

Introduction:

Birth Pangs of War

This is the true story of a Confederate bushwhacker by the name of John P. Gatewood, who hailed from Fentress County, Tennessee. His story will be told in due course, but first, it is important to elaborate on what is meant by bushwhacking and to set the stage of events in Tennessee that would lead to his arrival on the scene.

By definition, a bushwhacker is someone who hides behind a tree or camouflages himself in dense brush to lay in wait for some unsuspecting party to come along, at which time he will then “ambush,” or “bushwhack” the victim.¹ Not all bushwhackers kill their prey. Robbery is usually the chief motive, and “bushwhacking” has been going on since the beginning of recorded history.

However, the American Civil War—and particularly the conflict as it was fought on the Southern home front between native Southerners—was such a vicious affair that killing was common and even expected and encouraged. Robbery was sometimes the motive, but in most cases, the simple fact that a combatant was at war meant that he had to kill his enemies. To let a victim live was to encourage retribution from either the victim himself or from his kin, friends, and neighbors. Killing became necessary not only to cover the perpetrator’s tracks but also to ensure that he stayed alive.

The sad truth of that war is that the very act of extinguishing a human life often invited revenge anyway. A spirit of “mutual paranoia” came to permeate entire communities. Whether an individual had been directly responsible for an actual killing was almost immaterial; he often became a suspect . . . and a potential victim at the same time. This reality pushed people to “kill first or

be killed,” and, more importantly, to *keep killing* in order to stay alive. Hence, we have a “snowball effect.”

There were literally thousands of bushwhackers who operated across the breadth of the Southern home front between 1861 and 1865. Readers of the Civil War are often shocked to learn of this, because most have come to visualize a more conventional war between uniformed armies meeting in the open field. Of course, that occurred, and it occurred quite often. But a compelling case can also be made that *the war in the field was probably decided on the home front first*. A man who feared that his family would be harmed was much more likely to desert the army or never even report for duty.

Tennessee—the last Southern state to vote for secession from the Union—is a classic test case in exploring this dynamic. It is now a foregone conclusion among serious scholars of this war that the national debate over slavery eventually led to the outbreak of hostilities. Southerners, who are fiercely proud of their heritage (and I count myself among them), prefer to deemphasize this reality. Instead, we argue that “states’ rights” in the face of a “growing federal tyranny” was a more valid causal agent in leading to war. But, in reality, there would have been no discussion of states’ rights in the first place had there not been an equally important and extremely bitter debate between Northern and Southern politicians about the morality and continuance of slavery.

Be that as it may, most Southerners did not own slaves. In point of fact, only 25 percent of Tennesseans owned slaves, and only a fraction of that number possessed more than two or three at any one time.² But that simple demographic is deceptive. In reality, the *vast majority* of Southern *politicians*—the real movers and shakers in every state throughout the vast South—owned slaves. And it was their perception of the hated Yankee politician, who wanted to take away those slaves, that ultimately pushed their constituents into war.

In Tennessee, the situation was a bit more complicated. As one moves from the western part of the state toward the middle and then on into the east, the topography changes radically. In the west, near the Mississippi River, the land is flatter and the soil richer. In the world of 1861, this was prime cotton country and

large plantations—with their huge slave labor forces—abounded. When the war erupted, scores of West Tennessee farm boys enthusiastically volunteered for service in the Confederate Army.

Moving farther east, one comes to the rolling hills of Middle Tennessee. Cotton plantations were scant, but patriotic fervor for supporting the war effort was still intense, with slightly more than half of the locals still committed to the cause.

In East Tennessee, the mountains of the Cumberland Plateau and the Blue Ridge dominate the landscape. In 1861, cotton plantations were almost nonexistent. Farms, nestled deep in the mountains, were small and the families who inhabited them were exceedingly poor. They also grew more subsistence crops, like corn. This explains why East Tennessee was often known as the “Lincoln Country.” Large numbers of East Tennesseans joined the Union Army or decided to remain neutral by staying at home. The handful of loyal Confederates inhabiting these parts were truly an embattled minority.

One of those Confederate families was the Gatewood clan, who inhabited the Wolf River Valley in the extreme northern section of Fentress County. Prior to the War, the Gatewoods had been a peaceful people. Hailing from Virginia, they could trace their lineage back to a second-generation English colonist named John Gatewood, who had made landfall at Jamestown in the 1660s.³ As was the case with so many of the early Tidewater families, the Gatewoods made their living as tobacco farmers at a time when tobacco was all the rage in the mother country.

In 1604, King James I may have written: “There cannot be a more base, and hurtful corruption in a country than the taking of tobacco,” but for nearly 170 years after the founding of Jamestown, the smoking weed was the chief cash crop in the Old Dominion and a major export to England.⁴ Middle-class colonists, with a willingness to work hard and save their earnings, became, in time, wealthy planters.

Imported African slaves were integral to the success of large-scale plantation operations in Virginia, and the Gatewoods owned more than their fair share. As one example, Dudley Gatewood—the great, great uncle of this book’s subject—owned five hundred acres in Spotsylvania County and twenty slaves, according to tax records from 1782.⁵ Another branch of the family, located in

nearby Essex County, owned sizeable land holdings and numerous slaves. According to the 1730 will of Richard Gatewood, an uncle to John P. four generations removed, five Negroes were left to the wife and another seventeen dispersed among his six children.⁶ And Richard's younger brother Thomas, whose will was probated in 1748, left at least five Negroes to his own heirs.⁷

If the Gatewoods were big slaveholders, they were also a proud, contentious lot. Virginia court records from the eighteenth century reveal that almost every head of a Gatewood household was involved in some sort of legal conflict with his neighbors at one time or another. And at least one of the Essex County Gatewoods led a mob against British merchant Joseph Williamson in the closing days of the American Revolution, tarring and feathering the poor Scotsman when he returned near war's end to ply his trade with some of his former customers. Brought up on criminal charges by the Virginia State Legislature, Gatewood and others narrowly avoided prosecution when Essex County attorney Spencer Roane got his fellow legislators to throw the case out on the grounds that it had technically occurred *during* the war and was, therefore, still "an act of war led by patriots."⁸

In 1781, the same year that William Gatewood led the Essex County mob, Henry Gatewood—the grandfather of John P.—was born in nearby Spotsylvania County. Upon reaching manhood at the turn of the century, Henry moved to neighboring Orange County, where he met and married Amy Quisenberry in 1805. In the great tradition of his forefathers, he too made money off the cultivation of tobacco.

Two of Henry's sons, Berry and Pemberton, reached adulthood and promptly moved to Wayne County, Kentucky, in the early 1820s.⁹ The move across the mountains of the Cumberland Plateau from Virginia into more fertile and flatter land coincided with the rise of tobacco as a major cash crop in the still-infant state of Kentucky.

Wayne County, located just above the Tennessee line in the southeastern corner of the Bluegrass State, was still virgin territory in the early 1800s. Berry and Pemberton Gatewood, who must have been close as brothers, met their respective wives in Wayne County in the early 1830s. Then, quite suddenly, and on the heels of the Great Indian Removal of the late 1830s, the

brothers up and moved again—this time, just over the state line, to neighboring Fentress County, Tennessee.

A new business opportunity, promising even greater wealth, was calling. The brothers pooled their money and bought up some of the best land in the north end of the county, particularly in the Wolf River Valley at the site of the “Three Forks” (where the Wolf River, Shellot Creek, and Caney Creek converge).

Berry Gatewood, who by then was in his early thirties, was not the first man to settle near Wolf River. That distinction was held by one John Clemens, the future father of Mark Twain. Clemens had moved to the area in about 1830. More a dreamer than a farmer, he was preoccupied with inventing the first perpetual motion machine in human history (an aspiration that he never realized). Hearing that someone out west was on the verge of perfecting the contraption, John Clemens sold his huge tract of land to Berry Gatewood for next to nothing and moved his hapless family yet again . . . to Hannibal, Missouri.¹⁰

By 1840, Berry Gatewood owned five hundred acres and eight slaves. He had also established the first general store in the Wolf River Valley.¹¹ His brother Pemberton prospered by running a grist mill on the nearby river.¹² They opened a post office next to the store. The Gatewoods “cleaned up,” financially. The whites who came to settle in that part of Fentress County were practically at their mercy.

Though a few of the recent Wolf River arrivals did prosper, the majority were forced to settle along the sides of the nearby mountains where they eked out an existence by growing vegetables on small plots of dirt, raising hogs and chickens, and turning some of their corn into liquor. Mountain people, by and large, were pretty self-sufficient. But they still needed to make the occasional trek to the Gatewood Store down in the valley for supplies. They still needed to get their corn ground into meal at the Gatewood Grist Mill. None of them could afford slaves or even think about sending his children to school. The poor farmers remained poor while the Gatewoods grew richer with every passing year.

The situation grew worse as the 1840s and '50s progressed. Finding oneself in debt to the local store owner had been a constant theme throughout the history of Appalachia. Buying on credit was a common practice and still is in some of the more

remote parts of the South. Because that was the case, one or two bad crop years could wipe out a small farmer. To avoid the threat of personal bankruptcy, the small farmers simply sold off more and more of their land to the Gatewoods. By 1860, Berry Gatewood and his brother, Pemberton, owned more than 4,000 acres, practically making them feudal lords.

Written records stating how the respective families in Wolf River related to their more prosperous Gatewood neighbors are conspicuously absent. This fact should come as no surprise, for illiteracy in this part of Fentress was much higher than anywhere else. However, there is enough circumstantial evidence to indicate that the relationship was probably cordial on the surface but strained in all other respects.

When the Civil War erupted in the spring of 1861, tensions in East Tennessee rose even higher. Just a few months before, Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris had called the Tennessee General Assembly together at Nashville so that the legislators could vote on whether to secede from the Union. Acrimonious debating followed with no resolution. The legislators finally decided that a special referendum should be submitted to the people. The state's electorate voted to remain in the Union, with 69,387 voting "yay" and 57,798 voting "nay."¹³ Tennessee would not secede.

Then, after the guns sounded at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in April, another vote was submitted to the people, and this time, the secession spirit prevailed by a vote of 104,913 to 47,238.¹⁴ The governor echoed the sentiments of most Tennesseans when he proclaimed: "Tennessee will not furnish a single man for purposes of coercion, but 50,000 if necessary for the defense of our rights and those of our Southern brothers."¹⁵

By June, Tennessee's eligible white males from the middle and western counties were flocking to the Stars and Bars as volunteers. In East Tennessee, the mood was very different. Delegates from twenty-six counties met at Greenville, in Greene County, and decided to petition the legislature for the right to secede and form their own state. Governor Harris and the General Assembly denounced the delegates as "traitors," and vowed to sweep the area clean of "Lincolnites."

The Gatewoods, and what few Confederate allies they could

muster in Fentress County, must have felt like a lonely island in the midst of a stormy Unionist ocean. Indeed, existing records reveal that at least four neighboring Wolf River clans who owned land adjacent to the Gatewoods—the Crabtree, Hatfield, York, and Wright families—had sons who chose to side with the Union. Years later, one of the handful who sided with the Confederates, Zachary Taylor Crouch, would tell an interviewer: “Our county was very poor and there were not more than 12 or 15 families who [even] owned slaves.”¹⁶

In early July 1861, a large body of Confederate volunteers from Middle Tennessee entered Fentress County with the intent of recruiting as many able-bodied men as they could find in an effort to meet their regimental quota.

Dr. Jonathan P. Hale, a physician based in the county seat of Jamestown, promptly mounted his horse and rode like the wind for nearby Clinton County, Kentucky. Reaching the home of Unionist friend S. S. Bush, Hale implored Bush to send a letter to U.S. Sen. Andrew Johnson, who was visiting friends in Louisville.



Wolf River Valley, Fentress County, Tennessee

Bush wrote:

Dr. Hale is here from Fentress County. He says 400 Middle Tennessee troops came into that county last Monday evening. He represents that they [the people of Fentress] are without arms . . . there is not a pound of powder in the county. The people, he says, are determined to expel them and he came here to get arms. He wants rifles of some sort. He has requested me to write you and wants to know what time he can be furnished with 1,000 rifles.

If they can't get rifles, they want the best guns you can get, such as ones suited to *guerrilla warfare*. The guns can be sent to James Speed of Louisville, and will be forwarded through Clinton County and deposited somewhere near the line from whence they can be obtained by the Fentress County people.¹⁷

Bush then sent his own courier northward to deliver the message in person. It is not known whether Johnson ever got the note, or whether he was even successful at procuring the weapons. But the communiqué does illustrate that there were far more Unionists living in Fentress County than Confederates.

In a letter dated November 4, 1861, J. G. M. Ramsay, one of East Tennessee's leading secessionists, wrote Pres. Jefferson Davis of his concerns that Federal troops would invade all of East Tennessee, using Fentress County as their main point of entry:

The enemy intends to carry into effect the policy, long entertained and strenuously advised by Andrew Johnson and others, of invading East Tennessee. This may be attempted, not via Cumberland Gap, as generally apprehended, but via Jamestown and the several passes in Fentress County, where the mountains are much lower and the country more accessible. The inhabitants of that route are more rebellious and more disloyal to your Government.¹⁸

As fate would have it, the first confrontation between Union and Confederate troops on Tennessee soil would occur at Travisville, a tiny hamlet on the border of Fentress and Pickett Counties. The action, in and of itself, was largely insignificant. On September 29, 1861, a Confederate base camp, occupied by a small rifle company, was attacked by some five hundred troopers from the First U.S. Kentucky Cavalry regiment. After losing four men to the opening Yankee volley, a handful of the one hundred or so

Rebs shot back.¹⁹ Then, almost all skedaddled into the nearby hills, where they were never heard from or seen again.

That was the end of the “Confederate occupation” of Fentress County, though Southern forces would continue to traverse the area throughout the War.