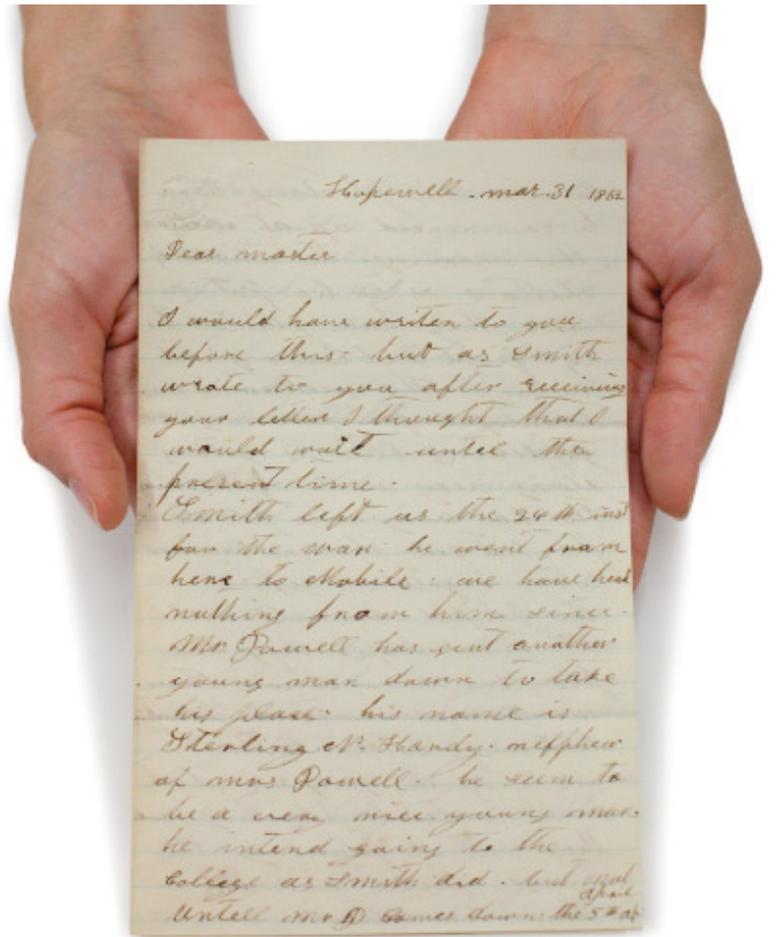


# LIFE DURING WARTIME

LETTERS IN SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS  
DOCUMENT THE  
CIVIL WAR DAY BY  
DAY

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*Letter written to John Hartwell Coker from his slave  
Lucy Skipwith.*

Greatly disturbed by the suffering of the wounded soldiers seemingly everywhere on Grounds, U.Va. student Lancelot M. Blackford rushed back to his room to write his father in Lynchburg.

"They cleared out the public hall [in the Rotunda Annex] & filled it with beds," he writes, "and on them the poor fellows are stretched. ... The whole scene, particularly that in the Hall, is a most painful and distressing one, ... to particularize would only give you pain & afford no gratification. ... I have seen something now of the 'horrors of war'; alas! alas!"

The date was July 22, 1861—the day after the First Battle of Manassas, or Bull Run—and Confederate authorities, overwhelmed with the 1,500 wounded Southerners now in their charge, were scrambling to find suitable housing and treatment. Charlottesville, thanks primarily to its railroad connection with Manassas Junction, suddenly became a prime location for a Confederate hospital complex.

"Two trains of wounded arrived here this afternoon," writes young Blackford. "There are at the hospital here and [in] town, & along the road, between, already some 1000 to 1200 patients." (Blackford—despite witnessing combat's horrible consequences—later joined the Confederate Army, serving in both the artillery and the infantry. After the war, he was principal of Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Va.)

Blackford's letters are among hundreds that a team at U.Va.'s Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library has been posting on "150 Years Ago Today," an online blog started in 2009 that features transcribed Civil War letters and diaries. Now that the nation is in the midst of the Civil War sesquicentennial, which runs until 2015, there's renewed interest in the bloody conflict. And reading the words of the participants themselves provides a new, more intimate level of understanding.

## GENERALS AND EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Accessible from the Special Collections home page and fully searchable by name or date, the blog features correspondence by such Confederate notables as Robert E. Lee and Gen. Elisha F. "Bull" Paxton, who briefly commanded the Stonewall Brigade.



*Included in Special Collections' holdings is this photograph of John Hartwell Coker.*

But it also includes the words of the everyday people who shouldered muskets on the battlefield, suffered deprivations on the homefront and struggled to grasp the equality promised them in the Declaration of Independence. By posting these primary source documents online, the Special Collections Library is presenting the war's daily triumphs and tragedies to the world.

This enormous project started fairly simply. "Twelve years ago, Mary Roy Edwards volunteered to start transcribing our Civil War letters and diaries," says Ann Southwell (Grad '73), a Special Collections' manuscript cataloger who heads the effort. "After a while we decided we should put them up on a blog. Then we got the idea that we could do the entire war day by day."

Edwards, the wife of former U.Va. architecture professor Charles R. Edwards, eventually transliterated more than 3,000 pages from the items at Special Collections. Another volunteer, John P. Mann IV, has been diligently working on letters written by Col. Edward T. Warren of the 10th Virginia Infantry. Southwell herself works on the project every evening after work.

## THE GIRLS BACK HOME

The vast majority of the letters and diaries were penned by Confederates—50 percent are by Virginians. A good example is the Aug. 18, 1861, letter by 20-year-old William Johnson, a member of the 19th Regiment Virginia Volunteers. Typical of soldier letters, it's about what was dominating his thoughts and dreams—the girls back home.

"We Wold like to here from Eny [of them] ... at Eny time," he scribbles from camp. "[T]he girls surtinly

cant be engaged in courting for there is No men left Now [that] the [militia] is called out. [T]ell the girls Not to get married till We fellows get back and give us a Chanch for Every one of us is Deturment to get a Wife as soon as We get back." (Unfortunately, Johnson never got a wife. He was listed as missing in action, and presumed killed, during the famous Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863, the final day of the battle of Gettysburg.)

The commencement of one of the war's greatest military careers was recorded by Union Brig. Gen. Charles F. Smith in the following order, written on Dec. 28, 1861: "In honor of the arrival of Brig. Genl. Grant, Commander of the District of Cairo, a Salute of Eleven Guns will be fired from Willard's Battery, paraded near Fort Anderson." (This command was Grant's first as a general. He later became general-in-chief of the armies and served two terms as the nation's 18th president. Smith died of a foot infection in April 1862.)

## OF FLAGS AND DEATH

In the following snippet written on Oct. 30, 1861, Jennie Cary describes, among other things, the creation of the Confederacy's first battle flags. Jennie, along with her sister Hetty, and their cousin Constance Cary, constituted the "Cary Invincibles," a trio of beautiful pro-Confederate belles who had "refugeed" with their family from Baltimore to Richmond. "[Captain da Ponte] is one of the editors of the New Orleans Delta," she writes, "and [he] wrote a piece about us ... winding up with a grand flourish about our being grand nieces of the illustrious [Thomas] Jefferson &c &c—it was copied into one of the Petersburg papers and brought to us by a friend—Quite charming was it not? ... On Sunday we drove over expecting to meet [Hetty]. ... She brought ... a quantity of Battle Flags which we have been diligently working on ever since—they are beautiful and Het intends sending hers which is especially handsome to Gen. [Joseph E.] Johnston!" (Carefully hand sewn by the Cary girls in the fall of 1861, the battle flags went to generals Johnston, Earl Van Dorn and P.G.T. Beauregard.)

"Death seems to be abroad in our land," begins the Mary Hinchman letter dated Jan. 25, 1862. In it she refers, at first, to the many illnesses plaguing her little town of Egypt, in Monroe County, Va. "There is somethin more distressing occuring here than death from sickness," she writes. "[T]hat is taking men out of their [houses] from their own firesides in the dark hours of the night and murdering them either on their farms or on the public highway[. O]n the night of the 22inst. Mr Timothy Alderman was taken. Soon after dark, their was four men called at his house and wanted him to come out. [T]hey wanted Aword with him, he told them he had been Sick. ... With that one of the men came to the door and presented his pistol at him and said he would shoot him if he did not come out. ... [A]nd Alderman has never been seen since." (Bordering on the Shenandoah Valley, Monroe County remained loyal to the Confederacy throughout the war. Little is known of Hinchman's fate, but her county was absorbed into West Virginia when it became a state in 1863.)

## 'DEAR MASTER'

The blog also includes letters from enslaved African Americans. "Dear master," writes Lucy Skipwith to her owner, Gen. John Hartwell Cocke of Fluvanna County, on March 31, 1862. "The weather is now beautiful for farming and gardening. Etter is getting along very well gardening. She has very nice plants in the flat beds. ... [W]e are looking for you to come out here in april. [ B ]ut as you did not say any thing about it in your last letter I fear that you are not coming. ... [T]he people all joines me in [sending] love to you." (Entrusted with the management of Cocke's Hopewell plantation in Alabama, Skipwith was offered her freedom several times, contingent upon her emigration to Liberia. She turned it down, preferring instead to stay with family and friends. A close friend of Jefferson's, Cocke had been a member of U.Va.'s first Board of Visitors. Cocke Hall is named in his honor.)

Slavery is the topic of another entry from the same date. It's a speech delivered by Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts regarding a bill for the abolition of slavery in the nation's capital. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Compensated Emancipation Act on April 16, 1862, thus making Washington's enslaved community the country's first freed. Lincoln issued the broader Emancipation Proclamation the following January, after the pivotal battle of Antietam. Sumner, a Radical Republican to the last, died in 1874 after an illustrious career.

## 'I AM A DELICATE MAN'

The Special Collections blog is not without humor. "I am a member of a volunteer company of cavalry ... none of whose officers has a military education," writes U.Va. alumnus John C. Dinwiddie to Robert E. Lee on May 20, 1861. "My own life has been spent in the study of books, though I have no military education. ... I am a delicate man & could not do a great deal physically. Could you ... point out to me a way in which I could without failing to serve my country with my hand, yet serve it more with my head?" (The reaction of Lee, known to be strict when it came to duty, can only be imagined. Dinwiddie went on to serve as a captain of artillery. After the war, he was a professor at Southwestern Presbyterian College in Clarksville, Tenn.)

The transcribers say their work is enjoyable but often challenging. "I despair with their punctuation and their odd capitalizations," says Southwell. Edwards concurs. "It usually takes about a day, maybe," she says, "to get used to a writer's spelling and abbreviations."

Nonetheless, the blog is attracting attention—it's received more than 20,000 hits as of early May. "We're getting a lot of hits from people in Russia, Ukraine and India," says Southwell. "I hope they're not using these letters to learn English!"



*On the left page, the handwriting belongs to prisoner of war diarist Sgt. Thomas W. Springer. On the right, the handwriting belongs to a friend who took dictation from Springer as he grew too sick to write.*

*At 16, Springer (1844-1864) enlisted in Co. G of the 191st Pennsylvania. He was captured in a battle at Weldon Railroad (or the Battle of Globe Tavern) on Aug. 19, 1864. Springer was first held at Belle Island prison in Richmond and then was sent to the prison camp at Salisbury, N.C.*

*The diary began the day before his capture. He continued writing in it until Nov. 20, when Sgt. James Eberhart took over writing for him. Eberhart, who survived imprisonment, continued the diary until Springer's death on Nov. 29.*