LETTER 13

(Henry S. Harmon [Herman?], Corporal, Co. B, 3rd USCI, Morris Island, South Carolina, October 23, 1863; CR, November 7, 1863) Fort Wagner finally fell to Union troops seven weeks after the famous charge of the 54th Massachusetts. Corporal Henry Harmon wrote that his Pennsylvania regiment, for digging trenches under intense enemy fire, deserved as much credit as the other regiments, such as the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, which had tried to storm the fort.

... If our friends of the city of Philadelphia could but look into our hospital and see the wasted frame of those who were but yesterday
noble specimens of manhood, the fear that we were forgotten would never again enter our mind, and if those persons could but receive a few cheering words from friends at home how their spirit would be elevated, their hopes revived. But instead they receive nothing but the rough sympathies from the rougher hands of their comrades in arms. How many careful housewives of our city have their many jars of preserves? I would ask you if they could not spare one to the care-worn and poor unfortunate soldiers in our hospitals. Now I would say to the male friends of our city, could they not spare some books and papers, and pipes or smoking tobacco, or something to cheer the heart of the poor unfortunate soldier, with soft hands to soothe his aching head, and food to satisfy his appetite. Hark! What sound is that we hear? It is the mournful sound of the muffled drum, and the slow tread of the soldiers as they carry some comrade in arms to his last resting place. His blue uniform is his shroud, and a rough pine coffin is the last we see of what was once our companion in arms. But I am proud to say that these are men who in the early part of their career, before sickness laid its heavy hands upon them, upheld the banner of the colored man in Pennsylvania.

Dear sir, we have taken Forts Wagner and Gregg, and you would ask how and by whom was it taken? By the soldiers of the gallant 3d Regiment of United States Colored Troops, backed by the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, and the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers [Colored], with spades and shovels dug up to the very parapet of the rebel fort under a heavy fire of grape and canister shell from rebel batteries Gregg, Wagner, Sumter, and James Island, Fort Johnson, and other batteries. In those trenches our men distinguished themselves for bravery and coolness, which required more nerve than the exciting bayonet charge. And, sir, I am proud to say that I am a member of the 3d United States Colored Troops, and I hope that I am not considered boasting when I say so. Our career has not been unmarked by loss of human life. We have had ten of our number killed and I cannot say exactly how many wounded; but it amounted to over twenty. When you hear of a white family that has lost father, husband, or brother, you can say of
the colored man, we too have borne our share of the burden. We too have suffered and died in defense of that starry banner which floats only over free men. . . . With our duties before us, and with a good leader such as we have in the gallant Colonel [Benjamin C.] Tilghman, formerly of the 26th Pennsylvania, who has left his luxurious home to aid in elevating our race; with a firm confidence in his abilities as a commander, we are ready to follow wherever he may lead us. He has three noble traits as a commander: justice, humanity, and firmness in all his orders to both officers and men. We expect some warm work here before long, but with the help of the God of battles, who knows the justice of our cause, we hope to go through without wavering, and though many of us must find graves in this land, I feel assured that the name of the colored soldier will stand out in bold relief among the heroes of this war. . . .
LETTER 61

(Milton Harris, Orderly Sergeant, Co. F, 25th USCI, Fort Redoubt, Florida, November 21, 1864; CR, December 17, 1864) Daily life at Fort Pickens and its outposts was usually quiet. That left time for the men to think about their living quarters, their health, their officers, and, for many, their education. Sergeant Milton Harris of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, tells in this letter
about his officers, “as good as [those of] any colored regiment that has come from the North.”

... The 25th is doing garrison duty now. Our regiment has three forts in charge – Redoubt, Barrancas, and Pekins [Pickens]. Pekins is the principal; Barrancas is the second in size, and Redoubt is the smallest. My company (F) and Company G hold Redoubt, and have nice and comfortable quarters, and we can keep ourselves clean and dry much better than in camp, where we have nothing but shelter tents.

We have had no picket duty to do, as yet, though there is some talk of our regiment being assigned to that important duty. The health of our regiment is getting quite good now. At one time nearly all of our men were sick. My company could not muster but seventeen men fit for duty, and some of the other companies could not muster as many.

We have not yet been in any engagement, with the exception of a part of our regiment, which was sent out on a scouting expedition, and who all returned safely. When the Johnny Rebs saw our boys, they skedaddled away so fast that they could not do much with them. They captured a few of the rebel cavalry. Everything is now quiet with us.

Our chaplain has done a great deal for us in many circumstances. When so many of our men were sick with the scurvy, he went to New Orleans, and got vegetables for us. Our men soon began to mend.

I must say that the 25th Regiment has been blessed with good officers – as good as any colored regiment that has come from the North. They take a deep interest in the boys of the 25th, and endeavor to make everything as pleasant and comfortable as possible. They are going to have a school for us in the fort. Capt. Wm. A. Prickett, of Co. G, has lately returned from New Orleans, with a
considerable number of books, for the benefit of our men, in the way of educating them. He has been furnishing them with books, so that a great many of them could learn to read and write. Some of them have improved a great deal by the teaching of the orderly sergeant of that company, Lewis Willis.

Captain Chester A. Greenleaf, of Co. F, is one who takes a deep interest in getting books for our men. He has already furnished quite a number.

Our regular school has not yet commenced. We expect to begin this week. I will tell you about it the next time I write.
(William B. Johnson, [Private,] Co. A, 3rd USCI, Jacksonville, Florida, July 27, 1865; CR, August 12, 1865) After a few weeks in Tallahassee, the 3rd USCI was sent back to Jacksonville. Despite the hostility of whites there, Private Johnson recalls some good things that happened back in Tallahassee.

... I will say now that few of the old soldiers who enlisted in the beginning of the war remain. Sickness has made a fearful havoc in this regiment.

I wrote to you some time ago that we were ordered to Tallahassee, the capital of the State of Florida. While there the men suffered – fevers raged throughout the camp, and out of 800 men, there were not 300 fit for active service. It being so unhealthy, we were ordered back to Jacksonville, and at present are commencing to improve.

Tallahassee is quite an extensive place, being laid out something like Burlington, N.J. The people of color were glad to see us, and cheer after cheer rent the air as we marched through the principal streets, led by the gallant Brevet Brigadier General B[enjamin] G. Tilghman, with colors flying and our band playing (John Brown’s marching on.) The would-be rebels looked on in silence, not daring to speak above a whisper. Gen. [Robert] McCook’s battery had taken possession of the town two weeks before we came. I will here state that these men are all from Kentucky, and although they wear the uniform of Uncle Sam, some of them are base traitors. The way they treated our colored people was shameful. We soon showed them that we came for justice. Justice we wanted, and justice we would have. The leading men of the rebellion showed signs of resistance, and ventured to look upon the nigger soldiers, as they
called us, but when Gen. McCook and staff came and witnessed our dress parade, and remarked that our men were well drilled, and in fact looked as well as any soldier he ever saw, they changed colors, and every day after 5 o’clock, P.M., the parade ground was covered with spectators. We had to keep a guard to keep off the crowd. When we left, many remarked that they were sorry we had to leave, and many colored families followed.

Lake City is the next place that we will inspect. The town is small, and you can ride around it in two hours time. The inhabitants were inclined to be civil and most of them did all they could for me. One particular and interesting feature in Lake City: the road about a mile from town, where the rebels drove the Blacks into, in the summer of ’64, to keep our scouts from bring them to our lines. Many lost their lives in this way; but thank God they had their time, and now comes ours. By good behavior, we will show them that we are men, and able to fill any position in life that we are placed in. There is only one thing I want; that is my vote; let us see what time will do.
(H. S. Harmon [Herman?], [Private,] Co. B, 3d USCI, Gainesville, Florida, [October 1865]; CR, October 21, 1865) Private Harmon, like many other African-American soldiers, discovered that when the shooting ended, his white officers revealed their racism. When the war was still being fought, those officers had urged their men to forget the old insults and oppressions and join the common struggle against the Confederacy. But now, with the war over for six months, those white officers had more in common with the white Southerners than with their own black soldiers.

. . . Since the surrender of the troops in Florida by General Samuel Jones and during the actual existence of the Rebellion, we have been told by our commanding officers on the eve of battle to forget
old grudges and prejudices, and fight like men for a common cause, meaning for us not to let the unjust and cruel treatment of the officers to the men influence us to a disregard for our duty to our common country. But now there is nothing of the kind to fear, the officers feeling that they have nothing now to fear from stray bullets, are exercising all the arrogance and despotism that their power gives them, and what appeals has an enlisted man if he applies for redress to a superior officer? It can only be endorsed through the officer who is his worst enemy, whose endorsement will be, as a matter of course, the most detrimental to the interest of the soldier. Now we have the tying up by the thumbs of which Mr. Green speaks, on the public streets of the town, and what is called riding the horse, which is two upright posts set in the ground, fully seven feet high, and a three-cornered cross beam, on which the men are compelled to sit astride, and other punishment, which even these people, both white and black, are horrified at witnessing, used to slavery and its horrors as they all are. And for what? Because some of those stanch Union men, many of whom wear the uniform of the so-called Confederacy, and have not to this day taken the oath of allegiance: but their word is sufficient to condemn any amount of colored soldiers, or citizens, for even citizens feel the effect of that most prevalent and baleful disease, negrophobia. Negro citizens, although they have been the only true and avowed friends of the United States Government in this section of the country, are still compelled to feel that they are black, and the smooth oily tongue of the white planter is enough to condemn any number of them to a tying-up for twenty-four hours, or two hours up and one down.

Such, my friends, is what we endure or witness, and if the United States Government ever gets five-year men she will not get them from the veteran 3d Regt. U.S.C.T., until she is compelled to give us officers of our own choice, who will be officers and gentlemen. Officers who can sympathize with the enlisted man without regard to color; men who will take into consideration a man’s former conduct, before punishment. . . .
(Henry Carpenter Hoyle, [Private,] Co. F, 43d USCI, Brownsville, Texas, August 28, 1865; CR, September 25, 1865) Occupation duty in Texas gave the soldiers time to think about the changes that had come in the past two years: emancipation, enlistment, and fighting for the Union. It also gave Private Henry Hoyle an opportunity to think about what he wanted next: the right to vote and a trip home to Philadelphia.

The question has often been asked, What benefit has the colored soldier been to the Government? I will try, if possible, to answer this question. In the first place, there have been few deserters and bounty-jumpers among them. Second, the colored troops can stand more fatigue than the others. Third, they can make more desperate charges, build breastworks more briskly, and stand heavier assaults than white troops. We are sorry to say that we have seen several [whites] who called themselves old veterans skulking and hiding in the woods, when they ought to have been with their regiment, fighting for the country. Nothing is more contemptible than to see a soldier shrinking from duty in the hour of danger.

And such men we find ready to condemn the colored troops. But we know of what value we have been to the Government, and I guess our officers know our bravery, and of what metal we are. And we defy any one to dispute our rights as soldiers and men.

I hope, when the colored soldiers arrive at home, they will disappoint the expectations of the copperheads, who predict that they will be riotous. But may we be an honor to our race, and may our future conduct be such as to please a most noble and generous
public. We want the right of suffrage, that we may be free and equal as other men.

It is reasonable to suppose that the same God who made the white man made the African. We have proved true and trustworthy to the Government. We have, it is true, been subjected to some cruel treatment at the hands of some of our officers, but, as Gen. [Benjamin] Butler remarks, let by-gones be by-gones. Let us study our present and future condition, and not study to do any man harm, but let us strive to do good unto all men.

God has willed it, that he has taken our beloved father, Abraham Lincoln, from us. But although dead, yet he lives. He brought liberty to the slaves, both North and South, and gave us in the North the freedom of speech in a proper manner, and I have no doubt we will get our rights as men and citizens of the United States. Let us not care for man as long as God is on our side. He will be true to His promises. "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God." She has partly done so already, and God has given liberty and freedom to the slave. Let her continue to call upon God, and He will raise us to our rightful and proper place among the nations of the earth.

Thank God! we are now free! No more will the torturing whip be inflicted on gray-headed fathers and mothers. No more will families be torn asunder and sold as cattle. Those dark days are past, and bright laurels attend us. May God grant us a safe return and bring us up out of Texas, for we have great trials and tribulations to go through. May we soon return to our quiet homes and enjoy the sweet comforts of life. God has brought us safely through the hottest of the raging battle, and He will stand by us while passing the scorching sun of Texas. . . .
LETTER 97

(William P. Woodlin, Musician, 8th USCI, Petersburg, Virginia, April 28, 1865; CR, July 22, 1865) Education clearly had a priority among African Americans. Because many white public schools kept out blacks, they started their own schools wherever possible.
In 1863, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (which published the *Christian Recorder*) took over Wilberforce College, in Ohio, the first college to be run by African Americans. The Church issued an urgent appeal for money to keep Wilberforce open. As this letter from Virginia shows, black soldiers responded openly to support the black college.

The appeal of the Trustees of the Wilberforce University for aid, in the columns of the *Recorder*, suggested the idea to a friend of our race of the following collection; and I, as the agent, am happy to state that the men of the regiment representing at least ten different States, have responded to my solicitations with alacrity, and I am enabled to present you, as the result of my labors, the sum of $241, which, if too late for a redemption fund, we desire to be placed in the endowment. The great changes which are now so rapidly molding the public mind have brought us to realize the necessity of intellectual improvement to a much greater degree than ever before. We wish, therefore, to show our interest practically now, so that in days to come posterity may enjoy it. It may be of some interest to you to know that this money was collected on the march after General Lee, from Petersburg to Appomattox Court House, and some of it the day after his surrender....
LETTER 116

(B. W., [Private,] 32nd USCI, Morris Island, South Carolina, July 8, 1864; CR, July 30, 1864) Some units were especially oppressed by racist officers. The 32nd USCI was one of these. Even after complaints about heavy duty and hard conditions are discounted as the usual "soldier gripes," it is clear that the men of the 32nd were badly treated because of their race. In addition, the officers seemed generally incompetent in military matters. Several soldiers from the 32nd USCI wrote letters that gave a consistent picture of mistreatment by officers who objected to any efforts of the men to assert their pride. This letter is probably from Benjamin Williams, a nineteen-year-old private from Philadelphia, who at the time this was written was under arrest for unknown charges but was still in camp with his regiment.

... We arrived at Sea Brook, eight miles up the creek, west of Hilton Head [South Carolina]. There we were ordered to encamp. We stayed there one week. We had nothing to eat but oysters and five hard tacks a day, that we picked up along the shore. As usual, after we had fixed up our camp so nicely, order came for us to strike tents and march, which was promptly executed. We marched back to Hilton Head and took the steamer Cosmopolitan, and reported at Folly Island, and marched to Morris Island, where we are still in camp near Fort Shaw. We are encamped on the old hospital ground, where they buried all their dead. We had to dig wells in the graveyard, and drink the water off the putrid bodies, and it is killing our men.

The health of the men in general, is as well as can be expected. We have lost ten men since our departure, and among the brave hearts was that of Jesse Dexter, the Quartermaster Sergeant, who leaves a wife and child to mourn his loss.

The paymaster has made us a visit, and offered us seven dollars
Racism in the Army

a month, which all of the men refused, except a few in the left wing, who sneaked up at night and signed the pay roll; but the majority of the men would sooner stay their time out and do without the seven dollars. Our officers seem very much put out, and beg the men to take it. They said that the next day we would get all that is coming to us, and said, "Boys, we think that you had better take the money." But we told them that it was a big thing on ice, but we could not see it; and, after the officers found out that the men would not take the seven dollars, they began to treat those men like dogs. The least thing that the men would do, they were bucked and gagged, and put on knapsack drill, and made to stand in the hot, broiling sun for four hours at a stretch; in consequence of which, a few of the men got sunstruck.

We have drills and dress-parades and battalion drills, which none of our officers know anything about. When they are ordered by a command, they don't know how to do it. One night we went out on picket duty. Every thing went on well all through the night, and in the morning, when the pickets were taken off, the rebels began to shell and cross-fire. Our brave officers sent the men on ahead and they stayed behind, because they were afraid of the rebels' shells, and, when they came down to camp they were under arrest for their cowardice. The officer in command told them that they had not as much heart as their men had, and that the regiment would be better drilled if they had the officers to command them, but they had not an officer in the regiment that knew his business and knew how to do his duty, and that the regiment was hardly worth the rations that they drew. And there is our drum-corps, that we brought with us from Philadelphia. They have not got their uniforms yet, and they are the worst corps on the island. They are laughed at and sneered at by all the other regiments. We know it is not the fault of the drum-major. It is the fault of the commanding officers. The General says that if we were to go into the field with such officers as we now have, we would all get cut to pieces, and that there is no use taking us into action until our officers have learned a little more.
Mr. Editor, it looks hard that a party of men should treat colored men in this way. There is our gentlemanly doctor. He is a very nice man, indeed. He has not got any medicine fit to give the men. If they get very sick in their quarters, the doctor will order them brought to the hospital where they will not be more than twenty-four hours before they are dead. That is the way the men are served. Dr. [Charles] Wight growls and snaps at the men as if they were dogs, and he says, if the men are not fit for duty, send them to him and he will soon get them out of the way, for he says it is no harm to kill a nigger.

When the regiment first encamped here, we were treated more like soldiers; but as soon as we refused to take seven dollars a month, they commenced to treat us like dogs. Before the Paymaster came around, there was not anything like bucking and gagging; but as soon as we refused to take the pay, they commenced. They even bucked and gagged a boy because he happened not to have the seat of his pants sewed up for inspection. It was impossible for him to sew them up, as he had no money to buy a needle and thread with.

Now, Mr. Editor, don’t you think this is bad treatment for a Pennsylvania regiment to get? I think it is ridiculous and a shame before God and man. There was not a group that left Camp William Penn with such a set of officers as the Thirty-second United States Colored Troops. Look at the Forty-third Regiment United States Colored Troops, which was raised after we were. They have been brigaded and are now acting as rear-guard over the baggage train of the Army of the Potomac, whilst we are not fit for anything but to do all of the picket duty and drudgery work on the island; and we don’t get our rations as we ought to. All the rations that are condemned by the white troops are sent to our regiment. You ought to see the hard tack that we have to eat. They are moldy and musty and full of worms, and not fit for a dog to eat, and the rice and beans and peas are musty and the salt horse (the salt beef, I mean) is so salt that, after it is cooked, we can’t eat it. Some days the men are sent on fatigue in the hot sun, and when
they come home to dinner, there is nothing to eat but rotten hard
tack and flat coffee, without sugar in it.

Now, Mr. Editor, if this is not killing men, I don't know what is.
There is one thing that I had almost forgotten. It is concerning the
Sergeant-Major of the regiment. He made his boasts and went
around bragging to the men in camp that he would not take seven
dollars a month; and before he would take it he would stay out his
three years and do without it, and he hoped that no man in the
regiment would take it. But when the paymaster came, he changed
his tune, and signed his name to the pay roll, and took the seven
dollars. The next day he looked like a man that had done some great
deed. Only look at it, he holding the highest non-commissioned
office that a colored man can hold. We would not think so hard of it if
he had been a private. He is one of your Philadelphia sports, and
bears the title of Sergeant-Major George W. Clemens. ...
(“Observer,” 22nd USCI, Chapel Point, Maryland, May 13, 1865; CR, May 27, 1865) General Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts was one of the first generals to employ black soldiers for combat. He believed they were brave fighters, and he gave them every opportunity to show their qualities in the fighting around Petersburg and Richmond, Virginia, in 1864. Butler was dismissed from his command, however, when he failed to attack vigorously in December 1864. Black soldiers were sorry to see him leave, because he had helped them struggle against racism. In this letter, “Observer” describes the harsh treatment given a black soldier who tried to march in the funeral parade for Abraham Lincoln. If General Butler had been in charge, “Observer” writes, such incidents would not have happened.

Allow me, through the columns of your most worthy paper, to address you in behalf of wronged and mistreated men – men who, for the love of God and their country, have sacrificed the pleasures of home and friends, and have met the enemy face to face, and driven them from their strongholds – men who have charged up to the very mouths of cannon that were incessantly belching from their iron stomachs a perfect shower of grape and canister, sweeping down whole platoons at every discharge, and scattering death and destruction around broadcast, as the sower cast the bright grain around him!
Let me ask you, patriotic people of America, should such men as these be beaten to the ground with swords in the hands of foul-hearted, craven, red-taped humbugs? They deserve not the name of officers.

Private Burke, Co. D, of this regiment, who has been sick for some time in the Hospital, after leaving that Institution, was detached from this command, where he remained until we were all ordered to Washington to participate in the funeral-procession of our late lamented President, by way of respect to the memory of the illustrious departed.

Not being properly drilled, and being perhaps a little awkward in his movements, this devoted soldier of the United States army was struck senseless and bleeding to the ground with a tremendous blow from a sword in the hand of an arrant coward and brute, his Company commander. How long is this to be endured? How long must the Government strain at gnats and swallow camels? How we long for the presence of that noble patriot and true soldier, who, for no other reason than his unwillingness to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of his true and trusty followers, was relieved of his command – bold and faithful BEN. BUTLER, who never shrank from a soldier’s duty, and always avoided useless slaughter.

With such a man for commander, brutality like that which we have described would find instantaneous redress, and the perpetrator be fitly punished. To complain in the present instance would be deemed insubordination. How inconsistent to laud the brave soldier as a hero, and yet kick him like a dog! Butler’s name will ever live in the hearts of his countrymen.