

Dear Family Member:

My parents kept this collection of letters in their bedroom closet at our family home at 70 Mason Street in Worcester, MA. My mother mentioned them to me at least twice during my boyhood. I remember her telling me that the author, while serving as a Union soldier at Savannah, GA, encountered Southern children that believed the Yankees were horned devils that would eat them. In retrospect, I realize that she had read some of the letters.

When my Dad, Ralph Dunbar, died in 1975, my brother Peter and I cleaned out his room at the boarding house on Cedar Street where he had lived. When we came to the letters we agreed that my interest in history made me their best custodian. So I have been for 40 years, keeping them in my safety deposit box. I once tried dictating the letters onto a tape recorder, planning to later transcribe them on a typewriter. However, that approach was awkward and required too much effort. I have now retired and finally have time do the letters justice in a way that will allow me to share them with all of you. Also, technology provides me the ability to scan them and provide you with images of the originals, rather than just transcriptions. That is what you will find on this memory stick: your copy of the collection. Because it is digital, you can copy it and pass it on through your own descendants. I hope as technology advances and memory sticks become obsolete, you will preserve the collection for the future by transferring it to those new means, as yet undeveloped.

The author of the main body of the collection is our common ancestor, named William Cook. During his service in the Union Army he wrote letters home to his wife, Hannah Jane. His family preserved them, passing them on through each generation. Cook was Ralph Dunbar's great-grandfather on his mother's side. To figure out your own relation to Cook, count the number of generations you are removed from Ralph Dunbar. The collection contains other letters that were either written or received by Ralph Dunbar's progenitors (also ours); many of the writers were related to Cook. There is even a woven locket of Cook's wife's hair, sent to him while in service. The collection contains a smaller grouping of letters. These were written by a friend of the Cooks, James M. Coburn. I will tell you more about him below. I have added pictures of some items that help illustrate the history told by the letters: for example, a picture of the 175th NY Vols. regimental flag now in the New York State Museum collection, and mid-19th commercial products Cook mentions.

William Cook was born in England, May 24, 1832, seventh child (of ten) of John and Jane (Smith) Cook. The family emigrated in 1848 and settled near Troy, NY. February 16, 1853, at age 21, he married Hannah Jane Heath. The wedding took place in Warrensburg, NY, and Rev. George S. Gold officiated. At some point, Cook and his wife moved to a part of Warrensburg, NY named Oregon. This out-of-the-way hamlet still exists. Cook frequently refers to Oregon as the "Woods." His parents and several siblings are mentioned in the letters. The one that plays the biggest role is Cook's younger brother Holden, who does farm chores for Cook and seems to own the house and 2 acres Cook and his wife are in the process of buying. For some reason he most often writes Holden as *Houlding*, although he also sometimes uses just the initial H. Richard and Thomas are also brothers, sometimes shortened to R or T. Richard lives in Troy, NY and is sometimes referred to as *Troy*. Cook also mentions Jane's parents and some of her siblings: her brothers, Caleb and Chauncey and her sister, Lucinda (married to Holden). Cook died April

6, 1895 at West Troy, NY, age 62 of pulmonary consumption. He is buried in Albany Rural Cemetery, Section 105, Plot 339.

I know of no photograph of Cook. However, we have a description of him from his enlistment papers. He was 30 years old when he enlisted: farmer, husband and father of four children. (Two more children would be born after the war.) He occasionally mentions his oldest, George (9 at the time of enlistment), occasionally referring to him as *G.* or *Ge.* Cook was 5 feet 6 ^{1/2} inches tall, with blue eyes, sandy hair, and a dark complexion. He may have been bald, as in three letters written in winter 1865, he asks his wife to arrange for a new wig to be sent to him, as the old one is worn out. He tells her he measures 22 inches around the forehead.

In 1864 Cook enlisted in the 175th Regiment, Company D, New York State Volunteers. He was referred to as a "one year man." He received a bounty as an inducement to join the Army. Late in the war, local governments relied on such bounties as a means to meet their enlistment quotas. The system invited fraud. Men would enlist, receive their bounty and then, skip town. Many then repeated the fraud by enlisting elsewhere and again skipping out. They were called "bounty jumpers". To control the problem, governments began paying the bounty in regular installments. Cook makes reference to this. He was paid \$33.33 per installment

Soon after enlisting, (mid-September 1864) Cook began writing letters to his wife and continued until after he mustered out and was returning home (July 1865). His letters document the things he saw, his worries and concerns, his troubles back home, his love for his family, and his deep faith. Unfortunately, we only have the letters he sent and not those he received. We have to hope those were saved by some other branch of his family and will be someday be reunited with this collection. However, what we have creates a window into Cook's life through which we can peer. The letters transform Cook from a name on our pedigree chart into a man we can know, even if incompletely.

Cook's letters are not an easy read. He did not have good handwriting. To compound the problem he frequently wrote small in order to cram more on a page. Occasionally, he inverted the page and wrote between the previous lines. His habit was to fold a sheet of paper in half, creating four pages. Usually, he began page one on the right hand side. Usually, he next flipped the sheet over and wrote pages two and three, then returning to the original side and writing page four adjacent to page one. However, he was not always consistent and his wife probably had as much trouble as I did determining his order. To help her, he occasionally numbered the pages. When he did this, I included the numbers in my transcription. Cook most often wrote on lined paper, probably the same paper he regularly requested his wife send him. However, he also used any paper available, sometimes pages torn from Army record books. He often wrote while in the field under unfavorable conditions. His letters from camp are more clear. Interestingly, as time passed his letters became easier to decipher. Perhaps the longer he was away from home, the more practiced he became at writing - more than he did as a farmer in the Woods. The letters indicate that he was corresponding with people other than just his wife.

Cook ignored the rules that make writing clear. He did not use much punctuation and he seldom capitalized the first word of a new sentence. This makes it hard to determine where one sentence ends

and another begins. He did not indent to indicate a new paragraph and a change of subject. The results are often confusing and arriving at his meaning frequently requires rereading a passage several times. Cook's spelling was seldom conventional. It was often phonetic and you will sometimes better understand the word by sounding it out. He tended to drop the second of double letters. Thus, *different* would be written *diferent*. He even occasionally uses the archaic *fs*, so that *Camp Russell* becomes *Rufsell*. The letter B is almost always capitalized, making me wonder if he knew how to make a lowercase b. He sometimes capitalized Js and Is. He consistently used *act* to mean *account*. *Now* is confusing as it could mean either *now* or *know*; *how* can also mean *owe* or *hoe*; *rig* means *regiment*. He often dropped the *h* in words like *has* and *his*. It is tantalizing to think that perhaps his phonetic spelling reflects how he spoke and that by reading him phonetically we draw close to actually hearing him. Having been raised in England and arriving here at 16 years old, he probably had an English accent, perhaps muted by time.

Cook often wrote the same word twice, sometimes together in a line, or at the end of one line and the beginning of the next. Also, he frequently began to write a word, stopped, and then wrote it in its entirety. This too, he often did at the end of a line and the beginning of the next. When Cook added words between lines I used the exponent command ^{like this} to simulate the actual letter.

I tried to copy his words exactly as he wrote them. So, while I probably made some errors, what appear to be my typos is most often an accurate transcription. If in doubt, refer to the scans. When unable to decipher a word, even by enlarging it, I used XX to take its place in the transcriptions. When I could read a word but it made no sense, or was confusing, I added (?). Cook's writing is often stream of consciousness. He can change an idea in mid-sentence. This is sometimes understandable, as he informs us that he frequently sets a letter aside for a space of time and continues when able.

When I could add clarification about a letter I wrote it in boldface at the top of the transcription. I used an * for the occasional footnote, adding historical detail about the event or the person mentioned. I organized the letters by date, both those written by Cook and those written later by others. I separated the letters in to several folders: 1864, 1865, misc., etc. One long letter has its own folder. It was written to Ralph Dunbar's father, Richard by his cousin, John. The cousin lived in a section of Newport, Wales named Caerleon. We are also fortunate to have letters from Cook's brother Richard and his brother Thomas informing Cook of the deaths his father (1866 in Troy), and then his mother (1867 in Erie). There is also a letter to Jane Cook from her mother, Lucinda Heath, (Cook's mother-in-law and Ralph Dunbar's great-great grandmother). The collection contains a four-page fragment of a letter written in 1919 by Maude Caroline Barnes Dunbar (Ralph Dunbar's mother) to her mother, Lillian Eliza Jane Barnes, (Cook's daughter and Ralph Dunbar's grandmother.) There are several photographs from the 1930s taken at John Dunbar's (Richard's brother, and Ralph's uncle) cottage on Webster Lake named Laurel Lodge. I do not know the subjects or the person who wrote the inscriptions on the back.

The collection contains a number of fragments that I could not associate with any letters. This indicates that some of the material has been lost. To keep the collection as chronological as possible I assigned undated letters and the fragments dates that correspond to their internal evidence. For example, if Cook mentions it is winter, I assume he is in winter quarters at Camp Russell. For a couple of months he

expressed concern for a box of belongings he had asked Jane to send him. I used this theme for dating. For a time he is focused on the hay crop. The deeds for the land he is buying is another reoccurring and useful theme. To indicate an assigned date I added @ at the front.

The collection also contains five letters written to Cook and his wife by their friend, James M. Coburn. Coburn apparently moved to the Warrensburg area from Orwell, VT. In 1862 he was on furlough and visited his parents at that place. Coburn enlisted for three years on August 8, 1861, only four months after Fort Sumter, and less than a month after the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run. He joined Company B, 44th Regiment, NY Volunteers. The 44th was involved in every major battle fought by the Army of the Potomac. Presumably Coburn participated as well. He was wounded at Gaines Mills, June 27, 1862 and in one letter informs us he is a paroled prisoner, meaning he was captured. He reenlisted as a veteran, December 28, 1863. By 1864 the 44th was so depleted by casualties it could no longer sustain itself and was disbanded. Coburn was transferred to the 146th Reg. He survived the war, mustering out at Syracuse in July, 1865. Why there are no letters after September, 1863, I cannot say. However, Coburn's service and experiences are extraordinary. By the way, my mother was confused. While Cook was the one stationed at Savannah, the belief by some southerners that Union soldiers had horns and tails is chronicled in one of Coburn's letters.

My mother was not the only person to examine the collection. I suspect every generation spent time perusing them. Someone tried cataloging the letters by writing notations on the envelopes. This may have worked for a while but was dependent on readers returning the letters from whence they came. It didn't happen. At some point the stamps were clipped from most of the envelopes and embossed designs were cut from the corners of some letters. Some notations and even spelling corrections were added to Cook's writing. While the letters did survive, they were not well-cared for. Folding and unfolding wore the text along creases, and pages were torn. I have flattened each sheet and protected it by placing it in an archival quality plastic sleeve. I will store the letters that way so that no further damage occurs. With scans available, it is no longer necessary to handle the originals.

Mike Dunbar
Hampton, NH
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