

George Wesley Byrd

C.S.A.

Private, Co. B (Taylor's), 1st Tennessee Artillery

Nov. 27, 1861 - Mar. 20, 1862

George Wesley Byrd (b. Feb. 15, 1829) was the fourth oldest son of **John Wesley "Jack" Byrd** (b. Jan. 1792; Washington Co. GA d. July 3, 1866; Stewart Co. TN) and **Luna Louisa Brigham** (b. 1797; Sullivan Co., TN. - d. Dec. 5, 1875; Stewart Co. TN). He, along with his 12 brothers and sisters (**William Carrol**, b. Aug. 23, 1815; **Evaline Olivia**, b. July 25, 1817; **Thomas Brigham**, b. Feb. 7, 1819; **Nancy Young**, b. Oct. 5, 1820; **John Ashley**, b. Sept. 23, 1822; **Louisa Villars**, b. Aug. 2, 1825; **Sarah Ann**, b. Aug. 8, 1827; **Elizabeth Jane**, b. Mar. 23, 1831; **Robert Payne**, b. Mar. 10, 1833; **Penelope**, b. Feb. 12, 1835; **Riley Marion**, b. Feb. 26, 1837; **Rhodean**, b. Sept. 23, 1839) was born along Byrd Creek, Stewart County Tennessee, in what is now Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area (LBL), next to the Tennessee River.

George Wesley Byrd married **Ann Elizabeth Harrells** (b. Nov. 26, 1846; AR - d. Dec. 17, 1909; Stewart Co. TN) on March 26, 1861 in Stewart County, Tennessee. They had the following children, all born there in Stewart County: **Magdalene Esther** (b. June 29, 1864), **Louisa Jane** (b. Jan. 25, 1867), **John Wesley II** (b. June 19, 1871), **Eugenia Eliza** (b. Dec. 6, 1874), **Ida Erminie** (b. Mar. 28, 1878), and **Robert Young** (b. Aug. 2, 1880).

Confederate service records indicate that **George Wesley Byrd**, along with three of his first cousins - **Albert C. Brigham, Jr.**, **Thomas H. Bailey**, and **Marion M. Bailey** - all enlisted together as Privates in **Captain Jesse Taylor's** Company B, 1st Tennessee Artillery. Both **George Wesley Byrd** and his cousin **Albert C. Brigham, Jr.** were enlisted by **Lt. Stankiewicz** at Fort Henry, Tennessee on Nov. 27, 1861; their cousins **Thomas** and **Marion Bailey** had enlisted earlier during the summer of 1861. Fort Henry was located on the Tennessee River, approximately 5 miles south of **George Wesley Byrd's** home along Byrd Creek.

Now under the direction of CSA **General Lloyd Tilghman**, **Pvt. Byrd** and his cousins worked rapidly to finish Fort Henry during the last months of 1861. A January, 1862 reconnaissance by Federal **General Lew Wallace** (later author of *Ben Hur*) on board the gunboat *USS Conestoga* revealed the low bastions of the fort were barely above the waters of the Tennessee River; between January 15 - 22, the Tennessee River rose 15 feet and was at floodstage. Despite the rising water, on January 21, **General Tilghman** sent out another appeal for local slaves to work on Fort Henry's fortifications. At that time there were 14 cannons at Fort Henry - including one 10 inch Columbiad (128 Lb. shot),

one rebored 24 -pounder (62 Lb. ball), two 42-pounders, and eight 32-pounder guns. Also during this time, Fort Henry's earthworks were improved to 14 feet of thickness, including 8-foot high parapets. The pace quickened as rumors of the Federal invasion force spread through the garrison at Fort Henry.

When not working on fortifications, drill and practice occupied much of the time spent by **Pvt. George W. Byrd** and his cousins under their urgent training by **Captain Jesse Taylor** and **General Tilghman** during the month of January, 1862. Fort Heiman, on the Kentucky side of the Tennessee River across from Fort Henry, was evacuated by **General Tilghman** by February 5, 1862 and his forces consolidated at Fort Henry. The forces at Fort Henry now comprised 6 infantry regiments plus 1 battalion, 3 batteries of light and heavy artillery, and 2 battalions of cavalry; a total of approximately 3,000 men.

Federal **General Ulysses S. Grant** had previously landed his initial convoy of soldiers under **General John A. McClernand** at Itra Landing, 8 miles below Fort Henry early on February 4. Desiring first-hand information, **General Grant** then boarded the Federal ironclad *USS Essex* for a recon of Fort Henry. When the *Essex* was within about 2 ½ miles from Fort Henry, **Pvt. Byrd** and his cousins under **Captain Taylor** indulged in a little target practice at **General Grant's** expense. One 24-pounder shell screeched over the gunboat, followed by a second that narrowly missed **General Grant** and *Essex* **Commander W.D. "Dirty Bill" Porter** as it crashed through the stern deck and dropped hissing into the Tennessee River. The *Essex* and **General Grant** quickly retreated back downriver.

General Grant and **Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote** made plans on February 5 for a coordinated infantry - naval assault against Fort Henry the following day. Meanwhile, Confederate **General Tilghman** and **Colonel Adolphus Heiman** decided that Fort Henry, due in large part to still rising waters of the Tennessee River, was undefensible and that all soldiers except **Captain Taylor's** Co. B including **Pvt. George W. Byrd** and his cousins - would be evacuated to Fort Donelson during early morning of February 6. **Captain Taylor's** men would man the guns and attempt to delay the Federal assault while **Colonel Heiman** and most of the garrison retreated to Fort Donelson 12 miles away.

Pvt. Byrd and his cousins no doubt felt some degree of trepidation on the morning of February 6, 1862 as they watched the rest of Fort Henry's garrison march away towards Fort Donelson. At 10:50 a.m., the assault flotilla of **Flag Officer Foote** - including the ironclads *USS Essex*, *Cincinnati*, *Carondelet*, *St. Louis* and timberclads *USS Tyler*, *Conestoga*, and *Lexington* - left Bailey's Landing (just south of Byrd's Creek area) and chugged upriver towards Fort Henry. About noon, the Federal ironclads sighted the fort and at 12:34 p.m., the assault was initiated by the *USS Cincinnati*, firing its 8-inch bow-mounted Dahlgren cannon; the other ironclads soon joined in.

General Tilghman and his staff took position at the center battery in Fort Henry - the approximately 70 Confederates in the fort had only 11 cannons facing the river and the Federal flotilla while **Flag Officer Foote** had a combined total of 54 cannons at his

disposal. As documented by **Edwin C. Bearss** in his book *The Fall of Fort Henry* (1963), **General Tilghman** refused to allow his men to return fire until he could evaluate the effectiveness of the Federal bombardment; he then told **Captain Taylor** to have his men begin firing. **Captain Taylor** assigned a target to each gun captain and told them their pieces must be constantly trained on that particular boat. The Fort Henry Columbiad fired first, followed by the rebored 24-pounder, and the other guns as the Federal ironclads closed in.

Foote's flagship *Cincinnati* took numerous hits as did the ironclad *Essex*, including a shot from the Confederate Columbiad that exploded the *Essex's* boiler and killed several of its crew with scalding steam. That single 128-lb. shot resulted in 10 killed, 23 wounded, and 5 missing from the crew of the *USS Essex*. While **Pvt. George W. Byrd** and his Confederate comrades were still cheering the fate of the *Essex*, the rebored 24-pounder rifle in the fort suddenly burst, killing or disabling its crew. Shortly thereafter, another disaster struck the valiant Confederates when their Columbiad was accidentally spiked by a jammed priming wire. By this time, several of the 32-pounders had been knocked out by the Federal cannonfire and the remaining ironclads raked the parapets of Fort Henry with destructive fire. **Pvt. Byrd** and his comrades understandably shrank from their stations in accordance with self-preservation. At approximately 1:30 p.m., **General Tilghman** threw off his coat and jumped up to man one of the remaining 32-pounders in an attempt to rally his men; he personally aimed two shots at the *USS Cincinnati*, causing her to alter her course. The three remaining ironclads now closed to within 600 yards of the fort, their 8-inch Dahlgrens actually blowing chunks out of Fort Henry's parapets.

Throughout the battle, the Tennessee River had continued to rise and now actually stood calf-deep within Fort Henry. **General Tilghman** now reluctantly decided to surrender at about 2:00 p.m. and had **Captain Taylor** strike the Confederate colors from the main flagstaff. **Flag Officer Foote** then received **General Tilghman** aboard the *Cincinnati* where **Tilghman** greeted **Foote** by saying "*I am glad to surrender to so gallant an officer.*" **Foote** rather unchivalrously replied back "*You do perfectly right, sir, in surrendering, but you should have blown my boat out of the water before I would have surrendered to you.*"

General U.S. Grant and his staff arrived at Fort Henry about 3:00 p.m., his infantry occupied the fort shortly thereafter. **Pvt. George W. Byrd** and his surrendered comrades were then sent into captivity, first by Federal steamboat to Cairo, Illinois and then to Alton, Illinois and the POW camp where both he and his cousin **Pvt. Marion M. Bailey** were received on February 17, 1862. Both cousins endured a relatively brief status as POWs - **Pvt. Byrd** and **Pvt. Bailey** signed loyalty oaths and were released from Alton POW camp on March 20, 1862. Interestingly, a list of prisoners at Alton Prison dated March 8, 1862 describes **Pvt. George W. Byrd's** residence as being "*Lauderdale County, Alabama*" – a clerk's mistake or **George Wesley's** attempt to protect his family along the Tennessee River?

Back home in Stewart County, Tennessee, **George Wesley Byrd** signed a second loyalty oath and posted a \$1,000 bond; this document is dated April 7, 1862 and lists his younger

brother, **Riley Marion Byrd**, and a neighbor, **Henry Hicks**, as securities. In the same National Archives microfilm file with this second loyalty oath document is a railroad pass with the following notations on it:

Parkersburg Apl 16 1862

*The bearer of this certificate, G.W. Byrd having been examined, according to instructions from Head Quarters, is permitted to pass on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad - N.W. Va. R.R. from Parkersburg to Kanawha Station by paying his fare.
by order of John F. Hoy
Lieu't Col.*

*Brig. Gen'l B.F. Kelley
by Geo. A. (?) Palmer*

On the back side of this railroad pass is also written: *"The undersigned accepts this pass on his word of honor that he is loyal to the United States and if he is hereafter found in arms against the government of the United States or aiding or abetting its enemies, the penalty will be DEATH."* Beneath this statement is the signature: *"G.W. Byrd"*

At the time of this writing it is not known exactly why **George Wesley Byrd** signed a second, \$1,000 security loyalty oath and traveled to Kanawha Station (now) West Virginia. Family history recorded by his great-niece, **Cleo Cherry Grogan** of Murray, Kentucky states that **George Wesley Byrd** had returned home to his aged parents' house on Byrd Creek sometime during the Civil War. Then one day, although he had a fever and was lying down, he heard the hoofbeats of three unfamiliar horses riding up to his parents' house. Getting up from his sickbed and taking a double-barrel shotgun with him, he quietly approached the three *"guerillas"* (**Cleo Grogan's** term) as they were dismounting in front of the house. Without hesitation, he shot and killed one guerilla who had already tied his horse to the pickett fence outside the front porch and knocked another rider from his horse with the second blast. The third guerilla turned and fled into the night. Although *"sick with fever"*, **George Wesley Byrd** left the two dead guerillas in his parents' front yard and *"walked into Dover"* to tell authorities about the incident. If this described incident indeed occurred during the Civil War, it is probably more likely that he would have walked to the Federal outpost at now occupied Fort Henry and manned by the 5th Iowa Cavalry (Curtis Horse) commanded by **Colonel William W. Lowe**.

George Wesley Byrd was the administrator of his father's estate after **John Wesley "Jack" Byrd** died in 1866. In 1870, he was sold the remaining land in Stewart county belonging to his oldest brother, **William Carrol Byrd**, now living in Randolph County, Arkansas. **Pvt. George Wesley Byrd**, Co. B (Taylor's), 1st Tennessee Artillery died October 14, 1898 and is buried alongside his wife, **Ann Eliza Harrells** in the Bailey-Byrd Cemetery, Land Between The Lakes NRA (LBL), Stewart County, TN. On his headstone is inscribed the following:

"Let us prepare to cross the chilly waters of death."



1860s Photo image of
George Wesley Byrd
courtesy of **Pauline
Byrd Cook** and **Sarah
Hillyard White**.



Photo image by
Kenneth E. Byrd,
taken March 2014.

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by **Kenneth E. Byrd**¹, Indianapolis, IN, **Cleo Cherry Grogan**², Murray, KY (dec.),
Pauline Byrd Cook³ (dec.), and **Sarah Hillyard White**⁴.

¹ 3rd great-nephew of **Pvt. George Wesley Byrd**, 2nd great-grandson of **William Carroll Byrd**, 3rd great-grandson of **John Wesley “Jack” Byrd**.

² great-niece of **Pvt. George Wesley Byrd**, great-granddaughter of **John Wesley “Jack” Byrd**.

³ Granddaughter of **Pvt. George Wesley Byrd**.

⁴ great-granddaughter of **Pvt. George Wesley Byrd**.