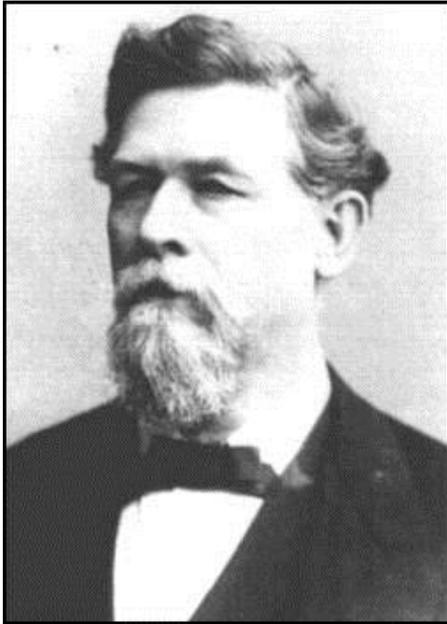


**Phillip Dale Roddey**  
**“The Defender of North Alabama”**

By Arley H. McCormick



**Phillip Dale Roddey**



Boys entering high school may check off names of Civil War cavalry leaders they recall: Custer, Forrest, perhaps Wheeler and then the recollection fades. Contemporary accounts mention Phillip Dale Roddey (sometimes spelled Roddy) in passing and only in relation to more widely acclaimed personalities, yet the farmer, steamboat owner and operator, businessman, superb cavalryman, and a favorite son of Moulton, Alabama was a clever and daring scout, aggressive raider, and an elusive foe to the Federal Army.

On April 2, 1820, Sara Roddey delivered a son to her husband, Daniel, at their farm near Moulton on Big Nance Creek. Phillip's parents were successful but poor

farmers, certainly incapable of providing a formal education to their children. But life wasn't without problems. One day, Dan Roddey's bull crashed through their fence and wandered into a corn field belonging to a neighbor, Jimmy Seward. Seward killed the bull, but Daniel Roddey couldn't prove it. He composed a poem and recited it at every opportunity:

*Jimmy Seward killed a bull  
Daniel Roddey found him  
Away down on Big Nance  
Ten thousand buzzards around him*

Mr. Brazel, a close acquaintance of Mr. Seward and the brother-in-law of the Lawrence County Sheriff, grew annoyed with the frequent insults to his friend. Brazel shot Daniel Roddey dead. Brazel was tried, found guilty, and hanged at Moulton, but only after the sheriff deputized another man to drop the trap door. His death resulted in the first capital murder case in Lawrence County.

Phillip's mother struggled to raise her three children alone. Phillip's youth, no doubt, instilled the virtue of hard work. He grew into the role as the man of the house, helping to support his mother and two sisters, Maggie Dale and Caroline. A clever young man with ambition and an inviting personality, his first business enterprise was learning the tailor trade.

At age 26, Phillip Roddey became the youngest elected sheriff of Lawrence County. After three years as a lawman, he turned to the steamboat business – first as a clerk, then a manager and finally in 1854, he and partner John Thomas Humphrey purchased the steamer *Julia H. Smith*. They operated between New Orleans and Waterloo.

The war began while Phillip lived in Chickasaw, Alabama and managed his steamboat business. As a businessman, like others in North Alabama, he did not support secession. After the vote however, he rallied to the Confederacy to keep a Federal army from destroying his home and state. When Tennessee's Fort Henry fell, Union gunboats were spotted in Alabama as far south as Florence. Rather than allow his steamboat to be seized by Federal forces, he burned it.

Phillip Roddey raised a company of mounted soldiers referred to as the "Tishomingo Rangers" at Tuscumbia, Alabama in October 1862. The popular captain possessed a genteel southern manner. Folks frequently referred to him as "Buttermilk Phillip" and his unit the "Buttermilk Brigade" because his organization lived off the land.

Captain Roddey learned what it took to be a cavalry commander. The cavalry arm of an Army is its eyes and ears moving on the flanks, sometimes the rear guard, or well in advance of the main body; the infantry and artillery; always expected to draw fire and fix the location and strength of the enemy.

Roddey's rangers, casually referred to as "bull pups," were first

to report – on January 17, 1862 – the buildup of Union troops at Pittsburg Landing just prior to the Battle of Shiloh. His Tishomingo Rangers escorted General Bragg at Shiloh where they were baptized by fire. Captain Roddey was cited for gallantry.

Captain Roddey "met the elephant" at Shiloh, but it took longer to master the techniques required for a great cavalry commander. He grasped the feel of operating behind Federal lines after the Army of Tennessee withdrew to Corinth. He learned that seeing without being seen, moving without being detected, hitting quickly and disappearing into the countryside, was the formula for a raider's success. Thus, after a couple of near disasters, he became recognized by Federal officers and his senior commanders as a daring, innovative, and to-be-feared commander of cavalry.

While Bragg was organizing for his Kentucky campaign, he advised General Sterling Price:

"Captain Roddey is detached with a squadron of cavalry on special service in northwest Alabama, where he has shown himself to be an officer of rare energy, enterprise and skill in harassing the enemy and procuring information of his movements. Captain Roddey has the entire confidence of the commanding general,

who wishes to commend him to you as one eminently worthy of trust.”

Federal forces occupied the vicinity of Corinth when General Bragg decided to move east. His confidence in Roddey’s leadership resulted in Roddey covering Bragg’s left flank. On August 21, 1862, General Bragg wrote his general orders:

“A portion of our cavalry, consisting of the companies of Earle, Lewis and Roddey, led by Captain Roddey, has made another brilliant dash upon a superior force of the enemy, resulting in their utter discomfiture and the capture of 123 prisoners. The judgment and prudence of the previous dispositions exhibit high military skill.”

General Bragg frequently reported Roddey’s success. It earned him favor, more responsibility, and a good reputation in North Alabama, as well as the authority to increase his command to a regiment. In October 1862, Colonel Phillip Roddey commanded the 1,400 men of the Fourth Alabama Cavalry, formed in Tuscumbia.

In December, 1862 his first major engagement as a colonel took place near Little Bear Creek, Alabama. Colonel Roddey’s men forced Union General Thomas W. Sweeney to

withdraw. Near the close of 1862, he was ordered to join General Van Dorn's cavalry corps in Mississippi.

Captain Roddey was baptized by fire at Shiloh; he honed his cavalry skills in and around North Alabama in 1862, and as the colonel of his regiment, he caused the Federal forces to suffer in 1863 and 1864. He started 1863 by raising and floating the *Dunbar* – a steamboat sunk by the Federals the previous winter. In addition, he had his men repair flat boats and barges to conceal for his use on the Tennessee River.

In February, he fought at Tuscumbia and in March at Columbus, Tennessee. By April, U.S. General Grenville M. Dodge was confused. He miscalculated and exaggerated the Rebels’ strength at various locations, and requested reinforcements to support the event that would later be known as Straight’s Raid.

Neither Colonel Roddey nor General Nathan Bedford Forrest could define the objective of Straight’s maneuver, but the Federal intent was for Dodge to distract and delay Roddey and Forrest while Straight slipped off to destroy the Confederate logistics infrastructure at Rome, Georgia. Forrest directed Roddey to engage Dodge while Forrest ensured Straight did not loop back to their flank. Roddey’s first engagement was at Buzzard Roost and Newsome Farm near Cherokee. His opponent was Colonel George E. Spenser’s 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama Cavalry (US). It would not be the last time they met.

On April 20, Roddey spooked Straight’s animals in the night and

caused a stampede. On April 23 at the Rock Cut west of Tuscumbia, Roddey met Colonel Spenser again, causing Streight to evacuate the area, leaving it in Roddey's control. Dodge believed he had gained the time Streight needed to complete the raid. He retired to Corinth, thus allowing Forrest and Roddey to follow Streight, even though he had a five day head start. Roddey caught Streight and was bloodied at Days Gap, but the chase continued till Streight was caught. He surrendered at Cedar Bluff, Alabama in early May.

After Streight's surrender, Roddey was directed to Decatur. When General Bragg learned he would not join him, he made his frustration clear to the Confederate high command but political pressure from North Alabama residents, who claimed each time Colonel Roddey left the area the Federals had their way with them, may have influenced his new assignment. From May 19 through July 4, 1863, Roddey commanded the District of North Alabama. Roddey returned to northwest Alabama and pursued the Federals to Florence. The Federals fought a delaying action and on May 28, they evacuated Florence. On their way out of town, they burned seven wagon factories, the largest tanning facility in the Confederacy, and many buildings that housed ordnance.

In June, Roddey's headquarters was moved to Burnsville to disrupt the Memphis & Charleston Railroad facilities supporting the Federal stockpile stored at Corinth. He continued to move his units around to confuse the Federal patrols and

informers. In August, Roddey was nominated to become a Brigadier General and was confirmed in April 1864.

Buckhorn Tavern was the site of another skirmish on October 12, 1863. Roddey's Brigade had moved south from New Market when they unexpectedly intercepted Union General Robert Mitchell's Cavalry Brigade advancing northeast from Huntsville. It was a short testy encounter that bloodied both commands. Each commander chose not to become decisively engaged, and both were quite happy to extricate themselves from the melee after dark.

At one time or another, almost every general in the Western theater wanted Roddey's support or his capture. Perplexing Roddey's position was an oft confusing chain of command. Major General Steven D. Lee wanted him in Mississippi to defend Vicksburg while General Bragg, then commanding the Army of Tennessee, wanted him in Tennessee. Frequently, Roddey would cross the Tennessee River with his regiment only to be recalled to his former position. On one occasion Major General Wheeler received orders from General Bragg to bring Roddey with him to the right of the Army of Tennessee in Northwest Georgia. Roddey was assigned to General Johnston, commanding the Department of the West, and Johnston advised Major General Lee, Johnston's cavalry leader that he supported recalling Roddey to support him. General Bragg, with the authority to direct Lee to move into Middle Tennessee and include Roddey's command,

never included General Johnston in the discussion leaving Roddey to act on his own initiative. Consequently, Roddey supported a raid into Tennessee and was commended for his destruction of the railroad between Nashville and Union General Rosecrans's forces. Perhaps Johnston accommodated Roddey's decision to appease General Bragg.

The Federals seemed to find Roddey everywhere and couldn't catch him anywhere. On November 13, Roddey was contesting the Federals crossing the river at Savannah, Tennessee. On the 14th, he was reported at Leighton; on the 17th he was seen at Decatur and Courtland. On November 23, he was reported at all points between Decatur and Florence. By November 27, he was seen near Lawrenceburg, Tennessee and Florence, Alabama. The Federals grew weary of chasing Roddey and from Tullahoma, Tennessee; Brigadier General A.S. Williams declared that he must be caught. Roddey continued to baffle and frustrate the Federals.

On December 11, Union scouts reported Roddey at Yellow Creek above Hamburg with 800 men. They believed he was the vanguard of a larger force. Union reports also placed him at Guntown, Mississippi with 1500 men and artillery. He was reported to be at Bartons Station, Alabama east of Cherokee and later at Glendale, Mississippi where the Federals lost men, horses, and weapons. In addition, he was credited with torching a covered bridge. His raiding was such an irritant that General U.S. Grant chastised his command to deal with General Roddey on Christmas Day.

Skirmishes continued in North Alabama. In January 1864, the Federals reported Roddey near Florence. He joined his 1,500 cavalry with Forrest on January 21 at Shoal Creek. On January 25, Roddey's troops camped at Bainbridge and skirmished with the Federals before they crossed the river with the main part of the brigade to Athens. In April 1864, Roddey's Brigade was transferred to the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, but he remained in Alabama during General John Bell Hood's 1864 Nashville campaign. On September 15, Roddey was reported in Guntersville, moving toward Lebanon. Every Federal command in Tennessee, north Mississippi, and north Alabama wanted to know where and what Roddey was doing.

General Hood's campaign to save the Confederacy failed on December 16, 1864 at Nashville. He retired the Army of Tennessee to Tupelo, Mississippi. After Hood's failure, the Union forces following the withdrawal and halted on the north bank of the Tennessee River in January 1865.

The previous fall, Roddey made a desperate attempt to retake Decatur but failed. Some historians refer to it as a feint covering General Hood's approach to Nashville. Now the Federals occupied Decatur and most of the north bank of the Tennessee River.

General Roddey often commented that his service cost the Confederacy nothing, possibly because of the war materials he re-appropriated from the Federal Army. However, North Alabama was isolated and occupied

by the Union Army and as the possibility of a Southern victory was waned, military discipline eroded and the reprisals against unionists and secessionists was bitter. Civilians suffered. The Secretary of War at Richmond, Virginia was asked to replace General Roddey's command in North Alabama with troops that had no local interest in the region. A decision was not necessary. In January, using his authority under Martial Law, Roddey executed four bushwhackers near Moulton.

In March, Union General James F. Wilson organized the largest Federal Cavalry force ever seen on the north side of the Tennessee River and crossed toward the heart of Alabama. Roddey and Forrest fought an aggressive delaying action and finally, they stood together for the last fight at Selma. They were out-manned and out-gunned. Most of Roddey's command was captured but Roddey and Forrest narrowly escaped by swimming the Alabama River in the dark. The remainder of Roddey's command surrendered at Pond Springs, Alabama, in May 1865. The Civil War had finally come to an end.

Confederate Brigadier General Phillip D. Roddey's war was over but building a new life during Reconstruction was as challenging as a cavalry officer's life was exhausting. Even before the war's end, Roddey's reputation was under fire. He was accused of catering to the peace advocates, whose platform included making a separate peace with the Federal authorities and letting the Confederacy make its own peace. It didn't help that a close

friend was D. P. Lewis, (later governor of Alabama) and a Peace Party member who eventually went behind Union lines. Roddey even named a son Dale P. Lewis Roddey. He was also accused of becoming a Republican, both allegations his supporters in Moulton rallied to refute.

Roddey's civilian experience and war time popularity no doubt influenced an offer for a partnership in a steamboat soon after the war. Unfortunately, the conditions of his parole, dated May 17, 1865, at Courtland, Alabama, prevented him from taking advantage of the opportunity. The two documents he had to acquire before returning to a normal life was a parole and a pardon. A pardon was more difficult. He applied to the war department for a pardon with endorsements from U.S. Grant and the Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama Cavalry Regiment (US), Colonel George E. Spenser. He and General Grant communicated occasionally after the war. With a pardon, Roddey was allowed to enter the business world again.

He moved his family to Tuscaloosa, Alabama and became a commission merchant. His negotiations were successful, but collecting his fees became a challenge. His associates, the Parker and Brooks Company, filed for bankruptcy and Roddey went to court to claim a debt against them for \$33,297.28. His claim was based upon a certificate allegedly signed by U.S. Grant guaranteeing Parker and Brooks funds. A federal court in Memphis declared the certificate invalid and he lost his claim. While

the war years provided him extensive knowledge of the Confederacy's terrain, the terrain of New York City was a challenge of a different sort. He became acquainted with Miss Carlotta Shotwell, not a particularly reputable lady and known by several aliases, one of which was Ms. Caroletta Roddey. Phillip Roddey charged that she stole his opera glasses. She claimed they were married before Roddey had divorced his wife in Alabama. The court found Ms. Shotwell not guilty of the theft but guilty of libel for claiming she was his wife.

He reportedly filed for bankruptcy twice; once he was reported to be dying in Florida. With each report, his faithful friends in Moulton ferreted out the truth. The former General's end came when his

business took him to London, England where he and acquaintances had acquired a patent for a pump. He was negotiating a sale when he was admitted to Westminster Hospital and treated for uremia. He died in the hospital on July 20, 1897 and his body was returned for burial in Greenwood Cemetery in Tuscaloosa.

Many aspects of the notable life of General Phillip D. Roddey remain undiscovered. Like his home behind the post office in Moulton, those aspects appear to be lost to history and time. There are few records of his early life, no contemporary biography, and yet both the Southern and Northern war reports illustrate that the "The Defender of North Alabama" had an exceptional capacity to lead men in war.



The Narrative can be found in the TVCWRT book published in 2012 titled, *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*. Complements of the TVCWRT.