

## Peter J. Williamson Letters, 1862-1918 (bulk 1862-1865)

### Collection Summary

**Creator:** Williamson, Peter J., 1823-1907

**Title:** Peter J. Williamson Letters

**Inclusive Dates:** 1862-1918 (bulk 1862-1865)

**Summary/Abstract:** The collection consists primarily of letters written by architect Peter J. Williamson home to his wife, Eunice, during his Civil War service. The letters document camp life and some of his war-time activities. Also included in the collection are six letters by other family members, and several letters written by Williamson to his wife during her extended stay with relatives in California in 1869.

**Physical Description/Extent:** .4 cubic ft.

**Accession Number:** 2007.033

**Language:** English, Dutch

**Stack Location:** SCC closed stacks, Range 3, Section 4

**Repository:** Special Collections Division, Nashville Public Library, 615 Church Street, Nashville, TN 37219

### Chronology

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|--------------------------|--|
| 20 Apr. 1823             | Peter J. Williamson born in Holland (Elst, Gelderland Province) to William and Hendrina "Harriet" Jansen Williamson. |
| Feb. 1840                | Eunice Leihy born in New York to Rev. Isaac M. and Ruth Leihy.   |
| 1850                     | Peter J. Williamson emigrates to the United States.  |
| 6 Oct. 1856              | Peter J. Williamson marries Eunice J. Leihy, now of Appleton, Wisconsin.   |
| ca. 1859                 | Son William (Willie) Williamson is born.   |
| 1 Sept. 1861-2 Feb. 1862 | 1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry organized at Rippon and Kenosha, Wisconsin.  |
| 1 Jan. 1862              | Peter J. Williamson enlists in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry as a Private.                                   |
| 10 Jan. 1862             | Peter J. Williamson is promoted to Full Sergeant Major.  |

10 March 1862	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry mustered in.
17 March 1862	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry left Wisconsin for St. Louis, Missouri. Stayed at Benton Barracks until 28 April 1862.
ca. Mar. 1862	Son Peter J. (John) Williamson is born.
28 Apr. 1862	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry moved to Camp Girardeau, Missouri.
April-Oct. 1862	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry attached to Vandever's Brigade, District of Southeast Missouri, Department of Missouri.
Oct. 1862-June 1863	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry attached to Cavalry Brigade, District of Southeast Missouri, Department of Missouri.
8 Dec. 1862	Peter J. Williamson promoted to Full 1 <sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, Company F, First Wisconsin Cavalry.
June 1863-Oct. 1864	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry attached to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1 <sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, Army of the Cumberland.
27-31 July 1864	McCook's Raid on Atlanta & West Point Railroad, during which P.J. Williamson distinguished himself.
Oct. 1864-July 1865	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry attached to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1 <sup>st</sup> Division, Wilson's Cavalry Corps, Military Division Mississippi.
31 Oct. 1864	Peter J. Williamson mustered out at Calhoun, Georgia.
2 Jan. 1865	Peter J. Williamson begins work as Assistant Architect in the Quartermaster's Department, Nashville, Tennessee.
19 July 1865	1 <sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry mustered out.
Between 1880 and 1900	Both of Williamson's sons die.
11 Aug. 1892	Peter J. Williamson applies for his military pension as an invalid.

15 Feb. 1907	Peter J. Williamson dies in Nashville.
6 Mar. 1909	Eunice L. Williamson applies for her husband's pension.
1928	Eunice L. Williamson dies in Nashville.

### **Biographical/Historical Sketch**

Born in Holland on 20 April 1823, Peter J. Williamson immigrated to the United States around 1850. By the time the 1850 census was recorded (5 Aug. 1850), he was a carpenter, living in Green Bay, Wisconsin. On 6 Oct. 1856, Williamson married Eunice J. Leihy, daughter of Rev. I.M. Leihy, of Appleton, Wisconsin. The couple remained in Appleton, and around 1859, their first son, William (Willie) was born.

In January 1862, Williamson enlisted as a Private in the 1<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Cavalry, Co. F. He was rapidly promoted to Full Sergeant Major. Shortly thereafter, in March 1862, when the collection's correspondence begins, Williamson's wife Eunice gave birth to their second son, Peter J. (John). By the end of 1862, Williamson was promoted to Full 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. During the war, Williamson's regiment was involved in scouting and raids in Missouri and Arkansas and saw battle in the Middle Tennessee, Chickamauga, and Atlanta campaigns. By the end of his service he was regimental acting assistant adjutant general. Williamson was not lacking in bravery, although his correspondence never goes into detail about his exploits. He was particularly acknowledged for his actions during McCook's raid in late July 1864. At some point during his service, although not mentioned in his correspondence, he was shot in the leg.

After he was mustered out at Calhoun, Georgia, on 31 Oct. 1864, Williamson may have returned to Wisconsin briefly before returning to Nashville by January 1865 to work as Assistant Architect in the Quartermaster's Department. During this work, he decided that he would stay in Nashville after the office was disbanded and go into business for himself as an architect. Housing was scarce in Nashville at the time, and it took Williamson several months to find suitable and affordable housing to allow his family to come to Nashville from Wisconsin. However, by 1869, the Williamsons were all living in Nashville.

In 1869, Williamson had the tables turned on him--he was the one pining away at home for Eunice, who had gone to California for her health and to visit family. It took months for Williamson to find the money to bring Eunice back home. Their sons evidently decided to follow in their father's footsteps, for in the 1880 census son William is listed as a carpenter, while son John is listed as an apprentice machinist.

At some point between 1880 and 1900, both of Williamsons' sons died. By the recording of the 1900 census, Peter and Eunice were living in Nashville with no living children. In August 1892, Williamson applied for his military pension as an invalid. He died in Nashville on the 15 February 1907. Eunice applied for his military pension in March 1909 and died in Nashville in 1928.

## Scope and Contents of the Collection

The bulk of the collection dates from 1862-1865 and consists of letters from Peter J. Williamson back home to his wife, Eunice, during the Civil War. There are a few letters written by relatives, including Peter's brother, William Williamson. The collection also includes 10 letters from 1869 written by Peter J. Williamson to his wife when she was visiting relatives in California. Several of the letters are either in Dutch or contain a note to Williamson's father in Dutch. Correspondents include: Peter J. Williamson; Eunice L. Williamson; William Williamson; and Isaac M. and Ruth Leihy. Locations represented include Kenosha and Green, Wisconsin; various locations in Missouri; Bloomfield, Indiana; Helena, Arkansas; Bridgeport, Alabama; Franklin, Cleveland, and Nashville, Tennessee; and Dalton, Marietta, and Cartersville, Georgia.

Williamson's war-time correspondence sheds some light on his life in various military encampments, although it is clear that at least at the beginning of the war he tried to shield Eunice from any information that might indicate that he was in danger or ill health. He does not refer very often to battle and makes camp life seem quite innocuous, no doubt in an attempt to spare Eunice from additional worry for his safety. P.J. Williamson's Civil War letters describe the realities of camp life, the scenery and inhabitants of various locations, various battles, and his attempts to move up in the ranks. A recurring theme in the letters is his frustration with the lack of knowledge about where his regiment will go next: "...soldiers life is very uncertain. No one is his own master."<sup>1</sup> He discusses various rumors he has heard about the action in other areas. These early letters seem optimistic that the war will be a quick one, although as the war progresses he begins to rue the "continuation of this accursed War."<sup>2</sup> His later letters provide more insight into the military action, although they never fully describe the dangers to which Peter was exposed nor his role in the action. At various points during his service he describes men having to be put on ½ rations and being "pretty hard up for the necessaries of life."<sup>3</sup>

While there are no return letters from Eunice in the collection, Peter's letters give some insight into Eunice's plight back home, including her financial hardships, the loneliness of being without her husband and worrying about the fidelity of soldiers far from home, and dealing with two young sons on her own. In fact, Eunice gave birth to their second son shortly after Peter enlisted and left home. Peter is adamant that Eunice not work for a living, and she appears largely to have been living off of the generosity of relatives and friends. Peter apologizes to Eunice for her loneliness throughout his correspondence, but argues that the liberty of his children is worth the sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> His letters also give some insight into the motivations of an immigrant fighting in the war—"...though but an adopted son; as an American Citizen I claim the protection of the laws and constitution of the country, and as an American Soldier I shall protect it to the end." It is noticeable, however, that Peter never discusses the institution of slavery and in fact

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, 21 Aug. 1862

<sup>2</sup> Letter, 15 Nov. 1862

<sup>3</sup> Letter, 2 Feb. 1863

<sup>4</sup> Letter, 25 Nov. 1862

appears to have had his own servant, whom he refers to variably as his “darky,” “Sambo,” and his “woolhead.”<sup>5</sup>

Several times in his correspondence Peter expresses his contempt for “Northern ‘rebels’” who are advocating compromise and peace.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, they are worse than than the Southerners he was fighting against.

“Down with the northern traitors! who represent themselves to the people ‘peace men.’ . . . The very spirits of many brave soldiers who fell for their country’s cause in swamps and ditches are to day calling on us for revenge, not only one rebellious traitors under arms, but on those traitors in the north who are the soldier’s bitterest enemies. They are known cowards, while the rebel soldier stands up for his rights in line of battle ready to give his life for his country’s rights.”<sup>7</sup>

An architect, Peter appears to have regularly sent Eunice sketches and maps with his letters, mentioning them frequently; however, only two are extant in this collection: a sketch of his lodgings in Nashville, and a map of the area where McCook’s raid took place in July 1864. On the McCook’s raid map, “If you trace the red spotted lines you will find the rout we marched over. The flags represented are the different points where we was attackt.”<sup>8</sup>

The letters written by Peter home to Eunice while he was working in Nashville as Assistant Architect in the Quartermaster’s Department provide insight into conditions in the city at the time. Housing and basic housekeeping items were very expensive, and nearly every place was full of lodgers. During his stay in the city, Peter decided that he would remain in Nashville after the war and set up an architectural firm. Peter describes Lincoln’s funeral procession as it traveled through Nashville, numbering 20,000 men and over 3 miles long.<sup>9</sup>

There is a gap in the correspondence between late 1865 and late 1869. During that time, Eunice and the children came to Nashville to live with Peter. It is uncertain as to how successful Peter’s architectural work was, although during the 1880s he appears to have designed several buildings on Vanderbilt University’s campus. It does not appear, however, that they were ever quite able to achieve the kind of financial success and lifestyle they had aspired to.

In 1869, Eunice traveled to California for her health and to visit her family, and there are nine letters from Peter to Eunice documenting his loneliness at being the one left behind. They were still experiencing financial difficulties as Peter seems unable to procure enough money for Eunice’s return trip to Nashville. While she was gone, the house they were renting was sold, and Peter was faced with trying to find another affordable home. There is also a letter from Eunice’s parents assuring Peter that there

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<sup>5</sup> Letters, 25 Dec. 1862, 6 Jan. 1863

<sup>6</sup> Letter, 27 Feb. 1863

<sup>7</sup> Letter, 5 Sept. 1864

<sup>8</sup> Letter, 27 Aug. 1864

<sup>9</sup> Letter, 24 Apr. 1865

had been no conspiracy to lure Eunice there and keep her, which was evidently Peter's allegation.

There is absolutely nothing in the collection that sheds any light on what happened to the Williamsons' sons between 1880 and 1900. One letter dated 1901 gives insight into the Williamsons' continued difficulties as Peter writes to his brother to thank him for a box he had sent. Peter describes the past year as disastrous for his business, and refers to Eunice as his "good crippled wife."<sup>10</sup>

## **Organization/Arrangement of Materials**

**Arrangement:** The collection is arranged chronologically.

## **Restrictions**

**Restrictions on Access:** In library use only. Available by appointment.

**Restrictions on Use and Reproduction:** Some items may be protected by Copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

## **Index Terms**

### **Personal Names:**

Williamson, Peter J., 1823-1907  
Williamson, Eunice Leihy, 1840-1928  
Williamson, William (b. 1841)  
Leihy, Isaac Morgan  
Leihy, Ruth Calkins

### **Corporate Names/Organizations:**

United States. Army. Wisconsin Cavalry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> (1861-1865)

### **Conference Names:**

### **Subjects:**

Soldiers—United States—Correspondence  
Soldiers—United States—Personal narratives  
Architects—Tennessee—Nashville  
Immigrants—Wisconsin  
Immigrants' writings, Dutch  
Veterans—Tennessee—Nashville  
Veterans—United States--Correspondence

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<sup>10</sup> Letter, 21 Oct. 1901

**Places:**

United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Personal narratives  
United States—Politics and government—1861-1865  
Southern States—Economic conditions—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Southern States—Social conditions—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Tennessee—History—Civil War, 1861-1865  
Nashville (Tenn.)—Economic conditions—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Nashville (Tenn.)—Social conditions—19<sup>th</sup> century

**Genre/Document Types:**

Correspondence

**Occupations:**

Soldiers  
Architects

**Associated and Related Material**

P.J. Williamson Papers, 1862-1869, Special Collections, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University. Consists of transcripts of 25 letters. Finding aid online at <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/williamsonp.shtml>.

**Administrative Information**

**Copyright:** This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

**Preferred Citation:** Peter J. Williamson Letters, Special Collections Division, Nashville Public Library.

**Immediate Source of Acquisition:** Donated to the library on 1 July 2007 by Martha T. Currey.

**Ownership and Custodial History:** The letters were passed down to Martha T. Currey by her father, Andrew B. Thach, Sr., M.D., who was a general practitioner in Nashville. Mrs. Williamson was a patient of Dr. Thach, and having no heirs she left the letters to him. Mrs. Williamson also rented a room from Dr. Thach's aunt, Ella Murphy, who lived on Motrose Ave. in Nashville. During the 1940s, photocopies of 25 of the letters in the collection were donated to Vanderbilt University. They were transcribed and edited by one of Vanderbilt's professors, Henry Lee Swint, and published in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, Volume 25, issues 3 and 4 (1942-1943). Copies of these transcripts were presented to the library by Dr. William R. Smith, great-nephew of Peter J. Williamson, in 2007.

**Processing Information:** Processed by Aimee James in December 2007.

**Accruals:** No further accruals are expected.

**References to Works by or about Collection Creator/Topic**

"Documents: with the first Wisconsin cavalry: 1862-1865 (I): the letters of Peter J. Williamson" Wisconsin Magazine Of History. Volume: 26 /Issue: 3 (1942-1943) Available online at:  
<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wmh/archives/search.aspx?area=browse&volume=26&articleID=14129>)

"Documents: with the first Wisconsin cavalry: 1862-1865 (II): the letters of Peter J. Williamson" Wisconsin Magazine Of History. Volume: 26 /Issue: 4 (1942-1943) Available online at:  
<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wmh/archives/search.aspx?area=browse&volume=26&articleID=14536>)

### Detailed Description of the Collection

Box	Folder	Contents
1	1	Letter, 5 Mar. 1862
1	2	Letter, 9 Mar. 1862~
1	3	Letter, 31 Mar. 1862*~
1	4	Letter, 13 Apr. 1862
1	5	Letter, 20 Apr. 1862*~
1	6	Draft, 15 May 1862
1	7	Letter, 18 May 1862*~
1	8	Letter, 18 May 1862
1	9	Letter, 13 June 1862
1	10	Letter, 29 June 1862
1	11	Letter, 12 July 1862
1	12	Letter, 6 Aug. 1862
1	13	Letter, 21 Aug. 1862
1	14	Letter, 4 Sept. 1862*~
1	15	Letter, 10 Sept. 1862
1	16	Letter, 7 Oct. 1862
1	17	Letter, 3 Nov. 1862*~
1	18	Letter, 15 Nov. 1862**~
1	19	Letter, 25 Nov. 1862
1	20	Letter, 25 Dec. 1862
1	21	Letter, 28 Dec. 1862
1	22	Letter, 6 Jan. 1863
1	23	Letter, 17 Jan. 1863
1	24	Letter, 27 Jan. 1863
1	25	Letter, 2 Feb. 1863
1	26	Letter, 20 Feb. 1863~
1	27	Letter, 27 Feb. 1863**~
1	28	Letter, 4 Mar. 1863~
1	29	Letter, 10 Mar. 1863
1	30	Letter, 12 Mar. 1863~



1	31	Letter, 16 Mar. 1863
1	32	Letter, 20 Mar. 1863
1	33	Letter, 23 Mar. 1863
1	34	Letter, 23 Mar. 1863
1	35	Letter, 8 Apr. 1863
1	36	Letter, 17 Apr. 1863**~
1	37	Letter, 9 May 1863
1	38	Letter, 9 June 1863
1	39	Letter, 28 July 1863
1	40	Letter, 23 Aug. 1863
1	41	Letter, 7 Sept. 1863
1	42	Letter, 14 Sept. 1863~
1	43	Letter, 30 Sept. 1863
1	44	Letter, 3 Oct. 1863
1	45	Letter, 13 Oct. 1863
1	46	Letter, 27 Mar. 1864
1	47	Letter, 4 Apr. 1864
1	48	Letter, 14 Apr. 1864
1	49	Letter, 2 May 1864
1	50	Letter, 9 May 1864
1	51	Letter, 22 May 1864
1	52	Letter, 29 May 1864
1	53	Letter, 30 May 1864
1	54	Letter, 6 July 1864
1	55	Letter, 12 July 1864
1	56	Letter, 15 July 1864
1	57	Letter, 20 July 1864**~
1	58	Letter, 2 Aug. 1864
1	59	Letter, 8 Aug. 1864
1	60	Letter, 13 Aug. 1864**~
1	61	Letter, 21 Aug. 1864**~
1	62	Letter, 27 Aug. 1864~
1	63	Letter, 5 Sept. 1864**~
1	64	Letter, 23 Sept. 1864
1	65	Letter, 26 Sept. 1864~
1	66	Letter, 10 Oct. 1864
1	67	Letter, 26 Oct. 1864
1	68	Letter, 2 Jan. 1865
1	69	Letter, 15 Jan. 1865
1	70	Letter, 3 Feb. 1865
1	71	Letter, 12 Feb. 1865
1	72	Letter, 24 Feb. 1865
1	73	Letter, 24 Apr. 1865**~
1	74	Letter, 8 May 1865~
1	75	Letter, 16 May 1865

1	76	Letter, 31 Aug. 1865
1	77	Letter, 7 Sept. 1865~
1	78	Letter, 4 Oct. 1865
1	79	Letter, 5 Sept. 1869~
1	80	Letter, 8 Sept. 1869
1	81	Letter, 12 Sept. 1869~
1	82	Letter, 20 Sept. 1869
1	83	Letter, 9 Oct. 1869~
1	84	Letter, 22 Oct. 1869
1	85	Letter, 27 Oct. 1869
1	86	Letter, 26 Nov. 1869
1	87	Letter, 1 Dec. 1869
1	88	Letter, 26 Dec. 1869
1	89	Letter, 21 Oct. 1901
1	90	Letter, 22 Jan. 1918
1	91	Transcripts (25)

\*published in Wisconsin Magazine of History, volume 26, issue 3.

\*\* published in Wisconsin Magazine of History, volume 26, issue 4.

~transcript provided by Dr. William R. Smith, great-nephew of P.J. Williamson.