

This story of the Civil War service of G.W. Wood is dedicated to his great-grandchildren: Tearle B. Kring, John A. Caldwell, Sara Caldwell Garcia, and Jim Windsor.

Part One: The Documents

The arrival of a package from the Texas Archives containing the pension records of my grandfather's grandfather was a door opening to mysteries of the past. Twenty-four sheets of legal-sized copies full of conflicting details of George W. Wood's

Civil War records prompted a research project that has resulted in a rare tapestry – the story of a youthful Confederate soldier who enlisted just four months short of his 18th birthday, the encounters of the unit he fought with, and the point at which the War may have lost its glory for these soldiers.

The story starts with G.W. Wood's original pension application dated October 1, 1931, in which he states that he is "*85 past*" years old and resides in Amarillo, Potter County, Texas, and that he enlisted in the C.S.A. in "*Ettiwaugh*" [Etowah] County, Alabama, serving from 1862-1864 in Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry "in Wade Hampton's company" and transferred to "*Joe Wheeler command sometime during 1863*". He states further that he was honorably surrendered with the note "*taken prisoner by Federal troops at Seville, east of Knoxville, Tennessee; Released in 1864 late in the year or late summer*".

Following his application is a letter from the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department in Washington dated October 13, 1831. It is apparently in response to a request from the State Comptroller of Public Accounts in Austin, Texas, to verify the service of G.W. Wood in the Confederate States Army. The letter states that Wood was a Corporal in Company B, 4th Regiment (Russell's) Alabama Cavalry, but notes that the last muster roll on file shows that Wood deserted on January 17, 1864. With that information, the State of Texas denies a pension to Wood.



The rest of the papers in the pension application are the clues to the story – or rather, the stories.

Wood responds to the pension denial with a letter to the Honorable Geo. H. Sheppard in Austin, Texas, expressing surprise that he's listed as a deserter. He writes: "*Please understand that I had no idea that a charge of deserting was ever placed against me however many times we were in confusion and we many times separated for a few days yet I say that I was in the army until in June or July 1864 perhaps later as best I can remember and then was captured, Captain Wade Hampton was killed and then I was under the command of first Lieut. Han Gillespie who took charge of the commanding officers place when he was killed however he was never elected Captain. We were in confusion most of the time and there were no roll calls during his command as I have knowledge of.*" He writes asking what avenues are available to him to prove his claim. The response that he receives from the Texas State Comptroller just a few days later indicated what documentation was allowable.

In November 1831, Wood reapplies for the pension this time stating that he is 86 years of age (which he will not be for another month) and that his address at the time of enlistment was Aurora, Alabama. He notes that he "*enlisted in September 1862 and served until captured. Prisoner and sick until after end of war. Was captured in September 1864.*" He notes that he

was originally in "*Company I, Steve Dunagan's Company and transferred to Hampton's Company, 4th Alabama General Forrest*" and further notes that he "*served under Gillespie until end of war*". This application includes his note that "*I was captured on the French Broad River near Sevierville, Tennessee September 1864 and then was taken to Sevierville where our horses were taken from us; then we went to Knoxville, Tenn., then to Nashville. I took sick with fever there and was unable to get home for five months after peace declared*".

The supporting documents in the file are as follows:

Affidavit for Proof of Service in the Confederate Army or Navy. State of Alabama, County of Cherokee. L. J. Mackey (of Round Mountain) and Robert Pruitt (no address given) state that they know that George W. Wood served in the Confederate Army from September 1, 1862 until January 17, 1864 and that they served with him in Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry Regiment of Col. A.A. Russell from 1862-1865. They jointly state (in essence) that he was taken prisoner by Federal officers and was paroled by them at Sevierville, that he was taken very sick after capture "*on Bondurant Cumberland River at Secesh Bend*". Their affidavit is made on January 27, 1925 (about six years before G.W. Wood's pension application).

- Research into the rolls of all companies in the 4th Alabama Cavalry indicate that there was no Robert Pruitt listed as a member. There was **Edward Pruett** and **Alfred Truitt**. Edward was listed in Company B.
- **Leander J. Mackey** was captured on June 27, 1863 at Shelbyville, TN, and was imprisoned at Camp Chase in Columbus, OH until the end of the War. He would not have known how long G.W. Wood served with the unit, except by hearsay.

Affidavit for Proof of Service in the Confederate Army or Navy. State of Texas, County of Hunt. L. F. Hale of Greenville, Texas states that he knows Wood served from 1862 until June 23, 1863 in Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry "*under Gen. Forrest and Wade Hampton Capt.*" Hale states that he served in the same unit from April 1862 until June 23, 1863. His affidavit is dated July 18, 1925.

- **Lewis F. Hale** is listed on the rosters of Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry. On the last muster roll taken by Company B, dated February 12, 1864, Hale is listed as "absent -- sick in hospital". Records show that he was ambulatory and later able to be made a member of the Invalid Corps, serving in that capacity until May 1864.

Letter typed on the letterhead of Lubbock County dated September 3, 1925 addressed to the Hon. Confederate War Department. It is an affidavit sworn by J.B. McCleskey and it reads:

"This is to certify that I have known G. W. Wood all his life before the war and after the war and was in the same 4th Alabama Cavalry, Waid Hampton's Company and in the same mess, slept under the same blanket and we fully understand why the record against him. See the record of D. H. McCleskey, LaFayette Williams disappeared some time while in Camp on the river bank, do not remember date, but was in 64. They insisted so strong on G.W. Wood to ride with them cross the river, leaving all his clothes. He went and never returned. I was sadly disappointed, and as the enemy soon appeared over there I knew what had happened, that he was captured. He has told me sence the war the hard struggle he had to get away, and he is reliable."

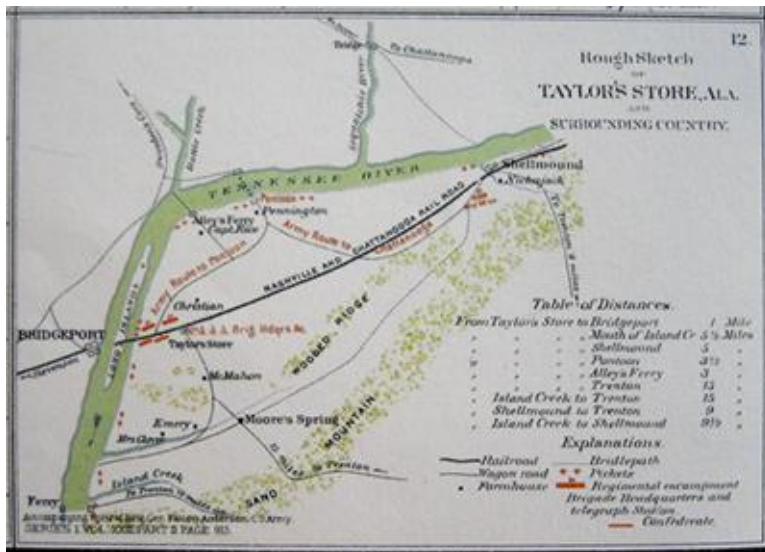
- **James Benson McCleskey**, a resident of Eastland County, Texas and indeed a former member of Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry, is G.W. Wood's first cousin. The families migrated from Georgia to Alabama and then on to Texas together. Note that McCleskey says in 1925 that "*we fully understand why the record against him*". Yet six years later in 1931, G.W. Wood expresses surprise at finding out that records list him as a deserter?
- **E. Lafayette Williams** is listed on the final roster of Company B, dated February 12, 1864 as having deserted on January 17th, the same notation that is on G.W. Woods record. The final item in the compiled service records of E. L. Williams is the note that he is "*on list of Rebel Deserters taking Oath in Knoxville on 22 January 1864*".
- The service records of **David Henderson McCleskey** (known as "Black Dave"), first cousin to James and George, list him as deserting on January 17, 1864.

Letter from George W. Wood to The Honorable Pension Board, Austin, Texas, dated November 3, 1931. He tells that “*we have to take the records as they are yet they have the appearance of being hastily made*” and notes that it is “*on records that can never be changed they are silent reminders of men in a hurry rushing here and there*”. He reiterates his enlistment details and adds this significant bit of information to his story:

“The records shat that I was listed a deserter in January 1864. Just what made the record show that I am unable to understand as I was in the service long after that and was one of the men that help bury our Captain Wade Hampton at night at what is known as the place of Thompson Station in Tennessee. He was killed in the battle of what was called Strawberry Plains, also Jim Dean was killed an buried at the same places. I was captured in June of thereabouts on the French Broad River right in the bend near Sevierville, Tennessee and was held some time and then was Paroled and sent North toward Nashville, Tennessee. I reached Nashville an was taken sick with the fever and was never able to reach my company any more as I was under the rules of the opposing side and you understand what a parole meant in those days.”

- **Captain Thomas Wade Hampton** was commanding Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry during the Knoxville Campaign. Records show that he was killed at Mossy Creek on December 24, 1863.
- Several Deans from the same family were serving in Company B. **John T. Dean** was killed in action at Mossy Creek on December 29, 1863. His brother, **Moses Dean**, was captured near Knoxville just days later on January 4, 1864.

Part Two: The Story



Members of the Wood and McCleskey families moved from Georgia to Alabama before the Civil War, settling around Walnut Grove, Aurora and Bristow Cove in what is now Etowah and Cherokee Counties. When the War broke out, **Stephen Dunnagan** (1825 GA-1894 NM) organized a group of Partisan Rangers that eventually became part of the 4th Alabama Cavalry under the command of Col. A. A. Russell. Dunnagan himself was married to **Eliza Ann Turk Wood**, daughter of **Lorenzo Dow Wood** and **Louisa Rhea McCleskey** and sister of G.W. Wood (1845 GA-1934 TX).

There were seven Wood brothers or cousins who served in the 4th Alabama Cavalry, along with five McCleskey kin, and a score of the spouses of sisters or cousins. The bulk of these young men enlisted in September 1862 and mustered in at a camp located at Taylor's Store near Bridgeport in extreme Northern Alabama. The camp was at a major railroad line and on the Tennessee River near several key bridges and a steamship port. It must have been exciting for young men seldom away from home to gather with their horses and begin training to become cavalrymen.

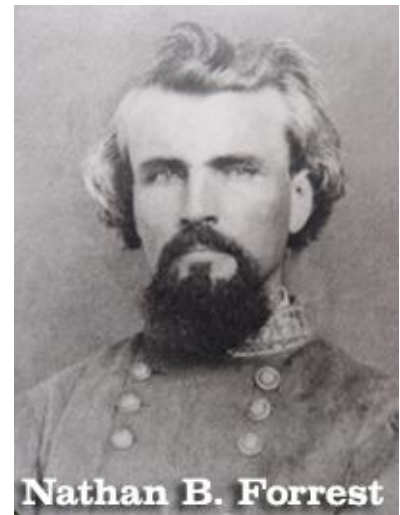
In December 1863, they joined with other units at Murphreesboro, TN, and formally became known as Russell's 4th Alabama Cavalry Regiment attached to the Army of Tennessee under **General Nathan Bedford Forrest**. The first major campaign of the young recruits from Alabama would have been in Western Tennessee at Parkers Crossroads, Lexington, Jackson, and Trenton. It was considered to be generally successful from the Confederate point of view.

During this campaign, Forrest wrote to the War Department of the Confederacy listing supplies and provisions needed for his growing army, and he was told that none were

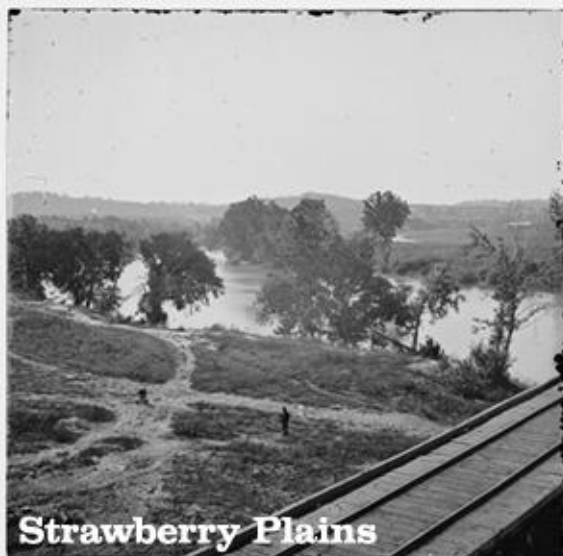
available. Being a determined and resourceful leader (much beloved by his troops), he determined to provision his army at the expense of the enemy. The young cavalry soldiers of the Confederacy had been supplying their own horses upon enlistment, and their mounts were to be replenished throughout the war with captured or appropriated animals. (A Federal officer was noted to have said that Forrest need not worry about a job after the war, as he could make his living stealing horses.) This might have been the first disillusionment to the young soldiers or the first inclination that the war was not to be so glorious, but all indications are that spirits were still high.

In the late April 1863, Forrest led the 4th Alabama Cavalry on a daring raid back into their homelands of Northern Alabama and Georgia. While their forced march after the 'bluecoats' was hard on the men, they must have felt excitement to be home again. Soldier diaries and official reports tell of Forrest's help from "local boys" in fording creeks and finding trails that would put his army into position to capture Col. Streight's Federal troops before they could get to Rome, GA. On May 3, the 4th Alabama Cavalry was in the group that effected the surrender of Streight and his men, resulting in imprisonment of a large number of high-ranking Federal officers. This would have been another high point for the young soldiers.

In June of that year during the Tullahoma Campaign, they were fighting with Forrest near Shelbyville, TN along the Duck River in a battle that turned disastrous for the Confederacy. It was here on June 27 that twelve soldiers of Company B were captured and a number more of them injured or killed. It was a devastating blow. They were pushed out of Tennessee into Georgia, and the stage was setting for the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863. Although this is deemed a Confederate victory, it also took its toll on the 4th Alabama with even more wounded, killed, and reported desertions.



In October 1863, an official report of **Major General Joe Wheeler** stated: "The three brigades from Gen. Forrest were mere skeletons, scarcely averaging 500 effective men each. These were badly armed, had but a small supply of ammunition, and their horses were in horrible condition, having been marched continuously for three days and nights without removing saddles. The men were worn out, and without rations." It was a crispy fall season and they were headed back North into Eastern Tennessee, this time under the command of General Longstreet. Their objective was Knoxville. It is at this time that the unit became fragmented and companies struck out on their own for skirmishes at New Market, Strawberry Plains, Dandridge, Talbott's Station, and Hays Ferry.



The area is a maze of creeks and rivers. The Tennessee River is formed at the confluence of the Holston and French Broad Rivers on the east side of Knoxville, Tennessee. New Market, Mossy Creek (now called Jefferson City) and Strawberry Plains were small settlements on the Holston River. Dandridge was on the French Broad River and southwest of it was Sevierville. Just a little further to the southeast, the Nolichucky River merges with the French Broad and troops were posted along the 'Chucky' also. The terrain is heavily wooded and mountainous.

The campaign stretched into November and December during a very cold and wet winter. Factions of both armies were grappling for control of foot and railroad bridges, key fords and ferries. The

citizens of Tennessee were noted to be heavily sprinkled with Unionists. Official reports from both armies indicated that foraging parties often met in villages or farms where they were all

trying to secure provisions. The rivers were reported to be rising almost four feet at times, making fording in the ice and snow impossible. All along the three rivers, there were factions of Union and Southern armies camped in the trees with their campfires easily visible across the water. They were struggling to stay alive.

Skirmish reports abound in the “War of the Rebellion” records, giving cameos of life in Tennessee during December. Armies raiding each other for blankets, cooking utensils, provisions, clothing, and shoes. Confederates were captured as they accidentally wandered into the wrong camp in the dark, but many then were willing to officially list themselves as “Rebel Deserters” and take an oath of allegiance to the United States in order to be warmed by the fire and get food for their bellies. One report of fighting near Dandridge indicated that the Rebels are dogged in their resistance and hold the line all day. When the Union army fell back at dusk, the Confederates could not pursue them because they had no shoes.

We wonder what Christmas was like for the young soldiers of the 4th Alabama Cavalry as they were camped on the banks of the Holston River at Mossy Creek.

Company B was down to less than half the men that enlisted in 1862. They had no warm clothing, no sustaining rations, and no forage for their horses. They were out of communication with their families and could likely not attend church services. It was very cold.

On Christmas Eve, Captain Thomas W. Hampton was killed in a skirmish. According to a historical marker in Jefferson City, the dead from Mossy Creek battle(s) were buried under a temporary truce in the town cemetery, so G.W. Wood’s statement about the burial of their commander is likely correct. **Lieutenant Hannibal Gillespie**, who was a ‘grocery keeper’ prior to the war, assumed command of what remained of Company B. Christmas Day likely dawned cold and bleak to this group of kinsmen so far away from their homes in Alabama.

On the night of December 28th, Union Brig. Gen. Sturgis got word of Confederate cavalry that had camped just south of him. He ordered a portion of his troops towards the Confederate encampment. This engagement resulted in “*scattering the Rebels into the countryside*”, as one report notes. Perhaps men of Company B were among those scattered.

It is not clear by the evidence whether G.W. Wood and David H. McCleskey actually did desert just two weeks later. There was never another muster roll taken by Company B through the duration of the war, so there was no opportunity for the men’s continued service to be reported. Conditions in the countryside were certainly not favorable for them, and one might imagine that these young men went in search of warmth and food. There is no report of their having been captured, and the rolls of captured soldiers are quite extensive and well documented. Although G.W. Wood’s recollections of this period may have some incorrect details, one must remember that he was 85 years old at the telling. Thompson’s Station was likely Talbott’s Station. Strawberry Plains and Mossy Creek were towns on the Holston River not very far apart, with skirmishes occurring at both places. One winter camp would have been like another, and it would have been difficult to remember the exact geographic location for some incident of the war. He states several times that they were all confused.

I thought that I might never know the answers, and then I found the letters.

Letters written in 1939 to **Walter Scott McCleskey** by **Mrs. Ella Wood Sampler** (1851 GA-1945 AL), daughter of **Robert Capel Wood** (1807 SC-1897 AL) and **Martha Matilda McCleskey** (1820 GA-1898 AL), state that Ella remembers meeting her cousins, George W. Wood and **Billy McCleskey** of Texas, when they came back to Gadsden, AL in 1922 for a Confederate veterans’ reunion.

I wondered why a 77 year old man would travel more than a thousand miles across the country to a reunion with soldiers if he had truly deserted them after that Christmas at Mossy Creek.

Resources

Great Commanders Series: General Forrest
by Capt. J. Hrvy Mathies

D. Appleton & Company: New York. 1902
Accessed online: [GoogleBooks](#)

Life of Lieutenant-General Nathan Bedford Forrest
by John Allen Wyeth, M.D., L.L.D
Harper & Brothers: New York and London. 1908
Accessed online: [GoogleBooks](#)

The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, Volume II
edited by Frank Moore
D. Van Nostrand: New York. 1868
Accessed online: [GoogleBooks](#)

With Sabre and Scapel: Autobiography of Soldier and Surgeon
(the Diary of John A. Wyeth (1845-1922) – 4th Alabama Cavalry)
Harper & Brothers: New York. 1914
Accessed online: [Documenting the American South \(docsouth.unc.edu\)](#)

Civil War Battlefield Guide, 2nd Edition
Frances H. Kennedy, editor and principal contributor
Houghton Mifflin Company: New York. 1898

This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga
by Peter Cozzens
University of Illinois Press: Chicato. 1996

The McCleskey Family in Georgia
compiled by the Rev Walter Scott McCleskey (Ret.)
Wolfe Publishing: Fernandina Beach, FL. 1997

Descendants of James and Joseph McCleskey, Soldiers of the Revolution
The Texas Group
Compiled by Charles S. McCleskey and many collaborators
Self published in 1978

They Rode with Forrest and Wheeler
A Chronicle of Five Tennessee Brothers' Service in the Confederate Western Cavalry
by John E. Fisher
McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers: Jefferson, NC. 1995

Collection:

The papers of Walter Scott McCleskey
in possession of Sylvia Caldwell Rankin, Marietta, GA

The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies
United States War Department
Government Printing Office, Washington DC
Accessed online: [Cornell University moa.cit.cornell.edu](#)

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Website by the Tennessee Historical Commission, Tennessee Wars Commission and Tennessee Department of Environment and conservation
[tennessee.civilwarsourcebook.com](#)

Footnote, Inc.
Collection of digitized documents contained in the National Archives
[footnote.com](#)