



James T. Thitchener grew up in the rural hamlet of Savill, on the border of Ulster and Orange counties, not far from the town of Plattekill. Little is documented about his early life, except that he was born in 1835, and was the son of William T. Thitchener and Catharine Higgins. His family was Quaker, as is evinced by their burial in the Plattekill Friends Cemetery. His parents were relatively impoverished, his father being a blacksmith and a farmer. His family's poverty may also be shown through the relative illiteracy in James' writing. As a young man, James wrote a series of letters home during his brief period of service in the Civil War while under Company I. of the New York 124th Volunteer Regiment. He enlisted on August 16th 1862 and was mustered to position of private on September 5th 1862 at the age of 27. He is quoted, however, saying that he only enlisted to **"get out of the way and break myself of some bad habits I had"**. Once enlisted, he is known to have fought in the battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. Chancellorsville, especially for the 124th was a miserable fight in which a large number of the Union forces were lost to typhoid, even before military hostilities had begun. On May 12th 1863, just days after the end of the Battle of Chancellorsville, he wrote, **"the most of us is sick - we had lay out in the rain[.]"**, referring to the Army of the Potomac's decision to break camp on the swampy banks near the Rappahannock, a disastrous move. James remarks in the same letter, that **"wen we look around [i can] see soo menny of our poor boys left behind[,] it tis harde to pat [part] with."** Throughout his service Thitchener wrote frequently about his dislike for military leadership, reiterating the anger which many foot soldiers shared for the divide between their lifestyles and those of the comparatively well off officer class. "Captain Clark," under whom Thitchener served, was often referred to as irresponsible, neglecting his men for alcohol and women. James was maimed in the battle of Gettysburg, on July 2nd 1863, while serving on the front line, less than one year after enlisting. The extent to which he was injured at Gettysburg is still unknown, but his wounds were evidently non-lethal. From an 1879 widow's pension application and various censuses, it is apparent that he had a wife, Celestia, whom he mentioned frequently in his letters. They had four children; Catherine, born in 1860, William A., born in 1862, Ann A. born in 1864 and Emily who was born in 1867. James died relatively young at the age of 36 on August 31st 1872 of unknown causes.

Letters like those written by James Thitchener offer illumination into the lives of the minions of poor who served in the same war as the officers whose letters we often find transcribed or used to craft period-novels. His and so many others, however, are stories about the actual woes of combat and the fears of war from the front lines, where frequently not an officer was to be found.