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Washington, Arkansas: "The War Years" (1860-1865)

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WASHINGTON, ARKANSAS

"The War Years"
(1860-1865)

by
Don Yancey

In Partial Fulfillment
of the
Course Requirements
for the
MAGNANIMITY SEMINAR
(Fall, 1974)

To the ignorant visitor to Washington, Arkansas, it may seem a bit strange that this tiny, decaying Southern town played such an important role during the War Between the States. The strangeness disappears, however, when one learns of how its location in the South, its people, and its monetary and troop contributions meant to the war effort here in Arkansas. Even when the Federals took control of Little Rock, the state capitol, Washington volunteered its services to serve as the Confederate State Capitol. Despite its later decline, Washington occupies a commanding position in the state history of Arkansas and the drama of the Southern Confederacy.

The two highways crossing in Washington help give it a background of importance to both the civilian and military populations. Digressing just a bit, "the one time buffalo trail, and afterwards an Indian trail through Arkansas, became in President Andrew Jackson's day the old Military Road, after Jackson drove certain Indian tribes out of the South."¹ The Military Road, Franklin Street in Washington, was joined by five Indian traces and the old Chihuahua Trail, Fort Jessup Trail, and Fort Towson Trail. Washington's place on these trails into Texas and the close proximity of the states made it a considerable supply depot and troop transfer and training point all during the war. The town newspaper, the washington Telegraph, had Washington as a home mainly due to its importance as a transportation center in the Southwest. Its owner, Mr. William H. Etter, a native of Pennsylvania,

¹Charlean Moss Williams, The Old Town Speaks (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1951), p. 8

came to Washington in the late 1830's primarily because Washington was a real crossroads and was such an opportunity for enterprising young men.

By 1860, the mood in Washington was grim as was the mood in other Southern towns. Secessionist conventions had met, debated, and adjourned without any real settlement of the serious questions facing the South's citizens. Several of Washington's leading citizens were prominent in the state and took their places in these conventions. One such citizen was Mr. A. B. Carrigan. Although the feeling of the town was "anti-North", the delegates from Washington generally were opposed to breaking up the Federal Union, and Mr. Carrigan often spoke openly of such. In several of his letters he speaks of "the suicide of withdrawing from the Federal union."² While the debate was often sharp and tempers flared, the conventions usually adjourned with accomplishing little.

The situation reached a climax when in April, 1861, the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, issued the call to Arkansas to furnish 780 men to subdue the rebellion in South Carolina after the firing on Fort Sumter. Governor Rector refused them for the North's use speaking of the North's "mendacity and usurpation."³ The stage was set for the war Drama which would cost Washington so dearly. She would see her sons march off to war and not see many of them again. The next secessionist convention passed a request to secede by a 59 to 1 margin. Senator Charles E. Mitchel, of Washington, subsequently resigned from the U.S. Senate, and Augustus H. Garland, also of Washington, was a delegate to the provisional Congress at Montgomery, Alabama, on May 18, 1861.

²Interview with Mr. William Carrigan, October 19, 1974.

³Williams, op. cit., p. 54.

Somehow war has always excited the blood of young men and caused young women to look in awe as the uniformed regiments march pass, and such was the case in Washington. Just as soon as the first news of Sumter came out in the Telegraph, young men and boys began to drill and march preparing for a lark "killin' Yanks." Little did they see or realize the carnage that lay ahead.

The first company to organize in Washington was the Hempstead Rifles, captained by John H. Gratiot, a veteran of the Mexican War.⁴ It was financed by Mr. William H. Etter, the owner of the Telegraph. In a ceremony in 1861, the Rifles presented Mr. Etter with a parchment engraved with the names of those in the unit. Not long after, many of those names were no more, for at the Battle of Oak Hills, Missouri, the loss of the Hempstead Rifles was far greater than any other unit involved.⁵ The remnant of the unit returned to Washington to be reorganized and recutitted--again financed by Mr. Etter.

Other units organized in Washington include the Hempstead Cavalry, the Hempstead Hornets, the Confederate Guards, the Prairie de Roane Home Guards, and other small units without any distinguishing names. Although their records are lost in time, speeches given when each unit was presented with their colors remain. Waxing eloquent with Southern patriotism, a Miss Diffie spoke after presenting the Prairie de Roane Home Guards with a guidon:

"We have an encouraging spectacle before us today, if one proof was wanting of the justness of our cause, we have that proof before us now. We see a company clothed in the panoply of war, composed of persons of every age, from those whose locks have grown hoar beneath the rays of a Southern sun, who might naturally desire to go down to the grave in peace, but come to offer his remaining days as an immolation on the altar of his cherished South."⁶

⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 55.

⁵Ibid., p. 57.

⁶Ibid., p. 312.

All companies organized in Washington drilled on the Prairie de Raane, near the present town of Hope. Captain Sam Ogden, of Washington, was one of the drill masters, and later rose to the rank of Lieutenant-colonel in the Fourth McNair's Arkansas Infantry. Although crude and rustic in nature, this was the only training that many men had before going into battle with their units.

Not everyone, however, chose to serve in the Confederate Army. The South had many whose sentiments had been Unionist and Washington was no exception. One of the greatest examples of this situation was the life of Mr. Orville Jennings. He had been a Unionist member of the state legislature in 1860-1861, but had become a Secessionist after a trip to Louisiana early in 1861 and the firing upon Fort Sumter. When the Confederate Congress passed the Conscription Act in 1862, Jennings became liable to be drafted. He ran unopposed for Mayor of Washington and was elected the same year. Since the mayor could hold a court of record according to the charter (town) of 1861, he was exempted from military service. John B. Eakin, the war-time editor of the Washington Telegraph, later wrote that this exemption was the primary reason for his running for mayor.⁷ After this term, he ran for reelection and won. Evidently Jennings never had real peace in his position as a Secessionist, because in early February, 1864, Jennings left Washington on the premise of checking accounts in Arkadelphia and continued to Little Rock, by this time in Federal hands, took the amnesty oath--proclaimed by Lincoln in late 1863--and set up a law practice.⁸ By April, the Radical Republicans were advancing Jennings as one of its two candidates for the U.S. Senate. Though this looms large in comparison to many other citizens, it does show that many faced difficult

⁷Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," February 15, 1964.

⁸Ibid.

decisions related to their loyalties. This also extended to those of Confederate sympathy living in Federal occupied areas. An anonymous correspondent of the Washington Telegraph travelled with the Confederate cavalry under Col. W.H. Brooks and reported about conditions and attitudes in Northwest Arkansas. With his bias and prejudice for the South showing, he wrote:

"I find invariably, as an unvarying rule, that all the lazy, thriftless, ignorant, hog-stealing gentry went north and howl loudly for the glorious Union, while the intelligent, honest, and industrious people were and are true and staunch southern patriots."⁹

While difficult decisions and raising armies plagued the governments, one of the most important problems was the old problem of finances. When Arkansas seceded from the Union, she was cut off from the old financial institutions of the North. This caused the Southern Confederacy and Arkansas to try to find new financial systems and monies for the war effort. Locally in Washington, the Washington Exchange Company was organized in 1862 to print and circulate small paper currency called "shinplasters." As was the case all over the South, these declined in value due to inadequate backing of gold. The backing of England and France to any overwhelming degree never materialized and it came to be that "confederate" was an adjective meaning "without any value." This was much the same with the War Bonds sold by the Confederate states. These were sold to finance each state's military efforts, and many leading citizens joined in the selling of them. Before being asked to serve in the lower house of the Confederate Congress, Augustus Garland canvassed the state speaking for the Confederate produce loans and taking any subscriptions in cotton.¹⁰

⁹Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," October 17, 1964.

¹⁰Arkansas Gazette, article, January 22, 1956.

Because the Confederate States had such a dependence upon their loose enforcing of laws, collecting taxes came to be one of the biggest problems faced. In Washington, an advertisement would appear in the Telegraph announcing that the tax collector would be in town at a certain place at a certain time. It would be up to each family, then, to have someone appear and pay what they owed. Needless to say, many did not show up and much money was lost to the state.

Washington, then, can best be described as being much like the other Southern towns in both attitudes and lifestyle. When the war began, it fell the duty of each town or locality to not only furnish units for service, but to equip them, also. Washington's units were attired in uniforms made by the women of the town, and the Telegraph had many advertisements asking for materials:

"Jeans and lindseys for the soldiers of Arkansas. I will pay cash for any quantity delivered to me at Washington. Our Army must depend in a great measure upon home manufacture for clothing, and it is hoped that they will not be disappointed in their expectations of South Arkansas."¹¹

Other advertisements asked for spare pieces of wool to be used as cannon wadding by the Confederate Artillery. In this way, the "folks back home" were directly involved in the war effort.

The efforts by women came into great importance during this time, and perhaps it can be said that without the women and their efforts, the Confederate cause would have been severely hampered.

¹¹Washington Telegraph, date unknown.

When, in the course of the War, it became necessary to have a hospital in Washington, the ladies of the town formed the Washington Hospital Association with Mrs. Mary McDonald as matron.¹² Beginning with their founding in 1862, they constantly appealed to the public for food, money, and clothing. These ladies were not only "friends" of the hospital, but were the nurses in them. The Baptist and the Methodist churches in Washington were the two hospitals, and men of both sides were treated there. These two places increased their importances when in 1863 Little Rock was captured by the Federals and the Confederate capitol was moved to Washington.

These were of such importance that early in July of 1864, W.H. Hart appeared at Washington and explained that he had come to inspect the military hospitals and see that the Texas soldiers were receiving the proper treatment. The Texas State legislature appropriated sums of money at the discretion of each commissioner (such as Hart) to be used in alleviating the needs of Texas wounded in other states. Hart could find no fault with the manner in which the sick and wounded Texans were cared for, and spent only a small amount of the money at his disposal. Most of his time was spent in arranging the transportation of wounded back home.¹³

On the other hand, Washington enjoyed musical entertainment during the War years, and many participated in the town concerts and impromptu parades. Since the academies in the town taught music as part of their regular curriculum, there were many who could join in when bands played concerts or organized parades.¹⁴ When Gen J.C. Tappan's Confederate Brigade camped near Washington, his band--with both brass

¹²Arkansas Gazette, May 11, 1964.

¹³Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," July 1, 1964.

¹⁴Ibid., February 28, 1964

and string instruments--joined a group of local pupils of Professor George E. Smith, known as the Washington Female Glee Singers, for a concert at the hall of the old Washington Male and Female Academy.¹⁵ This concert drew a capacity crowd, in spite of high prices for tickets. These concerts did much to help the faltering spirits of the citizens of Washington as the fortunes of the South grew worse and worse.

Things looked glum, indeed, in Arkansas when, in 1863, the impending capture of Little Rock by Federals under General Steele forced the Confederate state officials under Governor Harris Flanigan to repair to Washington with all the state records carried in oxwagons.¹⁶ The Hempstead Country Court-house was used as the State capitol building and his entourage was housed in various homes and hotels in town. The Armory was also transported to Washington, as well as the Central Stores of the state. Anyone who might help in the housing of legislators were to notify their senator, A.S. Williams.¹⁷

Although the legislature was relatively safe, it could accomplish little because it had adjourned in November of 1862. The machinery of government for the state had gone on, but beginning in May, 1864, John R. Eakin, the Telegraph publisher, called for a special session of the legislature.¹⁸ While there was some business that needed transaction, Eakin frankly admitted that the primary reason for meeting would be to show the world that the refugee government was still active.¹⁹ There was some thought, too, that the U.S. government might sue for peace with the Confederate States and since Harper's Weekly showed Arkansas as wholly under Federal control, it might be given to the Federals.²⁰

¹⁵Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," February 28, 1964.

¹⁶Mary Margaret Haynes, Landmarks of Washington, (Washington: Etter Press, 1958). p. 7.

¹⁷Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas." September 21, 1964.

¹⁸Ibid., July 28, 1964.

¹⁹Ibid., September 13, 1964.

²⁰Ibid., July 3, 1964.

The problem of courts in Arkansas was one which demanded attention, especially when public sentiment was aroused. Even though many elected and appointed offices carried powers of holding court, the actual performing of these duties "courtwise" was sporadic. Some of the courts in the counties of Arkansas that were still under Confederate dominion had resumed their operations early in the summer of 1864, and others took up their duties in the fall.²¹ John G. Halliburton, marshal for the Eastern District of Arkansas, announced on September 6, 1864, that the Confederate District Court would hold a term at Washington on the first Monday in October.²²

When Daniel Ringo, the judge presiding over this court, was reluctant to hold court because the law stipulated that court for the Eastern District would be held in Little Rock, public sentiment caused him to change the place of meeting court from Little Rock to Washington.²³ To solve the problem of the circuit court, Senator A.B. Williams suggested that the court be held at Washington at the next regular term by a special judge, to be selected under the provisions of the Constitution, and for all cases on the docket that were ready for trial to be disposed of.

The meeting of the courts and other matters vital to the lives of "ordinary" citizens were expedited by the use of the Washington Telegraph. After being founded in 1839, it grew in importance and even rivaled the Gazette for literary supremacy in Arkansas.²⁴ Eventually, it also became the official organ of the Confederate government of Arkansas.²⁵ Despite of the shortage of paper, frequent disruption of telegraphic service, absence of experienced staff members, and other unfavorable

²¹Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," September 4, 1864.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁵Ibid., p. 26.

wartime conditions, the few, newspapers remaining in Arkansas loyal to the Confederate cause flourished during the summer of 1864.²⁶ This was true of the Telegraph. Eakin, the Telegraph's editor, was assisted by Mr. Thomas A. Scott, the former editor and publisher of the South-western Democrat at Paraglifta, now in Federal hands.²⁷ Laborsiously working--for the Telegraph was printed on a hand-press--Eakin and his staff turned out issue after issue during the war informing the town as best as possible of the fortunes of the South and other news that could be had. News was often hard to come by in Washington and one would have to be discerning in believing the reports whether from rumor or in print. When Confederate Major General Patrick R. Cleburne, of Arkansas, was killed in the brief battle of Franklin, Tennessee, Eakin refused to believe the reports because they came through Federal sources.²⁸ For the next two months, Eakin searched the available dispatches and exchange papers trying to find a reliable contradiction. After the papers east of the Mississippi seemed to generally accept it as fact, Eakin wrote an editorial of it on February 8, 1865.²⁹ Because of the shortage of paper, the Telegraph was temporarily reduced to the size of a bulletin, and there was not enough space for a lengthy eulogy.

This shortage of paper irked the usually placid Eakin, and he openly criticized Governor Flanagin. The legislature had authorized the state to buy paper for official use in that last session, and give any left to newspapers. Governor Flanagin had given no sign of giving any away. with no other source of paper, the Telegraph was forced to drastically cut the size of the paper. It never again regained its original size before the War was over.³⁰

²⁶Arkansas Gazette, "Chronicles of Arkansas," July 10, 1964.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., November 22, 1964.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., January 29, 1965.

That was a bleak and dreary Christmas in 1864, both on the battlefield and in Washington. The Telegraph in one of its "cit-down" issues writes:

"Considering the Christmas holidays (Alas! dull enough whilst so much sorrow surrounds us), we only issue today a quarter sheet for the sake of the military orders and last dispatches. We have nothing later our extra bulletin of last Saturday, which is republished for the sake of our subscribers in the country."³¹

After that Christmas, the citizens were becoming painfully aware that the Confederacy would lose the war, and began making plans in the result that the South would surrender. The visit in January of 1864 had not helped General Kirby Smith to reassure the populace of Washington.³² By March, they were at such a state that they held a public meeting at the Hempstead Courthouse to discuss the defense of the town against both a Federal invasion and marauding bands of Confederate veterans without either homes or livelihoods.³³ Although at this meeting resolutions were passed showing lingering Southern patriotism, those present were aware that the war was quickly drawing to a close.

In February, Col. John Q. Burbridge had asked the public for arms to be used repelling Federals and marauders.³⁴ Citizens responding to a call for volunteers forming a defense group were to be under the command of Burbage. This group would never face Federal opposition. The war quickly came to an end and no "Federal invasion" ever came.

After Lee surrendered in April, much of Arkansas was cast into chaos. However, the Washington citizenry saw the impending situation, and Governor Harris Flanagin appointed Mr. A.H. Carrigan temporary judge of the town to help keep the chaos down.³⁵

³¹Haynes, op. cit., p. 8.

³²Arkansas Gazette. "Chronicles of Arkansas." January 3, 1864.

³³Ibid., March 7, 1864.

³⁴Ibid., February 6, 1864.

³⁵Interview with Mr. Charles Carrigan, October 12, 1974.

By June, Washington was occupied by Federal troops, but before they arrived, citizens "appropriated" the supplies in the Commissary. Mr. J.N. Boyd writes:

"as we know that everything belonging to the Confederacy would be turned over to the Yanks, I concluded that I would press a mule or a horse from the Quarter-Master one night. I found many others in the same notion, and a crowd of us went out to where they were kept---but found we were too late.

we went together and helped the women to get into the house in which the supplies were kept. The man in charge refused to let us in and I will never forget the time or scene. These women certainly helped themselves and soon had everything of any account out of that house. Just as they were about through, some one in the dark fired a gun under the edge of the house and I never saw such hustling in my life!"³⁶

When the Federals came, the Baptist Church, which had been a hospital, became a Negro school--the first in the state.³⁷ Rumor has it that when it came time to go to school, the young Negroes ran away and had to be forced to go.³⁸ Despite hard feelings and hard times, the years of Reconstruction passed and life in Washington went on as it had before. Those who served in the War reminisced about their experiences and some even wrote of them. Washington remained as a town where those who were wealthy could retire to their plantations and enjoy their wealth. Its decline also came and Washington today is a town that seems locked in time. The twentieth century has not fully come, and one almost can get the feeling that it would be a shame if it did!

³⁶Williams, op. cit., p. 96.

³⁷Haynes, op. cit., p. 10.

³⁸Interview with Mr. William Carrigan, October 12, 1974.

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Vernon, Walter N., "Beginnings of Methodism in Arkansas," The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, XXI (winter, 1972). (This goes into some depth exploring the start of the Methodist movement in Arkansas and those who played a part in it. Washington plays a major role.)

Williams, Charlean Moss, The Old Town Speaks, Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1951. (This is the most complete work on the history of Washington and is the only book in print on the subject. It is strong on recollections and local personalities, but it tends to be less than objective in outlook.)

Interviews

Interview with Mr. William Carrigan, October 12, 19, 1974.
(These interviews are valuable for their unique insight into the "mind of the period" and events not already chronicled. Mr. Carrigan obtained his information both from "word of mouth" from his father, prominent during the period; and from letters written by members of his family also during the period.)

Interviews with Mr. and Mrs. William Etter, October 5, 12, 19, 1974.
(This series of interviews also give insight into the thoughts of the people during the period; and stories lasting until today.)

Interview with Mrs. Charles Haynes, October 26, 1974. (Mrs. Haynes is the past head of the Washington Restoration Foundation and her interview is valuable in that it mainly concerned the physical side of the town, eg. buildings, clothes, papers, etc.)