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***Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls –
The Civil War Letters of Richard and Mary Watkins, 1861-1865***

BOOK REVIEW – Russ Smith

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LETTERS TELL OF LOVE, WAR

Almost any time personal papers are rescued from the obscurity of the archives and made available to the public, there is cause for celebration. This is particularly true of the recently published *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* edited by Jeff Toalson.

Based on the letters of Richard and Mary Watkins that are preserved at the Virginia Historical Society, these letters recount a true Civil War love story and , at the same time, reveal rich details of everyday life in war-torn Virginia.

Richard Henry Watkins and Mary Purnell (DuPuy) Watkins were married on Aug. 24, 1858, and lived at Oldham near Meherrin in southern Prince Edward County. Richard's real estate was valued at \$10,000 and his personal property at \$25,000 in the 1860 census reports. The latter figure is mostly accounted for by 27 slaves. However, even with the many slaves, the Watkinses don't seem to have enjoyed great wealth. Their letters are full of concern about crops and money even before wartime conditions begin to take their toll.

Although they already had two children at the beginning of the war, Richard and Mary's letters to each other read like those of newlyweds. Fortunately, they don't indulge in the more florid language of the period. They are more direct, as Richard is when he says, "I love you, I love you, love you, love you, love you" in a letter of Aug. 29, 1862. Clearly, both made a big sacrifice when Richard joined the Prince Edward Dragoons early in the war.

The letters are full of the minute details of both camp and home life. Richard reviews the duties of a quartermaster and even describes the furnishings of his tent. Mary keeps him informed of the development and antics of the children as well as the day-to-day concerns of running a plantation, including crop failures and hog slaughtering.

Mary gives a particularly poignant description of Christmas in 1863 with stockings being filled with apples, nuts and candy. The Yankees are blamed for Santa Claus being unable to deliver a china doll.

The roles of the sexes are necessarily altered during the war. Mary gains confidence in managing the plantation as time goes on, deferring only major decisions to Richard. Still, she continually refers to everything on the farm as his (“your corn,” “your wheat,” etc.) For his part, Richard maintains control of the money that they have in the care of a local merchant.

Richard’s company becomes part of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry and continues with that unit throughout the war. Eventually, Richard becomes the company commander, a post that he does not relish and from which he unsuccessfully tried to resign. He is wounded at Aldie in Northern Virginia and at Tom’s Brook in the Shenandoah Valley. The Tom’s Brook wound disables him from further service.

Although present-day notions of why the war was fought may be complex, there was no such ambiguity in Richard’s mind. In passing through the Shenandoah Valley, he marvels at how universally loyal the residents are to the Confederacy. He says, “We find the people in the Valley still loyal & true, I am agreeably surprised at this for a large majority of them are without slaves, very many never having owned them . . .”

Richard was probably viewed as a kind master by the standards of the time. He writes to Mary, “Am delighted you take so much interest . . . in the welfare of the negroes.” He also tells her to direct the overseer “not to expose the negroes in bad weather.” Whether this attitude was self-serving or not is, of course, open to question, since so much of his wealth was tied up in human capital.

Fredericksburg is mentioned twice in the letters. In August, 1863 Richard visits the Fredericksburg battlefield. He is surprised that the town isn’t damaged any more than it is. Apparently, the stories of the town’s destruction were inflated as they spread through the army. In September he goes back to Fredericksburg to purchase blankets and coats for his slaves. He buys these from the “poor people” who had gathered them from the battlefield . . .

Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls deserves a wide audience. No doubt it will appeal to the predominately male Civil War readership, but it also deserves the attention of those who are more interested in the details of home and family life in Virginia during America’s greatest conflict.
