

Charles M. Burnett

(1836-1899)

Methodist layman

Charles M. Burnett was not a soldier, and he was not a participant in any manner in the actual Battle of Gettysburg, but the courageous action of this resident of Chambersburg weeks after the fighting has earned him a place in the history books and in this issue of *The Chronicle*. He lived in a house he owned on Queen Street, across from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he owned farmland along Chambersburg's southern boundary.

A faithful member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Mr. Burnett was apparently financially secure and a supporter of civic and religious causes. While little information about his life, besides the deed which will be reported in this article, has survived, the following documented observations can be made.

- In 1847, Charles Burnett was one of the trustees for the new Methodist Episcopal church building at the corner of Second and Queen Streets. This was the congregation's third building, and the second at that site. It took the place of a smaller structure erected there in 1811 and was replaced by a larger edifice in 1897.¹
- In 1860, the borough of Chambersburg was expanded to include land owned by Charles Burnett on the Greencastle road.²
- In 1862, Charles Burnett purchased the farm of George Etchberger, a mile south of Chambersburg on the Greencastle road, for \$124 per acre.³
- In 1864, Charles Burnett was a member of the committee of five appointed to assess, for possible government reimbursement, the financial losses suffered by the citizens of Chambersburg during the occupations and the burning of the town.⁴
- In 1867, Charles Burnett was one of the organizers of a stock corporation "for the purpose of erecting a Market House and Public House" in Chambersburg.⁵
- In 1868, Charles Burnett was an officer in the Franklin County Bible Society.⁶
- In 1868, Charles Burnett owned three properties: a house on Queen Street in Chambersburg, property on Front Street at the south end of Chambersburg, and a farm south of town in Guilford Township.⁷

Charles Burnett is connected with the Battle of Gettysburg in that he gave up his plot in the old Methodist Cemetery for the burial of a Confederate soldier who wanted a Christian burial – after other churches and cemeteries had refused to allow such an interment. *The Chronicle* will tell that story by reprinting three published accounts of this noble but little-celebrated deed, each from a different century: one from 1863, one from 1905, and one from 2010. While none of the following accounts specifically identifies Charles Burnett as the man who stepped forward in the face of prejudice and possible hostility, he is so identified by the noted Jacob Hoke.⁸

Franklin Repository, 1863⁹

[Notice the obvious anti-Confederate bias in this account of the incident. – ed.]

DEATH OF A REBEL COLONEL. Colonel Benjamin F. Carter of the 4th Texas regiment died here [Chambersburg] in the Academy Hospital on the 21st instant, from the effects of wounds received at the battle of Gettysburg. He was a native of Tennessee and emigrated to Austin, Texas, in 1853, where he practiced law and rose to some distinction in his profession.

In July, 1861, influenced by the mad spirit of secession, he abandoned his wife and family, raised a company of infantry, and entered the rebel service. Since then he has, we learn, won the esteem of his rebel commander for bravery, and rose to the command of his regiment. His regiment was terribly cut up at the second Bull Run fight, again at Antietam, and almost destroyed at Gettysburg – where he fell mortally wounded, and his Adjutant, Lieutenant Brown, also fell seriously disabled.

Both of them were brought here, and with the rest of the prisoners in the Academy, received every possible medical attendance from Dr. A.H. Senseny, and all their wants were supplied by the kindness of our citizens, known to them only as strangers and foes. Colonel Carter is now, we believe, supported at home for the office of District Judge, and would doubtless have been promoted to the star of a Brigadier, had he survived.

Since he entered the service against his country, death has been busy with his loved ones at home, upon whom he had, by his position and influence, done much to bring the incalculable evils of civil war. His wife and two children died while he was at war with the government that had nurtured him from his birth, and a little daughter only remains to mourn the just but hard fate of a father fallen in such a cause and finding a hospitable grave among the people he sought to destroy.

During his illness he learned of the surrender of Vicksburg, and he frankly declared that it sealed the fate of the Rebellion. He said that the Mississippi open to the trade of the loyal Northwest, and Texas and Arkansas isolated from the so-called Confederacy, its destruction was only a matter of time – the fatal day must surely come.

Thus despairing of his bad cause, he died a stranger in the land he would have desolated, and his remains now lie in the old Methodist burying ground to await the call from Him who shall judge all men in the Great Day.

[Charles Burnett, when he died in 1899, was buried in his new plot at Cedar Grove Cemetery – as he had given his original plot in the old Methodist Cemetery to Colonel Carter. Since the remains in the old Methodist Cemetery had been removed (as noted in the third article) to Cedar Grove Cemetery (where, as noted in the second article, Carter's remains had originally been forbidden to rest) in 1896, the monuments of Colonel Carter and his benefactor Charles Burnett now lie within view of each other. – ed.]

Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania, 1905¹⁰

[A.K. McClure (1828-1909) was a prominent Chambersburg newspaperman, attorney, and leader in the emerging Republican Party. He published works on Andrew Curtin, Abraham Lincoln, and Pennsylvania politics as he had seen them, and he also wrote a contemporary biography of William McKinley. This selection begins July 4, 1863, with the end of the Battle of Gettysburg, and concludes with the death and burial of Colonel Carter. This extended passage is presented to place the events involving Charles Burnett in proper context. – ed.]

The following morning, the natal day of the republic, the sun arose to spread its refulgence over a cloudless sky, and the first news received from the battlefield was that Lee's trains were retreating toward the Potomac, and later came the message from Grant telling of the surrender of Vicksburg. The people of Pennsylvania not only felt that they had been rescued from invasion and the desolation of war upon their own soil, but they knew that the military power of the Confederacy was broken, and the dark cloud of uncertainty verging on despair, that hung over the great State for nearly a fortnight, speedily gave way to strengthened conviction and delightful hope that the Union could be restored by the valor of our arms.

The sudden change made by the report of Lee's defeat and the capture of Vicksburg was visible on every face, old and young. The terrible strain was ended, the invasion was repulsed, and the many thousands of people in the Cumberland Valley, scattered all through the interior and eastern part of the State, with their stock and other valuables, began a general movement homeward. Many of the farmers had left their golden wheat fields ready for the reaper, but fortunately the Confederates expected to occupy the valley and harvest it, and no destruction of the grain fields was permitted. Most of the crops were thus saved, and in a few weeks industrial operations in the shops and valleys were very generally resumed. General Couch moved his forces through the Cumberland Valley and rapidly repaired the railway and telegraph lines, and by the 10th of July he established his headquarters at Chambersburg.

The last echo of Lee's army in the Cumberland Valley came from his immense train nearly twenty miles long, that left Lee at Gettysburg on the 4th and led the advance of the retreat. To escape the dashes of the Union cavalry, this immense train re-crossed the South Mountain and turned southward at Greenwood to the Potomac along the unfrequented road on the mountain base, and where only the two small villages of New Guilford and New Franklin witnessed it. The wagons of this train were largely filled with the severely wounded, and accompanying it were all the wounded who were able to travel on foot.

This train was thirty hours in passing a given point, and General Imboden, who had charge of it, and whose cavalry command protected it, stated in an article contributed to the *Annals of War* that when compactly in line the train was seventeen miles in length. The number of wounded in the wagons and walking

was not less than 10,000 or 12,000, and many of those who attempted to walk with the train fell by the wayside. These were gathered up and brought to Chambersburg, where a Confederate hospital was improvised, but the intense passions inspired by civil war made the people of even so intelligent and Christian-like a community as those of Chambersburg at first withhold kind ministrations to the wounded of the enemy.

Dr. Senseny, my own family physician, was in charge of this hospital. After those wounded Confederates had been in Chambersburg for week, Dr. Senseny called on me and made a personal appeal to inaugurate a movement to give much needed relief to many of the suffering. It would not have been discreet for any other than a pronounced loyal citizen to take the first step toward relief for these sufferers, but my attitude was not one that could be questioned, and Mrs. McClure at once went with the doctor and visited all the sufferers personally. That movement made an open door for all, and thereafter they had even more generous ministrations than most of them could have obtained at home.

A message was brought to me by Dr. Senseny from Colonel Carter, I believe a native of Tennessee, but then a resident of Texas, who had no hope of recovery, and had appealed to the doctor to bring him someone who would give him the assurance of Christian burial. I called at once and found the sufferer, an unusually bright and handsome man, calmly watching the rapid approach of death. With beseeching eyes that would have melted the sternest enemy, he begged of me to give him the assurance that his body would receive Christian burial, and when he was told that I would personally execute his request, he reached out his trembling hand and gave most grateful acknowledgment.

A few days thereafter he died, and I at once applied to the authorities of the Presbyterian church, of whose congregation I was a member, for permission to bury him in the cemetery, but it was promptly refused. A new cemetery company [*i.e., Cedar Grove Cemetery – ed.*] had been organized a short time before, of which I was an officer, and I applied to that company to sell me a lot for the burial of the Confederate soldier, but that was refused. I then announced that I would set apart a lot on the corner of my farm on the public highway, and dedicate it by deed as the resting place of Colonel Carter.

The incident caused very general discussion, and finally several prominent members of the Methodist church decided that it was un-Christian to refuse burial to a fallen foe, and they permitted his body to be interred in their cemetery. Such were the appalling estrangements caused by civil war that a community noted for its intelligence and Christian character hesitated to give even decent sepulture to one who had fallen in the battle as conscientious in his convictions as were the brave boys who vanquished with him in the conflict.

Public Opinion, 2010¹¹

[This final article puts a modern perspective on the incident and adds information not contained in the previous articles. Written by staff writer Vicky Taylor, it brings the story to a remarkable conclusion. – ed.]

HONORING A FALLEN SOLDIER. Confederate officer gets tombstone dedication rite.

The tombstone of a Confederate officer who died in Chambersburg after being wounded at Gettysburg was dedicated during a memorial service Saturday at Cedar Grove Cemetery, Chambersburg.

Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Carter, who commanded the 4th Texas Infantry during the Battle of Gettysburg, was one of many Confederate wounded put on wagons after the battle was over. Most were taken back to Virginia, but Carter's injuries were so severe that he was finally left at a home in New Franklin, where he was captured by Union forces.

He was taken to a hospital in Chambersburg, where he eventually dies of his wounds, according to Lana Henley, who represented Carter's native state and the Texas division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy at the tombstone dedication Saturday.

Carter was an attorney and had served as mayor of Austin, Texas, before enlisting in what would become the 4th Texas Volunteer Infantry at the beginning of the Civil War. The 4th Texas would eventually see action in such places as Antietam and Manassas, where Carter would befriend a Union artillery captain fatally wounded in that battle.

James K. Palmisano, Pennsylvania Division Commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, said Carter gave his personal overcoat as a burial shroud for a Union soldier killed in the second battle of Manassas, Captain Stern, and probably wrote a letter to Stern's family, who lived in Chambersburg, as well as managed to get Stern's personal property returned to his family. That action could have been instrumental in obtaining a Christian burial for Carter after he died in Chambersburg.

As Carter lay dying, he asked the doctor and two people helping at the hospital for a Christian burial. Knowing that feelings ran high against the Confederates at that time, the doctor enlisted the help of Alexander McClure, who was instrumental in helping arrange a burial in a local Methodist church's cemetery. In 1896, when the church sold the property where the cemetery was located, the bodies interred there, including Carter's, were moved to Cedar Grove Cemetery on Franklin Street. Since the headstones weren't moved also, Carter's story was forgotten and he disappeared from local history.

More than a decade ago, Patty Wilson heard about the Confederate soldier that had been buried in Chambersburg and began looking for his burial site. Two years later she met Larry Phelps, who was researching a similar story. Between them they located records of Carter's burial and the removal of his remains to

Cedar Grove. After 10 years of research, Carter's story was ready to be retold and a tombstone erected to recognize his life and death.

Saturday's ceremony, complete with color guard, eulogy, a three-gun salute – using muskets – by members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and the sounding of taps, also included an exchange of burial earth by Henley, who brought a box of earth from the gravesite of Carter's wife, daughters and granddaughters to sprinkle on Carter's gravesite in Chambersburg. She also took a packet of Pennsylvania soil from his gravesite at Cedar Grove to put on his descendants' gravesite in Austin.

The Rest of the Story

Stories such as the one of Colonel Carter and Charles Burnett are difficult to reconstruct with complete accuracy. Researchers know that not everything appearing in print should be accepted without question. A June 29, 1896, article from the *Franklin Repository* newspaper, for example, reported on the moving of Carter's remains from the Methodist cemetery to Cedar Grove by stating he was "a New Orleans Confederate officer."

It is in that spirit that *The Chronicle* has documented the sources used for this article and reprinted the material as previously published rather than trying to weave the information into a single document. The following account from the findagrave.com website gives what the editor believes to be a concise and reliable account of Colonel Carter' death and burial – but even this account fails to name Charles Burnett as the Methodist layman who offered his own lot for the burial. This account is "based on the research of historian J. David Petruzzi," co-author of *THE NEW GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN HANDBOOK: Facts, Photos, and Artwork for Readers of All Ages* [published in 2011 by Savas Beatie], which includes this and other little-known stories of Gettysburg.

"Civil War Confederate Lieutenant Colonel, Mayor of Austin TX 1858-59, Benjamin Franklin Carter was born in 1831, in Maury County, Tennessee, and graduated from Jackson College, in Columbia TN. He relocated to Texas and served as an attorney before the war. On July 11, 1861, Carter was commissioned Captain of Company B of the 4th Texas Infantry, being promoted to major on June 27, 1862, and lieutenant colonel on July 10, 1862.

"Col. Carter was mortally wounded by shell fragment in the face and legs as he attacked the western slope of Little Round Top at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863. Badly wounded, Carter was taken along by the Confederates as the southern army retreated from Gettysburg following the battle. Since his wound was mortal, and to alleviate his further suffering, Carter was left at the home of Jeremiah George along the old Pine Stump Road (today SR 2020, the New Franklin Road). Carter was captured there, and taken, along with many other captured Confederate wounded, to Chambersburg Pa.

"When the Pastor of the Zion Reformed Church, Rev. Dr. Samuel Reed Fisher and his wife Naomi, heard that Carter had arrived, they requested that he be brought to their church for care. One of Naomi's sons by her first

marriage was Capt. Mark Kerns, a Federal artillery battery commander. At the Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862, Kerns was mortally wounded by Carter's men at the fight for Chinn Ridge. Carter had been so impressed by Kerns' courage and tenacity, when the young Federal died Carter had Kerns' remains buried on the battlefield in Carter's own coat. Naomi (who had been living in Bedford Pa. at the time, prior to marrying Fisher and moving to Chambersburg in January 1863) was told of Carter's kindness toward her son. So when she learned that the wounded Carter had been captured and had arrived in Chambersburg, she wished to return the favor and care for him. [Following the war, Naomi and her husband made at least one trip to the Second Manassas battlefield to attempt to retrieve her son's remains based on information given to her by Carter, but the attempt was unsuccessful. Kerns' battlefield grave site has never been discovered.]

"After several days in the Fishers' care at the church, it was obvious that Carter would die soon. Carter was then transferred to the Academy Hospital on King Street, a facility that was caring for many Confederate wounded. With no hope of recovery, Carter asked Dr. Abraham Senseney for 'someone who would give him the assurance of a Christian burial.' Senseney called on prominent Chambersburg resident Alexander Kelly McClure for assistance, and McClure visited Carter.

"Carter died on July 21, but after much difficulty finding a local cemetery that would accept the Rebel officer's remains, Carter was finally interred in the cemetery of the Methodist Church in an unmarked grave. Carter's wife and two of his three daughters died early in the war, leaving no one to retrieve his remains. The Methodist Cemetery was removed in the 1890s to expand the buildings of the church, and the bodies were all removed to Cedar Grove Cemetery. Because Carter's grave had never been properly marked, his identity and the location of his final resting place was lost to history for decades. After years of research, Carter was determined to rest in a section of Cedar Grove where all of the Methodist Church remains were deposited. The mass plot was marked with a stone monument listing the names of those removed, with one exception – one was listed as "Unknown."

"On April 10, 2010, a memorial service was held at Cedar Grove Cemetery and a new headstone was dedicated in the plot in the general area of Carter's final grave."

¹ "One Hundred Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Chambersburg, Pa." [pamphlet on file at the Conference Archives]. June 18, 1922.

² *Valley Spirit* [Chambersburg newspaper]. February 15, 1860.

³ *Valley Spirit* [Chambersburg newspaper]. November 26, 1862.

⁴ *Reminiscences of the War, or Incidents Which Transpired In and About Chambersburg During the War of the Rebellion* by Jacob Hoke. 1884, page 135.

⁵ *Valley Spirit* [Chambersburg newspaper]. April 17, 1867.

⁶ *Valley Spirit* [Chambersburg newspaper]. April 29, 1868.

⁷ *Atlas of Franklin County, Pennsylvania*, by D.G. Beers, 1868.

⁸ *Reminiscences of the War, or Incidents Which Transpired In and About Chambersburg During the War of the Rebellion* by Jacob Hoke. 1884, page 99.

⁹ *Franklin Repository* [Chambersburg newspaper]. July 29, 1863.

¹⁰ *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* by Alexander Kelly McClure. 1905. Volume II, pages 104-107.

¹¹ *Public Opinion* [Chambersburg newspaper]. April 11, 2010.