

# **William C. White letters**

MC 17

**Finding aid prepared by Bill Reuter.**

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Last updated on February 24, 2016.

Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center

; June 2011

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center
<b>Creator</b>	White, William C.
<b>Title</b>	William C. White letters
<b>Call number</b>	MC 17
<b>Date [bulk]</b>	1861-1864
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	September 27, 1861 - July 13, 1869
<b>Extent</b>	0.4 linear feet (; 1 box)
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Abstract</b>	William C. White (dates of birth and death are unknown) was an Irish Catholic Union soldier from Philadelphia. White began his Civil War service as a volunteer with the 69th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers on August 19, 1861 and served in some of the bloodiest and most important battles of the War – Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. This collection contains letters from White to his parents in Philadelphia, recounting his experiences during the war.

**Cite as:**

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], White, William C. Letters, 1861-1869 (MC 17), Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center.

## Biography/History

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Little is known about William White's life prior to his military service, and what is known about him comes mostly from these letters. He enlisted as a Private with the 69th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers on August 19, 1861. The 69th Regiment was recruited from Philadelphia by Col. Joshua T. Owen and was comprised largely of Irish Catholics. The Regiment was assigned to 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, and 2nd Corp of the Army of the Potomac. Within the Regiment, White was assigned to Company I.

The first assignment for the 69th Regiment was to construct Fort Ethan Allen and to build roads outside Washington. In October 1861, the 69th established Camp Observation, which would serve as winter quarters, near Poolesville, Maryland. On February 25, 1862 the Regiment left Camp Observation for Harper's Ferry and then Yorktown, but its first real combat came on May 31, 1862 at the Battle of Fair Oaks before engaging in the single bloodiest day of fighting in the War at Antietam Creek on September 17, 1862. The 69th Regiment lost 88 men in the battle.

After Antietam, White's regiment was sent to Bolivar Heights until October 30th, and then to Falmouth, where winter quarters were again established. On December 11, 1862, the regiment was sent to Stafford Heights, which is across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg. It was from here that General Ambrose Burnside, having just taken over command from General McClellan, intended to wage a winter campaign.

On July 1, 1863, the 69th Regiment arrived at Gettysburg, a battle that would cost the regiment every one of its field officers and a total of 151 casualties, which was nearly 60% of its strength. On March 14, 1864, the regiment returned to Philadelphia for a one month furlough, and in early May the regiment began the Wilderness battles, and continued fighting at Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. White's last combat came at Ream's Station on August 23, 1864 before he was discharged from the service 4 days later on August 27, 1864.

Little is known about White's life after the war, but we know from the last letter in the collection that he worked in Duluth, Minnesota for at least a time in 1869 building the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroads.

### Bibliography

Miles, Michael J. *An Irish Philadelphian in the Civil War: The Civil War Letters of William C. White*. Honors Thesis submitted in completion of Departmental Honors for History. St. Joseph's University. May 1, 2002.

## Scope and Contents

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All of the letters from within this collection were written by William C. White, camped at various Union locations, to his parents, who were living in Philadelphia. In his letters, White typically includes his location, such as "Camp Observation" or "on the James River." As an Irish Catholic from an urban area, White's perspective is somewhat unique in that many Union soldiers were Protestant and from rural areas. The Irish heritage of the men of the 69th regiment was clearly a source of great pride, as the Irish flags on the uniforms and other items, and the nicknames ("Paddy Owens Regulars" and "The 13th Street Boys") given to the regiment will attest.

The letters provide a first-hand perspective on some of the Civil War battles. His July 5, 1863 letter, for example, provides a glimpse of "Pickett's Charge," noting, "Our regiment was behind a stone wall. On the 2nd of July the rebels marched out on us and drove the men in front of us back and then marched to our stone wall. We fought them over an hour and then they turned and flew in all directions." Another example is a March 3, 1862 letter, in which White writes, "The arsenal where John Brown was in is a splendid building but it is all ruins now."

The letters also provide a glimpse of Union camp life during the Civil War and insight into the psyche of a Union soldier. White often asked his parents to send tobacco and stamps, and occasionally certain items of clothing that he needed. White mentions several times the vitriol directed towards deserters, often referred to as "loafers," and notes the issues with whiskey and the problems resulting from drunken soldiers. He even describes a strange condition known as "moon-blindness," as one soldier claimed to not be able to see after dark, which resulted from sleeping with his eyes half-open and having the moon shine on his eyeballs. Additionally, White spoke often of the regiment chaplain, Father Michael F. Martin, at the camp and the importance of religious services.

The last folder contains a researcher's typescript transcriptions of White's letters. It should be noted that these are partial transcripts.

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## Administrative Information

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Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center

; June 2011

Finding aid prepared by Bill Reuter.

## Access Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

## Provenance

Accession number 1990.017

## Existence and Location of Copies note

Digital reproductions of the William C. White letters are available at <http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:364084>

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## Related Materials

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### Separated Materials

A binder containing material related to this collection, including biographical information, military service records, and other material is assigned call # P008.713 and Accession# 2011.036.

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## Controlled Access Headings

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### Subject(s)

- Gettysburg, Battle of, Gettysburg, Pa., 1863.
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Anecdotes.
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Military life--Union.
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Participation, Irish American.
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Personal narratives.
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Regimental histories--Pennsylvania
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.

## **Other Finding Aids note**

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This is a revised finding aid. An older finding aid is available in hard copy at PAHRC.

## Collection Inventory

	Box	Folder
September 27, 1861.	1	1
November 8, 1861.	1	2
December 1, 1861.	1	3
December 31, 1861.	1	4
January 9, 1862.	1	5
January 11, 1862.	1	6
January 27, 1862.	1	7
February 3, 1862.	1	8
February 13, 1862.	1	9



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February 17, 1862.	1	10
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February 21, 1862.	1	11
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February 24, 1862.	1	12
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March 3, 1862.	1	13
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March 25, 1862.	1	14
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April 11, 1862.	1	15
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April 23, 1862.	1	16
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May 1, 1862.	1	17
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June 10, 1862.	1	18
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June 16, 1862.	1	19
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June 21, 1862.	1	20
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Undated Fragment (Most likely dates between June 21 and June 26, 1862.).	1	21
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June 26, 1862.	1	22
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July 4, 1862.	1	23
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July 10, 1862.	1	24
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July 13, 1862.	1	25
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July 30, 1862.	1	26
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August 19, 1862.	1	27
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August 23, 1862 and September 5, 1862 (There are 2 separate dated letters on the same paper. It appears White began the letter on August 23rd, and was either unable to send it or finish it, so he continued the letter on September 5th.).	1	28
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September 19, 1862.	1	29
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September 26, 1862.	1	30
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October 5, 1862.	1	31
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October 14, 1862.	1	32
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October 21, 1862.	1	33
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November 9, 1862.	1	34
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November 23, 1862.	1	35
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December 4, 1862.	1	36
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December 15, 1862.	1	37
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December 22, 1862.	1	38
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December 25, 1862.	1	39
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July 5, 1863.	1	40
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January 6, 1864.	1	41
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January 13, 1864.	1	42
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January 21, 1864.	1	43
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February 6, 1864.	1	44
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February 12, 1864.	1	45
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February 24, 1864.	1	46
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March 15, 1864.	1	47
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March 20, 1864.	1	48
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March 26, 1864.	1	49
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April 6, 1864.	1	50
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April 12, 1864.	1	51
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May 19, 1864.	1	52
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May 31, 1864.	1	53
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June 7, 1864.	1	54
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June 19, 1864.	1	55
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June 26, 1864.	1	56
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July 9, 1864.	1	57
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July 24, 1864.	1	58
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July 31, 1864.	1	59
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August 18, 1864.	1	60
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August 26, 1864.	1	61
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July 13, 1869.	1	62
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Typescript, partial transcription of letters, June 18, 1993.	1	63
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