

William White (1819-1904)
Civil War Letters, 1863-1864 – Transcriptions
Misc. 249

The following is a collection of five Civil War letters sent by William White to friend Jacob Wead of Sheldon, Vermont, 1863-1864. The Vermont Historical Society's collection also includes one letter (not transcribed here) sent to Jacob Wead by his father, D.D. Wead, reporting that the Fenians were assembling in Fairfield in June 1866.

White was born in Ireland in 1819. He married Sarah Husband on May 3, 1843, in Parish Ballintemple. White entered the US after living for sometime in Canada, where two daughters were born. It seems that he entered the United States sometime between 1851 and 1853, and was naturalized a US citizen in St. Albans, Vermont, in 1857.



White enlisted as a Sergeant in Co. I, 10th Vermont Regiment, on August 9, 1862, and was promoted to 1st Sergeant on December 5, 1862. He was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant on April 2, 1864, and was wounded at Cold Harbor, Va., on June 1, 1864. He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant on August 9, 1864, and was wounded a second time on October 19, 1864, at Cedar Creek, Va. He was promoted to Captain on June 15, 1865, and was mustered out at the rank of 1st Lieutenant on June 22, 1865. He died on August 14, 1904, at Sheldon, Vt., and was buried there in the Old Cemetery.

These letters are in the collection of the Vermont Historical Society (Misc. File 0249). The transcriptions were made by John Cotton, White's great-great grandson.

Camp at Whites Ford, MD
January 14th 1863

Dear Friend Jacob,

Please excuse me for intruding so far, as to take the liberty of writing to you, but when I remember the many hours patriotic and manly conversation I heard fall from your lips, I cannot refrain from doing so any longer.

I have hoped to receive a line from you ere this, although I admit it would be somewhat out of the regular course, so not having received any I now take this liberty upon myself.

Dear Sir, when I first enlisted I intended should I get into battle (which I expected to before this) that if I was spared to live through it I should send you some trophy to be kept by you as a relic of this war and if I ever shall (which most likely I will before long) I will send you something.

I know that when people at home in Vermont read about the soldiers living on hard tack and salt horse (as they call it) there rests in their minds a curiosity to know what kind of bread these hard tacks are. I send you a cracker which to you may not be any curiosity, but it certainly will be to a good many in Sheldon. It is a fair sample, and I hope it will not get broken on the way. I know you will take pains to let the people see it. The salt horse is nothing more or less than good salt or mess beef, which together with fresh beef, once or twice a week, beans, peas, pork, potatoes, once and sometimes twice a week, rice, soft bread occasionally, good coffee for breakfast and tea for supper, it makes a very good coarse living, better by far than many who find fault with it had at home. At all events I feel satisfied with it and grow fat on it. There was a time when there was quite a number of our men sick - but I think it was partly caused by ateing (sic) too much fat pork and perhaps perty by doing duty between the Potomac and canal, at all events I noticed that the men that were always complaining of being sick were all the time looking for fat pork and frying these same hard tack in the fat that came from the pork. So when I was promoted to orderly I forbid the frying of crackers or meat of any kind for supper and what think you is the result, why this very day I have only one man sick, when at the time of which I have been speaking I have known 39 men sick in our Company.

My dear friend I should like to have you here with me, for about a month to initiate you into camp life, and should I not like, think you, to stand at the corner of your fathers store and see your company march down the hill with martial music as you used to do, indeed I should, but I would not have you think by this that I want to get out of the army. No! dear sir, although I am not much of a fighting character as you know, I do not want to leave the Army until the Victory is complete for the Union and these accursed rebels once more be forced to return to their allegiance. I do not know when this shall be accomplished but I am satisfied that such must be the case and that Star Spangled Banner shall triumphantly wave over a free land, which it has never done yet, and from the last accounts I have heard, our arms are again victorious in the west.

My dear young patriot, it will cost a great many precious lives before this is ended, but in my opinion the Nation needed a scourging and the Lord in his providence is scourging it pretty hard, yet he knows what is best and let us be satisfied and submit with pleasure and reverence to His Holy Will. I do think the time is not far distant when this thing will be ended. Still I must confess that I cannot see far enough ahead to see through it, but until it comes I shall endeavor to do my duty. I understand ye have a very curious winter. We have very mild weather here but we have had it cold for a few days passed. I am within a few miles of Balls Bluff where Colonel Baker was killed and I have seen the ball holes in a building on this side of the river. Sugarloaf Mountain is only a few miles from here. Will you please give my kind regards to your Father and Mother and Charley Mr. and Mrs. Hapgood and Anna and all others to whom you see fit to do so, hoping to hear from you soon.

I remain respectfully yours

William White

Mr. J. Wead

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Brigade Headquarters MD

Camp Heintzelman

June 14th 1863

Dear Friend Jacob,

I am happy to acknowledge the receipt of your kind and interesting letter of the 3rd Inst. which was duly recd. and carefully perused, and while it was a source of comfort to me it also brought me tidings which I had not heard before heard, for while I was thinking that Amasa Gilbert was engaged in defending his country's honor, it seems he is at home in the peaceful little village of Sheldon enjoying himself. Well all right if he can content himself there while his country needs his help. T[h]ere he ought to be for he probably will do more good there than any where else.

I am glad dear friend to hear that you and your friends are enjoying the rich blessings of health without which all other riches is but a poor comfort. You say Sheldon is a dull place now. I think it must be somewhat so. Is your little military organization kept up yet, that has added some considerable to the life of Sheldon, and although it perhaps seemed boys play to some, I have not the slightest doubt that it inspired others with patriotic zeal and caused them to take up arms and array themselves under the Stars and Stripes for the defense of that glorious flag.

I am glad that your Father has torn down them old barns they did not look very well there so near such a house. You say you think ye will have a good hay crop this year

I hope so but that is more than they can say for this place. Everything started beautifully this last spring but for the last 5 weeks we have not had rain enough to lay the dust, and a scorching sun pouring his heat continually on the crops. It has so dried up the ground here that the grass wheat and corn seem burning up and deserters from the rebel army say they are in a great fret off South about the crops. Corn here is not over 4 inches high. Wheat begun to head out about 4 weeks ago but for the last two weeks it seems to be on a stand still. I have seen new hay come into camp but I have not seen any grass or clover that our farmers at the North would think worth cutting.

Fruit is going to be plenty I think. Apples are larger than a pigeons eggs, peaches are as large as marbles &c.; &c.; but it is awful warm. I stand the heat better than I expected, but I think should you see me now you would not know me. My face is so brown, but my health is good thank God and I feel just as well as I have done 20 years ago.

We had a little rebel raid over here on the night of the 10th instance. You most likely have seen an account of it on the papers, but it is incorrect in some parts. They crossed near Seneca where we lay last fall, and where Co. II of the 6th Mich. Calvary 75 strong were alone doing picket duty, the rebels came over 250 in number and the fight commenced. They fought like tigers on both sides. When after a while our men retreated to this place (a distance of 8 miles) but not without leaving their orderly sergeant and 3 others dead and 17 taken prisoner. The rebels left one Capt. One Lieut. and 3 men dead on the field and they took one Capt. and 2 men that were dead with them. How many they had wounded we do not know. There were 2 of ours wounded one slightly in the finger. The other I fear mortally. I send you a little bit of the Captain's shirt so that you can see what fine cloth some of the rebel officers wear now.

I will not finish this until tomorrow for I am expecting to be called out to fight this very night, but to return to my story when the retreating soldiers came here.

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11th (?)

About 5 o'clock in the morning I had just got through calling the roll and had set the men to work some at one thing and some at another when the alarm came that the rebels were upon us whereupon I ordered the men to fall in and in less than 3 minutes the company were all in line ready for a fight we were then allowed to fall out and get something to eat when we were fell in again and marched off about ½ mile where we were drawn up in line of battle. The battery soon came up to support us and so did two companies of cavalry that are here. We remained there until after 10 O.C. A.M. expecting the rebs but they did not come near us, for as quick as the fight was over they put for the other side of the Potomac very quick. Good night.

June 15th

Dear Sir. Yesterday we heard that Stewart was coming this way with 12,000 cavalry to make a raid through Maryland and PA and last night we were ordered to have our acoutriments where we could lay our hands on them at any moment and I had been informed that at sundown 400 of them started out from Leesburgh and I cantered down to the edge of the river opposite to Edwards Ferry where part of our Rgt is under command of Major Chandler and about 5 miles from here, so we expected to have to go out last night, but guess they thought it best not to undertake to come across. At all events they did not.

Will you please write to me occasionally when you have time, I wish I could have you out here with me for a couple of weeks, but I cannot. How is Charley? I suppose he has grown quite large by this time. My kind regards to your father and mother and Charley, Mr. and Mrs. Hapgood and Anna, Charles Duren and any others you whom you please. How is your grandmother and old Mr Hapgood? Good by for this time. God bless you.

William White

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Camp in the field

Near Sulphur Springs, Va August 23, 1863

Dear Friend Jacob,

Some week or 10 days ago, I recd. a letter from you, in which you mentioned that you had written me another beside that, since I wrote to you. I was surprised to have you say so as I had not recd. it but on Friday night night last I recd. it. It was dated June 22nd, two days before I left Poolsville MD, exactly.

And since which time I have traveled a great many miles, have seen a great many strange places, as well as strange faces. I have seen a great deal of suffering and destitution caused by this war, more than I ever expected

(margin says: the weather has been very warm here but I stand it well Thank God there are a great many sick just now)

to see before I enlisted, and more than I hope I shall ever see again. I have seen plenty of rebs, dead and alive, I was one of an escort that started from South Mountain with 973 rebel prisoners for Baltimore but when we got to Frederick City there was a rebel spy hanging to a tree., I tell you it was a glorious sight to me, but you might not like to see it. Well at Frederick City we had to leave quite a number of our prisoners that were sick, and unable to travel any further. I tell you Baltimore is quite a loyal city now, moreso by a long chalk than N.Y. There was a great variety of stuff taken with these prisoners such as teams and loading. I got some of their business documents. I will send you one so you can see some cecesh Paper. I wish you could have seen the men, such a dirty, filthy, motly looking set of soldiers I never saw before. I would defy any man to go amongst the 973 and be able to find two of them dressed alike. It made me wonder some then to see them, but I have seen so many of them since I do not look for anything else amongst them, I think if that smart man that cut down the Liberty pole, could have seen them, it would make him feels proud, to think what a glorious cause he was engaged in. I make use of the single because I do not think there is more than one person in the village that is degraded and black hearted enough to cut down the Stars and Stripes. They may talk but come to act that is another thing. We have a very good illustration of this in the draft. There are but few of the drafted men that will even dare to come out here and face the music and they do well they might get hurt if they did, but I must quit this subject as I want to touch a little on others.

I have been on Maryland hights, where little Mack drove Stonewall Jackson off from in such a hurry. I wish you could only see the hill he had to climb to do it. I have been close to the building in which John Brown was taken prisoner. I have seen the place where he was hanged also at a distance. I have been through a great many places in Virginia, have seen many splendid farms running wild. In fact the whole of VA is so, as far as I have seen and the old soldiers tell me I have not seen the worst yet. I am within 15 or 20 miles of Fredricksburg. I have seen many pretty villages almost destitute so much so that there was no business of any kind going on. The last village I have been in is what was once the pretty and I should think smart business place but the day we passed through there, they were all at the doors and windows and outdoors in the shade. I did not see one young white man. I saw a vast number of Ladys, with very long faces and pretty much all dressed in black as our whole corps passed through there that day. I suppose it rather started their ideas some, for I overheard one lady say "Oh! Dear me. I believe the whole North has turned out this time. The idea made me laugh, to think that she had not seen quite the 22nd part of our army and then we had not I think 1/4 of the men we could get if we scoured the country as clean as the rebs has done. Why then will men preach up this peace party. You asked me how I liked General Burnside. I must say I did not like him, for I think at Fredricksburg he showed plainly that he lacked judgment while he was so obstinate that none of his generals could do anything with him, and what was the consequence, why he repeatedly forced men up a side hill into the mouth of the rebel cannon, and musketry behind a stone wall, where they cut down our men like grass before a scythe and kept doing so until the Generals refused to obey his orders.

This I have from good authority, as good as the report of a court martial. But I did like General Hooker, and the very thing that he was removed for, the Government adopted in two days after, namely the evacuation of MD Rights. I like General Mede so far I do not think he was to blame for letting Lee cross the Potomac again, but I utterly dislike the plan of changing these generals so often.

Please excuse me for bothering you so long with these things but when I get to talking I do not

know when to stop and I must say that you have a great mind for a boy, no flattery.

Please give my respects to your father and mother and Charley grandmother too, and Chas. Duren, and Mr. and Mrs. Hapgood and Anna and old Mr. Hapgood. I guess he does not remember me. How is he now and how is grandma too? My regards to all others whom you please.

I am dear sir, respectfully yours. William White

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Judiciary Square Hospital

Ward 1 Washington DC

June 9, 1864

Master Jacob Wead,
Dear Sir,

I rec'd your very kind letter some 3 or 4 weeks ago, but owing to the pressure of military affairs, it was impossible for me to reply before this. When I tell you that I have been for the 10 days and nights without taking off my belt you will realize you will be able to see at once how busy we have been.

We broke camp on the morning of May 4th last and have been fighting or marching all the time since. On the night of the last day of May I was on picket and at 6 ½ o'clock on the morning of the first of June, the pickets were drawn off, we then marched of(sic) to Cold Harbor, over very dusty roads, and under a scorching hot sun, a distance of 15 miles with scarcely a drop of water to drink, and what we did get was not fit to drink.

Then we joined the Brigade at 4 ½ o'clock pm. They were preparing for a charge on the enemy. We moved off and took up our position, which was changed a little however about 6 o'clock. Shortly after we commenced moving forward, and in the course of 20 minutes as we were advancing in a brilliant charge, through a mess of standing and fallen trees, swamps and through a heavy shower of leaden and iron hail, and a dense sheet of fire on we went. When we got within about yards of the rebel rifle pit when a ball struck my saber, then glanced cutting a hole in the outside of my pants, bruised the main artery in my left groin enough to break the skin and make it very sore, but the ball did not go in. So you see I have great cause to thank and bless the Lord for His great mercy in sparing me, and you would think so were you to see what I have gone through and the number of other poor fellows who have been cut and mangled in all shapes and parts of their bodys in fact it almost beggars description. After I left the field our men still pressed on carried the reb work & our regt took some 300 prisoners.

I arrived here on the 7th tired and weary. I am quite comfortable now, with the exception of a little soreness, I am able to walk without a cane and I think that I will be at the taking of Richmond. This is a very good hospital, clean and good attendants and in a very healthy part of the city.

I see by this morning's paper that Old Uncle Abe is again nominated for the Presidency. I am glad of that.

The weather is very warm, but not as warm as it is farther south where I have been.

My kind regards to all friends, I hope you are all well, I have not had a letter from home for over 3 weeks for the reason the mail could not come to us.

As I have no more news at present I will close,

I am, sir, respectfully,

William White.

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Camp Near Cedar Creek, VA

Novr. 5th, 1864

Dear Jacob,

It is now a long time since I read your last letter, will you please excuse me for not replying before this late hour but the fact is I have been so incessantly pressed by military business that very often when I wished to do so I could not write my wife, at other times only a few words to let he know I was well and often it has been 5 or 6 days from the time I commenced a letter to her until I could get it finished, and write a little each day at that. From the time we break up camp on the morning of the 5th day of May last to the present time, we have not stopped over one week in any one place at once, only at two different times this fall we were about three weeks in a place, and then we were so busy drilling recruits doing picket duty, and making out returns, that we could not even think of writing to a friend.

Now that I have a little time I thought I would scratch you a few lines hoping you all enjoy the same usual good health that you have heretofore been so richly blessed with.

My dear friend. I was really surprised when I heard of the raid into St. Albans and Sheldon, and yet not entirely so, for I have been expecting something of that kind for the last 5 or 6 weeks, but not there. I have been looking for it farther west. It was no doubt a bold, daring and well planned scheme, and had it not been for the interference of the Strong Arm of Divine Providence, it might have terminated in the destruction of a great deal of life and property and perhaps death in our village. Thanks be to Our Heavenly Father who has saved you all from such a fate, for I tell you, there is no mercy in them rascals, as for Manhood, it out of the question. The real wonder to me is when they halted to burn the bridge why it was that they did not go into your fathers store and plunder that. Oh! I only wish that our little Regt. was there then. I think we would make them dance to as lively music as they ever heard, they certainly would have to pay dear for their fun.

(This next paragraph was very difficult to make out but I think I'm pretty close) I wish you could have been here with us a part of the time to see our battles (you would not think much of that,) at times I know the sight would be terrific to you or even older people, but when we got them to running before our men and they often in close proximity pouring bullets into them I know you would like to see the wretched graybacks (as we call the rebs) jump and stumble over, some into the mud to be trampled upon by man and horse. Some that hit a fall only to avail themselves the opportunity of getting into our lines, while many others of their unlucky comrades in ingenuity have stumbled over to fall into the cold relentless iron?? icy grasp of death. Such a sight (?) the

soldier but its truly and awfully terrible, after the battle to go over the field such a sight I would not wish you to behold and I trust in God you never shall. I will not attempt a description of that for I am altogether incompetent and in fact there is no man that is capable of fully describing three or four battlefields I have seen this summer and fall.

I am glad you are making preparations for them fellows should they or any other such visit you again but I do not think they will, they know you are fully prepared for them and they know it as well as you do so they will not come there while your men keep on the alert. But you may be sure they will strike at some other weak point. They will not give it up so, or if they find that your men thinking themselves safe and free from further trouble they may pay you another visit. I am glad to see that you have capable and reliable men in command of your company. They are men that will not be caught napping where there is work of importance to be attended to. I should like to be there with you now. Such work would only be fun for me but such is not the case.

My kind regards to your dear father, mother, grandmother, Charley, Mr. and Mrs. Hopgood?? and Anna, as well as Chas. Owen and all others who may enquire after me.

I am dear Jacob, very respectfully your friend

William White