GENERAL BUTLER’S LETTER

Directions: In his autobiography Butler’s Book, General Benjamin J. Butler expressed his concern that people believed he had always mistreated women in the South. You will remember that his Order No. 28, issued in New Orleans, directed that women who insulted Union soldiers would be punished. In his book, he explained, “These women, she-adders, . . . were the insulting enemies of my army and my country, and were so treated.” In his book, General Butler included the following letter, written to Santa Maria Clara, Superior of the Sisters of Charity, to show that he was capable “. . . of dealing with the good, charitable, and religious women in a manner worthy of myself and my government.” Read the letter and then answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of paper.

Headquarters Department of the Gulf
New Orleans, Sept. 2, 1862

Madame: — I had no information until the reception of your note, that so sad a result to the sisters of your society had happened from the bombardment of Donaldsonville.

I am very, very sorry that Rear-Admiral Farragut was unaware that he was injuring your establishment by his shells. Any injury must have been entirely accidental. The destruction of that town became a necessity. The inhabitants harbored a gang of cowardly guerrillas, who committed every atrocity; amongst others, that of firing upon an unarmed boat crowded with women and children, going up the coast, returning to their homes, many of them having been at school at New Orleans.

It is impossible to allow such acts; and I am only sorry that the righteous punishment meted out to them in this instance, as indeed in all others, fell quite as heavily upon the innocent and unoffending as upon the guilty.

No one can appreciate more fully than myself the holy, self-sacrificing labors of the sisters of charity. To them our soldiers are daily indebted for the kindest offices. Sisters of all mankind, they know no nation, no kindred, neither war nor peace. Their all-pervading charity is like the boundless love of “Him who died for all,” whose servants they are, and whose pure teachings their love illustrates.

I repeat the expression of my grief, that any harm should have befallen your society of sisters; and I cheerfully repair it, as far as I may, in the manner you suggest, by filling the order you have sent to the city for provisions and medicines.

Your sisters in the city will also farther testify to you, that my officers and soldiers have never failed to do to them all in their power to aid them in their usefulness, and to lighten the burden of their labors.

With sentiments of the highest respect, believe me, your friend,
Benjamin F. Butler

1. What had happened to the Sisters of Charity?

2. What reason did General Butler give for Farragut’s attack on Donaldsonville?

3. What did Butler specifically do for the Sisters to express his apology for the incident?

4. Did reading this letter change your opinion about General Butler? What else would you need to know to form a complete picture of General Butler’s treatment of Louisiana women?