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Further Thoughts on Visiting the LaFayette City Cemetery: The Battle of LaFayette

8-9 minutes

We were back in LaFayette for Father's Day weekend. I wrote last month about sheltering in in Walker county and taking my morning walks in the LaFayette city cemetery. So I was back in the cemetery last week—early morning, as I like to do, when the day is new and fresh. It was foggy, which gave the cemetery a different kind of beauty.

As I walked, I thought of my father. My parents are buried in Charlotte, where they lived after Dad retired from forty years in the Methodist ministry. Their headstone bears an image of a cross and flame, the denominational symbol created in 1968 when the

Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church (a name that has recently become ironic).

The Methodist ministry was something of tradition in my family. Of Dad's five uncles on his mother's side, two were Methodist ministers and a third was president of two Methodist colleges—and they were all the children of Rev. Alfred McKinley Hamilton, another Methodist minister.

Headstones can tell something of a person's life. My father was more than just a Methodist preacher, of course, but he did live with a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" (in the words of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism).

One of my favorite headstones in the LaFayette cemetery has the image of a blackboard with the word "Teacher" engraved above the name. There's also a ruler that says "3rd Grade," an open book, and an apple. "Forever Loved and Missed" is carved at the bottom. I believe it; I've forgotten most of the names of my high school teachers, but I'll always remember those from elementary school.

That's all I know about this person: she was a teacher. Headstones can tell us things.

There is a spot in the old section of the cemetery called "Confederate Square." It contains the bodies of fifteen Confederate soldiers who were killed at the Battle of LaFayette. The fifteen markers are identical: "Unknown soldier / CSA / June 24, 1864," under the co-called Southern Cross of Honor, an image established in 1898 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Each marker has a small Confederate battle flag stuck in the

ground beside it.

Turns out I was there just a few days before the anniversary of the battle. I read up on it after I got back to the house. The story begins in mid-June 1864, when Union Colonel Louis D. Watkins was sent to LaFayette “to endeavor to rid the country of several guerilla bands which were said to be infesting it,” as Watkins said in a report preserved in the *Official Records*. J. A. Sartain spent nearly six pages of his *History of Walker County* describing these “terrorists,” the most famous of which was a man named Gatewood.

Incidentally, Col. Watkins had been born in Florida to parents who were from Georgia, and the 400-odd Union soldiers he commanded were southern Unionists from Kentucky.

Early in the morning of June 24, Confederate General Gideon Pillow, whose soldiers consisted of men from Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, started to sneak into town to dislodge Watkins. According to contemporary accounts, a “heavy fog

covering the ground gave everything an eerie feeling," just like what I saw in the cemetery that morning. After the two sides exchanged shots on the streets of LaFayette, Gen. Pillow sent a message to the Union commander demanding surrender and threatening to burn the town to get rid of the Yankees ("destroy the village in order to save it" would be the phrase used a century later in Vietnam), but Watkins "respectfully declined to surrender." The fighting that followed was furious. Things were looking bad for the Union soldiers, but reinforcements from Rock Spring, a few miles to the north, arrived just in the nick of time. Gen. Pillow and his men beat a hasty retreat.

And so ended the Battle of LaFayette, where a group of southern-born soldiers fought another group of southern-born soldiers over—something.

Shortly after the battle, a satirical poem, "A Psalm of Life" ("as chanted by Gideon J. Pillow and his boys on retreating from Lafayette, Georgia, June 24, 1864"), made the rounds of northern newspapers. The climactic line: "Let the Yankees bury our dead! Run! Run!" That's pretty much what really happened. According to Miss Orpha Center (her account is recorded in Sartain's county history), "The Yankee soldiers passed her home carrying the dead Confederate soldiers to the cemetery for burial. They were playing a funeral dirge and were very respectful and solemn." Miss Center's brother, "a mere lad at that time, followed them and saw a large grave where he says they buried 15 in one place, all together in one grave."

Only much later were the present headstones added. In 1906, as part of a movement for national reconciliation, Congress established the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate

Dead, charged with identifying and marking the graves of Confederates soldiers who died in Union prisons. By the late 1920s, the federal government was providing grave markers for all Confederate soldiers. The markers in the LaFayette cemetery are of course much later than that.

Headstones can tell us things, but here, they tell us that we don't know much. We know that the soldiers were killed on June 24, 1864. We know that they were unknown. And we know that they were Confederate soldiers.

About ten years ago, the local Sons of Confederate Veterans did a lot of research to find the names of some of the soldiers who were killed that day in LaFayette, and they put up a sign with a list of those names. The list doesn't prove who the fifteen are, but it's probably the best we can do.

Even with the list, those soldiers were truly unknown for almost a century and a half. That "unknown" is sad. "When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah!" but these Johnnies never came home. I think about that when I see "unknown" on a grave marker. Who were they? Did they leave behind a grieving mother, a father who couldn't cry but also could no longer smile, a little brother who grew up alone? Or maybe they were married and left a wife and children who went through life never quite sure what had happened.

We do know this: they were Confederate soldiers, a fact that perhaps tells us less than we think. Some of those fifteen were from Alabama. In 1932, Bessie Martin wrote a book titled *Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army* (republished recently with the catchier title, *A Rich Man's War, A Poor Man's Fight*), which discussed not only the number of men who deserted (a lot), but also the reasons behind it (again, a lot). The soldiers buried in Confederate Square obviously did not desert, but disaffection greatly exceeded outright disloyalty. This was true across the South. Timothy Tyson told the story of his great-great-grandfather in eastern North Carolina, a Unionist who was drafted into the Confederate army. Lest we forget, not all white southerners loved the Confederacy.

Even though we might know the names of some, the men themselves are still very much unknown.

Headstones can tell us things, sometimes about the past, sometimes about the present; sometimes about others, sometimes about ourselves.

A walk through the cemetery early on a foggy morning is more than good exercise; it invites us to meditate, to think about the complexities and commonalities of humanity across the years.

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