

FLOURISH ACTIVITY '64: LETTERS HOME - 1

Without television, radio, and movies, soldiers in the Civil War relied on other forms of entertainment to pass the time in camp or awaiting battle orders. Some sang and played the harmonica. Many men in the army were avid conversationalists and storytellers. Others, obviously, were better listeners. Yet one universal pastime—that of letter writing—was every soldier's favorite, if not necessary, task. Civil War soldiers were incredibly prolific writers and readers of letters. With the advent of free public education and increased literacy (especially in the North), and without the telephone, for thousands of young men, most away from home for the first time, letter writing became a passion. Likewise, receiving letters from home was the most eagerly awaited event in camp.

To no one's surprise, the incentive to write these countless letters was homesickness. Absence from loved ones, unfamiliar surroundings, and the lack of freedom of movement created a pain that became a chronic and universal theme in Civil War letters. These letters became the sole contact available and men of war wrote home at any and every opportunity.

The majority of soldiers sincerely loved writing letters. Around them were events, people, and things that were at best new and strange, and they wanted to share all these experiences with their folks back home. Despite the time spent preparing for and fighting in battles, the weariness from marches, the slowness of the mail, and the lack of writing materials, most soldiers still managed to send at least brief, hastily scribbled lines home. So desperate were some to write that they used the juice of pokeberries to make ink and reused old letters, writing between the lines.

Writing materials Stationery, pens, pencils, and stamps were hard for soldiers to find or expensive to buy. Very often, they bought these items from the sutler, a dry goods salesman who accompanied armies from place to place. Stationery varied from quality paper to something resembling a rough parchment. But in general, stationery sheets used by Civil War soldiers were 5" x 8" and sometimes lined. While pen and ink was preferred, pencils with no erasers were usually the only writing tool available. Imagine writing a letter in pencil on inexpensive notebooks found in stationery stores or supermarkets and the soldiers used. Letters were usually written with a booklet of four pages (front and back). Envelopes carrying these vital letters would resemble one today except for the following: each successive line written on the front would be indented; no zip code was used; Miss or Mrs. would be written for ladies, Mr. for adult men, and Master for boys. Also included would be the name of the county, as well as the town and state.



FLOURISH ACTIVITY '64: LETTERS HOME - 2

Contents Most letters sent home were remarkably similar in format and content. Salutations almost always began: “My dear and affectionat [sic] wife” or something very close. Next, the soldiers gave a report on their health. (Sickness in the army could lead to death.) Following this would be inquiries or comments on affairs at home. Yet, the heart of almost every letter was an analysis of the military aspect of their lives: camp life, rations, religious expressions, battles, marches, lack of clothing, opinions on their officers and other soldiers, and even weather, which, interestingly, would appeal to a Minnesota farm family curious about the mild climates of the South. Oddly, a common subject among both Rebs and Yanks in letters was where they literally were as they wrote the letter. For example, “I am sitting on a rock above the town as I write this letter.”

Some soldiers had been schooled in penmanship’s spencerian script—which emphasized elaborate loops and curls. Their letters were artfully crafted, meticulously spelled, and grammatically correct. Most letters, however, were examples of crude handwriting, colloquial terminology, and, at best, phonetic spelling. Even “cuss” words crept into such missives. At the end of these letters, well crafted or not, there were usually sentimental thoughts, excuses for messy sheets and misspelled words, and strong admonitions to the family to write back soon. Above the signature went a formal closing (e.g., “I remain your obedient and loving husband ...”).

Vocabulary Before you begin writing a soldier’s letter home, look over some key words and phrases used in these years. The letters *you* write may be read aloud in a simulated atmosphere of campfire at a lull in a battle being fought in 1864. Along with such common words as preacher, secesh/Johnnies, butternuts, Yanks, Blue Bellies, a-coming, a-going, and n’er/nary, soldiers used some of these terms:

- Brasses—buttons, buckles, etc.
- Cuss’swear
- Into the fight—into battle
- I don’t know what—I don’t know
- Master—boys
- Missus/Madam—married woman
- Muster in—join the army
- Muster out—leave the army, usually killed in action
- Painted cats/jezebels—fast women
- Seeing the elephant—to seek adventure/gain experience in battle
- Sirs/sire/gentleman—adult males
- Skeddadle—to leave quickly, as retreat in battle
- Strawfoot’slang for a rural or backwoods soldier
- Teetotaller—person who doesn’t drink alcohol
- Three times—three cheers
- War widow—woman whose husband was away from home in the army or navy

I am sitting...

LETTER HOME FROM SULLIVAN BALLOU

Major Sullivan Ballou of the 2d Rhode Island wrote this letter home to his wife in Smithfield. Ken Burns, the creator of the multi-hour, PBS documentary *The Civil War*, carried a copy of this letter in his pocket during the six years he worked on his film.

July 14, 1861
Camp Clark, Washington

My very dear Sarah:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eyes when I shall be no more ...

I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt ...

Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood, around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar, that I shall return to my loved one unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly I would wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness ...

But, O Sarah! if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights ... *always, always* ... and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again ...

Sullivan Ballou was killed at the first battle of Bull Run.