



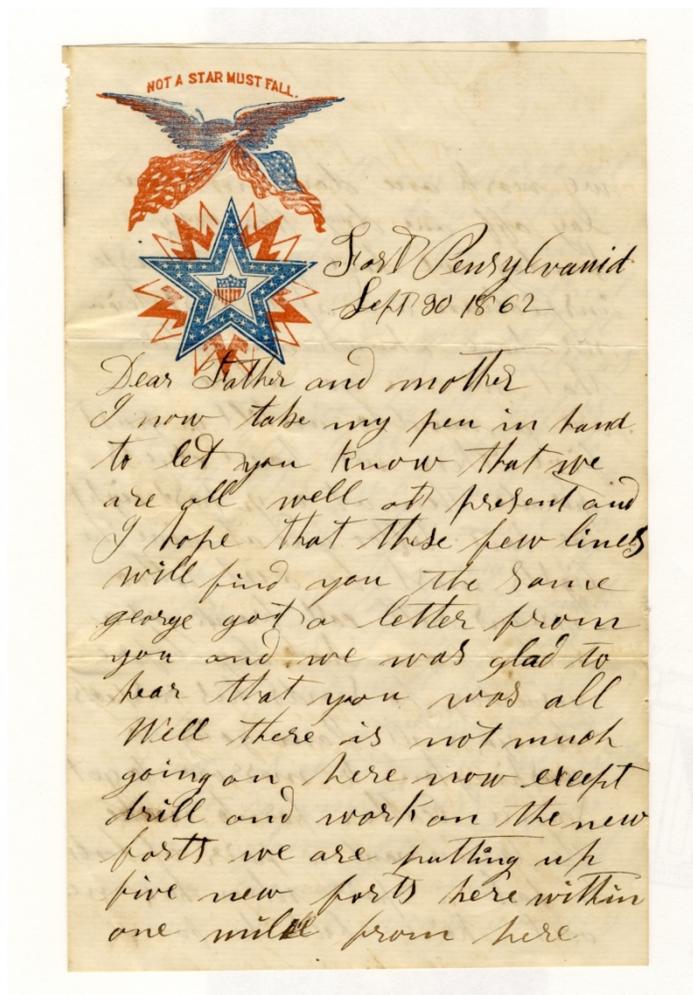
Kiss Clara For Me: The Civil War Era Letter of Samuel West

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December 2012

As town historian, a favorite inquiry is the one that starts with “I’ve got some old letters I found in the attic. Do you want to take a look?” Mark Flood of Slingerlands uttered words to that effect. While renovating his home on New Scotland Road he came upon a moldy, mouse chewed pile of papers that included a Civil War era letter from Samuel West. While admitting I am not a Civil War expert, I agreed to see what I could find out. As always happens with old documents, one question leads to another, and another, and another.

The Letter



Below is a transcript of the letter. In essence it is written as one long stream of consciousness. I have kept Samuel’s spelling but added paragraphs and punctuation for clarity.

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In an envelope addressed to Mr. James H. West Clarksville Albany Co N.Y. and post marked Washington DC Oct 1, 1862 is the following letter:

Fort Pennsylvania

Sept 30, 1862

Dear Father and mother

I now take my pen in hand to let you know that we are all well at present and I hope that these few lines find you the Same. george got a letter from you and we was glad to hear that you was all Well. there is not much going on here now except drill and work on the new forts. we are putting up five new forts here within one mile from here. we work one day and then lay off one day then every Sunday we have general inspection and after inspection we have church and after that we can go where we are a mind to until 1/2 past five then we have dress parade then at 1/2 past eight we have tattoo and at nine the lights must be out. tattoo means roll call.

frank got a letter from hat day before yesterday. he sends his respects to you all. I am going to washington to morrow to get some leather for to make the lieutenant a pair of boots. he had a pair when he came out here but he found them to small and George got them of him. He give him \$6 for them. they was sewed and a good pair at that.

I Suppose you get all of the war news as well as me but I See by the papers that Jeff davis wants to Settle this war and is going to Send three men to washington to arrange it. it dose not look So much like war as it did a short time ago but we will have it pretty Soon unless we have peace as it is said we will as the commissioners are in washington now to See if they cannot arrange it in Some way as they are getting tired of of the fun about now. they see that we are getting to large an army now so they want to stop the fun. I seen of piece in the paper to day how they offer to settle it and is an honorable way so far as I can see it some old abolitionists will not like it may be but I guess that it will Suit the majority of us

no more at present. write as soon as you get. this Kiss clara for me. tell her to be a good girl. give my love to all. tell till to write me soon. Samuel West

Privet Samuel West
Co H 113 Regt N Y S V
Washington DC

Who are the people?

My research started with the U.S. Census. Taking my cue from the letter's addressee, I find in the 1860 census that James H. West (age 51, shoemaker) and his wife Leydia A (44) and their daughter Harriet (15) are living in Clarksville. A separate entry lists George West (20, farm laborer). Another lists Samuel West (22, shoemaker), Mary E. (22) and Clara (2) all living in Clarksville.

So now I can deduce that Samuel West's parents are James and Lydia and that he has a younger sister Harriett. A look at the 1850 census notes that James and Lydia are living in Rensselerville with their children Mary (13), Samuel (12) George (9) and Harietta (6) which verifies that George is Samuel's brother. Did you note in the 1860 census that Samuel West is married to Mary and their daughter is Clara? Clara would have been 4 at the time the letter was written. No wonder Samuel sends kisses her way.

Did you note that both Samuel and his father are shoemakers? That explains the part in the letter about getting "some leather for to make the lieutenant a pair of boots." The letter also states that "Frank got a letter from Hat." Perhaps Hat is Samuel's sister Harriet?

What about the 113th New York Infantry?

The next avenue of exploration is finding out about the 113th New York State Volunteers. When I first read the letter I had some confusion about whether it read 117 or 113. I searched for Samuel West in New York's Muster Role Abstracts and found both him and George in the 113th. You might be curious to know that the Muster roll Abstract lists Samuel as 5'4 ½" tall with blue eyes, brown hair and a light complexion.

It only makes sense that Samuel and George were in the 113th. The regiment was known as the Albany County Regiment and the men were recruited principally from Albany County including New Scotland and Bethlehem. The regimental history at the New York State Military Museum has much information about the 113th, including the important fact that while mustered in as 113th Regiment of Infantry on August 18, 1862, the unit was designated the 7th Regiment of Artillery (heavy) on December 19, 1862.

This key fact was instrumental in discovering the book *Carnival of Blood the Civil War Ordeal of the Seventh New York Heavy Artillery* by Robert Keating. Keating's book conveniently has a complete roster in the back including these two listings:

West, George – Born: Saratoga, NY. Age 22. Occupation: farmer. Enlisted: August 12, 1862, as private in Co. H; wounded, September 30, 1864, at Petersburg; mustered out, June 16, 1865, as artificer.

West, Samuel – Born: Watervliet, NY. Age: 21. Occupation: shoemaker. Enlisted, August 12, 1862, as private in Co. H; promoted corporal, August 18, 1862; sergeant, December 9, 1863; first sergeant, June 1, 1864; wounded, June 3, 1864, at Cold Harbor; captured, June 16, 1864 at Petersburg; paroled, February 27, 1865, at North East Ferry, NC; mustered out, May 21, 1865, from hospital at Albany, NY.

Did you notice the age problem? The book and the muster roll abstracts appear to have the incorrect age for Samuel. In 1860, he was 22, so when he enlisted in 1862 he should have been about 24. A check of the Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served for New Scotland or Bethlehem reveals no listing for either brother.

Remember Frank from the letter? Unfortunately, there are several Franks in the regiment roster including Beardsley, Laureaux, Shepard and Treadwell. Frank will have to remain a man of mystery.

The regimental history of the 113th/7th includes an assortment of newspaper clippings. One describes the send off the Albany County regiment received when, on the evening of August 20, 1862, they received orders to embark on the steamship Hendrick Hudson at the Albany dock and head for points south. "Ten thousand men and women lined the streets through which the Regiment passed. No equally intense enthusiasm has marked the departure of any Regiment since the war began; and no finer body of men ever went to the tented field in any country."

Upon its arrival in Washington DC, the 113th was ordered to garrison various forts that were part of the defense of Washington, including Fort Pennsylvania (later renamed to Fort Reno). Samuel's letter aptly describes life at the fort including work on the forts, drills and inspections. The men were drilling on heavy artillery, hence their conversion in December 1862. The unit continued their work in Washington DC until ordered to join the Army of the Potomac in May 1864. Their first engagement was on May 19th at Spottsylvania.

During their course of the war, the 7th saw action with the Army of the Potomac at Spottsylvania Court House, Wilderness, North Anna River, Cold Harbor, Petersburg (assault & siege), Deep Bottom, and Ream's Station. The 7th was recalled from the front on February 22, 1865 to Baltimore, MD and garrison duty. On August 1, 1865, the unit was mustered out and honorably discharged from service.

Their arrival in Albany was noted in the local newspapers:

"The brave heroes of the Seventh Heavy Artillery arrived on the Norwich about five o'clock this morning. ...the Steamboat landing was swarmed with friends of the Regiment. The Citizen's Committee were promptly on hand to

care for their wants. Some of the boys, as soon as they landed, started for their homes; but the most remained, were formed into line, and marched up Broadway to Sate Street, through Pearl and Columbia streets to Broadway again, and down Broadway to Stanwix Hall. During the march, the sidewalks and streets were thronged with a dense mass of citizens. “

677 officers and enlisted men of the 113th/7th were killed during the Civil War, 217 “at the hands of the enemy”, the rest from disease and other causes.

What about the war news that Samuel imparts?

It is interesting to note that on September 22, 1862 Abraham Lincoln made clear his intention to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation was an executive order based on the president’s powers as commander in chief of the army. In his letter, Samuel speculates that the war will be over soon and that the abolitionists will not be happy. Knowing about the proclamation, perhaps Samuel believes it will not be issued if peace breaks. Hence the unhappy abolitionists. As we know now, the proclamation was issued, and the war continued.

Then what happened to Samuel?

After mustering out in May 1865, it appears that Samuel went home to Clarksville. Going back to the census, in 1880 it is clear that Samuel (age 42), boot and shoemaker, and his wife Mary (age 44) are living in Clarksville. By 1880, Clara would have been 22 and probably not living at home. The 1892 New York census has Samuel West age 53, shoemaker, New Scotland.

How did the letter end up in Slingerlands?

In the 1870 census, Lydia A West (age 54 and Samuel’s mother) is listed as living in Bethlehem Center. In 1880, Lydia A West (63, keeping house) is listed with Charles Simmons (20, son, laborer.) While the census record indicates Bethlehem Center, Lydia’s dwelling is clearly in the hamlet of Slingerlands. Living just a few doors down are Albert and Catherine Slingerlands (and their daughter Leah Haswell) prominent property owners in the hamlet.

The name Simmons is key because many of the other papers found with the letter relate to the Simmons family.

A mystery is why Lydia’s “son” does not have the same last name, and he would have been born in 1860 (when the census has her living with husband James in Clarksville). The 1860 census also has a William Simons, age 33 and his son Charles age 3 months living in Clarksville. Most likely, Lydia’s maiden name was Simmons with William being her brother. Or perhaps Charles is adopted? By the 1900 census Charles Simmons age 40 is clearly living in Slingerlands with his wife Mary and children William D. and Zelda. Further research is needed to determine if Charles Simmons was one of the owners of Mark Flood’s home.

Notes on Doing Research

In this day and age, finding the information in this article is more accessible than you might think. Here are the ways I went about it from the comfort of my own home.

The Bethlehem Public Library makes an enormous amount of information available on their web site (bethlehempubliclibrary.org). Click on the research tab for a listing. I used Heritage Quest to access census records. Ancestry is available for free if one is physically in the library (I bring my lap top and a cup of coffee and sit at the café tables in the hallway.) Ancestry’s New York records are available for free to New Yorkers through the New York State Archives web page. (archives.nysed.gov). With a little internet savvy, one can browse both the Town Clerk’s Registers of Men Who Served Civil War, and New York’s Muster Role Abstracts.

The New York State Military Museum has a wonderful website with detailed information including their New York State Unit History Project. Simply go to their website (<http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/mil-hist.htm>) and click on Civil War Units.