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Robert E. Leitch

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WILLIAM EVELYN CAMERON:

A Biography

Submitted by:

Robert E. Leitch.

William Evelyn Cameron was born in Petersburg, Virginia, November 29th, 1842. His father, Walker Anderson Cameron, was a cotton broker, descended from Sir Ewan Lochiel, the celebrated chief of Clan Cameron in Scotland.

Among Cameron's distinguished progenitors were Benjamin Harrison, who settled in Virginia in 1630, and was Secretary to the Colony; Sir Dudley Diggs, Master of the Rolls to King Charles I; Colonel William Byrd of Westover; and Edmund Jennings, deputy-governor of the colony from 1706 to 1710.

The founder of the Cameron family in Virginia and North Carolina was the Rev. John Cameron (1770), a graduate of Aberdeen University, an Episcopal clergyman, and rector of old Blandford Church, Petersburg. (1)

Cameron's physical condition in childhood and youth was delicate. His early life was spent in the direction of study, with out-of-door sports for recreation. He developed into an omnivorous reader, becoming, later, a man of refined literary tastes. In fact, it is said that he was always keen to discuss the great classical writers and their works. (2)

His scholastic training was obtained at the school of Mr. Charles Campbell, of Petersburg, the historian of Virginia; the Petersburg school of Mr. Thomas S. Davidson; and subsequently, was two sessions at the North Carolina Military Academy at Hillsboro.

In 1859, when but seventeen years old, he was selected for a cadetship at West Point, and went west and enrolled at Washington University, St. Louis,

(1) Richmond Times-Dispatch. Jan. 26, 1927.

(2) Conversation with Dr. Arthur Kyle Davis, Petersburg, Va.

in order to obtain a preparatory course. After having studied but a short time at this institution, he became dissatisfied, and obtained employment on one or more of the steamers of the St. Louis and Memphis Pocket Company, and was so engaged at the commencement of the Civil War in the Spring of 1861.

Serving as drillmaster, he was present at Camp Jackson with the Missouri Minute Men when they were captured by General Lyon. He, however, escaped, in the confusion and left on the last boat that went South. In a few days young Cameron was in Virginia, and reported for duty, at Norfolk as a member of Captain John P. May's company, the City Guard, of Petersburg, Virginia. which, upon the organization of the twelfth Virginia regiment, became Company A of that regiment. He had been in camp but a few days when he was elected second lieutenant of Company D. In May, 1862, he was appointed adjutant of the regiment, and was with the command until he received in the battle of second Manassas, a wound which disabled him until the following December, when he reported for duty during the battle of Fredericksburg.

A few days after returning to his command, Lieutenant Cameron was detailed as brigade inspector of Mahone's brigade, and as such served until June 1, 1863, when he was commissioned as captain in the inspector-general's department. Being assigned to duty with Davis's brigade, of Heth's division, he remained in this capacity until the summer of 1864, participating in the battles from the Wilderness to the Weldon railroad.

In October, 1864, Captain Cameron was commissioned as assistant adjutant-general, and in this capacity returned to his old brigade (Mahone's), now under the command of General David A. Weisiger, and remained with it until it surrendered at Appomattox Court House.

(3) Bernard, War Talks of Confederate Veterans, all information on

Cameron's military career obtained from here.

This final retreat to Appomattox was eloquently described by Cameron, himself:

"Occupying the lines of Bermuda Hundred between the Appomattox and the James, Mahone's brigade was spared the sights of shame and horror that surrounded and filled the two devoted cities---Gethsemane had come---- and so throughout that dreadful week the old Brigade held on its steady way. The roadside swarmed with drooping forms, the signs of ruin strewed the weary path; organizations melted away and discipline gave way to license; dismay and panic seized on headless masses, whole corps were routed; whole divisions captured. High officers lost heart, and with it honor, and urged their troops to safety. The route grew fierce as the days went by, at last there was no army. But through it all- through hunger, weariness, and hopelessness- through all the demoralizing evidences of defeat- in the fact of the confident foe- this Brigade (Mahone's) marched on as though the war were young, as firm as when it held the pass in Martland, as self-reliant as when it rushed upon the flaming Crater, as ready to obey the words of Lee as though he still had ninety thousand men to do his will, and still a Jackson in the flank."⁽⁴⁾

After the war, returning to his native city, Captain Cameron started life anew. He found employment as local editor of a small daily paper founded by A. M. Keiley. This, after being suppressed as disloyal by General Canby, was succeeded by the "Index", of which he was city editor until 1866, when the "Norfolk Virginian" was founded and put under his editorial management. Called home the next year by the death of his father, he purchased the "Index", became its editor, and continued in this position until 1872, when he sold his interest, and became associated with Baker P. Lee in the editorial control of the "Richmond Enquirer".

(4) Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, p. 64 address at Opera House, Norfolk, July 31, 1876 on second Reunion of Mahone's Brigade, held on the anniversary of of the Battle of the Crater.

In the political battles of reconstruction, Captain Cameron was to the front with pen and voice, and was foremost in advocating the conservative policy, which resulted in July, 1869, in the election of Walker as governor, and the redemption of the state from the carpet-baggers. During the heated controversies of that period, he was involved in a difficulty with Judge Robert W. Hughes, and in the duel ensuing was badly wounded by a pistol shot. (5) In 1876, he was elected mayor of Petersburg, and held that office by a succession of elections for three terms.

Concerning the local campaign for offices in Petersburg an interesting note appeared in a newspaper of that time: it is as follows; "it is considered a good sign of reform in politics that all of our principal aspirants for municipal office are gentlemen who both profess and practice the strictest teetotalism in regard to the use of liquor." (6) However, it is a known fact that Cameron was a drinking man; in fact, it is said that he was never known to be absolutely sober at any public occasion. (7)

In 1879 he was one of those Democrats who declared in favor of a readjustment of the state debt, and shared in the excommunication pronounced by the state committee against the advocates of that policy. He clung to his convictions, did strenuous battle for them through the columns of the "Richmond Whig", and on the stump, and in 1880 was a Hancock elector on the ticket put out by the ostracized faction of the party. (8)

When the Re-adjuster Convention assembled in Richmond in June of 1881, the two leading candidates for the nomination for governor were Parson Massey of Albermarle, and William E. Cameron, Mayor of Petersburg. Massey was extremely

- (5) Tyler, Men of Mark in Virginia.
- (6) Richmond Dispatch, Wed. Feb. 23, 1876.
- (7) Conversation with Dr. Arthur Kyle Davis, Petersburg, Va.
- (8) Tyler, Op.cit.

popular throughout the State, but William Mahone, the political "boss" of the party, was understood to oppose his nomination, thus handicapping the former from the start.

At six o'clock on June 2nd, the nominations for Governor were made. After Massie was nominated, Col. J. P. Minetree, of Petersburg, next placed the name of Col. William E. Cameron in nomination. The mention of Cameron's name was received with laud applause.

The balloting commenced at about nine o'clock. The first ballot was marked by great confusion- the friends of Massey and Cameron contesting at every step where the slightest irregularity was suspected. The first ballot resulted as follows: Cameron, 272; Massey, 234; Groner 95½; Wise, 127; The second ballot showed a slight gain for Cameron, being: Cameron, 287; Massey, 245; Groner, 105; Wise, 105.

On the third ballot at 12:30 o'clock, the name of H. H. Riddleberger, of Shenandoah, was placed in nomination by Mr. Lindsay, of Norfolk, for governor.

W. F. Gaddings, a Republican and friend of Massey, made a stirring appeal for that candidate. He appealed to the friends of Massey to stick to their favorite and not yield one inch. He called upon the friends of Cameron and Mahone to withdraw their nomination. Shortly thereafter, the Convention adjourned until the following day.

The most turbulent scenes witnessed in the Readjuster Convention during its sessions characterized the deliberations of that body the next day. The nomination of Riddleberger the night previous at the conclusion of the

second ballot, was considered very inopportune, and at one time it looked as if that action was going to have an unfavorable effect on Cameron. There seemed to be an impression that Riddleberger's nomination was sprung upon the Convention by some of the friends of Cameron to prevent the defeat of that candidate, and to prevent any combination being made by Massey and other weaker aspirants. This, however, was denied by Col. Cameron's friends, who said that they did not fear defeat.

Mr. Lindsey, the delegate who sprung the nomination of Riddleberger on the convention, unquestionably did the wrong thing. The friendliest feeling, however, existed between that gentleman and Cameron, and there is little doubt that Cameron men were prepared to question the nomination in preference to Massey, whom some of Cameron's most influential leaders had antagonized. The Wise men, except those from Richmond city, also preferred Riddleberger to Cameron. The delegates who came to the convention committed to General Groner, of Norfolk, were also friendly to Cameron, and prepared to accept him as their second choice. That candidate's geographical claims- he being a southside man, no doubt had much to do with this feeling.

The tide of battle at the fourth ballot was turned from Massey to Cameron by Accomac County- a County which in the memorable Democratic Convention of 1877, stood for Mahone for governor first, last and all the time. That County cast twelve votes. As soon as it was announced by Dr. Richard Wise, a native of Accomac, that the county changed its vote from John S. Wise, another son of the former governor, to Cameron, a general break occurred all along the Groner and Massey lines. At this juncture the scene in the Convention was one of the wildest confusion. Men stood upon their seats and

yelled, calling for order and adjournment. The leaders of the Massey delegation appealed to the Convention to take a recess, and made every other motion for delay, in order to devise means for strengthening their rapidly breaking lines. The Cameron men, among whom were the oldest politicians in Virginia, saw their advantage and pushed it with all possible energy. A Mr. Seddon, a clerk in Auditor Massey's office, jumped upon a seat and loudly called upon the Massey delegates to stand firm. Finding that his voice was not heard, he walked among the delegates endeavoring to encourage and rally them. It was too late, however. The tide had been turned by the Accomac men. One representative of Mr. Massey arose and said he was ready, as were others of his friends, to make Cameron's nomination unanimous. This was about to be done when the sylph-like form of Senator Mahone glided on the stage and stood before the Convention. What was a moment before one seething, yelling mass of excited human beings, was converted into an orderly body of politicians. The Readjuster chief raised his long, bony hand in the air, and called upon the Convention to be perfectly quiet for one moment. He then requested that the Convention would not permit the ballot which was then in process of being closed, to be counted. He appealed to the assemblage to give to the Massey delegates the conference for which they had asked a few moments before. He called upon the Convention in the name of God, not to think of doing otherwise. A few voices were heard in the house arguing as to this course. The majority, however, tacitly concurred in the suggestion of their chieftain, but were evidently not unanimous in so doing. It seemed to be apparent that the object of this movement of Mahone's was to conciliate Mr. Massey and his friends.

The result of the fourth ballot was already a substantial nomination for Mr. Cameron, and the conference which was, after vain appeals by the Massey men previously conceded by the Senator's intervention, looked upon as shrewd, harmonizing tactics. It, however, had the desired effect. After a conference of about half an hour the Massey men returned to the house. The fourth ballot, which was interrupted by the tactics of Mahone, was then continued, but when summed up, Mr. Massey's friends, seeing that there was no chance of securing the nomination for him, gave up. Massie appeared upon the stage, and desired that the nomination of Mr. Cameron be made unanimous. This was done with a yell that lasted for nearly fifteen minutes. Hon. John F. Lewis, of Rockingham, was nominated for Lieutenant-governor and Captain Frank S. Blair of Wythe for Attorney-General. (9)

The Convention of the opposing party, the Funders, met in Richmond on August 6, 1881. The delegates appeared indifferent and apathetic until aroused by a stirring speech of Ned Dandridge of Winchester on behalf of Mayor John W. Daniel. The names of all other candidates were withdrawn, and Daniel was nominated by acclamation. James Barbour of Culpepper, the "Original Readjuster," was nominated for Lieutenant-Governor, and P. W. McKinney of Prince Edward, for Attorney-General. The Funder platform advocated "equality of right and exact justice to all men", "the maintenance of the public credit of Virginia", and the integrity of the public school system, for the education of both white and colored children". It called for "the cooperation of all Conservative -Democrats, whatever may have been or now are their views upon the public debt, in the election of the nominees of this

(9) Petersburg Index Appeal, June 3, 4, 1881. The account of this convention was condensed from the newspaper accounts.

Convention and in the maintenance of the supremacy of the Democratic party
(10)
in this State".

The "Richmond Whig" lost no time in pointing out the fact that
the Funder candidates were "all in a huddle, hardly out of sight and call of
Richmond."
(11) By their selection the Valley, Southwest and Tidewater had
been ignored and slighted. The Readjuster candidates, on the other hand,
might well be said to represent the Tidewater, Piedmont, Valley and Southwest.

The Richmond Dispatch, however, took a very different attitude
toward the nicely calculated balance of the Readjuster ticket when it said,
"there's Cameron, he's for the Democrats; and there's Lewis, he's for the
negroes; and there's Blair, he's for the Greenback lunatics"
(12)

The struggle between Cameron and Daniel was one of the most
spirited political campaigns in Virginia history. Both men were excellent
speakers, Cameron excelled in debate and Daniel in oratory. Several times
during the canvass they appeared together and engaged in joint debates.
Throughout the campaign the Readjuster emphasized the question of public
schools. Daniel was charged with the assertion that it would be better
for the State to burn the schools than to pass a tax bill which he feared would
lead to repudiation. The Readjusters, on the other hand, presented statis-
tics to show how they had encouraged and supported the public schools since
gaining control of the Legislature.

The campaign came to a close in November and resulted in the
election of Cameron by a majority of 11,716 in a total vote of 211,230.
The Readjusters were likewise successful in maintaining their control in
both houses of the Legislature. The issues in 1881 had been very much the

- (10) Blake, op.cit, pp. 187-8.
(11) Richmond Whig, Aug. 9, 1881.
(12) Pearson, Readjuster Movement in Virginia, p. 139.

same as in 1879 and the campaign resulted in a similar victory for the Readjusters. H. H. Riddelberger, a Readjuster, was elected United States Senator to succeed Hon. John W. Johnson, A new bench of judges was elected by the Legislature to the Supreme Court of Appeals, and, in addition, the Readjusters took charge of all the public institutions of the State which recently had been under the control of the Funder element.

In 1882, the Readjusters were at the zenith of their power. Their control of the State offices, the Legislature and the Courts gave them an opportunity to carry out the "high mission" to which they had been elected by the people. Chief among the legislative enactments was the Riddleberger Debt Law, a modified form of the Riddleberger Bill of 1880 which Governor Holliday had promptly vetoed. This act was approved by Gov. Cameron on February 14, 1882, and immediately went into effect. According to its provisions West Virginia was held responsible for one-third the principle and accrued interest, as of July 1, 1863, and certificates of credit were issued which were to be accounted for by the state of West Virginia. According to the official records of the second auditor's office, it was demonstrated that the debt principle, after all proper deductions had been made, was \$16,843,034.17. The interest due was placed at \$ 4,192,342.98, making the total debt, as of July 1, 1882, which should mature in not less than eighteen and not more than fifty years. These were to be exchanged for the various types of outstanding bonds and were to bear three per-cent interest in lawful money. In no other form whatsoever were payments of interest on the debt to be made. (13)

Many reforms were made in connection with taxation, the general tendency being to lighten the burden of the laborer and farmer and to reach out more definitely into the field of corporate wealth. The general property tax

was reduced from fifty to forty cents, and realty was reassessed at a reduction of \$ 13,000,000.00. Effective methods were employed in the collection of delinquent taxes and the adjustment of State claims against the railroads. As a result of these measures the Readjusters found themselves in possession of an abundance of funds which they proceeded to spend with considerable prodigality. (14)

Hardly less significant was the attitude of the Readjusters toward the humanitarian and charitable institutions of the State. Appropriations for the care of the insane were increased, making possible the removal of hundreds of lunatics from jails to asylums. Money was provided for the erection of an insane asylum for negroes at Petersburg, and agitation was begun for the construction of a second asylum for the whites at Staunton. Appropriations to disabled Confederate soldiers were continued, and Virginia's representatives at Washington were urged to support the Blair Education Bill which provided for Federal aid to the public schools of the several states.

Many other reforms were speedily enacted by the Readjusters. Prominent among these was the adoption of a constitutional amendment which abolished the poll tax as a prerequisite for voting. It also provided that any citizen of the State who since the adoption of this Constitution had engaged, either directly or indirectly, in a duel, would be disqualified both from voting and office-holding. Significant, too, was the abolition of the whipping post which had been used to degrade and disfranchise the negro. The State penitentiary was made self-sustaining and much needed aid was extended to both the State Agricultural and Mechanical College and the Virginia Military Institute. Legislation was passed to encourage and protect native industry, and many benevolent and fraternal organizations were chartered.

During the period of political supremacy the Readjusters enacted all of the major legislation which they had promised the people. Several factors attributed to their remarkable achievements. First and foremost was the dynamic leadership of General Mahone. As chairman of the State executive committee and chairman ex-officio of the State Central Committee he was the source and motive power of Readjuster activity. His position as United States Senator gained for him the favor and support of the Federal Administration, and enabled him to strengthen the Readjuster cause by the exercise of a vast patronage. The Richmond Whig served as the official organ of the Readjusters in disseminating information among the people and in gaining popular approval. To be sure, the Readjuster legislation was made possible because of a sympathetic Legislature, a friendly governor, and a liberal-minded judiciary. And it should be borne in mind that such a governor and Legislature were elected in 1881 because they championed the interests of a majority of the white people and negroes in the State.

The Readjuster legislation speaks for itself. The Riddleberger Debt Law was accepted by Funders as well as Readjusters, and approved by all the courts in which it was contested, including the Supreme Court of the United States.. The Readjusters deserve lasting credit, too, for their loyalty to the public schools of Virginia. In strong contrast to the apparent indifference of the Conservative leaders was their generous support of public education. In the field of charitable and humanitarian activities their progressive legislation far surpassed that of any previous period in Virginia history. These considerations, and others, would seem to add weight to the testimony

of a prominent writer, who, in 1930, declared that "under Mahone and the brilliant galaxy of men- Cameron, Riddleberger, Lewis, Paul, Wise, and others whom he gathered around him- the State of Virginia had the best administration it had had in years, and it has never had as good since from the standpoint of efficiency and economy."⁽¹⁵⁾

William Cameron was a brilliant man, an excellent writer and a forceful speaker. To Mahone more than any other person he was indebted for his election as Mayor of Petersburg and later as Governor of Virginia. Properly appreciating the favors which had been conferred upon him, Cameron was disposed to number Mahone among the greatest men that Virginia had produced. On one occasion, indeed, he is reported to have declared enthusiastically: "I wouldn't give the parings of Mahone's toenails for all these men." Small wonder, then, that it was afterwards said of Cameron's administration that, "he immortalized and canonized the toenails of Mahone."⁽¹⁶⁾ Even before the end of his term of office, however, a misunderstanding arose between the two men, largely because Cameron felt that Mahone was meddling in his affairs. The estrangement increased and by 1888 Cameron was numbered among Mahone's active opponents,

After serving four years in the gubernatorial seat Cameron returned to the private practice of law; he having been admitted to the bar in 1876 after a course of reading in a law office.

In 1892 he was appointed agent for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and later was named a member of the jury of awards of Liberal Arts and still later was selected to prepare a history of that great enterprise. His "History of the World's Fair", "The Columbian Exposition", and biographical works of Lee, Tyler, Wise, and others bear witness of the facility of his pen.⁽¹⁷⁾

(15) Blake, op.cit., p. 195.

(16) Ibid., p. 268

(17) Richmond Times-Dispatch, Jan. 26, 1927.

In 1896, Ex-Governor Cameron supported Palmer and Buckner in the presidential canvass, and made speeches throughout Virginia against the proposed free-coinage of silver. (18)

In 1901, he was nominated by the Democrats of Petersburg to represent that city in the Constitutional Convention of Virginia, and was elected without opposition. In this Convention he served as chairman of the committee on the executive department.

During the year 1908 he moved to Norfolk and became editor again of the "Norfolk Virginian", which post he held for seven years and left to assume the position of editor-in-chief of the "Virginian-Pilot".

In the later part of his life, his health began failing him, and he was prevented from active participation in business affairs.

Cameron died at the home of his son, George V. Cameron, in Louisa County, Virginia, on Tuesday, January 25, 1927. He was eighty-four years old, and had been in ill health for several months. At the time of his death he was the oldest of the then seven living ex-governors of Virginia. (19)

He was buried in historic Blanford Cemetery. The services were simple and the body of the aged warrior was escorted to his last resting place by his battle companions, members of A. P. Hill Camp, Confederate Veterans. Taps were sounded as the casket, covered with the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy, was lowered. (20)

Governor Cameron was a brilliant soldier, statesman and editor. The majority of Virginians did not always agree with him, but they never failed to give him credit for the highest patriotism and the greatest sincerity of purpose. It was men like Cameron who fired the drooping spirit of Virginia to rise and reach forward to a brighter and a richer future. (21)

- (18) Tyler, op.cit.
- (19) Richmond Times-Dispatch, Jan. 26, 1927.
- (20) Richmond Times-Dispatch, Jan. 28, 1927.
- (21) Richmond Times-Dispatch, editorial, Jan. 27, 1927.

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