

IN THEIR WORDS



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Making It Right: The Civil War Letters of John Wilmot

By MARJORIE J. STRONG AND PAUL G. ZELLER

The story of John Wilmot is as old as soldiers and wars. From his twelve surviving wartime letters at the Vermont Historical Society we learn that when he went off to war in 1861, he left his girlfriend, Saphronia Ann Prescott, pregnant. He spent the rest of his short life trying to make it right.¹

John Wilmot, the son of Willard W. and Annette (Towle) Wilmot, was born in 1842 in Thetford, Vermont. In the 1860 U.S. census he was living with and working as a farm laborer for a Mr. James Tyler in Post Mills. This is how he came to know Saphronia.²

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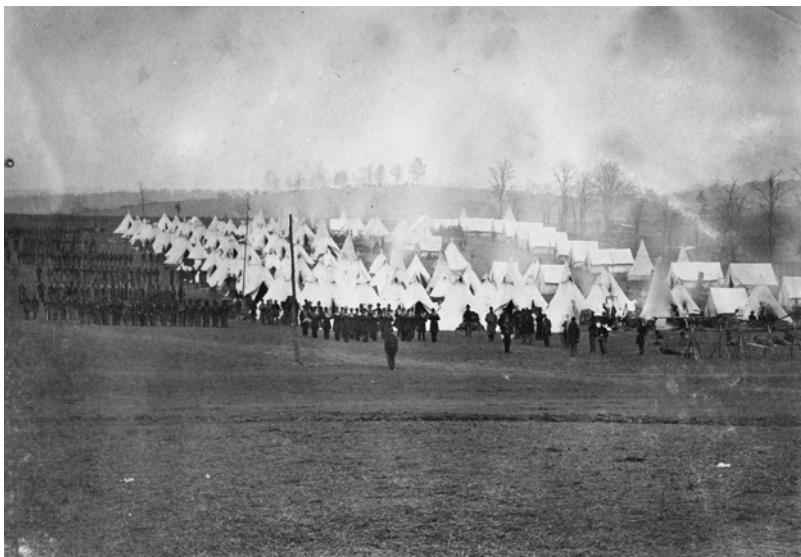
Saphronia, the second daughter and third child of Truman and Permelia (Stowell) Prescott, was born on August 8, 1838, in Fairlee, Vermont. Though her father appears to have been a relatively prosperous farmer, the family had its ups and downs. The Fairlee town records show that Saphronia's older sister, Melency, had an illegitimate child in 1857.³

The governor of Vermont, Erastus Fairbanks, ordered the formation of the 4th and 5th Vermont Infantry Regiments a little over a week after the Union defeat at Bull Run on July 21, 1861. Answering the governor's call, John Wilmot enlisted in Company H, 4th Vermont Infantry Regiment on September 9, 1861. At the time of his enlistment Wilmot was nineteen years old, stood five feet, eight and one-half inches tall, had grey eyes and dark hair, and cited his occupation as a farmer. The recruiting of the regiments was accelerated and they rendezvoused in Brattleboro over a three-day period between September 12 and 14. On September 14, before the troops were even outfitted, Governor Fairbanks received a request from the secretary of war to send the two regiments to Washington as soon as possible. The 4th Vermont was mustered into service on September 21 and that evening boarded a train heading for Washington, D.C.⁴

On September 28, the 4th Vermont joined the 2nd and 3rd Vermont Infantry Regiments at Camp Advance in Arlington, Virginia. On October 9 the regiments moved a few miles north to Camp Griffin, located near the present-day Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, where they remained until the spring of 1862. Here the men spent the winter training, building fortifications, and doing picket duty protecting Washington.⁵

The first surviving letter written by Private John Wilmot was written from Camp Griffin on March 5, 1862. It is apparent from the letter that Wilmot had known for some time that Saphronia was pregnant and he was determined to help support her. At this time she was living with her parents in Post Mills. Unfortunately, John had already assigned his state pay to his father, Willard Wilmot. The \$100 bounty Wilmot refers to was an enlistment bonus paid by the federal government to entice the men to volunteer; however, they would not receive it until their enlistment was up. The \$7 state pay he mentions was a state supplement to the \$13 a month the federal government paid to privates, which would hardly support a single man, much less a married one. The state pay was either held in escrow for the soldier until he was discharged or paid monthly in an allotment to his spouse or family as designated by the soldier. Wilmot also mentions being under age. At that time a man had to be at least twenty-one years old to enlist in the army. If he was

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Winter quarters of the 4th Vermont Infantry Regiment at Camp Griffin.
Photographer: George H. Houghton.

younger, one of his parents had to sign his enlistment papers giving their approval. In his letters, Wilmot sometimes calls Saphronia by her middle name, Ann. The spelling in the transcribed letters is as John Wilmot wrote it. In some cases punctuation has been added for clarity.

Camp Griffin, Va.
March 5th, 1862

Dear Ann

Your verry kind letter of the 26th Feb. was duly received. I was verry much pleased to hear that your health was so good. I hope this will find you well. My health is fast improving but I am not able to do dewty yet. I came from the Hospital Feb 27th and it seams good to get into camp again. If the Regt. should move in a few days I shal be likely to go to Washington to the general Hospital for they want none that are not able to carry a knapsack to go on the march. I dont want you to say anything about it but it would not be strang if Lyman Clement was at home within six weeks for they are makeing out his discharge now. He has done no dewty of any amount four months or more. I dont know but I could get a discharge if I should try for one but if I get a discharge now I should not get my \$100.00 bounty and that is what I should like pretty well. You spoke of my letting you have my state pay of \$7.00 dollars a month but it is too late now for I have made Father my attorney so that he now has the power of drawing it; and he can do as he pleases with it for I am not of age and you

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know had I known a little sooner how things were I would [have] made arrangements a little different; but as I wrote you before I shall let you have twenty dollars the next two months pay I get . . . I can't think of any more to write be very careful of your health. Please write soon. My respects to your Father and mother. Yours with much love from one who thinks of you continually.

John Wilmot⁶

In mid-March of 1862 the Army of the Potomac started deploying over a period of several weeks to the Virginia Peninsula in an attempt to capture Richmond. By April 5, the Vermont Brigade, consisting of the 2nd through the 6th Vermont Regiments, was in upper Newport News on the east bank of the Warwick River facing the rebel fortifications on the other side. Here the brigade would remain until May 4. On April 16, several companies of the 3rd and 6th Vermont were sent across the Warwick River in an ill-fated attempt to stop the rebels from reinforcing their fortifications. The 4th Vermont supported the operation with sharpshooters, as Wilmot explained in a letter written on April 21. The two men from Company H that he mentions being wounded were Private Francis A. Page of Barnet, who was given a disability discharge on December 12, 1862, and Private John P. Harris of Danville, who was given a disability discharge September 18, 1862.

Camp near Yorktown
Apr. 21st, 1862

Dear Ann

I now take my pen to let you know that I am yet in the land of the living. I am well and hope these lines will find you the same. You are in my thoughts where ever I am you are before me. I suppose you are having plenty of new sugar now up in Vt. I hope you will eat some for your absent and loving friend. I suppose you have heard of our engagement of April 16. Six Co. from our Regt. were deployed as skirmishers in the woods opposite the fort consequently we lost but few men. Our loss was two killed and nine wounded. The loss of our Co. was two wounded both with the same ball and both were wounded through the lungs. One was F. A. Page who worked for Calvin Coburn a year ago last summer. We Vt. boys just begin to find out something about war. Each have to take their turn in working nights on the breast works that are to protect our artillery. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth Vt. Regiments worked night before last. The rebels fired upon us with their rifles at four different times but we saw the blaze of their guns in time to sit down so that the balls passed harmlessly over our heads or lodged in the bank of earth before us and a battery near by us gave them a few charges of grape shot which with the fire of our pickets drove them behind their works. I think there is very careless firing on both sides. I can write no more this time. Please send me a postage stamp when you write. Perhaps you had better send me three or four for we cannot get

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them here. I should not send to you for them but it takes the last one I have to send this letter and if my life is spared I will try and pay you for them. Love to all from your true friend.

John Wilmot⁷

After this last letter there is a large gap in Wilmot's letters and the next one was not written until November. During this time the Vermont Brigade saw plenty of action. The 4th Vermont was involved in the battles of Williamsburg, Golding's Farm, Savage's Station, and White Oak Swamp. Then, with the rest of the Army of the Potomac, it marched into Maryland, where it was involved in the battles of Crampton's Gap and Antietam. After the battle of Antietam, the Vermont Brigade garrisoned the town of Hagerstown, Maryland, until the end of October, when it rejoined the Army of the Potomac and marched to New Baltimore, Virginia, and went into camp. It was from New Baltimore that Wilmot wrote the next letter, dated November 12. In this letter he mentions the baby being born. In fact, she was born April 23, 1862, and was named Rohessie Ardelle Wilmot, but was called Hessie by her mother. Saphronia stayed with her parents during her pregnancy. Her mother referred to Saphronia's stay as "her confinement" and the baby was born in her parents' house. Wilmot also mentions in the letter seeing Privates Joel Aldrich and John F. Abbott, both in Company B, 6th Vermont, and from West Fairlee, which is only two miles from Post Mills. They were apparently acquainted with Saphronia and would have undoubtedly learned of her pregnancy in letters from home. They were, however, too gentlemanly to mention it to Wilmot. He again is very concerned with supporting her and tells her that if he survives the war, he will marry her and "remove the stain which has fallen upon their family." The person Wilmot refers to as Chase in this letter is Saphronia's older brother, Truman Chase Prescott, who was married to Sarah A. Emerton, formerly a neighbor of the Wilmot family. Frank, Chase, and Sarah are their children.

Camp near New Baltimore, Va.
Nov. 12th, 1862

My Dear Friend

Yours of Nov. 2nd was received this morning. I had nearly given up all hopes of ever hearing from you again but the long looked for letter has at length arrived. And very glad am I to hear that you and the baby are both well. I hope this will find you Both well. My health has been good since I last wrote to you and is still good. I have had a sore on my right elbow for three months past. I had it opened two months ago and it has been a running sore ever since. It is not a verry large sore the raw place being about as large over as a ten cent piece. I have never been excused from dewty with it until today. I am

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excused from drilling because when I am in the ranks the others crowd against me and hurt it & besides when I have a bandage on it I cannot handle my gun so well. Some times that arm is nearly twice as large as the other but I hope it will soon get well. When I wrote to you before we were at Hagerstown, MD. Wee started from there on the 29th of Oct. and have not stopped over two days in a place since. You have received all the orders and you say you have even received the money on the last order so that my pay is all straight now. I mean to do all I can for you and save all the money that I possibly can. I would sine my state pay to you if I could but when I first came out here I made my Father my attorney to draw my state pay and I cannot change it now but if I live to come back home I think Father will give the most of it back to me. And if I had known how you were last fall two weeks before I did I should have given my state pay to you at that time. We have not been payed off for four months & I have not had any money for so long a time that I have almost forgotten when I had the last. When you write me again write me all you know about the friends at Post Mills. Tel me all the news you can. Tel Frank Chase & Sarah to be good children and tell Chase if he does not write to me I don't know as I shall come to see him when I get home. I have seen Joel Aldrich and Frank Abbott. They both spoke of you but said nothing against you. They are in the 6th Regt. Saphrona [sic] you must keep up good courage and spirits and not feel dessolate for I don't feel as though it was my fate to die in the army and if my life is spared wee will live enough happier together when I get home to make up the time that I am here. I don't think thare is any nead of my telling you to take care of our ofspring for I know you are too warm hearted to neglect the little darling. Give my respects [to] your Parents and tel them that if God spares my life I will remove the stain which has fallen upon their family if it is in my power to do so. I want you to write to me as soon as you get this and write to mee once a week without fail if you donot hear from me and I will write to you once a week if I have a chance to write as often as that. You will please always direct your letters to Washington, DC until I write you otherwise. I have now got wher it is hard to get postage stamps and I would like to have you send me some in your next letter. I must now bid you good by with many good wishes from your loving friend John Wilmot

From John Wilmot
To S. A. Prescott
Post Mills
Vermont⁸

John Wilmot survived the battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862, where the 4th Vermont had been on the skirmish line, losing eleven men killed and forty-five wounded, three of whom died of their wounds. The 4th Vermont went into winter camp near Falmouth, Virginia, where John Wilmot wrote to Saphronia on December 28. The person he refers to as Bush in the letter was one of his older brothers,

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Bushrod W. Wilmot. He also mentions two other soldiers. The first is possibly Private John H. Fuller of Chelsea, who was in Company D, 2nd Vermont. The second is M. Hill who is Private Myron D. Hill of Thetford in Company A, 3rd Vermont.

Camp near Falmouth, Va.
Dec. 28th, 1862

Dearest Saphronia

Your favor of Dec 14th and of the 20th are at hand and I hasten a reply. I am verry glad to hear from you so often and know that you and the little girl are well. I hope Frank and the rest of the family will soon get over their bad colds. My health stil continues good. I have received all the stamps you have sent to me and am verry thankful for them. You will not need to send me any more at present as I have a plenty on hand now. Bush [Bushrod] has sent me some in his last two letters. You spoke of our eating apples togather in the long winter evenings at some future time. I hope and trust wee may be al-lowed to. To speak the truth I have never felt as though I should die in the army. My way is Saphrona [sic] to always look on the bright side of things and I think it is the best way dont you. We are not having verry cold weather here now it does not freeze any nights. But the heavens are clouded and look like a storm. This winter has not been so cold as last winter was.

I think John Fuller was unlucky looseing his horse as he did. I donot know anything about M. Hill. I have not seen him since the battle. My Co. is now three miles away from our Regt. and the Bri-gade so you see I know nothing about them. Wee are now at Genl. Franklin's head quarters building stables for the cavalry horses and artillery horses. There are four Companies of our Regt. here H I D & K. You will Direct your letters the same as usual. I will now close hoping and trusting all will be well with us in due time and my best wishes to all. I remain with much love your true friend.

John Wilmot
(Write soon)⁹

The 4th Vermont moved its camp in January 1863 to Belle Plain, where Wilmot wrote home on January 31. Again, he is concerned about his ability to support Saphronia since the regiment had not been paid for some time and tells her that he cannot reimburse her father for sup-porting her and the baby until he is out of the army.

Camp near Bell Plains, Va.
Jan. 31st, 1863

Dearest Ann

Your favor of the 21st came to hand the 28th. Was happy to hear from you once more and know that you and the little girl are both well. All I can say is I hope [you] will continue to be blessed with good health. My health is quite good at present. About the army be-ing payed off wee have seen no pay master yet but all of us want to verry much. Wee see by the papers that our pay master has the money to pay us with but he has not shown himself among us yet.

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You spoke about being out of money. Well if you could get along without any this pay day I shal send it to another place where I have made arrangements to have it kept for me until I come home. But if you cannot get along without some I will have to send it to you. I want to have a little ready money to use if I ever come home you know, and if I don't live to come home it will be so arranged that you will get it. As for your Father I cannot pay him while in the Army. But if I live to come home sound as I now am I shal endeavor to pay him for taking care of my family. Wee have been have a hard storm here. It rained the 27th. The 28th it snowed all day and I think if it had not melted a great deal whil it was falling there would have been 15 inches on a level but as it was there was about 6 or 8 inches on a level in the morning of the 29th. It is about half gon now the roads are in verry bad condition now. Maj. Genl. Joseph Hooker Commands the army now. Burnside played out pretty quick but I think he meant to do what was for the best but he seemed to have bad luck on all sides. I hope Hooker will have better success. Wee shal not be likely to move at present as the going is so bad now but I will close hopeing to hear from you soon. Love to all. You must kiss the baby for me many times and hope fore my safe and speedy and safe return. I remain as ever your faithful and loveing

John Wilmot¹⁰

Again writing from the camp near Falmouth on May 9, Wilmot tells of having a tumor removed from his back and being unable to perform duty for two months, which means he did not participate in the second battle of Fredericksburg on May 3, and Banks Ford on May 4.

Camp near Falmouth, Va.
May 9th, 1863

Dear Saphronia

Yours of May 3rd has just been received And imagine my surprise when I read in your letter that you had written me several letters but had received no answer to any. Now Saphrona [sic] I have not received a letter from you since March 3rd until today And in that letter you said not a word about the box which I sent for although you had ample time to get it. In your letter which I received today you said that you had not the money to get the things with that was a sufficient reason for not sending it to me. I suppose you think strange that I have not sent you any money of late. You see it is just here I had a Tumor cut out of my back nearly two months ago and have not done any dewty since the wound is not healed up yet and I don't know as it ever will be sound again. I mean to send you some more money some time. We have had another big fight on the other side of the Rappahannock. The rebels were too strong for us and we had to fall back across the river again. I cannot write any more now. Joel Aldrich has been here to see me today. He was in the fight but came out safe. My best respects to all and hoping to hear from you soon. I remain as ever your affectionate friend.

John Wilmot¹¹

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There is another large gap in Wilmot's letters between May 9 and the end of September 1863. In that span of time Wilmot participated in one of the largest and most crucial battles of the American Civil War—Gettysburg. The Vermont Brigade, along with the rest of the Sixth Corps, was on the extreme left of the Union line and saw virtually no action, except for the 4th Vermont. On the third day of the battle, July 3, the 4th Vermont was on the skirmish line and had one man severely wounded. On July 10, the Vermont Brigade had quite a fight with the retreating Confederate forces at Funkstown, Maryland.¹²

The next letter was written from the Culpeper camp on September 26. In this letter Wilmot mentions leaving New York City, where the Vermont Brigade had been sent to suppress the draft riots. The state of New York implemented the federally mandated draft on July 11 and riots broke out in New York City two days later. Between July 13 and 16 the rioters caused \$1,500,000 worth of property damage and killed more than a dozen people, most of them African Americans. The draft went off successfully without any more riots and the Vermonters began their journey south on September 13, arriving in camp near Culpeper, Virginia, on September 22.

Wilmot writes in this letter that he is not able to perform duty again because of the wound where the tumor was removed, and that he expects to be transferred to the Invalid Corps or a general hospital. The Invalid Corps was established in April 1863 and provided a place for officers and men who could not perform full combat duty to perform in limited duty positions such as clerks and guards. The name was changed in March 1864 to the Veteran Reserve Corps. Wilmot's back apparently improved, since he was not transferred out of his regiment. He again sends money home to Saphronia in the letter. The person he refers to as Frank is one of Saphronia's younger brothers, Francis P. Prescott, who was apparently drafted but failed the physical examination.

Camp near Culpepper, Va.
Sept. 26th, 1863

Dear Annie

Your favor of the 15th came to hand last night and right glad I was to hear from you once more and know that both you and my little girl were well and I sincerely hope this may find you still in the enjoyment of good health. My health is not so good as it has been. That old sore on my back is troubling me again. I would get my Discharge if I could but it is impossible to get a Discharge now in the field. I am going to the Invalid Corps or to a General Hospital as soon as they have a chance to send me. When we left New York my back was not sore any and I was on duty. But as soon as I began to march and carry a load it came on again as bad as ever and I shall try to do no more duty until it is entirely well And I am satisfied it never will get

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well as long as I march I was sorry to hear that your Fathers health was so poor and I hope he will soon get well. I think Frank was lucky to be inspected out when he was drafted for he never could stand it to be a Soldier. You wished to know what I was going to do when I got home. If I live to get home I shal get Married the first thing I do if any one will have me. Farther than that I cannot tel you And if any one asks you again what I am going to do you tel them as I tel you. But I think I can find some way to get a liveing. I have no more to write now. Enclosed I send five \$5.00 dollars. I am as ever with much love.

John Wilmot¹³

After several brushes with the Confederates at Rappahannock Station and Mine Run, the Army of the Potomac went into winter camp in the vicinity of Brandy Station, Virginia, where it would remain through the winter of 1863–1864. In a letter written to Saphronia on December 13, Wilmot broaches the subject of reenlisting and asks her opinion. With the various bounties available he could earn a little over \$600 and, more importantly, a thirty-day furlough.

Camp near Brandy Station, Va.
Dec. 13th, 1863

Dear Annie

I once more take my pen in hand to let you know that I am yet alive & have not forgotten you & my little girl. Although many miles from you & surrounded by the rough scenes & enjoyments of camp life If such I be allowed term it. Yes I am surrounded by many War worn & hardened friends & companions. Hardened did I say? Yes they are hardened to the endurance & privations of true Soldiers & Patriots, defenders of their Country's laws against the attempts of a maliceous & despotic Tyrant Who has wantonly attempted to overthrow one of the best & Noblest Governments on the face of the globe. But with Gods help I think we shall succeed in subdueing him & his petty hord of hirelings. Poor misguided & ignorant men who now begin to see the uselessness of resistance But are either too proud or else ashamed to return to loyalty And enjoy the blessings of a peaceful country once more. But I think these hardened Vetrans of ours will show those poor misled wretches that the only hope for their salvation is to return to their homes as peaceful citizens of the United States. Thare has been a great deal of talk in our camps of late on the subject of old soldiers reenlisting. Thare are not many in my company who will reenlist but in some companies and regiments nearly all of the old soldiers have decided to go for three years more. The inducements are good. \$402.00 Government bounty with the State bounty of \$125.00 for old vetrans besides which they get the \$100.00 bounty from Government for the term now nearly expired & they of course will get the town bounty as they would count on the quota from their respective towns. But allowing they do not get the town bounty it amounts to \$627.00 and the regular monthly pay the same as now. What do you think Annie had I better go in again. I forgot to

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tel you too all that reenlist are granted a furlow of thirty days. Let me know in your next what you think I had better do. My health continues good and I truly hope this will [find] my dear ones enjoying that great blessing. Yours as ever from your constant but absent Soldier.

John Wilmot¹⁴

John Wilmot did reenlist on December 16 and got his bounties and his thirty day furlough. While he was home he married Saphronia Ann Prescott in Post Mills, on January 17, 1864. He also rented a house so she no longer had to live with her parents. In his first letter after he returned to Brandy Station, written on Sunday, February 14th, 1864, Wilmot tells Saphronia how much he loves her and asks how she is getting along in their new home. In this letter, Wilmot mentions Melency, Saphronia's older sister, and the possibility of her marriage. Melency married George Parker of Topsham on February 29, 1864. As well, he mentions Emma, Saphronia's younger sister.

Brandy Station, Va.
Feb. 14th, 1864

My Dear Annie

I suppose you are thinking of me at this moment. I cannot help thinking of you and my little Hessie all the time. Yes Ann you in my thoughts every moment. But Ann my dear I donot mourn over our sepperation. No I feel that we are to be sepperated only for a reason And I now feel you are min all mine And I now have something to live for and some one to love and love me. And now my dear Girl if you ever feel lonely remember that I love you as passionately as on the eve before we parted. Oh no dearest Girl sepperation does not cool the ardor of my love But Dearest I will not dwell too long upon the subject.

Has Father got his sleigh fills mended yet. We came near haveing a serious time of it for I thought old Charley would break his legs when he went down. I wonder if old Charley is lame any after such a breakdown. I hope he is not.

How are you getting along with your things for house keeping. Do you have good success. I hope and trust you do. Is little Hessie Fathers Lady now? I trust she is. I think Ann that I am the happiest man that ever lived it seems to me so & I hope I never shall have occasion to regret my choice.

Here the letter abruptly ends when Wilmot is tapped for picket duty and it is not resumed until Wednesday, February 17, when he returns to camp. Wilmot appears proud that the men in his company compliment him for getting married while he was home on furlough.

I will now try & finish my letter I had to go on Picket Sunday & stay three days It is verry cold & windy here today & has been for two days past We are expecting a storm after this cold snap The boys

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all compliment me on my success while at home they say I was the smartest one of the crowed for I was the only one that got married from my Company Ann I want you to write to me every week & oftener if you can. I want you to get your picture & Hessies taken for me as soon as possible. Have them taken on separate plates. You can most likely guess the reason for that. I suppose Melency is married by this time & if she is give her my love & tel her I wish her a happy life. My love to Father & Mother & all the rest of the family. Tel Emma she must learn to write so as to write to me. My respects to all friends & tel Mrs. [illegible] that her brother Henry is well & a prisoner in Richmond. P. S. accept this from your ever affectionate Husband

John Wilmot¹⁵

As usual, in a letter written on March 14, 1864, Wilmot talks about getting money to Saphronia. He also seems euphoric over being married. The Frank Rowell he refers to is Private Francis H. Rowell of Thetford in Company D, 1st Vermont Cavalry Regiment.

Brandy Station, Va.
March 14th, 1864

My Dear Wife

Your kind favor of the 6th came to hand last evening And I was once more gratified to learn that my little family were enjoying that greatest of blessing good health. My health continues quite good and I am most thankfull for it. About the bounty if Willard [his father] gets it I think he will do as I ordered him to do with it that was to put \$200.00 of it into the bank and give you the notes And take his pay out of the remaining \$100.00 and give what was left to you which would probably be about \$75.00 And if he gets the bounty for me I think he will do with it as I told him to. I saw Frank Rowell last evening. He is now only a few steps from us at Head Quarters 3rd Brigade. Frank seams to think evrything of his wife and I guess she thinks evrything of Frank for she writes three or four letters a week to him. I don't want you to write to me so often as that for I think you can manifest your love for me without writing so often as that. Do you remember about Frank and his wife hugging and kissing the time that you saw them in Pratts Store. If it is true about their doing so I think they must have been smart. Now you were thare and you can tell whether it is true or not. I don't think we shall have any fighting here for a month at least and perhaps not for two or three months. We have been mustered for pay and expect to be payed within two or three weeks. I have sold my watch but it got damaged so that I did not get only \$18.00 for it and I don't get that until pay day. I shall send you \$50.00 and perhaps more when we are payed. I am glad that you love our little Daughter so much and I hope your love will not diminish with time but continue to strengthen. Oh Ann you don't know the love I have for my Dear Wife and child. I cannot find words to express my love for you. It is as pure as the morning dew or the unclouded rays of the noonday sun. I know not how soon we shall meet again. It may be many months and perhaps years but I hope and trust

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and pray that a few months may bring us together again. A stout heart and steadfast performance of dewty Trusting in god for the consequences. Hoping to hear from you soon and sending many good wishes & warm kisses. I remain your affectionate husband with respects to all friends.

John Wilmot¹⁶

On April 14 Wilmot writes that he has been on picket again. In this letter he sends Saphronia two photographs of himself and suggests she offer one to her father's folks "if they want it." It would appear that although he married Saphronia as soon as he could, all was not forgiven. He also asks her to send him some black felt tape and elastic, presumably to make mourning armbands for the death of someone in his unit. By army regulation, a mourning arm band was made of black crepe and worn on the left arm, above the elbow. Also, since his last letter John Wilmot had been promoted to corporal.

Brandy Station, Va.
April 14th, 1864

My Dear Wife

Your kind favor of the 7th came to hand the 10th when I was on picket. I was once more pleased and gratified to learn that you were all well at home. My health is quite good. I got pretty well soaked out on picket for it rained nearly 36 hours. But it was a warm rain so we did not take cold and we had a good fire and plenty of wood. I was on picket three days. I came into camp the 11th.

This is the 4th pleasant day we have had since the storm. We haven't had over one fair day at a time between storms before this for three weeks.

I have got some Photographs and I am going to send two to you and you can let Father Ps [Prescott's] folks have one of them if they want it. Now my little dear you aint going to be such a foolish little simpleton as to get jealous of George & Melency for fear that Father and Mother will think more of them than they do of you and me O! Ann my love I am real glad if they do like George after all and I hope he will be steady and do well for Melency's sake if for no other reason. I hope Father and Mother wont fall out of bed again for I think it looks foolish don't you. I am going to send you an order for allotted money \$20.00. You had better burn that extra order that I sent for it never will be of any use to you. Have you drawn your State pay and the money on that other order. I trust you have.

Hopeing to hear from you soon again. I remain with my best wishes to all friends And much love to my dear ones your faithful and confiding husband.

John Wilmot

P. S. please send me by mail as soon as you can conveniently get it 2½ yards of velvet tape ¾ or 1 inch wide and ½ yard of elastic ¼ inch wide or perhaps a little narrower. I want the whole black. P. S. please don't forget This from

John¹⁷

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Corporal John Wilmot's last surviving letter was written from Brandy Station on Friday, April 22. As usual he was concerned with financial matters. He was also interested in how Saphronia was getting along with her new neighbors.

Brandy Station, Va.
April 22nd, 1864

My Dear Wife

I have just received your kind favor of the 17th. I was very much gratified to learn that both yourself and my darling little Hessie were enjoying good health Which is the greatest blessing we are permitted to enjoy.

My health continues perfectly good And I feel very thankful for the same.

I am verry glad that you are on such good terms with your neighbors And I hope and trust in their friendship.

Did not Willard say anything about what he sent you that \$10 Dollars for I think it is that which I mentioned in my last letter to you And guess Bushrod did not want the money. Willard is going to put it into the bank for me. That is what is left after paying that note to Dodge and the expenses of getting the money etc. Which will leave \$250 Dollars to put at interest. I shall [decide] what is done with the money as soon as I hear from Willard again which will probably be within a week from this time.

I haven't much to write tonight dearest it is so quiet in these parts just now.

Thare are pretty fair prospects of another rain tonight. But this rainy season is not going to last much longer I am thinking.

You must kiss my little girl for me and my little girl must kiss her Mother for Papa.

Give my best respects to all friends And write as often as convenient.

And accept this with many good wishes from your affectionate husband.

John Wilmot¹⁸

During the middle of April 1864, the Army of the Potomac got busy with preparations for the upcoming spring campaign. On May 4 the Vermont Brigade, with the rest of the Army of the Potomac, was on the road moving south in search of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The next day the two armies found each other in an area known as the Wilderness. Because of their severe casualties, the Vermonters would later call it "a wilderness of woe." The Battle of the Wilderness was especially frightful for the 4th Vermont. It went into battle on May 5 with approximately 600 officers and men. By the evening of May 6 it had suffered 257 casualties, over 40 percent of the regiment, which was more than that of any other regiment in the Vermont Brigade. Of these casualties 34 were killed, 194 were wounded, of

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whom 45 died of their wounds, and 129 were missing, many of whom were probably killed.

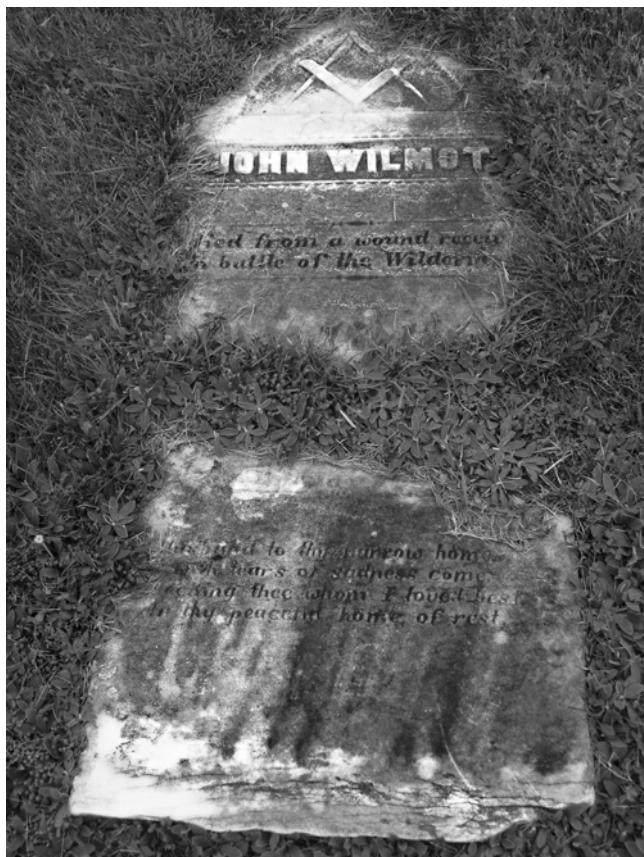
One of the severely wounded on May 5 was Corporal John Wilmot. He was hit by a rebel shell fragment on the inside of his left leg, tearing it open. After being stabilized in a field hospital he was evacuated to a hospital in Washington, D.C., and a week later he was evacuated to the Mower General Hospital in Philadelphia. Mower General Hospital was known as a pavilion hospital. It had a central enclosed complex of administrative and utility buildings with forty-seven patient wards radiating from the center. It was strategically located on twenty-seven acres opposite the Chestnut Hill depot of the Reading Railroad. Here Wilmot lingered until June 17, before dying of his wound. The cause of his death was listed as effects of his wound and bilious fever, an archaic term for a relapsing fever characterized by vomiting bile and having diarrhea.¹⁹

Saphronia did not know of her husband's death until she received a letter from Chaplain W. F. P. Nobel at the Mower General Hospital written on June 18. She probably received it on June 22 or 23. It read:

Dear Madam,

You have already been informed of the dangerous illness of your husband John Wilmot. I regret to inform you that he died yesterday morning, June 17th at 6 a.m. and was buried this morning at 10 a.m. He died from bilious fever and the effect of his wound. He left the following effects: 1 cap, 1 drawers, 1 bootees, 1 boots, 1 silver watch, 1 gold ring, 1 gold pen & holder, 1 pocket knife, photographs & pocket glass. He lent \$12 June 8th to Lewis Secor, Private Co. F, 4th Vt. [Lewis Secor was also wounded on May 5] You can get these by application to J. Hopkins, surgeon in charge, Mower Hospital, Phila. (Chestnut Hill)²⁰

According to Theodore S. Peck's *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers and Lists of Vermonters who Served in the Army and Navy of the United States During the War of the Rebellion, 1861–66*, John Wilmot was buried in the Philadelphia National Cemetery. For this article, contact was made with officials at the Veteran's Administration to verify the location of John Wilmot's burial site, however, the Veteran's Administration has no record of his burial. Apparently someone from Wilmot's family either went to Philadelphia and brought his body back to Thetford or paid to have it shipped. Regardless of how he returned to Vermont, he was reinterred in the village cemetery at Post Mills. John Wilmot's name, date of death, and the words "Died of wounds received in the battle of the Wilderness" are carved on his gravestone. The following poem is also inscribed on the stone:



Grave of John Wilmot, Post Mills Cemetery, Thetford. Photographer: Paul G. Zeller, courtesy of the author.

Husband in thy narrow home
I with tears of sadness come
Seeking thee I loved best
In thy peaceful home of rest

After John's death, Saphronia had to find a way to take care of herself and Rohessie, or else she would have to move back in with her parents. Thankfully the government had provided a solution to the problem. On July 14, 1862, Congress passed an act to provide a pension to soldiers injured by wounds or disease while in the service. If the soldier died of his wounds or disease, his widow, dependent children (if there

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was no mother), or dependent mother were also eligible for a pension. Saphronia took advantage of this opportunity and applied for a widow's pension, which she received at the rate of \$8 a month. In July 1866, the Pension Act was revised and the monthly rates were increased. Saphronia applied for an increase to her pension, but this time she hit a snag. In her supporting evidence for her pension, someone at the Pension Bureau noticed that Rohessie was born before Saphronia and John were married and therefore denied the increase. Why this was not taken into consideration in her initial application was not recorded. In September 1866, Saphronia hired a lawyer to help her, but he was unsuccessful. She hired another lawyer in June 1868 who served her better. In his appeal he noted that in accordance with General Statutes of Vermont, Chapter 56, Section 5, page 415, a child is considered legitimate if the father acknowledged it. This appeal worked and her pension was raised to \$12 a month. Because Saphronia never remarried, she received the pension, with increases, for the rest of her life.²¹

Saphronia had another child out of wedlock in Fairlee. The little girl was born on June 13, 1866, shortly before Saphronia applied for an increase in her pension, but only lived until October 6, when she died of croup. For some reason the baby's first name was not recorded in the Fairlee vital records upon her birth nor her death. On February 26, 1875, Saphronia had a third child out of wedlock, a son whom she named Alger Prescott Wilmot.²²

Saphronia died in her daughter's home in East Barre, Vermont, a few minutes before 5 P.M. on November 19, 1909. Her death certificate states her chief cause of death was senile debility, with a morphine habit as a contributing factor. She was buried in the Post Mills Cemetery on November 22, presumably beside John, although the space beside his grave is unmarked. One can only wonder if Hessie could not afford a stone for her mother, or if John's family would not let her grave be marked, or if the stone is missing.²³

MANUSCRIPT

The Letters of John Wilmot (MSS-28 #99-100) consists of letters written to Saphronia Ann Prescott (later his wife, Saphronia Ann Wilmot) from 1862 to 1864. The collection occupies two folders. Research material gathered through Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org has been added to the collection. As well, the VHS holds two Wilmot family letters (Misc 1688), one dating from 1839 and the other from 1850, and a letter addressed to Saphronia Ann Prescott by a cousin (MSS-24 #85) dated 1861.

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NOTES

¹Letters of John Wilmot, MSS-28 #99-100, Vermont Historical Society, Barre, hereinafter cited as Letters of John Wilmot.

²Vermontcivilwar.org.; Ancestry.com, U.S. Census 1860, Thetford, Orange County, Vermont, p. 436; John Wilmot's compiled service record, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780–1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., herein-after cited as John Wilmot's compiled service record.

³Town Clerk's office, Barre Town, Vt., Vital Records, death originals 1908–1909, p. 105; Town Clerk's office, Fairlee, Vt., Vital Records, book no. 1, p. D1.

⁴George G. 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.: The Free Press Association, 1886 and 1888), 156–159, hereinafter cited as Benedict and all references are to vol. 1; John Wilmot's compiled service record.

⁵Benedict, 160–161.

⁶Letters of John Wilmot; Benedict, 24; Saphronia A. Wilmot's widow's pension file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., herein-after cited as Saphronia Wilmot's widow's pension. The Lyman Clement that Wilmot mentions is Pvt. Lyman H. Clement of Thetford, Vt., who was given a disability discharge on April 3, 1862.

⁷Letters of John Wilmot; Theodore S. Peck, *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers and Lists of Vermonters who Served in the Army and Navy of the United States During the War of the Rebellion, 1861–66* (Montpelier, Vt.: Watchman Co., 1892), 134, herein-after cited as Peck; Benedict, 162.

⁸Benedict, 163–165; Peck, 187; Letters of John Wilmot; Saphronia Wilmot's widow's pension record; ancestry.com.

⁹Benedict, 165; Peck, 74; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁰Benedict, 165; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹¹Letters of John Wilmot.

¹²Benedict, 165–167.

¹³Paul G. Zeller, *The Second Vermont Volunteer Infantry Regiment, 1861–1865* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2002), 152, herein-after cited as Zeller; Benedict, 167; Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 1991), 870; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁴Benedict, 167–168; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁵Peck, 135; FamilySearch.org; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁶Peck, 237; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁷United States War Department, *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861* (1861; Reprint, Harrisburg: National Historical Society, 1980), 45; Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁸Letters of John Wilmot.

¹⁹Benedict, 169, 412–435; Zeller, 169; Peck, 135; John Wilmot's compiled service record; <http://www.lcpimages.org/inventories/mower/>; Saphronia Wilmot's military pension record; <http://www.antiquusmorbis.com/English/EnglishB.htm>.

²⁰Saphronia Wilmot's widow's pension file.

²¹Ibid.; U.S. Government, *Instructions and Forms to be used in Applying for Army Pensions Under the Act of July 14, 1862* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1862), 1–12.

²²Town Clerk's office, Fairlee, Vt., Vital Records, book no. 1, pp. B6, D10; Ancestry.com; Family Search.org.

²³*Barre Daily Times*, 20 November 1909; Town Clerk's office, Barre Town, Vt., Vital Records, death originals, 1908–1909, p. 105.