

Civil War Treasures: Love Is a Battlefield: Courtship and Marriage in the Civil War

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Feature Essay

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Laver, Tara *Civil War Treasures: Love Is a Battlefield: Courtship and Marriage in the Civil War.*

Confederate nurse Kate Cumming observed that the Civil War was “certainly ours as well as that of the men.” Though she undoubtedly meant to convey that women were not immune to the harshness and devastating effects of war, a less extreme arena in which women and men shared a common wartime experience was on the battlefield of love. And as with many other social institutions, the Civil War affected traditional customs surrounding courtship and marriage. In honor of Valentine’s Day, this “Treasures” column focuses on those changes.

In addition to contributing to mobilization and the ongoing war effort by forming aid societies, sewing and knitting clothing and articles for soldiers, raising money, nursing, and visiting the wounded, women wielded another mobilizing weapon-- affection. Popular songs and poems, peer pressure, and their own sense of patriotism led many unmarried women to favor soldiers over those who did not fight. As Louisianan Amelia Faulkner wrote a friend, "girls ought to have nothing but soldiers for their beaux and if all girls thought as we do, there would be more companies leave this state." Further, she offered to find her a beau from among the men where where she lived, "all soldiers, too, for I your friend would offer you nothing else." ¹

Nineteenth-century antebellum America put a premium on the traditional roles of wife and mother. In the South, the expectation that white women would marry was even more acute; unmarried women were out of place in a societal hierarchy that supported slavery, and there were few acceptable options for southern women outside of the bonds of matrimony. When the Civil War broke out, many couples married quickly before a fiancé left for battle. The impending departure of a suitor for the scene of war might also heighten affection. For example, after Abigail Kent received an unexpected visit from her suitor she wrote, “Before he was dragged off into this war, I think I appeared sufficiently

indifferent," but, she further confided, "now I show him my true feelings for fear that each meeting will be our last."²

The influx of soldiers from across the South, as well as the North, brought young women into close contact with potential suitors about whom they knew little. But the threat of becoming an "old maid" trumped tradition, leading many to marry after making only a short acquaintance, and without familial blessings. The romance of Joanna Painter Fox and George Waddill provides an illustrative example of how the rules of courtship and interaction between the sexes became more lax. Fox, a Natchez native who served as a Confederate nurse, met George Waddill, a druggist from Baton Rouge, at the hospital in Lauderdale, Mississippi, where they both worked. The couple had known each other at most a year before they wed, and Fox's mother had not met the prospective groom. She broke the news to her mother: Mother, I have news to tell you which I hope you won't blame me for. I was married last month on 26th to the one I have spoke to you so often about but then I did not think of marrying until this was over btu we both changed our mnds and married while Billy was with us. The ceremony was read by W.C. Harris, an old friend form home and now a stationed Preacher at this place or near here. Ma the only thing that worries me is that you did not see us married.³

Such haste could have disastrous consequences, as the story Frank Adams related to his sister illustrates. He wrote of a Confederate officer who, after his death, was found to have married several women in Louisiana as the army moved around the state. He adds, "I have heard of at least a dozen of the same kind."⁴ These polygamist soldiers took advantage of the nomadic life the war fostered.

If the war brought greater acceptance of marriage after brief acquaintances, emancipation and Federal officials' efforts to regulate the marriage of freedmen also provided an opportunity for slave couples to formalize existing relationships. For former slaves, participation in legal marriage was also an early assertion of freedom. Like many freed slaves, Nancy and Ceasar Coleman, who worked on Edward J. Gay's Plaquemine, La., plantation, sought to legalize their relationship by officially marrying through the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. The certificate shown here is one of 55 such certificates in the collection, all dated June 7 or June 11, 1864.

The examples given here are just a sampling of the resources available in Special Collections on the subject of courtship and marriage during the Civil War. One, the rediscovered Civil War letters in the Gras-Lauzin Papers, which are cited here, have recently been made available online through the Louisiana Digital Library. Comprised of 71 letters written to Henrietta Lauzin of West Baton Rouge, principally from her friend Amelia Faulkner and Confederate soldiers Francis F. Palms and Frank Babin, they provide a very focused resource for relationships between men and women in wartime.

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¹Amelia Faulkner to Henrietta Lauzin, April 14, 1862, Gras-Lauzin Family Papers, Mss.5.

²August 29, 1862, Abigail Means Kent Diary, Obadiah Pearson Amacker Family Papers, Mss. 1604.

³Joanna Painter Fox to her mother, October 14, 1864, Waddill Family Papers, Mss. 4578. In a this letter, Fox (now Waddill) writes her mother that she has married and explains that the couple had planned to wait but decided to take advantage of her brother's presence in Lauderdale to have a family member at their wedding.

⁴Frank Adams to one of his sisters, July 2, 1864, Israel Adams Family Papers, Mss. 3637.

Photo Captions:

At Top - Marriage certificate of Nancy and Ceasar Coleman, Edward J. Gay and Family Papers, Mss. 1295.

Below - Amelia Faulkner to Henrietta Lauzin, Aprl 14, 1862. Gras-Lauzin Family Papers, Mss. 5.