

Heman Chandler Orcutt (1825-1892)
Letters, 1864-1865
MSA 624:14-16

Introduction

This is a collection of 49 letters, mostly written by Heman Chandler Orcutt (1825-1892) of Hartland, Vermont, to his wife, Eliza, during the last year of the Civil War, 1864-1865. The donor transcribed all the letters and electronic copies of the transcriptions are included in the collection on a compact disc. The collection was donated by William L. Orcutt to the Vermont Historical Society in February 2012 and is stored in three archival folders.

Biographical Note

Heman Chandler Orcutt was born, the son of John and Sally Bullard Orcutt, in Massachusetts in 1825. Heman's older sister, Mary Hendeo Orcutt (1815-1873) was born almost a decade earlier when the family was located in Ashford, Connecticut. By 1850, the Orcutts had relocated to Hartland, Vermont. John Orcutt was a farmer, an occupation that his son shared (at least while in Vermont), according to the U.S. Census in 1870.

Once in Vermont, Heman Orcutt married Eliza Easton Gray (1825-1909) of Woodstock, Vermont, in 1852. The couple's first child, John Heman Orcutt (1856-1928), was born several years later. Their second child, Zalmon E. Orcutt, died at age 3 on 22 July 1864, shortly before his father's enlistment to serve in the Civil War and these letters. Their youngest child, Charles Russell Orcutt (1864-1929), was not yet one when his brother died and his father enlisted.

Heman Orcutt enlisted as a private in Company C, Vermont 6th Infantry Regiment on 26 August 1864. After enlisting, he shipped to the conscription camp at Fair Haven, Connecticut. By the end of September, he left first for Washington, and then for Bolivar Heights above Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in early October. Next, he moved first to Winchester (5 October), then to Middletown (16 October), and was in the battle at Cedar Creek (19 October). He was in Strasburg (3 November), where his unit at first had to retreat but then regrouped; in his letters, he writes of the Company capturing 52 artillery pieces and up to 3,000 prisoners at this time. By mid-December, Orcutt is at Petersburg, where he mostly remained till the end of the war. His letters also relate that he was ill for some time so was doing garrison duty mainly for those weeks. He was mustered out on 19 July 1865, shortly after the dates of the final letters in this collection.

Heman and Eliza Orcutt relocated to California with their sons sometime in the late 1870s. Heman Orcutt first appears on lists of registered voters in San Diego County in 1879. As of 1880, the U.S. Census indicates that he and both his sons were working as farmhands. Heman Chandler Orcutt died in San Diego in 1892. Eliza Gray Orcutt also died in San Diego in 1909.

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of 49 letters written by Heman Chandler Orcutt (1825-1892) of Hartland, Vermont, to his wife, Eliza, during the last year of the Civil War, 1864-1865, with a smaller number of additional letters written to Heman Orcutt from other relatives, mostly his wife and his sister, Mary Hendee Orcutt.

Heman Orcutt's letters describe his activities and experiences while serving in Company C of the 6th Vermont Volunteers and include many topics typical of correspondence from Vermont soldiers. He writes of the undependability of the mail and mentions money he is sending home. His federal bonus of \$100 for enlisting was paid a third on entrance into the service, a third half way through his enlistment, and a third at his discharge. Many of his letters home ask that items be sent to him, including paper and stamps, envelopes and pens. He also asks for gloves, apples and butter, his razor, vests, and an ax. During the winter, he was in a space with two other men and they had to cut their firewood, share their food, etc. As the war wound down he writes of increasing numbers of the enemy giving themselves up and coming through the lines to surrender.

Heman Orcutt often sent seeds he had gathered back home, put flowers he had picked into his letters, and mentioned both crops grown in Virginia and the poor quality of the soil. His letters ask how the farm and family is progressing back home. In addition to Eliza, their sons, and his sister, Mary, the letters also mention Lydia Pamela Gray regularly. The daughter of Eliza Gray Orcutt's nephew, John Gray, Lydia is regarded in the letters as a family member and was living with the Orcutt family at the time of the 1870 U.S. Census.

Inventory

- MSA: 14 Letters, from Heman Chandler Orcutt, September 11, 1864 – June 9, 1865
- :15 Letters, to Heman Chandler Orcutt, January 27, 1865 – May 25, 1865
- :16 Transcripts and CD

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