

The Life of William W. Gordon I

May 26, 1989

William Washington Gordon I was born in Augusta, Georgia, on June 17, 1796. Throughout his lifetime, he pursued several different careers: military, legal, and political. In his military career, he graduated from U. S. Military Academy at West Point and served in the Georgia Hussars. In his legal career, he was an apprentice under James M. Wayne and practiced in his own right from 1819 until 1836. In his political career, Gordon was Alderman of Savannah, Mayor of Savannah, and he served in the House of Representatives and Senate of the Georgia Legislature.

However, it was his accomplishments as a founder and organizer of the Central of Georgia Railroad and Banking Company that earned him a place in the history books of Georgia.

From its early formative years, Savannah has established roots as a commercial port. Its location, at the mouth of the Savannah River facilitates trade and commerce. Savannah's commercial heritage began in 1749, when the first vessel was loaded with cargo and shipped abroad. 1 In 1764 Mr. James Habersham shipped eight bales of cotton to Liverpool, England. This was the first time that cotton had been shipped from an American port.<sup>2</sup>

The port of Savannah continued to grow and prosper until the Revolutionary War drastically cut its trade. <sup>3</sup> The recovery was slow, and by 1786 exports were still below those of 1773. The port encountered several more setbacks but its citizens remained courageous, determined to compete with other older and more established cities such as Charleston, South Carolina.

The Great Fires of 1796 and 1820 coupled with the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1820 did little to facilitate expansion. However, by the mid 1830s Savannah had regained its wealth, the city was to burgeon. <sup>4</sup> At this time, Savannahians recognized the necessity of connecting Savannah with the interior of Georgia by

1. Charles C. Jones, *History of Savannah* (Syracuse D. Mason and Company, Publishers, 1890), 457, Special Collection (Minis Room), Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 462, Mr. Jones demonstrates that the big from the ship that carried the first cotton bales from Savannah to Liverpool was destroyed by one Sherman in 1864, exactly one hundred years after the ship had completed its journey

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 465,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 471

either railroad or canal. 5 This was a situation that required superior leadership, which was provided by William Washington Gordon I. He was responsible for building and organizing the Central of Georgia Railroad and Canal Company. He devoted countless hours of time and energy to this project, and eventually in 1842 he gave the ultimate sacrifice, his life.<sup>6</sup>

The line of Gordon's that produced William Washington Gordon, can be traced from Johnathon Rhen Gordon. 7 His son Ambrose Gordon grew up in Freehold, New Jersey. 8 He came south with the Continental Army, serving as Paymaster under Col. William Washington 9 and was wounded at the Battle of Eutaw Springs in South Carolina. 10 After the Revolutionary War, Ambrose Gordon moved to Georgia, and while living in Savannah was U.S. Marshal and Captain of the Chatham Troop of Light Horse. 11 While he was living in Augusta, Georgia as Maj. Gordon, commander of the Georgia Hussars, he escorted President George Washington from Savannah to Augusta. 12 For his patriotic service in the

5. Ibid., 472.

6. Vital Records, 1842. Department of Public Health Chatham County, Savannah, Georgia.

7. Manuscript collection 318. Gordon Family Papers. Addenda box 1, folder 42, item 365. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

8. MS collection 318. Addenda box 6, folder 5.

9. Ibid..

10. Ibid..

11. Ibid.. Also The Georgian (January 7, 1803), Page 3, Column 1. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

12, MS collection 318. Addenda box 6, folder 5,

war, he was awarded two thousand six hundred and sixty-six acres of land in Virginia and seven hundred acres of land in Washington county Georgia. 13 He also amassed ownership of thousands of acres of land in Camden and Richmond counties, located in Georgia. 14 He died on, June 28, 1804 in Augusta and is buried in St. Paul's Churchyard. 15 In his will, he provided for his wife, Elizabeth Meade, and requested his estate be divided equally among his children, except for the seven hundred acre tract of land located in Washington county, formerly his bounty for service in the War of Independence, which was bequeathed to his fourth son William Washington Gordon I. 16

With the death of his father, William entered school in Rhode Island, 17 His hard work enabled him to earn an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1814, only

13. Ibid., Also Allen D. Candler, ed. , Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia (Atlanta: The Franklin-Turner Company 1908), 2: 724, Special Collection (Minis Room), Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia.

14. MS collection 318. Addenda box 1, folder 36 and 37.

15. MS Collection 318. Addenda box 6, folder 5. Also, Lamar Lucian Knight, Georgia's Roster of the Revolution (Atlanta, 1920), 462, Minis. Room, Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia.

16. MS collection 318. Addenda box 1, folder 35.

17. Kenneth Coleman and Charles Stephen Gurr, eds. Dictionary of Georgia Biography (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1983) 1:356. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

the third appointee from the state of Georgia. 18 Gordon graduated number seven out of forty members on March 2, 1815 and accepted a brief commission as Aide de Campe for Bvt. Maj. Gen. Gains. 19 He resigned his service on October 15, 1815 to accept an apprenticeship under the Honorable James Moore Wayne, 20 Gordon continued in the field of law as an apprentice until January 7, 1819, when he was allowed to practice law in his own right in Georgia. 21 In June of 1819, he incorporated his service with Joseph C. Stiles, 22 Their office was located in the Bullock Building over the store occupied by Watts and Joyner. 23

Gordon's apprenticeship is important for two reasons. First, it was during this period that he learned how to be a successful lawyer and speaker. Secondly, Gordon met and fell in love with J. M. Wayne's niece, Sarah Anderson Stites.

The Stites family originated in Great Britain. Sarah was the daughter of Richard Montgomery Stites and Mary Wayne. 24 Her

18, Ms Collection 318, Box 22, folder 243, item 4478. Also, W. Cullum, Biographical Register of Officers and Cadets at the USMA (Boston and New York), 1891,

19, Ibid.,

20. Ibid.,

21. Columbia Museum and Savannah Daily Gazette. (January 14, 1819), Page 2, Column 3. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

\_\_\_\_\_ 22 The Georgian (June 12, 1819), Page 1, Column 2. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

23 Ibid.,

24. MS Collection 318. Genealogies, folder 425, item 5621.

father was the son of Capt. Richard Stites, who' was Aide-de Camp to Gen. George Washington. Capt. Stites died from wounds received at the Battle of Long Island. Dr. John Stites, the great—great— grandfather of Capt. Richard Stites was credited as being one of the physicians who certified the death of Charles

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Sarah P. Stites married William Washington Gordon on March 9, 1826. 26 The ceremony was conducted by Reverend Howe. 27 From her personal letters, she appears to be well educated and mannered, 28 and she also seems to' have a lot of energy and love for Gordon. They produced seven children but only four survived infancy and early childhood. 29 Those four were George Anderson Gordon born September 26, 1830, William Washington Gordon II born October 14, 1834, Elizabeth Clifford Gordon born on October 11, 1837, and Gulielma Clifford Gordon born in September 1840.30

25. Gladys Denny Shultz and Daisy Gordon Lawrence, *Lady From Savannah* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1958) , 58. Special Collection (Minis Room) , Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia.

26. Chatham Community Marriage Records Volume 1806—1851. 81. Chatham County Court House Probate Department, Savannah, Georgia.

27. Ibid..

28, MS Collection 318. Box 1, folder 1, item 9—16,

29. Genealogy of the Gordon Family, at the Juliette Gordon Low Birth place, Savannah, Georgia, Hereafter referred to' as Geneal. Also, Mary Stites Gordon died at the age of 15 months, 17 days on February 17, 1834, *The Georgian* (February 17, 1834), page 3, column 1. The other Gordon children that died during their infancy were Richard Gordon and William Gordon.

30. Geneal.

Their oldest son George Anderson Gordon entered the legal profession, 31 and then became a partner in Gordon and Mercer. 32 In 1855, he was District Attorney on the Eastern Circuit. 33 He was also a Savannah Alderman from 1856—58, and represented Chatham County in the Georgia Legislature in 1857—58.34

Their most famous child was William Washington Gordon II. He married Elinor Lytle Kinzie on December 21, 1857. 35 He was very active commander during the Civil War. 36 After the war he resumed action in the cotton business, eventually becoming the first President of the Savannah Cotton Exchange. 37 He also served in the Georgia Legislature from 1884—1890; and was a Brigadier General in the Spanish-American War. 38 His daughter was Juliette Gordon Low who was the founder of the Girl Scouts

31. Savannah Morning News. October 8, 1872) , Page 3, Column 1. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia

32. Ibid.,

33. Ibid..

34. Thomas Gamble Jr. , A History of the City Government of Savannah, Georgia From 1790—1901 (Savannah, 1900), 14, Special Collection (Minis Room) Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah Georgia.

35. Manuscript Collection 1275, J. F. Waring Papers. Box 18 folder 199. Georgia Historical Society Savannah, Georgia Also, Glads Denny Shultz and Daisy Gordon Lawrence, Lady from Savannah (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1958), 56. Special Collection (Minis Room) , Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia.

36. MS collection 1275, box 18, folder 199.

37. Ibid.,

38. Ibid..

of America. 39 He died on September 11, 1912 at the age of seventy—seven, in Richmond, Virginia a. 40

The excitement of marriage and the duties of fatherhood did not slow Gordon's ambitions. He was elected as secretary of the fourth of July celebration in Savannah, in 1819. 41 Considering it was only the forty-fourth year of freedom, it is easy to recognize the prestige that must have followed this date.

By the early 1820's, Gordon had served on numerous committees and was solidly establishing his place among the leaders of the city. In October of 1823 he was appointed Adjutant of the Squadron of Cavalry known as the Georgia Hussars by Maj. Macpherson Berrien of the 1st Division Georgia Militia. 42 Gordon would later become the Captain of the Hussars in June of 1833. 43 In 1824, he was elected City Recorder of Savannah. 44 He continued to hold various other positions and served on a number of committees. He was nominated as a candidate for City Alderman in 1828 but later declined any further consideration for the position. 45 There was no reason given for his action.

39. Ibid.. Also Shultz and Lawrence, *Lady From Savannah*, 183,

40. Department of Public Health Chatham County, Vital records; Death Register. Volume G— I, 1890—1960. Savannah, Georgia.

41. *The Georgian*, (June 12, 1819), page 2, column 2

42. *The Georgian* (October 13, 1823), page 2, column 5.

43. *The Georgian*. (June 19, 1833), page 2, column 6.

44. *The Georgian*. (January 9, 1824) , page 2 column 1

45. *The Georgian*. (August 26, 1828), page 2, column 2

In 1830, Gordon acquired the Wayne house for ten thousand six hundred dollars. 46 Its construction had begun in 1824 for the Honorable James Moore Wayne but was non completed until after it was purchased by Gordon. 47 The house is located on the corner of Bull St. and Oglethorpe Ave. , formerly South Broad St. , and it is an excellent example of Regency architecture. 48

Throughout the early 1830' s, Gordon held a variety of positions, He was Notary of the Planters Bank but he resigned this position on August 11, 1831. 49 A year later, he was appointed Secretary of Chatham County. 50 By 1833, he had received several other positions in the community: Chairman of the Centennial celebration of Oglethorpe's landing in Georgia 51, President of the Savannah Library Society 52, he was elected as ore of six Directors of the Savannah, Ogeechee, and Altamaha Canal Company by its stock holders 53, and was also elected as an

46. Superior Court Records, Deed Book 2-Q 1830, Folio 247 Chatham County Court House Savannah, Georgia.

47. Federal Writers' Project in Georgia Works Progress Administration Savannah, American Guide Series (Savannah Review Printing Company 1937) , 98—99. Special Collection (Miniis Room) Lane Library, Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia.

48, Ibid.,

49, The Georgian (August 11, 1831), page 3, column 3.

50, The Georgian (August 30, 1832), page 2, column 2

51. The Georgian (January 21, 1833), page 2, column 5.

52. The Georgian (February 4, 1833), page 2, column 5. He was re—elected in 1834, The \_ (February 5, 1834), page 2, column 5.

Alderman for the city of Savannah in 1833.<sup>54</sup>

The significance of William Washington Gordon's accomplishments before 1833 were to be greatly overshadowed by his later contribution to the founding and organization of the Central of Georgia Railroad and Canal Company. On October 31, 1833 a motion was made, by Alderman Jackson, which called for the municipality of Savannah to subscribe five hundred thousand dollars toward the construction of a railroad or canal.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the idea of a railroad that would connect Savannah with the interior of Georgia was born. In December 1833, the Georgia Legislature granted a charter to the Central of Georgia Railroad and Canal Company, "for the purpose of laying building, and making railroad and canal communications from the city of Savannah to the interior of Georgia."<sup>56</sup>

In the spring of 1834, a contractor, Mr. Cruger, was chosen to survey and estimate the cost of building the railroad and also to insure the practicality of the proposition.<sup>57</sup> Cruger's survey demonstrated the feasibility of the project, and he estimated the total cost of construction at two million--two hundred thousand dollars,<sup>58</sup>

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54. Gamble, *History of the Municipal Government*, 14.

55. *Ibid.*, 171.

56. "The History of the Central of Georgia Railway," *The Right Way*, October-November-December 1963, 1.

Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, Savannah, Georgia

57. Gamble, *History of the Municipal Government*, 171,

58. *The Right Way*, 3

The stage was set for William Washington Gordon I. In 1834, he was re—elected as Alderman and was chosen mayor by his fellow constituents.<sup>59</sup> He was also elected to the House of Representatives under the Union and States Rights Ticket.<sup>60</sup> While serving in the Legislature, Gordon promoted the railroads interests and furnished the strong leadership that was necessitated his the situation.<sup>61</sup> For his dedication and hard work, he was re-elected as Mayor of Savannah in September of 1835.<sup>62</sup>

During the Legislative session of 1835, the charter of the Central of Georgia railroad was challenged. As a Representative of Savannah, Gordon relied on his speaking talents to swing the tide in favor of the Railroad Bill. In December of 1835, the legislature passed the Railroad Bill and amended its charter to include banking privileges.<sup>63</sup>

Construction of the railroad was ready to begin. On December 15, 1835, the citizens of Savannah held a celebration to recognize the accomplishments of its dedicated servants in the Legislature.<sup>64</sup> Sarah A. Gordon

59. Gamble, History of the Municipal Government, 4 and 14.

60. The Georgian (September 10, 1834), page 2, column 2.

61. Ibid.,

62. The Georgian (September 8, 1835), page 2, column 3.

63. Gamble, History of the Municipal Government, 174, Also, The Georgian (December 28, 1835) page 2, column 6.

64. Sarah P. Gordon to William W. Gordon, 22 December 1835, MS collection 318, box 1, folder 2, item ? Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia

described the situation in a letter to William W. Gordon I, "a band came around the house at about ten o'clock yelling, 'Ten cheers for the railroad and Gordon'." 65 She continued "it was more like Broadway than anything I have seen for a longtime." 66

Gordon's career with the railroad was only beginning. He was elected to the Board of Directors of the Central of Georgia Railroad and Banking Company on March 26, 1836. 67 The following day, he was chosen unanimously as the first president of the company. 68 This new position prompted him to resign as Mayor of Savannah, 69 He was succeeded by Alderman W. H. Cuyler. 70 Gordon remained President of the Central of Georgia Railroad and Banking Company until his death in 1842.

In June of 1836, Gordon abandoned his law practice in order to concentrate his energy on the railroad. 71 His firm was taken over by McAllister and Henry. 72 However, Gordon continued to be an active member in community affairs. He was elected as a

65. MS Collection 318. Box 1, folder ?, item ?.

66. Ibid.

Ibid.,

67. The Daily Georgian (March 29, 1836), page 2, column 3. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia

68. The Daily Georgian (March 30, 1836), page 2, column 3

69. The Daily Georgian (April 1, 1836), page 2 column 2

70. The Daily Georgian (April 4, 1836), page 2, column 2

71. The Georgian (June 23, 1836), page 3 column 4

72. Ibid.

Trustee of the Independent Presbyterian Church in 1837, 73 and was an active member of the Friends of the Union of Georgia. 74

As he concentrated his efforts on the railroad, he was often called upon to travel throughout Georgia. 75 From 1835 through 1841, Gordon spent very little time at home. So of his time and energy were concentrated in the affairs of the railroad that he may have neglected his family by. 76. In letter from Sarah A. Gordon to William Washington Gordon dated December 8, 1838 she writes, "the Legislature is doing nothing so why don't you adjourn and spend Christmas at home instead of idling in Milledgeville." She continues, "I do hope you will not again be obliged or feel obliged, to go to the Legislature for I am as sick and tired of it as I can well be." 77 On several other occasions Sarah asked Gordon to write a small paragraph to their

73. The Georgian (January 3, 1837), page 2, column 1 Upon checking the membership role of the Independent Presbyterian Church, I found that Gordon is not listed as a member. His wife, Sarah P. Gordon became a member of the Church in 1832. "Confessions of Faith", Georgia Pamphlets (Savannah: Independent Presbyterian Church, 1842), 2:5. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

74. The Georgian (November 1, 1836), page 2, column 1.

75. The Georgian (July 13, 1830), page 35 column 1, This is only one example, Gordon's travels can be found on numerous other occasions.

76. Gordon, Sarah A., Letters to William Washington Gordon. MS collection 318. Box 1, folder 1.

77. Sarah A. Gordon to William Washington Gordon, 8 December 1838, Gordon Family Papers, MS Collection 318, Addenda box 5, folder 1, item 1

children, but he ignored her request. 78 The character of William Washington Gordon I regarding his family may be questionable but his dedication to the railroad is undebatable.

The years of 1839—40 were troubled times for the rail road severe rains coupled by the outbreak of disease caused a delay in its progress. 79 Never-the-less, Gordon continued to lobby for the railroads interests, utilizing his talents ac. a politician and speaker to' forestall any opposition that would have hindered its completion. He was elected to the Georgia Senate in October of 1840, 80 and was also' chosen as an Alderman of Savannah upon the resign at ions of Alderman Waring and Alderman McAllister. 81

The railroad eventually connected Savannah with Macon in 1843, a span of one hundred and ninety miles and with it came increased wealth and prosperity. 82 However, William Washington Gordon I did not live to see its complet ion, he died at the Gordon home or March 22, 1842, 83 The cause of death was bilious pleurisy, and the attending physicians were Drs, Arnold and Cuyler. 84 His. death was deeply mourned by his fellow

78. Sarah A. Gordon to William W. Gordon MS Collection 318, box 1, folder 1.

79. The Right Way, October-November-December 1963, 3-4,

80. The Georgian, (October 7, 1840) , page 2, column 2

81. Savannah Daily Republican (February 9, 1841), page 2 column 2. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

82, Ibid.,

83, Vital Records, 1842.

84, Ibid.,

Savannahian's. 85 In his will, he appointed George W. Anderson, his long time friend, as the executer of his will, along with his wife Sarah A. Gordon. He gave the profits from the sale of his liquor and wines to his sister Margaret Matthaei, and he allocated equl division of his property between his children upon the death of his wife. 86 Gordon was originally buried in Colonial Cemetery but was later moved to Laurel Grove Cemetery. 87

On William W. Gordon's death, the Chief Engineer of the Central of Georgia Railroad, Mr. Reynolds, stated, "the steadiness and determination with which he pursued the great objects of benefiting his native state and this city, and the most distinguished of publics benefactors."88 His fellow citizens also called for a centotaph to be erected in hishonor. In February of 1850, the Georgia Legislature honored William Washington Gordon by creating Gordon County in his memory. 89 Also, on June 25, 1882, the Central of Georgia Railroad and Banking Company constructed a memorial to their first president

85.The Georgian (March 23, 1842), page 2, column 2-3

86. Probate Record #122a, Probate Department, Chatham County Court House, Savannah Georgia.

87. ?

88. Jones, History of Savannah, 480

89. ?

and founding father. 90 The monument is located in Wright Square. It is a very handsome tribute to a man who symbolizes the virtues of hard work and dedication.

90. Georgia Society of the Colonial Dames of America, *Some Early Epitaphs in Georgia* (1922), 29.