

Civil War Letters

INTRODUCTION TO SULLIVAN BALLOU'S LETTER

Love of country is not unique to Americans, but in a democracy, sending citizens to war requires far more than a dictator's fiat. In 1861, men on both sides of the conflict were willing to lay down their lives for what they believed to be right. Southerners fought for states' rights and a society built upon human slavery, which many considered the natural order of the universe. When the war started, few volunteers in the northern army marched off to end slavery, but many were ready to fight and die to preserve the Union.

One such soldier was Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Regiment, Rhode Island Volunteers. Then thirty-two years old, Ballou had overcome his family's poverty to start a promising career as a lawyer. He and his wife Sarah wanted to build a better life for their two boys, Edgar and Willie. An ardent Republican and a devoted supporter of Abraham Lincoln, Ballou had volunteered in the spring of 1861, and on June 19 he and his men had left Providence for Washington, D.C.

He wrote the following letter to his wife from a camp just outside the nation's capital, and it is at once a passionate love letter as well as a profound meditation on the meaning of the Union. The beauty of the language as well as the passion of the sentiments touched the popular imagination, and brought home to Americans once again what defense of democracy entailed.

Ballou wrote the letter July 14, while awaiting orders that would take him to Manassas, where he and twenty-seven of his men would die one week later at the Battle of Bull Run.

Read Sullivan's letter to his wife as well as other letters from the Civil War to learn more about these brave men and women and the world they knew....



Complete the following activities:

1. Read Sullivan Ballou's letter. Discuss the following in your groups:

How does the letter make you feel?

Why do you think Sullivan Ballou wrote this letter?

If you were Sullivan's wife or children, would you plead with him not to enlist in the Union army? Why or why not?

In how many ways does Sullivan comfort his wife by what he writes to her?

Does he have regrets for himself, or only for his wife and children?

Sullivan writes that he is "communing with God, my country, and thee."

What is his relationship to the claims that each of these make upon his life?

Images of "wind" and "breath" appear and reappear in the letter. How are these images related at different times to "God, my country, and thee"?

Sullivan says that he is perfectly willing to die to pay the debt owed to those who fell in the American Revolution. What debt, if any, do students feel we owe to Sullivan Ballou and other men like him?

2. Choose two other letters written during the Civil War by southerners and northerners from "Letters from the Civil War Web Links document. Complete a "Written Document Analysis Worksheet" and "Civil War Letters Analysis Worksheet" for each letter.
3. Look through the authentic civil war replications. What do you notice about the style of writing, the paper, the language? Choose one of the letters to try and transcribe word for word.