

Introduction

During the Civil War, letters were among the few connections to home that soldiers had; their importance increased as the war advanced and troops found themselves farther from family and friends.¹ Soldiers constantly complained of not receiving “enough letters,” and one soldier wrote, “You can have no idea what a blessing letters from home are to the men in camp. They make us better men, better soldiers.”² Today, such correspondence offers “authentic, unfiltered glimpses of the realities of war,” and with “careful editing, collected letters provide fascinating sources of information about the people and the times of the Civil War.”³

Thwarting loneliness and homesickness, Civil War letters were mailed in large numbers. On the “Union side, 45,000 were sent daily via Washington to members of the Eastern armies and an equal number went off from soldiers to those at home. Ninety thousand more passed daily via Louisville for and from soldiers in the Western armies.”⁴

Several accounts indicate that “ordinary soldiers were perhaps the most prolific writers.”⁵ Most “soldiers spent their free time writing letters home, detailing their reactions to their new surroundings, politics, and emotions.”⁶ Indeed, numberless soldiers filled their “journals, their letters home, and their memoirs with the moral values they knew to be at issue in the conflict between North and South: manliness, godliness, duty, [and] honor.”⁷

The McKnight Collection of Civil War Letters

William McKnight of Langsville, Ohio, was one such common soldier who contributed to the thousands of letters sent daily. McKnight was a member of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry (OVC) from September 1862 until



William McKnight of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. *Courtesy of Ruth Hayth.*

his death in June 1864. During his time in the service, McKnight penned dozens of letters, primarily to his wife, Samaria. McKnight's writings reveal his viewpoints, emotions, and thoughts—the human side of the Civil War.⁸

In total, there are 108 letters in the collection. The vast majority are from William to Samaria, whom he also refers to as “Mary” and “Molly.”⁹ The letters are extremely accurate.¹⁰ McKnight mentions dozens of battles, dates, people, and places, and his letters closely follow the official record (OR) and the accounts that deal specifically with Ohio and the Seventh—Whitlaw Reid's two-volume *Ohio in the War* (1895a; 1895b) and R. C. Rankin's *History of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry* (1881). The remaining correspondence is primarily from Samaria to William and from other family members to William (see appendix A).¹¹

The pervasiveness of loneliness, suffered by thousands of soldiers, is documented in histories by Civil War scholars such as Gary Gallagher (Gallagher et al. 2003), Gerald Linderman (1987), and Steven Woodworth (1996). In one of his first letters home, McKnight confesses, “I had to get up and leave the table to hide my tears warm tears of love for you and the little ones at home.”¹² On November 26, 1862, McKnight remarks that his “mind is constantly turning homewards.”¹³ In one of the last letters before he is killed in action, McKnight expresses his homesickness and notes, “if I owned this whole State I would give it to be with you and this war at an end so that we might never more be separated.”¹⁴

Coupled with McKnight's loneliness is his desire to receive a “likeness.” Historian Andrew Carroll states that “what makes the letters so powerful is not only the history they record but also the common humanity they reveal”; part of this humanity is reflected in the “homesickness felt by Civil War soldiers who thanked their sweethearts for sending them ‘likenesses.’”¹⁵ On January 9, 1863, McKnight writes to Samaria, “I keep your likeness in my Pocket al the time and it is great comfort to look at your sweet face.



Samaria McKnight, Rutland Township, Meigs County, Ohio. *Courtesy of Ruth Hayth.*

Although it dont speak it seems so near & dear to me.”¹⁶ A few days later, McKnight states, “Your likeness is a great Comfort to me” and later adds, “I wish I could get the childrens likenesses.”¹⁷ In an undated letter to his son, Thomas McKnight describes William’s likeness and shares “oh how Dear it looks to me.”¹⁸

In addition to loneliness and family matters, McKnight writes of his patriotic beliefs, a sense of duty and honor and commitment to his country.¹⁹ Early in the war, McKnight shares that “I like Soldering foral the hardships I go with a wil. I think it my Duty and Calling” and that he perseveres for the “sake of [his] family and Country.”²⁰ In hearing the good news from Vicksburg, Mississippi, McKnight pens that the “news of the success of our arms is cheering to evry Union loveing heart and to none more so than the soldier who has left home and evrything thing near and dear to him and Perils his life for his Countries sake.”²¹ Finally, McKnight frequently reveals his desire for the war’s end: “when peace spread her majestic wings ore this crushed & heart bleeding Country & the Clash of arms shal be nomore.”²²

Believing duty and honor to be essential parts of a soldier’s character and responsibility, McKnight was deeply troubled by comrades who deserted.²³ McKnight writes, “Rather would I have my Dear little children . . . say that Pa was killed in War . . . than have it thrown up to them that [their] father was a *Deserter*.”²⁴ A few months later, McKnight identifies several men who deserted: “R. T. Andrews and Wm Burns has Deserted yes and Harry Spires and E. Andrews the[y] have reached home. They have disgraced themselves by their conduct.”²⁵

A devout Christian, McKnight displays an untenuous faith, which was common for Civil War soldiers and was “another buttress of the war’s moral framework for both soldiers and civilians.”²⁶ McKnight, for instance, frequently closes his letters with a prayer for his family and asks them to do the same for him. McKnight encourages Samaria, “Put your trust in him who is able and willing to save and who has always showered Blessings on our heads. Surely goodness and mercy has followed us al the days of our lives.”²⁷ McKnight closes another letter with a similar sentiment: “All the Consolation is that God in his infinite Mercy doeth all things wel. His wil be done.”²⁸ McKnight also relies on his faith to cope with the hardships of war. In May 1863, McKnight confesses, “I had rather a narrow escape. . . . As it is I feel thankful to the kind Providence for his mercies shown,” and then on June 2, 1863, in regard to Isaac Meaner’s death, McKnight writes, “but he that giveth and he that can take away gave him an everlasting one. One that

we are all shure of sooner or later.”²⁹ Finally, McKnight provides Samaria with godly advice for their children: “Bring them up in they way that they should go and you never wil have cause to regret it,” and “Teach them to love the *Savior* for he says in the *Holy Book* to Suffer little *Children* to *come* unto *me* & forbid *them* not for of *such* is the *Kingdom* of *heaven*.”³⁰

McKnight’s writings reveal great respect and admiration for one of his commanding officers—Captain Joel Higley.³¹ McKnight often speaks of Higley and describes him as the “best and truest friend that I had this side of the great watter.”³² McKnight also states, “He [Higley] and I are like true Brothers. He sticks to me all the time.”³³ McKnight adds, “I wish this world contained more men of Captain Higleys qualities.”³⁴

Captain Higley’s death profoundly affected McKnight.³⁵ Higley was killed in action at the battle of Blue Springs on October 10, 1863.³⁶ McKnight describes Higley’s death to Samaria: “I discover to my Horror our Brave & Noble Capt laying upon his Face upon the Ground. Hastening to him & speaking kindly to him receiving no answer I seen he was mortaly wounded. He never spoke.”³⁷ Higley was later described as a “most valuable officer, who was commanding a battalion and was killed in the thickest of the fight while encouraging and leading his men.”³⁸ An entry in McKnight’s diary comes to a similar conclusion: “Capt. Higley was instantly killed at the head of his Comd.”³⁹ Approximately five months after Higley’s death, while visiting his grave, McKnight writes, “But alas he is laid in the Cold Cold ground on the silent Breeses of the suny South lighs a requium over his unwept and untimely Grave. I have visited his grave thre times since we came here. The last time placed with my own hands a Decent tomb Stone to mark the resting place of him we all loved.”⁴⁰

Finally, McKnight was deeply concerned about Samaria’s well-being and her ability to support herself and the children. McKnight frequently questioned whether folks from Meigs County had paid their debts for the blacksmith services he provided before leaving for the war. On August 4, 1863, McKnight writes, “I would like to know whether you have money enough and how you get along.” Nearly a year later, on May 10, 1864, McKnight pens, “I want to send you plenty of money to live on so if you are deprived of my Company you wil not suffer bodily nor those dear little ones come to want as I hope they never may” and “I am going to send my over coat home and some money enough to by the little ones and yourself some summer ware. I felt as though I had not done enough for my family but I have been in such circumstances that I could not help it.”

After the war, much of the burden of caring for soldiers and their families shifted to the government. Historian Megan McClintock states that this had a tremendous impact on the federal budget. By 1890, the annual budget “for the Bureau of Pensions was \$106 million, and the federal government had paid over \$1 billion for Civil War pensions alone.”⁴¹ Moreover, in 1893, “over 40 percent of the federal budget went to support widows, orphans, the elderly and invalid soldiers.”⁴² Samaria McKnight was one of the many widows who received a government pension. Initially, the stipend was two dollars per month per child; according to Samaria’s pension records in 1874, that amount increased to fifteen dollars per month, which she received until her death in 1905.⁴³

The McKnight Family

William McKnight’s parents were Thomas McKnight and Jane McMaster. Both were born in Dumfriesshire, Scotland—Thomas on January 12, 1803; Jane on February 5, 1805.⁴⁴ Thomas and Jane McKnight left Scotland in 1830 with two children (Susan, born in 1826, and Jeanett, born in 1828) and arrived in Napan, New Brunswick, the same year with two children: although Jeanett died at sea, Samuel was born at sea. After spending six years in Canada, where they had three more children—Jeanett II (born in 1831), William (born in 1832), and John (born in 1835)—the McKnight family settled in Pomeroy, Meigs County, Ohio, in 1836. In 1840, they moved across the county to Langsville and proceeded to have six more children: James (born in 1837), Mary (born in 1837), James II (born in 1838), Mary Jane (born in 1843), Elizabeth (born in 1846), and Samuel (born in 1847). Both of McKnight’s parents died in Meigs County, but they outlived their son. Thomas died in 1873, followed by Jane in 1875.

William McKnight, who had eleven siblings, was born on July 2, 1832, in New Brunswick, Canada, and married Samaria Braley (born October 31, 1837, in Meigs County, Ohio) on March 8, 1855.⁴⁵ Samaria was one of nine children born to Ruel Braley (born in Maine on January 17, 1810) and Cynthia Rathburn (born May 9, 1812, in Rutland, Ohio).⁴⁶ The Braleys, “of Mayflower descent,” were among the earliest Meigs County settlers, arriving from Maine around 1816.⁴⁷ William was a blacksmith by trade. At the Civil War’s onset, William and Samaria had four children—Leila (born July 26, 1855), Thomas (born January 14, 1857), Lettie (born December 24, 1859), and Mary (born March 29, 1861).⁴⁸ Two more children joined the family



Martin Entsminger, William and Samaria McKnight's brother-in-law. *Courtesy of Lois Mohler.*



Addison Braley, Samaria McKnight's brother. *Courtesy of Lois Mohler.*



Alexander Braley, Samaria McKnight's brother. *Courtesy of Lois Mohler.*



Three of the Braley sisters. *Left to right:* Emma Jane Entsminger, Samaria McKnight, and Ellen Sidenstricker. *Courtesy of Lois Mohler.*

on July 4, 1863. McKnight's first response to the news that he was father to twins was "it surprises me so to hear that you have two little girls."⁴⁹ He then inquires about their names and writes, "you must let me know what you are going to call those little fourth of July Presents."⁵⁰ McKnight was able to take two furloughs home: the first, from April 16, 1863, until May 2, 1863; the second, from April 25, 1864, until May 6, 1864. Martha and Myrtha would have been nearly nine months old before William first saw them, just weeks before his death at Cynthiana, Kentucky, in June 1864.

William McKnight's letters also make reference to several other family members, of whom many fought in the Civil War. McKnight mentions five cousins by name who served: Will Halliday, James Johnson, William and Lenox McMaster, and Marion Rathburn. Halliday (Company K), Johnson (Company A), and Rathburn (Company I) were members of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry.

Ohio in the War

The Ohio Valley played an essential role in the eventual Union victory.⁵¹ At the beginning of the war, Ohio had the third largest state population (2,339,511) and also ranked third in wealth. In the 1850s and 1860s, Ohio also contained many of the nation's largest cities—Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Dayton were all in the top fifty largest cities in 1860.⁵² Geographically, the state was in the center of the country, connected to the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and the Great Lakes, and Ohio led the nation in railroad track mileage.⁵³

Ohio contributed a substantial number of men to the Union cause and initially responded to the war with great excitement. Following Fort Sumter's surrender, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for seventy-five thousand troops—Ohio's quota was thirteen thousand. Without hesitation and before the War Department had officially established Ohio's quota, Governor Dennison (who stated, "Ohio must lead") wired Lincoln and asked, "What portion of the 75,000 militia . . . do you give Ohio? We will furnish the largest number you will receive." Governor Dennison went even further after learning of Kentucky's refusal to supply troops: "If Kentucky will not fill her quota, Ohio will fill it for her."⁵⁴

Thousands of Ohioans responded to the call. Columbus at the time was a city of less than twenty thousand and was quickly overwhelmed by some thirty thousand troops.⁵⁵ Volunteers stayed in hotels and private residences; few had uniforms, weapons, or any other essentials.⁵⁶ However, Ohio's

patriotic fervor and “lingering images of a brief and glorious war were shattered” at the battle of Shiloh in early April 1862.⁵⁷ The Union victory came with approximately ten thousand casualties—a number that “shocked Northerners.” In Ohio, “residents’ responses to the new reality of a lengthy and costly war ranged from active mobilization of relief efforts to scathing criticisms of the troops in the field.”⁵⁸

In April 1861, Governor Dennison was turning away thousands of potential Ohio troops, but a year later it “became necessary to coerce and bribe men into service.”⁵⁹ Although few Ohio troops were ever drafted—a total of 12,251 were drafted and of that number only 2,400 served—it was an effective tool to stimulate enlistment.⁶⁰ Those who were drafted instead of volunteering carried a “terrible stigma,” for “military service was something of a patriotic duty in which all should take pride. To be *compelled* to serve, therefore, made one appear unpatriotic.”⁶¹

A total of 313,180 Ohioans served in 198 infantry regiments and 13 cavalry regiments, in addition to several artillery regiments and various independent units (see appendix B).⁶² Ohio “probably led the northern states in the percentage of its eligible men serving in the military forces” and was outranked in total numbers enrolled only by New York (448,850) and Pennsylvania (337,936).⁶³ A significant number of high-ranking officers were also from Ohio. During the war, ninety-nine Ohioans achieved the rank of general—including major general, brevet major general, brigadier general, and brevet brigadier general—and exercised “commands in accordance with the rank.”⁶⁴ Additionally, five Ohio-born Union officers later became presidents of the United States: Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley.

Buckeye volunteers participated in nearly every major battle, including Shiloh (April 1862), Antietam (September 1862), Fredericksburg (December 1862), Murfreesboro (December 1862), Chancellorsville (May 1863), Gettysburg (July 1863), Vicksburg (July 1863), Chickamauga (September 1863), Missionary Ridge (November 1863), and Nashville (December 1864). Moreover, more than fourteen thousand Ohio troops accompanied General Sherman on his march to the sea—Atlanta to Savannah—in late 1864, and an Ohio regiment was present at Lee’s surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.⁶⁵ Even though Ohio troops fought in most major battles, the majority saw action only in the western theater; only “one-fourth of the Ohio troops served in the eastern theater of the war.” Most served in the western theater in central Kentucky and Tennessee.⁶⁶

Not only did Ohio provide a significant number of soldiers, but also its farms and factories played important roles in the eventual Union victory. In the 1850s and 1860s, Ohio was one of the leading agricultural states in the country—over half the state was being cultivated, and the majority of adult males were farmers. In 1860, the state exported “nearly two million barrels of flour, over two and a half million bushels of wheat, three million bushels of other grains, [and] half a million barrels of pork.”⁶⁷ During the war, Ohio’s farms supplied a great number of draft animals, in addition to cattle, fruit, and wheat.⁶⁸ In regard to manufacturing, Ohio was home to several of the nation’s leading industrial cities—Cincinnati was the third largest manufacturing center in the country and by population the largest city west of the Appalachians—and contained 11,123 manufacturing establishments in 1860.⁶⁹ Carl Becker describes Cincinnati as the “entrepot of the Ohio and the Mississippi valleys” and the “industrial showcase of the West.”⁷⁰ Factories in Cincinnati produced a wide variety of goods, ranging from candles and caskets to shirts, shoes, and trusses. The war initially caused a sharp recession in Cincinnati; however, factories quickly turned to new markets and the manufacturing of war materials. For example, John Van, a “fledgling manufacturer,” in 1863 patented the #5 Army Range, which was the “first all-steel portable stove used in the field for hot rations; in a modified form, it is still used by the Army.”⁷¹ Additionally, Holenshade, Morris, and Company in Cincinnati had approximately six hundred employees and manufactured as “many as 6,000 army wagons a year during the war, as well as thousands of camp kettles, mess pans, tin cups, and bolts.”⁷²

The Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, Company K, and Meigs County

One of the military units from Ohio was the Seventh Regiment of the Ohio Volunteer Cavalry (for a list of officers, see appendix C). The “Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry was recruited on an order emanating from the War Department, that Gov. Todd of Ohio, would raise one Regiment of Cavalry, for ‘Border Service,’ the Ohio River then being the boundary.”⁷³ The Seventh, also known as the “River Regiment,” had a total of thirteen companies (A–M) and 1,204 men.⁷⁴ Soldiers in the Seventh were mustered into service from September 12, 1862, through November 8, 1862, at “Columbus, Camp Ripley, Athens, Pomeroy, and Gallipolis, Ohio,” and came from Adams, Athens, Brown, Clermont, Gallia, Hamilton, Lawrence, Meigs, Monroe, Scioto,

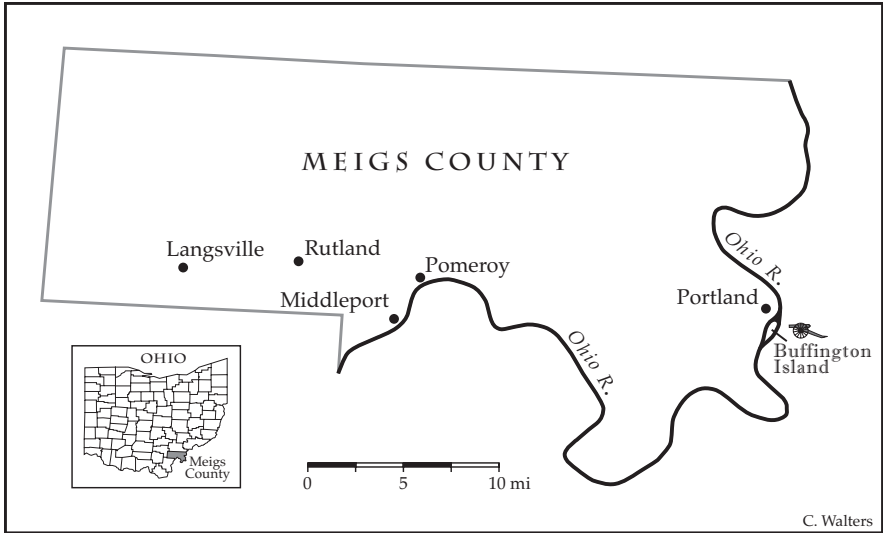
and Washington counties.⁷⁵ According to the Roster Commission (1891), 840 men mustered out of the Seventh on July 4, 1865, at Nashville, Tennessee.

Although the Seventh fought primarily in Kentucky and Tennessee, members of the regiment had traveled throughout the southern United States by the war's end. McKnight's letters provide descriptive accounts of several battles and the landscapes and terrain that he encountered. Many of the battles and skirmishes McKnight describes are listed by the Roster Commission (1891) as major engagements (see appendix D). McKnight's letters also discuss many of the cavalry's daily activities. Typical cavalry duties included "conducting reconnaissance, establishing and maintaining contact with the enemy forces, screening the movement of friendly forces and raiding against enemy lines of communication."⁷⁶

McKnight was a member of the Seventh Ohio's Company K. The official roster lists 110 men in Company K (see appendix E). Of that number, 13 were killed in action or died of illness or disease.⁷⁷ Company K's casualty rate of approximately 11.8 percent is slightly higher than Ohio's statewide average of 11.3 percent.⁷⁸

McKnight was proud of the Seventh and frequently mentions the regiment's accomplishments and boasts of the men's fighting reputation. On one occasion, McKnight quotes Rebel prisoners: "They think that 7 OVC must be 3 or 4,000 thousand strong for they say they cant go any place but the d—d seventh is after them."⁷⁹ McKnight further states that the enemy thought that the Seventh "must be old soldiers," because of their fighting prowess and experience.⁸⁰ McKnight contends that Union military leadership also recognized the Seventh as a fine outfit. McKnight writes to Samaria that when General "Burnside passed our column he said that ours was the best regiment in the state."⁸¹ McKnight adds that General Quincy Gilmore called them "the best in the field"—"that is the best Regmt in Ky."⁸² Finally, McKnight boasts to Samaria, "Co K is a crack Co I tell you."⁸³

McKnight, like several other members of Company K, was from Meigs County, which is located in extreme southeastern Ohio.⁸⁴ Meigs County, founded in 1819, was named after Return J. Meigs, an early Ohio governor.⁸⁵ Meigs County's population just before the war, in 1860, stood at 26,534.⁸⁶ When the Civil War broke out, Meigs County "was well settled and populated . . . and the industries related to timber, cooperage, hoop holes, logging, and the coal mines began to give employment to a large number of persons."⁸⁷ Other important industries prior to and through the Civil War included salt, bromine, and coal mining.⁸⁸

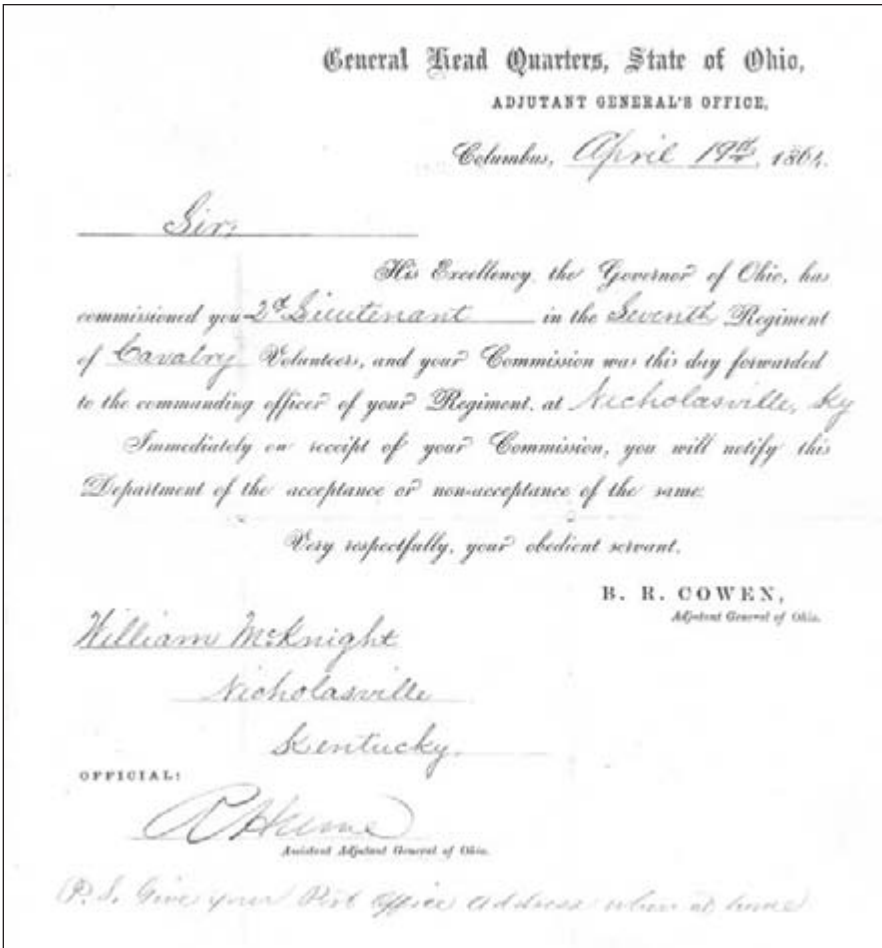


Meigs County, Ohio. Map by Claudia K. Walters.

The “Civil War dealt a great blow to the population of Meigs County. Nearly every family in the county was involved.”⁸⁹ From the war’s beginning until October 1862, Meigs County contributed 4,736 volunteers.⁹⁰ Meigs County lost a total of 505 men during the war. Their names are memorialized on a Civil War monument in Pomeroy, Ohio—the county seat.⁹¹ In 1905, an attempt was made to determine how many Civil War veterans still lived in Ohio. Twenty men from the Seventh Ohio’s Company K were still residing in Meigs County at the time.⁹²

McKnight the Soldier

By many accounts, William McKnight was not a typical Civil War soldier. The typical soldier was “unmarried, white, native born, Protestant and between 18 [and] 24 years old.”⁹³ McKnight was foreign born and joined Company K of the Seventh when he was twenty-nine years old and married with four children. According to the official roster, McKnight entered the service on September 12, 1862, and was appointed as first sergeant of Company K of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry on November 8, 1862.⁹⁴ McKnight was later promoted to second lieutenant on April 19, 1864, shortly before his death on June 12, 1864; however, he was killed in action before being commissioned at that rank. Moreover, although the official



William McKnight's original commission papers. Courtesy of Ruth Hayth.

roster does not show McKnight as having been elevated to captain, Lester Horwitz contends that McKnight attained that rank,⁹⁵ and McKnight noted in his diary on November 3, 1863, that he had been appointed captain, even signing several letters as “Capt Co K.”

McKnight was killed in action at Cynthiana, Kentucky, in June 1864. The battle's outcome was in doubt until the last day, when a Union victory was finally gained. After a “third charge,” the enemy was routed: “mounting their horses they moved down the rail road through Cynthiana, hotly pursued by our troops, driving them through the streets and into the river, killing, wounding and drowning many.”⁹⁶ Brigadier-General Stephen G. Burbridge

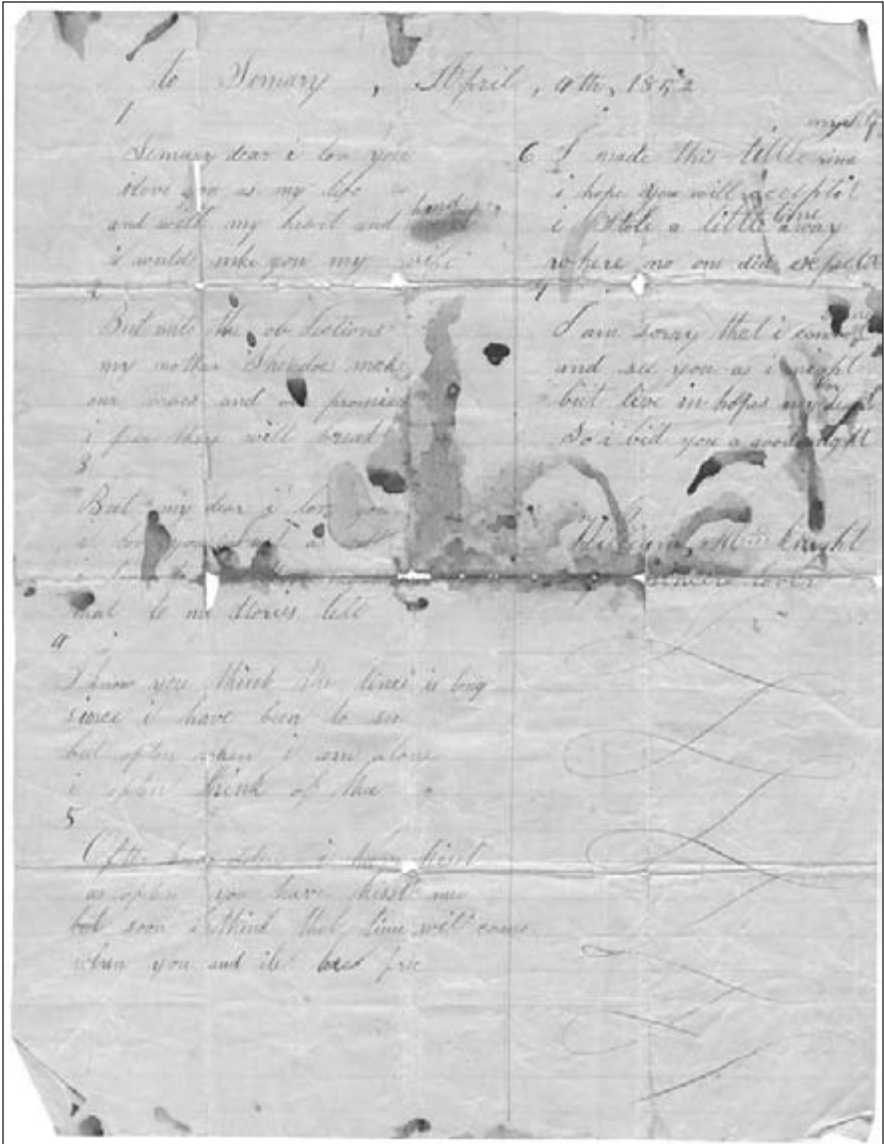
describes the action in the official record and adds, “I attacked Morgan at Cynthiana . . . [and] completely routed him, killing 300, wounding as many, and capturing nearly 400. . . . Morgan’s scattered forces are flying in all directions; many have thrown away arms; [they] are out of ammunition and wholly demoralized.”⁹⁷

In this fight, McKnight lost his life. Captain R. C. Rankin of the Seventh notes, “In this affair our loss did not exceed fifty in killed and wounded. Among the killed was Lt. McKnight, a brave and gallant officer.”⁹⁸ William Hartley, a family friend and sergeant in the Seventh, provides a more detailed account of McKnight’s death in a letter he wrote to Samaria: “Your Husband is Mortly Wounded . . . he is wounded in the Right Lung.”⁹⁹ Hartley’s assertion that McKnight had been wounded in the chest supports the family’s claim that McKnight’s now-bloodstained poem to his wife was folded in his vest pocket at the time of his death. The poem, dated April 4, 1852, was written to Samaria by William prior to their marriage in 1855 (see appendix F).

McKnight’s death remains somewhat controversial. The official pension records make no mention of foul play.¹⁰⁰ However, Mary Johnston and Ruth Hayth (William’s great-great-granddaughters) told us in October 2003 that foul play was involved and that McKnight was shot by one of his own men. Newspaper accounts support the family’s argument. In the 1930s, a reporter for the *Daily Sentinel* of Pomeroy, Ohio, described “Captain McKnight” as “Langville’s village blacksmith, who won his position by wonderful bravery and loyal service to the Union cause.”¹⁰¹ The newspaper article continues:

The slaying of Captain Billy McKnight at Cynthiana by one of his own men . . . was one of the foulest and most treacherous crimes that ever disgraced the annals of modern warfare. This was revealed by an examination when they brought him home which showed that the bullet had entered his back and come out his breast and was further corroborated in a statement of the soldier made in confidence to a comrade who later imparted it to a writer that he shot Captain McKnight because he was brave to the point of rashness and likely to lead them into places that were not necessary, all of which was a virtual confession that he was too cowardly to follow where the Captain dared to lead.¹⁰²

A later newspaper article further perpetuates the theory that McKnight was shot in the back by a fellow Union soldier: “The sight of a Civil War uniform



William McKnight's poem to Samaria Braley, April 4, 1852. Courtesy of Terry Hauger.

with a hole in the back made by the bullet which killed her great-great grandfather [sic], Capt. William McKnight of Langsville, remains vivid in the memories from the childhood of Mrs. Donna Tuckerman Russell.”¹⁰³

Whether McKnight was killed by his own men or by Confederate forces, the fact remains that Samaria, who never remarried, was widowed with

six young children. Years later, Samaria was still grieving the loss of her husband. In her diary, on May 2, 1886, she recalls that “twenty too years [ago] to day was the last time that my dear husband was home.”

John Hunt Morgan and William McKnight

July 1863 was a difficult month for the Confederacy. Robert E. Lee’s loss at Gettysburg and Grant’s success at Vicksburg turned the tide of the war. Also during this time, Confederate general John Hunt Morgan unsuccessfully raided through southern Indiana and Ohio. Much has been written about Morgan, the “Rebel Raider,” and several of the accounts make a connection between William McKnight and John Hunt Morgan.

Morgan’s raid through southeastern Ohio went directly through Meigs County and McKnight’s hometown of Langsville. An earlier account notes that “not only was the princip[al] engagement fought on her soil, but while other counties got the ‘once over’ he crossed Meigs twice, first from west to east and then from north to south.”¹⁰⁴ The McKnights feature in this incident: “Langsville has a story of Morgan’s consideration for women and children. A Mrs. McKnight, wife of a Union soldier in the field, has twin babies two weeks old. It is said that Morgan kept a guard at each outer door of the house during his stay at the village.”¹⁰⁵ One account states that “upon entering Langsville [Morgan] found the town deserted, except for Mrs. McKnight and her twin, two-week-old daughters who were frightened and seeking sanctuary in their little house with a lean-to back.”¹⁰⁶ This version of the story places William McKnight in Ohio at the time: “Unknown to General Morgan, her husband, Captain William McKnight was part of the Union force pursuing him. True to his chivalrous code, the General posted guards around Mrs. McKnight’s home so she would not be disturbed or endangered. In fact, he made himself a guest of Mrs. McKnight while he waited for the bridge to be built.”¹⁰⁷

Family history also supports the notion that Morgan stayed in the McKnight home and that McKnight was part of the Union detachment chasing Morgan.¹⁰⁸ McKnight’s great-great-granddaughter Ruth Hayth notes that Samaria “with her newborn daughters remained in her home and newspaper accounts relate that she was forced to cook for General Morgan’s Raiders, but was told she would not be harmed. During this time Mrs. McKnight’s husband, Capt. William McKnight was following General Morgan, hoping to capture him and his troops.”¹⁰⁹ Mary Johnston, also one

of McKnight's great-great-granddaughters, relates a similar story: "Captain William McKnight was chasing Morgan's Raiders when they stopped at [McKnight's] home in Langsville, Ohio and spent the night."¹¹⁰

There is little doubt that Morgan passed through Meigs County and most likely spent time at McKnight's home; however, despite what some family and historical accounts assert, letters clearly indicate that McKnight was in Kentucky at the time. McKnight first writes, "The Capt [Captain Higley] is with the Regmt reported to be in Indiana after Morgan."¹¹¹ Less than two weeks later, McKnight acknowledges, "I would have given any thing that I possessed to have been at home when Morgan was there. . . . I would liked to have been with the Capt and would have been had I been permitted to do so. It seems to me a very unfortunate circumstance to have been obliged to remain with the camp when there was work at home." He would have offered a different welcome to Morgan: "one thing certain if I had thought you were going to accomodate Rebs in my House I would have been there to accomodate him to a dose of lead the infamous thieving hounds of h—I." McKnight continues, "It makes my Blood boil to think that they were mean enough to impose their dirty Pictures on a poor defenceless helpless Family and what hurts me the worst is that for all we were goten up expresty for the Protection of our Homes we were absent and our homes disgraced and Country overund and destruction spread far and wide. Well its all come right I hope yet I should have been there had I been permitted to come but its al for the better I hope."¹¹² Without a doubt, then, McKnight was in Kentucky while other members of the Seventh were chasing Morgan through Ohio.

The final connection between McKnight and Morgan came in June 1864 at the battle of Cynthiana, Kentucky. On June 6, McKnight notes in his diary that "John Morgan [was] reported in the State." Four days later, McKnight writes, "Started 8 A.M. for Lex. Cannon heard in that direction. Rebels Reported in the Town arrived at Lex. 3 P.M. Rebels had gone we were 5 ms behind Halted and Fed and got Dinner. Slept 2 hours started out after Morgan in the direction of Paris took the George Town Road had an exciting chase." Finally, on June 12, Morgan was leading his troops into battle at Cynthiana against Union forces that included William McKnight of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry.¹¹³ The battle was a Union victory, although McKnight lost his life.¹¹⁴ This occurred a month after his writing to Samaria, "I am just as firm [as ever] in the faith that I wil be spared to come home."¹¹⁵