

### Civil War Obscura: Madame Castel's Lodger

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## Feature Essay

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Winter 2019

**Keyes, Frances Parkinson.** *Madame Castel's Lodger*. Farrar, Straus and Company  
ASIN: B00005WBOO

In 2019, most folks know what fan fiction is, and this book definitely falls into that category. I have never read a book quite like *Madame Castel's Lodger*, a semi-factual, semi-fictional biography of Confederate General P. T. G. Beauregard. Digging up old books that once were popular may seem like an odd hobby, but this particular volume reminds me of why I do it. It is truly an homage to Beauregard and gives some insight into his character only possible if the writer is southern herself.

Frances Parkinson Keyes (which rhymes with “skies”) was an adopted daughter of the South. At eighteen she married Harry Wilder Keyes, who served a senator from New Hampshire from 1919-1937. They moved to Washington while he served in the Senate, and where her husband died in 1938. She wrote a number of magazine articles and her first novel while living in the capital, continuing to write prolifically throughout the rest of her life. In the 1950s she bought the historic Beauregard House in the Vieux Carre´ section of New Orleans. She became a fixture of New Orleans life, and the home she made is one of the central characters in *Madame Castel's Lodger*. So is the French Creole way of life, of which General Beauregard was a member.

It is her attention to detail concerning his French, Catholic, Creole antecedents that make this novel so compelling. Keyes consistently points out the differences between Beauregard and the rest of the Confederate officer corps, and it is these differences that she claims made the trajectory of the general's career so erratic. Usually it is Beauregard's grandiose battle plans that come in for comment as to why he was not the premier general of the Confederacy. Yet when Beauregard's ability to work with others and cooperate is examined, he comes off very well. Perhaps these plans could have presented the South with a more focused, less time-consuming way to win the war, if indeed it could be won. But when P. T. G. comes into contention with Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Braxton Bragg, his Gallic sensibilities—including the fact that English

was Beauregard's second language—run in direct opposition to the proud Anglo-Saxon backgrounds of his peers. This was something I had never considered before, and author Keyes, who immersed herself in the culture of Creole Louisiana, made very plausible arguments in defense of *le petit Napoléon's* failures to be chosen for leadership positions. It devolved that Beauregard's assigned duty was to keep Charleston and her harbor safe, and he did so throughout the war.

*Madame Castel's Lodger* also gives interesting insight into the lives of Confederate officers after the war. Many were in similar circumstances to those of Beauregard: broke, homeless, jobless, and unable to vote. Employment meant signing a loyalty oath to the Union, and that willingness to admit defeat came more slowly to some than to others. Many were depending on "the kindness of strangers" to put food on their tables and a roof over the heads of their families. When Reconstruction began to be implemented, Beauregard, much like James Longstreet, felt that the new laws ought to be obeyed. Eventually he became a minor champion for the rights of the formerly enslaved.

Frances Keyes went to great lengths to research her subject matter and ensure the historical, geographical, linguistic and even scientific accuracy of her writings, and her work is an enjoyable read in every sense. The Beauregard-Keyes House and Garden (<https://www.bkhouse.org>) in New Orleans is now a museum. It has been restored to its former glory, and Keyes own studio is on display, as are the restored gardens, including the small fountain that so delighted Beauregard and his second wife, Caroline.

This book, although written almost sixty years ago and fictionalized in parts, still has much to recommend it to both the casual reader as well as the modern historian. It can be easily supplemented by Gary Gallagher's *The Confederate General*, vol.1, Steven Woodworth's *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*, and Harry Williams 1955 offering *P. G. T. Beauregard: Napoleon in Gray*. Perhaps it is time for another look at this compelling man and his contributions to nineteenth century America.

*Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.*