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**Lehigh University  
Library & Technology Services**

# Special Collections

## Flyer

### I Remain – A Mystery

Recent books like *The DaVinci Code* and movies like *National Treasure* have featured intrepid code-crackers who are busily employed in coaxing closely guarded national archives (and archivists) to give up secrets that will cast new light on historical events. Though these adventures may seem to be the productions of over-caffinated minds, it is nevertheless the case that archives do contain materials that bear further investigation – and, occasionally, they even contain a mystery or two...

One such mystery in Lehigh's Special Collections is a Civil War letter written in code. The letter is from Major General Fitz John Porter, and is addressed to General G.B. McClellan in Washington on August 16 [n.d.]. Porter was one of McClellan's Union army officers who had distinguished himself in the Peninsular Campaign.

At the Second Battle of Bull Run (August 28-30, 1862) Porter was sent to reinforce General John Pope. Because he did not move quickly enough, Porter was accused by Pope of failure to carry out orders. He was

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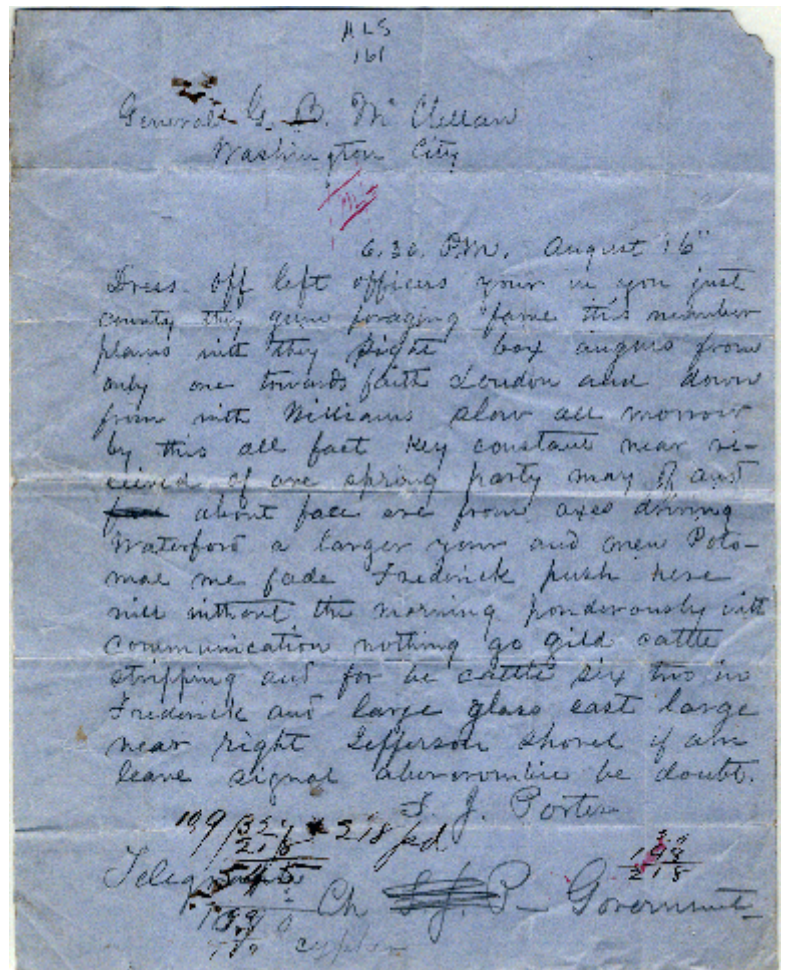
court-martialed for insubordination and cashiered from the army in 1863.

Porter's loyalty to McClellan (who had political differences with the Washington administration) may have been an influential factor in this dismissal from the army. Porter protested the decision and fought for years to be reinstated with back pay. As President, Grant himself vouched for Porter, who was eventually vindicated in 1879; an 1886 Act of Congress restored his rank (but not back pay!).

He went on to work for the city of New York and died in 1901. It is possible that this code letter may contain Porter's explanation of the actions he took, or failed to take, on the brink of battle.

Though the provenance of the letter is unknown, the use of codes by both armies during the conflict has been documented. The Union Army relied on a series of "Stager ciphers," devised by Anson Stager to encrypt telegrams detailing military operations and important government dispatches.

The telegrams were doubly encrypted – telegraph operators substituted a list of keywords for important people, locations, times, or military maneuvers. Then, the word order of the message was scrambled and null words were inserted. To decipher the message on the



other end, operators would have to recognize the pattern signaled by the first word in the letter; that key-word indicated the order in which the words in the message should be read.

The codes proved robust; whenever the Confederates intercepted a coded telegram, they published it in their newspapers and offered rewards to anyone who could crack it. Those rewards went uncollected, and the codes remained unbroken. The few codebooks with keys to the code were closely guarded – even Lincoln himself did not have access to them.

One of the few surviving codebooks is on display at the National Security Agency's Cryptologic Museum, Fort Mead, Md., (<http://www.nsa.gov/museum/museu00026.cfm>); it contains the key to the Cipher 9 series in use from 1861-1862.

The codewords listed in the book have two matches in our letter: "spring" is code for "rifled guns" and "may" is code for "charge." Special Collections also holds both volumes of the most in-depth study of this cryptographic system: William Plum's *The Military Telegraph during the Civil War in the United States*, (2 vols., 1882), which explains the system of word substitution that these codes employed.

Women's names, for example, were used to indicate time; Lehigh's coded letter contains, possibly, the name "ann," signifying "1:30 a.m." Thus, we know that the coded letter involves rifled guns, a charge, and perhaps an event at 1:30 a.m.

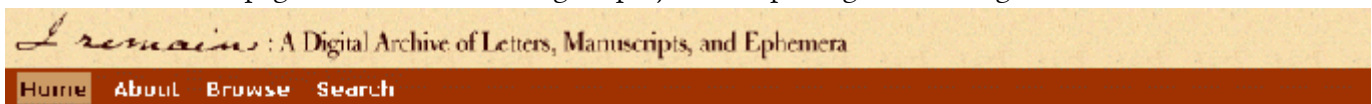
Beyond that, the letter has kept its secrets well, and awaits a clever codebreaker to unlock its message.

— MEGAN A. NORCIA, CLIR POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW

*Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Curator of Special Collections, or Ilhan Citak, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 758-6091; e-mail: [inspc@lehigh.edu](mailto:inspc@lehigh.edu)*

This letter is available in Special Collections and also online as part of *I Remain, A Digital Archive of Letters, Manuscripts, and Ephemera* (<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/remain/>), a collection of writings by famous scientists, Presidents, writers, artists, politicians, and poets spanning five centuries. In cooperation with Special Collections, the Digital Library Team has already digitized some of the letters and will work to make the entire collection available by May of this year.

Home page of the "I Remain" digital project <[http:// digital. lib.lehigh.edu/remain/](http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/remain/)>



This digitally accessible collection represents a range of lives — from ordinary citizens to Presidents, literary luminaries, movie stars, soldiers, and politicians.

The digital archive offers the opportunity to study the evolution of communication, trace the development of social networks, examine material culture, and gain insight into the way working writers and scientists shaped their ideas and shared their thoughts.

This project is under development. Please refer to the **project status** information for further details.

