

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Prompt succor Boston Nun Offers Comfort to New Orleans Prisoner

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Feature Essay

Winter 2006

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Prompt succor Boston nun offers comfort to New Orleans prisoner.*

New Acquisitions in the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries' Special Collections

A Sailor's Life

Collection: Robert A. Mullen correspondence, Mss. 4140, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. Size: 16 items.

Robert A. Mullen of New Orleans, La., was an officer in the Confederate Navy. Mullen was captured in 1863 off the coast of Portland, Maine, and was imprisoned there for several months. He was later transferred to Fort Warren prison in Boston, Massachusetts, where he remained until 1865. The 1870 census lists Mullen, age 30, as a clerk in New Orleans; wife Eliza, age 23, and an infant are listed as well. The collection includes letters from Mullen to Eliza Brenan of New Orleans, La., in which he describes his emotional state while in prison. He reports that he is treated well by his captors, but that he is not permitted to discuss anything in his letters other than "domestic matters." A letter written from Fort Treble prison, Portland, Maine, on July 1, 1863, describes in detail Mullen's experiences in the navy before his capture. He mentions running the blockade off of Mobile Bay, and capturing the ships Clarence, Tacony, Archer, and Revenue. "So they have taken us prisoners and have me now in a small dungen... Miss Eliza I do not no what they are going to do with me. they talked mighty strong of hanging every one of us. there is another rumer that they are going to send us to Fort Warren Boston." [July 1, 1863] "Oh I am confined in a cell all alone Where I am surrounded by Iron and Stone No one to come near me and whisper liberty But still I am sighing for my sweet country." [October 9, 1863]

While imprisoned Mullen also engaged in correspondence with Sister Ann Aloysius, one of two nuns employed by the Caritas Carney Hospital, South Boston. The charity hospital was established in 1863, and was funded by the Catholic Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul.

The letters from Sister Aloysius to Mullen indicate that she supplied him with coffee and sugar, worked to have a doctor examine him, and to have him released. She offers encouraging words to the enemy prisoner about his friends' efforts on his behalf, and the promise that God will always be with him. "You must not yield to depression no matter what the trials are that you have to submit to - that would not better matters. Put all your confidence in God- He will take care of you..." [October 24, 1864]

The collection is potentially useful to those interested in Confederate naval history, as well as those researching the role of women and charities affiliated with the Catholic Church during the war. The letters provide interesting facts - envision a naval historian using Mullen's letters to corroborate dates from other related accounts of blockade runs and destruction of merchant vessels or a scholar of charitable campaigns in the Civil War counting Caritas Carney hospital for inclusion in a statistical analysis of church-related efforts.

More importantly, though, the letters in the Mullen collection speak to the humanity of both a captured Confederate sailor and the Boston nun who took him under her wing. From this collection emerges the story of a young New Orleanian, far from home at a time of great uncertainty and fear, and the aid afforded him by a kind stranger. His circumstances resonate with the modern researcher, especially now in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Reading these letters today, one wonders what our letters will reveal to future generations about our willingness to help our troubled neighbors, even those we label "enemy."

If you are interested in using the Robert A. Mullen Correspondence 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.

(Image of Fort Warren, Boston, from Harper's Weekly, December 7, 1861, p.1).

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