

**Interview with Chandra Manning  
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Civil War Letters**

**1. Meet the Letters**

The first letter, first chronologically, was a letter written in October of 1862 by Jasper Barney, a private in an Illinois regiment. He fought for the Union Army. He was a farmer from Illinois and he is writing to his brother-in-law, another family member, about the state of the war and particularly about emancipation.

The second letter is written [in] the following month, November of 1862, but it is by a white Confederate soldier, a prosperous farmer, John White, to his wife. And he is writing at a moment when militarily, the Confederacy is enjoying more success, but Confederate civilians are living with the uncertainties of having a war fought in their own backyard. He's also writing about the Emancipation Proclamation and the fears that it has stirred up amongst Confederate civilians at home. His letter is a very personal letter, too, in that he is quite forthcoming with his wife about how much he misses home and how torn he feels between his desire to be home and protect his family and the need to fight this war.

And then the third letter is written in February of 1864. It is by a black member of the 14<sup>th</sup> Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, a black regiment. And he is writing from the city of New Orleans, which his regiment is occupying at the time, to really articulate what he and many other black soldiers see as the stakes, as why this war matters for black Americans, in particular.

**2. Slavery**

Men in a regiment or at least in a company, tended to enlist together, so letters that come from home will be read probably by more than one person, will probably be read out loud. A letter to home will often include a passage saying: brother A says to say X, Y, Z.

With Civil War soldiers' letters, the vagaries of letter survival can skew our picture a little bit. The letters to home have a much greater survival rate than the letters from home to the front. The letters from home don't survive because soldiers have nothing that they can do with them. Also, before a battle, soldiers are likely to destroy any personal letters that they have on them. Their fear is if personal letters are found on them that the enemy will somehow use that information.

The Union has the U.S. Postal Service. The Confederacy never really has a very efficient or working postal service. There's travel back and forth between home and the front lines all the time, so often somebody from home or nearby, is in camp and going home and you send letters that way. And when that person comes, they bring letters. There're also private express companies.

Jasper Barney is in the hospital when he writes the letter. He's trying to recover from a wound, so the first part of the letter is about recovering from his wound and that actually in one sense is typical because almost every soldier's letter talks about his health to almost excessive degrees.

### **3. Background For Letter One**

The letter was written in October of 1862 and in the fall of 1862, there's quite a lot of turbulence on the northern home front and regarding the Union Army cause in general. The war militarily had gone fairly well for the Union in the early months of 1862. Then in the summer of 1862, the war started going poorly for the Union militarily, and the North sort of woke up to the fact that this was going to be a much longer war than anybody had anticipated. So, by the fall of 1862, the northern home front and soldiers are still trying to cope with that realization.

One of those new measures that is taken to fight the war is the Emancipation Proclamation. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation had been issued on September 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation really changed the whole aim of a war that had been begun to save the Union, now becomes a war also to end slavery. Now, those two goals had never been completely separable, but the official line had always been—this is a war to save the Union and not to have really much of anything to do with slavery. Those changes really rocked much of the Civil War North, particularly the northern home front. You have quite a lot of dissent among white northerners over the Emancipation Proclamation. Black northerners, there's no dissent. They think that this is exactly what has been needed since well before the war began.

There are a number of issues at stake in the 1862 elections. There are economic issues. There are issues having to do with civil liberties. What actions can and cannot the United States government take during wartime. And there's the war. And, of course, there's the Emancipation Proclamation. Meanwhile, you have a number of new soldiers entering the ranks. So you have elections, tumult and dissent, and a host of a new soldiers coming into the Army, all at about the same time, and that's when this letter is written.

### **4. Emancipation Proclamation**

The letter is written by Barney who has actually been in this army for a while. So he is writing as an experienced soldier to his brother-in-law who has just joined. Barney, who would normally show a certain modicum of deference or respect for his more socially elite and older brother-in-law, thinks that this is too important an issue to stand on ceremony and so he tells him straight up—I think that you're wrong. I think that the Emancipation Proclamation is exactly what is needed to end this war and what is more, you're going to think so, too, as soon as you have been in the war for any length of time.

Barney is fairly typical. He certainly wouldn't have called himself an abolitionist. He certainly would not have predicted that in less than a year he would be calling for an end to an institution that's older than the nation itself. It's quite a radical thing to talk about ending slavery in the 1860s. He's undergone what is a huge transformation in his thinking. As you can see from the

letter to his brother-in-law, his family has not really kept up with his transition. A gulf has really opened between many soldiers and their families at home.

He is on the emancipation question even in the first paragraph. He says, “now, my lady love is more attentive for I got a letter from her yesterday. She is all right on the goose question.” “All right on the goose” means how you stand on the slavery question. She agrees with him about emancipation so he’s pleased about that.

Then in the next paragraph, he’s addressing what he sees as his brother-in-law’s mistaken views. “You say in your letter that you or your regiment is not in for freeing the Negroes. I am sorry to hear it. You wanted to know what I and my comrades thought of the Negro question. I think old Abe’s Proclamation is all right and there’s very few old soldiers that is against it. There’s my opinion that yourself and the greater part of your regiment will be in favor of it before you are in the service six months. I was of the same opinion of yourself when I first came into the service but I have learned better. You said you thought the thing would come to a finish by spring if the Negroes was left alone, but I think you will soon find out different. For it is my opinion that the war will never come to a close while the Negroes is left where they are to raise supplies for the rebel army. Even if we could suppress the rebellion and leave the main route where it was before, it wouldn’t be long before they would try the same game as before, but if we take away the main route of evil and confiscate all their property they will have nothing to fight for hereafter.”

First of all, it’s the war that has changed his opinion. Second of all, it’s going to change his brother-in-law’s opinion, too. His reasoning is actually quite pragmatic. What he’s talking about is the recognition that without the institution of slavery there never would have been a war. So if we want the war to end and if we want not to fight it again, we have to get rid of the cause. That passage encapsulates quite well a major shift in thinking that goes on. It’s a pretty astute analysis on his part and on many soldiers’ part that there’s no way that the Confederacy could have conducted a four-year war without the slave labor force. The Confederate work force is mobilized, is in the army.

## **5. Introduction to Letter Two**

“Old Abe give them 90 days and that was long enough for them to come to terms and save their property and Negroes, but it seems like they wanted to go with a whole-hog or none. Now, I think it is perfectly right to take the hog and leave them none and then if they ain’t satisfied, I’m in for banishing every rebel and rebel sympathizer from the U.S. I am a whole soul Union man and believe in giving the rebels a lesson to be remembered in after generations. Then we will never be troubled with civil war again.”

He’s talking about the precise terms of the Emancipation Proclamation here. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, is actually more properly the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. And what it says is that the slaves in the states that are still in rebellion against the Union as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863, will be freed. And so essentially it’s an ultimatum delivered to states in rebellion. And the reverse of it would say: therefore if you return to the Union before

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863, your slaves won't be freed. And the Proclamation says that because it is operating in the context of a Constitution that protects slavery and so the Emancipation Proclamation can only justify itself as a war measure.

So what he is saying is: Lincoln gave the states 90 days to come back. He gives them a chance to retain slavery and if they won't take that chance, if their demands and terms of greater protection for slavery are more important to them than coming back in the Union and keeping slavery where it is, then they made their own bed and let them lie in it.

By the time Barney writes this letter, he has no qualms at all about confiscating the property of even non-combatants. As he sees it, the only thing that's going to end this war is to take a much harder line, to take away the root of the war.

In the next paragraph, he wants to assure his brother-in-law that I'm not some wild-eyed abolitionist here. I'm not a crazy reformer. This is in fact what most of us hardened commonsensical soldiers think. He said, "Well, I think I gave you a very good sample of the opinions of myself and comrades."

I think the next paragraph is a good clue into the limits of growing emancipation sentiment among the Union Army. In other words, he is all for ending slavery, but ending slavery is quite different, in his view, from increasing rights of former slaves for anything approaching racial equality. You see that when he says, "P.S., I am not in favor of freeing the Negroes and leaving them to run free and mingle among us. Neither is such the intention of old Abe, but we will send them off and colonize them. The government is already making preparations for the same and you may be assured it will be carried into effect."

So, he doesn't know [what's to] come of former slaves, but he certainly doesn't want them living among his own friends and family in the north. He refers to a passage in the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that does not mandate, but suggests as a possible outcome for former slaves, maybe they'd be happier if we sent them back to Africa or to some place in South America and they could start their own society. By the time of the final Proclamation, all reference to colonization has been omitted. Slavery was Southern, but prejudice was nationwide and so colonization was a way of coping with the tension between the insistence that we really need to get rid of slavery and uncertainty about what do we do with real slaves.

## **6. About Civil War Letters**

The Confederate soldier is named John White. He is part of the Army of Northern Virginia, which is the fabled army of Robert E. Lee, and he is writing from Fredericksburg, Virginia, in late November of 1862. So he's essentially writing while Union forces are getting ready to try and take Fredericksburg. It's cold; it's miserable; it's wet. His letter may or may not make it outside battle lines.

He's writing to his wife. There are armies in her backyard. Moreover, White's wife lives in a part of the state where there are slaves and there is a terror that the war is going to inspire a slave insurrection. Those fears are present from the very beginning of the war, but at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, they become even more acute. There's more uncertainty and there's a lot more worry in his letter, even though militarily the war is going a lot better for his side at this time than it is for Barney's side.

The Confederacy is very centralized, much more centralized than the Union. The Confederate government nationalizes the economy to a much greater degree than the Union could even dream of doing and there's major disagreement about whether the Confederate state has any authority to do this. The reason why that disagreement doesn't spill over into a massive rush to rejoin the Union is—all that stuff stinks but it's not as bad as the Union. I think that's the calculus that goes on in the minds of most Confederate soldiers.

It's *not liking* the Union more than *liking* or feeling any attachment to the Confederacy that keeps the Confederate Army in the ranks. Civilians are ready to throw in a towel a lot earlier than soldiers are.

He starts off by talking about a local neighbor, and he explains that that's how he got some letters from his wife and is able to send some letters to her. But then he hasn't even gone through the state of his health or the health of all their children or their friends at home before he gets to his concerns about the possibility of slave insurrection. So his two main concerns right from the outset are: (1) we can't be in touch with each other as much as I would like us to be, and (2) you're worried and I'm worried about [a] slave uprising.

## **7. Sharpsburg**

He talks about the battle that he calls Sharpsburg (and the Union soldier would call Antietam). The Battle of Antietam took place on September 17<sup>th</sup> of 1862 right before the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Confederacy stages a number of invasions of Union soil in the fall of 1862. Robert E. Lee's Army marches into Maryland and the Union Army meets the Confederate Army at Sharpsburg, the name of the town in Maryland along a creek called Antietam Creek. The Confederates tend to name battles after the town nearest to where a battle is fought, while the Union tends to name battles after natural features, usually most often bodies of water.

Militarily, that battle was a draw, but it counts as enough of a Union victory because the Confederates were trying to invade the North. Their invasion was stopped at Antietam, and so the Confederates retreat back into the Confederacy. The Confederates do not see this as a devastating defeat by any means. But the Union has been so desperate for a victory because Lincoln has been trying to find a way to issue the Emancipation Proclamation since the summer of 1862. He did not want to do it at a time when the Union Army appeared to be failing because then it would just look like a desperate move and that's not how he wanted it to look.

As you can see from White's description of the battle, he saw it as a terrible battle, but he doesn't really see it as a major Confederate defeat. "Oh, Matt, it almost makes me shudder to think of it. How will the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1862 live in the memory of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Regiment and its friends? Oh, it was an awful day. Imagine my feelings, if you can, when I saw my comrades and friends falling all around me from the death-dealing shot and shell of the enemy and knew not how soon it would be my fate. Thanks be to a kind providence, I came out unhurt but narrowly escaped. A ball passed through my blanket between my body and right arm. I shot my gun until I could hardly get a cartridge down her. Finally, they gave way and ran, hotly pursued by our brigade, the 32<sup>nd</sup> leading the charge until pursuit was dangerous. They were said to be three to our one." He's writing this more than a month later, but it's still a pretty fresh impression of his experience of battle.

It's such an overwhelming experience to be in a Civil War battle. The impressions are roaring noise and smoke and a horrific smell and those are hard sensations to really write precise words about and so there are a series of stock phrases that soldiers tend to fall back on. There's nothing in her experience he can compare it to. It doesn't so much make his description hollow as highlight the enormity of the experience because he's clearly an eloquent man and yet that's too overpowering for him.

It's really important to him for two reasons: (1) the enormity of the battle itself, but (2) it becomes the occasion for this Emancipation Proclamation. White and his wife aren't shocked by the Emancipation Proclamation. They've thought since the beginning that the Union is out to destroy slavery and all this talk of union is really just a red herring, but the Emancipation Proclamation makes those fears more real for them. Moreover, they worry that slaves are going to hear about this Emancipation Proclamation and will become emboldened and as a result will start holding uprisings and possibly go on killing sprees.

## **8. Dilemmas**

"Dear Matt, I must tell you I am in a hard place and know not what to do. When I think of my sufferings, both in mind and body which are indescribable and how much my services are needed home, I am tempted to try and get there. I see no probability of getting there if I remain in the service. The war is likely to last for years yet and I cannot reasonably expect to survive it. Besides this, you are threatened with an insurrection," which is, again, a reference to the slave uprising that they fear is going to happen because of the Emancipation Proclamation, "and how better can I die than defending my family and fireside. To do this, I came in the war and now that you are threatened, I consider it my Christian duty to come to your rescue and protection. Dear Matt, you know that I love my country but I love my family better." And I think in that passage he captures the dilemma that's going to be a dilemma for a great number of Confederate soldiers.

And the dilemma is this—most Confederate soldiers don't own slaves. Two-thirds of white families in the Confederacy are not slave owners. But they're not stupid. They know full well that this war was begun to protect the institution of slavery and they're not embarrassed about that. In fact, they agree that it was important and the reason why is not necessarily that they own

slaves, but they live in a place where 40% of the population is black. Parts of the Confederacy, the majority is black slaves. And they honestly believe that the two races cannot live together harmoniously without the institution of slavery.

“Dear Matt, you know that I love my country but I love my family better.” Now, that sounds to me like a very unguarded moment. That’s not the sort of sentence you would want anyone you didn’t really trust to see, particularly in wartime when there were questions of loyalty, when there were questions of patriotism, when your own honor rests in part on your reputation for fearlessly defending your country.

There’s no censorship. There’s no official mechanism by which his superior officers are going to read his mail, but you don’t know that it’s not going to go amiss, that it’s not going to get dropped somewhere and have someone pick it up. So that he took that risk really underscores the sincerity of that line for me.

The problem is that if the heart of the motivation is to protect what one sees as the best interests, the health and the safety of one’s family, and then the war to protect one’s family starts threatening one’s family, what do you do? Does he best protect his family by staying in the Army and trying to secure an independent Confederacy where slavery will be protected forever or does he best help his family and protect his family by going home so that if there is an insurrection, he’s there to take care of them? And that tension will haunt him and will haunt most Confederate soldiers really for the rest of the war and is at the heart of the war experience for a very great many Confederate soldiers.

### **10. Introduction to Letter Three**

The third letter is written by a black Union soldier to the editor of the most prominent African American newspaper during the Civil War, *The Weekly Anglo-African*. Black soldiers throughout their term of service in the Union armies do this. They write to northern newspapers, particularly black newspapers, about their soldiering experience. The majority of black Union soldiers were former slaves who could not read and write and so we don’t have letters from them. Who we have letters from are the minority who are northern free blacks who could read and write before the war. They see themselves as having obligations, not just to their family, representing the war experience to their family, but to a broader, at least black public.

He is writing from New Orleans, Louisiana, in February of 1864. This soldier is a member of the 14<sup>th</sup> Rhode Island Heavy Artillery. New Orleans has been under Union control since May of 1862, so he is really an occupation force.

He’s also fighting two battles at once because initially black northerners who tried to join the Union Army were refused. Black soldiers were not accepted into the Union ranks until 1862 and they didn’t join in big numbers until 1863. Once they’re in the ranks, they’re paid less. At first there are no black officers and at first they are barred from combat duty. So he is fighting to save the Union and to redefine it—to redefine it as a place where he and people like him are seen as

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/source-analysis/civil-war-letters/>

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citizens, are seen as invested with the same rights and promises as white Americans are. And you see evidence of both battles in this letter.

The immediate audience for *The Anglo-African* is northern blacks. However, all newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have a habit of picking up letters, columns, articles, from one paper and running it in their own pages. There's always the chance that this could run in a white newspaper. So he always has a definite audience and a potential audience in mind.

## 11. Rights

“I will give a brief account of the battalion to which I am now attached and to which I hope to belong until this cruel war has ended and the nation enjoys once more the blessings of peace.” There he's talking about the Union versus the Confederacy, but then the next passage after that he's onto the battle for respect for citizenship, for equality within the Union itself.

“The battalion is composed of as good material and contains as brave hearts as any equal number of men that ever shouldered a musket in this war.” We are just as good. We are just as brave as any other soldiers—including the white ones is what he's saying there. “These men have left their own dear homes, their wives and children of their own free will. Why, then, should they not fight?” We have made the decision to fight in this war, just as white men have, so if one of the hallmarks of fitness for citizenship is the ability to reason, to exert one's own free will—look, we have done that.

“Yes, they will fight as they know full well that this is the golden opportunity that they have given them to establish their manhood and capability as soldiers before the world.” Manhood shows up all the time in black soldiers' letters and it can have one of two meanings. Sometimes it means recognition of the full humanity of all black Americans. In this one, though, he clearly means the adult male identity of black men because one characteristic of the adult man in 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture is the ability to take care of a family, the ability to support a wife and children. And it's men who are entitled to full political rights and he's twice told his readers that we have characteristics of manhood. One is in the moral agency—that we of our own freewill decided to do something. And two, is—we have wives and children, we support families. We therefore have the attributes of adult males and are entitled to the rights of adult males, so he means manhood in that explicitly gendered way.

The next and final paragraph is a very conventional one. This is the sort of thing that shows up in a number of public letters. “If it be my lot to fall on the battlefield, I shall be content to die far from home and friends. If my ears are saluted by the shout of our comrades, the battle is over, the stars and stripes wave triumphantly and the slave is free.” This is a letter that is not just telling loved ones how he feels, but is really also fighting this very public campaign for respect for black soldiers and for African Americans in general.

He signs it with the name Macy and this is another challenge of working with black soldiers' letters. They take pseudonyms all the time—I don't know who this soldier is. That could've been



a nickname. It could've been his first name. He in fact does give his company and his regiment, but he doesn't sign his whole name and so positive identification is a lot harder with black soldiers than with white soldiers.

## **12. Teaching Strategies**

I think juxtaposition works pretty well with letters. The Union and Confederate and the white and the black letters really do sound different. Students I think generally like reading letters, too. They feel like real people. It seems interesting to them, but having them read the letters against each other and just asking them what jumps out to you, what are they talking about, what strikes you, what surprises you. The initial reaction with these particular letters will work pretty well. If what you want them to talk about is the Emancipation Proclamation, it's all over those first two letters.

Another strategy—a sort of teaching assignment—might be to imagine the letter in response. You could talk about home front and battlefield using these letters. You could ask students to imagine: how might Jasper Barney's brother-in-law have responded to this letter? Asking them to imagine responses I think also makes them really engage with the questions and the issues that are raised by the letters.

There's not a lot of talk of politics in the Union letter and there's often politics in Union letters. And there's no overt criticism of Jefferson Davis or some aspect of the Confederacy in the Confederate letter which there often is in Confederate letters. At the time, black soldiers are fighting for equal pay and you'd expect that to show up and it doesn't. In February of 1864, that's a hot issue and it not showing up is a little surprising.

That is the drawback to using one letter. Of the letters that went amiss from John White, 12 of them might have talked about something that you would expect, but this letter doesn't. So it's hard sometimes to resist the temptation to think we know everything about him from this one letter. We don't.