

## *The Hickory Tree*

The woman came in to the visitor's center carrying a small pile of papers, bound together in an old file folder. A genealogist, no doubt, but a lot younger than the ancestor-hunters who usually came around.

"Hi, hello. I'm Abigail." She seemed a little nervous, like she'd never done anything like this before.

"What brings you in?"

She saw me eying the folder and held it up.

"Me and my brother've been cleaning out our mother's house this week." She paused, like she wasn't quite sure how best to explain herself.

"She's been in hospice care since last month," the woman – Abigail – finally said. "My mother, I mean. I came up to visit and help my brother with the house."

"Oh." I wasn't really sure what to say. "I'm sorry."

Abigail looked down at the floor. "It's funny, you know? I remember when I was a girl and she cleaned out our grandmother's place. Her mother. And now I'm doing it for her."

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"It's alright. Been a bit of a time coming, I guess." Then she looked back up and smiled quickly, finitely, as if to flush the topic. "But that's not what I came in here to talk about."

She held the papers out. "We found this when we were going through some old drawers. Papers on our four-times-great grandfather. A Civil War soldier. She – Mom – would tell us stories about him sometimes. She stopped talking about him after her mother died, though, so I never knew she'd ever done any real research."

I opened the folder: old Xeroxes of library microfilm, pages and pages, too many for me to read behind the desk. I looked back up.

“We went through it last night, don’t worry,” Abigail said quickly. “You don’t have to read it all. Mom followed him through, found out where he fought.”

“Ok, I see. And I assume he fought here?”

“Yeah, died here actually. There’s a roll of dead on one of the pages.”

I flipped through the folder until I got to a copy of an old newspaper page marked KILLED. It had a long list of names dated to the Battle. They were organized by the soldiers’ hometowns.

She leaned over the desk and pointed to the entries under the heading ABERDEEN, VIRGINIA. Her finger tracked down the rows until it settled on a name: EDWARD CATES.

“There he is,” Abigail said. “He died here and the article says the dead from Aberdeen were all buried together, right where they fell, where the regiment fought. Under a hickory tree.”

I looked up at her, a little surprised. “Not many hickory trees in this part of Virginia. Mostly just oak and pine.”

“I guess that’s why they made a note of it, then.”

With anyone else, I might have argued. But Abigail had a way about her that made me hope she was right.

She motioned for me to turn the page. When I did, I found a print of a picture of two women. One was younger than the other, but apart from that they looked identical. They were both beautiful.

“The younger woman’s Edward’s daughter. Anna. She’s my however-many-times-great grandma. The older’s his wife. Anna’s mother.”

Anna wasn't smiling, but she seemed happy. Her cheeks looked rosy, even in the sepia of the old photograph, and her eyes were bright. Her mother, looking not at the camera but at Anna, clearly adored her daughter, and Anna seemed to glow in the light of her mother's eyes.

"It's lovely, they're beautiful."

When I looked back up, I couldn't help but notice how much Abigail looked like the women in the photograph. She was between the two in age but looked like she could have been either woman's sister. Suddenly, as I looked from the photograph to Abigail and back again, finding Edward began to feel like the most important thing in the world.

It would almost be like I was helping Anna find her father.

Abigail spoke again: "One of the pages says they all joined up together, in the same regiment. All the boys from Aberdeen." She took the folder and flipped to an old copy of a regimental roll. Then she put it back down on the desk and pointed to the top of the page.

*Sixty First Virginia*. At least, I thought it said Sixty-First.

I squinted. "Sixty-First?" The old scrawl was hard to read, and the resolution on the copy didn't help.

"Yeah, I think so. I don't know, I'm sure you've done this more than me. I was hoping you could tell me if I was right."

I looked again, closer now.

"I think you're right." I moved the paper around so I could see it in a different light. "I think. It's hard to say but," I traced the letters lightly with a pen, "I think you're right."

Then she exhaled, as if she was relieved, and smiled at me.

"Alright then, Sixty-First it is."

“Sixty-First it is,” I echoed. Her excitement was infectious. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Really?” And the look Abigail gave me then was something wonderful.

“Oh sure,” I said, talking a little faster now. “With a regimental number we can find exactly where he fought.” I got up and pulled a big sheaf of laminated maps down from the shelf.

I ran my finger along the grey squares of the Confederate line, searching for the little one marked VA-61. After a few scans I found it: Sixty-First Virginia, just inside the perimeter line of the preserved land.

“Well it’s our lucky day.” I pointed to the map. “He’s right inside our property line.”

“Really? Our good luck then, huh?”

“You want to see it?”

Abigail’s face lit up at the question, like she’d never quite expected to get this far, like everything was working out even better than she’d hoped. And it struck me then that this, this pursuit of the Sixty-First Virginia and of Edward Cates, this was the first piece of genealogy-research that I actually understood. Because this woman in front of me was not like the other genealogists. She was not here as part of some vacation to find her old rebel forebear. She had no interest in the imagined glories an enslaving army, glories that had become the source of a twisted generational pride for so many, for so many who had never fought and who denied even the purpose of their ancestors’ fighting, and yet who still made their pilgrimages every summer to Richmond and Shiloh and Vicksburg and Antietam, as though in the presence of their long-dead great-great-great something-or-other they might find some personal meaning in a glorious cause that had never existed in the first place.

But no, Abigail hadn’t come because of any of that. She had come because of her mother.

“I would love to,” she said quietly.

I asked a colleague to cover the visitor’s center and we stepped outside. As we began to walk toward the spot where the Sixty-First had fought, I was surprised at how excited, how happy, I felt. To have some hand in this final gesture from daughter to mother, to help it along in whatever way that I could, felt in that moment almost like a calling, as though Abigail had always been the true reason for my work at the Battlefield.

But, after a few minutes’ walking, Abigail spoke up. She sounded uneasy, almost sheepish, like a child asking permission to do something they know they really shouldn’t be doing.

“I’ve got a question.”

“Yeah?”

“Edward was a Confederate, so that means he was on the side of slavery, right?”

I got the question a lot, and I always had the same answer. Of course he was on the side of slavery, just like everyone in that army. But when I went to tell her this, just as I’d told so many other ancestor-hunters so many times before, I found myself hoping, in spite of myself, that Edward had been an exception, that he had been the lone good one, that he had had the character to live up to the weight now laid at the feet of his memory.

“Well, yes. If he fought for the Confederacy, he fought for slavery,” I said, gently as I could.

“I suppose I knew that.” Abigail looked at the ground. “I guess I just hate the idea of him joining up to fight for that.”

“But you never know,” I said, surprised at my own voice. “Edward could’ve been conscripted,” I continued, quicker now. “Probably was, even. Lot of Confederates were. If he was one of them, that means he didn’t have much of a choice but to fight.”

“Really? I never knew that,” and Abigail started to look a little brighter again.

“Sure, plenty Confederates were conscripted. Don’t let anyone tell you that all the rebel soldiers were fighting for some Southern honor or bravery or anything like that. A lot of them were just here because they had to be.”

Abigail gave me another of her wonderful little smiles, and suddenly the thought that Edward had been a good man didn’t seem so ridiculous at all. For all we know, I told myself, Edward Cates had wanted nothing more than to be left alone, to live his life in peace with his family. I thought back to the wife and daughter in the picture from the folder, back to the almost-smile that peeked through Anna’s lips as she looked out into the camera, to the way her mother had looked at her, to the love the two shared. And then I imagined what that picture would have looked like if Edward had lived, and in my mind’s eye I saw a beautiful family, all together, untouched by the War.

We walked on.

“We’re close,” I said finally. I stopped and held out the map for Abigail to see.

“The Sixty-First would have been just on the other side of that rise over there. If that’s where he is, that’s where the hickory tree’ll be.”

“You think it’s still there?” Abigail sounded nervous.

“Could be. They made a point of not cutting down the witness trees here after the Battle. Plus, we’ve had the land since the Depression, and we haven’t cut down anything.”

And with this confirmation of hope, of the reality of our search for Edward, Abigail got quiet again, and I thought she might cry. But then she just looked at me, looked at me and smiled. So I smiled back, and we looked at each other like this for a good long while. I didn’t think anything had ever made me feel so good.

Finally, softly, Abigail tilted her head to the rise.

“Should we get going?”

“I guess so.”

Her hand brushed mine as she started up the hill.

As we got close to the top I began to look for the hickory tree peeking up over the ridge, for those first leaves and branches that would tell us we'd been right, that we'd found that one hickory out of thousands of pines and oaks out here in the Battlefield, the one tree that marked the spot where Edward and his comrades had fought and died and been buried, the tree that Abigail's mother had surely imagined but never seen, but that would, today, finally be returned to the family fold.

But the leaves and branches never came, even as we neared the summit and walked faster and faster, scanning, searching, hoping, for a glimpse of the tree. When we got to where we could just about see over the top Abigail craned her neck, just as I did, to see the other side.

But there was no hickory tree behind the rise. There weren't any other trees, either. All we could see, as we stood on the little ridgeline, was an empty field.

It was a great disappointment. We tried to play it off: Abigail forced a little laugh and said something about how silly it was to be out looking for a hundred-and-fifty-year-old tree. I mumbled that they must have cut the tree down after all. But, as we stood over top of the empty field, I felt whatever magic had passed between Abigail and me at the base of the hill falter, as though, without the hickory tree, the fairytale spell of our search for Edward had been broken.

“Well he was here, still,” I said, trying to salvage something. “The map said so, we know this is the Sixty-First, we know Edward's here.” I pointed to the spot on the map again.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said, without hesitation. I did my best to sound like I was certain. “He was here.”

“Ok then,” she said, in a voice that was more determination than surety. She took the map from me and walked down the rise. I followed. We walked around the empty field for a time, with Abigail stopping every so often to close her eyes and take a deep breath, like she was trying to will herself into communion.

“Do you think,” Abigail said after a while, “you could take a picture of me here?” Her voice was quiet and cautious, as if hoping that a photograph would complete some sort of ritual, would sanctify this desolate field, even in the absence of the hickory tree.

“Of course.”

When I was finished, I handed her phone back, and Abigail held it out in front of her and looked between the picture and the empty land. I imagined that she was trying to convince herself that the trip had been a success, that the picture would be a suitable going-away gift for her mother. I tried to convince myself of the same thing.

After a few minutes of this, Abigail turned back to me, and I knew it was time to go. When we got back to the visitor’s center, Abigail thanked me and left her email address on a sticky note by the desk.

“Just in case you find any more information, or ever find out what happened to that hickory tree.”

And then she gave me a little halfhearted smile and left. She said she was going back to the hospice. I imagined her stepping into her mother’s room and showing the picture on her phone, that picture of the daughter in an empty field, the picture that I could only hope would be enough.

I would have felt so much better if we’d found the hickory tree.

I closed up the center about a half hour after Abigail left, the hickory tree still on my mind. When I got to my car, still half-consumed with thoughts of Abigail and Edward, I saw my tank was near empty. As I pulled into the gas station about a half-mile down the road, just across the Battlefield property line, I'd moved on to thinking about the way she'd smiled at me at the base of that hill.

But, as I stood by the car, listening to the pump tick, I caught myself looking at a tree just past the far end of the parking lot. It was big, old, and had a thick trunk that stayed bald for about fifteen feet before it disappeared beneath a huge expanse of leaves, lush and green in the summer sun. I had seen the tree before, every time I'd stopped to fill up. But I'd never really *noticed* it until then, never noticed how it was different from the trees on the Battlefield, never noticed how it was neither pine nor oak yet was so large and stately it must have been as old as the Battle itself.

Surely not, I thought to myself. Surely.

But, when I pulled out my phone and searched for images of hickory trees, there it was.

I couldn't believe it. There was our tree, at the far end of the gas station, just across the road from the Battlefield preserve. Somewhere beneath the lot or the gas pumps, I realized, suddenly aware of the asphalt beneath my boots, lay Edward Cates and the rest of the dead boys from Aberdeen. I could've been standing on top of them right there and then.

When the tank was full, I turned back for the visitor's center. I had to go back. Maybe I had made a mistake? Maybe I'd misread the map? Maybe the Aberdeen soldiers had detached from the Sixty-First? There could have been any number of reasons, any number of things to tell Abigail.

But I knew I had to tell her something. Maybe she could get a picture in the actual place Edward had fought. Maybe she could take something better back to her mother. Maybe that little spark between us would even rekindle in the shade of the real hickory tree.

When I got back to the visitor's center I raced to the desk. I pulled down the maps and I searched, quick as I could, for the spot where the station sits today. I traced along the battle formations and the trenches and the ridgelines until I found it, that place right where the state highway meets the county road, that place right in the middle of the land that boys and men had fought over all those years ago.

And there, right where they'd built a gas station a hundred years on, was a little grey rectangle: VA-65.

Of course. Of course.

The *Sixty-Fifth* Virginia, of course! It had been so easy to misread that old script, smudged and Xeroxed as it was.

The Aberdeens hadn't fought in the Sixty-First after all, I realized, they'd fought in the Sixty-Fifth, and we'd spent the whole afternoon looking in the wrong place on account of some smudged handwriting from a century and a half ago. But that didn't matter now. Because I'd found him, I'd found the hickory tree and I'd found the Sixty-Fifth Virginia and I'd found Edward.

I logged into the computer at the desk and began drafting an email, but I stopped halfway through. A new regiment and a hickory tree and a gas station, I realized as the email stalled out, wasn't much of an offering. What if Abigail couldn't make it back out to get her picture before the end? What if she didn't have time to do any of her own research before her mother passed? Best to give her a little bit more about Edward. Best to do a little digging. Maybe, I indulged

myself, she could read whatever I found out at her mother's bedside. Maybe Abigail would be impressed with the research I'd done.

So I pulled up our Civil War database, and I went searching for the Sixty-Fifth Virginia.

It didn't take long to find them. They'd been raised in early 1862 out of Southwest Virginia and been around to all the usual places: Seven Days, Antietam, Gettysburg, the like. All the usual places, that is, until Christmas of 1863, when they'd gone South through the Carolina swamps. The database didn't say why exactly they'd been sent, only that they had been to the South Carolina coast and back before rejoining the Army of Northern Virginia in the Spring of 1864. Some sort of reinforcement thing, it seemed to allude to. Apparently, they'd passed through a place called "John's Drift."

Perfect, I thought. John's Drift. It was something to go on, another data point to add, maybe even another place for Abigail to visit or tell her mother about. A little fantasy of Abigail and I, driving together to South Carolina, played in my head. I typed "John's Drift" into the search bar and clicked the first result: an abstract of an old paper written by some graduate student a couple decades back. I started reading:

*March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1864 is a date unknown to most, though it looms large for those few who are familiar with the story of the John's Drift maroon colony. Hidden deep in the heart of the South Carolina swamps, John's Drift had been a haven for runaway slaves and free Black Carolinians for more than one hundred years. But that safety was shattered in March of 1864, when a detachment of Confederate troops, lost in the swamps and low on rations, stumbled upon John's Drift. The story, according to the sole survivor of the colony, is that the rebel soldiers, when confronted with the largely unarmed population, killed all of the residents of John's Drift save one, who they forced to lead them out of the swamps. It has long been assumed by historians that*

*the identity of the Confederate unit responsible for the John's Drift Massacre would remain forever unknown, as the one surviving resident of John's Drift, according to an account he gave years later, was unable to ascertain the identity of the unit before he slipped away at the edge of the swamp. However, a newly recovered diary, a recent archival gift from an anonymous donor, sheds new light on the John's Drift Massacre. In accordance with this new evidence, I argue that the rediscovered diary of Edward Cates, Pvt. CSA, VA-65, which he kept from his conscription until his death in the Summer of 1864, offers conclusive proof that it was the Sixty-Fifth Virginia regiment, and no other, that was responsible for the killings at John's Drift.*

- Cynthia R. Thomas, 1991

I sat in stunned silence at the desk as Ms. Thomas' words ripped through me, as they tore apart everything from the day that I had imagined to be good. The thought of helping Abigail to connect with her mother, the effort to give her something to take to the hospice, even those wonderful little smiles Abigail had given me, all of it fell away in an instant, all of it fell away and left nothing behind but the cut-up rags of my naïve hope.

In that moment, as if from thin air, I remembered a long-ago story from some old history class, a story that told how a group of medieval priests had dug up the body of an ancient and heretical pope and put the rotting bones on trial. At the time I had thought this trial of a corpse to be ridiculous, a monument to cruelty and bitterness more than any principle or belief. But, after reading of John's Drift, I wanted nothing more than to do the same thing to Edward, to disinter and desecrate what remains still lay beneath the hickory tree, to subject him to some semblance of the justice that he had escaped in life.

But I couldn't. Because, at some point, someone had bought the land, paved it over, and put up six gas pumps and a convenience store, right on top of Edward. And so now he would get to lay in peace, despite everything he had done, forever.

No, there was nothing to do but tell Abigail. I had to tell her. Because, if I didn't, I thought, one of the last things she would ever tell her mother would be a lie. And not just any lie, but a horrible one, a lie rooted in shame and hate and killing, a lie I couldn't bear to let her tell.

So I deleted the half-email I'd already drafted and began to write, praying Abigail got the message on her phone before she got to the hospice. But, as I wrote, I remembered something else Abigail had said as we walked to the field where the Sixty-First had fought: "My mother stopped talking about Edward after her mother died."

After Abigail's grandmother died.

When Abigail's mother had helped to clean out the house.

When she could have, in the old dusty tomes and boxes and papers not just of a mother but of a mother's mother, and all the mothers and fathers before that, that survive attrition and mold and mice and endure long enough to become a family's legacy, found an old diary, marked with the words *Edward Cates* and dated 1862-1864, the 1864 written in a woman's hand, not a man's, because of course Edward had never known that his diary would end in 1864, but his wife had, the wife to whom the army would have sent Edward's remaining effects, the wife who would have dated and then buried her husband's incriminating diary deep in the old family boxes, until it had eventually made its way to the descendant who now lay dying in a hospice in suburban Virginia.

The descendant who had not given up on finding Edward after all but who had rather found far more than she'd bargained for, had found something evil, something which affixed the

indelible stain of murder to the forefather she had sought for so long, which had made her hide all that research, which had made her bury it all once again. But burying the articles and regiment rolls wouldn't have been enough. She would have had to rid herself of the relation who so disgusted her, to cleanse herself of what must have been an awful shame not for sharing blood with Edward Cates, but for ever daring to be proud of him, to be proud of what she would have always known, deep down, could only have been a bloody and shameful history, just as everything associated with that army had been bloody and shameful.

So Abigail's mother would have had to give away the diary. What else could she have done? It must have felt as though there was no option but to get rid of it, to give it to some museum or archive in the hope that the donation would be adequate penance for all those years she had spent looking for Edward.

But now Abigail had found him on her own, or at least had come close, and now she was heading to the hospice to tell her dying mother of the great discovery she thought she had made. If Abigail got to the hospice before I could reach her, I knew, her mother would have to spend her final hours with her daughter recounting a family history not of love, but of shame and killing.

So I deleted what I'd written once again and replaced it with a simple plea:

*I have found more information on Edward Cates. Please contact me before you tell your mother about him.*

I sent the email and sat back, staring blankly at the empty inbox. I waited a minute, two minutes, ten minutes. No response. I reloaded the page and waited some more. After half an hour, and with daylight fading, I left for home. I refreshed my work email about fifty times that night, and about fifty more the next day, waiting for something from Abigail. But it never came.

Not the next day, or the day after that, or any other day down the line. I never heard whether she'd told her mother about Edward, or whether her mother had told her about the diary.

So, in the end, all I could do was wonder. I wondered what I should have done differently. I wondered why I'd gotten so caught up in finding Edward. Most of all, though, I wondered how I could've let myself imagine that he had been different, that Edward's story, in spite of everything I knew about his army, could have been something good. I wondered and wondered, asking myself the same questions over and over again.

But, despite all my wondering, I never managed to settle on even a half-decent answer for any of my questions, no matter how many times I asked. I never did manage to forget about Abigail or Edward, either. I never forgot about the way I'd felt when Abigail had smiled at me, or how badly I'd wanted to help her find Edward, or how angry I'd been when I first found out about John's Drift. Worst of all, I never forgot how *excited* I'd been about finding Edward, and how easy I'd found it to forgive him for his cause, to explain away everything he'd fought for.

Which is why I still feel a little pang of guilt, twice a day every day, as I drive to and from work, as I drive past the gas station and remember Abigail, and Anna, and Edward. Most of all, though, I remember John's Drift. Because John's Drift, really, is inextricable from the Battle, from the War, and from the stories of those who fought here. The memory of John's Drift cannot be exorcised from this place. It is sown into the very dirt of the Battlefield.

Perhaps that's the one tangible thing I've learned, in all my hours and days of wondering. Maybe that's the lesson in all of it, in those memories of Abigail and her forebears. Because, I suppose, it's not just Edward and the rest of the Sixty-Fifth Virginia buried under that gas station. There's a part of John's Drift buried there, too. A part that can't be covered up, can't be explained away, can't be left alone. A part that stands as a bloody and violent monument to

Edward Cates, and to what he really fought for. And not just any monument, either, but a lasting one, an honest one.

A monument that will remain buried right under the surface, no matter come what may. A monument that will sit, forever, just below a few gas pumps, a couple of feet of red Virginia dirt, and the roots of an old hickory tree.