Guide to the Benjamin Franklin Butler Collection

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Guide to the Benjamin Franklin Butler Collection, 1861-1868, 1889

Collection number: Wyles SC 46

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Descriptive Summary
Title: Benjamin Franklin Butler Collection,
Date (inclusive): 1861-1868, 1889
Collection Number: Wyles SC 46
Creator: Butler, Benjamin F. (Benjamin Franklin), 1818-1893.
Extent: .02 linear feet (1 folder)
Repository: University of California, Santa Barbara. Library. Department of Special Collections
Santa Barbara, California 93106-9010
Physical Location: Vault
Language: English.

Access Restrictions
None.

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Acquisition Information
Purchase.

Biography
Benjamin Franklin Butler was born in 1818, but his father died when he was an infant, leaving the family penniless. Butler grew up in Lowell, Massachusetts, where his mother ran a boarding house. After failing to get into West Point, Butler studied for the ministry at Waterville College, but after graduation he decided to become a lawyer instead. In the 1850s, Benjamin Butler got involved in politics, and quickly developed a reputation for ruthlessness, switching political parties
whenever it suited his interest. His bid for governor of Massachusetts in 1860 garnered him a mere four percent of the vote. However, he quickly received permission to form a state regiment to help ensure order at President Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. Despite having no military training or experience, Butler was made a brigadier-general in the tiny militia, which he then parlayed into the rank of U.S. Army general after the Civil War began.

After military successes in Maryland and North Carolina, General Butler was given command of the occupation forces in New Orleans. His tenure in the city was highly controversial, as he displayed the same ruthlessness and unconventional thinking that characterized his earlier political career. Having earned the nickname "Beast" Butler, he was relieved of command by President Lincoln at the end of 1862. Butler returned to the Northeast, where he built a huge following for his political ambitions, becoming so popular that President Lincoln offered him the Vice Presidential spot on the 1864 ticket. Butler turned him down, believing the army provided better opportunities than the vice presidency could. However, a long string of military defeats led Butler to resign in frustration at the end of 1864, and after Lincoln's assassination, Butler became one of President Andrew Johnson's fiercest opponents. Elected to Congress in 1868, Butler led the charge for Johnson's impeachment and served as the lead prosecutor in Johnson's Senate trial.

Although Johnson was acquitted, Benjamin Butler remained in Congress, often championing civil rights causes. Then, after numerous unsuccessful attempts, he was finally elected governor of Massachusetts in 1882. He served a two-year term, and then ran for president in 1884 as the candidate for the Greenback-Labor and Anti-Monopoly parties, receiving about two percent of the vote. He died in early 1893 at the age of 76.

**Scope and Content of Collection**

The collection contains three letters (ALS) about various Civil War-related issues. The first, written in the spring of 1861, is addressed to the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, and touches on Butler's concern for what he calls the "negro question," that is, the official status of the slaves in Confederate territory occupied by Union troops. Butler would continue to deal with African-American issues throughout the war and his subsequent political career.

The second letter comes from 1868, when Butler's new career in Congress was being haunted by his actions during the war. Butler writes to the *Boston Journal* seeking to set the record straight about lawsuits that have been brought against him by angry Southerners.

The third letter, from 1889, shows that even late in life, Butler was still plagued by questions about his actions in New Orleans, in this instance the 1862 execution of a man charged with tearing down a United States flag from a government building. The letter is addressed to either Curtis Guild, a Boston newspaperman, or his son, Curtis Guild, Jr., a politician and future governor.

Also included is a handwritten transcript of an interview conducted in June 1862 between General Butler and Captain Homer B. Sprague of the 13th Regiment of Connecticut Volunteers, prepared by Captain Sprague in New Orleans. Captain Sprague had refused to surrender a fugitive slave now in his regiment's employ to slave hunters, and General Butler was called in to settle the matter. The document reveals Butler's thinking on the subject, and the fine line he was forced to walk in dealing with slavery-related issues. After reviewing the case, Butler allowed the fugitive girl to remain with the Union Army. For further information, see *History of the 13th Infantry Regiment of Connecticut Volunteers* (1867) by Homer B. Sprague.

**Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Butler, Benjamin F. (Benjamin Franklin), 1818-1893.

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**Box**

**Three letters (ALS), 1861 - 1889**