

54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment: Gooding Letter

James Henry Gooding was among the African Americans who enlisted in the newly formed 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the early spring of 1863. A sailor who had spent a good deal of his young life on whaling ships, Gooding arranged with the New Bedford Mercury to be the paper's war correspondent.

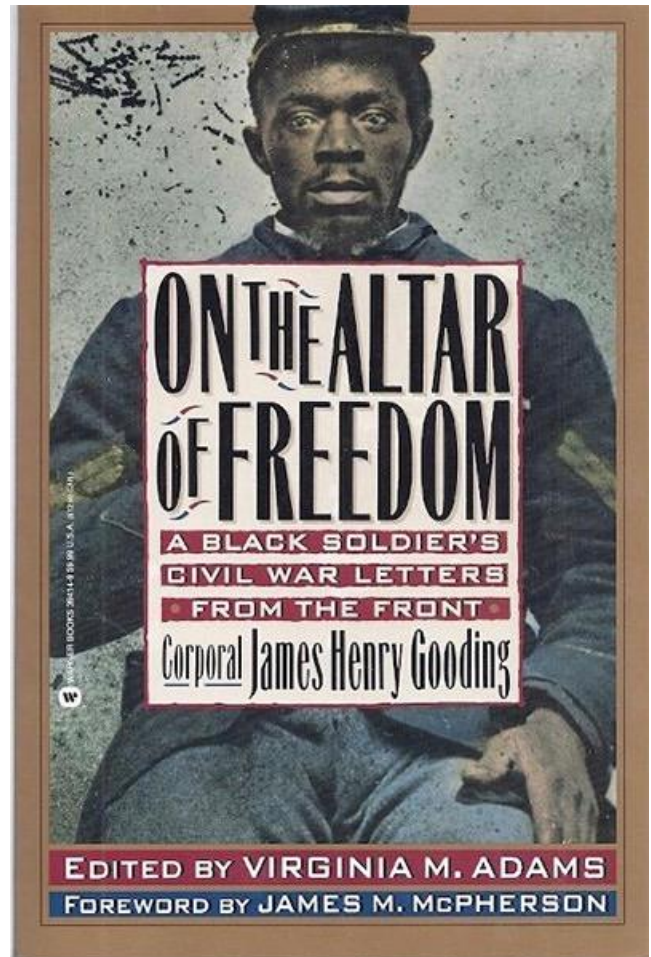
In this letter, Gooding offered the paper's readers a lively account of the new black regiment, in which he was to rise in December to the rank of corporal.

Letter from James Henry Gooding to the New Bedford Mercury

Camp Meigs, Readville, March 21, 1863

Messrs. Editors:—The glorious 54th (that is to be) is getting on nicely, there being now in camp 368 men, two companies, A and B, being full, and C and D wanting a few more men to fill them up, which can easily be done in a very few days. We have five men in our company who are enlisted, but expect them to be discharged, on account of physical disability; indeed, if every man had been received who applied, I think it would very near have filled five companies.

The men appear to be all very well satisfied, except a few in Cos. A and B, who are of a class to be satisfied with nothing. Two of them attempted to skedaddle last Friday night, but were caught by feeling a bayonet in the rear, as Co. C had sentinels posted at the time. They say their grounds for trying to desert are that they have received no bounty, as was represented they should as soon as they had enlisted and been sworn in. I think the men who are about the country recruiting should not misrepresent the conditions, but leave it more to the judgment and patriotism of men to enlist, simply providing conveyance to the camp, as, I think, they are authorized to do. As regards the men who came from New Bedford in this company, they do



not seem to think so much about any bounty, but, by the vote of the City Council, a sum of money was appropriated for the relief of the families of colored citizens enlisted in the 54th regiment, and some of the men fear their families are suffering now for the want of their customary support.

You, Messrs. Editors, may be well aware that colored men generally, as a class, have nothing to depend upon but their daily labor; so, consequently, when they leave their labors and take up arms in defence of their country, their homes are left destitute of those little necessities which their families must enjoy as well as those of white men; and as the city has passed a resolution to pay them a sum, they would rather their families received it than become objects of public charity. We are all determined to act like men, and fight, money or not; but we think duty to our families will be a sufficient excuse for adverting to the subject.

John H. Atkinson, of New Bedford, is in the hospital, very sick. I could not ascertain exactly what his complaint is, but think it is the effect of cold. With that exception the health of the men is very good. We have a very pleasant time in our barracks every evening, having music, singing, and sometimes dancing. We have two musicians who regale us with very fine music—a great deal better than a ‘feller’ pays to hear sometimes.

The ladies of the Relief Society will please accept the thanks of Co. C. for those shirts, socks and handkerchiefs, which should have been expressed in the last letter. God bless the ladies.

J. H. G.

P.S. Wm. T. Boyd, of Pa., died this day (23d). He was in the hospital but two days. He was a member of Co. B

J. H. G.

Discussion Questions:

James Gooding states, *“indeed, if every man had been received who applied, I think it would very near have filled five companies.”*

What do you make of this statement?

Why do you think they had more applicants than positions to be filled?

What sorts of details are important to the writer of this letter?

Compare this letter with the letter written by E.D.W. (1864) to the Christian Recorder. Do they describe conditions and events similarly?

What differences do you notice between the two letters?

Can you tell anything about the different personalities of the writers from their distinct writing styles?