"Civil War Treasures"

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Few men mattered more to American political life during the combined antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras than Charles Sumner (1811-1874), the passionate antislavery senator from Massachusetts who consistently riled the US Senate with his ceaseless baiting of the Slave Power between 1851 and 1874. Born in Boston, Sumner studied law at Harvard and practiced in his native city before embarking on a political career rooted on abolitionism. Originally a “Conscience Whig,” Sumner left his party in 1848 to help organize the Free-Soil Party, devoted to opposing the expansion of slavery into the western territories. His long tenure in the US Senate began in the spring of 1851 when the Massachusetts legislature selected him to succeed Daniel Webster, who had resigned his seat to become Secretary of State under Millard Fillmore. Following the dissolution of the Free-Soil Party in 1854, Sumner became one of the founding members of the Massachusetts Republican Party, standing out in its Radical Republican faction. A stridently committed abolitionist, Sumner became known in the Senate for his fierce antislavery speeches, one of which provoked the infamous Brooks-Sumner Affair, when Preston Brooks, a representative from South Carolina, beat Sumner nearly to death with his walking cane in the Senate chamber on May 22, 1856. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the war, he successfully prevented British and French intervention for the Confederate States of America. Sumner ultimately broke with the Grant administration over its proposed annexation of Santo Domingo in 1870, which eventually drove him to join the breakaway Liberal Republicans in 1872. He died while in office on March 11, 1874.
To commemorate the recent sesquicentennial of Charles Sumner’s death, this installment of “Civil War Treasures” features transcriptions of four of his letters held in the LSU Libraries Special Collections. Although not the most detailed of missives, they all date from significant periods of his tenure in the Senate: the imbroglio over the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Sumner’s assault at the hands of Preston Brooks, and his evaluation of an ever-worsening situation during the secession crisis in the winter of 1861.

**Sumner’s March 22, 1854, letter to Emory Washburn,** who had been installed as governor of Massachusetts only two months earlier, mused on the prospects of Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska bill, which had passed the Senate by a wide margin on March 3.\(^1\) Writing from the Senate chamber, Sumner considered its possible fate in a more hostile House of Representatives and emphasized the pressing need to have all hands on deck to defeat it.

My dear Sir,

I trust for y[ou]r pardon, while I express a hope that Mr. Scudder’s successor may start at once for Washington, without waiting for the official count of the votes, as soon as the result of the election is known.\(^2\) This earnestness is founded on the uncertain condition of the Nebraska Bill in the House & the importance of having the Northern seats occupied.

Some of our friends are sanguine that the Bill cannot be reached; but Mr. Cutting tells me that it may be reached within a week.\(^3\) The enemy are angry & wakeful & will resort to any practicable expedient in order to extricate it from its present position.

Some of the Southern men are determined to press it at all cost.

Revelations in Executive session of the Senate show a madness of Southern effort quite in harmony with the Nebraska plot.

Believe me, dear Sir,

very faithfully yours,

Charles Sumner

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\(^1\) Charles Sumner Letter, Mss. 2526, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

\(^2\) Zeno Scudder, a Whig representative for Massachusetts, resigned his seat on March 4, 1854. He was succeeded by Thomas D. Eliot, a Whig and free-soil supporter, who began his service about a month later on April 17.

\(^3\) Francis Brockholst Cutting (D-NY) served one term as a US representative between 1853 and 1855. He nearly fought a duel with Rep. John C. Breckinridge (D-KY) during the Kansas-Nebraska debates.
Two years later, following Preston Brooks’s assault on May 22, 1856, Sumner retreated to the Allegheny Mountain Health Institute, a spa perched atop Cresson Mountain in the Pennsylvania Alleghenies run by Dr. Robert Montgomery Smith Jackson, a graduate of the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia.\(^4\) Sumner arrived on August 3 and soon was greeted with messages from concerned well-wishers. **Among them was David Keyes Hitchcock, to whom Sumner replied from his mountain retreat on August 23, 1856.**\(^5\) Hitchcock was a Boston dentist and printer with a curiously varied publishing career. He initially printed works that suggested an affinity with Sumner’s politics, such as a second edition of *The Testimony of God against Slavery* by La Roy Sunderland, the noted Methodist minister and abolitionist, in 1836, as well as an anthology of writings on world peace the following year.\(^6\) Hitchcock turned from merely printing to writing in the 1840s, authoring a dentistry guide, a series of “teeth almanacs,” and an apologia in defense of the Russian political system under Tsar Nicholas I at a time when Russophobia was rife in the United States.\(^7\) It is anyone’s guess what Hitchcock wrote to Sumner, but it certainly must have appeared flattering toward the wounded statesman, as suggested by his favorable reply.

> My dear Sir,

> It was pleasant here away on the upper tableland of the Alleghenies, to receive the message you have sent me from ha__ved (?) & beloved Massachusetts; & I beg to assure

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\(^5\) Charles Sumner Letters, Mss. 2667, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

\(^6\) La Roy Sunderland, *The Testimony of God against Slavery: A Collection of Passages from the Bible, which show the Sin of Holding and Treating the Human Species as Property, with Notes, to which is added the Testimony of the Civilized World against Slavery, 2nd ed.* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836); *Obstacles and Objections to the Cause of Permanent and Universal Peace Considered* (Boston: Printed and published for the American Peace Societies by D.K. Hitchcock, 1837)

you of the joy I should have in mingling with the people in their great assembly at Newton. But this & all such things I must for a while forego.

Looking over the field from the quiet of my retreat, I see everywhere harbingers of success. The people are rising. The sectional party which now rules the country, inspired by slavery, & stepping each day still further in crime, is at last seen in its true character & must soon perish beneath the indignation of our awakened fellow citizens.

Believe me, very dear Sir,
Very faithfully yours,
Charles Sumner

Impatient for the action of Washington politics, Sumner left Dr. Jackson’s resort in early September, but his prolonged ill health prevented him from returning to the Senate permanently until 1859. Nevertheless, he was back to his old form by the time of the secession crisis in the winter of 1861. Writing from Washinton to a “Dr. Swan” in Massachusetts on January 6, 1861, Sumner clearly appreciated the magnitude of the situation as the states of the Deep South teetered on the brink of secession.9

My dear Sir,

I was glad to receive y[ou]r recent letter & to know that, notwithstanding your sometic affliction, you still regard public questions with your accustomed interest & with y[ou]r well-known habit of standing by the right.
We are on the eve of great events. This month will be more important than any since 4th July ’76. I pray that the North may stand firm.
It is probable that all the Slave States will take the vitiatory steps toward secession. It is possible that civil war may ensue, involving, perhaps, a servile insurrection & the extinction of slavery in blood. But I shall not be surprised if the difficulties incident to the present madness become so apparent at the South before spring, that they will be brought back. Starvation & anarchy will soon threaten them.
Pray keep Massachusetts (God bless her!) stiff. She must not abandon those principles which make her glorious. God bless you!

Ever sincerely yours,
Charles Sumner

8 This may have been Dr. Caleb Swan, who had been a member of the Free-Soil Party of Massachusetts with Sumner in the early 1850s. Charles Sumner: His Complete Works (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900), 4:3.
9 Charles Sumner Letter, Mss. 2646, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
About six weeks later, after South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas had seceded and began forming a united Confederate government, **Sumner** wrote a letter from Boston, which he marked as “private,” to an unknown recipient on **February 18, 1861**.\(^{10}\) Difficult to decipher on account of the very poor handwriting, he nevertheless appeared rather hopeful, even thankful that the crisis finally gave the nation an opportunity to address slavery once and for all as the ultimate cause of the country’s discord.

My dear Sir,

I lost no time in writing to the State Depart. after the receipt of y[ou]r favor. Mr. Mesh (?) had been already swept & a loyal citizen put in his place.

Everybody, including the supt. of M____ is now very hopeful. People think that we are to have some great success somewhere at M____, New Orleans, or on the coast. Everybody is anxious for Missouri & Ky.

Our weakness this far has been our timidity with regard to slavery. This is the giant whose shield we have been afraid to touch. **But it must be touched** & I have reason to believe that a majority of the cabinet is for this policy.

Meanwhile both England & France stand aloof, though they are as their sympathies & ______. It would be cheaper for them to ___port outright all their silver ______ than to take a single hostile step in behalf of the rebels.

Business here revived unexpectedly & people are becoming accustomed to the war.

I will value any facts from you if you will have the kindness to let me have them.

Ever faithfully yours,

Charles Sumner

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\(^{10}\) Sumner’s handwriting in this letter was very poor and some words are indecipherable. I have inserted blanks for these unreadable words. *Charles Sumner Letters*, Mss. 2667, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
The quick and crabby handwriting of this letter and Sumner’s almost desperate closing plea for information at a time when every scrap of news held tremendous value, betrayed the frenzied, fearful, and confused situation in the North as war approached. Nevertheless, despite the uncertainty and indecisiveness that hobbled the immediate northern response to the secession crisis, Sumner’s instinctive resolve to meet the gravity of the occasion by audaciously touching the shield of the giant of slavery displayed his irresistible inborn drive to engage any effort toward the cause of abolition, the north star of his career in the Senate.