

**From
CAMP DOUGLAS
to VICKSBURG**

The Civil War Letters of William J. Kennedy,
55th Illinois Infantry, 1861–1863

EXCERPT

Edited and annotated by
Rachael E. Mellen and
David A. Powell

SB

Savas Beatie
California

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Dedicated to the memory of my husband

Robert P. Mellen

The Convergence of the Armies on Shiloh

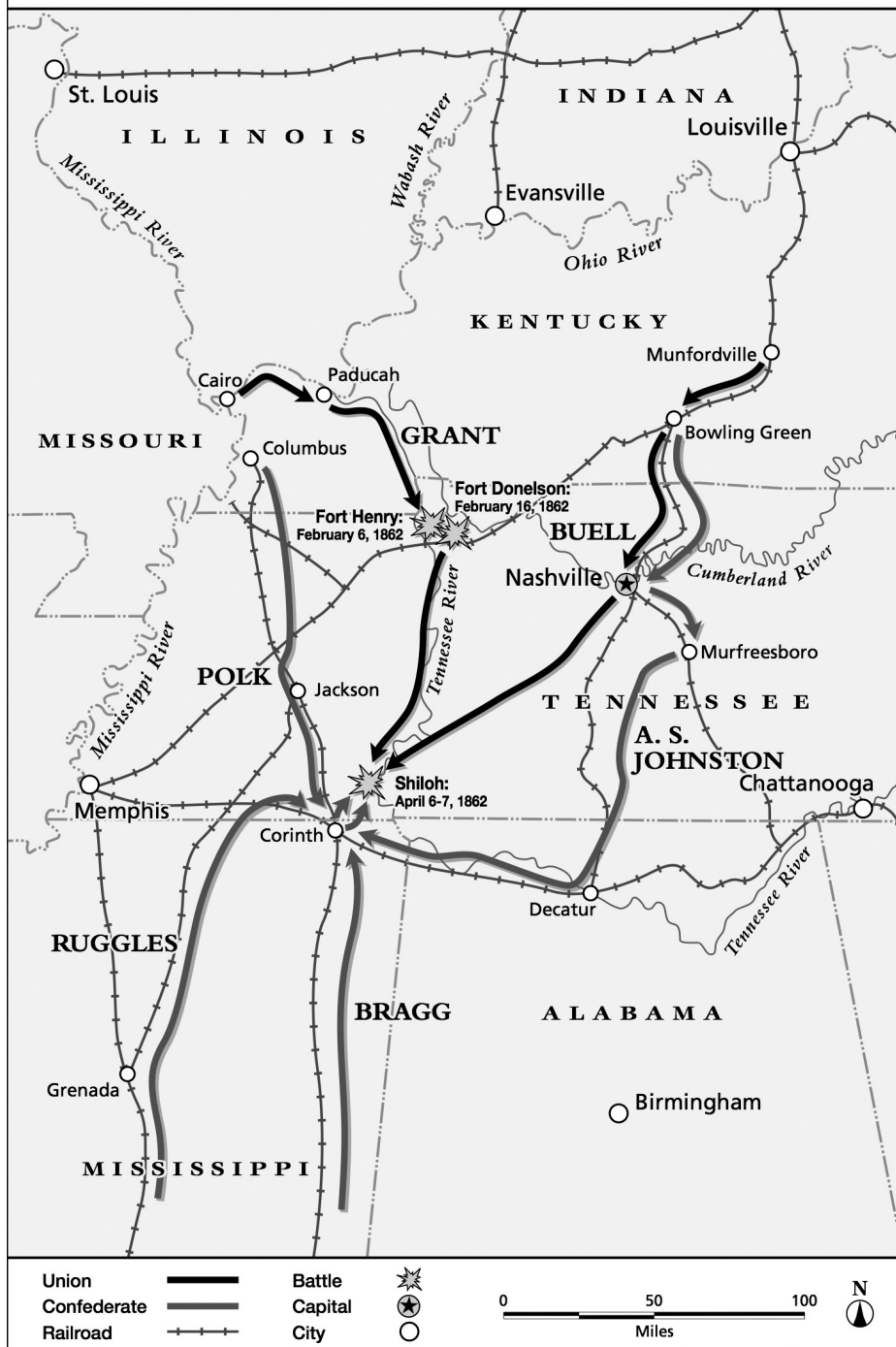


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Introduction

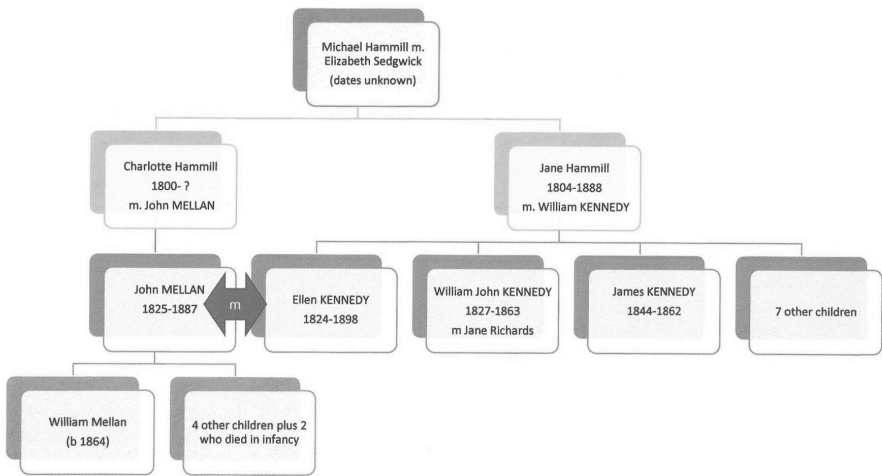
“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

— L. P. Hartley

Over thirty years ago I began researching the military career of one member of the 55th Illinois Volunteers, Company G, who was recruited in the river town of LaSalle, Illinois. The man was John Mellan, the great-great-great grandfather of my husband. I was intrigued to learn that there were two other men from LaSalle in the same company with the surname Kennedy—which happened to be Mellan’s wife’s maiden name. Could there be a connection? Surely this was too much of a coincidence. I ordered the military records of both men from the National Archives, but really there was no way to tell if my hunch was correct.

I decided to send a letter to the Illinois State Historical Library (now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library) inquiring if they had any materials related to the 55th Illinois. Indeed they did! Their response revealed that they had a set of about 150 letters written by William J. Kennedy between 1861 and 1863, including poems written by Mrs. Kennedy. These letters had been acquired from the Abraham Lincoln bookstore in Chicago in 1965. A family descendant had probably sold them to the bookstore. Although one letter has been published on the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library’s website, and others had been quoted in articles and books, most of the material has not been published or even read before.

Unfortunately, full-time work prevented me from going down to Springfield for many years—in fact, it took me nearly thirty! But as I opened up the first of five folders of letters, I realized I had unlocked a treasure trove! Almost every letter

Kennedy family flowchart. *Rachael Mellen*

referred to John Mellan, my husband's ancestor, and his wife and family. There was also James (sometimes called Jim), who turned out to be Kennedy's younger brother. Michael Humphrey, a young friend from LaSalle, completed the little group. Kennedy and Mellan took Humphrey under their wing. These four men had several things in common: three of them were closely related, all of them were working-class Irish Catholics, and all had moved to LaSalle in the late 1850s.

The letters are often hard to read. Most are dated, though some are just fragments without a heading. Although Kennedy wrote with a bold well-formed hand, the ink has faded in many of the letters, and some are torn, so there are words missing. Later in the war, he had a period of time when he had to write with his left hand. His poor spelling and inconsistent punctuation don't help either. He often capitalized nouns and used the ß sign for double 's,' as Germans do.

But despite these challenges to the modern reader, I decided it was well worth the effort to transcribe the letters. The story of these four previously anonymous LaSalle men comes alive under his pen—his perception, observations, and wit, as well as his fears and prejudices. Most of the letters were addressed to his wife Jane, though he rarely used her Christian name—she was simply addressed as "Dear Wife," according to the convention at that time. Much to his wife's chagrin, there is no sentimentality. Some letters were to his mother in northern New York state and a few to friends in and around LaSalle. Jane's letters do not survive. It was William's practice to burn the letters he received, rather than carry them and potentially risk them falling into enemy hands should he fall in battle. Judging

by Kennedy's return comments, it is not too difficult to infer what the family in LaSalle was experiencing. Her poems remain as a testament to her deep suffering.

Although much has been written about Illinois volunteer regiments in the Civil War, relatively little attention has been given to the 55th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. The first glimmer of interest in the regiment's history was kindled when the veterans themselves began to hold annual regimental reunions from 1884 onwards. There was a great deal of interest among the survivors to preserve their stories while memories were relatively fresh. The subsequent report of the first proceedings included an article by John G. Brown entitled "Historical Sketch of the 55th Reg. Ill. Vol." This was the earliest retrospective account of the regiment's activities during the war. It included a table of statistics of officers and men, dead and wounded, by battle or theatre of war. Reunions were held for about twenty years thereafter and usually included an essay on some aspect of the regiment's contribution to the war.¹

Following the success of this first reunion, a committee of the regiment comprised of Captains Lucien B. Crooker, John McAuley, and Adjutant Francis P. Fisher was formed to compile a history. Each committee member wrote a section, covering a specific period of the regiment's time in service. Chaplain Milton Haney also contributed an essay in the appendix. Acknowledgments were given to 54 members of the regiment who contributed to the account through letters, diaries, and reminiscences. Twelve of these were from Company G, five of whom were from LaSalle. They included Peter Roberts, James Gay, Andrew Williams, Calvin Songster, John H. Myers, C. C. Davis, Cyrus Brown, Charles Wood, Charles L. West, James Brazleton, Steven Bell, and Washington Biggs.

Regimental Chaplain Milton Haney published his autobiography in 1906, a section of which describes his experiences during the Civil War, particularly at Shiloh and during the Atlanta Campaign. He also paints a lurid picture of Peru and LaSalle, where he was assigned as minister before and after the conflict. Colonel Oscar Malmborg, who commanded the regiment for much of its existence during the battle of Shiloh and thereafter, also wrote a brief memoir published in 1870.²

The only other enlisted man of the 55th Illinois whose letters are known to survive is John Beach, also a private in Company G. Beach left 191 letters, dated

1 *Report of the Proceedings of the Association of the Fifty-Fifth Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry at their First Reunion held at Canton, ILL., Oct. 30th and 31st, 1884* (Davenport, IA, 1885).

2 Milton H. Haney, *Pentecostal Possibilities or the Story of My Life* (Chicago, IL, 1906). Malmborg, who was a Swedish immigrant, was the regiment's first lieutenant colonel. He commanded the regiment when Colonel David Stuart was commanding the brigade, including at Shiloh. Malmborg was later promoted to full colonel and given command of the regiment in his own right; after the war he returned to Sweden.

August 30, 1861-July 25, 1865. They are now in the archives of the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Additionally, fourteen letters addressed to his mother are archived at the Mark O. Hatfield Library, Willamette University; they are available digitally. The war diary of an officer, Thaddeus Capron, was published in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* in 1919. Capron's diary encompassed 79 pages, a much smaller collection than the Kennedy letters. I believe Kennedy's letters contribute immensely to our sense of what it was like to serve in a volunteer regiment during the Civil War.

Unfortunately for Kennedy, his family, and subsequent historians, William J. Kennedy died in 1863 of wounds received at Vicksburg on May 22nd of that year. His letters come to a sad end in the summer of 1863 with the news of his death transmitted home by friends and hospital workers. While he lived, however, Kennedy provided great insight into the inner workings of the 55th Illinois Infantry as well as a touching sense of his family life.

R. M.

Acknowledgments

I could not have produced this book without the assistance of numerous people. First and foremost, it was the encouragement and assistance of my late husband Robert that kicked off the project. When I discovered the relevance of the manuscript letters of William Kennedy at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum to our family history, it was Robert who persuaded me to embark on a program of transcribing the documents in full and put everything in context.

I also need to give top billing to my publisher Theodore "Ted" Savas and Veronica Kane, my production manager, whose faith in the project and guidance helped me produce a much-improved book. Ted also introduced me to David Powell, whose input and guidance have also proved invaluable. Thanks also to Sarah Keeney and all the staff at Savas Beatie, as well as Melissa Weeks who provided copyediting, and Derrick Lindow who indexed the manuscript so carefully.

The staff at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, especially Debbie Hamm, were incredibly supportive and interested in the project from day one and assisted me with my endless questions and demands.

My sister Ruth Dipple and my daughter Elizabeth Craig each volunteered a great deal of time to read the early drafts and suggest corrections and edits. Greg Romanek also read early versions of the manuscript and provided much-needed encouragement. Thank you! I also want to thank my other children Alice and Robin, daughter-in-law Kerry and sister-in-law Jill Mellen for their patience, support, and love of history.

Others whom I wish to thank for their assistance include the staff of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in Kenosha, Wisconsin; all my fellow volunteers and friends at the LaSalle County Genealogy Guild; the staff of the Peru Public Library and LaSalle Public Library; Anne Mosely at the Lincoln Museum in Lincoln, Illinois, who took time to show me their collection of Wide-Awake artifacts; the staff of the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library for providing me with a copy of a letter in Colonel David Stuart's autograph; Tom Parson and the staff at the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center for insight into the siege of Corinth; Paul Harrison at the National Archives who tried to help me track the discharge record of Joseph Clay; Emmett Redd of Missouri State University for his insights into the phrase "Sound on the Goose Question," Mark Wilson for sharing his knowledge of government vouchers, and Tim Tedrick of Battery G 2nd Illinois Light Artillery for furnishing me with a photograph of my husband at a Civil War reenactment.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the encouragement of the late Dr. E. J. Miller, emeritus professor of geography at Illinois State University. She was a source of inspiration in her pursuit of high standards in scholarship and her interest in the book's progress. If I have omitted anyone who helped me in this 10-year journey with William Kennedy, I apologize most sincerely.

Chapter One

From LaSalle to Camp Douglas: August–December 1861

Recruitment of Company G, 55th Illinois Infantry in LaSalle

The inauguration of Abraham Lincoln on March 4, 1861, as president of the United States followed a long, bitter, and divisive campaign. The South saw Lincoln's election as a direct challenge to its values, outwardly regarding the concept of states' rights versus Federal power, more fundamentally, the right to hold slaves. Politically, Lincoln was a Republican, and his main election plank was to maintain the Union at all costs. The attack on Fort Sumter less than a month after his election was a direct affront to the stability of the Union. Support for the attack came from a group of seven states wishing to secede from the Union and set up a separate "Confederacy" with its own constitution and form of government which was modeled—much like the Union they were leaving—on the form of government established by the Founding Fathers.

Immediately, Lincoln called up 75,000 militiamen for three months' service, with the optimistic assumption that the rebellion could be quelled in a few weeks. Since the United States had only a small standing army, Lincoln needed the aid of these part-time local militia to supplement the strength of the regular army. The Militia Act of 1792 provided the means to do this, earmarking all able-bodied, free, white, male citizens between ages 18 and 45 as liable to call-up and service of no more than three months in any one year. The state governors appointed officers in the militia, although the appointment of general officers was subject to Presidential approval.¹ If the militia proved inadequate, volunteers could be called upon to serve instead. By the end of July 1861, it was obvious that the

1 General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as a Military Commander* (London, 1970), 13.

conflict would not be short. The Union defeat at Bull Run earlier in the month prompted Congress to vote for the enlistment of a half million volunteers for the duration of the war.

This was the point of genesis for the 55th Illinois Infantry. Chicago lawyer David Stuart petitioned the War Department to raise a regiment, of which he intended to be the colonel.² Advertisements in newspapers and posters called for recruits to rendezvous at Camp Douglas on the Chicago lakefront. Among those who responded were the men who ultimately formed Company G of the 55th, hailing mostly from LaSalle and McDonough counties, with many from the town of LaSalle on the banks of the Illinois River.³

Like Chicago, LaSalle was a burgeoning community. The county seat, Ottawa, hosted one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858. Many of the inhabitants were of Irish extraction; some came to the area when the Illinois-Michigan Canal was built in the 1840s. After the opening of the Matthiessen and Hegeler Zinc Plant in 1858, the prospect of well-paid manufacturing positions attracted others. In 1863, the influx was so great that the local St. Patrick Catholic Church, completed in 1852, was forced to extend its building north to encompass a new sanctuary and chapel.⁴ Many of the new parishioners were Irish, though as the only Catholic church in LaSalle or nearby Peru, it had its fair share of Germans and Austrians. The site of the original wooden church on Third and Chartres Street had become the home of the Catholic Institute, an educational association for Catholic workers. This unique organization provided a meeting place for debate. It also maintained a library of classical and theological works and subscriptions to the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as leading Catholic papers, including *The Tablet* from London.⁵

The regimental history gives some details of the recruitment efforts in LaSalle:

About the first of August, 1861, Joseph Clay of LaSalle began recruiting a company to join the Douglas Brigade, then being formed at Camp Douglas. He was assisted by C. C. Davis, William J. Kennedy and a few others. Those enrolled, numbering about thirty-five

2 David Stuart was born on March 12, 1816, in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from Amherst College in 1838, he took up the legal profession in Detroit, Michigan; Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue, Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1964), 484-485.

3 Committee of the Regiment, *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Huntington, WV, 1993), 18.

4 Elizabeth Cummings, *The Stone Church: The Story of St. Patrick's of LaSalle, Illinois* (New York, 1988), 46.

5 *Ibid.*, 42.

men, reported at Chicago, August 7th. . . . The name of Lyon Guard was given to the company, until it became a part of the Fifty-fifth Infantry, when it was designated G.⁶

William Kennedy played a pivotal role in the formation of the company. An article from the *Chicago Tribune* dated August 22, 1861, to which he refers in his correspondence, listed the Lyon Guard among the brigade's composition and that the officers were Captain Clay, First Lieutenant T. Slattery,⁷ and Second Lieutenant "John" (William J.) Kennedy with a roster of 58 men.⁸ The regimental history states that Cyrus Browne was chosen as first lieutenant and Peter Roberts first sergeant. Because Clay claimed prior military experience, he was elected captain over Kennedy, who felt and later proved that he was the more capable man.⁹ A bitter division soon sprang up between Kennedy and Capt. Clay which came to a dramatic conclusion the following spring.

Joseph Clay's history before the Civil War was self-reported and conflicting. The roster of Illinois Civil War veterans lists Clay as originating from Reading, Pennsylvania, aged 33. However, according to the 1860 Census, he was born in New York and was only 25. This is probably the same Joseph Clay found living in Mentz, New York, in the 1850 census, the 22-year-old son of a doctor.

William John Kennedy was born in December 1827 in St. Lawrence County, New York, the third child and eldest son of William and Jane (Hammill) Kennedy. The surname was also spelled "Kanada" or "Canada" in various documents. His parents originated from County Antrim in Northern Ireland. Kennedy's maternal uncle had been forced to immigrate to the United States to escape religious persecution following an altercation with Protestant Orangemen at a local fair, and it is probably fair to assume that the remainder of the family left for the same reason.

At the time of young William's birth, northern New York State was still a recently-settled frontier, a land of fur trappers and pioneer farmers. There was very little evidence of Western civilization. Only four Catholic priests served the northern half of the state. Thus, William and Jane crossed over to St. Regis in Canada to have their marriage solemnized at the Catholic mission on a Mohawk

6 *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Illinois*, 497. Originally, David Stuart envisioned recruiting multiple regiments, which would be combined in the aforementioned Douglas Brigade, named for Stephen A. Douglas.

7 Timothy Slattery, a Morris resident, mustered in on August 7, 1862, in Chicago. Captain Clay would not accept an Irishman as an officer in the company, so he transferred to Company I.

8 *Chicago Tribune* August 22, 1861.

9 A Joseph Clay from Reading, PA, did enlist in the army during the Mexican War of 1848, but it is impossible to establish if this is the same man.

reservation and to baptize their eleven children. The marriage was not a happy one, however. Due to excessive abuse by her husband, whom Jane later described in a pension affidavit as “a drunken sot,” she left William Sr. in October 1860, taking her younger children with her.

Young William, who signed all his letters W. J., was known in the family as John. He married Jane Richards in Brasher Falls, New York, in 1850. His sister Ellen had recently married John Mellan, an Irish immigrant who was also her cousin. William and John were therefore cousins as well as brothers-in-law. In 1858, William moved his family, which included two sons, to LaSalle where a daughter was born. He was a harness-maker by trade, and the 1858 City Directory shows that he was already in business with Stephen Foster, also a harness-maker, at Fourth and Berlin Street (now Lafayette.)¹⁰ The timing could not have been worse. On August 12, 1861, the year John Kennedy left for Camp Douglas, his 6-month-old daughter Jennie Kennedy died. They buried her at Rockwell Cemetery outside LaSalle.

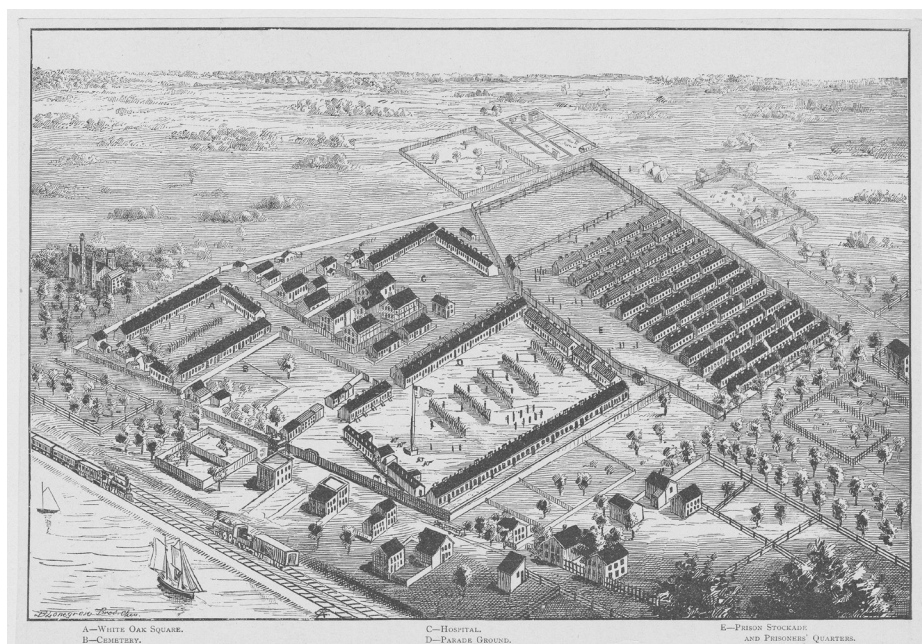
William actively recruited his family and neighbors to enlist in what was to be Company G. His 17-year-old brother James, brother-in-law John Mellan, and their friend Michael Humphrey all joined on August 6 in LaSalle. He no doubt had ties with many of the 30 other LaSalle men comprising Company G. They left by train, headed for Chicago, fully expecting to be home by year's end.

Both Kennedy and Mellan left behind wives and children who were expected to fend for themselves as well as possible. Kennedy's wife Jane was born in Vermont, the daughter of a blacksmith, while Mellan's wife Ellen (Kennedy's sister) was of rougher hew. Each of their struggles must have been almost as difficult as those of their husbands. Presumably, both men set up allotments of their pay that would be paid directly to their families, but still, those left behind faced a precarious existence. Throughout the war, until Kennedy's death in June 1863, he and Jane conducted a regular correspondence, sometimes three letters a week. Although none of her letters survives, the impact of the war on domestic life can be deduced from Kennedy's responses. The newly minted soldiers discovered that military pay was not dependable; a recurrent subject of their letters was the expectation of pay.

Camp Douglas

The state of Illinois was expected not only to recruit militia but to house, clothe, feed, and train them before making them available to the Federal government for service. Governor Yates was therefore authorized by the General

10 John C. W Bailey, *LaSalle County Directory for 1858 and 1859* (Chicago, IL, 1859).



Camp Douglas, Chicago, Illinois. *Chicago Historical Society*

Assembly in September 1861 to establish a single camp for the training of the Northern Illinois regiments. He commissioned Judge Allan C. Fuller to locate a site in or near Chicago, and it was Fuller who nominated the tract that was to become Camp Douglas.¹¹

The site, approximately four miles south of what is now the Loop (Chicago's downtown), comprised between 60 and 70 acres west of Cottage Grove Avenue between modern-day 31st and 33rd Streets, land which was owned by Stephen Douglas. The main advantages of the site were its flatness and access to water. It was also conveniently connected to downtown Chicago by a horse-drawn trolley line operated by the Chicago City Railway Company. Soldiers who arrived before completion of the barracks were housed in Sibley tents and spent most of their days learning military drill. A line drawing at the Chicago Historical Society depicts the interior of a barracks with three-tier bunks running up the long sides of a wooden hut and a pot-belly stove in the middle. Except for an upturned half-barrel, there was no furniture. An outbreak of measles occurred around October 1861, and about 200 soldiers were confined to the hospital, one of whom was James Kennedy. A special cadre of carpenters completed construction of the barracks, and a flag-

11 Denis Kelly, *A History of Camp Douglas, Illinois, Union Prison, 1861-1865* (Washington, D.C., 1989).

raising ceremony took place on October 23rd in the presence of the four brigades formed thus far in Northern Illinois.

The regimental history describes Camp Douglas as a succession of sandy knolls sparsely covered with scrubby black oak timber.

The barracks were a series of detached, rough buildings, which served well enough for the purpose of shelter at that season of the year. . . . No fence or wall surrounded the grounds, but the exuberant recruit was kept within reasonable bounds by a line of guards stretched entirely round the camp. No arms or uniforms had yet been issued, rough cudgels cut from the adjoining thicket being the weapons relied upon to represent authority. . . . Rations were good and plentiful, but suffered occasionally at the hands of inexperienced cooks, whose efforts were not always economical or palatable.¹²

A notable event was the arrival of Oscar Malmborg, a Swedish native who had trained at the Stockholm military academy and was probably the only officer in the 55th with prior military education and experience. He was soon to be despised by the rank and file because of his perceived pomposity and reputation as a hard taskmaster, but he nevertheless played a pivotal role in the 55th's first major engagement, Shiloh.¹³

In early December 1861, before the regiment's transfer to Missouri, Kennedy was given a furlough to go home to LaSalle to spend a few days with his family. On December 7, 1861, he rejoined the regiment at Camp Douglas. In 1865, Jane wrote a poem commemorating that last day together and paraphrasing his words:

Yet is just four years the evening
Since my husband said good-bye
My heart was well nigh breaking
And the tears were in my eyes

I held his hand in silence
And his eyes were glistening to
The days I've got to leave you
Although I love you so.

12 *The Story of the Fifty-Fifth Illinois*, 20.

13 Otto Eisenschiml, "The 55th at Shiloh," in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 56, no. 2, (Summer, 1963), 197-201.

I hope you'll not think hard of me
For leaving you behind
I must fight my country's battle
Now that the calls for men.

Three months will soon be over
I'll see you on furlough
Keep up good courage Jane.

Don't let the children forget me
Nor their love for me grow dim
I need not tell you this
I know what yours has been.

I wish the Boys to remember
What has taken me from home
And fight to defend their country
If called upon when men.

* * *

The Letters

23 August 61

Dear Wife & Children

I thought you would like to hear from (me) so I will tell you that we are having a first rate time. We have sixty men now all well and they all seem to like well. I had eleven men with me from La Salle besides one woman & child. Mr. Davis's¹⁴ wife & child came with us and stayed overnight went back to her folks some place in Will county Mr. Johnson went on to Michigan with his Brother will be back on Friday We had two young gentlemen from the country that was too smart to be Soldiers and live in a camp with the rest of us. But if they could board in the Tremont House¹⁵ they could put up with rest providing they could walk around with their hand in their pockets but that would not do. I made Mr. Hartz pay three dollars for his fare on the cars & twenty cents for rations. Breakfast & supper ten cts. Each. He went home same day.

Mr. Crane¹⁶ had not the money to pay so he could not go. He sent home for money. When he gets it and pays all expenses he can go home. He is home sick. If you see Foster you can tell him all the men from La Salle seem to like very well. James is well, also John. They both appear to enjoy themselves well

The old man that I had to dinner & supper ran away before the cars came—that was so drunk that he could not find the Depot

If you can see the Chicago Tribune of the 22nd [August] you can see what it says of our Brigade. They did not get my name in full. We all think they got the number of men in the camp too low, at least it is for today for they keep coming. I have not been In Chicago since came here but I am going down to stay.

The letter you sent me before I went home James got the same night he opened it. I never see it.

You can write if you get this before Sunday on that day. I want to know how Charley is.

Direct as you did the dispatch

My respects to all

Wm J Kennedy

14 Caleb C. Davis, also a LaSalle resident, enlisted in Co. G on August 7, 1861.

15 The Tremont House, a luxury hotel, was used by delegates to the Republican Convention in 1860. It stood on the southeast corner of Lake and Dearborn streets. Stephen A. Douglas died there in June 1861.

16 Possibly Farnam Crane, a 24-year-old druggist from LaSalle who had a young wife and daughter.

* * *

26 September 1861

Camp Douglas¹⁷

Dear Wife

I arrived here this morn at nine o clock It was very cold and have not got warm [...] this is the coldest day we have had this season. I found things a little better that I expected to be. The boys are well. There was ten or twelve men and of our camp and [?] the first Regiment all good friends of mine John would [have] gone if I had been here for he wanted to go bad We have got forty men in our camp now.

Clay says that he sent me a letter last Monday and the Colonel says he sent me one yesterday but I got none of them. If you get any of them you can keep them without. Stephen Foster wants to send some recruits up. If he does you let him have them. My things you can pack and send if you get a chance. I don't know when I can come down again

Tell Kate Craven¹⁸ that I am very sorry that I did not [?] once more I came away. Tell her she had better enlist and come here. You may tell Foster to get you a load of coal and you can ask him for a little money. Tell Pat¹⁹ to get you some corn for the pig. You had better get some bran for the cow. If you could get Pat to go after it you could get it for five cts per bushel, they will charge 7 cts. You can let me know if you get any passes and how you get a long and how long Kate stays with you. Give my respects to her and all the [...] folks. Don't think that I mean none about your self

Yours for the time

W. J. Kennedy

* * *

Camp Douglas

3 October 1861

Dear Wife

Yours of the 27th came to me yesterday. I was glad to hear from you, I had been looking for a letter for some time. I am sorry that you feel so lonesome and bad about things but you must not think that you will be as bad off always for I

17 This was a makeshift tent camp south of the location of the permanent camp.

18 Catherine Craven, a 19-year-old Irish seamstress living in Ottawa, Illinois, per the 1860 Census.

19 Patrick Gehan, Kennedy's brother-in-law.

[know] that I will get my pay soon and if I do you will have what I get. Besides you can get all that you want from Evens if [he] does as he told me he would. You may not get money but I think he will let you have what other things you want and need.²⁰

We was very uneasy about Ellen for we expected her here and looked for her for three days but she did not come. John got a letter from her and went down as soon as he could go. I did not think he could go on Sunday and went down to town had my dinner with the folks [I] boarded with when I was in Chicago four years ago. I went to Mr. Moore's to supper, he was not at home. When I got back to Camp I found that John had gone. I don't know what he can do with his family. I feel sorry for them. If he could do anything with his children he might bring his wife with him and I think she could make money but it would be a hard life for her. I would like to see her very well. You did not say anything in regard to your pig. Have you killed him yet? If not I think [you] had better for you can't buy feed for him and buy your meat without money. You did not say how & what kind of time Ellen had getting to La Salle. I think she must had a hard time to bring so many children with her so far all alone.²¹

Mr. Foster could not let you have any money and I don't blame him for I think he has a hard time to get money to carry on his business and I don't know how much he owes me. I know if he had money he would let me have it for he is a good man. I can get along without money for a while and I hope I will get some money from Uncle Sam soon. See if you can get what you want or must have, you can keep it. You have before this heard what has taken place in our camp, once that some of us will leave the company. I can't tell you that is I have more friends in this Camp than Clay has. I think he will find it out and yet I could tell you more but it is not necessary.

I want you to send to Doctor Hall²² and tell him that you want that dollar that he owes me for a lottery ticket. I let him have in E. Adgates lottery²³ last winter—don't be afraid to ask him for it.

20 Apparently Kennedy made a deal with Evans for the support of his family while he was gone, assuming it would be of short duration.

21 At this time, Ellen had six children, four of whom were under the age of 5. She would have traveled by railway from LaSalle to Chicago and then taken a tramcar to Camp Douglas.

22 Lyman Hall, listed in the 1860 Census as a physician in LaSalle. He enlisted in the 63rd Illinois Infantry in Dec. 1861. "Kansas, Grand Army of the Republic Post Reports, 1880-1940" Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Accessed 12/20/2024. <https://tinyurl.com/5x3btbjh>.

23 Lotteries were common in the U.S. until the 1840s when opposition from evangelical groups caused their decline.

The weather is cold now windy but we have a very good place to stay and we are all well. James wants to go home. I don't know when he will go but think he will.²⁴

Before we leave here (I don't know when we will go but don't think we will go in two weeks but can't tell) I will go home before we go. John will get here before you get this letter so I can't say anything to him. I will write you again soon, give my best respects to all the friends. You must write me again

Yours

W. J. Kennedy

When you write home give my respect to Hill—tell him I will write him when he answers my letter that I wrote him when he was in California.

Tell Sis that I will come home and see her, also Charley & Willie. They must go to school all the time.

* * *

11 October 1861

Dear Wife,

As I have an opportunity of sending a letter to you, I thought I would write a few lines. I got my valise by Mr. Vanbuskirk²⁵ and I was glad to get my things. We are all well, and no prospect of getting away from here. Mr. Brown & Joseph Strout got here Thursday morning, also Mr. Davis. They brought no recruits. Mr. Clay has [gone] off recruiting into Fulton County²⁶ [and] I don't expect him back before Monday.

We are going to move in a few days into our new Barracks [that] we are building at the old fair grounds which (is) in a half mile nearer the town and is built for winter Quarters for all recruits that may be in Chicago this winter but we don't know how long we may be here. We are getting some recruits back. We number not fifty men.

Capt. Moriarity²⁷ was here last Tuesday and made me go down town with him and stay all night. I never came across any one that used me better than he did. He done everything he could for me. He looks first rate, better than he did when he went away—he is not quite so fleshy as he was then. He said he was going to La Salle on Saturday. I have seen some of his men and they say he was a good captain.

24 This may have been the start of James's measles infection.

25 Alonzo Van Buskirk, a 44-year-old Corporal in Co. G. He originated from Clinton, New York, so it is possible that they were previously acquainted before moving to LaSalle.

26 Fulton County is located southwest of Peoria, Illinois.

27 David Moriarty, Captain in Co. F, 23rd Illinois Infantry, a physician and native of Kerry, Ireland. In the 1860 Census, he was residing in a hotel in LaSalle.

I was down town today with Strout and we see the Yates Phalanx²⁸ start for St Louis. They looked for they have about eight hundred men.

I have not learned from anything from home Brasher, [N.Y.] I have written to Ellen but have not heard from her.²⁹

You must not go without money. When you want it, go and tell Foster that you want some. I don't know when I will be at home but think I will before we leave here I want you to go over to Strout's and get my New Glee and Chorus Book³⁰ and send it up the first chance you get for we have some times singing.

Give my best respects to all & tell the boys to go to school, tell Sis that I will come & to see her. My respects to Kate Zeins

W. J. Kennedy

* * *

19 October 1861

Camp Douglas

Dear Wife

I have had a good to do for Capt. Clay has been gone for two weeks, we expect him back tonight. I got my singing book—Mr. Wood³¹ brought it to me, he said he see you, you was in the wash tub. I had a letter from Ellen Mellan last Tuesday saying she should start on Monday of this week (that was last Monday). We have been to the [railway] depot every night and morning but she has not got along yet.

Daniel Evens told me that he could let you have corn for the pig and hay for the cow so you need not starve while I [am gone].

John and I called on Mrs. Moore the other day and she made us stay to dinner. She said she see you a week ago; I did not see Mr. Moore he was gone on the road.

We don't know when we will go from here. We expects to go into our new barracks in a few days. [We] will have better winter quarters and be a little nearer town. We have now over seven hundred men in camp and they keep coming in all the time. We have in our company now sixty men.

28 The 39th Illinois Infantry was nicknamed Yates Phalanx after the Governor of Illinois. It mustered in on October 11, 1861, the date of this letter.

29 Probably Ellen Richards, Jane's sister.

30 Glee books were songs in three parts for male voices and were a popular form of entertainment at the time. Kennedy's was possibly the New York Glee and Chorus Book (Mason Brothers, 1856).

31 Charles Wood, LaSalle resident and member of Co. G.

I can't tell you when I shall be home but James is going down soon. Write me soon let me know how you get along and what Bridget³² is doing.

* * *

November 12, 1861

Camp Douglas

Dear Wife

So today is pay day and I have just got mine. I hasten [to] send you some, I have not time to write much tonight for it is late. I will write soon again. I will send you twenty dollars in this letter and in my next I will send you more. I only got thirty six dollars and Clay tries to keep me from that. You need not think that I am going to leave Clay – it's a long road that never turns.³³

* * *

13 November 1861

Camp Douglas

Dear Wife

As for my coming home there is no use of talking about that for I never can back out of anything in that way. If old Strout³⁴ wants to he can do it but I will not leave my friends in this Company for that is just what Clay wants. He has tried everything in his power to hurt me and he has done something in that way. But it will not last always for I have one friend in this Regiment that is worth to me a great deal, that is Colonel Stuart. He is now elected Colonel and he will do what is right by me. Lt Clay tried to throw me out of my pay and Stuart told me that I should have it so I got a private's pay—that liked to kill Clay. Stuart told me if I wanted to go home, as Strout did, I could do so and lose all I had done but if I wanted to stay he Stuart would do what was fair by me, and advised me to stay in Clay's Company. Clay don't count me one of his yet and I don't. Capt Clay wants to get me out so bad that he offers to help me get an office in some other Regiment. He will let James and John go with me, but there is twenty five would go if they could with me, but they can't, and want me to stay with them.

32 Probably his cousin Bridget Keenan.

33 An Irish proverb, "It's a long road that has no turning," means your luck will change.

34 Joseph Strout was listed as a 46-year-old carpenter from Maine in the 1860 Census. He was a neighbor of Kennedy's partner Foster.

Clay offered me last night to settle with him sixty five dollars. I told him that I should have more or none at all.

Now Jane if I was as easily discouraged as you I would gone home without anything for my three or four month's work.

I want to buy some things for the children but don't know what they want. If you see Ellen tell her that John will send her more money as soon as I send to you. He would like to know if she got the twenty dollars he sent her.

* * *

22 November 1861

Camp Douglas

Dear Wife

I have been looking for a letter for some time and have got none yet. The last time I wrote you I asked you to write me and let me know what I could get for the children, and whether you got the money that [I] sent or not, but I received no answer.

Strout was here day before yesterday and said that he thought that you got the money, but he could not say for certain. I have now send you sixty dollars twenty at three different times, and I want you to be careful of it you can get whatever you need but remember that it may be a long time before you can have as much again. I have more which I shall send home before we leave here and then you be a long while before you can get any more. I hope you will always have enough but you say that thirteen dollars per month will not suffice and my family and you must think of that while you have plenty, what will John Mellon's wife do on thirteen dollars per month with six children. She [has] not got much as you have to do with. I have got a bad cold now. The weather is bad—yesterday it rained all the afternoon and all night. Today it rained and snow some but the snow did not show on the ground, it was so wet.

Clay went home last night. He wanted to know if I had anything to send home—I told him no, that I had nothing to send but old clothes and thought he would not like to take them. He said no. If he comes in to the house you had better throw some hot water in his face—it might do him good.

Joseph Strout came here and give Clay heck. He was as independent as a hog on ice.³⁵ Clay was going take him up but Strout was gone before he knew it. They don't ask me to do anything and I am getting bored doing nothing.

³⁵ A mid-19th century turn of phrase, probably meaning "out of their element."

The boys are dancing all day, as they can't drill out of doors. They have a fiddle and lots of fiddlers and a good place to dance.

I told Strout to tell you to get the hog killed and sold for I think he will not do well in cold weather. You can get someone to do the work for you, you must get coal before the price comes up [then] you can put two loads in the coal hole.

* * *

1 December 1861

Camp Douglas

Dear Wife

I thought I would today that I would answer my two or three last letters as I have nothing to do and get no answer from you. I don't know why do don't write me. I told you in my last that we were expecting to start by Tuesday. Well we don't know anything to contrary. We may go and may not some think we will not go but don't know whether or not. I have nothing of importance to write. I did not send our things home and don't want to until we know when we start. I think we will know tonight if we go Tuesday if so I will send them tomorrow. We are all well I have got a bad cold but am getting over it now. It snowed all night and today is very cold. I suppose you are having cold weather in LaSalle. I would like to know how you get along and how the children are this winter. If we don't go from here this week I don't think we will go for some time. If not I will try and come home before we do go. The boys are betting on our going home, are betting we will go Tuesday others ready to take bets that we will not. We have been called so since they will not believe we will go this winter most of them wants to go now. They are tired staying here. I am for one.

The last letter I wrote you was on Thanks giving day. John sent one to his wife. I was looking for a letter from you yesterday but got none. I shall look for one this afternoon as the mail will come in then. If we go Tuesday will write you before we start.

My hands are so cold that I can hardly write so I will close tell the children that I was dreaming of them last night.

Yours W. J. Kennedy

The mail has come nothing for me.

END OF EXCERPT