

# Your Deserted Father

The W.H. Stark House - 2021

When William Henry Stark (1851 - 1936) announced his intention to leave home in Newton County to work in Orange, Texas, his father, John Thomas Stark (1821 - 1893) wrote him the following scathing letter. 20-year-old William had been working for his father for over 10 years, and at the time was delivering most of the mail on John's postal route. As the oldest son of 11 siblings, William played a major role in helping his father manage the household.



**John Thomas Stark**

William's move came at a time of major change for the family. William's only older sister, Eugenia, had left home 4 years before to get married. John's second wife, Nancy, died shortly after childbirth in 1870, and in 1871 John married his third wife, Donna, who was pregnant at the time of William's announcement to leave home. All of this explains, in part, why John felt he could not manage without his son. However, John was also a man who was easily offended, quick to anger, and, as this letter shows, perfectly happy to attack even close friends and family.

**Newton, Texas - October 19th, 1871**

**Mr. W.H. Stark,**

**You are my son in form and resemblance, but how do you think a father's heart can beat when after all I have said this morning you can coldly walk up and say good bye, announce[ing] that you will be back in a month or two. Not one word of excuse or apology. Show[ing] no regard for my feelings, wishes, or interest.**

**Bud, if I have shown or felt any preference between my children it has always been for you (1), and now if I should give way to my feelings I could curse the hour you were born. To think how I have nursed you and led you by the hand when you could not help yourself, and now God help me to return all my care with the basest ingratitude. It is almost more than I can bear.**

**I have had many trials in my life but always before my own house and kindred were supporting me (2). Now those I have loved best have stabbed me in the most tender point. You forsake your Father and go with strangers. You leave me when I tell you that I need you most.**



(1): John had expressed pride and confidence in William at an early age. Part of his rationale for leaving his young family to join the Confederate Army in 1862 was that 10-year-old William could take care of the farm, which he did during the entire 3 years his father was away at war. While the household and his siblings were managed by his mother, grandmother, and older sister, as the oldest male William took on many adult responsibilities.

(2): John did have an eventful life with many difficulties and personal conflicts, often of his own making. Charismatic and combative, John has several jobs and businesses: a general store, a federal mail route, a farm, and eventually a law practice. During his 4 years of active service in the Confederate Army, he was elected captain but, much to his frustration, rose no higher. His superior officers considered his temperament unfit for higher command.

**Now I command you to return, let us see whether my commands have any weight with you or not. Feeling as I do now I would not suffer what I do for no, not for all the money you will ever see I think (3). But it is useless to think, whichever way I tread sorrow meets. My own son has deserted me, life is but little worth to me. Your mother in her far off grave in Louisiana is happy for she died when she thought you good and obedient (4), while I live to wish I were dead or had died before I saw this day. If there were any inducement, I could excuse your conduct but there can be none. You ask me to let you go to Orange to work out of debt and because I was kind enough to let you go you consider yourself a free man (5). You had just as well take money out of my pocket (so far as money is concerned) where I was asleep. But you have convinced me by your conduct this morning that you have no feeling nor respect for me or my wishes and I must try and leave myself to have none for you.**

**I again say come right home. If you do not I shall be compelled to take steps to make you and if you push me to it, the furthest corner of the globe shall not hide you (6). You must come, but no stay, I am nearly crazy this morning. Stay and never come unless you can say you are sorry for the anguish you have caused my heart. I could have buried that face out of my sight forever. While I thought you good and obedient with less grief than I feel today at your cool, unfeeling, ungrateful conduct.**

**May God help and sustain me in my great trouble and forgive you and shield you from the retribution for the sorrow you have caused your only remaining parent. Now go to those you think more of than you do me. Work for those that you wish to help more than you do me. And meet the reward that will be sure to come on you for your disobedience. I could talk and write until tongue and eyesight would fail if it would only convince you of the great wrong that you are doing. But as my words failed to reach or touch one tender chord in your feelings this morning, I must give up the task as a hopeless one. But I could not refrain from telling someone my grief and to save your feelings and take care of your good name, must let on to all that you went with my consent while my own heart is torn by your base ingratitude**

**- your deserted father, John. T. Stark**

***Now if you go on I shall know that you have no love or respect for me or mine. Deeds speak louder than words (7).***

(3): William offered to send all the money he made to his father, an offer William's employer made again after John wrote asking him to send William home. William's decision to move to Orange would ultimately make him one of the richest and most powerful men in Texas, in charge of one of the largest lumber empires in the country.

(4): Here John evokes one of the most traumatic and life impacting moments of William's life, the death of his mother Martha. When William was 12, his mother and youngest brother (who was a toddler at the time) went to visit his father at Camp Texas in Louisiana. There, in the dangerous and unsanitary condition of a military camp, she contracted some kind of dysentery and died. She was quickly buried, likely to try and stop the spread of the disease, in an unmarked grave.

(5): "Working out of debt" is likely a derogatory term for wage labor. Someone who worked for a wage was dependent or "in debt" to their employer. So basically, John is accusing William of giving up his freedom and independence to work for strangers.

(6): The fact that William only went to Orange, one of the closest growing industrial areas to his home, is a good indication that he did not want to completely cut ties with this family. Indeed, William was more of a homebody and later in life did not like to travel like his wife, preferring to stay home.

(7): John is right about this. A few years after this fight, John moved to Orange of his own accord, validating William's decision to move. The two seem to have made up or at least come to an agreement relatively quickly. William seems to have always given his father respect but also developed independence and trust in his own judgment at a young age. He remained close to his siblings for the rest of his life and always made sure they were taken care of as the eldest son of the family.