




1-28-2013

Out of Sorts: Finding the Passion behind the Article

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Rudy, John M., "Out of Sorts: Finding the Passion behind the Article" (2013). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 65.

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Out of Sorts: Finding the Passion behind the Article

Abstract

The individual letters used to layout and print a newspaper in the 19th century were called sorts. Each letter was a sort. But the individual sorts that make up the words don't always give you the full story behind an article. They often aren't quite enough. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, The Gettysburg Compiler

Disciplines

History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

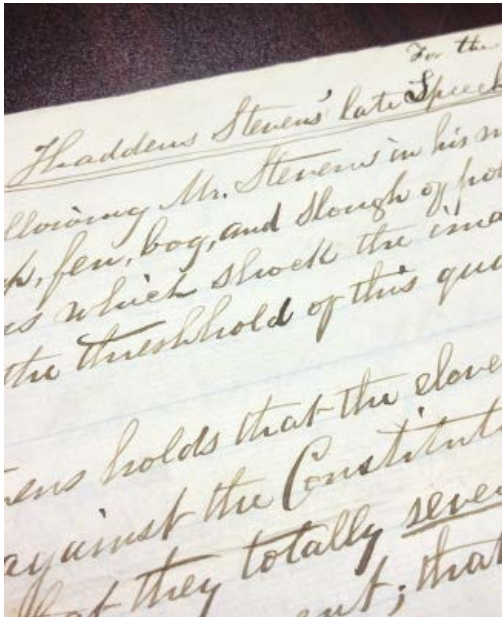
Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Out of Sorts: Finding the Passion behind the Article

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2013



The individual letters used to layout and print a newspaper in the 19th century were called sorts. Each letter was a sort. But the individual sorts that make up the words don't always give you the full story behind an article. They often aren't quite enough.

Digging hard into odd historical files, you find amazing things. Most recently it happened to me at Adams County Historical Society, my perpetual Thursday night haunt. Doing an in-depth dive, in essence living inside of an archive for years, you get to know the collection so intimately that it becomes a friend.

The vertical files in particular are amazingly odd creatures. They bear the fingerprints of anyone who has worked as at gathering the raw material together, in this case in Adams County. They're weird. They're wild. They're the mixed bag

of history.

A few weeks ago, I opened a mixed bag up and found the amazing. In a folder on the *Gettysburg Compiler*, the borough's often-inflammatory conservative newspaper of the 19th century, a yellowing page has iron gall ink scrawled across it. I thought I recognized the handwriting.

The title screamed at me, "Thaddeus Stevens' Late Speech." The opening lines were just too good to resist diving in deeper. "Without following Mr. Stevens in his meanderings through marsh, swamp, fen, bog and slough of political despond, let it suffice to approach the threshold of this quagmire of abolition heresies." The editor continues on, excoriating Stevens in interminable diatribe.

The tone is spot on for Henry J. Stahle, the newspaper's editor. So are the politics and the handwriting. In the end, Stahle demands every good, right-thinking American to:

"defend our free institutions; defend our liberal, toleration of religion; defend our homes, our altars, and our fires from the ruthless hands of conspiring demagogues and abolition traitors; defend the purity of the ballot box; defend the President in his Constitutional policy of restoration and re-Union; and God will bless and save our country from the ravages of another civil war."

The letter is amazing in its content and its vitriol. It was eventually published in the [September 18th, 1865 edition of the newspaper on page 2](#) as written. Surrounding it is the real aim of the editor: a concerted effort to deny David McConaughy a seat in the State Legislature, and thereby prevent real black voting rights from becoming a reality within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Where civil war had divided North and South, racial war threatened to divide states, counties and even small towns as the "War Between the States" subsided and the war over the future of the black man began.

But what's most exciting is the realization of the process. This diatribe was handwritten, with underlined words peppered throughout the page. The vitriol is in the words, but it's just as evident in the stroke of the pen. Touching the paper, the rage seeps through. These words were real for Stahle, they were things he believed so passionately and felt had such dire consequences that he penned them in neat but violent hand.

Where in the newspaper, Stahle's fear of America becoming, "*a government of a single idea*," is rendered in italics, in his draft each word is underlined of its own accord. Stahle fears the, "abolition traitors," because they threatens to transform America into, "a government of a single idea." That idea is ever-extending freedom to the oppressed a[Type a quote from the document or the summary of an interesting point. You can position the text box anywhere in the document. Use the Drawing Tools tab to change the formatting of the pull quote text box.]

nd punishing those who deny that freedom. And as you look at the words, look at the simple ink on a page, you can almost see Stahle's pen underlining each separate word in the phrase, a short underscore for each word resolutely placed below. This wasn't the America he wanted. And he let that fact be known.

When they were translated into type, when the sorts were laid in the trays and the paper was ready to print, the italics became uniform. The anger was there, but not nearly as palpable. But in touching a simple sheet of paper, a tool of hatred from nearly a century and a half ago, you find Stahle's soul in neat, dark ink.



A photo, alongside the handwritten manuscript in the folder, showing the *Compiler's* wartime office on Baltimore Street.

