Guide to the Letters of James W. Vanderhoef

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Descriptive Summary

Creator: James W. Vanderhoef
Title: Letters of James W. Vanderhoef
Date Span: 1854-1866
Abstract: Thirty-two handwritten letters and 3 poetry manuscripts arranged into four series, with additional supplemental materials compiled by the repository.
Series I: Pre-Civil War Letters
Series II: Civil War Letters and Papers
Series III: Post-Civil War Letters
Series IV: Undated items
Supplemental materials: transcriptions of letters and census and military documents
Quantity: 1 document box
Location: Map Room 6.3
Repository: Brooklyn Public Library – Brooklyn Collection
Reference Code: BC0105

Biographical History

Sources of information on the life of the author of these letters are few. His appearances in census records are only occasional; military records provide a richer lode, but they stop around 1866; and City Directories yield but little information. For some events, the letters themselves provide our only source to date.

James Wilson Vanderhoef was born around 1837 in New York, to Peter S. and Mary Vanderhoef. Peter S. Vanderhoef was born in New Jersey around 1795 and served in the 1st Reg’t. (Dodd’s) NJ Militia in the War of 1812 in the rank of Private. Peter is listed in the 1850 census and in the Williamsburgh directories as a “carrier” or “Letter carrier.” In 1853-4 the family lived at 511 Grand St, moving to 62 Eighth St (Eastern District) by 1856. In one of the final letters dated 1865 Peter is reported as having died. Mary Vanderhoef too was of New Jersey origin. The family included a daughter, Caroline born around 1840, and the married sister, Mary Ann (Molly) Guillan, to whom the letters are addressed.
James, too, entered early upon a military career. Described as 5 ft 7 inches tall, with fair hair, a light complexion and blue eyes, at the age of 16 he enlisted as a musician, joining the N.Y 1st Artillery Reg't, Co. B, during the War with Mexico.

On 6 Sept. 1861 he re-enlisted for a period of three years “or war” with the 45th Reg’t (German Rifles) N.Y.S.V. at the rank of 1st Sergeant. The regiment saw action in several battles, including Cross Keys, 2nd Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, after which 224 men were reported dead or missing.

On 24 Apr. 1862 Vanderhoef was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant and then again to 1st Lieutenant on Sept 1 of that year. On May 11, 1863 he was promoted to Captain, Co. E. It was at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1st, 1863 that he was captured and taken prisoner, being held at Libby Prison and other camps. According to the Regimental Descriptive Book, he was returned to his regiment in an exchange on May 13th, 1865.

A note dated 1892 confirms that from June 8, 1863 to June 30, 1865 Vanderhoef held the rank of Captain, after which the position ceased to exist “by reason of the consolidation of the 45 and 58 NY Vols.” A report of May 16th 1865, a few days after the exchange, reports him “sick.”

Yet another Register of Enlistments places Vanderhoef back in uniform as of Nov 13, 1866, when he signed up under a Capt. Quimby for a further three years in the regular army. By this time he is 30, a seasoned soldier—and according to his letters, a married man, having at last married his “pett” Jenny (a marriage apparently disapproved of by some of his friends.) Yet, according to the record, and despite this hopeful start, the future that Vanderhoef imagined in one of his letters as a Commissioned Officer in the Regular Army, seems not to have come to pass. The record seems to speak of a desertion, on Feb 3, 1867. And indeed, by the time of the 1870 census he has, perhaps even literally, gone underground; for there is a James Vanderhoef age 32—very possibly our author—born in New York, residing in Little Cottonwood, in the Salt Lake territory of Utah, occupation described as “works in mines.”

To date we have no further information.

Scope and Content
The collection consists of thirty-one letters by written by James W. Vanderhoef and addressed to his older sister, Mary Ann Guillan (born c. 1832) who resided at various addresses in Williamsburg. There is also one letter by another family member (William W. Vanderhoef) of Leipsic, Delaware; three m.s. poems which may or may not be original to the writer; and other documents pertaining to Vanderhoef’s imprisonment.

Most of the letters date from the Civil War period and provide a vivid example of the swift promotions possible in time of war. Vanderhoef and the 45th N.Y.S.V. fought in numerous battles, including 1st Bull Run, July 21st 1861, and one letter or journal page written from the battlefield there gives a detailed account of troop movements.

There are many inquiries after family and sometimes obscure discussions of family affairs. In spite of the years of imprisonment, Vanderhoef’s story as revealed in his writing is one of ambition fulfilled, of steady advancement as the reward for steadfast character. It is unfortunate for us that the correspondence did not continue far into the postwar years.
Restrictions

Access Restrictions
Collection is located in the Brooklyn Collection at the Central Branch at Grand Army Plaza. The collection may only be used in the library and is not available through interlibrary loan. Requests to view the collection must be made at least 48 hours in advance of visit.

Use Restrictions
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Access Points

Subject Topics:
Soldiers—New York (State)—Biography
United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Regimental Histories
United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Personal Narratives

Administrative Information

Provenance By purchase.

Preferred Citation
This collection should be cited as the Letters of James W. Vanderhoef, Brooklyn Public Library – Brooklyn Collection.

Related Materials

Available at the Brooklyn Collection:
The Brooklyn Collection holds numerous items relating to Brooklyn in the Civil War: http://bit.ly/HNVRHE
See also BAF files, History—Civil War

Available at other Brooklyn Public Library locations:
Brooklyn in the Civil War Web Site: http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/

Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Library holds a rich collection of books and pamphlets on the Civil War: http://bit.ly/HIrt1J

A brief history of the 45th Regiment NYSV can be found here: http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/45thInf/45thInfMain.htm
A timeline of the 45th Regiment is here:
http://www.civilwarintheeast.com/USA/NY/NY045.php

Arrangement
The collection is arranged chronologically, in four series – Series I: Pre-Civil War Letters, Series II: Civil War Letters and Papers, Series III: Post-Civil War Letters, and Series IV: Undated materials. Supplemental materials gathered by the repository, including transcriptions of the Vanderhoef letters, can be found in folders 5 and 6.

Series I: Pre-Civil War Letters
Folder 1
Written from Fort Monroe, VA, these letters date from the period of Vanderhoef’s first enlistment at the age of 16 as a musician with Co. B, 1st Artillery. Mainly consisting of inquiries after the health of various family members and protestations of eternal friendship, they nevertheless provide moments of interest. He thinks he might have his photograph taken; the soldiers must collect rainwater in barrels, for every well they sink is salty, and he now likes this rainwater “better than Croton water.” Fishing for striped bass provides good sport; and in one letter (Dec 20th 1855) Vanderhoef bursts with indignation, having heard that his father is homeless and penniless and no one in the family has taken him in.

July 30, 1854
Nov 10, 1854
Mar 13, 1855
Apr 7, 1855
May 19, 1855
Nov 2, 1855
Dec 20, 1855
Dec 27, 1855
Jun 16, 1856
Jul 31, 1856

Series II: Civil War Period Letters and papers
Folder 2
Written from various points in the South, the Civil War period letters provide first hand information on the movements and activities of the 71st NY Regiment.

May 1, 1861 Washington Navy Yard. Describes journey from New York to Annapolis, and writes of the hardships of the 36 hour march to Washington, where the company expected an attack. Various NY regiments are expected momentarily. James is with 30 other boys from Williamsburgh so he is “not a lone.” Co H, 71st Regt.

May 10, 1861 Washington Navy Yard. Says the Regiment was reviewed by the President and Mr Seward last evening. Co. H, 71st Regt.


Oct 1, 1862 Camp near Centerville, V A. Lieut Co F 45 Regt N.Y.V.

Oct 14, 1862 HQ 45th Regt. NYSV Camp Amsberg, Centerville. Long explanation of a misunderstanding which resulted in the Vanderhoef’s likeness (photograph) being “smashed to flinders on the sidewalk” by one Jane, whose feelings “must have been offaly hurt.”
Nov 4, 1862 Gainsville, VA. Writes that the Union Army has advanced, and he is promoted to 1st Lieutenant. Of Co. “I.”

Jan 10, 1863 HQ Co “D” 45th Regt NYSV, Camp at Stafford Court House, VA. Family news and requests. “No ink handy. And not a stamp in camp to be got for love or money.”

Jan 31, 1863 Camp near Potomac Creek Station VA. James writes that his company marched around for two weeks until a 15 inch snowfall prevented further movements. Pay is five months overdue.

Feb 9, 1863 HQ Co. “D”, 45th Regt NYSV, Camp at Potomac Creek Station, VA. Brief note. Vanderhoef is in good health and hopes for a furlough.

Feb 19, 1863 HQ Co. “D” 45th Regt NYSV Camp at Potomac Creek Station VA. Plans a surprise visit to NY.

Feb 21, 1863 Potomac Creek Bridge VA Plans to be home around March 18th. The following day being Washington’s Birthday, a grand review of troops by General Hooker is planned.

Mar 8, 1863 Camp 45 Regt NY Vol. The promised visit is put off until March 20.

Apr 25, 1863 Annapolis, MD. Wonders why Jennie does not answer his letters.

May 17 1863 Camp near Stafford C. Such is the demand for his photograph that Vanderhoef has had to send for more copies of it. Writes of the “loss our Regiment had in the seven days fight over the Rappahannock” with detailed description of the battle. 1st Lieut Co “D” 45 Regt NY Vol. Mentions as PS that the Regiment is transferred from 1st brigade 1st Division to 1st Brigade 3rd Division.

Jun 7, 1863 Poem, Oh wipe away the tear drops from thine eyes…

Jun 11, 1863 Announces promotion to Capt., Co. “E.” “It is a good company and I can depend on them in action.” Describes 18-month trajectory from Private up the ranks to Captain.

Nov 11, 1863 Adams Express Co New York receipt for one package addressed to Capt J.W. vanderhoef, 45 NYV, Libby prison Richmond.

Feb 14, 1864 (Libby Prison) A letter containing only 6 lines as per prison regulations.

March 27, 1864 (Libby Prison) Writes that he has received only one letter from his sister since December; and hope to be home in April for twenty days. Unfortunately silent on details of life in Libby prison.

Oct 13, 1864 (Columbia S.C.) Complains that he has heard nothing of family and friends since April 27th. Has been moved from Charleston to a prison encampment in Columbia with good water supply.

Jan 23, 1865 War Department notice in reply to enquiry from family, stating that Vanderhoef is “Prisoner of War.”

Series III: Post Civil War letters
Folder 3
Jun 27, 1865 Stevenson, Alabama. Announces that he has married Jennie in spite of the disapproval of friends. However the young couple have no money as Vanderhoef is owed $560 by the paymaster. He has been suffering from dysentery, and bemoans his unhappy lot and that of his sister; their father has recently died.

Dec 2, 1866 Fort Wood, Bedloe’s Island. Writes that since enlistment he has been so busy making out company papers and looking after things that he has hardly had time to eat or sleep. Passed exam for first Seargeant with no trouble and hope to be put forward for a commission in the regular army. Expects to go to Texas before Dec 20th. Writes that as First Sergeant he is given board, clothing, medical attendance and $24 a month.

Dec 28, 1866 On board steamer Rising Star 1,800 miles from New York. Writes that the ship will be in Aspenwall the next day, and will start for San Francisco in the evening, “a distance of 3,300 miles.”

Series IV: Undated items
Folder 4
Letter of William W. Vanderhoef, Sep 24, 1855
Two poems, undated: Lord Ullin’s Daughter; Purity.

Supplemental Materials
Folder 5
Transcriptions of letters

Folder 6
Copies of census and military records relating to James W. Vanderhoef