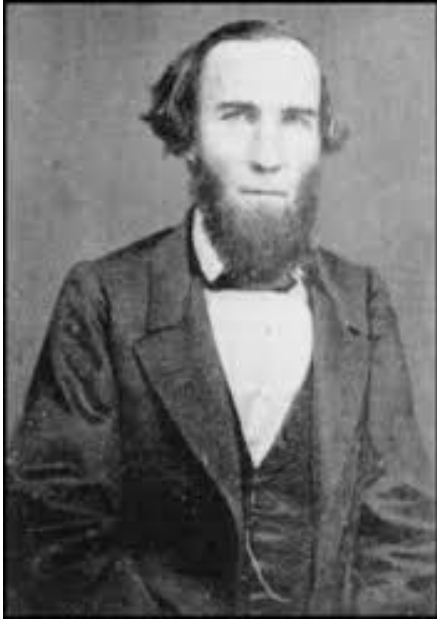


General Leroy Pope Walker

By Kent Wright



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North Alabama produced several men of good standing who served as general officers – both Union and Confederate – in the American Civil War. Perhaps one of the most well known was Leroy Pope Walker, a Huntsville native, who was born into a wealthy and politically powerful family on February 7, 1817. He was the son of John Williams Walker, an early politician who was destined for great things until his death at age 40 of tuberculosis. Leroy's mother was Matilda Pope Walker, daughter of one of Huntsville's founders, LeRoy Pope. Little is recorded of Walker's childhood in Huntsville except that he was very young when his father

died and the family was left in heavy debt. An early visitor to the family home near New Market was President James Monroe, who stopped there in June, 1819 before going into the town of Huntsville.

As a young adult, Walker studied law at the Universities of Alabama and Virginia, and was admitted to the bar in 1837. He established his law practice in North Alabama where he became active in Democratic Party politics starting the 1840s. Walker was North Alabama's most outstanding lawyer and leading Democrat next to Huntsville's Clement Clay. Walker married, presumably in his twenties, to a Miss Hopkins, with whom he had two sons, Clifton and John Percy Walker. After the death of his first wife, he married Eliza Dickson Pickett, the daughter of a Montgomery judge. To this union were born three children: Matilda Pope Walker, Eliza Pickett Walker, and Leroy Pope Walker, Jr.

Leroy Walker was elected into the Alabama State House of Representatives in 1840. While serving, he became increasingly pro-slavery and pro-secession. His oratory skill and passion ranked with the fiery U.S. Senator William Loundes Yancey of South Alabama. Together, they authored the "Alabama Platform" of the Democratic Party, a strong stand in

favor of westward expansion of slavery. Walker walked out of the Democratic Convention of 1860 when the Alabama Platform was not adopted into the national platform. By that act, he essentially split the Democratic Party and helped to ensure the election of Abraham Lincoln. Walker grew to greater prominence in the pro-secession faction – yet he remained a relative unknown nationally.

With increasing tension and division between North and South, the Confederate government was formed on February 4, 1861. Less than three weeks later, on February 21, the Confederate States War Department was organized at the cabinet level to serve under President Jefferson Davis. Walker was chosen to head the department as the Secretary of War. Davis wanted a civilian cabinet to run his government in the same tradition as the United States and he carefully picked his cabinet members with a view that they should represent all parts of the Confederacy. Davis first offered the job to nationally known Senator Yancey, but Yancey declined and recommended Walker. Walker was readily accepted because his attributes were favorable for a Davis cabinet – he was an Alabama native with a good reputation as a jurist and legislator and a strong stand on states' rights similar to Yancey's.

Publically, Walker was described as an outstanding legislator, a brilliant lawyer, and a staunch advocate of states' rights. Although

it was said that he lacked a sense of humor, he was a man of great firmness and was described as tall and handsome with an elegance of style. In private, he was regarded as cold and aloof.

The London Times foreign correspondent, William Howard Russell, wrote this about him: “He is the kind of man generally represented in our types of a Yankee – tall, lean, straight-haired, angular with fiery impulsive eyes and manner – ruminator of tobacco and profuse spitter – a lawyer, I believe, certainly not a soldier; ardent and devoted to the cause, confident....”

The Charleston Mercury endorsed Walker's appointment, but later commented that Walker “was selected with the understanding that Davis would control the business, which he did.” Davis, through the War Department, was authorized to raise an army of 100,000 under 12-month enlistments.

One of Walker's earliest official acts as Secretary of War was of greatest impact of all upon Americans. On April 11, 1861, he precipitated war on the following day with his telegraphed order from Montgomery to CSA Brigadier General Beauregard to fire upon Fort Sumter. Literally, within hours after the first shots were fired, Walker's fiery rhetoric riveted the attention of the American public. That night, in an impromptu speech at the Exchange Hotel in Montgomery, he boldly asserted that “...[the Confederate Flag] will before

the first of May, float over the dome of the old Capital in Washington. [and]...will eventually float over [Boston's] Faneuil Hall.”

Newspapers North and South instantly picked up on the speech, ostensibly the announcement of Confederate war policy, and it spread like wildfire. Walker later claimed he was misquoted, but that hardly mattered. The effect of those words from the Secretary of War, a man ranked only by Jefferson Davis himself, was the same as pouring gasoline onto a fire – one that was already sparked by the day's action against Fort Sumter.

There were many factors that influenced Northern support for the war, but Walker's impromptu speech instantly unified strongly divided factions in the North. His words ignited Northern passions for war and spread the fear of an actual *Southern* invasion of the North, which influenced Lincoln's call for 75,000 ninety-day volunteers. Stephen A. Douglas, the lead Western democrat, advised Lincoln to arm for war even as several Southern newspapers fanned the flames with the endorsement of an invasion of the North.

Davis became angered over Walker's gaff, but criticized little, if any. Walker stayed in the Davis cabinet until September 16, 1861. In his short term of office in the critical early months of the war, even though he was credited for raising 200,000 troops for the provisional and volunteer armies, he had considerable difficulty in getting

men into national service in the regularly Confederate army. Despite raising an impressive number of men, he was conspicuously ineffective in getting them armed, whether by Southern manufactory or foreign importation. No serious effort to import arms was pushed by Walker until just after the 1st Battle of Manassas/1st Battle of Bull Run when he wrote to his purchasing agents in London, “this war is now assuming truly gigantic proportions.”

Several factors beyond his control hindered his efforts, but lack of cooperation of the states was a leading factor. In particular, the governors of Georgia, Louisiana, and North Carolina, who had adopted strong states' rights positions, firmly resisted cooperation with a central government, especially in providing arms.

Walker submitted his resignation after receiving much abuse and criticism from nearly every quarter. Davis expressed no criticism himself, but neither did he defend Walker, whose troubles were only in part that he was in over his head. His problems were exacerbated by declining health.

Upon his resignation, Walker accepted an Army commission as a brigadier general at Mobile under one of his main critics, Brigadier General Braxton Bragg. There he was to have been assigned to command a garrison of presumably brigade strength, but Bragg effectively banished him from his army to an unimportant military

post in Montgomery. Complaining of the humiliation in a letter to Davis, he wrote: "The only service I can possibly render at Montgomery will be to play wet nurse to Major Vogdes, General Bragg's solitary prisoner of war."

Bragg relented and ordered Walker to command troops in the district of North Alabama consisting of "one regiment of infantry and one regiment of cavalry," with headquarters at Tusculumbia. Walker's command in North Alabama was almost immediately overshadowed by the loss of Fort Donelson and 14,000 men under General Albert Sydney Johnston. Taking his job seriously and foreseeing the threat to the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, Walker bade in a February 16, 1862 letter to General Johnston to allow him to expand his territory to Corinth, Mississippi. On the following day, he wrote to the new Secretary of War, Judah Benjamin, asserting that the "Kentucky line of defense has been lost, with a large part of our army. The line from Memphis to Virginia must be defended at all hazards. The Memphis and Charleston Road is the vertebrae of the Confederacy."

Perhaps as a result of his correspondence, Walker was soon assigned to command a brigade of Confederate States troops under Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles, 1st Corps, 2nd Division. His units were to have been: the 5th Alabama Infantry Battalion (artillery), the 38th Tennessee Infantry Regiment, the 51st Tennessee Infantry Regiment,

the 52nd Tennessee Infantry Regiment, the 1st Alabama Cavalry Battalion, and Captain Walter O. Crain's Tennessee light artillery battery. If it ever existed in body, his command was short-lived for almost immediately all troops assigned under him were ordered to Corinth, Mississippi and dispersed within Ruggles's Division.

At Corinth, troops were amassing under C.S. General A. S. Johnston to oppose U.S. Major General Grant's army at Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River in southern Middle Tennessee. The battle that ensued there, which claimed 23,000 casualties, took the appellation of a small church named Shiloh, an ancient Hebrew word for "a place of peace." Stripped of virtually all men in armed service, Walker protested that the only troops that remained in his district were, in his words, "...a battalion of Arkansas troops, badly armed. With this force of course I cannot render any service of consequence."

As pressure mounted in Northern Mississippi, Northwestern Alabama and southern Middle Tennessee, Walker would continue to plead to Richmond for more troops and arms to defend the Tennessee River and the Memphis-Charleston Railroad. At one point, he even wrote to General Beauregard at Columbus, Kentucky to beg for more support.

Upon being deposed of any semblance of a real command, on March 31, 1862, he resigned in disgust and returned to Huntsville to resume his law practice,

something he excelled at. For the remainder of the war, except during the occasional Union occupations of Huntsville when he fled the city to avoid capture, he served as the judge of the Confederate Military Court in North Alabama with the pay of a colonel in the cavalry. As the presiding military judge, he served to adjudicate matters of the army in the field. In this capacity, he also defended Unionist North Alabamians against charges of treason.

After the war, he continued in his private practice and successfully defended Frank James of the infamous James Gang against charges of robbing the Federal payroll near Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Well beyond his death on August 23, 1884, Huntsvillians fondly remembered Walker as “Judge” or “General Walker.” He was laid to rest at Maple Hill Cemetery in the city of his birth, Huntsville, Alabama.



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.