

Wigfall Grays
by
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No matter if you refer to it as the War Between the States, the Second War of Independence, the War of Northern Aggression, or the Civil War, the events of 1860 to 1865 in North America have had more written about it than any period in the history of the world.

At a time when the population of all the states and territories was only a little over 25 million people, the young republic would endure four years of war, two million casualties, 625,000 dead. Scholars and historians have since speculated and debated the circumstances that caused such a conflict. For some, the regional differences that had always existed from Colonial times had grown to the point that the Union formed by sovereign states was no longer functioning to the comfort and well being of its members. And that was the basis for its formation.

Philosophical and theological differences between a new, enlightened, and transcendental approach to religion in the Northeast, and a more traditional, fundamental doctrine in the South had resulted in a North/South split in several Christian denominations.

The aristocratic planter class in the South, with its institution of slavery, was despised and ridiculed by a growing, educated class in the North that demanded a more equal and fair distribution of power and wealth between capital and labor.

The relationship of the states to each other and the states to the central government of the union was under constant discussion. Likewise, questions of sovereignty and where it resided. As it was defined in the Constitution, only the people in each state had sovereignty. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights that formed the union describe a central government of the union that was so limited that it could never be sovereign. But many felt that real progress could not be made unless that central government of the union would become the ultimate, sovereign power. Nullification powers held by the individual states don't get much conversation now, but they caused a great deal of excitement at the time.

A tariff system that was the sole source of funding for a growing central government was designed to protect the manufacturing and banking interests of the North but did so at the expense of the South, in that the tariff was protective in the way it levied in imported finished goods and exported agricultural products. By the mid-1850s, over 80 percent of the revenue going into the federal treasury was from tariffs on Southern commerce. It was feeding a growing central government that offered no value to the agrarian South that was paying the price.

As the population grew and new states were added, the Southern states would be more isolated, powerless to have their interests protected in the union. These differences had split the Democratic party, North-South, with each faction naming its own candidate for President in the 1860 election, an election that would have four candidates for President, with the winner receiving little over one-third of the vote.

Regardless of any one cause, the result was that of the 15 Southern states, out of 34 states in the union, 7 Southern states saw no way to stay in the union after the election of Abraham Lincoln, of the new Republican Party, which had proposed doubling of the tariffs. They withdrew the authority that was their part of the union and formed a new union to serve their mutual interests. This was their right and their obligation.

The Confederate States of America was organized under a constitution that was almost identical to the original U. S. Constitution with its Bill of Rights. They were not moving away from the standards set by the Founding Fathers. They were trying to perpetuate those standards.

Tennessee was not one of those seven states, having decided that it would be tough, but that they would try to work things out while remaining in the union. Later that spring, things began to boil over. Troops from South Carolina fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. U. S. Military forces had left other properties in the seceded states when asked, but had delayed leaving Charleston, first by moving into Fort Sumter from Fort Moultrie, and then by attempting to reinforce its presence while talking about leaving. It seemed they wanted to provoke South Carolina into being the aggressor.

Louis T. Wigfall from Texas was in his home town of Charleston on that day. He was born and raised in South Carolina but answered the call that so many young, ambitious men heard coming from Texas. He had gotten into Texas with enthusiasm, rising to the rank of general in its militia, the Texas Brigade. He was an attorney and a member of the state legislature, which elected him to represent Texas in the United States Senate. He had come to Charleston on that day, on his way back from Washington, D.C., having been forced to resign his Senate seat after Texas's secession.

During the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Wigfall went out on his own with a small group and convinced Major Robert Anderson to strike the colors and vacate the fort to avoid any harm to his men. They had been fired on for some time, but no one had been injured. Anderson followed Wigfall's advice and was allowed to leave. The South Carolina officials had not sent Wigfall, didn't even know that he had gone out there, but when they saw the results, they were surprised but pleased, and let his actions stand.

Three days later, April 15, 1861, two things happened. President Lincoln, independent of Congress, called for 75,000 troops to be raised to be part of an invasion of the seceded states, to put down what he called a rebellion. They would force those states back into the union--a union that Lincoln deemed irrevocable. This was shocking and caught a lot of people by surprise. One thing we see in this conflict is that neither side fully understood

or appreciated the other's position or resolve. There were many factors that led to secession, but secession was the cause of the War.

Now with Lincoln's call, four more states saw the union as hopeless: North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas would leave the union and join the Confederate States of America. The other four Southern states, or "slave states," as they called them in the North--Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri--would be held in the union--held in the union as slave states. Emancipation would not come to Maryland any sooner than it came to Mississippi.

After Fort Sumter Louis Wigfall had taken a westbound train on the Memphis-Charleston Railroad. At stops along the way, he told the news of Fort Sumter and rallied the people to be ready to defend their homes against a probable invasion.

On April 15 he was in a small town near the western end of the railroad, that had just been surveyed and carved out of a wilderness 25 years before. His news and his speech inspired a willing crowd. Tennessee would still be in the Union for a few more weeks, but the people knew what was going to happen. That town, of course, was Collierville, Tennessee.

Though the town had a population of only about 500, a militia unit of 80 men was formed. Every man 18 to 35, some older, some younger, volunteered. They named the unit the Wigfall Grays. They met on the lawn of the Methodist Church for drills, while inside the church the women sewed uniforms.

On May 11 their received orders to report on May 15 at the Germantown Depot. They hustled to complete their arms and equipment. They met at the church in their new uniforms and were presented with a fine silk flag made by the ladies of town, and they were off.

At Germantown, the units were counted and assembled as the Fourth Tennessee Infantry Regiment. The Wigfall Grays would be Company C. They were sworn in as Tennessee Troops. The regiment went to Randolph, above Memphis, then to nearby Fort Pillow for what we would call "boot camp." It would be a long, hot summer, miserable conditions, boring drills, but on August 17 they were sworn into Confederate service. In late August the regiment got its first assignment of patrol reconnaissance around New Madrid, Missouri, in support of the Southern-sympathizing population of Southern Missouri. Later they went by boat for similar duty around Hickman, Kentucky. That winter they were back in Missouri. They had had a few skirmishes, just missing any serious action.

Early Spring they were ordered back across the Mississippi River into Corinth, Mississippi. They had been in service for most of a year away from home. They had seen very little action. That was about to change.

On April 3, 1862, they were ordered to march from Corinth to Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River, where union forces were gathering. April 6 and 7 was the Battle of

Shiloh. The Fourth Tennessee charged and captured several guns manned by seven union regiments, but they lost 66 of a little over 200 men. Company C had 5 killed and 15 wounded in just a few minutes. That night the union numbers grew dramatically, with reinforcements arriving by land and river. At the end of the second day, the Fourth was on its way back to Corinth. They were in retreat but had fought well and were not defeated. On April 25 they re-enlisted for two years.

From Corinth they were ordered to Mobile, Alabama, on the Gulf Coast, then to Montgomery and Atlanta.

Early summer of 1862, things were happening fast at home. On June 6 Memphis fell after a short naval battle. Memphis on the Mississippi at a railroad hub was an early objective of U.S. forces. Thousands of U.S. troops were sent to the area as an overwhelming occupying force. Collierville would be the site of a major garrison of U.S. troops, mostly from Ohio and Indiana. They fortified almost 15 acres north of the railroad and south of State Line Road, with a stockade inside that fortification, close to the railroad depot.

The war had come to Collierville, and the men were off in another theater of that war. Frustrating. Only the older men and young boys were left to watch after the women and the property.

Late that summer, the 4th was sent to Chattanooga, then across Tennessee to Kentucky. In a raid just 12 miles from Louisville, they captured 4,000 troops and valuable supplies. Later, at the Battle of Perryville, they were on the right side, part of Cheatham's division. They pushed the Yankees back over half a mile, but they did take some losses. They were now down to about half of the original 80 but were still eager to continue.

They moved from Kentucky into East Tennessee, and then back West. After the battle at Murfreesboro, Merritt Brown, of the Wigfall Grays, received the Medal of Honor. The company was now down to 22 of the original 80, and were alarmed with the news of a battle in Collierville. They knew very few details, but that it had lasted for several hours, with intense fighting. They yearned for news of their families and home.

The 4th was beat up but not beaten, and they voluntarily extended their enlistment for the duration, with no time limit, whatever it took. They were the first unit to do so and inspired many others.

At Chickamauga, the recuperating 4th was held in reserve under constant artillery barrage but out of range to fire back with shoulder weapons. At Missionary Ridge, Company C fought back and forth along the ridge. Of the 22 who entered the fight, 2 were killed and 4 were captured.

In 1864 the 4th fought along a route from Chattanooga to Atlanta, trying to delay the much larger union force and allowing time for the defense of Atlanta to be built. Dalton, Rome, Resaca, Kennisaw, all the engagements saw the 4th take part.

At Lovejoy after the fall of Atlanta, the regiment was so reduced that they, along with six others, were reorganized into one thin regiment. They headed west into Alabama, then north to Tennessee, to Columbia. Winter was there, and it was rough one. With very few supplies, food, or boots, they attacked union forces at Franklin, Tennessee, in the closing days of November. It was a horrible, bloody battle, but the Grays did their best.

At Nashville, closer to Christmas, now part of Strahl's Brigade, the old 4th fought hard. The Wigfall Grays had two captured. General Hood ordered retreat from Tennessee into North Carolina. He asked for the best infantry unit to be loaned to General Forrest to cover the retreat. What was left of the 4th, including the Wigfall Grays, was identified as that unit. They would operate as foot cavalry, with Forrest fighting delaying action, providing cover for the retreat. This would be the last action for the Wigfall Grays.

During the four years of service, the Wigfall Grays had traveled thousands of miles, had always answered the call of duty, and had done their best. Company C had 31 more recruits added to the original 80, for a total of 111. Of the 111, 16 were killed in battle, 17 died of wounds, 16 were discharged for wounds or illness, 15 were missing, 12 had been transferred to other units, and 5 joined union forces after capture when given the choice of that or prison.

Thirty-four were on the roll at the end--34 of 111. Most of them came home to Collierville, a very different Collierville. Only two or three buildings were left standing. The town had been looted and burned by departing U.S. troops--troops that had occupied it for three years but had no further use for it. Everything was gone, including most of two generations of men, but they went to work to rebuild what they had hoped to defend and keep but could not. They were determined to restore what was lost, built on the strength of character and honor they had inherited, and which they would never lose but would pass on to following generations.

They flattened the old fort and laid out a new commercial district surrounding the park, Confederate Park, near the railroad. All signs of the occupation were obliterated. Everything was for the future. There would be other challenges: reconstruction, yellow fever, other wars, and hard economic times, but come see the town now, and you be the judge of their success.

See the names on our historic markers, see the same names in our phone book and on storefronts. Those people and the generations that followed never lost their sense of value and honor, knowing what really matters and what's really important. It's hard for us to know exactly why they did what they did. They acted on circumstances as they saw them and were unwavering in their commitment to do what they thought was right.

It is difficult for us to understand some of the things our children or our parents do. We reach our conclusions after the fact, assessing things from our point of view, which includes hindsight, and that's just dealing with one generation away. To make judgments of our ancestors six or seven generations back, using only our perspective, is absurd. The fraud of political correctness is clearly shown when our generation is demanded to apologize for our ancestors--to apologize without asking those in the present generation if we may be ashamed of some of the things we freely accept in modern society, that might have been embarrassing and appalling to past generations, generations to whom we owe so much. No, I say we honor those past generations for who they were--our ancestors--that we try to be as strong if we ever face similar challenges, and to always be as loyal, and as honorable. It is much better to hoist the Bonnie Blue flag and have the band play *Dixie*.