

Civil War condolence letter for General Paul Semmes, 1863

Introduction

By 1863, thousands of Northern and Southern women had volunteered in hospitals to help care for sick and wounded soldiers. In cities and towns near battlefields, wounded soldiers were often placed in private homes and other buildings when hospitals were overcrowded. Whether in hospitals or in private homes, women provided a measure of comfort to the injured and often corresponded with soldiers' families when the men were not able to do so themselves. Mary Oden, of Martinsburg, West Virginia, sent this letter to Emily J. Semmes the day Emily's husband, Confederate General Paul Semmes, died from wounds he had received at the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863.

Excerpt

I need hardly ask you to pardon me for addressing you in this your season of sore anguish and bereavement, it will be enough to state in apology for so doing, that your sainted husband fell asleep among us; it was a privilege to have his example before us, teaching us that the soldier of Christ has nothing to fear when passing through the dark valley. Dr. Hadley one of his surgeons, remarked to him, that he bore his sufferings with great calmness, his reply was, I am endeavouring to bear them like a Christian philosopher; even when suffering severe pain he seemed to take pleasure in conversing and after he became so ill talked constantly of his family. . . .

One little circumstance I have forgotten; a few moments before the General died, he asked for his sword, laying it across his arm, he asked again for his Testament he took it and with it in his hands expired, they would have left it so, but that he had asked that you should have it. Oh! if all our warriors might die as he did, death would be robbed of half its sting.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and excerpt, view the image of the actual letter and read the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the circumstances which led Mary Oden to write this letter to Emily J. Semmes.
2. Locate and identify comments in the letter which indicate a level of respect, care and compassion offered to General Semmes.
3. In what ways did Mary Oden attempt to ease the grief of Emily J. Semmes? Be specific and cite examples in your response.
4. Why was it necessary for civilians such as Mary Oden to attend to the care of battlefield casualties?

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Transcript

Martinsburg

Friday July 10th 1863

My Dear M^{rs} Semmes

I need hardly ask you to pardon me for addressing you in this your season of sore anguish and bereavement, it will be enough to state in apology for so doing, that your sainted husband fell asleep among us; it was a privilege to have his example before us, teaching us that the soldier of Christ has nothing to fear when passing through the dark valley. D^r Hadley one of his surgeons, remarked to him, that he bore his sufferings with great calmness, his reply was, I am endeavouring to bear them like a Christian philosopher; even when suffering severe pain he seemed to take pleasure in conversing and after he became so ill talked constantly of his family. In a conversation with him, he told me that he thought he would write the despatch to be sent to you himself as you would feel less uneasy. I suggested that it might be taxing his strength too far, he wrote but little however; you have I suppose received it, but we thought you would like to have the original, we fortunately obtained it from the operator here, you will find it enclosed with several locks of hair in this letter. I know by experience how hard it is to resign a friend from whom we have been separated for a long time, whom he had fondly hoped to see again; that they should die far from home and among strangers adds keenly to our grief, but you my dear friend in affliction, will derive infinite comfort from the knowledge that his brother, your nephew and a friend that loved him tenderly, when he breathed his last were with him; he passed away just as D^r Pryor a Presbyterian minister had opened the Testament to read to him. To a minister who was with him earlier in the evening he expressed his willingness to die; his only regret was leaving his wife and children. Much very much sympathy is felt for you all; I have thought so much of your daughters, I too am fatherless, yes even worse than that an orphan indeed, but little more than a year has passed since our dear Mother was numbered with the dead; my dear Father has been dead a number of years and I know what it is to be without that fatherly love and protection which the heart ever yearns for. Excuse me for referring to my own trouble, I only do it in order that you may feel that you have the warmest sympathy of those who know how to sympathize, because they too have trod affliction's path. I wish you could see the quantities of beautiful flowers brought here this morning; for fear you may not be able again to

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look upon the deceased, I will tell you the arrangement, for no particular is trifling concerning those we love; a large bouquet of white flowers and evergreens was placed upon his bosom, white jessamine, clematis, and ivy were placed around the sides of the coffin near his head, on the outside two bouquets similar to the first were placed, one at the foot, the other below the glass, in the middle his coat and sword have been laid. His remains are laid in the sitting room according to Captain Cody's request, as it takes some little time to make arrangements, he preferred it to the parlors. Your husband desired Mr. Cleveland to find out each of our names in order to tell you, our family consists of my Aunt M^{rs} Pendleton, M^r & M^{rs} Allen, (my brother in law and sister) my sister Kate, my brother and myself; we have a friend Miss Murphy who was with us during his sickness. His friends now make efficient nurses that we could not do much, Kate prepared herself what little he eat while here; he came on Sunday morning July 7th [5th] about eleven o'clock, he rested better he thought that night than usual; the next morning he seemed better; in the evening my sister took him some raspberries and cream which he seemed to enjoy very much, he talked to her sometime about Virginia and Georgia. Thursday evening between three and four we thought he was dying, a surgeon and minister were both sent for, once he asked what time it was on being told that it was three, he said "by quarter past three I hope to be with Christ." We told M^r Hanson, that he was far away from Christ that he had not come up to His standard, but he was willing to die and ascribed his conversion to your example. I have been this minute in relating as far as possible all that relates to the departed, for fear that you may not hear all, for gentlemen sometimes forget little things that transpire, then perhaps M^r Cleveland may not be able to go to you, every word I know is treasured up as a precious memorial in the heart's casket and a twice told tale is not unwelcome when it concerns our beloved ones. While I write my heart is saddened by the thought that you are unconscious as yet of your irreparable loss. I wish you could be here, but God has ordered it otherwise, and may He give you grace patiently and resignedly to say, "Thy will be done." In conclusion my dear M^{rs} Semmes allow me to say, that what little we could do to conduce to your husband's comfort has been a great pleasure; we saw him first two weeks before his death passing through with his Brigade, his appearance struck us so forcibly that Captain Cheever, his commissary whom we had known before asked us if we would like to make his acquaintance, we then invited him to tea, his duties prevented his acceptance of the invitation, Captain Cody came with D^r Told & Capt Cheever and though we had not known the General he seemed very far from a stranger when brought among

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us. He has passed away but his spirit is now enjoying perfect peace; we mourn not for the dead but the living: for those who will grieve sadly that the privilege of ministering to the departed was denied them accept the love and deep sympathy of each member of our family, praying again that God may strengthen you even as he did him. I remain with much love your sympathizing friend –

Mary Oden

One little circumstance I have forgotten; a few moments before the General died, he asked for his sword, laying it across his arm, he asked again for his Testament he took it and with it in his hands expired, they would have left it so, but that he had asked that you should have it. Oh! if all our warriors might die as he did, death would be robbed of half its sting.

[inserted at the top of page one: PS – You will also find a few evergreens, taken from the bouquets laid upon the coffin my sister thought you would value them.]

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Image

P.S. - You will also find a few wreaths, taken from the bouquets
 laid upon the coffin, my sister - thought you would value them.
 Washington
 Friday July 10th 1863

My Dear Mr Semmes -

I need hardly ask you to
 pardon me for addressing you in this your season
 of great anguish and bereavement, it will be enough
 to state in apology for so doing, that you visited and
 kind fell asleep among us; it was a privilege to have
 his example before us, teaching us that the soldier of
 which has nothing to fear when passing through the
 dark valley. Dr. Bradley one of his surgeons, remarked to
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 his people was, I am glad to hear, to bear them like a
 Stoic philosopher; even when suffering severe pain
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 a conversation with him, he told me that he thought
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 nately obtained it from the operator here, you will find
 it enclosed with several locks of hair in this letter.
 I know by experience how hard it is to receive a

Mary Oden to Emily Semmes, July 10, 1863, page 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07225)

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friends from whom we have been separated for a
 long time, whom he had fondly hoped to see again,
 that they should be far from home and among stran-
 gers adds keenly to our grief, but you my dear friend in
 affliction, will derive infinite comfort from the knowledge
 that his brother, your nephew and a friend that loved him
 tenderly, ~~was with him~~ that was with him; he passed
 away just as Dr. Poyer a Presbyterian minister had open-
 ed the testament to read to him. So a minister who stood
 with him earlier in the evening he expressed his willing-
 ness to die; his only regret was leaving his wife and children.
 Much very much sympathy is felt for you all;
 I have thought as much of your daughters, I too am
 fatherless, yes even worse than that in nephew in
 deed, but little more than a year has passed since
 our dear Mother was numbered with the dead; my
 dear Nathan had been dead a number of years and I
 know what it is to be without that fatherly love and
 protection which the heart ever yearns for. Excuse me
 for referring to my own trouble, I only do it in order that
 you may feel that you have the warmest sympathy
 of those who have been to sympathize, because they too
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 quantities of beautiful flowers brought here this morn-
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upon his breast, white fessamine, clematis, and ivy were
 placed around the sides of the coffin, near his head,
 on the outside two bouquets similar ^{to the first} were placed, one
 at the feet, the other below the glass, in the middle his
 coat and sword have been laid. His remains are laid
 in the sitting room according to Captain Gady's request,
 as it was some little time to make arrangements, he
 preferred it to the parlour. Your husband desired Mr Cleveland
 to find out each of our names in order to tell you, our fam-
 ily consists of my Aunt Mrs Pendleton, Mrs Allen (my
 brother-in-law and sister) my sister Kate, my brother and
 myself; we have a friend Miss Murphy who was with
 a young lady sister. Her friend was much afflicted so much
 that she could not do much, Kate prepared herself what
 while he sat while here; he came on Tuesday morning July
 7th about eleven o'clock, he pined better he thought that night
 than usual; the next morning he came better; in the even-
 ing my sister took him some peaches and cream which
 he seemed to enjoy very much, he talked to her sometimes about
 Virginia and Georgia. Thursday evening between three and four we
 thought he was dying, a surgeon and minister were both
 sent for, once he asked what time it was on being told that
 it was three, he said "by quarter past three I hope to be with
 Christ". We told Mr Hanam, that he was far away from
 Christ that he had not come up to His standard, but
 he was willing to die and admitted his conversion to your
 exemplar. I have been thus minute in relating as far as
 possible all that related to the departed, for fear that

Mary Oden to Emily Semmes, July 10, 1863, page 3. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07225)

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you may not hear all, for gentlemen sometimes forget
 little things that transpire, then perhaps Mrs. Oden
 may not be able to go to you, every word I know is
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 and a voice told late is not unwelcome when it con-
 cerns one beloved one. While I write my heart is saddened
 by the thought that you are unconscious as yet of your ir-
 reparable loss, I wish you could be here, but God has order-
 ed it otherwise, and may He give you grace patiently and
 resignedly to say "thy will be done". In conclusion my dear
 Mrs Semmes allow me to say, that what little we could
 do to conduce to your husband's comfort has been a great
 pleasure, we can be in no further trouble for his death, pass-
 ing through with his Regt, his appearance struck us so
 favorably that Captain Shaver, his commissary whom we
 had known before acted as if we would like to break his
 acquaintance, we there invited him to tea, but
 prevented his acceptance of the invitation, Captain Oden
 came with Dr. Holt, Capt. Odenward through whom I
 do not know the General has come very far from a stranger
 when brought among us. He has passed away but his spirit
 is now enjoying perfect peace; we mourn not, the heart
 but the living, for those who will give us the
 privilege of ministering to the departed was denied them.
 Accept the love and deep sympathy of each member
 of our family, praying again that God may strengthen you
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Mary Oden to Emily Semmes, July 10, 1863, page 5. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07225)

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One little circumstance, I have forgotten, a few moments
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would be robbed of half its terrors.

Mary Oden to Emily Semmes, July 10, 1863, page 6. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07225)