

Did John C. Latham, Jr. Steal the Confederate Gold?

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A local legend that has always intrigued me is whether John C. Latham Jr., local philanthropist and United Way namesake, stole any of the Confederate gold in the final days of the Civil War? The legend's primary source is from descendants of Hazard Baker of Cadiz, Kentucky, a known escort for the fleeing President Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet. Perhaps the strongest argument that Latham might have been involved is, 'How else could Latham have attained the fortune that he later so magnanimously bestowed upon Hopkinsville before his death in 1909'? Latham's possible involvement in the disappearance of the Confederate gold will be the primary topic of this paper.

On April 2, 1865, General Grant and his forces were surrounding Richmond and it was just a question of time before Richmond would fall and Lee forced to yield to "overwhelming numbers and resources". During this time, Davis and his Cabinet remained in Richmond debating whether to surrender, continue the "Lost Cause" in the Trans-Mississippi, or flee to Mexico, Cuba, or Europe. While attending church at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Davis received Lee's message, ". . . I think it is absolutely necessary that we should abandon our position to-night . . ." After reading Lee's instructions, Davis quietly left church, went to his office, assembled his department heads, and gave the order to evacuate Richmond. An eyewitness described the day's subsequent events as follows:

Suddenly, as if by magic, the streets became filled with men, walking as though for a wager . . . All over the city it was the same--wagons, trunks, bandboxes and their owners, a mass of hurrying fugitives . . .

Confusion was everywhere as members of the still existent Confederate government clamored for places on the available trains leaving Richmond. In addition, several Confederate treasures had to be evacuated. The Confederate gold consisted of two different wagonloads, \$327,023 from the Confederate Treasury and approximately \$450,000 previously deposited in the banks of Richmond. The small fortune consisted of double eagle gold pieces, Mexican silver dollars, copper coins, silver bricks, gold ingots, and gold nuggets, all packed in sacks and boxes. There were also millions in Confederate banknotes and bonds, some 16,000-18,000 pounds sterling in "Liverpool Acceptances" (negotiable in England), and a chest of jewels donated by Southern women to buy a warship. Under the guard of sixty young midshipmen from the Confederate States Naval Academy, the treasure was loaded onto one train but not commingled. As Davis, the Cabinet, and the gold boarded the train, those remaining in Richmond either fled for their lives or joined in a night of anarchy. As word of the gold's removal traveled throughout Richmond, the gold's removal was ultimately accomplished at bayonet point and under perilous circumstances:

All through the night, crowds of men, women and children traversed the streets, rushing from one store-house to another, loading themselves with all kinds of supplies . . . This work went on fast and furious until after midnight, about which time large numbers of straggling soldiers made their appearance on the streets and immediately set about robbing the principal stores on Main Street. Drunk with vile liquor, the soldiers roamed from store to store, followed by a reckless crowd, drunk as they . . .

As the train transporting Davis, his Cabinet, and the gold left Richmond late at night, they constituted a band of men on the run, marked with common interests but dissipating hope.

Included among the Cabinet members who boarded the train for Danville, Virginia were the Yale trained Judah P. Benjamin (Secretary of State), North Carolinian George Davis (Attorney General), Tennessean Judge John Reagan (Postmaster General), Floridian Stephen Mallory (Secretary of the Navy), and South Carolina George Trenholm (Secretary of the Treasury). (As an aside, Trenholm has been identified as the role model for Margaret Mitchell's Rhett Butler in **Gone With The Wind**, a renegade blockade-runner and one of the wealthiest men in the South before the Civil War). The one Cabinet member who remained in Richmond was Kentuckian John Cabell Breckinridge, Secretary of War, who remained to supervise the evacuation. Breckenridge, a Centre College graduate, had only four years earlier been Lincoln's Vice-President. Breckinridge now found himself meeting with General Lee to negotiate the terms of surrender and with plans to rejoin the Cabinet in North Carolina.

As the train pulled away from Richmond, Davis and his Cabinet were unsure of the fate of the Confederacy as well as their own personal safety. Weighing on the minds of Davis and his Cabinet were the sentiments later penned in a May 1, 1865 *New York Times* editorial, where they were accused:

. . . of the greatest crime of the ages—a crime costing the lives of more than a half a million men, and aimed at the overthrow of the best government the world ever saw . . . The leading traitors should die the most disgraceful death known to our civilization—death on the Gallows.

Unlike Lee and his soldiers, Davis and his Cabinet were not immediately included in the terms of surrender which would have allowed them to return to their homes and resume a normal existence. The train's passengers, including some of their family members, were truly rebels on

the run fleeing for their lives. Expecting an attack at any time, the train moved southward under the possible attack of Major General P. H. Sheridan, whose withering devastation of the countryside had, “. . . made it impossible for a crow to fly over it without carrying his rations with him.”

Upon reaching Danville, a distance of 140 miles, the fugitives were given an “Old Virginia Welcome” and housed in local mansions by prominent citizens. Danville, Virginia served as the capitol of Confederacy from April 3-10. On April 4, Davis proclaimed, “ I will never consent to abandon to the enemy one foot of the soil of any of the States of the Confederacy . . . let us meet the foe with fresh defiance, with unconquered and unconquerable hearts.” Such optimism was short-lived, for on April 10, word was received that Lee had surrendered the previous day at Appomattox, Virginia. From Danville, the trains were quickly reloaded and headed for Greensboro, North Carolina. The Northern press continued to make life difficult for Davis, with the *New York Times* declaring:

He is, probably, already in direct flight for Mexico . . . But if he is caught he should be hung. . . . He was the prime mover in the rebellion He was the head and front of the conspiracy that precipitated the South into Revolution, and he has ever since been the head and front of the confederacy. . . To endeavor to save him from retributive justice is to outrage every enlightened sentiment, every unperverted insticnt To forgive Jefferson Davis himself, will be a miserable and most mischievous weakness.

With such motivation, Davis' goal was to re-establish the capitol of the Confederate Government in Texas or some other part of the South remote from desolate Virginia. It was hoped that the gold would be used to further this cause.

On April 11, the train with Davis' Cabinet and the Confederate gold arrived in Greensboro, North Carolina and were not well received. Fearing reprisals for aiding the "Rebel Chiefs" by the approaching Federals, neither homes nor hospitality were available. In light of Lee's surrender, citizens were more concerned with their own immediate need for food and clothes than for a retreating government with a doubtful future. In Greensboro, two boxes of gold sovereigns, approximately \$35,000, were left for the President and his Cabinet, and \$39,000 for General Beauregard's nearby army that had yet to surrender. The balance of the treasure was then removed to Charlotte and then back to Greensboro when Charlotte almost fell to the Federals. On April 16, the treasure was again loaded onto a train and transferred to Abbeville, South Carolina, then to Washington, Georgia, and finally to Augusta, Georgia.

Back in Greensboro, North Carolina, Generals Johnston and Beauregard met with Davis and the Cabinet on April 12. Despite Davis' optimistic goal to continue the fight or at least relocate the Confederate capitol, both Johnston and Beauregard tried to dissuade Davis of the futility of this objective. General Johnston pointed out:

. . . that it would be the greatest of human crimes for us to attempt to continue the war; for, having neither money nor credit, nor arms but those in the hands of our soldiers, nor ammunition but that in the cartridge-boxes, nor shops for repairing arms or fixing ammunition, the effect of our keeping the field would be, not to harm the enemy, but to complete the devastation of our country and ruin of its people.

With only Secretary Benjamin agreeing with Davis, Davis yielded, and approved Johnston's proposal that Johnston negotiate with Sherman for terms of peace. Leaving Greensboro on April 15, the Confederate leaders left by horseback and wagons under the protection of Tennessee cavalry and a company of Kentucky cavalry under Captain Given Campbell. During the slow trip to Charlotte, hoodlums begun stealing the group's horses and commissary supplies. Also during this trip, Benjamin, recognized as the most intellectual of the Cabinet members, recited from memory Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington". On April 19, the fugitives arrived in Charlotte and soon learned of President Lincoln's assassination.

The overall impact was that many in the North, enflamed by newspaper editorials, blamed Davis as a conspirator in the assassination and the South as a whole in a final attempt to negotiate an end to the war. The immediate effect of Lincoln's assassination was that a \$100,000 bounty was placed on Davis' head. Not surprisingly, nearby Union troops intensified their search for Davis. Events soon moved quickly toward the dissolution of the Confederacy. On April 26 Johnston surrendered to Sherman, despite Davis' order "to retire with his cavalry". Johnston's surrender completed the capitulation of all remaining Confederate forces east of the Mississippi River, with the exception of a few troops in Alabama and Mississippi. On April 26, the President and his five remaining Cabinet members left Charlotte with \$35,000 and the hope of re-establishing the Confederacy west of the Mississippi River. War hysteria and the death of Lincoln now made Davis public enemy number one, as evidenced in this *Boston Transcript* editorial:

The last known {location} of the rebel ex-President was that he was somewhere in the mountains of North Carolina, evidently determined, if possible, to get to Texas. He sneaked out of the rebel capitol, having first appropriated to his own private use all the real money left in Richmond. Talk about love of the 'Almighty Dollar'! The meanest 'Yankee' out of the penitentiary would have carried off only the amount belonging to him.

To make matters worse, Edwin M. Stanton, the Union's Secretary of War, now enflamed Davis' plight by issuing proclamations that the Confederate treasure was estimated to be between \$6,000,000 and \$13,000,000.

Continuing southward, the Confederate escort began to lose some of the awe initially held for President Davis and his Cabinet. As noted by General Basil Duke, none of the Cabinet, with the exception of Breckinridge, "knew what was going on, what was to be done, or what ought to be done". As Cabinet members George Davis, Benjamin, Trenholm, and Mallory now elected to leave the group and return home, Breckinridge and Reagan remained with President Davis. Also, the balance of the Confederate treasury and the Richmond gold was deposited in the Bank of the State of Georgia on May 3 in Washington, Georgia. Keeping \$35,000 in gold, Davis now disbanded all but twelve of his party and two ambulances and one wagon. With the Federals quickly beginning to close in for the \$100,000 reward on Davis and the \$25,000 on each Cabinet member, Davis and his group left Washington on May 4. Upon leaving Washington, Georgia, Davis' objective was to meet with General Nathan Bedford Forrest in Mississippi if possible and if not to continue to Texas with General Kirby Smith to "... carry on the war forever". In the alternative, the plan was to escape through Florida and by ship to Texas or to the Bahamas or Cuba. Finally, Davis was captured in Irwinville, Georgia,

approximately seventy miles from the Florida border, on May 10. Without any Confederate gold, Davis was quickly escorted under military guard to Macon, Georgia and ultimately to Fort Monroe, Virginia for a two-year imprisonment.

With President Davis' capture in Irwinville without any gold, the question must again be asked: 'Did John C. Latham Jr. play any role in disappearance of the Confederate gold between Richmond and Irwinville'? First, it is not clear in which Confederate unit Latham served during the Civil War. Although not exhaustive, a review of the Kentucky Adjunct General's report for the Confederate Volunteers, the Broadfoot Index, and the Kentucky Confederate Pensions book do not show any service by a John C. Latham Jr. Reviews of similar historical references prove equally inconclusive. A review of the specific individuals known to have served as escorts to President Davis do not mention Latham's name. Similarly, a review of the escort list that accompanied the Confederate gold fails to indicate that Latham was involved or paid for back salary. What is known about Latham is described in "**Family Histories 1797-1986 Christian County Kentucky**". Latham enlisted in the Confederate Army at age seventeen as a private in the 8th Kentucky Infantry in 1861 and experienced combat as a soldier at Fort Donelson. It further appears that Latham served in General Nathan Bedford's division and following Fort Donelson was transferred to the command of General P. G. T. Beauregard. Latham apparently was assigned to General Beauregard's headquarters in Raleigh, North Carolina and served there until Beauregard's surrender in May, 1865. In the December, 1894 issue of the *Confederate Veteran*, Latham is described as an enlisted soldier who "... served as a private soldier to the

end, surrendering at Greensboro, North Carolina in May 1865". And in **The Story of a Monument**, published in 1886 after Latham's funding of the Confederate monument in Riverside Cemetery, Latham is described as entering the Confederate army as a private and continuing in service until his surrender in Greensburg, North Carolina. Thus, it is unclear where Latham actually surrendered upon the war's conclusion and whether Latham was in a position to be a beneficiary of any Confederate gold.

A related question is since Latham's name does not appear on any regiment's roster, one must ask if Latham attempted to confuse his actual service record and service? A review of Christian County units does not provide any insight. Logically, it is likely that Latham would have enlisted in the Oak Grove Rangers, a group of one hundred thirty young men largely from Christian County under the leadership of Captain Thomas G. Woodard on June 25 1861. This is the unit in which Hazard Baker from Cadiz served as a Brevet Second Lieutenant. The Oak Grove Rangers were reorganized as Companies A and B, First Kentucky Cavalry Regiment and commandeered by Colonel Benjamin Helm. Another likely regiment would have been Company H, First Kentucky Cavalry Regiment, comprised of young men from Fairview and Pembroke mustered into service on November 1, 1862 and Captained by H.D. Leavell. Similarly, Latham's stated regiment, the 8th Kentucky Cavalry, was organized during the summer of 1861 and commandeered by General H. B. Lyon. Unfortunately, those members of the 8th Kentucky Infantry who were not killed at Fort Donelson were captured and sent to a Union prison camp in Camp Morton, Indiana. Although reconstituted as a unit when released in

1862 and later assigned to a unit under General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the 8th Kentucky Infantry was paroled at the end of the war in Columbus, Mississippi. As the distance between Irwinville, Georgia and Columbus, Mississippi is four hundred thirty-seven miles, it is unlikely that Latham was near enough to steal any of the Confederate gold. Nonetheless, as all three units saw action at Fort Donelson in February, 1862, the possibility exists that Latham could have followed General T. C. Beauregard to North Carolina and remained there until the end of the war. At Greensboro, \$39,000 of the Confederate treasury was distributed to 3,000 former Confederate soldiers as back pay in May, 1865. If Latham received any of such funds, the resulting \$13.00 would not have been enough to fund Latham's later fortune.

A second possibility is that Latham did not surrender at Greensboro, North Carolina but accompanied Davis' escort under General Basil Duke, serving under the immediate command of Captain Given Campbell, 2nd Kentucky Cavalry. Near Abbeville, South Carolina, General Duke was assigned as the custodian of the Confederate States treasury. Also, Latham possibly could have received \$26.25 as back salary on May 3 from General Breckinridge near Abbeville. At Abbeville, the gold wagons were surrounded by Confederate soldiers returning home who deemed it more appropriate that they receive the Confederate gold than the fast approaching Yankees. Under possible coercive circumstances, an additional \$108,000 of the Confederate treasury disappeared at this time.

If Latham did receive any gold that he later used to begin his business career, it most likely would have been gold stolen from the Richmond banks and not the Confederate treasury.

On May 4, 1865, Davis appointed Captain Micajah Clark of Clarksville, Tennessee the acting Treasurer of the Confederacy. These funds were never commingled with the Treasury funds and amounted to approximately \$450,000. Having accompanied the Treasury's gold since leaving Richmond but with different escorts, the "Bank Train"'s gold was eventually deposited in the Bank of the State of Georgia Bank in Washington, Georgia. Since Lee had surrendered on April 9, General Johnston on April 26, and Davis on May 10, on May 24 it was decided to return the bank's gold to Richmond. The gold was loaded onto five wagons and covered with canvas soas to appear as apple vendors from North Carolina. The five wagonloads of gold traveled fifteen miles before encamping for the night. Not surprisingly, advance news of the party spread across the countryside so that every returning Confederate and Union soldier in the vicinity became aware of the nearby fortune.

On May 24, a raiding party surprised the guards, tied them up to nearby trees and escaped with the gold, all without firing a shot and not shedding a drop of blood. The consensus among the many ex-Confederate soldiers was that if they did not steal the gold the Yankees would. Also, there was confusion that this was gold from the Confederate Treasury, with most not realizing that this gold was actually the property of the bank's depositors.

It was reported following the raid that gold and silver coins covered the area surrounding the wagons and that men filled their trousers and saddlebags and then disappeared into the night. The next morning, the bank officers found that they had been robbed of over \$250,000 and gathered up another \$40,000 from around the wagons. Although some of the raiders were

captured, local law enforcement officers decided that since the civil law of Georgia had been suspended because of the war, they lacked jurisdiction to prosecute and the raiders were released. With the only condition that the raiders return any gold that they may have taken, little if any was ever returned. Many raiders rode from the scene and were never apprehended. One witness claimed that two men took \$120,000 in gold to Kansas City, where they opened a business and became "men of large wealth". Others used their loot to become "cattle kings" and wealthy entrepreneurs in Texas and California. In addition, some of the gold was buried in the nearby woods, only to be dug up during quieter times. Another local resident stated:

The Yankees got a good deal of it, but there were oceans more of it scattered all over Wilkes and Lincoln counties, besides what was carried off. Some of it was hid about in swamps and woods, some was buried in the ground, and there is no telling how much has been forgotten and not found again.

To this day, many treasure hunters search the local streams and woods of Washington, Georgia for the lost Confederate gold.

In retrospect, if Latham did steal any of the Confederate gold, how much could he have realistically carried away on horseback to Memphis, Tennessee, where he later worked for his future father-in-law, T.H. Allen? After two years in Memphis, Latham returned to Hopkinsville and operated a dry goods business on Main Street for three years. In 1870 Latham moved to New York City where he became a partner in a large cotton brokerage firm listed on the New York Stock Exchange. In 1874 Latham married Mary Lewis Allen in Memphis and their wedding was attended by Mrs. Jefferson Davis. In 1886, Latham sent \$15,000 for the construction of a Confederate and Union monument to be erected in Riverside Cemetery. As the

In its construction I have been sustained by several thoughts . . . First of all, I have felt safe from the suspicions of selfishness, because it was a memorial to the unknown dead. Secondly, I have felt perfect confidence in the sympathy of all true women and brave men, believing that they would recognize in the tomb a deserved tribute to "all of heroism that could die". Thirdly, I have rejoiced in the opportunity it gave me to do honor to the memory of my comrades in arms, who left their homes and lost their lives "for conscience sake". And finally, I have felt that this memorial shaft would beautify the city of the dead in which my father sleeps, and that the marital spirits of the dead soldiers beneath it would stand guard about his grave.

Yes, there are several interesting possibilities that John C. Latham ^{*Fr.*} might have stolen the Confederate gold to fund his business career, but none are likely. It appears that Latham accumulated his fortune based upon his own hard work and willingness to take a risk, much to the long-term betterment of Hopkinsville in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

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