

Once Georgia seceded from the Union, many of those who had opposed secession wholeheartedly transferred their allegiance to the new Confederate States of America. Others, such as Chattooga County's Wesley Shropshire, followed their conscience and did their best to restore Georgia to the Union.

DAVID T. DIXON

ENEMY ON THE HOME FRONT: A GEORGIA PLANTATION OWNER WORKS AGAINST THE CONFEDERACY

Wesley Shropshire returned home from the secession convention in Milledgeville, Georgia, a dejected man, “distressed beyond measure,” according to his daughter Naomi. Once final passage of the secession ordinance was certain, many fellow Union delegates changed their votes in order to give the measure more force, but not Shropshire. He departed for his plantation near Dirt Town, north of Rome, as one of only a few men who had not signed the ordinance.

After being home for nearly seven weeks, Shropshire traveled to Savannah a week after the secession meeting had reconvened, yet he still refused to sign. Finally, after pleadings from his son Francis, a secessionist delegate, and their close friend Alexander H. Stephens, Shropshire relented. Stephens had convinced him that war might be avoided if Georgia appeared strongly behind disunion.

“Under these pressures, against my judgment,” Shropshire later explained, “I put my name to the paper.” It would be his first and last act of disloyalty to the Union.¹

In the years leading up to the Civil War, Wesley Shropshire was part of Georgia's burgeoning class of elite planters; a man of wealth and influence. He settled in Rome in 1834, and quickly established himself as a community leader, serving as sheriff, state representative, and state senator. He amassed a plantation of more than 2,200 acres, just over the county line in Chattooga, worked by 84 slaves, and well known for its productivity.²

Few men in north Georgia had a better reputation for fairness and honesty; but Union men were sorely disappointed

when they heard that Shropshire had signed the secession ordinance. Sion Darnell, a native of Pickens County whose father, uncle, and brothers served in the Union army, deeply resented the actions of Shropshire and other so-called “cooperationists” at the convention: “Such Union men did more harm to the South than the secessionists, because their ‘word did not comport with their action’ and they made promises to the ear to be broken to the hope from the very beginning. Had it not been for their truculent and vacillating course, the effort of the secession convention would have been baffled, but they lacked the moral courage and yielded. This is exactly what Mr. Shropshire did.”³

Such feelings may have had their roots in a simmering class antagonism, reflected on both sides of the conflict, according to scholar David Williams. For some Georgia Union men and rebels alike, the Civil War was a “rich man's war, but a poor man's fight.” The decision to oppose disunion was complex



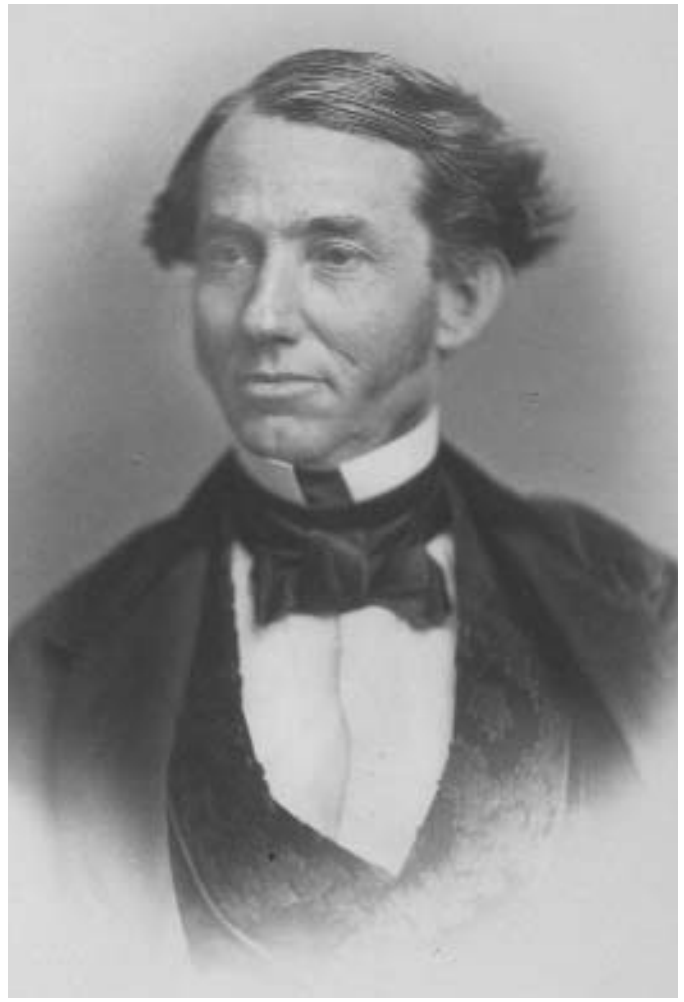


Unlike his father, Francis Shropshire was an outspoken proponent of secession, serving as a delegate at the convention in Milledgeville that passed the secession ordinance on January 18, 1861. Shropshire married a daughter of his father's political ally, Augustus Wright. While serving in the Confederate Army under General Kirby Smith at Cumberland Gap, he died of disease.

and personal; not easily explained by simplistic theories of class conflict or slaveholding geography. Most prominent Union men in Georgia and the South were conservatives who owned slaves and sought to settle the thorny issue of slavery through the political process within the current government.⁴

Northwest Georgia's small but growing planter class possessed the resources and social connections to keep out of active military service, and many did just that. Few could prevent their sons from volunteering, however, at least until a substitute could be found. For years, young men in Floyd County had joined exclusive military companies that functioned more like private social clubs, according to historian Steven E. Woodworth. Such organizations impressed the ladies, promoted male bonding, and conferred much needed status on the young men. When secession was announced, throngs of young Floyd County men rushed to enlist, many believing that war would never come.⁵

While he was convinced that secession was wrong, Shropshire could not persuade his children to follow his lead. His son Francis was the promising young law partner of the illustrious Augustus R. Wright of Rome. He told his father that



Rome's Augustus R. Wright was Wesley Shropshire's close friend and political ally in opposition to secession. Once Georgia withdrew from the Union, Wright cast his allegiance with the new Confederate States, serving as an officer in the army and then in the Confederate House of Representatives. He later regretted this course and spent the last few months of the war working openly for peace.

"his generation was in for the trouble, but if he was me, he would be of my politics," because "old men ought to be against it." Daughter Naomi felt the same way. "Having just grown to womanhood, I naturally sided with the South," she explained. "We laughed and jested at Father's gloomy prognostications."⁶

Once middle age and an exemption for men owning more than 20 slaves no longer protected wealthy men from serving, they could always purchase an exemption from an unscrupulous Confederate official. These men could be found, according to the *Rome Courier*, "in the marts of speculation, the dens of extortion, the haunts of revelry, the laps of wealth, in the pseudo-legalized entrenchments of pretended government service and agencies, in the line of profit, the enjoyment of ease and luxury, and in positions of trust and emolument, shielded (in too many instances) by 'little officials,' concealed behind the throng—thus skulking and sneaking from your first and sacred duty, the aid of your country."⁷

Some well-known planters who considered themselves "Union men," also fell into this category. George P. Burnett, who bragged that he was "the largest slaveholder north of Atlanta," later claimed that he had supported the Federal cause

throughout the war. His neighbors begged to differ. A.R. Wright described Burnett as “speculating very heavily and making all the money he could.” Burnett’s allegiances wavered. “At times he was loyal and at other times disloyal,” Wright explained, “just as it suited his purpose.” Burnett “did not seem to care for either side,” Wright claimed, “so long as he made money out of it.” Planters who were committed unionists, like Wright’s brother Moses and Wesley Shropshire, were rare, indeed.⁸

Shropshire’s wartime actions demonstrate that one did not need to leave home, join the Federal army, or hide behind bogus Confederate civil service, in order to contribute to the Union cause. “I suppose I sent at least fifty Union men and deserters to a Mr. William Embry, who lived at the foot of Lookout Mountain,” Shropshire proclaimed. He and Embry had a secret agreement, whereby Embry would shepherd all the men that were sent to him across the mountains and into Union lines. This agreement was honored up to the spring of 1864, when “times got so hot” for Embry that he had to go north himself.

Shropshire’s role in these escapes was a poorly kept secret. James G. Sturdivant, who entertained Sherman’s spies during the war, claimed that only Shropshire’s “white head and old age” kept him from being killed by the Rebels. This did not mean that they left him alone.⁹

Shropshire endured almost daily curses and insults from the Confederates in his neighborhood. “If abuses and hopes would have saved the Union,” Shropshire recalled, “I endured them.” The Rebels, he remembered, “told me to my face that they would strip me and whip me, and called me a damned old Lincolnite.” Lewis Pyles warned that Shropshire should be “burned at the stake.” Confederate soldiers often travelled miles out of their way to “camp on old man Shropshire.” They impressed seventeen horses, one hundred head of cattle, two hundred hogs, and ten thousand bushels of corn from the plantation, refusing to pay for the goods of a known “Tory.”

When Federal troops occupied the countryside north of Rome in the spring of 1864, Shropshire immediately went to Gaylesville, Alabama, under the guise of an arrest, and spent four hours discussing the movements of Confederate General John B. Hood’s army with Union General Jefferson C. Davis. Despite his loyal reputation, the remote location of Shropshire’s plantation afforded him little protection from the Federal army, which by the autumn of 1864 was focused on defending Rome and the Western and Atlantic rail line. During the balance of the war, the Shropshire place received many unwelcome visitors.¹⁰

The neighborhoods near Dirt Town, a country settlement between Rome and Summerville, were teeming with roving bands of thieves and murderers. Most called themselves

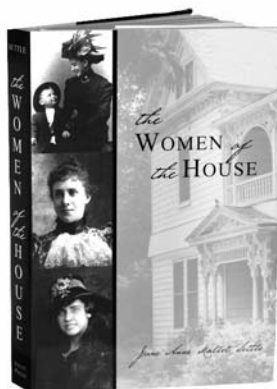
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This sketch from the August 4, 1866 issue of *Harper's Weekly* depicts the clandestine arrangements under which unionists often met.

“scouts.” Many of these scouts were associated with two competing gangs. One group was led by John Gatewood of Tennessee; the other was commanded by Jack Colquitt, formerly of a Texas regiment, but lately a resident of Polk County, Georgia.

The Shropshire plantation was invaded by each gang several times during the fall and winter of 1864-65. Gatewood's outlaw band first arrived in September, placing a rope around Wesley Shropshire's neck, which was only removed after the earnest pleadings of daughter Naomi. She convinced the bandits that her father was not hiding gold in the house. This was true as the gold was stashed in pockets beneath her hoop skirt.

One month later, the Federal army, led by a former Shropshire slave, finished taking everything of value outside of the home. Federal officers apologized for the necessity of stripping the plantation of its remaining sustenance, assured the owner that they would not touch anything inside the house, and promised that Shropshire would be compensated after the war. The next day, however, a group of pillaging Union soldiers, trailing behind the wagon train, completely stripped his house, causing a great deal of damage. Despite his losses, Wesley Shropshire was grateful that his life had been spared. Others were not as fortunate.¹¹

Violence ruled the land in northern Floyd and Chattooga counties for months on end. “One poor fellow was exempt from military duty on account of ill health,” Naomi Shropshire remembered, and “was tied to a sapling and shot to death. No one knew his fate until the buzzards found him.” Fights broke out between rival gangs of bandits. A young man from Tennessee had a disagreement with Harrison Watters over the proceeds of a raid, so Watters shot him dead. “He lay there for several days,” Naomi explained, “everyone afraid for

life to touch his body. Finally it grew offensive and Mr. William Davis, with the help of a Negro man, rolled the poor boy in a blanket and buried him in an out of the way country grave yard.”

In another incident, two renegade Union soldiers shot and killed the McSpadden brothers, two of Gatewood's scouts, at Mrs. Burns's house in Dirt Town Valley. A Rome correspondent to the *Georgia Journal and*

Messenger boasted that more than a few Union men were “pitiful carcasses [hanging] from swinging limbs,” and that the “decaying corpses” of escaped slaves who had been caught and executed polluted the country air.¹²

Shropshire managed to keep his family safe during the war, except for his son Francis, who died at Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, while in the service of the Confederacy. “It was distressing, but I am not to blame,” Shropshire lamented. Few pre-war Union men maintained their courage and convictions as consistently as Shropshire did during the war, and many of his contemporaries agreed. Shropshire's claim for war damages before the Southern Claims Commission was supported by a number of honored Georgians, including Alexander H. Stephens, Joseph E. Brown, and Benjamin H. Hill. The Commission approved his claim in its entirety, an extremely rare ruling from this cautious agency.

As for his legacy, Wesley Shropshire saw himself not as the vacillating coward that Darnell described, but as one of the few elite Union men who did not compromise his principles during the war: “If a third of the South had been as open, determined and fearless as I was, the South would have been conquered much sooner.”¹³

After the war ended, Shropshire, like most wartime Southern unionists, received dubious rewards for his loyalty to the Union. He represented Georgia at the 1867 Constitutional Convention, but spent most of his time trying to rebuild his diminished estate. Many of his former slaves stayed on in his service. One such freedman, Wiley Shropshire, related an incident that was typical of the post-war challenges facing Union men in northwest Georgia: “Mr. Shropshire gave us colored people a school house that was on his place to move out and put up as a school house for us. When we moved it out, the Klu Klux came and threatened us and badly whipped two of the colored men, Charles and Nathan, and burnt up the house.



After the Civil War, many of Wesley Shropshire's slaves elected to stay on as laborers. One of those to do so was Kate Shropshire, shown here many decades later.

Before they burnt the house, they left a paper at Mr. Shropshire's telling him if he did not stop that colored school that they would whip him. Mr. Shropshire has all the time been a friend to the colored people."

After the Klan left, Shropshire sent the threatening letter to Governor Bullock and his black tenants rebuilt the school. Shropshire lived out the rest of his days quietly on his farm in Chattooga County, where he died on December 30, 1894 at the age of ninety-one years.¹⁴

Wesley Shropshire's character and community service distinguished him from many of his fellow plantation owners. Most were conservative men like him, who feared God and

worked hard to build their fortunes. When civil war threatened, however, most of his peers who had supported the Union cooperated with the secessionists. Shropshire was a man of unyielding principle. His wartime actions show that he was one of the few wealthy men in the region willing to risk nearly everything to preserve the Union that he loved. ■

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Endnotes

1. Naomi Shropshire Bale, "Reminiscences of the War Between the States, 1861-1865," TMs, at Floyd County Library, Rome, Georgia. Claim #3163, Wesley Shropshire, Chattooga County, GA, 1878. Southern Claims Commission (hereinafter abbreviated as "SCC"). Testimony of claimant and Alexander H. Stephens.
2. Wesley Shropshire to Wesley Shropshire, July 1, 1892. TL at Floyd County Library, Rome, Georgia.
3. Claim #3163, Wesley Shropshire, Chattooga County, GA, 1878. SCC. Testimony of Sion A. Darnell.
4. For a recent study of the effect of class antagonism on Unionism in Georgia, see David Williams, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
5. Claim #3163, Wesley Shropshire, Chattooga County, GA, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant. Bale, "Reminiscences." Warren Wilkerson and Steven E. Woodworth, *A Scythe of Fire: A Civil War Story of the Eighth Georgia Infantry Regiment* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 1-29.
6. Bale, "Reminiscences."
7. *Rome Weekly Courier*, August 6, 1863.
8. Claim #507, George P. Burnett, Floyd County, 1877. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Augustus R. Wright.
9. Claim #3163, Wesley Shropshire, Chattooga County, GA, 1878. SCC. Testimony of Tyrell Gray and James S. Sturdivant.
10. Ibid. Testimony of claimant and Thomas J. Barbour.
11. Ibid. Testimony of claimant. Bale, "Reminiscences." George Magruder Battey, Jr., *A History of Rome and Floyd County* (Atlanta: The Webb and Vary Company, 1922), 205-209.
12. Bale, "Reminiscences." *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, July 20, 1864, cited in Robert S. Davis, Jr. "White and Black in Blue: The Recruitment of Federal Units in Civil War North Georgia." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* LXXXV, No.3, 359.
13. Claim #3163, Wesley Shropshire, Chattooga County, GA, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant, Alexander H. Stephens, Joseph E. Brown and Benjamin H. Hill.
14. Ibid. Testimony of claimant and Wiley Shropshire.