
Vermont Soldiers in Control of the Home Front: Family and Social Guidance through Letters

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With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 came the immediate need for large numbers of men to join the Union ranks and put down the southern rebellion. As patriotic as any, Vermont men enlisted in volunteer regiments as a duty to their country and families, and to fulfill personal and social concepts of manhood and honor. These societal expectations shaped how Vermont soldiers looked upon their actions, as well as those of their friends and family on the home front. Through correspondence with family and friends, Vermont soldiers guaranteed that their behavior and motives for fighting were well known; they also attempted to maintain control and influence over the actions and opinions of those at home.

Although predominantly rural, Vermonters conformed to popular Victorian social norms that centered on concepts of manhood, gender-acceptable behavior, responsibilities to family, and tempering one's behavior for the betterment of society. These ingrained ideals did not cease for these men simply because they left for battle and were no longer around family or occupying their hometowns. Not only did these soldiers take these views with them and incorporate them into their daily military life, but they also espoused them to family and friends through letters. Letters served the purposes of delivering war and camp news, as well as ensuring that families were aware of the ideals of the soldiers for the war and understood what the soldiers expected of them while they were separated.

During this period of American history, men were mainly responsible for providing for their families while women remained in the home and raised the children. Society of the time dictated that both men and women operate in different spheres, each designed to best highlight and cater to the idea that men should operate in the wider world of commerce and industry while women remained at home tending to their families. The idea was that society operated best when each group knew their place and what was expected of them.

Men felt that it was their duty to regulate as much of their social and personal lives as they were able. It was the popular Puritan view of a "calling" that men responded to when they went out into the world of capitalism. This world of capitalism was a world of selfishness where men were required to be calculating, shrewd, and demanding in their various areas of employment.¹ Men understood that their fortunes could rise and fall unpredictably in this world. This uncertainty

in the daily lives of men encouraged many of them to look for ways to create structure and certainty in other areas of their lives.²

The structured world in which men functioned made it so they were always aware of exactly what was expected of them regardless of the unknowns. Men were required to work hard to support their families and to be strong role models for their children. In many ways, identity was based upon occupation, moral convictions, and gender. Society judged harshly any man who strayed from norms through vices such as drinking, and gambling or other atypical behaviors.³

Responsibilities to one's country were viewed in the same fashion as responsibilities to one's family. Though not confined to the traditional concepts of family, many saw the Union as a family unit that all must serve and defend when the situation called for it. Across the north, men frequently wrapped political discussions about the Union in familial terms, which allowed them to accept and process the political ideals more readily and to endure those hardships that came as a result.⁴ Yet one must realize that by conveying things in ways that were familiar to the population as a whole it became easier for people to accept the trials ahead. Families of this era had expectations of each member and these expectations extended to society on a larger scale. Men were the proactive members of society, guided by strong ideals of what it meant to be a man and to be the breadwinner of a family. Men were the ones required to react to the call from outside sources to meet personal and societal expectations.

The start of the Civil War brought a clearer understanding of the concept and reality of men having to choose between responsibility to family, society, and country. For those who were single and had few responsibilities at that point in their life, the decision to enlist in the army and go to war was a simple one. Those who had families, businesses, or farms tended to find the task much more difficult to justify and accept. Rather than appearing as though they were choosing one over the other, the men described enlistment as an obligation. In joining the Union, the soldiers were protecting the homes of their family and friends from the threat posed by the Confederacy.⁵

At stake for many of these men was their very manhood—not in the physical sense but in the social sense. What men did in the world as an occupation defined who they were and offered clarity to the overall perception of their goals and sense of worth. The country needed them, the very society that they were part of and that allowed for this overall sense of manhood was crumbling. Not answering the call to fight in the war was, in some instances, the same as saying that those who stayed behind were less manly or that they did not deserve to hold the respect and social presence of those who were answering their nation's call.

Men looked at this call for troops as a duty and as a requirement of manhood. “Remaining a civilian was thought unmanly; going to war a proof of manhood . . . another attitude toward the relationship of soldiering and manliness was that claim that those who refused to fight were not men at all—they might as well be women.”⁶ It was the duty of men to defend their country, homes, and families; they would need to leave their families to do so.

The men, however, were not the only ones who society prompted to do their duty regarding the war and meet its demands. Women were also held to a patriotic standard that demanded they be willing to make any sacrifice that was necessary for their husbands to be at the disposal of the country. Since the role of women was in many ways a supportive one, these same expectations applied to their role in the war. War was a man’s occupation and not a woman’s, so it was thought that women should gladly and willingly support their men when they decided to go to war.

Charles Cummings, a Lieutenant in the 16th Vermont Volunteers, explained his motives to his wife: “I feel as if I had a duty to do here and I mean to do it to the best of my ability. If our regiment does nothing to distinguish itself and aid in putting down this rebellion, it shall not be my fault. I will do my duty, and then my sheets will be clear.”⁷ Cummings was determined to do what he felt was in the best interest of the country. He wanted to be successful and do his duty, by stating that his conscience would be clear if he did what was necessary to distinguish himself. Here we see the confidence of Cummings, he believes in the cause and in his ability to endure what is demanded of him. Men viewed their roles as proactive in this fight; they did not want to wait for the war to dictate to them what would happen. Instead, they hoped to take the fight to the enemy. This optimism is telling. Men such as Cummings were optimistic; they believed in their cause and saw the positive aspects of war. It is difficult to determine exactly what motivated this confidence, but it is telling that soldiers were so confident at the beginning of the war and expressed this confidence when they had yet to be in any fighting or endure any real challenges associated with warfare. It is easy to make such confident statements before one feels the reality of war.

Despite the pressure on the women to support the cause of war, as well as their husbands’ willing participation in it, some women were hesitant and even worried about the outcome of this support. Mary Jane Henry, the wife of a Vermont soldier, wrote to her husband shortly after he left Vermont for a camp in New York, “I cannot bear to think seriously of your going off to war . . . it does not seem so nice to think of your going off to run such a risk. I do hope something will happen . . . to prevent you going.”⁸ Though not enthusiastic about her husband’s

eventual departure for the field of battle, she was still willing to accept his decision even if that meant facing the challenges that were to come. She later went on to remind her husband that, though her life was entirely focused on him, “I do not let any one know how I feel. I am too proud for that. No one has seen me shed a tear since.”⁹ The heartache that she—and other women—would feel clashed with social expectations forcing her and others to simply accept their circumstances.

Although they were leaving for war, many of the Vermont soldiers still tried to guide their families by explaining to them how best to behave, respond emotionally, and manage certain responsibilities. A primary concern for many of the men was that their wives would become too emotional over the separation and become sick or otherwise unstable. Prominent medical theories of the time indicated that if a woman was too emotionally or mentally excited or stimulated, then it could cause a great deal of nervous energy and thus lead to insanity or other mental problems. Women were encouraged to funnel any nervous energy that they were experiencing into the care of their families and household responsibilities.¹⁰

Men encouraged their wives to avoid over-stimulation. In response to his wife’s letter regarding her concern about his leaving for war, William Wirt Henry replied, “I thought you would do just as you said you would, ‘calm down’, and do nothing but take care of Mollie and I know very well if you did that you would be all right in a few days, and now I have to thank you for doing so, and being a good girl.”¹¹ He later went on to tell her that he was “so glad to hear that you keep brave yet—that is right—you must keep brave to the last. It is not half so dark as some people paint it.”¹² William attempted to keep his wife calm and not overly emotional about his being in the army, acknowledging the rumors that were surely spreading back home about army life. Regardless of this encouragement and the motivation of patriotic duty, women still worried about their loved ones.

Remaining calm was not the only advice that husbands offered their wives from the field. Men were also very concerned about their wives’ behavior and about those with whom they associated. Roswell Farnham was quick to give his wife advice on how she should behave and who were acceptable companions. Most of his advice, however, focused on maintaining the correct political outlook:

I saw Abby & Jenny Write in New York- and Mary Stibbins Davis. She is a secessionist & her husband is in the southern army. I told her she would not be very well received in Bradford. I hope you will treat her with becoming coolness. Tell Laura if Mary is a

secessionist I want her to keep away from her . . . I am afraid that some of the folks have been talking “copperheadism” to you by the way you write about my being a target for the government &c. Do not write any such stuff again, for if any of the rebels should get hold of your letters, I want them to think that you are ready to sacrifice anything to put down the rebellion.¹³

Roswell Farnham was very opinionated as to whom his wife and family should and should not talk to and about what subjects were acceptable. Here one sees that men had powerful feelings about what their loved ones did in their absence. It is difficult to know what Mary Farnham wrote in her letters but the reaction to them is unmistakable. Roswell Farnham had a clear understanding of what he was doing and was not receptive to any viewpoint that went against his ideals and goals. He wanted his wife to share his viewpoints. Discovering that she said things in opposition to the positions he held caused him concern. It could indicate to someone that his family did not fully support the Union cause. Men expected their family to be supportive of the cause for which they were fighting; to hear otherwise proved to be grounds for great consternation. It was appropriate for that time and social context for him to reprimand his wife for what she had been writing. This was a key method of men finding ways, even from the battlefield, to guarantee that their families upheld the male view. Society expected women to keep their political views private and to behave in ways that would positively reflect upon their husbands.¹⁴

Society expected women to keep their political views private and to behave in ways that would reflect positively upon their husbands. While some men reacted with direct censure when discussing with their wives some of what had been written, others took a different approach and instead told their wives of undesirable behavior they witnessed in others. For instance, Captain Valentine Barney described to his wife a visit made to an army hospital in Virginia, which cared for both Confederate and Union wounded soldiers. According to Barney, several Union women visited the Confederate soldiers and brought them gifts. He stated that these activities only benefitted Confederate wounded and that Union troops were overlooked. In relaying this information to his wife he highlighted the type of behavior he did not wish to see repeated by his associates.

Where some used references of events they encountered to promote certain behavior from their families, others deployed less subtle tactics. Newly married Vermont Colonel Wheelock Veazey was persistent in telling his wife how his world revolved around her and of her devotion to him. He frequently

wrote her that, “You must be good & happy & confident & love your husband. . . . The best of all is to know that I have such a good wife. I know you are good, & try hard to do all you can to be good.”¹⁵ Here one sees that Veazey is reminding his wife as much as himself that she is devoted to him and will behave in his absence. Having married just two weeks before leaving for war, Veazey was still in the honeymoon stage. He wished to be reassured that all was well in his marriage while war separated him from his wife. Here is a prominent example of how society viewed proper behavior and how men would frequently speak to their spouses in paternal language. In referring to her as a good girl, Veazey is invoking some of the popular paternal ideals of the time. He looks at his wife as



Figure 1. Valentine Goodrich Barney (1834-1889) by an unknown photographer. Houghton Civil War Photographs, Vermont Historical Society.

one who is almost childlike and who needs constant reminders of doing what is right and maintaining proper behavior. It is difficult to determine if there was something about his wife’s personality or activities that caused him to feel that his wife needed these constant reminders on her behavior and devotion.

The need for women to support the decisions of their husbands regarding going to war was not the only major obstacle that women faced. The separation of men from their families caused major changes for Northern women. As societal constraints had previously barred women from the world of employment, finance, farming, and business, they were ill prepared to navigate those fields. Many

women whose husbands left for the war were now responsible for managing the household by paying bills, buying goods, and even finding a source of income. Their inexperience in the world of commerce and employment caused many women to be taken advantage of when negotiating contracts and maneuvering through the economic responsibilities required of them.

Some Union women did not experience financial difficulties when their husbands and sons went to war. Those women whose families were financially stable, or who had relatives with whom they could live, found the experience much more tolerable and even comfortable. This, however, was not the standard for Northern women, especially those from farming families. The loss of their husbands to the war meant that women had to step in and manage both farm and family. Entire families usually worked many of the farms that operated in rural areas, such as Vermont. The loss of men to the war made labor scarce and jeopardized production.¹⁶

Some husbands attempted to guide their wife's decisions and actions in the marketplace by suggesting bills to pay, livestock to buy, and decisions to make. Charles Cummings encouraged his wife in a letter by saying, "I am glad that you get along so well with the things at home. I knew you would as soon as you had had a little experience. You will have a good supply of garden vegetables and pork."¹⁷ He then went on to encourage his wife to discuss speculating in sheep with his father, for he was confident that they would be a sound investment in the future. Though anticipating being able to participate in the rewards of such speculation, some did not consider what their families would do with these additional responsibilities if they did not make it home.

Those who left home did so to fulfill their roles as men, but this did not mean that they were unaffected by the events taking place on the home front, or that they were not involving the home front in the events occurring in camp. Soldiers took the rumors and opinions of those at home as though they were facts and many soldiers spread rumors themselves. Soldiers also informed families and loved ones on the behavior of those in the military.¹⁸ This attempt to connect to home through letters, and even rumors, allowed the men to feel that they were still involved in many ways with the community they left behind.

Although the men at war worried about the behavior and activities of those at home, they also felt it important to share their views on the war and army life. The behavior of fellow soldiers, as well as the daily occurrences of camp, filled the letters. Recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Valentine Barney of the 9th Vermont shared a great deal with his wife. While some of the experiences he shared were amusing, many indicated just how hard life could be for some of

these men. On August 20, 1862, Barney wrote to his wife, "I went out to get the relief guard off and while at work I heard the discharge of a gun up in quarters. I sent up a sergeant up to see what was the trouble and found that a man in company 9 had shot himself (and probably purposely) right through the body while lying down, he died instantly."¹⁹ Although the men were motivated to serve their country, there were times when the hardships were more than some could bear. This was not the only suicide that Barney dealt with; while waiting to be exchanged at Camp Douglas, another of his soldiers committed suicide, and he discussed with his wife the challenges of attempting to keep the morale up in such conditions.

The bleak outlook of some aspects of these letters sharply contrasted with the frequent stories of antics that sometimes occurred in the camp. One of the most amusing instances that Barney mentioned, in regards to attempting to bring up the morale of the men, was a joke that he played on a fellow officer. He wrote,

Co. Lieut Sewell . . . has just got a letter from his wife and is now reading it and is expecting to find that some of his folks are dead. I got the letter from the office and before giving it to him I painted around it with ink and make it look like a mourning envelope, and his eyes stuck out when he first saw it, now he has smelt the rat and the boys are having quite a laugh at him to think how he was fooled. We have to make a little fun occasionally some way and sometimes at someone's expense, for without we had something of that kind to enliven our spirits in this monotonous camp life, we would all rest out.²⁰

Any individual in a situation such as Barney and his troops at Camp Douglas needed to find ways to decompress as well as find some amusement in their present circumstances. Barney did take a gamble in this situation. However, there could have been bad news in the letter, and his actions could have caused more pain or even conflict with Sewell. The main thing to notice here was not the gamble made by altering the appearance of the letter, but the fact that Barney was confident enough in his knowledge of the type of person Sewell was that he knew he would not react badly to a practical joke. It was important for Barney and his troops to have instances in their daily life that allowed for amusement and camaraderie, a chance to look at their lives in a way that was more relaxed and outside of stressful daily responsibilities.



Figure 2. Group of Company F, 4th Vermont soldiers in camp by an unknown photographer. Houghton Civil War Photographs, Vermont Historical Society.

While there were instances of antics carried out in camp to raise morale, it was the poor behavior of some of the soldiers that were discussed in letters home. Antics and amusement were part of life, but soldiers commented on behavior, especially bad behavior, more frequently due to the impulse associated with ensuring that each person behaved in a way that was socially acceptable and not embarrassing to those back home. One area of behavior that was heavily discussed was drinking. In dealing with a drunken soldier, Barney discussed the fact that this was not typical behavior for his soldiers for they were a temperance group. There was, however, one instance where he acted to punish some drunken soldiers:

The other day for stealing whisky of the commissary and getting drunk, I took three barrels and had holes cut through the bottom large enough to let their heads through and put them on the men so all that was to be seen of them was their heads sticking through the ole and a part of their legs & feet. I kept them marching with them marching

with them on for three days & nights- 4 hours on and 2 off and gave them nothing but hard bread soaked in whiskey- and I don't think they will steal whiskey again soon.²¹

Disciplining a soldier was in many instances a public event. If a soldier had become publicly drunk, gotten into a fight, stolen something, or disobeyed a direct order, they merited public punishment. This insured that everyone was aware of the repercussions of these offenses. Drinking was a common infraction due to the availability of alcohol from suttlers in the camps. Soldiers who were far from home and stressed because of their current circumstances found some comfort in the drinking. While Army regulations did not completely prohibit drinking, soldiers were highly encouraged to refrain from drinking based on social cues, and the desire to remain in control of their faculties. By putting the soldiers in a barrel and making their punishment public, Barney made it known to not only the other soldiers but also to those at home that he did not tolerate specific behaviors.

Soldiers were not shy about sharing their positive and negative views of those around them. Some did not know what judgment to form about events around them. While the punishment of comrades was sure to receive space in a letter, soldiers also discussed the officers that they admired and those that they doubted. First Lieutenant Chester Leach did not understand the actions of his superior officers. In July of 1861, he wrote, "There is quite a disaffection among the men towards the Col. They think he is rather cross & severe. . . . He has forbidden all selling of eatables around the camp & our Capt was officer of the day yesterday & he permitted a woman to sell her stuff so the Col has ordered him under arrest today."²² Though not openly praising his superior's actions nor justifying the views of the men towards the colonel, Leach still indicated that these actions affected him and he was trying to determine how he should respond to them. The fact that he noticed the men's attitude towards their commander indicated that he was aware of what was going on within his camp, even though he did not indicate his support of this position.

War-related issues on the home front, such as conscription, were also important to soldiers in their letters. They could assure that others were aware of their views on the situation, and vent any frustration that they had. Private Theodore Barton wrote in 1863:

I understand that they are going draft in the north and I hope they will for there is some that I should like to meet as I am going home

so that I can say to them as they say to us give it to hem we can whip them they will get sick of giving it to them and will find it no so easy whip them as it is to stay at home and say we can whip them but they will have to lend a hand and will not think it so much fun when they come to try it.²³

Regardless of the frustration resulting from those on the home front who spoke of bravery while staying out of the army, the soldiers were still determined to do their duty and continued to encourage their families to both support the war and accept their decision to serve. Hiram Barton explained in a letter to his sister:

I don't expect to get out of service less than a year and a half but I hope we will for I am tired of soldiering and killing is worse than all the rest but that is not my fault if men risk their lives and try to take others in trying to destroy the best government the world ever knew I have no objection to their being killed and think it no loss to the country.²⁴

In comments such as this, it is apparent that many of the soldiers used their letters as an opportunity to not only encourage their families to support them but also as a way of reminding themselves why they were fighting and experiencing the hardship of war.

Letters between siblings and spouses were a way for families to have some semblance of structure and unity amid the fog and chaos of war. The Civil War served as a time when men and women had to re-examine their concepts of duty, honor, and responsibilities. The loss of men from the home and workforce caused many women to be placed in situations they were not ready for nor capable of handling. The war took men from homes and towns where they had control over their futures and lives and put them into a position where little made sense. The rapid and drastic changes for both genders in society caused each to act in ways that best helped them cope with the changing situations and find ways to survive. While women were still in many of the same roles as caretakers (albeit in an expanded capacity), men found themselves in a dangerous world that made little sense. They were required to conform to regulations that they did not put upon themselves and to fulfill all duties asked of them. While much of this still holds true to the social ideals of the time, the circumstances were unusual.

In attempting to maintain control over their lives and their families, men took every action that they could to participate in home life. Whether it was by

giving advice on how to behave, providing guidance on the proper way to support the war, or even by telling about the activities in camp, men reached out to connect to a world they knew in an effort to not only feel, but guarantee, that their previous social roles were not only fulfilled but relevant.

Notes

1. G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes towards Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23, 31.

2. *Ibid.*, 30.

3. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

4. Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14-17.

5. Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 22-25.

6. Mitchell, 4,12.

7. Charles Cummings letter to his wife, Nov 8, 1862.

8. Mary Jane Henry, letter to William Wirt Henry, May 15, 1861.

9. Mary Jane Henry, letter to William Wirt Henry, May 31, 1861.

10. G.J. Barker-Benfield, 50-55.

11. William Wirt Henry letter to Mary Jane Henry, May 19, 1861.

12. William Wirt Henry letter to Mary Jane Henry, June 3, 1861.

13. Roswell Farnham letter to Mary Farnham, May 13, 1861, May 1, 1863.

14. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, ed. *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66-69.

15. Wheelock Veazey letter to his wife, July 19, 1861 and August 2, 1861.

16. Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 7-18.

17. Charles Cummings letter to his wife, November 22, 1862.

18. Charles Cummings letter to his wife, December 16, 1862.

19. Valentine G. Barney letter to Maria Barney, August 20, 1863.
20. Valentine G. Barney letter to Maria Barney, February 22, 1863.
21. Valentine G. Barney letter to Maria Barney, March 26, 1864.
22. Feidner, Edward J, "Dear Wife" *The Civil War Letters of Chester K. Leach* (Burlington: University of Vermont, 2002), 8.
23. Theodore Barton letter to sister, February 25, 1863.
24. Hiram Barton letter to sister, June 23, 1863.

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