

# Huntsville Historical Review

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Manuscript 1265

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## James Edward Butler-A Madison County Johnny Reb

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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JAMES EDWARD BUTLER--A MADISON COUNTY JOHNNY REB

[Editor's note: Young Butler's Civil War record (the engagements in which he fought or in which his cavalry unit, Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry Regiment, was engaged) was compiled by his granddaughter, Jane Claybrooke Hagood and her late husband, Dan Hagood, of Albertville, Alabama.]

James Edward Butler of Poplar Ridge, near Vienna (now New Hope), in September 1861, at the age of 18, joined Captain Frank B. Gurley's Company of Raiders. This group from Gurley's Tank, Alabama, participated in a raid of the Union post on the outskirts of Huntsville on August 5, 1862. With the aid of Hambrick's Company of A.A. Russell's Regiment, Tennessee Cavalry, they captured a drove of union beef cattle. General Robert L. McCook, U.S.A., was mortally wounded and captured at this time. Gurley and Hambrick's Raiders retired to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, joining A. A. Russell's Regiment which was organized as the 4th Regiment Alabama Cavalry, and was known as Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry. (There was also a unit at Decatur, Alabama, known as Roddy's 4th Alabama.) Arriving at Murfreesboro, Russell's 4th Alabama was assigned to the command of General N. B. Forrest.

Gurley's Company of Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry had no arms other than the ones they brought from home with them. Many of them had only flintlocks and squirrel rifles, some of which were made at Woodville, Alabama, by local craftsmen. Butler remained with Gurley's Company in Russell's 4th Alabama which joined with General Forrest and General Wheeler throughout the war.

On December 10, 1862, General Forrest moved across the Tennessee River at Clifton, with about 1500 men. Playing the game of "brag and bluff" they carried kettle drums with them and kept them going to convey the idea that they had infantry troops with them. On December 18, General Grant reported "Forrest and Napier are on this side of the river with 5,000 to 10,000 troops." General Grant got this information from Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, who was later that day captured at Lexington, Tennessee. Captain Gurley's Company led the attack at Lexington and captured one gun guarding the bridge. This was done at the cost of four men. They also captured two Rodman Guns which General Forrest kept with him until the end of the war.

Forrest's December raid in West Tennessee was to draw troops from the drive Grant was making into Mississippi towards Vicksburg by land routes. In destroying Grant's supplies in West Tennessee, Forrest was later able to force the Union army to use water routes and leave Mississippi in his efforts to capture Vicksburg. While on this raid into Tennessee, Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry was engaged at Lexington in the destruction of the railroad south of Jackson, Tennessee, in the attack on Trenton and the capture of its garrison. He led the attack on the Federals at Spring Creek and the capture of the garrison at Union City. He engaged in the complete destruction of the railroads in west Tennessee, and suffered the terrible experience of crossing the Obion Bottoms in late December, fought the important Battle of Parker's Crossroads, recrossed the Tennessee River on January 7, 1863, and returned to Columbia, Tennessee.

## Submission to Huntsville Historical Review

General Joe Wheeler, Commander of all Cavalry of the Army of Tennessee, joined Forrest in a new attack on Union supplies in late January, 1863. General Grant had strengthened the Tennessee supply routes with a mass of infantry, and little could be accomplished with the small cavalry forces at hand. On February 3, General Wheeler ordered an attack on Fort Donelson at Dover. Russell's 4th Cavalry fought in this engagement as dismounted troops and suffered a bitter defeat, leaving their dead on the ice-covered field as they made their way south, back to Columbia. Later in February Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry was removed from Forrest's command and assigned to Martin's Division under the command of General Wheeler. When assigned to General Wheeler, Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry was moved to East Tennessee and used as scouts guarding General Bragg's Army of Tennessee about Chattanooga. General Wheeler's reports state that during this period until the fall back of forces to Dalton, that the 4th Regiment was engaged at: Hadley's Bend and Hurricane Creek, Tenn. April 10; Uniontown, Tenn. June 23; Shelbyville Pike and Shelbyville, Tenn., June 27; New Church, Tenn, July 1; and University Place, Tenn, July 4.

Union forces moving from Bridgeport, Alabama, across Sand Mountain and up Big Wills Valley forced General Bragg to move to Dalton, Ga., during August, 1863. All troops under General Wheeler were at this time and until after the Battle of Atlanta, employed as scouts and pickets guarding the flanks of the Army of Tennessee. General Bragg did not know just where the Union forces were, and not until a number of small engagements had been fought by the cavalry did he fully realize the necessity of leaving Chattanooga and falling back on the mountains of North Georgia. A small cavalry force was in front of the Union troops in Wills Valley, but the 4th Alabama Cavalry was not engaged until September 13 near Summerville, Ga., on the 14th at LaFayette, Ga., and on the 16th at Alabama Road, Ga. They were engaged in covering the left flank during the Battle of Chickamauga, Ga., which took place on September 19, 1863.

Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry, acting as the ears and eyes of the army after the Battle of Chickamauga, engaged Union forces at Cotton Port, Tenn. September 30; Mountain Gap, Tenn., October 1; Pitt's Crossroads, Anderson's Crossroads, Valley Road, Dunlap, Tenn., on October 2. On October 3 they were engaged at Hills Gap and at Thompson's Cool Springs, Tenn. Three days later on the 6th, they were at Christiana, Fosterville and War Trace, Tenn.

General Longstreet was ordered in early November to capture Knoxville, Tenn., with his Corps brought from Virginia to aid General Bragg in Tennessee. Acting as the spearhead of the Knoxville drive by Longstreet, Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry was strongly engaged November 15, 1863, at Holston River near Knoxville, and on the 16th at Knoxville Road and Campbell's Station. Until recalled to the Army of Tennessee at Chickamauga, they were generally engaged in the siege of Knoxville. From November 17 to 23, the Army of Tennessee had fought the battle of Missionary Ridge at Chattanooga without cavalry. All cavalry troops were called from the Knoxville siege to the aid of the Confederate forces at Chattanooga on November 17; they were unable to withdraw until the 25th of November. The cavalry

: James Edward Butler-A Madison County Johnny Reb

forces were the only troops from the Knoxville area that were able to get back to the Chattanooga area. General Longstreet, being cut off by Union troops, returned to Virginia by way of what is now West Virginia. Confederate cavalry forces were badly scattered and much reduced when they reached General Bragg, who had retired to Dalton, Georgia. The 4th Alabama Cavalry lost fifty men at Kingston on November 24, 1863.

The new year of 1864 found the Union forces under Sherman raiding Mississippi from Memphis and Vicksburg. Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry was attached to General Forrest in the effort to stop General Smith in the southern drive to Mobile from Memphis. They were actively engaged in the West Point, Miss., area from February 21 until March 8, 1864. Fort Pillow at Dover, Tenn., was captured and destroyed by a rapid march by General Forrest on April 12, 1864.

Just before General Sherman started his march of infantry to Atlanta from Chattanooga, Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry arrived back in North Georgia to face Sherman's General Thomas at McLemore's Gap. However they were not engaged. After participating in the battle of Resaca, Ga., May 14, there followed a slow, well covered retreat to Atlanta. This amounted to one continuous fight for 120 days, from Dalton, Ga., to Jonesboro, Ga., the 4th Alabama Cavalry was involved with numerous engagements.

In August, 1864, when Confederate forces were sieged at Atlanta, General Hood, being impressed with the inadequacy of the Federal Cavalry thought he could safely mount an offensive force against Sherman's lifeline, the Western and Atlantic Railway, between Atlanta and Chattanooga. In August, General Wheeler with 4500 men, including Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry, moved to this appointed task. Within a few days they destroyed 35 miles of track near Marietta, Dalton and Resaca, Ga., and burned the bridge over the Etowah River, making violent demonstration against Dalton and Chattanooga. At this point, on some wild impulse, General Wheeler rode on through East Tennessee as far as Strawberry Plains, north of Knoxville, thence southward against Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad and broke it in several places, getting within a few miles of Nashville. General Forrest with his troops from East Mississippi also had been after the railroad and had done considerable damage. Federal troops were quickly sent from Atlanta, Chattanooga and Nashville against these Confederate raiders. Both Forrest and Wheeler were forced to fight their way back to North Alabama.

In one of these small but violent skirmishes, while cutting their way back to Alabama, James E. Butler was captured. This occurred on September 5, 1864, near Columbia, Tenn. He was taken to the state penitentiary in Nashville, and then on to Camp Chase, Ohio, where he was imprisoned, until June, 1865. Due to exposure he was ill during a period of this imprisonment. Because of laryngitis, he could not answer an interrogating officer. He was about to be thrown into solitary confinement when a fellow prisoner explained his inability to speak. By rubbing the fat from his meat ration on this throat and chest and hovering against a tiny fire, he treated his malady. Having only the uniform he was wearing when he was captured, he was forced to wrap himself in a blanket while he washed and dried his clothes.

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After his release at the end of the war, James E. Butler rode a freight car back to Alabama. On returning to his home, he engaged in planting and later became interested in the mercantile business, building up the third largest business of its kind in North Alabama. He was a democrat, served as justice of the peace, at was one time chairman of the county convention that nominated various county officers. He was active in the Primitive Baptist Church at Bethel, which was built by his father, Canada Butler.

He was married in January 1868 at Vienna [New Hope] to Nancy Jane Nichols. They had nine children: James Canada, Charlotte, William Edward, Emma, Robert Lee, Albert Henry, Charles Taylor, Laura, Nancy. Many of his descendents still live in eastern Madison County. James Butler died at New Hope, Alabama, July 23, 1913.