

White Brothers Battle in War

In 1920, a Charlotte Observer columnist, Mrs. J.P. Caldwell, wrote a lengthy account of a book written by Cordelia White Phifer of Charlotte, N.C. The hand-printed book was titled "Five White Brothers in the Confederate Army." Phifer was the niece of the five soldiers from Fort Mill.

The soldier sons of William Elliot White and Sarah Robinson Wilson White were Capt. Joseph Harvey White, Col. John McKemie, Dr. William Edward White, Capt. James Wilson White and Capt. Samuel Elliott White.

Capt. James H. White, a Davidson College graduate, was a commission merchant in Charleston when the Civil War broke out. He then organized a company made up of Mecklenburg and Charlotte men, ÑCompany B, 53rd NC troops. His first duties were in the defense of the North Carolina coast, but he was soon transferred to the army of Northern Virginia. He was killed by a shell in the battle of Spottsylvania.

Col. John M. White, who graduated with distinction from South Carolina College, organized the "York Guard" and was elected its captain. He served with Longstreet's army, advancing to lieutenant colonel in 1863, and he was present at the surrender at Appomattox. In four years of hard service he was not wounded, but he was knocked down by the force of a ball striking his sword belt in the battle of Seven Pines.

Dr. William Edward White was a graduate of Davidson College and received his medical degree from the University of New York. He entered service as the assistant surgeon of the 7th N.C. Regiment. He held the shortest service of all the brothers and died of camp fever in November 1861.

Capt. James Wilson White served with the 1st South Carolina Calvary in at least 17 major battles. He had Henry White, his slave and body servant, beside him throughout the war. Neither were injured. When White's good friend, Robin Jones of Mount Gallant Plantation near Rock Hill, was killed at Brandy Station, Capt. White rode his horse into the thick of battle and took Jones' body to a place of safety.

Capt. Samuel Elliott White was the only one of the brothers to have previous military training. He had attended Kings Mountain Military Academy and The Citadel. In his senior year at The Citadel, he led a student rebellion against a detested professor. White, who was an honors student, was expelled.

He spent several years in Texas and Mexico before returning to this area. He entered service as a 1st-Lieutenant in the 7th North Carolina Regiment and was made drill master of the company. He was severely wounded at Newburn, N.C., and for a time served as commissary officer in Salisbury, N.C.

In the foreword of her book, Phifer wrote that for 58 years a bundle of letters written by the five brothers had been kept in a bureau drawer. She was afraid that the letters might be sometime destroyed as having no value so she copied them "without correction or omission."

Along with the letters Phifer sketched the military service of each but added nothing else about their lives. She ornamented the book with red and gold ink, sketched a picture of the White Homestead (a National Register home in Fort Mill) and included pictures of each brother in uniform along with a picture of Phifer's mother (affectionately known to the brothers as "Sis Martha").

According to a newspaper article, the leather-bound book was sent for permanent keeping to the Confederate Museum in Richmond, Va., but the museum says that the book is not in their possession.

Louise Pettus is a local historian. This monthly article about the history of Fort Mill is presented by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. For more information, check out www.fortmilledowntown.com.