

## WALT WHITMAN IN WAR-TIME.

### FAMILIAR LETTERS FROM THE CAPITAL.<sup>1</sup>

WASHINGTON, Monday forenoon,  
December 29, 1862.

DEAR, DEAR MOTHER: Friday the 19th inst. I succeeded in reaching the camp of the 51st New York, and found George alive and well. In order to make sure that you would get the good news, I sent back by messenger, to Washington (I dare say you did not get it for some time) a telegraphic despatch, as well as a letter—and the same to Hannah<sup>2</sup> at Burlington. I have stayed in Camp with George ever since, till yesterday, when I came back to Washington. About the 24th, George got Jeff's<sup>3</sup> letter of the 20th. Mother, how much you must have suffered, all that week, till George's letter came,—and all the rest must too. As to me, I know I put in about three days of the greatest suffering I ever experienced in my life. I wrote to Jeff how I had my pocket picked in a jam and hurry, changing cars, at Philadelphia,—so that I landed here without a dime. The next two days I spent hunting through the hospitals, walking all day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information,—trying to get access to big people, &c.—I could not get the least clue to anything—Odell would not see me

at all—But Thursday afternoon, I lit on a way to get down on the government boat that runs to Aquia creek, and so by railroad to the neighborhood of Falmouth, opposite Fredericksburgh—so by degrees I worked my way to Ferrero's brigade, which I found Friday afternoon without much trouble after I got in camp,—when I found dear brother George, and found that he was alive and well. O you may imagine how trifling all my little cares and difficulties seemed—they vanished into nothing. And now that I have lived for eight or nine days amid such scenes as the camps furnish, and had a practical part in it all, and realize the way that hundreds of thousands of good men are now living, and have had to live for a year or more, not only without any of the comforts, but with death and sickness and hard marching and hard fighting, (and no success at that,) for their continual experience—really nothing we call trouble seems worth talking about. One of the first things that met my eyes in camp was a heap of feet, arms, legs, &c., under a tree in front a hospital, the Lacy house.

George is very well in health, has a good appetite—I think he is at times more wearied

<sup>1</sup> These letters have been selected from a volume, now in preparation by the literary executors of Walt Whitman, bearing the title "Hospital Letters," and are faithful copies of the originals. They are not published as having literary merit, but as throwing light upon the personality of the author of "Leaves of Grass," and especially as showing the spirit in which he entered upon and persevered in his self-imposed service to the sick and wounded of the war. To some it may seem undesirable to print these hastily scribbled, often penciled, often ungrammatical jottings, in which the great heart of the man is caught at unawares, off guard, and unveiled. From the point of view of the editors, it is important that the world should gradually come to know the man Walt Whitman—not specially as writer or philanthropist, or for any single feature or gift, but for his expansive personality, touching every shade and form of life.

Between Walt Whitman and his mother there existed a strong, perhaps exceptional, attachment. After the death of his father he was, in fact, the mother's chief counselor and aid. This woman, Louisa Van Velsor, born in 1795 and dying in 1873, possessed a remarkable nature, which, while not notable on the literary or esthetic side, was strong and clear-seeing and sympathetic. Walt always wrote to her in detail, when away from home. In 1848-49 he was in the South. The years between 1862-73 he spent in Washington. Few of the Southern letters seem to have been preserved. And while the Washington letters do not seem to present an unbroken chain, they are so

nearly complete as truly to reflect the main experiences of his personal history in the period between the first letter and the last.

The editors have had no wish or anxiety to straighten out the informalities of the letters, or to supply their breaks, or to subdue them to literary form. In their very simplicity and directness, and evident avoidance of topics which books and book-makers most affect, they reveal a side of his character and life of which the public has heretofore known little.

The letters tell their own story. Walt went to the field in the hurry of his alarm at the report that his brother George had been perhaps seriously wounded. From this immediate first touch with the sorrow and disaster created by the war, his drift into the ardent after-employment of volunteer nurse was easy though peremptory. In connection with the records herewith presented, and with the volume of which they form a part, the reader is referred to Whitman's "Drum Taps" and "Specimen Days." Except for one letter addressed to his brother "Jeff," and another sent to Jeff's wife, and a third written to Mrs. Price, the entire series are the direct confessions of son to mother, couched in all the simple verbal beauty of manly love and reverence.

HORACE L. TRAUBEL,  
R. M. BUCKE,  
THOMAS B. HARNED.

<sup>2</sup> His sister, wife of Charles Heyde, still living at Burlington, Vermont.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson Whitman, a brother. See Whitman's reference to him in "Specimen Days."

out and homesick than he shows, but stands it upon the whole very well. Every one of the soldiers, to a man, wants to get home.

I suppose Jeff got quite a long letter I wrote from camp, about a week ago. I told you that George had been promoted to Captain—his commission arrived while I was there. When you write, address, Capt. George W. Whitman, Co. K. 51st New York, Vol. Ferrero's brigade near Falmouth Va. Jeff must write oftener, and put in a few lines from mother, even if it is only two lines—then in the next letter a few lines from Mat,<sup>1</sup> and so on. You have no idea how letters from home cheer one up in camp, and dissipate home sickness.

While I was there George still lived in Capt. Francis's tent—there were five of us altogether, to eat, sleep, write, &c. in a space twelve feet square, but we got along very well—the weather all along was very fine—and would have got along to perfection, but Capt. Francis is not a man I could like much—I had very little to say to him. George is about building a place, half hut and half tent, for himself—(he is probably about it this very day)—and then he will be better off, I think. Every Captain has a tent, in which he lives, transacts company business, &c. has a cook, (or a man of all work,) and in the same tent mess and sleep his Lieutenants, and perhaps the 1st sergeant. They have a kind of fire-place—and the cook's fire is outside on the open ground. George had very good times while Francis was away—the cook, a young disabled soldier, Tom, is an excellent fellow, and a first-rate cook, and the 2d Lieutenant, Pooley, is a tiptop young Pennsylvanian. Tom thinks all the world of George—when he heard he was wounded, on the day of the battle, he left everything got across the river, and went hunting for George through the field, through thick and thin. I wrote to Jeff that George was wounded by a shell, a gash in the cheek—you could stick a splint through into the mouth, but it has healed up without difficulty already. Everything is uncertain about the army, whether it moves or stays where it is. There are no furloughs granted at present. I will stay here for the present, at any rate long enough to see if I can get any employment at any thing, and shall write what luck I have. Of course I am unsettled at present.

Dear mother, my love, WALT.

If Jeff or any one writes, address me, care of Major Hapgood, paymaster, U. S. Army, Corner 15th and F. Streets, 5th floor, Washington, D. C. I send my love to dear sister Mat, and to little sis<sup>2</sup>—and to Andrew<sup>3</sup> and

to all my brothers. O Mat, how lucky it was you did not come—together, we could never have got down to see George.

WASHINGTON, Friday morning, Jan. 2, 1863.

DEAR SISTER:<sup>4</sup> You have heard of my fortunes and misfortunes of course, (through my letters to mother and Jeff.) since I left home, that Tuesday afternoon. But I thought I would write a few lines to you, as it is a comfort to write home, even if I have nothing particular to say. Well, dear sister, I hope you are well and hearty, and that little sis keeps as well as she always had, when I left home so far. Dear little plague, how I would like to have her with me, for one day. I can fancy I see her, and hear her talk. Jeff must have got a note from me about a letter I have written to the *Eagle*—you may be sure you will get letters enough from me, for I have little else to do at present. Since I laid my eyes on dear brother George, and saw him alive and well,—and since I have spent a week in camp, down there opposite Fredericksburgh, and seen what well men and sick men, and mangled men endure—it seems to me I can be satisfied and happy henceforward if I can get one meal a day, and know that mother and all are in good health, and especially if I can only be with you again, and have some little steady paying occupation in N. Y. or Brooklyn.

I am writing this in the office of Major Hapgood, way up in the top of a big high house, corner of 15th and F. Street—there is a splendid view, away down south, of the Potomac river, and across to the Georgetown side, and the grounds and houses of Washington spread out beneath my high point of view. The weather is perfect—I have had that in my favor ever since leaving home,—yesterday and to-day it is bright, and plenty warm enough. The poor soldiers are continually coming in from the hospitals, &c. to get their pay—some of them waiting for it to go home. They climb up here, quite exhausted, and then find it is no good, for there is no money to pay them—there are two or three paymasters' desks in this room, and the scenes of disappointment are quite affecting. Here they wait in Washington, perhaps week after week, wretched and heart-sick—this is the greatest place of delays and puttings-off, and no finding the clue to any thing—this building is the paymaster general's quarters, and the crowds on the walk and corner, of poor, sick, pale, tattered soldiers are awful—many of them, day after day, disappointed and tired out. Well, Mat, I will suspend my letter for the present, and go out through the city—I have a couple of poor fellows in the hospital to visit also.

WALT.

<sup>1</sup> Wife of Thomas Jefferson Whitman.

<sup>2</sup> Eldest daughter of T. J. Whitman.

<sup>3</sup> A brother. <sup>4</sup> Written to Mrs. T. J. Whitman.

Saturday evening, Jan. 3d.

I write this in the place where I have my lodging room, 394 L. street, 4th door above 14th street. A friend of mine William D. O'Connor, has two apartments on the 3rd floor, very ordinarily furnished, for which he pays the extraordinary price of \$25. a month. I have a werry little bedroom on the 2nd floor. Mr. & Mrs. O'Connor and their little girl have all gone out "down town" for an hour or two, to make some Saturday evening purchases, and I am left in possession of the premises—so I sit by the fire, and scribble more of my letter. I have not heard anything from dear brother George since I left the camp last Sunday morning, 28th Dec. I wrote to him on Tuesday last—I wish to get to him the two blue woolen shirts Jeff sent, as they would come very acceptable to him,—and will try to do it yet. I think of sending them by mail, if the postage is not more than \$1.

Yesterday I went out to the Campbell Hospital to see a couple of Brooklyn boys, of the 51st. They knew I was in Washington, and sent me a note, to come and see them. O my dear sister, how your heart would ache to go through the rows of wounded young men, as I did—and stopt to speak a comforting word to them. There were about 100 in one long room, just a long shed neatly whitewashed inside. One young man was very much prostrated, and groaning with pain. I stopt and tried to comfort him. He was very sick. I found he had not had any medical attention since he was brought there—among so many he had been overlooked. So I sent for the doctor, and he made an examination of him—the doctor behaved very well—seemed to be anxious to do right—said that the young man would recover—he had been brought pretty low with diarrhoea, and now had bronchitis, but not so serious as to be dangerous. I talked to him some time—he seemed to have entirely give up, and lost heart—he had not a cent of money—not a friend or acquaintance,—I wrote a letter from him to his sister—his name is John A. Holmes, Campbello, Plymouth county, Mass. I gave him a little change I had—he said he would like to buy a drink of milk, when the woman came through with milk. Trifling as this was, he was overcome and began to cry. Then there were many, many others. I mention the one, as a specimen. My Brooklyn boys were John Lowery, shot at Fredericksburgh, and lost his left forearm, and Amos H. Vliet—Jeff knows the latter—he has his feet frozen, and is doing well. The 100 are in a ward, (6)—and there are, I should think, eight or ten or twelve such wards in the Campbell Hospital—indeed a real village. Then there are some 38 more

Hospitals here in Washington, some of them much larger.

Sunday forenoon, Jan. 4, '63

Mat, I hope and trust dear mother and all are well, and everything goes on good, home. The envelope I send, Jeff or any of you can keep for direction, or use it when wanted to write to me. As near as I can tell, the army at Falmouth remains the same.

Dear sister, good-bye.

WALT.

I send my love to Andrew and Jesse<sup>1</sup> and Eddy<sup>2</sup> and all—What distressing news this is of the loss of the Monitor—

OFFICE MAJOR HAPGOOD, COR. 15th & F. STS.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 13th '63

DEAR BROTHER:<sup>3</sup> Nothing new—still I thought I would write you a line this morning. The \$4, namely: \$2 from Theo. A. Drake and \$2 from John D. Martin, inclosed in your letter of the 10th came safe. They too will please accept the grateful thanks of several poor fellows, in hospital here.

The letter of introduction to Mr. Webster, Chief Clerk, State Department, will be very acceptable. If convenient, I should like Mr. Lane to send it on immediately. I do not so much look for an appointment from Mr. Seward as his backing me from the state of New York. I have seen Preston King this morning for the second time—it is very amusing to hunt for an office,—so the thing seems to me just now, even if one don't get it)—I have seen Charles Sumner three times—he says everything here moves as part of a great machine, and that I must consign myself to the fate of the rest—still an interview I had with him yesterday he talked and acted as though he had life in him, and would exert himself to any reasonable extent for me to get something. Meantime I make about enough to pay my expenses by hacking on the press here, and copying in the paymasters' offices, a couple of hours a day—one thing is favorable here, namely, pay for whatever one does is at a high rate. I have not yet presented my letters to either Seward or Chase—I thought I would get my forces all in a body, and make one concentrated dash, if possible with the personal introduction and presence of some big bug—I like fat old Preston King, very much—he is fat as a hogshead, with great hanging chops—the first thing he said to me the other day in the parlor of the Senate, when I sent in for him and he came out, was, "Why how can I do this thing, or any thing for you—how do I know but you are a secessionist—you look for all the world, like an old Southern planter, a regular Caro-

<sup>1</sup> A brother.      <sup>2</sup> A brother.

<sup>3</sup> Written to Jeff. (T. J. W.).

lina or Virginia planter." I treated him with just as much hauteur as he did me with bluntness—this was the first time—it afterward proved that Charles Sumner had not prepared the way for me, as I supposed, or rather, not so strongly as I supposed, and Mr. King had even forgotten it—so I was as an entire stranger—But the same day C. S. talked further with Mr. King in the Senate, and the second interview I had with the latter, (this forenoon) he has given me a sort of general letter, endorsing me from New York—one envelope is addressed to Secretary Chase, and another to Gen. Meigs, head Quartermasters' Dept. Meantime I am getting better and better acquainted with office-hunting wisdom, and Washington peculiarities generally. I spent several hours in the Capitol the other day—the incredible gorgeousness of some of the rooms (interior decorations &c.)—rooms used perhaps but for merely three or four committee meetings in the course of the whole year, is beyond one's flightiest dreams. Costly frescoes of the style of Taylor's saloon in Broadway, only really the best and choicest of their sort, done by imported French & Italian artists, are the prevailing sorts (imagine the work you see on the fine china vases in Tiffany's, the paintings of Cupids & goddesses &c. spread recklessly over the arched ceiling and broad panels of a big room,—the whole floor underneath paved with tessellated pavement, which is a sort of cross between marble & china, with little figures drab, blue, cream color, &c.) These things, with heavy elaborately wrought balustrades, columns, & steps—all of the most beautiful marbles I ever saw, some white as milk, others of all colors, green, spotted, lined, or of our old Chocolate color,—all these marbles used as freely as if they were common blue flags, with rich door-frames and window-casings of bronze and gold,—heavy chandeliers and mantels, and clocks in every room—and indeed by far the richest and gayest, and most unAmerican and inappropriate ornamenting and finest interior workmanship I ever conceived possible, spread in profusion through scores, hundreds, (and almost thousands), of rooms—such are what I find, or rather would find to interest me, if I devoted time to it—But a few of the rooms are enough for me—the style is without grandeur, and without simplicity—These days, the state our country is in, and especially filled as I am from top to toe of late with scenes and thoughts of the *hospitals* (America seems to me now, though only in her youth, but brought already here feeble, bandaged and bloody in *hospital*), THESE DAYS, I say, Jeff, all the poppy-show goddesses, and all the pretty blue & gold in which the interior Capitol is got up, seem to me out of place be-

yond anything I could tell—and I get away from it as quick as I can when that kind of thought comes over me. I suppose it is to be described throughout—those interiors—as all of them got up in the French style—well enough for a New York.

WASHINGTON, March 31, 1863.

DEAREST MOTHER: I have not heard from George, except a note he wrote me a couple of days after he got back from his furlough—I think it likely the regiment has gone with its corps to the West, to the Kentucky or Tennessee region—Burnside at last accounts was in Cincinnati—Well it will be a change for George, if he is out there—I sent a long letter to Han last Saturday, enclosed George's note to me. Mother when you or Jeff write again, tell me if my papers & MSS are all right—I should be very sorry indeed if they got scattered, or used up or any thing—*especially* the copy of Leaves of Grass covered in blue paper, and the little MS book "Drum Taps" & the MS tied up in the square (spotted stone-paper) loose covers—I want them all carefully kept.

Mother it is quite a snow-storm here this morning—the ground is an inch and a half deep with snow—and it is snowing and drizzling—but I feel very independent in my stout army-boots, I go anywhere. I *have* felt quite well of my deafness and cold in my head for four days or so, but it is back again bad as ever this morning.

May 5, '63

DEAR MOTHER: I have not received any letter from George. I write to him & send papers to Winchester. Mother while I have been writing this a very large number of southern prisoners, I should think a 1000 at least, has past up Pennsylvania avenue, under a strong guard. I went out in the street, close to them to look at them. Poor fellows, many of them mere lads—it brought the tears, they seemed our own flesh and blood too, some wounded, *all* miserable in clothing, all in dirt and tatters—many of them fine young men. Mother I cannot tell you how I feel to see those prisoners.

WASHINGTON Monday morning, June 22 '63

DEAR MOTHER. . . . Well mother we are generally anticipating a lively time here or in the neighborhood, as it is probable Lee is feeling about to strike a blow on Washington, or perhaps right into it—and as Lee is no fool, it is perhaps possible he may give us a good shake—he is not very far off—yesterday was a fight to the southwest of here all day, we heard the cannons nearly all day—the wounded are arriving in small squads every day, mostly cavalry, a great many Ohio men—they send off

to-day from the Washington hospitals a great many to New York, Philadelphia, &c., all who are able, to make room, which looks ominous—indeed it is pretty certain that there is to be some severe fighting, maybe a great battle again, the pending week—I am getting so callous that it hardly arouses me at all—I fancy I should take it very quietly if I found myself in the midst of a desperate conflict here in Washington.

Mother I have nothing particular to write about—I see and hear nothing but new and old cases of my poor suffering boys in Hospitals, & I dare say you have had enough of such things—I have not missed a day at Hospital I think for more than three weeks—I get more & more wound round—poor young men—there are some cases that would literally sink and give up, if I did not pass a portion of the time with them—I have quite made up my mind about the lecturing &c project—I have no doubt it will succeed well enough, the way I shall put it in operation—you know mother it is to raise funds to enable me to continue my Hospital ministrations, on a more free-handed scale—as to the Sanitary Commissions and the like, I am sick of them all, & would not accept any of their berths—you ought to see the way the men as they lie helpless in bed turn away their faces from the sight of those Agents, Chaplains &c. (*hirelings* as Elias Hicks would call them—they seem to me always a set of foxes & wolves)—they get well paid, & are always incompetent & disagreeable—as I told you before the only good fellows I have met are the Christian Commission—they go everywhere & receive no pay. . . .

WALT.

WASHINGTON Wednesday forenoon

July 15 1863

DEAR MOTHER, So the mob has risen at last in New York—I have been expecting it, but as the day for the draft had arrived & everything was so quiet, I supposed all might go on smoothly—but it seems the passions of the people were only sleeping, & have burst forth with terrible fury, & they have destroyed life and property, the enrolment buildings &c as we hear—the accounts we get are a good deal in a muddle, but it seems bad enough—the feeling here is savage & hot as fire against New York (the mob—“Copperhead mob” the papers here call it.) & I hear nothing in all directions but threats of ordering up the gunboats, cannonading the city, shooting down the mob, hanging them in a body &c &c—meantime I remain silent, partly amused, partly scornful, or occasionally put a dry remark, which only adds fuel to the flames—I do not feel it in my heart to abuse the

poor people, or call for a rope or bullets for them, but that is all the talk here, even in the hospitals.—The acc'ts from N Y this morning are that the gov't has ordered the draft to be suspended there—I hope it is true, for I find that the deeper they go in with the draft, the more trouble it is likely to make—I have changed my opinions & feelings on the subject—we are in the midst of strange and terrible times—one is pulled a dozen different ways in his mind, & hardly knows what to think or do.—Mother I have not much fear that the troubles in New York will affect any of our family, still I feel somewhat uneasy—about Jeff, if any one, as he is more around—I have had it much on my mind what could be done, if it should so happen that Jeff should be drafted—of course he could not go without its being the downfall almost of our whole family, as you may say Mat & his young ones, & a sad blow to you too mother & to all—I did n't see any other way than to try to raise the \$300. mostly by borrowing if possible of Mr. Lane—mother I have no doubt I shall make a few hundred dollars by the lectures I shall certainly commence soon, (for my hospital missionary purposes & my own, for that purpose) & I could lend that am't to Jeff to pay it back.—May be the draft will not come off after all, I should say it was very doubtful if they can carry it out in N Y & Brooklyn—& besides it is only one chance out of several, to be drawn if it does— . . .

Aug. 18, 1863.

. . . I suppose they will fill up the 51st with conscripts, as that seems the order of the day—a good many are arriving here, from the north, & passing through to join Meade's army—we are expecting to hear of more rows in New York about the draft—it commences there right away I see—this time it will be no such doings as a month or five weeks ago. the gov't here is forwarding a large force of regulars to New York to be ready for any thing that may happen—there will be no blank cartridges this time—Well I thought when I first heard of the riot in N Y I had some feeling for them, but soon as I found what it really was, I felt it was the devil's own work all through—I guess the strong arm will be exhibited this time up to the shoulder. . . .

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8, Tuesday afternoon.

MOTHER it seems to be certain that Meade has gained the day, & that the battles there in Pennsylvania have been about as terrible as any in the war—O what a sight must have been presented by the field of action—I think the killed & wounded there on both sides were as many as eighteen or twenty thousand—in

one place, four or five acres, there were a thousand dead, at daybreak on Saturday morning—Mother one's heart grows sick of war, after all, when you see what it really is—every once in a while I feel so horrified and disgusted—it seems to me like a great slaughter-house & the men mutually butchering each other—then I feel how impossible it appears, again, to retire from this contest, until we have carried our points—(it is cruel to be so tossed from pillar to post in one's judgment) . . .

One of the things here always on the go, is long trains of army wagons—sometimes they will stream along all day, it almost seems as if there was nothing else but army wagons & ambulances—they have great camps here in every direction, of army wagons, teamsters, ambulance camps, &c. Some of them are permanent, & have small hospitals—I go to them, (as no one else goes, ladies would not venture)—I sometimes have the luck to give some of the drivers a great deal of comfort & help—Indeed mother there are camps here of everything—I went once or twice to the contraband camp, to the Hospital, &c. but I could not bring myself to go again—when I meet black men or boys among my own hospitals, I use them kindly, give them something &c. I believe I told you that I do the same to the wounded rebels, too—but as there is a limit to one's sinews & endurance & sympathies, &c. I have got in the way after going lightly as it were all through the wards of a hospital, & trying to give a word of cheer, if nothing else, to every one, then confining my special attentions to the few where the investment seems to tell best, & who want it most—Mother I have real pride in telling you that I have the consciousness of saving quite a number of lives by saving them from giving up, and being a good deal with them—the men say it is so, & the doctors say it is so—& I will candidly confess I can see it is true, though I say it of myself—I know you will like to hear it mother, so I tell you. . . .

Oct. 15, 1863<sup>1</sup>

. . . In the hospitals among these American soldiers from East and West, North and South, I could not describe to you what mutual attachments, passing deep and tender. Some have died but the love for them lives as long as I draw breath. These soldiers know how to love too, when once they have the right person. It is wonderful. You see I am running off into the clouds (perhaps my element) Abby I am writing this last note this afternoon—in Major H.'s office—he is away sick—I am here a good deal of the time alone—it is a dark, rainy afternoon—we don't know what is going on in front, whether Meade is getting the worst

<sup>1</sup> Written to Mrs. Price, Woodside, Long Island.

of it, or not—but the result of the big elections permanently cheers us—I believe fully in Lincoln—few know the rocks and quicksands he has had to steer through and over. . . .

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2, 1864

DEAREST MOTHER: I am writing this by the side of the young man you asked about, Lewis Brown in Army Square hospital. He is now getting along very well indeed—The amputation is healing up good, & he does not suffer anything like as much as he did. I see him every day. We have had real hot weather here, & for the last three days wet & rainy—it is more like June than February. Mother I wrote to Han, last Saturday—she must have got it yesterday—I have not heard anything from home since a week ago, (your last letter)—I suppose you got a letter from me Saturday last—I am well as usual—there has been several hundred sick soldiers brought in here yesterday—I have been around among them to-day all day—it is enough to make one heart-sick—the old times over again—they are many of them mere wrecks—though young men (sickness is worse in some respects than wounds)—one boy about 16, from Portland Maine, only came from home a month ago, a recruit, he is here now very sick & downhearted poor child, he is a real country boy, I think has consumption, he was only a week with his reg't—I sat with him a long time—I saw [it] did him great good—I have been feeding some their dinners—it makes me feel quite proud, I find so frequently I can do with the men what no one else at all can, getting them to eat, (some that will not touch their food otherwise nor for anybody else)—it is sometimes quite affecting I can tell you—I found such a case to-day, a soldier with throat disease, very bad,—I fed him quite a dinner—the men his comrades around just stared in wonder, & one of them told me afterwards that he (the sick man) had not eat so much at a meal, in three months—Mother I shall have my hands pretty full now for a while—write all about things home.

WALT.

Lewis Brown says I must give you his love—he says he knows he would like you if he should see you.

CULPEPER, VIRGINIA Friday night

Feb. 12th 1864

DEAREST MOTHER, I am still stopping down in this region, I am a good deal of the time down within half a mile of our picket lines, so that you see I can indeed call myself in the front. I stopped yesterday with an artillery camp in the 1st Corps at the invitation of Capt. Cranford who said that he knew me in Brook-

lyn. It is close to the lines — I asked him if he did not think it dangerous — he said no, he could have a large force of infantry to help him there, in very short metre, if there was any sudden emergency — The troops here are scattered all around much more apart than they seemed to me to be opposite Fredericksburgh last winter — they mostly have good huts & fireplaces &c — I have been to a great many of the camps, & I must say I am astonished how good the houses are almost everywhere — I have not seen one regiment nor any part of one, in the poor uncomfortable little shelter tents that I saw so common last winter after Fredericksburgh — but all the men have built huts of logs & mud — a good many of them would be comfortable enough to live in under any circumstances — I have been in the Division hospitals around here — there are not many men sick here, & no wounded — they now send them on to Washington — I shall return there in a few days, as I am very clear that the real need of one's services is there after all — there the worst cases concentrate, & probably will, while the war lasts — I suppose you know that what we call hospital here in the field, is nothing but a collection of tents on the bare ground for a floor, rather hard accommodation for a sick man — they heat them there by digging a long trough in the ground under them, covering it over with old railroad iron & earth, & then building a fire at one end & letting it draw through & go out at the other, as both ends are open — this heats the ground through the middle of the hospital quite hot — I find some poor creatures crawling about pretty weak with diarrhoea — there is a great deal of that — they keep them until they get very bad indeed, & then send them to Washington — the journey aggravates the complaint, & they come into Washington in a terrible condition. O mother how often and how many I have seen come into Washington, from this awful complaint, after such an experience as I have described, with the look of death on their poor young faces — they keep them so long in the field hospitals with poor accommodations, the disease gets too deeply seated.

To-day I have been out among some of the camps of the 2d division of the 1st Corps — I have been wandering around all day — & have had a very good time, over woods, hills & gulleys, indeed a real soldiers march — the weather is good & the traveling quite tolerable — I have been in the camps of some Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, & New York regiments — I have friends in them, & went out to see them, & see soldiering generally, as I never cease to crave more & more knowledge of actual soldiers life, & to be among them as much as possible — This evening I have also been in a large wag-

oner's camp — they had good fires & were very cheerful, I went to see a friend there too, but did not find him in — it is curious how many I find that I know & that know me. Mother, I have no difficulty at all in making myself at home among the soldiers, teamsters, or any — I most always find they like to have me very much, it seems to do them good, no doubt they soon feel that my heart and sympathies are truly with them, & it is both a novelty & pleases them & touches their feelings, & so doubtless does them good — & I am sure it does that to me — There is more fun around here than you would think for — I told you about the theatre the 14th Brooklyn has got up, they have songs & burlesques &c. some of the performers real good — as I write this I have heard in one direction or another two or three good bands playing — & hear one tooting away some gay tunes now, though it is quite late at night — Mother I don't know whether I mentioned in my last letter that I took dinner with Col Fowler one day early part of the week — his wife is stopping here — I was down at the 14th as I came along this evening too — one of the officers told me about a presentation to George of a sword &c. he said he see it in the papers — the 14th invited me to come & be their guest while I staid here, but I have not been able to accept — Col Fowler uses me tip-top — he is provost marshal of this region, makes a good officer — Mother I could get no pen & ink to-night<sup>1</sup> — Well dear mother I send you my Love & to George & Jeff & Matt & little girls & all.

WALT.

Direct to care of Major Hapgood as before & write soon. Mother I suppose you got a letter I wrote from down here last Monday.

WASHINGTON March 22 1864

DEAREST MOTHER: . . . Gen. Grant is expected every moment now in the Army of the Potomac to take active command — I have just this moment heard from the front — there is nothing yet of a movement, but each side is continually on the alert, expecting something to happen — O mother to think that we are to have here soon what I have seen so many times, the awful loads & trains & boat-loads of poor bloody and pale & wounded young men again, — for that is what we certainly will, & before very long — I see all the little signs, getting ready in the hospitals &c. — it is dreadful when one thinks about it — I sometimes think over the sights I have myself seen, the arrival of the wounded after a battle, & the scenes on the field, too, I can hardly believe my own recollection — what an awful thing war is — Mo-

<sup>1</sup> The letter is written with pencil.—EDITORS.

ther it seems not men but a lot of devils & butchers butchering each other. . . .

April 5 '64

Well mother I went to see the great spirit medium Foster—there were some little things some might call curious perhaps, but it is a shallow thing and a humbug—A gentleman who was with me was somewhat impressed, but I could not see anything in it worth calling supernatural—I would n't turn on my heel to go again and see such things, or twice as much—we had table rappings and lots of nonsense. . . .

WASHINGTON Tuesday noon April 19 '64

DEAREST MOTHER: . . . I went down to the Capitol the nights of the debate on the expulsion of Mr. Long last week,—they had night sessions, very late—I like to go to the House of Representatives at night, it is the most magnificent hall, so rich & large, & lighter at night than it is days, & still not a light visible, it comes through the glass roof—but the speaking and ability of the members is nearly always on a low scale, it is very curious & melancholy to see such a rate of talent there, such tremendous times as these—I should say about the same range of genius as our old friend Dr. Swalm, just about—you may think I am joking, but I am not, mother—I am speaking in perfect earnest—the Capitol grows upon one in time, especially as they have got the great figure on top of it now, & you can see it very well, it is a great bronze figure, the genius of Liberty I suppose, it looks wonderful toward sundown, I love to go down & look at it, the sun when it is nearly down shines on the head-piece & it dazzles & glistens like a big star, it looks quite curious.

Well mother we have commenced on another summer, & what it will bring forth who can tell? The campaign of this summer is expected here to be more active & severe than any yet—As I told you in a former letter Grant is determined to bend everything to take Richmond . . . he is in earnest about it, his whole soul & all his thoughts night and day are upon it—he is probably the most in earnest of any man in command or in the government either . . .

WASHINGTON April 26 1864

DEAREST MOTHER: Burnside's army passed through here yesterday—I saw George and walked with him in the regiment for some distance & had quite a talk—he is very well, he is very much tanned & looks hardy. I told him all the latest news from home—George stands it very well, & looks & behaves the same good and noble fellow he always was & always will be—it was on 14th St. I watched three hours before the 51st came along—I joined

him just before they came to where the President & Gen Burnside were standing with others on a balcony, & the interest of seeing me &c. made George forget to notice the President & salute him, he was a little annoyed at forgetting it I called his attention to it, but we had passed a little too far on, & George would n't turn round even ever so little—however there was a great many more than half the army passed without noticing Mr. Lincoln & the others, for there was a great crowd all through the streets especially here & the place where the President stood was not conspicuous from the rest—The 9th Corps made a very fine show indeed—there were I should think five very full regiments of new black troops, under Gen Ferrero, they looked and marched very well. It looked funny to see the President standing with his hat off to them just the same as the rest as they passed by—then there [were] Michigan regiments, one of them was a regiment of sharpshooters, partly composed of Indians—then there was a pretty strong force of artillery—& a middling force of cavalry—many New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, R. I. &c. reg'ts—all except the blacks were veterans, seen plenty of fighting—mother it is very different to see a real army of fighting men, from one of those shows in Brooklyn, or New York, or on Fort Greene—Mother it was a curious sight to see these ranks after ranks of our own dearest blood of men, mostly young, march by worn & sunburnt & sweaty, with well worn clothes & thin bundles, & knapsacks, tincups & some with frying-pans strapped over their backs, all dirty & sweaty, nothing real neat about them except their muskets, but they were all as clean & bright as silver—they were four or five hours passing along, marching with wide ranks pretty quickly too—it is a great sight to see such a big army 25 or 30,000 on the march—they are all so gay, too, poor fellows; nothing dampens their spirits—they all got soaked with rain the night before—I saw Fred McReady & Capt Sims, & Col Le Gendre &c. I don't know exactly where Burnside's army is going—among other rumors it is said they go to the army of the Potomac to act as a reserve force &c.—another is that they are to make a flank march, to go round & get Lee, on the side &c.—we know nothing,—I hav'n't been out this morning & don't know what news—only that there is without doubt to be a terrible campaign here in Virginia this summer, & that all who know deepest about it are very serious about it—Mother it is serious times—I do not feel to fret or whimper, but in my heart & soul about our country, the army, the forthcoming campaign with all its vicissitudes & the wounded & slain—I dare say mother I feel the reality



more than some because I [am] in the midst of its saddest results so much—Others may say what they like, I believe in Grant & in Lincoln too—I think Grant deserves to be trusted, he is working continually—no one knows his plans, we will only know them when he puts them in operation—Our army is very large here in Virginia this spring & they are still pouring in from east & west—you don't see about it in the papers, but we have [a] very large army here . . .

2 o'clock, 28th, April 1864

DEAREST MOTHER: Just as I am going to mail this, I receive authentic information. Burnside's army is now about 16 or 18 miles south of here, at a place called Fairfax court house—They had last night no orders to move at present, & I rather think they will remain there, or near there—What I have written before as a rumor about their being to be held as a reserve, to act whenever occasion may need them is now quite decided on—You may hear a rumor in New York that they have been shipped in transports from Alexandria—there is no truth in it at all—Grant's Army of the Potomac is probably to do the heavy work—his army is strong and full of fight—Mother I think it is to-day the noblest army of soldiers that ever marched—nobody can know the men so well as I do, I sometimes think— . . .

WASHINGTON May 13 1864.

2 o'clock P. M.

DEAREST MOTHER: I wrote you a hurried letter late yesterday afternoon but left it myself at the P O in time for the mail,—you ought to have got it this forenoon, or afternoon at furthest.—I sent you two letters yesterday—I hope the carrier brings you your letters the same day—I wrote to the Brooklyn postmaster about it—I have heard from George up to Tuesday morning last, 10th, till which time he was safe,—the battle of Friday 6th was very severe—George's Co K lost one acting Lt Sturgis killed, 2 men killed, 4 wounded—as I wrote yesterday I have seen here Corp. Fred Saunders of Co K who was wounded in side, nothing serious, in Friday's fight, & came up here—I also talked with Sgt Brown, Co F. 51st rather badly wounded in right shoulder—Saunders said when he left Tuesday morning he heard (or saw them there I forget which) the 51st & its whole division were on guard duty toward the rear—the 9th Corps however has had hard fighting since, but whether the division, or brigade, the 51st is in, was in the fights of Tuesday 10th (a pretty severe one) or Wednesday I cannot yet tell, & it is useless to make calculations—& the only way is to wait & hope for the best—as

I wrote yesterday there were some 20 of the 51st reg't killed & 50 wounded in Friday's battle, 6th inst—I have seen Col Le Gendre, he is here in Washington not far from where I am—485 12th St., is his address—poor man, I felt sorry indeed for him, he is badly wounded & disfigured, he is shot through the bridge of the nose, & left eye probably lost—I spent a little time with him this forenoon—he is suffering very much,—spoke of George very kindly, said, "your brother is well"—his orderly told me he saw him, George, Sunday night last well—Fred Mc. Ready is wounded in hip, I believe bone fractured bad enough, but not deeply serious—I cannot hear of his arrival here, if he comes I shall find him immediately & take care of him myself—he is probably yet at Fredericksburgh, but will come up I think—Yesterday & to-day the badly wounded are coming in—the long lists of *previous arrivals*, (I suppose they are all reprinted at great length in N Y papers) are of men  $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of them quite slightly wounded, & the rest hurt pretty bad—I was thinking mother if one could see the men who arrived in the first squads, of two or three hundred at a time, one wouldn't be alarmed at those terrible long lists—Still there is a sufficient sprinkling of deeply distressing cases—I find my hands full all the time, with new & old cases—poor suffering young men, I think of them, & do try mother to do what I can for them (& not think of the vexatious skeddaddlers & merely scratched ones, of whom there are too many lately come here)—

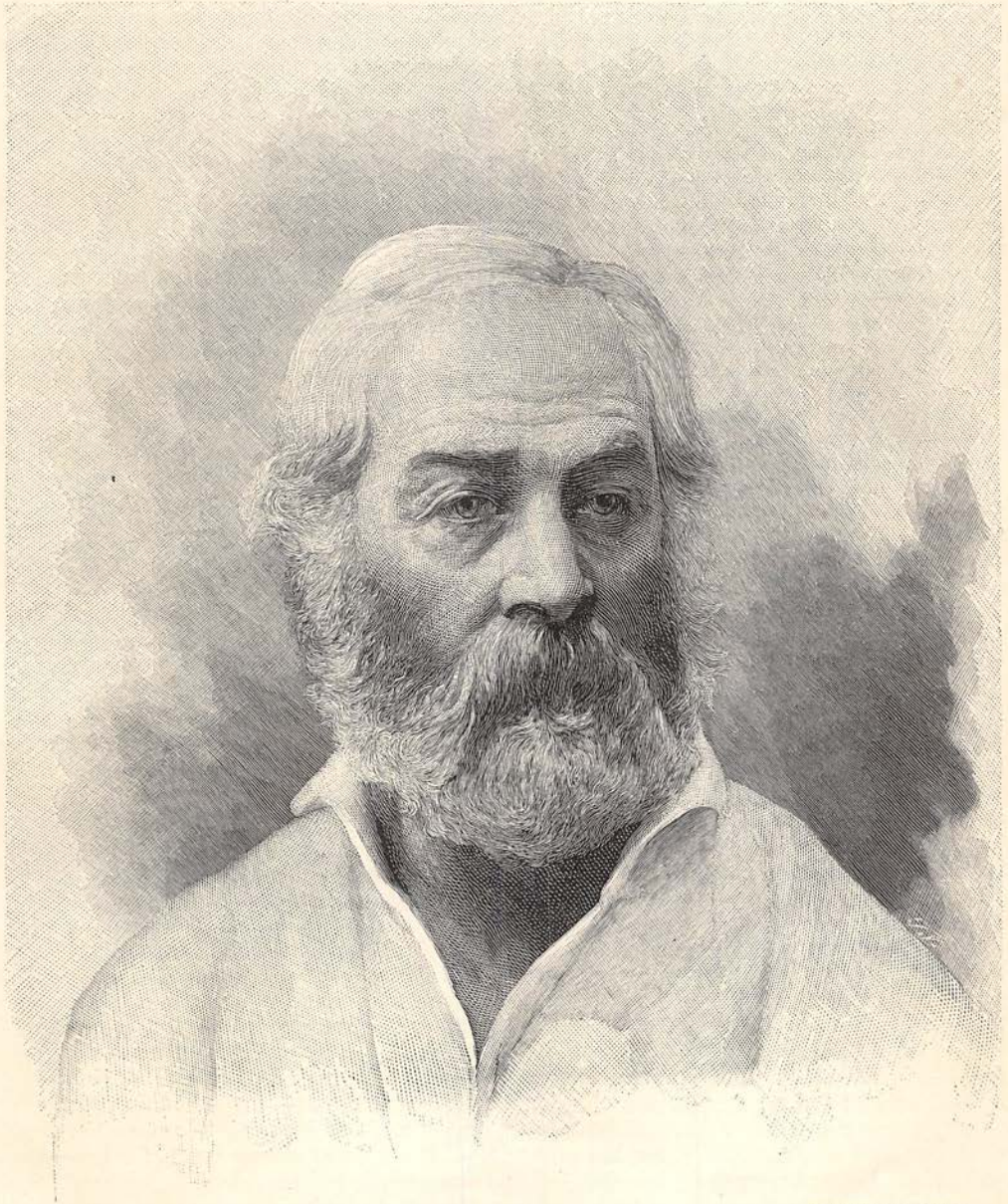
Dearest mother I hope you & all are well—you must keep a good heart—still the fighting is very mixed, but it *seems steadily turning into real successes* for Grant,—the news to-day here is very good—you will see it in N Y papers—I steadily believe Grant is going to succeed, & that we shall have Richmond—but O what a price to pay for it—We have had a good rain here & it is pleasanter & cooler—I shall write very soon again.

May 30 '64

. . . I have been in one of the worst hospitals all the forenoon, it contains about 1600—I have given the men pipes & tobacco, (I am the only one that gives them tobacco,) O how much good it does some of them—the chaplains & most of the doctors are down upon it,—but I give them & let them smoke—to others I have given oranges, fed them &c. . . .

WASHINGTON June 3 1864

DEAREST MOTHER, Your letter came yesterday—I have not heard the least thing from the 51st since—no doubt they are down there with the Army near Richmond—I have not written to George lately—I think the news from the Army is very good—Mother you



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

*Walt Whitman*  
*taken from life 1863*  
*war time Washington*  
*D C*

know of course that it is now very near Richmond indeed, from five to ten miles—Mother if this campaign was not in progress I should not stop here, as it is now beginning to tell a little upon me, so many bad wounds, many putrefied, & all kinds of dreadful ones, I have been rather too much with—but as it is I shall certainly remain here while the thing remains undecided—it is impossible for me to abstain from going to see & minister to certain cases, & that draws me into others, & so on—I have just left Oscar Cunningham, the Ohio boy—he is in a dying condition—there is no hope for him—it would draw tears from the hardest heart to look at him—he is all wasted away to a skeleton, & looks like some one fifty years old—you remember I told you a year ago, when he was first brought in, I thought him the noblest specimen of a young western man I had seen, a real giant in size, & always with a smile on his face—O what a change, he has long been very irritable to every one but me, & his frame is all wasted away—the young Massachusetts 1st artillery boy, Cutler, I wrote about is dead—he is the one that was brought in a week ago last Sunday badly wounded in breast—the deaths in the principal hospital I visit, Armory Square, average one an hour—

I saw Capt Baldwin of the 14th this morning, he has lost his left arm—is going home soon—Mr. Kalbfleisch & Anson Herrick (M<sup>C</sup> from New-York) came in one of the wards where I was sitting writing a letter this morning, in the midst of the wounded—Kalbfleisch was so much affected by the sight that he burst into tears—O I must tell you I gave the boys in the Carver hospital a great treat of ice cream, a couple of days ago, went round myself through about 15 large wards (I bought some ten gallons very nice)—you would have cried & been amused too, many of the men had to be fed, several of them I saw cannot probably live, yet they quite enjoyed it, I gave everybody some—quite a number of western county boys had never tasted ice cream before—they relish such things, oranges lemons, &c.—Mother I feel a little blue this morning, as two young men I knew very well have just died, one died last night, & the other about half an hour before I went to the hospital, I did not anticipate the death of either of them, each was a very, very sad case so young—Well mother I see I have written you another gloomy sort of letter—I do not feel as first rate as usual.

You don't know how I want to come home & see you all, you dear mother & Jeff & Mat & all—I believe I am homesick, something new for me—then I have seen all the horrors of soldiers' life & not been kept up by its excitement—it is awful to see so much, and not be able to relieve it

WASHINGTON June 7 1864

DEAREST MOTHER, . . . Well mother poor Oscar Cunningham has gone at last—he is the 82d Ohio boy (wounded May 3d '63)—I have written so much of him I suppose you feel as if you almost knew him . . . I believe I told you in last letter I was quite blue from the deaths of several of the poor young men I knew well, especially two I had strong hopes of their getting up—things are going pretty badly with the wounded—They are crowded here in Washington in immense numbers, & all those that come up from the Wilderness & that region, arrived here so neglected, & in such plight, it was awful—(those that were at Fredericksburgh & also from Belle Plain) . . . Many of the amputations have to be done over again—one new feature is that many of the poor afflicted young men are crazy, every ward has some in it that are wandering—they have suffered too much, & it is perhaps a privilege that they are out of their senses—Mother it is most too much for a fellow, & I sometimes wish I was out of it—but I suppose it is because I have not felt first rate myself—I am going to write to George to-day, as I see there is a daily mail to White House—O I must tell you that we got the wounded from our present field near Richmond much better than we did from the Wilderness & Fredericksburgh—We get them now from White House, they are put on boats there, & come all the way here, about 160 or 70 miles—White House is only twelve or fifteen miles from the field. . . .

WASHINGTON June 14 1864

DEAREST MOTHER I am not feeling very well these days—the doctors have told me not to come inside the hospitals for the present—I send there by a friend every day, I send things & aid to some cases I know, & hear from there also, but I do not go myself at present—it is probable that the hospital poison has affected my system, & I find it worse than I calculated—I have spells of faintness & very bad feeling in my head, fullness & pain,—& besides sore throat—my boarding place 502 Pennsylvania av. is a miserable place, very bad air—But I shall feel better soon, I know—the doctors say it will pass over—they have long told me I was going in too strong—some days I think it has all gone & I feel well again, but in a few hours I have a spell again. . . .

WASHINGTON June 17th 1864

DEAR MOTHER . . . I think I shall come home for a short time, & pretty soon (I will try it two or three days yet though, & if I find my illness goes over I will stay here yet a while—all I think about is to be here if any thing should happen to George). . . .