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# “In Search of All That Was Near and Dear to Me”

## *Desertion as a Window into Community Divisions in Caldwell County during the Civil War*

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ON SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 1861, HUNDREDS OF RESIDENTS OF Caldwell County, North Carolina, flocked to the county seat of Lenoir in “a state of feverish excitement,” as twenty-seven-year-old merchant George W. F. Harper put it. In front of the courthouse, a regimental muster called for volunteers to enlist and serve in a company of North Carolina state troops, and ninety-seven young men enthusiastically joined up. Among those eager enlistees was George Harper’s seventeen-year-old younger brother, Samuel, who volunteered for the company that called itself the Caldwell Rough and Ready Guards. Though the married slave owner George did not enlist that spring day, he proclaimed that he and other Caldwell men were “in readiness at any and all times . . . to march in defense of the rights and honors of the South against the aggressions of the North.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Samuel impatiently prepared for departure, “fearful lest our troops in the field would whip the Yankees . . . before we got there.” On June 3, the company marshaled in the town square for its departure. The younger Harper later recalled that “nearly every man, woman, and child was in Lenoir [that] day . . . to see us off.” Some of the leading men in the county gave brief speeches; ladies waved handkerchiefs and shed tears as the men began their journey to Raleigh, where they would become Company A of the Twenty-Second North Carolina Regiment. The enlistment spectacle only created more excitement among the young farmers and laborers in the greater Caldwell community.<sup>2</sup>

Residents throughout Caldwell County, situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, worked and played together, fought and courted each other. Whigs and Democrats argued at election rallies, read partisan newspapers from Charlotte, Asheville, Winston-Salem, and Raleigh, and debated the best methods through which to increase Caldwell's prosperity. While fewer than three hundred citizens lived within its town limits, Lenoir—just a few miles south of the county's geographic center—served as the market entrepôt and hub for social and political engagement for the county's nearly 7,500 residents (which included 1,088 slaves). Planters and yeoman farmers came to town to purchase goods at stores, trade with the merchants, send their sons to Belvoir or Finley High Academy and their daughters to the Methodist-run Davenport College or the Presbyterian-influenced Kirkwood School, conduct legal business at the courthouse, and attend church. Poorer families may have attended the same churches, but did not send their children to school or frequent the stores (although they would demand that planters provide corn and cloth during lean times). When it came to enlisting for the war, however, it didn't matter what class one came from or what one's political affiliations were. The nearly eleven hundred men from this county who enlisted in the Confederate army knew each other's families, kinship networks, social status, and individual strengths and weaknesses.<sup>3</sup>

The *rage militaire* that overwhelmed Caldwell was somewhat surprising given that the community had been Unionist up until that time. In the 1860 presidential election, the politically Whig county voted for the Constitutional Union candidate, John Bell, over the southern rights Democrat, John Breckinridge, by a 499–229 vote.<sup>4</sup> Residents hoped to maintain the integrity of the United States, something they feared would be impossible with the election of the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln (who was not even on the ballot in Caldwell County). William Lenoir, a prominent local planter from Fort Defiance in northeast Caldwell and scion of one of the county's foremost families, feared he would see “all the glory for which our forefathers fought, bled, & died buried in eternal shame & ruin.” Six weeks later, on December 22, 1860, William's lawyer brother, Walter, led a “Union meeting” in the Lenoir courthouse. While the attendees recognized the right of southern states to secede, they urged a peaceful “final settlement of the issues between the two sections . . . upon principles that were just to both sides.” Emphasizing the conditional nature of their Unionism, however, the residents resolved that “if this just demand is not complied with,” then the South “must demand, and if necessary, force, a separation of the two sections.”<sup>5</sup>

Local leaders earnestly hoped to avoid secession. Calvin Jones, a Caldwell planter and politician, wrote to Representative Zebulon B. Vance in Washington that “North Carolina and especially Caldwell and Wilkes are deeply attached to the Union,” and he confessed, “I cant contemplate a dissolution of this government without horror and indignation.” Walter Lenoir wrote to Vance in February 1861 advocating that North Carolina adopt a position of “neutrality,” rather than join the other seceded states. When the state general assembly called for a referendum on whether to hold a secession convention, Caldwell residents cast 651 votes against it and only 186 in favor of it, indicating a strong desire to remain in the Union. The state narrowly rejected the referendum. However, the county and state’s Unionism was conditional. If the Lincoln administration took any step to coerce the southern states that had seceded back into the Union, their resolve would break. Calvin Jones admitted, “The nature of southern people is impulsive and sectional feeling contagious.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the contagion spread rapidly after April 15, 1861, three days after Confederates fired on Charleston, South Carolina’s Fort Sumter, when President Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for seventy-five thousand troops to put down the rebellion. Governor John Ellis indignantly asserted that the call to arms against the seceded states was a “violation of the constitution and a gross usurpation of power.” He unequivocally confirmed the state’s resistance: “You can get no troops from North Carolina.” Within days of Ellis’s refusal to supply soldiers to the Union, the regimental muster that inspired Samuel Harper to volunteer met in Lenoir.<sup>7</sup> In neighboring Wilkes County, a crowd gathered in Wilkesboro on April 30 to call their own volunteers for a company. Local planter and merchant James Gwyn noted there was “a great deal of excitement—most everybody now for the South.” There was much drinking, rejoicing, and the occasional fight among excited youths in the course of the celebration. The euphoria, however, did not immediately dissipate the people’s deeply ingrained Unionist sentiments. On May 2, Gwyn wrote to his brother-in-law Rufus Lenoir of Caldwell that “the people seemed pretty nearly united in the cause of the South—but I think if an influential man had got up and espoused the other side, he would have had a good many to join him,” foreshadowing the dissent that would soon emerge.<sup>8</sup>

The martial excitement reached its peak in Caldwell County in July 1861 with the formation of two companies that would become part of the famed Twenty-Sixth North Carolina Regiment. These two companies provide a window through which to view the growing fractures in a community caught up in the whirlwind of secession in 1861. Fully one-third of the men who en-

listed that summer came from households that did not own land. Scions of the wealthiest families in the region enlisted with some of the poorest (who were often tenants or laborers on their farms). Similarly, a third of the first enlistees hailed from the commercial hub of Lenoir, but the remainder came from the river valleys, foothills, and mountain slopes throughout the county.<sup>9</sup> While this might suggest unity across class lines, the seeds did not root deeply in secessionist soil. Outside of the county seat, the bonds attaching men to their units were weaker. When the war brought significant suffering to their families, many of these soldiers abandoned their companies to return to the fields and rocky slopes of their homes.

The outburst of enthusiasm that spring and summer following Lincoln's proclamation created a façade of unity in Caldwell County that masked deep-seated divisions, grounded in class, geography, and politics. Cracks in this veneer developed in 1862, as shortages of food and manpower plagued local communities. The façade crumbled altogether in the summer of 1863, when Caldwell soldiers suffered enormous casualties at Gettysburg. Scores of enlistees left their units to return to their families at home, revealing the lack of strong Confederate identity in the county and exposing the various fissures of the community. The fight became one in their own neighborhoods, with deserters, draft evaders, and militant Unionists fighting against Confederate supporters. Few, however, were clairvoyant enough to see those future travails during the war's first exciting weeks.

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1861, CALDWELL'S LEADERS WORKED TO raise companies by giving speeches throughout the county each Saturday. Residents embraced the martial spirit, holding picnics for the speeches and enlistment musters. On July 15, seventy-nine men enlisted in one company, which called itself the Hibriten Guards after the 2,265-foot-high mountain overlooking Lenoir. They elected thirty-two-year-old Nathaniel Rankin, professor of mathematics at Finley High School and son of a local Presbyterian minister, to be their captain. Eleven days later, sixty-four men joined another company, calling themselves the Caldwell Guards and electing local farmer Wilson A. White as captain. On July 31, Rankin's company mustered to leave for Raleigh. In a public ceremony, Laura Norwood (niece to Rufus and Walter Lenoir) led twelve young girls in white dresses and blue ribbons to present a flag to the unit. The blue banner had been made from a silk dress of Rankin's fourteen-year-old sister, Annie, while his twenty-five-year-old sister, Ella Rankin Harper (George Harper's wife), had decorated the flag with the state coat of arms. Norwood presented the flag to Captain Rankin "with few words fitly

spoken,” according to one of the young girls in the procession. The company then marched to Hickory, where it boarded a train for Raleigh. Two weeks later, White’s company followed.<sup>10</sup>

The companies trekked to Camp Crabtree outside of the state capital, where they trained and received their assignments as Companies F and I of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina Infantry. The thrill of participating in the great adventure animated the men, and some found validation of their entry into adulthood. W. E. “Eli” Setser from Copenhagen, southwest of the county seat of Lenoir, enlisted at age seventeen alongside several cousins. From Raleigh, he boasted to his father, “i am much of a man.” Eli spoiled for a fight. In October, he wrote in a letter home, “We think we can whip six thousand yankees, the bois says they can whip five a peace. I think I can whip six myself.”<sup>11</sup>

Others were similarly excited about the fight, but less so about their leaders or their comrades. Eli’s cousin Thomas W. Setser wrote to his uncle in late August that if Captain Rankin “don’t dew beter tha is a bout ten of us going to leav and go som wher els.” In the camp, the yeoman farmer Thomas was surprised by behaviors that he had not witnessed in his social world back in Caldwell. “I hav bin in and at meny plases,” Thomas wrote, “but this is the god dams plase that i ever Seen. . . . Som Sings, Som gits drunk, Som curses, Som plays cards,” and the men generally partake in “all Sorts of devil ment that white men couda think of.” Thomas and many of the boys longed for home, especially the girls of Caldwell. In the summer of 1862, he wrote home to “tell the girls not to fancy [others] too mutch until myself and Eli come home, for they never seen good looking men until they see us.”<sup>12</sup>

Thomas’s service was not the pure lark that he had envisioned. After the Conscription Act passed in April 1862, he tried to hire a substitute to take his place in the regiment but failed. More firmly committed, his cousin Eli wrote in May 1862, “I expet to Stay in this war tele it eaneds.” The excitement of military service, along with their conviction that the Lincoln administration would be bad for them, provided motivation to soldiers such as the Setsers, who hailed from modest landholding farms. As the war dragged on, Eli longed for peace but declared, “I never want it made in this world in the yankees favor. I had as Soon live in Africa as to live under A Lincon Government.”<sup>13</sup>

After leaving the training camp, the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina moved to the coast near Beaufort, North Carolina, at the southern tip of the Outer Banks. Their first exposure to combat came on March 14, 1862, at New Bern. A Union expeditionary force led by General Ambrose Burnside defeated the Confederate troops defending that port city, and the men of the Twenty-Sixth barely escaped capture. They had been defending the far right flank of the

Confederate line when their comrades' hasty retreat cut them off from the road to New Bern. The regiment had to ferry across a large creek to escape capture, but under the leadership of their colonel, Zebulon Vance, and lieutenant colonel, Henry King Burgwyn Jr., they succeeded.<sup>14</sup>

The regiment then moved to Richmond in June 1862 to help turn back the Union advance on the Confederate capital. It participated in the Battle of Malvern Hill on July 1, 1862, which Eli Setser called a "very hard fite." The main Confederate attack on the formidable Union position, defended by thirty-one cannons and numerous brigades of infantry, began about 4 p.m. and quickly became a slaughter. Burgwyn wrote that upon being ordered into the fight about 7:00 that evening, the regiment marched to the front in confusion through a forest, while enemy artillery shells "were bursting over our heads & cutting down trees & lopping off huge limbs." They attacked in the fading twilight, so that they "judged of the enemy's position solely by the flashes of his cannons & they were fast enough to leave little doubt." Burgwyn counted at least forty-eight artillery discharges each minute. The regiment suffered relatively few casualties because the lateness and confusion of the attack prevented them from getting closer than four hundred yards to the Union line. Eli Setser walked over the battlefield the next day and found it "a terable Sight to see, mens arms and legs and head shot of[f]." He was frankly amazed to have survived: "They haven't got me yet, But they come mity near it."<sup>15</sup>

After the campaign, the regiment transferred to General J. Johnston Pettigrew's brigade and spent the next nine months trekking throughout eastern Virginia and North Carolina in attempts to threaten Union garrisons in the coastal regions of those states. The Caldwell men found the duty disagreeable. After "marching through mud and wading Creeks," Eli Setser wrote in the spring of 1863, "I had Rather be any whear Els." He would soon get his wish; in May, General Robert E. Lee called the brigade to Virginia to join his army for its Pennsylvania invasion, putting it on the fateful road to Gettysburg.<sup>16</sup>

By the time they joined the Army of Northern Virginia, the resolve of many Caldwell boys was weakening. On May 21, Thomas Setser wrote in a letter home, "You donte now how tired I am of this war." Some war-weary soldiers abandoned the regiment on its march north. Members of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina shamed the Caldwell deserters in their letters home. On June 8, Andrew H. "Dan" Courtney informed his wife that Perk Miller and Slight Shell, both of the Rough and Ready Guards, "has left there company." On June 17, he claimed that Redmond Church, Davis and Thomas Barber, and one other man had left the company during the march north. On June 21, he re-

lated that John McCarver and Larkin Coffey had also just deserted the company. The twenty-six-year-old farmer wrote that although life was rough in the army, "I would rather stay here two years longer than to go home dishonestly." Courtney and the rest of the Caldwell men marched toward their fate in Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup>

In the early afternoon of July 1, 1863, the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina arrived on the western outskirts of Gettysburg and subsequently received orders to drive the Army of the Potomac's Iron Brigade off McPherson's Ridge. The regiment began its charge, with Company F in the center, nearest the color guard carrying the flag. Simeon Philyaw, a twenty-three-year-old farmer from the western Caldwell mountains, rushed out ahead of the unit and fired the first shot during the charge, which "drew the fire from the Federal lines," their initial broadside "striking the ground about 15 paces in front" of the Confederates. The men advanced, receiving volley after volley of destructive fire from the enemy. One of those volleys wounded both Simeon and his twin brother Gideon. The regiment crossed a creek and pushed up the ridge, suffering enormous casualties along the way. A minié ball broke Dan Courtney's left leg below the knee. His comrades carried him to a field hospital, where Union troops captured him three days later. Union doctors amputated his infected leg, saving his life. He was exchanged and returned to Caldwell in October. Marching next to Courtney was his friend Eli Setser, who fell when a ball shattered one of his femurs close to the hip, preventing any successful operation to amputate. Eli lay on the field that night in agony, knowing he would die. His cousin Thomas, who had fortuitously missed the battle, found him that evening and helped him to the same field hospital where Courtney lay. A Caldwell friend who visited was impressed by Eli's resigned acceptance of his fate: "He told me that he was willing to Die and that he hoped to meet me in heaven." Eli died on July 6, leaving behind his parents and six younger siblings on their modest Copenhagen farm.<sup>18</sup>

Even though it had suffered such heavy casualties on July 1, the regiment nevertheless participated in Pickett's Charge on July 3, where more men fell. During the retreat, the regiment suffered additional casualties on July 14, when Union forces attacked while Lee's army tried to cross the Potomac back into Virginia. The campaign was especially devastating for the Caldwell boys. Members of Company F suffered nearly 100 percent casualties in the battle, while Company I fared little better. Of the 194 men present for duty in the two companies, 43 were killed or died of their wounds, 95 were wounded, and 62 were captured. Only seventeen men returned to Virginia unscathed after

the campaign. The battle firmly convinced many that there was no point remaining in the army while their families struggled at home.<sup>19</sup>

WHILE THE CALDWELL SOLDIERS OF THE TWENTY-SIXTH NORTH Carolina faced the monotony of marching across eastern Virginia and North Carolina and ultimately saw the devastation of their ranks in Pennsylvania, their families suffered from food shortages, a lack of help on local farms, uncertainty, and loss. In July 1861, the volunteers had been confident that the war would be short, and they expected the community to bond together to take care of their families during their absence. However, scarcity and speculation affected home-front food supplies from almost the moment the men marched out of town. George W. F. Harper noted in his diary as early as September 12, 1861, that groceries were “high and scarce.” Coffee was nearly forty cents a pound; two months later, none could be found anywhere in the county. Corn and bacon were selling for much higher than they had at the beginning of the war.<sup>20</sup>

While the wealthier women organized soldiers’ aid societies to provide clothing and care packages for their boys in the army, poorer residents struggled to find enough food to survive the winter. To add to the hardship, 130 more men volunteered in the spring of 1862 for the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina. James Daniel Moore, at home recovering from a leg injury, acted as a recruiting agent for Company F, enlisting sixty-four men to follow him to eastern North Carolina to join the regiment. The new recruits included ten members of the extended Coffey family, as well as twenty-four-year-old William McKesson “Keith” Blalock and his brother, Sam, described as “a good-looking boy.” Only Moore knew that Sam was actually Keith Blalock’s twenty-year-old wife, Malinda. Keith had refused to enlist unless she could join him. They only served for a month before Keith was discharged for disability and “Sam” revealed her identity to gain her discharge as well.<sup>21</sup>

Just after the spring planting season began and these new volunteers had departed with Moore for the front, unwelcome news arrived. The Confederate government had authorized a conscription law. The law required men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five to enlist in the army, the effect of which would be to remove even more of the prime labor force from the county. The law was universally reviled in the mountains. One resident sarcastically wrote a Raleigh newspaper editor asking that “after they take the next draw of men from this mountain region,” could they ask the president “as an act of *great* and *special* mercy” to send some of his cronies “to knock the women and chil-



dren of the mountains in the head, to put them out of their misery?" When the Confederate Congress amended the law on September 27, 1862, extending the uppermost draft age from thirty-five to forty-five, residents feared starvation. One western North Carolinian asserted that authorities "can form no conception of the untold deprivation which would be entailed on our women and children by taking off the men from thirty-five to forty-five." Ultimately, sixty-nine more men joined the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina because of the conscription law.<sup>22</sup>

Labor shortages and volatile weather produced poor harvests in the summer of 1862. One Caldwell resident wrote to a Raleigh newspaper on July 7, 1862, "Our corn crops are unusually backward; as far as wheat and oats, it is almost a failure." He admitted that "all the essentials of life are very scarce and dear, and I very much fear many people will be sorely pressed to support their families." He ominously warned about the growing class divide that he saw developing during the crisis: "In this hitherto patriotic and liberal county, the monster avarice has made its appearance among the most wealthy classes." In antebellum days, wealthy planters had always provided surplus food to their tenants and less prosperous neighbors when crops were not as plentiful. In October 1860, William Lenoir had recounted a typical visit of local poor farmers to Fort Defiance: "One wanted lard; another a bushel of corn; another a half bushel of Irish 'taters'; another about a peck of sweet 'taters.'" Indicating the unending nature of it, William wrote, "They all went away satisfied, *until they come again.*" But wartime shortages made this traditional largesse less frequent or generous.<sup>23</sup>

Local authorities and men of means began taking steps to redress the grievances of poorer citizens and nip the growing dissent in the bud. In the autumn of 1862, county magistrates appropriated \$1,000 to purchase corn and salt for soldiers' families. In December, Samuel Patterson, owner of a cotton factory and tannery, "contributed to the soldiers' families 100 bunches of spun cotton" and agreed to furnish them one hundred bushels of meal at seventy-five cents a bushel. In April 1863, Elkanah Flowers, a farmer who operated a mill in the southernmost part of the county, sold flour to soldiers' families at five cents per pound and salt at \$5 per bushel. Joseph Norwood and other large farmers allowed soldiers' wives and widows to tend small garden plots on their lands. "The women begged to retain their rent, expecting to get it at a low rate. I thought it was best to give it to them," he wrote of his tenants. "We find it necessary here to be very liberal with the soldier's families." These noble attempts to live up to the social contract that was implicitly agreed to when the enlistees

marched off to war proved insufficient. Charity would never be enough, and many soldiers believed that only they could adequately provide for their wives, children, or mothers.<sup>24</sup>

Volunteers and conscripts alike started to illegally return to their homes to help their struggling families. Local residents snitched on deserters when they appeared. On November 8, 1862, Ella Harper informed her husband, George (then a lieutenant in Company H of the Fifty-Eighth North Carolina), that one of his soldiers, most likely Gordon Morrow, was illegally at home. Morrow, a landless farm laborer, had enlisted in Company I of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina on March 15, 1862, but transferred to Company H of the Fifty-Eighth North Carolina eight days later. Ella related his excuse for deserting: his wife “sent him word that she could not get provisions for the winter with no one to help her.” Morrow decided he would not leave his wife, seven-year-old son, and one-year-old daughter to struggle at their home outside Lenoir. With provisions dear and relief efforts not enough, Morrow was hardly likely to be the only one to forsake his unit for his family. Ella warned her husband that “if there is not something done for the support of the soldier’s families, they *will not* stay away when their wives write to them that they are suffering for the necessaries of life, and many of them are doing that now.”<sup>25</sup>

More deserters appeared in Caldwell late that year. On December 10, 1862, from Camp French, near Petersburg, Virginia, Thomas Barber and five members of the Braswell family abandoned Company F of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina. Brothers James and Thomas Braswell ventured home to provide for their elderly parents and twenty-one-year-old sister on their tiny family farm in Copenhagen. They never returned to their unit. Only two of the deserting Braswells did—R. W. and Robert returned in June 1863 just in time to fight at Gettysburg. On the first day of that battle, R. W. received a wound in the breast (and later deserted from a hospital in Danville, Virginia), while Robert fell with a fatal shot to the head. Thomas Barber returned to his wife and four young daughters in Copenhagen to help them through the winter. He rejoined the regiment in February, only to desert for good on the march to Gettysburg.<sup>26</sup>

At least fifty-five Caldwell County men deserted from the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina, and most of them deserted after Gettysburg. More men would undoubtedly have abandoned their unit, but the carnage of that battle reduced the possible numbers of deserters. The war’s overall casualty figures for these two companies are revealing. Of the 420 confirmed Caldwell residents who enlisted in the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina, 115 died in service, 35 became POWs, 5 resigned, 46 received discharges for disabilities, 19

retired due to debilitating wounds, and 49 transferred to another unit (and 19 of those eventually deserted from their new units). Thirty-six percent of the remaining 151 men deserted.<sup>27</sup>

Level of financial resources was the major distinguishing difference between those who deserted and those who did not. The average wealth valuation of the 41 deserters who could be positively identified in the 1860 census was only \$744, compared to \$2,338 for the identified sample of 239 soldiers who did not leave the unit. Other variables reveal slight but illuminating differences between the two groups: 34 percent of deserters were heads of households compared to 39 percent of nondeserters; 32 percent of deserters were married compared to 36 percent of nondeserters; and 7 percent of deserters came from slaveholding households, while 9 percent of nondeserters did so. The average deserter was slightly younger, at 23.6 years of age, compared to 25.5 for nondeserters. These rather similar statistics reveal that slightly younger men returned home to help out their poorer households. They also did not run the first chance they got; deserters served an average of twenty months before leaving their unit. They came from the rural areas of the county as well. Only eight men from Lenoir deserted, out of eighty-three who enlisted. Meanwhile just over 20 percent of the enlistees from the farming valley of Copenhagen, southwest of Lenoir, deserted, while just under 20 percent of the enlistees from Collettsville, in the foothills west of town, and Patterson, along the ridges north of town, did so. As Kevin Oshnock has persuasively argued in his study of two mountain counties, the more geographically isolated a soldier's family was from commercial centers, the weaker his support for the secessionist cause was and the more likely he was to desert.<sup>28</sup>

If soldiers deserted for a variety of reasons, Governor Zebulon Vance did not think treason was one of them. "I do not believe one case in a hundred," he wrote in May 1862, "is caused by disloyalty." Rather, he attributed it to "home sickness, fatigue, and hard fare." Concern for their families clearly was a major factor for Caldwell deserters. Goodwyn Harris, a thirty-eight-year-old husband and father of eight from Lovelady in southeast Caldwell, had been drafted into the army on January 10, 1863, and reported to Company I of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina. This tenant farmer deserted in June 1863 as the regiment marched north. He explained to Governor Vance that "my better informed Judgment was over ruled by my sympathy for my family and there well fare." He claimed that his wife was "very weakly" and that his family, primarily daughters ranging in age from one to eighteen, were "dependent on my daily labors for their subsistence, knowing that provisions were all most out of the reach of the poor." After he deserted, he began to fear punishment he might

face, especially with local militia units seeking out draft evaders and deserters. He begged the governor for a pardon to “escape punishment for I was honestly in search of all that was near and dear to me.” Taking advantage of the governor’s amnesty proclamation for deserters in August 1863, Harris returned to his unit, and took a bullet in the thigh at the Battle of Bristoe Station, Virginia, in October.<sup>29</sup>

Once they returned home, many poorer soldiers pilfered from their neighbors to improve their own desperate circumstances, further driving a wedge between their personal concerns and those of the community. Dan Courtney, of Company F, wrote to his wife in Copenhagen on May 30, 1863, “I understand the deserters is stealing up there.” He declared that those who committed such deeds would rue their fate: “When peace is made, them that lives to get home will show [deserters] where they stand.” While not condoning their actions, Courtney and Governor Vance recognized that deserters were just concerned sons and husbands. Vance warned President Jefferson Davis that their terms of enlistment made the men believe that they “*should* have furloughs, which have never been redeemed.” He viewed that as a “*principal*” cause of desertion. Men frantic to get home to care for loved ones found their applications for furloughs rejected; Lee needed every man in the army. “Furloughing is stopped,” Courtney wrote. “I knot know whether it will commence again or not[;] if they don’t I’m afraid there will be a heap of deserters.” He was right; fourteen men left the regiment during the march to Pennsylvania. Nearly one hundred other North Carolinians also abandoned the army at the same time. While he did not desert, Courtney admitted on June 14 that even his unit loyalty had a time limit: “I knot think I can stay here longer than till Christmas without I get to see you.” His Gettysburg wound meant he got home before the holidays.<sup>30</sup>

Where one lived within Caldwell mattered, as some deserters found that the public shaming made their presence difficult for their loved ones at home. On June 25, while the army crossed the Potomac River on its way north, Harvey Lafevers and Sidney Hood slipped away from Company I and headed back to Lenoir. News of their absconding had reached the community in comrades’ letters about a week before they did. The two men finally arrived home on Friday, July 17. That next day, Lafevers went to Nelson A. Miller, captain of a local militia company, and asked for Miller’s assistance in getting back to his unit. Lafevers’s wife had indicated that he could not stay. The brick mason had married Clementine Hood, Sidney Hood’s cousin, on November 1, 1860, and they resided in the county seat. Lafevers had resisted the initial enlistment en-

thusiasm during the war's first summer and remained home with his pregnant wife, who gave birth to their first child on August 30, 1861. Perhaps succumbing to peer pressure, Lafevers joined James Moore's recruiting party in March 1862. When, after serving for sixteen months without a furlough, Harvey returned home illegally in July 1863, Clementine "told him plainly that he could not live with her if he did not go back to his Co." She told her disapproving town neighbors that when she learned Harvey had deserted, "she was very much hurt and said she would not give him one thing to eat, no I will not give him a drink of water." In the face of this pressure at home, Harvey sought to return. Though he was captured at Bristoe Station and spent eighteen months in a POW camp, he survived the war. His friend Sidney Hood returned to the regiment with him but did not fare so well, dying in prison in Maryland in March 1865.<sup>31</sup>

The Lafeverses' story indicates how geographical variations within the county affected both desertion and community cohesion. Clementine likely sent her husband and cousin back to their units not so much because of patriotism as public pressure. No deserter had yet returned to the town of Lenoir. She had to see her neighbors every day, in the street, in the market, and in church. Harboring or sanctioning a deserter would ostracize her from that community, and more importantly, deny her access to public and private relief provided for soldiers' families. Outspoken women like Ella Harper condemned dishonorable soldiers. Reverend Jesse Rankin delivered a sermon on Sunday August 9, 1863, in Lenoir that excoriated deserters. His daughter declared it "pretty severe on the 'croakers' and 'reconstructionists.'" Even President Davis published a public letter calling on women to persuade deserters to return to their units, or if that failed, to shame them into returning. Clementine felt pressure to conform.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these affirmations of Confederate support in Lenoir, ambivalence and Union sentiments prevailed in the rural regions—especially in the mountainous west and among the farmers in the foothills south and west of the county seat. On July 25, 1863, one local woman wrote to Walter Lenoir, who had lost a leg during the war and had moved to his farm in Haywood County, of "the Union sentiment existing in this county, among the women as well as the men." She echoed Ella Harper's warning of the previous fall: "The women write to their husbands to leave the army and come home and that's the reason that so many of them are deserting." In August, a Caldwell planter declared that "the men who have heretofore avoided the fight" exacerbated matters "by crying out for peace which means submission." As a result, he wrote Walter Le-

noir, "desertion is rife." Lenoir wrote his brother that same month about this issue: "I hope you are mistaken in saying that many of the Caldwell people say we are whipped, and the sooner we make terms with our enemies the better."<sup>33</sup>

By the war's third summer, many residents had given up the fight and diverted their efforts from the pursuit of a Confederate victory to a bitter struggle to survive. As early as May 1863, deserters had made their presence felt in the county, committing "depredations" around Lenoir. Dan Courtney was angry to learn that his family's plow had been stolen that month from his farm in Copenhagen. He wrote his wife, "I can't tell you what to do about that plow, but if I ever get home he will wish he had never stolen a plow." In August 1863, one resident denounced a "band of robbers and outlaws who are constantly plundering in the night." While some farmers or deserters may have committed such acts because they were desperate to provide relief for their families, there were, according to certain observers, others who had succumbed to the influence of "malicious folks who have their own wicked designs." These residents had no strong attachment to the Confederacy and saw the war as an opportunity to improve their own poor circumstances. One soldier in the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina recalled after the war that "in the western section of Caldwell County along the foothills of the mountains there was a constant dread of depredations committed by lawless bands of bushwhackers and deserters roaming through the mountains."<sup>34</sup>

The leader of one of those bushwhacking bands was former Twenty-Sixth North Carolina soldier Keith Blalock. After leaving the army, Blalock lived on Grandfather Mountain in western Caldwell, where he attracted deserters and draft evaders to his band. Working with Union authorities in east Tennessee, Blalock launched several raids along the western edge of the county. In the spring of 1864, James Daniel Moore of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina was recovering from his Gettysburg wounds at his home in the Globe, on the slopes of Grandfather Mountain, when a Unionist group of bushwhackers led by his former recruit attacked his father's home. "We had a regular battle with them," Moore remembered, "in which my father was severely wounded, and we wounded two of them," including Malinda Blalock. A few months later, after Moore had returned to the army, the Blalock gang attacked the home again, crippling two of Moore's cousins. But Blalock had his eye shot out in the contest, essentially ending his bandit career.<sup>35</sup>

In neighboring Wilkes County, nearly five hundred deserters, draft evaders, and militant Unionists armed themselves and took shelter in the hills and hollows, battling Confederate troops sent to round up the outlaws. A soldier described in September 1863 the expeditions to catch deserters in Wilkes: "The

deserters ambushed us in the mountain gorges.” Many of those wanted men crossed the border into the Brushy Mountains of Caldwell. Though his unit caught eighty deserters, one soldier declared, “the mountains are full of them, and it is about impossible to catch them, as they can move from mountain to mountain as we approach.” To make matters worse for hungry civilians, the troops hunting deserters commandeered many of the remaining food supplies. One resident assured Governor Vance that “famine is sure and speedy unless they are removed.” Such commandeering was not unusual; when some of General James Longstreet’s troops came through Caldwell in the spring of 1864 on their way from Tennessee to rejoin Lee’s army in Virginia, residents complained that the soldiers were “impressing corn and eating out the country.”<sup>36</sup>

In late June 1864, when a Union raiding force from east Tennessee led by Colonel George W. Kirk crossed through western Caldwell on its way to attack Camp Vance in Burke County, George W. F. Harper, home on furlough recovering from a wound, led the militia in pursuit. Nineteen-year-old Columbus A. Tuttle of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina, who had been wounded in the right arm at Gettysburg, the left arm at Bristoe Station, and severely in the hip at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 5, 1864, was at home recovering from his injuries. On June 28, Tuttle rode into Lenoir simply to pick up the mail and found himself swept up by the militia band. Though Tuttle protested that he “would be of very little service to them” because of his wounds, he nonetheless joined the group. They pursued the Federal force, which included several Caldwell deserters, inflicting only minor damages.<sup>37</sup>

While Tuttle ultimately returned to the army unit after recovering from his wounds, some of his comrades decided to forsake the cause. Simeon Philyaw had enlisted on July 15, 1861, into Captain Rankin’s company and served honorably until badly wounded in the thigh and captured at Gettysburg two years later. After being exchanged in October, Simeon had been allowed to recover at home. He undoubtedly encountered his twin brother, Gideon, who had also been wounded at Gettysburg and had deserted from a Confederate hospital six weeks after the battle. Gideon eventually quit hiding and rejoined his unit in the spring of 1864. Perhaps interactions with his wife or brother weakened Simeon’s resolve to return. While at home in early July 1864, Simeon asked Columbus Tuttle if he could borrow his horse to visit relatives in Burke County before returning to the regiment. Tuttle consented, recalling later, “That is the last I ever saw of horse or Phillyaw.” Philyaw joined Keith Blalock’s band of bushwhackers and soon died from an accidental discharge of his own pistol.<sup>38</sup>

Violence only increased as the war dragged on, widening class, political, and geographic divisions. Rufus Lenoir wrote to his brother Walter in November 1864 that “the robbers & bushwhackers in Wilkes & Caldwell are becoming more insolent & aggressive.” No one was ever at ease: “We never go to bed without thinking they may come before morning.” The increased discontent in the community, combined with the presence of bushwhackers and deserters, prompted many women to stop their social calls in the neighborhoods. It had simply become too dangerous. One lady living in the mountainous western part of the county cautioned her brother not to come home if he got a furlough but to stay in the relative safety of Lenoir. By early 1865, the divisions had become so strong that many left their homes—some fleeing to Lenoir and others abandoning the county altogether. Union cavalry commander General George Stoneman led a raid through the region in March and April 1865, burning buildings, confiscating food, and plundering homes. Long after Stoneman left, bandits continued to raid the county. Home guard units and returning Confederate soldiers fought these raiders for weeks after the war ended.<sup>39</sup> Residents of the county had been forced to limit their interaction with neighbors, the very activity that helped weave the fabric of the community together. The war and the hardships that it brought had rent that fabric apart.

This study of two companies raised in Caldwell County reveals how a community can simultaneously support and undermine military efforts. The martial furor of 1861 galvanized the previously Unionist area to action, motivating its young men to enlist, prompting local women to create aid societies to support those boys in uniform, and inspiring elite farmers, millers, and merchants to promise to look after families left behind. But the hardships of the war proved too much for the tenuous unity within the county. The devastation of the units at Gettysburg dramatically weakened any devotion to the Confederate cause that remained after two years of fighting, especially while soldiers’ families faced food shortages at home. Local efforts at charity proved woefully inadequate to deal with the problems of the home front, and soldiers abandoned their regiment to care for loved ones back home.

Returning deserters revealed the long-standing divisions within the community. Poorer, younger farmers and laborers from the rural regions outside the county’s commercial center tended to desert at higher rates than those whose families were better off financially or lived within the tight-knit community of Lenoir. Many of these deserters sought to improve their material conditions at the expense of their neighbors. Subsequent efforts to catch deserters and punish home-front foraging tore further at the bonds of society.



Ultimately, a great many Caldwell men chose loyalty to their families over the Confederate cause. Desperation led to discontent and depredations in the county that continued even after the armies surrendered in the spring of 1865. In this way, the story of these two companies is the story of the war; by examining one community in depth, we can better understand the complexities of war and its human implications.

## NOTES

1. George W. F. Harper, quoted in W. W. Scott, *Annals of Caldwell County* ([Lenoir, NC]: Caldwell County Genealogical Society, 1996), 127; George W. F. Harper, quoted in John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 68; Weymouth T. Jordan Jr., comp., *North Carolina Troops: A Roster*, vol. 7: *Infantry* (1979; repr., Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2004), 12–25.

2. Samuel Finley Harper, quoted in Scott, *Annals of Caldwell County*, 227; Nancy Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell: The Story of Caldwell County* ([Salisbury, NC]: Rowan, 1956), 128–29; U.S. Census, 1860, free inhabitants schedule, Caldwell County.

3. Scott, *Annals of Caldwell County*, 20–21; “Lenoir—Past and Present,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), July 2, 1911; G. W. F. Harper, *Reminiscences of Caldwell County, N.C., in the Great War of 1861–65* (Lenoir, NC: G. W. F. Harper, 1913), 9.

4. John L. Cheney, ed., *North Carolina Government, 1585–1979: A Narrative and Statistical History* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State, 1981), 1330. National Democratic candidate Stephen Douglas gathered only nine votes.

5. William Lenoir, quoted in William L. Barney, *The Making of a Confederate: Walter Lenoir’s Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 43; *Semi-Weekly Standard* (Raleigh, NC), January 1, 1861.

6. Walter W. Lenoir to Zebulon B. Vance, February 5, 1861, and Calvin C. Jones to Zebulon B. Vance, February 4, 1861, in Frontis W. Johnston, ed., *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, vol. 1 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 95, 97; Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 126. See the *Warrenton (NC) News*, March 22, 1861, on the secession vote.

7. John W. Ellis to Simon Cameron, April 15, 1861, telegram, in Noble J. Tolbert, ed., *The Papers of John W. Ellis*, 2 vols. (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1964), 2:612.

8. James Gwyn, quoted in Inscoe and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 68.

9. Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 533–48, 573–89; U.S. Census, 1860, population schedule, Caldwell County.

10. Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 132; William S. Powell, *North Carolina Gazetteer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 223; David H. McGee, “Home and Friends’: Kinship, Community, and Elite Women in Caldwell County, North Carolina, during the Civil War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 74, no. 4 (1997): 369; U.S. Census, 1860, free inhabitants schedule, Caldwell County; Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:533–48, 573–89.

11. W. E. Setser to W. A. Setser, August [n.d.], 1861, and October 14, 1861, in "The CSA 'Setser Letters,'" pt. 1, [http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wlsetzer/fam\\_setzer/csa-letters-part-1.html](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wlsetzer/fam_setzer/csa-letters-part-1.html).
12. T. W. Setser to unknown, August 25, 1861, in "The CSA 'Setser Letters,'" pt. 1, [http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wlsetzer/fam\\_setzer/csa-letters-part-1.html](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wlsetzer/fam_setzer/csa-letters-part-1.html); T. W. Setser to W. A. Setser, June 17, 1862, in "The CSA 'Setser Letters,'" pt. 2, [http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam\\_setzer/csa-letters-part-2.html](http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam_setzer/csa-letters-part-2.html).
13. W. E. Setser to W. A. Setser, May 31, 1862, in "The CSA 'Setser Letters,'" pt. 2, [http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam\\_setzer/csa-letters-part-2.html](http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam_setzer/csa-letters-part-2.html); W. E. Setser to family, April 20, 1863, in "The CSA 'Setser Letters,'" pt. 3, [http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam\\_setzer/csa-letters-part-3.html](http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wlsetzer/genealogy/fam_setzer/csa-letters-part-3.html). Eli and Thomas each came from households that owned \$2500 in real estate (U.S. Census, 1860, population schedule, Caldwell County).
14. Earl J. Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels: The Pettigrew-Kirkland-MacRae Brigade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 7-16.
15. W. E. Setser to W. A. Setser, July 16, 1862, in "The Setser Letters," pt. 2, 27; Henry King Burgwyn Jr. to Anna Greenough Burgwyn, July 14, 1862, Burgwyn Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC).
16. W. E. Setser to W. A. Setser, April 20, 1863, and March 24, 1863, in "The Setser Letters," pt. 3, 12, 11; Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels*, 34-118.
17. T. W. Setser to W. A. Setser, May 21, 1863, in "The Setser Letters," pt. 3, 12; A. H. Courtney to Mary E. Courtney, June 8, 1863, June 17, 1863, June 21, 1863, and May 31, 1863, Courtney Letters, Society for the Historical Preservation of the 26th Regiment NC Troops.
18. J. T. C. Hood, "The 26th Regiment at Gettysburg," *Lenoir (NC) Topic*, April 8, 1896; Jordan *North Carolina Troops*, 7:544; Judkin Browning, "Reverberations of Battle," *Civil War Monitor* 7, no. 2 (2017): 61-62.
19. Judkin Browning, "Deconstructing the History of the Battle of McPherson's Ridge: Myths and Legends of the Twenty-sixth North Carolina on the First Day's Fight at Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Magazine* 53 (July 2015): 14-30.
20. George W. F. Harper, quoted in Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 135-36.
21. McGee, "'Home and Friends,'" 369-72; Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:534-48, 573-89; "Interesting Narrative of the Civil War," *Raleigh (NC) Morning Post*, February 11, 1900.
22. Quoted in Inscoc and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 112; *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), November 18, 1863.
23. Letter from "Caldwell," *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), July 23, 1862; William Lenoir, quoted in Barney, *Making of a Confederate*, 43.
24. Inscoc and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 169, 170; *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), December 10, 1862, April 18, 1863.
25. Ella Harper, quoted in McGee, "'Home and Friends,'" 374; Ella Harper, quoted in Inscoc and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 114; U.S. Census, 1870, population schedule, Caldwell County. Harper refers to the deserter as Nathan Morrow, but he had died three months earlier on August 8, 1862. She must be referring to Gordon Morrow, who de-

served, stayed home over a year, was arrested, and returned to his unit on March 25, 1864 (Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 14:383).

26. Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:534, 536; U.S. Census, 1860, free inhabitants schedule, Caldwell County.

27. Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:533–48, 573–89. I cross-referenced every Caldwell County soldier with the 1860 census to confirm residence and build demographic profiles from which I derived the numbers used in the text.

28. Kevin David Oshnock, “The Isolation Factor: Differing Loyalties of Watauga and Buncombe Counties during the Civil War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 90, no. 4 (2013): 385–413.

29. Zebulon B. Vance to Jefferson Davis, May 13, 1863, in Joe A. Mobley, ed., *The Paper of Zebulon Baird Vance*, vol. 2 (Raleigh, NC: Office of Archives and History, 1995), 152; Goodwyn Harris to Zebulon B. Vance, July 13, 1863, Governors Papers, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh (hereafter SANC); Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*: 7:579; U.S. Census, 1860, free inhabitants schedule, Caldwell County.

30. A. H. Courtney to M. E. Courtney, May 30, 1863, June 14, 1863, Courtney Letters; Zebulon B. Vance to Jefferson Davis, May 13, 1862, in Mobley, *Papers of Zebulon Vance*, 152.

31. N. A. Miller to Zebulon B. Vance, July 21, 1863, Governors Papers, SANC; U.S. Census, 1860, free inhabitants schedule, Caldwell County; U.S. Census, 1900, population schedule, Caldwell County; North Carolina Marriage Index, 1741–2004, <https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=8909>; Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:580–81.

32. McGee, “Home and Friends,” 374, 380.

33. Julia P. Gwynn to Walter Lenoir, July 25, 1863, Joseph C. Norwood to Walter Lenoir, August 13, 1863, and Walter Lenoir to Rufus Lenoir, August 17, 1863, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

34. McGee, “Home and Friends,” 379; A. H. Courtney to M. E. Courtney, May 31, 1863, Courtney Letters; C. A. Tuttle, “Incidents Which Happened in Caldwell County in 1864,” *Lenoir (NC) News-Topic*, May 4, 1922, box 72, folder 21, Civil War Collection, SANC.

35. Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 136–37; “Interesting Narrative of the Civil War,” *Raleigh (NC) Morning Post*, February 11, 1900.

36. *Weekly Observer* (Fayetteville, NC), September 22, 1863; Inscoe and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 133–34.

37. Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 138; Tuttle, “Incidents Which Happened in Caldwell County in 1864”; Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:547.

38. Scott, *Annals of Caldwell County*, 247; Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:544; Tuttle, “Incidents Which Happened in Caldwell County in 1864.”

39. Rufus Lenoir, quoted in Inscoe and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 105; McGee, “Home and Friends,” 383; Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell*, 139–43.