

William P. Wood

(11 Mar 1820 – 19 Mar 1903)

The Evening Star, March 20, 1903

Colonel Wm. P. Wood Dead

Veteran of Wars and Friend of Edwin M. Stanton

Unearthed Brockway

Secured Plates of Noted 7.30 Bond Counterfeit

Performed Many Important Missions for Government and Life Was a Continuous Melodrama



When Col. William P. Wood died yesterday at the Soldiers' Home there was removed from earth a man who had been a prominent figure in the national capital for nearly half a century. He was a veteran of the Mexican and civil wars, and one of the few remaining survivors of Walker's filibustering expedition to Nicaragua. He was also the first chief of the United States secret service when it became part of the Treasury Department.

The connection of Col. Wood with the civil war was unique, and his relations with President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton were absolutely confidential.

His life was actively sought more than a dozen times: one man crossed the ocean to assassinate him; the confederates were determined to capture and hang him, and dozens, perhaps scores of times he escaped from apparently inextricable dangers by his extraordinary nerve, adroitness and audacity, coupled with prodigious physical strength and activity.

Life a Continuous Melodrama

Col. Wood's life was a continuous melodrama, bordering on the tragic. He was born in Alexandria, Va., March 11, 1820. His father was an engraver and die sinker, and Wood became one of the most expert model makers, die sinkers and mechanics in the country.

When the Mexican war broke out he enlisted in the mounted rifles of Gen. Sam. H. Walker, the noted Texan ranger, whose command soon became the 3d Regular Cavalry, in which Wood was the dare-devil leader of the famous Company C. Serving out his time, he returned to Washington and married Harriet Smith of Cumberland, Md., by whom he reared a large family.

He had receded from the Catholic Church in which he was born and baptized, and was a conspicuous leader in the Know-nothing, which was a "no popery," party. He likewise was an active conductor on the underground railroad, and aided hundreds of runaway slaves to escape safely to Canada and New England.

Wood drilled men to take part in John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859. Having in the Mexican war and elsewhere become proficient in military matters he revised and in part composed the book of tactics gotten out for the instruction of the abolitionists who were to join Brown in all parts of the country to wipe out slavery.

Admonished John Brown

Wood would have had charge of the enterprise, but objected to crossing state lines under arms. Unable to convince Brown that the methods he wished to pursue would lead him to the halter if he failed, as he was sure to do, Wood and his men remained out of the Harper's Ferry raid and quietly disbanded after Brown's defeat and his death on the scaffold.

When Edwin M. Stanton became Secretary of War he appointed Wood to be superintendent of the military prisons of the District of Columbia, and concentrated the so-called "state" prisoners and all others in the Old Capitol prison, near the Capitol, to which was soon added, for females and citizens, the Carroll buildings, called the Carroll prison.

Into these structures Wood sent spies, blockade runners, carriers of contraband dispatches, foreign officers armed with passports who were caught serving the confederacy, leaders of the Knights of the Golden Circle, opponents of the draft, etc. and to him, too, came all the captured mail of the locality to be deciphered and, if important, turned over to the proper officers of the War Department.

Prisoners Liked Him

While maintaining strict, almost tyrannical discipline, the prisoners liked and respected Wood, frequently adopting resolutions to give expression to their feelings toward him.

Probably Col. Wood's most daring feat was making repeated personal visits to every military prison in the south. Sometimes he effected an entrance as agent of the federal government; frequently he entered in the disguise of a confederate soldier and a few times he got in by permitting himself to be taken prisoner. In several instances he procured the statements of inmates as to prison conditions, written out by stenographers in the presence of the officials in charge, for the information of Lincoln and Stanton.

When charges of starvation and cruelty to Union captives in confederate prisons were most numerous and persistent and the supplies sent to the incarcerated Union soldiers from the north were intercepted and eaten by the hungry confederates, Wood disguised as a North Carolina volunteer, secured entrance to Salisbury, Castle Thunder and other prisons and distributed nearly a quarter of a million dollars in confederate money, with which the boys were able to purchase enough food and clothing to ease and prolong, if not save, life.

Capturing Counterfeiters

Among his other numerous and hazardous duties, Wood was charged by the Treasury Department with capturing counterfeiters, defrauders of the revenue, bounty-jumpers and persons violating government contracts for supplies.

When Lincoln was assassinated Wood was in Cincinnati searching for counterfeiters. A telegram from Stanton brought him in haste to Washington, where he was first to learn positively that the assassin was John Wilkes Booth. He secured from Dr. Mudd, in Maryland the first and only statement that Booth ever made concerning his part in the matter and would have effected a capture if the fugitive had not been shot as he emerged from a burning barn by Boston Corbett.

Col. Wood also secured the confession of Mrs. Surratt and Payne. He always maintained that Mrs. Surratt was innocent of taking any part in the conspiracy, and the last interview he ever had with Stanton turned upon this point.

After the war closed Wood was made chief of the secret service division of the treasury, in which he was eminently successful.

Famous 7.30 Bond Case

At the time of his death a bill was pending before Congress to pay him \$15,000 for capturing the plate and author of the noted and dangerous 7.30 counterfeit. This was known as the Brockway case. The forgery was the occasion of a great law suit against the government. The bogus bonds were indeed works of art. No question of the genuineness was raised until Jay Cooke & Co. forwarded \$84,000 worth to the treasury for redemption. Colonel Wood personally handled the case. He went to New York and received from Brockway the plates. Brockway was not prosecuted at that time because of the

information that he gave to the government. Broken down and nearing the grave, this old counterfeiter is serving a ten years' sentence at Trenton, N.J., having been sent from Hoboken.

(Brockway was released in 1904, see Evening Star, Jan or Feb 26, 1904: The late Col. Wm. P. Wood, who was at that time chief of the secret service, claimed a large reward on the ground that he recovered the original plates, but the evidence of Mr. Geo. W. Casilear, the then chief of the engraving division of the bureau of engraving and printing, proved that the plates were forgeries, and the claim was disallowed.)

Col. Wood died in poverty, whereas if the claim, which the treasury had reported was honest and due, had been paid, his last days would have been passed in peace and ease.

One of the last of Wood's remarkable performances was getting possession of the secret papers in the Credit Mobilier case, which enabled a New York paper to make a sensational exposure of that notorious scheme. The documents were in a safe in Philadelphia. From Judge Jere Black, Wood managed to learn precisely where they were and just which ones were necessary to make the exposure complete.

Employing the services of a professional safe picker and thief, Wood extracted the papers that he wanted from the safe, took them to New York to be copied and was back in Washington when the paper came out with the expose which shook the country from ocean to ocean and gave to Judge Black a shock which nearly paralyzed him.

Bosom Friend of Stanton

Col. Wood was probably nearer to Edwin M. Stanton than any other man. Wood was the last man who ever saw Stanton alive, and their final interview was a stormy one.

The last few weeks of Col. Wood's life were spent in writing his memoirs, and so anxious was he to complete the first outline of them that he frequently worked until midnight or arose at 2 in the morning and proceeded with his work.

The Washington Post, March 29, 1903

Trick Won Noted Case

Col. W.P. Wood's Part in Suit Involving Millions