

### CIVIL WAR TREASURES: The Needle and Thimble Brigade: Women in Civil War Baton Rouge

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## Feature Essay

Summer 2012

**Taylor, Michael** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: The Needle and Thimble Brigade: Women in Civil War Baton Rouge.*

“One thing is my heart’s desire now, and that is, to be a man,” an anonymous writer, who signed herself only as “Anxiety,” confided to the editor of the Baton Rouge *Gazette and Comet* in February 1862. “[A]nd would I were one, I would have left ‘footprints’ in the blood of the Yankees long ago.” In an audacious reversal of the nineteenth-century notion of “separate spheres,” Miss Anxiety publicly derided Louisiana’s “ornamental young men” who “clad themselves in the armor of excuses” and attended to their businesses rather than their state’s and the South’s honor. “In view of all these things,” she continued, tongue in cheek, “I move that the Red Stick girls form themselves into a company, called ‘The Young Men’s Protectors,’ and devise plans to take care of these heroes, who have won so much glory at home.”<sup>1</sup>

Although they never served as soldiers, women did in fact play important roles in Baton Rouge during the Civil War, and in some cases as protectors of a different sort. In this issue’s “treasures” column, we look at a number of items from the LSU Libraries’ Special Collections that shed light on women’s involvement in the struggle between North and South as it played out in Louisiana’s capital city.

A few months after the war began, the editor of the Baton Rouge *Weekly Advocate* reported that a group of women, whom he dubbed “The Needle and Thimble Brigade,” had begun meeting across the street from the paper’s offices to make clothes for Confederate soldiers. “From morning till late evening,” he observed, “do our noble matrons and maidens ply the needle.”<sup>2</sup>

When the Union Navy sailed up the Mississippi in the spring of 1862 intent on snatching Baton Rouge from the Confederate fold, a woman was unknowingly responsible for a minor but deadly fracas that heightened concerns about women’s safety. On May 28, three weeks after Federal forces took control

of the capital, five of Commodore David F. Farragut's men set off for the riverbank in a small unarmed boat in search of a woman to do their laundry. A band of guerrillas had somehow made it into the town and fired on the sailors as they neared the shore. Two U.S. gunboats returned fire, destroying several waterfront shanties and accidentally killing three women. In his diary, the Baton Rouge planter John C. Elder recorded that he had seen women running for safety as the attack got underway. He gave his buggy to two of them, one coddling a newborn baby in her arms, to help them escape.<sup>3</sup>

Many feared that worse was to come. Leon Bonnecaze, the Vice-Consul of France in Baton Rouge, wrote to Farragut immediately after the incident urging him not to hold the townspeople responsible for the actions of guerrillas and risk innocent lives "by skirmishing with your forces within the corporate limits." The commodore replied that he could make no guarantees, but that "if time and opportunity is given, you shall have due notice for the removal of the women and children."<sup>4</sup>

And yet when the battle of Baton Rouge commenced at daybreak on August 5, 1862, civilians were once again taken by surprise. Eliza McHatton-Ripley, the mistress of nearby Arlington Plantation, witnessed hundreds of women pouring out of the town, having been roused from their beds by gunfire, some "hatless, bonnetless, some with slippers and no stockings, some with wrappers hastily thrown over nightgowns." She spotted a "distracted mother [carrying] an older child with wounded and bleeding feet," and "occasionally could be descried a battered umbrella held over some delicate woman to temper the rays of what was fast becoming a blazing August sun." Eliza had helped organize the "Campaign Sewing Society" a year earlier when hostilities began. "Its very title shows how transient we regarded the emergency; how little we deemed the campaign would develop into a four years' war!"<sup>5</sup>

John Morgan, a native of Clinton, Louisiana, who was wounded and captured at the battle of Baton Rouge, left us a letter in which he tells about the role women played as nurses in the weeks following the Confederate defeat. "The ladies who are left here are very devoted to the wounded soldiers," Morgan wrote to his sister. "There is some half dozen or dozen young ladies who have been here almost all of the time, day and night, ever since we were wounded. I never saw persons take more interest in anyone than they have taken in the wounded soldiers here." As has so often occurred, he took an interest in them in return. "I have fallen in love with Baton Rouge, or someone here, I do not know

which, but am inclined to think that I will try and find out which when the war is over. I have made the acquaintance of some of the loveliest young ladies here that I have ever seen in my life." <sup>6</sup>

It was a lady, in fact, who helped Morgan deliver his letter to his sister in what was still enemy territory. For the woman to do such a thing would have required a pass, and a pass required an affirmation of loyalty. Women routinely acquired passes from Federal authorities. One pass, shown here, was granted to Leocadie Lauzin of Baton Rouge. It allowed her to purchase pork, lard, coffee, flour, calico, and shoes in the city and carry them over the picket lines; in exchange, she was required to take an oath of allegiance and swear that she would give no "aid, comfort or information" to enemies of the United States and would use the goods "for the exclusive use of myself and my family or plantation."<sup>7</sup>

To view any of the items mentioned above, be sure to visit the LSU Libraries' Special Collections summer exhibit, "Old Times Here Are Not Forgotten: Remembering the Civil War," which runs from July 30 to November 10, 2012. For more information, visit Hill Memorial Library's website or call (225) 578-6544.

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Notes:

(1) "One of the Unprotected," *Gazette and Comet* (Baton Rouge, La.), Mar. 8, 1862.

(2) "The Needle and the Thimble," *Weekly Advocate* (Baton Rouge, La.), Aug. 25, 1861.

(3) John C. Elder Diary, Mss. 4653. Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections (LLMVC), LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

(4) Leon Bonnacaze to David Farragut, May 28, 1862; David Farragut to Leon Bonnacaze, May 28, 1862. Abner L. Duncan Papers, Mss. 4199, LLMVC.

(5) Eliza McHatton-Ripley, *From Flag to Flag: A Woman's Adventures and Experiences in the South during the War, in Mexico, and in Cuba*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896. 35-36, 13.

(6) John Morgan to H. Addie Morgan, Aug. 19, 1862. John A. Morgan Papers, Mss. 1712, 1753, LLMVC.

(7) Pass from Edward Page, Provost Marshall, for Leocadie Lauzin, Oct. 2, 1863. Gras-Lauzin Family Papers, Mss. 5, LLMVC.