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The Mortal & Everlasting Life of Frederic Augustus James: Enduring Life Behind the Deadline of a Civil War POW Camp

Evan Kutzler 00:04

One of my favorite pieces of Frederic Augustus James's diary are the poems that he collects, at the end. I want to emphasize that soldiers and prisoners survived in part because they were able to make the uncomfortable funny. And here James whether it is his own creation or whether something that's copied into his diary, he's responding the idea that it's dishonorable to be a prisoner of war, that only bad soldiers are prisoners of war. And the poem is called, "Morale" and I used to love at Andersonville to read this at his grave. It goes like this. "Now volunteers and substitutes whilst marching in the column. It behooves each and all of you to take this warning solemn. Don't leave your ranks on any account or circumstance whatever, or else you'll see that nabs you'll be unless you're very clever. The host of Union prisoners that swell, the number taken are captured by the roadside at their coffee and their bacon. This fact should be well born in mind by all good Union thinkers, that two out of three that captured me are straggling coffee drinkers. The prison fair is served out here as scanty, poor and bad. A might of pork, of meal, one pint is all that can be had. Of coffee you'll not get one suck in this pine log institution, but foul air and water quite enough to wreck your constitution."

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:24

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:37

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:39

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript

pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Cassie Cloutier 02:06

At the start of this episode, you heard historian Evan Kutzler reading a poem written by prisoner of war Frederic Augustus James. In this episode, we are focusing on the Civil War and prisoner of war experience of James and others like him. Elaine Heavey, the Director of the Library at the MHS, introduces us to James's diary and letters held by the MHS. She also tells us a remarkable story of how they came into our collections. Historian Evan Kutzler, author of Living by Inches: The Smells, Sounds, Tastes, and Feeling of Captivity in Civil War Prisons gives us an overview of the prisoner of war experience and the MHS, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, Anne Bentley, describes a few objects in our collection created by prisoners of war or taken from prisons during the Civil War. We first sat down with Elaine Heavey, the Director of the Library at the MHS, to learn about the author of the diary and letters in question.

Elaine Heavey 03:14

Frederic Augustus James was a man from Massachusetts. He was born in South Scituate, which is now Norwell, in November of 1832. His father was a shipbuilder. He was a carpenter and ship joiner. He married his sweetheart, Ellen Foster in 1855. They bought a house in East Boston on 39 Prince Street, which still stands. They had two children, a daughter Mary in October of 1856 and a daughter Ellen, whom he calls Nellie in 1857 and then in 1862 James enlists in the Union navy and leaves his family in East Boston, is assigned to the ship Housatonic, and spends about a year in Charleston Harbor as part of the blockade force. It was a one-year enlistment, and in September 1863 James is actually on the Housatonic awaiting transport off the boat. His enlistment is technically over. He volunteers to be part of a landing party on September 8th in an attack on Fort Sumter, and he is taken prisoner during that attack.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:31

And we have here at the MHS items related to him and his service during the war. Can you tell us a little bit about the scope of the collection?

Elaine Heavey 04:41

We actually have two collections related to Frederic Augustus James. The first is a small collection of letters, mostly written by James to his wife Ellen, who he also calls Nellie and his two daughters. The letters also contain some informational letters sent to his wife and family members about James when he is taken captive and upon his death, some information about the death of his wife in 1909. Second collection item we hold is, in my opinion, one of the most remarkable things we have in our collection, and it is a diary that was kept by James from February 1864 until August 1864 so for about a six-month period during his time as a prisoner of war. He starts the diary when he is a prisoner at Salisbury prison, where he was for five months total before being moved to Andersonville. And his last entry in the diary is dated at the end of August 1864.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:53

So, both collections basically deal with his service?

Elaine Heavey 05:58

Yes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:59

So, we'd know probably relatively little about his life prior to the war or his motivations for joining?

Elaine Heavey 06:05

Yes. We do know he was a very religious man. He was a deacon at the Unitarian Church that he and his family belonged to in East Boston. One of the more powerful letters in the collection of letters is actually a letter from W.H. Cudworth, who was the minister at their Unitarian Church. Cudworth

also enlisted and was a chaplain with the First Massachusetts Regiment, and he gets news that James does not return to the Housatonic that night in September and writes a letter to James's wife about his own sadness at knowing that James has likely been taken prisoner, and encouraging her to have faith in God, and you know, to let that faith see her through this ordeal of her husband being a prisoner.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:57
Would you like to start with some of the letters? Should we take a look at some of them?

Elaine Heavey 07:02
Some of my favorite letters are the ones that James writes to his daughters. As a person who works with historical documents, I know that there are these like common threads of humanity that run through everything but the sweetness in these letters and the way that he talks to these young girls while he is aboard the ship. It's just really striking to me. One of my favorite letters is a letter that he writes to Mary, the older of the two daughters, in February of 1863 and he starts the letter explaining how he assumes Mary would want to hear about the birds and the butterflies he is seeing while he is on his ship and notes that the butterflies have been gone since the fall, but that he has seen recently, seen a bird. It's about the size of a Robin, has brown feathers and a big yellow spot on its back. And then he goes on to say to Mary, "Perhaps when it's warm in East Boston next summer, it will come and see you and Nellie and mother. But then, if there are two or three that look just like that one, you will not know which one it is will you? Well sometime next summer, I guess I shall come home and see you, and I suppose that you will be almost as glad to see me as to see the bird, wouldn't you?"

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:24
That's really touching.

Elaine Heavey 08:25

Yeah, the juxtaposition of the things that he writes to his wife about his experience and the care he takes in talking to his daughters about sharing his experience of being on this ship, and what he is seeing and what he is doing in a way that is accessible to this five- and six-year-old girl, right? He writes them a letter where he is part of a landing party that goes out to an island to build an encampment, and he explains to them that that's what he's doing. But then in the letter, he really is just describing to them the size and shape of the boat that he is in with the men, and how funny it is when the younger men who are with him step out of the boat and get all wet, plunging to the beach, and he decides to just stay in the boat and coast all the way onto the beach to avoid getting wet. Tells them about the little crabs he sees running through the sand. It's really remarkable.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:24

The diary I gather, has been published?

Elaine Heavey 09:26

Yes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:26

People can go to their local library, and they can check it out and read it.

Elaine Heavey 09:29

Yes, the diary was published in 1973. It's a remarkable little artifact. It is a small leather-bound receipt book. It is about 100 pages long, and we know from James's own writing that the receipt book was given to him by another prisoner by the name of Sherman, in February while he was at Salisbury. And the very first page of the diary, it says, "Private Journal" with like three exclamation points. "The property of Frederic A. James of East Boston, Massachusetts, and on this date, Saturday, February 20, a prisoner of war and also held as a hostage in the C.S. military prison at Salisbury, North Carolina." And his entries fill about half the volume, about 50 of the pages. And a colleague once noticed that his writing gets smaller as the diary progresses, perhaps as an indication

that James came to the realization that he didn't know just how long he would have to be writing in that diary and that he might have to start consuming space. In the diary writes really just about his daily life there. You get a lot of information about what he's eating, how he's preparing his food, what the rations are, the ways he and the men that he is with are using them, sharing them. And then there's a point when he's at Andersonville where he starts noting that he has decided to mess by himself rather than mess collectively with other men. He doesn't explain why exactly. He talks a lot about doing laundry. He is definitely a person who is very fastidious about his own cleanliness. I think that he deeply understood the danger of being unclean in these environments and the fact that it could lead to illness. He rinses out his underclothing quite regularly, and then hangs them to dry. And he also notes at various points the fellow prisoners that he's doing it for. So, he washes his own underthings and some of his comrades' underthings. He talks a lot about how he fills his time. The entries are relatively short. It seems like once a week on, I think it's Saturdays, he sits down and then kind of recaptures the entire week at one go. And so, it's just these short little snippets, you know, he'll talk about what he's reading.

Cassie Cloutier 11:52

To give us a closer look at the lives and experiences of POWs like Frederic Augustus James, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita Anne Bentley showed us some poignant relics made by captured Union soldiers. She began by describing the first item.

Anne Bentley 12:08

Well, it's a rectangular block of raw wood. It is in inches, roughly one and three quarters by nine by four inches, and it's solid. It's quite heavy, and there's a paper label glued onto it, and in manuscript ink, it says, "A piece of the deadline of Andersonville prison presented by Lieutenant J. C. Shailer USMC" for US Marine Corps, but it's a piece of the deadline in stockade prisons, which were the usual prisoner of war camp during the Civil War on both sides. There was very little in the way of housing, especially in the Confederate ones, the sky was their ceiling and the dirt was their bed. That was it. They needed a way to contain this mass of humanity, and so it was very common to have so-called deadlines. If the prisoners approached too close to those they were shot. This was to

maintain order both sides and they differed in construction. The Andersonville deadline was a sort of a stockade fence, very crude, quite low upright and a bar across. And so, this was part of that. Well, we have two items that were made by John Eliot Parkman. His dates are 1834 to 1871 and he was captured and placed at Camp Oglethorpe in Macon, Georgia in 1864 towards the end of the war, for about eight months as a prisoner of war in the Confederate camp. And he made these two items. One is a bowl of a pipe that's made of local clay. And he also made a fork out of wood, and it's a wonderful piece. It's almost as if he kept in mind his family silverware at home because he's almost he's replicated this in wood just almost perfectly. It's almost eight inches long, and it's exactly as you would expect a silver fork to be. It's got four tines. There's a shoulder where the tines meet the handle, and it's an oval end to it with trefoil three little bumps out at the top, which is exactly as a piece of Georgian silver might look, except that this is solid wood and it's got a bit of a polished surface, and there's a hole drilled through the tip of the handle, and the family had attached a tag, which is still there. And it says on this tag, "Cut out of a log by Elliot in the prison camp at Macon 1864," and then there's an asterisk John Elliott Parkman, written in another hand. This was given to us in 1928 from descendants of his. Just kind of an amazing thing that we had nothing to eat, but he could make a fork. The resiliency of a human being is just amazing sometimes. Next thing we have is a pocket watch chain that is made of braided horsehair, and it is an exquisite piece of hair jewelry. We have quite a collection. In fact, we featured a lot of it in our mourning jewelry exhibition. But this is the sort of thing a gentleman would wear. He would wear it clipped to his lapel or his pocket, and his pocket watch and keys would be attached to it. Because this is made out of horsehair at the end of it, there is a braided horseshoe of hair. And then there is the typical bar that you would feed your watch onto. The watch has a ring, and you put the ring over there, you slip the bar through it sideways, and then you tilt it, and that's what holds the watch on. But at the other end is a brass clamp that is spring loaded, and it's just like we have for keys and things now, you just pinch one side in and attach it to wherever you're going to attach it, and it's all in black horse's hair. And it's a series of very, very small chains that split into two for about an inch and then are twisted quite tightly. Then it's another double chain and another one of those twisted sections, a third double chain and that's when it comes down to the two chains, one ending in the bar to hold the pocket watch, and the other one ending in the horseshoe made by a union prisoner

in Libby Prison, which was the warehouse of Libey & Sons, Ships Chandlers in Richmond, Virginia, and it was given to the [Historical] Society by Elliot Pierce Thayer in the Pierce Thayer papers.

Cassie Cloutier 17:22
And how long is it?

Anne Bentley 17:24
From the brass hook to the bottom, it's 14 and a quarter inches long. It is a remarkable thing. It's very lightweight. It weighs nothing, and it's in incredible condition. The workmanship is exquisite. Whoever was responsible for making this was not an amateur. And at the time, in the 1830s, '40s and '50s in the United States, hair jewelry and the practice of weaving and creating hair jewelry was a booming industry all over the place. So, there were a lot of people who did this for a living. And this person certainly is not an amateur, whoever it was that made this. We have more of the typical items that would have been made by prisoners. There's a very small wooden cross that is maybe an inch and a half by three quarters of an inch, and it's quite thick. It's a quarter of an inch thick, cut in wood. It's just straight sided all the way around on the back, written in graphite, it says, "Bull Run." And this also came to us from the papers of Elliot Clark Pierce. Pierce enlisted in the 13th Mass. Volunteer Militia and was wounded at Second Battle of Bull Run. And because this says Bull Run on the back, we think it might have been given to him by the union prisoner at Libby Prison who made this and why I think it might have been given to him is that some of his fellow soldiers in the 13th Mass were captured and served time in Libby Prison. So, these three wooden items came with his papers he was never in the prison, but I assume that his colleagues or friends may have given them to him afterwards. He served towards the latter part of the year. For a while, he served as the chief of the First Ambulance Corps during the Civil War. If there were prisoner exchanges or anything, he might have had occasion to collect them, help them. But we don't really have the full story on why he has these three items, but there's the wooden cross, and then there are two rings that were carved. And one ring is almost like a signet. It's carved in wood, and the diameter is about three quarters of an inch, not very high, maybe almost a quarter of an inch high. It's been engraved in a form of rope ring, and the shank is carved square, and there's an inner filet carved out to

indicate a square stone in this rectangular shank. It came to us with Pierce's papers as carved by a prisoner at Libby. And the other ring, it's two and a half centimeters, or one inch in diameter. It's a little more sophisticated in that the back of the band is a little bit thinner than the front of the band, which has a carved shield, which I assume is supposed to be the federal shield. It's just plain. There's nothing else carved on it, just the shape of the shield. So, these are the more of the sort of things that prisoners might be making with their pen knives. Kind of rough and ready, but they've taken the time to run light of the knife over it, to smooth it down so that you don't see the carving marks. And if you just rub something long enough, you do get a nice patina on it, which these do have. Hours and hours and hours go into these, but these men had time. So, this is something that if you're prisoner of war and you don't know what the future holds, you have to do something to keep yourself sane. These were things that they did.

Cassie Cloutier 21:17

And there's not much prior skill that they would need to bring?

Anne Bentley 21:22

No, not really, but they're very good observers. If you held these up to pieces of actual jewelry, they would compare point by point, design by design, very, very closely. So, I think that carving this jewelry connects you to your former life while you're in prison. And I think that the fork and the rings, to me are the most poignant because in a place that when you read about, it was hell on earth, how do you retain your humanity? How do you keep going and by remembering the cross, by remembering what jewelry, what niceties, what convention, what luxuries, what life was before the war. It's just one way to say, I am human in all of this. I'm still human. I'm still here. I will return to this one day. So, to me, they're very poignant.

Cassie Cloutier 22:12

Yes, these little connections to everyday life.

Anne Bentley 22:16

Yes. When nothing around you is like anything you have ever experienced before. When people are dying, people are going crazy, they're really, really, truly relics.

Cassie Cloutier 22:34

Historian Evan Kutzler told us more about the conditions inside of civil war POW camps such as Andersonville.

Evan Kutzler 22:43

Prisons were everywhere, and they took a lot of different shapes and forms. There were in the north training facilities that were turned into then prisoner of war camps, then sometimes became parole camps, and then prisoner of war camps again. I'm thinking about places like Camp Chase, Ohio, Elmira, New York. They also had coastal fortifications, especially early in the war, Fort Warren, Massachusetts, and places that were specifically designed for prisoners, like Johnson's Island for Confederate officers. In the south, you had a less formal system of establishing prisons even than that often were started off as tobacco warehouses in Virginia, abandoned spaces, occasionally old training camps, like Camp Oglethorpe in Macon, Georgia. And then towards the end of the war, these large prison camps that are established in the Deep South, like Camp Sumter or Andersonville, that were designed to take on thousands and thousands of soldiers and then still were ended up being woefully too small for the numbers taken.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:46

If anyone who has a passing familiarity with Civil War history knows the name of a camp they know Andersonville, it was probably the most notorious. So, could you tell us a little bit about Andersonville, where it is how many people it was supposed to hold and how many people it ended up holding?

Evan Kutzler 24:03

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter, as it's known by the Confederacy in Andersonville, as it becomes popularly known by prisoners, didn't exist at all until well after the breakdown of the exchange system. So, it doesn't exist in [18]61, '62 or '63 at the very end of 1863 they're starting to plan it. The Confederate government has figured out the exchange isn't going to pick back up, and they want to empty what were at the time the notorious prisons of the Confederacy, which were in Richmond, Belle Isle, which is a little barren strip of land on the James River. And so, they wanted to build a much bigger facility as far from the fighting as possible, and southwest Georgia is about as far from the fighting as one could go. It's insulated from incursions in Florida. [William Tecumseh] Sherman is so far away he never seriously considers marching on Andersonville. Built by enslaved labor in December 1863 thereabouts, through early 1864. It's not even finished entirely when the first prisoners from Belle Island began arriving in February. It's 16 acres, initially designed to hold 8,000 prisoners, expanded in early summer, 1864 to 26 and a half acres, and at its peak population, it had about 33 or 34,000 prisoners in the summer of 1864 and there's all sorts of ways to kind of play around with the numbers here, but the Andersonville of terrible memory begins really in May 1864 when the prison capacity is exceeded, and continues throughout the end of October, and there's 13,000 US soldiers who die over the course of the 14 months the prison is in operation. The vast majority, like ten, eleven thousand of those, die in those six months when the prison is way overcrowded. And by the end of that period, all the healthy prisoners are being sent to other prison camps in Georgia and in South Carolina and Andersonville is really kind of in its waning days. They bring some prisoners back when it's clear that Sherman is moving into South Carolina and not into deep South Georgia, but it never has the incredibly overcrowded population that it had over the summer of 1864.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:22

Is Andersonville notorious because of the overcrowding? Were there other conditions or situations that gave it its reputation?

Evan Kutzler 26:30

Sure. Oh, yeah, no, overcrowding is a euphemism for human decisions, right? It's not well planned in terms of how prisoners are going to be fed, how they're going to be sheltered. You had a willful breakdown in transportation and supply. The Confederate government would argue, and their sympathizers would argue that, well, there's a blockade so we can't get medicine in, and there's food shortages everywhere. It's interesting to note that when there's a moment of fear that Sherman might march on Andersonville after he's captured Atlanta in September 1864 the old, rickety Confederate rail system hops into high speed and is removing 1,000s of prisoners from Andersonville to get them out of potential arrival of Sherman. And this is the breadbasket of the Confederacy. I mean, there is, yes, there are food shortages everywhere in the Confederacy, but the unwholesome quality of the food, of unbolted cornmeal, of the meat that was given to these prisoners, was hardly enough to sustain men over the course of these months, and adding to this is this arrangement of the camp. Kind of I'm trying to understand why it takes the shape it does. It's built on what would be loosely considered to be sanitarian considerations. You have your water system. You have your your drainage system set up. You have, you know, one end of the camp that's designed for where you get your drinking water from. In the middle of the stream, you're supposed to bathe and downstream of that is everything else. These are only designed for a few thousand soldiers, and quickly, the combination of tens of thousands of prisoners plus thousands of guards who are going to be upstream of the prison camp make this into a sanitarian's nightmare. The prisoners would call the death by inches, is how it's often described. They would call it starvation. And there's been a lot of back and forth over the years, over the century and a half, over whether prisoners were intentionally starved. I think that kind of misses the perspective angle. Most of the prisoners at Andersonville who die, die of wasting diseases. It's chronic diarrhea, it's dysentery, often with scurvy added on to it. Those definitions that are going down the official death records, those are being put in there by Confederate physicians who are seeing death in one way. But for US prisoners who are watching their comrades waste away and then eventually succumb to organ failure, brought on by dehydration and malnutrition, they calling it like they see it. They call it starvation because their eyes are telling them and they're all their whole senses are telling them that this is starvation.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:20

Let me ask you about some of the objects that we have from prisoners of war in the collection here at the MHS and get your thoughts on them. We have a piece of the deadline from Andersonville. We have some wooden rings which are just absolutely gorgeous. What can you tell about the experience of prison life by these objects? Are these just attempts by people to keep their minds busy, to keep focused on something? Why collect a relic of something that is so deeply scarring mentally, like a piece of the deadline?

Evan Kutzler 29:55

Well, the deadline is such a potent symbol for prisoners at Andersonville and other prisons. It's this fence within the stockade that one is not allowed to touch or to go beyond, or else they're going to be shot by the guards. The term deadline is used in some other contexts before this, but our the modern notion of the deadline is Civil War memory. There's so much talk about the deadline in the decades after the Civil War by prisoners writing about their experiences that publishers draw on this and say, "Well, that's a great metaphor for a time limit." It starts off as a very specific meaning about space inside a place like Andersonville come to mean, please get your writing in by this time. The consequences are not nearly the same as they as they were and people trespassed the deadlines much more regularly than they would have at a place like Andersonville. There's a huge emotional attachment to those pieces, and so it's a symbol of the horror of Andersonville. I think that's very different than the wooden rings that were also in your collection that I think come from, those will come from Libby Prison in Richmond. Prisoner made jewelry is, on the one hand, maybe a response to boredom. I also think, as Lea Lane who's the Curator for Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, has written about in her master's thesis, that these are objects of art as well, and they're gifts. Sometimes they're for loved ones. They're also objects of exchange. They're turning a piece of bone or a piece of wood into a commodity that can be traded with the guards. Can be traded for food, could be traded for maybe some clothing. It can be traded for something that's going to be very useful to one in captivity. In the North especially, there's also a trade on prisoner produced rings and other forms of jewelry that is a way of showing sympathy across the chasm. It's

popular among southern sympathizing women in parts of the North to wear and display as a show protest prisoner made objects. I think these are much more than just mindless whittling. They're really important objects that get at different elements of the prison experience, whether it's the horror of the deadline or whether it's the creation that can take place in prison, that can also help to sustain a prisoner and a prisoner's network.

Elaine Heavey 32:22

So about halfway through the journal, his first entry for June in 1864 he writes, "We began our career at Camp Sumter, Andersonville, Ga. We had a thunder shower to usher us in but it cleared off before night. R.L. Tinker and myself took up our quarters with some of our old shipmates and chums. The hut or 'Chebang' as our fellows call it, in which we live is roofed with four blankets and with logs for walls at the sides. We are located upon a hillside sloping to the south. A small brook runs through the center of the lot from west to east, and another hill side sloping to the north forms the other side of the enclosure." He goes on to describe Andersonville as a whole fenced in with a solid stockade and hard pine logs about 10 or 12 feet high. "A light railing runs around inside, 20 feet from the stockade fence. It is called the deadline, and anyone who ventures into the forbidden space is liable to be shot by the sentries. Between 19 and 20,000 prisoners are now here, which comprises about all of the prisoners held by the Sesesh, except officers who are confined at Macon" and he goes on to describe his rations and sort of what life is like at Andersonville at the beginning. He has a entry in there where he describes an enormous rainstorm that comes through and actually washes away part of the stockade fence. Does some serious damage at Andersonville. He describes it as "unbelievable rain." There's other documentation about the same storm beyond the diary talking about how this it destroyed parts of the prison, but that, shockingly, none of the prisoners tried to escape,

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:28

And then the disease that takes his life. Do we know what it is?

Elaine Heavey 34:32

We believe it was dysentery. In the end of July, he writes of waking up in the middle of the night and feeling that he has caught a cold. For the next four weeks, his diary entries sort of document his ups and downs with this illness. He himself in one of his very last entries, notes that he believes scurvy is underlying the health problems, but he definitely has lost control of his bowels. His friend Tinker, who he mentions in that very first entry when he arrives at Andersonville, was a nurse aboard the Housatonic and actually is working at the hospital in Andersonville, if you would call it the hospital at Andersonville. And so, James does talk about Tinker bringing him powders to try to help with his bowel problems, but we do believe that it was dysentery. We also believe that Tinker is the reason that we have James's diary. One of the remarkable things about this diary is that James dies in Andersonville, but the diary makes it home to his wife and still exists. It is believed that Tinker, who James knew on the Housatonic was with him through all of the prisons that he was in, and also Tinker's family lives close enough to East Boston that in the letters, James will give his wife instructions of things to pass along to Tinker's parents. So, it is our belief that Tinker was the one who took possession of the diary, and a month or so later, when he was released from Andersonville, made sure that it made it safely back to James's wife.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 36:09

And so where did the journal go after that?

Elaine Heavey 36:13

We know where the journal was until 1909 and then there is a gap between 1909 and 1969. She dies in 1909. Younger daughter, Nellie, had died in the late 1880s and so there is no family. And Ellen James's will stipulates that a desk and the diary are to be left to a nephew, and we know that in 1909 the diary left Ellen James's possession. We also know what happened to the letters, but I'll come back to that. And then the diary kind of falls away, until one day in 1969 a man named Jefferson Hammer, priest and historian, discovers the diary at a Connecticut bookseller antique shop, and purchases it for a few hundred dollars and then he, you know, dives into the diary and is just so struck by this story and this man that he undertakes this sort of ordeal of trying to find out

everything he can about Frederic Augustus James and eventually, in 1973 he is the person who transcribes, edits and has published James's diary. He was not aware that the letters existed, and the letters came to us in sort of another roundabout way. When Ellen James dies in 1909, She's an old woman with no family, and a woman who had been my understanding is that she was like a personal aide, or maybe a servant, is left to sort of clean out the house after Ellen passes away because there's no one else to do it. And she uncovers this packet of letters that is just going to be disposed of, and she keeps them, and they stay with her family for about 100 years. And one of this woman's descendants was a teacher, and offered to a colleague who was a history teacher to pass on the copies of the letters to her so that she can use them in her teaching. And this woman, you know, reads these letters, and they are remarkable. I mean, I know I focused on his family relationships, but he is aboard the Housatonic the night that Union forces attack battery Wagner and, you know, describes the weather and being able to see the cannon fire and the explosions. And then, in a letter to his wife, is writing about what they learned the next morning about what happened there. So, I mean, it's a very rich resource, and together, these two teachers identified the Massachusetts Historical Society as an institution to donate this collection of letters to so that we could make them available to historians moving forward. So that is how the letters came to us. On a sidetrack the history teacher who was working with the letters in her classroom also kind of falls in love with Frederic James, and she digs in to learn everything she can about him and discovers that his diary had been published back in 1973 and attempts to find the person who published it and he was still alive, they connected. He was able to see James's letter. She was able to see the original diary, and eventually, he identifies the Massachusetts Historical Society as the institution that will take possession of the diary at his passing, and we acquired the diary in 2012. It's a remarkable story of like these two threads of sets of materials generated by the same person who go on these like totally separate paths. And somehow fall into the hands of people who understand what they are and the historical importance, and then they find their way back together. And it's just fortuitous for us that they find their way back together here at the Massachusetts Historical Society. With his daughters, he writes an awful lot about that hope of coming home, knowing that it's a one-year enlistment, knowing how excited they will be when he returns home as he gets closer and closer to the end of his first year, you're just talking about that experience of coming home. There's one

letter that he writes to Mary, where he notes that in the previous letter he had received from his wife, she had mentioned that Mary had had a dream that he came home. And so, in that particular letter, he then goes on to recount to Mary that he had a dream too. And in his dream, the captain on the ship comes in and tells them that the war is over. And he immediately gets on a ship bound to Boston. That it's a pleasant and quick sail that he arrives at the Navy Yard and just hops right off that boat with his bundle, lands in a cart that takes him directly home. And he gets home, and it's nighttime, and you know, he says, "I imagine that mother came to the door and let me in, and she could hardly believe I was there because she didn't know I was coming." And the first thing that he does is asks her, "Where are my dear little girls?" And then she goes and opens the door to the bedroom, and he says, you know, "There you were fast asleep, looking just as you used to, but then I thought that I went to kiss you, and both of you waked up and said, 'Why, Papa!' And then we had such a time hugging and kissing each other that it waked me up, and I found that it was all a dream, and I was swinging in my hammock and had not been home, after all." To be in the reading room, reading through this collection of letters, knowing how the story ends and knowing that he doesn't come home at all makes that you know poignant moment, even all the more heartbreaking.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 42:24

To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast.

Cassie Cloutier 42:32

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