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WALKER JOHN DECKER
FARMER, SOLDIER, AND MINISTER OF
THE GOSPEL

By
John Laws Decker

A Paper
Presented to the History Faculty
of the
University of Richmond
in
Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor
of Arts in History
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Affectionately
dedicated to
those who yet proudly bear
his name, ever faithful to the best he
taught them - His children.

I

Farmer's Son

1

On a summer afternoon in 1839 a crowded and dirty
2 wagon might have been seen moving westward through the quiet town of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Another family was moving from the overcrowded, unfertile farm flats of New Jersey to the fresh, black land of Spotsylvania County southwest of the Rappahanⁿock river in northeastern Virginia. There were five children, ranging from a girl of nine years to a baby in the mother's arms. John Decker, the father, was a tall, dark, bearded man--the leader of the family.

The trip had been long and tedious, but complaining voices were few because the family was used to work and difficulties. They were farm stock not far removed from ancestors of Holland, Scotland, and England. John was the son of a Dutch immigrant, Richard Decker, who had come to the United States as a young man. His wife, Mary Kirkiff, had lived in this country for a longer time. John, the first of their five children, was born September 12, 1807. He was the only one of the group who carried on the family name for of the other two

1. According to an interview with Mrs. A. T. Harris, Fredericksburg, Virginia (hereafter cited as Harris), they lived at their first home two years. They moved to their next one in 1841 according to the Spotsylvania Deed Book, Therefore arrived in 1839.

2. See pp. 2 and 3.

boys, Nelson died young and George had no male descen-
dants.³

At the age of 22 John married 21-year-old Letitia Budd Walker of New Jersey. Her father, John Walker, was the only son of Sir Isaac Walker and Prudence Matthews. Sir Isaac came from England as a young man and died fighting for the colonies in the battle of Bunker Hill. Prudence had been kidnapped by pirates from an excursion boat off her native Scotland. She had been sold as an indentured servant to a wealthy Philadelphia family. While serving there she met and married Sir Isaac who⁴ bought her freedom for her.

Their son, John Walker, married Isabelle Richardson on September 1, 1803. Their daughter, Letitia, was the third of six children; she was born on November 1, 1808.⁵

John Decker and Letitia were married on February 19, 1829, at Newton, New Jersey,⁶ where they settled down to a life of farming. Not much is known of their early life except that the young couple were in very limited circumstances. They had to work hard and long to make ends meet. Any aristocracy that their blood may have borne was soon washed away by the stains of plain dirt farming.

Before they decided to move southward five little ones were born. Caroline, born in July of 1830, was

3. Harris.

4. Ibid.

5. Fredericksburg cemetery.

6. John Decker Family Bible (hereafter cited as Decker Bible).

followed by Nelson, Marshall Elton, Prudence Ann, and Mary Ann. Mollie, as this last baby was nicknamed, was born in December, 1838,⁷ so that she was only eight or nine months old when the family made the long journey into the South.

What brought the decision to move cannot be determined; probably it was just the old urge to better their position in life that brought them to seek new lands. The trip down could have been made by train to Washington, river boat to Belle Plains on Potomac Creek, and thence by stage coach to Fredericksburg.⁸ Yet it is hardly likely that a poor man such as John Decker could have footed the bill for six persons in this manner. Furthermore, farm animals and equipment had to be brought. The usual way for families to move in those days was by wagon⁹ and thus it is probable that a wagon brought the Deckers to their promised land.

John Decker must have visited Virginia in the summer of 1838. It is said that at that time he visited Lexington and considered buying lands where Washington and Lee University now stands. He had started out interested in mining and mineral wealth.¹⁰ Probably finding the land too expensive for his meager purse,

7. Ibid.

8. Interview with Mr. Charles Chesley, Fredericksburg, Virginia (hereafter cited as C. Chesley).

9. Interview with Mr. George W. Lewis, Spotsylvania County, Virginia (hereafter cited as Lewis).

10. Interview with Dr. Henry W. Decker, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter cited as H. W. Decker).

he turned northward and changed his ambitions back to farming and timberlands. Thus he came to Spotsylvania. The Kishpaughs and the Harrises, northerners too, already lived in the neighborhood.¹¹ He probably rented Broadie at that time for a man would be foolish to bring his family into a strange country with no farm definitely assured them.

The rough log building into which they moved has been replaced by a larger frame house which still stands in a nearly deserted pasture 12 miles west of Fredericksburg. Known throughout the region as Broadie, the homestead was then but a part of what it is now. Probably nothing but the cabin itself was standing although there may have been a shed for cooking and another for the stable. The Deckers were renting the place so that they might have a chance to see and learn the country before they bought a home.

The first weeks were busy ones. There was plenty to do making ready for the coming winter. The family had little time to think of anything but their sustenance. The father tended to be an affable, changeable man although these traits were less evident as he grew older.¹² In his younger days he had been something of a roustabout, but this was dimming now. Work combined with his wife's firmly guiding hand had toned him down

11. Harris.

12. H. W. Decker.

somewhat. Letitia was almost puritanical in some ways. She would not associate with or be near anyone she might think crude or vulgar. She did not like parties. In all probability she was not very sociable. The Deckers were never considered the friendliest people in the neighborhood; this manner came largely from Letitia's austere attitude.¹³

In spite of this spirit toward the outside world, the seven persons were closely bound into the warm heart of the family. In later years they were known for the way they stuck together through thick and thin; this spirit was born and nurtured before the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. The parents were entirely devoted to their children--determined to give them every possible advantage.

Both parents were Baptists and in Spotsylvania they found themselves surrounded by Baptist churches. If they were able to go to church during the first months and years, they probably visited various churches deciding upon their preference. They did not officially join a church until August of 1843 when they became members of Piney Branch, a half ~~of a~~ mile west of Broadie on the Catharpin road; it was known in the neighborhood as the Old Yellow Church.¹⁴

Broadie was their home through the winter and

13. Harris, H. W. Decker.

14. Harris.

15. Piney Branch Minutes, Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

summer and on into the winter of 1840. John must have taken in the crops that fall and decided to move before the next season began. The first land he bought in Virginia was purchased in February, 1841.¹⁶ Familiarly known as the "New Store tract", it lay in the corner of the Catharpin and the Orange Plank Road, noted for Jackson's famous flank movement at the Battle of Chancellorsville some twenty or more years later. The tract contained 548 acres of fields and timberland and cost the Deckers \$2,193. The purchase from James P. Charters was made largely on credit and those first years were the only ones during which the family was ever in debt.¹⁷

The shift into the new home was made during the winter. The "New Store", as the house was called, was right in the corner of the two roads and at one time was an old inn or store of some description. It was a much finer and larger place than Broadie. There were five large rooms downstairs as well as two smaller ones. The second floor was just a raised portion in the center with only two rooms in it. There was a large porch with shelves around it still lasting from the days of the tavern.¹⁸ The out-houses were more numerous and included slave quarters and a milk house. This little, crudely shingled, frame structure is still standing at the crossing of the two roads; the only original thing on the present property.

16. Spotsylvania Deed Book.

17. Ibid.

18. Harris.

It was into this home on the very edge of the Spotsylvania wilderness that a baby boy was born on the morning of May 25, 1841.¹⁹ Dr. Sanford Chancellor, a member of the highly respected Chancellor family of the county, was the attending physician.²⁰ Walker John Decker was born in one of the downstairs rooms of the New Store.²¹ He was named, of course, for his mother and his father.

The earliest days are void of record or recollection; we can only imagine how Walk, as the family was soon calling him, grew up. His family's fortunes were rising, but very slowly. At this time it is doubtful if John Decker held any slaves although he may have had a few, especially house servants.

Two years later in 1843 the next son was born.²² That summer Letitia decided she wanted to see her parents in New Jersey, and preparations for the trip were made. She took her infant son with her riding by stagecoach to Quantico where she got a boat for Washington. On the boat she had some trouble finding her baggage, and a man aided her in finding them and getting her arranged in her room. He admired the baby and Letitia told him that the child had not yet been named.

"Why don't you name him for me?" the stranger asked. Letitia asked his name and learned it was

19. Decker Bible
20. H. W. Decker
21. Harris
22. Decker Bible

Richard Calvin Chandler. Her son was named Richard
23
Calvin Decker.

The young mother must have been attractive looking for another gentleman spoke to her about her pretty hair.

"It would bring a good price," the man said musingly.

"Where could I sell it?" Letitia asked with a note of eagerness in her voice.

"I'll buy it now if you really wish to cut it off," the gentleman said. Straightened as her circumstances were, Letitia decided to sell her hair to help with the expenses of the trip. The hair was cut off then and there and sold to the stranger.²⁴ History does not record if it was Mr. Chandler who purchased the hair although that seems likely.

When she arrived home on the train, another gentleman gave her a ride in his buggy to her father's farm. Her father came to the gate saying as she began to get down, "Lady, let me hold your child." He had not even recognized his own daughter! The four years of toil in the South and the loss of her hair must have changed her a great deal. Beauty parlors were scarce in those days.²⁵

We have no record of her return journey although she was certainly back by the fourth Sunday in August

23. Interview with Mrs. Perry O. Thompson, Fredericksburg, Virginia (hereafter cited as Thompson).

24. Thompson, Harris

25. Ibid.

for it was then that she and her husband were received into the membership of the Piney Branch Baptist Church of the Goshen Association.²⁶ They were received by letter evidently from their home church in New Jersey. Pastor Joseph A. Billingsley welcomed them in the name of the congregation. He is an important man in this story for no other person seems to have held more influence over the Deckers and over son Walker in particular during the early days.²⁷

It is worthy of note that the year in which the Deckers joined Piney Branch was the first year that Mr. Billingsley had preached there; his ministry had started earlier in 1843. Mr. J. W. Herndon is recorded²⁸ as the moderator and minister before that time. This probably means that the new family in the community joined directly under the personal influence²⁹ of Mr. Billingsley as soon as he became pastor.

They seem to have immediately become an important part of the church. The records show that not more than four or five men attended the average church meetings, yet all through the minutes, now extant, John Decker was absent from very few of these. In November of the year he became a member Mr. Decker was asked to cite a Richard Bawling to appear before the church to answer a complaint that he had indulged in too much

26. Piney Branch Minutes.

27. Taylor, Virginia Baptist Ministers, Fourth Series, p. 188.

28. Piney Branch Minutes.

29. Ibid.

"ardent spirits".³⁰ This was a task that was not dealt out lightly in the early churches and giving it to a new member showed considerable confidence in him.

Rev. Billingsley must have trusted his young member considerably. The Pastor was noted for his strong feeling on the matter of intemperance. This will be noted later in the case of the Test churches splitting from the Goshen Association, but Mr. Billingsley was a strong believer along those lines all his life.³¹ John Decker must have given up any inclination toward the drinking of his younger days to have held the respect of such a man.

Walker grew up in a strong religious atmosphere. We have no mention of daily worship in the home but this would seem probable. The father steadily assumed more responsibility in the church. In 1845 he was sent to the Goshen Association meeting as a representative of the Old Yellow Church.³² This was something of an honor since only three church members from each place of worship could attend. Again in 1847 in the company of Mr. Billingsley, he attended the meetings.³³

Carrie, the oldest of the children, was probably away from home going to school; she was fifteen. She could not be taught at home for her father was a hard-working man with no time to spare and her mother was

30. Ibid.

31. Taylor, loc. cit.

32. Minutes of the Goshen Association Meeting (hereafter cited as Goshen), September, 1845.

33. Ibid., September, 1847.

34
uneducated. It was John Decker's aim to give her the best education he could afford so that she would be able to instruct the younger children when they were ready
35
for school.

The month after John Decker returned from his first association meeting his eighth child was born. Lucy
36
Isabelle Decker was born on October 25 at the New Store.

Records are few and far between during this period. In all probability there was nothing of interest to record. It was a humdrum, even dull, life. The crops had to be planted and then harvested. Fredericksburg was probably the height of the children's dreams of a place to visit. Church life was their only form of recreation; their only opportunity to see or visit with the neighbors. Marsh and Nelson worked with their father and his growing groups of slave hands. Carrie was away much of the winter. The younger children helped around the house, and so it went day into day, and month into month.

On one occasion callers came down in the evening to visit Letitia and her husband. There were fairly near neighbors all around them. Others lived up on the Orange Turnpike and it was from that busy pathway that these visitors came. Letitia had heard stories of the Turnpike and she did not like them. It was busy with wagons and teams hauling wheat from the Valley of Virginia to Fredericksburg and the Potomac. Inns and

34. Harris; Letitia B. Brockman, Lahore, Virginia (hereafter cited as Brockman); Spotsylvania Deed Book.

35. H. W. Decker

36. Decker Bible

taverns were frequent and the boisterous living of the teamsters and their men was notorious.

It was quite an event to have visitors and, for all of her austere manner, Letitia must have been honored. As her guests were leaving though, She said quite casually that they must never expect a visit from her on the turnpike.³⁷ There was too much whiskey and careless living there to suit her moralistic fancy. It is not remembered whether this blunt outburst cut the Deckers' calling list, but it certainly must have done so. The best people were known to live on the Plank Road.³⁸

Their neighbors and friends included the Bullards,³⁹ the Chancellors, the Bowmans, and the Perrys. It was to the Perry place that the children remember going "to borrow a chunk of fire."⁴⁰ Matches were a luxury, and fires had to be steadily maintained.

Marsh and Nelson as boys went to a private school at Chancellorsville called the Pettits' school. At one time during their life they were also taught by Mr. Melzi Chancellor who was a respected minister in the area;⁴¹ he served many years as the clerk of Spotsylvania County.

During Walk's earliest days he remembers a case of scarlet fever. Dr. Chancellor, by this time established

37. Harris.

38. H. W. Decker/.

39. Ibid.

40. Harris.

41. Ibid.

as the family doctor, took care of him and he came through with no serious after affects. The date of this sickness is uncertain, but he was probably three years⁴² old.

As a child Walk lived a happy outdoor life - one that fitted him for the arduous of the terrible war he was soon to live through. He recalls a great oak tree which is still standing a little way down the Plank Road from his house. The children played through its low branches and swung onto the road from its limbs. It was covered with a grapevine which always brought⁴³ more fun and stomach aches in the early fall.

When he was a little older, one day he was playing "horsey" with Dick. The boys took turns riding on each other's backs around the first floor of the old inn. He was on Dick's back when the younger boy stumbled and slipped down. Walker fell over a door jamb and broke his nose. It was a bad break and the evidence of the⁴⁴ fall was plainly visible all through his life. The slight disfiguration spoiled his profile, but it was not too noticeable from directly in front of him.

In the early summer of 1848, the proud father and mother had the honor of seeing their oldest son and second daughter baptized together by Mr. Billingsley. The ceremony took place in Mott's Run, a little creek

42. H. W. Decker.

43. Paper written in childhood by Walker John Decker (hereafter cited as Decker).

44. Letter from Decker to Mary S. Chesley (hereafter cited as Chesley), April 7, 1886.

emptying into the Rappahanⁿock and bordering property which the father was soon to own. They were taken into the church books along with his father; from then on in the book wherever John Decker's name appears, his son's, Marsh, stands beside it.⁴⁵

Just a month after this event, the last addition to the family was born. Emily Irene Decker came into the world at the New Store when Walk was seven years old.⁴⁶ That made nine children in all; a fine family it was, indeed! Little wonder that John and his good wife worked so hard to make things better for them.

In the fall of that year, the stout, gray walls of the New Store looked down upon one of the happiest days and evenings of the Deckers' life there. Carrie, the eldest child, had returned from school engaged, and now she was getting married. John W. Goodwin of Orange County was wedded to the eighteen-year-old bride in her father's home.⁴⁷ Probably Mr. Billingsley performed the nuptials although there is no record of this. Sister Ann, just twelve years old, was the proud and happy bridesmaid.⁴⁸

It was a big wedding and everybody in the neighborhood was invited. Among the guests were the Chancellors, the Bullards, the Chartterses, the Applers, and the Purvises. Supper was served to the crowd; the barbecue

45. Piney Branch Minutes.

46. Decker Bible.

47. Orange County Marriage Certificates, 1848.

48. Harris.

dinner made a big impression on Dick. He said that it "was no hand-out affair". Pink and white rock candy topped off the "tearing down supper". The newlyweds stayed at the New Store that evening and the next day went up to Orange to begin their long and happy life together.⁴⁹

Behind their happiness was a strange note of family discord. Slight though it was, it was there. Letitia did not want to have a big party with all the trimmings. That was not her idea of a good send-off, but Mr. Decker insisted on the gay occasion because the neighbors all around had been so nice to the children. They had been entertained often and widely with no chance to repay the courtesies.⁵⁰ The wedding supper and party gave them a chance to be hosts and hostesses.

Carrie's wedding must have been something of a disappointment to the father for he had carefully planned the best education possible for her so that she might teach the younger ones. No sooner was she home than she was married.

By this time the family's fortunes were definitely on the upswing. John by this time probably owned about 12 negro field hands.⁵¹ He was aiming at what seems to us a crude and cruel plan. All the field hands were big women which he had purchased at the Fredericksburg

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

mart with the definite idea of raising his own negroes. His stand on slavery was that it was all right except for the selling and breaking up of families it involved. He determined to raise his own families and keep them unbroken on his place. He had one negro woman who was very mean and easy to anger. Ellen, as she was known, refused an opportunity to work in the house and demanded field work; this started John on the idea of female hands. Ellen did not prove a good worker even in the field and so she was sold - the only negro the Deckers ever sold.⁵²

Letitia was violently opposed to slaving but was forced to recognize it because they could not survive economically without it. She took pity on Ellen, but received only curses in reply for her attempted kindnesses. When the woman was sold, the Deckers kept her young son, Henry, and made something of a household friend out of him. He slept in the kitchen and did odd jobs around the house.⁵³

Henry got along finely with the children of the family. He, Walk, Dick, Mollie, and Ann were steady companions for years as children. They played together and went to school together. Henry, the colored boy, was the boon companion of the two boys.⁵⁴

Mr. Billingsley made a deep impression on young

52. H. W. Decker.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

Walk. He spoke of him often in later life and wrote a beautiful tribute to him.⁵⁵ Walk, in his later days as a minister, used to love to tell how he often had to "hang onto the seat to keep from sliding straight to hell when Brother Billingsley was exhorting."⁵⁶ As a youngster he attended a revival service, better known in those days as protracted meetings; it was under the guidance of Mr. Billingsley and the baptizing, which always follows such a meeting, burned itself into the young boy's mind. A few days later his father caught him getting ready to baptize young Henry in the neighboring Po river. John nipped this desire in the bud and soundly scolded Walk for getting such notions while explaining to him the seriousness of baptism and the fact that only ministers baptized people. This is the first recorded ministerial instinct Walker showed.⁵⁷

Walker remembered his dad as being very changeable, sometimes stern and unyielding; on other occasions, gentle and forgiving. Never did he recall his father as a happy or carefree man.⁵⁸ John Decker was showing his advancing years as he settled down into church life and under the burdens of a large family. Through it all he proved himself a smart and capable business man.⁵⁹ Starting out with very little, the family never

55. Taylor, loc. cit.

56. H. W. Decker.

57. Eleanor M. Decker, Lahore, Virginia (hereafter cited as E. M. Decker).

58. John W. Decker, White Plains, New York (hereafter cited as J. W. Decker).

59. Surmise from later records of sales and purchases (Spotsylvania Deed Book) and final will (Spotsylvania Will Book, 1878).

felt the pinching hand of want except in the cruel days toward the end and after the Civil War.

Walker remembered watching the great burdened wagons of the turnpike. The busy tide of traffic must have seemed marvelous to the little fellow who lived on a much quieter road within sight of the gaping wilderness. He also remembered a churn they had at the New Store which was pulled by a dog. When regular churning day came around, Letitia's appearance with the cream would send the dog into hasty retreat. He never failed to hide under the big porch and it was always Walk's task to go in, get him out, and hitch him⁶⁰ up.

In 1851 when Walk was ten years old, the first real sadness struck the family. On June 20 Nelson, in the prime of his youth at 19 years of age, passed away.⁶¹ He had a comparatively mild case of dysentery and died rather suddenly.⁶² It must have been a severe blow to the family group, and we can be sure the father missed his aiding hand in the fields. Nelson was buried right on the place for it was not until years later that his brother purchased a lot in Fredericksburg cemetery to which his body was moved. A snowball bush grew over his grave, and the spot where he was buried is still visible today.

60. H. W. Decker.

61. Fredericksburg cemetery.

62. Harris.

Walker and some of his younger sisters first attended the Roger's Pine schoolhouse which was half-way up the Plank Road toward Chancellorsville. The schoolhouse stood not three hundred yards from the famous bivouac point where General Robert E. Lee last saw his faithful lieutenant, General "Stonewall" Jackson. The maestro of the little school was an eccentric gentleman by the name of Tom Downer. All that is remembered of him was his proficiency with a Jew's harp which was his constant companion.

Walk found school rather easy; the three R's came to him without much struggle, but he did not pass the elementary stages until much later. For instance, some of his writing at a slightly later date shows that his spelling and vocabulary were fairly good while his ideas on punctuation were nil. It was not under Downer's genial care that he grasped any inspiration to learn more.

It was here in his boyhood days that Walk fell in love with little Mollie Ferneyhough. She seems to be the only one he cared about all through the Civil War and for several years after that. It was his greatest pleasure to study out of the same book with Mollie; it happened more than once for books were scarce. Mollie lived at Broadie, the Deckers' home during the first year or so, and so Walk had plenty of chances to go home with

63. Harris.

64. Letter from Decker to Letitia B. Decker, Probably January 2, 1864.

her and carry her books--the carrying of a girl's books was something of an honor in those days. It was a sign to the aspiring young lover that all was not lost.

Walker did not assume his full share of the duties on the farm during his school days. He kept his hands rather white while Marsh worked fairly hard. ⁶⁶ Of course, none of them had back-breaking labor to carry for the slaves did most of the work. Walker told in later life of going out barefooted after the cattle on some of the cold and frosty mornings of early winter. He remembered standing on the spot of ground where the cow had been lying to keep his feet off the half frozen earth and also to warm them up a little before he started home.

One evening when the sun was nearly set, Walk and Dick went out together to get the cows. They got about two hundred yards into the woods when all of a sudden the most inhuman noises broke loose from the foliage of the trees overhead. It was like some terrible scream or groan. Both boys promptly took to their heels heading homeward. Walk was considerably in advance of his younger brother who was slowed down by a stone bruise. Walk made it all the way home hollering constantly, "Help, father, help! Run, Dick, run!" Upon parental investigation Marsh was discovered in the tree branches enjoying ⁶⁷ his little joke hugely.

65. H. W. Decker.

66. Ibid.

67. Brockman.

The family's thrifty ways and hard-won crops were beginning to show dividends. Mr. Decker bought the Redd place which was adjacent to the New Store tract on October 2, 1851. The 338-acre addition which included a small log cabin known as the "Cottage" cost \$800⁶⁸ which was paid in cash at the time of the purchase.

Sometime during the ensuing two years, John Decker exhibited his business acumen by skillfully avoiding a pitfall into which many southern landowners were to fall. His decision was nearly forced upon him by a bad epidemic of diphtheria among his family and his hands. Mose of the children of the female negro workers died because of lack of proper attention. There was no way aid could be gotten to them. The district's one doctor, Chancellor, was probably busy morning, noon, and night. Ten or twelve negro children are said to have died in⁶⁹ the poorly equipped, little slave quarters.

Added to this loss of life, John Decker saw the coming struggle over slavery looming in the offing. His slaves had been far from profitable when costs and deaths were added in. He and his wife, always a source of strength and good sense, made their decision to sell the workers and put the money into land. Mr. Decker seemed⁷⁰ to have a powerful land hunger eating within him. Wherever a patch of woodland reared its green head in Spotsylvania

68. Spotsylvania Deed Book; 1851.

69. Harris.

70. H. W. Decker.

County, John Decker was sure to see it and measure it as an investment. He nearly bought the Catherine Furnace tract of a thousand acres or more.⁷¹ Up to the days of the war when the Catherine Furnace Road, a log track in the wilderness, became famous it had been known as the Decker road because it bordered the Decker place.

The plan went through and the slaves were sold except for a few house servants among whom was Henry, the darling of the household. That move meant much to the Deckers later in life.

Walker had diphtheria at the same time. It was a severe case, more than Letitia could handle although she was used to the minor illnesses of the children. Dr. Chancellor, later lecturer on anatomy at the University of Virginia, gave what time and skill he could, and after a very close call, the twelve-year-old boy recovered and was soon his normal self.⁷² From then until long after the prime of life Walk was a completely healthy boy and man. We have recorded only a few cases of colds and flu to hold against his health record. It was a sturdy breed -- that Dutch blood he bore in his veins.

For reasons unknown and unrecorded, the Piney Branch church seems to have shut its doors about this time, the winter of 1853. The references to it stop entirely in the Goshen Association Minutes⁷³ and its own records

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Goshen, 1854.

after 1850 have been lost. This collapse left the Deckers without a church, but with a pastor; Mr. Billingsley stayed in the community. It was "largely through his influence" that Zoan Baptist Church was organized.⁷⁴

The membership was made up of persons from all the surrounding churches such as Salem, Wilderness, and the Old Yellor Church.⁷⁵ They had a church building, poor though it was, even before they were recognized by the Association. It was located on the Orange Turnpike about four miles east of Chancellorsville.

"Two newly constituted churches, Oakland, in Louisa, and Zoan, in Spotsylvania, applied for admission into the Association, and were received in the usual manner..." John Decker was one of the delegates to this, the first meeting at which Zoan was represented, and it was he who took the right hand of fellowship back to the new congregation. Zoan was admitted by the meeting at County Line Church in Caroline County in September 1854.⁷⁶ The family had picked its final church home. ~~for as long as this life shall last.~~

In later life Walk vividly remembered one afternoon in midsummer of 1855. He and his father were grinding an axe on the hand stone at the back of the place when a real estate dealer came out from Fredericksburg to go over the New Store preparatory to selling it.

74. Taylor, op. cit., p. 187.

75. Harris.

76. Goshen, 1854.

Walk asked why they were to sell the only home he had known and received an evasive reply.⁷⁷ The reason for the sale must have been that John Decker simply wanted to get a bigger and better place for his growing family. Through the sale of the old place and the sale of his slaves he had the money with which to buy another home.

By January 1856, the transaction had been completed; the house was to go to a gentleman from New Castle County, Delaware, by the name of Samuel Frazer and to his son-in-law, John R. Alrich, also from New Castle. All the New Store land and part of the Cottage tract went to the two northerners for a total of \$10,500. None of this came in cash; it was secured by several bonds given by Alrich and Frazer.⁷⁸

Moving day in the dead of winter must have been a madhouse for the Deckers. Luckily they were not planning to go far and the transfer could be effected over several days. The new home was the Cottage on the old Redd tract;⁷⁹ later when the narrow guage railroad came through and John Alrich had bought the Cottage and put up a new home, it was called Alrich's Crossing, a name familiar in Spotsylvania today.

The Cottage then was hardly pretentious; two rooms upstairs, two rooms down, a porch on the front and a leanto on the side was all the little log dwelling could boast.⁸⁰

77. H. W. Decker.

78. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1856.

79. Harris.

80. Ibid.

It was only temporary, but, even at that, it is hard to understand how the numerically and singly large Deckers could all get in. Above the kitchen was a loft where the boys probably slept under the eaves. As in many old Virginia homes, the kitchen and this loft were separated from the "big house".⁸¹

Life at the Cottage was not as pleasant as at the New Store. Their lands were not as wide and not as good; they had to fight to bring crops from the ground. That must have been one of their hardest years and certainly it was the last one of any real difficulty, for from then on, they were comfortably and securely housed in their new place which is known in the family as "Gravel Hill".

Mr. Decker must have started dickering for this brand new home soon after they left their ancient inn. In late December of 1856, it had not yet been finished,⁸² but the decision to purchase it was reached. This time they were north of the Orange Turnpike on the very banks of the Rappahanock about five miles above Fredericksburg close to Banks Ford. The home itself was set high on a hill which seems made of solid gravel. It was a good farm, bearing rich lands within its 475 acres, and crossed by several streams, the largest of which was Mott's Run.⁸³

81. Ibid.

82. H. W. Decker.

83. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1857.

The contract with Henry Robinson was closed on the third of January, 1857. The price for the seeming-⁸⁴ly ideal property was \$3,000 in cash. No sooner had the bargain been sealed than the majority of the family moved in even before the house was properly finished. Mr. Decker decided, however, that the cattle had better not be moved during the dead of winter for there was snow on the ground and it was bitterly cold. Walk and Dick were left in charge of the animals on the Cottage place; they were to drive them up in the spring after the roads were cleared and the family was well settled⁸⁵ in the new home.

It must have been a keen disappointment to the young men not to be able to move into the new place; the Cottage was none too attractive. But then they must continue at Downer's school, and it was closer from the Cottage. Also they must have admitted to themselves that it was almost exciting being left out on a farm all alone in the winter time. Henry, the colored boy and their inveterate companion, stayed with them and did⁸⁶ the house work. It proved not too bad, but they were glad to get back to the home fire and table in late March when they made the trip.

The rest of the family which had moved up to Gravel Hill had no easy time of it either. The house

84. Ibid.

85. H. W. Decker.

86. Letter from William S. Chesley to Mary A. Cauthorn, January, 1857.

was unfinished, and they put on the plaster themselves. Their hands were red and sore from the lime and the cold weather through many days of work.⁸⁷ Father John put in an outside staircase to one part of the upstairs for the men. There was no connection to the other part of the second floor which was kept for the ladies. The ladies' staircase went up on the inside. To go from one side of the upstairs to the other, one had to come down⁸⁸ and go up again. This oddity was just another one of John's strange, unexplained ideas.

One side of the house was brick and the other was frame. There was a wide, long porch on both front and back and the kitchen was in the basement. The house was different, to say the least, but it was large and well-equipped for the times. The barn and other smaller sheds around the place were in good condition.

Walker, now sixteen years old, was coming out into full manhood. He began to take his full share of the work. The lack of slaves probably kept the family at it for long hours. Father Decker was lucky indeed to have the three young backs upon which he could lay many of his burdens.

Their work branched out into many fields. Often they found it necessary to visit the Stafford side of the river, and so the boys built a flatboat. Bringing

87. Harris.

88. Interview with Mrs. Florence B. Decker, Richmond, Virginia.

a horse back from the other bank one day, they had a little accident which was to be repeated often in later years. The horse jumped out of the boat and started to swim toward shore. Walk, who had never swum a stroke in his life, leaped in after him in an effort to guide him to the right point. No sooner was he in the water than he found he could swim. He got the horse's bridle, and it was not long before they were back on shore at the home place.⁸⁹ Fording or swimming icy streams with horses and equipment would be "old stuff" to the boys before they were through the bloody days of the Civil War.

That fall (1857) John Decker again represented Zoan at the Goshen meeting -- this time at Mount Carmel in Caroline County. Zoan, Hebron, and Flat Run churches were becoming angered by some of the principles of the Association as a whole at that time.⁹⁰ It was over the matter of liquor and its relation to the church that the struggle started. In the three meetings between 1855 and 1857, those churches had queried constantly concerning matters of doctrine.⁹¹ The dissenters considered the Association's answers far from satisfactory, and the rift was growing. Not only was John Decker the first man to represent Zoan; he was also the last man, for in 1858 the ways of the Test churches and the Association parted.⁹²

89. H. W. Decker.

90. Goshen, 1857.

91. Ibid., 1855-57.

92. Ibid., 1857.

It was in this same autumn that Marsh probably started teaching in the little log school house near Salem Church.⁹³ He was 23 years old and had something of an education -- at least enough to teach the younger children of the neighborhood. Walker, Dick, Mollie, and Em were all students at the school; that is, they attended the school. Walk could not have really had his mind on his work or he would have learned more. Many things were running through his mind those days. He must have been thinking of marriage and a home of his own. Mollie Ferneyhough was still very much eligible so far as he was concerned. It is hard to tell when he first thought of the ministry as a profession. The urge to serve people as their pastor probably came to Walk during the Civil War. It was then that he first saw the suffering and the real meaning of life. As a boy he worked and played hard, in all probability neglecting the use of his brain considerably.

One of Mr. Decker's ventures these days was something of a hauling business. The Gravel Hill place⁹⁵ was always noted for the fine horses they kept, and it proved easy to sell the use of these teams to neighbors who needed hauling done. The boys would do the driving for their father was always dubious about lending horses out of the family. He could trust the boys to handle them well.

93. H. W. Decker.

94. Harris.

95. Lewis.

A contract to carry a large boiler from Fredericksburg to a feeble gold mine west of Catherine's Furnace furnished the boys a stiff task. Four teams of horses were hitched to the wagon and Dick rode the lead horse while Walk drove. As they were approaching a bridge made of planks laid onto crossing timbers, the check line got caught under the tail of one of the second pair. The horses veered to one side and as they moved onto the bridge, they were way off center so that the boards went up on one side and way down on the other. The boiler did not go over, but it was threatening. The horses sensed the danger and were trembling with fear. Walk crawled over the horses backs and released the check line and guided the frightened animals to the center of the bridge. ⁹⁶ The boiler and the teams were saved.

Henry Robinson sold John Decker four or five hundred more acres adjoining the Gravel Hill tract during the winter of 1857 for \$4,375. ⁹⁷ This meant that John held all the land around Mott's Run and it also gave him an old water mill located on the upper reaches of the stream. The purchase also included the house which was to be known as Fountainbleau or Fountain Bluff later in the Decker annals. The new land stretched all the way to Banks Ford along the Rappahanock and gave the family a veritable plantation of over 1,000 acres.

96. H. W. Decker.

97. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1857.

Waste was never a part of the Decker policies, and so soon the old mill was working. Dick and Walk ground corn there in the evening and went to school and worked on the place in the day.⁹⁸ They used to load the mill with corn and then fall asleep; when the corn had run through, the different tone of the grinding stone would awaken them. In less than no time, the fresh ground meal would be stored at the "big house" and the boys would be sound asleep again, but this time in their own beds.⁹⁹

So far as young Walk was concerned, one of the most unpleasant duties at Gravel Hill was selling the farm produce in Fredericksburg. They used to take in vegetables and meal to peddle through the streets. He found the classes with which he traded penny-pinching and mean. It was hard to get your rightful due from them.¹⁰⁰

In 1858 the Test churches finally decided that they could no longer proceed with their association. John Decker, by this time a leader of his congregation, was one of the leaders of the Test Baptists.¹⁰¹ It was their doctrine that a man could not be a member of the Baptist church and taste whiskey at the same time. The Association said that only the most inveterate drunkards should be excluded from the church although they agreed that liquor in the church should be fought constantly with

98. Brockman.

99. H. W. Decker.

100. Ibid.

101. Piney Branch Minutes.

102
moral and religious pressure. At Lower Gold Mine Church in Louisa County, the Association issued the following proclamation in September, 1858: "The reply to Hebron, Flat Run, and Zoan Churches (formerly of this Association, but since the last session of this body having united to form a New Association), is as follows:

" 'We can but regard the course pursued by these churches in the formation of a New Association as irregular, and discourteous to this body....It is not our province to grant them letters of dismissal.... We cannot in any manner whatever fraternize with that body.'"¹⁰³

Thus the Deckers' church broke its ties with the organized Baptists not returning until 1896,¹⁰⁴ long after the last of the Decker family had left the area. The Zoan Church Minutes up to 1894 are missing¹⁰⁵ so that complete records cannot be obtained, and we can only guess that the family grew in importance in the church until they went to the Church Eternal.

In the spring of 1859, Walker reached another milestone when he was baptized in Mott's Run on his father's place by Mr. Billingsley.¹⁰⁶ He was then eighteen years old, considerably more advanced in years than the other children when baptized. This may be accounted for by

102. Goshen, 1857.

103. Ibid., 1858.

104. Ibid., 1896.

105. Letter from Irving G. Mason to John L. Decker, July 12, 1942.

106. Taylor, op. cit., Fifth Series, p. 255.

the fact that he took it more seriously, or it may be accounted for by saying that he did not have any interest in the church or the church work until that time. It seems to me the latter conclusion is more likely.

Sometime during this era, a Mrs. Bowen, who with her husband was boarding at Gravel Hill, gave the place a new name. "Auntie Bee", as the children called her, first saw the house when it was afreshly painted, dull red, and she referred to it as the "Red House".¹⁰⁷ The name stuck, and though a new home now stands on the spot, a gray-painted building, it is still often called the Red House. In the narrative it will be called by both names alternately as the family did.

Marshall, the young professor of the family, had been "a-courting" for quite a while by the spring of 1860. The object of his affections was Miss Apphia Ellen Duerson, the daughter of the patriarchal "Uncle Danel" Duerson, the Deckers' next door neighbor further up the Rappahanock and the river road. Marsh and Ellen¹⁰⁸ were married on December 4, 1860 hardly dreaming in their blissful happiness of the terrible storm that was to break around them and all but envelope them. Mr. Billingsley, the Deckers' constant guide, was on hand to perform the¹⁰⁹ ceremony in the big house high atop the Gravel Hill.

107. Harris.

108. Spotsylvania County Marriage Licenses, 1860.

109. Harris.

Marsh was teaching at Salem at the time and kept up his teaching there until the war broke into his routine. The young people lived at the Red House until Marsh went into the army when Ellen moved back to her home to care for her aged father.¹¹⁰

110. Ibid.

II

Rider Under the Stars and Bars

Isolated as it was by poor transport, terrible roads and the complete lack of rapid communication, the Red House could hardly be called a center of violent political controversy at any time. If ever that was true, it must have come during the years of 1859 and 1860 while the whole nation quivered in its last throes before the great conflict that was about to break. John Brown's abolitionists had raided the arsenal at Harper's Ferry¹ almost touching off the spark in October of 1859. A thrill of expectation ran through Virginia and the entire South; its echoes must have reverberated even through the wilderness of Spotsylvania County.

South Carolinians were saying that war was inevitable; the deciding line was reached when Lincoln, the black Republican, was elected president in 1860. Seven states, not including Virginia, had taken the bold step of secession before the first of February of the next year. On the fourth of February, the government of the Confederate States of America was formed, and on April 12, 1861, Fort² Sumter fell to the secessionists. The war had begun.

Virginia was the first of the final group of southern states which joined the Confederate States of America

1. McClellan, The Life and Campaigns of Major-General J.E.B. Stuart (hereafter cited as Stuart), pp. 28-30.

2. Morison and Commager, the Growth of the American Republic, I, p. 544.

and the southern union was complete by July of 1861.³

Thus, like it or not, the Deckers were caught up into a maelstrom of activity as the men of Virginia began to prepare for the expected Yankee invasions. John Decker was probably closer to neutral in the struggle than being on either one side or the other. A Yankee by birth, his adopted state already meant much to him.⁴ The slave question did not enter the final decisions as much as the feelings of one way of life against another.⁵ Mr. Decker, approaching 54 years of age, would not be called upon to fight and so a final and definite decision for him was not necessary.

For his boys it was another matter; but for his boys the choice was easy. Their young lives had been nurtured in Virginia; all they knew was Virginia; and everything dear to them was in Virginia. Their course was clear-- they were rebels. Mr. Decker did not resent this fact although he was often accused of northern sympathies. He was ready to support his sons in whatever decision they might make.⁶

The 20-year-old Walker was the first of the three to decide. His fighting blood was up. The fierce valor of the Stonewall Brigade at First Manassas in July had swept through Virginia like wildfire. Probably without

3. Ibid., p. 545.

4. H. W. Decker.

5. Morison and Commager, op. cit., p. 548.

6. Harris.

a second thought, without a glance back, as soon as he could get away from the farm, Walker answered the call of the Stars and Bars. Many of the young hotbloods of the South were fearful lest the war should end before they could get a swing at the "damn Yankees".

About the first of August, 1862, Walk probably left home with a rifle and some clothes headed for the infantry camps. When he got there, the terrible disorder and slovenliness of the brigades recruiting at full speed gave him a shock. He had expected a neat encampment of white tents and uniformed officers. Instead he found a disordered rabble. No sooner did he arrive and look around than he turned and headed homeward.⁷

It must have been hard to explain to his dad why he had come home, but when Walker announced promptly that he had decided to join the cavalry, the matter was cleared up. This time he started out on horseback, and the next time he appeared at home, he was a private in the cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The cavalry camp, known as Camp Salvington, was on the far side of the Rappahanⁿock but very near Fredericksburg. Walk enlisted on August 12 as a private with pay of \$24 a month.⁸ His unit was the 9th Virginia Cavalry under the command of Colonel John E. Johnston and Lieutenant-Colonel W.H.F. "Rooney" Lee, son of the future

7. H. W. Decker.

8. Confederate Records (hereafter cited as Records), IX, July 1-September 1, 1862, Virginia State Library.

commander-in-chief of the Army of Northern Virginia. R.L.T. Beale, to be made a brigadier-general in the closing days of the war, was the major.⁹ The 9th Virginia is known in Confederate annals as the "Mercer Cavalry". That name appears at the top of all the official report sheets.¹⁰ Young Decker joined Company^E of Spotsylvania County under the command of Captain Corbin Crutchfield. There were in all ten companies all recruited from northeastern Virginia except for Company G of Lunenburg.¹¹

Walker must have found the first year of army life dull and hard to bear. Army regimentation and regulations are hard on any young civilian, but for this boy of the country and the out-of-doors it must have been near torture. The main difficulty as Walk and his companions saw it was that they did not have any fighting to do. They were aching to strike, but it was not until June of 1862 that they saw any real action.¹² In the meantime, days and months were spent training, recruiting, and preparing along the banks of the Rappahannock at Camp Potomac and Camp Salvington. All through that time they felt ready and willing. The reports of the 9th show them to be in good condition all around. Discipline was always marked very good on the report blanks. Military appearance was usually very good or

9. Beale, History of the 9th Virginia Cavalry (hereafter cited as Beale), pp. 149-162.

10. Records.

11. Beale, pp. 150-177.

12. Ibid., p. 16.

excellent; arms never failed to rate the comment,
"In good condition".¹³

Sometime during the first days of February, Walk¹⁴ got his first promotion; he was made a third sergeant. In this advance he skipped all the way from private through several ranks (corporal, 6th, 5th, and 4th sergeants) to his new post. Such a jump is an indication of only one thing; the young soldier had already won the confidence of his superiors, for he had no money to buy the post and was not a close friend of any of the army's higher officers. Even the first months of practice warfare must have steadied Walk somewhat. It is probable that in those few months he aged considerably. His twenty-first birthday surely found him much more mature in judgement and settled in his decisions than his twentieth birthday had left him.

It was probably at the insistent call of Sergeant Decker that Marsh and Dick finally decided upon joining the cavalry. It was hard for Marsh to leave his young wife and Letitia probably thought of Dick as her baby boy, but the new draft call was looming over their heads. They did not want to serve in the infantry which was the only choice when drafted.¹⁵ Marsh came first on the eleventh of February, 1862, and Dick three days later. They joined up as privates at Camp Boulware in Essex

14. Ibid., n. d.

15. H. W. Decker.

County immediately becoming members of the Mercer Cavalry and the Spotsylvania Company.¹⁶

Walk's first real fight lived the longest in his memory of those many in which he engaged through four years of war,¹⁷ and well it might for it was probably the most brilliant action in which he was engaged. Brigadier-General James Ewell Brown Stuart, recently appointed to the command of northern Virginia's cavalry, led the daring horse raid of 12,000 hard-riding rebels around the rear of McClellan's entire army on the peninsula.¹⁸ Starting as a reconnaissance exploit, it proved a full-fledged raid for the gallant Stuart came back burdened with 165 prisoners and more than 200 horses stolen from the invaders.¹⁹

Stuart used discretion in selecting his 12,000 and they were the cream of the horseback fighters of that time.²⁰ Seven of the Mercer's companies were chosen and put under the command of Colonel W. H. B. "Rooney" Lee. The expedition started out on the twelfth of June and the men hardly left their saddles until the fifteenth when they were safe back in Confederate lines.²¹

The ride was effort to learn McClellan's strength, and in that it succeeded finely whereas its other results

16. Records, n. d.

17. H. W. Decker.

18. Interview with Fife Lumsden (hereafter cited as Lumsden), Locust Grove, Virginia.

19. Stuart, p. 67.

20. Freeman, R. E. Lee (hereafter cited as Freeman), II, 99.

21. Beale, pp. 17-21.

were far beyond expectations. In general outline, the troopers rode north from Richmond to Hanover Junction; there they turned east and rode to Old Church, Tunstall's station, and the great Federal supply depot at the White House on the south bank of the Pamunkey river; then, southward they spurred toward the Chickahominy and through Charles City Court House; finally, west along the northern edges of the Union held White Oak Swamp and into Richmond.²² It was a breath-taking feat, and it established Jeb Stuart as a great cavalry leader.

Just after the riders rode through Hanover Court House on the twelfth they encountered some pickets of the Fifth New York Dragoons. Companies B and C of the 9th dismounted and charged in skirmish line forcing them back across the marshy Totopotomoy Creek. The Yankees formed again on the far side just at the foot of a bridge that led across the creek. Stuart personally took command and "without hesitation charged the enemy with Crutchfield's squadron of the 9th Virginia. This squadron consisted at that time of the Mercer Cavalry, from Spotsylvania County, Company E, and the Essex Light Dragoons from Essex County, Company F."²³ Crutchfield was not on the raid, and so the command of the squadron of two companies devolved on Captain William Latane of²⁴ F.

22. Stuart, pp. 52-66.

23. Ibid., p. 56.

24. Ibid.

The column charged across the bridge in fours. Walker Decker and Fife Lumsden of Company E were in the first rank of the charging men with Captain Latane about twenty feet out in the lead. The Federal force opened fire and at the first shots Latane fell instantly, his body torn by eight balls. Walker and Fife, swerving their horses apart to keep from riding down their fallen commander, led the charge with flashing sabers into the ranks of the Yankee dragoons. The New Yorkers fled, but their discipline held, and again they whirled into line; again the Rebel sabers flashed, and the horses' hoofs thundered down upon the enemy.²⁵ This time the Union men fled to turn no more. Company E had won its first skirmish under the eye of Jeb Stuart himself. From then on they were affectionately known as the "Charging Squadron".²⁶

Walk always told of the incident at Tunstall station when the boys in grey tried to stop a train with their carbines. The engineer just put on steam and had no trouble making his getaway.²⁷

The Chickahominy was terribly swollen when the riders reached it, tired and hungry, at dawn on the fourteenth. Colonel Fitz Lee led an attempt to swim the river, but although he reached the far shore, he had so much difficulty in doing it that he decided it

25. Lumsden.

26. Ibid.

27. J. W. Decker.

would be impossible for the entire command. He swam²⁸ back and joined Stuart on the northern bank. All the bridges were out and the usual fords were impassable.

The timbers of an old bridge were reported a little farther down stream. On checking them, Stuart set his engineers to work on^{plans} for a new bridge. The cavalry leader was very nervous, one of the few times he ever showed it. Usually Jeb was the dashing picture of galantry and good cheer, but the worried lines in his brow²⁹ could not be erased at this time.

Corporal Henry Hagan on his own set to work with some comrades to relieve the situation. He pulled down an old barn, and before dark he had the bridge readied. Reporting triumphantly back to Stuart, he said, "General, your bridge is ready. Your ~~draw~~³⁰ing men will show you their picture in the morning." The entire command crossed and the bridge was destroyed.

At Charles City Court House the men got their first sleep in 36 hours and then it was just on the ground with each man's bridle on his arm. None had eaten except for a few captured articles, and most of the men were³¹ famished. To top off their troubles, it began to rain.

A day later the raid was nothing but a glorious memory for they had successfully eluded the Yanks at

28. Stuart, pp. 63-64.

29. H. W. Decker.

30. Ibid.

31. Beale, p. 21.

White Oak and ridden into Richmond triumphantly. Company E went back into their encampment on Mrs. Mordecai's farm on the Brooke Turnpike.³²

In late June Sergeant Decker had his first chance as an individual to serve the confederate cause. General Stuart had been requested to send a trustworthy man to the north bank of the Chickahominy on the Old Telegraph Road to await a sealed dispatch. It was a message from Lee to General T. J. Jackson ordering him to come to Richmond to take part in what developed into the Seven Days' Fighting around Richmond. Walker was selected to carry the message.

At the appointed place in the early evening of June 25, Walk received the sealed orders from one of General Stuart's aides and was ordered to carry them to Jackson's headquarters somewhere near Ashland. Walk was surprised on hearing this for he thought Jackson was still in the Valley of Virginia repelling a Union invasion. He was ordered to deliver it in person.

Reaching Jackson's headquarters with no difficulty he found Jackson seated in his tent taking supper. He handed the message to an adjutant and saw him take it to Jackson. That night he ate with the infantry of the Stonewall Brigade and in a few hours was marching toward Richmond at the head of Jackson's column.³³

32. Beale, p. 23.

33. This entire story came from H. W. Decker who heard it from Decker. Decker was reminded of the trip by an incident similar to it in one of J. E. Cooke's novels. He thought Cooke was probably the aide bringing the message.

He found his own cavalry regiment had marched up to meet Jackson and placed himself on the left flank of the advancing column as they moved into the Battle of Mechanicsville.

During these Seven Days the cavalry did not have any particular part to play except guarding flanks and lonely outposts. ³⁴ One brilliant feat in which the 9th took part was the capture of the great Federal supply base at White House on the Pamunkey. ³⁵ The home was the personal property of Colonel "Rooney" Lee, and so the 9th was particularly interested in dislodging the enemy. They were too late to keep the fires set by the retreating Federals from nearly ruining the place. Stores were scattered about in great and abundant profusion-- something already strange in Virginia. The troops were hungry and filled their haversacks. Walker, thinking they would be there for several days, filled his bag with sugar and lemons to make lemonade! It had been so long since he had had any. The bugles cried "To Horse!" and the squadrons were soon on the road again, never to return. Young Decker reported afterward that he nearly starved to death trying to live off of lemons and sugar for the remaining four days of the fighting. ³⁶ We can be sure he was not as hungry then as he was many a time later on.

34. Beale, p. 28.

35. Stuart, p. 78.

36. H. W. Decker.

"The great battles around Richmond were over, and McClellan's shattered army lay toilworn and beaten upon the James, resting under the shelter of the guns of the fleet."³⁷

It was during this fighting that we have the first sign of war weariness from Marsh whose letters to his wife are still preserved. On July 5 he wrote, "I pray God that this iniquitous war may soon be brought to a close. Oh, it is a terrible thing for enlightened people to war with each other."³⁸ Marsh was unquestionably the deepest thinker of the three at the time.³⁹ He was a strong member of the church and the superintendent of the Sunday School at Zoan. He was very serious and often through the war we find him morose and bitter. He took everything very hard.

"The three Decker boys" were well-known throughout the 9th Virginia. They always rode abreast at the head of their company while it was on the march because they were the biggest men in it.⁴⁰ Walk had reached his full height of 6 feet, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and was big of bone and frame.⁴¹ The other two were also well over 6 feet tall. Their weight and size made them great cavalry fighters for it takes strength to wield a saber, their chief weapon. The instrument itself is not overly sharp,

37. Beale, loc. cit.

38. Letter from Marshall E. Decker to Ellen E. Decker (Hereafter cites as Marsh to Ella), July 5, 1862.

39. Ibid., June 20, 1860.

40. Lumsden.

41. Interview with Mrs. Bernard Kube, Spotsylvania County, Virginia.

and the only way in which it wreaked real havoc was when it was swung by a powerful man riding at full speed on a charging horse. Such a blow could cut through a limb or split a skull in one swing. Walk was noted for his ability with this deadly tool of war and much of it came through his size as well as from his powerful back and shoulders.⁴²

The next movement of the regiment was up through Orange into Culpeper County. Marsh was left at his brother-in-law's place in Orange at Thornhill where he was sick with jaundice.⁴³ H.s sister, Carrie Goodwin, nursed him back to health and he rejoined the company about the first of September.

Stuart's command reached Auburn in Fauquier County as it was getting dark on the twenty-second of August. A negro guide volunteered to take a regiment directly into Pope's camp at Catlett Station that evening and the 9th Virginia was chosen for the hazardous mission. It was raining hard and a furious storm was rolling in from the mountains when the troopers set out in the pitch blackness.⁴⁴

As they neared the station a password was decided upon so that they could tell friend from foe and the men were ordered to draw their sabers. They moved a few hundred yards further and the order "Charge!" was heard

42. Lumsden.

43. Marsh to Ella, August 22, 1862.

44. Stuart, p. 94.

above the shrieking of the wind and roaring thunder. The drenched riders dashed forward screaming the famed Rebel yell, "Woh-who -- ey! who --ey! who -- ey!"⁴⁵ The darkness was so intense that they did not know what they were charging, but forward they went soon finding themselves in a practically unguarded encampment of tents. The destruction began hurriedly so that the work could be completed before the terrorized Yanks could rally in the darkness and counter-attack. Every tent was looted and stores were destroyed. They tried to start fires in the tent city, but the rain was far too heavy. General Pope's hat and coat were taken along with most of his personal possessions and all of his orders and roll-books.⁴⁶

Within an hour the Confederates retired to the highway and reformed their squadrons, gathered their captured materials and stolen horses, and retreated to Auburn at full gallop.⁴⁷ Walk never forgot the blackness of that night, the thrill of the charge, nor the drenching rain that soaked everything; the raid on Catlett's station was one of the high points of the war for him.⁴⁸

General Lee's next move was the first invasion of Maryland.⁴⁹ The 9th Virginia was part of the Second

45. Beale, pp. 31-33.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. J. W. Decker.

49. Freeman, II, 350.

Brigade now commanded by Brigadier-General Fitzhugh
50
Lee. Their colonel was still the beloved "Rooney"
Lee. Stuart's command moved into Maryland by way of
Edward's Ferry on the Potomac near Leesburg after the
51
main army had already gone in. The cavalry's main
task was to protect General Lee's right flank from
Washington as well as to act as the eyes and ears of the
army giving information on all the enemy's movements.
In widely separated cavalry battles this function was
carried out completely. The men of the 9th engaged in
many skirmishes striking fear into many a Union heart
with their terrible saber charges.

The movement as a whole was not successful and
after about ten days in Maryland, Lee began retiring on
52
the thirteenth of September. The cavalry played a
particularly spectacular part in the rearguard action
as the Confederates retreated toward Sharpsburg. In
Boonesboro a stand had to be made to keep the attacking
enemy vanguard from reaching the infantry. "This diffi-
cult duty devolved upon Colonel W. H. F. Lee and the
9th Virginia Cavalry." They charged through the streets
of the town and brilliantly threw the enemy back. Union
sentiment in Boonesboro was strong and Lee found his
men surrounded by hostile citizens firing from their
53
homes into the streets. The cavalry retreated to the

50. Beale, p. 34.
51. Stuart, p. 110.
52. Ibid., p. 123.
53. Ibid., p. 125.

fields just south of town and there charged the Yankee riders again. Colonel Lee's horse fell in this charge, and he was overridden by his brothers in arms. As they retreated they had to leave him senseless in the road. ⁵⁴

A third charge in an effort to pick him up failed, and he had to be left to his fate. The Yanks evidently did not notice him for a few hours later he regained consciousness and crawled back to the rebel lines. ⁵⁵

The bloody battle of Sharpsburg or Antietam Creek did not concern cavalry, and the records of the 9th Virginia show that they stood by and watched the engagement. ⁵⁶ It was Fitzhugh Lee's brigade which covered the final retreat across the Potomac.

From this time until the Battle of Fredericksburg, the cavalry was not outstandingly active. As McClellan, and later Burnside, moved into Virginia, the horsemen harried their flanks through Loudon County and in other areas, but no serious engagements were fought. The 9th on October 31 made a particularly brilliant charge and capture at Mountsville for which they were cited. ⁵⁷

On the tenth of November the cavalry was reorganized and "Rooney" Lee was promoted to brigadier-generalship. Along with the 9th, the 5th, 10th, and 15th Virginia cavalry and the 2nd North Carolina cavalry were assigned to his brigade. At this time R. L. T. Beale was pro-

54. Beale, pp. 39-40.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., p. 41.

57. Stuart, p. 170.

moted to colonel and given the Mercer Cavalry command.

Soon after the middle of November the 9th moved into winter quarters in Essex County for refitting and rest. ⁵⁹ On December 12, they were sent to the Battle

of Fredericksburg and stationed on Lee's right flank at Hamilton's Crossing, but they did not get in any fighting. ⁶⁰ Their bivouac at Hamilton's Crossing was

just behind and to the right of the position of the guns of Major John Pelham's Stuart Horse Artillery. ⁶¹

Major Pelham was a gallant daring young officer of great courage with absolute disregard for his own personal safety. Walk was greatly impressed by the way in which he handled his guns as the blue waves tried to sweep across the flats from the pontoon bridges. Sergeant Decker long remembered what he often called the most beautiful thing he ever saw--the gallant charge of Burnside's Federal legions. The figures stretched along the Rappahannock as far as the eye could reach moving forward in perfect union seemingly unswerved by the terrible curtain of fire thrown down by Confederate muskets and artillery men. ⁶²

On December 20, Walk was promoted to second sergeant. ⁶³ The next spring the Federals were soon hammering at the Army of Northern Virginia and the campaign which ended at Chancellorsville began. The cavalry of the Union at this time was under the command of Brigadier-General George Stoneman. His orders from General "Fighting Joe

58. Ibid., pp. 186-182.

59. Beale, p. 54.

60. Ibid., pp. 56-57.

61. Stuart, map opp. p. 190.

62. H. W. Decker.

63. Records, Nov. 1-Jan. 1, 1863

Hooker were to cross the Rappahan^oock to Morrisville, ride directly south until he was halfway to Richmond and then swing east, thus cutting off Lee's men in Spotsylvania from Richmond.⁶⁴

The brigade was ordered to Culpeper and a few days later was camping on the farm of John Botts near Brandy Station. This body of men was the only thing standing between Stoneman's 11,000 and the completion of movement. The first move to cross the river came from Gregg's division which tried to cross on a railroad bridge near Kelly's Ford. The 9th and 13th charged the bridge head and the Yankees retired hastily. The river rose because of rains in the mountain and several other enemy stabs were thrown back by the cavalry men. "The bold action of two small cavalry regiments, aided by a swollen stream, thwarted the plans of the Federal commander and delayed for a fortnight the advance of the Grand Army of the Potomac."⁶⁵

While Hooker was being thrown back with a jolt at Chancellorsville, "Rooney" Lee's brigade was ordered to take care of General Stoneman and his efforts. The 9th was based on Gordonsville and made several sallies from that point. The first was to Trevillian's Station to protect the railroad from Stoneman's riders. On another occasion they marched into Goochland County and there singularly enough the E Company of the regi-

64. Stuart, p. 219.

65. Idid., p. 224.

ment met again in hand-to-hand saber fighting with the 5th New York Dragoons which they had met and worsted formerly on Totopotomoy Creek. By the end of May the campaign was over. Stoneman had recrossed the Rapidan and Hooker lay on the north bank of the Rappahanock ⁶⁶ licking his severe wounds.

On June 8, in the fields around Brandy Station near the Mercer Cavalry's camping place on Botts' farm in Culpeper, a great cavalry review was held for General Lee. "Lee put Traveller at the gallop, past the long front of the first line of gaunt cavalrymen. They were clad in tattered butternut or gray, but they made a gallant showing with their burnished sabers. Three miles Lee rode, by flags that bore the names of many battles. Then he turned and galloped three miles back along the second line without a pause....Then it was the cavalrymen's turn. Wheeling into column at the sound of the bugle, they gallopped past at the charge, Stuart riding at their head with his blade at fierce point."⁶⁷ It was a gallant sight fit for any of the tournament fields of old and hardly foreboding ~~of~~ the deadly fighting ahead.

The next day before the gray mists of dawn had risen from the water, Federal cavalry and infantry units were pouring across the river at Beverly's and Kelly's Fords ⁶⁸

66. Beale, pp. 62-66.

67. Freeman, III, p. 30.

68. Stuart, p. 289.

and on those very fields before darkness brought the blessed respite fourteen hundred men had lost their lives. The battle of Brandy Station or Fleetwood Hill was the greatest cavalry engagement of the entire war.⁶⁹ The troopers of the Union were trying to break Stuart's riders for good and all. The main objective was Fleetwood Hill, a promontory at the head of a little ridge, on the northern end of which stood Barbour's Hill. The Mercer Cavalry was stationed on Barbour's Hill, and it was that position they held throughout the entire day. Stuart himself was leading Hampton's brigade in charge after charge upon Fleetwood and he left "Rooney" Lee to hold his left with the men of the 9th.⁷⁰

Beale's men made three distinct charges and engaged in some of the most terrible saber fighting of the entire war. At least four regiments of Yankee cavalry tried to take the left hill, but every time they were repulsed. Just before the final charge General Lee came up and saw the enemy forming for another try. At the brow of the hill he waved his saber and cried to the men, "Forward!" At that instant he fell wounded, but the men charged and swept the blue coats from the field.⁷¹

Stuart sent a messenger saying, "The General sends his thanks to Colonel Beale and the men of the Ninth for gallantry in holding the hill, and if you will hold

69. Freeman, III, 30.

70. Stuart, pp. 264-290.

71. Beale, p. 68.

it five minutes longer he will send reinforcements." Fitz Lee's Brigade was moving down from Oak Shade. They were never needed though for as they appeared in the distance, the final Rebel charge and yell swept the field; the Yankees were fleeing toward the river.⁷² Stuart's riders had proved again that it was not their ragged clothing that counted; it was their burnished sabers.

The stage was set for Gettysburg and the northern movement of the Confederates began. While the infantrymen moved up between the Blue Ridge and the Bull Run Mountains, the cavalry were ordered to guard the passes in the Bull Run which opened toward the east and Washington. Walk's division under Colonel J. R. Chambliss was ordered to guard Thoroughfare Gap.⁷³ They stayed in that vicinity only a few hours and were soon marching toward Middleburg about sunrise on June 17.⁷⁴ That day men of the 9th engaged in several charges against the enemy who was moving toward Middleburg from the east. None of the men from Company E were engaged. Stuart had learned that well nigh overwhelming forces opposed him and so he decided to move back to the mountains in a defensive action which would slow the enemy and make the going tough.⁷⁵

Chambliss' men were on the left flank of the retreating front just north of the turnpike leading from

72. Ibid., p. 69.

73. Stuart, p. 296.

74. Beale, p. 71.

75. Stuart, p. 306.

Middleburg to Upperville and Ashby's Gap. All the way as they retreated they charged with the saber and then drew back, charged again and drew back. ⁷⁶ Finally, they had reached a position just outside of Upperville, but the enemy had been able to slip a few squadrons around their left wing so that the bluecoats now lay between the 9th and the main body of the Confederate riders. It was a simple matter for the saddle-worn troopers of the Mercer to wheel and answer the call of the bugle calling "Charge!" They had answered that call all day and this final charge was no harder for them. In the engagement Walk was wounded very slightly by a bullet through the right arm of his coat. It seared his flesh leaving a long scar, but it did not cause him to drop his saber or leave the field. He was with the unit when they finally rode through the gap to the Shenandoah safe ⁷⁷ behind the rifles of Jackson's infantrymen.

The next morning Marsh wrote a letter home from camp on the Shenandoah which is worth quoting: "Oh Ella we have been in since we left Culpeper several most terrific cavalry fights. Yesterday our brigade was entirely cut off from Ashby's Gap and a very serious battle ensued. We succeeded however in cutting our way out but suffered severely. Co E lost none killed but several wounded most were very slight. Pilsher had his leg fractured. Walker was struck on the elbow tore his coat sleeve but

76. Beale, pp. 74-75.

77. H. W. Decker.

did not enter. If his arm had been one inch nearer would ruined him forever. Buck Pendleton had his horse killed but was not hurt himself, when last seen. It is now Wednesday. Buck hasn't been heard from yet. Probably he was taken prisoner. I can't say....We are now waiting for the bugle." ⁷⁸ Buck Pendleton, mentioned here, was a devoted friend and almost a fourth brother to the three.

After the series of retreats westward Stuart's command was unified and the invasion began in earnest. Marsh, writing from Williamsport after the campaign is all over, gives us a fine picture of the war through the eyes of the common soldier. There were two letters, one sent by mail and one sent by Isaac Jones, a neighbor in Spotsylvania.

The first says: "I have been on my horse night and day for two weeks with a few exceptions. I am completely used up. Indeed I with the rest of us was riding five nights and days without getting off of our saddles except for a few minutes at a time when the column would make a halt. You can, dearest, form some idea of the trip around Hooker's army. We crossed the Potomac I do not know the exact point but not very far above Washington. The river I know is quite wide where we crossed. Some say one-half mile. I hardly think it is that wide yet it was dark when I crossed and could not judge the distance very well. We went within a few miles of

78. Marsh to Ella, June 22, 1863.

Washington capturing many prisoners, mules, wagons, and government stores. The trip was long and fatiguing consequently a great deal of the property captured was lost or destroyed. The day before we arrived within our lines a great battle commenced and continued and continued for two or three days after. It was awful indeed and the carnage terrific on both sides. Many a man sunk to rise no more. Suffice it to say the battle or battles were fought in Pennsylvania near Gettysburg resulting in a drawn fight so far as I can hear. We retreated to Hagerstown near the river and the wagons, and on the river at the place dated above I hear at this time again the sound of cannon and muskets. It is just what I expect the Fedrals will make every effort to cut us off from Virginia the river at this time being too high to ford and our pontoons destroyed. We no doubt to them appear to be in an awkward predicament. The guns continue to roar. Would to God they would cease forever." ⁷⁹

The second letter of the same day said in part: "We are much reduced by fatigues and hunger. Indeed it requires an iron constitution to withstand what I have been required to undergo. If it could only stop here how thankful I would be.

"I am quite sure from the observations I have made since I left Virginia that the two contending parties will never settle this worldwide rapture and this is the reason the future is so dark for me." ⁸⁰

79. Ibid., July 11, 1863.

80. Ibid.

On the twelfth the Confederates got a bridge across the river, and on the night of the thirteenth of July, they crossed into Virginia with the brigades of Fitzhugh Lee bringing up the rear.⁸¹

Four companies had now been detached from the Mercer regiment and Company E did not rejoin the Brigade until early fall. They were ordered to a rest camp at Mechun's Depot in Albemarle County. All the brothers got new horses from home and probably each of them had a chance to visit home during the rest stay. Dick definitely went home during the time they were there and Marsh, too, was absent quite some time. There is no mention of Walker returning to Spotsylvania, but he must have done so.⁸²

While in camp at Albemarle, Marsh speaks of the religious revival all through the Army of Northern Virginia.⁸³ It was a time of stress and it seems very natural that during this period of comparative inactivity the men should think some and turn to their religious beliefs as a mainstay. It is my opinion that it was here that Sergeant Decker first really felt the urge to be a minister. Revivals were held in many camps and among almost every unit. In the camp of the 9th, the revival was led by Chaplain C. H. Boggs. They formed a "Soldiers' Christian Association of the Ninth Virginia Cavalry" and the corresponding secretary, Richards by name, proudly reported that fact.⁸⁴ Religion touches deeply on the

81. Stuart, p. 367.

82. Marsh to Ella, September 4 and 14, 1863.

83. Ibid., September 8, 1863.

84. Jones, Christ in the Camp, p. 341.

battlefield, and we can only guess that it was here that it touched the heart of Sergeant Decker.

The rest camp men moved into Nelson County about the middle of September⁸⁵ and they rejoined their unit about the tenth of October.⁸⁶ It was during this rest camp period that the daguerrotype of the three brothers, which is still in the possession of the family was taken. Dick was kicked by a horse in early October and had some extra days at home because of it. Marsh writes jealously of this fact as if Dick did not really get kicked at all!⁸⁷

While the Decker boys were at rest camp with Company E, the cavalry had been reorganized into divisions. Their unit was still Beale's command, in the Brigade under Rooney Lee, and now in the division of Fitzhugh Lee.⁸⁸ They lay poised and ready at Raccoon Ford on the Rapidan on the tenth of October.

Stuart started out on the Bristoe campaign by moving westward and then coming back toward Culpeper Court House and Brandy Station. On the bloody fields around the station the 9th once more distinguished itself with alternating charges against a powerful Federal force. First the 9th would charge, and then the 13th Virginia Cavalry would charge while the 9th reformed. They had to withdraw from the positions won because of Union

85. Marsh to Ella, September 21, 1863.

86. Ibid., October 6, 1863.

87. Ibid.

88. Stuart, p. 372.

artillery fire, but they had won the day. Other battles were fought at Manassas Junction and the final one at Buckland where General Kilpartick's riders were swept completely from the field and sent flying northward.⁸⁹ Marsh's letters show this campaign to be more important to the soldier than it is to the annals of military history.⁹⁰ Company E was hit hard but the three Decker boys went through unscathed.

The regiment camped at the junction of the Rapidan and Robinson rivers until Christmas time when they were ordered over into the valley in pursuit of General Averill.⁹¹ During this rest Walker definitely visited home⁹² and was rejuvenated by slightly better food and his family's tender cares. Did he visit Mollie Ferneyhough? No one knows.

As the Bristoe campaign ended another great cavalry review was held at which the Governor of Virginia, John Letcher was present. Such reviews were a delight to the dashing Stuart's heart, and this was the last big one in which he led his troops. "Several of Lee's (Robert E.) nephews and his youngest son were among those passing in front of the commander, who had a secret parental delight in noting that Rooney's old regiment, the Ninth Virginia,⁹³ made the finest showing."

89. *Ibid.*, pp. 376-396.

90. Marsh to Ella, October 21 and 26, 1863.

91. Beale, p. 105.

92. Letter from Lucy I. Decker to Ellen D. Decker, December 25, 1863.

93. Freeman, III, 188.

The ride after Averill was a harrowing one not so full of danger as it was full of discomforts. The troopers rode through Charlottesville, Lexington, Natural Bridge, Buchanan, Fincastle, White Sulphur Springs, and then gave up the chase near Moorfield in Hardy county, West Virginia.⁹⁴ Food was very scarce but the worst element was the cold. The biting winds of the mountains in winter time made life miserable for the ragged horsemen. Marsh writes again that he is completely broken down. They were in the saddle fifteen days and nights in a row at one time. He said, "I have during this last trip suffered intensely from the cold. No raid or pursuit was worse. My shoes and pants are nearly gone. Dick is worse off than myself. He is a complete bundle of rags....To tell the truth I have never been so ragged since I have been in the army and Dick is a perfect sight."⁹⁵

On January 2, 1864, Marsh again wrote to his wife, and on the back of his letter we have Walk's only war letter. It was to his mother and is transcribed here exactly as written, punctuation and all:

"Dear Mother:

"As Marshall has left me a little room will write a piece we are on a raid somewhere I think we are going to tear up the Balt and Ohio RR. it is very cold but we all along very well the roads are miserable and covered with ice but we get over them very well by

94. Beale, p. 105.

95. Marsh to Ella, December 26, 1863.

leading our horses over the worst places we are all well and hope will remain so during this trip we march in the daytime the nights being too cold it is much colder here than Old Spott our horses stand the trip very well have fallen off some hope they won't give out before we get in striding distance of a land where we can remain in safety have not gotten in a fight yet and hope we won't our clothes are comfortable yet but expect we will get ragged before we get back I will write whenever I can I know you are anxious to hear from us now goodbye and look for a better day it is coming but I can't tell the day from your affectionate
"96
son W. J. Decker

This letter would tend to show optimism in place of Marsh's gloomy outlook. It is true that Walk had not joined the raid until later (December 27) and had just returned from a trip home; he was probably more cheerful because he had not taken so much in the im-
97
mediate past. It shows that Walk no longer has a love of fighting if he ever did have it. Finally the last line would tend to show what we might call a ministerial outlook or statement. More letters from Walk would make this task easier but they are few and far between.

After the fruitless chase of Averill the 9th rode back to its familiar stamping grounds in Essex county.

96. Letter from Decker to Letitia B. Decker, n.d., probably January 2, 1864.

97. Marsh to Ella, December 29, 1863.

There they rested and some of the companies took part in the killing of Ulric Dahlgren and the capture of his raiders. Company E took part in the chase but was not in action at the capture.

On May 4, 1864, the Battle of the Wilderness began; the Mercer Cavalry did not move during this campaign which was simply infantry slugging it out in the woods which Walk knew so well. They were ordered to the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House which was fought May 8-12 all through the same Wilderness. In marching to the second battle they marched across the Wilderness field of a few days earlier. "The open land as far as the eye could see was thickly dotted with the dead, who lay as they had fallen under a burning sun, many of them with their faces to the sky, and quite black from incipient decay." Walk recalled this terrible scene and his friend, Fife Lumsden, tells us that it was hard to manage a horse for they would not step on or over the bodies.

While the 9th was engaged at Spotsylvania Court House, Jeb Stuart was mortally wounded to the South of Yellow Tavern trying to stop General P. H. Sheridan's ride down the old Telegraph Road toward Richmond. The news was a terrible shock to Lee. If the year before in the death of the beloved Stonewall, he had lost his right arm, then

98. Beale, pp. 110-111.
99. Freeman, III, 269.
100. Beale, pp. 117-118.
101. Ibid., p. 117.
102. Lumsden.
103. Stuart, p. 413.

truly now Lee had lost his eyes. On hearing of Stuart's wounding, he said in a shaken voice, "He never brought me a piece of false information."¹⁰⁴ The Confederacy would yet feel the loss of their gallant commander of cavalry - Major-General Jeb Stuart.

On May 20, Grant started his great flank movement off to the right of the Confederates;¹⁰⁵ the movement finally resulted in the bloody battle of Cold Harbor beginning on the thirty-first of May.¹⁰⁶ The units of the 9th were withdrawn to a point near Bowling Green and on the railroad called Guinea's Station.¹⁰⁷ It was on the Mattaponi River. Grant's cavalry was pressing for the bridge across the river and after some vicious skirmishing the out-numbered Confederate riders had to give way. During one of the charges of the Yankees, Private Bob Jerrell was shot from his horse with a rifle wound in his chest. Marsh started back under fire to get him, but Walk stopped him saying, "You have a wife at home and I have none." Before Marsh could speak, he spurred back toward the enemy, got Jerrell onto his horse, and bore him back into the Rebel lines. It was a conspicuous deed of heroism and in these days of medals for all, Walk would have been decorated.¹⁰⁸ The Confederacy was hardly thinking of medals at this late hour!

The 9th rejoined their brigade on the Telegraph Road

104. Freeman, III, 327.

105. Beale, p. 119.

106. Freeman, III, 373.

107. Beale, pp. 119-120.

108. Lumsden.

on May 22 and engaged in several skirmishes with the Federal cavalry which was steadily advancing.¹⁰⁹ There were fights at Hawes' Shop, Hanover, Ashland, and the Old Church. The fighting was getting back into the familiar territory of the Chickahominy ride. In the Old Church fight Companies C and K attacked some pickets in a beautiful charge under Lieutenant Ball. Companies D and E supported the movement, and as the Yanks wavered, they swept down the road with sabers swirling and broke the back of the Yankee defense completely.¹¹⁰ In this fight Sergeant Decker received a saber cut on the head which was little more than a break in the skin. He did not stop fighting although he was a bloody looking sight.¹¹¹ As these skirmishes were roaring over the peninsula, the terrible slaughter of Cold Harbor was thundering a short way off to the south. It was one of Lee's greatest victories; 7,000 Federals had fallen to the blazing rifles of the Confederacy in fifteen minutes - the bloodiest fifteen minutes of the war.¹¹²

The 9th engaged in only one other fight before they crossed the James River on June 25 in the rear of Lee's army which had moved into defense positions at Petersburg.¹¹³ They were ordered directly to Stony Creek Station on Lee's line of communication to the south, the Weldon railroad. The cavalry's task was now to keep that railroad open so that supplies could keep moving northward. There was a

109. Beale, p. 121.

110. Ibid., pp. 127-128.

111. H. W. Decker.

112. United States Department of Interior, Manassas to Appomattox, p. 24.

113. Beale, p. 132.

sharp encounter at Sappony Church and the arrival of Hampton's Brigade saved the day; the enemy was retreating westward away from the railroad.¹¹⁴

The Lee Brigade met motley force under Colonel Phillips near Rowanty Run. Negroes and poor whites serving with him cracked under pressure and fled with the riders in hot pursuit - a familiar maneuver for them by now.¹¹⁵

The 9th was ordered north of the James again in the last days of July. After fighting again at Malvern Hill there was an engagement at White's Tavern. This was the first time that the discipline of the 9th broke in the least, and even this was an inconsequential let-down. The dismounted men (one of the very few times they ever dismounted) charged out of a ravine into a swathe of musket fire and retreated on the run. Troops behind them thought it was a panic and some trouble was caused. "The conduct of the regiment, which created a momentary apprehension of a panic, called forth bitter denunciation from our Major-General."¹¹⁶

The return of the 9th to southside Virginia was accomplished on the twentieth of August.¹¹⁷ From then on the cavalry men of north and south swirled over countless battlefields until the final break at Five Forks. It was a terrible time for Lee's tired cavalrymen. Food was very scarce at all times. Walk remembers having bacon for break-

114. Ibid., pp. 132-133.

115. Ibid., pp. 133-134.

116. Ibid., p. 139.

117. Ibid., p. 141.

fast and saving the cold drippings for a meal later in the
118
day. Both horse and man suffered constantly in the
confusion of the great battles for Petersburg, Richmond,
and the Weldon Railroad. The mounted men did not rank
as highly in the movements of the great leaders as they
formerly had for the death struggle was between the infant-
ry of north and south.

Five Forks was the last great battle. The common
soldier fought fiercely and well. The cavalry on the
flanks under Fitzhugh Lee was as swift and sure as they
had been all up and down Virginia throughout the war.
Some say that the subordinate generals did not perform
119
as they should, but who is to give judgement over the
toil and battle-worn veterans of the Army of Northern
Virginia.

Sergeant Decker ended his military career in a blaze
of glory. A rescue party from Company E had been sent out
to rescue some ladies caught in a house subjected to cross-
fire between the lines. On the return trip toward the
Rebel front, the horse ridden by Tom Harris, one of Walk's
intimates, was shot from under him. In the fall Tom
somehow was caught under his horse. With bullets whistling
around him as the rest of the party galloped on, Walk
wheeled his horse and dismounted. He lifted Harris'

118. H. W. Decker.

119. Freeman, IV, 40.

horse off the fallen veteran. Both he and Tom mounted Black Prince, Waik's captured charger, and fled to the Confederate lines. The story flew around the camp and soon the men were telling each other that Browalk, as he was known, had thrown Tom's horse over a fence in getting the animal off his rider.¹²⁰ Walk was a powerful man, but this feat must be credited to the imagination of his admirers.

The final days show no record for all was confusion. Food was gone, forage could not be obtained, men's nerves were ruined, and the enemy was closing in. The end was a terrible thing. At 3:45 P.M. on April 9, 1865, at Appomatox Court House, Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia.¹²¹ We do not know where the Decker boys were on the ninth. The following day they started home together. Their horses were very weak. Walk forced his saber into a tree and left it there; the scarred weapon added too much to the burden of his horse. Dick, more temperamental, broke his sword into pieces and cast it from him vowing never to touch another.¹²²

It was over. The Confederacy had fallen, but life must go on. Walk went out from the war a different man. He had swung swiftly from boyhood into maturity, and now he seemed again to be stepping out into life for a second time. Never once did he look back or waver. He was

120. Interview with Dr. R. Marvin Harris.

121. Freeman, IV, 142.

122. H. W. Decker.

determined to build a new life. Not as a shattered sword in the dust, but as a living sword quivering in the heart of a tree he would go forward.

III

Husband and Father

The homecoming must have been a happy event, and yet the whole was overhung by deep, black clouds of want. The fields and woods of Spotsylvania County had been decimated by the war. From Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House the marching soldiers had come or gone sweeping everything before them. Yankees had been bivouacked on the south shore of the Rappahanock on many a spring night. All the livestock, crops, and exterior movables had disappeared. The Red House itself had been searched on many an occasion; there were two bullet holes in it put there by Yankee snipers firing across Banks Ford.¹ As the boys had been to war, truly the war had been to their home.

It was spring and they must have set to work immediately rebuilding their lives and fields. They brought back their riding animals and a huge mule called "Whalon" because of his size.² The monotony of farm toil seemed only to have been broken and made harder by the four years of bloodshed.

The family still had its lands, but that was all. Cash was very scarce and things came from Fredericksburg or the store very infrequently indeed. They soon learned to get along on what they had until better times should

1. H. W. Decker.

2. Harris.

again aid them in making things easier. Through all of this we hear no word of complaint from any of the family; they seemed to take it stoically. They were tired of war and willing to try anything in its place; especially Dick, the youngest, was bitter against fighting. It had been a real struggle with his inner self to keep from deserting toward the end. We have an oft-repeated story of him sitting upon a log chewing minnie balls and spitting them out arguing back and forth with himself as to the right thing for him to do.⁵

Walker's return and the new life had definitely made up his mind about getting married and about whom he wanted to marry. He proposed to Mollie Ferneyhough out of the depths of a very devoted heart and got returned down with a resounding thud.⁴ The reason for her refusal is clear. At that time she was courting (or should we say was being courted by?) a young man of some means from the Stafford side of the Rappahanock, Henry Chesley by name.⁵ She had not thought of Walk as a possible lover; only as a childhood sweetheart, and so it was not hard for her to turn him down. She later married Mr. Chesley.

It was not so easy for Walk; in fact, it came as a severe blow for him. He seems to have taken the match for granted and never questioned it.⁶ The refusal simply added to his disillusionment which was already reaching

a

3. Brockman.

4. H. W. Decker.

5. Ibid.

6. C. Chesley.

a new low through the let-down after the war and the terrible agricultural conditions. We have a story of how he tried to break up one of Mollie's parties at Broadie. He and her brother John came dressed as tramps and enjoyed themselves by acting in concert with their costumes. Mollie was severely put out by this rather childish retaliation that Walk had adopted, probably half in fun.⁷

It was at this time that we have one of the first acts that later classed Walker as "pretty near the father of the whole community." Marsh's wife's father was very ill and it was Walker to whom the family turned for someone to comfort the old man in his last hours. "Uncle Danel" was very sick with brain fever and many was the night that Walk remembers sitting up with him. Particularly the young veteran recalled the strange and unearthly songs that the old man sang on his death bed. Walk said that he had never heard them anywhere before or since; he often wondered where Uncle Danel learned them.⁸

One of the main tasks on the farm at that time was fencing. In place of a sword he swung an axe, and the long split rail fences began to reappear.⁹ When the boys got back, there was, of course, not a rail on the place; both armies knew the fine effect of a fence rail

7. H. W. Decker.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

in a camp fire. They put up the old split-rail zig-zag type of fence that was such a familiar sight in the wire and nail-stripped South after the war.

On July 27, 1866, there was a rather strange and as yet unexplained turnover of property within the confines of the family itself. Ann, Mary, Walker, Richard, Belle, and Emily Decker, six of John's eight children, pooled their resources and bought from their father for the sum of \$4,000 the Red House and Fountain Bluff properties. At the same time Marsh and his wife purchased the remainder of the Cottage place including the home there from Father Decker.¹⁰ In both of these cases the children actually paid over in cash about what the property originally cost John Decker. From that time on he held his money in Fredericksburg municipal bonds and railroad bonds.¹¹ He lived at the Red House with his wife both paying board to whichever child owned and was administering that farm at the time.¹²

It seems probable that John, then fifty-nine years of age, had grown tired of farmwork and the directing of the affairs of the place. He probably wished to turn it over to the children and yet he needed some money to keep hom going for the rest of his life. The sale to the children was probably the most expedient method by which these two ends could be met.

10. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1866.

11. Executor's Report, Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1880.

12. Receipt of W. J. Butzner, March, 1878.

During these years he was a very influential member of the community in many respects. He served almost constantly on county juries including on several occasions the Grand Jury.¹³ He aged rather young in comparison with the rest of the family. His handwriting a little after this period shows him to be rather infirm and unsteady.¹⁴ He was very sick in his later days.¹⁵

The sales and purchases did not make any difference in the actual arrangement of things. All the children were living at home except for Carrie and Marsh - Mrs. Goodwin still lived in Orange and Marsh moved to the Cottage with his wife.¹⁶ It is not clear what was done with the Duerson property at this time. It belonged to Marsh and his wife, but they did not live there.

It was not long before Marsh tired of working the poor Cottage place and decided to cast his lot in Orange.

They moved in wagons during the spring of 1867. The roads were deep in mud and they had a difficult time of it. Father John drove one of the wagons and Dick and Walker assisted the trek.¹⁸

The gradual shift to Orange County is a rather strange thing. Beginning with Carrie almost the entire family moved to Orange where they all settled down within a half an hour's buggy ride of each other. John Decker owned some land in Orange, and it may have been his desire to have his children farm it that sent them westward.¹⁹

14. Note payable to Decker, July, 1878.

15. Thompson.

16. Harris.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Orange Deed Book, 1869.

The rich, red soil of Orange probably held considerably more promise for the farm-minded family than did the earth around ^{the} home of their childhood. ²⁰ It was a total movement leaving only one Decker in Spotsylvania--Belle, who remained the mistress of the Red House until her death.

This story is outlining some of the shifts and changes in the family, but all during this period we must remember that the back-breaking labor of rather primitive farming kept steadily on. Dick and Walk ran Fountain Bluff and Gravel Hill jointly, and they worked hard at their task. It was during this period that the farm gave its best service.

Walk at this time was still a large and powerful man. Whatever flesh he may have lost during the war was soon regained. During most of the fighting we find him clean-shaven in contrast with most of his officers and ²¹ companions. On his return from the war, he grew a beard and wore one throughout the rest of his life. During his younger days it was a dark-reddish brown and the thick head of hair he bore was brown, too, although without ²² the red tinge. His broken nose was still quite obvious but he must have been a fine specimen of young manhood. It was said in the community that when Walker Decker put ²³ his hands together he could hold a gallon of corn.

The only "sin" in which he ever engaged was an occasional chew of tobacco during the days as a cavalryman. The

20. E. M. Decker.

21. Daguerrotype in possession of E. M. Decker.

22. Interview with Dr. Garnett Ryland, University of Richmond, V

23. Lewis.

old southern sport of "chawin'" was very popular among the men, and Walk took it up during his younger days in the army. The story is told on him that one day when he was procuring a horse from the picket line, he got jostled between a mare and her colt. They pushed him in such a manner that he swallowed his quid; from that day on tobacco never passed his lips.²⁴ In all probability his interest in becoming a minister, aroused in those days of conflict, stopped this habit more effectively than did one swallowed mouthful.

During this period we hear no more of Walker's desires to be a minister. They were probably pushed into the background through the exigencies of the moment. College was no poor man's business and Walker was opposed to the idea. He said, "You'll just spoil a good farmer to make a poor minister."²⁵ Like many fathers he did not suspect the fires of ability and will that burned in the son's soul.

An event of major importance occurred during the fall of 1867--the wedding of Ann and John Alrich. This wedding in a very direct manner was the cause of two more²⁶ weddings within the immediate circle of the family.

John Alrich's first wife, the former Jane Frazer, was the mother of two children, Ellie and Sam; the family was making their home at the New Store, as we learned earlier, when Mr. Alrich was called to the colors of the

24. Ibid.

25. H. W. Decker.

26. Harris.

Confederate States of America. He served with distinction as a courier attached to the personal staff of General J. E. B. Stuart.²⁷ During April of 1864, while Mr. Alrich was at home, his wife passed away. She had contracted tuberculosis while sheltering herself and her family in a cellar during fighting in that neighborhood.²⁸ When Colonel John, as he was called because of his leadership of a militia company before the war, returned from Appomattox, he sent his little daughter to Delaware to be cared for by her mother's people, the Frazers, until he could make a home for her.²⁹

Ellie came back down into Virginia with her mother's sister, Lou Frazer, whom we have met before, arriving here in late November, 1866.³⁰ We do not know if Lou and Walker met at this time although it is not probable; if they did not know each other then, it would not be long before they were intimate.

Lou and her younger sister, Alexina, again came down to Virginia to take part in Colonel John's wedding the following December.

They were both known as fair young ladies although Lou was granted to be the beauty of the two.³¹ She had had a love affair in Delaware of considerable proportions.³² At one time she was burdened with a crossed eye, but an

27. Paper written by Harris for the U. D. C.

28. Brockman.

29. Harris.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Thompson.

operation had corrected this disfiguration. ³³ Alexina was 23 years old and Lou was 30.

The big wedding was conducted at Gravel Hill by the Revered Billingsley early on Sunday morning, December 1, 1867. ³⁴ Lou and her sister were the bride's maids and Walker was the best man. ³⁵ He had always been a close friend to Colonel John through the Civil War; later in life, they were to be even more closely knit in the bonds of public service. This is the first recorded point at which we have Walker actually noticing Lou above others. It may have been the first time that he had seen her since he had reached maturity although he had assuredly seen her many times as a boy. She was five years older than he, but this only aided in impressing her suddenly upon him. It was more or less a case of love at first sight.

After the morning ceremony they went to church at Zoan and heard Mr. Billingsley. This was Walk's first date with Lou and he made certain that he had the honor of escorting her. ³⁶ The church was very cold and the sermon was very long. Walk was rather noted through the community as a gentleman who always spoke out what he believed in. It was the custom of worship to ask if there was anyone else in the congregation who would like to say

33. Daguerrotypes in possession of Thompson.

34. Spotsylvania Marriage License, 1867.

35. Harris.

36. H. W. Decker.

anything beside the minister; any new ideas or beliefs that should be aired. It was a familiar thing for Walk to exhort at great length during these periods and the threatening possibility of such an exhortation that day aroused the fear of the members of the half-frozen congregation. Ten-year-old Ellie was the only one with the courage of her convictions; she crawled over to Uncle Walk and begged him not to exhort because her feet were so cold!³⁷ He laughingly promised not to, probably more out of regard for his new-found friend than for the cold child.

After church the whole wedding party went to the New Store for a big dinner at the home of the married couple. The festivities did not end until after supper when the guests made their separate ways homeward to their own farms. Alexina and Lou stayed at the New Store and, furthermore, much to Walk's delight they were planning to stay at least two weeks.³⁸

Dick had again seen Alexina and probably recognized her as the young lady who had come across him smeared with mud in the spring logging season so long ago. He evidently fell for the younger of the two sisters as hard as Walk fell for Louisa. The two brothers and the two sisters saw quite a bit of each other in the ensuing days, but none of the details of their courting are remembered.³⁹

38. Ibid.

39. Thompson.

40. Harris.

When the happy visiting period was over the boys drove the girls all the way to Orange Courthouse to take the train home. It was along buggy ride sometime just before Christmas and it was a cold day. ⁴⁰ As a farewell present Walk gave Lou a little writing desk which is still in existence. ⁴¹ It was a sad farewell, for when the girls got onto the train, something real went out of Walk's life; but it was not to be long before he regained it. No sooner had he and Dick returned to Gravel Hill than they both announced that they were engaged to be married ⁴² to the Frazer girls. It had been a whirlwind romance to say the least, for Walk had known Lou as a woman only about three weeks. Evidently no suggestion of unseemly haste was ever made even though the rules of decorum and conduct were strictly limiting. A long engagement was taken to make up for a short courtship.

Walk and Lou corresponded during the remainder of the winter and through the spring and summer, but those letters have not been preserved. Plans were made for the wedding which was to be at her home in Glasgow, Delaware, and Walk must have thought of her many times and kept himself in a state of nervous tension worrying about her during the year. He continued to work on the farm with no change in his usual routine.

We have a very interesting letter from Lou to one of her maids, a friend in Delaware. It tells of visiting

40. Harris.

42: In possession of Thompson.

Wilmington to purchase the organdy for her dress.

She made the dress herself; it is still in the possession of the family. Arrangements were made in Delaware for a very sophisticated wedding. The affairs of father Sam Frazer were up and his wheat speculations were producing well. The wedding invitations gave the date of the wedding as October 29, 1868; it was at 7:30 P.M. at her home.⁴⁴

The knot was tied by a Mr. Webb, the Frazer's Presbyterian pastor. It was a "tearing down big wedding", and guests from the entire neighborhood were there. The front porch of the home was screened with white muslin cloth and the banquet supper was layed on the porch.⁴⁵

No wonderment was expressed by the members of Walk's family, who still bore a lingering hate against the "damn Yankees", when Walk married one. The Frazers had always been southern sympathizers, and so it was all right. Father Frazer had told his boys that he would give them the money to buy a substitute in the Yankee draft or they could use the money to leave the country.⁴⁶ None of the Frazer men fought with the armies of the Union so Walk was not in any sense turning against the cause he fought so well to preserve.

Their honeymoon trip was nothing more or less than the ride home. They left Glasgow the next day and came to Elkton, Maryland, on the train. There they took the

43. In possession of Thompson.

44. Wedding invitation.

45. Harris.

46. Brockman.

river boat and came to Quantico where they caught the train to Fredericksburg. Dick had sent the tallest buggy drawn by the gigantic Whalon to bring back the newly-weds.⁴⁷

It was a triumphal return to Walk's old home. They came to the Red House to live for they had not yet decided on a permanent home although they were sure it was to be either in Orange or Spotsylvania Counties in Virginia.

Details from Walk's married life at the beginning are rather scarce. They were very happy together; the bond and love between them grew perceptibly stronger as the years wore on.⁴⁸ Walk probably did not like the plan of living at the home of his father and mother and probably worked hard rebuilding the home at Fountain Bluff. It was in very bad condition when he started working, but the young couple had decided on it as their home, and so he did his best.⁴⁹

The following December Dick and Alexina were married in Glasgow and their married life started out almost exactly as Walk's had.⁵⁰ They moved to the Red House, and it was their decision to come there first that finally made Walk and Lou move to Fountain Bluff to set up their own home.⁵¹ Soon after Dick and Alexina returned to Virginia, brother David Frazer and Emily, the third couple

47. Harris.
48. H. W. Decker.
49. Harris.
50. Decker Bible.
51. Harris.

in love between the Deckers and the Frazers, set their wedding date for the sixteenth of December. They were married at the Red House by Mr. Billingsley⁵² and moved to the New Store which belonged to Dave's father.

Colonel John and Ann had moved from the New Store to the Cottage place which was owned by Marsh who had already left it to go to Orange. Ann gave Marsh her share of the Decker estate at Gravel Hill⁵³ which was over near the Duerson place; the new piece became part of the Duerson farm which Marsh and his wife, Ellen, owned. John Alrich paid off his final share of the debt on the New Store property to John Decker⁵⁴ before he moved away.

Thus as the situation stood at the opening of 1870, David and Em Frazer lived at the New Store, Colonel John and Ann lived at the Cottage, Walker and Lou lived at Fountain Bluff, and Dick and Alexina along with Mr. and Mrs. Decker and their daughters, Mollie and Belle, lived at the Red House. No one could claim that the Deckers did not keep their old homes in their own hands!

One of the minor conflicts in the life of Walk and Lou must have come over the matter of religion. As we have noted she was a Presbyterian while he was a Baptist and feeling a strong desire to be a Baptist minister. It must have been many evening that they talked over the difference and discussed it, but neither was willing to give up his strong faith. They made a sort of a compact

52. Spotsylvania Marriage Licenses, 1869.

53. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1870.

54. Ibid., 1875.

finally whereby they would both read the Bible through
once more, and if they did not change their minds, there
would be no more said about the matter. ⁵⁵ The outcome of
this little trial is not recorded, but Lou died a Pres-
byterian and Walker became a Baptist minister; so the
reading must not have changed their already well-anchored
ideas. Both of them attended Zoan because it was too
difficult for Lou to try to go to church in Fredericksburg
every Sunday. ⁵⁶ She did not change her ideas however.

Lou was a very beautiful woman from all accounts;
especially her lovely smile drew admiration. She was
small of frame and figure and very attractive. The flock
of chickens at Fountain Bluff was under her care and one
occasion she threw a ring off her finger while feeding
the chickens. She was left-handed and the sweep of her
hand throwing out the grain tossed the ring away. Years
later it was found on the place ⁵⁷ and it is today in the
family as is her thimble. Both of these articles show how
small and dainty she must have been. The ring has the
word "Mac" in it which those who knew her are at a loss
to explain; Walk was never able to give her either an en-
gagement or wedding ring. ⁵⁸

Mrs. Decker did not want her husband to be a preacher
for she did not think he would make a good one. ⁵⁹ She was
very religious herself, but she did not think it would be

55. Thompson.

56. Harris.

57. E. M. Decker.

58. Thompson.

59. Lewis.

just the thing for Walk to do. He seems to have grown steadily in his desire although it was kept in the background to some extent. He used to take his little pocket Testament out to the fields with him when he was plowing. As he rested the horse, he would pause a moment or two to read his Bible.⁶⁰

During these years right at the start of their married life Walk must have improved his education considerably. It would be very logical to find that Lou was his teacher for she had had considerably more chance to get an education than he had. He must have spent time studying and reading because later we find him entering college with no more formal education. Either he learned with Lou's assistance or he learned by himself.

They were busy days for the young couple, and they had to work hard. Help could be secured for just a trifle, but Walk did not have that trifle. Lou, used to a life of comparative ease, must have found keeping the dark little home a terrible struggle.⁶¹ She had to learn a great deal right after she was married; under the tutelage of Mrs. Decker during their first year at Gravel Hill, she became a fair enough housekeeper. Her first home must have been hard, and the struggle with it showed later in the breakdown of her fragile constitution.

The Fountainbleau "big house" was not exactly a mansion of the old Southern tradition; in fact, it was a

60. Ibid.

61. Brockman.

very meager dwelling. There was one large room downstairs and a hall. Upstairs two small rooms was all the cottage boasted. The kitchen and room in which they ate were built on to the house by Walk and Dick as a sort of a shed-like extension. The cracks in the wall ran vertically and caused a good bit of trouble in rain or snow.⁶² It is not difficult to see why they had to work hard.

Work and tears were soon forgotten, however, when on the night of May 6 in the year 1870 a baby was born into the new home.⁶³ It was a little girl, and without a moment's hesitation, she was named Letitia Budd Decker, the name that Walker's mother bore. Letitia was a very tiny baby and was not at all well at birth. Louisa had a very difficult time at her birth and was not well during the baby's first few weeks.⁶⁴ The child continued to get weaker instead of stronger as the days past. Dr. J. D. Carmichael of Fredericksburg was attending almost constantly.⁶⁵

In place of their happiness of a few weeks, the little home was under a cloud of worry over the newest addition. Louisa developed cholera morbus and was not able to feed the child. The doctor tried to keep her alive on drops of tea and cream, but his efforts did not meet with success.⁶⁶ Within seven weeks' time Baby Letitia had passed away. She died on June 23, 1870.⁶⁷

62. Harris.

63. Fredericksburg Cemetery.

64. Harris.

65. Ibid.

66. H. W. Decker.

67. Fredericksburg Cemetery.

This was the first terrible blow that an all-understanding providence had forced upon the young husband, but it was not the greatest. Within fifteen years his life was to be shaken to its very depths with dreadful sadnesses, but this was the first and one of the hardest to bear. He and Louisa had looked forward to their first baby with such eager expectation and now to have the little girl snatched away before she was hardly theirs; it was almost too much for the young couple. The death was one of the bases of Walker's great firmness and strength for which he was so admired later in life. He had learned to bear up under trials and woes of his own so that he could appear to be a rock of comfort when others were bereaved or saddened.

Letitia was the first person to be buried in the new lot in the Fredericksburg cemetery which Walker purchased. ⁶⁸ We have a sad and interesting reminiscence concerning that funeral. The mother and father brought the little coffin to Fredericksburg in the foot of their buggy around the end of June. As the saddened couple in deep mourning moved up the street they passed a little thirteen-year-old girl who, with her mother, was waiting for her uncle's carriage which was to take them home. The girl's name was ⁶⁹ Mary Somerville Chesley; later she said that that was the first time she remembered seeing Walker Decker.

The shock of his child's death did not keep Walker

68. Harris.

69. E. M. Decker.

long in the slough of a despondent mood for the record shows that early in July he was elected the assessor for the Chancellor District of Spotsylvania County.⁷⁰ It was his first elected position and he was rather younger than the average men who took that post in corresponding district;⁷¹ the confidence of the surrounding community in his judgement and good sense seems to have been strong for the choice was an important thing to those land-rich, money-poor farmers. He served as the Chancellor assessor for three full years, being elected twice more in July of 1871 and 1872.⁷²

The task of assessing and recording the values of all the land in his district was no small job. True, most of the values were just brought forward the same as the year before, but many of them had to be revalued and many indeed were the complaints and arguments he had to undergo. One of Walker's strongest traits seems to be his inherent friendliness and his desire to be a friend to all. It must have been very hard on him to turn down childhood friends or near neighbors in their requests for reassessments. The final decision lay with him in all cases for at this time there was no appeal except to the Commissioner of the Revenue in the county and the record shows that he was too busy to serve as a court of appeal.⁷³

The task took many hours of painstaking work and study, not to mention travel and letter-writing. Walker's account

70. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1870.

71. Spotsylvania Land Book, 1869-1873.

72. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1871 and 1872.

73. Ibid.

books at the Court House are none too neat for the first year. His handwriting was already atrocious and some of the entries are almost impossible to decipher. Toward the end of his work in assessing, his entries become clearer and more logical without as much scratching out and changing.⁷⁴ Even bad as it was the first year, it would have been impossible for Walk to have done it with the amount of education he received before the war, so this lends countenance to the belief that he must have done some studying after his return.

One characteristic the accounting work developed strongly in Walker - from that time on he was most painstaking in carefully recording all his own personal financial matters of the smallest type.⁷⁵ We have one of his petty cash books during his college years and it shows the evident desire to keep accounts which showed the disposition of every penny.⁷⁶ The new elective position did not carry any salary with it; all the time and service he had away from his farm was given to the people who had elected him. It seems probable that he must have had some hired help for some of the time for otherwise keeping up so many tasks would have been impossible for him.

Life at the little house on the hill ran slowly onward without much change of any kind. Things were in better shape and gradually improving once more. The family was beginning to witness happier days again as their financial status rose

74. Ibid.

75. E. M. Decker.

76. Petty Cash Book of Decker.

slightly but steadily. It was with an easier heart that Walk and Louisa were able to dream in their beds as the strange murmur of the falls of the Rappahanock not far from home lulled them to sleep each night.

One year and a few days after the birth of their first child, the little home was blessed with the arrival of a second daughter. She was born on May 14, 1871.⁷⁷ Louisa was strong and healthy when little Ruth was born, and she did not suffer so terribly as when her first baby came into the world.⁷⁸ Both mother and child prospered and Walker became the proud papa of a growing baby girl. It must have been a double joy to them after their first bereavement to have such a fine child. We can easily imagine Walker the first time he took the baby to church; smiling and receiving congratulations, he must have been a happy man with his baby and his fine little wife by his side. At last the family was complete.

Walker and Louisa decided late in 1871 that they wanted to make Fountain Bluff their home for good and all. Accordingly another family deal was arranged. The Deed Book shows that Walker gave up his claim to the Red House property in exchange for which he took over the 236-acre place at Fountain Bluff. The deal was officially completed on January 2, 1872,⁷⁹ and for the first time, the family was living on property which they owned.

In the spring of 1873 Walker gave up his job as assessor. 80

77. Spotsylvania Birth Register, 1871.

78. Harris.

79. Spotsylvania Deed Book, 1871.

80. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1873, shows another person sworn in.

The records do not reveal whether he was defeated at the polls or whether he declined to run again for the post. That fall his friend Colonel John Alrick who was the treasurer of the county asked Walk to serve under him as a deputy and Walk agreed. He was sworn in November 29, 1873.⁸¹ The new task he had assumed was harder than his first one if that was possible. Instead of assessing he now had to collect the taxes. In those days the collector simply rode around on horseback and asked for the sums ordered at the various homes.⁸² It must have taken a considerable number of hours on horseback to collect some of those debts.

For two long happy years the family lived together in the peace of a Christian home where discord was unheard of and kindness was their joy; then the heavy hand of tragedy crept in again and stole away that happiness.

Louisa was to have had her third baby about the middle of June, but late in February both she and Walker fell very ill with pneumonia. They were sick in the same room on the second floor of their dearly loved little home. Walker's sisters Belle and Mollie nursed them carefully and patiently as best they could. One or the other of the two ladies was there all the time, preparing meals and making things easy as possible for two invalids. Baby Ruth stayed there at the home all

81. Ibid.

82. C. Chesley.

during the sickness. Walk fell ill a few days after
Lou and he had the worst case;⁸³ he was also able to
bear it with the greatest resistance.

Mrs. Decker's lungs were in very bad condition,
and it was not hard to see that she was slipping badly.
Dr. Carmichael attended her all through the illness.
One day when she was only semi-conscious the doctor was
giving her a little whiskey with a teaspoon when Walk
said, "Doctor, you say you know she's going to die.
They why do you give her that whiskey?" He stuck by
his principles even the life's darkest hours.

The doctor suggested to him that the stimulant
would let her die more easily; the loving husband
told him to go ahead by doing all he could to lessen her
pain.⁸⁴

Louisa passed away in great suffering on March 14⁸⁵
and was buried next to her first baby a few days later.
Major James Powers Smith, for many years the Presbyterian
minister in Fredericksburg, preached her funeral service
which Walk was forced not to attend because of his own
acute illness. Major Smith had served prominently
through the war on the staff of General T. J. Jackson
and was with Jackson at his death. The text of the
service was, "Blessed in the sight of the Lord is the
death of his saints."⁸⁶

The overwhelming sense of loss that swept over Walk

83. H. W. Decker.

84. Harris.

85. Walker John Decker Family Bible (hereafter cited as
Bible)

86. Harris.

was well-nigh impossible. He must have wondered over and over again how his Maker could allow one man to bear so much suffering. Just when their life together was reaching full blossom and they had everything to live for, her life was taken. It was hard for the devout Walker to understand and little wonder. Ruth was too young to understand, but sometimes as she grew older, she, too, must have felt the press of unutterable loneliness.

Both father and child were utterly devoted to Louisa and it is hard to express in words what a deep and terrible shock her death was.

Walk did not wish to stay longer at Fountain Bluff. It was heavy with sweet memories that cut into his soul like a sharp knife. Furthermore, a father and a baby daughter were in no condition to organize and maintain a house. Ruth and her daddy consequently moved to Gravel Hill where he put himself under the kind ministrations of his beloved sisters not to mention his mother and father who still lived there. Dick and Ellie left the Red House and took over the little house on the hill in the manner of an exchange. ⁸⁷ No deed marks this as a legal trade; it was just a change in dwelling places. They were all settled in their new homes by the beginning of the summer of 1874.

Exactly two weeks after his wife's death Walker was

88
elected the clerk of Chencellor Township. This was
a small task and had to do largely with organizing and
managing juries and planning local elections. 89
Walk
could not have campaigned for the job for he had been
sick for over a month before his election. The kind
people of the district probably gave it to him as an
expression of their sorrow at his loss and their re-
spect for him. The Court Order Book does not record
the swearing in of Walker for his new job so it is
probable that he declined this latest position; 89
at
any rate he never served as clerk of the township. He
did keep up his work as deputy treasurer under Alrich.

Walker seemed to want to soothe away his bitterness
with hard work; he labored incessantly on the Red House
place and was away from the house at long stretches.
His mother and his sister, Ann Alrich, were particularly
strong in guiding him during this period. 90
He went
down to Ann's house often to talk to her and to receive
her council.

He took a greater interest in church work and pro-
bably gave more time to quiet thought. 91
In his stress
and trouble it was only natural that his mind should
turn back to his long-smothered desire to become a minister.
His mother was very much in favor of the step and Ann
begged him to go ahead and do it. The immediate cause

88. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1873.

89. C. Chesley.

90. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1873.

91. Harris.

of his desire for change was, of course, the death of his wife. However, many other forces had been building toward that high peak in his career for a number of years gone by. One of the persons who may have influenced him considerably was John Willis,⁹² for more than half a century pastor of varied Baptist churches in Culpeper County. Walk knew and admired Mr. Willis and that gentleman probably aided him in his decision.

We can never know of the final decision. It is interesting to speculate about it. Was he out walking through the woods he loved? Was he pausing briefly behind the shining, ancient plow in a long black furrow? He may have been worshipping at Zoan.

He probably announced his decision to his friends at the church and received their approbation first. During the month of April in the year of 1876, he received his license to perform marriages after swearing⁹³ allegiance to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

On the first Sunday in the month of November his presbytery met and discussed him. They included Warren⁹⁴ G. Roane, Joseph A. Billingsley, and John C. Willis. Of these we have not met Mr. Roane. He was a pastor in western Orange County and Fluvanna for many years; no other connection between him and Walker is recorded.

The candidate was examined, approved, and ordained,

92. Ibid.

93. Spotsylvania Court Order Book, 1876.

94. Religious Herald, December 23, 1875. (Old Series vol. 48, no. 51; New Series, vol. 10, no. 51).

95. Ibid.

all in the same day. The ordination came in the regular way; Mr. Willis preached the sermon, Mr. Roane gave the ordination prayer, and Mr. Billingsley presented the Bible. Each man of the little presbytery gripped the candidate's hand in the right hand of fellowship, and then Walker gave the benediction. ⁹⁵ Walker was now a minister in the sight of both God and man.

"Brother Decker is modest, earnest and studious, and has the confidence of those who know him, and it is hoped that a career of usefulness in the Master's cause is ahead of him." ⁹⁶ They could not see the years of good and bountiful harvest that lay in the not too far distant future.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.