Matlack family letters to Samuel J. Matlack
1862-1865

Abstract: This collection consists of seventeen letters written by members of the Matlack family in Philadelphia to Samuel J. Matlack while he was serving in the Union Navy aboard the USS Wissahickon, a gunboat in the blockading squadron off the coast of South Carolina, during the American Civil War, from 1862-1865.
Descriptive Summary

Identification: MSS 099, F916
Creator: Matlack family.
Title: Matlack family letters to Samuel J. Matlack
Inclusive Dates: 1862-1865
Extent: 17 items
Language: Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

Citation: MSS 099, F916, Matlack family letters to Samuel J. Matlack, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.
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Biographical Note

Philadelphian Samuel J. Matlack (1845-1898) served as a sailor aboard the USS *Wissahickon* during the American Civil War.

Family members in Philadelphia—including his father, mother, sisters, brothers, and a relative—sent letters to Samuel J. Matlack, who served on the *Wissahickon* for the duration of the war. His family's letters, which span the period 1862-1865, were delivered via the steamer supply ship USS *Massachusetts* and addressed to Matlack onboard the "US Gunboat Wissahickon, South Atlantic Blockading Squadron," frequently specifying "off the coast of South Carolina."

The *Wissahickon* was a Unadilla class screw steam gunboat, initially deployed to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River. In 1862 the *Wissahickon* joined the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, which covered over 500 miles of coastline from the northern border of South Carolina to Cape Canaveral in Florida. Established by the Union Navy in 1861, the squadron sought to control the coastline and capture key port cities held by the Confederacy. The *Wissahickon* fought in the bombardments of Fort McAllister, Georgia, in late 1862-early 1863, and of Forts Wagner and Sumter, off Charleston, South Carolina, in the summer of 1863. The gunboat spent the remainder of the war patrolling the coast of South Carolina and its inland waters.

Samuel J. Matlack was employed as a manufacturer after the war. In 1867, he married Emma L. Everly (b. 1848). Records of his post-war activities are sparse, although his pension application indicates that he received treatment for mental illness in 1883 and that by 1885 his condition was severe enough to prevent him from working. In 1890 Samuel Matlack was admitted to the US National Homes for Disabled Veteran Soldiers for a "depression of skull" and in 1891 he successfully applied for a pension due to mental disorders resulting from his military service. In his pension application, Matlack was diagnosed with epilepsy and an unspecified "mental derangement." In 1892 Samuel Matlack was transferred to the Government Insane Asylum in Washington, D.C. (later known as St. Elizabeth's Hospital), where he remained until his death in 1898 of bronchial pneumonia.

Matlack family records are sparse. Samuel's parents were Mason Matlack (ca. 1824-1868) and Matilda E. Matlack (ca. 1808-1894). His brother, Lewis J. Matlack (1842-1909), was employed as a merchant and was married to Clemmie Matlack (b. 1844). As mentioned in letters in this collection, Lewis and Clemmie Matlack had two children: Laura (b. 1863, died in infancy) and an unidentified son (b. 1865). Samuel J. Matlack had four sisters: Mary, Mollie, Tillie, and Annie. A second brother, Harry Matlack, served in the Union Army and died while a prisoner of war, sometime prior to 1862. At the time of the Civil War, all of the surviving members of Samuel J. Matlack's immediate family were living in Philadelphia. Samuel Matlack's "nephyou" (probably his cousin), Mason M. Murray, served in the Union Army and was wounded in June 1864 in a campaign against Richmond. Mason Murray's leg was subsequently amputated and he remained hospitalized for the duration of the war. In December 1865, Murray wrote to Matlack from Tilton US General Hospital in Wilmington, Delaware.

Sources:

Browning, Robert M., Jr. Success is all that was expected: the South Atlantic blockading squadron during the Civil War. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2002.

http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=FSPhilPADeath&h=1343214&indiv=try&o_vc=Record:OtherRecord&rhSource=1200

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http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-m/massach2.htm

"USS Wissahickon (1861-1865)." Naval Historical Center. (Accessed 20 January 2012).
http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-w/wisahick.htm
Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of seventeen letters written by members of the Matlack family in Philadelphia to Samuel J. Matlack while he was serving in the Union Navy aboard the USS Wissahickon, a gunboat in the blockading squadron off the coast of South Carolina, during the American Civil War, from 1862-1865.

The letters document the Civil War era as experienced by civilians and depict the Matlack family's close relationship with their son and brother. Although the Matlacks described seeing wounded soldiers and supply ships coming and going through Philadelphia, their experience of the war was otherwise second-hand, mediated by newspapers and infrequent letters from their son and other first-hand witnesses to the combat zones. The Matlack correspondents wrote about family and neighbors: births, deaths, holiday celebrations, and day-to-day business and activities. They wrote about financial hardships caused by the war, especially the increased cost of goods. They commented on recent developments in the war effort and on political and current events, including the 1864 presidential election and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in April 1865. Samuel's father and brother relayed news about a relative, Mason M. Murray, who served with the Union Army and lost a leg to amputation after he was wounded in battle. Family members occasionally referenced information from Samuel Matlack's letters (which are not present in this collection), providing a few details to an otherwise undocumented military experience. Family members almost always admonished Samuel for failing to write more regularly and expressed frequent concerns for his safety. Lewis Matlack cautioned his brother not to "touch one drop of spirited drink" and Matilda Matlack prayed for her youngest son, on the occasion of his twentieth birthday and after an absence of two years, that Samuel should grow "to be a virtuous upright man."

Though small, this group of one family's letters reflects the sweeping historical significance of the war and its impact on American families: the mother was deeply distressed with concern over two sons in service, one of whom died; another relative suffered an amputation after a war wound; and families endured economic hardships but supported soldiers and sailors with boxes of sundries from home. Above all, letters through the mail relayed personal news, with notes about war progress toward cessation of fighting and hopes of family reunions. The Matlacks shared political opinions of support for "the National Union ticket" of "Old Abe" and Andrew Johnson as opposed to the Copperhead candidate George B. McClellan. Samuel Matlack's brother wrote about "the foul murder of our dear president, o such a gloom" and the final letter in the collection, from amputee Mason Murray to Samuel, summed up an opinion of war: "when they get hit like I did it is not much sport in it."

The letters in this collection are organized chronologically. The principal correspondents are Samuel's father, Mason Matlack and his brother, Lewis J. Matlack. Other correspondents include his sisters, Mary, Tillie, and Mollie; his sister-in-law, Clemmie (married to Lewis J. Matlack); his mother, Matilda E. Matlack; and his "nephyou" (or more likely cousin) Mason M. Murray. With the exception of Mason Murray's letter, written from Tilton Military Hospital in Wilmington, Delaware, all of the letters were mailed to Samuel from Philadelphia via the USS Massachusetts, an iron screw steamship that carried supplies from northern ports to the blockade.
Selected Search Terms

Personal Names

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865--Assassination.
Matlack, Clemmie, b. 1844.
Matlack, Mason, ca. 1824-1868.
Matlack, Clemmie, b. 1844.
Matlack, Matilda E., ca. 1808-1894.
Matlack, Samuel J., 1845-1898.
Murray, Mason M.

Corporate Names

United States. Navy--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.
Wissahickon (Gunboat)
Massachusetts (Steamer)

Topical Terms

Presidents--United States--Election--1864.

Geographic Names

United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Blockades.
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Naval operations.
Charleston (S.C.)--History--19th century--Sources.
Fort Sumter (Charleston, S.C.)--Siege, 1861.
Philadelphia (Pa.)--History--19th century--Sources.

Form/Genre Terms

Correspondence.
Occupation

Seamen.

Soldiers.

Personal Contributors

Matlack, Clemmie, b. 1844, correspondent.

Matlack, Lewis J., 1842-1909, correspondent.

Matlack, Mason, ca. 1824-1868, correspondent.

Matlack, Matilda E, ca. 1808-1894, correspondent.

Murray, Mason M., correspondent.

Related Materials in this Repository

This item forms part of MSS 099 Miscellaneous Literary and Historical Manuscripts.
Detailed Description of the Collection

Mason Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1862 May 4 [Box 63 F916]
2 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 4 May 1862
From father Mason: news of his and wife's recent illness and business prospects of family and neighbors; query about son's "fight you had with the nigrow on the forecastle deck."

Mary Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1863 August 6 [Box 63 916]
2 p. (1 leaf)
From sister Mary: news of grandmother's death, receipt of Samuel's money which mother used for bonnet and dress to go to grandmother's funeral.

M[ason] Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1863 August 16 [Box 63 916]
4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 16 August
From father Mason: news of a steamboat from Washington, D.C., which arrived carrying sick, wounded, and dead Union soldiers; relays information about neighbors serving in other theaters of the war.

Tillie [Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1863 September 21 [Box 63 916]
4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 22 September
From sister Tillie: references a failed military expedition which Samuel had been engaged in, and in which one of Samuel's commanding officers was taken as a prisoner of war. Expresses the families relief at having learned that Samuel survived the engagement. Also discusses the death of their brother, Harry, who died while a prisoner of war. The mailing envelope is black-edged.

Lewis J. Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1863 December 18-1863 December 23 [Box 63 916]
3 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 26 December 1863
From brother Lewis: writes that Clemmie gave birth to a daughter, Laura, on November 4, 1863; the infant died of illness when two weeks old. Discusses plans for Christmas festivities and Samuel's Christmas presents.

M[ason] Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 May 29 [Box 63 916]
2 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 29 May 1864
From father Mason: news of Mason's continuing illness; refers to a letter from Samuel's cousin, Mason Murray, who wrote that his unit of the Army was preparing to march against Richmond.

Lewis [J. Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 June 30 [Box 63 916]
From brother Lewis: news that Mason Murray lost his left leg to amputation following a war wound, and was subsequently hospitalized.

M[ason] Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 July 31-1864 August 13. [Box 63 916]

4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope

From father Mason: writes of a visit to Mason Murray in the hospital; refers to an expedition which Samuel participated in, under command of Captain West.

Mary [Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 September 22. [Box 63 916]

3 p. (1 leaf)

Lew[is J. Matlack] and Clemmie [Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 September 22. [Box 63 916]

4 p. (1 leaf)

From brother Lewis and sister-in-law Clemmie: both write urging Samuel to vote for Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson on "the national union ticket" in the coming presidential election, as opposed to the Copperhead candidate, George B. McClellan.

M[ason] Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 September 23. [Box 63 916]

3 p. (1 leaf), with envelope

From father Mason: writes to urge Samuel to vote for Abraham Lincoln in the coming presidential election, as opposed to the Copperhead candidate, George B. McClellan; refers to economic hardships.

Envelope, 1864 November 16. [Box 63 916]

Tillie [Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1864 November 28. [Box 63 916]

4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 5 December 1864

From sister Tillie: mentions the 1864 presidential election of "Old Abe" and General William Tecumseh Sherman's march through Georgia.

M[atilda] E. Matlack autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1865 February 15. [Box 63 916]

4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 16 February 1865

From mother Matilda: written to Samuel on his twentieth birthday; implores him to look to his spiritual salvation.
Mollie [Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1865 March 11 [Box 63 916]
4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 10 March
[text]

Lew[is J. Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1865 March 31 [Box 63 916]
4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 31 March 1865
From brother Lewis: references an earlier letter from Samuel, in which Samuel described the Union occupation of Fort Sumter. Also writes of Ves Crossley, a prisoner of war who escaped from a transport carrying him to Charlotte. He subsequently reached Sherman's lines and served there before being transferred and eventually discharged.

Lew[is J. Matlack] autograph note signed to Samuel J. Matlack, [undated, after 1865 February 22] [Box 63 916]
1 leaf, recto-verso
From brother Lewis: regarding the birth of his son; references Samuel's account of the Union occupation of Fort Sumter.

Lew[is J. Matlack] autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1865 April 20 [Box 63 916]
4 p. (1 leaf), with envelope post-marked 21 April
From brother Lewis: regarding father's alcoholism, the capture of Richmond, the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Discussion of the assassination includes information on the mourning observances in Philadelphia, and Lewis' hopes that, under Johnson, "the leaders [of the Confederacy] will all get what they deserve the rope for a neck tie."

Mason M. Murray, Tilton US General Hospital, Wilmington Delaware, autograph letter signed to Samuel J. Matlack, 1865 December 17 [Box 63 916]
3 p. (1 leaf), with envelope
From cousin, Mason: regarding his war injury, his and Samuel's differing views of warfare.