

### CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Louisiana State University and the American Civil War

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## Feature Essay

Winter 2010

**Jewett, Leah Wood** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Louisiana State University and the American Civil War.*

### Louisiana State University and the American Civil War

In 2010 faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the community at large will celebrate and commemorate Louisiana State University's 150th birthday. From its humble beginnings as a military academy called the Louisiana Seminary of Learning near Pineville, Louisiana, to its modern-day role as the state's flagship institution of higher learning, the school's history is intertwined with state and national history. It is fitting on this momentous anniversary to reflect on the institution's Civil War era beginnings.

West Point graduate and army veteran William Tecumseh Sherman answered the call for leadership of the new institution in 1859. Sherman had been involved in a number of unsuccessful businesses after leaving the military, and was well aware that there were few prospects available to him as a civilian. Hired as the school's first superintendent, Sherman was charged with arranging and supervising building contracts on the new campus, and for properly outfitting cadets. Once the facilities were completed, Sherman was to manage the academic and military aspects of the seminary, in addition to serving as a professor of engineering, architecture, and drawing.

Both the University Archives, and the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, housed within LSU Libraries' Special Collections, hold a multitude of documents related to the university's founding and general operations, in addition to correspondence related to William T. Sherman. A few pertinent documents are featured here.

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### **Board of Supervisors Records**

## **RG# A0003, University Archives**

*A circular dated November 17, 1859, announces the impending opening of the Seminary:*

The Board has, after much reflection determined to graft on this Seminary the principle of Military Discipline, after the manner and plan of the Virginia Military Institute...The Military System is not necessarily designed to make soldiers, but it teaches subordination to the laws and constituted authorities of the State; it exercises a wise and wholesome restraint over young men, at a period of their life when restraint is necessary and proper, and also teaches them the use of arms, and the science of organization, an knowledge of great importance to every civilized Government. Moreover, it does not withdraw their minds from study, but affords them healthful exercise during hours otherwise devoted to play, idleness or gossip.

## **William Tecumseh Sherman Letters, 1860**

### **Mss. 3044, LLMVC**

*Sherman writes to Board of Supervisors chairman General George Mason Graham. He discusses Braxton Bragg's acceptance of an invitation to speak at the Seminary, and provides an update on supplies procured for the school:*

Seminary

July 6, [18]60

Dear General,

I have received your note of yesterday with Col. Bragg's letter which I have read with great satisfaction. I had written him some ten days ago, urging him to come up if possible at an examination. I had no knowledge...that he had been invited to deliver an address...he writes as you know well and can speak his thoughts clearly and with emphasis, the best kind of oratory...if he do[es] accept I will be more than pleased.

Thought it will not be reasonable to expect too much of us at our first examination yet if the professors will use some little discretion then no doubt we

can satisfy all...As an examination will consume two whole days and nights and as our benches have no backs I have taken the liberty to order 12 dozen chairs not to cost more than \$12...from New Orleans. I am ...authorized and do this by a resolution of the board yet I should have procured your sanction first but I was not convinced of the pressing necessity till I experienced the necessity. I will have them in time for the examinations... Gov. Moore sent a fine lot of caps for the cadets and a basket of wine for the professors. 2

...Work on houses, fence, road etc. [is] progressing fast and I hope you will get notice of the appropriations for Houses and apparatus before examinations...

Yours Truly,

W. T. Sherman

**William T. Sherman Letters, 1860**

**Mss. 3253, LLMVC**

*Sherman writes to his father-in-law, Thomas Ewing, regarding his work at the seminary: 3*

S. L. & Mil. Acad-

Alexandria, Nov. 14, [18]60

Dear Sir,

Since my arrival here I have been very busy and have just completed putting into fine working order my 2nd lesson. And now have more leisure to attend to my more immediate interests.

The House built expressly for me is readily drawing to completion and will be ready for occupation by Christmas, should no political cause intervene. I have come to the conclusion that I ought to remove my family entire and permanently. To think of further change unless it is in its nature compulsory would be unwise, for I know there is no return to the army save as a Paymaster and then only at the foot of the list, giving a certainty of remote stations for a long time. This is the only Branch of service open to appointment from civil life. And even then a nomination by Lincoln will be subject to opposition by the Senate. There will be

some to thwart him in all nominations.

For myself I don't much care where I am. But I feel that Ellen would be more content in Ohio than anywhere else. And I would on that account have been willing to take employment on some railroad service there, and did make overtures to that effort last summer at Cincinnati without success. My plan here is honorable and respectable \$3500 a year salary, a fine new house of my own design, \$500 a year while I act as Treasurer and \$500 as superintendent of the Arsenal<sup>4</sup>. These two latter may at any time be lopped off.

I did think in the uncertainty of Political development it would be best not to make an absolute move till next fall. But now I find that no decisive movement will take place, and that it will be more economical to move this winter than to put it off another year. As arms have been deposited here, it would be imprudent to leave them and I think hereafter some of the cadets will be kept here as a Guard during summer. And as a matter of course I as Supdt [sic] should remain also. Therefore as I am in a measure compelled to stay here all the time it is better my family should be here and get acclimated. Of course I cannot afford to keep up two houses one here and one in Lancaster. Nor can I afford to have them travelling North [illegible] Summer. I think I can maintain them comfortably here and that is all. At the outset furniture will be costly but by economy I can send Ellen about \$300...I expect to require her to start Dec. 15. If she can dispose of her house & furniture she will need little or no help, but if she cannot do that she may need one or \$200. Which I can repay before March. I hope your judgment will confirm this my conclusion and that you will lend it the force of your sanction. The past two years have been a [illegible] struggle, and I need repose.

As ever with respect and affection,

W. T. Sherman

As the national crisis mounted, Sherman wrote to his father-in-law regarding his plans should Louisiana secede from the Union.

**William T. Sherman Letters, 1860**

**Ms. 3253, LLMVC**

*Sherman states his unwavering loyalty to the United States government and Constitution.*

Dec. 1, 1860

Dear Sir

Since I last wrote you I have observed a marked change in public opinion here- I was in town all day yesterday with a Dr. Smith, senator in the state legislature, who is the vice president of our board of supervisors and who is just from New Orleans. He is originally from Kentucky, but was an active supporter of Breckenridge in this state. He tells me, he was surprised at the tone of [illegible] in New Orleans which he described, and which I find corroborated by the editorials of all the leading city papers. All go to the effect that secession is a sure thing. The only questions being...when and how. Immediate secession, unqualified and unconditional is the prevailing sentiment. Dr. Smith will attend the session of the Legislature next week, the 10th inst. And says the calling of a convention will be the first and inevitable step – this will be he says unanimous – next the arming of the states. And putting herself in an attitude of defense, to this he says there will be no opposition. The convention will meet in January and the questions submitted to them will be immediate session or a general convention of all southern states, Louisiana to instruct her delegates to demand that the northern states shall repeal the laws averse to slavery and give pledges of future good behavior. Dr. S thinks it will be all the conservative men of this state will attempt, to carry this latter alternative against the adherents of the immediate secession.

...It occurs to me that Texas might withdraw from the Confederation resuming her status as before the Treaty. It might be that S. Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida might also fall out ...but the moment Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana declare an independence, sovereign and complete, with a right to control, interrupt or tax the Commerce of the Mississippi... Some tax and obstruction will result. And then up comes retaliation and war.

Now for myself I have told the Governor and all in authority that as long as Louisiana is a part of the United States I will serve her in my present sphere and [illegible] in case of domestic insurrection or molestation from without I will lead the cadets under my command. But that I will [illegible] no act inconsistent with my allegiance to the General Government: that as long as the form of

government indicated by the Constitution of the U.S. is in existence, that I will stand by it."

As I have no other means of existence now save this, I will stay here till the convention meets and does some act of treason. Then I shall quit – but where to go is a question. I cannot ...and must trust to the confusion that must result from the dissolution of this govt [sic] I must therefore change my whole plan, and leave Ellen where she is...If I leave here suddenly and unexpectedly, I will fetch up at St. Louis – Clay has been very sick, is so still, and I begin to have hope. Give Ellen the benefit of your advice as to probabilities [etc.] I am in good health but must have continuous and active employment.

As ever with respect,

W. T. Sherman

By all accounts, Sherman served admirably as superintendent, winning the respect of many influential Louisianans. In January 1861 upon Louisiana's secession from the Union, Sherman resigned his position at the Seminary. After a brief stint with the St. Louis Railroad streetcar company, Sherman returned to the Regular Army.

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During his short tenure at the seminary, Sherman and Virginia native David French Boyd became close friends. They discussed politics openly, and although the two were at odds on that topic, and each later served in opposing armies, they maintained a lifelong friendship.

Boyd was hired as a professor of English and ancient languages, eventually becoming the university's president. As civil war loomed, the fate of the Seminary remained uncertain. Boyd resigned to join the 9th Louisiana Infantry in 1861, later returning to the school. After the Seminary closed, Boyd became Chief of Engineers under General Richard Taylor's command. Captured by Louisiana Jayhawkers and "sold" to Union soldiers at Natchez in 1864, Boyd wrote to Sherman, who was in Vicksburg. Sherman complied with Boyd's request for transfer to a prison under General Nathaniel Banks' command, hoping for amnesty under an agreement between Banks and Taylor.

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**Walter Fleming Papers**

**Mss. 890, LLMVC**

*Boyd wrote to Sherman on April 7, 1864, thanking him for his intervention upon Boyd's capture:*

U. S. Transport, Polar Star

My dear friend,

I am pleased to inform you that I am momentarily expecting an exchange. We are just now lying in the stream off Alexa[ndria], La; and to-morrow morning we cross the falls. Some 500 Confed. prisoners are aboard, among them cadets Bringhurst and Woods (who went to West Point) and Ledoux Elgee, all of whom join me in regards to you.

I take this, my last chance, of again thanking you for your kindness in transferring me to Gen'l Banks' Dept., with-out which I should now be in a Northern prison with no prospect of getting home soon.

During my stay in New Orleans, as in Natchez, I met with nothing but the kindest treatment, and barring my capture within Confed. lines by a band of deserters and Jayhawkers (clad in Confed. uniform) which I think was illegal & improper, I have rec'd nothing but kindness, courtesy & respect from my captors & the federal authorities to whom I was delivered.

I am glad to see your promotion to the command of the Mississippi Dept – the second position, I believe, in the U.S. Army. Your good qualities as a Commander & a man, especially your contempt for politicians & their trickery sh[oul]d have entitled you long ago to such a place...

'Tis true that in so terrible a struggle as this many base wretches (the curse of every Country and every Cause) will desert to our enemies; but a brave and honorable man like your-self can have no respect whatever for such recreant and perjured villains. I claim your respect and confidence no less for being your open public enemy than your warm personal friend. I am the one no less than the other; and if I were now to desert the Southern flag...I would forfeit my



self-respect and be unworthy the countenance of every honest man North and South. ..Our people are becoming more determined every day and as recent reconnaissances have shown that there is no reasonable danger of our subsistence failing us, I assure you the "Rebellion" will never end as long as "Old Abe" shows fight...

Hoping to see you safe and sound after the war, when you shall have received your deserts, viz, the highest position in the U.S. Army, and requesting to be kindly remember to Mrs. Sherman and the gentlemen of your staff whom I lately met, I am,

Truly your friend,

D. F. B.

The two friends corresponded after the war, and over the years Sherman advised Boyd on various matters related to the Seminary. The latter visited the campus on several occasions. Boyd's remembrance of Sherman was published posthumously in 1910.

***General W.T. Sherman as a College President, by David French Boyd.***

**Baton Rouge, LA: Ortlieb's Printing House, 1910.**

**E467.1 S55.B8, University Archives**

It was the good fortune of the writer to be a professor under him [Sherman] for nearly two years...When the world knew him but little of him I looked up to Sherman as a singularly gifted man; his mind so strong, bright and clear, and original and quick, as to stamp him a genius; his heart, under his stern, brusque, soldierly exterior, the warmest and tenderest; of a happy nature himself, he strove to make all around him happy, and his integrity and scorn for a mean act were as firm as the rock.

The threatening of war disturbed him—pained him more, I really think, than anyone knew. He was constantly talking about it and deploring it, openly as well as privately. But his moral courage, his free, outspoken thought commanded the respect of the people of Louisiana. Besides he was so singularly efficient as chief of the State Seminary and Military Academy, and so universally popular, that there was no feeling against him on account of his political views—only a

general regret that so good and true a man differed from us.

Many other materials – published and unpublished- regarding Sherman, Boyd, and the history of LSU are available in LSU Libraries Special Collections. LSU Libraries will present an exhibition titled “Campus Chronicle: 150 Years of LSU” at Hill Memorial Library from February 22 – May 29, 2010. More information on the exhibition is available at [www.lib.lsu.edu/special](http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special). Visit [www.lsu.edu](http://www.lsu.edu) for more details on campus-wide activities related to the university’s Sesquicentennial.

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**Image:**

*First faculty of Louisiana Seminary of Learning, including William T. Sherman and David French Boyd, c. 1860*

*LSU Photograph Collection, University Archives*

**Notes:**

- 1-Braxton Bragg was a West Point graduate and friend of Sherman’s.
- 2- Louisiana governor Thomas Overton Moore.
- 3- Ewing was a family friend who raised Sherman after the unexpected death of the latter’s father. Ewing was the first Secretary of the Interior and served as an Ohio senator. Sherman married Ewing’s daughter, Ellen.
- 4-Federal arsenal at Baton Rouge.

**Sources:**

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