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## THE SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER: LITERATURE OF THE OLD SOUTH

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The *Southern Literary Messenger* enjoyed an impressive thirty-year run and was in its time the South's most important literary periodical. Avowedly a southern publication, the *Southern Literary Messenger* was also the one literary periodical published that was widely circulated and respected among a northern readership. Throughout much of its run, the journal avoided sectarian political and religious debates, but, the sectional crisis of the 1850s gave the contents of the magazine an increasingly partisan flavor. By 1860 the magazine's tone had shifted to a defiantly proslavery and pro-South stance. Scholars and students of history, journalism, and literature can discern much about how the hot-button topics of slavery and secession were presented in southern intellectual and literary culture in the early stages of the Civil War.

**Date Range:** 1834-1864

**Content:** 23,949 images

**Source Library:** Lost Cause Press

### Detailed Description:

The *Southern Literary Messenger* was one of the most successful and influential literary magazines in the South. Founded by Thomas Willis White (and edited for a time by Edgar Allan Poe) the *Messenger*, according to the magazine's editor James Ewell Heath in the first issue, was meant to serve as "a kind of pioneer, to scope out the land of literary promise in the South, and to report whether the same be fruitful or barren."

In the early nineteenth century, literary magazines published in the North, such as *Harper's*, set the tone for American literary dialogue. To capitalize on the relatively untapped market of southern readers, several editors attempted to establish similar journals in the South. But most of these journals failed quickly, in large part because there were fewer southern readers, and those who did read preferred the better-established northern magazines.

As a result, the *Messenger* foundered until 1835 when, on the recommendation of John Pendleton Kennedy, White hired Poe, then an unknown and impoverished poet, to serve as

the journal's literary editor. Under Poe's direction, the journal greatly increased circulation, improved in quality, and developed connections with the northern literary establishment. But the position, which required long hours of reviewing manuscripts, many of them poorly written, severely taxed Poe's patience and endurance. He left the journal in 1837 to pursue a writing career in the North, leaving White and his assistant, Matthew F. Maury, to produce the journal. Although a capable printer, White had little literary acumen. Under his direction, the journal published a hodgepodge of personal essays, tedious treatises on the classics, occasional poems, and effusive reviews.

In 1842, after suffering a stroke, White sold the *Messenger* to Benjamin Blake Minor, a Richmond attorney. Under Minor the journal shifted from chiefly literary content to primarily political and historical issues, publishing a long series on Virginia history, Captain John Smith's *A True Relation* (1608), essays on military strategies and diplomacy, and defenses of slavery. In 1845 Minor acquired William Gilmore Simms' *Southern and Western Monthly Magazine* and merged it with the *Messenger*, briefly using the convoluted title *Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review*. In 1847 Minor took a teaching position at the Virginia Female Institute in Staunton, Virginia, and sold the journal to John Reuben Thompson.

Thompson returned the journal to its literary focus, publishing work by many of the most prominent southern authors, including Poe, Philip Pendleton Cooke, William Gilmore Simms, and Henry Timrod. In spite of increasing quality, the journal struggled to generate subscriptions, again perhaps reflecting a limited audience for literature in the South. As issues related to slavery flared during the 1850s, the journal's content increasingly veered toward issues of states' rights, defenses of slavery, and polemics against abolitionism.

In 1860, when Thompson became editor of *Southern Field and Fireside*, and a physician, George W. Bagby took over the journal, the *Southern Literary Messenger* became a propagandistic organ of southern secessionism. Severing all ties with the northern literary establishment, Bagby published "purely Southern articles...that smack of the soil," as he wrote in his June 1860 "Editor's Table." During the Civil War, the journal published accounts of battles, and criticized both the North and the Confederate government, especially its president, Jefferson Davis. As economic conditions deteriorated in Virginia during the war, the journal ceased publication in 1864.

*Publisher's Note:* This collection comprises, in its entirety, the Primary Source Media microfilm collection entitled *Southern Literary Messenger*.