

BIRMINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

Department of Archives and Manuscripts

HARPER FAMILY **Papers, 1856-1863**

Background:

Robert Withers Harper was born on July 21, 1833, to Ellen Whitaker and James Harper of Prince George County, Maryland. Robert's wife, Laura Worthington, was born on May 12, 1836, to Elizabeth and Thomas Worthington, in Prince George County, Maryland.

On December 16, 1856, Robert and Laura were married in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, but soon moved to Arkansas where Robert set up his law practice and plantation. The couple settled near the town of Hard Times, in Conway County, a sparsely populated area on the Point Remove River.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Robert enlisted in the Confederate Army and was commissioned a major. In 1862, he was made a colonel of the Churchill Brigade, First Mounted Rifles, Arkansas. During the War he participated in at least six battles: Oak Hill, Missouri; Elk Horn, Arkansas; Farmington, Mississippi; Richmond, Kentucky; Murfreesboro, Tennessee; and Chicamauga, Tennessee. Robert hoped he would be transferred to Stonewall Jackson's unit, but on September 20, 1863, he was killed during the battle of Chicamauga.

Both of the Harper's male children, Robert Withers and Walter Worthington, died in childhood. Robert Withers died of scarlet fever, in 1863, while visiting his father in Huntsville, Alabama. The family was survived by one daughter, Ellen Whitaker Harper. In 1902, Ellen married Henry F. Kerber, of Ohio, in Birmingham, Alabama. Ellen's mother, Laura, lived with the Kerber's until her death on January 1, 1908. Laura was buried in Birmingham's Elmwood Cemetery.

Scope and Content:

This collection contains letters written by Robert and Laura Harper to Dr. Levin and Anna (Harper) Wailes of Natchez, Mississippi. The letters date from 1856-1863 and tell of family matters, business affairs, and survival during the Civil War. The materials are arranged in two series groups (Robert W. Harper and Laura W. Harper), and one (Miscellaneous) group. Within each series, the letters are arranged in chronological order when dates are provided.

In an 1856 letter, Robert expressed opinions on national issues including the Nebraska Bill and the question of civil war. Unfortunately, his series includes only two

wartime letters. However, Laura's letters are as interesting as those of her husband and she wrote six war time letters that are on record in this collection. In her wartime letters, she alludes to things such as the mustering of Arkansas and Confederate forces, troop movements in the Western Theatre, lack of decent food, and increasingly poor travel conditions for civilians and wounded soldiers.

Though the few letters in this collection span only seven years, they reaffirm some facts of Civil War History, and provide insights into the War's destructive effect on the lives of a soldier and his family.

Related Collections:

1. Jesse McQuigg Papers

Subject Areas:

1. Civil War (American)

Size: 1/4 linear foot (1 box)

Restrictions: Access restricted to microfilm copy. Standard preservation and copyright restrictions.

Guide Prepared By: Adam L. Wilson (August 2002)

File Number:	Description:
118.1.1.	Correspondence, Robert Harper, January 11, 1856 to July 13, 1863, (12 items)
118.1.1.1	January 11, 1856, Upper Marlboro, Maryland To Anna Wailes (Harper) In this letter, Robert tells of his new job at the newspaper office. He also speaks of moving to Little Rock and the conflict that he is having with his parents over what he wants to do with his life.
118.1.1.2	March 2, 1856, Upper Marlboro, Maryland To Anna Wailes (Harper) Robert is suffering from the flu when this letter is written. He speaks of wanting to marry Laura Worthington. He also tells of having gone to Little Rock and visited and how he is very anxious to move there.

- 118.1.1.3 July 12, 1856, Little Rock, Arkansas
To Levin Wailes
Robert tells of acquiring his law license in Little Rock, as well as how hot and grueling the summer months in Arkansas can be. He also briefly speaks of the construction of the Memphis-Little Rock railroad.
- 118.1.1.4 December 30, 1856, Upper Marlboro, Maryland
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
In this letter Robert speaks of his recent marriage to Laura Worthington. He describes the events of the ceremony and tells of all the people who attended. This is the first letter in which Robert mentions owning slaves.
- 118.1.1.5 January 20, 1857, Upper Marlboro, Maryland
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Harper speaks of the real estate in the area and the prices that it is going for. He discusses at length the things that everyone in the family received for Christmas.
- 118.1.1.6 August 22, 1857, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Tells of how he is disappointed in his crop yield. Speaks briefly of cousin George coming in from Alabama. Harper also discusses building frame cabins for his slaves, as well as how he wants to clear more land to plant more crops.
- 118.1.1.7 August 28, 1857, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Levin Wailes
Mentions Fillmore in the election and speaks of the Nebraska Bill (how he does not support a candidate in favor of it). Harper speaks briefly on how he believes southern rights should be protected. Kansas is also mentioned in this letter, (written about the time of "Bleeding Kansas"). Harper declares that he is not an abolitionist and calls the whole movement a scheme. He also mentions secession and says that he welcomes it if no agreement can be reached.
- 118.1.1.8 June 6, 1858, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Robert speaks of his worries about paying for expenditures on his land. The letter has a general tone of gloom about Arkansas. Harper suggests to his sister that he is very interested in getting involved in the cotton trade,

and that he has seed on the way, which he purchased from a friend on credit.

118.1.1.9

July 2, 1858, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Robert tells of how his cotton is growing, but that he really sees no positive signs as far as his corn crop being successful. He speaks on the economics of agriculture for this particular growing season and touches on the great controversy of the time over cotton.

118.1.1.10

May 22, 1859, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

In this letter, Robert speaks of Laura being sick and how he is very worried that she may die. He worries if the war in Europe will affect the price of staple crops in Arkansas. Some family problems also seem to have occurred, because Robert asks his sister to come and stay with his family for a while if she wishes.

118.1.1.11

January 26, 1862, Camp Bragg, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Robert has joined the Arkansas regiment of the Confederate Army. He gives descriptions about some of the action he has seen in the war and speaks of the sizes of the regiments. He also briefly mentions the War Department and Jefferson Davis. The tone for this letter seems to be very positive and optimistic about the outcome of the war.

118.1.1.12

February 13, 1863, Shelbyville, Tennessee
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

This is the last of Robert Harper's letters in the archive. He tells his sister of how his wife and two children are living in a boarding house in Huntsville, Alabama. In this letter, Robert's mental state is deteriorating as it becomes obvious that he is losing hope in the Confederates ever achieving victory in the war. He speaks of how his regiment has thinned and he thanks God for still being alive. Harper does write with a glimmer of hope, which probably kept him alive up to this point in the war. He sends his blessings to Anna and her family at the end of the letter and gives a eulogy to the consequences of war. He also mentions that he wants to move his family away from Arkansas when he returns home. However, he dies just a few months later at the battle of Chicamauga.

- 118.1.2 Correspondence, Laura Harper, April 17, 1856 - May 3, 1863, (17 items)
- 118.1.2.1 April 17, 1856, Greensboro, Alabama
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Laura tells Anna that she has just arrived in Greensboro and really likes the town. With the first line of this letter, the nature of Laura and Anna's friendship is easily discovered, as Laura tends to joke with Anna a lot in her writing.
- 118.1.2.2 May 13, 1856, Memphis, Tennessee
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
In this letter, Laura speaks of traveling more and going from Columbus to Memphis. From her first two letters it is easy to tell that she is in the middle of doing a lot of traveling.
- 118.1.2.3 July 4, 1856
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Laura is traveling by boat to Chicago in this letter. She tells of her bunk mate and the reading she has been doing from the library in the women's cabin. She also tells of the troubles in her travels since she last met with Anna.
- 118.1.2.4 No date given, Summer 1856
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Laura tells of Chicago. She describes the houses, the streets, and her experiences in the city. Next, she traveled to Niagara, crossing through Canada to get there. She also tells of going to the Winston Party and how she wishes Anna were with her.
- 118.1.2.5 March 25, 1857, Upper Marlboro, Maryland
To Anna Wailes (Harper)
Laura tells of how anxious she is to move to Little Rock. Robert is traveling to Arkansas when she writes this letter. She expresses that things have been rather stagnant in her life since they got married, but that the move will hopefully make both of their lives better. She expresses to Anna that she misses her dearly.
- 118.1.2.6 December 11, 1857, Point Remove, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura tells Anna that she wants to have children. However, she insists that she does not want to become a housekeeper as well. She touches on this and several other personal issues in this letter.

118.1.2.7

February 21, 1858, Conway County, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Robert is working on a tough case in this letter and Laura is concerned for his well being, because he seems to be very stressed by it. She also worries because Robert is behind on his first property payment and they lack a great deal of money being able to pay it. Laura also tells Anna that she has taken up gardening.

118.1.2.8

July 6, 1858, Point Remove, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura is writing from the boarding house in Point Remove and Robert is once again in absence at the inception of this letter. Laura tells that the corn is suffering from lack of rain, but that their hope lies in the cotton crop, which is actually looking very good. She invites Anna to come up for the Summer so she will be away from Yellow Fever in Natchez.

118.1.2.9

October 10, 1858, Conway County, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura discusses the crop harvest and suggests that it was a very good one. She also discusses a marriage and a death with Anna. This letter is very cordial and is mainly general correspondence between Anna and Laura.

118.1.2.10

May 29, 1859, Conway County, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

In this letter, Laura describes her recent experience of losing a child during birth. Laura writes the story out of why her child died, and what she tried to do about it when it happened.

118.1.2.11

May 27, 1861, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Robert has gone to Maryland and has joined the Confederate Army. Laura writes about how much she worries about Robert fighting in the war. She thinks that he will not be able to last during the battles and that if he sees action in the war he will want to leave. She knows a side of Robert that is not exposed in his letters, but that only

one's wife could truly know. She writes also of how she will soon depart to visit with Robert at Fort Smith before he begins his march into battle.

118.1.2.12

July 7, 1861, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Robert has recently been elected major in his regiment, and Laura speaks highly of this in her letter. She tells of how he has already seen battle and that she thinks he will eventually get killed, although she hopes for better things. Laura tells Anna of how lonely she is in this letter, but that the children keep her company. There is also a sentence about some black Republicans who she has heard are spies for Lincoln, as well as the losses of life on both sides that she has read about.

118.1.2.13

February 16, 1862, Hard Times, Arkansas
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

In this letter, Laura speaks of the loyalty oaths that Confederate soldiers had to make and how people were always very afraid of espionage. Robert is off fighting in the war when this letter is written. However, Laura discusses Robert's brother William at great lengths.

118.1.2.14

July 6, 1862, Greensboro, Alabama
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura writes about how she got dysentery while traveling to Natchez Mississippi and ended up in Greensboro, Alabama. This is the lengthiest letter of Laura's series and contains many stories within it. She tells of how Robert has been positioned in Tennessee, close to Chattanooga, but that she wishes she could receive letters from him more often. Robert comes to visit her when she is sick, she gives the details of this in the letter.

118.1.2.15

December 28, 1862, Huntsville, Alabama
To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura writes in this letter about how friends of the Harper family in Maryland are joining the Confederate Army to avoid the draft. We also see the lighter side of the Confederacy and the war with a story of a drunk speaker who ends up in jail with a bunch of confederate money in his pocket. However, the main point for Laura writing this letter really seems as if it is just a distraction to keep her mind off of the danger her husband is in. She barely

mentions Robert in this letter, but she talks about lots of different things.

118.1.2.16

January 10, 1863

To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Laura writes about the battle of Murfreesboro in Tennessee and how she has tried to remain close to Robert as the fighting has went on. Laura did not want to mail this letter to Anna until she knew that Robert was alive and safe.

118.1.2.17

May 3, 1863

To Anna Wailes (Harper)

Both of Laura and Robert Harper's children have died of Scarlet Fever when Laura writes this letter. She tells that Robert is taking it very hard and that she is very sad as well. She gives descriptions of how her children died and what seeing them get sick was like for her.

118.1.3

Miscellaneous Correspondence, Harper Family, January 12, 1859 - August 12, 1862 (3 items)

118.1.3.1

January 12, 1859, New Orleans, Louisiana

James Harper writes to his sister, Alice.

In this letter James Harper tells that he just celebrated his twenty-first birthday. It is hard to tell from the letter exactly how he is related to Robert Harper, but it seems as though he is a few years younger than Robert, because he turned 21 in 1859. Robert Harper's father also had the name of James, but this is not Harper's father. James also mentions the theater in New Orleans and a production he saw.

118.1.3.2

August 12, 1862

A letter to Levin Wailes petitioning the release of a soldier from the Confederate Army.

118.1.3.3

Checking account information for Dr. Levin Wailes.

Checks returned, balances, etc. Envelopes for letters to Anna Wailes (7 items).