William Law

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HIS 300
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere appreciation for the work done by Benjamin Palmer Axson (deceased). Some of the information obtained from his papers at the Georgia Historical Society is no longer available from any other source. I would also like to thank his son of the same name who was gracious enough to grant an interview. He freely revealed all that he knew about Judge Law and directed me to the book, *Holding Aloft the Torch*, and to Colonel William E. Harper. The description of Judge Law is possible because Col. Harper, a great-grandson of the judge, allowed me to view a picture of him. Alida Law was Col. Harper's grandmother, and the information about her came from him. He also is the beneficiary of my heartfelt thanks.
William Law was born on March 27, 1793. ¹ He died on January 22, 1874 as a result of a fall from a horse ² the previous July at the age of eighty. ³ His obituary mentions that he led a company of cavalry in the War of 1812. ⁴ Since little is known of his early life, this narrative essentially begins and ends on horseback. William Law was a great traveler and covered many miles between these events. When he was not traveling, he was busy letting the grass grow under his feet. In this case, interpret grass to mean children, responsibilities, slaves, rice and cotton. He was born to wealth and position, increased both and was held to be a brilliant man and a fascinating orator. Lest you think him overly blest, consider his appearance. William Law was not a handsome man. He looked much like Andrew Jackson, but add to that picture a scruffy beard and the nose of W.C. Fields. ⁵ Life also dealt him an even share of tragedies and setbacks, but he coped with these in a workmanlike manner. Now, with no further ado, meet William Law.

¹ Grave Monument, Laurel Grove Cemetery, Lot 418, Savannah, Georgia
² Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia), 23 January 1874, p. 3, c. 1.
³ Ibid., 31 July 1873, p. 3, c. 3.
⁴ Ibid., 24 January 1874, p. 2, c. 2.
As a Young Man

In a newspaper article in 1839 William Law refers to Liberty County, Georgia as the place of his nativity. An article about William McWhir, the principal of Sunbury Academy in 1807, mentions that William Law attended in that year. Law's obituary states that he moved to Savannah, Georgia before reaching his majority. It also says that he taught at Chatham Academy in Savannah and studied law at night under William B. Bulloch. Benjamin Palmer Axson claims that William Law studied law with the firm of Davis & Berrian. Perhaps he studied with both of them.

William John Grayson, in his autobiography, announces that he was appointed principal of Chatham Academy by the influence of his friend, Richard Habershon. This was in 1812. He asserts that William Law was his assistant and that they both occupied rooms at the academy. This places William Law in Savannah at the age of nineteen. It would also seem to indicate that his abilities were already highly regarded else he would not have been appointed assistant professor.

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8 Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 24 January 1874, p. 2, c. 2.

9 Benjamin Palmer Axson. personal papers. Collection 1330, Box 1, Notebook 3. Georgia Historical Society.

The idea that William Law commanded a company of cavalry in the War of 1812 comes from his obituary in 1874 and may be in error. Benjamin Palmer Axson says that William Law joined the Georgia Hussars in 1812 and became 2nd Lt. in 1821, 1st Lt. in 1823, Capt. in 1825 and Major in 1838. He also claims that Law was kept on the roll of the Hussars as an honorary member until his death.\textsuperscript{11} The first dress parade of the Hussars was held on Washington's birthday in 1817. At that time William Law was the 3rd Lt.\textsuperscript{12} so he could hardly have commanded the Hussars in the war. He served under Capt. Morel in 1818.\textsuperscript{13} William Law certainly served as Capt. of the Hussars because he resigned from that position in 1827.\textsuperscript{14} He was already a captain by the time of Gen. Lafayette's visit to Savannah in 1825 and was on the Committee of Arrangements for the Lafayette Dinner and Ball.\textsuperscript{15} A moment which may have haunted him later came at the ball when he toasted the stability of the republic.\textsuperscript{16}

William Law served on the Committee to Advise the U.S. Military Academy in 1829\textsuperscript{17} and was fined ten dollars for failure to attend parade.

\textsuperscript{11} Benjamin Palmer Axson.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Savannah Morning News} (Savannah, Georgia). 3 May 1872, p. 3, c. 2.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Columbia Museum and Savannah Daily Gazette} (Savannah, Georgia). 13 January 1818, p. 3, c. 4.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Savannah Georgian} (Savannah, Georgia). 27 September 1827, p. 3, c. 3.

\textsuperscript{15} ibid., 17 March 1825, p. 2, c. 1.

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., 21 March 1825, p. 2, c. 5.

\textsuperscript{17} ibid., 8 July 1829, p. 2, c. 5.
that same year. 18 Either his earlier resignation was not accepted or he thought better of it and rejoined. Law visited Picolata, Florida in 1834 for an unknown reason. All that is currently established is that he returned on the steamboat Florida. 19 It seems doubtful that his visit was related to the practice of law since it was so far afield. In 1836 he spoke in support of the formation of a volunteer legion to protect Savannah. Picolata and Jacksonville, Florida were being attacked by Indians, so maybe the earlier visit was of a military nature. 20 One must wonder, though, whether the idea of an eventual confrontation with the northern states may have played a part in this decision. The legion was formed and William Law was elected Capt. of the Cavalry Corps of the Chatham Legion on February 2, 1836. 21 He did become Major of that unit, possibly in 1838, because he resigned in 1840.22 At that time, however, it was referred to as 1st Division, Georgia Militia. Whether it was still the Hussars is unclear.

18 Ibid., 29 January 1829, p. 2, c. 6.
21 Ibid., 3 February 1836, p. 2, c. 6.
22 Savannah Daily Republican (Savannah, Georgia). 28 October 1840, p. 2, c. 6.
His Family Life

Benjamin Palmer Axson reports that William Law married Ann Carolyn Fabian in July of 1813. They had two children, William F. and Mary Estes.\textsuperscript{23} Their marriage settlement was recorded in August of 1813. One can tell that he had not yet become a lawyer because the settlement allows her to file a will as if unmarried unless their union produces offspring.\textsuperscript{24} Since William F. survived, the death of a child of Wm. Law Esq. recorded in Midway Church records for 1817 must refer to Mary Estes. The child is reported to have died at Sunbury in Liberty County.\textsuperscript{25} Ann died in 1819\textsuperscript{26} leaving him a widower. The epitaph on her grave marker says, "Sacred to the memory of Mrs. Ann Caroline Law/wife of Wm. Law/who departed this life at Sunbury/on the 20th, September 1819." \textsuperscript{27}

William Law married Alethea Marbury Jones, a Savannah woman, in Greenville, S.C. late in 1821.\textsuperscript{28} He was already a lawyer by this time and the marriage settlement provided for all property to go to the survivor even if the marriage produced no issue.\textsuperscript{29} They had six children, James Jones, Francis M., Sarah, Henry M., Alethea Stark and Julia.\textsuperscript{30}

A brief digression will help reveal the character of the man. In October of 1824 he was elected as a representative to the state legislature.\textsuperscript{31} His

\textsuperscript{23} Benjamin Palmer Axson.
\textsuperscript{24} Chatham County, Georgia. Index to Deeds, 1795-1910, Vols. 2E, 2L, 2Q, 3O, 3F. Superior Court. vol 2E, folio 332.
\textsuperscript{25} Ola M. Wyeth, and Dolores Floyd. Records of the Midway Congregational Church, vol 3, p. 121B.
\textsuperscript{26} ibid., vol 3, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{27} Savannah Unit WPA of Georgia. Epitaphs In Midway Cemetery. 1937, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{28} Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 2 November 1821, p. 3, c. 2.
\textsuperscript{29} U.S. Bureau of the Census for Chatham County, Georgia. 1830-1860. vol 2L, folio 50.
\textsuperscript{30} Benjamin Palmer Axson.
\textsuperscript{31} Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 7 October 1824, p. 2, c. 2.
departure for Milledgeville, Georgia to take his seat was announced on May 23, 1825. 32 Francis McLeod, his youngest son, died on June 12th following. 33 The ship Savannah departed from Savannah for New York on June 27, 1825 with William Law, his wife, two children and a servant. 34 There can be no doubt that he left the legislature to console a grieving wife. If you are unconvinced, consider a toast proposed by I.K. Tefft on the 4th of July: "William Law, our late representative -- Distinguished alike for the soundness of his political opinions, the brilliancy of his talents, and the amenity of his manners." 35 New York was not a fortuitous choice. Alethea Marbury Jones attended the Female Seminary in Harlaem, N.Y. until she was sixteen. 36 They returned in October of that year in the ship Augusta. 37 An interesting aside to this is that one of the two children who went had to be William F. Law, her step-son. That is not in itself unusual but then neither would it have been unusual had he been left behind with relatives. He was eight years old at the time. Alethea Marbury Law died early in 1832 and left William Law a widower for the second time. The funeral proceeded from their residence on St. James' Sq. 38

Alethea Jones Stark became Law's third wife in February of 1834. 39 She was born January 7, 1810, died April 22, 1872 40 and was the cousin

33 Ibid., 13 June 1823, p. 3, c. 2.
34 Ibid., 26 June 1825, p. 3. 35 Ibid., 7 July 1825, p. 2, c. 3.
35 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 7 July 1825, p. 3, c. 2.
36 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 29 January 1832, p. 2, c. 6.
37 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 24 October 1825, p. 3, c. 3.
38 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 19 January 1832, p. 2, c. 5.
39 Ibid., 4 March 1834, p. 2, c. 6.
40 Grave Monument, Laurel Grove Cemetery, Lot 418, Savannah, Georgia
of Alethea Marbury Jones. 41 They had ten children. Their names are Ebenezer Stark, Mary Louise, Wilhelmina, Ella, Caroline Matilda, Samuel Spry, Emily Marbury, Isabel, Georgia Walton and Alida Stark. 42 Alethea Jones Law was a traveler in her own right, and between her and William and them together, they logged quite a few miles. In 1837 she is shown returning from Augusta, Georgia by boat with three children. 43 Then, in June of 1837, they left for New York in the ship Moctezuma with seven children and two servants. 44 Their return, however, lists William Law and twelve steerage on the ship Mersey from Liverpool, England. 45 Since they were gone for more than five months and common newspaper usage was to list the last port of call, it is likely that they crossed the Atlantic from New York. Curiously, they returned with two more people on the manifest than left with them.

The traveling days of Alethea Jones Law nearly came to an end in May of 1838. She boarded the ill fated steamboat Pulaski for a trip to Baltimore, Maryland. 46 The boat exploded and many were feared dead. Everyone must have been excited, including the editor of the paper. He reported that William Law had been on the boat and was feared lost. 47 This is not the case; additionally, Mrs. Law and most of the passengers were saved. 48 After that,

41 Benjamin Palmer Axson.

42 Ibid.

43 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 15 May 1837, p. 3, c. 1.

44 Ibid., 20 June 1837, p. 3, c. 3.


46 Ibid., 3 May 1838, p. 2, c. 6.

47 Ibid., 22 June 1838, p. 2, c. 3.

48 Ibid., 26 June 1838, p. 2, c. 3,4.
she may have confined herself to travel by land. At the least, no further
notations that she took to water are immediately obvious. She is reported
to have traveled by train from Virginia with William Law in 1862, though.
This report is in the *The Confederate Diary of William John Grayson*. Mr.
Grayson claims that while in Virginia they had ridden twenty miles on
horseback in order to attend a son wounded at the battle of Manassas.
Grayson met them on the way back.\(^49\) In 1862 William Law was sixty-nine
years old, and Serg't E.S. Law of the Oglethorpe Light Infantry was indeed
wounded in that battle. \(^50\) If he did not weep when his mother and father
walked into that hospital tent, he was not a true son of his father.

\(^{49}\) Elmer L. P puryear, editor, "The Confederate Diary of William John Grayson," *South Carolina

\(^{50}\) *Daily Morning News* (Savannah, Georgia), 8 September 1962, p. 1, c. 1.
His Political Involvement

William Law became a lawyer in 1815 at the age of twenty-two. There is no way to know when he decided to participate in the political arena. What is known is that he was appointed public prosecutor near the end of 1817. His official title was Solicitor General for the Eastern District. In 1821, serving in this capacity, he became involved in a public scandal relating to the conduct of Judge Berrien. William Law was accused of secret connivance and management with the court and defendant by the editor of the Columbia Museum and Savannah Gazette. Law promptly had him arrested on a libel charge, advertised it, and claimed that he felt obligated to repel the attack immediately. In a curious paid advertisement five days later William Law stated that his previous announcement had been made in order to allow his accusers the opportunity to substantiate the charges. The tenor of the statement implies that he was sensitive to adverse criticism of his motives. This sensitivity might have to be considered in light of the fact that he was a founding member of the Savannah Anti-Dueling Association in 1827.

On the 4th of July, 1822 William Law delivered an "eloquent oration" commemorating independence. At the same celebration in 1826 he

51 Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 24 January 1874, p. 2, c. 2.
53 "Legal Advertising From Old Georgia Newspapers," Georgia Genealogical Magazine. 21 July 1821, p. 3, c. 3.
54 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 25 July 1821, p. 3, c. 3.
55 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 10 January 1827, p. 2, c. 1.
56 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 6 July 1822, p. 2, c. 1.
proposed a toast which must be presented in its entirety: “John Q. Adams -- From his lighthouses of the skies, may he make better observations on the State of Georgia.” 57 The particular meaning of this toast is beyond the ken of such a cursory investigation as this, but it is indisputably a joke at the expense of a sitting president. Dry and political it may be, but it is a joke all the same. William Law was not humorless. Shortly after this he petitioned the Court of Common Pleas for an adjournment to show respect for the recently departed Thomas Jefferson. 58 He also made a speech in honor of Jefferson at a ceremony later in the month. 59 His appreciation of Jefferson in the first indication of his tendencies in national politics.

You may recall that William Law first held elective office, state representative, in 1824. He returned to elective office in the fall of 1826 as a city alderman. 60 He probably accepted the nomination for this post more in a sense of his civic duty than a desire to enhance his status. He had already been proposed as a replacement for E.F. Tatnall, deceased, to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1827, 61 and in 1829 Governor Forsyth appointed him Judge of the Superior Court of the Eastern District of the State of Georgia. 62 He was elected to the same position against no opposition in late 1831 and held it until the year 1834. 63 He assumed the

57 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 6 July 1826, p. 2, c. 3.
58 ibid., 15 July 1826, p. 2, c. 1.
59 ibid., 29 July 1826, p. 2, c. 3.
60 ibid., 4 September 1828, p. 2, c. 4.
61 ibid., 30 August 1827, p. 3, c. 2.
62 ibid., 16 May 1829, p. 2, c. 1.
63 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 15 November 1831, p. 2, c. 1.
chairmanship of the Bar of the Eastern District on the heels of the election. Establishing a Court of Errors (Appeals) in the state was his primary concern as a judge. William Law was a judge for only five years, yet he was frequently referred to as Judge Law for the rest of his life.

Judge Law was a member of the States Rights Association of Georgia and attended the Great States Rights Meeting in early 1834 where a pledge was made to "resist, constitutionally, usurpation of rights by the Federal Government." That he was a man of convictions and a bold orator is indicated by his acceptance of a speaking engagement at a Union Meeting in Effingham County, Georgia. An observer, presumably a Union partisan, said that he was disappointed in William Law's stand and that the speech was based on feeling, not investigation. Note that he did not say that it was a poor speech. Two contributors to the local paper were less flattering to the Judge Law, though. The first refers to him as a "nullifier" and the second as a "politico traveling judge." The context of the comments makes it plain that they are not complimentary, but from the remove of more than a century these comments are historically significant, true and not uncomplimentary in the least. The second gentleman, however, continues on to include Judge Law's speech in a recipe for vomit. This is the only revealed instance of someone criticizing one of his speeches harshly. It also reveals that there was antipathy for the cause of

64 ibid., 17 December 1831, p. 2, c. 5.
65 ibid., 5 May 1832, p. 2, c. 5, 6.
66 Ibid., 13 February 1834, p. 2, c. 1, 2.
67 Ibid., 22 September 1834, p. 2, c. 4.
68 Ibid., 24 September 1834, p. 2, c. 2.
states rights in Georgia at that time. In fact, there was so much strong feeling against it that in the November elections of 1834 every candidate elected was a member of the Union Party. John C. Nicoll defeated Judge Law for the judgeship by a count of 167 to 90. 69 William Law returned to private practice in a brick building on Bull St. in front of the Exchange. 70 He continued to speak out for states rights, however, delivering an oration on the 4th of July, 1835. 71

Aside from another stint as alderman in 1841 as a Reform ticket candidate, 72 Judge Law disdained to seek elective office again. One begins to suspect that he was a proud man. Subsequent events imply that he saw the course of the future in a clearer light than most of his fellows; therefore, he turned his attention to national politics. He was a delegate from Georgia to the Boston Convention of the Whig Party in 1840. 73 On returning to Savannah he participated in the formation of Tippecanoe Club #1 in support of the candidacy of William Henry Harrison for president. 74 A correspondent's report to a local paper from Milledgeville on November 16, 1840 says that someone announced "the 'Book Man' gave it up" at the election result rally. This refers to Martin Van Buren conceding the election to Harrison and gives an indication of how Harrison's campaign

69 Ibid., 11 November 1834, p. 2, c. 3.

70 Ibid., 25 November 1834, p. 2, c. 5

71 Ibid., 26 June 1835, p. 2, c. 5.

72 Daily Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 7 September 1841, p. 2, c. 2.


74 Savannah Daily Republican (Savannah, Georgia). 30 October 1840, p. 2, c. 3.
was run. At that point "a unanimous cry of Law! Law! Law!!! was raised.\textsuperscript{75}
Can one doubt that he was instrumental in a campaign of national proportion?

Zachary Taylor was elected president as a Whig in 1848, and Judge Law was still on the Whig Committee in 1850. \textsuperscript{76} If his politics remained consistent, he supported Gen. Winfield Scott in 1852. Law wanted to nominate Fillmore and Donelson in 1856. \textsuperscript{77} Fillmore did get the nomination of the dying Whig Party but was badly defeated by the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan. \textsuperscript{78} There is a strong conviction among William Law's descendants that President Buchanan offered him the post of Ambassador to France.\textsuperscript{79} This hardly seems likely unless he deserted the dissolving Whig Party in order to support Buchanan or unless he and Buchanan were close friends. There is no obvious reference to his preference in 1860. You may confidently assume that he did not vote for Abraham Lincoln. A wild guess would be that he gave his support to Breckinridge.

\textsuperscript{75} Savannah Daily Republican. (Savannah, Georgia). 16 November 1840, p. 2, c. 3.

\textsuperscript{76} Daily Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 23 March 1850, p. 2, c. 1.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 7 July 1856, p. 2, c. 1.


\textsuperscript{79} Colonel William E. Harper. Interview by author.
Benjamin Palmer Axson, Jr. Interview by author.
Various Other Aspects of His Life

William Law hung out his shingle as a lawyer for the first time in 1819 in partnership with Joseph W. Jackson. Their office was on Johnston's Square and adjoined the establishment of Habersham & Drysdale. He must have had a genial relationship with R.W. Habersham and John Drysdale because they jointly purchased Ticket 3579 in the Savannah Poor House and Hospital Lottery in 1820. The ticket paid $25,000.00 so they each cleared over $8,333.00, assuming an even split. Did they give the odd penny to a street urchin or a slave? At least four other partners appear in the course of his life. These are Berrian, Bartow, Lovell and Falligant in various combinations over time. He was on the Committee of Examination which passed Robert Falligant for the Bar in 1866. Judge Law's obituary declares that it is needless to speak of his professional ability because it has passed into proverb.

The hurricane of 1824 killed two of his slaves on Colonels Island near Sunbury. That island may be the location of his original plantation, which may have been named Hunters Hall. Rain severely damaged his rice harvest on the Ogeechee in 1858, probably at Walton Plantation. (See the War Years and Their Aftermath) It at first seems absurd to think that he imported cotton and rice, but he did on at least two occasions, in 1825 on the schooner Flore and in 1828 on the sloop America. The importation occurred in winter in both cases.

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80 Daily Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 3 December 1819, p. 3, c. 2.

81 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 24 June 1820, p. 3, c. 1.

82 Benjamin Palmer Axson.

83 Savannah Daily Herald (Savannah, Georgia). 18 January 1866, p. 2, c. 3.

84 Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 24 January 1874, p. 2, c. 2.

85 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 25 September 1824, p. 2, c. 2.

86 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 27 January 1825, p. 2, c. 4.

87 Ibid., 31 December 1828, p. 2, c. 4.
though, so he was likely bringing in seed for spring planting. W.W. Wash sold William Law a 710 acre plantation called Chippewa in Chatham County in 1845. 88 It would surely be impossible to track down every piece of property that Law owned and even to trace the ones for which records exist is beyond the scope of this history. Part of the problem is that none of his three marriage settlements itemize property. Also, he was a land speculator, in which capacity he was involved in a number of deals of some complexity. 89 One of these involves the buying and selling of a parcel consisting of the Causton Bluff and New Hope Tracts. The deeds recording this deal make it appear that William Law made a $15,000.00 profit on a $10,000.00 investment in a single day.90 However, a WPA project dealing with these and other properties indicates that the time span was actually the seven years proceeding the close of the deal in 1849. 91 This only slightly detracts from its impressiveness, though.

John Forbes was sentenced to death by Judge Law in 1833 for the murder of Colonel Daniel H. Braidsford. 92 In another case, he sentenced James Groves to four years in the penitentiary for vagrancy. 93 These sentences are presented in order to show that while William Law was a man of great heart he was capable of harshness when necessary. He was

88 Chatham County, Georgia. Index to Deeds. 1785-1910. Superior Court. vol 3C, folio 29.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid., vol 3F, folios 315, 354.


93 Ibid., 7 February 1834, p. 2, c. 1.
also capable of stubbornness. On none of his census forms did he fill in any information about white household. His attitude toward the federal government could explain this omission. Another illustrative incident happened in 1838 when he was on the ballot for election as a Director of the Bank of the State of Georgia on the part of the state. He was not elected on the first ballot but had a high vote count and was in contention for a run-off vote. He withdrew his name from the ballot before the vote. Can this imply anything less than an imperial attitude? He was willing to serve if his election was by acclamation.

His service was freely given in non-elective situations, though. He joined the Hibernian Society in 1823, served as a trustee of Chatham Academy in (from?) 1824, was appointed to the Executive Committee for the Infant School in 1828, served on the commission to secure construction of a railroad between Savannah and Macon, was an elder of the Independent Presbyterian Church and was serving on the Board of Education at the time of his death. You can readily tell that William Law had an interest in education. In 1822 he and some friends paid for a newspaper advertisement to publicly commend

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95 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
96 Glynn County, Georgia. 1963. Georgia Court House Records. Deed Book “G.”
97 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 30 December 1828, p. 2, c. 3.
98 Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 27 May 1835, p. 2, c. 6.
100 Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 24 January 1874, p. 2, c. 2.
Rev. M.L. Weems for the publication of the *American Atlas*. Judge Law was invited to give a commencement address at Athens, Georgia in 1842. The speech so impressed a newspaper correspondent that he refused to comment on the text, insisting that only publication in full could do it justice. The *Georgia Historical Society* received Law's full support as a founding member and one of the initial curators. He delivered the oration at their first anniversary meeting in 1840. In it he stressed the necessity of preservation of even the smallest details of life since they too are a part of history. One wonders if a diary will ever come to light. He was a junior vice president of the society from 1841 to 1853, and his signature was on the petition to have the society chartered by the legislature in 1869.

101 *Georgian* (Savannah, Georgia). 22 March 1822, p. 2, c. 5.

102 *Daily Georgian* (Savannah, Georgia). 9 August 1842, p. 2, c. 5.


106 *Savannah Morning News* (Savannah, Georgia). 13 February 1869, p. 3, c. 2.
The War Years and Their Aftermath

The first secession meeting held in the State of Georgia occurred in Savannah in January of 1861. The meeting was at the old Masonic Hall on the corner of Bull and Broughton Streets and Judge Law was the keynote speaker. Colonel Charles H. Olmstead, who occupied Ft. Pulaski, called it "the most thrilling gathering in my life's experience" and claims that William Law gave the resolutions his "hearty endorsement." 107 Another source claims that he gave them his "absolute and unqualified approval." 108 His exact words matter little, and he certainly could not have stopped Georgia from seceding, but the fact remains that his was the voice which drew Georgia out of the union. He chaired a citizen meeting in 1861 109 and in 1863 he offered a resolution of grief and regret for the death of Gen. Thos. R.R. Cobb. 110 He offered what help he could to a woman forced, because of a letter she had written, to leave occupied Savannah in early 1865 111 and later served on a committee "to restore order and place the state right with the general government." 112

The census of 1860 shows that William Law was worth almost $150,000.00. 113 Most of this was lost as a result of the war. 114 Of what

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108 Lowry Axley, p. 82.


110 Ibid., 14 January 1863, p. 2, c. 3.


112 Savannah Daily Herald (Savannah, Georgia). 25 May 1865, p. 4, c. 1, 2.

113 U.S. Bureau of the Census for Chatham County, Georgia. 1860, p. 256.

114 Chatham County, Georgia. Estate Docket Book of Probate Court, file 183, doc 636.
was left, he had to mortgage the plantation called Hunters Hall in Liberty County to Green A. Amason in 1872. 115 Alida Law, his youngest daughter and the grandmother of Col. William E. Harper, was so embittered by the outcome of the war that when Lincoln pennies were introduced she refused to accept change of less than a nickel. She inherited his plantation of Walton on the Ogeechee River, which eventually became part of the Ford Plantation. 116

The war was over, but the peace had just begun. In June of 1865 William Law sued Capt. Silas Spicer of the union army for the return of a horse captured when Gen. Sherman occupied Savannah. The court ruled in favor of Spicer. 117 Law bided his time and then, in October after Spicer had sold the horse to Frederick Lapham, he went to court again. This time he won and regained possession of his gray horse. 118 It would be ironic if this was the horse that resulted in his fall in 1873. Meanwhile, he had resumed the practice of law as part of the firm of Law & Lowell at the Merchants & Planters Bank. 119 He was listed as a tax defaulter in 1866.120 The federal government became the defendant in another court case he initiated. He refused to take the "Attorney's Test Oath" in order to continue the practice of law. Judge John Erskine ruled in his favor. The act was deemed an unconstitutional "ex post facto" law. 121

115 ibid., filo 189, doc 539.

118 Colonel William E. Harper. Interview by the author.

117 Savannah Daily Herald (Savannah, Georgia). 23 June 1865, p. 2.

119 ibid., 14 October 1865, p. 3, c. 1.

116 ibid., 15 August 1865, p. 2, c. 5.

120 Daily News and Herald (Savannah, Georgia). 17 May 1866, p. 2, c. 6.
And Slavery

William Law was a slave owner for most of his life. His first census, 1820, was filed in Liberty County and declares ownership of either nine or thirteen slaves. 128 The fact that it was filed in Liberty indicates that he had not yet completely associated himself with Savannah. By 1830 he was filing in Chatham County and declared fifty-three slaves. 129 In the 1860 census he values his personal estate, part of which would have been slaves, at 62,775.00. 130 At one point William Law used title to five of his slaves to secure a deed. Their names are Cubit, Aberdeen, Beck, Champion and Balaam. The future issue of Beck was included in the security, so she may have been pregnant. 131 This might, however, have been a standard clause in a contract of that sort. There are numerous instances in which he bought and sold slaves recorded in the deed books of Chatham County. In 1845 he sold Thomas Mallard fifteen slaves at a price of $3950.00. 132

At a meeting of the Savannah Union for the Better Observance of the Christian Sabbath held in December of 1828 William Law proposed a resolution that coercive measures should not be used to enforce attendance; instead, the members should use the "powerful persuasion of their own example." 133 This is likely to have been directed at overly zealous Christians in respect to their slaves. In 1831, while a judge, he

128 U.S. Bureau of the Census for Liberty County, Georgia. 1820, p. 317.
129 U.S. Bureau of the Census for Chatham County, Georgia. 1830, p. 281.
130 Ibid., p. 268.
131 Chatham County, Georgia. Index to Deeds, 1785-1910, vol. 2Q, folios 342, 346, 348. Superior Court.
132 Ibid., vol 3C, folio 163.
133 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 11 December 1828, p. 2, c. 3.
sentenced J.E. Fay to twenty-five days in jail plus costs for beating a slave. On the same docket he sentenced John Gill to thirty days in jail plus costs for assault and battery. 134 Judge Law's slaves probably did not live in fear of their master. In 1841, while in private practice, he defended a slave, Charles, accused of murdering a white man. 135 Charles was convicted of manslaughter, branded on the cheek with an M and given fifty lashes. 136 While that cannot have been pleasant, his life must have hung in the balance. That same year at a meeting of the Savannah Bible Society William Law proposed this resolution: "Resolved, that the extension of knowledge of the Bible in these United States is the best safeguard of our rights and defense of our institutions." 137 Can there be any doubt that the institution of most concern to southerners was the "peculiar" institution of the south? The implication is clear. William Law felt that negro slavery was justified by the Bible.

In May of 1850 he was a delegate to the Convention of the People of the Southern States. 138 This may have been held in Nashville, Tennessee because there is a vague reference elsewhere about his being a delegate to a convention in Nashville at which slavery under the constitution was the chief topic of discussion. 139 Judge Law was called upon to represent the district as a district elector for the American State Convention held

134 *Georgiaian* (Savannah, Georgia), 7 February 1831, p. 2, c. 1.

135 *Savannah Daily Republican* (Savannah, Georgia). 11 February 1841, p. 2, c. 2.

136 ibid., 12 February 1841, p. 2, c. 2.


138 Benjamin Palmer Axson.

139 Lowry Axley, p. 81.

In Macon, Georgia in July of 1856. This convention vowed to resist any action of the U.S. Congress on slavery. 140

On election day, November 4, 1868, a mob of armed blacks led by Aaron Alpoeaia Bradley, a negro politician, approached Savannah by way of Ogeechee Road. They were intent on securing their privilege to vote. 141 Six white citizens, a small number in order not to alarm the blacks, rode out to meet them and convince them not to enter the city bearing arms. They were fired upon and fled. On regaining the city they discovered that the sixth horse was riderless. 142 Samuel S. Law, son of William Law, had endured the war unscathed only to be murdered near his own doorstep at the age of twenty-four. 143 If the courage of the son can be attributed to the father, then his father was a brave man.

A crowning laurel in the wreath of good works woven by William Law is his participation in the founding of the Georgia Infirmary in 1870. This institution was formed for the relief of "sick, indigent and infirm colored persons." 144 Even though his attitude before emancipation did not transcend his own times and even though his son had been killed by a mob of newly freed blacks, his heart was not hardened against them. The attitudes of William Law typify the best use of the slave system, which at its best was poor.

142 Weed Family papers. Collection 945, folder 1, Georgia Historical Society.
143 Savannah Morning News (Savannah, Georgia). 5 November 1868, p. 2, c. 1.
144 ibid., 6 June 1870, p. 3, c. 1.
145 Savannah Georgian (Savannah, Georgia). 13 March 1827, p. 3, c. 1.
A Brief Sketch of His Male Ancestors

William Law's father was undoubtedly Benjamin Law who died on March 12, 1827. 145 Benjamin Law of Liberty County, Georgia was a planter and a religious man with a liberal education who engaged in private pursuits. 146 The most significant fact available about him is that he served on a committee to establish Newport Academy near Riceboro in the time of Rev. Wm. McWhir. 147 William Law was his first child, though he fathered six others. 148 Unfortunately, there is some doubt about who William's mother was. Benjamin Palmer Axson lists only one wife, Mary Sandiford Maybank, for Benjamin, 149 but the records of Midway Church do not show him marrying her until 1796. 150 However, there is an entry in the church records in 1816 which states that Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Law have been restored to the congregation after having been suspended in 1799, the year of William's birth. 151 If the dates are not incorrect, either she was not William's mother or she and Ben were a gay pair, gay enough at any rate to offend the sensibilities of late 18th century Liberty County for twenty-three years. Mr. Axson suggests that William and his brother

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146 ibid., 28 March 1827, 2. c. 5.


148 Benjamin Palmer Axson.

149 ibid.


151 ibid., p. 141.

152 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
Benjamin may have been twins. Actually, the twins seem to have been Benjamin and Joseph, another brother.

There is no doubt at all in the minds of later family members, though no primary evidence has come to light, that a Joseph Law of South Carolina was the father of Benjamin and the grandfather of William. In 1765 Joseph married Mary Bradwell, the mother of Benjamin, in South Carolina. In July of 1771 Joseph, listing a wife, four children and thirty-six slaves, petitioned the colony of Georgia for four hundred acres on the Altamaha River. He later petitioned for more and had his petitions granted. He must have been quite popular because he became the representative for the Parish of St. Mary within a year and a half. In 1774 he married Elisabeth Spry, and in 1785 he married Mary Sandiford. This Mary Sandiford is the mother, by a previous marriage, of Benjamin’s wife, so Benjamin’s mother-in-law was also his stepmother.

153 Ola M. Wyeth, and Dolores Floyd, vol 3, p. 76.
154 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
156 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
158 Ibid., vol 15, p. 346.
159 Ola M. Wyeth, and Dolores Floyd. vol 1, pp. 68-69.
160 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
161 “Legal Advertising From Old Georgia Newspapers,” Georgia Genealogical Magazine 8 (October 1952): 323.
162 Benjamin Palmer Axson.
and William was limited to one grandmother. Joseph died in 1803 at the reported age of eighty-eight. 162

In order to trace William Law's ancestry any further, it is necessary to backtrack Joseph Law, his grandfather, and propose some possibilities and probabilities. Joseph's first recorded marriage was to Sarah Henley in South Carolina early in 1754. 163 Their first child, Hepsiabah, was born early in 1755. 164 Joseph also had children named Joseph, Benjamin and Nathaniel, among others and by various marriages. 165 Now, let a leap of the imagination carry you back to the year 1694 and a gentleman named Nathaniel Law of South Carolina. 166 Perhaps you see a connection already. There is more. Nathaniel Law (1694) had three sons named Joseph, Benjamin and Nathaniel. He also had a daughter named Hepsiabah. 167

The supposition of Benjamin Palmer Axson is that the Joseph mentioned as a son of Nathaniel (1694) is the father of the Joseph who moved to Liberty County. Little is known about this earlier Joseph. He had a child, Hannah, by a woman named Theodora in 1720 168 and she remarried as a widow in 1733. 169 Mr. Axson's supposition is certainly sound as far


164 ibid., p. 71.

165 Benjamin Palmer Axson, notebook 3.

166 Ola M. Wyeth, and Dolores Floyd, vol 3, p. 118.


as dates go because Joseph of Liberty County would have been born around 1715. There seems to be no reason, however, to preclude the possibility that Joseph of Liberty may actually be the son of Nathaniel (1694) since this gentleman did not die until 1732. Circumstantial evidence certainly implies that Nathaniel (1694) was either the great-grandfather or the great-great-grandfather of William Law. The werewithal to unshroud this mystery may be in the George H. Moffett Papers, MS 11-306, at the South Carolina Historical Society. A reference in the index of the South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine states that these papers contain genealogical notes on the Law family.

Afterword

Judge William Law is properly the subject of a much longer work than this. His genealogy could certainly be researched more fully. Were it left to me, I would start at the South Carolina Historical Society. His committee work must have generated thousands of reports. Decisions from the bench while he was a judge should be available somewhere. It is inconceivable that some of his speeches are not lying around in dusty corners of libraries. I have already mentioned that this paper does not treat the property he owned in a complete manner. The subject of his children is barely treated, also. Not all of my detail notes were used in the preparation of the paper, and anyone choosing to research William Law more completely is certainly welcome to review them.
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