

# Prison Pens: Gender, Memory, and Imprisonment in the Writings of Mollie Scollay and Wash Nelson, 1863-1866

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## Review

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Tim Williams (University of Oregon) and Evan Kutzler (Georgia Southwestern University) have presented a truly remarkable two-way correspondence between Confederate prisoner of war Wash (George Washington) Nelson, Jr. and his fiancée, Mollie Scollay. The couple's story reflects a people caught in the crosshairs of war. Williams's expertise in intellectual and gender history, and Kutler's expertise in Civil War prisons combine to contextualize and interpret Wash's experience of captivity, through both his letters to Mollie and his post-war memoirs, and Mollie's experiences on the home front, which included her perception of Wash's imprisonment.

Wash and Mollie hailed from Middleway, a town that in 1863 ended up on the border between Unionist West Virginia and the Old Dominion, which remained in the Confederacy. This nearly complete set of correspondence from prison and the home front paints a vivid picture of the wartime experiences of two elite Virginians, also cousins, whose lineage is connected to some of the state's most prominent families, including the Randolph, Page, Harris, and Nelson families. Wash, like his great-grandfather General Thomas Nelson, was involved in a new national experiment. Thomas Nelson was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, while Wash threw his support behind the Confederacy, rising to the rank of Captain in the artillery. Thomas Nelson's experience led to American independence, while Wash faced imprisonment at the hands of Union officials and, in the process, experienced the defeat of the Confederacy.

Wash and Mollie's romance began a few months before his capture by Union soldiers in New Market, Virginia in October 1863, perhaps when he was home on furlough. From that point on, the two were forced to develop their relationship under the watchful eye of Union inspectors who restricted letters going into and out of prison to one page. They also depended on the mail

delivery, which could pose challenges given that Union officials transferred Wash from Camp Chase (Ohio), to Johnson's Island (Ohio), to Point Lookout (Maryland), to Fort Delaware (on the Delaware-New Jersey border), to Morris Island (South Carolina). Both experienced common fears that letters would be lost, that Mollie would not know where to address her letters, or that inspectors would deem their letters too long and refuse to send them.

The correspondence between Wash and Mollie highlight other familiar aspects of the prisoner of war experience as they engage in gossip about acquaintances on the home front and in the army, bolster each other's spirits with talk of future plans, express faith in God, and, in the case of Confederate prisoners, seek approval from loved ones when it came time for Wash to take an oath of allegiance to the United States upon the Confederacy's defeat. Wash and Mollie's concerns and experiences are at once representative of and depart from the broader experiences of prisoners of war and their families at home. The departures are apparent since Wash and Mollie are members of the elite. For example, Wash writes of bouts with dysentery and scurvy, and of his general longing to be at home with his beloved. These were common illnesses and desires of prisoners of war on both sides. On the other hand, Mollie writes of attending dinner parties on the Southern home front while being cognizant of Wash's "unpleasant situation," and Wash encourages Mollie to write by sending her stamps from prison to affix on her letters to him (49). Mollie was surprised that she received stamps from "a *poor* prisoner," an act that to her seemed "contrary to *the rules of warfare*" (74). Mollie's reaction serves as a reminder that the war's impact and individual experiences could vary according to class.

Both Wash and Mollie were devoted to the Confederate cause and reluctantly accepted defeat, even though it meant that they could reunite. As Kutzler and Williams note, their correspondence echoes the Lost Cause, especially as Wash frets that his having fought for a defeated cause and taking the oath of allegiance might cause Mollie to form a negative opinion about him. Mollie's assurance to Wash in a letter dated April 23, 1865 that she did not think less of a "brave soldier, because he has been overpowered by numbers" directly echoes General Robert E. Lee's General Orders No. 9 (April 10, 1865) which acknowledged the bravery of the Army of Northern Virginia despite its being "compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources" (98; Lee General Order No. 9). The parallel raises the question of whether Mollie had read, perhaps in a newspaper, this order which played a role in laying the groundwork for Lost Cause ideology.

Wash's memoirs, written in 1866, is, as Kutzler and Williams note, an early example of Lost Cause ideology as Wash denounced his treatment in Union hands. But Wash's memoir also indicates broader aspects of the Civil War on the home front. Wash's account of Union officers shooting into prisoners' barracks at Johnson's island during the winter of 1863-1864 reflects guards' sense of heightened alert given rumors that Rebel sympathizers in Canada were conspiring to free the prison's captives and destroy Sandusky and Buffalo. In this way, Wash's recollections excite inquiry into how military prisons interacted with and reflected home front dynamics.

Ultimately, this is an excellent volume of interest to anyone wishing to understand the experiences of Civil War prisoners and their loved ones at home. It is also a valuable teaching tool for educators. The authors have created an interactive website, complete with lesson plans, to help students more fully engage with the topics of military prisons, gender, and historical memory.

*Angela Zombek is Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She is the author of Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War (Kent State University Press, 2018), and is currently working on a book project entitled "Stronghold of the Union: Key West Under Martial Law."*