AN ORANGE AND ALEXANDRIA RAILROAD BRIDGE
David Donald, ed., Divided We Fought, A Pictorial History of the War, 1861-1865 (New York, 1961), 99.
"THE BRAVE TWO HUNDRED AND SECOND": A PENNSYLVANIA SERGEANT'S POEM ON MOSBY AND THE RAILROADS

BY MICHAEL BARTON

SERGEANT Robert James Coffey of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, wrote a long poem while he was stationed with Company G of the 202d Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry near Salem, Virginia, in 1864. It is worth reproducing here for two reasons—what it tells us of his unit's history, and what it tells us of him.

The poem is inscribed in a slim thirteen-page pamphlet, apparently manufactured by Charles Magnus of New York City. The cover page features a lithograph of a young woman, which has been lightly hand-painted with water colors. Below her portrait is a printed, romantic ballad entitled "Fairy Belle," occupying the remaining two-thirds of the cover page. The other lined pages in the pamphlet, now filled with this poem and another one, were originally blank. His verses appear here exactly as they were written with no corrections of spelling or punctuation.

Coffey may have been the original author of the poem, or he may simply have copied it from someone. The frequent misspellings indicate that if he did borrow it, it was not from a published source. The poem may have been written in the field, as Coffey testified, but the excellent condition of the pamphlet suggests that he, or perhaps a relative, may have transcribed it into the pamphlet after the war.

Coffey was born near Shippensburg in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, on April 14, 1839. He was the seventh of James and Elizabeth Savage Coffey's nine children. The father, born in 1795, was a native of Wilmington, Delaware; the mother, born in 1803, had come from Baltimore. Robert Coffey first served three months in 1862 as a state minuteman guarding Pennsylvania's border with Maryland. Two years later, on September 1, 1864, at the age of twenty-five, he enlisted in a fresh regiment at Camp Curtin near Harrisburg for one year. He collected a one hundred-dollar
government bounty and, because of his prior service, was promoted from private to fourth sergeant within four days. He listed his previous occupations as merchant and teacher.

About a month after his regiment was disbanded, Coffey married Elenora Brown, age twenty-four, from Wolcott, New York. Their two daughters, Mary Elenora and Daisey Eloise, were born in Shippensburg in 1870 and 1872. The family migrated to Michigan in 1875, to Kansas in 1888, and to Delta, Colorado, in 1890, where they finally settled and farmed. At that time Coffey applied for a disability pension, claiming in his request that his military service near Salem, Virginia, had given him a "disease of the back, heart, and eyes, dizziness, shortness of breath, and general debility." He died on March 11, 1910. Elenora survived him for eight years.

The narrative details of Coffey's poem, dated November 22, 1864, are confirmed in Samuel Bates's *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, written shortly after the war. According to Bates, the regiment, recruited from Cumberland County, proceeded via Washington, D.C., to Alexandria, Virginia, in September, 1864, for duty on the Manassas Gap Railroad. They took their positions on the road from Thoroughfare Gap to Rectortown, intending to protect this supply route for General Sheridan's troops. The Union trains were being harrassed by both Mosby's Confederates and the local inhabitants. Corroborating Coffey's point, Bates said that if a soldier went beyond his lines, he was immediately either murdered or captured. Skirmishes took place at Salem, Virginia, on September 8 and 10 during which time the raiders were driven away, as Coffey wrote. On October 10 a train was wrecked by saboteurs, and the Union survivors were fired upon. The regimental commander, Colonel Albright, then ordered that every building within one mile of the wreck be burned to the ground. Afterwards Confederate prisoners were installed on the trains, and the sabotage ceased.

When Sheridan's success was assured, the Manassas Gap Railroad was abandoned; the regiment tore up the ties and rails and retired to Alexandria. At that point they began guarding the Orange and Alexandria Railroad while headquartered at Fairfax Station, Virginia. Four large forts were built there, one of which is sketched in Coffey's pamphlet. In May, 1865, eight months after it was organized, the regiment was ordered to Philadelphia, and thence to Harrisburg, where it was mustered out on August 3, 1865.

The poem is entitled "First Visit of the 202d Regt. Pa. Vol. To the Sands of 'Dixie.'" Coffey swears that "The Following verses give a
correct account of our Marches from 'Washington' to 'Salem,' Va.—
And also our fight with 'Mosby.'"

Twas on a Monday morning,
In the year of sixty four;
We took a boat in 'Washington,'
Bound for the Rebel Shore!

That night without our supper,
Our Regiment went to bed;
At the junction of 'Mannassa,'
Where many a Soldier bled!

Next morning bright and Early,
We five days rations drew;
And with our Colonels Orders,
Our knapsacks on we threw!

Our Orders being forward,
We soon were formed in line;
And up along the Railroad,
We marched to common time!

At gainsville we were halted,
And ordered for to lode;
And place a line of pickets,
On each side of the road.

At two we were in 'Gainsville,'
And formed again in line;
One hour then was given,
Our Regiment for to Dine!

We then Marched to 'Haymarket,'
And down to Thoroughfare Gap;
Where we cooked a hasty supper,
And laid down for a nap.

No tents had we to shelter,
Our bodies from the rain;
But we got beneath our Blankets
And I heard no one complain!

Next morning bright and Early,
The bugle called us out;
And after eating breakfast,
We moved along our rout!

We marched through grassy Medows,
And on between the hills;
One place along was famous,
They Called it 'Chapman's Mills!'
At "broad run" we were halted,
And ordered to Encamp;
To protect a set of Workmen,
While they built a water tank!

Companies "B" and "G" were chosen,
And soon we piched our tents;
The Regiment moving onward,
We had but slight defence!

At nine O'clock next morning,
Our orders came to move;
So they put us on some cars,
But a bore it only proved!

For "Engine" could not pull us,
And the trains were backing out;
As "Mosby" had attacked,
And set our front to flight.

So we Shouldered up our Muskets,
And hurried to the "plains;"
Where we fell to digging trenches,
With all our mights and mains.

At Nine O'clock next morning,
Companies "A" "B" "G" and "D;"
Were Ordered on to "Salem,"
To See what we could see!

At Two we came to "Salem,"
To the Left on "Salem Hights;"
And commenced to fortify it,
Expecting for to fight!

But we had not half completed,
The first side of our Fort;
Untill our Ear's were greeted,
With the Cannon's loud report!

Then we seen the coming foemen,
Ride toward us o'er the field;
But we only worked the harder,
Determined not to yeald!

On the Hillside Just-beyond us,
Their Cannon Soon was placed;
And on our little Army,
Their deadly muzzels faced!

Right Soon they opened fire,
And the Shells flew very near;
But Our Brave Boys only shouted
Come On you'll find us here!
SERGEANT'S POEM

Shell after shell they lofted,
Cheer after Cheer we sent;
'Till mad by our mockery,
They Swore we should repent!

Down on us charged the Rebels,
Three hundred in a breast;
But our gallant Soldiers Met them,
And some were laid to rest!

Again they charged upon us,
Again we laid them low;
And many an Empty Saddle,
Down O'er the field did go!

They rallied and retreated,
And "Mosby" long will feel;
The Shame we heaped upon him
With a few men fresh & Green!

All that night we lay in Ambush,
Looking for the dawn of day;
But the morning light but told us,
That they all had fled away!

In their place down by the railroad
Lay the Brave Eighth Illinoise;
Who had heared our Cannonading
And came to Save our Boys!

With them lay the fifth Artillery,
Sixteen hundred men or more;
Stood in Noble line of Battle,
We had Saved them day Before!

Then the Illinoise moved forward,
Searching Every foot of ground;
Every hill and Every hollow,
'Till they came to "Rector town"!

But "Old Mosby" had departed,
Every trace of him was gone;
So the fifth with Merry Music,
Bid Farewell and moved on!

Then they put us on the Railroad,
Every Searget with his squad;
Where we ever since are serving,
As a useful railroad Guard!

With "Guerillas" all around us,
Watching every move we make;
Shooting every thoughtless Soldier,
From the hill-top or the brake.
None dare wander for an hour,
From his comrads side for fun;
That He is not made the target,
For Some Sly "Guerillas" Gun!

But we ’listed to be warior,s,
And we mean to win the Name,
Though already some are Sleeping,
Robed in War’s red glare of fame!

Some are Sleeping, brave Companions,
In Virginia’s rebel state;
But we know they ’cant disturb you
Or your peaceful slumbers brake.

There are others too must follow,
Still their memories will be green
Long years with those surviving,
All this dark and trying scene!

Oh! that though will be so pleasing,
To us all long years from now;
That may live to wear the laurels,
That shall settle on our brow!

And the thoughts of that dark morning
When we raised our hands & swore
We would joine the Union Army;
And its shattered ranks restore!

We have come, and we are keeping
That proud Path from tarnish free;
We are holding up the Bannar,
Of our own loved country!

And when our term expires,
And the full twelve Months is reckond
We will give “three cheers for Dixie,”
And the brave “two hundred & second!”

The poem has little aesthetic merit. Its style, tone, and content are
derivative and simplistic, indicating that Coffey was emulating the
popular, romantic tradition of his time. But instead of dismissing it
as mere sentimentalism or trivial military data, let us take the piece
seriously, assuming that its author was being quite honest and
intense and that its survival meant a good deal to him and his heirs.
Sergeant Coffey represents a state of mind that we have largely lost
today. The style of his expression should not be separated from the
ideas he expressed, and both are archaic. In this poem there is an en-
thusiasm for battle and a deep affection for home that are usually
foreign to most of us. One finds similar feelings in hundreds of old
prints by Currier and Ives and on as many old battlefield monu-
ments. For better or worse, no such emotional configurations will be
found today in quite the same spontaneous form as this poem, which
makes it more than quaint Americana. The poem is the remains of
pre-modern minds, minds which we ought to continue to recover
and reconstruct for the sake of knowing our modern character better.
We tend to forget how different we have become between Salem,
Virginia, and Saigon.