

CHAPTER TWO: THE EFFECTS OF CONFEDERATE DESERTERS ON THE FLOYD COUNTY HOMEFRONT

The majority of Floyd County's enlistees and conscripts served the length of their commitment and returned home only after being discharged, killed, or defeated. However, nearly 23 percent of local soldiers chose to abandon the Confederate cause, desert their units, and return to "lay out" in the woodlands and mountains of Floyd County.¹ The deserters were welcomed and assisted by Floyd's actively disloyal Unionist residents, who openly encouraged further desertion, provided food and protection for local deserters, and sometimes even hired the county's runaway soldiers as day laborers. Family, friends, and neighbors also fed and safeguarded local deserters, allowing them to survive in mountain hideaways and elude Confederate forces sent to arrest them.² The passively disloyal aid local deserters received from kin and neighbors was based on familial ties and friendship and not specifically designed as action intended to impede or harm the Confederacy. Nonetheless, the passive disloyalty of kin and neighbors was viewed by county loyalists as parallel to the active disloyalty of Unionists and as blatantly traitorous to the Southern cause. The various forms of community support offered to the local runaway soldiers provoked a violent reaction from Floyd's loyalist residents and from the Virginia and Confederate governments. This conflict further divided the county and escalated its collapse as a positive portion of the Southern homefront.

After the rush of excitement and "patriotism" caused by secession, Confederate forces faced the grinding and excruciating vocation of soldiering in a long and bloody war. When the Civil War did not end quickly with a "glorious" Southern victory, but instead

¹All Floyd County enlistment and desertion information is derived from N.J. Agnew, "A Listing of Men from Floyd County Who Served as Confederate Soldiers in the Civil War or Between the States, 1861-1865: Compiled from the Records of Camp III," typed manuscript, no date provided, Floyd County Historical Society Papers [folder number five], Special Collections, Carol M. Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg (hereafter cited as V.P.I. and S.U.); John D. Chapla, *42nd Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1983), 64-150; Ralph G. Gunn, *24th Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1987), 68-106; John E. Olson, *21st Virginia Cavalry* (Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1989), 58-88; George L. Sherwood and Jeffery C. Weaver, *54th Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1993), 171-230.

²Confederate deserters almost always returned to their communities after deserting. They only very rarely enlisted with Federal forces. See Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1928; reprint Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), 24; Bessie Martin, *Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army: A Study in Sectionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932; reprint New York: A.M.S., 1966), 14.

mired in drudgery of camp life, loneliness, and only the occasional battle, some soldiers lost the will to fight.

Confederate volunteers were by military law committed to sustained service, yet for a variety of reasons thousands of men thwarted the law and deserted. Their decisions to abandon the war were based on a variety of common factors ranging from poor provisions and disease in camp, to mental anguish and homesickness, to life under restrictive military command, to the horrors of war, and to having their lives placed in the hands of officers ill-suited as leaders. Often a continued lack of battle combined with a lack of furloughs convinced Southern soldiers they were unneeded and deserved a chance to visit loved ones. Major Confederate defeats in 1863 also prompted desertion. The April, 1862, Confederate Conscription Act forced soldiers who served willingly and faithfully for one year back into service when their initial commitments expired. This compelled soldiers who felt unjustly conscripted to desert. Elements of the conscription act that allowed exemptions for men owning over twenty slaves, or permitted the purchase of a substitute, bred class resentment and the feeling among impoverished soldiers that the battle had become “a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight.”³ Pleas from suffering or starving family members on the Confederate homefront increased these resentments, and for many soldiers became too much to endure. However, desertion was not limited exclusively to poorer classes or to nonslaveholders. It was often based on factors like age, fitness, and familial needs.⁴ These major causes of desertion, combined with a profusion of individual rationalizations, cost the Confederacy thousands of soldiers by 1865, making desertion a crucial factor in Southern defeat.

To apprehend its runaway troops, the Confederate military used reserve forces to hunt them, offered rewards for their capture, and relied on home guard patrols and local law enforcement officials to arrest them. The Southern military also hoped to stop men from deserting by threatening severe punishment. By Confederate law “the crime of leaving military service without permission and without intention to return to it” could result in execution.⁵ Usually, however, lesser punishments were implemented, including: forced labor, stockade confinement, humiliation, whipping, torture, or physical mutilation.⁶ Punishments were intended to prevent further desertion as well as discipline the deserter, and were therefore usually carried out in view of other troops as well as

³Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1934; reprint New York: A.M.S., 1970), 13-14; Lonn, *Desertion*, 14-15; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 181-82.

⁴Kevin Conley Ruffner, “Civil War Desertion from a Black Belt Regiment: An Examination of the 44th Virginia Infantry,” in *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, ed. Edward L Ayers and John C. Willis (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 100-101.

⁵Martin, *Desertion of Alabama Troops*, 13.

⁶*Ibid.*, 223-26; Richard Bardolph, “Confederate Dilemma: North Carolina Troops and the Deserter Problem,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 67 (April 1989): 193-204.

publicized. In the fall of 1862, The *Daily Lynchburg Virginian* published the types of reprimands deserters could expect, informing readers that runaway soldiers were being sentenced to “wear a ball and chain for one month,” confined to the guardhouse and paraded on horseback two hours each day wearing a “deserter playcard,” forced to wear a “barrel-jacket,” branded with the letter “D,” and given 50 lashes.⁷

Official Confederate military response to the deserter problem, beginning in 1862, slowed desertion among most of its forces by the winter of 1863-1864.⁸ However, unlike the Confederate desertion model, troops from Floyd County deserted in increasing numbers from 1862 to 1865 and deserted primarily from 1863 to 1865. By war’s end, approximately 8 percent, (or 104,000 Southern soldiers,) had fled the army and returned home.⁹ Out of Virginia’s 103,400 soldiers, approximately 11.6 percent deserted. Of the 1,329 Floyd men serving in Confederate forces, 23 percent deserted.¹⁰ Floyd’s Confederate soldiers’ desertion rate was thus nearly three times higher than the Confederate average and almost double the rate for Virginia soldiers.

“I Am Coming Some Way or Another”: Floyd Soldiers Abandoning the War

Floyd soldiers who chose to abandon the Confederate army and return to their community did so for many of the same reasons other Southern soldiers decided to desert: they resented conscription, understood the suffering their absences caused, and eventually lost faith in the Confederacy. Sons of local Unionists drafted into Confederate service were also instructed by their parents to desert as soon as they could.¹¹ Disease and the drudgery of camp life disillusioned others. In February, 1862, James Pratt, a 30-year-old tenant farmer from Floyd’s Court House district, described “a heap of sickness and a heap of death” in the 54th Virginia Infantry and added: “I think hard times is coming now.”¹² County soldiers received numerous letters cataloging the extraordinary hardships their kin were experiencing in Floyd and begging them to return. Many encountered heartbreaking messages. The 42nd Virginia infantryman Cephas Walton received a letter from his wife

⁷*Daily Lynchburg Virginian*, 24 November 1862.

⁸Lonn, *Desertion*, 24-27.

⁹This figure is based on a Confederate enlistment estimate of 1,300,000 and *ibid.*, 226.

¹⁰Lonn, *Desertion*, 27, 63, 231; all Floyd County enlistment and desertion information is derived from the methodology described in footnote number one on page 41.

¹¹Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim 5862, National Archives of the United States, Washington, D.C.

¹²James W. Pratt [Russell County, Virginia] to Pratt Family [Floyd County, Virginia], February 1862, quoted in Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 35.

Nancy, who lamented: “my trubble is so grate i dont now how i can bar it . . . try to gite home as soon as posible.”¹³

Although shielded from combat through most of the Civil War, Floyd’s homefront population suffered the same types of food and labor shortages experienced in communities throughout the Confederacy. Floyd’s magistrates taxed and impressed provisions from residents to feed approximately 800 soldiers’ families. When local crops proved insufficient, county officials also begged Virginia’s government for relief.¹⁴ Magistrate Harvey Deskins repeatedly pleaded with Virginia’s governor that “a great many of our soldiers wives and families are inteirely barefoot, and a good many neighborhoods are so scare of men that the soldiers families can not get help to get firewood.”¹⁵

Many of Floyd’s soldiers deserted for reasons similar to those of impoverished tenant farmer John A. Ratliff. Enlisting in the 54th Virginia Infantry a month before the Confederate draft took effect, Ratliff left his 26-year-old wife Adline and two infant children alone on the family farm in Floyd’s Court House district. Like other soldiers from Floyd, he worried about his family and wrote home often to check on his “dear wife” and “sweet little children.”¹⁶ A year after enlisting, Ratliff felt “very uneasy” about his family in Floyd. He wrote his wife, explaining that he had recently experienced a series of omens he interpreted to be indicative of his children’s impending deaths.¹⁷ The situation at home worried Ratliff as well; his wife reported that the family “had got out of money” and would need his soldiers’ pay to survive.¹⁸ Additional descriptions of Adline’s many difficulties as well as accounts of his wife’s hardships from his father and brother forced Ratliff to consider leaving the army. By the spring of 1863 he was distraught and complained to his wife that “i hope the wore wont last much longer . . . three boys is

¹³Nancy A. Walton, Floyd County, Virginia, to “Husband” [Cephas L. Walton, Camp Near Petersburg, Virginia], 13 March 1865, Walton Family Correspondence, Newman Library, V.P.I. and S.U.

¹⁴Harvey Deskins claims that throughout the war Floyd’s magistrates found ways to feed an estimated 700 to 800 soldiers’ families. See Deskins, “Floyd Court House” [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 7 January 1865, Executive Papers and Letters, Virginia Governor William Smith, The Library of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter cited as Smith Papers).

¹⁵Harvey Deskins, “Floyd Court House” [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], January, 1865, Smith Papers.

¹⁶John A. Ratliff, Isle of Wright County, Virginia, to “Wife” [Adline Ratliff, Floyd County, Virginia], 11 March 1863, John A. Ratliff Letters and Papers, Private collection in the possession of John M. Ratliff, Salem, Virginia.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Adline Ratliff quoted in letter of John A. Ratliff, “Camp Near Knoxville,” Tennessee, to “Wife” [Adline Ratliff, Floyd County, Virginia], 23 April 1863, Ratliff Papers.

running a way -- i wish they hole regiment would run a way.”¹⁹ Ratliff stayed, but pondered desertion again at the end of summer when he let his wife know that “you might not be surprised to see mee at home at any time for I am coming some way or another.”²⁰

In August, 1863, Ratliff’s older brother Philip urged him to desert and explained that “the general opinion of the people in Floyd is that the war is nearly over.”²¹ He also informed his brother that 250 Confederate deserters were passing through Floyd County each week and they were “respcted as much as eny body else.”²² Ratliff heeded his older brother’s advice and deserted that autumn.²³

Family suffering, the apparent hopelessness of the continuing fight, and the knowledge that the Floyd community would support their decision, combined to prompt numerous county soldiers like John Ratliff to abandon their posts and return to the county. Like many of Floyd’s runaway soldiers, Ratliff was arrested soon after arriving home and forced back into the military. For Ratliff, however, the misery of continued absence from his wife and children was brief. Just weeks after his departure Adline received a lieutenant’s notice confirming the “the sad news to which is true.” Her husband had been killed by an artillery shell near Jonesboro, Georgia.²⁴

Local soldiers like Freeborn Hall, forced into the Confederate army but claiming to be “opposed to the Confederacy,” also deserted.²⁵ Unionists like Hall, who were conscripted into Southern forces, saw little reason to serve and often ran away as soon as opportunity presented itself. Hall crossed the front lines, fled north, and eventually made his way to Ohio; Samuel Slusher ran away to the Midwest and never returned to Floyd County.²⁶ Those who did return often spent the remainder of the war hiding in the mountains of the county to keep from being arrested and returned to military service.

¹⁹John A. Ratliff, “Camp Jackson,” Wythville, Virginia, to “Wife” [Adline Ratliff, Floyd County, Virginia], 5 April 1863, Ratliff Papers.

²⁰John A. Ratliff, “Bell’s Bridge,” Knoxville, Tennessee, to “Wife” [Adline Ratliff, Floyd County, Virginia], 15 August 1863, Ratliff Papers.

²¹P[hillip]. Ratliff, Floyd County, Virginia, to John Ratliff [Knoxville, Tennessee], 27 August 1863, Ratliff Papers.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 121.

²⁴The letter to Ratliff’s wife was sent by Lieutenant James [Luke Tompkins?], “Camp 54th Regiment,” Georgia, to Adline Ratliff [Floyd County, Virginia], 3 September 1864, Ratliff Papers.

²⁵Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8042, National Archives of the United States, Washington D.C.

²⁶*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 17710, testimony of Elijah Hylton for Samuel Slusher.

In the spring of 1864, Captain Asa Booth and all 101 Floyd soldiers remaining in Company D of the 54th Virginia deserted in Georgia and headed home.²⁷ The homogeneous composition of Company D, and of most Confederate units originating in Floyd, significantly increased their chances for desertion for several reasons. First, solidarity between men enlisting from the same locale often remained more important to them than devotion to Confederate ideals. This made their “localist identity” more significant than a Confederate nationalist identity and made desertion more common.²⁸ Second, disloyalty to the Confederacy within a significant portion of Floyd community strongly reinforced its soldiers’ decisions to abandon the war and increased overall chances for desertion among county troops.

The omnipresent threat of military punishment made abandoning the war a potentially dangerous decision for Floyd County volunteers and conscripts. In the fall of 1863, county soldiers in the 42nd Virginia witnessed three weeping deserters tied to stakes and executed.³⁰ This revealed dramatically the potential penalty for running away. Local men in the 54th Virginia also saw firsthand the “dying agony and spasms” of fellow soldiers executed for abandoning the war.³¹ However, most Floyd County soldiers were only physically punished for deserting. Thomas King, who fled the army in the summer of 1862, was arrested by the Floyd County home guard, returned to his unit, and “sentenced to be branded on his left hip with the letter D [and] put in hard labor for four months . . . with a 12 pound ball attached to his ankle.”³² Despite the punishment, or perhaps because of it, King deserted again in the winter of 1864 and was again arrested and returned to service. Former Court House district field hand Aaron Phillips also ran away from his unit in 1862. He was punished before purposefully allowing himself to be captured by Federal forces. Phillips then asked to enlist in the United States army and explained that he was conscripted into Confederate service and “does not think the South is right.”³³

Confederate officers from Floyd reacted with disbelief and anger when men in their commands fled the war. Colonel William Banks Shelor, the former clerk of the Floyd County Court, put a heavy guard around the 54th Virginia in the summer of 1862 in hope

²⁷Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 5.

²⁸Peter S. Bearman, “Desertion as Localism: Army Unit Solidarity and Group Norms in the U.S. Civil War,” *Social Forces* 70 (December 1991), 336-37, 340.

³⁰*Daily Lynchburg Virginian*, 18 November 1863.

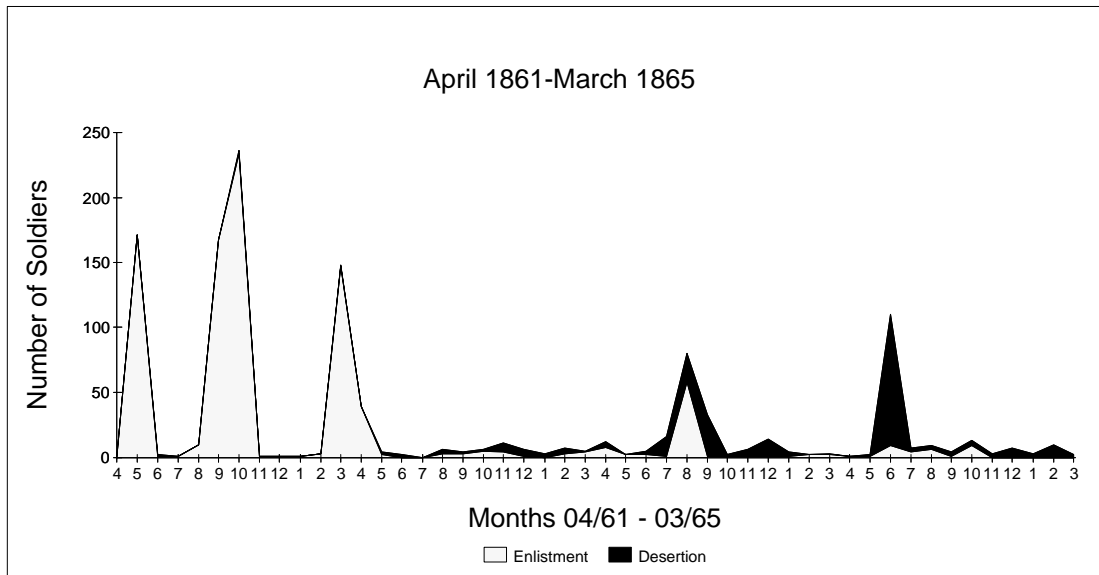
³¹John S. Robson, *How a One Legged Rebel Lives: Incidents in the Life of the Writer During and Since the Close of the War* (Richmond: W.H. Wade and Company, 1876), 55-56.

³²Chapla, *42nd Virginia*, 104.

³³ [United States, National Archives], “Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers who Served in Organizations from the State of Virginia,” [Washington, D.C.: National Archives of the United States, 1934, microfilm copy 324, roll 875].

of impeding the flow of men from the unit. When the guards proved ineffective, Shelor drank heavily and went into “a perfect rage.” He swore to end all furloughs and proclaimed that his troops “might die and go to hell for all he cared.”³⁴ Local Confederate commanders John R. Hammet, captain of the 54th Virginia’s Company I, and Austin Harman, captain of Company D, were also distraught over the increasing number of Floyd men in their commands abandoning the war. In March, 1863, they complained to Floyd County’s court that soldiers Monroe Hudson, James and Joseph Gray, Daniel Keith, and George Wells had “deliberately thrown down their arms, abandoned their comrades, and deserted their flag and county.”³⁵ The captains urged Floyd’s magistrates to post the deserters’ names in “the most public place in the county” to humiliate the men back into service. The anguish of officers and the punishments they inflicted did little overall to stem the tide of Floyd men leaving the war. By the fall of 1862, more county soldiers were abandoning local units than joining them (see Chart 2.0).

Chart--2.0 Enlistment and Desertion Occurrence, Floyd County Confederate Soldiers.



Sources: N.J. Agnew, “A Listing of Men from Floyd County”; Chapla, *42nd Virginia*, 64-106; Gunn, *24th Virginia*, 68-106; Olson, *21st Virginia Cavalry*, 58-88; Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 171-230.

³⁴Milton [Charlton], “Rocky Gap” [Virginia], to Oliver [H. Carden, Montgomery County, Virginia], 29 July [1862], Charlton Family Papers, Special Collections, Newman Library, V.P.I. and S.U.

³⁵Captain John R. Hammet, “Camp on the Blackwater,” Isle of Wright County, Virginia, to Floyd County Magistrates [Floyd County, Virginia], March 1863, and Captain Austin Harman, “Camp in the Blackwater,” Isle of Wright County, Virginia, to Floyd County Magistrates, March 1863, in Floyd County Court Order Book, 1858-1864, Floyd County Courthouse, Virginia, page 416-417.

After making their way back to Floyd, local deserters usually attempted to conceal themselves in mountainous portions of the county or in woodlands near isolated family farms. For additional protection and sustenance, many runaway soldiers banded together in gangs. The deserter bands descended from secluded mountain camps to stage foraging raids on local loyalists. They used scouts scattered throughout the countryside to provide warnings and to allow them to elude home guard and deserter patrols. One gang, established and commanded by David and James Sisson, eventually became bold enough to turn the tables on deserter-hunting Confederate forces. They ambushed and captured them instead, making the Sisson's gang notorious among deserter hunters.³⁶ Confederate runaways who were caught, arrested, and confined to Floyd's jail often later escaped, or were freed in jail-breaks staged by fellow deserters. This forced home guards and Confederate reserves into cyclical and pointless arresting and re-arresting actions.³⁷

The presence of hundreds of runaway Confederate soldiers in the Floyd community elicited contrasting reactions from its residents. Some supported deserters by providing aid and protection; others hunted the runaways and sought governmental assistance in apprehending them. The contrasting decisions regarding the desertion of local troops further divided the Floyd community and eventually drove many of its inhabitants into open warfare with each other.

“A Great Friend to Us Poor Fellows Who Had to Stay in the Woods”: Community Support of Deserters

Those in Floyd, who for various reasons chose to aid, feed, and protect deserters, contributed to the disintegration of the county as a useful portion of the Confederate homefront. Their homefront disloyalty allowed potential Confederate soldiers to elude military service and engaged hundreds of Confederate reserve forces in actions designed only to return deserters to service. Both Unionists and kin provided assistance to local men abandoning the war, and both groups were blamed and harassed by county loyalists and the Confederate military. Because aiding deserters in any fashion was considered treasonous, by supporting runaway soldiers, Floyd County residents risked imprisonment, property destruction, and physical violence.

Floyd's Unionist community openly assisted local deserters, frequently feeding even runaway soldiers they did not know.³⁸ By providing sustenance to deserters, county

³⁶Floyd County Court, Common Law Order Book 3, 1859-1868, Floyd County Courthouse, Virginia, page 239, August 1863; John Sergeant Wise, *The End of an Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 385-86.

³⁷Harvey Deskins, “Floyd County Court House” [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor John Letcher [Richmond, Virginia], 31 October 1863; Floyd County Court Order Book, page 313, July 1864.

³⁸In addition to the claims cited later in the text, see Records of the Southern Claims

Unionists hoped to encourage more Confederate desertion by making it a viable and survivable option. Floyd's Unionists presumed that coaxing county soldiers to desert would weaken the Confederacy and contribute to ending the war. Many equated "fighting against the rebellion" with "encouraging desertion from the rebel ranks by feeding deserters."³⁹ Andrew Stigleman endangered his family and property to further the Union cause. Court house district farmer Miriam Reed and her father provided rations for dozens of Floyd's runaway soldiers who were "strangers" they "never saw before."⁴⁰ Wealthy Unionist David Weddle Sr. felt by feeding "as many as 150 deserters a week" at his Floyd County farm that he was encouraging more county soldiers to desert.⁴¹ Phillip Ratliff provided 15 deserters with breakfast and then urged them to "go to their homes and stir up their friends against the secession cause."⁴² Farmers Tilman Overstreet and Eli Epperly "would harbor and feed deserters from the rebel army" as much as possible because they believed the action would "brake up the war."⁴³ Epperly felt that feeding the county's runaway Confederate soldiers at his farm was a good way "to keep them from being caught by the Rebels." ⁴⁴

The county's deserters looked upon Unionist assistance as an act of self endangering kindness not soon to be forgotten. In the summer of 1863, Denis Hylton deserted the 54th Virginia Infantry in Tennessee and returned to hide-out in the mountains of Floyd County. While hiding, Hylton was fed and safeguarded by Dunkard Joshua Weddle, a man he had never met before. Weddle felt that by supporting the county's deserters and "running the risk of loosing my own life for the advocates of the Union cause" he was fulfilling his patriotic duty to the United States.⁴⁵ And, every time the 30-year-old farmer from Floyd's Willis Ridge district fed Hylton and other deserters, he endangered his wife and three young children. For this, Floyd's runaway soldiers considered Weddle "a great friend to us poor fellows who had to stay in the woods."⁴⁶

Commission, Record Group 217, Claim Numbers 17604, 5861, Record Group 233, Claim Numbers 13128, 14495, 13909, 9442, 9141, 3520.

³⁹*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 2436.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2434.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2441.

⁴²*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8741.

⁴³*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 3491, testimony of Tilman Overstreet for Eli Epperly.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 3491, testimony of Jacob B. Moses for Eli Epperly.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim 2995, testimony of Denis Hylton for Joshua Weddle.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2995.

In order to further support local deserters, some Floyd County Unionists even provided food for their families and become an alternate outlet of assistance in direct contrast to the Confederate aid offered soldiers' families. Beginning in 1862, Otey F. Kinsey, a 50-year-old Simpsons district blacksmith and grist mill owner, provided ground grain free of charge to numerous deserters' families. Charles Huff, his neighbor, remembered Kinsey had invited runaway Confederate soldiers and their relatives into his home to eat.⁴⁷ When local loyalists eventually learned of Kinsey's disloyalty they threatened to burn his mill if he continued providing grain for the families of men they considered treasonous.⁴⁸ Despite the threats, Kinsey proceeded with his support, using the cover of night to grind grain and deliver it to deserters' families.⁴⁹

Local Union men also offered Confederate deserters employment when possible. The money or provision earned through such jobs allowed runaway soldiers to aid their families as well as provide sustenance for themselves. In 1863, local Unionist Amos Gramh hired several runaway soldiers to assist him in cleaning grain and was arrested along with them when Floyd's home guard appeared, eventually ending up confined to jail for several days.⁵⁰ After deserting the 54th Virginia Infantry and returning to Floyd County, Henry Dangerfield secured a job with miller Otey F. Kinsey. According to Dangerfield, Kinsey also employed numerous other deserters, "paid them well," let them sleep on his premises, and provided "timely warnings" when home guards approached.⁵¹ When Dangerfield built a distillery in the mountains of Floyd to provide further income for his family, Kinsey gave him grain to brew whiskey, and when Dangerfield's still later "sprang a leak" Kinsey quickly loaned him the tools necessary to fix it.⁵²

Floyd's Unionists frequently also provided shelter and protection for soldiers who abandoned the war. Elijah Hylton concealed runaway Confederate soldiers in his barn.⁵³ Court House district tenant farmer Andrew Weddle deserted the 54th Virginia and counted on Floyd's "good Union men" for shelter and protection.⁵⁴ In 1864, when

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8740, testimony of Charles Huff for Otey F. Kinsey.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 2992.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8740.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 17710; for other examples see Record Group 217, Claim Numbers 17604, 5861, and Record Group 233, Claim Number 14698.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 2430, testimony of Andrew Weddle for William Jasper Dillion.

Weddle was being tracked by deserter hunters, his Unionist friend William Jasper Dillion let him “dodge in and stay with him a little for protection.”⁵⁵ Unionists also actively warned and safeguarded local deserters. When Henry Dangerfield, a Huffsville district tenant farmer, deserted the 54th and was captured in Floyd by the local home guard, Unionist Otey F. Kinsey lured the guard to a nearby still and “made them drunk,” a circumstance that allowed Dangerfield to flee back into the woods and remain at large.⁵⁶ In the winter of 1863, Floyd County deserter John Earls was being tracked in the snow by a home guard unit when Andrew F. Stigleman met and warned him. Stigleman then promptly retraced Earls’ tracks, destroying traces of his whereabouts and confounding the nearby deserter hunters.⁵⁷

Floyd’s Unionists actively assisted local Confederate deserters across the lines, allowing numerous ex-soldiers to place themselves out of reach of further military service. They provided maps, horses, provisions and often even money to local runaway soldiers heading north. Noah B. Underwood, a Court House district farmer, endangered his wife and four children when he made maps for local deserters detailing the safest route to nearby Union lines.⁵⁸ Elijah Hylton, another strong Floyd County Union man, claimed to have done everything he could to assist local runaway soldiers in crossing into Federal lines.⁵⁹

Kin and neighbors further sustained the county deserter population and made abandoning Confederate troops a viable option for local soldiers. Their reasons for feeding runaway soldiers were far less overtly “disloyal” in origin, but considered equally treasonous by Floyd’s loyal Confederates. Residents like miller Jacob B. Moses, who in 1863 began providing grain for his deserter brother Jefferson, placed loyalty to family above concerns for their own safety and the success of the Confederacy.⁶⁰ When Moses’ son-in-law Samuel Spangler also deserted the 54th Virginia Infantry and made his way back to the county, Moses again placed familial ties above the Confederacy and kept Spangler and his wife supplied with enough grain to survive until the close of the war.⁶¹ Since both his brother and son-in-law were protected by local deserter gangs, Moses

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8740, testimony of Henry Dangerfield for Otey F. Kinsey.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim 2436, testimony of John Earls for Andrew F. Stigleman.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 3520, testimony of A.P. Dobbins for Noah B. Underwood.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 17710.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2993.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

eventually felt compelled to provide for these deserters as well, an action that provoked local Confederates to drive him from the county in early 1865.⁶²

Because local deserters were usually unable to sow or tend crops, their families, and primarily their wives or mothers, were placed in positions of responsibility for producing provision. Jane Weddle took on the added responsibility of feeding her secluded kinfolk and “sent out a basket of provisions for deserters every day for about 15 months.”⁶³ Aley Ann Kinsey, who was responsible for feeding several young children at home, found the time and energy to produce and personally carry provisions to several relatives “laying out” in the mountains of Floyd County.⁶⁴ As the mother of several deserters Mary Spangler was also called on often throughout the war to harbor and protect them. Spangler provided shelter for her sons willingly and “at all times,” even though the actions caused her loyalist neighbors to threaten her with violence and arrest.⁶⁵ In aiding husbands who deserted, the wives of local runaway soldiers placed the requirements of family above loyalty to their state or the Confederacy, providing sustaining actions for their husbands with conduct formerly within the “male sphere.”⁶⁶

The intelligence and warnings supplied by their relatives often allowed Floyd County’s runaway soldiers to elude Confederate deserter hunters as well as local loyalists and home guards. While providing information to deserters was based on kinship, loyal Confederates considered the action treasonous to the South. In the fall of 1864, when Aley Kinsey learned deserter hunters were closing in on her son-in-law Robert Huff, she warned him and was then promptly arrested along with her nine-year-old son for providing the information.⁶⁷ Freeborn Hall also warned his kinsmen in the fall of 1864, alerting his cousin John Hall, a member of the Sisson gang, that Confederate Colonel Robert Taylor Preston and his men were in Floyd to track and capture them.⁶⁸ Rebecca Blackwell, whose son Abraham deserted the 54th Virginia Infantry in October 1862, sent her eight-year-old son Isaac “to blow the horn when the homeguards were in the neighborhood,” providing Abraham with warnings in time to escape capture.⁶⁹

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 17764.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8740.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 2434.

⁶⁶Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 123, 131, 142-45, 149.

⁶⁷Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8740.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 8042.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2990.

“This Growing and Disgraceful Nuisance”: Local and Confederate Prosecution of Deserters

Floyd County’s Confederate loyalists perceived local deserters as traitors to the Southern cause and an embarrassment to their community. To remedy the “evil” of desertion, local loyalists initiated and participated in various activities designed to detain and punish the county’s runaway soldiers as well as return them to military service. The sustaining actions of Unionists and kin, who were feeding, sheltering, and protecting local runaway soldiers, was interpreted by county loyalists as a major component of the deserter problem. They perceived all persons supporting deserters as liable for action initiated to suppress such support. Floyd’s loyalist community realized early in the war that they would be unable to apprehend most of the county’s runaway soldiers, or halt community support, and they turned to the Virginia and Confederate governments for additional assistance, which eventually prompted military actions within the county that further divided its residents.

By the fall of 1862, gangs of runaway soldiers living in Floyd were subjecting loyal residents to foraging raids, threats, violence, and murder. These raids, and the parallel mayhem and conflict they created, continued almost unabated throughout the remainder of the Civil War, mirroring types of inter-community turmoil occurring elsewhere on the Confederate homefront.⁷⁰ The county’s loyal Confederate community, which consisted primarily of residents outside the parameters of the southern draft, felt outnumbered and outgunned by local deserters, and begged the state government for help. In November, 1862, when members of a Bent Mountain deserter gang ambushed and killed Confederate recruiting officer John R. Payton, county loyalists demanded action from Virginia’s government. Local Confederate Tazewell Price wrote Virginia Governor John Letcher, explaining that Payton was “shot dead from his horse” in broad daylight by deserters living on Bent Mountain and soon afterwards a witness’s house was “burned to the ground.” Price cataloged numerous additional “outrageous acts” committed recently in Floyd by the gang and complained that “robbery, theft and attempts to murder various citizens” as well as “threats” against any persons providing authorities with information were commonplace. He also explained that no “sufficient force” was available locally to arrest the “traitors,” making Floyd’s “respectable citizens. . . . alarmed [to] such and extent that

⁷⁰For similar activity on the Confederate homefront, see William T. Auman, “Neighbor Against Neighbor: The Inner Civil War in the Randolph County Area of Confederate North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 61 (January 1984): 68-69, 71-72, 78-86; Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community, 1818-1937* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 131-38; Ralph Mann, “Family Group, Family Migration and the Civil War in the Sandy Basin of Virginia,” *Appalachian Journal* 19 (Summer 1992): 380-89; Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 26.

they don't believe their lives are safe." Price begged Letcher to "send a force sufficient to scour the mountain" and "put a stop to such outrageous acts."⁷¹ Letcher's dispatch of deserter hunting forces to the county did little overall to impede the growth of deserter gang activity in Floyd. In late 1864, Bent Mountain was still the stronghold for numerous deserter bands, and in spite of the hundreds of Confederate troops that eventually did "scour" it, "thevery and robbery" conducted by runaway soldiers living there continued unabated.⁷²

As deserters continued to fill Floyd County throughout the war, more local loyalists requested state help. In the spring of 1864, "Virginia," an anonymous "loyal citizen" of Floyd, wrote newly elected Virginia Governor William Smith a detailed letter informing him of "the deplorable situation of affairs in our county." In the three page message Floyd's unnamed loyalist complained bitterly that "not less than 500 deserters" were living in the county and that "their number is almost daily increasing." The runaway soldiers "committed unbearable depredations upon the persons and property of loyal citizens," including "theft, arson and murder" and recently were joined by several escaped "Yankee" prisoners from Danville. Furthermore, the writer reported, the loyalist community and home guard were "nearly powerless" to apprehend the men and suspected "members of the police force themselves [were] friends of desertion." On behalf of the Floyd's loyal Confederate community "Virginia" implored Governor Smith to "devise some plan by which our county may be rid of this growing and disgraceful nuisance."⁷³

In the summer of 1864, the "Committee of Safety" in neighboring Montgomery County bolstered the complaints of Floyd's Confederate loyalists, and in a desperate dispatch to Confederate Major Leory they explained that Montgomery, Floyd, and Giles counties were "infested by armed bands of deserters," making "the lives and property of all loyal citizens very insecure."⁷⁴ According to the committee's report, deserter gangs

⁷¹Tazewell Price, "Copper Hill," Floyd County, Virginia, to Governor John Letcher [Richmond, Virginia], 16 November 1862, Executive Papers and Letters, Virginia Governor John Letcher, The Library of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter cited as Letcher Papers).

⁷²For a continuance of deserter gang activity on Bent Mountain, which was also commonly known as the "Roanoke Hills," see A.J. Hoback, "Flat Head," Floyd County, Virginia, to G. M. Mumford, "Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia" [Richmond, Virginia], 25 April 1864, Executive Papers and Letters, Virginia Governor William Smith, The Library of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter cited as Smith Papers); and James W. Walton Sr. [Floyd County, Virginia] to "Son" [Cephas L. Walton, Chimbarazo Hospital, Richmond, Virginia], 13 August 1864, Walton Family Correspondence.

⁷³"Virginia" [presumably Dr. A. J. Hoback, whose handwriting on subsequent loyalist letters to Smith appears very similar to this one], Floyd County, Virginia, To Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 6 April 1864, Smith Papers.

⁷⁴*The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 130 volumes (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 4, volume 3, 804-805.

were shooting “unarmed and inoffensive citizens,” pillaging and burning their property, and believed to be planing to destroy track of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad.⁷⁵ In September, 1864, a petition from Floyd’s pro-Confederates reported similar and even more shocking information to Governor Smith: 300 Floyd County deserters, led by a “Yankee officer,” had recently staged a meeting and were making plans to “destroy the railroad and keep it in said condition and dispell the secessionists of all their property.”⁷⁶ Supplies for the action would come from local deserters crossing into the Federal lines, the petitioners explained, and to their horror, they reported, an unnamed local magistrate was aiding the runaway soldiers with their scheme.⁷⁷

Floyd County’s own deserter patrols, required by an act of the Virginia General Assembly beginning in October, 1863, made local government officials responsible for finding ways to arrest their runaway soldiers.⁷⁸ The disturbing dispatches Governor Smith received from Floyd’s enraged loyalists were compounded by hundreds of similar letters from elsewhere in Virginia, and forced him to become increasingly suspicious of county magistrates in charge of deserter patrols. In January, 1864, Smith moved to toughen the patrol law, amending it to allow for the imprisonment of magistrates failing to organize sufficient local forces to apprehend deserters, or failing to inform Confederate authorities about “delinquents” “lurking about or passing through his county.”⁷⁹

In February, 1864, Floyd County’s court clerk informed the state government that the county was in compliance with the amended patrol law and that Captain Robert Newly would lead local men into the mountains to apprehend its runaway soldiers.⁸⁰ However, additional letters and complaints from Floyd’s loyal Confederate community concerning local deserters prompted Smith to lash out at the county’s magistrates. In September, he chastised and threatened to arrest Floyd’s head magistrate Harvey Deskins, writing,

I am astonished to have reported to me that there is a large amount of disloyalty in your county -- that bands of deserters were at large therein -- that they pillage

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “We the Undersigned Citizens,” Floyd County, Virginia, to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 11 September 1864, Smith Papers.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, Passed at Called Session, 1863* (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1863), 20.

⁷⁹*Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, Passed at Session of 1863-1864* (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1864), 21-22; see also manuscript of a speech given at the Virginia General Assembly by Governor Smith, January 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸⁰Jackson Godby, “Clerk of County Court,” Floyd County, Virginia, to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 18 February 1864, Smith Papers.

and plunder peaceable citizens - that they are even organized and that they and others of your county have been publicly addressed by a man said to be a Yankee officer and that no steps have been taken to suppress such scandalous proceedings.⁸¹

In a simultaneous letter, Smith urged Floyd's Commonwealth Attorney, G. W. Shelor, to proceed immediately with prosecution of persons responsible for the county's enormous deserter population. "The grave and scandalous evil infected to your people," the governor informed Williams, was "a burning disgrace" and "should be promptly and firmly rebuked."⁸²

Floyd Magistrate Harvey Deskins quickly responded to the governor's accusations as well as to threats made against him by Confederate deserter hunter Colonel Robert Taylor Preston, and argued that he had organized a patrol and was in the process of conscripting even more residents into it.⁸³ Commonwealth Attorney Shelor also promptly responded to the governor, explaining that the county currently had 100 citizens scouring the countryside for runaway soldiers.⁸⁴ "It is a mistake to suppose this county disloyal," Shelor complained, because most residents had "little sympathy with deserters. . . . [and] none fail to render aid arresting them when required to do so."⁸⁵ Deskins learned that despite his actions to organize patrols, Governor Smith considered him a disloyal resident of Virginia. In October, Deskins learned from a local clergyman that during a recent visit to Richmond, Governor Smith had questioned him "extensively about the situation in Floyd County" and informed him that the Floyd magistrate was not considered loyal by him.⁸⁶ Deskins quickly attempted to rebut the governor's assumptions, and in a subsequent letter demanded to "know on what authority you make so grave a charge."⁸⁷

⁸¹Virginia Governor William Smith, Richmond, Virginia, to Harvey Deskins, Floyd County, Virginia, 15 September 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸²Virginia Governor William Smith, Richmond, Virginia, to "The Commonwealth Attorney of the County of Floyd" [G. W. Shelor], Floyd County, Virginia, 15 September 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸³Harvey Deskins, "Floyd Court House" [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 20 September 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸⁴G.W. Shelor, "Floyd Court House" [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 26 September 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶Harvey Deskins, "Floyd Court House" [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 13 October 1864, Smith Papers.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

Despite Governor Smith's suspicions, Floyd County magistrates did organize several deserter patrols, and along with the county's home guard units, the patrols hunted deserters in the community and harassed residents supplying them aid. Since the patrols compelled most local men not already in the Confederate army to join in the hunt for runaway soldiers, they also forced additional wartime hardships on the community. In the spring and summer of 1864, all the county's male farmers were forced to "ride night and day" in search of deserters and were unable to "get much of their crop sowed."⁸⁸ Their absence caused Floyd to suffer a grain shortage the following fall, a situation that further disillusioned the community.

The county's deserter patrols also conflicted fiercely with armed local runaway soldiers. In August, 1863, a patrol led by Captain Asa Booth was "unlawfully and maliciously" ambushed by the Sisson Gang.⁸⁹ Booth and his men were captured and disarmed by the deserters and later returned disgraced to Jacksonville to report the incident to Floyd's magistrates. The following month patrols in Floyd's mountains bordering Franklin County encountered the "fort" of runaway soldiers and clashed violently with the fortification's inhabitants. In the resultant combat two deserters and four home guard members were killed and 60-70 runaway Confederate soldiers were captured.⁹⁰ However, apprehending deserters was sometimes of negligible value in Floyd County, where heavily armed gangs of runaway soldiers could confront guards at Floyd's jail and usually compel them to free deserters in their custody.⁹¹

When the county deserter patrols harassed the wives of runaway soldiers, and made it more difficult for them to provide for husbands in the woods, the women reacted by organizing and conducting pillaging raids on local loyalists. In the spring of 1864, the wives of local deserters banded together and "took by force" several hundred pounds of bacon collected by a Confederate "tax-in-kind" agent stationed in Floyd's Locust Grove district.⁹² Deserters' wives, who were denied county assistance during the war, used this

⁸⁸For conscription of all available Floyd men into deserter patrols and the subsequent grain shortage, see Harvey Deskins, "Floyd Court House" [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor William Smith [Richmond, Virginia], 7 January 1865, Smith Papers.

⁸⁹Floyd County Court, Common Law Order Book 3, 1859-1868, page 239, August 1863, Floyd County Courthouse, Virginia.

⁹⁰*Daily Lynchburg Virginian*, 14 September 1863.

⁹¹For damage to Floyd County's jail by deserters as well as runaway Confederate soldiers escaping from it, see Floyd County, Court Order Book, 1858-1864, page 313, July 1864, Floyd County Courthouse, Virginia; Harvey Deskins, "Floyd Court House" [Floyd County, Virginia], to Governor John Letcher, 31 October, 1863, Letcher Papers; "A Proclamation by the Governor of Virginia," 4 November 1863, Letcher Papers.

⁹²Dr. Andrew Jackson Hoback, "Flathead," Floyd County, Virginia, to G. W. Mumford, "Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia" [Richmond, Virginia], 25 April 1864, Smith Papers; for similar raids by deserters' wives in Appalachian North Carolina, see Gordon B. McKinney, "Women's

raid and others like it to feed their families. The county's deserters also continued to raid loyalists for additional provisions, killing their hogs, sheep and cattle at will.⁹³ County soldiers like William Howell, who received letters from his wife detailing the family's livestock losses to deserters in Floyd, were discouraged and disheartened by the deserter patrols' lack of success.⁹⁴ The county's Confederate loyalists fought off the gangs of pillaging deserters with any means available. Few, however, were as prepared as Court House district farmer David Goodykoontz, who shot at raiding deserter gangs through his home's gable end "portholes."⁹⁵

County loyalists' letter writing campaign to the Governor of Virginia and the Confederate Secretary of War eventually prompted a military response by each government designed to apprehend or execute Floyd's deserters and terrorize their supporters. Beginning in the fall of 1862, dispatches from Confederate conscription officers stationed in southwest Virginia affirmed the reports of the Floyd loyalists and notified Confederate authorities that the number of deserters in the county was "scandalously grave and increasing."⁹⁶ In August 1863, enlistment officer J. E. Joyner reported "a most unfortunate state of things existing" in southwestern Virginia and described "immense and outrageous" depredations carried out in the region by armed deserter gangs. Runaway soldiers, Joyner reported, were passing unmolested on local roads and when confronted by loyal residents would simply "pat their guns and defiantly say, 'this is my furlough.'" Citizens who dared report the deserters' activity had their homes burned and were "waylaid and murdered, or beaten nearly to death." As a result, loyal Confederates in Floyd and neighboring counties were "completely demoralized" and under the impression that the army was "dispirited and is deserting by the hundreds." Joyner recommended that Confederate authorities send speakers to the region who could provide its residents with "information about the country and the army which . . . they greatly need."⁹⁷

In the spring of 1864, the problems being caused by deserters living in Floyd reached the attention of the Confederacy's top military official. Robert E. Lee, after

Role in Civil War Western North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (January 1992), 37-45.

⁹³*Official War Records*, series 1, volume 43, part 2, 890.

⁹⁴Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 100.

⁹⁵R. L. Humbart et al, *Industrial Survey of Floyd County* (Blacksburg, Va.: Engineering Extension Division, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 1930), 10.

⁹⁶Major J. B. Dorman [Dublin, Virginia] to "Confederate Secretary of War" [Richmond, Virginia], 11 September 1862, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, Record Group 109 National Archives of the United States, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁷J. E. Joyner, "Henry Court-House" [Henry County, Virginia], to Sidney Smith, Richmond, Virginia, 15 August 1863, in *Official War Records*, series 4, volume 2, 721-722.

reading letters from Floyd deserters urging friends and kin in the Army of Northern Virginia to desert, ordered his regional commanders to dispatch troops to the county and arrest runaway soldiers living there.⁹⁸ The Confederacy's commander of Western Virginia, John C. Breckenridge, assured Lee that he would quickly "devise a plan for the suppression of this band of Tories and deserters."⁹⁹ Breckenridge placed Brigadier-General John Echols in command of the subsequent deserter hunting operations, and by October Echols reported that he was gathering information about "large collections of deserters and disloyal men in Floyd . . . and the depredations and outrages committed by them" and would soon be ready to "hunt them out . . . drive them from the country or exterminate them."¹⁰⁰ In a shocking subsequent report Echols also informed Confederate officials that he recently learned disloyal Floyd County residents had "gone so far as to elect what they called a brigadier-general of deserters . . . and organized what they called a state government, for which they claimed to have elected a governor."¹⁰¹

In late October, 1864, Echols reported that troops dispatched to Floyd under General Duke's command were conducting "most effective service" in the county and were able to apprehend "a large number of deserters and disloyal men." The troops had "shot some" of the runaways and hunted others "so effectively that many are coming in."¹⁰² General Duke reported that his men had filled the Floyd jail with runaway soldiers and their supporters and struck "terror" into the county's "disloyal citizens."¹⁰³ To assure continued progress, Echols ordered Montgomery County's Colonel Robert Taylor Preston and his 4th Virginia Reserves into Floyd to "follow up the treatment" through the fall of 1864.¹⁰⁴

Nearly 200 of Preston's soldiers in the 4th Virginia Reserves were conscripts from Floyd and were compelled to enter the county under orders to search for fellow county

⁹⁸Major-General John C. Breckenridge, "Headquarters - Department of Western Virginia" [Dublin, Pulaski County, Virginia], to General Robert E. Lee, 9 April 1864, in *Official War Records*, series 1, volume 33, 1269-1270.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰Brigadier-General John Echols, "Headquarters - Department of Western Virginia" [Dublin, Pulaski County, Virginia], to Major J. Stoddard Johnson, "Assistant Adjutant-General," Richmond, Virginia, 10 October 1864, in *Official War Records*, series 1, volume 43, part 2, 889-890.

¹⁰¹Brigadier-General John Echols [Dublin, Virginia] to Major J. Stoddard Johnson, "Assistant-Adjutant General" [Richmond, Virginia], 27 October 1864, in *Official War Records*, series 1, volume 43, 907.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

men “laying out” there.¹⁰⁵ Colonel Preston advised the troops that he considered Floyd’s runaway soldiers to be “sneaks”-- “among the most contemptible of the human race” -- whose apprehension they should consider to be honorable duty.¹⁰⁶ His reserve forces, comprised mainly of “old men and little boys,” also included numerous former Floyd County deserters who had been captured and returned to military service by previous Confederate troops.¹⁰⁷ By disguising several of his men as civilians and dispatching them into what by then was considered “the very heart of . . . Sisson’s Kingdom,” Preston hoped to discover the location of deserter camps and the homes of runaway soldiers living with their families.¹⁰⁸ When that information arrived, the reserve unit staged a series of surprise nighttime raids, apprehending dozens runaway soldiers and thoroughly terrorizing their supporters in the process.

Lieutenant John S. Wise, a 17-year-old Virginia Military Institute cadet, conducted one of the reserve’s raids on a man considered to be a “notorious” runaway Confederate soldier.¹⁰⁹ After surrounding the deserter’s home and demanding his surrender, Wise and his squad forced their way into his cabin, startling only the deserter’s frightened wife and crying children. Explaining that her husband crossed into Yankee lines a month previously, the deserter’s spouse complained the squad’s continued search would be futile. However, in the midst of her argument one of Wise’s men stumbled on her husband emerging from a tunnel behind the cabin and accosted him, sending his wife into an abusive rage.¹¹⁰ The squad left with the runaway soldier in their custody, but after proceeding only a short distance heard the eerie sound of the deserter’s wife sounding a “cow’s horn” to warn runaway soldiers concealed nearby.¹¹¹

Colonel Preston’s troops, and other Confederate forces, continued scouring Floyd County for deserters throughout the remainder of the war, returning dozens of men to service. Loyal Confederate residents praised the actions, assuring relatives in the army that

¹⁰⁵Agnew, “A Listing of Men.”

¹⁰⁶John Sergeant Wise, *The End of an Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 386.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 374; and for Floyd deserters captured and returned to military duty with the 4th Virginia Reserves, see the names listed for service with that unit in Agnew, “A Listing of Men”; and listed also as deserters on regimental rosters available in Chapla, *42nd Virginia*, 64-106; Gunn, *24th Virginia*, 68-106; Olson, *21st Virginia Cavalry*, 58-88; Sherwood and Weaver, *54th Virginia*, 171-230.

¹⁰⁸Wise, *End of an Era*, 385-86.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 387.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 388-90; for additional commentary on deserters using tunnels to elude Confederate deserter hunters, see David Dodge, “The Cave Dwellers of the Confederacy,” *Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics* 68 (October 1891): 514-521.

¹¹¹Wise, *End of an Era*, 390.

deserters living in the county were being rounded up and sent back into the war. In the trenches around Petersburg, Cephas Walton received instructions from his mother in Floyd not “to be woraly about the runaways that are in here, for they is a heap after them now.”¹¹² Cephas’ wife comforted him as well, informing him that, “they say thar is guards from petersburg hear i hope they will git all of the deserters out from hear.”¹¹³ The Walton family also informed Cephas that local soldiers stationed with him were running away to Floyd, explaining, “the woods is full of men ther is 3 hundred guards” and “they shot a deserter from Petersburg the same night he got home and they say that they is going to shot them all.”¹¹⁴

In addition to hunting runaway soldiers, Confederate forces arrested, harassed and terrorized Floyd residents who supported friends or kin that deserted. In the fall of 1864, Jane Weddle received threats from Confederate cavalry hunting her sons. The soldiers stole her chickens, fed their horses, and proceeded to “curse and swear and threaten to shoot,” warning her that if she refused to “bring [her] boys in from the woods that night that [the] next morning they would burn [her] house down.”¹¹⁵ Huffsville district farmer Jacob Weaver received similar threats and claimed “rebel soldiers threatened to hang my daughter in law” because they were feeding and sheltering his deserter son.¹¹⁶ Colonel Robert Taylor Preston confronted Weaver and his neighbor Thomas Nolle and promised to burn both their houses to the ground if they continued to sustain local deserters.¹¹⁷ Henry Dangerfield, who ran away from the 54th Virginia Infantry, frequently witnessed home guards violently harassing his Unionist friend Otey F. Kinsey, who despite the treatment “told them nothing.”¹¹⁸

The Confederate troops sent into Floyd to apprehend deserters, like troops elsewhere in the Confederacy, encountered extensive resistance from a portion of the community hoping to protect the county’s runaway soldiers. The county’s deserters

¹¹² “Mother” [Louisa Walton, Floyd County, Virginia] to Cephas L. Walton [Camp near Petersburg, Virginia], 5 March 1865, Walton Family Correspondence.

¹¹³ Nancy A. Walton, “Simpsons P.O.,” Floyd County, Virginia, to “Husband” [Cephas L. Walton, Camp near Petersburg, Virginia], 5 March 1865, Walton Family Correspondence.

¹¹⁴ James W. Walton [Floyd County, Virginia] to “Brother” [Cephas L. Walton, Camp near Petersburg, Virginia, March 1865], Walton Family Correspondence; Louisa Walton, Floyd County, Virginia, to “Son” [Cephas L. Walton, Camp near Petersburg, Virginia], 17 March 1865, Walton Family Correspondence.

¹¹⁵ Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim Number 17764.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim Number 5862.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, testimony of Thomas Nolle for Jacob Weaver.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Record Group 233, Claim 8740.

conflicted fiercely with Confederate soldiers sent to arrest them, more often than not eluding capture and continuing to “lay out” in the woods of Floyd. Despite the apparent success of numerous deserter hunting raids conducted in the county, the support of the community allowed the majority of Floyd’s deserters to escape arrest. In November, 1864, Brigadier-General Echols admitted the difficulty in correspondence with his superiors in Richmond and complained that,

It has been found very difficult to capture or drive from the county these deserters, because they are supported and sustained in every way by the disloyal citizens of that section, and when pressed by a superior force they scatter and take refuge in the great mountains of Southwestern Virginia, where it is almost impossible to reach them . . . and where they are supplied with all that they may need by their friends at the expense of the loyal citizens property in the vicinity.¹¹⁹

Floyd soldiers who abandoned the war and then returned to the county exacerbated loyalty divisions within their community. Unionists, relatives, and friends provided support, making desertion a viable and survivable option for county soldiers. Local pro-Confederate loyalists attempted to apprehend the county’s deserters, and when unsuccessful, alerted the governor of Virginia and Confederate authorities, demanding the men be captured and returned to military service. The conflicts that resulted from these deeply contrasting reactions profoundly divided the Floyd community, further factionalized its inhabitants, caused increasing homefront violence and turmoil, and hastened the disintegration of Floyd County’s Confederate homefront.

¹¹⁹Brigadier-General John Echols [Dublin, Virginia] to John Seddon, Confederate Secretary of War, Richmond, Virginia, in *Official War Records*, series 4, volume 3, 813.