

THE LETTERS OF MARY JULIA TYSEN ALLEN

LETTER ONE

Washington Territory
San Juan Island
March 2, 1868

My Dear Carrie,

I received your letter of December third a few days since. It took a long time to reach me as our mails have been very irregular this winter, the roads and river [1.] being impassable. I also got several from home. All came late and one telling us about their Christmas. How much you all must have enjoyed it and how happy I should have been to have shared it with you!

We do not have any money here. It sent Mr. Riker two hundred to invest in my name. It is not saved, but what Harvey took up when we left New York. Only think, if we were at home and getting things for gold we should have more than one thousand dollars and more I suppose as we hear greenbacks are down to sixty cents and I suppose will be less if the trouble in Washington continues. [2.]

...It seems strange but this post is very expensive [3.], more so than in San Francisco. There people do not stay with you. Only make a short call or a short visit, but here they come down on you for a week or more. The paymaster and his clerk have been here for ten days. We had to keep them nearly all the time, although we could not accommodate them at night, and now here is a Court-martial and they are to be entertained for a week or ten days. And the boys went up to Steilacoom with a party for a visit and they brought back their two friends about their age for a week or two. And then there is always someone visiting at the post that has to be asked in to dinner, so though I save in bonnets and dresses, it goes in other things.

It is not yet decided where we shall go, but somewhere I suppose. It would not do to leave us quiet in one place a year. There is a general rejoicing in this part of the

world on the removal of General McDowell from San Francisco. I do not suppose there was ever a man so universally disliked as he. [4.]

On Saturday last we went with a party of ladies and gentlemen to call on the ladies at the English Camp, where we all lunched. Got home here about seven o'clock and I asked the party to come in to supper. Bridget had to have the chickens that were running around the yard caught and cooked and hot biscuits; so they did not come in until about eleven o'clock.

If my girl were not the best natured in the world she would be put out sometimes; but fortunately she never is under any circumstances. She is a treasure and worth her thirtyfive dollars a month in this part of the world. Our neighbors have Chinamen and pay them thirty dollars. I would rather give five dollars more for a good reliable woman, although the Chinamen make excellent servants, good cooks, and excellent washermen and ironers. They are great imitators; and if you once tell them what to do, they go on doing it the same way until you tell them to stop.

I am taking this quiet morning to write you this long letter for Harvey has gone to sit on the Court-martial and the party of boys out to ride, I believe on mules and horses, or anything they can ride on holidays, I suppose, while these boys are here.

...We are having delightful weather now. I am sitting with a bright fire on the hearth and the outside doors all open.

About your friends the B-----s (1st. Lt. William Borrowe). I am afraid if I say anything about them I shall say too much; however, whatever I do say remember is to be repeated to no one.

When we started from Baltimore on the steamer, some of the older officers of the Regiment came to the Major and told him there were some officers on board that he would not want to know or have me know their wives. One of them was Lieutenant B----'s wife, who has three children. Well, of course, I did not become acquainted. Although sitting almost touching her sometimes and none of the ladies of the Regiment were introduced to her. We landed in San Francisco and each went to different posts and I never thought any more about him or her till

we were ordered here, and he was transferred to this company. That was in August. I did not call on her or meet her until we were all invited to the English Camp on New Year's Day, when to save embarrassment, to all, a formal introduction took place to the Major and myself. Then I had to meet them at the dinner we gave. I have not met her again, although he is always asking the Major to call.

Now you will say, "What is the matter?" She says she was a widow. She had one child anyway, about seven, another since her marriage, a boy about the age of Clarence, and a lovely little girl, of Belle's age or younger. Mrs. B. is a fine looking and elegantly dressed person. She leaves her husband and goes to Victoria and makes a stay at the Hotel three weeks at a time. They seem to have plenty of money and make a great dash where ever they go. He was dismissed from the army once but was reappointed, and I heard an officer say the other day they would subscribe to the Regiment a thousand dollars to present him if he would resign. He is a most elegant lieutenant; and if you were in his presence five minutes and did not know the man, he would make you believe black was white. But enough of him. But remember do not hint a word of this, for really I should not like to get his ill will. I am afraid you will think I have something personal against them, but I have not. I do not suppose I shall ever meet them again as Harvey never asks him in when he comes to the door on business. I thought I knew who they were when I first heard their name. [5.]

...We did not receive our mail at the proper time this week; so it has just arrived. ...I have been jumping and am distracted. The major has invited four gentlemen from Court-martial here to dinner, and we expected a whole sheep and fish, and of course are disappointed. Through someone's stupidity they have not come, so I did not know what to do, having only two chickens on hand and soup, so had to mount an orderly and send for some beef and canned oysters to make a pie and will have to do with that, peach pie and cake, coffee, etc. The court is sitting now. Will not get through till three o' clock. [6.]

...The party of boys have mounted themselves and rode down to the English Camp sixteen miles there and sixteen back over terrible roads. [7.]
And now I am going to close writing, not reading it over for I have not time...

From your loving sister, M.J. Allen

NOTES:

Harvey Abner Allen (1818- - 1882), native North Carolinian, was an officer in the United States Army who served as the commander of Battery I., 2nd Artillery at Camp Steele (American Camp) from June 1867 to July 1868. He later became the fourth commander of the Department of Alaska from Sept. 20, 1871 to Jan. 3, 1873. He graduated from West Point in 1841, and was assigned to the 2nd Artillery Regiment, serving with this unit for most of his career. He returned to the academy in 1843 where he taught mathematics until the outbreak of the Mexican-American war in 1846. He was involved with the siege at Vera Cruz, and the battles of Cerro Gordo, San Antonio, Churubusco and Molino del Rey, Chapultepec and the assault and Capture of Mexico City, all in 1847. During the Civil War he participated in the 1861 expedition to relieve Fort Pickens, FL, and remained in defense of that work until September 1864. He then served as commander of coastal defenses through the end of the war. In December 1865 he arrived on the West Coast where he was assigned to Benicia Barracks (in the Sacramento River delta) and then the Presidio until his assignment to San Juan Island. Following his tour on San Juan Island he was commander of the District of Astoria, OR from 1868-1871. He was then placed in command of the Department of Alaska, headquartered at Sitka. He finished his career at posts in his home state until his retirement at Fort McHenry, MD in 1878. Allen died at his home in Schraalenburg, New Jersey (now Dumont, New Jersey) on September 20, 1882, and was buried in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY.

1. This is presumably the Cowlitz River. The U.S. Army mails would have arrived at Vancouver Barracks on the Columbia. From there they would have been hauled up the Cowlitz from the Columbia and then carried overland to Fort Steilacoom. From the first they would have been carried down sound to Fort Steele.
2. During the war, Congress passed several major financial bills that forever altered the American monetary system. The Legal Tender Act authorized the federal government to print and use paper money, called "greenbacks," to pay its bills and finance the war. Even though greenbacks were not backed by similar amounts of gold and silver, creditors were required to accept them at face value. By the end of the war, the government had printed over \$500 million in greenbacks, and the American financial system's strict reliance on transactions in gold or silver had ended. By trouble in Washington Mary Julia is probably referring to the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson on Feb. 24, 1868, in the U.S. House of Representatives. Johnson was acquitted on May 16 by a single vote after a trial in the U.S. Senate
3. It is still expensive to live here!

4. This was Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell, West Point '38, was a career officer who is best known for being in command of the Union Army at the First battle of Bull Run (Manassas) on July 21, 1861. Essentially a supply officer, McDowell had never commanded troops in battle. He then performed poorly at the Second battle of Bull Run, which he blamed on another officer. He never commanded troops in battle again. He was instead exiled to the West Coast in 1864, where he assumed command of the Department of the Pacific, and then the Department of California. He returned to San Francisco after his retirement and became head of the city parks department. He is largely responsible for the creating the parks in and around the Presidio of San Francisco, where he was interred after his death in 1885.
5. William Borrowe, a New Yorker, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the 2nd Artillery in 1861. He was dismissed from the army in 1865, but was reinstated the same year. In 1871, he was honorably mustered out of the army as a first lieutenant. It is hard to imagine that two officers' wives would not regularly visit while living on a post as small as Camp Steele, where officers' row was a mere four structures. No wonder Mrs. Borrowe spent three weeks at a time in Victoria.
6. These provisions either came from the sutler or one of the stores in the village of San Juan, the island's first town, located about a mile from the post on Griffin Bay.
7. This was the Military Road, which followed the track of the original Hudson's Bay Company sheep run, cut by Vancouver Island Gov. James Douglas and his crew of Cowitchan workers in 1854 to establish sheep stations on the various prairies and rocky balds. Today, English and American camps are 13 miles apart by county roads.

LETTER TWO

Camp Steele
San Juan Island, W.T.
Sunday, March 5, 1868

My dear Carrie,

I wrote you only a few lines by the last mail and I intended writing you a long letter in answer to yours. Carrol's letter to Albert and note to Harvey arrived by the same mail. He is very young to be already thinking of West Point. It is not well for them to go too young. If Albert goes between eighteen or nineteen, it is as soon as I shall care to have him go. The studies are hard and the general discipline so strict. Two of our lieutenants here are graduates. One came from West Point only this fall. He did not enter until he was twenty and he seems young now. Mathematics are the important Branch. They say a many having a taste for them and smart can get along with the rest of the studies. [1.] Tell Carrol this little story: A young man was being examined and they were in doubt whether to pass him or not. Finally the committee agreed to give him one word to spell. If her spelled it right, they would accept him. The word was separate, but, unfortunately, he spelled it "seperate" and failed. Harvey is going to write Carrol all the particulars.

You must have very cold weather. I think I told you we have very little here. The winters are delightful. We are now having high winds so that it is unpleasant crossing to the city [Victoria] in our little steamer, but next month our pleasant weather begins, and then I want to go to town. I want so many things. I sent over, but perhaps you know when you send, you never get what you want. The last thing I sent for was a pair of pants for Carleton, just common duck stuff [2.] to play around in the mud with. They brought some purple and white. He has worn it three days and it is fit to be washed, so now I am going myself.

I see by the papers everything is very low in New York drygoods, I mean muslin 12 cents etc. It must be a great change for everyone. There will be no use in buying much in Victoria.

I am making myself a new set of chemise. Have two finished. I have a great deal of time for sewing. Have nothing else to do. I wish I had some of that heap you have on hand. The boys not having to wear white shirt saves me a great amount of sewing. They do not need them here as in California. There are no days when a flannel shirt is not comfortable, and it is not seen; for; their vests or jackets button up to the collar. Wear white ones only on state occasions. I must get some new dresses this spring as I am entire run out. I only wish I had you to help me fit them. It is so hard to do it alone.

It is too bad everyone is having babies. I never heard such times; I suppose it is because drygoods are so cheap. They are high here yet. The low prices have not reached us. [3.]

...I think I told you once that the major had under his command here about 25 islands; and, as they are in dispute between the English and American governments, only military authority can be exercised. Yesterday three white men came here and said they, with one other white man, inhabited one of the islands about fifteen miles from here; and these three had found the fourth one murdered before his own cabin, beaten to death, and they came to report it. They did not think it was Indians, for they use knives or guns; so of course it had to be investigated; and a board consisting of the doctor and two lieutenants, with an armed guard were ordered by Harvey to start early this morning. But this morning it blew such a gale that it was not considered safe to go in the Plunger, so they had to wait and telegraph for the little steamer Dianna [4.], so here she comes, pitching along. I suppose they will not be back until tomorrow some time. [5.]

...We are going to have a little garden, have planted some radishes etc. I suppose it is too cold yet for you to think of such a thing. Have you got a strawberry bed, or will they not flourish? I have one here. Very fine ones they say, planted last spring, so it ought to have a good many this year, but I can not take much interest

in anything out of doors, feeling that our stay here is so uncertain. I never felt so unsettled as I do here.

...The boys have not got back yet; they must have had some trouble I suppose, although now it has turned out to be twenty-five miles instead of sixteen. [6.]

The weather has been beautiful today, so calm and bright. Our gardener has been at work all day and Carleton has his bed all dug and planted with flower seeds.

Carrol's plan about hunting the goat is so original that I must tell him about the paper hunts they have in Victoria. They hunt hare in England of course, but have none here, so they have men with bags of bits of paper and they start and run, dropping these papers all along. That is the scent. Then crowds of ladies and gentlemen on horseback ride after them. They have had several in Victoria just out of the city and have, on occasions had a lunch spread at the Admiral's or Governor's grounds, the two big men of the place.

...A few nights since we were invited by the gentlemen to meet Dr. and Mrs. Temple [7.] in at their new quarters to hear some music. They have a Melodian [8.] and guitars and both sing. They had invited the old hospital steward, who is a real musical genius. Just give him a couple of drinks of brandy and he will play on any instrument you please and anything you ask him to play. We also had a little dance and gave the boys some lessons. He played for our party New Year's night.

I expected the boys would come rushing in when they saw the boat. Of course they wanted to go, and so it is hurry up dinner and get fixed up. Quite an unexpected excitement for them. Carleton thinks he might go too, but I tell him two boys are enough. He must wait until I go too.

Carelton has been writing a wonderful long letter to Jimmy. I can not say much for the writing. He does not improve much.

I shall not write home this time as I shall have the same thing to write over twice, so let them know you have heard from me, if convenient. I wrote the last mail, no, the one before, to you, also to Andrew, enclosing a check. Now I shall stop until tomorrow and see if I get any mail; but it comes in such a hurry, and very often

the boat wants to go right back, particularly if the weather is stormy. Then it is hurry up the mail.

In the next I expect you to tell me everything pretty you are getting for spring. I suppose you will not get another handsome dress as your black one is so handsome. Just think of mine lying in the trunk all this time. I am thankful it was not made up. I have had no use at all for it, and it spoils a dress to pack it so often.

I must close this immediately. No more till next time. Goodbye. Love to all from your loving sister, M.J. Allen.

Mail is in and goes right off. Do not say a word to anyone of that gossip I wrote you about in my last, nor ask any questions about the lady. I do not care to know of her.

NOTES:

1. West Point was still principally an engineering school with the top graduate going to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, headquartered at the academy.
2. Canvas trousers. *Doek* is Dutch for cloth, which was evolved into the English word "duck" in reference to sail canvas. Duck was typically made from cotton or linen (flax), with some use of hemp.
3. During the 1900's, it was "taboo" to write negatively about pregnancy and childbirth because it was largely lauded as the most noble and valuable contribution of women to their husbands and to society. Addressing the clinical details and suffering of childbirth was unacceptable at that time, so it remained largely unwritten. The writer Kate Chopin was criticized when her characters actually had negative thoughts about the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, most notably in her novel, *The Awakening*. (Taken from Kate Chopin website: <http://www.loyno.edu/~kchopin/index.htm>)
4. The steamer *Diana*, fondly called the "largest small steamer" or the "smallest large steamer" that ever ran in the Northwest, was brought to the West Coast from China in 1860. After her boiler exploded, she was brought north and eventually purchased by the Alberni Mill Company. Fitted with a new engine the ship carried the mails from San Juan Island to Victoria and the

mainland and ferried U.S. troops about Puget Sound under a \$6,000 contract with the U.S. Government. She actually flew both British and American colors depending on the port of call. Not long after the Allens left, she was sold to a San Francisco company. She was wrecked in 1874 off the Quinault Indian Reservation. Little is known of *Plunger* as of this writing.

5. The *Victoria Daily Colonist* reported on March 24 that a “colored man” had been found dead in his log cabin on Salt Spring Island (not one of the disputed islands). This “most inoffensive and harmless man” had not been seen for a week and his door was locked. A friend removed the chinking between the logs and spotted him lying on his back on the floor. A constable broke down the door and found him shot in the back, with clothing and a double-barrel shotgun missing. The newspaper suspected Indians and reported that other “colored” settlers feared for their lives.
 6. This is presumably the Military Road. The boys may have had to take a detour.
 7. Assistant Surgeon T. E. Semple is notable for finding the funding to build a new hospital ward at the camp. The couple probably moved into what the park now calls Historic Structure (HS) 10, which was moved from the long-abandoned Fort Bellingham in 1867.
 8. A melodeon is a reed keyboard instrument, usually housed in a table-like casing that predates the pump organ. Several million reed organs and melodeons were made in the United States between the 1850s and the 1920s. During this time Estey Organ and Mason & Hamlin were popular manufacturers.
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ADDENDA:

CARLETON ALLEN'S LETTER TO HIS COUSIN JIMMY RITER

Camp Steele
San Juan Island
Jan. 24, 1868

Dear Jimmy,

I forgot when I got a letter from you, but I am going to write to you now. Christmas Anson and Albert shot at a Target with a lot of other persons and the ones that shot the best were to have a Turkey. Albert got two. We had a Christmas tree. I got a sword and gun, trumpet, riding whip, a dog whistle, 125 glass marbles, a ball, and other things. We have skating now. I can skate a little, and we had some snow, and it was very cold. I got some paper that Grandpa sent me. We study every day until one o'clock, then we go hunting. Our Orderly shot a Deer, and the boys shot some ducks and Quails. Tomorrow is Saturday and we can go out in the morning and stay all day. They got seven Ducks last Saturday. My little Duck Jimmy went down to the hospital. I suppose he thought he was sick. I had to go after him and bring him home. Did you know his name was Jimmy? A great many crows come in the yard. One of them took him by the tail and pulled him around and last night an Owl was trying to catch him. I think his life is in danger. A boy caught an owl and gave him to me. I have got him in a box and feed him, and last night he got out; but he does not go away. Deers are very plenty we could have bought one for a dollar but we had a half a one and did not want any more. This morning when I got up, I found my Duck dead; I do not know what ailed it. I am now going to have little pet lamb as soon as it can go away from its mother. Another boy and I are building a house for it, you must write me a long letter for this one. I write a little every day. How is Carol, and Clarence and Belle?

From your loving cousin,
Carleton B. Allen

JANUARY 1868, CAMP STEELE
FOR THE OFFICERS AND LADIES FROM ENGLISH CAMP.

BILL OF FARE:

Soup
Mock Turtle
Fish
Salmon with egg sauce fried smelt

Entrée
Muttonchops & mushrooms chicken salad croquets
Roasts

Turkey, beef, ham, mutton
Vegetables

Potatoes, asparagus, green peas, corn
Game

Ducks, current jelly pheasants, celery
Pastry

Plum pudding Mince pies Peach pies
Deserts

Plum cake Pound cake Small mixed cakes
Raisins, nuts, candies, bon bons etc.
Beer, all kinds of wine

Coffee, music and dancing
