

CIVIL WAR TREASURES:Wanderers Among the Ruins: A Southern Family's Life in England During the Civil War

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *CIVIL WAR TREASURES:Wanderers Among the Ruins: A Southern Family's Life in England during the Civil War.*

A prosperous Louisiana planter like George Otis Hall normally would have spent the month of February attending to his new sugar crop. In February 1862, however, Hall found himself not on the banks of the Mississippi, but on the banks of the River Wye, a broad, placid stream that forms the border between England and Wales. Near its mouth sit the stately ruins of Tintern Abbey, left to crumble since the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of King Henry VIII. The whole scene had inspired one of Wordsworth's most famous poems. "Five years have past; five summers, with the length of five long winters! and again I hear these waters," the poet had written, reflecting on how much his life had changed since first visiting the area a few years earlier. Hall, too, would find himself in very different circumstances before he saw the Mississippi again, and as he wandered over the grounds of the abbey, or, a few days later, among the megaliths at Stonehenge (a site that carried his thoughts back "into the distant and undefined past"), little could he have known that a scene of devastation awaited him at home that rivaled the ruins of ancient Britain, if not in romance, then certainly in sorrow and desolation.¹

In our "treasures" column this month, we feature several letters, now held by the LSU Libraries Special Collections, in which Hall recorded his experiences abroad during the Civil War.

Born in South Carolina in 1809, he had spent his formative years in England before re-crossing the Atlantic, going into business in New Orleans, and then purchasing a sugar plantation, Magnolia Mound, on what was then the outskirts of Baton Rouge. A devout Catholic, he enrolled his eldest son George at Stonyhurst College, England's largest and finest Catholic preparatory school, in 1857. Located about fifty miles from Liverpool, Stonyhurst was an outgrowth of the College of Saint Omer in France, founded by Jesuits in the sixteenth century

to educate expatriate English Catholics. Several prominent American Catholics were educated at Saint Omer in the eighteenth century, and after Stonyhurst opened its doors in 1794, it too attracted students from “across the pond.” At the time of the Civil War, at least three Louisianans were enrolled there.²

Despite the school’s reputation for excellence, Hall worried about his son’s progress, lecturing him at one point that “You are now more than thirteen years old and ought to think a little of more serious matters than cricket and football.”³ In the spring of 1861, he decided to pay him a visit, along with his wife and other children, who were already in England. The political crisis between North and South was nearing its breaking point at the time of Hall’s departure, and it was while he and his family were in London that news reached them of the attack on Fort Sumter and the beginning of the Civil War. “It is a most unfortunate state of things and will doubtless lead to deplorable results for us all,” Hall wrote gloomily to his son at Stonyhurst.⁴ Not long afterwards, he recorded that “things are taking a very serious turn in America and in all probability our unhappy country will be involved in a civil war for many years to come... [U]nder any aspect we may take of it, it cannot fail to prove highly disastrous to our as well as all other interests in America.”⁵

Although he had intended to return to Louisiana at summer’s end, Hall discovered that the Union blockade had locked him out of his own country. Even sailing to Canada would not have solved the problem, according to Hall. “I was to have embarked on Thursday last for America and was all ready and packed up,” he wrote in September 1861, “when we got advices that Southerners were not allowed to pass over the frontiers of Canada without taking the oath of allegiance to the Washington government and with a passport.”⁶ The only other option was a long overland journey through Mexico and Texas, which Hall decided was too risky.⁷ For the time being, he would have to remain in England.

It would turn out to be a long wait. News arrived in the summer of 1862 that Baton Rouge had fallen to Federal forces. At Magnolia Mound, Union soldiers had “committed all kind of depredations, wantonly destroying what they could not use or carry away,” including Hall’s library and paintings.⁸ At one point, he gave vent to his suspicions that the war was being waged partly as an anti-Catholic crusade. “These northern fanatics are always mouthing about civil and religious liberty,” he wrote, “yet they tolerate neither. They burnt some years ago, as you know, the convents at Boston and the Catholic Churches at Philadelphia, etc. What would the Catholic signers of the Declaration of

Independence, among whom was Charles Carroll of Carrollton, think of the present state of things."⁹ The parallel to the destruction of the abbeys three centuries earlier in England must at least have crossed his mind.

Newspapers carried nothing to suggest the war would come to an end anytime soon, and although Hall had transferred much of his wealth to London banks, he worried about his financial situation. In January 1862, George received a note from his father instructing him to economize. Fencing, dancing, gymnastics, and music lessons would have to be put off "until more propitious times."¹⁰ Hall had enrolled two of his daughters at the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Roehampton (later attended by English actress Vivien Leigh, star of *Gone with the Wind*), but then pulled them out to save money. Things had gotten so bad by the spring of 1863 that Hall decided to withdraw George, too, from classes and either transfer him to a school on the Continent, where tuition was cheaper, or find him a job in his uncle Lindsay's office in Liverpool.¹¹ When George complained, his father wrote back, "I am afraid you have not realized the position of things. Our property is all devastated and we are shut off from all resources, if indeed any at all will be left to us after the war."¹²

George arrived in Liverpool in August and worked with his uncle for a few months before receiving word that his family was moving to Belgium "from motives of economy."¹³ Realizing that George needed another year of schooling (mostly to perfect his French), Hall enrolled him at a college in Melle, near Ghent. He would spend the rest of the war there, completing his studies in 1865. Hall himself waited out the latter part of the war in Brussels before sailing for New Orleans in December 1864. When he arrived in Baton Rouge in January, the destruction was as bad as he had expected.¹⁴ He described it in a long letter to his wife, then picked up the pieces as best as he could, selling off many household items and finding a tenant to lease Magnolia Mound before getting rid of it altogether in 1869. By June, he was back in Brussels and would spend the rest of his life in Europe, dying in Paris in 1880. His son George eventually made his way to California, while his daughters remained in France, where several Hall family descendants can still be found today.

The Civil War, it has been said, was fought in ten thousand places. It was felt, however, in many more, and even Americans who lived an ocean away could not escape its effects.

Michael Taylor is Assistant Curator of Books and History Subject Librarian in the LSU Libraries.

¹ George Otis Hall to George William Hall, Feb. 17, 1862. George Otis Hall Family Papers, Mss. 4320, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. ² Henry McCall of Assumption Parish, George Larue of New Orleans, and George William Hall of Baton Rouge. See George Larue to G. W. Hall, Jan. 28, 1865. ³ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Jan. 27, 1859. ⁴ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Apr. 28, 1861. ⁵ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, May 17, 1861. ⁶ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Sept. 29, 1861. ⁷ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Oct. 27, 1861. ⁸ G. O. Hall to Emma LeDoux Hall, Aug. 2, 1862. ⁹ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Apr. 13, 1862. ¹⁰ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Jan. 4, 1862. ¹¹ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Mar. 4, 1863; June 25, 1863. ¹² G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Apr. 30, 1863. ¹³ G. O. Hall to G. W. Hall, Aug. 22, 1863; Nov. 10, 1863. ¹⁴ G. O. Hall to Emma LeDoux Hall, Jan. 19, 1865.