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Abstract

Provides documentary evidence that Walt Whitman's brother, Andrew Jackson Whitman, served in the Union army during the Civil War and provides details of his service.

NOTES

BUNKUM DID GO SOGERING

The question of whether Walt Whitman's brother Andrew Jackson Whitman (or "Bunkum," as he was called by family members) served in the military during the Civil War has bedeviled Whitman biographers. Although aware of Walt's unequivocal assertion that Andrew was a soldier, biographers have expressed some doubts that Andrew actually enlisted. These reservations stemmed largely from an inability to substantiate Walt's assertion with an official record of Andrew's service. Since I have recently obtained a copy of the military record of Andrew J. Whitman from the National Archives which provides evidence of his enlistment, any lingering doubts that Andrew was a Union soldier should now be eliminated.

Walt Whitman referred to Andrew's military service in separate letters to Lewis Kirk Brown and Thomas P. Sawyer during Andrew's final illness in the late Fall of 1863. The Brown letter, written from Brooklyn on November 8-9, 1863, states, "Lewy, the brother I mentioned as sick, lives near here, he is very poorly indeed, & I fear will never be much better—he too was a soldier, has for several months had throat disease."¹ In the Sawyer letter, Whitman writes on November 20 (?), 1863, "I have a brother here, very sick, I do not think he can recover, he has been in the army."²

Katherine Molinoff was the first to speculate in print that Andrew may not have actually served in the Army. Attempting to obtain official confirmation of Andrew Whitman's enlistment, Molinoff instead found that "inquiries in the Library of Congress, in the Bureau of National Archives, have brought the reply that 'George Washington Whitman was the only brother of Walt Whitman fighting in the Civil War.'³ Taking their lead from Molinoff, other biographers have expressed similar doubts about the fact of Andrew's military service.⁴

A request I made to the National Archives for Andrew J. Whitman's compiled military service record, however, proved fruitful. According to the record I obtained, Andrew served as a private with Company H of the 13th Regiment, New York State Militia, Heavy Artillery.⁵ He enlisted in Brooklyn, New York, on May 28, 1862 for a term of three months. Andrew was mustered in on June 16, 1862, in Suffolk, Virginia, and was mustered out on September 12, 1862, in Brooklyn, New York.

The 13th New York State Militia was the same regiment that Andrew's brother George Washington Whitman served in for three months in 1861—George enlisted on April 23, and was mustered out with the other members of his regiment on August 6.⁶ (After his brief engagement with the 13th Regiment, George joined the 51st Regiment of New York Volunteers with which he served from September 1861 through July 1865.) In the spring of 1862, the 13th Regiment was again called out in response to President Lincoln's appeal to the Northern States to defend Washington, D.C., during Confederate General

Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign.⁷ The regiment left Brooklyn on May 31 for Fort McHenry, Baltimore. It had spent less than a week in Baltimore when it received orders to proceed to Fort Monroe on the James Peninsula, opposite Norfolk, Virginia. Once there, the regiment was sent to Suffolk, Virginia, where its members were mustered in for a term of three months. During this period the National Guardsmen patrolled the area between the Weldon Railroad and the city of Norfolk, which had just been evacuated by the Confederates but continued to be menaced by rebel troops. Although the regiment was engaged in several skirmishes, no serious attack was made on it during its enlistment.

Writing from Camp Crooke, Suffolk, on June 10th, 1862, Lt. Colonel John Woodward of the 13th Regiment described the post to his father:

Suffolk is the meanest God-forsaken place you ever saw—houses deserted, stores shut up, darkies, hounds, and poor white trash being the only objects seen. Those having anything to sell refuse entirely, or perhaps, will consent to let you have a little if you will pay in Confederate shinplasters or silver; and as I have not either I find hard work to get the necessities of life. The country around is extremely level and low. It is, in fact, the winding up of the Dismal Swamp. (Kennedy, 63-64)

A few days later, on June 15, Woodward complains to his father about "the lumps caused by the pigeon-sized mosquitos which the Dismal Swamp supplies us" (Kennedy, 66). Perhaps because he was not a poet, Woodward made no mention of "the mocking-bird, the American mimic, singing in the Great Dismal Swamp" which Walt Whitman described in *Chants Democratic*, published in 1860.⁸

The 13th New York State Militia remained at Suffolk until it was ordered back to Brooklyn at the end of its three-month term. The voyage back proved adventuresome when the steamer carrying the regiment—the *Baltic*—ran aground on the Chincoteague Shoals. There were no casualties, however, and within twenty-four hours the ship was set afloat and reached New York safely. The regiment was mustered out in Brooklyn on September 12, 1862. The members of Andrew's company had one final and solemn duty to perform that same day—"to escort the remains of a late companion in arms, Mr. Frederick Weedor, to their last resting place, in Greenwood Cemetery," according to an item in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of September 13, 1862. Weedor had contracted typhus fever on the voyage home and died shortly after arriving back in Brooklyn.

Andrew's military service record and the published narrative of the 13th New York State Militia substantiate remarks made about Andrew's war duty in extant letters from his brother George Washington Whitman. On June 9, 1862, George makes his first reference to Andrew's enlistment in a response to his mother's June 4 letter: "So Bunkum has gone Sogering too has he, well they will have good times in Baltimore for it seems to me this war is about played out" (Loving, 55). On June 29, George asks his mother, "Has Andrew written to you since he went Sogering. Poor Bunkum I wonder how he is getting along, what Co is he in I wish he would write to me" (Loving, 56-57). From Newport News, Virginia (about thirty miles north of Suffolk) on July 21, 1862, George writes his mother, "I think after we get paid I shall try and go down to see

Bunkum at Suffolk but I don't know certain as I can get away" (Loving, 59). George's final reference to Andrew's military service is on September 30, 1862. He mentions that the last letter he received from home was September 8. Imagining what the other family members are doing as he writes, he ventures that, "Bunkum I guess is around somewhere looking for a good chance to go sogering" (Loving, 71). This latter remark by George suggests that Andrew was considering following up his three-month stint with a longer-term enlistment, as George himself had done the previous fall. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of September 13, 1862 suggests a possible explanation for Andrew's decision not to re-enlist:

The Three Months' Regiments have not yet been paid off, and there is no present prospect that they soon will be. As regards the 13th Regiment, there are perhaps two hundred men who would re-enlist in the regiments now raising if they were supplied with their dues.

Andrew's military record indicates that he served his full period of enlistment and was not discharged prematurely for ill health as has been suggested by some Whitman biographers.⁹ The muster rolls in Andrew's service file do not indicate any periods during which he was absent sick from duty.¹⁰

Upon returning to civilian life in Brooklyn, however, Andrew's health did deteriorate rapidly. Extant letters between family members during the next year up until Andrew's death on December 3, 1863, invariably include a reference to a throat disease infecting Andrew. Andrew's death certificate, signed in Brooklyn, New York, on December 4, 1863, by John A. Brodie, M.D., lists the cause of death as "Laryngitis."¹¹ Typically a secondary pathology caused by some other disease (such as tuberculosis, syphilis, or alcoholism), chronic laryngitis can cause death through suffocation. Several Whitman biographers have speculated that Andrew had tuberculosis.¹² Whitman family doctor Edward Ruggles, who treated Andrew intermittently during his illness, told Thomas Jefferson Whitman in the spring of 1863 that throat diseases such as the one Andrew was suffering from "often ended in consumption."¹³ Extant Whitman family letters suggest that Andrew also had a drinking problem.¹⁴

In addition to the concern of his immediate family, Andrew's troubles elicited a sympathetic response from his friend James H. Cornwell. In the late winter of 1863, Andrew was discharged from his job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard "on account of his not being there much of the time," according to brother Jeff's account (Berthold and Price, 31). In the spring, Cornwell arranged for Andrew to come to Suffolk, Virginia, and later to New Bern, North Carolina, to build fortifications—presumably in a civilian capacity—for Brigadier General Frank B. Spinola's brigade (Berthold and Price, 56, 57, 60). Cornwell was an officer in the 158th Regiment, New York Volunteers, and the Acting Commissary for Spinola's brigade, to which he was detailed at the time.¹⁵ Although Jeff and Walt encouraged Andrew in this endeavor—hoping that leaving Brooklyn for the South Atlantic Coast "might have a beneficial effect upon his [Andrew's] throat," in Walt's words (*Corr.*, 1:103)—Andrew ultimately decided against going (Loving, 100). In this decision, "Bunkum"

seems to have shown greater sense than his brothers in realizing that a return to the swampy coast lands of secessionist Virginia and North Carolina would not have the beneficial effect on his health that Jeff and Walt believed it would. Dr. Ruggles had been counseling Andrew all spring and summer to move *away* from the coast and to the healthier air of the interior (Berthold and Price, 42, 47, 72, 76, 78).

Andrew's instinct to remain at home was probably reinforced by the unhealthy physical condition of his friend Cornwell. Cornwell returned to Brooklyn in May 1863 from his post in Washington, North Carolina, on a sick leave to recuperate from "symptoms of fever and extreme debility."¹⁶ In late August, both Andrew and Cornwell took a vacation in the country, perhaps following doctors' orders for Andrew to "go out from the seashore if he wants to get well" (Berthold and Price, 68). The two buddies went to Suffern, New York—known at that time as a summer resort—and also to Freehold, New Jersey—primarily known then and now for its racetrack.¹⁷ Andrew, however, returned in worse health than he left, contracting a nasty cold while away, according to a letter from Louisa Whitman to her son Walt.¹⁸

It is unclear from Cornwell's service record whether he returned to North Carolina that summer. The record does state, however, that by September Cornwell was detailed to Brooklyn with an assignment to recruit Union volunteers. Cornwell attended Andrew's funeral on December 5, providing a carriage for Andrew's widow Nancy and his children Georgey and Jimmy. Mother Whitman wrote Walt on the eve of Andrew's funeral that "his friends is all dooing very good Cornell in particular" (Gohdes and Silver, 189). According to his service record, Cornwell spent most of the remainder of his enlistment in Brooklyn and Manhattan, initially as a recruitment officer, as mentioned, and later assigned to the Judge Advocate's office. Cornwell was discharged in December 1864 because of physical disability. After his military service ended, Cornwell returned to his judgeship in the police court room at Brooklyn City Hall where he resumed the role of "Rhadamanthus on the bench," as Whitman had referred to him in "Scenes in a Police Justice's Court Room" published in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, September 9, 1857.¹⁹

Andrew Jackson Whitman has not been treated kindly by Whitman scholars, who have variously dismissed him as "worthless" (Canby, 209), "a ne'er-do-well" (Loving, Appendix B), and "an alcoholic married to a street-walker" (Miller, *Corr.*, 1:8). But perhaps with this evidence that Andrew Jackson Whitman donned a soldier's uniform to do battle "Against the foulest crime in history known in any land or age" (as his brother Walt described the attempted secession [*LG Var.*, 3:582]), the tarnished reputation of Bunkum will be brightened just a bit.

Washington Friends of Walt Whitman

MARTIN G. MURRAY

NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:179. This letter was first published in Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters*, ed. Emory Holloway (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938), 934.

2 *Corr.*, 1:186.

3 Katherine Molinoff, *Monographs on Unpublished Whitman Material* (Brooklyn, NY: Comet Press, 1941), 2:18-19.

4 See *Corr.*, 1:10,179; and *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*, ed. Jerome M. Loving (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975), Appendix D. The two most recent complete biographies of Whitman—Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980) and Philip Callow, *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992)—do not mention Andrew Whitman's military service.

5 Although Andrew served with the New York State Militia, the New York State Archives, Albany, New York, notified this author on October 23, 1992, that it was unable to locate a record of Andrew Whitman's service.

6 See the *Compiled Military Service Record of George W. Whitman, Company B, 13th Regiment, New York State Militia, 1861*, National Archives, Washington, D.C. George Whitman's service record can also be obtained from the New York State Archives, Albany, New York.

7 The description of the activities of the 13th Regiment New York State Militia was obtained from the following source: Elijah R. Kennedy, *John B. Woodward, A Biographical Memoir* (New York: De Vinne Press, 1897). Woodward was Lieutenant Colonel of the 13th Regiment during the summer of 1862. Woodward had served as a Second Lieutenant in Company G of the 13th Regiment during its three-month tour in 1861.

8 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, William White (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 2:296.

9 See Walt Whitman, *Faint Clews and Indirections, Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family*, ed. Clarence Gohdes and Rollo G. Silver (Durham: Duke University Press, 1949), 145, 183; Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (1955; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 275.

10 The military record states that Andrew Whitman appears on the company muster rolls for the period May 28 through June 30, 1862, but the roll does not indicate whether Andrew was present or absent. Since the record also indicates that Andrew enlisted for three-months service, and was mustered out on September 12, 1862, there is a two-and-a-half month "gap" in his service for which the official record does not account. Based on my review of other records for soldiers serving during the Civil War, such gaps are not uncommon and are likely to be the result of poor record-keeping. For example, George Whitman's service record indicates that he was mustered in the 13th Regiment on May 17, 1861 to date of enlistment April 23, 1861, and mustered out on August 6, 1861, but does not contain any information from company muster rolls during the intervening period. Given the Whitman family's reference to Andrew's service in Suffolk, it is likely that he remained with his company for the entire enlistment period.

11 The death certificate for Andrew Whitman was obtained by the author from the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Municipal Archives, 31 Chambers Street, New York, NY 10007. In a letter written by Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Walt Whitman in November, 1863, she notes that Andrew "is doctoring with dr Brody" (Gohdes and Silver, 186). Interestingly, the death certificate lists Andrew's age as 38 years old—two years older than the age given for Andrew by Walt Whitman in a family Bible presented to his sister Mary Elizabeth in 1878 (see Molinoff,

2:7). The death notice printed in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on December 4, 1863, also lists Andrew's age as 38 years old. Andrew's service record, however, lists his age as 32 years old when he was enrolled in late May, 1862 (making him 33 at the time of his death).

12 Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, *Manuscripts, Autograph Letters, First Editions, and Portraits of Walt Whitman, Formerly the Property of the Late Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 59 (this edition is a reprint of the Anderson Galleries' catalogue describing the contents of an auction held on April 15-16, 1936, in New York, by order of Dr. Jacob Schwartz); Molinoff, 2:18; Francis Winwar, *American Giant: Walt Whitman and His Times* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 239; Henry Seidel Canby, *Walt Whitman, An American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943), 189; Kaplan, 293; Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 16n, 98; and Callow, 192, 311.

13 Thomas Jefferson Whitman, *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman*, ed. Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1984), 42.

14 *Corr.*, 1:88-89; Berthold and Price, 58; September 3, 1863 letter from Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Walt Whitman (Duke University Library, Trent Collection).

15 *Compiled Military Service Record of James H. Cornwell, 158th Regiment, New York Infantry, 1862 through 1864*, National Archives, Washington, DC.

16 See Cornwell's military service record.

17 A September 3, 1863, letter from Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Walt Whitman (Duke University Library, Trent Collection) states, "Andrew has gone to a place called freehold and he went on the central railroad he went last monday as far as suffron station and came back the next day he has not drank any nancy says in three months until that day one week ago today he went with Jim Cornell." Suffern, New York was then called Suffern Station, and is pronounced "Suffron" in the regional dialect (according to Ken Cral, Suffern historian).

18 Undated, probably written in September 1863 (Duke University Library, Trent Collection).

19 Walt Whitman, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Emory Holloway (New York: Peter Smith, 1932), 2:11. Andrew's friend James H. Cornwell and Justice Cornwell of Whitman's newspaper article are clearly the same person. The *Brooklyn City Directory* (Brooklyn: J. Lain & Company) for the year ending May 1, 1858, lists James H. Cornwell as the Police Justice at the Police Justice's Court, City Hall. The directory lists no other James H. Cornwell that year. The 1860 Census for Brooklyn lists James H. Cornwell, age 39, occupation Police Justice; wife Mary E., 38; and sons James H., 13; George L., 10; Robert, 6; and Edward, 3. No other James H. Cornwell is listed in the 1860 Brooklyn Census. Cornwell's military service record states his age upon enlistment in 1862 as 41. The Brooklyn city directories for the years ending May 1, 1863 and May 1, 1864—the two full years during which Cornwell served in the Union army—lists Chauncey M. Perry as the Police Justice, rather than Cornwell. Finally, the Brooklyn city directories for the years ending May 1, 1868, and May 1, 1869, lists James H. Cornwell again as the Police Justice. (James H., Jr. is listed as an architect.) The latter listings for Cornwell coincide with his listing in Walt Whitman's address book for April

1868: "Judge James H. Cornwell, Police Court Room, City Hall Brooklyn N.Y." (Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier [New York: New York University Press, 1984], 837.)

4819

Brooklyn Dec 4, 1863

This is to certify that Andrew
Whitman died at No 122 Portland
Avenue December 30 Bow in —
U.S. Aged 57 years months
days color white nativity of
parents Cause of death
Laryngitis

John A. Grodie M.D.

Overseer

Andrew Whitman's Death Certificate. New York City Department Records and Information Services, Municipal Archives.