

# 'Dear Friends': The Civil War Letters of Francis Marion Elliott, A Pennsylvania Country Boy

Edited by Peter G. Boag

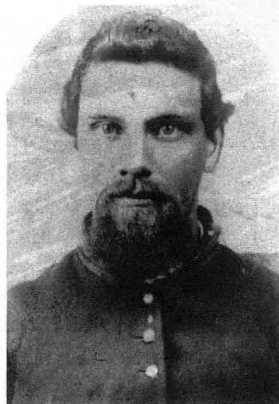
**F**RANCIS Marion Elliott was born 15 July 1842 in Cumberland Valley, Bedford County, Pennsylvania. He was one of Samuel and Margaret (Hemming) Elliott's 12 children. Little is known of Francis' life before he enlisted in the Union Army in Spring 1862. He fought with the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry's Company "E," which included many young men from Bedford County. Military records described him as 6-foot-1, with a florid complexion, blue eyes, and light brown hair.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1862 and 1865, the years Elliott served in Virginia, he wrote letters to his father, his sister, Harriett ("Het"), and his brother, Thomas. Of the dozen extant letters, the nine more interesting ones provide a picture of Elliott's emotional reaction to the Civil War. Additionally, these letters, written in an unschooled hand, offer a sample of nineteenth-century southern Pennsylvania vernacular and speech patterns.

During Elliott's first summer of the war, the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry made up part of the

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Peter G. Boag is Assistant Professor of History at Idaho State University. Francis Elliott's writing style is preserved here. Only occasionally did he use a period, preferring extra spaces to separate sentences. Only when the punctuation or bad spelling impaired meaning did the editor add a comma or a period or properly spell a word. All such additions appear in [brackets]. Locations that help track Elliott's movement also were added. Finally, Elliott chose not to sign many of his letters.



Francis M. Elliott, c. 1862

Army of Virginia under General John Pope. On 18 July, Pope issued orders for his Army to "subsist upon the country in which their operations were carried out."<sup>2</sup> At this time, we first hear from Elliott.

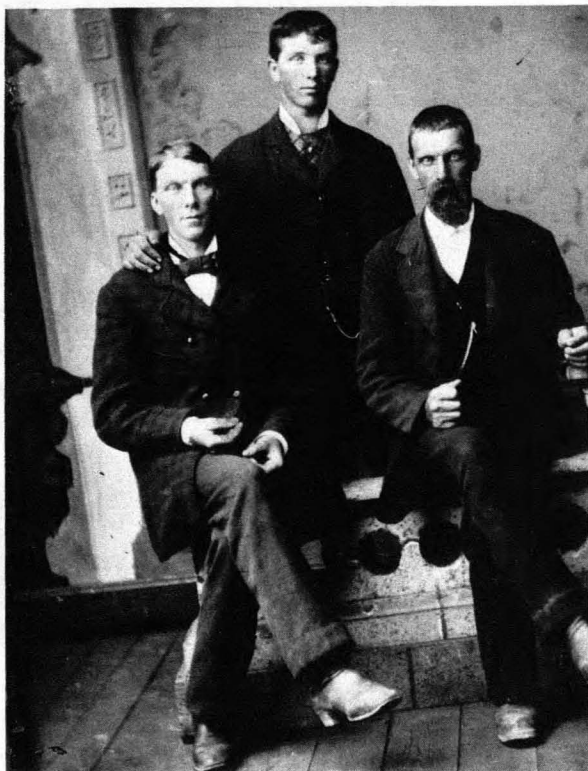
*August 10, 1862  
Ferrysville [Fayetteville, Virginia]*

Dear Brother

I suppose that you haint heard any thing of me since we left Clouds Mills [Virginia] we left there on the

27 July and we have ben on the March nearly evry day since and the way the army is a taring things to peaces it [breaks] evry thing whare ever we stop[.] the Salgers just goes and breaks open the corn cribs and [graineries] and helps them selfs[.] [G]eneral Pope has issued an order for his army to forage for themself to what they can find I dont see what the people will live on in Virginia for they wont have a nuf to keep them til winter for the Army is taking it all now they just turn the horse in to a field wheat and let them eat a way at the shocks of grain if they had don this long a go I think that the war would have been ove[r] before this time.

Although Elliott volunteered to go to war, his letters reveal no reasons. In the end, he was unprepared for the psychological burdens of war, for shortly after he wrote the above letter, he deserted and fled to



Elliott on the right; the other men, and the date of the photograph, are not known.

Ohio. During this period, he wrote one letter to his father. In the excerpts that follow, Elliott gives advice to the family in the event another son be called to war; he also reveals his low regard for blacks.

*June the 14 1863  
Harison County Ohio*

[Samuel Elliott,]  
thomas I fear wil be drafted[....] if he should be  
sow unlucky as to be drafted my advise to him to  
go to ilnois[...] but I wil tel him that thare is now  
plase like home on the count of sickness thare is  
A good [d]eal of sickness hear thare is not hardly  
A fimily but what has the tyfoide feaver I ploud  
som corn for a man last weak whare thare was  
three laying sick with that desease thare is more  
sickness hear now then thare has ben for ten years  
but it is nearly all gon[....] thay ar inlisten dam  
black nigers at [Cadiz] thay wil start A way to  
morow[....] who is it that would go in this war  
with A free wil and stand up by the Side of A  
niger and fight for thare fredom it is not I by a  
hel of A site I want free from this hel of A  
war[....]

if you are able perhaps it wil be ove Some good to  
you if you can get my discharge what ever it

cost I wil work for you to the A mount if it be A  
hundred dollars this war has Cos[t] the deth of  
one that wil never be for gotten I hope that it  
wil be the last[....] I hope that you wil tend to  
theas matters as Soon as you can I am working  
for a man by the name of thomas Baker I get  
thirteen dollars A month I like this cuntry and  
the people all first strate.

Fancis M Elliott

Elliott's statement that "this war has Cos[t] the death of one that wil never be for gotten I hope that it wil be the last," refers to his elder brother, John Elliott, who died 1 April 1863 after accidentally shooting himself in the leg. This brother had also belonged to Company E of the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry, having enlisted 31 December 1861 in Philadelphia. While John Elliott was in the Armory Hospital in Washington, D. C., Walt Whitman visited him and later wrote the following to his own mother.

*To Louisa Van Velsor Whitman  
Washington, Wednesday forenoon, May 13th 1863*

Dear Mother,

I am late with my letter this week — my poor, poor boys occupy my time very much — I go every day, & sometimes nights — I believe I mentioned a young man in Ward F, Armory Square, with a bad wound in the leg very agonizing, had to propt it up, & an attendant all the while dripping water on night & day — I was in hopes at one time he would get through with it, but a few days ago he took a sudden turn, & died about 3 o'clock the same afternoon — it was horrible — he was of a good family (handsome, intelligent man, about 26, married) his name was John Elliott of Cumberland Valley, Bedford Co. Penn., belonged to 2d Pennsylvania Cavalry[....]

Walt<sup>3</sup>

There is no correspondence from Elliott between his letter from Cadiz, Ohio, to his father in June 1863 and the next letter in July 1864. He returned to Pennsylvania at least once, to marry Ellen Katharine Sliger on 28 November 1863. In early January 1864, he was arrested in Bedford County — \$30 was paid for his apprehension — and he was taken back to the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry. The remainder of his letters encompass the period from the summer of 1864 until the war's end in 1865, and give details of a hip wound, exciting near-captures by the Confederates, unsettlingly macabre scenes in the aftermath of battle, and disagreement in the ranks over General George B. McClellan's run for President.

*July the 3 [1864]  
Camp Near City Point*

Dear Sister

I Have Sean some Hard seans cence that time we was in A Dredful Hard Battle on the 26 ove June and I got A lite Wou[nd] with A pease of it The Shel Struck me on the thigh[.] it was nearly Spent or it would tear my leg of[f] but as good as luck was it did not Hurt me sow much[....] I Cood git away but I tel you that I went of[f] ove the Battle Field on one leg it maid me very sick For A while I did not go to the Hosspitle For I though[t] I would Be likely to get sick For thare is sow meny Diseases thare.

yor Brother  
Francis M. Elliott

*July the 19 1864  
Camp near the James river*

Dear Friends

Cence I rote to you last I Have Met with an axident the twelfth day ove this month we was in A Hard Battle and my Hors was Shot From under me and He Fel on my leg and I made out to git loos But I pool my bo[o]t of[f] ove my foot I came very near being taken Prisiner But I maid my escape I lost...the Shirt that I Fech From Home and thay got it the [enemy] was [with]in t[w]o rods ove me and you May [k]now that I Had rund<sup>4</sup>

I wash that I was Home to Help Harves and git something good to eat once more. For we Have Hard living don Hear you may think that you see Hard times up thare but I wil tel you that you never Heard tel ove Hard [times.] Shits what the poor soalgers Sees.

Yor Brother  
Francis M. Elliott

*Auges the 3 1864*

Dear Sister

you [ap]pear to be very uneasy A bout me Being wounded[.] I am glad to tel you that it is wel[.] oany I can feal it in My Hip by jaring

wel Het I think this is the Hottes Cuntry I evry was in it is nothing but Sand Hear and the Sun is Sow Hot

Sow good by  
Francis M. Elliott

Francis M Hafer is our ordurly Sargin and I guess that He wil get to be lietenit He sends his love

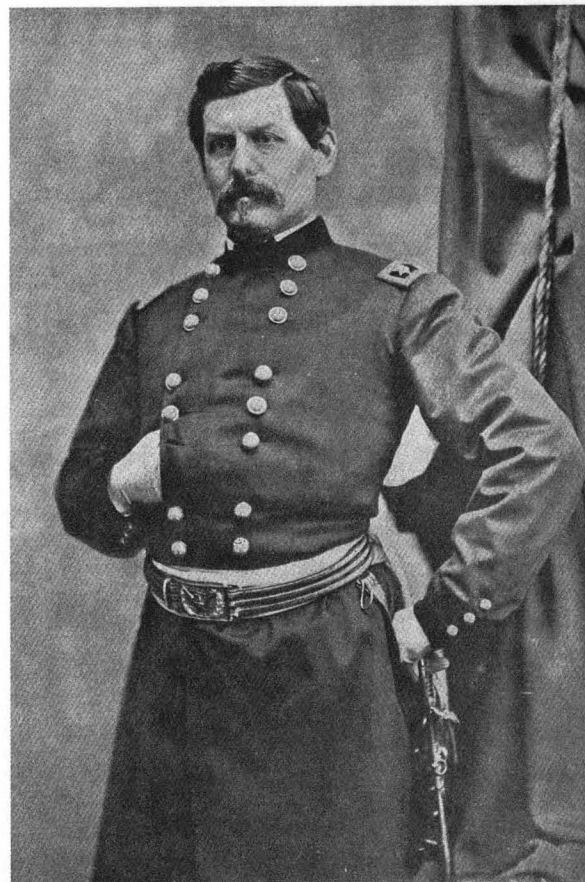
and best respects to you all. I will send you some rebbel money to look at[....] I am much A bige [obliged]to you for thum stamps.

On 25 August 1864, Elliott participated in the Battle of Reams' Station, one of the largest battles he saw. About 1,000 Union soldiers were killed or wounded, with the Confederates taking 2,030 prisoners (including 80 officers). Although the Confederates lost 1,500 soldiers,<sup>5</sup> they came out victors by maintaining control of Reams'.

*September the 10, 1864*

Kind Sister

I Was in the Battel at [R]eam[s'] Station[.] it was the Hardes batel that ever saw[.] it is said to be the Hardes Batel that ever Ben Fought in this War[.] you Cooden walk For the ded Men the rebels lost More then we did we was in Brest works and the rebels tride to drive us out thay Charge on us three times and was defeated and the Fourth time thay Charge with Four liens ove Batel and drove Some ove our Men out ove the Brest works with Bayonents thay wave thare Flag



U.S. General George B. McClellan

over the Brest works and one ove our Men grab  
at it Seven times and was struck with the Bayo-  
nent ever time there was a balls Cum thrue the  
Brest works [past] Both Sids ove My head and  
nock the Splinters in My Fase. Het I never Cood  
think that Men Cood go thrue Such plaisses and  
come out Safe I am tired ove Fighting in this  
unjust war[....]

In this same letter, Elliott mentions for the first  
time General McClellan's bid for president. After  
finding McClellan ineffective and at times a headache  
as head of the Army of the Potomac, President  
Lincoln relieved him of his duties on 7 November  
1862. McClellan, however, remained very popular  
with the enlisted men, who dubbed him "Little  
Mack." The general accepted the Democratic  
nomination for President on 8 September 1864, two  
days prior to a letter in which Elliott begs his family to  
support McClellan:<sup>6</sup>

I want you all to do the Best you can For  
McClerring For he is our oonly Hope think of  
yor Friends that is in the Battel Field at this time  
and the Men that Have Fel For the Cares ove  
aboliliosism [abolition] it is Said that the Solgers  
will Have a vote and if we Have I intend to Vote  
for little Mack the Solgers is nearly all For Him

Francis M. Elliott

During the fall and winter of 1864, Elliott fought  
in a number of battles resulting from the Union's  
tightening of the noose around Richmond. In a 29  
October letter, Elliott writes his sister of the gruesome  
aftermath of the Boydton Plank Road battle that left  
166 Union soldiers dead, 1,028 wounded, and 564  
missing.<sup>7</sup>

*October the 29th 1864*  
*Camp 2nd Pennsylvania*

Dear Sister  
Wel Het We Had A Fight on the 27 ove this  
Month and I Woulden go over that Battle Field  
now for no money For thare is Hundreds ove  
our Men laying thare now and Wil rot on the top  
ove the ground this country is covered With  
Bones ove Humans Men the Battle Field is A  
Site that [no] one nead Want to see if you  
Would see one you Woulden Want to See  
another its not that I am A Fraid that I  
Haint[...] but it is the grones and cries ove the  
Wonded and the dying the cutting to Peases ove  
Men it seams like the Sinfulness Work that Men  
can do

I diden think the other day that I Would Be



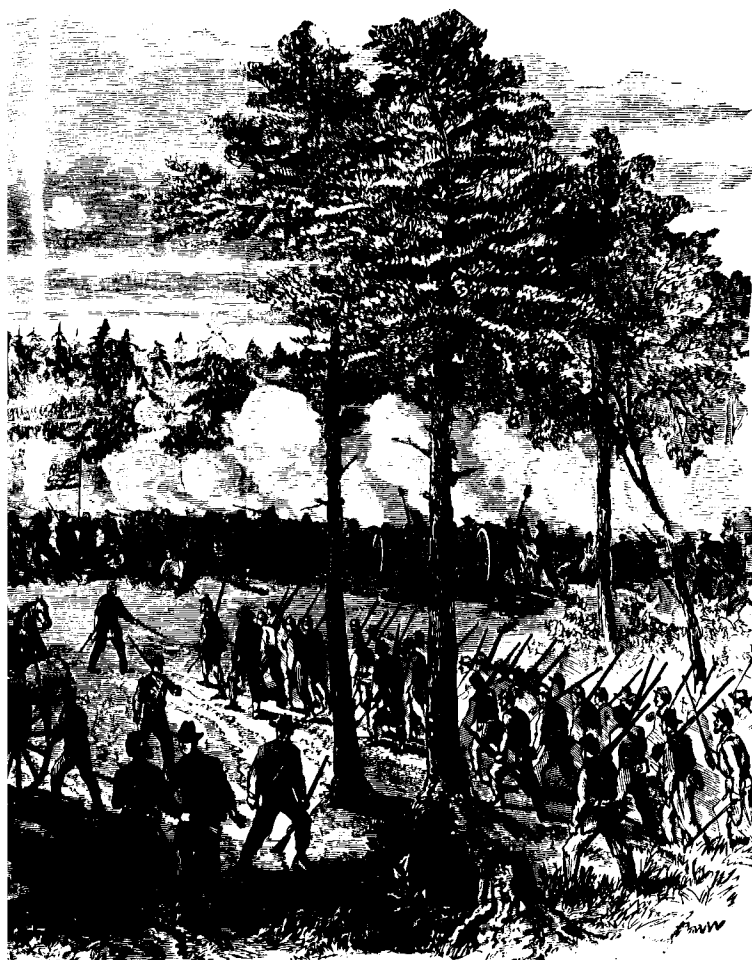
At the Battle of Reams' Station, Virginia, both forces suffered heavy losses, but the Confederates "won" by controlling railroad facilities in the area.

able to [raise] another Pen to rite you it Was A  
Plase that you cood see the Canon Balls and the  
Shells Fly and thay Was not Scary

With the general election coming, Elliott again  
mentions his support for McClellan in an undated  
letter, but this time he notes that the general won't get  
all the soldiers' votes.

I Wil vote For George B McClerring and I Want  
Pap and Thomas not to mis thare vote there is  
some Hear thinks that He is A trater if A man  
tels me that I Wil nock him don or kill my self  
tring to there is men in this Company Big[g]er  
then I that is For leken [a "lickin'"] I talk as I  
Pleas to them But I think that the soalgers Will  
go For little Mack I hope that He may Beat

Francis M. Elliott



February the 9, 1865  
Camp 2nd Penna Cavalry

Dear Sister  
Excuse my Bad Writing and Spelling I think  
that it [is] Harder to Serve our Cuntry then it is  
to Surve god.

Francis M. Elliott

March the 17, 1865  
Camp 2 Penn Cavalry

Dear Sister  
the year 1864 Has lernt Me A lesson that I Wil  
never For Git A man Dont [k]now Wuhat  
Freedam is til He is in Bondageouce[bondage]

times is terning With us now But I Hope that  
this Cruel War Wil Soon Be over and that Free-

dom May rule this land once more and I Hope  
that the Sound ove the Canon May not nead to  
Be Heard [no] more I must Close For the  
Present time I remane you affexinent Brother

F M Elliott

Three weeks after this letter was written, the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia — the force that the Second Cavalry had fought the year before — surrendered. The war ended for Francis Elliott. He mustered out on 31 May 1865 at Clouds Mills, Virginia. He returned to Pennsylvania, to his wife, Ellen, and to a son born in September 1864, just 10 months after Francis and Ellen had been married and eight months after Francis had been arrested and forced back into the war. Eventually the Elliotts had 12 children.

Francis Elliott resumed the life of a farmer, an occupation he pursued until his death in 1924. His battle-worn rifle, powder horn, pouch and saber are still in the possession of descendants, some of whom still live on the ancestral Elliott property in southern Bedford County. ■

<sup>1</sup> Elliott's military records do not provide his date of enlistment, though the earliest muster role found for him bears the date 5 June 1862. Reference is from Elliott's military and pension records, Military Service Branch, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. Here I must thank my third cousin, Carolyn Munger of Greenville, Ohio, for her permission to use Francis Marion Elliott's Civil War letters, the originals of which are in her possession. Munger is the great granddaughter of Elliott, and the granddaughter of Blanche (Elliott) Somerlatt. I am also gratefully indebted to my Aunt Marie (Roy) Wilder of Lake Oswego, Oregon, for initially transcribing and collecting the letters for my use.

<sup>2</sup> E.B. Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1971), 242.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *The Correspondence*, vol. 1: 1842-1867, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, Gary Wilson Allen and E. Sculley Bradley, eds. (New York: 1961), 99-101. In Edward F. Grier, ed., *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, vol. 2: Washington, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, 609, Whitman made this notation in his journal: "Sam'l Elliott father John Elliott from Cumberland Valley p.o. Bedford co. Penn Cavalry, cleaning his pistol shot himself, good family — May 5th they operated on, took chloroform, took off his leg he died under the operation — they held a strong smelling bottle three hours...."

<sup>4</sup> There is a family tradition that after losing his boot and being unable to retrieve it from under his dead horse during the heat of battle, Elliott was forced to walk around minus one boot for some time. He was 6-foot-1 and, it is said, had large feet for his size; it took a while to find them, but he

eventually confiscated large enough boots from a dead soldier.

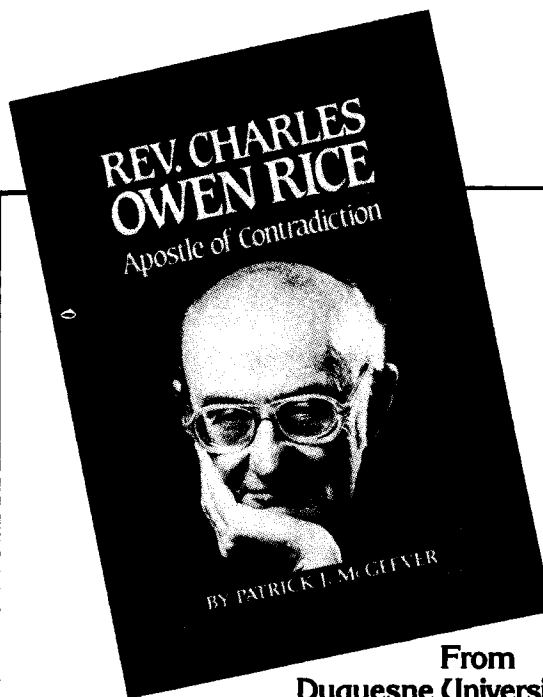
<sup>5</sup> *Lloyd's Battle History of the Great Rebellion* (New York: 1865), 408-410; *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: 1880-1910), vol. 42, part 1, 131.

<sup>6</sup> In the election of 1864, the Democrats attempted to capitalize on war weariness to defeat the Republicans, with McClellan campaigning for a quick prosecution of the war. President Lincoln, however, defeated McClellan in the general election, 212 to 21 electoral votes and 2,213,665 to 1,802,237 popular votes.

<sup>7</sup> Long, 589.



Elliott and wife, Ellen Katherine (Sliger) Elliott, at their home in Bedford, Pa., c. 1920.



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