

More Than a Home to the Confederacy's 'Grey Ghost'¹

Lawyer. Soldier. Patriot.

These words, on the monument to Colonel John Singleton Mosby at Court House Square in downtown Warrenton, give us a tempting glimpse into the character of one of the more interesting, influential – indeed, studied – figures from the 19th Century.

John Mosby had many experiences in Warrenton and throughout Fauquier County during the War Between the States. Fauquier was part of what became known as 'Mosby's Confederacy', an area comprising the northern tier of Virginia counties that Mosby protected as a colonel in the Confederate Army.



Mosby also settled here with his family after the war ended in 1865, renting a house near today's US 17 north of Warrenton for 10 years, before moving to one of the better homes in town for about 18 months during 1875-1877. That house, at 173 Main Street, is owned by the John Singleton Mosby Museum Foundation. Purchased in 1998, the foundation is returning it to its 1859-80 appearance to reflect the four prominent families – including Mosby's – who lived there during that period.

Mr. Mosby also maintained a law practice in Warrenton, with James Keith, in what is still known as the 'California' Building on Wall Street near the court house.

John Mosby, his wife Pauline, and their eight children are buried in the Warrenton Cemetery, on the brow of a hill near 'The Memorial Wall to Name the Fallen'.

But these are mere sketches, faint outlines, and don't begin to tell the full story of this most storied raider of the old Confederacy. To get a better understanding of this man, we must look at who he was and the core beliefs that made up his moral compass.

He was born December 6, 1833 to parents of modest means who lived in rural Nelson County, Virginia. As a child, Mosby was frail and sickly, and confined to his bed for lengthy periods. Doctors from the area did not expect him to live beyond the age of six.

Still, he learned to read at a young age, and later recalled that his childhood hero was Francis Marion, the famed 'Swamp Fox' from South Carolina whose band of local 'citizen soldier' militia disrupted and antagonized British forces during America's war for independence.

He learned Latin, Greek and mathematics, and studied these subjects as a student at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Mosby shot a fellow student, George Turpin, in the neck during an argument, which landed him in jail. He asked the prosecuting attorney, who had argued for his incarceration, if he could borrow a few law books to pass the time, and became infatuated with law.

He became sick once again, however, suffering from 'consumption' – today's tuberculosis – and was released from jail before completing his sentence. Once recovered from his illness, he asked the prosecuting attorney to mentor him to 'read the law' so he could become an attorney.

This he did and, when war came to Virginia in 1861, the 27-year-old Mosby was married and a father. He had joined a local home guard unit, which was mustered into Confederate service as the First Virginia Cavalry.

By the spring of 1862, Mosby was serving as a scout for General Jeb Stuart. He despised routine army life and, at year's end, asked Stuart for a few men to probe Federal defenses in Northern Virginia rather than endure boring months known as 'winter quarters'.

¹ By Dave Goetz, SMHS member and owner of Mosby's Confederacy Tours. First published in *The Warrenton Lifestyle Magazine*, March 2006 and reproduced with permission. Dave can be reached at mosbyman@infionline.net.

Over the next five months, Mosby's reputation grew rapidly. He not only harassed Federal cavalry and gathered intelligence on the movement of supplies and information, but captured a Union general out of his bed in Fairfax, defeated a much larger force of enemy cavalry in a lopsided victory and destroyed a train engine and set fire to its cars within a mile of enemy cavalry just above Catlett in southern Fauquier.

His band of 'partisan rangers' was formally organized near Atoka in northern Fauquier as the 43rd Battalion, Virginia Cavalry, on June 10, 1863.

Mosby's brilliance was expressed in many ways, and his tactics are still studied today. He virtually did away with the saber in his command, instead preferring the six-shooter, believing the saber to be an antiquated and romantic weapon of no use in modern warfare. He also billeted his men in 'safe houses' of southern sympathizers in a defined geographical area, making them farmers when they weren't soldiering.

By doing his own reconnaissance with the help of one or two trusted scouts, Mosby greatly minimized the chance of his plans leaking to the enemy. After deciding to conduct a raid, Mosby informed company commanders of a date, time and place to meet, and then their subordinates fanned out to various residences spreading the word. His men virtually never knew of Mosby's plans prior to a raid.

Mosby preferred couriers to other means of communicating, believing that if friendly forces could see or read his messages, so could the enemy.

There is no record of Mosby ever torturing a prisoner, and neither did he take part in the spoils of war.

The command grew to eight companies, with a total of about 800 troopers over the 28 months of the command's existence. Mosby and his Partisan Rangers terrorized the Union Army in Fauquier and surrounding counties: attacking supply trains; disrupting communications with Washington; wounding, killing and capturing literally thousands of enemy troops; and, in the process, so causing fear in the enemy's army that he earned the nickname, 'Gray Ghost'.

Just 12 days after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, Mosby disbanded his command at Salem – today's Marshall – in northern Fauquier County.

After the war, Mosby practiced law in Warrenton, and was quite busy with war claims against the federal government and other legal actions. He became a Republican and stumped for Grant in 1872. The public debate at Salem shocked most of those in attendance, who could not believe a hero of the Confederacy would turn his back on his fellow citizens and stump for a Republican, especially for their former enemy, Grant.

Mosby was shot at one night in 1877 in Warrenton, as he was getting off a train from Washington. The shooter missed, and Mosby saw it as a clear sign that his life was in danger. Grant interceded with President Rutherford Hayes, who assigned Mosby as US consul to Hong Kong, where he served the next seven years.

After Hong Kong, Mosby served as a staff attorney with the Southern Pacific Railroad (1885-1901); a special agent in Nebraska, Colorado and Alabama during the McKinley administration (1901-04); and with the Justice Department as an assistant Attorney General under President Theodore Roosevelt (1904-10).

Mosby died at Garfield Hospital in Washington, DC, May 30, 1916, at age 82. Some 3,000 citizens came to his funeral and burial in Warrenton Cemetery. The former sickly child and dreamer, guerrilla leader, attorney and diplomat was gone.

Some say it was the end of an era.



ALEXANDER OTLEY SETTLE MADDUX JAMES EDMUNDS DE BUTTS
C. 1865

Mosby's Rangers