

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "I Hope You Will Learn to Be a True Patriot": A Southern Planter's Letters to His Son at Harvard

Michael Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Taylor, Michael (2013) "CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "I Hope You Will Learn to Be a True Patriot": A Southern Planter's Letters to His Son at Harvard," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.1.03

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss1/3>

Feature Essay

Winter 2013

Taylor, Michael *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "I Hope You Will Learn to be a True Patriot": A Southern Planter's Letters to His Son at Harvard.*

When John Walworth dropped off his seventeen-year-old son Douglas at Harvard College shortly before the beginning of fall term 1850, the students and faculty there had just endured one of the most scandalous events in the school's history. John White Webster, a professor of chemistry and geology, had recently been convicted of the gruesome murder of fellow professor George Parkman, a member of one of Boston's wealthiest families. To try to cover up the crime, Webster had dismembered the body and thrown parts of it into the furnace and toilet in his private laboratory. Parkman's torso, too big to burn, was found locked in a chest, half of a charred leg shoved up inside of it. A horrified judge and jury wasted no time in sentencing Webster to death.

John Walworth was on his way home to Natchez, Mississippi, when he heard news that Dr. Webster had gone to the gallows¹. As terrible as the professor's actions were, however, they must have seemed like only the most extreme example of how the nation was becoming more and more uncivil—North pitted against South, white against black. Although that year saw the Compromise of 1850, the national rift continued to widen, and little more than a decade would pass before the whole country became embroiled in a four-year killing spree arguably no less heinous than the Webster-Parkman murder case. Even after the slaughter came to an end, another madman, John Wilkes Booth, would choose to settle his grievances with a pistol rather than civilized debate. Perhaps sensing this alarming trend toward violence, Walworth emphasized in one of his first letters to his son after leaving him at Harvard—a letter now part of the LSU Libraries Special Collections—that he should “study ease of manners and a kind and conciliatory deportment as well as your books”².

Admittedly, it was a challenging time for southerners like the Walworths to be civil to their Northern neighbors. Abolitionists, after all, were jeopardizing

their very livelihood. A New Yorker by birth, John Walworth had joined the ranks of prosperous Mississippi planters, owning, by the 1850s, about 200 slaves and two plantations totaling more than 3,000 acres, plus some 1,400 acres of "wild land" in Arkansas³. Although he disliked abolitionists, he felt strongly that he owed his prosperity to the Union and scoffed at the idea of secession, which, to his dismay, his son Douglas was in favor of. Harvard, in fact, was part of his plan to teach Douglas something about patriotism. If the boy got nothing more out of his time there than a lesson in good citizenship and getting along with other people, his father believed, he would be the better for it.

"Disunion ought not to be thought of," Douglas was advised in another letter. The South had gained much in the Compromise of 1850, which included the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. Daniel Webster, "the first man of all New England," was "still doing all in his power to allay sectional differences, and when we have all the great and good on our side, we may look with contempt and listen in silence to such petty politicians as raise these little neighborhood meetings. Therefore never allow yourself to get warm or in the least excited on this subject. I would not talk on it, but refer such (as wish to make themselves conspicuous by broaching it) to the Constitution of the United States and say, that is all we ask, and if they violate it, they are covenant breakers; and with such you wish to have nothing to do"⁴.

Covenant breakers on the other side of the aisle, however, were just as bad, in Walworth's opinion, and the legislature back at home in Mississippi was rife with them. Led by the state's fire-eating governor and fellow New York transplant John Quitman, the "ultras," Walworth believed, shared the blame with "rabid fanatical abolitionists" for the worsening sectional crisis. "This clique is equally contemptible in numbers and not much better generally in character"⁵. Walworth was also suspicious of filibustering schemes—attempts to take over Latin American countries and create a Southern, slaveholding empire—and he discouraged his son from getting involved in them. When, in 1851, Narciso López's failed invasion of Cuba ended in the execution, by the Spanish, of his Southern cohorts, Walworth showed little sympathy, calling the men "deluded" and the whole affair a "wild quixotic expedition"⁶.

"I hope you will learn to be a true patriot, to 'know no South, no North, but my country and my whole country,'" Walworth wrote to his son on yet another occasion, quoting the Great Compromiser, Henry Clay⁷. He believed Northerners ought to follow the same advice. While part of his reason for

sending Douglas to New England for an education was to form "acquaintances and friendships at school which will be lasting" and to learn to respect different points of view, few Northerners, he found, were returning the gesture. "[T]he Northern youth knows nothing of the South and her institutions, nor of her wants" ⁸.

In the end, of course, Walworth's best hopes for further compromise came to nothing. Douglas's education, too, did not turn out as expected. Despite having shown promise as a student, the young man was more interested in girls, clothes, the theater, and trips to New York and Philadelphia. A combination of ill health and homesickness compelled him to drop out of Harvard after his first year. He transferred to Princeton, but felt even less at home there and soon returned to Natchez. By the time he signed his name to the roll of a Confederate infantry regiment, his father's good advice to him as a teenager must have seemed a thing of the past. "When the people of the North and South know each other and their duties to each other better," his father had written a decade before, "we shall have more quiet times and better feelings" ⁹. We are left to wonder whether Douglas, during his years at war, ever reflected on the wisdom of those words, now that he was encountering his former schoolmates once again, not in the classroom, but on the battlefield.

The Walworth Papers are one of several collections in the LSU Libraries Special Collections containing materials related to Southerners at Northern universities in the mid nineteenth century. See also the James Foster, Randall Lee Gibson, Robert O. Butler, John Christian Buhler, Henry D. Mandeville, and John C. Burruss manuscript collections.

Michael Taylor is Assistant Curator of Books, LSU Libraries Special Collections

Notes:

¹ John P. Walworth to Douglas Walworth, Sept. 2, 1850. Douglas Walworth and Family Papers, Mss. 2471, 2499, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. All letters cited below are from this collection.

² Sept. 8, 1850.

³ Mar. 24, 1851.

⁴ Nov. 12, 1850.

⁵ Nov. 1850.

⁶ Sept. 15, 1851.

⁷ Nov. 1850.

⁸ Apr. 11, 1851.

⁹ Nov. 12, 1850 (addendum, Nov. 18).