

Civil War Book Review

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Civil War Treasures: Capture of the Crescent City

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Feature Essay

Jewett, Leah Wood

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Fairbank, Luther M. *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Capture of the Crescent City.*

New Acquisitions in the

Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections,

LSU Libraries' Special Collections

Letters, diaries, and photographs of Civil War-era soldiers and civilians bear witness to their unique experiences; these materials, along with artifacts, architecture, and traditions of song and story, establish a critical connection between past and present. Special collections and archives play a vital role in preserving these treasures for future generations.

In this new column, recently acquired and processed Civil War manuscript materials in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections (LLMVC) of LSU Libraries Special Collections will be highlighted. Recognized as one of the nation's premier repositories for materials relating to the antebellum plantation, Civil War, and Reconstruction South, the LLMVC includes the papers of individuals and families, records of plantations, merchants and financial institutions, and the records of political, social, and labor organizations. The most important of these collections relate specifically to the families and enterprises in the Lower Mississippi Valley, from Memphis to New Orleans, and are especially strong in the Natchez, St. Francisville, and Baton Rouge areas.

Why would a publication about Civil War books include a column on unpublished historical documents? We know what we know about the war from the documents left behind by those who experienced it; without Civil War manuscript collections, there would be no modern books about the Civil War. Newly acquired collections can offer important insights into known events or points of view, or, even more importantly, they can sometimes alter long-standing interpretations of the war. Whether a book is an edited collection

of soldier's letters or a children's book on the Emancipation Proclamation, somewhere down the line a Civil War manuscript collection was consulted.

But you know this already. Most everyone who is interested in reading books on the Civil War, and reviews of those books, has already experienced the thrill of witnessing a long-silent voice emerge from torn and yellowed pages penned in faded ink that brings history to life. We hope that both the seasoned researcher and the eager beginner will find these updates useful, interesting, and inspiring.

A Massachusetts Yankee in King Cotton's Port

Collection: Luther M. Fairbank Letters, Mss. 4909, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Size: 35 items.

Luther Fairbank was a farm laborer from Ware, Massachusetts. He enlisted in late 1861 as a private in Company D of the 31st Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. Fairbank's regiment escorted Union General Benjamin Butler into New Orleans, the first Union regiment to march into the city after its surrender in 1862.

Fairbank writes to his sister, Julia, while stationed at Camp Seward in Massachusetts, Mississippi (Ship Island and Greenville), and Louisiana (Fort Jackson, New Orleans, and Donaldsonville). He describes the Union bombardment of Fort Jackson in 1862, the arrival of Union forces in New Orleans and their subsequent looting of the post office, and he notes that civilians frequently beg the soldiers for food.

He reports the existence of Unionists in New Orleans and comments that the citizens are impressed with General Butler's ability to maintain order. He also mentions that Butler had a man (William Mumford) hanged for removing the American flag from the U.S. Mint, stripped the 7th Vermont Infantry of its colors for cowardice at the Battle of Baton Rouge, and employed slaves on a nearby sugar plantation. Fairbank claims that civilians support Butler's General Order No. 28 calling for an end to harassment of Union soldiers by women in the city. From both Camp Norwood and Fort Jackson, Fairbank mentions Confederate and New Orleans secessionist prisoners.

Fairbank condemns northern newspapers for inaccurate reporting, especially concerning the Union occupation of New Orleans. He frequently comments on the easy life of soldiers compared to that of farmers and describes fellow soldiers' attempts to escape duty by feigning illness. His letters further relate camp life.

Fairbank returned to Massachusetts after the war where he worked as a carpenter.

Pictured above: Undated letter (possibly dated June 1863) written on stationery featuring a printed map of New Orleans. Fairbank numbered locations on the map and provided a legend. Locations include the landing site of the 31st Massachusetts, their route into the city, and soldiers' quarters.

If you are interested in using the Luther M. Fairbank Letters or other collections in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, visit LSU Libraries Special Collections online at www.lib.lsu.edu/special for visitor information.