

Two Civil Wars: The Curious Shared Journal Of A Baton Rouge Schoolgirl And A Union Sailor On The Uss Essex

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Review

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Jeffery, Katherine Bentley *Two Civil Wars: The Curious Shared Journal of a Baton Rouge Schoolgirl and a Union Sailor on the USS Essex*. LSU Press, \$38.00 ISBN 9780807162248

Schoolgirl and Sailor: Valuable Perspectives on Disunion and War

The American Civil War had a titanic impact of American society North and South, and caused social interactions that probably would not have occurred in peacetime. One such encounter happened in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1862. A Union sailor, William L. Park, picked up a journal belonging to a young schoolgirl named Celeste Repp and kept it for his own wartime diary. Hence two different worlds came together and are brought to light here in *Two Civil Wars: The Curious Shared Journal of a Baton Rouge Schoolgirl and a Union Sailor on the U.S.S. Essex*, edited by Katherine Bentley Jeffrey.

Teenager Celeste Repp began her journal in 1859 while a student at St. Mary's Academy in Baton Rouge. It is mostly composed of her French lessons, and correspondence with beloved Catholic priest and future Confederate army chaplain Father Darius Hubert. While the events of 1860 and 1861 are not mentioned by young Repp they would soon impact her world and that of her family and friends. The coming of the Civil War meant that Baton Rouge would soon become a military objective of both Union and Confederate forces in the campaign for control of the Mississippi River region.

Federal forces seized that Louisiana city in 1862, and by June had taken over St. Mary's Academy and converted it into a hospital for Union troops. Two tars from the *U.S.S. Essex* were patients there when visited by a shipmate, gunner William L. Park. Using the old Navy adage "gear adrift" Park claimed Miss Repp's journal and converted it into his own written account of his naval service. Here their connection ends, as Celeste Repp subsequently left Baton Rouge and ended her days as a Sisters of Mercy nun in Vicksburg in 1914.

Park, a recent Scottish immigrant and veteran of the Royal Navy, enlisted as a Union sailor in September 1861. His journal grew into a terse tale of the life of a gunboat crew member on the Mississippi and how operations appeared to those serving below the quarterdeck. Details of the hard life sailors led aboard are forthcoming from Park, as well as his interesting observations on the changing state of race relations as slavery melted away to be replaced by an imperfect emancipation both ashore and aboard ship.

The *U.S.S Essex*, Park's floating home, was a fighting ship that saw active service including Forts Henry and Donelson, Baton Rouge, the clash with the Confederate ram *Arkansas*, the siege of Port Hudson, and finally the ill-fated Red River campaign in 1864. His entries list the dangers of death, dismemberment, and disease facing him and his fellow mariners, as well as cramped quarters and food low in quality and quantity. In the end Park survived and served out his three year enlistment and received an honorable discharge in September, 1864. He went on to build a civilian life and family, and died peacefully in 1909.

Editor Jeffrey does an adequate job in bringing the Repp-Park journal to life, but there are things in the Park section that could have been fleshed out with more specific annotations. Parks mentions names of Union commanders and events that could be better explained to the reader with some additional research. That said, *Two Civil Wars* is valuable and joins the still growing body of Civil War first-person accounts. It gives voices to two interesting nineteenth-century Americans who never met but shared a tremendous experience.

Robert A. Taylor is Professor of History and Associate Dean and Head of the School of Arts and Communication at the Florida Institute of Technology. Currently he is working on a military history of Florida.