

Lost soul: The story of Sam Postlethwaite

Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

By SAM SIMONS
Special to The Sun

A small group of people, several wearing Confederate uniforms, were gathered on Veterans Day before a grave marked with both the American and Confederate flags. It is a scene likely repeated throughout the Old South every year, but this was different. This was the grave of Samuel Postlethwaite of the 21st Mississippi Regiment, the only Confederate soldier buried in Rhode Island.

Sam rests next to his brother-in-law, William Greene, in Greenwood Cemetery in Coventry. According to Les Rolston, author of "Lost Soul: A Yankee's Fight for a Rebel's Dignity," Greene went south after the Civil War to act as a purchasing agent for his father's mill in Coventry. While in Mississippi, he stayed at a boarding house where Sam's sister Mollie was also staying. Her brother had been seriously wounded at the Battle of Malvern Hill, and would live out his life disabled and in pain. Mollie was not going to eat at the same table with a "Yankee" who had caused her brother such suffering.

"Then one day, while eating in her room, Mollie heard children outside squealing with delight," Rolston related. "When she looked out the window, there was Greene with a child perched on each shoulder, whinnying like a horse and galloping down the road. Mollie thought that this guy might not be such a bad fellow after all.

"To make a long story short, they were engaged a week later."

Greene returned to Rhode Island with his new wife, and brought Sam, then suffering from tuberculosis as well as his war wounds, to join them in 1875. Sam Postlethwaite, just 43 years old, died the next year. William was buried by his side in 1889, his marker facing the family homestead, across the street from Greenwood Cemetery. As the 20th century progressed, the mill was abandoned, the homestead replaced by tract housing, and the family forgotten. Even Sam Postlethwaite's marker would disappear.

The story would have ended there if not for Rolston's research.

One day in 1994, Mae Wrona saw an article in the Providence Journal about a soldier from the 21st Mississippi buried in Coventry, R.I. By a quirk of fate, her son John portrayed a soldier from the same regiment as part of a Civil War re-enacting group from Massachusetts.

"We knew about the 21st Mississippi because they had overrun the 9th Massachusetts battery at Gettysburg," Wrona explained, "The unit had a strong history so we knew we could give an accurate portrayal and give them the honor due them."

Working together, Rolston and the 21st Mississippi re-enactors were able to have the Department of Veterans Affairs supply a marker for Sam Postlethwaite. The group gathered on Veterans Day in 1995 for a dedication ceremony and they have returned every year since.

"It means a lot (to us) to honor Sam," Wrona said. "He has transformed into a symbol of the American soldier and how their deeds are forgotten when the wars end. Some call what we do (Civil War reenacting) a hobby, but it is really a remembrance. It's important to bring the memory of men like Sam back to life."

In recognition of his efforts to preserve the final resting place of Private Sam Postlethwaite, Rolston received letters of commendation from the governor of Mississippi, U.S. Senator Claiborne Pell and the Rhode Island House of Representatives.

"Lost Soul" is available online through Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Rolston's most current book is "Home of the Brave," the story of immigrants who won the Medal of Honor during the Civil War.

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