

Letters to an Iowa Lawyer, 1855-1870

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In 1855 the Hamilton Law School was incorporated at Hamilton College, Clinton, Oneida County, New York, with Theodore William Dwight, Maynard Professor of Law, History, Civil Polity, and Political Economy, elected as its head.¹ Professor Dwight, a year later, wrote a commendatory letter quietly praising the aptitude and performance of one of the school's first graduates, Ray Burdett Griffin.² Graduating in a class of eleven members, Mr. Griffin, at the age of twenty, left New York for Iowa, where at Manchester in 1857 he established a law practice and engaged in the buying and selling of real estate.

The lure which attracted Ray Griffin to the study of law at Hamilton College, and influenced his subsequent decision to practice his profession in Iowa, seems to have been set forth by one of his five brothers, James Edwin Griffin. James, already a liberal arts student at the college, and a quite outspoken opponent of the recently-created Republican party, wrote from Hamilton College to his brother on October 21, 1855:

. . . You say that the Republican Party is very strong in some parts of your State. I regret it very much. I hope you will bring what little influence you have to bear upon it and endeavor to expose to the people their *hypocrisy*. We debate the question in the [Union²] Society next Wednesday evening Whether we should support the Republican Party or not. I shall endeavor on that occasion to show up some of their fallacious and hypocritical doctrines without principles or even a shadow entitled to support.

You wanted I should send you the course of studies they pursued here in the Law Class. I called upon Prof Dwight last night and obtained

¹ H. W. Howard Knott, "Theodore William Dwight," *Dictionary of American Biography*, V (1930), 571-573.

² Letter from Theodore W. Dwight, State of New York, Hamilton College, November 18, 1856.

them. The order is as follows: Blackstone, Kent, Chitty on Contracts Cruise's Digest of Real Estate, Greenleaf's on Evidence first Vol. Pleading and Practice. This comprehends the course for the four terms. The tuition is \$20.00 per term. He, for this, furnishes you all the textbooks except Kent, which every student should possess as his own. He said he would wait on you until convenient for the tuition. Board is some \$2.00 per week, besides lights and fuel and also a room. There are some thirteen weeks in a term. If you should enter now you would get through by a year from next January. Then you would be prepared to go into an office and do a vast amount more of business than you would if you studied in a lawyers office only before you were admitted. Here you are drilled on the principles of law. In the other case you are confined more to particular cases. Prof. D. says you will do in three or four years do [sic] enough more to make it all up, and you [your] future prospects of success increased more than ten fold. John Brayton, who was at Whitestone, went to Iowa, I think last spring and has sent a paper to Prof. Dwight showing the Calendar of 42 cases carried up of which he was engaged in 35 of them. When here he was not considered to be of more than ordinary talent. Numerous other cases might be mentioned showing the superb advantage of a thorough course at a law school over the smattering law that you would obtain in a lawyers office. I think by all means and so does the Prof that you had better go through with a course here than attempt to be admitted in that state without. You have a plenty of time even if it takes you longer. than you expected. If you cannot commence now try to commence next Jan or in the spring. Write soon. Yours with respect. J. E. Griffin to R. B. G.³

James Griffin's letters written from Hamilton College, in addition to the above letter, include many colorful comments on Freemonters, Buchananites, Know-Nothings, and Republicans. His later letters written from Aledo, Illinois, where he taught school following his graduation from Hamilton College, and from New Boston, Illinois, where he practiced law for many years, contain most incisive views on Copperheads, Spiritualists, greenbacks, Free Love Associations, Democrats, the gold standard, Stephen A. Douglas, Negro slavery, and Republicans.

Unlike their younger brothers, Marion and Nathan, neither Ray nor James Griffin entered military service during the Civil War. Fortunately many of the letters from Marion relating his war experiences survive. Representative among the letters which he wrote from Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Alabama, while serving as a Second Sergeant in Company F, Twenty-First Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regi-

³ Letter from James Edwin Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, October 21, 1855.

ment,⁴ is the following letter describing the siege preparations before Spanish Fort, Alabama:

13th A.C.
Camp Pioneer Company 1st Div.
In the Field Mch 30th 1865

Ray

Since I last wrote you the entire Army moved forward, the 16" A.C. moved on a road to the right and the 13" Corps straight forward, skirmishing began 3 miles from Fish River Landing and continued until the evening of the 26" when our Army camped about 1½ mile from their works, and on the 27" our whole line advanced and gradually drove their skirmishers into their entrenchments they (the Rebels) not feeling disposed to come out and give us battle outside their works on the eve of the 27" Battery after Battery was brought into position to bear upon their works, and on the 28" Inst we commenced throwing up temporary works to cover our sharp Shooters our advanced line is within about 350 yds of the Rebel Forts. the principal Fort is generally known as Spanish Fort erected to command the channel, they also have two other Forts on the left connected by Rifle Pits, they are undoubtedly waiting for the *Feds* to charge the works, but they will wait in vain our Fleet is within about 1½ miles from the Fort and is gradually advancing, they being obliged to feel their way as obstructions has been placed along the channel to prevent our Boats from engaging the Fort, Rebel deserters report from 5 to 10000 in the vicinity their transportation by water is unlimited as their transports come down daily from Mobile (which via we have a good view of the City,) it is quite annoying to hear their old wooden Crafts blow their whistle of defiance and steam around as though they were the heaviest Ironsides, there will be a change of the program as soon as the Fleet can remove the torpedoes, they have sunk torpedoe after torpedoe along the principal roads leading to the Fort occasionally one is sprung doing little damage, a landing has been secured about 2 miles below here on the Bay which will form our base of supplies heavy ordnance are being unloaded and planted to bear upon the Forts we will make a *young Hell for them* then at 3 or 4 days hence Last night they came out about 200 strong crept up to our lines where we had a large fatigue squad planting a Battery but they were foiled at their attempt as they approached within about 100 yds our pickets *smelled mice* and fell back to the Re-

⁴ See George Crooke (comp.), *The Twenty-First Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry* (Milwaukee, Wis.: King, Fowle & Co., 1891), 197, and Iowa. Adjutant General's Office. *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, Iowa: Emory H. English, 1910), III, 491. Marion E. Griffin enlisted as a Private, Company F, Twenty-First Iowa Volunteer Regiment, from Epworth, Iowa, August 21, 1862, age 18, was promoted to Second Sergeant, September 13, 1862, and served until July 15, 1865; he was mustered out at Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

serve and when they approached our Boys poured in a volley that sent them back skiddating, it caused an alarm that called our Div into line could hear Col Van's Commands plain and distinct we [] are camped about ½ mile in the rear of the line of Battle

As soon as their communication by water is cut off they are gone up as Genl Smiths Right Wing rests upon the Bay between the Fort and Blakely Genl Grangers right connect with Genl Smith's left and his (Genl Grangers) left restes upon the Bay the storming of their works at this place will never come off as it would be like leading men to the slaughter pen, Maj Genl ERSCanby is sharing the hardships with his command he taking a dog tent for his quarters, uses the Mother Earth for a Sofa and eats *Hard tack like any one*.

With love and kind regards to all I will close write when convenient telling news etc.

Your Affectionate Brother.⁵
M.E.G.

It appears that Marion Griffin did not take part in the final capture of Spanish Fort as the Twenty-First Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment was withdrawn from the siege on March 30, 1865, the day this letter was written, to escort a supply train for Major General Frederick Steele, in command of the Column from Pensacola Bay, Florida, and proceeded to Holyoke Mills.⁶ Spanish Fort was captured on April 8, 1865, about midnight, by the forces of the Sixteenth Army Corps, commanded by Major General Andrew J. Smith.⁷

Six nights later, on April 14, 1865, in Washington, D.C. at Ford's Theatre, the stage actor, John Wilkes Booth, shot and fatally wounded President Abraham Lincoln. Marion Griffin's letter of April 21, 1865, reports the length of time it took the news to reach the soldiery and the confusion which surrounded the murder:

This evening brings sad intelligence to us (Soldiers) that is the murdering of President Lincoln and Wm Seward it fairly makes a soldiers blood run cold to think of such an atrocious deed, Southern Chivalry personified but . . . we have the Confederacy gaited, that is one Consolation

I sincerely hope that it may prove to be a ruse and not a fact . . .⁸

⁵ Letter from Marion E. Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, [Spanish Fort, Alabama], March 30, 1865.

⁶ See "Report of Lieutenant Colonel Salue G. Van Anda, Twenty-First Iowa Infantry, of Operations March 17-April 13," in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), ser. I, vol. XLIX, pt. I, 167.

⁷ See "Report of Major General Andrew J. Smith, U.S. Army commanding Sixteenth Army Corps, of Operations March 25-April 9," *ibid.*, 229.

⁸ Letter from Marion E. Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Mobile, Alabama, April 21, 1865.

A considerable number of the letters written to Ray Griffin bring together a picture of Abraham Lincoln in the minds of the people. Uriah Copp, Jr., a member of Ray Griffin's graduating law class at Hamilton College, and later unsuccessful Prohibition Party candidate for Governor of Illinois in 1880,⁹ finds amusing the idea of nominating for President of the United States, a second-rate lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, who frequently appears in court with one pants leg tucked in his boot and who uses the table as a footstool.¹⁰ Frank Bastillo, located at the corner of Terpsichore and Front Levee Streets, New Orleans, expresses incredulity that a single man, Abraham Lincoln, can wield such power as to put into effect so monstrous an instrument as the Emancipation Proclamation. Since its issuance, he reports, the death rate of freed Negroes, from lack of nourishment, is as high as five a day and he longingly remembers those peaceful times past when his slaves were well-fed and properly respectful.¹¹ Leander Keyes, Ray Griffin's brother-in-law, relates the whipping to death of a man in Virginia City, Nevada, on April 16, 1865, immediately following the receipt of the news of Lincoln's assassination in Nevada, for saying publicly that Lincoln should have been killed four years ago, and then refusing to retract his words.¹² Other letters reinforce or contradict these views, attesting to the effect Abraham Lincoln had on a nation and people.

After his discharge, in 1863, from the Seventeenth Illinois Infantry Regiment,¹³ Nathan Tyler Griffin, the second of the brothers to serve in the Civil War, and a photographer by profession, remained in Jackson and Vicksburg, Mississippi, taking pictures. While none of his photographs of these areas survive, his letters to his brother Ray provide interesting close-ups of the South in the last months of the War.

⁹ See Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Story of Illinois* (Chicago, Ill.: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1925), 375; and D. W. Lusk, *Politics and Politicians: A Succinct History of the Politics of Illinois from 1856 to 1884* (Springfield, Ill.: H. W. Rokker, 1884), 275.

¹⁰ Letter from Uriah Copp, Jr. to Ray B. Griffin, Oakalla, Iroquois County, Illinois, July 21, 1860.

¹¹ Letter from Frank Bastillo to Ray B. Griffin, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 19, 1863, written in the hand of Ino A. Gras.

¹² Letter from Leander Keyes to Ray B. Griffin, Gould and Curry Mill, Nevada, April 16, 1865.

¹³ Illinois. Adjutant-General's Office. *Report of the Adjutant-General of the State of Illinois* (Springfield, Ill.: Phillips Bros., 1900), II, 52. Nathan Tyler Griffin enlisted as a private, May 25, 1861, from New Boston, Illinois, and was discharged a sergeant, April 10, 1863, Company I, Seventeenth Illinois Infantry Regiment.

In February, 1865, he recounts his duties and experiences with the civilian militia of Vicksburg:

. . . We have a patrol guard out nearly every day picking up recruits and bringing up the delinquents from duty we drill twice per week and have *Dress parade* on Sunday. If a man is absent from one Drill or Parade he is fined \$5.00 and if he gets a Furlough to leave town it costs \$2.00 and a Discharge costs \$5.00 Every man between the ages of 18 & 45 who did not join the *Millitia* before the 8th inst is to be conscripted into the Army. According to General Orders No 4 H'd Q'trs of the Military Dpt. of West Miss. there will be a *draft* of *one* man *in* 7 in this Dept. said Draft to come off tomorrow (the 15th inst) No passes from the City are allowed until the Draft takes place. All the refugees and Deserters from the Rebels have to join the Militia but the Deserters can get Exemption from the Draft. . . .¹⁴

Nathan moved westward into Texas after 1865, set up his photography business in Clarkesville for a brief period, and then moved on to Sherman. It was during his stay in Clarkesville that he wrote the following letter relating an incident which roughly parallels many a modern television watcher's impressions of Texas in the 1860's:

We had a little shooting affair here yesterday which resulted in both parties getting seriously wounded. The affair originated from a previous difficulty in which a Mr. Simms and a Mr. Cooper had drawn their pistols but both were disarmed by Simms' friends (Cooper having none present) and as Cooper was about to get away from them one Mr. Henderson knocked him down with a six shooter and so the affair rested until yesterday when Cooper Shot Henderson with a double barrell ShotGun loaded with Buckshot. The first charge lodged in Henderson's hip and all of the charge (Six Buckshot) lodged in a space that could be covered by one hand; of the next charge three or four shot struck him about the shoulder. They were about 20yds apart and as Henderson fell to the ground he pulled out his pistol and shot at Cooper then bracing himself upon his elbow he shot twice more one of the balls passed through Cooper's thigh but Cooper run followed by Henderson's friends who fired at him seven or eight times. Coopers leg gave out and he laid down in a cornfield where the Soldiers soon after captured him. They are both dangerously wounded but may recover. Affairs of that kind are frequent in this country but generally one of the parties get killed. Nearly every body carries a Colts army Revolver and some carry two.¹⁵

¹⁴ Letter from Nathan Tyler Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Vicksburg, Mississippi, February 14, 1865.

¹⁵ Letter from Nathan T. Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Clarksville, Texas, July 18, 1867.

Nathan died in 1870, alone and unmarried, at Oil Springs [Indian Territory]. In spite of written inquiries the family could not discover the circumstances of his death.

On October 6, 1866, Ray Griffin wrote to his brother, Simeon, in New York, that he had just received a letter from their brother, Norman, whom the family had for several years thought to be dead. Norman's letter returning him to the living was written from Prescott, Arizona Territory, August 27, 1866. Four months later, he wrote the family the following letter:

Prescott, A.T.
Dec 16th 1866

Brothers.

Years have passed since I have had the pleasure of seeing your bright countenances or of gazing on the face of a kin. But often very often have I thought of you in my wanderings in foreign lands. I cannot say that I wished that you were with me as I think that your life has been more happily spent. My life has been that of a homeless wanderer and I have drunk many a bitter draught, but I live still and enjoy a small portion of the blessings of God. . . .

I left California and went to Lower California where I staid a short time but did not like the country and went from thence to Sonora staid there a while and went to Chihuha and after a short time returned to the State of Sonora where I remained until I came to this Territory I came to Tuscon in this Territory [] four years ago and have been in this vicinity about three and one half years. A great portion of the time since I arrived at the Pacific Coast I have been engaged in mining pursuits which is a Species of Lottery; which sometimes wins amongst the many times that it looses

It is a business of a very excitable character and when a man once engages in it it unfits him for any other kind of business, for one week he may make one hundred dollars per day and then he spends his money in proportion with the same rapidity as he has made it. Then perhaps he works hard for one year and cannot make more than enough for to give him a poor living. He may today have in his possession what he can sell for \$50,000 and tomorrow may show it to be worthless or he may reveal the secret that it may be worth double the amount of money. Quartz mining is very uncertain business as you are all well aware ere this; and it is but a step from Poverty to Wealth and on the other hand it is but the same distance from Wealth to Poverty as it requires so much money to conduct the business and one bad move may break up the connection and it is gone

I am in possession of a large quantity of mining claims some of which I consider to be valueble and intend to remain here until I can make money; out of them

I am flattered at the prospects of my grounds but the Indian difficulties here are very great which we have to contend with.

The Government troops that are and have been in the Territory do not try to kill the Indians but in many places are giving the Indians Provisions so that they are the better able to kill and rob us. It is a shame but it is nevertheless true . . .

Sincerely

Yours,

N. L. Griffin¹⁶

Norman wrote several letters from Prescott and Walker, Arizona Territory, after December, 1866. He continued his mining pursuits and he continued having difficulties with the Indians. At one point he wrote, "Every enterprize that is started is stopped by the hostile attitud in which the Indians show themselves there is not a week passes but brings to our view or knowledge the death of some of our friends or brothers."¹⁷ For a brief period Norman entered the employ of the Office of the U.S. Indian Agent, at the San Carlos Indian Reserve, Arizona Territory, and then he returned to mining again.

In 1870 Ray Griffin wrote to Norman, "I have made since I came here I think I can safely say One Hundred Thousand Dollars over and above all of my liabilities and most of it is in Real Estate I have the best residence in this County and it is worth Ten Thousand Dollars."¹⁸ Ray Griffin died on October 22, 1881, and was survived by his wife and seven children.¹⁹ He was succeeded in business by his eldest son, Clement Coffin Griffin. In addition to the monies and properties in his estate, Ray Griffin left an important legacy of 25,000 unpublished letters, both personal and business. In 1959, through the agency of Hubert Carr, these letters were presented as a gift to The University of Iowa Library by the executor of the estate of Sarah V. C. Griffin, last surviving member of the Ray B. Griffin family.

The rich opportunities for research in education, politics, economics, Civil War history, westward expansion, Negro slavery, patriotism, and Indian conflicts, suggested in the foregoing letters and quoted passages are augmented by several thousand additional letters on land

¹⁶ Letter from Norman Lee Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Prescott, Arizona Territory, December 16, 1866.

¹⁷ Letter from Norman Lee Griffin to Ray B. Griffin, Prescott, Arizona Territory, September 22, 1867.

¹⁸ Letter from Ray B. Griffin to Norman L. Griffin, Manchester, Iowa, January 1, 1870 (Letterpress copy).

¹⁹ For further biographical details see *The History of Delaware County, Iowa* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1878), 162, 577.

speculation, land agents, school and property taxes, railroad lands, debt collections, mortgages, land sales, and foreclosures. During the years 1858-1870, for example, Ray B. Griffin exchanged a large number of letters with three prominent men who had land holdings in Iowa: Joseph Sabin, the American bibliographer and author of the multi-volume work *A Dictionary of Books Relating to America*; Sidney Dean, U.S. Representative from Connecticut; and Lincoln Clark, U.S. Representative from Iowa. The researcher will also find letters from Theodore William Dwight, first professor at Columbia Law School;²⁰ Edward North, American classicist and educator;²¹ James Harlan, U.S. Senator from Iowa and Secretary of the Interior; U.S. Representatives from Iowa William G. Donnan and Thomas Updegraff; Iowa Governors Stephen Hempstead and George Wallace Jones; Iowa Brevet Brigadier General Matthew M. Trumbull; as well as documents signed by Iowa Governors James W. Grimes, Samuel Kirkwood, Cyrus C. Carpenter and Samuel Merrill and by U.S. Representative from Iowa David B. Henderson, and Iowa Brevet Brigadier General and Secretary of State Ed Wright. Additionally there are letters from a large number of the notables cited in Benjamin F. Gue's *History of Iowa* and Johnson Brigham's *Iowa Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*.

The Griffin Papers provide a candid look at Iowa and the nation in the nineteenth century. They emphasize the importance of collecting and preserving the manuscript papers and letters of early Iowa law and business firms. Clement C. Griffin carried on his father's extensive business correspondence, thereby extending the research possibilities of the collection up to 1900. A man's worth to society may live after him in the records of his thought, and Ray B. Griffin left a worthy legacy in his unpublished letters.

²⁰ *Dictionary of American Biography*, V, 572.

²¹ Edward Fitch, "Edward North," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIII, (1934), 558-559.

