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*Picture from "Joseph Wheeler; The Man, The Statesman, The Soldier" by T. C. De Leon, Continental Book Co., 1960.*

## **Home Sweet Home Home of General Joseph Wheeler**

by

Carolyn Brandon Elliott

from *Historic Homes of Alabama and Their Traditions*. National League of American Pen Women, Alabama Members. Birmingham Publishing Company, Birmingham, Alabama. 1935, reprinted 1969.

Three front gates, opening from the grove, extend the gracious invitations of flower-bordered ways leading to doors of two comfortable looking square frame houses that, together, form the historic home. The widest of vine-clad gates opens for the motorist a continuation of the drive-way from the grove to steps on east of front and rear porches of the larger house. To the pedestrian,

a central gate proffers a path of stepping stones to front steps of the same mansion erected by General Wheeler in the late 60s and now occupied by his daughter, Annie Early Wheeler. By the side of this home of the 60s, a smaller one, built more than a century ago, afterwards became the west wing of the Wheeler homestead. To this old wing the traveler wends his way from the west gate along a path whose prim box hedges seem to bind a buried record of home life during Alabama's territorial days and of pioneer life of a new State. Today, an ancient canopy strews crepe myrtle blossoms along that path, like rosy memories of a morning in 1867 when love found a way, as doors of the old house extended wide welcome to its home makers, General and Mrs. Wheeler. No earlier record of the west wing seems available, save that it was a territorial milestone erected by a family named Hickman, and that this was the first white family to live in that section after the Indians had moved their wigwams nearer trails of the Setting Sun. The house, although occupied at that time by the Hickmans, was not new the year before Alabama became a State, when, in 1818, young Richard Jones, while riding horseback from Georgia, discovered it within five miles of a chosen spot near the Tennessee River, where, in 1823, he and his bride established their life-long home. This mansion of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Jones was the birthplace of their only daughter, Daniella Jones, future wife of Joseph Wheeler.

...After the war, on February 6, 1866, General and Mrs. Wheeler were married, and a few months later moved into the home that her father had discovered in 1818.

The big house next door to the wing, where only members of his family have lived, became General Wheeler's haven, not only during days of reconstruction, but after his return from service to his country in the Spanish-American War, and between seasons of labor in Congress at Washington. The two houses, known as east and west wing, form an ante-bellum home of long halls, broad stairs, and sixteen spacious rooms. Facing the ancient grove on the north, the home is bounded on the east by a vast old-fashioned garden; on the west, by a smaller wild flower garden; on the south,

by acres of bloom, one of which is “God’s Acre,” the family burying ground of early days. On every side, cool green blinds open windows to sunlight while verandahs in front and rear, fragrant with flowering vines, tempt one to linger long in the great out-of-doors. However, when double doors, in response to a key of amazing size, offer entrance from front porch to ample hall, the invitation within is equally irresistible.

In the front hall of this home, is the portrait of a kind, wise man, done by Leavitt, the likeness of a soldier in a gray uniform. ...”A Great Warrior—An Eminent Statesman—A Paladin of Chivalry, Sincerity and Gentleness—The Strongest Characteristics of His Great Nature Were Loving Kindness and Tender Mercy. Christ’s Faithful Soldier and Servant to His Life’s End.” Such is the portrait of Joseph Wheeler’s life.

...A wing chair drawn close to the fire where smoldering back logs test the strength of brave andirons, invites companionship with those in portrait frames. An exquisite Florentine mirror, more than a century old, seems to reflect girl faces of the long ago. Through open doors a long French mirror recalls “the tender grace of a day that is gone”... On the library table a photograph...

As the fire burns low memories linger in the living room, and are intimately suggested in burnished mahogany of Georgian masterpieces of cabinet art; in the grace of a Chippendale sofa or a Windsor chair, a tilt-top table, a Sheraton desk, and especially guarded by the dignified old clock that has so long chimed the fleeting hours.

...A sideboard of generous proportions claims wall space with such stately assurance, one marvels at the levity that would dare to shrink its ideals to fit modern apartments. Gracing this board is a silver coffee service with lineage dating its advent into an exclusive family circle of Colonial china early in 1700. Two china pitchers... A silver cup that belonged to the small girl, “Daniella,”...is also a cherished relic of the Wheeler dining room. Another silver cup... A large oil painting of General Lee and General Wheeler, mounted on their favorite steeds, will be kept on memory’s walls as surely as

General Wheeler's crossed swords that, after so many battles, now rest in peace above south doors of the long hall.

This hall extending through the house, from front porch to wide back porch, broken only by the stairs, seems a veritable highway that binds great rooms on either side together. On the east of the hall above folding doors that seem always unfolded, is a motto thoughtfully broidered into a query: "Who Is My Neighbor?" The answer seems to echo footsteps of whom-so-ever passes that open way into the library, one time called "the front parlor." On the west side of the hall is a front bed chamber or guest room, and the dining room in the rear.

The same plan upstairs opens bed rooms to all the light and air that such high ceiled spaciousness can hold while an attic of ample portions, is the sanctum of relics great and small. Although less formal than parlors, rooms of the second floor are furnished in mahogany and rosewood of the same type. With the poise and dignity of having their positions assured, and their family connections unquestioned, stand old rosewood wardrobes with mirrors 7 feet high and 5 feet wide, for cavalrymen much taller than their commanding officer, "little Joe Wheeler"...

There are chests of drawers deep enough to hold hoop skirts and petticoats that matched the long dresses grandmothers of the 1920s had forgotten. One boudoir boasts a real high-boy; another, an old secretary like Governor Winthrop used. Just outside, thousands of apple, pear, plum, peach, fig, and cherry trees, form an Eden orchard that tempts bird neighbors to eat of forbidden fruit.

Planted in soil of the Wheeler estate are more than one million bulbs, and through these fertile grounds wind thousands of feet of stepping stones. The fossil imprint on many of these stones might encourage a modern geologist to claim relics of days when Noah and his family were spending the flood season cruising in the ark. One path leads to a vine-covered barn that stores relics of a past century. Among these, a carriage that Mrs. Wheeler's mother enjoyed in her girlhood days...