

PEACEMAKERS

By David D. Lennon

In the waning days of the Civil War, a remarkable and historic meeting took place in Clayton, North Carolina, which resulted in the city of Raleigh being spared from certain destruction, and which helped speed the end of that horrible conflict. That meeting is depicted in this painting.

On April 12, 1865, as the Union Army under General William T. Sherman was approaching Raleigh in the final days of the Civil War, North Carolina's Governor, Zebulon Vance dispatched two Unionist former governors, David Swain and William Graham, to travel through the battle lines east of Raleigh and deliver a message to General Sherman, surrendering Raleigh and asking that Sherman safeguard Raleigh from fires such as those that had swept Columbia, South Carolina when the Union Army occupied that city. Governor Swain and Governor Graham, along with several other officials, set out in a single railroad car pulled by a locomotive, with a flag of truce. After being accosted first by Confederate cavalry and then by Union cavalry, being robbed by the latter, and having been shot at, they finally made it to Clayton late that afternoon and were escorted to General Sherman, who tradition has it, was encamped near the house of one Joseph Smith, now called the "Smith-Compton- Ellington House," which still stands. It is located across the railroad tracks from the current U.S. Post Office in Clayton.

Once the visitors' purpose was known to General Sherman, they were warmly received, shared dinner and tents with Sherman's staff, and Sherman saw them off at the depot the next morning for their return trip, bearing a letter to Governor Vance in which Sherman promised to safeguard Raleigh. Sherman entered Raleigh later that day and, true to his word, posted guards to protect property. News of President Lincoln's assassination reached Sherman's army while they were in Raleigh, and it was only because of the guards posted by Sherman that multiple acts of arson were stopped, and the capital of our state was spared the devastation that had befallen Columbia, South Carolina.

This painting required a lot of research because I wanted to render as accurate a portrayal as possible of the meeting. The most thorough description was written by a gentleman named Dallas Ward, who, as a 19-year-old conductor on the North Carolina Railroad, accompanied the emissaries on their mission. From a photograph of him as an elderly gentleman, I was able to do age-regression and render him as a 19-year-old, I think credibly. From Mr. Ward's account, I was able to locate photographs of most of the others in the entourage: Major John Devereaux of the Confederate Quartermaster Corps (and a well-respected citizen of Raleigh), Dr. Edward Warren, the Surgeon General of North Carolina, and Union Lieutenant Colonel Lewellyn Estes, who was dispatched by General Judson Kilpatrick from the battlefield to accompany the emissaries to General Sherman's headquarters. I have also included the engineer, a "Mr. Faison," based upon a photo many years later of a gray-haired engineer by that name. Again, age regression was necessary.

I depicted General Sherman as he appeared in a photo from the battlefield in Atlanta the previous year. I portrayed him with a hardened visage, narrow eyes and a piercing look, as he is trying to assess the purpose of these distinguished-looking civilians who had clearly come through much danger to meet with him. Governor Swain, who stood 6'2" tall, was said to try to use his height to intimidate people. However, General Sherman was a robust 5'11" himself, and was not a man to be intimidated. I tried to capture what their vying for the upper hand may have looked like.

The Union Army's XIV Corps had taken Clayton that morning after a skirmish on the east side of town, in which 3 Union soldiers had been wounded, one of whom would die that evening. Since it was evening and Sherman was planning to move on to Raleigh the next day, he would have had his maps out

and would have been conferring with his subordinate commanders. Therefore, I put the XIV Corps commander, General Jefferson C. Davis (yes, there actually was a Union general named “Jefferson Davis”) to Sherman’s immediate left. Coming up from behind Sherman’s fly (I learned he did not use a tent- he insisted on a fly, which is like a large canvas tarp) is General Absalom Baird, who commanded the Third Division of the XIV Corps. The skirmish that morning involved elements of the 18th Kentucky, the 14th Ohio, and the 74th Indiana, all three units being in the Third Division of the XIV Corps. From the various accounts I read, I depicted the 74th Indiana as a unit in close proximity to General Sherman, and the infantry soldiers shown escorting the visitors are from that unit. I put the meeting at Sherman’s headquarters fly, based on Dallas Ward’s account.

Tradition says that of the columns of the Smith-Compton-Ellington house was damaged during that morning's skirmish by a cannon shell. Accordingly, I have depicted the house with a damaged column, and a severed tree nearby, to show the trajectory of the shell through the woods. I placed an orchard behind the scene of the meeting. While research has not specified whether there was an orchard in that particular spot, it is well-documented that there were a number of orchards in and around Clayton at the time of the Civil War. I chose to portray the budding blossoms of the orchard as an allegory to the burgeoning peace that was to come from this encounter, foreshadowing the surrender of the Confederate Army in North Carolina and the cessation of hostilities that soon followed.

After Governors Swain and Graham told General Sherman that they knew the War was over, Sherman relaxed the stern visage he had projected, warmly welcomed the emissaries, and he was pleased to respond to Governor Vance’s overture, offering safe conduct passes for the State officials, as well. Sherman saw them off at the Clayton depot the next morning, and wished them a safe trip back to Raleigh, stating “I shall be there before long.” And indeed, he was. True to his word, Sherman posted guards in Raleigh, and when the assassination of President Lincoln became known to his Army, those guards intercepted several groups of torch-bearing soldiers heading into town, intent on arson. Confederate General Johnston retreated to Greensboro, and ultimately surrendered to General Sherman at Bennett Place, near what is now Durham. Peace would shortly follow. This painting documents the significant role that Clayton and Johnston County played in the closing days of the Civil War, and in ensuring the survival of our State's capital city.

“Peacemakers”-- The People in the Painting

On the far left, a cavalryman is riding up to the residence of Joseph Smith (now known as the Smith-Compton-Ellington House in Clayton), which has been occupied by the Union Army, although General Sherman made his headquarters under canvas, in the foreground. A tree and one of the upper columns of the house have been damaged by an artillery shell from the skirmish with Confederate cavalry on Clayton's outskirts that morning. The seasonal dusting of pollen is visible on the roof of the house. Over the top of the canvas, we see General Absalom Baird, the Union Third Division commander, approaching with another officer. To the right of the house, several horses are being attended to by a soldier. Between the tents, we see a courier arriving from the X Corps, which was paralleling the XIV Corps on a road some 2 miles south. The courier is wearing the distinctive fishscale epaulets, which show he is from the 30th United States Colored Infantry.

The foreground shows General Sherman at his headquarters tent (under a canvas fly), where he has been conferring with his XIV Corps commander, General Jefferson C. Davis (to his immediate left). A map of Johnston County, showing Clayton is on the folding table behind him. To General Davis' left is Lieutenant Colonel Lewellyn Estes, who was dispatched by Union Cavalry General Judson Kilpatrick, whose troops intercepted the peace commission at the battlefield, to escort the delegation to General Sherman. Estes was Kilpatrick's Adjutant General, and would settle in North Carolina after the War. Lt. Col. Estes is in the process of presenting the top-hatted former Governor David Swain, then president of the University of North Carolina, to General Sherman, and Swain and Sherman are about to shake hands. Beside Swain, also in a top hat, is former Governor William Graham, who is awaiting his turn to shake hands, and in his left hand, he holds an envelope containing Governor Vance's letter to General Sherman. The rest of the delegation is walking behind the former Governors from the mule-drawn wagon which has transported them from the nearby railway depot.

Governor Vance's aide-de-camp, Colonel James G. Burr of the State Guard, is facing away from us. Burr, from Wilmington, was an executive with the Bank of the Cape Fear and the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad. Dr. Edward Warren, the Surgeon General of North Carolina, is following. I have depicted him in a medical officer's uniform, with a green sash, black collar (bearing the three stars of his rank as a Colonel) and a black-backed kepi. Major John Devereux of the Confederate Quartermaster Corps, and a prominent Raleigh citizen, is in the uniform with a single star on his collar. Behind Major Devereux are Dallas Ward, the 19-year-old conductor with the North Carolina Railroad, and Bob Harris, "our faithful old colored hand," who would later bravely hold the flag of truce atop the train as the delegation returned to Raleigh through the battle lines. Mr. Harris worked for the North Carolina Railroad, although it is unclear whether he was free or enslaved in that capacity. The locomotive's engineer, Mr. Faison, is shown beside Bob. Several soldiers of the 74th Indiana, with rifles, are escorting the delegation. Another soldier is in the immediate foreground, and a captain of that unit stands to the right, watching the proceedings.

In the background, some troops of the 74th Indiana have set up camp beside an orchard, and are preparing their fires for cooking the evening meal. One soldier has sought solitude against a tree in the orchard, and another is bringing two lanterns over to their encampment. Two more senior noncommissioned officers are watching the delegation from the edge of their camp, trying to discern what is going on. Another soldier is dragging some fence rails to the soldier who is chopping them up for firewood. The setting sun provides a vivid backdrop for the meeting, as soldiers, diplomats, and the rest of the entourage, all weary from a busy day fraught with danger, suspense, and travel, settle down for the evening and a historic discussion begins to unfold.

To the extent photographs were available, the painting attempts to faithfully represent the actual features of the major players depicted. The units and uniforms are, as best as research would allow, authentic to the military units and persons who participated in the actual event.