



Figure 1: A Johnson's Island prisoner of war cover from Stephen A. Corker addressed to his wife Margaret in Georgia.

## Stephen Alpheastus Corker: Politics Runs in the Family

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

A while back, I posted a very nice Johnson's Island prisoner of war cover in the retail section of my website. The cover (Figure 1) was addressed to Mrs. Margaret Corker. As I normally do, I researched the soldier to include personal information with the description.

I found the cover had been sent by Stephen Alpheastus Corker Sr. (Figure 2), to his wife Margaret in Georgia. Corker was one of the commanders of the Burke Guards, Company A, 3rd Georgia Infantry Regiment, Wright's Brigade, Anderson's/Mahone's Division, 3rd Corps, Army of Northern Virginia.

He was captured on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, sent to Ft. Delaware in July and then on to Johnson's Island in Sandusky, Ohio. Eventually he was forwarded to City Point, Virginia, for exchange and paroled in Augusta, Georgia, on May 19, 1865.

I received a phone call not long after I uploaded the retail description to the website. Imagine my surprise when the caller said his name was Stephen A. Corker! It took me only a fraction of a second to correctly guess why he might be calling. He specifically communicated his name with the middle initial (unusual), tempting me to speculate the reason for his call. He was elated to find and acquire the cover and its enclosed letter.

The modern day Steve Corker has been a stamp collector since the age of 11 and told me that he had begun genealogy research about two years before.

His great-great grandfather was the Johnson's Island prisoner and, yes, he was indeed named after him.

Steve traveled to Georgia to research his roots but ran into many roadblocks, as the courthouse in Burke County burned down twice.

He did find out that Stephen A. Corker was a successful lawyer, a member of the Georgia State House of Representatives and was later elected as a Democrat to the 41st Congress of the U.S. House of Representatives representing Georgia for 1870-71.

Steve found another branch of the family had donated 58 letters to and from S.A. Corker to the Hargrett Library of the University of Georgia. They were originally saved by his wife.

His initial fate upon capture was not known by his family. His life as a prisoner of war is documented in these letters. Of special interest is a letter to Mrs. Corker written by an adjutant for, and signed by, Gen. Robert E. Lee on August 18, 1863, saying in part:

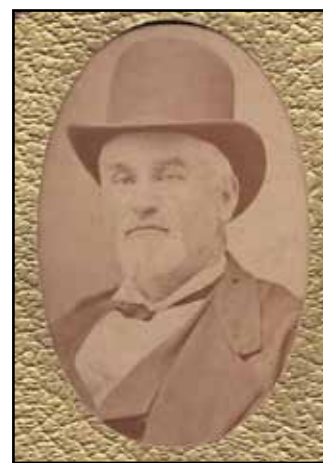


Figure 2: Stephen A. Corker Sr., circa 1875.

*"He did his part bravely and well in a charge of Wrights Brigade on the enemy's position at Gettysburg on July 2nd and when last seen was standing near a piece of the enemy's artillery where the fire was very severe. It is not known whether he was killed or wounded. I hope he is living and may long be spared to his family and the country. We hold no communications with the enemy now on this line and they have restricted almost to prohibition visits to the North by the Flag of Truce boats. I sympathize deeply with you in your anxiety and regret that I can do so little to relieve it."*

After we had spoken on the phone, I asked Steve if I might share his story. He graciously consented and sent me a large package of information about his great-great grandfather before he had even received the treasured cover and contents.

With his accompanying letter to me, he wrote:

"...if you look at a photo of me and of Stephen's likeness in the enclosed photo, we look like doubles...I will be humbled to actually hold the letter he wrote, to see his handwriting, to see the stamp he affixed and knowing that my great-great grandmother held and read the same letter. Thank you for making that possible."

What a wonderful feeling to help reunite a family with their roots!

### **Stephen Alpheastus Corker Sr. (1830-1879)**

Stephen A. Corker was born near Waynesboro, Georgia, to Stephen Corker (1804-1840), a prosperous plantation owner, and his wife Salenah A. Lanier (1808-1865). He was about 10 years old when his father died. His mother subsequently married a Baptist clergyman, Calvin B. Churchill. Corker studied law, was admitted to the bar, and began a law practice in Waynesboro.<sup>1</sup>

Corker married Margaret Myrtice Palmer in 1859 in Augusta, Georgia. He also engaged in agricultural pursuits as well as his law practice. The 1860 federal census shows that he owned four slaves, as well as \$4,000 in real estate and \$5,600 in personal estate. Ten years later, the value had grown to \$11,000 in reported real estate and \$6,000 in personal estate.<sup>2</sup>

Corker was elected ordinary of Burke County in January 1860. Within civic governance, notably in the southern states, the role of the county ordinary involved the discharge of certain, often legal or legally related, tasks falling to city or county authorities, such as licensing marriages and adjudicating claims against an authority.

After the war, he returned home and resumed the practice of law in Waynesboro and was a judge by the late 1860s.

In August 1870, Corker was one of 32 delegates

from Burke County to the State Democratic Convention. In October of that year, he was nominated for the short term and Dudley M. DuBose was nominated for the long term for Georgia's 5th Congressional district by the Democratic nominating committee at Augusta.

The short term to Congress was the vacancy caused by the House of Representatives declaring Congressman Charles H. Prince not entitled to his seat for the 41st Congress. Prince and the rest of Congressional Delegation from Georgia had been elected in April 1868 for the last remaining months of the 40th U.S. Congress and had then attempted to present their same credentials for the next Congress without a subsequent election. The position became vacant on March 3, 1869, while Congress decided the legality of their elections.

Congress decided in January 1870 that the members elected in April 1868 were not entitled to the seats for the 41st Congress. It was decided that elections for both the remaining portion of 41st and the 42nd Congress were to be held jointly in December 1870.

Corker's opponent in the election was a black Republican named Thomas Payce Beard. The elections results given by the Georgia Secretary of State were 14,678 for Corker and 9,112 for Beard. The results were contested by Beard, who reported that Republicans were compelled through threats of violence to vote for Corker against their wills, that there were numerous incidents of voting fraud. Corker denied the allegations.

Corker presented his credentials to Congress and was seated on January 24, 1871, pending the results of the Elections Committee. A Federal investigation into election began soon afterwards. Testimony was taken by witnesses of the election in the middle of February 1871. The case never came before the Elections Committee. Corker served until the end of his term on March 3, 1871, for a total of 39 days.<sup>3</sup>

After leaving Congress, Corker resumed the practice of law in Waynesboro. In October 1874, Corker was stabbed five times with a penknife by a man named Walker McCatherine following a disagreement about a ruling Corker made regarding a bit of property. None of the wounds were serious and he returned to work a few days later.

The Ladies Memorial Association, organized in September 1866, began gathering the remains of Confederate soldiers killed in skirmishes throughout Burke County from scattered graves. The bodies were reinterred in the Waynesboro Confederate Memorial Cemetery, which was established in the early 1800s. It is the site of Corker's final resting place (Figure 3).

Corker died of a stroke at age 49. His wife and three sons survived him.<sup>4</sup> But his story lives on.

In 2017, author John C. Hall Jr. researched and wrote



a book about Corker and his wartime experiences. Hall is yet another great-great grandson of Corker's and his photo shows a marked similarity to his ancestor.

Even though the Corker prisoner of war cover is long gone, I could not help but buy a copy of Hall's book, which is titled *Above the High Water Mark - Stephen Alpheastus Corker: The Life and Letters of a Lawyer, Soldier, Farmer and Statesman*.

The proper spelling of his middle name seems to be at issue; it is seen as both Alpheastus and Alfestus.

Hall shares first hand experiences related by Corker, such as having his sword shot in two at "Bloody Lane" at the Battle of Sharpsburg.

Most notable, however, is a blow-by-blow of his unit's movements at the Battle of Gettysburg, and the revelation that they may, in fact, have made the furthest advance of any Confederate troops in the war during combat at Cemetery Ridge.

"Everybody knows about Pickett's Charge," Hall said. "It's called 'The High Water Mark of the Confederacy.' That's actually not true. The high water mark of the Confederacy was the day before at Wright's Brigade Charge. Capt. Corker led the 3rd Georgia. There was the 48th the 22nd and the 2nd. In terms of the turning point of the war, high water mark, yes. But it's actually a term of distance, how far they went. Lee actually got the idea for Pickett's charge from what Wright's brigade did...They charged up the hill and captured Brown's Rhode Island artillery. The significance of that is there's some debate in the historical community that Wright's brigade did not break the Union line. Well here's a letter where Robert E. Lee details exactly where her husband was on top of the hill, amongst the enemy's cannons. So there's some historical significance here."

Hall cites evidence to challenge the consensus that Pickett's Charge the following day was indeed that figurative high water mark.

"The way the letters start off at the beginning of the war, there's a lot of patriotism," Hall relates. "People start dying and the war is getting bloody, so his attitude changes in the letters. There's one letter that says 'another year of misery and dying.'"<sup>5</sup>

### Robert Phillips Corker Jr. (1952-present)

Robert Phillips Corker Jr. (R-Tennessee, Figure 4) has served as the junior United States senator from Tennessee since 2007. He is the current chairman of the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations (115th Congress). Corker is also a great-great grandson of Stephen A. Corker Sr.

I believe the genes run strong and true. To my eyes, he looks a great deal like his ancestor. Politics were apparently passed along in the genes along with appearance.



**Figure 3: The Waynesboro, Georgia, Confederate Memorial Cemetery gravesite of Stephen A. Corker Sr. with details of the CSA Southern Cross of Honor and grave inscription.**

### Endnotes

- 1 Wikipedia: Stephen A. Corker, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_A.\\_Corker/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_A._Corker/) Accessed August 3, 2018.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Find A Grave: Waynesboro Georgia Confederate Cemetery <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/37633/waynesboro-confederate-memorial-cemetery/> Accessed August 3, 2018.
- 5 *The True Citizen*, "Hall explores wealth of Civil War history in new book," reprint from the *Dublin Courier Herald*, [http://www.thetruecitizen.com/news/2017-07-12/Front\\_Page/Hall\\_explores\\_wealth\\_of\\_Civil\\_War\\_history\\_in\\_new\\_b.html/](http://www.thetruecitizen.com/news/2017-07-12/Front_Page/Hall_explores_wealth_of_Civil_War_history_in_new_b.html/) Accessed August 3, 2018.



**Figure 4: The official U.S. Senate photo of Sen. Robert P. Corker Jr., the great-great-grandson of Stephen A. Corker Sr.**

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