

"Carroll Resident Toured 19th Century World"  
Carroll County Times article for 19 November 2006  
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

While his aunts Fannie, Rose, Margaret, Hessie, Ellen and Ann Birnie taught school and kept house near Taneytown for most of their adult lives, their young nephew, William Birnie, roamed far and wide, writing back to them about his experiences in Africa, in the Civil War, in post-Civil War Washington, D.C. and about more mundane activities. This column and the next will include excerpts from his fascinating letters housed at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

U. S. Naval Depot, St. Paul de Loanda (present-day Angola in Africa), February 3, 1860

I mentioned in my letter to Cousin Tally I would take advantage of the first opportunity that occurred to address you, and as the U.S.S. "Vincennes" will sail from this port tomorrow bound for Boston, I take advantage of her sailing to write you. Edward and I are very well. Neither of us has been sick since we left the U. States. I hope and pray we may continue in good health until we return to the States, which will not be long hence in my case, as I expect to be in New York by next fall. I will then, I hope, have entirely regained my wanted health and prepared to commence my business career again in the above City. I take for granted you have seen the letter I wrote Cousin T. It is therefore unnecessary for me to repeat the peculiarities of Loanda.

We have sufficient to attend to which makes time fly away very fast. There is most all the time a vessel in Port (I mean a man-of-war). Often there are three and four here at a time. At present the U.S.S. "Vincennes," "Marion," and "Mystic" are here, also one American whaler and one American merchantman. There being so many American vessels here, we have the full benefit of the officers' company. The "Hazard," a vessel from Boston, is at St. Helena (near here) with a large mail for the Squadron. We are expecting letters by her and I hope we may not be disappointed.

Edward will not be at a loss to get a clerk when I leave as there is a young man here who speaks both English and Portuguese fluently who will be very glad of the opportunity. If I remained, perhaps I might make money, but it would be a number of years in the future, and I do not feel disposed to make money deprived of all the enjoyments of this life.

Edward has a boat and two Kroomen furnished by the Government. I amuse myself often in the evening by going out sailing. The Kroomen have some very funny names such as "Bottle of Beer," "Jack Fryingpan," "Jack Halfdollar," "Tom Twoglass," and "Washerwoman." These are their American names, but they have Kroo names also.

When you do not write us via England, any letters addressed to the care of Mrs. J. S. Wiggin at Boston will reach us by the first vessel that leaves the U.S. They take advantage of every opportunity of sending letters here as they have a house engaged in business, also a regular line of vessels to this port, but do not advertise the date of sailing from Boston.

I must close this hastily written letter as the last boat to the "Vincennes" is about leaving the shore."

Clifton House, Niagara Falls (Canada Side), Sept. 6, 1865

Having a few moments to stop here, I thought I would write you a line or two from Canada... I am enjoying myself very much and my health is improving already. I will see all that is to be seen before I leave here. I am very much pleased with my visit to the Falls and am sorry some of you could not be with me.

I will write you again from St. Paul. Meantime, I am so busy seeing the places of interest around here that I have little time to write you a longer letter. I arrived at the Cataract House on the Am. side at 12 p.m. last night and, after supper, went out and took a night view of the Falls. Today I have taken another view and will leave for Buffalo [at] 6 p.m. this ev. From there I will take the boat to Cleveland. If you write to Father within a few days, please tell him you have heard from me, and that I am much better.

P.S. Cataract House, N. Falls, 5:30 p.m. I have just returned from Canada after spending 5 or 6 hours on that side of the river and I will leave here at 6 for Buffalo. I have seen everything on both sides of the river except the Whirlpool. This I did not have time to see, but will leave that until I go on my wedding tour if that should ever be my future, and I hope it will before I return East. I am delighted with everything I have seen here, and only regret I have never been here before.



*Mary Birnie, youngest sister of William, is seen here in an 1873 photograph by Alexander Gardner of Washington, D.C. Gardner is best known for his images of casualties after the Battle of Antietam. Photo from the collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.*

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