Do We Purposely Forget? The Unknown Generals in our Midst

John Rison Jones Jr.
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THE UNKNOWN UNION GENERAL IN OUR MIDST
by Dr. John Rison Jones, Jr.

Probably all towns have legends that provide color to tradition and inject mystery about the past. Unfortunately for the lover of legends, the historian intrudes and seeks a factual premise which often tends to deflate the best of the "stories." For instance, Huntsvillians love to point out that General LeRoy Pope Walker issued the order to fire upon Fort Sumter from his residence at 413 McClung—the Pope-Lowe House. It seems to make no difference that the general purchased this residence in 1870!

At Maple Hill Cemetery, legend has it that there is an unknown northern general who so loved Huntsville which he knew during the war, that he returned to the area and bought a farm. When he died, he asked to be buried in an unmarked grave among the unknown Confederate soldiers. This writer decided to investigate this story while working on a guide to the cemetery. Goethe's complaint of Martin Luther—"He took all of the beautiful poetry out of religion."—is probably appropriate to this writer who, when trying to solve this local mystery, was told by a librarian to "leave our traditions alone."

There are, in fact, two generals of the Grand Army of the Republic buried at Maple Hill. Major General William Thomas Harbaugh Brooks is one of the 587 northern generals whom Ezra Warner [1], the distinguished author of Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders, Louisiana State University Press, 1964, has found buried in a "formerly Confederate state."[2] The other general, Gilbert Marquis Lafayette Johnson, was a brevet colonel during the war and was accorded the rank of brevet brigadier general in the last days of the conflict. He was not of general rank during the war, but his involvement in Huntsville and his burial near the Confederate unknowns probably accounts for the legend. General Johnson's tombstone makes no reference to his rank, and so the basic elements of the tradition are there with truth only slightly twisted.

Major General William Thomas Harbaugh Brooks

General Brooks was born on February 21, 1821, in Lisbon, Ohio. He was appointed to West Point as a cadet in 1837 and graduated ranked 46th out of 52 graduates in the class of 1841. Twenty general officers of the great conflict of 1861 were from this class.

General Brooks saw service first with the Third Infantry and took part in the Florida Wars of 1842-1843. During the Mexican War, he won promotion and emerged from that conflict as a brevet captain with meritorious citations. His rise to the rank of colonel was due to his service on the Indian frontiers.

At the outset of the Civil War, he was appointed brigadier general of volunteers and he was active in the
Peninsular Campaign where he commanded a brigade in General William F. Smith's Division in the IV Corps at Williamsburg, and in the VI Corps during the Seven Days Battles. He was wounded three times during this period—at Savage's Station, Crampton's Gap, and at Sharpsburg. He commanded a VI Corps Division at Fredericksburg and at Chancellorsville. However, from May, 1863, until April, 1864, he commanded the Department of Monongahela, with headquarters in Pittsburg, after which he directed the First Division at Cold Harbour and Petersburg.

General Brooks was promoted to the rank of major general on June 10, 1863, but that promotion was revoked on April 6, 1864, which led to the general's decision to resign from the army in July of 1864. The general, it seems, had played politics and lost. The events surrounding the general's demotion began with a letter of December 20, 1862, to President Lincoln [3] signed by General William B. Franklin, then commanding the "Left Grand Division" of the Army of the Potomac, and General William F. Smith, commanding the VI Army Corps. The letter was very critical of General Ambrose Burnside's plan of operation. "The plan of campaign...already...commenced cannot possibly be successful." The generals, supported by General Brooks, commanding the First Division of the VI Corps; General Newton, commanding the Third Division of the Corps; and General Cochrane, commanding Newton's First Brigade, all believed that the entire Federal Army should be assembled for a massive assault on Richmond which would end hostilities. The current line, which stretched over 1,000 miles, did not permit the kind of massive concentration which the generals sought. Generals Newton and Cochrane met with President Lincoln in a private conversation. While Lincoln seemed to support their position, the results were ultimately disastrous for all concerned.[4] General Burnside was reassigned following the disaster at Fredericksburg; General Franklin was given a menial assignment; General Smith was transferred from the Army; Generals Brooks' and Newton's appointments were revoked; and General Cochrane resigned from the army because of poor health. He was, however, to live to age 85.

General Brooks' poor health, which had necessitated numerous sick leaves during his career, became worse. He resigned as volunteer brigadier general and as major of the 18th Infantry on July 14, 1864, to take up residence on a farm near Huntsville. The death of his only son, James Drake Brooks, on July 29, 1864, possibly contributed to his decision. Young James was only 13 months old. Inasmuch as the child is buried in Maple Hill Cemetery, it is possible that Mrs. Brooks was already in Huntsville.

What were the connections to Huntsville? This becomes obvious with a visit to Maple Hill Cemetery where the general and his family are buried in Section 9 of the oldest part of the original cemetery. Here one finds a double tombstone with the following inscriptions:

General William T. H. Brooks
February 28, 1821 - July 19, 1870
Nearby is the grave of their son, James, on the south side, and on the north side is the grave of James Perry Drake, who was born in Robinson County, North Carolina, on September 15, 1797 and died in Huntsville on August 12, 1876. This monument also indicates the burial of P. Holmes Drake, born June 18, 1812; died February 11, 1892. Nearby are the graves of Alme Brooks' sister, Anne Buell Drake Robertson (1840-1930) and her husband, Thomas Robertson (1840-1886) and their son, William P. Robertson (1874-1889). The Drake family was long prominent in Madison County. Many members of this family are buried in a private graveyard on the Carl T. Jones Farm, the former Drake Farm, in Jones Valley in southeast Huntsville.

General Brooks was buried with full military honors by the U.S. Command in Huntsville under General S. W. Crawford. The Southern Advocate [5] reported that a band and a company of soldiers were in attendance in addition to "many citizens." Perhaps in the end, the general did win his battles. His tombstone proclaims his rank in spite of his demotion and resignation.

General Gilbert Marquis Lafayette Johnson

Norman Shapiro, a member of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the Tennessee Valley Genealogical Society, provided a document from the Tennessee State Archives [6] which gives new information on this very colorful individual who was so beloved by his 13th Indiana Cavalry. [7] The veterans of the regiment recalled General Johnson's life in a "Tribute from members of the Regiment to the Widow of the General--One of the Romances of the War," a lengthy document written in 1896 for "the grandchildren of a brave grandfather."

General Johnson, then a brevet major, was placed in charge of the newly-formed 13th Indiana Cavalry Regiment when it was organized. It was the last such regiment raised in Indiana. At the time, Johnson was on the staff of Major General George H. Thomas, and with the new assignment, he was promoted to brevet colonel. The new unit was immediately dispatched south to the Nashville Instruction Camp. From there, the unit was sent to Huntsville where its first contact with Confederate forces was to hold the Huntsville garrison against an attack by General Buford. After running a courier line from near Mobile to Florida, the unit participated in an 800 mile raid through Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. In June, 1865, Colonel Johnson was assigned to command the subdistrict of northeast Mississippi and held this position until his unit was summoned north for demobilization on November 25, 1865, in Indianapolis. When he rejoined his regiment, he had a brevet brigadier general's commission in his pocket.

The Memorial contains many reminiscenses of Captain S. H. Moore, later a noted physician in Indianapolis, who was the
youngest officer in the 13th Regiment and a close personal friend of Colonel Johnson. He remembered that during the spring and summer of 1864 when the 13th Regiment was encamped in a grove near Huntsville, the Regiment prided itself on its drill procedures and especially its dress parades. Many local citizens drove out to watch these procedures, and often "the officers observed a young lady of the true southern type of beauty. She always came on horseback, accompanied by her father, a tall, gray-haired, dignified appearing man." Shortly afterwards, frequent details of "safe guards" were sent to the residence of Joseph C. Bradley on Franklin Street. Colonel Johnson always gave personal instructions to these guards. Because of the kind treatment at the Bradley home, soldiers began to vie for the "honor" of guard duty. Other officers often encountered Colonel Johnson riding in the early evening with Susan Bradley, Joseph Bradley's daughter. It came as no surprise when General Johnson's friends received an announcement that on June 26, 1866, General Johnson of Cincinnati married Sue Bradley at the Presbyterian Church in Huntsville with the Reverend Dr. Ross officiating.

Captain Moore recalled that during the Regiment's stay in Huntsville, Dr. Ross used his office one Sunday to preach a "strong rebel sermon--an exhortation that was evidently intended to arouse the animosity of his congregation against the Regiment." An officer present at the service arrested Dr. Ross. Colonel Johnson placed him under bond to preach no seditious sermons in the future. During the marriage service, Dr. Ross, after the rites were concluded, turned to the general and said: "Now I am even with you. When you were in command here, you placed me under bond to refrain from giving voice to my sentiments. Now I have placed you under bonds that will, if you are faithful and true, hold you for the remainder of your life."

After his marriage, General Johnson resided in Huntsville where he served as Postmaster from 1869 to 1871. When he died, he was buried in Maple Hill Cemetery with a simple marker that reads:

My Beloved Husband.
At rest, Gilbert M. L. Johnson,
died January 9, 1871; Aged 33 years.

This grave is in the Bradley plot where other members of the Bradley family are buried, and is very near the Confederate unknowns.

Joseph Colville Bradley was a prominent Huntsvillian. He was the owner of the Huntsville Hotel and was interested in the early utilities including the gas works. As a planter, he raised cotton and sold cattle. Consequently, he was forced to "play both sides" during the occupation of the city. Occupation was a reality and so he made peace with the enemy, but perhaps at a price for his children. [8] Joseph's father was James Bradley of Washington County, Virginia. James had married first Naomi Wells, and their son, James, Jr. who came to Huntsville with his father, married Adeline, the daughter of Governor Thomas Bibb. In
1808, James, Sr. married Jeanne Colville Hays, and their son was Joseph Colville, born in 1810. Joseph married Isabella M. Clark in 1838, and they were the parents of 12 children. Their daughter, Emily, was to marry Wilfred R. VanValkenburgh who came to Huntsville after the Civil War with his parents John and Charlotte VanValkenburgh. Colonel VanValkenburgh had been stationed in Huntsville during the war. Another of Joseph's children, Mary, and a granddaughter were to marry Stanage men who also served in Huntsville.

The death of General Johnson was perhaps not unexpected. Captain Moore recalled that on one occasion the general's horse was shot from under him. The general did not jump quickly and the horse rolled over on him. Though his injuries were not considered serious at the time, they were to cause difficulties later and eventually his death. Captain Moore added that "his wife and one child, a pretty daughter, survived him. After the general's death, they went south, and members of the Regiment lost trace of them."

Twenty years after the general's death, his widow was located in Key West, Florida, with her son-in-law, J. W. Johnson, who was not related to the general. The Regiment commissioned a large portrait of the general for Mrs. Johnson and sent this and a touching Memorial recalling the reverence with which the Regiment held their beloved general. Mrs. Johnson responded with three poignant letters. In the first, she hoped that she could meet the Regiment at the next reunion and "perhaps my little grandson, Gilbert M. L. Johnson, may meet his grandfather's old friends, visit a loving comrade too with little Isabella and Susie."

Today, as one walks through Maple Hill Cemetery, it is somehow comforting to know that the conflict that so divided the nation was ended in 1870 and 1871 for two of the gallant foe who were buried here. Yet, it is somewhat shameful that these two honorable men have found no status. One became an "unknown" legend whose background was shrouded in mystery. The other was simply forgotten. Is it that the south only honors its own and not the gallant enemy? If so, is it a legacy that should be passed on? Hopefully, when the Confederate dead are honored next year, their old foes might be remembered, and so mend "the nation divided."

ENDNOTES


Mr. Warner's monumental study of the Union Commanders is found in the Zeitler Collection, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.
2. General Martin D. Hardin is buried at St. Augustine, Florida.


4. Official Records, Volume XXXII, Pt. 2, p. 468. In a letter from General Hooker to Secretary Stanton, February 25, 1864, he refers to General Smith as "the evil genius behind Franklin, Brooks and Newton."

5. Southern Advocate, July 22, 1870.


7. Further information was provided by Mrs. Nancy Grayson VanValkenburgh Holder (Mrs. Darryl). Mrs. Holder was not aware that her kinsman was a general in the Union army. She knew that he had fought with the Union forces.

8. One wonders why the Bradley girls tended to marry former Union officers who settled in Huntsville after the war. Inasmuch as Joseph C. Bradley's half brother, James, had married into the prominent Bibb family, one would assume that the Bradley daughters had entree into Huntsville society. However, Joseph Bradley's association with the Union forces could have been taken as an insult to the "cause." And, many Huntsville men had been killed during the war.