

### Civil War Treasures: David F. Boyd: Eyewitness To Reconstruction

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## Feature Essay

Summer 2017

**Rasmussen, Hans** *Civil War Treasures: David F. Boyd: Eyewitness to Reconstruction.*

Faced with the challenge of reviving the struggling, impoverished, and lately shuttered Louisiana State Seminary of Learning & Military Academy after the Civil War, David French Boyd, a former Confederate colonel and now the school's superintendent, had good reason to appreciate the volatile political situation in Louisiana during Reconstruction. He often traveled from Baton Rouge, where the newly styled but still beleaguered Louisiana State University shared quarters with the Louisiana Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind, to New Orleans, site of the Republican-controlled state government. There he often witnessed thrilling political events and developments that he documented in two types of correspondence held in the Louisiana State University Office of the Chancellor records. The first are two series of telegrams Boyd sent from New Orleans to university officials in Baton Rouge during two particularly chaotic occasions: the attempted impeachment of Republican governor Henry Clay Warmoth in January 1872 and the Battle of Liberty Place in September 1874. Joining these anxious messages is a pair of letters David Boyd wrote to General William Tecumseh Sherman, whom he had befriended before the war, offering his commentary on the political situation in Louisiana following two contentious gubernatorial elections in 1872 and 1876.

The quarrel between loyalists of Governor Warmoth and the rival Custom House faction of the Republican Party finally came to a head in January 1872 when the latter bloc followed Republican Speaker of the House George W. Carter into an alliance with the Democrats for an ultimately unsuccessful conspiracy to impeach the governor. Fifteen handwritten telegrams sent to Baton Rouge from New Orleans, first by James W. Crawford, a benefactor of the university from Baton Rouge,<sup>1</sup> then by David Boyd, conveyed the palpable tension of the times. The witnesses described a frantic atmosphere of the governor facing arrest, partisan legislatures vying for legitimacy, federal troops coming to Warmoth's aid, the balance of power apparently shifting here and

there, riots feared to be imminent (but never materializing), and the university suffering without support from a legislature with no mind to do anything constructive. Boyd found the matter largely at an end by January 23: “Legislative matters quieting down considerably. Carter’s party will I think fall to pieces & the Legislature will no doubt be earnestly at work tomorrow, but as the fight is political not real, no one knows what a day may bring.”<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of that same year, Boyd wrote to William Tecumseh Sherman, then Commanding General of the US Army in Washington, giving an extensive commentary on the political situation in Louisiana. Boyd had known Sherman before the war when he joined the inaugural faculty of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning & Military Academy in Pineville, where Sherman served as the first superintendent between 1859 and 1861. They had maintained contact both during and after the war, so on December 27, 1872, Boyd did not hesitate to convey a vivid report expressing his thorough disgust over the recent disputed gubernatorial election. In his fantastic account, he described the outrageous political machinations of both sides, including purposefully deceptive ballots and blatantly partisan returning boards. Curiously, Boyd admitted a newfound sympathy for the roundly vilified Governor Warmoth, who had broken with the Grant administration to join with the Liberal Republican Party, suggesting a faint hope for Louisiana’s Democrats: “Many Democrats at once recognized in him and in his Republican influence their only chance, they thought, for freeing our State from Carpet-bag and negro rule. I was one of them, and was in that minority of Democrats that wished to run him for Governor, and finally put him in the U.S. Senate.” Nonetheless, too many Democrats opposed a possible fusion ticket, which kept Warmoth off the ballot and ultimately led to the state’s present abysmal situation “placing a vile, ignorant negro in the Governor’s chair ... and giving us for a Legislature the most degraded and depraved set of men (almost without any exception) of the same number that can be found, even in the State Penitentiary.”<sup>3</sup>

David Boyd had the misfortune to be in New Orleans trying to rescue the university’s precarious finances two years later when the White League defeated the Metropolitan Police and the state militia in the famous Battle of Liberty Place on September 14, 1874, briefly removing Governor William Pitt Kellogg in favor of the Democratic claimant, John McEnery. Already on September 10, Boyd sensed trouble brewing, writing William Van Pelt, the university’s clerk, “I telegraphed you again to-day there is plenty of money here; but with the whole population likely at any moment to get at each other by the ears, you may judge

how hard it is to get (borrow) it.” On September 14, everything blew up, sending a political crisis reverberating across the state and setting off a flurry of frantic telegrams between Boyd and Van Pelt:

September 14, 1874, Boyd to Van Pelt: “Can do nothing today. Much excitement. Trouble expected. Kellogg asked to resign and refuses. Tell Garig our situation.”<sup>4</sup>

September 15, 1874, Boyd to Van Pelt: “All business suspended. State House Arsenal and Public Offices in charge of Citizens. Kellogg’s Resignation rumored.”

September 16, 1874, Boyd to Van Pelt: “Did you receive my dispatch of Monday in time to stop payment? Answer. Penn fully in Power today but I fear Federal interference.”<sup>5</sup>

September 18, 1874, Van Pelt to Boyd: “The citizens have directed Major Bird of McEnery’s Militia to remove our guns today to a more secure place.”

September 18, 1874, Boyd to Van Pelt: “Presume the Citizens have acted for the best by all means do not let my Guns fall into the hands of the negrows [sic]. Say to Maj. Bird to use my Guns if ne[ce]ssary to repel any attack by negrows [sic] in Baton Rouge.”<sup>6</sup>

The restoration of Kellogg to power by federal authorities on September 18 put the affair to an end, but the animosities of Reconstruction continued to seethe for nearly three more years. On January 24, 1877, as the nation grappled with the dilemma of deciding the Hayes-Tilden dispute and Louisiana faced her own predicament with two claimants to the governorship—the Republican Stephen B. Packard and the Democrat Francis T. Nicholls—David Boyd once again wrote to General Sherman to apprise him of the political situation in the Bayou State. He recently had visited New Orleans for a meeting of the Board of Supervisors where he took advantage of opportunities to take the pulse of the city, which he offered as a starkly frank conclusion. Boyd’s letter revolved around a single observation: “Whether Genl. Nicholls is allowed to be Governor or not, the people of La. will not permit Mr. Packard to be Governor; nor will they allow his government to be organized.” He conveyed the popular frustration that had built over years of Republican rule in the state specifically, but hesitated to speculate very much on the national presidential contest. Instead, Boyd chose to emphasize

local disinterest in the brewing national compromise, remarking, “Yes, the thinki[ng] is that the presidency seems to hinge, in a great measure, on the electoral vote of La.—about which our people of La. care comparatively nothing. They w[oul]d prefer Tilden, but will cheerfully accept Mr. Hayes, if he be president. But let me tell you that the people of La. will not accept Mr. Packard as their Governor, nor submit to him at all, as such, under any circumstances!”<sup>7</sup>

In the end, David Boyd was right about the political situation in Louisiana, not that it took much acumen to read it. White Democratic resentment over Warmoth, Pinchback, Kellogg, Packard, and the rest always was plain to see and the fever pitch of resentment that Boyd observed in 1877 was undeniable. Regardless, his knack for being in New Orleans for Reconstruction’s more consequential moments has blessed us with a fascinating archive of documents among Louisiana State University’s other official records with which to appreciate that pivotal era.

David F. Boyd, by photographer: Washburn 697 Canal St. New Orleans, LA - LSU Libraries Digital Collections, PD-US

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<sup>1</sup> During the 1871-1872 academic year, J.W. Crawford donated to the university “[a] live coon; a live alligator; a lot of reptiles in alcohol; a large collection of insects in alcohol; and a portion of the skeleton of an Indian from Terrebonne Parish; a large vertebra of an unknown sea monster from Bayou Lafourche; and a large skull of an unknown marine fowl, found on Gulf Coast.” *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the La. State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana* (New Orleans: A.W. Hyatt, 1872), 79.

<sup>2</sup>Louisiana State University Office of the Chancellor Records, A0001, Louisiana State University Archives, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., box 2, folder 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, box 2, folder 47. Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback became governor of Louisiana on December 9, 1872, following Warmoth’s removal from office after being impeached by the House of Representatives. He remained in office for only thirty-five days.

<sup>4</sup> This probably refers to William Wallace Garig, a businessman and Confederate veteran of Baton Rouge who later served as vice president of the LSU Board of Supervisors in the 1890s. His daughters, Mercedes and Louise, were the first two female teachers at Louisiana State University.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson B. Penn was John McEnery's lieutenant governor. McEnery was in Vicksburg, Mississippi, during the clash, returning to New Orleans only on the evening of September 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., box 3, folder 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., box 3, folder 64.