

The Color Bearer Tradition

The War Between the States was the heyday of American battle flags and their bearers. With unusual historical accuracy, many stirring battle paintings show the colors and their intrepid bearers in the forefront of the fray or as a rallying point in a retreat. The colors of a Civil War regiment embodied its honor, and the men chosen to bear them made up an elite. Tall, muscular men were preferred, because holding aloft a large, heavy banner, to keep it visible through battle smoke and at a distance, demanded physical strength. Courage was likewise required to carry a flag into combat, as the colors "drew lead like a magnet." South Carolina's Palmetto Sharpshooters, for example, lost 10 out of 11 of its bearers and color guard at the Battle of Seven Pines, the flag passing through four hands without touching the ground.

Born in Charleston in 1824, Charles Edmiston and his twin sister, Ellen Ann, were the third son and second daughter, respectively, of newspaper editor Joseph Whilden and his wife, Elizabeth Gilbert Whilden. The births of two more sons, Richard Furman in 1826 and William Gilbert in 1828, would complete the family, making seven children in all. Young Charles' roots ran deep into the soil of the low country. His Whilden ancestors had settled in the Charleston area in the 1690's, and an ancestor on his mother's side, the Rev. William Screven, had arrived in South Carolina even earlier, establishing the First Baptist Church of Charleston in 1683, today the oldest church in the Southern Baptist Convention. Like many Southerners who came of age in the late antebellum period, Charles Whilden took pride in his ancestors' role in the American Revolution, especially his grandfather, Joseph Whilden, who, at 18, had run away from his family's plantation in Christ Church Parish to join the forces under Brigadier General Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion fighting the British.

At the time of Charles' birth, the family of Joseph and Elizabeth Whilden lived comfortably in their home on Magazine Street, attended by their devoted slave, Juno Waller Seymour, a diminutive, energetic black woman known as "Maumer Juno" to four generations of the Whilden family. Raised by Maumer Juno from the cradle, Charles soon developed a strong attachment to the woman - an attachment that would endure to the end of his life. The prosperity of Joseph Whilden and his family would prove less enduring, however, and business reversals, beginning in the late 1820's, combined with Joseph's stroke a few years later and his eventual death in 1838, would reduce his family to genteel poverty. To help make ends meet, Maumer Juno took in ironing. Despite a lack of money for college, young Charles managed to obtain a good education. Details about Charles' schooling are sketchy, but the polished prose of his surviving letters reflects a practiced hand and a cultivated intellect. Charles' admission to the South Carolina bar at Columbia in 1845 is further evidence of a triumph of intellect and effort over financial adversity.

In the closing decades of the antebellum period, when Charles Whilden was growing up in Charleston, the city was the commercial and cultural center of the low country as well as South Carolina's manufacturing center and most cosmopolitan city. By the time Charles Whilden reached adulthood, however, the Charleston economy was in decline,

and the city's population would actually diminish during the decade of the 1850's. Not surprisingly, after a brief attempt to establish a law practice in Charleston, Attorney Whilden chose to seek his fortune outside his home town. But the practice of law in the up country town of Pendleton also failed to pan out for Whilden. Confronted with a major career decision, Whilden elected not only to leave the law but also to leave the Palmetto State for the north. The 1850 federal censustakers found Charles Whilden living in a boarding house in Detroit, Michigan, where he worked as a clerk, probably in a newspaper office. Speculation in copper stocks and land on Lake Superior soon left Charles deeply in debt to his youngest brother, William, who had built up a successful merchandising business back home in Charleston. Desperate to get out of debt, and perhaps longing for adventure, in the spring of 1855 Charles Whilden signed on as a civilian employee of the U.S. Army. After an arduous two-month trek from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Whilden arrived in the old Spanish city of Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory, on August 27, 1855, where he took up his duties as civilian private secretary to the local garrison commander, Colonel John Breckinridge Grayson of Kentucky, who would later serve the Confederacy as a brigadier general in Florida. When Whilden arrived in Santa Fe, the city had been under U.S. jurisdiction for only a few years, and the population was overwhelmingly Hispanic and Roman Catholic, causing the Baptist Whilden to complain, in an early letter to his brother William in Charleston, that "[t]here are so many Saints days among these Hottentots, that it is hard to recollect them." So isolated was Santa Fe from the U.S. that mail reached the city only once a month from Missouri. Looking on the bright side of his cultural and geographic isolation in New Mexico Territory, in a letter written in May 1856 Charles expressed his intention to William to remain in New Mexico until "I have paid up all my debts, for I can do it better out here, than in the States, as there are no concerts, Theatres, White Kid Gloves, Subscriptions to Charities or churches, or gallivanting the ladies on Sleigh rides and to make a man's money fly."

Whilden's duties as Colonel Grayson's secretary were relatively light, leaving him ample time for other pursuits - perhaps too much time for his own financial good. His April 30, 1857 letter home to Charleston states: "In addition to the offices I hold in this Territory of Warden of a Masonic Lodge, President of a Literary Society, member of a Territorial Democratic Central Committee ..., I have lately added that of Farmer." Dreaming of making enough money to satisfy his debts to William and to establish a law practice in Texas, Charles had purchased a 16 acre truck farm near Sante Fe, establishing his claim as a "farmer." Alas, the farm would prove to be unprofitable. In his spare time, Whilden also occasionally edited the Santa Fe newspaper when the regular editor was busy. During the Presidential election campaign of 1856, Whilden penned an editorial supporting the renomination of President Franklin Pierce, a pro-Southern Democrat, and he expressed the hope in a letter to William that Pierce would be re-elected and "give me a fat office." Whilden's hope for a political sinecure also proved to be a dream.

Marriage was another unrealized dream. After his own marriage in 1850, William Whilden badgered his elder brother to end his bachelorhood and to settle down. In December 1854, when he was still in Detroit and aged 30, a friend had tried to interest Charles in marrying his fiftyish, red-headed aunt. Seizing the opportunity to turn the

tables on William, Charles wrote to William not to be surprised if he married the woman and took up William on his standing offer to permit Charles to honeymoon at William's stylish new home in Charleston. Whatever romantic aspirations Charles may have entertained when he arrived in New Mexico, the dearth of eligible women in the territory soon squashed them. In a letter to William written seven months after his arrival in Santa Fe, Charles could count only six unmarried American ladies in all of New Mexico, none of whom, however, lived in Santa Fe. However boring it may have been, life in Santa Fe also afforded Whilden time for puffing his meerschaum pipe, reading his subscriptions to the peppery Charleston Mercury newspaper, the highbrow Russell's Magazine, and reflecting on the mounting sectional tensions of the prewar years. In a letter to William dated March 26, 1856, Charles complained that the "Government is becoming more abolition every day" and he predicted that the "Union may last a few years longer, but unless a decided change takes place in Northern politics, it must at last go under."

Events would prove Whilden correct. On December 20, 1860, delegates to the so-called Secession Convention, meeting in Institute Hall in downtown Charleston, only a short distance from Charles Whilden's boyhood home on Magazine Street, unanimously adopted the "Ordinance of Secession", taking South Carolina out of the Union. The bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor four months later heralded the beginning of the shooting war. A lesser man than Charles Whilden might have been content to sit out the war in New Mexico Territory. After all, Whilden had been gone from the South for more than a decade. He was fast approaching 40. Whilden's frequent denunciations of abolitionism in his letters were based on principle, not political expediency or financial self-interest. Apart from a nominal, undivided interest in his beloved Maumer Juno that he shared with his siblings, Charles held no slave property. Furthermore, he was more than 1,000 miles from South Carolina, with little money for travel. But Charles Whilden was no ordinary man. Undeterred by the obstacles confronting him, Whilden resolved to answer South Carolina's call to arms. According to a reminiscence written in 1969 by his grand niece, Miss Elizabeth Whilden Hard of Greenville, South Carolina, the "only way he could get back to Charleston was by the Bahamas, and on his way back to Charleston the ship was wrecked, he spent some time in an open boat, suffered sunstroke, and as a result had epileptic attacks." The date of Whilden's harrowing return to Charleston is conjectural, as none of his correspondence from the early war years has survived, but the likely date is late 1861 or early 1862.

Whilden's Confederate service records in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. commence with his enlistment in 1864, but Miss Hard's reminiscence may be correct that her Great Uncle Charles "enlisted a number of times, but when he had an [epileptic] attack would be discharged. Then he would go somewhere else and enlist again." Confederate service records are notoriously incomplete, and it stands to reason that Charles Whilden would not have risked life and limb returning to Charleston only to avoid military service once home. Irrespective of whether or not he had seen prior service, Whilden demonstrably enlisted "for the war" at Charleston on February 6, 1864, as a private in Company I (known as the Richardson Guards) of the 1st Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers. Lieutenant Wallace Delph enlisted Whilden, and the lieutenant can

be forgiven if he looked askance at his new recruit. By most standards, Whilden was a marginal recruit. Though intelligent and patriotic, Whilden was also in his 40th year, the red hair of his youth turned grey. His urban background and string of sedentary occupations better suited him for a Richmond clerkship than active service in the field. On top of everything else, Whilden was epileptic.

Whilden's new regiment was a proud outfit. The 1st Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers, was known popularly as "Gregg's 1st South Carolina" after its first Colonel, Maxcy Gregg, in order to distinguish the regiment from several other South Carolina infantry regiments also identified numerically as the "1st Regiment." The successor to a regiment organized by Col. Gregg in December 1860 for six-months service, the 1st Regiment, SCV, was arguably the very first Rebel infantry regiment. At the time of Whilden's enlistment, the regiment was part of Brigadier General Samuel McGowan's brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia.

At one time part of A.P. Hill's vaunted Light Division, McGowan's South Carolinians had won a reputation for hard fighting on many a bloody field. That reputation was shortly to be put to its sternest test at a strategic Virginia crossroads village known as Spotsylvania Court House.

Following his repulse at the Wilderness on May 5 and 6, 1864, Union General Ulysses S. Grant ordered the Army of the Potomac to move southeast about 12 miles to the vicinity of Spotsylvania Court House (NPS Web Site), hoping to get between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond. General Robert E. Lee, however, was quicker, and elements of the Confederate First Corps arrived at Spotsylvania Court House just ahead of the Federals. Over the next few days a series of collisions in the area occurred as both sides took up positions and brought up additional units. The Army of Northern Virginia settled into a defensive line at Spotsylvania that bulged northward in the center to form a salient or "mule-shoe," with elements of Lieutenant General Richard Ewell's Second Corps defending the mule-shoe. At first light on May 12, nearly 19,000 men of the Union II Corps, taking advantage of ground fog, attacked the tip or apex of the mule-shoe, quickly overwhelming Major General Edward Johnson's 4,000-man division defending the apex. Once inside the mule-shoe, the Federals threatened to advance southward like a tidal wave. Only their own disorganization and a series of desperate Confederate counterattacks halted the Union's advance before it resulted in a general rout.

With most of Johnson's Division dead or prisoners, a considerable segment of the works inside the apex of the mule-shoe was unoccupied by any Confederate troops. To correct this, General Lee forwarded two brigades from the Third Corps, Harris's Mississippians and McGowan's South Carolinians, during the mid-morning hours of the 12th. With a cheer and at the double quick, McGowan's Brigade advanced towards the tip of the mule-shoe in support of Harris's Brigade, sloshing through rain and mud and under heavy fire. At the head of each of the brigade's five regiments, two soldiers carried the regimental state flag and the national battleflag. The blue silk state flag featured a palmetto tree encircled with a wreath of oak and laurel leaves; the national battleflag displayed the familiar blue, starred St. Andrew's cross dividing a red field. When the regular color bearer was shot, Whilden insisted upon bearing his regiment's national colors into the

fight, although he was not a member of Company K, the regiment's color company. Lieutenant James Armstrong, the commander of Company K and Whilden's messmate, relented, though, according to Armstrong's postwar account, Whilden was "feeble in health and totally unfitted for active service.... In fact, he was stumbling at every step." Watching Whilden struggle to keep up with his command, Armstrong offered to relieve Whilden of the flag and to carry it himself. Whilden relinquished the flag to the lieutenant, but only after Armstrong had promised to restore it to him when the regiment halted. As the command arrived at the next line, "Whilden came rushing up, took the flag and bravely bore it throughout the fight," Armstrong recalled. The lieutenant was being literal when he wrote that Whilden "bore" the flag, because, when the top of his flag staff was shot away during the advance, Whilden tied the battleflag around his waist and continued forward. When Whilden and his comrades finally halted in the late forenoon, they fell into trenches west of the mule-shoe tip. Perhaps two hundred yards of the salient's defenses then remained in Federal hands. In his recent book on Grant's Overland Campaign, Noah Trudeau writes: "Along those two hundred yards of mutually held trenches, men now killed each other with zealous abandon.

In a war that had birthed its share of bloody angles, this day and the morning of the next at Spotsylvania would give birth to the bloodiest of them all."

For the next 17 hours or so, McGowan's Brigade would hold its position along the apex of the salient front and would maintain a more or less continuous fire. At times the two sides were only a few yards apart. Now and then a hundred or so Yankees would surge forward over the Confederate trenches, only to be immediately hurled back in desperate hand-to-hand fighting. Rain fell intermittently during the afternoon of the 12th, adding to the misery of the combatants. About 10 o'clock that evening, a large oak, some 22 inches in diameter and cut almost in half by Federal rifle fire, fell down on works manned by Whilden's regiment, wounding several men and startling a great many more.

While this desperate fighting took place, other Confederates were constructing a new defensive line across the base of the mule-shoe about a mile to the rear of the Mississippians and South Carolinians. Finally, at 4 o'clock in the morning of May 13, the brigades of Harris and McGowan withdrew to the new line. Thus ended the longest sustained hand-to-hand combat of the war. The toll on McGowan's Brigade had been heavy. General McGowan was wounded early in the advance, and the commander of Gregg's 1st South Carolina, Col. C. W. McCreary, fell wounded almost in Whilden's arms. Total casualties within the brigade exceeded 40 percent. One of these casualties was the impromptu flag bearer, Private Charles Whilden. At some point before McGowan's Brigade retired to the relative safety of the new defensive line, a bullet tore open Whilden's shirt, inflicting a wound to his shoulder. With the flag still tied around his waist, Whilden was carried to a field hospital. For all intents and purposes, the war was over for him. The next day, May 14, Charles hurriedly wrote a letter to his brother, William, who was then serving as an artillery officer near Charleston. After describing the fighting of the preceding two days and the heavy losses of his brigade, Charles turned to a more personal subject. "[I]f it should be the decree of the Almighty that I should lose my life in this War," he wrote, then William should have his meerschaum pipe and his sisters-in-law should draw for his watch and chain. What little remained of his property, Charles wrote, should be "equally divided between Sisters Charlotte & Ellen Ann -- I promised dear Mother that they should never want if I could prevent it." Sent to the

General Hospital at Camp Winder in Richmond to recover his health, Whilden was furloughed to Charleston in late August. Listed as "absent sick at Charleston" on the muster rolls of his regiment for September through December 1864, Whilden never recovered sufficiently to return to active service. In common with other Confederate veterans, Charles Whilden struggled to put his life back together after the war. He might have succeeded, but on September 25, 1866 he died suddenly in Charleston at age 42. According to Elizabeth Hard, her Great Uncle Charles "died without fame or glory, as on an early morning walk he suffered an [epileptic] attack and fell in a pool of water from rain collected on the pavement." The man who had survived the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania drowned back home in a few inches of ground water. The story of the flag that Charles Whilden carried so courageously at Spotsylvania does not end with his death. After Whilden was wounded at Spotsylvania and hospitalized, the flag was stored with his other effects. Given to Whilden when he was furloughed to Charleston in August 1864, the flag was in his possession when he died about two years thereafter. About 15 years after the war, Edward McCrady, Jr., a prominent Charleston lawyer who had captained the color company of Gregg's 1st South Carolina early in the war and had later risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel of the regiment, petitioned William Whilden to turn over the battleflag that he had inherited from his brother Charles. McCrady had possession of the regiment's blue state colors, and he professed a desire to reunite the two flags. In a letter written on New Year's Day, 1880, McCrady pled his best case, pointing out that his regiment had carried the battleflag "in every battle until May 1864" and that, for years during the war, he had "lived with the flag in [his] tent, and slept with it by [his] side in the bivouac." After consulting his three surviving brothers, two of whom were Baptist ministers, William Whilden declined McCrady's request, essentially on the grounds that McCrady had no higher claim to the flag than any other veteran of the regiment. In declining, however, Whilden indicated a willingness to entrust the flag to a collection of Confederate relics. Following William Whilden's death in 1896, custody of the battleflag passed to William's daughter, Mrs. Charles Hard of Greenville. In 1906, Mrs. Hard delivered the flag to her Uncle Charles' old friend and messmate, James Armstrong, a postwar harbor master of Charleston who had commanded the color company of Gregg's 1st South Carolina at Spotsylvania. In his letter to Mrs. Hard expressing his appreciation for the flag, Armstrong promised to "communicate with the other officers of the Regiment in regard to sending the flag to the State House to be placed alongside of the blue State flag." Armstrong assured Mrs. Hard that, "[u]ntil sent there it will be kept in a fire proof vault." Time passed, and the battleflag remained with the aging Armstrong. Finally, in 1920, Mrs. Hard wrote to Armstrong about the flag. Rose McKeelin, Armstrong's nurse, responded, informing Mrs. Hard that Armstrong's leg had been amputated the prior month as a result of a wound he had suffered at Spotsylvania more than half a century previously. The letter explained that Armstrong had tried to convene a meeting of the surviving officers to discuss the flag but that he had failed to do so, and it concluded with the promise that Armstrong, being the senior of the two surviving officers of the regiment, would send the flag to the Secretary of State in Columbia to be placed alongside the blue state colors of the regiment already there. Although the evidence is not conclusive, the old soldier evidently made good on his nurse's promise on his behalf by turning over the battleflag to the state before he died.

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