

Here's the Civil War history they didn't want you to know

WaPo

By Howell Raines

December 20, 2023



Alabama farmers who volunteered for the First Alabama Union Cavalry were shaped by its commanders at Corinth, Miss., in 1862. (Grenville M. Dodge Collection/State Historical Society of Iowa)

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A new generation of Civil War scholars is filling in what one commentator calls the “skipped history” of White Southerners who fought for the Union Army. For me, the emerging revisionist account of the conflict is personal. I have discovered the story of a great-great-grandfather who was threatened with hanging as a “damned old Lincolnite” by his neighbors in the Alabama mountains. My given name is an Anglicized version of the biblical middle name of James Hiel Abbott, who died in 1877 after helping his son slip through rebel lines to enlist in the 1st Alabama Cavalry, a distinguished regiment of bluecoat fighters whose story was deliberately excluded from the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery. That son is buried in the national military cemetery at Chattanooga, Tenn. Until a few years ago, I was among the thousands of Southerners who never knew they had kin buried under Union Army headstones. How did a regiment of 2,066 fighters and spies from the mountain South, chosen by Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman as his personal escort on the March to the Sea, get erased? Oddly, the explanation reaches back to Columbia University, whose pro-Confederate Dunning School of Reconstruction history at the start of the 20th century spread a false narrative of Lost Cause heroism and suffering among aristocratic plantation owners.

As a 10-year-old I stood in the presence of Marie Bankhead Owen, who showed me and my all-White elementary-school classmates the bullet holes in Confederate battle flags carried by “our boys.” She and her husband, Thomas McAdory Owen, reigned from 1901 to 1955 as directors of the archives in a monolithic alabaster building across from the Alabama State Capitol. They made the decision not to collect the service records of an estimated 3,000 White Alabamians who enlisted in the Union Army after it occupied Huntsville, Ala., in 1862. The early loss of this crucial Tennessee River town was a stab to the heart

from which the Confederacy never recovered. Neither did the writing of accurate history in Alabama.



Thomas and Marie Owen with their son, Thomas Owen Jr., and his first wife Mabel in 1918. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)

The Owens were not alone in what was a national academic movement to play down the sins of enslavers. In the files in Montgomery, I found the century-old correspondence between Thomas Owen and Columbia University historian William Archibald Dunning about their mission to give a pro-Southern slant to the American Historical Association. They cooperated in Dunning's plan to hold the first AHA convention in a Southern city, New Orleans. In 1903, Dunning chartered a train to bring Northern professors to Montgomery, where Owen led

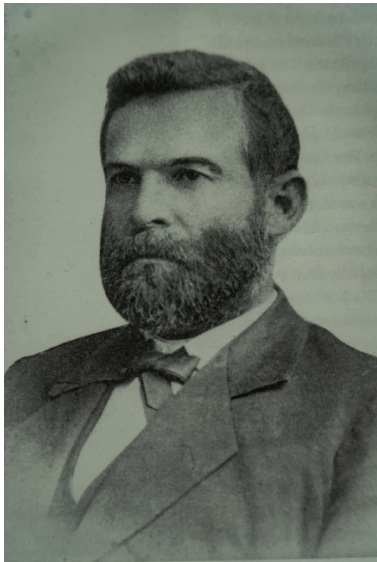
them on a dramatic nighttime tour of the “Cradle of the Confederacy.” It was a public relations coup for both men, cementing Dunning’s hold on the historical profession and establishing Owen as a national leader in Civil War preservation. Later, at the 1909 AHA convention in New York, Dunning scored another political triumph by inviting W.E.B. Du Bois to be the first Black PhD holder to address the group, then organizing a scholarly boycott of Du Bois’s challenge to the Dunning School’s white-supremacist theory of Reconstruction, effectively blocking divergent points of view for several decades. All these events contributed to establishing what scholars call the “Myth of the Lost Cause” as a main theme of Civil War scholarship for the first half of the 20th century. The chief tenets of the myth were these: Southerners were solidly behind the Confederacy; the war was about states’ rights, not slavery; African Americans were scientifically proven to be a “servile race”; Reconstruction was a failure because they were incapable of governing.

Dunning died in 1922, but his scheme to put a Confederate spin on Civil War history worked all the way up to the 1960s civil rights movement, when Du Bois’s non-racist theory about the positive accomplishments of Reconstruction gained traction. The fact that few Americans have ever heard of the 1st Alabama Cavalry and the defiant anti-secession activist who led to its founding, Charles Christopher Sheats, documents how such historiographic trickery produced what the Mellon Foundation calls “a woefully incomplete story” of the American past. The foundation’s Monuments Program is spending \$500 million to erect accurate memorials to political dissidents, women and minorities who are underrepresented in many best-selling history books.

A place to start could be a statue of Sheats in the Alabama forest where his Free State of Winston speech urged Alabama Unionists to secede from the

Confederacy and sparked the surge of enlistments that led to the founding of the 1st Alabama Cavalry. His estimated audience of 2,000 to 3,000 mountain farmers was perhaps the largest antiwar rally held by patriotic Southerners.

As a student, I heard tidbits about Sheats because he was born in 1839 in my mother's ancestral county, the Free State of Winston. The county was one of 22 in central and northern Alabama that elected anti-Secession delegates to the enslaver-dominated convention that took Alabama out of the Union on Jan. 11, 1861, by the unexpectedly close vote of 61 to 39.



Charles Christopher Sheats (Courtesy of Reita Buress)

It has taken six decades of historical detective work to rescue an accurate biography of Sheats from the malicious lies in the few Alabama histories that mention him. At 21, he burst from political obscurity to defeat his county's most powerful plantation owner by a 5-to-1 margin for one of the 100 seats in the Montgomery convention. There the famous secessionist "Fire Eater," William Lowndes Yancey, threatened to hang Sheats and the bloc of 24 hill-country delegates who refused to sign the Ordinance of Secession to protest their nonslaveholding constituents being forced into a new nation they did not

support. Sheats spent much of the war in prison but escaped periodically to begin the clandestine recruitment campaign that led to the founding in 1862 of the 1st Alabama Union Cavalry.

The campaign to erase Sheats and the 1st Alabama from the Civil War narrative was effective enough that I never knew that my great-great-grandfather Abbott ferried farm boys from Walker County, which adjoins Winston, across the Sipsey River so they could sneak north to enlist with Union forces that occupied Huntsville in 1862. Federal archives recount how Abbott kept a canoe on the fast-flowing Sipsey to send potential recruits on their dangerous journeys through the Confederate lines to 1st Alabama enlistment stations in Huntsville and Corinth, Miss. They fled rebel recruitment squads singly or in groups up to 100. So great was the influx that in 1862, Gen. Carlos Buell got Abraham Lincoln's permission to organize the "Alabama volunteers" into their own regiment.

The fact that their story is missing from the best-known Civil War histories provides dramatic proof of why modern doctoral students are only now establishing a new pantheon of loyal individuals and groups.



James Hiel Abbott with his wife Jane Mills Key "Cricket" Abbot and their children, circa 1840-1850. (Courtesy of Larry Abbott)

The backstory of how Confederate history was written to glorify the defeated side is complicated, and requires a dip into academic historiography and plantation economics. It is also full of odd twists. Dunning was the son of a wealthy New Jersey industrialist who taught him that Southern plantation masters were unfairly punished during Reconstruction. The younger Dunning installed a white-supremacist curriculum at Columbia and, after 1900, started dispatching his doctoral students to set up pro-Confederate history departments at Southern universities. The most influential of these was Walter Lynwood Fleming, whose students at Vanderbilt University produced "I'll Take My Stand," a celebration of plantation culture written by 12 brilliant conservative "Agrarian" writers including Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate and Andrew Nelson Lytle. My research showed that Lytle knew about the Free State of Winston, but chose instead in his popular book "Nathan Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company" to

lionize the sociopathic cavalry general who executed an integrated federal force of freed Black slaves and White Unionists as they tried to surrender at Fort Pillow, Tenn., in 1864. Lytle's mentor, Fleming, who was born on an Alabama plantation, reigned as the director of graduate education at Vanderbilt and peopled Southern history departments with PhDs schooled in the pro-Confederate views he learned from Dunning at Columbia.

The other background factor was King Cotton economics as it developed in the Black Belt lands of the frontier South. After 1830, the best farm acreage was bought up by the wealthy owners of Atlantic seaboard plantations, who brought slavery and their own aristocratic pretensions into new states such as Alabama. Poorer farmers had to settle for small farms in the Appalachian foothills. They could not afford enslaved people, and their Unionism had deep historical roots. The original highland homesteaders revered the "Old Flag" that their forefathers fought for in the Revolution and the War of 1812. Most of the some 100,000 future Union volunteers from the South were Jacksonian Democrats who hewed to Old Hickory's 1830 dictum that the Union "must be preserved." Lost Cause historians schooled by Dunning and Fleming simply glossed over the fact that White volunteers from the Confederate states made up almost 5 percent of Lincoln's army.

The great achievement of Dunning and the Lost Cause historians of his "Dunning School" was to create the impression that the vast majority of White Southerners supported the Confederacy, even though two-thirds of Alabama families did not own enslaved people. White support for the war peaked after the attack on Fort Sumter in 1861 but declined steadily after the Union victory at Shiloh in the spring of 1862. How then did the Civil War become the only conflict in which, as

filmmaker Ken Burns told me, the losers got to write the history, erecting statues of Johnny Reb outside seemingly every courthouse in Alabama? Long story short, after the Compromise of 1877 ended Reconstruction, plantation oligarchs regained control of Southern legislatures and state universities started churning out history books that ignored Black people and poor Whites. When national historians set about writing widescreen histories of the war, they relied on these tainted histories.

In the case of Alabama, this meant that the two most misleading books on Alabama history were footnoted hundreds of times in scholarly writings. One was Fleming's pro-Klan "Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama," published in 1905. Dunning boasted that his star student from Alabama was "none-too-reconstructed," and supervised the dissertation in which Fleming cast Sheats as a coward silenced by Klan threats even though congressional testimony showed that he spoke throughout Alabama urging former enslaved people to vote for Grant. The other book, "Alabama Tories: The 1st Alabama Cavalry, U.S.A., 1862 to 1865," was published in 1960 as a celebration of the "Confederate Centennial" by William Stanley Hoole, the librarian at the University of Alabama. As chief of the Lost Cause caucus on the Tuscaloosa faculty, Hoole carried on the work of exclusion started by the Owens at the Alabama archives. While they simply sought to bury the 1st Alabama Cavalry, he denigrated it as a lawless band of "hillbilly" war criminals who played no significant military role in the Civil War. In a skimpy sentence, he admitted that the Alabama cavalrymen were selected by Sherman as his personal escort on the March to the Sea, but he ignored official reports of their value to the Union Army.



A wood engraving of an 1864 engagement between Union and Confederate troops at Snake Creek Gap in Georgia. (Library of Congress/Prints and Photographs Division)

Those omissions point up another feature of history twisted to fit parochial politics and racial prejudice. For one thing, the 1st Alabama was one of the few integrated units in the Union Army: the regiment of 2,066 recruits included 16 freed enslaved people. The shortchanging of its accomplishments also cast a shadow over important events and colorful characters who deserved attention in mainstream histories. My most surprising discovery was that the 1st Alabama led the Union charge that could have prevented the burning of Atlanta. At Snake Creek Gap in North Georgia on May 9, 1864, they had a chance to rout Confederate Gen. Joseph Johnson's entire army by charging into its rear. Their attack was called off when one of Sherman's favorite generals arrived on the scene. In his "Memoirs," Sherman admitted that his subordinate had cost the Union Army an opportunity that "does not occur twice in a lifetime." The 1st Alabama Cavalry's shining moments came on the march from Chattanooga to Savannah. I never saw an Alabama history that noted the

startling fact that the 1st Alabama Cavalry is listed in the “Order of Battle” for the Atlanta campaign. How they came to be picked as the point of the spear that would be driven through the heart of the Confederacy is a story told in the 2020 University of Virginia dissertation of Clayton J. Butler, which was published last year as “True Blue: White Unionists in the Deep South During the Civil War and Reconstruction.” Its author is one of a number of rising historians who have published in the past 25 years the research that enabled me to complete my six-decade quest for the full story of Alabama Unionism.

At the pivotal Battle of Fort McAllister on Dec. 13, 1864, Alabamians were on both sides of the battle lines, as the 1st Alabama faced Confederate neighbors from back home under rebel Gen. Joseph “Fighting Joe” Wheeler. Later, the 1st Alabama figured in one of Sherman’s most famous demonstrations of the “hard war” tactics designed to break the will of Confederate soldiers and civilians. Rebel land mines blew off the leg of a 1st Alabama company commander, Lt. Francis Tupper. Sherman rushed to his side and, in a fit of anger, ordered Confederate prisoners of war onto the road, telling them to find the mines by digging them up or stepping on them.



Fort McAllister near Savannah, Ga., in December 1864. (Samuel A. Cooley/Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

By way of reward for 1st Alabama's performance on the March to the Sea, Gen. Francis Blair Jr., gave them the place of honor at the right front of Sherman's 17th Corps in the victory parade through captured Savannah on Dec. 27, 1864. The presence of Alabama soldiers at Savannah and the burning of Atlanta is the kind of belated news that can cause some Civil War buffs to gulp in surprise. Another of the new generation of Civil War students, attorney W. Steven Harrell of Perry, Ga., has found pension records showing that Sheats himself, having been freed from prison, rushed to the front to visit his old friends in the 1st Alabama as Atlanta lay in ashes.

Removing some of the lugubrious monuments beloved by conservative Southerners will allow an appreciation of the internal diversity of a war that

claimed about 620,000 American lives. And there's more to be learned, especially now that the Black Lives Matter movement inspired Alabama Department of Archives and History's modernizing director, Steven Murray, to correct the mistakes of the Owen legacy. Even he doesn't know what surprises lurk as cataloguers work through the vast files left by the Owens' team of Lost Cause manipulators.

Last year, in aiding my research at the archives, my grandson Jasper Raines found the muslin-wrapped rosters of the first three Alabama companies sworn into the Union Army in 1862. For more than 100 years, they lay misfiled in the records of the adjutant general's office of Alabama's Confederate government. Murray speculated that the young Thomas McAdory Owen might have gotten them from the Library of Congress director who befriended Owen when he was a post office clerk in D.C. in the 1890s. The question remains, of course, as to whether they were purposely hidden under a false label by Owen himself. Based on what I've learned since 1961, when I first ran across Sheats's name in Alabama folklore, I have to guess yes. When it comes to the history of Alabama's mountain Unionists, disappearance is the name of the game.