Guide to the Estes Family Correspondence, 1856-1916

65.12

Special Collections
Benjamin F. Feinberg Library
State University of New York College at Plattsburgh
Plattsburgh, N.Y. 12901

By
Carol A. Christiansen
July 1979

Revised by Debra Kimok
May 2011

Collection Size: .2 Linear Feet / 1/2 Hollinger Box

Acquisition Information: Unknown

Language of Material: English

Access Restrictions: Folder nine—access restricted.

Use Restriction: Unpublished manuscripts are protected by copyright. Permission to publish, quote, or reproduce must be secured from the repository and the copyright holder.

Processed by: Carol A. Christiansen

Subject Headings: Civil War; Keene (N.Y); Essex County (N.Y)—Farming; Estes, James Henry (1842-1921); Merrill, Shubael P. (1822-1882)
Biographical Notes

James Henry Estes was born in 1842 and died in 1921. His father was Otis Estes (1814-1892); his mother, Rhoda Ann (Merrill) Estes (1817-1888); brother, Byron (b. 1848); and sisters, Orphenia (1844-1863), Fanny (b. 1849), Lucena (b. 1855) and Diana (b. 1856).

The Estes' were farmers in Keene Valley, New York. James' grandfather, Otis Estes, was a native of Connecticut who settled in Keene between 1800 and 1810. He married Jerusha Dart, and in 1843 both died, leaving the farm to their son, also named Otis.

On September 19, 1839, the younger Otis married Rhoda Ann Merrill, daughter of James and Rhoda Ann (Lamb) Merrill. James Henry Estes was born September 23, 1842, and grew up on the Estes homestead in Keene.

On August 11, 1862, James enlisted in the 118th Regiment of Infantry, New York State Volunteers. Called the Adirondack Regiment, it was organized at Plattsburgh and included companies recruited from Clinton, Essex, and Warren counties. James belonged to Company C, which was primarily recruited at St. Armand, Jay, Keene North Elba, and Wilmington. The 118th left New York State on September 3, 1862 and served most of the Civil War in Virginia.

Following his honorable discharge June 27, 1865, James returned to his Keene farm, which he subsequently divided and sold for summer residences, keeping fifty acres for himself. For several years he worked as a guide, but after 1876, when he married Elizabeth B. Lee of Hartford, Connecticut, he devoted his attention to the care of summer boarders.

James and Elizabeth Estes had six children, two dying in infancy, and a third, a daughter, dying at age twelve. James served as Town Assessor for several years and was active in The Grand Army of the Republic.

James is the author of 43 of 77 letters in this collection. His uncle, Shubael P. Merrill (1822-1882), also a member of Company C of the 118th, wrote sixteen. These letters are written to the home of Shubael's brother-in-law, Otis Estes, and addressed to various members of the household, including his mother, Mrs. Rhoda Ann Merrill.

Born in Vermont in 1822, Shubael came with his parents to Essex County where he took up farming, an occupation he pursued for most of his life.

At the time of his enlistment, Shubael was living in North Elba with his second wife, the former Fanny Hull (ca. 1833-1862) of Saranac, and three sons. Fanny died shortly after Shubael's enlistment; he was not given leave to come home. Unlike James, Shubael was neither young nor healthy, and as a consequence, he spent a great deal of his term of enlistment in various army hospitals. His health is frequently mentioned in his letters which are generally concerned with friends and relatives and the news of the day.
Scope Note

The Estes Collection consists of one box with nine folders, the first six containing correspondence arranged chronologically, the seventh undated correspondence. Folder eight contains James' marriage certificate and a receipt for one hundred dollars from Lizzie B. Lee Estes to James Estes dated January 11, 1877.

Folder nine holds envelopes which are restricted to use only by permission of the Special Collections librarian.

The collection includes seventy-seven letters written during the Civil War by James Henry Estes (1842-1921) and his uncle, Shubael P. Merrill, two soldiers of the 118th Regiment of Infantry, New York State Volunteers, to relatives in Keene, New York.

The first folder, which contains letters written prior to the Civil War, contains two from Julius M. Merrill, a sailor. He was probably the brother of Rhoda Ann Estes and Shubael Merrill. The third letter is a response to an inquiry by Shubael about Julius. These three letters were written between 1856 and 1858.

There are several letters written during the Civil War by persons other than James Estes or Shubael Merrill. One, dated August 20, 1863 is from H. J. Slingerland in Bethlehem Centre, N.Y. to Otis Estes describing his move from Keene to his brother-in-law's farm near Albany. He also mentions some business done for Mr. Estes at the Comptroller's office. Two letters, dated June 19 and 20, 1864, are from Rhoda Anne Estes to James Henry, and there is one letter from James M. Merrill, also a Civil war soldier, to a cousin.

Two letters date from the post-Civil War period. The first, written March 15, 1880 to a friend Dot, with an enclosed note for Mrs. [James] Estes, from K. S., who was a resident of the Utica Insane Asylum and appears to have been either a former employee or a relative of Mrs. Estes, or both. The last letter in the collection, dated February 13, 1916 is addressed to Mrs. Estes in Taft, Florida and is from a woman in Connecticut.

While this collection holds letters written between 1856 and 1916, the majority of the letters date from the Civil War period, and it is from these letters that the collection draws its value, giving a firsthand view of soldier's life during the war years.

For almost a year after enlisting, James and the Adirondack Regiment saw no major action, being involved in drilling and defending Washington. The major topics of James' letters are his health, the weather, things he would like to have sent to him, area boys in the regiment, Keene news, prices, the draft, and camp life. He occasionally comments on politics and military events of the day. James' tone was usually patriotic and cheerful; he frequently mentions his good health, and often says he is enjoying himself.

In the spring of 1863, the 118th participated in the siege of Suffolk. Until the end of July the Adirondack Regiment saw continued fighting at Antioch Church and Baker's Cross Roads, Franklin, South Anna Bridge, and Gloucester Court House, all in Virginia.
From August 1863 through February 1864 the Regiment was not involved in any major engagements. In August James writes of his sorrow upon hearing of the death of his younger sister Orphenia. In October, from Camp Barns, near Norfolk, James writes of the hanging of a Doctor Wright of Norfolk, condemned for shooting a lieutenant who was drilling black soldiers. He provides a detailed description, with a diagram.

Beginning in March, the 118th commenced its heaviest season of fighting. James’ letters are full of quick marches, rebels being spotted, and military news. The regiment fought at Ballyhack, and Smithfield and the operations around Petersburg and Richmond, including Swift Creek and Drewry’s Bluff.

In June, James was wounded in the head and neck during the first assault on Cold Harbor. Due to the seriousness of his injuries, he was sent home for three months. He returned to his regiment in September, shortly after the engagement at Chaffin’s Farm, Virginia, and remained relatively close to rebel lines until the end of October.

By special order of the corps commander, the 118th, along with the 10th New Hampshire, exchanged their Enfield guns for the new Spencer repeating rifles at the end of October. These two regiments fought as skirmishers in the battle of Fair Oaks (October 27-29), facing heavy fire. James gives a detailed account of his actions and feelings during this engagement.

Following this battle, the Adirondack regiment was engaged in building breastworks and stockades. By December they had settled into winter quarters. The fall of Petersburg on April 2, 1865 was the regiment’s last military engagement. Until the regiment was mustered out on June 13, it served guard duty in Virginia.

**Container List**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box/Folder</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>Julius M. Merrill, February 5, 1856 – August 25, 1858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>August 24, 1862 -- December 16, 1862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>January 1, 1863 – December 5, 1863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>January 3, 1864 -- December 18, 1864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/5</td>
<td>February 12, 1865 -- May 16, 1865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>March 15, 1880 -- February 13, 1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/7</td>
<td>Undated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/8</td>
<td>James Estes’ Marriage Certificate; Receipt for One Hundred Dollars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Background Sources in Special Collections


