

Eagle Furnace, Tennessee -- The Clack Estate

John L. Kimbrough MD



Figure 1 – 5c Blue Lithograph from Stone 2 Position 5 Eagle Furnace (Tennessee) to Chattanooga, Tennessee June 5, (1862).

The cover in Figure 1 is from a very obscure post office in Roane County, Tennessee. Eagle Furnace is so obscure that it is not found on any official listings of Confederate post offices. However, it is listed in the *1863 Appleton's United States Postal Guide*. Eagle Furnace was established as an early iron furnace on White's Creek just south of Knoxville c1828 and was abandoned shortly after the war. The author has yet to see another cover from this Confederate post office. In addition to the decidedly scarce postal use, much more historical information is associated with this simple cover. The very prominent military address reads "W. R. Clack, Chattanooga, Tennessee, Co B 43rd Regt of Tenn Vols." The cover is part of a small amount of material from the estate of the addressee.

William Raleigh (Riley) Clack (1839-1919) of Rhea County, Tennessee enlisted with his brother Micajah in Company B 43rd Tennessee Infantry. The company was raised from men from Rhea County and organized in October 1861. The Clack brothers appear on the first muster roll of Company B, but William's middle name is misspelled as "Riley." In December 1861, the 43rd Tennessee Infantry was organized from East Tennessee companies formed in October and November 1861. This regiment was involved in the Vicksburg Campaign and was surrendered when the city fell on July 4, 1863. Declared exchanged in September 1863, the regiment served the remainder of the war in East Tennessee and western Virginia. The Clack brothers served with their company throughout the duration of the war.

In 1861 going off to war was viewed as a glorious adventure, particularly by young farm boys who perhaps had never been more than a few miles from their homes in their entire lives. Very frequently martial photographs were taken of the young soldier off to war to record this major event in his life. This was certainly the case with Private Clack as an extremely fine large size



ambrotype image has been preserved as part of the estate. Private William R. Clack (age about 22) is pictured off to war in a Confederate uniform with a revolver in his belt, holding a sword, and holding an unidentified small book which is most likely a testament or a prayer book (Figure 2). The image is hand touched up with a little color. Since revolvers and swords were not issued to nor were they normally carried by privates, these were most likely props provided by the photographer. The name and location of the photographer is not recorded, but the image was most likely taken in Knoxville. The image captures the adventure of the time with little or no understanding of the horrors of war that were to come.

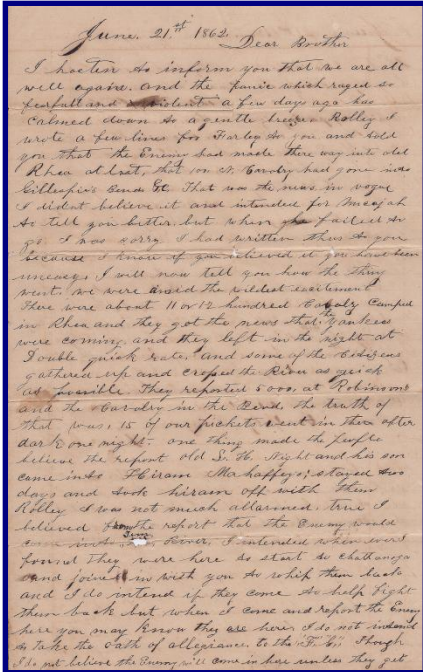
Figure 2 – Private William R. Clack Co B 43rd Tennessee Infantry 1861.

The cover in Figure 1 does not have an accompanying letter, but there is a letter in the estate to William (known as “Rolley” or “Rollie” by his friends and family) from another brother, Spencer G. Clack dated June 21st 1862. The letter from his brother Spencer is in the same handwriting as the address on the Eagle Furnace cover. Rolley’s older brother Spencer (1833-1905) did not immediately enlist. He later joined a short term regiment of state troops, Welcker’s Tennessee Cavalry Battalion, which was in service from August 1863 to January 1864. In his June 1862 letter to his brother Rolley, Spencer is at home in Rhea County and gives news of the local area. Such letters are of paramount importance to historians as they give a true personal account of the events of the time (Figure 3 on the following page).

June 21st 1862

Dear Brother

I hasten to inform you that we are all well again and the panic which raged so fearful and violent a few days ago has calmed down to a gentle breeze. Rolley I wrote a few lines for Farley to you and told you that the enemy had made there(sic) way into old Rea at last, that 100 N(orthern) Cavalry had gone into Gillespie’s Bend, etc. That was the news in vogue. I didn’t believe it and intended for Micajah to tell you better, but when he failed to go I was sorry I had written thus to you because I know if you believed it you have been uneasy. I will now tell how the thing went. We were...the wildest excitement. There were about 11 or 12 hundred Cavalry camped in Rhea and they got the news that the Yankees were coming and they left in the night at double quick rate and some of the citizens



gathered up and crossed the river as quick as possible. They reported 5000 at Robinson's and the Cavalry in the Bend. The truth of that was 15 of our pickets went in there after dark one night. One thing made the people believe the report. Old S. H. Night and his son came into Hiram Mahaffey's, stayed two days and took Hiram off with them. Rolley I was not much alarmed. True I believed from the report that the enemy would come into the Tenn River. I intended whenever I found they were here to start to Chattanooga and join in with you to whip them back and I do intend if they come to help fight them back but when I come and report the enemy here you may know they are here. I do not intend to take the Oath of Allegiance to the "F" "G" ("FG" most likely refers to the Federal Government since parts of East Tennessee had very strong and very

significant Union sympathies – JLK). Though I do not believe the enemy will come in here unless they get possession of Chattanooga and Knoxville and that I do not believe they will ever do. I believe haughty and indignant Lincoln and his minions will be compeled(sic) to cower before the S(outhern) Army while...there dismantled and routed host they will be first to exclaim the Southern Confederacy will ever live. – I have not heard from Micajah for several days. He was very well then. Rolley we will commence laying by corn next week. Our corn all looks pretty well. When we get done plowing and our meadows cut and some fencing done for pasture, I intend to come and see you. I want you to come and see us if there is any chance. I think they might let you off some time. Tell William M. Wilson that Jennie is about well again. "J.E." her health is restored but she is weak yet. I think she is getting along mightily well to be as sick as she was. I have no other news to write at present. Lenira and little Cage send there(sic) love and respect to you. May God's Power intervne in our behalf. Oh may he aid us as he did Joshua and Moses. Good by Tolley.

Spencer G. Clack

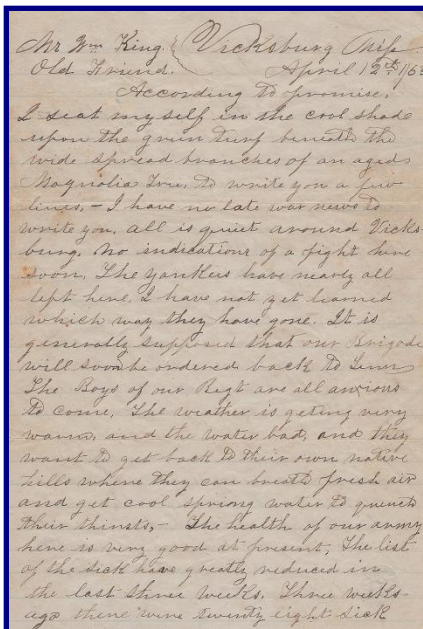
P.S. – Cousin Vina rec'd your letter and she wrote one in answer to it and sent it to get me to back it which I done and started it to Knoxville about the time you left there. Marion sent a letter in the same envelope.

In December 1862, Private Clack's regiment was moved by rail to Vicksburg, Mississippi and located at Camp Reynolds near Vicksburg. From the time of their arrival in the Vicksburg area through April 1863, the regiment was engaged in picket duty and in building fortifications for the siege to come. A letter from Private Clack, who was extremely well educated for the time, to a friend detailing the regiment's activities of mid April 1863 as well as his feelings about the war has been preserved (Figure 4 on the following page).

Vicksburg, Miss
April 12th 1863

Mr. William King
Old Friend

According to promise, I seat myself in the cool shade upon the green turf beneath the wide spread branches of an aged Magnolia tree to write you a few lines. – I have no late war news to write you. All is quiet around Vicksburg. No indications of a fight here soon. The Yankees have nearly all left here. I have not yet learned which way they have gone. It is generally supposed that our Brigade (Reynolds' Brigade of Stevenson's Division – JLK) will soon be ordered back to Tenn. The boys of our Regt are all anxious to come. The weather is getting very warm and the water bad and they want to get back to their own native hills where



they can breathe fresh air and get cool spring water to quench their thirsts. The health of our army here is very good at present. The list of the sick have greatly reduced in the last three weeks. Three weeks ago there were twenty-eight sick in the 43rd Regt. Now there is only twelve, none of them dangerous – As long as we stay here I am not uneasy about getting into a fight, for I do not believe that the enemy will ever attempt to take the place by storm for it would be almost impossible for them to do so. – They may shell us occasionally as they have done, but of little damage to us. I have become used to that. I love to hear them shoot when they are not too close. Our Batteries have sunk three or four of the enemies boats an acct of which you will see in "The Post." – I thought I heard heavy cannonading

at Chattanooga last June also in Ky last fall, but I knew nothing about it until I came here. The noise of our large siege Guns and like the most terrific thunder which appears to shake the earth to her very center, and their balls may be heard for miles as they whistle through the air. – I long for that happy hour to arrive when peace shall be proclaimed throughout our country and all who are out upon the tented fields be permitted to return to their respective homes to rest calmly beneath the wide expanded branches of the Tree of Liberty. – It is hard to conceive of the great joy that will animate and enliven the hearts of the people when the martial music of the hateful drum and fife is superceded by the sweet song of peace, when the march of armies gives way to the march of industry and civilization, when spears shall be turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares and the Goddess of liberty folding away forever the blood stained Banner of Civil War wares upon her wounded Bosom the healing Olive Branch of peace. But alas! Long ere this takes place much more hard fighting may be done and many vallient men lose their lives. And it may be very sad

fate to be numbered among the slain. If so, I feel that I will loose(sic) my life fighting upon a just cause. That I have given my life as a ransom for my country and a just God and patriotic people will avenge my blood. – Give my respects to your father & mother and the family. Tell your Pappa(sic) to write to me, and do not forget your promise also to your Grandfather and Mother – So I bid you adieu for the present.

*Yours Respectfully,
W. R. Clack*

Where this H. C. Remember me Though many miles from N I B.

P.S.—If you get “The Athens Post” dated the third of April you will find a song published in it that is sung a great deal here The Words of a Dying Boy. (The song referenced in the letter was the “Drummer Boy of Shiloh” written in Louisville, Kentucky by Will S. Hays. The song was popular both North and South with the Southern Edition printed later in 1862. The song about the last words of a dying drummer boy really brought home the horrors of the war and battles in which boys as well as soldiers were also killed – JLK.)

After the surrender of Vicksburg and the proper exchange of the regiment, Private Clack continued to serve with his company. But his exploits during that time are not detailed in the estate material. Contained within the estate, however, is one tattered small notebook. The notebook, which is incomplete, appears to be the informal record of Company B. The first part of the notebook contains remnants of some notices and newspaper clippings dated in the 1880's and was apparently used as a scrapbook. The company notations are all from 1864 and give listings and details about various members of the unit. Many of the later notations are in Private Clack's handwriting indicating that he was very likely detailed to keep the record book for the company on account of his education and excellent handwriting. He apparently retained the notebook for the rest of his life. Interesting information is contained in the notebook about various officers and soldiers of the company that does not appear on current databases such as “W. S. Miller wounded near Morristown severely in the leg 16 Nov 64. Deserted on or about 10 Jan 65” and “Jas M. Roddy wounded by Bushwhackers near Morristown, Ten on or about 1st Nov 1864” and so on. It is rare that such an item has been preserved for so long without being researched.

At the end of the war, William R. (Rollie) Clack returned home to Rhea County, Tennessee. In September 1865, he married Miss Sabria C. Newport, also a native of Rhea County. Together they settled in the old Clack farming home on White's Creek for the rest of their lives and raised six children (four girls and two boys). In September 1915, the Clack's celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary a lengthy account of which was published in *The Rhea County News* on September 17, 1915. Of Mr. Clack's Civil War service the following was written – “Mr. Clack was a true and loyal soldier for the cause of the Southland in the war of the sixties and wears a Cross of Honor conferred on him by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in recognition of his valuable services for the Lost Cause.” He died in 1919 at the age of 80 a much beloved prominent member of an old Rhea County family and is buried at the Old Friendship Baptist Church Cemetery near Spring City, Tennessee, the church of which William R. Clack was a founding member in 1875. His wife Sabria died in 1934 (age 85) and is buried with him.

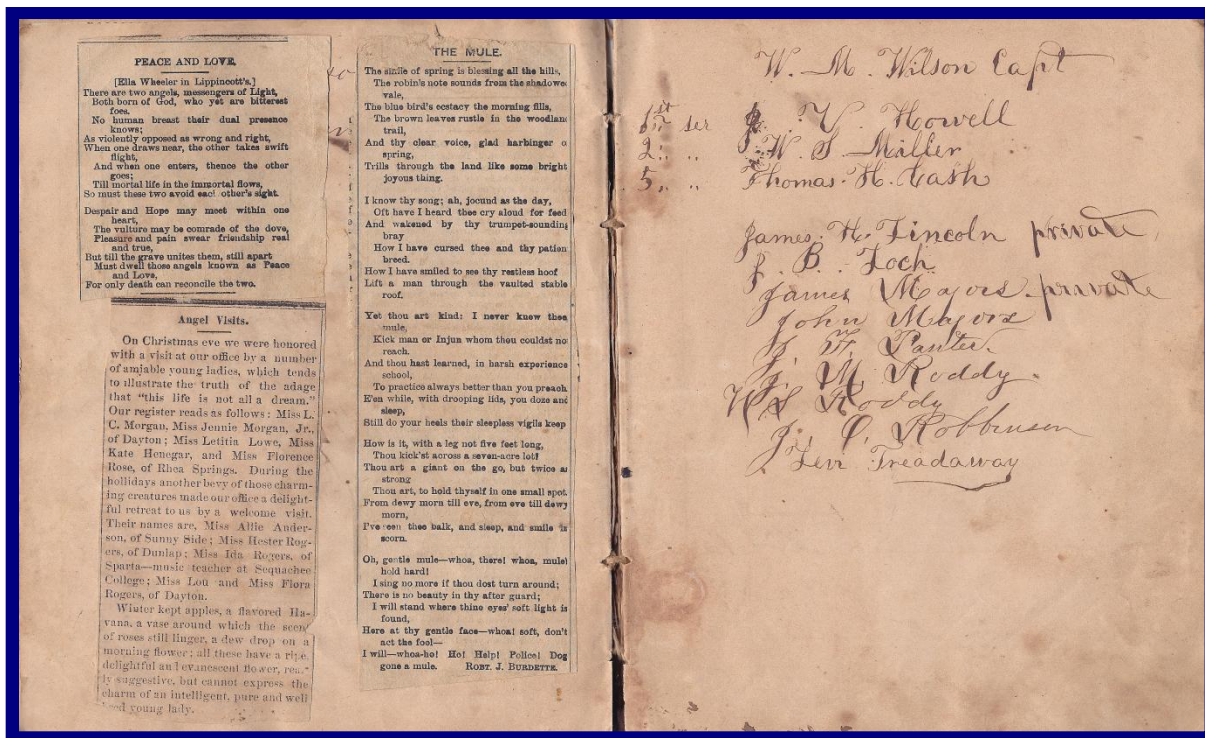


Figure 5 -- *Company B 43rd Tennessee Infantry Notebook – The page on the left shows some of the newspaper clippings pasted into the notebook indicating that the first pages were used as a scrapbook. The page on the right lists the names of the company commander, Capt W. M. Wilson, and the company sergeants and a few privates from mid 1864. More entries are contained on the following pages.*

7 JUL 2013 – UPDATE – Recently I was contacted by a direct descent family member of Pvt WR Clack who provided some additional information according to the direct family history.

William R. Clack was highly educated and was a school teacher by profession. He was very outspoken in his opposition to the war. He only enlisted because of the conscription law and because he felt he had to enlist. He remained a private throughout his service. As a school teacher, he could have obtained an exemption from service, but according to the family history he apparently never applied for such an exemption. His brother Spencer, the sender of the Eagle Furnace cover, was also a school teacher and did apply for and receive an exemption from service.

The family history passed down to the generations is adamant that Pvt Clack saw no further service with the Confederate Army after Vicksburg. According to the family, he was incorrectly listed as a “deserter” for many years after the war. That was only cleared up and removed from his record after his death when his wife applied for a pension which was denied on that basis. She challenged it and was able with statements and testimony from men who served with him to have that overturned and did receive a pension for his service. (I found no record of the word “deserter” used anywhere in the research that I was able to do – JLK.) He kept a diary and

journals and recorded many details during his life. He was also known to have updated entries at a later date. Many of his papers and effects and memorabilia are still preserved by the family along with other earlier family documents. But the scrapbook / company notebook referred to in the article is unknown to this family member. It may very well have been removed from the family papers and in the possession of someone other than Pvt Clack early on since it apparently was not part of the family papers known to the current direct descendents. The entries do certainly appear to be in Pvt Clack's hand when compared to the Vicksburg letter and clearly refer to events in 1864 and 1865. One explanation put forward is that he may have spoken with returning men from his old unit after the war and then written down the information received after the fact. The answer as to how and when these notebook entries were made and as to where the notebook resided until brought forward in 2011 may never entirely be fully explained in light of the fact that Pvt Clack saw no Confederate service after Vicksburg. Among the family documents is WR Clack's original Oath to the Union dated at Kingston, Tennessee May 6, 1864.

The pistol in his belt in the large ambrotype photograph is not a photographer's prop. The pistol, holster, belt, and buckle belonged to Pvt Clack and were carried by him in the war. They are to this day carefully preserved by the family. The sword in the photograph was not his and was therefore a photographer's prop as originally believed. The small book held in his right hand is indeed a New Testament given to him by his mother when he enlisted.

Spencer Clack, after his marriage, lived in adjacent Roane County not in Rhea County as stated in the article.

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July 7, 2013