

JEREMY GILMER AND THE CONFEDERATE ENGINEERS

by

Steven B. Rhodes

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

APPROVED:

---

James I. Robertson, Jr., Chairman

---

J. D. Miller

---

G. G. Williamson

October 1983

Blacksburg, Virginia

## JEREMY GILMER AND THE CONFEDERATE ENGINEERS

by

Steven B. Rhodes

(ABSTRACT)

This is a biography of Confederate Major General Jeremy Francis Gilmer. The primary emphasis of the paper is on Gilmer's career during the Civil War and his contributions to the Confederate Bureau of Engineers.

Jeremy Francis Gilmer was a native of North Carolina. In 1835 he was appointed to West Point from where he graduated in 1839, ranked fourth in his class. He was subsequently appointed to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

When the Civil War began, Gilmer and his family were stationed in San Francisco. He resigned his U.S. Army commission when North Carolina seceded from the Union. After he returned to the South, Gilmer was assigned to Albert Sidney Johnston's command in Kentucky. At the battle of Shiloh Gilmer was wounded and subsequently reassigned to Virginia.

Following a brief assignment to the Army of Northern Virginia, Gilmer was named Chief of the Confederate Bureau of Engineers. The Corps grew in numbers and influence as a direct result of Gilmer's influence.

At the end of the war Gilmer settled in Savannah with his family where he became President of the Savannah Gas Light Company. He held that position for the remainder of his life. In addition, Gilmer invested in real estate and railroads, amassing a substantial fortune. In 1883, Gilmer died peacefully in his Savannah home.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No paper of this size is completed without technical aid and support. The author would like to give special thanks to Mrs. Beth Burch for typing the massive manuscript and making sense out of an illegible scrawl. In addition, the author would like to thank Mr. Terry R. DeLong for proofreading much of the typed copy. Special thanks go to Ms. Bebbie A. Clark for additional proofreading of the typed copy as well as patience and support. Thanks also go to Dr. J. D. Miller and Dr. G. G. Williamson who served on my committee. Both managed to wade through this rather lengthy paper on short notice, and both have played a major role in the author's education at this university.

Finally, special thanks and grateful appreciation go to Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. for his advice, patience, and guidance. This paper and the author benefitted from Dr. Robertson's guiding hand; his knowledge of the Civil War and the writing craft are unsurpassed.

## CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. "Rumors of War" . . . . .	1
II. "This is a Mean Life" . . . . .	33
III. "Either a Prisoner or Killed" . . . . .	66
IV. The Confederate Engineer Bureau . . . . .	96
V. "All We Can Do Is To Fail" . . . . .	137
VI. Few Men Could Do As Much . . . . .	176
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	193
VITA . . . . .	201

"Rumors of War"

February 1818 - February 1859

Chapter I

The rolling hills of North Carolina offered a promise of future prosperity to some Pennsylvania colonists in the eighteenth century. It was not that Pennsylvania land was scarce, nor was it inhospitable. On the contrary, a number of Quaker, German, and Scots-Irish immigrants to the New World made their homes in William Penn's colony. By the early 1700's, however, the rich soil of Pennsylvania was becoming too rich; it was expensive. The rising cost of land triggered a migration out of Pennsylvania to the south. In North Carolina, land was plentiful and available at reasonable rates. As a consequence, many Scots-Irish immigrants to Pennsylvania filtered southward through Maryland and Virginia.<sup>1</sup>

When it was finally settled, Guilford County, North Carolina, resembled a cross-section of Pennsylvania population. Between 1749 and 1753 Guilford attracted three distinct groups from Pennsylvania: Quakers, Germans, and Scots-Irish.<sup>2</sup> According to local tradition, the first

---

<sup>1</sup>Hugh T. Lefler and William S. Powell, Colonial North Carolina: A History (New York, 1973), 98-100.

<sup>2</sup>Sallie W. Stockard, The History of Guilford County, North Carolina (Knoxville, Tenn., 1902), NYT, 13; Calvin Henderson Wiley, Alamance Church: A Historical Address Delivered at the Dedication of Its Fourth House of Worship, on October 18th, 1879 (Raleigh, N.C., 1880), 10.

Scots-Irish pioneers settled in central Guilford around 1753.<sup>3</sup> In later years, their portion of Guilford was called the Alamance Church section, after the Presbyterian church built in 1764 by the Scots-Irish.

One of the many Scots-Irish immigrants to Guilford was William Gilmer. His journey to North Carolina followed much the same route as most of Guilford's Scots-Irish. He was born in County Down within that section of Ireland known as Ulster. Gilmer immigrated from Ireland to Pennsylvania but apparently did not find the colony to his liking. North Carolina proved to be much more attractive for Gilmer. He elected to settle permanently in Guilford County, where he was assimilated into the Scots-Irish community.<sup>4</sup>

When the American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain, the Guilford Scots-Irish formed a company of militia under Captain Arthur Forbis.<sup>5</sup> William Gilmer joined the company, as did the Captain's brother, John Forbis.<sup>6</sup> Unlike many North Carolinians of Scottish

---

<sup>3</sup>E. C. Murray, A History of Alamance Church 1762-1918 (n.p., 1918), 4; Wiley, Alamance Church, 10.

<sup>4</sup>William C. Rankin (comp.) "Guilford's Scotch-Irish." (Charlotte, n.d.), 49; Gerald W. Johnson, "John Adams Gilmer 1805-1868," in Bettie D. Caldwell (comp.) Founders and Builders of Greensboro (Greensboro, N.C., 1925), 98.

<sup>5</sup>Johnson, "Gilmer," 98; Stockard, Guilford County, 171.

<sup>6</sup>Johnson, "Gilmer," 98; Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 44.

descent, the Scots-Irish uniformly opposed British rule.<sup>7</sup> The Guilford community was remarkable in its apparent homogeneity on this score. Years after the fact, the Reverend Eli W. Carruthers commented that "it is not known that there was a single Tory" among the Guilford Scots-Irish.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their enthusiasm and patriotism, the Guilford Scots-Irish did not engage regular British troops until late in the war. Early in 1781, British Maj. Gen. Charles Lord Cornwallis moved his army up through the Carolinas towards Virginia. His march took him into Guilford County. On March 15, 1781, an American army under Nathaniel Greene met Cornwallis in battle near Guilford Court House. Arthur Forbis and his men stood with Greene's army.

By all accounts, the Forbis company distinguished itself during the battle. When the other North Carolina regiments scattered in retreat from the British advance, Forbis' men held their position.<sup>9</sup> The Forbis company managed to discharge two disciplined volleys in the face

---

<sup>7</sup>Henry Lumpkin, From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South (Columbia, S.C., 1981), 4, 250.

<sup>8</sup>Murray, Alamance Church, 23.

<sup>9</sup>Johnson, "Gilmer," 98; Stockard, Guilford County, 171; Burke Davis, The Cowpens-Guilford Courthouse Campaign (Philadelphia, 1962), 153.

of the British troops before the King's soldiers forced them to leave the field.<sup>10</sup> The engagement cost Arthur Forbis his life. Nearly eighty years after the event, a monument was erected to Arthur Forbis in the Alamance Church Cemetery.<sup>11</sup>

When William Gilmer fought at Guilford Court House, his oldest son, Robert Shaw Gilmer, was eleven years old.<sup>12</sup> Some five years after the battle, a daughter, Ann, was born to the family of John Forbis.<sup>13</sup> Robert Gilmer was sixteen years senior to Ann Forbis; but despite their age difference, they deeply loved one another and became man and wife. Ann Forbis Gilmer was barely 19 years old when she bore her first child, John Adams Gilmer, in 1805.<sup>14</sup>

In the winter of 1818, Ann Forbis Gilmer was pregnant with her seventh child. She obviously was well accustomed to motherhood. The Gilmers were also fortunate with their family, for out of six children, only one child had died in infancy.<sup>15</sup>

Jeremy Francis Gilmer was born on his father's plantation some eight miles outside Greensboro, two miles from

---

<sup>10</sup>Murray, Alamance Church, 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 49.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 49-50.

the Alamance Church.<sup>16</sup> This seventh child and fifth son arrived on February 23. He was named Jeremy Francis Gilmer in honor of Ann Gilmer's older brother, Jeremy Forbis, who had died in 1817.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike his older brother John, Jeremy Gilmer was not educated by Rev. Eli W. Carruthers of the Alamance Church. Instead, Jeremy Gilmer was sent to Greensboro to study at Lindsley's private school.<sup>18</sup> The distance separating the Gilmer plantation from Greensboro prohibited daily travel. Jeremy Gilmer thus spent his adolescence at the home of his brother John.<sup>19</sup>

It was not a comfortable life, for the Gilmer household of Greensboro was crowded. John Gilmer was then only a struggling young lawyer with a wife, baby daughter, and small income.<sup>20</sup> Faced with meager resources, John Gilmer was forced to take lodgers in his home.<sup>21</sup> On at least one

---

<sup>16</sup>Margaret P. Hillhouse, Historical and Genealogical Collections Relating to the Descendants of Rev. James Hillhouse (New York, 1924), 156; Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 49.

<sup>17</sup>Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 50, 45.

<sup>18</sup>Hillhouse, Historical Collections, 156.

<sup>19</sup>Jeremy F. Gilmer to Calvin Henderson Wiley, Aug. 6, 1834, Calvin Henderson Wiley Papers, University of North Carolina.

<sup>20</sup>Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 49; Ibid.; Johnson, "Gilmer," 99.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

occasion, Jeremy Gilmer had to share his room with a student boarder.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Jeremy Gilmer was fourteen, the family of Robert and Ann Gilmer had increased to five children (though two of these died as infants).<sup>23</sup> Despite the presence of strangers, the family unit in Greensboro was a compact one. In Greensboro, Jeremy Gilmer was able to receive much individual attention. For this reason and others, John Gilmer assumed a position of importance to Jeremy Gilmer out of proportion to the normal relationship between brothers.

At least psychologically, John Gilmer saw himself as a father figure for his younger brother. The year Jeremy Gilmer turned 13, John Gilmer was 26 and their father was 61 years old. Although twice his brother's age, less distance separated John Gilmer from his brother than Jeremy Gilmer from his father. Robert Gilmer was quickly approaching an age more suitable for a grandfather than a parent of infant children. His interests differed considerably from those of a thirteen-year-old who was but one of eight children. Ideally, John Gilmer could better relate to his younger brother, and it seemed he was willing

---

<sup>22</sup>Jeremy F. Gilmer to Calvin Henderson Wiley, Aug. 6, 1834, Wiley Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 50.

to do so. Years later, John stated that Jeremy was "a dear brother to me, rather more like a child than a brother."<sup>24</sup>

Apparently, Jeremy Gilmer was not close to either of his parents. Perhaps this was a result of his peculiar situation in Greensboro, or the distance in age separating him from his father, or both. For whatever reason, and in his own mind, Jeremy Gilmer was estranged from his family. When his mother died in 1861--sixteen years after his father, Gilmer made a most unusual observation: "Her death will cast a dark gloom over all my Brothers and sisters who depended much upon her kindness and advice."<sup>25</sup>

Jeremy Gilmer was correct in distinguishing himself from his brothers and sisters in 1861. He was, in fact, the unique member of the Gilmers. Most of his family, including all of his brothers, lived the rest of their lives in North Carolina.<sup>26</sup> Yet when Jeremy reached maturity, he left the state permanently and returned only for brief visits.

---

<sup>24</sup>John A. Gilmer to Louisa A. Gilmer, Jan. 17, 1866. Jeremy Francis Gilmer Papers, University of North Carolina.

<sup>25</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 25, 1861, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>26</sup>Roscoe J. and Anna Mae Allen, "Alamance Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Guilford County, North Carolina" (typescript, n.d.), 14; Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 49-50.

On June 30, 1835, Jeremy Francis Gilmer received appointment to the United States Military Academy.<sup>27</sup> Gilmer's decision to become a soldier set him apart from his relatives. The family history was not richly laden with epic stories of military exploits. John Gilmer made it a point to recall with fondness the service of William Gilmer during the American Revolution, and perhaps admiration for the grandfather influenced Jeremy Gilmer's future.<sup>28</sup> No other member of the Gilmer family became a professional soldier.<sup>29</sup>

Lack of family tradition in the military did not hamper Jeremy Gilmer at West Point. He graduated fourth in a class of thirty-one cadets, one rank below his closest cadet-friend at the Academy, Henry Wager Halleck. Since both men were within the top five of their class, they were appointed lieutenants on July 1, 1839, to the Corps of Engineers.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Louisa Porter Minis (comp.), "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer: Captain of Engineers U.S.A., Major General and Chief Engineer C.S.A., Presented by his daughter Louisa Porter Minis of Savannah." (Richmond: Museum of the Confederacy), paged scrapbook.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, "Gilmer," 98.

<sup>29</sup> Rankin, "Guilford's Scotch-Irish," 49-50.

<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Krisman and Robert J. Lamb (eds.), 1970 Cullum Memorial Edition Register of Graduates and Former Cadets 1802-1970 of the United States Military Academy (Chicago, 1970), 230; Hillhouse, Historical Collection, 156.

Gilmer's first assignment was at West Point. Both he and Halleck were named assistant professors of engineering.<sup>31</sup> Halleck assumed his post five days after receiving his commission.<sup>32</sup> A considerable lengthier amount of time passed before Gilmer was able to report for duty; because after his graduation, Gilmer went home on furlough. While visiting his family, Gilmer contracted an illness so severe it forced him to delay his return to West Point. This was the first of several unusually lengthy illnesses which required bedrest. In this instance, it was December 4, 1839, before Gilmer reported for duty at the Academy.<sup>33</sup>

Gilmer's obligations as an educator ended the following June. The pedestrian posts which followed over the next six years were no more exciting to the young soldier. For Gilmer these years represented an apprenticeship in the science of military engineering. He was not awarded an independent command nor was he allowed to travel a great deal. His first post after the Academy took him

---

<sup>31</sup>George Washington Cullum, Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. (Boston, 1891), 740, 733; Hillhouse, Historical Collections, 156.

<sup>32</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, 733.

<sup>33</sup>U.S. Engineer Department. Record of Letters Received, Aug. 26, 1839, Record Group 77, National Archives; Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

only a few miles down the Hudson River to New York City. There he was an assistant engineer at Fort Schuyler guarding the city's harbor. This was followed in 1844 by an assignment to the Engineer Bureau in Washington where Gilmer served as an aide to Chief Engineer Joseph Totten.<sup>34</sup>

Granted, Gilmer gained much useful experience in practical military engineering and administrative work during these years. He was, at first, even enamored with Fort Schuyler--so much so that he requested to remain at the Fort beyond his assigned term.<sup>35</sup> Yet Gilmer grew weary of New York. By 1843 he described life at Schuyler as "monotony and stupidity double distilled."<sup>36</sup>

Gilmer became restless. His career seemingly lacked the adventure which attracted many young men to the service. Although life in the eastern cities of the United States had its attractions, Gilmer desired a post on the frontier. He confided to his friend, Lt. Charles Peoble Kingsbury: "I have never found any very great hardship in changing from a position which gave me the advantages and pleasures of social intercourse, to one which was isolated and threw me on my own resources."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Engineer Department. Record of Letters Received, Oct. 1, 1841.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Lt. Charles Peoble Kingsbury, May 7, 1843, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Gilmer's sentiments were understandable. Armies are created and maintained for warfare, not peace. Although the peacetime activities of the U.S. Army may have seemed interminable at times to Gilmer, his patience with mundane duties was eventually rewarded. On December 29, 1845, after nearly six years of cosmopolitan life, Gilmer was promoted to first lieutenant.<sup>38</sup> The new rank gave him the ability to act in the field without the supervision of another engineer. In May, 1846, the opening shots of the Mexican War signaled the end of Gilmer's apprenticeship. Orders came for Gilmer to report to Col. Stephen Watts Kearny as his chief engineer.<sup>39</sup> Kearny was charged with occupying New Mexico. Preparations for the invasion were being made at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas Territory, even as Gilmer left Washington. Although his ultimate destination was far from the center of hostilities, Gilmer was pleased with the assignment. The possibility of experiencing warfare first hand filled him with excitement. "I think we shall have a most glorious expedition," Gilmer predicted, "All speak in high terms of Col. K. and with such a commander we may hope for something brilliant."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Minis, Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, July 4, 1846, Lenoir Family Papers, University of North Carolina.

The first phase of the journey was anything but glorious, however. It took Gilmer nine days by riverboat to reach St. Louis, the staging ground for the West. When he arrived in St. Louis on July 2, Gilmer learned that Kearny had already left Leavenworth for Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gilmer was unperturbed by the news. On June 28, 1846, Kearny's reinforcements left St. Louis. Gilmer believed he could overtake this column within a few days.<sup>41</sup>

While Gilmer was engaged in obtaining a horse and certain essential supplies, he missed the first boat headed up the Missouri River towards his destination. Gilmer was able to secure passage on the next outgoing boat, but her departure was deliberately delayed by the ship's master. The captain was a zealous patriot and refused to sail on Independence Day.<sup>42</sup>

Once Gilmer was able to find a way out of St. Louis, he made good progress. He covered the distance between St. Louis and Fort Leavenworth in a week's time. After Gilmer reached the fort, he joined forces with two kindred spirits. Major Thomas Swords and Lt. Rufus Ingalls were both en route to join Kearny. On July 12, 1846, Swords, Ingalls and Gilmer left Leavenworth.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Ibid

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, July 23, 1846, Lenoir Family Papers.

On the second and third days of their trek across the plains, Gilmer's party ran into difficulties: their baggage wagon broke its axle. They made sufficient repairs on the axle both days to continue on their journey, but the weakened rear axle broke again on the seventh day out of Leavenworth. After nine days of travel, the officers overtook a U.S. Army Commissary train. As ranking officer, Swords decided they should remain with the wagon train for safety and, probably, repairs. By now the group was in Commanche territory. Each night the wagons were formed into a circle patrolled by sentries. Gilmer faced the prospect of an Indian attack with hearty bravado. To his friend, George Welcker, Gilmer wrote: "We have burnished our arms, and intend to give our red friends a warm reception if they honor us with a visit."<sup>44</sup>

Marauding Indians wisely avoided the small group of soldiers, however. The remainder of the journey passed without serious mishap. On the morning of August 15, Gilmer and his companions finally reached Kearny. Their reception was warm owing to the fact that, if nothing else, the new additions brought mail and promotions for some of the officers, including Kearny's to brigadier general.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Dwight L. Clarke (ed.), The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner: With Stephen Watts Kearny to New Mexico and California 1846-1847 (Norman, Okla., 1966), 71-72; Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Aug. 24, 1846.

If the officers and men under Kearny expected action when they entered Santa Fe on August 18, they were disappointed. The army established camp without incident on a hill near the city, then paraded through the streets. As the American flag was raised over the governor's mansion, a volley of thirteen shots in salute echoed through the streets of Santa Fe. These were the only shots heard that day. After the official ceremony, the mayor of Santa Fe held a reception for the conquerors. The occupation was complete.<sup>46</sup>

On August 22, 1846, Kearny formally annexed New Mexico for the United States government. One month later, Kearny named Charles Bent, an American resident of New Mexico, as governor of the new territory.<sup>47</sup> A day after the announcement, Gilmer observed: "The people of Santa Fe, and in fact of all parts of New Mexico visited by the Army remain quiet and seem to be fully reconciled to the present state of things. I presume we shall have no trouble or outbreaks, if the volunteer troops can be kept in any kind of discipline."<sup>48</sup>

New Mexico was unlike anything within Gilmer's knowledge or prior experience. The landscape alone was striking

---

<sup>46</sup>Clarke, The Original Journals, 72.

<sup>47</sup>K. Jack Bauer, The Mexican War 1846-1848 (New York, 1974), 135; Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, Sept. 23, 1846, Lenoir Family Papers.

<sup>48</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, Sept. 23, 1846, ibid.

and unusual to one accustomed to the lush greenery of the eastern United States. Areas of desert in one part of the country yielded to mountains or fruit producing farms in another. Yet while the land was widely varied and colorful, Gilmer was little impressed by the inhabitants. In particular, Gilmer was disturbed by the character of the people. In his assessment, Gilmer remarked: "The men here are poor d[evi]ls and the women are not much if any better. I doubt if there is a really virtuous woman in Santa Fe, and the gamblers are the gentlemen of the place. The Priests gamble as much or more than any other class."<sup>49</sup>

From a strictly military point of view, the New Mexicans were the enemy. If Gilmer judged them so morally bereft, he also found the New Mexicans a poor military adversary. The ease with which the occupation was installed seemed to confirm this impression. As a result of his own observations, Gilmer believed the New Mexicans were inferior and severely lacking in military prowess. "The people have nothing to fight with, or courage enough to attempt it," he stated. "The great body of the people . . . occupy no higher point on the scale of humanity than our Negroes."<sup>50</sup>

Kearny also came to feel there was little chance of rebellion in New Mexico, for by mid-September he was planning

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, Nov. 6, 1846, Lenoir Family Papers.

a new invasion that would take him out of the territory. As Kearny made preparations to leave for California with the main body of troops, he directed Gilmer to commence work on fortifications for the soldiers who remained in Santa Fe. Kearny was a prudent commander. While he doubted the probability of renewed hostilities in New Mexico, he was not nearly as certain as his chief engineer. Despite Gilmer's ardent appeal to accompany the main expedition, Kearny ordered him to remain in Santa Fe. Kearny believed Gilmer would be better employed in Santa Fe on the proposed defensive work, Fort Marcy.<sup>51</sup>

Once again it seemed Gilmer's destiny to be marooned in a city far from the battlefields. However, as far as Kearny was concerned, Gilmer's duties in New Mexico ended when the fort was complete. At that point, Kearny told him, Gilmer was free to report to Washington for new orders. Gilmer believed he would finish Fort Marcy before the onset of winter. It was not beyond the realm of possibility, for the defensive work was only an earthen fort. As Gilmer envisioned it, though, the completed fort would dominate Santa Fe. It was located on a hill some 660 yards from the town's center and would contain a battery of at least nine guns.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., Sept. 23, 1846.

<sup>52</sup>Kearny's instructions to Gilmer, Sept. 25, 1846; Gilmer's plans and intentions for Ft. Marcy, Sept. 23, 1846. Ibid.

When Kearny left Santa Fe on September 25, Gilmer considered himself well on the way to meeting his self-imposed deadline. So satisfied was Gilmer with the fort's progress that on the day of Kearny's departure, Gilmer requested that the Engineer Bureau furnish him with his future orders. The prospect of a winter in Santa Fe was unappealing. Nor was he especially satisfied with the company in Santa Fe. Indeed, Gilmer felt rather abandoned after most of the regular U.S. Army troops left Santa Fe with Kearny. "The forces left behind are all volunteers, but I hope, notwithstanding, that we shall be able to get along smoothly."<sup>53</sup>

Gilmer's hopes to be rid of Santa Fe and the volunteers were dashed, however. His timetable was too strict. The initial progress of September slowed despite his efforts. When the winds of November settled on Santa Fe, Gilmer was still at work on Marcy. The outer works were defensible by November, but the inner blockhouse was far from completion. As the weather grew colder, Gilmer reluctantly conceded that he had no choice but to winter in Santa Fe. Gilmer sarcastically remarked: "I have now been in this famous Spanish town nearly three months. Everything is moving along in a quiet way, no war, and but few rumors of war."<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Sept. 25, 1846.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Nov. 6, 1846.

A variety of problems and irritations kept Gilmer from achieving his goal. Apparently, he did not consider or expect any of the minor difficulties which delayed the completion of Fort Marcy. There was a lack of forage available for the pack animals transporting construction materials.<sup>55</sup> Wood was required for the fort's gun carriages. Since no sawmill existed in all of New Mexico, Gilmer was forced to divide his time between the construction of a mill and Fort Marcy.<sup>56</sup> Illness took a toll as well, reducing Gilmer's work force. Yet he had little pity for the sufferers. "There is considerable sickness and some deaths among the volunteers here," he wrote. "This results from their careless habits and not from the climate . . . the air is purity itself . . . . My health is good."<sup>57</sup>

Until he grew accustomed to the volunteers, Gilmer viewed them with the prejudiced eye of a professional soldier. In his opinion, the volunteers were rank amateurs with no business at the front. He observed: "All the troops here are volunteers, numbering more than 1700 men, and a sweet set of boys are they. All do as they please, and demonstrate to the Spaniards daily, that they belong to

---

<sup>55</sup> Engineer Department. Record of Letters Received, Nov. 5, 1846.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Dec. 7, 1846.

<sup>57</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, Nov. 23, 1846, Lenoir Family Papers.

the freest and 'smartest people in creation.' The men are about as good as their officers, more have learned enough of military matters to know that they are ignorant."<sup>58</sup>

When the reality of wintering in Santa Fe dawned on Gilmer, he became less critical of the volunteers. He cast aside his air of superiority and began to seek out the company of volunteer officers. Gone too was Gilmer's disdain for the New Mexicans. He began to learn Spanish and to show some appreciation for local culture. Occasionally Gilmer attended dances in company with other officers. To his great surprise, he discovered that the New Mexicans considered the cotillion to be barbaric and obscene. Santa Fe's society approved only of dances requiring considerably more energy. Gilmer enlightened his friend George Welcker with a flavor of the diversions in Santa Fe. "We have a little fun and amusement now and then in the way of fandangos, or dances with the Spanish senoras; sometimes a bachelor's party is gotten up, at which we play . . . whist, etc. and drink a little 'old Rye.' The senoras are pretty free and easy, and our dances are sometimes of the Stagg order, which you may have seen in days of yore, when at the Academy."<sup>59</sup>

In December, because of inclement weather, Gilmer discontinued work on Fort Marcy. The American post at Santa

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Nov. 6, 1846.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Fe then turned into something of an exotic holiday as Gilmer turned his attentions to the various amusements available to relieve the boredom. While the New Mexican society was a source of much entertainment, the American officers in turn entertained Santa Fe. A number of volunteer officers produced a minstrel show to the enjoyment of both the natives and the army. Santa Fe was unfamiliar with the peculiar American form of entertainment. The unusual antics of the officers brought droves of people to the theatre. Gilmer was thoroughly content with Santa Fe. "There are quite a number of intelligent officers here . . . and I think we shall be able to pass many agreeable evenings in various ways."<sup>60</sup>

The festive atmosphere of Santa Fe changed rapidly in December. Shortly before Christmas, the Americans discovered a rebellious plan afoot. A number of New Mexico's elite intended to seize the government and depose the American occupation. Despite this turn of events, Governor Bent held a reception for Christmas. Gilmer discounted the plot by noting only that it caused some excitement.<sup>61</sup>

One month later, Charles Bent was dead, the victim of New Mexican insurgents and Pueblo Indians. Sporadic outbreaks of violence and rebellion shook American complacency

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Dec. 9, 1846.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Dec. 27, 1846.

in the wake of Bent's death. Colonel Sterling Price of the Missouri volunteers took to the field in response. After a number of small engagements spaced over a few weeks, Price effectively crushed the rebellion.<sup>62</sup>

Gilmer played no prominent role in Price's campaign. In fact, as the rebellion drew to a close, Gilmer took to his bed in Santa Fe. By mid-February he was seriously ill. "I am a poor devil," he lamented. "I have been troubled for some ten days past with a deep seated inflammation in my right eye, an affliction very similar to the one which confined me to my room last winter, and the Doctor has pronounced the same sentence upon this individual, which the laughing Doctor enforced in Washington, to wit--stay in a dog dungeon, live on bread and water and pray for deliverance. In addition to this, my present Doctor, being an older sinner and with a seared conscience, has slapped a blister plaster on the back of my neck, to insure a greater vigilance and deeper penitence."<sup>63</sup>

Throughout his illness, Gilmer longed for two things: to be able to stroll the streets of Santa Fe, then to leave them for another post.<sup>64</sup> Yet by April 1, Gilmer was once again at work on Fort Marcy with little hope for a transfer

---

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., Feb. 3, 1846; Bauer, The Mexican War, 138-41.

<sup>63</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to George Welcker, Feb. 16, 1847, Lenoir Family Papers.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

within the foreseeable future. His own estimate put him back in Washington by June or July, 1847.<sup>65</sup> His guess was not far from wrong.

Late in August Gilmer returned to New York City.<sup>66</sup> As long as the war continued, he longed to be at the front. However, Chief Engineer Joseph Totten had other ideas in mind for Gilmer. He was ordered to Washington as Totten's assistant.<sup>67</sup>

In the spring of 1848, Totten relinquished his hold on Gilmer. He departed for Mexico with orders to report to Capt. Robert E. Lee. Unfortunately, the war was virtually over. The battlefields awaiting Gilmer were silent. Soon after Gilmer reached Vera Cruz on April 6, 1848, Lee assigned him to a survey team examining the battle sites around the Mexican capital.<sup>68</sup> The project lasted little more than a month. Lee relieved both Gilmer and Lt. Pierre G. T. Beauregard from duty and sent them back to Washington for new orders.<sup>69</sup> Gilmer's final report to Lee was sent from the U.S.S. Helen in Vera Cruz harbor as Gilmer awaited transfer. In it, Gilmer recorded the distances between various Mexican

---

<sup>65</sup>Engineer Department. Record of Letters Received, Feb. 16, Apr. 1, 1847.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., Sept. 1, 1847.

<sup>67</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

<sup>68</sup>Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Apr. 8, 1848; Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

<sup>69</sup>Letterbook of Robert Edward Lee, Virginia Historical Society, 282.

towns. Gilmer wistfully closed his dispatch with the Spanish farewell, "Adios."<sup>70</sup>

If Gilmer's Mexican War service lacked much of the romance and heroism then associated with war, his confidante Henry Halleck was no better satisfied by his experiences. When Gilmer heard from his friend in September 1848, Halleck's spirits were at their lowest ebb. After what Halleck considered outstanding service, he expected a promotion. From his viewpoint, a double brevet was not out of the question, yet none seemed forthcoming. Halleck's problem was the peace. He was stationed in Monterey, California, virtually isolated from the Engineer Department. With the war at an end, peace only served to underline the differences between military and civilian life. Gold had been discovered in California. While the officers were not allowed to prospect, the enlisted men were deserting in substantial numbers. As a result, Halleck complained, good servants were impossible to find. In short, Halleck was thoroughly disenchanted with the military. "Under ordinary circumstances our corps offers fewer chances for promotion or distinction than any other in the service," he wrote Gilmer.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>Minis, "Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 52.

<sup>71</sup>Henry W. Halleck to Jeremy Gilmer, Aug. 20, 1848, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

Gilmer was unfamiliar with the situation in California. He was becoming rather well acquainted with Washington, D. C., and its immediate environs. His new assignment was as engineer in charge of Forts Washington and Madison in Maryland.<sup>72</sup> The nation's capital was but a few miles up the Potomac River from Fort Washington. Since he was in such close proximity to the city, Gilmer did what he could for his friend. Gilmer passed Halleck's letter along to Capt. F. A. Smith at the Engineer Bureau. Smith was sympathetic, but he was able to secure only a single brevet for Halleck after using all the skills at his disposal.<sup>73</sup>

Added responsibilities did not mean promotions in the Corps of Engineers. After nearly ten years in the service, Gilmer was only a first lieutenant. Gilmer could well empathize with Halleck's complaints. As far as responsibilities were concerned, Gilmer's star was rising fast within the Engineers. Gilmer at year's end received a new posting with an increased work load. He was transferred to the South a few months after he requested the lantern staff on the capitol dome as a flagpole for Fort Washington.<sup>74</sup> For the next nine years, Gilmer was the most active engineer on the Southern coast from South Carolina to Florida.

---

<sup>72</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

<sup>73</sup>F. A. Smith to Jeremy Gilmer, Dec. 15, 1848, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>74</sup>Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, July 17, and Dec. 15, 1848.

Although Gilmer's new assignment was initially fourfold, it was localized around Georgia's port city of Savannah. He was charged with dredging the Savannah River, supervising the construction of Forts Pulaski and Jackson, and erecting a house for the "beacon keeper" on Cockspur Island.<sup>75</sup> In May, 1849, the renovations of Fort Marion, Fla., and the seawall at St. Augustine were added to Gilmer's duties.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from the occasional trips to Florida, Gilmer spent most of his time in and around Savannah. He was not a man to forsake city life when it was so near. Soon after his arrival, he made the social rounds of Savannah society. Entry into the world of the elite was not difficult for Gilmer. Although he was but a first lieutenant, Gilmer was the son of a planter. As such, his demeanor and attitudes doubtlessly recommended him to Savannah's upper class.

As he traveled in society's circles during the fall of 1848, Gilmer made the acquaintance of Louisa Fredrika Alexander. She was the oldest daughter of Adam L. Alexander, one of the wealthiest planters in Georgia. During the winter of 1849, and through the following months, Gilmer called on Miss Alexander. Slowly a romance developed. In June 1850, Gilmer proposed marriage to Louisa Alexander.

---

<sup>75</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, 740; Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Jan. 29, 1849.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., May 14, 1849; Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

Upon her acceptance, Gilmer immediately wrote Adam Alexander, whom he had not met, for his approval in the couple's plans. "May I hope for your unreserved and cordial assent to our union?" Gilmer asked. He then added: "I have not wealth to offer your daughter (being almost entirely dependant upon my salary as an officer of Engineers) but, in return for the great sacrifice which she will make in a partial separation from those who are so near and dear to her, I will devote to the promotion of her happiness all my time and energies."<sup>77</sup>

Partial or not, the question of separation from his oldest daughter bothered Alexander. He was not disturbed by Gilmer's character, for Alexander willingly approved of the marriage. Alexander's primary concern was the transient nature of army life. He did not want his daughter trundled from one frontier outpost to another. Once he learned of Alexander's fears, Gilmer immediately took it upon himself to ease his potential father-in-law's mind. Gilmer accomplished this by discussing candidly the assignment procedures of the Engineers. At that point, Gilmer told Alexander, he expected to remain in Savannah at least another three or four years. "It chanches that the majority of my brother officers of Engineers, are from the northern states, and, as natural consequence prefer positions along the north Atlantic coast,

---

<sup>77</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam L. Alexander, June 15, 1850, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers. University of North Carolina.

to any of the stations south of Virginia. Again, it has been the custom of the Engineer Department to make as few changes as possible in the assignments of its officers."<sup>78</sup>

Adam Alexander suffered no immediate separation from his daughter. On December 18, 1850, after a proper engagement of six months, Jeremy Gilmer and Louisa Alexander were married in Savannah. The ceremony was performed in the home of Louisa's uncle, Maj. Anthony Porter.<sup>79</sup>

Since the Porters were childless, Louisa Porter directed all of her motherly inclinations towards the children of her brother, Adam Alexander. As a tribute to Louisa Porter's affections, the Gilmer's named their first child in her honor. On September 5, 1852, Louisa Porter Gilmer was born in Savannah. She was nicknamed "Loulie" to distinguish her from her namesake and her mother "Lou" Gilmer. Loulie Gilmer developed just as strong an attachment for Mrs. Porter as her mother. For the most part, Louisa Porter assumed the responsibility of raising her grand-niece. The Gilmer's second child was equally high in Mrs. Porter's esteem, though Jeremy Gilmer chose the baby's name from outside the family. Henry Halleck Gilmer was born on November 7, 1854.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, June 29, 1850, ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Hillhouse, Historical Collections, 156.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 464, 186-87.

With the Gilmers settled in Savannah, Louisa Gilmer remained well within the reach of her family. There was a price, however, for Louisa Gilmer's proximity to her family. While she was able to spend most of her time in Savannah, Louisa Gilmer rarely saw her husband. The Engineers greatly expanded Gilmer's duties. As a result, Gilmer was absent from Savannah at frequent intervals. His promotion to Captain on July 1, 1853 was but a small consolation for this fact of life.<sup>81</sup>

It was Gilmer's misfortune to be experienced and centrally located in the South. Because of his knowledge of Savannah and the surrounding area, Gilmer was included on an 1852 commission to study the Savannah River. This experience earned Gilmer a position on two different boards examining the St. John's River in Florida and the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. When the commission's studies for river improvement were completed, Gilmer was chosen to implement the necessary changes.<sup>82</sup>

The Engineer Department was unwilling to waste any of Gilmer's talents. Nor was it willing to waste travel expenditures. Gilmer was not allowed to forget the reason he was brought to Savannah in the first place: fortifications. By the mid-1850's, he had supervised the construction of coastal

---

<sup>81</sup>Minis, "Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 5.

<sup>82</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, 740.

defenses in three states. Each one of Gilmer's assigned forts was located near a river or harbor under Gilmer's authority. Fort Pulaski and Fort Jackson were in Georgia, close to the Savannah River. While Gilmer labored on the St. John's river and the Hanover Canal in Florida, he constructed Fort Clinch, Fort Marion and works at St. Augustine. When he was sent to Charleston for harbor improvements in 1853, Gilmer was also charged with all the city's defenses (including Fort Sumter).<sup>83</sup>

Gilmer's health and spirits were severely overtaxed by his myriad assignments. With his health already in jeopardy, Gilmer notified the Engineer Department in April, 1854, that he needed the assistance of a younger officer.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, the Corps of Engineers suffered from a chronic shortage of officers. Washington delayed fulfillment of Gilmer's request until the graduates of 1854 left West Point. From that group Gilmer received Lt. George Washington Custis Lee, the ranking member of the class.<sup>85</sup> The appointment was satisfactory for both men. Gilmer and Lee were inseparable until July, 1857, when the latter was assigned to Fort Point, California.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Apr. 10, 1854.

<sup>85</sup> Cullum, Biographical Register, II, 572; Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Aug. 28, 1854.

<sup>86</sup> Cullum, Biographical Register, I, 740; Biographical Register, II, 572.

Shortly before Custis Lee's transfer, Gilmer's attention was drawn to a potential engineer. Gilmer's brother-in-law Edward Porter Alexander was a senior at West Point. As his son's graduation grew nigh, Adam Alexander approached Gilmer for advice. Alexander hoped his son would be appointed to the Engineers, but Alexander was troubled that his son might not receive the desired appointment. As much to calm his own mind as to succor his son, Alexander, in March, 1857, wrote to Louisa Gilmer. "Feeling more confidence in his views than my own in all things affecting Ed," he stated, "I beg that the Capt. will write to Ed and give him such advice as he thinks he may need."<sup>87</sup>

Whatever advice Gilmer offered his brother-in-law was sent by mail. Regardless of any hopes held by his father, Porter Alexander was not destined to become Gilmer's protege. The Corps of Engineers did not see fit to place Alexander under Gilmer's guidance. As Gilmer was well aware, Army assignments were not decided on the basis of family ties.

At the beginning of 1859, however, Gilmer did request the services of Porter Alexander.<sup>88</sup> The occasion was Gilmer's transfer from Savannah. On February 12, 1859, after nearly

---

<sup>87</sup> Adam Alexander to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 16, 1857, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, Jan. 3, 1859.

a decade on the southeastern coast of the United States, Gilmer joined Custis Lee at Fort Point in the harbor of San Francisco, California.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup>U.S. War Dept., Engineer Department, Record of the Officers of the Corps of Engineers from January 1, 1857 to December 31, 1870, Record Group 77, National Archives.

"This is a Mean Life"

February 1859 - January 1862

Chapter II

Gilmer's background served him well in California. His experiences as an army officer allowed Gilmer considerably more ease than his wife in adjusting to the new post. Their arrival in San Francisco marked Gilmer's twentieth year in the army. Those years had required a certain amount of nomadism from Gilmer. Yet during the passage of nearly a decade in Georgia, Gilmer's duties sent him from state to state. In the course of the Mexican War, Gilmer journeyed across the continent. Now, some twelve years after his war service, history repeated itself as the forty-one-year-old Gilmer went West.

As he entered middle age, Gilmer bore none of the scars associated with his profession. In over twenty-five years of military service Gilmer had neither sustained a wound nor witnessed a battle. At six feet in height, Gilmer was taller than most men, yet his outwardly vigorous appearance belied the numerous illnesses he had suffered throughout his life. Certainly there was nothing to indicate he was anything but healthy. Indeed, he had aged gracefully, for his dark hair and full beard bore only traces of gray. As a further indication of health, his complexion was dark, tanned by exposure to the elements. Gilmer looked the part of a professional soldier. After years of practice he could maintain an erect carriage. He had the face of an officer, with a prominent "classical" nose and dark eyes which could muster an imperious glare. Yet he was not

unapproachable, for over the years he had maintained a number of friends and acquaintances in the army.\*

Because of his widespread movements over the course of two decades, Gilmer knew a number of officers. This was one of the more pleasant aspects of army life. In 1859 the United States Army was small; the officer corps was an even smaller cadre. At each post, no matter how far flung, was a near certainty of renewing an old acquaintance. This was especially true for Gilmer in San Francisco. Thomas Swords, his old traveling companion from the Mexican War, was Chief Quartermaster for the Department of the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Gilmer's close friend, Henry Halleck, was also in the area, though outside the military world. After resigning his commission in 1854, Halleck had taken up the practice of law in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> He and Gilmer readily renewed their friendship.

San Francisco was less hospitable for Lou Gilmer. The only old friend she encountered was Custis Lee. For three years Lee served as Gilmer's aide in Savannah. Once Gilmer relieved him at Fort Point, Lee reverted to his old

---

\* Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 36. Additional description taken from a photographic portrait, circa 1863 (See Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders (Baton Rouge, La., 1959), 105.).

<sup>1</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, II, 436-37.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 734.

status as Gilmer's assistant.<sup>3</sup> Yet Lou Gilmer was denied even this friendship after a time. On August 19, 1859, Lee was transferred from San Francisco.<sup>4</sup> Lou Gilmer was further disappointed if she anticipated the arrival of her brother, Porter Alexander. Although Gilmer requested the services of his brother-in-law in 1859, the Engineer Department did not send Alexander to California until two years later.<sup>5</sup>

The harshest trial in California for Lou Gilmer was the separation from her family. Until 1858, she had spent most of her life in Georgia. If she traveled at all, it was with her family. She was familiar with only the eastern United States. San Francisco was an unknown. Even the city's climate seemed against her as the damp fog of San Francisco aggravated Lou Gilmer's health. Throughout her stay in San Francisco, she was troubled by "sick headaches," a malady which also afflicted her aunt, Louisa Porter.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Gilmers' arrival in California, the old debate over free and slave states had reached crisis stage. The precipitating factor in the crisis was a fanatic from

---

<sup>3</sup> Engineer Department, Record of the Officers, 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cullum, Biographical Register, II, 676.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 29, 1861; Louisa Gilmer Jr. to Jeremy Gilmer, Mar. 16, 1862, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

Kansas named John Brown. In October, 1859, Brown and a few followers seized the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, with the intention of fomenting a slave rebellion. Before the insurrection gained impetus, it was forcibly subdued by Gilmer's old mentor, Robert E. Lee. Brown was executed December 17, 1859, after a speedy trial. Thereafter, in some Northern states, Brown was honored as a martyr after his execution. Southerners noted the Northern reaction with a rising fury.

Tensions grew as the country approached the 1860 presidential election. Finally and irrevocably the lines were drawn. The relatively new Republican party nominated Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, as its presidential candidate. The Democrats were torn asunder by the slave question. No one platform was agreeable to all parties. By the time of the election, the Democrats were in three camps, offering three different candidates.

A number of Southerners feared that the election of Lincoln would doom the institution of slavery. Some basis existed for their fears. Although Lincoln denied any intention of abolishing slavery, many abolitionists were Republicans. In the closing days before the election, radicals in South Carolina threatened to secede from the Union if Lincoln won the presidency. The Republican victory that year was slim, but it was enough to send South Carolina over the brink. On December 20, 1860, the Palmetto State left the union.

The news of South Carolina's secession arrived in San Francisco on the heels of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, who left New York the day after South Carolina departed from the Union.<sup>7</sup> On January 15, 1861, Johnston assumed his post as Commander of the Department of the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Johnston was a Southerner, but few in California could say exactly what his intentions were regarding the crisis. Johnston chose to bide his time and keep silent. Secretly, he admired the stance of Lou Gilmer, who was anything but silent in her support of the Southern actions.<sup>9</sup>

The secession of Georgia on January 19, 1861, came as bad news to Gilmer. Georgia was his adopted state. Still, Gilmer chose to emulate his commander rather than his own wife. While many Southern officers were already resigning their commissions, Gilmer stayed his own decision until North Carolina chose its course.<sup>10</sup>

North Carolina was the focal point of dwindling hope in what Gilmer considered a time of gloom. He was not pleased by the turn of events in his native South, nor was

---

<sup>7</sup>William Preston Johnston, The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston (New York, 1880), 248.

<sup>8</sup>Cullum, Biographical Register, II, 368.

<sup>9</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 23, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Marion Alexander Boggs (ed.), The Alexander Letters 1787-1900 (Athens, Ga.: 1980), 227.

Gilmer particularly optimistic. "A dark and uncertain future appears to be opening upon the South," Gilmer observed to Major Anthony Porter. "What decisions may be made in these days of unhappy excitement in my native state, I know not, but I feel a conviction that she will not take the serious and responsible step of separating from the Union she once loved so well, without a full and deliberate consultation with [the unseceded Southern states]." <sup>11</sup>

Gilmer hoped for the best but prepared for the worst. During the decade he lived in Savannah, Gilmer had made substantial investment throughout the state of Georgia. <sup>12</sup> This was done with the aid of Anthony Porter. As president of the Bank of the State of Georgia, Porter was in a position to discern investment possibilities. <sup>13</sup> Gilmer's undeclared partnership with the banker began in 1850 with his marriage to Porter's niece. Porter's Christmas gift to the newlyweds that year was fifty shares of Georgia State Bank stock worth \$5,300 by Porter's estimate. <sup>14</sup> Ten years after that

---

<sup>11</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Major Anthony Porter, Feb. 9, 1861, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>"In Memoriam: Memorial Sheet on the Life of Major Anthony Porter, Dec. 1, 1869, ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Anthony Porter to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 25, 1850, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

occasion, Gilmer began transferring his funds from Georgia to California with Porter as his designated agent.<sup>15</sup>

Gilmer's desire for investment in California coincided with his knowledge of Georgia's secession. In February, 1861, Gilmer asked Porter to accumulate some \$10,000 through the sale of stocks in Georgia. Gilmer planned to invest his earnings in California. By that time he had already purchased stock in the San Francisco Gas Works which he expected would garner him a dividend of twenty-five percent interest over his initial investment. Yet although Gilmer praised the financial opportunities in San Francisco, he knew Georgia was no longer a safe haven for his money.<sup>16</sup>

As one Southern state after another seceded from the Union, it seemed there were no safe havens in the United States. Even in California, caution was the watchword for Southern officers. On April 10, 1861, Albert Sidney Johnston resigned his commission, a scant four months after he assumed command of the Department of the Pacific. For two weeks Johnston kept his resignation a secret, fearing the effect it might have on the command.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, Feb. 9, 1861, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Johnston, The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, 248, 261.

Popular opinion in California was very much against the seceded states. This fact was forcibly brought to Lou Gilmer's attention when an anonymous warning was delivered to her home in San Francisco not long after Johnston's departure. The letter cautioned Lou Gilmer to curb her tongue lest she damage her husband's career. If she did not follow this advice, the message continued, Gilmer might come under suspicion. Although she was later reduced to tears, Lou Gilmer was in no way cowed by the warning. The message-bearer bore the brunt of her fury. She reported to her father: "That was a little more than I could stand . . . now I said, go back and tell Col. Sumner and Col. Swords and every other spy in the country that I don't care what they suspect him of, so long as they can't suspect him of being a Black Republican, and that I'll be stoned to death by a mob before I'll turn against my blood and my people even so far as to keep silence when they are abused."<sup>18</sup>

As his wife battled with unseen tormentors, Gilmer struggled to maintain a calmness. He had a choice to make which could not be put off indefinitely. When the news of Fort Sumter's bombardment and capture reached San Francisco, Gilmer knew North Carolina would not tarry long in joining the seceded states. Gilmer prepared to resign, though the prospect of civil war gave him no pleasure. With weary

---

<sup>18</sup>Louisa Gilmer to Adam Alexander, May 10, 1861, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

resignation, he informed Anthony Porter of his decision: "I do not see how Civil War with all its horrors can be avoided. . . . I fear the conflagration will range until our once happy country is one great heap of ruins, North as well as South . . . But in the general desolation, I cannot do otherwise than take my lot with our own people . . .".<sup>19</sup>

Once Gilmer's decision was made, he stayed his resignation from the army. There was as yet no word from North Carolina. Further, Gilmer realized that he could not leave California immediately. His investments in California required attention as well as other affairs. When he wrote Porter of his decision, Gilmer took the precaution of informing Porter that his return to Georgia might be delayed for some time. "As we may be detained by many causes, and as even mail connections between us may be broken, causing all sorts of doubts, fears, and perhaps misunderstandings at home, I mean in the Southern community--I must ask you to take such steps, in these excited times, as you think most prudent to protect and secure my pecuniary interests."<sup>20</sup>

On May 20, 1861, five days after Gilmer wrote to Porter, North Carolina left the Union. Gilmer sent his

---

<sup>19</sup>ibid. Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, May 15, 1861,

<sup>20</sup>ibid.

resignation to Washington on June 11.<sup>21</sup> Since Gilmer was the chief engineer in the Pacific Department, there was no superior officer in California to receive his resignation.<sup>22</sup> Like Johnston, Gilmer was forced to wait for another officer to relieve him of his duties.

Gilmer also kept his silence on the resignation. Yet Johnston's replacement, Edwin V. Sumner, chose to force the issue. Sumner's sympathies were with the Union and he was unwilling to take chances with his command. As a result, Sumner ordered all the officers in the Department of the Pacific to reaffirm their allegiance to the United States. Gilmer, separate from Sumner's command, ignored the order.<sup>23</sup>

Sumner responded to Gilmer's silence with a more personal order. Gilmer was directed to consider himself relieved of all duties. As he was absent from San Francisco at the time, Gilmer did not learn of the order immediately. Before Gilmer could acknowledge Sumner's directive, Gilmer was notified that his resignation had been accepted by the Engineers. Lou Gilmer later recalled with satisfaction: "No notice was taken of Gen. Sumner's order at all! He was greatly mortified especially as his own aids [sic.]

---

<sup>21</sup>Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, June 11, 1861.

<sup>22</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 227.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 228.

had warned him he was going out of his province, and they all knew the snub he got in return."<sup>24</sup>

There was little time to gloat, however, for both North and South were arming for war. Gilmer's problem was how to get to the front a continent away. Had he been alone, the journey might not have seemed as threatening, but Gilmer had to be concerned over the safety of his wife and son. Fortunately, Gilmer's daughter was in relative safety with the Porters in Savannah.<sup>25</sup>

Steamships left San Francisco for the East at two-week intervals.<sup>26</sup> Initially, Gilmer planned to send his wife and child by steamer while he traveled overland.<sup>27</sup> Lou Gilmer foiled this scheme, however. As Gilmer told Porter: "Lou will never consent in these times to make the long sea voyage with anyone but me."<sup>28</sup>

As Gilmer predicted, their departure was delayed for several reasons. In the first place, Gilmer was unwilling to desert his post. He waited until relieved by Lt. George H. Elliot in mid-July.<sup>29</sup> Until then, Gilmer continued

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 228-29.

<sup>25</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, May 15, 1861, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>26</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 229.

<sup>27</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, May 15, 1861, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received, July 17, 1861.

to go about his duties as if there had been no change in his status.<sup>30</sup>

More importantly, Gilmer was unwilling to leave San Francisco until he was satisfied that his family had enough money for emergencies. Gilmer's source for this cash was the sale of his furniture and the rental of his home. He was unwilling to liquidate his stocks and bonds for a loss in profit at this point. Unfortunately, since the Gilmers relied on this money for travel expenses, they had no idea how long it might be before the cash was in hand.<sup>31</sup>

While the Gilmers waited for their money, Henry Halleck offered to lodge them in his home. The invitation was intended for only a few days; for by the time they moved in with the Hallecks, Gilmer and his family supposedly would be ready to leave. Halleck's home was but a mere stopover on the way back to Georgia. Yet Gilmer arrived seriously ill at his friend's home. He was put to bed at once, suffering from pain in his eyes and in his wrist. Gilmer's malady was soon diagnosed as rheumatic fever, and he spent most of the summer in agony.<sup>32</sup>

The Gilmers were finally prompted to leave by events in the East. On February 8, before Gilmer tendered his

---

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., July 13, 1861.

<sup>31</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 229.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 229.

resignation, the seceded Southern states banded together into a Confederate nation. The bombardment of Fort Sumter in April, 1861, put the Confederacy and the Union in a warlike mood. In response to this unprecedented action, Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the "rebellion." Both the Confederacy and the Union mobilized armies during the following months. On July 21, 1861, two of these armies met at Manassas, Va., and the Confederates won a victory in this first major battle.

San Francisco did not learn of the Manassas engagement until an evening in mid-August. Lou Gilmer had been unaware of the cause at the time, but she later recalled that the news of Manassas caused a considerable amount of commotion in the city. Halleck told her of the battle the next morning over breakfast. She rose from the table to tell Gilmer, but Halleck gently restrained her by the arm and claimed the duty of telling Gilmer. After Halleck left the room, Lou Gilmer followed to eavesdrop on the conversation. Halleck was blunt with his old friend. He began: "Well, Gilmer, they let Beauregard and Johnston get together and they whipped old McDowell!"<sup>33</sup>

Neither Gilmer nor Halleck would stay in San Francisco after the collision of armies at Manassas. They would be on opposing sides. Before the two friends parted, however, they concluded a bit of business which guaranteed Gilmer

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

the funds for his journey back to Georgia. Gilmer transferred his property and stocks in San Francisco to Halleck. Although the deal was concluded in legal terms, it was a measure of the trust Gilmer held for his friend. Halleck advanced Gilmer \$2,500 against the value of sixteen shares in the San Francisco Water Works. More money would be forthcoming once Halleck sold the stocks according to the contract. At the same time, Gilmer gave Halleck the deed to half of his property in San Francisco. Again, Halleck would act as broker to either sell or rent the property.<sup>34</sup>

On August 21, two days after the contract was sealed, the Gilmers boarded a ship for home. Gilmer neither looked nor felt as a man off to war. His ailing wrist was held tight by a sling; his eyes were shielded from the sun by dark glasses.<sup>35</sup>

From all over the nation, army officers and their wives were on the move, bound for home states or new assignments. A number of officers and their families were among the nearly 700 passengers on the Gilmers' steamer. Despite sectional hostilities and destinations, the Gilmers were treated well during the journey. The single exception in this regard was the ship's master, Captain Hudson. Since the Gilmer's sympathies were well known, they were

---

<sup>34</sup>Contract between Jeremy Gilmer and Henry Halleck, Aug. 19, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>35</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 230.

refused a spot at the captain's table. Hudson changed his mind after a unified protest from the other army officers on board. Lou Gilmer responded with a slight of her own; she declined to be moved from her place at the first mate's table. Later she asserted that she found the mate, Captain Dahl, to be considerably more courteous and kind than his commander.<sup>36</sup>

Lou Gilmer found another friend on board in the person of Mrs. Winfield Scott Hancock. Amelia Hancock was indeed a kindred spirit. She was a native Southerner with brothers already in the Confederate army. Despite her feelings on the war, her husband was a U. S. army officer en route to a new post at the front. Mrs. Hancock was just as outspoken as Lou Gilmer in her Southern sympathies. Hancock, himself, was unperturbed by the incongruity of his views and those of his wife. At one point on the voyage he noted his wife's feelings to Lou Gilmer by drily commenting that he "would be hanged yet for her tongue."<sup>37</sup>

The jocularly ended when the ship's company landed at Panama and crossed the isthmus. On the other side of that thin strip of land lay the Gulf of Mexico--and the Confederacy. The mood of the passengers changed once they

---

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 231.

were on the Atlantic side; they had entered into the battle zone. The Captain worried about marauding Confederate privateers. To guard against such an attack, the male passengers were drilled on the manual of arms.<sup>38</sup>

Whenever another vessel drew into view, the passengers rushed to the sides of the ship in anticipation. During one such sighting, Lou Gilmer happened upon the mother of Massachusetts congressman Benjamin Butler. After Lou Gilmer identified herself as a Southerner, Mrs. Butler made the mistake of asking the ship's fate if it was seized by Confederates. Lou Gilmer responded: "Well, they would take all the gold on board, take prisoners of the officers, and (just here a wicked thought struck me) of you."

"Me!" she screamed. "Why? Why?"

"Because of your distinguished son, Madame."

"But they would not know who I was."

"But I should consider it my duty to point you out."

Mrs. Gilmer concluded: "Terrible was her state of mind and it really pleased me. I who had so much more to fear."<sup>39</sup>

In actuality, Gilmer had more reason for fear than his wife. The chances were good that he would be seized when the ship landed at New York city. Yet there were

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

friends of the Southern cause who were willing to aid Gilmer's escape. The ship was still at sea when a Captain Mason of Ohio gave Lou Gilmer the name of a "safe" hotel in St. Louis. Shortly before the steamer docked, a Mr. Merchant was rowed out to greet the ship. He approached Gilmer with a warning. Army headquarters in New York had issued an arrest warrant for the Carolinian. Merchant told Gilmer to leave the harbor as fast as possible once the ship made port. Gilmer heeded the advice. Armed with Merchant's warning, he and the other Southerners on board made good their escape from New York and headed into Ohio. Because Gilmer expected difficulties along the way, he and his wife carried \$1,000 in gold currency.<sup>40</sup>

Gilmer and his family traveled together as far as Cincinnati. Once there, they contacted a Mr. Law who gave them money forwarded in his care by Major Porter. On September 16, following the meeting with Law, the Gilmers separated. Gilmer made his way to Lexington, Ky. on horseback and avoiding the main roads. Lou and Henry Gilmer traveled openly to Louisville. By September 25 Gilmer had reached Nashville and the comforts of the city's St. Cloud hotel. At the St. Cloud, Gilmer urged his wife in Louisville:

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 231-32; Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Nov. 21, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

"Do come on. Follow the advice of Mr. Dorn or the person he sends to you. Do start and then half your trouble is over."<sup>41</sup>

The rest of the trouble was over when Gilmer arrived in Savannah on the morning of October 3. Once again he traveled alone. Lou Gilmer and their son were safely ensconced with Adam Alexander in Washington, Ga. Until he knew his assignment in the Confederate army, Gilmer allowed his wife to remain with her father. A reunion could be arranged at a later date. In the meantime, Gilmer enjoyed the hospitality of his wife's sister and brother-in-law, Sarah and Alexander Lawton.<sup>42</sup>

Lawton and Gilmer had much to discuss when the latter was not sightseeing in Savannah. Lawton graduated from

---

<sup>41</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 232. The account of the Gilmer's escape is told primarily by Louisa Gilmer. In a postscript, their daughter Louisa Minis recounts the escape from New York. She stated (on 32): "They went to the little hotel by the river in St. Louis . . ." Although most of the information provided by Minis is corroborated, this statement is not, and the writer believes it to be incorrect. It would be illogical for the Gilmers to separate in Cincinnati, meet in St. Louis--two states away--then separate again. The Gilmers most likely went south immediately upon separating in Cincinnati.

Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 25, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

Boggs, The Alexander Letters; Jeremy Gilmer to Gilmer, Oct. 25, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 232.

Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 25, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>42</sup>ibid. Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 4, 1861, ibid.

West Point in 1839 with Gilmer and Halleck and was one of Gilmer's oldest acquaintances. Now Lawton was titular head of Savannah's defenses--with a wide range of problems.<sup>43</sup> Since Gilmer was rather familiar with Savannah's defensive potential, he proved to be a good listener on these matters. Lawton's main predicament was not unusual. Gilmer observed: "The great difficulty everywhere is to get arms. Out of 6,000 Enfield rifles, Lawton was allowed to retain one thousand only, and only one of the 18 guns" previously in the city.<sup>44</sup>

No one was better qualified to assist in Savannah's defense than Gilmer, and Lawton wanted Gilmer assigned to his command. Sally Lawton made an overly zealous effort to secure such an appointment for Gilmer. Without consulting her husband or Gilmer, Mrs. Lawton contacted Confederate Vice President Alexander Stevens,<sup>45</sup> an old friend of the Alexander family. During his term as a congressman years before, Stephens helped Gilmer obtain his captaincy in the Engineers.<sup>46</sup> However, Stephens' reply to Sally Lawton's

---

<sup>43</sup>Krisman and Lamb, 1970 Cullum Memorial Edition Register, 230; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 4, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 55; Alexander Stephens to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 6, 1853, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

telegram was curt. "It is not in my power [to] secure Capt. Gilmer for the Georgia coast, he is ordered West!"<sup>47</sup>

Gilmer was assigned to the Army of the Tennessee under Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston. As the Army was thought to be in or around Columbus, Ky., Gilmer's route was planned accordingly. On October 12 he reached Memphis. Yet in Memphis, Gilmer learned to his dismay that Johnston was no longer believed to be in Columbus, Miss. Frustrated and uncertain by this news, Gilmer wrote: "Where Genl. J. has gone is uncertain. By aid of the telegraph I may find out to-morrow morning."<sup>48</sup>

Before Gilmer had a chance to send out feelers for information, the Army of the Tennessee discovered his whereabouts. Like most of the Confederate forces, the army was short of engineers. It could ill afford to misplace one so experienced as Gilmer, when Johnston's army defended so broad a front. Consequently, Gilmer was needed immediately. Johnston's adjutant, W. W. Mackall, was short and to the point in his telegram to Gilmer: "Go by Nashville to Bowling Green, lose not an hour."<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 4, 1861, ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 13, 1861, ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 16, 1861, ibid.

At 6:30 on the morning of October 15, Gilmer left Memphis by rail. The scenery along the route was familiar. Gilmer was backtracking his way across Tennessee on the Memphis and Charleston. After a grueling repetitive journey, Gilmer reached Nashville early the next morning. Following a night's rest at the St. Cloud Hotel, he spent most of the day procuring the necessary accoutrements for an officer in the field. Gilmer's train for Bowling Green left at three that afternoon. Shortly before his departure, Gilmer penned a note to his wife: "The chances are we shall soon have active work in Kentucky, but of this you must not speak."<sup>50</sup>

On the evening of October 16, Gilmer reached Bowling Green. Johnston had preceded Gilmer to the town by a mere day. Harried by increasing demands for his attention, Johnston could spare only a few minutes for Gilmer's introduction to the camp. For further information Gilmer sought out Mackall. He arrived at Mackall's hotel as the latter was preparing for bed. Mackall and Gilmer discussed various matters for half an hour before Mackall yielded to fatigue. Yet by the time he left Mackall's room, Gilmer was still unfamiliar with the situation. "What we are going to do, in the way of military movements I know not," Gilmer mused. "The Genl. is not

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

very communicative, and Mackall does not seem to know."<sup>51</sup>

The camp at Bowling Green was only in the initial stages of construction. A house was rented for the headquarters staff, but as yet it was unoccupied. This was typical of the overall unsettled conditions of the camp. Gilmer learned through first-hand observation of the positions that Bowling Green was not fully prepared for a defense. "Some of these are far advanced towards completion" he noted. "Other batteries will have to be built to make our position as strong as it ought to be."<sup>52</sup>

During the first few days after his arrival, it became clear to Gilmer that Johnston was not inclined to engage in a campaign before winter. Johnston concerned himself with consolidating his army. For the winter, the army would remain on the defensive. The troops drilled at Bowling Green while Gilmer fretted away his time for want of action. Most of Sunday, October 20, was consumed by a review of the troops at Bowling Green. Gilmer spent the day outdoors, which did little to alleviate a head cold he contracted after his arrival at camp. His mood was not lightened by parades. Gilmer summed up his own feelings by sarcastically remarking: "We are still

---

<sup>51</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 17, 1861, ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

halting at this place and how long we will continue to do so is unknown to me, and I think to Genl. Johnston himself."<sup>53</sup>

Apparently the Union commanders to the north were of one mind with Johnston. No heavy offensive moves came from the direction of the Federal forces during the late fall. Among the many worthy Union commanders opposing Johnston was Henry Halleck. Gilmer was not disturbed in the least by the presence of his old friend in the enemy camp. During the period of stalemate in 1861, he wrote a letter to Halleck. Gilmer believed that their friendship would be unaffected by the unusual situation. "I do hope the day is not far distant when we will not be considered as opposed to each other although we may belong to different nations," Gilmer wrote Halleck. "I am now on duty with Genl. A. S. Johnston at Bowling Green, Ky. . . . If you can find an opportunity and think it right to hold communion with a 'rebel' do write me a line and direct it to 'J. F. Gilmer Engr, Bowling Green, Ky.'"<sup>54</sup>

Lou Gilmer's opinion of Henry Halleck was the antithesis of her husband's. She was appalled that one so close to the family could side with the Union. As

---

<sup>53</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 19, 1861, ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Henry Halleck, Oct. 28, 1861, Henry Wager Halleck Letters, Duke University.

Halleck gained more notoriety in the Northern press, Lou Gilmer criticized him with increasing vehemence. At one juncture she told Gilmer: "I almost hate Halleck, because it does seem to me a bad heart made him come so far."<sup>55</sup>

In time, Lou Gilmer's initial hesitancy grew into a strong revulsion for Halleck. At every opportunity she sniped at Halleck in her letters. She came to refer to Halleck as "Old Satan" as if the Union general represented every evil aspect of the North.<sup>56</sup> In her patriotic zeal, Lou Gilmer broached the subject of their son's name to Gilmer. On this occasion, she left tact by the wayside to be doubly sure her husband did not miss the point. She informed Gilmer: "Everybody here says I ought to change Henry's name but I can't. . . . Do you know Henry cried yesterday because I put Henry H. Gilmer in his book?"<sup>57</sup>

Gilmer wisely avoided any discussion of his son's name, and never revised his opinion of Halleck. At most, he conceded that some of Halleck's actions in enforcing martial law were "harsh."<sup>58</sup> This much he admitted but

---

<sup>55</sup> Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Nov. 21, 1861, Jeremy Gilmer Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Mar. 5, 1862, ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 14, 1861, ibid.

no more. For the most part, he remained silent on the subject. Early in the war he wrote his final statement on the matter when he admonished his wife: "I have known Halleck too long and too favorably to think him capable of such sudden change from his past character of honesty and justice . . . it is certainly unpleasant to think harshly of one who has been our friend in so many things, and whom I still consider my friend."<sup>59</sup>

Ironically, Johnston's defensive system in northern Tennessee was jeopardized by the forces at Halleck's disposal. Gilmer was responsible for these works. He knew Halleck could attack at any time. In November, Gilmer believed such an event was likely but deterred by factors beyond Halleck's control. Gilmer's opinion was that Halleck forestalled an attack before Thanksgiving only after Union Gen. John C. Fremont's ineffectual efforts against Confederate Sterling Price in the first part of November.<sup>60</sup>

Johnston's front was remarkably peaceful at the onset of winter. Gilmer spent most of his time shoring up Johnston's defenses in Tennessee through repeated examinations of the works. These inspections began a little more than a week after Gilmer arrived in Bowling Green.

---

<sup>59</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 14, 1861, ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 26, 1861, ibid.

On October 25, 1861, Gilmer was sent on a tour of Johnston's lines.<sup>61</sup> In the course of twelve days, Gilmer visited Clarksville, Fort Donelson, Fort Henry, and Nashville.<sup>62</sup> It was a journey of epic proportions which was repeated several times.

Yet the schedule proved to be beneficial for Gilmer. The constant traveling restored his fragile health after the long illness in San Francisco. Fresh air proved to be a tonic, as Gilmer got needed exercise by riding his horse. Occasional dampness in the air caused Gilmer some discomfort from rheumatism in his wrist, but this was only a minor drawback.<sup>63</sup>

The lifestyle was far from spartan. When Gilmer was in Bowling Green, there was plenty of time to enjoy the camaraderie of camp life. It was a time for Gilmer to renew old acquaintances and to acquire new friends. Much of Gilmer's time in Bowling Green was spent with W. W. Mackall. The two formed a close, mutually supportive friendship.<sup>64</sup> Yet Gilmer was not exclusive. Colonel Bushrod R. Johnson and Gen. William J. Hardee were also

---

<sup>61</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer. Oct. 25, 1861, ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 25, Nov. 3, Nov. 4, 1861, ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 4, 1861, ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 9, 1862, ibid.

visitors to Gilmer's tent. Gilmer first met Johnson at West Point, while Hardee kept informed on his native Georgia through Gilmer's correspondence.<sup>65</sup> In short, Gilmer admitted to his wife, "Everything connected with my position here is very pleasant except the absence from you. This is a drawback to all and all else will not compensate for this."<sup>66</sup>

Even in an era when romance was commonplace, the Gilmers' devotion to each other was extraordinary. They had seldom been separated during their eleven-year marriage. When such partings did occur previously, it was for a limited duration. Now Gilmer was engaged in a war of uncertain length, with no idea of when he would again see his beloved wife. "This is a mean life for us to live my dear wife, is it not?" he lamented. "And the worst is, this mean life may last for a long time."<sup>67</sup>

Gilmer was a realist. He did not believe the war would end in ninety days, but that it would be a long, protracted conflict. Under these circumstances the letters he received from his wife were a comfort. Even this small consolation was often denied to Gilmer, however.

---

<sup>65</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 14 and Dec. 8, 1862, ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 23, 1861, ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 19, 1861, ibid.

The Confederacy's mail service was poor at best. Two full weeks passed at one point without a word from Lou Gilmer; and during the absence of news, Gilmer worriedly wrote his wife: "I have never been so long without a word from you since we were married, and without explanation to the cause, I feel miserable."<sup>68</sup>

The mail ran no swifter nor was the absence less keenly felt by Lou Gilmer. Each long delay between letters only increased anxieties over her husband. Although she realized the postal service was probably to blame, this knowledge did not lessen her concern. In her yearning to see her husband, Lou Gilmer was driven to exclaim: "It seems to me I cannot live if I cannot hear from you."<sup>69</sup>

After little more than a month of separation, Lou Gilmer felt she had at last a solution to the problem. She would move to Tennessee or Kentucky to be with her husband. Gilmer quickly vetoed the idea for what he considered obvious reasons. He felt that battlefields were no place for a woman. At any moment, the army might be forced to move to an area "where you could not, with safety, follow" Gilmer gently explained to his wife.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, May 15, 1861; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 24, 1861, ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Oct. 19, 1861, ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 4, 1861, ibid.

Lest his wife be further upset by his refusal, Gilmer gave her some grounds for hope. He would try to be home for Christmas. Separation was barely tolerable, but Gilmer could not stand to further his wife's unhappiness. He was considerably distressed when Lou Gilmer questioned his affection for her. He replied: "My dear wife, you ask me to tell you if I love you! You know I do, and with a love far above all others in this world!"<sup>71</sup>

Love is often measured by concern. All too soon Gilmer was just as concerned with his wife's safety at home as if she had been at the front. Federal forces began to operate along the Georgia coast. In November, 1861, Union troops seized Port Royal, S. C.

Port Royal and the Georgia Sea Islands which came under Union control were disturbingly close to Savannah. Knowing full well that his wife often visited Savannah, Gilmer began urging her to refrain from any sojourns to the Georgia port. He was uncharacteristically stern in his letter of November 9: "Do not go to Savannah until the enemy is driven from Fort Royal and all other points in S. Carolina and Ga. The further you & all others of

---

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

your sex keep from the fields of strife, the better.

Do now as I request."<sup>72</sup>

In her next letter to her husband, Lou Gilmer demonstrated that she was unconvinced by his arguments. Her retort to Gilmer's instructions could hardly have eased his mind. She observed: "I can't see why you are so urgent for me not to come to Savannah. I know you don't think it will be taken by them without a bloody land fight first & that will give us all plenty of time to leave."<sup>73</sup>

In spite of reservations, Gilmer conceded to the fait accompli. He made only a mild protest later when his wife informed him that the children were on their way to Savannah. At least the children would be able to spend Christmas with their mother and her relatives. A few days before Yuletide, Gilmer was forced to admit that he could not come to Savannah for a visit.<sup>74</sup>

He shared his Christmas with Mackall in Bowling Green. Their one bright spot was the receipt of two boxes from his wife. The first was for Gilmer alone. It included blankets, undershirts, gifts, and a container of

---

<sup>72</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 9, 1861, ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Nov. 21, 1861, ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 26, Dec. 8 and 20, 1861, ibid.

potassium iodide for Gilmer's rheumatism. Lou Gilmer's second package contained homemade articles of clothing for both Mackall and Gilmer as well as sidearms and maps of the Georgia coast for Gilmer.<sup>75</sup>

Otherwise, the holidays were uneventful in Bowling Green. There was peace all along Johnston's front. Gilmer was grateful, for he knew the condition of Johnston's defenses. His assessment was cautious, but hopeful: "By spring we will be pretty well prepared to resist invasion at all points, certainly much better than we are now."<sup>76</sup>

In late January, 1862, rumors of an impending Federal assault floated through Johnston's command. The prospect was troublesome for Gilmer. He knew Johnston's forces were not nearly as strong as the opposing armies.<sup>77</sup> Through January, snow and rain had made the roads practically impassable. Gilmer felt that the threatened attack would come by another avenue: the rivers. In his opinion, the attack, if it occurred, would come from

---

<sup>75</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 29, 1861, and Jan. 2, 1862, ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 4, 1861, ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 10, 1862, ibid.

two sources: "Halleck by the Tennessee, Buell by the Cumberland."<sup>78</sup>

Fort Donelson and Fort Henry were directly in the path of the expected assault. On January 31, Gilmer left Bowling Green for an examination of the two posts. Shortly before his departure, he penned another letter to his wife. He expected to be gone less than a week, he wrote, and he asked that he be kept informed of developments around Savannah. The last thing he wanted was for his wife and children to be caught in a battle.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 19, 1862, ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 31, 1862, ibid.

"Either a Prisoner or Killed"

February 1862 - August 1862

Chapter III

## Chapter III

Although picturesque in peace, the Cumberland and the Tennessee rivers were ominous in war. In 1862, the two rivers were natural roads of invasion cutting through the heart of Johnston's defenses in Tennessee. The core of that defense boiled down to two small points guarding the sister rivers. On the Cumberland, Fort Donelson protected the water route to Nashville. Fort Henry guarded the gateway to the deep South on the Tennessee. If the Union forces could take Donelson and Henry, Johnston's front would collapse.

Federal Gen. Henry Halleck was aware of the potential for success embodied in Donelson and Henry. Early in 1862, Halleck casually proposed a strike at the two forts.<sup>1</sup> The actual planning and execution of the attack was left to one of Halleck's subordinate commanders, Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. In late January, Grant equipped himself with gunboats and infantry for the move against Johnston. Gilmer predicted that Halleck would come up the Tennessee supported by Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell on the Cumberland. He was partially correct. Halleck moved up the Tennessee in the person of U. S. Grant.

---

<sup>1</sup>Wiley Sword, Shiloh: Bloody April (New York, 1974), 4.

After a career in defensive engineering, Gilmer was well aware of the potential for disaster if Halleck seized Donelson or Henry. Gilmer had visited the two forts for the first time in the fall of 1861 during his initial inspection tour of Johnston's lines.<sup>2</sup> He found the two to be strikingly dissimilar in their state of preparedness.

Gilmer's companion, G. A. Henry, reported: "Fort Henry is in a fine condition for defense, the work admirably done, as Major Gilmer thinks. . . . Fort Donelson is in very bad condition. No work has been done of any account."<sup>3</sup>

Gilmer was so struck by the slow progress at Donelson that he considered discontinuing operations there altogether. In Gilmer's opinion, a more suitable spot for defense was at Line Point, some fifteen miles farther up the Cumberland.<sup>4</sup> On November 2, 1861, Gilmer had ridden with Lt. Joseph Dixon to examine Line Point.<sup>5</sup> The two spent the day discussing the alternatives in a driving rainstorm.<sup>6</sup> By the end of

---

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 3, 1861, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. War Department (Comp.), War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901) Series 1, Vol. IV, 496-497. Cited hereafter as O.R.; Series 1 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 506-7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 501; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Nov. 3, 1861, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

day, Gilmer was soaked, but he had reached a conclusion. He told Mackall that "as the works at Fort Donelson are partially built, and the place susceptible of a good defense landward, I advised Captain [sic] Dixon to retain the position and construct the additional defenses as rapidly as possible."<sup>7</sup>

Gilmer arrived at Fort Henry on January 31 amid rumors of an impending attack by Union forces. He was not calmed by what he found at Fort Henry. Despite his initial enthusiasm for the work, Gilmer later found a flaw in Henry's defense which had not been rectified even at this late date. Back in November, Gilmer had ordered Dixon to fortify some heights opposite Henry on the Tennessee. When Gilmer arrived in late January, these works were not done. The fault did not lay with Dixon. A labor force promised Dixon in November did not arrive until the first of the year.<sup>8</sup>

No one was satisfied with the progress of the work, least of all its commander, Brig. Gen. Lloyd Tilghman. His primary concern was the Federals' use of gunboats. In November, Tilghman had warned Gilmer of the dangerous threat posed by these vessels. By late January, however, the fort

---

<sup>7</sup>O.R., IV, 506-7.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., VII, 132.

was still susceptible to gunboats. Fort Henry boasted seventeen guns when Gilmer arrived in January. Of these, twelve faced the Tennessee, including a ten-inch Columbiad. Yet Henry's defense was left lopsided by the placement of the guns. The high point facing Henry on which Gilmer put so much emphasis was guarded by light field artillery. Tilghman was also severely lacking in experienced artillerymen.<sup>9</sup>

By February, it was far too late to correct the fort's most glaring deficiencies. Gilmer and Tilghman spent the better part of three days tightening Henry's defenses. On February 3, the duo left Henry for neighboring Fort Donelson. Gilmer intended to spend some time preparing the Cumberland defenses as he had Fort Henry. Tilghman recalled on the day of departure that "the pickets on both sides of the Tennessee River extended well in our front, having reported no appearance of the enemy."<sup>10</sup>

Around noon on February 4, Gilmer and Tilghman heard shots coming from the direction of Fort Henry. A messenger from Col. A. Heiman of the 10th Tennessee reached Tilghman at Fort Donelson. Heiman, at Fort Henry, reported Federal

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., seventeen guns at Donelson, twelve facing Tennessee and Columbiad, light artillery on heights, lacking experienced artillery men, 132; IV, Tilghman warns Gilmer, 523.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., VII, 133, 137.

gunboats shelling the fort, and Union infantry were coming ashore approximately three miles downriver on the Tennessee.<sup>11</sup>

Tilghman left Donelson in the early evening. Before his departure, he gave Gilmer the choice of remaining at Donelson or returning to Henry. Gilmer elected to join Tilghman. It was nearly midnight when they reached Fort Henry and the protection of cavalry. The situation was grim. Union gunboats were much in evidence. Federal infantry were in strength. Yet Fort Henry was granted one day of reprieve; the Federals made no offensive moves. This delay enabled Tilghman to place his infantry in the fort's exterior lines. He stripped Henry of all troops save those familiar with artillery, and that handful of men prepared defenses under Tilghman's supervision.<sup>12</sup>

Between 11 and 11:30 on the morning of February 6, the Union gunboats moved into position for attack. Then the duel began in earnest. Federals commenced a heavy bombardment on Fort Henry. The Confederates replied, but it was evident that they were ill matched in the contest.<sup>13</sup>

During the opening salvos, a Confederate 24-pounder cannon exploded, incapacitating its crew. Since this was

---

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 133, 137.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 133-34, 151.

the gun which Heiman called the fort's most "reliable," the Confederates were not off to a good start. One disaster followed another. Not long after the 24-pounder burst, a Union shell destroyed a 32-pounder cannon inside the fort. On the heels of this incident, the Confederates' 42-pounder cannon misfired, killing three men and wounding several others. One possible reason for this particular tragedy was the fact the garrison lacked the correct shells for the gun. Still later, the fort's Columbiad was put out of commission by a malfunction in its priming mechanism.<sup>14</sup>

After witnessing this series of catastrophes, Gilmer came to the conclusion that the situation was not salvageable. The Confederates were losing almost as many men from their own guns as from Union shells. Further, four of the fort's heaviest weapons were useless; and Union shots were telling on the fort.<sup>15</sup>

At this juncture, Gilmer approached Heiman. He pointed out the reality of the situation and asked if Heiman would not impress upon Tilghman the necessity of surrender. Although Heiman conceded that Gilmer's was the obvious course, he declined to discuss the matter with Tilghman. Heiman maintained that since Tilghman commanded

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 134, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 151.

the fort it was Tilghman's responsibility to make the decision. Tilghman, stated Heiman, "must be his own judge in regard to this affair."<sup>16</sup>

Gilmer believed that defeat was already a reality, so he took matters into his own hands. He personally broached the subject of surrender with Tilghman. Gilmer was far from alone in his opinion, for a number of other officers had made the same suggestion. Tilghman's response was the same to all: "I shall not give up the work."<sup>17</sup>

Tilghman's defiant posture could not save Fort Henry. As a last desperate measure, he ordered the infantry back into the fort so as to consolidate his forces. By then the heavy shelling, plus the rising waters of the river, had created pandemonium. With his forces in disarray, Tilghman conceded the battle was lost. Gilmer then stated: "A few moments later the flag was lowered."<sup>18</sup>

Gilmer was initially listed among the prisoners. In fact, the Federals captured no more than 100 men as most of Henry's garrison escaped to Fort Donelson. Gilmer was among these fortunates.<sup>19</sup> "Reached here today on foot from Fort

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 134, 141-42.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 135.

Henry," he wrote two days later. "Believing I was not fairly included in the surrender, I walked out of the fort when the flag was lowered."<sup>20</sup>

Lou Gilmer received her husband's last letter about the time she learned of the capture of Fort Henry. In that letter he informed her of his upcoming trip to the now-surrendered fort.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, the mail had run on time. When she realized her husband's position, she was panic stricken. To her father she wrote: "I felt sure . . . he was in all probability either a prisoner or killed. . . . I have been in bed ever since."<sup>22</sup>

Gilmer sensed his wife's anxiety and sent her a telegram through Major Porter in Savannah.<sup>23</sup> In addition, both Maj. Raines and Mackall wired Mrs. Gilmer on her husband's behalf.<sup>24</sup> Mackall followed his telegram with a lighthearted letter. Since there may have been an impropriety in Gilmer's actions, Mackall noted, "we may have to send him back to that Devil as you call him, Halleck. . . .

---

<sup>20</sup>W. W. Mackall to Louisa Gilmer, Feb. 8, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>21</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 31, 1862, ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Louisa Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Feb. 10, 1862, ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, Feb. 8, 1862, ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Major Raines to "Mrs. Major Gilmer," Feb. 8, 1862; W. W. Mackall to Anthony Porter, Feb. 8, 1862, ibid.

Dear Lou, I joke now, but 'till I could see the joke my heart was bleeding for you."<sup>25</sup>

As soon as he reached Donelson, however, Gilmer once again placed himself in jeopardy. Donelson was the obvious target for the next Union offensive. If Fort Donelson fell, then the Cumberland River was open to the Union all the way to Nashville. Johnston's Tennessee-Kentucky line would then become untenable. Should Donelson be captured, Johnston's position at Bowling Green would be behind Union lines. Gilmer was aware of the possibilities. In conscience, he could not allow this to happen without making some effort to prepare Donelson for a Union assault.<sup>26</sup>

For three days after his arrival, Gilmer worked arduously on Donelson's defenses. On February 9, at the end of those three days, Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow arrived at Donelson as its new commander. Pillow asked Gilmer to remain with him, which Gilmer dutifully agreed to do.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact Donelson had lagged behind Henry in construction, it proved to be much more capable of a strong defense. Donelson's geographical layout was infinitely superior. Whereas Fort Henry was dominated by surrounding

---

<sup>25</sup>W. W. Mackall to Louisa Gilmer, Feb. 8, 1862, ibid.

<sup>26</sup>O.R., VIII, 135.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 261.

hills, Donelson rested on heights overlooking a bend in the Cumberland.<sup>28</sup> Trenches extended around Donelson beneath the fort's guns in a roughly crescent shape, anchored in the north by Hickman's Creek and in the south by the village of Dover, approximately a mile from Donelson.<sup>29</sup> Since Donelson lay on high ground, the fort's garrison had no fear of the Cumberland River reaching flood stage, as was the case at Fort Henry.<sup>30</sup>

Several other factors worked in Donelson's favor as well. The fort enjoyed the immediate advantage of reinforcements in the form of refugees from Fort Henry. Donelson was also gifted with more heavy guns. In addition, the Union forces no longer held the element of surprise. The Confederates could profit from the time required by the Federals to bring their forces into position.<sup>31</sup>

On February 11, Union troops landed at two points on Donelson's side of the Cumberland. Despite the efforts of Gilmer and Tilghman during the previous four days, there were still gaps in Donelson's defense. Throughout February 11

---

<sup>28</sup> Jesse Taylor, "The Defense of Fort Henry"; Lew Wallace, "The Capture of Fort Donelson," in Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Robert U. Johnson and C. C. Buell (eds.) (New York, 1956), I, 368-69, 401-3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>31</sup> O.R., VII, 262.

and into the following night, Gilmer and Lt. W. J. Morris of the Engineers supervised work on additional trenches near Dover. Gilmer pronounced these lines complete on the following evening.<sup>32</sup>

February 12 was Donelson's last day of grace. Last-minute preparations were made on the defenses. The sounds of construction were punctuated by skirmishers' shots throughout the day. Confederate reinforcements under Brig. Gen. Simon B. Buckner reached the fort in the afternoon. Union gunboats were on the way as well. Smoke from the vessels' steam stacks was clearly visible from Fort Donelson.<sup>33</sup>

When Confederate Brig. Gen. John B. Floyd arrived with further reinforcements on February 13, the battle was already underway. Union infantry attacked in conjunction with a bombardment from the gunboats. Fort Henry succumbed to such efforts in a day; Donelson proved much more stubborn. Union forces gained nothing that day, even though casualties were high on both sides. Donelson's primary architect, Lt. Joseph Dixon, was killed at a river emplacement. As the sun fell under the horizon, new-fallen snow blanketed the battlefield.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 262, 359.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Offensive actions the next day were left to the gunboats. The Union infantry provided but an infrequent nuisance as skirmishers. Yet, while Donelson's garrison was otherwise occupied, Grant's men completed an encirclement of the fort by extending their lines to Dover. At 3 p.m., Union gunboats moved in close to try and pound the fort into submission. Confederates suffered but light casualties in repulsing the river assault.<sup>35</sup>

That evening Pillow, Buckner and Floyd met to determine their future course of action. Although every Federal assault had ended in failure, the situation did not appear promising for Donelson. Federal maneuvers during the day had left the fort both surrounded and outnumbered. While Gilmer listened, the three generals decided to attack their besiegers the next day. Pillow and Buckner would lead the assault against the Federal right.<sup>36</sup>

The breakout began at 5 a.m., with Pillow's men in the lead. As Pillow's troops contacted the Union lines, Buckner opened an attack with artillery on Pillow's right. Union resistance dissolved. By mid-morning the Federal right had collapsed.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 262-63.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Buckner had not fared as well as Pillow. Although Buckner made headway in his initial assault, the Union right center gave only so much ground. Buckner's advance stalled against heavy opposition. When Buckner's men could advance no more, they withdrew to the safety of their own lines. Pillow and Gilmer found Buckner's troops on the defensive even as Pillow's men carried the Union right.<sup>38</sup>

As Buckner and Pillow discussed the situation, Pillow's troops drove the Union right into Buckner's field of fire. The gunfire from Pillow's advance was clearly audible to Buckner, Pillow, and Gilmer. Pillow had virtually enveloped the Union flank. Heartened by Pillow's success, Buckner's men attacked once again.<sup>39</sup>

For a time it seemed as if the coordinated efforts of Pillow and Buckner might carry the day. The gap in the Union lines widened as Confederates pressed forward. Yet when the Union withdrawal seemed on the verge of a rout, the Confederate assault came to a stop. Pillow, with victory practically in his grasp, mysteriously ordered a withdrawal back to Donelson's lines. In the meantime, a Federal counterattack drove a wedge into the Confederate left. When

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 263-64.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 264.

the sun set on February 15, the Confederates were in a more precarious position than before the morning assault began.<sup>40</sup>

Gilmer had spent most of that day with Pillow. In so doing, he witnessed the breakout attempt from beginning to end. There was no good reason for Gilmer's presence in the field. The services of Johnston's chief engineer were not required under the circumstances. Gilmer's participation in the engagement was probably the result of his own decision. It was an experience for Gilmer. His horse was shot from under him, and he observed: "In the course of the day dozens of men were killed on my right hand and on my left. It was God's will that I should be spared, for what!"<sup>41</sup>

Gilmer was spared for the surrender. Union forces enjoyed the only tangible results of the day. The extreme right, a portion of Donelson's exterior lines fell into Union hands. Later that evening, Pillow conferred with Buckner and Floyd on the dismal turn of events. Gilmer left the generals to their own devices. Exhausted by the day's work, Gilmer rested in a room adjoining the council.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 6, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

Pillow roused Gilmer at 3 in the morning to inform him that Donelson would be surrendered.<sup>42</sup>

Once again Gilmer eluded capture on a technicality. By Pillow's request, Gilmer was attached to the general's staff, which was not considered part of the garrison. The surrender was left to Buckner. Gilmer and Pillow reached Clarksville on horseback, then embarked on a steamer for Nashville. Once in Nashville, Gilmer repeated his action after Henry by telegraphing his wife.<sup>43</sup>

General Johnston then withdrew to the south, his line destroyed by the Union offensive. Halleck was promoted to overall commander in the West. Grant was promoted to major general with the sobriquet of "Unconditional Surrender" after making that demand at Donelson. Gilmer found himself in the position of apologist. He had plenty of time to contemplate the disaster as the army retreated through Tennessee, yet his assessment was brief: "I will only say that forts of five nay ten times the strength of those works would have made no difference in the result. Want of

---

<sup>42</sup>O.R., VII, 264, 288.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., Gilmer attached to Pillow's staff; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Feb. 22, 1862, Gilmer Papers, Pillow and Gilmer's travels; Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, Feb. 17, 1862, Gilmer telegraphs wife., ibid.

supplies on our part and inferior forces gave the enemy a certain victory."<sup>44</sup>

During the hiatus between Henry and Donelson, Johnston had moved his headquarters to Nashville. Once Donelson was captured and the Union forces commanded the Cumberland, Nashville was no longer a safe haven for the Army of the Tennessee. The defensive works around the city were scattered and insufficient protection against any assault. Gilmer conceded that "the city could not be held by a force less than 50,000."<sup>45</sup>

At first Johnston withdrew only as far south as Murfreesboro. He seemed reluctant to pull out of the state altogether. While the army bided its time, Gilmer repaired bridges in the vicinity. He also considered the situation of Johnston's command. His conclusion was not optimistic: "We expect to leave here in a few days for some point south of this, maybe Decatur, maybe Chattanooga, maybe some other point."<sup>46</sup>

When Johnston did decide to move, the army marched rapidly. By March 5, it left Tennessee and halted at

---

<sup>44</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louise Gilmer, Mar. 3, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>45</sup>O.R., VII, 264.

<sup>46</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Feb. 22, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

Huntsville, Alabama.<sup>47</sup> Huntsville was but a brief stop-over, however. Four days later, the army was at Decatur.<sup>48</sup> Gilmer was decidedly critical of the retreat. "Unless we can show a stronger front and a more decided resistance," he stated, "we will be driven back to the Gulf Coast."<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the rapid departure of the army from Tennessee brought a rain of public criticism against Johnston and demoralized the army as well.<sup>50</sup> Both Gilmer and Mackall were low in spirit. Gilmer stopped at Shelbyville, Tenn. long enough to telegraph his wife to leave Savannah.<sup>51</sup> Mackall sent a telegram to Mrs. Gilmer's brother-in-law, George Gilmer Hull, with the same message directed primarily at his wife but including Lou Gilmer and Mrs. Porter.<sup>52</sup>

Lou Gilmer was on the South Atlantic coast and much more realistic than either her husband or Mackall concerning affairs in Savannah. Daily life there continued quite well in spite of the Federal presence offshore. Her reply to Gilmer's hurried messages was intended to bring him and

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Mar. 6, 1862.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Mar. 9, 1862.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Mar. 3, 1862.

<sup>50</sup> William Preston Johnston, The Life of Albert Sidney Johnston (New York, 1878), 510-12.

<sup>51</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 2, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Louisa Gilmer to Jeremy Gilmer, Mar. 5, 1862, ibid.

Mackall back to reality. The response was made in the form of a question. She asked: "Do you know of any dreadful engine of war and destruction that is to be brought against us, that we haven't heard of--or are you both, as I fear you are, infected by the defeat . . . in Nashville."<sup>53</sup>

Gilmer and Mackall gradually returned to equilibrium. Mackall was promoted to brigadier general, an appointment which doubtlessly helped restore his self confidence. Further, a Lt. Ingraham from Savannah assured Gilmer and Mackall that Savannah was in no danger. However, the memory of the retreat lingered with Mackall. He was well aware that his friend Gilmer narrowly escaped capture or death at Donelson and Henry. Mackall realized as well that the nature of their profession precluded any certainty of safety during a war. When Mackall next wrote to Lou Gilmer, he was deadly serious when he affirmed: "Lou, my friend, you shall always have the truth about J. F. from me and he will do the same for 'A' [Aminta Mackall]."<sup>54</sup>

As Gilmer's anxieties eased, he became less concerned with the future of the war than with the state of affairs in

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 9, 1862, ibid. Aminta Sorrell Mackall was the wife of W. W. Mackall. Mackall's remarks to Lou Gilmer were made in a postscript of the letter cited.

Decatur. Johnston began planning some sort of operation after consolidating his forces. Decatur was merely a stop-over on the road to a new campaign. Gilmer was not seduced by the attractions of Decatur, no matter how short the stay. He complained: "This place is a poor apology for a town, a miserable place and the sooner we can get away the better."<sup>55</sup>

Gilmer's complaints grew more vehement and varied as Johnston tarried in Decatur. On the one hand, Gilmer was billeted with five other officers, including Mackall, who occasionally shared their quarters with some wayward general, such as John C. Breckenridge. Then, too, although they were close friends, Mackall's presence in the quarters served as a reminder of Gilmer's own slow advancement. Mackall was now a general while Gilmer was seeking promotion to colonel. In a fit of temper regarding his delayed colonelcy, Gilmer exploded: "If not given to me, and pretty soon, I shall quit the services."<sup>56</sup>

In the weeks to come, Gilmer's concern over a promotion became a familiar theme in his letters. He continuously heard rumors that he was to get his colonelcy, but there was no confirmation. Finally, Gilmer asked his wife to contact Vice President Alexander Stephens to confirm or

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., March 9, 1862.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Gilmer's quarters, Breckenridge, Mar. 15, 1862; Quote, Mar. 12, 1862.

deny the rumors. Gilmer explained: "As I am now the ranking officer of the Engineer Corps, I ought to have that rank given to me without further delay. To withhold it longer is a reflection and it is but just to myself to know as soon as possible what are the intentions of the President towards me."<sup>57</sup>

Gilmer temporarily lessened his protests regarding a promotion when it seemed likely the army was due for action. Toward the end of March, Johnston finally left Decatur for Corinth, Miss. The move was made in stiflingly hot weather and in less-than-organized fashion. As far as accommodations were concerned, Gilmer found Corinth to be little better than Decatur. While Corinth did not impress Gilmer, it was an important location for Johnston. Here at last he accomplished the consolidation of his army with a view toward an offensive campaign. Surrounded by his corps commanders, Johnston closely observed the Union movements in Tennessee. Past events had jaded Gilmer somewhat regarding the gathering of generals. He observed: "Among them all, I fear there is not a Napoleon."<sup>58</sup>

The long-delayed consolidation of Confederate forces in the west was accomplished when Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard, "the hero of Sumter and Manassas," arrived in Corinth.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., Mar. 20, 1862.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Mar. 29, 1862.

Shortly thereafter, on April 1, Johnston ordered his commanders to prepare for an offensive. Late the following evening, Beauregard received word that Federal Maj. Gen. Lew Wallace was on the move towards Grant's advance base at Pittsburg Landing, Tenn. Beauregard immediately roused Johnston's chief of staff, Gen. Braxton Bragg, from his bed. After discussing the news, Bragg and Beauregard concurred that Johnston must attack. Johnston agreed, despite reservations concerning the preparedness of his troops. The army would march on April 3, he stated. Beauregard was informed of the decision at 5 that morning. By then, he had already sketched out a plan. According to his proposal, the army would attack Grant, then retreat with captured supplies. Johnston approved the plan in essence.<sup>59</sup>

That same day, Gilmer received a map of the battle area. His orders were deceptively simple. Between Corinth and the point of contact with the enemy. Gilmer was to "take all due measures and precautions, and give all requisite orders for the repair of bridges, causeways and roads on which our troops may move."<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Sword, Bloody April, 92-99; P. G. T. Beauregard, "The Campaign at Shiloh," in Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, I, 579-81.

<sup>60</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 14-17. On these pages are Johnston's Special Orders No. 8, with accompanying map--his plans and orders for the battle of Shiloh. Section IX of the orders specifically apply to Gilmer.

Beauregard's plan called for an April 4 attack. Owing to the rapidity with which the orders were issued and expected to be executed, much confusion prevailed in Corinth. Delays and congestion on the roads from errant brigades and corps forced the attack date to be moved forward a day. Although the army was approximately in its assigned place by April 5, it was not in position to attack. This process consumed the rest of the day. Most of Johnston's army was unpractised in the stealth required by a surprise attack, but the complacency of the Union army saved Johnston from discovery.<sup>61</sup>

None of the Confederate commanders were satisfied with the fiasco of the previous three days. Toward dusk on April 5, Beauregard openly voiced dissatisfaction by expressing reservations regarding the impending attack. In Beauregard's opinion, the element of surprise was lost. He suggested a prompt return to Corinth. Bragg reluctantly concurred. Soon after this decision was reached, Johnston arrived on the scene to determine what course the army would take the next day.<sup>62</sup>

While Beauregard's opinion on the matter was known to the gathering, Johnston was not satisfied with the opinions

---

<sup>61</sup>Sword, Bloody April, 99-106; 112-13.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 106-7; Johnston, Life of Albert Sidney Johnston, 566-67.

of either Beauregard or Bragg. He asked his friend, Maj. Gen. Leonidas Polk, for his opinion. Polk was in favor of an attack.<sup>63</sup> Gilmer then offered his opinion. He later recalled: "I ventured to suggest that a withdrawal would certainly destroy the morale of the troops. General Johnston said, 'We will attack the enemy in the morning.'"<sup>64</sup>

Gilmer's advice came from nearly firsthand knowledge of the Union camp. On April 4, an advance troop of Confederate cavalry had engaged in a skirmish with some of Grant's outlying units. Federal prisoners were taken to Johnston's headquarters; and from Union Maj. LeRoy Crockett, Gilmer learned that the Federal camp did not suspect Johnston's intentions. In their ignorance, the Federals had left their encampment open to attack.<sup>65</sup>

Johnston had no way of knowing whether or not his presence was still undetected on Sunday, April 6. The success or failure of the battle depended on the element of surprise. Johnston chose to gamble. The first elements of his army advanced toward the Union camp near dawn. Such was Johnston's anxiety that, accompanied by Gilmer and

---

<sup>63</sup>Sword, Bloody April, 107-8.

<sup>64</sup>Johnston, Life of Albert Sidney Johnston, 570.

<sup>65</sup>Sword, Bloody April, 111-12.

others, he left his headquarters when he heard the first shorts of the battle.<sup>66</sup>

As the battle developed, it seemed the Confederate attack would far exceed expectations. Federal troops were taken by surprise. Despite their initial shock, however, some Federal units were able to make a stand against the Confederate onslaught. A disproportionately large amount of pressure was needed to overwhelm Union Gen. Benjamin Prentiss's line alongside the river. Here Union resistance was so unyielding that the area was afterwards known as the "Hornet's Nest." Prentiss did not surrender until late afternoon, when most of the Confederate attack was concentrated on his position.

The early results of the attack, however, were encouraging to the Confederate troops. General William T. Sherman's division, on the far right of the Union line, bore the brunt of the first assault wave. Confederates were heartened when Sherman's line fell back in disorder. By early afternoon, the Confederates firmly controlled Sherman's camps. The momentum of the attack gradually pushed the Union troops toward the Tennessee River. Before the Federal withdrawal could be turned into a rout, however, Johnston was struck by rifle fire. Within minutes of sustaining a wound to his leg, he was dead.

---

<sup>66</sup>Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, I, 586.

The impetus of the Confederate attack did not knowingly stall after Johnston's death. Union troops continued their retreat toward the river while under covering fire from their gunboats. From a bluff overlooking the river, Gilmer watched panic-stricken Union troops attempt to cross the Tennessee. After he witnessed this scene, Gilmer rode quickly to Bragg's headquarters and proposed that Bragg cease his artillery fire preparatory to a full-scale infantry attack. Bragg was receptive to Gilmer's plan. He dispatched Gilmer with some other officers to halt the bombardment. As Bragg prepared his assault, however, he received new orders. Beauregard had assumed command of the army. He ordered a general withdrawal so as to suspend operations for the day. Gilmer later told William Preston Johnston: "Had General Beauregard known the condition of the enemy, as your father knew it when he was shot, the order for withdrawal would certainly not have been given."<sup>67</sup>

When darkness fell on April 6, the Confederates mistakenly believed they had won a major victory. The results seemed obvious; Beauregard was using Sherman's tent for his quarters, and the Union army did not seem capable of further resistance. Gilmer reinforced this opinion through his

---

<sup>67</sup> Johnston, Life of Albert Sidney Johnston, 635-36. Beauregard contended that Johnson did not know the dispersal of his troops since he was in the field (See Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, I, 588).

own sources. He reported the Union forces in retreat. In his opinion, all that remained for the following day were simple mopping up operations. Unfortunately, Gilmer was an engineer, not an infantry officer.<sup>68</sup>

During that night, Grant received reinforcements in the form of Gen. Lew Wallace's division and Gen. Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio. Before dawn on Monday, April 7, Buell attacked the Confederates. The Southerners were surprised by the role reversal. After being assured of certain victory, they found themselves thrown on the defensive. Hammered by fresh troops, weary Confederates could not equal the impressive stands made by Federal troops the previous day. Beauregard's withdrawal to Corinth began in the afternoon.

Sometime during the retreat, Gilmer received a wound. He returned to Corinth with the Confederate army. Shortly after his arrival in Corinth, Gilmer began to suffer from jaundice. On April 10 he was granted twenty days' leave. He returned to Savannah accompanied by a nurse.<sup>69</sup>

Considerably more than twenty days passed before Gilmer recovered. He was still in Savannah in July. Yet his time in Savannah was not idly spent. His wounding had

---

<sup>68</sup>Sword, Bloody April, 377.

<sup>69</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 18; O.R., X, pt. 1, 391.

a sobering effect. Since the first of the year, Gilmer had avoided capture twice and been wounded once. These were the fortunes and the reality of war. Before he left for the front again, he also considered his family's future. On July 21, he formally concluded his will. The sole recipient of Gilmer's possessions was Lou Gilmer. If she decided to marry after Gilmer's death, the will evenly divided Gilmer's estate between his wife and the children.<sup>70</sup>

With his affairs in order, Gilmer returned to war, but to a new theater of operations. During his convalescence, Gilmer accepted a post with Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.<sup>71</sup> Gilmer had held Robert E. Lee in high regard dating back to the time when both were in the Corps of Engineers. When Lee resigned from the Corps in 1855, Gilmer observed: "I am truly sorry to lose him from the Corps of Engineers. He is an ornament to any service, combining talent, energy, urbanity, nobleness and soldierly bearing seldom equaled and perhaps never surpassed."<sup>72</sup>

While Gilmer recuperated in Savannah, Lee made good use of the attributes noted by the engineer. On June 1, Lee had assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia.

---

<sup>70</sup>Last Will and Testament, July 21, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>71</sup>Adam Alexander to "Dear Child," May 30, 1862, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>72</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, April 29, 1855, Gilmer Papers.

When Lee took over the army, its position could not have been more precarious. Its back was to the Confederacy's capital at Richmond while in its front was a massive Federal army under Gen. George B. McClellan. Less than a month after assuming command, Lee drove McClellan back down the Virginia peninsula. The feat was accomplished in little more than one week's time with a numerically inferior force. Although the Seven Days Campaign yielded no decisive victory for the Confederates, Lee's efforts kept Richmond safe.

On August 5, Gilmer arrived at Lee's headquarters east of Richmond on the Williamsburg road. There was much Gilmer and Lee could discuss in their first meeting. They had served together briefly during the Mexican War. In the years following that conflict, Lee's son Custis had served a long period as Gilmer's aide. Once Gilmer reported to the general, however, Lee immediately broached the subject of Gilmer's health. Rather than place Gilmer in the field, Lee wanted Gilmer to be Chief of the Confederacy's Bureau of Engineers. Gilmer tactfully protested this decision. Gilmer had understood that he would be the chief engineer for the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee admitted that this was his original intention, but that the effects of Gilmer's wound gave cause for reconsideration. Gilmer answered: "I would like to make the effort."<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., Aug. 4, 1862.

Lee finally acquiesced to Gilmer's opinion and named Gilmer his chief of engineers. In addition to his assignment with the army, Gilmer was to be responsible for all the engineer duties in the Department of Northern Virginia, including the defenses of Richmond.

Privately, Gilmer also had doubts concerning his health. To his wife he confessed: "I hope my health will enable me to perform the duties, as I feel sure I can, at present, be of more service to our country in the field than in the Engineer Bureau where I would have office routine only without any chance of advancement."<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

The Confederate Engineer Bureau  
September 1862 - August 1863

Chapter IV

Life in Richmond, Va., has few pleasures during the summer. The sun is relentless in its power, often sending temperatures above the 100-degree mark. Air hangs lifeless over the city, laden with moisture from the James River. Only the occasional relief provided by thunderstorms makes life endurable. The summer of 1862 was no different. "Even the nights are warm," Gilmer lamented to his wife.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the climate, Gilmer seemed determined to prove himself capable of duty in the field. During the two days following their initial conversation, Lee acquainted Gilmer with the situation at the front. On August 7, Gilmer scouted McClellan's line at Malvern Hill on the peninsula. This was the site of Lee's last confrontation with the Union forces during the Seven Days Campaign. As a precautionary measure, 300 cavalrymen accompanied Gilmer. He reported: "We went round to the east of the hill and approached it in rear of the enemy, but when we came in sight of the position we discovered that the Yankees had abandoned the place and fallen back again towards 'Berkley' [plantation] where McClellan's main force has been so long."<sup>2</sup>

In the days that followed, Gilmer made his presence known along the defensive lines of Richmond and Petersburg. He rode from one end of the defenses to the other, usually

---

<sup>1</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Aug. 8, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

accompanied by Maj. Walter A. Stevens (who preceded Gilmer as Lee's chief engineer). On August 15, 1862, Gilmer and Stevens visited Petersburg. Ostensibly they made the journey to examine the area around City Point, on the Appomattox River. Gilmer had another purpose in mind, however, for he and Stevens called upon Gen. D. H. Hill to settle a minor dispute. After Hill and Gilmer exchanged social amenities regarding Savannah, Gilmer moved to the main topic. Hill, the infantry commander at Petersburg, had removed an engineer officer assigned to the area by Stevens. As far as Gilmer was concerned, only the chief engineer of the army could decide the duties of engineer officers. Gilmer recalled: "I told him [Hill] these matters must be understood at the beginning or never ending confusion . . . would follow."<sup>3</sup>

Gilmer's confrontation with Hill, a superior officer, was an exercise in audacity. Although he was the chief engineer for the Army of Northern Virginia, Gilmer obviously felt the engineers could serve in conjunction with the army but they were an entirely separate organization. Gilmer was also exploring the boundaries of his powers, as most people do when confronted with new responsibilities. Since there were no rules supporting Gilmer's separatist stance, he elected to probe a little further to fathom his own

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Aug. 17, 1862.

limits. On August 21, six days after the visit with Hill, Gilmer sent Lee a report on the status of the Richmond-Petersburg line. Included in the report was a query from Gilmer regarding the disposition of engineer officers under Lee. Gilmer had been Lee's chief engineer for over one month, yet he did not know the location of all his officers. Gilmer asked that all engineer officers report to his office. The underlying question in the report was the limit of Gilmer's authority.<sup>4</sup>

Lee grasped the intent of Gilmer's report. His response to Gilmer was characteristic of the subtlety Lee employed when issuing orders. Lee referred Gilmer to Stevens regarding the location of engineer troops. As far as contact between Gilmer and his engineers and the underlying question of jurisdiction, Lee explained: "As chief engineer of this Army of Northern Virginia you have the authority to call upon the engineer officers on duty with it for reports as to where they are and on what duty employed."<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, neither Lee nor Gilmer knew of a year-old precedent which settled the dispute of the engineers' chain of command. In the autumn of 1861, Capt. Samuel H. Lockett had requested from the Engineers Bureau a clarification of duties and authority. The few available engineers were so

---

<sup>4</sup>O.R., XII, pt. 3, 944-45.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

hard pressed that Bureau Chief Danville Leadbetter felt constrained to limit his officers. Leadbetter knew that unless engineer duties were defined, his engineers could spend more time squabbling with their commanders than constructing works. Possibly for this reason, Leadbetter, in October, 1861, had relinquished most of the engineers' independence. He had instructed Lockett: "The commanding general being responsible for the defense, he decides what works shall be built and when. Your own responsibility ends when your views have been made known to him officially."<sup>6</sup>

Lee indicated the engineers in the Army of Northern Virginia were his responsibility. The implied message of Lee's response was that Gilmer's authority extended only so far as receiving reports from engineer officers. Apparently, as far as Lee was concerned, Gilmer would make no decisions on engineer assignments; that came under Lee's authority. Only the War Department could overrule Lee's decision. For this reason, the Confederate bureaucracy beckoned to Gilmer once again in the form of the Engineer Bureau. If Gilmer were the Chief of the Bureau of Engineers, he could determine the lines of jurisdiction through consultation with the Secretary of War. Through his inquiries to Lee and his interview with Hill, Gilmer was seemingly preparing himself for command of the Engineer Bureau.

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., VI, 750.

It was only a matter of time before Gilmer was relieved in the field and elevated to the bureaucracy. In an effort to prove his fitness, Gilmer pushed himself beyond the limits of endurance. On August 9, he spent a full day in the vicinity of Chaffin's Bluff overlooking the James. During the course of the day, the heat had its way with Gilmer. He was stricken with a fever which forced him to spend the next day in bed. Gilmer refused to heed the warning signal, however, for he did not slacken his pace. After riding some 25 miles on August 20, Gilmer was taken ill once again. Gilmer's fits of illness were probably noted by his commander.<sup>7</sup>

In late August, 1862, Lee's army moved north. Gilmer remained behind in Richmond. This time it was not illness which kept Gilmer from the front but his own position of responsibility, for Lee left Gilmer in charge of the Richmond defenses. The general informed Gilmer: "I desire you to use every exertion to perfect and complete the defenses around and to the approaches to Richmond by land and water. I wish to place them in such a condition that troops can be withdrawn from them with safety to the city, leaving a proper guard, and again restored when necessary . . .

---

<sup>7</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Aug. 11, 1862, Gilmer spends day at Chaffin's Bluff, taken ill with fever; Aug. 21, 1862, Gilmer taken ill after 25-mile ride. Gilmer Papers.

as soon as you can leave Richmond I desire you to join me."<sup>8</sup>

At least one high ranking Confederate official shared Lee's keen interest in the city defenses. On August 31, President Jefferson Davis called Gilmer to his office for a discussion of the works. Since it was the first meeting of the two men, Davis made every attempt to be pleasant. The president knew of Gilmer's recent illness and asked Gilmer about his health. Inwardly Gilmer met the overtures with scorn. It was obvious that the purpose of the conference was to enlighten Davis on the progress of the defenses, not to exchange social pleasantries. Further, Gilmer was no great admirer of the president. Gilmer told his wife: "I had quite an interview yesterday with the President, the veritable traitor Jeff. . . . He was as polite as sunshine and many mornings, expressed great pleasure in meeting me . . . He was, no doubt concerned about the works, and pleased enough to have me attend to them, but 'divil a bit' did he care for my personal welfare thereafter, at least that is my opinion. A little time will show how matters stand. If he intends what is right toward me, he must without further delay promote me to the colonelcy of my corps."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>O.R., XII, pt. 3, 944.

<sup>9</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 1, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

Less than one month after his meeting with Davis, Gilmer knew the future of his career. On September 25, Gilmer was named chief of the Bureau of Engineers.<sup>10</sup> He knew of the decision days before the official announcement, through the good graces of Secretary of War George W. Randolph.<sup>11</sup> The Secretary, wrote Gilmer "decided to issue the order assigning me to the charge of the Engineer Bureau with the hope that I might be able to bring the engineer service into some kind of order."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the government's apparent faith in his abilities, Gilmer was not immediately advanced to the rank of colonel. By this time Gilmer was weary of evasive promises. Since the matter of his promotion rested with the president, Gilmer decided to go to the source. Gilmer told Davis that any further delay in a promotion could be interpreted as a negative comment on Gilmer's character. Davis was understanding and apologetic during the conversation. In an effort to soothe the engineer, Davis voiced the possibility of Gilmer being promoted to brigadier general. For the immediate future, however, Gilmer would be advanced to colonel. No reflection on Gilmer's worthiness was intended,

---

<sup>10</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. II, 95.

<sup>11</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 21, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

Davis stated. Further, Gilmer recalled, Davis added that "he saw no good reason himself for holding the place open any longer."<sup>13</sup>

Gilmer left the meeting satisfied with the position. Davis diplomatically allowed Gilmer to believe that his strong stance won the promotion. In reality, forthrightness had very little to do with Gilmer's advancement. Gilmer's problem in securing the promotion lay with the haphazard establishment of the Engineer Bureau.

On March 6, 1861, the Confederate Congress had established a Corps of Engineers. The engineers would be limited in size, only one colonel being allowed in the corps. In addition, the engineers were to be four majors, five captains, and an appropriate number of lieutenants. These officers commanded a single company of engineer troops. Two of the 100 engineer troops were designated as musicians. Since this was the Confederacy's entire complement of engineers, the rank of colonel was reserved for the chief of the bureau.<sup>14</sup>

There was no colonel of engineers in the Confederacy until Gilmer was made the bureau's chief. Between March 1861 and September 1861, a succession of proxies guided the Engineer Bureau. These men were merely the "acting chiefs."

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. I, 127-28.

Gilmer's refusal to accept the post cost him a promotion although he was ranking engineer officer. Had Gilmer remained steadfast in his refusal, it would have taken an act of Congress to create another engineer colonel before Gilmer could advance.<sup>15</sup>

Gilmer's difficulty in realizing his promotion was indicative of the problems he faced when he assumed command of the bureau. Secretary of War Randolph was earnest when he expressed the hope that Gilmer would organize the engineers. It was a task of Olympian proportions. The Engineer Bureau was understaffed, poorly funded and filled with inexperienced men. The situation was remarkable for a country fighting a defensive war.

Nearly all the Confederate states bordered on the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, seacoast defenses were necessary. Some forts were acquired through force, such as Fort Sumter, yet they were not sufficient for the Confederacy's needs. Internally, river systems ran from north to south into the heart of the Confederacy, and the heart could be cut out if the rivers were defenseless. Gilmer learned this bitter truth firsthand at Forts Donelson and Henry. The engineers should have been one of the most important branches of the Confederate services, for a well-trained cadre of professional engineers could have helped balance the lack of engineer manpower.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 326.

Initially it seemed the Confederacy was fortunate in this respect. In 1861 a number of qualified engineer officers left the U.S. Army. Of the seventeen officers who departed from the Corps, sixteen cast their lot with the Southern cause. The sole exception was Captain Francis T. Bryan, who did not commit himself to either side during the conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Numbers alone could not remedy the inexperience of the Confederate engineers. The majority of those who resigned from the U.S. Engineers were relatively recent alumni of West Point. Half of the Confederate engineers graduated after 1856.<sup>17</sup> Gilmer's friend, George Washington Custis Lee probably had the most experience of the graduates from the decade prior to the war. Not only was Lee an 1854 graduate, meaning seven years of experience, but he also gained extensive knowledge of seacoast fortifications while serving as Gilmer's aide.

Most of the Confederacy's engineers-to-be were in their apprenticeships when they resigned from the U.S. Army. Owing to the extremities of the time, however, each of them received assignments regardless of youth or previous

---

<sup>16</sup>William M. Robinson, Jr., "The Confederate Engineers," The Military Engineer, XXII (1930), 299-300.

<sup>17</sup>Robert R. Ellis, "The Confederate Corps of Engineers," The Military Engineer, XLIII (1951), 36-37; Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," 299.

position. Further, as a result of the Confederacy's desperate need for officers, the majority of these men were catapulted to a position of responsibility beyond their prior experiences. According to an act of Congress, officers resigning from the U.S. Army were accepted into the Confederate service at least one grade higher than their former ranks. In Gilmer's case this meant a promotion from captain to major.<sup>18</sup>

If the Confederate government had not tampered with its engineers it would have had a good foundation for an engineer corps. Young engineers were better than no engineers at all. Defying all logic, however, the Confederacy nearly squandered all of its engineering resources. In an effort to supply the officer corps of the entire army, the Confederate government assigned ten engineers to duties outside their profession. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, the most senior of the engineer officers, became a general of infantry. Custis Lee spent most of the war as Jefferson Davis' aide and a field commander. Porter Alexander and his friend, Richard K. Meade, both went into the artillery. The same fate befell Joseph Dixon, Robert F. Beckham and William Proctor Smith. (In Smith's case, the mistake was corrected at a later date.) Former U.S. Capt. William H. C. Whiting's fate was similar to that of Custis Lee.

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 300.

Throughout the war, Whiting served as a general of infantry while remaining on the Engineer roster as a major.<sup>19</sup>

Each former U.S. Engineer officer was accepted into the Confederate service with little apparent regard for the future Bureau of Engineers. As of March 16, 1861, the Confederacy boasted seven engineer officers. Custis Lee and William Whiting accounted for two more slots in the Bureau despite their actual roles during the war. An additional five officers, including Gilmer, were added during the conflict for a total of fourteen engineers. In terms of practicality, this amounted to less than two engineer officers for every state in the Confederacy.<sup>20</sup>

To the average observer, the size of the Confederate Engineer Corps would not have seemed absurdly small. Like everything else in the Confederate government, the engineers were based in design on their counterpart in the United States. The regular U.S. Army Engineers also amounted to a single company prior to the war. For this reason, Gilmer spent twenty-two years in the Corps before advancing to the rank of captain. Once the war began, the Engineers were expanded by volunteers to four companies with an appropriate number of officers. The Confederacy established a regular army, then organized its volunteers into the Provisional

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 299-300.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Army of the Confederate States (P.A.C.S.). In the process, an important branch of the army was ignored. Until December 1861, there were no means to appoint engineer officers in the Provisional Army.<sup>21</sup>

It was no surprise, then, that the Bureau of Engineers was ill prepared for the requests which poured in demanding engineer officers. By the autumn of 1861, there were simply no engineers to spare. The flood of officers from the U.S. Army slowed to a trickle. Each new engineer entering the Confederate service was immediately assigned to the field, often with breathtaking speed.

Gilmer's case was typical of an engineer's fate. About the time Gilmer returned to the South, Gen. Felix K. Zollicoffer requested the services of an engineer from the War Department. The relative importance of Zollicoffer's command in the western theatre did not warrant an engineer. The reply Zollicoffer received was hardly satisfactory. On September 30, 1861, Acting Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin wrote Zollicoffer that the last available engineer was Jeremy Gilmer, who was destined for Albert Sidney Johnston.<sup>22</sup>

Once in the field, Gilmer faced the same problems confronting the majority of the engineers: a dearth of qualified engineering personnel throughout the Confederacy.

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., size of U.S. Engineers before war, expansion during war, 414; no appointment of P.A.C.S. engineers, 297, 301.

<sup>22</sup>O.R., IV, 432.

Gilmer and the other engineers were forced to contract adjunct engineers from civilian ranks. Most of the part-time engineers knew nothing of the military aspects of their profession. Gilmer was fortunate in that Lt. Joseph Dixon was a former engineer (although at the time he was an artillery officer). Gilmer ignored Dixon's position and recruited the young engineer for construction at Forts Donelson and Henry. Owing to the situation in the West, Gilmer used civil engineers as well. For example, Gilmer entrusted a "civil engineer" named Sayers with the construction of defenses near Hopkinsville, Ky.<sup>23</sup>

The use of civilian and military assistants by engineers such as Gilmer was common enough to win the attention of Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin. If there was one man in the Confederate government who recognized the need of engineers, that man was Benjamin. In December, 1861, Benjamin brought the matter before President Davis in blunt terms. "The Corps of Engineers of the Army is composed at present of only twelve officers, while fivefold that number are needed. No provision exists for the appointment of engineers in the Provisional Army. There is a large body of gentlemen educated for scientific pursuits, not military engineers by profession, but whose services it has been indispensable to secure for engineering purposes, and who

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 544-45.

now occupy in the army the position of mere hired employees. . . . I trust you will concur in my earnest recommendation that Congress authorize the appointment of at least fifty officers in the Provisional Army of rank not higher than that of captain."<sup>24</sup>

Davis promptly agreed to Benjamin's proposal. Yet, somewhere between the President and the Congress, Benjamin's recommended minimum number of appointees became the maximum. Predictably, the influx of fifty P.A.C.S. engineers was not enough to satisfy the demands on the Bureau. Four months later, Congress sanctioned the appointment of more engineers, but again with stipulations. The bill of April 21, 1862, called for "an additional number of officers in the Engineer Corps of the Provisional Army of rank not higher than captain. Provided, that the whole corps shall not exceed one hundred."<sup>25</sup>

Initially, no one seemed to consider how the ceiling on rank might affect the engineers. Either Benjamin was satisfied with his efforts on behalf of the Engineers, or he was too occupied with other duties to pursue the matter. It took another Secretary of War to point out the flaw in the new bill. George W. Randolph came to question the quality of men the service might receive if the P.A.C.S.

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., IV, Vol. I, 796.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 821, 1080.

engineers were limited to captains. He stated the obvious to Davis: "The present law permits no higher grade than that of Captain. . . . This discrimination is unjust and impolitic. If men of talent and acquirement are needed in this corps, promotion should be offered equal to that attainable in other branches."<sup>26</sup>

Once Randolph pointed out the incongruity, Davis and the Congress readily agreed to the recommended changes. On September 23, 1862, Congress passed a sweeping bill which prescribed ranks for all the P.A.C.S. engineers. However, despite Randolph's intentions, the engineers gained little from the new bill. Congress allotted slots for exactly 100 men, neatly sidestepping Randolph's recommendation while granting it at the same time. In effect, promotions could be awarded to only ten men beyond the previous limit of captain. Congress allowed for "one colonel, three lieutenant colonels, six majors, fifty [forty] captains, thirty first lieutenants, and twenty second lieutenants."<sup>27</sup>

Considering the origin of many P.A.C.S. engineers, the lethargic response of Congress to engineer promotions did little to enhance the morale of the Corps. Prior to the war, South Carolina formed its own armed services, compatible with its seceded status as an independent country. Both

---

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Ser. IV, Vol. II, 47.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 198.

Virginia and North Carolina followed this example in the early days of the war. All three former states included an engineer branch as an arm of the service.<sup>28</sup> The Corps did, in fact, seem a breed apart in appearance, pay and numbers. Engineers were distinctive with their gray uniforms trimmed in "buff" and their brass buttons, embossed by a Gothic "E."<sup>29</sup> A colonel of engineers received \$210 per month in salary, equal to the pay of an artillery colonel, but \$15 higher than a colonel of infantry or cavalry.<sup>30</sup> At \$162, a major of engineers was the highest paid officer of that rank in the Confederate armed forces.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since there were slightly more than 100 men in the entire officer corps, the rarity of an engineer officer also attracted a certain amount of notoriety. The result was an Engineer Corps of amateurs, which a professional such as Gilmer could discern at a glance. After he assumed command of the

---

<sup>28</sup>Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," 415.

<sup>29</sup>T. M. R. Talcott, J. Thompson Brown, and R. W. Hunger, "Description of Confederate Uniforms" (typescript, Museum of the Confederacy), 2; Robinson, "The Confederate Engineers," XII (1939), 515.

<sup>30</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. I, 129; Robinson, "The Confederate Engineers," 514. Robinson asserted that "officers of Cavalry and of the General Staff received the same pay as the corresponding grades in the Engineers." This statement is incorrect for the higher grades. The pay rate was the same for captains and first and second lieutenants in the cavalry and engineers. General staff officers were paid the same rate as cavalry officers. (See O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. I, 129.)

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

Bureau, Gilmer's private assessment of the P.A.C.S. Engineers was grim. "We have lost nearly all the advantages aimed at, by the appointment of inefficient persons in the corps. Of the one hundred officers allowed, twenty-four have been given to worthless sons of broken down Virginia families, about twenty to South Carolinians no better than the aforesaid Virginians. Out of the whole, we have thus far gotten not more than a dozen good men, men who can lay any claims to be called engineers."<sup>32</sup>

These were the engineers sent into the field by the Confederacy in 1862. If Gilmer's opinion was even partially correct, then there were probably areas of the Confederacy which did not benefit from the engineers, but were handicapped by their presence. Yet the need was so dire, that any engineer officer was welcomed initially by an army commander. Out of necessity, most of the engineering burdens fell on the shoulders of P.A.C.S. engineers. They were put to work immediately by an engineer-starved Confederacy. As a result, even the sincere novices were unacquainted with their duties when placed into the field. Officially, Gilmer conceded: "The great and responsible labor of the military engineer in our Army has been . . . committed to the officers of the provisional corps. . . . Many of these,

---

<sup>32</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 12, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

though of clever attainments in their profession, had had no experience in military constructions up to the date of appointment, and had therefore much to learn at the same time they were called on to reduce it to practice."<sup>33</sup>

In short, by early 1862, the Engineers' manpower problem was not markedly improved, despite the expansion of the Corps. Engineer officers in the Provisional Army were available, but they required the supervision of ranking engineers. Joseph E. Johnston, commanding the Department of Northern Virginia, was amply supplied with P.A.C.S. engineers. In February, 1862, however, Johnston still lacked a chief engineer for his army. At that time, the P.A.C.S. engineers were still limited to the rank of captain. Acting Bureau Chief Alfred L. Rives was sympathetic to such plights, but understandably short on results. Following a period of consideration, Rives asked Johnston: "In a matter of such importance, could not a brigadier-general be temporarily assigned to duty as your chief engineer? General Whiting, major of Engineers, C.S.A. would doubtless render great service in that capacity. Should it be too difficult to detail him temporarily, General R. E. Rodes is most admirably fitted for the position. . . . He can also probably suggest to you the names of several capable engineers on other duty under your command."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. II, 259-60.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., Ser. I, Vol. V, 1081-82.

Few men knew more about the limitations of P.A.C.S. engineers than Alfred Landon Rives. By April 1862, he was the acting chief of a bureau that included 14 regular engineers and 100 P.A.C.S. engineers. Theoretically, Rives could have sent Johnston an officer from that pool. The fact that he did not was indicative of the engineer shortage and the powers of the Engineer Bureau. In actuality, the Chief of the Engineer Bureau did little beyond receive reports and make recommendations. Small wonder that until Gilmer became the Chief Engineer, the position was treated as a minor post.

On April 8, 1861, Maj. Josiah Gorgas had become the first chief of engineers.<sup>35</sup> By his appointment, the Confederate government indicated the relative unimportance of the Engineer Bureau, for Gorgas served concurrently as acting Chief of Engineers and as Chief of the Ordnance Bureau.<sup>36</sup> Even though Gorgas' main duty as engineer chief consisted of receiving reports, he knew by the summer of 1861 that the post was beyond his capabilities. Gorgas was not an engineer, but a former artillery officer. As such, he was not sufficiently versed in engineer duties to the point of recommending appropriate actions on the basis of

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., Series IV, Vol. I, 1176; Robinson, "The Confederate Engineers," 415-16.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 415.

engineer reports. Further, his duties at the Ordnance Bureau consumed most of his time. As a result, he admitted to the Secretary of War: "No attention can be paid to them [engineer reports] by me. It is no longer possible. You will see the absolute necessity for ordering an Engineer officer in charge here."<sup>37</sup>

In August, 1861, Maj. Danville Leadbetter replaced Gorgas in the Engineer Bureau.<sup>38</sup> Leadbetter was a military engineer; and although he was qualified to head the Engineer Bureau, his tenure was brief. There were so few regular engineer officers in the army that the Confederacy could not afford to waste Leadbetter's talents in the position of Chief Engineer. On November 11, 1861, he was sent to Tennessee to reconstruct railroad trestles destroyed by guerrillas.<sup>39</sup> He never returned to the Bureau.<sup>40</sup>

Captain Alfred Landon Rives succeeded Leadbetter as Acting Chief of Engineers.<sup>41</sup> At thirty-one years of age,

---

<sup>37</sup>Frank E. Vandiver, Ploughshares into Swords: Josiah Gorgas and Confederate Ordnance (Austin, Tex., 1952), 73.

<sup>38</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. I, 1176; Ser. I, Vol. IV, 531.

<sup>39</sup>O.R., Ser. I, Vol. IV, 234, 538.

<sup>40</sup>Charles C. Jones, Jr. "A Roster of General Officers, Heads of Departments, Senators, Representatives, Military Organizations, etc., etc., in Confederate Service During the War Between the States," Southern Historical Society Papers, II (1876), A52-A53.

<sup>41</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. I, 1176.

Rives was younger than either Gorgas or Leadbetter, yet he was probably better prepared than either of his two predecessors in the Bureau.<sup>42</sup> Rives knew what to expect from the job, for until his appointment to the national Engineer Bureau, he had acted as chief of the Virginia State Engineers.<sup>43</sup> Prior to that position Rives served in the field under General John B. Magruder in Virginia and as assistant chief of Virginia's Engineers.<sup>44</sup> Gilmer later observed that "of the many willing and efficient Engineers who devoted their abilities to the protection of our homes, none brought higher professional attainments and resources, nor greater zeal and energy into the struggle than Col. Rives."<sup>45</sup>

Few men in either the Union or Confederate armies could match Rives's background or experience. Although he was a Virginian by parentage, Rives was born in Paris, France, where his father, William Cabell Rives, was American ambassador. As a result of his father's position, Rives was accorded opportunities seldom available to American youths at the time. He graduated from Virginia Military

---

<sup>42</sup>"Autobiographical and Biographical Sketches of Alfred Landon Rives," Rives Family Papers 1781-1945, University of Virginia.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.; O.R., Vol. IV, 702-03.

<sup>45</sup>Jeremy F. Gilmer to Allen Caperton, July 13, 1869, Rives Family Papers.

Institute, studied at the University of Virginia, and returned to France in 1849 with his father. In France, Rives entered the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussees to continue his studies as an engineer. When he graduated in 1854, Rives was selected by Napoleon III as a member of a scientific expedition to Algeria. He declined additional opportunities in France for more pedestrian tasks in the United States. When civil war began, Rives was an assistant engineer to Montgomery C. Meigs in Washington, D.C. He cast his lot with the Confederacy when Virginia seceded from the Union.<sup>46</sup>

On May 10, 1861, Rives received a captain's commission in the Virginia State Engineers.<sup>47</sup> He still held that rank when he was named Chief of the Confederate Bureau of Engineers.<sup>48</sup> Rives' rise was so meteoric that it preceded the inclusion of engineers in the P.A.C.S. Technically, from November 13 to December 31, 1861, a man outside the regular army held the highest engineer office in the Confederacy. After the appointment of engineers in the Provisional Army, Rives received a captaincy in the P.A.C.S.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Autobiographical and Biographical Sketches, ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Rives Commission as Captain of Engineers in the Provisional Army of Virginia, ibid.

<sup>48</sup>O.R., IV, 702-3.

<sup>49</sup>Robinson, "The Confederate Engineers," 416.

Rives had much in common with the engineers. For all his knowledge of engineering, he was relatively inexperienced in the military side of the profession. Rives made mistakes as an engineer on Virginia's peninsula under Magruder, but he learned from his errors. Once he was sufficiently familiarized with his position as bureau chief, he set about overseeing engineer works. He was unwilling to let the P.A.C.S. engineers repeat his own mistakes. In March, 1862, Rives wrote P.A.C.S. Lt. Henry T. Douglas at Yorktown: "I would take occasion here to condemn, as a general system, small detached redoubts, although you might infer from what you see near Williamsburg that I am in favor of them. I was, when they were commenced, completely inexperienced, and acted under instructions. I now know and have known for some months past that the system is most defective."<sup>50</sup>

Rives did not hesitate to offer his own opinions. As a result, his presence was felt in the Corps of Engineers and elsewhere. Of particular interest to Rives was the status of defenses in his native Virginia. As spring drew near in 1862, Rives paid close attention to progress throughout Virginia at probable points of amphibious invasion. His engineers described their situations in reports for Rives's perusal and recommendations. Since

---

<sup>50</sup>O.R., XI, pt. 3, 388-89.

he had not the time nor the energy to visit all defensive works, Rives offered advice solely on the basis of reports. After the receipt of one such summary from Lt. Conway R. Howards on the Rappahannock, Rives replied: "It seems to me that one-half mile above Tappahannock is the proper place for the lower main battery and 1½ miles below Fort Lowery the proper position for the light artillery, more especially as I understand there are already intrenchments there. . . . Proceed, therefore, with the utmost vigor in the prosecution of the work on land as well as with the obstacles in the river. Piles will prove your most available means. Make use, however, of every available method."<sup>51</sup>

Of more immediate concern to Rives in the spring of 1862 were the defenses of Richmond. The capital of the Confederacy shone like a beacon to the Federal forces. In the early stages of the war, the battle cry of the Union forces was "On to Richmond," for it was believed that the capture of Richmond would precipitate the collapse of the Confederacy. In May 1862, the city's defenses were partially incomplete and, in some cases, lacking artillery. Rives confronted this problem by issuing instructions to John B. Standard, who was directing the city's defenses. "Colonel Goode, Major Allen, and other artillery officers have been directed to mount the 32-pounder guns on ship

---

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., XII, pt. 3, 841.

carriages around this city, and I wish you to point out to these officers, as I have pointed out to you, the places where they are to place the guns, and furnish them with every facility for forwarding the work at your command."<sup>52</sup>

By mid-July, Union forces under Gen. George B. McClellan had been stopped less than ten miles from Richmond. Despite McClellan's defeat, the memory of enemy forces at the gates of the city lingered. A memory of another sort remained with Rives, although it was equally distasteful. When it seemed McClellan was likely to capture Richmond, Confederate authorities pressed forward construction of defenses at a frenzied pace. Rives knew that the construction would not have been so frantic had the city been supplied with a sufficient number of laborers. In part, this resulted from lack of cooperation from the civil sector. If the city was to maintain its defenses for the future, a new solution had to be found. In July, Rives commented to Lewis E. Harvie, President of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, that "hands were called out in Halifax, Charlotte, Lunenburg, Pittsylvania, and Campbell Counties, but have failed to come except in small numbers. One difficulty met with I understand is want of transportation on your road. If such is the case, may I ask your attention

---

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., XI, pt. 3, 504.

to the subject as one of great importance at this particular moment."<sup>53</sup>

As of September 25, 1862, Rives was no longer officially concerned with either labor or cooperation between the authorities on engineer works. On that date, Lt. Col. Jeremy Francis Gilmer assumed command of the Engineer Bureau. When Gilmer superseded Rives, it did not necessarily mean a new direction for the Corps. Nor did it mean Gilmer was any less concerned with labor and civil authorities than Rives. Indeed, Gilmer's elevation to Chief Engineer did not alter the problems of the Engineer Bureau.

Gilmer and Rives shared basically the same approach in dealing with the field engineers. Like Rives, Gilmer found that he could not personally direct all works under the engineers' care. Consequently, he resorted to Rives's device of issuing instructions by mail. If Gilmer followed Rives's style, however, his tone carried more authority than that of Rives. Gilmer was particularly displeased if he found his orders altered or ignored by units in the field. On February 18, 1863, Gilmer wrote Lt. Col. Walter H. Stevens at Waldon Bridge, N.C.: "In my original instructions to Colonel Gwynn he was directed in all cases to give the works for defending points in the rivers of North Carolina a development such that they could be held by a

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 639.

small force. . . . These instructions are fully approved by the President. If defenses of a different character have been laid out at Weldon . . . you will please to have my original directions carried out."<sup>54</sup>

Gilmer's major concern spanned both his administration and that of Rives. After nearly two years of war, the size of the Engineer Corps remained dismally small. Rives oversaw the induction of roughly 100 P.A.C.S. Engineers. In Gilmer's opinion, although those engineers were welcome, their overall quantity and quality were not sufficient for the Bureau's needs. This was particularly true in light of the regular Corps' numbers and assignments. On December 7, 1862, Gilmer noted: "The Corps of Engineers in the Army of the Confederate States embraces--colonel, 1; majors, 4; captains, 8; total, 13. Of this number, 7 have been assigned to duty beyond the line of their immediate profession, leaving but 6 for engineer service, and these are in charge of operations from which they cannot be returned without serious risk to the country."<sup>55</sup>

Gilmer wanted an expansion of unprecedented proportions. As far as he was concerned, the reasons for such a move were as myriad as the engineers' responsibilities.

---

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., XVIII, 884.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., XX, pt. 2, 443.

Engineering officers were required to perform tasks varying from the construction of railroads to service under the Nitre and Mining Bureau--in short, everything of a scientific or technical nature. Gilmer maintained that the Corps needed more officers because of its growing list of assignments.<sup>56</sup> His vision of expansion also encompassed the rank and file of the Corps. In his report, Gilmer noted there were less than 300 enlisted and non-commissioned personnel in the Corps to assist the officers. Instead of this small scattered band, Gilmer recommended the establishment of four Engineer regiments of ten companies each, the regiments assigned to particular areas. He added: "I would under existing circumstances assign the four regiments of engineers as follows, viz: One regiment to the Army of Northern Virginia . . .; one to Eastern and Middle Tennessee; one to the Valley of the Mississippi and the Gulf Coast; and the fourth to Charleston, Savannah, Wilmington, and the eastern part of North Carolina, and as far north as Petersburg, Va."<sup>57</sup>

The validity of locating Engineer units in Virginia and Tennessee was unquestionable. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia guarded Richmond. Confederate fortifications ran up the Peninsula, between the James and York rivers,

---

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., Ser. IV, Vol. II, 261.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 260-61.

to the Confederacy's capital. Richmond and Petersburg were surrounded by defenses in varying states of completion. Engineers were also needed in Tennessee. The state was crisscrossed by rivers which Union forces had already exploited with remarkable success. Defenses were necessary if the Confederacy was to maintain its tenuous hold on the state. North and South Carolina needed Engineers for their coastal defenses, although both could also be threatened from the interior.

Under Gilmer's scheme, over a quarter of the Engineer strength would be in proximity to the coastal regions. By late 1862, the Union blockade of the Confederacy's coast was having the desired effect. Virginia's main port of Norfolk, and Louisiana's New Orleans were already under Federal control. North Carolina's ports were threatened from Roanoke Island, while Georgia's ports fell under Union eyes from the environs of Savannah and the Sea Islands. Confederate blockade runners still managed to elude Union ships, but their success rate had drastically decreased since the beginning of the war. Whatever usefulness remained to the runners depended on the number of ports able to receive their goods. Gilmer intended to protect the remaining ports through his dispersal of Engineer troops. The pitifully few harbors left in the Confederacy were in the Carolinas, Georgia, and along the Gulf coast, more or

less exactly where Gilmer stated that Engineers were the most necessary. The availability of such troops had a bearing on the Engineers' effectiveness as well. The Corps obtained most of its tools and supplies from abroad, particularly Great Britain.<sup>58</sup>

In his report to the Secretary of War, Gilmer strongly emphasized that haste was required in implementing his proposals. Since the Confederacy could not afford the time to indoctrinate 4,000 raw engineer troops, Gilmer suggested a simple solution. His four regiments could be obtained from the ranks of men already in uniform. Not only were these men familiar with military life, but Gilmer felt certain that some were experienced in areas required by the corps. Gilmer then warned: "Unless this be authorized, it will require so long a time to organize the number of companies needed that much injury will result to the service."<sup>59</sup>

On March 20, 1863, Congress granted Gilmer his four regiments.<sup>60</sup> In typical fashion, the legislative branch had delayed action on Gilmer's recommendations for nearly three months. With precious time already squandered, the Engineer Bureau immediately began its search for suitable

---

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 409-410; Ser. IV, Vol. III, 1085.

<sup>59</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. II, 261.

<sup>60</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, Vol. III, 191.

candidates inside the Confederate army. The process lasted for months and was taxing in the extreme. Even some of the acceptable candidates proved to be a disappointment, for they plagued Gilmer needlessly with their petty problems. Somehow Gilmer found the time and patience to deal personally with inquiries from potential engineers. Gilmer's correspondence with Lt. D. P. Woodruff was characteristic of the demands placed on the Bureau by applicants. On August 8, 1863, Gilmer wrote Woodruff: "I regret that I am unable to furnish you with any assistance or information with regard to procuring a horse. For such information you are referred to Lt. Col. W. P. Smith."<sup>61</sup>

One of the earliest applicants to the Bureau came from George Gilmer Hull, Lou Gilmer's brother-in-law. Gilmer declined Hull's offer when it was made in October, 1862. At the time, Hull was the manager of the Atlanta and West Point Railroad. Gilmer felt that since Hull was already in a position of responsibility, it would be wiser to let him remain in Georgia. Further, as most of the Alexander males were under arms, Hull would prove useful to the family in a crisis situation.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to D. P. Woodruff, Aug. 8, 1863, Talcott Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>62</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 12, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

Even without Hull's presence in Richmond, Gilmer spent most of his idle hours with his wife's relatives. The Army of Northern Virginia was rife with members of the Alexander clan. Porter Alexander, his wife Betty Mason Alexander, his brother William Felix Alexander, and Alexander Lawton were all in Richmond prior to Gilmer's arrival. While he was Lee's chief engineer, Gilmer quartered with the family in a house on the Williamsburg Road outside Richmond.<sup>63</sup>

When Lee launched his Northern invasion in the autumn of 1862, Porter Alexander and Lawton departed with the army. The remainder of the family moved to a house in Richmond's fashionable Church Hill district shortly before Gilmer was named Chief of the Engineer Bureau. Gilmer was pleased with the move, for the home was spacious enough to give each family member a private, furnished room. In short, Gilmer informed his wife, it was like home save for "your absence my old dumpling."<sup>64</sup>

The war soon intruded on the family's idyllic life. In the Antietam Creek campaign, Lawton was wounded in the calf. The wound was serious enough to bring Sally Lawton to Richmond with a physician friend from Georgia. Following

---

<sup>63</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, June 7 and Aug. 4, 1862, ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, family moves to Church Hill, description of house interior, Aug. 11, 1862; quote, Sept. 18, 1862. Ibid.

a stopover at the house on Church Hill, Sally Lawton and the doctor proceeded to Lawton's side in Staunton.<sup>65</sup>

The family's quarters on Church Hill became a hospital ward. Once Lawton was well enough to travel, his wife brought him back to Richmond for recuperation. Gilmer relinquished his room to the wounded man, knowing that the period of recovery would be anything but short. By the time he returned to Richmond, Lawton's leg was swollen with infection. After an examination of his wound, Lawton was sedated with chloroform while his leg was drained.<sup>66</sup>

Although the infection healed, Lawton was soon in agony from another source. Owing to the nature of his wound, Lawton had received heavy doses of morphine in Staunton. As a result, he became addicted to the drug. The attending physician in Richmond followed a plan of gradual withdrawal to end the addiction. Despite the slow reduction of dosages, Gilmer was able to discern a change in Lawton's behavior. He observed that Lawton became "restless and nervous."<sup>67</sup>

Lawton's malady soon threw the house into confusion. As the process of withdrawal continued, Sally Lawton concluded that her husband was losing his grip on sanity. It

---

<sup>65</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Sept. 28, 1862, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>66</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Oct. 19, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., Oct. 20, 1862.

was a trying time for the entire household; no one was unaffected by Lawton's plight, least of all Gilmer. Since Lawton required constant care, the nursing duties devolved on Gilmer and Felix Alexander. Sally Lawton, consumed by anxiety, was in no condition to be of much aid. At this critical juncture, Gilmer's right arm was nearly immobilized by pain from rheumatism. As he and Felix Alexander seemed the only family members capable of caring for Lawton, Gilmer's infirmity made him realize his own limitations. Such was Gilmer's concern that he actually considered bringing his wife and Louisa Porter to Richmond to help Lawton's recovery.<sup>68</sup>

Such a charged atmosphere naturally strained relations between household members. Gilmer found fault with Betty Alexander in particular. Her ineptness as a nurse was the direct cause. It was a minor matter, but under the circumstances enough to irritate Gilmer. In his exasperation, Gilmer remarked: "I have not as yet discovered anything for which she has a turn. Still, I must think her kindly disposed. . . . Every day I live, greater and greater becomes my amazement at Porter's marriage."<sup>69</sup>

The mood of the house slaves improved with Lawton's recovery. By mid-November, Lawton's disposition was much

---

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., Oct. 22, 1862.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., Oct. 19, 1862.

more congenial. His addiction was ended and he was able to enjoy the outdoors for brief intervals of time. Sally Lawton became optimistic. Even Gilmer had no complaints regarding the family. During the following month, however, the family began to move in different directions.<sup>70</sup>

On December 18, Gilmer announced Felix Alexander's engagement to Lucy Grattan of Richmond. This signaled Alexander's departure from the family circle. Betty Alexander's departure from Richmond barely preceded her brother-in-law's marriage. On January 3, 1863, three days prior to the nuptials, Betty Alexander and her infant daughter left for Chesterfield Station to join her husband. By that time, Betty Alexander had been replaced as a target for Gilmer's criticism by a new member of the household. Sometime in December, Mrs. Phoebe Pember attached herself to the family and came to stay at the Church Hill residence. In Gilmer's opinion, Mrs. Pember's basic fault was a tendency toward gossip. He observed: "Oh what romances she . . . does tell. I get provoked sometimes at her efforts to impose upon my skeptical nature, it is a reflection on my common sense . . . as a rule I believe she tells stories, romances or lies! with no sinister purpose, but

---

<sup>70</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Nov. 11, 1862, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

to make her interesting by keeping up the conversation."<sup>71</sup>

Shortly after the first of the year, then, Gilmer was abandoned to his own devices with Phoebe Pember. Porter Alexander and Felix Alexander were both in the field. With Betty Alexander's departure, only Gilmer, Phoebe Pember and her friend, Miss Ball, remained in the house. Even with this small company, the residence was empty at times. Gilmer was absent at the Engineer Bureau, while both Mrs. Pember and Miss Ball were matrons at nearby Chimbarazo Hospital. Still, it was impossible for Gilmer to avoid their company altogether. The pair of matrons kept the house in order, while Gilmer assumed full responsibility for the rent of \$300 per month. For a time, Gilmer considered vacating the house, particularly if Felix Alexander showed no inclination to return with his bride. Instead, Gilmer invited his own wife to Richmond.<sup>72</sup>

Phoebe Pember was no stranger to Lou Gilmer. Like the Alexander family, Phoebe Pember was from Georgia. If

---

<sup>71</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 18, 1862, Gilmer Papers. Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Jan. 3, 1863, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers; Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 378. Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 18 and 25, 1862, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>72</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Jan. 3, 1863, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

this association was not enough, Mrs. Pember achieved a certain amount of notoriety through her choice of profession during the war. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of nursing tasks were performed by males. Female nurses such as Mrs. Pember and Miss Ball were still the exception rather than the rule. Such women were independent, a quality not particularly valued in the ideal of Southern femininity. Women simply did not seek careers. Probably for this reason, Lou Gilmer predicted a rather sad and possibly shady future for Phoebe Pember.<sup>73</sup> Still, apparently neither Lou Gilmer nor her husband openly expressed any ill will or disapproval toward the nurse. Indeed, Gilmer treated Phoebe Pember with the same courtesy ideally reserved for all women. Phoebe Pember reported to her sister: "I staid nearly two months at Col. Gilmer's where they had a very pleasant mess, but he will not let me bear my share of the expenses. I was almost afraid to ask him what I owed him with tea at twelve dollars a pound and coffee at five."<sup>74</sup>

Although Gilmer exercised nothing but gentlemanly conduct toward Mrs. Pember, he probably disapproved of her

---

<sup>73</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Dec. 22, 1861, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>74</sup>Phoebe Yares Pember, A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond (Jackson, Tenn., 1959), 157.

actions. His opinion that women should be removed from war's harsher realities had not altered in the slightest degree.<sup>75</sup> Yet, after enduring the company of Betty Alexander and Phoebe Pember, it was difficult for Gilmer to deny his wife a visit to Richmond. In addition, and because of his position as Chief Engineer, it seemed likely that Gilmer would remain in the capital for the duration of the war. As a result, by April, 1863, Lou Gilmer had joined her husband in Richmond.<sup>76</sup>

In the midst of his reorganization of the Corps, Gilmer was temporarily detached from the Engineer Bureau. He had long known that such a transfer was possible. In his first discussions with Davis, the President indicated in a general way that Gilmer's services might be needed outside Richmond. General Lee was much more specific, for he suggested that Gilmer might be sent to Charleston, S. C. Gilmer was less than pleased by Lee's disclosure. While he could not afford to argue the matter with either Lee or Davis, Gilmer was blunt with his wife. He wrote her: "I wish to have nothing to do, as you know, with the Charleston people. I hope the Government can arrange

---

<sup>75</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Jan. 3, 1863, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

<sup>76</sup>Anthony Porter to Jeremy Gilmer, Apr. 10, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

to let them decide upon their own batteries and build them too."<sup>77</sup>

Gilmer was not consulted on the matter of his transfer. On August 25, 1863, he officially received an appointment as major general of volunteers with orders to report to Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard in Charleston.<sup>78</sup> Phoebe Pember recorded Gilmer's transfer with sadness. "I shall lose very kind and devoted friends by Davis appointing Gilmer a Major General, and sending him to Charleston. I have spent every evening with them for five months, and shall have no place to go now. I live a mile and a half from the city proper. As a sett off Mrs. Lawton has come in as Lawton has been made Quartermaster General."<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 25, 1862, Aug. 24, 1862; O.R., XII, pt. 3, 944-45; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Aug. 24, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>78</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 8.

<sup>79</sup>Pember, Southern Woman's Story, 166.

"All we can do is to toil"

August 1863 - May 1865

Chapter V

In August, 1863, Gilmer arrived in Charleston, S. C. The sight which greeted him differed considerably from his previous service in the city. In the summer of 1863, Charleston was under siege. A steadily encroaching ring of Federal forces threatened the city's existence, Union ships blockaded Charleston harbor and pounded the city almost at will. Federal infantry made gains against the city's defenses through occasional damaging forays in conjunction with the Navy's efforts. Further, Charleston was limited in supplies and men while the Union could bring almost unlimited resources to bear against the city. Yet, despite the pressure, Charleston refused to yield. Although the odds were against him, Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard was a stubborn defender. The city's worth was incalculable to the Confederacy.

Charleston was one of the few ports still able to receive goods from abroad. Although the harbor itself was useless owing to the blockade, the swift shallow blockade runners would easily navigate Charleston's many inlets and sounds. Yet as important as Charleston was as a port, it was equally valuable as a symbol of independence. South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union after Lincoln's election. The opening shots of the war were fired there. In the summer of 1863, the Confederacy felt

that it could not absorb another major defeat so soon after Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg.

Near the center of the harbor lay the heart of the matter. The Confederate flag still flew over Fort Sumter, mocking the Union task force. Fort Sumter was the first conquest of the Confederacy. As long as the fort remained in Confederate hands, the Union did not hold Charleston. For this reason, Sumter was the primary target of Federal gunners. As a result of prolonged Union bombardment, Gilmer could scarcely have recognized the fort on which he labored in the decade before the war. It was basically a ruin. Artillery Lt. William Gordon McCabe was impressed by the view, however. McCabe was transferred to Charleston from Virginia in August, 1863, and arrived at about the same time as Gilmer. After he beheld Charleston harbor for the first time on August 17, McCabe recorded that the fort "loomed up in the centre through the haze that was vanishing before the ocean breeze. How proud and defiant the old fortress looked, the deep mouthed Columbiads frowning down from her parapets. . . . Every few minutes comes the dull booming of their guns, and then bricks fly from the south face, showing that she has been struck."<sup>1</sup>

Unlike McCabe, Gilmer was not given to poetry. Under the circumstances, there was nothing romantic about the

---

<sup>1</sup>William Gordon McCabe Diary, entry of Aug. 17, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

situation. To Gilmer's professional eye, the siege seemed to have reached its critical stage and the effects of the besiegers were readily apparent. Fort Sumter was barely usable. The other harbor defenses were weakened from Union bombardments and assaults. The strain of the defense had turned Beauregard's hair gray. Personally, Gilmer believed the city could still be held, but that the harbor positions of Fort Sumter, Moultrie, Gregg and Simpkins were as good as lost. As for himself, Gilmer had come to Charleston to do a job. Yet even after a trip to Savannah in late August, Gilmer was uncertain as to the nature of his assignment. He noted: "I do not know yet in what manner he [Beauregard] will wish to employ the services of a new fledged Maj. General."<sup>2</sup>

Gilmer's quandary over his duties was inexplicable. Not only was Gilmer familiar with Charleston harbor, but he was experienced in coastal defenses. The Confederate government had enlisted the aid of its Chief Engineer to help salvage the situation in Charleston. Opposing Gilmer was an equally capable Union engineer named Quincy Adams Gillmore, who commanded the Federal infantry. Brigadier Gen. Gillmore's task was easier than that of Gilmer. The Union general needed only to destroy Charleston's

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., Aug. 23, 1863; Pember, A Southern Woman, 166; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Aug. 31, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

defenses; Gilmer had to keep the defenses basically intact in the face of constant bombardment. On August 21 alone, Sumter's garrison recorded that 923 shots were fired at the island fort; only 219 missed the mark. The city of Charleston was increasingly harassed as well. William McCabe dryly commented that "people are leaving the city as if we had the plague here, instead of a few 200 pd shell."<sup>3</sup>

Following the bombardment of August 21, Beauregard personally inspected Fort Sumter in company with Gilmer and Beauregard's chief engineer, Lt. Col. David B. Harris. Gilmer had first met Harris in 1862 when both were serving in the Western theater. By virtue of a common profession, the two men were thrown together again in Charleston. The situation could have been difficult: although Harris was Beauregard's chief engineer, Gilmer could have overruled all of Harris' decisions on the basis of his authority as Chief of the Engineer Bureau. Fortunately, Gilmer held Harris in high esteem and was well satisfied with his design for Charleston's defense.<sup>4</sup> Throughout late August, Gilmer and the balding, bespectacled Harris made almost daily

---

<sup>3</sup>O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 1, 614; McCabe Diary, Aug. 23, 1863.

<sup>4</sup>O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 1, 615; Jeremy Gilmer to Mrs. E. L. Harris, March 25, 1882, David Bullock Harris Papers, Duke University; Ibid., Beauregard was equally satisfied with Harris. When Beauregard left Charleston for Petersburg, Va., he took Harris with him. Gilmer noted that toward the end of the war Beauregard "reluctantly" let Harris return to Charleston, where the engineer died of yellow fever.

visits to Sumter.<sup>5</sup> The two men were virtually inseparable. Gilmer, who quartered with Harris and his engineers, termed Harris "the ruling member of the mess."<sup>6</sup>

One evening late that month, Beauregard summoned both Gilmer and Harris. Beauregard was disturbed by some news he had received during the day. As Gilmer and Harris listened, Beauregard recounted that he had been visited by R. B. Rhett, Jr., the brother of Colonel Alfred Rhett, who commanded Fort Sumter. To his brother, Col. Rhett had written a frank letter criticizing Beauregard. As a result, R. B. Rhett confronted Beauregard with the letter's contents. Beauregard paraphrased the letter as saying: "Notwithstanding what outsiders might say to the contrary, the garrison would certainly be sacrificed if not at once withdrawn."<sup>7</sup>

Beauregard would not tolerate insubordination. Colonel Rhett's conduct amounted to outright rebellion. To compound matters further, according to the letter Rhett spoke for all the officers under his command as well. Beauregard responded to this information by dispatching Gilmer and Harris to Fort Sumter. After the two engineers made a thorough

---

<sup>5</sup>O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 1, 615-16, 621; Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 27.

<sup>6</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 11, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>7</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 26-27.

examination of the work, they convened a meeting with Sumter's officers. The entire discussion was transcribed for Beauregard's benefit. According to Gilmer, Rhett steadfastly maintained that any further resistance at Sumter was futile. Gilmer recalled: "Col. Harris said that in his judgment the work would be held, and I concurred with him. A copy of the proceedings was taken and presented to you with a report from myself and Col. Harris the next morning in which we advised that Fort Sumter be held at all hazards. Needing artillerists for the inner line . . . you [Beauregard] withdrew Col. Rhett's command from the fort and substituted an infantry force under . . . [Major] Stephen Elliot."<sup>8</sup>

Although Elliot was enthusiastic about his new assignment, he was not in an enviable position. When Elliot assumed command of the fort, Sumter was left with only one artillery piece. To make matters worse, Union gunships often sailed to within point-blank range when bombarding Sumter. After he viewed one such attack on the evening of September 8, Lt. McCabe reported: "It looked so much like hitting a man when he is done. Our James

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 27. The account of Rhett's letter and the resulting controversy is taken from a correspondence between Gilmer and Beauregard in June, 1872. The original letters are attached to the pages cited. Although neither man was exactly certain of the date of the incident, a conference on the future of Sumter was held August 24. (See O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 1, 651-53.) Stephen Elliot assumed command on Aug. 27; O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 2, 309.

Island batteries, Fort Moultrie, and Battery Bee, also Batt'y Beauregard joined in the chorus. It was a grand sight: the whole harbour was enwrapped in smoke and the buildings in the city shaken up by the thunders of the artillery . . . amber tinted clouds sailing stately down the crimson western sky and there in the centre of this magnificent bay, hoary old Sumpter [sic] 'grand in her decay.'"<sup>9</sup>

On August 31, during the height of Federal activity around Charleston, Gilmer was named second in command of the Department of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.<sup>10</sup> Under the circumstances, the appointment did not give Gilmer cause for celebration. The attention of Beauregard's entire department was focused on the events in Charleston, where collapse seemed inevitable. From sunrise to sunset the city's defenses endured almost incessant bombardment. Repair work progressed at an agonizingly slow pace for want of labor. Although Beauregard requested slaves from neighboring plantations, his appeal met with an indifferent response. Even more troubling was Charleston's shortage of weaponry. In early September Beauregard was forced to borrow equipment and requisition a heavy artillery piece from Gen. William H. C. Whiting at Wilmington, North

---

<sup>9</sup>E. Milby Burton, The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865 (Columbia, S. C., 1971), 190; McCabe's Diary, Sept. 8, 1863.

<sup>10</sup>O.R., XXVIII, Pt. 2, 323; 329-30.

Carolina. Gilmer pinned nearly all his hopes for a successful defense on the city's interior lines, for he came to believe that the harbor defenses were lost.<sup>11</sup> As an engineer and Beauregard's second in command, Gilmer had good reason for despair. He reported: "The enemy can take positions outside the ranges of our columbiads and Brooke guns and in perfect safety hurl shot after shot at our devoted artillerists who are powerless. All we can do is to toil and toil to rebuild the earthen covers."<sup>12</sup>

Equally depressing was the neglect Gilmer found in Savannah. Since the city was not under attack, its garrison had grown apathetic and allowed the defenses to deteriorate. Savannah's harbor was protected by embankments of mud which, when dry, was a poor barrier against artillery shells. Further, the gun emplacements were sinking into the moist earth. On his first visit to Savannah that August, Gilmer was appalled by the conditions. He wrote his wife: "At Savannah, I found a rather sleepy state of things and you may be sure I did all in my power to wake the sleepers, especially the Engineers, who will have to rebuild in a great measure the main batteries on the river."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 329; Pember, A Southern Woman, 166; Ibid., 166.

<sup>12</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Sept. 9, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Pember, A Southern Woman, 167; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Aug. 31, 1863, Gilmer Papers.

During the following months, Gilmer's attention gradually shifted from Charleston to other points in the department such as Savannah. Gilmer could afford to do this as it seemed Charleston was no longer in any immediate danger. By late September, Union offensive moves around Charleston came to a sudden and inexplicable halt. Gilmer took advantage of the undeclared truce to invite his wife for a visit. Although Gilmer's confidence in the safety of Charleston had grown, Beauregard was apparently unwilling to leave the city to visit other sectors under his command. As a result, Gilmer was dispatched to inspect various trouble spots throughout the department. After all, Charleston was not the only city in the department that was threatened by potential Union assault. Of particular interest was the port of Savannah and the railhead of Atlanta in Georgia's interior.<sup>14</sup>

Gilmer's interest in Atlanta predated his arrival in Charleston by more than a month. In July, 1863, Gilmer had nominated Maj. M. H. Wright to command Atlanta's defenses, primarily on the basis of a recommendation from George Gilmer Hull.<sup>15</sup> Although Wright supervised Atlanta's defenses, the actual construction was left to engineer Capt. Lemuel Pratt Grant, who followed Gilmer's directions.

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., Sept. 18, Oct. 1 and 19, 1863.

<sup>15</sup>O.R., XXIII, Pt. 2, 909-10.

On August 11, Gilmer suggested that Grant plan a connecting defensive circle around Atlanta punctuated by "detached" strongholds.<sup>16</sup> Owing to other pressing engagements, Gilmer was unable to visit Atlanta, but he was kept appraised of the situation through Grant's reports. When Gilmer actually examined the defenses in December, he could find no fault with either Grant or the system's design.<sup>17</sup>

Gilmer's attention then focused on Savannah through the first of the new year. Not long after he inspected Atlanta, Gilmer returned to his adopted home. Owing to a recurrence of his eye affliction and the slow progress of Savannah's defenses, Gilmer on December 19 wrote to Beauregard and requested that he be allowed to remain in Savannah for an extended period of time. A month after he made his request, Gilmer was still in Savannah.<sup>18</sup>

Gilmer was convinced that Federals intended to assault Savannah. In January, 1864, Union troops were probing the various channels around the city. The only discernable results of this activity were the loss of a number of slaves. Still, Gilmer did not believe that the enemy's sole purpose

---

<sup>16</sup>Franklin M. Garrett, Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events, Vol. 1 (Athens, Ga., 1969), 568.

<sup>17</sup>O.R., XXX, Pt. 4, 489.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., XXVIII, Pt. 2, 566; Jeremy Gilmer to Alfred Rives, Jan. 10, 1864, Rives Papers.

in these forays was to secure labor. Beauregard seemed to share Gilmer's opinion. As Charleston was in no immediate danger, Beauregard was content to let his second-in-command remain in Savannah. Beauregard even went so far as to suggest that Gilmer assume the command of the District of Georgia and the Third Military District of South Carolina, encompassing Savannah and its environs. Although it meant an extension of his exile from the Engineer Bureau, Gilmer accepted the proposal with resignation. "As the time of my return to the Bureau is uncertain and may be delayed for weeks--possibly months," he informed Alfred L. Rives, "you will please to look sharp after the dignity and efficiency of the Bureau, calling on me for assistance when you need it."<sup>19</sup>

Gilmer judged his situation correctly. With the exception of a few days in late February and early March, he spent the first half of the year in Savannah. By now, Gilmer's expertise in harbor fortifications was such that his services were found to be more useful along the Confederacy's coast than at the Engineer Bureau. For this reason, on February 19, Gilmer and his assistant adjutant General, Capt. Robert W. B. Elliot, left for Mobile, Ala.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Alfred Rives, Jan. 10, 1864, ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Headquarters, Department of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, Special Orders No. 42, Section IV, Feb. 19, 1864, Adam Leopold Alexander Papers, Duke University.

Like Charleston and Savannah, Mobile in 1864 was still open to blockade runners. This was largely due to the careful planning and construction of its defenses over a period of three years. Mobile was ideally suited for defense. The city was located at the end of a thirty-mile long bay that cut deeply into Alabama's panhandle. When the Confederates finished fortifying the bay, the effect was similar to running a gauntlet. In order to enter Mobile Bay, ships passed between Dauphin Island and a thin strip of land known as Mobile Point and which jutted out from the coast at a right angle. Guarding the pass were two installations, Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island and Fort Morgan on Mobile Point. Both forts were built prior to the war. The later addition of Fort Powell closed the only alternate route into Mobile Bay from the Gulf. Fort Powell guarded Grant's Pass between the northernmost edge of Dauphin Island and the mainland. The bay itself contained water obstacles, additional batteries, floating torpedoes and the iron plated C.S.S. Tennessee. To guard against any land assault on Mobile, a triple ring of earthen fortifications encircled the city.<sup>21</sup>

The primary architect of Mobile's imposing defensive system was Danville Leadbetter. Since he was Alabama's

---

<sup>21</sup>James L. Nichols, "Confederate Engineers and The Defense of Mobile," Alabama Review, XII (1959), 181-82, 186-87.

state engineer prior to the war, Leadbetter was as familiar with Mobile as Gilmer was with Savannah. When the war began, Leadbetter was at Fort Morgan. From March until August 1861, Leadbetter personally directed the defensive construction around Mobile. Thereafter, although he was in and out of Alabama, Leadbetter closely scrutinized the progress of Mobile's defenses. Even as the acting chief of the Engineer Bureau, Leadbetter's primary concern was Mobile. Engineers who succeeded Leadbetter followed his design. Gilmer's contact with the city was limited to official correspondence between himself and the engineer in charge at Mobile.<sup>22</sup>

On February 22, 1864, Gilmer and Elliot arrived in the city to examine its defenses. The journey from Savannah had not been a pleasant one. It had taken the two men some fifty-two hours by rail to reach Mobile. Their accommodations are not always comfortable. At one point, Gilmer and Elliot were forced to ride in a cramped boxcar with thirty Tennessee soldiers. Yet, although he had endured a particularly exhausting trip, Gilmer set to work at once. He estimated that a complete circuit of the defenses would take almost a week.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 181-85.

<sup>23</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Feb. 22, 1864, Gilmer Papers.

As his first order of business, Gilmer presented himself to Maj. Gen. Dabney H. Maury, commanding the Department of the Gulf. Maury offered to share his quarters with Gilmer and he accepted the proposal rather than spend \$18 a night for a room at the Battle House Hotel. With the matter of lodging settled, Gilmer began his inspection of the defenses. After two days Gilmer formed his opinion of the works. The strongest sector of the system was at the entrance to the bay. As for the rest, Gilmer concluded: "The land defenses are not so complete as I would wish, but by a proper direction of labor which has now been supplied by the people, I think they can be pressed forward soon to a state of efficiency."<sup>24</sup>

The chief engineer of Mobile at that time was Lt. Col. Viktor Von Sheliha. Although Gilmer was basically pleased with the state of defenses in Mobile, his personal estimation of Von Sheliha was not high. Gilmer's opinion had little to do with Von Sheliha's abilities as an engineer. Instead, he suspected Von Sheliha's motives for joining the Confederate cause due to the fact that the man was a foreigner. Gilmer was particularly suspicious of Von Sheliha's marriage on February 18 to a Miss Williams of Mobile, since she was an invalid who walked only with the aid of crutches. Her father, Price Williams, was a war

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., Feb. 24, 1864.

profiteer who had amassed a fortune during the conflict. Gilmer remarked: "Foreigners in our army are, I fear, mere soldiers of fortune."<sup>25</sup>

Despite his misgivings regarding Von Sheliha's character, Gilmer was basically satisfied with the man's work. For his own part, Gilmer felt that only minor adjustments were needed in Mobile's defenses. Once these corrections were made, Gilmer saw no further need for his presence in Mobile. "There have been some sad misapplications of labor, but I am putting this all right," Gilmer wrote, "My stay here, my dear wife, must depend on the enemy. If the bombardment of Fort Powell be not renewed within a week, there is nothing to keep me here."<sup>26</sup>

Inclement weather and choppy seas prevented further shelling of Fort Powell by Union forces. As the inactivity lengthened into a general calm, Gilmer decided that he was needed elsewhere. Rumors of a proposed change in the command structure of Beauregard's department had reached Mobile. Gilmer was distressed to learn he might be made the commander of a "sub-department" rather than return to the Engineer Bureau. With this in mind, Gilmer reported on March 9 to Secretary of War James A. Seddon: "I have devoted the past sixteen days to the inspection, supervision,

---

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Feb. 27, 1864; Nichols, "Defense of Mobile," 185.

and direction of this city. . . . Having completed this labor, I start this morning . . . on my return to Savannah, Ga."<sup>27</sup>

Gilmer found no immediate change in the status quo when he arrived in Savannah. The department was still in Beauregard's hands and Gilmer was reaffirmed as commander of the Georgia District and the Third Military District of South Carolina. Within a month, however, Gilmer received word that he would be replaced by a subordinate, Brig. Gen. Hugh W. Mercer, who commanded the troops in the Georgia District. Although he was more than willing to resume his post as Chief Engineer, Gilmer protested Mercer's possible elevation. Gilmer felt that Mercer was too involved with local politics to be an objective commander. Beauregard replied fatalistically, "With regard to General M[ercer], I am aware of the objections to him, but my fear was to fare worse. You are no doubt aware that not those officers who stand the highest in the estimation of the War Department are sent here permanently; in fact, this has been called the 'Department Refuge.' Moreover, my recommendations of and applications for officers are seldom if ever heeded. . . . Since your other letter, Maj. Gen. Samuel Jones has been

---

<sup>27</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Mar. 3 and 5, 1864, Gilmer Papers; O.R., XXXII, Pt. 3, 601.

ordered to this department to relieve you. I hope he will do, but from what I hear, I fear not."<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, it was not Gilmer who was replaced by Maj. Gen. Samuel Jones. On April 20, 1864, Jones supplanted Beauregard on the basis of special orders from the president.<sup>29</sup> During the interim between Beauregard's departure from Charleston and Jones's assumption of command, Gilmer was asked to command the entire department. No one was more surprised by this order than Gilmer. For months, the infection in his eyes had grown steadily worse to the point that Gilmer was under the care of Dr. Bolling A. Pope of Washington, Ga. Gilmer exclaimed to his wife: "This is a pretty big business for me to get into just as I supposed I was on the point of being relieved from all duty."<sup>30</sup>

On April 19, Gilmer was back in Charleston. He and Robert Elliot arrived by train at two in the morning during a violent thunderstorm. They were spared a thorough drenching by Beauregard's personal ambulance which stood waiting

---

<sup>28</sup>O.R., XXXV, Pt. 2, 361, 408, 422-3

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 444-45. Gilmer was informed that he would be relieved by Jones on April 2, 1864, and once relieved he was ordered to "resume his former duties as Chief of the Bureau"; O.R., XXXV, Pt. 2, 398.

<sup>30</sup>Adam Alexander to Jeremy Gilmer, Jan. 24, 1864; Sarah Lawton to Jeremy Gilmer, Mar. 31, 1864; Adam Alexander to Louisa Gilmer, Apr. 10, 1864; Jeremy Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Apr. 19, 1864, Gilmer Papers.

for them at the train station. After a few hours' sleep, the pair strolled around the city to survey the damage done to Charleston during their absence. Gilmer was pleased to find the Mills House, where he and his wife were briefly reunited, was relatively unscathed. Only twelve shots had pierced the house, and the Gilmers' old room had escaped damage entirely. Jones arrived in Charleston late the same day.<sup>31</sup>

Within the month, it was apparent that Jones's primary duty was to oversee the dismantling of the department. Both Charleston and Savannah were stripped of troops to reinforce Gen. Joseph Johnston's Army of the Tennessee. On April 26, Gilmer was even forced to relieve Hugh Mercer and send him to Johnston's command. What troops were not sent to Johnston from Savannah were sent to Charleston. Gilmer could do nothing to stem the flow of troops from Savannah. Jones was apologetic, but he explained to Gilmer, "You can hardly know to what extent the force here has been reduced by orders from the [War] department, or I think you would see the necessity of bringing more troops from Savannah here."<sup>32</sup>

The situation was so desperate in Charleston that Jones elected to organize clerks, railroad workers and the fire department into a home guard. Jones suggested that

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> O.R., XXXV, Pt. 3, 448, 452, 473-74.

Gilmer do the same in Savannah. Gilmer was spared further aggravation. On May 25, Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws assumed command of the Georgia District and the Third Military District of South Carolina. Gilmer could finally return to his Engineer Bureau.<sup>33</sup>

In June, Gilmer resumed that command after an absence of nearly a year.<sup>34</sup> For want of better vision, and to insure the smooth operation of the Bureau, Gilmer divided his work between his brother-in-law, Maj. James Hillhouse Alexander, and Col. Alfred Landon Rives.<sup>35</sup> "Hilly" Alexander was but a recent addition to the Engineers. Prior to Gilmer's return to Richmond, Alexander served as his brother-in-law's aide. As a result of Gilmer's influence, Hilly Alexander was incorporated into the Bureau. Under the new command structure, Alexander dealt with the operational logistics work of the Bureau. As befitting his experience and position, Rives was given the more difficult tasks. Rives had the authority to deal with "all

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 473-74, 513.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., Ser. IV, III, 1183.

<sup>35</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Walter H. Stevens, July 25, 1864. Charles Tayloe Mason Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Sallie Gratton to Louisa Gilmer, July 22, 1864, Gilmer Papers.

communications relating to business of a technical and scientific" nature.<sup>36</sup>

Gilmer needed additional aid to run the Bureau. As a direct result of Gilmer's influence, the operations of the Confederate Engineers far exceeded any one man's ability for control. In the summer of 1864, the Bureau guided three regiments of Engineer troops in varying stages of organization. These troops and their officers were responsible not only for defenses but for the construction of bridges and railroads as well. The measure of Gilmer's successful expansion of the Bureau could be judged by the amount of appropriations for Engineer duties as prescribed by the Congress. In September, 1861, the Engineers' initial budget was set at a niggardly \$1 million as compared to \$3.5 million for the Ordnance Bureau and \$12 million for the Commissary Generals Office.<sup>37</sup> Gilmer was unable to influence the Engineers' budget until December, 1862, as the appropriations for the term had been set on the basis of Rives's recommendations. In Gilmer's first year as Chief Engineer, however, there was a marked change in funding

---

<sup>36</sup>Adjutant General's Office, James H. Alexander's commission as major, with orders to report to Gilmer Sept. 21, 1863, Adam Alexander Papers. Samuel W. Melton to James H. Alexander, July 16, 1864, *ibid.* Jeremy Gilmer to Walter Stevens, July 25, 1864, C. T. Mason Papers.

<sup>37</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, I, 599.

for the Bureau. Between December, 1862 and December, 1863, the Engineers garnered approximately \$10.5 million, or over five times the amount for the previous year.<sup>38</sup> By the time Gilmer returned to the Bureau in 1864, the Engineers had already received \$20 million in two appropriations.<sup>39</sup>

The operational expenses of the Bureau grew in proportion to the Corps's personnel. When Gilmer assumed command of the Bureau, there were 13 officers in the regular Corps and roughly 100 in the Provisional Corps of Engineers. On February 17, 1864, the Corps was expanded to include 120 officers. Gilmer circumvented the law by classifying 105 men as officers "in Engineer troops," with an additional 13 officers "assigned to Engineer duties" for a total of 246, minus 7 regular officers on assignment outside the Bureau.<sup>40</sup>

Officially, Engineer duties were limited to the construction of defenses and related matters.<sup>41</sup> As the war continued, however, the definition of the Engineers' authority was extended to include a variety of assignments, including railroads and the procurement of iron. Gilmer's direct

---

<sup>38</sup>Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," Pt. 2, 416. Robinson stated on this page: "The appropriations for December, 1862, included \$200,000 for the engineer service, with \$800,000 to cover the engineer deficit; for Jeremy, 1863, \$500,000; from February 1 to June 30, 1863, \$3,000,000; and from July 1 to December 31, 1863, \$6,000,000."

<sup>39</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, III, 139, 480.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 139, 190, 480.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., Ser. IV, II, 609-10.

involvement with railroads dated to his appointment to the "Iron Commission." The Bureau's interest in the subject followed as a matter of course.

The Iron Commission was formed on January 22, 1863, by the Adjutant and Inspector General's Office for the dispersal of iron throughout the Confederacy. Its immediate task was to determine which railways were indispensable. Iron would be requested from railroads of lesser significance to repair damaged lines or to serve as armor for Navy iron-clads. Ideally, the venture was a combined Army and Navy operation in which the two branches of the service would be equal partners. Once Gilmer was appointed chairman in February, 1863, the Navy's influence waned. Not only would Gilmer exercise his authority to the benefit of the Engineers, but the Navy chose Gilmer's brother-in-law, George G. Hull, as its commissioner. The third member of the board was Maj. I. M. St. John, later chief of the Nitre and Mining Bureau.<sup>42</sup>

Owing to other demands on his time, Gilmer subsequently resigned from the commission. Yet the Engineers' influence on the railroads continued to expand, with the tacit approval of the government. On June 16, 1863, the Engineers were granted the right to impress iron in the act establishing the Nitre and Mining Bureau. Further, within

---

<sup>42</sup>Robert C. Black, The Railroads of the Confederacy (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1952), 205-7.

a year Engineers dominated the Iron Commission. Although the Engineers now had the power to impress iron throughout the Confederacy, the railroad companies were most uncooperative. In February 1865, Gilmer complained to the Secretary of War: "A Commission for the collection of railroad iron from unimportant lines and distribution . . . has been organized by the joint actions of the War and Navy Departments. Every possible impediment has been thrown in the way of this commission, and serious delays have been caused under the impressment act by parties swearing out injunctions and resorting to other similar legal steps."<sup>43</sup>

As far as Gilmer was concerned, the responsibility of maintaining the Confederacy's railways fell solely to the Engineer Bureau. One day after the Engineer Bureau, the Nitre and Mining Bureau, the Quartermaster's Office, and the Bureau of Ordnance were given the right to impress iron supplies, Gilmer began exercising the power. In the summer of 1863, Confederate forces were advancing down the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. In light of these operations, Gilmer on June 17 ordered engineer Capt. T. B. Lee to follow the army to Winchester and Martinsburg, W. Va., to appropriate railroad materials from the Baltimore and Ohio line and the railroad workshop in Martinsburg.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 206. O.R., Ser. IV, II, 609-10; Ibid., III, 694; Ibid., 1085.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., Ser. I, XXVII, Pt. 3, 902-3.

In addition, the Engineers began to interest themselves as well in the construction of railroads. In December, 1863, Maj. Minor Meriwether was considering work on a line in southwest Georgia between Lawton and Live Oak. Rives approved of Meriwether's plans and instructed him to procure the necessary iron. If the railroads were uncooperative, Rives noted, "It is for the [Iron] Commission to judge when it is proper to proceed in the removal of iron from any of the condemned roads, but as a matter of policy I deem it best to secure instructions when to proceed from the honorable Secretary of War, as such a course will secure his hearty cooperation."<sup>45</sup>

The railroad companies were not the only source of opposition to the Engineer Bureau. In April, 1863, an assembly of the major railway companies of the Confederacy met in Richmond. During the course of the "Richmond Convention," the companies acceded to the creation of a department within the government to control the rail lines. The "Railroad Bureau," under Col. William M. Wadley (and later Col. Fredrick W. Sims) was eventually attached to the Quartermaster's Office. Initially, the Bureau was concerned only with the transportation and logistics problems of the railroads during a time of war. Later, Congress passed a railroad bill providing for the strict regulation of the

---

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., XXXI, Pt. 3, 787-88.

roads, including the seizure of materials from one line for use in another. Unfortunately, the bill specified that the Quartermaster's Office would enforce the regulations although the Iron Commission and the Engineer Bureau already claimed some of the duties. Although the powers of the Railroad Bureau were nebulous, at best, under national law, Sims believed that the enforcement of the regulations fell within the province of his bureau. As a result, Sims proceeded accordingly to the point of a direct confrontation with Gilmer.<sup>46</sup>

In late 1864, Union troops destroyed portions of the Mobile and Ohio line. Major George Whitfield of the Railroad Bureau was assigned to repair the damage. On the basis of a decision from the War Department, however, Whitfield's workmen were provided by the Engineer Bureau. Sims and Whitfield maintained that the construction should be done solely by the Railroad Bureau. When Sims questioned the validity of combined operations, Gilmer not only was unreceptive, but decidedly annoyed with the chief of the Railroad Bureau. Since the Secretary of War apparently backed Gilmer's view, Sims disgustedly abandoned all his Bureau's rights to construction.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Black, Railroads, 120-22, 164-68, 174, 232-33.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 232-33.

Sims's position against the Engineer Bureau was untenable due to a number of precedents plus the state of affairs in the Quartermaster's Office. He could expect little support from his chief, since by the time of Sims's confrontation with Gilmer, Alexander Lawton was the Quartermaster General. Further, although the Quartermaster's Department was empowered to deal with all matters affecting the railroad, at one time or another the Engineers had been granted basically the same powers, particularly as far as impressing materials. Rives at least was also confident that the Secretary of War would back the Engineer Bureau's decisions regarding the railroads. Moreover, the Bureau assumed the responsibility of construction on rail lines and bridges as a matter of course early in the war.

The case of Capt. Edmund T. D. Myers was typical of the Bureau's involvement with the railroads. On March 4, 1862, Myers, the son of then-Quartermaster General Abraham C. Myers, was given the duty of building a railroad from Greensboro, N. C., to Danville, Va. At the outset, Myers worked in conjunction with the Richmond and Danville Railroad. Yet when the company proved unable to provide the necessary materials, Gilmer gave Myers the power to appropriate surplus iron from dormant railroads throughout Virginia. This was in January, 1863, six months before

the Engineer Bureau could legally impress iron. When Myers suggested that the Bureau exclude the railroad company altogether and assume full responsibility for completing the line, Gilmer gave his approval. The railway was finished in June, 1864, after two years' efforts.<sup>48</sup>

One of the greatest difficulties faced by Myers was a dearth of slave labor.<sup>49</sup> This was a common problem for the Engineers throughout the south during the war. In part the scarcity of slaves was due to a lack of cooperation from the civil sector. In 1862, Rives could not bring laborers to Richmond because the railroads were unwilling to carry the slaves. Gilmer experienced a similar shortage in Charleston because the neighboring plantations refused to loan their workers to the beleaguered city. Yet the slaves were also adept in making themselves scarce. In 1861 a number of slaves escaped from their masters in Virginia to seek freedom at Union occupied Fort Monroe on the Chesapeake Bay. At that time there was some question as to whether or not the Federal forces could legally protect the escaped slaves. Later, the slaves were termed "contraband" of war and were appropriately seized by the Federal authorities with other captured supplies.

The "capture" of escaped slaves continued throughout the war, much to the annoyance of Confederate authorities.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 150-53, 232.      <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 207.

Early in 1864, Gilmer noted with disgust that the "thieving Yankees" were taking slaves from plantations around Savannah.<sup>50</sup> After the disappearance of so many slaves, plantation owners were probably hesitant to loan their slaves to the army. Some patriotic plantation owners continued to do so, however, with predictable results. On January 22, 1864, Rives estimated that approximately \$3,108,000 would be needed to satisfy claims against the Bureau for slaves who escaped or died while working for the Engineers.<sup>51</sup> Although the plantation owners were paid \$25 a month by 1864 for the use of their slaves, they could ill afford to lose property valued at \$2,000 apiece.<sup>52</sup>

As the citizens of the Confederacy continued to exhibit a marked reluctance to part with their slaves, the government resorted to impressment. In November, 1861, the Quartermaster's Office had stressed that impressment would be allowed only in extreme emergencies. Instead, the Confederacy depended on the voluntary cooperation of the private sector. When volunteerism failed, the government refined the laws in late 1863 to include impressment if no agreement could be made with slave owners. This act also failed to

---

<sup>50</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Alfred L. Rives, Jan. 10, 1864, Rives Papers.

<sup>51</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, III, 40.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.; Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," Pt. 2, 413.

procure the necessary work force, so in 1864 the government permitted the enlistment of free blacks for labor with the same benefits as a conscripted Confederate infantry private.<sup>53</sup>

By the summer of 1864, Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had succeeded in pushing Lee's Army of Northern Virginia back to Petersburg. At Petersburg the Army of Northern Virginia would be pushed no farther. In the fall of 1864, Lee's troops settled into trenches around Petersburg to wait out a siege.

The ominous presence of the Union army required the construction of additional defenses around Richmond and Petersburg. On November 19, 1864, Gilmer wrote to Lee with a scheme for the organization of labor. According to Gilmer, the average work force should consist of 100 slaves under a "manager," supplemented by three "overseers." A "battalion" type organization would be formed by eight "gangs" of 100 men each. These would be directed by a "superintendent," who, with two other superintendents, would receive orders from a "director." Lee could find no flaw in Gilmer's plan. The only change he suggested to Gilmer was the reduction of overseers from three to two men. However, Lee cautioned, that the slaves should be treated with consideration for their needs and operate under clearly enumerated guidelines of discipline. Lee added: "I hope steps will be taken

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 412-13.

to put the act into execution at once. We are in great need."<sup>54</sup>

The major problem with Gilmer's proposal was where to obtain the labor force. On December 5, 1864, the Adjutant and Inspector General's Office issued a directive ordering the enrollment of 20,000 slaves; a requirement which Congress doubled in March, 1865.<sup>55</sup> Yet the time for such emergency measures was long past. In February, 1865, Gilmer stated: "The greater part of the labor connected with . . . engineer operations has been performed by fatigue parties, by Engineer troops, by a limited number of details for mechanical service, and by negroes hired and impressed; but from all these sources the supply has been inadequate."<sup>56</sup>

Gilmer fared better in the formation of Engineer units than he did with labor. Under the plan he submitted to the Secretary of War in December, 1862, four regiments of Engineers were to be created for service throughout the Confederacy. In February, 1865, the Corps of Engineers boasted thirty-five companies (or the equivalent of three and one-half regiments). An actual regimental organization existed in only two locales, however, with the remaining units dispersed throughout the south. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia contained the 1st Engineer Regiment, the largest

---

<sup>54</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, III, 829-31, 838-39.

<sup>55</sup>Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," Pt. 2, 412-13.

<sup>56</sup>O.R., Ser. IV, III, 1086.

unit of its kind with twelve companies. The 3rd Engineers was a normal-sized regiment with two companies in the Army of the Tennessee. Of the unattached units, the largest concentration was in the Trans-Mississippi Department with nine companies. Beauregard's old Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida held two companies. The District of the Gulf and the Department of North Carolina contained one company each.<sup>57</sup>

The Engineer regiments were not created without a certain amount of difficulty. Since the Confederacy was not blessed with an unlimited supply of manpower, not all the field commanders could see the necessity of depleting the ranks further by creating an entirely new branch of service. On April 12, 1864, after engineer Lt. Col. Samuel Lockett experienced some problems in organizing engineer troops in the Department of East Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, Gilmer personally intervened with Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk, the departmental commander. Gilmer diplomatically pointed out that Polk's department was far behind in its organization of the engineer units. He added: "So much depends, as you well know, upon the cooperation of commanding officers that unless they will regard with favor our attempts they will rarely meet with success . . .

---

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 1085; Robinson, "Confederate Engineers," Pt. 2, 410-11.

feeling confident that when organized they will be of the greatest assistance to you, I would ask your support and aid for the officers who are engaged in the formation of these troops."<sup>58</sup>

Even in the Army of Northern Virginia, the integrity of the engineer troops was not maintained without major concessions from the War Department. On May 22, 1863, the Adjutant and Inspector General's Office issued orders for the creation of the engineer regiments. Although the selection process proceeded accordingly in the Army of Northern Virginia, some two weeks after the battle of Gettysburg, Lee halted the organization of the engineer regiment. Under Lee's orders the men already chosen to become engineers were sent back to their original units. Lee's reasoning for this action was that if a regiment was created and served intact, then the companies would not be available for their assigned divisions. At this point, Secretary of War James A. Seddon stepped in with a compromise. Rather than deplete the ranks of Lee's veterans entirely, Seddon suggested that only fifty percent of the companies would be taken from the army. The companies would be brought up to full strength by "conscripts."<sup>59</sup>

Despite his stated intentions, Lee's objections to the engineer regiments were probably the result of the

---

<sup>58</sup>O.R., Ser. I, XXXII, Pt. 3, 775-76.

<sup>59</sup>Robinson, "The Confederate Engineers," Pt. 1, 304.

heavy losses his army sustained at Gettysburg. Like every other field commander, he knew the value of veteran infantrymen. The origin of the engineer troops could not be ignored by infantry commanders. Instead of being an expert service arm for the armies, the engineer troops came to be seen as a reserve pool of infantry when the ranks were depleted by casualties. Thus, Gilmer's highly prized troops were used as common fodder. While he was commanding the Army of the Tennessee in the summer of 1864, Gen. John B. Hood committed the 3rd Engineers to battle. The Engineers suffered proportionately with the entire army. A similar fate befell the 1st Engineers in 1865, when they became foot soldiers in Lee's army around Petersburg.<sup>60</sup>

By January, 1865, there were no more reserves to be had for the Confederacy. All that remained of once-proud armies were pathetic remnants with very little hope. The troops either entrenched or withdrew in the face of the Union onslaught. Even engineer officers were drawn into action. When Federal forces seized Fort Fisher, N. C., in January, 1865, the Confederacy lost Gen. William H. C. Whiting, one of its more experienced engineers.

Fort Fisher guarded the port of Wilmington. In 1865, Wilmington was one of the last harbors open to blockade runners. Whiting spent virtually the entire war perfecting

---

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., Pt. 2, 411.

the city's defenses. In January, 1865, Whiting learned that his efforts would be for naught, for rather than support Fisher, Gen. Braxton Bragg planned a withdrawal of all Confederate troops from the city. Whiting could not abide by this decision, so he went to join in the defense of Fort Fisher. In the event that he would be captured or killed, Whiting left a verbal message for Gilmer with William H. James, which James paraphrased as saying: "he went to Fort Fisher 'not because of any orders,' but that finding himself 'without command or position'--he 'went because there was going to be a fight there!'"<sup>61</sup>

Between June, 1864 and February, 1865, Gilmer maintained his interest in the war from his desk in Richmond. While the war drew closer to the Confederate capital, Gilmer divided his hours between the Engineer Bureau and his domestic life with his wife at their home on the corner of 27th and Broad streets. The routine of Gilmer's life was disturbed on February 20 when Jefferson Davis asked Gilmer to visit Beauregard's army in North Carolina.<sup>62</sup>

Ostensibly, Gilmer was ordered merely to advise Beauregard and to use his expertise in engineering to hinder the Federal advance. Since Beauregard's commanders were

---

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., Pt. 1, 300. William Lamb, "The Defense of Fort Fisher," in Battles and Leaders of the Civil War; IV, 647. Ibid. Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 57.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 49, 60.

scattered throughout the northern portion of the state, Gilmer was to impress upon Beauregard the necessity of consolidating his army. Davis was fearful that Beauregard's troops would be destroyed if the separation continued for a lengthy period. If Beauregard proved unreceptive to the advice, Gilmer was secretly enjoined to relieve Beauregard and take command of the army.<sup>63</sup>

Either Gilmer misunderstood Davis' secret instructions or ignored them altogether. Much later, Gilmer recalled that he knew nothing of his confidential orders. By the time he arrived in North Carolina, the situation had changed to the point that Gilmer's presence was no longer needed at the front. Beauregard was relieved on February 23, but Gen. Joseph Johnston was the new commander, not Gilmer. Rather than return immediately to Richmond, Gilmer traveled with the army until March 4, when it reached Greensboro. From there, Gilmer took a train by way of Danville to Richmond.<sup>64</sup>

For the next three weeks, the situation remained unchanged around Richmond and Petersburg. Lee's army had lost its mobility. As long as the Army of Northern Virginia clung to the trenches around Petersburg, Richmond was relatively safe. Once the Confederate lines were

---

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 48-50.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 46-47, 50.

pierced, however, the capital would be untenable. On March 25, 1865, Lee launched a sudden attack against the Union line. Although the assault was initially successful, the operation ended in failure after the Federals counter-attacked and drove the Confederates back with heavy losses.

In the morning hours of April 2, the Confederate lines around Petersburg collapsed under the force of a Union assault. Rather than confront the attackers in a pitched battle which could only result in defeat, Lee withdrew his army. Davis was notified of the retreat by Lee, who advised the evacuation of Richmond. By the end of the next day, the Confederate government had left the city.<sup>65</sup>

Davis was unwilling to concede defeat. With remnants of his cabinet and the Congress, the government moved to Danville. Gilmer left Richmond with Lawton, John C. Breckinridge, and I. M. St. John with the intention of joining the president at a later date. Davis urged Lee to bring his army to Danville for a defense of the city. By April 9, construction work had already begun on Danville's defenses, although Gilmer had yet to make an appearance. Davis wrote to Lee on April 9: "The Secretary of War, Quartermaster-General, Commissary-General, and Chief Engineer have not arrived: their absence is embarrassing."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup>O.R., Ser. I, XLVI, Pt. 3, 1389.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 1389-90.

Lee had no intention of joining Davis in Danville to prolong the agony. The Army of Northern Virginia had fought its last engagement. On April 6, Union forces captured a third of the Southern army at Sayler's Creek. Lee surrendered the remnant of his army on April 9, at Appomattox Court House.

With the capitulation of Lee's army, the war was virtually over. Yet rather than submit quietly to fate as Lee had done, Davis chose to continue the struggle. The President left Danville with a small band of followers to join Johnston's army in North Carolina. Gilmer went southward as well, but for a different reason--he was going home. Like others in the President's train, Gilmer maintained the fiction of a functioning Confederate government. On April 27, at Catawba Bridge, N. C., Gilmer assigned Capt. George M. Helin as chief engineer of Davis' party.<sup>67</sup> Davis could find no refuge with Johnston's army, however, for the Army of the Tennessee surrendered to Union Gen. William T. Sherman one day prior to Helin's appointment. On May 10, Union troops captured Davis in Georgia.

Gilmer managed to elude capture on his way home. By May 5, he had reached Washington, Ga., and the Alexander family home. There he committed one of his last acts as a

---

<sup>67</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Gilmer," 33.

Bureau Chief when he paid engineer Col. John J. Clarke \$800 in coin for his services. On May 8, Gilmer was paroled by the local representatives of the U.S. Cavalry. For the first time in over twenty-five years, Gilmer was no longer a military officer.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 9, 36.

Few Men Could Do As Much and No Man Could Do More

Chapter VI

It was difficult to forget the past. In May, 1865, Gilmer was forty-six years old, a relatively advanced age to begin a new life. For twenty-eight years he had been in one sort of a uniform or another. That life ended with the collapse of the Confederacy. Unlike some former Confederate officers, Gilmer did not consider service in the armies of foreign countries. Nor did he refight the battles with which he was associated, a favorite pasttime of Southern commanders in the late 19th century. Instead, he adapted to civilian life with remarkable success. He had few options otherwise, for the life he knew was gone.

The "Old South" was irretrievable; the Southern states lay in smoldering ruins. Once fertile agricultural districts were barren. In Virginia, Union Gen. Phillip Sheridan had made good his promise to turn the Shenandoah Valley into a wasteland. General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia to the sea had cut a swath of destruction some fifty miles wide. Major southern cities such as Richmond and Atlanta were devastated by fires during the latter part of the war. The Southern ports could receive no goods as their harbors were clogged with debris and silt. Because of the exigencies of war, the harbors had not been dredged for years. The rail systems of the South, once meager, were now virtually non-existent. Smaller railroads had been stripped by Confederate authorities

while the larger lines were devastated by Union troops. Here the destruction directly affected the Alexander family, for Adam Alexander had invested heavily in railroads prior to the war. Although he did not face bankruptcy, Alexander's losses were considerable. He admitted to Lou Gilmer: "Sherman's march has been through the heart of my productive property, Geo. R.R., Central R.R., State Bank . . . more than \$200,000 of property have all gone up."<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite his losses, Alexander exhibited a marked tendency to begin anew at age sixty-two after ten years as a widower. On December 5, 1865, Alexander married Jane Marion Glenn, herself a widow. Unfortunately, not all of Alexander's children were able to make the transition to a new postwar life as readily as their father. "Hilly" Alexander was particularly hard-pressed after the war. As late as 1871, he was forced to borrow money from his aunt, Louisa Porter, to purchase a home for his family.<sup>2</sup>

Porter Alexander was in equally dire financial straits immediately after the war. At the conclusion of hostilities, Alexander was thirty years old with a wife and three children to support. He was so desperate for money that he

---

<sup>1</sup>Adam Alexander to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 20, 1865, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>2</sup>Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 375-76. Jeremy Gilmer to James Hillhouse Alexander, June 22, 1876; Jeremy Gilmer to James H. Alexander, Sept. 28, 1871, Adam Leopold Alexander Papers, Duke University.

considered offering his military expertise to Brazil. When this and other applications failed to bring concrete results--despite glowing recommendations from Lee, Beauregard, Gilmer and others, Gilmer offered two suggestions for employment. Gilmer believed that a good deal of money could be made in either the lumber business or as a trader of mules. In both cases, he was willing to supply the initial investment for a partnership.<sup>3</sup>

The necessity of resorting to occupations such as mule trading or farming left many Southern officers disgruntled by the peace. Gilmer's close friend, W. W. Mackall, was particularly embittered by the outcome of the war and his new occupation. In February, 1867, the former Confederate general reported to Gilmer that much of his time was spent feeding chickens and pigs. "Is not this present Negro humanity a strange thing," Mackall remarked. "Every year since you and I entered the Army there have been more poor Indians killed without cause than negros whipped and not a tear of pity shed. . . . Give all our love to Lou. God only knows how much pleasure it would give me to see you both, but that we may meet you must come

---

<sup>3</sup> Boggs, The Alexander Letters, 379; Maury Klein, Edward Porter Alexander (Athens, Ga., 1971), 141-42; Letter of Recommendation from Jeremy Gilmer, April 22, 1865, Edward Porter Alexander Papers, University of North Carolina; Jeremy Gilmer to Porter Alexander, Nov. 4, 1865, ibid.

north--you may live on corn bread but you can't travel on it."<sup>4</sup>

A number of wealthy civilians survived the war relatively unscathed in comparison to the professional soldiers. Some compromised with the reality of the situation by changing their politics from the Democratic party to the Republicans, thereby placing themselves in good stead with the Southern occupation governments. Others, such as Adam Alexander and John Gilmer, were able to absorb their losses from the war. John Gilmer lost \$15,000 as a result of the conflict, yet as far as his plantation was concerned, there was little change. Immediately after the war, Gilmer offered employment to his former slaves as hired hands. The majority of the freedmen on Gilmer's plantation accepted his offer. Further, as Gilmer was quick to point out, although he was a member of the Confederate Congress, he opposed secession.<sup>5</sup>

Jeremy Gilmer had not favored secession, but he had donned a Confederate uniform and taken the field against the Federal government. He could make no protestation of innocence like his brother John, but there was a course of action he could take to demonstrate his acceptance of Federal authority and admit the error of his ways. Between

---

<sup>4</sup>W. W. Mackall to Jeremy Gilmer, Feb. 8, 1867.  
W. W. Mackall Papers, University of North Carolina.

<sup>5</sup>John A. Gilmer to Louisa Gilmer, Jan. 17, 1866,  
Gilmer Papers.

1865 and 1867, a number of former high-ranking Confederates applied for amnesty from President Andrew Johnson. Save for a few specific exceptions, the pardoning process was open to all the Confederates. Yet it took time to review the individual applicants. On May 31, 1867, Gilmer received his presidential pardon. He sent a letter to the Secretary of State on July 2, 1867, with his acceptance of the pardon and an oath of allegiance to the United States government.<sup>6</sup>

Gilmer's pardon, and his renewed oath, signified a burial of the past. Yet although he intended to begin life anew, the same could not be said for some of his contemporaries. In the decades following the war, the literary market was flooded with memoirs of former high ranking Confederates. Generals such as Jubal Early, John Bell Hood, P. G. T. Beauregard, and James Longstreet, and statesmen such as Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens, criticized each other in print and refought battles long since lost.

Gilmer's contact with the spokesmen for the Lost Cause was limited. He did not write his memoirs but on rare occasions he did offer his version of past events. When Beauregard asked Gilmer for his account of the Rhett controversy at Fort Sumter in August, 1863, Gilmer corroborated Beauregard's statement and sent his reply within ten days.

---

<sup>6</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 10-11.

Nor did Gilmer hesitate in his response to William Preston Johnston's inquiries for the biography of his father, Albert Sidney Johnston. Gilmer sent Johnston a wealth of information. He was equally cordial to Mrs. E. L. Harris' request for information on David Bullock Harris, for Gilmer wrote a short memoir which was full of praise for Harris's abilities and contributions.<sup>7</sup>

In general, Gilmer responded willingly to requests from friends and those who gained his respect. Probably for this reason, Jefferson Davis experienced some difficulty in eliciting information from Gilmer. In 1878, Davis was preparing his memoirs of the war. Davis had his secretary, W. J. Walthall, write to Gilmer for his views on a number of subjects. After the passage of two years, during which he had received no reply from Gilmer, Davis himself wrote to the engineer. As he could find no logical explanation for the delay, Davis conceded that Gilmer had probably not grasped that the letter was basically from Davis. Gilmer responded but gave information in a vague and general manner. Consequently, in his next letter to Gilmer, Davis' tone was increasingly hostile. He asked Gilmer again for the same information but with more detail. To refresh Gilmer's

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 26-27; William Preston Johnston to Jeremy Gilmer, Sept. 13, 1872, Gilmer Papers; William Preston Johnston, Albert Sidney Johnston, 566-7, 570, 635-6; Jeremy Gilmer to Mrs. E. L. Harris, Mar. 25, 1882, David Bullock Harris Papers, Duke University.

memory of the incidents, Davis even included his own memories and a copy of orders he gave to Gilmer during the war. Davis concluded: "You will oblige me by telling me freely, where, and how, if not all, our recollections differ as wherein they agree."<sup>8</sup>

In his reply, Gilmer grudgingly complied with Davis' request. The matter in question dated to February, 1865, when Gilmer was sent to North Carolina by Davis. Gilmer repeated his orders virtually verbatim from the text Davis supplied in his third letter. However, Gilmer was adamant on one point. Davis recalled that he gave Gilmer confidential orders to supercede Beauregard if the general proved unreceptive to the president's design. Gilmer stated emphatically that Davis gave no instructions regarding the disposition of Beauregard's command, but he did conclude that Davis might have planned on giving such orders. That concluded the matter as far as Gilmer was concerned except for an apology for the delay of his reply. It took Gilmer six months to answer Davis. As an explanation Gilmer offered: "It is with extreme regret, nay, shame, that I find your letter of the 2nd April last is still unanswered. When it reached Savannah, I was confined to my dark room with a serious and painful inflammation of the eyes. . . . As

---

<sup>8</sup>Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 43, 45, 46, 48-49.

soon as it was possible for me to go by steamer to New York City. I was sent thither by my Savannah physicians . . . Please accept this excuse for my apparent neglect."<sup>9</sup>

Gilmer was not one to dwell incessantly on the past, for he had more immediate concerns. Had Gilmer been in the position of Mackall or served as an unwitting figurehead for shady schemes such as Early and Beauregard, he too might have been tempted to relive the days of past glory. Yet Gilmer was not embittered and recovered remarkably well from the conflict. He had planned for most contingencies. In 1861, Gilmer had anticipated the war. While he was still an officer in the U.S. Corps of Engineers, he transferred some of his holdings from Georgia to California. His investments in California were entrusted to the safe-keeping of Henry Halleck. Although his wife came to doubt the wisdom of this decision, Gilmer did not falter in his trust of Halleck. Gilmer's faith was not misplaced, for Halleck returned the holdings at the end of the war--with accumulated interest. Since the properties had prospered under Halleck's guidance, Gilmer saw no reason to terminate the arrangement. Halleck continued as Gilmer's agent in California.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>10</sup> Hillhouse, Historical Collections, 187; Henry W. Halleck to Jeremy Gilmer, Oct. 6, 1867, Gilmer Papers.

While it was comforting to know his investments were safe, Gilmer had no intention of living off his California holdings. In 1865 Gilmer became president of the Savannah Gas Light Company, a position he would hold for nearly twenty years. The job gave Gilmer \$3,000 per year. To supplement his income further, Gilmer worked with his wife's brother-in-law, Wallace Cummings, in Wallace Cummings and Company investment firm in Savannah. One investor was Adam Alexander to whom Gilmer promised: "With present prospects, we can safely guarantee ten per cent per annum on your deposit and we do so this year absolutely. Next year money may be in greater demand or less demand, making a modification of rates necessary."<sup>11</sup>

Prior to 1861, the financial wizard of the Alexander family was Anthony Porter. To a large extent, Gilmer assumed this role in the years following the war. Gilmer apparently learned a great deal from Porter, who acted as his agent and financial advisor while Gilmer was in the U.S. Army. Even during the war, Porter continued to advise Gilmer on investment possibilities. After 1865, however, Porter fell into decline. His position as president of the Georgia

---

<sup>11</sup>Jeremy F. Gilmer obituary, clipping from Savannah Sun, Dec. 2, 1883, ibid.; Jeremy Gilmer to W. W. Mackall, July 5, 1866, W. W. Mackall Papers; Jeremy Gilmer to Alfred L. Rives, Apr. 15, 1867, Alfred Landon Rives Papers, Duke University; Ibid.; Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, Jan. 30, 1869, Adam Alexander Papers.

State Bank ended with the Confederacy. Moreover, in 1865, Porter was seventy-seven years old and in failing health.<sup>12</sup> As a result, once Adam Alexander found that his son-in-law was adept in business, he increasingly placed the management of his investments in Gilmer's hands.<sup>13</sup> Nor was Adam Alexander the only family member to whom Gilmer offered advice. In time, Porter Alexander came to depend on Gilmer's counsel, and the two became close friends.<sup>14</sup>

Although Porter Alexander was forced to seek employment outside Savannah, he maintained a close correspondence with Gilmer. In 1881, not long after he left his position with the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, Alexander returned to Savannah at Gilmer's behest. Once there, Alexander joined forces with Gilmer to oust William M. Wadley as President of the Central Railroad. Wadley, who was once head of the Confederate Railroad Bureau, incurred the wrath of a number of Central stockholders by exercising almost dictatorial powers of the company. This in itself was not enough to create a strong opposition, for the railroad had

---

<sup>12</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Anthony Porter, Feb. 9, 1861, Gilmer Papers; Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 23; Memorial Sheet on the Life of Major Anthony Porter, Dec. 1, 1869, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers; *Ibid.*; Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, May 27, 1869, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Adam Alexander, July 8, 1869, Adam Alexander Papers.

<sup>14</sup>Klein, Edward Porter Alexander, 159.

prospered under Wadley's tutelage. Yet Wadley's control was based on slow expansion and decreased earnings for the investors. The Alexander family, including Gilmer, had maintained a heavy interest in the Central since before the war. This concern had not lessened over the years. In 1881, the family found itself on the side of Wadley's opposition.<sup>15</sup>

Porter Alexander committed himself to the struggle when he bought a large number of shares in the company. The purchase of the stocks was a deliberate maneuver to bring Alexander to the forefront of the opposition. Alexander was an ideal candidate for the opposition. In 1881 he was forty-six years old with a sterling war record, a measure of notoriety, and experience in railroads. With the backing of Gilmer and other family members, Alexander was presented as an alternative to Wadley. In the next election of board members, Gilmer and Porter Alexander won seats. Gilmer envisioned the next step as Alexander's election to the presidency of the company. Before this plan to seize the railroad materialized, Wadley succumbed to a stroke. Yet although Alexander was made president in August, 1882, he lost the office four months later to Wadley's son-in-law, William G. Raoul.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 175-78.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 178-83.

Porter Alexander was extremely discouraged by Raoul's election, yet for Gilmer it was but one defeat in a relatively successful postwar career.<sup>17</sup> Gilmer had done so well, in fact, that he could afford a number of luxuries. For his health, Gilmer could easily bear the expense of journeys to such diverse spas as Richfield Springs in New York and White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia.<sup>18</sup> Nor did Gilmer hesitate to send his son, Henry Halleck Gilmer, to the University of Toronto for his education. When there was spare time, Gilmer and his wife traveled widely. In 1876, the Gilmers made the grand tour of Europe like most affluent Americans of the age. Still, Gilmer's favorite place remained "Rockwood," the country home he built for his family near Clarkesville, Ga. Gilmer and his wife spent their summers at Rockwood, living a life of leisure and entertaining guests such as the Porter Alexanders and Charles Colcock Jones.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Gilmer to C. C. Jones, July 26, 1876, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Papers, Duke University; William Preston Johnston to Jeremy Gilmer, Sept. 13, 1872, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Hillhouse, Historical Collections, 187. Jeremy Gilmer to Sallie Lawton, [Oct.] 1876, Alexander Lawton Papers. Jeremy Gilmer to C. C. Jones, May 18, 1883, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Papers; Jeremy Gilmer obituary, Savannah Sun, Dec. 2, 1883, Gilmer Papers; Jeremy Gilmer to Edward Porter Alexander, July 2, 1882, Edward Porter Alexander Papers; Jeremy Gilmer to C. C. Jones, May 18, 1883, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., Papers.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Gilmer was not a healthy man after the war. No matter how much wealth he amassed, Gilmer's life style was determined by his illness. In 1867, Gilmer noted to Rives that he was pleased with the position at the Savannah Gas Light Company, for it did not make heavy demands on his health. The Gilmers' trips away from Savannah were often made to mineral springs for his health. Even in Europe, Gilmer visited an eye doctor in Paris for consultation about his condition. During his feud by mail with Jefferson Davis in 1880, Gilmer noted that he had been to New York to visit an eye specialist named Dr. Agnew.<sup>20</sup>

In January, 1883, Gilmer seemed to suspect that his health was in rapid decline, for he prepared a list of his holdings for his wife. Perhaps he was spurred by the memory of Adam Alexander, who had died the previous year at seventy-nine years of age.<sup>21</sup> When he prepared the assessment of his own worth, Gilmer was still in the process of executing Adam Alexander's will. After careful examination and enumeration of his investments, Gilmer put his own worth

---

<sup>20</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to Alfred L. Rives, Apr. 15, 1867, Alfred Landon Rives Papers; Jeremy Gilmer to Sallie Lawton, [Oct.] 1876, Alexander Lawton Papers; Minis, "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer," 50.

<sup>21</sup>Memorial Pamphlet on Adam Leopold Alexander, Apr. 9, 1882, Alexander-Hillhouse Papers.

at \$143,100 minus a \$16,000 debt to the Mechanics National Bank of New York.<sup>22</sup>

If Gilmer had any premonitions of death, they were premature. Life continued as before for Gilmer and his wife. They spent the summer of 1883 at Rockwood, as was their habit, and even extended their stay into the fall. In late November, 1883, after his return to Savannah, Gilmer was plagued once again by his recurrent illnesses. He shut himself away at his home in hopes for a recovery which did not come. In the evening of December 1, 1883, Gilmer died peacefully at his home in Savannah.<sup>23</sup>

During the course of his life, Gilmer achieved a certain amount of notoriety among his peers. He made friends in the army, and the officers who served with him could find no fault with his skill as an engineer. General officers, such as Lee and Albert Sidney Johnston, placed their trust in Gilmer's abilities and had no complaints. His main contributions to the Confederacy went unnoticed by the public at large, however, and Gilmer never received the

---

<sup>22</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to James H. Alexander, Jan. 16, 1883, Adam Leopold Alexander Papers; Jeremy Gilmer's estimate of worth, Jan. 27, 1883, Gilmer Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Jeremy Gilmer to C. C. Jones, May 18, 1883, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Papers; Jeremy Gilmer obituary, Savannah Sun, Dec. 2, 1883, Gilmer Papers.

acclaim of more dynamic or colorful officers such as Beauregard, Jackson, Johnston or Lee. This was an injustice, for Gilmer's role in the war was every bit as important as the field commanders. Gilmer's vision was of a professional Corps of Engineers for the Confederacy. It was a dream that nearly came to fulfillment. Had the Confederate government recognized the necessity of engineers earlier in the war, Gilmer might have been able to boast more accomplishments. As it was, for nearly two years Gilmer virtually controlled the Confederate rail system and built the Corps of Engineers into a sizeable force with a good measure of professionalism. Like Lee, Gilmer was exactly suited to his position during the war and, again like Lee, Gilmer was a man of conscience.

Gilmer did not rejoice at the secession of the Southern states, for he knew war would follow. He shared the opinion of most military men that no good came of armed conflict. Yet Gilmer cast his lot with the Confederacy. He could take no other course, for he was a Southerner by breeding and demeanor. Gilmer put his skills to good use for the Confederacy. He spent four years defending the South. As a reward he watched his accomplishments crumble, his promotions delayed, himself wounded and separated from his wife. When the war ended, having sacrificed his military career for a lost cause, he began a new life. Yet in the

face of adversity, whether it was illness or the incompetence of his superiors, Gilmer carried out his duty to the best of his abilities. Few men could do as much and no man could do more.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

In researching and writing the life of Jeremy Francis Gilmer the author uncovered a wealth of source material. By far the most important sources were the Jeremy Francis Gilmer Papers (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) and Louisa Porter Minis (comp.) "In Memory of Jeremy Francis Gilmer: Captain of Engineers U.S.A., Major General and Chief Engineer C.S.A., presented by his daughter, Louisa Porter Minis of Savannah." The former is a collection of Gilmer's letters and papers from 1839 to 1883, while the latter is a professionally bound scrapbook of letters and papers treating primarily of the war years and deposited in the Confederate Museum, Richmond, Virginia.

For Gilmer's family background and ancestry, a number of sources were used. A description of early North Carolina was provided by Hugh T. Lefler and William S. Powell, Colonial North Carolina: A History (New York, 1973). Additional information on Guilford County, North Carolina and Gilmer's family was taken from Sallie W. Stockard, The History of Guilford County, North Carolina (Knoxville, 1902); E. C. Murray, A History of Alamance Church 1762-1918 (n. p., 1918); and Calvin Henderson Wiley, Alamance Church: A Historical Address Delivered at the Dedication of Its Fourth House of Worship, on October 18, 1879 (Raleigh, 1880). The American Revolution in North Carolina is covered by Henry Lumpkin in From Savannah to Yorktown: The American

Revolution in the South (Columbia, S. C., 1981), and Burke Davis, The Cowpens-Guilford Courthouse Campaign (Philadelphia, 1962), which makes specific mention of the maternal side of Gilmer's family.

More specific information on Gilmer's family and his early life was provided by Margaret P. Hillhouse, Historical and Genealogical Collections Relating to the Descendents of Rev. James Hillhouse (New York, 1924); Gerald W. Johnson, "John Adams Gilmer, 1805-1868," in Founders and Builders of Greensboro, Bettie D. Caldwell (comp.), (Greensboro, N. C., 1925); William C. Rankin (comp.) Guilford's Scotch-Irish (Charlotte, n. p., n. d.); and Roscoe J. and Anna Mae Allen, "Alamance Presbyterian Church Cemetery" (typescript, n. d.). Of these works, the Allens recorded the inscriptions of all the monuments in the cemetery, while Rankin took the time and trouble to record the names, dates and specific information on the first Scots-Irish families of Guilford and usually two generations of their descendants. The earliest letter written by Jeremy Gilmer was found among the Calvin Henderson Wiley Papers (University of North Carolina).

Information on Gilmer and the West Point Class of 1839 was derived from Michael J. Krisman and Robert J. Lamb (eds.) 1970 Cullum Memorial Edition Register of Graduates and Former Cadets 1802-1970 of the United States Military Academy (Chicago, 1970); and George Washington Cullum's

Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., Vol. I (Boston, 1891). In addition, Cullum provides a summary of Gilmer's U.S. Army career and the second volume of the work provides useful information on Porter Alexander and Custis Lee.

Gilmer's career in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is covered by the "United States War Department, U.S. Engineer Department, Record of Letters Received," Vol. 5-14 (Record Group 77, National Archives, Washington). Background information on the Mexican War was taken from K. Jack Bauer, The Mexican War 1846-1848 (New York, 1974) and Dwight L. Clark (ed.) The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner: With Stephen Watts Kearny to New Mexico and California 1846-1847 (Norman, Okla., 1966). Gilmer's own impressions of the war and New Mexico are found in the Lenoir Family Papers II (University of North Carolina). Additional information on Gilmer's part in the war came from the "Letterbook of Robert E. Lee, Letterbook Number 2, 1842 May 3 - 1860 April 11" (Virginia Historical Society).

In 1850, Gilmer married Louisa Fredrika Alexander. Their courtship and much of his future association with the Alexander family is recorded in the Alexander-Hillhouse Papers (University of North Carolina). For background information on the situation in California and general information on Gilmer's last years in the U.S. Engineers, William

Preston Johnson, The Life of Albert Sidney Johnston (New York, 1880); "United States War Department, Engineer Department, Record of the Officers of the Corps of Engineers from January 1, 1857 to December 31, 1870) (Record Group 77, National Archives, Washington). Johnston's book is also helpful for the aftermath of Forts Donelson and Henry and the battle of Shiloh. Louisa Gilmer's impressions of the last days in California and the return trip to Georgia are in Marion Alexander Boggs (ed.), The Alexander Letters 1787-1900 (Athens, Ga., 1980).

A general background on Gilmer's life and service for the Confederate States can be found in Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders (Baton Rouge, 1959), which also includes a portrait of Gilmer. For specific information on Gilmer's activities during the war and information on the Confederate Corps of Engineers and its officers, the U.S. War Department (comp.) War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1901) proved invaluable. Also useful for background information were articles by Jesse Taylor, Lew Wallace, P. G. T. Beauregard and William Lamb in Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buell (eds.) (New York, 1884-1887).

Although the war pitted friends against each other, Gilmer believed this did not necessarily mean the end of

friendships. His letter to Henry W. Halleck during the midst of the conflict is remarkable and is found in the Henry Wager Halleck Letters (Duke University). Not long afterward, Halleck's commander, U. S. Grant, assaulted the Confederate strongholds of Forts Henry and Donelson. Johnston's recovery from this assault, the battle of Shiloh, and Gilmer's part in the campaign are recounted by Wiley Sword in Shiloh: Bloody April (New York, 1974).

The battle left Gilmer wounded and subsequently spurred his advance to Chief of the Confederate Bureau of Engineers. The dates of Gilmer's promotion and the careers of other Confederate officers are outlined in Charles C. Jones, Jr., "A Roster of General Officers, Heads of Departments, Senators, Representatives, Military Organizations, etc., etc., in Confederate Service During the War Between the States," in Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. 1 (Richmond, 1876). For a general account of the history of the Confederate Engineers, William M. Robinson, Jr., "The Confederate Engineers," in The Military Engineer, XXII (1930); and Robert R. Ellis, "The Confederate Corps of Engineers" in The Military Engineer, XLII (1951) and XLIII (1951). Both articles are informative, but of the two Robinson's is probably more reliable. Ellis's article is entertaining and written in a narrative style but he embellished a bit on the facts. In any case, neither

article is footnoted, but both use the O.R. as their primary source. Josiah Gorgas' brief stormy tenure as Chief Engineer is found in Frank E. Vandiver, Ploughshares Into Swords: Josiah Gorgas and Confederate Ordnance (Austin, Tex., 1952).

Alfred Landon Rives' career as a Confederate Engineer and a history of his life are found in the Rives Family Papers, 1781-1945 (University of Virginia). Additional information on Rives came from the Rives Papers at the Virginia Historical Society and the Alfred Landon Rives Papers at Duke University. The collection in Charlottesville is by far the most useful and extensive.

For Gilmer's life in Richmond, Phoebe Yates Pember, A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond (Jackson, Tenn., 1959) was useful. Gilmer's experiences under Beauregard were chronicled by E. Milby Burton, The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865 (Columbia, S. C., 1970); Franklin M. Garrett, Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events, Vol. 1 (Athens, Ga., 1969); and James L. Nichols, "Confederate Engineers and the Defense of Mobile," in Alabama Review, XII (1959). "The William Gordon McCabe Diary" (Virginia Historical Society) was particularly useful and interesting as it described Charleston during the siege. Also useful were the David Bullock Harris Papers (Duke University), for this collection contains information on Charleston and the relationship of Gilmer and Harris.

For the operation of the Engineer Bureau, the Talcott Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society), the Charles Tayloe Mason Papers (Virginia Historical Society), and T. M. R. Talcott, J. Thompson Brown, and R. W. Hanger, "Description of Confederate Uniforms" (typescript, Museum of the Confederacy) were useful. Of particular interest for the Engineers' association with railroads was Robert C. Black III, The Railroads of the Confederacy (Chapel Hill, 1952), possibly the only major work on the subject.

For the transition between the Confederacy and Reconstruction, Maury Klein, Edward Porter Alexander (Athens, Ga., 1971) was helpful. This work includes information not only on Alexander but on Gilmer as well. Other sources involving Gilmer's past war career were the W. W. Mackall Papers (University of North Carolina); the Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Papers (Duke University); and the Adam Leopold Alexander Papers at Duke University.

**The vita has been removed from  
the scanned document**