

## Who Wrote All Quiet on the Potomac Tonight- the Confederate Soldier or The Yankee Poet?



The Potomac River from Mt. Vernon- Wikimedia Commons

by Kathy Warnes

Disputes and lawsuits about the authorship of lyrics and music aren't limited to the twentieth or twenty first centuries. In literary circles, a nineteenth century dispute over the authorship of a Civil War song called [All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight \(The Picket Guard\)](#) was definitively settled in favor of Northern poet Ethel Lynn Beers, but Confederate soldier Lamar Fontaine's claim of writing the lyrics to the song still hangs over it like smoke from Front Royal, Spotsylvania Court House and the other battles that he fought for the Confederacy.

There is ample irony in the controversy about *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight* set along the Potomac River. [The Potomac River](#) flowed through both Northern and Southern territories and marked the geographic boundaries of contested states like Maryland and West Virginia. In the early part of the Civil War, especially the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, Union and Confederate armies along the Potomac camped mere yards from each other, well within picketing and shooting distance.

In the fall of 1861, most of the war dispatches from the Union Army were headed "all quiet along the Potomac," so the phrase was familiar to both soldiers and civilians.

### All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight or The Picket Guard

The poem *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight* or *The Picket-Guard* tells the story of a soldier picketing along the Potomac River. He notes that except for an occasional stray picket being shot by a rifleman hidden in a thicket the Potomac is quiet. "All quiet along the Potomac," they say.

The poet muses that the shooting of an occasional private and not an officer doesn't even merit a mention in the battle accounts and his death rattle is a lonely one. Most of the soldiers lie peacefully sleeping in their tents illuminated by the autumn moon, watch fires and stars with "glittering eyes."

While the lone sentry is patrolling he thinks about his two children sleeping far away on a low trundle bed. His vigilance and his grip on his musket relax momentarily as he loses himself in memories of his two distant children sleeping in their "low trundle-bed." He prays for them and their mother and wipes away the tears in his eyes with his sleeve.

Then he remembers where he is and gathers up his gun again. With dragging footsteps he passes a "blasted pine tree" and then he continues his patrol toward the forest. Suddenly he hears a rustling in the leaves, and he sees the flash of a rifle in the moonlight. He says goodbye to his wife Mary as he dies. Then all is "quite along the Potomac tonight." There is no sound except the rush of the river. The dew falls on the dead sentry's face. He is off duty forever.

### **Harper's Weekly Publishes All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight, The Picket Guard**

The poem appeared in Harper's Weekly on November 30, 1861 under the title *The Picket Guard* with the initials E.B. listed as its author.

Since the author was only attributed initials, many different people quickly claimed credit for the poem. *The London Times* printed *The Picket Guard* and said that it had been found in a Confederate soldier's pocket after he died.

An American paper quoted the poem and attributed it to a private soldier in the United States service who sent it home to his wife. A gentleman named Fitz James O'Brien supposedly wrote the poem as the story of a gallant soldier who had been killed at Ball's Bluff. An editorial paragraph telling this version of the creation of the poem appeared in the Harper's Weekly Magazine of July 4, 1863. In 1864, a Richmond music publisher set the poem to music and printed the credit "words by Lamar Fontaine" on its title page. As if to reinforce Lamar Fontaine's claim to the song, a Union soldier who marched with Sherman to the sea, found a paper containing a two column article about the poem telling the story of how Lamar Fontaine composed the poem "while on picket duty." He found the article in a deserted printing office at Fayetteville.

In 1866, [All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight](#) listing Lamar Fontaine as the author, appeared as a southern publication in a volume called *War Poetry of the South*, edited by Wm. Gilmore Sims.

### **Ethel Lynn Eliot Beers Wrote All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight or the Picket Guard**

Gradually, people besides the editors at *Harper's Weekly* and her friends, family, and readers learned that E.B. was Ethel Lynn Eliot, Beers, a poet from New York. Born Ethelinda Eliot in Goshen, New York, on January 13, 1827, she wrote and published poetry before she married William Beers in 1846 when she was 19. After her most famous poem *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight* appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on November 30, 1861, she published other poems and stories in many publications including the *New York Ledger*.

Ethel Lynn Beers dreaded publishing her collected works because she had a premonition that she would die after publication. Her publisher brought out *All Quiet Along the Potomac and Other Poems*, on October 10, 1869. She died in Orange, New Jersey, on October 11, 1869.

In the [Exposition to All Quiet Along the Potomac and Other Poems](#), Ethel Lynn Beers explained how she came to write *All Quiet Along the Potomac*. She wrote that she carefully gathered the dates and names of the people claiming to write the poem, and she asserted that she wrote the poem. She offered as proof a copy of the old ledger at *Harper's Weekly* listing the acceptance of and payment for *The Picket Guard*, among other literary works.

According to Ethel Lynn Beers, she had two credible witnesses to when and where and how she wrote the poem. She reported that she sat opposite a “lovely lady” at the boarding house who looked up from her morning paper at the breakfast table and said, “All Quiet Along the Potomac, as usual.” Ethel answered back, “Except a poor picket shot.”

The fallen picket still haunted Ethel Lynn and after breakfast she settled herself and her writing materials across the end of her sewing machine and wrote the entire poem before noon. She recalled, “Nothing was ever more vivid or real to me than the pictures I had conjured up of the picket’s lonely walk and swift summons, or the waiting wife and children.”

Ethel Lynn Beers concluded by saying that she had spent some time in Washington which familiarized her with the routines of war time and soldier life. She felt that the popularity of the poem was due more to the pathos of the subject matter than to any inherent quality.

### **Lamar Fontaine Wrote All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight or The Picket Guard**

Lamar Fontaine, a sharpshooter in the Mexican and Crimean Wars and a Confederate sharpshooter in the Second Virginia Cavalry, is the major challenger to Ethel Lynn Beer’s authorship of *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight*.

[Lamar Fontaine](#) was born in Washington County, Texas on October 10, 1829. After he received his education at the Military Academy in Bastrop, he became a Texas Ranger and hunted on the frontiers of Western Texas where he evolved into a skillful rider and an excellent marksman.

When the Civil War broke out he went to Mississippi and enlisted in the Confederate Army, serving first in the infantry, and then as an artillerist until he was transferred to his father's company in the Army of the Potomac. At the battle of Manassas, a cannon shot severely wounded him. It passed under his feet and bruised one of them so badly that he could no longer serve as an infantry soldier. Since he insisted on remaining in the army, his father arranged for a transfer for him to Captain Alexander's Company I, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Virginia Cavalry.

Lamar Fontaine went on to fight in several other battles including Front Royal, Cross Keys, Hazel River Bridge, Warrenton Springs and the battle of Germantown. After the Civil War, he settled on a plantation in Lyon, Mississippi, but traveled the world exploring, reminiscing about his war exploits, and [lecturing](#). He died in Clarksville, Mississippi on October 1, 1921.

In an interview in the [Brooklyn Eagle](#) of August 1, 1897, Lamar Fontaine gave his version of how he wrote the poem, *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight*. He said that he was on picket duty at Seneca Falls on the Potomac River, near Leesburg, in Loudon County Virginia, just after the first battle of Manassas. (Bull Run). The Confederates had just won the First Manassas or the First Battle of Bull Run and the general opinion in the Confederate camp had it that the Yankees had been whipped and the war would soon be over.

Continuing his story, Lamar Fontaine said that during a temporary lull in the fighting along the Potomac, he was on duty as a picket in the Union lines. On the opposite bank of the Potomac, a Confederate sentry hailed him and asked if he had any Rebel newspapers to exchange for Yankee papers.

The two soldiers exchanged newspapers and tobacco and they became friendly enough to visit each others' camps. They and the other Yankee and Confederate pickets just opposite each other on the banks of the Potomac agreed that they wouldn't shoot each other on picket duty. The consensus on both sides seemed to be that picking off pickets wouldn't win or lose the war for either side. Lamar Fontaine felt that the Yankees would keep their agreement so when he went on picket duty the next night, he built a camp fire. His comrade, a soldier called Moore, from Bedford County, Virginia, had just received a letter from his wife who had sent two tintype pictures of their two children. Moore sat by the fire reading the letter and fondly kissing the pictures. Moore and Lamar Fontaine discussed the possibility of the war ending soon and finally Moore stood up and stretched, raising his hands over his head.

According to Lamar Fontaine, he saw the flash of gunfire from the Yankee picket line across the river and Moore thudded to the ground. A bullet had struck him over the left eye, killing him

instantly. Lamar pulled Moore's body away and in the glare of the fire light, he saw that Moore's head rested on a copy of the *New York Herald*. The blood from his wound above the eye had splattered on a headline in large black type. The headline said, 'All Quiet Along the Potomac.'

After Lamar put out the fire, he swore that he would kill every Yankee on sight after that. He couldn't forget the death of his friend or the *New York Herald* newspaper headline. As he sat by the body of his dead friend, he heard the waters of the Potomac sing a midnight requiem for his friend. The next day, according to Lamar Fontaine, he sat down and began to write a poem:

All quiet along the Potomac, they say,  
Except here and there a stray picket  
Is shot, as he walks on his beat to and fro,  
By a rifleman hid in a thicket.  
"This nothing! A private or two now or then  
Will not count in the news of the battle;  
Not an office lost – only one of the men,  
Moaning out all alone his death rattle.

Concluding his story, Lamar Fontaine said that he wrote out a copy of the poem for himself and then showed copies of his poem to friends. Eventually his poem circulated through camp with no name attached to it. Finally, a copy of the poem was found in the pocket of a dead sentry. In time, a copy of the poem reached *Harper's Weekly* and was first published as an anonymous poem.

"It was a long time afterward that I learned that a young girl in Massachusetts claimed the authorship of my poem. But I can't see how a young girl, far removed from the scenes of war and wholly without personal observation of picket duty, could have pictured these scenes in verse. However, the poem is mine, and I drew my inspiration from that midnight scene in the rebel picket lines on the bank of the Potomac," Lamar Fontaine said.

### **The Confederate Soldier or the Yankee Poet?**

Despite the controversy about its authorship and circumstances of its creation, [All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight](#), became so popular that the military authorities on both the Union and Confederate sides prohibited shooting pickets. The power of music and lyrics transcended the power of a bullet to end life and legacy.

Authorship questions can be raised about both lyricist accounts. Sources say that Lamar Fontaine was wounded severely at the First Battle of Bull Run. If that is so, how could he have been on picket duty along the Potomac River shortly after that battle as he states in his narrative about writing the poem? Why is Ethel Lynn Beer's account of the circumstances of writing the poem

so generalized and not as intricately detailed as that of Lamar Fontaine?

The story of *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight* didn't end in the nineteenth century Civil War. The controversy swirling around its creation and creator still reverberates into the twenty first century. Although the authorship question appears to have been settled in favor of Ethel Lynn Beers, Lamar Fontaine still has his [adherents](#) and detractors. One of the most recent unfavorable depictions of Lamar Fontaine can be found in the December 15, 2011 [New York Times Opinionator](#) piece by Thomas J. Brown. Brown writes about *All Quite along the Potomac Tonight*, reinforces the authorship of Ethel Lynn Beers and says of Fontaine, "the most brazen pretender, a Confederate soldier named Lamar Fontaine, maintained in his 1908 autobiography that he had circulated 5,000 copies of the poem before Beers's version appeared, including an engrossed presentation to Jefferson Davis that supposedly drew a complimentary reply."

The fact that a Civil War era song *All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight*, can still stir controversy and emotion long after the original events, people, and emotions that inspired its creation have passed from the scene attests to the power of song.

#### References

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- Links about Lamar Fontaine and Ethel Lynn Beers:

[Lamar Fontaine.](#)  
[Lamar Fontaine](#)  
[Lamar Fontaine](#)  
[Lamar Fontaine](#)  
[Lamar Fontaine](#)  
[Lamar Fonatine](#)

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