



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

GENERAL EDWARD PORTER ALEXANDER

Soldier, Author, Scholar, and Captain of Industry



*Cadet E. Porter Alexander
West Point Class of 1857,
ranked third in his class.*

By **Colonel Jack 'Black Jack' Travis**

Edward Porter Alexander was born May 26, 1835, in Wilkes County, Washington, Georgia. He was one of eight children born to Adam Leopold Alexander and Sara Hillhouse Gilbert. His father Adam Leopold, a Yale graduate of the class of 1821, could read and write three languages--English, Greek, and Latin. Adam Leopold met Sara H. Gilbert in New Haven, Connecticut, where she was attending a woman's finishing school. Sara was from Washington, Georgia, and raised in the high country. Adam, from the low country, had a plantation named 'Hopedwell' near Riceboro, Georgia, south of Savannah. After their marriage, they lived in Washington, Georgia, at the old Gilbert house (Fairfield Plantation) that was built in 1808.

Alexander had a great childhood at Fairfield. He knew many of his father's plantation slaves, called them by name, and ate and played with their children. However, he also found himself preoccupied with hunting and fishing. This preoccupation stayed with him throughout his life, and played an important part in his destiny.

At about the age of 13, Edward got into a quarrel over secession, and was bullied by two of his peers. Told that they had pistols and were going to whip him, he armed himself with a 'pepper box' revolver. When they met, he and the two boys came to a collision. One boy hit him over the

head with a light stick. Alexander drew his pistol and pulled the trigger. It misfired and the boy pulled his pistol, too. He fired a second time, and again the pistol misfired. By this time, older boys who were present stepped in, stopped the fight, and took the pistols away. One of the older boys then fired Alexander's pistol, and this time it discharged. He realized he could have ruined his life with this single event. It made such an impact on him that he never forgot this lesson, and always tried to keep a cool head and stay out of politics.

From childhood on, Alexander desired to attend West Point; however, his father wanted him to become an engineer and not a soldier. When he was 14 years old, his two oldest sisters were about to marry West Point graduates. The fiance of Louisa Frederika Alexander, Jeremy Gilmer of Guilford County, North Carolina (later to become Maj. General Gilmer of the Confederate Army, Engineer Corps), convinced the elder Alexander that E. Porter could go to West Point and become an engineer if he stayed in the top of his class. Adam Leopold was so impressed by Gilmer that he gave his consent for E. Porter to attend West Point. Subsequently, Jeremy Gilmer and E. Porter Alexander were to remain the best of friends throughout their lives.

Now, the preparation for E. Porter's entrance to West Point began. Several years before, Adam Leopold had employed a Miss Brackett of Massachusetts to provide tutoring for all of the Alexander children. Because of this, he was very well prepared. In the winter of 1852-1853, he was sent to Savannah, Georgia to take lessons in French and drawing by the Lawton's of South Broad Street. Adam Leopold went to see the Honorable Robert Toombs (later Brigadier General Toombs of the 20th GA), one of their neighbors, to seek his help in obtaining an appointment for E. Porter to West Point. Toombs was delighted and honored, and consented to do this for the Alexander family.

WEST POINT CADET

E. Porter Alexander entered West Point in June of 1853, and was assigned Dick Meade of Petersburg, Virginia as his roommate. At the time, he weighed 150 pounds and was 5 feet 9-1/2 inches tall. He had to study hard to maintain his 3rd place ranking in his class in order that he might graduate as an engineer, as he had he promised his father---only the top ranked cadets were assigned as engineers. This required him to stay up very late at night and study by candlelight and to keep his behavior in excellent form so that he would avoid demerits.

While attending West Point, a tragedy struck the Alexander family. His mother, Sara Alexander, was addicted to morphine due to an illness that caused her to be in severe pain. She traveled to Philadelphia for special care and treatment. On her way to Philadelphia, she visited E. Porter at West Point. He was shocked by her loss of weight and appearance. When she returned to Washington, Georgia, her physical condition had deteriorated to the extent that she appeared as only skin and bones. She passed away in February of 1855, and was buried in the family cemetery at Fairfield Plantation. This was a great blow to the family and E. Porter. However, this personal tragedy brought him and his father, Leopold, closer together than they had ever been. In 1857, E. Porter graduated third in his class at West Point and was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant of engineers. He had fulfilled his promise to his father. His roommate, Dick Meade was first in his class, and later, during the War Between the States, he died of typhoid fever during the period of the Seven Days Battle, while serving as an engineer for the Confederacy; John Palfrey of Massachusetts was second in the class of 1857.



*Very rare photograph of E.Porter Alexander's wife.
Betty Mason (Miss Teen), of King George County, Virginia.*

UTAH EXPEDITION

Following graduation, E. Porter was given three months furlough and then ordered back to West Point as assistant instructor of Military Engineering and Fencing. In the fall of 1857, he was assigned to General Albert Sydney Johnston for the Utah Expedition. The expedition consisted of six columns, 500 men in each column. He was assigned to the 1st column and commanded by Colonel Andrews, West Point Class of 1823, who was a veteran of the Seminole Wars.

The expedition was sent by order of President James Buchanan. He wanted to replace Brigham Young as Territorial Governor with Alfred Cummings of Georgia. The Mormon leader and his followers were adamantly against this and were committed to resistance. The Utah Expedition was sent to use force to install territorial governor Cummings. However, during the winter encampment on the way to Utah, representatives of both parties were able to resolve the matter and install Cummings without any military action. Thus, the columns returned to the east.

E. Porter was in his absolute delight on the Utah Expedition. He loved the west--wide-open spaces, beautiful scenery, pristine rivers, streams, and forests. Best of all, the hunting was great. This was one of his true loves--the thrill of the hunt. Alexander while on horseback and on foot, personally killed twenty-five buffalo, and shot many quail, pheasants, turkeys and other game. He was also delighted to meet a variety of Plains Indians, such as the Sioux, Pawnees, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Utes. Also, during this time, he met two gentlemen who later become associated with him in history, at the 3rd day of Gettysburg, 1863--Captain Lewis A. Armistead and Captain Richard B. Garnett.

At the end of this expedition, E. Porter was ordered back to West Point to resume his duties as instructor of engineering and fencing. He met two Virginia belles, Gussie and Betty Mason. He took a strong liking to Betty Mason (Miss Teen) who was 24 years old. After a short courtship, they were married in King George County, Virginia on April 3, 1860. During their marriage, they had five children--three boys and two girls.

FEDERAL SERVICE

One day, quite by accident, in the lobby of a hotel, E. Porter met Surgeon Albert J. Myer, later Brigadier General Myer of the Federal Army. Myer had been involved in developing a system of communicating messages over long distances; an interest that he had picked up from observing



General E. Porter Alexander promoted to general on March, 1864 at age 28.

the Comanche Indians, who would signal each other by using long poles. Myer subsequently adopted the Baine Alphabet System, and thereby created the Signal Corps. The Federal War Department was very interested and excited about its possibilities and ordered Myer to create a staff and obtain the necessary equipment to create and refine the signal corps. To Alexander's surprise, Myer appointed him as his assistant. They tested their signaling apparatuses over great distances, and the Federal Government, impressed with the results, installed Myer as Chief of the Federal Signal Corps. This experience played a major role in Alexander's future.

Alexander received his orders to report to Oregon. He and Miss Teen took a long and arduous journey by steamboat and steam locomotive in order to get to their destination. Upon their arrival, he was sent to Fort Steilacoom in Washington Territory. He and Miss Teen fell in love with this area. It was full of beautiful scenery, excellent hunting and fishing, and the Indians were friendly and cordial. After a short duty there, E. Porter was ordered to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, to assist with its fortifications. During his stay there, Georgia seceded from the Union, prompting E. Porter to resign his commission in the Federal army. All of his commanding officers tried desperately to change his mind, but like Robert E. Lee of Virginia, Alexander could not fight against his home state and the people of Georgia. He and Miss Teen returned to Georgia.

CONFEDERATE OFFICER

E. Porter Alexander now realized that the Confederacy was forming and was raising an army to defend against the Yankee invasion. He reported to Richmond on June 1, 1861. Once there, he had an audience with President Jefferson Davis, who knew of Alexander and his signal corps experience, immediately appointed him as captain of the Confederate States Signal Corps. Alexander was authorized to train the men, and obtain the necessary equipment to establish the signal corps. He took great zeal and determination to immediately establish a well-run signal corps.

As head of the CSA Signal Corps, E. Porter was ordered to report to General P.G.T. Beauregard. He was placed on Beauregard's staff and given the honor of a place in his mess. Alexander wrote the following: 'General Beauregard had more courtesy of manner than any of the other generals with whom I ever served.'

Alexander had a tremendous respect for General Beauregard's engineering skills and his overall military bearing and manner. He felt his defensive engineering of the Charleston Harbor was superb and that he had done an excellent job with the defenses of Petersburg. Speculatively, General Beauregard would be the Confederate general most admired and respected by E. Porter.

Alexander now prepared himself for the inevitable War and battles to come. He purchased two horses--Dixie, a large, dark bay; and Meg, a shorter and lighter bay. This was significant because many times during the War, if Alexander would have been riding the taller horse, and artillery projectile would have taken off his head; and if he would have been riding the shorter horse, his leg may have been removed by a projectile. Consequently, fate played a most definite role in which horse he rode on any particular day.

About this time, a friend in Charleston, South Carolina gave E. Porter a telescope. This special astronomical glass was about six feet long when fully extended, a four-inch aperture, and a custom-made leather case was crafted to fit on his saddle. He knew a special way of holding the telescope, that made it very steady and usable without a tripod. Alexander never used field glasses; he only used his special telescope. This gave him a tremendous advantage in viewing the enemy and reconnoitering the land. It also came in very handy with his signal corps duties.

He hired a 15-year old 'ginger cake darkie' body servant by the name of Charley Crowley. Alexander acted as a father figure, and commented that he had to give Charley a little licking twice--once for stealing pears from a tree without asking the owner, and the other for stealing apple brandy and getting tight on it at Gettysburg. Charley was an admirable body servant and stayed with Alexander throughout the War. A strong bond of friendship and respect evolved between the two men.

Being on the staff of General Beauregard, Alexander was given an unusual assignment to do some secret service work. The Confederates needed more information on the movements and troop strength of the Federal army. Alexander created a system of spies and methods of receiving their information. He appointed E. Pliny Bryan, of Maryland, as his chief spy. With Bryan in Washington, DC, Alexander could receive signal messages. Bryan would get a room in a hotel that Alexander could see from Mason Hill in adjacent Virginia with his telescope, and would signal Alexander with a coffee pot reflecting from the sun or movement of the window drapes. This method worked extremely well. The famous Rose O'Neal Greenhowe, Augusta Morris, and Mrs. Baxley were in this system of spies. Unfortunately, this all ended. The Federals got suspicious and arrested them all. However, they were later released due to insufficient evidence.

On the morning of Sunday, July 21, 1861, General Johnston and General Beauregard decided that they must attack General McDowell and the Federal army. Thus, the Battle of First Manassas began. Alexander positioned himself on Wilcoxen Hill on top of a signal tower. This hill is now called Signal Hill. At approximately 8:30 A.M., a flash of light reflecting from a brass cannon caught his eye. He immediately saw the impending movements of the enemy. Federal troops were going to flank Colonel Nathan G. 'Shanks' Evans of South Carolina. He sent a signal to Colonel Evans, 'Look to your left, you are turned,' thus indicating that he was going to be flanked on his left. After receiving this message, Colonel Evans took the necessary movements to prevent this, thus saving his regiment. After the battle, General Beauregard was very pleased and much impressed with Alexander and the Signal Corps. Alexander had the honor of being the first to send a signal by the wig-wag method during the War Between the States.

Alexander's military record and performance during the War was outstanding. In addition to being well thought of by his superiors and subordinates, he acquired the following record of promotion:

- Graduated West Point - June, 1857, age 22
- Lieutenant - June 1857, age 22
- Captain - April 1861, age 24
- Major - April 1862, age 25
- Colonel - July 1862, age 26
- General - March 1864, age 28

After the Battle of 1st Manassas, he was assigned to the staff of General James Longstreet, 1st Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. At first, he served in many capacities, but mainly in artillery and later as chief of artillery for General Longstreet. Alexander's brilliant array of talents made him a general's dream -- he had a special genius for keeping things simplistic and well organized and a meticulous eye for detail. His exploits at Gettysburg are well known, but E. Porter gave exceptional service on other battlefields as well.



Post War photograph of E. Porter Alexander as a Southern gentleman - noted financial wizard, president of railroads and banks.

THE CUSS WITH THE TELESCOPE

On November 17, 1862, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Union General Burnside planned his advance toward Richmond with an army of 120,000 men. General Lee checked his advance with 65,000 men and gave him a sound defeat. The ensuing events would be of great value to Alexander and the Confederate artillery. General Burnside's army had now positioned itself on the north side of the Rappahannock River. His plan was to cross the river and attack the Confederate army, which was, by now, well entrenched on the south side of the river on the left and right flanks of Marye's Heights. The Confederates held a very strong position; E. Porter kept busy positioning the artillery of Longstreet's Corps. Captain Sam Johnston, Lee's engineer in charge of the whole army, rode with Alexander to position his gun pits. General Lee wanted the guns placed on the brow or reverse slope of the heights so they might duel with the Federal artillery on Stafford Heights. However, Alexander had a different plan. He felt the attack would fall on their far-left flank. Since he played a dominant role in placing the gun pits, Alexander positioned them in order to fire directly into the advancing Federal infantry and sweep the field.

He disputed General Lee's logic that the inferior Confederate ordnance could not duel effectively with the enemy's guns at that distance. After the pits were made, Captain Johnston rode to Alexander and replied, 'You made me put them there, now you come along and help me take the cussin'. After some exchange of ideas, General Lee had the last word and pressed Alexander into obedient silence, but left the gun pits unchanged.

Alexander strongly felt the beauty of the artillery position lay not only in its thorough sweep of the ground, but also in its very functional simplicity. Upon General Longstreet's inspection of the artillery, Alexander reported proudly, 'General, we cover that ground now so well that we will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb. A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it.'

During the time of the two armies positioning themselves, Alexander earned the nickname 'the cuss with the spy glass' from the Federal troops, because he was shelling Federal sharpshooters with one of Captain Moody's 24-pound howitzers, his favorite type gun. In one special case, there was a building nestled in a hollow and hidden by intervening low hills and trees. This building contained many Federal sharpshooters, and Alexander personally aimed Moody's howitzer with great accuracy and care and ordered it to be fired. The shell containing 175 mini-balls almost brushed the grass as it curved the hill, hit the building and exploded. AT once, a cheer came up from the Confederate picket line. 'That got 'em! That got 'em! You can hear 'em just a hollerin' and a groanin' in there!' There was no doubt of Alexander's skill and marksmanship with cannon after that great demonstration.

On December 10th, General Burnside committed himself to the attack. They had undertaken an impossible task, a charge across 400 yards of open ground under direct fire of artillery and infantry. It was a killing field on which charge after charge was repulsed by a furious and deadly artillery fire of canister and shell. Alexander's positioning of the gun pits proved deadly for the enemy. During this shelling, E. Porter noticed a covey of partridges flying aimlessly. He drew his pistol and shot a few choice birds for his mess. That act was remarkable in that, men were being killed by the thousands, and Alexander had the coolness and the mind to kill birds for his supper table. Throughout the War, there were several times that he killed many types of fowl for the supper table to keep food for himself and his men.



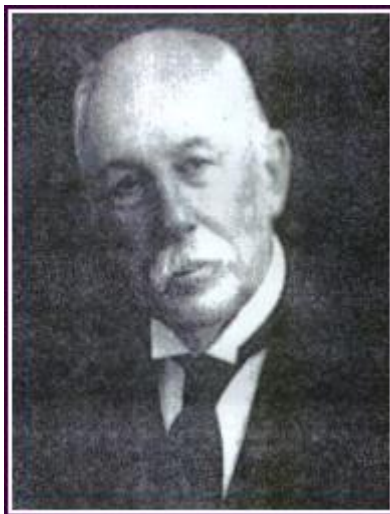
Alexander was appointed by President Grover Cleveland as his chief engineer arbitrator in the boundary dispute between Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. Alexander is seated between dignitaries of both countries. circa 1900

The Federals had no taste to renew the battle, and they retreated back across the river. A great victory had been won for the Confederates and their artillery. A few days after the battle, Alexander happened to be with Captain Sam Johnston at General Lee's headquarters. Just outside his tent, when General Lee came within earshot, Alexander brayed loudly to Captain Johnston, 'Sam, it was a mighty good thing those guns about Marye's Heights were located on the brows of the hills when the Yankees charged them.' General Lee gave no sign of hearing Alexander's remarks. However, Alexander henceforth was frequently called upon by General Lee to select battle lines and gun pits.

After the Battle of 1st Fredericksburg, Generals Lee, Longstreet, Jackson, A.P. Hill, and other Confederate generals spoke in their reports of Alexander's artillery as 'rapid,' 'destructive,' 'well-directed,' 'demoralizing,' 'murderer,' 'accurate,' 'efficacious fire,' and 'extraordinary effect' of their guns. 'Unflinching courage,' 'unshaken steadiness,' and 'spirit' with which they were 'admirable served.'

With the onset of winter, both armies went into their winter quarters. Alexander begged for leave to see his family. It was not easy since he was so very useful and hard to be spared. He finally got a three-day leave at the year's end, and hurried to meet his Miss Teen in Richmond, Virginia. Later, he was able to find quarters for his family at the Wortham House, less than a mile from his winter camp, near Mt. Carmel Church, north of Hanover Junction, Virginia. Their presence made all the difference, and he would describe the next three months as 'one of the happiest periods of all my life.'

'Mars Porter,' as his youthful body servant Charley called Alexander, gave the Army of Northern Virginia brilliant service and unsurpassed dedication throughout the rest of the War. He was the first Confederate to go aloft in a balloon at the Battle of Gaines Mill (Seven Days) using black cambric balls to signal the movements of Federal troops. Although fearful of heights, he thoroughly enjoyed this experience and marveled at its tremendous potential to gather intelligence information on troop movement, etc.



Alexander in his later years of life, about the time he gave the Centennial Address at West Point for the Confederacy, 1902.

When the 1st Corps of the ANV (Longstreet's Corps) was sent to Tennessee to reinforce General Braxton Bragg, Alexander accompanied the Corps as Longstreet's Chief of Artillery. He met General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and was highly impressed with his military genius and his overall personal and military bearing. However, just the opposite was his impression of General Bragg. Throughout the War, Alexander strongly felt that the lack of trained staff officers to give written orders instead of verbal presented many large problems for the Army of Northern Virginia. During the War, he was sent many captured Federal ciphers to decode for the Confederacy. He also met Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J.L. Freemantle of Her Majesty's Coldstream Guards at the Battle of Gettysburg. Freemantle was unofficial observer of the Confederate Army during his three-month visit through the Southern states, and consequently wrote a book about his observations.

On June 30, 1864, at Elliott's Salient, Petersburg, Virginia, Alexander was hit in the left shoulder by a sharpshooter's minie ball. The ball narrowly missed both arteries and joints. The 58-caliber projectile, when removed from Alexander, had stamped on it the thread marks from his frock coat. Alexander realized that he would be sent back to Washington, Georgia, to recover and convalesce from his wound. Before leaving for a forty-five day medical furlough, he communicated to General Lee his belief that the Federals were digging a 'mine.' Although it was searched for, the Confederates were unable to locate it, and subsequently the Battle of the Crater occurred. Upon his return to the lines at Petersburg, Alexander assumed command of all the artillery in the Petersburg defenses, and wore the new frock coat and uniform made by his kinfolk of Washington, Georgia.

In early April of 1865, the Federals broke the Petersburg line and hastened the retreat of Lee's army. During this hectic and hurried retreat, Alexander's baggage wagon was captured and burned by General Custer. He lost his new frock coat, sword, and other personal items. Charley lost his headquarters flag in all of the confusion during the retreat. His mascot, Buster, a pointer, was also lost at this time.

At Appomattox, Alexander made a proposal to General Lee that the Confederates should return to their states and carry on a guerrilla war, which could last for years. General Lee felt that he South had been through enough, and was in such a state of destruction that the resumption of peace was the best road for the South at that time. Alexander reluctantly, but respectfully concurred. After the surrender at the McLean House a disillusioned and disappointed Alexander traveled to Washington, DC to explore the possibility of securing a position in the Brazilian army. This attempt was foiled, and Alexander returned to his home in Washington, Georgia via New York and Port Royal, South Carolina. He was now left to find his way in a new life.

In his military memoirs, Alexander's opinion was there were three times, that the Confederacy could have won the War. The first time was at the Battle of First Manassas. He strongly felt that if the Confederacy would have pushed, they could have captured the Capital, Washington, DC. The second time was the Seven Days at Mechanicsville. Stonewall Jackson fell behind schedule, showed up late, and failed to carry out his part thereby allowing McClellan to escape and cost Lee a decisive victory. The third time was at the Battle of Monocacy in July of 1864. General Jubal Early had the opportunity to make a decisive push and the chance to capture Washington, DC, and to demoralize the Yankee population.

YOUNG NAPOLEON OF THE RAILROADS

Like most post-War Confederate officers, E. Porter Alexander now had to find a means to support his family. Although Fairfield Plantation had not been burned, it was in need of funds to get it back into a working plantation. The plantation life did not appeal to Alexander. He was offered a chair position of mathematics at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, and after a few years in that post, Alexander accepted an executive position with the Charlotte, Columbia, and Augusta Railroad. After distinguished service with the railroad, he was offered and accepted the position as President of the Savannah and Memphis Railroad. Alexander was now referred to as 'The Young Napoleon of the Railroads.'

The next two decades offered extraordinary opportunities for Alexander's professional career. He bought ten thousand acres of land on North and South Island below Georgetown, South Carolina. Today, this is called the Yawkee Wildlife Preserve. In his later years, he befriended President Grover Cleveland, a very popular figure in the South. Cleveland was a Democrat who wanted to return all captured Confederate battle flags to the Confederate states, but was stopped by the Union veterans who vehemently opposed this decision. Both President Cleveland and Alexander loved to hunt ducks. They spent many days at Alexander's hunting lodge at South Island, South Carolina, hunting ducks and killing as many as 600 per week.

BOUNDARY ARBITRATOR NICARAGUA SALUDA EL GENERAL ALEXANDER

To thank Alexander for his kindness and friendship, President Cleveland offered him \$1,000 a month in gold to be his boundary arbitrator between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This needed to be done, because a canal might be dug to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and stability in Central America was essential. Alexander accepted this offer because of the great windfall profits it offered his family. After two years of supervising and surveying the boundaries, Alexander completed his report and finished his duty as arbitrator of boundaries. This settled, once and for all, the boundaries between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The Nicaraguans gave him a hero's welcome with a fifty-piece band, a twenty-one-gun salute, and church bells tolling. Carrying him through the street near his hotel, he passed under an enormous floral arch bearing the inscription, 'Nicaragua Saluda el General Alexander.' He had an audience with Nicaraguan President Zelaya at his palace, and a grand banquet was held in Alexander's honor. The Nicaraguans rose in relays to praise and toast him in Spanish. Alexander was given his favorite wine, Chateau Yquen. In addition, during this time in Nicaragua, Alexander started and finished most of his memoirs (*Military Memoirs of a Confederate*).

Upon his return home, Alexander's wife, Betty Mason, died three weeks later, on November 20, 1899, in Savannah. She is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Augusta, Georgia. This brought to an end, his marriage of forty years. After many years of semi-retirement, living in Savannah, and South Island, South Carolina, Mary Mason, the niece of Betty Mason, affectionately helped take care of Alexander's needs at his South Island retreat. She was good-natured and assisted Alexander as his hostess when he entertained guests. She was unmarried; forty years old; wore thick glasses; and became an invaluable source of help to Alexander. On October 1, 1901, when he was sixty-six, they married, and honeymooned in Canada and at Niagara Falls. During their years together, she referred to him as 'The General.'

WEST POINT CENTENNIAL

E. Porter Alexander was extended the high honor of being an honored guest at the Centennial of West Point to speak for the Confederate officers. On June 9, 1902, he found himself on the speaker's platform with President Teddy Roosevelt, General Longstreet, and other dignitaries. At the conclusion, the *New York Times* confirmed Alexander's speech, although not without controversy, to be the best speech of the day.

Alexander retired to his South Island retreat, visited his children, and traveled with Mary. After several small strokes, he was brought to Savannah, Georgia. On April 21, 1910, he lapsed into a coma, and died without a struggle on April 28, 1910, at 8:30 PM.

The Episcopal service was quiet and sparse in Augusta, Georgia. Confederate veterans escorted Alexander's casket to the City Cemetery. Two old soldiers held a Confederate battle flag, while *Taps* was played.

Thus, we put to rest the life of a great American, a Southerner, and a great Georgian, who was a soldier, author, scholar, and a captain of industry.

