After Gettysburg
Frederick Law Olmsted on the Escape of Lee

The writer of the two letters, here published after their almost ninety years’ obscurity in manuscript, served from June, 1861, until September, 1863, as General Secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission. In that office, Frederick Law Olmsted added distinction to an already established reputation. A man of wide and varied abilities, he had earned himself a more than temporary and local fame by his books on slavery and the South. Never an abolitionist, but always a Union man, of high intellectual capacity and integrity, he was not only a good organizer but an effective executor. Much of the credit for the success of the Sanitary Commission is properly given to him.¹

At the culmination in Gettysburg of Lee’s invasion of Pennsylvania, Olmsted was in Baltimore, in charge of relief work. There he got reports of the battle from “officers wounded and en route home.” But by July 9 he had his headquarters at Frederick, and from this point, with other officers of the Sanitary Commission, was “to attend the movements of the army.”² This attendance led him to Williamsport, which he reached at least by “Monday, P.M.” of July 13. On July 15 he returned to Frederick. From there he went to Gettysburg, and by the morning of the 19th returned to Baltimore.

In the course of the experience, which made him a remote witness of the military turning point of the Civil War, he became a close observer of its critical aftermath. During the two weeks, he wrote three letters to his intimate friend Edwin Lawrence Godkin, then a correspondent for the New York Times and the London Daily

News, later the editor of the New York Nation—itself a project of Olmsted's, referred to in his letters.

The first of Olmsted's letters never reached Godkin, and is apparently irretrievably lost. The others came to hand. The earlier of these, sent from Frederick on July 15, 1863, shows the greater tensity and was obviously written under pressure of time and circumstance.

Sanitary Commission
Frederick, July 15, 1863

My dear Godkin,

I spent two days and nights at Head Quarters on Beaver Creek near Williamsport. I saw Genl Meade a few hours after the escape of Lee was established. He is tall, thin, stooping, but has a most soldierly and veteran-like appearance; a grave, stern countenance—somewhat Oriental in its dignified expression, yet American in its race-horse gauntness. He is simple, direct, deliberate and thoughtful in manner of speech and general address. On the whole he impressed me very favorably. He is a gentleman and an old soldier. He expressed disappointment at the escape of Lee, but said: "With the information that I had yesterday, I could not on the whole have been justified in—(hesitating)—saying that if we attacked yesterday there were sufficient grounds for a conviction that we should not get the worst of it."—"I had ordered an attack this morning. I was myself rather inspired to try it yesterday, but all my corps commanders except one were decidedly against it, and my own conviction was not strong enough to warrant me in acting against theirs."—"We are not as strong as we are supposed to be. I dare not say how weak we are." Reinforcements were constantly arriving; it was raining hard, the Potomac was rising. I suppose that we were by reinforcements and improvement of position ten thousand stronger on

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3 Rollo Ogden, Life and Letters of Edwin Lawrence Godkin (New York, 1907), I, 223,204 ff.
4 Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted and the Houghton Library of Harvard University have kindly given permission to print the Olmsted Gettysburg letters. I wish to make grateful acknowledgment also to Dr. Roy F. Nichols and Mr. R. Norris Williams, 2d, for their help and advice, and to Miss Dorothy Hammell, Research Librarian of Smith College, Miss Emma Forbes Waite of the American Antiquarian Society, and Miss Frances Russell of the New York Public Library. The letters are printed as they were written, with variations in spelling and punctuation maintained.
Tuesday than on Monday morning. I went out on Monday P.M. our line had been advanced during the day nearly a mile, and was advanced quarter of a mile while I was with it; the men and batteries all in line of battle and with slight entrenchments, which they seemed to construct almost of their own accord or as a matter of course.

[Sketch of Entrenchment Drawn by Olmsted]

In the woods or behind woods as soon as the line was formed they began felling timber, so that it would answer the purpose of abbatis. I went through the line and advanced to the outermost skirmishers who were driving the rebel skirmishers slowly back from tree to tree in the woods. I crept up with General Crawford amongst them to a point where with a glass we could see through the wood and caught a glimpse of an earth work before us and could see the dirt thrown up from the ditch upon it. I believe that in my estimate sent you a week or more ago of the forces at Gettysburg, I over stated ours. I had a hint that nobody was allowed to know how small it was, and I could see that those who knew best were not willing that I should believe some parts of the army to be as weak as I know they are. All who were likely to be well informed, unquestionably believe that Lee outnumbered us. They say we could not possibly have held out fifteen minutes longer and for half an hour the chances were felt to be evenly ballanced. We could not spare a man, and it seemed as if the slightest additional force on the part of the enemy would have broke us.

5 Samuel Wylie Crawford (1829–1892), in command at Gettysburg of the Pennsylvania reserves, 3rd Division of the Fifth Army Corps. National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York, 1904), XII, 232; hereafter cited as NCAB.

6 In the letter, “throwing” is interlined above “thrown up.”
The old army of the Potomac is in fine condition marches twenty or thirty miles a day and accepts what comes to it without hesitation—its chief discouragement arises from the smallness of the regiments many being as low as 200 men.\(^7\)

The statement made by Wilson Senator\(^8\) [sic] before the riots, that the draft was to be immediately enforced and the drafted men used to fill up the old regiments, was received with prolonged cheering. It is what all want—want more than anything else.

I enclose a note about the position from one of our inspectors written on Monday. ("The hermaphrodite Medico," means "Miss Walker M.D." "Doctoress Walker." "Walker M.D. on the war-path," as one of ours describes her.)\(^9\)

I hinted the matter of the weekly\(^10\) to the Surgeon General, who received it in the warmest manner possible. He said that he would do anything he could for it. I asked if he could recommend any writers in the Army. "I will write for it. I will write on Sanitary and Social Science all you want." He told me who was the best man in the army on projectiles, and said that he thought he could be got and he would introduce me to him in Washington. We discussed others.

I have heard nothing from New York—of the subscriptions. Nothing had been done when I left.\(^11\) Bellows and Agnew have been absent.\(^12\) Our operations have been on a much larger scale than ever before. I will send you some notes in a few days showing their magnitude. The immediate movement of the army after the battle, taking its administrative officers, left the necessity of our aid, peculiar at

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7 Olmsted here interpolated this note: "Many who were brigade commanders at Antietam and are now division commanders have fewer men under them now than then."

8 Henry Wilson (1812-1875), Senator from Massachusetts and chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XX. Biographical material hereafter given is taken from the *Dictionary of American Biography*, unless another citation is made.

9 Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919), first woman to hold a commission as assistant army surgeon; awarded a medal to honor for her services during the Civil War. *New International Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1916), XXIII; *Who Was Who in America, 1897-1942* (Chicago, 1942).

10 Eventually this weekly was named and published, 1865, as the New York Nation.

11 Subscriptions which the Sanitary Commission was soliciting to support its work. New York *Times*, July 9, 1863; repeated in later issues.

12 Henry Whitney Bellows (1814-1883), founder and president of the United States Sanitary Commission; Cornelius Rea Agnew (1830-1888), organizer and member of the United States Sanitary Commission.
Gettysburg. The army trains are astounding. The daily consumption of forage by the army (before the recent reinforcements) was 1,000,000 [sic] lbs of oats (at 3\(\frac{1}{2}\) cents) 300,000 lbs of hay (at 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) c.) 150,000 lbs corn, (at 2 cents).

I don’t think the riots will harm our enterprise. How I wish it was started and we could pitch in! I think you should take the ground that the most dangerous foes of the republic are in New York city, that the government has now the right and duty to put them down; that from this moment to the end of the war, government should deal with New York and other insurrectionary towns and districts, as it does with Baltimore and Nashville and New Orleans. Let Barlow and Bennett and Brooks and Belmont and Barnard and the Woods and Andrews and Clancy be hung if that be possible. Stir the government up to it. I did not mean to omit Seymour.\(^{13}\)

Our inspector who has arrived this moment from Berlin says there is no intention of crossing for three days. I can’t understand it. He says he thinks there was an apprehension that the enemy would resist the crossing. We have two pontoon bridges laid below Harper’s Ferry—though not in force on the Virg\(^a\) side.

When Meade telegraphed that the enemy had gone, Halleck replied that he must aquit himself for allowing him to escape by his energy in pursuit of him, etc. the tone being regarded by Meade as insolent. Genl Ingalls\(^{14}\) came in to the tent as he was reading it and Meade said: “Ingalls dont you want to take command of this army?”


\(^{14}\) Rufus Ingalls (1820–1893), appointed chief quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac, July, 1862. NCAB, XII, 240.
“No I thank you, Its too big an elephant for me.” “Well its too big for me, too, read that,” and then he immediately wrote in reply that his resignation was at the service of the Department. Two hours afterwards he recevd for answer to his reply that neither the President nor the General in Chief wished to be understood as blaming General Meade for the escape of the rebel army. This I know to be true, but as I cant mention my authority it should not be made public except in general terms. I was at Hd 2 at the time.

Yours very truly
Fred. Law Olmsted

Olmsted’s second letter, although it concludes with a correction, expands the main theme of the first. Written from his headquarters in Baltimore, it takes a more leisured pace. Olmsted gives himself time for description, turns from Gettysburg to his own affairs, and reconsiders his earlier impressions.

Sanitary Commission
Baltimore, July 19th, 1863

My dear Godkin,

I arrived here this morning from Frederick via Gettysburg, and found here yours of the 11th—I dont remember much of the missing letter. It was written while we knew little of the Gettysburg battle and contained such information as I could pick up from officers wounded and en route home, at this house. I was led to think that the forces engaged were very nearly equal. I now think our force was considerably the smaller. I was all over the ground yesterday. The field and all distances are much larger than I had supposed. The hills, except on the extreme left of our line, are gentle elevations. If the Hillhouse hill in New Haven were cleared of wood it would bear some resemblance to them. Artillery could be galloped easilly anywhere except on the extreme left and right, where there is a very rugged, rocky and wooded region. There on the second day Longstreet made a desperate attempt to outflank us, and at some points, where the ground was taken and retaken, I found plenty of evidence of terrible fighting. On one elevation a few rods square I saw a dozen or more exploded shells, and quite a number of knapsacks and caps with shot-
holes through them both Federal and confederate, with other equipments. The roads for miles about the town, as well as the course of the federal lines are still strewn with wrecks of equipments, muskets, baynets, caissons, and baggage waggons with broken wheels, although the provost marshall has had parties engaged in collecting them ever since the battle and much must have been carried off by the country people. Ten miles off I met two farmers on horseback each carrying three or four muskets, with some other things. The dead men are all buried and a great business is being done in disinterring bodies for embalming and shipment North. There are half a dozen difft embalmers competing for it. The Governor of Pennsylvania I believe pays for the removal of all Pennsylvania dead to their friends. The horses are mostly half covered with earth or partially buried, but the stench remains and pervades the town.

The hills on which the rebels formed of which you read, are unnoticeable swells of ground parrallel to the lines of the federal force and about half a mile distant. They are generally wooded on the rear slope and in some parts on the front. They completely screen all movements in the rear of their crest. The valley between the two elevations is smooth, generally with a turf surface, with some ploughed ground, standing wheat and orchards. The fields are large. There were some stone fences on the federal hill and rail fences in the valley. There were also plenty of loose stones throughout the federal position. These were got together at night and a slight breast work was formed of them—simply by laying them one against and upon another. Here and there some little earth had been thrown against them. They are not more than three feet high and are just like the slightest kind of stone fence of our New England sheep-pastures. A tree-trunk, fence rails, a broken waggon and sometimes a dead horse had been laid in when it came handy. The rebels whenever they advanced their lines, with any hope of holding them, which was the case only where woods and orchards partially covered them, had thrown up more complete works, chiefly of fence rails, occasionally with a ditch, as I sketched the plan of ours before Williamsport the other day. They had also barricaded the roads on their flanks. I should think that a true estimate of the battle lay just about midway between the accounts of the New York and the Richmond papers. Lee's loss must have been much greater than ours. Both
sides fought with great confidence and determination, to the last. Our side was not whipped, and, considering the first day as skirmishing, lost no ground except temporarily. The rebels, did not generally consider themselves whipped, I imagine, and probably expected to have another day of it. While their loss was the greater, their disorganization was less, chiefly because their bodies are all more numerous than ours. I presume their corps, brigades, divisions, regiments and companies, would all number fifty per cent more than ours. I have no doubt that Lee's army is better, man for man, than ours, today, solely because of its better organization.

I came here last night from Gettysburg, being twelve hours on the way, most of the time in a dirty hog-car with a lot of dead Pennsylvanians and wounded rebels. These latter did not talk much but one said about Vicksburg [sic], "It would have been better for us, if they had got the whole of Lee's army." They did not appear to have a thought of the end of the war, expressed surprise at the kindness with which they were treated when they came as invaders, and were as usual peevish, childish and exacting among themselves about their wounds and pains. . . .

July 19th, Bal

P. S. A surgeon who left Harper's ferry this morning, tells me that the last corps was crossing this morning, but it is known not to be the intention to pursue the enemy. Reason, the army is too much fatigued and worn down, man and horse, to undertake forced marches. This is the conclusion of a medical survey. It is thought they will move six miles a day only—taking it easy, while they guard against inroads from Lee, through the mountains. The Quarter Master is making arrangements to ship stores to Warrenton.

The following are among the corps and division generals which the Army of the Potomac has lost since its organization, including [illegible] and those transferred to other commands: Sumner, F. J. Porter, W. F. Smith Franklin, And. Porter, Hooker, Burnside, Hancock, Couch, Siegal, Reynolds Dana Hartsoff, Park, McClellan,
its old Quarter M. Genl.—whose name I can’t recall, is another important head gone, though the present, Gen’l Ingalls is a better one.  

There are but 1,500 men of the regular army in the Army of the Potomac, at present. In ten of the regiments of regulars there are today but 1,000 men—or 100 men to a regiment on an average. The largest regular regiment in the army is, I believe, the 8th, now in New York, numbering 600 men. The full force of these regiments is over 1,500, each.

A wounded Mass. officer told me that when his regiment went into action at Gettysburg, it had but forty of the original 1,040 privates who enlisted in it two years ago. As it had the very hottest place on the left centre, he supposed that not one now remained. This was the third time he had been disabled and he had been six months of the war a prisoner.

You will see that all the public reports make a different statement of the vote of the Council of war on Monday from that which I gave you a few days ago from Meade. I may have misunderstood or misrecollected what he said, but I should think not. Possibly he used a general term—speaking of the sentiment of his corps commanders as a body, but if so, he certainly gave me to understand that it was

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16 Edwin Vose Sumner (1797-1863), relieved from duty, at his own request, after Fredericksburg; Fitz-John Porter (1822-1901), court-martialed, found guilty, and cashiered, January, 1863, later to secure a reversal of judgment; William Farrar Smith (1824-1903), transferred after Fredericksburg because of his part in a letter of protest sent direct to Lincoln; William Buel Franklin (1823-1903), deprived of command in the Army of the Potomac after Fredericksburg; Andrew Porter (1820-1872), appointed provost marshal general of Pennsylvania, November, 1862 (Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography [New York, 1891], V, 72; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies [Washington, 1880-1901], Series I, LL, 937); Joseph Hooker (1814-1879), relieved of command at his own request and transferred to the Department of the Cumberland, succeeded by Meade; Ambrose Everett Burnside (1824-1881), relieved of command after Antietam and assigned command of the Department of the Ohio; Winfield Scott Hancock (1824-1886), seriously wounded at Gettysburg; Darius Nash Couch (1822-1897), relieved at his own request after Chancellorsville, and assigned to command in Pennsylvania; Franz Sigel (1824-1902), relieved because of bad health; John Fulton Reynolds (1820-1863), killed in action at Gettysburg; Napoleon Jackson Tecumseh Dana (1822-1905), badly wounded at Antietam; George Lucas Hartsuff (1830-1874), severely wounded at Antietam; John Grubb Parke (1829-1900), transferred with Burnside after Fredericksburg to Ohio Department; George Brinton McClellan (1826-1885), removed from command after Antietam; Stewart Van Vliet (1815-1901), succeeded by Ingalls as quartermaster general in July, 1862 (George B. McClellan, McClellan’s Own Story [New York, 1887], 128-129; G. W. Cullum and C. Braden, eds., Biographical Register . . . U. S. M. A., Supplement [Saginaw, Mich., 1910], V).
against attack on that day. I think that I was mistaken in putting the phrase: “I dare not say how weak we are,” into Meade’s mouth. It was Ingalls who said that, I conclude.

F. L. O.

The internal evidence of the letters plainly indicates that Olmsted expected Godkin to use the material sent him in his newspaper writing. Even more plainly in an earlier letter of Olmsted’s to Godkin, written from Vicksburg, the former tells the latter how to handle journalistically the material provided.¹⁷

Godkin, writing for the New York Times throughout these years, and acting as Civil War correspondent for the London Daily News, could have used the information Olmsted sent in either paper or in both. There is, however, no direct quotation of the letters in the New York Times for July and August, 1863, nor even a paraphrase. The work of the Sanitary Commission is covered by official reports,¹⁸ while news of the battle and the movements which followed it is presented under the by-lines of the Times’s regular field correspondents. In its editorials, to the composition of which Godkin may have contributed, the paper strongly defended Meade against his critics, urging that the General be left to make his own strategic decisions. The paper’s policy was set, however, before Godkin could have been swayed by Olmsted, since the first of the pro-Meade editorials was published on July 12.¹⁹ Olmsted’s word to Godkin may lie behind some of the later editorials, to strengthen a position already taken.²⁰

On the other hand, Godkin directly used Olmsted’s information and point of view for his London Daily News letters. Giving his source as “a friend of mine,” he quoted Meade in Olmsted’s own words, as justification for the failure to attack; stated “on excellent authority” the Federal inferiority in numbers; closely paraphrased Olmsted’s account of regimental losses, and in conclusion took the

¹⁷ Olmsted to Godkin, Apr. 4, 1863, Godkin Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
¹⁸ New York Times, July 9, 1863, and later issues; July 16, July 31 (signed Frederick Law Olmsted).
¹⁹ Ibid., July 12.
²⁰ Ibid., July 25 and July 30.
journalistic liberty of sharpening Olmsted’s story of the Massachusetts regiment—of which, in Godkin’s version, at the close of battle “not a man remained.” As a good Union man, he must have decided that Olmsted’s further insistence on the Federal weakness made dangerous publicity for the cause. He did not emphasize it, but in a later article strongly defended Meade, and quoted entire “some excellent remarks upon the situation” taken from the New York Times—remarks made in a characteristically Godkinian style, and likely enough his own.21

The accuracy in detail of the account which Olmsted provided his friend is debatable. While his own correction of the Meade comment reveals self-doubt, it also shows a meticulous and scrupulous intention. His hasty handwriting and the inaccuracy of spelling and wording suggest anxiety, fatigue, and hurry, and so, too, the perhaps outstanding importance of the letters—their psychological validity.

Olmsted, a trained and thoughtful observer, shows the stress of actuality. In intimate, though not responsible, touch with the military event, he reflects the exigencies to which Meade and his corps commanders responded. Since he was a man of cool and finished judgment, it is significant that he endorsed Meade’s decision, agreeing that an attack upon Lee’s retreating forces was impossible immediately after the battle, and that an offensive engagement on the 13th would have been risky, if no worse.

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