Remembering the Flag Raising Over Fort Sumter

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Residents of Waukesha, Wisconsin, celebrated Lee’s surrender on the evening of April 9, 1865, along with the rest of the North. The long war was ending and their loved ones might finally return home. Despite their distance from the fields of battle, Waukesha’s citizens had lost many brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers to the war, and saw the hardships endured by the families left behind on the Wisconsin home front.

May E. Wright, a young woman whose days in Waukesha during the war were filled with the quest for education and purpose, filled letters with mathematical proofs, literary analysis, and contemplative musings about the students in the classes that she occasionally taught. On April 12, she wrote to a friend that “Byron, even fascinating Byron, [has been] neglected & unread” following the news out of Richmond. “It seemed as if no one would be contented to cease cheering,” she wrote, “as long as one breath of lung power remained.” Interestingly, however, May did not express her joy alone; she also had a reservation, an anxiety that accompanied the celebration. Ever since the surrender of Lee, May had “been haunted with a fear that some disaster will turn the tide of triumph.”[1]

A few days came to pass with nothing but continued reasons to celebrate. On April 14, Union troops raised the flag of the United States over Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, where the war had begun four years earlier. It was a watershed moment, and May marked the occasion by penning the following poem:

*On raising the Old Flag at Ft. Sumpter*[2]

*Apr. 14. 1865,*
Oh! Glorious Flag! Again you wave
Oer Sumpter, proud & free;
Tho foes have filled full many a grave,
They find no grave for thee.
The Sun should shine with brighter light
The winds should move in freer pride,
The day that you by strength of right
Are moved in holy triumph's tide.
The breeze that wafts your folds aloft,
Shall bear a tide of grateful praise,
And mounting higher reach the Throne,
That grants to you this Day of days.
Once trampled in dust were those starry folds
Now burst from the tomb of Sorrow’s night,
Undimmed in splendor. Burning with rays
Like a soul caught from doom, into Heaven’s light.
Not a star is lost; not a stripe effaced,
E’en purer your seeming than of yore
For, from your front has been erased
The scarlet stain that once it bore.
And washed away by the crimson tide
Flowing from hearts e’en yours in death,
By the souls of the patriot braves who’re died
Pure shall you stay, while the nation has breath.
Rich is the sacrifice we’re given
Five hundred thousand, brave & young,
The parting of Earth, & greeting of Heaven,
Have heard in these four years agone.
Heavy the breeze now sound you playing,
With widows tears, & orphans sighs
With mother’s prayers & father’s yearnings
And memory’s echo of sad good bys.
May the great God, in accepting this offering
Dry up all tears, & stifle all sighs;
Answer all pray’rs which now we’re proffering
Keep in store greetings for all the good bys.
Pure now as your white, is the crest of our future
Deep is your blue, as the azure of sky,
Bright as your red, Hope’s star is burning,
By whose life we live, in whose death, we die.[3]

This poem speaks to the symbol that the flag had become over four years of war, to its significance as a representation of the Union’s meaning. May highlighted what she acknowledged to be the cause of the war—the “scarlet stain” of slavery—and associated the Union’s victory with God’s blessing for the “strength of right.” Northerners and southerners claimed God’s support during the war and believed that the outcome was determined by His stance on the issue of slavery, and May underscored the Union embrace of that logic by highlighting the significance of “holy triumph’s tide.” The flag, May argued, represented the life and death struggle of not just the soldiers on the field, but the whole of the country’s citizens, who likened the war to a test of their entire form of government. May’s celebration of the flag in victory illustrates how northerners understood what was at stake in this war.

In fulfillment of May’s fear, President Lincoln was shot at Ford’s Theater the same evening that she drafted this poem, and he died the next morning. The poem sat untended for a few weeks, until May could bear to include it in a letter to a friend on May 8. “My mind has been strained to its utmost, in attempts to grasp the astounding events, which have so rapidly succeeded each other,” May confided to her friend as an explanation for her long silence between letters. Not only did she experience “the extremes of boundless joy, & almost despairing sorrow, which have swept over our Nation,” but she was swept up also at that same time by a series of religious revival meetings that came through her town. Trying to wrap her head around this sequence of events, “neither study writing nor general reading have rec’d much attention.”[4]

By June, May was almost back to her old self, writing missives filled with discussions of her responsibilities, her readings, and religious discourse. Even then, though, she did not trust the peace growing in the land. May commented in a letter to a friend still in military service that while “war seems to be rapidly nearing its close…I hope no disaster, may darken our prospects.” Having already went through one rapid pendulum swing from ecstasy to despair, this young woman was hesitant to believe that the nation’s ordeal was truly over.[5]

The misspelling of Sumter is in the original.

May E. Wright to Mrs. R. Wittie, April 12, 1865, cont’d on May 8, 1865, Isaac N. and Mary E. Stewart Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Ibid.

May E. Wright to Isaac Stewart, June 1, 1865, Isaac N. and Mary E. Stewart Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

https://emergingcivilwar.com/2016/03/22/remembering-the-flag-raising-over-fort-sumter/