Letters To Araminta
Civil War Correspondence to Araminta Guilford Tripp
edited by Susan Block

The following letters are a small part of an extensive collection known as the Tripp Papers. The originals are housed in the Southern Historical Collection at the Library of the University of North Carolina. They were transcribed in 1990 by Jill Snider and compiled by Roslyn Holdzkom. Mrs. W. Truett Morgan and Mrs. R. Graham Mattocks of Wilmington, Araminta Tripp’s great-granddaughter, loaned the Society her own copies of the transcriptions for use in the Bulletin.

Many of the letters were written from Wilmington, Fort Fisher, and Bald Head Island by Captain William Henry Tripp, Araminta’s adoring husband. A true officer and a gentleman, the former North Carolina Congressman juxtaposed poetic descriptions of the beauty of the area with graphic details of the horrors of war. His writings are peppered with declarations of love for his beautiful young wife, anguish over their war-imposed separation, and concern over her ability to manage Mount Hope, their Pamlico River Plantation.

Also included are two stray notes from Fenner Guilford, Araminta’s likable, impetuous cousin. Though the following letters appear here much as written, they have been edited for purposes of localization, brevity, and decorum.

(Christmas Eve, 1861)

Cousin, I wish to give you an idea of our life. The tents are split open at the top and sides and the cool north wind blows on our heads all night and all day, our little mud chimneys do their part smoking our eyes out. Our beds consist of a mattress one breath thick that is filled with wheat straw. We have two little blankets made to cover cartridge boxes and a nap sack for a pillow. Then when breakfast comes, ‘tis Adam’s ox and Eve’s ash cake that is the fare.

Cousin, you don’t know what an effect the war has produced upon the minds of the men that live in the camp life. There is nothing that can touch their sympathy now.

Even when a man dies, he is often put in a coffin at night, that set in a tent, and instead of keeping a light and someone sitting up with him, one man will make his bed down by the coffin and go to sleep.

We have several Yankee bones now in our tent from the battle on the 21st of July. Sam Litchfield has a kneecap. Ed has an arm bone and several others. When we kill old Abe, I shall try for one eye tooth.

Yours affectionately,
Fenner Guilford

Fort Fisher
April 5, 1862

Dear Wife,

I was almost in ecstasy today with I received a letter from you. We are about a half mile above Fort Fisher which is immediately on the seashore and we are very pleasantly situated. It is a beautiful place even if there is so much sand. The fort is a strong one and well garrisoned. I have formed the acquaintance of a great many pleasant gentlemen here. In fact, the officers are all gentlemen. Macon Bonner and I are boarding at a house with a large number of them. Our fare is quite good at times, poor at others, depending on the weather. If it blows, our landlord can’t get any oysters and when it is calm, we have them in all ways plentifully.

When the tide ebbs, I can see ten thousand bushels of oysters left bare. In fact there seems no end of them. I can walk out to them and pick up any quantity. But, we do not eat many of them as they are too small to fool with. If you and the children were here, you would enjoy it very much. I know the children would run wild picking up sea shells. They are all sorts of colors and sizes. There are millions of them and a beautiful beach in the

Continued on page 2
Continued from page 3

Fort Fisher
January 5, 1863

My own precious wife,

The health of my company is very good indeed. My appetite is excellent and it is a good thing for we have only salt pork and bread, no sugar or molasses. We get some oysters for variety now and then. The pork we have is some that was taken from the Yankees in Kentucky by Bragg some months ago.

We received a dispatch from General Whiting at Wilmington last night that the Yankees are advancing in two columns on that place and are said to number, in all, 60,000 men. The Yankees from Suffolk landed at Swansboro and are coming on through Onslow and those from Newbern are coming on a little higher up in the country. We are working as hard as we can to be ready for them and will make a number of them bite the dust before they succeed in taking the town and forts. Their aim is, no doubt, to take the town and then starve us out but our Col. says we will eat up all our mules and horses and all the old cows before we give in. We expect a long and bloody fight of it.

Give my love to all my servants and tell Roden that as long as I live he has a friend that will stick to him through thick and thin. No one has ever had better servants than I have. Tell Roden to hide the gun in his house and when the thieves come to use it to the best of his judgment.

My own precious wife, you may rest assured that if I ever get home again, I shall be supremely happy. Meanwhile, if I die, I shall die faithful to you.

Yours forever,
William

Fort Fisher
January 17th, 1863

My dear Wife,

I now sit down to write you and let you know that the Yankees do not have me yet. But to the contrary, we got forty of them yesterday, eight of them officers. One of their gunboats ran shore about twenty miles above here and two of our companies went up and captured her crew. Today we are going to try to save what we can off her and then burn what we can of her, which will not be much as she is an iron ship. She was built in England to run the Blockade, but was caught on her first trip, taken to New York, and fitted out as a gunboat. Her name was Columbia and she was just coming here to take her place as one of the blockading squadron.

They watch us as close as a cat does a mouse, or rather they are watching for the vessels that are ready to run out. There are five ready to leave as soon as they can get out. Two of them have been trying to get out for over a week and have not been able to because of the low tide.

I am getting quite well again, but the wind pinches me so badly as I am still very thin. This is the windiest place you ever saw. It makes no difference where it blows from, we get it full blast.

Give my best respects to all my negroes and tell them I brag high on them and would not take anything for them.

Yours forever,
William

Fort Fisher
March 1, 1863

My dear Wife,

There are now at Wilmington four English steamers that have run the blockade in the past week. The Giraffe is now laying off here in the river, ready to go out with a load of cotton. She is a splendid steamer and very fast indeed. If she gets a mile’s start, all Lincoln’s fleet cannot catch her.

We are expecting the Cornubia in now as she went out a fortnight ago, bound for Bermuda. She is very swift. She went out between sunset and dark and all the blockaders got after her and cut her off. She turned in towards the beach and got a little start and then ran off to the southeast and they were after her as fast as they could, but it was no go. She soon left them. It was an exciting race and I expect the Yankees were mad. They had one of the fastest war steamers here at that time. She was sent here with the express purpose of catching the Cornubia and the Giraffe. She seemed disgusted at not be-

Continued on page 5
Continued from page 4

ing able to catch them, left in a few days, and has not come back again. Old Abe’s blockade has caused more foreign vessels to come in here than ever did in times of peace.

Yours forever and ever alone,
William

Fort Fisher
March 24, 1863

Dear Wife,

Col. Lamb has gone to Wilmington. Consequently, I am in command today and have very little time to write you as I am continually being run to for details and orders. The blockaders off here caught a schooner this morning without firing a gun. She gave up and they towed her off. She is now laying in sight at the stern of one of them like a pig in a string. One of the steamers (the Duoro) that was in line was caught after she got out last week, and none of us was sorry for she was owned by as perfect a hog that ever walked on two legs. The Giraffe is in here now getting ready to go out. She is loaded with cotton.

I have a fine bunch of bananas I wish you had. I have them hung up in my piazza.

I am busy gardening. Ben Thomerson is top gardener under my direction. I have sent to Tarboro for seeds.

Yours forever and ever,
William

Fort Holmes
Smith Island 3
February 24th, 1864

Dear Wife,

I have just sent to Raleigh for a suit of clothes, or rather, cloth for a suit. It was made in England for the officers. It will cost me forty dollars. I have enough clothes now, but think it best to get that cloth now as I may not have the chance again soon to get so fine an article so low. A suit of uniform costs in Wilmington now 1600 dollars. Boots are $175 a pair.

I hope by this time you have the oats and Irish potatoes planted and are making preparations for planting corn.

All are pleased at our change to this place. Wife, I eat some nice oysters for you almost every day and wish you could eat them for yourself. One can see thousands of bushels of good oysters at a sight. All one has to do is tote them up about 50 yards and eat as many as one wants. Clams are equally as plentiful and there are a great many fish of all sorts to be caught just for the trying. Coons are as plentiful as squirrels are with us and we catch them entirely in the daytime. We go in the woods and cut down a hollow live oak and often get as many as five out of one tree and fatter things I never saw. I get some ducks, also, once in a while. I’d give a thousand dollars for you to be here for two or three days to see the sights. Everything seems new to me here. The growth is entirely different and in fact everything is different from home.

I am yours entirely,
William

Smith Island
March 13th, 1864

Dear Wife,

I am busy building quarters. I have my house up and ready to cover and expect to have it done in a few more days. It is a neat log house built almost entirely of cedar logs and we have cedar shingles to cover it with. Just think what a pretty roof red shingles will make. I am very much pleased with the change to this place. The prospect is boundless and the scenery is beautiful indeed. The growth is so different from what I ever was used to and so novel as what I reckon makes it so charming to me. There is a rumor of our being moved again, but where to, I don’t know.

Accept all the love of your own dear
William

Smith Island
April 3d, 1864

Dear Wife,

I have at last gotten into my new house and can say as much as David that I live in a house built of cedar. My house with its cedar logs and cedar shingles has a chimney made of hewed logs dovetailed together. I have a floor also nicely dressed and jointed up. I have also a nice garden in prospect. Now love, if I had you and the children to stay with me, we could live quite nicely this spring and summer if we were undisturbed by those cursed Yankees.

Yours alone,
William

Smith Island
May 7, 1864

My dear Wife,

I am busy every day at low water gathering up shells to bring home with me. Darling, it is a tedious business but a labor of love which makes it very pleasant to me. Some of them are very small, not as large as a grain of wheat, but they are the prettiest shells I have ever seen. They are of different colors and you will have a fine chance to exercise your good taste in the arrangement of them for our dear little girls. It makes me feel good all over to contemplate you getting them. I have one tiny shell for you that is a real beauty.

I have a nice little basket apiece for Vene and Becky made by one of my men. They are not very nicely made, but they are strong. I have not yet gotten anything for the boys but will try to get them something before I come home. I believe I will buy them enough platted palmetto to make each of them a hat, also bonnets for the girls.

I have a very good garden, indeed, though not as good as my Fisher garden. My potatoes are about to bloom, cucumbers and beets very fine. I have a fine chance of

Continued on page 6
Continued from page 5

beans, shallots, and onions growing. I have some tomato plants and a good many melon vines.

Do darling write me all the news. Try to get someone to look out for my canoes. I do hope they are not all carried away by the Yankees.

Your own,
William

Smith Island
May 15, 1864

Dear Wife,

This island is the Botany Bay of North Carolina. The land is very productive and we can raise anything we wish in the way of vegetables. My house now has a piazza the whole length of it. I had it built last week.

All the convicts are sent here to work out their sentences. When they get here, they can’t get away. We have over seventy here now at work on the fortifications. Some of the poor devils die once in a while and are buried without honors of any sort.

You must excuse my not filling this side as the boat is ready to start.

Accept all my love as your own,
William

Wilmington
August 5, 1864

Dear Wife,

I now sit down to try and write you a letter although the chances are very bad indeed as my room here is as it has been everywhere I go; the place of general resort. It is now full of officers and you may be sure it is not the best place to write. You see by the heading of this letter that I am in Wilmington yet and still sitting on the jury of the general court martial, convened by General Beauregard. We have been now four weeks and we seemingly no nearer than when we first began.

Yesterday our folks back at the fort fired one of the guns that we got off the ship, Modern Greece, at the blockaders. The second fire completely disabled one of them so that another had to fasten on her and tow her off. It is said she was four miles off when we fired on her. I reckon they will learn to keep at a respectful distance after a while.

Wilmington
August 17, 1864

My dear sweet precious wife,

I found an old widow lady who had a fine house, well furnished, alongside the Courthouse and she rented me a room. She also agreed to have my washing done for eight dollars a dozen and cook my victuals (I to furnish wood) for ten dollars a month. She had another room across the passage which Captain Braddy took as soon as he found I was going to board there. Then Captain McBryde came over to see me and insisted on me letting him come in with me and I agreed to it. So we three occupy her entire upper or second floor. It is a nice three story house with a double piazza in front and a veranda in the rear. Our doors and windows are all open to the floor and my room, in particular, is nicely furnished. It has six chairs, one of them a rocking chair, a clothes press, a bureau with a large glass, a marbletop washstand, nice writing stand, towel racks, and a bedstead five feet wide with a nice mattress and mosquito bars.

The lady is named Southerland and has one small son with her and two sons in our Army. One is Captain of a light battery stationed on the sound, not over twenty miles from here. So you see darling, I am nicely quartered now.

I went to the theater last night and paid three dollars for a seat. Dress circle is five dollars. I came away well content not to go there again soon. It was miserable.

I fear darling I shall not be allowed to come home before our court convenes on the 19th of September. It may last for months and our president says he cannot excuse any member even for a day. I shall make a big struggle for it though, and if I fail it will not be my fault.

Oh, I do want to see you so much my darling sweet wife. I think of you and I can see your pretty blue eyes looking so fondly up to mine and I seem to feel the kisses from your warm lips on mine. I can almost see you coming out to the shop or to the orchard to be with me. Those thoughts are bliss, darling, to me. I do hope that there are many days of happiness ahead for us when we shall be reunited and enjoy each other’s love to the full. May the good Lord protect you from harm for you are the star of hope to me. With you, my dream of happiness is centered.

William

Wilmington
September 2, 1864

My own dear wife,

You must excuse these letters as I am so differently situated that I have but a sorry chance to write at all. With McBryde, Braddy and me being in the same house and having company in the evening until the night, I can hardly write at all.

Everything is very high here and still going up. A store rents for $20,000 a year quick. I know of one store with

A Scene on the Blockade Runner Lilian.
Running the Blockade into the Harbor of Wilmington, N. C.
Source: The Confederate Soldier In The Civil War
Continued on page 7
Continued from page 6

a wharf that rented for $80,000 for the next year, beginning on the first of October this year. The first of October is the general renting and moving day in this place. I am paying ninety dollars rent a month.

I think of you, my own sweet wife, all the time. When I see other officers with their wives, I cannot help suffering for I am cut off from a wife who is worth them all. I almost go mad sometimes thinking of the enjoyment I am deprived of, and you too darling.

This town is a perfect sinkhole of iniquity (so I hear). I have been told that there are 1800 public prostitutes here. Is not this a fearful state of morals?

We have news of hard fighting around Vicksburg. The Yankees did not bury their dead and our General in command there has to burn tar and night and day to kill down the stench. It is said to be awful.

There are a great many fine steamers running in here now. I believe there are as many as ten in port. The Giraffe, Cornubia, and Eugenia are out at sea and will soon be in if nothing happens. We have seven large ships blockading our inlet now all the time and still the steamers run in and out. They have a hard race for it sometimes though.

Give my respects to all the negroes and my love to our dear ones.

My whole heart pants to be with you, love, and to enjoy the luxury of seeing the happiness burning out of those pretty blue eyes of yours on meeting me.

William

Fort Holmes
Smith Island
October 25, 1864

Dear Wife,

General Bragg has come and taken command of all the forces and defences down on the Cape Fear. He paid us a visit on Sunday. We turned out in force. Our Government has certain news of the assembling of fleets both at Hampton Roads and at Beaufort to attack this place. We are as ready as we shall be unless we could have more troops sent us. Oh, how I do wish to see you once again before we begin the devilish work of butchering and being butchered.

Porter commands the fleet that will attack us. They have 50 steam barges that carry 50 men each so that they can land 2500 men in little or no time. Everyone off duty is at work until night throwing up earth works and performing the best he can.

We have a good deal of target practice down here at the forts now, getting ready for the Yankees. The papers say the fleet consist of the Ironsides (the iron clad dictator which has the heaviest guns in the Yankee service—some of them throw a shell nearly six miles), several turreted monitors, a large fleet of wooden ships of war, mortar boats, picket boats, besides the 50 barges I mentioned.

I have cleaned and loaded up my pistol and am getting my sword ready for action, but hope I shall not be called on to use either.

Yours gratefully,
William
Smith Island
November 20, 1864

Dear Wife,

There is but little news here now. Our forces have been driven out of Missouri and are in Arkansas. Hood is in Tennessee. The capture of the Florida is about to kick up a mess. She was taken out of a neutral port. The London Times says that all maritime nations should write and demand that she be given up as it was against the law of nations to seize a vessel in a neutral port. Our ship, Chichamanga, came in night before last. She was chased up to the bar and fired at broadside after broadside—which she returned. The Tallahassee is in also. They did a good deal of damage to Yankee commerce while out but had to come in as a large part of the Yankee navy was in pursuit of them.

As soon as I can get to Wilmington, I will buy some medicine and send it the first chance. Have any Yankees gone to Washington yet? How are the hands doing in getting the wheat? How are the hogs fattening? Did they gather many peas? How did the corn turn out?

I dream often of you dear. You, darling are the sweetest, dearest, and best piece of mortality on earth. I hope always to be courting you on earth and hope we may spend our honeymoon in heaven.

Write me of everything.

Yours forever,
William

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William Henry Tripp’s humble assessments of his battle spirit fail to do justice to his war record. He participated in the engagements at Fort Anderson, Town Creek, Jackson’s Mill, and the bloody Battle of Bentonville. On 12 July 1863, accompanied by only one other company, Captain Tripp led his men from Fort Fisher across the inlet to Zeek’s Island. Under constant fire, they marched up the beach to the site of the steamer Kate, a blockade runner in the possession of the Union. With a Whitworth cannon and rifles, they drove the enemy off, recaptured the steamer, and saved her cargo.

Captain Tripp survived the war and was present at Johnston’s surrender near Durham on 26 April 1865. He returned to his beloved Araminta and continued his life as a planter on land that today is still owned by his descendants. In 1872, he was appointed commissioner to oversee the surveying, marking, and mapping of Pamlico, a new county.

Over a period of twenty-four years, ten children were born to William and Araminta Tripp. Captain Tripp died in 1881. Araminta, thirteen years his junior, doubtless read through her collection of letters many times before her own death in 1897.
Interior of Fort Fisher, Near Wilmington, during the second bombardment.
Source: The Confederate Soldier In The Civil War

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