



# THE HERO & THE GHOST

*After the Civil War splits a Georgia family, a returning veteran secures his legacy and helps to bury shameful secrets in order to protect future generations.*

DAVID T. DIXON

Connor Wright remembered that he was eleven years old the day he watched Yankee soldiers steal up through the backyard and surprise his father. Edwin Wright, home on furlough from the 1st Alabama Cavalry, was captured and taken prisoner to Rome, Georgia, on October 25, 1864. Connor heard rumors that his father later died in a northern prison. Others said he was killed while attempting to escape. In any case, Connor never heard from him again.<sup>1</sup>

Countless Southern families remembered their tragic heroes with similar stories passed down for posterity. Edwin Wright's family, however, rarely spoke of him after the war. By the time his grandchildren had grown, no one seemed to remember much about the man who had vanished.<sup>2</sup>

The mysterious end for Edwin Wright vexed his descendants for generations. Why did they know so little about him and his ultimate fate? Clues lay dormant in the tortured consciences of war survivors. Devastated Southerners faced an anguishing question: Had their political leaders really sacrificed so many lives

and achieved nothing? Doubts lingered, memories were reshaped, and eventually a more comforting version of the war emerged. Southern writers and intellectuals transformed ordinary Confederate soldiers into revolutionary heroes battling overwhelming odds for the noble but doomed cause of states' rights.<sup>3</sup>

Connor Wright and his family constructed their own version of this Lost Cause mythology, concocting various accounts of his father's activities during the conflict. The stories the family improvised were designed to avoid a fact too difficult or dangerous to face: Edwin Wright left his family and went north voluntarily.

Edwin Wright's defection was difficult to admit, considering his wife's connections to the Confederacy. Harriett Connor Wright lost one brother early in the war, but younger brother Wesley Olin Connor survived four years of Confederate service. The family welcomed Wesley back as a hero while conspiring to keep Edwin Wright's story a secret.

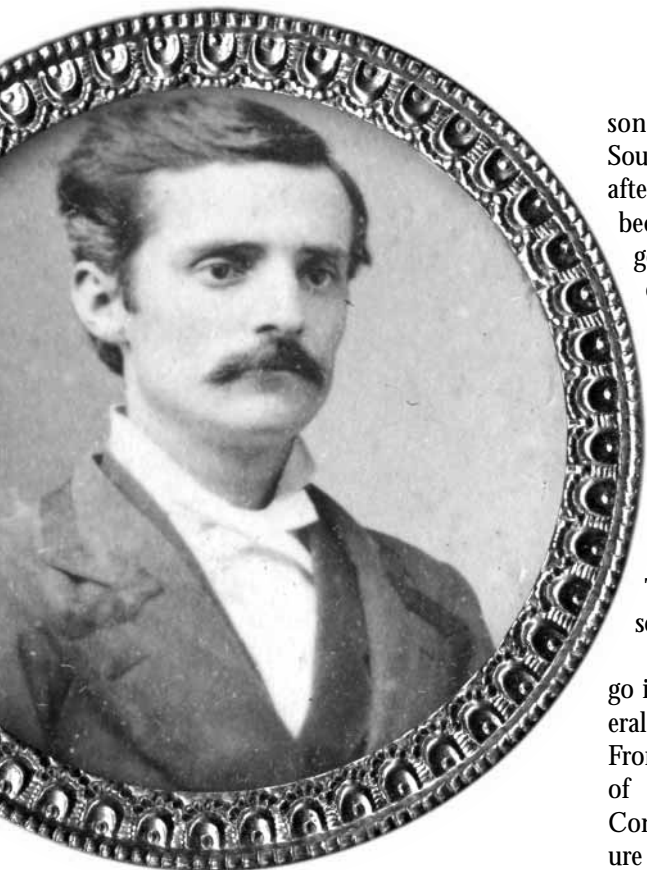
Wesley O. Connor and Edwin A. Wright came from old Southern families

of wealth and privilege. Wesley's father was a respected physician in Edgefield County, South Carolina. Dr. Connor sent eight-year-old Wesley and his sister Cornelia to Cave Spring to live with Harriett soon after she married Edwin Wright in 1848. After Wesley's own father committed suicide, Edwin became a father figure to the young man.<sup>4</sup>

Edwin Wright was the youngest of three brothers and the son of a wealthy Georgia planter. He and his brother Moses studied law at Franklin College (later the University of Georgia) following in the footsteps of their accomplished older brother, Judge Augustus R. Wright. After their father died, the two younger brothers quit college and purchased adjoining lots near Cave Spring, just southwest of Rome.<sup>5</sup>

As the South lurched towards secession, public opinion in Georgia was split evenly. All three Wright brothers spoke out in support of the Union. Augustus R. Wright tried to use his influence as a U.S. Congressman to deter Georgia from leaving the Union; but revolution fever caught fire. He finally agreed to support

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**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Twenty-year-old Wesley O. Connor, photographed as he went off to war in 1861. **ABOVE:** Caption about Edwin Wright. I hope he's Edwin Wright. Is he who I think he.

his state, hoping that he could “scotch the rebellion from within.”<sup>6</sup>

Edwin and Moses Wright were angry with their older brother and vowed never to support the Confederacy. Wesley Connor, on the other hand, ignored their counsel and joined the Cherokee Artillery in June 1861. Neighbors chose sides, destinies diverged, and the dearest of family relations faced the prospect of one day becoming mortal enemies.<sup>7</sup>

These political divisions at home troubled Wesley Connor, and he mentioned them often in his wartime diary. Large slaveholders like Edwin and Moses Wright could evade conscription during the first few years of the conflict. Community tensions grew as volunteer soldiers were wounded and killed while numerous able-bodied slaveholders rode out the war on their plantations.<sup>8</sup>

While Wesley Connor dodged Minie balls early in the war, Augustus Wright served in the Confederate Congress, raised a regiment, and contributed four

sons to the rebel cause. Hopes for Southern independence faded, however, after two years of carnage. Augustus became increasingly critical of fellow government leaders and accused them of trampling citizen rights. In private, he questioned his decision to go with his state out of the Union.<sup>9</sup>

Wesley Connor witnessed the fall of Vicksburg and retreated back through Cave Spring in August 1863. He spent time relaxing with his family while Edwin and Moses Wright dodged conscript agents. This high stakes game of hide and seek would not last long.<sup>10</sup>

Augustus convinced his brothers to go into seclusion rather than raise a federal regiment as Moses had suggested. From the floor of the Confederate House of Representatives in February 1864, Congressman Wright introduced a measure to reconstruct the Union. This created a sensation. Fearing for his personal safety, Augustus left Richmond before the end of the session. Later that year, all

three Wright brothers cooperated with the Federal army occupying Rome, with Augustus serving as an intermediary between General William T. Sherman and Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown.<sup>11</sup>

Further intrigue was afoot when Wesley Connor visited the Edwin Wright homestead again in early October. Edwin's brother Moses fled north a week later. Augustus then embarked upon an elaborate scheme to transport cotton north from Rome and sell it. He intended to use the profits to start a new life for his brothers and their families in Ohio. His safe conduct north was arranged by General Sherman, who had his own plans for Augustus Wright.<sup>12</sup>

On October 28, Augustus was escorted by Federal troops to the Edmund Towns farmhouse just across the state line in Alabama, where Edwin was waiting for him, having been “captured” only three days earlier. Augustus then continued north under Federal army protection to rendezvous with Moses in Louisville,

**Wesley O. Connor home, Cave Spring, Georgia 1903. Here Connor pursued his lifelong passion for learning and assembled a personal museum of natural history and wartime relics.**



Kentucky. From there he proceeded to Washington City.<sup>13</sup>

Sherman had convinced Augustus Wright to meet with President Lincoln and his cabinet in a last-ditch effort to return Georgia to the Union. Despite nearly a week of meetings, the peace plan went nowhere. Wright returned to Rome in December and immediately arranged for his youngest brother to flee north. Edwin arrived safely in Cincinnati on January 10, 1865, where he enlisted in the Union Army for three years.<sup>14</sup>

Wesley Connor's third wartime visit to Cave Spring came just two weeks later. He probably suspected that Hattie's husband was gone for good, as the name Edwin Wright never appears in Wesley's diary again.<sup>15</sup>

The visit included several talks with Augustus Wright, who related details of his failed peace mission and suggested that "the end" was near. After a "social party" with the wife and daughters of Moses Wright, Wesley questioned the worthiness of his cause: "What am I to gain? Who or what am I struggling for? Are not Liberty and Independence myths? If I fall, who outside of my immediate relations will miss me? Who will thank me for periling my life?"<sup>16</sup>

Casting doubts aside, Wesley Connor followed his conscience and returned to his command in late March 1865. The day after that Lee surrendered, Wesley's dear friend Moses Wright, who stubbornly clung to his own principles, died in self-imposed exile in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley journeyed to Louisville as a prisoner the following month, while Edwin Wright was stationed there with the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division. Wesley continued on to Camp Chase, Ohio, where he eventually swore the Oath of Allegiance and headed home. Five days later Wesley Connor arrived in the abandoned city of Rome.<sup>18</sup>

Hattie Wright was glad to have her brother back. She had a newborn baby and three other children to care for. Most of the family slaves had run off. While Wesley toiled in the fields, Edwin Wright

transferred to the headquarters of the Provost Guard. One day in late April 1866, he deserted. He was never captured or heard from again.<sup>19</sup>

The Wright family closed ranks around Hattie and her desire to safeguard her husband's secrets. Augustus Wright was assailed in the local press over his part in his contraband cotton caper. Augustus had intended the cotton profits be used to support both of his brothers, but only Moses was mentioned in the newspaper. Had Edwin's enlistment in the Union Army been revealed, retribution from rebel neighbors loomed as a terrifying possibility.<sup>20</sup>

Moses Wright's family, in contrast, made little effort to disguise their true allegiances. Widow Elizabeth spoke proudly of her husband's pro-Union sympathies and won a sizable damage award from the Southern Claims Commission. Edwin Wright's plantation had suffered similar depredations from Union soldiers, but his widow made no claim. Wesley Connor's fast-rising reputation in the Cave Spring community would have made such admissions embarrassing.<sup>21</sup>

Hattie sold the farm and purchased a Cave Spring lot near Elizabeth Wright in July 1867. That same year, Wesley Connor began a long career as principal of the Georgia School for the Deaf in Cave Spring. Wesley was a sort of Renaissance man, publishing treatises in geology and archaeology. He was a personal friend to both Helen Keller and Alexander Graham Bell. His most enduring avocation, however, was preserving the memory of his comrades in arms.<sup>22</sup>

Wesley worried that the efforts of his fellow Confederate soldiers would be forgotten. "We cannot honor the fallen heroes as we would wish," he lamented in December 1865. "The names of those illustrious men who have fallen for liberty, must perish with the present generation." A year later, Wesley still had doubts. "God forbid that I should ever believe that we were wrong," he fretted, "and our punishment was sent for endeavoring to break up the best



**Moses Rochester Wright, brother of Edwin and Augustus, was an outspoken Union man. He felt compelled to leave his family and flee behind Federal lines rather than fight for a cause he detested. He died in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1865.**

Government the world ever saw?"<sup>23</sup>

Wesley put such questions behind him for good upon his return to the battlefield at Resaca in 1867. He vowed "to instill to the minds of my children, if I should have any, the righteousness of our cause, and bind them to do the same with theirs to future generations." This commitment led Wesley to preserve not only his diary, but also the muster roll, regimental flag, and countless other wartime mementos.<sup>24</sup>

While Wesley and other Confederate veterans ensured their part in the war would always be remembered, the photographs, letters and family keepsakes of Edwin Wright simply disappeared. As the myth of the Lost Cause grew to epic proportions in the latter decades of the 19th century, the stories of Union men like Edwin Wright were forgotten. A quarter century passed before an opportunity arose to rewrite the history of this phantom, and thus reclaim a so-called "traitor" and deserter from his haunts in the family tree.

The opportunity to reinvent Edwin Wright came with the death of the family patriarch in March 1891. Judge Augustus Wright was gone, and with him went many secrets of the family's Union support during the Civil War. Judge Wright was honest to a fault. Though he

had been complicit in concealing details of his youngest brother's activities in 1864-66, his were sins of omission. Until Augustus died, Edwin Wright's real story was just a deposition away. Just four months after the death of Augustus, Edwin's widow applied for a Confederate pension.

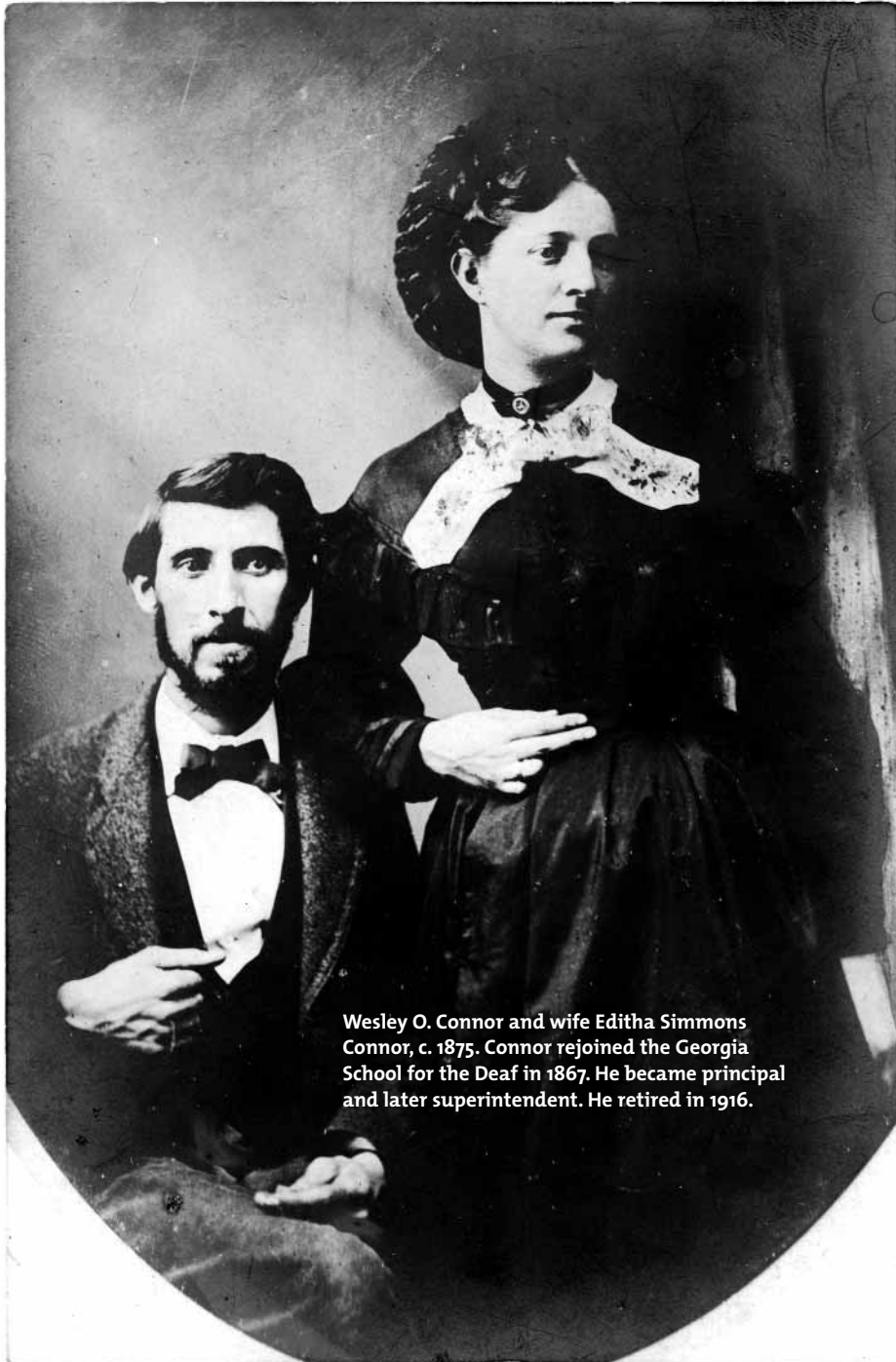
Hattie Wright's application was met with considerable skepticism by Georgia authorities. She claimed that Edwin had

been "captured" in January 1865. This date was crossed out later and changed to October 25, 1864. Three witnesses claimed to have served in the same unit as Wright, yet no service records existed to support this assertion. The state insisted that Hattie prove Edwin Wright died in the war, did not desert, and did not swear the Oath of Allegiance. She had difficulty in offering such evidence.

Hattie reapplied for a pension a year



U.S. Congressman Augustus Romaldus Wright in 1859. He raised a Confederate regiment and served in the Confederate Congress, but reverted to his Union sympathies late in the war.



Wesley O. Connor and wife Editha Simmons Connor, c. 1875. Connor rejoined the Georgia School for the Deaf in 1867. He became principal and later superintendent. He retired in 1916.

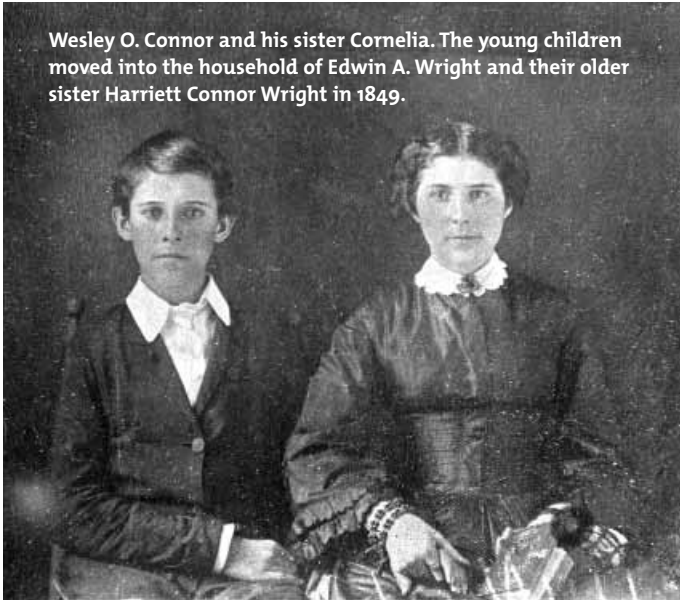
later, and this time submitted the deposition of her son, Connor Wright. She claimed a December 1864 date for her husband's capture, which conflicted with her son's testimony. She then produced a fifth witness who repeated her story nearly verbatim. With all three Wright brothers dead, the only other surviving adult with intimate knowledge of these circumstances was Hattie's brother, Wesley Connor. As a respected Confederate veteran, he should have been her star witness.

Wesley Connor's terse testimony, written on the back side of his sister's application, sounds distant and detached: "The within statement corresponds to that given me by Mrs. H.A. Wright while I was at home on furlough in January & February 1865." He did not attempt to verify the truth of his sister's statements or those of her witnesses. He simply confirmed that she had not changed her story.<sup>25</sup>

What Wesley did not say speaks volumes. Like Augustus Wright, he certainly knew more, but what he knew would only hurt Hattie's case, so he said nothing. The pension was denied.

The rest of Wesley Connor's long life was filled with accomplishments and honors. His 57 years of leadership at the

Wesley O. Connor and his sister Cornelia. The young children moved into the household of Edwin A. Wright and their older sister Harriett Connor Wright in 1849.



Georgia School for the Deaf was exceptional. He was a founder and president of the local bank, a Mason, and a brigadier general in the Confederate Veterans Association. When he died in 1920, he was one of the most loved men in Cave Spring.

One of many tributes to Wesley described him returning home from war to “the assistance of his sister who had helped rear him, Mrs. Edwin A. Wright. She had lost her husband who had been killed during the war.” Now both men were gone. Wesley Connor’s legacy would live on in his diary. His silence ensured that the ghost of Edwin Wright would lie undisturbed for generations to come.<sup>26</sup> ■

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## Endnotes

1. Application of Mrs. H.A. Wright, <http://cdm.sos.state.ga.us:2011/cdm/search/searchterm/Confederate%20Pension%20Applications,%20Georgia%20Confederate%20Pension%20Office,%20RG%2058-1-1,%20Georgia%20Archives/mode/exact> Confederate Pension Applications, Georgia Confederate Pension Office, RG 58-1-1, Georgia Archives. Hereinafter cited as “H.A. Wright Pension.”

2. Connor Wright Hollingsworth, *The Mystery of Edwin A. Wright* (Privately published, 1981). Anne Willingham Willis, *A Family History* (Rome, GA., 1946), 113-136.

3. William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996). David M. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001).

4. Hollingsworth, Margaret Wright, *Family Life and Ancestry of Tillie Rich and Connor Wright of Cave Spring, Georgia* (Privately published, 2006).

5. Willingham, *A Family History*.

6. A.R. Wright (Hereinafter cited as “ARW”) to Mary Wright Shropshire (Hereinafter cited as “MWS”), October 14, 1863, Beulah Shropshire Moseley Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter cited as “Moseley Family Papers.”

7. Testimony of Elizabeth H. Wright, October 19, 1873, claim of Elizabeth H. Wright, Records of the Southern Claims Commission (Allowed Claims), Floyd County, Georgia, RG 217, National Archives, Washington, D.C.. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation “SCC” for this source.

8. Wesley O. Connor family papers, MS 3102. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries (Hereinafter “Connor Diary”).

9. For a comprehensive discussion of the wartime activities of A.R. Wright, see David T. Dixon, “Augustus R. Wright and the Loyalty of the Heart,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* XCIV (Fall 2010)342-371.

10. Connor Diary, August and September, 1863.

Resolution of A.R. Wright in the Confederate Congress, February 4, 1864, in Rome *Tri-Weekly Courier*, February 11, 1864.

11. Testimony of Isabel Towns, William B. Towns, Augustus R. Wright, William A. Wright, Louisa Towns, 1878, claim of Isabel Towns, SCC, Floyd County, Georgia.

12. Ibid.

13. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of Gen. W.T. Sherman*, 4th ed., two vols. (New York., 1891), II, 137-142. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), series I, volume 39, pt.2, 395, 396, 501, 514,542 and Volume 39, pt. 3, page 412. *Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914*; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M233); *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917*, Record Group 94; National Archives, Washington, D.C., roll 30, January 1865.

14. Connor Diary, January 29, 1865.

Connor Diary, February 17 and 18, 1865.

15. Connor Diary, March 19, 1865. Testimony of Augustus R. Wright, October 19, 1873, claim of Elizabeth H. Wright, SCC, Floyd County, Georgia

16. Connor Diary, April 28 to June 19, 1865.

17. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, June 1821–December 1916. NARA microfilm publication M665, roll 20, May 1866.

18. ARW to people of Floyd County, October 12, 1865, in Rome *Courier*, October 12, 1865

19. Testimony of Elizabeth H. Wright, October 19, 1873, claim of Elizabeth H. Wright, SCC, Floyd County, Georgia.

20. Hollingsworth, *Family Life*.

21. Connor Diary, August 2, 1865 and November 25, 1866.

22. Connor Diary, August 5, 1867.

23. H.A. Wright Pension.

24. J.C. Harris, “W O. Connor—Brief Sketch of His Life,” *The School Helper Newsletter* (Cave Spring, Georgia: Georgia School for the Deaf, March 1, 1920).