WILMINGTON'S GENTEEEL GENERAL: 
WILLIAM MACRAE 
by Susan Taylor Gerdes

William MacRae was born in Wilmington on the ninth of September, 1834. He was the seventh of nine sons of Alexander MacRae, president of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad.1 As a teenager, William left his home, which was located on what is now the site of Saint Mary's Catholic Church, and went to receive his formal education in Philadelphia.2 Upon graduation, he was employed as a civil engineer surveying the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad. He was working in that capacity in Monroe when Fort Sumter was bombarded and he immediately enlisted in the Monroe Light Infantry.3

Though MacRae had no formal military training, perhaps his ancestry predisposed him to excel on the battlefield. His very surname means "Son of Fortune" and had been given to one of his brawny forefathers in Medieval Scotland following a particularly successful battle.4 Two of William's great-uncles died fighting for the Pretender at Culloden. His father, General Alexander MacRae, fought in the War of 1812, published a book on soldiery,5 led a government expedition through Texas,6 and at age seventy, re-enlisted to fight in the Civil War. He was the oldest officer in the Confederacy.7 All of William MacRae's eight brothers served at one time in the army or navy. One of them was already in the army when the war began and felt obligated to fight for the Union. He and his siblings not only fought on opposite sides, but in one battle, face to face.8

The combination of his heritage and the charismatic qualities that were uniquely his own made William MacRae a natural military leader. Soon after enlisting, he formed his own company and was commissioned captain of the 15th Regiment, to which his command had been attached. The tall, attractive, blue-eyed Scot handled his troops exceptionally well and was said to have the ability of instilling more fight into them than any other officer in the Army, John B. Gordon excluded. A member of MacRae's regiment was quoted as saying, "He could place his command in position quicker and infuse more of his fighting qualities into his men than any officer I ever knew. His presence with his troops seemed to dispel all fear and inspire everyone with a desire for the fray."9

In February 1863, MacRae was appointed colonel and was assigned to the command of the wounded General Kirkland's Brigade at Cold Harbor, Virginia. MacRae joined them just as they were moving out of camp on the border of Petersburg to escort wagon trains bringing in supplies. The preceding temporary commanders had been slack in their discipline resulting in a general

Continued on Page 6
PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This month marks the thirtieth birthday of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society. On Sunday afternoon, May 4th, after our annual meeting, we will have a reception in the Incorpators’ Garden celebrating this fact and also honoring the recipients of the Clarendon Award and the Society Cup.

The Clarendon Award is given annually for outstanding contribution and preservation of history of the Lower Cape Fear, preferably through historical writing, published during the preceding calendar year.

To commemorate our thirtieth year, the Clarendon Award Committee, (Walser Allen; chairman, Leslie Boney, Diane Cashman, John Debnam) recommended, and the Board approved, that the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society present a new award to be called the Society Cup. This award is to be given in recognition of meritorious and outstanding contribution to the aims and work of the Society, and/or the appreciation and interpretation of the history of Wilmington, and the region of the Lower Cape Fear. This award is to be presented, honoris causa, not more often than annually at the discretion of the Directors of the Society.

As I think back on this past year, the first thing that comes to mind is the willingness, cooperation, and enthusiasm that each board member and committee chairman has shown in performing their duties. This has certainly made the president’s duties easier. We have been successful with our Candlelight Tour, Wassail Bowl, membership drive, and Historic Wilmington Tour. These are our chief sources of income and projects that we need to continue and enlarge in order to achieve the objectives and purposes of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.

This year we have done an in-depth long range study for the Society, under the capable leadership of Captain Frank Conlon. The Board has reviewed the state of the Society and developed a plan that we hope will be helpful in guiding us in our future activities. It has been a pleasure to be your president and I thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Jean Anne Sutton

* * *

GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY

The Society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts:

GIFTS TO THE ARCHIVES

Mrs. Joseph W. Hooper, Sr.
Xeroxed copy of the memoirs of Louise DuBrutz Reston Bolles.

Mrs. Rose Allen Picot
Genealogical papers compiled by Mrs. Picot on the Allen and Banks families of Wilmington.

Dr. and Mrs. John Cashman
Duplin County Places, Past and Present, by Leon R. Sikes.
GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY
Continued from Page 2

The North Carolina Historical Review—Volume LXII,
Numbers 1, 2, and 3; Volume LXIII, Number 1.
From Currituck to Calabash—Pilkey
Fourteen slides of Wilmington historic properties.
Mona Smalley and Crockett Hewlett
Between the Creeks Revised: Masonboro Sound,
1735-1985 by Crockett Hewlett and Mona Smalley.
Leslie N. Boney, Jr.
Xeroxed copy of Wilmington and Smithville, 1848-
1900, by Dr. Walter Gilman Curtis.
Ruth Walker
Amazing Grace: A History of Grace Methodist Church,
Wanda S. Campbell
1850 Census of Bladen County.

GIFTS TO THE LATIMER HOUSE

The Society encourages all donations which add to
the historical interest of the Latimer House as well as
those that keep it running smoothly. The items below
have been generously donated during the past year.

Mrs. Raymond H. Holland
Beaten biscuit press.
Mr. and Mrs. James H. Mann
Set of 10 leather bound books: The South in the
Building of the Nation.
Mrs. Carolyn Hall, Mr. Raymond Holland, Jr., Mary
Wright Cantwell
Papier-mache table with mother-of-pearl inlay; papier-
mache box with mother-of-pearl inlay; black lacquered
box with mother-of-pearl inlay; two kitchen molds.
Dr. and Mrs. John L. Hazlehurst
Two candelabra and candles.
Mrs. Merle Chamberlain
Indian Throw.
Mrs. Sarah Hicks
Towels.
Mrs. Lucille Degenhardt
Two brandy glasses.
Mrs. Diane Cashman
Electric coffee pot.
Mrs. Marion Lyons
Electric broom.

Emily Sloan, Corresponding Secretary

MORE GIFTS, PLEASE

The response to our latest plea was gratifying. See if
you can help us out again.
The Gracious Department
Volunteer docents, period garden furniture and
ornaments.
The Practical Department
A tablecloth (72 x 48), serving trays, a heavy duty electrical
cord.

Stanley Brooks, Development Chairman

A SPECIAL THANKS

The Editor of the Bulletin wishes to express gratitude to Dr. Alan D. Watson for
the exhaustive research and articulate expression evinced in his article, "Timothy
Bloodworth," which was featured in the previous issue. It delighted local re-
searchers and will be welcomed by Mr. Bloodworth's descendants who periodi-
cally travel to Wilmington to gather infor-

mation about their famous ancestor.

We look forward to publishing more of

Dr. Watson's work in the future.

The Lower Cape Fear in Springtime:

"Nothing can be finer
than the banks of this
river; a thousand
beauties both of the
flowery and sylvan tribe
hang over it and are
reflected from it with
additional lustre."

—Janet Schaw, 1775.
Enemy's Loss

Price Artillery
Regimental Flags
Prisoners, 2400
Killed and Wounded, 400

Rail Road

Enemy's Battery

Obstructions of Trees and Brush

Cooke's No. 2

Merrill's No. 2

Cooke's Brigade No. 1

Merrill's Brigade No. 1
Continued from Page 1

loss of morale and alertness among the men. MacRae characteristically took full control and the laxity and grumbling were quickly replaced with “absolute faith in the Commander.”

MacRae fought at Malvern Hill with a regiment of 300 and left the battle with only 35; a colonel and six captains killed. At Bristoe Station, they were subjected to such terrific fire that “their lines were mowed down like grain before a reaper.” The Battle of Fredericksburg resulted in the death of nearly half his men, but MacRae held his ground, thus earning himself the nickname, “Fighting Billy MacRae.”

In addition, the 15th North Carolina fought in the Seven Days Battles, Second Manassas, and Sharpsburg. Their successes prompted one of his colleagues to write, “If there was any hard work or hard fighting to be done, MacRae’s Brigade was appointed to the task.”

On at least one occasion, the fighting became a little too hard. At some very idle moment while encamped in Northern Virginia during the winter of 1863-64, MacRae’s men must have decided to sharpen their skills with a snowball fight. At first, all was fun and games, but eventually the sense of competition became too fierce. Snowballs full of rocks started being hurled back and forth and before it could be stopped, the not-so-mock battle had left many of the men bruised and bleeding. It was a strange little wartime episode, but one so traumatic that one of the participants, years later, wrote: “The resulting bitterness among the men took time and comradeship, battles, privation and sufferings to destroy.”

On June 22, 1864, at the youthful age of 29, William MacRae became an acting Brigadier General, even though his position was not made official until November 4th of that year. His elation was no doubt tempered by his family’s realistic attitude to rank and privilege which was echoed in a letter from Walter MacRae to another of William’s brothers, Donald. It was dated March 26, 1863, and read: “No one down here knows what General . . . intended to do, although the papers confidently assert that he accomplished his purpose. These big generals don’t always have such deep laid plans as people give them credit for.”

However, General William MacRae quickly proved himself worthy of his rank. Walter Clark, a member of his new brigade, wrote of the “gallant William MacRae” who “changed the expression of the whole command in less than two weeks and gave the men infinite faith in him and in themselves which was never lost, not even when they grounded arms at Appomattox.”

MacRae’s most dramatic service occurred at the Battle of Reams Station, which took place on August 25, 1864 at a location ten miles southwest of Petersburg, Virginia. Union forces had chosen that as the place to destroy the Weldon Road Railroad, which was Robert E. Lee’s main line of communication with the South.

At daylight on the morning of the 25th, General Wade Hampton marched his cavalry and driven the Federal cavalry before him at all points. A first major assault occurred at two in the afternoon under the command of General A. P. Hill. Hill’s men fought well, but were repulsed. At five o’clock, three North Carolina brigades tried again. This time, General MacRae was one of the commanders. The other brigades were led by Generals John R. Cooke and James H. Lane.

As Lane’s and Cooke’s men made their way through fallen tree limbs that had been cut and sharpened by Union soldiers, MacRae positioned his brigade at the edge of a pine thicket about three hundred yards from

Record of General MacRae’s promotion on November 4, 1864. (The actual certificate is a part of the Veterans’ Records of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.)
the breastworks to be assaulted. As Lane’s men began to draw fire, MacRae’s brigade emerged from the thicket cheering loudly and advancing towards the enemy. Though the Union soldiers opened tremendous fire, MacRae’s men lined up in a straight and unbroken formation. Without firing a gun, they mounted the entrenchments and positioned themselves among their dazed enemies. The other two brigades quickly finished working their way through the sharpened limbs and also crossed the embankment. General Hampton’s men began to attack the Union Army from the rear, at which point they abandoned the field in confusion.

“MacRae’s Sharpshooters,” a group handpicked and trained by the General, opened fire on the retreating columns of the enemy. One of them was Wilmingtonian, W. P. Oldham, who according to the one witness, “sighted one of the guns repeatedly, and when he saw the effect of his accurate aim upon the disordered masses in front, was so jubilant that General MacRae, with his usual quiet humor, remarked, ‘Oldham thinks he is at a ball in Petersburg.’”

The Federal loss in the Battle of Reams Station was between 600 and 700 men killed and wounded. Over 2,000 prisoners and eleven pieces of artillery were taken. The Confederate loss was small and fell principally upon Lane’s Brigade. The following letter promptly made its way to Raleigh.

“I have frequently been called upon to mention the services of North Carolina soldiers in this army, but their gallantry and conduct were never more deserving of admiration than in the engagement at Reams Station on the 25th ultimo.

“The brigades of Generals Cooke, MacRae, and Lane ... advanced through a thick abatis of felled trees, under a heavy fire of musketry and artillery, and carried the enemy’s works with a steady courage that elicited the warm commendation of their corps and division commanders, and the admiration of the army.

“If the men who remain in North Carolina share the spirit of those they have sent to the field, as I doubt not they do, her defense may securely be trusted to their hands.

I am with great respect,
Your obedient servant,
R. E. Lee, General.”

In April 1865, when Lee and his tiny, tattered army were attempting to make their way to the mountains, MacRae and his brigade covered the retreat near Farmville. Nearing Appomattox, where preparations for surrender had already been made, MacRae attacked and drove off Union brigades which had been besieging Lee’s wagon trains. This fighting constituted the last battle of the war. MacRae was also the last to stack arms and surrender at Appomattox. His rank and file amounted to 442.

Despite the fact that during the course of the war, General MacRae had lost at least one horse, his hat, and his sword to gunfire, he himself returned to Wilmington in good health. After a brief rest, he accepted a position as General Engineer and Superintendent of the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad. Several years later, he moved to Georgia to supervise the Macon and Brunswick Rail-

road. His success in the world of business paralleled his rapid military promotions and soon he became Manager and Chief Engineer of the vast Western and Atlantic Railroad. 22

Tragically, William MacRae died February 11, 1882 of pneumonia at the age of 47. He was visiting in Augusta, Georgia at the time of his death. His funeral was held at Saint James Church, with burial following at Oakdale. 23 MacRae was eulogized as a “man of fine physique as well as professional attainments. As a civil engineer and manager, he had no superior.” 24

But certainly the most eloquent eulogy was delivered eight years later, when Major Charles M. Stedman, who had been a member of MacRae’s Brigade, delivered a Memorial Day speech in Wilmington entitled, “A Sketch of the Life and Character of General William MacRae.” After chronicling MacRae’s life, Stedman concluded: “Nature had endowed him with a type of personal courage which made him absolutely indifferent to danger, and his calmness amidst a hurricane of shot, shell, and musketry was as great as when seated at his breakfast table in his tent or reviewing his command at a dress parade. He made all around him brave. It mattered not how appalling the fire, how terrific the storm of death which swept a field of battle, his presence always steadied the men, who seemed to imbibe his spirit. I know not how to characterize this quality unless it be termed the ‘mesmerism of bravery.’” 25

FOOTNOTES
1 The Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C., April 28, 1868.
4 Atlanta Constitution, (“The Clan MacRae Held an Interesting Reunion at the Exposition”), November 10, 1895.
5 Alexander H. MacRae, The Soldier’s Instructor (Fayetteville, N.C., 1825).
7 The Weekly Star, Wilmington, N.C., September 7, 1888.
8 James Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1916), 100.
9 Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, 295.
10 The William Laurence Saunders (1835-1891) Papers, Raleigh, N.C., Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1981.
11 Saunders Papers.
13 Saunders Papers.
14 Charles M. Stedman, from records of the North Carolina Collection (Chapel Hill), University of North Carolina Library.
16 The North Carolina Collection, Chapel Hill.
17 Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, 295.
19 Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, 354.
20 Walter Clark, Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War (Goldsboro, N.C.: Nash Brothers, 1901), I. 471.
21 Saunders Papers.
23 Oakdale Cemetery Records, Wilmington, North Carolina.
24 Augusto Chronicle, February 12, 1882.