

Skirmish at Falmouth, Virginia April 1862

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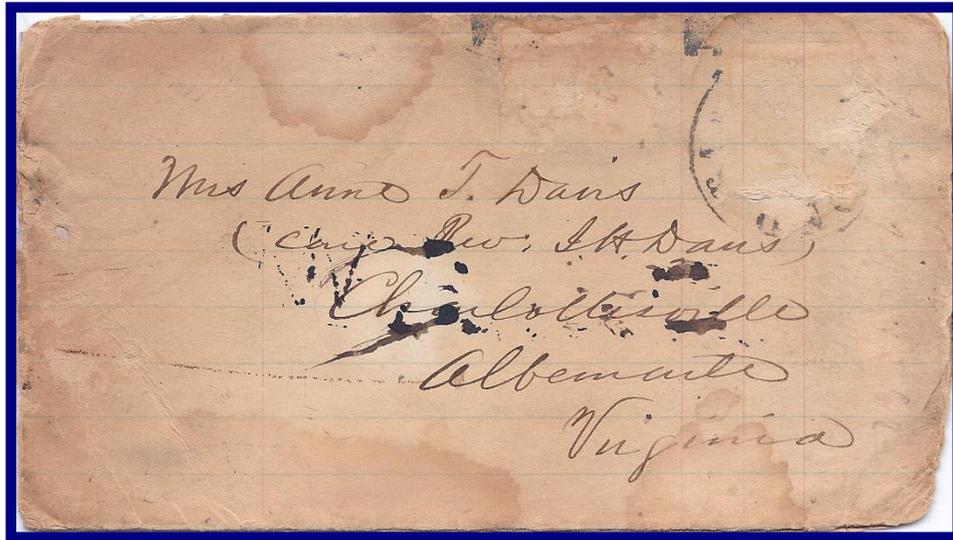


Figure 1 – Cover Richmond, Va to Charlottesville, Va

The cover in Figure 1 is hardly in decent condition. The cover would not even merit a second glance in a dealer's junk box at a show. There are noticeable water stains, severe edge wear, small pieces missing, and a remnant of a Richmond, Va postmark can be seen at the upper right with an obviously missing stamp. The address reads "Mrs Anne T. Davis Care Rev J. H. Davis, Charlottesville, Albemarle, Virginia. What cannot be seen at first glance is that this is a folded letter complete (Figure 2) which although not a lengthy letter is nevertheless quite a remarkable letter.

The letter was written by a soldier home to his (step)mother and contains a first hand battle line description of combat action at Falmouth, Virginia near Fredericksburg on April 18, 1862. What follows is a transcription of the letter. Because of small missing pieces and because of the handwriting, some words are not legible; but the entire content of the letter is most interesting. The letter is datelined from the prestigious and very popular Exchange Hotel in Richmond two days after the action.

*Exchange Hotel Richmond
April 20th (Sunday) 1862*

My dear Mother

Thank Providence John and self are yet safe - We met the enemy at 3 1/2 am Friday morning with the loss of one man killed and one slightly wounded on our side - and an (word illegible) a loss on their part of 25 - We had been camped just in the east of Fredericksburg - the 9th Cavalry had been in on the Stafford side supported by four of our infantry companies two of which were on the telegraph road

and are on the white ridge road - in the evening of Thursday the Cavalry on the white ridge road was driven in by the enemys cavalry beyond the infantry pickets. They rallied about 1 1/2 miles from Falmouth and the infantry came back to the same position. Our regt and other forces were ordered to (piece missing from letter)...our company and Capt Henderson's were ordered to join the picket in advance. We were soon in position, the infantry only four companies drawn up in line of battle about 50 yds in front of the cavalry. We rested on our arms until 3 1/2 oclock when the pickets came in at full speed crying "the enemy is right at our heels." we stood to arms instantly and shore enough here they came a heavy charge of cavalry. We stood motionless until they were within about 20 steps when the cry rang out "fire" - a blaze of fire sprang from the muzzles of our trusty muskets which we kept up two or three minutes firing about four rounds when the enemy retired in confusion. In about 15 minutes they made a (word illegible) and more ferocious charge coming in with a yell but with a like result - We (word illegible) them back (word illegible). Nine dead bodies were left upon the field together with 9 dead horses - rifles - pistols- caps blankets sabres overcoats &c - &c - Orders were given soon after (word illegible) to (word Illegible) which we did in good order. We crossed the Falmouth bridge - The wick was applied to all their bridges, all the (word illegible) & various other (word illegible) - and our army evacuated Fredericksburg. As we left the enemy appeared on the hills above Falmouth and shelled us for a few minutes killing one horse and wounding Roderick Lawrence of Beals cavalry slightly in the right arm - John was not in the fight he was suffering from a corn so that he could not walk well. I came here today as bearer of dispatches from Genl Field to Genl Lee & will return in the morning - I don't know where to tell you to write - you might venture a letter to Guiney's Depot. It may reach me - John directed me this morning to pass his love with mine to you all-

*Most affectionately
your son Robert*

The action described in the letter is the Skirmish at Falmouth, Virginia across from Fredericksburg. Union General Irvin McDowell drove the Confederates out and occupied Falmouth April 18-19, 1862. The letter although fairly short is extremely detailed concerning the action and speaks for itself. It is letters such as these that enable historians to obtain a true grasp of what it was like to actually be in a Civil War battle line.

The writer of the letter was 1st Lieutenant Robert Beale Davis (1835-1864) of Company K (also known as the Potomac Rifles) 40th Virginia Infantry. "John" mentioned in the first line of the letter was his younger half brother John Williams Davis who was serving in the same unit. The 40th Virginia Infantry is documented as having taken part in the action at Falmouth described in this letter. Lieutenant Davis was the son of Rev Joseph Hoomes Davis (1809-1879), a Methodist minister and educator, and the minister's first wife Martha Felicia Beale who died in childbirth in 1835. The Reverend's second wife, the one to whom the letter is addressed, was Anne Thurberville Beale who was the sister of his first wife and the one who raised Robert with their own additional four children. It was a very close-knit family. Robert Beale Davis attended Randolph-Macon College and the University of Virginia and practiced law with his uncle

Richard L. T. Beale in Westmoreland County, Virginia in the years just prior to the war. He entered service with the Potomac Rifles with a commission as 1st Lieutenant at the beginning of the war. Sometime in late 1862 or early 1863 he was promoted Captain of Company K. At Gettysburg, the unit was part of Heth's Division. Captain Davis, the writer of this letter, commanded the regiment during Pickett's Charge on the third day of Gettysburg and is so listed as the regimental ranking officer on the official Pickett's Charge Order of Battle. The Colonel of the 40th Virginia Infantry was John M. Brockenbrough who was apparently incapacitated at Gettysburg when his brother was killed on the first day and took no part in Pickett's Charge thus leaving the responsibility to Captain Davis as the next ranking officer in the regiment fit for duty. Captain Davis survived the action only to be later killed in battle during the Siege of Petersburg on October 1, 1864. Captain Robert Beale Davis is buried at Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia.

A soldier mentioned in the letter who was either a friend or a relative from Westmoreland County, Virginia and who also took part in the action at Falmouth is Private Roderick S. Lawrence of Company C 9th Virginia Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard L. T. Beale (1819-1893), Lieutenant Davis' uncle. Colonel Beale would later in early 1865 attain the rank of Brigadier General and after the war would serve in the Virginia State Legislature and the US House of Representatives. Private Lawrence is listed as wounded at Falmouth on April 18, 1862. This letter details how his wound occurred. Private Lawrence was later captured as a POW at Westmoreland Court House, Va February 14, 1863 and confined at Old Capitol Prison in Washington DC until exchanged about a month later. He served the remainder of the war with the Signal Corps.

Another soldier mentioned in the letter is Captain Henderson. This is a reference to Captain William Henderson (b1841) of Company H (also known as the Lancaster Grays) 40th Virginia Infantry. Captain Henderson lost reelection as Captain in May 1862 but continued to serve in the ranks and was subsequently wounded at Second Manassas and again at Chancellorsville. He reattained his commission in 1864 and survived the war.

Finally, two generals are mentioned in the letter as Lieutenant Davis was detailed to carry dispatches to Richmond from General Field to General Lee. General Lee needs no introduction. In April 1862, Robert E. Lee was in Richmond as the military advisor to President Jefferson Davis and was charged with monitoring the conduct of all military operations of the Confederate Army. The dispatches carried by Lieutenant Davis most likely contained a report of the operations around Fredericksburg. General Lee would not take command of the Army of Northern Virginia until a few weeks later on June 1, 1862. General Field refers to Brigadier General Charles Walker Field (1828-1892), a Kentuckian who commanded a brigade of Virginia regiments in General A. P. Hill's division. General Field was in command of the troops engaged at Falmouth. General Field was severely wounded at Second Manassas and did not see service again until early 1864 at which time he was promoted Major General and served through to the Appomattox surrender.

From this very unassuming cover comes a wealth of historical information. The importance of Confederate postal history is not confined only to the appearance and the condition of the cover

but also to the history contained which can be quite remarkable when discovered by a little diligent research.

Exchange Station (Redmond)
Sept 30th Sunday 1862

My dear Mother

Thom's Providence John and self and
got safe - We met the enemy at 3 1/2 A.M. Friday
morning - with a loss of one man killed & one slight
wounded on our side - and an admitted loss on their
part of 25 - We had been camped just in the rear
of Fairbush's - The 9th Cavalry had been on the
Stefford side, supported by four ^{companies} of our infantry.
Two of which were on the telegraph road & two on the
white edge road - In the evening of Thursday the
Cavalry on the white edge road were driven in by the
enemies Cavalry beyond the infantry pickets, they rallied
about 1 1/2 miles from Fairbush, and the infantry came
back to the same position - But regt & other forces were
ordered to ~~advance~~ ^{advance} the pickets
company & Capt. Henderson's were ordered to join the
picket in advance - They were soon in position, the
infantry only four companies, drawn up in line of
battle about 400 in front of the Cavalry - We rested
on our arms until 3 1/2 o'clock when the pickets came
in at full speed, crying "the enemy is right at our heels"
We stood to arms instantly, and there enough heard
they came, a heavy charge of Cavalry - We stood motion-
less until they were within about 20 steps, when the
cry rang out "fire" - a blaze of fire issuing from the
muzzles of our thirty Muzzles - which we kept up two or
three minutes, firing about four rounds, when the enemy
retired in confusion - In about 10 minutes they made
a charge and made furious charge coming in with
a yell, but with a like result - We pulled them back
fully, their dead bodies were left upon the field
together with 9 dead horses, 2000 - 2000 - Caps, blankets, Sabres
our coats &c - &c - Order a in some town a few days

Figure 2 - First Page of the Folded Letter