



The Iowa Boys Winter in

BY DAVID L. STRAIGHT

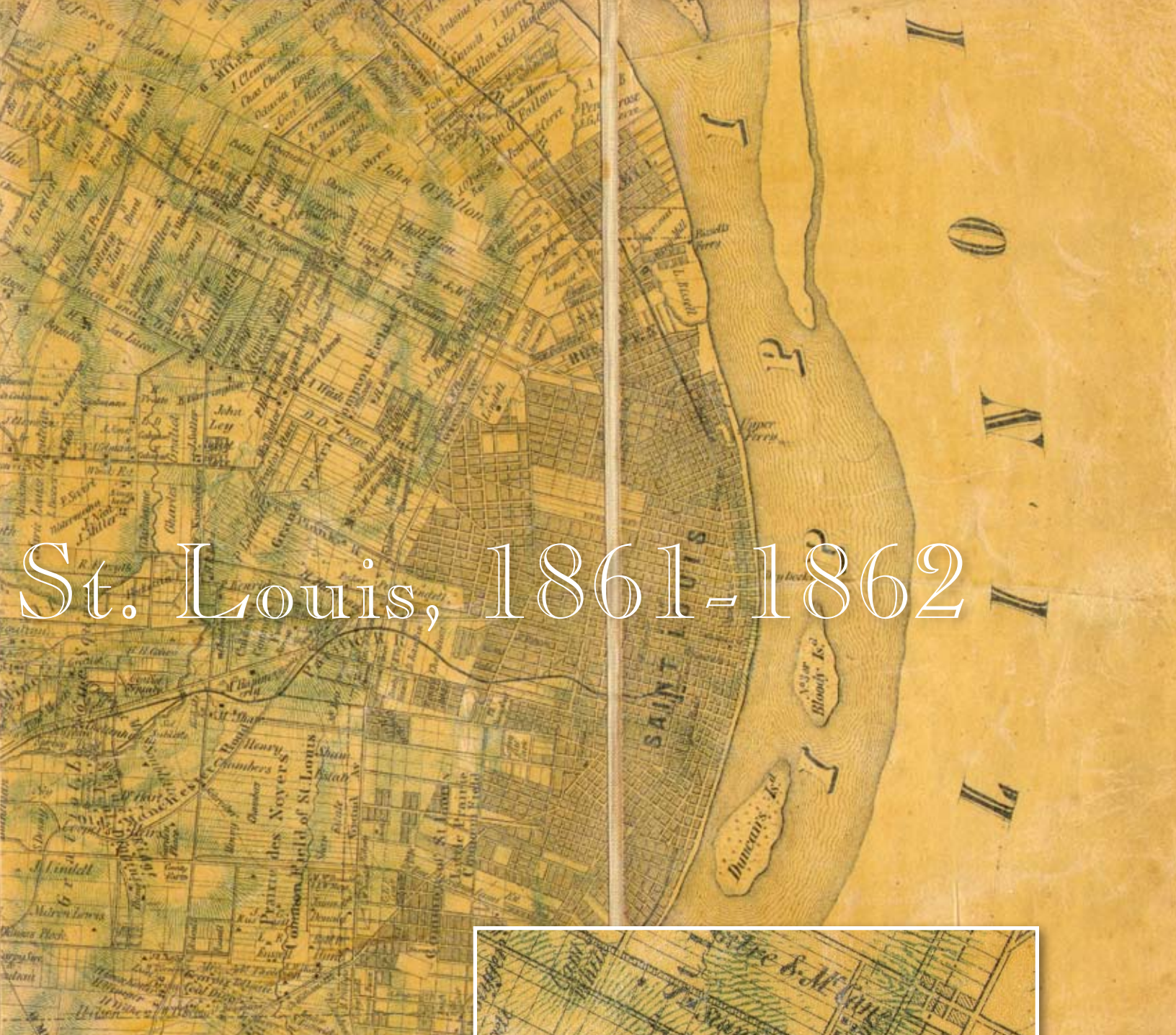


By the time Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon (1818-1861) arrived in St. Louis in March 1861, he was already experienced at fighting pro-Southern guerrillas. He came to Missouri from fighting in Kansas, where he had become both an ardent abolitionist and a Republican. Lyon was named commander of the St. Louis arsenal and enlisted the aid of a paramilitary organization called the St. Louis Wide-Awakes to protect it from the pro-secession Missouri State Guard, recently called up by Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson. Thinking the Guard was planning to take the arsenal, Lyon ordered the capture of the Guard on May 10, 1861; rioting broke out as Lyon marched the prisoners through St. Louis, leading to firing (a controversy still exists about which side fired first). Credited with keeping Missouri out of Confederate hands, Lyon was promoted to command the Army of the West July 2. Nathaniel Lyon died in battle at Wilson's Creek in southwest Missouri August 10. (Image: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

The day after the Union Army surrendered Fort Sumter in South Carolina, Abraham Lincoln called upon the loyal governors to raise 75,000 volunteer soldiers for ninety days of service under Federal command to put down the rebellion. The response was enthusiastic. In Iowa, twenty times as many volunteers turned out as could be taken into the first regiment.¹ During the summer of 1861, the 1st Iowa Volunteer Infantry, along with volunteers from St. Louis and Kansas, joined General Nathaniel Lyon's Federal troops in pursuing the secessionist Governor Claiborne Jackson and General Sterling Price across the state to keep Missouri in the Union.

As Lyon's force closed on the rebels near Springfield in August, the Iowa volunteers announced that their ninety days were nearly completed, but they were spoiling for a fight and were willing stay another week or so to see some action.² Like the Battle of Bull Run, which took place in Virginia the previous month, the lack of training and discipline among the volunteers, and a failure to coordinate the various units, resulted in a Union disaster at Wilson's Creek, near Springfield. Although no one foresaw the ultimate carnage, these early battles foreshadowed a protracted war rather than the summer adventure many young volunteers had imagined.

Battles and skirmishes, particularly in Border States like Missouri, continued throughout the summer and fall of 1861. As winter approached and the campaign season ended for the year, some of the Union forces went into camp to rest, heal, train, and prepare for the coming spring campaign. One of these locations was Benton Barracks, five miles northwest of downtown St. Louis. Three letters



St. Louis, 1861-1862

Benton Barracks included the Fair Grounds on Grand Avenue at Natural Bridge Road, and the adjacent land (marked O'Fallon) rented from Col. John O'Fallon. (Image: *New Topographical Map of Saint Louis County Missouri*, by Gustavus Waagner (St. Louis: Schaeff & Bro., 1857)).

Top Left: A matching Camp Benton envelope, although not from any of the three transcribed letters. Soldiers did not have free postage during the Civil War. The stamp is from the set issued in 1861 after the Post Office demonized all the previously issued stamps to prevent stocks remaining in southern post offices from being used to finance the war effort. (Image: *Private Collection*)





Another McLean lettersheet shows soldiers parading on the Fair Grounds adjacent to Camp Benton. The horse-drawn streetcar, in the foreground, has brought spectators out from the city. Except for the Civil War years, Agricultural and Mechanical Fairs were held here annually from 1856 until 1902. (Image: Private Collection)



A Camp Benton lettersheet showing the headquarters at the center, behind the soldiers drilling with the barracks running down both sides. The flag in the background is on the adjacent Fair Grounds. Lithographed by A. McLean in his shop at the corner of 3rd and Pine Streets in St. Louis.

On January 12, 1862, George W. Round was sufficiently recovered from illness to write his parents. He was a private in the 1st Independent Battery of the Iowa Light Artillery. George, age 18, was living with his parents in Cedar Falls, Blackhawk County, when he enlisted. The unit organized in Burlington in August 1861 and moved to Benton Barracks in early December where they received their full equipment, including six guns, with caissons. A few days after his letter, the Battery traveled to Rolla, the terminus for the southwest branch of the Pacific Railroad. They first saw combat at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, in March 1862. George was discharged in St. Louis with a disability on November 28, 1863. (Image: Private Collection)

January 12, 1862
Benton Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri

Dear Parents,

I received your letter on Christmas Eve. It was a very welcome Christmas Gift – but I could not answer it as soon as I would like to have done on account of a severe fit of sickness, which kept me in the hospital for more than a week. But I am now enjoying as good health as ever. The disease that I suffered with was intermittent fever brought on by a severe cold. I was well taken care of in the hospital and I will ever remember the kindness of Doctor Dyer and the nurses Charles Howard and Dutch August. The above is a pretty representation of Benton Barracks. Now imagine a row of buildings down by this tree standing alone and running in the opposite direction. One end commencing about the tree and the other end running down just opposite Headquarter, which is the large building in the center. This is the guard house. Now then, at the end opposite Headquarters, a row of buildings starts running in the same direction as those you see on the side. This is barracks no. five. Quarters no. 5 is where I am stationed. In my next, I shall send you a picture of the fairground. Or rather, I will send it by express & tomorrow I intend to send you twenty-five dollars by express. You will get it at Mr. Bishop's the latter part of the week. There is no more news. I forgot to tell you that I had got a letter from Elizabeth. She says she has not got a letter from you in three months. Give my love to all enquiring friends. I remain your affectionate son.
George W. Round

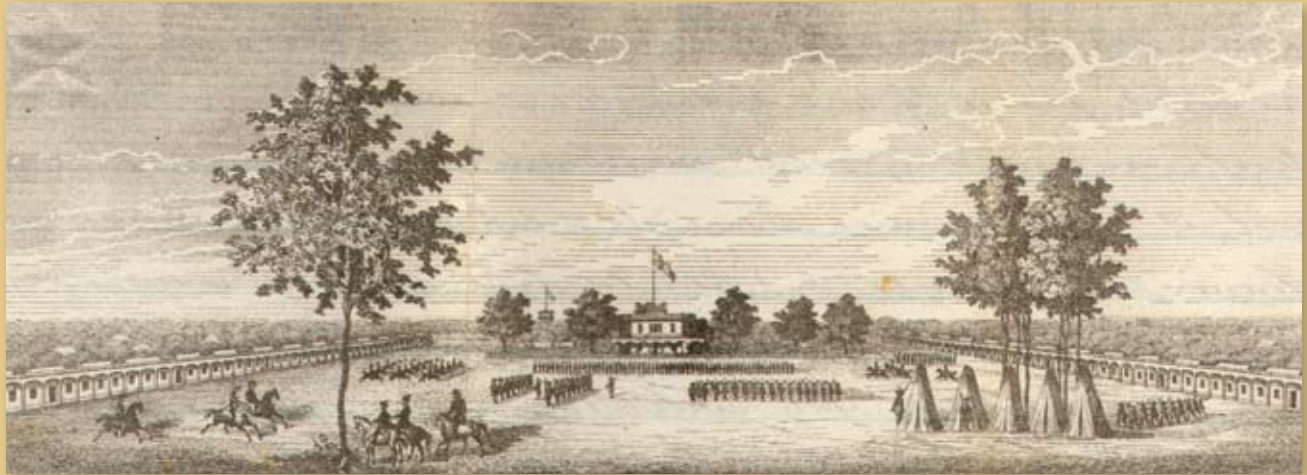
(from a private collection) written by Iowa volunteers posted to Benton Barracks provide glimpses of a Union soldier's life during the first winter of the Civil War.

Recognizing the need for a camp where enthusiastic farm boys and store clerks coming to St. Louis with the volunteer regiments could be turned into soldiers, General John C. Fremont ordered a survey of various sites west of the city. In August, he selected the 150 acres owned by Col. John O'Fallon, a nephew of William and George Rogers Clark. O'Fallon offered the government use of his land for one year for the patriotic price of \$150, and construction began immediately. Historian J. Thomas Scharf writing two decades later described Camp Benton as follows:

The site chosen was admirably adapted for a military camp, being level, free from obstruction, and covered with a beautiful greensward. It was immediately graded to a perfect plane, and an effective system of underground sewerage was constructed, so that after a rain the water was speedily carried off, and the ground thereby kept in excellent condition for parade purposes. A large number of mechanics were employed in the erection of barracks for men and stables for horses. The barracks were constructed in five rows, each seven hundred and forty feet in length, extending from east to west. Each row of barracks was about forty feet in width, exclusive of covered walks on each side, which extended six of eight feet from the main building. The interior was divided into compartments of convenient size, and these were lined on all sides with bunks for sleeping. Good provision was made for ventilation by means of openings in the walls, and there were sleeping accommodations for one hundred men in each seventy feet of the barrack building.³

The construction also included kitchen sheds, warehouses, and a two-story headquarters building. Water was piped into the camp from the nearby city reservoir.⁴ Named in honor of Fremont's father-in-law, the late Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Benton Barracks also incorporated the acreage and buildings of the adjacent St. Louis Agricultural and Mechanical Fair at the corner of Grand Avenue and Natural Bridge Road. Saloons, restaurants, and photography studios sprang up quickly around the camp.⁵ General Samuel R. Curtis, who assumed command on September 18, 1861, was given authority over all civilian and military facilities within a one-mile radius of Benton Barracks and ordered all civilian residents within that radius to move out. In the summer of 1863, General William Kerley Strong stopped all liquor sales within one mile of the camp.⁶

Our three letters from Iowa volunteers (transcribed left, and following this article) were written on Camp Benton lettersheets and, most likely, mailed in matching illustrated envelopes. The soldiers write as if these are



In a letter to his brother on December 15, 1861, William Robinson refers to other soldiers from Dubuque, suggesting that he was part of an Iowa unit. *The Roster of Union Soldiers* lists 20 men with that name who served in various Iowa units during the Civil War. Five of them should have been in St. Louis on that date; three with the 2nd Iowa Infantry (the same regiment as Charles Albright) and one each with 2nd Iowa Cavalry and the 3rd Iowa Cavalry.

December 15, 1861

Dear Brother

I received yours last nite and was glad to hear from you. I got one from home today. They was all well and doing well. I am well, fat, sassy, and dirty and up to any thing that comes along. We have fun hunting the Secesh here.

This picture represents the camp that we stay at in St. Louis. The white house is headquarters and the flag you see beyond that is on the fairgrounds and it contains 82 acres and is as level as a floor. The tents that you see is the guard's tents and the trees is persimmon trees. They was full of fruit. There is lots of extra work behind them rows of barracks. There is a cook shed and three long tables to eat at. And, an eve all round that a man can walk in the shelter when it rains. The men you see is going out to dress parade. There is only about half you can see.

There is two or three hundred acres in all. There was about 13 thousand soldiers there when I was. I tell you it looks nice to stand and look at them and to have the music and to see them step off. It makes one think he never seen anything. If you could see them some Sunday evening come to church, you would think you never seen any thing. For there is 8 or 9 band of music. Turns out, we have the German band from Dubuque with our regiment. They make good music and you ought to be here some of these moon shiny nites to see the boys waltz and dance. There will be sometimes 4 or 5 hundred dancers all at once and then you can hear them holler and scream for 5 miles.

And, at 9 o'clock every thing has to be still and all the lites blowed out and the roll called and every one accounted for. If they ain't they get on double duty.

I can't describe things as well as I could tell you. But I tell what kind of men we have to deal with. They are a one set of galas [sic] critters. They don't know anything and don't try to learn anything. There is some that don't know as much as the Negros they possess, and they all talk the same language that they do. And when we talk about the constitution, they don't know what we mean and they will stare and gaze at us like idiots. They never seen the constitution nor heard it read and don't know what we mean when we talk about the constitution. They are the ____ of creation and I think that when they was made the man's metal had run out and they mixed a rite ____ of yellow dog metal and alligator and skunk from the way they smell. And when they got it run up they called them Secesh. I think that is the way they got in this world. There is some lived here two years in two miles and a half of the rail road and never seen it. We can show them a trick or two that they never knew. There has been several of our boys shot at them but hadn't hit any of them yet. But, I think we have the pleasure of trying. Some now for we have some that we have to shoot soon.

We have took about 80 prisoners since we have been here. Our two companies we have done more them the balance of the regiment. We have 23 here now. We have to send them on as soon as they get ready to lend to _____. We have our horses yet and wagons and have to keep them till we leave here. We have cleaned them out for 50 miles around here.

I don't know that I can write anything very interesting, so I quit. Write as soon as you get this and I will try to answer all you write in the last two or three weeks. There has been several deaths. There has been 16 died and there is several more that ain't expected to live at present.

Still remain your affectionate brother,
Wm. Robinson

their first letters from Benton Barracks, so selecting the illustrated lettersheets was a logical choice. George mentions that he will send a picture of the Fair Grounds in his next letter. Among the details each writes about are food, recreation, or the barracks; William notes that the trees in the foreground are persimmons and “they was full of fruit.” Both Charles and William mention the nearly continual drilling and parading that was critical in training the new recruits. The soldiers on parade also provided a new entertainment for the citizens of St. Louis, already accustomed to riding out to the Fair Grounds.

Charles and George were both recovering from illness when they wrote. In armies that suffered more casualties from illness than from combat, health care was a major concern with so many men living in such close proximity. Bird Point, Missouri, where Charles recalls four or five deaths a day from illness, was in the swampy lowlands of Mississippi County at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Among the 1,433 soldiers of the 2nd Iowa Infantry, 75 were killed in combat and 24 more died from their wounds, while 121 died of disease.⁷ George, who was hospitalized at Benton Barracks, was ultimately discharged with a disability, perhaps brought on by illness.

When George alerts his parents that he would send “twenty five dollars by express,” he points out the difficulty soldiers faced when sending money, often their pay, home to their families. Soldiers were paid in cash, frequently with gold coins, which would be too obvious in the mail. There was no national banking system. Many small towns had no bank, and if they did, out-of-town checks were not accepted due to the cost and difficulty in collecting them. Although Registered Mail began in 1855, it was not secure before 1867 and carried no indemnity on the contents until 1898. Attempting to meet the needs of soldiers, the U.S. Post Office introduced money orders at 141 Post Offices in 1864. However, the vast majority of Post Offices were not authorized to pay out money orders until the early twentieth century, effectively limiting their use. This left the express companies, principally Adams, American Express, and Wells Fargo, as the best means for sending money, especially gold coins.

When William writes, “We have fun hunting the Secesh here,” he is referring to the secessionists and Confederate sympathizers who remained in Missouri. Because of the

divided loyalties in slave-holding Border States such as Missouri, troops guarded strategic points like railroads and bridges to prevent sabotage and were frequently involved with guerrilla actions. William expressed a very low opinion of the rebels, who were fellow citizens, only the year before. Perhaps most telling is his observation that they “don’t know as much as the Negros [sic] they possess.” That he is particularly appalled by the secessionists’ ignorance of the Constitution, but makes no comment about the institution of slavery, indicates that these Iowa volunteers understood the conflict to be primarily about preserving the Union.

Scholars estimate that soldiers, both Union and Confederate, sent or received an average of 180,000 letters each day of the Civil War.⁸ This extensive exchange of letters about health, weather, and daily activity was possible because the U.S. Post Office had recently adopted a more efficient business model based upon delivering high volumes of affordable mail. The most prominent features of this nineteenth-century Post Office reform were the prepayment of postage with stamps and a significant reduction in postage rates. Beginning July 1, 1851, the rate for a half-ounce prepaid letter was reduced to only three cents to any point in the United States less than 3,000 miles distant; the distance differential was eliminated in 1863. Prior to the rate reductions that began in 1845, postage on letters from St. Louis to any point in Iowa more than 300 miles distant by post road cost 25 cents per sheet of paper, with the envelope counting as an additional sheet of paper. Having grown up with a communications revolution that made postage affordable for all citizens, Civil War soldiers, while separated from loved ones, did not expect to be out of touch with family and friends.

In September 1865, the Benton Barracks’ land was returned to its owners. While nothing from the Civil War remains, the land survives as Fairgrounds Park. With its many functions—training camp, temporary duty station for troops awaiting deployment, cantonment where new regiments were organized and mustered, encampment for troops paroled by the Confederacy, military hospital, and camp for refugee slaves—thousands of soldiers passed through Benton Barracks during the five years of the Civil War.

NOTES

¹ Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 22.

² Catton, 49.

³ J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County from the Earliest Periods to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Everts, 1883), 400-401.

⁴ From F. F. Kiner, *One Years Soldiering* (1863) quoted on the website *Benton Barracks, Missouri* by Scott K. Williams <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/mo/county/stlouis/benton.htm>.

⁵ Charles van Ravenswaay, *Saint Louis: An Informal History of the City and its People, 1764-1865* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1991), 498-499.

⁶ William C. Winter, *The Civil War in St. Louis: A Guide Tour* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1994), 73-75.

⁷ Iowa, Adjutant General Office, *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines: Government Printing Office, 1908) vol. 1, “Historical Sketch Second Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry” reproduced and formatted for the internet <http://iagenweb.org/civilwar/books/logan/mil302.htm>

⁸ David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century American* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 137. Henkin discusses Civil War letters within the larger context of American postal communications.



On November 1, 1861, Charles F. Albright, a private in Company C of the 2nd Iowa Volunteer Infantry, wrote to his "Dear friend Lydia," signing the letter "your sincere friend and lover." Mustered in at Keokuk on May 27, 1861, his unit was initially assigned to guard the Northern Missouri Railroad. In July, they moved to Bird Point and served at various locations in southeastern Missouri until moving to Benton Barracks in October. The 2nd Iowa left St. Louis on February 10, 1862, spending the remainder of the year in Tennessee and Mississippi, including action at Fort Donelson, Pittsburg Landing, Shiloh, and Corinth. Charles survived the war. Having served his enlistment, he was discharged May 27, 1864. While no further information was found regarding Lydia Turner, he married a woman named Adeline in 1862. She claimed her widow's pension when he died in 1902.

Camp Benton (St. Louis.)
Nov. 1, 1861
Dear friend Lydia,

I seat myself this afternoon to answer your welcome letter, which I received on the 28 of last month & was very glad to hear from you my Dear friend Lydia. As you say, I am as anxious to see you as you are to see me. I think, if I am not mistaken. But as I am situated now it is no use of thinking about it for this time. But I hope we will have the privilege of seeing each other again. But I am glad to hear from you some times if I can not see you.

I am not as well at present as I have been the last time I wrote to you. I have been ailing for the last two weeks with a heavy cold & head ache. But I think it will soon be over & I hope that these few lines will find you & all the rest of the family in a good state of health. We have moved again as it is a very custom thing for the 2nd Iowa Regiment. We travel more than any other regiment in the west. I think & am positive of it & [we loose] more men on account of sickness. We was just worried to death while we stayed at Bird Point. Our number of deaths in the regiment averaged from 4 to 5 a day. There was two died in one tent in one day. But we have moved to this place & it is a very nice place to stop at. The best place we have

found yet. I should like if you was here to see this place the name of this place Benton Barracks (or Camp Benton). You will see the picture of it at the head of this sheet. I think you will say to yourself that it is a very nice sight to behold, to see the cavalry & infantry & all other sorts of soldiers drill. The Parade ground is covered with them this afternoon. Our company is not out today on account of so many being sick. Further, it is getting pretty cool down here on the old Mississippi River. We have followed it up very close this summer.

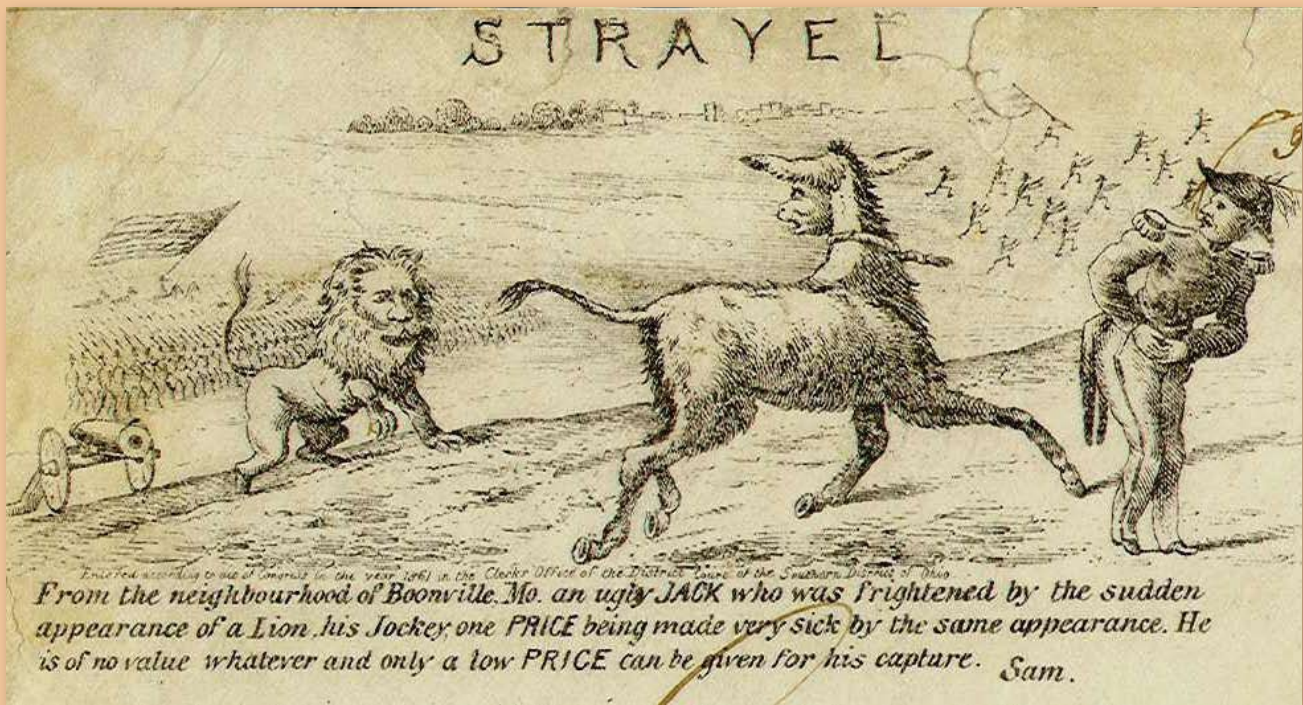
Dear Miss I must pass on for my fingers are getting pretty cold for writing. We sleep warm enough but in day time the doors are open most all the time & its gets very cold in here. But we are clothed very well & warm for soldiers. Some think they could stand most any thing but good living. But they like good meals as well as any body else if they could get them. But that is the issue here. There is nothing served up fit for a person to eat.

Well, I had my supper now. Two or four of us boys bought a can of oysters & we had a good supper once. It contained of an oyster soup and some crackers.

Dear Lydia, give my best respects to all my friends & acquaintances especially to my mother. Tell her that I am pretty well at present & that I would like to see her very much if I could. But as it is, I can not. I wish you was here to see the great city of St. Louis & Arsenal, Fairgrounds & Benton Barracks, all which is worth seeing & talking about. But I must soon come to a close for it is getting late & nearly time for dress parade, as it is customary in the army to have dress Parade every evening at sun down. Please answer me as soon as you receive this & give me all the information you can about matters & things in general & mother, Wm. & Ben went to the army or not? This shall be my close.

From your sincere friend & Lover
Chas. F. Albright

to Miss L. A. Turner
Please write soon if you can



“From the neighborhood of Boonville, Mo. an ugly JACK who was frightened by the sudden appearance of a Lion, his Jockey one PRICE being made very sick by the same appearance. He is of no value whatever and only a low PRICE can be given for his capture.”

This caption appears beneath the illustration on an envelope mailed from St. Louis to Boston on July 22, 1861. The figures (left to right) are Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon, Missouri’s secessionist Governor Claiborne Jackson, and General Sterling Price, leader of the pro-Confederate militia. In June 1861, Jackson called upon the State Militia to defend Missouri against invasion. When General Lyon marched on Jefferson City with a pro-Union force from St. Louis, Jackson and most of the state legislature, who had ratified the Confederate Constitution, fled. On June 17, 1861, he routed the pro-Confederate militia and captured many of its supplies at Boonville. Less than two months latter, on August 10, trying to salvage a victory from the disaster at Wilson’s Creek, Lyon became the first Union general to die in combat.

The notice of copyright filed in the “Clerk’s Office of the District Court of the Southern District of Ohio,” suggests this envelope was printed in Cincinnati. Allowing

time for the news to travel, artwork to be completed, and then for printing and distribution, the availability of this envelope in St. Louis only a month after the skirmish at Boonville shows the extent to which the rest of America was aware of the events unfolding in Missouri.

After the 1851 reduction in postage rates made the use of envelopes affordable, a tradition of illustrated envelopes quickly developed. Envelopes carried not only commercial messages advertising hotels, railroads, and merchants, but also political messages promoting such causes as abolition, temperance, peace, and post office reform. Presidential campaign envelopes were popular by 1856. Against this background, it is not surprising that patriotic themed stationery appeared as soon as conflict began. Dr. Steven Boyd estimates that over 330 Union and Confederate printers produced more than 15,000 different patriotic envelopes by the end of the Civil War.¹ Flags, goddesses, guns, Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, various generals, the Constitution, and camp scenes, such as the Camp Benton stationery used by the Iowa volunteers, were among the most common designs. Not only were these envelopes mailed to make political statements, but they were also collected in albums.

NOTES

¹ Steven R. Boyd, *Patriotic Envelopes of the Civil War: The Iconography of Union and Confederate Covers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2010) p. 3.