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WILMER MCLEAN (1814-1882):

Victim or Scrooge?

by Cliff Johns

The recent popular Civil War book *Confederates in the Attic*, by Tony Horwitz, quotes National Park Service ranger Patricia Schuppin at the Appomattox site as saying in regard to Wilmer McLean, who found himself in the unenviable position of seeing the opening and closing of the Civil War on his own property: "I have to break the bad news that he was a pretty unscrupulous fellow."¹

Why this negative assessment, which echoes earlier historians' opinions? When we think of the surrender of Lee to Grant in Wilmer McLean's parlor on April 9, 1865, McLean is worth a closer look. Metropolitan Washingtonians have an additional reason for wanting to know about McLean in that he was born and

lived much of his life in Alexandria, Virginia.

Most Washington-area Civil War buffs have generally known that Wilmer McLean was the owner of the 1,200-acre "Yorkshire" tract along Bull Run Creek [Blackburn's Ford Prince William County] and that his plantation was the scene of the Battles of First and Second Manassas or Bull Run. More significantly, McLean, the owner of the house at Appomattox Courthouse, was buried in St. Paul's Episcopal Cemetery in Alexandria. Furthermore, the last professional position he held was that of Collector of Customs for the Port of Alexandria. McLean also maintained extensive, life-long connections to the Washington area, and died in Alexandria on June 5, 1882.

Wilmer McLean's tombstone stands amidst those of numerous ancestors and other relatives, down a lane from the so-called Female Stranger's grave. Buried nearby is also Confederate Brigadier General Montgomery Dent Corse, a prominent banker and a former commander of the 17th Virginia Regiment, CSA (The McLean plots are in unnumbered lots, in Section 4.)²

Like Robert E. Lee, Wilmer may have also attended the Alexandria Academy. As an employee of the Confederate Quartermaster's Department, McLean was conversant with notable Confederate artillerymen and memorist E.P. Alexander; cavalryman Tom Rosser; General P.G.T. Beauregard; General Joseph Johnston; and General John C. Pemberton. In 1863, Pemberton desperately defended Vicksburg (where McLean stored large amounts of sugar he was trying to market.) An indication of McLean's familiarity with the Confederate leadership is exemplified in a letter Confederate raider Colonel John S. Mosby wrote on August 19, 1876, to President Grant asking for a position as Treasury Department clerk for his friend Wilmer McLean. Wilmer who like Mosby had become a Republican after the war much to the chagrin of his neighbors.

Alexandria's Wilmer McLean was descended from Scotsmen whose first place of settlement in America was New Jersey--one of his ancestors crossed the Delaware River with General Washington in the Revolution. These Scotsmen married New Jersey and

Pennsylvania women. Then Daniel McLean migrated in the 1790s to Alexandria, Virginia. The town on the upper Potomac was a thriving seaport run mostly by other émigré Scottish merchants and traders.

Wilmer McLean's father, Daniel McLean, established a large bakery, specializing in sea biscuits for sea-going vessels needing non-perishable stores for their crews out on long voyages. Daniel became so financially successful at this trade that he was able to found St. Paul's Episcopal church which broke away from Christ Church in 1809 ostensibly because Reverend William Gibson "had made himself obnoxious to a majority of his congregation."³ Until 1817, St. Paul's parishioners worshipped in a small Christian chapel situated on the east side of the 200 block of South Fairfax Street. In 1817, when St. Paul's congregation constructed a new church on the 200 block of South Pitt Street, it was Daniel McLean who donated the property for the structure.⁴ The religious testament in Daniel's will suggests he was very pious, and left instructions that his heirs retain the family pew (given rent-free because of his many benefactions) so long as they were able to attend services there.

Most of the Alexandria McLeans are buried in St. Paul's cemetery off Hamilton Lane and their gravestones -- though seriously weathered -- stand in a cluster still plainly visible, in plots properly tended. St. Paul's Church historian Mrs. Ruth Lincoln Kaye fondly speaks of the founding McLeans, and can relate many anecdotes about them, as can McLean relative and author

William Francis Smith. A frugal, shrewd, and acquisitive Scot, Wilmer McLean, with his inheritance held in trust for him, built a fortune of his own

as a grocer and baker (Kerr & McLean) in Alexandria before the Civil War. Unfortunately, economic depression during the 1840s led to his financial



Wilmer McLean, courtesy of Appomattox Court House, National Historical Park.

failure.⁵ Then, on January 19, 1853, as Wilmer approached his 40th birthday, he married Virginia Beverley Hooe Mason, widow of Dr. John Seddon Mason, who had inherited the 1,200-acre "Yorkshire" tract, one 330-acre Fairfax County tract, two sizable Prince William tracts totaling 500 acres, and at least 14 slaves. The main house at "Yorkshire" was a "handsome old colonial mansion,"⁶ whose image as reproduced in *Photographic History of the Civil War* which illustrates to the viewer its attractiveness and historical importance. [Today, the cornerstone of one of these historic buildings is embedded in the museum within the Bull Run Battlefield's Visitor's Center.] Most of the widow's property was held in trust. McLean moved from Alexandria soon after his wedding to serve as master of his vast land-holdings. He retained such strong Alexandria ties, however, that his daughter, Virginia Beverley McLean, who was born at Appomattox in the fall of 1865, was not baptized at Alexandria's St. Paul's, Church until February 25, 1883. (There is evidence that McLean through marriage had manipulated two wealthy widows and thereby increased the limited profits of his grocery business.)⁷

Virginia Beverley Hooe Mason McLean, having mothered three children during her marriage to the Dr., even into her mid-40s gave birth to a McLean brood that consisted of one son and three daughters. Lucretia ("Lulu") Virginia McLean, born May 5, 1857, was the owner of the rag doll stolen by young Union officers at the time of the Appomattox surrender. This doll was

drolly dubbed by them the "silent witness" to the signing of the surrender terms by Lee and Grant, and as such was considered too valuable a relic to leave behind as a mere child's plaything. (McLean biographer Cauble cites a Lt. Col. Thomas W.C. Moore specifically as the purloiner of the doll.)⁸ Union soldiers filched it, but reportedly they substituted another doll in compensation for the deed.

In the early days of the conflict Wilmer McLean and his brother Anthony served the Confederate Quartermaster's Department as civilians but were soon disillusioned and secured positions for personal gain. Wilmer, after aiding General Beauregard in troop dispositions, and supplying information about the Manassas area, leased his property and buildings to the Confederate government just before, during, and after the first battle, until the Rebels finally pulled out of this position in March 1862.

Certainly, McLean is one of the few known Virginians to have charged the Confederacy for the use of his land as a battlefield and to have received remuneration!⁹ His cook-house, which attracted unwanted Union attention due to a prominent Confederate signal station placed there with McLean's okay, was the first artillery casualty of First Bull Run (Manassas). McLean's large new [1857] stone barn became a Confederate hospital during the battle, and then a temporary jail for captured

U.S. Congressmen and some Federal soldiers.

(McLean had sent his family to safety deeper into southwest Virginia preceding the action.) Receipts at the National Archives show McLean was paid \$1,125 from Richmond as rent for animals, for fodder, and for his services. In addition, Wilmer probably procured medicines and other more mundane but essential commodities for the Confederate army.¹¹

The record of declining payments to McLean indicates he lost ardor for the Cause and soon quit the neighborhood of the first significant Confederate resistance to Federal incursions into the state. Later, he probably benefited as a businessman, particularly by moving sugar around the embattled Confederacy at large. Before this profitable sugar speculation, McLean, according to his biographer, "purchased paper, candles, and other scarce items in Richmond, and had them shipped to Manassas, then sold them to the Confederate Quartermaster for the highest price he could receive."¹²

Some of this defection was due to a shrewd man's estimate of the dim chances of Confederate success; some was due to McLean's disgust with the prevalence of liquor among attendants of Rebel wounded on his land, and of what he considered disregard for his property; some his Scottish inherent urge to profit even during troubled times for fellow Virginians. His 1863 correspondence to General Pemberton in Vicksburg is a

plea for the release of a large quantity of Louisiana sugar holed up in the besieged Mississippi River town; but even a letter of introduction from General Joseph Johnston failed to loosen Pemberton's siege mentality and grip on McLean's goods. Vicksburgians would soon be starving, and speculators were understandably despised by desperate believers in the Cause. This became another grievance between McLean and ardent Confederate leaders in-the-know, like his former neighbors General Robert E. Lee, Confederate Adjutant General Samuel Cooper, and Brigadier General Montgomery Dent Corse.

Despite McLean's place in the Northern Virginia establishment, his early attachment to the Confederacy, and his stake as a significant Virginia landholder, he obviously felt that his budding family and financial future required distancing himself from the fighting. McLean, dubbed "Major" for his early militia activity, was in his mid-forties when war broke out, and so was exempt from active military service. McLean wrote E.P. Alexander that he moved to Appomattox so he would "never have to see another soldier." Alexander duly recorded the remark in his own memoirs. McLean traditionally has been blamed for such self-serving actions, and worse -- commodities speculation -- by Confederate stalwarts, and by those responsible for interpreting Civil War sites.

There is an undercurrent of disapproval to E.P. Alexander's physical description of McLean, and obviously

mixed with sympathy, as well as astonishment at one of the most extraordinary coincidences in American history:

He was a short, stout little fellow & with a face easily remembered. I said, "Hello! McLean, why what are you doing here?" He replied, "Alexander, what the hell are you fellows doing here? I stood it on Bull Run till, backwards & forwards, between you, my whole plantation was ruined & I sold out & came way off here over 200 miles to this out of the way place where I hoped I never would see another soldier of either side, & now just look at this place" -- & he pointed around to his yard full of tents & his fields stretching off low from [being] trampled & fences burned in the numerous camp fires, for the last guns were fired on his lands & in his house Gen. Lee surrendered to Gen. Grant. So the very first & the very last hd.qrs. & the very first & last collisions of these two great armies in a four years' war had taken place in the house & on the premises of the same individual -- who fleeing from the turmoil & danger had moved meanwhile over 200 miles.¹³

Of course, at the time of Lee's surrender to Grant, April 9, 1865, McLean *did* see more soldiers, as those interested in American history will never forget -- hungry, ragged, dirty, and soon-to-be dispersed Confederates; and their opposite number, exultant, rapacious Union souvenir-hunters; and a horde of men eager for war's end.

It was Colonel Charles Marshall of Lee's staff (sometimes purported author

of Lee's farewell to his troops), randomly encountering McLean in the village of Appomattox just before that fateful April day, who asked the obviously substantial but otherwise unknown local citizen if there was a house suitable in which Lee and Grant could discuss surrender terms. McLean's initial response, based on his personal negative war experiences, was to take Marshall to a nearby abandoned house for inspection as a possible surrender site. Marshall said it would not do. McLean, in conflict between his anticipation of further depredations against his own property and his sense of responsibility to aid the dignity of the war's conclusion, and while suffering exasperation at his bad luck again for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, blurted out, "Maybe my house will do!"¹⁴

History was made, and McLean found himself a reluctant host for the second time to one of the most dramatic episodes of the entire Civil War and of American history, this one the virtual conclusion of the fratricidal conflict seared into America's soul
f o r e v e r .

APRIL 9, 1865 AND THEREAFTER:

The best available evidence posits General Lee's arrived at the McLean house an hour before General Grant appeared on the scene. Traditional portrayals of the Confederate leader depict him as immaculately dressed, alert and dignified, despite the horrendously deprived Confederate conditions, and the deep sadness of the errand, as the pristine image of the Marble Man requires.

However, the most accurate historical depictions of the general's actual condition at the surrender meeting (Cauble's two volumes, and eye-witness writings, *passim*) strongly indicate that Lee was not only worn, tired, and hungry, but physically ill as well, though doubtlessly flawlessly uniformed, as tradition has it. The beloved general - nearing age 60 -- actually "fell into an extended sleep" awaiting his counterpart Grant's late arrival (Grant was late because he had to ride from several miles behind his lines), while host Wilmer McLean nervously but sympathetically chatted with Confederate Colonel Marshall and Grant's Union staff officer Babcock, partly to cover for Lee's fatigue.

Lee's own statements indicate his worn, ill condition. On the next day, April 10, Lee himself (more comfortable with General George Gordon Meade than with Grant) told General Meade "he was very sick and had not a mouthful to eat." Meade, in turn, recorded that Lee "looked old and feeble."¹⁵ So Lee's heretofore physical impressiveness and dignity were somewhat counterbalanced by human frailty on this momentous occasion, despite time-honored portrayals to the contrary. Of course, Lee successfully hid the full extent of his suffering from most observers with his vaunted stoicism and dignity.

Officers of both sides and Union troops gathered to witness history, and at the same time systematically began to dismantle Wilmer McLean's property for mementos. McLean was said by Union General Ord and others to be stalking around nearly hysterical, torn

between ostentatious protest at the second of the war's personal incursions against him, and at the supposed historical solemnity of the event. Soldiers "were carrying off his fence rails"¹⁶ General Sheridan "bought," with two \$10 gold pieces, the small parlor table on which the surrender was signed; however, the money was thrown on the floor when the McLeans objected, and soldiers were ordered to take the table away without the owners' consent. (This little table, manufactured in Alexandria's Green Furniture Factory [S.E. corner of Fairfax and Prince Street] was later given to Mrs. George Armstrong Custer by her husband as a gift from General Sheridan.) These thefts and transgressions continued for several days. Later, when photographer Matthew Brady arrived from Petersburg to record the historic room, he found the parlor completely bare of furnishings. The resultant picture is barren of many defining household objects, and is a reminder of how historical conditions beyond an individual's control wreak havoc.

The McLean family always reacted vehemently against accusations that through greed they had held an auction of their historic furnishings to capitalize on the republic-altering occurrence on their property for the second time. Indeed, there is no absolute evidence for this rumor, which nevertheless has persisted to this day. After a year of increasing destitution the McLeans moved back to Alexandria.

Eventually, the Appomattox house was dismantled brick by brick

under a later owner named Ragland, and much of the masonry sold for souvenirs. The surrender house was not reconstructed until the centennial when a ceremony led by historian Douglas Southall Freeman culminated in a ribbon-cutting by male descendants of generals Lee and Grant.

Wilmer McLean fell on hard times after the surrender and paid to have his Appomattox house photographed so that prints could be sold. (Holding \$40,000 in Confederate money at war's end, McLean watched its value evaporate completely by summer '65. Eventually, his real estate was confiscated by creditors.) He even used his Alexandria roots, shared with Robert E. Lee, by asking the general to pose for a portrait by a New York artist so that copy prints could be made and sold for his benefit. Lee's reply was immediate, icy in its politeness, and in the negative:

My Dear Sir: I rd. by the last mail your letter of the 2d inst., requesting for me to sit to an artist for my picture for you.

I regret that I shall be unable to comply with your request, and must beg that you will excuse me. Very respectfully yr. obnt. svt., R.E. Lee.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Lee consented freely to sign photographs of himself for presentation to scholarship students of a Virginia school, and performed other small acts of kindness involving the use of his image. Does Lee's refusal to be photographed show particular animus toward fellow Alexandrian McLean, the commodities speculator; or is it merely

another expression of Lee's Olympian dignity and discretion?

McLean, joining the Republicans under Grant (like former Confederate military men Longstreet and Mosby) first secured a post at Manassas as a federal revenue agent. With Col. John S. Mosby's help, he tried to obtain a Treasury clerkship, but was unsuccessful. Finally, McLean, returned to Alexandria, and was granted the customs post for the Port of Alexandria in return for supporting the Union.

None of these moves endeared him to Confederates, but they saved his family from financial ruin. The family's vast land holdings in Northern Virginia were never farmed by them again, due to the destruction of southern agriculture during the war and Reconstruction.

Wilmer McLean entered once again into Alexandria's social and civic affairs, which had been greatly diminished by the war. He served in his federal post from October 1876 till January 1880. He died of an unrecorded ailment on June 5, 1882.

McLean's obituary appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette*, his hometown paper, on the next day. It reads, simply:

On Monday evening, the 5th instant, in the 68th year of his age, WILMER MCLEAN, son of the late Daniel McLean. Funeral at 3 p.m., Wednesday, from his late residence, corner Pitt and Wolfe streets.¹⁸

No mention of Appomattox, nor of First Manassas, nor of a native son of the Old Dominion. (Most obituaries of the period *are* similarly succinct, as some familiarity with them shows, but the McLean name *was* prominent among Alexandria denizens for nearly a hundred years, and so this scion should, perhaps, have been an notable exception. Of course, Virginians' feelings about the war, even by 1882, were such that it would have been hard to editorialize honestly about issues surrounding McLean's "loyalty."

What is the reason for this matter of fact send-off? Since Wilmer's father, Daniel McLean, was exceptionally well known and respected, this succinct notice could be interrupted as a put-down due to war-time speculations, and later conversion to Republicanism, amidst un-reconstructed, resentful Southern Democrats, or the contentions arising among the new post-war political factions.

Meanwhile, McLean's wife, Virginia Beverley Hooe Mason McLean, mother of his four children, outlived him by 11 years, and is buried next to Wilmer at St. Paul's Cemetery in Alexandria.

In death, was Wilmer McLean dis-respected by his hometown paper, and by his Confederate neighbors? Was he disliked?

Wilmer McLean's saga is one of the best local examples of a well-heeled Virginia civilian losing property and status during the Civil War. Not only does it show financial ruin but divided personal loyalties, and confused

motives and expectations, in the face of a world turned upside down.. Moving away from the war at its inception only to encounter it again at its close, while speculating in scarce commodities, McLean has often been portrayed by historians as selfishly engaged, while other Virginians selflessly and loyally served and suffered throughout the conflict and after. It was artilleryist E.P. Alexander who first pointed out in print to a large audience the extreme coincidence of merchant/land-holder McLean being in the path of war (so to speak) at both the opening and closing of the American Civil War. Clearly this frugal nineteenth century Virginia grocer suffered from this incredible happenstance as did his family.

But was he loyal enough to his fellow Virginians?

The truth of McLean's life *vis-a-vis* the Civil War was probably that of an older Virginia civilian trying at first to help the Confederacy, soon realizing its inevitable demise, and consequently attempting to save his growing family from destitution for some of which he was responsible via bad business practices. McLean was forced to enact the role of *paterfamilias* at the expense of a reputation for unimpeachable loyalty to the South. His Alexandria neighbors, at least, seem to have understood the impetus of his stance, since they too had suffered worse during the Union occupation, which lasted from the beginning to the end of a long four years. But perhaps General Lee's icy response to McLean's request to sit for his artist, along with other

evidence, suggests a Confederate dislike for war-time speculators. Sundays at St. Paul's Episcopal Church must have been difficult on many occasions. Perhaps some letters, yet to be discovered in an attic in the future might contain local opinions about the man McLean and his doings.

Future historians may regard Wilmer McLean as a man of material substance and social prominence in Virginia, and intent upon not losing these assets if at all possible, while being subject to incredible accidents of chance. During McLean's encounter with the War, he also exhibited a Scotsman's mentality for the bottom line. These actions may have led others to condemn him, especially in quarters where there had been great losses and devastation.

War-time speculation in goods can be perceived as a policy of provision or exploitation. After 135 years Wilmer McLean is still caught after the Civil War's close in the hotly debated consequences of the great American cataclysm which destroyed the Southern world, and turned former neighbors into enemies, or at least chilly acquaintances, amidst their efforts to regain citizenship and economic viability. McLean may well have been considered by the Civil War generation of Virginians who knew him to be Dickens' Scrooge, or some kind of secular simonist.

- ² Kaye, *St. Paul's Cemetery Records*, pp. 53-55.
- ³ Powell, *History of Old Alexandria, Virginia*, p. 119.
- ⁴ Kaye, *History of St. Paul's*, p. 5.
- ⁵ Friedman, "Wilmer McLean: the Centreville Years," *passim*.
- ⁶ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 20.
- ⁷ Friedman, "Wilmer McLean: the Centreville Years," *passim*.
- ⁸ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 50.
- ⁹ National Archives records cited in Cauble.
- ¹⁰ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 21.
- ¹¹ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 21-22.
- ¹² Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 31.
- ¹³ E.P. Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, pp. 46-47.
- ¹⁴ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 46.
- ¹⁵ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 48.
- ¹⁶ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, p. 49.
- ¹⁷ Cauble, *Wilmer McLean*, pp. 54-55.
- ¹⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, June 6, 1882 (Evening); Microfilm, Special Collections, Alexandria Library, Barrett Branch.

Notes

1. Horowitz, p. 267.

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