William Shepperd Ashe
The Spirit of Eastern North Carolina
by Robert J. Cooke

In September 1861 Major William Ashe was in trouble again. As Assistant Quartermaster of the Confederacy in charge of all rail transportation east of the Mississippi River, he had tried to commandeer several badly needed locomotives and boxcars from the Western and Atlantic Railroad. In so doing he had encountered the wrath of Joe Brown, Georgia’s governor and a strong advocate of states’ rights.

As Ashe attempted to follow his orders to seize equipment, Governor Brown “...burst into fury. Curt telegrams warmed the wires to Richmond, and in a few hours Secretary of War [Judah P.] Benjamin was reading a crisp lecture on the sovereign status of Georgia.” Ashe tried to reason with the governor but was told, “If you seize our cars or engines, I will, by military force if necessary, make counter
seizures." 1 Instructions from Richmond by Quartermaster General Abraham C. Myers quickly changed Major Ashe's orders.

This was not the first time he found himself the center of controversy. In January, 1861, while in Washington, D.C., it was Ashe who instigated the capture of Forts Caswell and Johnston, located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, by sending a telegram to Wilmington's Committee of Safety. Later, it was he who caused a stir when, in an effort to obtain weapons for the newly-raised regiments, he threatened to take the firearms from the people. It was his way. He saw what needed to be done, then went at it with all his energy. And watch out if you stood in his way!

William Ashe not only had a way of riling people up through his actions, but also through his speeches. He was a gifted orator who early chose politics as a field of endeavor. He progressed from being a Polk presidential elector in 1844, to state senator, to representative in Congress. Along the way he made a few enemies, but many more friends. That was his way also. Just who was this man of such fervent beliefs?

William Shepperd Ashe was born on August 13, 1813, at Rocky Point (then a part of New Hanover County), North Carolina. His father Samuel was a prominent planter in the Lower Cape Fear. His mother was Elizabeth Shepperd, daughter of "...Colonel William Shepperd of Hawkins, who had been a zealous officer during the Revolution... serving in the provincial congresses and Legislature." His grandfather (also Samuel), was the first Chief Justice of North Carolina and was also Governor of the State. 2 He had several brothers and sisters, among them John Baptista, who would be elected to Congress from Tennessee; Thomas Henry and Richard Porter, both of whom would become "forty-niners" and migrate to California.

Ashe's early years were spent at the family's plantation in Rocky Point (The Neck), but when he was educated, it would be at one of the finest colleges in the country: Washington College, near Hartford, Connecticut.

After college he studied law under Judge John de Rosset Toomer and in January 1836 was admitted to the bar. Just a few short days earlier he had married Sarah Ann Greene, a descendant of the Granges of Brunswick County. 3 It appears that he was satisfied with married life, but unhappy with his career, because, according to his son Samuel, his "...social disposition...at variance with the exactions [sic] of a professional life, led him to abandon the practice of law..." Several biographies of Ashe indicate that he used his free time to read and study, mainly politics. He was drawn to the political arena and soon began to make a name for himself. Unlike his father, he had "...attached himself to the wing of the Republican party which became known as the Democratic party." 4

In 1846, Ashe was elected to the state senate, representing New Hanover County. It would be in those chambers that his political acumen would be shown. At this period throughout the country there was widespread debate on "internal improvements." Rivers needed dredging. Roads, canals and railway lines required maintenance to improve transportation. In the assembly there was a bill which would allow construction of the Piedmont Railroad from Danville, Virginia, to Charlotte, North Carolina. Senator Ashe was vehemently opposed to such a line, believing that it would siphon off the produce of the Western counties to either Virginia or South Carolina. He introduced a bill of his own, calling for the building of "a road [the North Carolina Railroad] from Charlotte to Goldsboro, connecting there with the road to Wilmington." Thus thwarted was the North-South road; goods would flow Eastward to

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3 Ashe, 30; Gault, 14-17. This union produced several offspring, including Samuel A'Court Ashe, historian and publisher of the Raleigh *News and Observer*. Young Samuel grew up on the family plantation as well. Originally owned by Edward Moseley, "The Neck" was so named because it was on a neck (or spit) of land surrounded by the Northeast Cape Fear River. Another son, John Grange, relocated to Texas and enlisted in the Confederate Army from that State. An infant daughter, Susan Grove, aged ten months, died on May 23, 1860. Another daughter, Ann Elizabeth (Miller) died in 1868. And yet another daughter, Mary Porter, was born in 1842 and died in 1865.
4 Ashe, 30-31. Ashe had been elected County Solicitor for the Lower Cape Fear region, but resigned shortly afterwards. See also *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 56.
North Carolina’s ports. One of Ashe’s strongest allies in this fight was another east coast Representative Edward Stanly (who would, during the Civil War, become the “Union” Governor of North Carolina). When the Ashe Bill came before the Senate in late January, 1849, the vote was a dead tie. The Speaker, Calvin Graves, cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of the road. William Ashe may well be called the “father of the North Carolina railroad.”

In 1848, Ashe was elected both to the State Senate and to the National Congress. Choosing to move to the capital city of Washington, D.C., he again represented New Hanover County. He was a Democrat, but one who would always push for “internal improvements.” This was not always the party line! At one point, when a Federal appropriations bill (for North Carolina river improvements) was to be voted on, he influenced many of his Democratic associates to absent themselves when the bill was “... voted through by his friends among the Whigs.”

Ashe served three terms in Congress. Elected in 1849, he served through 1854 and during that time “... acted with the ultra-southerners in opposition to the compromise measures of that sectional crisis.” The Compromise of 1850 was passed during his tenure, but he had little to do with it for he felt that secession was the best course for the South. Indeed, he would later say the South made a mistake in not seceding in 1850. In 1852 he secured the appointment of James Dobbin (a longtime friend) as President Franklin Pierce’s Secretary of the Navy. Ashe then served on the Naval Committee and was also chairman of the Committee on Elections.

One of his actions in Congress benefited the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad; he pushed for an extension of the time allowed to pay the duties on imported iron. In 1854, while still a Congressman, Ashe was elected president of the railroad. This caused something of a stir. Many felt he should resign from Congress, but he refused to do so. Shortly after being elected, he made a trip to England, to make “... a very advantageous arrangement in regard to its bonded debt.” The English market was reticent about U.S. railroad stocks, as there had been several cases of company officials stealing money from the roads.

Ashe was not merely a figurehead president. He took an active role in the running of the railroad and set about making railroad travel more comfortable for the passengers. Most roads of the times gave scant attention to comfort. With Florida’s Senator David L. Yulee, another avid secessionist, he “... built up a large Florida travel while fostering local business by every means in his power.” Ashe and Yulee discussed “sleeper-car” service (several “sleeping cars” were run on the W&W night trains), but this innovation would have to wait until after the Civil War. In an effort to promote more business, he established regular steamship runs between Wilmington and New York. He also arranged with the North Carolina Railroad to have freight trains run directly from Charlotte to Wilmington. Freight did not need to be transferred. The produce of the Western counties flowed through the Port City, just as he had envisioned as a state senator some ten years earlier. That was his way: to help the economy of his region. It worked.

Ashe was not afraid to make decisions. In 1856, in a letter to his Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Sewall L. Fremont, he directed that the engineer lay off all unnecessary hands, as revenues were declining. “The immediate curtailment of forces in our shops,” he wrote, “must be made. I approve of your plan of compressing two road Masters, but... you had better dismiss your chief carpenter. I explained [sic] fully to Capt. Green my policy about... monthly allowances... I directed him to commence it immediately.”

In 1858 Ashe again opposed the Piedmont

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7 Ashe, 32-33. Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1996 (Alexandria, Va.: CQ Staff Directories Inc., 1997), 592. During his time in Washington, Ashe’s mother (who had been living with him) died. An infant daughter, probably Sarah Green, also died while Ashe was a Congressman. See also the Wilmington Daily Journal, August 2, 1853. Ashe represented the Seventh District, comprised of Cumberland, New Hanover, Robeson, Sampson, Duplin and Onslow Counties.

8 Ashe, 33.
9 Ashe, 32-33.
10 Ashe to Fremont, undated letter, Samuel A’Court Ashe Collection, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina. This letter was probably written in 1856. “Capt. Green” was likely the road’s treasurer, James S. Green.
connection proposed by Governor John Motley Morehead. Such a line would have diverted traffic from the W&W to Virginia. To help insure it's defeat he deferred his business interests, ran, and was again elected to the state senate. He was successful and the line was not completed until 1864. 11 That year also brought the breakup of “through” service, with the Virginia roads complaining that they were not getting their share of the profits. Sectionalism probably also played a part in the breakup.

With the tensions of the times, Ashe found it hard to stay away from politics. He was chosen to be a delegate to the Democratic National Convention (where he was to be nominated for Vice President), but “... the course of events at Charleston rendered it inexpedient... and in the crisis that followed he became one of the most urgent secessionists in North Carolina.” 12 It was at this convention that Breckenridge and Lane were the choice of the Southern Democrats, while Stephen Douglas was the Northern wing’s selection. This split in the party all but insured Lincoln’s election.

William Ashe may well have been present when the Cape Fear Minute Men, a volunteer militia organization, fired a volley on December 21, 1860, saluting South Carolina’s secession. He was definitely in Raleigh early in the new year, heading a delegation from Wilmington, which tried to persuade the Governor to take possession of Forts Johnston and Caswell guarding the mouth of the Cape Fear River. After informing Governor John W. Ellis of the turmoil in Wilmington, Ashe repeated the rumor that the revenue cutter, Harriet Lane, was headed for the area. The Governor remained unconvinced and refused to order out the militia. Returning home, Ashe found that dissolution meetings were being held nearly every night. He became a member of the town’s “Committee of Safety,” an organization styled on the earlier Revolutionary Committees of the same name. These men, most of the town’s leading citizens, were ready to act on a moment’s notice. 13

On January 8, 1861, the spark intended to inflame the area was received by the Committee in the form of a telegram from Washington, D.C. It was from Ashe and it warned that “... a United States Revenue ‘Cutter with fifty men and eight guns’ was on its way to Fort Caswell.” It was on the basis of this telegram that the Militia Companies of Wilmington were assembled and sent to take possession of the forts. The cutter never appeared and the forts were returned to their Ordnance Sergeants, only to be taken after the state officially seceded from the Union. 14

Secession in North Carolina in May 1861 brought the community together. That year Ashe was selected to be a member of the State Convention and was one of the leaders who took the State out of the Union. Shortly after, he was prevailed upon by President Jefferson Davis to give up his seat and take a commission in the Confederate Army. Davis was a friend of his and needed someone familiar with railroads to be in charge of transportation. Ashe was commissioned a Major in the Quartermaster Department in July 1861 with the responsibility of all rail transportation east of the Mississippi River.

One of Ashe’s biographers wrote that he had “great capacity.” That was a nineteenth-century term for a “workaholic.” Consider that Ashe had been working on a state constitution, was an officer in the Army with no military background, had a great responsibility in the Quartermaster Department, and was still president of the W&W. He soon set up an office in Richmond and “[W]ent to work with a will. As unofficial field assistants, he selected railroad officials of known ability. He introduced printed transportation requests... He induced the Virginia Central to operate daily through trains in each direction between the capital and its western terminus... [a]nd in October there appeared some badly needed regulations to govern the transit of the sick and wounded from the army to the hospitals at Richmond.” 15

Ashe found himself acting as intermediary between railroad officials and military officers. In September 1861 Richmond had tried to send “... 1,000 barrels of flour to the front, but the Richmond agent of the Virginia Central complained that the authorities were holding practically all of the rolling stock... at Manassas... that only two cars remained in the... yards, and that all his freight depot was completely blocked. There instantly exploded a telegraphic chain reaction of charges, denials, and excuses, to and from Jefferson Davis, General Johnston... Judah P. Benjamin, Commissary General L.B. Northrop, Quartermaster General Myers, and the local officers at Staunton.” Ashe was quietly working on the problem, meeting with the parties involved.

11 Powell, 57.
12 Ashe, 34.
14 The Southerner, January 26, 1861.
15 Black, 66. Ashe’s assistant in Wilmington was Stephen D. Wallace, General Ticket Agent for the W&W. Another assistant was William H. Shaw.
He was finally able to sort out the tie-up. His report indicated an early grasp of one of the major problems that would plague Confederate transportation right up to the end of the war. There was a shortage of rolling stock (boxcars, flatcars and passenger cars) and a deficiency of storage facilities. Ashe indicted the Government for not scheduling shipments and the railroads for not unloading shipments promptly. Ashe was the right man for a tough job. That was his way.\(^\text{16}\)

In September 1861 Major Ashe was sent south to obtain several locomotives and boxcars. He had been given orders by his boss, Quartermaster General Abraham C. Myers, to lease or to seize the equipment. As many of the roads had no extra stock, he settled upon Georgia's Western and Atlantic road. The problem was that the War Department "had overlooked the fact that the [railroad] was owned by the State of Georgia. Ashe met a sharp rebuff."\(^\text{17}\) Ashe's orders were changed: Leave the road alone! It was a scene that would be repeated again and again during the war. When the Davis administration was confronted by state authorities, it consistently backed down. It was late in the war before Richmond exercised the power of seizure of strategically important rail lines. No such difficulties existed in the North. Early in 1862, the U.S. Military Railroad system was created. Any road deemed important to the war effort could, and would, be seized by the army.

Ashe's next assignment was an inspection tour of the southern roads, making recommendations and cost estimates. He recommended that the connection between Selma, Alabama, and Meridian, Mississippi, be completed. And now, seeing things from a different perspective, he wanted the Piedmont connection to be finished, though he had fought so hard against it earlier. Now it was the Governor of North Carolina, Zebulon Vance, who stood fast against building the road. Vance believed that if the interior road was built, Richmond would not be as concerned about the W&W. One of the most important recommendations that Ashe made was for appropriations to be made for "...establishing works to re-roll iron and manufacture locomotives." His requests went unheeded and the "T" rails of the southern roads, unable to handle the large volume of traffic, soon wore out and were not easily replaced.\(^\text{18}\)

In December, 1861, Ashe was in Tennessee conferring with Campbell Wallace, the president of the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad. Several bridges in the area had been burned by Union sympathizers, and Wallace requested that the Government repay him "...for work done for the Confederate States." He went on, "Colonel Ashe came along: I gave him the same answer, and he assured me our money should be paid, and on his arrival in Richmond telegraphed me to send ... for our money ... . I was astonished to receive by telegraph from him the news that Colonel Myers not only repudiated Ashe's contract with the roads, but it would be days before he would be able to send me money."\(^\text{19}\)

This misunderstanding between Ashe and Myers led indirectly to Ashe's departure from the Quartermaster Department. "Ashe was manifestly dropping from the picture. Discouraged by the lack of cooperation from the carriers, and particularly by his superiors' irritating habit of taking his responsibilities upon themselves, he was in fact losing all interest. . . . In April, 1862 he withdrew from the frustrations of Richmond[.]"\(^\text{20}\)

Ashe desired a more active role in the war. He saw his state threatened as the coastal areas began to fall under the control of the Federals. Late in August 1861 General Ambrose E. Burnside's Federals captured forts on the Outer Banks and threatened a move into the interior. Ashe suggested the coast might be better protected if it were divided into three areas of command. Brooking no dissent from citizens, he kept Davis apprised of suspected Union collaborators. Ashe recommended they be sent to the prison at Salisbury.

As he had feared, the town of New Bern fell early in 1862. Major Ashe requested permission to raise a company of light artillery. General Robert E. Lee had other plans for Ashe. Lee needed firearms for the newly raised North Carolina regiments and wrote to General Theophilus H. Holmes, located at Goldsboro: "I am informed by Major Ashe, of North

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 67. Unfortunately, the "traffic-snarl" continued for most of the year.


\(^{18}\) Linda Lucille Crust, ed., *The Papers of Jeff Davis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 7:430, 439. It is a fact that not one new "T" rail was produced in the South during the war.

\(^{19}\) *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion* (Harrisburg, Pa.: National Historical Society, 1985), SI, 7:768. Wallace apparently gave the status of Colonel regardless of the official rank.

\(^{20}\) Black, 70.
Carolina, that large numbers of country rifles and other arms can be collected in that State, and I have directed him to get all that he can."

Thus was set in motion another incident that would find Ashe in trouble. There were not yet enough arms being brought through the blockade, so Ashe was sent to North Carolina to procure them. Soon after there appeared in the newspapers an advertisement announcing that agents would be sent throughout the State "...to borrow, purchase, and if necessary, impress all the arms now in the hands of private citizens." A friend in Raleigh wrote, "Your advertisement for arms and particularly for impressing them came in for its share of comments." Repercussions were felt in Richmond as the Confederate Congress asked President Davis "...whether he has authorized any person... in North Carolina...to seize and 'impress' the private arms of the citizens[.]" The resolution was withdrawn only when the Governor of North Carolina, Henry T. Clark, issued a proclamation which read: "Any attempt to seize the arms of our citizens is at variance with the Constitution, and in opposition to the declared policy of the government, which makes it the duty of every citizen to keep and bear arms and protects the arms of the militia even from execution for debt." One author has written that "[t]he proposition greatly excited some of the editors and politicians who were not in sympathy with the Confederate government, and who pretended to see in it a purpose to disarm the people and deprive them of their constitutional right to carry arms."

A few days later, General Lee wrote to Holmes: "I am advised of the inability of the State of North Carolina to arm the regiments now in camp at Raleigh.

"The rifles sent you...I suggest that you place them in the hands of the flanking companies... and give the balance muskets or such private arms as can be procured... If you can use them and desire it, I can order a number of pikes to be sent to you. Owing to the lack of fire-arms some of these have been sent to nearly every army in the field, and, if well handled and wisely distributed, will undoubtedly do good service."

22 Ibid., SL, 2:1549.
24 Ashe, 34.

Pikes for the Army! Although they were issued on a minor scale, the need for such medieval weapons faded when English rifles began to arrive through the blockade.

Early in June 1862 Ashe officially resigned from the Quartermaster Department. While remaining available to help transport troops, he stated that he was leaving so that he might help defeat "...that miserable traitor Stanly." Edward Stanly had been appointed Governor of North Carolina by President Abraham Lincoln, but never gained the support of the people. Stanly resigned in 1863 and returned to California. That summer, Ashe was "authorized...to raise a legion of infantry, artillery and cavalry, to be commanded by himself." The regiment was never raised.

In September, Ashe was occupied at the salt works on Wrightsville Sound. That day Ashe was "cheerful, active and vigorous." It was there that he received word that a son "with [Stonewall] Jackson's
corps had been taken prisoner. Ashe quickly made his way to Wilmington and commandeered a railroad hand car. He was still president of the W&WRR. He began to make his way home to Rocky Point. He knew the south-bound mail train had left Weldon some hours before, but he was certain he could make it to the North East (present-day Castle Hayne) siding before the train did. What he did not know was that the train had experienced problems. The engine was switched to a faster one recently purchased from the Seaboard and Roanoke. Neither the engine nor the hand car had headlights. Just past the siding, the mail train smashed into the hand car, "... picking it up on the cowcatcher. The others who were with Mr. Ashe on the hand-car had got off and escaped. He alone was hurt." When he was finally found, he was unrecognizable. In addition to other injuries, his "... left thigh was broken—his right leg shattered below the knee, and his right foot almost crushed off." Ashe was brought back to Wilmington, but there was little the doctors could do for him. His right leg was amputated below the knee, but as The Wilmington Journal reported, "[from the terrible nature of the injuries, it is evident that the case must be critical in the extreme."  

A few days later, the Journal again reported: "Mr. Ashe met with a terrible accident on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad . . . being struck by the down mail train, and he [was] so frightfully injured as to render recovery almost hopeless. He lingered, however, until last night about eight o'clock, when he passed off quietly and calmly . . . from sheer exhaustion."  

The paper editorialized: "In the mighty revolution in which we are now engaged[,] his efforts were early, efficiently, and patriotically devoted. In this, as in all other political movements in our State for the last twenty years, the mighty magic of his mind was realized . . . it may be said with truth that he was the master spirit of eastern North Carolina."

In a later editorial the Journal wrote that "... we shall seldom look upon his like again; nor can this community and the State . . . soon cease to mourn the loss of the noble, generous, big-hearted gentleman, the ardent patriot and the useful citizen."  

William Shepperd Ashe was buried in the family cemetery at Rocky Point. His wife, Sarah Ann, lived less than a year after his death and is buried by his side.

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28 Ibid.
29 The Wilmington Journal, 13 September 1862.
30 Ashe, 35.
31 Sarah Ann died 8 July 1863 at her residence at the age of 48. Her daughter Mary wrote in her diary about her invalid mother and a 'young sister,' who was "delicate." Mary died in Fayetteville in June 1865. Her delicate sister (most likely Sarah William Ashe), lived until the ripe old age of 94! See the Confederate Veteran, 38 (1938), 421.
Ashe's tombstone and that of his wife, Sarah Ann, are located at the Ashe Family Cemetery near Rocky Point. The cemetery is on private property.