

Backroads to Gettysburg

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An historian's research into his family's Georgia roots triggers an odyssey that leads to a little-known event connected with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Few people know that two famous orators shared the stage with Lincoln at the Gettysburg dedication in November 1863. The opening speech that day was given by Edward Everett, the former governor of Massachusetts. Lincoln presented his masterpiece that afternoon. But the day's concluding speech remained lost until recently, when an anthropologist stumbled upon the text in a cardboard box at a remote ranch in Wyoming. Forgotten too was the incredible true story of the concluding orator, Charles Anderson, a slave owner who risked everything to save the Union. Anderson had the courage to hold steadfast to his convictions at a time when nearly all southerners turned against the Union.

I now have the privilege of recounting Anderson's exciting odyssey through some of the most dramatic events of the Civil War. Twenty years spent in the libraries and archives of Georgia prepared me for this rare opportunity to shed new light on one of the most iconic moments in our nation's history. My adventure began where so many unexpected detours happen: with a traumatic, life-changing event.

My father's death in his late fifties from pancreatic cancer unleashed a latent passion in my life. The mystery surrounding his childhood in Calhoun, Georgia, which he seldom discussed, became an obsession for me. Like many people, I realized that I had an unquenchable desire to learn everything I could about my dad's murky past. Much of what I learned was not pretty. (My searching resulted in "Murder in Calhoun!" in the Spring 2013 issue of *Georgia Backroads*.) As I dug deeper, all kinds of interesting characters emerged from the shadows of my family tree.

Like many who find themselves obsessed with genealogy, soon I was caught up in names and dates. I became laser-focused on the arduous detective work needed to trace my family line back to the mother countries across the sea. Despite finding family ties to a marginally-famous English poet, a very famous American president, and a whole rogue's gallery of outlaws and philanderers, my greatest triumphs were quantitative: another three generations! Well done!

The urge to understand what it was like to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors led me on a five-year odyssey through the Deep South and as far away as the Scottish borderlands and England. Along the way, I met many interesting people, alive and long dead, and compiled a heritage travelogue to share with my family. It was fun and interesting, but less than satisfying. Something was missing. I eventually realized that merely adding 2,000 names to my family tree felt like less than a



Although part of a prominent slave owning family from Kentucky, Charles Anderson sided with the Union, served as an officer in the Union Army, and as lieutenant governor of Ohio presented the third speech at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863.

worthwhile accomplishment. A return trip to Rome, Georgia, finally revealed the yawning gap in my work.

Most people use the terms "genealogy" and "family history" interchangeably. I was beginning to understand that these were two different but complementary disciplines. The reason that I did not feel satisfied after playing family history detective was that I had been more concerned with the genealogical scoreboard than I was with the stories of my ancestors. Perhaps our competitive, sports-infused society breeds such behavior, even when it comes to our hobbies. Whoever obtains the most Facebook friends or collects all the commemorative quarters must surely be a winner, right?

Eventually I realized that it wasn't the scoreboard that mattered but rather the individual stories behind those men and women who happen to fill out the branches of my family tree.

Prominent among the heroes and villains in my dad's family album was Augustus R. Wright, a Georgian who served in both the United States and Confederate Congresses. If I could

learn more about this man, I might better understand a cryptic reference in the Wright family history. It claimed that my third great-grandfather, Moses Wright, the brother of Augustus, lost his life during the Civil War as a consequence of his staunch loyalty to the Union. I read Dan Roper's article about Augustus Wright in the Autumn 1997 issue of *North Georgia Journal* magazine and wondered if my newly-acquired archival research skills might turn up more on the interesting Wright brothers. To tell their stories properly, however, I really needed to become a historian.

My addiction to history had only increased in the six years since my father's death. I returned to school at night in 2002 to earn my M.A. degree in history from the University of Massachusetts, in hopes of pursuing the profession fulltime in retirement. When it came time to pick a thesis topic, Augustus Wright seemed a worthwhile candidate. Little did I know that there were many Georgians who strongly opposed secession, right up to the moment their state left the Union. While my research was underway, eminent University of Georgia professor Thomas Dyer was publishing a book on the Union circle in Atlanta that paralleled my study of a similar community in Floyd County. It seemed that these fascinating Union men were everywhere, their stories mostly forgotten, just waiting for an enthusiastic amateur like me to bring one or more of them to a broader audience.

Dr. Julie Winch served on my thesis committee and suggested that I could "mine" my thesis work to publish several articles. "Augustus R. Wright and the Loyalty of the Heart" appeared in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* in the autumn of 2010. I sent the article to Dan Roper, who by then had become publisher of *Georgia Backroads*. Our mutual interest in this fascinating character led Roper to inquire if I had other stories I would consider publishing in the magazine. I felt honored to be asked. Other chapters from my thesis were rewritten as articles for *Georgia Backroads*, and our friendship blossomed.

Through my work for the magazine, I was exposed to talented writers like William Rawlings, who turned his interest in his own family history into an article and eventually into the book *A Killing on Ring Jaw Bluff*. Rawlings was a part-time writer with a different fulltime job, like me. He found a great story among some rascals in his own family heritage. His talent for beautiful prose inspired me to attempt my own book-length project.

Nearly ten years ago I had come across a blog posting by Tim Wise, who was infuriated by what he called the "men of their times" defense of slavery and other apologies for America's legacy of racism. Wise cited Charles Anderson's brave 1849 speech to the Philomathean Society at Kenyon College, challenging the doctrine of white supremacy, a belief that was accepted as fact by nearly all white United States citizens in the 19th century. As a southerner whose family had owned slaves, Anderson's views on the matter of race seemed remarkable. I had just published a study of free blacks in New

Hampshire and was developing several other projects, so I dropped Anderson into my "ideas" file and forgot about him. Later, having exhausted my ideas for *Georgia Backroads* articles, I returned to Anderson as a potential story candidate. I was astonished at what I discovered.

Indiana University's Rob Tolley had stumbled upon the original manuscript of Anderson's oration that concluded the Gettysburg cemetery dedication events. I contacted Rob and he was most gracious, introducing me to local contacts and directing me to archives where he had donated the remainder of Anderson's personal papers. Without Rob's passion and dedication, this small piece of Gettysburg lore might have remained lost forever. As I dug into the material, it became clear that Anderson was just one of so many "B-list" characters in our history who merit more attention.

Anderson's life is a compelling story backed by a wealth of diaries, letters and other primary sources. It really is a historian's dream project. I was surprised to discover that during Anderson's brief service as a colonel and commander of the 93rd Ohio Infantry, his wounds and subsequent retirement had prevented him from participating in the Battle of Chickamauga. His successor as commander was killed and his nephew seriously wounded in that battle. This tenuous connection to an important part of Georgia history reminded me of the debt I owed the readers of *Georgia Backroads* and my friend Dan. Without the encouragement and feedback from my Georgia cousins, friends, and readers, I would not have been prepared to take on such an important task.

The long road from Georgia to Gettysburg took me past the mansions of large slaveholding kin like the Wrights. Throughout the countryside, there had been small farmers who conspired with slaves and free blacks, all risking their lives to aid the Union cause. In cities like Rome and Savannah, I found characters of unusual resolve and principle, whose stories lay buried in largely forgotten records like those of the Southern Claims Commission. As I picked up Anderson's trail, the path led me through Tennessee and Kentucky, into the Ohio River valley, and eventually to Pennsylvania. The trip included a brief detour to Texas, where Anderson's position as a slave-owning southerner loyal to the Union took a dramatic and dangerous turn.

My own journey of discovery from Georgia family roots to a new career as a historian is not nearly as compelling as Anderson's, but it has been just as rewarding. Sometimes we find the most interesting things when we take a highway exit and make seemingly random turns down roads that are unfamiliar to us. When I started my drive in the Floyd County countryside and ended up on the battlefield at Gettysburg, no one was more surprised or delighted than I was. ■

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