

Iowa Royster on the march into Pennsylvania

Iowa M. Royster to his mother, July 29, 1863, in the Royster Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As you read...

Iowa Michigan Royster was a student at the University of North Carolina, graduating with highest honors in 1860. After graduation, he served the university as a tutor, but left this position and enlisted in the 1st North Carolina Cavalry as a private in 1862. In June 1863, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the 37th Regiment of North Carolina Volunteers.

In this letter to his mother, Royster described his experiences while fighting for the Confederacy in Pennsylvania. Iowa Royster was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg and died ten days later.

For more about Iowa Royster, see this finding aid from the Southern Historical Collection (see http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/r/Royster_Family.html).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What different kinds of information did Iowa include in this letter?
2. Iowa became engaged to a woman he'd known for one week. What does this courtship and engagement tell us about the life of young people during the civil war?
3. What did the soldiers take from families in Pennsylvania?
4. Why was Iowa happy to be in Pennsylvania?
5. Why did General Lee forbid Union soldiers from taking food and property from families in Pennsylvania?



Figure 1. Iowa Royster and his fellow North Carolina soldiers passed farms like this one on their march through south-central Pennsylvania before the Battle of Gettysburg.

Chambersburg, Pa., June 29th 1863

Dear Ma:

I suppose you saw in the “Progress” newspaper a notice of my appointment to this regiment. It was quite unexpected. I had made a request to Capt. Nicholson of this reg’t to recommend me to the Col. but he did not expect any good result. When I read the appointment in the newspaper I was under arrest in my old company. In a day or two came a note from Col. Barbour of the 37th asking Col. Baker to send me to him as I had been appointed in his regiment. Col. Baker released me from arrest and sent me on with many expressions of goodwill, and wishes for my future success. The occasion of my arrest was this. Col. Baker gave an order that the 1st sergeants should call out the men and make them clear out the camp — cut down the trees and pull up the brush. It was Sunday and I was acting as 1st Sergeant of Co. E. I refused to obey the order. I wouldn’t make the men work on the Sabbath, and I was order to go to my tent and consider myself under arrest. It was less than a week before I hear of my appointment. The reg’t had two fights with the Yankees while was under arrest. I didn’t have to fight. They had taken my arms from me and sent me back to the wagon train. So it was a good thing at last.

On my way to join my reg’t, I came by Winchester and saw Kate. She had rec’d a letter from you dated in Jan. and was preparing to answer it. She and I are engaged. Tell my Papa that I don’t know how much her father is worth. Don’t know whether he is worth anything or not — couldn’t come within ten thousand dollars of the amount to save my life. All of his good instructions lost. Well, “a fool will have his own way.” Quick courtship wasn’t it? A week’s acquaintance last September and two days in June. I congratulate myself on my promptness. Great quality in a soldier. When I left Winchester Kate gave me a bundle of provisions, a paper of candy, raisins, etc., some hankerchiefs, trimmed my hat, and did a great many things to captivate me.

I sold my horse for 350 dollars and my saddle for fifty. So I have 400 cash with me. I wish I could get a chance to send it to Raleigh and settle Mr. Lovejoy’s account. I am so extravagant that I am afraid I shall spend all my money here and have none, or if I get knocked over by a Minnie I would not like for the Yankees to get my Confederate.

I am the only officer present in my company. The men are very clever. There is not one among them who swears or uses any profane language. There are about twenty four.

When the co. started from N. C. it numbered 126. At Sharpsburg last September only five. The Capt. went back a few days ago on business expecting to join us in a few days. I fear that the Yankees have got him. He is a member of the Baptist Church. When the company was first made up, the captain, the three lieutenants and one private were all preachers. Every regiment in the brigade has a chaplin; I heard a sermon yesterday. In this brigade there are the 18th, 7th, 33rd, and 87th and 28th reg'ts. I find a great many old acquaintances among them, and on the whole have quite a pleasant time. Everybody told me that my feet would be blistered, but I have been marching nearly a week and have experienced no inconvenience, though several men have fallen by the road. There is no straggling. All are compelled to keep up. Those who are too weak or sick ride in ambulances or wagons. Lee has fully double the number of men he had at Sharpsburg. Our regiment for instance had only fifty at Sharpsburg, there about two hundred and seventy five now. The other regiments are the same way.

Yesterday and the day before our soldiers plundered far and wide - taking butter, milk, apple-butter, fruit, chickens, pigs and horses and everything they could lay their hands on. The people are frightened out of their senses. "take anything you want but don't hurt us" is their cry. They are afraid to protest against anything. It is the most beautiful country you ever saw, the neatest farms, fine houses, good fences. The whole country is covered with the finest crops of wheat, such wheat as is not seen in our country.

Yesterday however, Genl' Lee sent an order around that all stealing and plundering should be punished in each case with death, that officers should be held accountable for the execution of his orders, that he made war upon armed men - not upon women and children. The plundering will be stopped now. I never saw people so submissive and badly scared as these people in my life. It must be conscience. They know how their soldiers have desolated Virginia and they fear that ours will retaliate. But I can't bear it. I hate to take anything when it is given from fear. Quartermasters and Commissaries and Surgeons are empowered to impress everything necessary for the use of the army. But men are not allowed to have anything but what they buy.

I heard but don't know how true it is that nine of our soldiers were shot yesterday for taking jewelry from off the persons of the women. The articles of war make a death punishment for stealing, and in an enemy's country a regimental court-martial has the power to inflict this punishment. Gen. Lee seems determined to stop all marauding. I don't know what place we shall attack, most seem to think Harrisburg. For my part I want to stay here until the war is over, and take their towns and beat their armies and live on their people. Lee's men have unbounded confidence in him. The Yankees are in great perplexity — don't know what point to re-inforce — don't know whether Lee will attack Harrisburg, Pittsburg, Baltimore, or Washington. I want to take them all. It is glorious. All the fences that are burnt now are Yankee fences. They'll be willing for us to stay out of the Union hereafter. We've come back to the Union, but not as they expected. Write soon. Direct to Lieut. Iowa Royster, 37th N.C.G. Lane's Brigade, Pender's Division, Hill's Corps.

On the web

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Battle of Gettysburg, Civil War, North Carolina, history, military, and soldiers.

Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

Figure 1 (page 2)

Image from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lcd1863/2707817056/>. This image is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 2.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>.