

Civil War Treasures: Three Correspondents On The New York City Draft Riots Of 1863

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Feature Essay

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The infamous New York City draft riots of July 13-16, 1863, remain the worst urban riots in American history. Fomented mostly by working-class Irish immigrants and laborers of Irish descent, the insurgents were incensed over the prospect of being drafted to fight at the behest of upper-class Anglo-Protestants for the freedom of black slaves. Resenting the exploitation and condescension of the former, and fearful the latter would compete for their unskilled jobs as freedmen, the rioters directed their rage at federal officials, Republican institutions, the affluent, and individual African Americans across Lower Manhattan over four days. The George H. Suydam Correspondence, which recently was cataloged for the LSU Libraries Special Collections, includes three accounts of the riots. Chiefly comprised of personal correspondence received by George H. Suydam before, during, and after his service in the US Army during the Civil War, Suydam received letters mostly from family members and friends. While these letters chiefly concern the typical home front news of everyone's comings and goings, correspondents occasionally included news of the war, including the war on the streets of New York City.¹

George Henry Suydam (1842-1914) was born in New York City to Henry Suydam Jr. (1806-1858) and Almira (*née* Van Nostrand) Suydam (died 1868). He grew up in Newark, New Jersey, with his eight siblings, but was living and working as a clerk in Brooklyn on the eve of the Civil War. He enlisted in Company C of the 174th New York Infantry Regiment on October 16, 1862, and was commissioned a second lieutenant. The regiment was sent to Louisiana in December 1862, where it participated in the Siege of Port Hudson in July 1863. George Suydam was commissioned a first lieutenant after the completion of the siege and soon after traveled to Donaldsonville as part of the relief effort at Fort Butler, where he also fought in the Battle of Kock's (or Cox's) Plantation in mid-July 1863. The 174th New York Infantry was consolidated with the 162nd New York Infantry on February 17, 1864. That year, Suydam's new regiment

fought in the Red River Campaign, including the Battle of Sabine Cross Roads and the Battle of Pleasant Hill in April. After retreating to Morganza in May and moving to New Orleans, the regiment then was sent to Fortress Monroe, Virginia, in July 1864. Suydam was commissioned a captain the following August. The regiment then participated in Philip Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley Campaign in the autumn of 1864. The regiment had duty in Washington, D.C., from April to June 1865. Near the end of his service, he spent time in Hawkinsville, Georgia, and then Savannah, where he was finally mustered out of service with the rest of his regiment on October 12, 1865.

The first news of the riots appeared in a letter from his sister, Mary L. Mathu, written from Brooklyn over two days on Monday and Tuesday, July 13 & 14. Squeezed in among the usual family news, descriptions of the contents of promised care packages, and worried concern for her brother's safety, is a brief notice of the inception of the riots. She was particularly grateful no disorder had yet erupted in Brooklyn, "although there has been great apprehension that some disturbance would occur tonight, beginning probably at Mr. Beecher's church—he himself you know sailed several weeks since for Europe, and I think his friends must be heartily thankful for his absence."²

George Suydam's brother, James Van Nostrand Suydam, wrote his brother from New York on July 14 and immediately launched into a vivid account of two days' disturbance. He related stories of how rioters broke into buildings, set fires, and prevented firemen from extinguishing them. He told how they fired and marched on ill-prepared police and soldiers, the latter being no more than ineffective, rundown invalids just returned from the war. He complained that female rioters encouraged their men to violence and described how a soldier was beaten and stoned by the mob. James Suydam told of how some quick thinking hotel guests on Fifth Avenue fooled the rioters by cheering them so they would move on and not attack the hotel. He noted how Republican newspapers were in especial danger, as when the ground floor of Horace Greeley's *Tribune* was destroyed, but he took pains to describe how the office of the *Times* was protected by a Gatling gun and water-soaked paper filling the lower part of the building to retard flames. He also wrote of brazen thefts on the street, severed telegraph wires, and broken railroad lines. James Suydam closed with two gruesome tales, one of an unoffending black man beaten, hung from a lamppost, and his clothes set on fire, the other of Colonel Henry O'Brien ambushed and beaten at his home after fighting the mob in the streets.³

George Suydam's sister, Adeline Suydam, writing on July 15 & 16, best conveyed the palpable fear felt in the city with a terrifying picture of the chaos on the streets. Sarah and Will Armstrong & John Franklin came out here last night. She and Will came in his light wagon bringing their silver with them. Neither cars nor stages were running, the stores were all shut up, and the streets filled with ugly rough looking men, and as she looked down the cross streets she could see nothing but a perfect sea of heads. The men look each so scowlingly at them and occasionally there would be a cry of "How are you, three hundreds?"⁴ It is a general uprising of the poor or rather the roman catholic [sic] poor against the rich. Last night we were better prepared for them, and to-night I hope we will be able to rake Broadway from one end to the other, if that is the only way to get rid of them.

Even in her own home she worried for her safety, admitting, "We all stayed up till about half past twelve, when Mary and I laid on the outside of her bed, until half past four when I went to my room. This was all done secretly so that the servants who are all Roman Catholics and sympathizers with the rioters should not know it." Her heart went out especially to the African American victims of the mob, whose abuse riled her most furiously, declaring, "I must say that their scandalous treatment of the negroes has made me feel as if I should like to see them fairly mowed down with grape shot."⁵

In the end, Adeline Suydam got her wish. Reinforcements from the army did indeed put down the mob with all due force, such that most of the 120 or so dead over the four stormy days were rioters.

¹ George H. Suydam Correspondence, Mss. 5307, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

² Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn was a center of American abolitionist agitation and an important station on the Underground Railroad. Mary L. Mathu to George H. Suydam, July 13-14, 1863, George H. Suydam Correspondence, box 1, folder 7.

³ James Suydam to George H. Suydam, July 14, 1863, George H. Suydam Correspondence, box 1, folder 7.

⁴ This refers to upper-class men who could afford to pay the three hundred dollars necessary to pay a substitute and thus avoid conscription.

⁵ Adeline Suydam to George H. Suydam, July 15-16, 1863, George H. Suydam Correspondence, box 1, folder 7.