

Civil War Treasures: The Civil War Saga Of The Wall Family Of Clinton, Louisiana

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Feature Essay

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While it might be peculiar to describe a collection of antebellum, Civil War, and postbellum letters as “new,” such an odd characterization would not be unreasonable for the Wall Family Papers in the LSU Libraries Special Collections. Acquired at auction last October, the papers are comprised of 54 letters exchanged among the members of the family of Isaac and Mary Wall of Clinton, Louisiana, between 1829 and 1921. They have been cataloged only recently and are now available to researchers for the first time. Among other family events spread over nearly a century, they vividly document the woes of a woman in southeast Louisiana who gave a brother and four sons to the Confederate army, ultimately losing three of the five.

Mary Susannah Winans Wall (1816-1897), originally of Wilkinson County, Mississippi, was the daughter of Martha DuBose and William Winans, a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church and founder of one of the earliest such congregations in Louisiana. She married Isaac Wall (1798-1872) on January 15, 1834. Isaac was educated in his home state of New Jersey before moving to Mississippi and then Louisiana, where he worked as a carpenter and architect. He helped design the auditorium of Centenary College in Jackson, Louisiana, in the 1840s, as well as portions of the East Feliciana Parish Courthouse and Lawyers’ Row in Clinton, now a National Historic Landmark District. He also served as a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Mary Wall worked as an educator, serving as principal at the Clinton Female Seminary, which was incorporated on March 18, 1861, and also served for several years as a public school for local children.

Mary and Isaac Wall had nine children: six boys and three girls. Their two eldest sons, Lieut. William Winans Wall (1837-1862?) and Sgt. Benjamin Drake Wall (1840-1864), both served in Louisiana’s Crescent Regiment and died during the Civil War, the former of illness and the latter killed at the Battle of

Mansfield in April 1864. The two middle sons, Lieut. Ira Bowman Wall (1843-1928) and Wesley Winans Wall (1846-1922), served with their maternal uncle, Col. Wesley P. Winans, in Company G of the 19th Louisiana Infantry Regiment. Although their uncle was killed at the Battle of Missionary Ridge in November 1863, the two brothers survived the war. Ira (called Bow) married Lizzie Embree in 1866 with whom he would have at least four children, and worked as a planter on his in-laws' land in Clinton, called "Embree Vale." Wesley was captured on September 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga and was held as a prisoner of war at Camp Douglas in Chicago, Illinois, through April 1865. After the war, he worked in a variety of jobs, including as a telegraph operator and hotel keeper, in cities throughout Mississippi and Louisiana, such as Biloxi, Lafayette, and Cheneyville. He married Rebecca Burr in 1877 and they had at least two children. Wesley Wall died in Cheneyville, Louisiana. Isaac and Mary Wall's two youngest sons were only children during the Civil War.

Most of the letters were written either to or by Mary Winans Wall or her son, Wesley. The earliest letters were written to Mary Wall by friends and family and discuss personal news, mutual friends, and daily life. These include a letter from William Hezekiah Nathaniel Magruder on September 1, 1833, while he was a student at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Magruder, who would go on to found the Magruder Collegiate Institute in Baton Rouge, describes attending prayer services with "Doctor Fisk," presumed to be Wilbur Fisk, the first president of Wesleyan.

Much of the correspondence relates to the Wall family's experiences during the Civil War, including the deaths of three family members and the long imprisonment of Wesley Wall at Camp Douglas. A November 18, 1860, letter from Benjamin Wall to his younger brother, Wesley, addresses the outcome of the 1860 presidential election and possible actions that the southern states might take as a result, including secession, forming a confederacy, refusing to sell cotton to the North (which he doubts would succeed), and encouraging trade with Europe. A May 9, 1862, telegram reports on the state of three family members after the 19th Louisiana Infantry Regiment was engaged at the Battle of Farmington, Mississippi: "Ben slightly wounded; Major Winans not heard from; Bouman not in fight." Mary Wall wrote to General Philip Cooke, Union commander in occupied Baton Rouge, in December 1863, seeking permission to cross Union lines to visit her still-living son Benjamin, her widowed sister-in-law in Shreveport, and her widowed daughter-in-law in Franklin, as she

simply refused to travel by taking the oath of allegiance to the United States.

Other correspondence from the Civil War period consists of seventeen letters written to Wesley by his mother, Mary, while he was imprisoned at Camp Douglas between October 23, 1863, and April 15, 1865. In many of these letters, Mary implores her son to pray, read the Bible, practice his “careless” handwriting, and always strive to improve himself and others. She also shares news of the family, including the deaths of his brother and uncle. Only one letter from Wesley Wall from this time has survived. In his October 5, 1864, letter, he indicates that he has been writing to his mother every three weeks, and that his letters must not be getting through to the family. Mary also wrote to the commander at Camp Douglas on February 14, 1864, asking that her son be paroled and released to the care of two uncles living in the North: “I have lost two sons in this war, and this boy has been in prison a long time, for one so young. Please do what you can for me.” In her May 1, 1864, letter to her imprisoned son, Mary describes the bizarre spectacle of a ring tournament held in wartime: “Clinton is very gay now, quite too much so, for these sad times. People seem to think it is no use grieving, and praying any longer, and have parties, picnics, balls, tourneys, &c.; Lizzie Embree was chosen queen, at the tournament near Clinton, by George Bell, who was the victor knight.” She also mentions in a September 13, 1864, letter about receiving kind treatment from Union soldiers in town, which she attributes to her earlier care for their wounded men brought to Clinton from Baton Rouge.

Later letters written between 1870 and 1921 typically discuss family matters, including a September 21, 1882, letter from Isaac Dickson Wall (the family’s fifth son) to his brother-in-law, Judge William Kernan, in which he asks for counsel on leaving the Methodist ministry, saying that he disagrees with some of its teachings. Nonetheless, the memory of the Civil War endured through the end of the letters when Ira Bowman Wall, in a November 6, 1912, letter to his brother Wesley, describes attending a Louisiana Confederate veterans’ reunion in Baton Rouge, gives news of the death of a former officer in their regiment, and muses on the passage of time since the war: “You and I are all that are left of Co. G. Caddo Tenth, 19th La. Regt. Inf. Vols, C.S.A. that we know of, and we too I guess, will soon pass away.”