



### Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

Paul is the Author of *Quantrill of Missouri*, *Quantrill in Texas*, *Quantrill at Lawrence* and *Lost Souls of the Lost Township*. Petersen is a retired U.S. Marine Corps master sergeant and a highly decorated infantry combat veteran of the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is a member of the William Clarke Quantrill Society, the James-Younger Gang Association, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Jackson County and Missouri State Historical Societies.

## Last Confederate Veteran a Quantrill Man

Walter J. Williams was listed as a private in Quantrill's brigade noted from the Ex-Confederate Missourians Association 9th Annual Reunion in Kansas City, in 1891. He was recruited in South Central Texas and transferred to Quantrill's Brigade five months later according to his 1932 Confederate pension application. Williams was the last Confederate veteran in the United States. He died in Houston, Texas on December 19, 1959, being 117 years old.

As a young boy I remember hearing about the death of the last Confederate veteran, and 58 years later it seems strange to be writing about him. Very little information exists on Williams's time riding with Quantrill. At the start of the Civil War 19 year old Walter Williams stated that he joined Colonel John Bell Hood as a drummer boy in Company "C" of Hood's 5th Texas Infantry Regiment. Research shows that he joined Quantrill for a short time before joining the 5th Mississippi Cavalry as a forage master when he was twenty-two years old in 1864. Williams said he served 11 months in the Confederate army before the war ended making him enlisting in the Mississippi cavalry in June 1864. Though he was interviewed often in his declining years interviewers failed to question his early military career on exact dates and organizations.

His life is as interesting as it is confusing. Both his name and date of birth are controversial. Also known as Walter Washington Green Williams, some claimed he was born in Itawamba County, Mississippi on November 14, 1854. Birth records for Itawamba County Mississippi have long disappeared. He moved to Texas in 1870 to a 20 acre farm in Eaton, Texas, 100 miles from Austin. Though reported to be only 8 years old when the war started family records indicate that Williams was actually born in 1842. His use of different middle names has also caused confusion as Williams said that he had used several

different middle initials during his lifetime. One researcher claimed that he failed to find a Walter G. Williams in the National Archives although a Walter Washington Williams was discovered in the archives at Jackson, Mississippi belonging to a Mississippi regiment as a private. Original records from the South bearing his service were lost or destroyed when the Confederacy collapsed.

As was their custom Northern newspapers and writers attempted to discredit Williams's honorable service to the Confederacy basing their findings on census records alone when the use of census records cannot be used conclusively for any official verification. When he died December 19, 1959, according to his New York Times obituary, Northern newspaper reporter Lowell Bridwell wrote a story saying he had failed to find evidence to support Williams's claim as the oldest Confederate veteran. Bridwell based his findings on census records. Bridwell was an interesting individual. While he was a reporter, he drew the ire of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who suspected him of being a communist. In a 1991 article in *Blue and Gray* magazine entitled *The Great Imposters*, another Northern writer, William Marvel, often accused of writing revisionist history, gave details concerning Williams birth based on census records from before his 1932 Confederate pension application, as having occurred between October 1854 and April 1855 in Itawamba County, Mississippi. Marvel's findings based on census records shows that Williams was too young to have served in the Confederate Army. Also, he did not identify himself as a Confederate veteran in the 1910 census which included a question about whether a person had that status. In Williams's support back in the times when he was born, there was very limited documentation to support birth and death dates. Other officials contended that the Archives of the Federal Government are

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incomplete on the Confederacy and that ages in census records sometimes are inaccurate.

Williams first laid claim to military service with the Confederacy when he applied for a State Civil War pension in 1932 when many veterans decided to apply due to the Great Depression. Texas authorities investigated his application and determined that his claim to service was authentic. They granted him a pension. Direct support for Williams's claim came from fellow soldier G. M. Burkhart who often recounted Civil War experiences with Williams including an old tin-type photo of the two Confederate soldiers together. Texas pension officials George Sheppard, the State Comptroller, and J. H. Taylor, the head of the State pension fund, examined the application when it came in. They went to the State library and checked to see whether Williams had served with Quantrill during the Civil War. They were satisfied that he had.

His acceptance by the Federal Civil War pension board required him to have written documentation with a valid affidavit from a witness also from the military service vouching for his service showing age at time of application, place of residence, service information such as company, regiment, length of service, name of witness and date of application, and date of enlistment and discharge. All persons entitled to pensions were to appear before a Board of Pensions for examination and swore on oath for the validity of their statements. On the state level, the governor of Texas declared, "We shall respect and follow the records of the State and the Confederacy rather than the archives of the Federal government which have always been recognized as incomplete with respect to members of the Confederate army. As a result, Williams was officially granted a pension not only by the Texas Confederate Pension Commission but also by the Federal government based on all available records. After all other claimants had died, Williams was celebrated as the last Confederate veteran after his death on December 19, 1959, at the age of 117.

Interestingly, William's father lived to be 119.

His death was an occasion for national mourning. Governor Price Daniel of Texas ordered flags at half staff and President Eisenhower declared a national day of mourning and ordered all Federal flags to fly at half staff also bestowing on him the title of general. Congress recognized his passing. Williams was buried in his Confederate uniform.

Little was asked of specifics concerning Williams's wartime experiences under Quantrill by interviewers across the country but research of his life and that of Quantrill's campaigns and those of John Bell Hood can lead us to some logical conclusions. His pension record stated he joined the Confederacy in South Central Texas. Other records indicate he joined at Blue Mountain, Tennessee. But an apparent error was recorded because there is a similar Blue Mountain in South Central Texas. Because his pension application states he was recruited in South Central Texas and 5 months later joined Quantrill this would have shown his initial enlistment in the Confederate army in John Bell Hood's 5th Texas Regiment as early as July 1863 where he would have joined Quantrill the following December when Quantrill arrived in Texas for his winter sojourn. The Fifth was recruited, for the most part, in Waco, San Antonio, Bonham, Weatherford, and Austin and was first organized and mustered into Confederate service at San Antonio. This would have put Williams in Texas during the summer of 1863 where he heard of Quantrill's success at Lawrence, Kansas and victory over General Blunt at Baxter Springs, Kansas. During the winter of 1863 when Quantrill and his First Regiment, First Brigade, Army of the South, was stationed in Sherman, Texas, Williams enlisted with him there. This service with Quantrill is what qualified him as a Missouri veteran. Years later he was met by his former comrades when he attended and was accepted into the Ex-Confederate Missourians Association held in Kansas City, Missouri in 1891, where he was listed as a private in Quantrill's brigade. Williams served faithfully under Colonel William Clarke Quantrill from December 1863 to March 1864, when Quantrill left Texas on March 10. These facts fall into perspective when Williams's records show that after leaving Quantrill he crossed back across the river and joined

Company "C" in the 5th Mississippi Cavalry Regiment as a forage master in June 1864. Williams found himself again serving under General John Bell Hood in the 5th Mississippi Cavalry Regiment in the Army of Tennessee when it was placed under Hood's command on February 1, 1864. Williams served 11 months with Hood before the war ended. On December 19, 1959 the last survivor of the Civil War had gone to join his comrades-in-arms. His was a rare distinction. He was a symbol of a bygone era. God save the Confederacy.

**Paul R. Petersen**

*Ref: Enrollment at Kansas City Reunion, August 19-20, 1891. In Secretary's Annual Report of the Ninth Annual Reunion of the Ex-Confederate Association of Missouri, pg 49. Held at Kansas City, on Aug 19th and 20th, 1891 (St. Louis: Slawson Printing Co., 1891); Wilson Daily Times, NC, Sept 5, 1959; Wichita Falls Times, December 19, 1959; Florence (NC) Morning News, Sept 4, 1959; Bluefield (WV) Daily Telegraph, Dec 20, 1959; Daily News Record, Harrisonburg, VA, Dec 21, 1959.*