

A former Confederate officer on slavery and the Civil War, 1907

Introduction

How can a soldier be proud of the country he defends while at the same time opposed to the cause he is fighting for? John S. Mosby, the renowned Confederate partisan leader, dealt with this moral dilemma years after the Civil War ended. Mosby despised slavery and believed the South had seceded to protect it. Yet he fought to defend the Confederacy, as he felt his patriotic duty to his nation outweighed all other factors. After the war, Mosby befriended General Ulysses S. Grant and joined the Republican Party, but firmly stated, “I am not ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery – a soldier fights for his country – right or wrong – he is not responsible for the political merits of the course he fights in . . . The South was my country.”

In the wake of Reconstruction a growing number of southerners began to argue that protecting slavery had not been the real cause of the war, and some even claimed that slavery was in fact a just institution. These ideas spread and grew into the “Lost Cause” movement, a romantic vision of the South that would eventually gain exposure from the popularity of films including *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. In this letter written in 1907, when he was an attorney at the Justice Department, Mosby furiously attacked the men who supported this mindset. Mosby expressed a complex and fascinating set of beliefs about the Civil War at a time when its history was just beginning to be written.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. To what extent are John Mosby’s comments hypocritical in view of his defense of slave ownership by his family?
2. List and explain the reasons Mosby expressed particular disappointment with “the modern Virginians.”
3. Mosby claimed that he was proud to fight for the Confederacy—“a soldier fights for his country. . . . The South was my country.” Mosby claimed he hated slavery and was not responsible for the political merits of the cause. Write an argument countering Mosby’s philosophy.

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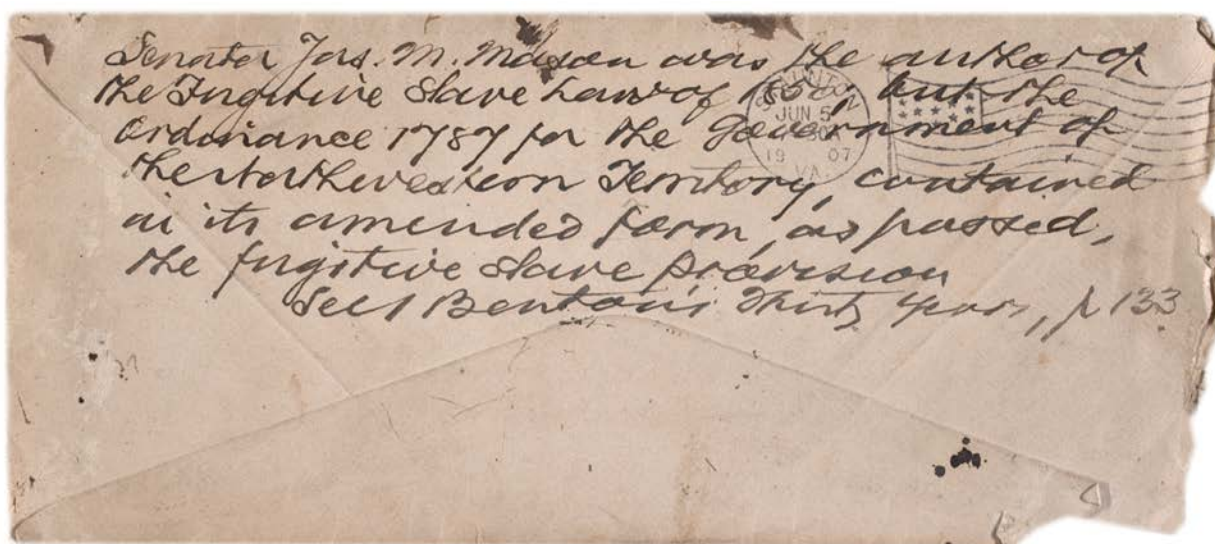
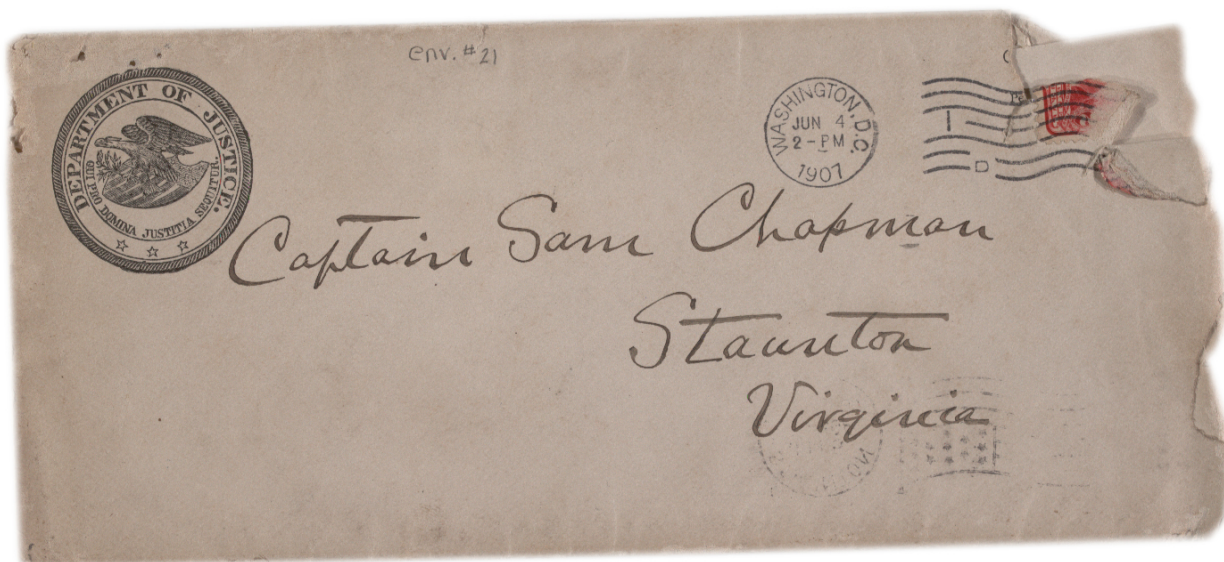
ADDRESS REPLY TO
"THE ATTORNEY GENERAL"
AND REFER TO
INITIALS AND NUMBER.

Department of Justice,
Washington.

Severian proclamation - because
slavery w. not be secure under Lincoln.
South Carolina ought to know what
was the cause for her seceding. The
truth is the modern Virginians
departed from the teachings of the
Father. John C. Calhoun's last
speech had a bitter attack on
Jefferson for his amendment to the
Ordinance of '87 prohibiting slavery
in the Northwest Territory. ~~He~~ Calhoun
was in a dying condition - was too weak
to read it - So James M. Mason, a
Virginia Senator, read it in the Senate
about two weeks before Calhoun's death -
Mch. 1850. Missouri Hunter not only voted
against the admission of California
(1850) as a free state but opposed a protest
against it. The Senate refused to record on
its Journal. Now in the Convention wh.
Gen. Taylor had called to form a constitu-
tion for California, there were 52 N ortherners
50 Southerners - but it was unanimous
against slavery - but the Virginia Senators,
with Ron McKenno. were opposed to giving
self-government to California. Ask South
York to give Chintian a skinning. I am
not ashamed of having fought on the side of
slavery - as a soldier fight for his country - right or
wrong - he is not responsible for the political events
of the course he fights in. Yours truly
John Mosby

John Mosby to Samuel Chapman, June 4, 1907. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03921.21 p. 2)

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John Mosby to Samuel Chapman, June 4, 1907. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03921.21 env.)

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Transcript

June 4th 1907.

Dear Sam.

I suppose you are now back in Staunton. I wrote you about my disgust at reading the Reunion speeches: It has since been increased by reading Christian's report. I am certainly glad I wasn't there. According to Christian the Virginia people were the abolitionists & the Northern people were pro-slavery. He says slavery was "a patriarchal" institution – So were polygamy & circumcision. Ask Hugh if he has been circumcised. Christian quotes what the Old Virginians – said against slavery. True; but why didn't he quote what the modern Virginians said [*struck:* about] [*inserted:* in] favor of it – Mason, Hunter, Wise &c. Why didn't [*struck:* t] he state that a Virginia Senator (Mason) was the author of the Fugitive Slave law – & why didn't he quote The Virginia Code (1860) [*strikeout*] that made it a crime to speak against slavery, or to teach a negro to read the Lord's prayer. Now while I think as badly of slavery as Horace Greeley did I am not ashamed that my family were slaveholders. It was our inheritance – Neither am I ashamed that my ancestors were pirates & cattle thieves. People must be judged by the standard of their own age. If it was right to own slaves as property it was right to fight for it. The South went to war on account of Slavery. South Carolina went to war – as she said in her [2] Secession proclamation – because slavery w^d. not be secure under Lincoln. South Carolina ought to know what was the cause for her seceding. The truth is the modern Virginians departed from the teachings of the Father's. John C. Calhoun's last speech had a bitter attack on M^t Jefferson for his amendment to the Ordinance of '87 prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territory. [*struck:* Jo.] Calhoun was in a dying condition – was too weak to read it – So James M. Mason, a Virginia Senator, read it in the Senate about two weeks before Calhoun's death – Mch. 1850. Mason & Hunter not only voted against the admission of California (1850) as a free state but offered a protest against [*inserted:* it] wh. the Senate refused to record on its Journal. Now in the Convention wh. Gen. Taylor had called to form a Constitution for California, there were 52 Northern & 50 Southern men – but it was unanimous against slavery – But the Virginia Senators, with Ron Tucker & Co. were opposed to giving [*inserted:* local] self-government to California. Ask Sam Yost to give

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Christian a skinning. I am not [*strikeout*] ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery – a soldier fights for his country – right or wrong – he is not responsible for the political merits of the cause he fights in.

Yours Truly

The South was my country.

Jno. S Mosby

[written across the top of page 1]

In Feby. 1860 Jeff Davis offered [*inserted: a*] bill in the Senate wh. passed, making all the territories slave territory. (see Davis' book.) He was opposed to letting the people decide whether, or not they w[*struck: ould*] [*inserted: ^d have*] slavery – W^m. A. Smith, President of Randolph Macon quit his duties as a teacher & in 1857-8-9-60 traveled all over Virginia preaching slavery & proving it was right by the bible.

[envelope]

Captain Sam Chapman

Staunton

Virginia

[verso]

Senator Jas. M. Mason was the author of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850; but the Ordinance 1787 for the government of the Northwestern Territory, contained in its amended form, as passed, the fugitive slave provision.

See Benton's Thirty Years, p 133.

Notes: Written on Department of Justice stationery. Christian is George Christian (see GLC03293).