

An astounding contrast of rancor and humanity: the rage of Arabella Pettit and the final Journey of Captain Edward P. Lawton (Part 1)

By John Hennessy

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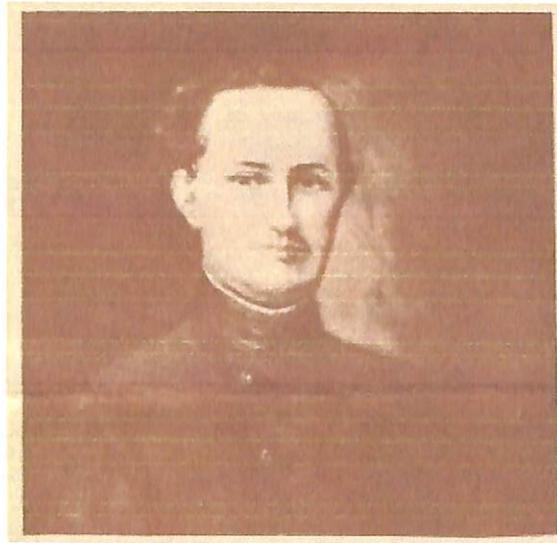
Union troops enjoying the spoils of their looting on lower Caroline Street.

The plight of Fredericksburg civilians in the fall of 1862 inspired Arabella Pettit of Fluvanna County, Virginia, to outrage toward the Yankee perpetrators. She wrote to her artilleryman husband, "Shoot them, dear husband, every chance you get." Foreseeing that she and her family might be next, Arabella urged her husband, "It is God's will and wish for you to destroy them. You are his instrument and it is your Christian duty. Would that I may be allowed to take up arms, I would fight them, until I died."

Perhaps more so than any battle in the East, Fredericksburg inspired a new wave of rancor among Southerners. The damage to the town by bombardment, the pointed destruction by looting Yankees, and the image of civilian refugees fleeing to the countryside combined to fire Southerners like Arabella Pettit with a deep mixture of fear and anger. It was this fury, rather than the fraternal sentiments so common in postwar recollections, that characterized the Civil War at its core. There is no other imaginable accompaniment to the slaughter of more than 200,000 men on America's battlefield.

But, as we have often pointed out, the Civil War was a complicated mix of emotion, fact, imagination, policy, motivation, and acts innumerable. We are all tempted to shop the historical landscape for a story or passage that validates our notion of what the war was and what it was about. Such things help us to see things in simpler, often more comfortable terms. America has made a sport of this exercise over the decades, as we struggle to understand a political and human disaster whose intensity and nature seems to many to be entirely un-American in its nature.

But the war defies simplicities. It was, for example, simultaneously a war for independence, a war for the Union, a war for emancipation, a war to sustain slavery and white supremacy, and a war that would define the extent and reach of the federal government. It was also a war of intense cruelty and expressions of great humanity. Contradictions and odd admixtures like these render the war both defiant of easy understanding and the object of intense interest. Thoughtful people struggle to reconcile and understand. The less thoughtful among us simply seize one and assert it over all others. Just a few days after Arabaella Pettit penned her memorable, rancorous mandate to her husband, the same Union army that she and millions of other Southerners pilloried undertook an unprecedented (at least for Virginia) gesture that gave even the most bitter Southerners pause.



Captain Edward P. Lawton, mortally wounded at the Slaughter Pen on December 13, 1862.

In the fighting that raged on the south end of the battlefield on December 13, 1862, Captain Edward P. Lawton, a staff officer in the brigade once commanded by his brother Alexander, fell wounded in the fighting in what we know today as the Slaughter Pen Farm. Lawton fell at the farthest advance of his brigade, virtually among the Union batteries west of the Bowling Green Road. His brigade of Georgians soon were driven back, and the Brown-educated Lawton fell into Union hands. They apparently cared for him well, though his case was hopeless, with a wound somewhere near the spine, paralyzed on one side. He was taken across the river and, at some point in the next several days, transferred by rail and boat to a hospital in Alexandria. Unbeknownst to the Confederates, he died there on December 26, 1862.



The Slaughter Pen farm, very near the spot where Captain Lawton fell wounded

For so many thousands of men, that would have been the end of the story—another body buried on distant ground. But soon after the battle news of Edward’s wounding at Fredericksburg reached his wife, Evelina Loyer Davant Lawton, in Savannah. Evelina travelled to Fredericksburg, determined to nurse her husband to health. She arrived on or about New Year’s eve, only to discover that her husband remained within Union lines. Undeterred, Mrs. Lawton secured a pass to cross the Rappahannock and travel to Alexandria to attend to him. On New Year’s Day, she presented herself at what had been the upper pontoon crossing site, where, as Noel Harrison described [here](#), the armies had establish a crossing point for conducting business under flags of truce.

Word of Mrs. Lawton’s presence soon reached the man responsible for managing the civilian comings and goings from Fredericksburg, Colonel William W. Teall, staff officer to his father-in-law, Union Major General Edwin Vose Sumner (Teall was married to Sumner’s daughter Sarah). He dispatched an ambulance to the upper crossing to carry Mrs. Lawton to the Phillips House. It so happened that the Vice President and several congressmen were visiting the front that day, and Hamlin had arranged a special boat to carry them from Aquia Landing to Alexandria. Teall arranged for Mrs. Lawton—still full of hope that her husband lived—to join them. At 1 p.m. on New Year’s Day, Evelina Loyer Davant Lawton—“an interesting lady in appearance,” wrote Teall—joined the U.S. vice president for what must have been a somber, anxious journey (at least for her) to Alexandria. On the way, she was, reported an Alexandria newspaper, “the recipient of many kind attentions from Mr. Hamlin....Her deportment was of a highly cultivated and dignified lady, who keenly appreciated the horrors of the present war.”

Once at Alexandria, she learned that she was too late—her husband had died a week earlier. “The intelligence nearly deprived her, for a time, of reason,” the Alexandria reporter wrote. For the next several days, she would remain in Alexandria, hosted by merchant John D. Corse and his wife Lucy (John’s brother was Confederate Colonel Montgomery Corse)—all the while arranging for the return of her husband’s body to Savannah. By January 7, all was ready, and the final journey of Captain Edward P. Lawton began.

The final journey of Captain Edward P. Lawton (part 2)

From John Hennessy

<https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/the-final-journey-of-captain-edward-p-lawton-part-2/>



Col. William W. Teall, who escorted Evelina Lawton across the Rappahannock

Evelina Lawton's southbound journey from Alexandria with her husband's corpse had a stunningly empty conclusion. After the train from Aquia Landing pulled into Falmouth Station (where the Eagles Lodge now stands on Cool Spring Road), the train emptied, leaving her alone in the car with the coffin. Union colonel Teall, the fatherly looking son-in-law of General Sumner, arrived at the station expecting to find two other women bound for Confederate lines. Instead, he found Mrs. Lawton, alone, "attired in deep mourning." He took her hand, which "she extended with such an air of sadness, even despair." Teall called for the officer of the day, and soon Mrs. Lawton and the coffin were on the platform, with an honor guard over them. They shortly departed for the Phillips House, Sumner's headquarters. "She seems so thankful and submissive," Teall wrote that night. Captain Lawton's coffin sat in an ambulance on the slope in front of Phillips house.



The Phillips House

It was too late to arrange for a crossing that day, so Teall made arrangements for the following morning—determined, he told his wife, to “place this sorrowing woman on her homeward journey with all the kindness and attention I should hope you would received were you in her place.” He summoned 20 men from the 10th New York Infantry, the National Zouaves, as an escort, and summoned an ambulance pulled by four white horses.

“After giving the order to proceed I took my seat beside her & this little procession moved slowly towards the river. She was entirely ignorant of the demonstration of respect to her husband’s remains, & as our ambulance turned into line & the escort moved solemnly with arms reversed to the music of 2 muffled drums her surprise was instant and complete. I saw the struggle. She turned to me and said, ‘Col I needn’t tell yu how gratified I feel’ & burst into tears. Oh! what a moment of anguish was this, of grief pure & intensified. It was more than I could care & involuntarily gave way myself to the pressure of the mournful scene.”

Down the slope toward the river the processsion slowly travelled, and as they came into view soldiers and civilians on the Fredericksburg side of the river rushed out to watch, lining the river bank (Teall had given the Confederates notice that Mrs. Lawton was coming). More lined the road on the Stafford (Union) side of the river. Right onto river road, to the upper crossing.

[In his letters, Teall describes several instances when dozens even hundreds of soldiers and civilians turned out at the upper crossing site to witness the passage of civilians and prisoners back and forth. As Noel Harrison notes in his post on the upper crossing, it was likely one of these passages captured by the photograph below. Based on Teall’s description of the crossing of Mrs. Lawton, it seems unlikely this image is of the crossing on January 7, 1863, for Teall describes an even busier scene than is represented in the photo. Still, this photo conveys a strong sense of what was likely the scene that day.]



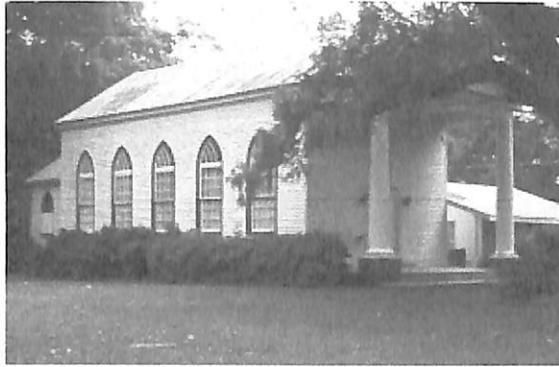
The upper crossing, with spectators—surely looking much as it did the day of Mrs. Lawton's crossing.

Teall crossed first, with the coffin, falling short of the south bank because of low tide. Confederate soldiers rushed to bring boards to bridge the mud; they quickly produced two doors from one of the nearby houses. Teall returned for Mrs. Lawton. Zouaves placed boards to the boat, and holding onto Teall's arm, she stepped in. The boat had no seat, so the two stood amidships arm in arm. As the boat pulled away, she turned to the Union soldiers onshore and said, "Soldiers, I thank you all."



As they approached the Fredericksburg shore, “the crowd seemed instinctively to fall back” and Confederate general Joseph Kershaw stepped forward to meet Teall and Mrs. Lawton. “I beg Genl to commit this lady to yr tender care,” Teall said, and placed her arm on his. Kershaw thanked Teall for his “kind attention.” Teall took Mrs. Lawton’s hand. “Good by madam—God bless you.” She attempted to speak, but her “features and tearful eyes expressed more...and the gentle pressure of her hand told of the depth & intensity of her emotions.” Teall, oppressed with sadness, jumped into the boat and made his way to the north bank, ending what he called “one of the saddest scenes I have encountered since our arrival in the Valley of the Rappahannock.”

Not surprisingly, this episode received far less attention than the accusations of atrocities on both sides, but several newspapers did in fact note and comment upon it. The *Richmond Examiner* correspondent in Fredericksburg called the scene “touching” and wrote that it was “no less grateful to our feelings than it was creditable to the magnanimity of our foe.” The *New York Herald* correspondent welcomed the contrast with past reports of atrocities, and he hoped that a little Union magnanimity might go a long way among the Confederates: “May this feeling extend to all now in arms against the country that gave them birth—that nursed and protected them—and which they are now seeking to divide and destroy.”



Robertville Baptist Church, Jasper County, S.C., where Captain Lawton is buried.

Evelina Lawton travelled with her husband's remains to Jasper County, South Carolina, where he was buried in the cemetery of Robertville Baptist Church. Evelina never remarried. With her three children, she moved to Charleston, where she opened a boarding house in her family home. She died in 1893.

We seem to be going through a period (with respect to Civil War historiography) where stories of this sort—Kirkland too—are at a discount. The theory goes that they feed the reconciliationist mania that gripped the nation in the postwar years and in the process caused collateral damage to the nation. But to dismiss such accounts is no more valid than asserting their primacy (as many did, and some still do). Instead, it seems to me, our great challenge as public historians is not to choose between Arabella Pettit's rancor and William Teall's magnanimity in order to define the war. Rather we need to accept that the Civil War was both those things (and much more), in a complex, rich mixture that renders the war almost in-exhaustively interesting.