

## SPOTLIGHT

### The Civil War Letters of John H. Crowder

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IN A LETTER written from the thick of battle in the Civil War, sixteen-year-old John H. Crowder posed a question to his mother: “If Abraham Lincoln knew that a colored Lad of my age, could command a company, what would he say[?]” (“Letter, April 23rd 1863”). With this question, Crowder sought to establish his place in history as a young person of colour, confident in his abilities to create a future for himself against all odds. Crowder’s story gives invaluable insight into the experiences and perspectives of youth and African Americans, voices that are too often missing from the historical record. In a collection of Crowder’s letters written between early 1862 and 5 May 1863, mostly addressed to his mother, the young man reveals the hopes, obstacles—including others’ jealousy over his youthful success—and discrimination faced by young African Americans in the Civil War era.

The case of John H. Crowder allows us to explore an important facet of African American writing, political involvement, and civil rights activism that is also often omitted from conversations concerning African American life in the post-Antebellum South. Mary Naill Mitchell’s foundational work exploring African American juvenilia has helped scholars appreciate the significance of Black youth to our understanding of the contested social and political aspects of slavery’s legacy. Though Mitchell does not study Crowder’s letters, her assertion that Black youth who wrote letters in the antebellum and post-antebellum periods were “active participants in the chronicling of their community” and their “collective history” also applies to Crowder (64). Examining Crowder’s letters in light of such scholarship further illuminates the activities and perspectives of young African Americans during the post-Emancipation period, a transitional time of continued struggle for racial equality.

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Fortunately, in 1994 Joseph T. Glatthaar brought Crowder's letters to light; his transcription and contextualization of these documents makes it possible for us to examine this significant example of African American juvenilia. Approaching Crowder's letters through the lens of juvenilia studies can yield insight into how young soldiers of colour experience and respond to the realities of war. They provide glimpses into Crowder's budding political and civil engagement and his navigation of the challenges of racial prejudice and the responsibilities of early adulthood, in the context of his social, emotional, and intellectual development as a young person and a writer. Crowder's writing often reveals his close, caring relationship with his mother, shown by his frequent expressions of concern for her well-being and his desire for her approval as he strove to become a respectable young man. Studying these letters enriches our understanding of Crowder's life, not only as an African American soldier, but as a youth.

Born in 1846 in Louisville, Kentucky to free people of colour, Crowder moved to New Orleans with his mother, Martha Ann Stars, before turning five years old (Glatthaar 203). He spent the remaining twelve years of his life working in order to support himself and his mother financially. At eight years old, Crowder began working on steamboats on the Mississippi River for five dollars a month. Although he started out as a low-ranking cabin boy, he eventually climbed the ranks to the position of a steward, raising his income to twenty dollars per month. At age twelve, Crowder worked in a jewellery store for twenty-five dollars per month (Affidavit of Martha Ann Stars). Despite the obstacles faced by someone of his age, race, and economic status, Crowder persevered in pursuing his education and career. He eventually joined the Louisiana Native Guard as an officer at the age of sixteen, though he had to lie about his age in order to join, as all commissioned officers had to be at least eighteen years old (Glatthaar 205).

The Louisiana Native Guard was a significant force during the American Civil War—though it is often left out of conversations concerning nineteenth-century American history—as it represented one of the first instances in which African American soldiers were allowed to fight in the Union Army.<sup>1</sup> Composed primarily of free men of colour and formerly enslaved men, the Native Guard challenged and undermined the then-prevalent belief that African Americans were unfit for military duty, and it ultimately played a crucial role in advancing the cause of civil rights in the United States. It is therefore crucial to view Crowder's letters written during his service in the Civil War as part of a broader tradition of African American progressive action at the time. As a member of the Native Guard, Crowder found himself among a larger cohort of soldiers who were outspoken in their advocacy for equal rights and believed in taking tangible action to secure them. As a young writer, moreover, Crowder provides valuable insight into the hopeful and ambitious mindset of the youth in this community of progressive social and political activists.

On the one hand, Crowder joined the war for practical reasons: to provide an income for him and his mother (Affidavit of Mrs. Maria Wilson). On the other hand,

it is likely that he joined because of the morality that was imbued in him by one of his mentors, John Mifflin Brown (1817–1893). Brown, a prominent abolitionist, bishop, and leader in the underground railroad, was a longtime friend of Crowder’s mother; after they moved to New Orleans and joined Brown’s African Methodist Episcopal congregation, he had many opportunities to mentor and teach Crowder throughout his childhood (Deposition). Crowder’s drive and informal education from Brown equipped him with the skills needed not only to write exceptionally well but also to meet the demands of an officer at an early age.

Tragically, Crowder died in action at the Siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana, on 27 May 1863 (Glatthaar 206). For ten years after his death, Crowder’s mother battled the United States Government for a dependant’s pension, submitting her son’s letters as corroborating evidence for her claims (Glatthaar 207). Without his mother’s efforts in a system stacked against her, Crowder’s letters likely would have been lost, as correspondence by a young person of colour was rarely preserved in the United States at that time.

His letters quickly make us aware of Crowder’s longing for the future. He looks forward to a world in which a young man like himself could command an army, as he says in one letter: “none would believe my exact age; and I find that the white officers in the service are men averaging from 25 years to 45 years. none [*sic*] that I have seen yet, are as young as I am and even then at that age, I give no exception to color, and have the advantage to excell me in military matters” (“Letter, April 23rd 1863”). Crowder’s proud and determined statements in his letters reveal both his response to the numerous rumours and stories his fellow, older soldiers spread about him, as well as his ambitions of rising to leadership in the future. For Crowder, maintaining a clean and honorable reputation was imperative if he wanted to advance through the military ranks. In an earlier letter, Crowder writes of these rumours:

I am sorry but I cannot help the reports that my enemies have circulated. I now [*i.e.*, know] you have heard it all. It is said that I was put under arrest It is not so I have neither been put under arrest nor have I been lectured by any of my superior officers. It has been said that I was the cause of Sergeant Francois Death he was my warmest friend we always was friends. And I was not the one that caused his death so healp me God. It has also been Said that I was married and I was cashered for marring a Contraband I am neither married nor have been cashered. I did not send home a woman as my wife, but I sent her to help you at home her mother to wash and Iron for you and father. (“Letter, November 20th 1862”)

These lines illustrate Crowder’s desire to prove himself a capable soldier, as well as his resilience in the face of prejudice. They suggest that, in Crowder’s vision of the future, he will be a respected man no longer ridiculed for his age or status. Crowder’s

anxiety about being misrepresented speaks to his budding concern for equal rights, as he has a desire to make a name for himself outside of the labels his senior officers try to impose upon him.

Crowder becomes increasingly concerned with his appearance as a reputable young man when he learns that his mother has heard of the rumours. He writes to sternly defend himself:

But Mother, Your Son has been Missrepresented to you by one that is unknown to him, and dare not meet him for I have dear Mother resolved if I ever meet him one or the other fall. And let me tell you Dear Mother you have believed what the reports about me to be so. You Know That I never touch licqor and farther more i never smoke, but you believe me to do such but I do not smok nor drink licqor and you Know it. but you will listen to the trash of everbody. ("Letter, January 2nd 1863")

As he came of age during the tumult of the Civil War, maintaining a reputation as an honourable young man took on increasing importance for Crowder, not only for his status in the military but also due to his financial responsibility to support his mother and family. The sole male provider, after enlisting in the war Crowder sent money home from the front lines and hoped to reassure his mother of their family's stability. In this pivotal stage of stepping into an adult supporting role at a young age, defending himself vigorously against false rumors circulating about his character was imperative. In correcting this narrative, then, Crowder strove to prove himself a capable soldier and man dedicated to creating a stable future for his loved ones.

Crowder's ongoing struggles to protect his honourable reputation and prove his trustworthiness to his mother are especially revealed in his discussion of conflicts with other soldiers, such as his developing rivalry with "Capt Lewis":

Mother my opinion of Capt Lewis and Lieut Moss has been reduced since my arrival in this city. They are the most pucillanamous dirty Low life men that I ever seen. Like many others they have no respect for no one. they seem to think there is not a woman that they cannot sleep with. every woman seems to be a comon woman with them. they have grown hateful in my sight. I will relate an incident that happened in camp a married Lady with a young girl came to camp to see us. while siting und[er] our little harbor one of the privates, made signs at the married lady of the most disrespectful Kind. She told the capt in this maner, that, that man, pointing toward the man, insulted me capt and grocly [grossly] and then left camp. Capt Lewis seen the man do it, and did not say one word it was his duty to have had him arrested as he belonged to our Regt. he did not do it. I taken the

responsibility upon myself and arrested the man and had him punished for it. Capt Lewis from that day taken a more disliking to me, but I care not, if it had of been you it would have been the same.

I remember your first lesson, that was to respect all females. I do respect all. that lady is a respectful lady every way shape or form. she is a lady, and I had the man punished, that insulted her. did I do right, or not mother.

I understand since my arrival in this city that Capt Lewis is trying to get me out of the regt. and he has said to persons that he thought would not tell me, that he would get me out if he had to tell Gen Banks that I was not of age/and of course would be dismissed from service. there is but one thing now that I wish and you must do it. let no one know-no matter who it is, that wants to know my age, how old I am never from this day tell any one my age under no circumstances had you not told Capt Lewis my exact age, he could not do it, but you told him that I was you-know-so do not tell none under the sun of heaven if you do you ruin me. by holding my position at an unknown age when I do leave the service (if not discharge for not being of age to hold a commission) I shall raise myself much higher, in the next country, that I want to hold a position in. I hope that you will not gratify any one else, by telling them my age you will not mention this to any one, for I wish it to remain quiet, until I can act, as I want. we will not be in the service lifetime, and when he, capt. Lewis does leave, I shall avenge the wrongs that he has done to me; remain quiet, some of these days, I will have him as I want him. ("Letter, April 27, 1863)

These conflicts suggest that many of his officers were envious of his youthful success and forward-thinking ambition. In this detailed letter, Crowder not only continues to defend his moral character but also stresses how crucial it is that his exact age remains unknown, as he faces prejudice due to his status as one of the youngest soldiers. In defending himself so vigorously against false allegations, Crowder seeks to overcome the odds stacked against someone of his race and age to continue his ascent up the military ranks. In doing so, he hopes to assure his mother he is the one in control of his future.

As Glatthaar suggests, it is likely that these conflicts and rumours were started because Crowder's white commanding officer found an African American youth in a high military position to be a threat; moreover, it was likely that, in general, "most white soldiers found any black officer disturbing, let alone one so young and proficient as Crowder." For this reason many "whites insulted black officers, protested vigorously to authorities and folks at home, and threw every impediment

in the path of these” black soldiers (Glatthaar 206). As he climbed ranks unusually quickly, Crowder faced resentment of his success in surpassing older men, a success that underscored how youthful achievement could stir jealousy when conventional hierarchies were challenged. In spite of these rumours and harassment, however, Crowder was determined to “stay in the service, as long as there is a straw to hold to,” and was adamant about never resigning—and about earning his payment for his service before he did (“Letter, April 18, 1863”). Despite other soldiers’ envious efforts to impede the young Black leader, Crowder’s words reveal his unwavering dedication to his future and to achieving more than others would allow or expect of his youth and race.

In other letters, Crowder turns from his military future to his family. Particularly, he frequently returns to his love for his mother and his desire to secure a stable life for her, as well as his affection for another mother and daughter pair he had met shortly after joining the Native Guard (“Letter, November 20, 1862”). As he explains, Crowder met the two after they had escaped from slavery, and he quickly grew fond of the daughter, Liser. He sent the two to help provide for his mother in New Orleans while he continued his service (“First letter, undated”). His letters frequently ask his mother to care for Liser, while he continues to earn money for the family, such as in a letter from 23 April 1863, in which Crowder writes:

I do not intend to resign, nor will I resign unless I am the only black officer in the Service. as long as there is a button hold to I will hold to it. I know the Government is bound to pay me if I live and if I fall, you can get it all that is coming to me every coper cent of it, and with this I will put up, for it is my desire some of these days, to able to Genl an army. [...]

You will Keep my name in Liser’s mind, that she may grow more constant and learn to love me though I am far away. if you do this, and, repeat my affectionate wishes to her, and tell her my greatest desire is when I leave the service to make her my wife, by this you shall be satisfied with my marriage. a heap depends on you in Keeping my name constantly her years [*i.e.*, ears], and she will never cease to think of [me] if you do this. (“Letter, April 23rd, 1863”)

This letter provides insight into how Crowder’s aspirations within the military support his ambition to provide for his family. As a young black soldier, achieving high rank would be an impressive accomplishment, and Crowder hoped such a position would establish long-term stability and security for his family. Determined to earn enough money from his service to support his mother, marry Liser, and provide for the entire family, Crowder exhibits a deep-rooted commitment to lifting himself and the ones

he cares for out of the poverty and instability that plagued many African Americans in the aftermath of slavery.

One letter from Crowder addressed to Liser was preserved, in which Crowder's emotions reveal a tension between his desire to return home to be with his family and the awareness that in order to provide for them, he must stay at war:

I would like very much to see you and mother, and you may look for me soon. Sister do not think that brother does not want to come home. brother is very anxious to come, but it hurts brother to come and not have any money to leave with mother. howsoever, brother will come soon. ("Letter, April 18, 1863")

Despite Crowder's resolute commitment to remaining in the military to support his family financially, this letter also conveys a sense of sorrow at being separated from his loved ones for long periods. As a young man shouldering the significant responsibilities of an early maturity necessitated by circumstance, Crowder is acutely aware of the tension between fulfilling his duty to provide for relatives and his longing to be with them.

Crowder's desire to create a life for himself, his mother, and Liser shows his consistent proleptic glances into the future, as he longs for the moments when he can see his love again, embrace his mother again, and secure for himself a more stable future. These letters reveal a forward-thinking youth, envisioning life beyond the challenges of the present, and overcoming limits on what youth could achieve or handle. Though still a teenager in the military, Crowder takes responsibility for loved ones, demonstrating not only his optimism and resilience but also his sense of duty and hope for the future.

All of Crowder's letters—as well as forty-eight pages from the deposition of his mother as she fought to obtain Crowder's military pension—can be found in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in the form of photocopies of originals housed at the National Archives in Washington, DC. These photocopied documents were acquired by Wilson Library at a time when the original documents were thought to have been lost, and although they have since been recovered, their status at Wilson Library raises questions of archival access, acquisition, and preservation. What motivated the preservation of these letters at each stage of their history, and what else may have been lost to history? For groups often underrepresented in archives, even copies of writings may be better than exclusion. The unlikely preservation of Crowder's letters and their photocopies reminds us that we must be more diligent in our efforts to preserve documents from marginalized voices.

Crowder's writing fills a particular gap in archives that often overlook the experiences and personal expression of African American youth during this time in American history. His letters exhibit a youthful optimism and sense of responsibility

that resonate with other works of juvenilia produced during times of upheaval, inviting us to consider his experience alongside those of adolescents like Anne Frank, who wrote so observantly from the margins of armed conflict. They offer an intimate perspective on coming of age during the American Civil War and demonstrate how one ambitious young man pushed back against the racial barriers of his time through his commitment to duty, family, and dreams for his future.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Louisiana Native Guard was the first official black regiment in the Confederate Army, and was formed 2 May 1861, as a regiment designed to defend the state of Louisiana. When Louisiana fell to the Union, most of the original members switched sides to form a new Louisiana Native Guard—also known as the Corps d’Afrique, the first all-black regiments in the Union Army—on 27 September 1862. This second regiment—consisting of soldiers from the Confederate regiment, free men of colour, and formerly enslaved men—was the group that many Afro-Creole writers and community members rallied around during the Civil War. See Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718–1868* (Louisiana State UP, 1997); Clint Bruce and Angel Adams Parham, *Afro-Creole Poetry in French from Louisiana’s Radical Civil War-Era Newspapers: a Bilingual Edition* (Historic New Orleans Collection, 2020); Clark, Emily Suzanne Clark, *A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (UNC Press Books, 2018).

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