



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

John A. Richardson

1826-1872

Reluctant Lieutenant Colonel of the 36th NC

By **Ray Flowers**

Shortly after, coming on board at Fort Fisher State Historic Site in 1997, I came across a curious passage in an article by Colonel William Lamb of the 36th North Carolina. Simply entitled "Fort Fisher", Lamb inadvertently posed a riddle within the story that has since proven a Gordian knot to unravel. In relating a pregnant anecdote he wrote, "I had been sent to Fort Fisher to discipline the garrison against the temptations incident to blockade-running. My first act on taking command, July 4th, 1862 was to suspend an officer for being intoxicated and I had him

cashiered." Now, who was this intemperate officer? With no other account of this episode known to exist, positively identifying the offender is thus far impossible. However, after following a long circuitous trail of circumstantial evidence, I have since arrived at the conclusion that the officer in question "might" well have been none other than Lamb's own reluctant Lieutenant-Colonel, John A. Richardson.



The genesis of this investigation began where most research for Confederates posted along the Lower Cape Fear begins, with a perusal of Fort Fisher's secular bible: Manarin's North Carolina Troop Roster 1861-65, Vol. I Artillery. Under Richardson's name, his titillating entry as Lieutenant-Colonel reads, "Transferred from 2nd Company I of this regiment upon election as Lieutenant-Colonel May 14, 1862. Dismissed by General Court Martial November 17, 1863. Dropped from rolls

January 23, 1864." Unfortunately, though Richardson's inexplicable court martial might be unique, it does not appear immediately damning, after all, Lamb took command of Fort Fisher in July of 62 and Richardson was not court-martialed till November of 63, almost a year and a half later. Further convoluting the issue is Lamb's history of the 36th found in Clark's North Carolina Regiments 1861-65. Assuming the third person, he wrote, "Colonel Lamb remained at Fort St Philip, Old Brunswick until 4 July 1862 when he relieved Major John J. Hedrick in command of Fort Fisher and defenses of Confederate Point, including Zeek's Island." This pronouncement beggars the question, if a Lt-Col (Richardson) was present, why would a Major (Hedrick) be in command? At this point Richardson all but vanished for another five years. In fact, under closer scrutiny the reluctant Lt-Col is barely visible throughout his tenure. In September of 62, as commandant of Fort St Philip, he wrote a letter of complaint to Governor

Vance concerning regimental organization. Then there's Lamb's succinct explanation for John D. Taylor's promotion and his (Taylor's) superseding Richardson as Lt-Col, "January 23, 1864 Major Taylor was promoted to Lt-Col in place of Richardson dropped." Little else appears, he's not even mentioned in the "Official Records". In post war years Lamb wrote several histories extolling the exploits of comrades and acquaintances associated with his old command, but nary a word about Richardson. The silence is deafening.

Evidently there was a rift between the Colonel and his Lt, but what was the bone of contention? Like Lamb, Richardson was an attorney, though nine years older, and unlike Lamb, he was a North Carolinian, as were most of the troops and company commanders of the regiment. However, when Major Lamb arrived in Wilmington, in October 1861, on the staff of fellow Virginian General Joseph Reid Anderson, he already ranked Captain Richardson. In May of 1862, just prior to the regimental elections, Lamb's adjutant, Lt Thomas Rowland, who was born in Michigan though raised in Virginia, wrote his mother that his good friend Captain George Parker was to be Lamb's Lt Colonel. Rowland was a talented engineer, a West Pointer, and eventually promoted and rotated to another theatre of war. Obviously Lamb thought something of the young man, Fort Fisher's Battery Rowland was almost certainly named in his honor and as late as November 1864 his old colonel remembered him with a gift box of wine and oranges. But where did Rowland get the impression that Parker was to be promoted to the Lt-Colonelcy? Parker was not a Virginian, though he was a graduate of Virginia Military Institute and had relations in Lamb's home town of Norfolk. And while Parker would never be the Lt-Colonel, he did ultimately assume Rowland's vacated position as adjutant. Could it be that Richardson was a victim of the Old Dominion clique?

For the longest time, it seemed that history had successfully ostracized Richardson. Then about a year and a half ago, several new pieces of the puzzle appeared that helped to flesh out the reluctant Lt-Col considerably. First of all, Mr. Chad Johnson, a Fort Fisher employee, UNCW graduate student and Lower Cape Fear Civil War enthusiast acquired a compilation of Richardson's Registers, Returns and Rolls from National Archives. Two of the documents are compelling: One, a Field and Staff Muster Roll for July and August 1862, dated August 31, reads, "Transferred to Fort Fisher per Special Order No. 345 from District Hd. Qr. Date July 3rd". The other, a Return dated July 1862 reads, "Transferred to Fort St Phillip July 6, 1862 by order of Brig. Gen'l French". Clearly these papers place Richardson at Fort Fisher on July 4th, 1862, and almost as important, show him leaving soon after. And while the Return does not indict him for drunkenness, the info did make me a bit giddy.

Next, in January 2003, an out of state researcher, whom I had assisted earlier, reciprocated, sending me a copy of Richardson's Service Record, again from National Archives. It states in part, "Attempted to resign, letter in record, on 1-20-63 because he had not received his appointment and the Col and Major had received theirs. There is an endorsement, apparently by Lee, that he knew of no reason why the appointment should be denied. Whiting made the appointment on 2-18-63. On 8-18-64 Richardson wrote to the AIGO (Adjutant and Inspector General's Office), letter in record, requesting a copy of his CM (Court Martial) transcript in order that he might defend himself. Unfortunately there is no information as to the General Order, number-department and the like, that published the court's findings." Once more, the records are devoid of detail or explanation, yet one can't help but feel that somebody (or bodies) within the 36th, just didn't like Richardson.

This sentiment was confirmed shortly thereafter when Mr. Bob Cooke, Fort Fisher employee, former marine, and Lower Cape Fear Civil War enthusiast, produced another letter from Richardson to Governor Vance, two newspaper clippings and yes, a photograph. In the letter, dated November 26, 1863, one week after his court martial, Richardson requests permission to resign his position as well as an exemption from conscription. His excuse for the exemption being that he could not support his family on a private's pay of eleven dollars a month, nor could he afford to hire a substitute. Equally empathetic is his reason for resigning, which he gives as, "the relation existing between myself and certain of the officers of the Regt to which I belong is unpleasant, as much so, indeed, as to render it exceedingly disagreeable to me to remain longer with the Regt." In closing, Richardson assures the governor that should his "Excellency" act favorably upon his request, "I promise to enter the ranks whenever the enemy attempts to attack us in the vicinity of Wilmington." Obviously unimpressed, Vance scribbled his laconic response on the back of the letter. "The Gov has no power to excuse him from conscription ZV".

Less than three months later, Richardson submitted an advertisement to the "Wilmington Journal" that appeared on February 8, 1864. Apparently, he had been accused of skimming money from the soldiers' enlistment bounties. In retaliation, he denied the charges vehemently and offered a one thousand dollar reward to any man who would swear differently in a court of law. "This offer will stand good so long as I live," he pledged. Now, was this accusation linked to his court martial, or just part of the flotsam and jetsam of malicious gossip that followed in its wake? Moreover, are the alcohol related incident of 62 and the court martial of 63 unrelated issues? Once more the Lt-Col is reluctant to say.

The last we hear of the former Lt-Col during the war appears in the "Wilmington Journal" on January 16, 1865. He was in Wilmington to relinquish five escaped Yankee prisoners that had been recaptured near Elizabeth Town. Ironically, Fort Fisher had fallen the day before and Colonel Lamb and most of the 36th were now prisoners of war. Could Richardson's auspicious appearance in Wilmington be attributed to his promise to the Governor that he would, "enter the ranks whenever the enemy attempts to attack us in the vicinity..."? If so, he'd arrived just a little too late. Perhaps for once, Richardson's reluctance had finally paid off.

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