

Smith, Riley Letter

Riley Smith Letter

1864



Title Statement

Smith, Riley Letter Riley Smith Letter, 1864 Ms.1991.017

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Publication Statement

Publisher: Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries (0434)
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Newman Library, Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
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URL: <http://spec.lib.vt.edu>



2022 (CC0 1.0)

Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2023-08-07 13:39:25 -0400.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Revision Description

2020-09-14 Finding aid notes updated to new department standards. juliags

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

Ms.1991.017

Unit Date

1864

Language

The materials in the collection are in English.

Abstract

Letter from Riley Smith, a soldier in the 3rd Michigan Infantry during the American Civil War, written to "Dear Cousin Erma" from camp on March 7, 1864, focusing on his reasons for reenlistment and prospects for the war's end.

Creator

Smith, Riley

Extent

0.1 Cubic Feet 1 folder

Repository

Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

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Source of Acquisition

The Riley Smith Letter was purchased by Special Collections and University Archives in 1991.

Processing Information

The processing and description of the Riley Smith Letter commenced and was completed in October, 2022.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: [identification of item], [box], [folder], Riley Smith Letter, Ms1991-017, Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va.

Biographical Note

According to Ernest B. Fisher's *Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan*, Riley Smith was born in Jefferson County, New York, on May 18, 1833. The 1850 federal census lists a 17-year-old Riley Smith living in the Jefferson County home of Oslow and Harriet Smith. In 1854, the younger Smith moved to Nelson, Michigan, where he owned a 160-acre farm, worked as a practical surveyor, and taught school. He also served as justice of the peace in 1861. On May 10, 1861, Smith enlisted in Company K, 3rd Michigan Infantry. He mustered in with the regiment on June 10, as a fifth sergeant and later rose to the rank second sergeant, though later records list his rank as private. Smith remained with his regiment while participating in the battles of First Bull Run and Yorktown. Following the Battle of the Wilderness, he became ill and was hospitalized at Satterlee General Hospital in Philadelphia for three months. He appears to have joined Company F, 5th Michigan Infantry on June 10, 1864. Other records suggest that he was taken prisoner on Boydtown Plank Road, Virginia on October 27, and held at Libby Prison, Richmond, until February 17, 1865. Following his discharge on June 22, 1865, Smith returned to Kent County and married Caroline Gilman (1844-1911) on July 9; the couple had one son. In addition to farming, Smith served as clerk of Nelson Township in 1866; as county surveyor from 1867 to 1868 and as county superintendent of the poor from 1875 through 1878. Riley Smith died on August 21, 1897, and was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Kent County, Michigan.

Scope and Content

This collection consists of a single letter written by Riley Smith, a soldier in the 3rd Michigan Infantry during the American Civil War. Written from the regiment's camp on March 7, 1864, the letter is addressed "Dear Cousin Erma." Smith writes of his recent visit home, then of the prospects for peace: "I think the war will be over in the early part of summer because the army has been filled with men, not money or officers. ... Again Copperheadism that has been such a fire in the rear to us is about 'Plaid [sic] Out.' Later, he writes of the Confederate deserters crossing the lines each day. Smith also provides his reasons for reenlisting: "I like [my life as a soldier] very well when not in danger which happens but few times a year. ... I enlisted first with the prospect of eleven dollars per month and all the fighting to help put down this rebellion and I have never seen a time when I had so little faith in a government by the people that I was ready to go home and leave the job unfinished." Smith continues with a positive description of the local climate and its effect on his health.

Keywords

Civil War

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

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Description of Subordinate Components

Letter

Unit Date 1864

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