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Richard D. Dunphy: A Frank Request to Gideon Welles

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Abstract

By January 1866, the war had concluded and the country's divisions had begun to heal. Richard Dunphy, meanwhile, devoted himself to claiming his pension and his medal. When the Medal of Honor he had earned during the Battle of Mobile Bay was lost amidst the naval bureaucracy, Dunphy took it upon himself to write a letter directly to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. He believed that Welles, who had been involved in the creation of the award, would be able to help obtain his well-deserved medal. This letter, owned by the Gilder Lehrman Institute, provides unique insight directly into Dunphy's mentality during the years immediately following the war. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Richard Dunphy, pensions, Union veterans, Medal of Honor, Gideon Welles

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Richard D. Dunphy: A Frank Request to Gideon Welles

OCTOBER 24, 2013

By: Kevin Lavery, '16

By January 1866, the war had concluded and the country's divisions had begun to heal. Richard Dunphy, meanwhile, devoted himself to claiming his pension and his medal. When the Medal of Honor he had earned during the Battle of Mobile Bay was lost amidst the naval bureaucracy, Dunphy took it upon himself to write a letter directly to Secretary of the Navy [Gideon Welles](#). He believed that Welles, who had been involved in the creation of the award, would be able to help obtain his well-deserved medal. This letter, owned by the [Gilder Lehrman Institute](#), provides unique insight directly into Dunphy's mentality during the years immediately following the war.

The letter begins with an apology for Dunphy's audacity in addressing Gideon Welles directly, rather than filing his request through the Navy. He explains that Admiral Farragut had planned to send the medal through a mutual acquaintance, but that it had never arrived. "I place a great value on it and I believe I am justly entitled to it," he writes. The medal had been awarded for the same action during which Dunphy lost both of his arms, and so it was an important memento of his experience and a reward for his gallant sacrifice that warranted a direct appeal to the highest authority.



Fascinatingly, Dunphy alludes in the letter to a conversation he had with Welles in Washington several months prior, although he does not describe it in detail. Among the 2.1 million Union soldiers fighting in the war, Dunphy had the rare honor of meeting the secretary of the Navy and so felt a special confidence when writing to him that speaks volumes about Welles' ability to interact with common sailors. Dunphy's letter also praises Welles for being an advocate for soldiers' pensions, the income source upon which he and other invalids were so dependent. He observes that "the pension is low especially in my case when I have to pay a man to accompany me wherever I go." This problem was partially resolved by his marriage and the availability of artificial limbs, but the pension remained important to Dunphy's ability to raise a family until the end of his life.

This letter is also notable in that it is one of the few documents written from Dunphy's point of view. It is difficult to tell whether he dictated or used a prosthetic limb to write, but the words at least appear to be his. In his pension files, the documents are all either written by government officials, his wife, or acquaintances regarding his legal troubles. His own words are strikingly absent from the discussion, appearing only through the filter of government investigators looking into his domestic struggles. This letter restores Dunphy's voice to his own story, and is therefore one of the most important documents to understanding the mentality of the wounded veteran.

Although there is no record of whether Dunphy actually received his long-sought medal, a small note on the back of the letter reads, "medal to be prepared." Welles presumably ensured that the sailor received his medal and the issue was settled. Whether or not this was the case, the letter serves as a valuable record of Dunphy's story as told by the veteran himself and the meaning of the Medal of Honor to one of its earliest recipients.

Sources:

Richard D. Dunphy to Gideon Welles, February 6, 1866, GLCo8655, Gilder Lehrman Collection, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York City.

Images:

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