The Civil War
of a Pennsylvania Trooper

The Civil War letters of Sergeant Joseph Addison Griner to his mother, Sophia Jane Griner, and his sister Lavinia are uncommon in several ways: they form a correspondence covering practically the entire duration of the war and all the major campaigns in the East; they reveal the cavalry soldier’s view of long encampments, bad weather, sickness, and, occasionally, exciting fighting; and they demonstrate the persistent idealism that hardened but never failed and that surely was of great importance in the ultimate Union victory. Unfortunately, the letters are common in other ways: they reveal the limitations of Griner’s meager education; they are sometimes filled with the clichés of contemporary periodicals rather than fresh, imaginative expressions; and they show that if their author frequently searched for the significance of his experiences, he usually ended by accepting the most blatant Union war propaganda. It is hardly possible, in a short description, to exhaust the material of these one hundred and twenty-three letters, but by means of selected quotations, the typical qualities of the collection can be highlighted.¹

Joseph Griner was born on July 24, 1837, presumably in New Jersey. He was the eldest of six children born to Michael and Sophia Jane Griner. Joseph’s father was born on November 15, 1800, at Albany, New York, and his mother, on April 21, 1811, in Connecticut.² Michael Griner was by trade a glassblower, employed at one

¹ Extant are 102 letters from Joseph Griner to his mother, ten letters from Joseph to his sister Lavinia, four letters from Joseph to both or to the family, three letters from Sophia Jane Griner to her son Joseph, and one letter from Lavinia to Joseph. In addition, there are single letters from Joseph to Mr. Burdsale and Mr. Shiner, from S. S. Benedict to Sophia Jane (about Joseph’s projected furlough in 1864), and from F. T. Marter to Sophia Jane (about Joseph’s death).

² Sophia Jane Hayden, who died on Jan 28, 1886, was a widow when she married Michael Griner, surviving a Mr. King, by whom she had a daughter, Sarah Jane King (b. Nov. 15,
time in the Waterford Glass Works, Camden County, New Jersey. He was with the Union Army in 1861, serving at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, possibly as a civilian employee, but returned home early in 1862. In August, 1862, he enlisted in the 12th New Jersey Infantry and served for a time in an ambulance train, being discharged for disability on July 8, 1863. His age at that time is given on his discharge paper as sixty-six. This apparent stretching of his age and a family legend lead one to believe that like other old men of the time who found it difficult to obtain a job, Michael Griner enlisted primarily in order to enjoy a disability pension. He became a member of Post 198, G.A.R., and died on December 7, 1877.

Sophia Jane Griner seems to have been the chief supporter of the family during the Civil War years, working as a schoolteacher at Prompton, Wayne County, Pennsylvania, although she also lived at Hyde Park, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. From time to time, she seems to have been with her husband in New Jersey. The family was hard up, and although at times Joseph received no army pay for as long as six months and had to receive some help from home, his letters show that he contributed substantially to the family income. Before the war, Joseph worked in sawmills on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. On April 23, 1861, he enlisted in the Philadelphia Light Guards, Company C, Third Brigade, First Division Pennsylvania Volunteers. Re-enlisting that summer, he served with what was to become the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry. He was killed in the skirmish at Dinwiddie Court House on March 31, 1865.

Joseph Griner’s first letter in this series, dated April 17, 1861, is curiously prophetic of events to come: “We have elected Mr. Lincoln but I am afraid it is a-going to call your son from home for a long period and perhaps forever, for I am not the one to stay at home when danger threatens my beloved country, to be called a coward in after years when peace is again declared and prosperity again reigns

After reporting his enlistment at Philadelphia in a letter of April 28, on June 6 he described his adventures in pro- Secessionist Baltimore, adding this comment: "How often in boyhood's young days when reading the account of soldiers' lives have I longed to be a man, and now the opportunity has offered; but I wish it was with some other foe than our own countrymen. But at present they are the worst foe that we ever had. They are nearly as bad as the Indians and as desperate and savage."

Much space in succeeding letters is devoted to accounts of camp life. On July 6 Joseph wrote to his mother, not very considerately: "A sad occurring took place in the Massachusetts camp last Saturday in the death of a fine young man by the accidental discharge of his pistol. He had been on parade and just came in camp when the ramrod of his cannon was misplaced. In stooping to replace it the pistol fell from his belt and exploded, the ball passing through his heart, killing him instantly. He fell dead at his two brothers' feet. He was sent to his parents in Boston." In the same letter, he wrote that he intended to re-enlist, "for there is nothing else to do as I know of and besides I do not wish to give it up so just as I am getting used to it." In time, he came to be proud of soldiering; announcing on October 10 his promotion to the rank of corporal, he added: "And withall soldiering is not so bad as some people make believe it to be. If Henry [McCully] had stuck too he would have seen something, but we don't want no babies in the army. We want men." On October 13, he returned to the subject: "I want you to tell me what has become of Henry and Smith. Tell them they need not be alarmed, for we don't want such men in the army as them." And finally, on January 16, 1862, he warned: "Smith and McCully are liable to be sent for at any moment. If so they will likely be shot as deserters or imprisoned for three years, but don't say anything about it."

Joseph's own patriotism, on the other hand, was quite vocal. In his letter of November 7, 1861, from Arlington, he wrote:

We struck tents at an early hour on Monday and marched to the Long Bridge, but the water being so high from the recent heavy rains the regiment

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3 The often erratic spelling and capitalization in the letters have been standardized and a minimum of punctuation has been added. It has seemed advisable to leave the grammar untouched. Necessarily, some flavor of the letters has been lost by these changes; for example, Joseph persisted in signing his letters "Your Affectionate Son," and often his struggles with polysyllabic words were truly heroic.
could not cross. We then marched four miles to the Chain Bridge and
crossed in Virginia to Arlington Heights, where we encamped for the
present. But I guess for a short time only. We are at present under the guns
of Forts Corcoran and Woodbury and another which I do not know the
name of and behind strong rifle breastworks. It is a pretty wild country
here, hilly and rocky but a very romantic place. War has done its work here.
Where once was fertile fields and stately forests the white tents of soldiers
is seen shining in the distance. Houses are demolished, grain is trampled
down, timber lays in heaps and piles to clear the country for action, but
I don't think we will ever have one here.

Your prayer is a most noble one and one which every mother should send
up to heaven to protect them that has gone forth to defend their country's
rights and liberties. He indeed is a most cowardly poltroon who will lay out
and see his country's flag trampled in the dust when he can raise his arm to
defend or die in its defense. And I am willing to die at any moment or come
off the field with an unstained name. And I hope the day will yet come when
the name of Joseph Griner will be raised to the book of fame or else find an
honorable grave on the field of battle.

Five days later, on November 12, he became quite eloquent when he
described the celebration of General McClellan's birthday:

Large bonfires was erected in camp. Patriotic songs was sung by officers as
well as privates and all seemed to enjoy the sport. Finally, the fireworks in
the city [Washington] looked splendid. It was a sight once seen not soon to
be forgotten. To see all those grim visages, soldiers standing around a large
fire, their breasts swelling with patriotism, cheering for their gallant leader
till the very hills seemed to echo back the sound of rejoicing. I wish, Mother,
you could see some of the heart-inspiring scenes which I have seen since
I first enlisted in the service. You would then know the reason that prompts
me to endure cold, hunger, and fatigue. But them that has never experi-
enced them can never know why man should leave his home and them he
holds most dear for the hardships of the soldier's life. But I have passed
through them all and never will I leave while my country stands in need or
death shall lay me low.

Not all of Joseph's experiences were so moving, as he admitted in
his letter of November 14: "Every day we hear most pleasing
accounts from our brothers-in-arms that has gone before us, and
makes us wish we were with them. I begin to think now we will have
nothing at all to do. It is too bad after being eight or nine months
enlisted to see no service at all, but maybe it is all for the best and
maybe we will see service enough yet before the war is over." When
something unusual did happen it was, understandably, especially exciting to Joseph; his letter of November 19, for example, described a grand review and a visit to the house in which the early war hero Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth was killed:

It was the grandest sight the world has yet seen. [Colonel Ernest G.] Chorman’s regiment occupied a very conspicuous place in the drama; some ninety thousand United States troops were reviewed by Gen. McClellan, President Lincoln, and all the greatest men in the country. The shouts of the men fairly made the earth tremble as the young Chieftain passed in review, the horses seemed to catch the spirit of the men and pawed and neighed in concert with the cheers of their riders. Munson’s Hill was four weeks ago in full possession of the Rebels but now in possession of our men, which I think they are able to hold to the last.

I got a pass and rode down to Alexandria to see some of my old friends stationed at that place. I stopped at the Marshall House to see the place where the noble Ellsworth fell by the hands of assassin. Imagine my feelings, Mother, upon standing on the very spot where he breathed his last. I nearly shed tears. I send you a piece that I cut from the step where he fell.

Joseph’s pride as a soldier is revealed in greater detail in another letter of November, 1861:

We got our full complement of arms yesterday and are well equipped. The arms are of the best description and workmanship and bought at the highest prices. The revolvers are the best I ever saw and the sabres which us non-commissioned officers got are of the best quality, being made in France. Of the rifles I cannot speak too highly. They carry a ball to almost a certainty eight hundred yards.

Imagine your son mounted upon a fine horse, armed with sabre, revolvers, and rifle, and ready to meet his foes at any moment, and it ought to make any mother proud who has a son to serve her country at this her time of need. I tell you what, Mother, when I first buckled on my sword it made me feel awful proud.

We are pretty comfortable at present. We sent to the city and bought a small stove which warms our tent nicely. The boys are highly pleased with it. I like the horse service much the best so far although you have more work to do in camp. But when it comes to marching it is much the easiest. But I don’t have the work to do myself, only to see that it is done. There is a great responsibility resting upon the non-commissioned officers, much more than there is upon the commissioned, but so far I have performed every duty with satisfaction and hope to to the end. I think I will get promoted before long to a sergeancy.
Like many soldiers, Joseph seems to have left a girl at home. He frequently inquired about her, and in his letter of December 1 he raised a somewhat awkward problem:

I want you [Mother] to be sure to find out about Rachel Casto. And now to tell you the reason I wish to know so particular, not that it worries me in the least but for this reason. I received a letter from her sometime ago, but I could not make out the name. I knew it to be from her, but I thought maybe she might be married, and if so I did not want to keep up a correspondence with no married woman, for I have young ones enough to keep my head busy at present. It occupies all my spare time to write to them all as it is.

Rachel, as it turned out, was not married, and Joseph continued to write to her, although what he said in those letters will never be known. Like most soldiers he seems to have been interested in the girls near his camp. On December 31 he wrote:

I shouldn't wonder, Mother, if I didn't fall in love with some of these pretty Secesh girls here yet. Some of them are for Union. I see their fathers and brothers are all pretty much in the Secesh army.

I was in the house of the notorious Williams who boasts of having shot over thirty of our pickets. He has got an interesting daughter and wife but I wouldn't trust them far. We have some good times and some pretty rough ones.

In this same letter he spoke enthusiastically about a new horse he had acquired. He had lost his first horse, and earlier in the month had written sadly: "I loved him. He was so intelligent and noble." Now, "I have got a splendid little mare . . . which I think the world of. I wish you could see her every morning when I go out. She shakes hands with and appears very glad to see me. I wish you could see her. I would fetch her home with me but it would cost too much, I fear. But when I come for good I will fetch her along. . . . I guess this is an awful poor letter but I am a poor letter [writer] at the best, so you must excuse me, for the boys are cutting up pretty high tonight and they bother me very much. The cannons are firing salutes in honor of the New Year."

Joseph's letter of January 16, 1862, suggests that Sophia Jane Griner was not quite as confident of Providence as was her son:

You say, Mother, that you think the Lord has left us to fight our own battles, but I think that he is still with us, for are we not almost always vic-
torious in all our battles with fearful odds? I have not yet despaired, nor shall I as long as I see any chance at all. To this war do I look for a rise in this world or death in an honorable grave, for if we do not conquer I wish to live no longer. There is an ambition stirred within me which never before existed. And every time I look toward the city and see the dome of that all-inspiring building, the Capitol, my heart swells within my breast and I think, shall traitors ever make their laws beneath its roof where the best men that ever lived once held the power? Never while millions of freemen can support our rights shall traitors rule. But I did not expect to make a speech this morning, Mother, so I guess I will quit and talk about something else.

The life of a bored but not entirely unhappy soldier in camp appears through Joseph's letter of February 2:

Nothing but mud, mud, mud. I am getting tired and sick of seeing it any more. But notwithstanding we are all enjoying very good health and spirits, trusting our great commander's judgment in letting us lay idle so long, hoping for the day to come when we shall bid good-bye to the rocky shores of the romantic Potomac and sacred soil of Virginia.

The boys are all happy and gay as if nothing ever troubled them. It is a great source of amusement to me to see them gathered together at night and listen to their many stories of home and their travels etc.

By my side lies my three favorites—namely Rifle, Sabre, and Revolver, as bright and clean as labor can make them. My other pet stands quietly eating her hay along the picket in front of the tent, ready at any moment to be saddled and away, while I am getting as fat and lazy as I can be very well.

I don't think I shall ever be good for anything to work again. I guess I shall have to get a commission in the Regular Army and always be a soldier. It's the height of my ambition to come home with the straps of an officer on my shoulders, if they would only give us something to do to earn them.

Joseph's prejudice for the military turns up in a letter to his sister Lavinia on March 3: "If you ever get married, I don't want you to any citizen but an officer, for I don't think they are worth any woman's notice any more (citizens, I mean). Any man that will stay at home in these times I think is beneath all notice whatsoever. I begin to like soldiering better every day, and I don't expect I shall ever be good for anything else."

The capture of some prisoners was reported in his letter of March 6: "Yesterday some of the companies were out scouting and captured some prisoners, who were sent into Washington to jail. They were very fine looking men to what some of them are, but
they looked pretty sheepish, I can tell you, just about like a boy at school when the master is a-going to whip him."

Then, in his next letter, dated March 15, he described his first major action:

They [the Confederates] have the most splendid winter quarters built of logs, far superior to ours, and have lived a great deal better by the looks of the provisions laying around. There was at least 50,000 men laying there the morning before we came to Centreville. Their forts were well built, but in the place of guns they had large logs placed in the embrasures, I suppose to scare us, but in that they failed.

After resting our horses for some time we again proceeded forward towards Bull Run, which place we came to about sundown. The bridge was set on fire and still burning, but the cavalry proceeded forward on to Manassas Junction, where we arrived about nine at night, but everything was set on fire by the Rebels and was still burning. We could see the rascals passing and repassing the fires as we came up, but they all left before we got there.

Well, Mother, there is three of the strongest places the enemy held, taken in one day without firing a gun. Our regiment and the 3rd Pennsylvania Cavalry formed the advance guard of the Army of the Potomac, and the utmost praise is due our regiment for the coolness displayed on that eventful day, and I hope their services will duly be appreciated by their friends at home. And I hope the day is not far distant when you shall all hear a good account of the gallant 8th, for McClellan says he hasn’t a finer regiment in the service.

Day before yesterday I was promoted to a sergeant by the Major, which is quite a raise from the ranks. One step more, Mother, and if nothing happens and I have no downfall and the shoulder straps of a commissioned officer is on my shoulders.

I should like to have England try America after we get this settled if she wants some fun, for our troops are getting perfect in their drill and never was there more discipline in the Regular Troops than in the Volunteers at present. But I must close for the present. It is raining about as hard as it can and our tent is leaking badly, if you can judge by the look of this sheet of paper, which I think is pretty well spotted with rain. . . . I liked to have forgotten to tell you about my adventure. In fording Bull Run my horse stumbled and threw me over her head, plumb in the creek, and the boys call me the hero of Bull Run.

Joseph’s next adventures came in the Peninsular Campaign. At first, he was largely a commentator on the action. On April 24 he wrote:

Jeff [Davis] commands his forces himself in person. Gen. McClellan commands our troops against him and works day and [night]. He has his coat
off and sleeves rolled up and looks more like a laborer than the great Chief-tain of our country. But his presence inspires the men with confidence, which they much need under their severe trials which they labor. . . . The Rebels played a pretty nice trick on a regiment of our troops last week in trying to cross a sluice which was about knee-deep. But in crossing they left the water in on the poor fellows and nearly drowned them, taken some prisoners, but they paid dear for it the next day. The same regiment got an old cannon, and after firing until they got tired, left it to draw them on, laying in ambush until they came to take the piece away, when they fired on them, killing forty and taking some fifty. So you see they can’t make much playing tricks on the Yankees, for they can play as many tricks as they can.

On May 7 Joseph reported the capture of Yorktown, Williamsburg, and, prematurely, Richmond:

We left Hampton on Sunday last and proceeded to Yorktown while the battle was at its height at Williamsburg, a short distance from the former place. The Rebels left Yorktown on Sunday morning. The firing was kept up very heavy all Saturday and Sunday night, and I suppose they thought the place was becoming too hot for them. We lay at present on the very spot where they used to shell so heavy. The earth is literally torn up with the shot and shell, the timber is greatly torn down, and the ground is covered with huge pieces of shell, and the fresh-made mounds of earth mark but too plainly the spot where some of the brave defenders of this glorious Union lie sleeping the sleep that knows no waking, while their friends at home must mourn. The Rebels made a pretty bold stand at Williamsburg, which place was strongly fortified. Col. [William F.] Small’s [26th] Regiment, P.V., was on the advance and got badly cut up. The New Jersey 7th performed prodigies of valor. After fighting their way in through four columns deep of the Rebels, they found themselves entirely surrounded and cut off from reinforcements and nothing left but to fight or be taken prisoners, which they done with credit to themselves and the state they came from, but they got badly cut to pieces. There was a great many of my most intimate friends in that regiment, which I fear I shall never see again. . . . I understand this morning that Richmond is taken but I don’t know whether it is true or not. It seems, Mother, as if McClellan is afraid that some of us will get hurt, for he keeps us in the rear. He knows he can trust us, for at the taking of Manassas he gave us great praise. It is not from incompetency, for we are well drilled, but he wants the best in the reserve corps in case of need. We are always in close quarters to any battle and see all that is going on.

I would like to give you a small description of Yorktown, but my space is small. It is a very strongly fortified place, their works being well built and mounted with splendid guns, but they are all spiked and look as sullen as their prisoners, who are pretty hard looking cases. They have a great many torpedoes and infernal machines planted around Yorktown, but they
haven't done much harm yet. They are making the Rebels dig them up. Yesterday they dug up some fifty.

We will soon be in Richmond now, Mother, and soon demolish all Secesh out of Virginia and then [head] for some other state. Keep up a good heart, dear Mother, and trust in God for the best, and all will yet be well. . . . You need not send me any more money, for we have been paid off. I wish I could send you some, but I am afraid to from here, for it ain't safe.

On May 10 he wrote indignantly about the Confederate withdrawal from their fortifications at Yorktown:

Yesterday I paid a visit to the Rebel's works at Yorktown, which are very formidable in appearance; and had an army of men in place of dastardly cowards held them, it would have cost many a valuable life to have taken their fortifications. But they know they are in the wrong and therefore can fight with no confidence. They have the largest description and best of guns at Yorktown, splendid fortifications put up by the best engineers in the country, but still they evacuated them all without a struggle. It makes my blood boil with indignation to see such cowardice from my own countrymen too, from the very people I always respected, from the very people [of] whom I was born, from the chivalry of the South. It is degrading in the highest degree to all American citizens to own them as countrymen.

The guns are all spiked and charged. Four of their best rifled guns had burst recently, scattering the fragments of iron in all directions. And by the looks of the blood more than one scoundrel had bitten the dust from his own instrumentality in trying to take the lives of others. But the ways of Providence are wonderful. . . . On last Thursday Gens. Beauregard, [Joseph E.] Johnston, and Jeff Davis was at Yorktown and held a council of war with Magruder, the latter general being in command at that place, when it was agreed by the wise heads of the Southern Confederate States to evacuate the town, which was done on Sunday, much to the chagrin of Magruder, who I believe is a pretty brave man, and if he was on the right side would gain good praise.

Joseph's usual response to the enemy was contemptuous laughter, as his letter of May 18 shows:

This is a most beautiful country here, and the farther we get in it the nicer it gets, large splendid plantations and any quantities of Niggers, but the white people are principally Secesh and will hardly give us a drink of water. I must tell you of a little trick practiced by the darkies here. We are encamped on a large plantation where there is some twenty of the latter race. When the Rebel pickets used to be posted here, ours was close by; the people used to send the darks with provisions to the former, but the darks instead
of carrying the provisions to the Rebels carried it to ours. That was a pretty good joke, wasn’t it, for them. The Negroes all hail our approach with joy. The Secesh are all down in the mouth and begin to think that they had better let seceding alone. I don’t think the war will last much longer, for I don’t see how it can.

As the days went on, Joseph played a more active part in the Peninsular Campaign. It was a weary young soldier who wrote on July 6:

I am pretty well worn out with fatigue, being in the saddle pretty much all the time of late, day and night covering the rear of our army. The Rebels harass us all the time, and many were the skirmishes we had with them but with small loss except horses; for eight successive days our horses were not unsaddled, nor did we lay down to sleep. But I am only adding to your misery by recalling these scenes. We are now in a place of safety, and I don’t think we will be likely to get into such a scrape again. I could write volumes if I chose, but what is the use, only to tell you of my safety. My time is precious. Let the reporters write that has nothing else to do.

On July 28, he wrote his last letter about the unsuccessful campaign: “That retreat was surely a masterly one and shows great generalship on the part of McClellan. That week of battles, I shall never forget all its horrors, for I was in it all. May I never see such another. We are at present doing picket duty and have some amusing times. We often get into conversation with the Rebel pickets and have made a sort of agreement not to shoot at each other, but sometimes they do.”

He continued to have faith in McClellan, writing on September 8: “... we are hourly expecting an attack. It appears as if Providence was against us at present, but I have not despaired nor lost my confidence in little Mac but think things will all come out right by and by.”

Letters dated September 17, 18, and 26, 1862, all written on one sheet, describe Joseph’s part in the battle of Antietam:

[September 17] As we charged in one end of the town [Frederick, Maryland], the Rebels left the other. Burnside arrived at about the same time that we did from another direction and captured a number of prisoners. We stayed at Frederick that night and proceeded on to [Middletown], capturing some thirty prisoners. I led the extreme advance myself with a small party as advance guard and had my own fun chasing the Rebels; I captured ten myself.
I must tell you a little incident which occurred. You probably recollect of me telling of being on friendly terms with the pickets at Malvern Hill. Well, seeing a party of six Rebs ahead, I with a party of four made a dash at them. Seeing a noble looking man, I rode up to him and presented a cocked revolver at his head and demanded his surrender, which he seemed loath to do. When on looking he recognized in me his old friend of the Hill, instantly dropping his arms he rode up and grasped my hand. But the bugle is sounding the assembly and I must stop for the present.

[Boonsboro, September 18] The success of yesterday's battle—one of the hardest of the war, the results of which I have not heard as yet—you will know probably as soon as I. Thousands of wounded are passing this way. . . . All quiet this morning except an occasional shell. The Rebs have fallen back. . . . But Sis, I have only a few minutes more, so I will finish about the picket. He exclaimed, "Why Sergeant, is this you? I would rather give you my arms than any other man in the army." He then drew his sword and gave it to me and introduced me to his friends, and the best of feelings prevailed. But Sis, there is that confounded bugle again.

[Sharpsburg, September 26] Day before yesterday I passed over the late field of battle, and the horrors presented to the eye was awful. Thousands of mutilated corpses lay as they had fallen, and the stench nearly suffocated me. For once in my life since I have been a soldier I was horrified, with no excitement to draw one's thoughts from the scenes before his eyes. You can imagine my feelings.

But we soon had something to draw our thought elsewhere, for passing on we came suddenly upon a Rebel battery who were not slow to open on us, and every description of missile, shell, grape, canister, railroad iron, etc., was hurled amongst us but with not much fatality. Our battery soon silenced them.

Joseph's next surviving letter, dated December 19, was written on a sheet from the marriage register in King George Court House, Virginia, and contains an account of the battle of Fredericksburg:

We have had some pretty exciting time lately at Fredericksburg. I happened to be an eye witness to the whole, from the bombardment of the city till the battle of Saturday, and I never saw such a sight before. Imagine a hundred and seventy heavy guns opening their thunders at once, the screams of the dying and wounded, the incessant rattle of small arms, the cheers of the combatants, the shrill screech of the shells hurled through the air, and a hundred other awful things, and you have a small idea of the battle of Fredericksburg. Never shall I forget that sight as long as I live. I have seen some hard fighting, but I never saw anything to compare with that yet, but I haven't time to enter into any details at present. Let the reporters attend to that. . . . There is now six month's pay due me. I hope we will get paid soon.
The defeat at Fredericksburg did not discourage Joseph, even though his attitude toward his superiors became somewhat more critical. His letter of January 3, 1863, was both realistic and philosophical:

We have been very busy of late, which will, I hope, be a plausible excuse for my seeming neglect to my third duty: first my God, second my country, third my mother. Oh my country, how my heart bleeds for your welfare. If this poor life of mine could save you, how willingly would I make the sacrifice, but we must all wait our time. I feel that all will yet be well in the end, and our reverses are but to try our faith and patience. Had we but true and loyal men at our head, I think this cruel war would soon be at an end and rebellion soon be crushed to its core, but as long as each and all are working against the other, it will be a long time before this war is over and peace once more restored to our unhappy country.

The removal of Gen. McClellan was almost a death blow to the Army of the Potomac, but it has somewhat recovered from the shock. It is too well disciplined to display anything but good order, let any reverse meet them that may. We are all ready to welcome our idol back whenever he sees fit to come, which time I hope is not far distant. Burnside is an able officer, but he has not the talent of McClellan to handle an army like ours. . . . On our left flank along the Rappahannock the enemy are on the other side, and we often keep up a conversation at long range, but no firing has yet taken place between the pickets.

I am at present acting orderly sergeant of our company, which keeps me pretty busy, so if I don’t write a long letter today, you must not blame me for it. . . . I suppose, Mother, you would like to know whether I was ever under fire or not of the enemy. In answer I would say that I have passed through twenty-one different battles and skirmishes and never received a scratch. I have had bullets pass through my clothes and cannon balls and shell pass so close that I have felt the heat of them, but thank God I am still alive and well and as ready to serve my country as ever.

On January 17, Joseph reported a visit with his father, then in the army: “He looks hearty and well and is well used by the boys. He is in the ambulance train. He wants to know whether you took his dog and gun [to Pennsylvania?] with you or not. While I was with him your letter was handed him. He is well suited. He gave me ten dollars to send you. I will send five this time to see whether you get it or not, and as soon as you write I will send you the other five. . . . It is so cold, Mother, I can’t write much today.”

About the newest commander, General Hooker, Joseph was not very optimistic, according to his letter of February 6: “You ask me, Sis, whether we were one of those that got stuck in the mud. We
were, for the Army of the Potomac seldom moves without the 8th along. The army has a new commander again, Joe Hooker. I wish the weather was good to see what he would do, but I suppose he has rose so far but to fail as his predecessors. But I hope not, for he is an able officer." Letters of February 19 and 27 report continuing bad weather: "It has been the worst weather I ever saw. For four days it has been snowing and raining and the mud, you should see it. It is almost impassable. Teams can scarcely move at all, and a horse sinks in up to his flanks in soft mud. Everything is quiet and still as usual. I am well and in good spirits. . . . We went on picket on the 22nd of this month in that awful snow storm, and I caught a severe cold which nearly lay me up. I was sent into camp unfit for duty for once since I have been a soldier, but I am some better today." By March 9, he had recovered enough to joke with his sister about a picture he had sent home: "I am glad, Sis, somebody thinks well of my likeness. By the by, Sis, what do you think a young Secesh lady, pretty too, told me? Why, that so handsome a Yankee as I should be in the army to get killed. But I told her I wasn't killed yet. I have a good deal of sport sometimes. But Sis, don't think I am vain, far from it."

Although the letters reveal that Joseph fought in the battle of Chancellorsville, for once he chose to pass over his adventures; instead, since he was on picket duty along the Rappahannock, he asked his mother on May 20 "to send me some fish hooks, middling size, a tolerable stout line in your next letter if you can." On June 7, he announced his promotion to acting sergeant major, adding: "Mother, don't forget to send me all the Harpers Weekly's you can. My duties are numerous at present. I haven't much time to write today. Mother, I want you to send me a nice little necktie, for I have got to keep myself pretty decent in my new occupation, also some post stamps if you can conveniently. But I must close, for I have dispatches to make out this morning."

As one might expect, the beginning of the Gettysburg campaign disturbed Joseph. On June 18, he wrote: "I understand that Lee has crossed into Pennsylvania. I sincerely hope it is not so, for I wish not to see that state ruined by invading armies. But I fear it is only too true. The last accounts I heard he was only six miles from Harrisburg with nothing to oppose him. I expect he has possession of that place by this time. If he is in Pennsylvania, I shall be very anxious to get
there, I can tell, for I wish to defend the state." His next letter, from Manchester, Maryland, on July 3, reported his going into Maryland and Pennsylvania:

Heavy firing has been going on at the front for the last two days, but I haven't heard any news as yet of the results. Mother, I am not as much exposed as I used to be, for I don't go skirmishing unless the whole regiment goes into action. I haven't been into a fight since Chancellorsville, although the different companies of the regiment have all been engaged more or less. That firing is getting heavier all the time. I almost wish they would send us there, for I hate to hear a battle going on and not partake of its dangers.

I do not have to buy my own clothes, but I do buy a good many, for I don't like those government clothes. As soon as we get paid off I am a-going to send to you for a shirt or two. . . . Well, Mother, I have seen my chin today for the first time in nearly two years. In other words, I have shaven and I don't hardly know myself although I feel a great deal more comfortable.

On July 7 he described his adventures in the last stages of the Gettysburg campaign:

I am in excellent health and the best of spirits but very much fatigued from long and rapid marches by day and night. Night before last we made (under Gen. [Hugh Judson] Kilpatrick) one of the most daring raids of the war, passing entirely through Ewell's (late Stonewall Jackson's) corps, burning and destroying hundreds of wagons and capturing 425 prisoners without much loss. Yesterday we caused them to burn about ten miles of their wagon train at Williamsport in their attempt to recross the river back into Virginia. They are getting badly used up here. If Gen. Meade only pushes forward now, I think he will give them a defeat they will never get over. They are getting heartily sick of their northern campaign while our men are just getting in earnest. The old Army of the Potomac will yet win laurels for itself in this war so that it will ever be remembered in the hearts of its countrymen. The Rebel loss at Gettysburg was awful. Our loss was very heavy, and the battle of Gettysburg will long be remembered by those who participated on that bloody field.

Casualties were high in Joseph's regiment after the hard summer and fall of 1863. He wrote from Warrenton, Virginia, on October 31:

Yesterday we were relieved from picket at Beverly Ford, where lies a whole Rebel corps of infantry commanded by Ewell. They were very ill, too, firing upon us at every opportunity, but did not do us any harm. They were continually beating their drums and yelling and appeared to be trying to make all the noise possible from some cause. I don't think they made
much on their last trip but hard blows. The cavalry done hard service in the rear on that fall back. Our regiment is nearly used up. Two years ago we numbered twelve hundred; now we number 104 for duty; six months more of such service will use us all up if we don't get recruited before long.

His campaigning continued, however, and he sounded a little discouraged in his letter of December 5:

Last night is the first time for two or three weeks that I have slept under a tent, being constantly moving nearly day and night. We have had hard service, I can tell you. They make some strange moves with the army. After advancing for fifty or sixty miles, again [we] fall back. I care not for balls or other dangers as long as I can keep my face to the enemy, but I do hate to turn back. But it does not become me to dictate to our general. . . . We are now lying between the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers on the south side of the former. We are all very much disappointed at the turn of affairs, but I suppose it is all right, at least I hope so.

Mother, we haven't been paid for nearly four months. As soon as I get paid I will relieve your wants. I am sorry you did not get that $20 I sent you last pay day. Try and keep a good heart, Mother. I have only eight months more to serve this time.

There is nothing I want except some tobacco, which is hard to get here. If you could send me a half pound, I should be very glad of it.

Relief came with a furlough, anticipated in a letter on January 23, 1864, and concluded on March 19 when he returned to camp at Warrenton. He reported the normal camp adventures on April 23:

I just got relieved from picket this morning, and I don’t feel very brisk tonight. The guerrillas have become pretty troublesome for a few days past, but they haven’t done much damage as yet. Night before last they shot one of Co. E’s men—wounded him, but I think he will recover. I think now that the army will soon commence active operations if the weather will continue favorable, which I hope it will, for I begin to get anxious to see what Gen. Grant will do. I hope Lee will assume the offensive this spring, for then we will have a better chance at him. We had a grand cavalry review here a few days since by the new cavalry commander, Gen. Sheridan. Everything passed off in the best of style. . . . The boys are all merry tonight. Some singing and playing different kinds of music or fighting their battles over again around the camp fires.

On June 5 came the terse statement, “I have been within one and a half miles of Richmond,” followed on June 9 by an account of Sheridan’s Richmond raid:

I thought that I passed through hard service before, but all is nothing compared with the present. Grant has driven Lee within a few miles of Rich-
mond and is still fighting every day. We are now upon the same ground occupied by Gen. McClellan two years ago. Some of the same battlefields have been fought over again. Heavy fighting is going on today, but we are not engaged as yet, but it is hard to tell what an hour may bring forth. The cavalry corps has had hard service to perform this spring, doing the same duty as a corps of infantry besides making one of the greatest raids ever known, completely turning Lee’s right flank, gaining his rear and burning all his commissary stores, capturing a large wagon train, recapturing 500 prisoners of ours on their way to Richmond, and burning a great many cars, locomotives, tearing up railroads and injuring the Rebels to vast extent, and were at one time within one and a half miles of Richmond, where very heavy fighting took place. But we came out all right, but our loss was pretty severe. But they lost more than we did. Generals [J.E.B.] Stuart and [James B.] Gordon was killed on that raid. We were gone about twenty days and during that time had very little rest, and had not the country been rich should have fared very hard for food. As it was we had nothing sometimes for two or three days. We came back by the way of the peninsula, passing over the old Seven Days battlefields of McClellan and lay at Malvern Hill for two days to recruit ourselves and horses and then crossed the [Pamunkey] river at the White House and joined the main army.

Our loss in the cavalry corps within the latter part of March has been over 5,000 in killed and wounded. Our Regiment has lost about eighty men, several from my own company. I had my horse shot at Richmond. I think the Rebel capital must surely fall. If we had had a corps of infantry along, we could have taken it very easily. . . . Keep up a good heart and hope for the best.

Joseph was next heard from, on June 22, at City Point, where he awaited a new horse:

Sheridan has again started upon another grand raid. Where I do not know. How I should like to have been with him. For the first time I am absent from my company, but I hope to join it soon. This is indeed a place of war. Teams are constantly passing to and fro from the landing, carrying supplies to the front. . . . The weather is very warm and dry days but chilly nights with very heavy dews. The dust is truly awful. Water is scarce and poor, and the men suffer severely sometimes for it.

Grant, I think, is the right man in the right place. I also think if him and Meade cannot accomplish the downfall of Richmond, there isn’t any use of anybody else trying. The Niggers fight well and that is all the praise I can give them.

Prisoners are coming in all the time. About 1,000 lie within fifty yards from where I am writing, dirty, ragged, hard-looking specimens of Southern Chivalry.

After being in some fighting before Petersburg, which he noted in his letter of August 1, Joseph wrote home on August 6 from the
Cavalry Corps Hospital at City Point. There he remained, seriously ill with dysentery, until October, when he rejoined his unit. His letters during this period show that he never lost his spirits, even though he was eager to escape hospital confinement.

[August 20] It is a pretty place here on the Appomattox River just below Gen. [Benjamin Franklin] Butler's headquarters. All the firing from right to left is plainly heard from here, and several nights I have lain awake half the night listening to the combatants hammering away at each other, sometimes very heavy. . . . In this hospital are some 800 or 900 from the corps sick and wounded. They are daily shipping them north to the general hospital—that is, the worst cases. I haven't any news worth relating at all. Only when we was across the river we had some of the hardest fighting I ever saw. I got my clothes cut in several places. I saw the Rebel Gen. [John Randolph] Chambliss [Jr.] about ten minutes after he was killed. I believe some of our regiment killed him. We had men killed that day whose term of service expired the next. It seemed very hard after serving three years to be killed when their time was so near out, but I suppose it was to be so. . . . I should like to be home now and go a-trout fishing.

[August 31] I feel pretty well at times. Then again I feel miserable. Yesterday I was taken with the cramps in the stomach and had a very hard attack, but today I feel pretty well. I have had the chronic diarrhea for a long time. It is very hard to cure. There has been a great many deaths from it here. . . . I don't want to stay here longer than I can help, for I would sooner be with my company. . . . Fruit is pretty plentiful all through the country. I guess that was the cause of so much of the diarrhea through the army. But I am quite giddy-headed, so I guess I will close for the present.

[September 9] There is considerable indignation displayed at the proceedings of the Chicago [Democratic] Convention and their principals asking for an armistice at this time when it seems as if the Rebellion is at its extreme ends. . . . For my part I wish to see no kind of an armistice but a subjugation of the South. I would just as lief to hear of the defeat of the Democrat Party this fall as to hear of a Union victory, for I think it will be just about as beneficial to the country in its present state. Gen. Grant has a very curious way of firing salutes in honor of the victories with double-shotted guns. On Monday morning all the batteries in front of Petersburg was ordered to fire a salute in honor of the taking of Atlanta with double-shotted guns. The Rebs replied very lively, and I have very seldom heard a more furious cannonade than was kept up for an hour or more. So you see the Rebs had the pleasure of honoring their own downfall.

[September 19] I still think of going to the regiment soon. I have asked to go twice, but the doctor would not permit me to. If you only had some influential friends of the Governor's, you could get me a furlough, but I guess you have not up there [His mother tried but failed to arrange the fur-
lough]. . . . There is a good many dies here from wounds and sickness, or has, but not so many now that the weather has got cooler. . . . I guess there ain’t much danger of McClellan being elected this fall, but there’s no mistake but what he will run strong. Two or three nights ago the Rebs broke through our lines and carried off 250 head of cattle and got away with them. They murdered some of the guards that was guarding them in cold blood after they had surrendered.

[September 28] I shall try and go as soon as possible to secure it [a promotion to orderly sergeant in his company]. I think it best, and even if I can’t stand it I can come back here soon. I feel very well today and hope I shall continue so.

Back on duty, he wrote on October 7: “I feel pretty well, only somewhat weak yet, but I think I will be all right in a few days. A man will never get well in a hospital. I left there four days ago.”

Joseph continued to take an interest in politics. On October 12 he wrote: “My principal object, Mother, in writing [is] to get my papers for the coming election. I lost a vote yesterday by not having them. I guess you can get them for me by paying ten cents. See Harry about them, for I must not lose my vote for Uncle Abe, for it stands in hand for every true man to come forward and show his colors this fall to defeat the enemies of our country, the Copperheads.”

A letter on October 29 described the battle of Hatcher’s Run, near Petersburg:

I do not know whether the expedition was a failure or not. It consisted of two divisions of the Second Corps, two from the Fifth, and two from the Ninth Corps, with our division of cavalry—the Second. We started about three o’clock on the morning of the 27th and had advanced but a short distance before skirmishing commenced, which continued to get sharper as we proceeded on.

The cavalry captured quite a number of prisoners and some wagons loaded with hams and other commissary stores. No general fighting took place until about 4 o’clock in the afternoon, when the infantry were hotly engaged, and I have very seldom heard firing as heavy. We took our position on the left and was soon as hard engaged as the infantry but bravely held our own, and thus the firing continued until long after dark. The cavalry done its work well. I never saw them fight better. I think the Rebs got a great deal the worse end of the bargain. Charges and counter-charges were the order of the day, and both sides lost heavily. My company lost one man.

At 12 o’clock they commenced to fall back, and the following day were all in the old camps again, at least the cavalry was. But I think that portions
of the Fifth and Ninth Corps extended the lines considerably on the left in the direction of the South Side R.R. Thus you see tightening the grasp on Petersburg. . . . Mother, I want you to tell Father to send me by Adams Express a three-pound ax. . . .

Joseph received the ax on Christmas. Before then, according to his letter of November 30, he had built winter quarters with his friend F. T. Marter, his former “buddy” having been taken prisoner: “I have got a very pretty little house built of boards about six feet by eleven, plenty of room for two with a very snug fireplace built of logs which with a small fire warms the tent splendid. Myself and comrade are very well satisfied with our work. By the way, he is a very fine young man, smart, intelligent, and tidy, a native of Philadelphia with a splendid education.” But on Christmas Day he wrote that the cabin had to be rebuilt: “We have had new quarters to build lately. We had good ones, but they was not built in uniform style enough to suit the general, so he ordered others. They are now twelve feet long by six in width, five feet in height, composed of logs. I have just finished mine.”

Earlier, on December 13, Joseph had described the Weldon Railroad Expedition in which his unit played a major part. At the end of the letter he wrote: “I like to have forgot. Here is a piece of cloth, home-made, which I captured from a Reb. He had some twenty yards of it strapped on his saddle. But I chased him so hard he had to cut it loose and let it go. In returning I picked it up. They use it for clothing.”

Christmas, 1864, Joseph’s last, was relatively quiet:

Although Christmas I have been at work all day pretty steady. The day has been beautiful, mild as spring, in fact. There has been no terrible cold weather as yet, and all the snow that I have seen this winter I could hold in my cap. . . . The box came to hand about an hour ago, and I have just eaten a hearty supper. Everything was in good order, and the ax will answer very well indeed. I feel very thankful to you, Mother, and all the givers. Tell them so for me. . . . Not a shot has been fired on the lines today, which is remarkable, but I suppose they have a compromise for Christmas. I am in very good health and spirits. The news from all quarters is cheering, and I hope before long to hear of peace being declared.

On December 28, he asked for something to read: “Mother, if you have any old literary papers, I wish you would send me some, for I
find the lying in camp pretty tedious if only for a few days. I like to be going when the weather is good. The weather today is just like summer, mild and very warm, but tomorrow it will perhaps be colder. The flies are quite troublesome today. . . . I guess I'll lie down and take a nap." The lull in the war was brief, though, and on February 10 he reported more action:

I have passed through one of the greatest ordeals of blood—hard fighting, hard marching, cold and rainy weather, starving—as that I ever passed through. But thank a kind and merciful Providence, I passed through all unharmed but badly fatigued. But a few days rest will bring me around all right again. . . . There has been some terrible fighting, Mother, the past few days, and thousands of brave men that were alive and well last week are now filling honorable graves in defense of their country's rights. But, my dear Mother, it is not my intention to enter into any details, for I will leave that to newspaper correspondents. This is merely to assure you of my present safety.

Joseph was confident that the war would soon be over: "If he [General Sherman] meets with no disaster, the peace question is blown to the winds, and there is nothing left but to fight it out, and I think this summer will settle it; but many brave men must fall yet ere its close. There has been some heavy firing in the Petersburg lines for the last few days, but I guess it don't amount to much." He was shaken, however, by the death of his cousin, Edward Griner. On February 18 he sent his mother the details:

He was killed in the trenches of Fort Fisher [North Carolina] and died bravely fighting. His regiment was the first to storm the fort, and although but a handful fought as only brave men can fight and were the first to plant the old starry flag upon the ramparts of treason. I severely lament his loss, but I have the pleasure of knowing he died as becomes every true-born American, and no man can say Ed was a coward. He has proved his courage on many well-tried fields of battle. He has been in all this summer campaign under Butler and escaped unharmed. I know not what will become of Till [Edward's wife, Matilda] and her family.

Joseph's last letter touches once again on his cousin's death, but is generally optimistic:

March 19, 1865

My dear Mother

Yours was duly received, and I was very glad to hear that you received the money. I enclosed $20 a few nights since. I hope you have received that also by this time. I shall enclose $10 more in this.
I greatly lament Edward's loss, for I dearly loved him, but we must all submit to fate.

I am enjoying tolerable health at present. The weather here is as mild as midsummer, and I think before long you will hear of a forward movement of the Army of the Potomac, for I think Grant will use his best endeavors to wind up this affair this summer. I hope so, for what has got to be done must be, the sooner the better.

There was some very heavy mortar firing on the lines yesterday, but that is so common there is not much notice taken of it any more. One can see the shells burst from here quite plain, and it looks very pretty by night.

We have just received more good news from Sheridan, Sherman, and [Brigadier General John M.] Schofield. They are doing their work finely and seem determined to bring the war to a close. We have been having some fine reviews of late, some of the finest I ever saw. The army has improved greatly this winter, notwithstanding their several severe marches, and I do not think was ever in better condition. Gen. [David McMurtrie] Gregg has left us for good and is much regretted by all his command. He has been with us so long, shared our hardships and dangers in every instance, that it seems almost like losing a father. I know not who will take his place, but I suppose Grant will make a good choice, for he seldom misses. I wish Phil Sheridan would come back. We little thought what a commander the cavalry corps had when Phil first took command, for he looked very small and insignificant to take charge of 20,000 men and horses, but we soon learned to respect him.

Mother, I want you [to] make and send me a couple of check shirts for this summer if you can without much trouble, for they ain't as apt to get buggy as other shirts. Let some of the Prompton lasses work at them. You can send them by mail.

I received a letter from Sallie last evening. She is some better and has taken a trip to St. Louis for her health. Her sister resides there. I would write you a longer letter, but I have hers to answer today, and two letters in one day is an awful day's work for me. Tell Vickie I will answer hers soon. Give my love to all and write as soon as you receive this. Oh, I like to forget, I sent you my watch. Please write as soon as you receive it, for I shall be worried about it. I do not want any stamps at present, Mother.

Your affectionate son,

Joseph

Joseph Griner was killed on March 31 and probably never received his sister Lavinia's letter of March 24. Unaware of her son's death, his mother wrote on April 2:

My Dear Son,

I am quite anxious about you, for I see by the papers where our cavalry are, and I suppose you are with them, but I hope you are safe. I think we
are progressing in our war, but it is very hard to think of the loss of life in these last battles. We hope every one will be the last. Your last letter containing the ten dollars was received, also the one with twenty and the [gold] watch all safe. I looked for a letter from you last night, but you had not been where you could write, I know. I want to hear from you very much. I pray for your safety hourly. God grant you may be saved through this great danger. I will not write much until I hear from you, which I hope will not be long. I will send you some shirts soon. Things are coming down quite fast.

Your Affectionate Mother,

S. Jane Griner

On May 4, 1865, Joseph's friend F. T. Marter sent Mrs. Griner an extraordinary letter of consolation:

Mrs. Griner

Madam

Your letter of inquiry through Miss Spencer [of the Christian Commission?] came to hand, and the contents have been duly noted by me.

In writing to you in regard to the death of Joe, I undertook to perform a duty for which I was not at all fit. If I could have gotten another to have performed the sad task, I should not have done it myself, although it was as little as I could have done as a friend of Joe's. Death is to me a very painful subject to speak upon. I can sympathize with you all in this sad hour of grief and affliction. I am an orphan, having lost both of my parents at a very early age, and at present time have not an own brother or sister living. I am quite alone in the world, and therefore seek to make friends of all I came in contact with. Joseph was much beloved among his comrades, making friends and companions with all whom he met. In the late campaign many were killed in the regiment, but none missed as much as Joe. I do not know how much money was coming to him, but will inform you as soon as I can find out, which will be in a few days as the rolls are about being made out for the last two months.

If I live to get out of the service, I shall endeavor to come and see Mrs. Griner. Joe always spoke very highly of his home and friends and tried to get a furlough to visit them this last winter.

I do not know Charlie's address but will try and find it out. We did not come near enough to the infantry for me to see him to tell him of Joe's death.

I am sorry to say that there was not any of his personal effects recovered, as the Rebs took everything from him, even to part of his clothing. It has been very near ten days since we last received any mail, and your letter just came to hand this afternoon; and I am answering it this evening after having finished my work in the office.
I have not the power nor words to express myself as I should like to, but hope that you will take the will for the deed and excuse my briefness upon this occasion.

Anything that I can do or any information that I can give you upon this sad subject will be most gladly and cheerfully rendered.

Joe's Sincere Friend,

F. T. Marter

Sophia Jane Griner invited Mr. Marter to visit the family in Pennsylvania, and he accepted, leaving behind his picture to illustrate the collection of her son's letters.

Mary Washington College of the University of Virginia

Daniel H. Woodward