

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 19 | Number 3

Article 6

9-1-1993

Fighting Fire with Fire

Charles Rice

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rice, Charles (1993) "Fighting Fire with Fire," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 19: No. 3, Article 6.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol19/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

Fighting Fire with Fire

Charles Rice

It is hard for us to believe that little more than a century and a quarter ago our own Madison County was the scene of a brutal little sideshow of the great American Civil War. Yet Madison County, like most of North Alabama, saw quite a bit of bloodletting and considerably more than its share of senseless destruction. The bridges of Madison County were a natural target for the invading Union Army, since the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was a vital supply line of the struggling young Confederacy. However, private dwellings, farm buildings, and even entire towns were also put to the torch by the northern forces in their attempt to strong-arm Southern civilians into returning their allegiance to the Washington government. The callous campaign of terror quite naturally backfired more often than not and served mainly to drive lukewarm secessionists into the ranks of the Southern Army. The well-timbered mountains and valleys of eastern Madison and neighboring Jackson and Marshall Counties provided perfect hiding places for the guerrilla companies formed under the Confederate partisan ranger act. Leader of these isolated Confederates was a Paint Rock native named Lemuel Green Mead. If the name sounds familiar, it is because his uncle, Lemuel Mead of Huntsville, was one of the signers of the Alabama State Constitution.

Regrettably, Colonel Lemuel G. Mead did not live long enough to write his memoirs, being shot down at age 47 in a land dispute in Gurley in 1878. However, his second in command, Rev. Milus Eddings Johnston, did tell much of the story in the *Guntersville Democrat* in the summer of 1902. Forgotten for nearly ninety years, Johnston's tale, titled by him *The Sword of "Bushwhacker" Johnston*, finally appeared in book form late last year.

Milus Johnston was a humble Methodist minister who admitted he had no desire to take part in the war. However, he was hounded by the invading forces until he finally crossed

the Tennessee River and cast his lot in with the Confederacy. "The writer recollects distinctly to this day," Johnston related, "that upon reaching the south bank of the river he called a halt and about faced, and straightening himself up, he looked northward and said: 'Boys, I have come to the conclusion that God never yet made a man to be slobbered on always by dogs; hence I am going to give those fellows in turn — the best turn I can get into the hopper!'" And the Union Army would have ample opportunity to regret that it had ever made an enemy of the dashing "Bushwhacker" Johnston.

First commanding a company of Mead's Battalion, Johnston soon became acting major, leading a squadron of several companies. By early 1865, he had become Lieutenant Colonel of his own 25th Alabama Cavalry Battalion, which he finally surrendered more than a month after Appomattox, his men stacking their arms on the site of today's Huntsville Hospital. Between January 1864 and May 1865, however Milus Johnston had joined colonel Mead in repaying the Union occupiers of Madison County in their own coin. The bold Confederates captured wagon trains, gobbled up forage parties, ambushed cavalry patrols, and generally bluffed their enemy into thinking they were much stronger than they actually were. One of Mead's crowning accomplishments was the capture of the entire Company G of the 13th Wisconsin Veteran Volunteers at Paint Rock Bridge on the last day of 1864. Mead and Johnston managed this feat with less than 40 men, burning the bridge, rolling a captured cannon into the river, and then marching away to safety with their prisoners.

The Sword of "Bushwhacker" Johnston is a very readable account of the War Between the States in the Huntsville area. Fully annotated by Charles Rice, who also wrote the introduction, Johnston's book comes with a complete muster roll of Mead's North Alabama and Tennessee Cavalry Battalion, as well as a full name index. If you like your history and you love your romance, buy, beg, or borrow a copy of Johnston's memoirs. Milus Johnston's relaxed style makes learning history seem both easy and enjoyable. *The Sword of "Bushwhacker" Johnston* can be purchased for \$19.95 plus \$2.00 shipping from Flint River Press, P. O. Box 49, New Hope, AL 35760. It can also be found at Shaver's Bookstore on Whitesburg Drive in Huntsville.