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America's Family: The Wheelers of Alabama by Elise H. Stephens

Joseph Hull Wheeler and Daniella Jones (Sherrod) Wheeler were married in February, 1866, and thus began their married life at a time when national upheaval, Southern defeat and dislocation caused the young couple to cleave to one another for a security no longer theirs by birth or inheritance.

They built together, with the aid of their relatives, a home, a family, a town, a legend. A legacy we all still share. Their children numbered seven: Lucy Louise, Annie Early, Joseph Jr., Ella (died in childhood), Julia Knox, Carrie Payton, and Thomas H. (Drowned September 7, 1898).

The Wheeler home speaks to us today of a quiet past, refined by family china, embellished by family heirlooms, and ennobled by family portraits, all under-girding family pride. There is not one air of the fashionable drawing room, rather the aura of the library. Books line the walls, nudging the portraits. Scrapbooks, still

spilling over with clippings, rest awkwardly on shelves and bedside tables. They are the historians' richest link to the Wheeler past.

Joseph Wheeler was by nature a family man, as was his wife Daniella. The Wheeler marriage was a lasting one. The two were very much alike. Raised in antebellum culture that put a premium on refinement of tastes and noblesse oblige, Joseph and Daniella both valued the written word and the spoken promise. Family loyalty and public service were the hallmarks of their marriage.

Daniella Jones was the only daughter of Col. Richard Jones, one of the richest men in North Alabama, and granddaughter of Georgia Governor Peter Early. Born in Lawrence County in 1841, raised in luxury, she attended The Huntsville Female Seminary in the 1850s. Her father would do anything for her. The story is told that when asked by her Huntsville boarder, Col. Bradford, if there was anything the Bradfords could do for Daniella, Col. Jones replied: "Anything she wishes. If she requires you to have the Courthouse moved, have it done and draw on me for the expense." (Saunders)

Joseph and Daniella seem never to have questioned who they were or what their roles were in life. Rooted firmly in the history of this country, they traced their lineage to an ancient past. During the turbulent days of Reconstruction and Redemption, genealogy became serious business to them as they together worked their lives back almost to the Ark.

Certain of their own roots planted in a time of peace and promise, the senior Wheelers intended that their children, born amidst still smoldering ashes of Civil War and Reconstruction, and still bearing the pain of the South's defeat, would bear the pride of the family's name. In the preface to their genealogical study, *American Ancestors of the Children of Joseph and Daniella Wheeler*, they wrote:

To Our Dear Children:

We have gathered the foregoing hoping it may be not only of interest but profitable to you. It will at least be a

constant reminder that every act of your will, in a measure, attach to all of your name and race.

One lineage descendant's chart shows that the children are not only in *Who's Who* but descended from Hoo de Hoo. The narrative accompanying the chart reads:

It will be seen by this chart that Anne, born 1425, daughter of Lord Thomas Hoo, and who was 12th Generation from Robert Hoo, who died 1000, married Sir Godffrey Boleyn and was great-grandmother of Anne Boleyn, who was born 1507, and married Henry VIII, and became the mother of Queen Elizabeth, who was born Sept. 7th, 1533. It will, therefore, be seen that the descendents of Phillip Newdigate and Joane Hoo are through this line related to Queen Elizabeth and also related to Lord Nelson. (The famous Lord Nelson, Admiral)

Major-General Joseph Wheeler, U.S. Army, who was born 10th Sept. 1836, is the 15th generation and his children are the 16th generation in descent from Robert Hoo, who died 1310, and Queen Elizabeth of England is the 10th generation in descent from the same Robert Hoo. (Pedigree Chart-Wheeler File, Huntsville Public Library)

As we all know, she who is raised with a silver spoon in her mouth is best fit to wed one with a gold spoon in his. And so it happened. Dani Ella Jones, while still in her teens married Benjamin Sherrod, whose vast acres adjoined the Joneses and whose fortune exceeded her own.

But this marriage of means was not meant to last, as Sherrod died early and in the words of the historian James Edmund Saunders in *Early Settlers in Alabama*: Daniella Sherrod was left "a blooming young widow." (220)

If Daniella was a "blooming young widow," Joseph Wheeler was a better than average young bachelor downright handsome in

his Confederate uniform. Other young ladies had their eyes on him too. Mrs. L. Virginia French of McMinnville, who kept a war Journal of happenings in the Middle Tennessee region, especially singled out Wheeler as a desirable escort for Mollie, a vivacious young school teacher daughter in the family. Through Mrs. French's eyes, one comes closer to the young General Joseph Wheeler, the man referred to as the "Pony Colonel," because of his diminutive size and as "War Child" because of his youthfulness.

In her Diary for Sunday, March 1st, 1863, Mrs. French writes:

Maj. Gen. Wheeler, the young cavalry hero is here—arrived a day or two since. I have not seen him—am told he is a small man—i.e., physically—as a cavalry officer he is reported great tho' some think his attacking Fort Donelson with cavalry was not very judicious. (p. 113)

Her Sunday, March 8th entry noted that she and Mollie saw Wheeler and his staff at the Episcopal Church and that Mr. Hodson of Wheeler's staff had lead the service.

On Monday, March 10 she wrote:

...about dusk Gen. Wheeler and five of his staff (came calling). I thought the cavalry had come to take us "vi et forcibus." ... The Gen. seems a pleasant gentleman—quiet, genial and agreeable, physically he is small scarcely much taller than myself—dark eyes and hair—black whiskers—around head—good forehead. He is not distingue and the suite seem to be perfect gentlemen.

On Wednesday, March 18th, Mrs. French noted that a messenger brought her "a model of the Battle Flag presented by Mme. LeVert to Gen. Wheeler. The flag" she writes, "is made from silk."—She then adds that her husband, Colonel French (of the home guard, I presume) who she called Darlin' "told me today I must now invite Gen. Wheeler and staff to supper on Friday evening. I consented to do so—and as he was going out into the country he brought me eggs and a turkey for the same."

On Thursday, March 19th, Mrs. French had to call off the proposed dinner because the Gen. and his troops were ordered by Gen. Bragg to pull out and either “fall back” or advance with the Federals who were reported moving out of Murfreesboro. On Sunday, the 22nd, Mrs. French added to her Journal the gossip that “nearly all of Wheeler’s staff were very drunk when they left. Dr. Read told the Col. so,” she wrote, “and it so disgusted him that he said he would give up the idea of getting up an entertainment for them. ...and I was surprised...for we all thought Wheeler’s “staves” such gentlemanly men.” “Well,” she wrote, “there’s no telling who, or what you entertain these days.”

It is too bad Wheeler was called away from McMinnville because the French’s would have given him a dinner very much like the one they hosted a few days earlier for Gen. John Hunt Morgan and his new wife. Mrs. French’s Journal entry for March 17th reads thus:

“I had an elegant supper prepared—it would have done credit even to “better times.” True, I had trouble getting some of the material and had to devise many expedients—but it was, nevertheless and elegant success. Mrs. Read asked Mollie afterwards, “where in the world did Mrs. French get all that fine supper in such times as these!”

“I had the richest, clearest, and hottest coffee, light bread, biscuit, and waffles, potato cakes, stewed peaches and apples, cole slaw, chicken salad, pickles sweet and sour, golden butter, a splendidly done turkey, and fine boiled ham, and to crown the repast a very large “snow cake” that would just melt in your mouth, and a stand of the most elegant custard in silver cups.”

It is no wonder she could conclude: “We had a charming time and everything passed off completely to my satisfaction.” (p. 117)

Gen. Wheeler was back in Mrs. French’s busy Journal in May. This time he appears to be courting Mollie. “On Wed.” she writes,

“Gen. Wheeler came to take Mollie riding that evening but it had been raining and she declined going. The Gen. spent two or three hours with us.” On Friday evening, the first of May, Gen. Wheeler came to ride with Mollie. “I had a nice supper prepared but the Gen. could not stay to tea. As it was May-day I gave him some nice cake for himself and Maj. Buford. The Gen. brought me a new work just issued by Goetzel and Co. Mobile—”the Confederate” and the next morning sent me “Great Expectations” by Dickens, a reprint from the same house.” (p. 133)

Mrs. French and General Wheeler had the same publisher—Goetzel and Co. Mobile—in common. She writes in her Journal regarding her work. “Gen. Wheeler tells me my book will have a great circulation—so does Darlin’—so does Mollie, ...Gen. W. has a work in press now—*Cavalry Tactics*—Goetzel is getting it out.”

Mrs. French no doubt was impressed with the young bachelor general who in the midst of war could find time to write a book and court. In her May 18 entry she notes that a Maj. Chaffie is interested in courting Mollie, but she writes, “I had much rather Mollie had captivated Gen. Wheeler.” (p. 140)

The tides of war cast Wheeler so far a field that he had to catch romance on the wing. From his original moorings down in Pensacola as Artillery Lt. he went to Corinth via Huntsville, taking command as Colonel of the 19th Alabama, then to Kentucky as a Brigadier Gen., back down to Middle Tennessee as Chief of Cavalry becoming Major General in 1863. From Murfreesboro to Chickamauga, to Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain, Knoxville, Dalton, Gadsden, Resaca, Atlanta, Macon, Savannah, Columbia, SC: the course of war bearing the tides of defeat carried Wheeler along, always ready to fight, to do his share or more, to lead raids when called upon or to pull up the rear, guard the flanks, scout out the enemy and advance the flag, always sticking close to the main body of men his cavalry were assigned to protect.

It may be argued that the hours Wheeler spent in the saddle, awake and alone, exceeded those of any other command. His unit always contended that they fought more, marched more, suffered

more, cost their government less, and inflicted greater injury on the enemy than any other cavalry command in the Confederate army.

Yet he, like countless others, refused to be daunted by the devastation—the death and dying that became so much a part of their every day. Schooled in chivalry as much as in cavalry tactics, Wheeler sought the refuge of a young lady's companionship when possible.

Wheeler's Raid into the Sequatchie Valley in October of 1863 ended with Wharton's division going through McMinnville (where Mollie lived), while he ended up struggling across the Tennessee River near the home of his future bride. One of the men in his command recalled that the General had one quirk: he would go miles out of his way to stay at a white house. Perhaps it was this idiosyncrasy that brought him to the home of Colonel Jones.

Romance took over at the door of the Jones home. Wheeler's biographers including Saunders, DeLeon and Dyer have General Wheeler meeting Daniella Jones and the two falling in love at first sight. DeLeon reports that Mrs. Sherrod was initially "interested by the self-forgetfulness and sadness of the victorious leader, on receiving reports from his subordinates of killed and casualties." The Wheeler's daughter Annie has confirmed the love-at-first-sight story. There are those who speculate that Joseph Wheeler was as careful in selecting his wife as he was his horses. No doubt Daniella was well-bred and rich. But this historian, being a romantic, opts for love.

There is in the State Archives a letter Wheeler wrote to Daniella, addressing her as "My dear Friend" and signing himself "Your devoted friend. J. W." His timidity and sensitivity are matched only by his tact and sincerity.

My Dear Friend,

I was delighted a few minutes since at receiving your letter of April 21st, and as a courier leaves by daylight tomorrow, I write immediately to give you my thanks.

You say you cannot write about yourself without being accused of egotism. I will not bring the charge my dear friend. The letters are for myself alone and no other subject can be as full of interest to me as that.

It is nearly seven months since I first met you and some chilling fears gather around, which tell me that I trouble you with my letters. Talk plainly with me on this point and tell me if you have still the same regard for me expressed the sad day I left Caledonia, you know what I asked and what you said you would try to do. Tell me, I pray you, if I weary you by calling these things to your mind.

Sometimes I think you never had any more regard for me than for anyone to whom you wished to be polite—and then again I flatter myself that you regarded me a little nearer. I only know as I have before expressed myself how highly I regarded and esteemed you. I know very little of ladies' ways of expressing themselves and must beg you to tell me if your feelings have changed.

Do not fear you will hurt me by so doing, as nothing will cause my friendship for you to cease, and there is no way in which you can show your friendship for me as much as by relieving my mind upon this point.

I have written 2 letters to you since April 3rd—one was sent yesterday. I regret you never received my letter of February—possibly your letters would have been different. I have a copy of that one preserved which I am tempted to send you tonight, but I will now wait until I hear from this. I was deeply pained to hear of the brutal treatment of the Yankees and trust the forces now sent in that direction will prevent a recurrence of their brutalities.

Please write me quickly and tell me all about yourself. Nothing can be more interesting to me. As I am

your friend who will delight in your happiness, and I trust may at least call you friend, can I not? You know how I would talk if with you—try and talk to me as freely—But it is very late—so good night.

Your devoted friend, JW

He is a general, and she a wealthy young woman. One is satisfied that the young man inside the General is smitten and in love with the young girl inside the rich widow.

The marriage of Daniella Jones (Sherrod) to Joseph Hull Wheeler assured Col. Jones that his daughter would be well taken care of. Joseph Wheeler took his young bride to N.O. a retreat of a handful of Confederate generals including Beauregard, Longstreet and Hood. We get a view of the young couple—a rather jaundiced one I fear from Varina Davis, wife of still impressionable Jefferson Davis in *First Lady of the South* by Isbel Ross. (He tried his hand at the hardware business, but it was rough going—a struggle, involving tooth and nail.)

Winnie was ill in New Orleans, and she feared measles for her. She saw Dick Taylor and quarreled with him and then made up. It was strange to see what her husband's former generals were doing. Beauregard did not call, she noted. Longstreet was engaged in a commission business. "Little Wheeler"—formerly General Joseph Wheeler, of the cavalry command—was in a small hardware shop—measuring out nails, and tacks, and such little things, smiling and deft with his fingers—he has a sweet little shy pink-faced wife—just bearing the same relation to the body social, as he did to the cavalry service, presentable, but neither influential, imposing or efficient. However, Varina wished these two babes in the woods safe-conduct to their haven. Otherwise they would "eat blackberries and die." (p. 287—Harper Bro., 1958)

In 1869, at the urging of Daniella's father who was constantly concerned for the couple's health in fever-infested New Orleans, the Wheelers moved to North Alabama. Joseph found occupation as a planter, read law, became an attorney, a stockholder and director of The Memphis & Charleston RR, and a Democratic spokesman.

In 1880, he ran for Congress. The Alabama Democrats of the 8th District took 25 ballots before they selected Wheeler to be their candidate to run against the popular incumbent William Lowe of Huntsville. But once the momentum was his, Wheeler went about the business of campaigning for office as he had campaigned in war. He rode circles around his opponent, speaking at every turn. He was a little man and he sought to be remembered in little ways as he championed the little fellow.

The Republicans and Independents and Greenback party folks called him a corporation man, a hard-money man, a military man with no experience in civil affairs. His opponent, making fun of his size, threatened to "take down the little General's political breeches and lay him across my lap for correction."

The outcome of the 1880 election is still debated. According to the Democrats, Wheeler won the seat from the maverick independent Lowe—or so it appeared. It is doubtful if any election in all of Alabama between 1866 and 1900 was conducted without voter fraud, but the 1880 congressional race in the 8th District was so close, with both sides indulging in such questionable practices, that both sides cried foul. Wheeler only won—or Lowe only lost—by 43 votes out of 24,773. Yet the election judges had thrown out 601 Greenback-Independent-Republican ballots because they had markings on them other than that prescribed by State law. As *The Huntsville Gazette* put it, paraphrasing Hamlet:

To count or not to count, that is the question. Whether 'tis better in the end to suffer the pangs of sorrow and inglorious defeat or to take arms against a sea of ballots, and by rejecting end them. (Dec 6, 1880)

The wheels of justice turn slowly and Wheeler served ten of 11 months of the congressional term before he was ruled against. In that time he had established himself as a creditable legislator. When Lowe died in 1882, the opposition couldn't find a candidate as attractive as the earnest, hard-working Wheeler.

An article from the *Los Angeles Times* August 27, 1900 vividly portrays Congressman Wheeler as "biquitous," always running up the stairs, taking three at a time, starting his work day at 6:00 and not ending it before 10:00 p.m., employing dozens of clerks and stenographers, mostly young women, "transcribing letters from stenographic notes dictated the night before, :addressing and stuffing envelopes with packets of seeds."

When he was at home at Wheeler, NOBODY rested. Daniella wrote daughter Annie in May 1884 (Yet another view of the family scene):

[3 May 1884]

Dear Little Annie,

I expect you think letters from home are like angel visits in one respect at least _____. "Few and far between" but if you knew how everlastingly busy we are you would not wonder.

We have to get off scores of letters and papers for Papa every day and when he is away he leaves something to do for every moment and then we have had cotton buyers by the dozen for a month and have had to board and mount them ad nauseam.

Uncle Tom has at last sold and we will send you \$100 in a day or two. Aunt P was delighted with the patch you sent and your letter. I hope you are well, you do not say how you are. I will get Papa to order some preserves sent you from Baltimore. Wish I knew what kind you preferred but do not want to wait and will order.

As a young congressman, Wheeler quickly acquired a reputation for feverish endeavor. A *New York Times* article called him “a marvel of activity ...always dodging into the committee rooms, then out into the corridors, talking one moment with a constituent, and the next over to the Supreme Court looking after some local interest, and then when least expected he will be back in his seat in the House.” (scrapbooks)

If ladies of the period found relief by pouring their hearts and thoughts into daily diaries, Joseph Wheeler made of the Congressional Daily Record a repository for all of his concerns. “Just one minute to say just one word” became the catch phrase for Congressman Wheeler, and a standing joke as everyone knew that the next day his “one word” would cover several pages in the *Record*.

To better represent and reach his constituents, he not only made maximum use of the *Record* but also of the United States mails. “He sends out more matter through the mails than any other 3 members.” He would purchase from urban-area representatives their allotments of government seeds and distribute the seeds with instructions for planting and other agricultural documents to farmers in his district.

The story is told of him: Once General Wheeler was traveling in a buggy along a road in Alabama. He overtook a mail carrier groaning under the weight of an enormous sack of matter and invited the man to take a seat by him.

“Why don’t you have a horse?” he asked.

“I have had 3 at different times, but they died. The work was too heavy.”

“You mean that burden of the mails was too great?”

“Yes, that’s it. There’s a fool Representative from this district who sends out such a lot of trash that the

mails are loaded all the time. This bag is full of such stuff—books and such.”

“How much money would buy you a horse?”

“Horses are high now. I couldn’t get a good one for less than \$30.”

Wheeler counted out \$30 and gave it to the man and drove off.

As a legislator, his reputation for having all the facts and figures became legendary. One historian went so far as to say:

“His statistical information was wonderful, and when accuracy on all great issues was needed, it became a proverbial suggestion about the capitol at Washington to “ask Wheeler.” Frequently, he could give offhand a long series of statistics, and was resorted to as an encyclopedia.” (p. 231 Riley, B. F. *Makers and Romance of Alabama History*.)

Wheeler may have been accurate but he was rarely succinct. In fact, if the truth be known, he was pompous in his speeches to the point of being a pedant and a bore. It would not be surprising if the real reason he acquired and most certainly kept the sobriquet “Point” not because there was so little to him, or that he graduated from West Point, but because he was so slow in getting to or in making his point.

One speech on the tariff—given Friday, May 4 and continued on Saturday, May 5, 1888, took up 142 pages of small print. The points Wheeler wanted to make were given on pages 4 and 5, the rest was historical, statistical and exceedingly tedious. Wheeler’s tactic as a Democratic congressman was to bowl them over with facts and to deaden protest with profuse verbosity.

A sampling of letters from his constituents gives the flavor of the man and his times. Typical of thousands is one from Danville, Alabama.

Jan. 13, 1888

Hon. Joseph Wheeler

Dear Sir,

Will you please send me, from the proper departments, whatever garden and farm seeds this region ought to try; also, the pension laws of the United States, also the Constitutions of the states; you may also have sent whatever meteorological apparatus the Signal Department furnishes to volunteer observers in this part of Alabama. If you can think of any government documents that would be really useful in a country school library, have them sent also; I promise that they will be used.

If I can do anything for you over here be sure and command me.

Very truly,
Ed E. Fluckstern

P.S. Be sure and send beet, tomato, carrots, parsnips, vegetable, oyster, cabbage, peppers

Long Island, Ala
Feb 6

Honorable Co. Wheeler,

I send you a correct list of Voters Who getes Male at my office. I have filed it out as near as I was able to. There is a good many Who getes Male hear who is not Legal voters. Mr. R. E. Wiswell is a Tennessee Voter but gites his male hear but lives in Ten. I will count the papers of seeds and distribute them correct. Will you please send me a few varieties of Garden seeds, I am not a Voter but a good Lessinerer.

Will promise to do all I can fur you. I never can
forgit you for enterduceing the bill to increase the
compensation of fourt class Post officis as I am one Who
does a great deal of Work & gites but little for it and I
am quite ready as I am a widdow. Please call on me at
any time and any infermation I can give you will taik
apleasur in doing so.

Yours & Mrs. Angeline Thraux

Scottsboro, Ala
May 9, 1888

Honor Joe Wheeler

Dear Sir, it is with the gratest of pleasur that I drop you a
few lines to let you no we air all well and I feel under
many obelegathions to you for being so kind in working
after my clame. My Boy that is named after you is
alooking for a present from you. I think he ought to have
a nice present for he is all the Boy in this county that is
named after you. I am all the union solger that has
named a boy after you if you send the baby a present you
sent it to the post offes. I will bring my short letter to a
clos by saying I hope you will run again.

Your affectiant frind
David Welbankes

His correspondence was not limited to constituents, however.
People from all over the country and different parts of the world
wrote to him about odd and sundry.

As a Congressman, Wheeler steadily grew in stature. He
became one of the beloved characters on the Hill. His politics,
always with an eye to the folks back home, became increasingly
national in scope. He favored a low tariff, an increase in currency

circulation, and federal support to public education. He served on such diverse committees as Territories, Interior, Military, and Ways and Means.

Wheeler was at the height of his political power and seniority when the Spanish-American conflict over Cuba careened toward war. Seeing the drift, Wheeler hastened to offer his services. His gallant gesture and McKinley's subsequent appointment as Major General of Volunteers symbolically, for the whole nation, brought down the final curtain on the Civil War. The Nation's wounds were healed. It was fit to fight again.

Wheeler was so popular when he came home from Cuba, his name was bandied about for the governorship, the Vice Presidency, and even the highest office of the land. One widely suggested slate that may have gone farther in our T.V. age was "The Hero of Manila and the Savior of Santiago: Admiral Dewey for President, Wheeler for Vice President." When asked his opinion of such a combination, Dewey is quoted as saying: "Gen. Joe Wheeler has been mentioned as my running mate? Well, Well, that is lovely. A fine mess we two would make of it!"

When Wheeler was asked about his political future, he was quick to say that President McKinley had given him "the highest compliment that anyone could give me, and I will act as he directs. I will stay in the service as long as he wants me to do so, and when he indicates that there is no longer actual need of my services, I will leave."

When all is said and done, Joseph Wheeler was first and foremost a soldier. He was trained to it and he experienced the fullness of life best through it. It made a man of him yet ironically, it enabled him to keep in touch with the "little boy." As he said at age 62: "I prefer the army life to the life of a member of Congress. I am full of life as a soldier and but a gray haired man as a civilian. I feel as young as when I was a boy." Then with an extra twinkle in his calm, dark eyes, he would add: "Although some little discussion has been raised to my age, I hope to be old enough soon to make a good soldier."

Now it is time for us to pay our respects to the family's enormous contribution to American history and Alabama pride. We can do that by joining The Friends of Wheeler Plantation and by spreading the word that the Wheeler home is a North Alabama tourist attraction, a shrine to liberty and family solidarity.

...TO BE CONTINUED

