



Three Vermonters

“This story, in which a very young boy meets a very great man, is based on a true incident.” Based on a true incident? That, of course, is a key question.

By MICHAEL N. STANTON

In the late 1830s one Jonathan Emery decided to leave his home in London, England, and settle in the New World. It is impossible to guess his motives for this enormous shift, but in any event Emery brought his family first to Maine, then to a town in Vermont called Eden. He could scarcely have imagined that his decision would result in the death of his eldest son, George, in a Confederate prison camp during the Civil War, still less that George’s young son Martin would have an encounter with President Abraham Lincoln while George was imprisoned at Andersonville. No one could have supposed that more than eighty years later, another Vermonter, Catherine Cate Coblenz, would set these events down in a not-quite forgotten book for children.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE VERMONTERS

Jonathan Emery and his wife Sarah had nine children, of whom the first three were born in England. The oldest of these, George, was born there on September 26, 1828, and so would have been about ten years old when his family came to Vermont.¹

George in turn married Mary Belle Carter in Maine in late 1849, and they lost little time in starting a family. Unlike many of his fellow soldiers, George Emery was no raw youth when the Civil War broke out in 1861. He was in fact thirty-two years old and the father of five children

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(so far), of whom the fourth, Martin, had been born on November 14, 1858. George seems to have consciously chosen to fight for his adopted country by enlisting in the Eleventh Regiment of Vermont Volunteers (later designated the First Regiment of Heavy Artillery) when it began forming in the summer of 1862. He enlisted from Irasburg on August 6 of that year and along with many others from the area (including the town of Eden, Lowell, Barton, and Albany) was assigned to Company F. The entire regiment was mustered into federal service on September 1, 1862. It was the largest of Vermont's seventeen regiments, with a nominal strength of 2,320 men divided into thirteen companies and a staff unit; its commander during most of the war was Col. (later Brevet Brigadier General) James Warner of Middlebury.

At first the nature of the Eleventh's service seemed idyllic, in wartime terms anyway. It was stationed in the northern defenses of Washington, D.C., building and garrisoning posts such as Fort Slocum, Fort Totten, and Fort Stevens. Garrison duty was bland, and men like George Emery could have their families nearby, as Emery in fact did. As the regimental historian (the very same James Warner) wrote in the encyclopedic *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers*, "No more pleasant or cheerful experiences were ever the lot of soldiers in actual war than those enjoyed by this regiment during the whole of the year 1863 and the first three months of 1864."² According to pay records, George Emery had "extra duty" as a carpenter at Fort Slocum from December 1862 on into the new year.

With the sharp irony of wartime, this placid life soon ceased. After the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864, General U. S. Grant (who had come east to take command in March) needed replacement line troops and the Eleventh was called to actual combat duty. It fought at Spotsylvania, where Col. Warner was wounded in the neck, at Cold Harbor, and at Petersburg. That Grant sent these comfortably situated troops into extremely uncomfortable battle is in a way a testament to his well-known ruthless resolve. That they suffered the fate they did is a testament to Robert E. Lee's equally notable tenacious resolve.

As a kind of sidelight to Grant's efforts to dislodge Lee from Petersburg, troops of the Eleventh Vermont, with others, were sent on June 23, 1864, to attack the Weldon Railroad, an important Confederate supply route. The attack failed and over 400 Vermonters were taken prisoner. It was, Howard Coffin says, "one of the saddest of all days for Vermont in the Civil War."³ Among the 400 were George Emery and forty-eight others from Company F alone; most were sent to Andersonville, and most died there. Of the forty-eight men captured from Company F, thirty-five never returned north, including George Emery.



George Emery, Union soldier. Courtesy of Michael Stanton.

THE SECOND VERMONTER AND THE MAN FROM ILLINOIS

Back in the capital city of the Union, five-year old Martin Emery was doing his best to help his fatherless family. According to the story as preserved in Emery family tradition, and as related by Catherine Cate Coblenz in *Martin and Abraham Lincoln* (1947),⁴ Martin often accompanied a black man named Snowden from the Emery home in Alexandria

into Washington, where Snowden sold fresh produce from his wagon. Martin wore a smart little uniform in emulation of his father and was very proud of his dad as both a soldier and as a cobbler, which George Emery had been in civilian life.

On a certain day in the heat of a Washington summer, Snowden saw that little Martin was very tired. He left the boy to rest in a parklike area while he completed his rounds. As the boy ate his lunch sitting on the steps of a large building he fell into sober reflections on how long his father would be a prisoner of war and how his mother could feed and clothe the family. A shadow fell across his somber countenance—the shadow of a tall lanky man who asked why the boy was so sad. It was Abraham Lincoln, coming down the steps of the Capitol building, and Martin explained about his family's plight in his father's absence. Lincoln promised to speak to someone and, in Catherine Coblentz's account, said, "I'm pretty sure there will be food from the army stores every week for your mother." Little could be done about George Emery's evil situation at this moment, but his family could be helped.

Then Martin noticed that Lincoln himself looked rather worn and uncomfortable. Something was wrong with his shoe, Lincoln explained, and it was causing him considerable pain. Martin, who had been well schooled at his father's bench, offered to repair Lincoln's shoe and with a pair of rocks managed to flatten a protruding nail. Thus the small boy and the great man provided one another comfort and help, each according to his abilities.

George Emery's plight was indeed bad. If the Confederates could not adequately feed, or clothe, or arm their own soldiers, and they could not, they certainly could not adequately feed or house enemy prisoners—especially since the number of those prisoners had been vastly swollen by the suspension of prisoner exchanges. Thus, George Emery died at Andersonville on September 15, 1864. He was thirty-five years old and left a wife and six children.

But the gods of war—ironists all—had not finished their sport with George Emery. Conditions at Andersonville were dreadful and dozens of men like Emery died daily of disease, privation, and ill treatment. It is unsurprising in these circumstances that good record keeping was a matter of almost no consequence. Although he had died in September, word did not get through, and George Emery was listed as a deserter in his unit's records for November and December.

One of the best collateral results of the compilation of the *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers* was the correction of such errors. The compilers canvassed Army records, North and South, over and over to ascertain the facts. As Theodore S. Peck, who was in charge of this



Abraham Lincoln and Martin Emery. Illustration by Trientja, from Catherine Cate Coblentz, Martin and Abraham Lincoln (1947). Courtesy of Michael Stanton.

work, wrote: “I find that about three hundred Vermonters who were recorded as deserters in the roster of 1864-65-66 died in rebel prisons, or on the battle field in the hands of the enemy . . . *These corrections of the record of so many of our gallant men are alone worth all the work and expense of preparing this Roster*” (Peck’s emphasis).⁵

Peck was writing at the completion of the *Roster*, in 1892, but long before that, George Emery’s status had to be dealt with. Although he had died in September 1864, he was carried on the rolls in November and December as a “deserter,” one who had in fact sworn allegiance to the Confederacy in October 1864. Such, as Peck noted, was the confusion surrounding the status of Emery and several hundred others.

When Martin’s mother Mary applied for a widow’s pension for herself and her six children in 1868 her petition was denied on the basis of the erroneous records of George Emery’s behavior. The rejection is dated November 3, 1869, some fourteen or fifteen months after the original application. Documents show that she applied again in 1872, this time armed with statements from Emery’s fellow soldiers about his good record, and even from fellow prisoners about his death at Andersonville well before the desertion and treason allegedly took place.

In both rounds, Mary Emery had to furnish affidavits and other proof that (1) she was indeed the wife of George Emery (testimony from those present at the wedding back in 1849); (2) she was the mother of his children (testimony from relatives and neighbors who were present at the actual lyings-in); and (3) statements from still higher officials that those officials taking the testimony—justices of the peace and the like—were indeed competent to hear it. Finally, on March 21, 1873, the Adjutant General’s Office in Washington issued a finding that in the case of George Emery “the charges of desertion & of having taken the oath of allegiance to the Southern Confederacy . . . while he was a prisoner of war are removed from this man’s record.”⁶

With the way now clear, further proceedings eventually awarded Mary Emery a pension, probably for about the amount originally applied for: \$8.00 per month plus \$2.00 per month for each child under sixteen years of age. In 1879 Mary Emery applied for arrearages on her pension according to a law passed that year (it is unknown whether these arrears were awarded) and in October 1910 a rather stark document entitled “PENSIONER DROPPED” noted that Mary’s pension should cease because she had died the previous January.

Meanwhile, Martin Emery grew to manhood, married, raised a family, and told his children and grandchildren and eventually even his great-grandchildren about his encounter with the now all-but-sainted president. As a man of many interests he pursued many callings and

was at one time police chief of Plymouth, New Hampshire, according to his granddaughter, Ruth Jones, of Hillsboro. Emery died in Concord in the summer of 1944.

Martin Emery was twice married, and after the death of his second wife, Mrs. Jones says, at what would seem to many people an advanced age, Martin Emery became what she calls a “gentleman hobo.” He would travel about from place to place, always well turned out and spruce in appearance, visiting friends and kinfolk. He mostly alternated between family in and around Eden, Vermont, and relatives in central New Hampshire. On one of these peregrinations, around 1934 or 1935, he hitched a ride with a woman and he told her his story of meeting Abraham Lincoln. The woman was Catherine Cate Coblentz, and a few years later she was able to retell his tale to a larger audience.⁷

THE THIRD VERMONT

Catherine Cate Coblentz was a writer with a strong Vermont background and strong ties to her native place, yet she is little known there. She was the author of ten children’s books, of which one, *The Blue Cat of Castle Town*, won an honorable mention in the Newbery Awards for 1946. As the title indicates, that book, like *Martin and Abraham Lincoln*, had a Vermont background.

Catherine Cate was born in Hardwick in 1897, where her father was a stonemason and later a schoolteacher. Her love of books came early, for the family home was next door to the village library. Young Catherine spent considerable time there and when the village librarian eloped one fine day, she took over the library for the summer. She was then a ninth grader. About this time her father died and to help support the family she began writing for the village newspaper.

During World War I Catherine moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked for the Bureau of Standards and graduated from George Washington University. At the Bureau she met and then married a distinguished physicist, William Weber Coblentz (1873–1962), who later won the Rumford Prize for his work on the properties of light. They had two children but both died young, so Catherine’s love of children expressed itself in books. It is a tribute to her writing and her love of young people that the children’s reading room at the Cleveland Park branch of the D.C. Public Library is named for her.

Catherine and her husband traveled widely, and she “sometimes discovered stories lost in history, which it seemed to me that children would enjoy.” *Martin and Abraham Lincoln* would be such a story. Its setting and background combine the two areas she was most familiar



Catherine Cate Coblentz, from the dust jacket for The Beggars' Penny (1943).

with, rural Vermont and the city of Washington, and it was certainly a story lost in history until she met old Martin Emery.

Even though Catherine Coblentz died in 1951 her stories have taken on a kind of independent life. She meant them not just for entertainment but also for enlightenment. She saw the value of history for children and others: As she wrote, "Becoming acquainted with the people and the problems of yesterday is, I believe, one way of knowing the people of today. Such knowledge and understanding should aid in solving the problems of tomorrow."⁸

Pious hope this may be, but some have shared it. In 1976 *Martin and Abraham Lincoln* became one segment in a 32-part series, "Stories of America," fifteen-minute color videotapes designed for grade-school children, produced by the Ohio State Department of Education and distributed by the Agency for Instructional Television. *Martin* fits into the sequence right between *The Underground Railroad* and *Clara Barton*. The tape itself seems unobtainable nowadays, but the blurb in the *Teacher's Guide* reads as follows: "This story, in which a very young boy meets a very great man, is based on a true incident. Abraham Lincoln finds a way to help the boy, whose father is in Andersonville Prison, and Martin, in his small way, helps the President."⁹

FACT AND FICTION

“Based on a true incident”? That, of course, is a key question, and debate about the legend, including which Emery son met Lincoln, persists within the family.¹⁰ Still, there is no compelling reason to doubt Martin Emery’s story or its value as lore, legend, and lesson, even though it has no independent verification. So far as I have been able to discover, Lincoln made no record of the meeting, none of the many Lincoln biographers mentions it, and it is not found among the endless stream of anecdotes about Lincoln. Nor have I been able to locate any papers of Catherine Coblentz’s that would tell us whether she undertook research into the authenticity of the tale.

Martin Emery’s story lives at the intersection of fact, folklore, and fiction. It certainly contains a nugget of truth, despite the accidents of transmission, embellishments, and mere passage of time that may deface any such story. According to Ruth Jones, Martin himself never celebrated Thanksgiving because he mistakenly believed that was the day in 1864 on which his father died. Martin would have been only five years old when he met Lincoln—a tad young, perhaps, for the encounter as told (could he have learned even rudiments of the cobbler’s trade?); his nine-year-old brother Jonathan might be a more likely candidate, as some descendants have suggested. And this uncertainty becomes even cloudier when an imaginative writer deals with the material.

Indeed, there is some reason to suppose that Catherine Cate Coblentz exercised measurable poetic license to change a few of the details and circumstances of the story, perhaps to help children understand it more easily. For example, in the story Martin meets Lincoln as the president is coming down the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building. But, then as now, presidents almost never visited the Capitol except on important state occasions. Lincoln, whose presidency was as closely watched and as thoroughly documented as any before very recent times, seems to have visited the Capitol during the time Martin’s dad was a prisoner (from June 23 to September 15, 1864) only on the 4th of July, and that clearly would have been a public, not a personal occasion.¹¹

Another candidate for the site of the meeting of the very young boy and the very great man would be in the vicinity of the Soldiers’ Home, near Rock Creek Road, where Lincoln used a cottage on the grounds as a kind of summer White House or retreat—a prototype of Camp David. Putting the encounter there would solve another problem of accuracy that Coblentz seems to have created: in her story Snowden and Martin come into the city from Alexandria, where both the Emery house and the “nearby fort,” as Coblentz calls it, are supposedly located.

But Alexandria is southwest of central Washington, whereas the forts and emplacements where the 11th Vermont Regiment was stationed (Forts Slocum, Stevens, Totten, and others) are all in the northeast or northwest quadrants of the District of Columbia, in effect forming an arc or chain guarding Washington from invasion or other threats from the Maryland side—and not very far from the Soldiers' Home. Company F specifically was at Fort Slocum for almost its entire time in the District. Just why Coblenz transferred the action in this way is unclear, unless it was simply to use the iconic image of the Capitol as an easily recognized symbolic landmark.

So where, and consequently when, and to what effect the man and the boy met may be problematical questions, but they do not damage the core of the story. By still another irony, in October 1864, just a month after George Emery's death, negotiations for prisoner exchanges between North and South reopened. From the viewpoint of the Emery family, this renewal must have seemed far too little and far too late.

NOTES

¹Most of my sources are mentioned in later notes, but special thanks go to an old friend, Kenneth Gervais of Portland, Oregon. He is Martin Emery's great-grandson, and it was he who first told me about Martin's encounter with the president, and about Catherine Coblenz's book. It was pleasant not only to hear the family story, but also to renew a boyhood friendship. Added information on the Emery family comes from Emery Family Genealogy: <http://www.lanset.com/memry>

²James Warner, "Eleventh Regiment," in *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers . . . during the War of the Rebellion, 1861-66* (Montpelier, Vt.: Watchman Publishing, 1892; reprint Newport, Vt.: Civil War Enterprises, 1996), 409; hereafter cited as *Roster*. Unless otherwise noted, all the information on the regiment and its men comes from this book.

³See Howard Coffin, *Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1995), 273-75. For a detailed account of the Weldon Railroad conflict, see Dr. David Cross, *A Melancholy Affair at the Weldon Railroad: The Vermont Brigade, June 23, 1864* (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Publishing, 2003).

⁴Catherine Cate Coblenz, *Martin and Abraham Lincoln based on a true incident*, pictures by Trientja (Chicago: Children's Press, 1947).

⁵*Roster*, vi.

⁶This information and that in the preceding and following paragraphs comes from documents copied and furnished by Debra Gervais, Esq., of Riverside, California. George Emery was her husband Michael's great-great-grandfather.

⁷Conversation with Ruth Jones, 30 April 2002.

⁸"Catherine Cate Coblenz," in Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycroft, eds., *The Junior Book of Authors* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951), 73-74. Coblenz's interest in writing about history for children is indicated by some of her other titles: *The Falcon of Eric the Red* (1942), *The Bells of Leyden Sing* (1944), *Sequoia* (1946).

⁹*Stories of America: Teacher's Guide* (n.p., n.d.) p. 25.

¹⁰Private communication dated 9 August, 2002, from Natalie Whalen (a great-granddaughter of Martin): "There has been controversy [in the family] for years as to which of the brothers really met Abraham Lincoln, but there is no way to prove it now."

¹¹See Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology 1809-1865* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside House, 1991), *passim*. This chronology is detailed enough to document a number of encounters—quite trivial ones—Lincoln had with children during his presidency.