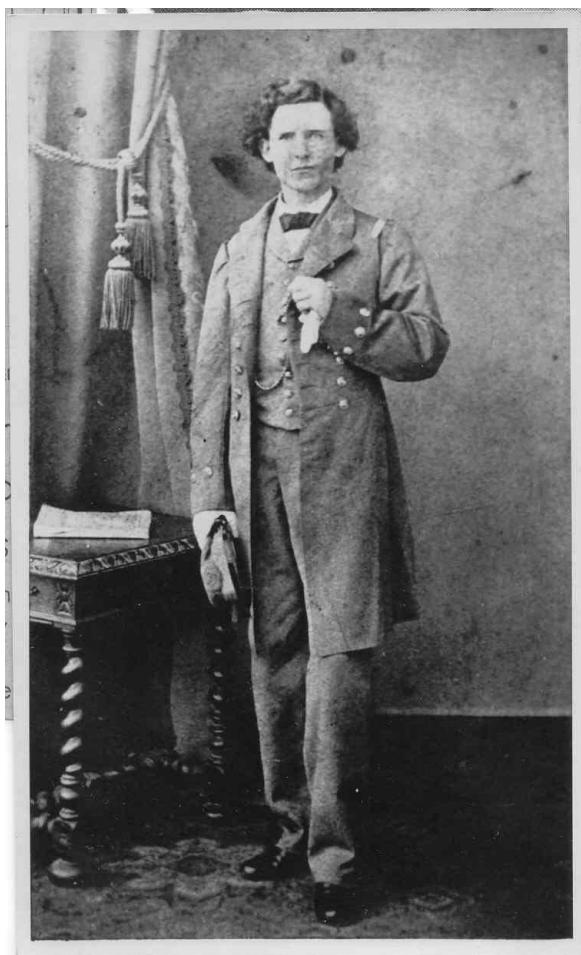


Swashbuckling Dalton

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

William Robert Inge Dalton was a dashingly handsome young man that joined the U.S. Navy as a youth to enjoy adventure and life. His beginning was on December 6, 1841, in Livingston, Alabama, born to a successful medical doctor, Robert Hunter Dalton and Jane Martin Henderson. Through his mother's line, he was a great grandson of Governor Martin who served North Carolina as governor three times and grandson of Colonel David Henderson who served in the Revolutionary War. On his father's side he was a grandson of Robert Hunter who served in the Revolutionary War as a brigade general in North Carolina. His brother served in the Confederate States Navy, Lieutenant Hamilton Henderson Dalton.

With this beginning, Dalton had a rich world of wonder, bravery, and accomplished



relatives and friends of the family to look up to. He entered the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, at the age of sixteen as a midshipman by the influence of a family friend, Jefferson F. Davis. He had the privilege of being trained on the famous U.S. frigate *Constitution*. Anticipation came in the form of the country dividing itself bringing new excitement for Dalton.

Dalton wrote, "Rob D. Evans and I were the youngest midshipmen in the service just before the war began. When 'all hell broke loose,' we had a short time previously returned from a cruise on the U.S. sloop of war Plymouth to Spain, the coast of Africa and neighboring islands. Noticing that all Southern officers were immediately clapped into prison as soon as they resigned, I and a few others determined to go to Washington and hand in our resignations personally to the secretary of the Navy – 'to beard the lion in his den.' And if necessary, to fight our way past the guards, making a run for it to the Potomac River where a boat was

waiting for us to cross over to Virginia. When it came my turn to be admitted to the august presence of the secretary, I noticed a very tall man enter before, whom I instantly recognized as President Lincoln. (There were no horns on his head, though, as I imagined), and when I saluted the secretary, Mr. Welles, I turned and saluted (with a

bow as well as a military salute) the President. I was deeply impressed with his mien, and charm, in spite of prejudices with the merry twinkle of his bright glowing eyes, though inclined to resent what I mistakenly conceived to be his patronizing manner. (I could never endure patronizing airs from any of the great men I have met.) He sat down at the far end of the table, joisted his feet, stretched out his long legs, leaned back, and appeared to assume, at once, a preoccupied state of mind. Soon I noticed a decided melancholy sadness overspread his countenance. Especially do I remember those long legs and tremendously large feet – the feet appeared larger because the bottoms were so fully exposed to view. ‘My sole alive!’ I thought, ‘whenever he walks it must be death to creepin’ insects, for sure.’

Dalton handed his resignation in 1861 to Mr. Welles, whose response was, “Well, sir, what course are you going to pursue?” “Oh, Said Mr. Lincoln, who began to take some notice of me. ‘I’ll tell you, Welles, he’ll steer his course due south; you may depend on it.’ Mr. Lincoln got up and as he walked out, he patted my head and said, ‘I truly hope, my young friend, that you will never have cause to regret this step, let us shake hands!’ Mr. Welles called me a traitor as he handed me the acceptance of my resignation.” Dalton responded that he would not fight against his own people. He had been appointed to Annapolis from the sovereign state of Mississippi. Then he saluted and left. The other midshipmen in the corridor said they had seen several officers arrested as they left out the front entrance. Dalton stated, “We ‘vamoosed’ that ranch by jumping out of a window ten feet from the street.” From there they made it to the Potomac River crossed over to Virginia and Dalton joined the Confederate Navy on June 12, 1861 to serve on the *CSS Nashville*, his first ship.

Dalton had just returned on the *Nashville*, taking dispatches to Mr. Mason in England from President Davis, when he received a telegram from Secretary of Navy Mallory to come to his office in Richmond. Mr. Mallory sent him to the President for another dispatch trip. After President Davis greeted me warmly, he said, “Will, here is a dispatch of the utmost importance. Give it personally to Mr. Slidell in Paris. If you are captured, destroy, it, get rid of it, even if you have to swallow it.” Dalton’s description of the dispatch, “The dispatch was tightly rolled into a very small black ball the size of a small marble. I wondered why the President should use so insignificant a contain which I thought could not possibly hold much writing. I was astonished yet more when afterwards I saw that ball opened, and its contents revealed, at the large number of sheets which came out of it.”

Commodore Maury ordered the young men to get out of Paris, as they were making themselves “too conspicuous.” Dalton helped Napoleon’s son get up off the ice after falling where they were skating. Empress Eugenie was so please for Dalton’s kindness to her son, she asked what she could do for him. Dalton instantly replied, “Your Majesty, the Emperor will grant any request you ask, please ask him to recognize the independence of the Southern Confederacy.” The response was laughter.

To get to Europe, Dalton had to travel to Wilmington, North Carolina then sail to Halifax, Nova Scotia. There he got on an English ship bound to Liverpool. He went to London and delivered a bundle of papers and letters to Commodore Maury, then on to Paris. To return, he traveled to Southampton, England, boarded the steamer for Halifax then back to Wilmington on the *Owl*, a blockade runner.

Dalton's last detach trip was from New Orleans with a letter from General Lovell to Colonel Higgins in command of Fort St. Phillips near the mouth of the Mississippi River. Dalton had command of the steamer *The Diana* which was transporting prisoners and mail to that fort, to Fort Jackson, and to New Orleans. After arriving at the Fort St. Phillips as it was being shelled, he and his two friends that was with him came into the fort. "It was here I first smelled gunpowder, and heard the wild screeching of bursting shells, and the wasp-like whizzing of minnie balls." "Colonel Higgins and a number of officers standing under the archway yelled out to us, 'Run, you damned fools,' but we walked leisurely along into safe quarters, brick dust showered all over us. My eyes were so filled with sand, that the surgeon had to take me to the surgery to retore my sight."

After the Confederate Navy, he served in the Peruvian Navy and in the Brazilian Navy. Dalton finally settled down to study medicine and received his medical degree from St. Louis college. He first practiced in New York City in dermatology then he moved with his family to Seattle, Washington, and joined the John B. Gordan Confederates Veterans camp 1456. He volunteered to serve during WWI as a doctor at the Seattle Naval department. He passed away on May 25, 1931.