

Samuel R. Watkins



Samuel Rush Watkins was born on June 26, 1839 at Mount Pleasant, Tennessee. His parents were Frederick Henry Watkins and Penelope E. Williams. He received his formal education at Jackson College in Columbia. He originally enlisted in the “Bigby Greys” of the 3rd Tennessee Infantry in Mount Pleasant, Tennessee, but transferred shortly thereafter to the First Tennessee Infantry, Company H (the “Maury Greys”) in the spring of 1861.

Watkins faithfully served throughout the duration of the War, participating in the battles of Shiloh, Corinth, Perryville, Murfreesboro, Shelbyville, Chattanooga, Chickamauga; and his account of the chaos in the woods along Brotherton Road on September 19th stands as one of the best accounts of the battle by any participant, Missionary Ridge, Resaca and the remaining battles of the Atlanta Campaign. He fought at Franklin and the battle of Nashville. Of the 120 men who enlisted in “Company H” in 1861, Sam Watkins was one of only seven alive when General Joseph E. Johnston’s Army of Tennessee surrendered to General William Tecumseh Sherman in North Carolina April, 1865. Of the 1,200 men who fought in the First Tennessee, only 65 were left to be paroled on that day.

He married Virginia Jane “Jennie” Mayes in 1865 and had eight children.

Sam R. Watkins is today one of the most well-known common soldiers in Civil War history. Despite his low rank, Watkins has found immortality through his 1882 memoir *Company Aytch*. “*Co.Aytch*” is considered to be one of the greatest memoirs ever written by a soldier of the field. Originally published as a serial newspaper column from 1881 to 1882 in *The Columbia Herald*, his stories were collected and printed in book form in 1882. The charming prose captures the experience of the common private soldier, from the hardships of camp life to the horrors of battle, the camaraderie of a unit to the loss of a brother, the pride in one’s state to the devastation of defeat. Sam’s writing style is quite engaging and skillfully captures the pride, misery, glory, and horror experienced by the common foot soldier. Watkins is often featured and quoted in Ken Burns’ 1990 documentary titled *The Civil War*. A sampling of his writing shows what he endured at the “Dead Angle” at Kennesaw:

It was one of the hottest and longest days of the year, and one of the most desperate and determinedly resisted battles fought during the whole war. Our regiment was stationed on an angle, a little spur of the mountain...and was subject to the enfilading fire of forty pieces of artillery of the Federal batteries. It seemed fun for the guns of the whole Yankee army to play upon this point.

Well, on the fatal morning of June 27th...as the sun began to mount toward the zenith, everything became quiet, and no sound was heard save a peckerwood on a neighboring tree, tapping on its old trunk, trying to find a worm for his dinner. We all knew it was but the dead calm that precedes the storm. On the distant hills we could plainly see officers dashing about hither and thither, and the Stars and Stripes moving to and fro, and we knew the Federals were making preparations for the mighty contest. We could hear...the rumbling sound of heavy guns, and the distant tread of a marching army, as a faint roar of the coming storm, which was soon to break the ominous silence with the sound of conflict, such as was scarcely ever before heard on this earth.

It seemed that the archangel of Death stood and looked on with outstretched wings, while all the earth was silent, when all at once a hundred guns from the Federal line opened upon us, and for

more than an hour they poured their solid and chain shot, grape and shrapnel right upon this...point, defended by our regiment alone, when, all of a sudden, our pickets jumped into our works and reported the Yankees advancing, and almost at the same time a solid line of blue coats came up the hill. I discharged my gun, and happening to look up, there was the beautiful flag of the Stars and Stripes flaunting right in my face, and I heard John Branch, of the Rock City Guards, commanded by Captain W. D. Kelly, who were next Company H, say, "Look at that Yankee flag; shoot that fellow; snatch that flag out of his hand!"

My pen is unable to describe the scene of carnage and death that ensued in the next two hours. Column after column of Federal soldiers were crowded upon that line...but no sooner would a regiment mount our works than they were shot down or surrendered...

Sam Watkins died on July 20, 1901 at the age of sixty-two in his home in the Ashwood Community. He was buried with full military honors by the members of the Leonidas Polk Bivouac, United Confederate Veterans, in the cemetery of the Zion Presbyterian Church near Mount Pleasant, Tennessee.

Sources: *Co. Aytch* by Sam R. Watkins
Sam Watkins, (National Park Service)
Find a Grave Memorial
American Battlefield Trust