

## 2014 Graduate Research Prize

### “If I Get Home Safe”: William C. White’s Experiences in the American Civil War

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**History**

On March 25, 1862, William C. White was stationed in Washington, D.C. as part of the massive detail protecting the federal government. After obtaining a one day pass to tour the city, he and some of his comrades decided to enter the Capitol. They were astounded by what they saw. White described his trip to the Capitol as follows:

a few of us went up to the capitol and went up to the dome. In a room there is some splendid pictures of Washington and Scott on his horse, life size, all oil paintings. It is a beautiful scenery. The pictures is all life size. We nearly got lost. I happened to find the senate. We went in and I never thought there was such a splendid place in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Even though his journey to the Capitol may not have been the culmination of his experiences in the American Civil War, it certainly left a lasting impression. Like many other Irish-Catholic Philadelphians, White’s actions in the Civil War allowed him to proudly identify as an Irish-American.

While thousands of letters from Union and Confederate soldiers exist, William C. White’s *Letters, 1861-1869* provides an intriguing new perspective on the war. As an Irish-Catholic Philadelphian, White was raised in a tradition and culture that has not received much attention from scholars. White’s upbringing in the tough ethnic districts of Philadelphia was marked by prejudice, poverty, and outright violence. Despite Philadelphia’s standing as a cultural, economic, and political power, waves of ethnically focused violence periodically occurred. This violence climaxed with the destructive and deadly Nativist Riots of 1844. Irish men, women, and children were physically and verbally assaulted, Irish-Catholic churches burned, and Irish laborers forced to work for the lowest paying, most menial jobs available. White grew up in this highly charged ethnic context, and it helped to shape the ways in which he

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<sup>1</sup> White to his parents, March 25, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869* (MC17).

understood the war.

Yet, when the Civil War erupted in April 1861, White rushed to sign up for the Union Army. He joined the predominately Irish Sixty-ninth Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment (69<sup>th</sup> PA) and was quickly whisked off to Washington, D.C. White experienced some of the most pivotal moments of the war with the 69<sup>th</sup> PA, including the Battle of Antietam, the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Battle of Gettysburg, and the Overland Campaign. White's service in the Union Army, his Irish-Catholic upbringing in Philadelphia, and his marvelous set of letters offer scholars the opportunity to use White's life to study the experience of Irish-Catholic soldiers from Philadelphia. Reminiscent of African-Americans' and women's Civil War experiences, the war would become an arena for William White and Irish-Catholic Philadelphians to prove their loyalty and claim their stake in the future of the United States. White's experiences cannot be simply described by notions of fighting for "cause" and "comrades," for this picture is too clear. Rather, White and Irish-Catholic Philadelphians fought to cast aside identities as Irishmen and realize identities as Irish-Americans. The process of developing an Irish-American identity entailed service in the military, ardent Unionism, and devout religious belief. In all, the story of William White's war experiences is the story of all Irish-Catholic Philadelphians struggling to build a new life in a new land, navigating the complexities of urban America, and creating a future in a country that begrudgingly welcomed them.



This monument marks the 69<sup>th</sup> PA's location at the Battle of Gettysburg. The 69<sup>th</sup> PA was stationed near the Copse of Trees and The Angle, which took the brunt of Pickett's Charge.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 69<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment Monument at Gettysburg National Military Park, Gettysburg PA (photo by author).

William C. White's *Letters, 1861-1869* is the primary foundation of this essay.<sup>3</sup> In sixty-six letters to his parents, White discusses the mundane life of a Union soldier, describes bloody battles, asks for supplies from home, alerts his parents to the welfare of his friends and neighbors, and comments on politics. White's letters are often introspective, typically critical, and always candid. While White was an opinionated and clear writer, the passing of 150 years can create ambiguities in his accounts. Specifically, White often discusses obscure skirmishes, the command hierarchy of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA, and wounded neighbors. In an effort to clarify these ambiguities, Anthony W. McDermott's *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From its Formulation until Final Muster Out of the United States Service*, a regimental history of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA published in 1889, will be utilized.<sup>4</sup> McDermott was a dear friend of White's and wrote the most comprehensive history of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA.<sup>5</sup> McDermott lists the commanders of the regiment, details actions in the field, and attempts to compile information on the 69<sup>th</sup> PA for "more competent historians."<sup>6</sup> To reconstruct White's life and military service, a host of military records, census data, and city directories will be employed.<sup>7</sup> In particular, pension forms, veteran schedules, and muster rolls indicate where White served, how long he served, and his physical condition. The primary source base for White is significant but, to truly understand White's experiences, a broad range of secondary literature must be consulted.

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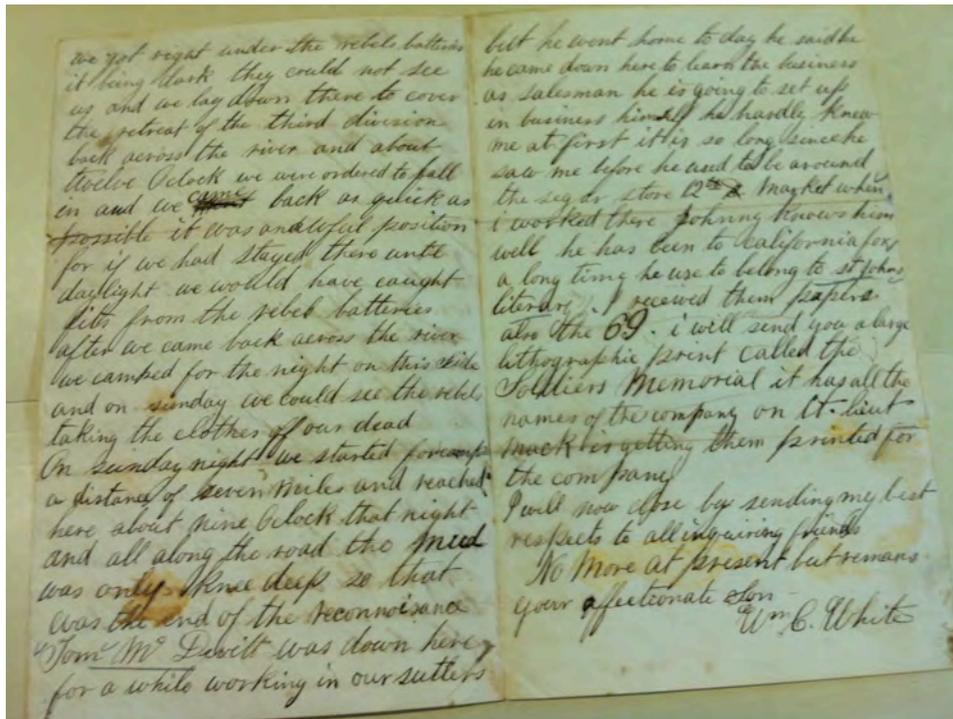
<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, White's letters only cover 1861, 1862, and 1864. The sole surviving letter from 1863 was White's description of the Battle of Gettysburg. I transcribed White's letters and quoted White word for word. As a result, I have included his misspellings and have not edited passages that include racially offensive language. William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony W. McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From its Formulation until Final Muster Out of the United States Service* (Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher & Co., 1889).

<sup>5</sup> White constantly wrote to his parents that McDermott was safe and healthy. He even called McDermott a "friend" in a letter home on March 20, 1864. White to his parents, March 20, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC 17)*.

<sup>6</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers...*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*; Ancestry, *United States City Directories, 1821-1989*; Ancestry, *1880 Census*; Ancestry, *1890 Veterans Schedule*.



An example of White's penmanship.<sup>8</sup>

The vastness of Civil War scholarship raises questions such as how to narrow the source base and how far back in the literature to explore. In terms of this paper, the most recent applicable work comes from Gary W. Gallagher's *The Union War*, which was published in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Gallagher resurrects the notion that men truly fought for "Union," which he believes is an idea that has been lost on historians. As a companion piece to his seminal work, *The Confederate War*, Gallagher pushes scholarship in new directions and attempts to spark historiographical debate. Gallagher asserts that Northern men, much like White, could fight for Union while disavowing emancipation.

Paul A. Cimbala discusses soldiers' ideals in *Soldiers North and South: The Everyday Experiences of Men Who Fought America's Civil War*, which was published in 2010.<sup>10</sup> Cimbala intricately details the lives of Union and Confederate soldiers in nine essays that cover topics such as "Daily Camp Life," "Approaching Battle," and "Engaging the Enemy." With an emphasis on ordinary soldiers, Cimbala shows that men, North and South, faced similar circumstances. Namely, bad food, distaste for company drill, frightening battlefield experiences, and a home front they deemed not loyal. Cimbala describes what life at the front and in camp would have been like for White. Randall M. Miller provides another important Civil War account in *Religion*

<sup>8</sup> William White to his parents, February 12, 1864. William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869* (MC17) (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center) (photo by author).

<sup>9</sup> Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Paul A. Cimbala, *Soldiers North and South: The Everyday Experiences of Men Who Fought America's Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

*and the American Civil War*. Miller's essay, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," asserts that religious belief was essential to the development of Irish-American identity.<sup>11</sup> As a part of a larger collection of essays, this argument places Catholicism within the spectrum of religious belief in the Civil War era. Miller claims that Irish-Catholic men felt deep religious devotion, attended mass when it was offered, and sought absolution before going into battle.

James M. McPherson also discusses the religious beliefs of soldiers in his classic work, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*.<sup>12</sup> Published in 1998, *For Cause and Comrades* has become a crucial work for understanding Civil War soldiers' motivations. McPherson claims that soldiers on both sides joined the ranks for "cause" which was defined by Victorian ideas of duty to one's family and country. While they may have joined for cause, McPherson asserts that what made men actually fight when in battle was the protection of their "comrades." The bonds of friendship and camaraderie built during long marches, harsh conditions, and battle were the reasons why men fought so hard in the Civil War. While McPherson aptly describes the majority of Civil War soldiers, White's motivations do not neatly fit within his framework. Furthermore, McPherson is in conversation with Gerald F. Linderman's *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, which was published in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Linderman posits a more critical view of individual motivations. In fact, he draws a distinction between the volunteers of 1861 and 1862, and the conscripts and bounty-induced men of 1863 to 1865. Linderman believes that the earliest recruits fought out of courage and for the defense of their country. Later recruits fought for their own financial gain or were simply forced to fight after being drafted. Linderman presents a fuller framework than McPherson for understanding White's, and many other Irish-Catholic Philadelphians', service. Yet neither Linderman nor McPherson provides the perfect formula for understanding Irish-Catholic Philadelphians.

As a result, the inclusion of specialized histories becomes necessary to complete the picture of William White's war experiences. Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin's *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*, published in 2010, outlines African-Americans' fight for equality in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> Biddle and Dubin center their work on Octavius Catto, an African-American activist and teacher, and how the struggles in his

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<sup>11</sup> Randall M. Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, editors Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

life paralleled those of African-Americans generally. In developing their argument, Biddle and Dubin recreate pre-war Philadelphia and dedicate an entire chapter to Irish-Catholic Philadelphians.<sup>15</sup> Overall, Biddle and Dubin highlight racial tensions in Philadelphia and show the social environment into which White was born.

In addition, Jay P. Dolan provides a complete history of Irish-Americans in his 2008 work entitled, *The Irish Americans*.<sup>16</sup> Dolan sketches the role of Irish men and women in the United States from the 1700s through the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960. While Dolan writes a broad history, his discussions of the Irish in Philadelphia before and during the Civil War are excellent. Dolan asserts that Philadelphia was the capital of Irish-American identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and held a posture of political, social, and religious control in Irish America. While Dolan discusses Irish-Americans broadly, Susannah Ural Bruce's *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865* solely discusses Irish-Catholic soldiers.<sup>17</sup> *The Harp and the Eagle*, which was published in 2006, is the most important work on Irish-Catholic soldiers in the Civil War and why those men fought. Bruce asserts that Irish-Catholics had dual, and competing, loyalties to both Ireland and America. Subsequently, Irish-Catholic troops fought for a myriad of reasons including money, Union, and Irish nationalism. While no one reason explains why Irish men fought, Bruce claims that service in the Union Army fostered a new allegiance to the United States. Even though an Irish-American identity would develop slowly, Bruce shows that the process began in the American Civil War. While Bruce discusses Irish-Catholic involvement in war, J. Matthew Gallman's *Receiving Erin's Children: Philadelphia, Liverpool, and the Irish Famine Migration, 1845-1855* outlines the migratory connections between Philadelphia and Liverpool, England.<sup>18</sup> *Receiving Erin's Children*, published in 2000, describes a migration process in which Irish immigrants fled from Ireland to Liverpool to Philadelphia. Gallman provides vivid detail about the living conditions of Philadelphia's Irish community with a particular emphasis on health, religion, and violence.

William L. Burton also discusses ethnic soldiers and their regiments in *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*.<sup>19</sup> Published in 1998, *Melting Pot Soldiers* details the service of mainly German and Irish regiments in the Civil War. Specifically, Burton looks at Irish soldiers' hatred of abolitionists and Irish actions at Fredericksburg. Burton also states that while

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 6, which is titled, "The Irish, The Killers, and Squire McMullen." Ibid., 115.

<sup>16</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Susannah Ural Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> J. Matthew Gallman, *Receiving Erin's Children: Philadelphia, Liverpool, and the Irish Famine Migration, 1845-1855* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*, second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

Irish regiments may have seemed united to outsiders, they were in fact riddled with factions. Each faction was looking for advancement and power in post-war America. James Hennesey, S.J. outlines a differing aspect of Irish-Americans' war experiences in *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*.<sup>20</sup> Published in 1981, *American Catholics* is a comprehensive history of Catholics in America from the first Catholic diocese in Baltimore to the early 1980s. While most of Hennesey's arguments are beyond the scope of this work, he does have a fine chapter on Catholics in the Civil War. Hennesey argues that the Catholic Church remained intact during the war due to an abundance of priests. Also published in 1981 was John Modell's and Lynn H. Lees's essay, "The Irish Countryman Urbanized: A Comparative Perspective on the Famine Migration."<sup>21</sup> Modell and Lees argue that Philadelphia was a critical point of entry for Irish immigrants. They claim the highly urbanized environment of Philadelphia was markedly different from Ireland and, as a result, immigrants had to adapt to this new lifestyle. Dennis Clark's *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* continues this theme and is the only full-length account of the Irish in Philadelphia.<sup>22</sup> Published in 1973, *The Irish in Philadelphia* was an early attempt at uncovering the lost story of Irish Philadelphians. Clark focuses on social aspects such as housing, fraternal clubs, and other Irish causes. Clark's work is a start to understanding the Irish community of Philadelphia but, more than forty years later, much work remains.

For purposes of brevity, only one or two of the most crucial sources for each of my arguments have been cited. Since Irish-Catholic Philadelphians in the Civil War have not received much scholarly attention, it was vital to read the newest works since each contained newly discovered material. Therefore, only relatively new scholarship ranging from the 1970s to the present has been utilized. In this paper, I argue that Irish-Catholic service in the Union Army was out of devotion to Unionism. This argument is in line with Gary Gallagher's placement of Unionism at the core of why many Northern soldiers fought. In order to better understand this Unionism, William Burton's detailed discussions of ethnic regiments have been included. Moreover, Randall Miller provides a framework for understanding Irish-Catholic religious belief. I argue that an Irish brand of Catholicism was vital to keeping men in the field and helping to define what it meant to be Irish-American. Finally, Bruce allows for a detailed discussion of Irish-American identity through her claims that the Irish had

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<sup>20</sup> James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> John Modell and Lynn H. Lees, "The Irish Countryman Urbanized: A Comparative Perspective on the Famine Migration," in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the 19th Century*, editor Theodore Hershberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

competing loyalties. Bruce asserts that Irish-Catholics viewed themselves as both Irish and American. I slightly disagree and argue that a distinct Irish-American identity, which placed America above Ireland, developed during the Civil War era.

To understand William White's war experiences, we must understand his life and the social environment in which he was raised. However, reconstructing White's life poses some challenges. One such challenge is piecing together his childhood. White's birth records have been lost, he does not appear in census data until 1880, and he does not speak of his childhood in his letters. After combining information from muster rolls and a pension form dated 1892, entitled "Declaration for an Original Disability Pension," it seems likely that White was born in 1844.<sup>23</sup> His parents were both born in Ireland and migrated to Philadelphia before the Great Famine of the late 1840s.<sup>24</sup> Since White commonly discusses the "12<sup>th</sup> Street Boys," a nickname for his company in the 69<sup>th</sup> PA, it is reasonable to assert that White grew up in the Moyamensing section of South Philadelphia.<sup>25</sup> While White's childhood is murky, he comes into clearer focus during the Civil War. The pension form from 1892 lists White's height as 5 foot 9 inches, his complexion as light, his hair as light, and his eyes as green.<sup>26</sup> White joined the 69<sup>th</sup> PA on August 19, 1861 for a three year enlistment.<sup>27</sup> He was promoted to corporal on February 1, 1862 after just five months' service and promoted to sergeant one year later on February 1, 1863.<sup>28</sup> White was mustered out of the army on August 26, 1864 when his three year enlistment expired.<sup>29</sup> Following the war, White disappears from the record until July 1869, when he wrote his parents from Duluth, Minnesota where he was working as a laborer for the Lake Superior and Mississippi Rail Road.<sup>30</sup> It is unknown how long White stayed in Minnesota, but by 1880 White was back

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<sup>23</sup> Muster Rolls: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*; Declaration for an Original Disability Pension: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>24</sup> Ancestry, "William White," in *1880 Census*.

<sup>25</sup> This information was derived by combining White's discussions on 12<sup>th</sup> street and the fact that S. 12<sup>th</sup> Street was located in the ethnic neighborhood of Moyamensing. It seems likely that Moyamensing is where White lived. This cannot be completely verified but it would be illogical for White to mention 12<sup>th</sup> Street so fondly without having some personal connection. White to his parents, January 11, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>26</sup> The form also claims that a middle aged White had "rheumatism," "impaired vision in both eyes," and "heart disease." Declaration for an Original Disability Pension: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>27</sup> Muster Rolls: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*; Ancestry, "William C White," in *1890 Veterans Schedule*.

<sup>28</sup> Muster Rolls: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>29</sup> Muster Rolls: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*; Ancestry, "William C White," in *1890 Veterans Schedule*; Declaration for an Original Disability Pension: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>30</sup> White to his parents, July 13, 1869: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

in Philadelphia working as a trolley car driver.<sup>31</sup> White never married and did not own a home. Instead, he lived as a boarder in the house of a German immigrant named Anne Gasslein at 1629 Filbert Street from 1880 until at least 1892.<sup>32</sup> Documentary evidence for White ends in 1892 so it is impossible to know when and where White died. As a whole, White's life was typical for an Irish-Catholic Philadelphian. He was born to immigrant parents, worked menial jobs, and rented a room in a boarding house. It was White's conventional life that makes him fascinating because he allows scholars to begin to understand average Irish-Catholic Philadelphians.

While reconstructing White's life poses challenges, reconstructing the social environment in which he was raised is much easier. Antebellum Philadelphia was a hotbed of Nativist sentiment. Know-Nothingism had a strong presence in Philadelphia in the 1840s and its heated rhetoric engendered intolerance towards Catholics, particularly Irish-Catholics. Burton describes this prejudice in Philadelphia when he states, "brotherly love was conspicuous by its absence in Philadelphia in the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>33</sup> Waves of periodic violence directed towards Irish-Catholics occurred throughout the pre-war period, but none were as serious as the Nativist Riots of 1844.<sup>34</sup> The riots began at the Nanny Goat Market in Kensington and quickly spread across the city.<sup>35</sup> Nativist rioters beat, shot, and stabbed Irishmen and also burned St. Augustine's, an Irish-Catholic church located at Fourth and Vine.<sup>36</sup> The burning of St. Augustine's indicates that rioters specifically targeted Irish-Catholics. For instance, Bruce states, "Protestants passed several German Catholic churches in rioting in Kensington and left them unscathed, focusing instead on Irish Catholics, whom they viewed as the most impoverished, lazy, and criminal in America."<sup>37</sup> The Nativist Riots of 1844 ended when the militia imposed martial law, but the damage was done and ten people had died.<sup>38</sup>

Despite periods of violence, antebellum Philadelphia, as Dolan states, was "the capitol of Irish America."<sup>39</sup> In fact, Modell and Lees point out that Philadelphia in 1850 had the sixth largest population of Irish people in the

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<sup>31</sup> Ancestry, "William White," in *1880 Census*; Declaration for an Original Disability Pension: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>32</sup> Ancestry, "William C White, 1881," "William C White, 1886," "William C White, 1887," "William C White 1889," in *United States City Directories, 1821-1989*; Ancestry, "William White," in *1880 Census*; Declaration for an Original Disability Pension: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>33</sup> Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> The Nativist Riots occurred the same year that White was likely born. He was born into a city that was deeply divided along ethnic lines.

<sup>35</sup> Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 127.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 129-130.

<sup>39</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, x.

world.<sup>40</sup> By 1850, Irish-Catholic Philadelphians represented 18 percent of the city's population.<sup>41</sup> As a result of this massive influx of immigrants, Irish-Catholic Philadelphians grouped together in ethnic neighborhoods such as Northern Liberties, Kensington, and Southwark.<sup>42</sup> Dolan describes the living conditions of the Irish in Philadelphia as "not as congested as New York or Boston, but the Irish neighborhoods still housed some of the worst tenements, described by one observer as 'no better in any respect than pens of cattle.'"<sup>43</sup> This heavily populated urban environment was profoundly different from the green fields of Ireland. Philadelphia was an industrial city which Clark describes as "one of the greatest conceivable contrasts to the fields and villages of the Irish countryside."<sup>44</sup> Instead of agricultural work, which was common in Ireland, Irish-Catholic Philadelphians worked as laborers, stevedores, and ditch diggers. Biddle and Dubin call this work "donkey labor" and state, "it was common to hear Gaelic on those docks as Irishmen loaded cargo from wagons onto ships and from ships onto wagons."<sup>45</sup> Workers were paid menial wages, worked long hours, and often were barred from higher paying jobs.<sup>46</sup> These harsh conditions caused most Irish-Catholic Philadelphians to live in poverty and under the constant threat of Nativist violence.

Even though Irish-Catholic Philadelphians had difficulties at home, they eagerly filled the ranks of the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.<sup>47</sup> White joined the newly created Company I of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA, which was carved out of the Second Regiment of the Philadelphia County Militia, following the expiration of Lincoln's initial call for troops in April 1861.<sup>48</sup> The 69<sup>th</sup> PA was a predominately Irish-Catholic regiment and was led by Colonel Joshua 'Paddy' Owens, who was actually Welsh, not Irish.<sup>49</sup> Bruce claims that the 69<sup>th</sup> PA was heavily influenced by the renowned Sixty-Ninth New York Regiment of the Irish Brigade, "right down to their regimental number."<sup>50</sup> On August 19, 1861, the 69<sup>th</sup> PA was mustered into service with the colors of both the United States and Ireland flying proudly. Bruce highlights the 69<sup>th</sup> PA's

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<sup>40</sup> These numbers include Ireland and Great Britain. Modell and Lees also state that "the Irish inflow into both London and Philadelphia around 1850 was larger than the contemporary movement into Dublin or any other city in Ireland." Modell and Lees, "The Irish Countryman Urbanized: A Comparative Perspective on the Famine Migration," 358.

<sup>41</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 123; Biddle and Dubin claim that Irish workers typically made between 63 and 80 cents a day.

<sup>47</sup> Dolan claims that approximately 140,000 Irish men served in the Union Army throughout the war. Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*, 148.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 73.

colors when she states that they were “edged with gold trim, the green banner bore an image of the old Irish Harp, with its Maid of Erin, on one side and the coat of arms of Pennsylvania on the other.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, White requested that his parents send him “Anthony McDermott’s photographs of the National and Irish flag of our regiment.”<sup>52</sup> These dual flags were a visual representation of how the 69<sup>th</sup> PA understood their identity.

Participation in battle also helped soldiers develop an Irish-American identity. White’s first combat experience came at the Battle of White Oak Swamp on June 30, 1862.<sup>53</sup> This engagement was a part of the Seven Days Battles during Major General George McClellan’s Peninsular Campaign.<sup>54</sup> The Peninsular Campaign aimed to capture the Confederate capitol of Richmond by landing troops on the Virginia Peninsula. While the Battle of White Oak Swamp was indecisive, the Seven Days Battles were a resounding Confederate victory and caused the Peninsular Campaign to fail. In describing his first combat experience, White was surprised at how he reacted to battle. He writes, “Well I never knew what it was to be in a battle until the battle of White Oak Swamps. I thought a fellow would be skeered out of his wits but instead of that it seemed like play for we would be laughing and talking to each other yelling and firing away.”<sup>55</sup> Even though White thought battle “seemed like play,” he did constantly discuss how loud and distressing the sound of battle was. White states, “We can sit in our tent and hear the sound of the cannon on this side and in a few seconds the explosion of the shell on the other side.”<sup>56</sup> The sounds of battle included constant explosions and the sound of men dying, which Cimballa claims created an “aural hell.”<sup>57</sup> At this point in the war, White confidently boasted of a quick Union victory, supported the Army’s commanders (particularly McClellan), and cheerfully wrote of his experiences in camp. This would all begin to change when White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA entered Sharpsburg, Maryland.

After defeating the Union on the Peninsula, Confederate commander Robert E. Lee pressed his advantage and invaded Maryland. The Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac met at Sharpsburg, and the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 166; White also discusses the regiment’s flags when he states “Col Owens [Joshua Owens] went on to Harrisburg to get flags for the regiment. I believe an Irish flag, the harp.” White to his parents, January 9, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>52</sup> This is the same Anthony McDermott that wrote the 69<sup>th</sup> PA’s regimental history. White to his parents, July 9, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>53</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> As White was transported to the Peninsula via ship, he saw the armored Union steamer, the USS Monitor, and was less than impressed. White writes “If you seen that boat the Monitor which fought the Merrimac you would laugh at it. . . . it is about 3 inches out of the water and plated with iron. . . . I had to laugh at it. It is like a raft with a cheese box on it.” White to his parents, April 11, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>55</sup> White to his parents, July 13, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>56</sup> White to his parents, February 13, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>57</sup> Cimballa, *Soldiers North and South*, 156.

result was the single bloodiest day of the war. On September 17, 1862, White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA were sent into a tough battle where White was appalled at the bloodshed.<sup>58</sup> White described the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam as follows:

I took a walk over to the battlefield. I saw, it made me sick. It is worse than Fair Oaks. It was four miles long and the dead lie all along. In one place there was a regular line of battle for about one hundred yards. They layed in twos when Rickett's battery opened grape and canister. It mowed the rebels down like grass. I saw a great many of our dead, but twice as many rebels.<sup>59</sup>

White continued his description of the Battle of Antietam on October 14, 1862. He states, "Our company is very small now. When we went to Camp Observation we had ninety left. We lost fifty-five dead, wounded, and deserted. Our regiment had 900 men when we left Camp Observation. Now we cannot raise four hundred."<sup>60</sup> White was obviously shaken by the mass casualties of the Battle of Antietam and how those casualties reorganized his regiment. While White was still optimistic about the prospect of Union victory, he began to question whether the Union Army's means justified its ends.

The Battle of Fredericksburg helped to clarify White's and many Irish-Catholic Philadelphians' questions about the war. On December 12, 1862, White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA entered Fredericksburg, Virginia where they dodged Confederate fire and looted the town. White describes foraging when he states, "we could get anything we wanted. We got one thing we wanted that was chewing tobacco. We got boxes of it. I have got from ten to fifteen dollars worth."<sup>61</sup> While December 12 was full of looting, December 13 became infamous for Irish-Americans. The newly appointed head of the Army of the Potomac, General Ambrose Burnside, ordered an uphill attack on a protected Confederate position.<sup>62</sup> White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA charged up Marye's Heights where they were quickly cut down by thick Confederate fire.

White describes the attack when he states:

That was a terrible battle at Fredericksburg. Our brigade was in the hottest of it. They tried to relieve our brigade four times but as soon as the

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<sup>58</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> White to his parents, September 26, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>60</sup> White to his parents, October 14, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>61</sup> White also notes that men stole jewelry, silverware, "a splendid gold watch," and all kinds of groceries. He states that the paper he wrote his letter on was a "sheet of Fredericksburg paper." White to his parents, December 15, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>62</sup> George McClellan was replaced by President Lincoln after the failure of the Peninsular Campaign and McClellan's reluctance to pursue the Army of Northern Virginia following the Battle of Antietam.

line would get ahead of us they would break and run in every direction, so they had to wait until dark before they relieved as the bullets and shells were coming too hot for them.<sup>63</sup>

After failing to take the Heights, White had to lie prone on the ground as Confederate fire whizzed over his head. It was not until nightfall that White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA could safely escape down the Heights and back across the Rappahannock River. White describes the scene for his parents in terms easier for them to understand when he states:

It was like as if the rebels were on top of Fairmount and us charging up the hill and the rebels keeping a steady fire of musketry and grape canister on us. Any man of sense would know that it could not be taken. Old Burnside did not get a good name this time for all the soldiers call him Butcher Burnside.<sup>64</sup>

The disdain for General Burnside was the first indication of White's and Irish-Catholics' changing view of the war. Irish regiments took heavy casualties at Fredericksburg, which caused many Irish-Catholics to wonder if Union commanders were purposely placing Irish regiments in positions to be slaughtered. The nickname Butcher Burnside would stick and Irish-Catholic support for the war would never fully recover.

Despite the disaster at Fredericksburg, White did not desert the army or fail to support the cause of Union. In fact, White and the Irish-Catholic Philadelphians of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA played a prominent role in perhaps the most crucial moment of the war. July 3, 1863 was the third day of a massive battle between Union and Confederate forces in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, only 150 miles from Philadelphia.<sup>65</sup> White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA were stationed in the direct middle of the Union line behind a low stone wall on Cemetery Ridge. Bruce describes the position of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA at the Battle of Gettysburg when she states, "although they did not know it at the time, the 69<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania's line rested near two of the most famous landmarks at the Battle of Gettysburg: 'The Angle' and the 'Copse of Trees.'"<sup>66</sup> This position placed the 69<sup>th</sup> PA as the main target of what would become known as Pickett's Charge. After a two hour artillery bombardment, the 69<sup>th</sup> PA faced a mile-wide, 12,500-man Confederate force marching toward their position. White describes the first part of the Confederate

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<sup>63</sup> White to his parents, December 22, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>64</sup> White to his parents, December 25, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>65</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer*, 29-30; White described the fight on July 2, 1862 as "On the 2nd of July the rebels marched out on us and drove the men in front of us back and then marched to our stone wall. We fought them over an hour and then they turned and flew in all directions." White to his parents, July 5, 1863: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 168.

advance on July 3: “On the 3<sup>rd</sup> they opened fire on our stone wall with over one hundred pieces of artillery. The shot and shell flew thick and fast.... After they shelled us for about two hours they marched out in line of battle and charged on our stone wall.”<sup>67</sup> As Confederate Major General George Pickett’s forces came closer, Union artillery loaded with grape shot and canister as well as Union musket fire destroyed large sections of the Confederate lines. However, the Confederate advance overran White’s initial position by “about 50 yards” before White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA “turned and drove them back.”<sup>68</sup> The Confederate penetration of Union lines on July 3, 1863 was the high water mark for the Confederacy. Confederate forces would not come closer to victory than they had at Gettysburg and they would not invade the North again. Because of White and the 69<sup>th</sup> PA, Pickett’s Charge ended in abysmal failure and helped to turn the war in favor of the Union.<sup>69</sup>

Even though White had a vital role in the victory at Gettysburg, he decided to not reenlist at the end of his three year enlistment period. While it is impossible to know exactly why White refused to reenlist, it is possible that White was tired of fighting and felt he had honorably served his country long enough.<sup>70</sup> White details his decision to not reenlist when he states:

You need not expect me to reenlist. There is not much talk of it in our brigade. I don’t think there is twenty five in the brigade that have reenlisted. Them that did reenlist got their eye shut on the thirty day furlough. I am sure that they will not get me again, no matter how much they try.<sup>71</sup>

As White served out his final few months, he was thrust to the fore in the Overland Campaign and the Siege of Petersburg. The Overland Campaign, which ran from May to June 1864, and the Siege of Petersburg, which ran from June 1864 to March 1865 were part of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant’s plan to break the Army of Northern Virginia by constant campaigning.<sup>72</sup> White describes the Overland Campaign as never-ending and states, “the campaign is still going on and I don’t know when it will end but I hope it will not last long . .

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<sup>67</sup> White to his parents, July 5, 1863: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The 69<sup>th</sup> PA Monument is just to the right of the High Water Mark of the Confederacy if you are looking at the Union line from the Confederate line. The Monument was built with donations from the 69<sup>th</sup> PA’s members and McDermott lists “W.C. White” as donating \$5 towards construction. McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer*, 101.

<sup>70</sup> It is also possible that White refused to reenlist due to his disagreement with Union war policy or circumstances at home. What we do know is that White felt he had done his time and decided to move on.

<sup>71</sup> White to his parents, January 13, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>72</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer*, 38 and 47.

. we have been sent into other brigades to fight where regiments of nearly one thousand strong have broken and run.”<sup>73</sup> While White wished to finish his service peacefully, he engaged in numerous large battles and small skirmishes. White’s final battle was the Second Battle of Ream’s Station, which occurred on August 25, 1864.<sup>74</sup> He describes the battle and his ensuing mustering out of the service the next day, August 26, 1864, when he states, “I am still well after going through about as tough a fight as ever I was in which I will tell you about if I get home safe. It was on the Weldon Railroad but I suppose you have heard of it by this time.”<sup>75</sup> With that, White’s experiences in the field ended and he was honorably discharged from service.

White’s experiences reveal his deep seated support of the Union. White and many other Irish-Catholic Philadelphians were strict Unionists who fought for the ideals of freedom and democracy. As Gallagher points out, a Union victory “meant keeping aloft the banner of democracy to inspire anyone outside the United States who suffered at the hands of oligarchs.”<sup>76</sup> The ideal of keeping freedom and democracy alive in the United States became a popular cause among Irish-Catholics. Indeed, many Irish troops thought preserving the Union gave hope to those in Ireland suffering under British rule. For instance, McPherson states, “If secession fragmented America into the dis-United States, European aristocrats and reactionaries would smile in smug satisfaction at the confirmation of their belief that this harebrained experiment in government of, by, and for the people would indeed perish from the earth.”<sup>77</sup> Irish-Catholics wanted to ensure that American democracy and hopes for Irish independence would not be destroyed. However, Irish-Catholic loyalty to Unionism was tested when George McClellan, a Philadelphian, was relieved of command. McClellan was a committed Democrat, which made him popular with the Democratic-leaning Irish community. White recalls McClellan’s somber ride away from the Army, “All the boys was sorry about McClellan leaving. When he passed us he said: ‘Boys stand by your green flag.’”<sup>78</sup>

However, White’s racism and anti-abolitionism are also evident.<sup>79</sup> For instance, White states, “we’ve heard that Lincoln and Grant visited the hospitals at City Point and the wounded cursed them out of the hospital. The papers say Lincoln was cheered wherever he went. Down here it must have been the niggers and mules that cheered him.”<sup>80</sup> White’s 1864 description of only “niggers and mules” cheering Lincoln and Grant indicates that he did not agree

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<sup>73</sup> White to his parents, May 31, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>74</sup> McDermott, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer*, 47.

<sup>75</sup> White to his parents, August 26, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>76</sup> Gallagher, *The Union War*, 34.

<sup>77</sup> McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 112.

<sup>78</sup> White to his parents, November 23, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>79</sup> White was a proud Democrat, a War Democrat, but a Democrat nonetheless. He disagreed with Lincoln and Grant, but also felt that the war had to be conducted until Union victory.

<sup>80</sup> White to his parents, June 26, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

with Union policy following the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, White's letters are rife with derogatory and stereotypical descriptions of African-Americans. White describes runaway slaves escaping to freedom in Maryland as "two niggers that swam across from Virginia on horses."<sup>81</sup> In describing the South to his parents, White states, "the South is as far as I seen of it that it is nothing but niggers and wilderness, swamps and woods."<sup>82</sup> White also indicates that the men of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA commonly discussed African-Americans, concluding that "all the men around here swear they will drive every nigger out of Philadelphia."<sup>83</sup> When in 1863 the Lincoln administration finally allowed for the creation of United States Colored Troop regiments, White described their lack of fortitude in battle in an 1864 letter, writing, "There is niggers in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> corps. When the niggers got in the second line they broke and ran in all directions."<sup>84</sup> Such descriptions of African-Americans were common for an Irish-Catholic Philadelphian. African-Americans often lived in close proximity to Irish-Catholics and they would compete for the same jobs.<sup>85</sup> These race-based tensions caused many Irish-Catholic Philadelphians to verbally, and at times physically, assault African-Americans. Despite White's disagreement with emancipation as official Union policy, he served out his enlistment.

White served his country for three years and was a part of some of the most crucial moments of the Civil War. He and his comrades' actions on their home soil at Gettysburg helped to save the Union. White's enlistment early in the war and the absence of discussions about bounties or money indicate that White likely served out of loyalty to the Union. It was this sense of protecting democracy, freedom, and Union that caused Irish-Catholic Philadelphians to fight and die. Burton aptly summarizes Irish-Catholic notions of service: "Irish soldiers dying before the Stone Wall at Fredericksburg did not sacrifice their lives for Irish independence; for the most part they fought for the same reasons their compatriots fought – to support their friends and comrades and to preserve the Union."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> White to his parents, December 1861: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>82</sup> White to his parents, July 13, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>83</sup> White to his parents, May 1, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>84</sup> White to his parents, July 31, 1864: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>85</sup> Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 119; Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 53.

<sup>86</sup> Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*, 153.



“Wm C White” is listed under Corporals in the middle pane for Company I.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, Irish-American identity was not solely based on military service or Unionism. White’s experiences in camp show that Catholicism had a key role in developing an Irish-American identity. White was a devout adherent to Catholicism and attended mass whenever it was possible. Army movements, drill schedules, and picket duty commonly disrupted the ability of priests to conduct mass, but when it was available White attended. White describes attending mass while moving through Harpers Ferry, West Virginia when he states, “There is a splendid little church painted fancy in Harpers Ferry, so we went down there yesterday, Sunday, and heard mass.”<sup>88</sup> While attending mass was important for all Catholic soldiers, mass was particularly vital for Irish-Catholic soldiers. Irish-Catholics composed a large portion of Northern Catholics, especially Philadelphia Catholics, and they created their own brand of “militant Catholicism.”<sup>89</sup> This brand of Irish Catholicism sought to pacify Nativism, eradicate anti-Catholic sentiments, and build Irish-dominated parishes.<sup>90</sup> For example, White writes, “we had a mass here this morning by one of the priests of the Irish Brigade. Father Dillon, he comes over every Sunday and says a mass.... I never wore that little Irish prayer book, the other I always carry in my pocket.”<sup>91</sup> The protection of White’s “little Irish prayer book” and

<sup>87</sup> Pennsylvania Monument at Gettysburg National Military Park, Gettysburg, PA (photo by author).

<sup>88</sup> White to his parents, March 3, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>89</sup> Miller, “Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War,” 262-264.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-264; Miller also asserts that Church leaders understood that Catholics would be judged, whether rightly or wrongly, off their service in the army. As a result, Miller states, “The Catholic church therefore sought to ensure that the soldiers fought bravely, acted responsibly, and honored their Catholic faith.”

<sup>91</sup> White to his parents, July 13, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

his attendance of Irish Brigade masses speak to this brand of Irish Catholicism.

In addition, the Irish Brigade masses White spoke of were typically conducted by Father William Corby (or who White identified as “Father Corbin of the 88<sup>th</sup> N.Y”).<sup>92</sup> When Corby could not say mass, James Hennesey asserts that “Jesuits from the French missions in New York and the South and the Maryland Province, Holy Cross priests from Notre Dame, Redemptorists and secular priests from a score of dioceses” could fill the void.<sup>93</sup> The connection between priest and soldier was most profound in the moments before battle when men sought absolution. Men had their faith tested before entering battle and the comforting words of a priest could give men the strength needed to sustain their belief.<sup>94</sup> This role of Catholicism for White, and other Irish-Catholic Philadelphians, was in line with soldiers of different religious belief in both armies. For example, Gerald Linderman states that soldiers believed “God would ensure the survival of the soldier of perfect faith, the battlefield victory of the army of devotion, and the triumph of its cause.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, the Catholic Church was not only a constant source of comfort and strength, but it was also a way to ensure Union triumph. Whether it was through Sunday mass in camp, absolution before battle, or a prayer book in a pocket, a particularly Irish brand of Catholicism became inextricably linked to what it meant to be Irish-American.

In all, White’s experiences as well as those of other Irish-Catholic Philadelphians indicated that the Civil War helped to develop an Irish-American identity. A song written for White’s 69<sup>th</sup> PA perhaps best condenses this notion:

Our country we are bound to save,  
And keep evermore,  
And soon the stars and stripes shall wave,  
On all our glorious shore.  
The stars and stripes, our own true flag,  
That we do prize so dear,  
There is nothing like brave Owens,  
And his Irish Volunteers.<sup>96</sup>

Foremost in this song is the claim that the 69<sup>th</sup> PA was “bound to save” their “country.” The country invoked in the song was not the home of the 69<sup>th</sup> PA’s

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<sup>92</sup> Corby is best known for the general absolution he gave to soldiers before the second day of battle at Gettysburg. White to his parents, December 22, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>93</sup> Hennesey, *American Catholics*, 155.

<sup>94</sup> Miller, “Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War,” 268.

<sup>95</sup> Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 103.

<sup>96</sup> “Col. Owens Gallant Irish Volunteers” composed by Arthur Fadden, published by J.H. Johnson’s Card and Job Printing Office, Philadelphia, PA: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

ancestors, Ireland, but their home, the United States. The song continues by claiming that the stars and stripes were the 69<sup>th</sup> PA's "own true flag." Even though the 69<sup>th</sup> PA carried both the colors of the United States and Ireland into battle, this song indicates which of those two was more important. In general, Irish-American identity tended to be overtly patriotic. This patriotism was vividly represented by White when he states, "we will march away from Dixie land to the tune of Yankee Doodle. I would like to spend the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in Philadelphia."<sup>97</sup> White spoke of Fourth of July celebrations because they became important social occasions for Irish-Americans. White describes July 4, 1862 as, "It is fourth of July. Here the cannons is roaring all day and the bands playing. Gen'l McClellan reviewed us today."<sup>98</sup> Irish-American inclusion in Fourth of July celebrations became symbolic of their inclusion in American society. No longer did they consider themselves Irishmen living in America, but full Americans albeit with Irish ancestors. Tied to this Irish-American identity were, as Miller states, "loyalty to the memory of Irish ancestors, the needs of Irish liberation, and the demands of the Catholic church."<sup>99</sup> Irish-Americans aided newly arrived Irish immigrants and Irish liberation causes through monetary donations.<sup>100</sup> With the exception of a handful of men in the Fenian Brotherhood, almost all Irish-Americans began to distance themselves from Ireland.<sup>101</sup> Instead, they focused on building their local communities and devoting themselves solely to America.

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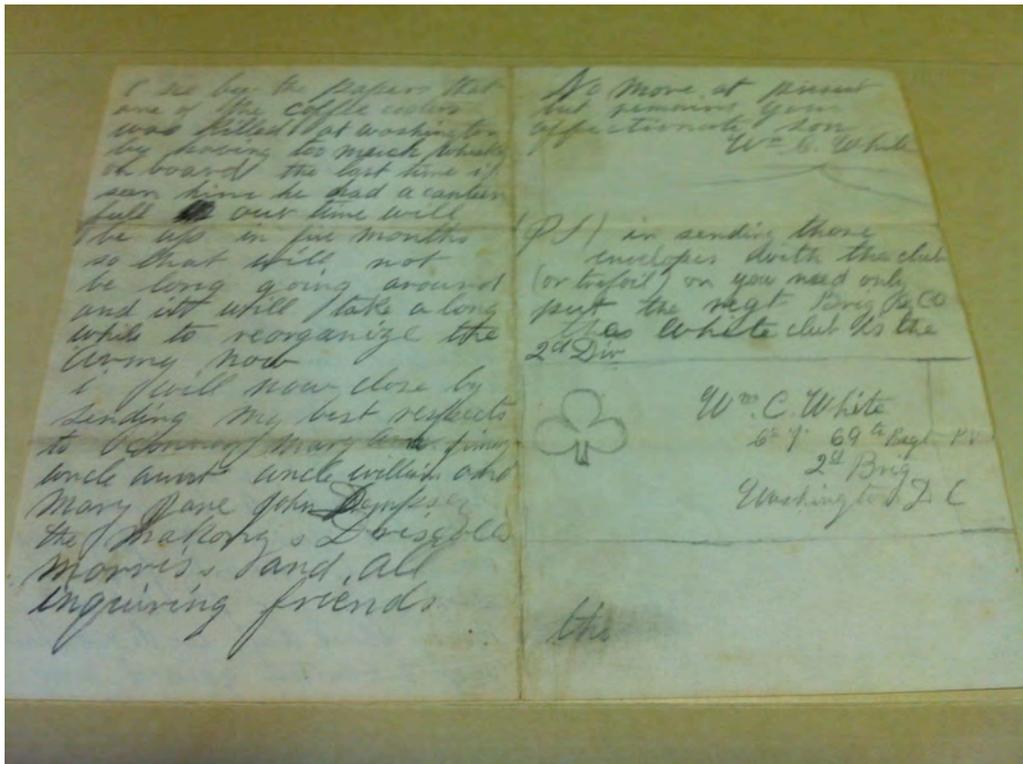
<sup>97</sup> White to his parents, June 14, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>98</sup> White to his parents, July 4, 1862: William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)*.

<sup>99</sup> Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," 273.

<sup>100</sup> Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 244.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 193; The Fenians served in the Union Army to gain military experience which they could export back to Ireland and use to fight against British rule. Ultimately, the Fenians did not accomplish much but they did hold a noticeable place within the Irish community for a period of time in the mid-nineteenth century.



A hand drawn shamrock placed directly next to White's signature.<sup>102</sup>

In conclusion, William White's experiences in the American Civil War were also the experiences of Irish-Americans creating a unique identity. Through service in the Union army, ardent Unionism, and devout religious belief, individuals of Irish descent changed the ethnic paradigm. No longer would the Irish be victims of prejudice, poverty, and violence, but members of a unique American community. While the Civil War may have been incredibly destructive for many aspects of American life, it was constructive for Irish-Americans as they began to create a new identity. White's experiences highlight this construction and show that ordinary individuals had a profound impact on what being Irish-American meant.

<sup>102</sup> William White to his parents, March 15, 1864. William C. White, *Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17)* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center) (photo by author).

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