

NOTES

A BROTHER'S LOVE

Walt Whitman's concern for the well-being of his soldier-brother George Washington Whitman is well known among Whitman biographers. From Walt's spontaneous journey to the battlefield of Fredericksburg, where George was wounded, to his campaign for a special exchange to free George from a Confederate military prison, Walt went to great lengths to ease the burdens of Major Whitman's military life. I have located an additional example of Walt's solicitous intervention on his brother's behalf in George's official military service record.¹ In April 1865, Whitman apparently hand-wrote a medical certificate, which was then signed by the family physician and notarized by a local conveyancer, requesting an extension of George's leave of absence. The extension was requested because George was suffering from rheumatism which he contracted while in prison. Although this medical certificate has been previously cited, it has not been attributed to Walt Whitman before now.²

George Washington Whitman's military service extended the length of "the war of attempted secession."³ He first enlisted in April 1861, the same month that Lincoln declared a state of insurrection, and was mustered out in July 1865, two months following Confederate General Kirby Smith's surrender in the trans-Mississippi region which brought the conflict to a formal close. George saw action with the 51st Regiment-New York Volunteers in some of the war's most contested engagements, including the battles of Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg and the Wilderness. Perhaps the war's bleakest days for George, however, began on September 30, 1864, when he was captured at Poplar Grove, Virginia, near Peebles' Farm. He spent the next five months in Confederate military prisons in Petersburg, Virginia; Richmond, Virginia; Salisbury, North Carolina; and last in Danville, Virginia. George achieved his freedom in February 1865 as part of a general prisoner exchange (Loving, 3-8 and 17-26).

The joy felt by the Whitman family at George's homecoming a few weeks later was tempered by anxiety over the soldier's ill health. George made the family aware of his near-death in January from lung fever while in the Danville prison.⁴ In a March 26, 1865, letter to William and Ellen O'Connor, Walt claimed that George "... could be in what I would almost call fair condition, if it were not that his legs are affected—it seems to me it is rheumatism following the fever he had."⁵ Walt continues, "He is going to report to Annapolis promptly when his furlough is up—I told him I had no doubt I could get it extended, but he does not wish it—He says little, but is in first rate spirits." In an April 7 letter, however, Walt reports to William that "My brother George has been unwell, again, & has sulkily permitted me to get an extension of his leave of absence, 30 days longer" (*Corr.*, 1:257-258).

To obtain the extension, a medical certificate testifying to George's inability to travel because of illness was sent to the commanding officer at George's

Annapolis post. The certificate is signed "Dr. Edward Ruggles."⁶ However, I believe the text of the certificate was drafted and hand-written by Walt Whitman. Ruggles' signature appears to be in a different hand than Whitman's, presumably Ruggles' own. The document is notarized by Charles H. Thomson in what appears to be a third hand, presumably Thomson's.⁷

A transcription of the document with my presumptions of who wrote which text follows. On one side of the paper is written:

[In Walt Whitman's hand:]

(Sent to U.S. Officer Commanding Post ["Medical Officer" scratched out], Annapolis Md., April 3, 1865. Duplicate attached to furlough.)

Medical Certificate of Extension of Leave of Absence from April 4th to April 24th 1865
Brooklyn, New York, April 3, 1865. Captain George W. Whitman of the 51st Reg't. New York Volunteers, having applied for a Certificate on which to base an Extension of leave of absence I do hereby certify that I have carefully & several times Examined this officer and find that he has Rheumatism, with swelling & weakness of legs, & Debility—resulting from six months incarceration in Rebel prisons at Salisbury and Danville, (from which latter place he was paroled one month since,)—and that in my opinion it is now unsafe for him to travel, and will be injurious and unsafe for him to travel for the period from the 4th to the 24th of April, the latter inclusive.

signed,

[In Ruggles' hand:]

Edward Ruggles M.D.
N. 5 East Baltic St.
Brooklyn⁸

On the opposite side of the same sheet of paper is written the following:

[In Thomson's hand:]

Personally appeared before me this third day of April 1865 Edward Ruggles M.D. to me known to be a practicing physician in good standing in the City of Brooklyn aforementioned who being by me duly sworn according to law did depose and say that the foregoing certificate is true and correct.

Charles H. Thomson
Notary Public Kings Co. N. York.

[In Whitman's hand:]

Certificate involving Extension of leave of absence of Capt. Geo. W. Whitman 51st New York Volunteers, from the 4th to the 24th of April 1865.

Although not signed by Walt Whitman, the medical certificate appears to have been drafted and written by the poet. There are several Whitman gram-

matical touches, including the frequent use of the ampersand, dashes in place of sentence endings, the parenthetical comment, and underlining. It is interesting that even in such a formal statement, the casual grammatical style typical of Whitman's personal letters is evident. The handwriting on the document that I ascribe to Walt Whitman almost certainly is that of the poet. In particular, "[George] W. Whitman" is written the same way as Whitman's familiar signature. The details of the formations of certain letters—the "d," the "f" and the "s"—and of whole words—"Brooklyn" and "New York"—also support my contention that the document was hand-written by Walt Whitman.

Given George's reluctance to embrace the extension-of-leave enterprise and with the clock fast running out on the original leave, one can picture Walt taking matters into his own hands, literally and figuratively. Walt consults with Ruggles who is more than happy to oblige his old friend, having eagerly cooperated in Walt and Jeff Whitman's plan to arrange a special exchange for George a few months prior while George was still a prisoner of the Confederacy.⁹ Walt drafts the medical certificate, Ruggles signs it, and the conveyancer Thomson (whose offices are located next door to Ruggles' home) notarizes it. Walt presents the *fait accompli* to George who "sulkily" permits Whitman to send the certificate off to Annapolis.

With the extension of George's leave through April 24, the Whitman family had the benefit of the soldier's experienced commentary on the Fall of Richmond on April 3, and Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9. And perhaps George's quiet presence lessened the awful shock of April 14 and 15, as the family passed around without word the newspapers describing their beloved President's assassination (PW, 31).

The Washington Friends of Walt Whitman

MARTIN G. MURRAY

NOTES

1 *Compiled Military Service Record of George W. Whitman, 51st Regiment-New York Volunteers, 1861 through 1865*, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

2 Jerome M. Loving, ed., *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 25, 135.

3 This was Whitman's term for the American Civil War (see Walt Whitman, *Prose Works* 1892, ed. Floyd Stovall [New York: New York University Press, 1964], 2:426).

4 Clarence Gohdes and Rollo G. Silver, ed., *Faint Clews & Indirections: Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1949), 188.

5 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:256-257.

6 Dr. Edward Ruggles was the Whitman family physician (see *Corr.*, 1:90, 319-320).

7 *The Brooklyn City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1866*, published by J. Lain and Company, Brooklyn, contains the following listing for Thomson: "Thomson, Charles H., conveyancer, 9 Court."

8 The 1866 Brooklyn directory contains the following listing for Ruggles: "Ruggles, Edward, (M.D.) h. 5 E. Baltic." Ruggles is not listed in the Brooklyn directory for the year ending May 1, 1865.

9 Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price, eds., *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1984), 105.