

Thomas P. McKenna
William Scott “Sleeping Sentinel” Research, 1861-2012
MSA 763

Introduction

This collection contains the research of Thomas P. McKenna of Stowe, Vermont, on the story of William Scott, the so-called “Sleeping Sentinel” of the Civil War. Mr. McKenna donated the collection to the Vermont Historical Society in 2016. It is stored in one archival flip top box and consumes .25 linear feet of shelf space.

McKenna has done much research and compiled data on the court martial and subsequent pardon of Private William Scott of Groton, Vermont, the so-called Sleeping Sentinel. McKenna did much of the research during the mid – 1990s and his data contains copies of the document he obtained from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Rather than another re-telling of the story of William Scott, the collection presents letters and documents attempting to eliminate the presidential pardon of Abraham Lincoln, so much a part of the legend. A granite monument to Scott can be found along side US Route 302 in Groton, Vermont, the “William F. Scott Memorial Highway.”

Biographical Notes

William Scott was born in 1839 and grew up in Groton, Vermont, one of nine children. Among the siblings, five of the Scott brothers who reached adulthood served in the Union Army. William died in battle at Lees Mills, Virginia; his brothers George and Daniel died in the hospital of disease; Joseph died as the result of hardships of service shortly after his discharge; and John lived for ten years after the war.

William Scott has become a Vermont folk hero due to an unfortunate incident that occurred while he performed picket duty at a bridge outside of Washington, D.C. On his early morning rounds, the Captain of the Guard found Scott and his two companions asleep at their post. As three individuals performed guard duty at any post, two of the soldiers would be allowed to sleep while the third remained awake and vigilant. Unfortunately for Scott, the captain came by during his “awake” period. The captain had Scott arrested for violation of the 46th Article of War. At the subsequent court martial, the court found Scott guilty and sentenced him to death by firing squad.

Members of Scott’s company and others in the regiment petitioned Brigadier General William Smith to have Scott’s life spared. According to the story, the petition went all the way to the White House for a presidential pardon. A pardon eventually did reach Scott just moments before the firing squad carried out the sentence. Private Scott went back to his company vowing to become a better soldier. He died on April 17, 1862, of a gunshot wound to the chest.

Another person highlighted in the collection is Luke Ferriter (1844-1930), a member of Scott’s regiment and one of the other two sentinels at the guard post with Scott. Ferriter enlisted at the age of 17 without parental consent; he served under the name of Charles L. Smith. Ferriter

stated he had been selected as one of the riflemen assigned to carry out the execution and later gave eyewitness testimony concerning the events. He survived the war after many military adventures and rose to the rank of sergeant.

“The Rev. William Eleazar Barton (1861-1930) was one of the early twentieth century's most prominent writers and lecturers on the life of Abraham Lincoln. Born in Sublette, Illinois, in the same year Lincoln assumed the presidency, Barton grew up in an environment heavily influenced by reverence for Lincoln. After pursuing undergraduate studies at Berea College in Kentucky, Barton earned his divinity degree from the Oberlin Theological Seminary in 1890. He served parishes in Tennessee, Ohio, and Massachusetts before becoming the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Oak Park, Illinois, a position he held until his retirement in 1924. Four years later, Barton accepted an appointment as lecturer at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, where he also organized and served as pastor of the Collegese Congregational Church.” (Copied from University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Finding Aids, Guide to the Lincoln Collection).

Scope and Content

This collection contains information on the court martial and subsequent pardon of Private William Scott of Groton, Vermont, the so-called Sleeping Sentinel, collected by Thomas B. McKenna, of Stowe, Vermont, from several sources.

Many of the documents in the collection are copies of documents Thomas P. McKenna obtained from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., in the mid-1990s. Other items in the collection are modern day news media reports. Among the copies of documents is the petition to spare Scott's life.

The collection includes a series of correspondence between Reverend William E. Barton and several military and governmental sources as part of Barton's search for official records of the William Scott case. Much of the correspondence, 1922 – 1926, was conducted by Barton for a book on Lincoln that he was writing. He managed to collect much information including a copy of the transcript of Scott's court martial and his death sentence. Other pages are hand written research notes by Barton.

Barton eventually published an article in the New York Times Magazine claiming the presidential pardon was a myth and stating that the pardon really came from General George McClellan. A copy of the article can be found in the holdings of the Vermont Historical Society (Newsp. D B Sco86b).

Other people disputed Barton's findings, among them Luke Ferriter of Brattleboro, an eye witness to the events. The collection contains newspaper articles containing Ferriter's version of the events as well as research by other historians concerning Scott. More modern media information is included telling the overall story of William Scott.

Related Collections

The Vermont Historical Society Library holds additional material about William Scott including:

- Barton, William E., *New York Times Magazine*, 3 Oct 1926, Newsp. D B Sco86b.
- Four letters written by William Scott: Letter from William Scott, Camp Griffin, Va. (call number MS 973.732 Sc86) and William Scott Civil War letters, 1861-1862, (call number MS 973.732 Sc86a)
- Several books about Abraham Lincoln and William Scott including: Lowry, Thomas P., *Don't shoot that boy!: Abraham Lincoln and military justice* (call number 343.730143 L955d 1999) and Clark, Allen C., *Abraham Lincoln, the merciful president, the pardon of the sleeping sentinel* (call number 920 L63cLa 1927).
- "A Story of Lincoln" [told by Luke Ferriter of Brattleboro, Vermont] (call number Manuscript Misc. 1233)

Inventory

MSA 763:01	Scott Military Information
:02	William E. Barton research
:03	Other Scott researchers
:04	News media articles / general information

Dwight Harrington
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