

A letter from a Confederate soldier to his sister regarding the death of a former slave turned Union guide, by Avery Irons

Dearest Lucy,

I pray that you and mother are safe and in good health and loyal care. Please hold the contents of this letter to yourself. I only commit these words to ink in case I perish in one of these fields. What I have witnessed is a terrible weight to carry alone. I apologize for foisting my burden upon your already saddled shoulders. Please forgive me this momentary weakness.

I now know what became of Thomas James. Three sunrises ago our company came upon a section of Union scouts. Our men fired on the scouts, who escaped. But, their slave guide was captured. I am certain you have already surmised that this guide was Thomas James himself. The men dragged him shackled and gagged to the colonels (including father). Imagine my surprise and heart's seize when I recognized the gray eyes and narrow face of our beloved Thomas James. Our eyes. Our narrow face. I know well the number of years that have passed since father sold him away, but it was him unmistakably, undeniably. One of the colonels pulled his pistol to shoot him immediately but father raised his hand to stop him.

Lucy, I wish that I shared the keenness of your sensitivity and your ability to articulate the depths of all that you perceive. My words, and these few lines, cannot give true testimony to all that passed between father and Thomas James in the few seconds that their eyes met. Father's eyes did not apologize, but there was regret, more regret than I have ever seen in a man. Thomas James's eyes did not plead – they were resigned, with a sort of strength rare in anyone's eyes. They held each other's gaze even as father lowered his hand and the trigger was pulled.

If I do not return, I leave it to your discretion and gentleness to tell Sue Ellen of her son's fate. Father will not speak to me of what happened. I know that he will never let the truth herein enclosed cross his lips. I have tortured myself these past few days with speculations about what would have happened had mother not insisted that Thomas James be sold away. I remember all of our playtime promises to free him when I inherited Willow Oaks. I like to think that I would have honored the promises of my youth. Yet, I sit here in this uniform, fighting this war, having not spared a single breath to save his life. May the merciful Lord forgive me. May He forgive us all.

Your loving brother,

Stephen

September 18, 1863

Source:

A. Stetson - Captain - 9/15/1863, Kempsville, VA
Official Record, Sept. 15, 1863

I have the honor to report that while marching through a wood a few miles from here my advance, consisting of a sergeant and 6 men, was fired into from the side of the road immediately after they had passed, and the negro guide was either captured, or, being wounded, has crawled into the wood.