

"I FEEL IMPELLED TO WRITE": MALE INTIMACY, EPISTOLARY PRIVACY, AND THE
CULTURE OF LETTER WRITING DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

BY

L. BAO BUI

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Bruce Levine, Co-chair
Professor Emeritus John A. Lynn, Co-chair
Professor Emeritus Elizabeth Pleck
Professor Kristin Hoganson

Abstract

This dissertation sheds light on the gendered and commemorative history of the Civil War. Many historians have recognized the importance of soldiers' letters as evidence of the cultural and ideological mentalities of Americans in wartime. Yet the scholarship has failed to notice the urgency with which soldiers sought to control and maintain the privacy of their correspondences. For millions of combatants, the Civil War presented problems of maintaining privacy unknown in civilian life. Yankees and rebels alike defined their letters as a form of personal property and regarded unauthorized access to their letters not simply as theft but as violations of their person. The safeguards they sought to impose on their mail reveal how these soldiers tried to defend the boundaries of privacy in the midst of a military environment generally devoid of personal space.

This dissertation draws on thousands of soldiers' letters held at over three dozen archives and libraries across the United States. The prevailing model of combat motivation emphasizes the ideological components of cause and country. Soldiers' wartime letters suggest they fought not just for nation and ideology but also for the personal stakes associated with their public standings as honorable men. Women on the home front played key roles as the epistolary confidants of soldiers. After the war, these women, as well as veterans themselves, sought to maintain the public façade of masculine heroism by silencing the wartime admissions of fear, doubt, and desertion.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: "It is the Event of the Day"	1
Chapter 1: Public Reputation, Public Letters.....	27
Chapter 2: Private Lives, Private Letters.....	56
Chapter 3: Sins and Secrets.....	84
Chapter 4: Loose Lips, Open Hearts.....	119
Chapter 5: The Disruption of Privacy.....	153
Conclusion: "The Blessings of Uncle Sams Mail"	184
Bibliography.....	198

Introduction: “It is the Event of the Day”

The soldiers of the American Civil War constituted the most literate military force ever known until then.¹ With pen and paper Civil War soldiers could record and communicate their thoughts, musings, and feelings to loved ones hundreds or even thousands of miles away. The recruits, volunteers, and draftees came from a society long accustomed to receiving and sending information in the mail. The troops, and their civilian correspondents, benefited enormously from the maturation of a reliable and affordable national postal service in the antebellum period.² Mass literacy and the postal mail changed not only how the common soldier could relate to himself, but also how he related to others.³ Granted,

¹ James M. McPherson estimates literacy rates of more than 90 percent in the Union forces and 80 percent in the Confederate army. See McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11. David Henkin and James Marten concur with these estimates in their respective works. See Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 137 and Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 10.

² In 1860 Great Britain and the United States had the world’s most advanced industrial economies coupled with near-universal literacy rates and effective national postal systems. Still, the American post office covered a much larger geographic area than its British counterpart, and the rate of wartime mobilization was higher in America during its conflict of 1861-1865 than Britain’s rate of mobilization for its major mid-nineteenth century conflict, the Crimean War. Plus, whereas most soldiers on both sides of the American conflict possessed some degree of passable literacy, the Franco-British force in the Crimea squared off against mostly illiterate Russian conscripts. For more on history of the British postal system, see Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009) and Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 27-50. For a study of literacy in the antebellum period, see Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

³ The phenomenon occurred on both sides of the North Atlantic world. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall point to increasing literacy rates and the introduction of the postal service, among other technical and organizational developments of the late eighteenth century, as facilitators of family ties in England during early industrialization. See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 321.

magazines, telegrams, and local newspapers fell readily into the hands of civilians and soldiers in both North and South throughout the war, but these mass publications did not allow for regular person-to-person contact within close-knit social groups. Through the post mail, the troops could communicate and converse with just about anyone; they could reach out to a spouse, a romantic interest, family members, friends and neighbors, even newspaper editors. Some men even sought and acquired female pen pals through advertisements in the newspapers. According to one historian, the endeavor to “maintain the integrity and unity of kinship ties” some times proved an “exceedingly difficult task.”⁴ Still, the soldiers of the Civil War persisted, and they arguably found more success than their counterparts had known in any previous conflict.

The wartime correspondence of these soldiers did not constitute a new phenomenon. During the War of Independence, notes Wayne E. Fuller in *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*, “postriders carried letters and documents of one kind or another between a frequently moving government and its armies in the field as well as between soldiers and their families.”⁵ The generation that went off to war in 1861 benefited from nearly a century’s worth of steady advances in communications and transportation.⁶ In *Spreading the News*, Richard R. John points to “a communications revolution” which between 1775 and 1844

⁴ Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 176.

⁵ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 35.

⁶ George Rogers Taylor’s *The Transportation Revolution* (1951) endures as a classic treatise. For an excellent and concise treatment of advances in transportation and communications in antebellum America, see also David Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 6.

transformed the economic, social, political, and cultural fabric of the United States. Granted, the development of national roads, canals, and railroads greatly facilitated the movement of goods and people, but John draws attention to “the transmission of an unprecedented volume of newspapers, letters, and other kinds of information through time and over space” during the early Republic and antebellum periods.⁷ The extraordinarily high literacy rates of the combatants during the Civil War and the sheer volume of correspondence these troops had no equal in previous military history. According to one historian, “many more letters were sent and received by Civil War soldiers than during any previous war,” amounting to correspondences measured in tens of millions.⁸ One turn-of-the-century study calculated that the Union and Confederate armies wrote or received 180,000 letters a day on average.⁹

Deployment to faraway battlefronts fueled an insatiable demand by soldiers for both letter-writing materials and the means to deliver them. The daily time spent letter writing, even in the midst of active campaigning, the urgency with which postal delivery systems were set up in the camp communities, and the eagerness with which the mail was received suggest a strong emotional and

⁷ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

⁸ Robert E. Bonner, *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 9.

⁹ Cited in David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 137. Gerald F. Linderman, Nina Silber, and Mary Beth Sievens cite even higher figures of 180,000 letters a day heading to or from Union soldiers alone. See Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, “Introduction,” *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front*, ed. Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 2; Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 94. In comparison, the Union Military Telegraph Corps handled some 6.5 million messages during the war, for a daily rate of less than 5000 telegrams a day. See David Hochfelder, *The Telegraph in America, 1832-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 7.

practical value that Americans attached to written correspondence.¹⁰ “It is the event of the day to watch mail distribution,” wrote one Union officer.¹¹ Another soldier testified, “I have seen men who never flinch in battle, or faltered when one comrade after another fell by their side, weep like children because the mail brought no messages from home.”¹² Letter writing ameliorated the dullness of camp life, gave comfort to the homesick, boosted morale, fortified the nerves, and allowed soldiers to stay engaged with the affairs of household, business, and neighborhood. “No other is a greater or better blessing than that of letter writing, to know that we can hear from those we cannot see,” proclaimed one Union bluecoat at war’s end.¹³ His opponent in grey offered similar praise: “[W]e can have no comfort in anything or pleasure either except when we get letters from home & then we forget everything in the pleasure it affords us in reading yours & writing in answer.”¹⁴ That the common soldier could receive and send mail had profound implications for morale, combat motivation, desertion rates, and the outcome of the war itself.¹⁵

¹⁰ According Bell Irvin Wiley, most soldiers enjoyed writing letters and eagerly anticipated the arrival of the mail. See Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943), 192-193. The companion piece, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, appeared in 1951. Cheryl A. Wells, in her study of conceptions of time during the Civil War, noted that writing letters perhaps constituted “the most popular leisure time endeavor” for the soldiers in camp. Wells, *Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 61.

¹¹ John W. Ames to his mother, 12 January 1863, John W. Ames Papers, USAMHI.

¹² Cited in Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1979), 61.

¹³ John F. Brobst to Mary Englesby, 2 June 1865, cited in Margaret Brobst Roth, ed., *Well Mary: Civil War Letters of a Wisconsin Volunteer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1960), 146-147.

¹⁴ Bob Hill his sister Mary, 23 February 1863, John W. Hill Papers, University of Texas at Austin, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

¹⁵ Wiley noted the impact of letters on soldiers’ morale and willingness to desert. See Wiley, *Johnny Reb*, 200-210. For more recent scholarship, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), chapter 11. Reid Mitchell expresses similar views in *The Vacant Chair*:

For Civil War combatants and their correspondents, epistolary communications shaped how they experienced and understood the war. The vast quantity of personal writings they produced provide testimony to the lives and thoughts of millions of ordinary people living through a violent revolutionary period in their nation's history. "[T]aken as a whole Civil War letters, diaries, and memoirs," writes Thomas E. Rogers, "provide a unique opportunity for historians to read what large numbers of mid-nineteenth-century common men and common women thought about the issues of the day."¹⁶ Like many other scholars, David Henkin has looked to letters as "important sites for the elaboration and circulation of antebellum cultural norms, especially for those of gender and class."¹⁷ For Richard E. Bonner, "this distinctive body of work contributes not simply to American history but to a fuller appreciation of American literary expression."¹⁸ These letters constituted not only personal mementos and historical artifacts in their own right, but their candid words reveal a multitude about everyday Americans' attitudes, ideologies, and worldviews. Penned by commoners and elites

The Northern Soldier Leaves Home (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25-29. Kenneth W. Noe, in the introduction to *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), provides a succinct review of the literature on combat motivation during the Civil War. Earl J. Hess suggests that soldiers' letters played a significant role in shaping the home front's opinions about the costs and benefits of the war. See Earl J. Hess, "A Terrible Fascination: The Portrayal of Combat in the Civil War Media," *An Uncommon Time: The Civil War and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Paul A. Cimballa and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁶ Thomas E. Rodgers, "Civil War Letters as Historical Sources," *Indiana Magazine of History* 93, no. 2 (June 1997): 106.

¹⁷ Henkin 117. Manning also uses letters to show soldiers' attitudes towards African-Americans and slavery.

¹⁸ Bonner 9.

alike, these literary texts enable a richer, more nuanced understanding of American society during the nineteenth century.

For millions of soldiers, the Civil War presented problems of maintaining privacy unknown in civil life. Americans of the nineteenth century had a keen sense of their privacy and regarded it as a form of personal ownership. The Civil War vastly increased the number of secrets about oneself or others that had to be guarded and protected through privacy controls. Without such controls secrets slipped out that could damage one's reputation, that is, one's standing in the eyes of others. This dissertation examines the personal correspondence of the troops to reveal their attitudes and actions regarding the sanctity of their mail, and by extension, their private lives. In so doing, one gains additional insight into the values, morale, relations with the home front, and the combat motivation of Civil War soldiers.

Hundreds if not thousands of miles away from home, the troops embraced wholeheartedly the opportunities created by affordable, accessible mediums for self-expression and interpersonal communications. Yet these letters also created problems. Candid and unfettered disclosure on paper created vulnerabilities for letter writers keen on maintaining the security of their communications. Not surprisingly, Civil War soldiers were neither entirely careless of the information contained in their letters nor wholly apathetic as to who had access to their epistles. They conscientiously tailored their letters, some times for public dissemination and other times only for a limited audience. Like their successors in the twenty-first century, nineteenth-century Americans had to strike a balance between the delights

of sharing thoughts and news and the unpleasant consequences of losing control over that same information. After all, the advent of postal culture in the antebellum period, like the ubiquity of online social media and other telecommunications technologies today, facilitated information creation and sharing but also rendered its users vulnerable to surveillance and violations of personal privacy.

Researchers today have ever more reasons to see privacy as a subject that straddles the various disciplines within the social sciences.¹⁹ For historians, how individuals, societies, and legal systems construct privacy in a globalized twenty-first century draws attention to role of privacy within the larger histories of society, culture, law, and technology.²⁰ Problems of privacy management, believed to be unique to the Facebook age, developed among the mass public during the Civil War. Thus far, scholars of the nineteenth-century understandably have gravitated toward studying privacy within the contexts of literary culture and family life.²¹ Even when

¹⁹ Examples include Lorna Stefanick, *Controlling Knowledge: Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection in a Networked World* (Edmondton: Alberta University Press, 2011), Whitfield Diffie and Susan Landau, *Privacy on the Line: The Politics of Wiretapping and Encryption* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), Priscilla Regan, *Legislating Privacy: Technology, Social Values, and Public Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Kerry Segrave, *Wiretapping and Electronic Surveillance in America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2014).

²⁰ For an early work in this subfield, see Priscilla M. Regan, *Legislating Privacy: Technology, Social Values, and Public Policy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

²¹ See Katherine Adams, *Owning Up: Privacy, Privacy, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Karen Chase and Michael H. Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600-1900* (London: Verso Books, 1988); Mary Kelly, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literacy Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Stacey Margolis, *The Public Life of Privacy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Milette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior of Life of Antebellum American Literature*

contemporary scholarship recognizes the Civil War's impact on the development of privacy, the analysis tends to focus on the institutional, legal, and technological aspects of surveillance, eavesdropping, and intelligence gathering.²²

The Civil War, then, offers a unique opportunity to study privacy management and information sharing as a social habit and a way of life among ordinary soldiers and members of their social networks. Eager to stay in steady contact with loved ones, millions of Americans - civilians and soldiers alike - inscribed messages at a greater frequency than ever before. Men who penned only the occasional missive in peacetime became active writers and connoisseurs of the well-composed letter during wartime. Indeed, Bell Irvin Wiley, in his pioneering study *The Life of Johnny Reb*, wrote that because of the war "a large portion of the middle and lower strata of Southern society became articulate for the first time."²³ Furthermore, the war raised the stakes for men who sought to prove their valor and masculine virtues in the crucible of battle. Their social standing benefited from laudatory letters that publicized their conduct at the front lines. For these men who risked their manhood and reputations in battle, the mail provided dual utility: a public forum for them to be heard and praised at the home front and a private means for intimate, highly emotional confessions. Letter writing liberated the

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²² For examples, Lawrence M. Friedman, *Guarding Life's Dark Secrets: Legal and Social Controls over Reputation, Propriety, and Privacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Frederick S. Lane, *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of our Most Contested Right* (Boston: Bacon Press, 2009); Segrave, *Wiretapping*; David J. Seipp, *The Right to Privacy in American History*, Program on Information Resources Policy, Publication P-78-3 (Cambridge: Harvard University; 1978). Even John's *Spreading the News* discusses violations of personal mail in the early modern period largely in terms of government surveillance. See John 42-44.

²³ Wiley, *Reb*, 192.

thoughts of its practitioners – sometimes in ways that transgressed social and gender norms. Yet, soldiers’ attempts to assert control of their personal information took place under conditions hostile to, if not devoid of both spatial and epistolary privacy. Hence, the precariousness of privacy and the vulnerabilities of interpersonal communications compelled Billy Yank and Johnny Reb to mind both what they confessed on paper and who had access to the personal letters they sent home.

Privacy formed an integral part of the social life of Civil War soldiers. They wanted more than just to receive and send letters; they diligently asserted their authority over their personal letters and they monitored the information about themselves percolating through their social networks. Their constant struggle to police the turbulent and porous boundary separating private knowledge from public news reveals itself in their letters. To borrow a contemporary phrase from the field of communications study, this corpus of letters constitute an “evidence-based corpus for understanding the behaviors, decisions, and changes salient in managing private information.”²⁴ Precisely because of its centrality to how soldiers’ experience of war, epistolary privacy opens a window on the significant aspects of both the Civil War in particular and nineteenth-century America in general. Yet how Civil War soldiers perceived and exercised their capacity to control epistolary information about themselves remains unexplored territory. In one recent article on the Civil War the author declares, “How many times such sentiments were

²⁴ Sandra Petrino, “Brief Status Report on Communication Privacy Management Theory,” *Journal of Family Communication* 13, no. 6 (2013): 9. The article is a condensation of her earlier monograph, *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

privately exchanged between lovers, or husbands and wives, is impossible to say.”²⁵

The nature of private epistolary correspondences and the emotional investments involved in such exchanges deserve more scholarly attention than has been the case.

This dissertation argues that during the Civil War the controls that soldiers sought to impose on their epistolary correspondence constituted a vital component of their social definition of autonomous selfhood and its attendant rights, privileges, and functions. Frederick Lane, in his study of privacy in America, argues that Americans have long associated privacy with “a broader sense of personal freedom.”²⁶ As other scholars have pointed out, the concept of privacy encompasses the power of choice; to possess privacy means the ability to disclose private information, to control what other people know about oneself.²⁷ Ownership of one’s personal information equates not to a fixed binary between full disclosure and absolute secrecy, but rather a spectrum of options the owner commands. For white men in uniform, such control personified the liberties and privileges they felt entitled to claim as members of the ruling class, gender, and race who rightfully deserved praise and recognition for their service to their country. Thus, the power to freely express one’s private thoughts on paper and to choose who had access to that epistolary information highlighted the social divisions and inequities within American society at large. Katherine Adams, in her study of women’s writing in the nineteenth century, notes that both legal minds and magazine editors at the time framed privacy as “a privileged relation to one’s extracorporeal self,” and “the

²⁵ James H. Broomall, “We Are a Band of Brothers: Manhood and Community in Confederate Camp and Beyond,” *Civil War History* 60, no. 3 (September, 2014): 305.

²⁶ Lane, 1, 68.

²⁷ Friedman, 4; Lane, 32; Seipp, 6.

freedom and equality of the autonomous individual.”²⁸ Yet the war created opportunities for marginalized groups – women, slaves, even poor illiterate whites – to stake their own claims to literacy, postal access, and personal autonomy. Perhaps even more than their white male counterparts, female soldiers in disguise and black Union soldiers knew full well that the capacity to write one’s own letters signified personal freedom and independence.

For these claimants, old and new alike, the war revealed the precarious nature of epistolary privacy, given the conditions of military life and the weakened ability of soldiers to safeguard the information contents of their personal mail. The practice of letter writing, as many soldiers acknowledged, was delightful, useful, heady and addictive, an indispensable instrument to serve an indispensable need for self-expression and interpersonal communication. Precisely because of all these characteristics, letter writing constituted a source of deep anxiety, particularly when surrounded by curious campmates and vengeful enemies who regularly violated the seal of private correspondence. Civil War soldiers attempted, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile their claims to epistolary ownership with the vulnerabilities inherent to the postal mail. These fighters - black and white, North and South, male and female - continued to write regardless of the dangers of public exposure or the interception of letters in transit. The persistence of these letter writers constituted an exercise in resistance and autonomy against both the impersonal nature of both the military bureaucracy and the mass slaughter of the battlefields. Thus, this study argues that the epistolary experiences of Civil War soldiers constituted analogs to

²⁸ Adams, *Owning Up*, 4.

our own contemporary efforts to maintain the precarious and shifting boundaries of our private sphere in the face of increasingly powerful technologies and avenues of surveillance.

While this study focuses on the epistolary experience of three million or so Americans who went off to war during 1861-1865, this is also a study of an important moment in the history of communications, gender, and warfare. This dissertation draws upon a rich array of earlier scholarship on the lives of Civil War soldiers, to which it contributes both by extending the inquiry into new realms of social and information history. For example, this dissertation emphasizes that letter writing offered one of the few avenues of individual agency available to the soldier. Scholars have pointed out that antebellum ideals of the ideals of autonomous manhood provided fertile grounds for men to resist the demands of military discipline and the subservience of self to a large, impersonal bureaucratic machine.²⁹ For the soldier living away from home and chafing under onerous military regulations, diaries and letters offered a private space for free and unfettered expression, often of opinions and feelings never meant for a public audience. The practice of letter writing itself provided fertile ground for social and legal deviance. Ex-slaves and women who enlisted proved quick and capable practitioners of both the epistolary and military arts, and in doing so muddled the racial and gender distinctions that girded nineteenth century America.

²⁹ Lorien Foote and Lauren Thompson, "Evolving Conceptions of the Southern Male: Identity, Morality, and Masculinity in the Civil War Era," Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri, 18 April 2015.

In their letters to confidantes the troops disclosed a side of themselves they did not want others to know. White male soldiers utilized the instrument of letter writing to confess to acts and feelings that pushed the boundaries of respectable masculinity. In contrast to scholarly literature that tends to emphasize manhood in mid-nineteenth century America as tough, bawdy, and even violent, this dissertation points to the sensitive nature of male soldiers.³⁰ “Men of the nineteenth century,” writes Stephen Berry, “were encouraged to cloak their hearts and stifle their doubts.”³¹ The business of war demanded tough, ruthless fighters, and social norms encouraged soldiers to maintain a face of stoic courage, steely resolve, unshakeable conviction in the camps for their comrades to see and report back home. Sentimentality, according to one historian, constituted “a symptom of weakness that manly men avoided.”³² In his study of the character of Civil War soldiers, Michael Barton argues that many men equated sentimentality and emotion with women. Men, in contrast, denied themselves these very traits because they “could not tolerate the possibility that they might be effeminate.”³³ Yet, the letters of soldiers dripped with saccharine rhetoric, yearnings for the comforts of the domestic sphere, and admissions of doubt, loneliness, fear, and anxiety. These men may have avoided visible or public signs of weakness. However, they did not shy away from

³⁰ See Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) and Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

³¹ Stephen W. Berry II, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

³² Dubbert, 15.

³³ Michael Barton, *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 73.

expressing sentimentality in epistolary form, provided that their correspondent maintained the confidentiality of the revelation.

An analysis of how soldiers understood and practiced epistolary privacy expands the existing scholarship on the Civil War as public and private memory. Henkin, for example, argues that even before the Civil War Americans viewed personal letters as “sincere and confidential disclosures made in the insulated context of an intense emotional relationship.”³⁴ The Civil War, like most conflicts, saw a bifurcation of roles along gender lines with men in the role of fighters and women in support services, whether at the home front or in the camp communities. Yet unlike any previous conflict, the Civil War saw millions of male combatants take to letter writing as the means of maintaining an informational and emotional link to loved ones at home. Within the insulated context of confidential epistolary exchanges, the male writer/fighter kept a portion of his inner life hidden from the public in general, and from other male soldiers in particular. This confessional culture – pinned and centered as it often was on the male soldier’s closest female contact – meant that much of how men experienced war could be expressed only to women on the home front.

Furthermore, the dissertation draws attention to the fragility of personal privacy and malleability of Americans’ attitudes towards the sanctity of the mail. For Victorian Americans in the antebellum period, adherence to the standards of privacy indicated good breeding and middle-class respectability. Indeed, Karen Lystra argues that the exclusivity and significance attached to private

³⁴ Henkin 103.

communications arise only because such correspondence and expressions could occur only out of the public light.³⁵ Privacy as a pre-war value, a cultural norm and expectation, endured into wartime. Yet the state of war produced both the circumstances and the incentives in which the mail lived under the constant threat of public exposure. Inflamed passions weakened the stigma against opening other people's private letters. The state of national emergency made acceptable, even necessary, the desecration and abandonment of principles that Americans in the antebellum period came to perceive as both socially and legally sacrosanct.³⁶

When the scholarship on privacy discusses the Civil War era the focus tends to fall on the role of institutions or technological advances.³⁷ This study calls attention to the role played by everyday people in creating and undermining the culture of privacy. Americans, as Lane points out, have a long history of proclaiming privacy as a sacred and inalienable right, inseparable from and intrinsic to human dignity; the Civil War reveals the social limitations of that bold claim. The threats to personal privacy, and by extension our sense of personal liberty and autonomy, then as now, emanate as much as from those to whom we entrust our private thoughts as from the surveillance powers of states and institutions.

³⁵ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17.

³⁶ While this dissertation deals only with non-governmental, yet systemic violations of postal privacy, the Civil War, like other periods of emergencies in American history, encouraged government officials to sacrifice liberty in the name of security. For a succinct treatment of how the Lincoln administration curtailed Constitutional civil liberties during the war, see Geoffrey R. Stone, *War and Liberty: An American Dilemma: 1790 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 22-40.

³⁷ Segrave, for example, writes, "The surveillance state we live in today in which everyone is put under surveillance all the time (at least with respect to online activities) got its start here, in 1861 and 1862, on the battlefields of America." Segrave 3.

Broadly put, this dissertation looks at the management of epistolary information within the role of the history of communications. The study shifts the subject under analysis away from the letter solely as textual evidence for understanding literary, intellectual, or ideological trends. Instead, the focus falls on to the process of information sharing through letter writing and attempts to control access to such information. Specifically, the following chapters explore how and why soldiers actively tailored, enforced, and policed the boundaries of epistolary privacy. In their personal letters Civil War soldiers revealed themselves as articulate and emotional wielders of pen and paper. They wrote and consumed letters prodigiously, and yet they exercised diligence, discretion, and vigilance over what they disclosed and to whom.

Sources and Methods

There are more surviving Civil War letters, published or unpublished, than any historian could possibly consult. The surviving correspondence from the Civil War number in the millions but this number does not constitute a representative sample of all the soldiers who fought in the war. The higher rates of illiteracy among African-Americans, and especially those who were ex-slaves, and the lower socio-economic status of their families contributed to fewer letters being produced from black soldiers and fewer still of those letters preserved in archives and libraries. I address the problem of scarcity of black soldiers' letters by including books and articles that have reprinted letters of black soldiers. I cite from letters of illiterate men, dictated to an amanuensis, since otherwise the surviving record is

slanted toward native-born white men of the middle and upper classes, whose families had the resources to store and preserve the letters. Still, the unconventional, often times phonetic spelling, the disregard for grammar, and the haphazard punctuation seen in many of the letters cited here indicate that these soldiers did not have the luxury of a formal schooling.

Within a collection of Civil War letters the obvious gaps in correspondence indicate that a letter had been deliberately omitted from set or accidentally lost or destroyed. Even more so in wartime than in peacetime, Americans wrote more letters than they received. Many letters sent to and from the front lines did not survive the hazards of the transit and camp life. More Civil War letters became lost, stolen, or discarded amidst the rough conditions of the camp and the carnage of the battlefield than have survived in the nation's archives. Hence, archival collections normally contained more letters from the soldier than letters to the soldier.

The preservation of correspondence depended mostly on family members deciding to keep them. Ironically, some of the letters have survived despite explicit instructions to "burn after reading." Family members held onto letters as tokens of their loved ones, especially if the soldier died during the war. As with other family memorabilia, letters survived as cherished heirlooms. The family was conscious and proud that the letter represented the honorable service of a family member in a noble cause. Though one could argue that among the social elites the thirst for public honor was more acute, even commoners held a high regard for men who rendered military service in the defense of home and hearth.

Still, there was no shortage of letters from which to choose. I did not attempt to create a representative sample of soldiers' letters. Instead, I employed one major principle of inclusion: I examined the letters of soldiers from a broad spectrum, both enlisted and officers, black and white, from all social classes and regions of the country. I included men of varied marital and family status, bachelors, married men, fathers, and the occasional widower. They served in various branches of the army - infantry, artillery, cavalry, engineering, signals and medical corps, even the regimental bands - and the naval forces as well. The letters were penned from every location where soldiers fought and lived, from the desert trails of the Arizona territory to the coastal waters of the Eastern seaboard.

The letters and diaries cited in this dissertation come from over thirty archives and libraries, including the largest depository of soldiers' letters at the U.S. Army Military Historical Institute. I also cite letters published in books, articles, and newspapers. I refer to letters from every year of the war in order to show how attitudes toward privacy evolved during both the war and a given soldier's term of service. But I have excluded memoirs and letters written after the war in order to avoid the nostalgia so common in the reminiscences of veterans.

With each collection of letters I noted the topics the soldier discussed along with the biographical details of each soldier, including his regiment, rank, battle participation, and whether he was wounded, died in battle, or survived the war. My main emphasis, however, was in the soldier's background, his military and combat experience, the number and relationship of his correspondents and what I am calling, in Facebook lingo, "his privacy settings," that is, his instructions to the

recipient regarding what could be done with his correspondence and the information contained therein. In many cases, however, a letter did not contain such explicit instructions but held other clues that implied who had permission to access to the soldier's private thoughts.

Despite the desire of the soldier to bear his soul to a trusted loved one in his letters, it appears that topics have to do with sexuality was taboo. Euphemisms for venereal disease occasionally were mentioned in letters.³⁸ The shortcomings in military logistics and the wear and the tear of the campaign season meant that regiments often did not have enough warm blankets and coats to go around, forcing men to share both. In the nineteenth century it was common for more than to share a bed, without any assumption of homosexuality. Still, acts of homosexuality were never discussed in men's letters homes. Historians have found only a few cases of white soldiers court-martialed for rape of white women. As Reid Mitchell puts it, black slave women in the South were often the victims of choice. Nonetheless, the subject of a soldier raping a woman was rarely ever mentioned.³⁹

North and South, poor and rich alike, soldiers shared a common culture of letter writing. Certain rhetorical and compositional conventions appeared in most letters. Letters typically began with news of the writers' health accompanied by wishes for the good health of the intended recipients. There was no such thing as a "model letter" for a soldier, no book explicitly written to provide models of the kind

³⁸ Thomas P. Lowry notes that soldiers were usually reluctant to openly discuss in their private correspondence such topics as sex with prostitutes and sexually transmitted diseases. Still, Lowry points to the surviving court records and medical files that reveal much about the sexual escapades and misdeeds of soldiers during the Civil War. See Lowry, *The Stories the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994).

³⁹ Mitchell, 106.

of letter a soldier should write home. In the antebellum period manuals of letter writing did offer many examples of "familiar letters," letters with no specific objective other than the purpose of maintaining contact between one family member and another. The letter was expected to convey the author's attachment to family or to a love interest. A letter from a sibling or romantic partner could chastise the recipient for not writing frequently enough. Yet these manuals did not provide a list of topics that were taboo; it was assumed that the writer would know that certain topics were not discussed. This dissertation will make clear that soldiers engaged in extensive self-policing. As much as they reported on their activities and the actions of their campmates, they exercised discretion as to what they shared with the home folks so as to not reflect badly on themselves or to cause their relatives excessive worry.

Layout of Dissertation

The layout of the dissertation borrows from Sandra Petrino's work on "Communication Privacy Management Theory." Petrino identifies three elements - privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence - that illuminate "where private information resides as well as the way information is regulated."⁴⁰ Petrino begins by pointing out that notion that "people believe they are the sole owners of their private information." She then argues that because they see information as private property, they believe they possess the sole right to control access to it. She then points out that when the "original owners" grant other access to private

⁴⁰ Petrino, "Brief Status," 8.

information with others who become “authorized co-owners” and “are perceived by the ‘original owner’ to have fiduciary responsibilities for the information.”⁴¹ In this sense, the letter of the soldier tells us about his female confidantes and his relationship with them. Finally, Petrino points out the turbulent, shifting, and porous boundaries that separated the private from the public. The wishes and desires of the soldier were not always followed, and he himself sometimes changed the parameters of what he deemed private information. Plus, people other than the intended recipient opened the soldiers’ letters without permission. In short, the personal mail was often violated, expectations were disappointed, and confidences disclosed. Petrino’s analytical concepts provide the framework for understanding how men at war sought ownership and control of the mail, entrusted other with ownership of sensitive information, and responded to transgressions against their personal mail.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans had grown accustomed to legal and social norms that secured the right to privacy of the mail. The first part of the dissertation explores the ways in which Civil War soldiers understood and exercised ownership over their private mail. Chapter Two looks at the process by which letters were shared. Chapter Three examines how letters were regulated and the rationales for both dispersing epistolary information and restricting its dissemination; the chapter also considers how much privacy soldiers could reasonably command within the confines of the regimental camp. After all, military life in general afforded little privacy. Only the senior commanders had separate

⁴¹ Ibid 9.

quarters, and the common soldier lived his daily routines under the constant surveillance of regimental comrades, many of whom knew him from his civilian days. Living in close proximity to each other around the clock allowed and even encouraged the troops to gather intelligence about each other to report home.

The war revealed how privacy was neither distributed evenly nor enjoyed equally by all soldiers. In the military camps, as in American society at large, an essential right like privacy functioned as a marker of rank, privilege, and luck. Large sub-groups of soldiers found themselves excluded from the endeavor. The wounded, the sick, and the illiterate, for example, had to rely on epistolary intermediaries which made secrecy impossible. While enslaved, African-Americans had no legal claim to personal privacy; as enlisted Union soldiers, they had to contend with high rates of illiteracy that forced them to rely on their literate comrades or their white officers to do their letter writing and reading.⁴² Indeed, the effort made by black Union troops to acquire literacy and to write and read their own letters suggests how this particular skill set embodied and signified personal liberty and the privileges that came with full equality.

⁴² High rates of illiteracy only partly account for why relatively few personal letters written by previously enslaved African-American soldiers have found their way to the nation's archives and libraries. The more well-off a soldier's family, the more likely the resources to store and preserve the soldier's wartime letters. As African-American families endured systematic discrimination and higher rates of poverty, they likely had less access to means that allowed wartime letters to survive as family heirlooms or donations to libraries and historical societies. Still, letters written by black soldiers, often to newspaper editors and government officials, have been preserved and documented. For examples, see Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Soldiers exchanged personal correspondences with friends and family of both genders, but more often than not, the chief female figure in a soldier's life received the lion's share of the mail. The second part of the dissertation looks at how women became, in Petrino's terminology, "co-owners" of men's secrets. Just as the war turned many men, often from the bottom half of society, into connoisseurs of elegant prose, epistolary rhetoric, and long letters, women took on a new role as the confidants and consumers of men's epistolary confessions. Privacy was essential to self-expression and self-revelation, and Civil War soldiers were well versed at both tasks. As Chapters Four and Five make clear, privacy also covered up all manners of mistakes, sins, transgressions, and perceived failings. In public the men exalted masculine courage, tough exteriors, and controlled emotions, but in their letters they articulated their vulnerabilities, their admissions of doubt and despair, their innermost emotional life, their revulsion at war and its horrors. The troops freely confessed their yearnings for neighborhood gossip, for female affection, and for the comforts of domestic life. Some admitted their inability to write romantic prose or to live up to the standards of masculine literacy. Others even reported military secrets and the sins and failings of themselves and other soldiers. For the men who penned these confessions, sentimentality or lack of control was considered effeminate or a sign of masculine weakness. Behind the seal of closed envelopes, then, Civil War soldiers lived out a life that they could not share with the public eye, and each soldier was left to his (and in rare cases, her) own devices to maintain the security of their private thoughts, and by extension, their social reputation and public standing.

Male soldiers regularly trusted their most sensitive information to their closest female figure, normally their wives but also relatives like mothers, sisters, and even cousins. As the epistolary confidants of men, women knew what the men intentionally hid from public view and from their fellow male soldier. Women, as co-owners of information, possessed delegated control over a man's private property. Were they good and faithful stewards or profligate and casual in their respect for his property? Either way, privacy and secrecy complicated the power dynamics between the men off at war and the women at the home front; the women became bearers of secrets that if disclosed could prove damaging to their men's reputation and honor.

Hence, women played a major role in the selective public memories of their men's military service.⁴³ What soldiers' private letters revealed about male insecurity, weakness, and indiscretions were left out of both the wartime celebrations of heroism and the postwar remembrance. The public discourse in the Gilded Age tended to emphasize the soldiers' heroism, toughness, and masculine comradeship rather than their confessions of homesickness or their deep attachments to domesticity and the female-dominated world of the household. The female correspondents knew all along a different side to the war, one that encompassed a larger scope of what their men thought, felt, and went through during the conflict. Woodrow Wilson, speaking at the Gettysburg semicentennial celebration in 1913, called upon the nation to "not forget the splendid valor, the

⁴³ For how veterans themselves used their postwar memoirs to shape the public memory of the Civil War and its meanings, see Thomas C. Leonard, *Above the Battle: War-Making in America from Appomattox to Versailles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 9-24.

manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another.”⁴⁴ Yet, the words penned by these men to their womenfolk during the war itself suggest that valor in battle and devotion to nation existed alongside profound doubt, alienation, and infidelity. In a sense, a secret history of the Civil War lived behind the veil of female guardianship, unseen and unknown by the public.

Chapter Six, the third part of the dissertation, uses Petrino’s notion of “privacy turbulence” to explain why soldiers had to keep vigilant over the privacy of their epistolary correspondence. The Civil War made information valuable and dangerous. Military and political elites sought to up-to-date information in planning their strategies, campaigns, and battles. Likewise, the lowly commoners, who had much to say and quite a few things to hide, also understood the logic of attaining and containing sensitive information. The vulnerability of the mail posed a threat to the well-being of Civil War soldiers. Challenges to personal privacy bloomed under the circumstances and conditions of the war. Boredom and curiosity led friends and foes alike to disregard the seal on personal correspondence. Ever mindful of the consequences of leaked secrets, the soldiers resorted to various means of safeguarding their private correspondence, punishing violators, and destroying secrets. Whereas in previous conflicts literacy and the mail were restricted to and enjoyed only by the elites of society, during the Civil War the foot soldiers could write letters and become managers and purveyors of information exchanges. What the lowly grunt kept secret in his letters might not have mattered to his

⁴⁴ Cited in David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 11.

commanding officers and elected leaders, but it did matter to him, and it did shape the mental calculus that sustained his will to fight and see the war through.

This dissertation represents an inquiry into the mindset and attitudes of soldiers who sought control over epistolary information during the American Civil War. The analysis also examines the dynamics that shape the meanings of privacy, gender roles, and social privilege in nineteenth century America. The Civil War's revolutionary legacies continue to influence the contours of modern American social and political life. For most of human history the ability to record in written text one's thoughts and feelings, to indulge in self-expression using media that could be readily shared with intimates many miles away, remained the province of a tiny portion of society's elites. During the Civil War, for the first time in human history, a human society fielded armies whose lowliest members possessed the power and the right to create and share media content borne of their own individual proclivities.⁴⁵ These men and women knew full well the dilemma and the opportunities created by mass literacy and mass communications. The struggle by the everyday soldiers of the Civil War to control and regulate access to their personal letters offers a tale of insight and precaution to Americans in the twenty-first century as we construct, practice, and understand the social norms attendant in our own communications revolution. In the least, it can be said that the soldiers of the Civil War, who wrote and regulated their personal information while living and fighting a bloody conflict, knew firsthand the delights and vulnerabilities of living in an information age.

⁴⁵ Recent Civil War scholarship has noted how Civil War soldiers perceived access to avenues of personal expression as "an empowering channel." See Jason Phillips, "The Grape Vine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence," *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 4 (November 2006): 755.

Chapter 1: Public Reputation, Public Letters

“The Rights & Liberties of an American Citizen”

The volunteers, recruits, and draftees of 1861-1865 entered the war desiring and expecting to stay in contact with their homes via the personal letter. As Sanitary Commission worker Mary Livermore remarked about the Union forces, “there never was an army so intent on coresponding with the kindred and friends left behind.”⁴⁶ Yet Yankees and rebels alike often grossly underestimated or failed to realize how the hierarchy of military command, the strict routines of military life, and the war itself created numerous obstacles to maintaining both epistolary connections and epistolary privacy. In the camps the men struggled to safeguard the contents of letters. Though the widespread use of envelopes provided some degree of protection, letters themselves easily became lost, destroyed, intercepted, shared, or misinterpreted once it left the hand of either the writer or the intended recipients.

Chapters two and three examine soldiers’ attempts to impose ownership over information contained and transmitted in personal letters. This chapter provides an ethnography of the unwritten rules that shaped how soldiers conscientiously and diligently demarcated the information they wanted publicized. The information soldiers deemed public varied from one soldier to another: one man’s secret to keep to his deathbed was another man’s public newscast. Epistolary

⁴⁶ Cited in Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, eds., *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 1.

access did not mean a mutually exclusive binary between full public disclosure and utmost secrecy. Rather, access operated as a continuum between the two extremes.⁴⁷ At one end, a soldier might authorize and even encourage a letter's circulation within the public realm. Some letters even appeared reprinted in mass media with the author's intent and permission. At the other extreme, a letter writer might explicitly command that no one but the single addressee read the letter and know of its contents. The writer's attitude towards epistolary access was not static, even when explicitly spelled out in forceful terms. For Civil War soldiers, their ongoing experiences in the war and their evolving relationships with their correspondents altered the calculus by which they regulated the privacy settings on their letters.

As this chapter shows, what remained constant was the belief that a person had rightful ownership of information about himself or herself. Letter-writers wanted to command both the contents of their personal mail after it left their hands and the circle of persons privy to those contents. Correspondents, then, enjoyed privacy only when they had consent over and knowledge of who had access to their personal mail. The epistolary exchange between Andrew Valentine, an ex-slave serving in a Union regiment and his wife Ann, still held in bondage, illustrates the

⁴⁷ Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost use the continuum model to discuss the public and private spheres; this dissertation applies the same framework to the subset of access to personal letters. Feeley and Frost, "Introduction," *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History*, ed. Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12. For an overview see the *Journal of Women's History* special issues on "Women's History in the New Millennium: Rethinking Public and Private," 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003) and "Continuing the Conversation," 15, no. 2 (Summer 2003). See also Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 324.

point. Geographic separation and chattel slavery did not impede the couple's correspondence. Apparently, Ann had the assistance of a literate white, "Jas. A Carney," who lived nearby and acted as her intermediary. Carney received and read to Ann her husband's letters, and in turn, took dictation from Ann to be sent to the husband. The arrangement made sense. Ann was most likely illiterate (not surprising for a slave). Even more crucial, the slaveowner, "Hogsett," would open any letters sent directly to her. At the end of one dictated letter, Carney added his own thoughts in the form of a warning for Andrew to heed: "Do not write too often[.] Once a month will be plenty and when you write do not write as though you had recd any letters for if you do your wife will not be so apt to get them. Hogsett has forbid her coming to my house so we cannot read them to her *privately* [my italicized]."⁴⁸ Though Carney knew the exact words exchanged between the couple, his access received both their blessings, and hence, did not violate the privacy of their correspondence.

Charting soldiers' highly variable instructions for disclosure affirm that personal privacy mattered greatly to nineteenth-century Americans of all social classes and backgrounds. The conflict elevated the utility of privacy while rendering personal information and military intelligence all the more vital to the operations of

⁴⁸ "Ann" to her husband Andrew "Andy" Valentine, 19 January 1864, cited in Ira Berlin, et al., eds., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 360-361. At the time, Andrew Valentine was serving in a Missouri (Union) regiment. The original letter is enclosed as "Brig. Genl. Wm. A. Pile to Maj. O. D. Greene, 11 Feb. 1864, P-91 1864, Letters Received, series 2593, Department of the Missouri, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 Pt. 1, National Archives." The letter is addressed to "Andrew Valentine Co E 2nd Mo Colored Inft A D Benton Barracks St Louis Mo." Both the letter and the "endorsement" are in Carney's handwriting, indicating that Carney took dictation from Ann and then added his own cautionary message for Andrew Valentine. I am indebted to Kelly Selby for pointing me to this particular letter.

both armies and families alike. The diligence soldiers applied to restricting access to their mail, the precautions taken to destroy correspondence, and their responses to violations of the mail indicate that soldiers were acutely aware of how the war made circumscribed and vulnerable the quality of epistolary privacy. Furthermore, during the Civil War some individuals and groups had more epistolary privacy than others. Those most excluded from enjoying the full privileges of privacy and liberty proved the most determined and adept at seizing the opportunities afforded by the war, often in ways that transgressed existing social and legal norms.

Military service had a paradoxical impact on men's sense of their masculine selfhood and personal autonomy. The pursuit of mastery helped define manhood in antebellum America and mastery meant control of oneself, of material possessions, of one's circumstances.⁴⁹ Stephanie McCurry pointed out in *Masters of Small Worlds* that white Southern men in particular derived their self-identity from their capacity to head independent households and command others they deemed dependents.⁵⁰ Indeed, in *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam argues that "historically it has become difficult, if not impossible, to untangle masculinity from the oppression of women."⁵¹ The power to wield violence in the name of defending home, hearth, and country affirmed men's claim to masculine virility, independence of action, and the rights of ownership and citizenship. These characteristics set white men apart from

⁴⁹ Lorien Foote, "Evolving Conceptions of the Southern Male: Identity, Morality, and Masculinity in the Civil War Era," Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri; 18 April 2015.

⁵⁰ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii–ix, 208–38.

⁵¹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 4

and superior to both the female gender and to dependents like slaves and children. The concept of dependency, as historians have shown, evolved considerably since the colonial period, when dependent status applied to both men and women. By the antebellum period, dependency “was considered proper only for women, children, slaves, and paupers.”⁵² Both coverture laws regarding women’s wages and property and the exclusion of women and blacks from military service signified their status as neither autonomous beings nor full citizens of the nation-state. As Katherine Adams argues in her study of nineteenth century female writers, privacy functioned as a badge of power and authority, an entitlement to which neither blacks and nor women could make full claims.⁵³

In wartime, however, white men lost a good deal of the entitlements they had taken for granted in peacetime. Military service constituted something of a paradox for white men. To bear arms in the defense of their homes and country signified their status as free men and citizens who had access to the fullest rights and privileges under the law. Yet, these men surrendered much of those same rights and privileges when they enlisted.⁵⁴ The structures and rules of military life infringed severely upon the autonomy and independence of action that white men could claim

⁵² Rachel Filene Seidman, “A Monstrous Doctrine? Northern Women and Dependency during the Civil War,” *An Uncommon Time: The Civil War and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Paul A. Cimballa and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 172. Seidman argues that the Civil War gave a huge impetus for women to question and overthrow their status as legal dependents. See Seidman 176.

⁵³ Katherine Adams, *Owning Up: Privacy, Privacy, and Belonging in U.S. Women’s Life Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁵⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: The Free Press, 2008), 34-35, 42, 50-52; Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 57-60; Stephen W. Berry II, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 176-177.

as their exclusive domain. As Jason Phillips has pointed out, “army life restricted troops’ power, freedom, and equality. White southern men, in particular, experienced an iron discipline that clashed with their peacetime society.”⁵⁵ The common soldier had no private space, no command of his daily schedule, no freedom of movement, not even the choice of daily clothing.⁵⁶ Plus, the chain of command meant that everyone, from the lowly private to the general-in-chief, answered to and received orders from a superior.

Most Americans went to war with little if any knowledge of or experience with military hierarchy, command, and regulations.⁵⁷ Recruits and volunteers, especially in the early phase of their service, complained of their subjugation to an impersonal bureaucracy and round-the-clock discipline. “I [k]now by experience,” wrote an Alabaman early in his enlistment, that “a man...in ware [war] is tide down under a master.”⁵⁸ A Union sailor on blockade duty in 1862 revealed his acute awareness of the personal freedom he lost when he enlisted:

[W]hen my year is out I shall not feel under any obligation to serve my country in any position in which the rights & liberties of an American

⁵⁵ Jason Phillips, “The Grape Vine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence,” *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 4 (November 2006): 759, fn. 9.

⁵⁶ As Cheryl A. Wells points out, since a soldier answered at all times to a superior, even time itself belonged the military high command. However, Civil War soldiers, she insists, felt that they “owned” any leisure time not governed by clock-regulated tasks. See Cheryl A. Wells, *Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 61.

⁵⁷ In early 1861, the national army numbered just 16,000 regulars. Though many states and towns had volunteer militias, these units rarely lived up to professional standards in training, discipline, and equipment. “Many of them,” wrote James M. McPherson, “spent more time drinking than drilling.” McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 313, 317.

⁵⁸ Ambrose Doss to his family, 15 January 1862, Ambrose Doss Papers; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library (hereinafter UAL).

citizen shall be denied to me, as in many respects they are at present.⁵⁹

A more grizzled veteran in 1865 employed blunt language when he equated military service with being “a dog, a perfect slave.”⁶⁰

In such a restrictive environment the practice of writing represented one arena where a recruit or draftee could exercise a measure of autonomy beyond the reach of military authority.⁶¹ Writing for private consumption – whether in the form of diaries or letters – allowed him to carve out and maintain his individual identity in the midst of the impersonal, even dehumanizing effects of the war. Of course, soldiers had plenty of other means, such as desertion and even outright insubordination, to prove that they were not just mindless automatons or interchangeable cogs in the military machine. Still, for these men, writing and reading leisure represented a small but significant aspect of their daily lives over which they retained a measure of control akin to what they had known in the prewar days.

“The Infidelities of the Post Office”

In early modern England the control of postal communications by the state served to protect the secrecy of official correspondence; no such protections,

⁵⁹ Frederic Augustus James to his daughter Nellie, 22 November 1862, Frederic Augustus James Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereinafter MHS). James was probably aboard *USS Housatonic* on blockade duty just outside of Charleston, South Carolina when he composed this passage.

⁶⁰ James Hart Nugent to his brother Dan, 8 March 1865, James Hart Nugent Letters, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereinafter WHS).

⁶¹ Daniel Kotzin, “Soldiers and Masculinity or Masculinity and War,” Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri; 18 April 2015.

whether based in constitutional law or cultural norms, extended to the mail of private persons. Under Oliver Cromwell Parliament enacted England's first complete postal law in the mid-1600s. Not incidentally, the government's proclaimed monopoly over the mail, as Cromwell saw it, allowed for the surveillance of potential troublemakers to the Commonwealth. This proclaimed right of the government to both deliver the mail and to open letters continued after Cromwell's death and the end of the Protectorate. Under Charles II, government officials proved accomplished hands at the stealthy task of opening and resealing letters without leaving a trace to make either sender or receiver suspicious. Even after the Glorious Revolution, successive British administrations in the eighteenth century, in one historian's words, "routinely treated the post office as a convenient depot of intelligence, by detaining, opening, copying, and when necessary deciphering 'private letters' in transit."⁶²

The advent of a state-run postal system accessible to the entire population and pledged to maintain the privacy of personal correspondence stands out as both relatively modern and decidedly revolutionary. The idea of the sanctity of personal mail arose, not coincidentally, with the Enlightenment and the notions of inalienable rights of individual. The first formal recognition of postal privacy in the Anglo-American legal tradition occurred during the reign of Queen Anne, when Parliament adopted the Post Office Act of 1710. Following the example set by the mother

⁶² Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

country, the colonial mail under Benjamin Franklin, the first American postmaster, upheld as one of its central tenets the privacy of the mail.⁶³

The political revolutions in the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth century challenged the long-standing government policy of reading people's private letters. The French revolutionaries of 1789 took seriously the issue of postal surveillance by the national authorities. According to Daniel R. Headrick, "In the *cahiers de doléances* (notebooks of grievances) presented to the Estates-General in 1789, one of the primary complaints against the royal postal service was that it violated the privacy of correspondence."⁶⁴ Accordingly, Article XI of the Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaimed the free communication of ideas and opinions. Likewise, the penal code of 1791 guaranteed the inviolability of correspondence.

Across the Atlantic the Americans also set about codifying the culture of privacy. The 1792 Post Office Act both established the national postal system and firmly embedded the concept of communications privacy into law and postal policy.⁶⁵ "The immunity of the mail to government inspection Henkin and interference," writes David M. Henkin in *The Postal Age*, "had been a legal cornerstone of the American postal system since 1792."⁶⁶ Other scholars posit pre-

⁶³ Lane 6, 18.

⁶⁴ Daniel R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 188.

⁶⁵ Anuj C. Desai, "Wiretapping before the Wires: The Post Office and the Birth of Communications Privacy," *Stanford Law Review* 60, no. 2 (November 2007): 568.

⁶⁶ David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 99. See Lane 3-17 for a discussion on evolution of postal privacy in colonial America. The word "privacy" does not appear in any of the founding documents, but Lane argues that the fundamental rights of life, liberty, and happiness "are both personal and private to each individual." Plus, the list of grievances mentioned in the

Constitutional or even classical origins for our modern jurisprudence on privacy.⁶⁷ Yet as Wayne E. Fuller points out, reality did not match political ideals or legal rhetoric. The federal mail service in the early Republic struggled to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding, commercial nation-state. The shoddy state of postal roads, the vastness of American wilderness, and the ever-present threat of theft rendered the postal system so untrustworthy that people rightly feared disclosing sensitive information in their letters.⁶⁸ Thomas Jefferson spoke for many of his fellow Americans when he complained that “the infidelities of the post office and the circumstances of the time are against my writing fully and freely.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, by the antebellum period public opinion had grown accustomed to regard the “sanctity of the mails” as absolute in the same way it esteemed the inviolability of the home.⁷⁰ Americans of the Civil War generation, writes Robert E. Bonner, “entrusted their most personal expressions and prized possessions to the large,

Declaration included perceived infringements by the British Crown on the private affairs of the colonials.

⁶⁷ Desai, for one, argues that the legal principle of privacy preceded the Bill of Rights, a view espoused most famously by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas when he wrote the majority opinion in *Griswold vs. Connecticut*, 381 U.S 479 (7 June 1965). David H. Flaherty points to even older precedence, arguing that modern Anglo-American privacy laws had its antecedents in the Greco-Roman world and biblical literature. See Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 245.

⁶⁸ Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 2. The law in the early Republic provided the death penalty for the crime of mail theft, yet according to one historian, “Robberies of the mail were not infrequent, especially in the South;” see Wesley Everett Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 95.

⁶⁹ Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, 26 November 1798, in Thomas Jefferson, *Works*, Federal edition (New York, 1905), vol. 8: 488, cited in David J. Seipp, *The Right to Privacy in American History*, Program on Information Resources Policy, Publication P-78-3 (Cambridge: Harvard University; 1978), vi. See also Seipp 16-18.

⁷⁰ “The Right to Privacy in Nineteenth Century America,” *Harvard Law Review* 94. no. 8 (June 1981): 1899.

standardized structures of the U.S. mail” and “did so without much thought, since they had little reason to question the Federal postal service.”⁷¹

“To His Own Reputation”

Henkin’s *The Postal Age* sheds light on the relationship between letter writing and the emerging national market economy in the antebellum era. Americans aspiring to climb up the social ladder needed proficiency in the arena of epistolary communications. Good penmanship, diction, and composition made for good business letters; not coincidentally, many Americans associated these epistolary virtues with upstanding character, industriousness, and social respectability.⁷²

Privacy also mattered, and not in just the legal protection afforded the mail. In *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain*, Deborah Cohen examines how the Victorians defined the meaning of privacy. Victorian Americans, like their British counterparts, understood privacy as the state of restricting who had access to one’s innermost thoughts.⁷³ A true loved one or a trusted friend could keep a letter private; those who could not found themselves cut off entirely from

⁷¹ Robert E. Bonner, *The Soldier’s Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 19. Yet, the trustworthiness and reliability of the postal service did not mean that people perceived they had greater control over their privacy; English Victorians actually perceived the increased accessibility of the postal system as an intrusion upon privacy and domestic sanctity. See Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 246. For Americans’ attitudes towards privacy in the twenty-first century, see S. J. Best, B. S. Krueger, and J. Ladewig, “Privacy in the Information Age,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2006): 375-401.

⁷² Henkin 95.

⁷³ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 1.

communication. Cohen argues that the Victorians believed that secret-keeping constituted the necessary means for maintaining privacy. Along similar lines, Karen Lystra tackles the historical meanings of public and private in her study of romantic love in nineteenth century America. The Victorians, Lystra argues, reserved the private sphere for a different set of expressions that could not and should not find a public audience. Lystra points out that the contemporary mind would deem such a divergence between private and public thought as a sign of hypocrisy. For Victorian Americans adherence to the standards of privacy indicated good breeding and middle-class status.⁷⁴ In other words, they interpreted respect for and the diligent practice of privacy as a marker of social respectability.

Social respectability and privacy, however, must be seen as privileges restricted to a few and not universal rights accessible to all in Victorian America. In *Guarding Life's Dark Secrets*, his study of the legal and social history of propriety, Lawrence M. Friedman contends that the American legal system has never “concerned itself with everybody’s reputation.” “Protecting reputation” in the nineteenth century, he emphasizes, “meant protecting privacy....especially or

⁷⁴ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17. Protecting one’s private thoughts incited suspicions of hypocrisy in the pre-Victorian age as well, argues Patricia Meyer Spacks. The Victorian conception of privacy as a positive social trait contrasted sharply with prevailing cultural norms in the eighteenth century when, as Spacks has pointed out, privacy “presented, many thought, clear and present dangers both to the social order and to vulnerable persons (women, the young) within that order....Possibly connected with secrecy and with performance, as well as seclusion, the very idea of privacy could arouse fear.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

primarily for elite and respectable people.”⁷⁵ Lori Glover and James H. Broomall point out a similar dynamic at work in the minds of elite Southern white men who believed that an honorable, manly reputation remained the exclusive preserve of their social class. “Although acknowledged as males,” writes Glover, “poor whites seldom and slaves never gained affirmation as men from the gentry.”⁷⁶ Likewise, Broomall notes that the historical literature has a tendency to paint Southern white men as fiercely individualistic characters who “defined their public personas through an aggressive defense of reputation or shaped their personal identities through the subordination of slaves and family.”⁷⁷

Yet antebellum American did allow for considerable social mobility. Particularly in the industrializing North, the poor and working class, immigrants, and other marginalized groups could earn a measure of respectability through climbing the economic ladder. At the very bottom rung, slaves had neither claim to social respectability nor the right to private space, much less private correspondence. Slavery denied African-Americans of the most basic elements of personal autonomy. By law and by custom, both enforced with violence and repression, a slave Ann Valentine had no right to literacy or to write or speak freely within a white-dominated society

⁷⁵ Lawrence M. Friedman, *Guarding Life's Dark Secrets: Legal and Social Controls over Reputation, Propriety, and Privacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 8, 213.

⁷⁶ Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 3. For an anthology on the subject, see Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

⁷⁷ James H. Broomall, "We Are a Band of Brothers: Manhood and Community in Confederate Camp and Beyond," *Civil War History* 60, no. 3 (September, 2014): 272.

Compared to most of the population and in particular to the black slaves, white men had it good in antebellum America. They had every reason to proclaim and defend a hierarchical society; though social mobility existed to some degree for most Americans, white men held a near monopoly on the commanding heights of society and the political economy. The right of white men to property was extensive and consequential. They laid the fullest claim to ownership of the republican nation, of the franchise, of wages and wealth, of literacy, of their own bodies, of the bodies and labor of other human beings.⁷⁸ When constructed as a vital component of personal liberty, the power to command one's mail constituted a marker of a privileged social class. The legal language of the nineteenth century not only made explicit the connection between privacy and ownership but also made clear that "prying" was malicious inquiry into another person's affairs. In an 1831 case, a Pennsylvania court ruled, "Every man's house is his castle, where no man has a right to intrude for any purpose whatsoever. No man has a right to pry into your secrecy in your own house."⁷⁹ According to attorney E. L. Godkin's 1890 article, "The Rights of the Citizen: IV. To His Own Reputation," "privacy is entirely about the ability to

⁷⁸ For example, Shawn Johansen's study of fatherhood in the antebellum period makes a similar argument; the exercise of control over their children constituted a key component of men's "dominant place in the family and society" which explains why the men "did not relinquish power easily." Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 10. Bertram Wyatt-Brown earlier made similar arguments about male dominance in the affairs of marriage and family property: "Nevertheless, male honor required masculine leadership of the family." See Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), chapter 10. Similar points about antebellum patriarchy are made in Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1992), 8-9.

⁷⁹ *Commonwealth v. Lovett*, 1831, cited in Seipp 6.

control information about oneself.”⁸⁰ That same year, two Boston lawyers, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, in their seminal *Harvard Law Review* article, “The Right to Privacy,” advocated for tort reform that would allow people whose private lives had been violated to sue for damages; in other words, the two men argued that the same judicial recognition and legal protection granted to one’s physical, private property should extend to one’s intangible, public reputation.⁸¹ For women of the antebellum era, privacy meant a discursive space of ideology about the home and the physical space of the domestic household - subordinate, limiting, and restrictive.⁸² For men, privacy constituted the means of maintaining an honorable reputation; to possess privacy meant control of access to and dissemination of any information that might injure their public standing.

“As Becomes an Officer and a Gentleman”

The Civil War gave white men, in the North as well as in the South, even more incentives to become astute, careful, and vigilant managers of information. In their letters they routinely articulated their hopes for a speedy return and reintegration into their pre-war civilian life, preferably with an enhanced status from having served honorably in the war. “I belong to as good a regiment as is in the service,”

⁸⁰ Cited in Lane 68.

⁸¹ For a brief but succinct discussion of Warren and Brandeis’ article, see Samantha Barbas, “Gossip Law,” *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History*, ed. Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 124-125. “The Right to Privacy” was published in the *Harvard Law Review* 4.5 (1890). Brandeis later served on the Supreme Court from 1916-1939.

⁸² Mary Kelley’s *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literacy Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) makes a convincing case for how print media created a public stage for women writers of the nineteenth century to voice their hopes, fears, and most of all, their sense of agency.

bragged Ohioan Henry Dykes to his wife, “and I expect it will fight its way thru and then I will come home in triumph.”⁸³ One Maryland cavalryman wrote at war’s end, “[W]e have now the victory after four years of hard fighting and rough fair. We will be able to return to our homes with honor and fame.”⁸⁴ Even the dead had their share of fame (or infamy), to be borne by their acquaintances and next of kin. “Remember Will Baum for he fought like a man and never will be forgotten by his companions,” wrote a corporal in the 10th Indiana to his wife after a mutual acquaintance fell in a recent battle.⁸⁵ The very language employed the Hoosier to describe his late comrade made explicit the idea of war as a proving ground for the martial qualities that defined honorable manhood in the minds of many Americans. Military service, as Joe L. Dubbert pointed out, “offered an exciting prospect for masculine fulfillment” since it provided a very public arena “in which a man’s manly qualities were put to the severest test possible.”⁸⁶

Soldiers therefore had good reasons to mind not only the content but also the reading audience for their letters. They had to screen sensitive information and correct false reports in circulation that might dishonor them in the eyes of family, friends, and neighbors back home. After all, rumors ran rampant in the camps.

⁸³ Henry Dykes to his wife Sarah, 16 September 1862, Dykes Family Letters, Ohio Historical Society (hereinafter OHS).

⁸⁴ Jesse Beard to his brother Josiah Beard, 21 May 1865, Josiah Beard Letters, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

⁸⁵ Harrison Derrick to “Molly,” 30 January 1862, Harrison Derrick Letter, Indiana Historical Society (hereinafter IHS). The 10th Indiana fought in the Battle of Mill Springs (or Logan’s Fields) on 19 January 1862 in Kentucky. The engagement ended in a Union victory.

⁸⁶ Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1979), 57. Johansen notes that the men in his study paid increased attention to the preservation of honor once the war broke out. Johansen 127. See also Glover 3.

Furthermore, the traffic in letters and newspapers between the regiments and their home towns created a common market for the production and consumption of gossip, innuendo, and speculation. Unlike other forms of diversion, rumor-mongering required nothing more than the will to chatter. As one rebel put it, "the 'grape vine telegraph,'" was "a machine that can be worked by any one," and "the most ridiculous rumor will be operated as a fact after going a few yards."⁸⁷ Thus did an Alabaman warn his mother, "there are so many false reports, gets to the ears of our parents, for it must sender them uneasy until they are correctly informed."⁸⁸

Letters often contained testimony verifying a soldier's good character and honorable conduct. In one example, Joseph M. Rabb, an Indiana soldier, came to the defense of a comrade accused of intemperance. Rabb wrote to his sister of "a report had got out there in town that Billy Moore had taken to drinking." Rabb firmly refuted the claim: "[T]here is not a word of truth in any such report I know Billy Moore as well as any man in the Regiment and see him a dozen times a day and I never saw him drink a drop of whiskey or any thing of the kind."⁸⁹ Given how antebellum American society associated alcoholism with moral deficiency, respectable men sought to avoid what Union General George McClellan called "the

⁸⁷ Entry for 18 October 18 1864, Samuel Horace Hawes Diary, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond (hereinafter VHS). Cited in Phillips 754.

⁸⁸ William T. Landman to his mother, 21 June 1861, Landman Family Letters, Tennessee Tech University, Angelo Volpe Library and Media Center.

⁸⁹ Joseph M. Rabb to his sister, 23 November 1864, Joseph M. Rabb Papers, IHS. Of course, rumors of scandalous misconduct went in both directions. One Ohioan cavalryman informed his wife "about a report here about Orange Ball wife. Sherman Northway has got to the Regt. and he brings the report that she is running around with other men at a great rate...It seems as though, the duce had got into the women or there was a great many lies told about them." Thomas M. Covert to his wife, 4 August 1862, Thomas M. Covert Papers, USAMHI.

degrading vice of drunkenness.”⁹⁰ Joseph F. Shaner, a Confederate, sprang to his own defense when unfavorable reports of his conduct circulated through his home community. The indignant rebel testified to his sisters regarding his public rectitude:

[S]ome of them that has bin a writing home about me[.] I can say one thing that they cant say[.] I can say I dont get drunk when ever I get a chance and they cant say that[.] while they are out a looking for whiskey I am in my tent a reading my testament[.]⁹¹

For this particular rebel, the defense of his reputation required him to quickly counter the letters sent by his comrades by writing a letter of his own that would reshape the social dialogue of his home community in a direction that to him, embraced the truth and not coincidentally, set right his public image.

Shaner’s text suggests that acquaintances within the camp birthed these unflattering rumors about him. His predicament and his response to it offer insight into the nature of combat motivation for Civil War soldiers. Tattling owed as much to the malicious will of one’s campmates as to soldiers’ stream-of-consciousness style of writing. Either way, tattling operated as a means of policing the conduct of community members through public shaming. In a letter to his wife sent from his

⁹⁰ As McClelland observed in 1862, “No one evil agent so much obstructs this army...as the degrading vice of drunkenness...[T]otal abstinence from intoxicating liquors...would be worth 50,00 men to the armies of the United States.” Cited in Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952, reprint edition), 252. Alcohol consumption was widespread in Civil War armies despite the influence of the temperance movement and the social stigma attached to drinking. That rumors and repudiations of drinking should occur so frequently in soldiers’ letters speaks much to American anxieties, fears, and tastes regarding alcohol. For an overview, see W.J. Rorabaugh’s *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and *Thomas R. Pegram’s Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1998).

⁹¹ Joseph F. Shaner to his sisters, 23 September 1861, Joseph F. Shaner Letters, VHS.

post in New Mexico territory, George Henry Pettis vigorously sought to defend his “morals and virtues” in the face of “ill reports” to the contrary:

As regards the ill reports about me, you do very well in giving them no credit; they have not a shadow of foundation....I have ever conducted myself, especially since I have been in service, as becomes an officer and a gentleman, and I have never heard of any complaints to the contrary; and as far as morals and virtues are concerned, I would have no objections to your knowing every item. I can assure you that I have never done an act that I shall ever blush for.⁹²

The social dynamics of camp life and the lack of privacy help explain why Civil War soldiers fought and endured. “[I]f I fall or survive the conflict,” asserted Pettis, “that it will be with honor to myself and family.”⁹³ Cause and comrades mattered for how men like Pettis constructed their will to combat. What also mattered as well was the soldier’s regard for his reputation, which he knew extended beyond his person to his family as well. This reputation the soldier was keen to protect from the suspicious and curious eyes of his letter-writing campmates. Enforcing and upholding the ideals of manly conduct, then, depended on the readiness of men to turn the “grape vine telegraph” on each other.

Minor failings like homesickness the soldiers could admit without serious damage to their public image. Soldiers like Shaner and Pettis used letters to refute rumors linking them to more serious social transgressions like drunkenness and gambling. As Shaner’s case shows, reputation mattered to the average white

⁹² George Henry Pettis to his wife Annie, 31 August 1863, George Henry Pettis Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁹³ Ibid 1 December 1862.

American male even before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter in 1861.⁹⁴ Lorri Glover contends that in the antebellum period elite white Southern men in particular “were obsessed with reputation.”⁹⁵ Lawrence Friedman points that a good reputation stems from perceived adherence to the social norms; he emphasizes the importance of perception, since in his words, “reputation...is what other people think of you. What they think of you is, obviously, a function of what they know about you or think they know about you.”⁹⁶ The contents of many soldiers’ letters, not surprisingly, usually spoke well of the individual and his unit’s performance in the cause of country, family, and duty. “Soldiers wanted to meet these expectations; they wanted to be able truthfully to write home that they had done their duty,” according to one historian.⁹⁷ In modern parlance, soldiers had a vested interest in their privacy settings and the newsfeed percolating through their social networks. Put another way, they sought to achieve mastery of both the deadly arts of warfare and the management of information.

“I Am Writing to All the Family”

Soldiers had various channels by which they could command a public audience eager for both general news and personal information from the front lines. To maintain their voice, presence, and even authority within their pre-war social networks, they wrote home two kinds of public letters. Some took it upon

⁹⁴ Lane 24.

⁹⁵ Glover 183.

⁹⁶ Friedman 1, 4.

⁹⁷ Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26.

themselves to act as unofficial reporters for their state and local newspapers.⁹⁸ These soldiers' letters, sometimes signed, sometimes left anonymous, were intended for publication and consumption by a general audience. As published, these journalistic reports contained little personal information but many details about the daily routines and battlefield tribulations of the regiment along with a bit of editorial commentary by the author. This form of public writing often cast the author and his unit in good light while keeping the home communities abreast of the latest developments at the war front. The steady traffic in news and letters between a regiment and its home community nurtured group solidarity and lifted morale. The letters published in foreign-language newspapers like the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* bolstered ethnic pride and sense of belonging.⁹⁹ Likewise, African-American recruits sent to national newspapers a stream of letters intended to publicize their regiments' contributions to saving the Union and advancing the twin goals of emancipation and racial equality.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ For an example, see Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, eds., *Anti-Rebel: The Civil War Letters of Wilbur Fisk, 1861-1865* (Croton-on-Hudson, NY: Emil Rosenblatt 1983). Fisk served four years in the 2nd Vermont, during which time he regularly sent letters to *The Green Mountain Freeman*.

⁹⁹ For an example, see Joseph R. Reinhart, trans. and ed., *Yankee Dutchmen under Fire: Civil War Letters from the 82nd Illinois Infantry* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013). The members of the predominantly German 82nd had their public letters published by the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, the leading German American newspaper in Illinois. Reinhart points out that "Anglo-American newspapers carried little or no information about" ethnic regiments in the Union army; hence, ethnic communities like the Germans had to rely on the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* in order to keep up on activities and campaigns of units like the 82nd. See Reinhart 3.

¹⁰⁰ A large collection of these letters appear in Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Eric L. Smith, ed., "the Civil War Letters of Quartermaster Sergeant John C. Brock, 43rd Regiment, United States Colored Troops," *Making and Remaking Pennsylvania's Civil War*, ed. William A. Blair and William Pencak (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 141-163.

Far more common, and far more consequential, were the public letters sent to friends and loved ones containing positive information about an individual or a unit's performance. Typical of many letters sent by soldiers, the letter of Samuel C. Kirkpatrick, of the 11th Wisconsin, to his family glowed with pride in his outfit. In regards to in the Arkansas theatre of operations, he wrote, "I must tell you about the boys from our neighborhood and the surround counties. The boys fro[m] our neighborhood seems to stand it about as well any of the boys in the Co."¹⁰¹ Though Kirkpatrick did not explicitly instruct his family to publicize this letter, his high praise for his mutual friends and acquaintances serving alongside no doubt made the rounds in his hometown. Indeed, epistles like Kirkpatrick's came with either explicit instructions or implied expectations that the letter or its contents circulate freely within the household and neighborhood. For example, George Antle, of the 63rd Ohio, made it clear to his wife Ellen: "I cant rite two [sic] all of you so you will have to pas[s] them around when you get one."¹⁰²

Confederate soldiers who owned slaves or who headed a farm or plantation worked by slaves regularly included their slaves in their epistolary addresses. Bob Hill, of the 22nd Texas, included inside one letter an explicit instruction for his sister back home in Texas in 1862, "[L]et this be read Generally to all white & black."¹⁰³ The white slave master, more than anyone else, could presume to command both his mail and his social inferiors. Both writing letters and fighting in the war reinforced

¹⁰¹ Samuel Cotter Kirkpatrick to his family, 22/23 July 1862, Samuel Cotter Kirkpatrick Letters, Library of Congress (hereinafter LC).

¹⁰² George Antle to Ellen Antle, undated letter (probably December 1861 or January 1862), George M. Antle Letters, OHS.

¹⁰³ Bob Hill to his sister Mary Scott, 16 June 1862, John W. Hill Papers; University of Texas at Austin, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (hereinafter DBC).

his presumptions and his claim to the supreme seat at the top of the social, economic, and political pyramid. Men like Hill insisted on their power to broadcast their epistolary authority to their social dependents and human property, and the presumption persisted even into the Confederacy's last days. One wealthy South Carolina planter, helping to hold off U. S. Grant's determined siege of Petersburg, told his wife in early 1865, "I will write a letter for you to read to the negroes at the proper time."¹⁰⁴

The planter's commandment suggests the public nature of written correspondence. Writes Henkin, "Despite the rhetoric surrounding intimate correspondence, letters were often written for larger audiences." Henkin even calls letters "promiscuous," since when they came addressed to a single person, the recipients circulated them through the network of kin and local community.¹⁰⁵ The men in uniform did the same as their civilian counterparts. As one Gilded Age chronicler put it, around the campfire the soldiers "would produce recent letters giving interesting information about mutual friends or acquaintances."¹⁰⁶ The social and epistolary norms meant that unless the writer specified otherwise, a personal letter would enter the public sphere and its information contents shared with the general public. Plus, conventions of epistolary composition, combined with a sincere desire to be remembered by the home folks, led many soldiers to close out their epistles with a stated wish that the recipient transmit the absent writer's

¹⁰⁴ John Bratton to his wife Bettie, 17 January 1865, John Bratton Letters; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Louis Round Wilson Library (hereinafter UNC).

¹⁰⁵ Henkin 103, 144, 151.

¹⁰⁶ John D. Billings, *Hard Tack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Old Sybrook, CT: Konecky and Konecky LLC, 1888; reprint, East Bridgewater, MA: J. G. Press, 2007), 68.

greetings to all friends, family members, acquaintances, and even slaves. One Rebel ended his letter with “Love to all – Howdy to the negroes.”¹⁰⁷

Even in the absence of any explicit instructions, a letter that opened with multiple salutations suggest the author intended the letter to pass through more than one pair of hands. The single salutation sometimes did prompt an explanation from the sender within the body of the letter. “This letter though addressed to you is to be considered written for the benefit of all,” wrote George Remley of the 22nd Iowa to his brother Howard, “and as Pa is equally anxious to hear from us, I would like for you to send it to him if he is not at home when you get it.”¹⁰⁸ Hiram M. Cash, serving with the 5th Maine, asked his parents, “Tell the boys and friends that I cannot get time to write to them separately so when I write a letter to any I mean the whole.”¹⁰⁹ The letters of Charles Callahan, a Confederate soldier, suggest that he corresponded regularly with numerous friends and family members during his term of service. Yet, as much as he desired receiving letters from individuals in his social network, he reminded them to treat his letters as communal property meant for group consumption: “I have written to all of them if not individually I have collectively.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Edwin Pinckney Becton to his wife, 5 February 1864, Edwin Pinckney Becton Papers, DBC.

¹⁰⁸ George Remley to Howard Remley, May 25, 1863 in Julie Holcomb, ed., *Southern Sons, Northern Soldiers: The Civil War Letters of the Remley Brothers, 22nd Iowa Infantry* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2004), 65.

¹⁰⁹ Hiram Cash to his parents, 27 July 1861, Hiram M. Cash Letters; University of Virginia, Special Collections Library (hereinafter UVA).

¹¹⁰ Charles Callahan to John Callahan, 25 September 1861, Callahan Family Letters; Tennessee Technical University, University Archives, Volpe Library (hereinafter TTU).

The circle of intimacy might extend beyond a romantic partner or even one's immediate blood relatives. Some soldiers included friends as well as family in their epistolary circle. Other soldiers clearly acknowledged that the group with whom one shared letters constituted "the family," which included wives, parents, siblings, and children. Confederate James B. Griffin explicitly acknowledged to his wife that she served as his conduit for dispersing news: "[I]n writing to you I consider that I am writing to all the family. For I know you give them what news I may communicate to you."¹¹¹ In a similar vein, William Henry Burbank, while deployed to North Carolina, wrote to his mother and siblings in Michigan: "I am sorry that I cannot write to the girls separately but I am somewhat contracted in time and also write for one as much as another." Burbank implored his siblings to treat his letters as addressed to the entire family, regardless of whose name appeared as the recipient.¹¹² His fellow Michigander, Henry Clarke Gilbert, likewise reminded his daughter to take no offense if she did not receive a letter addressed to her: "My letters are generally directed to Ma but they are just as much for you as if your name was at the head of them."¹¹³

Just as soldiers sought command of public broadcasting, so too did they demonstrate the will to cut off communications completely with certain members of their social networks. Before the war civilian correspondents believed that family ties should trump politics in defining the circle of family members to whom one

¹¹¹ James B. Griffin to Leila Griffin, 3 August 1861, James B. Griffin Family Papers, DBC.

¹¹² William Henry Burbank to his family, 19 January 1863, William Henry Burbank and Family Letters; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; William L. Clements Library (hereinafter UMCL).

¹¹³ Henry Gilbert Clarke to Grace Clarke, 3 November 1863, Gilbert Henry Clarke Letters, UMCL.

wrote. Just days after Lincoln's election in early November 1860, an indignant Elizabeth Horton of Alabama wrote to her cousin in Emma Barbour of Massachusetts and presciently declared, "The S-O-U-T-H will not have a 'Black Republican' for a ruler." Ironically, Horton's closing remarks expressed her desire that no upheaval, certainly not one as Lincoln's ascendancy to the presidency, could unravel the epistolary ties binding together the Horton-Barbour clan: "Write soon! I do not suppose that Politics can interfere with our correspondence; at least, I hope not."¹¹⁴ Arguably, Horton voiced the cherished desire held by countless families in the tense months before Fort Sumter that epistolary connections would remain immune from the nation's political crisis. Yet, as seen in the wartime testimonies of soldiers, the same passions that rendered the fabric of the Union also severed the channels of information that linked together members of Americans' far-flung social networks.

In the cauldron of sectional conflict correspondents could find themselves exiled from epistolary circles because of their political views. In some families, the politics of secession and slavery meant a deliberate and calculated policy of exclusion. A doctor before the war, William Vermilion enlisted as a lieutenant in the 36th Iowa. Staunch abolitionists, William and Mary Vermilion clashed with members of William's family who opposed emancipation. The rift carried into the epistolary realm. Although Vermillion and his wife corresponded regularly throughout the war, political differences led Vermilion to disown some family members. "I don't

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Horton to Emma Barbour, 15 November 1860, in Shirley Blotnick, *Emma's World: An Intimate Look at Lives Touched by the Civil War Era* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 1990), 54-55.

want anyone who is not [loyal] to ever read anything I write to my friends," he wrote his wife in mid-1863, and he vowed, "I will never write to John or Thom [his brothers], no never, unless they become loyal men, which I think will never occur."¹¹⁵ His letter of 30 August 1863 suggests that that his estranged family returned the sentiment: "Neither Thom, John, or father has ever written me a line since I came into the Service. They don't want to correspond with an Abolitionist I suppose."¹¹⁶ Likewise, Harvey Black, a surgeon with the 4th Virginia, did not take advantage of his short stay on Union soil during Robert E. Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in 1863 to send a letter to his Northern relatives. As he explained to his wife Mollie:

I did not write to my father's family while in Pa. as I intended. Somehow I dont feel much like corresponding until the war is over. I can only write under great restraint which is but little pleasure to me and but little comfort to them.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

For Yankees and rebels alike, writing and reading letters connected them to home and the networks of social contacts from the pre-war days. Letters, then, reminded Johnny Reb and Billy Yank not just of home but also of their civilian identities as autonomous individuals who answered to no master or superior. The

¹¹⁵ William Vermilion to Mary Vermilion, 24 May 1863, cited in Donald C. Elder III, ed., *Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 109.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, August 30, 1863, in Elder 211.

¹¹⁷ Harvey Black to Mollie Black, 19 July 1863, cited in Glenn L. McMullen, ed., *A Surgeon with Stonewall Jackson: The Civil War Letters of Dr. Harvey Black* (Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 1995), 57.

wartime writings of soldiers regularly contained testimonials to the joys they derived from the practice. “Oh the pleasure of writing to and receiving letters from home,” scribbled a Pennsylvania sergeant in his diary.¹¹⁸ “No other is a greater or better blessing than that of letter writing, to know that we can hear from those we cannot see,” proclaimed one member of the 25th Wisconsin to his beloved back at home.¹¹⁹

The costs and scarcity of epistolary materials, combined with the vagaries of the postal service and the conditions of military life, did set limits on how often and to whom soldiers could send their precious mail. Yet, these factors alone do not explain fully why Union and Confederate troops alike took pains to conscientiously and diligently demarcate the boundaries of their epistolary networks. The testimonial of Harvey Black reveals the complex set of emotions with which soldiers approached letter writing and maintaining their pre-war networks of social connections. Just as soldiers sought command of the mail, so too did they demonstrate the will to extend or cull their circle of epistolary intimacy. To write to and to hear from one’s family and friends was not entirely an unconscious act undertaken with little thought. For Black and many others like him, the pleasure of letter writing resulted as much from the correspondence itself as from the power to write at one’s discretion, that is, to write what one pleased and to whom one wills.

¹¹⁸ Alfred Thompson, diary entry of 25 May 1863, Jay Luvaas Collection, USAMHI. Thompson was a sergeant in the 49th Pennsylvania.

¹¹⁹ John F. Brobst to Mary Englesby, 2 June 1865, cited in Margaret Brobst Roth, ed., *Well Mary: Civil War Letters of a Wisconsin Volunteer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1960), 146-147.

Black servants of Confederate soldiers sometimes did prevail upon their masters to send messages on their behalf back to their still-enslaved loved ones on the plantation; slaves like Ann Valentine carried out clandestine correspondence behind their masters' back. Both acts showed agency on the part of Americans held in bondage. Yet, while the slaves in both cases had access to the mail, the mark of their enslavement was the utmost discretion with which they had to approach the mail in the face of social and legal constructs that denied them standing as autonomous epistolary agents. Thus, the ex-slaves who enlisted in the Union ranks, knew perhaps far better than their white comrades that even in an environment as restrictive as the military camp, the practice of letter writing represented one crucial arena where a man could exercise a measure of his rightful autonomy beyond the reach of any authority.

Chapter 2: Private Lives, Private Letters

“I Do Not Want Every Body to Know”

Lowly enlisted men and officers alike openly complained about the deficiencies of their fellow compatriots. Near the end of his second year with the 87th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment Private Jacob M. Herr sent home a missive in which he criticized his wealthy neighbors for avoiding the draft. “[T]hey are rich,” the bluecoat wrote, “and would sooner pay three hundred dollars than give one of their sons to try the hardships of a soldier.” Having freely spoken his mind, Herr urged his family to treat his complaint with discretion: “Please don’t show this letter [to] any person for there are things in [it] I do not want every body to know.”¹²⁰ Herr had to append this requirement because otherwise his family assumed that he wanted his letter, or the information content within, to circulate freely within the community. In another example, Robert W. Hamilton, a sergeant in the 124th Indiana also imposed a pact of silence on his readers. During the Atlanta campaign in the summer of 1864 the Hoosier sergeant directed frank criticism at his commanding officer:

The capt[ain] means well, and is well thought of as a man, but as a commander, but little confidence is placed in him....His health is very poor, and is entirely unable for military duty. This is confidential, of course....Well, I have said enough about our officers, as I always

¹²⁰ Jacob M. Herr to his father, 24 August 1863, Jacob M. Herr Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute (hereinafter USAMHI).

deemed it a poor piece of business for a soldier to complain about his Superiors.¹²¹

Like Private Herr, Sergeant Hamilton reminded his correspondent to uphold the confidentiality of the admission. Like millions of their fellow combatants, these two bluecoats had good reasons to mind what they said in their personal letters and what their recipients did with them.

Herr and Hamilton could write and had access to both writing materials and a national postal system. For the duration of their absence from home they could maintain epistolary connections with members of their pre-war social networks. During the war neither the Union nor Confederate militaries imposed any stringent censorship on the mail.¹²² Americans at both the front lines and the home front had full liberty to commit their thoughts to paper. Indeed, neither official orders nor even common sense managed to stop soldiers from divulging anything and everything - including sensitive military operations - to their selected correspondents. The act of writing, as scholars have argued, gave soldiers a powerful means for recording, understanding, and sharing their experiences in the

¹²¹ Robert W. Hamilton to his father, 9 August 1864, Robert W. Hamilton Correspondence, Indiana Historical Society. At the time, Hamilton held the rank of first sergeant in the 124th Indiana.

¹²² Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943), 210. See also Leslie E. Bliss, "Censors in the American Civil War," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (May 1943): 359-362 and Quintus Charles Wilson, "A Study and Evaluation of the Military Censorship in the Civil War," unpublished master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1945. Not surprisingly, POW letters were an exception. For example, Confederate authorities in charge of the Andersonville camp censored the letters of Union prisoners in order to keep the Northern public from learning of the wretched conditions of the camp. The first heavy censorship of American soldiers' letters did not occur until the early twentieth century during the First World War, according to Myron Fox. For more on military censorship, see Fox's interview with the Public Broadcasting Service, available online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/warletters-censorship/.

war. Yet, those same Americans conscientiously sought control over who had access to these epistolary confessions. As Frederick Lane contends in *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of our Most Contested Right*, “[T]he history of communicating over any distance is tightly woven with the history of efforts to keep such communications private.”¹²³

“For Home Consumption Only”

Scholars have offered contrasting views on the culture of privacy when it came to written correspondence. On the one hand, in *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* David M. Henkin contends that in the nineteenth century correspondents implicitly understood that their letters would pass from hand to hand.¹²⁴ Recipients honored epistolary privacy more in the breach than in the observance. On the other hand, William Decker, in *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications*, argues for “the generally confidential life a letter leads as a private autograph text.” Decker contends that writers in most cases intended their letters for consumption by a few intimates or a single person.¹²⁵ This chapter examines how soldiers conscientiously and diligently demarcated what information they wanted to remain private and the rationales and circumstances that steered letter writers towards secrecy in their correspondences. Put another way, privacy

¹²³ Frederick S. Lane, *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of our Most Contested Right* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 2.

¹²⁴ David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 103, 144, 151.

¹²⁵ William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6, 21.

controls were largely implicit and letter writers provided explicit instructions usually when there was some specific stimulus that generated concern or caution in the mind of the writer.

Indeed, unequivocal orders to maintain privacy abound in the letters of Civil War soldiers. Soldiers exerted a great deal of effort to impose ownership over information about themselves contained and transmitted in personal letters. “[I] dont Want you to let eny Body See this letter,” wrote John D. Shank, a member of the 125th Illinois, to his family.¹²⁶ The desire to hear all the news from home co-existed harmoniously with an understanding, spoken or unspoken, that personal letters stay confined to the sole recipient or a small circle of intimates. Daniel Thurber Nelson, a Union surgeon, operated under such a policy. In a letter to his wife in Massachusetts, he wrote, “You cannot imagine the eagerness with which we devour, yes that’s the word, newspapers and more especially letters.” Yet while the former “go the rounds,” the latter “are private food.”¹²⁷

Though letter sharing and gossiping were intrinsic features of the social communities of both the regimental camp and the civilian home front, this did not mean that all epistolary practitioners paid scant attention to the boundaries separating public from private. Daniel Thurber Nelson had a like-minded comrade in William H. Ball, a Union artilleryman from Wisconsin. Whereas Nelson deemed all personal letters private, Ball made the careful distinction between the public

¹²⁶ John D. Shank to his family, 18 January 1863, cited in Edna Hunter, ed. *One Flag, One Country, and Thirteen Greenbacks a Month* (San Diego, CA: Hunter Publications, 1980), 55.

¹²⁷ Daniel Thurber Nelson to his wife, 16 April 1865, Daniel Thurber Nelson Papers, VHS. At the time, Nelson was serving with the Union Army of the James in northern Virginia.

letters he sent to his home newspaper, *The Sentinel*, and the private letters he intended for his trusted confidants. As he explained to his sister:

I do not know whether you let any one read my letters or not, but as I think of it now I will tell you that I do not want anyone but you and Smith to read or hear read any of the letters I send you. There are none there who are particularly interested in me and the public will see enough of what I write through the medium of the *Sentinel*.¹²⁸

Ball felt able to compose a letter fit for the local newspaper to publish. In contrast, William Coleman, a South Carolina volunteer, lacked confidence in the quality of his literary craftsmanship. Perhaps he even deemed his thoughts too personal and revealing to expose to public inspection. Either way, he issued clear orders to restrict his epistles to his private circle of family and close friends. “You spoke of some one wanting my letter published, if you had consented I would not have write again, what I write is for your selves alone and I do not wish others to peruse my foolish letters,” wrote Coleman.¹²⁹ Robert Winn, a cavalryman from Kentucky, had faith in his epistolary prowess, but still, he posted at the top of one letter to his sister unequivocal instruction that explicitly demarcated the boundary of his epistolary circle: “For Home Consumption only.”¹³⁰ “It is for your information I write, not for

¹²⁸ William H. Ball to his sister Lib, 11 May 1863, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI. Ball began the letter on 11 May but continued into subsequent days; this quoted passage came from the section of the same letter dated 12 May. It was common practice to compose a letter over the course of several days or even weeks.

¹²⁹ William Coleman to his sister, 11 August 1861, William Coleman Papers, USC. Coleman’s lack of confidence persisted into his second year of service. In an undated letter, most likely from 1862, he sarcastically referred to “this elegant epistle” and promised his sister that “I will write again sooner and try and do better.”

¹³⁰ Robert Winn to his sister, 14 January 1862, Winn-Cook Family Papers, Filson Historical Society (hereinafter FHS).

any body else outside of the family,” he reminded her in a subsequent letter. “I will tell you who and what.”¹³¹

For most soldiers, however, the boundary separating private and public letters operated not so much as a sharp binary as a grey zone that soldiers transitioned back and forth over the course of a both a particular letter and a person’s time in the service. Even within the family social group, soldiers navigated the shifting boundaries between public and private letters. In an epistle addressed to “Mother Brother Sisters,” William Henry Burbank, then a young 24-year old from Michigan, asked his family to share his letters among themselves while upholding the pretense of private correspondence tailored to specific individuals:

I am sorry that I cannot write to the girls separately but I am somewhat contracted in time and also write for one as much as another so you must take it all as a private letter although I suppose Eva would appreciate a private letter the best. However tell her that I will write her another letter one of these days which she can have all to herself[.]¹³²

Of particular note, Burbank’s promise to satisfy his younger sister Eva with a letter solely for herself indicate that even adolescent children knew of the status conveyed by epistolary intimacy

The particular circumstances and an individual’s proclivities towards either privacy or sharing varied from writer to writer; plus, one soldier’s attitudes towards the safeguarding of his missals might very well change due his war experience. In one epistle, written in the spring of 1862 to his sister, George W. Landrum gave

¹³¹ Ibid., 24 February 1862.

¹³² William Henry Burbank to his family, 19 January 1863, Burbank Family Letters, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Clements Library.

permission to his sister to publish his writings in a local newspaper: “[A]nything you think worthy of the papers, put it in, remembering that what I write is only intended for home perusal, and probably would be interesting only to home friends.”¹³³

Landrum’s case was not exceptional; many soldiers took it upon as citizen-journalists who decided what news from the front was “interesting” or necessary for the civilian public to read.

Yet a soldier like Landrum could develop two minds when it came to how much exposure he permitted the contents of his letters. Perhaps like many of his comrades, Landrum reached a point when he decided to consciously shield the home front from the horrors he regularly witnessed on the battlefield. In the fall of 1862, this usually verbose soldier, once indifferent to his family sharing his letters with a public readership, had a change of heart after witnessing the carnage on the battlefield of Perryville: “I will not attempt to describe the horrible scenes I there witnessed – men with their heads shot off, and mangled in every possible manner.” The postscript injunction at the end of this particular letter reads, “This is only for the home folks to read.”¹³⁴ Landrum’s case suggest that far from automatically assigning categories to their letters and the information contents of such letters, soldiers gave careful thought to what they shared and what they kept private.

During the war, soldiers had access to multiple media that allowed them to articulate both private thoughts and public opinions. Each medium - regimental newspapers, open letters to newspapers, personal mail, and private diaries – had its

¹³³ George W. Landrum to his sister Amanda, 23 April 1862, George W. Landrum letters, OHS.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 October 1862.

own measure of private access and public disclosure. Sometimes very sensitive information circulated through these channels of communication; not surprisingly, soldiers had good reasons to seek some measure of control over who in their social networks had access to their personal information. Herbert George of the 10th Vermont wisely ordered his parents to refrain from making public his despondency with the Union's military fortunes. When much touted Union offensives against Atlanta and Richmond stalled amidst horrific bloodshed in the summer of 1864, George vented his frustrations onto paper. "The prospects are not very bright for soldiers & a good many are despondent & faithless," he wrote. "Grant is wearing his army all out." Yet because Union soldiers equated the pro-Southern sympathies of Northern Copperheads with treason and an abdication of manly patriotism, George explicitly reminded his parents to protect his public standing: "don't show this letter to any body" lest the friends and neighbors "will think I am a Copper head!"¹³⁵

George's explicit injunction and the implicit trust he placed in his parents suggest that he knew that no guarantee of privacy applied once a letter left the hand of its creator. "Once those thoughts are expressed externally in any fashion –

¹³⁵ Herbert George to his parents, 24 July 1864, cited in James G. Davis, ed. *"Bully for the Band!" The Civil War Letters and Diary of Four Brothers in the 10th Vermont Infantry Band: Charles George, Herbert George, Jere George, and Osman George* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2012), 175. George had good reason to avoid any association with Copperheads. Though Union soldiers had varying opinions on both emancipation and the war aims of the North, one Iowan officer captured the general view of Copperheads when he wrote, "I am surprised to think that so many of them are allowed to live. I am in favor of treating them as you would the natural Snake, that is to kill them." See David James Palmer to his parents, 23 March 1863, David James Palmer Papers, University of Iowa, Iowa City; Special Collections Library (hereinafter UISC). The early months of 1863, according to Kenneth W. Noe, marked the high tide of Copperheadism in the Midwest. See Noe's "'The Conservative': A Civil War Soldier's Musical Condemnation of Illinois Copperheads," *Illinois Historical Journal* 84, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 268.

speech, diary, letter, telephone conversation, e-mail, instant message – our ability to control the spread of information is diminished by varying degrees, “ Lane says in *American Privacy*. “As a general rule, the farther away the recipient is from us, the more difficult it is to control the privacy of the conversation.”¹³⁶ In other words, wartime correspondents, soldiers and civilians alike, had little control over who had access to the letters even if the letters reached safely the intended recipient. As Henkin points out, “[T]heir letters, once posted, lay beyond their control and often circulated outside the one-to-one relationship that the form of the sealed epistle seemed to imply.”¹³⁷ One Confederate soldier boasted that his superior officer “lets me read all the letters that he gets from his Mother and she writes a splendid letter.”¹³⁸ Whether the major’s mother ever discovered her son’s openness with her correspondence, or whether she reacted with disapproval or appreciation, remains a mystery. In contrast, a Confederate lieutenant had harsh words not only for the content of the letters the men shared around the camp but also for the disloyalty shown to the Confederate nation by these men’s wives: “I have seen & am constantly seeing the most desponding & patriotism killing letters imaginable, written by women to their husbands in this co. or Reg. generally.”¹³⁹

Not all persons at home showed care and prudence when it came to disseminating the contents of soldiers’ letters. When Union fortunes sunk precipitously after the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg in early December 1862,

¹³⁶ Lane, 2.

¹³⁷ Henkin, 105.

¹³⁸ Bob Hill to his sister Mary, 5 March 1863, John W. Hill papers, DBC.

¹³⁹ Joshua Calloway to Dulcinea Calloway, 19 June 1862, cited in Judith Lee Hallock, ed. *The Civil War Letters of Joshua K. Calloway* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 33.

Charles Brewster let loose his frustrations; “[I]t is a soldiers privilege to grumble,” he penned. Yet he admonished his sister Mary to “be careful what you show and what you quote of my letters, as it all comes back to the Regiment.” His criticism of the Union war effort apparently became public knowledge, for he now had “a letter shown me the other day wherein it said ‘Charlie Brewster writes that the soldiers curse the government the Stars + Stripes’ which was all true at the time and probably will be gain when we come to some particularly hard service.” “It is not pleasant to have these sayings come back to a fellow,” Brewster concluded, having learned firsthand how his private opinions, once put down on paper and sent home, became publicly known among his social acquaintances, much to his consternation.¹⁴⁰ The surviving records do not reveal what punishment Brewster imposed on his sister for her lack of discretion.

A year earlier, in 1861, Brewster still trusted his sister. “I have written this letter partly to you and partly to Mother and I do not suppose it makes much difference who it is directed to as it is for all of you,” he wrote to her soon after his regiment arrived in Washington D.C. Interestingly, his letter, one of the first of many that he sent during his three-year enlistment, ended with a postscript, “[O]f course you will not read or show this letter to anyone,” by which he meant anyone outside his family.¹⁴¹ Home front morale, in this case, trumped a soldier’s privacy, for Brewster’s letters appeared in the local newspaper, a common practice during the

¹⁴⁰ Charles Brewster to Mary Brewster, 31 December 1862, cited in David Blight, ed., *When This Cruel War Is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 207.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1861, cited in Blight, 44.

war.¹⁴² Upon hearing that his family made his letters public, Brewster threatened, perhaps facetiously, to cut off all communications: “Don’t you forget that you will get no more letters from me if you publish any more of mine.”¹⁴³

“I Had a Brother in the Same Co.”

Regardless of why Brewster’s sister had his letter published in the local newspaper, the public readership no doubt had a vested interest in the welfare of Brewster’s regiment and its members. Many of Brewster’s comrades came from his hometown, and his neighbors most likely sought to glean his letter for news of their loved ones. Brewster’s case demonstrates that the demographic homogeneity of most regiments reinforced the norm of information sharing which, while having its positive aspects, also made privacy harder to attain for the individual soldier. Both Washington D.C. and Richmond left recruitment largely in the hands of state and local authorities. Regiments often contained recruits from the same family, ethnicity, neighborhood, village, county, and state.¹⁴⁴ Social networks within the

¹⁴² McPherson 80. For examples of ethnic German soldiers in the Union army having their letters published in German-language newspapers throughout the North, see Joseph R. Reinhart’s *A German Hurrah!: Civil War Letters of Friedrich Bertsch and Wilhelm Stängel, 9th Ohio Infantry* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2010). Reinhart argues that the German American press, by linking German-Americans soldiers to their home communities, fostered their sense of ethnic consciousness. See Reinhart 2.

¹⁴³ Charles Brewster to his mother, 26 June 1862, cited in Blight 163.

¹⁴⁴ For example, the 10th Michigan Volunteers drew its members entirely from the town of Flint; the town mayor, not surprisingly, served as their regimental commander. Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 49-50. Joseph R Reinhart estimates that of the 200,000 native Germans who fought in the Union forces, 36,000 of them fought in entirely ethnic German regiments. See Reinhart, ed., *A German Hurrah!*, 1. Overall, foreign-born recruits made up a quarter of the Union forces. The Union high command had a strong incentive to support ethnic regiments; such regiments rallied the North’s large and diverse immigrant groups to the Union banner,

camps operated as extensions of their civilian home communities. Writes Robert E. Bonner in *The Soldier's Pen*, "Most companies consisted of neighbors who were intent on gossiping through the mail about what was going on both at home and in the camp."¹⁴⁵

For many a recruit and volunteer, particularly those who enlisted in the early years of the war, military life brought new faces and new places into his worldview. Yet, within the regimental and company units, familiar faces from his pre-war civilian life abounded. "I am finding old acquaintances here nearly every hour," reported one volunteer with the 51st Georgia soon after his unit's arrival in Virginia.¹⁴⁶ Logistical necessity, local tradition, and political considerations compelled Richmond and Washington to delegate to local and state governments the task of raising the hosts of armed men needed for the sectional conflict. The decentralized approach to mobilizing vast armies, in turn, often produced regiments that had a high degree of homogeneity in ethnic, occupational, or geographic composition.¹⁴⁷ For example, the sons of New York's prosperous merchants and

and on a practical level, linguistically homogenous units allowed non-English speaking volunteers to serve alongside officers and comrades who spoke the same language. See Reinhart, ed., *Yankee Dutchman Under Fire*, 1. See also Ella Lonn's two seminal works on the subject, *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940) and *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). For a more recent work, see William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ Bonner 25, 28-29. See also Mitchell, *Chair*, 21, 27; Bannet, 12-13; Henkin, 103, 144.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Henry Brooks to his wife, 27 July 1862, cited in Katherine S. Holland, ed., *Keep All My Letters: The Civil War Letters of Richard Henry Brooks, 51st Georgia Infantry* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 36.

¹⁴⁷ In antebellum America, Daniel Walker Howe writes, "most people thought of themselves as members of a local community. They usually lived in communities with others of their own background." Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

professional classes made up most of the 7th New York.¹⁴⁸ In his study of combat motivation during the Civil War, James M. McPherson points out that most members of a volunteer company often “enlisted from the same community or county.”¹⁴⁹ In one noteworthy case, 104 of the 109 men in one Alabama company listed Ireland as their place of birth.¹⁵⁰ For another historian, the regiments operated as “extensions of the communities from which they sprang.”¹⁵¹ The 10th Michigan exemplified how regiments could be carved wholesale from the social fabric of single locale; volunteers from Flint filled the entire ranks of the 10th, with the town mayor and doctor serving as the regimental colonel and surgeon, respectively.¹⁵²

Not surprisingly, a regiment or company often contained multiple members of one family. Freeman Osburn and at least four members of his extended family

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin W. Bacon, *Sinews of War: How Technology, Industry, and Transportation Won the Civil War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1997), 7. One of the first state militias to answer Lincoln’s call for volunteers to put down the rebellion, the 7th New York arrived in Washington D.C. in late April 1861.

¹⁴⁹ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80; Reid Mitchell made same point earlier in *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Experiences* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 19. Kenneth Noe points out that regiments from rural regions, in turn, often comprised of companies drawn from several adjacent counties in the same state. Email correspondence 26 March 2014. Major urban areas like New York City or Richmond produced regiments comprised almost entirely of men from within the city limits.

¹⁵⁰ Wiley, *Johnny Reb*, 323.

¹⁵¹ Keith P. Wilson, *Campfire Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 110.

¹⁵² Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred C. Knopf, 1990), 50. Peter S. Bearman points out that the “tightly localist social organization of the army” constituted both a blessing and a curse. Localism “induced mass mobilization in response to powerful community sentiments” but “led to desertion as the impact of fighting a losing war began to be experienced at home and on the front.” See Bearman, “Desertion as Localism: Army Unit Solidarity and Group Norms in the U.S. Civil War,” *Social Forces* 70, no. 2 (December 1991): 340.

served together in Company D of the 102nd Ohio.¹⁵³ A letter written by Thomas O. Nickerson, a corporal in the 3rd Rhode Island, captured perfectly the phenomenon:

[I] had a Brother in the same Co. also one in the second R.I. Regt. and three cousins....then I came home and took my Father and two of my Brothers and came out in the Co. which I am now present. i have also got a Brother in law and a cousin in the same Co.¹⁵⁴

While encamped in winter quarters with the 1st Michigan Light Artillery Regiment, Marshall M. Miller described a scene that would have struck many a Civil War soldier as familiar.

“Well the next thing was to write our homes a letter and some are writing on a board and some on their knapsacks and some lying down on their busoms [sic]. It is a rather interesting sight to see them assure you.

There is 5 to 15 in each tent now writing to the old folks at home and some that are not so old.”¹⁵⁵

Miller’s words reveal two wartime experiences that nearly every soldier knew well. One, writing and reading letters constituted a pervasive camp occupation. Indeed, reading materials, of any kind, provided welcomed relief from both the monotony of camp life and the horrors of the battlefield. Two, the very nature of military life made personal space a precious luxury. Access to spatial privacy, not surprisingly, mirrored the distribution of privileges within the hierarchy of the military command. Only the senior officers had tents or cabins to themselves; most troops

¹⁵³ Osburn Family Letters, Illinois History and Lincoln Collections; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas O. Nickerson letter of January 19, 1862, quoted in Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, eds. *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 29

¹⁵⁵ Marshall M. Miller to his wife Caroline, date unknown, Marshall M. Miller Letters, LC. Given what Miller described in this letter, and his location as Louisville, Kentucky, he probably composed this piece during January/February 1862.

shared their daily space – whether tent, cabin, barracks, prison, or trench - with masses of other men.¹⁵⁶

In a roundabout fashion, the soldiers of the Civil War experienced the social life of their forebears in the days of the Founders. In the compact towns and villages of the colonial era, the line between public and private barely existed; neighbors kept a close eye on each other, and news and information spread quickly through social circles.¹⁵⁷ For the average Yankee or rebel, the social composition of the regiment meant that he lived most of his hours and days under the (mostly) benign surveillance of people familiar with him and his family from the pre-war days. In the nineteenth century, according to Katherine Adams, the literary and legal discourse on privacy was driven in part by the “fear of being owned,” that is, losing ownership over oneself due to unsolicited and involuntary exposure to the public

¹⁵⁶ One Union lieutenant, encamped with the 3rd New York in New York City, described the typical housing arrangement as such: “Four boys are quartered in each tent, the Capt. has a tent, and the two Lieuts. have one together.” Willoughby M. Babcock Jr. letter of 21 May 1861, *Selections from the Letters and Diaries of Brevet Brigadier General Willoughby Babcock of the Seventy-Fifth New York Volunteers* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1922), 18.

¹⁵⁷ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 3. For a specific study, see David H. Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972). John Demos points out that the colonial homes of both rich and poor placed little emphasis on creating private space for their occupants. See Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 46-48. Similar points are made in Howe 32; see also Priscilla Brewer’s *From Fireplace to Cookstove: Technology and the Domestic Ideal in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) and Jack Larkin’s *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). The scholarship offers contrasting interpretations of the relationship between privacy and social bonding in American society. Lane argues that since the colonial days “Americans had deemed personal privacy as integral to necessary quality of both communal living and a broader sense of personal freedom” while Dubbert points out that in the antebellum period the gains in individual privacy came at the cost of decreased “sociability and a sense of community participation.” See Lane 1 and Dubbert 14.

eye.¹⁵⁸ Hence, Civil War soldiers surrendered ownership of their private lives to a social environment from which chances to escape were few and far in between. As another scholar has written, “If privacy is viewed as a boundary between and individual and all other individuals, it is partly dependent on physical isolation.”¹⁵⁹ The military environment offered the common soldier neither the physical nor social space where he could isolate himself from the thousands of fellow comrades who made up the regiments and armies. The military camp and its denizens simply did not heed one’s “right to be let alone.”¹⁶⁰ When carrying out any activity, a man had his comrades, often his childhood friends and neighbors, in the immediate space looking over his shoulder. Since both letter writing and mail distribution took place in full view of one’s comrades, the troops not surprisingly came to know each other’s writing habits and the quantity of mail each person received. “You women measure your husbands love by the number & length of their letters of their letters,” wrote Elisha F. Paxton, of the 27th Virginia, to tease his wife Linnie. “If so tell Annie Lewis that Will is the most affectionate husband in the Camp.”¹⁶¹

“Through the Hands of a Friend”

Surprisingly, women soldiers who concealed their identity did not have far more explicit privacy controls over their correspondence, despite the absolutely

¹⁵⁸ Katherine Adams, *Owning Up: Privacy, Privacy, and Belonging in U.S. Women’s Life Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Priscilla M. Regan, *Legislating Privacy: Technology, Social Values, and Public Policy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 43.

¹⁶⁰ This famous phrase entered the legal and cultural language in Warren and Brandeis’ 1890 *Harvard Law Review* article, “The Right to Privacy.”

¹⁶¹ Elisha Franklin Paxton to Linnie Paxton, 4 May 1861, Elisha Franklin Paxton Letters, UVA.

vital need to avoid detection. To be sure, the hundreds of women who disguised themselves as men to fight in the war had to hide their biological identity on a daily basis, even while they, like their male counterparts, wanted to hear from home. One of the most fascinating collections of Civil War letters originated from the hand of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, a young woman from rural New York. In 1863, at the age of nineteen, she signed up with the 153rd New York under the alias “Lyons Wakeman.”¹⁶² Wakeman fell into the category described by one Union veteran as “those not so fortunate as to have enlisted with acquaintances, or to be near them in the army.”¹⁶³ For Wakeman, this apparent misfortune enabled her to find gainful employment in the army while serving her country at the same time. Her ruse worked in part because apparently no one in the regiment recognized her from the pre-war days, as suggested by one letter she wrote to her parents:

¹⁶² Mary Livermore, a Sanitary Commission agent, claimed in her 1888 memoir that some four hundred women served as soldiers in the Civil War. Deanne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook’s recent work, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) examines some 250 known cases for which reliable evidence exists. Since many wartime letters and papers have been lost and not all female soldiers kept or even produced any material records of their service, the actual number of women who served in the Civil War must stand considerably higher than 250. Scholars like James M. McPherson and Earl J. Hess also put the figure in the hundreds. See Hess, “‘Tell Me What the Sensations Are’: The Northern Home Front Learns about Combat,” in *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 141. For more on female Civil War soldiers, see Elizabeth D. Leonard’s *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York: Norton, 1999), and Richard H. Hall’s two books, *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War* (New York: Paragon House, 1993) and *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (University Press of Kansas, 2006). For a general survey of women soldiers in the early modern era, see John A. Lynn’s *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For the experience of female combatants in early nineteenth century warfare, see Thomas Cardoza, *Intrepid Woman: Cantinières and Vivandières of the French Army* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010) and Charles J. Esdaile, *Women in the Peninsula War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), chapter 4.

¹⁶³ Billings, 69.

I have been gone one year and I haven't Seen a man nor a woman that I ever seen before I left home. I have been along with entire strangers to me. Don't you think that I have Stood it well?¹⁶⁴

Wakeman's family reciprocated her letters, though understandably they must have felt some trepidation at the possibility that doing so would blow her cover. In November 1862 she reassured her father that "you needn't be a feard to write any[thing] prisye [private] to me for I can read all you can write." "I suppose you thought that I would have to get Somebody to read it for me but I read it all my self," she insisted.¹⁶⁵ Like the vast majority of soldiers on both sides of the conflict, Wakeman wrote and read letters on her own. She wrote at an elementary level, often spelling her words phonetically, which suggest she had only a few years of formal schooling in her childhood. Still, the historical value of Wakeman's surviving letters should not be underestimated. As Thomas Cardoza has pointed out in his study of women in the armies of the French Revolution, before 1850 few females serving in and with French military formations were literate; high rates of illiteracy among commoners and a social culture that discourage the writing and publishing of memoirs have put up formidable barriers to giving full due to women's

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Rosetta Wakeman to her parents, 20 September 1863, cited in Lauren Cook Burgess, ed., *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1864* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 47. Elizabeth D. Leonard points to the various other factors that allowed disguised female soldiers to avoid disclosure. To give one example, even though women such as Wakeman lived every day in close proximity with hundreds of men, camp life still "allowed for sufficient freedom of movement to enable women soldiers to avoid notice when bathing and dealing with other personal matters." See Leonard 199-213.

¹⁶⁵ Wakeman to her father, 24 November 1862, cited in Burgess 19.

experiences and their vital role in the functions and operations of military forces in the modern period.¹⁶⁶

Wakeman's letters, valuable as they are, show that even poor and working class people like herself consciously mimicked the epistolary rhetoric and compositional styles of their better-educated superiors. Even more significant, her letters suggest that the female teenager from New York competently and contently carried out her duties as a professional soldier. For Wakeman herself, the most critical value of her literacy was that it rendered her a measure of epistolary independence; she possessed the ability to shield her correspondence and to assert ownership over her private thoughts committed to paper. Sandra Petronio points out that privacy is instrumental to our sense of individuality. "Privacy," she writes, "has importance for us because it lets us feel separate from others."¹⁶⁷ Wakeman's unusual case proves how the power of literacy gave her the best of both worlds; on paper she remained true to her gender and individualism, while in public she remained inseparable, that is, undetectable, from her comrades.

Henkin considers the "mass military correspondence" typified by Wakeman's epistolary output as a novel characteristic of the Civil War.¹⁶⁸ Despite her working class background, Wakeman's letters suggest she had a rudimentary formal education, but one sufficient to endow her with a communicable literacy. That the young woman grew up in the North and not the South no doubt helps account for

¹⁶⁶ Cardoza, 3-4.

¹⁶⁷ Sandra Petronio, *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁶⁸ Henken 138.

this fortunate outcome. According to Nina Silber, “In 1850, the white population in the northern states was more than double what it was in the slaveholding South, yet these states had more than three times as many public schools and twenty times as many public libraries.” Not surprisingly, Southern whites had illiteracy rates of over 7 percent, compared to 2 percent for Northern whites.¹⁶⁹ Wiley estimated that in a typical Confederate company of 80 to 100 men, one could expect to find 1 to 20 illiterates; in a typical Union regiment of 800 to 1000 men, one could expect to find no more than 6 illiterates.¹⁷⁰ Still, within modern era Civil War soldiers compare quite favorably with those of European counterparts.¹⁷¹ Paul Kennedy points out that as late as World War One, the illiteracy rates of recruits stood at 33 percent in Italy 33 percent, 22 percent in Austria-Hungary, and 7 percent in France.¹⁷²

Yet despite the prevalence of literacy in the Civil War armies, the various misfortunes of war curtailed the ability of many soldiers to read and write their own messages, and by extension, their capacity to control who had access to their private thoughts. Like their illiterate comrades, soldiers rendered incapacitated due to

¹⁶⁹ Silber and Sievens 25. McPherson cites slightly different numbers. In 1860, the free states had a 94 percent literacy rate, compared to 84 percent for slave states; the Southern slave population had an estimated literacy rate of about 10 percent. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Coming of War*, vol. 1. 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 28.

¹⁷⁰ Bell Irvin Wiley, “Johnny Reb and Billy Yank Compared,” *American History Illustrated* 3 (1968): 4-9, 44-47. On paper, a Civil War infantry company had about 100 soldiers; a regiment, comprised of eight or more companies, had about 800 to 1100 soldiers. In reality, few units ever went into battle at full paper strength. A typical mid-war regiment mustered about 300 to 500 men for action.

¹⁷¹ At mid-century, European literacy rates varied significantly between and within countries. Sweden led the way with 90 percent while the Russia Empire had a dismal 5-10 percent. Queen Victoria’s Scottish subjects (80 percent) had a higher rate than her English (60-70 percent). Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*, 3rd edition (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 111.

¹⁷² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 210.

sickness or injury could participate in the culture of letter writing, albeit at the expense of privacy. Friends, campmates, superior officers, chaplains, and hospital nurses, and even prostitutes acted as intermediaries.¹⁷³ Cornelia Hancock, a twenty-three year nurse, arrived at Gettysburg in early July 1863 to care for the wounded from the recent battle. Her duties extended beyond tending to injuries, as she recounted in her memoir: "I went from one pallet to another with pencil, paper, and stamps in hand, and spent the rest of the night in writing letters from the soldiers to their families and friends. To many mothers, sisters, and wives I penned the last message of those who were soon to become the 'beloved dead.'"¹⁷⁴ Both the illiterates and the incapacitated were disadvantaged minorities within the Civil War armies; both groups had to forgo privacy in order to have a letter either read to them or written on their behalf.¹⁷⁵

The wounded and dying men at Gettysburg received free from Hancock her epistolary services. In other cases, the men had to pay. Two summers later, the Army of the Potomac began the nine-month Siege of Petersburg. The tiny port of

¹⁷³ Wiley, *Johnny Reb* 207. See also William C. Davis, *The Fighting Men of the Civil War* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 139. The practice of asking close members one's social network or hiring professionals to act intermediaries in epistolary communications had antecedents in early modern Europe and continued into the nineteenth century, even after the poor and working classes had entered en mass into the ranks of the literate. See Briggs and Burke 23, 131. See also Roger Chartier, "Introduction," Alain Boureau, Roger Chartier, and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12-14.

¹⁷⁴ Henrietta Stratton Jacquette, ed., *Letters of a Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock, 1863-1865* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1998), 4.

¹⁷⁵ Of course, the two categories are neither mutually exclusive nor immutable. Casualty lists included illiterate and literate soldiers alike. Illiterate men did learn to read and write, while literate soldiers, when rendered sick and injured, required the assistance of an intermediary.

City Point, situated on a site overlooking both the James and Appomattox Rivers, became the Union army's headquarters and its main logistics center. Not surprisingly, the bustling town became a hub of prostitution whose practitioners made more than just sex available to the soldiers. As one young worker in the Sanitary Commission reported to his father in late 1864:

Though between pay periods, it is said that they will take their time and do many special things and charge accordingly. Some of these hussies, during their indisposed periods, sell their services to the men to write letters for them to their loved ones at home. How foul. A mother, wife or sweetheart receiving a mistle [sic] penned by these soiled hands.¹⁷⁶

For most illiterate or incapacitated soldiers, assistance with writing or reading letters did not require a trip to the brothel. Within the military units, the presence and willingness of one literate soldier opened up the world of epistolary correspondence to all those in his immediate circle. "Isaac Percy does all my writing for me as we are in the same mess together," went one of many letter received by the family of David Douglass, a soldier in the 79th Indiana. "And he has to write for about half of the mess. And it keeps him busy."¹⁷⁷

Few slaves could read or write; the law in many Southern jurisdictions actually forbade the teaching of literacy to slaves or their employment as mail carriers.¹⁷⁸ Hence, slaves had no choice but to depend on others, usually their

¹⁷⁶ Cited in Thomas P. Lowry, *The Stories the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 29.

¹⁷⁷ David Douglass to Margaret Douglass, 9 December 1862, David Douglass Letters, LC.

¹⁷⁸ In his history of the post office in the Early Republic Wesley Everett Rich noted that in many parts of the South African-American slaves worked as riders. The fear that black postal carriers "might gain knowledge which would make them dangerous to the white people" led to the Post

masters, to act as epistolary intermediaries. Wealthy Confederate soldiers frequently brought along an able-bodied slave; assigning a slave to the domestic chores of cleaning and cooking not only showcased the social status of the master but also spared him from performing vital tasks deemed fit only for women or servants.¹⁷⁹ Though separated from their slave community back on the plantation, these camp servants still found ways, however truncated, to communicate through the mail. Anderson “Ance,” regularly sent messages to his slave family and friends by asking his master, James Barr, a private in the 5th South Carolina Cavalry, to compose a few lines that would accompany Barr’s letters to his wife. One such letter from Barr read, “I must now write a few lines for Ance as he is here asking me to write for him...He wants to know how his wife is.”¹⁸⁰

Former slaves who entered the Union camps either as military recruits or as contraband workers had a powerful incentive to master reading and writing.¹⁸¹

Office law of 1802 which forbade the use of any but a free white person as a mail carrier. See Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 95-96. According to Patricia W. Romero and Willie Lee Rose, “Occasionally a slave child would be taught the rudiments of reading or writing by his master on the plantation, but the laws forbidding the education of blacks were strictly obeyed otherwise.” See Susie King Taylor, *A Black Woman’s Civil War Memoirs: Reminiscences of My Life*, ed. Patricia W. Romero and Willie Lee Rose (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1988) fn. 1, 35.

¹⁷⁹ Broomall 287, 298. The stigmatization of “female” labor also applied to sailing ships in the early American period. See Brian J. Rouleau, “Dead Men Do Tell Tales: Folklore, Fraternity, and the Forecastle,” *Early American Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 46.

¹⁸⁰ James Barr to Rebecca Barr, 15 March 1863, cited in Thomas D. May, ed., *Let Us Meet in Heaven: The Civil War Letters of James Michael Barr, 5th South Carolina Cavalry* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2001) 60. Robert S. Starobin’s edited work, *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: Viewpoints, 1974) sheds light on the methodological problems associated with letters by African-American slaves. Starobin points out that literate whites acted as epistolary intermediaries for slaves, though not surprisingly, slaves like Ance had to exercise caution in what they asked their white masters to put down on paper.

¹⁸¹ On literacy rates among black soldiers, see Joseph Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle, The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 72, 101, 178,

Literacy, for them even more so than for free whites, constituted the mark of personal freedom and autonomy. John Boston, a Maryland fugitive slave who had found freedom with the “14th Regiment New York State militia,” then encamped in Upton Hill, Virginia, sent a joyful note to his wife informing her that “this Day i Adress you thank god as a free man...I am free from al the Slavers Lash.”¹⁸² As Keith P. Wilson points out in *Campfires of Freedom*, black soldiers, three-quarters of them ex-slaves, acquired some degree of literacy in the regimental camps; still, most remained functionally illiterate at the end of the war in spite of their military experience.¹⁸³

Yet, the high rates of illiteracy within black Union regiments did not constitute an insurmountable barrier to participation in the culture of letter writing and information sharing. Religious men themselves, black soldiers often trusted a

227-228; and Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Howard, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. 2, *The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 613. Wiley calls black soldiers the “most numerous and eager pursuers of learning” in the camps. See Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952; reprint, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 157.

According to Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, many black soldiers, over three-quarters of them ex-slaves, were illiterate farm workers when they entered the army. See Costa and Kahn, “Forging a New Identity: The Costs and Benefits of Diversity in Civil War Combat Units for Black Slaves and Freemen,” *The Journal of Economic History* 66, no. 4 (December 2006): 936. Susie King Taylor, born in Georgia in 1848, found herself one of the first slaves liberated when Union forces seized the coastal islands off Savannah in the spring of 1862. Unusual for a slave, Taylor in her childhood had received permission to learn to read and write. As a free “contraband” fourteen-years old, she recalled, “I taught a great many of the comrades in Company E to read and write, when they were off duty. Nearly all were anxious to learn.” See Taylor 52. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the commanders of the first black Union regiment, also testified to the eagerness of ex-slaves to acquire literacy in his postwar memoir, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, first published 1869. Higginson also wrote the introduction to Taylor’s memoir, published in 1902

¹⁸² John Boston to his wife, 12 January 1862. Cited in Ira Berlin, et. al. eds. *Freedom: A Documentary of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Series 1, Volume 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 357.

¹⁸³ Wilson 104.

man of faith to carry out the task.¹⁸⁴ Chaplain John R. Reasoner of the 119th Colored Infantry claimed that in the month of November alone he “wrote 150 letters for the Soldiers to their families, and friends.”¹⁸⁵ Most importantly, unlike their counterparts still held in bondage, African-American soldiers could partake of epistolary communications without having to self-censor their thoughts or asking leave of their owners. Like Wakeman’s transgression, the attempts by black soldiers to become masters of their own epistolary communications amounted to a bold challenge to the antebellum social order.

Among black soldiers, as among their white comrades, those who possessed literacy had an asset in high demand by their illiterate peers. Though the common practice of “mediated literacy” expanded the social network of epistolary correspondence for both whites and blacks, free and enslaved alike, the use of an intermediary guaranteed that a third party would know the letter’s contents from inception. Put another way, the ability to read and write created an unofficial hierarchy of sorts within the ranks. Literacy acted as a gatekeeper to the largely middle-class notion of personal privacy and respectability. Orrin S. Allen, of the 112th New York, reassured his wife Francis that while he did favors for his fellow soldiers who could not read their mail, his own literacy allowed him to keep her letters all to himself: “I read a good many of the letters coming to soldiers...a favor

¹⁸⁴ For more on the religious life of Civil War soldiers, see Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and Steven E. Woodworth, *While God Is Marching on: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

¹⁸⁵ Cited in Wilson 82. For another example of Union officers writing letters for black recruits, see Charles Brewster letter of 27 October 1864, cited in Blight 335.

by the way...In which I never reciprocate.”¹⁸⁶ Yet, the fortunes of war could force a role reversal, since the wounded and injured soldier, whatever his race, lost a key privilege of a literate (and healthy) person. Allen himself had to rely on intermediary after he sustained a wound during the Battle of New Market Heights in the fall of 1864. His letter from the hospital began thusly, “Through the hands of a friend I will now inform you of my present condition. Day before yesterday I was injured by a shell.”¹⁸⁷

Conclusion

Civil War soldiers paid due diligence to what they committed to writing paper, who had access to those writings, and what information about themselves circulated through their social networks. As Sarah Wakeman and Orrin S. Allen knew all too well, the ability to read and write one’s own letters proved the crucial initial element in the management and maintenance of one’s epistolary privacy. Yet, ownership of literacy did not necessarily translate into ownership of other rights associated with personal liberty. A literate slave could read and write without the assistance of an intermediary, but the slave could not stake a claim to privacy, as ownership by another human precluded the possibility of the slave having a personal sphere deemed inviolable and sacrosanct by law and custom. Likewise, an illiterate black Union soldier, though in need of an epistolary privacy, exercised autonomy in when and with whom he choose to correspond.

¹⁸⁶ Orrin Sweet Allen to Francis “Frank” Allen, 18 January 1863, Orrin Sweet Allen Papers, VHS.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 October 1864.

Control of information about oneself was propped up by cultural norms or by legal statutes. Together, the various forms of ownership created a somewhat loose but palpable hierarchy of privilege and status in American society. An individual's access to privacy, spatial and epistolary, could and did change depending on circumstances. Revolutionary in its nature and consequences, the Civil War had both a leveling and disruptive impact on the distribution of privacy. Enlistment meant the loss of personal space and autonomy, but promotion to the senior ranks usually came with better – that is – more private housing. Ex-slaves who entered the Union camps gained a measure of literacy and access to the postal mail, and white male soldiers incapacitated by injury found themselves in the position similar to that of the slave Ance, who had to depend on the abilities and willingness of another person to compose a message to his wife. Ance's master, James Barr, no doubt took it for granted that as a free white man, and a well-to-do slave-owner to boot, he could claim the powers of dominion over himself, his private mail, and other people.

For men like Barr who occupied the highest rungs of America's social and legal hierarchy, these entitlements seemed perfectly natural and worth defending at any price. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends, antebellum conceptions of honor, respectability, and manhood help explain "the desperate commitment of Southern whites to hold black Africans forever in their power."¹⁸⁸ The great historical irony, of course, is that the utter determination of men like Barr to defend the fullest

¹⁸⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23-24.

measure of their ownership rights resulted in the very destruction of that most crucial form of ownership, of one human being over another, that made possible the antebellum world that Barr knew. The Civil War demolished chattel slavery in its institutionalized form; at the same time it opened the door for African-Americans to gain citizenship, literacy, personal privacy, and even social respectability and an honorable reputation.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Neither the Civil War nor the Thirteenth Amendment ended the racial ideologies that girded black chattel slavery. The scholarship has pointed out the numerous ways that repression, terror, discrimination, and the control of black labor endured after 1865. For a classic work on the subject, see Ira Berlin's *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

Chapter 3: Sins and Secrets

“I Am Reading Hearts, Not Words, When I Read Their letters”

The postal revolution occurred in tandem with the rise of Jacksonian democracy. The electorate, which greatly expanded in number, became more eager consumers of the latest political news arriving in the post mail. Whereas Jacksonian democracy showered its blessings disproportionately on white men, the benefits of the postal revolution proved far more democratic, reaching nearly all social groups in antebellum America. Relatively low costs combined with high rates of literacy meant that most people— with the significant exception of slaves — could participate in epistolary exchanges, often centered on admissions and sharing of highly sensitive and personal information. The act of confession-making, as Michel Foucault contends, has deep cultural significance. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Michel Foucault argues that “Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth.”¹⁹⁰ The postal revolution of the mid-nineteenth century opened expansive new avenues of confession-making to an ever increasing share of the American populace. “Almost everyone,” David Henkin writes of the antebellum period, “conducted these intense and intimate emotional relationships and left a paper trail of sincere confessions.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 56. For a history of confessional culture, see Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the “Confessing Animal”* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹¹ David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago, 2006), 103, 106.

When Johnny Reb and Billy Yank marched off to battle, the practice of confessing on paper thrived within the epistolary traffic between home front and front lines. Military life provided ample evidence that trauma and death were imminent, and hence, made it more necessary than ever for soldiers to reveal on paper their inner emotional and psychological lives to trusted individuals. Sandra Petronio points out that the act of sharing sensitive or personal information can provide enormous benefits." Through disclosure, she writes, "We....may increase social control, validate our perspectives, and become more intimate with our relational partners when we disclose."¹⁹² A South Carolinian, writing to his wife from the trenches outside Petersburg in the summer of 1864, remarked that with pen and paper he could, in his words, "give myself up heart and mind, thought and feelings entirely to my loved ones."¹⁹³ As a forum to express sentimentality and affirm attachment letter writing provided enormous emotional satisfaction to its users. "I feel that I am reading hearts, not words, when I read their letters," wrote a contented New York infantryman of the mail he received from friends and family back home.¹⁹⁴

This chapter argues that for combatants on both sides, the letters sent home functioned as epistolary confessional booths where they felt safe and comfortable discussing their most private thoughts and actions. Then as now, technologies of communications offered opportunities for manipulation, impersonation, and

¹⁹² Sandra Petronio, *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1-2.

¹⁹³ John Bratton to his wife Bettie, 13 July 1864, John Bratton Letters; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Louis Round Wilson Library (hereafter UNC).

¹⁹⁴ Walter Stone Poor to George, 30 August 1862, Walter Stone Poor Correspondence, New York Historical Society (hereafter NYHS).

deception, and Civil War soldiers certainly partook of these less than honorable acts. Still, despite the difficulties with the postal service and the duplicity of some of its users, many Americans trusted the mail and their correspondents enough to share intimate details of their private lives.

Not surprisingly, married men directed the bulk of their personal letters to their wives. Single men in the process of courtship had enormous incentives to write regularly to their intended, and even single, unattached men often had a close female relative, usually a sister, mother, or even a cousin, who received a disproportionate share of the soldier's epistolary output. Many men relied on a single confidant, though it was not uncommon for Union or Confederate soldier to include several people in their inner circle.

In their letters the troops recorded their emotional vulnerabilities, their sins and other transgressions, their admissions of doubt and despair, their revulsion at war and its horrors, even their sensitivities to the harshness of military life. To their authors, such honest outpourings revealed a sentimentality considered effeminate or a sign of weakness. In the act of confessing, however, soldiers had to mediate the conflict between their natural impulse to freely articulate their emotions on paper and their desire to appear properly masculine. "Many an hour when I have been on guard has passed almost unnoticed while I was thinking of home and wondering if you were thinking of me," admitted Daniel W. Sawtelle, a Maine soldier, to his sister, before restraining his hand from indulging in a subject he felt unbecoming both a man and a soldier: "But there I guess you will think I am getting setemental [sic] if I go in this strain and will drop the subject and talking of things that are transpireing

[sic] around.”¹⁹⁵ Even as Sawtelle felt the need to give expression to his deep-seated homesickness, he did not want to look “setemental” in the eyes of his sister.¹⁹⁶

Sawtelle’s genuine emotional response to the conditions of the war battled with his sense of proper masculine epistolary bearing, which for him, meant scribbling heroic – but also emotionally detached - reports of his unit’s conduct in the warzone. Hence, Sawtelle’s display of self-correction suggests that male soldiers, especially those who sought to adhere to standards of masculine toughness, policed their own epistolary confessions.

A soldier like Sawtelle could reveal his true feelings, thoughts, and even conduct to the chief female figure in his domestic life - usually a sister, mother, or wife – but not to his fellow comrade-in-arms.¹⁹⁷ The Yankee or rebel who confided his vulnerabilities to a female had to trust her implicitly or provide her with explicit instructions to safeguard his disclosure. For example, Lieutenant Richard Goldwaite, while deployed with the 3rd New York to Fortress Monroe in Virginia,

¹⁹⁵ Daniel W. Sawtelle to his sister Sophronia, 22 February 1863 cited in Peter H. Buckingham, ed., *All’s for the Best: The Civil War Reminiscences and Letters of Daniel W. Sawtelle, Eighth Maine Volunteer Infantry* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 217. Sawtelle’s unit, the 8th Maine, was then deployed to Port Royal Isle, South Carolina.

¹⁹⁶ Sawtelle had to fear only the loss of his manly standing by public disclosure of his homesickness. His predecessors faced far lethal consequences. Western militaries in the early modern period treated homesickness as both a physical ailment and a serious offense against good morale and order. In the Russian army, according to David Lowenthal, soldiers who let their military effectiveness suffer due to homesickness were buried alive, to set an example to others. David Rosenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 10-11. For a study of homesickness during the Civil War, see Frances Clarke, “So Lonesome I Could Die: Nostalgia and Debates over Emotional Control in the Civil War North,” *Journal of Social History* 41, No. 2 (Winter, 2007), 253-282.

¹⁹⁷ Of course, just because the men looked to paper correspondence to express their feelings to their womenfolk did not mean soldiers did not form deep emotional attachments to their regimental mates. The social space of the camp and the shared hardships of war encouraged intimate long-lasting bonds to form between men from different classes and regions. See James H. Broomall, “We Are a Band of Brothers: Manhood and Community in Confederate Camp and Beyond,” *Civil War History* 60, No. 3 (September, 2014), 273.

openly complained to this wife, "It is very cold nights here and is cold to sleep in tents, but a soldier must put up with anything." On the one hand, the lieutenant felt the urgent need to gripe even as he showed an awareness of the social expectations that dictated how a manly soldier should deal with the discomforts of military life. On the other hand he feared the hit his public image would take should anyone construe his complaints as a sign of weakness. "Looking over my letter and seeing what foolish nonsense there is in it and how soft it is," he wrote, "I hardly want to send this to you." Send the letter Goldwaite did, but not without binding his wife to one non-negotiable condition: "If you will promise me to show this to nobody, I will send it to you."¹⁹⁸ Confession, as the Goldwaites demonstrated, was based on a relationship of trust, but trust could be misplaced, since a man's greatest secrets might be divulged. Thus, privacy and secrecy complicated the power dynamics between men and their female confidants; the women became bearers of secrets that if shared, could prove damaging to their men's public reputation and honor.

Indeed, scholars have pointed out importance of confidentiality in interpersonal communications. "Few aspects of personal privacy are more important than the confidentiality of one's thoughts and communications," writes Frederick S. Lane.¹⁹⁹ After all, says Lane, "[S]ignificant harm can result when confidential messages go astray."²⁰⁰ In *Correspondence*, his study of letter writing in

¹⁹⁸ Richard Goldwaite to Ellen Goldwaite, 1 November 1861, cited in Marti Skipper and Jane Taylor, eds., *A Handful of Providence: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Richard Goldwaite, New York Volunteers, and Ellen Goldwaite* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 61-62.

¹⁹⁹ Frederick S. Lane, *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of our Most Contested Right* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 1.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

the early modern period, Roger Chartier argues for the confidentiality of written correspondence, a sharp contrast to others like Henken who sees the sharing of letters within social groups as the default state. “Secrecy,” says Chartier, “whether betrayed or closely guarded, was automatically assumed to be the letter’s main attribute.”²⁰¹ Richard D. Brown, however, emphasizes that the nature of the letter’s contents mattered. Recipients willingly shared letters containing general news with family members and friends, but letters devoted to personal sentiments remained guarded secrets.²⁰²

The scholarship, despite differences on key features, all point to a common feature of wartime epistolary culture; soldiers conscientiously distinguished between letters they wanted shared and those they wanted read by a singular individual, or at most, a few trusted intimates. Their letters recorded their efforts to hide, to keep secrets—or to engage in the more subtle open/closed technique of sharing but restricting (“keep it between the two of us”). To restrict access simply required much more attention and effort than pulling off the nineteenth century equivalent of a press release. Those epistles deemed most private, or containing sensitive information, the soldiers could and did burn the item or asked (and trusted) their recipients at home to do likewise, thus ensuring no one else could ever read or know of the scribbled secrets.

²⁰¹ Roger Chartier, “Introduction,” Alain Boureau, Roger Chartier, and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton University Press, 1997), 15. Even diarists, as Patricia Meyer Spacks, has noted, wrote with “awareness of ultimate readers other than their nominal addressee.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 169.

²⁰² Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 178.

Civil War soldiers had good reasons to exercise vigilance over the letters they sent and received. The most crucial information a soldier had to share was about health, injury, and death. He had very great reason to share good news about continued survival and conceal bad news about his own injuries or the death of others. Thus soldiers wanted to spare or lessen the anxieties felt by the family members who feared for the safety, health, and very life of loved ones in uniform. Almost as crucial as health was the survival of personal reputation. In their letters they voiced their hopes of returning to civilian life, having earned public esteem for their military service. The pursuit of honorable manhood required them to maintain vigilance over what their communities back home knew about their conduct, both in camp and on the battlefield. Many soldiers did fail the test of professional military conduct, of courage in battle, and of moral rectitude off the battlefield. If an individual felt he had behaved in disreputable fashion, at least he wanted to make sure that the home folks did not know his failing grade.

Soldiers were not simply disclosing information about the secret selves; they were also disclosing information about other soldiers, invariably reporting on the health and behavior of men who did not give their permission to report about them to people at home. Furthermore, though the individual soldier cared about his own reputation, he also showed concern for the reputation of miscreant fellow soldiers because they depended on each other when they went into combat. It proved difficult to prove your honorable manhood – often synonymous with middle-class respectability - when the other men in camp knew you gambled, drank, and

trafficked with prostitutes.²⁰³ In sum, the fighting men of the Civil War sought to achieve mastery of both the deadly arts of warfare and the management of news as it flowed through their social networks.

Confessional culture did not confine itself to the literary medium. Confessions committed to paper represented a written version of the kinds of confidences men expressed to each other in camp. Men who shared the same tent or cabin on cold nights, who cooked and lived together for months on end could talk quite honestly about themselves and comrades in arms. Moreover, as the war dragged on year after year, some men came to believe that only their fellow soldiers understood the horrors they were experiencing. Their comrades did not have to be shielded from news about disease and death - it was all around them. Historians have claimed that the longer the war endured, the more the men came to see their camp as a substitute for home, the place where the laundry hung and one went for a cooked meal. Moreover, as we have already seen, men often shared their personal letters with their comrades. The regimental camp, then, was not without its own bonds of intimacy and modes of information sharing among its male residents.

“I Can Write to You When I Can Write to No One Else”

The rise of mass literacy and the postal revolution in the antebellum period meant that the commoners who filled the ranks of the Civil War armies knew the

²⁰³ Jonathan W. White, et. al., have pointed out that even black soldiers in Union regiments adhered to the notion that honorable manhood required a degree of moral rectitude, education, and financial responsibility. Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third U.S. Colored Troops,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139, no. 2 (April 2015): 180.

joys and utility of secured communications over long distances. William S. Porter of Maine suffered wounds in the spring of 1864 during the brutal Overland Campaign in northern Virginia. During his recovery he wrote to future wife Esther "Etta" H. Friend:

Yes truly it is a pleasant thing to hear from those we love & there is times when we are sad and lonely & a letter from those absent ones will cheer us like some "ministering angel" filling us with joy & how pleasant it is to know & feel...that we have a confidant in which we can trust[.]²⁰⁴

According to Henkin, the culture of letter writing encouraged "sincere and confidential disclosures made in the insulated context of an intense emotional relationship."²⁰⁵ Porter's giddy delight suggests that the emotional connectivity provided by letter writing stems in large part from sharing secrets with someone who safeguarded that information. Indeed, the exclusivity and significance attached to private communications arise only because such correspondence and expressions could occur only out of the public light.²⁰⁶ Victorian culture encouraged a cultivation of the innermost self and intimate confessions between lovers, and especially between courting or married couples, who presumably upheld the confidentiality of the emotional exchange.²⁰⁷ Both men and women found in private

²⁰⁴ Willis S. Porter to Esther "Etta" H. Friend, 14 October 1864, Willis S. Porter Diaries and Correspondence, Maine Historical Society (hereafter MEHS). Porter had been wounded in the summer of 1864 during the Overland Campaign in Virginia. He wrote this letter while recovering at Camp Keyes in Augusta, Maine.

²⁰⁵ Henkin, 103, 106.

²⁰⁶ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17.

²⁰⁷ For a discussion of the role of epistolary confidentiality and the loss and winning of *confidence* in the letter novels of the early modern period, see Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity:*

letters a protected sanctuary for individual expression. "I have no one to tell what I think about things, only you," wrote one New Yorker to her lieutenant husband.²⁰⁸ Couples, engaged or married, were expected to share confidences; not sharing them would have been interpreted as a deficiency in the relationship. Because the couple was engaged in sharing secrets, it was necessary to provide assurances of privacy. One Alabama soldier reassured his wife that "when I receive letters from you they are strictly private and you can write anything you may wish to communicate."²⁰⁹ The traffic in confessions went both ways. "You and I have no one to tell our secrets to," wrote another Confederate to his beloved, "and surely we can confide in each other."²¹⁰

Married adult women did not have a monopoly on the role of trusted confidant to soldiers in the field. In her study of the Southern masculinity Lorri Glover points out that on certain issues young white men of the gentry class confided exclusively to their sisters and mothers.²¹¹ Likewise, Shawn Johansen, when describing fatherhood in the antebellum period, notes that men fulfilled various roles throughout their children's life, from nurse and playmate to confidant

Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 46-86. See also Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²⁰⁸ Ellen Goldwaite to Richard Goldwaite, 18 July 1861, cited in Skipper and Taylor, eds., 37.

²⁰⁹ Joel H. Puckett to Mary "Molly" Puckett, 10 February 1862, Joel H. Puckett Papers; University of Texas, Austin; Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (hereafter DBC).

²¹⁰ William Clark Corson to Jennie Hill, 12 August 1861, William Clark Corson Letters, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS).

²¹¹ Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 21. Glover refers to the context of Southern gentry boys who rejected evangelicalism. "Those few who did convert," she writes, "typically confided first (and sometimes exclusively) to sisters and mothers."

to their adult children.²¹² When the men went off to war they corresponded, directly or indirectly, with a wide range of members in their social networks. The circle of intimacy often included extended family members and close friends.

Still, certain patterns emerged from the surviving records. Degrees of intimacy mattered, and the closer the emotional attachment between correspondents, the more valued a letter from that particular writer compared to letters from other members in the epistolary network. As one Maine soldier informed his longtime female pen pal, “One letter from a true friend is better than a dozen from doubtful ones.”²¹³ Not surprisingly, soldiers tended to write the most to their closest family members; married men wrote to their wives, while men engaged in courtship wrote to their intended. “I write more to you than I do to all of my other correspondents together,” wrote William Clark Corson, a Virginian cavalryman, to Jennie Hill.²¹⁴ Abel H. Crawford, of the 55th Alabama, professed to Rebecca A. Potts that “never will I want to stop correspondence with you, though I never have much to write yet I feel that I can write to you when I can write to no one else.”²¹⁵ Unattached single men wrote most often to their parents, siblings, and often to close friends, and yet even in these cases a sister or female cousin would often receive a disproportionate share of the soldiers’ correspondences. In the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for men to have longstanding epistolary

²¹² Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

²¹³ Samuel C. Chase to Mrs. King, 24 April 1865, Cyrus and Dorcas King Collection, MEHS.

²¹⁴ William Clark Corson to Jennie, 18 February 1862, William Clark Corson Letters, VHS. Corson and Hill were married after the war.

²¹⁵ Abel H. Crawford to Rebecca A. Potts, 25 October 1863, Abel H. Crawford Letters, Tennessee State Library and Archives (hereafter TSLA). Potts was Crawford’s intended beloved.

exchanges with female family members. Jared Andrus Abell, for example, had a regular pen pal in his cousin Hannah Abell. Halfway through the war he admitted to her, “I think you have had as many of my most secret thoughts as anyone, not even excepting my dear Mother. I have no female correspondent but you the last ten years.²¹⁶ Not surprisingly, when financial troubles arose, the Connecticut bluecoat trusted his cousin alone with his thoughts on the matter. “I beg you will not let anyone know that I may have ever wrote you any thing in regard to money matters. I would not let Father or Mother suspect any thing of the kind,” he implored.²¹⁷

Men disclosed information not just about themselves, but also about others known to their relatives back home. Joseph Hotz, a member of the 50th Indiana, described to his wife the cowardly conduct of two soldiers known to the regiment’s home community. These two men, he claimed, “have big mouths, but chicken out when it goes into battle,” and he left it to her discretion as to what to do with the news: “You don’t have to tell anyone about this, it’s enough that you know what kind of ‘birds’ they are.”²¹⁸ As with Abell, the knowledge shared by Hotz to his confidant revealed some unpleasant truths about the conduct of men at war.

“So Lady Like in Your Letters that I am Proud of Them”

As Abell’s correspondence suggests, letter writing presented a forum in which both genders sought to execute their agencies, needs, and desires. The letters

²¹⁶ Jared Andrus Abell to his cousin Hannah Abell, 8 March 1863, Jared Andrus Abell Letters, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library (hereafter USC).

²¹⁷ Ibid, 11 April 1863.

²¹⁸ Joseph Hotz to Maria Hotz, 19 March 1864, Joseph Hotz Letters, Indiana Historical Society (hereafter IHS).

of Civil War soldiers heaped praise on their womenfolk who acted as both confidants and heads of households while the men went off to war. Yet this same body of evidence reveals that these men adhered to a worldview of gender-defined identities that applied to the art and utility of letter writing itself. One Texan, Edwin Pinckney Becton, saw the regimental life as a “a great place to find out [about] men” but nevertheless, believed that “Woman as a general rule is actuated by the purest motives but man is generally governed by interest.”²¹⁹ The comments that soldiers directed at their female correspondents, often a mother, sister, wife, or daughter showed attempts to police the boundaries of epistolary appropriateness, structured as they were along highly gendered lines that delineated the proper topics and manners suitable for a female correspondent. In a war in which men regularly confessed in strictest confidence their deepest fears and anxieties to women, Becton reminded his wife that she ought to mind his epistolary needs: “nothing would make me more unhappy than to receive ‘whining, homesick epistles’ from you.” Her proper adherence to epistolary conventions, he noted, marked her as an adult female of sensible maturity:

I am always glad to receive long & affectionate letters from you & there is something so elevated, so dignified so lady like in your letters that I am proud of them – You talk like a woman of sense & not like a sixteen year old girl[.]²²⁰

Indeed, soldiers became connoisseurs of “good letters” from loved ones at home.

The metrics of a good letter, of course, reflected both what the men wanted to hear

²¹⁹ Edwin Pinckney Becton to his wife, 9 November 1862, Edwin Pinckney Becton Papers, DBC.

²²⁰ Ibid, 14 December 1862.

from home and how a woman should write to her man away at the front defending hearth and homeland. "I could wish that your letter was more genial, that it would be a little more encouraging than it was, that you could have a little more feeling," complained George Henry Pettis to his wife, "but as you are not capable of expressing yourself in other than such coarse language, you are not to blame."²²¹ To a modern audience such words smack of condescension, yet to George Henry Pettis, and perhaps even to his wife, the tone was one of marital duty and epistolary honesty.

Northern soldiers likewise policed the boundaries of what constituted suitable topics for both female audience and female writers. After delivering a lengthy polemical discourse on the weighty subjects of war, civilization, and the Constitution, Colonel Henry Clark Gilbert stopped himself in mid-passage and apologized to his daughter Lucy for bringing up subjects that he felt deemed uninteresting to the female sex: "I forgot that I was writing to my dear loving daughter, a young lady of eighteen....If I could write any thing interesting to you I would burn this up & try again."²²² Even older women received similar treatment. The mother of William H. Perry, a Virginian artilleryman, had her news feed, and perhaps even her intellectual horizons, curtailed by her son's explicit belief that women would have no gain from hearing of the latest war news. After informing his

²²¹ George Henry Pettis to his wife, 8 June 1863, George Henry Pettis Papers, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (hereafter YUB).

²²² Henry Clarke Gilbert to his daughter Lucy, 15 January 1863, Henry Clarke Gilbert Papers, DBC. Apparently, Gilbert considered his musings on politics and war as ill-suited to a woman's ears: "Men are nothing, lives are nothing, treasure is nothing, but the country, civilization, & progress are every thing....Let blood run every where & Death in every form decimate the people but let right prevail."

mother of Confederate losses at Gettysburg – “our army is considerably thinned in numbers” - Perry halted the war reporting. “But enough of this dull subject,” he wrote, “for however interested in such matters, they are quite dull I know in letters.” Women, he suggested, would do better by attending to what he calls “the little domestic ties of home” which meant sending a steady stream of news regarding “little home matters” to their men in the field.²²³

In its own way, the insistence with which men pleaded for and even demanded regular reports of home life meant that men could still intrude upon the privacy of women’s daily lives regardless of time and distance. “Maria, tell me how you get along about your groceries, flour and such like. Give me all the particulars,” wrote Rezin Kile, an Illinois trooper, to his wife.²²⁴ His Confederate opponents proved Kile’s equal in determination to keep tabs on what their wives were doing at home. For Corporal Charles Roberts of Mississippi, the marital bond created an obligation for full disclosure between wives and husbands. “I don’t want you to omit telling me Everything in your letters,” he wrote his wife, “for between us there should be no secrets.”²²⁵ Likewise, an officer in the 24th Alabama, Joel H. Puckett spent his first Christmas season in the service convalescing in a military hospital. Even in his weakened condition the Alabaman insisted that his wife report every detail regarding the homestead:

²²³ William Hartwell Perry, Jr. to his mother, 19 July 1863, William Hartwell Perry Letters, University of Virginia, Special Collections Library (hereafter UVA).

²²⁴ Rezin Kile to his wife Maria, 22 September 1862, Rezin and Maria Kile Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

²²⁵ Charles Roberts to his wife, 28 August 1863, Charles Roberts Collection, University of Mississippi, J. D. Williams Library, Special Collections (hereinafter UMWL). Corporal Roberts served in the artillery corps of the Confederate Army of the Tennessee.

I want to be kept posted about every thing thats going on at home if any body is sick I want to know it all the work and particularly about the stock. Make them fat and save your salt, letters written to you of course is for you & Ma I could write either of you 8 pages every time if I thought it necessary, dont you fail to mention every thing however small.²²⁶

Apparently Puckett's wife diligently complied, for a month later he conveyed his approval of her effort to live up to his epistolary standards and demands. "Well I found your letter as usual, very interesting and well written," wrote Puckett. "You seem to try to think of everything. Thats right."²²⁷ In modern parlance, the intense supervision of Puckett, Roberts, and Kile borders on micromanaging. Hence, even with their husbands physically away at the front, wives left alone to manage the household had no privacy to call their own. These women labored under the epistolary oversight of their spouse. Letters, then, allowed male ownership of the family and the domestic household to operate, in however truncated fashion, across the miles and the years of separation.

Double standards applied. When the troops ranted and raved, they expected an audience at home to hear them out. Yet these same men also laid judgment on such philosophical sermons and emotional digressions. Too much emotion, that is much ado about nothing, marked one as effeminate. After one particularly long-winded free-flowing musing, something that nearly all soldier-writers were prone to, a volunteer from Maine derided his own composition as characteristic of how women write: "This is a pretty long scrawl for me and you will see on careful perusal

²²⁶ Joel H. Puckett to his wife Mary "Molly" Puckett, 18 December 1861, Joel H. Puckett Papers, DBC.

²²⁷ Ibid., 18 January 1862.

that it possesses the feminine characteristics of containing little in much.”²²⁸ The masculine mode of writing, according to this volunteer, meant clarity and rationality of thought, and serious, orderly thoughts at that. Yet, letter writing proved malleable and adaptable to all the needs, illusions, and hopes that soldiers projected with pen onto their stationery papers. The written letter allowed women and the home folks to cheer, comfort, and inform their fighting men, while the men, in turn, used the mail to attend to home, business, and personal affairs that were serious and sentimental simultaneously.

“So Just for Devilment I Have Written to Her”

Like all communications medium, letter writing reflected the will, intention, and character of its users. Soldiers, like other classes of letter writers, proved capable of both epistolary trickery and honesty. In one incident, a member of the 11th New Yorker Battery, on a lark posted an advertisement in a “lonely-hearts” magazine. Having received a reply from “Hattie,” the delighted but nonplussed artilleryman felt compelled by “truth and candor” to “acknowledge that a little despection [sic] was used in the advertisement.” Less “Hattie” entertain a false image of his physical looks, he tried to set the record straight in an attempt to win her over with his forthright character:

In other words my true description differs materially from the one therein set forth, and may not please you as well as the one "fancy painted," but I thought it was all for fun, therefore funningly gave a

²²⁸ John Andrew Fox to his sister Feroline, 12 November 1863, Fox Family Papers, Series V, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS).

fictitious description as well as cognomen. Be it known unto you then, this individual is twenty-nine years of age, five feet and eleven inches high, dark blue eyes, brown hair, and light (ruddy) complexion. There you have it. How do you like the description?²²⁹

Thus, this particularly New Yorker demonstrated both rascality and virtue in his epistolary encounter with a female correspondent.

As much as it allowed for romantic overtures and exchanges of heartwarming affection and sincere devotion, the mail equally proved a readily available instrument for mischief, deception, and pranks. Not every soldier who wielded the pen with eloquence did so with honorable intentions towards the female sex. Examples of epistolary high jinks and scandalous manipulations abound in soldiers' letters. A Union quartermaster revealed to his wife how he covertly foiled the unscrupulous attempts by a fellow officer to seduce a woman through the mail: "While I am writing this letter he lays on a lounge opposite the table, reading 'Great Expectations,' and would surely kill me if he know I am slyly sitting and writing right opposite him."²³⁰ Lyman Blackington, of the 19th Massachusetts, played a cruel prank on a local girl and swore his sister to not reveal the details of how he pulled it off:

You told me to write to Louisa Ralph. Jake told me what kind of a girl she is and wished me to write and so just for devilment I have written to her a "high-fa-lu-tin" letter...I signed my name Henry Way, an old

²²⁹ Unknown soldier to "Hattie" 9 February 1864, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Library, Special Collections. Available online at <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/cwlove/dearhattie.html>. Accessed 28 August 2015. The soldier's letter indicated that he served in the 11th New York Battery.

²³⁰ Ferdinand Sophus Winslow to wife Wilhelmina, 26 November 1861, Ferdinand Sophus Winslow Letters; University of Iowa, Iowa City; Special Collections Library (hereafter UISC).

acquaintance of hers who knew in the “Holmes Neighborhood.” Don’t you tell anyone else now...[or else] Miss Louisa will get hold of it.

The Massachusetts infantryman even promised his sister that he planned to compound his victim’s humiliation: “[I]f I get an answer [from Louisa] I will send it home for you to read.”²³¹ In another case, Charles George described to his wife the scheme played by his brother Herbert on their sister Emma:

He [Herbert] has been having some fun with her [Emma]. I will tell you: Emma writes letters sometimes and puts them in the “Comfort Bags” that got to soldiers. Herbert knew her assumed name and wrote her a letter disguising his hand. He succeeded in getting a reply which was all he wanted. It was a splendid letter – one that a brother might feel proud of – he answered in his own name. I don’t know how it all came out.²³²

The literacy possessed by the George brothers allowed one to engage in the act of epistolary deception and the other to report it. Incapacitated or illiterate soldiers could readily call on others to do their writing, and brothels inevitably popped up wherever large concentrations of troops assembled and encamped. Sometimes the opportunity availed itself to the men to commit two misdeeds with one outing. One worker in the Sanitary Commission claimed that the prostitutes in City Point, Virginia, provided an additional service, that of writing letters on behalf

²³¹ Lyman Blackington to his sister Hannah, 23 March 1862, Lyman and Jacob Blackington Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute (hereafter USAMHI).

²³² Charles George to his wife Ellie, 25 February, 1863, cited in James G. Davis, ed. *“Bully for the Band!” The Civil War Letters and Diary of Four Brothers in the 10th Vermont Infantry Band: Charles George, Herbert George, Jere George, and Osman George* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2012), 58. The four George brothers - Herbert, Charles, Osman, and Jere - served together in the 10th Vermont Volunteer Infantry Regiment

of their clients to their mothers, wives, and sweethearts back home.²³³ Needless to say, the soldiers involved most likely did not reveal to their correspondents the true identity of the epistolary intermediaries.

While the illiterate males visiting these brothels deceived their loved ones, at least the literate female prostitutes presumably recorded faithfully the messages of their clients. An Iowan reported to his wife of an incident in which an ex-officer named Phillips took advantage of his role as trusted epistolary intermediary to demoralize the home front:

We are unlucky, for Capt. Phillips ought to have been arrested and tried for treason. It is a shame that such a man should be allowed to leave the service, and draw his pay from the government. For some time before he left, he was in the habit of writing letters home for the boys, which he always filled with treason.²³⁴

Cases such as that of Captain Phillips demonstrate the dark side of letter writing, and the agency by which its participants carried out willful misrepresentation and created false identities to serve dishonorable ends.

Still, honest mistakes, compounded by the slow speed of mail delivery, did occur. Jacob A. Blackington (brother of Lyman) discovered much to his shock that his attempts to comfort the wife of a hospitalized comrade, Joseph Gifford, backfired.

²³³ Cited in Thomas P. Lowry, *The Stories the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 29. Situated on a site overlooking the James and Appomattox Rivers, City Point served as U.S. Grant's headquarters during the Siege of Petersburg during 1864-1865. As the main depot center and supply port for the Army of the Potomac, the little town saw heavy traffic in humans and material goods, which no doubt attracted other less reputable operations as well.

²³⁴ William Vermilion to wife Mary, 6 May 1863, cited in Donald C. Elder III, ed. *Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 91.

The poor man died, leaving the widow to think Blackington deliberately and maliciously deceived her by informing her otherwise. As Blackington explained to his sister,

I have just received your letter dated November 5. O, Sister, I was struck terror when I read your letter. I never once thought that I should see Joseph's death in your letter. I that that he was in some hospital....What will Mrs. Gifford think of me by my writing that Joseph was safe in some hospital. She will think that I was trying to deceive her, but I told her just what they told me.²³⁵

Ironically, in a well-meaning attempt to provide useful service to his comrade's wife, one Blackington brother ended up in the same position as his mischief-making sibling, that of causing grief to the intended recipient.

“Many a Poor Soldier Dies Concealing the Truth”

At the home front letters from a soldier were eagerly awaited, but they were dreaded as well because they might contain bad news. The unintentional distress inflicted on Gifford's widow point to a common experience well-known to most of the Civil War's participants, the ubiquity of death and its unpredictability. Even though the United States had a highly developed postal system by 1860, weeks or months could go by before correspondents heard from each other. Anxiety over the loss or delay of the mail and the possibility of a correspondent suddenly expiring in the interim explain a common feature of letter writing from the seventeenth century

²³⁵ Jacob A Blackington to sister Hannah, 10 November 1862, Lyman and Jacob Blackington Papers, USAMHI.

onwards.²³⁶ Like generations of writers before them, Americans during the Civil War routinely began their letters with declarations of good health. For example, William Batts of the 12th Georgia in one of his letters wrote, “Pa, when I wrote you last I was a little unwell and...home sick, but now I am in good health.”²³⁷ The near-constant presence of fatal diseases and the specter of sudden injury or death in battle imparted a deadly earnestness to these rhetorical flourishes. The belligerents on both sides had daily reminders of their mortality and the precariousness of their epistolary links to distant friends and family.

Yet for various reasons, soldiers also sought means to hide sickness or injury from loved ones. However, to successfully pull off the ruse required the acquiescence or complicity of campmates. Wisconsin soldier Clement Abner Boughton notified his family of a fellow who “wrote home but did not let them know that he has been sick.” Boughton went along with the deception: “I do not want them [the soldier’s family] to find out any thing about it in my letters.”²³⁸ For similar reasons, Henry Orendorff, a member of the 103rd Illinois, swore his brothers to secrecy during a period when the regiment saw intense fighting around Atlanta in the summer of 1864. During his thirty-four months of military service, Orendorff sent letters home at a rate of nearly one a week. As a money-saving tactic, he and

²³⁶ William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 23, 60.

²³⁷ William Batts to his father, 18 January 1862, University of Georgia, Athens; Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library (hereafter UGA).

²³⁸ Clement Abner Boughton to his family, 3 August 1862, Clement Abner Boughton Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; William L. Clements Library (hereafter UMCL). This was not the first time Boughton engaged in such deception. In an earlier letter of 21 July 1862, Boughton stated to his family his policy of intentionally withholding worrisome news from the home front: “Bill W. is shaking with the ague. Don't say anything to his folks, I don't intend to write when anyone is sick, so as to have their folks worry about them.”

his brothers, also in the service, frequently enclosed in a single envelope multiple letters addressed to various family members for dissemination within their intimate social circle.²³⁹ Yet he forbade his brothers from circulating one particular letter in order to spare his other family members unnecessary anxiety: “Don’t send this home nor don't write home about my getting that scratch on the knee for it would only tend to make them uneasy.”²⁴⁰

Recipients back home could readily imagine that soldiers were withholding bad news about injury, illness, and death from them. Soldiers then had to claim, honestly or not, that they were truthful correspondents. A shortage of time combined with the prevalence of sickness and injuries provided a convenient excuse for why some soldiers neglected to divulge all the details of camp life. “I suppose you would like to know something about the sick boys,” wrote John W. Cleland to his sister back home in Ohio. “[Y]ou seem to think from what James [older brother] said that we do not want to let you know who is sick. we cannot think of every one that is grunting round every time we write.”²⁴¹ In contrast, another Union soldier, Charles Brewster reassured his sister Mary that he would faithfully keep her abreast of the health of their mutual acquaintances serving in the unit. His letter, written in late summer of 1861, suggests the prevalence of lethal illnesses in the army camps, news of which, no doubt, gave the folks at home plenty of reason to worry:

²³⁹ William Anderson, ed., *“We Are Sherman’s Men”*: *The Civil War Letters of Henry Orendorff* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University, 1986), 6.

²⁴⁰ Henry Orendorff to John and William Orendorff, 21 August 1864, cited in Anderson 105.

²⁴¹ John W. Cleland to his sister, 23 November 1862, John W. Cleland Letter, Filson Historical Society (hereafter FHS). Cleland served with the 111th Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

[W]e have had another funeral this afternoon...this makes the sixth, I believe, one of whome [sic] is buried here under a tree in full view of the camp, and speaking of this makes me think you have written to me several times about Fred Wrights being sick, and I have written to you as often that he is not sick....If anybody is dangerously sick I shall let you know but as for paying attention to such stories if people have any sense they will not.²⁴²

Far removed from the front, and separated by mail service that sometimes took weeks and even months, Mary Brewster had to rely on her brother's willingness to dispense truthful updates on the health and safety of her male friends and family members in the camps. Civilians like her could only ask their correspondents to remain forthright and not hold secrets, no matter the consequences.

Relatives at home could read between the lines, and eventually learned that a soldier might conceal information from them in his letters and could even deliberately lie to them. Concealing the truth did not equate to lying in a letter, but soldiers' relatives neither accepted such practices nor took such epistolary ruses lightly, given the consequences and the stakes involved. Mary "Dollie" Vermilion in the fall of 1863 learned that a family friend, Josephus Hays, had hid from his family the chronic diarrhea that ultimately killed him:

His [Hay's] mother told me that the manner of his death hurt her worse than his death itself...The poor fellow lay in the hospital several months. He never told them in his letters that he was much sick and they would never have known it – in time to see him – had not his sister in Ills. learned the truth, by some means, and wrote to her father to go to him. He started at once, and a few days after they got a letter from Josephus...saying that he was all right, and able for his ration. I

²⁴² Charles Brewster to Mary Brewster, 25 September 1861 in David Blight, ed., *When This Cruel War Is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 41.

have no doubt but many a poor soldier dies concealing the truth just this way for fear of causing uneasiness in their friends at home.²⁴³

Mary Vermillion most likely had every reason to suspect that Josephus Hays' deception worked in part because of the complicity of his comrades. The circumstances of his death compelled her to make a heartfelt plea to her husband William, who had deployed with the 36th Iowa to Arkansas: "My darling, if you love you[r] Dollie never deceive her in this way."²⁴⁴

Soldiers, in turn, not only expected their loved ones to tell them the truth but to follow up truthful but worrisome news with regular updates to assuage their worries. Joshua K. Calloway, a lieutenant in the 28th Alabama, complained as such to his wife: "I must complain of maltreatment by you, for it you are not able to write you can get somebody to write for you. But to write that you are all sick and then not write a word for a week is a grievous sin, and if I were to get news every day of the increasing severity of your illness it would not be any worse."²⁴⁵ In his eighteenth months of active service Calloway sent home over seventy letters. The irregularity of the Confederate mail service exacerbated his worries, which ended only with his death the Battle of Missionary Ridge in November 1863.

"Swearing like Sailors and Drinking Like Bacchanalia"

Their intentions towards eligible young women, not surprisingly, encouraged the troops to show discretion towards who had access to their letters. One Illinois

²⁴³ Mary Vermilion to William Vermilion, 10 November 1863, cited in Elder 260.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Joshua Calloway to Dulcinea Calloway, 29 July 1863 in Judith Lee Hallock, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Joshua K. Calloway* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 118.

soldier, John D. Shank, informed his relatives of his pen-pal romance, but commanded them to keep the secret within the family:

i dont Want you to let eny Body See this letter. Nor tell eny Body a bout me riten to eny surten one Girll – the girrel i ex pect to have for my Wief, none of youns could ges in 10 year. i think i Can git her if i live to git home, and if She lives.²⁴⁶

Shank's letter reveals the personal stakes involved both in epistolary courtship and in surviving the war long enough to make good on the mutual exchange of affections conducted through the mail. Sometimes, though, the confessions involved lesser risks, but soldiers still minded what people thought of them back home. When the 14th South Carolina deployed to the Confederate capital, Samuel Lewers Dorroh cautioned his mother about sharing his observations on the women of Virginia: "Richmond is the prettiest place I ever saw and the most great big fine looking women I ever saw. I never saw no pretty girls before. Old S. C. cant hold her a light, but you need not tell the gals about there that I said so."²⁴⁷ Dorroh's mother became privy to at least one aspect of her son's wartime experience, but in all probability she kept the secret as to maintain her son's standing with the young eligible women in their neighborhood.

On many other occasions confessions dealt with far more serious matters. One Kentuckian, dismayed that someone had opened one of his letters during its transit, proclaimed that he had nothing to fear from public disclosure. As he put it,

²⁴⁶ John D. Shank to his family, 18 January 1863, cited in Edna Hunter, ed., *One Flag, One Country, and Thirteen Greenbacks a Month* (San Diego, CA: Hunter Publications, 1980), 55. Shank served with the 125th Illinois and at the time was stationed in Nashville, a major transit junction, which most likely aided his courting his mysterious pen pal.

²⁴⁷ Samuel Lewers Dorroh to his mother, 28 April 1862, Samuel Lewers Dorroh Papers, USC.

“I write nothing in any of my letters that I am ashamed for the world to see.”²⁴⁸ Few soldiers, North or South, however, could make the same claim. While deployed with his Connecticut regiment to Florida, Jared Andrus Abell revealed to his cousin Hannah the shocking details of his recent past that nobody in his family knew:

You doubtless recollect the manner of our closing correspondence when I was in Wisconsin. Well under the spur of the moment in the bitter disappointment, I proposed to a young lady, was accepted. In a short time, she was the bride of Death, and I was free once again. This may be strange to you, but true. Very few of my friends ever know the circumstances. She died within two months of our engagement. I have never told even my Mother this, and I trust you will never let any one read this, or acquire any information through you. Let the past be buried in oblivion, and let us look to the future and enjoy the present.²⁴⁹

As Abell’s story exemplify, men found it possible to live secret lives while in the service, though some felt compelled to share the details with a trusted, and often female, confidant.

Transgressions, failings, and acts of indiscretion and poor judgment of all kind pepper the letters the soldiers sent home, often with injunctions to keep mum about the delicate subject described. When the 5th Maine first arrived in Washington DC in the summer of 1861, one of its members, Hiram M. Cash, enthusiastically reported to his family, “I see some one almost every day that I am acquainted with belonging to other regts.”²⁵⁰ Two years later, what Cash once considered an asset now became a liability; having received a medical diagnosis of

²⁴⁸ Robert Winn to his sister Martha, 8 August 1863, Winn-Cook Family Papers, FHS.

²⁴⁹ Jared Andrus Abell to his cousin Hannah Abell, 8 March 1863, Jared Andrus Abell Letters, USC.

²⁵⁰ Hiram M. Cash to his parents, 18 July 1861, Hiram M. Cash Letters, UVA.

“unfeet for active” service, he had to work extra hard to contain the news of his discharge from the unit. “I want you to keep this news a secret from all except you and father,” wrote Cash to his folks. “[D]o not fail to keep this secret for I do not want any one else to know it until I get home.”²⁵¹

Besides the fear of looking weak or unmanly in the eyes of their social peers, soldiers had other compelling reasons to restrict access to their letters. Though African-Americans made up 10 percent of Union forces, the army deliberately excluded them from the senior ranks. Hence, ambitious white officers looking to move up the ranks could ask for a transfer to command positions in black regiments. Perhaps mindful of his family’s reservations about him serving alongside black soldiers, Frances E. Vinaca, a member of the 186th New York, asked his father to maintain silence: “I want you to be as particular not to speak of it. I want you to be sure and keep it secret,” wrote the New Yorker. “I have been studying the tactics lately and I am going to try and get a commission in a colored regiment.”²⁵² Likewise, George W. Draper, a soldier in the 89th New York, reenlisted in opposition to his family’s wishes. “Do not let anyone know that I have enlisted again till you hear from me again,” he wrote to his sister, “then I will give you liberty to tell as much as you like.”²⁵³

²⁵¹ Ibid, 3 October 1863.

²⁵² Frank Vinaca to father, 28 December 1864, Francis E. Vinaca Papers, UMCL. Vinaca’s letter of 12 January 1865 indicated that he let his sister in on his big secret; still, Vinaca reminded both his sister and father to let know one know of his application for transfer to a black regiment for “I would be in a pretty fix if everyone knew.”

²⁵³ George W. Draper to his sister “Susie,” 8 January 1863, Norwich Collection, USAMHI. Draper’s letter of January 7 to Susie suggests that his family opposed his reenlistment: “Now do not scold me for I have done only what I thought was the best thing for me to do.”

Generals and politicians on both sides wished for more men like Draper. Desertion plagued both sides during the war. The stigma of cowardice and the threat of punishment did not prevent some 10-15% of all soldiers from absconding from the ranks.²⁵⁴ Men who abandoned their units usually sought refuge with their home communities. The downside meant that family members of soldiers still dutifully serving would know of men who had come home without permission. One Confederate, while deployed to Chattanooga, Tennessee, had intelligence as to the location of Hank, an acquaintance who had deserted, and how the offender could be reached and convinced to return to the regimental fold. To his wife back in Florida he conveyed the command, "Tell Hank he had better come to the company or he will be punished as a deserter."²⁵⁵

Few items called for more secrecy than the desire to desert, a topic rarely broached in soldier's letters. The men who withstood the hardships of the war year after year had nothing but scorn to reap on their regimental mates who abandoned their units; one Texan reported to his sister that "some of the Texas Rangers have forsaken their Colors and have gone home." "Their names," he proclaimed, "will be Published and handed down to posterity through the records of the country as

²⁵⁴ Ella Lonn gives desertion figures of 200,000 for the Union side and 104,000 for the Confederates. These numbers represent one in seven enlistees for the North compared to one in nine for the South. See Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co., 1928). Thomas C. Leonard claims a much higher number of 500,000 men who deserted. See Leonard, *Above the Battle: War-Making in America from Appomattox to Versailles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 16. For a case study of localized patterns of desertion, see Peter S. Bearman, "Desertion as Localism: Army Unit Solidarity and Group Norms in the U.S. Civil War," *Social Forces*, 70, no. 2 (December 1991): 321-342.

²⁵⁵ Michael Raysor to his wife Sallie, 20 August 1862, cited in Aaron Sheehan-Dean, "'If It Was Not for You I Would Be Willing to Die': The Civil War Correspondence of Michael and Sallie Raysor," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Winter, 2008): 397.

Deserters."²⁵⁶ Besides the lasting shame and social stigma that came with the act, the death sentences doled out to deserters served as a deterrent to others who might contemplate the same. Juniper Waters, of the 8th Kentucky, wrote to his wife regarding two acquaintances who deserted from his company. The military authorities, he informed her, "are Sure to handle them [the two men] both Rough if they Catch them anymore." Waters then implored his wife to save these two men from the firing squad: "[D]o not tell this to anybody else but be Sure to tell them or their wives So they may hear it and Come back to Camp and not be Shot."²⁵⁷ Hence, the wives of these three men not only knew of their husbands' misconduct, but also became accomplices to acts, that if publicly known, would disgrace the family name during and after the war.

One can reasonably assume that far more men harbored the desire to desert than those who did made explicit such thoughts in their letters home. Those who desired or planned to desert had to show great discretion when broaching the topic in their letters, usually with explicit instructions to keep the secret safe. Even then, disclosure to a close confidant, usually the wife of the soldier, meant that the information could never see the light of day during one's own lifetime or after that as well, less it damage the reputation of the veteran and his family. Richard Henry Brooks, while serving with the 51st Georgia, even feared what would happen should anyone intercept the letter exchanges between him and his wife, exchanges which contained incontrovertible proof of his guilt. In the summer of 1863, Brooks

²⁵⁶ Bob Hill his sister Mary, 29 April 1864, John W. Hill Papers, DBC.

²⁵⁷ Juniper Waters to Permela Waters, 12 April 1862, Watters-Curtis Family Papers, FHS.

contemplated deserting, for as he explained to his wife, “others do an are never hunt for it,” and “if ever I get home I will stay as long as I can.”²⁵⁸ In November of that year Brooks received a 30-day furlough; though he overstayed his leave by nearly two months, Brooks apparently escaped punishment and eventually rejoined his unit in early 1864. Still, the lucky escape had a sobering impact on him, for shortly after returning to service he warned his wife against mentioning the topic of desertion in any of her letters. “My Dear do not write anything about my getting away from here,” he wrote, “for it you do the letters may come after I am gone an some one else will get the letters an find out all about it. [B]e sure to keep it a secret forever.”²⁵⁹

Other forms of misconduct, while not as serious as desertion, also called for caution between intimate correspondents. The soldiers yearned desperately for entertainment to relieve the dullness of camp life; the war removed countless young men from the daily influences of family, neighbors, friends, churches and local institutions that served to restrain and channel male conduct into norms of acceptable behavior. “[T]here is great need of something to improve the moral tone of our army,” one Mississippian admitted to his wife, since, as he put it, “Too many forget their self respect, because they away from home and [free from] public opinion.”²⁶⁰ Henry A. Robinson of the 100th Indiana equated camp life to a school for disreputable habits: “[I]f any man wants to learn anything bad, let him come

²⁵⁸ Richard Henry Brooks to his wife Telitha E. Gresham, 25 July 1863 in Katherine S. Holland, ed. *Keep All My Letters: The Civil War Letters of Richard Henry Brooks, 51st Georgia Infantry* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 95.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1864 in Holland 115.

²⁶⁰ Charles Roberts to his wife, 3 May 1863, Charles Roberts Collection, UMWL.

here.”²⁶¹ The combination of distance and boredom proved fertile ground for mischief and temptations. Peter F. Clark, a Missouri cavalryman fighting for the Union side, noted in one of his epistles the corrosive effects of camp life. “I am in the army,” he wrote, “but I trust God it [the army] will never have the demoralizing affect on me that it has on many numbers who were in good standing as church members at home and who are now swearing like sailors and drinking like bacchanalia.”²⁶² A similar testimonial came from one member of the 112th New York who informed his wife, “Men who claim to be respectable at home use language in camp that is unfit for any human to pronounce.”²⁶³

Military life, despite all its restriction and regulations, offered plenty of opportunities for disreputable behavior of every kind. Indeed, Brian J. Rouleau, in his study of camaraderie among sailors, argues that in an environment as restrictive and hierarchical as a ship or a regimental camp, “drinking, gambling, and whoring...the traditional paths to the assertion of manhood, took on added meaning.” Put another way, rowdy and rascally conduct operated as assertions of both personal agency and male identity in occupations that “allowed for only infrequent opportunities of display, and often only displays of servility, subordination, and obedience.”²⁶⁴ Yet, these social infractions, as frequently as they appeared in soldiers’ letters and diaries, fell by the wayside in Americans’ postwar

²⁶¹ Henry A. Robinson to his wife, Henry A. Robinson Papers, IHS. The letter is undated letter but probably dates from October 1862 when Robinson and the 100th were in training camp.

²⁶² Peter F. Clark to Jane Clark, 14 January 1864, Peter F. Clark Papers, Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center (hereafter MHML).

²⁶³ Orrin Sweet Allen to Francis “Frank” Allen, 18 November 1862, Orrin Sweet Allen Papers, VHS.

²⁶⁴ Brian J. Rouleau, “Dead Men Do Tell Tales: Folklore, Fraternity, and the Forecastle,” *Early American Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 46.

historical consciousness. One expert on venereal diseases during the Civil War pointed out that veterans' memoirs published during the Gilded Age tended to omit any references to wartime debauchery; their authors intentionally steered public memory towards a belief in "the spotless morality of military life."²⁶⁵

The actual wartime testimonials painted a different picture. The wife of Jesse Reid, of the 4th South Carolina, knew just how quickly prostitution established itself as a feature of men's wartime adventures. In June 1861 she received a letter from her husband who described the visits by prostitutes to camp: "If you could be here on those occasions you would think that there was not a married man in the regiment but me."²⁶⁶ Along similar lines, when John Knapp, a major in the 14th Illinois, divulged to his father the petty vices of a fellow soldier, the Union officer explicitly asked his father to never reveal the salacious details:

M. W. of Winchester...told his mother he would not gamble. The other day he got a letter from home and his mother told him that those that sent so much money home must have won it; but it is the other way. His father come to St. Louis to see him and gave him some money; I don't know how much. He drew as much as we did on pay day and sent home twenty dollars. He lost all he kept and then borrowed some and lost that, so that is the way with us boys [who] won so much money. I seldom tell tales but I have to tell this. Keep it secret.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Lowry 4. For examples of postwar memoirs that presented a sanitized version of the war, Lowry points to Kate Cummings's *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War* (1866) and Carlton McCarthy's *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life* (1882). Also of note, Colonel and later President James Garfield's large collection of wartime letters was not published until 1964, under the title, *The Wild Life of the Army* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1964). The subtitle was added by the editor, Williams Frederick, not Garfield himself. Despite its title, the book made no mention of gambling, drinking, or whoring.

²⁶⁶ Jesse Reid to his wife, June 1861, cited in Lowry 32.

²⁶⁷ John Sullivan Knapp to Nathan M. Knapp, 20 October 1861, Knapp Family Papers, USAMHI. For a cultural history men's gambling and drinking habits in Victorian America, see Richard

Presumably, M.W. did not inform his mother he had broken his promise to her, but his infractions predictably made their way into the letters his brothers-in-arms wrote home. M. W. could only rely on Knapp's father at home to keep silent regarding the moral failings of their soldier boys at the front lines.

Conclusion

The social dynamics and regulated spatial boundaries of the regiments can lead scholars to overestimate the willingness of soldiers to share all kinds of information with each other. As Jason Phillips writes, "Whether in combat, on the march, or at camp, soldiers lived in a confined environment." Combined with soldiers' propensity to indulge in rumor-mongering and gossip-spreading, Phillips concludes that "few secrets existed within the company."²⁶⁸ On the contrary, the secrets were there. Soldiers loved to gossip about others even as they exerted calculated efforts to protect and guard the most sensitive details of their private lives against the inquisitive eyes and free-flowing pens of their comrades. In a sense, soldiers had to invent privacy precisely because they had secrets to hide. Since they had almost no personal space where they could hide from public inspection, Billy Yank and Johnny Reb looked to letters as safe vessels for sheltering and sharing their emotions, misdeeds, and mistakes. Military life generated a host of secrets, some trivial and harmless, others sufficient to sink a man's public reputation.

Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

²⁶⁸ Jason Phillips, "The Grape Vine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence," *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 4 (November 2006): 777.

More often than not, female epistolary confidants served as the tight-lipped caretakers and prudent guardians of these men's secrets. In the words of one rebel, "I can keep a secret from everyone except my wife, so she need not fear telling me."²⁶⁹ The men relied on and trusted their women to protect their individual masculine reputation, and by extension, masculinity as a social and cultural system. Hence, the confessions the soldiers at the front lines shared with their wives, girlfriends, sisters, and female relatives revealed the sharp contrast between how men actually understood their masculine identities and the ideals of masculinity promulgated in the public discourse. If nothing else, the ideal of military service as the exclusive proving ground of masculine honor and identity depended on the complicity of women who maintained a discrete silence.

²⁶⁹ Charles Roberts to his wife, 30 January 1863, Charles Roberts Collection, UMCL.

Chapter 4: Loose Lips, Open Hearts

“I May Have Spoken of Matters not Intended for the Public”

Civil War soldiers saw the personal letter as their literary fiefdom. Letter writing constituted a private realm free from the onerous military regulations and command authorities that exercised so much control over their daily lives and routines. The natural propensity of soldiers to proclaim their military exploits, combined with curiosity and the sheer desire to share information with the home folks made these letter writers eager and careless. Most recruits and draftees had no prior experience living for prolonged periods in large camp communities. For many young men and teenage boys, the war marked their first time away from home. Civil War armies did not impose any effective system of censorship on what soldiers could record in their letters and diaries.²⁷⁰ Plus, as a way of shoring up morale on the home front, town and state newspapers regularly printed letters composed by local residents serving at the front. Left to their own devices, with an eager audience at home, free from oversight by the military command, and restrained by only by common sense and supplies of writing instruments, soldiers wrote on whatever topic they pleased.

Even the women at the home front understood that the conduct of war required strict control of what passed through information channels. At the start of the war Alice Grierson wrote to her husband, then just newly enlisted in the Union

²⁷⁰ James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12.

army, "I suppose whatever you may know of intended military plans of operation you are not at liberty to tell your friends."²⁷¹ Her common sense understanding of military protocol exceeded those of the men in uniform. Most soldiers had an appallingly laissez faire attitude bordering on insouciance towards any notion of military secrecy. Sensitive details about ongoing operations appeared frequently in letters sent home. The more astute members of the Civil War armies did show a consciousness of what they could share about military life and what they could not. Lest people outside the family and particularly the enemy should intercept his sister's letters, Confederate lieutenant William C. C. Vaught implored her to be "be careful what you say – Do not mention anything about this army...Do not mention this place you write from."²⁷² Likewise, Henry C. Semple, a rebel artillery officer stationed near Pensacola, Florida bragged to his wife, "The men at the fort have worked like beavers and now the fort is stronger & safer than it ever was." Yet Henry had the common sense to know that his account of Confederate defensive preparations should never enter into the public realm. Rather than destroy the letter he added a word of caution immediately after his boast: "You must not permit anyone to speak of anything in this letter as coming from me - I may have spoken of matters not intended for the public."²⁷³

The letters of some soldiers indicate they needed authorization to discuss certain items. Confederate James W. Harris conscientiously complied. In the early

²⁷¹ Alice Grierson to Benjamin Grierson, 23 May 1861; Benjamin H. Grierson Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

²⁷² William C. C. Vaught to his sister Mary, 4 July 1862, William C. D. Vaught letters, Historic New Orleans Collections, Williams Research Center (hereinafter HNOC).

²⁷³ Henry C. Semple to his wife Emily, 27 November 1861, Henry C. Semple Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Southern Historical Collection (hereinafter UNC).

days of the war Harris found himself assigned to the defenses at Yorktown, not far from Richmond. While there, he boasted to his sister, "I wish you could be here to see what work has been done and how well fortified we are against the enemy." Harris purposely left out the details since, as he put it, "We have been prohibited from writing home of the number of men here and giving descriptions of the entrenches."²⁷⁴ An obliging and mindful Texan wrote to his female correspondent, "I might give you some items that would interest you with regard to the movement of our troops and gun boat – if permitted to do so."²⁷⁵ Along similar lines, a Kentucky cavalryman informed his sister, "We have not much news to write, if we had permission, but I believe news is prohibited."²⁷⁶ One Union trooper deployed near Beaufort, South Carolina tried to keep his sister abreast of his whereabouts, but as he put it, "At Beaufort are we but came near being somewhere else, where I shall not pretend to say, as we are prohibited from writing anything concerning the operations and movements here."²⁷⁷

For every instance of discretion, self-restraint, and obedience to military protocol, the counter-examples proved in equal if not greater numbers. A Union colonel, William W. Teall, had a habit of telling his wife highly critical information regarding the Army of the Potomac's offensive operations in late 1862: "The line of

²⁷⁴ James Harris to his sister, 23 July 1861, Harris Family Letters; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Hoole Special Collections Library (hereinafter UAL).

²⁷⁵ James C. Bates to Mootie Johnson, 24 April 1862, in Richard Lowe, ed., *A Texas Cavalry Officer's Civil War: The Diary and Letter of James C. Bates* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 108.

²⁷⁶ Robert Winn to his sister, 22 May 1862, Winn-Cook Family Papers, Filson Historical Society (hereinafter FHS).

²⁷⁷ Charles Griswold to Mary Griswold, 3 Aug. 1864, Griswold Family Letters, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division (hereinafter NYPL).

march will be to Fredericksburg (this is a secret) which we shall reach probably in 2 days after we start by forced marches.” Not only did the colonel violate military directives but he also entrusted his wife with keeping such details to herself. In a letter written two weeks later Teall mentioned that “at least 25000 troops leave Washington this morning to join us & our bridges will be thrown across the Rappahannock 9 miles below this on Thursday next.” A soldier could justify such indiscretions by pointing to the delay caused by the letter’s time lag, the expected interval between writing and receipt. Though Teall reminded his wife, “This my dear is strictly confidential,” he justified his court-martial worthy offense in such terms: “I know you will not make an improper use of it. However in the delays attending the transmission of our mail matter, you may learn of it through the public prints before this reaches you.”²⁷⁸ Still, the dangerous habit of unguarded talk practiced by men like Teall suggests that soldiers could not be trusted to exercise self-censorship when conversing by the mail with their closest confidants.

Perhaps in response to cases where epistolary recipients did make “improper use” of letters written by bored or careless soldiers from the front, the Union high command in August 1863 issued General Orders No. 66 which forbade soldiers from giving military information to friends or to the public press.²⁷⁹ Yet, as Captain John F. Irwin of the 149th Pennsylvania pointed out to his father just a

²⁷⁸ William W. Teall to his wife, 12 and 29 November 1862, William W. Teall Correspondence, TSLA. Teall’s letter of 29 December 1862 revealed in detail the attack plans while reminding his wife he trusted her not publicize the information: “I will now tell you a secret. I know you will not divulge it before the proper time. In the morning 1500 Cavalry under Averill will cross the ford above here & strike at once for Richmond & Petersburg going entirely around them.”

²⁷⁹ Virginia Matzke Adams, “Introduction,” Virginia Matzke Adams, ed. *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier’s Civil War Letters from the Front, Corporal James Henry Gooding* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), xxxiv.

month later, the prohibition was more honored in the breach than in the observance, despite a system for punishing such offenders. "We are strictly prohibited from writing anything in regard to future movements although it is done to some extent but entirely wrong," wrote Irwin, "and the persons doing so liable to punishment."²⁸⁰ Even with formal orders in place, the urge to write on all and any topic proved a hard habit to forgo. One Indiana volunteer shared with his wife the camp rumors spread by "some of the boys says that all the letters are opened at the office & if there is any thing about the army that the rebels could get any information from they dont go." Admitted the Hoosier, "I have wrote something about things here in most every letter."²⁸¹

"Write More Gossip"

Not all soldiers believed that the women at home could keep their mouths shut and their letters hidden. The complaint of Massachusetts soldier, John Andrew Fox, to his sister suggests the channels of gossip linking the regimental campmates with the neighborhood circles they left behind:

Don't young women have anything to do besides attend to other people's business? I have a talk with somebody who corresponds with some lady at home and the first I know some out-of-the-way person knows some other person and a secret telegraph is established and characters and private history and little peculiarities and one's past experience are all overhauled and pulled about and passed round till you begin to fear the feminine world knows much about you that you

²⁸⁰ John F. Irwin to his father, 21 September 1863, John Fisher Irwin Papers, United States Army Military History Institute (hereinafter USAMHI).

²⁸¹ Isaac Little to his wife, 24 September 1862, Isaac Little Letters, FHS.

would like to know yourself if it were not for displaying an impertinent curiosity.²⁸²

Just as revealing, in chiding his sister – and by extension all women - Fox expressed his annoyance at the female gender for being fundamentally nosier and more prone to gossip and the spilling of secrets, all of which he found to be “impertinent,” that is, transgressing the norms of good, respectable behavior.

The tales and incidents soldiers recounted in their letters indicate that they themselves committed plenty of impertinent acts that drew unfavorable attention. Camp life, for better or worse, generated activities that became the subject of gossip, should any particular soldier report such information about his comrades to his correspondents. At its most basic level, gossip was readily available information about others, though the subject of such gossip probably wanted such information to remain secret. The journalist Gail Collins contends that “the classic form of gossip” is “unverified information about a person’s private life that he or she might prefer to keep hidden.”²⁸³ In their anthology on the subject, Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost define gossip as a form of “private talk.”²⁸⁴ As is the nature of gossip, people talked about the foibles of others, while they hoped to screen information about themselves so that they did not become the subject of unfavorable chatter. Patricia Meyer Spacks points out the “troubling aspect of gossip is its blurring of

²⁸² John Andrew Fox to his sister Feroline, 12 November 1863, Fox Family Papers, Series V, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereinafter MHS).

²⁸³ Gail Collins, *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics* (New York: William Morrow 1998), 6.

²⁸⁴ Feeley and Frost, 4. This conception of privacy provides the foundational framework for their anthology, *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

lines that we prefer to keep distinct....One can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, how and by whom it is understood.”²⁸⁵ Along similar lines Lane argues that containment of falsehoods, that is, curtailing their spread, is crucial to maintaining some sense of control over the information spread about oneself. “[A]t least once the gossip is localized,” he writes, “it is possible to correct the most egregious misstatements.”²⁸⁶

In reality, transmission by word of mouth or pen and paper, facilitated by the close proximity of the men next to each other, made it difficult to localize any tidbit of news, no matter how outlandish or incredible. Within the camps, the military high command censored neither incoming nor outgoing mail. Hence, gossip, among other kinds of information, filled the letters transiting between the regiments in the field and their civilian relations back at home. Not everyone saw this fact of military life as a positive virtue or even a necessary evil. In early 1865, a lieutenant colonel in the Army of Northern Virginia sought to justify to his mother the “barrenness” his letters by proclaiming his refusal to participate in the “loathsome” activity:

I don’t think my letters in the past have been remarkable for the amount of sensational news they contained and in future perhaps you may have cause to grumble at their barrenness in this respect. I have been so disgusted and vexed by that class of long faced newsmongers and sombre visage rumour bearers that are constantly on the lookout for news....They are very much like another institution of the army and scarcely less loathsome, I mean vermin. It seems impossible for an army to get clear of either entirely.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 6.

²⁸⁶ Lane, 56.

²⁸⁷ William Thomas Poague to his mother, 17 March 1865, cited in Monroe F. Cockrell, ed., *Gunner with Stonewall: Reminiscences of William Thomas Poague* (Jackson, TN: McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc., 1957), 152.

While few soldiers could claim to match this particular Confederate in either epistolary eloquence or supreme disgust for gossip, all had at least some inkling of how gossip worked and the ease by which it disseminated through epistolary networks. The rare individuals who showed utmost self-discipline and resisted indulging in gossip found themselves greatly outnumbered by more than happy and willing participants.

Gossip flourished in the social environment of the Civil War camps, where everyone's life became readily available to observation and reporting by others. Spacks argues that gossip in its most extreme form "manifests itself as distilled malice" that "plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others." "Gossip," she writes, "can effect incalculable harm."²⁸⁸ Men like Madison Bowler knew full well that the dynamics of rumor-mongering made every person's actions, no matter how innocuous or well-meaning, a subject of talk for the folks at home. In 1863 Bowler complained to his wife of his dissatisfaction with his cook. The Minnesotan officer thought about hiring "contraband," that is, "colored women...who know how to cook." However, he apparently shot down this idea. Perhaps he suspected that his having a personal servant in the form of a black woman could lead to suspicion about her being a prostitute. As Bowler put it to his wife, "I do not relish the idea of having one about to furnish material for stories to go

²⁸⁸ Spacks, *Gossip*, 4

home to you.”²⁸⁹ Surrounded nearly at all times by social acquaintances and family members, a soldier’s misconduct and private vices quickly became public knowledge. Whether or not such scandalous or embarrassing information made its way to the soldiers’ home communities depended in large part on their campmates’ proclivity to gossip and tattle in their letters home.

Soldiers’ habit of sharing with the home folks all the details of their adventures in faraway places often involved coverage of comrades’ amorous deeds. When his unit, the 3rd U.S. Colored Troops deployed to Jacksonville, Florida, Tillman Valentine faithfully reported to his wife back in Pennsylvania that his regimental mates, married and single alike, had paired up with the local free black women. “[A]ll the boys has girsl [sic],” but less his wife suspected him of infidelity, he assured her, “you neade not think that i have any galls [girls] here for i have not any...I think to [sic] much of my little Children for that.” Ironically, Sergeant Valentine, who signed off as “your true husband,” deserted his Pennsylvanian wife and children and married a Florida native at the end of the war without having divorced his first wife.²⁹⁰

Just as the relatives desired for stories, scandalous or not, from the front lines – which soldiers generously furnished – the troops routinely commanded, begged, and pleaded with their correspondents to write. Content seemed to have of hardly

²⁸⁹ Madison Bowler to Lizzie Bowler, 15 April 1863, cited in Andrea R. Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It Your Duty: A Minnesota Couple’s Civil War Letters* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 157. Bowler had good reason to mind his conduct. Like most Civil War units, Company F of the 3rd Minnesota was fairly homogenous; eleven other men from Bowler’s hometown served alongside him in Company F, and overall, some 70% of the company’s strength came from Dakota County alone. Foroughi, 26.

²⁹⁰ Tillman Valentine to his wife Annie, 25 April 1864, cited in White, et. al., 186, 187.

mattered as long as loved ones kept their promise to maintain contact through the mail. One Union infantryman wrote back from Tennessee to his wife in Kentucky, “tell mee all about the times up there.”²⁹¹ Another bluecoat, while serving in Mississippi, commanded his sister to “Write more regularly...long letters containing all the news.”²⁹² A Tennessean urged his correspondents not to second guess themselves. As he explained to his family:

[Y]ou say the reason you did not write is that you thought you could not write any thing that would give any body any satisfaction. I cannot write any thing that would give any body any satisfaction but I can keep begging you all to write to me.²⁹³

To have everyone write to him, and as often as possible, proved all that this particular rebel wanted.

Most soldiers, however, offered guidelines as to what they wanted in letters from loved ones. Countless letters from camp echoed the request that Paul M. Higginbotham, of the 19th Virginia, made of his brother Aaron, “You must write as often as you can, and let me know how all are, and how things are going on at home, and in the neighborhood.”²⁹⁴ Charles S. Brown, of the 21st Michigan, even laid out the specific information he sought from the neighborhood grapevine: “tell me all the minutiae of everything all I hear from in Flint...keep me posted in matters & things about town who is married or dead or got a baby or has any body been murdered

²⁹¹ Juniper Watters to Permela Waters, 22 May 1862, Watters-Curtis Family Papers, FHS.

²⁹² William H. Ball to his sister Lib, 13 August 1862, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI.

²⁹³ John F. Owen to his family, 23 December 1861, Owen Family Letters, Putnam County Archives, Tennessee.

²⁹⁴ Paul M. Higginbotham to Aaron Higginbotham, date unknown but probably 1864, Paul M. Higginbotham Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereinafter VHS).

&c.”²⁹⁵ The variety of gossip favored by the troops, it seemed, ran from the mundane to the morbid.

Such idle talk and tidbits of home life have not found a receptive ear among some historians who regard them as peripheral to the significance of the war or even as a distraction to narrative unfolding of campaigns and battles. One scholar decried how “the contents of even lengthy letters and diaries are given over largely to family gossip and unimaginative routine comments,” thus rendering them bereft of “truly lasting worth.”²⁹⁶ Such criticism ignores the intense psychological and emotional value that the troops attached to “matters & things about town.” The men clamored for news, whether gleaned from local papers and letters or through the rumor mill.²⁹⁷ Far away from home, Civil War soldiers sought the kind of intimate connection provided by the banal details of domestic life complimented with tales of scandals, secrets, foibles, and the melodramatic happenings of the hearths and neighborhoods they left behind. Gossip, then, provided the immediacy and inside knowledge that allowed these men to retain both their identities as civilians and their active membership in the social circles they inhabited before the war.

The close-knit social character of regimental units magnified what Chartier considers a key function of letter writing and sharing. Letters, and the

²⁹⁵ Charles S. Brown to his sister, 25 May 1864, Jay Luvaas Collection, USAMHI.

²⁹⁶ Frank L. Byrne, “Introduction,” *Uncommon Soldiers: Harvey Reid and the 22nd Wisconsin March with Sherman*, ed. Frank L. Byrne (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), xv. xviii.

²⁹⁷ Rumors, Jason Phillips writes in his study of Confederate soldiers’ will to fight in the later years of the war, “offered soldiers an empowering channel, or grapevine, of expression.... Whether true or false, news traveled far and fast because thousands corresponded with loved ones.” Jason Phillips, “The Grape Vine Telegraph: Rumors and Confederate Persistence,” *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 4 (November 2006): 755.

dissemination of their information contents, acted as vehicles for social bonding and group identity formation. “[A]t the level of the community – whether family, village, workmates or political associates,” he writes, “the goal of letter-writing was to cement, maintain and extend the bonds of social life and solidarity.”²⁹⁸ As one Union veteran recalled in his postwar account of army life:

[E]venings were the time of sociability and reminiscence....It was then that men from the same town or neighborhood got together and exchanged gossip. Each one would produce recent letters giving interesting information about mutual friends or acquaintances, telling that such a girl or old schoolmate was married; that such a man had enlisted in such a regiment.²⁹⁹

For Chartier, letters acted as powerful means of reinforcing collective social identities by allowing the sharing of information between group members separated by distance. Feeley and Frost, however, point to gossip’s inherently divisive nature:

Gossip occurs within distinct social groups, such as families, networks of friends and colleagues, and communities....gossip builds on and furthers interpersonal intimacy and trust...The process of gossiping cultivates social relationships and a sense of solidarity. For many participants, this outcome or “we ness” is often more important than the information shared. Gossip...leads to exchanges among participants, creates social ties and connections, and builds a sense of community. While gossip contributes to camaraderie within groups, it simultaneously establishes or reinforces who remains outside....By

²⁹⁸ Chartier, 15. Henkin also argues along similar lines: “In an era of widespread transition and dislocation, the posted letter became for many Americans a powerful symbol of personal continuity and a badge of membership in some distant network of personal relations.” Henkin, 120

²⁹⁹ John D. Billings, *Hard Tack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky and Konecky LLC, 1888; reprint edition J. G. Press), 68. Billings served with the 10th Massachusetts Volunteer Artillery Battery, a unit that saw action with the Army of the Potomac.

identifying who is “in” and who is “out,” gossip fosters both social inclusion and exclusion.³⁰⁰

For Feeley and Frost, the sharing of information via gossip does more than aid socialization; gossip also imposes boundaries, structure, and hierarchy on a social group since not everyone has equal access.

Everyone in the soldier’s network of correspondents counted as a source of news, but the evidence suggests that men knew who in their social circles had the inside track on the local scuttlebutt. While deployed in Mississippi, William H. Ball, of the 5th Wisconsin Battery, laid down a challenge to his brother at home: “I want to hear Monroe [Ball’s hometown] gossip. Who can gratify me?” Yet, when addressing his sister several days later, Ball discretely assigned a mission to her: “Private for you: Write more gossip.”³⁰¹ Likewise, a Confederate soldier told his sister that he wanted to “know how all is at home and all of the [news],” and yet followed up the request with the unequivocal command, “Do not let any bodie read this except Sister Mat or Mother.”³⁰² A Texan, John B. Ray, showed no discretion in expressing what information he wanted and who he believed could best provide it. The rebel admitted to his sister that he had “nothing to wright” but asked her to keep him informed, particularly in regards to one facet of neighborhood life: “Martha you must write to me and tell me al of the nuse you must tell me how the girls look and

³⁰⁰ Feeley and Frost, 8. See also Brian Rouleau’s work on folklore as a shared body of knowledge that allowed sailors to both air their misgivings and build a sense of community and belonging. Brian Rouleau, “Dead Men Do Tell Tales: Folklore, Fraternity, and the Forecastle,” *Early American Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2007): 48, 57.

³⁰¹ William H. Ball to his brother, 17 June 1862, and to his sister, 21 June 1862, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI.

³⁰² John H. Hill to his sister Mary Scott, 1 July 1863, John H. Hill papers, University of Texas at Austin; Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (hereinafter DBC).

whether there are any talk of any of the girls marrying or not.” Most tellingly, by the passage’s end, Ray had commanded his sister, mother, and aunt to all write to him, as if implicitly acknowledging that his female relations would have access to, and would share willingly with him, the intimate details regarding the lives of the local citizenry, and especially its young women.³⁰³

In another instance, Confederate James W. Harris, responded to what he perceived as his sister’s self-imposed seclusion from society. He rationalized his intervention by claiming the masculine imperatives that took him away to war and yet allowed him to still claim an authoritative voice in her personal life:

Now Dear Sister this is my advice to you and perhaps it may be the last request that I will ever make of you, for there is no telling what day...if not through sickness, or some chance bullet from our enemy may carry me away from this world of troubles, no doubt you will think strange of me in advising you but [you] would expect something new from the wars, but I feel it my duty to do so, and perhaps this will be the only chance I will ever have.³⁰⁴

Her fault, as he as he told her, was that “you never leave the house to visit any body and no one to tell you what is transpiring in town.” Harris had a personal stake in his sister’s social life, or lack thereof, for as he put it, “I would like to hear all that’s going on about our little Town and what changes has taken place Since I left[.]”³⁰⁵ Hence, Harris’ affection for his sister and his self-interest in maintaining membership in the social circle dovetailed neatly. He discharged his sense of brotherly duty by urging her to venture more into society; yet his admonishment

³⁰³ John B. Ray to his sister Martha, 18 June 1863, John B. Ray Papers, DBC.

³⁰⁴ James W. Harris to his sister, 18 July 1861, Harris Family Letters, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library (hereinafter UAL).

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

also revealed his reliance upon his sister to gather the gossip of the town that he craved but could not attain unless through a female operative.

The correspondence of Charles Brewster, a Massachusetts volunteer, suggests how a soldiers' attitude to news of mundane happenings from home changed over time. In the early months of his service, he admitted to his aunt the quality that distinguished her letters, "I like your letters because they are longer than the others tell them to write everything whether it appears of any consequence or not to them." Later in the war, he clarified to his correspondents, and perhaps even to himself, his revised outlook:

Your gossiping letter as you call it is just what I like, for although I don't like gossiping at home, it is quite a different matter when it comes to letters. at home one hears the same thing over + over again, until you get sick of it, but out hear he has to depend upon letters entirely, you would be astonished to know unimportant items become of great interest when one is away from home so long.³⁰⁶

For Brewster, as for countless others in uniform, separation and distance caused by the war induced a newfound taste for the gossip that the women in his family apparently had in liberal supply.

Soldiers' letters indicate that they openly admitted their desire for, indeed their indulgence in gossip. "[W]rite to us all the home news and home 'gossip,'" went an anonymous soldier's letter published in the *Rockville Parke County Republican*, an Indiana newspaper, in June 1864.³⁰⁷ Such an outright public

³⁰⁶ Charles Brewster to his Aunt Lu, 3 September 1861, and to his mother, 21 November 1863, in *Blight* 10, 268.

³⁰⁷ Cited in Thomas E. Rodgers, "Civil War Letters as Historical Sources," *Indiana Magazine of History* 93, no. 2 (June 1997): 105.

declaration belies many soldiers' ambivalent attitude towards the practice of gossip. The Civil War placed large numbers of men together in long-term regimental and camp communities. The men naturally gossiped among themselves, but in their letters, they rarely ever admitted they indulged in the practice, fearing, as Andrea Friedman has pointed out, that such chatter would make them look effeminate.³⁰⁸ Gossip often has female connotations; men discuss but women gossip. Indeed, the low social and informational value assigned to gossip arises in part from its exclusive association with women, according Kimberly Wilmot Voss.³⁰⁹ The first known instance of a man assigning feminine (and thus, negative) traits to gossip dates back to Dr. Johnson's 1755 dictionary, which defined a gossip as "One who runs about tattling like women at a lying in."³¹⁰ "Popular understandings of gossip continue its negative association with women's talk," writes Feeley and Frost. However, the historical evidence, they contend, shows that "both women and men engaging in the practice of gossip in equal measure."³¹¹ The soldiers of the Civil War more or less demonstrated unequivocally the veracity of Feeley and Frost's claim, though bluecoats and rebels alike tended to shy away from saying so in outright terms. "I wish to mention I had a letter from a friend who gives me all the

³⁰⁸ Andrea Friedman, "When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History," Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri; 18 April 2015. For more on how men's participation in gossip delegitimizes them in the political sphere, see Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavendar Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics," *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History*, Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost, eds., (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 203-224.

³⁰⁹ Kimberly Wilmot Voss, "Gossip in the Women's Pages: Legitimizing the Work of Female Journalists in the 1950s and 1960s," *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History*, ed. Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 183.

³¹⁰ Feeley and Frost, 4.

³¹¹ *Ibid.* The point is repeated in Voss, 183 and Spacks, *Gossip*, 25-26.

gossip of the city [St. Louis] and including most of my friends,” boasted James E. Love, a Union infantryman from St. Louis. With a sense of bemusement at how civilians and soldiers shared a common love for gossip, Love concluded, “Folks will talke somehow.”³¹²

“I Don’t Act Very Manly But the Tears Will Come.”

Soldiers loved to talk and spread gossip, but they showed particular care when it came to the subject of romantic intimacy. In the early stages of courtship a soldier might curry favor with his sweetheart by telling her that she could share his letters with her parents. This proved the case for John F. Probst, a young soldier in the 25th Wisconsin, who sent public letters to Mary Englesby in the opening stages of their friendly correspondence. As their relationship blossomed into courtship, his letters became more personal and more private. Interestingly, Probst waited until near the end of war before trying his hand at courtly poetry; conscious of his first attempt to compose romantic verses, Probst implored Mary, “[Y]ou must not show them to anyone but yourself. Laugh at them but do not let others laugh at me.”³¹³ Probst’s adherence to the model of a masculine suitor intertwined with his earnest desire to avoid public humiliation or ridicule should either his love proclamations fall short of the literary standards or worse, his letters reveal an unmanly sentimentality.

³¹² James E. Love, to Molly Wilson, 22 August 1862, James E. Love Papers, Missouri History Museum and Library (hereinafter MHML). Though from Missouri, Love served with the 8th Kansas at this time.

³¹³ John F. Brobst to Mary Englesby, 1 March 1865, cited in Margaret Brobst Roth, ed., *Well Mary: Civil War Letters of a Wisconsin Volunteer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1960), 116.

In earlier generations the public outpourings of feeling were not only accepted but was actually expected of a soldier, and especially of an officer. Yuval Noah Harari writes that during the Revolutionary War “both British and American officers (as against American common soldiers) publicly wept at the execution of Major André (Benedict Arnold’s British accomplice). One American officer stated that he left the field ‘in a flood of tears,’ another wrote that the scene excited the ‘compassion of every man of feeling and sentiment.’”³¹⁴ Sensibility, argues Sarah Knott, operated in the eighteenth century as a class marker that distinguished the gentleman officer from the coarse common foot soldier. In the eyes of his superiors the lowly grunt’s supposed lack of deep feelings rendered him an insensitive brute, fit only to be commanded and not to command.³¹⁵

Yet, by the antebellum period, the cultural constellations that defined martial virtues had changed. Commoners gained access to both the franchise and the highest echelons of the military hierarchy.³¹⁶ Democratization of electoral politics and the officer corps went hand in hand with increasing attention paid to war memoirs written by foot soldiers.³¹⁷ At the same time, sentimentality lost its status as a class marker and became confined to the private sphere. As Stephen Berry points out, “Men of the nineteenth century were encouraged to cloak their hearts

³¹⁴ Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 158.

³¹⁵ Sarah Knott, ‘Sensibility and the American War for Independence,’ *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2004), 19–41. See also Knott’s *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

³¹⁶ Joseph Allen Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 3.

³¹⁷ Harari, 190.

and stifle their doubts.”³¹⁸ Manhood, according to Joe L. Dubbert, rested on the ability to acquire and rise up through the social ranks; such ruthless, single-minded pursuit of social mobility did not cultivate sentimentality, “a symptom of weakness that manly men avoided.”³¹⁹ Thus, while soldiers like Probst professed on paper their deepest feelings, such admissions of vulnerability came with reminders to keep these matters private, less they endanger the soldier’s masculine image within his social network.

The dominant constructions of manhood in antebellum America circumscribed the range of sentiments American men could freely express in public. However, with private letters, men revealed both an expansive palette of emotions and the literary ability to articulate clearly these feelings. Indeed, Karen Lystra’s analysis of nineteenth century American love letters demolishes the stereotype of the tight-lipped, repressive, emotionally unexpressive Victorian male. Writes Lystra, “The evidence of love letters suggests that both sexes generally accepted the private range, depth, and intensity of men’s feelings as normal.”³²⁰ According to Lystra, the prevailing cultural norms of Victorian America encouraged men to commit to paper their declarations of affection and longing for their girlfriends,

³¹⁸ Stephen W. Berry II, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

³¹⁹ Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1979), 15. For masculinity in nineteenth century America, see Marc C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

³²⁰ Lystra, 20-21. Michael Barton, however, argues that cultural norms allowed Victorian men less room for sentimentality compared to their female counterparts. See Barton, *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 73.

wives, and children. Yet, soldiers had to balance the desire to express heartfelt sentiments and vulnerabilities with the need to keep such intimate revelations known only to a private audience. As Alabaman infantryman explained to his wife, "I know when you get letters from me every body has to hear them read and so I am debarred from the privilege of talking love as it looks to me simple when penned."³²¹

Deep currents of idealized sentimentality girded family life in antebellum America; soldiers' letters regularly contained heartfelt declarations of homesickness and yearnings for the comforts of happy domesticity.³²² "I spend the most of mine thinking of home and its dear ones with their many charms and social pleasures and comforts," wrote one Virginian to his wife.³²³ A Union soldier, Henry Patterson, confessed to his "Dear ones at home" that life in the military and deployment to faraway battle lines changed his perspective on domestic life: "The comforts of home cannot be appreciated until one leaves them for the hardships of a soldiers life. I expect to enjoy them more when I get back than I did before."³²⁴

The "soldiers life" then, required soldiers to behave like men. In other words, the men were expected to publicly display a masculine hardiness and to show no

³²¹ Joel H. Puckett to Mary "Molly" Puckett, 10 February 1862, Joel H. Puckett Papers, DBC.

³²² Fred A. Shannon, for one, writes, "The homesickness of the men drove them to letter-writing." Shannon, "The Life of the Common Soldier in the Union Army, 1861-1865," *The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader*, ed. Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 103. Shannon's article first appeared in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13, no. 4 (March 1927): 465-482. For more on domesticity and private knowledge before the nineteenth century, see Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

³²³ Andrew Jackson Dawson to Milly Dawson, "Sunday in Oct. 1864", Andrew Jackson Dawson Letters, UVA.

³²⁴ Henry Patterson to his family, undated letter, probably 1862, Henry Patterson Letters, Newberry Library.

hint of “feminine” feelings.³²⁵ Letter writing gave men the private space in which they could give free reign to their identities as highly emotional beings. Admissions of sentimentality usually were entrusted to close female relations whom the soldier felt would keep the confession safe. A sergeant in the 20th Wisconsin confided to his daughter, “I am afraid I don’t act very manly but the tears will come. I wish I could see you and spend tomorrow with you, but I must stop or others will see...my weakness.”³²⁶ A Minnesotan officer made a similar confession to his wife, “[M]y heart is so full of home yearnings....I am so lonely here I hardly know how to contain myself.” In the postscript, he added, “I have just read this over and am almost ashamed to send it; but will for this once crowd down my shame and send it.”³²⁷

Epistolary expressions of sentimental longings for home and family went hand in hand with explicit orders to keep the contents of these letters private. Typical of many soldiers’ correspondences, the letters of William W. Martin, of the 22nd South Carolina, contained repeated declarations of his homesickness, but he implored his wife to “keep this letter and dont you show it to nobody or tell them what is in it.”³²⁸ Men like Martin adhered to the belief that certain emotions were

³²⁵ John Lynn points out that camp life has long been an arena for gender tension and malleability. In the early modern period the women who accompanied the armies “chose to appropriate certain masculine traits to better deal with the physical and psychological demands of life on campaign.” The harshness of the military environment made it necessary for camp women to appear masculine but “would not allow men to compromise their masculinity.” John Lynn, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 51-55.

³²⁶ Jonathon Dwight Stevens to his daughter Mattie, 24 December 1862, Jonathon Dwight Stevens Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³²⁷ Madison Bowler to Lizzie Bowler, 23 October 1864 in Foroughi 259-260.

³²⁸ William W. Martin to Sarah Martin, 27 December 1864, Clemson University Library, Special Collections. See also Chartier, 19-20: “Family letters, sometimes the work of several hands and even more often read aloud by several people, often passed on or copied out, were not the place for intimate outpourings. They demanded restraint and a strict self-censorship that could only be

the natural and exclusive preserve of women. The belief compelled him and his male peers to deny a public existence to some of their deepest, most organic feelings. As Gayle Rubin has observed, “Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities.”³²⁹

“You Must Speak a Good Word for Me”

The reluctance of male soldiers to admit publically feelings they deemed feminine, and thus, weak and unmanly, stands in sharp contrast to how they diligently proclaimed, often to female correspondents, their undertaking of household chores while in camp. “[M]other i am Cooking for 20 men,” wrote David Manlux, a Missouri infantryman, “if ever I get out of the army I am going to live an old bach[elor] and do my own Cooking.”³³⁰ Everyday life for most soldiers consisted of executing both activities directly related to their identities as military professionals and mundane maintenance duties exactly like the household tasks usually defined as women’s labor in the peacetime civilian world. One Union soldier informed his mother, “I have all my cooking to do and all my washing and so many hours to drill every day.”³³¹

lifted when the person writing could count on the discretion of his or her addressee.” Lystra argues that the exclusivity and significance attached to private communications arise only because such correspondence and expressions could occur only out of the public light; see Lystra, 17.

³²⁹ Rubin in Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

³³⁰ David Manlux to his parents, 17 August 1862, David Manlux Letter, MHML. Manlux served in Company G of the 8th Missouri Infantry, a Union outfit.

³³¹ David Douglass, to his mother, 9 December 1862, David Douglass Papers, Library of Congress. Douglass wrote the letter while 79th Indiana was deployed to the “State of Tennessee.”

Soldiers acquired these domestic skills precisely because in their peacetime lives the presence of a mother, sister, or wife guaranteed the provision of these necessary services. Once removed from these sources of unpaid female labor, soldiers had to prepare their own meals and mend and wash their own clothes. Those soldiers less talented or with more money could outsource these tasks. Charles Roberts, a Confederate artilleryman, happily informed his wife that he had “drawn a pair of pants from the Quartermaster’s Department.” However he had to “send them out in the country tomorrow to be fixed up,” since as he put it, “I have no genius for tailoring.” Roberts’ text suggest that his seamless transition from his mother’s household care to that of his wife meant he had no incentive then, and no ability now, to mind his laundry: “If I had not married so early in life I should have acquired some skill in sewing on buttons and patching clothes.”³³²

Those soldiers who did master these “feminine” chores had a tendency to brag and publicize.³³³ The boasting began even before the actual fighting commenced. A Mississippian deployed to northern Virginia in the summer of 1861 reported that “we Boys have got to be very good cooks & washers & nice house keepers we keep ower tents clean & ower yards swept clean.” The rebel seemed eager to have his female correspondent pass along the news of his “soldiery

³³² Charles Roberts to his wife, 3 May 1863, Charles Roberts Charles Roberts Collection, University of Mississippi, J.D. Williams Library, Special Collections (hereinafter UMWL).

³³³ As John Lynn points out, in the early modern period soldiers who took on chores such as washing clothes risked ridicule. Such tasks were relegated entirely to the numerous female camp followers whose hard labor was vital to the operations of the armies. During the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the state gradually assumed control over the logistical functions performed by these women. By the nineteenth century, the professional state armies of the Union and Confederacy generally forbade women from living in the regimental camps, or limited such women only to the wives of officers. Hence, essential everyday tasks like cooking and cleaning fell entirely on the soldiers themselves. See Lynn, 1, 55.

appearance”: “you must speak a good word for me for I think I will make the Best housekeeper in the world.”³³⁴ Other soldiers openly proclaimed the superiority of the male sex in carrying out these vital chores. “I washed one and a half dozen of shirts and drawers, soled and heeled 4 pair of boots and done my cooking besides,” a Union private declared to his wife, “I think that will beat you women all to pieces.”³³⁵ Having done “a washing, ironing and drying all in a day,” William Ball rhetorically asked his sister, “Smarter than a woman, ain’t I?”³³⁶ Another volunteer recruit presumed that a few years’ worth of camp life had rendered the men superior to women when it came to domestic housekeeping. “I tell you we are COOKS now,” declared Clement Abner Boughton Perhaps, “I could learn the Wisconsin girls something about COOKING, especially by a camp fire.”³³⁷

Margaret R. Higonnet and Patrice L. R. Higonnet offer in their influential article, “The Double Helix,” a framework for understanding why soldiers boasted of their housekeeping prowess while bidding their confidants to keep secret the true extent of their men’s emotional life. Wartime, the Higonnets argue, can induce “a realignment of social territory.”³³⁸ Living in housing conditions with few if any women around, men like William Ball and Clement Abner Boughton found themselves occupying social and labor roles typically assigned to female members of

³³⁴ H. A. Stephens to his Elizabeth C. Lofton, 13 July 1861, John Guy Lofton Collection, UMWL.

³³⁵ William Wallace to his wife Sarah, 5 February 1862, William Wallace Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. Wallace served in the 3rd Wisconsin.

³³⁶ William H. Ball to his sister Lib, 21 June 1862, William H. Ball, USAMHI. Ball served with the 5th Wisconsin Battery.

³³⁷ Clement Abner Boughton to Boughton family, 3 February 1863, Clement Abner Boughton Papers, University of Michigan, Clements Library (hereinafter UMCL).

³³⁸ Margaret R. Higonnet and Patrice L. R. Higonnet, “The Double Helix,” *Behind The Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, Margaret Randolph Higonnet, et. al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987). 31.

the household. To paraphrase the Higonnets, gender sharply narrowed the parameters of how these men reflected on their newfound roles.³³⁹ Instead of seeing the onerous nature of these tasks or the low social value assigned to both such work and the female labor that performed these essential chores, the men emphasized their accomplishments and even their masculine superiority in executing these missions. The mundane household tasks that women were expected to perform without complaint became noteworthy endeavors, deserving of public recognition, when fulfilled by men.³⁴⁰ If circumstances forced men to compete with women in a contest that advantaged the latter, it was necessary for former to report that they would nonetheless win. However, in the realm of feelings the men treaded with more discretion. When Civil War soldiers trespassed into the territory of sentimentality seen as the sole and rightful sphere of women, the men devalued and indeed, kept secret their own emotional responses to the horrors of war and separation from their loved ones.

“When the Secret History of the War is Known”

In contrast to what William W. Martin wished for, his fellow Confederate, Council Bryan, an officer in the 5th Florida, preferred that everyone knew of the contents of one particular letter. Shortly after Gettysburg, Bryan expressed his disgust at how the Southern press failed to acknowledge the sacrifices and heroic deeds of the fighters from his home state in that recent battle. *The Floridian*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁴⁰ As Margaret R. Higonet and Patrice L. R. Higonet, write of gender relations during the World Wars, “Even when material conditions for women differ after the war, the fundamental devaluation of the tasks assigned to them remains.” Higonet and Higonet, 35.

discovered the veracity of what Union colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson noted during the war, that, “What is called military glory is a fitful and uncertain thing. Time and newspapers play strange tricks with reputations.”³⁴¹ The Richmond newspapers, according to Bryan, played a mean trick on him, for in their accounts of Gettysburg, they lavished unwarranted praise on the Virginian units at the expense of regiments like his own. Wrote an irate Bryan,

I see the Richmond papers gave all the credit of the hard fighting in the Centre to Pickett’s Division of Virginians, a more cowardly set of fellows never disgraced our uniform....When the Secret history of the war is Known, then we will get justice I hope.³⁴²

Bryan’s complaint suggests two sides to the war, the public news that everyone knew, and the “Secret history” of the war that only men like himself had known. In the least, by transmitting to his social circle his version of what happened at Gettysburg, this particular rebel created a dissenting voice against what he perceived as an unfair, and incomplete, public narrative, even if only a few of his friends and associates should ever know of it.

Men like Bryan who served in the very public capacity as soldiers saw the lack of public attention as demoralizing and a sign of ingratitude and injustice. In

³⁴¹ Cited in Louis P. Masur, ed., *The Real War Will Never Get into the Books: Selections from Writers During the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 187. The quote originally appeared in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Regular and Volunteer Officers,” *Atlantic Monthly* 14 September, 1864: 348-357. Besides his articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Higginson had two other notable claims to fame. He commanded the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally organized black regiment, from 1862-1864. After the war, he helped publish the works of the poet Emily Dickinson.

³⁴² Council Bryan, letter of 22 July 1863, cited in Zack C. Waters and James C. Edmonds, *A Small but Spartan Band: The Florida Brigade in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 86. Though only a captain at the time, Bryan assumed command of the 5th Florida after the regiment incurred severe losses on 2 July 1863 at Gettysburg.

contrast, female soldiers in disguise, while equally desirous of moral support from their networks of kin and friends, actually sought to stay out of the limelight. Indeed, for Sarah Wakeman and others like her, privacy and the ownership of personal information took on added significance. The maintenance of secrecy and confidentiality made possible both their epistolary lives and their continued service in the ranks. Even though she violated social norms and military regulations, Wakeman, like most soldiers, wrote regularly to not only her immediate family but also to friends and cousins, including several who served in the Union army.³⁴³ At the risk of having her identity exposed, she dared to sign off her letters with her real name instead of her alias. Thus, the members of her social network had incontrovertible proof in the form of her letters written from camp. Wakeman placed a great deal of trust in her correspondents, and the evidence suggests that none of them betrayed her. They, like Wakeman herself, kept the secret safe, and right to the grave too. When she died from disease during the disastrous Red River Campaign in June 1864, the Department of War had her buried beneath a headstone that bore the simple inscription, "Lyons Wakeman, N.Y." Even after her death, her family kept the letters, and by extension her military service, out of public view. Understandably, they made no effort to publicize their daughter's service and sacrifice in the postwar commemorations.

³⁴³ In her letter of her letter of 13 October 1863 Sarah Wakeman informed her parents that she spent the morning with Henry Austin and Perry Wilder, two friends known within the family circle. Wakeman's letter of 15 January 1863 contains a similar reference. See Lauren Cook Burgess, ed., *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1864* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23, 49.

The memoirs of veterans helped shape how Americans in the Gilded Age and beyond recalled and remembered about the Civil War. As Yuval Harari has noted, the turn of the nineteenth century saw the rise of not only literate armies but also a greater voice for the lowly grunts who could shape the public discourse on war through their personal reminiscences. Writes Harari, “[F]or the first time common soldiers could compose alternative war narratives of personal experiences – and expect these narratives to be published and read.”³⁴⁴ Yet Civil War veterans’ postwar narratives contributed to a version of public memory that sometimes erased or downplayed significant aspects of their wartime experience. For example, Daniel H. Sawtelle, of the 8th Maine, openly admitted to his sister Sophronia his feelings of despondency and bitterness during his unit’s tour of duty in South Carolina during June 1863. His words to her at the time contained an undeniable suggestion that he contemplated suicide:

I will tell you the truth. I am not decided what course to pursue. Sometimes I get to thinking and it makes me almost crazy [sic]. If we should be called into battle at such times I should soon find a way to end all such trouble. Had we gone into battle up to Charleston as I was in hope we should, you would have never see me again....³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Harari, 144, 190.

³⁴⁵ Daniel W. Sawtelle to his sister Caroline, 23 April 1863, cited in Peter H. ed. Buckingham, *All’s for the Best: The Civil War Reminiscences and Letters of Daniel W. Sawtelle, Eighth Maine Volunteer Infantry* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 234-235. Since its mustering, the 8th Maine suffered from persistent and enervating infighting within its officer ranks, a factor which no doubt contributed to the low morale among the troops like Sawtelle. For a case study of the long-term effects of war-induced traumatic stress on an individual regiment, see Leslie J. Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut’s Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014). Similar works include Eric T. Dean, Jr., *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

By letter's end, however, Sawtelle pulled himself back to a more hopeful disposition; yet mindful of what he had confided previously, he commanded his sister to erase forever the evidence of his bout with depression, lest the stigma of mental illness injure his public reputation. "I had better drop this subject," he wrote to her, "Before I do, I will ask you to burn this as soon as you read it."³⁴⁶

As it turned out, Sawtelle and the 8th Maine survived some of the worst fighting of the war and shared in the glory of Union victory in 1865. Sawtelle himself lived to a ripe old age of ninety-three, by which point he, like thousands of other veterans, had composed a memoir for public consumption. In contrast to what he had let his sister know about him during one of his lowest points in the war, in his memoir he painted a slightly different picture of what he and his unit went through at the time:

In the summer of '63 there were a great many sick soldiers and a great many wounded were brought to the big new hospital built on the shore....It was here that my comrade...McKinney died...and I was on the detail to bury him....[B]y this time it had got to be such a common thing that it made little impression on us. We felt as though we were standing on the very brink and to get dull or despondent meant a sure plunge. Many were the boys that lost their grip and went over the brink.³⁴⁷

While admitting to low morale and suicidal depression within the regiment, nowhere in his memoir did Sawtelle reveal his own brush with going "over the brink." The incontrovertible evidence of at least one "secret history" of the Civil War

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 235.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 54-55. For a discussion on the psychological stress suffered by Civil War soldiers and veterans, see Adams, *Living Hell*, 107-132, 200-201.

lay in the hands of Sophronia Sawtelle, who knew the details and kept them safe, hidden from public exposure.

The deliberate actions of Council Bryan, the Wakeman family, and Sophronia Sawtelle indicate the role of willful agency in shaping how Americans remembered the conflict and its meanings. In his seminal work, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, David Blight says of historical memories, “some survive and are refashioned into mythologies, and others are erased altogether.” By the early twentieth century the public mind came to see heroic sacrifice, epic valor, and national rebirth, rather than slavery and white supremacy, as the central issues of the Civil War. That kind of mythmaking, writes Blight, “grew in carefully cultivated soil, the harvest of human choices made by powerful leaders and ordinary folk. Collective memories are the source of group self-definition, but they are never solely the result of unthinking decisions.”³⁴⁸ The myth of sectional reconciliation erased fundamental facets of the war and entire categories of experiences and thoughts held dear by its participants at the time; that particular outcome, says Blight, came about as a direct result of individuals and social groups who consciously and deliberately sought to shape the nature of public memory.

The stories of Council Bryan, Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, and Daniel H. Sawtelle personified that process of selective memory making. Sawtelle and Bryan sought what they felt was their rightful share of their nation’s adulation; whereas the former succeeded in crafting a certain public image, thanks in part to the complicity

³⁴⁸ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 149, 388.

of his sister, the later failed in his endeavor to draw attention to the wartime contributions of himself and his fellow Floridians. The Wakeman family, by successfully suppressing their daughter's letters, helped to ensure that the public memory of the war's heroism would remain the exclusive domain of the male gender.³⁴⁹ In the postwar years, justice, that is, public recognition for their dutiful service, came to neither Sarah Rosetta Wakeman nor Council Bryan.

Council Bryan and Sarah Wakeman both played their part in the "secret history" of the Civil War, but their respective cases highlight several key similarities and differences. Both individuals recorded on paper their own personal accounts of what they witnessed and did, and then shared these written accounts with others. For Bryan, however, the letter allowed him to stake a claim to what he perceived as his regiment's fair share of public admiration, which no doubt could only enhance his social standing. For Wakeman, to remain hidden, and thus able to continue her service in the ranks, offered comfort and satisfaction enough. To further his reputation, Bryan sought to bring to light the hidden truth about the war; to save their family reputation, the Wakemans had no choice but to do the exact opposite.

Conclusion

Sarah Wakeman's case illustrates that soldiers, for various reasons, intended certain letters for sole consumption by a restricted audience. Her gender and her

³⁴⁹ Thomas Cardoza, for one, positions his work, *Intrepid Woman: Cantinières and Vivandières of the French Army* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010) as an explicit repudiation of the "widespread idea that women's participation in war is something new to the twentieth century." The perception that nineteenth-century women were on the periphery of military history, he writes, "is not just misguided; it is patently false." Cardoza, 4.

transgressions forced her family to hide her correspondence from public view. Indeed, the issue of gender figures prominently into the practice of letter writing and the management of privacy by Civil War soldiers. With the exception of several hundred women like Wakeman who fought in disguise as men, nearly all soldiers were men. While the home front readership included both genders of various ages, soldiers usually trusted epistolary confessions and secrets to sweethearts, wives, and a few other close female figures. While the men some times intentionally shielded their female relatives and love interests from knowledge about the horrors of war, paradoxically these women constituted the only ones whom the soldiers entrusted with such knowledge. That male soldiers felt comfortable making these personal revelations to their female contacts meant that these women knew some of the most sensitive details regarding the private lives of men at war. Their own testimonies indicate that men did not always prove themselves as macho, tough, patriotic, brave, and virtuous as postwar commemorations would like to believe.³⁵⁰ In reality, the men needed and sought to confide both their individual experiences and their sensitivities and emotional responses to the war; to fulfill that need, the soldiers often looked not to other men, but to women who then became co-owners and secret-sharers of their soldiers' inner thoughts.

Letter writing showed just far entrenched the cult of domesticity and sentimentality had become a male virtue. Nineteenth century norms allowed a broad sweep of masculine practices, as Broomall has pointed out in his study of

³⁵⁰ Lowry points out that when veterans sought to turn their wartime writings into published manuscripts, they deliberately left out the more salacious bits. "The soldier himself, now a respected citizen and veteran, was quick to blue-pencil the scandalous reality of his past before it reached the public." Lowry, 9.

Confederate soldiers.³⁵¹ Another critic of the so-called separate spheres doctrine has argued, “By imagining that the spheres metaphor physically divided nineteenth-century life into two arenas – a public realm for men and a private one for women – historians have tended to impose an inordinate segregation on the sexes.”³⁵² The confessions made by men to women, and the subject of these confessions, reveal a more nuanced view of the interdependence of men and women in mid-nineteenth century America. The conduct and thoughts of men and women did not confine themselves to the boundaries between the masculine world of public life and the feminine domain of the household and family. A Pennsylvanian admitted to his wife how the war had induced a change in his conception of manhood. “[T]his war has caused me to think in terly [entirely] diferent from what i did,” he wrote, “i feal my self a man and as if i ought to be a man and as if i ought to act as a man.” For this Union bluecoat, “to live like a man and give over all low and mean habets” meant to “be very car ful of my money and not spende one cent unnesurly” and to teaching “the children good maners.”³⁵³ Hence, within the confines of intimate correspondence, soldiers expanded and redefine the boundaries of masculinity.

³⁵¹ Broomall, 273.

³⁵² Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth Century North* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 2. Nancy Grey Osterud also criticizes the rigidity of the separate spheres concept by emphasizing the common culture shared by both women and men; she argues that “some women sought mutuality in cross-gender relationships rather than retreating into a separate women’s culture.” Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9.

³⁵³ Tillman Valentine to his wife Annie, 25 April 1864, cited in Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third U.S. Colored Troops,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139, no. 2 (April 2015), 184-185. Valentine’s letters constitute one of the few surviving collections written by an African-American soldier to his family members.

Manhood required exertion in both the public arena of the battlefield and in private realm of childrearing and household management.

In their letters, the men yearned for the delights of home, for neighborhood gossip, for affection and female love, but that was not something they could say in public letters. Men's sentimentality, their domestic sensibilities, and their shortcomings operated in the shadows of war but were at the center of epistolary exchanges. The practice of letter writing, at least, made men more mindful of home, or more willing to express it on paper – even if they remained sensitive to how other men will perceive them for thinking about the comforts of home instead of the glories of battle and duty to country. In sum, to look at letters as vehicles for exclusive information exchanges between men and women in wartime is to recapture the importance of men's social attachments and not incidentally, an understanding of the war as an experience shared by both sexes, though often in secret.

Chapter 5: The Disruption of Privacy

“To Break Open Other Peoples Letters”

The Civil War spurred a steady traffic in correspondence between soldiers and their home communities; personal letters filled the post mailbags and the coat pockets of comrades transiting between the home front and the battlefield. One Yankee with a penchant for meticulous record keeping reported that he wrote 163 letters in 1863, 109 of which were to his homefolk and 55 “to other friends.” He composed an additional 37 letters for presumably illiterate comrades. In return, he received a total of 85 letters.³⁵⁴ Considering that annual postal letter output in 1860 amounted to about five letters per person, this particular Yankee had an epistolary output forty times the national average. Though few soldiers could rack up such impressive numbers, many if not most of them composed letters at rates far above their peacetime levels.

Precisely because they wrote so often and because they attached so much worth to their personal mail, these men grew attuned to how wartime conditions created or intensified conditions precarious to the security of their private letters. The act of committing sensitive personal information to paper intended for consumption by a restricted audience required the author to implicitly trust all persons who handled the message. As David J. Seipp notes, the first organized mail service in the colonial period offered an alternative to the well-worn method of

³⁵⁴ Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952; reprint Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 183.

asking a friend or acquaintance to carry one's mail. For the new system to work, however, customers had to feel comfortable with letting strangers, albeit institutional employees, handle the protection and transmission of their messages. According to Seipp, "[T]he hands that carried one's private correspondence were not those of a paid messenger or personal friend, but of an unknown person who had to be implicitly trusted."³⁵⁵

Since the earliest days of the Republic postal policies steadily increased safeguards designed to prevent invasions of personal mail.³⁵⁶ The 1792 Post Office Act both established the national postal system and firmly embedded the concept of communications privacy into law and postal policy.³⁵⁷ "The immunity of the mail to government inspection and interference," writes David M. Henken in *The Postal Age*, "had been a legal cornerstone of the American postal system since 1792."³⁵⁸ Yet as

³⁵⁵ David J. Seipp, *The Right to Privacy in American History*, Program on Information Resources Policy, Publication P-78-3 (Cambridge: Harvard University; 1978), 11.

³⁵⁶ Indeed, the political revolutions in the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth century challenged the long-standing government policy of reading people's private letters. The French revolutionaries of 1789 took seriously the issue of postal surveillance by the national authorities. According to Daniel R. Headrick, "In the *cahiers de doléances* (notebooks of grievances) presented to the Estates-General in 1789, one of the primary complaints against the royal postal service was that it violated the privacy of correspondence." See Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 188.

³⁵⁷ Anuj C. Desai, "Wiretapping before the Wires: The Post Office and the Birth of Communications Privacy," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 60, no. 2 (November 2007) 568. Desai actually goes further, arguing that the legal principle of privacy preceded the Bill of Rights. In the least, the Post Office Act of 1792 prohibited postal officers from opening the private mail. Exceptions, however, were made. Undeliverable letters were opened by clerks in the dead letter office. If the letter contained valuables, it was returned to the sender; if not, the letter was promptly destroyed. See Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 42.

³⁵⁸ David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006) 99. The word "privacy" does not appear in any of the founding documents, but Frederick S. Lane argues that the fundamental rights of life, liberty, and happiness "are both personal and private to each individual." Plus, the

Wayne E. Fuller points out *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-century America*, reality did not match political ideals or legal rhetoric. The federal mail service in the early Republic struggled to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding, commercial nation-state. The shoddy state of postal roads, the vastness of American wilderness, and the ever-present threat of theft rendered the postal system so untrustworthy that Thomas Jefferson, among others, feared disclosing privileged information in their letters.³⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the antebellum years saw the steady expansion and increasing professionalization of the postal service.³⁶⁰ The postal statutes of 1825 forbade not only employees but also all persons from opening private letters with intent to “obstruct the correspondence, to pry into another’s business or secrets.”³⁶¹ Hence, the men who went off to war in 1861-1865 had grown accustomed to the cultural and legal norm of postal privacy.³⁶² Less than a year into his service, Robert Winn, a Kentucky cavalryman, expressed dismay when he discovered that someone had

list of grievances mentioned in the Declaration included perceived infringements by the British Crown on the private affairs of the colonials. See Lane, *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of our Most Contested Right* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 3-17

³⁵⁹ Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 2. The law in the early Republic provided the death penalty for the crime of mail theft, yet according to Wesley Everett Rich, “Robberies of the mail were not infrequent, especially in the South.” See Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 95.

³⁶⁰ The social impact of the national postal system in the antebellum period are examined in Richard B. Kielbowicz’s *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989) and Wayne E. Fuller’s *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

³⁶¹ Cited in Seipp 12.

³⁶² Frederick S. Lane, *American Privacy: The 400-Year History of Our Most Contested Right* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 24, 32.

violated his personal mail: "It seems strange to me why people should have curiosity enough to break open other peoples letters."³⁶³

Soldiers like Winn discovered that privacy maintenance, as Sandra Petronio contends, "is often unpredictable and can range from disruptions in the privacy management system to complete breakdown."³⁶⁴ This chapter looks at the various threats to epistolary privacy and how Civil War soldiers coped with the breach in epistolary confidentiality. Though they wished for and desired privacy, Yankees and rebels alike had to contend with numerous, sometimes insurmountable, challenges to the security of letters coming to and from the camps. To borrow Petronio's phrasing, they learned to "value privacy when they lament its apparent demise."³⁶⁵ In that regard, the fighting men of the Civil War overlapped with the female writers of the era who, as Katherine Adams pointed out, conceptualized privacy "in terms of violation and loss."³⁶⁶ Letter writers lived under the constant threat of involuntary disclosure. Recipients, camp comrades, mail personnel, and the enemy regularly violated the epistolary seal of private letters. Plus, the hundreds of miles separating the men from their correspondents, the nature of postal delivery, the circumstances of the war itself, and the seeming interminability of the conflict curtailed what powers these men could exert over who had access to the sealed contents of letters.

³⁶³ Robert Winn to his sister, 4 December 1861, Winn-Cook Family Papers, Filson Historical Society (hereafter FHS).

³⁶⁴ Sandra Petronio, "Brief Status Report on Communications Privacy Management Theory," *Journal of Family Communications* 13, no. 6 (2013): 11.

³⁶⁵ Sandra Petronio, *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 2.

³⁶⁶ Katherine Adams, *Owning Up: Privacy, Privacy, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

Soldiers' responses to these offenses varied from resignation and adaptation to rage and threats of violence. Their reactions to living in an environment offering few guarantees of personal privacy covered the spectrum. Some could only express their bewilderment and peeved indignation while others took proactive measures such as preemptively burning letters so that no one else could read them. Also, soldiers adapted various strategies for dealing correspondents who did not abide by the rules regarding confidential information sharing. Some of the men succeeded in maintaining privacy, controlling information access, and keeping intact their public reputation. Most faced numerous and persistent obstacles in the quest for privacy and secrecy, and some signally failed at the task and endured the consequences. The measures by Civil War soldiers to safeguard their privacy in the face of harsh and unpredictable wartime conditions reveal both the vulnerabilities of information exchanges and the stakes of personal privacy in an information age.

"A Great Many Letters Will Get Miscarried"

Letter writers routinely had letters go missing. Lost and delayed letters provided a common staple of many a soldier's complaints about life in uniform. "A great many letters will get miscarried," predicted Chester K. Leach of the 2nd Vermont in July 1861.³⁶⁷ Historians have pointed out that soldiers accepted the realities of impaired mail service with anything but quiet resignation. "Soldiers

³⁶⁷ Chester K. Leach to his wife Ann, 11 July 1861, in Edward J. Feidner, ed., *"Dear Wife": The Civil War letters of Chester K. Leach* (Burlington: University of Vermont, 2002), 5.

chafed exceedingly at the tardiness of mails," wrote Bell Wiley in *Johnny Reb*.³⁶⁸ Unreliable personnel also gave many soldiers another reason to gripe that the mail service had failed them. "I have not received a letter from you for some time," complained one Kentucky soldier, who then concluded, "I suppose the mails are very carelessly managed."³⁶⁹ The postal grievances of Indiana soldier Joseph Hotz compelled him to lash out at both officers and postal personnel who made his life miserable. To the disgruntled, lost mail provided proof of not just incompetence but also lack of concern for the ordinary soldier. "I get angry some times when the others get mail and I don't, but that doesn't change any thing," Hotz wrote. "The letters stay in the post office or get lost. The postmasters are bums just as our officers. They don't give a hoot about the soldiers."³⁷⁰

Soldiers often sent money home to their families via the mail. The practice encouraged thieves and unscrupulous mail personnel to prey on the mail leaving the military camps. One Union cavalryman reported that his last letter to his sister "had been broken open [sic], and a blank piece of paper put in with a few words written on it." The bluecoat surmised that "this was done by some one after it left me but I cannot tell or surmise who although I guess that they found no Money it."³⁷¹ Such accounts no doubt fed into the camp rumors that postal employees routinely opened private letters. An Indiana volunteer reported to his wife that he heard from

³⁶⁸ Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 201.

³⁶⁹ Thomas Speed to his parents, 4 July 1864, Thomas Speed Letters, FHS.

³⁷⁰ Joseph Hotz to his wife, 8 November 1864, Joseph Hotz Letters, Indiana Historical Society (hereafter IHS).

³⁷¹ Robert Winn, to his sister Martha, 8 August 1863, Winn-Cook Family Papers, FHS.

“some of the boys [who] says that all the letters are opened at the office.”³⁷² James E. Love described the “great excitement” that overtook the camp when the authorities caught a man “who had been robbing the mails of our letters & dispatchs.” The punishment the angry soldiers wanted to exact upon the culprit suggests the value of the mail to these men. “[I]t was with difficulty the officers rescued him from being Lynched as it was he was very badly used – between brickbats sticks & fat pork – had a hard time,” according to Love.³⁷³

Sometimes the personnel problem arose from within the very ranks of the regiment. Joseph Milton Foster, of the 37th Massachusetts, described to his parents the fate that befell a soldier caught stealing the regimental mail:

Well I must tell you of a little instance that happened the other day or the other knight. There was a Man from our Co. caught a Robbing the male the other knight...[H]e had robed the male three times and that he had taken \$2.25 Dollars and they got a big board and rote on it. They Wrote ‘I am a contemptable thief. I robed the Regamental male['] and they put it on his back and marched him threw ever Streat in the Regt. with that on his back and if we dident [s]hoot him. I wouldnt say so but I must close.³⁷⁴

The eager volunteers of 1861 marched off to the battlefield just as envelopes came into common use. Up until then, writers folded the paper into thirds and sealed the letter with wax even though this meant that portions of the letter lay exposed to the carriers involved in the delivery. Either method, according to Lane, provided some measure of security. “Once a letter was sealed with wax or in one of

³⁷² Isaac Little to his wife, 24 September 1862, Isaac Little Letters, FHS.

³⁷³ James E. Love to Molly Wilson, 15 August 1861, James E. Love Papers, Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center (hereafter MHML).

³⁷⁴ Joseph Milton Foster to his parents, 22 April 1864, Joseph Milton Foster Letters, University of Virginia, Special Collections Library (hereafter UVA).

the newfangled prefolded, gummed envelopes,” he writes, “a sender could reasonably assume that it would arrive at its destination unopened.”³⁷⁵ The appeal of envelopes manifested itself in the frequent references to envelopes in soldiers’ letters. The men requested these items from their families, borrowed them from friends, or purchased them from sutlers who accompanied the regiments.³⁷⁶ One Massachusetts soldier complained that the high demand for envelopes, coupled with their scarcity at the front, meant that “the sutlers prices for such things is just about their weight in gold.”³⁷⁷

However soldiers concealed their letters, whether in envelopes or by fold and wax seal, such precautions did not always shield the contents from prying eyes. Indeed, the literature on communications history emphasizes the instruments, technologies, and institutions of government employed for spying on people’s personal correspondence. What often receives less attention is the threat poised by everyday commoners. For example, in colonial America, couriers often left the mail bags at taverns or coffee shops for the recipients to pick up; the practice invited

³⁷⁵ Lane 24.

³⁷⁶ Wiley, *Johnny Reb* 196; see also William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 59.

³⁷⁷ Charles Brewster to his mother, 22 July 1862, cited in David Blight, ed., *When This Cruel War Is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 174. Sutlers carried a wide range of consumer goods, from alcohol and tobacco to shady medical remedies and epistolary supplies. See Thomas A. Lord, *Civil War Sutlers and Their Wares* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), 38-46. The effort and risk involved in transporting and selling commodities near the front lines made it reasonable for the sutlers to mark up their prices. Still, the soldier-customers perceived such prices as exorbitant, unjustifiable, and unscrupulous. Writes Lord, “If there was any one class of men the soldiers disliked more than any other, that was the sutlers.” Lord 30.

trouble, for the locals, starved for news and gossip, saw the open letter bags as fair game.³⁷⁸

Indeed, curiosity and boredom made every letter, even the ones without money, vulnerable. For most soldiers, camp life consisted of long stretches of inactivity punctuated by brief moments of sheer terror. "Camp is certainly a monotonous," admitted Kentuckian Thomas Speed to his parents.³⁷⁹ Soldiers routinely complained of inactivity and apologized to their readership for the lack of anything interesting to write about. "I am sorry I have no news of interest to communicate to you, but our life in camp is so very monotonous, so little transpires, that we have to write our thoughts only," wrote George W. Landrum to his female correspondent.³⁸⁰ The boredom, as much as the rigors of war, seemed to push the men to their limits. "Everything is dull beyond endurance," griped one Confederate. "Every theme of conversation has been exhausted."³⁸¹ In an environment short on amusement and fresh reading materials, other people's private letters became fodder simply for their entertainment value. Though divided by politics and geography, Northern bluecoats and Southern rebels alike often showed a common disregard for the sanctity of private correspondence. Camp mates not only peered over one's shoulders and reported on one's deeds and misdeeds, they also routinely opened unclaimed letters addressed to absent regimental members. To preclude his

³⁷⁸ Seipp 11. For more on curiosity and privacy in the eighteenth century, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

³⁷⁹ Thomas Speed to his parents, 24 February 1863, Thomas Speed Letters, FHS.

³⁸⁰ George W. Landrum to "My kind Friend" Miss Christiana Wilson, 19 February 1863, George W. Landrum Letters, Ohio Historical Society (hereafter OHS).

³⁸¹ Joshua K. Calloway to wife, 15 March 1863, cited in Judith Lee Hallock, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Joshua K. Calloway* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 74.

personal mail from suffering such a fate, John Antle, of the 7th Ohio Cavalry, instructed his wife Anna: “dont write anything more that you dont want others to see for when leters goes to the ridgement and the oner is not there they open them and if I hapen to get afurlo [a furlough] and a leter cum fur me it would be opend.”³⁸² Even though Americans conferred on the personal letters a seal of inviolability, that attitude did not stop the sharing of the letters’ contents once the seal had been broken. As one scholar noted, the dissemination of neighborhood gossip around the campfire served as both entertainment and an instrument of group socialization.³⁸³ Once accessed by curious readers other than the intended recipient, a letter’s content transformed from private news into public gossip as it percolated its way through the camp grapevine.

“The Disgraceful Act is Too Often Done by Both Parties”

If their own comrades showed little respect for the sanctity of the letter, the enemy and even civilian souvenir hunters showed had even less.³⁸⁴ “Few things are more disruptive to standards of moral behavior and human decency than armed conflict, and the American Civil War was no different,” writes Frederick S. Lane.³⁸⁵

³⁸² John Antle to Anna Antle, 10 May 1863, John Antle Letters, OHS. Soldiers recuperating in military hospitals, however, could have their mail forwarded to them. For an example, see the 31 July 1864 letter of Henry Orendorff in William Anderson, ed., *“We Are Sherman’s Men”: The Civil War Letters of Henry Orendorff* (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1986), 98.

³⁸³ John D. Billings, *Hard Tack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Old Sybrook, CT: Konecky and Konecky LLC, 1888; reprint, East Bridgewater, MA: J. G. Press, 2007), 67-68.

³⁸⁴ For more on civilians scavenging from dead soldiers, see Earl J. Hess “‘Tell Me What the Sensations Are’: The Northern Home Front Learns about Combat,” in *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front*, eds. Paul A Cimbala and Randall M. Mille, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 135.

³⁸⁵ Lane 28.

The Civil War saw its fair share of war crimes, cruelties, and atrocities.³⁸⁶ Indeed, the underlying cause of the war, slavery, rested on the brutal denial of fundamental human rights, including privacy and literacy, to an entire group of people.³⁸⁷ However cherished by their owners, displaced personal letters became just another material item in the flotsam of battlefield litter and booty. Even the troops themselves acknowledged that any item on their deceased bodies could fall into the hands of the still living. Having received a “little brest pin” and a “buten [button]” from home, Tillman Valentine, an African-American sergeant in the 3rd U.S. Colored Troops, assured his wife that not even his possible demise in combat could separate him from these precious reminders of home. “[W]hen i go in battle they shall go with me,” he wrote, “and if you here of me being ded you may know that they are buried with me with out sum one strips me and takes them off of me[.]”³⁸⁸ Like his comrades, Valentine had good reason to anticipate what would become of his beloved breast pin and button should he fall on the battlefield. Civilians prowled amongst the bodies of the fallen after major engagements, searching for relics to sell and items of curiosity. Earl J. Hess writes of one such scoundrel who “found a letter

³⁸⁶ See Gregory J. W. Urwin, ed., *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) and Mark Grimsley and Clifford Rogers, *Civilians in the Path of War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). Michael C. Adams catalogues horrific incidents arising from “war psychosis” in *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), chapter 6.

³⁸⁷ Daniel Walker Howe points out that where slaves lived determined how much privacy they had on a day-to-day basis. Slaves on large plantations “had more privacy than an isolated enslaved individual or family could expect as the property of a white small farmer.” See Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59.

³⁸⁸ Tillman Valentine to his wife Annie, 25 April 1864, cited in Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third U.S. Colored Troops,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139, no. 2 (April 2015): 183.

written by a son to his soldier father that had blood stains on it” and also “a letter written by a young girl to her lover in the army.”³⁸⁹ Soldiers, too, participated in morbid scavenger hunts over terrain they only recently fought over. Surveying the bloody aftermath of one battle, a Union colonel described a gruesome scene in which “Dead men & dead mens bones are scattered every where...The earth has been washed off & heads & arms & legs are poking out in every direction.” His own troops, he noted, “are scattered through the woods, curiosity hunting, and finding horrors.”³⁹⁰

Material scarcity and shoddy logistics have long characterized large-scale warfare.³⁹¹ Both sides in the Civil War practiced the well-worn custom of stripping the enemy dead of usable articles such as clothing, weapons, ammunition, stationery, and even food. Peter Hairston, of the 1st Virginia Cavalry, described Confederates pilfering from the Union dead and wounded left behind on the Manassas battlefield after the first major engagement of the war in July 1861: “Our troops have been busily engaged in appropriating everything they might possibly need, from a pincushion to the finest army tent.”³⁹²

³⁸⁹ Earl J. Hess, “‘Tell Me What the Sensations Are’: The Northern Home Front Learns about Combat,” *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front*, eds. Paul A. Cimbal and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 135.

³⁹⁰ Henry Clark Gilbert “to My Dear Wife In the Field, May 3, 1864,” Henry Clark Gilbert Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; William L. Clements Library (hereafter UMCL).

³⁹¹ For a general survey of the subject, see John A. Lynn’s *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

³⁹² Cited in Robert J. Trout, *With Pen and Saber: The Letters and Diaries of Jeb Stuart’s Staff Officers* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1995), 21. Indeed, souvenir hunting contributed to the Union defeat at Manassas Junction in July 1862; at one section of the field Union soldiers successfully drove off the Confederates defenders and then stopped to pick up souvenirs, thus allowing the rebels to regroup and counterattack.

Hairston's choice of words, "Everything they might possibly need," grossly underestimated his fellow soldiers' voracious appetite for writing materials. On the first day of the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862 the Confederates surprised and successfully drove Union forces from their encampment along the Tennessee River. An Ohio soldier who survived the onslaught, Enos P. Brobson, recalled that the rebels "came on us so quick that we hadent time to get any thing out of our Camp," and noted that the attackers "ransacked every thing we had [and] took all of our writing paper."³⁹³ According to Wiley, "Every Southern victory was followed by a flood of letters home written on elegant paper decorated with the Stars and Stripes."³⁹⁴ Throughout the war, soldiers wrote on whatever paper they could purchase or procure, either from seizing the enemy's supplies or in some cases, taking such items from the bodies of the dead.

Some rebels went further. Like their civilian counterparts, soldiers on both sides engaged in souvenir hunting and they often sent home mementos gathered from the battlefield. In the aftermath of one of the numerous battles for Atlanta in the summer of 1864, Private George S. Lea, of the 7th Mississippi, sent his father "some Yankee letters captured on the field in the Battle of the [July] 22nd," noting "there was a great many captured."³⁹⁵ Another Confederate reported that he spent the morning after a battle "taking off the arms and ammunition left on the ground by the enemy." He also added that he "road all through the [abandoned] Yankee camp

³⁹³ Enos P. Brobson to unknown, 20 April 1862, Enos P. Brobson Letter, Tennessee State Library and Archives (hereafter TSLA).

³⁹⁴ Wiley, *Johnny Reb* 198.

³⁹⁵ George S. Lea to his father, 24 July 1864, George S. Lea Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute (hereafter USAMHI).

and secured a number of trophies, among which I have saved a Yankee daguerotype and a lot of letters, envelopes." Most disturbingly, he admitted, "I tried to cut a ring off a dead Yankee's finger, but my knife was too dull." The Rebel felt justified in his gruesome action: "This may appear revolting to you but if you had seen as much of the scoundrels as i have you would think otherwise."³⁹⁶

Such conduct occurred on both sides. George Remley, a soldier in the 22nd Iowa, sent his sister "to keep as a 'memento'" what Remley described as "a specimen of literature written in genuine southern style." As for the souvenir's origins, Remley explained, "It was found on a secesh, who was killed by our scouts."³⁹⁷ When Remley lost his own life at the battle of Winchester in 1864, his opponents returned the favor. S. D. Price, adjutant of the regiment and the dead Iowan's bunkmate, mentioned in his condolence letter that the Confederates had rifled through Remley's body and took most items of value, leaving only "his pocketbook which they overlooked." "I am sorry to say that the disgraceful act is too often done by both parties," wrote Price.³⁹⁸

Personal letters taken from the deceased had no intrinsic military value, but they did provide their new masters with literary materials and reading pleasures.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ William Clark Corson to Jennie Hill, 4 June 1862, William Clark Corson Letters, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS). Soldiers' letters also mentioned the victors mutilating corpses and making trophies from body parts of the slain. See Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 166, 173.

³⁹⁷ George Remley to Jane Remley, 8 March 1863, cited in Julie Holcomb, ed., *Southern Sons, Northern Soldiers: The Civil War Letters of the Remley Brothers, 22nd Iowa Infantry*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2004), 43.

³⁹⁸ S. D. Price to James Remley, 4 October 1864, cited in Holcomb 162.

³⁹⁹ Robin Young, in her history of the one of the most famous letters of the Civil War, writes, "This acquisition of booty normally extended to removing money or military items the dead could

As Richard D. Brown explains in *Knowledge is Power*, “Because these were letters of strangers, indeed, enemies, ordinary rules did not apply.”⁴⁰⁰ Another scholar contends, “This acquisition of booty normally extended to removing money or military items the dead could no longer use, although most soldiers enjoyed reading pilfered letters.”⁴⁰¹ Indeed, reading the enemy’s letter for amusement constituted both a morale booster and a means of striking back at the unseen opponent. James E. Love, while on operations with the 8th Kansas in Tennessee, wrote to his beloved in St. Louis: “We have been capturing quantities of property – belonging to the secesh army when here, in the shape of officers Trunks, letters swords &c – also a large mail, which has given us great amusement.”⁴⁰² To its owner, the loss of a letter to the enemy, not surprisingly, proved a cause for disappointment. After Confederate cavalry commander John Hunt Morgan captured a mail shipment bound for Union forces in Alabama, George W. Landrum, an Ohio soldier in the Signal Corps, sadly but dutifully informed his sister that “some ‘Secesh soldier’ had the pleasure of reading that sixteen-page letter you wrote me.” “Give my love to all and tell everybody that has written me within the last twenty days, to write again,” implored Landrum, “as the Sesesh got their letters.”⁴⁰³

William H. Ball apparently found nothing odd in sharing with his sister “a secesh letter left here” while at the same time asking her to “Send on that picture...in

no longer use, although most soldiers enjoyed reading pilfered letters.” Young, *For Love and Liberty: The Untold Civil War Story of Major Sullivan Ballou and His Famous Love Letter* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 725.

⁴⁰⁰ Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 180.

⁴⁰¹ Young 725.

⁴⁰² James E. Love to Eliza “Molly” Wilson, 1 July 1862, James E. Love Papers, MHML.

⁴⁰³ George W. Landrum to his sister, 13 May 1862, George W. Landrum letters, OHS.

a letter” and reassuring her that “It will come safe.”⁴⁰⁴ Sentimentality and hatred of the enemy shared space in the same bosom. Thomas M. Covert, a Union cavalryman, bragged to his wife, “I read the letter of the rebel Lieutenant wrote to his mother. He is quite full of gas.”⁴⁰⁵ Even as he derided his opponent’s private mail, Covert waxed sentimental when it came to his family. A year into his service he admitted, “It is hard to be away off here where I cant see my little family that is so dear to me, but will know how to appreciate there society when I get home once more.”⁴⁰⁶ The letters of William Clark Corson, of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry, written during the Peninsula Campaign of 1862, indicated that he had looted the bodies of dead Union soldiers who had fallen in the fighting around Richmond. He had no qualms about sharing captured letters with his girlfriend, who received from him “a specimen of Yankee lover’s poetry which you will find highly entertaining.” Oddly enough, Corson’s love token came with the instruction, “You must not let any one see it however.”⁴⁰⁷ A fellow Virginian, also involved in the fighting for Richmond, sent his father a “a Yankee letter” along with the commentary that “there is nothing remarkable about it – save that of the hundreds I have seen it is the best in composition & the best in spelling, about the only one without something hatefully vulgar.”⁴⁰⁸

Confederate and Union soldiers alike made claims about the enemy’s collapsed will to fight based on their readings of captured letters. Private Morgan

⁴⁰⁴ William H. Ball to Elizabeth Smith, 4 April 1862, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI.

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas H. Covert to his wife, 6 October 1862, Thomas H. Covert Papers, USAMHI.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 July 1862.

⁴⁰⁷ William Clark Corson to Jennie Hill, 9 June 1862, William Clark Corson Letters, VHS.

⁴⁰⁸ William Hartwell Perry to his father, 20 June 1862, William Hartwell Perry Letters, UVA.

Jefferson served with the 35th Texas Calvary during the Red River Campaign in Louisiana in the spring of 1864. His unit got their hands on a large cache of mail seized on May 4 from the Union transport packet *City Belle*; apparently, the letters boosted the morale of the rebels and impressed on them the dispirited state of their opponents. Private Jefferson reported to his wife that “we have seen some the letters was captured. they say the yankees is badly whiped and thay sat thay tired of the wore and sum of them ses they will not fite eney more.”⁴⁰⁹ Such overly optimistic appraisals had their counterparts in the Union army. One Northern trooper mocked the Confederate letters his regiments captured and read, making note of those letters that came from family members who opposed secession: “the spelling & sentiments are so rich – many of the letters too are to young men from their sisters & others at home, expressing Union sentiment, & requesting them to leave the secesh Army.”⁴¹⁰ Indeed, as these two cases illustrate, soldiers’ writings tended to mix together equal parts insightful observations and sincere sentiments with outlandish and unsubstantiated claims about ongoing events.

Captured mail sometimes even appeared in newspapers. In an article subtitled “Inside View of the Fashionable Secesh of St. Louis,” *The St. Louis Globe-*

⁴⁰⁹ Morgan Jefferson to his wife, 13 May 1864, cited in Gary D. Joiner, ed., *Little to Eat and Thin Mud to Drink: Letters, Diaries, and Memoirs from the Red River Campaigns, 1863-1864* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 144. The Red River Campaign ended in defeat for Union forces, but needless to say, Jefferson’s belief in his opponent’s lack of will to fight was more wishful thinking than anything else. For more on the Red River Campaign, see Ludwell Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958); William Riley Brooksher, *War along the Bayous: The 1864 Red River Campaign in Louisiana* (Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 1998); and Joiner’s two recent works on the subject, *One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003) and *Through the Howling Wilderness: The 1864 Red River Campaign and Union Failure in the West* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006)

⁴¹⁰ James E. Love to Eliza “Molly” Wilson, 1 July 1862, James E. Love Papers, MHML.

Democrat, featured the contents of two letters, both apparently composed by Southern sympathizers, for the pro-Union newspaper referred to them as “The richest expose of the season...found in the following letters, which were captured a few days ago in the rebel mail bag.” Ironically, one of the two letters began with the line, “I hope this mail will get safely through.”⁴¹¹ Confederate newspapers apparently carried out the same deed. While deployed to Louisiana with the 75th New York, Major Willoughby Babcock dreaded the interception and publication of his private correspondences. As he confided to his wife, “I hear there is some danger of the capture of this mail, by guerillas on the road, but I hope none of my letters will get into print in the C.S.A.”⁴¹²

Yet, in a war of fierce emotions and unprecedented bloodletting, moments of sympathy and empathy appeared. Madison Bowler, a Minnesotan, described to his wife Lizzie a particularly poignant incident in which Union soldiers matter-of-factly passed around a dead rebel’s letters.

I stopped during our skirmish in front of the regt to look at a dead man. He was a large, good looking man – an orderly Sergt – lying on his back, a pool of blood which had issued from the fearful looking wound through his head from ear to ear, showed that the work had been done. He looked calm and natural, except the glazed eye. Pretty soon one of our men came up and pulled a package of letters from his pocket, one of which he gave to me. It was from his wife, F. E.

⁴¹¹ *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 9 September 1862, Chouteau Collection, MHML.

⁴¹² Willoughby Babcock to his wife, 23 April 1863, cited in Willoughby M. Babcock Jr., ed., *Selections from the Letters and Diaries of Brevet Brigadier General Willoughby Babcock of the Seventy-Fifth New York Volunteers* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1922), 98-99. “C.S.A” stood for “Confederate States of America.” The practice of printing the personal letters of one’s opponents was a well-worn tradition. Thomas Jefferson, for one, complained that his private letters were often published in the opposition press. See Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 43.

Preston, and date "Social Circle, Ga." She has sent him some pies, cakes, and peas, and is going to do everything for him. She does not want him to get his miniature taken until she sees him again. Poor woman! She will never see him again on this earth. I could not help thinking how badly she would feel when she recd. the sad news.⁴¹³

The nonchalance with the Union soldiers pilfered the Confederate corpse suggests both the hardening of emotions brought about by a vicious civil conflict and the accepted regularity of these events. Yet Bowler's compassion for the now widowed wife of the deceased Confederate hint at the wide range of individual responses to both death in battle and the act of reading another person's private mail. At the least, it could not have escaped both Bowlers that their fate might mirror that of the rebel soldier and his grieving widow.

"Either Burn Up Letters or Put Them Away"

The vulnerability of the mail posed a threat to the personal and interpersonal well-being of Civil War soldiers. Personal items looted from the dead became souvenirs and mementos for the folks at home, while captured letters became public fodder subject to inspection and jest in the hands of their new masters. Embroiled in a bitter sectional conflict, few combatants expressed any reservations with reading the mail of their opponents. Understandably, soldiers took precautions to make sure their letters and other sentimental private items remain out of the grasp of the enemy. Unlike many soldiers, Manuel Yturri, of the 3rd Texas, declined to

⁴¹³ Madison Bowler to Lizzie Bowler, 31 July 1862, cited in Andrea R. Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It Your Duty: A Minnesota Couple's Civil War Letters* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 109. Foroughi identified the Confederate soldier as Frances Preston, a sergeant in Company D of the 2nd Georgia Cavalry. See fn.74.

carry a photo of his loved ones on his personal body. Death held less fear for him than the thought that the image of his beloved would fall under the scrutiny of Yankee soldiers. As he explained to his wife:

After the battle our soldier found many pictures of the dead Yankees, of their families, fiancées, etc. I don't ask for yours because we might fight with the Yankees and I might be killed and they would keep your picture. I don't want that.⁴¹⁴

Yturri's fellow Confederate William Clark Corson explained to his beloved that "The reason why I did not write to you whilst gone was that I was afraid the Yankees would get my letters." As proof, he added, "They captured the mails twice in King-George [County] whilst I was there."⁴¹⁵ Southerners themselves proved just as adept at raiding mail shipments. "You write to met hat you wrote me five letters but I only rec two of them," wrote one Ohioan to his wife, "our male has been captured twist between memphis and corinth by the rebels[.]"⁴¹⁶

Soldiers expressed grief over the lost of precious letters to various causes, but having one's personal mail read and mocked by the enemy added insult to injury. Better for a letter to be lost for good than found by strangers, or worse, one's hated opponent who would derive a measure of satisfaction from gaining access to one's private thoughts and feelings. In the summer of 1864, George Knox Miller, a rebel cavalry officer, reported to his wife that he had lost one of her letters during the Confederate retreat to the outer defense of Atlanta; "I regret it very much," he

⁴¹⁴ Manuel Yturri to Elena Yturri, 23 July 1864, cited in Jerry Thompson, ed., *Tejanos in Gray: Civil War Letters of Captains Joseph Rafael de la Garza and Manuel Yturri*, trans. Jose Roberto Juarez (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2011), 54.

⁴¹⁵ William Clark Corson to Jennie Hill, 10 October 1863, William Clark Corson letters, VHS.

⁴¹⁶ Henry Dykes to his wife Sarah, 6 August 1862, Dykes Family Letters, OHS. A sergeant in 53rd Ohio, Dykes participated in the Union offensive drive into Mississippi in the spring of 1862.

told her. Yet he reassured her by providing the details surrounding the loss of the epistle:

Your letter of the 26th & 28th was handed me one mile the other side of the river. I read it while the shells were flying around and putting it hastily in my pocket, unluckily lost it. I would have destroyed [it] immediately as I generally do, but the perusal was so hasty that I wished to look over it again. I'm confident it did not fall into Yankee hands as I was near the pontoon bridge and think I lost it while galloping after getting to this side of the river [the Chattahoochee, just outside of Atlanta].⁴¹⁷

Hence, that his wife's letter met its end in the waters of the river provided reasonable assurance to both wife and husband that the hated enemy could not pry into the private world of their epistolary exchanges.

As the fate of Miller's letter from his wife demonstrated, soldier's most sentimental and private belongings lived in constant danger on both the battlefield and the regimental camp. Both sites offered few means to maintain privacy or preserve letters. However much soldiers prized writing, sending, and receiving letters, those same letters lived a life of many hazards, from unsealing by one's own campmates to capture and destruction by the enemy, but not before suffering the ignominious fate of public disclosure and unauthorized circulation. The simplest solution to the dilemma, and the most secure means of limiting access to epistolary knowledge, lay in destroying the physical body of the letter. A rebel from Georgia implored his female correspondent to write, but he would reciprocate only on the

⁴¹⁷ George Knox Miller to his wife Celestine, 5 July 1864, cited in Richard M. McMurry, ed., *An Uncompromising Secessionist: The Civil War of George Knox Miller, Eighth (Wade's) Confederate Cavalry* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 231.

precondition that she terminate the written proof of his correspondence: “Mollie you must write me a long letter & if you promise to destroy mine as soon as read[,] I will write.”⁴¹⁸

Whether around the domestic hearth and in the regimental camps, fire provided a most readily available and effective means of erasing the existence of private letters, and countless wartime epistles met their end that way. One Massachusetts infantryman reassured his sister, “I always burn my letters after I have read them so you need not be alarmed about yours.”⁴¹⁹ Indeed, many letters to and from soldiers regularly contained the specific instruction “burn after reading.”⁴²⁰ “Either burn up letters,” wrote William H. Ball in December 1861 to his brother D. Smith back at home in Wisconsin, “or put them away where no one will see them. Soon thereafter Ball had a change of heart regarding the fate of his wartime scribbles. In February 1862 he asked his brother, “Please get a little box to put my letters in and preserve what I write after this,” and for good measure Ball added, “Don’t let anyone read this and do not read it to anyone.”⁴²¹ Ball apparently found it worthwhile to preserve for his own future perusal his wartime letters. Yet his letters to his sister “Lib” apparently contained sensitive information he never

⁴¹⁸ M C. Leydance to Molly Reid, 4 February 1864, Stephens-Reid Letters, University of Georgia, Athens; Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library.

⁴¹⁹ Charles Brewster to his sister Martha, 21 February 1863, cited in Blight 213. We know of Charles’ destruction of his sister Martha’s letters only because Martha preserved his letters.

⁴²⁰ David M. Henken, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 105. The practice of instructing the recipient to burn the letter long predates the Civil War, though obviously during the War, the fear, often substantiated, that one’s private letters should fall into the wrong hands gave many soldiers a greater incentive to burn letters or to ask their recipients to do so.

⁴²¹ William H. Ball to his brother D. Smith, 17 December 1861 and 23 February 1862, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI.

wanted to see the light of day ever. One letter to her in December 1862 ended with the unequivocal command, “Burn this letter.”⁴²²

William H. Ball’s correspondence with his siblings suggests that the reduction of letters to ashes did not happen without forethought and deliberation. Writers attached great emotional value to both their own letters and the letters they received from distant loved ones. Soldiers’ letters indicate that they and their correspondents discussed the conditions and rationales under which the recipient would carry out the procedure. “[I]f you wish you may burn [my letter],” wrote a Kentucky regimental surgeon to his wife, “but I will not burn yours simply because your hand was sore and you could not write it quite as well as usual.”⁴²³ Having professed to his wife his heartfelt desire to return home to her company, one New Yorker, added as precaution in the postscript, “You must burn this letter, for I am ashamed of it and don’t want nobody to see it but yourself.”⁴²⁴

Soldiers also had practical reasons to not keep large sets of letters on them. In some theatres of operations the troops lived in semi-permanent housing, especially during the winter months. Most soldiers, however, experienced frequent and even daily relocations; a life constantly exposed to the elements, sometimes without even a tent or bag to store one’s personal items, constituted the norm during the course of one’s enlistment. Since the regiments moved about so often

⁴²² William H. Ball to his sister Lib, 19 December 1862, William H. Ball Collection, USAMHI.

⁴²³ Claiborne, J. Waltan, to wife Nannie, 7 September 1863, Lewis Leigh Jr. Collection, USAMHI. Walthan was a surgeon with the 21st Kentucky.

⁴²⁴ Richard Goldwaite to his wife Ellen Goldwaite, 24 July 1861, cited in Marti Skipper and Jane Taylor, eds., *A Handful*, 39. Ellen Goldwaite commanded her husband to burn her letter of 17 November 1861, for she felt “ashamed” at “such poor writing.” See Skipper and Taylor, eds., 64-65.

from site to site, particularly in an active theatre of operations, the men naturally found it desirable to lighten their load before a long foot march. As one scholar points out, "The enlisted man was constantly on the move, with eighty or more pounds of equipment to strap on his back and waist, he could hardly burden himself with such nonessentials as letters."⁴²⁵ Soldiers' letters testified to how practicality sometimes took precedence over sentimentality. "I have burnt the letter that Uncle Ostin wrote me," wrote one recruit from Maine to his family, "I got so many I could not carry them."⁴²⁶

Soldiers did not have to rely on their own volition to destroy the mail that had waited for so eagerly. Letters from the home front also contained requests to burn after reading. A Union captain serving in northern Virginia notified his mother that he had complied with her instructions: "I hereby avail myself of this occasion to inform you that both said epistles have been consigned to the flames of a blazing camp fire according to your repeated threats and requests."⁴²⁷ Likewise, Anna McKinney, the fiancée of David P. Grier made him promise to burn her letters; Grier, then the 28-year-old colonel of the 77th Illinois, dutifully but reluctantly obeyed: "I burn all your Letters according to promise although it is very hard for me to do it, as I should like to keep them and look over them when I am taken with the Blues."⁴²⁸ Interestingly, Grier never once asked McKinney to reciprocate and

⁴²⁵ Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr., "Introduction," cited in *Through the South with a Union Soldier*, Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr., ed. (Johnson City, TN: Tennessee State University, Research Advisory Council, 1969), 10-11.

⁴²⁶ William Henry Harrison Perry to Fannie Sumner Kidder, 9 Nov. 1862, WHHP Letters, MEHS.

⁴²⁷ John W. Ames to his mother, 16 March 1862. John W. Ames Papers, USAMHI. In letter of April 13/14, 1862 Ames again notified his mother he has burned her most recent letter.

⁴²⁸ David P. Grier to Anna McKinney, January 1862, Grier Family Papers, MHML.

destroy his letters, which suggest that within this particular courtship, the woman valued and feared for the privacy of her thoughts more than the man did. Perhaps in both cases the women correctly surmised that the men at the front lines would have few effective means of securing private letters from the hands of inquisitive campmates.

Burning a letter containing highly sensitive information constituted one sure-fire means of excluding all others from entering one's epistolary confidence. That willful act of exclusion, to paraphrase Katherine Adams, restored agency to the recipient, in a process she calls "(re)claiming free and autonomous individuality against the threat of alien others."⁴²⁹ For Civil War soldiers, the threat to privacy came from both friends and foes alike. Even when risking life and limb in the midst of battle, the troops still devoted considerable energy and effort to securing the privacy of their mails. "I always have a general burning, when danger threatens, of all my epistolary valuables," explained John Bratton of the 6th South Carolina to his wife. "I have no doubt that the Yankies would enjoy them very much, indeed too much."⁴³⁰ Bratton's Union counterparts operated under the same reasoning. Chastened after a rebel attack came close to overrunning his unit's position, Massachusetts soldier Charles F. Tew amused his wife by telling her what went through his mind in those tense moments. "Crackey, what a time they [the enemy] would have had reading our letters," he wrote, and added that he took the necessary

⁴²⁹ Adams, *Owning Up*, 10.

⁴³⁰ John Bratton to his wife Bettie, 25 May 1862, John Bratton Letters; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Louis Round Wilson Library (hereafter UNC).

step: "I burned them all in the oven."⁴³¹ In June 1864, when Confederate General Jubal Early nearly penetrated Washington D.C.'s defenses, one Union soldier stationed in the city took to burning his lover's letters in order to safeguard them from capture and examination by the enemy. As Walter G. Dunn explained to Emma Rudolph:

When I entered the Hospital I thought I would preserve all your letters, and did until the late raid [by], when I thought it prudent to assign them to the flames, I can assure you I did it with regret but knowing the threatened condition of the City in its defenceless hour and knowing that all correspondence found in a government office would be subject to a very rigid examination by a band of lawless ruffians, I concluded that you would justify my proceedings, and acted accordingly.⁴³²

Whereas Dunn destroyed his lover's letters to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy, fellow Union soldier Clement Abner Boughton burned his correspondence "for I did not want the Camp to read it if they got hold of it."⁴³³ Another Union soldier, Edwin Horton, of the 4th Vermont, while participating in the siege of Petersburg, commanded his wife to "not to show any of my letters. " He also reassured her that he "always burn them up as soon as I read them [her letters]." A regimental camp, in his words, provided no safe place to store old letters that otherwise would become fodder for public gossip. "I dont burn them because I am ashamed to keep or to read them to others," wrote the Vermonter, "but I burn them

⁴³¹ Charles F. Tew to his wife, 18 November 1862, Charles F. Tew Papers, UMCL.

⁴³² Walter G. Dunn to Emma Rudolph, 31 August 1864 in Judith A. Bailey and Robert I. Cottom, eds. *After Chancellorsville: Letters from the Heart: The Civil War Letters of Private Walter G. Dunn and Emma Randolph* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1998), 111-112.

⁴³³ Clement Abner Boughton to his family, 26 April 1863. Clement Abner Boughton Papers, UMCL.

because I dont think it is a good plan to keep a lot of old letters for others to read and chuckle about as soon as a mans back is turned.”⁴³⁴ Likewise, a member of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry explained to his sweetheart that he cherished her letters but valued their privacy more: “I commenced saving your letters but I feared some one might look in my valise and read them, so now I burn them after reading and kissing them four or five times.”⁴³⁵ Understandably, some soldiers wanted to preserve the epistolary record of their romantic exchanges and did not wish to consign such sentimental objects to the flame. Timothy Cooley Wood, of the 23rd Ohio, did not want anybody to know that he saved his girlfriend’s letters. He sent those precious items home to his sister Abby for safekeeping, since, as he put it, “I want you to keep it for me as I haven’t place to carry such things but don’t let anybody know about it.”⁴³⁶ A Maine soldier notified his parents that he was “Sending home...a few letters I hate to destroy,” along with detailed instructions to deposit “Letters in private drawer upstairs, not to be opened.”⁴³⁷ The letters they sent home, soldiers realized, constituted a personal record of their wartime experiences. For some men, the desire to peruse their letters after the war (assuming they survived) was worth the

⁴³⁴ Edwin Horton to his wife, 14 January 1865, cited in Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, eds., *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 153.

⁴³⁵ William Clark Corson to Jennie Hill, William 12 August 1861, Clark Corson Letters, VHS.

⁴³⁶ Timothy Cooley Wood to Abby Wood, 23 July 1861, Timothy Cooley Wood Letters, Ohio Historical Society (hereafter OHS).

⁴³⁷ Uriah Lee to parents, 11 November 1864, Uriah Lee Family Collection, UMCL.

risk of exposure during the war. "Take care of all my letters that you get from me," wrote one Georgian to his wife, "for if I live to get home I want to see all of them."⁴³⁸

Some soldiers did cope when their secrets came out, whereas others wanted to punish those who violated their privacy. Marshall M. Miller, a member of the 1st Michigan Light Artillery, discovered that his private letter addressed to his colleague, a "Lieut. Hawley," had been opened by "Mrs. Hawley." Furthermore, the offending wife apparently had "a little fun over it all" by sharing the contents of the letter with the neighbors, including Miller's family. In response to such transgressions against his private mail, the indignant artilleryman conveyed his displeasure to his wife as such: "You may please say to her I shall not write any more to Hawley while he is at home for she reads his letter."⁴³⁹ Thus did Miller entrust his wife to act as both his messenger and his instrument for shaming another woman, presumably because his wife herself was above reproach. What Hawley's reaction was either at home or when he returned to the camp we do not know. Still, this incident indicates that the violation of mail could involve multiple people, not just the letter-writer and the offender.

Conclusion: "If God Grants Me Life"

The instances when the war encroached upon these entitlements and their owners' subsequent responses provide a glimpse of just how ingrained unequal

⁴³⁸ Richard Henry Brooks to his wife, 8 June 1862, cited in Katherine S. Holland, ed., *Keep All My Letters: The Civil War Letters of Richard Henry Brooks, 51st Georgia Infantry* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 27.

⁴³⁹ Marshall M. Miller to Caroline Miller, 18 April 1865, Marshall M. Miller letters, Library of Congress (hereafter LC).

privilege was in the minds of those who benefited the most from the system. The letters of Manuel Yturri reveal one man's attempt to impose mastery over his letters and more importantly assert the prerogatives that came with his status as both free and male. In the summer of 1864, Yturri entered his third year of service with the Confederate army. Like most soldiers, he cherished the steady stream of postal traffic between himself and his network of friends and family. His belief in his ownership of privacy shines through in his reaction to news that an acquaintance had violated his mail. Yturri spelled out to his wife what he planned to do about it:

My dear, when you answer this letter tell me if Tat showed the letter to Robert Franklin or if he took the liberty of opening and reading it. If that is the case I want to know so I can write him a letter and if God grants me life and I return to San Antonio I'll inflict some good slaps by which he'll remember me as long as he lives so that he never again opens someone's else mail and shows it around. The scoundrel will have to pay for that. Woe to him if he took the liberty of opening my letter and showing it.⁴⁴⁰

Yturri's threat of violence against the transgressors of his mail demonstrated the deep-set passions Americans attached to both their postal privacy and the revelations of their innermost selves contained within the lines of the texts safe behind the envelope seal.

Furthermore, Yturri's proclaimed right to inflict violence on behalf of his family, the Confederate nation, and his private mail hit at the major themes of power and control. As a male, he had the privilege of protecting home and hearth by

⁴⁴⁰ Manuel Yturri to Elena Yturri, 23 July 1864, cited in Jerry Thompson, ed., *Tejanos in Gray: Civil War Letters of Captains Joseph Rafael de la Garza and Manuel Yturri*, trans. Jose Roberto Juarez (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2011), 52.

rendering military service to the state. The public knowledge of Manuel Yturri's enlistment contrasted sharply with the desire of female soldiers in disguise to keep their service a secret. Indeed, literacy and privacy, like the right to military service, reveal the hierarchies of power that instigated the war and shaped the epistolary experience for many soldiers who fought in it. Slaves, who inhabited the bottom of the social and economic pyramid, had the right to neither privacy nor literacy. In contrast, the white men who did most of the fighting and dying during the war had long taken it for granted that they could write and have their letters respected.

Yet, the conditions of wartime ensured that white soldiers knew little personal privacy while in camp. Their long-term absence meant limited means to control the circulation of personal news and private letters within their home-front civilian communities. However, a writer could hope that at least at home his beliefs about privacy would be respected. If someone like Yturri wanted to limit access to sensitive details, he needed to both provide explicit instructions ("burn after reading") and to punish those who violated the seal of privacy on his personal letters. Indeed, once the soldier committed any thought down to paper, his (or her) capacity to control that information rested on various factors beyond his power. The letters coming into and out of the soldiers' hands faced the real hazards of public disclosure at the hands of the enemy, unscrupulous acquaintances, nosy campmates, and the intended recipients themselves. Indeed, Brown suggests that the Civil War and the animosities it generated greatly weakened antebellum cultural norms that afforded protection to the letter. Ordinary rules and peacetime customs

between fellow citizens did not apply to the letters of strangers, campmates, and most of all, the enemy.⁴⁴¹

Assuming the letters arrived safely to the home front, discretion and decorum served to enhance privacy, while carelessness, eagerness, or ignorance of writer's intent decreased the privacy accorded the received epistle. In a time of separation, death, and anxiety, Americans derived both practical utility and emotional sustenance from written correspondence. Yet, writing and receiving letters, often containing intensely personal confessions, meant running the risks of exposure, ridicule, and notoriety. In an environment where privacy remained precarious, burning letters constituted an act of autonomy and agency. Consignment to the flames guaranteed absolute security of letters, at the cost of losing a physical token of the author. The war made precarious not only the preserving of one's life and that of one's nation (whether the Union or the Confederacy), but also one's innermost thoughts. Hence, even Yturri, firm, resolute, and passionate in the defense of his private letters, knew he first had to survive the war in order to make good his claims to a privileged, but vulnerable privacy.

⁴⁴¹ Brown 180. Lane makes a similar point. He notes that Lincoln soon after taking office ordered federal marshalls to seize the telegrams of Confederates and their sympathizers. For Lane, such acts illustrate that the Lincoln administration proved willing "to bend or break constitutional principles for what are perceived to be exigent circumstances." Lane 26-28.

Conclusion: “The Blessings of Uncle Sams Mail”

The Civil War radically altered the social landscape of America. The conflict displaced a large proportion of the American population, ruptured community ties, and disrupted every day life. The destruction of the South’s farms, plantations, and cities turned many Southern white civilians into refugees. In addition, from the first months of the war onward slaves flocked to sanctuary and freedom behind the Union lines; indeed, the war resulted in the liberation and elevation to citizenship of nearly one in eight Americans. In the North especially, women left home to work as nurses in hospitals and field stations close to the military theatres of operations.

Above all, for men of military age on both sides the war meant mobilization, deployment, and the postponement of the usual milestones of early adulthood. For many young recruits, enlistment meant their first significant long-term separation from their home communities.⁴⁴² Eager to maintain ties of mutual affection and communal knowledge, millions of homesick, sentimental, and articulate men looked to their own penmanship and the postal service for a solution. Soldiers wrote and received letters while living in an environment bookended by extremes. Moments of sheer terror punctuated long stretches of tedious monotony confined to regimental camps, prison stockades, garrison walls, and ships on blockade duty. Letter writing provided one of the chief forms of daily leisure and helped sustain morale as these men endured both the stupefying boredom and the exhilarating, sometimes fatal, combat. Soldiers’ letters often contained testimonials to the

⁴⁴² William C. Davis, *The Fighting Men of the Civil War* (Norman, OH: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 138.

benefits they derived from employing what a South Carolinian volunteer called “this mighty weapon the pen.”⁴⁴³

Through the mail the men could project their thoughts and individual personality across the miles and years separating them from their home communities. Union and Confederate soldiers routinely referred to their letter exchanges in terms of an ongoing conversation that neither the war nor the physical separation could terminate. “[W]e are permitted by the blessings of Uncle Sams mail to converse though we be miles apart,” wrote one Union soldier to his friend in another regiment.⁴⁴⁴ An Alabama lieutenant notified his family, “I am well and still very well satisfied, considering being separated from those with whom it has always been a pleasure for me to be with and converse with but now can only converse by the art of penmanship.”⁴⁴⁵

Letter writing provided more than just the practical utility of delivering a message across long distances. To “converse by the art of penmanship” meant that

⁴⁴³ John Calhoun Clemson to his mother Anna, 4 January 1863, Thomas Green Clemson Papers Clemson University Special Collections. A prisoner of war January 1863 to April, 1864, Clemson composed this letter from his cell on Johnsons Island, Ohio.

⁴⁴⁴ R. R. Wilson to John Knapp, 10 March 1864, Knapp Family Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute (hereinafter USAMHI). The two men knew each other before the war, though they served in separate regiments, Wilson in a regular army unit, the 17th U.S., and Knapp in the Illinois 14th. The idea that letters exchanges operated as a long-distance dialogue between correspondents preceded the nineteenth century. See Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). According to Nance K. Baym, “The fundamental purpose of communication technologies from their ancient inception has been to allow people to exchange messages without being physically co-present.” See Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 2. For similar works, see Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴⁵ Benjamin J. Gaston to his family, 3 January 1862, Benjamin J. Gaston Letters, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library.

its practitioners could maintain an emotional attachment with and a voice within the communities they left behind. The traffic in letters between the civilian home front and the military camps, garrisons, prisons, and ships provide compelling evidence of Americans' desire and determination to maintain their pre-war social relationships. For these soldiers and their correspondents the postal age made possible an additive and yet liberating world of self-expression and long-distance connectivity. John C. Baum, an Ohio trooper deployed to the western side of the Mississippi River, praise the postal mail as he entered into his third year of service in January 1865. As he eloquently put it to his family, "it is the only way left us whereby we may know of each other's welfare though thousands of miles lay between us and the restless water of the might river roll between."⁴⁴⁶

The epistolary grace exemplified by Baum supports Bell Irvin Wiley's contention that Civil War soldiers showed marked improvement in both the style and substance of their letter-writing over the course of time. "By 1864 soldiers who at first had experienced much difficulty in expression and penmanship were showing a noticeable progress in both handwriting and composition," wrote Wiley in *Johnny Reb*, "Letters at this time are marked by less circumlocution, by greater ease of style and by increased coherence."⁴⁴⁷ The soldiers themselves confirmed epistolary eloquence as a desirable skill for men to have. Having composed many letters from the front lines, a Wisconsin infantryman suggested to his mother that a

⁴⁴⁶ John C. Baum to his sister Libbie Baum, 2 January 1865, John C. Baum Papers, Ohio Historical Society (hereinafter OHS).

⁴⁴⁷ Wiley, *Reb* 205.

certain male relative “would improve in penmanship and Composition very much by letter writing. He will some day find quite handy to write compose a good letter.”⁴⁴⁸

As this Wisconsinite suggested, it took time and practice to master the art of composing a good letter. In the meantime, the more honest and self-aware soldiers admitted their own poor writing or sloppy penmanship. “I wish I could write a good letter,” admitted an Ohio cavalryman to his wife, “but I never dairead a letter after I have written it or I will not send it, for I will find so many so many mistakes in it that it looks like the ---- well, very bad.”⁴⁴⁹ Men who penned only the occasional missive in peacetime became in wartime more attuned to their writing prowess and the merits of a well-written, and preferably long, letter. “I cannot write a letter fit to be seen,” wrote Rezin Kile to his wife Maria, “But that letter of yours I thought was one of the best you have written.”⁴⁵⁰ Early in the war one member of the 3rd New York, feeling that he had filled his letter with “nonsense,” pleaded with his wife, “You must not show this to nobody for it is put together so that I can hardly read it myself.”⁴⁵¹ The long years of separation gave soldiers plenty of time to better their penmanship; one Pennsylvanian in 1864 rhetorically asked his wife, “donte you think I am empruving in wrighting,” and just to remove all doubt, he quickly added,

⁴⁴⁸ Clement Abner Boughton to his mother, 17 July 1864, Clement Abner Boughton Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; William L. Clements Library (hereinafter UMCL). Boughton never did find out if his words of advice made an impact he intended for he died while serving with the 12th Wisconsin later that year.

⁴⁴⁹ Thomas M. Covert to his wife, 5 February 1865, Thomas M. Covert Papers, USAMHI.

⁴⁵⁰ Rezin Kile to wife Maria, 2 November 1862, Rezin and Maria Kile Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

⁴⁵¹ Richard Goldwaite to his wife Ellen Goldwaite, 7 July 1861, cited in Marti Skipper and Jane Taylor, eds., *A Handful of Providence: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Richard Goldwaite, New York Volunteers, and Ellen Goldwaite* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2004), 35.

“i think i have em proved[.]”⁴⁵² Walter Stone Poor, a member of a New York regiment, showed even less modesty when he shared with his intended female recipient his delight with his own composition; in the postscript he scribbled for her consumption, “This is a splendid looking letter.”⁴⁵³ An Iowan sergeant comforted his grieving mother by praising his deceased brother, recently killed in battle, as “one of the ablest men Iowa had,” and concluding his eulogy with the telling comment, “A greater writer was he.”⁴⁵⁴

“A Person's Writing is Indication of Their Character”

Civil War soldiers did much to refute the myth of male inexpressiveness or even male indifference to epistolary flourishes. The delight that greeted the arrival of mail in the camp provided a steady topic that inspired fine examples of emotional proclamations from these fighting men. One Iowan informed his wife that “letters from home“ were “the only things that does give real pleasure...like gentle refreshing showers to a dry land.”⁴⁵⁵ “Your letters are very one treasured careful [as] gold,” wrote one New York infantryman to his wife, “and unless the events of war tear them from me, will remain till life shall close, secure momentos of war,

⁴⁵² Tillman Valentine to his wife Annie, 25 April 1864, cited in Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third U.S. Colored Troops,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139, no. 2 (April 2015): 185-186. Apparently Valentine did not realize he had spelled “improve” incorrectly and in two different ways within the same short passage.

⁴⁵³ Walter Stone Poor to Mary, 25 April 1861, Walter Stone Poor Correspondence, New York Historical Society.

⁴⁵⁴ Matthew C. Brown to his parents, 12 June 1863, Matthew C. and John C. Brown Letters, Library of Congress. The Brown brothers served in the 23rd Iowa.

⁴⁵⁵ Charles Thomas Ackley to wife Elizabeth, 14 April 1864, Charles Thomas Ackley Civil War Diaries Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City; Special Collections Library. Ackley served with the 7th Iowa, then deployed to Prospect, Tennessee.

Mutual Suffering and Devotion.”⁴⁵⁶ The vast body of letters from the Civil War offer substantial and incontrovertible evidence of men’s ability and desire to express their feelings on paper. The fear of stepping beyond the boundaries of acceptable masculinity did not stop many soldiers from indulging in highly romanticized vocabulary and rhetoric while articulating and sharing their heartfelt yearnings with their loved ones at home.

For George Barnett, the desire to maintain through the mail a conversation with his family overrode all other consideration of epistolary craftsmanship. Having endured a long stretch without any mail or news from home, the Michigander complained that “it isn’t fair to take a fellow away from home and keep him so many months without even a scratch of a pen from his friends.” Such was the Barnett’s desire to stay connected with home that he facetiously claimed that, “If it [the war] lasts much longer I shall be under the necessity of addressing a letter to Old Abe and giving him full information as to all the particulars.”⁴⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, soldiers routinely treated precious letters from home as totems of their loved ones. The soldiers kissed, and caressed such letters, and some even went so far as to keep on their physical bodies these epistles while going into battle. The act of burning a beloved letter revealed soldiers’ determination to safeguard the intimacy of their private emotional life from the prying and curious eyes of outsiders. Not surprisingly, soldiers also saw their personal mail as extensions of their personhood. “It is said, that a person's writing is indication of

⁴⁵⁶ Orrin S. Allen, 112th NY, to his wife Francis, 18 January 1863, Orrin S. Allen Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Allen served in the 112th New York and at the time was stationed in Suffolk, Virginia.

⁴⁵⁷ George Barnett to his wife Dotty, 3 December 1864, George Barnett Papers, UMCL.

their character,” wrote one New Yorker.⁴⁵⁸ Soldiers certainly wanted the best side of their character to shine through in their personal mail. Self-conscious of how his hastily composed letter poorly represented himself to the reader, a Union naval officer begged his wife, “Dont let any one read it [for] I am ashamed of it.”⁴⁵⁹ A sergeant in a colored regiment proclaimed to his wife how he had “em proved” in his writing. His growing confidence in his epistolary skills formed an integral part of his newfound impetus for self-improvement, for as he put it, “if i live to get home we will live diferent for I am deter mand to elevate my minde[.]”⁴⁶⁰

The highly politicized nature of American antebellum society, combined with the blessings that Jacksonian mass democracy bestowed upon white men, meant that many soldiers often took these epistolary infringements as an affront to their personal dignity. Certainly, their letters regularly expressed displeasure, disgust, and disappointment emanating from dashed expectations of better treatment. “I do not know when I will have another opportunity of sending you another [letter],” wrote John Guy Lofton, a Mississippi infantryman to his wife, “[Y]ou must write me often for that privilege is denied me here[.]”⁴⁶¹ Dr. Robert Hubbard, serving with

⁴⁵⁸ Unknown soldier to “Hattie” 9 February 1864, Special Collections, Virginia Tech. Available online at <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/cwlove/dearhattie.html>. Accessed 28 August 2015. The soldier’s letter indicated that he served in the 11th New York Battery.

⁴⁵⁹ John Rodgers Goldsborough to his wife, 8 May 1862, John Rodgers Goldsborough Letter, University of Georgia, Athens; Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library. Goldsborough wrote this extraordinarily long letter – over 50 pages – while on blockade duty aboard the steamer *USS Florida* off the coast of Georgia.

⁴⁶⁰ Tillman Valentine to his wife Annie, 25 April 1864, cited in Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third U.S. Colored Troops,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139, no. 2 (April 2015): 184-185.

⁴⁶¹ John Guy Lofton to his wife Elizabeth C. Lofton, 28 July 1861, John Guy Lofton Collection, University of Mississippi, J.D. Williams Library Archives and Special Collections. From Northern Virginia. 11th Mississippi.

the 17th Connecticut, felt aggrieved when a much sought after letter from home “was brought into camp this evening but the Chaplain & Co were both absent and not finding anyone readily to receipt for it he [the mail carrier] took it back to Brigade Head Qrs.” The episode prompted a rhetorical “Now was not that provoking?” from the good doctor.⁴⁶² Another New Englander vented his discontent at what he perceived as needless military bureaucracy interfering with the mail. “We get a mail once in three days which is an abominable shame as boats come down from Washington every day,” wrote Charles Brewster, “but all letters have to go to [General Ambrose] Burnside’s Headquarters which is 12 miles from here and it takes one day to go and one to come.”⁴⁶³

One Ohioan equated the mishandling of his mail to what he perceived as the military’s mistreatment of soldiers in general. “I do not know what it is, but letters are sometimes ten days getting here,” complained Major Emmanuel T. Hooker of the 179th Ohio while stationed near Nashville in 1865. “I guess they think soldiers letters are not worth much and they are permitted to stay in the distributing office.” The incompetency and injustices of the postal service, among the other offenses inflicted on their private mail, directly injured these men’s sense of their personal dignity. The conclusion reached by this Union officer found its refrain in many a

⁴⁶² Robert Hubbard to his wife, 25 February 1863, to his wife, cited in *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front*, ed. Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 116.

⁴⁶³ Charles Brewster to his sister Mary, Dec. 1, 1862, in Blight 191.

soldiers' complaint about their wartime experience: "Soldiers are not of half the value that mules are, at any rate, judging by the way that they are treated."⁴⁶⁴

"It Will Be with Honor to Myself and Family"

The epistolary history of Civil War soldiers illustrates the transformation in the meaning of privacy during the war. Initially Johnny Reb and Billy Yank saw the mail as a powerful instrument for both gathering information about their home communities and for exerting their presence within both the domestic sphere of the home and the public sphere of neighborhood and community life. Just as they ardently made use of the mail as an instrument of publicity, they held fast and hard to the desire to retain the personal nature of postal communications. Their letters home made clear their reluctance to divulge certain information outside a select circle of trusted individuals. Priscilla Regan argues in *Legislating Privacy* that contemporary public policies regarding the privacy of individuals rest upon long-standing social values; nineteenth century Americans, like their present-day successors, attached great importance to their personal privacy.⁴⁶⁵ Civil War soldiers had to adapt to the social arrangements of military life that nearly obliterated the boundary between private and public life. In doing so, these men – and women in disguise as men – grew even more aware of the importance of privacy. Soldiers acquired a profound appreciation for privacy precisely because they were deprived of it within the regimental camps, barracks, naval ships,

⁴⁶⁴ Emmanuel T. Hooker to his daughter Fannie, 8 March 1865, Emmanuel T. Hooker Papers, OHS.

⁴⁶⁵ Priscilla M. Regan, *Legislating Privacy: Technology, Social Values, and Public Policy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 47.

garrisons. Indeed, personal privacy mattered at any site where soldiers congregated in large numbers within confined spaces and lived under rules that made its occupants feel they were automatons.

In that regard, soldiers' defense of their epistolary rights and privileges operated as both an indicator and a function of personal liberty and agency. Guarding one's epistolary privacy – that is, insisting on the ownership of the information created by oneself or about oneself – offered Billy Yank and Johnny Reb one form of socially acceptable resistance to the strict regimen of military life. The defense of what little remained of their privacy represented an assertion of these men's sense of individuality, autonomy, and agency. Soldiers' letters revealed their discomfort with both the massive military bureaucracy they lived under and the horrific bloodshed they sought to live through. For the troops in blue and grey alike, these two defining features of the Civil War experience often times came across as impersonal, inscrutable, dehumanizing, and beyond their control. No wonder the men couched their discharge from the service in terms of regaining once more their entitlements as free white men. "I shall be glad when I can go and come when I have a mind to, and come when I please, and no one's business," wrote one Wisconsin soldier as he anticipated his mustering out, "and then good-by to all masters, for I shall be my own man once more."⁴⁶⁶ The language of freedom also figured

⁴⁶⁶ John F. Brobst to Mary Englesby, 22 May 1863, cited in Margaret Brobst Roth, ed., *Well Mary: Civil War Letters of a Wisconsin Volunteer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960), 63. A member of the 25th Wisconsin, Brobst did not muster out until June 1865.

prominently into what a Maine volunteer confided to his wife in 1864, "I shall look forward to time go home...to see the time when I shall be a free boy again."⁴⁶⁷

Some 750,000 of these men did not survive the war to go home; most did, however.⁴⁶⁸ During their time in the service, however short or long, they had various degrees of success in asserting control of their own epistolary voice. Yet, their consistent and insistent attempts to do so revealed that they never lost sight of what it meant to own themselves and their privacy. Whether the war and a life in uniform lived up to their expectations or not, the soldiers in their letters spoke to and about their daily conditions, their hopes and dreams, their fears and doubts, their moments of joy and sadness. And always they wrote about what they saw, felt, and lived through during the years of battle, boredom, and bloodletting. If the troops had to endure both the tedium of camp life and the terrors of the battlefield, they refused to do so as nameless cogs in the military machine or faceless cannon fodder. The act of letter writing, of scribing their personal testimonies onto paper for others in their social circle to read and be influenced by, meant that these soldiers did not suffer in silence.

By war's end, privacy mattered more for another reason. During the course of the conflict soldiers had confessed aspects of their feelings that they did not want anyone except their most trusted female confidante to know. The cloak of epistolary

⁴⁶⁷ William S. Porter to his wife Etta, 7 September 1864. William S. Porter Diaries and Correspondence, MEHS. The 19th Maine was mustered out 11 September 1865.

⁴⁶⁸ For over a hundred years scholars accepted the figure of 620,000 as the total of number of American deaths out of the three million men who took up arms in one capacity or another during the Civil War. Recent demographic analysis by J. David Hacker points to a much higher figure, up to as high as 850,000 but not less than 650,000. For Hacker, the mid-point of 750,000 provides the most reasonable estimate. See Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (December 2011): 307-348.

confidentiality hid the secret that men had a feminine side, that they longed for home, that they were homesick, and more seriously, that they suffered from bouts of cowardice and sometimes contemplated desertion. The femininity of manly men was kept a secret of the Civil War, known by and shared only between intimate correspondents. The nature of combat produced secrets and the nature of masculinity insured that female relatives, although not entirely trustworthy, were nonetheless the best confidants for these secrets.

The fierce defense of privacy demonstrated in wartime letters adds weight to the argument that Civil War soldiers fought for more than just cause, country, or their brothers in arms. In their hearts and on paper they nurtured the desire to not just win the war, but to perform honorably, and known to the public as having done so. “[I]f I fall or survive the conflict, that it will be with honor to myself and family,” declared one member of the 1st California early in the war.⁴⁶⁹ These men saw themselves as good fathers, husbands, and sons dutifully volunteering for the fight; whatever their actual behavior in camp, they hoped to return home with their honor intact, if not ennobled. If a soldier died in the service, he wanted to be remembered as a man of courage and high moral character. In peacetime honor could be demonstrated by good moral character and mastery over dependents. Honor, even in wartime, was more difficult to defend through mastery over dependents, but good moral character remained as important on the front lines as at the home front.

⁴⁶⁹ George Henry Pettis to his wife, 1 December 1862, George Henry Pettis Papers, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Most significantly, manly honor could be established, displayed, and earned in battle.

Acting like a coward - or even harboring cowardly thoughts - violated manly ideals of honor, duty, and courage. Dishonor was not simply the opposite of honor; it was a stigma, a disgrace that extended from the soldier to his entire family. Even as the Confederacy inched ever closer to defeat in late 1864, one defiant rebel assured his mother that he would never soil his family name by quitting the fight. "I have endeavored during the past history of this war, in all the engagements I have been in, never to sully your name on the bloody battlefield, as awful as they are," wrote David Ballenger. "It grieves me to think that I should at last bring dishonor, shame and contempt upon your grey hairs by turning back in the day of battle like the children of Ephraim."⁴⁷⁰ The idea of honor has often been seen as peculiar to Southern male aristocrats. Yet the privacy concerns of soldiers' letters show that a good reputation mattered to Yanks as well as Confederates, of all classes and backgrounds.

Of course, the desire for a good reputation meant that a soldier appeared manly in the eyes of not only his family but also among his brethren in the regimental camp. Manhood, the wartime letters show, was not an attribute of an individual man, who simply described his own code of conduct. His letters continually conveyed information about other men from his community; he

⁴⁷⁰ David Ballenger to "My dear Mother," 12 December 1864, David Ballenger Papers, UMCL. Ballenger refers to Psalm 78:9 - "The children of Ephraim, *being* armed, *and* carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle." Ballenger was a member of the famed "Hampton Legion," named after its leader, the fabulously wealthy South Carolinian plantation owner Wade Hampton III. The Legion fought in nearly every major battle in the Eastern Theatre, from First Manassas in 1861 to the final encounter at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865.

defended the reputations of some and tattled on others. Masculinity involved the continuous monitoring of the behavior of one's fellow soldiers. Put another way, the culture of letter writing meant that the regimental camp resembled a surveillance state whose members constantly policed, punished, and rewarded each other's conduct through malicious gossip and avowals of honest reporting.

It has long been recognized that Southern women believed that they had the duty to shore up the masculine egos of their defeated soldiers returning home from the battlefields in 1865. In fact, on both sides of the conflict, women played a powerful role in both in maintaining and guarding the secret history of the war. Like the surviving veterans who had fought the battles, the women who lived out the war as home front epistolary confidants created a commemorative culture that celebrated men's heroism, bravery, and self-sacrifice. Perhaps even more so than their male counterparts, the women scrubbed clean an extensive record of effeminacy, homesickness, and thoughts of cowardice and desertion. The point is not simply that the memorial history written postwar was untrue, but that it was a deliberate denial of truths revealed to female confidants in letters received from their beloved soldier-men.

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William Groves Morris Papers
Henry C. Semple Papers
Edmondson and Speed Civil War Papers
Joseph Walters Letters
Albert M. White Papers

University of South Carolina; South Caroliniana Library
Jared Andrus Abell Letters
Carson Family Papers
William Coleman Papers
Samuel L. Dorroh Papers
James McFadden Gaston Papers
William L. Faulkner Letters
Grace Totten Stevens Letter
Joseph and William Templeton Letters

University of Texas at Austin; Dolph Briscoe Center for American History
Edwin Pinckney Becton Papers
Jacob De Witt Brewster Letters
John E. Campbell Letters

James D. Davidson Papers
 George W. French Letters
 George A. Gordon Papers
 Edwin S. Graham Papers
 James B. Griffin Family Papers
 John W. Hill Papers
 W. Randolph Howell Papers
 William M. Oden Papers
 Joel H. Puckett Papers
 John B. Ray Papers
 John H. Reagan Papers
 Fleming W. Thompson Letters

University of Virginia, Special Collections Library

George W. Aughenbaugh Letters
 Bedingfield Family Letters
 Blackford Family Letters
 John and James Booker Letters
 Hiram M. Cash Letters
 Civil War Letters Primarily from Union Soldiers, 1862-1865
 Andrew Jackson Dawson Letters
 Fackler Family Letters
 Joseph Milton Foster Letter
 Henry A. Hefflefinger Letters
 Adele Pedesclaux Landry Letter
 Sanford McCall Letters
 Elisha Franklin Paxton Letters
 William Hartwell Perry Letters

Virginia Historical Society; Richmond, Virginia

Orrin Sweet Allen Papers
 Morgan Brown Campbell Papers
 William Thomas Casey Papers
 William Clark Corson Letters
 Harman Dinwiddie Papers
 Dodge Family Papers
 Joseph Milton Elkins
 Paul M. Higginbotham Papers
 William Henry Lewin Papers
 Morris Family Letters
 Daniel Thurber Nelson Papers
 Joseph F. Shaner Letters
 Kellian Van Rensselaer Whaley Papers

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Library, Special Collections

“Dear Hattie” Letter

William Henry Ruse Correspondence

J. C. Morris Letter

William F. Testerman Letters

Wisconsin Historical Society; Madison, Wisconsin

George Hyer Brayton Diary

Elisha Henry Estabrooks Letters

William Lamont Papers

Alonzo Miller Papers

James Hart Nugent Letters

Edward S. Redington Papers

Richard Baxter Satterlee Letters

William F. Saylor Letter

Martin C. Short Diary and Letters

Henry Southard Letters

Charles Spencer Letters

Jonathon Dwight Stevens Papers

William Wallace Papers

Clement E. Warner Papers

Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

John Mason Brown Letters

Benjamin F. Burke Letters

George Henry Pettis Papers

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