

**James Willson (1842-1863)  
Papers, 1856-1883  
MSA 483**

## **Introduction**

The focus of this collection is the Civil War letters of James Willson (or Wilson) (1842-1863) of East Warren, Vermont, for the period 1860-1863. The collection also contains letters of family members and friends. The collection was bought by the VHS in 2008 from Professor Richard Vangermeersch of the University of Rhode Island (ms. acc. no. 2008.5). Professor Vangermeersch purchased the collection roughly thirty years earlier, although he does not remember the source. The collection is housed in one archival flip top box (.5 linear feet)

## **Biographical Note**

James Willson (sometimes with one "r", sometimes two), was born in East Warren, Vermont, probably in 1842. His father was Henry S. Willson, a farmer, who died February 28, 1862; his mother was Rosaline Hillery Willson, who later married a Horace Steele. She died September 28, 1896. His mother's parents were Robert Hillery, born about 1797, died December 23, 1876, and Lephah (or Leaffey) Hillery, born about 1799, died December 17, 1875. The Hillery farm was probably in Warren, though perhaps it was further down the Mad River Valley.

The 1850 census shows father Henry being age 30, son James as age 8, and his sister Lucy age 5. A third child, Henry, who was younger than Lucy, died in 1870 at age 14. Lucy married Melville B. Eaton, a correspondent of her brother James and perhaps a cousin, in March of 1864.

James Willson joined Company B, 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment Vermont Volunteers, in October 1862, for a nine month enlistment. He hoped to take over his grandfather Hillery's farm when he returned from the war, as he mentions in a number of the letters. Unfortunately Willson's time was extended and he was killed at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863. According to the *History of the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment Vermont Volunteers*, he was killed while helping a wounded soldier from the field. The same source indicates that Willson had had a premonition that he would not survive the war.

His body would eventually be returned to the East Warren cemetery. His girlfriend, perhaps fiancé, Delia (Fidelia) Porter, aged 17 per the 1860 census, died February 22, 1864, some say of a broken heart.

## **Scope and Content**

The letters in this collection are arranged chronologically, retaining the numbering system established by the previous owner of the collection, Richard Vangermeersch. Each letter has been transcribed. The seller has also provided eighteen

pages of commentary on the letters (Folder 18) as well a chronological inventory of the collection, an index of names mentioned in the letters (both in Folder 1), and a list of what he calls “visuals” (i.e., items of visual interest) (Folder 17)

After leaving training camp in Brattleboro, Willson’s unit was sent to Virginia, near Alexandria, and most of his service was south of the Potomac. He was at Union Mills, visited the Bull Run battlefield, and was stationed at Wolfrun Shoals, Camp Carusi, Camp Widow Violet, and others. He wrote of hearing the gunfire during the battle at Fredericksburg. Most of Willson’s service involved guarding against Confederate raids towards the Potomac. His letters show that there were long periods of quiet followed by some quite sharp engagements.

On June 26, 1863, the unit started moving northwest and by July 1<sup>st</sup> it was at Gettysburg. His mother wrote on June 28<sup>th</sup> “If you can only come home safe and well. It is all that I will ask but we cannot tell what a few days will tell. .... Keep up good courage and put your trust in God of battles and I hope that he will care (sic) you safe through your trials.” Willson’s last correspondence (just the envelope survives), was dated June 29 from Monocacy, Maryland.

In his letters, Willson wrote of camp life, his health, how others from home were surviving military service. He expressed interest in what was happening at home, mostly writing to his mother, (his father had just died), but some to his sister and brother. He also expressed interest in taking over his grandfather’s farm on his return. A letter of November 23<sup>rd</sup> describes his visit to the Bull Run battlefield, talking of weapons found, skeletons, etc. A letter to Melville Eaton in January describes the hardships of army life, as he tries to dissuade Melville from entering the service. A March 11<sup>th</sup> letter speaks of General Stoughton being captured, “and the Second Vermont Brigade don’t care much.” On May 10<sup>th</sup> he speaks of General Stannard reviewing the troops. “We like his appearance first-rate. He does not appear much like General Stoughton. I hear that he Stoughton has been exchanged and that he is in Washington. All we ask is that they will keep him there and not give him the command of this Brigade again.” June 21<sup>st</sup> his mother writes from Fayston, “there have been some twenty or thirty run away from this town and Waitsfield to get rid of the draft.”

The collection also includes a map, item #55, that could not have been created during Willson’s period of service. The map shows the Potomac being guarded by the Vermont 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiments, among others, but not Willson’s 13<sup>th</sup>. Also the map depicts an area further up river from where he was stationed. It is not clear how this map made it into this collection, but it has been kept here to fit the commentary Prof. Vangermeersch has provided.

Many of the names that Willson mentions in these letters are family names that still exist in the Mad River Valley. The unit was formed from the towns of Warren, Waitsfield, Moretown, Fayston, and Duxbury, and those towns still contain families with the names Backus, Joslin, Boyce, Thayer, Billings, and others.

## Related Collections

Tintypes of James Willson and Delia (Fidelia) Porter are housed alphabetically in FB-27, along with the library's other tintypes. The wrapper for the photograph of Delia Porter, a very small hair wreath, and a paper cutout of a hand are filed with letter 58 in Folder 12.

## Inventory

- MSA 483:1 Finding aids created by Richard Vangermeersch:  
 Summary of collection  
 Inventory of letters  
 Index of people mentioned
- 2 Letters 1-10, 1860 & October – December 1862
  - 3 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 11-20, December 1862 – February 1863
  - 5 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 6 \_\_\_\_\_ 21-30, February – March 1863
  - 7 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 8 Letters 31-40, March – April 1863
  - 9 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 10 Letters 41-50, April – June, 1863
  - 11 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 12 Letters 51-60, June – September 1863
  - 13 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptions
  - 14 Miscellaneous:
    - R. A. Parmenter to Mellville [Eaton], Dec. 26, 1862
    - A.P. Van Deusen to Mell [Eaton], Dec. 30
    - Charles Mills to Mellville [Eaton], Jan. 18, 1863
    - C. to Charles W. Duncan (?), Nov. 18, 1861
    - Unknown to Mr. Hillery, July 9, 1856 (no transcription)
    - M. B. E. [Melville Eaton] to "Friend Rune," Feb. 13, 1883 (on back of letterhead for M. B. Eaton & Son, Morrisville, Vt.), typewritten letter, no transcription
  - 15 Transcripts of first four miscellaneous items
  - 16 Envelopes
  - 17 "Visuals" (photocopies of graphically interesting items in the collection by Richard Vangermeersch)
  - 18 Analysis of individual letters by Richard Vangermeersch

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 willson.doc