

Story behind the marker

■ Letters show how historian, Elliott Springs worked together.

Official historical markers were first authorized by the State of South Carolina in 1905.

The responsibility for authenticity was given to the S.C. Historical Commission (now the Department of Archives and History). Because of a lack of funds, very few markers were erected before the mid-1930s.

In 1936, a historical survey was authorized, and Dr. Nora Davis was given the authority to identify potential sites and to encourage local historical societies to finance the markers.

One of the prime sites for a marker was the White Homestead at Fort Mill that was the scene of the last official meeting of the Confederate Cabinet. Correspondence between Davis and Elliott White Springs, who had inherited the White Homestead, began in 1939. There were 32 letters between the two from April 26, 1939, to March 18, 1940.

The letters, preserved in the S.C. Archives, are instructive to read, partly because they show how a historian (Davis) seeks to get the facts about a historic event, but without complete documentation.

In the first letter (mistakenly addressed to Col. Leroy Springs), Davis wanted to know if Elliott Springs (son of Col. Springs) would be interested in erecting a standard historical marker at the home of his grandparents. The marker cost \$65.

Elliott Springs replied the next day that he was happy to pay the expense.

He also wrote, "My great-grandfather's name was William Elliott White, and he owned the house at Fort Mill where President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet spent the



Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

night on April 26, 1865. I have always understood that a meeting of the cabinet was held in the front yard of this house under an oak tree on the morning of April 27th, and that Secretary Trenholm handed in his resignation, due to ill health, and proceeded to his home. My grandfather, Andrew Baxter Springs, was present at this meeting and strongly advised the Confederate cabinet to split up and take different routes to their destinations."

Davis and Elliott Springs both knew that various accounts of the event disagreed about the details. Some historians contended that the gathering of cabinet members with Jefferson Davis was not official.

They said there had not been an official meeting since the fall of Richmond to Union troops. Others said that the last full meeting of the cabinet was in Charlotte at the home of Col. William F. Phifer and his wife, Mary Martha (who was the daughter of Col. William Elliott White).

The claim that the last meeting was in Abbeville was not taken seriously by the state archives because it was not a full cabinet meeting.

Elliott Springs stated, "We of Fort Mill have always considered that this was the last full meeting of

the Confederate cabinet, though the newspaper of Charlotte each year publishes the fact that the last full meeting took place in Charlotte."

Davis was already convinced that the Fort Mill meeting was official. Her problem was with the wording of the marker.

Her first letter offered "three suggested inscriptions." A major source of information was the diary of the wife of George Trenholm, the secretary of the treasury.

Another major source was the "Official Records of the Confederacy." Most of the correspondence dealt with the wording of the marker, and the marker finally stated, in part, "The cabinet held its last meeting at which the resignation of G.A. Trenholm, secretary of the treasury, was accepted and Postmaster General John Reagan was appointed his successor *ad interim*."

Elliott Springs helped by sending pictures and biographical data on the Whites and Springeses who were involved.

He found something that said that the meeting was under a pine tree in the front yard. Then he was told by his cousin, Harvey White of Graham, N.C., that the meeting was held under a cedar tree. An 1890s account said that the meeting was under a sassafras tree. Wisely, no specific tree was mentioned in the final wording.

Finally, the marker was ready, and on March 11, 1940, Elliott Springs had the monument erected at its present location on North White Street in Fort Mill.

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Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Sundays.