

A Guide to the Giles Gunn Papers, 1848-1854 MS.0292

Giles Gunn papers

1848-1854

Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

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Unit ID

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Unit Date

1848-1854

Language

English

Creator

Gunn, Giles, 1825-1892

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Repository

Virginia Military Institute Archives

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

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Acquisition Information

The Giles Gunn papers were donated to the Virginia Military Institute in 1933 by Mary Maigret, Gunn's niece.

Preferred Citation

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Biographical / Historical

Giles Gunn was born on December 19, 1825 in Connecticut, most likely in Washington, Litchfield County. He was the son of John Northrup Gunn, Jr. (1798-1883) and Lora Smith (1800-1841), who were married on June 16, 1819.

By 1848, Gunn was working as a teacher in Lexington, Virginia, where he married Virginia W. Morrison of Rockbridge County on December 19, 1859. Birth records indicate that the couple had several children, all born in Rockbridge: Lora (1860-?), Johnella (1871-?), Effa (or Effie) (1875-?), Fred (187?-?). This listing of children may not be complete.

Gunn died on November 24, 1892. No other biographical information was available at the time the collection was processed.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of five letters (dated 1848 to 1854) written by Giles Gunn while he was a schoolteacher in Lexington, Virginia. The letters, addressed primarily to his sister Mary (living at the Gunn home in Washington, Litchfield County, Connecticut), include discussions of interesting local events as well as references to family. Topics include: VMI commencement A detailed description of his school and his methods of instruction A description of the communion service at a local church, including references to black communicants References to the townspeople's reaction to a rumored slave insurrection A discussion of the murder of VMI cadet Thomas Blackburn.

Keywords

Lexington (Va.)—History
Virginia Military Institute—Band—19th century
Virginia Military Institute—Cadet life—1840-1849
Virginia Military Institute—History—19th century
Virginia Military Institute—Cadet life—1850-1859
Correspondence
Blackburn, Thomas, 1834-1854

Description of Subordinate Components

Letter to Mary Gunn

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/1847

Unit Date 1848 July 8

Language English

Scope and Contents

Written from Lexington, Virginia. Letter regards commencement at the VMI and a speech by the governor of Virginia.

Keywords

Commencement ceremonies

Virginia Military Institute—Cadet life—1840-1849

Correspondence

Transcription

Lexington, VA July 8th, 1848

Dear Sister Mary, Having a few spare moments I will improve them by commencing a letter to you and if I get it begun I know that I shall finish it some time or other.

You are at school I suppose taking in learning in junks as big as my fist and then to settle it go home and trot little May on your knee. Wa'll there is nothing like improvement "go it while you are young", if I could live over my life again I would study and no mistake. Oliver is well or was last Sunday he was down here and as fine as a new band boy, it would make you laugh and no mistake to see him try to drink buttermilk. The people here use that as "the drink" as much as we do water, if you should drop into where he is about noon, you would find him seated on a stump with what is call a "corn dogger" in his hand that is made of indian meal wet up with water and baked in the ashes and is his other hand a gourd of buttermilk that is as thick as ice cream, on this he is growing fat, it is enough to make any one grin their eye teeth out, to see what a pretty face he makes as he devours this tempting feast. He looks as though he would have "snake and mild" that father used to tell of before it.

I suppose that you are all well. It is healthy here I have not heard of half a dozen deaths since I have been round here. The farmers have all finished harvest and never was better weather but it has rained now two days and looks as though it meant to keep it up.

Last Tuesday was the fourth of July. I left out school and went into town. It was commencement day at the Virginia Military Institute and the Governor of the State was there to sign the diplomas attended by the State Brass Band. The cadets marched from the Institute which is about half of a mile from the town preceded by the band which consisted of about a dozen old rusty looking fellows that blew a soul stirring march with fury enough to wake the dead and make live ones hold their ears. The cadets were about 90 in number dressed in gray coats with skirts about as wide as my hand an 8 inches long and white pants, they are a good looking company and after going through with their evolutions they marched into the meeting house then the cadets made several speeches in praise of war of the institute telling what her sons had done on the plains of Mexico and with what pride the people ought to cherish it. After they were all through, Gov. Smith was introduced. He was received with much applause and with many bows commenced. He was just about as venerable looking a man as Uncle Gersham Finn. He said "that he was happy to be called upon to give advice to young men like them just entering upon life and the first thing that he wished them to do was to hope for a bright day for tomorrow. The next thing that he advised them to do was to get married no young man could be any thing till he was married. He never heard of a smart man that was a bachelor, (never heard of John Randolph) never knew of a quarrel to take place between a man and a woman but the man was to blame. He had lived a long life and was capable of giving advice to young men as a father to his children. There was two books that he would recommend to all young men The first was the Bible, the next Shakespeare, all young men should read and profit by both" and so he went on in a regular stirring speech praising the ladies then telling the young men they must not try to win them by flattery for they were rational beings and despised flattery. He went into the praise of Va, he said that while other states were progressing in dollars Va was progressing in the mind, and so he went on in a soul stirring amid cheers that were deafening. This was my first sight of a real Gov. and it did not give me a very good opinion of the race.

My knife is just about as good as a tool one would be. Tell father if he will send by Orve Platt to Litchfield and get one of the Holleys pen knives I will pay him for his trouble, get on about the size of this if he can. If he can find more of Holleys send me a good hard one of somebodys that is sharp to begin with and I will send him another dollar as soon as I receive it.

I have got some flower seeds and will send them one of these days, my school is half out and then I don't know what I shall do, whether I shall come home or stay, or There is no news stirring here not so much as a weeding, it is too hot even for that. Give my love to all and write soon, have you heard anything of Julia yet and where is she, I expect a letter from home at the office if it is there I will put a mark on the outside of this to let you know it is rec'd.

I have not got a letter from Mrs. Garnett yet if she has written send no word. From your brother, Giles Gunn

Letter to Mary Gunn

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/1848

Unit Date 1848 August 13

Language English

Scope and Contents

Written from Lexington, Virginia. Letter describes communion at a local church.

Keywords

Lexington (Va.)—History

Correspondence

Transcription

Westwood, Lexington, Va Sunday, Aug 13th 1848

Dear Sister Mary, Your letter came to hand a week ago but I have not had time to answer it till now. I got one from Father last night dated the first day of Aug. I can't see why they are so long coming through; some of the time they have got to me in four days from the time they are dated. There is not much news stirring in these parts, mighty still time. About eight miles from here is a sacrament (quite a rare thing in this country) today, I had intended to go but as it is rainy I shall stay at home. You would like to see them partake. A table is made in front of the pulpit and all that can get round it set down, then the minister at the head of the table cuts the bread, and blesses it, and gives it to another priest who takes it on one side of the table and passes it to each person and says "may this emblem of the dying savior be blessed to your sanctification", thus a minister on each side of the table goes through with his ceremony and the same motions over the blood, on wine then the head priest gives a short exhortation and a prayer and these rise and make room for another table full thus they go it till all have had a bite then they call upon the colored brethren, on past of the ministers do to come down out of the gallery. In some of the churches they climb up to the gallery by a ladder on the outside and go in at the window Monday Night Oliver and Loveridge came here just after I begun to write as I had to put it off. Oliver sends his best love to all and to you in particular. The Doctor that I board with has sold his place and the new owner has moved on; he has six children. The two oldest girls, one eighteen and the other sixteen. They have a piano and are just thundering at it all of the time. They made just about as much music as the cow that Ralph Smith had. The house is a large one, but for all that we are thick as three in a bed. There are thirty three in all black and white in the establishment for the kitchen is a part of the house. I am going to the mountains in a few weeks to hunt for deer and I expect I will have some fun.

There was a sale here the other day of the Doctor's goods and the way the liquor flew want to be beat. The raw material was set before them by the pail full and two thirds of those assembled went home scarcely able to set on their horse. Is all that spree of marrying over. I was coming home expecting to find Lev All, Sam Hollister, John Hine, Jim Mitchen with a baby on each knee and rocking a cradle with each foot, if they don't look out their day of grace will soon be over. If Uncle Andrew don't get married now he has got to quit having his sprees. If the boys had any life they would plague him till he would butt his brains out against a pumpkin or leave the world and climb a tree. If the girls are all engaged let me know and I will look out elsewhere as I have no doubt the best fish are yet to be caught. You would probably like to know how Oliver looks. I will give you his appearance as he looked when he retuned from preaching yesterday. His hair is long and black, his whiskers as black as a coal, his long mustaches black as you please, give him quite a dignified appearance. He has grown taller than he was last fall and his belly shows the effects of buttermilk and its rising qualities. It puts one in mind of a toad that has just swallowed a snake. I tell him that he will crack open like Gid Hollister's sheep and let the tallow out, if he don't refrain from the use of buttermilk as a beverage tea totally and entirely. You must write as soon as you get this, as the Lord only knows whether I shall stay round here and longer than this quarter and I hardly believe he does for I alter my mind so often. Tell Aunt Amarilli's that she must not entirely forget the Yankee boys in the Old Dominion. That she must take time to give us a few lines of motherly advice as now is the time that we need it. I often think of her and her counsel and if I was religious I would put up a prayer for her but as I am not I will send my love. Also a huge slice to little Albie with half a dozen kisses.

Give my love to all my kith and kiss and make a bow to deacon Albernatha for me the first time you see him. Tell Mrs. Garret that I am well and I hope she is the same. I shall answer Father's letter in about a week. Tell him to have his pen sharpened as to answer instantly. From your brother Giles Gunn

Letter to Mary Gunn and Susan Gunn

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/1849

Unit Date 1850 March 15

Language English

Scope and Contents

Written from Lexington, Virginia. Letter includes a detailed description of teaching at the local school, including a discussion of the curriculum and his discipline methods.

Keywords

Correspondence

Lexington (Va.)—History

Transcription

Lexington, Va March 15th, 1850

Dear Mary and Susan, Your letter has been on hand over a week but if you do not get time to write when

you go to school. What do you think of a poor fellow who has the charge of a school and you want to know what I am doing? Well not much of any thing. In the morning I go to the school house about eight o'clock at half past I commence school. Then comes hearing lessons that they have had to learn over night. This is the first thing and it generally takes me about an hour and a half for I have all the lessons learned out of school. After I get through with this I hear them all read then I have a class in Arithmetic after that I spell and then it is noon. In the afternoon I hear them read all round. Then I have a class in passing then a class in arithmetic and spell and get through about five. Though in the time I have two recesses of half an hour and a noon spell of an hour and a half. The history of one day is the history of every day for it is always necessary to have the work go on as regular as clock work and that makes the children regular. Mary if you go to teaching school begin right at first make them know that you are the master. If any thing comes up that you don't know never let the scholars see that you are at a loss. Give your opinion freely and if they show you a book different declare that you are right and the book wrong. If I was you I would never whip unless absolutely necessary, make them set on the floor it hurts a great deal worse than whipping if they refuse to some do not tell them half a dozen times but take them by the hair and drop them one or two [?] in this way will be a lesson, that the whole school will remember. Never threaten without performing. Always be regular. Follow these rules so far as you go and they will reach and you need have no fear of succeeding. Explain your lessons as much as you can, for you can learn as much in one day by talking it to the as they will learn in a week from the book. Get ambition in your school by some means. I have not a scholar in school but if they get down in the class they will cry and I have some grown. Always make it a practice to review once a week all they have learned that week and once a month for the month. Susan what do you intend to do this summer? You said nothing about your prospects. I have been almost sorry that I came home last summer, if I had not I would come this and go to school to Uncle Fred. I would like to study surveying and some other things. You should have wrapped your flower seeds in something if they were in the letter when I got it for I lost them out in the dirt as I opened it as I walked along. I hope by this time Aunt Amarilis and Don will be well. Since I wrote to father two have died right close to my schoolhouse and three more have been taken sick. I am up watching almost every night for everybody round here are afraid of the fever. In some of the houses there is no once goes in through the week but the Dr. and me. How is Louis now. You must both of you write to me so soon as you can and let me know what is going on for I have no correspondent in Washington except at home. How many scholars have Uncle Fred. Send me some more seeds if you can find any but wrap them up better. Give my love to all inquiring friends. Tell Father that I received two newspapers from him this week for which he has my thanks. Has Oliver got around there yet? Write soon. Be good girls and don't forget Giles

[Hand-written upside down at the top of this page] Do not read Sam's letter but see how he likes it and tell me the next time you write

Letter to Mary Gunn

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/1850

Unit Date 1851 January 6

Language English

Scope and Contents

Written from Lexington, Virginia. Letter includes a description of the town's response to rumors of a slave insurrection.

Keywords

Slavery

Correspondence

Lexington (Va.)—History

Transcription

Lexington, Va Jan 6th 1851

Dear Mary Your letter was duly received about a week ago and as it was in Christmas times I think I shall be excusable that I did not answer it sooner. I have let out school 8 days for Christmas holidays and tomorrow morning I shall again commence beating the brats. I have got almost tired of the business and think this is the last winter I shall work at it in this country.

They had a monstrous fuss round here the other day. A letter was found in the road "purporting to be from one nigger to another holding forth that on such a night they were to rise. 300 men were to attack the Military Institute and get possession of the 20,000 stand of arms in the arsenal there. Then they were to walk into the city of Lexington killing all they could get hold of". You had better believe that it made some stir. he militia was called out and they now parade the streets from night to morning It is curious how quick the people of this country can be roused to a state of watchfulness for their all depends upon this. The blacks must have no chance to make a beginning and they know this. I think the letter was a hoax written by some one to see what they could do, but if it was written by a nigger, it was by some one who knew the state of things at the Institute well and if their plans had succeeded it would have been right hard to stop.

I has been right dull times this Christmas not more than three or four frolicks all the times I wish I could drop in there and see how you all look but I do not think you would any of you know me. I have altered a good deal in the last six months.

How does Uncle Sherman and Sam do this winter? Do you like to live there? How is Aunt Jennette heal and all of Uncle Truman's folks? How is Grandfather's folks? All well and how does he stand the times? I meant to write a letter to Father before this time but there is nothing going on here that will interest him when there is I shall write to him. Tell Susan that I want her to write to me, and I will answer it, but if she don't write soon I will get mad and write a long one to her.

Ellen I suppose is still in New Preston and Oliver is peddling. How does Sam do this winter and is he going to school? Has Father got all of his thrashing done and h9ow is his health?

There is nothing new to write about here so what is the use of writing.

Give my love to all inquiring friends let me know all the news at home when you write. Farewell. God's blessings attend you From your brother G. Gunn

Letter to Mary Gunn

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/1851

Unit Date 1854 February 1

Language English

Scope and Contents

Written from Lexington, Virginia. Topics include the murder of VMI cadet Thomas Blackburn by Charles B. Christian, a local law student.

Keywords

Murder—Virginia—Lexington

Correspondence

Blackburn, Thomas, 1834-1854

Christian, Charles B. (Charles Burks)

Transcription

Dear Molly, I have received your letter this very day and am determined for once to toe the mark. I have just seated myself and if I don't get to tired I intend to give you and Sue a piece of my mind even if it be a very small broken piece.

1stly I am still pedagoguing and I tell you it goes mightily against the grain such a day as today for it is one of the pleasantest days I ever knew. The thermometer at noon was nearly up to summer heat at noon and I had no fire in the schoolhouse. My school consists of about forty scholars most of them large boys some of them taller than I am. I have enjoyed myself first rate so far especially in bad weather but when it is fine I intend to do the best I can but I long to be out aboard of the old pump wagon scouring the country. It gives a person a chance to see the world and though it may make me wild now when I come to settle down, I shall put on as long a face as I deacon.

2ndly. Ol. (though I had ought to have put him first) is now in Randolph County which is about one hundred and fifty miles west or northwest from here. He has been gone now about three weeks and I do not much expect him back before the middle or last of March. It is a great region there for pumps. I intend to go there as soon as my school is out and shall probably be there off and on the greater part of the summer.

The people around here are getting up to murdering. Last August in Staunton a man was found dead in his bed with his head staved in with a hammer. In December they hung a man for it and he died protesting his innocence; day after tomorrow they are to hang another man as his accomplice who as yet declares himself innocent.

They were both convicted by another man who turned states evidence; and it is now the general opinion that he did the deed himself.

Two weeks last Sunday was noted in Lexington for a tragedy worse than that. It seems that a young man by the name of Christian had engaged the company of a young lady to go to preaching. She was advised not to go with him by a cousin of hers, a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. Christian (who was a law student) found out who it was and prepared himself with weapons and on Sunday night waited till he saw Blackburn the Cadet come into the church with a lady then he stepped up and touched him requesting to say a word to him. He took him out into the street and by his tale demanded of him to retract what he had said upon Blackburn's refusing so to do he let in on him and before any one could interfere had stabbed him in several places and cut his throat from ear to ear with a bowie knife and killed him so dead that he never kicked. Christian then went and delivered himself up to the authorities and it is now the general opinion that he will get clear as the prosecution was so great. You see how nice a sense of humor the southerners have. In law here if our man calls another a liar and he beats him almost to death for it the law

does nothing with him for it is considered sufficient provocation.

I reckon you have heard enough about murders if not I could tell you of some half dozen more that have happened in this region during the last six week. I do not expect I will come home this summer. I wish you were here to take my school when it is out. Virge says "do tell her to come down here and I will go back with her when she wants to go". Hess is not at home but will be next Saturday (if I can get time to go after her).

If mother has that carnation rooted if she will send it over to John's he will attend to it and give it to Bob Dunlap before he come home. I bought a cooking stove for Mr. Morrison in NY last August and last week it got here. If you want to come on here you can come with Bob. I know he will take good care of you.

Where is Father going to plant and how is his health? Have you had much cold weather this winter? Give my best love to Father and Mother and Sam and tell Sam I want to hear from him before long.

I shall write to Jen as often as you write to me whilst I am teaching school but farther than that I can't answer for. Ol was down to Bransons during Christmas they were all well.

Give me love to Louis if you are still up there. My candle is out. Write soon and give me all your news. Your brother Giles Gunn

PS Virge says tell him I am wearing carpet as strong as a horse (Don't you believe that-Virge)