

Montgomery County in August 1862: A Showalter Observation

Edited by James I. Robertson, Jr.

Letters from the Confederate home front are scarce in Civil War annals. Postal delivery was unpredictable; soldiers who received letters from loved ones either read them continuously until the paper disintegrated from repeated folding, or else lost them in the chaos of war. Similarly rare are communiqués from one writer to another behind the lines. Letters of that age were momentary and private exchanges of thoughts. Comparatively few civilians saw historical value in mail – or anything else in a struggle that taxed concentration and endurance. This is especially so in such regions as Southwest Virginia, where terrain and scattered population further reduced general communication.

Therefore the recent appearance of Henry Showalter's letter to his brother Samuel is a treasure in itself. Moreover, the contents of the letter give a fresh picture of individuals and life in eastern Montgomery County during the second year of the Civil War.

The Showalter family was German in background, large in number, mostly Mennonite, and, by the mid-19th century, scattered throughout the Shenandoah Valley as well as the hill country to the south.¹ Henry Showalter was the progenitor of the family that settled in Botetourt, Roanoke, and Montgomery counties. Beginning around 1800, he purchased a number of tracts in those areas. Henry Showalter and his wife Magdalena raised seven sons and four daughters.

The fourth child, Nicholas, grew up in Botetourt County. He married Elizabeth Griffin and, around 1840, moved to a small farm in eastern Montgomery County. The couple had seven sons. The two who play a role in this letter are Samuel, born in 1821, and Henry, born five years later. By 1860 Nicholas Showalter was 65 years old, with \$2,000 in real estate and \$425 in personal property. In short,

Nicholas Showalter was a small-scale farmer among neighbors of similar station.

On reaching adulthood, Nicholas's son Samuel re-located in the Salem section of Roanoke County. Samuel's brother Henry soon purchased a small tract of farmland in the Alleghany Springs region of neighboring Montgomery County.² As was normal for the time, family members had only a limited education; in Virginia, schools were mostly private undertakings and not readily available, especially in rural and frontier areas.

The enthusiasm and excitement associated with the coming of the Civil War did not infect the majority of Showalters, who were Mennonites and believed in pacifism.³ The April 16, 1862, enactment of a conscription act by the Confederate Congress aroused fresh, strong reactions against the Civil War because the measure appeared to be an encroachment upon both personal liberties and state rights.

Such was the environment in which Henry Showalter sent a letter to his brother. What became of the two siblings thereafter is unknown.⁴ Still, for a moment in time, Henry Showalter reported on his region, his neighbors, and the current effects of civil war in Montgomery County. Because that contribution is unique, it has lasting value.

The original letter is in the possession of a Showalter descendant, Elizabeth Hubbard DeMaury of Troutville, Virginia. Her son, Virginia Tech student Joshua DeMaury, first brought the letter to the editor's attention. Deep appreciation goes to the DeMaury family for permission to publish the Showalter letter here.

Mont[gomery] Cty.

August the 27, 1862. Alleghany Springs

Dear brother, I take this privilege to inform you that We are tolerable well at present & hope these few lines will find you in good health. you requested me to write to you. Last Monday week the men over 35 was ordered to meet at Christians burgh.⁵ Some thought they was to go under general floyd.⁶ none of the Showalters did not go. The other day it was said that [those] under 35 was ordered out. but they have not been around to notice us.

Joseph is not stout.⁷ some times he has very bad spells. Davison Myres came home before I got back from your house & is here yet, to gether with all the rest of us.⁸ he expects to be discharged. I dont think there is many in this neighborhood that wants to go. I for one do not want to go. It has bin very dry here, but Corn looks tolerable well.

elliott Willis has got home since the exchange of prisoners.⁹ the yankeys [kept] Him about 4 months. I believe he was not well treated. davison Myres seen a man when he was in the Army that told him that he was at Brother david's Wedding.¹⁰ I did not ask Myres who he Married but I guess it was C. Ronk.¹¹ William willis died in the army.¹² About Richmond hospital. Miss willis took it very hard, he being her youngest child.¹³

archibald White¹⁴ is making Copperas¹⁵ up the river above Miss Martins.¹⁶ there is Some very rich ore there. they sell their Copperas at \$1.00. I dont know how they have raised 50 cts. On it. Mother Colered with it & Colord very well. I have begun to thrash [and] Sell wheat, & its a hard way to thrash with flails.

I dont know how long they will let me stay out of [the] army. eli has got the sore throat. it not be dangerous. I expect William & Mary is uneasy after loosing the other one.¹⁷

I aloud to write to you last week but Isaac¹⁸ & James¹⁹ Showalter went to Salem last Saturday. Isaac aloud to go to your house but it rained so he Staid in Salem till Monday morning & then came back on the train & James Staid at James Woltz's.²⁰

If you have any[thing] worth relating, write to me. So fare well for the present till next we meet. When this letter you see, remember me Till together in heaven we be.

Henry Showalter to Samuel Showalter

Come to see us as soon as you can. Jesus let me to thy bosom fly while the billows round me roll.²¹

Endnotes

1. Genealogical material supplied by Elizabeth Hubbard DeMaury, Troutville, Va.; Judith Showalter Sandy, Blacksburg, Va.; and Louis R. Showalter, Roanoke, Va.
2. The 1860 Montgomery County census listed five Showalter families living in the Alleghany Springs area. Heads of the household were William, Nicholas, Anthony, Philip, and John Showalter. Nicholas was the oldest. The others were farmers with children ranging in number from two to six.
3. Showalters were one of some 400 Mennonite families in western Virginia when civil war began. The religious sect lived faithfully by the teaching of Jesus to “love your enemies” and to “turn the other cheek.” In 1861, one church authority wrote, the Mennonites “could not approve of, or support what they considered to be a rebellion against an established government ordained by God.” They had no grievance “against the Union at the outset of the war, and if they had, their doctrinal position would have obligated them to refrain from opposition or resistance.” Samuel Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy* (Scottsdale, Pa., 1969), pp. 15, 16, 18.
4. On April 23, 1863, a Henry Showalter enlisted at Dublin in a new company being formed for the 26th Virginia Infantry Battalion. The only other data in this man’s service record is that he was present on duty in April, 1864. Terry Lowry, *26th Battalion Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va., 1991), p. 151.
5. The first two paragraphs of the Showalter letter address the reaction to the Confederacy’s 1862 conscription act. This was the first instance in American history when the government ordered men into the army. Open opposition, inexperienced enforcement, multifarious methods of evading the law, and men continuing to volunteer for military service initially kept the number of conscripts low. At the time of the Showalter letter, the State of Georgia had furnished barely 2,700 conscripts – an average of about 24 men per county. Albert Burton Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (New York, 1924), pp. 123-7.
6. Following disgraceful behavior at Fort Donelson, Tennessee, in February 1862, Brig. Gen. John B. Floyd had returned to southwestern Virginia and minor duty. He was then commanding a band of conscripts estimated at 500-1,000 men. U. S. War Department (comp.), *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1902), Ser. I, 12: Pt. 3, pp. 446, 564.
7. The third son of Nicholas Showalter was twenty-three at his March 10, 1862, enlistment in the “Preston Guards” of the 11th Virginia Infantry Regiment. The remainder of Joseph Showalter’s short service record lists him as “absent sick.” Robert T. Bell, *11th Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va., 1985), 93.
8. A. D. Myers, a Montgomery County farmer, had joined a nearby Floyd County company that became part of the 54th Virginia. Myers served with the regiment until deserting the army in January 1865. G. L. Sherwood and Jeffrey C. Weaver, *54th Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va., 1993), p. 206.
9. On April 17, 1861, Elliott Willis enlisted in the “Montgomery Fencibles,” which became a company in the 4th Virginia. He was captured in March 1862, at the

- battle of Kernstown. Exchanged five months later, Willis returned to the army and gained promotion to sergeant. A foot wound in 1863 preceded his May 1864 capture at the battle of Spotsylvania. Willis died July 5, 1864, of disease at Point Lookout Prison, Maryland. James I. Robertson, Jr., *4th Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va., 1982), p. 81.
10. David Showalter of Botetourt County enlisted April 22, 1864, in the 3rd Virginia Reserves. As of December 31 of that year, he was reported absent without leave. Patti O. Weaver and Jeffrey C. Weaver, *Reserves: The Virginia Regimental Histories Series* (Lynchburg, Va., 2002), p. 281.
 11. Showalter married his first cousin, the daughter of Joseph and Mary Showalter Ronk of Lincoln County, West Virginia (Family papers in the possession of Judith Showalter Sandy).
 12. William Willis of Montgomery County enlisted March 10, 1862, with Joseph Showalter in the “Preston Guards” company of the 11th Virginia. Four months later, he died of unknown causes. Bell, *11th Virginia*, p. 98.
 13. Elizabeth Willis was a widow in her early sixties. At the time, she lived with her eldest son, Elliott, in the Alleghany Springs area. William Willis was the youngest of her three sons. 1860 Virginia Census – Montgomery County.
 14. Then in his thirties, Archer C. White was a “retired merchant” in the Shawsville area. His personal estate was in excess of \$16,000, a princely sum in those days. 1860 Virginia Census – Montgomery County.
 15. Copperas is the general name for ferrous sulfate, a green, crystalline compound used primarily in dyeing and the making of ink.
 16. Quite likely, Showalter was referring to Kezza Martin. The 70-year-old widow lived in Christiansburg with her son’s large family. 1860 Virginia Census – Montgomery County.
 17. Eli Showalter was the six-year-old son of William and Mary S. Showalter, a farming couple in the Alleghany Springs region. “The other one” was likely their infant daughter Janetta. 1860 Virginia Census – Montgomery County.
 18. Like the writer of this letter, Isaac Showalter also joined the new company raised in 1863 for the 26th Virginia Infantry Battalion. His enlistment date was September 29, and he was reported present on duty in April 1864. Lowry, *26th Battalion Virginia Infantry*, pp. 23, 151.
 19. James Showalter was eighteen at the time and the oldest of six children of Philip and Mary A. Showalter in Alleghany Springs. 1860 Virginia Census – Montgomery County.
 20. A carpenter by trade, 38-year-old James H. Woltz enlisted March 21, 1862, in his hometown Salem’s Flying Artillery. He spent much of 1863 on detailed duty around the Salem area but surrendered with his command at Appomattox. 1860 Virginia Census – Roanoke County; Robert L. Nicholas and Joseph Servis, *Powhatan, Salem, and Courtney Henrico Artillery* (Lynchburg, Virginia, 1997), p. 225.
 21. Showalter presented a coarse rendition of the opening lines of Charles Wesley’s famous hymn: “Jesus, lover of my soul / Let me to Thy bosom fly / While the waters nearer roll/ While the tempest still is high ...”