

'TIL SECESSION DO US PART

WHEN GEORGIA SECEDED FROM THE UNION, A PROMINENT ROMAN FOUND THAT THE SCHISM THREATENED HIS BUSINESS, HIS LIFE, AND HIS MARRIAGE.

DAVID T. DIXON

The two-day pursuit ended in the Chulio district in northwest Georgia's Floyd County in early December 1864. Peter Sheibley lay writhing in pain, courtesy of a blow to the head from the Spencer rifle wielded by Josh Irons. Then Adnorium Lumpkin grabbed Sheibley's hat and tossed him his own ragged chapeau, lambasting him with all the choice curse words he could remember.

The leader of the band of marauders bullying Sheibley, Confederate deserter-turned-regular-scout Jack Colquitt, leveled the charges against Sheibley. Colquitt accused his prisoner of disloyalty and spying for the Federal army. Acting on orders from General Joseph Wheeler, Colquitt had the authority to turn such men over to the local authorities or to confine them in a way that would prevent them from aiding the enemy. The notorious desperado decided to handle this case in his usual fashion, and a rope was prepared for Sheibley's hanging.¹

Sheibley, a northern-born gentleman of superior education, immediately requested a hearing before the women of the community. As Lumpkin recalled, "Women were in the habit of controlling such cases," and even Colquitt's desperate men "generally did as they said to do."

Three women were summoned, including Mrs. Arp and Mrs. Formby. "These women were our friends and rebels," Lumpkin explained. "They said they did not want to hang or shoot anybody in this settlement," because, according to Lumpkin, "it would cause trouble for them." The women knew that Sheibley was a Union man, but in a private meeting, they were able to convince Colquitt that he was not a spy. Incredibly, Sheibley was released and hurried home. He was one of the few Union men to encounter the infamous Jack Colquitt and live to tell the tale.²

What caused this impromptu country jury to rule in Sheibley's favor? The true answer may never be known; however, clues abound in the unusual wartime behavior of Sheibley and other Rome, Georgia, merchants and professionals. These hints point to a complex web of social relationships and class values that shielded elite Union men from the wrath of their Confederate neighbors. As Michael Fitzgerald points out in his study of Civil War Unionists in Mobile, Alabama, local authorities tolerated a "nest of privileged sedition," from which Union men could retain their inner political beliefs while performing minor services to the rebel cause. In the words of Rome's post-war mayor Zachariah B. Hargrove, such actions were known as "Yankee layouts."³

Peter Madison Sheibley was one of many northerners who moved south during the first half of the 19th century, bringing

the talent and expertise needed to build a social and commercial infrastructure in burgeoning towns like Rome. He taught Latin, Greek, and mathematics at the Rome Collegiate Institute. Sheibley was "a young man of fine appearance and pleasing manners," former student H.W. Johnstone, recalled,



Pennsylvania-born Peter Sheibley came south to teach at private academies. He married into a family of ardent secessionists. His refusal to serve in the Confederate army while two of his brothers fought for the Union made his situation at home and in Rome, Georgia, more precarious as the conflict wore on.

"a finished scholar [and] a firm, competent teacher."

In 1855, Sheibley married Judith E. Booton, the daughter of a wealthy slave owner. It seemed a good match at first, but as the country lurched towards civil war, Sheibley realized that he had married into a family of ardent secessionists. If he had indeed married for love, he would soon discover that his wife's affection came at a high price.⁴

Sheibley's moral and political beliefs placed him in an increasingly untenable position with his in-laws and neighbors. Many Rome residents knew that he was an abolitionist. It was an open secret that Sheibley taught blacks against the laws of the state. In spite of this, he was a respected man with close connections to Rome's social elites. Hargrove was one of several local leaders who protected Sheibley from harm. "He

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and I were brother Masons,” Hargrove explained, “and I felt compelled to prevent any extreme measures.”

When Sheibley’s brother William left Rome in May 1861 and later organized the 133rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, community pressure on Sheibley increased. An editorial in the *Rome Weekly Courier* appeared to target the schoolmaster: “It is the duty of every citizen to show by actions, as well as words, that he is with us, and we have a right to know the true position of all who are in our midst, whether they be of Northern or Southern birth, and whether they have relatives in the North or not.”

Sheibley was suspected of maintaining communications with his brothers in the North and had to use “all kinds of diplomacy” to save his own life. His diplomatic efforts began at home.⁵

Judith Sheibley described herself as “a Southern woman in sympathy with the Confederacy.” This was an understatement. She was an active supporter of the rebel cause, as was her mother, two Confederate officer brothers, and a brother-in-law. Judith decided that her husband’s reputation needed a rather hasty repair, so she arranged to have his name listed as a contributor to a soldier’s aid society. In fact, the money given was hers alone.

Judith Sheibley convinced her husband to allow indigent soldiers’ families to occupy several vacant buildings on their farm, under the banner of “homes for the homeless.” Years later, Sheibley tried to justify this act by maintaining that “the duress and threatening of my wife and my wife’s family and the secret feeling that I was a spy, prompted the disguise.”

Finally, Mr. Sheibley was persuaded to attend a town meeting in June, 1861, where he introduced a measure to tax county residents \$15,000 to equip volunteer military companies. His later claim that his “object was by dilatory measures to break up the meeting” seems preposterous. It is probable that Sheibley was embarrassed that he felt compelled to engage in “survival lying” to deflect attention from his Union sympathies and to protect his family. His deceptions did not work.⁶

After the Battle of Manassas in July 1861, conflict intensified inside the Sheibley household. With his school closed, Peter

Sheibley opened a shoemaking factory some distance from home. He was working there when the news of the Confederate victory reached Rome. The town erupted in the kind of spontaneous celebration not seen since secession in January. Homes were illuminated as a show of support for the troops.

When he returned home a few days later and learned that his wife had illuminated their house, Sheibley was furious. “I told her I thought it was very unkind of her,” he recalled, “to treat me in that way in my absence.”

Judith Sheibley was defiant. “I illuminated it when he was

away from home,” she proclaimed, and her husband “was rather provoked about it. That I should rejoice in even one state seceding from the Union was against his principles and I knew it was.” Despite Judith’s efforts to conceal her husband’s true loyalties, their neighbors knew where he stood. Many were determined to eliminate this traitor in their midst.⁷

Soon after his return to Rome, Sheibley faced the full fury of a community of indignant rebels. Henry A. Gartrell, the editor of *Rome’s Southerner and Advertiser* newspaper, assaulted Sheibley on Broad Street. Late in 1861, James P. Ware entered Sheibley’s shoe shop with a loaded gun and threatened to kill him, only to be restrained by bystanders. In April, 1862, Judith’s brother, Major Daniel F. Booton, was organizing a cavalry company. “They were vindictive seces-

sionists,” Sheibley remembered.

Booton told Sheibley that he must go into the war “or die at his hands.” When he refused, Booton drew his sword and was barely restrained from killing his brother-in-law by the swift action of William B. Higginbotham, a free black merchant and close friend of Sheibley. Higginbotham caught Booton’s arm just in time to avoid a serious injury to Sheibley.

At this point, Sheibley considered leaving Rome for the Federal lines, but his epileptic wife was too ill to travel. One cannot help but wonder whether a healthy Judith would have gone north with her husband. Instead of fleeing, Sheibley resolved to enter into a nominal contract with the Confederate government to manufacture shoes as a ruse to keep him out of service.⁸



Judith Booton was the daughter of a wealthy Virginia slaveholder. She married a known abolitionist and Union man, but would consistently defy her husband’s wishes and always supported the Confederate cause.



Judith Sheibley's brother, William S. Booton, volunteered for the 8th Georgia Infantry on May 27, 1861. He was killed in action at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863. His mother died of grief one month after learning of her son's fate.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1862 and 1863, Sheibley made shoes for the Confederacy and used professional and personal ties to keep out of trouble. He was part of a small, close-knit group of Rome Unionists who were insulated by their token service to the Confederate cause.

Levi R. Blakeman, a Connecticut-born carpenter, was part of this circle. He had known Higginbotham while both lived in Aberdeen, Mississippi, and followed his friend to Rome just as the town was beginning to boom. Blakeman had suffered a serious injury before the war and was unable to serve in the army. He maintained a low profile, but his heart was solidly behind the Union.

In the winter of 1862-63, Blakeman was forced into service by the surgeon of the Confederate post hospital at Rome, and ordered to make bunks for wounded and ill soldiers. He refused at first; but after a threat of imprisonment, resigned himself to the task. Blakeman and other Rome Union men settled into an uneasy silence for a few months as they went about their business. In May 1863, however, that temporary "truce" was shattered.⁹

Early that month, Rome had been seriously threatened during a bold raid by Union Colonel Abel D. Streight of the 51st Indiana Volunteers. The raiders were ultimately repulsed and captured by a much smaller force of Confederates led by General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Rome's narrow escape from the Federals was a wake-up call. Among the prisoners from the 1st Alabama (USA) Cavalry being held in Rome was Isaac C. Funderburk, a native of Floyd County. The presence of so many Federal captives reawakened the suspicions against northerners like Sheibley and Blakeman.

On May 23, an editorial in the *Rome Courier* accused Sheibley of being a Union spy. Public reaction was immediate. E.C. Hugh of Yeiser's Legion bragged that he would "collar" Sheibley and force him to serve in the army, leading him "behind a wagon like a dog." Hugh apparently found his inspiration in a slave trader named Ross, who had earlier paraded collared slaves chained to his buggy while his horse trotted down Broad Street. Blakeman overheard the threat and rushed over at midnight to warn his friend. Sheibley fled into the mountains, and eventually turned to another Union man, Robert O'Barr, for advice.¹⁰

O'Barr had friends in high places. He suggested that Sheibley call on "a man of inward Union sentiments," Thomas D. Hamilton, the post-quartermaster at Rome. Hamilton gave Sheibley a "lock-proof" exemption and arranged for him to receive a string of shoemaking contracts from the Confederate government.

The public was not satisfied and demanded that the new conscript officer, Thomas J. Perry, enroll Sheibley in the regular army. Sheibley showed Perry his exemption, but Perry refused to recognize it. That evening, Sheibley and his friend Blakeman joined the home guards. Blakeman was discharged the very next day as a cripple, but Sheibley never showed up at camp. Instead, he went into hiding.

On September 15, 1863, the Forrest Artillery officially expelled Peter Sheibley, calling him a "self-assumed disgrace." He was hanged and burned in effigy on a Rome street corner. He placed an ad in the *Rome Courier* on October 8, offering to sell his property and move north. O'Barr tried to obtain a pass for his friend to travel behind Federal lines, but was told "that it would cost him more than his neck would be worth." So O'Barr went west and left Sheibley in Rome with one less friend to offer support.¹¹

By the time the Federal army appeared on Rome's doorstep in May 1864, women, children, and old men remained in town alongside a beleaguered circle of Union men. The exodus of fighting-age men, courtesy of the conscript agents, meant that Unionists like Sheibley could remain in their homes and businesses without the usual daily threats to their safety. The approach of the Federal troops worried Sheibley's wife, who was often bedridden and concerned that the excitement of the war might cause her condition to worsen. Judith Sheibley had lost one of her brothers at Gettysburg and made it clear to her husband that she wanted to be near her family. As usual, she had her way, and the family left by train for her sister's plantation in Marshallville.¹²

Levi Blakeman had no such political discord in his home. The occupation of Rome by the Federals gave his and other

loyal families a real opportunity to do service for the Union cause. The Blakeman family wasted no time in doing just that. His wife had a younger sister, Miss Mira Bell, who lived with them during the war. Bell was a brave young woman and a good rider. She had seen how her brother-in-law and sister had suffered at the hands of the rebels and was eager to help the Union cause now that the town was under Federal control.

Blakeman supplied a horse and Bell began the dangerous task of carrying letters from Federal officers stationed at Rome through rebel lines to Chattanooga and back. As historian Robert S. Davis has pointed out in a recent study, a network of “safe houses” existed between Rome and Chattanooga, designed to assist deserters, escaped slaves, and spies of the Union army.

On one occasion, Mira Bell was stopped by John Gatewood’s scouts, and she was accused of being a Union spy. Anticipating capture, Bell had arranged for her letters to be dropped off to Mrs. James S. Sturdivant, whose husband was in the Union army. When the scouts searched Bell’s belongings and found nothing of interest, they released her. Eventually, word reached the rebels that she was indeed a spy living in the Blakeman house. From that point forward, Levi Blakeman became a prisoner in his own house, protected by a guard of Federal soldiers.¹³

In the meantime, Peter Sheibley was on the run again, appearing in Atlanta and Macon during the summer of 1864. He seemed to be spending little time in Marshallville, which leads one to wonder if he was truly welcome at the home of his wife’s family. In August, he met up with the First Alabama (USA) Cavalry and was brought to Rome. Sheibley was welcomed by the Federal authorities and given protection papers and passes to travel in and out of town at will. A month later, he swore loyalty to the Union.

Union men and their families enjoyed a respite from persecution that was all too brief, as Sherman’s army evacuated Rome, Atlanta, and the rest of north Georgia in November. Those that did not join the Federal forces remained at home; a group of defenseless citizens who were easy prey for Colquitt and his bandits.¹⁴

It will never be known just how many Romans were robbed, beaten or killed in the lawless winter of 1864 and ’65. Colquitt’s mandate concerned Union men and deserters; but his principle aim was indiscriminate terror and plunder. His men hanged William Quinn by the neck until he gave up his valuables. When Nicholas Omberg, a former Rome alderman, went to Quinn’s aid, the scouts shot him dead. Judge Lewis D. Burwell and Joseph J. Cohen also spent time in Colquitt’s noose before they relinquished their money. Peter Omberg and the widow of Judge Joseph H. Lumpkin were also robbed before the vandals fled to the countryside.

In this lawless environment, political differences were temporarily forgotten. Forty men, including at least six known Unionists, banded together to form a patrol force that defend-



Mattie B. Sheibley never married and dedicated the majority of her adult life to honoring the memory of the dead uncle she never knew, along with other Confederate veterans. After yet another successful trip to the state capital to lobby for a new monument, a Georgia legislator remarked that Mattie was evidence that women could be successful in politics.

ed persons and property until the return of the Federal troops in June, 1865.¹⁵

Peter Sheibley survived the war with his life and family intact, but with little else. He was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1867 and sold his plantation five years later. With Georgia’s Reconstruction politics initially controlled by the Republican Party, Sheibley was named Postmaster. He served as secretary to the Georgia Constitutional Conventions of 1867 and ’68, and was appointed Grand Vice-President of the state’s Loyal League. His prominence as a post-war community leader, like that of most other Union men, was short-lived. Many Confederate survivors of the Civil War regarded such men as traitors to their section and used the Klu Klux Klan and other covert means to intimidate them. One day in 1867, Sheibley heard a knock at his front door. When he opened the door, a coffin fell into his house.¹⁶

After Sheibley died in 1894, the political tension in his household finally subsided. His son Sinclair moved to Washington, D.C., where he served for many years in the Department of Justice.

Sheibley's daughter Fannie married former Confederate Major Franklin Jackson McCoy of Mobile. Widow Judith and daughter Mattie became active members of the Rome chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Mattie retired in 1907 after serving eight years as the editor of the UDC column in the *Atlanta Constitution*. She was present at the unveiling of numerous memorials to Confederate heroes and martyrs across the state of Georgia. Despite the harrowing wartime adventures of their father, Mattie and Fanny appeared content to allow the public memory of Peter Sheibley and other Union men to dissolve in the haze of the popular Lost Cause mythology. ▀



Peter and Judith's eldest child Fannie on the lap of her nurse, about 1859. The Sheibley family did not own slaves. Judith's brother, Daniel, resided with them, and listed 18 slaves in the 1860 census of Floyd County, including a 28 year-old female.

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Endnotes

1. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. Southern Claims commission (hereinafter abbreviated as "SCC"). Testimony of claimant and Adnorium J. Lumpkin. File now in USCC, docket #4997. Sheibley's case was disallowed due to his declaration of bankruptcy, which automatically disqualified claimants. Upon appeal to the U.S. Court of Claims, his claim was again denied, despite the fact that eighteen credible witnesses testified, all favorable to his case.

2. Ibid. The Formby family was split between Union and Confederate supporters, while the Arp families were all strong secessionists. At this point in the war, there were few men left in many parts of Floyd County, which may help explain why women were called upon to pass judgment on Sheibley.

3. Michael W. Fitzgerald, "From Unionists to Scalawags: Elite Dissent in Confederate Mobile," *Alabama Review* 55 (April 2002) 106-121. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Z.B. Hargrove. Hargrove was an unusual character, having been a rabid secessionist, turned post-war Republican.

4. Battey, *A History of Rome and Floyd County*, 258. The 1860 census shows that Sheibley's household then included his mother-in-law, brother-in-law William S. Booton, and brother William.

5. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Z.B. Hargrove. File now in U.S. Court of Claims (hereinafter abbreviated as "USCC"), docket #4997.

6. Ibid. Testimony of claimant, Judith Sheibley, and Defendants Brief on Loyalty.

7. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Judith Sheibley. File now in USCC, docket #4997.

8. Ibid. Testimony of claimant, Judith Sheibley and William B. Higginbotham.

9. Claim #1497, Levi R. Blakeman, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and William B. Higginbotham. File now in USCC, docket #3471.

10. *Rome Weekly Courier*, May 23, 1863. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Levi R. Blakeman. File now in USCC, docket #4007. Claim #1497, Levi R. Blakeman, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Robert O' Barr. File now in USCC, docket #3471.

11. Claim #1497, Levi R. Blakeman, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant, William B. Higginbotham and Robert O' Barr. File now in USCC, docket #3471. Investigator Thomas J. Perry says of Blakeman: "No man in this community stands fairer than he does as to honesty and correct dealing and for truth. In fact, this entire community regarded him as a Union man throughout the war."

12. Battey estimates that there were only about forty families left in Rome by this time. See Battey, *A History of Rome and Floyd County*, 198. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Judith Sheibley. File now in USCC, docket #4007.

13. Claim #1497, Levi R. Blakeman, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Robert O' Barr. File now in USCC, docket #3471. Robert S. Davis, Jr., "White and Black in Blue: The Recruitment of Federal Units in Civil War North Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* vol. LXXXV, No. 3, 347-374.

14. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Thomas J. Perry. File now in USCC, docket #4077.

15. Battey, *A History of Rome and Floyd County*, 205-209.

16. Battey, *A History of Rome and Floyd County*, 209. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant. File now found in USCC, docket #4077.