

Civil War Treasures: Candid Complaints from a White Southern Teen in Post-Civil War Boston

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Feature Essay

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The digital copy of a diary kept by seventeen-year-old New Orleanian Minnie C. Hunt from August 1866 to March 1867 has recently been added to the Louisiana Digital Library.¹ In her diary, held at the LSU Libraries Special Collections, Hunt records her experiences while spending several months visiting relatives in Boston. Hunt expresses her love of sewing, playing games, and spending time outdoors, but she also discusses loneliness, family conflict, financial anxiety, and physical pain. Hunt's candid revelation of her own hardship makes the diary a particularly rich text for research on upper-class white women's lives at the close of the Civil War, particularly in terms of their challenges and the resources to which they had access.

Hunt positions herself as an outsider in Boston, opening her diary on August 18, 1866 with the declaration, "I have at last arrived in Yankeedom" (4). She frequently alludes to a feeling of displacement, writing, for example, that she enjoyed meeting Confederate officer Captain Shepard because it was "such a relief to see a live rebel after seeing so many Yanks" (8). The next day she confesses, "I feel a little homesick tonight" (9). She later describes attending a birthday at which "everyone seemed to have a nice time," but concludes, "I did not enjoy it very much but suppose it was because I was a stranger" (32). Throughout the diary, Hunt is aware of herself as a somewhat reluctant and sometimes unwanted visitor in Boston.

This sense of displacement is reflected in Hunt's relationships with her relatives, and particularly with her Aunt Kate, with whom she lives during much of her stay. She expresses hesitation about her relationship with Aunt Kate in her first entry, writing, "Aunt

¹ "Minnie C. Hunt Diary, 1866-1867," LSU Libraries Special Collections, Louisiana Digital Library, <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/lsu-sc-mchunt%3A1#page/1/mode/2up>.

Kate met us very kindly and I suppose was glad to see us” (4). Hunt later connects her uneasiness in her relationship with her Aunt Kate to their differences in regional and political affiliation, writing, “[Aunt Kate] is so kind, but I am afraid she is tinctured with Yankees as she seemed to be rather snappy at something I said about the trials” (10).² As the diary continues, Hunt’s conflict with Aunt Kate escalates. Approximately two months later she writes, “I know Aunt Kate does not want me but I am obliged to stay” and a few days after that she confesses, “had to keep [guests] waiting in consequence of a fight Kate & I had in which I upset a pitcher full of water” (41, 44-45). Hunt expresses appreciation for Aunt Kate’s hospitality, but political and domestic tension frequently colors their interactions and sometimes erupts into direct conflict.

Although Hunt’s uneasy relationship with Aunt Kate is a recurring theme, she indicates anxiety around many of her social engagements, and often reveals a rather moody disposition toward adult relatives that will likely feel familiar to anyone who remembers their teenage years. She has a particular distaste for her Aunt Kate Reed: the first time Hunt mentions her, she writes, “Aunt Kate Reed came before we had finished [dinner]. She was as soft spoken as ever and professed to be glad to see us but I know she was not” (7).³ About ten days later, she observes that Aunt Kate Reed is “disagreeable” and writes, “I don't know what I should do if I had to go there” (11). A month later she writes, “I went to call on Aunt Kate Reed but luckily she was out, so I was saved from that dreadful thing” (28). Aunt Kate Reed is not the only relative she tries to avoid. She confesses that she “cannot overcome [her] dislike” for Uncle Edward and writes of his upcoming visit, “I really dread it” (5). She also recounts this particularly petulant episode:

I took my [sewing] into my room and discovered Mr. & Mrs. Williams heading for the avenue. I did not want to see them so I ran for the closet and sewed there till I heard the bell ring when I shut the door. But Mary thought as she could not find me she would search in the closet for my hat so I was dragged out & had to dress after all. I was too mad to enjoy anything. It amused them all very much. (38)

² Hunt does not specify what trials she mentioned. Given the date and apparent controversy, she might be referring to *Ex parte Milligan*, the Supreme Court ruling that denied the Lincoln administration’s power of military commission jurisdiction, which was part of the administration's plan to deal with Union dissenters.

³ Note that Aunt Kate Reed is not the same Aunt Kate discussed in the preceding paragraph.

Unsurprisingly, Hunt often seems happiest when she has the house to herself: “I am alone in my glory” is a repeated refrain (9, 29).

Granted, not all of Hunt’s worries and complaints come off as so youthful. In one notable entry, she has received a disturbing letter from her father in Louisiana and writes, “The worm has come and destroyed the cotton so again our hopes of making something are dashed, though if we clear the expenses and do not get into debt I shall not care so much. It seems as if the fates were against our making any money and we have waited so long for a better time” (22). We should reserve our deepest empathy for the formerly enslaved people who were at this time receiving meager federal assistance and living under laws that enforced ongoing subjugation to their enslavers, but Hunt’s fear for her family’s financial future is nevertheless enlightening.

Hunt also deals with the more personal challenge of physical pain and documents her attempts at finding remedies. She frequently complains of debilitating headaches and writes, “I suffer such unusual dissipation” (7). During a particularly intense headache, she takes iron pills and applies a poultice to her face (31). Several weeks later, she writes that she “almost disgraced [herself] by laughing when [a friend] inquired after [her] health,” and in context her laughter certainly seems sardonic (50). Shortly following this social blunder, her days are consumed by dental pain that prevents her from eating. She eventually has the tooth extracted, and she writes, “Had my gums frozen but I declare it hurt me like fun” (56). Although Hunt’s pain often keeps her at home, she is able to seek the treatment that non-white people were systemically denied.⁴

Minnie Hunt’s 116-page record of six months in post-Civil War Boston provides insight into the social and domestic experience of a young white southern woman navigating an unfamiliar and often contentious environment. Her entries provide a candid revelation of the challenges and privileges of her particular position within a changing and complex nation. The Louisiana Digital Library now makes this text openly available for research, teaching, and general curiosity.

⁴ For a brief overview of the inadequate health care freed people received, see: Schuessler, Jennifer, “Liberation as Death Sentence,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/books/sick-from-freedom-by-jim-downs-about-freed-slaves.html>

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