



State of Tennessee
Department of State
Tennessee State Library and Archives

Oliver Caswell King
and
Katherine Rebecca Rutledge King Papers, 1856-1893

COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:

King, Katherine Rebecca Rutledge, 1843-1925

King, Oliver Caswell, 1841-1893

Inclusive Dates:

1856-1893

Scope & Content:

Documents include personal correspondence, political essays, history themes, unpublished editorials, original poetry, addressed envelopes, a greeting card, and a memorial death card. A number of postal covers bear Confederate States of America postage stamps. It was not possible to match all the empty envelopes to their original contents. These papers provide social, political, and domestic context for historians researching period courtship practices, college experiences, Civil War camp life, and the wartime home front. Quotes in this finding aid have not been edited for spelling, syntax, or grammar.

The correspondence of Oliver Caswell King and Katherine (Kate) Rebecca Rutledge King is extraordinary in content and breadth. More than 150 love letters document the courtship and marriage of this Sullivan County, Tennessee, couple. He affectionately called her Toad and she greeted him as Oll. Their letters are peppered with humor, teasing, playfulness, gossip, political commentaries, advice, and light-hearted attempts to make the other jealous.

Oliver's Tusculum College compositions, circa 1859-1861, are articulate and thoughtful. Themes range from the influences of Greek and Roman civilizations to freedom of expression, Italian unification, and the harmful effects of procrastination. The essays include two eloquent arguments for Southern liberty.

King's letters to the Greeneville Democrat newspaper, written during the time of the secession debate, address the "political darkness" of the day.

Oliver's transition from anti-Lincoln to pro-Union to Confederate sympathizer is evident in his essays, editorials, and letters. A month after the 1860 presidential election, Oliver professed he was "still in the notion of going to fight Lincoln," but in mid-February 1861 he claimed, "I stick to the Union yet." Though most Tusculum students were secessionists, Oll was applauded throughout a Union speech he made at a college political meeting. By May 1861 he was extolling the Southern cause and telling Toad that their countrymen are "fired with an holy zeal to redress" the wrongs done to Tennessee.

Kate's sentiments mirrored Oll's. On February 13 [1861], she informed him that there was "a great deal of excitement up here about the Union. I believe there are more for the Union than disunion." Three weeks after the firing on Fort Sumter, she reported that nearly all the local boys were going to war – for the Confederacy.

Her patriotism for the Southern cause is apparent throughout the correspondence. After Oll enlisted she admitted, "If my sweetheart ha'dt to have went [to war] I don't believe I would claim him any longer for I don't know how he could have shown his love for me more plainly than by volunteering to defend our homes." Southern women commonly expressed such feelings to their menfolk, and their encouragement exerted weighty influence. Kate was pleased with the little flags that she and Nan made for the horses of a Confederate passerby; the brace "looked as if they felt very proud to have a Southern flag waving over them."

The earliest letter in the collection, from John C. Rutledge to "My little daughters," was written August 21, 1856. It was progressive and emphasized the value of a girl's education. Rutledge wrote that being possessed of "a right mind is a Divine blessing" and that the gifts of mind and speech "distinguish us from the animals, which also have feeling."

Oliver King's first love letter to Kate is dated May 10, 1858, from his home in Poor Hill. By January 1859 he was writing from Emory and Henry College in Virginia. He was "desperately lonesome" and leading the life of a "solitary misanthrope." He wrote afterward to say he had left school, never to return. "I could not see my rights, my liberties, my conscience trampled on by a despotic faculty. I could not see talent made subservient to Methodism." He confessed to "working a little, playing a little, studying a little and doing nothing to a considerable extent."

Early in 1860 Oliver was back at school courting Kate from Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tennessee. He excelled there and enjoyed an active social life. On February 4, he told Toad he would be attending a celebration and warned her to

“look out, I’m going to have such a speech that I can’t fail to catch a sweetheart.” Toad was unconcerned about other women. Of Oll’s teasing comment about giving her “the dodge,” she replied that he knew what would happen if he did.

Kate had a full college life of her own at the Masonic Female Institute in Blountville where her favorite subject was Latin. Other course work included arithmetic, botany, philosophy, religion, and literature. Reading assignments like William Paley’s work on the evidence of Christianity were not unusual.

The couple was uninhibited about mentioning the spats between them. When Kate was angry, he reproached her for “coquettish frivolity.” She once wrote what Oliver called a “spicy little note” that “excited as much fear and amazement in my mind as you designed it to do.” In an undated letter, Oliver was almost frantic when he wrote, “For God’s sake unsay those horrid words!... Oh tell me that you love me still! Tell me you have not trifled with a heart that loves you so madly, so blindly, so wholly as to give up all else.”

The wartime correspondence largely covers 1861-1863. Oll’s letters were usually dated with location, month, day, and year, making it easy to follow his movements. Most of Kate’s letters were dated with only month and day, though she often identified her whereabouts.

Private Oliver C. King’s first military service letter to Toad was written from the Fair Ground Camp near Knoxville, June 7, 1861. He soon wrote from Camp Fulkerson, Loudon County, and told Kate she was the “the bright ‘guiding star’ of his existence. At Camp Cummings near Knoxville, he reported a conversation on love and sweethearts. On July 6, the company was back at Fulkerson, where he grumbled that Toad’s love was not as demonstrative as his. It was a recurring complaint.

By the end of 1862, then-Lieutenant O. C. King and Co. K, 61st Tennessee Mounted Infantry (Pitts’) were in Mississippi, “the land of moss-oaks, cypress trees, long-leaf pines, dismal swamps and extortioners....” He referred to Jackson as the “Modern Sodom” and wrote that it was the “last place on God’s green earth for patriotism, generosity, hospitality, or any of the higher emotions which should characterize a people engaged in an arduous struggle for Liberty.” He contrasted home with the “close-fisted white-livered heartless scoundrels who inhabit other portions of our Confederacy.”

Conditions in Mississippi were rough. The soldiers were fighting constantly and sleeping on the battlefield. “The Yankeys seem determined to have Vicksburg at all hazards.” Oliver believed the South would just have to fight it out if it took a whole generation.

Kate and Oliver were planning their marriage early in the war, but they found little support among family. In June 1862 he broke news of Cousin Lizzie’s

antipathy toward the match. Toad informed Oll that Aunt Barsha believed it was “out of the question for you and I to think of marrying.... She thinks I ought to have Joe Dulaney.” Toad’s mother also had strong feelings about the love affair. In a cryptic letter (August 6, 1862) to her daughter, Sarah Rutledge wrote she had many secrets to tell Kate. Had she heard from Jonnie? “do you love him still? do you think you will give yourself to him? Poor Oll, have you heard from him yet? ... I am truly sorry for him, but I hope it will all be for the best.”

Toad sensed rejection from Oliver’s family as well. “It seems we are destined to misfortune.... I expected both sides would object to our marrying on account of our relationship but Oll I can never marry a man whose parents object on account of me being poor.” She said that she understood why his folks wanted him to marry well. “[You] are your papa’s only boy. Obey him if you can and let not the memory of the one once loved mar your happiness.”

On July 16, 1863, Oliver asked “Uncle Crocket” for consent to the marriage. Oll wished to be “the guardian of [Kate’s] honor and happiness.” Hearts must have softened. John Crockett Rutledge replied to Oliver that Kate had the right to choose her own life’s companion. Rutledge thanked Oliver for the “respect and regard that you entertain for my feelings in regard for my daughters welfare by consulting my approval or disapproval before you consummated your plans.” The couple married on August 12, 1863.

Kate made political observations of her own. On U.S. Election Day 1860 she wrote Oll that Blountville’s “old maids” did not have their party, but everybody “is much excited about the election. Breckinridge is before Bell and Douglas behind. [Lincoln was not on the Tennessee ballot.] Mollie Dulaney says she’s sorry you can’t vote but I’m glad you would vote the way I wanted you to.” A year later she was writing about the Confederate election. She believed if Oll was “old enough to fight for Jeff Davis you ought to be allowed to vote.” She reported that seven Tories voted in town, but “thank goodness none of them was akin to me.”

The couple’s sense of humor flavors the correspondence. In April 1863 Oll remarked that “Caroline still walks like an old Virginia field hand. [She] has got to wearing hoops! She looked Sunday like she had a loose bundle of wheat straw tied round her waist! Bah! ” He light-heartedly shared on December 12, 1862, that the captain had found a worm in his biscuit. (That letter also contains an excellent description of a marquee tent and camp life in Jackson, Mississippi.)

Fairs, picnics, sacramental (religious) meetings, concerts, parties, and balls were integral parts of the Southern social fabric. In a letter of October 8 [1860], Oliver reported hearing that the “old maids of Blountville are talking of having a Leap year party.” Later that year he was elected to make an oration at the upcoming commemoration of Washington’s Birthday. (Celebrations of the first president’s birthday were widespread well into the 20th century.) Concerts are mentioned in

several letters. Toad made a witty comment about one where there was “more courting done that night than has been done in a long time.” In an undated post-war letter, Oll made reference to attending “the centennial,” possibly an 1876 U.S. independence celebration.

Idiomatic expressions dot the correspondence. One of Toad’s sisters hinted that Mollie’s romantic interest Capt. Bushong [?] would “make the wiggle before long.” Oll’s growing romantic interest was obvious when he said he would like to present Kate a locket “with my ‘Phiz’ in it” [chiefly British slang, a face or facial expression; a photograph]. Toad and Oll each made references to “Madam Rumor.” On July 26, 1863, he teasingly wrote that “[J__] wants me to eat ‘old Friz’ the day I’m married.” Old Friz was the name of a chicken.

The letters remain with the envelopes in which they were found. Outstanding examples include a handsome Tusculum College cover and a patriotic Confederate cover. Many of the envelopes bear United States or Confederate States postage stamps.

The Oliver Caswell King and Katherine Rebecca Rutledge King Papers cast an intimate light on period courtship customs, Upper South social and cultural life, contemporary political awareness, and Civil War home front and military life.

Physical Description/Extent:

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2014-020

Language:

English

Permanent Location:

VII-M-4

Repository:

Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee, 37243-0312

Administrative/Biographical History

Katherine (Kate) Rebecca Rutledge was born March 6, 1843, the daughter of John Crockett Rutledge and Sarah (Sally) Caswell Cobb Rutledge. John Crockett Rutledge was the first cousin of Sally’s first husband, a well-to-do farmer named George Washington

Rutledge (1798-1840). John and Sally Rutledge made their home in Sullivan County, Tennessee. Kate's family nicknamed her "Toad," and she was addressed that way in most family correspondence. She was educated at the Masonic Female Institute in Blountville, Sullivan County.

Oliver Caswell King was born August 4, 1841, in Washington County, Virginia, the first of four children of Leander Montgomery King and Penelope Louisa King, née Massengill. L. M. King was a prosperous Sullivan County farmer and the postmaster at Poor Hill. Oliver was educated largely at Tusculum College, a Methodist school in Greeneville, Tennessee.

Oliver and Kate were first cousins once removed through Richard Caswell Cobb and Rebecca Buckingham Cobb. This explains Oliver's references to Kate's father as "Uncle Crocket." The Kings married on August 12, 1863, and had four children: Michael Caswell, Penelope Cobb, John Rutledge, and Leander Montgomery. By the time of the 1870 census, the family had moved from Sullivan County to Jefferson County. The 1880 census counted two African American servants living with the Kings in Morristown, Hamblen County. Oliver King was identified as a lawyer on both censuses. He was only 52 when he died in 1893. His obituary in Confederate Veteran magazine states that he was ex-president of the Confederate Veteran Association of Upper East Tennessee. Kate died in 1925. Both are buried in Morristown.

Kate King's 1915 Confederate widow's pension application (Tennessee State Library and Archives), the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System database (National Park Service), the Index to Compiled Confederate Military Service Records (National Archives), the 1890 Civil War veterans census, and the personal correspondence are the most helpful primary sources for reconstructing Oliver's military service.

King enlisted as a private in Captain A. L. Gammon's Company, 19th Tennessee Infantry on June 6, 1861, two days before Tennessee voted to secede. Though the official records state he first enlisted in McClellan's 5th Tennessee Cavalry Battalion on August 14, 1861, his letters to Kate prove he did indeed enter Confederate service in June. In September Oll sent news of his transfer to a cavalry outfit.

Kate stated on her pension application that "sometime in 1862 [Oliver] assisted a Capt. Kelton to raise a company and was made a Lieutenant in same." This would be Captain Samuel Houston Kelton who commanded Co. K, 61st Tennessee Mounted Infantry (also called Pitts' Regiment).

Oliver was already home on sick furlough when the regiment was captured at Vicksburg in July 1863. By the time he recovered his health, the Federals had occupied the territory between upper East Tennessee and his paroled command, thwarting his return. Following the Battle of Blountsville (September 22, 1863), Oliver – being well-acquainted with the territory – joined Colonel James E. Carter's 1st Tennessee Cavalry as an independent scout. In June 1864 the troopers dismounted at Bristol and hurriedly took the train to Staunton, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley.

Their mission was to stop the Federals from getting to and tearing up the railroad between Bristol and Lynchburg, Virginia. In the heated Battle of Piedmont (June 5, 1864) Union soldiers routed the Confederates. Oliver was severely wounded in the leg, taken prisoner, and for some weeks the chances of his recovery looked bleak. When he left the hospital, the Zachary Johnson family of Mount Meridian, Virginia, took him in and nursed him to enough strength that he could get home in November. It was mid-1865 before he could leave his bed.

It is quite possible that Oliver survived his wound because he was a Freemason. On the field a U.S. officer recognized Oliver as a Mason, ordered that he be placed on a stretcher in the shade, and called for an ambulance. On June 10, 1864, Oliver wrote to "My Dear Friends," with news of the injury. H. E. Dunham included a note telling the Kings their son was in good hands: "As he is a brother Mason I will take particular care of him." Oliver's father was with his son by July and wrote home that Oll's condition was very poor. Mr. King advised Toad to come without delay. The letters taper off after Oliver's health improved.

Organization/Arrangement of Materials

Each author's letters are arranged chronologically.

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Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:

Confederate States of America. Army. Tennessee Cavalry. McClellan's
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Confederate States of America. Army. Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, 1st
Confederate States of America. Army. Tennessee Infantry Regiment, 6th
Confederate States of America. Army. Tennessee Infantry Regiment, 19th
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Subjects:

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United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Poetry
United States -- Politics and government -- 19th century
Vicksburg (Miss.) -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

Document Types:

Envelopes (Stationery)
Essays
Greeting cards
Letters to the editor
Love-letters
Memorial cards
Personal correspondence
Poetry
Postage stamps
Songs
Speeches (Documents)

Acquisition and Appraisal

Provenance and Acquisition:

The papers were donated by the Kings' great-great-grandchildren, Olivia King Inman and The Honorable Dennis Hisey Inman.

Processing and Administrative Information

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Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection, Knoxville, Tennessee
Tusculum College, Greeneville, Tennessee

Electronic Location and Access:

<http://www.tn.gov/tsla/history/manuscripts/findingaids/2014-020.pdf>

DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

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