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Document: *Letter to Edwin Young from Otter Island, December 18, 1861*

Transcript:

Head Quarters Otter Island Dece^m 18th/61

My Dear Edwin

I have just rec^d your kind letter of Dece^m 3rd/61 the first one that I have ever received from you. I need not assure you that it gives me much pleasure to peruse your letter, and regret not having received the others. I received one letter today from home, which tells me that all are well, which is a source of great gratification I can assure you. It is very sad to be separated from those we love, my case is doubly sad – so many Dear-little creatures who so affectionately love their Papa, and such a devoted Wife, all far-away, causes a feeling of sadness which my usual equanimity cannot overcome.

However, I am buoyed up with the hope that this accursed rebellion will soon be crushed, and I may once more enjoy the happiness and comforts of home.

Serving in a good cause, is the only justification in my own brain for my leaving home Wife and children.

Go and see them often, cheer them up, and bid them look forward to the early return of Husband & Papa.

Annie's letter informs me that you are booked for Christmas Dinner – and she anticipates much pleasure therefrom – please do not fail to be there. I know the little ones will be so much rejoiced to see you. Tell them to be good children, and that Papa will expect to find them much improved in goodness when he returns.

When I arrived at Port Royal – Gen^l Sherman divided my Reg^t, leaving 5 Companies under Lieut-Col. Beaver to occupy Fort Seward at Port Poyal, myself with the other 5 Companies and one Company Rhode Island Artillerists were ordered to Otter Island (St. Helena Sound) for the purpose of guarding the right flank of his Army from the enemy approaching from Charleston; I brought five Guns with me – one 10 inch Columbiad & 4 Rifled 32 pounders. An excellent Fort constructed and abandoned by the Rebels is now receiving them – three are already mounted the remaining two will be up in a few days, when I will be able to bid defiance to Secesh, I have sufficient ammunition for a long siege and boys that will work cheerily. I am preparing tonight to go early in the morning with three Companies up the Asheboo River to Fenwicks and Bear Island, for the purpose of driving away the Rebels that may be there posted, and securing a large number of Cattle Hogs sheep & Horses – sweet potatoes corn &c. that Negroes tell me are there, we have already been on the lower end of Fenwicks Island, and procured Potatoes Corn & Beef. I am confident of my ability to drive the Rebels from the Island if there, although I rather expect to find it abandoned, as are all the Sea Islands between this and Beaufort. You know that a small force of good men guided by Courage & prudence can do a great deal of work in a short time. We go up in Surf Boats, and may perhaps occupy Fenwicks Island permanently, that being one more step towards Charleston.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Nove^m 23^d contains a good map of the Coast, by examining it, you will be able to trace our position and movements. I am not trammel'd



by orders. The only order I have received is the one directing me hither, and instructing me that in assuming command of this important position, I am expected by Gen^l Sherman to guard the right flank of his army from attack by the enemy approaching by way of the Asheboo & South Edisto Rivers. This I will do & I think I can do, but I have asked for the rest of my Reg^t to be sent here in order that I might act partially on the offensive— We are about 35 miles from Charleston and of course are nearer to that noted City than any other Federal Troops, and may possibly be the first to enter its ruins. I think that with 10 or 12000 infantry & a proportionate force of artillery & cavalry, we could [unintelligible] approach close to Charleston and perhaps force them to abandon the City without a Battle. the bulk of their fighting army is yet in Virginia, and could not return in time to participate.

The Climate is mild, and exceedingly healthy. I am very hearty, have every thing very comfortable, good living is abundant – without price. Turkeys, Geese, Ducks & Chicken have taken the place of Pork & Beans. I send daily foraging expeditions to the Islands south of us, where all such good things abound without Planters to fix a price, our boys devour the poultry to prevent the Negroes becoming Gluttonous

This idea advanced by a soldier some time ago seems now to be the settled policy, in Camp.

Negroes continue to arrive on the Island. I have set some of our men at work constructing huts for them about one mile North of the Fort, one hundred fifty of them are here, and will make quite a town- I am working the men in the Fort, they work well - are very ignorant, more so than the Denizens of Tow Hill.

My Columbia and Wrightsville boys are all well, Howard is one of my good soldiers - he enjoys soldiers life very much, is becoming large and fat, and while he enjoys good health, I do not interfere to prevent him doing all the duties of a soldier, he just received a letter from home - and the likeness of his 3 sisters of whom he is very proud - I think his Parents may well be proud of him. I asked him today if he would like to go home - he replied Yes on a visit - but not to stay away from his Company.

It is now 10 o'clock. I have considerable work to do before retiring, and must rise early - will leave this to be forwarded by first vessel going to Port Royal.

Good Bye

Yours truly

Tho^SWelsh

To E. S. Young Esq.
Phila^{dia}

Address

45th Reg^t Penn^a Vol.

Otter Island Via Port Royal

South Carolina

[from NWT collection; transcribed by RCW]



LancasterHistory

Analysis: Wiggin

This is an interesting picture of Welsh's circumstances, duties, and understanding of the nature of the military situation, just one week after his arrival in the Sea Islands. Welsh's confidence in his command comes through, and he even opines on the opportunity of swift action to capture Charleston. This is consistent with his no-nonsense views on the execution of his military responsibility – mission focused and action oriented, with little sympathy for the foot-dragging paralysis that plagued the Union command—a view that surfaces again when McClellan fails to follow up after the Battle of Antietam.

He also discusses some of his experience with the “contrabands,” which appears rather manageable and perhaps advantageous, at least up to this point in time. Tow Hill is the Negro section of Columbia, the “denizens” of and with which Welsh had ample dealings during his years, pre-war, as Justice of the Peace.

Edwin Swift Young is the brother of Welsh's wife, Annie. Howard is presumably Howard Vache (age unknown, probably somewhere between 16 and 20), second son of Edwin's and Annie's sister Elizabeth Kline (Young) Vache. He was later wounded in the tragic friendly-fire incident on March 13, 1861, and subsequently killed in the battle of Cold Harbor. His three sisters were Hettie, Alice, and Lydia, all quite young. Another sister was later born in 1866.

Scope and Content Note:

Handwritten letter from Thomas Welsh to his brother-in-law, Edwin S. Young. From Headquarters, Otter Island, South Carolina. Welsh expresses his hope that the "rebellion" will soon be over; discusses his deployment to Otter Island, his activity to defend the outpost, camp food, Christmas plans, interactions with people of color and nephew Howard Vache's adaptation to life as a soldier.

