

# Samuel W. North Letter and Transcription

## January 26, 1863 - Camp near Fredericksburg

### Introduction

On Monday, January 19, 1863, General Burnside gave the order to the Army of the Potomac to begin, what would be his final campaign, against the Confederate Army. The Confederate troops near Fredericksburg had been decreased in numbers; the men were sent south and west to support the Confederate forces in those regions. The history books would ultimately call Burnside's infamous, last campaign the "Mud March."

Sam wrote that his regiment, the 126<sup>th</sup>, was ordered to attention on Tuesday, January 20, to listen to the reading of Gen. Burnside's letter, in which he asked every man to "make one more effort for the union." "The auspicious moment having arrived," with the withdrawal of Confederate troops.

There were no Doppler weather forecasts in 1863 and the northerners in command evidently did not take into account that the milder winters of Virginia produced rain instead of snow, as compared to the northern states. In fact, at the end of Sam's letter, he asks his brother John if they've had any sleighing yet.

The New York Times imbedded one of their reporters, William Swinton, with the Army of the Potomac during the Mud March. He wrote of the Mud March, "One might fancy some new geologic cataclysm had overtaken the world; and that he saw around him the elemental wrecks left by another Deluge. An indescribable chaos of pontoons, wagons and artillery encumbered the road down to the river. Horses and mules dropped down dead, exhausted with the effort to move their loads through the hideous medium." Sam's letter of January 26, 1863 reinforces Swinton's statements. His letter is graphic and, indeed, gruesomely graphic in regard to the mules and horses.

For three days, the men of the Army of the Republic, wallowed through the mud toward the river, in one last effort for the Union, under Gen. Burnside. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, Burnside abandoned his plan and the troops headed back to camp. Once again, Mother Nature thwarted the plans of humankind and 150 years later, she is still creating "geologic cataclysms."

On Tuesday, January 26, 1863, Gen. Joseph Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac.

of course I should do so in a hurry  
to get it ready for the mail to day  
I found a letter of Signal strength would  
I have a letter to write to you  
Dear Brother  
Your letter of the 7th inst came duly to  
hand and should have received attention in this but as  
you had been preparing to move and my time has been  
fully occupied by receiving orders since the 16th  
I was at sea on the march for we have moved though  
we did not march much it was nearly all swamps and  
had the most miserable roads for about a week we were  
ordered to leave for days before in our haste we were  
ordered some three days before the most almost and  
ridiculous manner we spent all the time we were  
that we were going to embark and go to the peninsula  
north that we were going to change our base of operations  
and the four days' rations were to provide and a new one  
could be found for supplies some thought we were going  
to Washington others thought they were going and others  
you could hear about a dozen before a day on Tuesday  
the 20th we got orders to strike tents and leave the Army  
the troops commenced moving past our camp. After  
after Battle then the infantry one brigade after another  
began at least one Army corps had passed then came  
the fronton trains I think it disordered the fronton  
with the way the troops we made in a few days after it was  
I have to thank to write this time that I must omit it. In the  
meantime our reg had been drawn out as we had been waiting  
you turn to make off with an old rode up to Fort. El. Stone and  
quadrant an order "then attention is ordered" and we had been ordered  
address to his son would to us I omit it as you have read it in  
the papers or this I suppose to say he wanted us to make one more effort  
for the Union. The assistance we had having given the enemy had  
been repulsed by the withdrawal of part of his force to reinforce  
his main in the south and west. The day was dull cold and cloudy  
at about one O'clock we moved out and after much delay and  
hindrance I stopped about dusk ten or twelve and a half miles from

old camp after we had quite finished and cooked  
coffee and ate our supper and laid down to sleep it soon  
commenced to rain hard we managed to get up and go to just  
my own tent after a good deal of floundering & stumbling after  
the men lying down we got them up in a kind of a way  
but the ground was loose and spongy and when it got soaked  
with the rain the pins would not hold but were pulled out  
all night the rain ran in under me in a perfect stream  
and when I moved it would spread like a ramping through  
a wet piece of parchment on the ground we were all wet and  
got a little coffee and mud off though the mud on blankets but  
concent and coffee did not do much good and we had some  
trouble as many in consequence, cold and moving the road soon  
began to mud and the further we went the deeper it got raining  
all the time all along the road we saw many dead and broken  
hollow sticks in the mud whiffing yellow and disagreeable  
stinks from the mud, mud and corruption enough to eraze a soldier  
about the middle of the day the roads got worse up and we had  
to the assistance of mules to the depth of water or further in  
through this we were hampered as fast as we could go the roads  
lined with stumps and logs we had played at the rest of the  
in a woods for the night. The next morning the state of affairs  
was very thin but terrible. The road was lined with wagons  
and mules the drivers with their teams having taken refuge  
in the woods along the road where they have made large  
fires and were drying their clothes a little and soon the hills  
out commenced they would hold tin canisters which to  
one wagon full took up and then go back for another  
about dinner time we were ordered but without arms and  
were set to making corduroy roads this was done by taking  
rails poles or saplings and laying them crossways these stumps  
and pieces of wood with fresh brush our march division was  
out at work but it went very slow and we had much trouble  
a mile to make for one shaft the spectacle was most  
ridiculous the men were out in the rain wading through the  
mud up to the tops of their boots first of these were dead  
but were very few enough on the logs to keep out the mud  
but had only about an inch or two to go on you could not

tell how deep the mud was by the looks of the surface but there were generally marks about the deep places such as a dead horse or a mule or two who had perished in the struggle with the monsters they must all had a little pool of blood at their nostrils showing that they had burst blood vessels. here would be a caisson within in the mud up to the axel their two ammunition wagons, directly and in a fair way to be engaged in the hilly road we worked till night and left the caisson there was a direct march down from each company and it was my good fortune to be one of the detail from one company it was half march the same the next day our march to this had been this day with a heavy mud and heavy <sup>and</sup> tired and stiff in almost every way on but for this there the impracticality of winter campaign had been fully demonstrated and the teams had taken the back track the artillery was reduced back to their old camp and this might be seen coming two horses in nearly every hour and falling by the wayside in some some of our best sixteen horses in one caisson and think at that about one or two miles in the afternoon we had finished our part of the road this was on Friday I forgot to tell you that there had been orders to issue whiskey to the men but the drums on which the barrels were were stuck in the mud and the men instead of them out and instead the men in and dipped in with tin shells and canteens some had you in fire canteens full and soon there was lots of men staggering around and wallowing like hogs in the mud but was awful and still there were some relief parties sent three men were passing our regt all drunk it was hard to kill which was worst at least two of them were thought one Irishman wanted to be down but his comrad dragged him along he held his hands out to our boys and said "help" which both the poor "Pat" the third a long board shouldered fallen with a wave of the hand said as he staggered away gentlemen I cant appreciate your

company and stopped on a little way when he assumed the position of a soldier and raising himself to his full height said "I am in command of this regt" and commenced giving orders some were stationed along the road as the men passed sent first "militia" and first for a d-d piece of all the division since I was far to have any supplies like this it would be discovered one got four barrels rations on packy each one got about a gallon I did not take any as I had four barrels of the coffee in the caisson I was happy to be able to buy the men of our boys were drunk some was a little drunk but all behaved pretty well one canteen was on packy down and our quartermaster lent us some crackers and in sacks and carried on the backs of mules and some some cattle up and killed them so we did not suffer for provisions and on Saturday we marched back to our old camp you may imagine that march I was at near finished out as I have said in my life hope I shall never have another such a one. the old troops say this beats the famisale all to pieces for mud and hard times we got back to our old camp to find that our chimney pipes in tables were burnt up our camp had been confined by a fog and a struggle but we have got things pretty comfortable again though we hadnt moving our camp to high road and water if possible we had a little of the same thing which we had with us and it makes our tent very comfortable while I am writing it is too warm the weather still on our side and does I have not seen the wagons coming back yet I hear that they put water downstream to fill it out but did not expect them to float it but did not get it shore and we went says they are harassing them another that they are coming from both sides and leaving them there must be a great deal of artillery stuck in the mud yet I am sure you had by all means get all the fire to waste and you will do so and that will all the more I got a couple of fished from some the my colored sacch has not got his bag yet but our quartermaster has one for them today I am sorry they are things these would show us as they will show all the rotund little boys my respect to both and remain yours

**Transcription**

**Camp near Fredricksburg**

Jan 26<sup>th</sup> 1863

Dear Brother,

Your letter of the 7th inst came duly to hand and should have received attention in this but we have been busy preparing to move and my time has been fully occupied. I received mothers letter dated the 16<sup>th</sup> while we were on the march. for we have moved though we did not march much it was nearly all wading. we had been under marching orders for about a week. We had orders to have four days rations in our haversacks. We never carried more than three days befor. the most abusrd and ridiculous rumors were afloat all the time one rumor was that we going to embark and go to the peninsula another that we were going to change our base of operations and the four days rations were to provide until a new rout could be opened for supplies some thought we were going to Washington others thought Harpers ferry and others Warrenton you could hear about a dozen reports a day. On tuesday the

20<sup>th</sup> we got orders to strike tents and early the morning the troops commenced moving past our camp, Battery after Battery. then the Infantry one Brigade after another until at least one Army corps Had passed then came the pontoon trains I think I described the pontoons and the way the bridges are made in a former letter. at any rate I have so much to write this time that I must omit it. In the meantime our regt had been drawn out on line and were waiting our turn to move off when an aid rode up to Lieut. Col Rowe and gave him an order then "attention to Orders" and we had Gen Burnside's address to his army read to us I omit it as you have read it in the papers ere this suffice to say he wanted us to "make one more effort for the union. the auspicious moment having arrived. the enemy having been weakened by the withdrawal of part of his forces to reinforce his armies in the south and west. the day was dull, cold and cloudy at about one o'clock we moved out and after much delay and hindrance stopped about dusk two or two and half miles from

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old camp after we had built fires and cooked coffee we ate our suppers and laid down to sleep it soon commenced to rain and we concluded to get up and try to put up our tents after a good lot of blundering and stumbling over the men lying down we got them up in a kind of way but the ground was loose and spongy and when it got soaked with the rain the pins would not hold but were pulling out all night the rain ran in under me in a perfect stream and when I moved it would squash like tramping through a wet piece of ground. in the morning we were called into line and got a little coffee and moved off through the mud our Blankets tents overcoats and clothes all ~~were~~ thoroughly soaked and our load about twice as heavy in consequence, commenced moving the mud over shoe mouth and the farther we went the deeper it got – raining all the time – all along the road were seen teams, ambulances, & batteries sticking in the mud, whipping, yelling, and swearing all together making noise and confusion enough to craze a bedlamite about the middle of the day the roads got mixed up and worked to the consistency of mortar to the depth of twelve or fourteen inches through this we were hurried as fast as we could go the road lined with stragglers and boys who had played out the regt stopped in a woods for the night the next morning the state of affairs was anything but consoling. the road was lined with wagons and artillery the drivers with their teams having taken refuge in the woods along the road where they had made large fires and were drying their clothes a little. and soon the pulling out commenced they would hitch ten or twelve mules to one wagon pull them up and then go back for another about dinner time we were ordered out without arms and were set to making corderoy roads. this was done by taking rails poles or saplins and laying them crossways three deep and covering them with pine brush our whole division was out at work but it went very slow and we had more than a mile to make for our share the spectacle was most

ridiculous the men were out in the rain wading through the mud up to the tops of their boots that is those who had boots. mine were long enough in the legs to keep out the mud but had only about an inch or two to go on you could not

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tell how deep the mud was by the looks of the surface but there were generally marks about the deep places such as a dead horse or a mule or two who had perished in the struggle with the monster they most all had a little pool of blood at their nostrils showing that they had burst blood vessels. here would be a caisson sticking in the mud up to the axle there an ammunition wagon deserted and in a fair way to be engulfed in the bottomless road we worked till night and next morning there was a detail made eleven men from each company and it was my good fortune to be one of the detail from our company it was pretty much the same the next day only ("more so") the men had been three days in the rain and mud and weary wet tired and stiff in all our bones we worked on but by this time the impracticability of winter campaigning had been fully demonstrated and the teams had taken the back track the artillery was ordered back to their old camp and they might be seen coming ten horses in nearly every team and twelve or fourteen in some. some of our boys saw sixteen horses in one caisson and stuck at that about one or two o'clock in the afternoon we had finished our part of the road this was on Friday. I forgot to tell you that there had been orders to issue whisky to the men but the teams on which the barrels were, were stuck in the mud and the men rolled them out and knocked the head in and dipped in with tins kettles and canteens. some had four or five canteens full and soon there was lots of men staggering around and wallowing like hogs in the mud it was awful and still there were some rich scenes enacted. three men were passing our regiment all drunk it was hard to tell which was worst at least two of them were tight one Irishman wanted to lie down but his comrade dragged him along he held his hands out to our boys and said "help help the poor Pat" the third a large broad shouldered fellow with a wave of the hand said as he staggered away gentlemen I can't appreciate your

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company and staggered on a little ways when he assumed the position of a soldier and raising himself to his full height said "I am in command of the regiment" and commenced giving orders some were stationed along the road saying as the men passed "don't fight men" "don't fight for the d----d nigger of all the drunken men I ever saw I never saw anything like this. it can't be described. our boys got whisky rations on Friday each one got about a gill I did not take any as I had seen enough of the effects of it the day before I am happy to be able to say that none of our boys were drunk some were a little lively but all behaved pretty well. our rations run out on

friday evening but our quartermaster sent us some crackers tied up in sacks and carried on the backs of mules. and drove some cattle up and killed them so we did not suffer for provisions. and on Saturday we marched back to our old camp you may imagine that march I was as near played out as I ever was in my life hope I shall never have another such a one. the old troops say this beats the peninsula all to pieces for mud and hard times we got back to our old camp to find that our chimneys, boxes and tables were burnt up our camp had been occupied by wagoners and straglers but we have got things pretty comfortable again though we intent moving our camp to where wood and water is plentier. we have a little sheet iron stove which we can cary along with us and it makes our tent very comfortable while I am writing it is too warm. the weather still continues dull and cloudy. I have not seen the pontoons coming back yet I hear that they put eighteen horses to one to pull it out but did not succeed then tried to float it but did not het it along and one report says they are burning them another that they are covering them with brush and leaving them there must be a great deal of artillery sticking in the mud yet. have you had any sleighing yet. tell the girls to write and you write soon and give me all the news I got a couple of papers from home they are welcome Jacob has not got his box yet but our quartermaster has gone for them today I am sorry they put things that would spoil in as they will spoil all the eatables.

Write soon my respects to Orth and Governor. S.W. North

(A PS written in pencil, instead of pen, across the top of page one.) excuse Blunders as I am in a hurry to get it ready for the mail today I send a piece of signal telegraph wire I sent a testament did you get it what was the postage on it