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Richard Cary

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A DOZEN BEN BUTLER LETTERS

By RICHARD CARY

THE twelve letters of Benjamin Franklin Butler now in the manuscript files of Colby College Library are inconsiderable when measured against the thousands of items in the Library of Congress or the impressive collection at the Boston Public Library. None of the Colby notes is addressed to or concerns a figure of major proportions, like Lincoln, Grant, Charles Sumner, Farragut. (The petition to see President Harrison is minimal in length and indirect.) Thus they would appear, at first blush, somewhat superfluous codicils to the life and times of an important public personage over the thirty-year span they cover.

This view becomes more secure after contemplation of the gigantesque five-volume *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler During the Period of the Civil War* (Norwood, Mass., 1917) compiled by his devoted granddaughter, Jessie Ames Marshall.* And yet, as Racine reminds us, virtue has its degrees. From infinite small flakes, without cohesion, without definable configuration, one may reconstruct the living pith of a man—his tenderness, thrift, response under stress, wit, impatience, firm hand and orderly tenor of mind. In this mood the following handful of letters is presented, each in its way a scintilla of a spirit unique and irrepressible, each a fragmental verification of an amazing, multiplex personality.

1. Dated: April 17, 1862. From: Off the Mouth of the Mississippi. To: F. A. Hildreth. Two pages, holograph, on ruled stationery, without letterhead. Signed: *Butler*.

This letter is reproduced wholly to show the effects of the exigency under which it was begot. General Butler's blemished grammar, punctuation, and spelling are not due to indifferent instruction at Colby but to tension on the eve of embarking on a crucial naval invasion.

*Mrs. Marshall was exceptionally generous in providing fresh materials and essential background information for this article and that by Professor Raymond.

Off the mouth of the Mississippi
April 17th 1862

Dear Fisher

I got your note yesterday.
Troubles enough but we are in the hand
of God. I shall keep the "Lion" for the
present though your Capt is not worth
anything. I think I shall how to arrest him
I have made Bartlett harbor master at
Ship Island. I have left Sarah at
Ship Island. She has been quite sick
but has now recovered

I am now at the mouth of the Mississippi
with Horn Batters and eight Regiments
of my best troops and the attack will
be made tomorrow upon the Forts Jackson
Philip by the bay. If they fail I must
try a storming and assault

I shall do something whether rush or not
I see out with out all knots

All the Ships have arrived safe
and well Great Luck in the last
hours. Tell George I thank him
for the completeness of my outfit
A poor return he has received but God
willing there is a future

God bless you for taking care of my interests
in my absence - to you I commit mine
and my family in case of accident
trusting with confidence to an honest
man

Will write when possible.

F. R. Aldrich Esq. Yours Ben Butler

Fresh from his triumphal seizure of Annapolis, relief of Washington, and possession of Baltimore, Butler was authorized to raise volunteer troops in New England. In the course of this activity he ruffled the feathers of two powerful antagonists—Governor Andrew of Massachusetts and General McClellan—both of whom wished him far from the scene. Thus it came about that on the night of February 25, 1862, Butler set out from Fortress Monroe on the steamer *Mississippi* with some 1600 troops and orders to take New Orleans.

The voyage was eventful, consuming thirty days instead of the customary two weeks. The commander of the ship, a suspected secessionist, played the fool and ran aground twice on Fryng Pan Shoals off Cape Fear, North Carolina. Butler summarily imprisoned him and proceeded to his destination, Ship Island, about ten miles from the coastal entrance to the Mississippi River. Here he established headquarters to await aid from the navy in reducing forts Jackson and St. Philip, upon which New Orleans relied for defense. On the day after he wrote this letter, Butler followed Admiral Farragut's fleet up the river in the *Saxon*. By April 27th the forts had capitulated and Butler was full speed ahead in "the race for the glory of the capture of New Orleans."

The *Saxon*, whose chief did nothing to allay Butler's glum distrust of sea captains in general, was variantly described as a steamer, a steam tug, a gunboat, and by Butler himself as

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"my little headquarters yacht." It was chartered to Captain Paul R. George of the Quartermaster Corps in Boston as a transport messenger boat or for towing purposes on the Butler expedition. In a letter to the General, George complained of political "tampering with your command," naming Governor Andrew as one of the principal obstructionists. As reward for his probity, George failed to be reconfirmed in his post.

Sarah Hildreth, Butler's wife, accompanied him on many of his field campaigns despite the appalling privations to be endured. On the 19th of April she wrote from Ship Island to her daughter of "rather a severe sickness" that had confined her to bed for nearly a week. To the end of her life she was both comfort and counsel to a harassed man.

Fisher A. Hildreth originally introduced his sister to Butler. A Democratic politician appointed postmaster during Butler's term as state senator in Massachusetts, he conducted civilian aspects of Butler's affairs during his military and congressional years.

2. Dated: April 15, 1867. From: Washington, D. C. To: Colonel Drake DeKay. Two pages, holograph, on stationery ruled horizontally and vertically, with letterhead of intertwined BFB monogram. Signed: *B. F. Butler*.

My Dear DeKay

I am always troubling you and when you say no more I will stop
Miss Blanche wants at Gloucester this summer a long waggon or dog cart with a rumble for a boy to take care of the horse behind.

Now I am willing to gratify her if the expense is not too great. What can such an article be got for. May we not find one for sale which somebody who has been as foolish as I propose to be has laid aside. I see plenty such advertised in the newspapers.

Will you take the trouble to look out this thing for me and call on me for as much.

You were and I fear are still much needed in our Asylum. I want a man from New York

In 1867 Butler was U. S. Congressman from the Essex district, which included Gloucester. His permanent residence was Lowell, in the Middlesex district, represented by his friend George Boutwell. Rather than run in opposition to Boutwell, Butler had purchased in 1863 "a piece of land on Cape Ann,

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on the northeast coast of Massachusetts, for a summer home for myself and family . . . next to Ipswich Bay, a beautiful and picturesque piece of water, where the sunsets are equal to those of the Bay of Naples." In the first years Butler joined his sons and their tutor in a tent on the shore, while his wife and daughter stayed at a farmhouse. In 1867 he built *Bay View*, a stone home overlooking the bay.

Blanche was the General's only daughter. She married Major General Adelbert Ames, who became military governor, elected governor, and senator from Mississippi after the War.

In 1866 Congress established the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers to alleviate distressful conditions among veterans. Butler was appointed president of the Board of Managers and treasurer. He held these offices for fourteen years.

Formerly aide-de-camp to General Mansfield and on the personal staff of General Pope, Colonel Drake DeKay came under General Butler's jurisdiction in his capacity as Commander of the Department of Virginia and North Carolina.

3. Dated: April 24, 1873. From: Washington, D. C. To: F. S. Marshall in South Bend, Arkansas. One page, handwritten by amanuensis, on stationery ruled horizontally and vertically, without letterhead. Signed: *Benj. Butler*.

Dear Sir:

Please give me the names of those who you think are making claims against the Government, and if you know where those claims are made, as mentioned in your letter—whether they are made in the Court of Claims or before the Southern Claims Commission. It is difficult for me to find out, as you give no name.

Thanking you for the information on behalf of the Government in which both of us are interested as good citizens.

During his tenure in the 42nd Congress Butler was a member of the Joint Select Committee on Insurrectionary States.

4. Dated: May 21, 1873. From: Lowell, Mass. To: John I. Davenport in New York City. One page, handwritten by amanuensis, on unruled stationery, with letterhead of chalice and scroll enclosing the motto, "*Comme je trouve*." Signed: *Benj F Butler*.

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My Dear Davenport:

Please fix up DeKay's certificates for him. The printer is waiting for them and I am waiting for the printer

Davenport had been Butler's military secretary, the head of his Bureau of Information with the rank of lieutenant; then an assistant provost marshal in the War Department, a U. S. Commissioner by grace of Congressman Butler, and a supervisor of elections in New York City.

DeKay may refer to the colonel correspondent (letter 2, above) or to Captain Sidney B. DeKay, a New York socialite, former aide to General Butler, volunteer in the Greek army, then U. S. assistant district attorney for the city of New York.

In this letter Butler assumes the signature which becomes standard hereafter. Possibly, he thought to reduce future confusion between himself and Benjamin Franklin Butler (1795-1858)—also a lawyer, former partner of Martin Van Buren, Attorney General for five years and briefly Secretary of War in Jackson's administration—who preferentially signed *B. F. Butler*.

5. Dated: November 11, 1876. From: Boston. To: James O. Beirne in Washington, D. C. One page, handwritten by amanuensis, on ruled stationery, without letterhead. Signed: *Benj F Butler*.

My Dear Sir:—

I am very much obliged to you for your kind note of congratulation at the triumph of the right in the Seventh Massachusetts District.

I hope I may deserve, by my future action, all that my friends so kindly expect of me.

After winning elections to Congress from the district of Essex (Gloucester) successively from 1867, Butler was defeated in 1874. In 1876 he ran from his home district of Middlesex (Lowell) and won, serving his last term as representative, 1877-1879.

6. Dated: March 19, 1877. From: Boston. To: N. W. Bingham, Special Agent of the Treasury Department in Boston. One page, handwritten by amanuensis, on ruled stationery, without letterhead. Signed: *Benj. F Butler*.

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Dear Sir:—

As the matters in controversy between the United States and Jordan Marsh & Company have now been settled and adjusted, I desire to ask for them the return either to themselves or to me of all the papers and documents relating to their business which may be in your possession.

As a counselor at law Ben Butler was held in equal esteem with such eminences as Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, and Caleb Cushing. It was said that his clients need only whisper his name to secure favorable judgments out of court, so formidable was his reputation as a lawyer's lawyer. He handled personal litigation for President Pierce, for Edison's inventions, for John Sutter's gold property rights in California, helped in defense of the Haymarket Riot anarchists, and drew up the specifications for Elias Howe's sewing machine patent.

7. Dated: February 24, 1880. From: Washington, D. C. To: Ellenette Pillsbury at 2 Belmont Square, East Boston, Mass. One page, handwritten by amanuensis, on ruled stationery, without letterhead. Signed: *Benj. F Butler.*

Dear Madam:—

The gentleman to whom I referred the matter of your Mother's claim for land in Solon Ohio informs me that after looking the matter up he does not find that there is anything to be recovered.

Under these circumstances I do not see that there is anything further for me to do in the matter.

After his congressional career ended, Butler shuttled constantly between offices in Boston, New York, and Washington, D. C.

8. Dated: March 18, 1889. From: "At office," Washington, D. C. To: E. W. Halford, private secretary to President Benjamin Harrison. One page, holograph, on unruled stationery, with letterhead of chalice, scroll, and motto as in letter 4, above. Signed: *Benj. F Butler.*

Dear Sir

I should be glad to see the President when it would be least inconvenient to him. Will you so say and that I wait his pleasure?

Butler was in accord with Harrison on the vital tariff question. At Harrison's request, Butler stumped the doubtful state

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of Michigan to rally the votes of his former Republican supporters. Two weeks after Harrison's inauguration, Butler is requesting an audience.

9. Dated: August 27, 1889. From: Washington, D. C. To: Mrs. Natalie Pollard at 2306 Seventh Avenue, New York City. One page, typewritten, without letterhead. Signed: *Benj. F Butler.*

Madam:—

I have examined, as well as I can, my papers in Washington, and I do not find anything to guide me as to what claim you want me to give up or release, and I certainly must decline giving a general release. Give me a description of the land by metes and bounds which you want me to release, and I'll try to do it; but I cannot release all the land in Washington.

Always considerate of women's wants, attorney Butler occasionally relieved his exasperation at their foibles through a touch of levity.

10. Dated: October 2, 18 9 [presumably 1889]. From: 6 Ashburton Place, Boston. To: Hon. Roland Worthington in Boston. One page, typewritten, with letterhead as reproduced below. Signed: *Benj. F Butler.*

*Law Offices of
Benj. F. Butler
Washburn and Webster
No 6 Ashburton Place
Rooms 445 & 6
Boston, October 2, 18 9.*
Frank L. Washburn *Benjamin Webster*

Dear Sir:—

I have been employed by those interested beneficially in the share of stock in the Boston Traveller Company, once the property of Mr. Flanders, whom you knew, and which was transferred to George H. Morrill, to see if a settlement can be got in regard to the moneys due on that share of stock, including, perhaps, a proper transfer of the stock.

Will you give your attention to it or refer me to your counsel, whom I suppose is Mr. Russell.

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After his defeat for the presidency of the United States on the Greenback Party ticket in 1884, Butler never again sought elective office, turning his full attention back to law. He maintained practice here and at 32 Nassau Street in New York City.

William Prentiss Webster was the husband of Susan Hildreth, the sister of Mrs. Butler.

11. Dated: November 17, 1890. From: 6 Ashburton Place, Boston. To: "Dear Sir" [correspondent unidentified]. One page, typewritten, with letterhead as above (letter 10). Signed: *Benj. F Butler*.

Dear Sir:—

My information upon the topics of the several branches of the family of Butler is so vague save my own immediate family that I cannot throw much light upon the matter.

My grandfather Zephania Butler and his brother Benjamin and I believe Henry came to Nottingham New Hampshire from Woodbury Connecticut. They were members of a very large family of which I understood that Pierce Butler of South Carolina was a distant connection and Benjamin F. Butler the Attorney General of the United States under President Van Buren another, but that is rather from tradition than knowledge. There is also a like tradition that the two Butlers Zebulan and John, I believe, who fought each other so savagely in the Revolution in the Valley of Wyoming, the incidents of which you will find in Campbell's poem by that name, were connected with that family. But you can find more than all I knew or recollect about it in a book, being the history of the town of Woodbury Connecticut published by a gentleman whose name I do not know, a few years ago. If you send to the town clerk of Woodbury and ask him to procure for you a copy of the book I think you can get much that you want. My father was the youngest son, Zephania. My mother's name was Charlotte Ellison.

Ben Butler's grandfather was Zephaniah Butler, a captain in the campaign of General Wolfe at Quebec, "marching with other brave soldiers from Woodbury." With his brother Benjamin he later settled in Nottingham.

Pierce Butler (1744-1822) was a delegate from South Carolina to the Constitutional Convention, a signer of the Constitution, and a Senator.

Benjamin F. Butler (1795-1858) did stay on as Attorney General for a year at the request of newly elected President Van Buren, his one-time law partner. He resigned without

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political or personal break to return to law practice in New York State.

There is no direct allusion to Zebulon or John Butler in Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809), but Stanza VI of Part II deplores the "woes/Amidst the strife of fratricidal foes."

Two slips in the penultimate sentence are obviously clerical errors. The General no doubt dictated "the youngest son of Zephaniah." His father, named John, was a captain in the War of 1812.

The record Butler refers to is William Cothren's *History of Ancient Woodbury, Connecticut* (Woodbury, 1872), in three volumes, which contains two pages of Butler genealogy. On page 1473 of Volume II the author acknowledges receipt of the bulk of these data from "Gen B. F. Butler, M.C."

12. Dated: September 19, 1891. From: 6 Ashburton Place, Boston. To: Edward A. Robinson, care J. C. Ayer & Co., in Lowell, Mass. One page, typewritten, with letterhead as above (letter 10). Signed: *Benj F Butler*.

Dear Sir:—

Will you please run up and see me some evening at my house in Lowell when I should like to talk with you about your letter in regard to Fort Fisher.

Toward the end of the War, the only substantial port in the Confederacy still receiving contraband was Wilmington, North Carolina. Fort Fisher, strategically situated about seventeen miles down Cape Fear River, guarded the approach to the city and prevented Union vessels from pursuing English, French, and Southern blockade runners. When it was decided to suppress the Fort, Butler—Commanding Officer of the Department of Virginia and North Carolina—conceived the ingenious scheme of loading a ship with 300 tons of gunpowder, towing it near the Fort, and igniting it. After some significant misgivings, the plan was sanctioned by a board of officers approved by Lincoln, his Secretary of the Navy, General Grant, and Admiral Porter. On Christmas eve of 1864, the powder boat was exploded off Fort Fisher with negligible results. Soldiers patrolling the Fort thought the ship's boiler had burst.

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At this point the U. S. Navy laid down an effective barrage. General Butler landed some 3500 troops but, upon hearing a false report of extensive reinforcement of the Southern ranks, withdrew the bulk of his men, leaving several hundred on the beach. Incensed by this debacle, General Grant requested on January 4, 1865, that Butler be relieved of his command "for the good of the service." He was removed by Lincoln's Executive Order No. 1 on January 8th.

To the charges of cowardice hurled at him, Butler retorted, "The wasted blood of my men does not stain my garments." The justification he carried to his grave is expressed in part in the epitaph he wrote: "Here lies the General who saved the lives of his soldiers at . . . Fort Fisher." Any definitive judgment on his action must ponder the comparative worth of humanitarianism and heroism, the quiddities of discretion and valor.

Rounding out a baker's dozen of Butler manuscripts at Colby College is a characteristic army request for urgent materials in the field. Scrawled by various hands on two-thirds of a folded sheet of plain white stationery, with stamped date of November 15, 1864, it can be seen working its way *manibus pedibusque* "through channels" until—six days later—it receives the qualified imprimatur of the Commander. (This document is reproduced in full on page 497.)

From his Flying Hospital headquarters "In the field Va.," the ranking officer of New York's 100th Engineers company "Asks permission to remove brick from the Aikens Grist Mill for the construction of five places in Hosp." Garlanded with the usual interpolations of transmittal jargon and progressive indorsements, the chain is terminated by Butler's brusque decree: "Not for the flying Hospital as that had better be broken up—but for the General Hospital. Permission granted."

The General had lately returned to his command post from duty in New York City, where he had the responsibility of preventing anticipated election riots. He was currently leading the Army of the James, whose objective it was to attack Lee's forces from one angle, while Grant's Army of the Potomac engaged them from another in the frustrated drive to subdue Richmond. Within seven weeks Butler was remanded to civilian status.

5 K 1864 (ms. 20) 1864

Flying Hosp. 10th Ab.
In the field Va. Nov. 15th 1864
N.Y. (W-477.C) 1861.

Challenges M. S.
Sug. 100th N. Y. in chg.

Asks permission to
remove brick from the
sinks. Must make further
construction of fire pla-
ces in Hosp.

ms. Dep. Va. & No. 2
In the field Va. Nov. 15th 1864
Respectfully forward-
ed to Dep. Hd Qrs
approved and re-
commended. The
use of bricks near
the fire is a neces-
sary precaution against

ms. 2
Recd. H. of J. Nov. 15th 1864

2
3
5
evidence -
Gen. Butley
M. S. in Use.
Acty. M. S. Dir.

Recd. 200th Army of the James
In the field Va. Nov. 20th 1864

Not for the flying
Hosp. or that.
have better be broken
up - but for the
General Hospital.
Permittedly Granted

By Gen. Butley
M. S. Dir.
Gen. Butley's auto. sign
returned Gen. Butley



Recd. Back ms. H. of J. Nov. 20th 1864

MAJOR-GENERAL BUTLER IN COMMAND
(see page 396)