

EDGAR DINSMORE LETTERS

Despite a wealth of personal narratives of service in the American Civil War from the pens of participants on both sides and ranging in reliability and interest from personal (and sometimes acrimonious) apologia to exact printings of soldier and civilian diaries, the part that the Negro played in the war has been recorded only in the stories of their white companions and commanders.

In the thousands of letters of both Union and Confederate soldiers preserved in the George Washington Flowers Memorial Collection of the Duke University Library only two small lots are those of Negro soldiers. The larger, but less interesting, of these two groups is a collection of twenty-one letters of Alonzo Read of Spring Wells, Michigan, covering the dates 1864-1866. Read enlisted in the One Hundred and Second United States Volunteer Infantry in January, 1864, and was trained in camp at Detroit before being sent to Hilton Head, South Carolina, in the summer of that year. He saw service there and at various places in eastern South Carolina and in Savannah, Georgia, during 1864 and 1865. All of the Read letters are addressed to the soldier's mother. Most of them were written by friends as Read himself was barely literate. The letters contain little information and are of interest chiefly because they were written by a Negro.

The four letters of Edgar Dinsmore are, on the other hand, of great intrinsic interest in that they reveal the reactions to war and army life of a Negro private fighting, as he thought of it, for the freedom of his race. No record of Dinsmore's war service exists in the office of the Adjutant General of the United States, nor is there a pension record for him preserved with the National Archives. It is barely possible, therefore, that these letters were written as a joke by a white officer of the company. Such a possibility is

slight considering the extent of the correspondence. In any case, the ideas expressed seem to be entirely those of a Negro.

The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer infantry, of which Dinsmore was a member, was recruited early in 1863 under the command of Col. Robert G. Shaw as the first Negro regiment from the Northern states. The men were trained at Camp Meigs, Readville, Massachusetts, until May 28 when they were sailed for Hilton Head. Arriving there on June 3 they were sent on to Beaufort, S. C., for four days and then to St. Simon's Island, Ga., where they remained until July 8.

After July, 1863, the regiment was actively engaged. The principal events in which it participated were the battles of James Island, S. C., July 16, 1863; Fort Wagner, S. C., July 18, 1863; Olustee, Fla., February 20, 1864; and Honey Hill, S. C., November 30, 1864. The regiment acquitted itself well during the campaigns and in its two years of service had some five hundred casualties.

The regiment was engaged in a minor action at Boykin's Mills, S. C., as late as April 18, 1865, but after the cessation of hostilities it was first quartered in St. Andrew's Parish, S. C., and later at the Citadel, the military college of South Carolina. The Fifty-Fourth was mustered out late in August and sailed for Boston. There they disbanded after a parade through the city on September 2.

The following are the letters of Dinsmore to Carrie Drayton whom he had met through a personal advertisement in the columns of the *Afro-American*. The first letter is addressed to 42 Dominick Street, New York, New York. No cover exists for the second letter. The last two letters are directed to 104 Carrol Street, Brooklyn, L. I., New York, and 104 Carrol Street, South Brooklyn, New York. The first three letters were written from Morris Island in the harbor of besieged Charleston, the last from St. Andrew's Parish across the Ashley river from the city.

R. B. HARWELL

Camp 54th Mass Vols
Morris Island S. C.
May 18th 1854

Miss Carrie Drayton.

My kind friend, your most kind letter has been received and perused with a pleasurable interest that can only be accounted for by the noble sentiments contained therein.

True dear lady I have received several letters from sympathising friends, but from none has the[re] come more kindly words than from yourself, and I only regret my inability to reply in fitting terms. But you must take the will for the deed and only remember that it comes from a rough soldier boy.

To the soldier nothing is so sweet as the consolation of knowing that even though he be far from dear ones, and the loved ones, that his name is cherished fondly, and that his brave deeds are proudly spoken of.

O if you only knew how much happiness that a newspaper or a letter fresh from the hand of a dear friend gives to the soldier. You would never tire of thinking of them. Yes I claim to be an earnest soldier, having been well schooled for the past year in the art—*divested of its romance*, and I will here remark that if I ever did possess any superfluous accomplishments that "James Island,"¹ "Fort Wagner,"² and "Olustee"³ have effectually divested your "most humble" of them, and he now stands forth a plain, rough soldier.

You will perceive by the heading of my letter that we have left beautiful Florida with its balmy breezes, its richly perfumed flowers, and its everglades filled with sweetly singing birds, and have come back again to this lonely Isle in the sea, here to remain for perhaps many months.⁴ When we bid farewell to it last January I earnestly hoped that we should never return, for tis very, very lonesome, and although we *should* be proud to be here (for almost on this spot that I am now writing many of our brave men have died) I can not love the sandy, barren, and desolate place. Letters now will be doubly welcomed. I am glad that the Sanitary Fair is being so successful. I do not think that they are so much of a "humbug" as many say they are. They furnish many little things to the soldier that are conducive to his health. There is an Agent here and he is much liked for his kind treatment to soldiers.

I am some little acquainted with your city. I am much sur-

¹ July 16, 1863. See Emilio, L. F. *History of the fifty-fourth regiment of Massachusetts volunteer infantry, 1863-1865.* (Boston, 1894) P. 392.

² July 18, 1863. *loc. cit.*

³ February 20, 1864. *loc. cit.*

⁴ The regiment was in Florida from February 7 to April 17, 1864. *ibid.* P. 148-185.

prised that Zion (If it be good old Methodist Zion) has an Organ in their Church. If so I am rather of Miss Drayton's opinion that they worship the Organ more than aught else.

Your letter finds me in the best of health as well as my comrades of my company.

I hope Miss Drayton that you will deign to reply to this apology for a letter, and through these means, in the future we may be better acquainted.

I fear that I will tire you.

Hoping that you are in the enjoyment of Heaven's choicest blessing—good health, I am with the highest considerations of grateful respect—

Most kindly yours,
Edgar Dinsmore

P. S.

Please address—

E. D.

Co. "F" 54th Mass Vols

Morris Island

S. C.

E.

Morris Island S. C.

Dec. 25th 1864

Miss Carrie Drayton,

Dear Miss,

At last your long looked for letter has come to hand, and I cannot tell you with how much pleasure I perused it.

You tell me that I am indebted to you a letter. I trust that you will pardon me for my seeming neglect, for I assure you that up to yesterday I have received but one letter from you, and I can only account for it by the supposition that *your* letter was lost or mis-sent.

I do not forget that I expressed a wish that our correspondence might continue, and will you permit me to again hope that you will honour me with a few lines occasionally? I am always more than grateful to those kind friends who sometimes think kindly enough of me to write to me, and I never permit myself to allow a letter to remain unanswered.

Today is Christmas, but it does not seem like that Joyous holiday here. The whole Regiment with the exception of mine, and one other Company is away on an Expedition, somewhere in the vicinity of Charleston or Savannah, and we have no means of knowing when they will be back, and 'tis very lonely indeed, so much so that I am really homesick, and who would not be when one thinks of the happy ones gathered around the home fireside? Yet I know that I am not forgotten, for every soldier however humble he may be has

some kind one to think of him and pray for his safety. Do not smile Miss Carrie at what I have written for if you are ever troubled with that terrible complaint "the blues," you will know how to sympathise with a soldier boy.

Before this letter reaches you the holidays will be gone, and you will have commenced the new year, full of life and hope for a bright and better future for our poor race.

Heaven knows we have been downtrodden long enough, but the clear sky is peeping through the clouds, and I fondly trust that ere the dawning of another new year, peace will have smiled on *our* land and we be a *free* people. Yet until that end has been attained we are not weary of the task that we have undertaken.

May I wish for you a happy Christmas, and a very merry new year!

I read of the attempt to burn New York⁵ and I thank heaven that it failed. One cannot imagine the untold misery that that single night's devilish work would have entailed upon the innocent poor of the City. These desperate attempts show conclusively that the Rebels cannot hold out much longer.

We are all proud to know that President Lincoln is re-elected, and Gov. Seymour⁶ defeated, these facts give us renewed hope, and makes us eager to meet the foe.

As I write this I hear it rumored that the enemy have evacuated Savannah,⁷ and for aught I know the old 54th may be taking their Christmas dinner there.

I read in the newspaper that you have had sleighing in New York. It seems strange to hear of snow, we have saw none since we left old Massachusetts, nearly two years ago.

That you are in the enjoyment of the blessing of health and happiness is the earnest prayer of

Your true friend—

Edgar Dinsmore

P. S.—Now dear Miss Carrie do not fail to favor me with an early reply, your letters are very kind.

E. D.

Morris Island S. C.

Feb 1st 1865

Miss Carrie Drayton,

My very dear friend, may I call you this? Your very kind and sweet letter bearing date of Jan 6th has just come to me, and finds me in the enjoyment of the greatest blessing that Heaven vouchsafes to man—good health.

⁵ *The New York Times*, November 27, 1864. P. 1, cols. 1-4.

⁶ Horatio Seymour, governor of New York. See Randall, J. G. *The Civil War and reconstruction*. (Boston, c1937) P. 414.

⁷ Savannah was taken December 20, 1864. See Emilio, P. 263.

How can I thank you in sufficiently grateful terms for your kind and cheering words to your as yet unknown friend Edgar? I know not myself, but pray take the will for the deed, and when you receive my poor epistles if they lack in language give to the author the credit of endeavoring to be gratefully interesting.

Kind friend, you are pleased to tell me that you like my poor letters, and while you are pleased with mine you disparage your own, pardon me, but this must not be, for I assure you that all my numerous replies to my "Personal" in the *Anglo African*,⁸ none gave me more real pleasure than did Carrie Drayton's.

An now having told you this, I have a proposition to make to you, fondly trusting that you will accede to it. 'Tis very simple.—Will you give me 'carte blanche' to drop formality inside the envelope and call you by your pretty name—Carrie[!]

I do not like formality at all, and I hope that my newly found friend Carrie does not, and as it will be so long before I receive a reply to my question I will just give imagination the rein, and infer that you have kindly yielded assent. There am I not a presumptuous fellow? I know that you will think so, but pray let my very presumption be my excuse, besides Carrie, I belong to the "tribe of Abraham," and folks down here, (Rebels in particular) pretty generally conclude that we are privileged characters.

I do not know as to whether or not that will be pardon sufficient in your eye, but we soldiers have lived so long without the pale of civilization that civil etiquette is to me as among the lost arts. So here goes, I shall call you plain Carrie in *this* letter, hoping that with your consent, I may in the next.

I have perused attentively your views on the war, and on the whole the argument is terse, and to the point.

Yes the black man's place is on the battle field, right by the side of the White man, even in front of him, leading him to that victory or death that is our battle shout. The life is fraught with danger, yet still we like it, and we would think ourselves unworthy of that boon for which we strive, were we at home now, while there are so many laurels to be won.

The end is very near—I am convinced, and when Rebellion is crushed who will be more proud than I to say "I was one of the first of the despised race to leave the free North with rifle on my shoulder and give the lie to the old story that the black man will not fight." And now that he will fight no one dare deny.

Do not have any fears of this country being ruled by Irish, I think that it is destined to become thoroughly Americanized, I might say Negroized.

I am happy to tell you that we receive the most kind treatment from our officers, we do not expect otherwise, for their reputation is

⁸ *The Anglo-African*, edited by T. Hamilton. New York, 1859-1863.

identified with ours, and although sometimes military law is a little severe, we have become used to its requirements and it seems very natural. Probably those soldiers that you speak of were Conscripts, old soldiers were never known to hold much love for them.

Please accept many thanks for your more than kind wishes for my happiness, indeed I feel that in Carrie I have found a true friend, and—pardon me—some how or other I am beginning to feel a great curiosity as to who Miss Drayton resembles, I would ask her bluntly for her carte de visite but that would be altogether too much assurance, but will she give me a pen and ink sketch of herself in her next letter, if agreeable? I fear I have asked too much already, do not be offended if I have.

And now Miss Carrie that you are in the enjoyment of the inestimable blessing of good health is the earnest prayer of

Very truly yours—

Edgar Dinsmore

The New York Branch of
The U. S. Christian Commission,
30 Bible House, New York
Send this as the Soldier's Messenger
to his home.

Let it haste to those who wait
for tidings.

Co. ["F" 54th] Regt. [Mass] State Vols. . . .
[10th A] Corps.

[St. Andrews Parish S. C. May 29th] 1865

Printed
Letterhead

My dear Carrie,

(If you will permit me thus to address you) How can I express the pleasure that I experience this evening at the reception of your inexpressibly welcome and more than sweet letter bearing the recent date of the 19th of the present month? I feel that tis impossible for me to "tell all I feel," so I will leave to *your* vivid imagination the feelings of one whom you have never met, but who thinks oft and fondly of thee as a near and dear friend, as one whose every thought toward the soldiers of her race is fraught with deep and lasting goodness.

I would apologize, and ask forgiveness for my *seeming* neglect in replying—or rather writing to you, but I feel that it will be superfluous when I assure you that since February 18th we have been almost constantly on the move, marching and fighting for the good old cause—LIBERTY. Since I wrote you last we have been to Savannah, Charleston,⁹ and many places of lesser note in the land of "Chivalry" (!) thus the pleasure of corresponding with

⁹ Federal forces moved into Charleston February 18, 1865. Emilio, P. 282.

those we love has been in a measure denied us but now we seem to be permanently located for a season. I grasp with eager avidity the opportunity of assuring you of my continued regard for those who in my many lonely moments kindly gave to the soldier boy their sweetest thought and best wishes that he might be happy, and even "when this cruel war is over" I feel that 'twould be base ingratitude on my part to forget my *friends*, and should we never meet—but I mean it shall be otherwise—be assured that the memory of none will be held in more grateful remembrance than that of Carrie Drayton.

Yes Carrie I do feel very-very happy at the thought of soon returning home to mingle among the scenes of other and happier days. O how oft when amid the scenes of danger have I fondly dreamed of the hour when I could return, proud in the consciousness of having contributed my mite toward the elevation of my poor people, and now that it is so near at hand I can scarcely realize the truth.

We have not definitely learned when we are to return home, but we know 'twill be 'ere long.

I believe that I never told you that I reside in the state of Connecticut. I am some little acquainted in New York City, so I flatter myself that "at some future day" Carrie and Edgar may meet by chance. I wonder would the meeting be agreeable to Carrie? Will she tell me in her next?

We mourn for the loss of our great and good President as a loss irreparable. Humanity has lost a firm advocate, our race its Patron Saint, and the good of all the world a fitting object to emulate. Shurely while we mourn this great calamity we have some slight consolation in the belief that he is rewarded for his labours here, in the land where sin cometh not, and sorrow is unknown.

The name Abraham Lincoln will ever be cherished in our hearts, and none will more delight to lisp his name in reverence than the future generations of our people.

Indeed the fall of King Jeff partakes strongly of the ludicrous, I perceive that although he [con]stantly asservated that the south would have "independence or extermination," he unchivalrous fellow tried to sneak off clad in female apparel. Though it does not excite *my* wonder greatly, for a southerner always relays on the women for and in every thing, invariably on the approach of the "Yankee" Mr. Southerner takes to the wood—or swamp—leaving Mrs. Southerner to "face the music," and so poor Jeff was caught, well the best wish that I have for him is that he may be fitted with a "hempen cravat cut in the latest fashion."

Dear Miss Carrie, nothing would give me more pelasure than to possess your carte de vissite. I would most willingly send you mine, but I have none at present. I however promise to send you one at my earliest convenience. Do I dare hope that you will send me yours by return of mail? It would give so much pleasure to have

the "shadow" of my dear friend Carrie near me, I would venture to tell her some little thing that perhaps I would not dare to trust upon this inanimate paper. Say shall it be mine?

We are very pleasantly encamped now on the south bank of the Ashley River directly opposite the city of Charleston, access to the city is easy and we are all very happy.

You wrong me in thinking for a moment that I will not care for my good friend Carrie after my return from the war, though I will not argue the point but let events decide. Indeed Carrie I would despise myself did I for a moment think that such could be the case, so I shall have the pleasure of disappointing you in a measure. Many thanks for the compliment you pay me when you tell me that you will have to make me your ideal hero. I plead guilty to a soldier's vanity, and the curiosity of a "Yankee" so I am constrained to beg Carrie to tell me how she has pictured me.

I shall look anxiously forward to the reception of your next letter in spite of the "ordination of fate" that you write of.

We are haveing delightfully weather at present, little or nothing to do, many of the gentle sex of Charleston visit us, and—tell it not—many of the twaney [tawny] skinned heroes of the 54th have fallen victims to the darts of cupid and weddings are of frequent occurrence.

And now hoping that you are in the enjoyment of the blessing of good health I close my letter & trusting to soon receive a reply with Carrie's "second self."

Sincerely Yours,
Edgar

P. S. Please address
E. D. "F" Co 54th Mass Vols
Charleston
S. C.