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Letter from George Armstrong Custer, ML December 13, 1873

Steven Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator of the Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum in Harrogate, TN.

Some men are born warriors, individuals who cannot live in a world of routine peace, men who fail miserably trying to advance in business or politics because they crave combat. George Armstrong Custer knew himself to be such an individual. "I would be willing," he wrote. "Yes glad, to see a battle every day during my life." This was not pure bombast, although the Boy General was a student of grandiloquence when it came to his own accomplishments and talents. It was "Custer Luck," the almost mystical quality that attached itself to the young soldier with flowing hair and velveteen uniform, positioning Custer to participate in the greatest war his generation would know. He rose from 2nd Lieutenant to Brevet Major General, and led one of the most important, if underrated, attacks made during the Civil War, besting Confederate legend Jeb Stuart at the Battle of Gettysburg. Part of Lee's three-pronged attack to defeat Meade and, Stuart at Gettysburg was ready to redeem himself. Fate threw him up against another romantic, and equally talented cavalryman. Had Custer not led his Wolverines to blunt the Confederate charge, "Beauty" Stuart might have pierced the Union Army of the Potomac from the rear and created yet one more defeat for the mighty Union army.

It was Custer's manner to put himself and his men in harm's way, to engage the enemy completely, and without reservation. That quality was indispensable in a soldier but equally, potentially disastrous. To his credit, he attracted loyal men who did not hesitate to follow him, but he also created disdain and distrust among the officers and men of the famous regiment with which he was associated, the 7th.

Had he lived his life so that his heroic action at East Cavalry Field

on July 3, 1863, had been the epitome of his career, his star would have burned longer but a little less brilliantly. Legends are monuments to people or events; and their existence is due to great accomplishments or grand failures, so Custer would never have been satisfied with just one victory.

The December 13, 1873 letter in the collection was written by Custer to his parents. It seems oddly mundane. Custer of the Little Big Horn, the Cavalier of the Washita, writing to his mother and father about mail delivery, strangely fixated on appearance. “I weighed myself a day or two ago,” he noted, “and weighed 164 pounds.” But he soon focused on others, “Libby and Agnes Bates are both enjoying excellent health and both looking fleshier then when they left Monroe.

The Dakota Territory suited him and his brother Tom, who went out hunting regularly. “It is cold,” he wrote, “well below freezing.”

There is a page missing from the letter, but the chatty tone offers insight into the man who writes so passionately about soldiering and duty. “I appeal to you as a soldier to spare me the humiliation of seeing my regiment march to meet the enemy and I not share its dangers,” he desperately wrote President Ulysses S. Grant for fear that his political indiscretions would deny him the opportunity to do what he so cherished—leading his regiment into battle.

They were two different worlds, the plains of West and the lush farmlands of Virginia; but they had two things in common. First, they were battlegrounds, different in scale: each with those geographical peculiarities that made them unique. Second, they were indelibly connected with George Armstrong Custer, a soldier of dash and *élan* who was bold to the point of recklessness. Convinced that he had a mystic connection to glory through Custer Luck, Custer’s ability to inspire troops (sometimes out of hatred) and his disregard of danger made him the ideal cavalry commander. Whether or not this particular trait resulted in his death, along with over 250 men on the banks of the Little Big Horn River in 1876, is still open to debate. During the Civil War, however, if Custer accomplished nothing more in his troubled career than turning back Jeb Stuart at Gettysburg, it would be considered remarkable.