

Col. Silas Adams

**FROM AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE UNVEILING
OF THE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKER GIVEN
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By

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Col. Silas Adams

Civilization is a contract between the great dead, the living and the unborn. This is one way of saying that the past, the present and the future are linked together in an unbroken line. We who are living are a bridge between those who have gone before and those who will walk in our footsteps when we are gone.

Very often we hear the question, "What's the use of studying history?" But it has been truthfully said that "he who will not study history is condemned to live it over again." Certainly this is one of the reasons why we have come here today to honor a man who has been dead for over seventy years.

Silas Adams was born February 9th, 1839 and died May 5th, 1896, having lived a good portion of his life here in Liberty. His father was James M. Adams and his mother was Melinda Williams before her marriage to James Adams. Silas Adams was born in Pulaski County, close to the Casey County line, and his father moved over the line into Casey when Silas was two years old. This was in the southeastern part of Casey County down on Fishing Creek.

The young Silas Adams got his early schooling in Pulaski County at the Shermanville School. He then attended Bacon College in Harrodsburg and the State Normal School at Lexington. He taught a number of schools, perhaps at the Shermanville School, and was studying law when the dark and ominous clouds of Civil War poured out the hate that tore this nation apart.

On February 8, 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected President of the Confederate States of America. On April 12 and 13, 1861, General Beauregard bombarded the federal fort, Fort Sumpter, in Charleston, South Carolina Harbor. On July 21st, the first battle of Bull Run was fought and thus began the bloodiest civil war in history. When the Civil War started, Kentucky was divided in its allegiance. Governor McGoffin was a Southern sympathizer but the state failed to secede from the Union.

The problem of the right of a state to secede from the Union had plagued the nation from the very beginning. Slavery was at the very center of the question but the war was fought over the matter of secession. Every time a new state came into the Union the North and South were at dagger points whether or not the new member would be a free state or a slave state. Under these conditions Kentucky was caught in the middle, but perhaps a majority of Kentuckians were Northern sympathizers.

On July 16, 1861, Wm. J. Landrum of Lancaster, Ky. was commissioned a colonel in the Union Army with the directive to organize a Volunteer Kentucky Cavalry. Col. Landrum immediately named Frank Wolford of Casey County as a Lt. Colonel. Wolford was 44 years old at this time and was a veteran of the War with Mexico. He had served two terms in the State Legislature after the War with Mexico and had become acquainted with Landrum in this way.

On July 17, 1861 Col. Wolford went to Mt. Olive in the eastern part of Casey County to make a speech for the Union and to seek volunteers for a Kentucky Cavalry. He was accompanied by his brother, Francis M. Wolford, and Geo. W. Sweeney of Liberty. Silas Adams, 22 years of age, who was then a law student, was one of the first volunteers, and went over the county with Col. Wolford making many speeches in support of the Cavalry.

On July 27th a great rally was held in Liberty and Company "A" was completed with Geo. W. Sweeney as Captain, Silas Adams as First Lieutenant, and Francis Wolford as Second Lieutenant of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry. In a few days Company "B" was formed in the Rolling Fork section of Casey County. Many counties around Casey formed companies and in all there were twelve with about 850 men. These volunteers supplied their own horses and signed up for three years.

On August 6, the companies started to gather at Camp Dick Robinson on the north bank of the Dix River in Garrard County for boot camp training. The First Kentucky Cavalry never had much formal military training. They learned to

fight by fighting. Their baptism of fire came at the battle of Camp Wildcat on the Rockcastle River about half way between London and Mt. Vernon on October 21st, 1861.

The Southern General, Felix K. Zollicoffer, had come into Kentucky by way of Cumberland Gap, and was sending raiding parties all over Eastern Kentucky. The First Kentucky Cavalry was sent in the direction of Cumberland Gap as a scouting party and ran into a force of Zollicoffer's men and a sharp skirmish took place. Zollicoffer now moved his army in the direction of Somerset along the south bank of the Cumberland.

Gen. George Thomas, who was in command of the Army of the Ohio, of which the First Kentucky was a part, moved toward Somerset with a strong force of men to intercept Zollicoffer. There was much skirmishing through the early part of January, 1862. On the 18th and 19th a full scale battle was fought around Mill Springs and Logan's Cross Roads. It was in this battle that Gen. Zollicoffer was killed.

On May 5th the First Kentucky was ordered into Tennessee, and close to Lebanon, Tenn. ran into John Hunt Morgan's men. The battle lasted one and one-half hours, and there were about 40 men killed on each side. It was in this battle that Col. Wolford was severely wounded in the hip and captured by the Rebels and then recaptured by his own men. Silas Adams was promoted to Captain June 7, 1862.

In August, 1862, the Southern General Braxton Bragg moved into Kentucky in the Glasgow area. It was September 24th, 1862, that Silas Adams captured Col. Martin J. Crawford, who was in command of the Third Georgia Cavalry. Adams and a small force of the First Kentucky left Elizabethtown about midnight and rode in to New Haven just before daybreak where Crawford was camped.

Crawford's men never knew anything was wrong until they were completely surrounded. Adams went to Crawford's tent and found him still asleep. He ordered him to get up, get out and surrender. Crawford said, "Who the hell are you, giving me such orders?" "I am Captain Adams of the First Kentucky Cavalry," Adams replied. Crawford replied that he

would not surrender to a captain. Adams replied, "Surrender in two seconds or I'll blow your damned head off." Along with Crawford, about 300 men, equipment and horses were captured in this raid.

On the 8th and 9th of October the armies of Generals Buell and Bragg clashed in the battle of Perryville. The First Kentucky was in the thick of this battle. Adams was promoted to Lt. Colonel on November 28, 1862.

in March, 1863, the Rebel General Peagram marched into Kentucky with about 3500 men on a raiding party looking for horses and cattle. They moved faster than anticipated and cornered a smaller force of Federals in the vicinity of Danville, Ky. There was hand to hand fighting in the streets of Danville, and a number of the First Kentucky were captured, Silas Adams being one of them. He was taken to Monticello by a company of Southern Cavalry.

The plan was to take him to the Andersonville Prison in Georgia. While camped at Monticello the Southerners started looking for whiskey. None of the people there would offer to help so they appealed to Adams to find some whiskey for them. He called in a friend who went to the local druggist who supplied all they wanted. The fly in the ointment was that the whiskey was spiked with knockout drops.

Eastham Tarrant, who wrote "The History of the First Kentucky Cavalry", has this to say about the episode. "Adams pretended to drink with them but took none of the whiskey. This was an excruciating privation to the Colonel, because he loved the beverage tenderly."

Adams was gone from his outfit about a week. On the 1st of July, 1863, John Hunt Morgan began his famous raid. He came from Tennessee into Kentucky near Burkesville with about 4000 men. He crossed the Ohio River near Corydon into Indiana, then across Ohio where he was captured near Steubenville on July 26, 1863, by Col. Frank Wolford and the First Kentucky Cavalry.

In August, 1863, The First Kentucky, under the command of General Burnside, was sent into the Knoxville, Tenn. area to oppose Southern General Longstreet. Longstreet's

forces were stronger and had Burnside on the defensive, as were Sherman and Grant in the Chattanooga area, at this time. In the latter part of November, the First Kentucky, along with the rest of Rosencran's army, was bottled up in Knoxville by Longstreet and under heavy siege.

But the tide turned. In a three day battle around Chattanooga on November 23, 25 and 25, General U. S. Grant won the battles of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, and promptly sent a large force to Knoxville in support of General Burnside. On the 28th and 29th, Longstreet threw everything he had at Knoxville, but failed to take the city, and the cause of the Confederacy was beginning to look hopeless as far as the Western Campaign was concerned. Longstreet's forces withdrew stubbornly and there was fighting in east Tennessee through December. On the night of January 1, 1864, the temperature dropped to 29 degrees below zero in eastern Tennessee and many soldiers, both Union and Rebel were frozen to death.

On February 4th Wolford's Division was ordered to Mt. Sterling to be re-organized, re-mounted and re-equipped. In early March, 1864, while at Mt. Sterling, Wolford was invited by the people of Lexington to come to their city to be presented with a fine sword for his fine war record and his part in capturing John H. Morgan. After the presentation, Col. Wolford got up to thank the people for the honor, but he didn't stop here. He castigated President Lincoln for the emancipation proclamation of January 1, 1863, and the policy of using former slaves in the Northern Army.

This was construed as a violation of the 5th Article of War which states that an officer shall not speak disrespectfully of the President. On March 18 he was courtmartialed and one week after this was discharged from the Army. This was a stunning blow to the First Kentucky Cavalry. Eastham Tarrant has this to say in his history, "... the First Kentucky Cavalry much regretted parting with Col. Wolford, but we knew that his position would be filled by a young leader whose gallantry had already brought luster to his own name and in

after service was destined to bring additional honors to the Regiment"

So far as I could find, there was always the best of relations between Col. Wolford and Silas Adams. At this time Wolford was 48 years of age and Adams 25. Adams was given Wolford's command on April 28th when the refitted Cavalry was ordered into northern Georgia to take part in the battle for Atlanta. In March, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant was named Commander of the Armies of the United States. Gen. Wm. Tecumseh Sherman was named Commander of the Division of the Mississippi and General George E. Meade had the Command of the Army of the Potomac.

At this time the Confederates were in these positions. General Robert E. Lee occupied the south bank of the Rapidan in Virginia, covering and defending Richmond. The Army of General J. E. Johnston occupied a strongly entrenched position around Dalton, Georgia. General Forest was in northern Mississippi with a strong force of cavalry.

In the battle through northern Georgia and for Atlanta, The First Kentucky Cavalry was under the command of General Sherman. Sherman started his drive for Atlanta on May 7, 1864. He had about 100,000 men under his command and was faced by the very able Southern General Johnston with about 65,000 men. Johnston was strongly entrenched, was on the defensive in that Sherman had to come to him, and he knew the terrain perfectly.

Dalton, Georgia is about 15 miles from the Tennessee line and about 80 miles from Atlanta. On May 13th Dalton was taken. On the 1st of June, Sherman was within 30 miles of Atlanta and it was here that the First Kentucky Cavalry took Altoona Pass with some very hard fighting that caused Northern newspapers to give much space to the First Kentucky.

On the 15th of June, Silas Adams had his closest call of the war. A bullet grazed his face and took off part of his heavy black whiskers. Another bullet went through his coat. It was the day after that that he was commissioned a full Colonel.

On July 21 and 22 there was terrific fighting around Atlanta in which it was estimated that the Union lost over 4000 men. At this time Sherman sent General Stoneman south of Atlanta with three specific orders. The first was to open the Macon road. The second was to find and defeat Wheeler's Cavalry, and the third, if the first two were successful, was to drive south to Macon and on to the infamous Andersonville Prison and to release the prisoners there. It was estimated there were over 30,000 Union prisoners in the Andersonville Prison alone.

Stoneman opened the Macon road but failed to find and defeat Wheeler's Cavalry. He then drove for Macon. On August 1 a force about three times the strength of Stoneman's surrounded his cavalry and Stoneman decided to surrender. Col Adams was indignant and told Stoneman that under the circumstances he would not surrender and asked for permission to lead the First Kentucky out of the trap. Stoneman replied that if he would take full responsibility for the consequences he could do so. Many of Stoneman's men followed Adams.

On the 3rd day of August, two days after Stoneman's surrender, Adams brought about a thousand men back to Sherman's position at Atlanta. For his part Adams was highly complimented by Gen. Sherman who wrote an official statement saying "great credit is due Col. Adams for the energy and management displayed in bringing his command out of almost certain capture." Gen. Stoneman was criticized for not following Sherman's orders to first overcome Wheeler's Cavalry.

When Sherman and Adams were discussing the Macon affair, Adams reminded him that the enlistment period of the First Kentucky was already up. Sherman immediately set on foot procedures to send the First Kentucky Cavalry back to Kentucky and to have it mustered out. On September 1 Sherman entered Atlanta, ordering all civilians out of the city and putting much of Atlanta to the torch. The First Kentucky Cavalry did not take part in the march to the sea, but was mustered out of the service of the United States on

December 31, 1864. On April 9th, 1865, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomatox Courthouse.

In 1867 Silas Adams entered the Lexington Law School, was graduated and admitted to the bar in 1870 and began the practice of law in Liberty. On December 26, 1872, he was married to Malissa Elliott, daughter of David Elliott. To this union were born two daughters, both dying in infancy.

From 1889 to 1892 he was a member of the State House of Representatives. In 1892 he ran as a Republican candidate for the United States Senate and was defeated. He was elected as a Republican to the Fifty-Third Congress, serving from March 4th, 1893 to March 3rd, 1895. He was defeated for re-election to Congress and resumed his law practice in Liberty.

In 1891 the veterans of the First Kentucky Cavalry started a project to have the history of the First Kentucky Cavalry written. Eastham Tarrant, who had been the Regimental Quartermaster Clerk of the First Kentucky Cavalry was commissioned to do the job. In 1894, "The Wild Riders of the First Kentucky Cavalry, A History of the Regiment in the Great War of the Rebellion" was copyrighted by Eastham Tarrant, W. T. Humphrey, John J. Elliott, R. T. Pierce, and Silas Adams. In the preface of the book Eastham Tarrant wrote, "My chief object has been to tell about the First Kentucky Cavalry: what they did and how: giving as high coloring as allowable to their virtues and charitably smoothing over as much as possible their short-comings, so that I did not interfere with the truth of history."

Silas Adams died here in Liberty, May 5, 1896, in a house that occupied the spot where the Liberty Cash Store now stands. He was buried in the Brown Cemetery not too far from Mount Olive. My grandmother Sallie Jane Humphrey, who was a sister of Silas Adams, told me a number of times that the Government offered to move his remains to the Square here in Liberty and erect a suitable monument, but the family would not agree to this. There are many things that we could say about Silas Adams. But there is one thing we can say for sure, he crammed a lot of living into 57 years.