

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Battle of the Books: Fates of the Printed Page in the Civil War

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Battle of the Books: Fates of the Printed Page in the Civil War.*

The most horrific aspect of the Civil War was, of course, the 600,000 deaths that resulted from it. Many other terrible things, however, befell the nation during those years, not least of which was the destruction of books and libraries.

Several copies of what is now one of the most valuable books in the world—the spectacular elephant folio edition of John James Audubon’s *Birds of America*—were destroyed during the war. The copy that belonged to the Hugger family of Limerick House near Charleston, South Carolina, fell victim to Union troops under General E. E. Potter. After the men had finished ransacking the house, they sat down to dinner, but rather than eating it off of Mrs. Hugger’s china, they wrapped it in pages torn from Audubon’s masterpiece. Another copy of the work was owned by Eli Geddings, a Charleston physician. Fearing the city would be destroyed, he sent his library to Columbia, the state capital, where, despite his precaution, it went up in flames along with the rest of the city in February 1865 during General Sherman’s occupation. A third copy is believed to have perished under unknown circumstances somewhere in Charleston before the war ended ¹.

It is doubtful whether Sherman ever learned of these sad events. If he had, he would have been appalled. The general was, after all, an intelligent, literate man who, up until just a few months before the war’s outbreak, had been the superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy, the forerunner of Louisiana State University. In 1859, shortly before the school opened, Sherman moved from his native Ohio to the little town of Pineville deep in the central Louisiana woods and began acquiring books for the use of his nineteen students and five professors. When summer came, he escaped the stifling heat by going to New York, where he purchased approximately 400 additional volumes from bookseller David Van Nostrand. The books range from Friedrich Schiller’s reflections on the Thirty Years’ War to William Hickling

Prescott's histories of Latin America; from Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos* to the poetry of John Milton. He even took care of mundane things like dictionaries and encyclopedias and left directions about how the volumes should be bound².

Although Sherman promptly tendered his resignation from the seminary when Louisiana tendered its own resignation from the Union in January 1861, he never gave up on the school. During the Red River Campaign, he gave orders to General Nathaniel Banks that the campus be spared. Nonetheless, its buildings had little if anything left in them by the end of the war, having been used by troops on both sides of the conflict. Sherman did what he could to help recover as many books as could be found, and duplicates were transferred from the State Library.

Just as the collection was being put back together, however, tragedy struck. On October 15, 1869, a fire destroyed the Seminary, including the 7,000-volume library. Sherman came to the rescue again, sending books from his own library and whatever else he could scrape together in Washington. "I have a bag of books, sent me from the Congress, which I have not even opened, and I have ordered it sent to you," he wrote in May 1873 to David F. Boyd, his successor as superintendent. "If of little value, they will help to fill your shelves"³.

Not all was doom and gloom when it came to books during the Civil War. Although the war put a stop to the flow of textbooks from the North, Southerners did what they could to fill the need. In Louisiana, despite severe paper shortages, Governor Henry W. Allen ordered the printing of the *Louisiana English Grammar* on paper that may have been smuggled in from Mexico. His secretary, Edmund Halsey, edited the work. In Mount Lebanon, Professor William W. Womack used Noah Webster's *Elementary Spelling Book* as the model for his *Confederate Speller*. It was intended to be the first in a series of books "by which it is proposed to supplant an unwholesome supply from alien and inimical sources"⁴.

To learn more about these materials, visit the online exhibition Louisiana for Bibliophiles: A History of Reading in the Bayou State

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Notes:

¹ Waldemar Fries, *The Double Elephant Folio: The Story of Audubon's Birds of America*. Amherst, Mass.: Zenaida Publishing, 2006. 158, 186.

² "List of Books bot [bought] for Prof. Boyd by W.T. Sherman of D. Van Nostrand, New York Aug. 20. 60 - to be Shipped about Sept. 25." Louisiana State University Office of the Chancellor Records, A0001, Louisiana State University Archives, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

³ William T. Sherman to David F. Boyd, May 20, 1873. David French Boyd Papers. William T. Sherman Letters, Mss. 890, 893, 3362, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

⁴ Roswell C. Smith, *Louisiana English Grammar*. Shreveport: Printed at the Office of the South-Western, 1865; W. W. Womack, *The Confederate Speller*. Mount Lebanon, La.: Printed and for sale at office of Louisiana Baptist, by W. F. Wells, 1864.