

Hiram Eastman – Civil War Deserter

On April 17, 1861, the Prince William County Cavalry was ordered into service by the governor of Virginia. As this had been rumored for weeks, it was not a surprise to anyone. All members were ordered to be at Brentsville April the 23 or be represented by a substitute. The following enlistees included many of the county's most well known citizens:

Captain W. W. Thornton	Lucien Alexander Davis	Samuel S. F. Davis
Hiram F. Eastman	Thomas Price Ellicott	Maurice Evans
Matthew Finegan	John Gaines	J. M. Graham
George W. Herndon	John H. Herndon	Henry Holland
Meredith Horton	Lucien L. Omeare	David T. Norman
Benjamin P. Mitchell	James W. Peters	James B. Pridmore
Thomas W. Marders	William H. Selecman	Benjamin Dyer Merchant
L. A. Marsteller	John R. Jewell	Charles E. Keys
Robert H. King	Colin K. Lambert	James E. Larkin
Absalom T. Lynn	George H. Lynn	John H. Lynn
Leroy W. Lynn	Milton Lynn	Richard B. L. Macrae
James M. Shirley	John R. Shirley	Thomas S. Shirley
Thomas O. Thornton	Charles H. Weedon	John Vivian Towles
Robert C. Towles	A. M. Walls	William T. Washington
Peter Thomas Weedon	Charles Donahoe	

Hiram F. Eastman was a member of Company A of the 4th Virginia Cavalry in the Confederate Army. Similar to many other privates, not much has been written about him in the official records of the Civil War. In fact, there is only one line about him in the entire regimental series, which states "Hiram F. Eastman, Company A, enlisted 4/23/61, deserter."

Just off route 234 in the Dumfries area sits a beautiful piece of land, known today as the Four Seasons Adult Community. Most old timers will tell you the community was built on the old Bailey Farm. This is true, but before the Bailey family farmed this land, it had been settled by two New York families named Eastman and Calender.

In the early 1850s along with a great influx of other northerners, these two families found their way to Prince William County, built houses, and started to ingrain themselves within the community. In just a few short years, their lives began to change in a way for which they had not bargained. The mood in Prince William was changing, and most late coming northerners were at a loss as to what they should do. Most, but not Hiram, thought it wise to join a Virginia Militia even though their hearts seemed to mirror the views of the future enemy. A relative, only referred to as Russell, had joined the Prince William Cavalry over a year before the war had started and, in April 1861, had been ordered to join the secession army. Hiram decided that, for the good of the family, he would join the 4th Virginia as a substitute to replace Russell. He left the farm and made his way to Brentsville where he, along with about 50 others, enlisted April 23, 1861, in Captain William Willis Thornton's Company A of the 4th Virginia Cavalry.

Russell was later informed that even though he had used a substitute, his militia unit was being called into active service, and he would have to leave within a week. He immediately decided to leave Virginia rather than join the Confederate forces. He left at night with the hope of reaching Washington City a place of safety. By putting his clothes on a raft and swimming Occoquan Bay, pushing the raft before him, he escaped from Prince William County. On hearing of Russell's escape, Hiram decided that he, too, would desert when a chance presented itself.

Capt. Thornton was ordered to Fairfax Court House to prepare for an attack. On the night of May 31, 1861, the 4th was ordered into action to confront the approaching 2nd US Cavalry. This appears to be the only action Hiram Eastman saw in his short tenure in the Confederate Army. After this one skirmish, Hiram, along with the rest of Company A, was sent to the lower part of Prince William at Camp Scott near Occoquan to patrol the Potomac from Occoquan to Dumfries. The following is from a letter written by Hiram to his sister, telling of his escape.

“Once more I have the liberty and opportunity to write you. We have seen rather serious times in Old Virginia, during the last three months, though, as yet, our family have not suffered particularly. I was sent down to the river to withdraw the guard. Leaving my horse, I walked about three miles to where they were stationed, and when they had gone, went out into a field where some Negroes were at work, and ordered them to follow me. We went into a fish house and took out a boat, which, when put in the water, leaked faster than I could bail with a large pail. We then went in search of old clothes, and finally succeeded in caulking it pretty well. One Negro got in with me and we started on our voyage with nothing except two pieces of board we found on the shore. We succeeded in this way very well for a mile or so, when there came up a gale and we were obliged to go ashore again. We laid down for an hour, and then started again. This time we got along better, and finally landed five miles above, this side of Occoquan Bay, about one o’clock A.M. We spent the rest of the night in a field, under a shock of rye, out of the rain. In the morning again took up the line of March, and walking fifteen miles to Accotink, where I arrived about eleven o’clock, without having had anything to eat since six o’clock of the morning before.”

“You can imagine my condition after going without food so long, and walking and working as I had. We are all doing well enough at present, however, so you need feel no more anxiety on our account. We left the crops harvested, with no one to draw them in or thresh them. I had no opportunity to go home after clothes or anything, and am in rather destitute circumstances; but that I don’t mind any, as I am now getting wages enough for my wants.”

Not much is known of what happened to Hiram Eastman after his desertion and escape from Virginia other than he joined the Union Army and served in the 11th Regiment, New York Cavalry. There is no record of Hiram’s returning to Prince William after the war. In fact, only the family cemetery and a beautiful 200 year old tree remain as acknowledgements of the old Eastman Place.

Ron Turner