

BECOMING AN OFFICER:  
WASHINGTON, D. C., OCTOBER 1863

*Oliver W. Norton to Elizabeth Norton Poss*

At Gettysburg Private Oliver W. Norton's brigade had played a crucial role in holding Little Round Top for the Union at the cost of more than 120 men killed or mortally wounded, including the brigade commander, Colonel Strong Vincent. "There is no one to fill his place," wrote Norton, who had served as Vincent's brigade bugler. "Oh, how we loved him!" Norton served at brigade headquarters for another three months before seeking a commission as an officer in the U.S. Colored Troops.

---

*Home of the Sanitary Commission,  
Washington, D. C., Oct. 15, 1863.*

Dear Sister L:—

My mind has been in such a muddle since I came to Washington that I cannot remember whether I have written to you since I came here or not. I know I have answered your last letter, but I believe I did that in camp, and though I have not heard from you since, it seems time to write again, so here it is.

First, what I am doing here. If you have not heard, you are wondering if I have at last got into a hospital. Not very, at least I am not under medical treatment.

You know that, with my restless disposition, I could not be contented as brigade bugler while there was a possibility of doing better. As long ago as last May I began to work for a commission in a colored regiment. I wrote to Galusha A. Grow for advice. (I presume you noticed the record of that in my diary and wondered what that was about.) I heard nothing from him till this fall, when I received a letter recommending me to the notice of C. W. Foster, Major and Assistant Adjutant General, Chief of Colored Bureau, and requesting that I might be examined. It was dated September 21st. I immediately made an application to Major Foster, enclosing this letter, and in due time received an order from the War Department permitting

me to appear for examination before the board of which Major General Casey is president. I reported to the board on the 1st of October and was informed that I could not be examined for a week or two yet, and was sent to this place to stay in the meantime.

Second, my prospects. When I first came here I had a very poor idea of the qualifications requisite to pass a successful examination. I knew I was as well qualified as half the officers of my regiment and I hoped to get through. Now I find that none are commissioned who are not qualified to hold the same rank in the regular army, and I begin to feel very small indeed. A man is required to show, first, a thorough knowledge of Casey's Tactics (and the examination is very severe in this), then a good knowledge of geography and history, arithmetic, algebra and geometry. Then the "Army Regulations," "Articles of War," muster and pay rolls, etc., etc., in fact be fully as well posted for second lieutenant as colonel of volunteers. Since I have been here two lieutenant colonels and many line officers have been rejected as unfit for second lieutenants.

After all this comes a searching physical examination, and no matter how well a person is posted, if the surgeon does not pronounce him sound in every respect, he is rejected. Knowing all this you may believe that my hopes of success are very small indeed. However, I shall try, and if I succeed shall be very agreeably disappointed, and I shall consider it no small honor, either. I am studying all I can, but I cannot fix my mind to study as I once could. Two years and a half in the army vetoes that.

I left the army at Culpeper. To-day they are reported at Bull Run, and the air is full of rumors of another great battle on that already famous field. For the first time, if so, the "Third Brigade" has been in a fight without me. I confess to no little anxiety for the result. Our army, I know, is weakened. The Eleventh and Twelfth corps have been sent to Rosecrans, and the First, Second, Third, Fifth and Sixth comprise the whole of our army. The papers say that "Meade is only falling back to seek a field," but I don't believe it. If he had the force, the fields at Culpeper are just as good as those at Bull Run, where the rebels have the memory of two victories. However, I will not croak, but hope for the best.

From Pennsylvania and Ohio we have glorious news. Curtin is re-elected by 30,000 majority and Brough has beat Vallandigham 100,000. That is a greater victory for Pennsylvania than the battle of Gettysburg. It is a victory for the country. Copperheads are nowhere and the elections speak in unmistakable terms the determination of the people to support the administration. It cannot but have its influence on the South and on the war.