

Samuel W. North Letter and Transcription

March 17, 1863 - Camp near Falmouth

Introduction

Besides the challenge of deciphering the fluid, handwritten script of 19th century letters, there's also the vocabulary and abbreviations that become obstacles to understanding what the writer intended. Without the Internet, it most certainly would be many times more difficult to research such issues. Quite often, the first sentence in letters of the Civil War era acknowledged the receipt of the addressee's most recent letter, such as, "I received your letter of the 10th inst' (instant)," meaning that the letter was dated the 10th of that particular month. The beginning of Sam's March 13th letter begins, "I received your letter of the 27th ult'." It looked like ult' but what did it abbreviate. Ultimo past – means earlier than the present or of the preceding month. In the 21st century, we'd simply say, "I received your letter written on the 27th of last month," or, "letter of February 27." Sam also used inverted question marks and exclamation points, which are most commonly used in Spanish at the beginning of a question, followed at the end of the sentence with a "regular" question mark. I have not yet discovered a reason for that use in 19th century American handwriting.

Tyler's brigade moved its camp a couple miles west of its previous Falmouth camp on Monday, February 2, 1863. The new location was closer to wood and water and was the 126th Regiment's final camp for the last several months of service. Sam was most certainly not alone with constant thoughts of home.

On March 3, 1863, the U.S. Congress passed the first American wartime draft (known then as conscription) act. The act required four different drafts between 1863 and 1865. By April 1, within 29 days of passage, all males between the ages of 20 and 45 had to register or enroll. This included foreigners who were planning to become U.S. citizens. All men 20 to 35 and 36 to 45 and not married were in Class I. All other men were Class II. Discharged veterans, who had already served, whether three months, nine months, or a year, were also required to enroll. The Congress allowed for exemptions; those who could afford it could pay \$300 or the draftee could find a substitute to fight in his place, who most likely was paid a bounty. The \$300 was heavily weighted toward the well-to-do. In New York City, this clause caused draft riots that led to bloodshed. 631 of the U.S. Civil War draft registration books can be accessed at Ancestry.com.

In Sam's letter to his brother John, he wrote, "you will be clear of the first enrollment and the nine months men will not be there at the time of the enrollment pap is over fortyfive so I think we are all right if I live to get home." John would have been born

in about 1845, making him 18 in 1863. For this reason, Sam wrote, “you will be clear of the enrollment.” John wouldn’t have been 20 until 1865. Their father, referred to as “pap” was about 46 in 1863 and over the age of 45, the maximum age for required registration.

For two months between January 16 and March 16, 2nd Lieutenant Jacob Trout commanded a 30-man detachment that was assigned to the General Hospital at Stoneman’s Switch. Stoneman’s Switch was a U.S. Military Railroad named after Gen. George Stoneman, commander of the Union cavalry of the Army of the Potomac. Trout returned the day before Sam started his letter

Gen. “Fighting Joe” Hooker relieved Gen. Burnside of his command of the Army of the Potomac on January 26, 1863. One of the changes Hooker made was to make sure all his men had a variety of food in ample amounts – a morale booster, for sure.

Sam’s subscription to the “American Agriculturist” magazine was to be sent to him at camp. The letter indicates that something went wrong with the instructions as to where it should be sent. His intentions were to read it in camp and then send the issues home to John and his father. The magazine’s history goes back to its first publication, “American Farmer,” in 1819. In 1841, an additional publication began called the “Prairie Farmer.” Today, these two publications are owned by Farm Progress Companies, Inc., headquartered in Chicago. The company publishes 18 state and regional farm publications. “Prairie Farmer” is the nation’s oldest, continuously published magazine.

Peter McCauly Cook was a corporal in Co. C. He evidently didn’t think it was very soldierly to be a fifer or drummer. Sam strongly advised him to accept the Colonel’s orders to become the Fife Major, a noncommissioned officer, as was the Drum Major. Five of the 126th’s companies had two musicians (one fifer and one drummer), four companies had one musician, and Co. E. had one fifer and one drummer, as per Rowe’s history of the 126th. Company fifers and drummers played only for their own company. The regimental fife and drum corps had 10 fifers and 10 drummers, selected from the companies and chosen by the regimental fife and drum majors. The three main duties of the fife and drum corps were: tactical signals to march, halt, charge, retreat, double time, etc.; in camp they played reveille, dinner signal, tattoo, lights out; ceremonial duties included entertainment of troops or dignitaries, formal parades, and funerals. Fifers and drummers also carried stretchers and aided the medical staff.

The PA Civil War Veterans Card File, the Burial Card File, and the history of the 126th do not indicate that Peter Cook accepted the rank of Regimental Fife Major. After discharge from the Civil War, Peter Cook went on to become a

physician and is listed in the 1870 U.S. census in Ayr Township, Fulton County. He married Sarah Seylar in 1871. He died in January 1897, in his daughter's home in Webster Mills (south of McConnellsburg) at the age of 53. He was listed as an invalid on November 21, 1896 on the Civil War Pension Index card.

There are only two more letters of Sam North to be transcribed and published – one in April and one in May.

Bonnie A. Shockey, president
Allison-Antrim Museum, Inc.

Transcription

Front Page

Camp near Falmouth

March 17th 1863 A.D.

Dear Brother John

I received your letter of the 27th ult' & was glad to hear you were able to be about again. Most of the boys are out on pickett but as I have been out every time before this they did not take me out this time but took those who were not out last time. the last time we were out there was considerable firing along the lines. dispatches passing up & down most every hour. my post was in a hollow or ravine at the edge of a thick pine woods. it rained and was anything but pleasant standing out in the mud. I thought of you at home in your warm beds and peaceful homes. I tell you I have seen some pretty rough times in the last six months and expect them to continue so for two months more. but I have been blessed with good health & spirits and am very well contented. Still I would not advise you to let your patriotism get high enough to bring you out. wait till after our time is up at least. I think Col" Rowe will try to raise a regiment after we are discharged which will be about the first of may. it is only supposition with me. you will be clear of the first enrollment and the nine months men will not be there at the time of the enrollment. pap is over fortyfive so I think we are all right if I live to get home. I want you to write an account of the enrollment when it comes off and the spirit in which it is received. Lieutenant Trout is back with the company again. he is more popular now than he was. some of the boys think he has been badly treated. Ol' Parker had a letter from Ed' Murry. he was in the Post Office department at present. the Mercersburg boys were all well. Gen Tyler has come out of his court Martial with honor. they could not sustain the charges and he has been honorably acquitted. it was proven that he has been in seventeen battles & skirmishes & proved himself a brave man. I sent his photograph in my last letter.

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I sent the Jan' & Feb no^s of the agriculturist did you get them? I have not rec'd the March no

yet dont know whats wrong. this is St Patricks day and the Irish Brigade are having a gay old time horse racing foot racing bands playing &c heard very heavy cannonading away out on our right this afternoon sounds as if it was ten or twelve miles off the weather has bee(n) very changeable it rains or sleets every few days this evening the frogs in the run are croaking merrily. John McClune & I are the only ones in our tent now the rest are out on pickett we have been living on the fat of the land since fighting Joe has taken command we draw fresh bread potatoes fresh beef onions beans split peas &c often so we can have vegitables most every day I must stop writing as it is getting dark. I see Rhodes & Randals boys most every day. I wish I had some of the apples you speak of they cost five cts apiece here. I dont think we will be paid off till our time is up. I forgot to ask pap to send me some money just mention it to him to send two dollars & a half or less will do I have no particular need for it but dont like to be without a little. I just read Ursalas letter saying you had got the March no of the Agriculturist I have not rec'd it here yet it has been sent home in Mistake I directed it to be sent here until may but I suppose he mistook it for march. if you have got the Jan & Feb no's – which I sent from here – you may send the march no. here as I would like to read it I will then

send it back again. If you did not get the others dont send it. they are getting affairs in order So that we may move whenever the weather will permit. they are introducing pack – mules into the army the cavalry at least will have them I have not seen any yet. I forgot to tell you Peter Cook has been appointed fife Maj of the regt he refuses to serve he was ordered to report

to the Col" this morning but he slipped off with the picketts says he came out to carry a musket I advised him to accept. give my respects to govnor & all the old friends Mr Orth especially is that German boy working for you

[At the top of the back page, written upside down.]

yet? how are the mules getting along do you like them as well as horses my love to all the friends your brother S.W. North