



Dublin Historical Society

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A CIVIL WAR LETTER

Letters are among the principal raw materials of history. They supply evidence not merely of events, but of contemporary opinions and attitudes. Letters written during the Civil War have two advantages: legible handwriting and long-lasting paper. Paper made from wood pulp – the kind that self-destructs because of acidity – did not become common until after the war. Penmanship, hitherto emphasized by endless copying exercises in the common schools, deteriorated as the nineteenth century wore on and has never recovered.

Today's keypad guarantees legibility, but leaves longevity in doubt. Will the billions of e-mails and text messages survive on the millions of hard drives? And will our descendants still have the machinery needed to read them?

On a summer's day in 1863 Luther Pratt Eaton sat down in Dublin to write a letter to Henry H. Holt, a private in the Union Army then stationed near Portsmouth, Virginia. Luther and Henry were first cousins, their common grandparents being Moses and Esther (Ware) Eaton of Hancock.

Luther was 26, having been born on Christmas Day, 1836. The Eatons lived in a house, no longer standing, near the Hancock line in what is now Harrisville. Luther's father, Moses Eaton, Jr., (1796-1886) achieved considerable fame as a fancy interior painter – what would nowadays be called an interior decorator. Some of his stencil work survives in the Old Parsonage.

Henry Holt was 22. He was the son of Nathan Holt, originally from Nelson, and Rhoda, a sister of Moses Eaton, Jr. He grew up in the house still standing on the west side of Brush Brook Road and now owned by James and Sandra Boyd.

In the summer of 1862 the war was going badly, and President Lincoln issued a call for 300,000 fresh recruits. Henry was one of the many New Hampshire men who responded to that call. On September 15th, along with three other Dublin lads, he went to Concord and was

mustered into Company G, 13th New Hampshire Volunteers.

In early October the Regiment entrained for Washington and by the end of the month was encamped in the Washington suburb of Fairfax, close enough to Confederate lines for the men of Company G to be called upon for picket (outpost) duty. On December 1st they began a ten-day march through Maryland and Virginia to join Ambrose Burnside's Army of the Potomac just in time to take part in the debacle of Fredericksburg. After fighting their way into the ruined city, the Union army was ejected by Lee's counter-attack and forced back across the Rappahannock.

In less than four months Henry Holt had traveled a long way from Dublin, by train, steamer, and much of the time on foot. He had bivouacked on bare frozen ground, gone hungry when rations were slow in catching up, tasted the fear of combat and the humiliation of defeat. He remained a private, and did nothing – either good or bad – to earn a mention in the regimental history.¹ Since we have none of his letters home, we don't know what he thought about it all. Like thousands of his unsung com-

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The Annual Meeting will be on Friday, August 21, at the Dublin School.

There will be a dinner to benefit the Society's projected website, followed by the annual meeting (no charge) at which Headmaster Brad Bates will talk on the history of the school. Reminders will be mailed in the course of the summer, but now would be a good time to mark your calendar.

rades his experience conformed to the classic definition of warfare through the ages: long periods of acute boredom punctuated by short periods of acute fright.

After a couple of miserable winter months on the banks of the Rappahannock, the Thirteenth was moved to an area southwest of Portsmouth, Virginia, on the edge of the Great Dismal Swamp, where they saw more combat in defending the town of Suffolk against a Confederate attack. During the heat of summer 1863, the Regiment was employed clearing trees and building camps. It was so occupied when Private Holt received this letter from home.

Dublin, N.H. Augst 8th, 1863

Cousin Henry,

I have just received your letter of Aug third and was very glad to hear that you was well and having a comparatively easy time. we are also as well as usual so also are your folks as well as people generally in this vicinity[.] we have had for a rarity five good hay days last week and have got in to our meadow a little ways[.] the week before we had a day and three quarters of good weather.

As in any farming community, and especially in haying season, the principal topic of interest was the weather.

We had a very severe shower a week ago last night which washed the roads and flowed [flooded] the meadows making the grass very gritty and hard to cut on the river bank. farther north I understand some bridges were swept off where the shower was much more severe than here.

The river near the Eaton house was the Nubanusit.

Your folks are getting along very well with haying[.] I think they have got most of the hay at home. They have had Mr. Wilkins some[.] they say he can mow pretty well where it is smooth. It will take us I think a good share of this month to finish unless we have pretty good weather.

Mr. Wilkins was probably Abraham Wilkins, who appears as a hired man in the 1850 census. He would have been about 62, a considerable age for

that time.

I expect they will commence drafting in this state this week but do not think they will in this district for several days. I have not yet decided whether to stand it or to go with the navy[.] the folks do not wish me to go in either the navy or the army. Perhaps I may not go[,] they are so much opposed to it[,] but if I do go it will be in the navy I think. if we were not so busy haying I would go to Boston and look around and see how I liked the appearance of things in the naval line.



Henry Holt in Civil War Uniform, c. 1862
From Leonard and Seward, *The History of Dublin, N.H.*, Dublin, 1920, after p. 200

Congress passed the Conscription Act in March, 1863. Of the quota assigned to each district 20%, selected by lot, were called in the first draft, beginning in July. The draft was thus literally a lottery. Of those called, more than half were rejected for physical or mental unfitness. Others fled to Canada or the West, and there were exemptions for those claiming to be somebody's sole support (but not because of essential occupations). If all else failed, a substitute could be hired.

There was thus little likelihood of Luther Eaton's being drafted, but he was at least considering his options. In the event, for whatever reason, he did not serve in either branch of the service. He lived until 1915, dying in Dublin at the age of 78.

Bruce has got clear minus of \$300.00 which he paid for a substitute[.] I think he had better have gone last fall as he would probably have got into the band and had a pretty easy time but perhaps he is willing to pay his \$300.00 and know that he is an able bodied man.

Twelve Dublin draftees procured substitutes, none of whom came from Dublin and six of whom later deserted. Three hundred dollars seems to have been the going rate.

No one by the name of Bruce, whether as Christian name or surname, is recorded in the Leonard & Seward's Town History as having paid for a substitute. Probably this Bruce came from another town.

I hope the war will not last a great while longer but I presume the rebs will hold out for a while but we have

obtained some advantages that they can never regain and I hope that we shall soon obtain more though I look for nothing decisive in Va till the army is filled with drafted men unless Lee comes north once more. Mobile & Charleston I think will soon be in other hands then the rebs will be pretty well shut in and if foreign nations do not interfere and I think they will not, they will have to yield[.]

Luther evidently had a quite sophisticated grasp of the strategic and political status of the war. He was writing about a month after the twin Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg on July 4th, 1863, which presumably were some of the "advantages" he had in mind. Grant's victory at Vicksburg, combined with Farragut's control of New Orleans and the lower Mississippi, not only cut the Confederacy in two, but denied it one of its principal outlets for foreign trade. The Chesapeake, where Henry Holt was stationed, was already in Union hands, so Mobile and Charleston were, as Luther recognized, the last major ports still under Southern control.

The reference to "foreign nations" was also astute. During the first two years of the war, when the South appeared to have the upper hand, there had been an ever-present threat that England and perhaps France would "interfere" by recognizing the Confederacy and perhaps providing it with military or financial aid. Luther rightly guessed that, after Lee's decisive defeat at Gettysburg, this threat began to fade.

Dam sorry to hear that the diphtheria has broken out in the 13th and hope it will be checked before it goes far,

in its mild form I do not think it is very bad but in its worst form it is rather hard to manage[.] I do not think of much more at present to write. Write soon

From your friend

Luther

Henry must have mentioned the outbreak of diphtheria in his letter of August 3rd, the day after it is first mentioned in the regimental history: "Diphtheria is very prevalent in camp, caused in great degree by the heat and the bad water we have to use."²

We are unfamiliar with diphtheria nowadays, since all children in advanced countries are routinely vaccinated against it. It is a bacterial inflammatory disease, unclean drinking water being a common cause. In its mild form, it produces open sores on the limbs and extremities – debilitating but not life-threatening. In its severe form, however, it attacks the mucus membrane around the windpipe, and can cut off the ability to swallow and breathe.

In Company G there were four deaths from diphtheria in August, 1863, or about five percent of the total company strength. One of the four was Henry Holt, who died on August 21st. His body was shipped home, and is buried in the Dublin cemetery.

–J.W.H.

¹ Thompson, S. Millett, *Thirteenth Regiment of New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion / 1861-1865 / A Diary Covering Three Years and a Day*, Boston, 1888

² *Ibid.*, p. 190

HOW THE LETTER CAME TO US

Some months back I got an e-mail from Peter Wallner, Director of Library Services at the New Hampshire Historical Society, in which he said that an auction house in North Carolina was having a sale which would include a number of New Hampshire Civil War letters. Among these was one written from Dublin to a Henry Holt. The NHHS planned to bid on some of these letters, including the Dublin one, but wanted to be sure that we wouldn't be competing with them.

I got on line to the auctioneers and found a description of the letter, which told everything except

who had written it. I called the auctioneers to ask, and was told that the letter was simply signed "Luther".

Starting with this clue, Nancy Campbell and I spent an entertaining morning trying to figure out who "Luther" might have been. We settled on Luther Eaton as the most likely, based on his age and the fact that he and Henry Holt were cousins. (We were quite pleased with our detective work when we got the letter and saw the salutation, "Dear Cousin".)

Based on our research, we decided to bid on the letter, and e-mailed

the auctioneers for bidding forms. These turned out to be rather daunting, calling for a bank reference, several commercial references and a credit card number. (The Society has no credit card.) I called Peter Wallner and told him that we were not sophisticated enough to meet the requirements for bidding. If the NHHS was going to bid on other material in the sale, would they place a bid on this letter for us? This Peter very kindly agreed to do – a fine example of collegiality and cooperation among historical institutions.

–J.W.H.

SOCIETY NEWS

A New President. The Society was shocked and saddened by the sudden and untimely death of our president, **Anne Anable**, on February 19. Vice-president Henry James took charge and called an emergency meeting of the board, at which it was decided that Annie would have wished us to go ahead with the winter pot-luck supper scheduled for the following week. This was done and, in spite of a technical glitch, was acknowledged to be a great success. Henry graciously accepted his elevation to president, inspired he says, "by Annie's indomitable spirit of service to the town."

Two New trustees have joined the board. **Sarah Bauhan** grew up in Dublin and earned a degree in History from U.N.H. She lives in Hancock, and is a musician by profession. She also has some technological expertise, and has volunteered to create a web site for the Society. **Timothy O'Connell** lives on Boulder Drive with his wife Kirsten and their 3 children. Tim holds a degree in Architecture and runs a construction management firm in Peabody, MA.

Sarah is the daughter of our late president William L. Bauhan, and Tim is son-in-law to former trustee Nancy Cayford, so control of the Society is passing to a new generation. (And about time, too! Ed.)

Will Morgan's Book. The Society is sponsoring the publication of a book on Dublin architecture being prepared by **Prof. William Morgan**. Will is known to many as a one-time Dublin summer resident who, along with Bill Bauhan, was a moving spirit in the National Register project back in the 1970s and '80s. What makes the subject of Dublin architecture especially interesting is the large number of summer "cottages" designed by nationally known architects. The book, however will be a survey from the earliest "capes" to Dan Scully's *jeux d'esprit*.

ACCESSIONS TO THE ARCHIVES

As a result of Will Morgan's researches, we have been in touch with **James F. Hilleary**, the architect who designed "Oak Hill" for Ray Smith in the early 1960s – the house that now belongs to Dr. & Mrs. Hampers. Mr. Hilleary has kindly sent us four photographs of the house, taken shortly after its completion. These are the



ANNE STEINERT ANABLE ON HER WEDDING DAY
September 5, 1964

Long before she became President of the Society, Annie allowed us to copy this and other photographs from her wedding album.

only pictures of the house we have ever seen.

The Jaffrey Historical Society has sent us a printed copy of *A Sermon, Delivered by Wm. F. Bridge, in Dublin, Dec. 18, 1864, on the Death of Lewis D. Learned, Corporal of Co. G, 14th Reg. N.H. Vols., killed at the Battle of Cedar Creek, Va., Oct. 19th, 1864, Peterborough, 1865.* The Rev. William F. Bridge was the Congregational Minister at that time. Lewis D. Learned was one of two Learned brothers to serve in the Civil War, the other being Marion D. Learned, also of the 14th N.H. Their younger brother, Henry D. Learned, was the first President of the Historical Society.

We have recently bought several items, including the Eaton/Holt letter which is the subject of the essay above. Among other purchases are the minutes of an ecclesiastical council in 1775 suspending the Rev. Joseph Farrar and a tintype, c. 1890, of Luke Harland Richardson.

Contributors of photographs recording current events include **Hank and Nancy Campbell, Sally Shonk Carey, Carole Allen and Sharron Monaghan.** Our thanks to all of them.

C R E D I T S

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Newsletter was edited by John Harris.

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