[Sullivan Ballou's Body: Battlefield Relic Hunting and the Fate of Soldiers' Remains](#)

Major Sullivan Ballou's last letter home has become something of a sacred text. Penned days before the first major battle of the American Civil War, the major's words enjoyed an outsized afterlife when they became part of Ken Burns' immensely popular documentary *The Civil War*. Read by Paul Roebling and paired with "Ashokan Farewell," Burns created an indelible scene. Ballou, an officer in the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry Regiment, used soaring rhetoric to anchor his devotion in country and family. He declared his love for his wife Sarah "deathless," bound by cables that "nothing but Omnipotence could break." Yet his love of country came over him "like a strong wind" and moved him inexorably to the battlefield. Burns concludes the stirring segment by relating Ballou's sad fate: mortally wounded at the Battle of Bull Run. But his story did not end there.

Ballou's body, buried in late July 1861 at Sudley Church near the Bull Run

battlefield, did not rest in peace. Sometime after the battle, rebel soldiers dug up the remains of United States troops. According to local Blacks who witnessed the scene, the Confederates first searched for buttons as souvenirs. Their work then turned far more macabre. They started collecting bones. One soldier proclaimed that he intended to use a skull as a "drinking-cup on the occasion of his marriage." Bull Run initiated many a soldier into the bloody world of combat. Horrified and exhilarated by the encounter, they transferred their mixed emotions into the collection of objects with violent histories. However terrible these acts, Sullivan Ballou suffered a worse fate: Confederates disinterred, beheaded, and then burned his corpse.

Ken Burns never related the fate of Sullivan Ballou's body. To do so would have spotlighted an uncomfortable part of Civil War history marked by violence and brutality. Perhaps the master documentarian should not be faulted. The incident, well-publicized during the war years, has largely been forgotten. Simon Harrison, one of the few scholars who has written about the collection of bones in war, maintains that the "Confederate soldiers and their supporters who collected Northern skulls did so because their political interests were predicated on representing Southerners and Northerners as two different peoples." Harrison's argument is convincing. But the incident also speaks to a broader cultural shift. The existential crisis of civil war challenged, though never overturned, the nineteenth-century's prevailing culture of romanticism. Soldiers' reports from the front, citizens' encounters with the aftermath of battle, and the circulation of objects with violent histories created narratives of war that were marked departures from conventional accounts of war grounded in heroism and glory. Only by placing Ballou's sentimentalist letter in tension with his dismembered body can Civil War Americans' layered discourse be fully revealed.

It is worth pausing here, though, to note that the removal and display of human remains intersects with a long history. On the one hand, white Americans, and their English forebears, had a history of taking and displaying skulls as acts of domination. New Englanders affixed the head of Philip, a Wampanoag leader, on a post outside Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1676. And in 1838, Dr. Frederick Weedon took the personal effects of the Seminole warrior Osceola and then removed his head. At different points in the American South, enslavers displayed Blacks' heads as warnings against resistance. On the other hand, Europeans and Americans had long kept bones as relics or artifacts of curiosity. Beginning around 1200, the new Gothic architectural style within European churches accorded privileged spaces for the body parts of saints. Holy relics and human remains were essential parts of religious life. Much later, during the Revolutionary era, avowed Loyalist David Redding was caught trying to steal muskets at Bennington, Vermont. He was executed for the crime in 1778. A local resident, Dr. Jonas Fay, collected the body and preserved the skeleton. After being conveyed to another family, the bones ended up back in Bennington at the Historical Museum before eventual reburial. Thomas Paine's skeleton suffered a similar fate. Disinterred from an American burial plot, the bones ended up in England. They were distributed among different people, some lost or

destroyed, others collected and displayed.

Confederates' quest for bones thus connects to a bizarre history of the use, and misuse, of human remains. Bones from the Bull Run battlefield were taken as acts of domination and displayed as trophies of war. However macabre, human remains became part of the deeply variegated material culture of war. The gravity of civil war and the conditions it generated resulted in "a massive traffic in objects," as historian Joan Cashin observes, "prompting the redistribution of millions" of objects of war. Bayonets and bullets, fragments from famous trees and notable buildings, articles of clothing and military accoutrements all featured prominently. Human skulls were another matter entirely.

By the time Northern citizens visited the Bull Run battlefield in the spring of 1862, word of the rebels' atrocities had already circulated. The acts were being used, even exaggerated, for political purposes and publicized in the Northern press. Congress launched an investigation. Ohio Senator Benjamin Wade delivered a summary of the committee's findings. He framed a key portion of the report around the "treatment of our heroic dead" and punctuated his case by methodically documenting the "fiendish spirit" of the rebels. Wade wisely focused on a theme both familiar and important to nineteenth-century Americans: the care, burial, and memorialization of the dead which formed key elements of the Good Death. Civil War Americans saw the human body, even in death, as central to selfhood and individuality. Bodies were fastidiously prepared and carefully buried. Yet war had called everything into question. Acting with practicality and alacrity, Americans hastily dug and imperfectly marked graves. Corpses were often comingled in long, anonymous trenches. Soldiers North and South watched on with trepidation as they worried about their potential fate. North Carolinian George Battle, writing to his mother in July 1861, described the Bull Run battlefield as a "most horrible sight." He came to a Yankee soldier "who had only a little dust thrown over him." Worms were "eating the skin off his face," and Battle shuddered "to think that perhaps I may be buried that way."

The antebellum era saw the rise of rural and garden cemeteries. Battlefields not only obliterated the boundaries between the living and the dead but also threatened the sanctity of human remains. Frederick Scholes of Brooklyn, New York, visited the battlefield in April to find his brother's body. He met a Black man, Simon, "who stated that it was a common thing for the rebel soldiers to exhibit the bones of the Yankees." Scholes surveyed the area and found the disturbed grave of a Zouave. He then uncovered a long trench containing bone fragments. In one instance, he found a sawn shinbone. "From the appearance of it," Scholes conjectured, "pieces had been sawed off to make finger-rings." Another visitor to the area, G. A. Smart of Cambridge, Massachusetts, went in search of his brother. He found the uniform—homemade by their mother—but "no head in the grave, and no bones of any kind." Scenes from Bull Run shattered any hope that the Civil War's Union dead would be treated with the dignity that cultural norms demanded.

Soldiers, citizens, and the enslaved encountered the aftermath of battle for the first time in the summer of 1861 and spring of 1862. The harrowing photographs of the Antietam battlefield, which forever changed public representations of war, were still months away. Most Americans understood battle in a highly idealized form later captured in the lithograph, "Battle of Bull Run," by the Chicago-based firm Kurz and Allison. Although wounded men are present, there is a total absence of blood. Those figures portrayed in the act of being shot are gallantly posed. And the neat, tidy lines of soldiers romanticize the chaos of combat. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Kurz and Allison, *Battle of Bull Run—July 21st—Federal Gen. McDowell . . . Confederate Gen. Beauregard,* Manassas, Virginia, circa 1889. Photograph courtesy [Library of Congress](). Accessed July 29, 2021.

In the first year of the conflict, Americans were still processing the escalating scale of war and its devastating consequences. This process included a drive for material connections, especially to the war's first major battle which the *Richmond Dispatch* described as possessing "interest and significance" seldom attached to "battles ever before fought." Material culture fused the front lines to the home front, as soldiers collected and conveyed things from the battlefield. Whether out of total indifference to the Federal dead or out of a macabre fascination with their handiwork during battle, bones were included among the artifacts. A local citizen related that the Confederates had boiled bodies to remove the flesh and obtain the bones as relics. Although Confederate soldiers rarely wrote about the collection and use of bones, Dick Simpson of the 3rd South Carolina Infantry opined to his sister: "We have had no opportunity to collect the trophies from the battlefield . . . But Dick Lewis was here yesterday and promised to get some things from the Fourth Regt such as sword, bayonet, pistol, balls, and if you want it we can send you some yankee bones." It is the matter-of-fact mixture of swords and bones that makes the entry so chilling.

The testimony of Rhode Island governor William Sprague IV, who had fought at the battle of Bull Run, proved the most damning. He and a party of men went to the spot of Ballou's grave. Once there, no body was discovered. Instead,

Sprague related, the body had been "taken out, beheaded, and burned." Nearby they found a shirt belonging to Ballou. The party gathered "up the ashes containing the portion of his remains that were left, and put them in a coffin together with his shirt and the blanket with the hair left upon it."

Newspapers marveled at the stories from Bull Run. While some tales were—indeed still are—difficult to corroborate, Northern audiences consumed and believed them. *The Liberator*, for example, published large sections of the Senate Committee's report. The piece leveled the charge, "Inhumanity to the living has been the leading trait of the rebel leaders, but it was reserved for your Committee to disclose, as a concerted system, their insults to the wounded and their mutilation and desecration of the gallant dead." *The Liberator* told how the bodies of United States troops had been left to decay in open air, while bones were "carried off as trophies." The former point carried great weight. The victors in battle were supposed to bury the dead of both sides. And, in fact, a young Georgia soldier told his parents shortly after Bull Run, "Wee will Hav to burry the Yankeys today to keep them from stinking us to death." Yet, the rebels fulfilled their obligations inconsistently. John Reekie's powerful 1865 image, "A Burial Party, Cold Harbor," demonstrated the consequences of unfinished work. Included in Alexander Gardner's 1866 publication, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, the image captured badly decayed bodies from the battles at Gaine's Mill and Cold Harbor. Bones and rags—not uniformed corpses—are splayed across the stretcher. Gardner, a social activist and staunch abolitionist, used this image to chasten white Virginians: the "sad scene . . . speaks ill of the residents" who "allowed even the remains of those they considered enemies, to decay unnoticed where they fell." (Figure 2)

Figure 2: "A Burial Party, Cold Harbor, Virginia," John Reekie, in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War,* vol. 2, image courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Richard Norton Memorial Fund. Accessed July 31, 2021.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, which carried clear-eyed images and stories of the Civil War, used the atrocities as inspiration for a grim cartoon. "The Rebel Lady's Boudoir," printed in May 1862, depicts a scene of

domestic inversion. A fabricated letter reads, "My dearest wife, I hope you have received all the little relics I have sent you from time to time." He most recently included "a baby-rattle for our little pet, made out of the ribs of a Yankee drummer-boy." The sitting room is portrayed as a perverse cabinet of curiosity. Skeletal remains line the walls. Skulls, leg bones, and arm bones have been incorporated into furniture and tableware. Death incases domesticity. As with many cartoons of the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century, an unattended child is left to her own devices while the mother neglects her socially prescribed duties. In this case, the toddler plays with a skull. The spoils of war are represented as a series of dark trophies. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* successfully created exaggerated depictions of white Southerners' savagery for political fodder. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: "The Rebel Lady's Boudoir," with caption, "Lady (reads) — "My dearest wife, I hope you have received all the little relics I have sent you from time to time. I am about to add something to your collection which I feel sure will please you — a baby-rattle for our little pet, made out of the ribs of a Yankee drummer-boy." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* May 17, 1862, digitized via [House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College](#). Accessed July 27, 2021.

Readers of *Frank Leslie's* may have recalled an image from *Harper's Weekly* published in the fall of 1861. Using an autumnal reference, the print portrays Confederate president Jefferson Davis as a zombie-eyed grim reaper. The rebellion he leads has resulted in widespread death. He callously collects the human harvest trudging forward without thought of the consequences or costs. Playing on similar themes in June 1862, and coinciding with the release of the report on rebel atrocities at Bull Run, *Harper's Weekly* published a cartoon featuring specimens of "Secesh Industry." A goblet made from a Yankee skull, a necklace from Yankee teeth, a paperweight from a jawbone, a reading desk composed of a human skeleton, and various items made from hair composed the array of grim objects. (Figures 4-5)

Figure 4: "Jeff Davis Reaping the Harvest," October 26, 1861, Harper's Weekly, image courtesy [Library of Congress](). Accessed July 30, 2021.

Figure 5: Cartoon with caption: "Some Specimens of 'Secesh' Industry—intended for the London Exhibition of 1862, but unfortunately intercepted by the 'Paper Blockade.'" *Harper's Weekly,* June 7, 1862.

The desecration of Union graves at Bull Run were an exceptional moment. No other cases of widespread grave plundering have been documented. Instead, Confederate soldiers—like their Union counterparts—more typically collected materiel from the battlefield. But white Southerners' first major encounter with their foes and their subsequent actions, as well as public reactions, are nonetheless revealing. The Civil War challenged Americans' preconceptions about death and burial. The war's killing fields forced participants to grapple with the great "existential crisis brought on by the war." Confederates questioned the prevailing social importance of sentimentalism through the collection, display, and use of bones. Furthermore, Northern cartoons referencing these atrocities placed familiar cultural touchstones and contemporary concerns in tension with one another, thereby both confirming and challenging prevailing tropes. Visual depictions and printed accounts created a new discourse that turned rebels into barbarians and paved the way for a more savage war. This episode, therefore, while anomalous, highlights the broader cultural transformations of the Civil War era and demonstrates that while romanticism was never fully supplanted, the era challenged prevailing orthodoxy. (Figure 6)
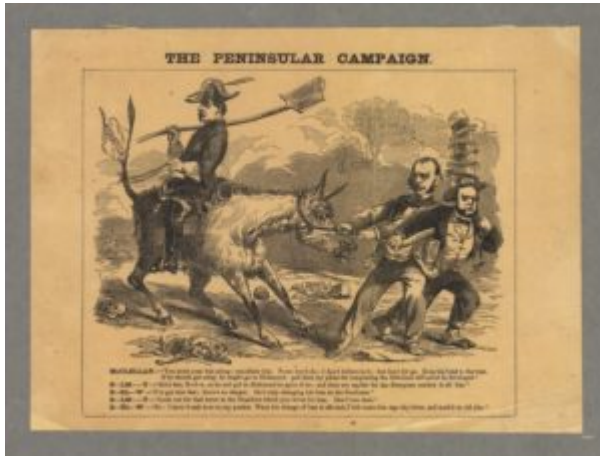
Figure 6: This political cartoon, circa 1862, satirizes United States General George B. McClellan's failures during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. Partial skeletons litter the ground as evidence of the fierce fighting, while political and military affairs are stuck at an impasse. "The Peninsular Campaign" (United States: s.n., between 1862-1865). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts.

Further Reading:

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