

Correspondence Between Col. Rice and the Bensons
Springfield, Nov. 28, 1880
Washington Post, December 20, 1886

My Dear Mr. and Mrs. Benson

When I was at your house in October and we talked of the time, twenty-five years ago, when you and your neighbors about Sudley Church succored the wounded of the Union Army left upon the battlefield of Bull Run, you suggested in answer to my inquiry how that kindness could be repaid, that nothing would be more welcome than some aid in paying the debt of \$200 with which your little church was burdened, and I promised to do something toward it. The coming of thanksgiving week reminded me of my pledge, and four days ago I caused to be published in the *Springfield Republican* the story of the good you and your friends did to us whom you counted as enemies in the old war days, and expressed a wish that enough money might be contributed in this city to pay off the whole of that church debt. The result is that \$235 has been paid in to me, and I sent you the amount yesterday in money orders drawn upon the post office at Manassas. Let it be used to free your church from debt, and if more than enough for that, I know the church can find good use for the surplus.

Perhaps those who have made up this gift would prefer that it be conveyed without further waste of words; for our Northern people are practical to a fault, and little given to effusive expression of their better sentiments. But my personal interest in the matter is so great that I am sure they will indulge me in saying a little more.

The money has all been paid in four days, without other solicitation than a simple suggestion; in a newspaper. Most of it was handed to me in person, accompanied by the fewest possible words, and often by only a silent pressure of the hand. Some came in letters, generally laconic to the last degree, but all breathing a genuine desire to requite a kindness too long unheeded, as you will see by the copies which I send with this. The Grand Army of the Republic was also active in the good cause, and I enclose newspaper extracts showing its participation as well as the general history of this pleasant affair. There are seventy-nine contributors to the fund as shown by the accompanying list, twenty-seven of them being veteran soldiers of the Union Army. They are of various creeds and politics and of all ranks and conditions in life, But like England's greeting to her prince-royal's Danish bride.

Saxon and Norman and Dane are we, but all of us Dane in our welcome of thee, the message which this gift carries to you two, to Sudley Church, and to the Southern people, is that the givers are all your friends. And if I could be permitted to voice the dearest wish which this incident awakens in their hearts. I believe it would be that it might dispel the last doubt of a complete and lasting reconciliation between the North and South.

In behalf of all who have joined in this tender of aid, and of many more who would gladly have done so if opportunity had wanted. I wish you and your neighbors and your church such abundant happiness and prosperity in the future as will, in some measure, make amends for the sufferings of the past. Most sincerely yours,

John L. Rice

The Reply of the Bensons
Sudley Springs, Va., December 8, 1886

Col. John L. Rice

My Dear Friend: your very kind remembrance of Mrs. Benson and myself has placed us under great obligations to you. We heartily thank you for your effort, which proved so successful, in behalf of our little church that occupies the same site it did when the scenes of the late conflict were being enacted. On the evening of December 2 we had an oyster supper for the benefit of the church, when a large part of the congregation assembled. Having just returned from Manassas with your generous gift of \$235 and the letter and papers which accompanied it, a good opportunity was afforded to give publicity to your kind response to our need. Accordingly the letter and the papers were read to the company, and had you been present to witness the deep appreciation of all, as shown in the quiet of the whole house and the tears which moistened the eyes of many, you would have felt amply repaid for your benevolence. Immediately a vote of thanks was tendered to you and all whose names appear on the list of subscribers. Our estimate of this noble deed is far above the value indicated by the figures. It has converted Mrs. Benson, for while she always rendered service so far as she could to your suffering soldiers, she has never been fully reconstructed till now.

Now, my dear colonel, if you or any of your friends ever visit Sudley, as I hope you may, we promise you an old Virginia greeting – not such a greeting, however, as a lady of the neighborhood once promised to an officer of the retreating Union army when she asked him why his men were falling back, and he replied, “That we may prepare to renew the attack tomorrow.” She said, “I suppose you have heard of Old Virginia hospitality?” Yes,” he replied. “Then,” said she, “come back tomorrow, and the gentlemen, who are not all at home to-day, will give you a sample of it.” Be assured, kind friend, of a hearty welcome for yourself and others to our homes whenever you choose to come.

I love to meet and talk with old soldiers about the days of suffering through which we passed. There is much that we remember with pleasure, and much that we cannot forget too soon. We served, as we were able, many of your noble men at Sudley Church. Many died there; others took our names and promised to write to us. No doubt many of them have passed away and some have forgotten us. One poor fellow on leaving said to Mrs. Benson: “Let me take your hand once more,” and while the tears streamed down his face he added: “If I live to get home I shall tell my mother to pray for you.” She believes now that mother’s prayers have been answered in her behalf.

My heart is full as I pen these words, and I feel that I would love to say more but must forbear. Again allow me to say in the name of Sudley, we gratefully acknowledge your generous offering. Your sincere friend,

Amos Benson