

Laurence Eugene O'Keeffe Collection (MC 218)

Biographical Note

Laurence Eugene O'Keeffe was born in Ireland on August 10, 1835 and died on January 16, 1907. He is [buried](#) in Westview Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia. His family immigrated to the United States in 1850 and by 1853 was living in Columbus, Georgia. During the Civil War he served with Company C of the 17th Regiment of the Georgia Volunteers, stationed in Virginia. He was captured at Richland, Tennessee on May 23, 1863 and incarcerated at the U.S. Prison Depot in Johnson's Island, Ohio. He was paroled and sent to City Point, Virginia for exchange on February 24, 1865. He returned to Columbus after the War, and ran a steamboat line on the Chattahoochee River. In the early 1870s he moved to Atlanta and became head of the one the largest chemical and fertilizer industries in the country. He married Sarah (also known as Sallie) C. Cox on June 30, 1880 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Scope and Content

Most of the following descriptive information is taken from the Georgia Department of Archives inventory for AC 84-015:

A diary, sheets from another volume, and Civil War letters, all written by a young Irishman who had moved to Georgia, make up this interesting collection. O'Keeffe's unusual position as a well-educated, articulate young man living in a foreign country resulted in a unique record of life in ante-bellum Columbus, Georgia.

Despite his youth, Laurence already considered himself a diarist and saved his book for "what is original" (p. 115), scribbling during slow hours in the store and in his room until he fell asleep or the candle went out. When he finished one volume he wrote "...ever since then a something has been pressing on my mind like to what a person feels when they [sic] have left some duty undone" (p. 101).

The Civil War Letters are also unusually articulate. They include as much about O'Keeffe's interests as they do about actual war activity. Laurence sometimes spelled his name O'Keefe in an attempt to have it pronounced properly. 1846-1907 1 box (.3 l.f.)

Permission to Publish

Permission to publish material from the Laurence Eugene O'Keeffe Collection must be obtained from the Columbus State University Archives at Columbus State University. Use of the following credit line for publication or exhibit is required: Laurence Eugene O'Keeffe Collection (MC 218) Columbus State University Archives Columbus, Georgia

Provenance

Donated by Clara O'Keeffe Black (Mrs. Homer Black) in 2007. A note in the file indicates that the materials (except the diary of Mary Joseph O'Keeffe) were filmed by the Georgia Department of Archives and History, after which they were returned to Mrs. Black. An inventory indicates that the Georgia Archives assigned it their collection number AC 84-015 in 1984.

Box and Folder List

Box 1

- Folder 1 - O'Keeffe Family Information. Account of Laurence's life and family by his son, John E; O'Keeffe. L. E. O'Keeffe's certificate of first communion and his obituary from an Irish newspaper, 1846, 1907 and n.d.
- Folder 2 - L. E. O'Keeffe Diary Pages. Describes attending Adelina Patti concert in Columbus, Georgia, probably from February, 1853

- Folder 3 - L E. O'Keeffe Diary (145 pages). Longest extended narrative in the collection, kept from March 26-May 26; documents a young man's interests and life in Columbus, Georgia. He was a passionate devotee of the arts, especially music. Other concerns were his sisters and religious beliefs as a Roman Catholic. Street and social life in Columbus were carefully delineated: salesmen in the store where he clerked, farmers and poor "crackers" who came into town, their amusements, education, and treatment of their slaves; the installation of gas lighting in town and the arrival of the first railroad train from Savannah; holidays and ordinary life at the store. At various points he described parties, funerals, weather, vegetables appearing for sale on the street, and the suburban gardens of the wealthy. With a sharp eye and considerable humor toward himself, he told the tale of a room he shared with the local Justice of the Peace - Laurence for sleeping, the J.P. for his work - and the hilarious consequences when court needed to be held after midnight, 1853
- Folder 4 - L E. O'Keeffe Civil War Letters. 16 original loose papers, 31 pieces. The Civil War letters are almost as interesting as the diary, despite poor writing conditions and the tedium of camp life. Most of them were written to his family in Columbus, Georgia, while the 17th Regiment of the Georgia Volunteers were in winter quarters. Portions of some are missing, 1861-1862
 - April 19, 1861, Columbus, Georgia. To his sister Emily in St. Augustine, Florida, where she was in school. He described preparations for war. Incomplete letter, 1 piece.
 - August 26, 1861, Lynchburg, Virginia. Had just arrived in camp after a "300-mile" trip. 1 piece.
 - August 31, 1861, Lynchburg, Virginia. They have been mustered in. He described the trip through Tennessee, the roads lined with signs of the glorious Confederacy. A Union sympathizer was murdered by soldiers. 4 pieces.
 - September 14-18, 1861, Lynchburg, Virginia. Camp Confidence. He had attended a concert in town and later went by train to Manassas. Pages 1-4 and 8-5 believed to be one incomplete letter. 3 pieces.
 - September 23, 1861, Manassas, Virginia. Description of the camp at Little Bull Run. 1 piece
 - October 8, 1861, [Manassas]. He wrote from the library of a private home nearby and assured them of his good health despite poor camp conditions for ordinary soldiers. 4 pieces.
 - October 25, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. A further description of Camp Toombs. 1 piece
 - November 6, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. Preparations for winter quarters and Christmas in Camp Qui Vivre. He had lost some belongings and needed an overcoat. 3 pieces.
 - November 11, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. Camp life. Someone had given him an "India rubber coat." 1 piece.
 - N. D. [Indian summer 1861], Centerville, Virginia. A box of provisions arrived for him from home. 1 piece. Incomplete.
 - November 28, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. He was well situated for Winter and described daily activities. He never felt his family wrote enough to him, particularly Emily in the St. Augustine convent. 3 pieces.
 - December 9, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. Captain Chapman was ill and would be returning to Columbus. Laurence could not get leave for Christmas. 1 piece.
 - December 14, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. Only the sick could get a furlough. The rest would build huts for the winter. 1 piece.
 - December 18, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. He was still waiting to see if McClellan would advance or if they would go into winter quarters. 1 piece.
 - December 23, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. He described a skirmish with Union soldiers on Frying Pan Road, December 20th. They prepared for Christmas in Camp Qui Vivre. 3 pieces.
 - December 29, 1861, Centerville, Virginia. This letter is nearly illegible because the ink has faded. 2 pieces:
- Folder 5 - L E. O'Keeffe Civil War Letters, 1862. 14 original loose papers, 18 pieces. Continues letters from camp in the 17th Regiment Georgia Volunteers
 - January 3, 1862, [Bull Run] Prince William County, Virginia. They moved to Camp Georgia, and snow had fallen. 1 piece. Incomplete.
 - January 8, 1862, Bull Run, Virginia. He was visited by the Moses brothers and heard about Mont Moses' planned marriage to Minnie Dessau in Spring 1862. 2 pieces
 - January 15, 1862 (misdated 1861), Bull Run, Virginia. He described winter quarters further. Still could not get a furlough. 1 piece.
 - January 18, 1862, Bull Run, Virginia. He requested no more baggage as he would have to leave it behind in the spring. He made friends with Dr. Barry, a Roman Catholic physician, and Eva Caball, a singer, wrote him. 1 piece

- February 6, 1862, Bull Run, Virginia. He was able to make plans for a furlough. 1 piece.
- February 11, 1862 (misdated 1861), Bull Run, Virginia. Lt. Grant was granted a furlough first as his wife had had a baby. O'Keeffe was to follow him. 2 pieces.
- February 16, 1862, Prince William County, Virginia. It snowed and weather conditions were severe. He resented those able-bodied men at home who would not enlist. 1 piece.
- February 27, 1862, Prince William County, Virginia. He was less certain than ever of a furlough and glad to hear that Governor Brown had instituted the draft in Georgia. 1 piece.
- March 3, 1862, Bull Run, Virginia. The men had a snow fight. 1 piece.
- March 13, 1862, Culpepper Courthouse, Virginia. They had marched 45 miles to a new location under orders from General Johnson to leave winter quarters. Laurence still hoped to have an Easter furlough. 1 piece.
- March 24, 1862, Orange Court House, Virginia. He referred to a hypocritical, ex-friend. Saw President Madison's house and visited another with fine religious paintings. 2 pieces:
- March 30, 1862, Orange Court House, Virginia. The weather was bad. More about the contemptible Lt. G. (3/24/1862). Writing is faint. 1 piece.
- April 16, 1862, Yorktown, Virginia. They were marched from Orange Court House to trains which took them to Richmond where he went to mass. They then were moved by steamboats down the James River where he was in his first real battle, described moment by moment, the beginning of the Peninsular Campaign. 2 pieces.
- June 23, 1862, Richmond, Virginia. They were camped near the lines below Richmond. The Confederate army seemed slack and undisciplined to him. 1 piece.
- Folder 6 - L. E. O'Keeffe Civil War Letters, 1864-1865; 9 original loose papers, (5 photocopied), 9 pieces.
 - Letters from prison have little news since there was no activity.
 - January 25, 1864, U.S. Prison Depot Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece
 - February 14 [St Valentine's], 1864, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece
 - April 25, 1864, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece.
 - August 15, 1864, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece, photocopy.
 - September 19, 1864, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece.
 - January 11, 1865, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece, photocopy
 - February 3, 1865, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece.
 - February 10, 1865, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece.
 - February 16, 1865, Johnson's Island, Ohio. 1 piece.
- Folder 7
 - Diary belonging to Mary Joseph O'Keeffe (May 1, 1938-February 9, 1928).