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William Roane Aylett, 1833-1900

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WILLIAM ROANE AYLETT, 1833-1900

By

Joseph Patrick Harahan, Jr.

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Richmond
in Candidacy
for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

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PREFACE

This thesis grew out of a paper presented in Dr. Joseph C. Robert's Civil War Seminar in January, 1967. At that time the topic was limited to a study of the Civil War correspondence of the subject with only a cursory narrative of his life.

The decision to expand the topic into a full biography was based on two factors. First, the need for such a study was pointed out by military historian Theodore Ropp in an article in the South Atlantic Quarterly on the Civil War.¹ Ropp stated that there was need for historians to know just "who were the company officers of the two volunteer armies," and "were the Confederate officers 'aristocrats', or young lawyers, merchants, college students, and educated farmers." Since the subject of this biography formed a volunteer company at the time of Virginia's secession from the Union and served as an officer in the Army of Northern Virginia throughout the war, a study of his life would seem beneficial.

¹Theodore Ropp, "Products of a Great American Industry" South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII, (Summer, 1957), p. 384.

The second factor involved the material available for this biographical study. In 1966, a large manuscript collection (approx. 2800 items) was presented to the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. This collection, entitled Aylett Family Papers is centered around correspondence of the subject of this biography, William Roane Aylett (1833-1900).

It is hoped that this thesis study will contribute to a better understanding of the Civil War period in Virginia.

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CHAPTER I

AYLETT FAMILY BACKGROUND AND STATUS IN 1833

The founder of the family in America, John Aylett was the youngest son of Sir Benjamin Aylett,¹ and was born at Braxted Magna, Essex, England about 1630.² Like his father, John Aylett was a Royalist and an Anglican.³ He supported the Royalist cause against the Puritans in the English Civil War, and his Royalist activities after Cromwell's decisive victory in 1651 led to his emigration to America. The specific incident occurred in 1655, at which time Aylett was involved in the battle of Worcester against the Roundheads in which the Royalists were defeated.⁴ As a result John

¹The spelling of the family name varied widely during this period--Ayliffe, Ailoff, Ayloff, Aylett, and Eylett. Aylett appears to have been established in the Virginia colony by 1702. Leon G. Tyler, (ed.), Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, (5 volumes, New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1915), V, p. 824.

²William Winston Fontaine, "Aylett Family Tradition," William and Mary Quarterly, first series, XV, (July, 1906), p. 99.

³Tyler, Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 824.

⁴Fontaine, "Aylett Family Tradition," p. 100.

Aylett in the company of other Royalists emigrated to Virginia in the fall of 1655.

In Virginia, Aylett settled in the Northern Neck section of the colony.⁵ It was his eldest son, Philip Aylett who founded the family plantation in King William County in the Tidewater section of Virginia.⁶ In 1684, the Aylett family received a grant of land in New Kent County from King Charles II of England.⁷ This tract of land, with numerous additions in the early 18th century, remained in the possession of the Aylett family for over two hundred and fifty years.⁸

In 1686, the land in King William County, then a part of New Kent County, was occupied by Philip Aylett, the eldest son of John Aylett.⁹ It was deeded in its entirety to his eldest son, William Aylett, who expanded the family's holdings

⁵Ibid., p. 100.

⁶Ibid., p. 100.

⁷Richmond Standard (Richmond, Virginia), May 1, 1880, p. 4.

⁸The remaining acreage was sold in the early 1920's by the heirs of William Roane Aylett. Aylett Family Papers, 1776-1945. (MS in Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), Philip Aylett (executor) to heirs, May 21, 1921.

⁹Charles E. Hatch, "Colonel William Aylett, A Revolutionary Merchant of Virginia," (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Virginia, 1935), p. 12.

substantially¹⁰ and established the Aylett family in politics in Virginia. William Aylett served as the first clerk of the county, when King William County was formed in 1702.¹¹

Through this position Aylett acquired additional lands, and in 1722 he persuaded the General Assembly to locate the new county courthouse for King William at Ayletts, Virginia, which was a small crossroads town located at the edge of the Aylett plantation.¹² William Aylett served in the House of Burgesses from 1723 to 1726, and for many years he was the tobacco agent for St. John's Parish in King William County.¹³

During this period the Aylett's plantation home, "Fairfield," was built, and the Aylett family became prominent in colonial Virginia society.¹⁴ William Aylett's eldest son

¹⁰ Virginia Land Patents (microfilm copy, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia), Book 9, p. 640, Book 10, p. 331, Book 15, p. 273, Book 16, p. 525.

¹¹ Elizabeth H. Ryland, "Pamunkey Neck: The Birth of a Virginia County," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, L, (October, 1942), p. 326.

¹² Hatch, "Colonel William Aylett," p. 16.

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴ Tyler, ed., Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 824.

Philip Aylett (1706-67) inherited the family plantation in 1726, and his daughters married into prominent Virginia families. Two of Aylett's three daughters married into the Lee family, and one Ann Aylett, married Augustine Washington.¹⁵ The only other achievement of significance of Philip Aylett was the securing of authorization from the General Assembly of 1730 of the right to designate Aylett's Warehouse, which was owned by the family, as a public facility.¹⁶ This action was significant because all quit rents and levies were paid at the warehouse, and it became the center of tobacco trade in King William County.

William Aylett (1743-1781), the only son of Philip Aylett, was a prominent colonial merchant who at one time owned a store, a tavern, a sawmill, and a warehouse, in addition to the family's extensive lands.¹⁷ He supported

¹⁵ Anne Aylett married Richard Henry Less; Mary Aylett married Thomas Ludwell Lee; and Anne (second of the name) Aylett married Augustine Washington. Aylett, West, Dandridge, Moore, Mason Genealogical Notes. (Photostat copy, Virginia State Library.)

¹⁶ William Waller Henning, (ed.), The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All of the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619, (13 volumes, (New York: G. Bartow Co., 1809-1823), IV, p. 267.

¹⁷

Hatch, "Colonel William Aylett," p. 25.

the movement for independence actively as he participated in the Raleigh Tavern meeting in Williamsburg in 1774.¹⁸ During the war, Aylett was appointed Deputy Commissary General for the Virginia forces by his neighbor and friend, General George Washington.¹⁹ While the Revolutionary War activities of Colonel William Aylett have been researched by other scholars,²⁰ the significance of those activities on the Aylett family land holdings is central to this study. In the latter stages of the war Aylett furnished supplies from his own means to the Virginia forces, and when these supplies became exhausted he put up his own bonds as security for additional purchases from other sources.²¹ Just prior to the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, William Aylett contracted a fever and died.²² The result was that the bonds which he had used as security for army supplies were called on and substantial losses and debts were incurred.²³

¹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁹Tyler, ed., Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 825.

²⁰Hatch, "Colonel William Aylett."

²¹Ibid., p. 45.

²²Ibid., p. 47.

²³Ibid., p. 48.

William Aylett's first son died in infancy and the second, Philip Aylett (1767-1831) took control of the family plantation in 1781. He returned to farming as a livelihood and concentrated on rebuilding the plantation. In the latter, he was aided by acquisition of western lands which were awarded to Revolutionary War soldiers or to their heirs. In 1809, the descendants of William Aylett were awarded 6665 acres of western land, which was located in the territory of Kentucky.²⁴ Philip Aylett was active in the King William County Court during this period, and the records of the court show that he was acquiring small parcels of land in King William County which were added to the family holdings.²⁵

In 1786 Philip Aylett married Elizabeth Henry, the youngest daughter of Patrick Henry, former Virginia governor and Revolutionary War leader.²⁶ In 1802 the family home "Fairfield" burned and a new one "Montville" was built to replace it.²⁷ Also at this time, Philip Aylett entered

²⁴Land Office Military Certificates No. 5605-09 of 1,333 acres each were granted to William Aylett's estate on April 7, 1809. King William County Records (MS. Virginia State Library), Book 2, p. 647.

²⁵King William County Court Records, 1798-1810. (Microfilm, Virginia State Library).

²⁶Aylett Family Genealogical Notes (Photostatic copy, Virginia State Library).

²⁷Peyton Neale Clarke, Old King William County Homes and Families, (Louisville, Ky.: S. Brown Co., 1897), p. 13.

politics in King William County. In 1806 he was elected to serve in the House of Delegates of the Virginia General Assembly, a position he held for six consecutive years.²⁸ Later he was appointed Sheriff of King William County by Governor James P. Preston.²⁹

In 1813, when the activity of the British troops threatened Virginia during the War of 1812, Philip Aylett formed a company of men in King William County and offered their services to Governor James Barbour.³⁰ The document which the men of the volunteer company signed and sent to the Governor read:

We, whose names are hereto annexed, considering it might be necessary, in consequence of War being declared . . . against the United Kingdom of Great Britain--that a Home Defense should be prepared in case of invasion or insurrection. . . . We come forward to offer our services for that purpose (military duty) under such rules, regulations and penalties, as may be prescribed by a majority of our company; and further, that each of us will, to save public expense agree to furnish ourselves with arms, ammunition, etc.³¹

²⁸Earl G. Swen and John W. Williams, (ed.), Register of the General Assembly of Virginia, 1776-1918. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1918), pp. 69-81.

²⁹King William County Records. (Microfilm: Virginia State Library), Book 7, pt. 1, p. 117.

³⁰unsigned article, "Patriotism in the War of 1812, Volunteer Association in King William County, Virginia," Tyler's Quarterly Magazine, XXI, (October, 1939), pp. 125-126.

³¹Ibid., p. 126.

This enlistment action was to be repeated in May of 1861, when William Roane Aylett, Philip Aylett's grandson, formed a company of men from King William County, and offered their services to the Governor of Virginia, John Letcher. William Roane Aylett's father, Philip Aylett, Jr. (1791-1848) also served in the War of 1812 as a private in two separate companies of the Virginia Militia forces. In 1813, he served in Captain Robert Gamble's Troop of Calvary for one month and two days, and in 1814 he served for a brief period (10 days) in Captain Anderson Miller's Company, Virginia State Militia.³²

In the years following the War of 1812, Philip Aylett and his son, Philip Aylett, Jr., concentrated on acquiring additional land and slaves in order to continue the rebuilding of the plantation. In 1815 Philip Aylett, Sr., listed 2,400 acres of land and \$7,000 worth of buildings in the tax record books of the county.³³ By 1820, the amount of land had increased to over 3,000 acres, with an \$8,000 valuation placed on the buildings of the estate.³⁴ In this year, 1820, the Ayletts were the largest land holders in

³² Mustering Rolls of the Virginia Militia in the War of 1812. (Richmond: W. F. Ritchie, Co., 1852), pp. 344, 590.

³³ King William County Land Book, 1815. (MS. Virginia State Library).

³⁴ King William County Land Book, 1820. (MS. Virginia State Library).

King William County.³⁵

In the post-war period, 1815-1820, Philip Aylett, Jr., became active in the affairs of the plantation. The county record books reveal that 11,815 acres were transferred to him in 1815, from his parents for the sum of one dollar.³⁶ In 1817, the county personal property tax book showed that he paid taxes on one free male and seven slaves.³⁷ In the same year Philip Aylett, Sr., listed 45 slaves.³⁸

Philip Aylett, Jr., was also active in the political affairs of King William County in the period following the War of 1812. He served as a member of the House of Delegates in the Virginia General Assembly from 1817 to 1824.³⁹ After missing the session in 1825, the people of King William County elected him again in 1826 to the House of Delegates.⁴⁰

³⁵See Chart No. 1 in the Appendix for the Aylett family landholdings from 1815 to 1860 in King William County.

³⁶King William County Records. (Microfilm, Virginia State Library), Book 6, p. 431.

³⁷King William County Personal Property Book, 1817. (MS. Virginia State Library).

³⁸See Chart No. 2 in the Appendix for the Aylett family slaveholdings for the period 1815-1860.

³⁹Swem and Williams, eds., Register of the General Assembly, pp. 95-113.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 119.

Philip Aylett's political career ended with two terms, 1832/33, and 1833/34 in the Senate of the General Assembly of Virginia.⁴¹ These sessions were turbulent ones, however, as the anti-slavery movement in Virginia reached its peak.⁴² The slavery debates in the special convention in 1829, and in the legislative sessions of 1831 and 1832 had concluded with a tentative affirmation of the status-quo, primarily because no alternative method of labor with adequate controls could be found. Although Aylett did not participate in these debates, the county he represented, King William County, had the second highest percentage of Negroes (slave and free) to the total county population (67.7%) of any county in the Tidewater area.⁴³ The Ayletts were political leaders in a county which was in a strong pro-slavery section of Virginia.

A survey of the status of the Aylett family--its land-holdings, its property, its political, and its social position--in the year 1833, the year that William R. Aylett was born, would reveal that it was in a position of leadership in the Tidewater section, but not in the state as a whole. It is clear that the economic foundation of the family estate had been restored, and by 1833 it was on a

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 135, 137.

⁴²Joseph Clarke Robert, The Road from Monticello, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1941), p. 51.

⁴³Ibid., p. 113.

firm basis. One indication of this affluence was that all four of the children of Philip Aylett, Jr. that lived to adulthood, were educated in boarding schools or colleges away from King William County. In land, the Aylett family held 2277 acres in 1833 which placed it in the top five per cent of all property holders in King William County.⁴⁴

The condition of the land was in all probability poor as it had been impoverished from over use in the past. Edmund Ruffin, on a survey trip through King William County a few years later, noted that the level highlands along the Pamunkey River contained soil that was very stiff.⁴⁵ The Aylett lands fall into Ruffin's category geographically, and probably they fall into his analysis of the condition of the soil also. In January, 1832 the first edition of Ruffin's Essay for Calcareous Manures was published. This work served as the manual for the agricultural revival which would take place in eastern Virginia.⁴⁶

⁴⁴King William County Land Book, 1833. (MS. Virginia State Library).

⁴⁵Edmund Ruffin, "Analysis of Soils in King William County," The Farmers Register, IX, (1841), p. 23.

⁴⁶Avery O. Craven, Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1650-1860. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1926), p. 136.

In 1833, the Aylett family owned 31 slaves, and \$4,100 worth of buildings.⁴⁷ Most of these buildings had been constructed since 1800, thus in this area the plantation was in good condition. In 1831, Philip Aylett, Sr., had died and the number of slaves was reduced from 74 in that year to 50 in 1832.⁴⁸ At this time the economic feasibility of keeping large numbers of slaves was being questioned in the Tidewater section as well as in other sections of Virginia.⁴⁹ In the generations that followed 1833, slavery would be seen as a positive value; however, the decision as to the number of slaves for a plantation would be decided on economic bases, rather than social ones of an earlier period.

Politically, the Ayletts stood at the top echelon of King William County in 1833. They owned extensive lands, and numerous slaves; they had participated vigorously in the War of 1812; and they had a background as a family of being associated with King William County since its inception in

⁴⁷ King William County Personal Property Book, 1833. (MS. Virginia State Library).

⁴⁸ King William County Personal Property Book, 1832. (MS. Virginia State Library).

⁴⁹ Robert, The Road from Monticello, p. 22.

1702. Therefore, as a prominent family in the county, the Ayletts' participation in politics can be seen as part of the whole pattern of society in one tidewater Virginia county. Prior to 1833, the Aylett family had been active in state politics; Philip Aylett, Sr., had been elected to the House of Delegates six times, his son Philip Aylett, Jr., had served in the General Assembly for ten sessions either as a Delegate or as a Senator. Throughout this period, the Aylett family's political affiliation was Jeffersonian at both the state and national level.⁵⁰

The social life in the ante-bellum South centered around the plantation; and life at Montville, the Ayletts' plantation, centered on the family. William Roane Aylett's father, Philip Aylett, Jr., had married Judith Page Waller on February 20, 1823.⁵¹ They had seven children, three of whom died in childhood. Of the four children who lived to adulthood, Patrick Henry Aylett (1827-1870) was the eldest, followed by William Roane Aylett (1833-1900), Pattie Waller Aylett (1835-1865) and Rosalie Page Aylett (1836-1898).⁵²

⁵⁰ Tyler, ed. Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 825.

⁵¹ Aylett Family Papers. Aylett Family Bible.

⁵² Ibid.

Like earlier generations of the Aylett family, this one should be viewed as part of the Aylett tradition which had been established in the one hundred and seventy-five years prior to the birth of William Roane Aylett in 1833. The Ayletts had been planters, or planter-merchants who established themselves in the mainstream of the tidewater gentry late in the 17th century and who remained there economically, politically, and socially into the 19th century. It would be William Roane Aylett's task in his lifetime to take control of the family plantation and maintain it for future generations.

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM ROANE AYLETT--EARLY LIFE, 1833-1853

William Roane Aylett was born on May 14, 1833.¹ The first fifteen years of his life were spent at "Montville," the Aylett family home in King William County. The Ayletts were planter-farmers who lived in a section of Virginia which experienced an agricultural revival during the three decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

During this period the most common method of farming in the tidewater section was the four field system of crop rotation. This method consisted of planting a crop of wheat on clover the first year, followed by corn the second year, wheat on oats the third, and clover turned under by deep plowing the fourth year.² In the 1830's Edwin Ruffin published his agricultural writings on the use of marl and manures; and the Farmer's Register, a monthly agricultural

¹Aylett Family Papers (MS. in Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), Aylett Family Bible.

²Craven, Soil Exhaustion, p. 157.

journal edited by Ruffin, gained wide circulation among tidewater planters.³

In 1841 Ruffin made a survey trip through the eastern tidewater counties, and he recorded in the Farmer's Register that marl was present in large quantities in King William County.⁴ The use of marl and the knowledge of its benefits was well known in the Aylett's section of King William County. Richard H. Hall of Rumford Academy Farm, which bordered Aylett's plantation, had used marl on his fields as early as 1816;⁵ and W. S. Fontaine, another neighboring plantation owner and a relative of Ayletts, reported in the Farmer's Register that he put 2,500 bushels of marl on two acres of sandy land in 1835, and had had "good results."⁶ Although there are no family records or correspondence to indicate whether the Aylett's used marl or manures on their lands during this period, there is a strong probability of it. For in the early 1850's when guano was first introduced

³A. O. Craven, Edmund Ruffin Southerner, (New York: D Appleton and Co., 1932), p. 62.

⁴Edmund Ruffin, "Analysis of Soils in King William County," Farmer's Register, IX, (1841), p. 23.

⁵Craven, Soil Exhaustion, p. 94.

⁶Ruffin, Farmer's Register, IX, (1841), p. 25.

in Virginia the Aylett's records show that extensive amounts were purchased through various firms in Baltimore.⁷ The county tax records also show an increasing diversity in the livestock owned by the Aylett's. In addition to horses, the Ayletts were listed as owning considerable numbers of sheep, hogs, and cattle.⁸

The productivity of the land increased dramatically in the period after 1835. As it improved, and the farming became more diversified, land values in the tidewater area increased. One observer estimated that in the year 1842, in King William County alone, land values had increased by more than \$483,000 over the previous year.⁹ From 1838 to 1850 in the entire tidewater section land values increased by over seventeen million dollars.¹⁰

⁷Aylett Family Papers, Judith Page Aylett to William R. Aylett, 13 March 1850.

⁸King William County Personal Property Tax Books, 1830-1850. (MS. in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia). For a listing of the Ayletts livestock holdings see Appendix, Chart number 4.

⁹Edmund Ruffin, "An Estimate of the Increased Value of Property in King William County Caused by Marling," Farmer's Register, X, (1843), p. 481.

¹⁰Craven, Soil Exhaustion, p. 142.

The Aylett's increased their landholdings after 1830 through the receipt of additional western lands granted to them as heirs of General William Aylett, revolutionary war soldier. On April 23, 1839 the Executive Department of the State of Virginia granted two Revolutionary Bounty Warrants for western lands in the amount of 1583 acres.¹¹ These lands were not occupied or claimed by the Ayletts immediately, and it was not until 1880 that the claim was located and sold to other parties.¹²

As a boy William Roane Aylett received his early education from tutors at the plantation, and in 1848 he entered a local preparatory school, Rumford Academy, which was located in King William County. This was a boarding school and it had an excellent reputation in the tidewater area for its scholarship.¹³ William's brother, Patrick Henry Aylett, who was six years older, had preceded him to this boarding school, after which he had attended Washington College, University of Virginia, and Harvard University.¹⁴ In a letter

¹¹Land Office Military Certificates Number 8979, 8980. (MS. in Virginia State Library), William Aylett Folder.

¹²Ibid.

¹³P. N. Clarke, Old King William County Homes, p. 21.

¹⁴Paul M. Barringer, et. al., University of Virginia (2 vols., New York: Lewis & Co., 1904), I, p. 379.

to his father, William explained the daily schedule at the academy:

We go to school at half past 8 o'clock and break up at one . . . then we go in at three and break up at five. . . . We eat supper at six. We have playtime from six to seven, and then we commence at seven and study till bedtime. So that I do not have much time to write. . . .¹⁵

Aylett remained at Rumford Academy, for two years until 1850.

During the fall of 1848 his father died unexpectedly in Richmond.¹⁶ Philip Aylett was fifty-seven, and upon his death the mantle of family responsibility passed to Patrick Henry Aylett. The choice was unfortunate for Patrick Henry had just finished a course in law at Harvard University in the spring of 1848, and he was preparing to emigrate to Richmond and establish a law practice. At the death of his father in September 1848, Patrick Henry was forced to return to Montville in King William and assume supervision of the family plantation. His interests lay elsewhere however, as he began to involve himself in politics at the local and state level. He and publisher Joseph M. Daniel formed a close personal association which lasted many years during which time Aylett contributed numerous editorials to Daniel's newspaper, the Richmond Examiner.¹⁷ In 1850, Patrick Henry

¹⁵Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Philip Aylett, June 14, 1848.

¹⁶Richmond Examiner, (Richmond, Virginia), October 12, 1848.

¹⁷Richmond Whig, Richmond, Virginia, April 28, 1870.

Aylett was nominated to be a candidate to the Reform Convention of 1850-1851,¹⁸ and in 1851, he was nominated for the Senate of Virginia from the eastern tidewater section.¹⁹ In neither case was he successful in winning office.

During this period of his brother's literary and political activity William Roane Aylett was attending the University of Virginia. Repeatedly his mother, Julia P. Aylett, wrote to him of her dissatisfaction at his older brother's management of the plantation affairs and of his activities in politics. In June of 1852, she stated that "I shall be glad, my dear boy, when you come home to live as I shall put all my matters in your hands. At this time I fear (that) Henry has gotten our affairs in a badly complicated condition."²⁰ At an earlier time she had advised him "not to enter politics, for politics brings in nothing and only gains enemys."²¹ Thus, during his years at college Aylett's mother encouraged him to finish school, and then return to Montville and supervise the plantation for the family.

¹⁸Richmond Whig, July 9, 1850.

¹⁹Richmond Examiner, April 21, 1851.

²⁰Aylett Family Papers, Judith P. Aylett to William R. Aylett, June 23, 1852.

²¹Aylett Family Papers, Judith P. Aylett to William R. Aylett, November 12, 1851.

During the time when Aylett was a student at the University of Virginia, it was an untamed and often lawless place for "gentlemen" who came from all sections of the South to be educated. In 1851, at the university there was a rash of student riots in which one professor was shot and several students wounded.²² Aylett's sister wrote to him immediately after the riot that the family was glad to hear that "he had taken the precaution of getting behind the brick pillars during the engagement," and added, "I hope that you will always seek refuge behind columns when the bullets are flying around you."²³

While at the university, Aylett joined and was active in the Sons of Temperance Society. In 1852, he wrote to the president of the King William County chapter of the Sons of Temperance requesting funds for the building of a "Temperance Hall" at the University of Virginia.²⁴ The return letter contained a small contribution of five dollars and several laudatory comments on Aylett's part in the temperance movement in the state as a whole.²⁵ The temperance movement in

²²Barringer, et. al., University of Virginia, I, p. 149.

²³Aylett Family Papers, Pattie Waller Aylett to William R. Aylett, March 4, 1851.

²⁴Aylett Family Papers, J. Newton Browne to William R. Aylett, April 16, 1852.

²⁵Ibid.

King William County was also active at this time, his mother wrote "they . . . had a great protracted Temperance Meeting at Aquinton (church in the upper part of the county) and . . . Bro. Henry said there were about 2,000 people there."²⁶ These meetings were promoted by the local temperance societies which often had an aura of secrecy about them. When Aylett left the University of Virginia in June of 1853, he carried with him a letter from the President of the University of Virginia division, James William Morgan, to the authorities in King William County Chapter of the Sons of Temperance requesting that he be given "the pass word and the explanation for the quarter commencing on the 1st of July (1853)."²⁷ At this time the individual temperance societies in Virginia were trying to obtain prohibition laws on the statute books similar to the ones which had been enacted in Maine in 1851.²⁸

While Aylett appears to have been a teetotaler during his university years, his social life was active and even robust at times. In the ante-bellum South the social life

²⁶ Aylett Family Papers, Judith P. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, April 23, 1851.

²⁷ Aylett Family Papers, James William Morgan to King William County Division Sons of Temperance, June 28, 1853.

²⁸ Ray Allen Billington, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860. (New York: Rhinehart & Co., 1938), p. 323.

of the young people revolved around entertainment at the plantation homes. Aylett visited with one or another of his friends at their homes during the vacation periods. While at the university there was much entertaining at Montville, the Aylett family home. Both of his sisters were in boarding school at this time, one in Richmond, the other in Tappahannock, a small town near Montville; and they would bring classmates home with them during their vacations.²⁹ It was one of these girls, Miss Minnie Mason, that Aylett became involved with during Christmas week, 1853.³⁰ At the end of the week they became secretly engaged, and William returned to the University and his studies.

The engagement did not remain a secret, however, as his mother sent him a scathing letter informing him of her disapproval. The letter is revealing of the status of the Ayletts in the area, and the role of the women of the family in maintaining a certain social position from generation to generation. First, his mother stated the fact that it was "An engagement which you cannot get out of without a loss of honour. . . ." Then, she commented on his fiancée,

²⁹ Aylett Family Papers, Pattie W. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, April 24, 1851.

³⁰ Aylett Family Papers, Pattie W. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, January 4, 1853.

"Her motives were mercenary, she came to Montville for the express purpose of capturing one of my sons. . . . She shall never enter my doors." But the heart of the letter stated, "She is one of ten children, and her father will not be able to give her one dollar."³¹

He extricated himself from this predicament by writing a letter to the girl's father, William R. Mason, explaining the engagement and asking his advice, which he stated that he would accept categorically and follow. Aylett made a draft of this letter for his own records, and in it he made an attempt to explain how the engagement occurred:

It is not necessary that I go through the minute and unimportant details of the whole transaction, suffice it to say, that guided by our feelings we observed and were governed by no rules or laws but those of love, which of course are irregular and framed according to circumstances.³²

On the advice and insistence of Mason the engagement was terminated shortly thereafter. It was not until 1860 that William R. Aylett became engaged again, and then to his future wife, Alice W. Brockenbrough.

At some point during his university years, 1850-1853, it appears that a family decision was made that William

³¹Aylett Family Papers, Judith P. Aylett to W. R. Aylett 7 January (1853).

³²Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to William R. Mason, undated.

would finish his schooling, and then return home to Montville and assume the responsibility for the plantation, thus allowing his older brother, Patrick Henry to go to Richmond and establish a law practice. This decision was probably made in the summer of 1852, when Aylett decided to switch his course of study from medicine to law. In September, 1852, Aylett wrote to a friend that law was a "more decent" profession for a planter than medicine.³³ During his first two years at the university Aylett had majored in chemistry. He was an excellent student in the subject, for when there was an opening on the faculty in the Chemistry Department in 1852, a friend, William Barton Rogers, Jr., wrote to him and encouraged him to make application for the position.³⁴ There was no response from Aylett, however, as he turned to the study of law.

When he began the study of law at Virginia in the fall of 1852, his correspondence with friends who had recently graduated and had begun law practices increased. They informed him of their impecunious law practices, and recommended farming rather than law as a profession.³⁵ Robert

³³Aylett Family Papers, Robert T. Scott to W. R. Aylett, September 20, 1852.

³⁴Aylett Family Papers, William Barton Rogers, Jr. to W. R. Aylett, November 6, 1852.

³⁵Aylett Family Papers, Richard T. Hawes to W. R. Aylett, November 17, 1852.

Gregory wrote that he had had only one case, "and that a free negro" in the first six months of practice.³⁶ Richard Hawes, a neighbor in King William County, wrote of the activity at the county courthouse; "There is a superabundance of lawyers here, but a derth of clients--a scarcity of dollars, but plenty of liquor and beggars."³⁷ In another letter, a relative of Aylett's, William A. Winston, wrote to him in 1851 explaining that he had taken a position in Richmond as a clerk in the Chancery Court Office that "pays him \$600 a year, which is better than any young lawyer is doing."³⁸

Although in 1853 Aylett's study of law appeared to be of a superfluous nature and unpromising of financial reward, the reverse was true. In the short span of fifteen years all of the underpinnings of his society would be destroyed, and Aylett would have to turn to the law profession for his economic livelihood. However, in 1853 when he left the University of Virginia the world was certain, and William Roane Aylett's position in it a certainty. His education complete, the traditional role of tidewater planter lay ahead.

³⁶Aylett Family Papers, Robert Gregory to W. R. Aylett, December 17, 1853.

³⁷Aylett Family Papers, Richard T. Hawes to W. R. Aylett, February 9, 1853.

³⁸Aylett Family Papers, William A. Winston to W. R. Aylett, August 17, 1851.

CHAPTER III

WILLIAM ROANE AYLETT--MIDDLE PERIOD, 1853-1860

In the summer of 1853 Aylett left the University of Virginia and returned to King William County to Montville, his family plantation estate. It was a large plantation in 1853 containing more than 2000 acres of land and 38 slaves.¹ The land was listed on the county tax records as owned by Philip Aylett's estate which in essence meant three owners: Judith P. Aylett, his mother; Patrick Henry Aylett, his brother; and William R. Aylett. The slaves were owned in the same manner except for those which had been willed directly to his mother, Judith P. Aylett in 1848. From 1853 to the Civil War there was no increase in the family's land holdings, and many of their slaves were rented or hired out as domestics in Richmond.²

¹King William County Land Book, 1853, (MS. in Virginia State Library).

²See Appendix, Chart Number 3 for the Aylett family landholdings from 1851 to 1861; see Aylett Family Papers, Lewis Hill to W. R. Aylett, 11 February 1857. Hill was the slave dealer in Richmond who hired the Aylett's slaves out.

As supervisor of the plantation Aylett appears to have turned his energies to diversifying the farm, and to repairing equipment which had been allowed to deteriorate during years when his older brother had managed the plantation. The King William County Personal Property Tax Records for 1854 show that the Ayletts owned 70 hogs, 50 sheep and 50 cattle.³ This was the first time that the Ayletts had recorded any livestock on the tax books. In 1854, Aylett paid a bill for \$71.46 for repair of farm equipment, which was annotated with a remark indicating that it was for several years work.⁴

Although no systematic ledger of accounts for the plantation exists for the period when Aylett was managing it, there are some receipts and bills from individual companies which give an indication of the nature of his expenses. In 1855, Aylett paid the plantation overseer, E. L. Peay, \$66.66 as part of his annual salary.⁵ In 1857, Aylett bought 3,500 bushels of lime for \$300 from two separate suppliers.⁶

³King William County Personal Property Tax Book, 1854, (MS. in Virginia State Library).

⁴Aylett Family Papers, Calnells Accounts with P. Aylett's Estate, 1854.

⁵Aylett Family Papers, E. L. Peay to W. R. Aylett, receipt, April 11, 1855.

⁶Aylett Family Papers, John A. Tolley to W. R. Aylett, account, May 15, 1857; and Thomas J. Bramble to W. R. Aylett, account, August 11, 1857.

During the same year he paid L. H. Chappell, a local carpenter \$76 for repairs to Montville and the buildings of the plantation;⁷ and to one Edward T. Powell he paid \$48.30 for the labor of one free negro on the plantation.⁸

The economy of the plantation was geared to the market, and in general Aylett dealt with the grain markets in Baltimore rather than Richmond. The Aylett's farm had access to the York River, and thus they would transport their grain by waterway to Baltimore, and purchase their supplies from Baltimore firms for the return trip. This system worked well in periods of stability when both the prices and the costs of goods were controlled by a steady market. However, in September of 1857 a panic occurred in the financial section of New York City, which led to repercussions throughout the country.⁹

Because of the low price of wheat at the market in Baltimore, Aylett decided not to sell his red wheat crop, and his brother Patrick Henry advised him in November 1857 to borrow money to cover the plantation's debts.¹⁰ Prior

⁷Aylett Family Papers, L. H. Chappell to W. R. Aylett, account, 1 April 1858.

⁸Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Edward T. Powell, receipt, 10 July 1857.

⁹George W. Van Vleck, The Panic of 1857, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 126.

¹⁰Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 1 November 1857.

to this time one of Aylett's close friends, Sam S. Carr, who was a lawyer in Towson, Maryland had written to him of the crisis,

the banks north of the Mason Dixon are cracking and breaking up with a report that is resounding throughout the country. . . . Specie is scarce as hen's teeth and bank notes are in such bad report, that I am reluctant to take them as fees.¹¹

The financial crisis continued into 1858, with the banks in Baltimore not resuming specie payment until February, and those in Richmond not until the first of May.¹²

If the Ayletts suffered from the "Panic of 1857" to any degree it was shortlived. Their assets were in land, and slaves, and like most of the Southern agricultural economy, they were relatively immune from panics and depressions. In January 1858, a friend of Aylett's wrote that he had found a man with good credit who wanted to borrow \$2000, and did Aylett want to "let him have it."¹³ Aylett arranged to lend the money to the man with interest.¹⁴

During this period, 1854-1861, when Aylett was managing the farm for the family the ownership was divided and major bills were paid in three equal increments. As an example in

¹¹Aylett Family Papers, Sam S. Carr to W. R. Aylett
14 October 1857.

¹²Van Vleck, The Panic of 1857, p. 79.

¹³Aylett Family Papers, Thomas Croxton to W. R. Aylett,
5 January 1858.

¹⁴Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Thomas Croxton,
18 February 1858.

1855 when William Aylett paid the overseer E. L. Peay he received this receipt from him: "Recd. of Wm. Aylett sixty six dollars and sixty six cents, being the amount in full of his portion of my wages due me as manager of Montville for the year 1854."¹⁵ In 1860, Aylett's contract with a new overseer, W. A. Mitchell included a bonus provision of two dollars "if 750 barrels of corn were raised of Aylett's fields."¹⁶

The labor on the plantation was slave labor, and the Ayletts owned between 30 and 40 slaves throughout the period.¹⁷ Many of these slaves were hired out as domestics for which a specified sum would be paid annually as rental, and the slave had to be returned to its owner "well-clothed and in good condition."¹⁸ Usually a bond was posted with a third party for the slave's master as insurance against mistreatment to the slave during the rental period. The amount of money that the owner received would vary with the age, sex, and skill of the slave. In October, 1857 one

¹⁵Aylett Family Papers, E. L. Peay to W. R. Aylett, receipt, 11 April 1855.

¹⁶Aylett Family Papers, W. A. Mitchell to W. R. Aylett, contract, 18 August 1860.

¹⁷See Appendix, Chart Number 4 for the Aylett family slave holdings from 1851 to 1861.

¹⁸Aylett Family Papers, B. Samuel to W. R. Aylett, contract, 8 January 1859.

of Aylett's accounts show that he received \$36.24 "for the hire of two general negroes for one year."¹⁹ In 1859, he received fifty dollars for the hire of a "negro woman named Betsy" from the owner of the local tavern, B. Samuel.²⁰

Often Aylett would serve as the lawyer or third party who would draw up the contract and arrange for the meeting of the parties. Public hirings in King William County were held in the first part of December, and the terms of most of the contracts that Aylett arranged ran from Christmas Day to Christmas Day the following year.²¹ Periodically, he would arrange for the sale of a slave, either one owned by his mother or one owned by a third party. William Gwaltney a neighbor of Aylett's, sent him such a request in 1857: "I am desirous to purchase the late J. T. Wormley's cook, and sell a young woman who has displeased me by too great an intimacy with another's husband forsaking her own."²²

Another aspect of the problem of slave relationships can be seen in the lack of mobility which ownership of a large number of slaves imposed upon the owner. In 1857 a

¹⁹Aylett Family Papers, Henry Duling to W. R. Aylett, receipt, 26 October 1857.

²⁰Aylett Family Papers, B. Samuel to W.R. Aylett, 8 January 1859.

²¹Aylett Family Papers, W. H. Burruss to W. R. Aylett, 27 November 1860.

²²Aylett Family Papers, William Gwaltney to W. R. Aylett, 22 December 1857.

classmate of Aylett's, Charles E. Bleakeley, who lived in one of the Piedmont counties wanted to move into King William County and buy the farm adjacent to Montville. After a long series of letters, Bleakeley finally admitted that he couldn't raise the money to purchase and stock the place in King William, and he added, "Besides the negroes that I have in this country have intermarried with those of my neighbors, and I cannot well move them, and I have been disappointed in selling them."²³

As the owner of a large number of slaves, the Ayletts set the pattern for the social behavior between whites and negroes in their area. In 1856 Aylett's mother had questioned the propriety of a negro slave named Henry sleeping in the mill, which was owned by the Ayletts but ran by one, Jesse Butler and his family.²⁴ Butler, who probably had no formal education, wrote a letter of denial in which he stated that Henry had been staying in the mill "four years before I came hear (sic)," and replied to the accusation that the slave had been in his home with this comment:

²³Aylett Family Papers, Charles E. Bleakeley to W. R. Aylett, 4 September 1857.

²⁴Aylett Family Papers, Jesse Butler to W. R. Aylett, 3 September 1856.

I would not let Henry stay in my house where my family was for I should think that you would not have a man in your hire that would be guilty of so mean and lowlife an act to have a negro man wrapt up in his house with himself and his family.²⁵

The matter was dropped and Butler continued to operate the mill for the Ayletts.

During the period when Aylett was supervising the plantation for the family he was also active in his law practice and in politics to a lesser degree. The first years that he practiced law in King William were lean ones for him. A study of receipts from his law practice and his accounts with book dealers in Richmond indicates that Aylett was spending more money on law books than he was receiving from the cases that he tried in court. In 1857 the clerk of the King William County Court, J. V. Pollard, certified that Aylett had received eighteen dollars in fees for the past year.²⁶ Since Aylett practiced law in three county courts, Essex and New Kent counties, in addition to King William, he would have received fee from each one, but it is doubtful that in the first years of his law practice that his fees exceeded one hundred dollars per year. Beginning in 1856, Aylett advertised in the Richmond newspapers

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Aylett Family Papers, J. V. Pollard to W. R. Aylett, 20 November 1857.

by having his calling card published on the front page of the papers.²⁷

The type of law cases that Aylett had during these years were most often collection suits for business firms in Baltimore and Richmond who had delinquent clients in the eastern tidewater counties.²⁸ Also Aylett had a few cases which involved bounty claims for the heirs of soldiers who had served in the Revolutionary War and in the War of 1812.²⁹ Aylett had one interesting divorce case during this period which was the result of the two parties differences on the slavery issue. Aylett represented the wife of a Dr. Gregg, a wealthy Boston physician. The case grew out of an incident which occurred when Dr. Gregg's mother, also of Boston, visited the Virginia home of her daughter-in-law, and became so vehement and outspoken in her opinion of their treatment of the slaves, that a formal apology was demanded. When the elderly Mrs. Gregg refused, an argument ensued in which Dr. Gregg sided with his mother and his wife with her parents; the result being a divorce suit.³⁰ In the court trial that followed, Aylett won the suit for Dr. Gregg's estranged wife,

²⁷Richmond Examiner, (Richmond, Virginia), March, April, 1856.

²⁸Aylett Family Papers, Wm. Chestnutt & Co. to W. R. Aylett, 21 March 1859.

²⁹Aylett Family Papers, Edward Prince to W. R. Aylett, September 23, 1858.

³⁰Aylett Family Papers, Gregg vs. Gregg, complaint in lawsuit, November 26, 1858.

and she received considerable alimony payments throughout the war.³¹

In 1858 Aylett became the county agent for the Mutual Assurance Society, a fire insurance company in Richmond.³² As agent for this company he made collections and payments for the towns of West Point and Tappahannock, both of which are located in King William County. The Richmond agent for this firm was John Rutherford, who was also the chairman of the state Democratic Central Committee.³³ In March of 1859, Rutherford made Aylett a senatorial elector for the Twenty-First Congressional District for the Democratic Party.³⁴ Prior to this appointment, Aylett had been active in state politics in the gubernatorial election of 1856 in Virginia.

In that election the Democratic candidate, Henry A. Wise, opposed the American Party and the Whig Party candidate Thomas S. Flournoy.³⁵ The issue was nativism and

³¹ Aylett Family Papers, William M. Turner to W.R. Aylett, 5 July 1861.

³² Aylett Family Papers, Billings for the City of Tappahannock by W. R. Aylett, 28 July 1858.

³³ Aylett Family Papers, John Rutherford to W. R. Aylett, 7 March 1859.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Constance Mary Gay, "The Campaign of 1855 in Virginia, and the Fall of the Know Nothing Party," Richmond College Historical Papers, I, (June, 1916), p. 324.

the secrecy of the Know-Nothing movement.³⁶ The Ayletts were Democrats, and both William and his brother, Patrick Henry, campaigned for the Democratic ticket and against Know-Nothingism. In April 1855, after a speech that he had made in support of the Democratic candidates, Aylett received a letter from a friend, H. C. Loving, who encouraged him to make other speeches on the subject, for "we need young and enthusiastic speakers to lash the Dead Sea Waves of Know Nothingism."³⁷

Aylett's brother, who was in politics through his long association with the Richmond Examiner newspaper, wrote to him to "give Know Nothingism the devil--for however few there maybe present [For your speech]--we will report it in the Examiner."³⁸ Patrick Henry Aylett had made speeches in Staunton, Charlottesville, Martinsville, Norfolk, and Fredricksburg for the Democratic cause.³⁹ In the results of the election Wise received 83,434 votes to Flournoy's

³⁶W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know Nothing Party in the South, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950) p. 122.

³⁷Aylett Family Papers, H. C. Loving to W. R. Aylett, 4 April 1855.

³⁸Aylett Family Papers, Patrick H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 2 April 1855.

³⁹Ibid.

73,244.⁴⁰ The American Party and Know Nothingism was never again a force at the state level after 1856, although the American Party continued to win municipal elections in Virginia.⁴¹

After the campaign Aylett began to write editorials to the Examiner under the pen name "Olin."⁴² W. D. Coleman, editor of the Examiner sent a note to Aylett requesting that he "please send as many contributions as possible. . . . We shall rely on your furnishing about 3 a week--more if you can."⁴³ A few years later another editor J. C. S. Fitzpatrick of the Southernor, a small newspaper published in Tappahannock, Virginia, wrote to Aylett that he was going to change the affiliation of his newspaper from "neutral to democratic" and asked the "cooperation of leading Democrats in this section" to contribute editorials.⁴⁴

By 1859, Patrick Henry Aylett had been made editor of the Examiner, a position which he reported "added 1200 to 1500 dollars per annum" to his income.⁴⁵ He was active in

⁴⁰C. M. Gay, "The Campaign of 1855 in Virginia," p. 325.

⁴¹Overdyke, The Know Nothing Party in the South, p. 95.

⁴²Richmond Examiner, September 26, 1856.

⁴³Aylett Family Papers, W. D. Coleman to W.R. Aylett, 13 August 1856.

⁴⁴Aylett Family Papers, J. C. S. Fitzpatrick to W. R. Aylett, 4 August 1859.

⁴⁵Aylett Family Papers, P. H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 3 July 1859.

the legal profession also, in 1860 he was appointed by President James Buchanan to the position of Federal District Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia.⁴⁶ In addition, he served on the Board of Visitors for the United States Military Academy, and the University of Virginia.⁴⁷ By the time of the Civil War, Patrick Henry Aylett was influential in Virginia's legal and political circles.

The year 1860 was an important one for William R. Aylett because of three events. The first was his engagement to Alice Roane Brockenbrough and their marriage in July of 1860.⁴⁸ Their correspondence indicates a great reluctance on the part of Alice to commit herself to marriage. When she wrote to Aylett in January of 1860 that she had not told her mother of their engagement or asked her parents permission to marry, he was amused and called it "a touch of modern female delicacy" in his return letter.⁴⁹ However, as the months passed and she still had not received her family's approval Aylett sent her an angry ten page letter, in which he admonished her:

⁴⁶Aylett Family Papers, P. H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 22 January 1860.

⁴⁷Barringer, et. al., University of Virginia, p. 379.

⁴⁸Aylett Family Bible (MS. in Virginia Historical Society).

⁴⁹Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Alice R. Brockenbrough, 25 January 1860.

You are, my dear, of legal age and competent intelligence to decide and act in reference to this act for yourself. I cannot consent to the indefinite postponement of our marriage in order that your family may take the time to try the question of my sanity . . . (That) . . . would require me, as a man of honor and self respect to ask for a release from this engagement.⁵⁰

The approval from the Brockenbrough family was announced immediately and a June wedding was planned.⁵¹

The wedding had to be postponed for one month as his mother, Judith P. Aylett died unexpectedly on May 10, 1860 in Selma, Alabama.⁵² She had gone to Alabama earlier in the year to visit her daughter, Mrs. P. W. Cabell and her son-in-law, Dr. P. H. Cabell; and Aylett had accompanied her there returning to Virginia in April. At the death of his mother William decided not to go to Alabama for the funeral, but to go later and bring her body back to Virginia.⁵³

The death of Mrs. Aylett prompted a decision by Patrick Henry to sell his share of the plantation which he had inherited from the estate which was dissolved at that time.⁵⁴ He stated that the farm was "not a good

⁵⁰Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Alice R. Brockenbrough, 10 May 1860.

⁵¹Aylett Family Papers, Alice R. Brockenbrough to W. R. Aylett, 13 May 1860.

⁵²Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Cabell to W. R. Aylett, 9 May 1860.

⁵³Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to P. H. Aylett, 20 May 1860.

⁵⁴Aylett Family Papers, P. H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 12 July 1860.

investment" and that he wanted to sell "his portion" and "to hire out the negroes."⁵⁵ As executor of the estate, Patrick Henry had already sold the family's grain mill and distributed the proceeds to the family.⁵⁶ On the matter of the plantation property it was agreed to continue the existing arrangement of shared ownership by the two brothers through the year 1861, with William agreeing to buy his brother's share in 1862.⁵⁷ The sale never took place, as by the spring of 1862 Union forces were in control of King William County, and William Aylett was serving in the Army of Northern Virginia as a company commander.

After the property of the estate had been settled Aylett was free to marry. On July 31, 1860 he engaged Andrew Fisher, a local minister, and the wedding took place.⁵⁸ Apparently the negotiations over the plantation had resulted in much family enmity and his brother, Patrick Henry, who was in Richmond and only sixty miles away, did not attend the wedding.⁵⁹ The father of the bride,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Andrew Fisher, receipt, 31 July 1860.

⁵⁹ Aylett Family Papers, Emily Rutherford Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 10 August 1860.

William F. Brockenbrough, sent a note to Aylett in December, 1860, "The negroes at Belleville [Brockenbrough family home] were divided yesterday, and you got a good lot."⁶⁰ He also asked Aylett to take a negro slave with him to Alabama because they "were not selling well in Richmond."⁶¹

Prior to his trip to the deep South, Aylett had received a letter from his brother-in-law, Dr. P. H. Cabell who told of the secessionist fever in Alabama at that time:

There is no doubt that Alabama will secede as soon as her convention meets. There is hardly a man who wants to stay in the Union, who dares to say so . . . We are resolved to do so (secede) come peace or war, rather than submit to that Lincoln and a free nigger Vice President.⁶²

Aylett's feelings corresponded with those of his brother-in-law, for while he was in Alabama he had publicly promised that he would sell his property, and take his slaves South if Virginia remained in the Union.⁶³ Aylett had intended to run as a candidate for the Virginia Secession Convention of 1861, but he returned from Alabama too late,⁶⁴ and

⁶⁰ Aylett Family Papers, William F. Brockenbrough to W. R. Aylett, 28 December 1860.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Cabell to W. R. Aylett, 2 December 1860.

⁶³ Aylett Family Papers, John T. Coleman to W. R. Aylett, 28 February, 1861.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Fendall Gregory represented King William County at the Convention.⁶⁵

Aylett's brother, Henry, was also a strong secessionist and after a short trip to New York in March of 1861, he stopped in Washington for the inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln. He wrote to Aylett of Lincoln's inaugural address, "it breathes fire and brimstone, and may bring even the convention to its senses--but of that I am doubtful."⁶⁶

When Virginia did secede from the Union in April, 1865, Patrick Henry Aylett was again in New York, this time he was selling the family jewelry; and he sent back to William "two elementary works on tactics, one by Hardee."⁶⁷ In this same letter he commented on William's plan for forming a company of volunteers in King William County, "I think you are very right not to think of general duty in the militia. Companies for the home defense are as expertise as the militia. . . ."⁶⁸

Two weeks after this letter, William R. Aylett entered military service as captain and company commander on the side of the Confederacy. With this act one phase of his life came to a close, and another more violent one began.

⁶⁵Swem and Williams, (eds.), Register of the Virginia Assembly, p. 248.

⁶⁶Aylett Family Papers, P. H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 4 March 1861.

⁶⁷Aylett Family Papers, P. H. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 25 April 1861.

⁶⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

CIVIL WAR PERIOD

On the morning of April 12, 1861, the guns at Charleston opened fire on Ft. Sumter; one week later, the Virginia State Convention adopted its ordinance of secession; and one month later, on May 12, 1861, the men of King William County offered their services to the Governor.¹ William Roane Aylett was elected Captain of the company, and he drew up the "Company Declaration" which was submitted to Governor John Letcher.² It stated, "We the undersigned. . . ., pledge ourselves to abide by all needful rules, and regulations, which shall be adopted for the government of the company, by a majority of its members."³ Although the strength of a company was one hundred men with officers, the Taylor Grays had only fifty-four men.⁴ The

¹Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett and 53 men of Taylor Grays Company to Governor John Letcher, 12 May 1861.

²Aylett Family Papers, Document, Declaration and List of Taylor Grays Company (draft) undated.

³Ibid.

⁴Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett and 53 men of Taylor Grays Company to Governor John Letcher, 12 May 1861.

company was accepted, outfitted, and sent to the city of West Point in the southern end of King William County to start its training. It was at West Point that an inexperienced company captain, Aylett, wrote directly to the highest Virginia commander, General Robert E. Lee, concerning the rifles his company had been issued by the Quartermaster at Richmond.⁵ Aylett reported that his company had received flintlock muskets, and that many of them were unserviceable. He proposed that if Lee could arrange for the Taylor Grays company to get modern rifles, he, Aylett, would send the flintlocks to another newly formed company down on the lower peninsula. The signature affixed to the letter read, "very respectfully your obedient servant, Wm. R. Aylett,"⁶ and it had no connotation of rank, or any designation. There is no indication that General Lee accepted Aylett's suggestion, or even replied to the letter.

During this period Aylett's brother, Patrick Henry, was in Richmond and wrote to him, "there are ten-thousand volunteers without arms" in the city, and he advised that there was "no possibility of getting arms at this time for equipping a company."⁷ It is interesting that in this same

⁵Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Major General Robert E. Lee, 27 May 1861.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to William R. Aylett, 25 May 1861.

letter, Patrick Henry advises his brother to "make your corn crop as large as possible this year as goods were scarce in Richmond."⁸ Earlier in the year he had advised William, "Do not fall into the error of keeping too many slaves, bring the excess to Richmond as they are hiring well there!"⁹ Throughout the war their correspondence centered on the plantation, particularly as the scarcity problem grew more severe in Richmond.

The problem of outfitting the local volunteer company was solved by a special King William County levy of five thousand dollars, which was a proportional tax based on the amount of property an individual held in the county.¹⁰ Aylett collected the taxes from the men in the Taylor Gray's Company, most of whom paid one dollar, although Aylett was required to pay thirty-five dollars and ninety five cents.¹¹ He then arranged for the company uniforms to be made in Richmond.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 5 January 1861.

¹⁰ Aylett Family Papers, list of taxes collected from men of Taylor Gray's Company by William Roane Aylett, undated.

¹¹ Ibid.

While at West Point in training with his company, Aylett used his man-servant, "Bob," who was a slave from the plantation, to carry his letters to and from Montville. "Bob" remained with him throughout the war, and in his letters home he often made reference to the slave's loyalty and to the respect he had for him. In June of 1862, Aylett's company was in the midst of a skirmish when "Bob" arrived at camp with some personal supplies that Aylett had bought in Richmond. Aylett reported that, "Bob was pretty active in the fight," and added that the slave had him write a letter home, "in which he [Bob] recounted many hair-breathed escapes."¹² The practice of including news from one slave to another in letters written by his wife or himself, was common throughout the war.

Both his and his wife's attitude toward the negro slaves reflected a management-labor philosophy which was more paternalistic than capitalistic in practice. Both seemed to associate the concept of a negro race with inferiority, and in their correspondence they made no attempt to mask their opinions. Early in the war Aylett wrote to his wife that, "General Magruder's after slaves in King William County again, to work on fortifications," and he indicated that of their slaves, "Joe, from his acquired knowledge of

¹²Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett (wife), 10 June 1862.

how to take care of himself will have to be sent."¹³ As the war progressed his wife, Alice had to contend with growing discontent among their slaves. In July, 1863 after the battle at Gettysburg, she wrote that the servants at Montville were "lazy," and also were "pretending to be sick," and she concluded, "that I am out of patience with them as a race."¹⁴ Undoubtedly one reason for this attitude was the receipt of a letter from the State of Virginia explaining that a slave of the Aylett's, one "Richard," had been hung in Henrico County at the direction of the Governor.¹⁵ A valuation of \$1800 was placed on the slave.¹⁶

But Alice Aylett's harsh feeling about the slaves did not last, for just one month later she included at the end of a letter, a humorous note from one of the slaves, which

¹³Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 25 February 1862. Major General J. B. Magruder (1807-1871) was in command of Yorktown at this time and often would send into the nearby counties to get slaves to work on fortifications. See D. S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, A Study in Command (3 volumes, New York: C Scribner & Sons, 1943), I, pp. 146-151.

¹⁴Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to William R. Aylett, 24 July, 1863.

¹⁵Aylett Family Papers, George W. Munford, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia to W. R. Aylett, July 9, 1863.

¹⁶
Ibid.

read, "Tina says, I must send her love and tell you that you must come over here to see me, and that she has a big swamp for you and Brother H. [Henry] to hide in should Yankees come."¹⁷ In December, 1862 just prior to the Battle of Fredricksburg, Aylett wrote a short letter home commenting that he had heard of the death of one of his slave's children on another plantation, and he commented, "I do feel for old Sam and his family more than words can express."¹⁸

In a war in which the abolition of the institution of slavery was a very real issue, the rumor, or the possibility that free Negro Union troops might be in the countryside caused the old fears of racism to be restated. In June, 1863, Aylett's wife wrote him concerning the local excitement of a rumor that a Union negro regiment was being readied to conduct raids into King William County. Aylett commented in reply, "as to a negro regiment being at Yorktown, I don't believe a word of it--and if so, it need not excite any additional alarm, for negro regts. (sic.) are officered by Yankee Whites, and if they were not I don't think they'd conduct cruel war any worse than the Yankees."¹⁹ At the end of the war, when Aylett signed the oath of amnesty, he

¹⁷Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to William R. Aylett, 17 August 1863.

¹⁸Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 3 December, 1862.

¹⁹Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 23 June 1863.

accepted the abolition of slavery.²⁰

For the first eight months of the company's existence from May 1861 to December 1861, it remained at West Point and was involved in only a few minor skirmishes.²¹ In December, 1861, it and three other companies were incorporated into the 53rd Virginia Regiment, which was placed under the command of Brigadier General Benjamin Huger.²² From this date until August, 1862, Aylett served as Captain and commander of the company.²³ His correspondence during this time to his wife and brother contain very few accounts of military events. His company was involved in only three light skirmishes, and in the Battle of Seven Pines, June 1, 1862, fought near Richmond. He indicated that war on the company level was infrequent, and brief. Early in July, 1861, Aylett wrote, "our troops had a little skirmish with the enemy . . . day before yesterday" and "the Yankee

²⁰Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Rosalie Page Sampson (sister), 10 June 1865. Aylett was in Federal Prison, Johnson's Island, Ohio where he was taken after being captured at the Battle of Saylor's Creek, April 6, 1865.

²¹Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 3 December 1862.

²²Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, (Photostatic copy in Virginia State Library), Book 6, p. 2. The muster roll states that the 53rd Virginia Regiment was "organized in December, 1861, by the consolidation of Montague's and Tomlin's Aylett's Battalions. . . ."

²³Ibid., Book 6, p. 2.

prisoners . . . are the best and most respectable looking set I have seen."²⁴ In October, he wrote about the nature of war and the amount of actual fighting versus the reports of false rumors which spread throughout the countryside. He related how "the other day our company was out for rifle testing, and by night-fall the rumor had--that both forces had attacked, and we won, but suffered heavy losses."²⁵

During General George McClellan's Peninsular Campaign, the mail service was interrupted because of the large Union force between Richmond and King William County, and only one letter remains for the period from May to September, 1862. That letter is important however, because it was written from camp near Richmond, a few days following the Battle of Seven Pines, and gives an indication of the battle from one company commander's viewpoint.

The results of the last battle were 3 killed, 30 odd wounded, and 4 or 5 missing, and, the fight was in the woods and swamps, so thick that the hostile forces could not see each other . . . enough to do good shooting. My upper lip was grazed slightly by a ball . . . which I did not think of sufficient consequence to write you before.²⁶

In May, 1862, the one year enlistment term of the men in the Taylor Grays Company expired, and most of the men

²⁴Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 15 July 1861.

²⁵Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Alice B. Aylett, 20 October 1861.

²⁶Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to wife, 10 June 1862.

re-enlisted for the duration of the war;²⁷ but, this time they enlisted in Company D, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Armistead's Brigade, Pickett's Division, Longstreet's First Corps, of the Army of Northern Virginia.²⁸ Aylett was re-elected as Captain of the Company.²⁹

In October, 1862, Aylett was promoted to Major,³⁰ and he was given temporary command of the regiment while the regular commander, Major Harrison Tomlin³¹ was on leave.³² The amount of information about the regiment, and the war increased substantially in his letters. He described a skirmish near Winchester during Lee's first Northern campaign:

²⁷Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to Patrick Henry Aylett, 20 May 1862.

²⁸Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Book 6, p. 1.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Aylett Family Papers, Promotion Orders, signed by George W. Randolph, Secretary of War, 10 October 1862.

³¹Harrison B. Tomlin was appointed Major on May 3, 1861 and served as commander of Aylett's company and one other until his promotion in September 1862. Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Book 6, p. 1.

³²Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to wife, 20 October 1862.

The enemy it seems, seeing the fire from a house which was burning accidentally, took it into their heads that we were retreating. Hence, they advanced rapidly to the town, but finding . . . that our army was where it has been all the time, and ready for them, they went back more rapidly than they came. . . .³³

In November, he wrote about "heavy cannonading," and he described another engagement.³⁴ During this period the mail to and from the army was infrequent, so Aylett and his wife began numbering their letters. In one letter, she declared that she had written every mail, "except one, and that day we had no mail, as the stage driver was conscripted."³⁵

On the third of December, 1862, just prior to the Battle of Fredricksburg, Aylett wrote a letter to his wife in which he mentioned General Jackson and General Lee for the first time--in his personal correspondence. After he cautioned her not to read the letter to anyone, he described their positions, and commented that, "General Lee is exceedingly desirous they [Union forces] should cross, [the Rappahannock River], and is confident of being able to give them the worst beating they have had."³⁶ The

³³Ibid.

³⁴Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 11 November 1862.

³⁵Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 3 November 1862.

³⁶Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 3 December 1862.

Army of Northern Virginia ten days later on December 13, 1862, decisively defeated a Union Army led by General Burnside.³⁷ Two weeks later on Christmas Day, 1862, his wife visited camp and stayed with him for about a week.³⁸ Aylett wanted to return home with her and applied for a furlough to go to Montville to attend to business, and to see his first child, Sallie, who had been born in October of the previous year.³⁹ Late in January, when he still had not received approval, he wrote to her, "I am still discouraged and disheartened at not hearing from my application for furlough . . . General Lee is retaining them while he can learn more of the intentions of the enemy."⁴⁰ In this same letter he included a sardonic comment about the soldiers life in general, "I return the vaccine you sent me, there is no use my lying about it, as I have repeatedly been vaccinated lately, but without effect."⁴¹ Shortly thereafter, he was granted leave.

³⁷Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, pp. 359-368.

³⁸There exists no record of her visit, but in their correspondence both Aylett and his wife make mention of the trip and the duration of the stay.

³⁹Aylett Family Papers, Aylett Family Bible.

⁴⁰Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 25 January 1863.

⁴¹Ibid.

In March, 1863, he was promoted to Lt. Colonel;⁴² and in April, when the Commander of the 53rd Regiment, Colonel John Grammar, Jr., resigned his commission,⁴³ Aylett became one of the candidates for the position. He wrote home "Old Armistead wants me to be Col. (sic.) of the Reg. (sic.) and is going to examine me for the position. He thinks I will pass."⁴⁴ He passed, and was given command of the regiment and recommended for the position of Colonel.⁴⁵

In the next two months the Army of Northern Virginia was involved in fighting in the Shenandoah Valley, and in preparation for Lee's Second Northern Campaign.⁴⁶ On June 23, 1863, Aylett hurriedly wrote a short letter home explaining, "We have orders to move at 3 A.M. tomorrow morning with 3 days cooked rations in our haversacks. I

⁴²Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Book 6, p. 2.

⁴³Colonel John Grammar, Jr. enlisted in September, 1862, in the rank of major and was promoted to Lt. Colonel in October 1862. He resigned in April, 1863. See Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Book 6, p. 21.

⁴⁴Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 27 May 1863.

⁴⁵Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Book 6, p. 2.

⁴⁶For a description of the activity within the Army of Northern Virginia during this two month period see Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, pp. 683-714, and III, pp. 20-50.

don't reckon we shall stop short of Pennsylvania. Ewell is already there."⁴⁷ He went on to reveal his feelings about the approaching invasion, "I don't apprehend any more raids in the home country,--Genl. Lee is going to give the scoundrels too much to do near their own homes."⁴⁸ In the next paragraph he expressed clearly the emotionalism of his men, and the difficult situation he, as commander, was faced with.

I have just ordered several boxes of matches and mean to make the front of my regt. (sic.)--a smoking ruin--orders or no orders--Genl. Lee may order private property respected, but I don't mean to obey, and the army will not. My men shall take . . . what they please, but it will be done according to my orders, in a systematic, regular way.⁴⁹

Military historians report that the damage to the countryside was not great,⁵⁰ so Aylett's letter may have been a boast. However, this researcher feels that the letter probably reflected the feelings of the men of the Army and its lower commanders better than conclusions drawn from statistics of damage.

Gettysburg, and the disaster which came on the third day of battle when the men of General George E. Pickett's Division charged across an open field toward Seminary Ridge,

⁴⁷Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 23 June 1863.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, III, p. 205.

lay ahead. In the battle, the men of Pickett's Division were cut down so decisively that every field and general officer in the charge, except one were either killed or wounded.⁵¹ Aylett was wounded severely in the head;⁵² but, in Richmond, four newspapers reported that he had been killed.⁵³

In a long letter to him, two weeks after the battle, his brother, Patrick Henry, related how he had received word of his being alive, and had "sent a messenger to Alice," and that, "he got there a day ahead of the county edition of the four papers," which announced your "death," or "mortal wound."⁵⁴ In the same letter his brother wrote that he had heard that Armistead was dead,⁵⁵ and that the

⁵¹ Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1959.), p. 239.

⁵² Tyler, Ed. Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 285.

⁵³ Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 21 July 1863.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Brig.-General Lewis Addison Armistead was one of Lee's best brigade commanders. He died July 3, 1863, in the Battle of Gettysburg in Pickett's Charge, but not until he and his men had scaled the stone wall on Seminary Ridge and had driven the Union gunners back. Armistead fell mortally wounded with his hand on a Union cannon. Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 12.

new commander should be made a Brigadier-General.⁵⁶ Also, "he knew Pres. Davis, and Sec. of War Seddon well," and, "the recommendation of the Division Commander carries great weight in most matters, and I hear that Pickett likes you."⁵⁷ However, the recommendation from General Pickett was not forthcoming; and, in his report to Lee, Pickett blamed his lower commander for the defeat,⁵⁸ and as a result Aylett was never recommended for an advanced position.

On the return trip to Virginia from Pennsylvania, Aylett was with the wagon train that carried the Confederate wounded. This wagon train was a lengthy one, stretching out for seventeen miles and taking thirty-four hours to pass a given point.⁵⁹ It was commanded by General John D. Imboden.⁶⁰ Along the road through Maryland the Confederate

⁵⁶ Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 21 July 1863.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, IV, p. 444.

⁵⁹ Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (4 volumes, New York: The Century Company, 1884), III, p. 423.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

wagon train was attacked by local citizens, many of whom were captured and interned as prisoners of war.⁶¹ On July 7, at Williamsport, Maryland the Confederate wagons were attacked by a Union force of about seven thousand men.⁶² Aylett was put in charge of a group of wounded line officers, teamsters, and commissaries.⁶³ In the battle that followed Aylett fought well, and received a letter of commendation from Gen. Imboden.⁶⁴ The Union force was repelled, and the wagon train proceeded to Virginia.

Following the battle at Gettysburg, a mood of defeatism and depression seems to have affected the civilian population in Virginia. His wife, Alice, wrote a long depressing letter to him, dated 21 July 1863, in which she said she was "distressed at so many soldiers dying at Gettysburg," and she commented, "Everyone intends leaving this neighborhood, as it seems to be the general impression that this country will be overrun with Yankees before this war is closed!"⁶⁵ One month later, the Union forces made a raid

⁶¹ Clayton Malcom Thomas, III, "The Military Career of John D. Imboden," (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Virginia, 1964), p. 114.

⁶² Johnson and Buel, ed., Battles and Leaders, III, 426.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Col. Wm. Aylett Folder.

⁶⁵ Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to William Roane Aylett, 21 July 1863.

into King William County.⁶⁶ A raiding party came to Montville, and his wife reported the damage to him, "our only heavy losses are the negroes, who went voluntarily before they even saw the Yankees."⁶⁷ These raids continued as the war progressed and although statistics on property losses are not available, Aylett himself wrote in June of 1864, "I have lost nearly all of my property at the hands of the enemy."⁶⁸

From July, 1863 to January, 1864, Aylett was not involved in any major fighting, and, since King William County was in control of Union forces during much of this period, there were very few letters between Aylett and his wife. Most of these letters were written in a cross-checked manner which were designed to get through unsuspecting Union guards. The quality of paper used in these letters deteriorates markedly during this period also.

⁶⁶ On August 6, 1863, a Union force of about 400 men, under the command of Lt. Colonel C. Carroll Trevis, Fourth Delaware Infantry, entered King William County and seized the town of Aylett, Virginia. In his report Trevis recorded that "a very large grist-mill belonging to Colonel Aylett, of the Rebel Army . . . was burned." The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (128 volumes, Washington; United States Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. 27, Part 2, p. 779.

⁶⁷ Aylett Family Papers, Alice B. Aylett to W. R. Aylett, 25 August 1863.

⁶⁸ Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett to William R. Sampson (brother-in-law), 4 June 1864.

For the last fourteen months of the war, Aylett served as commander of the 53rd Virginia Regiment,⁶⁹ in a Brigade commanded by Brigadier General Seth M. Barton.⁷⁰ The Brigade was one of four that made up a Division which was led by Major General Robert Ransom, Jr.,⁷¹ which was under the overall command of General Pickett.⁷² This combination of commanders was not harmonious, and the friction between them led to two incidents, one of which resulted in General Barton's trial for court-martial.⁷³ Aylett considered that the two incidents involved him personally, and in one he felt his honor as a soldier and a man were questioned.

⁶⁹Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, (Microfilm, Virginia State Library), Aylett Folder.

⁷⁰Brig. General Seth Maxwell Barton (1829-1900) served with Stonewall Jackson in 1861-1862 winter campaign; with Pemberton at Vicksburg where he was captured, paroled and exchanged; and early in 1864, he was given command of Armistead's old Brigade of Pickett's Division. Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 18.

⁷¹Major General Robert Ransom, Jr. (1828-1892) was a West Point graduate, who resigned his commission in 1861 to enter the CSA. He served with North Carolina's forces in the Seven Days Battle, Maryland campaign, and in minor posts in Virginia, before he was placed in command of Pickett's old Division. Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 253.

⁷²Official Records, Series I, vol. 33, p. 87.

⁷³Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, p. 225.

The first incident concerned a raid to New Bern, North Carolina, which General Pickett organized and planned; but which was not successful because Barton's Brigade did not attack according to the plan.⁷⁴ Pickett ordered a Board of Enquiry,⁷⁵ and Aylett was called to testify.⁷⁶ In a letter to his wife, Aylett explained the incident, "The blunder he . . . Barton . . . committed was not in not attacking the place, but in allowing himself to be deceived as to its strength. He was entirely too sanguine, and believed too readily what was told him."⁷⁷ Aylett remarked as to the possible outcome of the case, "I should not wonder if I was not in command of the Brigade at anytime,"⁷⁸ and he cautioned her to be silent about this information. Barton was censured, but was retained in command,⁷⁹ as Aylett testified that Barton's judgment not to attack was correct.⁸⁰

⁷⁴See Pickett's account and his criticism of Barton in Official Records, Series I, vol. 33, pp. 92-94; and Barton's reply and defense, Ibid., p. 97.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 1000.

⁷⁶Aylett Family Papers, W. R. to wife, 21 February 1864.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 18.

⁸⁰Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 21 February 1864.

In May, 1864, the corps was operating in the Richmond-Petersburg area, and Ransom's Division moved to a position just South of Drewry's Bluff, near Hopewell, Virginia.⁸¹ On the 11th of May, they were involved in a "very severe fight," Aylett recorded, and "my Regt. (sic.) was right in the thick of the fight."⁸² He went on, "we went out to see what the enemy was about, and finding they were in great force, our reconaissance became a fight."⁸³ He added, "The Regt. lost 40 men killed, but we killed about 3 to one of the Yankees."⁸⁴

On the battlefield, Major General Ransom relieved Brigadier General Barton from command of his brigade,⁸⁵ and

⁸¹ Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, p. 223.

⁸² Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 11 May 1864.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, p. 218.

appointed a Colonel B. D. Fry⁸⁶ to head the unit.⁸⁷ In his report, General Ransom stated that General Barton and the regimental commanders were "inattentive" in carrying out their orders.⁸⁸ In reply, on the night of the battle, Aylett and the other four regimental commanders of the Brigade⁸⁹ wrote an official letter to General S. Cooper, Adjutant General, Headquarters Department, Richmond in which they stated:

We the undersigned officers of this brigade have the honor to ask that Brig. Genl. S. M. Barton be restored to the command of which he was to-day relieved. . . . We cannot but believe that his removal . . .⁹⁰ is the result of a misconception of facts. . . .

General Cooper ordered an investigation of the incident.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Brig. General B. D. Fry (1822-1891) was educated at VMI, and was appointed as a colonel in the 13th Alabama Infantry when the war broke out. He was wounded several times, and at the time of this incident he was in command of a rear brigade, Gracie's Brigade. Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 96.

⁸⁷ Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, p. 218. Special Orders dated 11 May 1864, signed by Maj. Gen. R. Ransom.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

⁸⁹ The four other regimental commanders were: Col. Jas. J. Philips, 9th Virginia Infantry; Col. C. R. Fontaine, 57th Virginia Regiment; Captain George V. Griggs, 38th Virginia Regiment, Col. W. M. White, 14th Virginia Regiment. Ibid., p. 219.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 218-220.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 220.

Aylett was especially incensed at Genl. Ransom's appointment of Col. Fry to head the brigade, and on the 30th of June, 1864, he wrote another official letter to Adj. General Cooper, stating, "I respectfully submit that such an action is unusual, and to me as Senior Colonel of the Brigade was unjust and uncalled for."⁹² Aylett included testimonials to his ability from two Confederate Generals, Pickett and Imboden.⁹³ A reply explained that no action would be taken until General Barton's case came up for court-martial trial.⁹⁴ The officers and men of the Brigade would not let the Drewry's Bluff incident die, and on August 22, 1864, they initiated another letter, this time to President Jefferson Davis, in which they tried to expedite action in the Barton case.⁹⁵ This letter was indorsed by Aylett who was serving as acting commander of the brigade, and he included a bitter challenge to Major General Ransom, "to tell the truth and not to question the ability of officers and men further."⁹⁶ This correspondence went to

⁹²Confederate Records, 53rd Virginia Regiment, Aylett Folder.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, pp. 227-228.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 228.

Pickett, Lee, Secretary of War Campbell, and President Davis with the result that the brigade was sent a new commander,⁹⁷ Brig.-General George H. Stewart,⁹⁸ who remained with the unit until the end of the war.⁹⁹

From this point forward, Aylett seemed to rely on the men of the regiment for support, and he finished out the war as a loyal but unambitious regimental commander. His correspondence to his wife became more depressed, as the war progressed. He wrote of learning of "the visitation of Yankee thieves and barbarians" to King William County, and that he wanted to help but, "at this juncture, severed as all our lines of communication are, deprived as we are of all power of locomotion by the loss of all horses, the question is how to go anywhere."¹⁰⁰ He continued, "and the next question is where to go--for no portion of the country seems to be secure from the raids."¹⁰¹ By December,

⁹⁷ Official Records, Series I, vol. 36, p. 229. This solution was suggested by Lee who seemed unaware of the entire incident.

⁹⁸ Brig. General George H. Stewart (1828-1903) was from Maryland, and served throughout the war in the Army of Northern Virginia. Prior to this time he had served at First Manassas, in Ewell's Valley Campaign, at Gettysburg, and in the Virginia Campaign that followed. Ironically, he was captured on 11 May 1864 the same day that the abortive Drewry's Bluff attack took place by the unit he was sent to command six months later. Warner, Generals in Gray, p. 290.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 30 June 1864.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

1864, he was drawing on his back pay and sending it home to her to help pay for supplies.¹⁰²

In March, 1865, Aylett reported in a letter home, the Army was "on the move," and that, "Richmond cannot be held."¹⁰³ In this last letter before he was captured at the Battle of Saylor's Creek, April 6, 1865, Aylett wrote a poignant line to his wife, "if [they were] separated by mail, fall back on love."¹⁰⁴ Three days later Lee surrendered, and the Army of Northern Virginia disbanded, a defeated army.

Once captured, Aylett was taken first to Old Capitol Prison in Washington, D. C.,¹⁰⁵ and then to Johnson's Island, Ohio,¹⁰⁶ where a large Federal Prison was located.¹⁰⁷ On the 20th of April, 1865, he wrote to his wife explaining that he was a prisoner, and that he had found "a host of

¹⁰²Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 27 December 1864.

¹⁰³Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 9 March 1865.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 20 April 1865. This letter was written from Federal Prison, Johnson's Island, Ohio and in it he describes his journey there.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷The officers captured at Saylor's Creek were taken to the Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C. Speech to Confederate veterans by W. R. Aylett, undated, Aylett Family Papers. The enlisted men were probably taken to Point Lookout, Maryland, a federal prison depot for distribution to other prisons. Official Records, Series II, vol., 3, pp. 1001-1003.

acquaintances and friends" there.¹⁰⁸ On the 7th of May, he wrote to his sister, Pattie W. Cabell, who lived in Selma, Alabama, that "all the officers here, myself among the number, are applying for the Oath of Amnesty (sic.)."¹⁰⁹ Next, he expressed his sentiments toward the defeated cause, "The Confederate Government is dead--and I recognize allegiance as due to the Govt. (sic.) which can protect me and my wife and children in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."¹¹⁰ Aylett was released from prison during the month of July, 1865.¹¹¹

There is no explanation for the late release of Colonel Aylett from prison. By July 5, 1865 there remained only 150 officers as prisoners of war confined at Johnson's Island, and the military prisons at Point Lookout, Maryland; Newport News; Hart's Island, New York; Camp Chase, Ohio; and Camp Douglas, Chicago, Illinois had been closed, as all their

¹⁰⁸Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to wife, 20 April 1865.

¹⁰⁹Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett to Pattie C. Cabell (sister), 7 May 1865.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Aylett Family Papers, W. R. Aylett, Johnson's Island, Ohio to Patrick Henry Aylett, Richmond, Va., 6 July 1865. In this letter he wrote of his impending release from prison.

prisoners of war had been released.¹¹² The monthly returns of U.S. Prisons 1865 show that all of the remaining prisoners of war at Johnson's Island Prison were released in July 1865.¹¹³

The war ended in July 1865 for William Roane Aylett, and he returned to Virginia and to the family home, Montville, to rebuild the plantation. Aylett had accepted the verdict of the battlefield when he signed the Oath of Amnesty and declared his allegiance to the United States. Next he would be forced to accept the verdict of economic reality in the post war reconstruction period that followed.

¹¹²Official Records, Series II, vol. 3, pp. 700-701.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 1004.

CHAPTER V

WILLIAM ROANE AYLETT--POST CIVIL WAR PERIOD, 1865-1900

In July 1865, Aylett returned to Virginia and to his family home, Montville, in King William County. Farming again became his primary interest and he tried to restore the plantation to its former productivity. The size of the family's landholdings (1920 acres) had not changed throughout the war, and the land was still listed as being owned by Philip Aylett's estate,¹ which meant that it was divided between William R. Aylett and his brother Patrick Henry Aylett. The war years had been lean ones at Montville, as the Ayletts had lost much of their livestock, in addition to the slaves that comprised their labor force.²

Some of the family's former slaves were hired back on a monthly basis to serve as laborers for the plantation.³

¹King William County Land Book, 1866.

²King William County Personal Property Record, 1865.

³Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett, Account Book, 1866-1872, entry for April, 1866.

In 1865 and 1866, Aylett paid the freedmen eight dollars per month for work in the fields, while the women were paid four dollars a month as domestics.⁴ In these years he made monthly entries in his accounting register for the Negroes in his employment, however, starting in 1868 he had the freedmen sign contracts at the beginning of each year.⁵ In that year he had ten of the freedmen under a share cropping type of contract, and two others, who worked as servants, under contracts which stipulated clothing rather than land.⁶

The terms of these contracts stipulated two things; first, that the individual would rent a certain portion of Aylett's land for one year, the payment to be a one-half share of the crop raised on that land; and second, that Aylett as the lessor had the right to employ the individual on his family's lands whenever he desired.⁷ At times this last provision was not honored by the freedmen, as they would make excuses or refuse to work for Aylett when harvest or planting time came.

In one instance when a freedman named Bob refused to work, Aylett reported in his diary, "I directed him to go on

⁴Ibid., May, 1866.

⁵Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett, Diary, 1867-1869, entry for January 2, 1868.

⁶Ibid., January 3, 1868.

⁷Ibid., January 5, 1868.

pulling [fodder] and reminded him of my rights under our contract and offered to read it to him."⁸ Aylett considered that the freedman's refusal to work constituted a breach of contract, because he commented the next day, "on my way to auction [I] found him [Bob] pulling fodder and asked him who he was working for, he said for his share of the corn. I told him he was no longer working under contract and to give up his land and crop to me."⁹ One month later he noted in the diary, "I have just learned today that Lewis [freedman under contract] went to Richmond last night without my knowledge or consent . . . [this action] will result in a breach of contract."¹⁰

Often the terms of these contracts would not stipulate land but some other item. On January 1, 1868 Aylett noted that he had "engaged Robert at Nelson's wages, \$1.25 per month and two suits of my old clothes per annum--one summer and one winter."¹¹ Aylett also hired children or minors to work as servants in his home. These children were acquired by contract on an annual basis, except that their parents

⁸Ibid., August 28, 1868.

⁹Ibid., August 29, 1868.

¹⁰Ibid., September 28, 1868.

¹¹Ibid., January 1, 1868.

would arrange the terms of the contract with Aylett. On January 5, 1869 Aylett copied this contract into his diary: 'Sam Robinson has hired Margaret, his daughter to William Aylett for one year for her food and clothing--2 units of winter clothing, 1 pair of shoes, 2 pair of winter stockings, and 1 blanket. . . .'¹²

Since Aylett was a lawyer, at times he would draft legal contracts for the hiring of freedmen. By 1868 the problem of desertion by the Negroes had become a serious one, and the contracts that Aylett drew up contained limiting provisions in case of a breach of contract. In May, 1868 Aylett made a copy of a contract that he drew up for a Mrs. Wallace:

Ailsie Wallace hired one Delia Baldwin for 1 year from date, for her victuals, and two suits of summer and two suits of winter clothes, 1 pr. of shoes, unless she should need more--But if the said Delia should leave before the close of the summer then she forfeits the summer clothes and if she leaves . . . before the winter then she forfeits the winter clothes. Delia is hired to do anything needed that she can do and to make herself generally useful.¹³

In general as the years progressed, the contracts, both those Aylett drew up for third parties, and his own, became more stringent, and less favorable to the freedman. By 1870 the planter class had complete control of the rural freedman's economic existence. No land would be sold to

¹² Ibid., January 9, 1869.

¹³ Ibid., May 13, 1868.

the ex-slaves, nor could they become lease holders.¹⁴ Wages were kept low by county or district meetings of planters to establish a standard wage rate to pay the Negroes.¹⁵ In some counties the farmers agreed not to employ freedman unless they were able to furnish testimonials from their last employer.¹⁶ These actions together with the failure of the cotton crop in 1866-1867 forced most of the rural freedman into a serf-like existence, as share croppers on their ex-master's lands.¹⁷

One factor in Aylett's financial treatment of the Negroes in the years preceding the war was his own financial position. The capital required to operate a large farm, with paid laborers rather than slaves, was considerable; and Aylett had to turn to other areas to raise money. Prior to the war he had had a small law practice, and afterwards this law practice became an important source of additional income. Robert Hudgin, a lawyer in Caroline County wrote

¹⁴Oscar Zeichner, "The Transition from Slave to Free Agricultural Labor in the Southern States," Agricultural History, XIII, (Spring, 1939), p. 26.

¹⁵John P. McConnell, Negroes and Their Treatment in Virginia, 1865-1867 (Pulaski, Virginia: B. D. Smith, 1910), p. 33.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷Zeichner, "The Transition From Slave to Free Agricultural Labor in the Southern States," p. 31.

to him of the legal activity in one tidewater county.

The large number of suits recently brought in our county, and the great straights in which the people find themselves, is likely to introduce for the first time, a sharp practice in pleading, to obtain a delay in obtaining payments, etc. . . .¹⁸

In 1868 the Republican controlled state legislature re-organized the civil court system at the county level.¹⁹

From that point forward Aylett began to devote more of his time to his law practice and less to farming.²⁰

However, in the years that immediately followed the war Aylett relied less on his law practice than on his pen to bring in additional income. Prior to the war he had contributed articles to the Richmond Examiner and other Richmond newspapers. In 1865, his brother Patrick Henry Aylett, became editor of a new newspaper in Richmond, the Richmond Times.²¹ This newspaper was begun in April 1865, and continued until June 1867, when it went bankrupt and was sold at auction.²² Apparently William began contributing articles early in the fall of 1865, for his brother

¹⁸ Aylett Family Papers, Robert Hudgin to W. R. Aylett, May 5, 1866.

¹⁹ Hamilton J. Eckenrode, The Political History of Virginia During Reconstruction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1904), XXII, series 6-8, p. 44.

²⁰ Richmond Dispatch, (Richmond, Virginia), August 7, 1900.

²¹ Lester J. Cappon, Virginia Newspapers 1821-1935 (New York: D. Appleton Co., 1936), p. 188.

²² Ibid.

wrote to him in October of that year complimenting him on his editorials.²³ In December, 1865 at the urging of his brother,²⁴ William wrote to the editor of another Richmond newspaper, the Richmond Examiner, inquiring as to the possibility of contributing editorials to that paper.²⁵ Although the editor, H. Rives Pollard replied in the negative, the refusal was not permanent and by May 1866, Aylett was receiving thirty dollars a month for his contributions to the Examiner.²⁶

The type of articles that Aylett wrote for these newspapers were generally political in nature and conservative in tone. None of the editorials are signed; however, Aylett was receiving substantial payments for his contributions from both newspapers, so that a survey of the type of editorials in those papers would give an indication of Aylett's writings. In 1866 the Richmond Examiner in its editorials was; anti-radical rule in Virginia, against the calling of a state constitutional convention, anti-Negro, pro-white, and it extolled the virtues of the lost Confederate cause, and in particular advocated the release of

²³Aylett Family Papers, Patrick Henry Aylett to William R. Aylett, October 14, 1865.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Aylett Family Papers, H. Rives Pollard to W. R. Aylett, December 26, 1865.

²⁶Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett, Account Book, 1866-1872, entry, May, 1866.

Jefferson Davis from prison. Although the Richmond Times supported President Andrew Johnson's reconstruction policy at first,²⁷ it too turned to the conservative cause when the Radical Republicans came into power in Congress in 1866.²⁸

In April 1866, Aylett began to keep a ledger of his receipts and disbursements on the plantation.²⁹ Among the receipts, the monthly checks that he received from the Richmond newspapers represent approximately sixty to seventy per cent of his monthly income for 1866.³⁰ The prices that he received for his crops were depressed during this period, and his dealer in Norfolk could only get \$1.08 a bushel for his corn when it sold on the market in April, 1867.³¹ Thus, in 1870 as the end of reconstruction in Virginia approached, William R. Aylett was being forced by economic circumstances to turn away from the traditional role of tidewater planter. A combination of bad crops, high costs, and the demise of his brother's newspaper in June 1867; together with an increase in the demand for lawyers to handle civil cases, led Aylett to the profession of law on a full-time basis.

²⁷Cappon, Virginia Newspapers, p. 188.

²⁸Richmond Times, (Richmond, Virginia), April 24, 1866.

²⁹Aylett Family Papers, William R. Aylett, Account Book, 1866-1872.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Aylett Family Papers, Morris, Gwathney & Company to W. R. Aylett, 3 April 1867.

Reconstruction in Virginia ended in 1870 when the state was readmitted to the Union by an act of Congress on January 26, 1870. Aylett was active in the campaign to approve the Underwood Constitution which would be acceptable to Congress, while at the same time he wanted to restore the government to the white conservative element in the state. In 1868, the Underwood Constitution was drafted by a state constitutional convention, but not submitted to the voters until July 1869. It contained three provisions: Negro suffrage, disfranchisement of all ex-Confederates, and the prohibition from office of all ex-Confederates who could not take the "iron clad" or "test oath," which were offensive to most voters in Virginia. In December 1868, a small group of men from the western part of the state, led by Alexander H. H. Stuart proposed a compromise to submit the new constitution and two of the provisions separately to the voters of the state, with the hope that the Constitution and Negro suffrage clause would be approved and the other two defeated. Congress agreed to Stuart's proposal when on April 7, 1864 President Ulysses Grant recommended that Virginia be authorized to vote separately on the general body of the constitution and on the two proscription provisions.³²

Coordinate with the campaign for approval of the Underwood Constitution was the gubernatorial race of 1869.

³²Charles E. Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia 1870-1902 (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1961), p. 2.

The Republicans nominated a white man, Henry Wells for Governor, and a negro, J. D. Harris for Lieutenant Governor, while the Moderate Republicans, led by William Mahone nominated two white men, Gilbert C. Walker and John T. Lewis for Governor and Lieutenant Governor respectively.³³ The white Conservative Party had previously nominated Robert E. Withers, but the leaders of the party were induced by Mahone and the Committee of Nine, led by John B. Baldwin, to drop Withers and support the Moderate Republican, Walker for Governor.³⁴ Walker agreed to campaign for the defeat of the disfranchising amendments.

Aylett and his brother were active in the Conservative Party at this time and they both worked for Walker during the campaign. On June 8, 1869 the Richmond Examiner, a white conservative newspaper, reported that "Col. Aylett, canvasser for the first Congressional district will address the people in behalf of the Walker ticket in King and Queen county, Tappahannock, Warsaw, Williamsburg, Westmoreland, . . ."³⁵ As the campaign progressed the issue became one of blacks against whites.³⁶ On June 14, 1869 Aylett

³³Eckenrode, Virginia During Reconstruction, p. 125.

³⁴Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 4.

³⁵Richmond Examiner, June 8, 1869.

³⁶Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 4.

spoke in Norfolk, and the Examiner reported the speech; "Mr. Aylett predicted that, if white men would do their duty, the Walker ticket would be elected by a 40,000 majority."³⁷

The election was held on July 9, 1869 and when the results were announced a week later, Walker defeated Wells by a vote of 119,535 to 101,204.³⁸ The body of the constitution was approved while the disfranchising article and the "test oath" were defeated.³⁹ The results in King William County, which was sixty per cent Negro, was a defeat for Walker, but a "white" vote for the two clauses and the constitution.⁴⁰ Throughout the state the election was a conservative triumph as ninety-five Conservatives were elected to the House of Delegates and thirty to the state Senate.⁴¹

Shortly after the new constitution went into effect and Virginia was readmitted into the Union, Aylett was appointed Commonwealth's Attorney for King William County.⁴² Without

³⁷Richmond Examiner, June 14, 1869.

³⁸Eckenrode, Virginia During Reconstruction, p. 125.

³⁹Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁰Richmond Examiner, July 13, 1869.

⁴¹Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 6.

⁴²Richmond Dispatch, August 7, 1900.

the defeat of the "test oath" Aylett would not have been able to serve in this position. He was appointed Commonwealth's Attorney for the county for a three year period, after which he had to stand for election to retain the position.⁴³ In 1873, Aylett was re-elected, and again every three years until his retirement in 1886.⁴⁴ During this period the fee for a county Commonwealth's Attorney was fifty dollars per year, plus ten dollars fee for every felony conviction, and five dollars for misdemeanor cases.⁴⁵

Just after he was appointed Commonwealth's Attorney a tragedy occurred in the family. On April 26, 1870 Patrick Henry Aylett was killed when the floor of the Supreme Court Room in the State Capitol Building collapsed.⁴⁶ At the time of his death, P. H. Aylett was; a successful lawyer in Richmond; one of the editors of the Richmond Examiner; and was a candidate for nomination to be the next mayor of the city.⁴⁷ After the tragic death of his brother, William turned to his law practice and to his family in King William County.

⁴³Code of Virginia, 1873 (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia State Library, 1874), p. 1075.

⁴⁴Tyler, ed., Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 825.

⁴⁵Code of Virginia, 1873, p. 1076.

⁴⁶Richmond Examiner, April 28, 1870.

⁴⁷Ibid.

In the sixteen year period that William R. Aylett was Commonwealth's Attorney for King William County, 1870-1886, his reputation as a lawyer was established.⁴⁸ He practiced law throughout the state, and was certified to practice before the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, the highest court in the state. During this period the Aylett family landholdings were reduced by one-half. Until 1870, the family's land (1920 acres) had been held by the estate of their father, Philip Aylett, but with the death of Patrick Henry Aylett the trust dissolved, and his brother's portion was sold.⁴⁹ Thereafter, the remaining land (931 acres) was listed as owned by William R. Aylett of Montville.⁵⁰ In these years Aylett began to accumulate stocks and bonds, so that by 1885 he was second wealthiest man in King William County in respect to personal property.⁵¹

This period was the time in which Aylett raised his family. By the year 1870, the Aylett family numbered six.⁵²

⁴⁸Tyler, ed., Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, V, p. 825.

⁴⁹There is no record in the collection of the disposition of this land. The county tax records show a reduction in the Aylett's land after 1873. In 1872 the records do list the estate of P. H. Aylett as having 989 acres of land.

⁵⁰King William County Land Book, 1873-1900.

⁵¹King William County Personal Property Tax Records, 1885.

⁵²Aylett Family Papers. Aylett Family Bible.

Two of the children, Sarah Brockenbrough (1861-1942) and Pattie Waller (1863-1898) had been born during the war. These two girls were followed by twins in March 1866, but these children died of diptheria in 1869. A year later in March, 1867 a fourth child Philip Aylett (1867-1927) was born, and nine months later another child, Alice Page Aylett (1868-1941) entered the family. These children were followed by five more children over the next eleven years.⁵³ Of the Aylett children only seven lived to adulthood, but all of these received their education from tutors, and private schools or colleges.⁵⁴

Throughout the period when Aylett was Commonwealth's Attorney he was active in politics in the state. In 1873 he campaigned for the ex-confederate general, James Lawson Kemper who was running for governor. He corresponded with Kemper about the time and place that he might speak in King William County.⁵⁵ Kemper won, largely on the ability of

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Although public education was free in Virginia after 1870, Aylett hired tutors for his children's early education. In August, 1891 he placed this advertisement in a Richmond newspaper, "For the education of my son, I shall have a competent teacher in my home for session 1891, 1892 . . . and will take in six boys as boarders." Richmond Times, August 15, 1891.

⁵⁵Aylett Family Papers, James Lawson Kemper to W. R. Aylett, August 14, 1873.

the Conservative party to cloud the issues with exhortations of Radicalism and Racism.⁵⁶ This election ended all threats of Radical rule being re-established in Virginia.

The readjuster movement came to Virginia in 1879. Although all of the southern states, except two, Texas and Mississippi, repudiated their prewar debts during this period,⁵⁷ there was a bitter fight over the issue in Virginia. At the date that Virginia was readmitted into the Union, January 1870, the state debt with interest amounted to forty-six million dollars.⁵⁸ Led by William Mahone, the Conservative Legislature in 1871 had passed the Funding Act of 1871, which authorized the state to issue new bonds paying six per cent interest in return for the amount of old bonds plus interest.⁵⁹ Following the passage of this act the revenues of the state were not sufficient to pay both the bonds and the normal state operating expenses, which now

⁵⁶Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 11.

⁵⁷Thomas D. Clarke and Albert D. Kirwin, The South Since Appomattox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 57.

⁵⁸Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 16.

⁵⁹Charles C. Pearson, The Readjuster Movement in Virginia, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), p. 37.

included the cost of a public school system.⁶⁰ During the 1870's the state became divided politically between the Funders, who wanted to pay the debt in full, and the Re-adjusters who wanted to scale it down. Aylett was a Funder. He held a large amount of bonds (\$2500),⁶¹ and he had been a conservative prior to this issue. The readjustment issue was largely a continuation of the long tradition of sectionalism in Virginia, the Eastern planters against the Western small farmers. The results of the election of 1879 was a victory for the Readjusters, and it led to a four year period of Liberal rule in the state.⁶²

While involved in legal and political activity after 1870, Aylett also participated in the southern movement to record the history of the Confederacy, particularly of the Army. As early as January 1867, Aylett's old commander, George L. Pickett had written to him requesting a history of his unit, the 53rd Virginia Regiment.⁶³ Many of the southern

⁶⁰Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 18.

⁶¹King William County Personal Property Record Book, 1875.

⁶²Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 22.

⁶³Aylett Family Papers, George L. Pickett to W. R. Aylett, January 14, 1867.

military historians contacted Aylett for information on specific battles.⁶⁴ He became a member of the Confederate Veterans and he made several trips to Northern battlefields to speak and participate in reunions with the Union Veterans.⁶⁵ In 1887, John W. Frazier, a former Union soldier at Gettysburg, worked with Aylett to erect a statue to General Armistead.⁶⁶

As the years progressed Aylett grew more mellow in his feelings toward the Civil War. In 1887, he spoke at Gettysburg on the twenty fourth anniversary of the battle.⁶⁷ The tone of the speech was moderate as he praised both sides in the fighting.

I feel proud that I belonged to a people that furnished such armies and such generals. . . . I recognize that the great titans of American history will be Grant and Lee, Jackson and Sherman, and that deathly roll of heroes on both sides. . . .⁶⁸

Aylett spoke of a "great English Race" in the same speech, and of a reconciliation between the North and South.⁶⁹ When

⁶⁴Aylett Family Papers, M. W. Hazelwood to W. R. Aylett, November 22, 1894.

⁶⁵Richmond Dispatch, August 6, 1900.

⁶⁶Aylett Family Papers, John W. Frazier to W. R. Aylett, July 14, 1887.

⁶⁷Richmond Dispatch, July 6, 1887.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

he retired from public office in 1886, he increased his activities in the Confederate Veterans. One of his speeches, "Women of the South" was published in the Southern Historical Society Papers.⁷⁰

Although his law practice declined after 1886, his political interests continued. In 1880, Senator William Mahone, leader of the Readjuster movement in 1879, attempted to win re-election from the Virginia State Senate for his U. S. Senate seat, and was defeated.⁷¹ Aylett had worked against him in King William County and one of his political friends, George Lee, wrote to him about the campaign, "The glorious victory resulting in the bitter defeat of Mahone has filled my heart with delight."⁷² Lee continued with a comment on the Republican President in 1889, Benjamin Harrison, "The success of the Democrats everywhere is a stinging rebuke to President Harrison who is little, if any better than Mahone."⁷³

⁷⁰William R. Aylett, "Women of the South," Southern Historical Society Papers, XXII (July 1894), pp. 53-64.

⁷¹Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, p. 44.

⁷²Aylett Family Papers, George Lee to W. R. Aylett, November 7, 1889.

⁷³Ibid.

Aylett, himself became active in politics in 1890 when he was one of three men mentioned for the Democratic nomination for the First Congressional District.⁷⁴ He was not selected, but several newspapers in Richmond supported him. One of the interesting facts of the time was that Aylett, in canvassing the section for support would make two speeches, one to the white people and another to the negroes, on the same day and at the same political rally.⁷⁵ By 1890, the white supremacy element was in full command of politics in Virginia. In 1893, the local newspaper, the West Point Virginian reported that "Col. Aylett is being considered for Lieutenant Governor," and the paper endorsed him.⁷⁶ Apparently, this effort was a local one for he was not nominated by the Democratic Party in that year. With this failure, Aylett turned away from politics and spent his remaining years at Montville.

These years were sad ones for him, as first, his wife, Alice Brockenbrough Aylett died of a brain concussion when she tripped on the stairs at Montville, just prior to

⁷⁴Richmond Times (Richmond, Virginia), October 7, 1890.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Virginian (West Point, Virginia), July 4, 1893.

Christmas 1895.⁷⁷ Next his sister, Rosalie Page Sampson, died in 1898;⁷⁸ and his eldest daughter, Pattie Waller Aylett contracted malaria and died in 1899.⁷⁹ During the first week of August, 1900, Aylett had a stroke which left him partially paralyzed.⁸⁰

On August 6, 1900 William Roane Aylett died of heart failure at Montville, King William County, Virginia.⁸¹

⁷⁷Richmond Dispatch, December 11, 1895.

⁷⁸Aylett Family Papers; Aylett Family Bible.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Richmond Times, August 7, 1900.

⁸¹Ibid.

APPENDICES

CHART NO. 1

AYLETT FAMILY LANDHOLDINGS

1815-1860

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>NO. OF ACRES</u>	<u>VALUE PER ACRE</u>	<u>VALUE OF BLDGS.</u>	<u>TOTAL VALUE</u>	<u>TOTAL TAX</u>
1815	Philip Aylett, Sr.	2,463	\$ 9.00	\$7,000	\$36,950	\$31.40
1820*	Philip Aylett, Sr. Philip Aylett, Jr.	2,471 545	14.38 7.50	7,500 500	39,623	49.54
1825	Philip Aylett, Sr. Philip Aylett, Jr.	2,471 542	14.44 7.50	7,650 500	39,749	31.80
1830	Philip Aylett, Sr. Philip Aylett, Jr.	2,471 606	15.50 8.00	9,050 600	42,061	33.65
1835**	Elizabeth Aylett Philip Aylett, Jr.	200 1,627	15.20 10.24	1,000 4,600	22,296	17.85
1840	Philip Aylett, Jr. Elizabeth Aylett	1,678 200	10.84 11.69	3,000 700	20,530	20.53
1845	Philip Aylett	1,939	10.14	2,467	19,669	19.67
1850***	Philip Aylett (Est.)	2,021	9.42	1,264	18,984	18.98
1855	Philip Aylett (Est.)	1,980	8.00	1,200	16,240	32.48
1860	Philip Aylett (Est.)	1,970	9.00	1,500	17,820	71.28

*In 1820 Ayletts were the largest single landholders in King William County.

**In 1831 Philip Aylett, Sr., died.

***In 1848 Philip Aylett, Jr., died.

Source: King William County Land Books 1815-1860.
(MS. in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.)

CHART NO. 2

CHART OF SLAVE HOLDINGS OF AYLETT'S IN
KING WILLIAM COUNTY 1815-1860

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>SLAVES</u>	<u>HORSES</u>	<u>TAXES</u>
1816*	Philip Aylett, Jr.	8	4	\$ 6.32
	Philip Aylett, Sr.	41	21	41.48
1820	Philip Aylett, Jr.	7	6	5.98
	Philip Aylett, Sr.	47	10	44.50
1825	Philip Aylett, Jr.	18	6	10.67
	Philip Aylett, Sr.	43	18	25.41
1830	Philip Aylett, Sr.	49	22	21.42
	Philip Aylett, Jr.	25	9	11.97
1835	Philip Aylett**	27	14	13.09
1840	Philip Aylett	30	15	13.20
1845	Philip Aylett	32	19	16.50
1850	Jane Aylett***	7	2	10.59
1850	Patrick Henry Aylett	24	11	8.78
1855	William Roane Aylett and Patrick H. Aylett	29	11	16.00
1860	William Roane Aylett and Patrick H. Aylett	29	16	36.60

* 1815 Personal Property Tax Book Extant.

** Philip Aylett, Sr., died in 1831.

*** Philip Aylett died in 1848.

Source: King William County Personal Property Records,
1815-1860. (MS. in Virginia State Library.)

CHART NO. 3

AYLETT FAMILY LAND HOLDING 1851-1861

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>NO. OF ACRES</u>	<u>VALUE PER ACRE</u>	<u>VALUE OF BLDGS.</u>	<u>TOTAL VALUE</u>	<u>TOTAL TAX</u>
1851	Philip Aylett (estate)	2020	\$ 8.00	\$1200	\$16,560	\$19.87
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett (owned the mill)	30	100.00	1000	3,000	3.60
1852	Philip Aylett (estate)	2020	8.00	1200	16,560	29.81
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	100.00	1000	3,000	5.40
1853	Philip Aylett (estate)	2020	8.00	1200	16,560	35.12
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	100.00	1000	3,000	6.00
1854	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	8.00	1000	16,240	32.38
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	100.00	1000	3,000	6.00
1855	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	8.00	1000	16,240	32.48
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	100.00	1000	3,000	6.00
1856	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	8.00	1000	16,240	64.96
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	400.00	1000	12,000	12.00
1857	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	9.00	1500	17,820	71.28
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	400.00	1000	12,000	12.00
1858	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	9.00	1500	17,820	71.28
	Martha wife of R.P. Aylett	30	400.00	1000	12,000	12.00
1859	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	9.00	1500	17,820	71.28
1860	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	9.00	1500	17,820	71.28

CHART NO. 3 (CONTINUED)

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>NO. OF ACRES</u>	<u>VALUE PER ACRE</u>	<u>VALUE OF BLDGS.</u>	<u>TOTAL VALUE</u>	<u>TOTAL TAX</u>
1861	Philip Aylett (estate)	1980	\$ 9.00	\$1500	\$17,820	\$102.68

* Philip Aylett died in 1848 and his estate remained intact until his wife, Judith P. Aylett died in 1860.

** This property, the mill, was given to Dr. P. H. Cabell and his wife Pattie W. Aylett in 1858 when they were married.

Source: King William County Land Books, 1851-1861, (MS. in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.)

CHART NO. 4

AYLETT FAMILY SLAVE HOLDINGS 1854-1861

YEAR	NAME	NO. OF SLAVES	NO. OF HORSES	NO. OF SHEEP, HOGS, CATTLE	TOTAL TAX
1851	Judith P. Aylett J.P.*, P.H. ^{ca} , & W.R.A. ^{ca}	7 28	2 14		\$30.62
1852	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	9 31	2 15		21.45
1853	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	8 30	4 16		28.80
1854	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	6 26	3 16	170	29.31
1855	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	6 23	3 14	125	26.36 (26.26)
1856	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	6 24	2 15	100	54.00
1857	J.P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	6 23	2 14	150	43.20
1858	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	6 25	2 13	160	50.00
1859	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	4 25	2 17	140	48.32
1860	Judith P. Aylett J.P., P.H., & W.R.Aylett	4 25	2 15	100	47.14
1861	William R. Aylett** Patrick H. Aylett	19 11	6 6	105	50.67

* Judith Page Aylett - wife of Philip Aylett

* Patrick Henry Aylett - eldest son of Philip Aylett

* William Roane Aylett - second son of Philip Aylett

^{ca}Judith P. Aylett died in 1860.

Source: King William County Personal Property Records, 1851-1861, (MS. Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia).

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