

Confederate Veterans
in
Stone Mountain

A Perspective on Southern Heritage

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The material in this booklet was originally given as a presentation during Confederate History Month, April 2000, to Masonic lodges in Stone Mountain, Tucker, and Clarkston, Georgia. Hence, a special emphasis is given to those Confederate veterans who were Masons.

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The Sons of Confederate Veterans is a historical, patriotic, non-political organization composed of male descendants of men who fought for the Confederate States of America. The SCV has a worldwide membership, including camps in Brazil and Europe.

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The current public discussion of Confederate heritage and symbols is generating the usual short-sighted nonsense about the motives and merits of our ancestors. Even some modern Southerners find themselves asking, “Who were those folks who proclaimed their political independence over 135 years ago?” It’s a question that calls us to look beyond sound bytes, media hype, and journalistic glibness.

South Carolina writer Ben Robertson once observed: “Graveyards in the South are like the Southern hills: there is the same looming eternity about them, and we understand eternity in our lonely country. It gives you a proper perspective to spend an hour among the tombs.”

Graves of unknown Confederate soldiers buried in Stone Mountain Cemetery ↵



What perspective can the grave stones in our local cemetery give us about Southern history in the shadow of the Mountain? Let’s spend a few minutes on a virtual tour among the tombs of a few of the more than 60 Confederate veterans buried there.

A significant number of men from the Stone Mountain area served in four locally recruited units, companies attached to the 36th and 38th Georgia Infantry, 2nd Georgia Cavalry, and 12th Georgia Artillery.

Headstone of Thomas Jefferson Thomas (1836–1891). In 1999, The Confederate Memorial Camp sponsored the re-marking of this grave site. ↵



The “McCullough Rifles,” part of the 38th Georgia Infantry, served under the command of Stonewall Jackson and John B. Gordon, and participated in all the major campaigns of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Thomas Jefferson Thomas, whose broken headstone is shown here, was a private in the 38th when he was wounded at the battle of Gettysburg. Captured during the retreat from Pennsylvania, he spent a year and a half in the Point Lookout prisoner-of-war camp in Maryland before being released to return to his farm in DeKalb.

*Headstone of Oliver
Winningham (1831–
1914)* ↵



The “Magruder Dragoons,” part of the 2nd Georgia Cavalry, served under the command of “Fighting Joe” Wheeler in all the major campaigns of the Army of Tennessee, including the battles around Atlanta. Local businessman Oliver Winningham was captain of the company for several months in 1862 before resigning due to bad health. Winningham, who was a member of the Stone Mountain Lodge from 1857, served the remainder of the war as a Major in the Georgia militia.

*Headstone of John
Thomas Willingham
(1836–1889)* ↵



The “DeKalb Rifleman,” part of the 12th Georgia Artillery, served in the defense of Charleston and Savannah before being transferred to John B. Gordon’s command during the last year of the war in Virginia. Lieutenant John Thomas Willingham served with the DeKalb Rifleman for almost three years and temporarily commanded the company for over four months when it was stationed on the coast at Thunderbolt, Georgia. Willingham joined the Stone Mountain Lodge after the war in 1866.

Headstone of James R. Smith (1831–1910) ↵



Company F of the 36th Georgia Infantry served at Vicksburg and in the Army of Tennessee during the Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Carolina campaigns. The company's First Lieutenant James R. Smith spent a significant part of his military career fighting disease in army hospitals at Lauderdale Springs, Mississippi, and at Macon and Augusta, Georgia. However, he was with Company F when it surrendered at High Point, North Carolina in 1865. Smith was a member of Stone Mountain Lodge from 1853.

Detail from the headstone of John L. Sawyer (1847–1916) ↵



Several veterans buried in Stone Mountain were mere teenagers when they went to war, such as 16-year-old John L. Sawyer, who left home in 1864 to join the 7th Georgia Infantry in the trenches of Petersburg, Virginia. The Southern Cross of Honor carved on his headstone memorializes his devotion to his country. The medal was created by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1898. Sawyer was one of over 78,000 Southern soldiers to receive this award.

*Headstone of Elwin
Litchfield Phillips
(1844–1887)* ↵



Fourteen veterans buried in Stone Mountain had been prisoners of war, including Elwin Litchfield Phillips of the 16th Battalion Georgia Cavalry. The 19-year-old Sergeant Phillips survived Rock Island prisoner-of-war Camp in Illinois, where 77% of the prisoners died of sickness, starvation, and exposure.

*Headstone of Isaac
B. Pope (1832–
1881)* ↵



Seventeen veterans buried in Stone Mountain had been wounded in battle. Private Isaac B. Pope of Cobb's Legion sustained gunshot wounds in battles at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1863 and Cold Harbor, Virginia in 1864. Somehow, he survived to be one of only four veterans buried in Stone Mountain to surrender with General Lee at Appomattox Court House in 1865.

*Memorial
inscription to
Presley Lanier
(1820–1864)* ↵



Some local citizens who marched away never returned, including Private Presley Lanier of the 38th Georgia Infantry. He was killed in the battle of Spotsylvania Court House in 1864. Buried in an unknown grave somewhere in Virginia, Lanier's only legacy is a fading memorial carved on the back of his wife's headstone.

These are some of the purely military facts about this generation of Southern patriots. However, as poet Stephen Vincent Benét noted:

War is an iron screen in front of a time,
With pictures smoked upon it in red and black,
Some gallant enough, some deadly, but all intense.
We look at the pictures, thinking we know the time,
We only know the screen.

Beyond the acknowledged military prowess and durability of the Southern soldier, what can we learn about the men themselves? What personal price did they forfeit in their bid for political and social self-determination? What did they accomplish after the shooting stopped?

*John Forsyth
McClelland (1840–
1885)* ↵



Lieutenant John F. McClelland, shown here in a wartime photograph, was a veteran of the 44th Georgia Infantry. Originally from Henry County, he survived two years of battle and 10 months in a prison stockade. After the war, he attended Emory College and taught school in Stone Mountain and Conyers. Later, McClelland became a minister of the Gospel, simultaneously pastoring Presbyterian churches in Stone Mountain and Lawrenceville while serving as chaplain of the Georgia House of Representatives. Lieutenant John F. McClelland was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 1998 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

*Headstone of
Andrew Jackson
Thompson (1824–
1876)* ↵



Andrew Jackson Thompson, whose grave is marked by one of Stone Mountain's most intriguing headstones, was a veteran of over two years of service with the 12th Georgia Artillery. Two of his brothers died while serving in Virginia. Unfortunately, Jack Thompson survived the war only to meet foul play as a victim of a confidence scheme that defrauded him of \$700 and cost him his life as the victim of a grisly murder.

*Headstone of
Ransom Martin
Thompson (1846–
1927)* ↵



Jack's youngest brother, Ransom Martin Thompson, permanently lost the use of his right leg from a gangrenous infection while serving with the 2nd Georgia Reserves guarding Yankee prisoners at Camp Sumter near Andersonville. After the war, Ransie Thompson, who joined the Stone Mountain Lodge in 1877, was mayor of Stone Mountain and DeKalb County Coroner. Private Ransom M. Thompson was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 1997 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

George Presley Trout
(1839–1923) ↵



George Presley Trout may be the single most celebrated person in the cemetery. A native of Jackson County, Trout lost three brothers during the war, including his twin who was killed at Gettysburg two days before George himself was captured at Vicksburg.

While serving as a private in the 43rd Georgia Infantry, George Trout was wounded in the battle of Atlanta near the Troup House, made famous after the war as the subject of the Atlanta Cyclorama painting—a fact he wanted to impress on later generations in an admonishment cast in the brass plate atop his grave:

*“Wounded in the
Battle of Atlanta.
I remember when I
fought for God and
you, won’t you
remember me with love
for God and me.”* ↵



Yet, Trout’s greatest claim to local fame is the persistent rumor that he’s buried with his favorite horse. The size of his tomb only helps keep the rumor alive. Private George P. Trout was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 1996 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

*Headstone of John
Gray Rankin (1816–
1902)* ↵



John Gray Rankin, a native of Massachusetts, joined Stone Mountain Lodge in 1856 soon after moving to Georgia. He was serving his second term as Worshipful Master in 1861 when he joined the 38th Georgia Infantry. His military career included a battlefield commendation in 1862 before being wounded and captured in 1864.

After the war, this Yankee Confederate was a superintendent at one of the local granite quarries and led the Stone Mountain Lodge a third time in 1873 as Worshipful Master. Captain John G. Rankin was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 2000 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

*Headstone of Paul
Turner Goldsmith
(1844–1868)* ↵



Paul Turner Goldsmith was a teenaged cadet in the Georgia Military Institute when Sherman's hordes descended on Georgia. Called into adult service, the boys of GMI fought in the open fields of Resaca, in the trenches of Atlanta and Savannah, and gave the Yankees a stinging defeat at a railroad bridge on the Oconee River. They remained in service until the end of the war.

Having refugeeed from Bartow County in 1863, the Goldsmith family took up residence near Atlanta where they were living when Paul died at age 24. He had been one of six sons his parents had sent off to defend their state. Paul's father, Turner Goldsmith, was a member of the Stone Mountain Lodge. Cadet Paul T. Goldsmith was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 1999 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

*Headstone of
Thomas P. Wells
(1828–1906)* ♣



Private Thomas P. Wells (a Stone Mountain Lodge member from 1856) joined the 36th Georgia Infantry with his brother. Tom was captured at the battle of Champion's Hill near Vicksburg, Mississippi. He was eventually exchanged and surrendered with his company in 1865. After the war, Wells owned a local hardware store. It was said that when weighing out an order of nails, Tom Wells could look at the pile and calculate exactly how many the customer had purchased. He served in the Stone Mountain Lodge at various times as Secretary, Treasurer, and Junior Warden.

Elisha Wells, the patriarch of the Wells family in DeKalb County, had 10 grandsons who served in the Confederate Army. The Wells family was especially hard hit by the war. Four of Elisha's grandsons died in Confederate service, two of whom were killed in battle—one in Virginia, one in Mississippi. Additionally, the husbands of two of his granddaughters died while serving at Vicksburg.

*Headstone of John
Wilson McCurdy
(1834–1922)* ♣



Another family hard hit by the war were the McCurdys. John Wilson McCurdy, a member of Stone Mountain Lodge from 1857, joined the 38th Georgia Infantry. At the battle of Sharpsburg in 1862, he was one of several officers to be shot down while commanding the regiment during the bloodiest single day in American history. Permanently disabled, he returned to Georgia and finished the war serving as an officer with a local unit that disbanded at Yellow River. After the war, John McCurdy was mayor of Stone Mountain, a DeKalb deputy sheriff, and represented the county as a member of the state legislature.

*Headstone of Philip
Burford McCurdy
(1837-1914) ↵*



John was joined in the 38th Georgia by his younger brother Philip Burford McCurdy who was wounded and disabled by shrapnel during the battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. He returned to Georgia to serve in the same local defense unit as his brother. Philip joined Stone Mountain Lodge after the war in 1871. Phil McCurdy was DeKalb County tax collector and a licensed preacher with the Stone Mountain Baptist Church. Sergeant Philip B. McCurdy was specially honored during the Confederate Memorial Day ceremony on April 26, 1995 sponsored by The Confederate Memorial Camp.

John and Phil McCurdy had two younger brothers, Stephen and James, both of whom died in Confederate service in Virginia where they lay buried in unmarked graves.

*Veterans
Administration
marker for graves of
unknown
Confederate soldiers
buried in Stone
Mountain City
Cemetery ↵*



The Confederate veterans of Stone Mountain paid a dear price in treasure and blood for their efforts to preserve constitutional liberty. And, like the 150 unknown Southern soldiers resting in the cemetery, our local veterans often left behind little more than a tattered memory. But the story of their sacrifice and courage has lived in the traditional conversation between generations.

Now, we hear voices who would bully us into ignoring the heritage of 1861, anxious to have all trace of our ancestors fade from neglect...

Headstone of William C. Austin (1838–1920). In 1999, The Confederate Memorial Camp sponsored the raising and re-setting of this headstone. ↵



...or sink before the onslaught of an infamy of lies. What would the men in gray have us believe about them? The details of their personal lives are as varied and unique as the stones that mark their graves. But as Southerners, they were of one accord when they marched beneath the battle flag. And they speak to us still across the ages in the words carved on the Georgia Monument at Kennesaw:

We lie here in obedience to law
When duty called we came
When country called we died

The Confederates of Stone Mountain were obedient to law; it is our duty to remember.

Sources

Ben Robertson quote from *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, Ben Robertson, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1960, page 94

Stephen Vincent Benét quote from *John Brown's Body*, Stephen Vincent Benét, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1968

Photograph of George Pressley Trout courtesy of Janice Still, Raleigh, NC

Photograph of John Forsyth McClelland from *History of the Doles-Cook Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, C.S.A.*, Henry W. Thomas, The Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, Atlanta, 1903

All other photographs by Chris Davis