

**Guide to the Samuel Gilbert Webber Letters and Sketch,
1862-1864
MS0080**

**The Mariners' Museum Library
at
Christopher Newport University**

Contact Information:
**The Mariners' Museum Library
100 Museum Drive
Newport News, VA 23606
Phone: (757) 591-7782
Fax: (757) 591-7310
Email: library@MarinersMuseum.org
URL: www.MarinersMuseum.org/library**

Processed by Jay Moore, 2011, updated 2013

DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

Repository: The Mariners' Museum Library
Title: Samuel Gilbert Webber Letters and Sketch
Inclusive Dates: December 1862 – February 1864
Catalog number: MS0080
Physical Characteristics: 5 letters, 1 envelope and 1 sketch
Language: English
Creator: Webber, Samuel Gilbert, 1838-1926

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Samuel Gilbert Webber was born July 24, 1838 in Boston, Massachusetts, son of Aaron D. and Maria (Gilbert) Webber. He graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in 1860. Webber joined the Union navy in 1862 as an assistant surgeon. He served on board the receiving ship *Ohio* in 1862 and then on *Rhode Island* in December 1862. He later served aboard the ironclad *Nahant*. He was on board while *Rhode Island* was towing US Steam Battery *Monitor* toward Wilmington, NC, a voyage that was interrupted by the sinking of the ironclad. He married Nancy Pope Sturtevant in 1864 and mustered out of the Navy a year later. Harvard awarded Webber his medical degree in 1865; his experience in the Navy took the place of actual classes. He continued study for two years in Vienna, Austria and returned to Boston. Webber served in various hospitals, clinics and medical schools in the Boston area and lived in Boston suburbs. He was appointed member of the first faculty of the Tufts College Medical School, and finally retired from all appointments in 1917, at age 79. Webber died on December 5, 1926.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

This collection includes 5 letters written by Webber to his future wife Nancy (Nannie) Sturtevant from the US Steamer *Rhode Island* in December of 1862, January of 1863, and February of 1864. It also contains a sketch of a building he entitled "Berard's." The sketch depicts the building in a tropical setting, suggesting that the sketch may have been done while *Rhode Island* was assigned to the Gulf Blockading Squadron in the summer of 1862 or the late spring of 1863. It is also possible that the sketch dates to 1864, when the *Rhode Island* was attached to the Special West India Squadron.

The letters give an unambiguous picture of Webber as both a devoutly religious man and deeply in love with Nancy. Scattered among the lengthy expressions of love and Christian piety are references to battle casualties, civic duty as Webber sees it, and evidence of his lifelong abhorrence of alcohol.

Of chief interest to Civil War scholars are his descriptions of both Fort Monroe and *Monitor*. Webber includes a small sketch in his Dec. 22 letter depicting the design of the fort's casemate gun ports. Also present in the letters is a telling of his visit to *Monitor* to minister to a crewman who "caught his leg in the machinery." Nearly an entire page of text is dedicated to his description of *Monitor*, including a rather rare reference to the rifle screen and the auxiliary ship's wheel atop the turret, both of which had been installed in November in Washington, DC. He also states that the ironclad *Montauk* is expected any day, and supposes that the ironclad *Nahant* will soon be in Hampton Roads. Ominously,

he writes to Nannie, "We leave as soon as the weather is favorable enough. I hope they won't wait till it is still & then have a storm as soon as we get outside."

Equally important is the letter begun on Dec. 30, 1862. In it Webber gives a vivid account of the sinking of the Monitor and the rescue of her crew from his perspective aboard the *Rhode Island*.

In the letter dated February 1864, Webber gives a detailed glimpse of life on board the *Rhode Island* while serving with the Special West India Squadron.

The letters and sketch are organized into folders. They are arranged by accession date.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Accession Number

A2005.26; A2013.14; A2013.15

Accession Dates

2005, 2013

Restrictions

The collection is open to all researchers.

Publication Rights

Copies of any materials may not be reproduced, published, or distributed in any form without the expressed permission of The Mariners' Museum.

Preferred Citation

Samuel Gilbert Webber Letters and Sketch, 1862–1864, MS0080, The Mariners' Museum Library

Note to Users

Due to the fragile and rare nature of the collection, researchers are requested to handle the materials with caution and in accordance with prescribed archival practices. When using these materials, please preserve the original order of the collection.

RELATED MATERIALS

The commissioning bible for the USS *Rhode Island* is located in the Library's Rare Book collection. The front endpaper denotes that the bible was kept in Sick Bay of U.S. Steamer *Rhode Island*. As Webber was the asst. surgeon on board and read scripture frequently, he may well have used this one.

Samuel Gilbert Webber letters are also located at the University of South Carolina Library; the Naval War College; Florida State University Libraries; Massachusetts Historical Society (in Webber Family Papers); and Navarro College (Corsicana, Tex.) in Pearce Civil War collection.

FILE GUIDE

BOX 1

Folder 1

Letters; Sketch

December 21, 1862: US Steamer *Rhode Island*, Hampton Roads

Webber writes that “at last we are fixed,” that is, attached to the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. He notes that it is more dangerous than some stations, but that God will take care of him. He wonders if “a republic recognizing and supporting slavery will be tried.” This letter was singed by flame, which Webber remarks upon.

December 22-23, 1862

States that he wandered over to Fortress Monroe on Dec. 19 and describes the fortifications. He includes a sketch of a gun port. He expresses surprise at the lack of artillery pointed inland. Describes patients and the nefarious effects of alcohol on them.

December 28-29, 1862: US Steamer *Rhode Island*, Hampton Roads

Writes of acquaintances from home. Discusses his visit to *Monitor* to treat a wounded man and states that the surgeon of *Passaic* (Ironclad : 1862) was already there. Writes at length about *Monitor*, and says that they will shortly be joined by the ironclads *Montauk* and *Nahant*. Expresses concern about the weather that is delaying their departure for parts unknown. Small format continuation of the letter and envelope are also present.

Sketch entitled “Berard’s” and note intended to accompany sketch.

Folder 2

Letter

December 30, 1862 – January 4, 1863 U.S. Str. *Rhode Island* At Sea.

Six-page letter to Nannie written over the span of several days. Webber describes in some detail the last voyage of the *Monitor* and the rescue of her crew. He also describes the serious hand injury suffered by Surgeon Weeks during the rescue and his treatment of Weeks's injury, which led to the partial amputation of three of Weeks's fingers.

Folder 3

Letter

February 11-17, 1864 U.S.S. *Rhode Island*, Cape Haytien

The letter gives detailed glimpses into life on board the USS *Rhode Island*, discussing such varied topics as food served at table, problems with his messmates, and the weather at Cap-Haïtien. In addition, the letter contains numerous expressions of Webber's love for Nannie and his dreams for their future life together, as well as references to his religious beliefs.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Finding aid, Samuel G. Webber Papers, 1863-1865, Pearce Civil War Collection,
Navarro College, Corsicana, Texas.

http://www.pearcecollections.us/fa_ind.php?fid=131.

Marquis, Albert Nelson, ed. *Who's Who in New England*. Chicago: A.N. Marquis, 1909-
?

Taylor, E. W. "Samuel Gilbert Webber, A.B., M.D. 1838-1926." *Archives of Neurology
and Psychiatry* 17 (March 1927): 377-379.

SUBJECTS

Rhode Island (Side wheel steamer : 1861)

Monitor (Ironclad : 1862)

United States. Navy-Sea life.

United States-History-Civil War, 1861-1865-Personal narratives.

Fort Monroe (Va.)