

"A KING AMONG MEN - THE LIFE AND TIMES OF COLONEL JAMES H. RION"
(From a Charleston newspaper)

Lieutenant-Colonel James H. Rion, aged 34, Fairfield County, surrendered at Johnston's capitulation, April 26, 1865. May 27, 1854, wounded at Drewry's Bluff in the left forearm; and on the 18th of June in front of Petersburg, while commanding the Washington Light Infantry, of Charleston as skirmishers, he was wounded in the right forearm.

When I joined the battery at Battery Marshall, Colonel Rion had a handsome sword and belt which had been presented to him on the 10th of May, 1851, by the two companies of cadets at Mt. Zion. But upon going to Virginia a pistol was found more useful to an officer than a sword, and his sword was left in Richmond at the hospital with Mr. George H. McMaster for safe keeping. These were forgotten at the evacuation and doubtless some Federal carried it home - a bloodless trophy. It had on it Major Rion's name and the date of its presentation.

At the battle of Drewry's Bluff Jefferson Davis came personally to the field, and in the apple orchard and near the main road, amid the wounded and dying, complimented Colonel Rion for his own gallantry and that of his command, "one of the very best regiments," he called it, "in the whole service".

When the battalion arrived in Petersburg (having ridden on tops as well as in the cars) and marched through the town begrimed with smoke, but with steady tramp of veterans, the city was in consternation. Wise's men were flying gunless and hatless. The ladies were gathered upon the pavements, fearing the appearance of the enemy and as we came up the street some of them asked, "What brigade is that?"

At the head of the column I answered, "Hagood's South Carolina brigade". Down the ladies went on their knees saying, "We are safe now". Hagood's Brigade had saved them twice before and we were regarded as favorites in Petersburg.

We were marched through the city in the direction of the enemy, and twice during the night we were ordered to charge, but the orders were countermanded and we passed the night throwing up breastworks, and with the pickets and finding two forts which had been deserted by Wise's men, unoccupied by the Federals, I moved the pickets for them when the enemy did the same. We got there first. Colonel Rion came up with the battalion. The enemy came at us with a brigade at first, and in the subsequent assaults, they came three brigades deep. Colonel Rion gave me charge of the fort on the right of the railroad cut, and gave strict orders that the fire should be held until he gave the word. The battle was fought by strict tactics by Colonel Rion. "Rear Rank! Ready, Aim, Fire!" Front Rank! Ready, Aim, Fire". General Grant, in his official report says that for three days he made no advancement at this point, that he sent General Smith, and, then, went in person. But it did no good. General George B. F. Butler says that Grant got drunk. We held the fort.

We held Colonel Rions' battles, Fort Wagner, Walthall Junctions, Swift Creek, Drewery's Bluff (turning right flank of Federals), Bermuda Hundreds, Cold Harbor, Chickahominy, Haw's Shop, Fort Fisher, Fort Anderson, Ox Swamp, and Bentonville.

His devotion to duty was self-sacrificing. As a skirmish leader he made his reputation. But he excelled as an engineer. His sally ports which he cut through the breastwork from the fosse in front (while we were below Richmond) were adopted first by General Lee's

engineer and then by the whole army.

James H. Rion was born in Montreal, Canada, on the 17th of April 1828. His mother was Miss Margaret Hunter, born in Liverpool, England, on the first of December, 1810. She knew her husband as Henry Rion, an engineer of the English Army who died on the seventh of March, 1828, aged 42 years, 11 months, and ten days. Young Rion was a posthumus child and a French nurse, who had been employed by his father, clandestinely had him baptized in the Catholic Church. His mother was an Episcopalian and when she learned of this baptism had him again baptized in the Episcopal Church. In after years, however, when Colonel Rion joined the Presbyterian Church he had himself immersed according to the Baptist Faith. Dr. Woodrow of evolution fame, preached his funeral sermon and called him a king among men.

Colonel Rion inherited from his mother his wonderful memory. Once in camp bivouacking together, he asked me to repeat some book I had read. I could not comply. He said he could recall anything he had read, and actually did repeat from the "Scottish Chiefs" until I went to sleep. On another occasion I selected Cousin's "History of Modern Civilization" and he did the same thing.

Mrs. Margaret Rion was for years Mr. Calhoun's housekeeper and business manager at Fort Hill and during that time she had almost sole control of the house and farm. It is said she whipped Willie Calhoun and her son, James, with the same switch.

On the 12th of August, 1861, she took charge of the Midway Hospital, at Charlottesville, Virginia. In the winter of 1862 she contracted typhoidal-pneumonia and died January 1, 1863. She is buried at Charlottesville.

In 1870, I was a tourist in Europe and one day in visiting one of its grand cathedrals I saw an arch in front of the side entrance through I had come an elegant cenotaph. The name was spelt the same as that of my friend. At that time I had never seen the name so spelled elsewhere. The epitaph described the deceased as a Major of Engineers in the English Army, and gave the time of his death and other particulars which I cannot now recall, but all of which immediately suggested my friend, Colonel Rion. When told about it, he said it was his father.

Colonel Rion was fond of Muhlback's historical novels. He would always maintain that the Commune did save the Dauphin (who was born in 1785) when they took him from his father and placed the lad beside their president, saying that "The Dauphin belongs to France", and that he was saved by his grandmother, Maria Theresa of Austria. Colonel Rion had a beautiful likeness of the Dauphin which he carried with him for years. Beyond his father we cannot positively go, but certainly Colonel Rion was not a man who would nurse a chimera for a lifetime!

Young Rion's first job in life was to lay out Boneventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. (Copy of letter to the "Savannah Republication" July 25, 1849 - Rion's description of the cemetery).

Rion and Willie Calhoun were roommates at South Carolina College. While a senior at this school, James Rion was appointed to deliver Calhoun's eulogy on May 6, 1856.

President of Planters' Bank at Winnsboro, South Carolina. Director of the National Bank at Columbia, South Carolina

Master of Arts at South Carolina College, 1858, and Doctor of Laws by Davidson College, North Carolina, in 1883.

He married Mary Catharine Weir, daughter of Samuel Weir of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

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