

NEWTON COOPER

"THE WATERMELON MAN"

11 Nov 1840-30 Mar 1922

As a genealogist, I have many family lines that I enjoy investigating. Like so many others, I have a favorite predecessor that I like to research. That person is my Confederate ancestor, Newton Cooper, "The Watermelon Man".

Newton was born on November 11, 1840, in Baker County, Georgia. He was the second child of William Cooper, the first being a son named Jasper and the third a daughter named Susan. In 1848, Israel Maples partitioned the Doughtry County, Georgia, courts for guardianship of the three Cooper orphans. The three Cooper children are

listed in the household of Israel and Louisa Maples on the 1850 Baker County, Georgia, census. By 1860, Jasper had married and had an infant son. Susan was still in the Maples household and Newton was nowhere to be found.

Newton surfaces again in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 27, 1861, when he enlisted in the 6th GA Inf., Co. F, also known as the Mitchell Independents. Alfred Holt Colquitt was elected the first colonel of the unit, which included men from Baker, Butts, Crawford, Dade, Houston, Mitchell, Oglethorpe, Taylor, and Twiggs Counties. Newton was part of Colquitt's Brigade under Commander John T. Lofton and Capt. E. H. Shackelford. The regiment garrisoned at Yorktown, Virginia, from June 1861 until the

spring of 1862, experiencing its first combat in April in defense of Yorktown.

Jasper Cooper enlisted March 4, 1862, at Camp Davis, Georgia. He transferred from the 51st GA Regt. to his brother's unit on July 28, 1862. Transferring proved to be a fatal mistake, as Jasper died on September 8, 1862, in General Hospital No. 16, Richmond, Virginia.

The 6th GA Inf. fought at Seven Pines and in the ensuing Seven Days Battles before Richmond. Corpl. Newton Cooper appeared on a Roll of Prisoners of War sent for exchange from Ft. Delaware, Delaware, to Aikens Landing, Virginia, on October 2, 1862. He was declared exchanged November 10, 1862, at Aikens Landing, Virginia. He had been taken September 17, 1862, at Sharpsburg. Visiting

Ohio, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, wrote in July 1863 after visiting Ft. Delaware, "The prisoners were afflicted with smallpox, measles, diarrhea, dysentery and scurvy as well as the ever-present louse. A thousand ill; twelve thousand on an island which should hold four; lack of food and water; astronomical numbers of deaths a day of dysentery; and the living having more life "on" them than "in" them."

At Antietam, the Sixth suffered extremely heavy casualties, estimated at more than 200 of the 250 men engaged (including the regiment's lieutenant colonel and major). John T. Loftin was elevated to colonel after Antietam and led the Sixth at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. In the latter battle, the Georgians participated in Stonewall

Jackson's famous flank attack that smashed the Union Eleventh Corps. Following Chancellorsville, Colquitt and his "depleted" brigade were first transferred from Virginia to Kinston, North Carolina and then to Charleston, South Carolina. They participated in the defense of the city during the summer and fall of 1863. From July 1863 until February of the next year the brigade manned the defenses of Charleston Harbor, fighting at Battery Wagner and helping to garrison Fort Sumter.

On August 1, 1863, Newton took unauthorized leave to "ride south" to marry Anjello Walker. In the remarks section on the Company Muster Roll for March-April 1864 is noted, "Deserted August 1, 1863, Returned 1 June 1864." There is conflicting

information as to how long Newton was absent without leave. His two pension applications list the absence as ten months. His military records show he was on a company muster roll for the period December 31, 1863, to August 31, 1864, in Arthur Hood's Battn., Co. B, GA Cavalry, which became Co. B, 29th Battn., GA Cavalry. That roll states Capt. John T. Wimberly enlisted him as a private on September 23, 1863, at Decatur County, Georgia. Other records indicate Capt. Wimberly enlisted Newton at Camp L. Cobb on October 7, 1863. Later he rejoined his former unit by order of Gen. Beauregard and was listed on the 6th GA muster roll in March-April 1864.

By late 1864, the Sixth had lost a total of nearly 900 men killed and wounded. Late

in the war, Colquitt and his brigade were transferred to North Carolina, fighting at Bentonville before their final surrender on April 26, 1865, and parole on May 1, 1865, at Greensboro, North Carolina.

I have no information on Newton and Anjello from the close of the war until they appear on the 1880 Warren County, Mississippi, census with five children listed. The 1900 census states that Anjello was the mother of seventeen children with six of them living at the time of the census. I have only been able to document eight of the children.

Newton raised watermelons for a living. He sold watermelons on the streets of Vicksburg and also sold the seeds. There was always a contest between family members

as to who could raise the largest watermelon by the July 4th picnic. One year Newton had a watermelon weighing 110 pounds.

Newton's wife, Anjello, died sometime between the 1900 census and 1905. On his July 30, 1908, Confederate pension application, Newton stated he was living with his son, Lewis Cooper. On the 1910 Warren County, Mississippi, census he is living with his daughter and son-in-law, Alex and Ada Hagan. On August 24, 1917, Newton filled out another pension application stating he was living with his son, Lee Cooper.

In his old age, Newton lived at the Confederate Annex behind the Kuhn Memorial Hospital on Openwood Street, now known as Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. The Annex

burned to the ground during the early morning hours of September 27, 1918. An old ledger book, kept by the UDC for the years 1912-1918, was found in the Old Court House Museum and transcribed by me in November 1996. The ledger had several entries for Newton Cooper including his name on the list of residents in the Annex on June 1, 1915. On July 7, 1915, he was readmitted to the Annex. On August 2, 1915, he was given a weeklong furlough. In 1916, he was on the list of veterans admitted during the year. On May 25, 1916, he was given a furlough to June 15. Newton was given leave to visit relatives on January 7, 1917.

Newton is listed as living at the Poor House on the 1920 Warren County, Mississippi, census. At the time of his

death on March 30, 1922, he was living with one of his daughters, Mary Ella Taylor. The story was told to me that there was no grass growing in the yard around the house.

Newton's daughter would take the broom every day and sweep the dirt in the yard. Newton would sit in a chair and watch her sweep.

Then he would tell her, "I think you missed a spot over there."

Fisher Funeral Home records have an entry reading, "Newton Cooper March 30, 1922. One Rosewood finished coffin, use of ambulance, hearse, head and foot board, cemetery for grave, burial robe and services rendered \$57.36 Paid." The Vicksburg Evening Post, Friday, March 31, 1922, produced this obituary, "Gallant Confederate Veteran Passes Away Newton Cooper, an old time

resident of Warren County and gallant Confederate veteran, passed away at his home near the Log Cabin store last night, aged 70 years. Deceased had been in poor health for some years and the end had been anticipated by his only daughter and his friends. The funeral services will take place at Fisher's funeral chapel at 4 o'clock this afternoon, Rev. Robert Selby officiating. Deceased made his home for sometime at the Confederate Annex at the city hospital until the structure was destroyed by fire and has since lived with his daughter just outside of the city. The gallant old veteran had many friends who will sincerely regret his death. They have missed him for some years as he was formerly a figure on the streets of the city during the watermelon season,

disposing of his luscious crop of the famous "Cooper Melon." The obituary has several errors. He was not 70 years old. He was 81 years, 4 months, and 19 days old at his death. He had not one but three surviving daughters, Mary Ella Taylor, Elmina "Posse" Douglas, and my great grandmother, Ada Rosie Lee Hagan.

I have been doing genealogical research for nineteen years. It took me ten years to find the death date for Newton. When the information became available, I began to search for a tombstone. During my search, I found a cousin descended through this line that remembered visiting the gravesite as a child. Using the information I had uncovered, I applied for a Confederate marker. When it arrived, I paid Mr.

Jimmerson of the A. J. Martin Marble Works to inscribe "The Watermelon Man" on the back. A dedication service was held at Cedar Hill Cemetery on April 30, 1995, with Company E, 46 Mississippi Jeff Davis Rifles, a re-enactment group, taking part in the ceremony. Approximately forty descendants attended the Sunday afternoon service.

There is still a lot I don't know about my Cooper ancestors, but one thing I am confident about, Newton and Jasper Cooper fought bravely and were willing to die for their beloved Southland.