

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

AN ARMY WIFE'S LETTERS FROM PITTSBURGH DURING THE WAR OF 1812

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WE are going to live at the garrison, 'tis a very pretty place," wrote twenty-seven-year-old Mrs. Nancy Bedinger Swearingen from Pittsburgh on August 18, 1813.¹ Nancy's husband, Captain James Strode Swearingen, had recently been appointed deputy quartermaster general for the western military district.²

Captain Swearingen, son of Josiah Swearingen, a Revolutionary war veteran, was born near Shepherdstown, Virginia, now West Virginia, on February 3, 1782. His career in the United States Army started in 1803 when he was appointed a second lieutenant of artillery. At the age of twenty-one he temporarily commanded the company of soldiers sent from Detroit to establish the first Fort Dearborn, later Chicago. After being put in command of Fort Pickering on the Chickasaw Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi, he was assigned to Pittsburgh as military agent.

In 1806, Swearingen was appointed district paymaster at Baltimore, Maryland, where he remained nearly three years. Furloughed, he visited relatives in western Virginia where he met and courted his first cousin, Nancy Bedinger. Nancy was the daughter of Major Henry Bedinger, a veteran of the Revolution, and his wife, Rachel Strode Bedinger, aunt of Captain Swearingen. Major Bedinger, a wealthy flour and produce merchant, had built a fine home, "Pro-

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1 The letters of Nancy Bedinger Swearingen are in the Davenport copies, Danske Bedinger Dandridge Papers, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina.

2 Copy of Colonel James Strode Swearingen's statement describing his life and career dictated to the Reverend J. B. Britten, Chillicothe, Ohio, Jan. 30, 1863, Chicago Historical Society. See also James Grant Wilson, "Sketch of the Life of Lt. James Strode Swearingen, etc.," *New York Herald*, Oct. 4, 1903, and Roy Bird Cook, "Colonel James Strode Swearingen, West Virginian, Founder of Chicago," *The West Virginia Review* (Aug. 1933): 314-16.

tumna," near Martinsburg, Berkeley County. Nancy and James were married in 1811.

President James Madison called for a declaration of war with Great Britain on June 1, 1812, and, after two weeks of deliberation, Congress passed a resolution to that effect. The surrender of Detroit by General William Hull, governor of the Michigan Territory, resulted in an order for all commanding officers to report immediately for active service. Captain James Swearingen, then in command of Fort Mifflin, below Philadelphia, marched with his company to Greenbush, New York, near Albany. From Greenbush he was ordered to Sackett's Harbor, a wilderness outpost at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, where he was to take on a battery. There he encamped for three months before the secretary of war directed him to proceed to Pittsburgh.

Nancy Swearingen, who had been staying with her parents at Protumna, joined her husband at the garrison. She found Pittsburgh a relatively small place with a population of around 5,000. The town had a number of factories, several tanneries, and boatbuilding yards. Two newspapers were published, and a coach ran daily to Philadelphia.³ Nancy wrote to her parents, "The society appears very good — General Neville's family I am delighted with."⁴

The late General John Neville, of Winchester, Virginia, had been commandant of Fort Pitt, the major frontier post, during the first two years of the Revolution. Later he went into business and accumulated a large fortune. He was host at frequent social events, and after his death in 1803, his family continued to grace Pittsburgh society. His son, Captain Presley Neville, was a respected merchant.⁵

Although Nancy Swearingen was "delighted" with old General Neville's family, she expressed some reservations about the rest of Pittsburgh society when she again wrote home. She now considered it "very indifferent" and no more attentive to strangers than were Pennsylvanians in other parts of the state.⁶

Nancy missed what she considered to be the superior amenities of Martinsburg and Shepherdstown where she had spent her girlhood. When she learned that Lieutenant Archibald Darragh of the garrison was going to Virginia and would probably stop by to see her parents

³ Frank C. Harper, *Pittsburgh: Forge of the Universe* (New York, 1957), 131, 297.

⁴ Nancy to parents, Aug. 18, 1813.

⁵ Harper, *Forge of the Universe*, 109, 117; Mark Mayo Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York, 1966), 779-80.

⁶ Nancy to parents, Aug. 31, 1813.

at Protumna, she commissioned him to have shopkeeper Elkanah Cohen select for her an attractive winter bonnet. Lieutenant Darragh's brother, Nancy said, was a respectable cabinetmaker and "squire" at Pittsburgh. As for the lieutenant himself, he was a worthy, good-hearted person but not overburdened with brains.⁷

Nancy's letter also contained a message for her sister Sally, aged twenty-three. Major Ralph Marlin, the commanding officer at Pittsburgh, had "bespoke" Sally. Nancy described the major as a bachelor about thirty-three years old, very handsome and with a fine build. He was a respected lawyer, had pleasant manners, and was rich. She would be happy to have him as a brother-in-law except for one thing. "Alas, we all have our faults," Nancy lamented. "He has been very fond of the ardent since he entered the army, although he was never known to drink before." She feared it was all over with the major as he now drank alone in his room.⁸

Nancy found housekeeping at Pittsburgh arduous and little to her taste. A succession of servants had been unsatisfactory, and she complained to her parents about the situation. Major Bedinger reminded his daughter that her mother had been equally unversed in the domestic arts when she had married him in 1784, but that one would have to search far to find a better housekeeper or a more active woman of the same age. Nancy finally found a good servant girl whose father had belonged to the old artillery company which James had left at Sackett's Harbor. The new girl gave Nancy unwonted leisure. "I now have nothing to do but sit in the parlor like a lady, sewing or knitting," she wrote home on January 9, 1814.

Then disaster struck the American arms on the Niagara front. After capturing Fort Niagara, enemy raiders moved up the American side of the river, and, combined with another Canadian force, left destruction in their wake. The villages of Buffalo and Black Rock were destroyed. Nancy Swearingen described for her family the excitement prevalent in that part of the country. "The British, after taking Niagara, burning Buffalo, etc., came up the lake towards Erie and the country was alarmed," she explained. "Capt. Elliott of the Navy, in great consternation, sent an express to Major Marlin desiring him to march with the troops under his command at this post to Erie to defend the town and shipping," she wrote on January 9.

Maryland-born Captain Jesse D. Elliott had been assigned the task of building a shipyard at Black Rock, now a part of Buffalo,

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

where vessels for the United States fleet on the Upper Lakes were to be constructed. He had been second in command under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry at the Battle of Lake Erie.⁹ Now with the British threatening the town of Erie, Pennsylvania's only port on the Great Lakes, Elliott wanted Marlin to bring immediate succor.

"Major Marlin, a worthy gentleman but no soldier, worse still scarcely ever sober, did not know what to be at," Nancy wrote her parents. "All was disorder and confusion." The Pittsburgh Blues, whose members had already seen a year's active service, volunteered once again, as did some of the militia. Nancy was unsure of the number who volunteered, but she did know that Marlin had only 150 men in the entire district. Most of these were at Pittsburgh, with a few at Brownsville, Uniontown, and elsewhere. "They commenced marching off in detachments of 15 or 20 each on Wednesday morning between 3 and 4 o'clock," Nancy wrote on January 9, 1814.

Due to Marlin's incompetence, a large part of the burden of getting the men and stores off to Erie fell to Captain Swearingen. Nancy's letter of the ninth continued: "And that we might have all the trouble at once, the British prisoners arrived on Monday last, dreadful objects, generally sailors taken by Capt. Perry, shot all to pieces." Ten days later a number of women and children of the captive soldiers and sailors arrived. These were followed on Friday by about a dozen British officers, "horridly torn to pieces."

There appeared to be no rest for Nancy's weary husband. After being "worried, vexed and dreadfully fatigued" from getting Marlin off, Swearingen next had to ready for the use of the captured British the barracks and officers' quarters which had been left in great disorder by the recruits. The prisoners were to stay in Pittsburgh until the United States marshal could find quarters for them elsewhere. Old Fort Pitt had been allowed to fall into ruins after Great Britain had recognized American independence in 1783. Its ramparts had become a crumbling wall, its moat a debris-filled ditch. A new bastion, called Fort Fayette, had been built on the Allegheny River when Indian outbreaks proved that Fort Pitt had been abandoned prematurely.¹⁰ Fort Fayette, now used mainly as a military storehouse, had to be readied by Captain Swearingen as a temporary shelter for the prisoners.

Next Captain Swearingen received a report that 1,300 men were

⁹ Robert West Howard, *Thundergate: The Forts of Niagara* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968), 161.

¹⁰ Harper, *Forge of the Universe*, 90.

ill at Detroit. He was ordered by General Lewis Cass, governor of the newly restored Michigan Territory, and in command at Detroit, to send to that post large quantities of hospital and medical stores. Swearingen had hired a light wagon and sent the stores off to Detroit on January 8, 1814.

According to Nancy Swearingen, an enormous quantity of medical and hospital supplies had been sent the previous winter and spring to the northwestern army, but all had been "lost or destroyed." No accounting of the loss was to be had. Nancy heard an officer say that just prior to the Battle of the Thames in early October 1813, the troops of one regiment took what they pleased of the surgical instruments to use as knives. "There never was more waste, destruction, and loss of public property in any country as by the Northwestern Army," Nancy complained. She had heard twenty officers say that as much as \$50 had been paid for a barrel of flour, and \$30 for one bushel of corn. General William Henry Harrison, United States commander in the northwest, had written to Captain Swearingen for supplies, saying: "We must have them, spare no expense, the Treasury is open to me."¹¹

Lately General Harrison had gone to Washington, and his trip through New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore was a gala progress celebrating his triumph at the Battle of the Thames. Huge banquets were tendered him in the cities, and cheering crowds thronged his route. Harrison lingered in the capital for a week, then he and three aides caught the Western Maryland stage on December 23, 1813.¹² Thomas Worthington, United States senator from Ohio and soon to be governor, had loaned the general a horse named "Old Hull," which Harrison rode in triumph into Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh society toasted the victor of the Thames at dinners and parties before he embarked for Cincinnati on New Year's Day. On January 9, he reached Cincinnati, where his family had lived for some time, and set up his headquarters. Nancy Swearingen wrote to her family on the same day that Harrison reached his home. She had little to report about the general, but she thought "Old Hull" one of the finest horses in the world: "I rode him 8 or 10 miles in the country today and could scarcely hold him in."¹³

Nancy had some gossip for her sisters Sally, Betsy, and Maria.

¹¹ Nancy to parents, Jan. 9, 1814.

¹² Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe* (New York, 1939), 214; Dorothy Burne Goebel, *William Henry Harrison* (Indianapolis, 1926), 187.

¹³ According to Nancy's letter of Jan. 9, 1814, General Harrison had arrived in Pittsburgh the "week before last."

She and James, along with almost everybody in town, had attended a splendid party at the Beltzhoovers'. The hostess, a charming pretty creature seventeen or eighteen years old, had been married about a year and a half and was worth \$20,000 or more. Her husband, a "gentlemanly, clever little fellow," owned a glassworks and was getting very wealthy.¹⁴ Nancy was glad that the handsome bonnet which she had ordered from her hometown storekeeper, Mr. Elkanah Cohen, had arrived in time for the winter's festivities. It was a fashionable "Perry" hat, named in honor of the hero of Lake Erie, and was of dark purple velvet and black satin, trimmed with black feathers. Nancy said that the bonnet made her feel "elegant." James, too, had received a fine pair of spurs brought from Washington as a gift from his brother-in-law, Senator Worthington.¹⁵

The American army under General James Wilkinson at this time lay idle in winter quarters at French Mills, now Fort Covington, New York, near the Canadian border. A vigorous invasion of Canada was planned, and troops were being raised to send to Sackett's Harbor and Plattsburg. Swearingen expected the First Regiment of Infantry at Pittsburgh soon to fill up and join the American forces.¹⁶

Early in February 1814, reports were received at Pittsburgh that the three hundred British prisoners held at Chillicothe, Ohio, had plotted to burn the town, murder the inhabitants during the night, release their officers who were being held in close confinement, and march to Erie. Fortunately the conspirators made a confidant of a man in town who pretended to be friendly. As soon as the man obtained the whole story he went with it to the commanding officer of the militia. The plotters were immediately confined. Nancy Swearingen thought that Chillicothe's three hundred prisoners must be a great deal of trouble since the sixty held at Pittsburgh were worry enough. James was in constant dread with two magazines to protect and nothing but militia, drunk half the time, to guard them.¹⁷

Regardless of war's alarms, life went on. Nancy Wilkins, daughter of General John Wilkins, Jr., of Pittsburgh, had been married ten days before to Captain James R. Butler of the Pittsburgh Blues. The

¹⁴ It is not clear whom among the large Beltzhoover family the Swearingens visited, but Nancy identified Mrs. Beltzhoover as "Judge Wallace's daughter" and Mr. Beltzhoover as "Mrs. Mason's youngest brother."

¹⁵ Worthington married in 1796 Eleanor Strode Swearingen, daughter of Josiah and Phoebe Strode Swearingen. The Worthingtons moved from Shepherdstown, Berkeley County, Virginia, to Scioto County, Ohio, and Massieville, later Chillicothe.

¹⁶ Nancy to parents, Feb. 6, 1814.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

bridegroom was the son of General Richard Butler, killed in 1791 at St. Clair's defeat by the Indians under Little Turtle near the Miami villages.¹⁸

Nancy Swearingen often longed to see her family. "You must certainly take a trip to Pittsburgh this spring, my dear father," she wrote on March 20, 1814. "You know that travelling across the Alleghenies always has a good effect on your health, and there are so many things in Pittsburgh worthy to be seen — glassblowing is the most beautiful process in the world."

However, army life is always uncertain. Captain Swearingen was appointed quartermaster general of General Harrison's district and was ordered to Chillicothe. "We arrived three days ago," Nancy informed her parents on April 23. Both she and James had been quite ill on the road and so had traveled slowly. Neither had ridden a horse such a long distance for some time, but Nancy described her mount as a "delightfully going" steed. As yet their servants and baggage had not arrived, nor had suitable living quarters been found. They had become so well settled at Pittsburgh that it would take a while to adjust to new surroundings.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ At war's end, Captain Swearingen retired from the army and lived at Chillicothe until his death on February 3, 1864. He had six children, two of whom died in infancy.