

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Facing the Enemy Planter's Diary Outlines Daily Struggle With Occupation

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Feature Essay

Summer 2007

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Facing the Enemy Planter's diary outlines daily struggle with occupation.*

Collection: John C. Elder diary, Mss. 4353, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Size: 1 item. New Acquisitions in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections LSU Libraries' Special Collections

As in many diaries of the day, the early pages of John Carroll Elder's journal are filled with reports on the weather, crop planting, and day to day activities such as attending church. In spite of the start of hostilities between North and South one year before, his life was apparently affected little by fighting in the East. Though Elder's entries are short on details, they successfully convey a Confederate planter's experience in war.

February 23

To church at 7 o'clock. Godfather for Caroline.

February 24

6 Ploughing and [illegible]. Ned grinding corn. Austin and women breaking corn. Dry wind from North.

But when the Crescent City fell to Union hands in April 1862, everything changed.

Forty nine year-old John Carroll Elder, a native of Maryland, was a planter in East Baton Rouge Parish at the outbreak of the Civil War. At the time of the 1860 census, Elder's real estate value is listed as \$30,000; personal property totaled \$20,500. Sixteen slaves, ages one to 50, lived and worked on his plantation. Based on Elder's references, it is likely that cotton was the principal crop. His property was located along the Mississippi River, a few miles north of

downtown Baton Rouge near the modern community of Scotlandville (site of historically black institution, Southern University). He was probably Catholic, as his wife, Mary Elizabeth Duffel, is buried in the Catholic Cemetery associated with St. Joseph's Church (later a cathedral) in Baton Rouge, and the Catholic Church is the only one specifically mentioned in his diary.

Elder records Union activity along the river and in the capital city from the first days of occupation. The April 25 entry—the day before the Union capture of New Orleans—refers to his efforts to hide cotton from the enemy (no doubt in response to Governor Thomas Overton Moore's order for citizens to destroy the crop to keep it from falling into enemy hands). In May, Elder witnesses the arrival of Union troops in a variety of naval vessels, including the gunboats. Intertwined with his reports of ships and Federal soldiers, Elder notes that plowing, planting, and the children's blackberry picking continues.

May 4

I burn cotton in gin. Gunboats coming up...

General Benjamin Butler's Order No. 29 banning the use of Confederate paper currency is mentioned, followed by a description of the bombardment of Baton Rouge:

May 2s8

Capt. Farragut Bombarded Baton Rouge.{1} Women and children running, the road crowded with them...burning shells struck the Catholic church and other building with grapeshot.

Elder describes his many encounters with the enemy, who search his property, attempt to force him to take the oath of allegiance to the United States, steal crops and livestock from him, and harass his neighbors. Area residents did their best to hide valuable crops and livestock from the enemy. The presence of Federal soldiers in the area brought the war home to the Elder family:

June 3

Gun boat stopped before the house and 1000 men with 6 pieces [of] artillery came on the plantation to see if there were any guerillas...Col. Payne commanding.

June 4

Meet men up the road and concluded we could do nothing with pop guns against cannon and Enfield rifles. Heard we whipped the enemy at Richmond. Killed 2 rabbits.

June 5

Met 10 Guerillas back of field. Visited Mr. Blunt with Elizabeth. Negroes scraping sweet potatoes, planting corn.

June 6

Six thousand soldiers in Baton Rouge. One ship, 4 gunboats sail full of runaway negroes. [Soldiers] rob Birds Plantation of corn, meat milk poultry.

June 8 (S)

Did not go to church because the enemy were in Baton Rouge.

June 15 (S)

Stayed at home, the enemy in Baton Rouge. Ten mortar and gunboats...to Vicksburg. Enemy took Ludlow's horses.

June 17

Gunboat and 2 mortar boats. A. Williams{2} negroes say that he and son were shot and buried in the levee.

June 18

Plowing corn and cane hoeing pota[toe]s. Six enemy came to Williams Plantation, order[ed] the negroes to go to work.

June 20

...All boats left for Vicksburg.

June 21

...Enemy put handcuffs on Mr. Gee, broke his trunk open and gave his clothes to the negroes of A.A. Williams.

June 22 (S)

Enemy took Bogel's Cotton. Fed their horses and men, about 35 of them asked me to take the oath of allegiance. I refused. Enemy arrived at 11 o'clock at night. At sunrise came to my house, the servants [were] all crying with fear. Kept Latile in room till evening.

June 26

Enemy taking Mr. Bogel's cotton on the ferry boat... left 15 bales at landing.

June 28

Gravellin had wagon loaded with Bogel's Cotton. Had it put back to bayou.

In an attempt to retake Louisiana for the Confederacy, General Earl Van Dorn sent troops to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to engage the enemy. Opposing forces met in the capital city on August 5. Elder outlines measures taken by his family to leave their home after receiving word that Van Dorn had ordered an evacuation of the area in anticipation of fighting.

July 1

Gen. Van Dorn's proclamation ordering every one to move 8 miles east of river. My family [is] busy packing up trunk and boxes.

In general as the Union army advanced, slaves took notice, and work levels dropped significantly. Historians note many instances in which slaves who stayed behind on the plantation assisted arriving Union soldiers in locating the hidden valuables of slaveholders. Many left the relative safety of the plantation seeking uncertain freedom for themselves and their families among the soldiers in blue. Elder reports the waves of departure as slaves from neighboring areas begin to leave:

July 10

Ned left last night with Taylor's negro Mose in a skiff. Drove 21 head of cows and calves over to Devil Swamp. Taylor's negro child died. Baptized two negro children of Taylor's. Five negroes left of Judge Favrot's. Heard Blanchard was taken prisoner.

July 11

Flat boat of negroes left LeBlanc. Twenty five of A.A. Williams's negroes left.

July 14

To Baton Rouge with Mrs. Taylor to look for negroes. At bank received note 80 \hat{u} Gov. Shepland{3} told him of Russell and [that] armed men came and took my cotton by force. He had the commander Gen. McMillan to give me an order for any cotton which I stored in Capt. Payne's warehouse. Governor said to the officers --do you supply citizens with armed men to steal? Got a pass for one week

July 16

Remained all night in Baton Rouge at the priest's house. Engage the police officers to look for Ned, Sam and Mose.

Throughout the occupation Elder and his neighbors are plagued by the federal requisitioning of their property. In this instance, Elder makes note of the commanding officer and the regiment involved:

July 28

Got home at 12 o'clock. Lt. Grimstead of 21st Indiana regiment⁴ came with a company of armed men and took on boat 11 head [of] cattle, 1 sheep, chickens and 30 watermelons.

August 5

Battle [of] Baton Rouge.

Once Federal troops focused their attention on Vicksburg, the citizens of Baton Rouge were able to function somewhat normally, as Elder indicates in

subsequent entries:

Undated

The enemy left Baton Rouge about the middle August. They took 13 bales of my cotton to New Orleans.

October 16

Received payment of 13 bales of cotton in New Orleans.

October 21

Negroes gathering corn.

October 22

To Baton Rouge with Taylor. [Had] my hair cut. Brother Tom [is] very sick.

October 24

To Devil's Swamp with [illegible]; seen 1 sow and pig, 1 cow and calf.

October 25

Turned very cold and windy.

Elder closes his diary with A list of articles taken or destroyed on John C. Elder Plantation from 13 to 20th March 1863 By the Federal soldiers of the United States Army. Among the items listed: 14 mules, 2 horses, 1 mare, 10 cows, 10 calves, 4 oxen, 3 sows, 20 pigs, 19 turkeys, 70 chickens, plates, saucers, cooking utensils, harnesses, saddles, a grindstone, animal fodder hatchets, and one silver thimble. He notes that the soldiers also broke the stove, damaged the cabin door and destroyed the corn house. He estimated the property's total worth at \$5,472. Union confiscation and/or destruction of the property belonging to Confederate civilians was commonplace; it is likely that Elder's neighbors suffered similar damage.

The details of Elder's life after the war are unknown, save the fact that his wife died in 1867. John Carroll Elder died in Baton Rouge on August 7, 1900.

Though it offers no specific details of his life, the obituary in the *Daily Advocate* describes Elder as one of the oldest and most respected citizens of this parish and a member of one of the most historical families in the country. While there is little supplemental documentation of his life in the historical record, his diary stands as a testament to one man's trials on the Confederate homefront.

Note: Grammar, spelling, and punctuation of the original diary text has been standardized for this article.-----

1. Alfred A. Williams owned property adjacent to, and across the river from Elder; the property is highlighted in blue in Persac's 1858 map.

2. Probably George F. *Shepley*, military governor of occupied Louisiana.

3. Two letters recently cataloged in the LLMVC shed light on the events that led to the shelling of Baton Rouge. Printed in the Official Records of Union and Confederate Navies, Series I Volume 18 (pp. 515-516) the original letters exchanged between Admiral David Farragut and the Vice Consul of France are within the holdings of the Special Collections.

Transcriptions of the letters follow:

Officer of Vice Consul of France

Baton Rouge, LA

May 28, 1862

Commodore Farragut

Commanding U. S. Navy

Off Baton Rouge

Sir

In the temporary absence of the mayor of Baton Rouge and in the recess of the council of the same city, I am requested and authorized by the citizens to inform you that the attack which was made on one of your small boats this morning, and the subsequent firing on one of your vessels, were made by a troop

of mounted men from the country.

The citizens, therefore, wish that the city may not be held responsible, and thousands of unprotected women and children exposed to the dangers of a cannonade and bombardment and driven from their homes, on consequence of proceedings which they could not control. As early as possible, no doubt, the authorities or the citizens will send a communication to the commander of the rangers, urging him to avoid compromising the safety of the women and children and the security of the property of the city, by skirmishing with your forces within the corporate limits. In the meanwhile it is hoped and expected that hereafter should you deem it proper to cannonade or bombard the city you will give timely notice for the withdrawal of the women and children and all noncombatants.

With high respect

I [illegible], Sir

your obt. serv.

L. Bonneau

Vice-Consul au France

U.S. Flag Ship Hartford

At anchor off Baton Rouge

To the

Vice Consul of France

Baton Rouge

Sir:

In reply to your communication of this morning, I have to state that no one could have been more surprised than myself at the wanton attack made upon my small unarmed boat, with an officer and four boys, while attempting to land at the foot of one of your streets. I felt assured at the time that it must be the act of

some lawless band. As I had received every assurance from the mayor and Council, and even from many of the citizens of Baton Rouge that every effort would be made by them to preserve order and prevent any overt act that might in any way compromise their town. Hence you may easily imagine my surprise at the salutation we received this morning û notwithstanding the provocation, however, I did everything in my power to avoid the destruction of either life or property of the citizens of Baton Rouge û I endeavored as far as practicable to inflict the punishment where it was due. Should there be no further attack upon us there will be no necessity for my firing upon the town, but, I cannot promise that when attacked I will not return the fire, but you may be assured that if time and opportunity is given you shall have due notice for the removal of the women and children.

I am,

Very respectfully

Your Obedient Servant.

D. G. Farragut

Flag Officer, Western

Gulf Blockading Squadron.

(Of note: Special Collections holds the Hart-Bonnecaze-Duncan Family Papers, which include materials related to Leon Bonnecaze, consular agent. The letters transcribed above are part of a separate collection currently under processing, the Abner L. Duncan Papers, Mss. 4199).

4. The 21st Indiana Infantry was stationed in Baton Rouge from May 30 to August 20, 1862. Local photographer Andrew Lytle captured several images of the regiment during occupation.

About the illustrations:

On the cover:

The 21st Indiana camped in front of the Baton Rouge courthouse, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

With the column:

Portion of map comes from Norman's Chart of The Lower Mississippi River By A. Persac. Published by B.M. Norman, New Orleans, La. 1858. John C. Elder's triangular parcel is marked with an orange dot (added for emphasis).

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