

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Condemnation of Captivity Connecticut Corporal Denounces Slaveholders

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Feature Essay

Fall 2006

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Condemnation of Captivity Connecticut corporal denounces slaveholders.*

New Acquisitions in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries' Special Collections

Plantation Revelation

Collection: Edwin Benedict Letters, 1862-1863, Mss. 4318, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Size: 13 items.

Corporal Edwin Benedict served with Company G of the 23rd Connecticut Infantry. Organized in New Haven, Connecticut, in November 1862, the unit was attached to the defenses of New Orleans and the District of LaFourche, Department of the Gulf.

In this collection of letters to his wife, Mary, of Newtown, Connecticut, Benedict mentions traveling to Fort Jackson, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Ship Island, Brashear City, and Camp Parapet. He witnesses the building of Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island, noting the presence of female Confederate prisoners. Benedict also describes the operation of a plantation sugar mill.

Like most soldiers writing home, Benedict fills his letters with descriptions of the mundane: food, camp conditions, illness, and guard duty. In this case, however, it is in the course of Benedict's guard duty that he experiences a significant personal revelation regarding the institution of slavery.

British citizen and absentee planter Ambrose Lanfear requested, and received, Union protection for his plantation, Louisa, in St. Charles Parish. Slaves continued laboring there with the tacit blessing of the federal government. It is here that Benedict was stationed, quartered in the pigeonier. During this time, Benedict became personally acquainted with slaves on the plantation who

cooked for and traded with the Union soldiers.

Benedict spends most of his first letter of March 1, 1863, to his wife attacking the institution of slavery, and describing the war as an act of God in vengeance against slaveholders. While the letter is riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, one would be hard-pressed to find a more eloquent and genuine expression on the subject:...I believe that while this war is striking the death blow to slavery in our fair land it is intended to teach a lesson of humility to brake down that arrogant prid to reduse the wealth that great soarce of pride and teach mankind tis God that rules tis him that giveth tis his to take away and ifman threw pride will not yeald without the cup of sorrow and disapointment will be drained to the biter dregs meany is the one that thiss day complain of hardships that never kew what hardships or sufering was has a wife ben taken from their bosom has the husband ben torn from his wife and children and hurried away what for for the agrandisement of man that man what dose he do lounges in idlness eats drinks and sezs he is happy so long as he has made a successful bargain for what for the body of a felow man no but he is black he has no soul he is mine mine my welth has purched him hereafter he must know nothing but work and gain the fine clothes build the beautyful mancon provide the gold for my cofers and bread I unthankfully eat never think of the giver tis mine my slaves raised it but let us loock a little farther tis night the rich owner maybe is complaining of some loss perhaps he mourns the looss of a loved child or his dear companion or perhaps in his mancion is reveling and joy unmindful that sorrow ever disturbed the torn heart of eany felow man but hark in the lonely cottage of the poor slave that has ben draged from the wife and children he loved so well perhaps some may say it is a picture of fancy but it is the fact as meany can bare witness our cocks husband for one he was taken from his wife and three children and has not herd from them in eigt years what do we hear the earnest but untaught prayres and petisions for his dear ones he has been obliged to leave and for streangth to bare his trials but even the privelage to prey he must steal if he has no soul why does he prey is there eany brute that looks up to God now beshore it is not so they are not sold but meany is the night we hear them preying and singing nearly all night and sabbath they have their meeting to prey and sing and if there is one can read he conducts the meeting but where is the white ther is no meeting hous about here and all I am acquainted with want none but go a hunting or fishing never seam to think they have a soul to save a heaven to gain but money gold and the means of getting more seams to occupy their whole attention...

A thorough review of Union soldiers' letters reveals a range of responses to both slavery and the enlistment of African Americans: racism, indifference, and brotherly concern fueled by religion. It is possible that many of Benedict's comrades-in-arms would have been uncomfortable with both his befriending slaves and the degree of his moral outrage regarding the peculiar institution. Regardless, one imagines that Benedict's experience on Louisa Plantation was permanently embedded in his mind, affecting him for the duration of his life.

If you are interested in using the Edwin Benedict letters or other collections in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, visit LSU Libraries Special Collections online at www.lib.lsu.edu/special for visitor information.

Leah Jewett is the Exhibitions Coordinator and Civil War Manuscript Archivist at Hill Memorial Library, LSU Libraries' Special Collections.