

A Guide to the George Williams Civil War Letters

George Williams Civil War Letters 1862-1864
1862-1864

A Collection in the Special Collections Department 11003, -a, -b and -c
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Use Restrictions

See the [University of Virginia Library's use policy](#).

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Scope and Content

This collection consists of eleven letters of George Williams, a Civil War soldier from Monroeville, Huron County, Ohio, to his family, 1862-1864. Based on internal information, he was a musician in Company B, 123rd Ohio Regiment. A history edited by C. M. Keyes, *The Military History Of the 123d Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry* (Sandusky: Register Steam Press, 1874), is available in the Rare Books Division of the Special Collections Department (call number E525.5 123d 1874).

Company B was recruited and enrolled into the service with the regiment at Monroeville, Huron County during August-September 1862. The 123rd was sent to what later became West Virginia and served in a variety of capacities and operations including reconnaissances, scouts, raids, siege, occupation, and provost duties. It was surrendered during the battle of Winchester in June 1863 and imprisoned until paroled and exchanged in August. The 123rd participated in the Union's Shenandoah Valley Campaign (1864), the Petersburg siege (1864-1865), and the Appomattox Campaign (1865). Williams and his regiment were honorably mustered out of the army on 12 June 1865.

Accompanied by modern-day typescripts and photocopies of a photograph of Williams in uniform, the letters were written in various West Virginia towns [Beverly, Huttonsville, New Creek, Martinsburg, Petersburg, and Romney] and Winchester, Virginia; they discuss personal, family, and war news. Williams is primarily a distant observer and commentator of miscellaneous events, not a participant. Members of his and other Ohio regiments [34th, 101st, 110th, 116th, 120th, 122nd; and the 87th Pennsylvania] as well as various generals, are mentioned by name: Ambrose E. Burnside [1824-1881]; George Crook [1828-1890]; Joseph Hooker [1814-1879]; Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson [1824-1863]; Robert E. Lee [1807-1870]; Robert Milroy [1816-1890]; James A. Mulligan [1830-1864]; William Rosecrans [1819-1898]; and Franz Sigel [1824-1902].

The majority of the letters are to his sister, Lill (Lillis Williams), a resident of Monroeville. On 6 November 1862, he writes from Beverly [West Virginia] that members of the 101st Ohio Regiment have been promoted but two members of the 87th Pennsylvania were shot by guards for attempted arson, and, his recent vaccination (his arm is still sore). He has written two letters for fellow musician Joseph Sallabank. A letter of 12 November from Huttonsville rejects rumors that Jefferson Davis wants peace. Williams also claims that the mountains surrounding the town prevent the flow of cold air and its residents have never seen a railroad or a steamboat.

From New Creek [West Virginia] on 19 November 1862, Williams describes his regiment's travels by foot and rail from Monroeville to the West Virginia towns of Beverly and Webster; the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the presence of 15,000 Union troops, the Potomac River, and General Stonewall Jackson are mentioned. Williams believes New Creek to be a civilized country because "things are cheap." His letter of 21 November 1862 refers to the presence of General James A. Mulligan's [1830-1864] Irish Brigade and the 110th, 120th and 122nd Ohio regiments; Sibley tents, New Creek farmers as pleasant and generous, and General Ambrose

Burnside are also mentioned. Williams declares that Stonewall Jackson is in retreat thanks to the efforts of Generals Franz Sigel, William Rosecrans, and Robert Milroy. Two forts [Fort Piano and Fort Fuller?] are being constructed for the defense of the area.

On 1 January 1863 Williams writes from Petersburg [West Virginia] about his comrades' purchase of chickens from blacks, camp news, Burnside's defeat at the battle of Fredericksburg, and an inspection by acting general Colonel James Washburn of the 116th Ohio Regiment. His letter from Romney, 28 February 1863, reports the arrival of new guns and clothing and expresses the regiment's pride in serving with Colonel "Billy Willson" [William T. Wilson] by recounting an incident which endeared him to his troops: "The quartermaster made out a requisition for clothing a long time ago but the clothing didn't come till the Colonel said if they didn't send it shortly he would take his men where it was--it came a few days after." Williams sends "some old papers I found down in the Court House"; describes the town's founders as lunatics for locating it in the mountains, and remarks that two Romney companies are serving with the Confederate Army.

Williams' first letter from Winchester, Virginia, 4 May 1863, describes rainy weather which has turned into shirt sleeve/barefoot weather, payday, and General Milroy's preparations for the town's defense, including two well-manned forts [Fort Jackson and Fort Collier?]; General Joseph Hooker has crossed the Rappahannock River to attack the rebels. He also reports the death of Private [Joseph] Tuman of Company B and his burial in Martinsburg. Williams speaks of having received a letter from Lill and mentions Maria Hillyer (another sister?) and her son Eddy (his nephew?) as experiencing in-laws troubles with the Hillyers. Six days later, 10 May 1863, he requests stationery and reports his regiment's capture of four prisoners, Hooker's "grand Sham fight" (defeat) at Chancellorsville [May 1-4, 1863], rebel raids on railroads, and the dismissal of a drum major.

His letter of 14 May 1863 tells of rebel raids toward Parkersburg and Clarksburg and newspaper accounts of the death of Stonewall Jackson ("he was the worst enemy we ever had"). Private [Malvern H.] Barnhart died after an illness of twenty-four hours was treated with morphine and opium--his remains were sent to Martinsburg for burial. This letter continues on the 15th with a description of Winchester as good country for fruit and flower gardens and that Williams' band (three drummers and eight fifers) is to perform at the funeral of a member of Company C. Meanwhile, the drum major has been discharged ("he never was of no account"). While in Martinsburg, 28 October 1863, Williams reports the capture of Charles Town, West Virginia. As the colonel is on leave the regiment "will not amount to much" until his return. The rebels have crossed the Rappahannock but "Our Generals are not sharp enough for old Lea" [Robert E. Lee].

The last letter of these collections was written at Winchester on 24 September 1864. Williams celebrates recent Union victories in the Shenandoah Valley [the battles of Winchester, 19 September, and Fishers Hill, 22 September] and includes a brief account of the wounded and the aftermath--all homes and churches were converted to the hospitals and there was not enough time to bury the dead; it took three days just to bury dead rebels. According to him, Company B did not suffer any casualties. General George Crook, and the dishonorable discharge [30 August 1864] of Captain Lemuel E. Merry, 34th Ohio Regiment, are mentioned.