

Joseph Wheeler; Soldier, Congressman, Servant to His Country

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

Joseph Wheeler was a Georgia boy, born in Augusta, GA, on September 10, 1836, the youngest of four children. Even though he spent his youth with relatives in Connecticut, still he considered himself a Georgian. He was appointed to West Point from the state of Georgia. He served his country until the state of Georgia seceded then he served in the Confederate States Army (C.S.A.). After the war, he served in United States (U.S.) Congress and back in the U.S. Army during the Spanish American War. Joseph Wheeler spent his entire life in service to his countries.



Episcopal
Academy in
Cheshire, CT,
school picture
1855

Barely making the height requirement to get into West Point, he stood five feet and five inches tall and weighed 120 pounds, which is why he chose the cavalry. His size bought him the nickname “Little Joe.” He graduated from West Point placing 19th out of 22 cadets. Commissioned Second Lieutenant in the 1st Regiment of Dragoons, he attended the Army Cavalry School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. After graduation in 1860, he was sent to the Regiment of Mounted Rifles stationed in New Mexico Territory where he picked up another nickname.

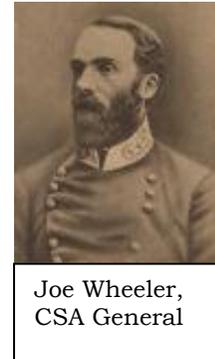
Attacks by hostile Native Americans were common in the territory. Wheeler was assigned escort duty for a wagon train heading to Fort Craig from Hannibal, Missouri. He was with an ambulance carrying a mother and new born baby. When the wagon came under attack, Wheeler shot one Apache with his musket and charged into the band blazing away with his Colt pistol until they fled. From then on, he was called “Fighting Joe.”

When Georgia seceded from the Union on January 19, 1861, Joe followed his state and resigned from the U.S. Army. Joe’s brother wrote to Georgia’s governor for Joe to be appointed in a cavalry officer’s service. Fighting Joe was given a lieutenant slot in the Georgia militia and then in the Confederate Army. Starting on constructing coastal defenses at Pensacola Bay, he was soon noticed and promoted to Colonel while helping build forts, batteries, and training recruits. When others couldn’t get along with General Bragg, Wheeler’s unassuming manner and professional conduct won Bragg’s trust. When Bragg became commander of the Army of Tennessee, Wheeler rode with him. His first command was of the 19th Alabama Infantry Regiment, where they showed their grit in the Battle of Shiloh while losing one-third of their men.

When the tide turned against the Confederates on the second day of the battle, Wheeler was given command of the rear guard covering the army’s retreat. By now, Fighting Joe had been wounded three times and had several horses shot from under him. His command expended to include the 25th, 26th Alabama, and the 4th Mississippi when he transferred to General Hardee in

the Army of Mississippi commanding the 2nd Cavalry Brigade for several months. He proved himself a cavalry leader in raids in Tennessee and Kentucky. He became known for his extremely effective cavalry functions in covering the front and flanks of retreating army, intelligence gathering, and delaying enemy advances. He was appointed Brigade General of the 2nd Corps of the Army of Tennessee. Wheeler's troops covered a rearguard action for the Battles of Perryville, Stones River, Chickamauga, and many others. With his command of 5,000 cavalymen, they ran raids against Union supply lines, destroying railroad bridges, and hundreds of supply wagons while keeping actions against Union Forces. He was continuously in the field.

Within a year, Joe had earned his second star as Major General. In May 1863, he published a manual, *Cavalry Tactics*, which proved valuable in systemizing cavalries. He was unfortunate to run into General Forrest's temper at an attack on a Federal base at Dover, TN. Forrest thought Wheeler didn't manage the field correctly. Forrest told Wheeler, "Tell Bragg that I will be in my coffin before I will fight again under your command." General Bragg fixed the feud in Tullahoma Campaign by separating them putting Wheeler on the right flank and Forrest guarded the left. After the Battle of Stone River, Wheeler and his men were fighting with Union General Stanley covering General Bragg's retreat from Shelbyville. Stanley had found a weak undefended portion on the Confederate flank and moved his men in. Wheeler tried to make a stand on the bridge over Duck River but being overwhelmed by the Union, Wheeler with 50 of his men jumped in the Duck River to escape.



Joe Wheeler,
CSA General

General Bragg sent Wheeler with 4000 men to attack Federal supply trains to keep them from reaching Chattanooga where the Union had settled. Three of the brigades were from Forrest who stated that the men were not ready for the expedition. Wheeler reported later, "the men were mere skeletons who were badly armed, had but a small supply of ammunition, and their horses were in horrible condition, having been marched continuously for three days and nights without removing saddles. The men were worn out and without rations."

During the raids on the Union, Wheeler and his men inflicted 2,000 enemy casualties, destroyed 1,000 supply wagons and hundreds of draft animals, burned five bridges, tore up hundreds of miles of railroad track causing estimate of damage over \$1 million. In the end, Wheeler lost too many men to continue on the attacks, cutting short plans for more cavalry raids. He was also very good at river raids capturing Union ships: *Charter*, *Trio*, *Parthenia*, *Hastings*, and destroying the *Slidell*.

Wheeler was the only effective Confederate army to oppose Sherman as he marched through Georgia and continued through South Carolina. Wheeler defeated Union Brigade General Kilpatrick at the Battle of Aiken. By this time, discipline was too lax to keep his men in line and the civilians of Georgia complained about Wheeler's men as much as they did Sherman's.

Fighting Joe Wheeler commanded in 127 battles and 500 skirmishes. He had 16 horses shot out from under him, 36 staff officers shot at his side, 8 killed. As a cavalry officer at 26, he and his men received the Thanks of the

Confederate Congress for their service and from South Carolina for defending Aiken. Fighting Joe became Chief of Cavalry of the Army of Tennessee making Brigadier General by the age of 26. After General Stuart's death in May of 1864, Fighting Joe became the highest-ranking cavalry officer in the Confederate Army.

General Wheeler was captured close to Atlanta while covering President Davis' escape through Georgia from Richmond. Davis' party was captured a few days later. All were put on the same boat to Fort Monroe. Clement Clay and Alexander Stephens only had coats and shawls to cover themselves on the boat. General Wheeler sent his blanket to them and he slept on the open deck of the boat. Later Wheeler was transferred to Fort Delaware for several months until release.

General Hardee wrote of Wheeler to President Davis, "I have not met anyone in this war more devoted to the cause, or anyone more zealous, conscientious, or faithful in the discharge of his duties."

President Davis said, "He displays a dash and a consummate skill which justly entitles him to a prominent place on the roll of the world's greatest cavalry leaders."

General Lee stated after the war: "The two ablest cavalry officers which were developed by the war were General J.E.B. Stuart of Virginia and General Joseph Wheeler of the Army of Tennessee."

Joseph Wheeler found his wife during the war but since Fighting Joe was so busy chasing yankees, they didn't get married until 1866. His command landed on Daniella Jones Sherrod's home camping for the night. Daniella was a widow by the age of 20 and a staunch supporter of the Confederacy. She said she was attracted to Joe's sad eyes. She captured his heart and he became an Alabamian settling on her plantation after their marriage. They produced seven children, five daughters and two sons that both served their country.

After the War, he tried his hand at several different occupations while studying law. He was more successful with his battles for U.S. Congress as Democratic Representative of Alabama's Eight District which he served for eight years. He worked to unite the North and South once again and pushed for economic policies to help rebuild the South. He had an ongoing friendship and correspondence with William H. Council, Huntsville's leading Educator. Wheeler served as Chairman of Committee on Expenditures in the Department of the Treasury, and Committee on Territories.

At the age of 62, he volunteered and served in the Spanish-American War with Teddy Roosevelt. Three of the Wheeler children served in the war with their father. An article in the *Augusta Chronicle* published February 27, 1898, stated, "General Joe Wheeler's standing offer of his military services to the War Department is not buncombe. He is a born soldier, a distinguished

veteran and despite advanced years is as active as a cat. He is the best horseman in Washington.”

The *Chronicle* ran an article on August 15, 1898, stating, “General Wheeler, who commanded our corps, has been as chipper as lively as a cricket from the beginning and although he had a touch of fever, he has been out every day. Being short of stature, he did climb a tree during the battles...funniest thing that ever occurred in military history - a commanding officer directing his troops in battle from a tree top – but there is nothing the matter with Old Joe – from an officer who was there.” During a battle, Fighting Joe was sick but going to the front in an ambulance until he saw some disabled men. He put them in his wagon and continued onto the front on his horse. His men were encouraged by their leader’s act. He served as senior member of the commission which negotiated the surrender of Santiago and the Spanish Army in Cuba.



U.S. Army uniform worn during the Spanish-American War.

After the Spanish-American war, he was sent to New York to command a camp. The Philippine-American War started and he took command of the 1st Brigade in Arthur MacArthur’s 2nd Division. General McArthur ordered General Wheeler to take his men to a certain point telling he how to travel. General Wheeler disagreed with the path and suggested a different way which General McArthur stated the course Wheeler planned would delay the men two weeks. Fighting Joe dismounted placed a sick soldier on his horse took a gun from another sick soldier and shouted, “Come on boys!” going his path overtaking the cavalry and brought his men ready to fight.

Appointed commander of Camp Wheeler in Huntsville after he came back from the war, he stayed at a residence on Monte Sano. During his stay the city of Huntsville presented a \$700 black Kentucky saddle horse to him on the Courthouse square. The *Democrat* ran an article on December 1, 1898: “Huntsville’s streets were crowded with enthusiastic citizens from all areas of the Eight Congressional District of Alabama...“Captain Milton Humes spoke for the citizens of Huntsville in presenting the horse and saddle to General Wheeler. General Wheeler’s response,

After the Philippine-American War, he retired as a Brigadier General in the U.S. Army in 1900. During all his war experiences, he authored several books. In 1902, General Longstreet visited West Point and saw General Joe Wheeler dressed in his Federal Spanish-American War uniform. Longstreet said, “Joe, I hope the Almighty God takes me before he does you, for I want to be within the gates of hell to hear Jubal Early cuss you in that blue uniform.” Longstreet died two years before Wheeler. General Joseph Wheeler had the Federal and Confederate flags draped on his coffin and was buried in Arlington Cemetery in January 1906.

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