

What Really Happened to William Davidson Fitzgerald of Nelson County, Virginia?

By “Buck” Harris

This article, which first appeared in the August 2004 issue of the Backroads newspaper, was written by my good friend and historian Lynden “Buck” Harris. Buck was a frequent writer for the paper, submitting in-depth articles about other Nelson County natives which he thoroughly researched and had documentation for. Buck was born on February 24, 1932, in the little hamlet of Pkin, close to Vesuvius and was living in Staunton at the time of his death on February 22, 2019. I wish to thank three other contributors who have given new details on the life of William Davidson Fitzgerald; Johnathan Woodie of Appomattox, Marilyn Marme’ of California, and Kristin Gembara of Wintergreen.

For the past 50 years, relatives and Fitzgerald kin kept telling me about their great uncle, William Davidson Fitzgerald, who was so opposed to slavery, the Civil War, violence, and the harsh treatment of the poor Negro that he rebelled against the Confederate cause. His only method to express his opposition without resorting to violence was to SPEAK OUT not only against the Confederate cause but favor the emancipation he hoped would come without the need for war. This opposition against the Confederates resulted in his arrest and incarceration, as a Union sympathizer, in the prison camp “Castle Thunder” in Richmond, Virginia, where it was told he starved on bread and water and died there during the war.

Over the past several years I have done considerable research with the Nelson County Fitzgerald clan and especially with the Bartlett Hawkins Fitzgerald family. For some reason I was always running into information about William Davidson and his Fitzgerald family. Let’s find out who this W.D.F. is, his family and his life.

Supposedly, William Davidson was born as the son of James Coleman Fitzgerald and Susan Males (Wales-Nales) Fitzgerald and reportedly the grandson of disabled Revolutionary War veteran Bartlett Hawkins and Maskey Coleman Fitzgerald. There are Fitzgerald researchers that refuse to accept this connection between James and Bartlett and they have good reasons to believe this. Based upon a Nelson County Court case of May 24, 1854, it is stated, “Satisfactory evidence was adduced in court to prove the only surviving children and heirs at law in fee of Bartlett Hawkins (Alias) Fitzgerald...”. You can note that James Fitzgerald, who was born in 1788, was not listed. Also, you can note that he and his second wife Sally Snead had children after 1854. This connection will have to be validated at a later time. Anyway, James and Susan had four children; William Davidson, Zephaniah C. (Zephinah), Samuel and Elizabeth. After his wife Susan died, James married Sally Snead and had the children; Peter C., Robert Alexander, Bethania, Attahaulpa “Atta” and John R. “Big John”.

William Davidson Fitzgerald was born in 1811 and thought to have died of starvation in Castle Thunder Prison, Richmond, Virginia in 1863. He married his first cousin Sarah Ann

Fitzgerald on November 23, 1835. Sarah Ann was born August 28, 1816 and died April 15, 1899. She was the daughter of John Clarkson Fitzgerald and Nancy E. Carr Fitzgerald. They had the following children: Henry Ruffner, Alfred McElroy, Beatrice V., Milton Hitt, Walter and Ellen D.

It is interesting to note that William Davidson was raised in the mountains of Nelson County where the highest level of education offered would have been the 7th grade. However, he attended and graduated from Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia in 1832-1833. This graduation is documented in the 1888 Alumni Book and is available for review at the Rare Book Section of the University Library in Lexington, VA.

All three of these Fitzgerald families lived in the western section of Nelson County, in and around Montebello, Tye River, Crabtree Falls, or the Fork Mountain areas. Review of the Nelson County 1850 census will find that William Davidson and his family were living at Chestnut Flats on Fork Mountain in the Massies Mill District and William was working as a carpenter.

A search of the 1860 census found William Davidson had relocated his family to Tishomingo County, Mississippi, with exception to number one son, Henry Ruffner, who remained in Nelson County and maintained his own family. William Davidson was teaching school in a small village called Boneyard and son Alfred McElroy, now 20 years old, was working as a carpenter for his neighbor, Rev. O. Dowell Fitzgerald. It is obvious that this entire Fitzgerald clan is very religious and produced many ministers of the gospel without formal education... just God-given talent and the desire to spread the Word of God. In 1860, the Rev. Dowell Fitzgerald was the minister of the Corinth Baptist Church in Alcorn County, Mississippi, and both William Davidson and Alfred McElroy were members. It does not take long to determine why William moved his family from their surroundings of Nelson County to Tishomingo County, Mississippi, to live next door to Dowell Fitzgerald. William Davidson was a first cousin to Dowell while Sarah Ann, William's wife, and Dowell were sister and brother.

We can recall the research and historical records of this Fitzgerald family left by William Boyd Fitzgerald and especially his letter to all Fitzgerald's of 1979. He emphasized the compassion and religious background and care for their fellow man this family maintained. He admonished his relatives and friends that all parties of this Fitzgerald clan were against the War Between the States. He explained William Davidson's opposition to the war and to slavery in general and the fact that he lost his life in defense of his compassion by being starved to death at Castle Thunder Prison in Richmond. William Boyd explained that Alfred McElroy was likewise in opposition to the war that he relocated to Texas to keep out of the Confederate States Army. Explained that son Milton Hitt joined the Union Army and fought for the North and that son Henry Ruffner was in-scripted into the CSA but deserted and returned home to Fork Mountain without having to serve.

Recalling that the first shots fired to begin the War Between the States were fired at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 12, 1861, it was on August of 1861, four months later that Alfred McElroy, as a 20 year old, joined the 2nd Regiment, 1st Brigade, Mississippi Volunteers

as a drum major. Beginning on August 24, 1861, he joined Company D, 23rd Mississippi Infantry. He was captured at Fort Donnellson on February, 1862, and was a POW at Camp Douglas, near Chicago, Illinois. While in prison, he had pneumonia from March 26 to April 20, 1862, and “fitus intermittus” August 30 to September 10, 1862. You would be having intermittent fits, too, to be under the conditions that existed at this prison. His company was exchanged on September 20, 1862. Alfred M. went back into action but deserted during the retreat from Abbeville in December of 1862. On July 23, 1862 he was picked up in Tishomingo County (at home) by the Union Army. Alfred McElroy took the Oath of Allegiance and they noted that he too was a scout. The next census available, in 1880, Alfred and his family were living in Rice, Ellis County, Texas. The 1910 census found Alfred’s wife, Martha Josephine Fitzgerald, living in Pushmataha County, Oklahoma, living with her son Robert D. Fitzgerald (38), his wife Lola B. (33) and children; Alfred (14), Luther D. (13), and Walter D. (6). Josephine was the 69 year old widow of Alfred McElroy Fitzgerald with her own income consisting of her husband’s Civil War pension. She was born in North Carolina and her maiden name was Kistler.

Further research revealed that the Rev. Dowell Fitzgerald, brother to Sarah Ann, enlisted in the 32nd Mississippi Infantry on March 13, 1862 as a Private in Company D. He applied for and was accepted as Chaplain for the Regiment on April 7, 1862. On January 13, 1864, he resigned and the war department accepted his resignation.

Son Milton Hitt Fitzgerald did, in fact, join the Union Army in late 1864, at age 17, and served in the 5th and 6th Regiments, West Virginia Calvary around the Berkley Springs, West Virginia, and Winchester, Virginia areas, without having to actually see action in the war.

Knowing that William Davidson Fitzgerald was residing in the same area as Dowell, further research revealed a William Fitzgerald, from Tishomingo County, Mississippi, joined the same outfit as Dowell Fitzgerald on March 7, 1862, and was killed in action on October 8, 1862, during the battle at Perceivable, Kentucky. At this point it was assumed that this individual was William Davidson Fitzgerald and instead of dying from starvation at Castle Thunder, he was killed in action fighting for the CSA during the Civil War. This William Fitzgerald’s service record was obtained from the National Archives and found that this particular Fitzgerald was born in Ireland and was 41 years old and did not fit our William Davidson Fitzgerald. However, did he falsify his age and place of birth to hide the fact he was fighting for the Confederates? I pondered this information for months.

Trying to find some type of documentation just one last time, I was lucky and found the ultimate: In the historical documents for Abraham Lincoln, on reel 55, was a letter from a William Fitzgerald, Castle Thunder Prison in Richmond, Virginia, to Abraham Lincoln, dated July 4, 1863. A copy of this letter is attached. There is no question that this letter was written by William Davidson Fitzgerald, Nelson County, Virginia. I expect anyone reading this letter will get cold chills and will never feel any greater pride than after reading it.



Photo of Castle Thunder, Richmond, Va. Unknown author - Selected Civil War photographs, 1861-1865 (Library of Congress) Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

William Fitzgerald to Abraham Lincoln, July 4, 1963

Castle Thunder Prison, Richmond, Virginia

As a citizen of the United States I take liberty of addressing you a short letter.

I am now, and for a considerable time, have been incarcerated by the Enemies of our Country, in Castle Thunder, Richmond. Here I shall soon die; but before being consigned to my obscure grave, I desire as a Southern man to applaud and commend your efforts in the holy cause in which you are engaged; not only of restoring the Union, but in rending the shackles of

Slavery from millions of our fellow beings. Let me assure you that the prayers of thousands in the South ascend to heaven daily for your ultimate success, in the great work.

The heads of the wicked rebellion, and the public journals of the Country, would have the people of the North and of Europe believe that the Southern people are unanimously in favor of a new government; but Sir, a pretension more false was never promulgated. If the sense and will of the people, including the rank and file of the army, could be taken today, they would, by an overwhelming majority, declare in favor of the Union. Of the white population of the South more than two thirds of the adult males are non-slaveholders or poor. It is impossible for them to fraternize with such men as Jeff Davis, Yancey, Benjamin and their coadjutors. It would be unnatural for them to sympathize with this fratricidal rebellion, or revere an oligarchy founded on slavery, which the rebel leaders are seeing to establish. Slavery has been a curse of the poor white man of the South and he would be mad indeed to desire to perpetuate it. The wealthy planter has ever been the poor man's enemy and oppressor, and the latter would be too generous by half if he desired to increase his foe's power over him. You may depend upon it that in general the rich of the South despise the poor, and the poor, in return, hate the rich.

True it is that the army of the Confederacy is composed principally of men non-slaveholders but they are not in arms by their own volition. True it is that at the beginning of the war many volunteers from this class were raised; but they did not realize the fact that they were to fight against the United States, against the Union. We are a sensation people; and they were carried away by the excitement of the moment. The leaders induced them to believe they were merely going to repel another John Brown raid. The deception then successfully practiced by the heartless traitors, enabled them afterwards to enforce the conscriptions, and now the people are powerless. But let the war for the Union be prosecuted, let your armies advance, and wherever they can promise security to the people you will find the masses loyal.

In conclusion I will venture a single suggestion on another point—it would be arrogance and folly in a humble individual like myself to presume to council the Chief Magistrate of a great nation but having closely watched the progress of this war, and the policy of your administration, I may be pardoned for expressing the result of my observations, and a single suggestion.

Your Emancipation Proclamation opened the grandest issue involved in this sanguinary struggle, and may prove the heaviest blow dealt the rebellion. But as I understand it, and as it is unwisely interpreted in the South, it frees all the Slaves within the territory to which applies without offering any indemnity to loyal citizens. In this respect it is wanting. There are many loyal slaveholders in the South, and your proclamation has driven some, and will drive others over to the rebels. I know within my own circle of acquaintances several with whom it has had this effect. In my own town two gentlemen, who before the proclamation were regarded as Union men and furnished substitutes to the rebels with great reluctance, immediately after the promulgation of the document, entered the Confederate service, one as a Colonel and another as Captain. Not only were these two men added to the rebel army, but also the influence of their example was by no means insignificant.

Since then you cannot desire the innocent to suffer for the misdeeds of the guilty, that the loyal should receive—the wages of treason, let another proclamation be issued, promising loyal citizens of the South reasonable compensation for the slaves liberated, out of the confiscated property of the disloyal, and the two proclamations together will quickly prove, with assistance of the army now in their field, the heaviest blows, and the death blows of the rebellion.

Such is the belief of your dying, and, Obedient Servant—

William Fitzgerald

{Copied as presented from the website: memory.loc.gov/mss/mal/maltex/rf/-orig/mal.0.55.rt Subj. Confederate States d2466600 Document: William Fitzgerald to Abraham Lincoln, July 4, 1863, Castle Thunder, and Reel 55}

From Lynn Coffey's Notes: In doing some research of my own, I found that William Davidson and his brother Zephaniah were arrested by the Confederacy on May 25, 1863 in Nelson County, Virginia and taken to Castle Thunder Prison in Richmond, Virginia where William died on July 27, 1863. William and Zephaniah were never were tried or convicted of a crime.

It is not known why William came back to Nelson County from his home in Mississippi. Oral histories that have been handed down said that many Nelson County residents living in and around Fork Mountain that were against slavery and would not participate in the South's cause or were enlisted and became deserters hiding out near Spy Rock where Confederates could be easily seen coming to arrest Union sympathizers.

New details have emerged from Buck Harris's original article in the Backroads which I would like to include in this blog. They were submitted by Johnathan Woodie, Marilyn Marme, and Kris Gembara who researched more on William's life and were kind enough to let me include them to make a more complete article

New Details Emerge on the Life and Death of William Davidson Fitzgerald

Other surprising details on William's imprisonment and the involvement of other members of his family were discovered on a brief post on the Internet. Marilyn Marme' of Moorpark, CA was seeking information about her great-great grandfather, Alfred McElroy Fitzgerald of Rice, Texas, when Buck Harris answered. The two were brought together to collaborate on additional Fitzgerald family research. These new details were printed in the December 2009 issue of the Fitzgerald Family Association Newsletter.

Through Internet searches, Marilyn found *Devil's Game; The Civil War Intrigues of Charles A. Dunham*, authored by Carman Cumming. This biography was based upon articles and stories written by Dunham who was a Castle Thunder prisoner himself, under various pseudonyms. The book included an extended account of the arrest, imprisonment and death of William Davidson Fitzgerald. Further investigation on Charles A. Dunham alluded to the fact that he was quite adept at embellishing stories and one should keep this in mind when reading "*Devil's Game.*"

Another historical biography, titled *George W. Alexander and Castle Thunder: A confederate Prison and its Commandant* by Frances Casstevens also briefly mentioned William and his death in the prison.

A search at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond uncovered a letter written by William to General J. H. Winder. General Winder was the military commander of the CSA prisons including supervision over Captain Alexander, the commandant of Castle Thunder. William's letter to General Winder is quoted below:

Castle Thunder
2 June, 1863

General J. H. Winder:

Dear Sir;

My brother and myself have been held at this place as prisoners for over a week, and have not yet been informed of the charges against us.

Will you not grant us an interview at the earliest possible moment in order that we may learn of what we are accused. Whatever the charges are we are confident that if you will grant us an interview we can satisfy you that we ought not to have been arrested, and should be at once released. Please grant us this favor and we promise to detain you but a very few moments.

Yours,
William Fitzgerald

It is from this letter we discovered that brother Zephaniah Fitzgerald was incarcerated along with William.

In the book "*Devil's Game,*" Dunham (writing under the pseudonym Harvey Birch) gave the readers of his time and ours a wonderful description of William Davidson Fitzgerald:

Mr. Fitzgerald was in appearance a fax simile, of Abraham Lincoln. His appearance, carriage and address, was so much like Mr. Lincoln that his first entrance into their room caused an indescribable sensation to those that had at one time another seen Mr. Lincoln. For an instance they feared that the rebel threats to capture our president had been executed, and

they we all pleased to learn the truth. The prisoners dubbed the newcomer, "Father Abraham", a title he wore becomingly and with pride until death deprived him of this title.

Also in the "Devil's Game" book, we learned that while attending Washington College in the early 1830's William Davidson boarded with the Letcher family and their son John was a classmate. In 1863, this same John Letcher was the Governor of the state of Virginia. After being in Castle Thunder a few days, William penned a note to his old friend Letcher informing him of his situation. A day or so later, William was honored with a visit from the Governor and received the assurance that he and his brother would be released the following day. The Governor promised to call upon General Winder at once and "make it right". Not only did the next day come and go, but a week more rolled away; still William Davidson and his brother remained in prison. William, thinking that the delay resulted by the neglect of General Winder, addressed another letter to the Governor and immediately received this brutal reply:

Executive Department, Richmond, June 15, 1863

Mr. Wm. Fitzgerald:

Sir—I was aware before the receipt of your letter yesterday that you were still in prison, and I can assure you that it will be no fault of mine if you do not remain so during your natural life. When I promised to intercede with the military authorities in your behalf, I believed your assurance that the suspicious against you were without foundation. But on calling on General Winder I found that it had been reported to him by a gentleman of undoubted loyalty and veracity that you have been for years an enemy and vilifier of Southern institutions. In 1856 you voted for the abolitionist, Fremont, for president. Ever since the war you have maintained a sullen silence in regard to its merits. Your son, who, in common with other young men, was called to the defense of his country, has escaped to the enemy—probably by your advice. This is evidence enough to satisfy me that you are a traitor to your country, and I regret that it is not sufficient to justify me in demanding you from the military authorities to be tried and executed for your treason.

Yours,

John Letcher

Can you imagine how William Davidson felt when he received this letter from his old friend the Governor? This may have been the last straw and the vehicle that broke his spirit and perhaps his will to live.

Charles Dunham declared it was the scanty and meagre rations allowed prisoners at Castle Thunder that caused the death of Mr. Fitzgerald. A man of such strength as William Davidson, especially with his reported good health and being only 52 years old, could live more than 62 days, even on bread and water. According to a published report in the Richmond Enquirer, the

death occurred on July 27, 1863. We suggest that William's heart had been broken and it was his intent to die as a Martyr for the cause.

Although it was known in the family that William Davidson's daughter Beatrice travelled from her home on Fork Mountain to Richmond in an attempt to obtain the release of her father, the details were sketchy. What better way to present this episode than to quote the account by Charles Dunham who was present at the time of this terrible tragedy:

Out of his death arose one of the most touching incidents I have ever witnessed. His daughter, a young lady of remarkable beauty and intelligence, provided herself with several letters and affidavits from her neighbours, who certified that they were intimately acquainted with her father, and had never known him to utter a disloyal sentiment or commit a disloyal act, and repaired to Richmond, without her father's knowledge, to lay them before the rebel President and solicit her parent's release.

Jefferson Davis coldly refused to interfere in the matter when the young lady, intent on her purpose, sought an interview with Mrs. Davis and implored her intercession with the President in Mr. Fitzgerald's behalf. Her efforts proved successful and the next day, with an order in her pocket for her father's discharge, she hastened to Castle Thunder to give him an agreeable surprise. On presenting the order to the Commandant she learned that her father had died and been buried two days before. The scene which followed can be so readily imagined that I will not attempt to describe it. But before leaving the subject I would add, as an example of what an energetic young lady can accomplish, that Miss Fitzgerald, after having sufficiently recovered from the shock occasioned by her father's death, returned to Jefferson Davis and the next morning again visited the Castle with an order for the release of her uncle, her father's brother, who had also been for a considerable time a prisoner.

As a further indication of the malignant spirit of the rebel officials, I will add that when William Fitzgerald was removed to the hospital, his brother, who had also been imprisoned on suspicion, asked leave to accompany him as a nurse, which was refused. Several times during William's sickness his brother begged permission to visit him; but this small favor was denied. When Fitzgerald died, the brother besought me, as I was on good terms with Captain Alexander, the Commandant, that he be allowed to see the deceased. I made the application, but the inhumane captain refused it, and added that "the damned old traitors will soon meet in Hell, where they can see enough of each other."

The final quotation is not a proper manner in which to close this account of the last two months in the life of William Davidson Fitzgerald, a direct ancestor to many of you reading this today.

We hope you have come to appreciate that WDF was an unusually intelligent and capable individual. It is obvious he was a dedicated teacher of the poor and had an ardent love for his country and God. His anti-slavery views were long-standing, as evidenced by his naming his first born after Henry Ruffner, who wrote the famous Ruffner Tract, which advocated gradual emancipation long before the Civil War. As evidenced by his letter to Lincoln, WDF's

abolitionist and anti-succession views emanated from his strong religious convictions, common sense and compassion for the poor and then-enslaved.

Nelson County Causalities

By Kristin Gembara

As a young girl, I remember listening quietly to a conversation between my mom and my Uncle Austin. They were discussing their great, great grandfather Andrew Jackson Hatter who was killed during the Civil War. The story goes that a couple of confederate soldiers came down the lane. Andrew's pregnant wife Harriet Campbell Hatter saw them, and ran outside and yelled at her husband working in the field "Run, Jackson, run!" He turned and ran and one of the soldiers shot him in the back, dead. He left behind a pregnant wife and three small children. Some folks say he was planning on reporting for duty after he got his crops in the ground, others say he was an escaped P.O.W.

The fact is he never reported for duty. Through research of Civil War records, I found Andrew Jackson Hatter, along with his three older brothers, did not enlist in the Confederate or Union army.

A few years back a friend shared what is known as the Baptism of the Dead records written by Milton H. Fitzgerald, son of William Davidson Fitzgerald. Milton noted on this record that Andrew Jackson Hatter, son of John C. and Elizabeth Fitzgerald Hatter, died on June 22, 1862. I was able to look through digitalized newspapers from that time and struck genealogical gold. On June 27th 1862 The Richmond Daily Dispatch reported on some occurrences in Nelson County.

Daily Dispatch

Vol. Xxii — no.153 Richmond, Va. Friday, June 27, 1862

THE ARRESTS IN NELSON COUNTY.

--We have been placed in possession of the facts in regard to the prisoners brought to this city a day or two since from Nelson county, Virginia. It appears that the entire credit is due to the "Nelson County Tigers," an organization of citizens or and of Col. R. P. Lyon. A considerable of deserters and traitors have been taken in their mountain gap on the Tye River Turnpike, where, being fully armed, they defy any power to take them, dead or alive. The "Tigers" have determined to break up this nest, and in one successful foray, already captured some and killed two. The names of the persons killed were James Fitzgerald, a deserter from Capt. J. Henry Rivers company, and Andrew J. Hatter, who failed to comply with the Governor's proclamation of the 10th of March, calling out the

militia. Colonel Lyon is about to return to Nelson county, armed with full powers to proceed against these disloyal individuals, and we doubt not the gang will soon be broken up.

The oral history I overheard about Andrew Jackson was correct. Unfortunately, Andrew Jackson Hatter wasn't the only person killed that day. Who was James Fitzgerald? As I continued my research, I found he was the son of Zephaniah and Mary Coffey Fitzgerald. This is the same Zephaniah Fitzgerald, along with his brother William Davidson Fitzgerald, together were taken away to Castle Thunder on May 25, 1863 for being "sympathetic to the Union".

I found James H. Fitzgerald and his brother William H. Fitzgerald listed in a book titled *The Nelson Artillery Lamkin and Rives Batteries*, written by W. Cullen Sherwood.

-Fitzgerald, James H.: Pvt. Born Nelson Co. Residence Massies Mill, age 24, 1860 census. Enlisted 8/31/61 Nelson Co. AWOL, left camp 12/13/61. Reported to be in Nelson Co., 12/31/61. NFR. Bro. of William H. Fitzgerald.

-Fitzgerald, William H.: Pvt. Residence Massies Mill, age 21, 1860 census. Enlisted 8/31/61 Nelson County. Sent to Nelson County as nurse to 2 discharged men by order of Lt. Ligon, 11/17/61. Deserted 11/17/61. Was killed 12/13/61 by a party sent to take him and others by the Civil Authorities. Bro. of James H. Fitzgerald.

More on Castle Thunder Prison

Castle Thunder Prison was located between what is now 17th and 18th Street on the northern side of East Cary Street in Richmond. It was a former tobacco warehouse located on Tobacco Row. It was converted into a Confederate prison to mainly house civilian prisoners but political prisoners, captured Union spies and those charged with treason during the Civil War were also incarcerated. The prison originally had a capacity of 1,400 inmates but eventually held more than 3,000. In addition to the problems of overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of food, Castle Thunder also had an "inner room" of balls and chains that the brutal Confederate Captain, George W. Alexander, the Commandant, used on Union prisoners. An investigation was ordered in 1863 to look into the conduct of Captain Alexander. He was charged with harshness, inhumanity, tyranny and dishonestly, however, the charges were dropped after the investigation. At the close of the Civil War, the United States government used Castle Thunder to incarcerate Confederates who were charged with war crimes. The number of Union prisoners who died during the four years Castle Thunder was in existence is not known. Records state the prison was in service from August 1862 until April 1865 and was burned in its entirety by a fire in 1879.



Stereo view of Castle Thunder. Photo from Library of Congress. <https://lcn.loc.gov/2011646717>.

©Lynn Coffey

