

# A Guide to the Johnson Family Papers, 1858, 1862-1865

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A Collection in Virginia Military Institute Archives MS 0341  
Virginia Military Institute Archives  
2002

## History

**Processed by:** Virginia Military Institute Archives Staff  
**Funding:** Web version of the finding aid funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

## Title Statement

A Guide to the Johnson Family Papers, 1858, 1862-1865

**Subtitle:** Johnson Family, Papers

**Collection:** MS 0341

**Author:** Diane B. Jacob

**Sponsor:** Web version of the finding aid funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

## Publication Statement

**Date:** © 2002 Virginia Military Institute

**Publisher:** Virginia Military Institute Archives

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## Profile Description

**Creation:** Machine-readable finding aid derived from HTML. Machine-readable finding aid created by Diane B. Jacob. Date of source: 2002.

**Language Usage:** Description is in English

## Revision Description

**Feb 16, 2004** PUBLIC "-//Virginia Military Institute::Preston Library::Archives//TEXT (US::ViLxV::vilxv00024::A Guide to the Johnson Family Papers)//EN" "vilxv00024.xml" converted from EAD 1.0 to 2002 by v1to02.xsl (sy2003-10-15).  
**Feb 26, 2004** converted to conform to eadVIVA.dtd by vivastrict.xsl  
**2013-11-21** Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

## Descriptive Summary

**Collection number**

MS 0341

**Language**

English

## Physical Characteristics

The papers consist of 26 letters filed in one box.

## Repository

Archives, Preston Library, Virginia Military Institute

# Administrative Information

## Access

There are no restrictions.

## Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

## Preferred Citation

Johnson Family Papers, MS 0341, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, VA 24450.

# Alternative Form

The Johnson Family Papers are available online at:

<http://digitalcollections.vmi.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15821coll11/id/1291>

# Biographical/Historical Information

**Mortimer Howell Johnson**, a lawyer was born at Bridgeport, Harrison Co. West Virginia in 1815. He married Eliza Dulaney Kemble, b. Kingwood, Preston Co., West Virginia. The Johnson Family resided in Brownsburg, Rockbridge County, Virginia at beginning of the Civil War, and Mortimer enlisted in April 1864 (at age 48) in the Rockbridge Senior Reserves. He was described as having a dark complexion, dark hair & eyes, 5' 6". He died December 13, 1889, at Charleston, West Virginia and is buried at the High Bridge Presbyterian Church cemetery, Rockbridge Co., Virginia. He was the father of Porter Johnson, Virginia Military Institute Class of 1867.

**Porter Johnson** was born in 1845 in Taylor County, West Virginia. He matriculated at the Virginia Military Institute on September 1, 1863 and was a cadet private at the Battle of New Market on May 15, 1864. Porter resigned from Corps of Cadets on March 6, 1865 and joined the 8th Confederate Battalion commanded by Col. Garnett Andrews. He was captured at Salisbury, NC on April 12, 1865 and imprisoned, and was paroled June 13, 1865. He returned to Rockbridge County where he was a farmer. He died June 9, 1917.

# Scope and Content Information

The papers consist of 26 letters, bulk 1862-1865, from Mortimer Johnson and his son Porter to members of their immediate family. The Johnson family, originally from West Virginia, moved to Brownsburg in Rockbridge County, Virginia, although they maintained close ties to their former home. Topics in Mortimer's letters include civilian life during the war; the animosity between Union and Confederate sympathizers in West Virginia (the letter of April 28, 1863 discusses the Union loyalty of Stonewall Jackson's sister, Laura Jackson Arnold); the Battle of Fredericksburg and its aftermath (Dec 1862); the Jones- Imboden Raid (West Virginia, April 1863). Porter's letters include a discussion of VMI cadet life at the Alms House in Richmond, Virginia, where the Corps was headquartered during the last months of the war.

# Contents List

## Mortimer Johnson Correspondence, 1858; 1862-1865

### Letter to Leake Johnson, 1858 February 10

#### Scope and Content

Written at Richmond, Virginia. Contains family news; comments on work of the state legislature.

"The legislature is working very slow and not doing much good for the country. The House is not in session yet this morning. At 8 o'clock I left my boarding house came by the Post Office and barber shop at half past 9 in the house and engaged in writing this letter to you. The house meets at 11 o'clock and adjourns about 3 o'clock, so that we get dinner at half past 3. Sometimes the house does not adjourn

until later. You set down in the house with a comfortable cushioned chair to sit upon, a desk before you to write upon and it frequently happens that while a member thinks he is making a very fine speech, one half the members are engaged in writing letters or reading newspapers. I suppose you have heard of the fight that happened in Congress last Saturday. It was disgraceful to the Nation and the men that were engaged in it are heartily ashamed of it...."

## **Letter to C. W. Newlon, 1862 February 2**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Brownsburg, Virginia. Regarding the inflated prices of grain used to produce whiskey for soldiers.

"...The North expected to starve us out when the war commenced. All that recognize a superintending providence had cause to thank the giver of daily bread last year for our unusually heavy crop of all kinds of grain. It was every where considered as an evidence that the Lord was on our side. Grant that it was so will he continue to be if we abuse his choicest favors-- if we convert ourselves into a nation of extortioners and have for our soldiers an army of drunkards. Grant as some contend that liquor is necessary for the soldiers should not a limit be placed upon the price of it . Liquor for which 3 dollars per gal is paid after running the blockade of the camp is frequently sold to the soldier at the high price of from one to five dollars per pint. If it is necessary for the soldier it should be added to his rations and handed out under proper rules and regulations and every other person detected in smuggling liquor into the camp should be summarily and severely punished...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1862 September 20**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Staunton, Virginia. Contains family news; expresses concerns about high cost of food.

## **Letter fragment to Eliza Johnson, 1862 late October**

### **Scope and Content**

Family news; mentions woman who is a Union sympathizer; Porter is eager to join the army.

"...His idea is that a man has but one time to die and that a few years more or less will not make any difference. He says that he is able to carry a musket and that if he does not raise his arm in defence of his country under existing circumstances he shall never feel like asking a Southern woman to marry him and that a northern woman he would not have under any circumstances."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1862 December [ca. 15th]**

### **Scope and Content**

Written shortly after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

"...Our loss in the fighting that has taken place is 1742 in killed and wounded. Our dead have been buried. The Yankee dead remain unburied. The field of battle is still in dispute. The Yankees have not asked the privilege of burying their dead and we cannot [venture] to do it. Ours were carried off during the fight. We occupied the best position and think the enemy loss 5 to our one. I have just been to take a look at the Yankee Army. They are drawn up in line of battle, but as it is now 4 o'clock we do not think there will be a fight today. The principal fight was on Friday--though in sight we feel secure...."

## **Letter to Eliza Porter, 1862 December 18**

### **Scope and Content**

Written after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

"...The loss of the abolitionists in the last battle near Fredericksburg was greater than we at first supposed. They are again on the other side of the River. I spent yesterday afternoon in going over a portion of the battle field near or adjoining the City. On the portion of the field I visited there were at least 500 dead. Under a flag of truce they were burying their dead but doing it in a very careless manner. Unless they worked last night they cannot get through before sometime today. After going through Fredericksburg and seeing the results of their vandalism I felt no sympathy for their justly merited fate. Scattered books, broken [----], furniture of all kinds and every description carried into the streets and broken to pieces. Our own loss is narrowed down to less than 400 killed and less than a thousand wounded, while the loss of the enemy cannot be less than 2000 killed and from 10 to 20 thousand wounded and missing. All who have visited the ground concur in the opinion that the dead are

thicker upon the ground than any [field] they have seen. One could have walked for 400 yds upon the dead...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1862 December 25**

### **Scope and Content**

References to the Battle of Fredericksburg; personal news.

"... Porter did not arrive here until the dead were buried so that he missed a sight. I have very much desired he should see under the hope it would lessen his desire to join the army before he is 18...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1862 December 29**

### **Scope and Content**

Family and business news.

"...I sold the wagon, harness and the two old horses for 625 dollars including the horse I had when you arrived. I thought it better to keep the two young mares for the present. Porter was offered 300 dollars for the bay mare today but thinks she will bring more money. I have heard nothing of the butter and apples left at Staunton and Waynesboro and probably never will. If so I shall lose by my investment as I sold what arrived here for cost and expenses. You had better have your apples opened and see that they are not rotting. These that arrived here had rotted considerably...."

## **Letter 1862 undated fragment**

### **Scope and Content**

Regarding family friends who have been wounded; refugee families; problem with currency.

"...If you get any money either get gold or valley money do not trust to N. W. Virginia money and for this reason--If in the tide of War our armies should ever win the N West your money will not be good, as the men having charge of the banks will leave and carry with them the specie...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 January 25**

### **Scope and Content**

Family news; mentions situation in West Virginia.

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 March 10**

### **Scope and Content**

Written from Lynchburg, Virginia. Remarks on inflated prices.

"...Here you see nothing and hear nothing but tobacco--save when a soldier steps up to pay his bill or asks what he will have to pay for a days board and is answered 5, 6 or 7 dollars. I feel satisfied from his look, that he wishes all these people in Yankeedom and their town in ashes. I do not feel hopeful at this time as to the result of the contest. I do not fear that Yankees can whip us, but I do fear that the desire of gain, the thirst for money will yet overwhelm us. ..."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 March 14 and 15**

### **Scope and Content**

Misc. family and business news.

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 March 29**

### **Scope and Content**

Misc. family and business news.

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 April 25**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Beverly, West Virginia, regarding situation there.

"...Beverly was taken yesterday after about two hours cannonading and some but not much skirmishing of infantry. The abolitionists were about 1300 in number. Latham succeeded in burning all his stores. [He] succeeded in getting away in the direction of Philippi with little or no loss of men. Our cavalry

pursued, but I fear without any success...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 April 28 and May 1**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at "Hillery's, 9 miles west of Beverley." Regarding Jones-Imboden Raid, West Virginia; Union sympathies of Laura Jackson Arnold.

"...Had Jackson been in command we would have been in Clarksburg today, The railroad would have been destroyed. When we turned back almost every man was dissatisfied--all wanted to fight the enemy without regard to numbers. Mrs. J. Arnold 1 --sister of Gen. Jackson--went off with the yankees. Arnold stayed at home says he is a good southern man, that his wife is crazy but Hell he says, could not govern a Jackson...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1863 May 5**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Weston, West Virginia. References to Jones-Imboden Raid and burning of bridge at Fairmont.

"...Gen. Jones arrived at Buckhannon Saturday morning, having been at [ ], Morgantown, Fairmont, [Skinnton], Bridgeport, Philippi. We immediately marched to Weston arriving here on Sunday morning. Beyond Evansville the Railroad was torn up for a considerable distance. The fine bridge at Fairmont was [blown] down. There was a fight at Fairmont, several killed, 400 prisoners taken. 3 killed at Bridgeport & c. Gen Jones command brought in 1200 horses taken from Union and secession men without pay...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1864 September 23**

### **Scope and Content**

Written from Camp Kemper, near Staunton. Regarding the Battle of Winchester, Virginia.

"...The enemy in far superior number attacked Early about day light. We held our own until 3 oclock driving the enemy some two miles--at which time our Cavalry upon the left embracing Vaughan's, Imboden's, McCausland's, and Wickham's brigade gave way. This placed the enemy's cavalry in Winchester in the rear of our infantry and close upon our wagon train. The wagon train would have been destroyed but for the large number of stragglers with the train--the Yankee Cavalry mistaking them for a strong guard. Our infantry retired fighting saving the train and all the artillery but 3 pieces...."

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1864 October 11**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Richmond, Virginia. Contains general family, business and war news.

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson 1864 December 4**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Lexington, Virginia. Contains family and business news.

## **Letter to Eliza Johnson, 1865 March 7**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at Lexington, Virginia. General Sheridan is in valley.

## **Porter Johnson Correspondence, 1865**

### **Letter to his sister, 1865 January 12**

#### **Scope and Content**

Written from the Alms House in Richmond, Virginia, where VMI was headquartered from December 1864 until Richmond was evacuated in April 1865.

"...We are very poorly fixed here for study, twenty in a room, one small table, no chairs or stools, but one gas burner, and attached to the side of the wall instead of the center of the room where it ought to be. There is but one little stove in the room and the meanest coal that you can imagine. We have but two meals a day which is quite often enough of the kind, bread and beef for breakfast and beef and bread for dinner...."

## **Letter to his father, 1865 February 5**

### **Scope and Content**

Written from the Alms House in Richmond, Virginia, where VMI was headquartered from December 1864 until Richmond was evacuated in April 1865. General news.

## **Letter 1865 February 23**

### **Scope and Content**

Written from the Alms House at Richmond, Virginia. Porter has decided to join the army.

"...I feel it due to myself as well as to you to state to you some of the reasons I have for leaving here and giving up the only opportunity which I shall perhaps ever have of getting an education. In the first place I am past nineteen years old and I think that it is my duty to be in the army. All who stay here after they become eighteen are generally considered shirkers. Then I do not think that the school will continue much longer than the first of April, for is it reasonable to suppose or can it even be expected that in this the death struggle of the Confederacy when every man woman and child should be at his or her post, when every nerve is to be strained to attain the object which we have so long fought for, that two or three hundred well drilled, able bodied men will be allowed to remain idle and inactive? I am sure the answer of any rational man will be No!"

## **Letter to his father, 1865 March 27 (#1)**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at New's Ferry. He has joined the army.

"...I resigned about two weeks ago. I have been in the trenches one week since, with the Corps. It then took me a week or such a matter to make my arrangements to leave the city. I have accepted the place I wrote you about, and am now on my way to join my command, it is at Charlotte, NC. I would like very much to have come home before going into the army, but the way not being open when I had the time at my own disposal I did not attempt it."

## **Letter to his mother, 1865 March 27 (#2)**

### **Scope and Content**

Written at New's Ferry. General news; sends love.

## **Letter to his mother, 1865 June 16**

### **Scope and Content**

Written from Prison Hospital, Camp Chase, Ohio.

"The order for release of prisoners has at last arrived. I expect to be released in about a week. It is a bitter pill but has to be swallowed. I do not expect to be home immediately. J.W. McCorkle is sick, he expects to go to his Uncles in Cabell county. I must go with him. He would do the same for me and more. Then I will go by West Va. I shall stop a few days then hasten home as fast as possible. I am in good health."