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**William Roberts Jr. (b. 1837)**  
**Papers, 1831-1865 (bulk 1861-1864)**  
**1 box, 0.25 linear ft.**

**Collection 3069**

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William Roberts, Jr., the son of a Philadelphia school teacher and historian, left his city at the age of 24 to serve as company clerk in Colonel (later, Brigadier General) John W. Geary's Pennsylvania Volunteer Force, 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Company D, of the Union Army. Roberts served for three years, rising to the rank of Sergeant during his service from July 1861 until July 1864. A graduate of Philadelphia's prestigious Central High School, Roberts' letters to his family captured his sense of participating in an important historical event. This sense of history, expressed with intelligence and wit--and further enlivened by his own relish of adventure--permeates his many observations. In addition to his battlefield reports, Roberts' letters indicated an ongoing concern for his family's financial stability, as well as his own financial--and marital--plans.

All of Roberts' letters from the battlefield, with the exception of a letter of February 1, 1862, have been transcribed into a manual of two hundred fifty pages. The majority of these letters, addressed to either his parents or his sister, were written in pen and ink, with a few in cross-etching format. In addition, a letter to his father, dated October 1, 1861, was written on paper from Cutler L. Laflin's Mills of Lee, Massachusetts; the paper remains a vibrant blue and carries an embossed logo of a lion at its upper, left-hand corner. The collection also contains several pre- and post-war family letters between Roberts and family or friends. In addition, the collection holds letters to Mary (Mollie) Greble Roberts, of Baltimore, Maryland, from her cousins in Philadelphia. Roberts' correspondence indicated that he had courted and proposed to Mary Greble while in the army. A letter of October 24, 1864 to Mary Greble from her cousin Sallie M. Greble confirms a marriage date of October 31, 1864. Ephemera in the collection include a newspaper advertisement for the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment's entertainment program, dated January 21<sup>st</sup> 1862, and two newspapers, *The Weekly Visitor*, *Delaware County Gazette* dated January 7, 1831 and *The Christian Banner*, dated December, 1864.

Roberts' position as company clerk provided him with the opportunity to write, as well as read, and he often requested newspapers and books from his family. His requests included copies of the *Bulletin* and the *Inquirer* from Philadelphia, as well as *The New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*; books included novels such as *Ramona* and *Les Miserables*. Soon after his deployment to a camp near Harper's Ferry in July 1861, Roberts permitted publication of his letters in the *Bulletin*, requesting in his letter of September 6, 1861, that personal items be removed. An avid correspondent, Roberts wrote to many friends, requested photos of them and sent his own likeness to family and friends--especially to

Mary Greble. (A copy of a photo of Roberts and Mary Greble is included in the transcribed letters.)

Stationed from July 1861 until February 1862 at Point of Rocks, Maryland, Roberts' letters recounted activity in and around the area with particular attention given to an encounter at Harper's Ferry by Colonel Geary on October 18, 1861. In a letter of October 21, 1861 to his father, Roberts disputed newspapers' accounts of this engagement led by Colonel Geary as a "skirmish." Although not a key battle, Roberts' detailed account, taken from the Colonel's formal report, offered a glimpse of the ongoing fighting—and dangers—ever present around contested sites. Absent major engagements, however, Roberts letters in the fall and winter of 1861 focused on the vagaries of camp life. In a letter of October 14, 1861 to his father, Roberts depicted the arrival of the "Spondoolicks," or Pay Master, and described the conditions of some soldiers awaiting their wages: "Some of them have families at home in an almost destitute condition." He noted: "The shoes of some of the men are entirely worn out, & their bare feet touch the ground, & in many instances the seats of their pants are also 'non est.'" (Roberts often finished his sentences with Latin quotations.) Roberts himself needed "flannel shirts," and recounted finding lice on his shirts, remarking: "I must have caught them from some filthy beast." Other letters from Point of Rocks, Maryland, depicted more pleasant camp scenes. In a letter of November 6, 1861, Roberts noted that Beck's Brass Band from Philadelphia was stationed with their regiment. He also described the regiment's holiday entertainment of song and dance skits composed by the men with offerings from the glee club and orchestra. (The full advertisement for this program has been copied with the transcribed letters, following Roberts' letter of December 21, 1861 to his parents.)

Writing in the new year of 1862, with the army in winter headquarters, Roberts letter of January 18, 1862 to his sister demonstrated the humor found throughout his letters. He envisioned how he would behave at home after his soldier's life: "I would...stand guard in the yard all night with a broom stick...appropriate all the chickens and pigs I met with...[and]...insist on all the lights in the tents, house I mean, being put out at taps (9 o'clock)." In the same letter, jesting about a lost letter from a female friend, Roberts commented: "I hope it has not miscarried." On February 26, 1862, Roberts wrote to his sister, from Harper's Ferry, Virginia, that the army was on the move and stated that the Army "if successful will be in Richmond in a month." He then described the excitement generated by the union soldiers massing for the intended assault on Richmond. "The air is vocal with the music of bands. At least 15,000 men are in the town & with the noble McClellan in command we have no fear of any rebels."

Subsequent letters, however, detailed inconclusive and sporadic fighting until his letter of March 10, 1862 to his father which announced his regiment's participation in taking Leesburg, Virginia. Posted to railroad patrols throughout the Shenandoah valley following this engagement, Roberts' ensuing letters captured the contrasting sights of war—its harsh realities alternating with an occasional kindness or a surprising, colorful scene. Writing on March 17, 1862 to his parents from Upperville Fauquier Co., Virginia, Roberts remarked: "The darkies are all for the Union, & from actual observation I can say that their love for their masters is grossly exaggerated. They followed us in large numbers but as feeding them would entail privation on our own troops, an order was issued & carried out,

to drive them all away.” In the same letter Roberts documented “the difficulty of obtaining sufficient substance for the command” and related his meeting a “very kind” woman who offered food and nursing despite, as she said, their “coming to murder her friends & relatives.” “ In a lighter vein, Roberts’ letter to his father on April 8, 1862 from Warrenton, Virginia, described the sight of General Blenker’s Dutch troops: “Saourcroust & pretzels! Twelve thousand Dutchmen make a good deal of noise. They carry no tents but bivouac by campfires in the open air.” And again, on April 15, 1862 writing from Rectortown, Virginia Roberts reported: “We have the Zouaves d’Afrique with us, & bully boys they are too. They are dressed with wide flowing scarlet breeches & coats ornamented with yellow braid & with a red cap & yellow tassel.”

Continuing their movement in Virginia through the spring and then the hot, southern July weather, Roberts, in a letter of July 8, 1862, reported the cruelty inflicted on soldiers by the sun and—in this case—by a Union officer. Roberts wrote: “The sun was literally boiling hot & that miserable beast of a (Lieutenant Colonel) Tyndale urged the men on until many dropped exhausted; & if a man left the ranks for a drink of water, when a halt was not ordered this wretch would make them pour it out.” Roberts noted that Colonel Geary reprimanded Tyndale threatening to “have him cashiered” if done again.

On August 29, 1862, Roberts joined in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Bull Run, participating in an engagement near Centreville, which he described in a letter to his father, September 8, 1862. He confessed: “I was very much shaken when I first went in to the fight, but soon became accustomed to the sharp ‘st, ’st of the bullet, & the “boom-whir-r-r-r of the shell. At this time we had to retreat, & the vile traitor McDowell led him men into a cross or enfilading fire, where they were terribly cut up” Roberts admitted also that his battle experiences “are forever stamped on my memory. The panic & flight, the charge the din & smoke of battle can never be described. It has to be experienced to be known.” Deployed to Maryland to join in the battle of Antietam, Roberts in his letter of September 21, 1862 described the 28<sup>th</sup> regiment’s eight hour battle under Colonel Tyndale—an experience that changed his opinion of the Colonel: “Col Tyndale is as brave as steel. All his faults are forgiven—he is brave; He was wounded through the top of the head, the ball coming near his neck.”

By the end of September, 1862, Roberts reported that the army would probably winter in Virginia; and in a letter of October 2, 1862 Roberts’ expressed his disappointment that “the sickening ‘all quiet along the Potomac’ will be the staple of the papers through the long dreary winter again.” Roberts’ letters through the fall and winter, written from Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, discussed the possibility of his father’s visiting Baltimore, news from home, as well as the clerk duties occupying his time. In a November 18, 1862 letter, now from Boliver, Virginia, Roberts wrote about the discontent felt by all—they had not been paid for four months. Roberts wrote his next letter home on January 15, 1863 to announce their “marching orders,” rumored to be the South or perhaps, back to “that miserable mud hole Manassas.” Roberts’ following letters described the difficulties of moving troops, animals, and artillery through winter’s winds, rains, and muddy roads. Encamped near Aquia Creek, Virginia Roberts recounted in a February 19, 1863 letter, his visit to Mollie (Mary) Greble in Baltimore. Writing again to his father on March 13, 1863, Roberts, contemplating marriage with Mollie Greble, suggested that if “the new conscript law is passed, or the Negro troops

are raised” he might obtain—with “political influence”—a “Commission as Lieut & Regt'l qf Master.”

The Army's eventual movement South to either North Carolina or Kentucky remained stalled and Roberts, in a letter of April 7, 1863, complained to his father of their inaction: “the Army of the Potomac might as well be a dead letter, so little space do they occupy in the news columns.” In a letter to his father on May 7, 1863, however, Roberts announced: “Here we are again at Aquia Creek at our old camp after ten days of marching & fighting the most tremendous battle of the war. Though unsuccessful, the Army is not dismayed.” Roberts described their participation in the Battle of Fredericksburg led by General Sedgewick, his own regiment fighting at Chancellorsville, and writing of this struggle, Roberts commented: “The sharp & continuous volleys of musketry like a wave of sound from one end of the line to the other, & the awful crash of canister, the whistling of shells, I never heard equaled. Antietam was child's play to it.” He then summarized the outcome: “We drove the rebels, & they us time & time again, but the final advantage belonged to them, & we fell back about half a mile.” The remainder of the letter described their retreat to Aquia Creek, Virginia.

Subsequent letters from Roberts, describing his regiment's move north and west to support the Union Army at Gettysburg, includes a letter of June 20<sup>th</sup> to his father, reporting on deserters' executions. Encamped a mile from Leesburg, Virginia, Roberts wrote: “All was hushed as death, as the prisoners blindfold, & bound were taken from the ambulance, & each placed upon his coffin...and each one near an open grave.” Roberts noted that after a volley of shots: “The men at each end fell instantly; the one in the centre sat bolt upright a moment & then fell. All was over.”

Roberts' letter of July 3, 1863 to his father, recounted the details of their march and arrival in Gettysburg, where his regiment remained only one day--being ordered to move out as escort to railroad transports. In a brief letter of July 4, 1863 Roberts confirmed to his father news of the Union Army's victory at Gettysburg. In an August 11, 1863 letter to his sister, Roberts intimated that the army was again on the move, and shared the patriotic fervor expressed in many of his letters. Describing the arrival of draftees, Roberts contrasted his status as a volunteer with those forced into service: “It shall be my proudest boast through life that I was one of the original three years men in this great Army; neither belonging to the 9 mos or 2 yrs class, or the \$300 & gum blanket, or to the first or second class of drafted men.”

In the fall of 1863 Roberts moved west through West Virginia, Ohio, and then south to Tennessee to support the Army of the Cumberland. In his letter of October 1, 1863 Roberts attempted to capture the impressive beauty of the mountains in West Virginia, describing: “the gorgeous tints of autumn on the foliage, the blood red ivy winding around the ancestral oak, & the delicate yellow blending with the deep green; a clear sky & pleasant breeze over & about all.” Roberts noted also the powerful engine that pulled them to its heights: “The enormous coal burners they use on this road are curiosities in their way, and are strong enough to pull any sized train.” By November 23, 1863 Roberts had marched through Kentucky, Tennessee, then into Alabama in order to cross the Tennessee River to establish camp at Wauhatchie, Tennessee, near Lookout Mountain. Of this site, Roberts remarked:

“Today the whole army at Chattanooga, including Sherman’s force are in motion.” In the same letter Roberts composed a poem of seven verses, entitled “Peace.” Roberts’ December 1, 1863 letter to his father contains his account of the Battle on Lookout Mountain (which he compared to Wellington’s victory at “Waterloo”) and his Division’s part in the victory. “Up the mountain they went with wild cheers, & despite the difficulties of the position, & the resistance of the enemy they carried two lines of rifle pits, taking nearly 2000 prisoners & two pieces of cannon.”

Encamped in Bridgeport, Alabama following the Lookout Mountain victory, Roberts’ letters discussed his upcoming release from service, (he will send his father an “advertisement for a position in *Inquire*” in a letter of April 17<sup>th</sup>) as well as his views on the war, slavery, and political events. Writing on March 6, 1864 to his father, Roberts avowed his full endorsement of Abraham Lincoln’s nomination for the presidency, and his contempt for slavery, and those politicians, such as “Fernando Wood, Voohries of Indiana, Cox & Pugh of Ohio ‘et id omne genus,’ “ who failed to support the Union.” In a letter of April 21, 1864, Roberts displayed even greater rancor toward the rebels with news of the “butchery of our troops at Fort Pillow,” as well as “the making of rings & ornaments from the bones of our dead” and the report of “Dahlgren’s assassination.” His fury building, he continued: “Our colored soldiers must be protected, & the wretches who assassinate them after they are prisoners of war by that very act forfeit all claim to mercy.”

Roberts, having marched with his regiment to Georgia, reported in a letter of May 7, 1864 that they are part of “an immense army” under General Hooker’s command supporting General Sherman at Dalton. Roberts noted, in closing this letter, that his discharge date is July 6<sup>th</sup> with an expected arrival home by the first of August, adding beneath his signature: “I am 27 yrs of age to morrow.” Writing again on June 11, 1864, operating “28 miles from Atlanta,” Roberts quoted a prisoner who expressed the Confederate soldiers’ awe of (General) Sherman. “‘Sherman gets on the top of the highest hill, & gives his orders viz: ‘Attention—Whole Generation’—‘Right Wheel by Millions’ March!’ “ In this same letter Roberts noted he is among those “looking for their discharge every day,” and reported plans for his release from service: “We go to Harrisburg to be mustered out, & then for home.” Roberts noted also that when asked to remain beyond his discharge date, he gave his reply as an emphatic “NO.”

Roberts’ last letter, dated June 28, 1864, from Big Shanty, Georgia, reported camp conditions amidst the almost constant “cannonading & musketry firing for the last three weeks.” He then offered a detailed picture of the scene: “But fighting is such an every day matter now, that you can hear the bands playing nearly all the time right in the hottest of the fire. Men lie around playing cards, smoking or cooking their meals with the utmost nonchalance with the bullets & shell flying & bursting al around them. A man had the whole top of his head blown off by a shell, while eating his dinner yesterday.” Roberts concluded his letter determined to obtain release from his army service and to “not accept pay for any service after the 6<sup>th</sup> of July,” and reminded his family not to expect him before August 1. This last letter is signed--as were all letters to his parents-- “Your affectionate son ‘Will.’”