

The JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Volume II

DECEMBER 1938

Number 1

TWO LETTERS OF U. S. GRANT

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For a number of years the Rutgers Library has owned two manuscript letters written by General Grant to his father. Professor Kull has read these letters to his classes in United States history every year, but the rest of the world has never been privileged to hear them. Members of the Associated Friends will be interested to have a glimpse of these significant and moving documents.

ON AN eminent point on Riverside Drive in New York City with the majesty of the Hudson to the north and to the south, stands the most imposing tomb of a public man in American history. It is the tomb of U. S. Grant. Symbolic of the affection of the American people who erected it, it is a measure of their judgment of his greatness. General Grant was the hero of the Civil War. He had emerged as victor in the greatest military contest Western civilization had seen up to that time and took rank next to Washington as a military genius in American history. A grateful people heaped upon him its gifts—cigars, horses, houses, and a fortune in money, and twice did they elect him president of the United States.

The life of Grant is one of those strange histories which leaves the interpreter baffled in his search for a key. In the year the Civil War began Grant was engaged as an unwanted clerk in the leather business of his two younger brothers in Galena, Illinois. Here his family allowed him to stay on after his failure to find a job of his own. Defeated in his own mind, held in con-

Chapington P. O.
St. Louis Co. Mo.
Feb. 9th 1854.

Dear Father,

Spring is now approaching when farmers require not only to till the soil, but to have the wheat to till it, and to seed it. For two years I have been compelled to farm without either of these facilities, confining my attention therefore principally to oats and corn; two crops which can never pay for if they bear a high price it is because the farmer has raised ^{scarcely} enough for his own use. If ~~they~~ ^{we} abundant they will scarcely bear transportation. I want to say

tempt by his brothers, and passed up as a no-account by his fellow citizens, Grant was a sorry figure indeed. And this but four years distant from Appomattox and Grant the idol of a nation.

Graduated from West Point, where he had gone unwillingly, Grant soon found action in the Mexican War. With no liking for war, and fundamentally a pacifist, if W. E. Woodward in his *Meet General Grant* interprets him correctly, he performed his duties with pedestrian effectiveness though no diarist of that war noted him. He came out of Mexico as a brevet captain with favorable mention in the regulation reports, though with no particular distinction. After a few years of stagnation in one army post and another, he was sent to California, leaving his wife behind. California was a dismal experience, compounded of homesickness, hatred of army life, and inner emptiness. Liquor was a way out, and when its hold became too great, Grant was ousted from the army. Rare was the army officer who in that day did not drink, but a reasonable restraint was expected of a captain in the line. In 1854, Grant, dismissed from the army, was without money, without a job, and a long way from home.

On leaving California, Grant said to a friend, "Whoever hears of me in ten years will hear of a well-to-do Missouri farmer"—rationalization, one might say, to cover chagrin. But more accurately, no doubt, Grant was here voicing his emancipation from a distasteful profession and his hope of a better life. But a better life was not to be found on a Missouri farm. His slave-holding father-in-law let him have eighty acres of unbroken land near St. Louis, but it was without a house and with his own hands Grant felled the trees and hewed out the logs for his cabin. "Hardscrabble" he grimly called his farm.

The two letters which follow were written by Grant to his father during these "Hardscrabble" days. They were presented to Rutgers University by Mrs. Eliot R. Payson from the estate of her brother, the late Charles L. Corbin, nephew of Abel Corbin, who married Grant's sister, Virginia. The letters are here published for the first time. They need no comment from me. Their tragedy speaks from every word.¹

¹ A name or two perhaps need identification: Mary was Grant's youngest sister; Julia was his wife, the sister of Frederick T. Dent, a classmate of Grant at West Point. The Dents were a Southern, slave-holding family who lived but a few miles from St. Louis and not far from Jefferson Barracks where Grant was stationed after leaving the Military Academy.

Sappington P.O.
St. Louis Co. Mo.
December 28th 1856

Dear Father:

Your's and Mary's letter inclosing Land Warrant was received a few days since. I will mail it in a few days.

Every day I like farming better and I do not doubt but that money is to be made at it. So far I have been laboring under great disadvantages but now that I am on my place, and shall not have to build next summer I think I shall be able to do much better. This year if I could have bought seed I should have made out still better than I did. I wanted to plant sixty or seventy bushels of potatoes, but I had not the money to buy them. I planted twenty however and have sold 225 bushels and have about 125 on hand, besides all that I have used. Next summer I shall plant what is left of them and buy about fifty bushels of choise seed besides. I have in some twentyfive acres of wheat that looks better, or did before the cold weather, than any in the neighborhood. My intention is to raise about twenty acres of Irish potatoes, on new ground, five acres of sweet potatoes, about the same of early corn, five or six acres cabbage, beets, cucumber pickles & mellons and keep a wagon going to market every day. This last year my place was not half tended because I had but one span of horses, and one hand, and we had to do all the work of the place, living at a distance too, all the hawling for my building, and take wood to the city for the support of the family. Since the 1st of April my team have earned me about fifty dollars per month independent of doing my own work. This year I presume I shall be compelled to neglect my farm some to make a living in the meantime, but by next year I hope to be independent. If I had an opportunity of geting about \$500⁰⁰ for a year at 10 pr. cent I have no doubt but it would be of great advantage to me.

Julia and the children are all very well. Mrs. Dent has been at the point of death for the last two weeks, but is now much better and will recover.

Mary makes no acknowledgement of having recieved a letter from me! Did she not get an answer to hers written shortly after you were here? I wrote in answer.

Some three weeks since I went into the Planter's House and saw registered "J. R. Grant, Ky." on the book. Making enquiry I found that J. R. G. had just taken the Pacific R. R. Cars. I made shure it was you and that I should find you when I got home. Was it you?

Remember me to all at home. Tell Molly to write to me again. Write soon.

Yours Truly
U S. Grant.

To

J. R. Grant, Esq.
Covington Ky.

P.S. In view of the Land Warrant having to go to such a distance, and likely, after reaching Washington Territory being obliged to pass through

the hands of so many strangers, I have filled the assignment to J. R. Grant. It will be better for you to assign it again than that it should be endangered.
U. S. G.

The five hundred dollars asked for in December seem not to have been received, as the second of these letters makes pathetically clear. Nor was the request of the second letter more fruitful. These four years at farming were tragic ones. In Grant's own memoir of over eleven hundred pages, they are blotted out with a single paragraph.

Sappington P.O.
St. Louis Co. Mo.
Feb^y 7th 1857.

Dear Father;

Spring is now approaching when farmers require not only to till the soil, but to have the wherewith to till it, and to seed it. For two years I have been compelled to farm without either of these facilities, confining my attention therefore principally to oats and corn: two crops which can never pay; for if they bear a high price it is because the farmer has raised scarcely enough for his own use. If abundant they will scarcely bear transportation. I want to vary the crop a little and also to have implements to cultivate with. To this end I am going to make the last appeal to you. I do this because, when I was in Ky. you voluntarily offered to give me a thousand dollars, to commence with, and because there is no one else to whom I could, with the same propriety, apply. It is always usual for parents to give their children assistance in beginning life (and I am only beginning, though thirty-five years of age, nearly) and what I ask is not much. I do not ask you to give me anything. But what I do ask is that you lend, or borrow for, me Five hundred dollars, for two years, with interest at 10 pr. cent payable annually, or semi annually if you choose, and with this if I do not go on prosperously I shall ask no more from you. With this sum I can go on and cultivate my ground for marketing and raise no more grain than is necessary for my own use. I have now in the ground twenty five acres of wheat with the view of getting in that much meadow, but this ground I shall not probably have for another year as it is not on my part of the place, and is for sale. I am getting some ten or twelve acres more cleared this winter which will turn off about 300 cords of wood that will be valuable next summer and winter; but the chopping has to be paid for now.

The fact is, without means, it is useless for me to go on farming, and I will have to do what Mr. Dent has given me permission to do; sell the farm and invest elsewhere. For two years now I have been compelled to neglect my farm to go off and make a few dollars to buy any little necessaries, sugar, coffee, &c. or to pay hired men. As a proof of this I will state that since the 2d day of April last I have kept a strict account of every load of wood taken to the City, or Coal Banks, by my team and it has amounted,

up to Jan^y 1st, to a fraction over 48 dollars per month. Now do not understand from this that if I had what I ask for my exertions wood sease; but that they would [be] directed to a more profitable end. I regard every load of wood taken, when the services of both myself and team are required on the farm, is a direct loss of more than the value of the load.

My expenses for my family have been nothing scarsely for the last two years. Fifty dollars, I believe, would pay all that I have laid out for their clothing. I have worked hard and got but little and expect to go on in the same way until I am perfectly independent; and then too most likely.

All of Mr. Dent's family, now here, and Julia are suffering from unusual colds. Dr. Sharp has purchased a house in Lincoln Co. this State and will move there soon; was to have gone several days ago, in fact, but recieving a Telegraphic Dispatch a few days ago that his father was very low he started immediately home, taking his wife and child with him.—Mrs. Dent died on the 14th of Jan.^y after an illness of about a month. This leaves Mr. Dent, and one daughter, alone.

Julia wishes to be remembered. Please answer soon.

Yours Truly
U. S. Grant.

What future could one predict for the writer of these letters? The farm was a failure. In 1858 Grant sold his live stock and utensils at auction and paid up some of his debts. Then came a venture in real estate, but Grant had no business sense and failure was again written against him. After repeated efforts to find a job, his hard-fisted father, who had accumulated a fair fortune, persuaded his two younger sons to take Ulysses as a sort of assistant into the leather business which he had set up for them in Galena. His thread-bare army uniform was all that remained of braver days.

Then came the Civil War.