

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Blue BayouNew York Private Participates in Banks Expedition

Leah W. Jewett

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Feature Essay

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Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Blue BayouNew York private participates in Banks Expedition.*

Collection: Abraham Garrison letters, Mss. 4035, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Size: 20 items. New Acquisitions in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections LSU Libraries' Special Collections

Abraham Garrison was a private in the 161st New York Infantry, Company A. The regiment was organized in 1862, and took part in the Banks Expedition. Married with two young children, Garrison spent the duration of his service in Louisiana. Though the Abraham Garrison letters make up a relatively small collection (20 documents û most of which are written from Garrison to his wife, Lydia), they present a poignant vignette of the war on a personal scale.

Garrison writes to his wife, Lydia, about frequent illness among the troops and notes the presence of starving children and adults in Baton Rouge:

This city has no one in it except some few old white men and women but negroes by the thousand, starved and naked and bare foot. White folks the same--they have nothing except a little corn meal and that is one dollar a peck...but what hurt me the worst was to have the little children to run up to me and ask me for some hard crackers. I gave as long as I had any. That made me think of home (December 22, 1862).

In a clear example of racism among the Union ranks, Garrison writes to his friend, Robert, about his disgust for black Union soldiers, and mentions a rumor that Confederate forces at Port Hudson have sent black soldiers to attack the Union regiments just south of the area.

They have been fighting-- this is the third day. Down the river about nine miles we could hear them run plain. We look for our turn next. The rebels are plenty here. I was on picket the other night and in the morning we saw about 35

of guerillas a looking for pickets but they didn't get no shots nor we either. We have a large army here, there will be big tearing about here or somewhere's else before long, I can smell it now. But let it come, we are here first. But the worst of all we have two negro regiments, that makes me sick. If our folks can't lick the South without negroes they had better give it up. But after all the South has got four regiments of negroes that they have sent down from Port Hudson to attack us...there is about 4000 of them here now and I would like to see all of them in the middle of the river (February 10, 1863).

The letters include pleas for information on livestock and crops at home, as well as instructions to his wife on how to manage the property and the harvest. Garrison repeatedly insists that he does not owe money to neighbors who seek to take advantage of her financially while he is away:

You spoke to me about Owen Borden's boy--I don't owe him anything. Don't you pay everything that comes up because they think that they have a good chance to plunder now because I am gone. They all would take the last cent from you. Don't you pay a cent to anyone till you hear from me. That 30 acres of land that Adison bought--don't you pay a dime on it for I done more work on that than all the stuff ever come to... Adison ain't as honest as I took him to be...Lydia, you had better sell what little you have got left before they steal it all from you (February 13, 1863).

Outraged at the poor treatment of privates, Garrison laments the war and those who profit from it, When I think it all over we are used worse than the negroes that are here (February 13, 1863).

It is very sickly here now, the hospitals are full but they die off so that it gives others a chance to come in. When they die they throw them out on a stoop and they lay there [wh]ile a cart comes along and takes them away. A man has got to have a heart like a stone to stand what he sees...

...I want this war stopped as quick as possible for I think it is the most corrupt thing that I ever knew. It is nothing but a speculation for the big officers. They don't try to do anything. They don't care for a man['s] life then I would for a chicken (March 5, 1863).

This war is the greatest humbug that ever was. It's to make money on negroes. The officers don't care; they live well and plenty of whiskey and the

poor privates has to suffer. I wish the whole of them was in the Mississippi (April 17, 1863).

With assurances of his eminent recovery, Garrison describes a recent illness:

I caught a heavy cold. I have been in the hospital ever since about five weeks but don't be alarmed. I am coming up all right again. I shall go to camp in a few days. I thought I would not lie to you, I would tell you just as it was. I would of wrote to you before but I thought I wait till I got about well first. In this hospital lice is no [illegible]; they are so thick on some of them that it puts me in mind of [peasants?] carrying their eggs off. I caught two fine fat fellows on me. They die off fast here they can hardly get lumber enough for coffin (April 17, 1863).

Several weeks later Garrison describes his experience amidst the Siege on Port Hudson:

Lydia my dear we have been a fight[ing] about eight day and it is awful. We all lay about three hundred yards from the fort. We fight every day. We have not [captured] the fort yet but we expect to have it every day. this I write on the battlefield. We have lost a number of men out of our regiment now and wounded...We have a large force about 40 thousand and artillery...Port Hudson is considered one of the hardest places we have to take. ...Lydia you know a man in this place can't think of much the cannon is a roaring so that you can't hear nothing...the bullets fly so that we have to lay behind trees to save our heads (June 2, 1863).

We made a charge on Port Hudson on the 13th but was repulse[d] and such a slaughter I never saw but we held our old ground yet there will be another charge today or tomorrow. This will make three charges. We have been fighting for the last three or four weeks. Banks will never leave till it fall. They have so much of the advantage of us (June 16, 1863).

And finally, Garrison writes of victory:

This battle is one of the hardest battle that has been fought in this department, so they say....we have got Port Hudson at last and we all marched through it and it was a sight to see. What a stronghold they had there. We was sent from there to Fort Butler that is between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Fort Butler is a very nice little fort close to the river. The Rebs attacked them there and mister Rebs got licked nice. Lost 1000 men I suppose that was what sent us there. We landed here on the 10th of July. We laid here over night and the next morning marched up the bayou about 5 miles and drove the Rebs before us. We made a stand over night and the next morning the fight commenced they had a large force and they was too much for us but now back to the 161st. Until the order came fall back, we fought all the way back. We had a small force. They had about 14 thousand men. Our regiment lost about 73 men killed, wounded, and missed. Our regiment is a getting small now, we have about 200 men now. ...the damn Rebs left, we don't know where they have gone nor don't care. We have got the old Mississippi clear. There was a boat came down the other day from St. Louis it made great hurrah (July 17, 1863).

On January 14, 1863, Garrison wrote to his wife Lydia about his deepest fears:

But hope that God may spare my life to come back home. I never want to be laid here. I want to be laid where my family is laid but I am too far from home. I am more afraid of sickness then I am of bullets.

Less than two months after Garrison's last letter on August 9, 1863, a message was sent to Lydia from the General Hospital in Baton Rouge. Garrison had died of typhoid fever and dysentery on September 17, 1863; he was buried in Baton Rouge at a site later designated as a National Cemetery.

Note: Spelling and punctuation have been standardized in the Garrison letters for this article.

About the photographs:

On the cover:

Baton Rouge National Cemetery postcard, ca. 1906. Leroy S. Boyd Family Papers, Mss. 99, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

With the column:

Gravesite of Abraham Garrison, Baton Rouge National Cemetery.

Leah Wood Jewett is the Exhibitions Coordinator and Civil War Manuscript Archivist at Hill Memorial Library, LSU Libraries' Special Collections.