



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the William Pettit Correspondence

NMAH.AC.0177

Don Darroch

1985

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	William Pettit Correspondence
Date:	1864-1865
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0177
Creator:	Durrie, Paul, -1985 (Collector) Dibner, Bern, Dr. (Donor) Gordon, Gertrude Durrie (Collector) Pettit, William (civil servant) (Author)
Extent:	0.15 Cubic feet (1 box)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Correspondence of William Pettit, clerk in the War Department during the American Civil War, to his wife Hannah Pettit in Wisconsin.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

These letters and other material were donated to the Smithsonian Institution in August 1985 by Dr. Bern Dibner of the Burndy Library, Norwalk, Connecticut. He received the materials from Gertrude Durrie Gordon who inherited them from her brother Paul Durrie who died in 1985. His wife was a descendant of the Pettit family of Wisconsin.

Alternate Form Available

Typed transcriptions of all the letters (prepared by repository) are included in the collection.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Don Darroch, 1985

Preferred Citation

William Pettit Correspondence, 1864-1865, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical / Historical

William Pettit came to Washington, D.C. from Elkhorn, Wisconsin in the summer of 1863 to work as a clerk in the War Department. He left his wife, Hannah, and three daughters, Mary, Agnes and Lucy, at home. His main duties as a clerk were to answer letters received by the Department. He lived very frugally since he earned only \$93.50 per month, part of which sent home to pay for his family's expenses and life insurance. He wrote many letters to his wife describing his activities and his thoughts related to wartime Washington. He took advantage of many opportunities available to a civil servant of the period in the nation's capitol. He occasionally attended the fortnightly open house at the White House, lectures at the Smithsonian Institution, and sessions of the Congress and Supreme Court. Since the letters in this collection are from January 2 through March 30th and October 5th through December 30th, 1864, the six summer months activities are unknown.

According to a note from his great granddaughter, Pettit was riding horseback in Washington, the day after the last letter was written, and was killed. Since there is a letter written April 17, 1865 from his wife, it is impossible to know exactly when he died.

Scope and Contents

The collection consists of thirty-eight letters which William Pettit wrote to his wife from Washington, D.C.; a letter written soon after Lincoln's assassination by Pettit's wife; a letter from Lucy Pettit (Pettit's daughter) to her grandparents describing her birth on February 2, 1843; and a first draft of "my family reminiscences" - consisting of seventeen hand-written pages describing the family's genealogy from the middle 1600's when they first arrived in this country.

All 38 letters of the collection have been transcribed on typewriter. Pettit was concerned about how much wood his wife should order and what she should pay for it. He commented about his children's schooling and their penmanship. He discussed how much money he was sending home and how he was budgeting himself. His first letter describes New Year's Day when he went to the White House to see the ambassadors pay their respects to Uncle Sam. He got pushed with the crowd inside the White House and describes Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln and the types of people crowding in. He continued to go to the White House open houses because he was amused at the types of people who went there including those who put on airs, showed off their clothes, or thought they themselves were important.

Pettit had a subtle sense of humor as he describes well-known personages, church leaders, and people he worked with. He lived in a boarding house on 9th St., N.W. He has some interesting comments to make about the life and opinions of the time concerning the United States and war, bureaucracy and politics.

Pettit was strongly anti-slavery and had very positive views of Blacks. Some of these came from his religious convictions and others as a result of actual behavior of Blacks during the War in incidents which he describes.

He wrote about the coming 1864 election and the competition against Lincoln. He mentioned that Grant had been to Washington. He reported about the troops in the Army of the Potomac and rumors of war activities. For example, he mentions that the Southern rebels planned to blow up prisoners of war in Richmond if the city was to be taken. There is a description of an escape from a Confederate camp by a Northern officer.

Pettit tells about meeting with a drunken soldier whom he helped to get food and housing; and who tried to save from being knocked in the head as was happening weekly in Washington. He went to concerts and commented on the performances. He particularly expressed his preference for Wisconsin performers. He described church services and decorations for Easter and Christmas.

Pettit mentioned a Negro victory in battle, and commented that talk of re-enslaving such men was "mean." He said that Blacks had helped many to escape from the Confederates.

In the letter from Hannah dated April 17, 1865, his wife comments about Lee's surrender and her thoughts on the President's assassination. She said it was like losing a family friend. At first, they had thought it was a mistake but

was shocked when it was verified. She said that she had spent a gloomy Easter because of it although the day was beautiful. She asked the rhetorical question whether the vice president could do the job and concluded that this event would be a great trial for the Nation's good.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Civil service
- Genealogy
- Slavery -- United States
- Supreme Court

Types of Materials:

- Correspondence -- 1840-1930
- Letters (correspondence) -- 1860-1870

Names:

- Grant, Ulysses S. (Ulysses Simpson), 1822-1885
- Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865
- Lincoln, Mary Todd
- Pettit, Agnes
- Pettit, Hannah
- Pettit, Lucy
- Pettit, Mary
- Smithsonian Institution
- United States. Congress

Places:

- Elkhorn (Wis.)
- United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
- Washington (D.C.) -- 1860-1920
- White House (Washington, D.C.)

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	William Pettit letters; handwritten original, 1864
Box 1, Folder 2	William Pettit letters; typed copies, January 2- February 29, 1864
Box 1, Folder 3	William Pettit letters; typed copies, March 2 - December 30, 1864
Box 1, Folder 4	William Pettit letters; letter from his wife, April 17, 1865; undated letter; "letter to grandparents" of Lucy Orinda Pettit February 3, 1843, 1865 - 1865, 1843 - 1843
Box 1, Folder 5	William Pettit letters; handwritten Pettit family document; typed Pettit genealogy and family history