

Civil War Treasures: The Soldier's Everlasting Rest: Preserving the Dead in Civil War New Orleans

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *Civil War Treasures: The Soldier's Everlasting Rest: Preserving the Dead in Civil War New Orleans.*

If you enjoyed HBO's hit series *Six Feet Under*, a collection of Civil War letters in the LSU Libraries' Special Collections might be just for you.

The William R. Bell Papers, dating from 1842 to 1874, provide a snapshot of what it was like to be an undertaker during the Civil War. Born in Scotland, Bell came to New Orleans as a young man in the 1830s and subsequently worked as a livery stable owner, renting out horses and carriages for hire. By 1854, he was also employed as an undertaker, a not uncommon second profession for livery men, who were already needed to transport bodies and mourners to the cemetery. The Civil War presented an additional business opportunity: preserving bodies so they could be transported long distances without posing a health hazard.

Today, we take it for granted that soldiers who die in the service of their country will be returned to their loved ones, and yet before the middle of the nineteenth century, a fallen soldier's grave was rarely more than a few yards from where he fell. The Civil War was the first conflict in American history in which middle class families were realistically able to demand the same privileges for their dead that had once been reserved for the most prominent individuals. This was made possible by practitioners of an ancient art that had recently been modernized and added to the gallery of nineteenth-century wonders—embalming.

The expenses incurred in embalming, transporting, and recovering a body—perhaps the hardest job of all, as we learn from a letter in the Bell papers written from Morgan City, Louisiana—still meant that officers, even in death, had an advantage over enlisted men, especially when they were Northerners and died in places as far from home as Louisiana.¹ Bell, however, did what he could to help. In one case involving fifty Union soldiers buried a half-day's journey

from New Orleans, for example, he offered to reduce his usual price on account of the friends of the deceased being poor.² That said, another letter shows that Bell faced the same problem all businessmen face—the need to be paid. In March 1865, he received a heartbreaking note from an impoverished widow in New York whose husband, a regimental chaplain, had died of malaria in New Orleans, and whose body Bell had been holding for six months while awaiting payment from his regiment, which itself had not been paid for the same period of time. “The loss of my companion has almost killed me,” the man’s wife wrote, “and then to think I can’t have his body, it will ruin me... O this cruel war, this cruel war”.³

Bell’s papers also shed light on the macabre but no less fascinating process of preserving a body in the nineteenth century. Several letters from Dr. Thomas Holmes, the so-called “father of American embalming,” are included in the collection. Holmes rose to prominence after embalming Abraham Lincoln’s friend Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, the war’s first high-profile casualty. Although his work was certainly important and widely discussed, his letters to Bell reveal his frustrations and failures. Holmes was a leading promoter of arterial embalming, a process pioneered in the late 1700s that involved injecting a preservative fluid into the circulatory system. Still in use today, most undertakers at the time of the Civil War readily saw its advantages over older techniques, which were not only inefficient, but also extraordinarily grotesque: corpses were typically disemboweled and then dried or pickled in alcohol or brine. Often the torso was stuffed with fragrant herbs (balm), the origin of the word *embalm* (a fact alluded to by Walt Whitman in his Civil War poem *Ashes of Soldiers*: “Give me to bathe the memories of all soldiers, Shroud them, embalm them... Perfume all! make all wholesome!”).

Despite Holmes’s belief that New Orleans was the best city in the United States for his process, Louisiana was ultimately a disappointment. Two Crescent City undertakers may have taken advantage of the war to get out of the terms of their contract with him, and Bell, who had expressed an interest in his costly equipment, changed his mind after examining a body Holmes had embalmed in New York and sent to New Orleans. It was, according to Bell, “not fit to look at.” A body that he himself had embalmed, on the other hand, still “looked very natural after being dead three months,” and in another letter, he boasted that he could “do as good a job now as Dr. Holmes ever did.”⁴ Although Bell’s technique is unclear, enough details exist in his correspondence to establish that it did not resemble Holmes’s. We know for sure that he used alcohol, but it was

probably in the old-fashioned way, for in a letter to his New York supplier of specialty coffins, he complained that they leaked when filled with liquid. Other supplies listed among his correspondence that could have been used in his mortuary include zinc (an ingredient in early embalming fluid), coal oil and petroleum (mentioned by an authority on the substances in 1865 as having been used by embalmers since the days of the pharaohs), and even kauri gum, an exotic tree resin that can be mixed with turpentine to make varnish, one of the more peculiar items in the eighteenth-century embalmer's toolkit.

Strange and unsettling as they are, Bell's papers support the study of profoundly important issues in social and cultural history, such as how the Civil War came to be remembered, changing attitudes about death, the rise of Victorian sentimentality, public health, the history of American business, and even immigration (like Bell, most of New Orleans's undertakers in the mid-nineteenth century were born abroad). To learn more about Bell, Dr. Holmes, and the curious history of pre-modern embalming, see: Michael Taylor, "The Civil War Experiences of a New Orleans Undertaker," in *Louisiana History*, Summer 2014 (vol. 55, no. 3).

Michael Taylor is Rare Book Curator and History Subject Librarian for the LSU Libraries.

¹ Dominique Pochelu to W. R. Bell, March 23, 1864. William R. Bell Papers, mss. 2117, 2118, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

² A. H. Bronson to W. R. Bell, Oct. 1, 1863; W. R. Bell to A. H. Bronson, Oct. 21, 1863. Bell Papers.

³ Angeline B. Dwyer to W. R. Bell, Mar. 26, 1865; W. R. Bell to A. B. Dwyer, Oct. 19, 1864; A. L. Gurney to W. R. Bell, Jan. 2, 1865. Bell Papers.

⁴ W. R. Bell to Minett & Co., Nov. 6, 1863; W. R. Bell to Parker & Gillespie, Sept. 29, 1864. Bell Papers.