

Profile: Nathaniel Ragsdale Coleman

Nathaniel Ragsdale Coleman was one of Mosby's shortest-serving recruits. His period of service was from February 6, 1864, until he was captured by the Yankees February 18th, a period of 12 days.

Coleman was born July 19, 1843, at 'Creekside', Halifax County, Virginia, the son of Dr. Ethelbert Algernon Coleman and Martha Frances Ragsdale. 'Nat' entered Virginia Military Institute at the age of sixteen. While there, the young cadet had a high academic average and was listed as fifteenth in his class of fifty-two men. Two years later the War Between the States began. Cadet Coleman and all members of his class at V.M.I., under the leadership of Major T.J. Jackson, were sent to Camp Lee, Virginia. They served as drill masters for Confederate recruits, training soldiers for the war. The V.M.I. group was disbanded in July of 1861 and N.R. Coleman joined the 24th North Carolina Regiment, Floyd's Brigade. He served under Col. W.J. Clark until that regiment was disbanded in January of 1863.

A year later, January 4, 1864, Coleman enlisted under Col. John S. Mosby in Company B, 43rd Battalion Cavalry, the Partisan Rangers. His papers described him as being twenty years old, with blue eyes, brown hair, light complexion and being five feet, six and one-half inches tall.

Private Coleman reported for duty in Fauquier County, Virginia, on February 6th. On the night of February 18th, a band of Yankees swept down to Upperville with intention of capturing Mosby and his men. Mosby happened to be in Richmond and with his men housed all over the county, they proved difficult to capture. However, Nathaniel Coleman was one of the 25 men captured and taken to the Old Capital prison in Washington D.C. On June 15, 1864, he was sent to Fort Delaware in the state of that same name.

While there, an interesting event happened: in the Danville, Virginia, prison was a Yankee soldier from New Jersey. His father was very concerned because food was scarce and of poor quality. As it was impossible at the time to send food or money through the lines, he wrote the chaplain of the Danville Post telling him of his son in prison there. He asked if there was anyone near Danville who had a son in nearby Fort Delaware, he would send him food in return for food supplied to his son in Danville.

The chaplain, Dr. George Washington Dame, happened to know That Dr. E.A. Coleman of Halifax County had a son at Fort Delaware. Dr. Coleman immediately, upon receiving the news, collected a wagon of provisions to go the twenty miles to Danville for the New Jersey boy.

The boy's father kept his word, and you can imagine how delighted Nat Coleman was when he received food in prison from an unknown Yankee. One item, a ham, was prized so highly that Nat slept with it under his pillow so that it could not be stolen.

Coleman was released from Ft. Delaware on May 31, 1865, after he had pledged the Oath of Allegiance. His statistics were listed the same except he was five feet, eight and one-half inches tall. He had grown two inches while in prison, a result of the good food sent by his benefactor.

Returning to Halifax County, Nat farmed on his father's land for ten years. On July 2, 1869, he and his classmates at V.M.I. were made honorary graduates by the Board of Visitors.

October 13, 1873, Nat met his wife-to-be. Anne Nelson Page had come from Albemarle County, Virginia, to teach the children of Nat's sister, Betty, and her husband John Clark. The day she arrived was the funeral for Mr. Clark's father at Banister Lodge. Anne described Nat in her diary: "I like Mr. Coleman so much and think he is very handsome indeed. He is not very young now, nearly thirty, I suppose, but lively and full of fun." Nat was thirty and Anne was eighteen. He proposed two months later and they were married January 13, 1875, in Albemarle County.

Anne was the daughter of Frederick Winslow Page and Anne Kinloch Meriwether of 'Millwood' in Albemarle County. She was born September 15, 1855.

The newlyweds moved into their new home, 'Riverside', in Halifax County which Nathaniel had inherited from his Ragsdale grandparents. He was the oldest son and the namesake of his grandfather, Nathaniel Ragsdale.

The Coleman's had two daughters: Frances Ragsdale and Nathalie Page.

The 'Colonel', as Nat was called after the war, died December 30, 1917, at 'Riverside'. As there were no sons, the Ragsdale farm was sold out of the family after four generations had resided there. Mrs. Coleman lived with her daughter in Richmond until her death July 4, 1936. They are buried at Grace Episcopal Church Cemetery at News Ferry in Halifax County.

Profile by Nathaniel Ragsdale Coleman's great granddaughter, Jean Brydon Robinson, and first appeared in *Southern Cavalry Review* January 1987.