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Civil War Treasures:

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Feature Essay

Fall 2007

Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES*: .

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

"South" of the Border

Contract provides window into unofficial Confederate trade hub

Collection: Union Refugee Transport Contract, Mss. 4007, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

Z. S. Doane agreed to pick up passengers from a stop along the Rio Grande and deliver them to New Orleans for a reasonable fee. The contract outlining the deal is simple enough:

Articles of agreement, made this fifth day of August A.D. 1863 between L. Pierce Jr., US Consul at Matamoros and Z. S. Doane, master of Am Schr [illegible] witnessed; That the said Z. S. Doane agrees to take on board his Schooner outside of the bar of the Rio Grande any number of passengers that the said Pierce may wish, and transport them tot he Quarantine below New Orleans and to received from the Chief Quarter Master of the Dept. of the Gulf two thousand and two hundred dollars in currency.

It is further agreed that, in case the vessel should not be detained more than two days at Quarantine that the Schooner will take them to the city. All necessary provisions to be furnished by the Master of the Schooner, and bedding to be furnished by the passenders [*sic*].

Witness L. Pierce, Jr. U.S. Consul Zebina S. Doane

Written on the back of the contract is the following note:

The captain states that the consul [illegible]. S. B. HolabirdCapt [illegible] will pay this out of the charity fund.S. B. Holabird*

Though it reveals little on its own, this contract is part of a larger, complicated story of the Civil War involving a major center of illicit trade for both Europe and the American Northeast, which provided lifeblood to the Confederacy.

Matamoros, Mexico, lies just south of Brownsville, Texas; the twin cities are separated by the Rio Grande River. The waterway proved a tenuous boundary during the Civil War, figuring significantly in the federal blockade and the lucrative southern cotton trade. Tensions ran high on both banks, erupting frequently throughout the war.

Upon the secession of Texas, Union loyalists crossed the river seeking refuge (Thompson and Jones, 49). Their safe haven proved a volatile place. France had occupied Mexico City, taking steps to fulfill new dreams of empire (Townsend, 9). Infighting in Mexico pitted party factions against one another vying for power and governorship of the state of Tamaulipas (within which Matamoros is situated) (Delaney, 76). Alliances and loyalties were made and broken, making the region unstable and chaotic at best (Townsend, 23).

The federal blockade stymied southern trade; that is, until Confederates established cooperative relationships with Mexican authorities under the shield of international neutrality. Diplomacy hindered the federal blockade—Mexican vessels were not subject to American authority, making them the perfect conduit for Confederate cotton. Trade with Europe, and even the American northeast, flourished.

Matamoros is to the rebellion west of the Mississippi what New York is to the United States—its great commercial and financial center, feeding and clothing the rebellion, arming and equipping, furnishing it materials of war and a specie basis of circulation that has almost displaced Confederate paper...The entire Confederate Government is greatly sustained by resources from this port (*OR* Series I, Vol. 48 Part 1) as quoted in Delaney, 473).

For all intents and purposes, Matamoros served primarily as a Confederate port and prospered as a result of this voluminous trade (Townsend, 4).

President Lincoln sought immediate federal occupation of Texas, particularly the southwestern region which included Brownsville, in order to stem French influence on the war and possible recognition of the Confederacy, and to disrupt the Confederate-European cotton trade (Townsend, 4). Politics muddied the waters, however, and Union military focus in Texas initially centered on an invasion of eastern Texas via the Red River. Early federal failures including the Confederate victory at the Battle of Sabine Pass forced the Union to concentrate efforts on the Rio Grande and West Texas (Townsend, 12-15).

Into this tumultuous environment, refugees fleeing Texas included wealthy businessmen, German immigrants, Confederate deserters, and poor farmers—their only shared trait was sympathy with the Union. Civilians escaping persecution in Brownsville and surrounding areas were hunted down by Confederates (both officially and unofficially) and were either imprisoned in nearby Fort Brown or executed (Thompson and Jones, 52).

Texans arrived in droves at the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros seeking food, shelter and protection from the federal government (Thompson and Jones, 51). Leonard J. Pierce, Jr., U.S. Consul to Mexico from 1861 to 1864, advocated to the Lincoln administration on their behalf, and arranged for transportation of many to Union-held New Orleans. Over time Pierce's pleas became increasingly desperate, articulating his fear that loyal citizens would be abandoned as necessary casualties of war. *The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* include correspondence to and from Pierce regarding the situation in Matamoros:

Consulate of the United States of America. Matamoros, March 1, 1862.

Hon. W. H. Seward, Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.:

Sir:

It has been with the greatest difficulty that I have established myself here, as the Confederates had used every possible exertion to get me driven out...

The Confederates occupy both the Texan and Mexican side of the Rio Grande at this mouth, and use every exertion to prevent me from communicating with the U. S. ship Portsmouth...

Matamoras is now the great thoroughfare to the Southern States. They pass their coffee, flour, and in fact all the supplies they receive through here. They have also a large pile of cotton on the east bank of the river, to take out when an opportunity offers, or, as they say, burn, in case of an invasion...

There are many of the citizens of Texas leaving since the Governor's proclamation calling out the militia, and some that have been prisoners and escaped; nearly all without friends or means to take them North.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your most obedient, L. Pierce, Jr., Consul

Consulate of the United States of America Matamoras, Mexico, March 21, 1862.

Hon. W. H. Seward, Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.:

I am continually besieged with refugees and deserters; most of them without funds, who expect me to send them North. For many I have procured situations, where they can earn a subsistence, and others I have to provide for to the best of my ability...

...L. Pierce, Jr., United States Consul

Consulate of the United States of America Matamoras, Mexico, May 5, 1862.

Hon. W. H. Seward, Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.:

...The crowds of refugees from Texas do not diminish in the least, although it is very difficult, owing to the strict watch kept upon their movements, for them to get out. Many are arrested; some are hung; others are taken and pressed into service.

False dispatches of the most ridiculous kind are circulated throughout the country and through Mexico; but even this mode of encouraging the masses is failing, and though the counties bordering on the Rio Grande there exists a perfect reign of terror...

L. Pierce, Jr., United States Consul

In the meantime, the consul at Monterey wrote to Seward as well, describing his own observations of the situation at Matamoros:

Matamoros, Mexico, May 23, 1862

Hon. W. H. Seward, Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.:

...I have been for the past two days with Mr. Pierce (consul here), and from what I see it is evident that he should expend treble his salary upon the worthy Union citizens. It is really painful for a consul to see men drive from home and the comforts of life, not even allowed to bring an article of clothing; the only cause of complaint in many cases that they were Northern men (had never killed any one), and refused to fight against the United States. O, sir, would that I could show cases vividly before the Department! Must this thing be, that our best, truest citizens must be turned into the streets, from the door of an American consul upon a population poor themselves not able to speak their language, also threatened by the soldiers from Brownsville for harboring them?...

...May I hope that some provision will be made for those sufferers, that the United States consul may not be a disgrace in the eyes of other nations by driving away from his presence honorable citizens that seek the protection of his and their country; honorably for their country's welfare thus reduced that they cannot feed themselves... (OR Series 1, Vol. 9).

Several months later in August 1863, Pierce and Doane signed the contract for refugee transport to New Orleans.

Once in New Orleans male refugees were recruited for federal military service. Regardless of their efforts to join the Union cause, many displaced Texans found themselves the focus of suspicion among federal authorities and residents for being first and foremost, in their eyes, southern (Marten, 354-355).

Union forces led by General Nathaniel Banks occupied Brownsville in 1863, essentially taking control of the area and cutting off one of the Confederacy's major supply lines (Garza and Long). Pierce continued his calls for protection from federal authorities, as is evident from the response he received from Major General N. J. T. Dana in December:

Headquarters Thirteenth Army Corps Brownsville, Tex., December 10, 1863

L. Pierce, Jr. United States Consul, Matamoras:

Your dispatch of this date is this moment received. Every protection in my power will be thrown around every loyal American and his property. I would not be justified in bringing a force into the city of Matamoras to defend it against the Federal forces of President Juarez. The Federal Government of Mexico is on terms of intimate friendship with ours. It seems to me, if your danger is imminent, you should remove more under my protection with your property and money. The folds of the Star-Spangled Banner are large enough to cover every loyal American and every friendly foreigner who has not forfeited its protection by acts of alliance with rebels, aiding them to cut our throats, and the strong arms of the citizen soldiers here will protected them against all comers... (OR Series I, Vol. 26, Part 1).

The town changed hands the next summer, and Confederate troops remained for one month after Lee's surrender at Appomattox and Jefferson Davis's capture by federal authorities. In the meantime, Leonard Pierce, Jr. had resigned his post at the close of 1864 (Faulk and Champion).

A final battle ensued in the area—the Battle of Palmito Ranch—resulting in a Confederate victory. The war was already won, however, and the fighting on May 13, 1865, amounted to little. All Confederate forces had surrendered by June 2.

The humble document serving as a contract between Pierce and Doane is evidence of yet another fascinating chapter in American history, emphasizing the complexity and chaos that was the Civil War.

* Samuel B. Holabird was the Quartermaster of the Department of the Gulf from December 1862 to July 1865. (http://www.qmfound.com/BG_Samuel_Holabird.htm) Army Quartermaster Foundation, Inc. accessed 10/5/07)

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About the illustrations:

From the cover: "The Confederates evacuating Brownsville, Texas" *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 13, 1864, p. 100

Column illustration: "Pontoon bridge across the Rio Grande - Detachment of US troops crossing to Mexico" *Harper's Weekly*, January 5, 1867, p. 12

