr. Johnson's daughters. Then the song of the Columbia Guards was sung by several of our squad while Miss Johnson played the tune upon the Piano. The next morning we took leave of our kind host and family, and rejoined the company in town, and were escorted out of it by the citizens and soldiers, while the band played the Star Spangled Banner, and our banner unfurled to the breeze. I should have mentioned that a few miles on this side of Millheim there was another arch over the road with this motto, "Honour to the brave." Our first place after leaving Boalsburg was Pine Grove, where a squad of the Centre county Company joined ours. Our next place was Graysburg, where we were treated kindly and after taking refreshments made the best of our way through, mud and water to Water Street, a distance of twenty-six miles from Boalsburg. This close the third day. One the next we pursued our journey passing through a place called the Yellow Springs, Hollidaysburg and some small villages of which I heard no name. At Hollidaysburg, five of our teams stopped and we had to procure others, and we arrived at Summitville at eleven o'clock at night. I must here mention a circumstance which must be shocking to every man of any sense whatever. The Sequestrator of the Turnpike Company of the Huntingdon and Cambria Turnpike, upon which we travel from Waterstreet to Pittsburg, passed along the pike and in the most pre-emptory manner possible commanded the gate keepers to exact the utmost farthing of toll of the teamsters. The name of this unfeeling wretch is John Izart. The charter of the company provides that all soldiers and military men shall pass free when going to and returning from parade, and yet, when soldiers are going into the actual service of their country, they must be charged full toll. One poor woman who tended a gate cried like a child because she was compelled to collect the toll, and said it was unjust, and if she had the money she would pay it in place of the Guards. I am of the opinion that every honest man throughout this nation will join with me and say that the name of John Izart, of Spruce Creek, Huntingdon county and State of Pennsylvania, should be branded with eternal infamy and disgrace for attempting to exact toll from those who are on their way to fight for their county.

Yours

Charles W. Fortner

The Columbia Democrat, January 9, 1847

Letter #3

Fortner wrote his third letter three days after arriving in Pittsburgh. He was quite impressed and emotionally moved by the number of people who demonstrated their

sincere affections for them. To him, Pittsburgh was a busy city but dingy. The men remained here for six days before they departed by boat to New Orleans on January 9.

Pittsburg, January 6, 1847

Col. Webb:

We are now in the place, and have been since Sunday afternoon. When I last wrote we were at Summitville. The next night we reached Armaugh [sic] Armagh, and Saturday night we were at New Salem, which is twenty-four miles from here.

I have seen many things since we left Danville that I shall never forget. Through all the towns and villages which we passed, we received the most hearty congratulations, and often have the inhabitants of the country gathered in clusters upon the road side to cheer us on our way. The schools were dismissed and the scholars arranged in line upon the road-side, and as we passed the female part would drop a modest curtsy, and the boys make their best bow. All this appeared to be the expression of a warm and friendly feeling towards those who were about to enter upon the battlefield in defence of a freeman's right secured to use by the blood of our forefathers.

But amid all this cheering, I saw many whose eyes were wet with weeping, and men and women whom I never saw, and never expect to see again, shook our hands while the big tear of paternal affection stood in the eye. The hoary headed veteran and saint-like matron, have poured upon us their benedictions. And I must confess that it has cost me many a strong effort to suppress the rising emotions which choke utterance, and cause the scalding tears to moisten the manly cheek.

Since we have been in Pittsburg, I have had but little time to look about; however, I saw Mr. Henry Sproul, formerly of Columbia county, and Samuel Staddon of Rohrsburg. Pittsburg wears rather a gloomy appearance. There is a continual cloud of black smoke hanging over the place, which gives the buildings the appearance of age and decay while they are still new. In the district, which was burned in forty-five, there has since been erected some elegant buildings, and as a general thing, there appears to be an immense amount of business transacted in this place. Not less than fifteen large steamboats are at this time lying in the river along Water-street, and boats are continually ascending and descending the Monongahela, which waggons of all sizes are constantly moving in different directions about the city loaded with commodities of every possible description, and the shops spread to the gaze of the passers by, everything both useful and ornamental, from the penny toy up to the solid substantial for the support of nature. Yesterday the City election took place and resulted in the election of persons to office favorable to temperance, and decided by vote against granting tavern licenses for the sale of intoxicating drinks. The Odd Fellows had a turn out to day, but I have been unable to learn the object, but I suppose it was in commemoration of some departed brother, as I noticed they all wore crape on the left arm. The Ladies of this place by an arrangement with the Ladies of Danville, presented each member of the Guards with a copy of the Episcopal Prayer Book, or book for Church Service, so that now through the charitable as well as patriotic conduct of the Ladies of Danville, each member of the Guards has a Testament and Prayer Book, and may Heaven's smiles ever rest upon them for the interest they have taken in behalf of those who go to die upon the field of battle. We have to-day received a part of our camp equipage; our uniforms are to be ready by morning, and we shall, if possible, get afloat to-morrow. They way they are now loading the steamboats at this place with bombshells is a pretty sure sign that there is to be some hard fighting in Mexico before the haughty Dons can be brought to their proper senses. The general health of the company is good,

and kindness appears to prevail through the company. The Guards have thus far sustained a decided fair character for honesty in dealing and gentlemanly deportment. There was a sad accident happened this morning near our quarters. — One of the members of a company connected with the 2d regiment, accidentally shot a boy dead upon the spot. The man had loaded his pistol with the newly invented exploding cotton, and by some mishap the pistol went off, the ball entered the right breast of the boy, killing him instantly, verifying the old saying that "firearms are dangerous things."

In my next I shall speak something of the appearance of the country through which we have passed, and also give the result of the election for regimental officers which took place to-day. It was very quiet for so large an election.

Yours

Charles W. Fortner

The Columbia Democrat, January 16, 1847