

Wigfall One Of South's Early Secession Champions

BY LOUISE PETTUS
AND RON CHEPESIUK

South Carolinian Louis Trezevant Wigfall certainly did not lack in boldness. Setting out in a boat with two oarsmen and a private, ignoring the frantic shouts of those on shore to return, with shells bursting all around, he doggedly moved toward Fort Sumter.

Upon arriving, the would-be hero tied a handkerchief to the point of his upraised sword, then went looking for the fort's commander, Maj. Robert Anderson. When the astonished Anderson appeared, Wigfall explained the futility of resistance. Amazingly, Wigfall convinced Anderson and the federal garrison to surrender Fort Sumter.

The first shots of the Civil War had been fired. Lewis Trezevant Wigfall, one of the South's earliest champions of secession, had become the Confederate man of the hour.

Wigfall, born in Edgefield County on April 12, 1816, became one of the most interesting figures of the war. The brash and outspoken Wigfall was invariably at the center of any issue with which he became involved.

Early in life, Wigfall exhibited the hot-headed nature that would lead him into trouble and controversy all of his life. During Wigfall's first venture into political life, the gubernatorial campaign of 1840, an intense hostility developed between him and the prominent Brooks family. In March 1840 the feud went beyond the political arena, when Wigfall believed the Brooks clan had kept his brother Arthur, who would soon be ordained as an Episcopalian minister, from obtaining a church in Edgefield.

Over a five-month period, Wigfall took on the Brookses and their friends, becoming involved in a fist fight, three near-duels, two duels and one shooting — all of which left one dead and two, including Wigfall, wounded.

The state charged Wigfall with murder for killing Thomas Bird, but the charges were dismissed in March 1841. The controversy surrounding the incident, however, did little for the political career of the ambitious Wigfall. He didn't help himself either when he callously complained in public that the Brookses had cost him more than they were worth.

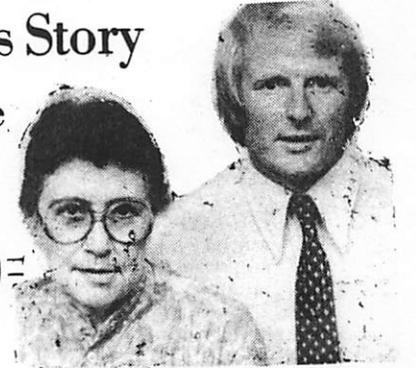
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South Carolina's Story

The making of a state



Nothing ever deterred Wigfall from speaking his mind. In 1844, he was 16 years ahead of the majority of South Carolinians when he announced his support of secession in protest against the protective tariff and the defeat of the Texas annexation treaty.

But Wigfall's fortunes began to take a turn for the worse. His son died; his debts mounded. Although he loved South Carolina and truly wanted to be a leader in its development, he came to realize that he had little chance of pursuing a successful political career.

Like many other South Carolinians at the time, he decided to go west and begin life anew. In 1848 he moved to Texas, settling in Marshall.

Son Wigfall's political ambitions became a reality. He won election to the Texas State House of Representatives and Senate, and then to the U.S. Senate in 1859. In Congress he continued his secessionist ways, contending, among other things, that it was the duty of the federal government to protect slave property in the territories. On Dec. 14, 1860, he signed the southern address that urged secession and the organization of the Confederacy.

When the shelling of Fort Sumter began in April 1861, Wigfall quickly traveled to Charleston, where his arrival turned out to be in sharp contrast to his humiliating departure for Texas in 1846. Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard appointed him to his distinguished staff of volunteer military aides, which included Wigfall's old friend Gov. John

Manning. The sword and the red badge of the office became Charleston's highest symbol of social prominence.

While most Charlestonians hoped that Maj. Robert Anderson and his federal troops would be evacuated without incident, Wigfall relished the attack on Fort Sumter. Diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut reported that "The only thoroughly happy person" was Wigfall, who was "in his glory."

When Wigfall returned successfully from his mission to Fort Sumner, Charleston gave him a hero's welcome. In October 1861, he was made a brigadier general and placed in command of the troops in Virginia known as the "Texas Brigade." Soon after, he resigned to accept a seat in the Confederate State Senate.

As the Civil War progressed, Wigfall became a bitter opponent of Jefferson Davis' leadership. He even went so far as to propose that the Confederate president be deprived of his power as commander-in-chief and that the power be vested in an official appointed and subject to the removal by the president and Senate.

Even as the tide of battle turned against the Confederacy, Wigfall refused to concede defeat. Until the end, the war remained a life and death struggle for him. When the Confederacy finally collapsed, Wigfall went into hiding in Texas before escaping to England in March 1866. While in exile, there is evidence that Wigfall worked with other rebels in trying to provoke war between the U.S. and Great Britain.

Six years later, Wigfall returned quietly to Baltimore. On Feb. 18, 1874, the unrepentant secessionist died in Galveston, Texas.