

"With Drums Beating and Colors Flying":

A Civil War-Era Letter

Introduction

In September of 1864 Neal McCoy of Wayne County, Ohio, made a visit back to his old home at Jerseytown in what he calls "that God forsaken County of Columbia." After returning home to Ohio, he wrote to an (unnamed) boyhood friend a detailed and lively account of his visit. The four-page letter brims with local War-related news (recruiting, enlistment bounties, dashing cavalry) and politics (the upcoming presidential contest between the Union or Republican ticket of Abraham Lincoln and the Democratic party's slate headed by Gen. George McClellan).

McCoy's visit coincided with one of the most dramatic moments in Columbia County history – the "invasion" by over 1000 U. S. troops to put down the supposed "Fishing Creek Confederacy" against the wartime draft. His letter provides a vivid account of ordinary village people in the midst of stirring events such as the sudden appearance of 250 infantry marching into Jerseytown "with drums beating and colors flying."

At the time, rural Columbia County was heavily Democratic in sentiment, and was believed to be full of "copperheads" or Southern sympathizers. McCoy, however, seems to have been staunchly Republican – perhaps part of the reason that he had moved to Ohio about the time the Civil War broke out.

Neal McCoy, son of Robert, was born in 1815 and grew up in or near Madison Township. In 1838 he married Esther "Hettie" Foster of Union County and took up a career as storekeeper, first in White Hall (then in Columbia, now in Montour County) and then in Jerseytown. On Cummings' 1860 Map of Jerseytown Neal McCoy's house and store are on the southeast corner of the village's main crossroads. In the 1850 U. S. census he is listed as a merchant age 34, with wife Esther 32, and three children ages 11, 9, and 4. The family was still there during the 1860 census, but shortly afterward, the McCoys moved to Ohio and settled in Fredericksburg, Wayne County, south of Akron.

McCoy's letter was discovered recently among the Society's Bound Manuscripts; it is laid loose in MS 143, which is the docket of cases heard 1822-1833 before Justice of the Peace Caleb Thomas of Madison Township. (Thomas' journal was bought at a garage sale in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1990 and later was donated to CCHGS.)

McCoy's letter is reproduced below with updated spelling and punctuation and a few words added in square brackets; the letter-writer's penmanship is difficult and his spelling erratic, so some words and names are conjectural. The letter mentions incidentally over twenty Columbia County persons and about the same number of sites

(homes, saloons, etc.). In the footnotes we have provided tentative identifications for many of these names along with explanations of some obscure terms and phrases.

The manuscript was transcribed and annotated by George Holdren and W. M. Baillie with much-appreciated help from Julia Driskell, Harriet Eckroth, Bonnie Farver, Helen Gammon, Edith Hess, and George Turner.

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Fredericksburg, Wayne County [Ohio], 6 Oct. [1864]

My dear Sir:

I think I am due you a letter, as I have been over the old grounds in Pa. I will give you a history of my trip to Jerseytown and vicinity – that God-forsaken County of Columbia. I left home on Thursday the 8th of September, arrived at Harrisburg the same night about midnight. At the Hotel I found Clark and many others from Bloomsburg and Danville. I stayed there until the next Monday, had a glorious time and spent the time very pleasantly. I had lots of good old Bourbon [and] took dinner with Simon Cernron [Cameron]; he gave me all the assurance that Pa. would go all right [in the upcoming election]; when I told him Ohio would give 75,000 [votes] for the Union ticket he gave me another shake of the hand, and Clark proposed we would all take some more Bourbon, which we did with a good grace.

I was cross in Harrisburg to hear my old friends call me "old Mac"; I had a low western hat and my hair was mickling long, that made me look old. I got my hair cut off in fighting trim and got a stove pipe hat which made quite a difference; then they called me "Col" again.

There was a great many troops there; they sent off three Regiments while I was there. I saw a great many Soldiers that I was acquainted with from Northumberland, Montour & Columbia Counties. Among them was Russel & Richard Stout. They was in the 112th Regiment; they took the Bounty in Northumberland – \$100. Russel wanted some whiskey and could not get any, as the Saloons will not sell to Soldiers. I took him to my room and gave him a good taste.

I went from there to Bloom, stayed over night, saw all of my old friends; went next evening to Jerseytown, got there about 7 at night. There was a big crowd there, in fact all the Township; they was raising money by subscription to hire men [for the army]. They finally raised / borrowed in all \$14,000 in cash. Funston, Kief, Coon, & Esq. Smith was appointed a committee to hire the men. They went to Bloom and tried hard to hire some of the "100 days men" of the Army of Fishing Creek. They laid around Bloom & up at the Camp about a week; the 100 days men was moved to Muncy & they followed them up there.

By the way, I was setting on Kief's Porch [with] some others; I spoke and said "What is that noise?" and looked up towards Bloomsburg & in come thirty cavalry under full canter, their swords rattling & the tramp of so many horses that it was really alarming. They whirled around Rimly's, ordered a halt & dismount; you never saw such Confusion! Not scarcely a woman or man was to be seen. Rimly took to the hay mow and was not to be found. Mrs. Rimly showed herself a Lady – she gave them all the bread that she had. I am sorry to say Mrs. S. told them she had not any. Esther Barber & Elyse Acranz also done well. Brugler & Beyent & self gave them as much to drink as the officers would let them have. They mounted and out they went under full charge.

[They] hardly left Town before in comes 250 infantry with drums beating and colors flying; it was a beautiful sight. They stayed ½ an hour & encamped at Essick's Creek; next day they moved to Muncy. The committee followed them there but did not succeed in hiring any. I see by the Bloom paper they had a draft [of men for the army] in Madison.

It was fun to see Funston, Coon & Kief whispering and palavering together at Bloom & Jerseytown. I had a pleasant time there; everybody treated me so very kindly – old men, women & children and all. I had many a good malt on the old Porch. It was diverting to see the County people look & look to see me there. They would stop and say, "You have come back! What, are you going to start store again? I wish you would; we all go to Danville now." It is the poorest miserable place I ever saw. I do not see how they live & content themselves.

Dollman says it was hard enough when I left, but a darn sight worse when Jack went; you know that Jack was a god dem power would do you a favor when no other one would. Him and I went out to see Daniel Smith, took dinner there on Sunday; we had a good time, could hardly get away good, and Kind Susan, she got me one of my good old dinners – she knew what I liked. It done me so much good to see her step around the table; she looks thin, also Mrs. Smith. I called to see Mrs. Ohl, the old thing with her old complaint; she had a great deal to say about you going away. I stayed one night at Cotners', that was enough & I was glad to get away. Polly went on so heavy that I felt sorry for that she has another baby. (Dollman says she will soon kill it.) I was astonished to hear no dispute of the Abatement, not a word did I hear, could not even get a word out of old Billy. All [that people talked of] was to get money to hire men. Rimly was drunk all the time I was there.

I visited the [words unreadable] and all my old haunts. I walked down our old lane to the barn and over the meadows, sat down and had my thoughts back to think of the many pleasant days I had spent. Our old house is empty & I went up stairs in my old room and took a good nap on the bare floor, enjoyed it very much. I saw all of Zeisloft's circle; he wants to sell very much. I was at Washingtonville, Danville, all very glad to see me. I went to Phil's & Jack purchased a large stack of [word unreadable].

Arrived safely at home [in Fredericksburg], found Luster at home and all well excepting Mother who is very ill with the Rheumatism, confined to her bed – likely her old winter

[ailment]; I never saw any person suffer as she does. Aunt Ellen, Clem & Samuel are all well; our trade is very good. I like Ohio better every day. Much love to all; give my best respects to Frank Rewlen & wife, Hallerin & all friends there.

N McCoy