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Two Unpublished Whitman Family Letters

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- 15 Trent Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.
- 16 Allen, 407.
- 17 Trent Collection, "Christmas Letter, 1863."
- 18 *Dear Brother Walt*, 104.
- 19 *Corr.*, 233.
- 20 Molinoff, 21.
- 21 *Corr.*, 248.
- 22 Walt Whitman, "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers. Visits Among Army Hospitals, At Washington, on the Field, and here in New-York," *New York Times* (December 11, 1864).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Trent Collection, "28 March 1870."
- 25 Trent Collection, "April 5 (1870)."
- 26 Trent Collection, "24 (March 1870)."

TWO UNPUBLISHED WHITMAN FAMILY LETTERS

A fragment of a letter signed by Walt Whitman lies nestled in the Special Collections department of Hunter Library at Western Carolina University, along with two unpublished letters written by his two brothers, Thomas Jefferson (Jeff) Whitman and George Washington Whitman. All of the letters reflect a familial concern of three brothers, for each other and for their mother and sisters. The collection reinforces the importance of Walt Whitman's family in the poet's life.

In the first letter of this collection (MS. 1.1 and MS 1.2), dated March 19, 1862, George Whitman describes the battles of Roanoke, Virginia, and New Berne, North Carolina, to his sister, Mary Elizabeth Whitman Nostrand. The letter's tone is matter-of-fact, even though George documents the loss of many "intimate friends." George indicates that he has not received news from home for a month, and he urgently requests that Mary "write immediately."

Near Newbern N.C. March 19th 1862

Dear Sister

Hearing that a mail leaves here today I have only time to write a few lines to let you know that I am well and hearty. Tell Han we have given the rebels another licking and won a splendid victory. I went through the fight and did not get a scratch although the balls rained around me for over two hours, and several of our boys were struck down close to my side. We left Roanoke Island March 11th and landed about sixteen

miles below Newbern (which is, or was a city of some 6,000 inhabitants) on the 13th and took up the line of march. After marching 8 or 10 miles through the woods, a halt was ordered as it was getting dark and we passed rather an uncomfortable night as it rained pretty hard and our blankets soon got soaked through. We got up at daylight on the morning of the 14th, marched 4 or 5 miles, when we came upon the enemy in strong forces behind breastworks as usual. We marched up under a terrible fire, formed line of battle, and at it we went. The enemy were posted in an almost impregnable position, but after 3 hours hard fighting (during which time our boys had crept nearer and nearer to the enemy's works) the rebels ran and the day was ours. Our regiment suffered pretty bad, we had only about 651 men when we went into the fight, and lost about 100 in killed and wounded, among whom was some of my intimate friends. One young fellow (named Bob Smith, Orderly Sergeant Co. 13) was shot through the heart, he lived in Portland Ave. near Mother. Among the badly wounded is our Lieutenant Colonel R. B. Potter, shot through the side. I asked him at the time if he was hurt, he said nothing to speak of (and did not give up for an hour after that). After the fight I found our Major LeGendre lying in the mud, a ball had struck him in the back of the neck and passed out through his cheek. I took off the blanket that I had strapped to my back, laid him on it, got some help and carried him about a quarter of a mile to a tent where he now lies in a very critical condition. We had one captain, one lieutenant, 3 orderly sergeants, our Chaplain, and 16 or 18 privates killed. Lieutenant Carrington had a leg taken off. He was by my side when he was struck and was an intimate friend of mine. Two other lieutenants were shot through the leg. I don't know what our total loss is but should think about 450 killed and wounded.¹ I think the enemy lost about the same number. The battle was on each side of a railroad leading into the city and we knew they carried off a good many of their killed and wounded in cars. Immediately after the fight a front of our force started in pursuit, but the rebels had set fire to a bridge which crosses a river about .9 of a mile wide. Our troops finally crossed in a boat and found the city nearly deserted and fired in 3 or 4 places. The fires did not do much damage however and most of our troops are now quartered there. Our regiment marched slowly up to the river and as our boys were about lived out we spread our blankets on the ground and passed the night there. We are now encamped on the banks of the river about 2 miles from the city and we have things very comfortable. We will probably stay here for some time. The enemy had tremendous advantages over us and as they had more men engaged than we had, they ought to have cut us to pieces as they have spent months and months fortifying and getting ready for us. After we were landed from the ships, our gunboats went up and drove the rebels out of 4 or 5 splendid short batteries so that our victory is complete. We have taken quite a number of canon, and to day a part of our force leaves here to take another small city lying on the coast. The last letter I received from home was dated February 19th and I have had none from you since I left Annapolis. I wrote you soon after our fight at Roanoke. Did you get the letter? Write immediately please. G. W. Whitman

Direct 2nd Brigade Burnside Expedition Newbern N.C.

The second entry of this collection (MS 2.1 and 2.2) is a partial letter Walt wrote to his brother Jeff. It has been identified by Ted Genoways as the second half of a letter dated January 16, 1863; the first half was published in the first volume of *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*.² Genoways published the entire letter in his supplementary seventh volume of *The Correspondence* (2004).³

The third entry of this collection (MS 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4) is a letter from Jeff to Hannah, dated May 15, 1864. The news is again all about George, and his regiment's movements. The tone of the letter seems to indicate that Hannah kept her distance from her family.

Brooklyn, May 15, 1864

Dear sister Han,

Mother duly received your last letter and glad were we to hear from you again. Of course the great topic of thought and talk with us all just now is about George. We yesterday received a letter⁴ from Walt saying that he had heard from George up to last Tuesday at noon and that up to that time he was all right. He had lost quite a number of his company—his first Lieutenant—but was himself unhurt. Oh I do so hope that George may get through safe. What a blessing twill be if he does escape—and yet I hardly dare hope—it does not seem possible that one can go through so much and come out entirely unharmed, but oh for mother's sake I do so hope he may escape. Mother is getting very old and I fear the worst results if anything should happen to George. If we hear anything more be assured I will not fail to write you at once.

So Han you have got a mansion of your own—I hope you won't get proud and not shirk to your poor relations. Well Han, since we have seen each other I have also been doing pretty well. I have a wife and two babies to see to. Think of that with butter at 40°—However we manage to move along—I am still in the water office—engineering—have a pleasant place and a pretty good time. I am much worried dear sister to see that you don't get much better—that you are so unwell. I was in hopes that when the spring came that you get all right again. You must keep up your courage and take good care of yourself and you will come around all right in a short time. I see you feel pretty bad about George's not coming down to see [you]. Poor fellow, he wanted to come bad enough but when he was on he had a long time to get his company mustered in or out. I believe the next day after he got through with that he was ordered to recruit in Brooklyn. Did you know that the officers did not have any furlough? They did not and had to report for duty regularly—yet George did not expect to leave so soon and thought he would be about to get leave to visit you.

Han, write to mother (and me too) as often as you can. Mother is pretty well, much better I think than we have reason to expect at her age. We often talk about you and wish that you would come on and see us. Mother often speaks of coming on to see you and if George comes out all right, you need not be thrown into a flurry if you see an old lady and young man (perhaps good looking) coming along your way—that would be mother and George, or mother and I (if I then the part in bracket comes in).

Good bye dear sister—write us soon—all send their love—affectionately your brother Jeff.

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NOTES

- 1 According to the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, there were ninety-eight Union soldiers killed, wounded, or missing in the Battles of Roanoke and New Berne, North Carolina, combined.
- 2 Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:67-68.
- 3 Ted Genoways, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 7:17-20.
- 4 This letter is to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, dated May 12, 1864; *Corr* 1:221.