

1846 War With Mexico Split State

2 Years Later, What Divided South Carolina Reunited It, In Victory

On May 13, 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico. President James K. Polk in his war message charged that the Mexicans had spilled American blood on American soil. The nation divided over whether war was justified.

South Carolina was divided. Sen. John C. Calhoun opposed the declaration of war. At the same time, the governor of South Carolina, William Aiken, called for a regiment of infantry volunteers. On May 29 the state adjutant general announced the state would accept applications for 10 companies of 77 men each.

Chester was one of the first districts to respond.

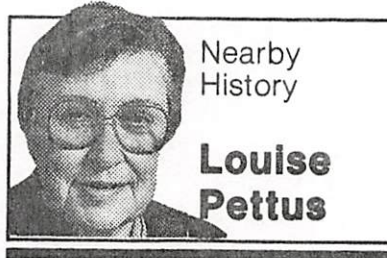
Nathaniel Eaves, a state senator and a militia major, organized a recruitment rally to take place June 6. The Chester band played, women sang patriotic songs and Eaves addressed the crowd. That day, 67 young men enrolled.

Two days later Eaves held a second rally and got enough volunteers to fill the quota and R.G.M. Dunovant was elected captain.

Lancaster also raised a company of men (York District did not). Leroy Secrest, a merchant who had also fought in the War of 1812 and the Seminole War, was elected captain.

The volunteers drilled in their home districts before ordered to report to Charleston on Nov. 30. There was no railroad through either Lancaster or Chester. The men marched to Columbia in order to board a train there for Charleston.

On Dec. 8, foot-weary Chester men straggled into Columbia.



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When the word spread of their arrival, a crowd assembled to cheer them and the cadets of South Carolina College escorted the men to the state capital.

Eaves, the state senator who had recruited the Chester company, had joined it as a private. He was 58.

The regiment drilled in Charleston until Dec. 22, when it departed by train for Port Isabel, Tex. The men had neither tents nor knapsacks and little medical service.

By the time the train arrived at the bitterly cold Texas port, many South Carolinians were in hospitals and homes from Augusta, Ga., to Texas.

In Pueblo, Mexico, so many of the Lancaster County men were ill that the company was disbanded and the surviving members placed in other companies, many of them joining the Chester company.

Eaves became the regiment's paymaster but, nevertheless, participated in battle and was slightly wounded.

Given an honorable discharge by Gen. Winfield Scott, Eaves was back in the S.C. Senate seat on Dec. 7, 1847, to great applause from his fellow senators.

The U.S. Army death rate in the Mexican War was about 15%. The Palmetto Regiment death rate was 43%, mostly from disease.

The Lancaster group had only two men killed but 33 died of disease.

When the Chester and Lancaster "boys" returned, there were bands, parades, banners, welcome speeches, dinners, toasts and large crowds. Gold medals were awarded to the families of the deceased.

The United States was in possession of the whole Southwest from Texas to California. No one seemed to remember that two years before the war was not so popular.

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