

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "What a Price to Pay, for What?": Four Civil War Letters of Sarah Ker Butler

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "What a Price to Pay, for What?": Four Civil War Letters of Sarah Ker Butler.*

The letter that Sarah Ker Butler (1823-1868) wrote to her sister-in-law Margaret Butler on March 5, 1861, opened as any letter might at that time of year in the South, with a long description of her garden. Yet this was no ordinary spring, and as the letter unfolds, we learn that the sweet smell of camellias had already begun to mix with the stench of secession and fear of civil war.

Mrs. Butler, at the time she wrote this letter, was living on Le Carpe Plantation, her husband Richard Butler's estate near the small town of Houma in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. She originally hailed from Natchez and was a member of a prominent family of Mississippi planters and educators. Her grandfather, David Ker, an Irish immigrant, was "presiding professor" (chancellor) of the University of North Carolina when it opened in 1795. He also founded Mississippi's first public school for girls at Natchez in 1801. Sarah's father, Dr. John Ker, a graduate of the medical college of the University of Pennsylvania and owner of Linden Plantation near Natchez, was the chief benefactor of Mississippi's short-lived Oakland College. Her siblings William Henry and Mary later became distinguished educators, as did her grandniece, Sarah Towles Reed, a labor activist for the New Orleans public school system.

Sadly, education would prove to be one of the fatalities of the Civil War. In her letter of March 5, Sarah writes that she has had news from Natchez, but has not heard whether her brother "Willie" has "caught the military mania."¹ Willie was a junior at Harvard, where he was a member of the rowing team and Fly Club, and "was a favorite... in all phases of College life."² By the summer of 1861, he had dropped out of Harvard and returned south to join a Confederate cavalry regiment. (Although Ker went on to become one of Mississippi's leading educators, his lack of a degree prevented him from obtaining a teaching position at a university, and he was estranged from his college friends until near the end of his life.)³ "It is very natural and in one sense right," Sarah wrote, referring to

southerners' passion to defend their way of life, "and yet I cannot reconcile it to myself to see brother arming against brother, and it amazes me to hear people say it is in a cause exactly similar to that which produced the Revolution."

Sarah echoed these thoughts less than six weeks later, on April 16, 1861, in another letter to Margaret Butler, written after learning of the bombardment of Fort Sumter. The news left her feeling anxious and morally conflicted. She had recently read a sermon by Thomas Atkinson, Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina. A moderate on the issue of slavery, Atkinson had recently preached that the United States, and especially the North, had grown too prosperous and consequently corrupt. "Great prosperity has been the ruin of many countries, and of many men in every country."⁴ The South was therefore justified in cutting itself away from what many clergymen saw as a diseased body. The plantation elite, of course, has prospered as much as anyone, and Sarah Butler confided to her sister-in-law that she found it hard to have much enthusiasm for "our side" based on Atkinson's arguments. The country, she had written in her March 5 letter, certainly "had had prosperity so long that we needed a check"; as for the current state of affairs, however, "I think we should demand and defend our rights, but it seems awful to see brethren arraged [sic] against one another."

Her April 16 letter also provides a first-hand account of the stir the news of Fort Sumter caused in Houma, where the Butlers attended church. On entering the town, she and her husband saw soldiers, "knapsacks on backs.... There were 70 odd volunteers to leave the crossing that evening on a special train." She wrote that her "little village was in the greatest excitement" and that she had never had "as great a shock of news." The Butlers waited after church for the mail to come in so they could get the latest update on the events unfolding in Charleston. "This brought the news of the capture of Fort Sumter, and I don't think I ever felt more thankful than to hear (the most wonderful part of all) that no lives were lost on either side. I think Major Anderson (with trained gunners) must have tried not to hurt anyone."

Sarah's thoughts returned briefly to her garden in a letter of June 7, 1861. "What are we to do about getting plants now?" she mused. "Tho' I wish that was the worst of it all." She had recently received a letter from Natchez, listing people who were going off to the war. A Mr. Martin (probably William T. Martin) had raised a cavalry troop, which Sarah's own brother Willie would soon join. Martin had had saddles shipped from St. Louis packed in barrels and surrounded with tobacco "so that they should not be stopped." Butler also

reported that a lack of funds had prevented one group of men from forming a cavalry company, so they formed an infantry company instead. "The aggressiveness of the north has done more to reconcile me to things than anything else," she admitted, but feared that the national divide would soon extend to her beloved Episcopal church. "[W]hat a price to pay, for what?"

"It is the rarest thing for me to have the 'Blues,' but I must plead guilty lately," Sarah wrote in March 1863. She had fled her home in Louisiana following the fall of New Orleans and was now living in Natchez. The future seemed bleak. Dr. Stephen Duncan, one of Natchez's wealthiest planters, still clung to the idea of reunion, Sara reported; as for the war, he believed "it will end after a while, but not as we think... we will be starved into submission." The siege of Vicksburg was still two months away, but Federal troops were busily trying to secure the Mississippi River above Baton Rouge and take control of the mouth of the Red River. Sarah mentions the ironclad USS *Indianola*, which had managed to slip past Vicksburg and blockade the Red River, only to be captured on February 24, 1863, by the CSS *Webb* and the recently captured USS *Queen of the West*. Despite such heartening news, the general feeling was one of apprehension. "We are feeling extremely anxious about Port Hudson of course, especially since 2 vessels have passed the works, and I fear we shall not have the good fortune to sink them, much less to capture and use them, as we did the Queen of the West." She then reports that Federals at Grosse Tete, Louisiana, had sent back handcuffed contrabands (escaped slaves) who had come to them. "I think it likely they are tired of the Elephant," she commented. Sarah's father, Dr. John Ker, had been a vice-president of the American Colonization Society, so exasperation over the issue of slavery was no stranger to the family.

Sarah Ker Butler's four letters, now part of the Margaret Butler Correspondence in the LSU Libraries' Special Collections, have been included in *Civil War in the American South* (<http://www.american-south.org>), a collaborative digital project of the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries. Twenty-seven institutions have contributed to the project. LSU's contributions illustrate the ideological, political, and cultural origins of the Civil War with an emphasis on education, science, literature, and the arts in Louisiana. Digital images of 67 manuscripts are currently available, and the project will eventually include approximately 50 books, broadsides, and pieces of sheet music published in or related to Louisiana, circa 1850-65.

1 Sarah Ker Butler's letters of March 5, April 16, and June 7, 1861, and March 8, 1863, are part of the Margaret Butler Correspondence, Mss. 1068, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

2 *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, March 1904, 470.

3 Ibid.

4 Quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. 42.