

Eli Landers: Letters of a Confederate Soldier

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Elizabeth Whitley Roberson's *Weep Not for Me, Dear Mother*¹ chronicles the life of Eli Landers through the first two years of the American Civil War. Using primary documents—letters from a young Confederate soldier to his mother and sister—students learning about the Civil War can begin to think about war in personal terms. Examining the content, tone, and implications of the letters makes students aware of the personal costs of that war and gives them an emotional understanding that they could not find in most other sources.

Landers's actual letters were fortunately recovered by an unknown woman who found them in garbage strewn along the side of the street. This woman eventually gave the letters to a neighbor boy whose mother in turn gave the letters to Roberson when she learned of her expertise in American history. Subsequently, Roberson's own interest in the Civil War resulted in her visiting Gwinnett County, Georgia, where she found the Sweetwater Church, Eli's headstone, and the farmstead to which he wished to return when the war was over. With good investigative techniques, Roberson ferreted out Eli's relatives who could fill in the gaps of the story, visited the battlefields and stood in the same spots about which Eli wrote, and collected photographs and other background materials that would augment Eli's story. Through the perspective of the Southern soldier, Roberson describes the anguish of fighting on home turf, of fighting without food or ammunitions, of worrying about the family's survival at home, and of trying to find reasons for participating in a civil war.

Eli Pinson Landers's story fascinates even the most casual readers of these primary documents. The handwritten and transcribed letters in *Weep Not for Me, Dear Mother* demonstrate the art of communication, presenting an insider's view of the tediousness of war, the personal losses, and a glimpse into the details of the Civil War.

The story starts when nineteen-year-old Eli Landers left Lilburn, Georgia, just outside Atlanta, to fight "till death if needed!"² From the first train ride out of Atlanta, Eli pens his feelings, his "adventures," his changes, in almost daily letters to his mother and notes to his sister and other members of his family. He describes feeling excited about the "lark" he was on as he left home, feeling angry at being treated like "Negroes"³ who had to have passes, and worrying about the crops back home. He begs for long letters to assuage the loneliness of the camps, waiting, watching his friends die from diseases and in battle, realizing that his army was losing the war, and requesting a monument for his grave should he die. Eli's personal story takes readers from Atlanta to Gettysburg, through many major battles and campaigns before his death of typhoid fever on October 27, 1863, at age 21.⁴

Letters: August 11, 1861 (Gwinnett, GA) and August 15, 1861 (Description of earlier experience in Augusta, GA)

This is the 11th day of the month and I must write some more to let you know that the time has come close to hand when I must close the old cottage door. They are now getting breakfast. When I eat I will start to the Stone Mountain to leave there at half past 9 o'clock tonight. If nothing happens I will eat my breakfast in Augusta in the morning and I will mail this letter today at the Mountain. But we have a fine set of boys. All of our Settlement boys but Bill Miner. Tell Barry Brasell that he has missed the best chance in the world. My hand and heart trembles so this morning that I can't write much as I would for the thoughts of leaving Gwinnett and my Mamma and friends in general. I have said nothing about domestic business in my letter nor don't expect to. My time is short here. Breakfast is nearly ready and then I must start. But if I never see you again take care of yourself and I will try to do the same. So no more only truly remain your affectionate brother until Death.

E.P. Landers to H.D. Landers

We ate breakfast in Augusta Monday morning. We got there about sunrise. The citizens of Augusta give us our breakfast and treated us well. There was a young lady give me a flag make of silk ribbon and told me to take it to Virginia but some grand raskal stold it. The people, both men and ladies, give us the praise all the way. They hurahed for Georgia for she carrys the day here at Conier's Station. The tracks was full of ladies and fellas. I fell in love with one of them. She had on a dress like Add's white one.

Letter: August 14, 1861 (Richmond, VA)

Dear Mother,

This morning after coming back from drilling I am much wearied. I seat myself to tell you that I am in my tent by myself and to tell you that I am well this morning. I promised you that I would write you the truth if I could but it is impossible to do it although I am allowed to write what I please. When I wrote you the first letter I had just got here and had not seed much then but my eyes has been opened since then. We moved from that first campground in the Old Fair Ground. There is about 5 acres in it. They keep guard out all the time and we can't pass out nor in without taking a pass from the Captain. It is hard for a white man to tote a written pass like a Negro! The Gwinnettt Negroes is free compared to us but don't tell Bill Miner that! Let him come on up here. There is two fellas just come out of the guardhouse. They was put in there night before last. I wrote to you that it was cold here and it was, but in the morning it got as hot a day as I ever experienced. The sweat is running down my cheeks right now. We have had enough to eat till last night. We did not have a bit of bread for supper, only what we bought because the quartermaster drawed rations for five days and it give out. I got permission from my captain and went up in town. There I saw the greatest place I ever did see! Atlanta is nothing more than a kitchen to a Big House. I will tell you folks that there is no use trying to compare nothing to what I have saw since I left home. I saw Washington's Monument. It was away up a stack of fine rock

and he is on the largest horse that I ever saw. Washington is on the horse with his sword in his hand. The horse and man looks as natural as nature itself. Just get out of the way because it looks just like its coming right onto you! It is larger than any man or horse you ever saw. I also shook hands with old Zachary Taylor yesterday evening. He looks just as natural as the man itself. It is about the size of a man and is made of tombstone. You can see the coat buttons and neck tie, even down to his shoestrings. Well, I really can't tell you as plain as it is. Here we are 750 miles apart and I am here trying to tell you the conditions! We expect to be called tomorrow as soon as we get drilled enough but we are ready to start anytime. They had a fight in Missouri on the 16th. We killed and wounded three or four thousand and was still in pursuit of them with a large body of cavalry and was likely to destroy all of them which I am in hopes they will. They had a fight in thirty two miles of us on Wednesday night. The Yankeys killed and wounded five hundred of our men but we whipt them in the fight. We don't know how many we killed of them but they drove fourteen hundred of the Yankeys up in Richmond "to take supper with us!"

Letter: Fall 1861 (Richmond, VA)

I stood duty the other night when it was raining hard and I thought of my old feather bed at home.

There is many trials and tribulations to undergo here but I prefer it before subjugation.

Mamma I never shall forget the last time I saw you and all the rest of my people. I would sure like to see some of the old Gwinnett peach peelings and water millions [watermelons] rinds. We hardly ever get anything of that kind but we must make out without them. This letter closes with thoughts in Gwinnett. Mamma I dream about you all nearly every night. I drempt that you had come to see me and I was going about Richmond with you but I hope that the day will come when it will not be in dreams that I will be with you when we will set down round your table to eat in independent peace for that is the only way that I ever expect to eat with you again. My dear Mother this is a dreadful life but I feel reconciled to it for I believe that we are on the right side of the question. Mamma I think about you every hour in the day. I just think about you working so hard without me till I hardly can stand it. It was hard enough when I was there to help you but you must do the best you can.

Letter: March 15, 1862 (Suffolk, VA)

My Dear Mother,

I this morning take pleasure in writing you a few lines to let you know how we are getting on. As for myself I can't tell the truth and say that I am well but I think that it is the cold and being exposed to the weather and the broken rest waiting on the rest of the sick. I am sorry to tell such news to you but I reckon I had better tell the truth. All of my mess is down sick but me. E.M. McDaniel has been very bad off for several days but I think he is some better this morning. W.N.

Franklin had a hard chill this morning and is now bad off and also W.M. Mayfield had a chill this morning and is now very sick. W.W. has not come back from the hospital yet. He is in Williamsburg though I heard from him. He is improving so that takes all in my tent. There is a great deal of sickness in camp now but no more than I expected for we was the worst exposed of any set of men I ever saw but I hope that I will stay up to wait on the rest of them for they are not able to wait on each other but I fear that I will fail for I can hardly keep up now and have to be up and down all night. If I have to wait on them and drill too, I think that they ought to excuse me from all other duty but they will not do it but I will do the best I can for them but the best is bad enough for we are right where there is no accommodation to be found. They are in the tent lying on the ground but that is soldiers' fare anyhow. I can't write as I wish to for the poor boys is moaning with their pain so bitterly that it has confused my mind till I can't compose it but you need not to expect to derive much pleasure from this letter for there is no good news in it. We are expecting to leave here in a short time and if we do I don't know what in the world we will do with the sick for there is no hospital in Suffolk. But I reckon if we do leave they will be sent to Petersburg. It is now raining and a prospect for a wet spell and if there is one surely some of our sick will die. It looks hard that men should suffer so on account of the infamous Yankeys! Goodby My Dear Mother.

Letter: July 6, 1862 (Near Burnt Chimney, VA)

Affectionate Mother,

I am once more permitted to write you a few lines to let you know that I am yet alive and well but that is more than many of my friends can say and I know that it is for nothing good that I've done that I am spared but a great Blessing bestowed upon me. But the God of all nations has for some purpose brought me through another engagement unhurt and I feel thankful to say so for while many of my brother soldiers were slain on the field. We had been pursuing the Yankeys for three days. We pursued them hot all day Sunday when in the evening we came up with them which terminated in a hard fight. But our regiment was not engaged in it. We stayed there all night and next morning we started out after them again. We marched all day Monday when in the evening another struggled insued lasting from 5 o'clock till 9 o'clock with unmerciful fighting. Our regiment got here just as the battle was over. We stayed on the battlefield that night. Our line was formed over many dead and wounded Yankeys. We eat breakfast over all their dead, some with their brains out on the ground. After eating we formed a line of battle and started out throught the woods on another Yankey drive. We marched till about 12 o'clock when news came to us that General Jackson was before us with thirty thousand men after the Yanks. Then we turned our course and in the evening we came up with the Yankeys in line of battle in a noble position with a heavy battery in good range of us. We made an immediate attack and with large forces on both sides. But they having all advantages of the ground and our men not expecting them so close by that our men was not properly organized for the engagement but we had run on them and we was obliged to fight or retreat. The first command given was to fix bayonets and charge the batter which the gallant men in great heroism did but we had to charge through an

open field for about a half mile under the open and well directed fire of a heavy battery well supported with infantry. The grapeshot and bums cut our lines down so rapidly our officers finding it could not be taken. We was ordered back for form and tried it again but did not succeed and retired the second time. It is amazing at that range how any of us got through to tell the fate of others for bumbshells was flying round as thick as hailstorm. Great destruction on both sides but the number is not yet ascertained. There was several of our regiment killed and a good many wounded but none of our company was killed. D.W. Haney was wounded in the knee. The doctor says that he will lose his leg. Mallock was shocked with the bursting of a bum in his face injuring his eyes. Two of our captains got wounded and one of them is now dead. A piece of bum scalped me on the side of the head making a mark but not breaking the skin. It burnt so I thought I was really wounded. Next morning I went over the battlefield and it was awful to look at the scene of destruction that had been done. The field was lying thick with the noble Southerners being trampled on.

Letter: May 8, 1863 (Fredericksburg, VA)

My Dear Mother,

Knowing that you will be uneasy till you hear from me I will write to you for you will be sure to hear that I was killed in the fight last Sunday, for it was currently reported here that I was. But I write this with my own hand to testifying that I am yet in the Land of the Living and all honor and glory be to God for his care over me. We have had some awful times here for the last ten days. We have been in line of battle all the time marching through the woods, mud, and swamps and some part of the army was fighting all the time. We have lost a many a good soldier during this time. The 3rd of May our Brigade got into it heels over head and our regiment lost more men than we ever have in any fight yet. We had to fight them behind their entrenchments. There was some of our company killed within fifteen steps of their trench. Our company is nearly ruined. At last count we had lost three killed dead on the field and twenty wounded I will give you the names of some of the wounded: Asa Wright, Frank Plaster, Thom Mathews, Dave Johnson, Dave Rutledge, Jo Rutledge, Thom Todd, Thom Massey, Jim Raby, Bill Hunneycutt, Caut Cofer and others. Bill Wommack lost his right leg and died soon after. Thom Massey lost his left arm. Thom Weathers was wounded and died the next day. Elbert Daniels got shot through the thigh and also died soon after. I was slightly wounded in the hand but I am still with the company. I stayed at the hospital two days to wait on Jim Mathews and Bill Wommack. They was badly wounded. Jim was shot near the kidneys. The ball never came out and he was very feeble when I left him. I understand he died today, poor fellow said all the time it would kill him. He said that a plain token come to him that if he went into the fight he would get killed. The poor fellow looked very pitiful at me when he got shot and begged me to help him but I had no time to lose. It was everyman for himself for they was falling on my right and left and my disposition inclined to try to return the fire with as much injury as possible. We fought desperately to gain the day but after all our destruction we captured the whole passel of the line that was fighting us. They raised from their trench with a white flag and surrendered to us like lambs. Three cheers for the Army of the Potomac! I must brag although our Brigade suffered worse than any other but my heart is full of thanks for the great skill that has been manifested among us. During the fight we have

defeated the enemy. In every attempt we have completed our designated goal and every point we have slain thousands of their men. There is no use to try to give a correct report of the prisoners though I don't think that fifteen thousand will cover the number we have taken. Several of their generals and many officers of other ranks as well. Our troops all seemed to go into it as cheerful as if they was going to their dinner and not very few stragglers behind either. The men would march with their heads up and energy shining on their brows and with such a spirit the victory will always been ours. We have drove old Hooker and his blue coats back over the Dare Mark, but thousands of them will never get back. They will moulder on the south side of the River. The Rappahannock River is the Dark Mark with General Lee they can't stay on this side!

Letter: August 10, 1863 (unknown site, VA)

They have got many of our friends in their hands and they are beginning to treat them very bad. I would not be surprised no time to hear of the Black Flag being raised on that account. There is some talk of it but I hope the people will use more humanity in this war than that. I am willing to defend our rights under a Civilized Banner, but I am very much opposed to the Black flag. But if the Yankees raises it first I will fight it but if our men raises it first then I am done. Give all the Vicksburg boys my best respects. Tell them to keep in heart but I know it is bad to fight under officers without confidence. I wish they had such officers as we have got. I think they would be more successful. General Lee has the confidence of our whole army. We don't doubt his loyalty.

Letter: September 24, 1863 (Chattanooga, TN)

It is unknown who will get killed in this fight. It may be me and if I do get killed if there is any chance I want my body taken up and laid in the dust round old Sweetwater and I want a tombstone put at my head with my name and my company and regiment, the day I enlisted and the name and date of all the battles I have ever been in. I have spoke to some of the company to see to this matter if they should live and me not. I reckon what little I've got will pay expenses. This is my request if it is possible. Now don't think I've give up to being killed but you know it is an uncertain thing as we are expecting to be called to attention soon so I will hasten through.