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How Private Murray Became “Private No More”

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In 2017 I experienced one of those special moments in a historian’s career. That exhilarating moment of realization that the document you are looking at is hundreds of years old and has not been seen in a very long time. I was scrolling through a set of digitized pension records from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) when something in one of the folders caught my eye.¹ Some of the thumbnail images looked different than the typical affidavits and pension forms I was accustomed to seeing. When I opened one of the files, I noticed that one of them was a handwritten document dated 1864, before the soldier died. I then realized that the document was a letter written by the soldier to his mother. My excitement grew as I scanned through the rest of the pension folder and discovered that there were many other such letters. I had been researching the 102nd United States Colored Troops (USCT) for several years by then and had not yet come across an original letter written by one of the soldiers during the war. Needless to say, everything on my to-do list that day was forgotten as I began trying to read through the letters. The condition of the letters and quality of the handwriting made reading them difficult, so I did not get far that day, but it was enough to know that I had something rare and special. Six years later I was holding a copy of *Private No More* in my hands.

Like *Private No More*, many of the projects throughout my career developed more by chance than by plan. As a graduate student in the early 1990s I had to scrap my first dissertation topic about six months into the research. I’ll never forget the disheartening moment when I discovered that someone else, a well-recognized scholar, was much further along in the topic I had chosen, and I would need to go in another direction. The news threatened to sideline my PhD. Then, several weeks later, while sitting on the floor and hoping for inspiration in the collapsible stacks at the University of Buffalo’s library, I ran across a brief reference to Buxton, a settlement of fugitive enslaved people and free Blacks in Canada. My interest piqued, Buxton became the subject of my dissertation and first book, *Crossing the Border*. After the publication of

Crossing the Border in 2007, I was faced with that “now what?” juncture as the project I had been working on for more than a decade was complete. The last chapter of the book focused on the effect of the Civil War on Buxton. Several dozen men from that community crossed the border and enlisted in the Union Army, many of them in the same regiment, the First Michigan Colored Infantry.² Initially, I intended to do a deep dive into the military service of just those men, but the more I learned about the First Michigan, the more I saw an opportunity to share that unit’s story, and I extended the project. My first strategy was to sample pensions for ten men in each company, but my research soon convinced me to expand the sampling to a full-fledged effort to acquire records for every soldier in the regiment. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it was this decision that led to *Private No More*. Private John Lovejoy Murray of Company E was not part of my initial sample group and I did not acquire his pension file until I was well into my research.³

John Lovejoy Murray enlisted as a private in the First Michigan Colored Infantry on December 1, 1863, pledging to serve the US Army for three years. He never returned home, succumbing to a fever on April 12, 1865. During his service, Murray wrote home often to his family and friends in his hometown of Lockport, New York. After his death, John’s mother, Sarah Wells, applied for a federal pension based on her late son’s military service. This pension file, retained at the National Archives in Washington, DC, contains fifty-six letters penned by Murray to his family and friends. Also in the file are four letters written by Sarah to her son late in the war. Sarah gave all these letters to T. D. Yeager, a special examiner for the US Pension Bureau, as evidence in support of her claim. Despite Yeager’s promise that the letters “should be returned to her as soon as possible,” they never were.⁴ At the expense of John Murray’s family and friends who parted with these precious pages from their loved one, readers today are able to experience the war through the eyes of a literate northern free Black soldier.⁵

As was the case in my rediscovery of the letters, their existence in the pension files was by happenstance. The letters were placed in John Murray’s pension file, and they have remained in the pension record largely untouched and unseen since the 1880s. These letters were not passed from one generation to the next as a prized heirloom. They were not stored in a family chest or displayed in a curio cabinet and taken out and read at family gatherings. Without his death and his mother’s subsequent pension claim, it is likely that Murray’s voice would have been lost forever. Murray’s immediate family consisted of himself, his mother, Sarah, his stepfather, Asher Wells, and his grandmother.⁶ John never married or had children and, as far as I have been able to determine, had no siblings. If these letters had not been turned over to Special Examiner Yeager, it is reasonable to assume that upon Sarah’s death, they would have been discarded, making Murray’s and his family’s personal experiences during the war unrecoverable today.

Among the valuable sources housed within the depths of the National Archives that contribute significantly to scholarship are the vast pension collections of Civil War soldiers and their dependents. Affidavits and other records document the varied experiences of Civil War veterans and their families in the postwar era. They are valuable for genealogical and community studies. They inform researchers as to the myriad hardships—physical, mental, emotional, and financial—faced by veterans and their families. Many items provided to the Pension Bureau during claim investigations were never returned. Letters, marriage certificates, photographs, and other items submitted as evidence in a pension application often became part of the permanent files. These collections help recover the voices of underrepresented soldiers and their

families. It is the richness of the pension records that has greatly expanded my own research as the postwar years have become a significant part of my study of those who served in 102nd USCT.

Historians of nineteenth-century America and African American Civil War soldiers have long relied on, and continue to explore, the pension files to inform their scholarship, gaining valuable insights into military and social history.⁷ Pension files of veterans of the United States Colored Troops and their families are the foundation of Elizabeth Regosin and Donald Shaffer's *Voices of Emancipation*, a study of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction years through the pension records.⁸ A growing number of scholars studying various African American regiments during the Civil War utilize the pension files to deepen our understanding of the soldiers' and their families' stories.⁹ As Karen Hamilton's *The Barrett Files* illustrates, individual pension files tell stories, not just of the soldiers and veterans but also of the struggles faced by women who were deemed illegitimate widows by pension bureau officials, and of pension fraud perpetuated by imposter soldiers.¹⁰ These diverse uses of pension files underscore their invaluable role in shedding light on the complexities of African American experiences during and after the Civil War, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of this pivotal period in American history.

Along with diaries and journals, letters from soldiers like Private Murray afford readers today the closest contact possible with Civil War soldiers, allowing us to eavesdrop on their innermost thoughts and feelings. Indeed, I often felt like an intruder as I read and reread these family letters. Letters like those in the Murray collection are crucial pieces to our understanding of Black soldiers in the Civil War because voices of Black soldiers are fewer. Roughly 180,000 of the more than two million Union soldiers were African Americans. A majority of them were, unlike Murray, illiterate. Mail was a treasured link between Civil War camps and battlefields and home. Writing and receiving letters helped morale. It maintained the connection between soldiers and civilians: husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and mothers. Millions of personal stories were thus recorded. Many were lost or destroyed during the war. Even more have disappeared since the end of the war. Letters such as those found in the Murray pension file are a means of recovering the human dimensions of war, providing valuable insights into what it was like to serve during America's most deadly conflict.¹¹

The first title of the manuscript was *Dear Mother* since most of the letters were written to John's mother, but the editors at University of Georgia Press, rightly so, encouraged me to find another name. The letters were not just for Murray's mother. They were for his stepfather, grandmother, and others who read them. At the same time, however, the letters were private correspondence, not intended for public viewing. For over one hundred years, they lay in a folder stored in the depths of the National Archives, unseen and unread by all but a few. In recovering and publishing them, the letters of Private John Murray are indeed private no more.

Over the last decade, I have acquired all available pension files for veterans and their dependents of the 102nd USCT, close to nine hundred files, each ranging from a dozen or so documents to hundreds of pages.¹² No other pension record contains a collection like the Murray one. Recently, some letters were discovered in Greenbury Hodge's pension file, but there are fewer than ten. Substantially smaller than the Murray collection is a cache of letters written by or for Private Alonzo Reed, Company E, located in the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. Other record groups in the National

Archives contain small numbers of communications authored by 102nd USCT soldiers.¹³ There are undoubtedly some scattered in local historical archives and still others held in private hands, but unless a stash of letters remains undiscovered somewhere, this may be the last collection of firsthand voices communicating the experiences of Black privates in the regiment.¹⁴

Recovering the voices of Murray and his family proved to be challenging. I conducted the majority of the transcribing using high-resolution digital images; however, I also consulted the original materials housed in the archives. I traveled to the National Archives in Washington, DC, more than once to retrieve the pension file and piece together the pages of the letters, which had been placed in the folder out of order. Digitization of records is a wonderful tool, but sometimes I needed to hold the paper and see how the pages were originally folded to fully understand how seemingly unconnected words on different pages actually formed a letter. Despite being stored in the relatively protected environment of the National Archives, time ravaged most of the letters: ink and pencil faded, paper tore, and ink bled on other pages. Although his penmanship was generally quite good and the images clear, the age and condition of the pages made accurate and complete transcriptions a lengthy and arduous task. Unfortunately, I did not keep track of how many times I went through the correspondence trying to transcribe every word as accurately as possible. My records show at least five different sets of transcriptions. I'm confident it was many more than that. Some letters were relatively easily transcribed. Some took numerous attempts. Many were the work of multiple eyes. When my colleagues in the history department at Radford University passed by my office and saw me struggling, even using the fifty-five-inch monitor on my office wall, to make out a word or section of a letter, they often popped in to try and help. Students in my Digital Archives classes often lent a hand. One of those helpful students was our department work-study student. Her desk was right outside my office. I have no idea how many times I yelled, "Help, Katie!," but she came to my rescue every time. Often, the two of us were successful in deciphering the troubling word or section, one letter or word at a time. How many words were recovered because of this assistance is unknown. The recovery of Murray and his family's voices are all the more complete because of them. Despite all these efforts, there are still a few places where some of the words are simply unreadable.

My goal was to preserve the wartime experiences of John Lovejoy Murray and his family and friends so that the reader might see their experiences in much the same way that contemporary readers did. Murray's unconventional spelling and lack of punctuation impart a stream-of-consciousness quality to the letters that make them difficult to understand at times. In transcribing and publishing the letters, I wanted to remain faithful to the originals so as to allow the writers to speak for themselves in their own ways while letting modern readers share their experiences by making the letters accessible. Men and women without a formal education, like John Murray, often penned documents that might appear impenetrable to the eye but are usually understandable when read phonetically.¹⁵ In the end, the textual body of the published letters appear essentially as in the original. The nuances of Murray's language—peculiarities of grammar, syntax, capitalization, and spelling—appear without any "*sic*" notations so as not to disrupt the flow of the narrative. The only major change made was to employ the relatively unobtrusive device of adding silent periods at unpunctuated sentence breaks, to delineate thoughts and ideas as they occur in order to clarify these for the reader. Although most such judgments were unambiguous, there were instances in which the placement of sentence breaks required an interpretive decision. I hope I remained truthful to Murray's words and intent.

As any reader will quickly notice, the annotations throughout the volume are extensive. This is where there was the most push–pull between the editors and me. If one looks through the multiple versions of the manuscript, most of which I still have, the biggest difference between drafts is the extent of the annotations. The editors wanted less. I wanted more. The editors were concerned about losing Murray’s voice amid the annotations. I wanted to make sure that the readers were provided with ample contextual information. In the end, the editorial process and compromises reached along the way made for a much better finished volume. I see the annotations as part of the story, not just informative prose. The book is about Private John Lovejoy Murray, but to know him and his experiences it is necessary to know also his regiment and the men who served alongside him. The annotations provided throughout the volume situate the 102nd USCT within the larger context of the theater of war in which it served. Most but by no means all the people, places, skirmishes, and other events mentioned in the correspondence have been identified. The intent was to add depth to Murray’s story rather than detract from his voice. The research into the family, friends, and community that he conversed with through his writings further uncovers their lives on the home front. One major point I insisted on was that the notes in *Private No More* appear at the bottom of the pages rather than at the end of the chapter or book. I wanted this material to be a part of the book, not just an add-on that people would find easy to ignore.

My students played an integral role throughout the editorial process. At least three groups of students in my upper division history courses at Radford University read and commented on various aspects of the manuscript such as ease or difficulty of reading and understanding Murray’s letters, the length of the annotations, what annotations were unnecessary, or where more explanation was needed. They even weighed in on the decision as to which letters were included as images in the volume. My initial intent had been to include a significant number of images so readers could better see and understand Murray from his own handwriting. Ultimately, however, only a small number of images were included. More would have been prohibitively costly. While I understand such decisions, it was difficult to let go of the desire to have readers see Murray’s letters as they were written.

Published letters by Black soldiers are rare. Even fewer are complete printed collections of a single soldier. Whereas most published works of African American Civil War writings are collections of communications written by Black soldiers to African American and abolitionist newspapers, Murray’s letters represent the private side of the war. The Murray letters offer a less mediated source for understanding literate Black soldiers from the North than letters published (and edited) by an abolitionist journal or newspaper. Soldiers’ dispatches to newspapers provide a window on the public aspects of the war for Black soldiers. But it is in letters like Murray’s that we find the more personal accounts of the experiences faced by Black soldiers.¹⁶

This collection of letters helps tell the story of Black soldiers as they struggled to freedom. Though Murray’s wartime service was not terribly distinguished in the conventional military sense, his reflections on the tedium, discomfort, and danger of camp life as well as campaigning give interesting insights into the day-to-day aspects of wartime service and its impact on the troops. They are significant precisely because his dispatches are replete with mundane everyday matters, and yet they reveal genuine interpretive insights into Black soldiers’ Civil War experience. His is the story of the soldiers who did not receive accolades for their heroic actions, the ones who spent more time laboring than in battle on the front lines, the ones who died

from disease more often than combat. Predictably, Private Murray complained about drilling and marching, the weather, his poor health and disease, officers, poor equipment, pay, poor food, and rumors that circulated widely in army camps generally. Perhaps unexpectedly to many readers, some of the activities and sentiments portrayed in the letters are hardly distinguishable from those described by White soldiers. Murray exhibits how White and Black soldiers shared the same, decidedly human, concerns and experiences in wartime.

In addition to the value of John's letters as communication between a soldier and his mother, the letters written to John from his mother express the hopes and fears of a soldier's mother. Extant correspondence such as these are also rare. Letters sent home by a soldier to his loving family were often cherished and preserved. More difficult to find are those letters sent to a soldier who was, in Murray's case, sick, hospitalized, and separated from his tent mates. This communication from mother to son contains trivial community news, information about family and friends at home and off at war, general comments on family finances and health problems, and the heart-wrenching despair of a mother who fears her only son dead. The Murray collection illustrates the importance of the connection between soldiers and family. They highlight how Black families and communities attempted to cope with the challenges and dislocations of the war.

My intention is to not let John Lovejoy Murray's be the only voice of the 102nd USCT made public. Roughly sixteen hundred men served in the regiment over the course of its service, and they all, collectively and individually, deserve a voice. Their story, as with all the other African American soldiers, deserves to be told. I have no accurate count of how many records I've acquired over the past decade, but my research thus far takes up almost two terabytes of data. In addition to pension files, compiled military service records, muster rolls, descriptive books, reports of the guard, monthly returns, chaplain reports, and carded medical records are all stored in my files. These and others are the records that will help uncover more of the story of African American Civil War soldiers. My hope is to eventually make these records publicly available in some form, but that project has only begun. I have started a manuscript to tell the story of the 102nd USCT and that of its soldiers and veterans in the decades after the war, but that too is years away from completion. Every so often a descendant of one of the 102nd soldiers contacts me, seeking information on their ancestor. I gladly share whatever I can. They sometimes have knowledge and records that I do not. This exchange of information is all in an attempt to recover the service, lives, and deaths of Union Black soldiers and their families. As one of my students, certainly not the first, said this semester when something clicked for her in class, "History is like a puzzle, and we are putting together the pieces." John Lovejoy Murray's letters are one of those pieces, and the puzzle is a panorama of African American soldiers during the Civil War.

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1. The researchers at American Civil War Ancestor provided their services in digitizing the archival material from which my work has derived. ↩
 2. The First Michigan Colored Infantry was redesignated the 102nd United States Colored Troops (USCT) in May 1864. Both designations were used interchangeably throughout its service. ↩
 3. Financial and time constraints meant that I obtained pension files in batches, often through generous grants from the College of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences at Radford University. The Murray

file was part of a batch received in 2016, at least four years after my initial foray into the pension records for the 102nd USCT. ↵

4. T. D. Yeager to Mr. Moore, Chief Widow's Division, Pension Office, September 9, 1873, John Murray, Civil War Pension Files, RG 15, National Archives and Records Administration. The Pension Bureau initiated an investigation after another woman submitted a conflicting application. There were two John Murrays enrolled in the 102nd USCT. John Lovejoy Murray, Company E, was the son of Sarah Wells. John Murray, Company K, who deserted less than two months after his enlistment, was the son of Catharine Murray who lived in Detroit. When Catharine learned that a John L. Murray died in Charleston during the war, she became convinced that her son was dead and that she deserved a mother's pension. Catharine's filing for a pension triggered the special examination into the validity of Sarah's request. Sarah furnished wartime letters in her possession to the special examiner in her case to prove that John was her son and that her claim for a mother's pension was legitimate. After his investigation, Special Examiner Yeager concluded "beyond a doubt that Sarah Wells was the mother of the soldier and the correspondence between the claimant and soldier confirm that fact." Sarah subsequently received a pension of eight dollars per month. ↵
5. John Lovejoy Murray, Compiled Military Service Record (CMSR), RG 94, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC. ↵
6. John Murray's father, Alonzo Murray, died around 1840 while John was still a child. His maternal grandmother, Catharine Thomas, lived with Sarah and Asher from at least 1860 until her death in 1876. US Federal Census, 1840–1870; New York State Census, 1845, 1855, 1865. ↵
7. See works such as Brandi Clay Brimmer, *Claiming Union Widowhood: Race, Respectability, and Poverty in the Post-Emancipation South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); and Dale Kretz, *Administering Freedom: The State of Emancipation after the Freedmen's Bureau* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022). ↵
8. Elizabeth A. Regosin and Donald R. Shaffer, eds., *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). ↵
9. See, among others, J. Raymond Gourdin, comp. and ed., *Voices from the Past: 104th Infantry Regiment, USCT Colored Civil Soldiers from South Carolina* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2007); Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Kelly D. Mezurek, *For Their Own Cause: The 27th United States Colored Troops* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016). ↵
10. Karen Yvonne Hamilton, comp., *The Barrett Files—A Civil War Pension Case: The Original Transcribed Documents 1866–1921* (Jupiter, FL: Yesterday Press, 2020). ↵

11. Robert Bonner, *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 9. See also David Barton and Nigel Halls, eds., *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1999). ↩
12. The largest file to date contains 885 images. ↩
13. Greenbury Hodge, Civil War Pension Files, RG 15, National Archives and Records Administration. William Waring, Chaplain, submitted regular reports to the Adjutant General Office, Letters Received, Ser. 360, Records of the Adjutant General Office, 1780s–1917, Colored Troops Division, RG 94, NARA. Various letters were also sent from soldier to the Adjutant General and can be found in Letters Received by the Adjutant General, Main Series, 1861–1870, M619, Roll 0321, RG 94, NARA. ↩
14. As was standard, the officers of the 102nd USCT were White. Some of the writings of these White officers exist. For example: Captain Wilbur Nelson, Company I, Diary, 1864–1865, Wilbur Nelson Papers, Michigan, State University Archives and Historical Collections. ↩
15. During my extensive research into the Murray family, no evidence of any formal education was discovered. Indeed, it is not even clear who taught Murray to read and write. Perhaps it was his mother, who was herself literate. Perhaps it was one or more members of the Crain family with whom Murray lived and worked before the war. ↩
16. See Virginia Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991); Edwin Redkey, ed. *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Noah Andre Trudeau, ed. *Voices of the 55th: Letters from the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, 1861–1865* (Dayton, OH: Morningside House, 1996). ↩