

## Letters from Eli Slifer, 1861

by

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Born in 1818 in Chester County, Eli Slifer moved to Union County as a young boy but was forced to return to his hometown in 1831 to live with relatives after becoming orphaned. Slifer walked 100 miles to Lewisburg in 1834 to become a hat maker's apprentice and soon found employment in the canal boat industry, marrying Catharine Motter Frick of Northumberland in 1840. The couple had eight children but unfortunately three children passed away in youth. A year later, Slifer became a junior business partner at brother-in-law William Frick's canal barge firm. Slifer began his own farm



Portraits of Eli and Catharine Slifer, circa 1870. Portraits are photographs overdrawn with charcoal and are currently displayed at the Slifer House Museum. Used with permission of Slifer House Museum.

manufacturing company named Slifer, Walls, and Shriner in 1845 and for twenty-five years he gained respect from the community as well as a small fortune, which in turn impelled him to become active in Pennsylvania politics.

First serving as a member of the State Assembly, then as Whig senator of the State Senate, Slifer resigned from his three-term position as treasurer of the Commonwealth in 1861 after being named secretary of the Commonwealth by Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin. Slifer's new position, only second to that of the governor, required him to raise and deploy troops and supplies from Pennsylvania to the Union Army and at times placed him in charge of state affairs during Governor Curtin's periods of illness. The beginning of the Civil War and his new position as Secretary of the Commonwealth were not the only major changes to Slifer's life in 1861. Slifer and his family prepared to move into their newly erected, 21-room Italianate mansion built on nearly 200-acres known as the Delta Place and



Image of the Slifer residence in 1867. Photograph includes the family on the porch for a homecoming celebration after Eli Slifer's retirement from the office of Secretary of the Commonwealth.

Photo courtesy of Slifer House Museum

designed by prominent architect Samuel Sloan of Chester County. There was little time for Slifer to celebrate his new position and home, however, as duties of war beckoned him to office in Harrisburg.

Twelve letters from Eli Slifer to his wife, Catharine, dated March 7 to December 30, 1861 (with the exception on one undated letter) express the growing fear and mutual anxieties of husband and wife after Slifer departed. Always addressed to "My Dear Catharine" and signed "Affectionately Yours," the romantic lines of Slifer's letters provide insight into the progress of the war and its effects on religion and life at home. Slifer discusses in his letters his position as Secretary of the

Commonwealth, travel and health, and longing to be back at the farm with his family. The letters also contain details on items purchased by Slifer for the new house and the roles of Catharine and her children at their Lewisburg residence. One letter in particular serves as a snapshot of the Slifers' lives during the first year of the Civil War:

Harrisburg, Pa. April 22, 1861

My Dear Catharine,

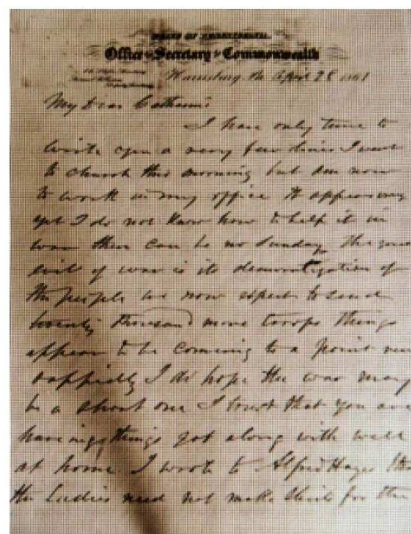
I have only time to say a word or two to show that amid the noise and confusion of this army camp, I have not forgotten you. I feel better than I did but I need rest. The Lewisburg boys left last night for Philadelphia to go on to protect the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. The poor fellows will soon find that war is a terrible thing. We had no Sunday yesterday. I slipped away long enough to hear Cookman in the morning. In the evening I had to work. I wish you would write me very fully stating how you are getting along. Let the boys hurry up the corn ground. I would have Palmer finish the spring house and ice house and all the other work that is to be done around the farm. I suppose you have had the grape seed sown about the house and in the orchard. As soon as you can dispense with the nursery man you should do so since the cattle are now sold. Chopper can work the garden. You should have some melons planted in the sandy ground below the barn, and it is also time to have a little early corn out. I may possibly come home soon if it is only to be at home an hour or two.

Very affectionately yours,  
Eli Slifer

The beginning of the Civil War was marked with the Confederate troops attacking a U.S. Military installation at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, on April 12, just ten days before Slifer wrote his letter home to his beloved Catharine. Lincoln responded by calling for a volunteer army from each state, with a reported 75,000 men called to suppress the Southern uprising. As Secretary of the Commonwealth, Slifer would

have raised and deployed troops from Pennsylvania for the Union. Perhaps the “Lewisburg boys” sent to guard the canal Slifer referred to were men of the Third Pennsylvania Light Artillery Battery B, one of the twelve companies of the Third Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery. A deeply religious man, Slifer writes to Catharine of his disappointment that he had no time for worship and rest on Sunday and even had to work in the evening, however he manages to slip away in the morning to hear “Cookman” who likely gave a short sermon. Slifer later mentions in a letter written on April 28, “In war there can be no Sunday. The great evil of war is its demoralization of the people.”

After giving his account of his situation during the rising war, Slifer turns his thoughts to life at home. Seemingly anxious about Catharine running the home and farm in his absence, Slifer requests that she respond to his letter with a full account of happenings at home and proceeds to give a list of chores that need to be completed by his wife, three sons, and the farm hands. His reminders to his Catharine include tilling the land for the corn crop and garden for vegetables, completing the construction of spring and icehouses, and planting the grape seed, corn, and watermelon.



Copy of a letter written on official office stationery from Secretary of the Commonwealth Eli Slifer to his wife, Catharine Slifer, dated April 28, 1861. The letters are currently housed in Bucknell University Archives.

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Slifer ends the letter with a wishful thought that he might slip away from his duties to join his family. Despite his deepest desires to come home, Slifer many times found himself a prisoner of his duties.

The letters show Slifer to be a dedicated leader of the state and a devoted husband and father. On April 22, six days before sending the letter above, Slifer wrote to Catharine, "I am so busy that I cannot say more than that this town is full of soldiers. You must do the best you can. I depend very much on you." Nervous to leave his wife to managing the 200-acre farm and its staff, in addition to her normal household duties, Slifer displays both anxiety of being parted from his homestead and confidence that his wife can take care of the family and farm. On July 6, he writes to his wife, "If the boys have nothing else to do they should get the posts from Beam & Kreammers. And they might do the necessary sodding about the yard whenever you think the time is right." Despite the chaos of wartime, Slifer takes time to write instructions on how to manage the property. He expresses love for his family and concern for his health, as an excerpt from a letter written on December 30 demonstrates:

Yesterday was a very long day to me indeed as it usually is when I am away from home. I have thought much of you and the children. I have so much pain about my breast that I fear my heart is growing weak. A friend of mine, L[?] McClure of Pittsburg, fell dead last week of heart disease. I am very anxious for you and the children to learn to manage the farm. Do you think you could if I should be called away suddenly?

The letters from 1861 also serve as a glance into the events of war and the roles of both men and women. On April 28, as the war was beginning, Slifer writes, "I wrote to Alfred Hayes that the ladies need not make shirts for the men who are now at camp. They may see to

equipping the next company. The state will furnish the men now in service before you could reach them.” Women played a crucial role in aiding the war, with ladies forming organizations such as the United States Christian and United States Sanitary Commissions and donating clothing and goods to churches and hospitals. Slifer also reports in the same letter, “We now expect to send twenty thousand more troops. Things appear to be coming to a point very rapidly. I do hope the war may be a short one.” Slifer, like many, would have never guessed that the war would continue for an additional three years. Other lines discuss progress of the war, including a letter from September 22 that reads of a “great victory” for the Union on the North Carolina Coast. Perhaps Slifer was referring to the Union Navy destroying the fort defending the inlet at Ocracoke, North Carolina.

The original letters from 1861 are in a larger collection and located in the Register of the Slifer-Walls Collection, Bucknell University Archives, Bertrand Library. Lynett Chilson, Dana Intern, compiled the collection from 1989-1991. Doris Dysinger, a special collections and university archives specialist, served as the project coordinator. Copies of the original letters from Eli to Catharine, including selected letters from Eli to Catharine from 1853 to 1867, as well as transcriptions of the 1861 letters, are available to the public at Slifer House Museum. The letters have the ability to help a reader imagine life of the past during the time of a disrupted home front and turbulent war, through the vivid descriptions of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, Eli Slifer, to his beloved wife.

### **Recommendations for Further Reading**

Reed, Doris Hartley. *Delta Place: 1769-1976*. Print. (No additional publishing information.)

*Delta Place is a small book compiled by Doris Hartley Reed, who helped to preserve Slifer House from demolition in 1972 with the help of her husband, the late David L. Reed, the first administrator of Lewisburg United Methodist Homes, now RiverWoods Senior Living Community. Reed prepared the application to nominate the property to the Pennsylvania Register of Historic Places and served as*

*chairperson of the History Committee during the preservation and restoration of Slifer House. The book is available at Slifer House Museum.*

Godcharles, Frederic Antes. *Chronicles of Central Pennsylvania*. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company.

<http://collection1.libraries.psu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/digitalbks2&CISOPTR=10777&REC=1>

*Compiled by Frederick A. Godcharles, a historian, author and former State Librarian of Pennsylvania, *Chronicles of Central Pennsylvania* provides insight not only into the history of the land and families of Union and surrounding counties, but also insight into the original landowner of Pennsylvania, William Penn. Penn had sold the plot of land to his two sons, Richard and Thomas Penn, that later became known as "Delta Place" and the site of the Slifer mansion.*

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