

Nearby History column by Louise Pettus, printed in Charlotte Observer's York Supplement, July 19, 1992

Brothers' letters bound in history

In 1920, a Charlotte columnist, Mrs. J.P. Caldwell, wrote a lengthy account of a book written by Miss Cordelia White Phifer of Charlotte. The hand-printed book was titled "Five White Brothers in the Confederate Army." Phifer was the niece of the five soldiers from Fort Mill.

The soldier sons of William Elliott White and Sarah Robinson (Wilson) White were Capt. Joseph Harvey White, Col. John McKemie White, Dr. William Edward White, Capt. James Wilson White and Capt. Samuel Elliott White. Capt. Joseph H. White, a Davidson College graduate, was a commission merchant at Charleston when the Civil War broke out. He then organized a Company made up of Mecklenburg and Charlotte men, Co. B., 53rd N.C. troops. His first duties were in the defense of the North Carolina coast, but he soon he was transferred to the Army of Northern Virginia. He was killed by a shell in front of the breastworks in the battle of Spottsylvania.

Col. John M. White, who graduated with distinction from South Carolina College, organized the "York Guard" and was elected its captain. He served with Longstreet's army, advancing to lieutenant colonel in 1863, and was present at the surrender at Appomattox. In four years of hard service he was not wounded but was knocked down by the force of a ball striking his sword in the battle of Seven Pines.

Dr. William Edward White, a graduate of Davidson College who received his medical degree from the University of New York, entered service as the assistant surgeon of the N.C. Regiment.

His was the shortest service of all of the brothers. He died of camp fever in November 1861.

Capt. James Wilson White served with the 1st S.C. Cavalry in at least 17 major battles. He had Henry White, his slave and body servant, beside him throughout the war. Neither were injured. White's good friend was Robin Jones of Mount Gallant Plantation near Rock Hill. When Capt. Jones was killed at Brandy Station, Capt. White rode his horse into the thick of battle and lifted Jones's body on it and took it to a place of safety.

Capt. Samuel Elliott White was the only one of the brothers to have previous military training. He had attended Kings Mountain Military Academy and the Citadel. In his senior year at the Citadel, he led a student rebellion against a detested professor. White, who was an honors student, was expelled. He spent several years in Texas and Mexico before returning to this area. He entered service as a 1st lieutenant in the 7th N.C. Regiment and was made drill-master of the company. He was severely wounded at Newburn, N.C., and for a time served as commissary officer at Salisbury, N.C. After returning to his company, White was made captain of Co. B. 7th N.C. Regiment. In the foreword of her book, Phifer wrote that for 58 years a bundle of letters written by the five brothers had been kept in a bureau drawer. She was afraid that the letters might be destroyed as having no value so she copied them "without correction or omission."

Along with the letters, Phifer sketched the military service of each but added nothing about their lives. She ornamented the book with red and gold ink, sketched a picture of the White Homestead (a National Register home in Fort Mill recently restored) and included pictures of each brother in uniform along with a picture of Phifer's mother (affectionately known to

the brothers as "Sis Martha"). The leather-bound book was sent for permanent keeping to the Confederate Museum in Richmond, Va.

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