

The Battle of Fort Gregg

*Why there were so few members of the 12th and 16th Mississippi Regiments
present at the Surrender at Appomattox.*

Several years past, I was prowling around on Old Port Gibson Road between Willows and Rocky Springs, (Claiborne County) near the Old Village of Humphreys. Rumor has it the Wallace and Couch families, who had inter - married, operated a hotel at this location serving travelers on the Natchez Trace from the very earliest days. The Wallace family cemetery is located beside the old road bed.

My interest; The Couch family (However spelled) are cousins. In addition, my Great Aunt was Mrs. G G Wallace. Several members of both families are buried in the Cemetery including Uncle George and Aunt Sally Wallace. I was looking at the stones when my curiosity was aroused. The Confederate Veteran's Stone stated; William Wallace Couch, birth date, death date, and the inscription "He was at Fort Gregg." **What and where was Fort Gregg and why was he being there this important?!!!!** I began to gather information..

I was to discover **the Skirmish at Fort Gregg** lasted a total of Three hours - From 11:00 A.m. until 2:00 P.m., April 01st, 1865. Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth were defensive positions built into the Siege Lines at Petersburg, Virginia. Also, the men of the 12th and 16th Mississippi Volunteers, in the words of General Robert E Lee himself, saved the Army of Northern Virginia from, perhaps, being surrendered in the trenches at Petersburg that afternoon. And yes, the Army was surrendered, instead, a few days later and Sixty miles westward at a place called Appomattox.

The Siege Lines of Petersburg were constructed around and in front of Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth. The small area between the lines and the two forts had been utilized by the men to build shacks, houses, shanties, etc., to protect them from the elements, after all they had been at this location all winter. These houses were burned just before the Skirmish to clear the field of fire and to delay the Federals. Lieut. Frank H Foote of Port Gibson, Mississippi was in the group that fired the buildings. Lieut. Foote was not in Fort Gregg. He was on horseback. After the fires were set, he appears to have either entered Battery Whitworth and thus escaped capture or passed on out the back for he was surrendered at Appomattox.

And, oh yes, **All Men Hate Siege Warfare**, they refer to the "Trenches" as the "Ditches." Fort Gregg was the true defensive position and in the front. Battery Whitworth, constructed behind Fort Gregg, was an artillery position and constructed so as to support Fort Gregg.

We may never know exactly what happened. To add to the confusion, both Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth are listed in the reports by the various officers using different names. It gets terribly confusing.

There are a number of accounts, all these accounts are the same, however, they all vary. For instance, the exact number of defenders and who they were remains uncertain. This will probably never be known. The number of 244 defenders in Fort Gregg is generally accepted. The number of 12th and 16th Mississippi Regiment men are listed in some accounts as 150 and others as many as 200. All these numbers have problems and all are suspect.

Also, we may never know the names of all the men in Fort Gregg. The names of the officers always survive, thus we know Colonel James H Duncan, Captain A K Jones and Lieut. Frank H Foote, all from Port Gibson,

Claiborne County, Mississippi, had a part. Unless one has personal knowledge of a certain man, it becomes terribly complicated to chase them down man by man. In addition, the men captured at Fort Gregg are usually simply listed as “Captured at Petersburg, April 02nd, 1865,” thus increasing the margin of error.

Thanks to Mr. Foote, we know most of the members the 12th Regiment’s Claiborne Guards (Company) for whatever reason, he did not give us the names of the of the 16th Regiment’s Fairview Rifles, (The Claiborne Guards and the Fairview Rifles were Claiborne County companies.) however, there appears to have been approximately ten men involved. And thanks to the book My Grand Fathers Journal we know the members of the Westville Guards. And yes all these companies had men from other Counties. And certainly men from Claiborne were in companies organized in other counties. The 12th Regiment contained; Pettis Relief raised at Gallatin, Copiah County; the Charlie Clark Rifles from the Union Church area, the Vicksburg Sharpshooters from Warren and the Raymond Fencibles from Hinds. The 16th Regiment had the Crystal Springs Southern Rights listed as Copiah County but containing a large percentage of men from the Utica, Hinds, and the Rocky Springs area of Claiborne.

I would, also, remind that a Regiment at 100% full strength, which it seldom, if ever, achieves, is composed 1,000 fighting men - Ten Companies of 100 men each. The Regiment is commanded, usually, by a Colonel and a Company by a Captain. Thus - The 12th and 16th at this time consisted of a total of 150 - 200 men between the two Regiments. They were commanded at first by Colonel Duncan and later by a Captain A K Jones. This is an example of how desperate the situation had become by April, 1865.

The Commanders at Fort Gregg were Colonel James H Duncan of the 19th Regiment (I do not know what he was doing in this position.). The Officer next junior to him was Captain A K Jones, also, of Port Gibson. Captain Jones was “**the Senior Captain on the Field**” at that particular moment and thus - When Colonel Duncan went down, Captain Jones assumed command.

Colonel Duncan was wounded, it was thought mortally, at the beginning.. Afterwards, he was left for dead. Thus - For all practical purposes Captain A K Jones of Port Gibson, Mississippi, was the commanding officer for the entire fight.

One of the tid - bits of information I picked up was “Why were there so few men from the 12th and 16th Mississippi Regiments to be Surrendered at Appomattox.” Historians have long commented that the 12th and 16th men at Appomattox appeared to be men that were not in the lines, they were the teamsters, the hospital workers, surgeons, musicians, the men just released from the hospital, etc., all necessary but not the fighting men. Where were the fighting men. **Fort Gregg gives the answer.**

The Battles or the Civil War are also very complex and complicated. There were, many times, over a Hundred Thousand men involved. And the Siege of Petersburg was to last Ten months. Thus - Fort Gregg was a very small part of a very large battle.

Some months past I was watching the book reports on C - Span. They were interviewing an author about his recent biography of Robert E Lee. This book must be at least to some extent, a history of the Civil War. The author was holding forth about Petersburg. I picked up the phone, got the line, and asked him; “Please comment on Fort Gregg, I had cousins inside.” He began his comment with the statement; “Why yes, I will be glad to, however, it was a very, very minor skirmish.” **It sort of hurt my feelings.**

When General Robert E Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia retreated after Gettysburg, there was no choice. The Army of Northern Virginia was placed squarely between the Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Capitol at Richmond. General Lee was never to get enough “stuff” to mount another campaign. It was all defensive. He tried desperately to avoid the siege, realizing what it would eventually mean.

General Grant was brought East, in February, 1864, to become General - in - Chief of the Union Armies. We should remember this was a very unpopular action and the Eastern Establishment was unhappy. (You know the old adage, everything in the East is better.) President Lincoln inquired if General Grant wished to replace General Mead as the Commanding Officer of the Army of the Potomac. General Grant’s reply, “No, that will not be necessary, I will be there, I will in effect be in command.” Grant was a very on hands type of manager.

The result’s of General Lee’s strategy was “the Battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Hanover Court House, North Anna and Cold Harbor. And in June, 1864, General Grant had General Lee pinned and the Siege of Petersburg was the result.

General Lee predicted the outcome from the beginning. “It is just like a string that is stretched tight. Each time the Union Army makes a move and we must respond, the Siege Line becomes longer. The string becomes more tight and more tight. Sooner or later the string is going to break, the only question is who, when and where. General Grant and the Union Army kept the pressure up with almost daily attacks and the lines stretched tighter.

The **when** was dawn, April 01st, 1865, the **where** was at a place called **Five Forks**. The **Who**; The Union Corp Commander was General Phillip Sheridan, the Confederate Commander was General George Pickett, of Pickett’s Charge, Gettysburg fame. A huge gap was torn in the Confederate lines. The Union Army immediately began gearing up for the final break through. At that moment, it appeared the Confederate Army might well be forced to surrender in the trenches before nightfall.

The Confederate Army had many plans and alternatives, if this happens we will do this, however, should that happen we will do that, etc. Thus - General Longstreet immediately disengaged his Corp and began to move to shorten the line and plug the hole. This would work, at best, only temporally. And it all takes time, two hours was the estimate.

The only obstacle the Union Army faced was a hand - full of Confederate troops, mostly from Mississippi and two insignificant defensive positions hereafter to be known as Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth.

I am going to read a small portion from My Grandfather’s Journal, the Story of Company B, Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry Volunteers, Harris’ Brigade, Mahone’s Division, Hill’s Corp, the diary of Private Lafayette Franklin Riley of Westville, Jasper County, Mississippi. These are Private Riley’s own words, much paraphrased and some deleted. .

“The orders came for us to fall back on Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth. The 16th and the 12th were to occupy Gregg. We burned our old quarters, which were located before or in front of the Two Forts, to create a field of fire. We picked up all the muskets we could carry and followed Lieut. Col. James H Duncan, of the 19th Mississippi, into Fort Gregg. General Harris led his men into Battery Whitworth.

In Gregg were approximately 150 men from the 16th and 12th Mississippi, joined by another 60-65 men, men from the Washington Artillery (Louisiana), a few others from Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, South

Carolina, Maryland, a total of 230 - 235 men in all. The 19th and the 48th Mississippi and a few from other commands occupied Battery Whitworth. A courier arrived with a message which Col. Duncan read aloud; The message said; "Hold Fort Gregg at all hazards." (**Signed**) General Robert E Lee.

We formed into regiments by companies, the 16th on the right, the 12th on the left. The unattached men were scattered through - out the regiments. General Wilcox arrived. mounted on his horse so that we could hear him, he cried out; "Men, the salvation of the Army of Northern Virginia is in your keeping. You must realize your responsibility. Do not surrender this Fort. If you can hold the enemy in check for two hours, General Longstreet and his Corp, who are making a forced march, will be here and the danger to 'the army in the trenches' will be averted."

(From another source and in typical style some loud - mouthed backwoods Private from Mississippi yelled; **"Tell General Lee we will hold forever, we will never surrender."**)

The attack was made by our old adversary, Federal General Gibbon's Corp. The enemy advanced in a solid mass. To defend ourselves, we had two pieces of artillery, both of which were taken out of action after an hour. Each man had a number of muskets. Those who were wounded loaded the extra muskets and handed them to the men behind the parapets.

For about three hours we kept up a rapid fire. If a Federal got within 25-30 yards of the Fort, he was safe, we could not see anyone in the ditch. But no sooner was a head seen above the wall than it was with - drawn with a Minnie ball in it. They attacked four times, one of which lasted almost 30 minutes. They were driven back three times. Finally, with the approaches to the Fort littered with dead men, the Federals began to climb the walls. We lit the fuses of our shells and rolled them into their ranks. They began pouring over the walls and sides of the Fort. We met them with rifle butts. But too many of our men had fallen for us to resist. Surrounded by so many Federals we could scarcely breathe, we were forced to surrender. More than 60 of us were dead, Had it not been for the Union Officers, so angry were their soldiers, I fear most of us would have been killed. Outside the Fort the ground was covered with 600 - 700 bodies."

When Fort Gregg was overwhelmed, Battery Whitworth was abandoned. Battery Whitworth's was constructed to support Fort Gregg and it became untenable. Regardless, General Longstreet had needed Two hours and the men at Fort Gregg had given him Three. Thus Battery Whitworth was no longer important. However, it was close, as the Federals poured over the front of Battery Whitworth, the Confederates fled over the back.

The Union Army had no will to continue the fight that afternoon. Thus - The defenders in Fort Gregg had accomplished their purpose. The Army of Northern Virginia slipped out of the trenches at Petersburg during the night and headed West. Thus - Abandoning Richmond to its fate. General Lee and his army had an appointment with destiny at another place no one had ever heard of. This one was named Appomattox.

And continuing from My Grandfather's Journal: "The survivors of Fort Gregg were taken to the Prison at City Pont, Virginia, and then to the giant Federal Prison at Point Lookout There were prisoners from everywhere, and we began to realize just how serious the situation had become. It appeared our whole army must have been captured.

We were astonished at the huge amount of material stockpiled about Point Lookout for the use of the Federal troops; Uniforms, rifles, ammunition, food, tents, wagons - Everything their soldiers might need or want.. What a contrast between the plenty here and the scarcity we had faced for a year.

On Monday, April, 10th, we heard the war is over, General Lee had surrendered. We were stunned and did not have much to say. We were sad and yet we are glad. We were sad because we had lost the War, we are glad because, if we could survive, we would eventually be released.” (**The End of Private Riley’s Comments.**)

What followed was much and mass confusion. Many rumors were spread. These rumors included; That we would be held in prison forever. All Confederate Officers and Government Officials had been arrested. The officers and officials would be tried for treason and hanged. President Davis was in prison, very sick, and expected to die. However, it all came to pass, and eventually we were released

The Rebels who took the Oath of Allegiance to the United States were furnished transportation home. (The ones who refused walked.) Private Riley left Point Look on June 30th and passing through Washington, Cincinnati, Cairo and Memphis arrived in Vicksburg on July 10th. He traveled by both steam boat and railroad. It appears that it was necessary for him to walk from Vicksburg. Regardless, he left Vicksburg on July 10th, passing through Jackson and Hazlehurst, and arrived home, Westville, Jasper County, Mississippi, July, 15th 1865.

I know very little about Colonel James H Duncan, other than that he received medical attention and recovered from his wounds. We may assume the officers and men all had experiences not unlike Private Riley’s. Captain Jones returned to Port Gibson and lived a long and useful life. He was to serve Claiborne County as Chancery Clerk for many years. He purchased the Israel Loring House and made this into the family home. He was to live to a ripe old age. Lieut. Frank H Foote survived, returned to Port Gibson, and served as United States Post Master for a number of years. As a hobby, Mr. Foote gathered information concerning men from Claiborne County who wore the Grey. People like us have much to thank him for. Later in life, after the death of Mrs. Foote, he moved to Vicksburg and made his home with his daughter where he was of great assistance with the organization and construction of the Vicksburg National Park.

Notes - S C V - Port Gibson, Mississippi - September 19th, 2002

Notes - S C V - Port Gibson, Mississippi - February 05th, 2004.

The following books should be readily available.

The following have information on Fort Gregg;

The Last Citadel, Petersburg, Virginia, June, 1864 - April 1865, by Noah Andre Trudeau. Pages # 381 - 390. An excellent write - up and probably the best.

My Grand Father's Journal by Austin C Dobbins, Morningside. This the Diary of Franklin Lafayette Riley and his adventures in Company B 16th Mississippi Volunteers. It is a Regimental History.

The Civil War, by Shelby Foote.

Several issues of the Confederate Veteran Magazine have articles.

The Publications of the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History.

And of course, The War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series 1; 70 Volumes.

And excellent account of the events that occurred immediately after the end of the Civil War, the rumors, etc. April - 1865, The Month That Saved America, by Jay Winik

For Claiborne County information see The Annals of Claiborne County, Mississippi, Soldiers of the War, 1861 - 1865, A Tribute to Mr. Frank H Foote.

The Men at Fort Gregg

The 12th Mississippi Volunteers, The Claiborne Guards Company; W D Brown; W W Couch, (Mis spelled in book.), W H Drumgoole from Hinds County; Captain A K Jones, H W Porter, John H Roberts - Killed at Fort Gregg. A Sevier, J W H Schaefer, J H Sims, W R Thompson & Pierce Wells. A total of 11 in Fort Gregg. I found no one from this Company surrendered at Appomattox. **The 16th Mississippi Volunteers, The Crystal Springs Southern Rights; The Fairview Rifles (Claiborne County)**; John Mutchler from Jefferson County, This list does not include those captured at Fort Gregg or surrendered at Appomattox. **The 16th Mississippi Volunteers, Company B, The Westville Guards** who were mostly men from Simpson County; Washington J Berry, Robert L Bridges, William Giles, Samuel J Hemphill, James W Hilton, Samuel B Howell, William Lucas, Franklin Lafayette Riley, John D Rogers, William F Taylor. A total of 10 at Fort Gregg. . By comparison a total of Five were surrendered at Appomattox.

Does any one know or know how to get the information on the following;

My interest - I would like to know whom she was named for.

There was an Admiral H W Hill but he was circa World War I.

Found on the Internet.

Dictionary of American Navel Fighting Ships.

Department of the navy - Naval Historical Center

805 Kidder Breese, S E, Washington Navy Yard

Washington, D C, 20374 - 5060

H W R Hill

Sw Str t 602.

“**H R W Hill**,” also known as “**Hill**,” was built in 1852 at New Albany, Ind., and employed by the Confederates as a transport in the Mississippi River area. Under Captain Newell, she participated in the Battle of Belmont, Mo., on November, 1861. As part of the force under Maj. Gen. L Polk, C S A, she stood fearless at her post while under heavy Union fire ready to transport troops back and forth across the river in the course of the Battle. “**H R W Hill**” fell into Union hands at the Battle of Memphis on 6 June 1862.