Truths or Tall Tales? Investigating Two Unusual Anecdotes from Stone-Campbell Movement History

Part I: "A Model Military Document": T.B. Larimore and the Battle of Shiloh

I've never had the same fascination with the American Civil War that many historians, professional or otherwise, share, but I do have fond memories of visiting the Shiloh National Military Park several times over the course of my thirty-three (and counting) years. My dad took me to the site of the battle for the first time when I was three, or so I'm told, and we've been back a few times since then. I also went twice on high school field trips and have done my fair share of academic and popular reading on the battle. I'm not an expert, necessarily, but not a complete novice, either.

My primary area of research as a historian is the history and theology of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and my first major research undertaking was an article on T.B. Larimore, which was eventually published in *Restoration Quarterly* back in 2016.[1] My fascination with Larimore stems in part from my thirteen years at Mars Hill Bible School (kindergarten through twelfth grade) but also from a copy of *Life, Letters, and Sermons of T.B. Larimore* that my better half gifted me back in 2013. At that point, I was just beginning my master's degree in history and wasn't sure what kind of research I wanted to pursue. The timely, perhaps even providential, gift steered me toward SCM history and the rest, well, was history.

[1] John Young, "Dixieland's Demise: T.B. Larimore's Dixieland College and the Tenuous Position of Christian Colleges within the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2016): 143-159.

Life, Letters, and Sermons obviously proved to be a work of great importance for my career, but I was always a bit perplexed by an anecdote related early in the book by the author, Emma Page Larimore, T.B.'s second wife. T.B. served as a scout in the Confederate army, though he was eventually captured in 1863 and sent back home after taking the noncombatant oath. Prior to that time, however, Larimore saw action at the Battle of Shiloh, and on that topic, Emma Page writes:

> The memory of those war experiences was very vivid in his mind. He was with the army at the battle of Shiloh, the duty assigned to him being to watch the Tennessee River for the appearance of Federal gunboats; and he wrote the dispatch that informed General Albert Sydney Johnston of the presence on the river of two gunboats convoying a fleet of transports up the river–a dispatch that General Johnston pronounced "a model military document." When we visited Shiloh National Park a few years ago, Mr. Larimore searched for, and, with the help of a citizen of that community, found the spot on the river where he caught his first glimpse of the gunboats. He said there was a house just behind him on the high bluff on which he was lying as he watched the river, and in a thicket of berry vines we found the remains of the chimneys of the house that stood just where he remembered it to have been."[2]

[2] Mrs. T.B. (Emma Page) Larimore, *Life, Letters, and Sermons of T.B. Larimore* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Company, 1931), 12.

Several details of the above story can be easily confirmed. As noted already, Larimore was a Confederate scout, so this type of assignment would not have been unusual for him.[3] The gunboats mentioned in the quotation were an important feature of the Shiloh battle, providing covering fire which prevented the Federal position from being overrun at the end of a disastrous first day.[4] The broad outlines of Larimore's Confederate service, and his memories of it, are simple enough to trace as well. According to historian Wes Crawford, Larimore spoke often of his Confederate service, which "helped perpetuate the memory of the Confederacy… his speech reveals his great pride in being counted among the Confederate veterans."[5]

However, a feasible timeline for the story is harder to identify, as Johnston's death in the early afternoon of the first day of battle considerably shortens the window in which he could have read a message from Larimore. Johnston was shot in the leg around 2:10pm, but he seemed generally unconcerned about the incident and did not seek treatment for what likely would have been a survivable wound–with a doctor's assistance. In the end, he was declared dead around 2:30pm, leaving P.G.T. Beauregard as the ranking officer for the remainder of the battle.[6]

Further complicating the timeline is that the two gunboats–the *Lexington* and the *Tyler*–had been effectively out of the battle for most of the day because of a lack of clear orders from

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[3] Douglas A. Foster, "Larimore, Theophilus Brown (1843-1929)," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster et al (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 452-453.

[4] The presence of the gunboats is mentioned in numerous histories of the Shiloh battle, but they also made the cut for the relevant volume of the Oxford History of the United States. See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 412.

[5] Wes Crawford, "Churches of Christ and Lost Cause Religion: One Southern Denomination's Attempt to Find Identity in Post-Civil War America," *Restoration Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2022): 11.

[6] O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, eds. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beatie LLC, 2007), 273-276. Also helpful in reconstructing the timeline of the Shiloh battle, including Johnston's death, is Smith's work *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

on high. "After listening to the sounds of battle for a good while," one historian notes, the commanding officer of the *Tyler* started to move into position to support a possible Federal retreat, while the *Lexington* moved back to the location where it had started the day. "Occasionally Confederate overshots splashed water around" the *Tyler*, but even with its closer position, it was simply sitting still on the water, and it was not clear that any Confederates were aware of its location at that time. Finally, around 1:25pm, the commanding officer sent a subordinate ashore to find some updated orders for the ship, and after his return, the *Tyler* started shelling the Confederate army around 2:50pm, almost half an hour after Johnston's death.[7] By the time the first of the gunboats entered the fray, then, Johnston was no longer around to read any dispatches.

This is far from a thorough debunking of the story, but it does raise some questions as to whether a message about the gunboats' entry into the battle could have been delivered on the day of battle in time for Johnston to compliment Larimore on his writing. To be sure, reconstructing timelines for battles is always a tricky business, and there is the possibility that Larimore's missive related to an earlier Confederate encounter with the *Lexington* and *Tyler* a few days before the start of the battle proper.[8] This interpretation is supported by a slightly different account of Larimore's involvement at Shiloh, also written by Emma Page Larimore but published roughly twenty years earlier:

> He was at the battle of Shiloh, but was in command of a special picket detachment detailed to watch the river above Pittsburg Landing and report all movements of

[7] Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, 312-313.
[8] Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, 116.

> the Federals that might be observed. He wrote the dispatch that informed Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston of the arrival and presence of the first Federal gunboats and transports above Pittsburg Landing, where the Federals who fought at Shiloh landed…[9]

This version places T.B. on the scene prior to the battle, observing the Federal troops arriving at Pittsburg Landing in advance of the main conflict, which would have given plenty of time for him to write a noteworthy dispatch to his general. This, to me, seems to be the most likely version of events, but the other question still remains: is there any evidence that Johnston spoke so highly of his scout's writing?

My initial guess had been that Larimore's memory had gotten a bit foggy with age and that the anecdote from *Life, Letters, and Sermons* might have been an embellishment of an actual, original event made grander by time. That volume, after all, was not published until 1931, nearly seventy years after the events of the battle. The other quotation cited above was published in 1910, closing the gap somewhat, but still leaving nearly fifty years for the story to have developed or changed.

Another find moves the date for the anecdote much closer to the purported event, though there is still no evidence cited for the source. In his 1889 work *Smiles and Tears: Or, Larimore*

[9] Emma Page (Larimore), *Letters and Sermons of T.B. Larimore*, vol. 3 (McQuiddy Printing Company, 1910), 286-287.

and His Boys, F.D. Srygley offers the following version of events, much closer in substance to the earlier of the two Emma Page Larimore recountings:

> He was at the battle of Shiloh, and was put in command of a special picket squad to guard the river above Pittsburg, to prevent a flank movement by Federals landing at a point higher up the river. He wrote the dispatch which gave Johnson [sic] notice of the passage of the first Federal gun-boat above Pittsburg. Johnson is said to have remarked that the dispatch was a model military document.[10]

Although Srygley's account doesn't establish a timeline, the substance of Larimore's orders seems to fit well with the version offered two decades later by Emma Page, and again seems to confirm that his message was related to events prior to, rather than from, the battle proper. Yet we have no source for the Johnston remark, and this is, as best as I can tell, the earliest version of the story in print–over two and a half decades after the fact. Srygley simply tells us that Johnston "is said to have remarked," but the vague, passive nature of the sentence does little to indicate how Larimore, or Srygley for that matter, might have heard the remark. Perhaps Larimore delivered the missive himself, or a courier brought word back to him later on. We simply don't know.

In the end, then, we have a plausible set of circumstances for Larimore to have written a "model military document" a few days prior to the battle itself, but no clear way to establish how

[10] F.D. Srygley, *Smiles and Tears: Or, Larimore and His Boys* (F.D. Srygley, 1889), 72.

the purported compliment might have gotten back around to him. Sometimes, as historians, our sources don't provide us everything we might hope for, and that seems to be the case this time.

"they better bring a wheelbarrow": Austin McGary and the KKK

A similar difficulty arises in trying to verify an unusual story about Churches of Christ preacher, editor, sheriff, and both former member and noted opponent of the Ku Klux Klan, Austin McGary. Born on February 6, 1846, in Huntsville, Texas,[11] McGary (like Larimore) joined the Confederate military at a young age—so young, in fact, that he was still only nineteen at the war's end.[12] Four years after being paroled from the defeated army at Houston, McGary killed a man in Midway, though his legal defense of self-defense ultimately proved successful.[13] Around the age of thirty, McGary became the sheriff of Madison County, Texas, a post which he held for about two years.[14] During his tenure, McGary killed a suspect who had tried to outdraw him. Perhaps because of dangers like these, McGary later moved into a similar role as a prisoner transport for the state of Texas, a job which he likewise held for about two years. Still a religious skeptic at this point, McGary returned to Madison County to reconsider his future.[15]

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[11] F.D. Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons: A Collection of Original Sermons by Different Men, with a Biographical Sketch of Each Man Accompanying His Sermon, Illustrated by Half-Tone Cuts*, 358.

[12] Many of the dates in this presentation come from the timeline compiled by Terry Gardner at "Austin McGary," *The Restoration Movement*, https://www.therestorationmovement.com/_states/texas/mcgary,austin.htm, hereafter referred to as the "Gardner timeline."

[13] Terry J. Gardner, "McGary, Austin (1846-1928)," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster et al (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 507-508.

[14] Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons*, 360.

[15] Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons*, 360-361; Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement*, vol. 2, *1866-1906* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 403.

On December 24, 1881, McGary was baptized just before the year's end; he soon pursued his newfound religious calling with the same dedication (and wanderlust) that he had shown during his time in law enforcement. In 1883, McGary relocated to Austin, from which he began publishing the *Firm Foundation* during the following year.[16] Never content to stay put for long, though, McGary lived in at least six different Texas communities between 1891 and 1897, according to Lane Cubstead, and he even evinced interest in establishing a colony in Mexico around 1900.[17] Eventually losing control of the *Firm Foundation* in 1902, for reasons doctrinal and otherwise, McGary moved several more times in the following years, including stays in Los Angeles, California; Eugene, Oregon; and Springdale, Arkansas, where he purchased a farm. By the 1910s at the latest, McGary had landed back in Texas, from where he would edit a number of religious and prohibitionist papers in the next few years before passing away on June 15, 1928, in Houston.[18]

This summary has hardly done justice to the larger-than-life story of Austin McGary. Earl Irvin West observes in the second volume of *The Search for the Ancient Order* that McGary's stories helped inspire John W. Thomason Jr.'s novel *The Lone Star Preacher*, and even the usually restrained West devotes an entire chapter to McGary and the exciting, though often uncited, stories of his adventures.[19] In fact, it is one of those stories that I wanted to investigate,

[16] West, *Search for the Ancient Order* vol. 2, 403; Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons*, 361; Gardner timeline.
[17] Lane Cubstead, "History as the Firm Foundation Made It," *Firm Foundation*, April 28, 1959, 259; Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement*, vol. 3, *1900-1918* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1979), 362.
[18] Gardner timeline.
[19] West, *Search for the Ancient Order* vol. 2, 397. The chapter continues through p. 408.

since it has, like the above tale about Larimore, shown up in numerous works on McGary in the years since his death. West's account of the incident is as follows:

> The most prominent characteristic of McGary was his courage. Fear had absolutely no part in his make-up. At Willis, Texas, near Houston, the Ku-Klux Klan became active after the Civil War, and McGary was widely recognized as a bitter enemy. He was warned to get out of Willis, but he ignored the warning, until a stranger from another town informed him that he would be killed, and that people from another community would do it if he did not move. McGary was puzzled for a moment what to do. He conceived a plan, and sent an old Negro to every street corner in the town to shout at the top of his voice that McGary would speak on a certain Sunday afternoon at a specified locality on the subject of "Ku-Klux Klan."
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> The time arrived and the town was full of people. McGary laid serious charges before the Klan. The Klan was unconstitutional. He related how they had taken an old preacher out of his house at night and beaten him unmercifully. McGary's language was bitter in the extreme. He told them his door was unlocked at all times; that they could come any time they choose, but they better bring a wheelbarrow in which to haul their boys off. "I have a gun and some of you know that I am handy with it," McGary cried. The Ku-Klux Klan never bothered A. McGary.[20]

[20] West, *Search for the Ancient Order* vol. 2, 404-405.

Although I must have initially encountered this story many years ago when reading West for the first time, it was only with the much more recent publication of Jason Fikes's 2022 article "Jesse P. Sewell, White Supremacy, and the Formative Years of Abilene Christian College" that it jumped out to me. In that article, Fikes summarizes the above anecdote, citing West, and adds that "Later in 1923, McGary wrote an extended editorial to the *Houston Chronicle* denouncing the Klan's unlawful and cowardly activities."[21] This editorial (actually published in 1921) has, thanks to the work of Terry Gardner and John Mark Hicks, has been reproduced on Hicks's website; in it, McGary forthrightly discusses both his previous involvement with the Klan during the Reconstruction era as well as the reasons for his later opposition to it.[22]

As you may have guessed already, however, I am more interested in the bit about the wheelbarrow. This particular aspect of McGary's anti-Klan activity is much harder to verify: Fikes cites West, but West cites no one! The dearth of citations in West's McGary chapter has already been identified and explored at length in a helpful post by Terry Gardner in the "Friends of the Restoration" Facebook group, which fact-checks the widely repeated but erroneous claims that McGary never carried a gun, or killed anyone, or both.[23]

Since West also does not give a date for the story in question, we must first try to figure out when it could have taken place, if indeed it did. Two options jump to the top of the list. The first extrapolates from the dates given by West for other milestones in McGary's life and

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[21] Jason Fikes, "Jesse P. Sewell, White Supremacy, and the Formative Years of Abilene Christian College," *Restoration Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2022): 176.
[22] Republished as "A Stone-Campbell 'Father' on the Ku Klux Klan," https://johnmarkhicks.com/2011/12/31/a-stone-campbell-father-on-the-ku-klux-klan/.
[23] Terry Gardner, "Austin McGary and Internet Quotations," in "Friends of the Restoration" Facebook group, November 3, 2021.

assumes that the historian slotted the story into the appropriate place in the narrative, even though he did not call attention to it. This would place the story somewhere in the vicinity of 1883-1884, between McGary's move to Austin and his founding of the *Firm Foundation*.

This hypothesis has several definite drawbacks, however. While nothing in West's version of events necessarily requires McGary to have been living in Willis at the time of the confrontation, it seems less than likely that he would have moved to Austin in 1883, started his paper in the same town in 1884, but have also spent enough time in Willis in the meantime to provoke such hostility from the Klan—especially since Willis is much closer to Houston, where McGary also lived for several years, than to Austin.

A stronger option places the potential Willis incident at some point in the very early 1920s, just prior to the aforementioned *Houston Chronicle* editorial. In that piece, McGary states that he had decided previously not to speak publicly about the Klan "again," although circumstances had forced a change of plans. A.R. Holton places McGary in Willis during the 1920s,[24] and the McGary-Douglas debate locates in Willis at the time of the discussion in 1921.[25] Though this timeline doesn't square with West's implied chronology, it is a much more feasible window for the incident to have occurred, and it would also explain the strong (even by McGary's standards) rhetoric in the *Houston Chronicle* editorial.

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[24] A.R. Holton, "75 Years Advancing With Texas," *Firm Foundation*, January 20, 1959, 38.

[25] The debate was published in serial form in *The Apostolic Way* beginning with the January 15, 1921 issue, and all three pieces (April 1, 1921, and October 1, 1921, are the other two) have McGary posting his correspondence from Willis. Eventually, the work was compiled into a book, the full citation for which is given in Michael W. Casey, "From Religious Outsiders to Insiders: The Rise and Fall of Pacifism in the Churches of Christ," *Journal of Church and State* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 464 n47.

Even with this more plausible timeline for the Willis confrontation, however, we still need to evaluate (in the absence of any primary source evidence prior to West's chapter) how believable the story is. To be sure, the ideas that McGary would stage a public scene of this nature, that he would threaten violence if someone challenged him, and that he would be strongly opposed to the Klan in these later years of his life are all reasonable; there is nothing in the story that immediately jumps out as being out of character for McGary. However, West's version is very light on details; in addition to the missing time frame, none of the other participants in the story besides McGary is identified, and neither is the "other town" from which the specter of violence was emanating. It sounds like a preacher story–it's interesting, it gives us a feel for McGary as an individual, but even though it tells us truth in the abstract sense, it may or may not do so in a more literal way.

Even though neither of our investigations led to a smoking gun (or wheelbarrow, or dispatch), I hope that today's presentation has been interesting and that it has kindled or rekindled your love of movement history. As historians, as scholars, we are truly blessed to get to do what we do, and we can do worse than to bring a little bit of levity to our work when we have the opportunity. Thanks for your time and attention.