A UNC student asks to sign up

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Letter from Edward H. Armstrong to Thomas G. Armstrong, April 20, 1861, in the Julien Dwight Martin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As you read...

Edward Hall Armstrong was born in 1841 in Wilmington. In 1858, at the age of 17, he enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He left his studies before graduating to enlist in the Confederate army. Armstrong was wounded at the battle of Spotsylvania Court House (Virginia) in 1864 and died from his wounds at the age of 23.

UNC-Wilmington's Special Collections Library holds Armstrong's papers and has transcribed a series of his letters and other documents (see http://library.uncw.edu/web/collections/manuscript/001/armstrong.htm) covering his time as a student at Chapel Hill, his war service, and his death. Also included are his obituary and letters from his family and friends after his death. The collected letters tell the story of this young man's growing conviction that he must take up arms, his experience as a soldier, and his (and his family's) sacrifice.

A STUDENT'S LETTER

Armstrong's letter shows the patriotic fervor in North Carolina after the fall of Fort Sumter. Although North Carolina had not yet seceded from the Union, men began joining the Confederate army, and North Carolinians prepared for war.

UNC Libraries has posted the page images (see http://docsouth.unc.edu/true/mss06-07/mss06-07-p01.html) of Edward Armstrong's letter. They show notes scrawled in the margins, inserted words, and handwriting that is hard to read — nothing like the historical documents you may be used to seeing, but what you might expect from a young man writing home from college. Why do you think he wrote the way he did, with notes in the margins?

Dear Pa

To day again I went to the office, but no letter was there to cheer my spirits, by telling me to come home and hasten to the war. I was anxiously expecting one, and the disapointment went quite hard. The Orange Guards[1] left Hillsboro this morning, and I am told that there were few dry eyes in the crowd congregated to see them depart. There was

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parting with wives and children fathers and brothers, and with some no doubt a parting for the last time. There was a flag raising here to day. The ladies of the place made and put up the Flag. The citizens raised the pole in which I had the pleasure of assisting. Two young ladies made speaches and were followed by the following noted gentlemen, S. F. Phillipps, Capt Ashe[2], Gov Swain[3] and Sidney Smith, together with quite a number of Students. Gov Swain in alluding to the war said that the south was invincible by any force that our enemies can send against us. He thought that further blood shed could be avoided, by every man in the South shouldering his musket. Lincoln would then see our strength and would know that it would be useless to attempt to coerce us. Such being the case I beg you to let me be one to proceed to Federal Point[4], and frighten Lincoln out of his witts, if possible and if the Gov's prediction should prove untrue and war should actually be necessary, I should be happy to bear a part, humble though it be, in defense of my country. The flag raised to day contained nine stars, the last two in honor of Virginia and N. C. This is probably the first flag raised, on which N Carolina has been numbered with the seceeding states. God grant that she may soon take her place among her southern sisters in reality. News from Maryland states that, the citizens of Baltimore yesterday attacked the Seventh regiment of N. Y. which was proceeding to Washington in answer to Lincoln's call. reports says that about 14 were killed.[5]

Thank the lord that Maryland has yet some patriots left within her borders, who will oppose aggression to the death, although she is presided ofer by the traiterous Hicks[6]. I learn even while writing that Lincoln has taken Genl Scott[7] prisoner because he was going to side with the south, and had thrown up his commission, and has him now in Prison. This is fine treatment to give that old veteran who has fought and bled in defence of his country. There was also a skirmish yesterday at Harpers Ferry. Major Lilly of Virginia who lives near there is here now on his way to take charge of his company. Two Thousand South Carolineans are now on their way to Norfolk[8] to aid the virginians in taking fort Monroe[9]. Can I stay here and pretend to study, when I am continually hearing news from the war and when my country needs? Apr 21st since writing this letter I have heard that fortress monroe is taken, that Gov Ellis[10] has caled out thirty thousand troops. There is a company formin[g] here to go to Washington City, composed of students. As my state needs my services I shall not volunteer. Please write to Capt Cowan immediately and see if he will except me. I am copelled to go somewhere. Another of my classmates Lyon of Edgecombe leaves tomorrow morning. Several will leave during the week.

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Notes

1. The Orange Guards were a company of soldiers from Hillsborough, North Carolina. They formed Company G of the 27th regiment of North Carolina troops.

2. Samuel A'Court Ashe was from Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. He was a student at UNC Chapel Hill before the Civil War.

3. David Swain was governor of North Carolina from 1832 to 1835.

4. Federal point is south of Wilmington. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad connected the port of Wilmington with railroads to Virginia, and before the war even began, the Confederacy began building a large earthen fort, called Fort Fisher, on Federal point in order to keep supply lines open from Wilmington to troops fighting in the north.

5. Maryland was a slave state, but it did not secede. Although Maryland remained part of the Union, many people in the state supported secession. On April 19, 1861, a group of troops from Massachusetts passed through Baltimore on their way to Washington, D.C. A mob with pro-Southern sentiments attacked the troops and the soldiers responded by shooting into the crowd. Four soldiers and 12 civilians were killed.

6. Hicks was the Governor of Maryland and although he was a slaveholder, he did not support secession and was instrumental in keeping Maryland part of the Union.

7. General Winfield Scott was born in Virginia. He was a well-known public figure in antebellum America. He had fought in the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, and he served as a top military commander for the Union during the Civil War. He did not side with the South, nor was he ever imprisoned. This student may have believed the rumor because Scott was originally from the South.

8. Norfolk is a seaport town located on the the Chesapeake Bay in the south-east corner of Virginia.

9. Fort Monroe was a U.S. military base located along the tip of the Virginia Peninsula. When Virginia seceded, U.S. troops were already stationed at this military base. As such, Fort Monroe was occupied by Union soldiers throughout the war.

10. John Ellis was the Governor of North Carolina from 1858 until his death in 1861. He was a slaveholder and believed that the constitution safeguarded private property, and he believed slaves were the property of their owners. As such, he strongly supported North Carolina's secession from the United States.

About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada. Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.