

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Politics and Piety

Leah W. Wood

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Feature Essay

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Politics and Piety

Though unable to vote or take public office, women of the Civil War era in some cases formed very strong opinions regarding contemporary politics and impending war. Influenced by ideas espoused in newspapers, preached from the pulpit, and discussed at home and among neighbors, women were exposed to all variety of commentary of the day. Some confronted political topics with fervor in their correspondence, some waxed pious, and still others avoided the subject altogether.

An example of this can be found in a letter written by Mrs. A. Davison to her granddaughter, Anna Maria Hennen-Jennings, regarding secession and possible civil war.

Alfred Hennen, son of John Hennen, a surgeon in the Continental Army, was born in Maryland in 1786. Alfred graduated from Yale and came to New Orleans in 1808 to practice law. He was a distinguished civil lawyer, a prominent Presbyterian, a professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Louisiana (later Tulane), and a director of the old Bank of Louisiana. He purchased a home in St. Tammany Parish in 1817 called The Retreat, and in 1820, married Anna Maria Davison.

Their daughter Anna Maria Hennen married Needler Robinson Jennings in 1843, and the two had five daughters. During the early part of the Civil War, Needler Jennings was a Major in the Confederate Army, serving as aide-de-camp to General Leonidas Polk at the battle of Shiloh. Jennings died in 1863 as a result of wounds received there.

Northhampton [MA] Feb. 14th, 1861

My Dear Ann Maria,

You will think it very strange when I tell you that only within a few minutes have I seen your sweet, though short letter in conjunction with the dear little ones 13th Jan. At the time I received the united expressions of their thanks so beautifully conveyed and expressed I was too sick to even read all at one time. I laid it aside and at another time took it up again entirely overlooking the page on which you wrote. This morning feeling pretty well. I thought I would write to the children (Anna's previous letter I did answer before getting so sick) and looked again at the letter and recognized you my dear child as making one of the precious group.

I regret exceedingly to know of your sufferings and confinement. I fear you have been too active and do too much, It will not answer to do so. I sympathize most assuredly with all the friends of Carey Clark. The decease of a young man just entering life, under any and every circumstance is sad. I did hope to hear that Mr. Jennings health was improved by his Northern trip. I still hope that it may be better. The same helpful, trusting, disposition I see you are blessed with and a blessing it really is, to feel that whatever may befall us we have a Father in Heaven who will not forsake us but will be with us in every trouble and sustain us. If we are his children he will make us what we ought to be; and sometimes it is through a very rough and trying path before we are properly disciplined and enabled to say, thy ways O Lord I will acknowledge and will receive all thy chastisements as mercies in disguise. O! how sweet to commune with our Heavenly Father when all earthly things are receding! I have been particularly blessed in feeling thus, in my last illness, for life seemed flickering on the socket. It has pleased God to restore me as far to health that I have been out on the gallery to walk two or three times but never out of the house since I entered it on the 4th of Dec. Mrs. Kirkland and her husband have both been kind and attentive and I have needed no good thing though it has been rather a sad winter or a very exciting one.

While writing Mrs. Kirkland informs me that she sees in one of N. Orleans *Picayune* that Mr. Jennings has not resigned his clerkship¹. They say it was not necessary as the court is dissolved, and they rather concluded that it showed some little or rather did not show such hot haste.

It seems strange that Louisiana has gone out of the Union. Seized the Forts, Arsenals, Mint, Custom House etc. Money in the Mint and all. Benjamin² has

been greatly exposed for stealing in Yale College. It will probably get in some of the Papers South.

To the sensible well informed people, all this Secession looks like playing Baby house. It has not seemed so to me, I have been trembling for fear of civil war.

The Abolitionists of the Garrison school has been delighted at it. Now they say the slaves will be free when the Federal government ceases to protect slavery. I have been sad and gloomy at the prospect of affairs. The conspiring to prevent the country of the Electoral vote and to seize on the Capitol and prevent the inauguration of Lincoln, has been a terror to me. For certainly then there would be civil war; but I breathe more freely now. The votes were counted yesterday without any demonstration by the conspirators and very probably there will be none on the inauguration day for Gen. Scott³ has taken every precaution against it.

If I were to say that the South has acted foolishly you would think that I am against the South, not so! The government will be maintained. The party going into power abide by a sentiment a principle and they will not yield it. They have no purpose to meddle with slavery where it is, but they will not let it go into new territory when the Constitution forbids it. I think this Confederacy with Davis as its President looks formidable. John Perkins and Charles Conrad I see represent Louisiana.

These doings are in accordance with Dr. Palmer's⁴ advice on Thanksgiving Day. To throw off allegiance to our government, and reconstruct one, on the Basis of slavery, to give to the civilized world as the cause of God and religion...Slavery, he said, was the best basis for society. I must not comment for I know your partiality for the Dr. but do think of it! Do you want this inheritance for your children? A clergyman here said this was the best thing that had happened to open the eyes of Northern people, for they had hitherto thought all Christians South considered slavery an evil and a moral wrong, and would get clear of it if they could; but to hear from a representative man, that it was holy, and righteous, and that he recommended overturning the government and fighting for it for the benefit of the civilized world was astounding.

My friends here are moderate anti-slavery people deprecate Civil War, prefer that the secessionists be let alone to take their own way, they say they will

soon get sick of it.

Where have I [illegible]! This subject here absorbs all others. Every night we have the Papers. Lincoln is on his route. How they guard him. How they greet him. What they are doing at Montgomery! At Charleston. All interests us. All these wonderful and unthought of movements. My Dear Ann Maria we [illegible] some purpose unknown and unforeseen by us. What purpose is to be accomplished is known only to Him who... all me conjecture one result. Some another and nobody knows anything about it.

You did not mention a little sack a very pretty woolen one for Edith. I bought three one for Edith particularly one for Elizabeth Caddy and one I told [illegible] to give to little Louisa Mathe's daughter. I shall not like it if Edith does not get it.

Anna and Alice are at school I hear⁵. My old and faithful friend Mrs. Timmons keeps me [illegible] up about the Tract 6 and Bible Society. It would seem they have both declined. On the anniversary of the Tract Society there were four persons only when there were usually thirty or forty. The Bible Society has had no meeting.

This is a scrawl: do pardon it for it must be so, or none. Tell the dear little ones I will write them a little letter soon. Kiss them all for me and May God bless them and you and your husband and all. Tell all the servants Howdye for me and believe me your ever affectionate Grandmother

A. Davison.

How much I wish you had some of the fine apples we have here. How little Edith would enjoy them!

I had a letter from Francis a few days since. She seems very happy.

1-Jennings was Clerk of the District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Louisiana.

2-This refers to future Confederate Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin. There is a debate as to whether or not Benjamin was expelled from Yale College and if so, what the cause of the expulsion was. However a 2008 online exhibition presented by the Yale University Library describes Benjamin as a Yale graduate.

(http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/exhibits/elms/19th_item12.html)

3-General Winfield Scott.

4-This is a reference to Dr. Benjamin Palmer's Thanksgiving Sermon, delivered at the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans on November 29, 1860, quoted in part below:

My servant, whether born in my house or bought with my money, stands to me in the relation of a child. Though providentially owing me service, which, providentially, I am bound to exact, he is, nevertheless, my brother and my friend, and I am to him a guardian and a father. He leans upon me for protection, for counsel, and for blessing; and so long as the relation continues, no power but the power of Almighty God shall come between him and me. Were there no argument but this, it binds upon us the providential duty of preserving the relation that we may save him from a doom worse than death...It is a duty which we owe, further, to the *civilized world*.

As an elder in the Presbyterian church, Alfred Hennen knew Palmer personally; the latter delivered the sermon at Hennen's funeral service in 1870.

5-Several of the Jennings children attended Pelham Priory School for Girls in New York.

6-American Tract Society, of which Hennen was a member. The focus of the group was publication and distribution of Christian literature and moral guides.