

A Zinger from

Wm. T. Sherman

HAMPTON SMITH

As the Minnesota Historical Society library's Civil War specialist for more than 20 years, I've found that the Governor's Correspondence files from the Civil War era can yield some very interesting letters. These range from a father asking for news about his son serving in a Minnesota regi-

ment to official missives from the Secretary of War. Among all of this variety, a series of letters between Governor Stephen Miller and General William Tecumseh Sherman caught my attention.

Their exchange began when Miller requested a pass on the military railroad between Nashville, Ten-

nessee, and the front lines in Georgia so that a commission headed by Dr. Luke Miller could visit Minnesota troops at the front. Sherman carefully but firmly explained his reasons for denying the pass: "You would take the very bread and meat out of your soldier's mouth's [*sic*] that a state inspector might come and su-

General William Tecumseh Sherman, famed for his sharp tongue as well as his military prowess, about 1865

A Minnesota Historical Society staff member since 1983, Hamp Smith has worked in both the archives and reference library, where he specializes in military history—particularly the Civil War—and all things dealing with railroads.

pervise the act of other medical officers here on the spot commissioned by yourself," he wrote.¹

Yet the governor continued to press for a pass, even going over Sherman's head to the War Department. This brief, fiery salvo from the general ended the exchange.

Headquarters, Military Division of the Mississippi,
In the Field, Gaylesville Ala. Oct. 25, 1864.

To his Excellency,
Stephen Miller.
St. Paul, Min.

Dear Sir,

Yours of Sept. 15 has just reached me. I beg to assure you of my most complete[?] respect and friendship but it does seem to me that you can at your distance see that I have no means of transporting a single man.

Our Railroad is broken 4/5 of the time, is now broken and I can hardly foresee the time during war when any person can hope to reach this army unless escorted by a Brigade. If it be absolutely necessary that you should visit your Regiments by a Commission, I will get the War Department to replace them by other troops and send yours to a more peaceful Country.

I am with respect,
Your obedient Servant.
W. T. Sherman,
Maj. Gen.

There are a number of unusual things about this letter. For starters, it appears to be in Sherman's own hand, rather than dictated or transcribed by an army clerk. In addition, the letter is somewhat personal in tone, though it is clear that the general was not happy. Sherman recalls his "respect and friendship" for Miller before concluding by delivering the sort of withering sarcasm for which he was famous.²

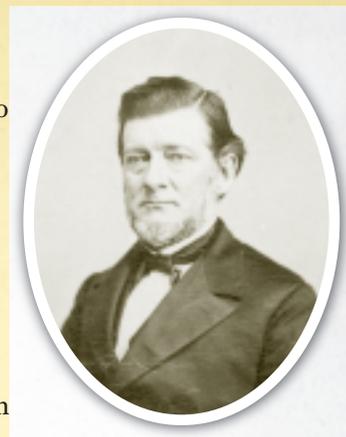
Sherman wrote to Miller at a critical point in his 1864 campaign. Atlanta had fallen to his army at the beginning of September, but John Bell Hood's Confederate Army of the Tennessee was still in the field and had maneuvered around the Union army, attacked Sherman's railroad line, and marched into north Alabama. Hood was trying to lead his opponents out of Georgia on a merry chase into Tennessee, but Sherman was well aware of his game. "It was clear to me," the general noted in his memoirs, "that

he [Hood] had no intention to meet us in open battle, and the lightness and celerity of his army convinced me that I could not possibly catch him on a stern-chase."³

A few days before his letter to Governor Miller, Sherman had written General John M. Schofield at Chattanooga about his intentions to let Hood go. "I want the road repaired to Atlanta: the sick and wounded men sent north of the Tennessee; my army recomposed, and I will then make the interior of Georgia feel the weight of war." He intended to cut himself off from his base of supply and march on Savannah.

All told, Governor Miller's request came at a bad time and touched a sore point. The railroad had been a constant headache for Sherman for the past six months. It was his only supply line and vulnerable to raids by Confederate cavalry. His men had labored mightily to keep it open, hence "Uncle Billy's" irritation.

WITHIN A FEW WEEKS OF WRITING, Sherman had divided his forces, leaving part, under the command of General George Thomas, to confront General Hood's Confederates. The remaining troops, including the Second and Fourth Minnesota Infantry regiments and the First Minnesota Light Artillery, made the famous March to the Sea. Governor Miller's commissioners would not catch up to them until they reached Washington, D.C., at the end of the war. Perhaps that was the "more peaceful country" General Sherman had in mind. □



Governor Stephen Miller,
about 1864, photographed
by Joel E. Whitney

Notes

1. Sherman to Miller, Aug. 1, 1864, Minnesota Governors Records (Stephen Miller), Correspondence, Minnesota State Archives.

2. The two men may have known each other from the early days of the war. Both took part in the Bull Run campaign in General Irvin McDowell's Army of Northeastern Virginia; Sherman, then a colonel, commanded the Third Brigade of the First Division, while Miller served as lieutenant colonel of the First Minnesota Infantry, part of the Third Division.

3. Here and below, Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: D. A. Appleton and Co., 1886), 2: 157.

All images are in MHS collections. Letter photograph by
Eric Mortenson/MHS.

Headquarters, Military Division of the Mississippi.

In the Field, Fayetteville Ala. 1864.

Oct 25.

To his Excellency
Stephen Miller
St Paul Minn
Dear Sir.

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just reached me. I beg
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takes and I can hardly
find the time during
war when any person
can hope to reach this
any unless escorted by a

... If it be also
... that you
... visit you Reynolds
... I will
... was dependent
... than by other
... but don't you
... people can
I am with respect
Mr Fred Sherman
W. Sherman
Any one

General Sherman's letter of October 25, 1864, filed among Governor Miller's correspondence in the Minnesota State Archives. The photos show both sides of the folded one-page letter.



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