

Western Carolina University

William Stringfield's Amnesty Letters

(June 1866)

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English 608

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Introduction

The letters transcribed are two drafts of the same letter sent from William Williams Stringfield to President Andrew Johnson in June of 1866. They detail Stringfield's request for amnesty for his crimes of treason during his role as Lieutenant Colonel with the Confederate Army in the Civil War. These letters are stored in the Special Collections department of the Hunter Library at Western Carolina University. The accession number for the manuscripts within the collection are MSS 80-6, and there are entries ranging from 1801 to 1968. The vast range is because there are also materials pertaining to the Stringfield's parents and children. It includes personal correspondence, diaries and minutes, financial records, legal papers, as well as clippings and scrapbooks. The collection was gifted to Western by Dr. Richard W. Iobst on Oct. 31, 1970.

Due to the intention of these letters and for brevity in this edition, the transcribed documents are referred to as "Amnesty Letters" instead of "Stringfield Letters." This is a specific result of the fact that "Stringfield Letters" is used in this document to refer to the entirety of the letters from the collection. There are no previous transcriptions of these letters available in Western's library catalogue, and this edition is the only published transcription of these texts.

Stringfield was born May 7, 1837 and died on Mar. 6, 1923. He served in several Confederate units, mostly with the Thomas Legion. He spent a great deal of time in Western North Carolina throughout his life and is a well known figure in the area. His collection is located at Western because of his regional importance, and especially due to his significant role in national politics after the war and his building of the White Sul-

phur Springs hotel in Waynesville in 1879. Stringfield had seven children with his wife Maria M. Love. (Hunter Library Special Collections).

The Amnesty Letters were written on lined notebook paper. The pages have significantly aged — they are yellow and fragile with small tears in both of the sets. There are coffee stains on the letters as well. The first text is a draft Stringfield wrote and has two words crossed out and one phrase added in a margin. The second is the final version that was sent to the President. It was rewritten in lieu of the on page edits in his first draft. Overall it was neater and more presentable than the former. There is an additional paragraph break added in the final version as well. To distinguish between the two, the first is referred to as “Amnesty Letter (Draft)” and the second “Amnesty Letter (Final Version).” These were some of the neatest texts in the collection. Much of his other writings are scribbled and contain upside down writing or writing along the sides.

These letters would be of particular interest to several groups. Civil War historians and regional folk may be drawn to them because of the local background present within both the letters and the explanatory notes. Additionally, people in fields including or related to political science, history, veteran affairs, war dynamics, or digital humanities may be interested in them as well.

This edition provides a compelling context to one Confederate veteran’s efforts to start a new life after the war. The explanatory notes complement his writing to explain what was going on, why he was writing, and what happened afterwards. They provide insight on topics of amnesty and pardon for confederates after the war. The mid to late 19th century in the United States was a complicated time, and this edition is only a glimpse into that dynamic period that followed the Civil War.

An annotated Works Cited list has been included in the final portion of this work.

Editorial Practices

This version of Stringfield's Amnesty Letters aims to re create the text with as little editorial intrusion as possible. Errors in punctuation or grammar have not been altered. This edition was not concerned with reproducing the physical conditions of the letters. Reproducing the exact location of greetings, dates, and salutations in the letters was attempted but not the focal point of these transcriptions. All punctuation, line breaks, paragraphs, and words are presented as they were written. The only alteration to Stringfield's writing is the adjustment of underlined words to italicized words. This decision was grounded in an effort to present the letters in a more visually appealing way so that readers are still able to discern the emphasis placed on particular words. This modification does not sacrifice any grammatical or philological authenticity.

In order to account for these variances, the original letters precede the transcriptions. The image and transcription of the draft is first, and the final version second so that they may be experienced in the order they were written.

The transcription of the draft includes Stringfield's on-page edits. The crossed out words themselves are omitted but referenced in annotations. The phrase added in the margin has been included parenthetically.

Some of Stringfield's words are not used in our contemporary language, and references have been included to note the sources of clarification for these terms. Additionally, one particular word was only transcribable due to cross referencing another Stringfield Letter.

While the majority of the letter was transcribed by close examination and re-searching the outdated language, there were several similarities in Stringfield's handwriting that contributed to this work. The consistencies between his "T's," "I's," and "L's" allow for differentiation between words containing those letters. Conversely, his "C's" and "E's" are very similar, though context, observations of style, and the formal, neat nature of the Amnesty letters allowed an accurate transcription of the documents. While there may possibly be errors in this edition, extensive time has been spent researching troubling phrases and cross referencing words both within the Amnesty Letters and between other letters in the Stringfield Collection.

Footnotes accompany the transcriptions as they occur allowing for the reader to experience both the document and its context simultaneously. The annotations focus on explaining why Stringfield was writing directly to the President for amnesty when the majority of Confederates were automatically granted pardon. Background information on the two people in the letter — Stringfield himself and President Johnson — has been included as it pertains to the context. Additionally, explanatory notes have referenced the sources used to clarify meaning for the outdated words and phrases.

Given that these letters are incredibly similar in content, the majority of annotations are presented in the final version of the letter. Stringfield discerns between the two letters with vertical text on the second page of each letter labeling the first as a draft. These notes are not included in the transcriptions since they are vertical and unrelated to the actual content, they are, however, referenced in footnotes.

Transcriptions With Explanatory Notes

Image of Amnesty Letter (Draft)

[June, 1866]

To His Excellency
 Andrew Johnson,
 President of the United States.

Your petitioner, a citizen of
 Jefferson County, State of Tennessee,
 would respectfully ask the interposition of Executive
 Clemency in his behalf, in so much as he
 is excluded from the benefits of the Proclamation
 of Amnesty of May 29th 1865, by reason of
 being at that time under an indictment
 for Treason, and being under bonds to
 appear before the United States Court for the
 Eastern District of Tennessee. Your Petitioner would
 say that he was not excluded from the
 benefits of the amnesty Proclamation upon
 any other ground, or by any other Clause,
 having held the inferior position of Lt Col in
 the State Southern or Rebel army, and
 not having done anything while in said army that would
 exclude him from the benefit of said Amnesty.

Your Petitioner would further beg
 leave to state that he applied for Pardon
 on the 30th of June 1865, having previously
 taken the ~~required~~ oath of Amnesty as
 required - a copy of which is herewith enclosed
~~and~~ never having heard from said application
 he now renews it, hoping for as early an
 answer as circumstances will approve.

Finally, your Petitioner will
 say that since his release from arrest
 he has been quietly pursuing his business,

and is now at his old home unmolested
 by any of his old neighbors. With many of
 whom he so widely differed during the late
 unfortunate war; and should the pardon
 he seeks be granted, he will hereafter and
 forever, honestly and faithfully protect
 and defend the Constitution of the
 United States as it is, or hereafter
 may be legally amended.

Stoughton Plains Va. Wm. W. Stoughton
 June 1863

Mr. J. M. Stanton
 Copy

Transcription of Amnesty Letter (Draft)

[June 1866]

To His Excellency
 Andrew Johnson.
 President of the United States.

Your petitioner — a citizen of *Jefferson County, State of Tennessee* — would respectfully ask the interposition *Executive Clemency* in his behalf — in so much as he is *excluded* from the benefits of the *Proclamation of Amnesty of May 29th, 1865* by reason of being at that time under an *indictment for treason*, and being *under bonds* to appear before the United States Court for the Eastern district of Tennessee. Your petitioner would say that *he was not excluded* from the benefits of the amnesty. In clamation¹ where any other ground, or by any other clause (besides the one above noticed) , having held the inferior position of Lt - Col in the late Southern or Rebel army, and not having done anything which is said among that would exclude him from the benefit of said amnesty.

Your petitioner would further beg leave to state that he *applied for pardon* on the *30th of June 1865*, having previously taken the Oath of Amnesty² as required³ — a copy of which is herewith enclosed, never having heard⁴ from said application he now renews it, hoping for as early an answer as circumstances will approve.

Finally, your petitioner will say that since his release from arrest he has been quietly pursuing his business, and is now at his old home unmolested by any of his old neighbors with many of whom he so widely differed during the late unfortunate war and should the pardon he seeks be granted, he will hereafter and forever, honestly and faithfully protect and defend the reconstruction of the United States as it is, or hereafter may be legally amended.

Strawberry Plains, Tenn.
 June, 1866.

William W. Stringfield⁵

¹ OED online defines "cla'mation, n" as "a crying out, call, invocation." Observing other words beginning with "c" such as "clause," "clemency," and "citizen" shows consistencies within Stringfield's "C's" that provide evidence for the word being "clamation."

² The Oath of Amnesty required a signed dedication of loyalty and obedience to proclamations abolishing slavery and was required for all Confederates seeking pardon (Nuff, 224).

³ Stringfield originally wrote "taken the required oath" but crossed out "required" and rewrote it as shown.

⁴ The word "and" preceded "never having heard" but was crossed out and removed.

⁵ One notable difference is that on the right side of the draft, Stringfield has vertically written "App for Pardon (copy)." On the edited version, he omitted the "copy" and simply wrote "App for Pardon" vertically, on the left side of the second page. These notes are visible on the images of the originals.

Image of Amnesty Letter (Final Version)

[June, 1865]

To His Excellency
Andrew Johnson
President of the United States.

Your petitioner, a citizen of the County of Jefferson, State of Tennessee, would respectfully ask the interposition of Executive Clemency in his behalf, in so much as he is excluded from the benefits of the Proclamation of Amnesty of May 29th 1865, by reason of being at that time under an indictment for Treason, and being under bonds to appear before the United States Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee.

Your Petitioner would say that he was not excluded from the benefits of the Amnesty Proclamation upon any other grounds, or by any other clause beside the one above noticed, having held the inferior position of Lieut. Col. in the late Southern or Rebel Army, and not having done anything while in said army that would exclude him from the benefits of said Amnesty.

Your Petitioner would further be glad to say that he applied for Pardon on the 30th day of June 1865, having previously taken the Oath of Amnesty as required, a copy of which is herewith enclosed, never having heard from said application he more renewed it, hoping for as early an answer as circumstances will approve.

Finally your petitioner will say that since his release from arrest he has been quietly pursuing his business

and is now at his old home unmolested
 by any of his old neighbors, with many
 of whom he so widely differed during
 the late unfortunate war. And should the
 pardon he seeks be granted, he will hereafter
 and forever, honestly and faithfully,
 protect and defend the Constitution
 of the United States as it is, or hereafter may
 be legally amended.

William W. Sturges

Strawberry Plains, Tennessee
 June 1866

App. for Pardon

Transcription of Amnesty Letter (Final Version)

[June, 1866]

To His Excellency,
 Andrew Johnson
 President of the United States.⁶

Your petitioner,⁷ a citizen of the county of Jefferson, state of Tennessee, would respectfully ask the interposition of Executive Clemency⁸ in his behalf, in so much as he is excluded from the benefits of the *Proclamation of Amnesty* of May 29th 1865,⁹ by reason of being at that time under an *indictment for treason*¹⁰ and being *under bonds* to appear before the United States Court for the Eastern district of Tennessee.¹¹

⁶ Johnson became president after Lincoln's assassination and, as Lincoln did, accepted oaths of loyalty as being "sufficient for the restoration of citizenship to former Confederates" (Lee, 15).

⁷ OED Online describes "petitioner" as a person or party who makes a petition or formally presents one to an authority." Given that Stringfield uses the word "your" before this and immediately details his home town, he is clearly referring to himself in all instances of this word.

⁸ Free Dictionary defines executive clemency as "the power of a President in federal criminal cases... to pardon a person convicted of a crime." This phrase implies that Stringfield was required to write President Johnson directly in his pursuit of amnesty.

⁹ Johnson issued a total of four general pardons, the most important one was this first, original proclamation since it stood for over two years. Pardon beneficiaries had to swear an oath that promised loyalty to the future country and commit to the abolishment of slavery. (Neff, 224)

¹⁰ News of General Lee's surrender was slow to reach Western North Carolina and Tennessee. On April 25th, 1865, a man from the Ninth North Carolina First Calvary "came to (Stringfield's) headquarters at Franklin, Macon county and said that General Lee had surrendered." The man was jailed and released the next day when another soldier arrived with the same information. Stringfield was sent to Knoxville to surrender (Clark, 760), but upon arriving, he and his men got into verbal disagreements with the Union soldiers and refused to take the oath of allegiance, which was required of captured Confederates throughout the war (Britton, 45) and were subsequently jailed. They remained in Knoxville "well into the summer" (Brown and Coffey, 127).

¹¹ Generally, Confederate soldiers were pardoned after taking the Oath of Amnesty though, in some instances, direct writing of the President was required. A transcription of the entire Amnesty Proclamation of May 29th, 1865 from Civil War Interactive lists the 14 exceptions. The 12th explains that, "all persons who, at the time when they seek to obtain the benefits hereof by taking the oath herein prescribed, are... *under bonds* of the civil, military, or naval authority" must apply directly to the president. Only because of Stringfield's refusal to take the oath of allegiance, which resulted in his imprisonment and subsequent legal charges in Knoxville, did he fall into this category.

Your petitioner would like to say that he was not excluded from the benefits of the Amnesty Proclamation upon an other grounds, or by any other clause beside the one above noticed¹², having held the “inferior position” of Lieut. Col.¹³ in the late Southern or Rebel army, and not having done anything while in said army that would exclude him from the benefits of said amnesty.

Your petitioner would further beg leave¹⁴ to say that he *applied for Pardon* on the 30th day of June 1865¹⁵, having previously taken the Oath of Amnesty as required, a copy of which is herewith¹⁶ enclosed, never having heard from said application, he now renews it, hoping for an early an answer as circumstance will approve.

Finally your petitioner will say that since his release from arrest he has been quietly pursuing his business and is now at his old home unmolested by any of his old neighbors, with many of whom he so widely differed during the late, unfortunate war, and should the pardon he seeks be granted, he will hereafter and forever, honestly and faithfully, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States as it is, or hereafter may be legally amended.¹⁷

William W. Stringfield

Strawberry Plains, Tennessee¹⁸
June, 1866

¹² Here Stringfield is acknowledging the fact that his imprisonment in Knoxville was the sole reason for his exemption from amnesty and for the writing of this letter.

¹³ Stringfield’s rank can be clarified by examining Medford, 161 where it states that he was a Lieutenant Colonel from Tennessee who had served under William Howard Thomas.

¹⁴ “Beg leave” is a phrase no longer used in American english that means, in the context of the entire sentence, “would like to mention” or “would further claim to say that” (Net Bible).

¹⁵ Stringfield and his men were taken captive on May 1st (Godbold and Russell) making it such that he originally applied for pardon within two months of his imprisonment. Given that the letter is dated June, 1866, perhaps he was originally unaware of the clause exempting him from amnesty, and did not realize this until months passed.

¹⁶ A previously transcribed letter from A. J. Jackson to Stringfield included this word.

¹⁷ These bold claims proved to be true. Stringfield settled in Haywood County after the war. In addition to building the White Sulphur Springs Hotel, he also became active in politics and Confederate veteran affairs. He served as a member of the North Carolina Legislature in 1882 and 1883, and of the State Senate in 1901. Additionally, in 1895 he was elected commander of the Confederate Veterans of Western North Carolina and as a member of the Military and Veteran Committee (Hunter Library Special Collections).

¹⁸ Though Stringfield was born in Nashville, Tennessee he lived in Strawberry Plains for many years (Hunter Library Special Collections).

Works Cited

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