

SOME CIVIL WAR LETTERS

By
George E. Pettengill

These letters from Civil War camps in the area were written by John Wesley Pettengill of Sangerville, Maine. He enlisted on the first call for volunteers in 1861 in Co. H of the 6th Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment and served throughout the war, later transferring to the 1st Veteran Infantry of Maine. He was born in 1839 and died 1877. His cousin William H. enlisted in the same company and died June 22, 1862 of typhoid fever contracted during the Peninsula campaign.

The letters are variously written to John's older brother David and his younger brother Daniel. The former was with other Maine men in the Virginia woods getting out ship timber when the war broke out and narrowly escaped being pressed into the Southern army.

Daniel enlisted August 21, 1862 in the 18th Maine Infantry, afterwards changing to the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery. Born 1844, he died Oct. 25, 1932.

The writer was quite unorthodox in his composition, seldom beginning sentences with a capital, although for some reason he liked to use capital D's where not expected. Nor did he use periods, so it is often difficult to tell where one sentence ends and another begins, although he used colons and semi-colons. To make reading easier, periods have been inserted where they seem to belong, although the letters have otherwise been transcribed without correction of errors of spelling and capitalization. Most of the more personal references to family back in Maine have been omitted, although some have been included to give a little more flavor to the letters.

George E. Pettengill

Camp Lyon's Chainbridge
August 25th 1861

Dear Brother it is with pleasure I take my pen in hand to let you know I am prety smart and hope these few lines will find you well and smart. henry had a letter from his mother last night and she said that you was better the last she heard from you. . . . I would like to go down there and would go in a minute if I could get away. it is the worst place for that, that every I got into. a man cannot get out of here then he can get out of states prison. it is rather hard but have to put up to it. . . I would wright to them but when I have any time to wright I feel so tired and sleepy that it is hard work to wright any letters at all. when I am on guard duty it is Day and night: and cleaning guns we have to keep them in order all of the time. our men is healthier now then they have been at all. the fever and ague is all around here amongst the natives but I do not know of man in this Regiment that has got it. the northern men stand it here better then

the people around here. this country is full of soldiers. tell all to wright to me (J W P.) and I will be happy to hear from all and especily from you and aunt . . . for the orders has just come to prepare Divine servise. our orders is very strict and have to obey them.

So good by from from an anxious brother in your welfare and the Comfort of aunt.

John W Pettengil

I am in haste
5 P M

Camp Griffin Lewinsvill Virginia Dec 2nd 1861

Dear Brother

it is with pleasure I seat myself to wright you a few lines to let you know that I am as comfortable as usual. hope these few lines will find you the same. we are here yet how long we shal stop here is more then can tell for present. it is rather cold and chilly nights here not any snow as yet but a lot of rain to make it muddy and nasty. it is not so cold here I suppose as it is down East. I suppose that you have snow there now. we last week shifted our Campe's a little on to the hill. it is some warmer in them now. we have to go on picket every 3 Days. it is rather cold standing picket nights now. last Saturday we had one of the Cavelry's horse shot. he disobeyed the guard and they shot the horse. the guard intended to shoot the rider but missed him and put the ball just below the saddle through the horse. it was one of the 6th Maine boys that done it. not any man has any right to Dictate a guard on his post for the guard has the whole Law of the land on his side when he does his Duty. if a man disobeys a sentinal he must suffer the consequence of it. we had a grand review of troops the other Day of about 75,000 men or soldiers on one field. all's quiet along the lines now as far as heard from. . . and I hope soon the war will end. if it Does and I am saved and am well I shal go down East there stay and mak a home if nothing happens. when the war ends is more then I can tell for present or anyone else. it may not be long but soon it may begin to be Desperet and terrible and be carried on with power all over the lines till it is ended. god Grant that it may soon be over and this now Distracted Country become a happy land to us all go back to the homes that we have left and recieve the friends there with willing hands and warm hearts and say to the rebels shame shal cover your heads from this to all eternity for raising this contest so vile so contempttible to the human race; let the world see us again as a mighty nation united under the old flag that has gained respect from all nations of the earth and will always maintain its own power *home* and *abroad*.

it is, rather a pleasant fall here except the rainy weather. we have to Drill a great Deal. it keeps us doing some thing all of the time. sometimes have to take it little harder than others. I have not seen any rebels yet to fire at. we are about 10 miles from washington City 12 miles from fairfax Court house. we have here at this place this Division under General Smith of the 7th Maine and the 6th Maine regiments and 11 eleven more infantry in all 13 regiments of in-

fantry 1 one Cavelry one artillery in all of about 15,000 men under Smith and just above us is General McCalls Division of the same number of men which makes about 30,000 men here in this section from Chain Bridge.

they are a small portion of the army and its strength. men here any quantity of them.

it is getting late and shal have to close soon by wishing you good Day wright soon.

from a true brother John W Pettengille

* * *

Camp Griffin Lewinsvill December 14th 1861

Dear Brother

I again take my pen in hand to let you know that I have got your letter and picture. it is a noble one. I am much obliged to you for it. you said them coats you had got I am glad of that. I guess that they was a little on them for to pay. you pay for them what the bill is. well I have got my boots they are just the thing's that I needed. If I had got them a week sooner I think I should not been sick. I have been in the hospital now since a week ago last thursday. how long they will keep me there is more then I can tell. I had the sore throat or the diptheria but they put stuff on it that stoped it prety soon; prety soon after they put it on my throat I could swallow water or Gruel prety good. they keep putting it on and now my throat is well about as ever. our assistant surgeon is a good hand to handle the sore throat. he has not lost a case of it yet they have it here now all the time.

my boots they are a first rate pair and the pretyest. ten Dollars would not get them of me. they have offered 8 Dollars but they can't come in to them. evrything here is awfull high. I got some Gloves and one pair of socks and come very exceptable for they was what I needed. you will have to pay Roberts the freight of my boots; and the boots to; I thought it would be better for you to Do it.

these coats has done me a good deal of good. I have layed in them; in the cornfields; by side of fences; and stone walls; in bushes by side of trees on guard in rains and winds. I always had them both on when out or on duty in the night. they are good stuff or they would have been worn out long ago. I always took them on picket with me and my old rifle to my side. when sleep there lay partly on my gun so no one could take it away from me with out awakening me but I never went to sleep on the picket post unles they was a sentinal sat close to me to in case of troubl to wake me. the cape is to put up over the head to sleep in.

... it is now the time for you to get schooling but but be carefull and not hurt yourself.

for me I am nobody nd never expect to be but get along some way or rather. so it is getting late so Good by for present from

John W Pettengill ...

Camp Griffin Lewinsville Va January 23d 1862

Dear Brother

I again take my pen in hand to wright you a few lines and send you my profile or picture. I am here yet and smart as usual so is henry and Llewellyn Mitchele. it is awfully muddy here and has been here for some time.

...all of the folks as far's as I have heard is as well as can be expected under the existing state of affairs. we are laying here idle. our second lieutenant is Down to Dexter to get recruits for us. his name is George Roberts and is a good officer. ...tell all of the folks that the army is well cared for in all respects under the state of things.

so good by from a true brother
yours truly

John W Pettengill

* * *

Camp Griffin Lewinsville Virginia feb 20th 1862

Dear Brother

it is with pleasure I seat myself to wright you a few lines in answer to your letter of the 16th that I recieved last night and in it I found a picture of yours. it was the old fellow himself. I think you look rugged as a bear and hope you feel as well. ...well David I am in hopes this war will end this summer so if all things is favorable I can go home and live with my people once more. at home I am in hopes if I am permitted to return to be able to get me a place and go to work on it for rambling around a man neather has a home or any thing else but if I have my health such times is not always going to last but hope when I get out of this to have a chance to live at home or make one; I have done about as well since I have enlisted as I should if I had not done so. I have been paid of very prompe by the government since I came here and have saved the most of it so far. we have 13 dollars per month and all found but I should like to get out of it this spring so as to go down to Sangerville to stay once more. some times I have a mind to enlist into the regular servise but I think I shal not it will not hardly pay...

so David I shal have to finish these few lines. Henry is well as usual so is all of the boys.

so Good by for present

John W Pettengill

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Camp Griffin Lewinsville Va February 27th A D 1862

Dear Brother *Daniel*

it is again with pleasure I seat myself to wright you a few lines. it is now about 7 P M and all is well now as usual.

it is fair weather here now but the wind blows prety hard some times and it dries up the mud very fast. we are laying here under orders to be ready to go at an hours notice with all of our luggage. last night the teems was to work all night in the rain transporting things in their propper places and yesterday all of the cooks had orders to cook up 3 Days rations on hand. no they worked all

last night getting everything in proper trim for something we know not what for; to Day we have packed all of our blankets except one woolen and one rubber and send them to Washington so now I expect we will lay rather cold but we cannot help that we have to obey orders. our baggage is reduced down now to a very small load and when the order comes to march we can in an hour be ready and on the march with all we have summer small tents and all; what the plan of General Mclelen is is not known but we are prepared now to meet the hardships of this campaign which by the movements of things here tends to look like coming upon us soon but I say God be with us and go with us; and strengthen the trembling heart in the perilous hour of Battle; to Day we hear of Banks crossing the river if it is so we think we will see fun soon; this division has been strengthened by a battery of 6 guns which now makes 22 cannon in this Division now fully equipped and ready for the fray.

well Daniel be a good boy take care of your self. do not worry on my account for that will not do any good at all. tell all hands to wright if they can if they cannot of cours they cannot; I am a little inclined to think that it will be a long day before I see you again or any of them; but Daniel put your trust in god at all times; for me you know I do. you may depend on some important news from this quarter soon. it may not be for a few Days or a week or so but when this powerfull body of men moves it will make the secesh land tremble by the roar of our artillery and the mighty clash of arms will ring at the approach of Battle in the hands of these brave men.

So good by
J W P

This last letter is accompanied by "Poetry on the Journey of the 6th Maine Regiment to the Seat of war by J.W.Pettengill" extending to 200 lines. The remaining three letters of this correspondence which have survived are not from the Arlington area so are not transcribed here. However brief notes of their contents are included.

One is from Camp 9 near Yorktown April 21, 1862 with a plan showing his location and that of the Confederates. He tells of being under fire and of Henry's narrow escape from being shot. The next is from a camp near Fairoak June 6, 1862 which tells of action around Richmond.

The final letter is much later from a camp near Warrenton City November 5th, 1863 which tells of action near Fredericksburg and of making a forced march of thirty miles to Gettysburg. He notes that when he went into Maryland he was within ten-twelve miles of Daniel.

These letters hopefully have some interest as reflecting the feelings and experiences of an ordinary Union soldier in the war.