

An Iowa Soldier Writes Home

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*The Civil War Letters of Union Private
Daniel J. Parvin*

Edited with commentary by

Phillip A. Hubbart

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*In loving memory of my father and mother
Donald and Esther Hubbart*

The Civil War's domestic impact was so extensive and varied that it almost defies description. Total casualties on both sides (360,000 Union, 258,000 Confederate) equal the number lost in all other American wars combined.

The percentage of the eligible population mobilized (50% in the North, 75% in the South) remains unsurpassed in Western military history.

The nearly four million African American slaves liberated by the war represent a process of emancipation unequalled in the Western Hemisphere in scope and degree of governmental coerciveness.

James Brewer Stewart

Prof. of History, Macalester College, St. Paul, Minn.

The Oxford Companion to American History 132 (2001)

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Preface

This book is an edited collection of 117 letters that a Union soldier, Daniel J. Parvin, wrote home to his wife and family in Muscatine, Iowa, during the American Civil War (1861–65). Parvin went in as a private and came out as a corporal—so that these letters are a dog soldier’s view of the war.

Despite run-on sentences, some misspellings and lack of paragraphing that had to be corrected in the editing process, Daniel J. Parvin emerges from these letters as a perceptive writer. He narrates relevant events with a keen eye for critical detail, particularly in his vivid and dramatic accounts of the battles he was in—the Battle of Shiloh [where he narrowly escaped death], the Siege of Vicksburg [where he served in a reserve capacity] and the Atlanta campaign [where he was seriously wounded and almost died]. He employs the same attention to detail in his descriptions of day-to-day camp life.

Parvin was also a passionate and opinionated man. He expresses his views in colorful language on the people, events and politics of his day—including his views on Lincoln, Grant, McClellan, the Emancipation Proclamation, Black Union regiments, southern sympathizers in the North, the Union and Confederate causes, rebel soldiers, and so on. And he often pours out his heart on the painful loneliness he felt away from home, and on the deep love he had for his family and country.

What is remarkable, however, about Parvin the man is that he can, on the one hand, fight so fiercely and with such loyalty for the Union cause, and yet, on the other hand, express his utter disdain for war and the soldiering life—as well as [at times] conceding an admiration and even a sympathy for the Confederate soldier. He is a complex, sensitive and intelligent man whom [I hope] the reader will soon come to like and admire. [I am indebted to my friend Dennis Dalton for this insight into Parvin’s character.]

These letters are owned by, and are on display at, the Muscatine Art Center, in Muscatine, Iowa, Parvin’s hometown. In 1977, Esther Hubbard, the great-granddaughter of Daniel J. Parvin, donated these letters to the Center so that they may be preserved for future generations. The Center, in turn, has

graciously allowed this historic correspondence to be published in this volume—portions of which have been selected for inclusion therein.

My name is Phillip A. Hubbard. I am the great-great-grandson of Daniel J. Parvin. I am also the son of Esther Hubbard, and the editor of this book. I am not, however, a professional historian. I am a retired Florida state court appellate judge with a keen interest in my country's history—much like, I hope, the reader of this work.

This is a reader-friendly book. Whereas most other Civil War letter collections present each letter in chronological order, this book extracts portions of the letters and organizes them around certain stated themes. These themes represent subjects that, in the editor's view, readers most want to know about in the average soldier's life.

The reader can review the table of contents, select portions of the book that seem the most interesting, and read those portions without having to plow through the entire book. The reader can then pick up the book at a later time to read other subjects of interest. For the many readers out there with busy lives, this is no small advantage.

Yet this method does not sacrifice depth. To the contrary, this approach allows the reader to get a focused view of common experiences and contemporary people in a single chapter or section, that would otherwise have been scattered throughout the entire letters if a chronological approach were used. Moreover, I have used the research of respected historians and original sources in my commentary, to place Parvin's account within the context of his time and place.

Here is how the book is organized.

- **Introduction.** Chapter 1, among other things, covers a chronological breakdown [with maps] of Parvin's participation in the Civil War (1861–65)—so that the reader can place each letter in context. [Also, see the timeline of Parvin's Civil War service pages 157–61, *infra*.]
- **Military Engagements.** Chapter 2 deals with all of the letters that mention the military engagements in which Parvin was either involved or was near. Also included are letters dealing with Parvin's miraculous recovery from his near-fatal wounds suffered during the Atlanta campaign.
- **Opinions.** Chapter 3 deals with Parvin's often emphatic, even damning opinions of contemporary persons and events. These opinions were totally uncensored by his superiors.
- **Camp Life.** Chapter 4 deals with Parvin's experience with everyday camp life during his entire army service; e.g., writing and receiving letters, camp sickness and medical services, army food, army pay, army discipline, guard duty, picket duty, camp assignments, and so on.

- **Miscellaneous.** Chapter 5 is a catch-all chapter dealing with a series of striking subjects: Parvin's re-enlistment in the army in 1864, his contemplated enlistment in navy gunboat service, foraging the southern countryside, furloughs, travel experiences, a soldier's flights of fancy, and so on.

From these selections, I hope the reader can better understand the upheaval and tragedy of the Civil War by viewing it through the eyes of this forgotten foot soldier. Learned scholars have written sweeping accounts of the Civil War told largely from the perspective of political and military leaders. But how did an average soldier like Parvin experience it? This book tries to answer that question.

Acknowledgments

A number of people were of great help to me in putting this book together. Without them, the book would never have been completed as fast as it was—or with anything resembling its present quality.

First and foremost, I thank my sister-in-law Janice Nolin of Huntsville, Alabama, for the enormous amount of time and effort she put into this project. With her inquiring mind and her expert familiarity with Internet sources, she extensively researched both the genealogy of the Parvin family, and the history of Daniel J. Parvin's Iowa regiment. Time and again, she unraveled difficult family and military puzzles that baffled me. She also located an outstanding historical work on Parvin's regiment that I have used throughout this work—and prepared, as well, a valuable family tree for the book. I cannot thank her enough.

Deidre Pearson, formerly of the Muscatine Art Center, expertly transcribed Parvin's handwritten letters and e-mailed her transcriptions to me so that I could insert relevant portions of them into the book, which I was writing on my computer. She saved me a year or more of having to do the same laborious task from the xeroxed copies of the letters that I have—some of which are most difficult to read. She was also kind enough to photograph the tombstones of Daniel and Sarah Parvin at the Greenwood Cemetery in Muscatine, Iowa, that are included in this book. I am most indebted to her. Moreover, my friend Robert Stewart was most helpful in transcribing many of the letters that were quite difficult to read, for which I am most grateful.

Virginia Cooper, the registrar of the Muscatine Art Center, has been most generous in helping me coordinate this book with the informative exhibit of the Parvin letters at the Art Center that is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2011 on the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War. In the process of this happy cooperation, I was able to settle on the basic organization of this book. She also was kind

enough to read the first draft of the book and offer helpful suggestions. Many, many thanks to her.

Tim Colton, the Production & Design Editor at Carolina Academic Press, secured and placed the Civil War maps that appear in the book. He also suggested that I visit the Library of Congress website to obtain appropriate Civil War photos for the book—all of which are in the public domain. I did so and the fine collection of Civil War photos that appear in the book are from that collection. I am most indebted to him.

I would like to thank Keith Sipe, the publisher at Carolina Academic Press [CAP], and the CAP Editorial Board, for agreeing to publish a book that is somewhat outside the scope of works that CAP ordinarily publishes. I am most appreciative. My thanks also go to Linda Lacy and Zoë Oakes, the Executive Editor and Acquisitions Assistant, respectively, at CAP for all their encouragement and help in this project. Moreover, Kelly Miller, the Production & Media Designer at CAP, designed the cover for the book, and inserted the photos and illustrations that appear therein—for which I am most grateful.

My aunt, Doris Rolfe, of Chandler, Arizona, has been most helpful in securing some of the family background for this book. Her late husband [and my uncle], Bob Rolfe, had a great interest in the Parvin letters, and, with his marvelous memory, was the repository of much of the genealogy of our family. Many thanks to my Aunt Doris and my Uncle Bob.

My many friends, too numerous to mention, showed great interest in this project and gave me a good deal of encouragement. Gerald Wetherington, Dennis Dalton, Pat Kruppa, Chuck Edelstein and Diane Thurston, in particular, were kind enough to read the text and give me their impressions. In addition, Dennis Dalton and Pat Kruppa did some useful proofreading work and offered valuable insights into Parvin's character. Also Aristides Millas, an accomplished architect, sketched out a partial Parvin family tree for me that was quite helpful in the ultimate product that appears in the book. I thank them all.

My deceased father and mother [Donald and Esther Hubbart] have been my inspiration for compiling and editing the letters for this book. Both were fascinated with these letters and read them with great care. My mother inherited the letters through the family and donated them to the Muscatine Art Center, Muscatine, Iowa—Daniel J. Parvin's

hometown—so that they could be preserved for future generations. I cherish their memory.

My devoted wife Martha Hubbart expertly proofread the text, came up with the title for the book, and offered valuable suggestions for improving the work. She also took two excellent photographs that appear in this book. I cannot possibly put into words how much she has meant to me in the nearly 50 years of our treasured marriage.

Finally, I thank my great-great-grandfather Daniel J. Parvin for his lively writing, his perceptive observations, his passionate honesty—and, most of all, for the sacrifices he made for our country. Without him, there would be no book. With him, we experience in part the turbulent Civil War times in which he lived.

List of Abbreviations

Books

- B. Catton Bruce Catton, *The Civil War* (Houghton Mifflin Co.) (paperback ed.) (1988)
- D.J. Eicher Daniel J. Eicher, *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks) (2001)
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- J.E. Morcombe Joseph E. Morcombe, *The Life and Labors of Theodore Sutton Parvin A.M. LL.D.* (Allen Printing Co., Clinton, Ia.) (1908)
- Hist. Muscatine County *History of Muscatine County Iowa From the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time*, Vol. I (S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., Chicago) (Irving B. Richman, supervising ed.) (1911)

- Roster & Record, Hist. Skch. *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion, Vol. II, 9th–16th Regiments—Infantry, “Historical Sketch Eleventh Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry”* (Des Moines, Ia.; Emory H. English, State Printer; E.D. Chassell, State Binder) (1908)
- Roster & Record, 11th Reg. *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion, Vol. II, 9th–16th Regiments—Infantry, “Eleventh Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry”* (Des Moines, Ia.; Emory H. English, State Printer; E.D. Chassell, State Binder) (1908)
- J.P. Walton Josiah Proctor Walton, *Pioneer Papers: comprising a collection of early events of Bloomington, Iowa, now Muscatine, and its surroundings, being a short history of the business men, the schools, the churches and the early politics of the pioneers* (paperback) (originally published in Muscatine in 1899) (Nabu Press, August 31, 2010)

Web Sites

- C.W. Soldrs. & Sailrs. Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Website, National Park Service [n.ps.gov/cwss/soldiers.cfm]
- Greenwood Cemetery Records Greenwood Cemetery Records, Muscatine, Iowa, Ancestry.com
- Ia.Gn.Wb.Prj. Iowa Gen Web Project [iagenweb.org]
- Register of Old Settlers Muscatine County, Iowa, Register of Old Settlers, Book One, Iowa Gen Web Project [iagenweb.org]