

William Harris Hardy and the American Civil War

Reagan L. Grimsley¹

Assistant Professor, Auburn University

“Strong men and women, old and young, wept. Many prayed that God in Heaven should accompany us. Mothers of sons took me by the hand and begged me to take care of their boys... Many a noble boy that day received his mother’s last kiss and his wife’s final embrace.”²

On Friday, May 31, 1861, a 24 year-old lawyer turned volunteer company commander gathered his unit of eighty men in the small central Mississippi town of Raleigh, the county seat of Smith County. The above quote described the scene that day as the soldiers and their families shared their last moments before the troops left for war. The company, nicknamed the “Smith Defenders,” would march the next day to Brandon, Mississippi and then continue onward via railroad to the state capital at Jackson. In both Brandon and Jackson, citizens greeted them with pomp and circumstance, characteristic of the early days of the war. The unit formed part of the 16th Mississippi Regiment, Company H, and would see action in Virginia under Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. Many of the young soldiers who departed that day did indeed receive their last farewell from family and friends.

The young company commander, elected as Captain of his unit, was William Harris Hardy. He survived the war to become one of the foremost boosters of south Mississippi in the postwar period. A lawyer, politician, and judge, Hardy also made his mark in the post-Civil War era by building two railroad lines and founding the Mississippi cities of Hattiesburg, Laurel and Gulfport. Although his latter career is widely known, Hardy’s participation in the war as a young man is often overlooked, and this special Civil War Sesquicentennial edition of the *Primary Source* offers an opportunity to elaborate on the man and to highlight his archival legacy. This article will serve two purposes. The first is to provide a brief

¹ The author is currently preparing a book length manuscript which focuses on the lives of William Harris Hardy and Joseph T. Jones.

² Toney A. Hardy, *No Compromise with Principle: Autobiography and Biography of William Harris Hardy* (New York: American Book-Stratford Press, Inc., 1942) p. 59.

biography of Hardy and his Civil War career. The second will be to identify and highlight special collections materials either created by Hardy or which support the study of his life during the Civil War Era. Quotations from primary source materials in this article serve to illuminate the primary source materials and to illustrate Hardy's eloquent prose.

At the outbreak of the war, Hardy was in his mid-twenties, full of vigor and ambition. Born in Lowndes County, Alabama in 1837, Hardy studied at the local Town Creek schools and for a short time at Cumberland University in Tennessee. Moving to Jasper County, Mississippi in 1856, he taught school at Montrose for one year and then at Sylvarena Academy in Smith County for one term. He began studying law under the tutelage of the Shannon and Street Firm in Paulding during 1856 and gained admission to the bar in 1858. He moved to nearby Raleigh, Mississippi and set up shop, and by 1860 his law practice was thriving. In the 1860 census, Hardy owned real estate worth \$2000 and a personal estate worth another \$500.³ He married Sallie Ann Johnson on October 10 of the same year, and by the outbreak of the Civil War, the couple was expecting their first child. A local Democratic Party leader, Hardy was in an advantageous position to encourage other young men to join the war effort, and it was in part his influence which raised the eighty-man company of Smith Countians which comprised the Smith Defenders.

Although he was only in his mid-twenties, Hardy received the nod as Captain of Company H. As was common with many units which volunteered early in the war, he found himself among friends and family. His brother, Thomas Hardy, eventually rose to the rank of first lieutenant in the company. A cousin, Snowden Hardy, and a brother-in-law, Henry W. Evans, also served in the unit. Smith County was predominantly rural in 1860, and the majority of the soldiers of Company H were yeoman farmers. As described by Robert G. Evans, whose 2002 work *The 16th Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and*

³ *1860 Census of the United States*. Washington, DC. Manuscript Census returns for Smith County, Mississippi.

Reminiscences is the seminal monograph on the unit: “The Sixteenth Mississippi was an average Confederate unit, made up of ordinary Southern men.”⁴

After a review by Governor John Jones Pettus in Jackson in early June, the company traveled by train to Corinth, Mississippi to await orders. While at Corinth they drilled in anticipation of future military action. News of a Confederate victory at First Manassas, the initial engagement of the war, “sent a thrill of joy and a shout throughout our camp...”⁵ By the first week of August, 1861, Hardy found himself in Manassas, Virginia. The 16th Mississippi would spend the remainder of the year in Johnston’s Army of Virginia, mainly conducting picket duty. Sickness set in almost immediately after the regiment left Jackson. Hardy himself remarked in a letter dated October 17, 1861 that he suffered from dysentery for three weeks. The cold weather placed further hardships on the Mississippi troops, as many were ill prepared for the cold weather and fell ill with colds and pneumonia.⁶ Sickness continued to vex Hardy. While the 16th fought with Jackson in his Valley Campaign, Hardy instead spent much of the spring and early summer furloughed on sick leave. When he rejoined the regiment in August of 1862, the unit was assigned to Longstreet’s Corps and preparing for a large-scale battle at Manassas Junction. The Second Battle of Manassas was trial by fire for Hardy. He performed superbly, and Company H proved its mettle during the engagement, charging the enemy and forcing them back some four miles. While proud of the unit’s performance, in a letter to his wife Sallie, Hardy wrote of the horrors of war:

“We slept in the line of battle on our arms on the bloody field, and oh, the heart sickens at the thought. All the firing had ceased, everything was calm and still after the awful storm save the awful shrieks of the dying and wounded, which were great from every quarter in every direction. Cries for help, for water, brother calling for brother, comrade for companions, some

⁴ Robert G. Evans, *The 16th Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002) p. xviii.

⁵ William Harris Hardy to Sallie Johnson Hardy, 22 July 1861. William H. and Sallie J. Hardy Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

⁶ William Harris Hardy to Sallie Johnson Hardy, 17 October 1861. William H. and Sallie J. Hardy Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi; William Harris Hardy to Sallie Johnson Hardy, 9 January 1862. William H and Sallie J. Hardy Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

calling on God to take their dying souls to heaven, other praying him to take care of their wives and children.”⁷

Hardy actively led Company H until September of 1862 and saw his last action with the company at the siege of Harpers Ferry. On October 14, 1862, he resigned his command in the 16th Mississippi, having been absent on furlough sick for six of the prior eight months. While Hardy listed his ailment as chronic gastritis, Confederate surgeons described his condition as chronic dysentery. According to his memoir, his poor physical condition led to a more than six-month stay in a sick bed in Charleston, West Virginia during the fall of 1862 and spring of 1863. After the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, Hardy returned to Mississippi, and his stint with the 16th Mississippi ended.⁸

Back home in Mississippi, Hardy reunited with his wife Sallie and met his daughter Mattie for the first time. Hardy had faithfully corresponded with Sallie throughout the first two years of the war, often lamenting over his inability to procure a leave to visit her and his young child. Back home in Raleigh, Hardy spent a year working to regain his health. On April 1, 1864, Hardy rejoined the Confederate Army as an Aide de Camp to General Argyle Smith. The appointment was at the rank of Lieutenant, and Hardy joined Smith during the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain in the summer of 1864.⁹ As a member of Smith’s staff, Hardy participated in the Battle of Atlanta, where the general received a grave wound. Hardy traveled with Smith as he was removed to Macon, Georgia and then to Brandon, Mississippi to recover from his injuries. The two returned to post in Cleburne’s Division of Hood’s Army of Tennessee in the late fall of 1864 and participated in the Battle of Nashville. During the Battle of Franklin, Smith’s brigade did not take part in the action. This battle essentially destroyed the Army of

⁷ William Harris Hardy to Sallie Johnson Hardy, 7 September 1862. William H. and Sallie J. Hardy Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

⁸ Resignation documents located in *Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Mississippi*, National Archives and Records Association, Publication Number M269, Record Group 109, Roll 242. Hardy, *No Compromise with Principle*, p. 68-71.

⁹ Argyle Smith to Samuel Cooper, located in *Compiled Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers, and Nonregimental Enlisted Men*, National Archives and Record Administration, Publication Number M331, Record Group 109, Roll 0118.

Tennessee as an effective fighting force and Smith and Hardy retreated with the army to Corinth. After a brief furlough the two were ordered to the eastern seaboard, where they eventually joined the army of Joseph E. Johnston in anticipation of participating in the Carolinas Campaign. Shortly after their arrival, Johnston's Army surrendered to William T. Sherman on April 26, 1865, and after parole Hardy began the long journey back to Mississippi. He arrived back in Mississippi on June 1, 1865, a veteran of two different commands, spending in total two and half years in the service of the Confederate States of America.¹⁰

After the war, Hardy moved to Paulding, Mississippi and continued the practice of law. Reconstruction did not inhibit his economic advancement, and by 1870 his estate was valued at \$11,000.¹¹ During the next two decades he would rise to prominence as a behind the scenes Democratic party leader and a railroad builder of the New South. He correctly foresaw that building railroads to tap the natural resources of the piney woods region of Mississippi would bring economic opportunity the area. This development required outside capital, much of which came either from England or from Northern businessmen or financiers. Hardy was also a noted public speaker and several of his speeches drew upon and shaped the memory of the war. Most notable among these are a eulogy of Confederate General Mark Lowery in 1885, which both praises the man and his accomplishments, but also pointedly memorializes the soldiers who fell under his command. A second eulogy delivered in New York City on the occasion of Jefferson Davis's Death in December, 1889 honors Davis's life and calls for the reconciliation of North and South.¹² A quote from Hardy's 1889 speech is poignant, and summarized his approach to the events surrounding the war:

¹⁰ Hardy, *No Compromise with Principle*, 76-83.

¹¹ *1870 Census of the United States*. Washington, DC. Manuscript Census returns for Jasper County, Mississippi.

¹² Address delivered by William Harris Hardy at Blue Mountain, Mississippi, 17 June, 1885, reprinted in *No Compromise With Principle*, p. 318-341; *New York Herald*, 8 December 1889, reprinted in *No Compromise with Principle*, 223-228.

“God speed the day when all the asperities engendered by the late war shall be forever buried in the deep sea of oblivion, and we shall all cherish as one glorious, common heritage, the courage, valor, and patriotism displayed by both sections.”¹³

Hardy was not unique in his dual purposes of seeking to remember the Confederate dead and their cause while also calling for an end to sectional differences in an effort to put the war to rest. As historian David Blight suggests, ordering Civil War memory around the shared values of manliness, valor, sacrifice, and a mutual sense of honor created a language which veterans of both sides of the conflict could embrace with pride. It provided the additional benefit of engendering commercial reconciliation and promoting northern investment in southern business enterprises.¹⁴ By 1900, northern financiers controlled a majority of southern railroads.¹⁵

Fortunately for researchers, William Harris Hardy left behind a copious cache of letters and an autobiography which document his life. He also penned a series of articles about reconstruction in Mississippi which appeared in the *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Volumes IV and VII*. Curiously, historians who study the Civil War and Reconstruction often overlook these documents. A closer examination of these sources can provide possible leads for historians seeking source material on the Civil War in Mississippi.

The primary archival material which documents Hardy’s war experience is located at the McCain Library and Archives on the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi. There are two collections which contain Hardy letters, photographs, and other memorabilia. The first collection, cited often in the above biographical piece, is the William H. and Sallie J. Hardy Papers, comprised of 1.6 cubic feet of material. Sallie Johnson, as mentioned above, was the first wife of William Harris Hardy. She died of malaria on September 16, 1872. As noted in the finding aid, the heart of the collection is a series of 66

¹³ *New York Herald*, 8 December 1889, reprinted in *No Compromise with Principle*, 228.

¹⁴ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001) p. 199—200.

¹⁵ John F. Stover, *The Railroads of the South: A Study in Finance and Control* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955) p. 254, 281.

original letters written between 1860 and 1881. Many of these letters focus specifically on the Civil War and give field reports about camp conditions and a handful contain descriptions of battles. Many also focus on the concern Hardy had for the family he left behind in Mississippi, and he queried Sallie about finances, the family, and happenings on the homefront. A second archival collection at the University of Southern Mississippi, the William H. and Hattie L. Hardy Papers, consists of .9 cubic feet and focus on the time period after 1873. After the death of Sallie Johnson, Hardy met and married Hattie Lott on December 1, 1874. While the 127 letters in this collection do not specifically deal with the Civil War, they do serve to document Hardy's later life. In particular, they are of note to those studying Mississippi during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and are important to placing Hardy's life in context with that of his Confederate peers.¹⁶

In 1911, William H. Hardy's son Lamar requested that he "chronicle the principal events of his own stirring life."¹⁷ Hardy agreed, and this autobiography became the basis for the 1946 monograph *No Compromise with Principle: Autobiography and Biography of William Harris Hardy*, written by Hardy's son Toney. This volume combines Hardy's 1911 autobiographical piece with a biographical examination of his life by two of his children, Toney Hardy and Mattie Hardy Lott. Also included are reprints of some portions of family letters, speeches, and newspaper articles which illuminate the life of William Harris Hardy. This is the currently the only biography of William Harris Hardy, and as it is written by family members the text often avoids painting an unfavorable picture of Hardy. Still, the family stories by the two Hardy children add insight into the subject's character and personal life.

Two other sets of archival material can reveal important clues about the lives of Civil War soldiers in Mississippi. The first is manuscript census data, which is crucial to placing the pre-civil war lives of the soldiers in perspective, and garnering information about their family and economic status.

¹⁶ For finding aids of the collections see www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/m380.htm and www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/m182.htm.

¹⁷ Hardy, *No Compromise with Principle*, xv.

The Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Mississippi is likewise a useful resource to delve further into the service records of soldiers. In Hardy's case, the official records fill in many of the gaps which are unavailable in his autobiography or the family letters. For instance, Hardy places his resignation in 1863, while official records clearly record it as October 1862 and provide relevant surgeons recommendations of his medical conditions. Other useful information such as muster roles and letters of appointment can lend other clues when developing biographical sketches of combatants.

One last source deserves particular mention, as it uses the William H. and Sallie J. Hardy Papers effectively to tell the story of the 16th regiment. After spending the better part of a lifetime researching the Civil War history of the 16th Mississippi Infantry, Judge Robert G. Evans authored the edited volume *The 16th Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences*. This monograph tells the story of the 16th Mississippi through a variety of primary source materials compiled by 18 members of the unit, which include a number of letters from William Harris Hardy to Sallie Johnson Hardy. It is a welcome resource for those researching Civil War history in Mississippi, and can serve as a model for future regimental histories.¹⁸

As Mississippi marks the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, there are still many gaps in both the historical and archival record which need to be filled. This brief study of William Harris Hardy is representative of the many stories which are as yet only partially told, both in terms of biography and the collection of the types of sources needed to effectively write about the this tumultuous conflict. Archivists can continue to support the study of the era by continuing to build primary source collections which contribute to our understanding of the war, and should seek to provide greater access to the materials by making archival sources available online when possible. For example, the digitization of *The*

¹⁸ Evans, *The 16th Mississippi Infantry*.

Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Mississippi is an important step forward for historians, genealogists, and others who seek searchable, online access to information about soldiers and units from the state. In an era of budget cuts and institutional spending restrictions which often limit funding for such projects, it is crucial that archival intuitions invest in projects which capture the public's imagination and promote use. Civil War collections certainly fill this niche.