

Civil War Letters – Levi Havens to Daniel and Clarinda Havens

This document is an edited transcription of letters written by Levi Havens of Clintonville, NY to his brother Daniel Havens and his brother's wife Clarinda Havens. They were written while he was employed as a soldier fighting in the United States Civil War on the side of the Union forces under General Meade (and later Grant) between August of 1863 and March 1864.

There are nine letters from Levi and (sadly) one from his companion Sam Clark which notifies Daniel of his brothers being killed in action on May 10th of 1863, along with nine others in the same Company in the famous charge on Spotsylvania Court House in Virginia where so many lives were lost.. The letters were originally enclosed in envelopes addressed to Mr. Daniel Havens, Clintonville, NY and Daniel Havens of Bloomingdale, NY.

The letters themselves have many misspelled words and archaic grammar and were totally devoid of punctuation. In this edited version, punctuation was added and most of the spelling errors and grammatical errors were corrected. Also slight changes in the wording was undertaken at some points to make the meaning clearer. The purpose of this document is to facilitate reading for the intellectual, emotional, and informational content of the letters.

Someone wishing to study the lexicographic content of the letters or the vernacular and writing peculiarities of the writer or his era should consult the photocopies of the letters themselves or else refer to the unedited transcription which was meticulously copied EXACTLY as written with no punctuation or corrections. The unedited document also includes information about the writing medium. It describes the ink and the paper of each letter and even its dimensions and how it was folded. The only information lacking in that document is that line breaks are omitted. The writer had a tendency to start words near the right margin that he didn't have room to finish. Some of these he squeezed in by writing smaller and curling it up the edge, but in several places he crossed the unfinished word out and began the word again on the left edge. Whenever he did this it was noted (for the sake of some researcher who might possibly be interested in this peculiarity.) All cross-outs were noted and attention was drawn to inconsistency of spelling and the improvement of spelling that occurred from the first letter to the last. Almost every conceivable lexicographic attribute of the letters was captured in the document so that a study of a photocopy of the letters themselves should not be required except to access and study the handwriting itself or to confirm the correctness of the transcription where there might be a question.

This document was created by Richard J. Lawrence, October 1998, from original letters on loan from their owners Mr. & Mrs. Prescott Lawrence of Clintonville, NY

Each of the following pages references one of the letters. (the second to last letter required two pages.)

[This first letter was found enclosed in an envelope with one of the other letters and apparently was originally sent home in someone else's letter to be given to Daniel. All other letters were in envelopes addressed to Daniel. The first three were addressed to Clintonville, NY and the rest to Bloomingdale, NY. This is the only letter of the group that didn't have a date, but the letter with the earliest date had mentioned that he'd just been on Riker's Island, so this letter was probably the first and was written in mid- to late August 1863.]

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Please give this to Daniel Havens.

Dear brother and sister,

I think you would like to hear from me so I will write a few lines to let you know how I am and where I am.

I am not very well now but I am getting better every day. Last week on Tuesday I was taken sick with the dysentery and was very sick Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I could not eat anything. I had three doctors tend me Sunday. They gave me some liquor to drink and it did me good. I began to get hungry and they gave me some rice to eat, so I am getting better now. I am on Riker's Island four miles from New York City.

I have a board for my bed, a blanket to roll myself up in, a nice tent to sleep in, and plenty to eat -- beef and bread effey[transcriber is not sure what the word was but it looks like e-f-f-e-y] and sometimes ham and potatoes and sometimes cheese.

I can't write much to you this time, but when I come home I will tell you more, so good bye. Write to me as soon as you can.

-- Levi Havens

*[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Clintonville, NY]*

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Camp on Raphanie River, Monday the 6th of September [1863]

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter last Saturday and was glad to hear from you. I am not very well now. I have been very sick ever since I got here but I am so I walk around now. I did expect to get my discharge on the island in New York but I am past all right here. [?] I have not drilled but one day here and I don't mean to any more if I can make myself sick and avoid it if I can. I am hoping they will get sick of me and give me my discharge. I don't think I can stand it to be a soldier anyway.

It is very warm here and cool nights. There are a great many armies laying here. Cavalry too. [unknown word] it is a great sight to see them drill. There are a good many sick here with dysentery but we have a doctor here. A man goes around every morning to see who is sick and takes them to the doctor. We have plenty to eat and that is good too. We have to do our own cooking. Sam Clark tents with me. We [each] have a woolen blanket and a rubber blanket to lay on the ground. We roll over ourselves within the woolen blanket and we lay very warm. I do my own washing. We have soup and candles, plenty of fresh beef that is good too. And pork too. We get good news about the war every day. [I] went to meeting yesterday and the minister gave me a testament

and two primers too. We have a meeting Sunday and a prayer meeting every other night.

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Dear brother, I suppose you think it hard for me to come here, but I will tell you about it. If I have ever been lied [? the word looked like b-i-d but I think he intended the word "Lied"] about ever since I was married and my mind was bad. Sometimes I thought I would go away from my friends among strangers so if I had been in my right mind I never would have come here for money and leave the one I love as well as I love my eyes. I pray for my little family and all my friends. I ask God to watch over them every day and keep them all in the right way, and I believe He will. I hope you all will pray for me that I may return safe to my dear family. All the friend I have to go to is God, and I have faith in Him. He can do all things and I, for one, will follow Him. I read the Bible and take comfort [in it]. 'Tis all the comfort I have. I would like to see you all, but if I don't ever see you remember that I am bound for heaven. I hope that I will meet you all there. I went into the woods and I knelt down all alone and prayed to God for mercy. I asked God to forgive all my sins and take me and "do as thou see fit" and I began to feel happy. So I keep praying every day.

I haven't any news that I can think of now, so I will close.

I bid you all good bye. This is from your brother to Daniel and Clarinda Havens. Give my love to all.

Direct you letters to:

Co. C 9th Regiment like[?]  
Washington, DC  
1 at Corps, 2nd Division, 2nd brigade.

Tell Mary I am getting along very well and still have hope in the Lord.

*[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Clintonville, NY]*

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Tuesday, September the 22nd 1863

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter last Saturday and I will try to answer it the best I can.

I am well now. We have moved 18 miles. We are 2 miles from Cullpepper. We expect to go to Charleston, but we can't tell where we will go.

I have written to Mary today and sent 15 dollars to her in a letter. And the Postmaster told me that if we went away from here we might not have a chance to send a letter for nine or ten days. So I thought I would write to you now. I want to send my money home so I will send five dollars in your letter, trusting you to give it to Mary. I am very thankful for your envelope. I send my love to all. I feel very well now. I think that if I ever get home again, that the stories told about me never will make me feel as I used to. I don't care what they say about me now, but I have nothing to say against any of my connection [? "connection" must have been an archaic rendering of "kin"]. I love them all, so give my love to them all. You must write soon and I will try to answer them [your letters].

I can't think of any more to write now so I will close my letter.

Good Bye for this time. This is from you brother Levi Havens.

Direct your letter to:

Co. C, 9th Regiment, NY
Selt[?] Washington, DC
1 at Corps, 2nd Division, 2nd Brigade

[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Clintonville, NY]

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October the 10th, 1863

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter of October today. I was glad to hear from you. I got your line you sent in Mary's letter too. I am not very well now. I have got the yellow jaundice, but not very bad yet. There is a good many got it here. I had a hard time last night, but I feel better now. So don't worry about me. I am satisfied with anything that falls on me.

I thank you for your postage stamp.

I saw a deserter shot. We marched about six miles to see him shot in the rain. We had a hard time getting back. The mud was over our shoes all the way.

It is very warm days here and cold, damp nights.

You say you are going to move up into the woods. I hope you will do well and take comfort too. You must write to me as soon as you get moved so you can. And if I ever get home I will come and see you, for I think enough of you to go a good ways to see you, Daniel, and I have got along so far without having any trouble.

I am glad you got my daguerreotype [this was an early type photograph]. I shall remember you all if we ever meet again on Earth. Give my love to Calvin and Libby. Tell Calvin that I have not forgotten him and I will try to write to him soon as I can.

It is a very nice place down here in "Old Virginia". There are some very nice girls down here too -- left without any father. I think it is a good chance for somebody to get a wife and a farm too. Plenty of Negroes to work too.

I can't think of more to write this time, so I will close my short letter by sending you all my love. So Good Bye brother and sister and little Marinda.

Direct your letters to same.

Here [enclosed] are some verses I send to Marinda. Write as soon as you can and tell me all the news. This is from your brother Levi Havens to Daniel Havens.

*[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY]*

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Virginia, November the 1st [1863]

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter last night. I was glad to here from you once more. I am well now. I got a letter from Mary. She's well and all the folks too. You say you are homesick. But never mind, if you can do well you will be satisfied I think.

My faith is good yet. We expect a battle before long but it doesn't frighten me. We are marching about every day so it is hard work for me but I get along very well yet. You will see me as soon as I get out of this war -- I shall come up there to see you and the place.

I can't think of any news now to write, but I am bound to be a true and faithful Christian, yet I will tear a hymn out of my hymnbook for Marinda. Tell her it is all I can send her this time. Give my love to all your folks. Mary is well pleased with her new home -- [she] has not written anything about it yet.

The railroad was torn up here for about ten miles by the rebels but it is almost repaired again.

You must write soon and tell me all the news you can. So Good Bye.

This is from you brother Levi Havens to Daniel Havens.

[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY]

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Saturday morning, November the 21st, 1863

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter last night. I am well now and we don't have so much marching to do now. There has been some fighting here close by me but I have not been in any battle yet. But I have seen wounded men with broken legs and arms too. [Also] some dead men.

[I] got a letter from you soon after you moved up there before this one and answered it right off directed to Bloomingdale, Essex Co. N.Y. and I sent some hymns to you that I tore out of my hymn book in it. Mary got a letter from you too. But never mind, I will send you some hymns and give Marinda some of them. If I can get a furlough to come home this winter I shall come up to see you before I come back here.

Tuesday, the 24th. (We had to march before I could close this letter.)

You say you think of me when you eat or go to bed, but don't worry about me. I find happiness and comfort here, but I am sorry to say that I had to come away from all my folks to find comfort and peace. I am sorry for my dear little family when I think of them, but I hope it will be all for the best and I trust in God the he will make all things well. So I send my love to you all. I hope you will live so at to meet me in Heaven (if not in this world) where trouble and sorrow come no more. So Good Bye, brother and sister. To Daniel Havens from Levi Havens.

(This is the last sheet of paper that I have got and I can't get any [more] now but I will get plenty soon. I wanted to answer your letter as soon as I could so I had to write on this, but I don't believe you can read it.) [He probably intended to say, "I hope you can read it anyway."]

*[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY]*

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December the 16th, 1863, Keeley Fort on the Rahanic River we are camped now.

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter day before yesterday. I was glad to hear from you. I can't say that I am well now for I have got the dysentery, but it is better now. I am sorry to hear that we can't live without having some of the connection talking about one another. But I never mind -- it doesn't make us any the worse. So I don't care how much they talk about me I am going to try to get a furlough to go home and, if I do, you will see me up there with

Mary. My captain told me if he could help me get a furlough he would, but I shall wait until I get my pay and I shall get that next month. But we hear that the government can't hold us only nine months, I hope it is so, but if I get my discharge in nine months I will enlist again for I am all alone here -- nobody to trouble me, and if I can't live to home and take more comfort than I ever did then I should rather be dead than to live. But if I come out as I expect to, I will take my little family and go as far from home as I am now.

Now, I will try to tell you a little about the times we had this last march. We marched 15 days. We met the rebels and old General Lee. We were brought into a line of battle and first thing I knew our canons began to roar like thunder. The rebels began to fly around as they were in hot siork. [?siork]. I could see them and after a while the rebels began to fire at us. General Mead rode around and gave the order to lay down every man and after a while we got orders to go back into the woods. We stayed there all night and day, then we were marched out to fight. We got orders to halt and I was sent off to get water to carry with us. After a while we got orders to go back to the same place and we stayed there until night. Then we marched all night and all day then we layed down until morning and keep on marching until we got to Keeley's Fort. We waded the river and the next day we waded back and camped here. But one half of it without anything to eat and we had to march all the time too. I can't tell you now many were killed but you will hear all about it.

The first thing that I got to eat was a small piece of beef and it tasted good to me. But we get enough to eat now. I was weighed the other day and I weighed fifteen pounds more than I ever weighed before, so I am getting fat -- but never mind, good times are coming. I have no fault to find. I take things as they come and I think it all for the best. I still trust that God will make all things right with me.

Tell Marinda that I will send this heart she sent to me home and have Mary lay it for me. The gum is very good and I will send some verses to keep. I can't think of any more to write now. Good Bye once more. This is from Levi Havens to Daniel and Clarinda Havens.

[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY]

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January the 29th, 1864 -- Camp on Slaughter Mountain

My Dear brother and Sister,

I have just got your letter and I am glad to hear from you once more but I am sorry to hear you were sick. I am well now and fat as a hog too, but we have had some hard times since I wrote you last. We are in sight of the rebel's camp now, but everything is still. But you need not expect to see me this winter for I can't get a furlough to come home. But [if] I ever come home I will come and see you. I have got a nice log house to live in this winter and the weather is as warm as [summer is.] So I do enjoy myself very well, but I think of my little family. I have just got a letter from Mary and they are well too,

but my father and mother are not very well. They are all worrying about me. They think they won't ever see me again, but I think if they live until next Fall they will see me home safe and sound, for I think the war will be settled by then. I feel just as safe as if I was at home. Everything seems to be all for the best with me and I believe that I shall come out all right yet.

[writing changes from black ink to pencil.]

We are now in a new camp about 2 miles from Cullpepper. We got orders to march as I was writing this letter and I have lost my ink so I write with my pencil. We have marched about ten miles. It is now the last day of January. We are not so near to the rebels as we were.

I haven't much time to write now, so I must close this letter. So Good Bye once more.

Direct your letters to:

69th Regiment NY Like,  
Washington, DC  
1st Corps, 2nd Division, 2nd Brigade.

From Levi Havens to Daniel Havens.

*[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY]*

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Camp near the City of Cullpepper -- Sunday morning, March the 27th, 1864

Dear brother and sister,

I got your letter last night. I was glad to hear from you once more, but I am sorry to hear you are sick. I am not very well now. I have bad pain in my head, but I hope these few lines will find you all well. I got a letter the other day from Mary and they are all well now.

I have had some hard times since I wrote to you. We marched down on the Rapidarm River to have a little fight with the rebes, but they run so we came back to our camp. It is a very nice place here and we have had a warm winter. We have had three snow storms but it all went off the next day. We get a good deal of rain here. We get good news about the war. We think the war will come to an end this Summer. It beats all how fast the rebels desert and come in here to our army every day from 2:00 until 8:00.

I can't think of any more news to write now but tell Marinda her chew of gum is very good, but I haven't anything to send to her now. But I will send my Love to you all. I must tell you that I have read my testament through and I still keep on reading it. And I smoke my pipe every day too. So you see I take great comfort here in the war away

from my friends. But I think if I were with my little family I could take still more comfort, for I know they are in trouble, for I got a letter from friend of mine and they tell me all about how my folks talk about Mary. God knows I am sorry for her, and I'd rather die than ever go back there to live. For I know that I can't take any comfort there, but if I live to get my discharge I shall go back to my wife, but I don't think I shall stay there long. I am bound to find some place where [I can] take comfort while I live. I think if I am killed here and some one of my folks will think of the trouble they have caused me. [?] But I can tell them all [I] am willing to die and leave my dear friends for I know there is comfort for me in another world and mean to try to live so I can gain that comfort and happiness that no tongue can express.

Sometime I think that I must someday have the chance to ask my folks about their religion and how they got it too. But never mind, one must work for one's self. I don't believe in asking others to pray for me that I may be saved. I believe that if I am saved by the grace of God that it will be done by my own work not by others. I don't believe in taking pains to go to meetings to get my soul saved or get my sins forgiven. I think that God will hear my prayers and answer them just as soon if I am by myself. So let us do it ourselves. I often wake up in the night and think of what I read and I can't get to sleep, so I get up and go all around our camp and no tongue can tell the mind I have. I read in the bible a verse:

it says, "at midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee because of Thy righteous judgement. I am companion of all them that fear Thee and of them that keep Thy precepts."

Well, I guess you will get tired of reading this letter so I will close by sending you all my love. So Good Bye dear brother and sister. I hope that we may meet once more in this wide world, but let us live so we can meet at God's right hand where grief nor sorrow never comes. There we shall part no more and live forever.

This is from Levi Havens to Daniel Havens.

PS - Write as soon as you can for I like to hear from my friends.

Direct your letter to:

Company C, 9th Regiment NY
Seh 1 Corps, 2nd Garrison, 2ns Brigade
Washington, DC

[This letter was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Bloomingdale, NY The previous letter was the last letter in the set written by Levi to his brother Daniel. The following letter was written in another hand and was signed S. C. which we can presume from its contents is from Sam Clark who Levi had mentioned he shared a tent with back in his second letter.]

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June 18 /64 -- Battlefield near to a line of battle near Pottersburgh.

Well, friend Daniel, I now sit down to let you know. Well, at this date I now tell you that I saw Levi all the time from [when] we left Riker's Island and we tented most all the time and that he was shot dead on the tenth of May on a charge at Shattleluaney [Spotsylvania?] Court House and nine more the same time out of the same Company. I have been wounded twice since he was killed - on the left arm. My arm is getting along very well now. I did not let any of our folk know it, for they think I am driving a mule team. Levi told me when we formed a line of battle that [he] was going to be shot and he said that he dreamed [it] so the night we were driven back and the men fell into the rebels hands. What Levi had fallen to the rebel's hand. So you can tell more about the war then I can tell you. We kill the Rebels life says [?] to home I have seen from two to five hundred killed in about five minutes. General Grant has driven [them] out of the wilderness to the South side of the James River and formed a line with Battles. S. C. [Sam Clark].