

LETTERS OF THE OFFIELD BROTHERS,
CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS FROM UPPER EAST TENNESSEE

Edited By LEONA TAYLOR AIKEN

"I now tak my pen in hand to write you a few lines to let you no [know] you no nothing about Warr til you git in wher the men lie on the ground [;] you cold [could] walk on them fir an hunderd yards . . ." wrote John ["Sun"] Offield, Confederate soldier, to his brother Joseph Offield, from Fairfax Court House, Virginia, August 4, 1861. He continued: "I leveld my old muskit at one tride to Bring him [down] But I dont no whether I kild him ur not[.] But I exspect I did[.] I promist you to Bring you a scalp and that cap is as ni[gh] it as things git[.]"¹

Recently a package of ragged, brown letters, a \$50.00 Confederate bill, and three North Carolina land grants were given to Rocky Mount Museum, Piney Flats, Tennessee, by Mrs. Betty Offield Brown, 81, of Covina, California. The letters were from her uncles, dated from August 4, 1861, to August 23, 1864, and told the sad story of five sons in one family who fought in the War Between the States, and of whom only one returned home.

Joseph and Elizabeth Bolling Offield of Upper East Tennessee had six sons and four daughters. The two youngest sons, George and Washington, were identical twins who were too young to join up in the war, but Washington ran away and joined the Confederate cavalry. George, Mrs. Brown's father, was the only son who took no active part in the conflict.

The pioneer Offield family, along with two other families, came to the Holston Valley from eastern Virginia before 1796, the date of the earliest land grant. Two families settled in the Virginia part of the Valley, but James Offield, looking for better hunting grounds, went across the "nobs" (hills in southwest Virginia) and built a little log cabin on the west bank of the Holston River near present-day Bristol,

¹This is a postscript (addressed to Joseph Offield) in a letter of the same date (August 4, 1861) to the family, abstracted below.

Tennessee. Over the years the log cabin was remodeled and enlarged and the family continued to live there until the TVA demolished it, and the site is now covered with South Holston Lake. It was in this cabin that his son Joseph was born, and also his grandsons, John and Joseph, who wrote the letters printed below.

All the letters are written with ink. The first letters are on good white paper, but the later ones are on thin, lined, notebook paper. All have yellowed and the writing has become almost illegible in the past hundred years. The envelopes are made from ledger paper, with figures showing on the reverse side, and they all bear ten cent stamps marked "Confederate States of America." Some of the letters signed "John" appear to have been written by different persons, for some are better written and less misspelled than others. This document begins with a letter written by John to his father, Joseph Offield, after the Confederate victory at Fairfax Courthouse in June 1861, and which was notably optimistic; but many of the later ones were much less so.

State of Va. Fredrick [sic] Co[.] Winchester
June the 28 1861

Dear father[:] it is with great Pleasure that i . . . let you know that i am well . . . I have found our Company . . . wee reached Winchester the 27 about midnight. . . . the Company has had a little scrimmage[.] they run the yankees from newcreek Dept [Depot] and taken too [two] cannons and Bernt the railrode Bridge up and [took] aright smart of other plunder and lost narry man[.] we taken there [their] flag also

John Ofield [sic]
to Joseph Ofield [sic]

Fairfax Court house Va. Aug 4th 1861

Mr. Joseph Offield & Family
Dear Father Mother & Bretheren

I feel it a glorious privilege as well as an important duty to give you an account of the scenes through which we have passed since we entered into the service of our country and the condition of our Co. at the present time. We as you are aware had been stationed at Winchester but the enemy we were expected to fight there marched around by Washington to attact [sic] [P.G.T.] Beauregard's troops at Manassas and as soon as our Commander perceived this movement of the enemis [sic] we were ordered to take up our line of march to meet the enemy and as soon as we got [with]in 7 or 8 miles of Manassas we were surprised to hear the guns and cannons roaring[.] The enemy had attacked our men and they were fighting with great honor. Our forces whiped [whipped]²

² Hereafter misspellings will not be corrected unless necessary for clarity; essential punctuation will be added within brackets. It is of interest to note that John Offield frequently misspelled his own last name.

them and run them to Fairfax. There were about 130,000 engaged in the fight and about 60,000 of our men [.] We killed about 8,000 of the enemy and lost about 2,000 men[.] There were 2000 of our men killed in our Regt[.] No loss in our Company. The Yankees left along the road wagons provisions to the amount of from 1½ to 2,000,000 of dollars[.] We too captured 6 or 700 horses and took about 6 or 7000 prisoners[.] We also took 82 pieces of the best artillery in the North and took a long cannon which they called long Tom about 20 feet in length. We are now eating their provisions sleeping in their tents wearing their cloths and & [etc]. We are now stationed where the Yankees made their headquarters. How long we will stay here I am not able to say. . . . I would like to see you but I cannot now though [I hope] that we may meet again and then I shall [be] filled with joy and happiness. . . .

John Offield⁸

Fairfax Va August 25, 1861

Dear father[etc]; . . . we hav[e] had a heap of sickness. . . . Jo if you cant cum to our company i dont want you to join . . . times is teribel hard. We have bred un meat and met and bred; and crackers and coffey ur giten cerce [scarce] and we dont think they] will git any [illegible] til we whirp [whip] the yankeys and git ther purvisien [provisions] . . . pap i wod like to see you when you git your yankey cap on to see if you look like the [illegible] . . .

John Offield

Army of the Potomac
Camp near Centerville
December 16th '61

Dear Father and Mother[:] I again this Sabath morning . . . [am] dropping you a few lines . . . I would like to Be at home a Christmas to take dinner withe you . . . if you have any thing good you will please think of me. if you will come out heare I will give you a good dinner for we have a rarity here every day which is Beef and tuf Bread. But if you will Be sure and Come i will have the Bred short-end and the Beef Cooked pirfectly dun an have Coffee made strong three granes [grains] to the gallon[.] I suppose if you get any Coffee now . . . you have to Pay a large Price for it . . . it is geting tolerable Coald here and we have had a little snow here . . . A Fiew Lines to Dear Brother Joseph[:] I am informed that they drug you out as a molitia and I want you to let me kno how you like the operations of a soldiers life and how bad you was scared when you was standin picket on the oald holston mountain . . .

John Offield

When nature was sinking in silence to rest,
The last beames of daylight shown dim in the west

⁸ At this point in the file are two unsigned drafts of the same letter to "Joseph Offel," beginning: "Dear Brother," almost certainly written by John: "you no [know] nothing aBout Warr til you git in wher the men lie on the ground[;] you cold walk on them fir an hunderd yards. . . . I leveled my old muskit at one . . . But I dont know whether I kild him ur not. . . . I promised to Bring you a scalp and that Cap is as ni[gh] it as things gits[.]"

On fiere by pail moonlight I wandered my feet,
Sought in great meditation som lony [lonely] retreat

The ailing brother James enlisted in April 1862, and less than a year later, February 9, 1863, died while a prisoner in the "Yankee Hospital" in Murfreesboro.

This letter from John tells of his fears for James:

Mr. Joseph Offield Snr.

Kingston Tenn Apr 17th '62

Dear Father:

. . . I was sorry to hear of James enlisting for I know he cannot stand the fatigue of a camp-life. It is hard enought for me to keep up much less a man who has the Rheumatism. I dont want you to let him go, and tell [him] that I said he cant stand it 2 months before he will be sent to the hospital . . . We have had several very hard trips since we left Knoxville and have stood them very well. On our last Trip, which was to a valley called Brimstone in Scott County Tenn near the Cumberland river, we had a fight with some Yankee homeguards as they call themselves, though we call them jay-hawkers. They killed as you are already informed, 2 of our boys . . . Henry Haley and Samuel Jones [and] wounded four . . . C. R. Millard [?] O. S. Brisco, A P [?] Smith and David Malone. We killed 15 of them and wounded about 20. There was only our Co. in the fight, and only 27 of our boys there; while the yanks numbered about 120 men. . . . The people here and every where we have been since we left Va. are almost intirely Union, but I believe they are more so here than any place we have been[.] There is a great stir about reenlisting and reorganizing the Regt. the first volunteers will not more than half reenlist in that Regt. yet they have enough recruits to supply their place[s]. It is also rumored that a law [was] passed in the house of congress at Richmond to impress all the volunteers now in the field but I think that there is nothing of it, though the conscription Bill did pass; and the militia are all called out. . . .

Jno. Offield

Tullahoma Tenn Apr 21st 1862

To William Offield

Dear Brother: . . . myself & John are both well . . . There are a great many reinforcements coming in here from different parts[,] some from Vicksburg & some from Virginia (So I understand) & in fact some of the boys saw a portion of them. . . . Bill you don't know how glad I was when I heard the unexpected news that you had got home for we had all given you up as dead[.] Bill I would be glad if you could stay at home awhile some 2 or 3 weeks, but Lt. Carrier⁴ talked to the Col. about getting you a furlough & he said that it was impossible to get it & perhaps you had better come as soon as you can for the orders are verry strict & there might be some danger in staying too long. When you come I want you to bring me 2 shirts & 1 pair of socks & the

⁴ Lt. Carrier has not been identified.

same amount for John. . . . we want you to get the money at home & bring us a pretty good supply of tobacco for we cant get any here that is worth anything & we have to pay 1.50 cts per plug for that[.]

James

James had found the marching hard going and was ill, as he wrote in this letter:

Knoxville E. Tenn. Hospital No 3 June 21st 1862

Dear Father: I have not written home for some time for several reasons I have been marching nearly all the time since I left home and have not been stopped long enough to have a letter written. I have been sick for about 2 weeks but am considerably better. . . . I have been in the hospital more than a week. There has been considerable furlowing going on, but not much among Tennes.

The Troops are moved back from Cumberland Gap and the Yanks are now in Powels [Powell] Valley. Forces are rapidly concentrated at Chattanooga and is no doubt that a desperate struggle will be made shortly. . . . There has existed great excitement in the City for fear of the Yanks com[ing] in (via Clinton) and tearing up the Rail-Road[.] It is a general opinion here that E. Tenn will be in the hands of the enemy within 20 days. I cant see any other alternative myself. If this be so, you may look for Yanks instead of Shelby Greys[. Will be] at home shortly if [I] get a furrow [furlough], though I am not caring about it, yet of course [it] would be better for me were I there.

James Offield

Knoxville was not taken by Union troops until September 1863. Meanwhile, the news of James' death on February 9, 1863, was relayed to his father by this letter from a comrade:

Camps 26th Regt. Tenn Browns Brigade, Beechgrove
June the 4th 1863

Mr. Joseph Offield
Holston Valley
Sullivan County E. Tenn.

Dear Sir—Having just learned of the fate of your son Ja's [James], I decern [discern] it a duty I owe to his relatives to inform them concerning him, & therefore embrace this opportunity & devote it to that purpose. We received by flag of truce this morning a report of all the members of our Regiment who died in the Yankee Hospital at Murfreesboro while prisoners & I am sorry to say that your son James' name appears on that list, he died on the 9th day of February 1863. . . . Both armies have been maneuvering for some time. Yesterday we made a reconisance in force, went within four miles of Murfreesboro when we encountered the enemies pickets when a sharp skirmish ensued[;] no loss on our side save some three or four horses. All is again quiet & I think both [Gen. Braxton] Bragg & Rosencrans [Gen. W. S. Rosecrans] are willing to wait the Result of "Vicksburg" which all admit is the turning scale of the war & should the southron arms be crowned with a signal victory at that point, while their army is in a demoralized condition troops can be massed here and hurled upon

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⁵ Gen.
⁶ Jobe
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Rosencrans, in such overwhelming numbers that he will be forced to give away [*sic*], for his army is now considerably weakened by Reinforcing, [U. S.] Grant, in Mississippi & it is to be hoped that before long the Stars & bars can be carried triumphantly & transplanted upon the banks of the turbid waters [*sic*] of the Ohio that should ever be as a gulf of fire between us. Should we be victorious at Vicksburg the Reconstructions Candidates (& I understand there is not a few of them in East Tennessee) had better try to ride into office upon some other hobby for it would be just as impossible to get gallant hearted Mariners into a dispute about Sea water or fellow soldiers into an envious quarrel about plumes & collors while storming side by side some Sebastopol or breasting shoulder to shoulder the fierce tides [tides] of battle as to get them to agree to a Reconstruction of the Union after having stood side by side with friends & relatives & seen them fall fighting for their homes their fire sides for liberty & to avenge the wrongs & insults heaped upon inocent women in every City town or Parish that has fallen into their hands as did New Orleans when it fell into the hands of beast "Buttler"⁵ that odious wretch & black hearted villian [*sic*] whose name should ever be a curse upon the lips of every Southron [*sic*] freeman. The health of the Boys is generally good, and all anxious to heare [*sic*] the news from upper East Tennessee. You will still direct your letters to Wartrace as it is the nearest point to the Rail Road though we are stationed at Beach Grove some ten miles or more distant, let us heare who are the Candidates for Representative & the platform upon which they ask for the sufferage [*sic*] of the people, no more at present, Respectively Yours

H[?] R Jobe⁶

This letter reveals that three of the brothers are together in the same regiment:

Camp near Wartrace, Tenn
June 12th '63

Dear Father Mother & Family

. . . We are stationed within a mile & a half of Wartrace stile [still] near where we have been ever since we left Tullahoma & are in a nice place and it seems to be a healthy part of the country. We have had a good deal of picket duty & Hard marching to do for some weeks past but we have not had much to do for the last few days . . . We cannot tell much about the prospects of a battle here[;] some think that there will be a fight here before long & others think that we will not have to fight here at all[;] this is a matter that we can tell but little about but if we do have to fight we will all do the best we can & hope that we will all be spared to get home again to see you all & find you doing well & keep in [as] good spirits as you can & try to do all you can in trying to make all the grain you can for if the war should continue there will be no chance to buy anything [for] another year & if it

⁵ Gen. Benjamin F. Butler.

⁶ Jobe must have been a close friend as well as comrade of James Offield. He may have been a member of the Jobe family of Elizabethton, Tenn.

should close, which we hope it will[,] you need not be afraid of having too much. . . . Your affectionate sons untill death[.]

William Offield
Joseph Offield
John Offield

Tyners Station E Tennessee Aug 7th 1863

Dear Father . . . Jno is well[;] we herd from bill yesterday[;] he was geting better fast[;] he said he would be at the company next week.⁷ I got the boxes all to the company but the provision was a good deel spoiled[.] It was five days in geting here. I lost my 2 blankets and 1 pair of socks in coming. I lost them at the depot. . . . send 2 blankets and 2 pair of socks

Joseph

Strawber[r]y Plains Jefison [Jefferson] Co Tenn Sep 18 [1863]
Dear Father . . . We are at the Strawberry Plains garden [guarding] the Bridg but I cant tell how long we will stay here[.] We have no orders to move yet[.] We have a right smart of duty to do but we get plenty to eat and we are able to do it[.]

J Offield

Calhoun Ga April 7 1864

To Nancy Offield

We are stationed at Calhoun[.] we have aheap to do but we ar not tied down like we ar [were] when we was in front We here [hear] that [Gen. James] Longstreet has fell back to Bristol[.] I hope it is not so[.] The Capt sends his love [to] all his friends on the river[.]

Jno Offield Joseph Offield

Camps 26th Tenn Regt Browns Brigade June 1st 1864

Dear Father

. . . we are all three well [William, Joseph, & John], & I do hope this may find you all well. We have been marching and fighting a good deal since I returned to the Company. We marches sometimes day and night. Our feet got very sore[;] not many of the Tennesseans deserted on this retreat[.] But a good many Georgians in the northern part of Georgia (which is now occupied by the Yanks) left us. . . . Several of the company was pressed [impressed] at Petersburg, but they all have made their way through. We have been at this place about 7 days[;] we were in [at the] front some 3 or 4 days[;] we only skirmished with them during that time. we [are] now in reserve for the first time[;] we had been in line. it was rumored yesterday that Gen [N. B.] forrest had captured Chattanooga.⁸ It may not be so, I hardly believe it. The Yankeys have a large force here[;] it is reported there is 6 regiments of negroes here. I have not seen any yet. I think the Yankeys will meet with a reverse sure. I hope so anyway. John was slightly wounded in the left ear

Affectionately till death

John & Joseph Offield

⁷ The brothers presumably had been separated, and William had been wounded or was ill. Tyners Station was a hamlet ten miles east of Chattanooga.

⁸ An example of the false rumors of wartime.

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In Line of Battle near Morinter [Marietta?], ga June the 16 '64
 Dear Father

I am hapy to say that I am permitted one time more to write you a line stating my health to be good as common trusting these few lines may come in our time to find you all enjoying the comforts this life. . . . we can see the yanks very plain & their works. continued cononading & skirmishing on the lines[;] occasionally a few prisnors taken by both partys[.] It is believe by all that there will be a general engagement before many days though they keep flanking the boyes are all tolerbly well but very much fatigue[d] marching, day & knight through rain as well as sunshine & mud as well as dust[.] they are all in fine spirits[;] they never murmar[.] we are geting plenty of bread and bacon If we meet no more on earth I hope we will meet where parting is known no more.

Wm Offield

Battlefield near Marritta [Marietta] Ga June 16th 1864

Dear Father Since I last wrieten you I have been engaged in the Great Campaign in which the Army of Tennessee has undergone from May 5th to the present date[.] I have not [had] time to give you a full Diary of the Campaign Our Regiment were in the hot contest which took place near Resacea [Resaca, Ga.] Sunday morning May 15th 1864[.] But owing to our splendid position and our temporary brest-works which we had hastily thrown up we scarcely lost a man and were able to resist every assault which the enemy made which were about six on our brigade during the day[.] After the hot-contested battle was over we crossed the river at Resacea and marched southward without making any particular stand until we reached this place We are now in line of battle waiting the approach of the yanks but I fear that they are too sharp to attact us in this position[.] We have been in this visinity for upwards of three weeks[.] We have marched [and] counter marched until I am very tired of such duty[.] I would rather fight not for any glory that may arise thereby on my part or that I am anxious to fight—but I am soother in my own mind that the fighting has to be don[e] and the sooner the better so far as the fatigue and hard ships of soldiers is concerned[.] Informe [sic] me whether George and Washington has gone into service.

Your son, Wm Offield

Now the sad news of the death of John is written.

26th Tenn In line Atlanta Ga Aug 19th '64

My Dear Father Mother & Sister:

. . . I was with John untill he died[.] he was wounded 22 of June[;] Died 3rd July [after having] lived 11 days[.] He was sensible of his death all the time—saw [saying] he new [knew] that he wants [to] die and that he was willing to go for he was agoing to rest[;] he did not seem to suffer much untill the last[;] he was up 3 minutes before he died[.] I have been here for 2 days tell George & Wash to stay at home as long as you [they] can work like good boys but never go like some[.] When you decide to go in try to go to cavelry[.] I am not as stout as I was before I had the measles we have been

here for most 6 weeks[;] we hold our line yet and we think old hood⁹ is a fighter but there was no better than Johnson[.]¹⁰ I hope peace will be made this fall or winter[.]

Joseph Offield

Line of Battel ner Atlanta Gorga Ag 23rd '64

Dear uncel [Toliver]¹¹

. . . John got wound[ed] the 22 of June and died the 3 of July[.] i was with him till he died[;] he was willing to go[;] he said that he was going to rest[;] he was in his rite [right] mind till he died and said that he wanted awl [all] of his friends an relations to try and mete him there[.] We are still connonaden and skirmishing her[e] and have bin for put [pretty] nere fore months[.] it semes as that [though] it never will sease [cease.] i want you to talk to Gorge and tell him to stay at home and take car [care] of what he maks [makes] and work and be a good boy and not to run off[f] becose [because] Wash is gon[e.]

J Offield

Camp 26th Tenn Atlanta Ga August 23rd '64

Dear Companion and Friends

. . . We are living tolerable well at this time and get plenty of bacon and corn bread and sometimes mess of peas[.] we had a fine mess of peas and rice together today[.] I don't think there is any danger of starving for while yet[.] if I new that we always had as plenty as we have now I never would be uneasy about starving. I hope you have plenty at home . . . I want to come home[.] I has been so blind on there [their] marches that they hav had to leed me after night[.] I think they ought to do something for me[.] I think I ought to go to the Hospital or bee discharged[.] I dont think Im any use to the government[.] We have a great deal of Picket duty to do[.] Here the pickets is not more than 75 yards apart[.] they kill and wound a good many of our men[.]

Wm Offield

Camp Atlanta Ga August 23 '64

Dear Mother

Sam Smithson¹² came yesterday and sayd that Wash was gon to cavalry[.] I was sorry to here that he was gon but glad to her that he was gon to cavalry if nothing els would do[.] I dont want any one up here to go to infantry for it is two [too] hard a servis [service.] Joseph has returned to his company[;] he is not right wel but is doing duty[;] he will all be right [be all right] in a few days[;] he stayed with John all the time that he was wounded untill he died[;] he lived 11 days after he was wounded[;] he died at this place[;] he talked to Jo and give him all the satisfaction that he could[;] he says he was willing to dy [die] and prepard to go[;] he sayd he was going to rest[.] I was truly

⁹ Maj. Gen. John D. Hood.

¹⁰ Possibly Gen. Bushrod Johnson (or Gen. Joseph E. Johnston).

¹¹ Tolliver Bolling, who lived near the home of Joseph Offield, Sr.

¹² Sam Smithson was a neighbor; he lived about eight miles from Bluff City, Tennessee.

glad to here that he was prepard to meet his God in Peace[.] I no he is
far better off that [than] we ar[.] you wanted to no how he was beried[;]
Jo sayd he had good cloth[e]s and a verry good coffin and was put away
verry decent[.] tell Georg to stay at home as long as he can and then go
to cavalry[.] I dont want him to come here[.] it is mutch harder duty
than cavalry[.] If I never meet you no more in this life I want you to
meet me in Heaven[.] I will close[.]

Wm Offield

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