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## **WILLIAM CHARLES, RELIC MAKER**

**by Mark H. Dunkelman**

Most Civil War regiments probably contained a man like William Charles--someone who was handy at fashioning trinkets for friends at home and comrades in the service, and came to realize that he could sell the products of his artistry to supplement his low army pay. The development of Charles's sideline is well charted in more than 150 letters he sent home during the war. The relics pictured in the illustrations, while not documented as made by Charles, very likely were his handiwork. More of Charles's output may someday be recovered--from drawers and attics in western New York or elsewhere in the country, or from beneath the soil of Virginia, Tennessee or Alabama.

A native of Wales, William Charles was born April 14, 1831 in Aberystwyth, a coastal town on Cardigan Bay. He was one of eleven children of David and Ann (Morgan) Charles. The family emigrated to the United States in 1842; according to Charles lore, one of William's sisters died during the voyage and was buried at sea. The Charleses lived in the central New York State towns of Newport and Bridgeport before moving westward to Cattaraugus County in 1855 and settling in the town of Freedom, joining a sizeable Welsh community there which dated from the early 1840s.

On June 24, 1858, Charles married Ann Evans. The couple had two children: Thomas David (born July 10, 1859) and Frances Ann (February 22, 1862), affectionately referred to by Charles as Tommy and Sissy. When Charles volunteered, his family was evidently living with

his in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Evans, on a farm near the village of Sandusky in the town of Freedom.

William Charles enlisted in Freedom at age 31 on August 26, 1862, to serve three years. That same day he enrolled at least seven members of the Freedom Welsh community to serve in the newly-forming 154th New York Volunteer Infantry. Charles was mustered in as a private in Company F of the new regiment on September 25, 1862, and with the command he left for the Virginia front four days later. On arriving at Fairfax Court House, the 154th New York was assigned to the First Brigade, Second Division, Eleventh Corps of the Army of the Potomac. Within a month, on or about October 25, Charles was appointed to daily duty as acting ordnance sergeant and regimental armorer (although he was not promoted to the rank of sergeant until September 8, 1863). In conjunction with these duties he was provided with a chest of tools, which enabled him to conduct his future business.

The 154th New York was on an excursion to Thoroughfare Gap when Charles first mentioned crafting something in a letter to Ann. "Tell Tommy that Dattie is making a little ring for him," he wrote on November 15, "and maybe one for Frances Ann too." A week later, Charles sent the finished products home in a letter--two rings carved from laurel root with a jackknife. Another week passed and he informed his wife that he had carved a laurel root pipe. "It smokes as good as any pipe I ever saw," he wrote, "and by the by you must know that I smoke once a day--just as I did there, just before going to bed. But I never smoke without thinking of those in Freedom." Charles eventually sent the pipe home to his father-in-law, but he subsequently expressed embarrassment about its craftsmanship, and discontinued making pipes. (A private of Company B, Emory Sweetland, became the regiment's premier pipe maker, and two examples of his laurel root pipes are known to survive. One is pictured in "Relics of a Regiment," *North South Trader*, Vol. IX, No. 3, March-April 1982, p. 24.)

Rings became Charles's main output, and bone his favorite material, preferred over laurel root for its durability. He sent a bone ring to Tommy, which he had spent a long time in making, in a letter of January 2, 1863. "I wish you would have him be careful of it," he instructed

Ann, "and keep it in remembrance of his father. Yes a father that thinks more of him than he does of his own life." He added that his work had inspired a trend in the 154th. "Since I began to make Rings every body in the Regt. has got to making them."

The sentimental importance Charles attached to his little presents, evident in his message to his son, was eloquently expressed on January 5 when he sent a ring to Ann. "I wish I was there to place it on your finger as a token of that undying Love which was plighted and given to you some years ago," he wrote. "Wear it for my sake and may it comfort thee and encourage thee and uphold thee in all the Storms and trials which may in this world meet thee." The ring featured two hearts, and he explained the symbolism to his wife. "You see the hearts in the Ring are a part one from the other Still they are not Separated for they are in the same Ring. So our hearts are now far a way from each other but still I trust that they are United and will continue so untill time is no more."

After carving more rings and some small buttons for his children during the winter, Charles took his workmanship to another level with a bone ring he described on March 6. He made it for Tommy "to put on his hankkerchief or comforter." It featured a large heart carved with the head of an eagle, two flags, the initials T.D.C., and other designs. "Every one that has seen it says that it is the best thing that they ever saw made with a jack knife," Charles boasted. He added, "You may think that I am very foolish to spend my time in making such things but then I like to do it, because I think it pleases those little ones that are so dear to me. you see that love will do that which money cannot do."

Charles continued to make rings and handkerchief slides for family and friends in Freedom, and it is possible that the homefolk would have remained the sole beneficiaries of his work. But on March 21, 1863, Major General Joseph Hooker issued an order instituting badges to distinguish the various corps of the Army of the Potomac. This eventually led Charles to establish a thriving business crafting crescents, the badge of the Eleventh Corps, and selling them to his regimental comrades. But from the available evidence, two momentous campaigns and battles intervened before he got started--Chancellorsville, where the 154th New York lost

40% in killed, wounded and captured, and Gettysburg, where the regiment suffered 78% casualties, most of them captives.

William Charles's duties kept him behind the lines at both battles (although the supply train he was with did come under fire at Chancellorsville). The decimated 154th New York was camped at Alexandria, Virginia, doing duty escorting conscripts to the front, when Charles described his new sideline making Eleventh Corps badges on September 13, 1863. "When I have spare time I make half moons. Have made from ten to fifteen since we came to this camp [on August 8]. Yesterday I made one for Major [Lewis D.] Warner from a 50 cts. piece here is a drawing of it [reproduced as an illustration.] it looks very well, But I think the one with the Heart in [it] looks better. . . . This looks as well as any I have made I could sell lots of them if I only had silver to make them [Lieutenant] Col. [Henry C.] Loomis [who had resigned from the 154th after Chancellorsville] told me the other day that he that he would send me some." When he received his pay, Charles declared, he was going to purchase five dollars worth of coins, and he figured he could produce six to ten crescents per week, and sell them for fifty cents apiece. That could provide him with up to twenty dollars a month--more than his pay from Uncle Sam.

A week later, Charles described his production methods. He and another member of the regiment--who unfortunately went unnamed--bought eight dollars worth of silver, in five, ten, twenty-five and fifty cent pieces. "I make the crescents and he marks them," Charles wrote. Folks at home had learned about the product, and were sending coins for Charles to convert into crescents. A popular design was a crescent with a heart rising from its concave arc, with appropriate inscriptions (as sketched in his September 13 letter). Business was apparently booming, but then the entrepreneur met with several setbacks.

First the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps were transferred from the Army of the Potomac to the western theater. A long railroad journey carried the 154th New York from Washington to Bridgeport, Alabama, and within a month the regiment spearheaded the movement to Lookout Valley, Tennessee, which opened the famous "Cracker Line" to relieve the siege of Chattanooga. Just as Charles was getting settled in Lookout Valley and ready to resume his business, a

disaster struck when two thieves stole his tool chest. The miscreants were apprehended, and most of his tools were recovered, but he was missing three of his best files, among other items. Without those files, Charles could not produce satisfactory crescents, as he admitted on November 20: "I can not make them very good for somebody stole my files. But I will send them as soon as I can get them marked. maybe I will send them without marking them." Within the next few days the great Union victory at Chattanooga was gained; the 154th played a minor role in the battle and had six men wounded while skirmishing. Shortly thereafter Charles noted that "the boy that did [the inscribing] for me is gone." Presumably he found someone else to incise the badges.

But despite those setbacks, business continued to thrive, with sales strong both in camp and on the homefront. Some sales were made in camp for relatives at home. First Sergeant Ambrose F. Arnold of Company D, another Freedom resident, paid Charles for a crescent to be sent to his son at home. Charles begged Ann to send him all the coins she could--"every ten cents in silver is worth from fifty cents to a dollar to me"--and he discovered some popular new materials for his wares. "The other day we found a piece of Rebel Shell, what they threw at us from Lookout Mountain," he wrote. "The butt or what is called the fuse chamber was made of a metal something like Brass so the Boys must have it made up into finger Rings I have made 8 of them I intend to send one home But no sooner do I get one made than some one takes it off [my hands]." To his ill mother-in-law, Charles sent a ring made from "a purple colored Shell"--probably a mussel shell--and announced he could sell similar rings in camp for two dollars apiece.

When Captain Harrison Cheney of Company D left for his Freedom home on a leave of absence on Christmas Day 1863, Charles sent with him a crescent, two rings and a basket made from a peach pit. "If Uncle Sam pays me I can send home \$100," Charles informed his wife on January 12, 1864. "I have \$40. now all but \$14 of it I have earned by doing little jobs for the boys If I had Silver enough I could earn much more." At the regiment's winter camp in Lookout Valley, Charles returned to working with laurel root, making rings he sold for a dollar apiece. "I

have some spare time now," he wrote on February 6, "and most every day I make a Ring or a crescent for some of the boys." Almost everyone in the regiment, he noted, had a ring he had made from brass recovered from Confederate shells. On February 19 he reported he had \$50 to send home which he had earned by making rings and crescents. He was making between two and three dollars a day from the work, crafting rings from nickels and dimes and selling them for a dollar each, and offering crescents made from nickels for fifty cents apiece. But he continued to be hindered by shortages of silver.

Occasionally Charles engaged in a special project. He made a crescent which incorporated the Masonic emblem for Assistant Surgeon Dwight W. Day, a Freedom townsman, and declared it "looks very well." He mentioned that he hoped to have a gem-sized tintype of himself taken and fix it in a shell or pearl frame for Ann to wear as a "Bosom Pin," but whether he ever did so went unrecorded.

The crescent design was abruptly discontinued in April 1864, when the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps were merged to form the Twentieth, and took the five-pointed star for a badge. The new badge created a great demand for Charles's work, but he was again plagued by a shortage of coins. "If I only had silver now I could sell a great many stars," Charles wrote on April 24. "I made one for the Coln. [Patrick Henry Jones] yesterday from a 25 cts. piece & most every one in the Regiment would buy one of me if I only had them." But before Charles could outfit the entire 154th New York with Twentieth Corps stars, orders came which effectively put him out of business. He was detached from the regiment, and while the 154th took part in the Atlanta Campaign, the March to the Sea and the Carolinas Campaign, Charles served behind the lines at Ringgold, Georgia, Bridgeport, Alabama, and Blair's Landing, South Carolina, where he continued to produce trinkets for the homefolk. He rejoined the 154th at Raleigh, North Carolina, at the close of the war, and was mustered out with the regiment at Bladensburg, Maryland, on June 11, 1865.

It must be stressed that Charles's handicraft work was but one notable aspect of his army career. In filling out a form for the New York State Bureau of Military Statistics two years

after the war ended, Charles wrote proudly that he "was not in Hospital or on furlough, or otherwise detained from duty" during his entire thirty-three months in the service--a claim few soldiers could make. He was a leader of the 154th New York's small Welsh contingent, which he had called to the colors. A devout Christian, he played an active part in the religious life of the regiment. Sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, he taught freedmen to read and write and organized Sunday schools for them during his time at Bridgeport in 1864. He appears to have been the type of soldier who was very efficient at enhancing the morale of his comrades.

William and Ann Charles had two more children in the postwar years, William C. (born 1866) and Milton J. (1869). Ann Charles died on March 14, 1869, about a month after giving birth to her last child. William Charles married Martha Ellen James, a native of Wales, in 1871, and they had two children: Cora Ellen and Maryette. In 1889 the family moved from Freedom to the neighboring town of Farmersville. In addition to farming, Charles taught several terms in the district school, and was a justice of the peace, a Republican, an ardent prohibitionist, a lover of flora, a Good Templar, a deacon of the Freedom Ebenezer (Welsh Baptist) Church, and a founder of the First Baptist Church of Farmersville Station. After two years as an invalid, William Charles died on December 19, 1896. An obituary described him as "a most devoted Christian man and one prominent in every good work in and about Farmersville Station." He was buried at Freedom. "Many old soldiers gathered to pay their final respects to their beloved comrade, who had endeared himself to them on many an occasion, especially in sorrow," his obituary stated. "He was always ready to allieviate every cause of sadness, so far as possible, by prayer, counsel or material aid."

#### **ILLUSTRATIONS--CAPTIONS AND CREDITS**

1. William Charles, Company F, 154th New York, ruby ambrotype, photographer and date unknown. *Courtesy of Jack Finch.*
2. Sketches by Charles of Eleventh Corps badge designs, in a letter to his wife Ann of September 13, 1863. *Courtesy of Jack Finch.*

3. Eleventh Corps badge of Captain John C. Griswold, Company F, 154th New York. Griswold was promoted from first lieutenant to captain of Charles's company in April 1863, and was discharged a year later. His captaincy coincided with Charles's peak production of corps badges, and it seems likely Griswold purchased this badge from Charles. *Author's collection.*

4. Eleventh Corps badge of Assistant Surgeon Dwight W. Day, 154th New York. Day was from Charles's home town of Freedom, and was mentioned several times in Charles's letters. On two occasions, Day returned to Freedom on furlough carrying trinkets made by Charles. The engraving on Day's badge is much more sophisticated than Griswold's, perhaps taking place after Charles replaced his unnamed engraver. *Courtesy of Richard Adams.*