

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: War's Terrible Toll.

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Feature Essay

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Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: War's Terrible Toll.*

War's Terrible Toll

In December 2010 LSU Libraries Special Collections will present the exhibition "The Dear Ones at Home: Women's Letters and Diaries of the Civil War Era." On display through April 2011, this exhibition is part of the Libraries' observance of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Original documents on display represent a range of women in the midst of a variety of circumstances, discussing topics such as politics, religion, contributions to the war effort, courtship and marriage, life on the homefront, and slavery, among others. Contemporary and more recent works of fiction and non-fiction are featured, including several antebellum works by African-American women writers.

The documents described here are part of this exhibition, and each focuses on some aspect of death in the Civil War Era.

A familiar visitor to the loved ones of the mid-19th century, death came to call far too frequently during the war years. Initially, the bereaved strove to uphold prevailing Victorian mourning practices, but the sheer volume of the dead, soldiers' deaths far from family and under brutal circumstances, plummeting finances, and the blockade made the familiar rituals nearly impossible to continue. Political ideology had become manifest in blood, and those left behind tried desperately to continue living. Correspondents who had such news often sought to comfort a mourner with details of death and burial.

Letter from Celina Allain to Andrew Cannon, 1860

Andrew Cannon Family Papers, Mss. 4979

Cannon served as the groundskeeper at St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery in Baton Rouge from 1848 until his death in 1868.

Celina Allain, a self-described "poor slave woman," writes to Cannon to ask him locate her child's grave: "I wish to have a tomb built, and you will do a great favor to me, if you be so kind, to look for the grave and cross, and let me know if you find it, and what will the place of a tomb cost."

Letter from his mother to Albert Batchelor, March 13, 1861

Albert A. Batchelor Family Papers, Mss. 919, 1293

Batchelor's mother describes the details surrounding a relative's burial:

"...poor cousin Isaiah Norwood ...was carried to the Presbyterian Church Semitry last Saturday and there buried...his funeral was attended by quite a large number of our friends. I regretted not being able to obtain a metallic coffin for him. I had a very nice sypress coffin made and nicely trimmed with lace and covered with black velvet.

Letter from Etta Kosnegary to "Dear Mother & Sisters," November 12, 1862

Etta Kosnegary Letter, Mss. 2897

Lewis has been dead nearly six weeks and it seems like I never can become reconciled to my fate...I had his funeral preached last Sunday, by our presiding elder there was a large congregation out and He preached an excellent sermon. His text was the first chapter and 10th verse of the second epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy. ...while [Lewis] was sick his mess mates wanted to write to me and he would not consent to it he told them that camps was no place for a Lady... They had such a tyrannical set of officers they would not let him come home until they saw there was no chance for him to live....nearly all the ladies of the neighborhood have called on me but company does me no good I had rather be alone...

Letter from Amelia to Henrietta Lauzin, May 24, 1864

Gras-Lauzin Family Papers, Mss. 5

It becomes my painful duty to write you what by inquiry Pa learned about your brother...Captain Bowman...said that Paul had been killed in a fight on Bayou Lafourche on the 13th of July that he had seen him buried in a gentleman's yard about 12 miles below Donaldsonville...while digging the grave some citizens knowing his family was Catholic had requested not to have him buried deep as they wanted to bury him in the Catholic church yard. He was shot through the breast and died instantly, it was in the first fight in which he was engaged after leaving home...we would rather them so than fear to do their duty...

Letter from Amanda H. Sandell to Lemanda Lea, July 29, 1864

Lemanda E. Lea Papers, Mss. 704

Lemanda E. Lea was a resident of Liberty, Mississippi, and wife of Confederate soldier, I.G. Lea. Her brother, Wyley G. Martin was a private in Company D of the 18th Mississippi Calvary Regiment.

It is my painful duty to inform you that your brother Wyley is dead. He died last Sunday night before. Ma and Permelia started Mr. Quinn came home yesterday said he saw Wyley but did not see him die but said he saw a lady after he left that saw him put in the coffin, said he was put away decently...let us to bear our troubles with Christian fortitude.