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Sillers-Holmes Family Correspondence

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Introduction to the Sillers-Holmes Family Correspondence

The heart of the Sillers-Holmes correspondence is a group of fourteen wartime letters written by the Confederate officer William W. Sillers (1838-1863) of the 30th North Carolina Infantry, mostly to his sister, Frances (Fannie) Sillers Holmes (b. 1834/5), in Clinton, Sampson County, North Carolina. The group also includes a letter written on 11 November 1863 by Capt. Gary F. Williams (Co. A, 30th North Carolina) to Fannie Holmes's husband, Dr. Allmond Holmes (b. 1831/2), describing the circumstances of William Sillers' death. There are also three additional letters to the Holmes household, one directed to Fannie by an unidentified friend (28 January 1864), and two written c1859-62 by Allmond Holmes's sister, Anna, to the Holmes's daughter, Annbell.

William Walter Sillers—the name often appears as "Sellers" in surviving records—was a native of Clinton, Sampson County, North Carolina. He matriculated at the University of North Carolina in 1855 and was graduated in 1859, with third honors. In August 1859 he was licensed to practice law in Sampson County. In the 1860 Federal census, Sillers—who would never marry—was enumerated at the home of his brother-in-law, Dr. Allmond Holmes, in the town of Clinton. Sillers did own a farm in Clinton township—presumably inherited from his parents, though the circumstances surrounding this are not clear. This is the "plantation" discussed with some frequency in the letters. Sillers' real estate is valued at \$10,000 in the 1860 census, and his personal estate at \$50,000 more. Much of this latter figure would have been accounted for by his slaves, 50 of whom are listed under his name in the 1860 slave census. Sillers was thus a member of the Sampson County planter elite—as was his brother-in-law Allmond Holmes, who likewise owned a plantation in Clinton and who held, in 1860, 57 slaves. During the war Holmes worked for an indeterminate time as a surgeon at Poplar Lawn Hospital in Petersburg. Holmes children mentioned in the letters are Annbell (1855/6-1863); John (b. 1857/8); Bessie (b. 1861); and William (b. 1862).

One week after the surrender of Fort Sumter Sillers joined a local militia company, the "Sampson Rangers," as a private. He was elected 1st lieutenant the following August, and retained that grade when the Rangers were mustered in to Confederate service as Co. A, 30th North Carolina Infantry (8 October 1861). The first captain of Co. A was James C. Holmes, doubtless a relation of the doctor's and a man mentioned several times in Sillers' letters. Throughout the winter of 1861-62 the regiment was attached to the District of Cape Fear, Department of North Carolina; it saw little action, spending much of its time at Camp Wyatt near Wilmington. On 1 May 1862, at reorganization, Sillers was elected major, and so left Co. A to serve on the staff of Col. Francis Marion Parker. In June the regiment was sent to Richmond, and soon thereafter attached to the Army of Northern Virginia (George B.

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

Anderson's Brigade, D. H. Hill's Division). Sillers was wounded in the arm at Malvern Hill (1 July 1862) but was active for the Maryland campaign, and assumed command of the regiment in the Sunken Road at Antietam when Col. Parker was wounded (17 September 1862). Parker would not return to the regiment until the following April; in the interim, Maj. Sillers remained in command (the regiment's lieutenant colonel, James T. Kell, had suffered what proved to be a permanently disabling wound in June 1862). The 30th North Carolina entered the 1863 campaigning season under the brigade command of Stephen Dodson Ramseur, in what was now Robert Rodes' Division of Jackson's Second Corps. Sillers fought at Chancellorsville and at Gettysburg, where the regiment was heavily engaged on 1 July. When Parker was wounded Sillers once more assumed command; he would remain the regiment's ranking field officer for the remainder of his service. On 3 September 1863, following James Kell's resignation, Sillers was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He was mortally wounded on 7 November, in a minor engagement at Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock. The 30th North Carolina was on outpost duty behind the ford when it was ordered up to the river to assist the 2nd North Carolina in contesting a Federal crossing. It soon became apparent that the Federals were crossing in strength, and the order came to withdraw. Many of the men refused to leave the cover of the buildings near the ford in which they had taken refuge, and Sillers was shot through the lungs attempting to get them to fall back. The affair was a disaster for the regiment, which suffered over 180 casualties, most of them captured; Sillers died two days later (9 November 1863), at Gordonsville, Virginia. In his battle report Maj. Gen. Rodes—who ordered the men forward in the first place—wrote that Sillers "behaved gallantly and did his duty" but that the 30th North Carolina "did not sustain its reputation." (*Official Records*, Series 1, Vol. 29, Part I, pp. 631-33).

At several points in his letters to his sister, Sillers remarks with some poignancy on the awful divide between army life and the familiar world of Sampson County. A mild winter day in Virginia provokes a nostalgia that yields some brief respite from the realities of war:

The sun is shining brightly today, and for a wonder, the little birds, the dear unknowing consolers of saddened hearts, are not silent in the few remaining trees left standing around our tents. Their sweet warbling is seldom heard amidst the bloody scenes of war. Pure innocents, they, like everything good by nature, and sent only as a blessing by the good Giver, seem instinctively to fly away at the approach of strife which things of Heaven never know. The sun and the birds and the soothing quiet of nature always, always carry my thoughts homeward. When I shut my eyes and hear the music of the gentle songsters, how like the sounds that fill the air around my own quiet home! Open them, and how sad the change! There is no dreaming here with open eyes. Dreadful reality is too near, and ever present. Thank God! for this beautiful day and the lived associations it, as all days like it, bring to mind, and this blessed rest from the weariness of actual bloody strife, if not from ~~the~~ preparation for the renewal of the bloody drama! I always feel better and stronger, readier to perform the wearisome routine of my daily duties, after hearing that all are well at home, and then having a beautiful day to bring to my mind a vivid a picture of scenes so dear. ([9 February 1863](#)).

"The soldier's dream of home" is, of course, an abiding theme of Civil War epistolary prose. Still, Sillers' homespun eloquence bears remarking, as does the insistency with which thoughts of home are entertained throughout these letters. An extended meditation on death, for example, contrasts those who die in the field, anonymous and unmourned, with those who have the good fortune to die at home ([22 March 1863](#)). For Sillers, Sampson County and its inhabitants constitute "all that is dear to me on Earth" ([1-7 October 1862](#)). His dream of home pertained to his own plantation, surely, but it seems to have found particular focus

in the domestic circle he knew best: the residence in Clinton he shared with Fannie and her husband and children in the months before the war. Sillers' preoccupation with home was perhaps exacerbated by his long inability to obtain a furlough, because of the absence of the regiment's other field officers. He may have returned home to recover from the wound suffered at Malvern Hill (1 July 1862), though he was certainly back with the regiment in August. From that point on he did not visit Sampson until September of 1863, after James C. Holmes was promoted to major, and Sillers himself to lieutenant colonel.

If thoughts of home proved a consolation for Sillers, they were also a source of anxiety. Sampson County may have been at a remove from the killing fields of Virginia, but it was scarcely untouched by the war. In his absence, Sillers worried about the well-being of his sister's family, and shared their grief at the death of their oldest child, Annbell, in January 1863. He worried about smallpox, and the possibility of Yankee incursions—like the raid of 3-7 July 1863 on the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad, in neighboring Duplin County. There was also the matter of Sillers' plantation, and its resident slaves. Many of the letters include explicit instructions regarding the planting of crops, the maintenance of livestock, and other matters, to be relayed by Fannie to a Sillers slave named Uncle Moses, who appears to have been responsible for getting the work done. (One other slave is mentioned throughout the letters: a man named Ransom, who attended Sillers in the field). Sillers hoped only that his farm would be self-supporting; i.e., that it would produce enough to feed and clothe his slaves. For the management of his financial affairs, Sillers looked to his brother-in-law, Allmond Holmes. He was especially anxious to settle his debts, but could only do so if Dr. Holmes first collected from those whose own notes of obligation Sillers held. All this was complicated by the low regard for the national currency. As Sillers observes, in his letter of [9 February 1863](#), "Confederate money is not a legal tender and some may prefer the notes to the money, and Dr. will oblige me by finding out who of my creditors will receive this money before collecting too much."

As for their military content, Sillers' letters contain relatively little detail on "marching or fighting" (as he says), but many broader observations on the war and its campaigns. The only sustained account of events on anything approaching a tactical level appears in the letter of [15 November 1862](#), describing a brush with the enemy around Front Royal in the Shenandoah on 6-7 November. There is one letter written in the aftermath of the 1862 Maryland campaign (intended first and foremost to inform the family of his survival), while three date from the month after Gettysburg. These latter do include some instructive anecdotes—especially the letter of [7 August 1863](#), with its amusing account of Sillers' own ineffectuality as a looter:

Ransom fell in with a party of pillaging soldiers at Gettysburg and got possession of several small articles for his mother. He didn't get much, but what he did get was very useful, such as spools of thread, a pair of shoes for children. I thought I would try and get Johnnie and Bessie and the baby some shoes and other articles; but when I came to think about it, I couldn't imagine what sizes I ought to get. I didn't have the most distant idea. As for clothing it was a very difficult matter to get into a dry-goods store. None were opened that I know of unless under compulsion and you know, Sister, I was never much of a hand to force my way through.

Despite his very evident dedication to the cause, Sillers' assessments of the progress of the war are typically objective, and void of patriotic rhetoric. He never derides the Union, nor does he make any particular claims for Southern arms. If his commentary is often informed by an air of resignation, this is due at least in part to the fact that several of the letters were written in the wake of Confederate defeats—the loss of Roanoke Island in early February 1862, as well as Antietam and Gettysburg. On several occasions Sillers is expressly critical

of Southern strategies, most notably in the letter of [31 July 1863](#), with reference to Lee in Pennsylvania. What he found especially intolerable, though, was the human suffering caused by the war, beginning with his own regiment:

It would break the hearts of the ladies of our county who are far away from the desolate and bloody battle-fields of Northern Virginia and who are unaccustomed to seeing the hardships and privations which a Soldier in an active campaign has to bear, to see the destitution of this part of our army. It is not one or two who are without shoes and half-clad; but it is the greater part of every company in our regiment who are in this condition. I have become almost hardened to the sight; but sometimes my heart is deeply touched by the fortitude and cheerfulness with which on some of our long marches the barefooted men bear up with a song or a laugh upon their lips. It is inexpressibly saddening. It brings one down, down, in such a way, as I had never wished proud, spirited men humiliated. I sometimes wish I were away from these heart breaking sights; and think I will try to get relieved of them; but then duty, duty, duty. Dear Sister, I do not like to write anything tending to make you unhappy in your quiet, peaceful home; but I know you wish to be acquainted with the real condition of the soldiers, and it is right that their condition should be known. I hope that the Government, before the extreme severity of Winter sets in, may be enabled to furnish more shoes and clothes to men, who have been without them for months, and know what the want of them means. ([15 November 1862](#)).

Such passages suggest a fundamental decency, echoed in the testimonials of others. Sillers' commanding officer, Col. Parker, mentions him on occasion in his own personal letters, as in one written to his wife on 4 May 1862, describing the regiment's reorganization: "The Major was promoted, and one of the Lieutenants elected Major; he is a very nice man, a capital selection, and I doubt not will make a very good officer; you may probably have heard me speak of him very favourably, he is Lt. Sillers of Sampson Co." (Taylor, 1998, p. 168). It is perhaps possible to see the encomiums of Capt. Gary Williams, in his letter of [11 November 1863](#) describing Sillers' death, as something more than prose tailored to the occasion: "He has ben more like a Father to this Regt. than any thing else There is not a man but what loved him."

Provenance note: The Sillers-Holmes letters were purchased by the University Libraries in 2004 from Will and Lynn Gorges of New Bern, North Carolina.

Bibliographic note: Col. Francis Marion Parker's brief history of the 30th North Carolina (published in Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65*, Raleigh, 1901, Vol. II, pp. 495-505) contains no mention of Sillers. But he is mentioned in Parker's personal letters, which appear in Michael W. Taylor, *To Drive the Enemy from Southern Soil: The Letters of Col. Francis Marion Parker and the History of the 30th Regiment North Carolina Troops*, Dayton OH, 1998. He is also mentioned in Taylor's accompanying commentary; see especially p. 412. Three battle reports written by Sillers appear in the *Official Records*: on South Mountain and Antietam (Series I, Vol. 19, Part 1, pp. 1050-52, and on Gettysburg (Series I, Vol. 27, Part 2, p. 591). The skirmish at Kelly's Ford that resulted in Sillers' death is described in reports by Robert E. Lee (*Official Records*, Series I, Vol. 29, Part 1, pp. 611-616) and Maj. Gen Robert E. Rodes (Series I, Vol. 29, Part 1, pp. 631-633). Sillers death is also mentioned in the diary of Alexander D. Betts, published as *Experience of a Confederate Chaplain, 1861-1864*, Greenville SC, 190?, pp. 49-50.

Index of Letters

NUMBER	MS TYPE	DATE	PLACE(S)	AUTHOR
MSN/CW 5025-01	Letter	February 16, 1862	Camp Wyatt, North Carolina	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-02	Letter	October 1-7, 1862	Camp near Winchester, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-03	Letter	November 15, 1862	Camp near Strasburg, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-04	Letter	January 13, 1863	Camp near Guinea Station, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-05	Letter	January 14, 1863	Camp near Guinea Station, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-06	Letter	January 28, 1863	Camp near Fredericksburg, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-07	Letter	February 9, 1863	Camp near Guinea Station, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-08	Letter	February 26, 1863	Camp near Hamilton's Crossing, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-09	Letter	March 22, 1863	Camp near Fredericksburg, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-10	Letter	July 16, 1863	Near Darksville, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-11	Letter	July 31, 1863	Near Madison Court House, Madison County, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-12	Letter	August 7, 1863	Near Orange Court House, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-13	Letter	August 22, 1863	Near Orange Court House, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-14	Letter	September 28, 1863	Camp at Morton's Ford, Orange County, Virginia	William W. Sillers
MSN/CW 5025-15	Letter	November 11, 1863	Near Morton's Ford, Orange County, Virginia	Gary F. Williams
MSN/CW 5025-16	Letter	January 28, 1864	Raleigh, North Carolina	"Fannie"
MSN/CW 5025-17	Letter	[1859-1861]		Anna Holmes
MSN/CW 5025-18	Letter	February 2, [1862]	Fayetteville, North Carolina	Anna Holmes

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