

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Captain's Log--Collection Covers Crescent City Experience

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Feature Essay

Fall 2008

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Captain's Log--Collection covers Crescent City experience.*

Collection: Charles W. Boothby Papers, Mss. 4847 Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections

Historians estimate that more than 5,000 Louisianians enlisted in Louisiana Union regiments. Most of these men were immigrants (German and Irish), and many had been previously impressed into Confederate service (Hunter 189). Once New Orleans fell in 1862—thanks in large part to these men and their less than enthusiastic support for the Confederacy¹—many enrolled in Union regiments, motivated both by sentiment and salary (Hunter 186, 190).

During federal occupation of the city General Nathaniel Banks, following in his predecessor Benjamin Butler's footsteps, worked to raise loyal units to protect the area. The 1st New Orleans Volunteer Infantry was organized in March 1864. Made up of "mainly of Crescent City immigrants and southern Mississippi farmers" (Hunter 207) the mission of the unit was, explicitly and exclusively "the protection and defense of New Orleans" (Current 92). Other occupations represented in Company D of the unit include cooper, musician, shoe maker, paper vendor, and laborer. According to the records in the Charles W. Boothby Papers, several men were transferred to the unit from the 6th Michigan Heavy Artillery, while others had been previously enlisted in the 1st Louisiana Infantry (Union). At least one soldier in the company was listed as having been "gained by desertion."

The task of recruiting troops for the 1st New Orleans Volunteers fell, in part, to Charles W. Boothby, Captain, Company D. Born in 1837 Boothby was a teacher by profession; in 1861 he enlisted as a private in the 12th Maine Infantry Regiment, and was promoted to lieutenant. The organization of the 1st New Orleans Volunteers gave Boothby the opportunity to rise in rank.

Though scant, the Charles W. Boothby Papers at Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library offer the only significant collection of records pertaining to this guard unit. Military records, coupled with Boothby's personal correspondence, help piece together the experience of a white Union regiment—men who lived in Louisiana but chose, for a variety of reasons, to serve the Union.

In a letter to his younger brother, George, Boothby describes his new found duties:

Headquarters, First New Orleans Volunteers,

Corner Claiborne and Canal Streets, [Wood's Press building]

New Orleans

January 16, 1864

Brother George:

Your kind letter of date about Christmas was duly received and I now attempt to answer it, together with those you had previously written, as you assert, although I have not been far in the arrears in answering letters until recently; for the past two months I must plead guilty of neglect – in writing, but will endeavor to make up for past-negligence. I do not know that this will reach you directly, not knowing that you are in the vicinity of home. Almira F. wrote me that you that day commenced your school but did not say where. I will direct the letter home and you will probably get it some time.

Well, here I am still in New Orleans, and I think destined to remain in it – a long while yet. My health is very good indeed. I reside in the city and have for two months past. I left the Q.M. Dept. at Lakeport to go into the 1st N. Orleans Vols. In which regiment I am now an officer. For the past two months I have been recruiting for the regiment and as recruiting is very dull, it has taken a long time to get enough men for an organization. As you would like to know all the particulars in regard to the regiment, and my interest in it I will tell you. Three months since Gen'l Banks authorized the raising of the regiments of infantry "for protection and defense of New Orleans" one (the 1st) to be stationed in the city for guard duty, and the other(2d) to be stationed at Carrollton. The enlistment

papers expressly state that their services are limited to the "Defenses of New Orleans," and they will not see service unless the city should be attacked, which is very improbable yet it takes more than one regiment to do the guard duty of the city. Barracks have been built expressly for the reg't – exceeding in neatness and comfort any that can be found in the country. The uniform differs from others as they are raised for a special duty. Our regiment – the 1st- commanded by Col. C. W. Killborn now numbers about 300, which are now being organized into small companies to go on to duty as guard. Recruiting is slow; I do not know whether a draft will be ordered or not; the enrollment is made but the military authorities hope to get men by volunteering. At the commencement of the movement I was told by Col. Killborn that if I would go to recruiting I should have a position in the regiment. I did so, and yesterday received from General Banks a captain's commission in the 1st N. Orleans Vols. The first captain's commission issued to the regiment. It strikes me that it is quite a jump from the rank of private to captain. By the paper I send, you will find a publication of the issue of the commission with others. My application was for a 1st Lieut, but the military board of examination before which I was called recommended me after examination, to Gen'l Banks for a Captaincy; I think it quite a compliment when I consider that many were rejected. But I have not fully decided to keep the commission for this reason: although an officer may be mustered 1st Lieut. Unless there should be a draft it would take me two months to get my men to be mustered captain, and living at one dollar per day for board, what I have paid for more than two months past – I feel like getting under pay soon as possible. I may decide to have my commission revoked, and be mustered as 1st Lieut. Commanding company. I have been boarding until the present. The Adj. Of the regiment and myself have now rented a neat two story house – have furnished it enough for comfort – have my servant "Aunt Hester," a steady old colored woman, one of the best cooks in the city or any other, and we live comfortably and independent – We are master of our own house and it seems more homelike. Of course our duties are with our regiment, but that is not every day, and our house is but a few steps from the headquarters of the regiment. The Adj.'s sister is coming out here to stop with use. If Lizzie would like to come out here she can come now, and have a good home, for I shall be settled here until the war closes. I would like to have her come. It is not much of an undertaking to come to N. Orleans, and probably she could get a school if she wished one – wonder how she would like a colored school; they are established here now - many northern ladies are taking darkie schools...

...Some of them learn remarkably fast – and some of them are blockheads. Lizzie might come if she would; nearly every officer stationed here has some of his friends here from the North – indeed a large number of the ladies seen on Canal St. – the fashionable St. – are northern ladies. – you can know them; only “Yankees” have those brown straw bonnets, with perhaps a large feather, and those gay colors – those cloaks – more like a gentleman’s overcoat than anything else, this style indicates a northerner – secesh ladies are nowhere, and don’t appear so often – the “yanks” monopolize the streets, military matter are “in status quo” – an expedition has gone across the Lake and are occupying Madisonville – some of the companies of the 12th Me have gone – not Co. “C.” but- I must write to mother and Frank.

Your brother

Charles

Write soon

In letters written in March 1864, Boothby notes with pride his company’s involvement in the festivities associated with Governor Michael Hahn’s inauguration:

I had my company there, as part of the guard, and in performing the “Anvil Chorus” by the band. Forty of them beat time on anvils. I drilled them the night before and in the morning. The next day I was about tired out. The beat of a brass drum was represented by cannon, fired by electricity. It was a tremendous concert and a perfect success...

I took my company out to aid in inaugurating Gov. Hahn. It was fitting that the 1st New Orleans Vols. Should help inaugurate the first Governor after the state’s redemption from rebeldom.

The larger significance of the regiment’s participation in the celebration is illustrated by G. Howard Hunter’s observation that immigrant enlistment was part of a larger picture that developed in New Orleans in the midst of war and occupation:

New Orleans Unionist regiments were part of an immigrant movement that changed the power structure of the city—a movement which reached its apogee

in 1864, when, in what would have been unthinkable before the war, foreign-born and native-born laborers together elected German immigrant Michael Hahn as governor of occupied Louisiana (Hunter 186).

Apart from the excitement of the inauguration, Richard N. Current points out in *Lincoln's Loyalists*:

Many of the loyalist troops spent most if not all of their time doing such quotidian duties as garrisoning, guarding, patrolling, foraging, recruiting, scouting and raiding rather than engaging the enemy head-on in large-scale, spectacular battles (Current 159).

In a letter to his mother dated July 24, 1864, Boothby notes concern about his men's behavior, no doubt influenced by boredom associated with their limited duties: "The regiment has been paid today- and a strict guard must be kept, to prevent the men getting out and going on a 'spree.'"

The 1st New Orleans Volunteers remained on duty through May 1866. By this time, the unpleasant task of serving as a firing squad had been added to their list of duties.

May 25, 1866

Dear brother-

We have in a military way all we can do with officers and men furnish all the details that go from the city- all the patrols in the city and hang or shoot any 'niggers' when called upon, yesterday a 'Freedman's Bureau' or in other words a colored soldier was shot at the Police Jail - by sentence of gen'l court martial- he had killed a white man.

Ludike and myself with our companies were detailed for the guard and also furnished the shooting party. The soldier was of the 10th Heavy Artillery he was led into the jail year behind his coffin, the drums beating the dead march- his hands were tied behind him, and he was set upon his coffin. Twelve men under Lieutenant Powell were the shooting party- six of the men with loaded muskets. I noticed after they had fired that six bullets had passed entirely though him near the heart of course he died instantly. About two weeks since, a colored soldier was hung at the same place, for the same crime.

Ludike and myself with our companies were the guard - the scene was repugnant; at the first fall of the rope, the man was only stunned, the rope having slipped. He was again taken upon the scaffold the rope was again cut, and this time his neck was broken. Do not think the chief duties of the 1st New Orleans is executing negroes.

Boothby remained in New Orleans after he was mustered out of service. He married a local woman, Celia O'Neal (of whom he writes frequently in war-time correspondence with family members), had seven children, and held a variety of positions in the city, including the office of Superintendent of Public Education. It was during his tenure in the final years of Reconstruction that there were several major violent episodes in response to efforts to integrate New Orleans schools – Boothby sought to maintain the status quo, urging black leaders to stop short of forcing black enrollment in white schools (Current 169). In 1900 Boothby attended the Republican National Convention as a representative of the 1st District of New Orleans. He later served as Superintendent of the U. S. Mint.

The Charles W. Boothby Papers include Boothby's descriptions of New Orleans during war, and official documents of his regiment, providing a unique record of the 1st New Orleans Volunteers. He fleshes out the Reconstruction and Redemption eras in the city as well, detailing cultural events (Mardi Gras) as well as violent political upheavals (Battle of Liberty Place). Both a witness to and agent of Crescent City history, Boothby died there in 1908.

1. "After Capt. David Farragut ran his fleet past the gauntlet formed by Forts Jackson and St. Phillip along the Mississippi below New Orleans, Confederate Gen. J. K. Duncan complained that his men were deserting the forts. 'Scores of them have been daily going over to the enemy and enlisting,' (Hunter 192).

Sources:

Current, Richard N. *Lincoln's Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.

Hunter, G. Howard. "The Politics of Resentment: Unionist Regiments and the New Orleans Immigrant Community, 1862-1864," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 185-210.

Image:

Charles W. Boothby, c. 1864

Boothby Family Collection, Mss. 4993

Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections

(currently under processing)