

This story, researched and written by our webmaster Sylvia Caldwell Rankin C76211, traces the Civil War service of G. W. Wood MC7 and is dedicated to his great-grandchildren—Tearle B. Kring, John A. Caldwell, Sara Caldwell Garcia, and Jim Windsor.

G. W. Wood (25 Dec 1846 Hall Co., GA-28 Feb 1934 Potter Co., TX) married Jessie Loucinda Cauble C7 (1 Apr 1853 Hill Co., TX-8 Oct 1923 Lea Co., NM), daughter of Eveliza Chaney and John W. Cauble, on 24 August 1867.

Wood and McCleskey Men in the Civil War

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 Civil 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 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).

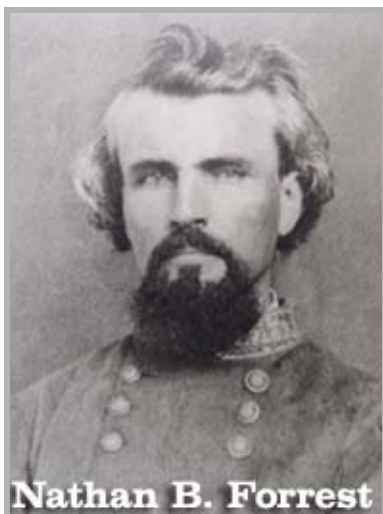
There were seven Wood brothers or cousins who served in the 4th Alabama Cavalry, along with five McCleskey kin and a score of the spouses of sisters or cousins. The bulk of these young men enlisted in September 1862 and mustered in at a camp located at Taylor's Store near Bridgeport in extreme northern 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.

General Forrest and Events Before Mossy Creek

In December 1863, the men had joined with other units at Murphreesboro, Tennessee, 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 West Tennessee at Parkers Crossroads, Lexington, Jackson, and Trenton. The campaign was considered generally successful from the Confederate point of view.

During the campaign, General Forrest wrote to the War Department of the Confederacy with a list of provisions needed for his growing army. He was told there was none. Being a resourceful leader [beloved by his troops and admired by historians], he determined to provision his army at the expense of the enemy. The young Confederate cavalry 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.] Realizing that provisions and mounts to fight the war must come from their own ability to secure them may have been the first disillusionment to the young soldiers or their first inclination that the war was not to be glorious; but, all indications were that spirits were still high.

In the late April 1863, General Forrest had 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 may have felt excitement to be home again. Soldier diaries and official reports tell of General Forrest's help from *local boys* in fording creeks and finding trails that would put his army into position to capture Colonel Streight's Federal troops before they could get to Rome, Georgia. On 3 May 1863, the 4th Alabama Cavalry had been 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



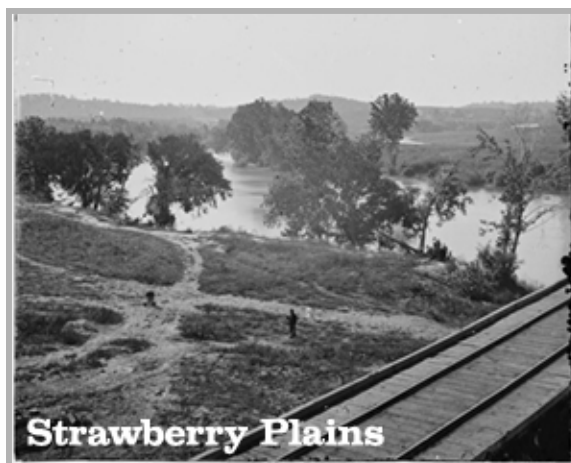
been another high point for the young soldiers.

In June 1863 during the Tullahoma Campaign, they had fought with General Forrest near Shelbyville, Tennessee, along the Duck River in a battle that turned disastrous for the Confederacy. It was here on 27th of June 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 was deemed a Confederate victory, it 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** had 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 had been a crisp fall and they had headed back north into East Tennessee—this time under the command of **General James Longstreet**. Their objective was Knoxville. It was 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.

That part of East Tennessee 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. 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—then and now—is heavily wooded and mountainous.



Christmas 1863 on Mossy Creek

The campaign stretched into November and December and across a 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 known to be heavily sprinkled with Unionists. Official reports from both

armies indicated that foraging parties often met in villages or on farms where they were all trying to secure provisions. The rivers were reportedly rising by almost four feet at times, making fording in the ice and snow impossible. All along the three rivers, there were soldiers of both Union and Southern armies camped among the trees with their campfires easily visible across the water. Every man struggled to stay alive.

Skirmish reports abound in the *War of the Rebellion* records, giving cameos of life in East Tennessee during that December. Armies raided 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 were willing to officially list themselves as *Rebel Deserters*—taking an oath of allegiance to the United States—to simply warm themselves by the Yankee fires and to fill their bellies with Yankee food. One report of fighting near Dandridge indicated that the Rebels were dogged in their resistance and held the line all day. When the Union army fell back at dusk, the Confederates could not pursue them because they had **no shoes**.

Christmas on the banks of Holston River at Mossy Creek in 1863 for the young soldiers of the 4th Alabama Cavalry can only be imagined. Company B was down to less than half the number of men who enlisted in 1862. They had no warm clothing, no sustaining rations, and no forage for their horses. They were far from their families and the comforts of home. It is likely they could not attend church services. The weather was cold and wet and they had little protection from the elements. But the fighting went on.

On Christmas Eve, **Captain Thomas W. Hampton** was killed in one of the skirmishes. According to a historical marker in Jefferson City, the dead from the Mossy Creek battle or battles were buried under a temporary truce in the town cemetery. When **G. W. Wood** reported in his pension application that he had helped bury his commander that Christmas in 1863, his statement was surely true. With Captain Hampton gone, **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. But the fighting went on.

Events After Christmas at Mossy Creek

On the night of 28 December 1863, Union Brigadier General Sturgis got word that Confederate cavalry 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 stated. The men of Company B may well have been among those scattered and some may have deserted.



George W. Wood

It is not clear by evidence whether **G. W. Wood** and **David H. McCleskey** actually deserted, as reported on the official record, just two weeks after Christmas at Mossy Creek. Reportedly, no later muster roll was taken by Company B throughout the duration of the war and no proof exists of their remaining with the company.

One must question why Wood and McCleskey would choose to desert. Conditions in the countryside were no better than in camp. Outside camp the weather was just as cold and food just as scarce. If one left camp in search of warmth and food, returning to camp gave some small measure of security. It is certain that they were too far from their Alabama homes to return there easily.

There is no report of them being captured on the rolls of captured soldiers, which are quite extensive and well documented.

Although **G. W. Wood's** recollections of this period had some incorrect details in his pension application, he was sure at age 85 that he did not desert his company after Christmas 1863. He may have wandered away from camp since one winter camp would have looked much like another. He stated several times on his application that they were all confused.

The Letters

I thought that I might never know where the truth lay. 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). Ella stated that she remembered meeting her cousins, **George W. Wood** and **Billy McCleskey** of Texas, when they came back to Gadsden, Alabama, 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. If we accept his statement that he did not desert but was captured and became ill, we can also believe that he helped dig the grave for **Captain Thomas W. Hampton** at Christmas 1863 and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner. Wood must have realized that a soldier fights to support those in his unit as much as he fights for the cause of the war. He held a kinship with those men who spent a hard Christmas in 1863 beside Mossy Creek in East Tennessee and that is the reason he traveled a great distance for their reunion sixty years later.

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 eighteenth 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 1 October 1931 in which he stated that he was “85 past” years old, resided in Amarillo, Potter County, Texas, and 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 stated further that he was honorably surrendered with the note “taken prisoner by Federal troops at Severtville, east of Knoxville, Tennessee; Released in 1864 late in the year or late summer.”

Following his application was a letter from the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department in Washington dated 13 October 1931. It was 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 stated that Wood was a corporal in Company B, 4th Regiment (Russell's) Alabama Cavalry, but noted that the last muster roll on file shows that Wood deserted on 17 January 1864. With that information, the State of Texas denied a pension to Wood.

The rest of the papers in the pension application are the clues to the story—or rather, the stories. Wood responded to the pension denial with a letter to the **Honorable Geo. H. Sheppard** in Austin, Texas, expressing surprise that he was listed as a deserter. He wrote, “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.” Wood wrote asking what avenues were available to prove his claim. The response that he received from the Texas State Comptroller just a few days later indicated what documentation was allowable.

In November 1831 Wood reapplied for the pension; he stated this time that he was 86 years of age—which he would not be for another month—and that his address at the time of enlistment was Aurora, Alabama. He noted that he “enlisted in September 1862 and served until captured. Prisoner and sick until after end of war. Was captured in September 1864.” He noted also that he was originally in “Company I, **Steve Dunagan’s Company** and transferred to Hampton’s Company, 4th Alabama General Forrest” and further stated that he “served under Gillespie until end of war.” This application included his note, “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.”

Supporting Documents in the Pension File

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** stated they knew that George W. Wood served in the Confederate Army from 1 September 1862 until 17 January 1864 and they served with him in Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry Regiment of Col. A. A. Russell from 1862-1865. They jointly stated [in essence] that he was taken prisoner by Federals and was paroled at Sevierville, that he was taken very sick after capture “on Bondurant Cumberland River at Secesh Bend.” Their affidavit was made 27 January 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 27 June 1863 at Shelbyville, Tennessee, and was imprisoned at Camp Chase in Columbus, Ohio, 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, stated that he knew Wood served from 1862 until 23 June 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 23 June 1863. His affidavit was dated 18 July 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 12 February 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 3 September 1925, addressed to the Hon. Confederate War Department. It was an affidavit sworn by **J. B. McCleskey** and 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 a former member of Company B, 4th Alabama Cavalry, was **G. W. Wood's** first cousin. The families migrated from Georgia to Alabama and then on to Texas together. Note that McCleskey said in 1925 that “we fully understand why the record against him.” Yet six years later in 1931, G. W. Wood expressed surprise at learning records listed him as a deserter.
- **E. Lafayette Williams** was listed on the final roster of Company B, dated 12 February 1864 as having deserted on the 17th of January—the same notation that is on **G. W. Wood's** 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, listed him as deserting on 17 January 1864.

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

The records state 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[d] 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[d] 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.