

HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A KING
Lt. Colonel James Henry Rion, C.S.A.
Biography by James A. Gabel

James Henry Rion was born in Montreal, Lower Canada, on April 17, 1828. Family history tells that his father Henri de Rion had been a Major in the British Army Engineers stationed in Montreal. However, available official British records can not substantiate that fact. His father died on March 7, 1828. His mother, Margaret Hunter Rion, remained with her parents until they too died in August. Mother and son then left Canada, but their exact travels remain clouded in history. By no later than 1841, but possibly earlier, they arrived in Savannah, Ga.

At a young age James Rion began to show that he was not cut from plain cloth. Enrolled at the Chatham Academy at twelve, within two years he had, according to a friend, "mastered everything to be taught at the Academy. He had completed studies of Algebra, Geometry, and Mathematics comprising Logarithms, Mensuration of surfaces, solids, heights and distances, Trigonometry, Surveying and Navigation; ... Caesar, Virgil, Cicero's Orations... together with several French works..." Barnard Bee, who attended Chatham with James, in later life remembered James receiving letters at the Academy from John C. Calhoun, so it may be that the Rions had made connections with the great man prior to their arrival in Savannah in 1841. In any event, in March 1844, Rion's mother became the housekeeper at Fort Hill the home of John C. Calhoun. Thereafter James was raised with and attended the Pendleton Academy with the younger Calhoun boys.

Calhoun made some attempts to satisfy Rion's request for an appointment to West Point but was not successful. Rion was, however, able to obtain a scholarship from the Clariosophic Society at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina). This award was augmented by an invitation from the president of the school, William C. Preston, to join his household. President Preston each year invited a couple of students of great promise to reside in his house. Even more beneficial to Rion than the monetary savings and the close association with this "man of thorough culture, a great rhetorician, orator and statesman" was the fact that it was here that Rion met his future wife, Mary Catherine (Kitty) Weir. Kitty had become Preston's ward after the death of her father in 1847.

Rion returned to Savannah in the summer of 1850 and laid out the Bonadventure Cemetery – a place that is admired for its beauty to this day. That December he graduated with the first honors in his class. He gave the salutatory address in both Latin and English. A year later, he married Kitty Weir in Pennsylvania- the home state of her parents. Following graduation, Rion became Professor of Mathematics and History at the Mt. Zion Academy in Winnsboro, South Carolina. It was here in Winnsboro that he began his legal and military career. Upon his arrival at Mount Zion he organized the students into a corps of cadets and became involved in the local state militia unit, the 25th Regiment, 6th Brigade. At the same time he completed the study of law he had begun before going to SC College. In December 1853, he was admitted to the bar. While practicing law he continued his professorship at Mount Zion and rose in the militia. He was elected major, lieutenant colonel and then colonel of the 25th Regiment.

On November 5, 1857, Rion shot and killed John Player, a friend and classmate at college. Apparently, Player had insulted Kitty and then refused to apologize. The authorities would not arrest Rion until he demanded that they do so. He was then acquitted in March 1858, after the jury deliberated for only six minutes.

With the enactment of the Ordinance of Secession, Rion organized the Fairfield Fencibles in January 1861 and was elected captain. When the company became part of the 6th South Carolina Volunteers, Rion was elected colonel. The 6th was sent to the defense of Charleston harbor arriving the evening before the bombardment of Fort Sumter began. The companies were scattered at different posts, and Rion had some difficulty establishing military discipline over the independently minded volunteers. At one point, two companies that were comfortably quartered in the Moultrie House for awhile refused orders to report for duty at the more spartan surroundings of Battery Island.

The regiment took no part in the bombardment of Fort Sumter except as onlookers, and in June was ordered back to Summerville to be reorganized and mustered into Confederate service. There, discontent among the various factions rose to a head. Colonel Rion responded by calling out the regiment. He stated that, while he was not to blame for the unhappiness of the volunteers, since he was elected by popular vote, he would now submit the question of his resignation to the same constituency. All officers and men who desired his resignation should take three steps forward; those who desired him to remain, should stand fast. After heads were counted, Rion had lost the plebiscite by three votes. Rion immediately tendered his resignation and returned home.

By November 21, 1861 he had raised another company, the Lyles' Rifles, "for the war." Many of its members were former 6th Regiment men who had chosen not to remain with that regiment when it was mustered into Confederate service. The Rifles were mustered into the Confederate Army in December and initially were attached to the Holcombe Legion, but by February 22, 1862 it was part of the 7th Battalion, South Carolina Infantry, commanded by Patrick Henry Nelson. Assigned once again to the defenses of Charleston with his unit, Rion was promoted to Major in March of 1863. On July 11th of that year, Rion commanded the 150 man picket force in front of Battery Wagner when the first Union assault was repulsed. Four days later he lead a daring night reconnaissance raid against the enemy lines. The raid resulted in approximately 40 Union killed to only one Confederate. Rion twice returned to the scene of the fighting to recover wounded men that were initially left behind.

From September 1863 to February 1864, Rion was in temporary command of the 22nd S.C. Regiment at Battery Marshall and Fort Johnson in the Charleston Harbor defenses. Despite several requests from General P.G.T. Beauregard, he declined to become permanent commander of the 22nd, preferring to remain with the 7th Battalion.

In May 1864, he went to Virginia with the Battalion, which was brigaded with the 11th, 21st, 25th and 27th S.C. Regiments in Brig. Gen. Johnson Hagood's Brigade. In the engagement at Drewry's Bluff, Rion was wounded in the right forearm but stayed with the unit until nightfall. A month later at Petersburg, he was shot through the left forearm while leading the brigade skirmishers in front of Hare's Hill, south of the City Point Road. He was not able to bounce back from this injury as quickly, and after a month in and out of hospitals, he was sent home to Winnsboro to recuperate.

During Rion's two-month absence, Lt. Col. Nelson was lost. He failed to return after leading the spearhead of a Confederate attack along the City Point Road on June 24th. Rumors reached the Battalion through a captured lieutenant that Nelson had been murdered by negro troops while being taken to the rear as a prisoner. In addition, all of Hagood's Brigade suffered severely during the mid-August battle for Weldon Station.

Rion rejoined the Battalion in early September. In November he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, to date from Nelson's disappearance on June 24th. By December 26th, the Brigade had been transferred to Wilmington, North Carolina in response to Federal operations against Fort Fisher. Rion would command

the Battalion and, subsequently, a composite regiment, and finally the remnants of Hagoood's Brigade in engagements near Wilmington, Kinston, and Bentonville, culminating in the surrender of General Johnston's command and Rion's parole at Greensboro.

Rion had survived the war, but his mother had not been as lucky. She had been working as a housekeeper in San Francisco, California when the war started. She returned east at the end of May of 1861 on the same ship as numerous like-minded Southerners, most prominent of whom was Edward Porter Alexander, later a Brig. Gen., C.S.A., recently resigned from the U.S. Army. By August she was serving as a nurse at Midway Hospital in Charlottesville - the first established in Virginia by the South Carolina Hospital Association. She soon became Head Matron at Midway and served in that capacity until her death from typhoidal pneumonia on New Years Day 1863. She was buried there in the city cemetery, accompanied to her final resting-place by "all of the men from our Carolina hospitals that were able to be out."

Rion returned to Winnsboro to pick up the pieces of his life. By General Order No. 1, dated December 22, 1865, he was appointed once again to command of the 25th Regiment of the reorganized S.C. Militia. But under the reconstruction laws this appointment never came to pass. Nonetheless, his law practice prospered. Among his many prominent clients was Thomas Green Clemson, who had married John C. Calhoun's daughter Anna Maria. Rion was deeply involved in drawing up the provisions of Clemson's will which eventually led to the establishment of Clemson Agricultural College (now Clemson University). Rion also immersed himself in both politics and commercial enterprises. He was elected a member of the S.C. Constitutional Convention in August 1866, and from 1876 to 1880 was the S.C. member of the Democratic National Executive Committee. In November 1886, just before his death in December, he was elected President of the S.C. Bar Association.

At his death on December 12, 1886, three sons and five daughters, as well as his wife of 35 years survived him. But probably the most interesting legacy that Colonel Rion left was the revelation that he was heir to the throne of France. Rion claimed on his deathbed that his father was the Lost Dauphin, son of Louis XVI and Marie Antionette.

What follows are excerpts from a sworn statement made by Dr. Ralph B. Hanahan, who served Rion during the war as unit surgeon and afterward as family physician.

On Saturday 11th Dec. 1886 about 2 o'clock P.M. I was requested by Col. Jas. H. Rion to come down and dine with him as it was the 35 anniversary of his wedding day. I reached his house about 3 1/2 o'clock and almost immediately sat down to dinner. There was none but his family present with the exception of myself...After eating we sat around the fire and smoked a cigar., it then being near dark.

...he stepped towards the table...placed his hand upon his chest over the region of his heart; exclaiming "My what a pain, what a pain. Angina." We seated him on a chair and he leaned his head upon the table for a few moments, when he raised his head from the table the expression was fearful, his skin was white as marble and as cold, while large globules of sweat stood upon his face, and he kept exclaiming "My what pain, how ! suffer." We laid him upon a lounge near by and I administered different remedies until the brunt of the attack passed off. When comparatively relieved he requested to be raised to a sitting position. Supported on either side by his two sons Willie and Holbrook he spoke of the distribution of his property and expressed to Mrs. Rion his wishes regarding it. Mrs. Rion being hard of hearing it was necessary to repeat to her what was said, and Willie or myself performed that duty. After finishing about his property, he said, "I have a secret, a great secret, I hardly know how to tell it all, but I want you to understand that if I recover, it must never be mentioned or alluded to in any way." He then said "I am the son..." Willie interrupted him and said, "Yes Father we know."

[What Willie was referring to was the rumor that had been around for many years that Rion was the illegitimate son of Calhoun, based on their intimate association during Rion's younger days.]

He replied, "But you don't know. I am the son of Louis the XVII. My Father was the Dauphin of France. He was supposed to have died and was buried, but when the grave was examined there were no remains in it. The Duchess D'Orleans substituted a deaf and dumb boy in his place and he, bearing the name of Rion to prevent his being assassinated, was sent to Montreal, Ca.

My Father lived in Montreal and late in life married a Miss Hunter daughter of Col. Hunter in the British Army. She was uneducated but was a handsome woman. My Father married her, so as to have issue. I was baptized in the Catholic Cathedral in Montreal and you will find the record among the secret annals of the Cathedral. At my father's death I was turned over to Mr. Calhoun, then Sec. of War with papers substantiating my claim so that he could prosecute them." He said also that papers substantiating his claim would be found in the records of the Austrian Court. That he did not know of these facts until he was 21, when he was pledged to secrecy and forbidden to take any steps towards the recovery of his rights unless a French man-of-war was sent to convey him back. ...

He stated also that he had always refused any civil office because taking the oath would invalidate his claim, that military honors he was always fond of and did not refuse. In answer to a question as to who would succeed to this right He replied, Preston his Eldest son and after him Jimmie his, Preston's, son. He was anxious to know if I thought this narrative was the result of delusion produced by Morphine, fear of death or from other extraneous cause. I replied no, that his word was sufficient for me

At 3.15 o'clock he sank to rest as peacefully and quietly as an infant...on Sunday the 12th of Dec. 1886.

I have endeavored to set forth all of the paramount facts...I have set down nothing but what I am positive he said and endeavored to give his language as far as I could.

Much of what Colonel Rion revealed to his doctor as he lay dying of a heart attack had a ring of truth to it. Many historians who had studied the mystery surrounding the fate of the Dauphin had generally concluded that there is a strong likelihood that he was rescued. However, on April 18, 2000, two European scientists announced that they had completed a DNA analysis that proved that the boy that had died alone in a prison cell was, in fact, the son of Marie Antionette. One of the doctors that had been present at the autopsy of the boy had stolen his heart as a memento. The heart passed through various owners until 1975 when it was put into the custody of the Memorial of France at St.-Denis, a private organization that oversees the royal graves. The scientists were able to extract three samples of mitochondrial DNA from the heart and compared them with samples from locks of hair taken from Marie Antionette and two of her sisters and samples taken from two living maternal relatives. In all cases, they said, they found "identical" sequences. This scientific evidence would seem to disprove the claims of James Henry Rion's and all the other claimants that they were the "Lost Dauphin." With familial pride, I can only subscribe to the sentiments expressed by Judge William M. Thomas, who had been Rion's wartime adjutant, in an April 10, 1887 memorial published in the *Sunday News*, Charleston, SC: "Col. Rion was not a man who would nurse a chimera for a lifetime." He must have been told the story of his ancestry by someone who he believed, and he lived his adult life as though the story was fact.

Cemetary Books

Cemetery survey books of Fairfield County are available at the Fairfield Museum in Winnsboro or by mail from the address below. Volume One includes large cemeteries in the western part of the county; Volume Two is cemeteries in the East and Volume III is some of the rest including most family and abandoned burying grounds. The cost is \$25.00 each (plus \$5 for each volume if mailed).

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