

VERMONT

*The
Proceedings of the
Vermont Historical Society*

HISTORY



SPRING 1995

VOL. 63, No. 2



The Civil War Letters of S. E. and S. M. Pingree, 1862–1864

The Pingrees were articulate, often eloquent correspondents. . . . Both were opinionated commentators on the military milieu into which they had suddenly been thrust.

By KELLY A. NOLIN

Dark, cluttered, mysterious spaces: nearly all academic libraries have them. Into these vacant or unused places are poured the unsolicited gifts, the office contents of long-retired faculty and staff, the institution's archival offspring, and the cataloging backlogs of successively understaffed months or years. Year after year, historic layer upon historic layer, the accumulation grows, an embarrassment of riches to the researcher, a nightmare to the space-conscious library director. Eventually, inevitably, someone is assigned the task of bringing order to the chaos.

It was from just such a dark space within the library at Lyndon State College that I pulled from the furthest reaches of a heavy old filing cabinet a bundle of forty-six letters. They were written on the fields of the Civil War by two brothers, Samuel E. and Stephen M. Pingree of Hartford, Vermont, from January 1862, when the Vermont Brigade was in winter quarters at Camp Griffin in northern Virginia, to June 1864, shortly after the brigade had emerged from the trenches at Cold Harbor. Nearly all are addressed to a cousin, the Honorable Augustus Pingry Hunton of Bethel. Hunton served as Speaker of the Vermont House of Representatives from 1860 to 1861, presiding over that body during the special war appropriation session called by Governor Erastus Fairbanks in April 1861. As superintendent of recruiting for Windsor County, Hunton offered a sympathetic ear as his cousins voiced the needs of the Vermont soldier and described the brigade's almost chronic want of men. The letters are not only intimate expressions of soldiers' homely concerns amid the

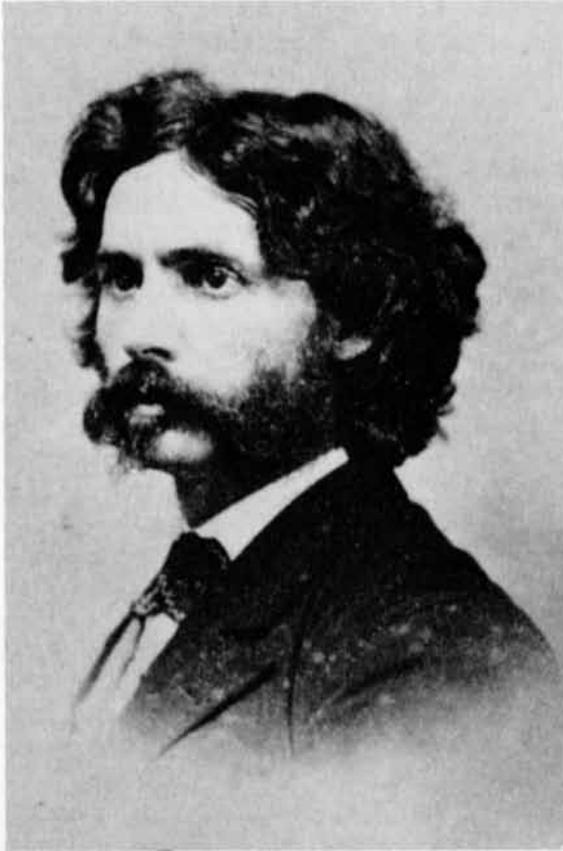
tumult of battle but also a record of the deeds of two men who played a part in the great events that riveted the attention of its own generation and continue to fascinate ours.

Samuel and Stephen Pingree were born in Salisbury, New Hampshire, Samuel in 1832 and Stephen in 1835. The brothers stepped from the halls of Dartmouth College into lifelong careers in law, opening an office in Hartford, Vermont, in 1860. Both rendered good service to that town throughout their lives. Samuel was town clerk for more than sixty years, and Stephen represented the town's citizens in the Vermont legislature from 1872 to 1873. Both married and settled down, and both died as Hartford residents, Stephen in 1892 and Samuel in 1922. With a high reputation as a criminal lawyer but no legislative experience, Samuel was called to the office of lieutenant governor in 1882 and served until 1884, when he became the forty-third governor of Vermont. Of his term as Vermont's chief executive, it has been said that "he executed his duties with conspicuous ability and wisdom, and his administration ranks among the best in a well-governed and highly conservative state."¹ Before they launched their careers in local and state politics, however, the two Pingree brothers endured three hard years of military service.

Both Samuel and Stephen rose through the ranks of the Third and Fourth Vermont regiments, respectively, from first lieutenant to lieutenant colonel. The Pingrees were articulate, often eloquent correspondents, occasionally citing Shakespeare and the Bible and using Latin terms and medieval allusions. Both were outspoken and opinionated commentators on the military milieu into which they had suddenly been thrust. They relayed home news of their regiments within the Vermont Brigade and made observations on the Union army as a whole. Through their eyes we become acquainted with the officers and men of the Old Brigade, the behavior of the various regiments and brigades under fire, and the actions (or inaction) of Confederate and Union leaders. Their legal backgrounds, together with their frequent assignments on courts martial, made the Pingrees reliable and reasonably fair judges of military conduct.

In their letters they also addressed the philosophical questions of slavery and reliance on religious beliefs in "times like these"² and the political issues of emancipation and conscription. In August 1863 Stephen Pingree discussed the volatile issue of war policy, formulating a personal credo:

I once doubted the policy of this war. I never doubted the right to maintain the Union, and no living man ever heard a word that could be so construed from me. Thousands who thought they foresaw a short struggle would have opposed the war as impolitic had they foreseen the half of what has occurred, and some who called me a traitor for doubting its practicability now shudder at the idea of being forced to do what I did



Lieutenant Colonel Samuel E. Pingree, Third Vermont Regiment.

voluntarily—and am still ready and anxious to do to the end, cost what it may. I once doubted the policy of the negro soldier bill and, in fact, of the emancipation policy of the Gov't, but I was honest in both objections; the first on the ground that negroes would be an unprofitable army, and the other on the ground that, if we must emancipate, we could do so as we occupied the country, and not beforehand exasperate the South and cool the ardor of the border states by a course that must prove fruitless until military occupation could enforce it. Today, I believe in not only the justice but the policy of a war to restore the Union. I believe not only in Universal Emancipation, both in the border & rebel states, in the former by purchase of the loyal and by force of all others, and in the latter by force and without compensation, but I have faith in the effectiveness of Negro troops and, having reason to believe they are of use, I have no scruple against using them & protecting them, if need be, by hanging a Rebel for every one of them executed or sold into



Lieutenant Colonel Stephen M. Pingree, Fourth Vermont Regiment.

slavery. I have aided negroes to escape here and deliver themselves up to the military to be sent north, and I will always do it, because I hate Slavery and believe by destroying it we weaken this Rebellion.

I will not say that I am opposed to peace while there is a vestige of Slavery left. I leave that to the proper authorities to arrange, but I sincerely hope that, come when it may, soon or late, Peace will find a restored Union without a single bondman within its borders, for I fear for the stability of an Union with such an institution, and I almost fear the Vengeance of Heaven upon an enlightened nation that permits Slavery such as this has been, & is, in her borders.³

The brothers' letters include much that may seem mundane but was of paramount importance to the Civil War soldier: lengthy marches, drill and picket duty, sporadic receipt of mail and wages, construction of roads and earthworks, and—because so much depended on it—the weather.

There is rejoicing over the availability of fresh produce or the receipt of a box from home, the strain and frustration of ill health, nostalgia at the approach of Thanksgiving and the reality of short rations, and the anguish of heavy regimental losses and the deaths of comrades. The Pingrees discuss strategy and do their utmost to make clear to Hunton their regimental positions as well as the positions of the various Union army divisions and their relation to the Confederate troops. To illustrate the often confusing descriptions of locations, the brothers include three hand-drawn maps, one of which is reproduced here (see p. 91).

The battle of Lee's Mills on April 16, 1862, was the opening assault on the enemy by General George Brinton McClellan in his peninsula campaign and the first engagement of troops in which Vermont regiments sustained heavy casualties. McClellan's objectives were threefold: to stop the Confederates from strengthening their batteries, to silence their fire, and to gain control of Dam Number 1. But there was apparently some disagreement, if not outright confusion, among the various Union commanders regarding the importance of the assault. Indeed, to launch any attack along the Warwick River went against the better judgment of General E. D. Keyes, who asserted, "No part of [the Yorktown-Warwick River] line, so far discovered, can be taken by assault without an enormous waste of life."⁴ His warning went unheeded.

McClellan's plan was to send four companies of the Third Vermont Regiment across the Warwick and into the Confederate rifle pits beyond, where they were to await reinforcement before advancing on the formidable array of earthworks in their front. Led by Captain Samuel Pingree, the battalion pushed forward, "shouting, yelling, firing."⁵ Seven southern regiments met them with a pounding rain of short-range artillery and musketry fire. The men gained the shallow pits, though they offered the Vermonters scant protection from the enemy barrage. Pingree twice dispatched messengers with urgent requests for support or positive orders to withdraw. There was no reply to either message, and for forty minutes the men held their ground. In the words of Lieutenant Erastus Buck (Company D), "We were bound to die rather than retreat without orders."⁶ Ammunition was running low, and the small band of men was almost completely hemmed in by Confederate troops when at last the order to withdraw arrived.

Back on the east bank of the Warwick, regimental officers assessed the terrible damage of the assault. The four Vermont companies together suffered a 45 percent loss; Pingree's own company, Company F, lost a remarkable 52 percent. Samuel Pingree was hit twice, one Confederate musket ball entering his left hip and another taking the thumb from his right hand. He spent ten weeks in a Philadelphia hospital recovering from

his wounds and from subsequent typhoid pneumonia. For courage exhibited in the battle, he received the congressional Medal of Honor.

If Samuel's military career had ended on the banks of the Warwick River, both his honor and his country would have been well served. But this was only the first of his military distinctions. Following his recovery, he rejoined the Vermont Brigade at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, and thereafter he and the troops under his command frequently merited special mention in official dispatches. The battles of Salem Heights and Cold Harbor and the engagement at the Weldon Railroad were but a few cases in which his superior officers commended his actions.

Samuel's final extant letter to his cousin in Bethel speaks to us most dramatically of his service. It is a stunning conclusion to a remarkable collection of letters, a seven-page description of the beginnings of General Ulysses S. Grant's overland campaign of 1864, the campaign that would end at Appomattox Court House with the formal surrender of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

During the first two and a half weeks of the campaign, the Vermont Brigade lost over half its entire fighting force in killed, wounded, and missing, sustaining the heaviest casualties of any brigade in the Union army. Samuel's lengthy and detailed letter covers the start of the campaign in the Wilderness; more than 1,200 Vermonters were shot in two days (May 5 and 6, 1864) of intense fighting. The letter continues with an account of the Vermont troops' participation in Emory Upton's bold charge at Spotsylvania Court House, as Union soldiers nearly breached Lee's lines in a few brief hours on May 10, 1864. Pingree describes the horror of Spotsylvania's "Bloody Angle," where fighting equalled or surpassed the intensity of that in the Wilderness. He concludes with a report of the trench warfare at Cold Harbor, Grant and Lee settling down to a bloody stalemate after Grant had sacrificed some 7,000 men in about thirty minutes during an ill-conceived attack on a well-entrenched position.

In the outer trenches near
Cold Arbor Va. June 10/64

Cousin Hunton,

You have read & heard how busy this army have been since we crossed the Rapidan on the 4th of last month, and on that account you will probably have charity to overlook my long reticence towards you.

If I had the advantages of a reporter at army Hd. Qurs. I should take great pride & pleasure in writing you a truthful history of the operations of this & the rebel army since the opening of the battle of the 5th ult., but as I have attended religiously to my own duties and passed camp rumors lightly by, I can speak knowingly of but a limited portion of these great developments.

In our advance on the 5th ult. we ran upon the enemy in a woods

(some ten miles broad by 17 long) called by the natives the Wilderness—The order of battle was prepared & we attacked the enemy at about 2½ P.M. & drove them back, they fighting every rod against us in a most gallant manner.

In this battle the Vt. Brigade were fighting with the 2d Corps and near the left of the army while most of the 6th Corps were on the extreme right. We advanced a half mile or so and held our ground—should have gone further but must wait for the left to advance *pari passu* [side by side] with us. In this battle I was with my proper regiment. We lost in killed & wounded over 200 officers & men.

Next morning before day I was ordered to take command of the 2d Vt. Reg't. where I have been since. At day break the order was to advance again. The advance was not made till about 6 A.M. We pushed the enemy back over a mile & were ordered to wait as before till the left advanced even with us—we held our ground till about 1 P.M. when the enemy massed against the 2d Div. 2d Corps on our left & forced them back—getting in our left rear,—we retire to our entrenchments and await the advance of our elated enemies.

At 4 P.M. they had shown no [disposition?] to attack us and another general advance is ordered by Gen. Grant to take place at 6 P.M. However, the enemy was intent upon assaulting our works and moved upon us at about 5 P.M. while we were in full preparation to move into the woods upon him again. This was our streak of good luck—for being in readiness to leave our line of works on the road and go out to fight the enemy, how much stronger we must be to meet him behind a line of earth pits which we had been two hours in building the night before.

A. P. Hill's entire Corps massed in deep lines of battle were hurled desperately against our Corps (2d) center and for twenty or thirty minutes the battle raged with intensest fury—not a gun was used—all was musketry—there was but one rolling sound and that lasted till the last enemy was driven out of sight & hearing back into the woods or left dead or wounded under the murderous fire of our men.

Our lines immediately advance & reestablish our morning line.

In this battle the enemy were badly whipped & Gen. Hill's Corps lay down in grief that night beyond question.

Next day it was evident Lee was changing his line to his right, somewhere.

We move towards Spottsylvania C.H. accordingly. Lee's forces are a bit ahead of us and have had time to intrench partially (2 or 3 hours is enough to build fair lines against musketry).

It was Sunday night (the 8th) we attack to get a position—get it & rest till morning. Enemy entrench for defence—we entrench to make our lines safe if our attack should result unfavorably.

The day (9th May) is consumed in sharp skirmishing, reconnoitering, canonading & entrenching closer upon the enemy. Gen. Sedgwick is shot to day while at the front ordering the position of batteries (by the way we are now out of the Wilderness & batteries are bro't in on both sides which makes a great battle all the more sublime and inspiring).

The 10th battle opens on the right—at 8 A.M. our lines advance & drive the enemy back. Loss great on both sides of course.

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Great fighting & rolling of musketry on left—Hancock said to be in luck. 6th Corps to attack at 5½ P.M. and it is bravely done—Below see diagram hereafter explained. Those four lines of battle formed in Pine woods are composed of 12 Reg'ts—3 in each line which are to advance over the open field & take the Rebel line in front. While the 2d Corps whose storming party you see formed in the woods on our left were to take the line in their front moving with us—I had the honor to lead a Reg't. in this charge—We advanced out of the woods at the appointed time with bayonets fixed at a double quick and dashed across the field & without firing a shot took the whole concern in our front capturing some 1500 prisoners & 8 guns. As soon as we got the works the fire of our front line was opened with good effect—too good indeed for every horse was shot at the guns—& we had no means of getting them off.

Now about our left. Gen. Mott commanding the storming column of the 2d Corps was repulsed—Immagin then where we were holding the line marked "A" & the enemy holding the enfilading line marked "B," which Mott should have carried at all hazards. You see the enemy held us by our left rear. The 2d Vt. Reg't. with many others intermingled held this line under a fire from the flanking work on the left & a direct fire in front (the enemy's second line) until some half an hour after dark—when after repeated requests from staff officers and finally an order from Gen. Write [Horatio G. Wright] (now Corps Commander) coming too positive to be trifled with we fell back to the woods—reformed & marched back to our entrenchments leaving the 8 captured guns again to the enemy (for want of transportation over the line we took & back to the woods).

This I assure you was galling to the pride of brave men—When I got by myself where I would not be ashamed of it I cried like a whipped spaniel—I saw many soldiers cry like girls, and many who took things less to heart, gave vent to their mortification at having lost all they had gained so nobly—by the fault of others, by letting of unnumbered salvos of profanity. I believed while there, & I believe still that the only true way to save us was to send a column to take the enfilading work on our left. It might have cost 500 men that night. I do not think it would have cost a man more. The next day it cost us over ten times that number.

This assault cost us killed & wounded 900 men and some 60 officers—cheap enough if we could have held it. Speaking in the light of military economy, it was doubling of capital anyway, for after we got the line those of the enemy who dared retreat were shot down without stint—those who rushed to our rear fared best. We were under fire direct about 40 seconds I should judge—grape & shell were hurled plentifully at us both from front & flanks. If I should be spared to see you again at your home I should take great pleasure in demonstrating this battle to you—there are so many things even in the diagram which I cannot make lucid here.

Well, the next day came the greatest battle of all—greatest because most general. But you have read it over & over as reported by those who make reporting their business and who know more of the general features than any officer at his post can know.—

However, the Vt. Brigade were in all over again—nearly 15000 men

fought all day and nearly all night to drive the enemy from lines marked B, B^I, & B^{II}, and at night our men fought one side of the work and the enemy the other (within ten feet of each other) before morning however the enemy were disgusted with yankee tenacity & withdrew. The loss was immense on both sides. The enemy had massed reserves to hold it the night before & we had to take it.

The enemy were found to be still moving to their right to keep Richmond masked & we move to our left confronting him from point to point—fighting him often (tho' not getting him to a general battle) until we now find ourselves face to face on the left bank of the Chickahominy—about parallel with that stream—our left & the enemy's right resting (I only judge) near Bottoms Bridge. Since we arrived here & found the enemy strongly entrenched we have made (the first day of our arrival) vigorous attacks at all points along the lines to break them thro'—At some points we have carried their first lines, only to find siege lines beyond—at other points the most valorous troops have been driven back. The enemy's position is well chosen & Beauregard has been some weeks in fortifying here under Gen. Lee's direction—his dealings with Gen. Butler behind the strong works of Ft. Darling having been only subsidiary to his labors on the Chickahominy for the use of Lee's army.

The assaults we have made here have undoubtedly been necessary for we can seldom tell what strength opposes until we try it.

We are now advancing per gradum [by degrees] upon the enemy's works—digging a parallel each night a few rods nearer than we held the night before. Before I venture an hypothesis allow me to tell you just how we are situated in my immediate vicinity. You will notice that I have been able to speak knowingly only of what I have seen et mina pars fui [and it was but a small part of the whole]. Let me say again that an officer on duty with his Reg't. knows little of the great machine of the army.

This army is now so strongly concentrated (if I may judge of the whole from what I know of this Corps) that such an attack as Jackson made on Porter (then the extreme right of McClellan's Army) can never make an impression on us now. The Vt. Brigade consisting of 8 Reg'ts. (the 11th being divided into 3 provisional Reg'ts tho' on paper only one) occupies a front of only one Reg't. in length (or a company or two more) and are massed from front to rear.

Each Reg't. holds the front line 24 hours & the line next the front (the 2d line being of equal danger & importance) also 24 hours—then is relieved for 48 hours and goes about a half mile to the rear to straighten up, wash up, sleep up & clean up arms. Col. Seaver with 4 Reg'ts. is now in the 1st Division—So you see the brigade are not together.

It is my turn today to hold the front line. Last night we finished the line we hold today—tonight the Reg't. that relieves me will begin another line a few rods higher the enemy. The line I am in now with my Reg't, 2d Vt. is within 250 yds of the enemy's first line—they are behind works like this. Our Sharpshooters trenches are in our front & within 100 yds. of those of the enemy. These holes are dug in the night—men put in them who remain till next night and are then relieved by other Sharpshooters—If one of them gets wounded we dig a sap to him &

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bring him in—this don't pay unless he is wounded in fore noon for it takes half a day to dig to them generally & if afternoon we let him lay till dark then get him in.

You will observe that we have to lay low behind our intrenchments in the day time for the lines of battle are at easy range of each other and the moment a head is shown above the parapet a sharp shooter's ball is directed to it. In this way we loose two or three careless men from each regiment every day, and the enemy do the like.

It is estimated that each army loose 1500 per day in this way. It is just about "nip & tuck."

You may feel to inquire how long this dripping state of things is to last?

I think we shall soon bull dog the enemy out of their works—if we do not we shall soon be so close upon them we can carry them by assault without having a long way to go under fire. If this is not deemed practicable we shall move to the left on to James River near Bermuda Hundreds or Ft. Darling—That is where many think we will soon turn up—our right resting below Ft. Darling & our left above Richmond Hill—both flanks resting on the James—then we can work up Lee's communications southward & prevent his escape, for what is Richmond worth in our hands and Lee with his army well organized falling back into the mountain fastnesses of western North Carolina or the central regions of Georgia?

He should be fought if possible from the south side and the James could furnish us with communications & surplies from Washington.

How does this look to you? It is discussed here by those who have nothing to say about it. We know nothing of the plans in esse [in actual fact].

While I have written this we have been under constant tho' not vigorous shelling & I have lain among the soldiers close under the works—they shell the batterries about 2 rods to our right & left which can reply only occasionally as the enemy's sharp shooters keep the gunners shy.

Give Reg'ds. to Mrs. H. & the children & to Aunt H, Mr. & Mrs. Parker. I wish you would let Mr. Parker & family read this as I know not when I shall have time to write so full a letter again. Stephen is sick & in Div. Hosp but getting better. I have a bad Diarrhea but am not off duty & think I won't be.

Your Cousin

Saml E. Pingree

To conclude—We are getting along well and the Rebellion must soon crumble[?]-we pray for another draft—for 200000 more men—now is the time for every resource to be opened—⁷

Although we know far less about Stephen Morse Pingree, the author of the bulk of these letters, his service was no less distinguished, his story no less worth telling.

It is from Stephen Pingree that we hear of the ubiquitous Confederate lieutenant colonel John Singleton Mosby's raids on the rear of the Union army's Sixth Corps and of the extortion the people of Pennsylvania (and

of Gettysburg in particular) practiced upon the Union troops who had made great sacrifices to keep its border towns and the Union territory north of them safe.⁸ In fact, Stephen Pingree's regiment, eastern Vermont's youthful Fourth, included the only troops of the Old Vermont Brigade engaged on the battlefield at Gettysburg, albeit late in the third day of that momentous clash.⁹ Later, at the Battle of the Wilderness, Stephen's regiment suffered the greatest loss of officers of any regiment in the brigade: over two-thirds of those present, 40 percent of its fighting force in all.

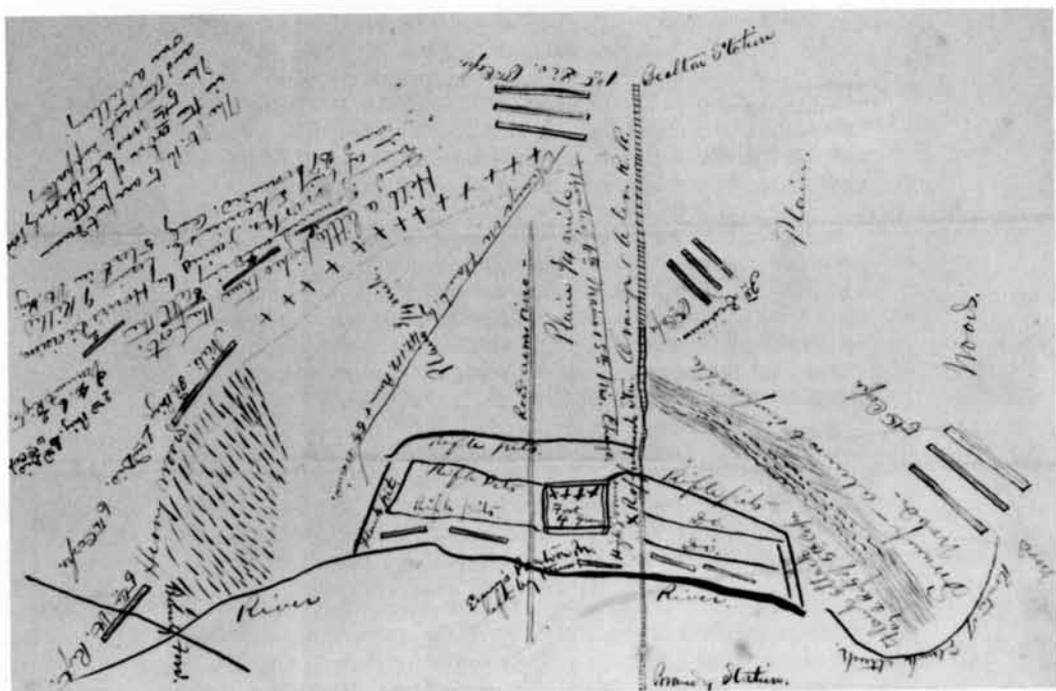
And it is Stephen Pingree who asserts strong opinions on the payment of town bounties to new recruits and even stronger views on how New York should handle conscription riots:

I hope stern measures will be taken with the traitors north who are inciting or aiding in the work of opposing the execution of the laws. If the Army is needed, it should be used—and used with terrible effect, too. I would see N.Y. deluged in blood rather than see this spirit of treasonable violence either succeed there or spread elsewhere.

I hope hundreds & thousands will be shot down in the streets if necessary to quell this mob. . . . Canister should always be used upon a mob of the proportions this one assumes, before blank cartridges. Blank cartridges are good to 'taper off' with. If there was any excuse or palliation for this mob, mild measures might be proper—but the lesson of blood will be most effective on them as a punishment & on others as a warning.¹⁰

Stephen's letters inform us of the discouragement within the Army of the Potomac by November 1863, the troops demoralized by the bad weather, lack of food, poor water supply, overwork, and frequent change of command. Stephen also drew two detailed maps that remain a focal point of the collection. The first map accompanies his letter of October 8, 1863, and depicts the position of the Sixth Corps on the Rapidan River in an attempt to help Hunton "see by it, the position of our men & the enemy's front line and also, the isolated position we occupy."¹¹ The second map, enclosed in a letter dated November 11, 1863, accompanies his description of the evening battle of Rappahannock Station (November 7, 1863):

We left camp near Warrenton on the morning of the 7th, very early, and took dinner 1½ miles from Rappahannock Station, in sight of, but unmolested by, the Rebels. They had a strong fort of four faces on the north side of the river, and but a few rods from it, on a commanding piece of ground west of the R.R. and east of the turnpike to the River. It was flanked by very strong rifle pits, and had one strong pit in front running west from the R.R. What their force was before, we do not know, but they soon got a force of 9 Regts. to this side, with 4 cannon, and prepared to give us a warm reception. I enclose a diagram (a very rude one) of the situation as it was when our Division had driven their first line from the hill in their front and gained an eminence[?] for our Artillery.



Plan of the battle of Rappahannock Station, November 7, 1863. From a letter by Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus Hunton, November 11, 1863.

Neil's & one Brigade carried the first hill about 1 mile from their works, with very trifling loss. We had one man killed by a shell. The 1st Division under Bartlett was at our left and the 3d under Terry still further. We were the right, and our Brig., as you will see, in line a little in rear of Neil and behind our artillery. The 5th Corps were covered by the woods at the extreme left.

It was now about 4 o'clock, and our artillery opened on the enemy's works. This continued for over an hour, with very slight skirmishing of infantry. The enemy's artillery firing was excellent. After an hour or more of Artillery firing, it was time for action.

It was now a little after sunset, and we had to wait for this as the sun was in our faces and at their backs, when the gallant 6th Maine, under Col. Harris, charged the enemy's works and, breaking their 1st line of battle in the heavy rifle pit in front of the fort, west of the R.R., pushed on and gained the redoubt and, scaling ditch & wall, were soon at work with the bayonet, with their fire tried colors on the north face and the secession battle rags of two larger Regts. on the opposite. They were 251 muskets when they started and went for over half a mile under a terrible fire of canister and musketry, and now they had cornered themselves in a pen with near 600 desperate rebels from Louisiana. It could

not last. They were forced back in less than 2 minutes, and the treasonable rag of the rebels was again on the north face of the fort. . . .

As quick as thought, Harris gets his men behind the rifle pit from which he had just forced the enemy and, though on the wrong side, it covered his men and they held it. In ten minutes, the 5th Wisconsin, always by the side of the 6th Maine in more than two years of service, was with them and over they go together and plant the colors of Wisconsin & the Pine Tree State, East & West, side by side, and keep them there.

Probably there has never been such a use of the bayonet and gun stock before in this war as the next 15 minutes witnessed. Hardly a gun was fired in the fort, but 29 dead Americans and 18 dead rebels, besides more than 100 of both wounded, lay in this little fort. Nearly every one was hit with the bayonet or struck with the stock.

It was dark and the enemy had the advantage of numbers & of a knowledge of the ground. Meantime, the 49 and 119 Pa. Regts. and 5th Maine made a detour to the enemy's left, and two Regts. from the 5th Corps came behind them on the right, and the work was done. Many escaped by swimming, getting under the river bank in the darkness, but the trophies of the battle were 4 cannon, 4 caissons with ammunition and horses (some killed), 1623 prisoners of whom 123 were commissioned officers, over 2000 rifles and sets of equipments, 8 battle flags (Regimental), one Brigade flag, and the enemy's pontoon bridge!!¹²

The Pingree brothers also penned two of the more unusual documents we have from the Civil War. In a letter to Hunton's children, Mary and Albert, dated April 9, 1863, Samuel recounts a review of troops by President Lincoln and his family:

Dear Cousins—

It is a beautiful day and tho very busy in the forenoon I find myself quite idle and ill-at-ease just now, so I propose to make myself happy by writing a few words to you—

Yesterday was a "Great Training" day with the army here—I was engaged at home the most of the day but in the after noon went to the Review.

There were four Corps reviewed by the President and Major Gen. Hooker—the 6th, 2d, 5th & 3rd comprising in all just about sixty thousand troops—

Mrs. Lincoln and one of her sons—a lad about your size and age, Albert—formed a part of the reviewing party, besides whom there were a great many ladies and gentlemen from Washington before whom our troops showed off their finest military airs.

The President is not considered a handsome man by good judges tho he appeared to enjoy himself quite as well as the more graceful beholders.

My Regt. was not out, being on a three days tour of Grand Guard duty.

The Review was near the river and in good range of the enemies batteries and in full view of their camps.

He goes on to include a surprising account of one of the officers in his division: "There is a Corporal in a Regt. of our Division who was promoted from the ranks at Antietam on account of marked bravery. The

Corporal had never lost a day's duty since in service (2 years), until taken very sick with Typhoid Fever a few days ago, when, expecting to die sent for tent mate and made know[n] to the Surgeon that she (the Corporal) was the wife of the soldier. If she recovers I am told she will be commissioned and honorably discharged." Samuel ends with a personal appeal for mail from his young cousins: "I hope you will make up a letter for me soon. A letter does us more than ordinary pleasure now-a-days. It is a soldier's blessing at all times."¹³

Two weeks later Stephen Pingree wrote a letter to nine-year-old Albert describing in terms touchingly sensitive to a child's understanding both the magnificence and sadness of battle:

I wish you could see a Review of one or two hundred Regts of Infantry with 35 or 40 Batteries of Artillery and the usual number of Cavalry Squadrons. It is a great sight—and one, I hope for which there will be no occasion in this country when you are a man. A battle looks very nicely—if you are far enough off to not hear the groans, and for 20 minutes of the commencement[?] of the Battle of Fredriksburgh, I was where I could see firing—but after that, I was in the front and had no time to look beyond my own duty and attend to my men.

I saw 18000 men engaged as I was going across the field to the front with a single company—of 41 men, and I never saw so magnificent a sight before, but it was sad, nevertheless. A volley of from 12 to 20 rifle shots were fired at my Co. as it came in sight, in passing the opposite end of a little ravine, and, as they fell a little under the work—and I was some 5 or 6 yards in front of my Co. they fell pretty thick, around & "among" my boots, but without any other injury to me or any more than to "scare" me a bit, which I forgot as soon as I advanced some 15 rods to where we could fire too. A battle is very unpleasant.¹⁴

Samuel E. Pingree was mustered out of the Union army in July 1864, his brother Stephen two months later. Like many other veterans of the war, they picked up the threads of their lives and resumed the careers for which they had prepared themselves before the dramatic interruption of warfare. But their experiences on the battlefield continued to stimulate their imaginations and gifts for narrative. Even before he received his Medal of Honor, Samuel achieved local fame and popularity by holding the children of Hartford spellbound with fascinating accounts of his exploits—made all the more real for his audience by the sight of his mangled hand. These stories might have been lost to future generations had the cache of their letters to relatives remained hidden. Now, however, we have again in their own words descriptions of their individual experiences of the Civil War. With their quiet, stern soldier's eloquence, the Pingree brothers convey through their letters the personal impact of the cataclysmic war that was, in the words of Samuel Pingree, "so big with the fate of free institutions."¹⁵

NOTES

I have prepared a descriptive calendar and complete transcription of the S. E. and S. M. Pingree Civil War Letters available to researchers at both the Samuel Read Hall Library of Lyndon State College and the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier. The original manuscripts are held at the Vermont Historical Society (MSA 135).

Very special thanks are due to my patient and tolerant co-workers at Lyndon State College, the staffs of the Vermont Historical Society and the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, Howard Coffin, Rebecca J. Wallace, and my family, all of whom supported me in my attempt to make known, indeed to sing the praises of, the remarkable, ribbon-tied bundle of letters that emerged from the shadows one winter's day.

¹ William Richard Cutter, *New England Families* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1914), 1943.

² Lyndon State College Collection of Pingree-Hunton-Stickney Family Papers, Civil War Letters (hereafter cited as Civil War Letters), Vermont Historical Society, Letter no. 35, Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 11 November 1863, beyond Brandy Station, Virginia. I have slightly altered the punctuation in the transcription of the letters for clarity.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 28, Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 2 August 1863, Waterloo Bridge, Rappahannock (North Fork), Virginia.

⁴ General E. D. Keyes quoted in Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fort Sumpter to Perryville* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 407.

⁵ Corporal George French, quoted in Howard Coffin, *Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1993), 94.

⁶ John E. Balzer, ed., *Buck's Book: A View of the 3rd Vermont Infantry Regiment* (Bolingbrook, Ill.: Balzer & Associates, 1993), 30.

⁷ Civil War Letters, no. 45, Samuel E. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 10 June 1864, near Cold Harbor, Virginia.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 26, Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 18 July 1863, Berlin (now Brunswick), Maryland; and no. 27, Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 22 July 1863, near Uniontown, Virginia.

⁹ George Grenville Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War: A History of the Part Taken by the Vermont Soldiers and Sailors in the War for the Union, 1861-5*, vol. 1 (Burlington, Vt.: Free Press Association, 1886), 166.

¹⁰ Civil War Letters, no. 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 33, Stephen M. Pingree to Augustus P. Hunton, 8 October 1863, on the Rapidan, Virginia.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 21, Samuel E. Pingree to Albert and Mary Hunton, 9 April 1863, near Belle Plain, Virginia.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 22, Stephen M. Pingree to Albert Hunton, 23 April 1863, Camp Fair View, Virginia.

¹⁵ Samuel E. Pingree, *An Oration Before the Reunion Society of Vermont Officers in the Representatives' Hall, Montpelier, Vt., Nov. 7, 1872* (Montpelier, Vt.: Polands' Stream Printing Establishment, 1872), 15.