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A NOTE ON GOVERNOR GEORGE F. DREW

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER *

FOR THE PROPONENTS of the legend of the "Lost Cause" George F. Drew ranks high in the galaxy of heroes as the "Redeemer," whose election as governor in 1876 saved Florida from the "Radical" Republicans, and restored "home rule" to the native white population. Of course, many Floridians had known during the 1876 election campaign that Drew was a New Hampshire native, that he had been a Unionist in Georgia during the war years, and that he was only recently converted to the Conservative-Democratic cause, after supporting Ulysses S. Grant for President in 1868. Nor was it any secret that the United States Court of Claims had awarded him a cash settlement for cotton which had been confiscated by General Sherman's army and that such claims were only paid to Unionists who could prove their unswerving loyalty to the United States between 1861-1865. All this was enough to convince Conservative-Democrat Edwin W. L'Engle that, even though Drew could probably be elected, he would not be much better than a "Radical."¹ The Republican Tallahassee *Sentinel* raged that "Mr. Drew was nominated for the Union flavor that his record might give the 'Lost Cause'."²

Despite the general acquaintance with Drew's wartime status, it is doubtful that many of his supporters in 1876 and certainly his later admirers knew much about his specific activities. The beginning of hostilities in 1861 found Drew in Columbus, Georgia, running a sawmill from which the Confederate government was supplied with lumber. Later in that year he began making salt near St. Andrews Bay in West Florida. This business was abandoned when Federal raiding parties destroyed his equipment in 1862. After the dissolution of his salt-making enterprise, Drew sold his mill in Columbus and moved to Adams Station in Lee County, Georgia. At this point on the South-

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1. Edwin W. L'Engle to Edward M. L'Engle, May 19, 1876, L'Engle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
2. Tallahassee *Sentinel*, June 10, 1876.

western Railroad between Smithville and Albany, he began another sawmilling venture, and he also owned and operated the depot, which was sometimes thereafter called Drew's Mills.

Although he furnished lumber to the Confederate government from this new mill just as he had earlier in Columbus, Drew's Union proponents pointed out that he had never served in the Confederate army and had never subscribed to a Confederate loan. Beyond that, he allegedly had expressed bitter opinions about the "rebel" cause and even planned to cripple the Confederacy by volunteering to lead some Union general through southwest Georgia to cut off supplies to Lee's forces in Virginia. Drew also advocated arming Negroes in support of the Union, a totally heretical sentiment in the Confederacy.³

While these allegations are difficult to substantiate, there is strong evidence that he assisted Union sympathizers in running the Confederate lines to escape military service. H. R. Linthicum of Columbus, who avoided the draft until 1863 by working in a gun factory, was told to contact George F. Drew of Lee County if he wished to avoid his impending induction into the Confederate army. At Drew's instigation, Linthicum sold all his belongings and went to Adams Station where he remained for two months. From there Drew drove him in a buggy through Tallahassee to St. Marks. Failing to contact a northern gunboat there, they drove to Quincy and obtained a passport from General Howell Cobb which declared that Linthicum was a Confederate agent buying machinery for grist mills. With this identification they were allowed to pass through guerilla lines between Quincy and Apalachicola. They were finally able to signal the *James L. Davis*, a Union blockade vessel, which took Linthicum on board. Drew then returned to Adams Station.

Drew allegedly told Linthicum that he, too, would leave the Confederacy were it not for his family and property. He may have wished that he had in late 1863 when he was arrested, charged with disloyalty to the Confederacy, and tried before a Confederate Commissioner at Macon. He was apparently convicted and imprisoned at Savannah until sometime in 1864. About that time Drew worked out a scheme enabling him to

3. The information in this and succeeding paragraphs was taken from Case File GJ 3309 (George F. Drew), Records of the Court of Claims, Record Group 123, National Archives.

leave the South and take most of his property with him. One of his acquaintances, J. B. Ross of Macon, was a staunch Confederate who owned about 200 bales of cotton stored in a Savannah warehouse. The cotton was in danger of capture by General Sherman's forces. Drew converted his property into cotton stored in southwest Georgia and traded it to Ross for that in Savannah. Then, Drew took his family to Florida and ran the Confederate lines, finally boarding a Union boat near Savannah.

Meanwhile, his cotton was captured by the Union army and sold in New York. Drew entered a claim for the cotton, and between 1868 and 1871 his case was considered by the United States Court of Claims. After due consideration of lengthy testimony, the Court found that Drew was "always loyal to the United States," that he was the legitimate owner of 200 bales of cotton captured by United States forces in January 1865, and that he should recover \$35,066 as the net proceeds from it.

With this settlement Drew was able to expand the lumbering operations of the Drew and Bucki Corporation at Ellaville, Florida. When he was elected as the "redeeming" governor of Florida in 1876, he was often referred to as "Millionaire" Drew. While this is an exaggeration of his holdings, most of which he lost by the early 1890s, there was much election-year commentary on the role the cotton claim played in his affluence. It is an open question whether public knowledge of the proof which supported the claim would have affected the election. Probably not. But quite apart from that question, Drew is a most remarkable Confederate hero.