

# A Civil War Historian's Lament

By Gerard A. Patterson

There is one thing that a Civil War historian can confidently count on taking place as soon as he has published a work on any aspect of the conflict.

Once the book is irretrievably distributed, he just knows he is going to fall into some information that he can only wish he had found while doing the research.

Trivial or priceless, the (to him) fresh but unusable material can at this point serve only one purpose — to reaffirm the hard fact that a work of history will always be incomplete and has to be taken as an interim report, nothing more.

Where will the exasperatingly belated revelations come from? The historian can only speculate as he waits in anticipation of the inevitable after his treatment has gone to press and is, literally, out of his hands.

Sometime it is a matter of self-mortification as the author stumbles upon an overlooked reference himself and can only chide himself for his careless scholarship and bemoan his failure to consult an obvious source.

But most often it is the appearance of the work itself that loosens and unearths a lode of pertinent material. A reader somewhere is made suddenly aware by your work of the possible value of that packet of yellowed letters come upon in the attic of the ancestral home.

Innocently, the holder inquires through your publisher whether you might possibly be interested in what has been uncovered (though it might very well shake the very foundation of your thesis).

The cluttered attic is, of course, one of the foremost obstacles to historic discovery. There is no estimating how much invaluable material languishes there above the heads (in a true sense) of dwellers who — through lack of knowledge or interest — have no appreciation whatever of the value of their possessions.

A few years ago, I published a work entitled *Justice or Atrocity* that dealt with the 1864 hangings in little Kinston, N.C., of 22 Confederate deserters who had been captured serving in the Union army. The affair nearly landed Confederate Gen. George E. Pickett of Gettysburg fame in the dock as a war criminal after the war.

Well, it can be imagined the stir a controversial work of this sort generated in the town where the event actually took place. Soon, I was invited by the local historical society to come down and give a talk at the Kinston public library on the incident. I ventured there at my peril, apprehensive as to how I would be received by the local folk. I needn't have been concerned.

Some 120 persons were crammed into the meeting room of the library when I arrived, the vast majority of whom, I would quickly discover, had no idea that such an affair had taken place in their hometown almost across the street and were simply anxious to learn more about it.

But what was most impressive about the audience was that about 15 of those attending were, by a show of hands, direct descendants of the men hanged and yet were, until that night, unacquainted with one another even though all had lived in that area most of their lives.

Of course, I had been able to find none of these people while doing my research and was reduced almost to tears as they heaped vignette after vignette upon me about their ancestors and stuffed my pockets with copies of letters and documents such as widow's pension applications that detailed the lives of the executed men. Much to my chagrin, there was not a thing I could do with any of the information; it was too late. The book was out.

Probably the most lasting reminder of the trip was that subsequently the Historical Preservation Group arranged to have a large



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marker erected at the approximate site of the hangings near the courthouse with the names of all the men hanged inscribed on it (along with a text block I was pleased to compose at the group's invitation).

Though my Kinston experience was the most dramatic personal example of how invariably information comes into historians' hands when it is no longer usable, there have been other painful experiences.

The same volume would have been enhanced by a rare find that I encountered on the cover of *The Civil War News*, a photo of LaSalle Corbell Pickett, the general's widow, as a young woman.

Publication of the memoir of a Union cavalryman brought with it recollections of Confederate Gen. Cadmus M. Wilcox as an instructor at West Point before the Civil War and of Appomattox that would similarly, have enlivened my biography of the general, *From Blue to Gray*.

Most of the time, you can't really blame yourself for the incompleteness of a study which, after all, at some point must be halted and submitted for publication unless it is intended as a life's work.

How could you possibly have known, you can fairly ask yourself, about the existence of this daggerreotype or correspondence never deposited and catalogued in an accessible library?

The dread is to learn that something that was readily available was overlooked through your own carelessness. And the letter writers and reviewers will always be lurking out there in legions to bring the oversight to your attention, led by those seething over having their own idea for a book they would someday write being snatched from them by an inferior talent.

While most historians can accept criticism that is balanced by at least some complimentary observation, the sort toughest to take is a letter that focuses entirely on an apparent error and has nothing else whatever to say about the work.

With so many researchers mining the Civil War field, related information on virtually any topic a historian has pursued is bound to be uncovered, sooner or later. That's a given.

A great measure of satisfaction comes in seeing one's own discoveries subsequently used by other writers following the same subject, being properly credited for the morsel and becoming (if only in *agat* type) a footnote to history.

As painstakingly as they seek new information, researchers know they have already made the most important discovery about the nature of their field. That is, how arrogant it is for any historian to believe for a moment that he has provided the last word on any subject.

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