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***“Brother Charles”*: Letters Home to Michigan
Civil War Correspondence of the Wadsworth Brothers
1861-1865, bulk 1863-1865**

COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:

Wadsworth, Elihu, 1837-
Wadsworth, Orry H., 1840-

Inclusive Dates:

1861 September 20-1865 December 21, bulk 1863-1865

Scope & Content:

Civil War correspondence of the Wadsworth Brothers encompasses the entire era, 1861-1865. Predominant are letters received by Charles B. Wadsworth of Summerfield, Michigan, a farmer and family man educated as a teacher at Oberlin College, Ohio. The letters are authored by his younger brothers, Elihu and Orry, who, at the inception of the Civil War, are both students at Oberlin College.

Beginning in 1835, Oberlin College undertook a mission to educate African Americans. James Oliver Horton, the Benjamin Banneker Professor Emeritus of American Studies at George Washington University wrote of Oberlin’s history while Director of the Afro American Communities Project for the Smithsonian Institution. In that article, “Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment,” Professor Horton describes the decision to admit blacks thusly: “Its departure from educational tradition marked Oberlin, in the minds of most, as an impractical, visionary institution with dangerous inclinations. Early students and faculty brought an abolitionist zeal which shaped Oberlin's stand on interracial education. This commitment to equal educational access for blacks and women provided for the school a unique heritage and formed the basis of the Oberlin tradition.” (Horton, 477)

Horton goes on to describe the desegregated atmosphere at Oberlin: “For white students, almost totally unfamiliar with Afro-Americans, the opportunity to speak

to and know a black person was in itself an educational experience highly valued. Apparently there was prestige associated with interracial contact, as one observer reported a competition among whites for seats at the dinner table of a black student, especially if that student had been a slave.” (Horton, 485)

Arranged chronologically, the collection is initially significant for snippets of commentary on the social life and customs of the first coeducational institution of higher learning in the United States (Oberlin College), as well as course offerings and student living arrangements.

Principal in the collection are letters written from 1862-1865 that chronicle Elihu’s departure from Oberlin College to join Company H, 18th Michigan Infantry. These letters to “Brother Charles” include accounts of troop movements, weather conditions and solicitations as to family health and home. In late 1863, coincident with a decision to pursue appointment with the United States Colored Troops (USCT), Elihu’s correspondence takes on a decidedly spiritual tone.

The provision for enlistment of African Americans in the Union Army was created by War Department General Order No. 143. This order established the Bureau of Colored Troops on May 22, 1863. Whites wishing to be considered for leadership appointments in these regiments were either selected through political means or by examination. Section III of General Order 143 addresses appointments in the following statement: “Boards will be convened at such posts as may be decided upon by the War Department to examine applicants for commissions to command colored troops, who, on application to the Adjutant-General, may receive authority to present themselves to the board for application.” (United States War Department, retrieved from <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/>) Elihu describes the examination process as “rigid.” (Folder 1, Box 9)

One explanation for the use of white officers in “colored” regiments was expressed in “The Evolution of the Colored Soldier,” an article from the *North American Review*, written thirty-four years after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox:

“In the early days of colored troops in the regular army, it was essential, to get the best results, that they should serve with white troops, so that discipline could be enforced when necessary. It was a decidedly risky experiment to attempt making soldiers of such people. They needed the object lesson of contact with white troops. Naturally of an imitative disposition, the colored man took the white soldier as his pattern, carefully watching every gesture and movement with inquisitive concern. Recruited from the most dangerous and shiftless of the freed negroes, they were naturally lazy, and disinclined to do the work required of them. They spent all their leisure time in gambling, drinking and quarrelling. Every possible punishment employed in the discipline of frontier posts was

inflicted upon them. They were stood on barrels, they were "bucked" and gagged, they were marched about the garrison with heavy planks tied to their backs, bearing the word "gambler" in chalk. Everything was done to discipline them, every means taken to make soldiers of them. But so rapidly did the mutinous spirit develop in the command, that only by the merest chance was a tragedy averted." (Parker, 227)

In November of 1863, one month prior to his appointment with the USCT, Elihu writes to "Brother Charles":

"It is elevating to the African Race to make soldiers of them and as they are thus made freemen I [?] that it bespeaks a brighter era to our Glorious Union when no longer the clanking chains of that doomed monster slavery, are heard within our borders and the last crack of the drivers lash dies away upon the ear.... I am not at all shocked with the idea of putting arms into the hands of our sable brethren and permitting them to share the dangers and glories of fighting for Liberty, especially when it is going to... make them a Liberty-loving people." (Box 1, Folder 9)

Elihu's sentiments are echoed by another responsible for recruitment of "Colored Troops" in Tennessee. In a letter to the editor of the *Christian Recorder* newspaper in Philadelphia, dated September 19, 1863, Joseph Lee offers these statements from Nashville, Tennessee:

"The colored people here have been greatly oppressed. They have been pressed to work on the forts without their own consent, and without pay. Several of these colored laborers have called on Major Stearns, the U.S. Commissioner for the organization of colored troops, and laid in their complaint of non-payment. The major seemed to be greatly pained at his kind of ill treatment of colored laborers; he immediately hired a hack and drove out to the fortifications, and then called on Governor Johnson, and he has proceeded on to the front, the headquarters of this department, to see Major General Rosecrans, to inquire into this state of affairs. What should be our position as the people of African descent, to obtain the freedom of our race? It should be a union of sentiment to be demonstrated in showing forth our manhood by taking hold of what the government has presented, and is willing to entrust us with, "arms." It is an elevated position to us, who are totally ignorant of the arts of war, to become triumphant over slavery for the foundation of our liberty. It must be a union of sentiment to set the everlasting zeal by the force of arms. Let us rally to attain greatness as a type in the human family, to the stand-point of freedom, which is now within our grasp, and demands only our manly courage. I am with you. I do not say go. This is my watchword; let us rally to the cry of freedom and liberty forever, at the point of the sword and the bayonet. We shall have enlisted in a glorious cause, that is sacred to God and to man. I contend that men are not afraid to die in a cause like this. It is Christian-like to war for truth and justice; for liberty of soul and body; for equal rights with the rest of mankind. The Lord has promised to aid us as He

did Joshua, when he commanded the sun to stand still until Joshua had won the victory.” (Williams J. E., 1863)

Elihu’s letter dated the day after he is mustered into Company B, 16th USCT at the rank of First Lieutenant, describes recruiting efforts in Fort Donelson and Clarksville, Tennessee and a visit to a “contraband school.” He further relates the Confederate response to black enlistment and the “line of patrols to keep the Negroes from coming in. A party of sixty started and only one got through. Although they are watched so diligently about ten per day get through the lines and enlist immediately. When we get two companies armed we will break the blockade [sic] and then the men will come in in swarms....” (Box 1, Folder 9)

Detailed in the letters from Elihu to Charles are narrative snapshots of Nashville architecture circa 1863 (Box 1, Folder 9) and descriptions of the 16th USCT encampment at the intersection of the Red and Cumberland Rivers. (Box 1, Folder 10) The Battles of Nashville and Franklin bear mention in 1865 correspondence from Elihu while attached as Quartermaster of the First Colored Brigade. Of significant note is a letter dated January 4, 1865 that relates daily events from December 21, 1864 through January 5, 1865. (Box 1, Folder 14)

The letters from Orry H. Wadsworth to Charles cease in 1863 and resume in 1864 under debatable circumstances. Orry’s letters are characteristically conversational in tone and present a singularly idiosyncratic worldview of a young nineteenth century man at odds with society’s expectations. He reflects on the value of an Oberlin education in antebellum America, the obstructionist nature of chaperones in the social environment of Oberlin College in 1862 and ambiguous feelings about the military.

The perceptions offered by Orry’s correspondence illuminate social and military phenomena during the Civil War, such as dispensing enemy correspondence:

“I send you more Rebel letters, captured at Cumberland Gap. They are truly a curiosity yet they are a [?] of the mercy taken, and contain the same sentiment as far as discontent in the Rebel Army is concerned.” (Box 1, Folder 8)

From Knoxville, Tennessee in September 1863, attached as clerk in the 23rd Army Corps, Orry holds forth on Union sympathies found in East Tennessee:

“The successes of this Corps in East Tenn. are such as may cause the nation to rejoice. The Loyalty of East Tenn. is clearly proven by the fact that since we came here several thousand men have enlisted in the Union Army; hundreds of them are being ‘mustered in’ (original emphasis) daily.” With regard to Confederate desertions in North Carolina, Orry writes in the same letter, “... two thousand deserters were...on their way to join the union army.” (Box 1, Folder 8)

Supporting materials are primarily contextual and include both contemporaneous military documentation related to Charles Wadsworth and post-war newspaper clippings detailing Wadsworth family members.

Physical Description/Extent:

1 Box, 18 Folders

Accession/Record Group Number:

Mf. 1995

Language:

English

Permanent Location:

Mf. 1995

Repository:

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

Administrative/Biographical History

“Elihu H. Wadsworth,” (b. 1837) is enshrined on plaque number B-33 by the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Captain Wadsworth served in the 16th United States Colored Infantry, Companies B and D. His military career began when he left college and returned to his home state to enlist. On August 8, 1862, Elihu became a Private in the 18th Michigan Infantry.

Detailed primarily to perform clerical work while with the 18th, Elihu was assigned to the Headquarters of the Inspector General’s Office in Nashville, Tennessee during the fall of 1863. He eventually rose to the rank of First Lieutenant and on December 1, 1863, upon completion of screening for appointment with the United States Colored Troops, he was mustered into the 16th United States Colored Infantry as an officer.

The 16th United States Colored Infantry was organized in late 1863, as supported by recruitment described by Elihu in December of that year. (Box 1, Folder 9) Troops included “contraband” or ex-slaves, who had fled to Union lines and were working as military laborers. Elihu describes the encampment of the 16th in Clarksville, Tennessee near the Red and Cumberland Rivers. (Box 1, Folder 10) In 1865, the 16th USCT joined detachments of the 44th, 102nd, and 109th U. S. Colored Troops as the First Colored Brigade. First Lt. Elihu H. Wadsworth’s valor was noted in a report by commanding officer, Colonel Thomas J. Morgan. (Box 1, Folder 18)

The post-war military career of Elihu saw him rise to the rank of Captain with appointment to Company D, 16th U. S. Colored Infantry on April 20, 1866. According to United States Colored Troops Military Service Records (1861-1865), 15 days prior to mustering out of Company B and into Company D, 16th USCT, Elihu drafted a letter to his command headquarters, taking issue with how promotions had been handled in the regiment. This two-page document invokes Article 34 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and names Colonel William B. Gaw, 16th U. S. Colored Infantry as having “wronged me not only in recommending my juniors for promotion over me but also in making statements concerning me which are derogatory to my character as an officer and a gentleman and disgrace me both in the eyes of the officers of my regiment and in the estimation of the War Department....” (U. S. Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861-1865, Elihu H. Wadsworth) The 16th USCT is thought to have been mustered out of service on April 30, 1866.

Charles B. Wadsworth (b.1834) was subject to section 8 of the March 3, 1863 Act of Congress “for enrolling and calling out the national forces.” Charles was subsequently exempted from military duty in November 1863, “by reason of permanent organic defect of the left foot” by the state of Michigan. (Box 1, Folder 16)

Orry H. Wadsworth’s military history is elusive, with stints in two Ohio regiments. This included the three months of service provided by the 7th Infantry Ohio Regiment in 1861 and Company D, Ohio 56th Infantry, 1864-1865. While with the 8th Michigan Cavalry, his regiment was part of the 23rd Army Corps. This is confirmed by his September 1863 correspondence. Military records, though limited in detail, record birth dates of either 1833 or 1839 for Orry Wadsworth and further show that he never rose past the rank of Private while with the 8th Michigan Cavalry. Interestingly, Orry enlists as First Lieutenant with Company D, Ohio 56th Infantry Regiment on November 23, 1864 and resigns at the same rank on May 10, 1865.

Orry’s Civil War journey was disrupted by an apparently intentional capture by Confederates with expectation of parole and an undated letter from Camp Parole, Annapolis, Maryland. (Box 1, Folders 10 & 15)

Organization/Arrangement of Materials

The collection is organized into three series, with correspondence arranged chronologically. Correspondence dated 1861-1863 is arranged in a single series. The second series includes correspondence related to Company B, 16th United States Colored Infantry and encompasses years 1864-1865. The third series consists of supporting documents.

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Index Terms

Personal Names:

Bragg, Braxton, 1817-1876
Rosecrans, William Starke, 1819-1898
Wadsworth, Charles B., 1834-
Wadsworth, Elihu H., 1837-
Wadsworth, Orry H., 1840-

Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:

United States. Adjutant-General's Office.
United States. Army. Colored Infantry Regiment, 16th (1863-1866)
United States. Army. Michigan Infantry Regiment, 18th (1862-1865)
Company H.

Subjects:

Franklin, Battle of, Franklin, Tenn., 1864.
Lookout Valley (Tenn.)
Miscegenation--Southern States--History--19th century--Sources.
Nashville, Battle of, Nashville, Tenn., 1864.
Oberlin (Ohio)--Social life and customs--19th century--Sources.
Oberlin College—Students--19th century.
United States. Army. Colored Infantry Regiment, 13th (1863-1866)
United States. Army. Colored Infantry Regiment, 14th (1863-1866)
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Participation, African American.
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Personal narratives.
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Religious aspects -- Personal narratives.
Slaves--Education--United States.
Whites--Southern States--Social conditions--19th century--Sources.

Whites--Southern States--Attitudes--History--19th century.

Geographic Names:

Decatur (Ala.)
Huntsville (Ala.)
Stevenson (Ala.)
Camp Parole (Md.)
Chattanooga (Tenn.)
Clarksville (Tenn.)
Knoxville (Tenn.)
Murfreesboro (Tenn.)
Nashville (Tenn.)
Nickajack Cave
Pulaski (Tenn.)
Tullahoma (Tenn.)

Document Types:

personal correspondence
military records
narratives (document genres)

Acquisition and Appraisal

Provenance and Acquisition:

The collection was loaned for microfilming in two accruals by a descendant of Charles B. Wadsworth on July 3, 2011 and July 7, 2011. Acquisition was arranged by Ms. Gwynn Thayer of TSLA during *Looking Back: The Civil War in Tennessee* digitization project.

Processing and Administrative Information

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Existence and Location of Originals:

Ownership of originals is retained by donor.

Electronic Location and Access:

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DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

SERIES I. – Correspondence to Charles B. Wadsworth, 1861-1863

Series Scope and Content: letters from brothers, Elihu and Orry Wadsworth

Series Arrangement: Chronological

CONTAINER LIST

Contents/Item Title	Date	Box	Folder
Letters From Elihu [Fall 1861, Oberlin]	09/20/1861	1	1
	09/26/1861		
	10/10/1861		
Letter from Orry [1862, Bethel]	03/16/1862	1	2
Letters from Orry [1862, Oberlin] Impressions of college social life and customs and the abolitionist aspects of Oberlin’s mission. Expresses ambivalence with regard to slavery. Use of suggestive, Victorian-era slang to express frustrations with chaperoned coeds. Brief reference to forwarding letters received from Elihu (to Charles) as method of family correspondence.	06/22/1862	1	2
	10/15/1862 (letter fragment)		
Letters from Elihu [Summer 1862, Oberlin] Relates enlistment of classmates headed for Camp Chase and leadership and teaching in “Sabbath school” and Bible class.	06/22/1862	1	3
	07/15/1862		
Letters from Elihu [Company H, 18th Michigan Infantry] “Camp Wallace” [sic] “On picket Boon Co. Ky.” “Camp near Lexington Ky.” “Camp Ella Bishop, Lexington, Ky.”	09/16/1862	1	4
	09/29/1862		
	11/02/1862		
	11/20/1862		

Relates episode involving defiance of contraband order and requests bible verses.			
Relates casualties due to illness in his regiment and provides reassurances regarding his imminent recovery.	12/21/1862?		
Letters from Elihu [1863 January to April]		1	5
“Camp Ella Bishop, Lexington Ky.” Makes mention of a wagon train bound for “the foot of a big hill 16 miles beyond Richmond” to relieve the Carter command.	01/13/1863		
“Camp near Danville Ky.” Troop movements, weather conditions; relates statement made by [Captain] Curtis “in view of the duties before us.... Both those we owe to our country and those we owe to our God.”	03/01/1863		
“Camp near Stanford Ky.” 10 page letter relating a “brief account of our proceedings,” including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 21, “...on our way to Stanford to reinforce Wolford as his scouts reported that the enemy were crossing the Cumberland in force....” • March 22 description of engagement of 16th USCT, 22nd Michigan, 18th Michigan and 104th Ohio and Wolford’s Cavalry with 7th Indiana Battery • March 25, “...here I could plainly see the 44th Ohio skirmishing with the rebs....” 	04/04/1863		
Letter from Orry [1863 June - Camp Fitch, Ky.]	06/03/1863	1	6
Letters from Elihu [1863 June to July]		1	7
“Nashville, Tenn.” Makes mention of Grant at Vicksburg and writes: “Our forces abandoned Franklin and Brentwood yesterday.”	06/04/1863		
Includes sharp statements against the draft resistance encouraged by the “Copperhead” Valandingham [sic] and physical conditions of Confederate prisoners, including officers--“Many of them didn’t half fight. Appeared to want to be taken.”	07/02/1863		
“Soldiers Home Louisville Ky.” “I together with about 50 men of our regiment arrived here with 308 rebels taken near Shelbyville, Tenn.”	07/05/1863		

<p>Account of rebel attack of train from Lebanon, writing, "... got my news from the conductor."</p> <p>"Nashville, Tenn." "Rosecrans... seems not to think it beneath his dignity to be seen talking with a private."</p>	07/21/1863		
<p>Letters from Orry [1863 September - Knoxville, Tenn.]</p> <p>Headquarters 23rd Army Corps</p> <p>Reference made to "rascality being carried on by some of the officers" and enclosed order documenting their discharge. [see Box 1, Folder 16] Writes of "sneaks that always follow the army taking advantage of their necessity of the soldiers asking double prices for articles actually required by them." Makes mention of "fight between Bragg and our Rosey" and the capture of 12,000 Rebels.</p> <p>Refers to engagement with Confederate General Braxton Bragg's army "near Loudon about 30 miles from here."</p>	09/28/1863 09/30/1863	1	8
<p>Letters from Elihu [1863 September to December]</p> <p>Head-Quarters United States Forces, Inspector General's Office</p> <p>"The people of this, as well as other states have come to see that they have been duped by the slaveocracy..." Includes description of Nashville geography and architecture, as well as the view from the statehouse.</p> <p>"News from the front is very scare. Suppose the rebs have cut the communication between here and Chattanooga." Makes mention of "heavy reinforcements... through here on their way to join Rosecrans..."</p> <p>"In addition to the force to be drafted there will be a hundred thousand Colored Volunteers in the field in three months from this date; upwards of thirty thousand are already in the field and have shown themselves good soldiers on some bloody fields..." References appointment in "a colored regiment."</p>	09/?/1863 10/06/1863 11/02/1863 11/13/1863	1	9

<p>“I have been and am still very busily engaged in helping to fill up the 16th Regiment Col’d Infty....”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • References Fort Donelson--“The country is very broken and gives the guerillas a great chance to bushwhack the soldiers.” • References activities of Confederate patrols at Fort Donelson and Clarksville to prevent African American enlistment 	12/02/1863			
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SERIES II. – Correspondence from Elihu Wadsworth, 1st Lieutenant, Company B, 16th U. S. C. T. 1864-1865 to Charles B. Wadsworth

Series Scope and Content: letters to brother, Charles Wadsworth, detailing troop movements, weather conditions and reflections on the mission and activities of the 16th USCT from 1863-1865.

Series Arrangement: Chronological

<p>Letters from Elihu [1864 January to March]</p> <p>“Camp of the 16th U. S. C. I. Clarksville, Tenn.] “We are encamped one mile west of Clarksville on a hill about a hundred and fifty feet above the waters of the Red and Cumberland Rivers....” Writes of his literacy efforts within the regiment and names “Captain Curtis” and “Lt. Cryder [sic]” as “both in favor of educating the Africans....”</p> <p>Headquarters Company B, 16th U. S. Colored Troops, Clarksville, Tennessee “I thank you for... your sentiments with regard to the blacks are the same as my own. If my friends feel ashamed of me for the course I have taken I am sorry, but as they deem it a priviledge [sic] so to do I would not have them deprived of the full benefits of their privileges...”</p> <p>“Head Qrs. General Court-Martial, Clarksville, Tenn.” Mentions reading <i>DeHart’s Military Law</i></p> <p>Headquarters Company B, 16th U. S. Colored Troops, Clarksville, Tennessee References Orry’s status as prisoner of war</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have a boy cooking for me.... He has hair like yours or mine and don’t show a bit of colored blood.... I am teaching him to read and am 	<p>01/14/1864</p> <p>02/02/1864</p> <p>02/17/1864</p> <p>02/18/1864 [“10 o’clock pm”] 03/07/1864</p>	1	10	
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<p>trying to have him forget that he was ever a slave....”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In some of the companies the men are not well treated and they manifest their dissatisfaction by deserting....” • “Two companies of our regiment have gone to Nashville and four more ‘B’ ‘J’ ‘H’ and ‘D’ are now under marching orders. We are awaiting a boat to come down after us....” <p>Concerns regarding tailored uniform coat sent from Charles as requested.</p>	03/20/1864		
<p>Letters from Elihu [1864 April to July]</p> <p>Headquarters Co. B 16th U. S. C. T., Nashville, Tenn. References miscegenation and sexual morality of slaveholders--“I have almost come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as virtue in the South especially amongst the whites....”</p> <p>Headquarters Co. B 16th U. S. C. T., Chattanooga, Tenn. References “Nigger Jack [sic] Cave where the rebels used to get their mitre to make powder of....”</p> <p>Expresses concern for family’s response to Orry’s re-enlistment and support for Lincoln-Johnson ticket in upcoming presidential election--“I should be glad to have an honorable peace at once but if that cannot be I rather serve my country until my head is gray than for any compromise of freedom with slavery to be made....”</p>	04/06/1864 04/28/1864 07/17/1864	1	11
<p>Letter from Orry [1864 May - Camp Stockton] References enlistment 8th Regiment, Michigan Calvary at Mt. Clemens</p>	05/25/1864	1	12
<p>Letters from Elihu [1864 September to November]</p> <p>Headquarters Co. B 16th U. S. C. T., Chattanooga, Tenn. References picket duty on “Lookout Valley Road.”</p> <p>“Camp of the 16th U. S. C. Inf. Tullahoma, Tenn.”</p> <p>“Headquarters Co. B 16th U. S. C. Inf. Chattanooga, Tenn.” Details orders received on September 29, 1864 and</p>	09/04/1864 09/24/1864 10/07/1864	1	13

<p>movement through Huntsville and Stevenson, AL, Nashville and Columbia, TN and into Tullahoma and mentions “fight war in Pulaski.”</p> <p>Makes mention of inter-regimental politics and officers with “charges against them.”</p>	<p>10/14/1864</p> <p>11/20/1864</p>		
<p>Letters from Elihu [1865]</p> <p>“Hd. Qrs. 1st Cold. Brig. 1st Sept. Div. Jonesborough, Ala.”</p> <p>References the 14th USCT, Battles of Nashville, Franklin and Murfreesboro and relates events of December 21, 1864 through January 5, 1865.</p> <p>Headquarters, Company B, U. S. C. T., Chattanooga, Tennessee</p> <p>Within context of “the fight both days before Nashville” references casualties of the 13th US Colored Infantry.</p> <p>Writes of being Quartermaster and having returned to his regiment.</p>	<p>01/04/1865</p> <p>01/18/1865</p> <p>02/16/1865</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>14</p>

SERIES III. –Supporting Documents

Undated Correspondence	1	15
Letter to Charles Wadsworth re: sale of farm		
Remnant of letter from Elihu		
Letter from Orry headed “Camp Parole, Annapolis, Md.”		
Contemporaneous Supporting Materials	1	16
Clippings [undated, unsourced]	1	17
Miscellaneous Supporting Materials	1	18