

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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A Civil War Enigma

The strange events that occur in any war are no more strange than those that took place during the Civil War.

This last weekend Isaura and I joined other family members for a reunion of the Coppage/Coppedge descendants meeting in Winchester, Virginia. Each year since the reunions began in 1948, a different location is chosen. For instance, last year we met in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It's a fun time getting to know folks who are kin even though we may never have met until a few years ago.

During some free time on this family weekend, we decided to visit some of the historic spots in the town of Winchester. The first place we checked out was the home of General Stonewall Jackson which was a short five block walk from our hotel. His reputation as a great field commander was second only to Robert E. Lee for the Confederacy. Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson was a deeply spiritual man of whom it was said, "It was the fear of God which made him so fearless of all else." One of Stonewall Jackson's biographers wrote that Jackson was "a Christian soldier in every sense of the word."

One of the strange oddities that took place was the untimely death of General Jackson. From the beginning of the war Jackson had masterfully executed one campaign after another, creating a great deal of consternation for the "boys in blue." In his late 30s. Jackson was outmaneuvering the Northern forces at every turn. During the Battle of Chancellorsville in May of 1863, word came to Jackson that the Union Army (Army of the Potomac) was quite lax in securing one of its flanks. Jackson took his Confederate Army (Army of Northern Virginia) and prepared to move on the exposed enemy. Wanting to see the situation for himself, he and his advisors rode their horses to reconnaissance the line. While still well back in their own area of control, but with evening drawing nigh, the Confederate soldiers standing guard on a picket line had been told that anything on horseback would be the enemy. Unknowingly, Jackson and his small cadre were unrecognized in the diminishing light of day. The pickets opened fire killing several of the riders and severely wounding General Jackson. Within a week he was dead from the onset of pneumonia which was primarily caused by his grievous wounds and amputated arm.

Yet another strange story that couples with the death of Stonewall Jackson: *"The Civil War has sometimes been referred to as a war of "brother against brother," but in the case of the Jackson family, it was brother against sister. Laura Jackson Arnold was close to her brother Thomas until the Civil War period. As the war loomed, she became a staunch Unionist in a somewhat divided Harrison County. She was so strident in her beliefs that she expressed mixed feelings upon hearing of Thomas's death. One Union officer said that, though she seemed depressed at hearing the news, her Unionism was stronger than her family bonds.*

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In a letter, he wrote that Laura had said she "would rather know that he was dead than to have him a leader in the rebel army." Her Union sentiment also estranged her later from her husband, Jonathan Arnold. ("Laura Jackson Arnold: Sister of General Thomas Jonathan Stonewall Jackson". Civil War Women Blog. November 29, 2010. Archived from *the original* on December 23, 2010. Retrieved June 24, 2015).

The last of the strange occurrences for this article centers around the life of the town of Winchester, Virginia where we held out Coppage/Coppedge family reunion. Geographically located in the Shenandoah Valley, this quaint, historic community is the quintessential small town of America. But during the Civil War it earned a rather dubious distinction no town would ever wish to have. With its close proximity to the newly formed northern state of West Virginia, yet firmly established in the southern state of Virginia, the town was never sure who had the upper hand on any given day. Both sides fought for control of the town repeatedly during the four years that the war dragged on. By the end of the war, the town of Winchester had changed hands 72 times! On one day alone control changed hands five times. There were folks living in the town who were sympathetic to the North, and of course, there were many more who were ardent supporters of the Southern Cause. So as not to put themselves in a bad way, residents of the town would wake in the morning, and first thing look out their window toward the town hall to see which flag was flying: Stars and Stripes, or Stars and Bars.

If you should have the opportunity, take time to travel through this beautiful, historic area. Plus there is so much more to learn. For instance, in 1756, then Colonel George Washington was commissioned to build Fort Loudoun to fight the French and Indian War. The fort, on what is now downtown Winchester, was manned until the start of the American Revolutionary War. During the Revolutionary War in 1775 a unit of men from Winchester known as "Morgan's Sharpshooters" marched to Boston, Massachusetts where they captured a number of Hessian soldiers, holding them captive in Winchester. *"Hessian soldiers were known to walk to the high ridge north and west of town, where they could purchase and eat apple pies made by the Quakers. The ridge became affectionately known as Apple Pie Ridge. The Ridge Road built before 1751 leading north from town was renamed Apple Pie Ridge Road."*

I still cannot get over the fact that Winchester changed hands 72 times in four years! Strange, indeed.