

Andrew Jackson Coffey

The Last Civil War Union Soldier buried in Nelson County



On October 10th, 2020, the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) honored Pvt. Andrew Jackson Coffey, a former soldier who fought for the Union during the Civil War years, with a military dedication ceremony at the Coffey family cemetery where Andrew is buried. A week prior, on October 3, members of the SUVCW came to set a marker next to Coffey's headstone at the cemetery which is located on the North Fork of the Tye River, close to Nash.

The day of the dedication was overcast with a fine mist of rain and colorful autumn leaves coming down as my husband and I wound our way down Campbell's Mountain Road on the way to the cemetery. About the halfway mark, fog began rolling in and I imagined how a day like today might have looked to Civil War soldiers in the middle 1860s. It set the stage for the upcoming program and as we neared the

site, a 35-star United States flag placed at the cemetery entrance guided us in to the parking area. This particular flag, which would have been the one that Andrew served under, was in use during the last half of the Civil War era. The stars include all of the Union States at that time (with Kansas, added January 29th, 1861 and West Virginia, added June 20, 1863), including the seceded Southern States, as President Lincoln's aim was to preserve the Union.

Andrew J. Coffey was born in Nelson County, Virginia, on October 11, 1835 and on February 7, 1861, married Rebecca Campbell who was born on November 29, 1840. He volunteered for the Confederate Army in May of 1862 but soon deserted because of his religious and moral views of slavery. He traveled north to join the 3rd Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery, a volunteer regiment and was stationed with them at Fortress Monroe in Hampton Roads for most of the war. In 1865 he was transferred west to the Dakota Territory and stationed at Fort Sully where he fought the Sioux Indians until the end of the War.



After being discharged, Andrew returned home to Nelson County to become a farmer. In the

mid-1880s he received a soldier's pension. After his death on April 2, 1911, Rebecca was given a widow's pension, giving her family \$30 per month (approx.\$800 today).

Andrew was buried in the family graveyard along with his father and mother (Henry Benjamin and Mary "Polly" Campbell Coffey), his daughter (Mary Melissa) who died in childbirth, and Mary's husband (Joseph T. Campbell). The graves are enclosed by a thick rock wall and a chestnut tree spreads its limbs outside the wall, near the head of the graves.



The property where the cemetery is located is owned by Elizabeth "Libby" Coffey and her late husband, Carlton, who was a direct descendant of Pvt. Coffey. Betsy Coffey-Chaudet, daughter of Elizabeth and her husband Roy were present at the ceremony honoring Andrew and she said she was proud that he fought for the Union because of his faith.

Overall, the October 10th dedication ceremony was sponsored by the SUVCW and represented by its components. This organization was created in 1881 and chartered by Congress in 1954. The SUVCW is the legal heir and representative of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) which was the principle Union Veterans' organization following the Civil War. Unlike other Veterans' organizations of the period, who's membership was limited to current and former officers, the G.A.R. was made up of all ranks. The G.A.R. was also the largest racially integrated organization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and served as the model for the VFW and American Legion.



Betsy Coffey-Chaudet, descendent

Other components represented at the dedication include:

The Department of the Chesapeake, SUVCW, a state level component, chartered in 1887, that covers the District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia. Jay Rarick is the 117th Commander of the Department of Chesapeake (formerly known as the Dept. of Maryland) in its 133-year existence.

The Taylor-Wilson Camp No. 10, Department of the Chesapeake, SUVCW. This is the local chapter of the SUVCW which is located in Lynchburg, Virginia. This is the organization which actually performed the dedication ceremony. Bro. Timothy Ake is the Commander of this Camp.

Rev. E. Clarence Purdue, Sr., American Legion Post, 17, Lovingston, Virginia. This is Nelson County's local American Legion Post. Originally chartered as the Nelson County American Legion Post 17, it is the only Veterans' organization left in the county. Ms. Judy Pestch is the Commander of this Post.

Rev. E. Clarence Purdue, Sr. Sons of the American Legion (SAL) Squadron 17, Lovington, Virginia. This newly (2018) chartered Squadron of the SAL is sponsored by American Legion Post 17. Jay Rarick is the first Commander of this SAL Squadron.



Jay Rarick, SAL Commander

Five flags were set next to the cemetery where the men from SUVCW were standing. They are identified from left to right:

**The National Colors:
Current U. S. Flag with 50 stars**

**The Dept. of the Chesapeake,
SUVCW colors**

The Taylor-Wilson Camp #10, SUVCW

**The Rev. E. Clarence Purdue, Sr.
American Legion Post #17**

**The Rev. E. Clarence Purdue, Sr. Sons
of the American Legion Squadron #17**

The ceremony began with the traditional panoply for the dedication of a grave marker from the usage of the Grand Army of the Republic, 1917 Ritual, which includes placing a rifle, haversack, canteen and kepi (Union hat) at the grave. Presented during the ceremony, at the base of the gravestone are a wreath of evergreen, symbolizing “Undying love for the comrades of the war”, a single rose, symbolizing “Future generations emulating the unselfish devotion of even the lowliest of our heroes”, a wreath of grape vine, “Crowning these remains with the symbol of victory”, and an American Flag, “In behalf of the Grand Army of the Republic for whose integrity and unity our late Comrade A.J. Coffey offered his services during the War of the Rebellion...”





l/r – Wayne Parent, Mark Day, Dr. Clifton Potter, Jr., Jason Mullen, Dr. Charles Driscoll, Ron Johnson and Jay Rarick. Not pictured, Mrs. Barbara Day and Ms. Emily Mullen

The service began with Master of Ceremonies and Sr. Officer present, Jay Rarick, giving an opening welcome and a brief history of Pvt. Andrew Jackson Coffey’s military career to those in attendance. Next, Commander, Brother Mark Day gave an overview of honoring Coffey for his service on the battlefield. Chaplain, Dr. Charles Driscoll lead in a prayer asking God to bless our country and comfort Andrew’s descendants in their loss. The Commander then asks the Officer of the Day, Jason Mullen to set up the Army symbols at the grave with a soldier to stand guard. First Sister, Emily Mullen presented a wreath of evergreen, symbolizing an undying love for the comrades of the war. Second Sister, Barbara Day presented a single red rose, symbol of purity. Third Brother, Ron Johnson presented a grapevine wreath as a symbol of victory. Commander, Mark Day then deposited a flag on the grave of Andrew Jackson Coffey. Chaplain, Dr. Clifton Potter, Jr. read a poem entitled The Unknown Dead. It was at this point that three volleys by a firing squad would have been fired but because of the day’s rainy weather, this part of the ceremony was omitted because loose black powder tends to miss-fire in dampness. As everyone stood with their hands over their hearts, Bugler, Comrade Wayne Parent played “Taps”. The Chaplain said a short prayer and the Commander ended the ceremony and dismissed the Camp.

“Taps are sounded – Lights are out – The soldier sleeps.”



Chaplain, Dr. Charles Driscoll



Commander, Mark Day



Chaplain, Dr. Clifford Potter, Jr.



Bugler, Comrade Wayne Parent

Setting the Marker



*Jay Rarick, Dr. Clifton Potter, & Dr. Charles Driscoll setting the marker, 10/3/2020
Below: The G.A.R. marker on Andrew Jackson Coffey's grave*





As the military dedication ceremony for Pvt. Andrew Jackson Coffey came to a close, Jay Rarick and I both commented on the coincidence that the soldier being honored was born on October 11, 1835 and 185 years later on October 10th, 2020, he finally got the recognition that was due him as the man who “Swore to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and to hold true faith and allegiance to them.”