



*Lt. Spalding in Civil War Louisiana: A Union Officer's Humor, Privilege, and Ambition* by Michael D. Pierson.

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Historian Michael Pierson (Univ. of Massachusetts–Lowell) specializes in the history of gender and ethnicity in the nineteenth-century United States.<sup>1</sup> In *Lt. Spalding in Civil War Louisiana*, he continues his study of the Pelican State, but through a very specific lens. In contrast to the soldiers Pierson has written about earlier, Stephen Spalding grew up in a wealthy family. He attended the University of Vermont and carried his privilege with him to Louisiana. He left little correspondence for scholars to examine. But, while researching an earlier book, Pierson read a letter Spalding wrote to his friend James S. Peck, now in the possession of the Vermont Historical Society. He became so intrigued by the junior officer that he set out to “write an entire book about one letter” (xi). Some may scoff at such an idea, but the author makes a convincing case that the letter clarifies many obscure aspects of the US Civil War. Unlike the typical soldier’s letter, it

sparkles in its immediacy, stripping away the mythology that makes all Union soldiers patriotic, virtuous, unselfish emancipators, and all white Louisianans proud rebels. For his part, Spalding mocks these ideals, and he centers his world around more personal concerns: promotion, friendship, sex, alcohol, death, and jokes. (xvi)

Spalding was no ordinary soldier, and Pierson aims to figure out just who he was, uncover the hidden meanings in his letter, and thus analyze aspects of the society he lived in.

Before enrolling in the 8th Vermont Regiment, Spalding served in the famous 7th New York State Militia. When the latter arrived in Washington, DC, its men acquired a heroic aura as members of the second northern regiment to reach the capital. They then soon participated in the first Union movement into Virginia, but Spalding “missed all the famous parts of the Seventh’s campaign” (21) because he waited weeks to join the regiment. Once in Washington, he lived in a comfortable style: “With more food than they could eat, good weather, and a magnificent camp, Spalding and his comrades had much to enjoy. They also probably did not learn too many practical lessons about soldiering” (25). In short, Pierson contends, Spalding’s time in the Seventh did not serve as any sort of real preparation. But that didn’t deter him from using his undistinguished service in the Seventh to lobby for an officer’s rank in the 8th Vermont. Like so many others, Spalding joined the scramble for promotion and exaggerated his earlier service accordingly. Although he received this early promotion, Pierson wonders “did he fail to impress his commanding officers when he knew less about infantry drill than he should have, given his recent experience” (32)?

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1. His previous books are *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2003) and *Mutiny at Fort Jackson: The Untold Story of the Fall of New Orleans* (id., 2009).

In contrast to most soldiers, Spalding “wrote and acted from the perspective of someone at the top of a social pyramid, and no evidence suggests that he questioned his place there” (34). During his time in Louisiana, he showcased his attitudes about race and gender. He remarks that Jim, his African American servant, was “painfully black” (34) and jokes about throwing a chair at him.

Spalding’s ties to the Democratic Party, Pierson remarks, “make it easier for us to understand his comments” (42), given the party’s deeply engrained white supremacist attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Jokes are often about power and Spalding’s humor may have been a way to express complaints. That said, “it was not completely safe to be violently racist in [Maj. Gen. Benjamin Franklin] Butler’s Department of the Gulf in 1862” (55).

Although born and raised in Vermont, Spalding felt at home in New Orleans “because he could enact the same masculine roles that he had performed as an undergraduate in Burlington, Vermont, and as a young law student in New York City in 1860 and 1861” (61). Using coded language, Spalding let Peck know that he had visited a house of ill repute and “wanted to share his brothel experience with his former roommate” (72), never doubting his right to frequent such a place and pay for sex. But the war changed his life in ways that threatened the perquisites of his high social standing.

Spalding’s interactions with his men showed similar concerns about power. Shortly after writing his letter to Peck, he was appointed to serve on a regimental court-martial. Interestingly, “many of the defendants were charged with having gotten drunk and misbehaved—exactly what he had just boasted to James Peck of having done” (87). Spalding had to tread lightly here because, unlike Jim and the prostitutes he had used in New Orleans, the soldiers he commanded in Company B had the power to make his life miserable. Pierson suggests that Spalding may have mitigated the sentences of some of his men, although it is impossible to know for sure.

Spalding also felt the limits of his power when thinking about death. He used humor to fight homesickness and depression, although his witticisms made him seem callous. He sometimes joked about replacing soldiers before they were actually dead and buried, putting him, Pierson observes, “on the forefront of a new way of using humor to deal with the war’s horrors and the sense of powerlessness that soldiers can experience in its midst” (104). Spalding apparently had a premonition about his own death, though Pierson sees his sense of foreboding as more a matter of itching for a fight. He wanted either to gain respect in battle or depart from the army as a wounded hero. However, he was killed on 14 June 1863 during a ill-fated Union attack against the rebel stronghold of Port Hudson.

Pierson concludes with two letters Spalding wrote to family members, later published in a newspaper. They read very differently from the one he sent to Peck. “The question is not which letter reflects the true Spalding, but which one stands out in a sea of Civil War letters. Families and friends have tended to preserve the letters that sound like the ones Spalding wrote to his family” (136). This makes the letter to Peck particularly valuable and revealing. It not only provides new perceptions about the war, but also “reminds us of how many Americans, even from the very northern border of the North, understood the war in hierarchical terms” (138).

*Lt. Spalding in Civil War Louisiana* illustrates how a discerning historian can read against the grain, using neglected bits of information to paint a more accurate picture of social mores. Thanks to its author’s lively prose and compelling analysis, it will engage and instruct college students, specialists, and general readers with an interest in historical methodology and the novel use of overlooked sources.

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2. Here Pierson is in conversation with Michael Todd Landis, *Northern Men with Southern Loyalties: The Democratic Party and the Sectional Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2014).