

GEORGE RABB

*The CIVIL WAR MEMOIR
of a CATAWBA COUNTY TAR HEEL*



*Edited by REBECCA IKERD ALGHRARY
with a foreword by MICHAEL HILL*

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FOREWORD

It is an indelible image, that of the aging Confederate veteran, and George Washington Rabb of Newton, North Carolina, fit it to a “T,” right down to the white goatee and the missing leg. A classic photograph of Rabb, in a grouping with other veterans, adorns the covers of two works: Gary R. Freeze’s 1995 Catawba County history *The Catawbans: Crafters of a North Carolina County* and Ansley Herring Wegner’s 2004 account of the state’s artificial limbs program entitled *Phantom Pain: North Carolina’s Artificial-Limbs Program for Confederate Veterans*. With the publication of Rabb’s memoir, edited by his grandniece Rebecca Ikerd Alghrary, we gain insight into the man in the picture.

Rabb enlisted in Company A (the “Catawba Rifles”) of the Twelfth Regiment North Carolina Troops, saw action during the Seven Days campaign around Richmond in 1862, was wounded at Chancellorsville in 1863, and lost his leg at Fisher’s Hill in 1864. After the war Rabb returned to Catawba County where he operated textile mills, served as county treasurer, and was elected to a single term in the State House. In 1907 he spearheaded the effort to erect a Confederate monument on the courthouse grounds. Rabb lived to the ripe old age of ninety-three and died

in 1935. He penned his remembrances of the 1860s at the age of eighty-eight. Evidently, he had a remarkable memory or was something of a scholar of the war, as his eye for detail was extraordinary. Editor Alghrary found only a few discrepancies between his work and the historical record.

As we hurtle toward the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, public awareness of the events of 1861–1865 is bound to increase (not that it has ever waned to any perceptible degree) and it may be helpful to situate this account among the many other studies of the war. First-hand accounts, such as Rabb’s, are among the most valuable sources on the conflict and are especially welcome. The rush to tell the story of the war began soon after Appomattox and, in North Carolina, peaked with the publication in 1901 of Walter Clark’s five-volume *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War*. Bell Irvin Wiley’s *The Life of Johnny Reb*, published in 1943, remains a starting point for scholars investigating the experience of the common soldiers during the war. More recently, Princeton professor James M. McPherson outlined the motivations that drove these fighting men in his *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997).

In the summer of 2008, Oxford University Press published *The Making of a Confederate: Walter Lenoir’s*



Five Catawba County veterans of the Civil War in 1925. From left to right: Ike Williams, George W. Rabb, Luther E. Long, former Newton mayor, R. H. Reitzel, John Arrad, and John Sherrill. Rabb and Reitzel would buy a pair of shoes together; Rabb wore the left shoe, Reitzel the right. (Photo courtesy of the Catawba County Historical Association.)

Civil War, based on a memoir of the war held for many years in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC–Chapel Hill. That book, edited by William L. Barney and based on the writings of a member of the prominent Lenoir family of “Happy Valley” in neighboring Caldwell County, makes an excellent companion study to the present work.

Particularly noteworthy in Rabb’s memoir is his eyewitness account of the naval battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*. His matter-of-fact description of the carnage and the loss of his leg also distinguish his story. His place in Catawba County history has long been assured (his obituary referred to him as “Uncle George”) and now Rabb can take his place in Civil War annals.

MICHAEL HILL

Research Supervisor

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PREFACE

As a child playing in the big front room at my Grandmother Rabb’s in Newton, North Carolina, I discovered a tall crutch hanging from a nail in the closet. I had a fascination with this crutch and often took it down to examine and play with it. But my grandmother had warned me that it was not to be taken out of the room. This was “Uncle George’s crutch and was very old.”

Also in that same room sat an old pigeon-hole desk, or secretary. I loved to play at the desk and pretend I was working in a post office. Each little cubby hole was the perfect place to sort my papers and games. There were still a few papers in the pigeon-holes, but I paid little attention to them. Likely they were left over from George Rabb’s work in his many ventures throughout Catawba County.

My grandmother, Mama Rabb, was known around Newton by those who visited the State Theater as “Miss Mollie,” the ticket lady. She was the wife of Uncle George’s youngest brother, William. They came to Catawba County from the mountains in the late 1920s to live with him and help care for him. He was aged and had lost a leg at Fisher’s Hill, Virginia, in the Civil War.

My mother also lived in the house until she was



George Washington Rabb in likely the late 1920s. His crutch is in the collection of the Catawba County Museum of History, a site of the Catawba County Historical Association, in Newton, North Carolina.

about twelve years old and has memories of Uncle George. She describes him as a strict disciplinarian who would not allow her elbows on the dinner table or let her go to the movies. She greatly admired the man and said he had an exceptional memory.

George Rabb must have had a remarkable memory because at some point between the age of eighty-five and eighty-eight he wrote a complete account of his adventures in the war between the North and the South. This was written strictly from memory, and he made very few errors in dates and events.

In 1991, while living in Charlotte, I climbed my attic stairs one day and rediscovered the old, partly handwritten and partly typed notes that I remembered so well from Mama Rabb's during my childhood (Mama Rabb typed most of Uncle George's notes when he was ninety years old). These notes were too important to abandon to an attic life, and with the help of Sidney Halma, Flora Belle Abernethy, and Rebecca Ratchford of the Catawba County Historical Association, Rabb's memoir was published by the CCHA in 1994 as *A Confederate Remembers Northern Virginia: George Rabb, Catawba County Soldier* and was very well received.

Evelyn Rhodes of the Catawba County Library and the entire library staff were invaluable to my research. Even though my mother said Uncle George had an

exceptional memory, I wanted to verify the dates of battles and events that he had reported, and it took a good deal of exploration to accomplish this. It was a joy when I found that a certain event exactly matched Uncle George's memorable account.

Others of immense help were Sylvia K. Ray of the CCHA who is a well-known Newton historian and expert editor.

Taking a trip to our nation's capital, I stopped along the way to visit Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in July of 1992 and am grateful to the staff of the National Park System for their information and attention.

Claude Guy Rabb and Eva Rabb, both relatives of George Rabb, were gracious to give me help on family history. An old friend, Dr. Wayne Morris, professor of history at Lees-McRae College, gave me much encouragement and advice. Dr. Morris recommended that Dr. Todd Groce, director of the East Tennessee Historical Society, read the manuscript. Both encouraged me to write an introduction that followed the Twelfth Regiment's deployments throughout the war.

All of these kind people as well as my family and friends gave me the motivation to bring this project to completion, and I owe them all a deep debt of gratitude.

In the section by Uncle George titled "George

Rabb's Story," I have not changed a thing, excepting the correction of a few misspellings and the addition of subheadings. The text is based on Uncle George's handwritten account. Where the paper had crumbled from age, I have designated these areas "text missing" or "text unclear" when the typed manuscript could not provide clarification.

The Catawba County Museum of History holds the George Rabb Collection with artifacts from this good man's life. An old metal box that was found on the Rabb property between Newton and Maiden contains letters, notes, and IOUs from numerous friends and acquaintances of his. It appears that he was kind and generous and very well thought of by all who knew him. He was indeed an early twentieth century businessman and leader who strived to improve community life for all around him, and in the early 1930s excerpts of his Civil War memoir appeared in his local paper, the *Catawba News-Enterprise*.

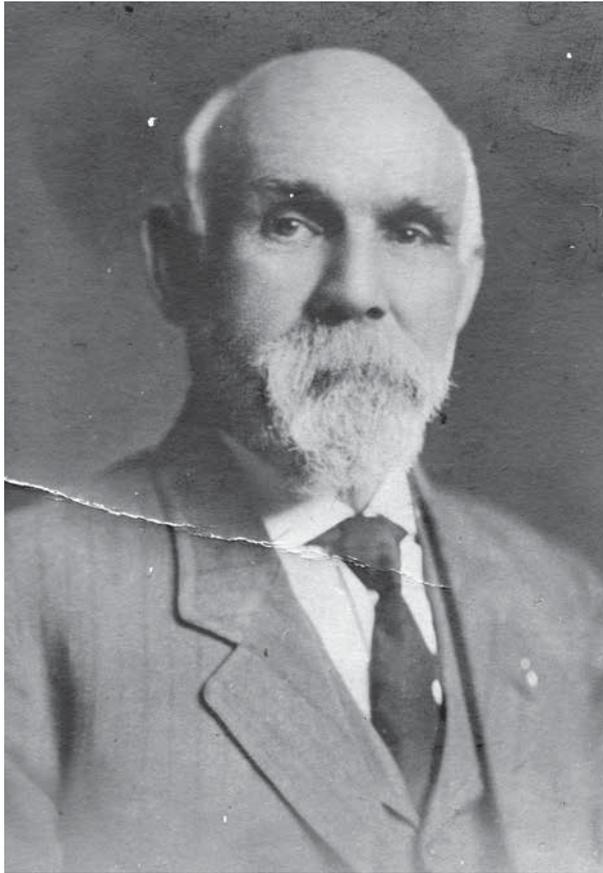
The memories of those dangerous days of 1861–1865 will live on in countless books, stories, articles, and motion pictures for years to come. It was a terrible time when our nation was at war not with a foreign enemy, but within our own borders – a war between the North and the South. Sacrifices were made on both sides of this conflict and sometimes brother fought against brother.

GEORGE RABB

With sesquicentennial observances of this great war to begin in 2011, I hope the re-publication of George Rabb's personal story will lend to further appreciation of our Union and the cost of its preservation. And the cost was high. Both sides paid dearly in loss of human life, and the South was left desolate, stripped of resources and pushed back decades in its progress and contributions to the young nation.

I would be remiss in my acknowledgments if I did not thank Mike Hill at the North Carolina Office of Archives and History for his interest in writing a foreword to this work and Nathan Moehlmann, my publisher, for prodding me to correct and write additional segments that I believe have greatly improved this edition. Thank you, Nathan, for your dedication to George Rabb's story and for all you have done to bring it to life once more.

BECKY I. ALGHRARY



George Washington Rabb (December 21, 1841–December 8, 1935)
at around sixty years of age in the early 1900s.

GEORGE RABB'S STORY

The Threat of War

I was thirteen years old when my family moved from near Beatty's Ford in Lincoln County to this county. My father finally settled on a farm about four miles south of Newton where I grew up very much as any other farm boy of that time did. I helped with all the work about the place and found recreation in hunting. With my schoolboy companions, J. M. Arndt, Robert Cline, John Sapaugh, Daniel Moose, Noah Propst, Silas Smyre, all who lived in the community, I hunted squirrels and became a good shot.

There was nothing much eventful until there began to be talk about state's rights and secession. Then the countryside became alive with talk. A mass meeting was called and Reverend Polycarp Henkle was appointed to represent the county at a state convention at Raleigh to determine how North Carolina stood on the issue. Slavery did not enter into the question. My father was no slave owner and that issue never came into my mind.

But excitement grew. I felt a patriotic duty to serve the state. All my schoolboy companions with whom I hunted were joining the army. And, too, a year earlier, in 1859, when the completion of the railroad to

Newton was celebrated, a group of soldiers from Salisbury made a deep impression on me. I didn't know much about the issue, but enthusiasm, patriotism, and the fact that all my companions were enlisting, made up for the lack of knowledge and decided me.

George Enlists

When I told my father, he wanted to persuade me not to go. "No, don't go, George, and I will send you to school," he told me.

He warned me that I was not going into a frolic, but I wanted the excitement. And when I left, he went with me as far as Salisbury. I enlisted for a year, but when my time was out, I was more than glad to re-enlist.

It was a fine company of eighty-seven young men who left this county for Raleigh. We were all fresh from the farm, strong and healthy. Our average age was not over twenty-one years. We had lived out of doors almost all of our lives and represented the finest type of young men. We were all single except Captain Bradburn.

We gathered on the steps of the old John Wilfong home and received our uniforms which the women of the neighborhood had made. They bought the cloth

and met at the home of Mrs. John Wilfong, who had the only sewing machine in the community, and put together our first uniforms. They were good suits and fitted well. We were given a great send-off when we boarded the train for Salisbury.

I was nineteen years old December 21, 1860, and it was on April 27, 1861, that I joined the Confederate Army, Catawba Rifles, Company A, Regiment 12. My father was with me when we left Newton. We remained in Salisbury three days and my father boarded with me at a hotel. Then I told him goodbye, and we went on to Raleigh where the convention was still in session. We were quartered in a church and pitched a small camp in the yard. Although we were without guns, we stood guard to lend a military touch.

North Carolina Secedes

Within a week after we reached Raleigh, the state seceded. Immediately, there was the biggest show of enthusiasm I had ever seen and I experienced the biggest time of my life. A full battery of artillery was fired, there was hollering everywhere, and bells were ringing. It was a great demonstration and all the sentiment, as I caught it, was to go to the army.

Winter Quarters – Camp Fisher, Sewell's Point⁶

We remained in Raleigh two weeks. We arrived just too late to be included in the First Regiment to be organized in the state. But the Second Regiment was completed with ten companies and we left for Richmond. There we went into camp and continued to do a little guard duty although we still had no guns. We stayed in Richmond about two weeks and went from there to Norfolk where we went into camp about a mile from the city.

Six weeks after arriving in Norfolk, Captain Bradburn resigned and Pinkney L. Rowe was elected captain. Through the summer we drilled every day.

When fall arrived we moved to Camp Fisher fourteen miles away and built good winter quarters. At Norfolk we had been quartered in cloth tents, but here we built log cabins with accommodations for twelve men to the house. The camp was located seven miles across the bay directly opposite Newport News which was then in the hands of the Federals.

Here we drew our first guns. These were out-of-date smooth bore flint and steel muskets. With them we were given four rounds of cartridges. We continued our intensive drilling. There were squad drills in the morning, company drills at eleven o'clock, regimental

drills at two o'clock, and dress parade at six o'clock. We remained at Camp Fisher through the winter of 1861 and 1862, drilling and picketing the beach.

Battle of the Merrimac and Monitor

At Camp Fisher, located on Sewell's Point, I witnessed one of the most dramatic events of the Civil War, the naval battle between the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*. I stood on the beach and witnessed the whole battle.

I saw the *Merrimac* under construction and watched it in action. Only the absence of the enlisting officer prevented my becoming a member of the crew on the first ironclad vessel in history.

While [I was] at Camp Fisher, the naval battle between the *Merrimac* and the Yankee vessels took place. While on leave in Portsmouth, I saw the hull of the ship before it was completed and went through it when it was completed. The Federals were constructing the vessel when the Confederate troops took Portsmouth. The Yankees set fire to the uncompleted ship and all but the hull was burned down to the water's edge. The Confederates took the hull, completed the ship, and covered the part above the water with two sheets of metal, each about two inches in thickness.



Shortly after 1842, when Catawba County was partitioned off from Lincoln County (which was comprised of present-day Catawba, Lincoln, and Gaston Counties), Newton was designated the county seat. Its first permanent courthouse (pictured), a Greek Revival structure, opened on June 14, 1847. The Confederate monument (foreground) was erected in 1907 and dedicated that year at Soldiers Reunion. Rabb was a generous supporter of the fund drive. Soldiers Reunion, taking place the third Thursday in August, in Newton, began in 1889 and is one of the oldest continuous veterans celebrations in the United States. In 1924, the antebellum courthouse was replaced with a Renaissance Revival courthouse, now the Catawba County Museum of History. In its collection are the water trough (foreground, right) and portions of the wrought iron fence (foreground). The monument stands today in the same place, facing north. (Photo courtesy of the Catawba County Historical Association.)

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| J. H. YOUNT | \$10.00 |
| W. H. Williams | \$10.00 |
| E. P. Shrum | \$10.00 |
| J. R. Caldwell | \$10.00 |
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| J. F. HERMAN | \$10.00 |
| M. O. SHERRILL | \$10.00 |
| | |
| TOTAL: | \$379.00 |

10. General Robert D. Johnston.
11. In *I Rode with Stonewall*, Henry Douglas states, "It was a scene of desolation, ransacked houses, etc. The first day we pursued the 'flying column' for twenty-five miles to Liberty and just before night, Ramseur drove Hunter's weary rear guard through the town," 290–291.
12. Rabb was wounded at Chancellorsville; he lost his leg at Fisher's Hill.
13. Rabb's house was on West C Street (not B) in Newton where the present-day post office stands.

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