

IN THEIR WORDS



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“My Soldier Boy Mark”: The Civil War Letters of Pvt. Mark B. Slayton

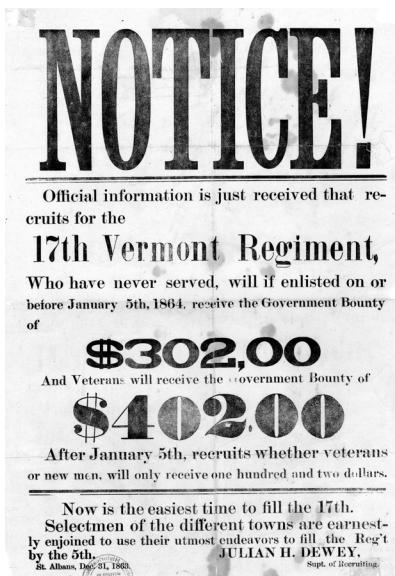
By PAUL G. ZELLER

The 17th Vermont Infantry Regiment was the last regiment raised in Vermont for the Civil War. Governor Frederick Holbrook issued the order for its formation on August 3, 1863. The nine-month regiments of the Second Vermont Brigade had been mustered out of service just several weeks before, and it was thought by state officials that many of those veterans would enlist in the 17th Vermont—but that was not the case. For most nine-month men, business or family affairs made it difficult for them to spend any more time in the army. In addition, many men thought that the Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg meant that the war was about over. Probably most importantly, bounties (similar to signing bonuses today) for the new regi-

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LEFT: Recruiting poster for the 17th Vermont Infantry Regiment, released on December 31, 1863. RIGHT: Pvt. Mark B. Slayton, Company C, 17th Vermont Infantry Regiment.

ments were limited to \$100, while men enlisting in the older regiments were receiving \$300. The War Department finally lifted the \$100 bounty cap in December 1863 and offered \$302 bounties to first-time enlistees and \$402 bounties to veterans, but the offer was only good until January 5, 1864. That offer helped fill up Company A, but it was not until early March that Companies B, C, and D were mustered, followed later by Companies E, F, and G on April 12.¹

One of the men, a boy really, to enlist in the 17th Vermont was Mark B. Slayton from Stowe, who enlisted as a private in Company C on February 28, 1864. While his age on his enlistment papers appears as eighteen, he was actually about three months shy of his seventeenth birthday. At the time of his enlistment he stood five feet, seven inches tall, had black eyes and black hair, and gave his occupation as a farmer. Mark Slayton was the son of Jerome Bonaparte and Rhoda N. (Thomas) Slayton. Jerome Slayton had originally married Sarah Bicknell on September 12, 1843. They had one daughter, named Sarah, born in September 1844. Sarah Slayton died on January 10, 1845, and her daughter died the following June. Jerome then married Rhoda N. Thomas on July 22,

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1845. They had two children: Mark B., born on May 5, 1847, and Helen, born on August 10, 1849. Rhoda died August 24, 1851, at age 27. Jerome married for a third time on April 18, 1852, to Sabrina A. Montague. Sabrina was the daughter of Isaac and Hannah (Pierce) White of Barre, Vt. She married William Montague around 1841 and after William's death on April 15, 1850, she married Jerome. William and Sabrina had two children: The first died as an infant; the second was Rosamund Marion Montague, who was born on April 16, 1846. Jerome and Sabrina had one child of their own, Angie M., born on December 5, 1855.²

There are ten letters written by Mark Slayton in the collections of the Vermont Historical Society. The first was written while he was in the 17th Vermont's camp of instruction on the fairground in Burlington. This letter was written to Mark's uncle, Ahijah Thomas who married Jerome Slayton's sister, Clarissa, in 1849.³

Burlington Apr. 10 [1864]

Uncle A. & Aunt C:

On Sunday, a week ago today, I received a letter from you announcing that you intended to send a valise containing eatables. Nothing could have been more satisfactory and acceptable. But I little expected as rare a treat as I found in my possession on Thursday when I opened the valise and discovered the valuable articles. You will think [it] strange that I was unable to get it before Thursday when it left Stowe Saturday. Monday being unable to get a pass, I sent to the office by a member of Co. C but it was not open. Tuesday I could not go or send. Wednesday I sent again with no better success, though the office was open. Thursday I sent a third & last time; they said as previously that it was not there, but the fellow looked around a little and discovered it, and brought it safe and good minus the chicken into camp. The chicken, alas was unsuitable for eating and I buried it with military honors. Every thing else was in excellent condition, the sugar, pies, apples, dried beef and the rest. And I am enjoying their delicious taste. Considering this timely and splendid present not only entitled to a reply, but an acknowledgement of heart felt indebtedness I have endeavored to do both. But I find it not an easy task with what language I have at command, to do the latter. All I can say is I shall remember it. Uncle H., you have done well; 1000 lbs. of sugar & faithful attendance to the horses in March. I suppose you will make some more this mo. Tell Howard & Flora & the rest, not excepting Arthur, to write frequently and I will try and ans. them. We drill four hours a day and go on guard quite frequently. Yesterday was quite a day in camp; two companies were organized & the Governor, Adjutant Gen. and Col Randall were present. It seems like summer here. We are living much better than we did, a change of Quartermaster has brought a change of fare.

Tell Uncle Abial & all others thinking of coming down here to do so without fail, for they will have a grand opportunity. It is quite certain that we shall remain here till we leave the state and there is but



*Capt. Abial H. Slayton,
Company H, 9th Vermont
Infantry Regiment.*

little prospect of that this two months. I shall without doubt have an opportunity to send the valise home before we leave the state. I will improve the first good one.

If you are anxious to get it soon, write to that effect.

Tell Howard not to be discouraged if in great labor & calculation have rendered his brain & body partly inefficient. I want he should eat my allowance of sugar in addition to his own. Tell grandfather I should like to have him come down with Uncle A. and I shall not object if the rest of you come. Write the health of all.

Your Nephew
Mark⁴

The Uncle Abial that Mark mentions is Abial H. Slayton, another of Jerome Slayton's brothers. Abial Slayton had commanded Company H, 9th Vermont Infantry Regiment, from June 27, 1862, until his resignation due to poor health on December 8, 1862.⁵

The dignitaries Slayton writes about are Vermont Governor Frederick Holbrook, Vermont Adjutant General Peter T. Washburn, and Colonel Francis V. Randall. Randall had previously served in two other units. He was commissioned as captain of Company F of the 2nd Vermont Infantry Regiment in May 1861. Then he was commissioned colonel and given command of the newly formed 13th Vermont Infantry Regiment on September 24, 1862. The 13th Vermont was one of the nine-month regiments in the Second Vermont Brigade. Colonel Randall and the 13th Vermont had gained some notoriety in the battle of Gettysburg when the 13th, 15th, and 16th Vermont Regiments flanked and helped

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stop Confederate Major General George E. Pickett's fateful charge on July 3, 1863.⁶

In his next letter Mark writes about the disposition of his pay. At the time privates in the U. S. Army received \$13 a month. The state of Vermont paid its men an extra \$7 a month, which went to someone designated by the soldier or was held in escrow until the soldier was discharged. The \$125 he mentions is part of his bounty.

Burlington, April 14, 1864

Father, mother & the rest:

I received a letter from you yesterday stating to my surprise that you had not received any letter from me for some time, when I wrote you last saturday in reply to Helen's letter that I found in the valise. You should certainly have received it monday night. You probably have rec. this. I am greatly indebted to you for all the letters, but cannot answer each separately. I must write briefly and pointedly. We have been ordered to report to Annapolis, Maryland. And Lieut. Guyer told me to day that we should certainly come monday. We shall probably be paid saturday. To day I allotted my monthly government pay, or ten dollars of it. The other three I shall draw together with my government bounty which will be a sufficiently large amount for spending money. I mean the \$3, the rest I shall endeavor to send home. The \$10 will on pay days be sent to the State Treasury there to draw interest. I thought this an admirable course to pursue. Nearly every man in the company did the same. They consider it best to keep as little money with them as they can conveniently. If you should need any of this money you can easily get it.

I expect the \$125.00 this week. I shall send it home by express, or some other safe way, also the Valise. send no more letters here for they will not reach here in season to be read before we leave.

My health is good, and I am ready to go to the southern portion of the country. It is not certain that we shall leave the Monday, but quite bearable. I can hardly make the boys believe that your statement in relation to sugar is true. Six pounds is beyond their comprehension. The mail man is here waiting and I shall have to close. When we leave I will write more frequently.

Affectionately
Mark

Lieutenant Guyer that Mark mentioned was First Lt. Guy H. Guyer of Wolcott. Guyer had previously served as the captain of Company H, 9th Vermont Infantry Regiment, but had to resign from the army for family reasons. He was commissioned as first lieutenant in Company C of the 17th Vermont on February 24, 1864.⁷

Due to the desperate need for troops in the upcoming campaigns, the first seven companies of the 17th Vermont were ordered south, totaling about 600 officers and men, with the other three companies to follow as soon as they could be formed. The scuttlebutt about going to

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Annapolis, Maryland, was only partly right. The IX Corps, to which the 17th Vermont would be assigned, was in Annapolis being re-equipped and reinforced with new units. However, instead of going to Annapolis, the seven companies of the 17th left Burlington for Alexandria, Virginia, on April 18. Because the regiment still had not filled its last three companies, the seven companies left under the command of the regiment's Lieutenant Colonel, Charles Cummings. Since army regulations would not permit a colonel to command a regiment without its full complement of ten companies, Col. Randall remained in Vermont recruiting. Cummings had previously served as lieutenant colonel of the 16th Vermont.⁸

Camp near Alexandria, Va. [April 25 or 26, 1864]

Father, mother and the rest:

You will perceive by the date That I am in the land of strife. A pretty little journey of about six hundred miles brought us here saturday night [April 23]. Monday tuesday, wednesday, thursday, friday and saturday were consumed in this journey. We passed through some of the principal cities of the U.S., viz.: Springfield, Hartford, New Haven, New York, Amboy, Wilmington, Philadelphia, Washington, Alexandria. I had some nice boat rides & saw the state house and a few other large buildings.

Saturday about dark we arrived on the field of rest. Tents were immediately furnished us sufficiently large to be occupied by four. These tents, called A tents, were thrown up, and I slept as sound on the ground as I ever did on feathers. Our tents forming as do a village present a novel & beautiful appearance. Our streets are kept neat & clean. Samuel Clark is sweating over the kettle in virtue of his position of cook of the co. I can hardly realize that I am actually in Va. the state of which I have read so much and that rebels have traveled over the country in view. But as it is I like [it] better than I expected, but we shall not probably remain here long. We are liable to leave at any time. Some think we shall leave to-morrow. Some that we shall not for a week or two. Some think that we shall go to North Carolina. Others that we shall go to the front. All is conjecture [sic] for some length of time. You will probably do best to wait till I write again. There are encamped in this vicinity about 30,000 men. I shall write as frequently as possible. You must not expect as often as while at Burlington. You have probably received the \$20 sent by me. While the cars stopped at Waterbury about five minutes, I saw Uncle Abial. He handed me a package of sugar & cakes and a letter from Aunt C. & Uncle A. The letter contained good advice & the sugar was not bad to take.

Father handed me a letter from T. a good long one. I will try and answer it some time.

Tell grandmother W. her present is just the thing. It is as hot as June in Stowe.

Mark⁹

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Upon arriving in Alexandria, the 17th Vermont was assigned to the Second Brigade of the Second Division of the IX Corps. It was brigaded with the 6th, 9th, and 11th New Hampshire Regiments and the 31st and 32nd Maine Infantry Regiments. The Maine regiments were combat-hardened units while the New Hampshire regiments, like the 17th Vermont, were new. On April 27 the 17th Vermont, along with the rest of the Second Brigade, left Alexandria and marched south, reaching Bristoe Station on the evening of April 28. Here it remained until May 4. While at Bristoe Station, Mark Slayton wrote his next letter.¹⁰

Camp near Bristow Station, Va.
May 2, 1864

Dear Mother

You probably think that it is about time to write again. I am of the same opinion and will prove so as I get through with this short. And I also think that mother is the one to write to. So the rest of you need not complain if I write to you only indirectly. Well then mother how do you get along making your flower beds with your feeble health. But perhaps you have not commenced yet. When you do I want Angie to assist all she can.

I learned by your letter a sad account of Henry Pike. It must be hard for his parents to see him in such a forlorn condition. I hope God will give me strength to resist the many temptations in my path. You also mention an unpleasant difficulty between T. Barnes and F. in consequence of liquor sold by the former. All I have to say about it is I am glad to hear that [the] cause of temperance is advancing. Tell grandmothers White and Slayton & my other relatives that I would gladly write to them all now, but cannot for the present, but I think of them never the less. When you write again you must write all the particulars of interest. Write concerning your health and the rest. How is father getting along with his work. Tell him to take good care of himself. How is the school flourishing. How are Helen & Rosa, Angie, little Angie I will try and write a few lines to. My last letter by mistake I did not give the time, which was written about a week ago just previous to starting from A [Alexandria]. We left that city last Wednesday as we supposed for the front. We marched that day and the next marching about 40 miles and then stopped here, where we are at present. I have something to tell you rather unpleasant. Since we started from Alexandria I have been pretty unfortunate. The night before we started I was taken sick & vomited some. The next morning I fainted. I had caught cold and was quite lame in my back. The Dr. thought I had better try and march. I did and had to take the ambulance after making 4 or 5 miles. But the ambulance came near breaking down and I changed and lost my knapsack and contents.

Do not work too hard
From your son,
Mark

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Mark Slayton was not the only one sick. With many men unused to marching and others coming down with measles, the 17th Vermont reached the bloody battlefield of the Wilderness on May 5 with only 400 men. May 5 was the first of two days of horrendous fighting in the tangled woods of the Wilderness. The 17th Vermont was thrown into combat with virtually no training on May 6. This was the start of what would be known as Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign that would consist of forty days of almost continuous fighting and marching, as the Army of the Potomac pushed its way toward Richmond. In its first day of combat the 17th Vermont lost more men than any other regiment in the Second Brigade. Its losses were ten killed, sixty-four wounded, ten of which were mortal, and six missing. One of the wounded was the 17th Vermont's acting commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Cummings, who received a scalp wound that would keep him out of action for several weeks. He would be killed the following fall in the Battle of Poplar Grove Church on September 30. The 17th's next fight was on May 12 at Spotsylvania Court House. In this action the regiment lost twelve men killed, fifty-eight wounded, seven of which were mortal, and two missing. Four days after the battle of Spotsylvania, Mark wrote home again.¹¹

Camp in the field 18 miles
South of Fredericksburg
May 16, 1864

Dear Father

About two weeks ago since I wrote home from Bristow Station; since that time I have had no opportunity to write. Between the date of that letter and this much has transpired. As you are doubtless aware there has been fighting every day since the first of May. The 17th Regt. has been in two battles. One Black Wilderness near Chancellorsville, and the other at this place. One was fought the sixth the other the 11th [actually the 12th], five days later. Our loss in the first was 11 wounded, 1 killed; in the second 12 wounded, 1 killed in Co. C.

Which leaves us only 29 men fit for duty. I was with the regt. in both fights and feel very thankful that I have escaped. The entire loss of the Regt. is heavy, probably over a hundred killed & wounded. There are a great many sick. Only 188 men in the Regt. able to do duty. You will learn a list of the killed & wounded.

I must close now or not send
God bless you all Good bye
Mark

P.S. I will write again more particularly as soon as convenient

Mark

Three days later Mark had an opportunity to write home again.

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Near Spottsylvania C. H.
May 19, 1864

Dear friends at home.

Today for the first time since leaving Bristow Station the mail was distributed for the regt. The boys had just stopped from a tedious march, but you ought to see their eyes glisten as they peruse the various letters from their distant friends. There is nothing that will make them feel half so well. Do not then forget to write frequently. You have opportunities & advantages that I have not. I will write when I can rest assured of that although perhaps with poor pen or lead pencil and amid scenes of confusion & strife. The 5th of May after a long & toilsome march we took the field of danger, and ever since then we have been exposed to an enemy's fire, night & day. We have been two day's in a hot fire where we lost heavily considerable over 100 men killed & wounded which reduced our regt. with various sick to about 200 men. And the survivors are pretty well fatigued. You will learn by the papers much more than I can tell concerning the regt. Yesterday—today is May 20—I saw a number of soldiers from the 11th [Vermont Infantry Regiment] which has been organized into two infantry regts. and assigned to the 6th [Corps]—Gen. Hancock's—corps where the old Vermont Brigade is. I saw S. Simmon, C. Moody, P. Night, P. Pike, G. Whitney, C. Watts, J. Currick, S. Gillet. I shall endeavor to see the other boys of the 11th. also old Brig. I am very anxious to see Henry Thomas and will if practicable. The boys are enjoying a fine rest just now a little in the rear. Yesterday—May 19—I had indescribable pleasure in reading some papers brought in with the mail. The first I had seen for three weeks. 3 or 4 days since I began a letter, but had only half finished it when the letters were sent. That is the way here, if you commence a letter you little know when it will be completed. I am quite certain, however, that I shall be able to finish this. It is useless to use any words respecting my knapsack & contents. They are of little account in a time like this. If I can carry a blanket, piece of tent with my gun, cartridges & rations I shall be doing well. Soldiers in an active campaign carry only what is absolutely necessary, and think themselves fortunate to escape with their lives so not a sigh for the old knapsack, but heart felt thanks to Providence that I am alive & well this fine morning. You can little imagine what we have undergone & have to in the future. But do not worry about me. I am well very well comparatively speaking. I began this letter last night and am finishing it this morning, but it will take another page.

Mark¹²

Mark was incorrect about two details concerning the 11th Vermont. The unit was raised as the 11th Vermont Infantry Regiment, but when it reached Washington, D.C., in September 1862 it was redesignated as the 1st Vermont Heavy Artillery and stationed in the fortifications that surrounded Washington. As a heavy artillery unit it was authorized twelve companies rather than ten like an infantry regiment, and the two addi-

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tional companies were quickly recruited. After the terrible losses in the Wilderness, many of the heavy artillery units in Washington, including the 1st Vermont Heavy Artillery, went back to their original organizations as infantry regiments and were sent to the Army of the Potomac. When it was converted back to an infantry regiment it was not divided into two regiments as Mark thought, but rather into three battalions for better command and control. Secondly, it had been assigned to the VI Corps not the V Corps.¹³

The 17th Vermont left Spotsylvania with the rest of the brigade on the evening of May 20, heading south. On May 31, the Vermonters were in combat again at Totopotomoy Creek, where they lost one man killed and four mortally wounded. From Totopotomoy Creek the Army of the Potomac moved south until it encountered Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Cold Harbor on June 1. The 17th Vermont was not involved in the slaughter that day, when the Federals sustained nearly 2,200 casualties. The Vermonters, however, were not so lucky on June 3, when Grant ordered another charge on the Confederate works. In this attack the 17th Vermont lost one man killed and seventeen wounded, five mortally. The charge of June 3 was the last assault on the Confederate works at Cold Harbor. From that time until June 12, the two opposing armies engaged in trench warfare. On June 8, the newly recruited Company H arrived from Vermont to join the 17th, bringing an additional fifty-seven men. Prior to Company H's arrival, the 17th was down to 178 men. On the day of Company H's arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Cummings wrote, "During the last fifteen days we have been under fire every day but three, and two of those days we were on the march."¹⁴ Company I would not join the regiment until August and the last one, Company K, would not arrive until October. On June 12, the Army of the Potomac moved out in the dead of night toward the James River with Petersburg as its objective. The Second Brigade crossed the James River on June 15 at 11 A.M. and after a grueling twenty-two-hour march it reached the outskirts of Petersburg at noon the next day.¹⁵

The 17th Vermont participated in an assault at Petersburg on June 17, where it distinguished itself. In the assault the 17th Vermont captured the colors of the 17th Tennessee Infantry, its adjutant, and seventy of its men. Lieutenant Colonel Cummings wrote after the battle, "I cannot refrain from noticing the coincidence, that on the anniversary of the 17th of June the Seventeenth Vermont captured the colors of the Seventeenth Tennessee, together with guns and prisoners numbering more than half their own number."¹⁶ The loss in the 17th Vermont was six men killed, including Company C's First Lieutenant Guyer, who fell early in the charge shot through the chest. The Vermonters were en-

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gaged again on June 18 and lost four men wounded, two of whom later died of their wounds. The next day three more men were killed and two wounded, one mortally, in their trenches. For the next several weeks the Vermonters were engaged in almost constant fighting along their picket lines and experienced numerous artillery bombardments. Unable to break the Confederate line, Lieutenant General Grant decided to lay siege to Petersburg. It was during this period that Mark Slayton wrote his next letter.¹⁷

Camp near Petersburg, Va. June 23, 1864

My Dear Father:

You are [no] doubt anxious to hear from your little boy who is fighting the enemy of his country—the enemy of freedom, of justice and of Humanity. I have written you in great distress for writing material, not because I had any desire to annoy you, but because I was in actual need of said material. Please remember this the first time you write and that will be sufficient. You will notice that we have advanced considerably and are now below the James, near Petersburg, Va. A long and tedious march brought us here. We crossed the James I think the fifteenth at midnight on pontoons. The march ended of course in a fight & a hard bloody fight, where we lost our Lieut. Lieut. Guyer was shot dead at the head of his men in a midnight charge. He was a brave officer, a noble man, and his loss is deeply felt by the boys. We also lost killed two other men, John Hall, Ralph Dwinell and two or three were wounded. Our Co. numbers only 20 men and is commanded at present by Sergt. Raymond. We have one other officer, a Corp. This is a terrible reduction. I have had a great many narrow escapes. But good Providence has spared my life thus far. I certainly have great reason to be thankful. I trust I am. We are getting the rebels in close quarters. We will fix them yet. I have just answered Charlie S's letter. I did it yesterday and committed two blunders. I stated it the 23 instead of 22, and forgot to put a Postage Stamp on. But they say it will reach home and take three cents out of C's pocket. Tell him I will settle with him when I get home. I could find nothing but a couple of half sheets of paper and old pencil. I am more fortunate today and have got ink and pen. Continue to keep me well posted on home affairs. The condition of crops and of the health of my friends.

I will again explain my desire to write all and my inability also. Rosie I hope will find relief doctoring her eyes.

I cannot write to Angie and Helen this time, nor Mother. They all deserve replys to their letters which I received on the 17th. Father my pen is getting so poor, and I am getting so tired that I shall have to stop by asking you to write more frequently and the rest to do the same. Take good care of yourself and stock.

Send frequent reports.

Tell Mother to look out for number one.

We are resting in the woods.

Your Son
Mark¹⁸

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The Sergeant Raymond that Mark mentions was Albert Camp Raymond from Stowe. Raymond had enlisted as a private in Company E, 13th Vermont, and was mustered out on July 21, 1863. He enlisted in Company C, 17th Vermont, on February 5, 1864, and was selected as second sergeant. On July 26, 1864, he was wounded while on the skirmish line in front of Petersburg by a rebel minié ball that skimmed across his nose and right eye, causing him partial blindness. He was treated in Harwood Hospital in Washington, D.C., and returned to his regiment in late September 1864. He was promoted to first lieutenant on March 11, 1865, and to captain of Company C on June 26, 1865. He was mustered out of service July 14, 1865.¹⁹

Two weeks later Mark was finally able to write home again.

Near Petersburg, Va.
July 6, 1864

Father & Mother:

The evening of the third we came from our position in front. Let me explain. We have no regular line of battle in front, but a strong picket line occupying formidable pits or breastworks, extending some 10 miles in front of the doomed city. There is a rebel fort on the left of this line and about a mile in front, which our folks are approaching by means of a subterranean passage. As soon as it is reached it is contemplated blowing it up.

We are not making much progress as you doubtless think. To all appearance we are not. But it is a slow work, another Vicksburg. It took months to capture that strong hold, and why should it not take most of the time, at least to accomplish the same result here. Petersburg has proved to be, or Lee has made it by concentrating a greater portion of his forces here, and by fortifying, a much more formidable place than is generally supposed. It is in fact the key and approach to Richmond as the contending armies are now situated. I mentioned our going to the rear on the evening of the third to spend 48 hours and to celebrate the fourth of July in fine soldier style. Well it passed like other days. It was a happy day for me. I saw to my pleasure and surprise Mr. Seamans on that eventful day, a day which I shall never forget. I was lying down in my rudely constructed tent when he peeped in very unceremoniously. Was not I very glad to see him and didn't I have a nice chat with him. He is a volunteer with the sanitary commission, and intends returning home in August. He sent Helen his best respects and expressed a strong desire to see her and thought he should go to Stowe as soon as he went north. Tell Helen to tell Charlie that I have seen Philo. I read Helen's letter to him which pleased him very much especially what it said about Mr. P. Angie's letter I also read, he thought it was a very good one. This morning I received a letter from Helen mailed the 1st, in which I learned for the first time that I was wounded and in Vermont. I can't see the point yet. The 30th of June we were mustered for pay. When we get it I will let you know. I want you should

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write from the old brick house by Mr. Churchill's. now you have got my letter and remember what I wrote about materials. I am going to write Angie and will stop here.

Your son,
Mark²⁰

The following letter is the one Mark wrote to his sister Angie and included in the same envelope with the previous letter.

Dear Little Sister Angie

I must certainly write a few lines to you in return for your many little excellent letters. You must go to school and learn all you can, help mother & father all you can, play all you can, and write to your brother all you can. Father must let you hold the old horse once and a while, and he must not scold you any more than is necessary. They must let you go to the lyceums in my place when it is best. You may write just as many more letters as you please.

Good bye Siss,
from Mark

P.S. Father and the rest: You can direct your letters Washington, D.C. and they will reach me where ever I am.

Mark²¹

The next letter is one received by Mark Slayton from his father.

Stowe July 11th, 1864

My Soldier Boy Mark

I improve this at this time a little leisure while my hay is drying to write you a few words. We have received your letters quite regular and have read them with interest, also those to your uncles & aunts. You appear to be making the best of your situation & seem hopeful of the future. A few days ago we expected to see you soon for the following reason, Azro Luce passed through town on a furlough from Brattleboro where he has been since wounded as you probably are aware and told Madison Hodge that you were there badly wounded in the breast. But as soon as able would come home on a furlough. This coming direct left no reason for doubt and he belonging to your co. made the thing sure as we supposed. Added to this was the statement of Eugene Stockwell that a soldier by the name of Keller, member of your company, as he stated to him on the cars that you were at B sick or wounded. Eugene & Luce both came the same day & their time expires in a few days. The same day Albert Raymond's letter to his father informed us you were at Petersburg & soon several letters from you revealed the same fact. It was presumed you knew best of your whereabouts & so rested in the conviction that you were where the enemy state shows a bold front. What caused this blunder of Luce, we are curious to learn.

Shall hire a few days work at \$2.00 per day. Crops look very well generally. A very dry June has made the hay crop a little less than an average. For as change I have gone into the India Meal business to

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the extent of an acre or so just to please you & others. The Caulkin's cow brought twins this year both oxen but not quite ready for the plough. I am well as ever but mother is quite unwell for a few days past, hopes to be better soon. Helen's at home till she improves. Expect Rosa, eyes are better she writes & expects to come home soon. I think of nothing more to write now & have written this in a hurry. Write every opportunity.

J. B. Slayton²²

The following letter is the last one in the collection written by Mark Slayton. Whether it is the last one he ever wrote is unknown.

Near Petersburg Virginia, July 21, 64

Dear Father

After waiting a month I received a letter from you the 17th Inst. The last one before that I got in the evening of the 17 of June, the day of the desperate charge on Lee's works in front of Petersburg. Quite an internal—a letter to long to send me. You certainly must do better in the future. I should have to excuse you in part I suppose on account of pressure of business. But there is one thing I shall not excuse you for. And that is your non-fulfillment of a request of mine to send some of the articles used in writing. I commenced appealing for the above mentioned articles as early as May 20th, and have kept it up very persistently until the present and all I have received is 4 stamps, a month since that helped me considerably, but I have had to work every way to get material to write home. I started from Burlington with \$3.00 most of which I spent at Alexandria for necessaries. The rest I have saved until it was all gone. Some have sent home for a number of dollars. All I want is a package of what I have asked for. Now do not disappoint me father. I saw George Cheney yesterday. He is detailed on some light duty at City Point—distant some 6 miles. He rode on a good horse and seems to be taking comfort. The day before John Weeks came 2 or 3 miles to see me. He is looking tough as a knot if you know how that is, and says he does not regret that he enlisted. Pretty spunky. George insisted upon giving me a few stamps. I am glad to learn that you are getting along so well with your work. I would recommend the course you have adopted in changing work. A little society is good and also hiring what is necessary. You say that you have rec. several letters from me, but you do not say when. I wish you would hereafter. I wrote one on the 9th, which you have probably rec. before this. Tell my Aunts and uncles they must immediately ans. my letters. In my letter of the 9th is enclosed a sheet to C. A. Savage. I forgot to mention it in my haste. But it was evident to whom it was intended. I get any amount of reading most all the newspapers and some [illegible] reading. In a news-dealer [*Lamoille Newsdealer*] of the 18th I learned that the telegraph from Stowe to Waterbury is completed. And today's paper contains a call for 500,000 more men. These new calls and northern raids and the rise in gold are doubtless discouraging to Copperheads, but they cannot be very to the loyal. There is a brighter time

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coming. You can send a few quids of gum in the next package. Write on stationary and it will cost you less. You can tell mother I hope she will soon regain her health. She must be careful. So must you. Write soon as you get this.

Your son, Mark²³

The “subterranean passage” Mark mentioned in his letter of July 6 was a tunnel, or mine as it was called at the time, that was being dug by members of the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment, whose members had been recruited in the coal mining region of Pennsylvania. The mine had been proposed by the commander of the 48th Pennsylvania as a way to break through the Confederate fortifications and get to Petersburg. It was started on June 25, and when finished on July 23 the mine ran 511 feet from the IX Corps’ position. At the end of the mine a chamber with two lateral galleries was dug twenty feet under a Confederate fort. The chamber was to be loaded with 8,000 pounds of powder and blown up. Initially, a division of colored troops was chosen to lead the assault through the gap made by the exploding mine, and in fact, they had rehearsed the maneuver a number of times. On July 29, the day before the mine was to be blown, Major General George G. Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, informed the commander of the IX Corps, Major General Ambrose P. Burnside, that using the African American troops for such a hazardous operation was fraught with political repercussions if the mission failed, and that one of his three white divisions would have to be used instead. Burnside let his division commanders draw straws to see which one would lead the assault. Brigadier General James H. Ledlie, commander of Burnside’s 1st Division, who was incompetent and usually drunk, drew the short straw.²⁴

The 17th Vermont, now consisting of only eight officers and 120 men, along with the rest of the Second Brigade, moved into position for the assault at 2 A.M. on July 30. At 4:45 A.M. the mine was exploded. The earth trembled and roared and then a column of smoke and sand, mingled with cannons, camp equipage, and men leaped into the air. Ledlie’s troops were slow to start and by the time they were underway, the Confederates had regained their composure and made a counterattack. Many of the Federal troops who were supposed to be charging through the Confederate lines went instead into the crater made by the explosion, and were trapped and shot like fish in a barrel. Meanwhile, the Vermonters lay on the ground waiting for the mass confusion around the crater to clear so they could make their charge.²⁵

At about noon the 17th Vermont finally began its advance, led by their major, William B. Reynolds, because Lieutenant Colonel Cummings had been ill for several weeks and unfit for duty. No sooner had

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they started than Major Reynolds was hit in the chest by a rebel minié ball. He staggered and fell against Lieutenant Worthington Pierce of Company D, saying, "Pierce, I am shot! Can you get out of this?" Several men placed Reynolds on a blanket and carried him to the rear, where he died a few minutes later.²⁶

The rebels were also using artillery in addition to small arms fire. In their cannons the artillerymen were using anti-personnel ammunition called canister rounds, which were similar to paint cans filled with cast iron balls. One of the canister balls hit Pvt. Mark B. Slayton in the left breast, killing him instantly. He was only seventeen years old.²⁷

By the time the slaughter was over, and the Federals had retreated, the 17th Vermont had lost ten men killed, forty-six wounded, and eighteen missing. Of the eighteen missing, seven died in Confederate prisoner of war camps. The 17th returned with only one officer, who was wounded, and a little over half of the men with which it went into battle. Afterwards this battle would always be known as the Battle of the Crater.²⁸

After the battle, Company C's Corporal Daniel C. Watts thought that Mark Slayton was among the missing. He found out differently several days later, as he wrote in the following letter to Mark's father.

Camp in front of Petersburg
Aug. 6, 1864

Mr. Slayton Sir

It is with the deepest regret that I seat myself to inform you that Mark was killed in the fight on 30th of July. I supposed him to be a prisoner at least some of my company that came back said that he was in the fort with the Capt. & was taken with the rest. A Pioneer from the 48 Pennsylvania Regt. came to my tent to day and inquired if I knew a person by the name of Mark B. Slayton in the 17 Regt. & at the same time handed me an old letter which he had taken from Mark's pocket & he said that his pockets were all picked & the letter he found in his Blouse Pocket. I also inquired of him where he was hit. He said that he was hit in the left breast with a grape shot.

Thinking perhaps you would like to keep the letter. I will send it to you & also the postage stamps that was in it just as they were placed by him.

Truly Yours
D. C. Watts

Mark Slayton was buried on the battlefield near where he fell. The letter found in Mark's pocket is thought to be the one his father wrote him on July 11. After the war, all of the soldiers buried in field graves were reinterred in Poplar Grove National Cemetery in Dinwiddie County just outside Petersburg. This is where Mark B. Slayton probably lies today as one of the hundreds of unidentified soldiers.²⁹

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MANUSCRIPT

Mark B. Slayton Civil War Letters, 1863, MSA 518:15. Vermont Historical Society, Barre, Vt.

NOTES

¹ George 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*, 2 vols. (Burlington, Vt.: The Free Press Association, 1886, 1888), 2:496-497; 17th Vermont Infantry Regiment recruiting poster, Vermont Historical Society, Barre, Vt.

² This information obtained from Mark B. Slayton's compiled service record, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C.; ancestry.com; familysearch.org; Abby Maria Hemenway, *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 5 vols. (various publishers, 1867-1891), 2:763; 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), 582.

³ Asa Walker Slayton, comp., *History of the Slayton Family* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Dean Printing Company, 1898), 107, 206; Ancestry.com.

⁴ Mark B. Slayton Civil War Letters, 1863, MSA 518:15, Vermont Historical Society, Barre, Vt.; the other letters transcribed for this article are also from this collection; Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:497. Howard and Flora that Mark referred to are two of Ahijah and Clarissa Thomas' children. Uncle A is Abial Slayton.

⁵ Peck, *Revised Roster*, 368; Abial H. Slayton's compiled service record, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 1: 65 and 2: 405-407; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 50, 482, 582.

⁷ Guy H. Guyer's compiled service record, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 368, 580.

⁸ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:497, 498.

⁹ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:498. The Samuel Clark that Slayton mentions was Pvt. Samuel B. Clark, Co. C, 17th Vermont, from Morristown, Vt. Grandmother W. is Sabrina Slayton's mother Hannah (Pierce) White.

¹⁰ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:498-499;

¹¹ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:498-504, 523.

¹² The 11th Vermont soldiers that Slayton mentions were Pvt. Sylvester Simons, Pvt. Clement G. Moody, Pvt. Philo J. Knight, Pvt. Paphro D. Pike, Pvt. George S. Whitney, Pvt. Chandler Watts, II, Pvt. John B. Kusic, Pvt. Willis Stephen Gillett. The Henry Thomas Slayton mentioned was Pvt. Henry G. Thomas, a musician in the 3rd Vermont, from Stowe; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 252, 255, 424, 427, 429, 430, 443, 447.

¹³ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 1:342-354.

¹⁴ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:507.

¹⁵ Peck, *Revised Roster*, 571-573; Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2: 505-508.

¹⁶ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:509.

¹⁷ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:509-510.

¹⁸ Pvt. Ralph E. Dwinell was killed in the assault on the Confederate lines June 17, and Pvt. John H. Hall was killed by a rebel sharpshooter while on picket on June 22; Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:509, 510; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 581, 582; Ancestry.com; Asa W. Slayton, *History of the Slayton Family*, 206.

¹⁹ Peck, *Revised Roster*, 580, 581; Jacob G. Ullery, comp., *Men of Vermont: An Illustrated Biographical History of Vermonters and Sons of Vermont* (Brattleboro: Transcript Publishing Company, 1894), Part II, 333.

²⁰ Mr. Seamans and Mr. Churchill are not identified.

²¹ The Philo that Mark mentions is Philo Pike, 11th Vermont.

²² The men mentioned in Jerome B. Slayton's letter were Pvt. Daniel Azro Luce, Co. C, 17th Vermont; Pvt. Eugene Stockwell, Co. D, 5th Vermont and Pvt. David C. Keeler, Co. C, 17th Vermont; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 159, 582; Madison Hodge is probably James M. Hodge, a 44-year-old shoemaker of Stowe; Ancestry.com; The Caulkins are not identified. India meal is actually Indian meal, which is another name for corn meal.

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²³ Pvt. George A. Cheney, Co. B, 4th Vermont Infantry Regiment; Peck, *Revised Roster*, 115; C. A. Savage is probably Charles A. Savage, the 11-year-old son of Reuben A. and Elizabeth D. Savage of Stowe; Ancestry.com.

²⁴ Michael A. Cavanaugh and William Marvel, *The Petersburg Campaign: The Battle of the Crater "The Horrid Pit," June 25-August 6, 1864* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1989), 23; Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:511-514; Mark M. Boatner, III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 1991), 647-648.

²⁵ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:511-514; Cavanaugh and Marvel, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 40.

²⁶ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:514-517.

²⁷ Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 119; Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:518; Cavanaugh and Marvel, *Petersburg Campaign*, 51. Although Corp. Daniel Watts says that Mark was killed by a grape shot, it was actually a canister ball.

²⁸ Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War*, 2:518.

²⁹ Peck, *Revised Roster*, 582; Mark B. Slayton's compiled service record.