Augustus R. Wright and the Loyalty of the Heart

BY DAVID T. DIXON

A telegram from Gen. William T. Sherman arrived at the White House on October 24, 1864. With most of Atlanta's commercial buildings in ashes, Sherman stood poised to sweep, virtually unmolested, across the state and to deal a deadly blow to the fading hopes of the Confederacy. Before moving directly toward Savannah, however, Sherman hesitated. He had concocted a scheme that would remove Georgia from the Confederacy, spare the state further ruin, and lead to a reconstruction of the Union. His earlier efforts having failed, Sherman's final attempt at brokering a separate peace for the state was left in the hands of "a man of high character and of true faith in the future." That man was a fifty-one-year-old Georgian, Augustus Romaldus Wright.[1]

Wright arrived in Washington, D.C., in early November. He met with President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward regularly for several days. Lincoln assured Wright that if the rebellious states renounced the Confederacy, he would promise universal amnesty and restoration of their rights as citizens in the Union. The president also suggested that Wright might

[1]Augustus Romaldus Wright is sometimes confused with another Georgia Confederate, Ambrose Ransom Wright (1826-1872) of Augusta. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of Gen. W. T. Sherman*, 2 vols. (New York., 1891), 2:137-42; *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 1, vol. 39, pt. 2, 395-96, 501, 514, 542, and vol. 39, pt. 3, 412 (hereinafter cited as *O.R*); Isaac W. Avery, *The History of the State of Georgia From 1850 to 1881* (New York, 1881), 302-304.

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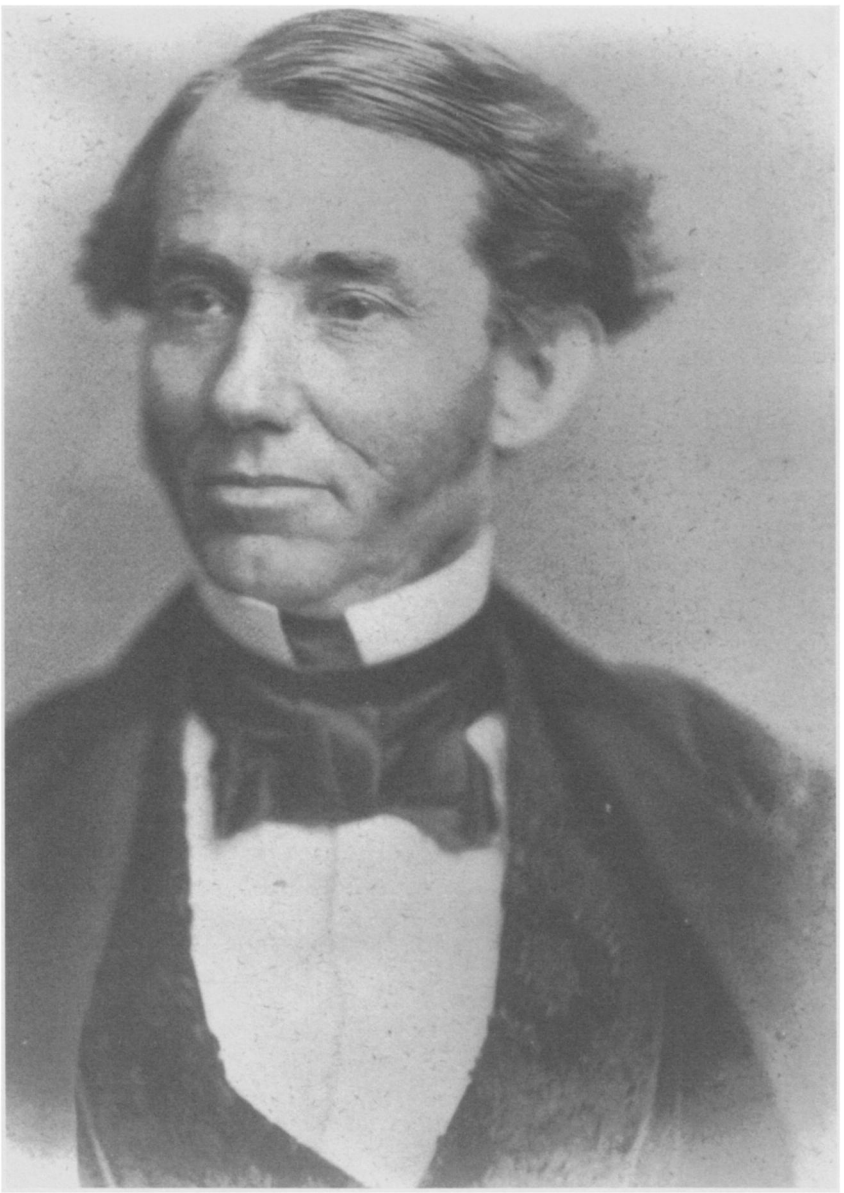
become military governor of Georgia when peace was restored. Lincoln insisted that he convey this message to Jefferson Davis, despite recent failed efforts of Wright and others to interest Georgia governor Joseph E. Brown in the proposal. Davis did not trust anyone involved in either plan. Lincoln's peace proposal was never considered. Wright left Washington on November 14, and two days later, Sherman began his march to the sea.[2]

Wright would seem to be an unusual choice for a peace mission. Earlier that year he had participated in the Confederate Congress. Four of his sons served in the Confederate army. He had raised and commanded a legion as colonel of the Thirty-eighth Georgia Infantry. As a member of the Provisional Confederate Congress, Wright helped to write the Constitution of the Confederate States of America. Why would he, in a time of great peril, turn against his government and cooperate with the likes of Sherman and Lincoln? Writing to the *Rome Courier* in October 1865, Wright called Sherman "one of the greatest and most honest men I ever saw." Of Lincoln, Wright claimed, "I never saw a public man who, in my opinion, was more devoted to the welfare of the whole of the country." Nonetheless, Wright would remain a respected figure in his state and community long after the war. How did Wright's neighbors come to terms with his shifting allegiances?[3]

The answer may lie, in part, in the idiosyncratic nature of Unionism in the wartime South. It was often characterized by a fluidity that reflected the changing fortunes of the Confederacy. As historians John Inscoe and Gordon McKinney point out, Unionism could be "surreptitious and fluctuating," and the determi-

[2]U.S. Congress, Joint Select Committee on the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, *Report of the Joint Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, 13 vols. (Washington D.C., 1872), 6:91-92, 147 (hereinafter cited as *Report of the Joint Committee*); Ava Louise Wright, *Sketch of My Grandfather, Augustus R. Wright of Georgia* (undated), pages not numbered; File of Augustus R. Wright, Case Files of Applications from Former Confederates for Presidential Pardons 1865-1867, microfilm publication M1003, and Pardons of Augustus R. Wright and Miller A. Wright, Copies of Presidential Pardons and Remissions, 1794-1893, microfilm publication T967, roll 3, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[3]Jon L. Wakelyn, *Biographical Dictionary of the Confederacy* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 448-49; William J. Northen, *Men of Mark in Georgia*, 7 vols. (Spartanburg, S.C., 1974), 3:326-31; Christian Index, *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (Atlanta, 1881), 603-604; *Georgia Temperance Crusader* [Penfield, Georgia], June 22, 1860; Beulah Shropshire Moseley Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereinafter cited as Moseley Family Papers); *Rome* [Georgia] *Courier*, October 12, 1865.



Augustus Romaldus Wright (1813-1891) by Matthew Brady. Wright served as representative of Georgia's fifth district in the Thirty-fifth U.S. Congress from March 4, 1857, until March 3, 1859. *Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.*

nants of wartime allegiance "elusive and complex." Unionism began as an organized political movement, which was greatly diminished by "conditional" Unionists, who cooperated with the Confederate government, thus forcing their "committed" brethren underground. As the war progressed, a peace movement combined diverse elements of the Unionist population with the disaffected and deserters. Many people had a shallow commitment to any ideology and may have been motivated by class antagonism, family feuds, or any of a number of apolitical factors. The desperate situation evident in most southern communities by the end of the war and the changing behavior of residents during the Federal army occupation, makes the labeling of people like Wright as "loyal" or "disloyal" problematic.[4]

Wright himself saw no contradictions in his actions during the war. He considered himself a strong "Union man" who never supported secession and used whatever influence he could muster to restore the old flag. For Wright, his strong moral principles mattered most. He simply followed what he called "the loyalty of the heart" in everything he did, often disregarding public opinion. He seldom wavered. His strong convictions allowed him to act decisively, based on an intuitive notion of what was right.[5]

An analysis of his life before the war reveals how attitudes regarding public service, patriotism, race, religion, and family emerged as Wright matured. Combined with unique personality characteristics, these beliefs formed the essence of his character and the basis for his behavior. The often chaotic and rapidly changing context of war stressed these principles. Wright's struggle to balance competing wartime loyalties makes it difficult for historians attempting to understand the complex character of this man and his peculiar brand of Civil War Unionism.

Augustus Wright was born in 1813, the eldest son of a family of wealth and privilege that lived in Wrightsboro, Columbia County, Georgia. His father, William Wright, was a wealthy Augusta merchant, plantation owner, and Whig state representative. Both strict and kind, he had high expectations for his children. In 1828, Au-

[4]John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000), 84,104.

[5]*Report of the Joint Committee,* 6:132

gustus Wright entered Franklin College (now the University of Georgia) as a classmate of Alexander Hamilton Stephens. They became lifelong friends and political allies. Wright left college before graduation to read law at Appling, Georgia. His superior intelligence and leadership potential became apparent, so Wright's father sent him to the famous law school of Tapping Reeve, in Litchfield, Connecticut, where many of America's national leaders had trained. Wright's father warned him that "the fag end of the bar is probably the last place this side of Hell that I should envy." Wright gave his father no reason to worry that he would fail to become a distinguished lawyer.[6]

Wright returned from Litchfield in 1833 brimming with patriotism and imbued with a sense of duty unusual for a young man of nineteen. Of the many controversial issues of the time, the nullification crisis loomed most ominous. This attempt by the state legislature of South Carolina to nullify a federal law caused many to fear that a sectional split was imminent. "I do not believe the Union can continue five years longer," Wright fretted in a letter to his physician back in Connecticut. He feared that "the materials are collected for a revolution, which need but the application of the torch to light them into such a conflagration, that the blood of the western world cannot extinguish it." Wright then made a pledge that would set the course for the rest of his political life, promising that "could your humble servant apply a remedy—cost what it might, it should be *applied.*" Wright would live to repeat this vow many times in his life. The costs would often be high indeed.[7]

Wright was admitted to the Georgia bar in 1835. He and his young wife, Elizabeth Richardson of Augusta, settled in Crawfordville, near the home of his friend Alexander Stephens. Soon, however, a dearth of clients compelled him to move to Cassville and start anew. Cassville was a frontier town in the area recently vacated by the Cherokee Indians. Wright built a double log house and entered into a partnership with renowned lawyer Achilles Shackelford. His first case was as defense attorney for a Cherokee

[6]Anne Willingham Willis, *A Family History* (Rome, Ga., 1946), 113-36; William Wright to A. R. Wright, June 14, 1833, in Northen, *Men of Mark*, 3:327. A. R. Wright correspondence hereinafter abbreviated as ARW.

[7]ARW to Dr. Josiah G. Beckwith, September 30, 1833, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens (hereinafter cited as Hargrett Library).

Indian accused of participating in the murder of a white family. He lost the case and the Indian was hanged. Despite this inauspicious start, Wright soon prospered and became a popular lawyer and an attractive political candidate. He ran twice as a Whig party nominee for Congress and lost both races, gaining in popularity but tied to the fate of his party. The state legislature elected the twenty-eight-year-old Wright in 1841 as judge of the superior court, Cherokee circuit. He held this post for seven years.[8]

The life of a circuit court judge was arduous, particularly in an area where the few roads were of poor quality. Cherokee country was a far cry from the culture of Augusta's plantation aristocracy. Court was often held outdoors under a tree or in a log cabin. Jurors on longer trials might have to camp out near the court grounds. Wright grew in his appreciation and affection for his less prosperous neighbors and he became their great favorite. But when his wife became ill, he moved to Cave Spring in Floyd County to be near her relatives so that she could have help. Elizabeth died in 1845, leaving five motherless children, and Wright remarried the following year. By 1849, tired of riding the circuit, he resumed his law practice in Cassville. His reputation for fairness and honesty had grown so large, however, that he became forever known to his many friends and family as simply "Judge Wright."[9]

Wright remained politically active and stumped for the Union throughout Cherokee country during the sectional crisis of 1849-1850, renewing the pledge he had made as a young man. Controversies around the fate of slavery in the new territories after the Mexican-American War threatened to destroy the Union. Wright aligned himself with national Democrats like Stephen A. Douglas, who was instrumental in achieving the Compromise of 1850. His skills as an orator made him a champion among his rural brethren. A contemporary described Wright as "an impressive and pathetic speaker," who could "stir the heart, draw tears or bring laughter." In the case of *King v. King*, a peer later wrote: "The jury

[8]Mary Wright Shropshire, unfinished manuscript of Wright family history to 1876 in Moseley Family Papers (hereinafter cited as Shropshire manuscript); Lucy Josephine Cunyus, *The History of Bartow County, formerly Cass* (Easely, S.C., 1933), 105,111-12,141-44. Joseph B. Mahan, *A History of Old Cassville, 1833-1864* (Cartersville, Ga., 1994), 17-19.

[9]Wright's second wife was Adeline Allman. Columbia County, Georgia Ordinary, Estate Records, Inventories and Appraisements, Sales, 1839-1850, Book EE, 174-76, 440-45, Augusta.

and the audience were in tears and Judge McCutcheon wept on the bench." The theme of Wright's speeches often promoted "poverty against riches, homespun against broadcloth." Wright used his powerful oratory to help drive a wedge between slaveholders and so-called "up-country men," urging the latter to support the Union.[10]

Wright underwent a religious conversion during these years. His family followed the Methodist faith, but he eventually embraced the Primitive Baptists and became an ordained minister. He believed strongly in predestination and in the doctrine of the elect. He felt that preachers should be paid little, because many were corrupted by money and politics. He preached infrequently, whenever the spirit moved him or when an urgent need arose. More than any other development in his long life, his zealous conversion to the ministry, at the age of thirty-six, strengthened his core convictions.[11]

One of his basic beliefs, nearly universal in his day, was his acceptance of the doctrine of white supremacy. Wright's racism was paternalistic in nature and expression. He did not hate blacks; in fact, he approved the washing of their feet in church and claimed that he was willing to lay down his life for a black brother if necessary. But Wright was no abolitionist. He decried the clergy in the North for turning revival meetings into prayers for the abolition of slavery. Wright thought that the black race was not capable of self-government. He felt sympathy toward them because their "color was an incontestable evidence of their incapacity." Still, Wright reasoned that the blacks who attended his church were better than their brothers and sisters. He believed that a combination of divine will and natural selection led to an aristocracy of ability. Thus, his racial beliefs were more consistent with northern Whigs than with southern Democrats. Nevertheless, he abandoned the dying southern wing of the Whig party and embraced the Democrats in the elections of 1852.[12]

[10]*Federal Union* [Milledgeville, Georgia], April 9, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 19, 1849, Cobb Papers, Hargrett Library; Joel Branham, *The Old Court House in Rome* (Atlanta, 1922), 19-38, 50-51; Warren Grice, *The Georgia Bench and Bar* (Macon, Ga., 1931), 170-77, 211-15, 344-45.

[11]Shropshire manuscript; Christian Index, *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 603-604; *Georgia Temperance Crusader*, June 22, 1860.

[12]*Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:92-94, 99-101, 106-109,113-16, 120-49; Moseley Family Papers.

Wright moved his family to Rome, the burgeoning metropolis of Cherokee Georgia, in 1854, and commenced a law practice with his son-in-law, Francis C. Shropshire. By this time, the population of northwest Georgia had grown to a point where the region's leading men were beginning to exert influence in state politics. Rome was the sixth largest town in Georgia and local political leaders were known collectively as the "Rome Regency." These men were eager to expand their power and wealth and felt that Georgia needed new leadership. Two lawyers from the Cherokee region soon benefited from the political machinations of the Regency. One was the dynamic and well-connected Wright. The other was a virtual unknown named Joseph Emerson Brown.

Brown and Wright were personal friends, but they were not always political allies. Wright admitted Brown to the state bar in 1845. They worked together in 1851 in a state suit against a contractor. As the 1857 elections approached, a large and impressive field of candidates vied to succeed retiring governor Herschel V. Johnson. The Democratic convention remained deadlocked after twenty ballots; Wright was the only member of the nominating committee from the Cherokee country to resist supporting Brown. He would not abandon his friend and neighbor, retired representative John H. Lumpkin, as Wright had recently won Lumpkin's seat in Congress. Brown won the nomination in a voice vote and went on to crush Benjamin Hill of the American or "Know Nothing" party in the general election. Although they remained friends, Brown never fully supported Wright in a political contest again.[13]

Wright had been elected representative from Georgia's fifth district in the Thirty-fifth Congress by a huge margin. In accepting the nomination of his party, Wright made it clear that he supported incoming governor Brown and President-elect James Buchanan. Beyond that, the voters of the fifth district selected Wright because they knew him to be a man of unblemished character and high principles. What they could not know was how Wright's personal and political convictions would translate in na-

[13]Joseph H. Parks, *Joseph E. Brown of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, La., 1984), 3, 14-15, 22-29, 57; ARW to Georgia Democratic Party, July 14, 1857, in *Cassville* [Georgia] *Standard*, July 20, 1857.

tional government. The very strengths that made Wright such a strong advocate—his passion, his religious fundamentalism, his moral convictions and his ardent patriotism—combined with Whig philosophy to make him a dubious Democrat and a political liability. During one brief term in Congress, Wright became one of the most controversial political figures in the state.

Wright, like most old-line Whigs, claimed to eschew politics, but considered it his solemn duty to serve the people. He described Washington as a "city of pomp and display, of folly and wickedness, of pleasure and gaiety, of vice in high places and debauchery almost everywhere." He met the wife of Senator William M. Gwin of California, whom he described as a "tavern keeper's daughter before her marriage (who) has mixed many a mint julep for gentlemen." Wright embarked on his own political course, determined to support issues that agreed with his conscience, whether they pleased the Democratic establishment in Washington or not. The response from the Regency was immediate. Wright received a cryptic message on March 3, 1858, urging all "small fry" and "little fish" to fall in line with the administration. Veiled threats from Lumpkin and Governor Brown followed later in the month. Wright was rapidly becoming a political island unto himself.[14]

Wright had ample inspiration in playing the part of political martyr for his principles. Soon after his arrival in Washington, he heard Rev. Daniel Cumming of Vienna Baptist Church preach for the first time. "He brings *tragedy* in *full plume* into the pulpit," Wright exclaimed. Cumming would throw his head back, squat, jump, tear his hair and according to Wright, "did not die *distinctly*, but came very near it a great many times." Wright admired the common eloquence of this man who talked "in the simplicity of a child more soul saving truth . . . than I ever heard." When Cumming preached on the "Christian Courage" of the Apostle Paul, he compared him to George Washington, retreating through New Jersey, focused on achieving a good end. Wright suggested that General Washington, "teased, disappointed, perplexed, deserted

[14]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, January 28, March 5, 1858; ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, February 14, March 14, 1858, Moseley Family Papers; Joseph E. Brown to ARW, March 11, 26, 1858, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Hargrett Library.

by friends, his motives misunderstood, unappreciated and often perverted," held fast to his righteous goal. Like Washington, Wright was prepared to sacrifice public acclaim to maintain his moral convictions. He would not wait long to do just that.[15]

Wright was amazed that President Buchanan betrayed the South by appointing a territorial governor who opposed the proslavery Lecompton constitution for Kansas and again by arresting the filibusterer William Walker, who was attempting to establish a slave empire in Nicaragua. His colleagues were afraid to challenge the president for fear of being dumped by the party. "When I came here I knew nothing of politicians. The depths of the *depravity* of our *leading men* is something the public never can know," Wright lamented. While his former allies plotted to replace him in the next election, Wright broke his public silence with a major speech on the floor of the House, denouncing Buchanan's policy in Central America. The speech signaled the end of Wright's stormy honeymoon with the Democrats. A few months later, Brown implored Wright to support party policy. In that case, Brown assured him, "you have nothing to fear from my friends . . . for my opponents are your secret enemies." Brown had no idea how far Wright would go to assert his independence.[16]

The news that Wright was endorsing U.S. Senate candidate Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, an advocate of popular sovereignty in territories, spread rapidly through the Georgia press in August 1858. Many state newspapers had always doubted the sincerity of Wright's conversion to the Democratic party. Soon the word was out that other ex-Whigs like Stephens had followed Wright's lead and had declared for Douglas. Even old line Democrats like former governor Herschel Johnson and other Union men joined the Douglas camp. Wright maintained that Douglas had "done more than any man living to roll back Northern fanaticism" and accused the Know-Nothings of trying to destroy the candidate because he married a Catholic. Southern Democrats, like their Whig

[15]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, December 13, 1857, April 19, 1858; ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, February 14, March 14, 1858, Moseley Family Papers.

[16]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, April 19, 1858, Moseley Family Papers; Speech of A. R. Wright of Georgia in the House of Representatives, May 31, 1858, U.S. Congress, *Congressional Globe, 35th Congress, 1st Session* (Washington, D.C., 1858), appendix, 458-61; Joseph E. Brown to ARW, May 24, 1858, Joseph E. Brown Papers.

counterparts, were slowly imploding. Wright and his allies chose to fight for the Union instead of merely clinging to the narrow interests of their section. They would pay a high price.[17]

By the fall elections of 1858, Wright knew that his political fate was sealed. He had lost his enthusiasm for politics but would not shirk from his duty, even in the face of harsh personal attacks. He enraged his peers further by being the only Georgia Congressman to vote for a bill funding black education in Africa. The *Rome Courier* predicted that "the people of this district will consign him to the political grave he has made with his own hands, so effectually and so deep that he may never have a resurrection." Even old allies, such as the *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer,* could only give his nomination lukewarm support, condemning his political acts while praising "the purity of Wright's moral character." Wright lost his bid to retain his Congressional seat to Col. J. W. H. Underwood, a compromise candidate. "There will be strong opposition to me from all cliques for I belong to none of them," Wright wrote to his law partner and son-in-law, Francis Shropshire in February 1859. When his former law partner Warren Aiken, an opposition candidate for governor, accused Brown and Wright of corruption in state railroad litigation, Wright exploded. He turned the tables on Aiken, accusing him of having "*one* hand in the public treasury . . . cramming his pockets as fast as he can; with the other pointing to Brown and Wright, saying behold the democratic rogues." The people believed Wright and trusted Brown. Aiken was soundly defeated, and Wright again turned his attention to the fragile Union cause.[18]

The best chance to save the Union, Wright decided, was to elect Douglas president in 1860. He came to this conclusion after reading Douglas's 1859 pamphlet on popular sovereignty in the territories. In a September letter to the Illinois senator, Wright

[17]ARW to Dr. C. P. Culver, August 23, 1858 in *Milledgeville* [Georgia] *Southern Recorder,* September 7, 1858; *Cassville* [Georgia] *Standard,* September 9, 16, 23, 30, 1858; *Milledgeville Southern Recorder,* October 5, 12, 19, 26, 1858; *Atlanta Intelligencer,* October 7, 14, 21, 28, 1858; ARW to editor, October 7, 1858, in *Atlanta Intelligencer,* October 14, 1858.

[18]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, February 1, 1859, Moseley Family Papers; *Rome* [Georgia] *Courier,* March 9, June 8, 1859; Speech of Augustus R. Wright at the Milledgeville Convention in *Atlanta Intelligencer,* June 30, 1859; *Atlanta Intelligencer,* July 7, 1859; ARW to editor, September 8, 1859; in *Atlanta Intelligencer,* September 15, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to ARW, January 11, February 23, May 4, 6, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, April 7, 13, 20, 28, 1859, Joseph E. Brown Papers.

promised "to follow the *truth*, though it should lead to the stake." He chided both northern and southern fanatics, as well as "men of character and position, who ought to stand 'like the oaks of Basham' before the popular blast, do bend like the reed." At the Charleston Democratic convention, Wright denounced the secession movement as "both false and fraudulent." Wright and Stephens campaigned tirelessly for Douglas and his running mate, Herschel Johnson, during the summer and fall of 1860. But the Democratic party had split into factions, virtually handing the election to Lincoln. Immediately after the election results were known, Wright penned a letter to Johnson, maintaining that "the men who have figured in bringing this disaster upon us, have not had my confidence for a long time; they never can have it. I will not rely upon them in the hour of trial." Wright called on God to show Johnson "the path of duty, which is the path of safety."[19]

Duty called Wright to attempt yet another arduous task: to cool the secessionist flames that burst forth immediately after the election. Northwest Georgia was a bedrock of Union support, yet Wright's home county of Floyd leaned toward secession. The pressure to jump on the secession bandwagon, as Wright later described to a U.S. Congressional committee, was severe: "Now public sentiment in the South is very violent; you have no idea of it. You have never been, any of you, at the starting of a revolution. You have no idea how it sweeps over the land. It is like a New York riot, and men had better get out of the way of it. I made a speech in the City Hall of Rome, and but for a few personal friends they would have killed me right there. I understood that several thought I ought to be killed for trying to stop the course of events."[20]

Most local accounts of secession activities focused on celebration; but the intimidation of Union men was at least as important in creating the appearance of cooperation and community solidarity, if not unanimity. If a man as popular and respected as Wright felt threatened, it was clear that all Union men and women

[19]ARW to Stephen A. Douglas, September 29, 1859, Stephen Arnold Douglas Collection, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; *Rome Courier*, May 25, June 22, 1860; ARW to Herschel V. Johnson, November 9, 1860, Charles Colock Jones, Jr., Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

[20]*Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:89.

had reason to fear for their safety. The vast majority holding such views silently deferred to the new order.

Wright was nominated in December as a potential delegate to the state secession convention in Milledgeville, but was defeated by his son-in-law Francis Shropshire, an ardent secessionist and close ally of Governor Brown. After the ordinance of secession passed in January 1861, delegates were chosen for the new southern Congress. Representatives from Wright's old fifth district nominated him and immediately drew the ire of the two other Floyd men, Simpson Fouche and James Word. They nominated an alternate candidate and accused Wright of being unwilling to "stand by the action of the State." Shropshire sprang to Wright's defense, claiming that he had first-hand knowledge of Wright's commitment to go with his state if voters chose to leave the Union. Wright was elected by a single ballot. "Tell him, if you see him," Shropshire wrote to his wife, Wright's daughter Mary, "not to decline his election to the Southern Congress—to go by all means."[21]

Wright was more than two hundred miles from Milledgeville when the election took place. He knew nothing of the proceedings and certainly entertained no thoughts of running for yet another political office. When he first heard the news of his election and learned that the question of secession had not been referred back to the people, Wright announced that he "would have nothing to do with the treasonable project." The editor of the *Rome Courier* pleaded with the people to forget their past differences with Wright and unite behind the new government. His friend Alexander Stephens urged Wright to take his seat to avoid division at home. Stephens felt that, by taking office, the Union men might still have the opportunity to forestall the rebellion.[22]

Wright's election to the Confederate Congress in February 1861 presented him with a wrenching dilemma. Faced with difficult decisions in the past, he always deferred to the moral judgment of his heart, in order to do the right thing. Loyalties to his neighbors, family, and constituents were comfortably aligned with his love for his state and his country. If God had truly blessed the

[21]ARW to Floyd County Secession Convention Committee, December 17, 1860, in *Rome Courier*, December 20, 1860; *Rome Courier*, January 29, 1861; Francis C. Shropshire to Mary Wright Shropshire, January 23, 1861, Moseley Family Papers.

[22]*Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:89-91; *Rome Courier*, January 31, 1861.

young American republic and kept the dreams of the founding fathers alive, then whose side was God on now? How could Wright continue to support the Union cause without jeopardizing the safety of his family and neighbors should war come? As he left Rome for Montgomery, Alabama, in early February 1861, Wright lacked a clear path forward, perhaps for the first time in his adult life. During this time of great danger and uncertainty, Wright knew he had to make choices between several cherished principles. He had to use his head as well as his heart. Making the right decision now was not merely a matter of honor or principle. It was a matter of survival.

Moses and Edwin Wright were outraged to learn that their brother had accepted a position in the Confederate government. They knew that Augustus Wright was a Union man at heart, but they had never been in public service themselves and did not understand how strong the call of duty could be. As Wright explained to his constituents in 1861, "my country called me in the hour of danger to stand by her. I obeyed the call." Wright pledged his fidelity to his neighbors, who were "first entitled to my service." In doing so, he made his personal loyalty to the Union subordinate to their needs. Shortly after his arrival in Montgomery, Wright confessed that he was already "tired out with Congressional life" and only desired to "save the people, who little dream of it, the horrors of impending war. I see little chance to do that at present."[23]

Wright had made a commitment to the people and was determined to live up to it. He poured himself into his congressional work. In less than a month, Wright acted as one of the architects of the new Confederate Constitution. He introduced two bills that created a volunteer army and his voting record shows support for most Confederate nationalist legislation. Despite his efforts, many secessionists in Congress treated Wright with suspicion. The feeling was mutual. The "ultras," as Wright referred to revolutionaries like William L. Yancey and Robert Rhett, were "fierce, ferocious,

[23]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; *Rome Courier*, January 31, 1861. Elizabeth Harper Wright was the wife of Moses Wright. ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, February 25, 1861, and ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, February 29, 1861, Moseley Family Papers.

plunder seeking men," more dangerous to the future prosperity of the South than the Republicans. Even if war came and the Confederacy emerged victorious, such men would "fasten on us like Vampyres [*sic*], and by their *exclusive* patriotism, and self devotion, and constant appeal to the lowest passions, finally control the country." Agents of the ultras kept a close eye on Wright, suspecting that he had "some great intrigue afoot." On the contrary, Wright explained, "I have none at all, and have no definite object in view, except to do my duty in my best way."[24]

Wright found another opportunity to do his duty when the war broke out in April. He raised a force of twelve hundred men, called Wright's Legion, which was mustered in to the Thirty-eighth Georgia Infantry and included three of his sons. He spent nearly five months as a colonel in command of the regiment, mostly guarding the port at Savannah. Wright's popularity soared at home as the result of his service to his state. The *Rome Courier*, recently complicit in shredding Wright's career in the U.S. Congress, gushed that his conduct "has been marked with so much zeal—so much energy—so much earnestness of purpose" in support of the new government, that he deserved their unconditional support for re-election. He won in a landslide, resigned his commission, and returned to Congress. Wright was doing everything that his genius allowed in supporting the Confederate cause, but his heart remained disturbed.[25]

As early as February 1861, Wright had expressed serious doubts about the righteousness of his state's course. Wright claimed that the secession convention had ignored the will of the people. He was convinced that Georgia voters would have defeated secession in a fair vote by a majority of fifty thousand. The present situation was not merely the triumph of demagogues over democratic principles; it was an assault on a republican form of government blessed by God. Wright feared, even before the war began, that the Confederacy "should be 'dashed to pieces as a potter's vessel' for our transgressions." He pleaded with God to "for-

[24] *Rome Courier*, February 26, 1861; Ezra J. Warner and W. Buck Yearns, *Biographical Record of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge, La., 1975), 262-63; Thomas B. Alexander and Richard E. Beringer, *The Anatomy of the Confederate Congress* (Nashville, Tenn., 1972), 388, 397, 405.

[25] *Rome Courier*, October 3, 1861.

give our iniquities and grant us peace." Wright's prayers were not answered. Instead, the war intensified and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Americans began in earnest.[26]

Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as permanent president at Richmond in February 1862. In contrast to the pomp and pageantry of the provisional inauguration a year earlier, Wright declared that "a gloomier day never settled on the capital of Virginia. The heavens were ominously dark." The president looked "emaciated, care-worn," according to Wright, "with a deep feeling of sadness pervading his pale, intellectual features." Davis had good reason to worry. Inflation was accelerating and the war had caused shortages of many essential items. The most serious threat to the Confederacy, however, was dissension in the government itself. "The vileness of our race is being exhibited now every day in the efforts of some of those who were first to overthrow the old government," Wright charged. These "demagogues," Wright exclaimed, "working like maggots upon the body politic," were traitors who "glory in the news of our defeat" and "weaken the confidence of the people." Wright resolved to stick by the president in this difficult time, "because it is right, because he is worthy and because it is the only course to secure law and order and any government at all." Wright also believed that Davis, a devout Christian, "had commended himself and his country into the hands of God." If God truly blessed the Confederacy, surely He would save it from the traitors within.[27]

The spring of 1862 was not kind to the Confederate cause. The carnage at Shiloh in early April, the fall of Fort Pulaski near Savannah, and the occupation of New Orleans later that month depressed homefront morale and further increased the pressures on Jefferson Davis. By this time, Wright's close ally, vice president Stephens, had become vocal in his opposition to the administration. Congress adjourned on April 21, 1862, and Wright returned home, still in support of the president. In June, he sent a letter to Davis complaining that his friend James A. W. Johnson had raised a regiment of nearly nine hundred men, but that Governor Brown

[26]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, February 25, 1861, and ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, February 29, 1861, Moseley Family Papers.

[27]ARW to Francis C. Shropshire, February 24, 1862, *ibid.*

would not allow the troops to leave the state. The governor was concerned that the recently passed conscription act and the power to impress private property could add up to military despotism. Was not the blood of so many volunteers a sufficient demonstration of Georgia's patriotism? After six months at home, Wright went back to Congress to consider his next step.[28]

The fall session was barely under way when word came of the Confederate victories at Second Manassas and Richmond, Kentucky. On September 4, 1862, President Davis proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to God for His great blessings. Soon afterwards, the slaughter at the Battle of Antietam occurred. Wright doubted that God really did approve of a regime that had shed so much precious blood and seemed to be increasingly disrespectful of the rights and liberties of its citizens. "I will try to get Mr. Shropshire on the bench and out of the army," he wrote to his daughter. "My own poor boys I see no chance to get out. Perhaps it is best—it *compels* me to put my trust in God for them." His four sons had fought in many battles to date and had emerged unscathed. As his affection for the Confederacy waned, Wright prayed that God would one day show him the way of truth in a time of chaos. That day came on September 22, 1862.[29]

Wright spent the morning with other members of the Medical Committee of the Confederate Congress visiting a hospital for sick and wounded enemy soldiers. To his horror, the facility was in a deplorable state—so bad that the congressmen had to rush out of the upper ward almost immediately. "The honor of our country," Wright reported to the Secretary of War, "will not permit us to bring the matter to the attention of Congress, thereby making the matter public." Wright demanded that conditions at the hospital be improved at once, and that it be at least equal to those hospitals that cared for their own soldiers. Surely God could only rain wrath on a government that would permit such atrocities. A shaken and disturbed Wright returned to his lodgings at a local boarding

[28]Thomas Edwin Scott, *Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, La., 1988); ARW to Jefferson Davis, June 3, 1862, Linda Laswell Crist, Mary Seaton Dix, and Kenneth H. Williams, eds., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis,* 12 vols. (Baton Rouge, 1995), 8:223.

[29]ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, September 12, 1862, Moseley Family Papers; Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 1986), 82-102, 268-93, 336-67.

house to find an urgent telegram. His son, Capt. Miller A. Wright, had been seriously wounded at Sharpsburg, Maryland. The telegraph said that his left arm had been amputated. Wright left for Maryland the next morning.[30]

To his great relief, Wright found that his son was wounded in the foot and carried him home to Georgia to recuperate. He had been home only a short time when he received news that a second son, Alexander, was a casualty and an invalid in southwest Virginia. Wright rushed to his aid and also brought him home. Unknown to Wright at the time, a third son lay near death from fever, cut off completely from all communication. Charles, like his brothers, survived, but his father's heart was irretrievably transformed. Wright journeyed to Milledgeville in early November to meet with Governor Brown and urge him to appoint his son-in-law, Francis Shropshire, then an adjutant in Smith's Legion, to the bench. Brown would make no commitments until after the close of the state legislative session. Rome lawyer Charles H. Smith wrote to Howell Cobb on November 12, 1862, complaining that Wright was "using his influence to discourage the people." Moreover, "[w]e feel deeply troubled that we have got to fight such an enemy at home." On November 28, Wright received yet another urgent message. Francis Shropshire was dead. Wright returned to the Confederate Congress in January 1863 determined to seek peace.[31]

A sizeable peace contingent had already formed in Congress by the previous September. Wright joined fellow Georgian Hines Holt, Henry Stuart Foote, and twenty-four other members, voting in secret session to send a peace commission to Washington, D.C. Wright's resolution, like those made previously, bore no fruit. Wright saw only "darkness and misery" ahead. The only thing left to do, Wright wrote in a tone approaching despair, was to "be resigned and try to prepare for it, and by the chastisement of our Father be made a better people." He compared many of the northern and southern leaders to the Crusaders, people who

[30]ARW to G. W. Randolph, September 22, 1862, in *O.R.*, ser. 2, 4:900; ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, September 22, 1862, Moseley Family Papers; *Rome Courier*, October 2, 1862.

[31]MWS to Francis C. Shropshire, November 3, 1862, Moseley Family Papers; Charles H. Smith to Howell Cobb, November 12, 1862, Cobb Papers. Adjutant Francis C. Shropshire of Smith's Legion, Infantry Battalian (later Sixty-fifth Regiment, Georgia Volunteer Infantry) died November 28, 1862, of typhoid fever at Cumberland Gap, Tennessee.

acted in the name of religion, yet possessed little Christianity. "When will the blessed Savior come," Wright implored, "when men whose feet are swift to shed blood (military men) shall be an abomination, and the men who preach love, and forgiveness, and peace shall rule the earth?"[32]

Wright did not wait for the Congress to adjourn and left for Georgia in early March 1863. By the end of May, Jackson, Mississippi, had fallen and Vicksburg was under siege. Wright's friend, Col. William H. Stiles, begged him to help raise a local force to defend against expected raids from Union forces locally. Wright's efforts failed because of the ongoing squabbles between President Davis and Governor Brown over control of so-called "home guard" units. In the meantime, the news that Wright's son William had been wounded at Gettysburg, followed by the surrender of Vicksburg, convinced him that the war would soon come to his neighborhood. Wright sold his house in Rome and retired to his plantation on the Coosa River, just across the state line in Alabama, near his brothers Moses and Edwin.[33]

Northern Alabama was brimming with disaffected citizens. Hard-core Unionists opposed the government and did what they could to subvert Confederate authority, including protecting deserters and raising Federal regiments. Other former Union men, who cooperated with the rebels reluctantly, formed secret peace societies, which sprang up throughout the South in 1863. A third group, known in the North as "mossbacks," had no interest in politics and simply hid out to avoid military service. Wright became, in his own words, a "refugee" at this point. His move to the country was more than an attempt to shelter his family from a war that drew ever closer to his home. In his heart, Wright was abandoning the new nation he had pledged to serve. He did what he felt was right. It was a decision fraught with danger.[34]

[32]Ava Louise Wright, *Sketch of My Grandfather*; ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, undated (ca. February 1863), Moseley Family Papers; Jon L. Wakelyn, *Confederates Against the Confederacy: Essays on Leadership and Loyalty* (Westport, Conn., 2002), 67.

[33]William H. Stiles to ARW, June 9, 1863, Mackey and Stiles Family Papers, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; William H. Stiles to ARW, July 15, 1863, *Rome Courier*, July 23, 1863.

[34]See Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (New York, 1934); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York, 1905), 109-48; Margaret deMontcourt Storey, "Southern Ishmaelites: Wartime Unionism and Its Consequences in Alabama, 1860-1874," Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1999.

Wright's friends put him up for re-election to Congress in the fall of 1863, but he withdrew in favor of Gen. William T. Wofford. When Wofford declined the nomination at the last minute, Wright's name was put on the ballot. He refused to campaign, saying that he "felt no disposition to be a ruler under such despotism," and finished a distant third. Wright had given up on a government that, instead of protecting its citizens, "robs us of every thing we have." Proposals to conscript children as young as sixteen he called "outright murder." As he prayed for peace, Wright tried to rationalize his cooperation earlier in the war: "None of the blood of these poor innocents are upon my skirts," he professed. "I have done my best to avoid this Revolution, and when started, tried to scotch it." To atone for his guilt, Wright began working secretly to aid Union men and their families while he struggled to help bring an end to the war.[35]

One man in urgent need of Wright's assistance was his brother. Moses Wright owned more than twenty slaves and was thus exempt from service until the Confederate Congress modified the law to protect overseers on large plantations in May 1863. Moses was a steadfast Unionist who seldom hesitated to voice his opinions in public. Confederate scouts threatened to burn his house and force his family behind enemy lines. He was in communication with Federal officers and considered raising a regiment for the Union army. Wright convinced Moses to stay home, keep quiet, and protect his family, promising that he would use his influence to try to keep him out of the army. When the conscript agents came in December, Wright convinced his brother to join the home guard at Rome, which was not considered at risk of doing any real fighting. On a visit to his family in Alabama ten days later, Moses was arrested and ordered to serve in the regular army. He was granted fifteen days leave to prepare for his assignment. Moses placed Edmund Towns in charge of distributing one thousand bushels of corn to his indigent neighbors and went into hiding.[36]

[35]ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, October 14, 1863, Moseley Family Papers.

[36]Testimony of Augustus R. Wright, October 19, 1873, Claim of Elizabeth H. Wright; *Rome* [Georgia] *Tri-Weekly Courier*, January 2, 1864; Albert Burton Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (New York, 1924), 70-83.

With his brother secreted safely near the Towns's farm, Wright headed back to Richmond for the final session of Congress, intending to resign upon arrival. "I hardly know which side detests me most," Wright complained, "Fire-eaters or Republicans." Instead of resigning, however, Wright decided to make one last plea for peace. On February 3, 1864, Wright introduced a resolution to reconstruct the Union, "based upon the equality and sovereignty of the States." The Confederate Congress erupted. "Why sir," Wright recalled seven years later, "there were thirty men on the floor in an instant, hallooing 'Mr. Speaker' at the top of their voices." Jeremiah Clapp, a congressman from Mississippi, moved that the galleries be cleared and the doors locked. "I did not know honestly but that I should be slaughtered right there on the floor," Wright recalled. It would be better for the southern states to reunite under terms of agreement, Wright felt, "than to break down and be at the absolute disposal of the Federal Government." He hardly knew then just how right he was.[37]

As Sherman's army prepared to invade north Alabama and Georgia, Wright hurried home to defend his family. He was determined not to flee when the Federals came, but to "meet whatever doom awaits me at once." The countryside was in a state of near chaos. Armed bands of deserters, scouts, and other lawless men, often with little allegiance to either side, roamed at will, terrorizing women and children and plundering what little food was left. Confederate scouts came to Wright's plantation and stole his son Miller's fine horse, sent back from the front. They returned a few nights later and called for Judge Wright, asking if he was not a Union man dodging the fight for his country. Wright replied: "You are a pretty set of scoundrels to talk of dodging a fight from one's country. My boys are at the front fighting while you thieve from the government and everyone else; dodging bullets and threatening the lives of honest men. Yes, you hold on there a few minutes and I'll meet you at the gate." By the time the judge was dressed, the scouts were gone.[38]

[37]ARW to Mary Wright Shropshire, December 1, 1863, Moseley Family Papers; Resolution of A. R. Wright in the Confederate Congress, February 4, 1864, in *Rome Tri-Weekly Courier*, February 11, 1864; *Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:90.

[38]Shropshire manuscript.

Gen. William T. Sherman's staff at the home of Charles H. Smith, Rome, Georgia, in 1864. *Vanishing Georgia Collection, flo075, Georgia Archives, Morrow.*

The greatest threat posed by the scouts was not to Wright himself, but to his brothers, Moses and Edwin, both of whom were now in hiding. One of Wright's friends placed a notice in the April 2, 1864, edition of the *Rome Tri-Weekly Courier,* claiming that the family had recently received a letter from Moses, mailed from Havana, Cuba. This was clearly a ruse to throw the scouts off his trail. The brothers were in almost daily communication with each other, thanks to the efforts of Edmund Towns. Moses was moving in and out of Federal lines at Chattanooga, providing intelligence to the Federal army. On May 4, General Sherman and his army began their invasion of Georgia. Less than two weeks later, Federal troops occupied Rome.[39]

Seeing the Union flag again flying over his hometown must have been a bittersweet experience for Wright. While the presence of the Federal army promised order and protection for

[39] *Rome Tri-Weekly Courier,* April 2, 1864; Testimony of Isabel Towns, William B. Towns, Augustus R. Wright, William A. Wright, Louisa Towns, 1878, in Claim of Isabel Towns, Southern Claims Commission, Floyd County, Georgia, RG 217, National Archives.

Union men and their families, the soldiers' voracious appetite for local stock and provisions filled Wright with dread and apprehension. His first priority was to secure the safety of his brothers and their families, particularly Moses, who was now a prime target of conscript agents, the sheriff, and scouts. Together with Moses's brother-in-law, Alexander T. Harper, Wright devised a plan to get his brother to safety and secure his financial future in the North. Harper's uncle was Col. Alfred Shorter, the wealthiest man in Floyd County. When Shorter fled just before the occupation of Rome, he left his property, including more than two hundred bales of cotton, in the care of his nephew. Wright agreed to use his influence to save Shorter's cotton from the Federals, in exchange for one-quarter of the cotton for himself and half of the balance for his brother Moses. With the agreement in place, Wright went to work.[40]

Brig. Gen. William Vandever, the commander at Rome, knew of Wright's reconstruction sentiments, because his resolution had been leaked to northern newspapers. Vandever formed a friendship with Wright, but felt it was his duty to send the cotton forward with the army, instead of letting it become contraband. Wright figured his efforts had failed and went back to his plantation to pass the summer protecting his family. Shortly after the capture of Atlanta in early September, Wright met with Col. George E. Spencer, a close personal friend and commander of the First Alabama U.S. Cavalry. Spencer suggested that Wright could save the cotton if he would travel to Atlanta to see Sherman. "I was under fire to get to Rome," Wright explained, "so how do you expect me to get to Atlanta?" Spencer replied that Sherman wished him to meet with Lincoln and attempt to arrange a peace. Spencer instructed Wright to return home and said that he would set up an interview.[41]

His invitation to meet with Sherman was delivered at midnight in mid-September by a force of two hundred cavalry soldiers, according to Wright. They "arrested" him, possibly as a show of force to shield him from the suspicion of his Confederate neighbors,

[40]ARW to People of Floyd County, October 12, 1865, *Rome Courier*, October 12, 1865; *Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:91-92.

[41]ARW to People of Floyd County, October 12, 1865, *Rome Courier*, October 12, 1865.

and carried him to Atlanta. Sherman told Wright that the cotton matter had been referred to the president and the Secretary of the Treasury, but he was sure that Lincoln would do what was right. In the meantime, Sherman had another scheme in mind. Wright, former U.S. Senator Joshua Hill, and William King of Marietta would act as intermediaries between Sherman and Brown to determine if Georgia would consider a unilateral withdrawal from the Confederacy in exchange for a full restoration of citizen rights under the Constitution. They immediately began carrying messages between the two leaders. Brown thought the proposal ludicrous, claiming Sherman had no authority to make such an offer. He scolded Wright for being "too depressed in feeling." Jefferson Davis caught wind of the affair and rushed to Georgia, where he gave a series of speeches critical of Brown and encouraging support for the Confederate army. Wright returned to his home in time to experience the consuming wrath of Sherman's foraging parties.[42]

Capt. Miller Wright returned to his father's house on furlough in early October 1864. He was digging a milk cellar when two of his brothers, fifteen-year-old Allman and eleven-year-old Paul, raced by at full gallop on their horses, chased by a half-dozen Federal soldiers. Miller ran into the house to hide before his brothers' pursuers realized they had cornered two children. The soldiers entered the house, arrested Captain Wright, and took him to Rome. About this time, Federal troops carried off nearly everything on the 705-acre plantation of Moses Wright. Moses went directly to Sherman about the property, but was not able to meet with him. He brought his family into the Union lines at Rome for their safety and went north with a portion of Sherman's army. Moses Wright would never see his wife and family again.[43]

Confident that he had halted the advances of Confederate forces under the command of Gen. John Bell Hood to the west, Sherman broke camp on October 28 at Gaylesville, three miles north of the Wright plantations. He began a twenty-six mile march back to Rome. That evening, Judge Wright received a now familiar knock on his door and was greeted by Lt. Colonel George L. God-

[42]*Ibid.*; Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2:137-42; Avery, *History of the State of Georgia*, 302-304.
[43]Shropshire manuscript; Claim of Elizabeth H. Wright.

frey of the First Alabama (Federal) Cavalry, along with four hundred soldiers. They carried Wright to the river crossing near the Edmund Towns farm and were met there by Edmund's son William. The younger Towns had been captured by Confederate conscript agents only five days previous, had managed to make his escape, and had arrived at his father's house earlier that same day. Towns ferried the large force across the Coosa and they made camp on the property for the evening. Waiting for them at the Towns farmhouse was Wright's brother, Edwin. The next morning the large group made the journey to Rome, where Judge Wright again met with Sherman. Edwin Wright and William Towns took the Oath of Allegiance and Towns joined the First Alabama U.S. Cavalry.[44]

Sherman and other officers gave Wright letters for Lincoln and immediately sent him north to Washington, D.C., accompanied by his son, Miller. Although the peace mission appeared doomed, Wright hoped that Lincoln might still aid him in saving Shorter's cotton, thereby helping his brother reunite with his family in the North. Lincoln instructed the Secretary of the Treasury to purchase the cotton at once and have it transported to Green Adams, the government agent at Nashville. Adams would then sell the cotton at Cincinnati, with one-fourth paid to the government and the balance to Wright. Lincoln endorsed the back of the contract, instructing the army to aid Wright in forwarding the cotton. Lincoln also issued a pardon to both Wright and his son, on the condition that Miller stay behind Federal lines for the balance of the war. Wright and his son then left Washington to rendezvous with Moses in Louisville, Kentucky.[45]

When he arrived at Louisville, Wright received news from James A. Stewart, a recent refugee from Rome, that Sherman had burned the town and that the cotton had been destroyed. Wright telegraphed Lincoln on November 21, 1864, asking for help. Lincoln replied that there was little he could do, because Congress had not appropriated money for claims of this nature. Three days later, Wright and his son entered Nashville, where they found another group of recent refugees from Rome, who informed him that his cotton was not destroyed, but stored and guarded in a gin

[44]Claim of Isabel Towns.
[45]*Rome Courier*, October 12, 1865; *Report of the Joint Committee*, 6:91-92.

house across the river. Wright telegraphed Lincoln again, asking for an extension on their contract to June 1865, in order for him to have time to transport and sell the cotton. "Peace," Wright told Lincoln, "will only come after exhaustion of one of the parties. *Power* in the Confederacy is in the hands of those who will *not* be *satisfied* with their *rights* under the constitution. They will have a separate government which *they controul* [*sic*]. That is what Mr. Davis means by 'independence.'" Wright left Miller in Nashville and journeyed home "with much reluctance and some *fear* of the result," he wrote to Lincoln, "but I cannot desert my family."[46]

Wright returned to a nightmare when he reached Rome at the end of November 1864. Sherman's army had been gone for weeks, leaving almost every commercial building and warehouse in ruins. Worse still, independent scouts ravaged the towns and countryside, robbing and killing at will. Scouts rode boldly into Rome on November 28, robbed three people, murdered a city councilman, and left unscathed. Wright and his family lived in daily fear of the notorious John Gatewood of Tennessee, who had terrorized the plantation of prominent Union man Wesley Shropshire in September. Gatewood had tried to burn the home of Moses Wright in October, only to be chased away by Federal troops. One day not long after his return, Wright was surprised to meet an exhausted William Towns near his home on the Coosa. Towns had been on one of Sherman's raids in eastern Georgia, got lost, and somehow made it back home. He brought important news. Edwin Wright had gone north to enlist in the U.S. Army. He was never heard from again.[47]

The Wright families passed the rest of the winter as virtual prisoners in their own homes. Spring finally came, and with it the welcome return of Federal soldiers and some semblance of order. Wright and Alexander Harper started immediately for Nashville, along with one hundred and seventy-eight bales of Shorter's cot-

[46] *Rome Courier,* October 12, 1865; ARW to Abraham Lincoln, November 21, 1864; Abraham Lincoln to ARW, November 21, 1864; ARW to Abraham Lincoln, November 24, 1864. All in Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

[47] George Magruder Battey, Jr., *A History of Rome and Floyd County* (Atlanta, 1922), 197-209; Claim of Elizabeth Wright; Claim of Isabel Towns. The ultimate fate of Edwin Wright is still a mystery. Contrary to Isabel Town's testimony that he was murdered by Confederate scouts, U.S. Army enlistment records show an Edwin A. Wright of the same age and birthplace as enlisting in Company I, Second Infantry, at Cincinnati, Ohio, January 10, 1865. He deserted on May 3, 1866. In any case, Edwin Wright was never seen again by his family.

ton. At Nashville, Green Adams informed Wright that the government had relinquished its claim to one-fourth of the cotton, and that he was free to dispose of it as he wished. Wright tried to sell the lot on the spot, but was offered less than eighteen thousand dollars. He decided that he would transport the cotton to New York himself, thinking that he could obtain a fair price there. On his way north, he stopped in Louisville to see his bother Moses, and then headed for Cincinnati. He arrived in the Queen City just as the news of Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox broke. "It has been a great day here," Wright wrote to his wife. "I am a Union man; I think it is best the Confederacy 'went up;' but the strong disposition here manifest to rejoice over us and regard us as serfs begets sometimes a feeling of strong defiance." Wright left Cincinnati before he could learn even more important news. Just one day after Lee's surrender, his brother Moses had died.[48]

Wright finally returned to Rome, three months after he had left, with twenty-nine thousand dollars in profits from the cotton. He intended to use most of it to support his brothers' families. Shorter, now back from exile, was incensed at Wright's actions and accused him of trying to steal the cotton by means of legal trickery. Their dispute soon raged into the newspapers just weeks before the election for delegates to the state constitutional convention. Wright was the leading candidate, but Shorter's public accusations ended his chances and he finished last. Wright was characteristically gracious in defeat, praising his neighbors, who would not permit dishonor to attach to their representatives. He launched into an able defense of his behavior, concluding with the wry sense of humor that he always retained, in spite of his difficulties: "Time will mellow his aspersions, and I have faith to believe we shall yet be friends. And now the *whole* matter of the cotton is before the people. Those who have been so interested in it will have time to think and talk. Lawyers can be consulted upon the law, theologians upon the morals, and pretty little women, whose prerogative it is to talk about *hidden* and *mysterious* matters, with rustling crinoline and flying ribbons, can travel from house to house and tell *how* it was Judge Wright 'stole' Col. Shorter's cotton."[49]

[48] *Rome Courier*, October 12, 1865; Wright, *Sketch of My Grandfather.*
[49] *Rome Courier*, September 12, 28, October 12, 1865.

Wright's charms did eventually win over Shorter and they became close friends and business partners. It was a testament to the Christian charity of the judge that he could make friends out of so many of his enemies, forgiving even an assault on his most preciously held possessions: his character and public reputation. Wright never held public office after the war, but his political opinions were often solicited and published in the newspapers. He played a key role in the crafting of Georgia's state constitution in 1877. After he died in 1891, Wright was most remembered for his many talents employed in the service of his fellow Georgians. Many pre-war contemporaries like Joe Brown, however, noted that Wright's ardent temperament and his stubborn independence earned him "the reputation of being changeable in politics and religion. He loves truth and despises consistency when the two seem to come into conflict."[50]

The struggle to make moral decisions had been hardly a struggle at all earlier in Wright's life. Allegiances to God, family, state, and nation seemed to be aligned quite clearly in his mind, and especially in his heart. War changed all that. Decisions that were previously simple became the result of a tortuous mental calculus that pitted cherished beliefs and principles against each other. The definition of "loyalty" became fluid and situational, inexact and ambiguous. Independent men of high moral principle had a difficult time operating in the context of civil war, and had an even harder time justifying their actions.

After the fighting ended, Wright began to think back on those terrible years and tried to come to terms with the part that he had played in the conflict. In his heart, Wright maintained, he never wavered. "If there was ever a man on earth who had an idolatrous reverence for the Union," Wright told a Congressional committee after the war, "I was that man." Throughout the war, Wright insisted, "there was not an hour when the flag of the Union should not have floated over every foot of our territory if I could have controlled it." Clearly, Wright felt the need to justify his actions and return, at least in his own mind, to a place where his principles maintained their purity and immutability. Was he deceiving himself? Did Wright truly believe that future historians and his south-

[50]Herbert Fielder, *A Sketch of the Life and Times and Speeches of Joseph E. Brown* (Springfield, Mass., 1883), 65.

ern neighbors would understand his behavior during the war and, like almighty God, forgive his errors as well as those of his fellow politicians, Union and Confederate alike?[51]

To call Augustus R. Wright of Georgia a traitor to the southern cause, a moralizing martyr for peace, or even a base opportunist, are all gross oversimplification. To accept Wright's own narrow rationalization, however, may also be inadequate. The dynamic, complex, and confusing context of war makes even the most apparently straightforward acts of loyalty or disloyalty subject to interpretation, based on individual circumstance. With war on the horizon, Wright felt an overwhelming sense of duty to his fellow Georgians. One of the primary responsibilities of government, in Wright's mind, was to protect the people. If disunion and war promised the disastrous consequences that Wright consistently believed that they did, he had the opportunity and the duty to attempt to arrest the rebellion from within. He had learned from his abbreviated career in the U.S. Congress, and from the divisive presidential election that followed, that by stubbornly adhering to principle and ignoring political realities, one could contribute to destructive and dangerous outcomes. So he compromised one of his sacred principles, loyalty to the Union, and cooperated with the secessionists.

As the war dragged on to unanticipated lengths, Wright's moral principles achieved preeminence in his mental calculus. Secession was wrong, as Wright had maintained from the start, because the question had never been referred to the people officially. It was clear to him that God could only hate war and the radical clique of demagogues who precipitated it. The death of his son-in-law, the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers, and the injuries to his own sons convinced Wright that he had acted in error. Wright turned away from the Confederacy and turned toward peace. With his family and neighbors in serious danger, Wright employed his best survival skills to try to protect those he loved. The Confederate government failed to maintain order and had compromised personal and property rights in Wright's eyes. It devoured the scarce, essential resources needed for the welfare of its most vulnerable citizens: women, children, and the elderly. Wright could not abandon the people on the homefront. He tried to stop

[51] *Report of the Joint Committee*, 6: 90, 110.

the war, but the Davis government had decided to fight to the end. So Wright conspired with the Union army, aided fugitives, and smuggled contraband. Short of taking up arms for the enemy, it is hard to imagine a more blatant attempt to subvert the authority of one's government. Perhaps Wright's own words best describe his unique views on loyalty: "There are two kinds of loyalty. One is loyalty of force, where a man may be afraid of bayonets and the power of his government, and, therefore, he may support the government, and sustain it by his taxes, and even go to war if he is compelled to do so, while in his soul he might hate it, believing it to be despotism. In my opinion, true loyalty can only exist in the affections of a man, and can only arise from a conviction that the government blesses him, that its power is used for the protection of his person and his property. This "true" kind of loyalty, Wright explained, was 'the loyalty of the heart.'"[52]

Most of Wright's friends and neighbors understood his behavior, because many of them had attempted to balance their own conflicting allegiances throughout the war. The people of Georgia were deeply divided over secession. These divisions did not evaporate, but the Union movement, like the southern political system, disintegrated in November 1860. Most Union men cooperated, at least outwardly, with the new government. Wright's privilege of reserving the right to have a crisis of conscience later was exceptional. As historian Thomas Dyer concluded in his study of the secret Union circle in Confederate Atlanta, "loyalty was frequently imperfect, rarely unconditional, and often influenced by circumstance." Many newly minted Confederates harbored serious doubts about their adopted cause despite their outward bravado. Thus the difficult task of balancing competing allegiances faced Union man and secessionist alike. The choices that they made and their reasons for making them carry huge significance for historians attempting to weigh the importance of internal divisions on the Confederate homefront. Augustus R. Wright provides a compelling account of a prominent Georgia leader and his struggle to reconcile his duties as a citizen with the moral dictates of his heart.[53]

[52]*Ibid.* 6:132

[53]Thomas G. Dyer, *Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta* (Baltimore, 1999), 267.