The Soldier in the Attic

By Carolyn Wilson
My parents' attic was hot and dust motes made me sneeze. My back ached from carrying boxes downstairs; my heart ached from the loss of my parents. I pulled the next box toward me tilting the lid back. A yellowed bunch of letters tied up with faded blue satin ribbon lay amongst the many stamps that my Dad had not glued into the books filled for his grandchildren. Love letters? I picked up the pack to study the address on the top envelope. It had nothing to do with my parents. Instead, it was from a Lieutenant William H. Irwin to a Henry Irwin in Allegheny City, which is now the North Side of Pittsburgh. The postmark, 1862! Ready for a break, I took the letters down to the kitchen, sat at a table, and untied the blue ribbons.

The envelopes, all about 3 x 5, were neatly stacked. Most were orange, but others were tinted pale yellow, cream, and pink. Soiled and dog-eared, they each wore the same three-cent reddish brown United States stamp and had been slit neatly on one of the narrow ends. Many had the dates of the letters written on either the left end or the back.

Opening the letters gingerly, I put them in order by date. The first was the most damaged as the Irwin family must have opened it many times to share with family and friends the news of their son's training at Kittanning, Pennsylvania. While most of the letters were written in 1862, as the Civil War carried on there were fewer and fewer.

William's penmanship was beautiful, grammar pretty good, and some spelling better than mine. Only an occasional run-on sentence was a flaw. Later, when I saw completely phonetic letters by officers, and some with little or no punctuation, I appreciated my soldier even more.

I studied the envelopes as I returned the letters to them. Some had pencil markings on the outside with loads of numbers. An empty envelope with a huge blob of red sealing wax was from Harrison City. One labeled "Fortress Monroe" had two letters missing, judging by notes on the outside, one from August 25 and one from September 6, 1862. These lost letters probably had details of battles that were passed on to someone; one of the envelopes noted that Lieutenant Irwin was nine miles from Richmond and two miles from Bottom Bridge. December 15, 1863, simply read "Directions." Perhaps a member of the family or a friend was planning to visit the soldier?

As I tied them up with the old blue ribbon, I knew I had just made the acquaintance of an amazing young man. I wanted to know more about him, his family, his past, and his future beyond the letters. I photocopied them, put the correspondence in our safety deposit box, and slowly began my search for more information.

Perhaps my dad had been interested in the stamps on the envelopes. I took them to a dealer who shook his head. They had no value because everyone had used the George Washington three-cent stamp at that time. I checked a map of early Pittsburgh that I remembered seeing in the front of Annie Dillard's book, An American Childhood. Pittsburgh in 1800. Irwins! There were lots of them for so small a town so long ago.
Soldiers in the Civil War were on average in their mid-20s so most would have been born 35 to 40 years after the map was made. A William Irwin and his tavern and a John Irwin and his store were noted in small print at the map's side. In a letter from Plymouth, North Carolina, on June 3, 1863, William H. sent $125 by Adams Express to Henry Irwin, care of John Irwin and Co., Pittsburgh. It made me start looking for John, as well as William. Relatives?

William H. Irwin, my soldier. The H. probably stood for Henry after his father, who he'd Expressed money to for safe keeping in care of John, the shop owner. William wrote so clearly and consistently in spite of a variety of stationery and locations, one being on his knee. Where had he gone to school in the early 19th century? Who was he? Where had these letters come from? The Civil War letters were just one of so many things I wished I could talk about with my parents. The soldier was no relation to me, because my dad's family had been in Canada at that time, and my mother's family had settled in Meadville, Pennsylvania, a century before. My father was an orthodontist who might have taken the letters in payment for straightening a youngster's teeth. I knew a painting in the waiting room had been acquired that way.

I realized then how little I knew about the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln. Slavery. North and South. Gettysburg. My nephew was a Civil War buff so I called him about my find, but his return letter was upsetting. He had gone on the internet for news of the Pennsylvania 103rd regiment, and on a website devoted to the Civil War, he found not only a detailed history of the Pennsylvania 103rd, but also of Company G, the one William was in. I studied the web page, which gave background to William's letters; Evan K. Slaughenhoupt, Jr., had compiled the site from a book on the 103rd written by Luther S. Dickey.

On February 24, 1862, Company G left Camp Orr, marched to the Allegheny Valley Railroad, stopped in Pittsburgh for dinner, and then left for Harrisburg. In Washington, Company G of the Pennsylvania 103rd was assigned to a division under Silas Casey. They went on to fight at Williamsburg, Fair Oaks (Seven Pines), the Seven Days Battles, Harrison's Landing, Suffolk, and then were stationed at New Bern where they fought at Kinston, Whitehall, and Goldsboro. Their last post was Plymouth, North Carolina, where they were attacked by the Confederates, captured on April 20, 1864, and sent to various prisons including the notorious Andersonville.²

I went back over his letters checking the names of places where William had been stationed: Kittanning, where an Uncle Lewis had given him a sword; Washington City; New Kent Courthouse. Then in a letter dated June 22, 1862, from White House Landing he mentions his health problems. The next four
A letter from William Irwin to his father, dated January 31, 1862.

Headquarters 103d Regiment Pa Vol.
January 31st 1862

Dear Father,

I would have written to you before this but I have been looking for marching orders ever since I came up and I thought I should not write until I heard when we would leave here. The Colonel told me yesterday that he received a letter from Washington stating that we would not receive marching orders until next week and when I hear the day we will leave I will let you know in time so you can be on the lookout for us. I like camp life very well as far as I have got and have been enjoying it very much for the last few days on account of the wet weather but I am in hopes that the mud will wash out. I wrote to Uncle Levi the other day and asked him if he got the letter I told him for the Sword & Bell. I got 100 rolls of paper for the 100 men in our Company and I think we will get ten more this week. Captain Stuchel is a very popular man and I like him very much.

I still hold the position of 1st Lieutenant and with a good prospect of being 1st before long. Tomorrow our Company will have to go on guard and then I will be on duty at the office of the guard for twenty-four hours. I wish you all were getting along as well as home.

Yours truly,

[Signature]

103d Regiment
letters are all from a hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia. His illness kept him out of the fight at Fair Oaks where Casey's troops were unfairly maligned, and he missed the bloody Seven Days fighting because of it. By his August 3rd letter, he had rejoined his outfit at Harrison's Landing. Other letters were from Suffolk, New Bern, and Plymouth, but after his last letter from Plymouth dated January 21, there were no more.

Dead! This fine young man that I was so fond of might have died in battle. Everyone liked him, or they wouldn't have invited him to live with them, worked on his promotions, and even lent him a horse. My nephew suggested a book on the 103rd Pennsylvania Volunteers might tell me more. I had to find out.

I called my neighbor to see if she would go to the Senator John Heinz History Center with me so I could do more research. She was delighted to as she wanted to look up her great grandfather who was depicted in a large oil painting. With all the names in the world, she was looking for a David Irwin.

I was in luck. The History Center's library had a copy of Dickey's *History of the 103rd Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry 1861-1865*, which was the source of information mentioned in the letter from my nephew. A young man handed me a dark, heavy book. Sitting at a table, I opened it and began to read.

William hadn't died! There in the book were more letters sent to his father from two prisons, neither of which was Andersonville with its terrible reputation. There was even the picture William had promised his mother that he would have taken, and he was wearing the sword Uncle Lewis had given him. The notes on my soldier were detailed and complete. They read:

**ADJT. WILLIAM H. IRWIN**

Adjutant William H. Irwin was mustered into service as First Lieutenant of Company G, Jan. 10, 1862. Adjutant Irwin, while very quiet and reserved in manner, was very popular with both officers and men. He was with the Regiment in all its marches and engagements from the Peninsula campaign until it was captured at Plymouth, NC, Apr. 20, 1864 and paroled at Wilmington, NC, March 1, 1865. The writer has before him several letters written from Confederate prisons by Adjutant Irwin to his father, then an eminent citizen of Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. These letters are published here because they will not only be of interest to all surviving members of the Regiment, but because they also give a different insight into Southern prison life from that generally published.

C.S. Military Prison
Charleston Sept. 24, 1864

Dear Father:

I wrote to mother by the last flag of truce communication and requested her to tell you to send me some money. For fear that she should not receive the letter I thought I would write to you. I wish you would please send me twenty dollars in gold or fifty dollars in U.S. currency (whichever is most convenient) by Adams Express to Hilton Head, care of Maj. Gen. Foster. I also need some clothing, which you can send the same way. One pair boots; one pair pants; two flannel shirts, two pair drawers, three or four pr. socks, towels, brush and comb; one tin plate, knife, fork, and spoon. A small quantity of coffee and sugar, and anything else you can get in a small box. My health is very good and I am getting along very well.

Affectionately your Son
Will
As I studied more about the Civil War, I learned that the Confederates placed Northern Officers at Charleston, South Carolina, in an attempt to deter constant bombardment from the Northern guns on Morris Island. My soldier does not tell his family about this. Dickey comments that Irwin's letters present a different point of view of Southern prisons. In reading other letters from the same prisons, the disparities are amazing. Other soldiers told of long marches and being packed in crowded cars that recently had carried cattle and had not been cleaned. They wrote of cruel and vicious guards who killed without reason. The South was short of food for its own men so Northern prisoners really suffered. Epidemics of yellow fever and small pox caused the movement of the Charleston prisoners to a new penitentiary called Columbia, which was just a stockyard enclosure without any shelter. Later, the prisoners received tents, but sleeping on muddy ground was never mentioned in William's letters.

There was also a short passage on his company and the following is the part most pertinent to Lieutenant Irwin:

Sketch of Company G.
Co. G was chiefly recruited in Indiana and Allegheny Counties, by John Stuchell, James J. Morrow of Indiana County, and William H. Irwin of Allegheny, Pennsylvania. The Allegheny County recruits came principally from the village of Tarentum and the adjoining townships, who were enrolled to W. H. Irwin during the autumn months of 1861. The company was organized at Camp Orr during the winter of 1861-62 by merging the two squads, and the Co. was mustered into service on Jan. 10, 1862 with John Stuchell, Capt.; William H. Irwin, 1st Lieut.; James J. Morrow, 2d Lieut. As Co. G was among the last companies organized at Camp Orr, it never had the maximum enrollment; in fact, the total enrollment during the war was only 96, there being only four additions to the Co. after it went to the front. The aggregate mortality was 36, eighteen deaths occurring in Southern prisons, or immediately after being released; 14 by disease in camp or hospital; and three killed in battle, or died of wounds received in action [Dickey's numbers].

Having read other Civil War soldiers' letters, I knew of the rotten food, dirty drinking water, unsanitary conditions, and exposure to the elements that prisoners endured. I wondered how William and his company had survived under such horrid circumstances. However, I was relieved when I found the next note in the book, which gave me two important clues about my soldier's life and family:

After his return from the Army, Adjutant Irwin engaged in the foundry business and for many years before his death was the successful proprietor of the Rosedale Foundry in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, now known as the Rosedale Foundry and Machine Works and of which Adjutant Irwin's son Henry T. Irwin is manager.

From this I knew he married, had at least one child, and was a successful businessman, but I wanted additional details. I decided to look for more information and discovered details on his parents, brothers, and sisters. My daughter obtained an 1850 census report on the internet, which listed a "Wm. Irwin age 11 male" along with siblings Maria 14, Hannah 12, Catharine 7, Lewis 4, and John age 1. The parents were Henry 37 and his wife Elizabeth 35. The H initial in my soldier's name was undoubtedly for Henry, and his brother, Lewis was probably named for the uncle who had given William the sword.

A decade later, a census showed William at age 19 with another younger brother Harry, now eight. An individual report listed William as a "literate, unmarried, white, Flour Merchant, age 19." The names of his siblings meant nothing to me until I reread his letters. In them, he mentions Hannah, Maria, and Harry. There on the list were Hannah, Maria, and Harry. They were his family! He also spoke of Uncle Lewis, Aunt Margaret, and Uncle Peter. From his letters, I knew that they sent him letters, boxes of food, and lent him money.

Back to the History Center, where helpful staff found my soldier's business Rosedale Foundry in Industries of Pittsburgh, Trade Commerce and Manufacturers Historical and Descriptive Review for 1879 and 1880 under the
Dear Father

Our Regiment returned yesterday morning 11th inst and accomplished the object of the expedition. Richmond, Alexandria, 41st & South Carolina Rail Road near Pittsburg. We had fighting to do for five days before we reached battle at Kinston, which lasted for four hours. Our Regiment sustained a loss of seventeen killed and sixty-five wounded. I was hit twice by spent balls once on the arm and once on the wrist neither one hurting me much. It was about an hour we were ordered to advance and we did not go very far until we saw the enemy. They commenced firing. The way the bullets flew by was a sight. I never was in such a hot place in my life before. Our force consisted of from fifteen to twenty thousand men. The Rebels had about ten thousand coming to the nature of the ground all of men were not engaged, he capture about two hundred.
I started searches for the Peterson family, William's wife's family the Purviances, and his father's family, the Irwins.

With the news of the Peterson name as a business partner and family member, I found all sorts of information. In a small self-published book called Tarentum by H. D. Simmons found at my neighborhood library, there was Lewis Peterson. No wonder Uncle Lewis hoped his nephew would stop and see him. Tarentum and Kittanning where he trained are both in the same area north of Pittsburgh.

In the books History of Allegheny County and The Allegheny River, I learned that Lewis Peterson, Jr., was born in Pittsburgh on October 6, 1828. In 1840, his father went into cotton spinning and the manufacturing of cotton batting and candlewick. This plant was destroyed by the Great Fire in Pittsburgh, and Peterson began the production of salt on his farm in Tarentum. Oil was discovered on the farm by Thomas M. Kier, and Peterson produced it for sale to the Hope cotton factory. History of Allegheny County goes on to say that Lewis Peterson, Jr., followed his father in the production of salt and oil. After the Civil War, he built the Rosedale Foundry and worked with his nephew, William H. Irwin, my soldier. Peterson was a member of City Council and then a Mayor of Allegheny for three years. For six years, he was a member of the State Board of Charities. In 1881, he conducted a meeting at his house to consider starting a hospital in Allegheny City; he offered to work on the project without compensation. Peterson, Jr.'s father died at 94 years of age in 1885.14

Coincidence. Chance. These are terms that fit my search for knowledge of Lieutenant William H. Irwin's life. The world is very strange. I was in for another surprise. My mother's first cousin, Hildegard Dolson who was also my godmother, had written a book called The Great Oildorado. I was with a friend who grew up in Titusville, Pennsylvania, an early site of the oil boom. Thinking he would enjoy some notes on his old hometown, I pulled the book from the shelf and flipped through the pages. There, amazingly, was my soldier's grandfather mentioned in Aunt Hildy's book: "It was mid-November when Drake finally realized the third borer was as ephemeral as the others. He wrote his company directors sadly that salt man Lewis Peterson had told him he'd have to give up until spring."16

As I continued my research, I looked for a link between my soldier and Major John Irwin since I had found a lot of information about this brave and industrious Major John in library books while looking for information on William. Major John Irwin operated the Pittsburgh ropewalk that furnished rope for the ships in the War of 1812. He and his brother James, though born in Ireland, were of Scottish ancestry. They came to America in 1772 following an Uncle Sam who settled in Georgia.

"We had fighting to do for five days before we reached the bridge. On Sunday... we fought a severe battle at Kinston which lasted for four hours... our Regt sustained a loss of seventeen killed and sixty-five wounded."
and uncles Robert and William both of whom were said to live near Fort Pitt. John wrote his father that after trading with the Indians, he took the job of "victualling" the Continental Army by appointment from Continental Congress. As a member of the staff

"I like Camp life very well as I have got and have been enjoying first rate health. We have not been drilling very much for the last few days on account of the wet weather but I am in hopes that the mud will freeze up so as we can get to work again."

of General George Washington, he was paid by the United States Government.

John Irwin recruited a company of soldiers at Philadelphia when the Revolutionary War broke out and became their Lieutenant-Captain. When General Arnold went to Quebec, the First Regiment of the Pennsylvania Continental Line included John Irwin. He was under General Wayne in the Paoli massacre and suffered 22 bayonet wounds, which affected his health the rest of his life, but even with those injuries he was with George Washington at the victory of Yorktown. John Irwin was an honorable soldier.

A passage in Historical Gleanings of Allegheny told about Major John's membership in the Cincinnati Society, an order established in the United States by the officers of the Army in 1783, "to perpetuate their friendship, and raise a fund for the relief of the widows and orphans of those who had fallen in defense of their country." Its membership includes patriots headed by George Washington, who like the great Roman, left their rural pursuits in order to serve their country and, at the close of hostilities, returned to them. The society is hereditary in its operations—the membership descending from father to son to the latest generation."

Next began four years of wandering through libraries at the History Center, in Oakland at the Main Branch, in Oakmont, Williamsburg, Chautauqua, and even in Sewickley, where I struck gold. The librarian found some 3 x 5 index cards for Irwin. One was Henry Irwin, Jr., (probably Harry in the 1860 census), William's brother, who attended "Professor Wakeman's school" and Western University and entered the iron brokerage business. He became treasurer of Shenango Furnace Company. His wife's name was Lillie, and his son's name was Charles Edwin. From these cards I also learned that William's sister Maria married a Holdship and moved to Atlanta, Georgia; his sister Kate married a Rankin, and sister Hannah lived on Beaver Street and died in 1917 after a two-year illness.

More relevant to advancing my search, however were the cards on William's son Henry and on John Irwin:

Irwin, Henry T.
M. Helen Perry, daughter of Mrs. Oliver Hazzard Perry of Jersey City, Feb. 1910. His sisters are Marjorie Irwin and Elizabeth Irwin. J. Wilson Porter and W. D. Shields went east for the wedding. President of the Rosedale Foundry, Pgh 1914.

Irwin, John
The ropewalk pioneer, Pgh. Died at his residence, Sewickley, June 30, 1863. Life Story—Parke-328. FW Jr. knew Charles E. Irwin, a descendant, who lived on Meadow Lane, Edgeworth. Charles E. Irwin's father was Henry Irwin, Jr. who lived on Nursery Lane, Edgeworth, 1908. The stone house in Edgeworth was built in 1903.

Fantastic! Charles would have been a nephew of William H. Irwin so there was a direct line to the early Irwins on the 1800 map in Dillard's book. In other books I found two John Irwins, father and son, both amazing people. No wonder my soldier inherited such good genes.

By finding a link between my soldier and Major John Irwin, I had part of the puzzle, but it meant nothing until I formed the frame to fit the pieces into it. Going back to the book by Nevin about the women of 1885, I ran across a Mrs. John Irwin whom I had overlooked earlier in my delight at finding both Mrs. William Irwin and his mother, Mrs. Henry Irwin. Under "Gifted Women" was one of the longest paragraphs, and the last sentence was a gift to me:

Mary Pattison, the wife of Major John Irwin of the Revolutionary Army, was one of the remarkable women of the century. A pretty young girl, of Scotch-Irish parentage, she met and captivated the gallant young American officer at a State ball in Dublin, shortly after peace had been declared. With her bridgroom she left home and friends and sailed for the New World. They settled in Pittsburg. Mrs. Irwin was a woman of advanced intelligence and wonderful business ability, and when in
1794, the Irwin rope-walk—the first this side of the mountains—was erected, she entered into the enterprise as an equal partner with her husband—and that, too, in those far-back days when a woman in business was almost unheard of. With signal success the business was carried on for many years, after her husband's death Mrs. Irwin assuming sole control, and herself training to the work her eldest son, John, who finally succeeded her. Then the description of a woman, who was far ahead of the times in her management of a huge company, went on to tell about her family:

Another of her sons was Dr. William Irwin, one of the best known of the old-time Pittsburg physicians, two daughters being Mrs. Eliza Semple and Mrs. Margaret George. Major Irwin, her husband, was a member of the Society of the Cincinnatus [sic], an order instituted by George Washington at the close of the war among his officers. It has been called, owing to the laws of primogeniture being recognized, the only order of American aristocracy, and in the fear that it might establish a system similar to that of England, was at first discountenanced. Mr. William H. Irwin is the present possessor of the honor he being a great-grandson of Major Irwin.

Here was the link I had been looking for. My soldier was the great-grandson of Major John Irwin.

An article titled The Sculls and the Irwins from a 1963 Western Pennsylvania History magazine notes that the will of Major John Irwin mentioned his brothers James and David. David! Could my next door neighbor be related to my soldier? Also in the same article is the information about the major retiring to his beautiful country home called Brush Hill. Something clicked in my mind. Years ago, I had attended a party in a friend's "new" old house. It was a huge stone place with thick walls and in need of loads of work. Its name was Brush Hill. The story of its restoration had just been published in the local paper.

John Irwin's first country home was burned by Indians, the next was hit by lightning, and so in 1792 he built a two-story fieldstone mansion that would "withstand man and elements." The story of its restoration over years by a family who loved history was chronicled in an article by Marilyn McDevitt Rubin. My friends raised the house, dug a basement, replaced the inset windows, and while making it comfortable for today's world tried to keep it true to the time it was built.
John's daughter Mary married John Scull who started an early newspaper in Pittsburgh. Brush Hill was left to them, and they lived in it many years.

Another look at the federal census showed a successful young husband and father in 1880, where he was listed as 36 years old with his "wife Mary, daughter Carrie M., age 7, and sons Henry T., age 4, and Wm. P., age 8 M." Also listed were Kate I. Krehan and Johanna Murphy who, I would guess, were there to help with a busy household.

Serendipity is a happy coinage by Horace Walpole to denote the faculty of making lucky and unexpected "finds" by accident. There have been so many lucky finds in researching William H. Irwin. I have learned about his wonderful parents and grandparents. His son Henry who took over his business and daughter Elizabeth H. Irwin, who married Benjamin Rush Bradford Townsend on June 14, 1922. Her husband became a director and vice-president of Rosedale Foundry and Machine Company and held many other prestigious positions. They lived on an estate in Sewickley.

I turned to Allegheny Cemetery, one of the oldest and finest in Pittsburgh, to look for my soldier and his family even though it was across the river from where they had lived. Calling early in my search, I was told they had five William Irwins, and they gave me the location of their resting places. In fall 2006, I visited the cemetery office for a final search. They would pull up a William Irwin to name the surrounding graves.

"Gertrude. Emma. Edward?" "No."
"Lewis, Henry, Elizabeth?" "Yes!"

The attendant looked up with surprise and called to another staff member in the office, "It's that big double lot with the monument."

"Can you tell me where it is?" I asked.

"Better than just a map ... I'll give you a list of all the people buried there." He snapped the pages out of his book, ran them off on his copier, and handed me my soldier's family tree. At the top of the sheet, it said the lot was owned by Henry Irwin, his father, who must have been the man who endowed it. Hannah, who lived in Sewickley, was there. My soldier, November 26, 1891, and his wife, Mary Purviance, April 3, 1895, rested with other names I had found in my search. A son, William P., died on September 20, 1901, in his early 20s. The P. probably stood for Peterson or Purviance, both good family names. The other son, Henry T., was the son who went into the Rosedale Foundry with his father. Also with William were his parents Henry, February 9, 1885, and Elizabeth, November 20, 1893. The size of the lot, the monument, the perpetual care—all testified to the financial success of the family.

The most touching thing in the Irwin plot was the grave honoring Lieutenant Commander Henry Taylor Irwin, Jr., my soldier's grandson, who was born September 11, 1916, and died March 27, 1944, when he was lost with his submarine U.S.S. Tullibee in combat in the South Pacific. Another brave and honorable Irwin. He would have been the candidate for the Order of Cincinnati.

In one of the 26 letters that Carolyn Wilson discovered, William Irwin was stationed at Plymouth, North Carolina, where he was later captured:

Hd Qu 103 Regiment PV
Plymouth, NC Oct 23, 1863

Dear Father,

I received your letter of the 7th instant on the evening of the 20th. Your letter was thirteen days coming. We still receive our mail by New York and New Bern. It is not very safe for it to come by Norfolk as there have been a number of our Canal boats captured by the guerillas of late. It was only last week that a boat was captured the Captain and several passengers were wounded and taken prisoner. Officers and enlisted men going home on furlough from here prefer going by Norfolk (although they are liable to be captured) on account of reaching home much sooner than they would be going to New York. I am glad to hear that Governor Curtin has been reelected, had Woodward been elected, it would have almost demoralized the Penna soldiers. We had an election in our Regiment resulting in Curtin receiving two hundred and twenty-six votes and Woodward only twenty-five. You say you had no idea that I would accept the Captaincy of a Company. I have not as yet decided whether I will or not. It is a very difficult matter for me to decide what is best to do. I have not heard anything of the rebel "iron-clad" lately. I presume it must be nearly completed by this time. There is not as much sickness in the Regt now as there was a week or two ago. My health is first rate now. I think I have got entirely well of the fever and ague.

Your Son
Wm. H. Irwin

William H. Irwin to Henry Irwin, October 23, 1863.
It has been a number of our Canal boats captured by the guerillas I late. It was only last week that a boat was captured the captain and several passengers were wounded and taken prisoners. Officers and enlisted men going home on furlough from here fearing going by Norfolk (although they are liable to be captured) on account of reaching home much sooner than they would by going to New York. I am glad to hear that Geo. Curtin has been re-elected. Had Woodward been elected it would have almost demoralized the Penna. troops. We have an election in our Regt. resulting in Curtin receiving two hundred and twenty-five votes and Woodward only twenty-five. You say you had no idea that I would accept the Captaincy of a Company. I have not at
When I learned the date of my soldier's death, I was able to find his obituary and the cause of his death. Looking through microfilm, I found a smeared obituary that said William H. Irwin died unexpectedly at his home on Fayette Street, Allegheny "from congestion of the brain from which he suffered but forty-eight hours." The next line told of the Order of Cincinnati, descending to him through his great grandfather, Major John Irwin. It mentioned his father Henry, a talented brother Jack, who must have been christened John, his wife Mary, and his children.²

There is no way to find out how my father, Dr. Edwin G. Flint, obtained Lieutenant William Irwin's letters as any records from his orthodontic practice were lost when downtown Pittsburgh's Jenkins Arcade was torn down in the 1980s. I continue to find out more and more about William Irwin. From the Sewickley Historical Center came a map with his son-in-law's home right on the Allegheny Country Club golf course. From the Darlington Collection at the University of Pittsburgh, I obtained a painting of early Pittsburgh with locations laid out including the Irwin ropewalk. A man who called my husband on business turned out to have a wife related to the Irwins. There is so much information out there that I dare not tie up the blue ribbons.

When one reads accounts of the "Plymouth Pilgrims," as the troops seized in the defeat at Plymouth were named, and their long, horrible journey to prisons and the conditions they endured there, it is a wonder William never mentioned any of it in his letters.³ He never expressed a desire to escape, even though his companions did in letters to their relatives. It seems that William did not want to upset his family.
The only thing that might have concerned them was his letter telling of the bullets flying all around during an expedition to take out a bridge at Goldsboro, North Carolina. He wrote, "I was never in such a hot place in my life before, but I stood up to the work."

Lieutenant William H. Irwin stood up to the work in all of his life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said in his essays, "There is properly no history, only biography."

I will go on and on looking for more information about Lieutenant William H. Irwin, but I have found my soldier. He survived the war and a terrible prison experience to return to Allegheny City, marry, have a family, and build a business. When one sees his parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, one can understand where those virtues of honor, bravery, integrity, and fine character have come from. The blue ribbons may go on, but I will tie the letters up and give them to the History Center. William Henry Irwin is part of our history.

Carolyn Wilson (Connie) is an artist living in O'Hara Township who was a substitute teacher in the Fox Chapel School District for 32 years. She is currently working on a book titled *The Soldier in the Attic.*

All letters from William H. Irwin cited in this article are in the possession of Carolyn Wilson unless otherwise noted. They span from June 22, 1862, to December 15, 1863.


6 Dickey, 91.
7 Ibid., 72.
8 U.S. Census Schedule for 1850, The Historic Pittsburgh Census Project, University of Pittsburgh, at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/census/census_driver.pl?searchtype=household&key_1=755&key_2=1&database=Allegheny_1850
9 U.S. Census Schedule for 1860, The Historic Pittsburgh Census Project, University of Pittsburgh, at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/census/census_driver.pl?searchtype=household&key_1=266&key_2=1&database=Allegheny_1860
13 Ibid., 16.
14 History of Allegheny county, Pennsylvania: including its early settlement and progress to the present time; a description of its historic and interesting localities; its cities, towns and villages; religious, educational, social and military history; mining, manufacturing and commercial interests, improvements, resources, statistics, etc.; also, biographies of many of its representative citizens, Part II (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., 1889), 534; Sarepta Cooper Kussart, *The Allegheny River* (Pittsburgh: Burgum Printing Company, 1938), 199-200.
17 Nevin, 31.
18 Ibid.
21 Pittsburgh Press, November 28, 1891, 4.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.