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CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Pondering Presidential Politics in Private

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Feature Essay

Summer 2010

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Pondering Presidential Politics...in Private.*

In the months before Lincoln's election to the presidency in November 1860, planters and businessmen, including those surrounding James Pirrie Bowman, pondered the growing political crisis cautiously among friends and close professional associates. Though short on detail, Bowman's correspondence gives modern readers insight into thoughts and concerns regarding the most public of politics, shared in private.

Born at Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana in 1832, James Pirrie Bowman graduated from Yale University Medical School in 1851. He married Sarah Turnbull, daughter of the wealthy Daniel Turnbull of Rosedown Plantation, in 1857. Bowman served as 1st Lieutenant of the 3rd Louisiana Cavalry, CSA from 1861-1865. After the war he returned to Louisiana to manage affairs at Rosedown, and Frogmoor, and Bayou Gross Tete plantations in Pointe Coupee Parish. Bowman died in 1927.

(Note: spelling, grammar, and punctuation reflect that expressed in original letters)

James P. Bowman and Family Papers, Mss. 1372, 1382

Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections

Amherst County, VA

July 21, 1860

James P. Bowman Esq.

My Dear Sir

I am in receipt of your kind favor of the 8th inst, your punctuality in writing is a good evidence of that energy, which should characterize every man of business, and the more particularly, one like your-self, blessed with youth, health, and vigor. If, by such example, you design offering me a lesson, tis no more than the just dues of one, who has in days now past and gone taught you so many.

You afford me a rather gloomy account of things in general, the more particularly in relation to your prospects on Gross Tete. The farmer, here too, and as far as known to me, is complaining of drought. In some sections tolerable crops of wheat have been realized – oats are good in all parts, and that without explanation. But corn and tobacco were suffering all kinds of exhaustion from thirst? I shall however make allowance for you knowing , as I do, your proneness to look only on the dark side of every picture. You have time plenty yet for rain, and a change more propitious to the production of sugarcane. Never murmur at the doings of God, for the same never fail to prove the most wise, healthful and advantageous to the true interest of his poor shortvisioned creature man.

I am sorry to hear of the severe afflictions that have been visited on your little daughter, Martha, but on the contrary, there is reason for gratification and rejoicing... that she has been mercifully spared to you and her mother, and further still, that it is well with her as it was, at the time of your writing.

I am more than pleased to find you taking some more than ordinary interest in politics. I think indeed tis time the Sovereigns were rising en masse, and in such capacity, asserting their rights. We now have in the field five candidates, or rather aspirants to the presidency, and not one of whom can the people find as wholly unexceptionable and true. I can not and I am frank to own, that if I had the casting of 20 votes, I could not determine for which of the five, I could safely vote. An especially sad dilemma, this, and I have a presentiment tho that there is enough of well-paired conservatism in our glorious country and happy [illegible] to preserve the Union , we are destined a position among the nations of the earth, which [illegible] hither to has attained. The old Dominion too has fallen into the common gulfs. She now stands for below what she has been, and as it were, into worse than disgrace and corruption. All here seem to have lost the true essence of Democracy. Brother is arranged against brother, nothing but division among the ranks is to be seen. Tis truly a “tangled hank Lord” as the man said, with his ideas confused at prayer, yes – a very mixed up business indeed, say I. At this crisis all I have to say is, that my sword is drawn, ready to be used against all

fanaticism, whether seen in Religion or free nigger sympathy. A vast deal of which, is manifest here, in my daily walks. At Lynchburg, the Bell ¹ rings loud and clear. At Richmond Breckenridge ² is in repute, while at Petersburg one days journey south of the Capital, Douglas ³ reigns supreme.

We now are in the midst of summer, and that the hottest weather I ever felt, the consequence is that of very little repose for me, who are in need of all to be had. I wish I was back in La, and had never come on to this, a dreary land, to me, I am however, living as usual a temperate life, Haven't taken a drink of ardent liquid since my sojourn in old faginnny ⁴, and can't say that I ever feel a desire to do so. Please write me as often as convenient, for the writing to, and receiving letters from my friends, is my meat & drink. My kindest remembrance to your wife and all my friends as you may meet them.

Very truly yours,

R H Tompkins

Baton Rouge, September 14, 1860

Jas. P. Bowman [Bayou Sara]

Dear Sir

Rummaging in my wifes writing desk today for an envelope I came across your favor of the 27th Sept ⁵ unopened and of course unread – my regret is equal to yours at this occurrence and I trust no bad consequences will result from the mislaying of your letter – I had thought it strange that I heard no further from you in regard to your bets with Buch– I have written to Capt Pilcher in accordance with yr wishes expressed in the letter, but going a little farther than my instructions in saying to Capt Pilcher that Mr Buch must not seek a loop hole on acct of your desiring to put up a note that he must telegraph me immediately in that case and steps would be promptly taken to place sufficient funds in Nashville. I fear the elections in Delaware, Florida and Mississippi will cause Buch to crayfish if he is not of the right stripe. We keep the excitement up in this parish but it is uphill work with me since the elections of the 9th –

Pennsylvania gone leaves me without hope to beat Lincoln – and Zeb holding an office at the hands of the Democratic party – I am restrained in

uttering my opinions for fear of injuring a party that has honored me so much. As for this Union in my opinion is "The silver cord is loosed and the Golden bowl is broken," and yet I must only whisper this...

I have most of my seed cane saved. Willie has scarcely any put up I fear – some say there was ice this morning – I am very apprehensive about the weather tonight – Pumpkin vines were frosted forty acres from the river today –

With kind regards

Yrs Very Truly

A. Barrow⁶

Monday morning – no frost last night.

Baton Rouge

September 23, 1860

James P. Bowman, Bayou Sara

Dear Friend

Willie sent me your letter in reference to bets made with Buch of Nashville.

I congratulate you on your good fortune, believing there is no doubt but that you will win the two largest bets. The third I fear you will lose, since there is a prospect that the Douglas men will generally vote the Bell ticket.

I have been at home for some two weeks and cannot help you further than to refer you to Capt M. S. Pilcher⁷ or to my father in law S. R. Cockerell, either of whom will be happy to do you a service.

Let me hear from you – Parties remain pretty much as formerly in this Parish – seventy five opp. We hope to find means to reduce it however – the crop prospect is reduced to an absurdity. I am very truly your friend

A. Barrow.

Nashville

October 24, 1860

Mr. Aleck Barrow

Dear Sir

Your favor of the 15th to hand – I called on Mr. L. F. Buch and made known the wishes of Mr. Bowman – he did not seem disposed to give the affair that attention, that many persons would think it deserved – merely remarking that it had been so long since the circumstance took place, that he was not disposed to have anything further to do with it – so I suppose he considers the matter at an end – you and I would call it backing square out.

I hope your crops, these high priced times will turn out better than you anticipate d- your friends are all well- Mrs. P & Lizzie join me in kindest regards to your Mother and Lady Effie – I should like to have your views with regard to Willies⁸ trade with Tom Sparks⁹ – I think it a fearful undertaking – we intend putting the Brass collar on Bell & Everett¹⁰ the 6th Nov.¹¹ & after the 4th March 1861¹² hang every Yanceyite¹³ in the Republic, unless they apologize.

Respectfully yours,

Merritt S. Pilcher

Baton Rouge,

November 2, 1860

Dear Jimmy

I enclose you Capt Pilcher's letter, just received – it speaks for itself and Buch's conduct is in character with what I feared. My cane is yielding badly but the sugar is of good quality-

The majority in this parish cannot be much either way, though our opponents still insist upon their 75 – we are leaving no stone unturned.

Very truly yours

A. Barrow

1-John Bell (TN), Constitutional Union party candidate for president in 1860.

2-John C. Breckenridge (KY), Southern Democratic candidate for president.

3-Stephen A. Douglas (KY), Northern Democratic candidate for president.

4- "Virginny" or Virginia.

5- Most likely August 27.

6- Alexander (Aleck) Barrow II.

7- Steamboat captain from Nashville, TN.

8- Barrow's brother.

9- Barrow's brother-in-law.

10- Edward Everett (MA), Bell's running mate for vice president.

11- Date of presidential election.

12- Date of presidential inauguration.

13-Term used for ardent secessionists who embraced the sentiments of the outspoken Rev. W. H. Yancey.