



Major John Shawhan



Tabitha Rush

John SHAWHAN Major, CSA

by Robert E. Francis

Birth: 2 Apr 1811

Military: 1846/1861-62

Veteran of the Mexican War; Confederate Officer

Death: 2 Oct 1862, Morgan County, Ky Age: 51

Occupation: Military Officer; sheriff, Ky. legislator

Father: Joseph SHAWHAN (1781-1871)

Mother: Sarah "Sallie" EWALT (1783-1837)

John Shawhan, the son of Joseph Shawhan and Sarah Ewalt, is one of our most colorful ancestors. His exploits as a professional soldier have been well documented in several sources, including Civil War correspondence, eyewitness accounts, newspaper articles, and historical journals and books. The following brief essay will attempt to flesh out this most interesting man.

John was born April 2, 1811 in Bourbon County, Kentucky. He grew up on a farm just north of the present day county line of Bourbon and Harrison Counties, about a mile west of State highway 27. He joined the family whiskey distilling business as a young man and continued the family tradition.

He married the young and beautiful Tabitha Rush, daughter of George and Jane Rush. The story of how the couple met and fell in love is lost to history. However, one possible scenario has to do with John's much older 1st cousin, Nancy Shawhan. Nancy was the daughter of John's uncle. John Shawhan (1771-1845). Nancy's first husband, Nicholas, died in 1835 and Nancy eventually fell in love with a family friend, George Rush. George's wife, Jane, died in 1838, and the widowed couple began a romance that resulted in marriage, January 30, 1839. It may be that through John's acquaintance with Nancy's husband George, that he met and fell in love with Tabitha. John and Tabitha married early in 1839 and had their first child, Sarah Jane, some time in 1839. Over the course of the next few years, John and Tabitha began their family. Joseph and Maggie were born in 1844 and George H. followed in 1846.

It was in May of 1846 that John Shawhan answered the call of his nation to go to war in what became known as the "Mexican War." John was selected as captain of the Cynthiana, Kentucky, contingent, consisting of 105 men. On June 6, the newly formed troop traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, where they joined up with volunteers throughout the state. The Cynthiana men were joined with eight other companies and designated "Company D," under Colonel Humphrey Marshall, and mustered into service. Of the original 105 men who signed up, Company D left Louisville, Kentucky, with only 96 men and, while enroute to Mexico, one man died, bringing the total to 95.¹

The army traveled from Louisville to Memphis, thence to Little Rock and on through Arkansas and Texas to Port Lavacha on the Gulf. The Rio Grande was crossed and the enemy's country invaded. The Battle of Buena Vista on February 21 and 22 1847, was the company's first taste of real war. In that battle Capt. Shawhan's company lost these men: Corporal J.A. Jones, Privates D.P. Rogers, W. McClintock, James Pomeroy. Wounded: Captain John Shawhan, Wm. Snodgrass, I.S. Bryson, W.C. Parker, S.M. Vanhook, George H. Wilson, James Warford and Chas. H. Fowler.² Years later, John Shawhan's bravery in battle is remembered by his one-time commander, Colonel, now Brigadier General Marshall:

"I value him high; he served under me in Mexico, and I saw him borne from the field at Buena Vista badly wounded. I know he is gallant, and I would have appointed him to command my cavalry force had I the disposition of the matter."³

The Battle of Buena Vista was the only battle of consequence in which the men were engaged and, while on their way to the City of Mexico, the company's services of twelve months expired. The company returned to New Orleans around the July 1, 1846, received their pay and were discharged from service.⁴

John returned to his home in Harrison and Bourbon Counties and assumed the responsibilities of raising his family. Over the next several years, John and Tabitha had several more children. Helena was born in 1848, followed by John in 1850, Daniel in 1852, and Anna in 1855. While John continued in the family's whiskey business, his natural leadership skills led him into other areas of endeavor. He was sheriff of Bourbon county and represented both houses in the Legislature.

Tragedy struck the Shawhan home on December 9, 1857, when John's beloved wife Tabitha died at the young age of 38. Tabitha was buried in the old cemetery in Cynthiana, Kentucky, and later moved to the Battle Grove cemetery.

In April 1861, war swept across the land, and John answered the call to serve his native soil once again; but this time, as an officer for the Confederate cause. We have the good fortune of having a first hand account of Capt. John Shawhan's company from the time of its inception in September, 1861, until his death on October 2, 1861. The account was written by one of John Shawhan's sergeants, John Aker Lafferty, a Cynthianian who served under Captain Shawhan. Lafferty writes:

"In April, Fort Sumpter was fired upon and fell into the hands of the Southern forces, which was the signal for definite action. The sympathizers of each side began holding their separate meetings in little neighborhood groups to discuss the situation and to watch the trend of affairs. The meetings continued until it was seen that war could not be averted.

"The summer season being well on, we began our preparations for making up a company to join the

Confederate Army. Our first call was for a meeting at the depot grounds in Cynthiana. There being no armed forces in our county, such meetings could be held, at that time, without interruption. Companies were formed in different places for service on both sides.

“At our first meeting, John Shawhan, who lived in our immediate neighborhood, and who had been a soldier in the Mexican War, acted as our leader, but we effected no regular organization. We held weekly meetings at that place and were drilled as a company. After a short time we moved our meeting place to what was known as Beech Bottom, now Poindexter Station, which was a more convenient place. There we increased our activities and kept our camp until September 15, 1861, when we started south to be mustered into regular service. At that time, Federal soldiers had come into the State and daylight meetings were not advisable. We planned a night meeting, to be held immediately, at the residence of Ben Desha, on the Falmouth Road, about two miles south of Cynthiana. After collecting there to about the number of one hundred and twenty-five, all mounted on horseback, we proceeded that night to Dud Van Hook’s, fourteen miles northeast of Cynthiana, and thence to Al Byram’s place in Bath County, and from there we continued our journey to Esquire Boyd’s farm on Slate Creek, in the same county, where we stopped during the day. The second night we went to McCormick’s place, now Frenchburg, at the foot of the mountains, and went into camp.

“While there, we learned that Federal soldiers were in the neighborhood, and for the protection of our camp, we were given our first experience in standing picket. Being raw recruits, the prospect of having the enemy appear at any time, and having pickets at their posts with guns loaded to kill, made the situation rather exciting; but no trouble came to us while there. The next night we left that place and went out by Hazel Green to a farm owned by a widow by the name of Gardiner, near Sawyersville. After remaining there a short time we proceeded to Prestonsburg and went into regular camp on a farm called Garfield’s Bottom. We received some recruits on our journey, and while there, recruits came to us in great numbers. We organized our company and several other companies were organized and all mustered into service about October 1, 1861. Our company was made up chiefly of Harrison County men.”

While his troops were preparing for war, John and other Confederate officers petition the newly elected President of the Confederate States of America for help:

Prestonsburg, Floyd Co., KY., October 2, 1861

His Excellency Jefferson Davis,

President of the Confederate States of America:

Sir: Our Legislature has betrayed us. We have marched to this point on account of its strategic importance with 1,000 men. Hundreds are gathering around our standard daily. We can have 5,000 men here in two weeks. We would most respectfully petition Your Excellency to send us immediately some experienced military man to command us, and place us upon a footing to make ourselves available in furthering the cause of civil freedom, in which we have enlisted, and to which we pledge our lives and our sacred honor. Other information respecting our wants and our statistics will be furnished by the commissioners who are the bearers of this petition.

BEN DESHA,

Captain of Light Infantry Company (armed).

E. F. CLAY,

Captain of Cavalry Company (armed).

JAMES M. THOMAS,

Captain Mounted Rifles (forty minies, with equipment).

T. R. WORSHAM,

Infantry (unarmed).

H. C. SWANGO,

Infantry (unarmed).

A. J. MAY,

Captain, Morgan (unarmed).

JESSE MEEK, Infantry (unarmed).

G. W. CONNER,

Captain, Infantry (unarmed).

G. M. EWING,

Captain, Infantry (unarmed).

Guards, Infantry

JOHN W. SPARKS, Captain

Infantry (unarmed),

JOHN SHAWHAN.⁵

The company was officially formed at Prestonburg, Kentucky, September 1861, as Company A, 1st Kentucky Cavalry. Captain John Shawhan was made company commander and Lieutenant William VanHook as Executive Officer. John Lafferty was 2nd sergeant in charge of drilling the soldiers.

Their first engagement was at Piketon, Kentucky. Lafferty's narrative provides a detailed account of the battle from a soldier's perspective:

“After reorganizing our company, we drilled hard every day for about a month while in that camp and did some scouting service throughout the country. We then moved our camp to Pikeville where other companies were organized. Most of the companies composing our body were infantry; but ours, being mounted to do either cavalry or infantry service, was called Mounted Infantry.

“After we had been in Pikeville a week or so, we received information through our scouts that a strong force of Federal soldiers was coming up Big Sandy River in the direction of our camp. This created much excitement and for the first time we began to realize what war meant. We promptly began preparations to meet the enemy face to face and try our skill at killing.

As the country around us was mountainous, we were in position to go out and select a place of vantage on the mountainside where we could take them by surprise and do serious damage to them before they came near our camp. A detail of one hundred and sixteen men was selected from among those assembled at our camp to go out and engage the enemy from the mountain side. Brother James D. and I were of the

number selected. Nearly all our men in the detail were armed with double-barreled shot guns, and we had prepared cartridges, each containing eleven buckshot, so that such a charge would be very effective at short range. We went several miles from camp to a point on the Big Sandy River called the Narrows, or better known as Ivy Mountain or Ivy Creek. We left our horses at the top of the mountain in care of a squad of horseholders, and went down to a place where we established ourselves behind the rock, about one hundred feet above the narrow mountain road which had been dug or blasted out of the side of the mountain. At that place the mountain was almost perpendicular. The road was about one hundred feet above the river, was very narrow and extended in that condition for about two miles. We were completely hidden from the view of those who might pass along on the road.

“After a short time, the enemy under the command of General William Nelson and numbering about four thousand came along on that road and filled it full, as far as I could see, with men, wagons, and horses. The men, wearing their new blue uniforms, presented a grand appearance, marching gaily along, wholly ignorant of our presence. After the head of the column had passed us, Lieutenant Wm. H. Van Hook who was commanding us, gave the order to fire, and instantly all of our men fired their double-barreled shotguns from behind the rocks into the ranks of the enemy and continued firing as fast as they could reload their guns. At no time did we shoot at them more than one hundred to hundred and fifty feet away. We were so securely protected behind the rocks above them that when we stepped back to reload our guns we were out of all danger; and as we stepped forward to fire, we were only partly exposed for a moment.

“Completely surprised by our attack, the whole body became panic-stricken and thoroughly demoralized. Passage forward or backward for a time was impossible and they were kept within easy range of our guns. With no escape, they in a disorganized way, opened fire upon us with slight effect. We fought for one hour and a quarter and our shotguns with buckshot were so effective at that distance that their losses were 160 killed and 500 wounded. Our losses were 7 killed and a few wounded.

“During the progress of the battle when the confusion on the road was at its height, I could see, from where I was located, that a great many of their men and horses fell over the precipice into the river below, and I could see the water splash as they fell into it. No doubt most of them fell over from the effects of wounds and exhaustion but many were crowded over during the wild excitement.

“Our ammunition became exhausted and we were ordered to retreat. By that time the enemy had climbed the mountain at a point two miles from us and was making an effort to prevent our escape. In retreating from our position we had to run for some distance over the top of the mountain to the place where our horses were in charge of the horseholders. Each man was making the best possible speed to get back to his horse. The wounded, one of whom was myself, together with our helpers, lagged behind our more fortunate comrades, who, upon reaching their horses, started posthaste to make good their escape. The horseholders, having heard that several of our number had been killed, ran also with the unclaimed horses in their possession. The horseholders should have held their post until it was certain that all who were able to return had arrived. However, they had not gone very far before they were informed that others were still behind, and they came back to us in time to enable us to reach our camp in Pikeville in safety. We left our dead behind. I hardly think so small a body of men at any time during the war fought greater odds and did greater execution.

“The first man I saw killed during the war was Dr. _ of Owen County who fell by my side in that battle. I received two wounds, one in my left hand and one in my hip, though severe they were not dangerous. The bullet in my hip was not removed.

“There was much sadness and sorrow in camp upon our return when it became known that seven of our men had been killed. The report also had the effect to fill each man with the determination to fight the enemy to the bitter end.

“My wounds did not give me a great deal of trouble and about four weeks thereafter I was able to report for duty.”

John Shawhan was wounded in the conflict. From a report by Union officer Col. Sill to his commanding officer

General Nelson, we read:⁶

Piketon, November 10, 1861

Sir: I have the honor to report that my command occupied this place yesterday afternoon about 4 o'clock. Colonel Metcalf's mounted force, in advance, exchanged shots with a party, probably a reconnoitering one, who had just crossed the river. They retreated. I threw out Metcalf's and Hart's force, deployed as skirmishers, on the hill-side flanking the road, which debouched at the ford. They found the enemy's men, making off by the Shelvy road. A few rounds of shell were sent after them, and Metcalf's men mounted their horses and took possession of the town. The remainder of the force crossed on a raft bridge. I reamed that the enemy were occupied all of yesterday leaving. General Williams was here when the skirmishers opened fire. I now occupy his headquarters. The only casualty that I know of was 1 man killed on this side. On the route we encountered a company of mounted men twice. The first time our fire killed a horse and wounded 2 men. Night before last a reconnoitering company of 10, sent out by Colonel Metcalf, encountered *Captain Shawn's cavalry, of about 150, and, it is reported, wounded Captain Shawn (italics mine)*. His company went back in great haste. There are many particulars I will speak of when I meet you. Troops are very hungry. All that we can get is beef. There is a mill near here, which we will set in motion today, and get plenty of corn meal.

I am, very respectfully, sir, your most obedient servant,

J. W. Sill,

Colonel, Commanding

The Union Army proved too large for the Confederates to stay in the area and they were forced to retreat to Pounds Gap, Virginia. Again, from Lafferty's journal we read:

We did not remain in our Pikeville camp as the country around us was filling up with Federal soldiers. General Nelson's army was approaching us cautiously after our fight with them, and some of them came close enough to shoot across the Big Sandy River into our camp. Our numbers, organization and equipment were so inferior to theirs that we broke camp and went through Pound's Gap into Virginia. After a short encampment in that State, during which time we perfected our organization, exchanged our shotguns for army rifles and did a great deal of hard drilling, we returned to Kentucky and had a small engagement with General James A. Garfield's forces on Middle Creek near Prestonburg. There were but few fatalities on either side in that engagement and then we returned to Virginia and went into winter quarters at Lebanon.

While in Lebanon, an epidemic of measles broke out and a large number of our men died during that winter. When spring opened we started on a campaign into what was afterward West Virginia and fought a battle at Princeton. The enemy was commanded by General Jacob D. Cox. Our leader was General Humphrey Marshall, who commanded about three thousand men, including our organization, known as the 1st Kentucky Battalion in charge of John S. (Cerro Gordo) Williams. We won a brilliant victory over the enemy, which was composed largely of imported Germans who had come to this country to join the United States Army. They were brave men but not skilled fighters. They had drilled but little and used their guns as they were taught in their native country. They seldom put their guns to their shoulders in firing but shot from their side and did very poor work. Several of us walked over the field after the battle, and saw the trees were bullet marked on the side from which they fought up as high as forty feet, the same trees showed bullet marks on our side low to the ground, with few being so high as ten feet. They lost many, killed, wounded and captured; our losses were one killed and a few wounded.

A more detailed account of Pound's Gap is given in a letter from John S. Williams, Colonel, Confederate States Army, to Brig. General Humphrey Marshall, C.S. Army at Wytheville.⁷ I have italicized the instances in which John Shawhan is mentioned.

Camp near Pound Gap, November 13, 1861.

General: Since my last report to you I have been compelled to abandon Picketon by an overwhelming force that advanced upon me in two columns, one directly up the river from Prestonburg, 1,000 strong, with a battery of six pieces, and the other from Louisa up John's Creek, a branch of the Sandy, numbering 1,800 men, with a battery of field pieces. Both of these columns converged upon Picketon.

My whole force consisted of 1,010 men, including sick, teamsters, and men on extra duty. I did not believe that the advance of the enemy would be so rapid, and hoped that the artillery and reinforcements promised would arrive before they could disturb me at Picketon. Under this confident hope I commenced gathering supplies, explored the leather resources of the country, found them abundant, and organized a corps of shoemakers, and had them at work. Major Hawes had purchased 1,000 fat hogs and a number of beef cattle, and was making preparations to salt them. My men were badly clad and badly armed, with not a knapsack, haversack, or canteen. They carried their powder in horns, gourds, and bottles. This was our condition when the enemy commenced the advance upon us. Retreat was inevitable, but there was too much public property to be abandoned without an effort to save it. I at once ordered all the transportation possible to be collected, and sent the sick, wounded and the live stock to the rear on the Pound Gap road, for the Tazewell route was no longer safe. I sent a small armed force immediately on the Tazewell route with written orders to turn back the artillery and all public wagons to a point of safety in Virginia. I then sent Captain Holliday, with a small mounted company, on the John's Creek road, and Captains Thomas and Clay on the River road to Prestonburg, to observe the movements of the enemy. This was on the night of the 8th. Captain Thomas discovered the advance guard of the enemy about 15 miles from Picketon. I went in person with Captains May and Hawkins, with their companies of infantry, and Lieutenant Van Hook, with 20 mounted men, to the position of Captain Thomas, near Ivy Creek. I found that Captain Thomas had burned the bridge there. The men were allowed to refresh themselves and the horses were secured in a deep mountain cave, and the whole party of 250 men moved on foot to a strong position half a mile in front of the burned bridge, here to await what we supposed to be the advance guard of the enemy's force.

I resumed to our camp at daylight and met the report of Captain Holliday, who had been fired upon by an advanced guard of the enemy of about 150 men. He gave them a gallant fight, killed 8 of them, having only 1 of his number wounded and 1 horse killed. *I dispatched Captain Shawn with his own and Captain Cameron's companies, to observe the movements of the enemy on John's Creek, with instructions to engage any party not more than twice his number, but not to attack the enemy's full force.*

At 1:30 o'clock on the 9th instant the enemy moved up to Captain May's position (Ivy Creek) with a force of 1,600 men and a battery of six pieces, and were received by 250 rifles and shot-guns, in pointblank range, every one of which took effect. Their column wavered and fell back, but returned in good order, and attempted to carry the pass by assault under cover of their cannon, but were repulsed again with terrific slaughter. They then withdrew beyond the range of our shotguns, and their infantry up the hills soon outflanked our little band compelling them to fall back behind the burned bridge. Here our force made a stand, but the enemy advanced no further. I then ordered three more companies of infantry to sustain Captain May's command or to cover his retreat if necessary.

At 12 o'clock at night Captain Shawn reported to me that the enemy were advancing in full force on the John's Creek road with great rapidity. I then ordered Captains May, Shawn, and all the outposts in. I made a display of forces in Picketon, sent the exhausted infantry in the direction of our retreat, and waited with the balance of the command the arrival of the enemy. They came up slowly and cautiously, but were detained for an hour by Captain Thomas' company of sharpshooters, stationed near the ford, which prevented their artillery from getting into position to rake the town. As they approached I moved the rear guard of 400 men off in good order. They opened upon us a tremendous fire of artillery and musketry, and were replied to by our sharpshooters. We had 1 man killed and 3 wounded, while the enemy had 6 killed.

In the Ivy fight our loss was 10 killed, 15 wounded, and 40 missing. Some of the missing men have gone back to their homes, and others join us daily. We lost Lieutenant Rust, who fell gallantly in the discharge of his duty. My first belief was that the enemy had lost but 150 men, but from subsequent information received from spies, Union men, escaped prisoners who have joined us, and others who have

examined their burial ground, I am satisfied the enemy lost over 300 in killed, with the usual proportion of wounded. I cannot speak in terms of commendation too high of the gallantry of Captains May, Thomas, Hawkins and Clay, and Lieutenant Van Hook and Sam Clay. Indeed, the officers and men behaved with so much courage and coolness that to discriminate at all would be invidious.

If we had 1,000 men more and a battery of six pieces we could have whipped and destroyed both columns; but with the small force I had it was impossible to fight both at once, and to have exposed my whole force to one would have exposed the rear to the other. Our cartridge boxes arrived the other day after the fight. We had powder and lead, and made our own cartridges and molded our own bullets.

The enemy have 6,000 troops near Piketon; 1,000 of them advanced 10 miles this side of that place. They have not more than 1,500 at Prestonburg. What they have below as reserves I know but little of, for all communication is cut off and the whole country is frightened out of its wits, and but few men will act as scouts or guides. I am satisfied that this large force was not moved up the Sandy merely for the purpose of dispersing the unorganized and half-armed, barefooted squad under my command. They intended to move upon the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, I think, by way of the Tazewell Court House. They fortify their positions, and have a large number of wagons. The Sandy is now navigable for steamboats to a point above Piketon.

We want good rifles, clothes, greatcoats knapsacks, haversacks, and canteens indeed, everything, almost, except a willingness to fight. Many of our men are barefooted, and I have seen the blood in their tracks as they marched from Ivy to this place. You know what we want, general. Send such articles as we need to Abingdon. There is but little subsistence here, and I fear I shall be compelled to fall back to a point where I can subsist until our organization is perfected. We have been so constantly fighting that we have not had time to complete our muster rolls. I have now over 1,200 men. If I could make a forward movement the effect would be good upon the country.

Mr. Thomas has just received from the governor of Florida a commission as aide de-camp, with rank of colonel. I cannot insist on retaining him from such increased rank. Send somebody else.

If the enemy should move by way of the Pound I have not a sufficient force to resist them - no artillery, no entrenching tools, nor axes, spades, or picks. If they come we will give them a fight, but this will do us no good but to destroy a few of them.

I have just learned from a spy that a steamboat arrived at Piketon yesterday with supplies to the enemy.

Major Hawes wants more money. He has bought hogs, horses, wagons &c.

Your obedient servant, Jno. S. Williams, Colonel, C.S.A.

John's activities are alluded to during the winter of 1861-1862 in a letter, dated January 1, 1862, from Major R. Hawes, C.S.A., to General S. Cooper, Adjutant-General, C.S. Army:⁸ *Two hundred Kentucky cavalry, under command of Captain Shawhan, at Salyersville and West Liberty, about 40 miles in advance of General Marshall's headquarters at Paintsville.*

He was promoted to major on March 12, 1862. We read in Brigadier General Humphrey H. Marshall's letter to General Cooper:⁹

"Captain Shawhan received only yesterday his commission as major of the First Cavalry under the reorganization of the mounted force. His company of cavalry is the only cavalry I have. He will, I presume, return the commission under the circumstances, but I wish you to authorize me to request his acceptance of it, and so leave me a chance to assign to him troops, instead of having him assigned to men unwilling to elect him to office. I value him high; he served under me in Mexico, and I saw him borne from the field at Buena Vista badly wounded. I know he is gallant, and I would have appointed him to command my cavalry force had I the disposition of the matter. As I presume you will not recall the commission, I hope you will

in a note to me request him to retain the rank. I can speedily make the actual command equal to the rank.”

On March 19, 1862, General Robert E. Lee replied to Brigadier General Humphrey’s request with the following: “Captain Shawhan can retain his commission as major of cavalry, with the hope that his command will speedily be raised equal to his rank..”¹⁰

John Lafferty gives us an account of the last months in the life of Major John Shawhan.

“We were by this time seasoned to the hardships of war. Leaving West Virginia in the summer of 1862 we again entered Kentucky through Pound’s Gap. General Kirby Smith had begun an invasion of Kentucky with his Confederate Army, and we were ordered to Paris. We were there for only one night and were immediately ordered to join General John H. Morgan’s forces which were trying to prevent the escape of the Federal General George Morgan, with his army of 10,000 men, retreating from the Cumberland Gap on his way to Ohio, by the way of Hazel Green, West Liberty and Grayson. Our Battalion, then commanded by Major John Shawhan, joined General John H. Morgan at Hazel Green and were able to harass the Federal forces by fighting them almost continually until they reached the Ohio River beyond Grayson and crossed over.”

The last official account of Major John Shawhan’s activities before his death is recorded in an intelligence report from W. H. Wadsworth to Major-General Horatio G. Wright (USA), dated September 26, 1862. An excerpt of this letter reads: “Day before yesterday Captain Shawhan passed through Paris for Mount Sterling with a company, and gave out that he was hurrying back to Humphrey Marshall, to whose command he belongs.”¹¹

We have two accounts of the death of John Shawhan. The first comes from an article provided by Ron T. Shawhan, taken from “Morgan in the Mountains” by James M. Prichard and published in the October 1985 edition of “Civil War Times.” It reads as follows:

“Then a rebel force commanded by a Kentuckian and brigadier general, Humphrey Marshall, joined in the Confederate rush into the Blue Grass State. Riding into Kentucky from southwest Virginia, Marshall’s soldiers passed through mountains north of the Cumberland Gap. Southern troops sat astride all of George Morgan’s (Federal) supply lines. Faced with starvation or surrender, the Union commander instead elected to march his men out of the Gap and follow a hazardous route through the mountains of eastern Kentucky home to Ohio.

“Gradually shifting their line of march to the northeast, the retreating Federals wound their way through the rugged wilderness to Hazel Green, northeast of Proctor. Morgan’s troopers (Confederate) set out in rapid pursuit, reaching the mountain village virtually on the heels of the enemy column. However, halting briefly enroute, Morgan was reinforced by a portion of Humphrey Marshall’s cavalry, commanded by Colonel John Shawhan, a fifty-two-year-old veteran of mountain warfare who had served with Morgan during the war with Mexico.

“Late on October 3, the Confederates resumed their march to the Lexington area. At a point about eight miles from Morehead, northeast of west Liberty, a volley of shots suddenly rang out from a bluff overlooking the road. Colonel Shawhan fell dead from the saddle. During the confusion that followed, one Rebel was accidentally killed by return fire.

“Morgan’s troopers quickly scaled the heights only to find that the bushwhackers had escaped. Ironically, these final shots of the campaign were fired by a handful of local youths, whose fifteen-year-old leader would later claim to have fired the shot that killed Shawhan. One of Shawhan’s troopers placed the colonel’s body upright before him in the saddle and bore his dead commander into Morehead. There a wagon was obtained to convey the remains home for burial.”

The second account comes from the journal of John Akers Lafferty. It is a sad but dignified accounting of the death of a great man:

“We were next ordered to Lexington. While on the march to Lexington, we passed through Rowan County, and about eight miles from Morehead Major John Shawhan was killed by bushwhackers. We had captured several bushwhackers on the march and after paroling them, let them go. It was our opinion that these men got ahead of us and reached the high bluff from which they shot as we passed along. Major Shawhan was killed and one horse wounded. Many of our men sprang from their horses and commenced to climb the bluff, but they were checked by a part of our command in front of us, which having heard the gun shots, halted, mistook our men for bushwhackers and opened fire on them. This stopped the pursuit for a few minutes, and by the time our men reached the top of the bluff, the bushwhackers had gone, leaving behind them one gun, a hat and a coat or two. Some of our men from the front and the rear of our lines rode through the hills in search of them, but as they were well acquainted with that mountainous section, they easily made their escape. Mat Messick placed the dead body of Major Shawhan upright before him on his horse and carried it eight miles to Morehead where we were able to get a spring wagon in which to carry it.

“General Kirby Smith, with his entire army, was then marching through Kentucky on his way to Cincinnati, over roads that led through Harrison County. We continued our march until we reached Paris, then we, who were residents of Harrison County, were granted permission to go home for the night only and ordered to take the dead body of Major Shawhan to Cynthiana, where it was buried in the Old Cemetery. We were ordered to report the next day at Lexington.

“We Harrison County men rode rapidly to Cynthiana, delivered the body Major Shawhan, October 7th, and dispersed to our respective homes where we spent a few hours, which was the only visit made to our homes during the whole war. By hard riding, we reported promptly at Lexington the next morning. When we arrived there we found the battle of Perryville was being fought and we were ordered to proceed at once toward the battlefield. We went over the Nicholasville turnpike and got within hearing distance of the guns. The battle being about over, we were halted and given orders to be ready to march next morning.”

After the war, John and Tabitha Rush Shawhan’s remains were reinterred in the Battle Grove Cemetery, Cynthiana, Kentucky. Their tombstones sit just behind the obelisk of John’s father, Joseph, alongside two other identical gravestones, that of two of their children.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cynthiana Democrat, June 1896, Page 9.

² Ibid.

³ Letter from Brigadier-General H. Marshall to General Cooper, Adjutant and Inspector General. Correspondence from *The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882. Vol. 22. p. 323-4.

⁴ Cynthiana Democrat, June 1896, Page 9.

⁵ *The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882.

⁶ Report of Col. Joshua W. Sill, Thirty-Third Ohio Infantry, under Gen. W. Nelson (Union). Correspondence from *The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882.

⁷ *Correspondence from The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882. Vol. 17., pp. 228-30.

⁸ Letter from R. Hawes, Major and Brig. Commissary, C. S. Army, to General S. Cooper, Adjutant-General, C.S.

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⁹ Letter from Brigadier-General H. Marshall to General Cooper, Adjutant and Inspector General. *Correspondence from The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882. Vol. 22. p. 323-4.

¹⁰ Letter from General Robert E. Lee to Brigadier General Humphrey Marshall. *Correspondence from The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882. Vol. 22, V. 349.

¹¹ Letter from W. H. Wadsworth to Major-General Horatio G. Wright (USA). *Correspondence from The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington: Government Printing Office. 1882. Vol. 28. pp. 547-8.