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The Confederate Post

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

A final cover to Brigadier General James Johnston Pettigrew

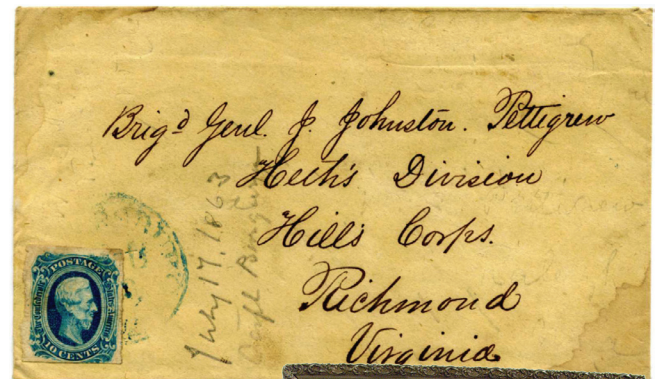
The illustrated cover is franked with a 10¢ blue (Scott CSA #12) canceled by a blue Petersburg, Virginia postmark on a cover addressed to “Brigd Genl. J. Johnston Pettigrew, Heth’s Division, Hill’s Corps, Richmond, Virginia”. It is pencil docketed “July 17, 1863, Capt Bingham”, indicating the correspondent and date of contents. Bingham had no way of knowing that the day he wrote to Pettigrew was the very day of this remarkable general’s death. Confederate collectors love covers with these types of evocative military addresses.

Brigadier-General James Johnston Pettigrew was born in North Carolina in 1828. At age 14, Pettigrew entered the University of North Carolina and President James K. Polk attended the 1847 commencement ceremonies. He was so impressed that he gave the 18 year old graduate a professorship at the U.S. Naval Observatory. Pettigrew held this position until 1849, when he began his law studies. He also studied at the University of Berlin and mastered German, French, Italian and Spanish. He learned to read Arabic and Hebrew and became an accomplished pianist. After traveling in Europe, he returned home to practice law with his second cousin James L. Petigru, one of the most famous attorneys in the nation. Petigru was a slaveholding Unionist, while James Johnson Pettigrew was a non-slaveholding secessionist.

After participating in the capture of Fort Sumter, Pettigrew enlisted in the Confederate service and was commissioned a brigadier general on February 26, 1862. He refused the promotion, declaring that no one should be a general unless he had led men in combat. Later, amidst heavy fighting, Pettigrew was ordered to accept the promotion. During the Peninsula campaign, a musket ball pierced Pettigrew’s throat and shoulder, permanently disabling his right arm. When soldiers tried to carry him to the rear, he ordered them back to the front ranks. Pettigrew lost consciousness on the battlefield and was captured. In August 1862, he was exchanged for a Northern general in Confederate hands and immediately reported for duty, though he was partly incapacitated.

Pettigrew was given command of the 26th North Carolina brigade, one of the most distinguished in the war. On June 1, 1863, Pettigrew’s Brigade joined the Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee on the march to Gettysburg. The first day of the battle, Pettigrew’s Brigade attacked and, in desperate fighting, drove the Union forces off their positions at McPherson’s Ridge. Casualties were tremendous in this half hour fight. The 26th North Carolina lost more than any one regiment in any day in the entire war - North or South - over 1,100 out of a total of 3,000.

When Pettigrew’s division superior, Gen. Harry Heth, was wounded, Pettigrew took command of the shattered division, and



The portrait of General Pettigrew was painted by William Garl Brown. It hangs on one of the interior walls of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



on the third day led it in the immortal charge against the Federal position on Cemetery hill, often referred to as Pickett’s Charge. While some of Pickett’s men went up to the stone wall, some of Pettigrew’s men went over the stone wall. Though Pickett directed his division from a distance, Pettigrew was one who went up to the wall and was one of the last to return to Confederate lines. Thus, Pettigrew’s Brigade filled out the middle part of North Carolina’s Confederate boast “First at Bethel, Farthest to the front of Gettysburg and Chickamauga. Last at Appomattox.”

Though painfully wounded in the hand, Pettigrew kept the field, and was on duty during the agonizing retreat which followed. On the morning of July 14th, Heth’s division reached the Potomac at Falling Waters. While Pettigrew was receiving orders from Heth to remain there in command of the rear guard, a party of forty Federal cavalymen was mistakenly allowed to approach. They dashed recklessly into the Confederate troops, demanding surrender. Gen. Pettigrew’s horse spooked and threw him. Rising, he drew his pistol to take part in the skirmish and was mortally wounded in the stomach. He was told that the only hope of saving his life was to be immobilized and left behind where Union doctors might find him. He refused, saying that he would rather die than be in another Yankee prison. He was carried to Bunker Hill where he died on July 17th, only two weeks after his 35th birthday.

A South Carolina friend wrote of Pettigrew, “more than anything he loved liberty, but he felt that to love liberty was an empty mockery unless that love was exhibited in sacrifice which its acquisition requires.” ☒