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## "THE SLY MENDACITY OF HINTS": PRESTON BROOKS AND THE WAR WITH MEXICO

KENNETH A. DEITREICH\*

THE SOUTHERN BORDER OF TEXAS HAD LONG BEEN A SOURCE of friction between Mexico and its northern neighbors by the mid 1840s. Border clashes with Texan and later American military forces were frequent, and Mexico had even threatened to go to war with the United States over the issue of Texas statehood. Therefore, when President James K. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to lead his four-thousand-man army into the disputed region between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers in January 1846, the commander in chief knew that he was committing a blatant act of aggression, one likely to provoke a war. Had Polk been able to foresee the enormous consequences of that war, he might have thought twice before ordering Taylor to proceed. In fact, the War with Mexico would prove to be a violently transformative event for both the United States at large and the thousands of American soldiers who fought in it.

Among the men whose lives were forever changed by their Mexican War service was a twenty-seven-year-old South Carolina planter named Preston Brooks. Brooks gained notoriety in 1856 for his assault upon Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a pivotal event in American history known as the "Caning of Sumner." A decade earlier, however, Brooks was a sometime lawyer and former single-term state legislator whose chief claim to fame in his home state, apart from having fought a duel with hot-headed attorney Louis T. Wigfall, was his brief tenure as Governor James Henry Hammond's aide-de-camp.<sup>1</sup>

But just as the Mexican War fundamentally changed the nature of American politics, transforming it from a debate concerning issues such as internal improvements and westward expansion into a bitter fight over slavery and states' rights, so too did the war alter the course of Preston

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<sup>1</sup> Brian D. McKnight, "Brooks, Preston Smith," in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 288-289; William L. Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," in *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garrity and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 628; Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 14, 46; Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944), 24-25; Robert Neil Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks: The Man and His Image," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 79 (October 1978): 300.

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Brooks's life from one of relative obscurity to national political prominence. Today, Brooks is largely a forgotten figure, even among professional historians. To the extent that he is mentioned at all, it is almost always in connection with the Sumner assault. To be sure, the Caning of Sumner was one of the most important incidents of the antebellum period—it led to a worsening of sectional tensions and thereby directly contributed to the process of disunion—but there must be more to Brooks's story than this single, ugly incident.

Thirty-six years of age at the time of the caning, Brooks could already lay claim to a lifetime's worth of knowledge and experiences when he walked into the Senate chamber on that fateful day in May 1856.<sup>2</sup> Yet of all those experiences, Brooks's participation in the War with Mexico represented a defining moment that was of paramount importance in shaping his character and temperament. His Mexican War record is significant for not only what it reveals about Brooks himself but also the insights it provides into the attack on Sumner and, indeed, the entire process of sectionalism. By examining this little-known chapter in a largely undocumented life, this article aims to arrive at a better understanding of Brooks as well as the forces that eventually drove the North and the South to civil war.

Born on August 6, 1819, at his father's plantation near the village of Edgefield Court House, Preston Smith Brooks was part of an extensive kinship network that embraced some of the antebellum South's most prominent families.<sup>3</sup> Through his paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Butler Brooks, he descended from a long, proud line of war heroes that included Revolutionary War general William Butler, whose father and brother, both named James Butler, had been killed in 1781 by a loyalist force under the command of Major William "Bloody Bill" Cunningham at the infamous Battle of Cloud's Creek. Perhaps the most esteemed of Brooks's Butler kin was illustrious Alamo defender James Butler Bonham.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks," 296–297.

<sup>3</sup> "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks, and Proceedings of Congress on the Occasion of His Death," *Southern Quarterly Review*, n.s., 2 (February 1857): 349; McKnight, "Brooks," 288–289; Barney, "Brooks," 628; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 36; Fox Butterfield, *All God's Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence* (1995; repr., New York: Perennial, 2002), 15–16, 25; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 24–25; Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks," 296–297.

<sup>4</sup> Preston's grandfather Zachariah Smith Brooks was a war hero in his own right. He served with General William Butler before marrying Butler's sister Elizabeth. John Belton O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: S. G. Courtenay and Co., 1859), 2: 473–474; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 348–349; McKnight, "Brooks," 288–289; Barney, "Brooks," 625, 628; Lawrence M. Keitt, eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 3rd Sess., 501 (1857); Glenna Whiteaker Wilding and Mary Samuel Carter,

In addition to this family tradition of military service, Brooks's birthplace had such a reputation for violence and mayhem that throughout much of its history, the community carried the epithet "Bloody Edgefield."<sup>5</sup> Contemporaries and scholars alike have noted the extremely violent nature of the nineteenth-century South, attributing it to everything from "an exaggerated sense of honor" to the availability of firearms, frontier conditions, slavery, chivalric traditions and ideals of the upper class, ethnic factors, and climate.<sup>6</sup> Even by southern standards, though, the violence in antebellum Edgefield District was excessive and marked by street fights, drunken brawls, public floggings, and duels. To cite but one example, Edgefield native and future U.S. senator from Texas Louis Wigfall is known to have fought at least two, and possibly as many as eight, duels during his lifetime, including the aforementioned affair with Brooks. In addition to the contest with Wigfall, Brooks came close to dueling on at least three other occasions.<sup>7</sup>

Growing up among the South Carolina planter class, with its aristocratic pretensions and strict honor code, in the exceptionally combative environment of Edgefield, Preston Brooks would have been constantly reminded

*River of Years: Genealogy and Narrative History of the Brooks-Carter Family of South Carolina* (n.p.: Tangent Enterprises, 1994), 36–37; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46. Genealogical information drawn from the Brooks family website, *The Brooks Historian*, <http://brookshistorian.org/bbrooks/public.html> (accessed July 7, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 7, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 233; Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 11–12, 15, 24, 34, 44–46, 49, 81, 129; Nicole Etcheson, "Manliness and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1790–1860," *Journal of the Old Republic* 15 (Spring 1995): 61–63, 67, 69, 70–71; Edward R. Crowther, "Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 58 (November 1992): 619–620, 623–624, 627–629, 632–633; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 101, 352–361, 370. See also W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941); Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1982), esp. xv, 14–18.

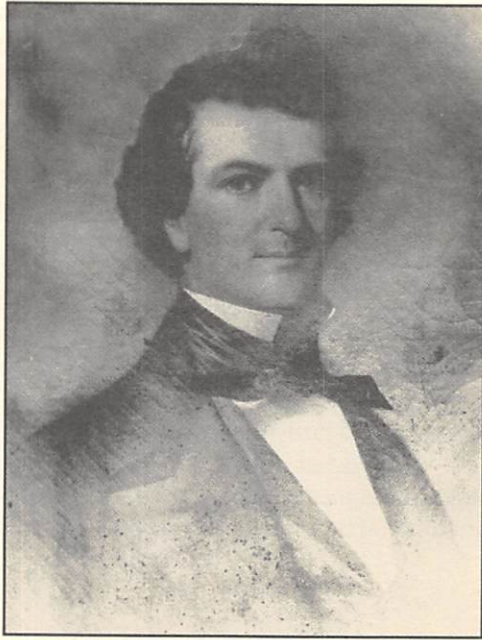
<sup>7</sup> The duel with Wigfall took place on November 11, 1840. Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 13–16, 25; McKnight, "Brooks," 288–289; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks," 299, 300; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46, 72–73, 75, 91; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 24–25, 31–32; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 23–24; Alvy L. King, *Louis T. Wigfall, Southern Fire Eater* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 28–30, 32–33, 35; journal of Whitfield Brooks Sr., November 3–4, 1840, quoted in E. Mims Mobley Jr., "Preston S. Brooks: A Right Honorable Man," 10–17, 30, Old Edgefield District Genealogical Society, Edgefield, S.C.; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 349.

of his position as a member of the ruling elite and the expectations that came with that status.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the image of his cousin James Bonham fearlessly facing down hordes of Mexican soldiers at the Battle of the Alamo alongside such legendary figures as Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie must have made an indelible impression upon Brooks's psyche. For Brooks, the example of Bonham giving his life for Texas in 1836 undoubtedly left little question about what was expected of him as a white southern male during the Mexican War.

Given his background, it was perhaps inevitable that when South Carolina governor William Aiken Jr., responding to a request from President Polk, issued a call for a new twelve-month regiment in May 1846, not only would Brooks be one of the first to enlist, but he also would take the initiative in raising a company of young volunteers from Edgefield District that included his brother Whitfield Butler Brooks. As Preston Brooks saw it, he was simply doing what was expected of him.<sup>9</sup> On June 1, the fledgling company held its first organizational meeting to elect officers, and naturally, Brooks was chosen captain of what became known as the "Old Ninety-Six Boys," a

<sup>8</sup> The wealth, isolation, and nearly autocratic authority afforded by plantation slavery bred within white southern males of the planter class a belief that they were superior not only to their slaves but also to their white, non-slaveholding neighbors. While the concept of "southern chivalry" remains controversial, sons of the planter class were taught from an early age to think of themselves as the better sort and embrace certain qualities that often included, but were not limited to, morality, veneration of women, and perhaps most importantly, honor. Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentleman Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 5–6; Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Patriotic and Plebeian in Virginia; or, The Origin and Development of the Social Classes of the Old Dominion* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1959), 1, 7, 54, 67–68, 80, 83, 85–86, 96, 99–100, 104–105; Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 11–12, 15, 24, 34, 44–46, 49, 81, 129; John Fraser, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 12; Etcheson, "Manliness," 61–63, 67, 69–71; Crowther, "Holy Honor," 619–620, 623–624, 627–629, 632–633. See also Cash, *Mind of the South*; James Horn, "Cavalier Culture? The Social Development of Colonial Virginia," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser., 48 (April 1991): 239–240; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 101; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46; O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches*, 473–474; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 348–349; McKnight, "Brooks," 288–289; Barney, "Brooks," 625, 628; Keitt eulogy, 501.

<sup>9</sup> President Polk's request specified that the new regiment should consist of ten companies of seventy-seven men each, along with officers and other support personnel, for a total of 777 soldiers. Ernest McPherson Lander Jr., *Reluctant Imperialists: Calhoun, the South Carolinians, and the Mexican War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 27–28; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 368–369; "Roll of Honor—U.S. Casualties in the Battles of Churubusco and Contreras," pt. 3, Descendants of Mexican War Veterans website, <http://www.dmww.org/honoring/chucon3.htm> (accessed September 11, 2010) (hereinafter cited as "Roll of Honor," DMWW); John A. Quitman, eulogy of



The Brooks-Butler family tree is full of valiant fighting men, including a Revolutionary War general and a defender of the Alamo. Preston Brooks (1819–1857) was determined to add to the legacy by proving his martial prowess during the Mexican War. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

reference to the Revolutionary War outpost of Fort Ninety-Six. Along with Captain Brooks, the company's officers included First Lieutenant William C. Moragne and Second Lieutenants Joseph Abney and David Adams.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some initial difficulties, statewide recruitment continued apace and by the end of June had progressed to the point that ten regimental

Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 3rd Sess., 501 (1857); Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1950), 201, 258, 511; P. M. Butler to Preston Brooks, December 6, 1846, Preston S. Brooks Papers, 1828–1938, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia (hereinafter cited as PSBP); Burton, *In My Father's House*, 95–96.

<sup>10</sup> William P. Jones was initially elected second lieutenant, but for reasons unknown, he was soon replaced. *Edgefield Advertiser* (Edgefield, S.C.), June 10, 1846; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 27–28; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 368–369; "Roll of Honor," DMWV; Quitman eulogy, 501; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 201, 258, 511; P. M. Butler to Preston Brooks, December 6, 1846, PSBP; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 95–96.



companies representing ten districts from Greenville to Charleston were ready to elect senior officers.<sup>11</sup> To almost no one's surprise, former South Carolina governor Pierce Mason Butler, the son of General William Butler and another of Brooks's cousins, was elected to command the new regiment. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Dickinson was chosen as second in command, with Adley H. Gladden as adjutant. Along with selecting their senior officers, the members of the ten companies formally designated themselves as the "Palmetto Regiment."<sup>12</sup> In mid July 1846, however, recruitment for the Palmetto Regiment came to a halt. General Taylor's victories in northern Mexico had convinced American officials that the war was as good as over, and Secretary of War William L. Marcy, suddenly and almost without warning, informed Governor Aiken that the new regiment would not be needed, seeing as "sufficient force had already been organized and 'sent forward' to prosecute the war." Following the abrupt end to recruiting in South Carolina, writes Ernest M. Lander, "The regiment soon fell into disarray."<sup>13</sup>

By late autumn, the return of Antonio López de Santa Anna and the rallying of the Mexican populace to his banner convinced military leaders in the United States that in spite of the victories at Monterey and Saltillo, the war was not so close to being won as they had previously thought. With that in mind, on November 16, 1846, Secretary Marcy informed Governor Aiken that the Palmetto Regiment would be needed after all. Lander notes that Marcy's instructions to Aiken "called for the regiment to rendezvous at Charleston as quickly as the companies could be assembled." Marcy additionally specified that recruiters were only to accept "men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five and in good 'physical strength and vigor.'" But since the regiment's terms of service had been changed from one year to the duration of the war, those who enlisted under the old terms were now legally released from their previous obligation. That meant local recruiters had to start over again from scratch.<sup>14</sup>

The Edgefield company had refilled its quota by early December, and following a rousing public send-off at the courthouse square, Captain Brooks and the rest of the Old Ninety-Six Boys set out for Charleston's Camp Magnolia. In camp, while awaiting the arrival of the other companies then forming throughout South Carolina, the company from Edgefield underwent a series of medical examinations and other inspections by regular

<sup>11</sup> The ten companies came from the following districts: Abbeville, Charleston, Chester, Edgefield, Greenville, Kershaw, Lexington, Newberry, Richland, and Sumter. Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 27–28.

<sup>12</sup> Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 246, 264, 468; K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War: 1846–1848* (New York: McMillan, 1974), 263, 265, 298–299, 511; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

army officers.<sup>15</sup> It also was at Camp Magnolia that the unit received its first rudimentary military training and officially mustered into service as Company D of the South Carolina Volunteers.<sup>16</sup> On the day after Christmas, 1846, the Palmetto Regiment, nine hundred strong and commanded by Colonel Pierce Butler, started out for the seat of war in Mexico by rail, moving via Hamburg, Atlanta, and Montgomery to the port of Mobile.<sup>17</sup>

By early February 1847, the South Carolina Volunteers had reached Lobos Island, staging point for General Scott's invasion of the Mexican heartland.<sup>18</sup> There, they joined the rest of the American army in preparing for the upcoming landings at Veracruz. The Palmetto Regiment, together with the New York Volunteers, was assigned to Brigadier General John A. Quitman's brigade of Major General Robert Patterson's division.<sup>19</sup>

Scott's campaign would culminate seven months later, in September 1847, in the capture of Mexico City. However, when the South Carolina Volunteers and the rest of the American forces marched triumphantly into the Mexican capital, Preston Brooks was nowhere to be found. Bad health had forced him to return home several weeks earlier. Brooks arrived in Mexico weakened by the lasting effects of a hip wound he received in the duel with Wigfall. The regimental surgeon, Dr. Samuel Davis, noted that the old injury caused Brooks to walk with a "curious drag of the left leg." Then, during the siege of Veracruz, Brooks contracted typhoid fever.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "For the Advertiser, Edgefield, Nov. 30, 1846," *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 2, 1846; "The Presentation of the Flag," *ibid.*, December 9, 1846; "Roll of the Old '96 Boys," *ibid.*; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 38, 48-51.

<sup>16</sup> Within a few days, damage from a violent storm forced the volunteers to abandon Camp Magnolia in favor of the Charleston Race Course. "Roll of Honor," DMWV; Quitman eulogy, 501; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 201, 258, 511; P. M. Butler to Preston Brooks, December 6, 1846, PSBP; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 95-96; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 48-51.

<sup>17</sup> Quitman eulogy, 501; P. M. Butler to Preston Brooks, December 6, 1846, PSBP; P. M. Butler to Behethland Butler, January 27, 1847, Pierce Mason Butler Papers, 1819-1883, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereinafter cited as PMBP); Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 48, 51-56, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> "Roll of the Old '96 Boys"; "Roll of Honor," DMWV; Quitman eulogy, 501; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 201, 246, 258, 264, 468, 511; P. M. Butler to Preston Brooks, December 6, 1846, PSBP; P. M. Butler to Behethland Butler, January 27, 1847, PMBP; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 95-96; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 263, 265, 298-299, 511; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 48, 57, 80, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; Quitman eulogy, 501; Samuel Davis to Capt. Preston Brooks, May 2, 1847, PSBP; "Special Orders, No. 79. By Command of General Scott. H. L. Scott, A.A.A.G.," n.d., PMBP; "Headquarters, Palmetto Regiment, S.C.V., Puebla, Mexico, Regimental Orders, No. by Order of Col. Butler," n.d., *ibid.*; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 97-98; diary of Martha Caroline Means Brooks,

Understanding the deadly nature of typhoid, which he noted was "almost certainly fatal to our soldiers under the climate of Mexico," Dr. Davis urged Brooks "to march no further & to borrow a horse; or to get into a wagon." On the verge of losing the use of his left leg, the surgeon advised Brooks "to get leave of absence, or if he could not do that, to resign his office, and to return to the United States."<sup>21</sup>

Brooks was not dissuaded by Dr. Davis's warnings, however, nor did he heed those of Colonel Butler, who likewise recommended that he go back home. It was Brooks's belief that his worsening condition was attributable to the disease-ridden climate of Veracruz and a "complete change of air & water would restore him to health." On that basis, he convinced Butler to allow him to ride in a wagon with the regiment as far as Jalapa.<sup>22</sup> This proved to be a grave error in judgment that nearly cost Brooks his life. By the time the South Carolinians reached Jalapa in late April 1847, Brooks's condition had badly deteriorated.<sup>23</sup> Dr. Davis later recounted being summoned to Brooks's bedside where he found the patient "in a dying state, from which he was only rescued by the most prompt and vigorous treatment." Brooks continued in this "feeble state of health" for another two weeks. After concluding that the change in climate was not having the desired benefit, Davis advised Brooks to go home another time, explicitly stating that if the patient persisted "in going on with the army, or in remaining in Mexico, he would die. There was no alternative; compelled by this bainful [*sic*] necessity, he at last yielded."<sup>24</sup>

Davis followed up his warning with a firmly worded letter to Butler, reporting to the colonel that Brooks had been incapacitated by a "severe attack of fever" and would be incapable of performing his duties "for months to come." Butler, as it turned out, needed little convincing, and the next day, he ordered Brooks to return to South Carolina to convalesce

PSBP (hereinafter cited as MCMB diary); letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 86–87.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>22</sup> Jalapa (alternatively spelled "Xalapa" and "Alappa" by the Americans) was located about forty miles inland, outside of the unhealthful coastal region. Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; Quitman eulogy, 501; Samuel Davis to Capt. Preston Brooks, May 2, 1847, PSBP; "Special Orders, No. 79. By Command of General Scott. H. L. Scott, A.A.A.G.," n.d., PMBP; "Headquarters, Palmetto Regiment, S.C.V., Puebla, Mexico, Regimental Orders, No. by Order of Col. Butler," n.d., *ibid.*; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 97–98; MCMB diary; "Correspondence and Presentation of a Sword," *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 19, 1849; letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 93, 106–107.

for sixty days. On June 7, Brooks was reassigned to recruitment duty in his hometown of Edgefield.<sup>25</sup>

Brooks's arrival back in Edgefield on June 25, 1847, sparked a whispering campaign among his friends and neighbors who could not help but question why a man who bore no battle scars had left the war zone just as matters at the front were heating up. Exactly what was said and by whom is unclear. Brooks himself would only admit that his feelings had been "wounded" because "even worthy citizens" reproached him "in consequence of my absence."<sup>26</sup>

Brooks had as hard of a time attracting new recruits for service in Mexico as he did explaining why he left the fighting. Originally tasked with signing up three hundred new volunteers by November 1, Brooks made a gallant attempt, addressing recruitment rallies and militia musters throughout the summer at Anderson, Greenville, and Edgefield, among other places.<sup>27</sup> Although specific information is sketchy, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that despite the noteworthy inducements—a twelve-dollar bounty and forty-two-dollar clothing allowance per recruit, plus 160 acres or one hundred dollars in treasury notes to be paid at the end of the war—Brooks's efforts were less than successful.<sup>28</sup> According to a *Charleston Courier* article dated September 22, 1847, Brooks's address to Colonel Thomas P. Butler's Greenville militia regiment, in which he called upon the locals to "prove their revolutionary blood," failed to have its desired effect. The militiamen were largely unmoved by Brooks's "bold, manly and eloquent appeal."<sup>29</sup> In the end, the newspaper reported, Brooks was only able to procure "a meagre promise or two, a glorious nibble or so."<sup>30</sup>

Brooks's recruiting duties gradually became less of a concern than deflecting the pointed gibes of his neighbors, or "the Parthian darts of concerned

<sup>25</sup> In addition to Brooks, Captain Joseph Kennedy of Fairfield and Lieutenant Joseph Kershaw of Kershaw were reassigned to recruiting duty in South Carolina. Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; Quitman eulogy, 501; Samuel Davis to Capt. Preston Brooks, May 2, 1847, PSBP; "Special Orders, No. 79. By Command of General Scott. H. L. Scott, A.A.A.G.," n.d., PMBP; "Headquarters, Palmetto Regiment, S.C.V., Puebla, Mexico, Regimental Orders, No. by Order of Col. Butler," n.d., *ibid.*; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 97–98; MCMB diary; "Correspondence and Presentation of a Sword"; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 93, 106–107.

<sup>26</sup> "Correspondence and Presentation of a Sword"; letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP; Whitfield Brooks to the Honorable James A. Black, December 20, 1847, *ibid.*; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501.

<sup>27</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 107–108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), September 22, 1847, quoted in Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

friends," as he later described them. In fact, within a month of his return home, Brooks had written to the adjutant general of the War Department in Washington, D.C., requesting an immediate return to regular duty in Mexico. Brooks grew so impatient that he did not even bother waiting for orders, but instead struck out for Mexico on his own. As it happened, Brooks was too late. He missed the war entirely, something he would spend the rest of his life trying to live down.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime, while Brooks was "recuperating" in South Carolina, the Palmetto Regiment had been gaining a reputation as one of the hardest fighting units in Mexico. The regiment compiled an impressive combat record: in addition to Veracruz, Butler's men saw action at Contreras, Chapultepec, Garita de Belén, and Churubusco.<sup>32</sup> The regiment faced its toughest challenge at the Battle of Churubusco on August 20, 1847, where it was ordered to make an ill-advised and poorly led assault against superior numbers. While the attack succeeded, the South Carolinians suffered the highest casualty rate among American forces in the battle, almost 10 percent of the 137 killed and 879 wounded.<sup>33</sup>

Among the losses suffered at Churubusco was Colonel Pierce Butler, who remained at the front of the regiment despite being seriously wounded until finally shot in the head. The regiment also lost its second in command, Lieutenant Colonel John P. Richardson, who was wounded a few minutes after Butler went down and died several days later. Command of the regiment then fell to Major Adley Gladden, who subsequently was wounded as well. With the wounding of Gladden, command passed to Captain Robert Dunovant, Brooks's brother-in-law.<sup>34</sup>

Like the rest of the Palmetto Regiment, Company D suffered heavy losses at Churubusco. The company reported two killed, Second Lieutenant

<sup>31</sup> "Correspondence and Presentation of a Sword"; letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP; Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, *ibid.*; Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501.

<sup>32</sup> General James Shields was appointed to command of the brigade after the army's August reorganization, when General Quitman was promoted to major general and command of the division. Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 246, 264, 468; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 263, 265, 298–299, 511.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest M. Lander sets the Palmetto Regiment's casualties for the war at 429 dead, 43 desertions, and 547 returned home, this from a total of 1,019 men who served in the regiment. Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 173; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 263, 265, 298–299, 511; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 246, 264–265, 342, 468, 469.

<sup>34</sup> Captain Dunovant was married to Brooks's sister Ellen. O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches*, 474; "Roll of Honor," DMWV; Quitman eulogy, 501; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 96; MCMB diary; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 263, 265, 298–299, 511; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 246, 265, 340, 342, 469.

David Adams and Private Thomas Tillman, and eleven wounded, including Preston Brooks's younger brother Whitfield. Whitfield's wounds would prove to be mortal, and he died in Mexico City on October 7, 1847. His last words, according to witnesses: "Have I discharged my duty?"<sup>35</sup>

Pierce Butler and Whitfield Brooks lived up to the ideals of southern honor and manhood by dying a hero's death, but Preston Brooks's war record was far less heroic. Actually, whether or not he even had a war record is debatable. Depending upon whose account one believes, Brooks might have seen combat early in the war, at the siege of Veracruz. In his eulogy of Brooks, South Carolina congressman Lawrence M. Keitt rather vaguely asserted that the two "shared the earlier and later events of the campaign between Vera Cruz and the City of Mexico."<sup>36</sup> Brooks's division commander, John Quitman, was more definitive than Keitt, flatly declaring in his eulogy of Brooks that the deceased "saw action at Vera Cruz." Quitman further claimed to have seen Brooks on the front lines "sharing with his men the provations [*sic*], the danger and the triumphs of that famous siege."<sup>37</sup> What is not in dispute, though, is that by the time Brooks returned from his convalescent leave in late September 1847, the fighting was effectively over.<sup>38</sup>

Brooks was not about to allow a small matter like the end of actual combat operations cheat him out of a chance for glory, however.<sup>39</sup> While in Mexico, he was so intent on belatedly proving his courage that he went to great lengths to place himself in a number of hazardous situations. In addition to riding with a group of Texas Rangers, he volunteered to serve as an escort for a member of General Scott's staff and even carried dispatches for the general himself.<sup>40</sup>

Following a major reorganization of the army in early December 1847, rumors began to swirl about the future of the Palmetto Regiment, which

<sup>35</sup> O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches*, 474; "Roll of Honor," DMWV; Quitman eulogy, 501; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 96; MCMB diary; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 263, 265, 298–299, 511; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 246, 265, 340, 342, 469; Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>36</sup> Keitt eulogy, 501.

<sup>37</sup> Quitman eulogy, 501.

<sup>38</sup> Barney, "Brooks," 625; Keitt eulogy, 501; Quitman eulogy, 501; Samuel Davis to Capt. Preston Brooks, May 2, 1847, PSBP; "Special Orders, No. 79. By Command of General Scott. H. L. Scott, A.A.A.G.," n.d., PMBP; "Headquarters, Palmetto Regiment, S.C.V., Puebla, Mexico, Regimental Orders, No. by Order of Col. Butler," n.d., *ibid.*; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 97–98; MCMB diary; letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>39</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 135–136.

<sup>40</sup> Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93.

was now under the command of newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Adley Gladden and stationed at the village of San Angel, just outside of Mexico City.<sup>41</sup> Based on one source, the regiment was about to be "either reorganized & reduced to two or more companies" or sent home altogether. Another report held that several new replacement regiments were being formed in anticipation of further fighting in Mexico, and one of them presumably was intended to relieve the Palmettos.<sup>42</sup>

Still harboring the fervent desire for "a fight with the enemy," Brooks promptly made two appeals, first through his father and then personally, to Representative James A. Black, asking the congressman for South Carolina's First District to intercede with the War Department on his behalf in the hope of procuring a commission as colonel, or at least lieutenant colonel, with one of these rumored new regiments.<sup>43</sup> Brooks's father, Whitfield Sr., wrote to Black that his son "deeply & sorely feels the loss which he had sustained by being absent in the great battles near the city of Mexico & he now pants for an opportunity of doing something to regain what he conceived he lost."<sup>44</sup> The elder Brooks went on to remind Black of the sacrifices that the Brooks-Butler clan had already made to the war effort: "It would be difficult to find a man, the blood of whose family has been poured out more copiously or freely on the soil of Mexico."<sup>45</sup> Whitfield Sr. ended his letter with an assurance of Preston's determination never to leave Mexico "until he has been in a battle."<sup>46</sup>

Preston Brooks pleaded his own case in a missive to Black a few weeks later. After refreshing the congressman's memory about the death of his brother following the Battle of Churubusco, Preston strongly suggested that as the surviving sibling of a soldier who had made the ultimate sacrifice, he deserved special consideration in the assignment of command

<sup>41</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 171.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*; Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>43</sup> Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>44</sup> Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> In addition to his son Whitfield Jr. and cousin Pierce Mason Butler, Whitfield Brooks Sr. lost a nephew, William Butler Blocker, who was "cut in two by a cannon ball" while leading his company at the gates of Mexico City. Another of Brooks's cousins, Dick Watson, also was seriously wounded at the head of a storming party, but survived. Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>46</sup> In the same letter, Whitfield Brooks requested that Black investigate another "matter of intense interest to my feelings." The body of Whitfield Jr. had never been returned from Mexico, so Whitfield Sr. asked Black to appeal to the secretary of the navy in order that it might be transported back to Charleston onboard a government vessel. Black's efforts apparently were successful. Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP.

billets for the new regiments. Should a colonelcy prove unattainable, Brooks assured Black of his perfect willingness to accept a position as a major of dragoons.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, all of these appeals came to nothing. The rumored new regiments turned out to be exactly that—only rumors. Adding a note of finality to the whole business was the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, which officially ended the war and with it any possibility Brooks had to win military glory. The peace treaty was bad enough for Brooks, but even worse indignities were to follow in the form of an unpleasant encounter between him and the Second Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment, a hard-bitten outfit made up largely of rowdy toughs from the western Pennsylvania coalfields who were not the least bit impressed with the South Carolinian or his notions of southern chivalry.<sup>48</sup>

The trouble began on the evening of February 12, 1848, when Brooks, acting in his capacity as captain of the guard, refused to dismiss a detail of soldiers from the Second Pennsylvania, presumably on the grounds that they had failed to perform their garrison duties to his satisfaction. Instead, according to one account, Captain Brooks "drilled them intensely for about two hours."<sup>49</sup> The next day was a Sunday, and the members of the guard expected at least some relaxing of the normal routine. Yet Brooks, in an attempt to demonstrate that "he understood his duty," vigorously drilled the guard again.<sup>50</sup>

The Pennsylvanians were combat veterans, and they did not take kindly to be tutored in military protocol by a man who seemed to have conveniently avoided any actual fighting, no matter how splendidly he marched on the parade ground. When Brooks had one soldier "bucked" for refusing to obey orders, a mob from the Pennsylvania regiment decided to take matters into their own hands. After rescuing the errant soldier from confinement, they heckled Brooks and pelted him with eggs.<sup>51</sup> Brooks, together with an armed escort, tried to leave, but that only emboldened the Pennsylvanians to taunt all the louder. Enraged, Brooks grabbed a loaded musket from one of the guards, pointed it at the regiment, and "damned

<sup>47</sup> Preston Brooks to James A. Black, January 13, 1848, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Allan Peskin, ed., *Volunteers: The Mexican War Journals of Private Richard Coulter and Sergeant Thomas Barclay, Company E, Second Pennsylvania Infantry* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), 257–258.

<sup>49</sup> Other accounts describe Brooks as giving the Pennsylvanians "a tedious drill of three hours in length." Randy W. Hackenburg, *Pennsylvania in the War with Mexico: The Volunteer Regiments* (Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing Co., 1992), 81–82; Peskin, *Volunteers*, 257–258.

<sup>50</sup> Peskin, *Volunteers*, 257–258.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



them to groan now."<sup>52</sup> Brooks made a second attempt to depart, and again, the Pennsylvanians mocked him. This time, however, Brooks "showed no reaction" and simply walked away.<sup>53</sup>

Later, about noon that same day, Brooks happened to pass by just as the Second Pennsylvania was preparing for a brigade drill in front of General Caleb Cushing. Predictably, the Pennsylvanians began "hooting" Brooks once more. By now Brooks was so thoroughly fed up with the harassment that he took out a service revolver "and snapped it three or four times at the crowd," an act that met with derisive laughter and applause when the gun failed to discharge.<sup>54</sup> In a few minutes, Brooks returned with yet another armed escort. But the Pennsylvanians already had formed ranks and were ready to pass in review before General Cushing, whose presence, and that of other notables, apparently did nothing to restrain Brooks. Richard Coulter, a private in the Second Pennsylvania, recorded that Brooks "walked past the regiment and ordered Lieutenants Wolf and Davis under arrest, although we had a colonel in command. He was again laughed at and complained to General Cushing."<sup>55</sup>

To the casual modern observer, Brooks's run-in with the Pennsylvanians may seem like a mere case of overreaction, as indeed it was, but for him, the matter was deadly serious. Despite his best efforts to establish martial credibility in Mexico, Brooks found himself in the familiar position of having to defend his courage, this time against a bunch of pale-faced Yankees. Brooks doubtless thought himself justified in ordering the arrests and perhaps rightly so. Still, engaging in such a public and petty quarrel with the Second Pennsylvania hardly did his image any good. For a start, being openly mocked and pelted with eggs was not conducive to the appearance of a military hero. A court-martial was unlikely to change these negative perceptions, and as a matter of fact, it would only serve to remind everyone that Brooks's own perceived shortcomings had provoked the incident in the first place.

Even so, Brooks's poor judgment and lack of discretion notwithstanding, the military authorities could not allow such insubordination to go unpunished. Following the pass in review, the Second Pennsylvania was "drilled extensively" and given a stern lecture by its commanding officer, Colonel John W. Geary. After receiving Colonel Geary's assurances that the officers in question, Lieutenants Hiram Wolf of Company K and Biven

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>53</sup> According to witnesses, one of Brooks's bodyguards even went so far as strike a member of the Pennsylvania regiment "in the head with his musket." Peskin, *Volunteers*, 257-258; Hackenburg, *Pennsylvania in the War with Mexico*, 81-82.

<sup>54</sup> Hackenburg, *Pennsylvania in the War with Mexico*, 81-82.

<sup>55</sup> Peskin, *Volunteers*, 257-258.

Davis of Company L, would be prosecuted, Brooks was finally persuaded to let the matter drop before making an even bigger fool out of himself.<sup>56</sup>

No longer needed in Mexico, the Palmettos were transferred to Veracruz and then on to Mobile in late May 1847, where they were formally mustered out of service. Because the regiment's transit orders did not arrive in Mexico until after their departure, there was no transportation available to take them from Mobile to Charleston. As a result, the men were forced to find their own way home, traveling in small groups and at their own expense. In spite of these difficulties, most made it back to South Carolina by early July.<sup>57</sup> Upon their return from Mexico, Captain Brooks and the Old Ninety-Six Boys were accorded a heroes' welcome and were the guests of honor at a well-attended community barbecue.<sup>58</sup> In addition to the customary speeches from local dignitaries, the barbecue was marked by a "most interesting" ceremony in which the members of Company D, "as a testimony of their appreciation of his services," presented Brooks with a silver pitcher.<sup>59</sup> In his acceptance speech, Brooks praised the gift "as the willing testimony of as gallant a corps as ever went into a battlefield—of men who know him better than all the world beside, and whose approbation he prized far above all other earthly honors."<sup>60</sup>

The highlight of the day, however, was when Brooks and his second in command, Lieutenant William Moragne, finally took leave of their men, a ritual that the *Edgefield Advertiser* described as "the parting of brethren in arms who had fought shoulder to shoulder over many a bloody field—who, for a long period had but one common purpose, the honor and glory of our National Arms."<sup>61</sup> In summing up its account of the day's proceedings, the *Advertiser* indulged in a bit of hyperbole:

We have attended many public meetings, but never did we observe a more becoming spirit. The order, the harmony and sobriety were perfect. It was just such a reception as should have been given by an intelligent and patriotic people. It was marked by nothing which can bring shame or sorrow, but will long be remembered as the affectionate spontaneous

<sup>56</sup> Geary was as good as his word. Davis was convicted by a general court-martial and "suspended from command for two months," including forfeiture of pay. Wolf also was convicted at court-martial and subjected to a fine. Peskin, *Volunteers*, 257–258; Hackenburg, *Pennsylvania in the War with Mexico*, 81–82, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 171–172.

<sup>58</sup> At least three thousand people attended the event, which was held at a local picnic spot called Centre Springs on July 27, 1848. W. C. Moragne, "Barbecue to the '96 Boys," *Edgefield Advertiser*, August 2, 1848.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> The company was finally mustered out of service on October 16, 1848. Moragne, "Barbecue to the '96 Boys."

offering of admiration and gratitude to the gallant men, who by their heroic conduct in a distant land, have illustrated the power of American Arms, and entwined new laurels for the brow of "Old Edgefield."<sup>62</sup>

Any hopes on Brooks's part that such displays of public acclaim, even from members of his own company, might finally dispel whatever lingering doubts remained regarding his Mexican War service were quickly dashed, however, as it was not long before the Edgefield rumor mill began grinding out fresh accusations. Again, details are sketchy, but it bears noting that this time Brooks took a more proactive approach to quieting the whispers. Possibly anticipating trouble, he procured a resolution of support from his fellow officers attesting to his dedication and the fact that it was only because of his obedience to orders that he had been "deprived of the honor of participating in the glorious achievements of our army in the valley of Mexico."<sup>63</sup>

While still in Mexico, Brooks also appealed to Dr. Samuel Davis, the regimental surgeon, asking him to lay his "professional & personal testimony" before the people of Edgefield District regarding the severity of Brooks's illness, his reluctance to leave, and the absolute necessity of his being removed from the hot Mexican climate. There was a sense of desperation in Brooks's words as he described for Davis the "wounded feelings" and "mortification" he felt at the reproach by "worthy persons of my district" for having been "denied the privilege" of battle through no fault of his own.<sup>64</sup> Brooks was anxious that Davis, in pleading his case, pay particular attention to his condition during the march to Alvarado: "Was I not at death's door on this journey and did I improve at [all?] while at Jalapa? Did not Col. B[utler]. & yourself again insist on my return and did you not tell me that my life depended upon it? Had I proceeded with the Army do you believe that I would now be numbered with the living?"<sup>65</sup>

Brooks's insecurities about his illness in Mexico raise the question of exactly what, if anything, was wrong with him. Was he actually sick, or was he feigning? The question is not one of mere speculation, but rather represents a central issue of this article as it relates to Brooks's character. If he was truly unwell, then Brooks was a victim of circumstances that were beyond his control. In that case, he merited a grudging admiration for having so gamely struggled, at the risk of his own life, to answer the call of duty and his own conscience. But if Brooks was shirking, then he deserved every bit of the contempt he received. The best evidence is found in the written

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> P. S. Brooks to Dr. Samuel Davis, September 25, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

record of Dr. Davis, who recounted in considerable detail the developments that compelled Brooks to withdraw from Mexico. As they amount to the only "eyewitness" account of Brooks's condition during the march from Veracruz to Jalapa, Davis's comments are worth quoting at length:

Whilst the Regiment was at the City of Vera Cruz, Captain P. S. Brooks laid low with a roasting Typhoid Fever, a disease extremely fatal in our own [illegible] country, and almost certainly fatal to our soldiers under the climate of Mexico—I urged him not to think of remaining there, or of going into a General Hospital, but to get leave of absence, or if he could not do that, to resign his office, and to return to the United States. He refused, peremptorily, to comply with this advice, Col. Butler, seeing the condition he was in, endeavored to overcome his scruples, & warmly urged him to return home; Capt. Brooks however, was under the impression that if he could be carried in a wagon as far as Jalapa, the complete change of air & water would restore him to health; and he prevailed upon Col. Butler to have this arrangement made for him.<sup>66</sup>

Davis went on to relate the exact order of events that alerted him to Brooks's condition. The surgeon first observed "a singular movement in his [Brooks's] gait" during the march to Alvarado, which he attributed to an old wound that Brooks had suffered several years earlier in the Wigfall duel:

It was so striking it occupied my attention some time & remembering he had been wounded a few years ago, near the lower part of the spine, I suspected that it might in some way be the cause of this curious drag of the left leg; I, therefore, rode up to him & entered into conversation with him upon the subject, from which conversation, I was satisfied, it was a serious matter & advised him to march no further & to borrow a horse, or to get into a wagon, for I apprehended if he continued to walk he might lose the use of lower limbs from Paralysis. I then told him I feared he would not be able to continue in the service & that he certainly would not be able to march through it—I now believe that, that march was in a great measure the cause of his subsequent illness, & in consequence of it, he did come near to losing the use of his left leg.<sup>67</sup>

As previously noted, Brooks's condition soon grew so dire that Dr. Davis feared he might die if he stayed in Mexico.<sup>68</sup>

The full truth of the matter may never be known. Still, in view of Davis's "expert" testimony and lacking any definitive evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable 150 years after the fact to give Brooks's claims of disability the benefit of the doubt. The residents of antebellum Edgefield were far less magnanimous, however. They were not about to pardon Brooks for missing the war, regardless of how many doctor's excuses he procured.

<sup>66</sup> Letter of Dr. Samuel Davis, October 7, 1847, PSBP.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Rumors that his conduct during the war had been less than honorable continued to swirl around Brooks. Matters finally came to a head at Edgefield's 1849 Fourth of July celebration. The cause of the trouble was an elaborate sword-presentation ceremony intended to honor those who had fought in Mexico. Brooks was completely excluded from these proceedings. For Brooks, such a snubbing was an insult to his honor and reputation as a gentleman that could not go unanswered. Understandably outraged at being, as he put it, "unjustly neglected," Brooks demanded an explanation and was told that he had been "placed on the same footing" with fellow Edgefield native Milledge L. Bonham. Bonham, another of Brooks's cousins and lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Army's Twelfth Infantry Regiment, likewise had been sharply criticized for his own delay in returning to the war after "accidentally" shooting himself in the foot at the Battle of Churubusco. Despite Bonham having been cleared of any wrongdoing by a board of inquiry (summoned at Bonham's request), Brooks unwisely and without thinking blurted out: "to this I object for although I know Bonham to be a brave man—yet his courage has been questioned—mine has not and while in the city of Mexico he demanded a court of inquiry in consequence of charges have been made against him—these things you have heard before they are matters of fact—they are on record."<sup>69</sup>

Word of Brooks's remarks soon reached Bonham, who naturally interpreted them as an insult to his honor.<sup>70</sup> Cousin or not, Bonham did not intend to let Brooks get away with this sort of mudslinging, and he demanded an immediate explanation of Brooks's meaning. This led to a series of increasingly tense letters between the two men that concluded with Bonham's demand for "a hostile meeting." Thanks to the intervention of a "mutual friend" (probably former congressman and future governor Francis W. Pickens), the dispute did not reach the dueling ground and was resolved, if not amicably, at least to both parties' satisfaction.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Barney, "Brooks," 625; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 340; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93; P. S. Brooks to M. L. Bonham, July 14, 1849, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, 1771–1940, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereinafter cited as MLBP).

<sup>70</sup> Brooks was well aware that Bonham had been cleared of the charges and of his touchiness on the subject. Following his own return to Mexico, Brooks had written to warn Bonham that his "courage and honor were being questioned because of his delay in returning to the war." Barney, "Brooks," 625; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 340; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93; P. S. Brooks to M. L. Bonham, July 14, 1849, MLBP.

<sup>71</sup> Barney, "Brooks," 625; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 340; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93. The following letters are all part of the MLBP: Milledge L. Bonham to Preston Brooks, July 14, 1849; P. S. Brooks to M. L. Bonham, July 14, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 16, 1849; Brooks to Bonham, July 17, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 18, 1849; Brooks to Bonham, July 18, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 19, 1849; Brooks to

It should be obvious that both Preston Brooks and Milledge Bonham attached an enormous amount of importance to matters of honor. Despite their agreement to peacefully resolve their differences, they were fully prepared to risk serious injury or death to maintain their public reputation, even if that meant dueling with a close relative. Rather than acting as a deterrent, the fact that Milledge Bonham was not only Brooks's cousin but also James Bonham's brother probably inflamed the situation. Brooks's emotional response to being named with Milledge Bonham and excluded from the Fourth of July ceremony was undoubtedly rooted in a deeply felt sense of guilt over having abandoned the war zone, thus leaving it up to Milledge Bonham alone to uphold the family honor and avenge the death of James Bonham and later those of Whitfield Brooks and Pierce Butler as well. Perhaps Brooks realized that he had failed to meet the expectations of southern manhood. Certainly, the bravery exhibited by other family members, some of whom gave their lives fighting in Mexico, must have wounded his pride.<sup>72</sup>

Although this specific episode with Milledge Bonham was peacefully resolved, the larger question of Brooks's war service remained unsettled. Later that same year, in December 1849, several members of the Old Ninety-Six Boys, as a token of "their high appreciation of his gallant and patriotic services during the War with Mexico," presented Brooks with his own "handsome sword" purchased at their own expense and engraved with a golden palmetto tree. The sword also featured an inscription, part of which read: "Unanimously presented to: Captain Preston S. Brooks by his Company, D, Palmetto Regiment, in Consideration of their confidence in him as an Officer, his kindness to the men under his command and their high appreciation of his gallant and patriotic services during the War with Mexico."<sup>73</sup> In accepting the "elegant present," Brooks professed finding comfort in the knowledge that "those who know me best, love me most." Still, he could not refrain from taking one more swipe at his critics:

Could any occurrence [*sic*] entirely compensate me for the Parthian darts of concerned friends, —of amiables who are "Skilled by a touch, to deepen slanders tints. With all the sly mendacity of hints," it would be the considerate, voluntary and generous compliment conveyed by your

Bonham, July 19, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 20, 1849; J. C. Simkins memorandum to Bonham, July 20, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 22, 1849; Brooks to Bonham, July 23, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 25, 1849; Bonham to Brooks, July 26, 1849; Brooks to Bonham, July 26, 1849; Arthur Simkins to [illegible], August 1, 1849.

<sup>72</sup> Barney, "Brooks," 625; Henry, *Story of the Mexican War*, 340; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93; Milledge L. Bonham to Preston Brooks, July 14, 1849, MLBP; Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 136.

<sup>73</sup> "Correspondence and Presentation of a Sword."

offering . . . You, and those you represent have had the best opportunities of knowing me as I am—of judging of my services, of my virtues and my faults, and it is somewhat remarkable that while my warmest and most devoted friends, (and Thank God! I had many in every grade of the Regiment, from the incomparable Butler and admirable Gladden, down to privates and musicians) are to be found among those who have won glory at the cannon's mouth, my detractors, have yet to smell the burning of "villainous saltpetre."<sup>74</sup>

During the months that followed the sword presentation, Brooks continued to be the target of rumor and innuendo. It was, at least partly, a desire to get away from the gossip that motivated Brooks in January 1851 to relocate his family from Edgefield Court House to his plantation, Leaside, located near the village of Ninety-Six.<sup>75</sup>

But try as he might, Brooks could never fully escape the shadow of doubt that surrounded his service in Mexico. Rumors concerning his war record—or more accurately, his lack of one—would dog Brooks for years to come. In addition to regrets about his service, Brooks came to regard the war almost as a curse. This was never more apparent than in his reaction to the unexpected death of his beloved daughter Sallie Means Brooks in July 1851. A favorite of her father, Sallie was notable among Brooks's four children for having been the only one born during his absence in Mexico. As such, her death, like that of her Uncle Whitfield at Churubusco, was not only a terrible blow to Brooks, but in a very real sense also came to symbolize all of the perceived misfortunes that befell him after the war. As a heartbroken Brooks noted in his diary on July 14, the day of Sallie's death: "It seems as if I am destined to losse [sic] every thing associated with the Mexican campaign."<sup>76</sup>

If Brooks was unable to put the issue of Mexico behind him, it was certainly not for lack of trying. Indeed, erasing the stigma surrounding his Mexican War service became a near obsession with Brooks. He frankly admitted as much when he wrote: "If I can but get in one battle, and feel that I too have spilt my blood with the brave Palmetto Boys, I shall be content . . . Oh! how my heart grieves, when I think of the brave 96 Boys, but every blow I strike shall be for them and poor Butler!"<sup>77</sup>

It was this need for redemption that lay behind Brooks's desire to ride with the Texas Rangers, his efforts to obtain command of a regiment, and his dangerous confrontation with Milledge Bonham. Within a few years of

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Martha C. Brooks, "Extracts from the Diary of My Husband for the Children," January 1851, PSBP.

<sup>76</sup> Brooks, "Extracts from the Diary of My Husband," July 1849, July 14, 1851, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 136.

the war's conclusion, this same quest for redemption would lead Brooks to seek a career in politics.<sup>78</sup> When viewed within the context of his Mexican War service and the controversy surrounding it, both Brooks's decision to run for Congress and especially the attack upon Charles Sumner can be understood as part of a long-term effort aimed at winning back the respect and approbation of the citizens of Edgefield District. In other words, having failed to defend the honor of his family and the South on the battlefields of Mexico, Brooks would defend them within the halls of Congress.

But even in this, Brooks was not entirely successful. He turned out to be a rather uninspired choice as a congressman. During his two terms in office, Brooks introduced no major legislation, and during the debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he was actually criticized by his constituents for being "a little too national."<sup>79</sup> As for the Caning of Sumner, here again things did not turn out exactly as Brooks had hoped. To his fellow South Carolinians, Brooks's actions may have seemed noble and heroic, but in the eyes of northerners, he was nothing but a bully and a coward, a charge made all the more telling by his refusal to fight a duel with Congressman Anson Burlingame of Massachusetts in the aftermath of the attack.<sup>80</sup>

For all his professed bravado, Preston Brooks was never more than a reluctant warrior. The image that emerges from the records of Brooks's service in the Mexican War is that of a man torn between his desire to measure up to the expectations of others and the limitations of his own character. It

<sup>78</sup> Whitfield Brooks to Hon. James A. Black, December 20, 1847, PSBP; Preston Brooks to James A. Black, January 13, 1848, *ibid.*; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> While for the most part a strict adherent of states' right orthodoxy, Congressman Brooks was given to occasional outbursts of independence such as his support for the 1854 Pacific Railroad Bill that often did not sit well with his constituents. Perhaps Brooks's most egregious act of political heresy occurred in January 1856 when he opposed the candidacy of a fellow southerner, William R. Smith of Alabama, for Speaker of the House of Representatives on the grounds that Smith was known to harbor nativist sentiments. Brooks declared, "I would vote for Nathaniel P. Banks or Joshua P. Giddings [both vocal slavery opponents] a thousand times in preference to that gentleman [Smith]." Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks," 301-302; Miles Taylor, speech on Sumner assault, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., app.: 876 (1856); David Herbert Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1960), 289-290; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 348, 350, 353, 363, 364.

<sup>80</sup> James E. Campbell, "Sumner-Brooks-Burlingame; or, The Last of the Great Challenges," *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 34 (October 1925): 435-473; Anson Burlingame, "Voice of the North," quoted in Charles Sumner, *Charles Sumner: His Complete Works* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900), 5: 304; "Southern Chivalry—Argument versus Clues," *Liberator*, June 6, 1856, 91; Donald, *Charles Sumner*, 298, 307-308, 310-311.





Turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcard view of the Palmetto Regiment Monument on the State House grounds in Columbia. The cast iron and copper palmetto tree was purchased by the General Assembly in 1856 as a memorial to the South Carolinians who lost their lives during the Mexican War. The names of Preston Brooks's brother and two of his cousins are among the 441 listed on the monument. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

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often seemed that Brooks was motivated less by feelings of aggression or a desire for revenge than by fear over loss of reputation. As Brooks himself wrote a few weeks after the attack on Sumner, "I should have forfeited my own self-respect, and perhaps the good opinions of my countrymen if I had failed to resent such an injury by calling the offender in question to a

personal account."<sup>81</sup> Assuredly, there was nothing particularly courageous about the way in which he battered Sumner. Even many southerners had to question the character of a man who, rather than directly confronting his opponent, sneaked up on him, catching him unarmed and unprepared and rendering him defenseless by pinning him beneath a desk.<sup>82</sup>

Brooks would spend the rest of his life waiting for an absolution that never came. In the end, though, his wait proved brief. At a little past seven o'clock on the evening of January 27, 1857, scarcely six months after the assault that made him a household name, Brooks died of what was variously described at the time as "a severe cold," "the croup," and "an affliction of the throat, of what is technically called laryngitis."<sup>83</sup>

The specter of Mexico haunted Brooks to the grave, and even in death, he was never quite able to break free from his past. During the course of his congressional obsequies, the Mexican War was brought up time and again. If the subject could not be avoided after his passing, then at least the tone was considerably more charitable than it had been just a few years earlier. No doubt motivated by the desire to speak well of the dead, Brooks's colleagues in Congress, many of whom were themselves Mexican War veterans, went out of their way to present Brooks's service record in the best possible light. Setting the tone for what was to follow was Brooks's close friend and political ally Representative Lawrence Keitt of South Carolina. Keitt boldly declared that Brooks had "shared the earlier and later events of the campaign between Vera Cruz and the City of Mexico, having in the mean time been recalled home by a severe and exhausting attack of illness."<sup>84</sup>

From there, the task of arguing Brooks's case was taken up by Mississippi senator John Quitman. Having served as Brooks's brigade and division commander, Quitman was well aware of the questions that surrounded Brooks's service in Mexico. Yet the senator could not help taking some creative license in delivering a eulogy that praised Brooks for having displayed "the serene, cheerful, and determined bearing of the soldier and gentleman," even as it hearkened back to the battlefields of Mexico that Brooks had never really known: "He was an officer of that gallant Palmetto regiment which, on a bright day in March, formed its line of one thousand

<sup>81</sup> P. S. Brooks, resignation speech, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., app.: 831(1856); Donald, *Charles Sumner*, 289-291.

<sup>82</sup> Campbell, "Sumner-Brooks-Burlingame," 435-473; Burlingame, "Voice of the North," 304; Donald, *Charles Sumner*, 294-296, 298, 307-308, 311.

<sup>83</sup> McKnight, "Brooks," 288-289; Barney, "Brooks," 626; L. A. Gobright, *Recollection of Men and Things at Washington, during the Third of a Century* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1869), 419; "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 365, 368.

<sup>84</sup> Keitt eulogy, 501.

men on the beach at Vera Cruz, and which, when, six months afterward its flag, soiled by the smoke of battle, was planted on the gates of Mexico, could muster but three hundred men fit for duty. Its brave and accomplished commander, Colonel Pierce Butler, who fell on the gory field of Churubusco, was the blood kinsman of the deceased."<sup>85</sup>

Nor was the impulse to heap praise upon the late Congressman Brooks limited to southerners. Even a Yankee such as Representative Lewis Campbell of Ohio had to concede that "the records of the War Department, showing that he responded promptly to the call of our common country, and the statements just made by the gallant gentleman from Mississippi [Quitman], as to his valor on the battle-field [*sic*], are facts which will validate the statement that Preston S. Brooks was both gracious and brave."<sup>86</sup>

By far the most egregious example of reputation enhancement on Brooks's behalf, however, was undertaken by Representative John H. Savage, a fourth-term Democrat from Tennessee. Rather than merely embellishing the truth, Savage made what can only be described as a gross overstatement that seems completely divorced from reality, not only praising Brooks but also recasting him in the role of Spartan warrior: "History records but one Thermopylae; there ought to have been another, and that for Preston S. Brooks."<sup>87</sup> The blame for cheating Brooks out of his rightful place in history, Representative Savage continued, could only be directed toward a higher power: "Brave, patriotic, and unselfish, if he [Brooks] had been permitted to choose his own death, I feel confident he would have fallen in some great battle for the public weal; but that mighty power which controls and governs all things, from an atom to the universe, had decided otherwise, and it is not my will nor habit to question the will or ways of Omnipotence."<sup>88</sup>

Even among his former constituents in Edgefield District, who had always been Brooks's most vocal detractors, there was a growing awareness that perhaps they had been excessively harsh in their judgments regarding his war record. Brooks could never be enshrined in the pantheon of Edgefield immortals such as James Bonham and Pierce Butler, but in the wake of his "chastisement" of Sumner, the perception began to take hold that Brooks was a man of honor after all.

Preston Brooks finally achieved in death the vindication that had so long eluded him in life. Even though he did not meet his end on the battlefield, Brooks had come to the defense of his native state in Congress, and for many residents of Edgefield District, that was enough. This new-found

<sup>85</sup> Quitman eulogy, 501.

<sup>86</sup> Lewis D. Campbell, eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 3rd Sess., 501 (1857).

<sup>87</sup> John H. Savage, eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *ibid.*, 502.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

appreciation for Brooks's manly virtues was well expressed in a resolution adopted by his old comrades in Company D at a large public meeting to commemorate Brooks's passing, which read in part:

A soldier—a patriot has fallen! The South wails—Carolina weeps, but we, his old comrades in arms, are chief mourners at his tomb. May we not drop the tears of affection over the untimely fate of one so brave, so generous, so chivalric, so loved! In sorrow we pay this feeble tribute to a fellow-soldier, whose friendship we enjoyed, whose gallantry we admired, whose virtues we cherished, and whose patriotic services now embalm his memory in our hearts. Resolved, That in the death of Preston S. Brooks, our late Commander in Mexico, we have lost a staunch friend, and the country a brave soldier, patriot and statesman.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> "Speeches of the Hon. Preston S. Brooks," 368–369.