

# A Truce Is Nothing To Keep Secret

## News Of War's End 'Delighted' Chester

In Columbia, on Feb. 16, 1865, Mrs. Felix DeFontaine began packing her goods before boarding a train taking her to the Chester courthouse. There had been rumors earlier in the day that Sherman had been repulsed and Columbia was saved, but by afternoon the cannons were loud and the Confederate soldiers were obviously retreating.

In her panic, Mrs. DeFontaine packed her goods helter-skelter. She later found her best crepe veil packed in a bag of meal and knives and forks mixed with bonnets and laces.

The same day Union Forces entered Columbia, the DeFontaines received an invitation to board the personal railroad car of the president of the railroad if they wished to leave.

That night as the train, moving slowly with the weight of 16 passenger cars, wound its way toward Winnsboro, the passengers were sleeping — all except Mrs. DeFontaine and her fretful infant.

In the distance she heard what sounded like the approach of another train. The sound grew closer. "Quick as a flash the thought came to me about the 'signal light,' and arousing my husband, who sat next to me, I said, 'Quick, for God's sake, take that candle and wave it in front of the door, for something tells me that the signal light is out.'"

The engineer of the approaching train saw the light and reacted immediately. Mercifully, the baby's restlessness and Mrs. DeFontaine's quick thinking saved the two trains from colliding.

When they got to Chester, they found refugees everywhere with all of the railroad cars on the sidings taken over for housing. The DeFontaines felt lucky to find an unfurnished attic that had once been occupied by a shoemaker.

With a Union invasion threatening Chester (Sherman turned eastward at Rocky Mount, instead), the local people became very anxious about the security of their valuables and either buried or hid them in secret places.



Nearby  
History

**Louise  
Pettus**

As a refugee, Mrs. DeFontaine had no place to safely bury anything.

Instead, she wrote: "Besides my war pockets which reached to the hem of my dress, I carried hung upon a heavy cord about my waist, one piece of flannel, twelve yards of dress goods, twelve yards of muslin, two pounds of tea, five pounds of coffee, two pounds of sugar, a silver cup, two dozen silver forks, the same of spoons, spools of cotton, silk, needles, pins, etc., etc. In my skirts were sewed my watch, money and private papers." She wore all of this on her person for some three or four days.

In addition to the refugees from Columbia there were the refugees from Richmond.

Gen. Sam Hood called on the DeFontaines. Gen. James Chesnut of Camden, aide to Jefferson Davis, and his staff were in Chester. One day Mrs. Chesnut, later to be famous for her "Diary From Dixie," called on Mrs. DeFontaine.

Mrs. Chesnut asked Mrs. DeFontaine whether she could keep a secret. The reply was that she would rather not. But Mrs. Chesnut insisted, saying she had broken the seal of a dispatch sent by courier to her husband.

The paper said an armistice had been drawn up and that meant the war was over.

Mrs. Chesnut did not know where her husband was but knew that Mrs. DeFontaine's husband was with him. Mrs. DeFontaine replied, "If you are sure that this man is not a spy (tell him to) go at breakneck speed upon the Union road (and) he will probably overtake them."

The dispatch was confirmed by Chesnut that evening. Mrs. DeFontaine went to her husband's printing office and had a number of large posters made to tell the people of Chester that armistice had indeed come. The posters "delighted the eyes of all who looked upon them."