

## A Letter From Judith Ann Robertson Foster (1845–1924)

Judith Ann Robertson Foster was Benjamin Moses Robertson's oldest sister. In 1918 when she was seventy-four years of age, she wrote the following letter to her grandchildren depicting her childhood in Chesterfield County leading up to and after the Civil War. In 1974 her grandson, Lucius Peebles Robertson, Jr. had the letter printed into a booklet entitled FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN in which he adds the following comments:

"The original, handwritten letter is informal. Its spelling and punctuation have been retained. Paragraphing has been added.

The details of the war are not spelled out chronologically. When she speaks of watching the battle of Petersburg from Fleets Hill, it is in April, 1865 at the beginning of the last ten days of the war. The retreat lead [sic] through Chesterfield County and past the court house.

When she speaks of Drewry's Bluff she speaks of events a year earlier in May, 1864 when Butler's forces moved inland from Bermuda Hundred to cut the railroad between Richmond and the south."

Judith Ann's letter to her grandchildren was the inspiration for Benjamin Moses Robertson's descendants to share their memories and recollections with their children and grandchildren.



*Judith Ann Robertson Foster*  
(1845–1924)



*Natural Bridge*  
*August 1918*  
*For my grandchildren,*

Your grandmother Judith Ann Robertson was blessed with christian parents. My father Moses M. Robertson was a widower when he married my mother who was then a widow with two children her name Judith Ann Nunnally. (John W. and Mary W. Nunnally were her children)

I was born on March 11th 1845. My childhood days were spent on a large farm near Chesterfield C.[ourt] H.[ouse] My parents were well off in worldly goods, had everything in great abundance, so, we were very happy. My oldest brother Joseph H. Robertson was very handsome and a great lover of horses. I rode with him from early childhood.

My father died when I was in my thirteenth year. I was then a christian, and member of Salem Church. My father was the largest contributor and gave his personal attention to the building of Salem. Mother sent me to a private boarding school soon after father died. After a session there I went to Fork Union a school for girls which was known as Dr. P. S. Hinson Academy for young ladies. While there the first talk of the Civil War began.

My brothers had joined a company the Chesterfield C. H. Infantry, brother Joseph came to Fluvanna after me just at Commencement time, as they were going to have a picnic and great parade to get all young men to enlist for service. It was then our troubles began.

Mother's health was not good so, she decided she could not spare me to go back to school. My brothers' company was the first to answer the call to Arms. They entered active service in April Sixty-One.

brother Joseph fell at his post while on guard duty at Jamestown Island, he was sent over to Williamsburg. Mother went down to nurse him, but all efforts failed, he died of Typhoid fever in his nineteenth year — And was brought to the dear old home for burial. This was the first great sorrow of my life.

My half brother (Sister Mary's own brother) John W. Nunnally was killed on June 2nd 1862 at the Battle of Seven Pines. He wrote in his diary at eleven o'clock Saturday night before he was killed on Sunday A.M. 'I know in whom I have believed and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him.' The surgeon of his regiment sent this to my mother with a note saying my brother lived only a few moments as the ball passed through his jugular vein. The Colonel and Captain went back to look for his

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body but never found it.

After this great sorrow my mother gave her time to the care of the sick in the Hospitals in our own home. Two young men from N.[orth] C.[arolina] died and was buried in the family grave yard. I spent my time doing all I could for our suffering soldier boys. I went time and again with my mother to the Hospitals in Richmond, where we took many gallons of milk, eggs, meat, in fact, everything that we had which was suitable to nourish the dear boys. it makes my heart ache even now when I recall the sufferings I saw, some with both eyes gone, others with their legs shot off — we would fill their canteens with milk, leave it on their cots, raw eggs, &c.

I was visiting in Petersburg at uncle Ben's who lived on the Fleets Hill (where the negro school is at now.) Our government had amunition on that hill, we sat up all night when Petersburg was being shelled by the Yankees. The evening before I rode horseback in company with an artillery officer, whose company was in action when he went back. I looked across the river and could see the yankees all lined up for the attack, they were so close I could see their guns, [k]napsacks &c. I went home the next day on the last train that left Petersburg.

Sunday was a dark day, as we knew the time had come when our army would evacuate Richmond. On Monday A.M. we went over to the C.H. carrying everything eatable to give our boys as they were leaving us in the hands of the negros and Yankees. I've often looked back on that, as the saddest day of my life.

I wrote a hasty letter to your grandfather Eldridge Marcellus Foster which I sent by a soldier who was wounded in his arm. Your grandfather surrendered with that letter sewed up in his clothes, which he always valued more than any other, he first read it by camp fire while on his way to Appomattox C.H. Lee surrendered, this letter [of] all others I had written was buried with your grandfather at his request, he had them tied together with white ribbon.

In 1864 the heaviest battles were fought between Drewry's Bluff and Centralia, at this time the Yankees sent out raiding parties, my mother became so anxious, she sent my sister Jennie, our little brother James — and myself from home, carrying with us provisions and three of our best horses. The Yankees went to my home — searched it, but did not at the time take any valuables. After the severe fighting we started back home, not knowing if the house was standing, or mother living — on our way home we crossed the battle field, where the dead men were laying like cattle, many wounded still living whose lives were fast ebbing away — this was the only time I ever saw human brains. We had to retrace our steps many miles in

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order not to pass the nude bodies of the dead Negros had stripped off their clothes. We found things in great confusion but, the worst was yet to come.

No sooner than our army had left us, the Yankees came in their Ambulances and carried off pictures, mirrors, bedding, in fact everything they could take, They took all of my clothes, my maid Sarah came crying to tell me, 'The man who they called Major asked if I would like to have them back' — saying I was the bravest girl they ever saw. (I wish you had a picture of the scene when the so called major brought back my clothes, tied up in a white counterpane, he drew a very fine handkerchief from a silk coat pocket and asked me to give it to him as a souvenir. I replied I would not to save your life, he took the handkerchief gave my clothes back — or rather left them on the porch.

When my brothers bought their pistols they bought one for me, which I wore constantly, and slept with it under my head every night. Some negro told the men I was armed. Whereupon they asked for the pistol. I replied it was bought for my personal protection, they would not only see it but feel it if I was molested. One of the men asked with a sneer on his face, 'Are you a good shot.' I replied, go and look at my target, and decide if you want to take a chance.'

There were five negro soldiers with this raid, the first thing they did was to run their sabres through the three new graves — thinking we had valuable buried there. I packed the best silver, three watches, and the dollar I cut my teeth on, in a tin box and buried it under a setting Turkey's nest. Some of those spoons I've used for fifty-two years, hope you will be reminded of 'me' whenever you see them. I brought the box of silver in the night before this raid, put it under a mahogany davenport, when I went in the parlor, they were carrying out every ornament. I took my album and sat on the davenport, (not knowing if the box was still there) one of the men ran his sabre under where I was sitting — but there I sat, they never found the box. I was brave then, nothing daunted me. I think now I did not realize the danger I was in. My Heavenly Father took care of me.

Four weeks we had a guard in our home, sent over from the C.H. where the Provo Guard had headquarters. These officers were kind in bringing our mail, and would have given us many things, but [we] never accepted or asked favors of them. My mother had many sheep and Lambs — which were off in the woods. The officers were kind enough to buy the Lambs, which was the first 'Green Backs' I ever saw.

The most profound apology ever made me, was by a Major who asked me to ride with him, When I told him he had forgotten how much I had suffered, too much to think of riding with my enemy, he was on his feet in

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a minute, and had more respect for me by declining than if I had accepted.

I took my little brother and went to Richmond to spend those 'Green Backs' What did I see? Richmond in ruins from the great fire, We crossed the river on a pontoon Bridge. (boats tied together with ropes). On returning home I met Grants Army in Manchester, thousands of soldiers, at the head of Hull St a general rode up to the buggy asking if I would like to get by. I thanked him, he with his aides led us out. The gentlemen (old men) who were with me did not get home until next [day]. I've sometimes regreted I did not ask who my benefactor was.

The reconstruction period was worse than the war.

As soon as possible after your grandfather was released as prisoner after the surrender — he came to see me (I had lots of beaux) Mr. Foster seemed overjoyed at seeing me once more, when leaving asked if he might write to me, which I consented to, but: he was so long writing I never answered the letter, of course he came at once to know why I did not write, I told him because I had too many other boys who I had to write to. (Let me say right here, I never flirted with any one. Always had too much self respect.) My correspondents were mostly real war friends.

Eldridge Marcellus Foster was born in Amelia Co[unty] April 16th, 1841.

Mr. Foster came often to see me, he had hired an old Packet Boat, which went up and down the James river canal from Richmond to Clifton Forge. he bought and sold goods until he made sufficient money to go in business for himself. as soon as he saw his way clear he asked me to marry him, saying he had done himself a great injustice by not asking sooner — but: he could not until he had some means by which to support us.

I kept him waiting three weeks before I consented to marry him, he was so insisting before I decided, I told him he would have to wait until I was fully decided, or not come any more, he answered in great earnestness and very humbly I'll wait forever before I'll take no.' This settled it. I decided then and there to share his lot through life. I did not tell him then but waited until his next visit before we became engaged.

On June 7th 1866 we were married in the dear old home, having twelve couples to wait on us, and everything good to eat. Mother gave us what was then called a big wedding. On leaving home my dear old Mamy kissed and wept tears of sorrow on my hands, (which has never dried.) blessed memory. Daddy Lee stood at the gate, handkerchief in hand, his head white with frost of many years. Thus I left my childhood home, for a new life. I am grateful yet, for all the love which was show[er]ed on me.

We went to Jetersville, Amelia [County] where Mr. Foster was doing business, we were there nearly two years. My mother's health was failing

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she was anxious to have us come home. So, Mr. Foster decided to try farming, which proved to be a great mistake financially, but: his health was better on the farm. It was there God gave us our first child.

Annie Virginia — Born Oct 27th 1867. She was a joy and blessing to us all through her short life. She became a member of Grace St Baptist Church at the age of twelve. Died in her eighteenth year of Typhoid fever. She had no fear of death, as she drew near the end we knelt beside her bed while her dear father offered a beautiful prayer, thanking God that He had loaned us such a jewel, and committing her into His hands who is too wise to make mistakes. Virgie was in the graduating class of the Richmond High School which was closed an hour sooner in order that her teachers and class mates could attend her funeral which Dr. Hatcher said there was not a dry eye in the church. She was beloved by all who knew her.

We were still at the old home when Alta came to us on June 5th 1869 She is my constant companion, and gives her time in christian work. May God spare her many years in His service.

Eldridge Robertson Foster was born in July 9th 1871 his coming brought untold joy to his parents, he was large and handsome, loving and obedient. We moved into Richmond Oct 1st 1876 Eldridge was stricken with Dipthera and died Oct 8th sent back to the dear old [home] to be buried. Our hearts were crushed at his going. We never ceased to mourn his loss, his hat and suit of clothes were buried with his grandfather. The last thing he said was 'Mama kiss me good night — I am not afraid to die but [would] rather stay with you.'

Mary was born in Chesterfield Nov 2nd 18[74] She was fair, with golden curls, just a ray of sunshine to cheer and bless but: alas God called her home when ten months old. She and Eldridge were buried in the family graveyard.

Your dear mother Irene came to us Jan 22nd 1877 She was the happiest child I ever saw, could scarcely pronounce a word distinctly until eight years old — yet: everybody loved her because she was so gentle and happy. I trust her dear life will be spared to see you useful christians.

Katherine was born in Nov. 28, 1879

She enjoyed every day of her short life., was married to Dr. J. C. Motley only lived ten months after her marriage, her death cast a gloom over everyone who knew her. Peace, blessed peace to her memory.

James Gordon was born April 13th 18[82]

Our fondest hope was renewed to have a son to care for us in our declining years. but: not for long for he too passed away at fourteen months of age. Gods sustaining grace was given to us in great measure as our loved

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ones were gathered home.

Your grandfather was a christian gentleman all through life, he lost the use of his limbs for a year before the end came — during that year he never wanted me to leave him, would hold and kiss my hand day and night, The greatest joy of my life was his unchanging love for me, he had kept all of my letters, one of my wedding gloves, which he requested to be put in hand after death, he also wanted some of the flowers (orange blossoms) pinned on his coat. Thus ended our long happy union, but his presence abides with me yet, and governs my life. The time will not be long before I join him in the Home of many mansions. When my time comes

‘I want no moaning at the bar  
When I put out to sea’ only may it be said,

‘She hath done what she could.’ I shall leave you in Gods hands, with the blessed hope of meeting you again beyond the River.

*Grandmother  
Natural Bridge August 1918  
In my seventy fourth year.*