

George Oscar French (1844-1865)
Family Papers, 1857-1888
MSA 414 & Ms Size D

Introduction

This collection contains the Civil War diary and letters of George Oscar French (1844-1865) of Castleton, Vermont, typescripts of those letters and diary, and related family letters. June and James Salander gave the collection to the Vermont Historical Society in March 2006 (ms. acc. no. 2006.1). The transcriptions were done by Dawn Hance of Rutland and typed by Joann H. Nichols of Brattleboro. The collection is stored in two archival flip top boxes and consumes 1 linear foot of shelf space.

Biographical Note

George Oscar French, called Oscar, was the second of six children born to Ezra Warner French and Amanda Roberts French of Castleton, Vermont. Ezra was a farmer and worked in the slate trade, doing roofing, among other things. The first of the French children was Emeline Helen French (March 17, 1841 – July 21, 1921). Second was George Oscar French, born April 25, 1844, and killed on April 2, 1865, just before the Battle of Richmond. The third child was Wilbur Ernest French (July 26, 1846 – March 21, 1881) who mostly called himself Will, though sometimes Ernest. He served briefly in the Civil War. The fourth child was Mary Alice French (b. January 19, 1849). Fifth was Frank W. French (February 14, 1850 – December 10, 1871) and sixth was Ella Agnes French (July 14, 1856 – January 21, 1931).

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of this collection is the Civil War letters written by George Oscar French (1844-1865) during the Civil War to his parents in Castleton, Vermont. The letters start on August 6, 1862, the day on which French enlisted, and continue up until April 1, 1865, the day before he was killed just prior to the fall of Richmond and the end of the Civil War.

Oscar French enlisted in Company C, 11th Vermont Volunteers, and trained at Brattleboro into early September, ending up as a sergeant. He next moved to the defenses of Washington, serving mostly in a heavy artillery unit, and remained there until May 13, 1864. After that he saw a great deal of heavy action, often as an infantryman including at Cold Harbor, the Shenandoah Valley (he received a wound at Cedar Creek), and Petersburg. He was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant June 28, 1864. He was killed on April 2, 1865, during the last week of the war.

One of the sub-themes of the letters is the relationship between Oscar French and his father. He wrote to his father, “I am going to Fairhaven to enlist today. I came home to ask your consent but as you are gone shall write my name in the articles and if you will not let me go you can take it off.” Two days later he writes, “but don’t for God’s sake

make any objection for I am bound to go and it is hard enough to go and fight without having to fight before I go”

In a number of letters there is a reference to an on-going dispute between father and son on the merits of the war. Oscar berates the Copperheads, including Congressman Clement L. Vallandigham of Ohio, who his father seems to have been supporting, and some of the anti-war New York press. “I suppose Vallandigham is one of your bold war Democrats. Rather call him a sneaking dough faced secessionist who dare not face the ... support of the cause he secretly espouses. I am one of Abe Lincoln’s minions and am ready to lose my life in the holy cause of exterminating Ole Secesh wherever it is to be found. I am astonished to hear such or to see such words from your pen.”

Neither father nor son was supporters of abolition. In a January 17, 1863, letter Oscar writes, “the Abolitionists are scarce in the Army and every day are growing beautifully less. Once in a while some old foggy will dare to put forth his Abolition gas, but he is immediately quieted with such a shower of curses that he soon dries up” However, Oscar is much moved by an escaping slave family he encounters while on duty at Fort Stevens outside Washington D.C., and he writes in great detail about their plight in a letter dated December 9, 1863.

Oscar is strongly critical of his father’s pro-McClellan stand in the 1864 election. He attacks “dirty peace men”. “I care not who is Pres. If they only go in for a vigorous prosecution of the war. Making slavery a secondary question and using the full Abolition principle if necessary to weaken our enemy.” Oscar is not the only son who had a strained relationship with his father. There are also several letters from brother Will to his father, both during the war and after Will moved west, and again the letters seem quite testy.

The letters contain many references to pay policy of the army, which often is months in arrears. Oscar often sends money home, but then has to ask for money to buy parts of his uniform, and he orders boots to be made at home and sent to him. His father seems to be lecturing him on his spendthrift ways, but Oscar defends himself, while also asking his siblings to do more to help at home to make life easier for the parents.

Oscar gets one leave back to Vermont, plus two extended periods in the hospital, but otherwise he is very much involved in the war. His letters are cheerful, he is proud of his unit and of the service Vermont men are doing in the war. When he witnesses a hanging for desertion he points out the man was a New Yorker. At Petersburg he disparages the unit to his side that broke and ran, and points out they were not Vermonters.

French offers unfettered views of the harshness of military service. When his brother Will was talking of joining, Oscar writes “I am afraid that the draft will take Wilber but I hope he will stay out of the Army as long as he can. I never want him to suffer what I have suffered and what has made an old man of me in my 21st year.” Later he writes, “Let the North come out and volunteer just as we did. Not send good for

nothing substitutes and bounty jumpers. We want support and the support of stern, determined men. Had our citizens shown as good a will as the citizens of the South, this war would be closed ere now.”

Most of Oscar’s letters refer to action on his immediate front, not how the war is going in general, though in March of 1864 he writes, “as old U. S. G. is in command, that he will rush things in every direction.” During a heavy bombardment he writes, “The most fault I find is the unpleasant sound of various dense bodies moving through the air with great velocity. A minie ball cut my hair just above my right ear, did not hurt.”

The collection includes Oscar’s last letter, written the day before he was killed. This letter must have arrived home at the same time the letter from the U. S Treasury requesting that he return the \$250 bonus he had received on his enlistment because he was no longer entitled to it due to his receiving a commission. French’s body was temporarily lost at City Point, Virginia, and could not be returned home at once due to the nature of his wound and the inability to properly embalm him. There is a letter itemizing the costs of having the body sent home, though an earlier letter mentions of a collection taken up by the men to have the body shipped home.

The collection includes pages from a diary Oscar kept in September and October, 1864, when he was campaigning in the Shenandoah Valley and saw heavy action. He mentions “Large fires in the Upper Valley. Every house and barn in a radius of 5 miles were burnt in revenge for the murder of Lieut. Meigs of Sheridan’s staff.” (Philip H Sheridan in his *Memoirs* writes that Meigs was “killed without resistance of any kind whatever, and without even the chance to give himself up. Determined to teach a lesson to these abettors of the foul deed . . . I ordered all the houses within an area of five miles to be burned.”) Oscar later writes about “the rear guard burnt every vestige of hay and every barn that contained grain or forage. Desolation most complete following our track. Every grist mill, cotton, or saw mill was burnt.”

The rest of the collection is made up mostly of letters to Oscar’s sister Ella French from sister Alice in Castleton while Ella was living in Middlebury and teaching. These are mostly undated, just “Tues. eve” or “29”, but were evidently in the late 1870s. The letters are quite long, dealing with events in Castleton, getting crops in, who has visited, health topics, etc.

The collection includes letters from Will home in 1872 from the west and one from Alice to brother Will living in Michigan in 1881. There is a long letter from Will from Hammond, Michigan, to his father, evidently having just heard of the death of his brother Frank, and speaking of it in terms of the loss of Oscar earlier. Will and father were not on the best of terms, and in his few war letters he expresses dislike of the military, of the men he served with, and of the people in Vermont, in contrast to the opinions expressed by his brother.

Organization

The collection is organized in chronological order, with three folders for each period of several months. The original letters for each period are filed first, followed by a file of photocopies of those letters, and followed by a file of transcripts of the letters. Towards the end of the war Oscar French often wrote in pencil and the letters can be hard to read in the original but are easier with the photocopies.

Inventory

- MSA 414.1:01 Civil War, diary, September-October 1864
02 _____, _____, photocopies
03 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 04 _____, letters, August 1862
05 _____, _____, photocopies
06 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 07 _____, _____, September-December 1862
08 _____, _____, photocopies
09 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 10 _____, _____, January-March 1863
11 _____, _____, photocopies
12 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 13 _____, _____, April-June 1863
14 _____, _____, photocopies
15 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 16 _____, _____, July-September 1863
17 _____, _____, photocopies
18 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 19 _____, _____, October-December 1863
20 _____, _____, photocopies
21 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 22 _____, _____, January-March 1864
23 _____, _____, photocopies
24 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 25 _____, _____, April-May 1864
26 _____, _____, photocopies
27 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 28 _____, _____, June-July 1864
29 _____, _____, photocopies

- 30 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 31 _____, _____, August-September 1864
- 32 _____, _____, photocopies
- 33 _____, _____, transcriptions
- MSA 414.2:01 _____, _____, October-December 1864
- 02 _____, _____, photocopies
- 03 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 04 _____, _____, January-March 1865
- 05 _____, _____, photocopies
- 06 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 07 _____, _____, April 1865
- 08 _____, _____, photocopies
- 09 _____, _____, transcriptions
- MS Size D Civil War, commission and discharge papers
- 10 _____, _____, Wilber Ernest French
- 11 _____, _____, photocopies
- 12 Ella French, letters, group 1
- 13 _____, _____, _____, photocopies
- 14 Ella French, letters, group 2
- 15 _____, _____, _____, photocopies
- 16 Ella French, letters, group 3
- 17 _____, _____, _____, photocopies
- 18 French family letters & papers, includes photograph of man in horse-drawn cart
- 19 _____, _____, photocopies
- 20 _____, group 2
- 21 _____, _____, photocopies
- 22 _____, _____, transcriptions
- 23 Miscellaneous

Ethan W. Bisbee
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