Alabama
Mont Gumory, May 22nd 1862

Mrs. J. Elwell & Children

My Dear family

I once more have some prospect of sending a letter to [you] from U.S. Post Office with a hope that it may reach you. I have written two letters to you since I was taken prisoner on the 6th of April, but having no confidence in the honor or pledges of men that have forfeited all claim to honor or respect by becoming traitors to the government that has protected them from childhood I have but little hope that you have received them, so I will write as tho this was [my] first letter. [faded out] the great battle at Pittsburg my landing on the 6th of April which proved to be an unfortunate day for me as well as some twenty five hundred others including the 12th Regiment. I take it for granted that you are well posted in regard to the battle and its results as every thing that I could write [have] been published in the newspapers, so I will confine my remarks in this letter to my self & the Company to which I belong as I am well satisfied that you would give more to know where I was at this time, & know that I was well and had a hope that before long I would be home, than you would to know where I was on the 6th of April or what great things was done by me on that day. Well to commence the Subject I am in a Large Cotton Shed in the city of Mont Gumory, Surrounded by a Guard of the d---d traitors. The inclosure that

Letter from John Elwell to Mrs. J. Elwell and Children, May 22-23, 1862. Folsom Collection (MS 246), Special Collections Department, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries.

This letter describes John Elwell’s experiences at the Battle of Shiloh, Pittsburg Landing, April 6, 1862, and as a prisoner of war following the battle. Elwell was in Company E of the 12th Iowa Infantry Volunteers.

Note: This transcription preserves the spelling and capitalization of the original. Square brackets indicate words that are unclear or impossible to interpret. The letter itself is stained and cracked, written in pencil on lined paper.

Transcribed by Kristen Vannoy, 2006.
formes our prison is a brick wall about 20 feet high and about three hundred feet long, &
two hundred feet wide & on each side is a shed about 40 feet wide, which formes a good
shelter in a storm & a good shade when the sun shines. There is about seven hundred
men, including privits non Comishend officers & lieutenants & this prison among this there is
men from every western state, all the officers of rank above lieutenant are at Selma a
town on the Alabama River about 40 miles below Mont Gumery. We have not heard anything
from them since we came here. Our Company was all brought here except the
captain. Since we were brought here there has two of our died John Roch died on the 8th
of May with typhoid fever & Amonia [sic] & on the 10th of May Stephen Story died with
typhoid fever, Milton Boad C D Morris & H Hoyington are sick at the present time, the
balance of the men in Co E are as well as could be expected Considering the fare we have
get. And here let me give you a bill of fare received by the prisoners in the first place the
men are divided into messes of 20 in a mess & each mess has two iron pots a large and
one & a small one this constitutes all the cooking utensials we have neathe [sic: neither]
cups plates knives or spoons except those that had money to buy them with, each mess
gets 15 lbs of corn bread made without sifting & without salt & 15 lbs of salt muel meat
one pint of rice and one quart of molasses or sugar for each days rashens, and the muel
meat generally is so rotten that nothing but a dog or a southern rebel could eat it. This
formes the bill of fare so far as the eatibles are concerned, and the southern officials tell us
that we get as good as there soldiers do & if that is a fact there soldiers are to be pittied.
a good many of the prisoners have some money & they buy wheat bread & with
what they get as rashens & what they buy they can keep sole & body to gether. I had about three dollars left yet for my self & Liut Williams when that is gone I will sell my
watch and by being very saving I can get along for some time yet, and I hope that our
government will not let us stay here much longer the report is that the men Privits are to
be sent north on a parole not to fight against the confedercy untill exchanged. They say
they wont parole the officers so I will be compeld to stay here untill the U.S.
government exchanges us or recaptures [sic: recaptures] us. I hope the time is not far
distant when we will all get back to a civilized community. I am writing this letter with
the expectason that the privits are to be sent north in a few days & I can send it by them to
some U.S. post office it is a God send to the privits to get out of this place as they are
generly out of money and Some of them have Sold there pants and more to get money to buy Somthing to eat & have nothing now to ware in the Shape of pants excet the drawers, there is none that have a change of clothes they have to go without while they wash ther Shirts. The only thing that the South produces in abundance is lice & fleas they grow Sopontaines [sic: spontaneous?] & of the larges kind & can assure you that the Cotton Shed that we occupy is well Supplide & evry man has all he wants, look along the Shed of a morning & you can Sea two or three Hundred men with there Shirts of [sic: off] hunting for Suthern Stock this is Suthern Shlvlery and eating mule beef is partaking of Suthern hospatility. The South is all a poore Swampy Cuntry & the inhabitants are all a miserable poor god forsaken race, fore [sic: for] representatives of the cause they are fighting for. I hope that here after no northern man will ever have the impodence to talk to me about Suther hospitality & Suthern Shvliry if he does he may expect to fight or run, for I have Seen the anamul & know how it looks and it make me feel like fighting to even think of about it. Well after all my health is better than it was when I was taken prisoner and if I do not get any thing worce than Suthern each lice & fleas I will live through it, and when we get back to americka we can Safley say that we have seen the elephant.

Well as to the part that the 12th Rigment took in the battle of Pitsburg landing on the 6th of April we was on the battle field about 7 O clock A M and took our pusuion in line of battle we was in Cornel [sic: Colonel] Tuttles Brigade & in General Lawman devision the Line of battle was about two miles long in the Shape of half circle and our devision was in the Senter we was told to hold our posion [sic: position] we had not ben in line more than 10 minits before the Rebles came up in line in front of us and we opend fire on them and they returned our fire the firing lasted about half an hour when the Rebbles fellback & we laid down on the ground so that we was intirley hid from thare vue [sic: view] and the battry that was placed about 10 Rods behind the left wing of our Rigment kept up afire in the direction of there retreat and in about half an hour we discoverd the Schurmishers [sic: skirmishers] of the Rebbles advancing again we laid sill [sic: still] & they advanced within about 40 Rods of us and not seing any infantry between them & the battry they fell back again & in about 20 minits they moved up in sight again in three Collums we could se from the way that they advanced that they thought we had faulen back and they
was coming up to charge & take the battery we laid Still untill they advanced within 50 feet of us and then we raised and fired & the whole front rank Semi to all fall at once they Returned the fire but was so Confused by our fire that they shot over our heads & don no harm & gave them the second fire & they Commenced foling [sic: falling] back in Confusion & the left wing of our Rigment charged on them & they run out into an open field in front of the right wing and they pourd [page torn] fire in to them & the battery was at work givin them [grape canister?] all the time, and we ware told by the Rebbles after we war [sic: were] taken prisoners that only [16?] men in the Rigment that advanced in front made ther escape without eathe [sic: either] being kiled or wonded & from the looks of the ground where they ware when we first opend fire on them I am preprad to beleave that the most of the Rigment next to us fell the dead bodys on the ground ware as thick as the rails would be if a 10 rail fence was throwen down & the rails scatterd over a strip of ground a rod wide—our brigade [all] held there position all day we was ingaged the most of the time without much loss on our part untill about 5 O clock PM when we ware ordered to fall back and form a new line and we fell back about [8?] hundred yards when we discovered that the tines [sic: lines?] on bouth sides of us was broke and that we ware flanked on boath sides but we still still had no idea that our forces had retreated & left the field and we haulted and opend fire on the Rebbles in frunt of us and they returned our fire with some effect killing several of our men the 12th and 14th Iowa was all that was ingaged & they held there ground for half an hour never douting that the other Rigments that had faulen back would come up again & help drive the Rebbles back but in this we ware disappointed we faut on untill we ware ordered to Retreat by the Right flank & we did not proceed far in this direction untill we came to hault by discoverung that the flanking lines was closed in frunt of us & that apart of two or thee [sic: three] regiments had surendered and we began to think then that our chances was rather slim but we still kept fighting and we kept our position & still had hopes that some more forces would come to hour assistances & the 14th Rigment gave up throwd down their arms and raised the white fag [sic: flag] & when our men saw that the 14th had surendered some of them in our Rigment raised the white flag and we ware ordered to Surender, & if you ever saw aset of men that felt bad it was the men in Co E altho we had lost four men in our Company & 11 more wounded what was left Said that they would
rather die than be taken prisoners—the tears roled down ther faces or at least some of
them cept H Lieut Williams & myself all broke our swords and threw [sic: threw] them
down on the ground and we all marched out as prisoners of war & now we are here—

Mont Gumory Alabama May 23rd 1862

Mrs J Elwell

I will now close this letter that I have already Spun out to twice the
length I intended. I have so much to say to you that it Seames as tho I have left out of this
letter evry thing of importance. I know that you have been ansus [sic: anxious] to hear
from me and perhaps you have Sufferd more in mind on account of you uncertain
information about my fate than I have don from my imprisinment but I hope that when
you get this your mind will be releaved to some extent We must bare our misfortunes
paishently it is onlly one of the horrows of war. I hope it will not be miny months before I
will be home. The Confeddrcey is about plaid out. I must Close this hastily writen letter if
thare is any thing in this letter that you think will be of interest to the Citizens of
Waterloo you may make what corrections you se fit by rubing out & writing over & give
it to Hartman. I have hardly red it over after writing & have made no corrections, yours
for ever Hoping to meet you soon.

      To his Rib                        John Elwell