

Richard C. Taylor letterMS.0159

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1854 January 15

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Descriptive Summary

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Creator

Taylor, Richard C. (Richard Cornelius), 1835-1917

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Administrative Information

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Biographical / Historical

Richard Cornelius Taylor was born in 1835 in Norfolk, Virginia. He graduated VMI in 1854. During the Civil War he was a Major, artillery, with the Confederate States of America. After the War he was a railroad official and teacher. Taylor died in 1917 in Norfolk.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of one letter (dated January 15, 1854) from Richard C. Taylor to his father, Walter H. Taylor. Taylor describes in detail the circumstances surrounding the murder of his classmate Cadet Thomas Blackburn by Charles B. Christian, a Washington College law student.

Related Materials

The book titled "Murder in Lexington: VMI, Honor and Justice in Antebellum Virginia" (The History Press) by Daniel Morrow is an account of Thomas Blackburn's murder and subsequent events.

Keywords

Virginia Military Institute—Cadet life—1850-1859

Washington and Lee University—Students

Washington College (Lexington, Va.)—Students

Lexington (Va.)—History

Virginia Military Institute—Class of 1854

Murder—Virginia—Lexington

Correspondence

Blackburn, Thomas, 1834-1854

Christian, Charles B. (Charles Burks)

Description of Subordinate Components

Letter to Walter H. Taylor

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/5419

Unit Date 1854 January 15

Language English.

Scope and Contents

The letter describes in detail the circumstances surrounding the murder of Richard C. Taylor's classmate Thomas Blackburn by Charles B. Christian, a Washington College law student.

Keywords

Correspondence

Lexington (Va.)—History

Murder—Virginia—Lexington

Virginia Military Institute—Cadet life—1850-1859

Virginia Military Institute—Class of 1854

Washington College (Lexington, Va.)—Students

Washington and Lee University—Students

Blackburn, Thomas, 1834-1854

Christian, Charles B. (Charles Burks)

Transcription

January 15, 1854

Dearest Father: This was to be a letter of congratulations at my stand first on everything but tis a sad time here now. The body of one of our classmates lies bloody in a room below. He was murdered last night. The greatest excitement prevails and it is only by mildness and the prayers of the minister of the gospel last night that the lynch law was not executed. In order to give something for my feelings to dwell upon and quiet them I will write you a detailed account of the whole of this sad affair. At a party which I attended uptown a law student by the name of Christian, having been introduced to Miss Anderson, engaged her company for church. Her cousin in the Corps, our classmate Blackburn, having heard of it and not liking the character of the gentleman told her to write and decline his invitation. This was some weeks ago. This fellow Christian who has the name of a numskull, wrote her a very amusing note having Latin, French & etc. quotations in it, only part of which was at all serious where he desired to know who was the calumniator. This was shown to Blackburn in fun, nothing being thought of it.

Our dear classmate who never knew fear went up and told him he was the man answerable for everything. C. told him that I have heard the expression that "he acted nobly in seeing after his cousin." He was very much frightened and seemed glad to get out of the scrape. Everybody thought all parties were satisfied. This was Saturday. This was all of the difficulty previous to last night. A classmate and myself went up last night for Miss May Kerr and Miss Julia Lewis to go to church. Miss J was not there. He walked down with Miss M and I alongside of them. As we got opposite to the Doctor's door we saw a man run up and tell him there was something the matter at Mr. White's down the street. We thinking that a child or somebody was sick paid no attention to it. When we were opposite the church, seeing a light and some 1 or 3 of our fellows on the fence, I ran across to see what was the matter, Miss M telling me to immediately return and tell her. One of the cadets saw me and jumped down and told me B. was stabbed. I knowing of the difficulty between B & C and thinking the students & cadets were going to fight and not dreaming that B was anything more than scratched and was still fighting over the fence or in fact scarcely knowing what I thought, ran back and told Lightfoot that some of our boys were in difficulty & to carry Miss M in Church and hurry out, she begging us to keep cool and not fight. I immediately ran across and jumped up on the fence and Oh God, can never forget what a sight. There was a classmate whom but a few hours before I was laughing and joking with in his dying struggle. I was perfectly paralyzed. He was stabbed in three places on his head and once under his ear, the latter cutting his jugular vein and killing him almost instantly. What my first feelings were I can scarcely describe. I felt as if I could see the author of that deed burned to a crisp. As soon as he had breathed his last I jumped from the fence. There were but five of us there at the time. On first promptings we with one accord cried for vengeance and were about to collect our Corps who now came pouring up and take the author of this dreadful, dreadful deed from the jail where they had lodged him. But thank God better feelings soon came and we who were first so excited endeavored to calm those who now came up panting and crying death to the cowardly villain. By and by those cadets were quieted by the exertions of many of the citizens of the peace and professors and when his remains were carried down they were persuaded to follow him a mournful, mournful crowd. I know we were wrong dearest Father to entertain ideas of vengeance against a man who must have suffered unutterable torments the whole of last night, but think of seeing his cold a bloody form, his proud spirit send to its last accounts by one who was not worthy to enter his noble mind and then you can look upon us with leniency. At first I was the only 1st classman there and Christian's knife and stick were brought to me by a Cadet who found them behind the church where the fight took place. I could scarcely hold the knife in my hand. It was a long wooden handle butcher knife and clodded with his blood and flesh. I immediately looked out a magistrate and put them in his hand. There was great dread lest the law student should get them and hide them. The lower part of barracks is now crowded with citizens. The inquest is being held over the body. Our class sat up with it last night. Immediately after we came down Col. Smith made a very touching address recommending us in the strongest terms to pursue an orderly course and let the law have its way. There is no doubt that the murderer will be hanged. He carried B down from the church telling him that he wished to see him. This was the last that was seen of them until C had finished his blows and ran away. B was totally unarmed. He went to the church with Miss Julia Junkins. Poor Miss Anderson is dreadfully distressed, he was her cousin. She heard of it in church and came out when she heard he was really dead. It was awful to see her. I hope I may never see such excitement again. In a little while the street was blocked to you could hardly walk. We will bury poor Blackburn tomorrow. All feelings of revenge have died away in everybody's heart and there will be no disturbance.

When we returned to Barracks some of his room mates expressed a desire the bell should be tolled. Bruce a fellow classman and myself went up and tolled it for half an hour. It sounded very solemn on the still midnight air and as I thought that the young man whose spirit had just winged its flight to its creator and whose sad requiem we were then performing, but a few hours before was sitting next to me in church and afterwards was in our room talking and joking and the last words I think he uttered to me he was endeavoring to plague me because a young lady whom he said I was in love with up town had sent some message or something to him. I could but say to myself how true is the text "in the midst of life we are in

death." Poor fellow he was one of my best friends and our society has suffered a sad, sad loss. It was a sad warning to us all and one I hope that will have great effect. Nothing at all is known about the fight. Something more will be brought to light after awhile I expect. Excuse dearest father this doleful letter but it was a relief to tell you all about it. I commenced to writing to you on Friday but thought I would let the report get home first and give you the good news of my stand. Succeeded at last, first in all my studies. Tis true I had to study like five hundred and when we came out for the last time I could hardly talk, went to bed and slept and slept. Goodbye dearest father, love to dear ma and all sisters & brothers. Your own dear son. Excuse bad spelling writing in haste, Yr Dick