

CHAPTER 1

“Plenty of Work and Opportunity”

Victory! Glorious victory belonged to them! The boys of the Fourth Virginia Artillery, only recently mustered into infantry, had come through their first fight. The morning had seen them march through the heavy underbrush and thick pines of the Virginia woods outside Richmond until they were within sight of the Union earthworks. Then, with a bayonet charge, the boys had swept the Federals from their fortifications. The ecstasy of victory, mixed with the relief of survival, filled the young soldiers as they stood in Casey’s Redoubt. It was May 31, 1862, during what would be known as the Battle of Seven Pines.¹

Douglas Southall Freeman’s father, Walker Burford Freeman, looked down the line to his right and his left. All along the line he saw the flags and uniforms of Confederate general Robert Rodes’s brigade. He knew nothing of what might be happening at other portions of the line, but could it be anything other than a similarly glorious report? He saw no evidence to the contrary. All around him lay dead and wounded Yankees, yet he and his comrades were amazingly intact. The bounty of their capture, eight guns and all the supplies of the overrun Federal camp, was spread before them. And now, suddenly, in their midst was General Rodes. Astride his horse, the light of battle reflecting in his face, the thirty-two-year-old, six-foot, blond brigadier looked every bit the Arthurian hero. He congratulated his men on their splendid effort and then gave a special order to the Fourth Virginia: Turn those captured guns toward the enemy and open fire! A cheer of joy erupted from Walker and the boys in the redoubt. Their training was in artillery, and their pride had not well suffered the recent switch to infantry. Now they would man the captured guns, bring their training to bear, and finish the morning’s work.² If at this moment a wave of euphoria surged through eighteen-year-old Walker Freeman, it was merely the latest manifestation of such an emotion he had experienced in the nine

months since he left the small town of Liberty, Virginia, to fight for the Confederacy.

The town of Liberty stood on an eminence in Bedford County in the midst of the rolling foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Bedford was a pastoral county bounded on the north by the James River and the south by the Staunton River. Towering above the fields and streams were the Blue Ridge ranges: Headforemost Mountain, No Business Mountain, Big and Little Onion Mountains, and the twin peaks of Otter. The names of the creeks winding through the countryside bespoke a way of life: Sheep, Stony, Difficult, Goose, Crab Orchard, and Clover.³ The land was fertile, the streams full of spotted trout, and wildflowers splashed color from the emergence of "Johnny-jump-up" in April through the end of the aster in October.⁴ Walker Freeman was entranced with the beauty of Liberty, and the sight from the town looking to the west was indelibly stamped in his mind's eye.

The great range of the Blue Ridge is in full view, standing out against the horizon, in bold outline. It is near enough to be plainly visible, and yet far enough to give the coloring and contour a dreamy tint that lulls one into thoughts of the almightiness of God and the wonders of His handiwork.⁵

Walker Freeman had been born a slight five miles from this panoramic scene. His father, Garland Hurt Freeman, had come to Liberty in the mid-1830s from a not-too-distant farm near the Meadows of Goose Creek. Then in his twenties, Garland Freeman was a powerfully built man with a "pious disposition."⁶ He brought with him his young wife, Judith Holland, and established a farm in the shadow of "No Business Mountain."⁷ There the two set to work—hard work—clearing the ground and sowing the first crop. Their work was rewarded in a season as the farm prospered, and their domestic bliss was increased with the birth of a son, Stephen. As was so often the case in these days on the frontier, tragedy followed soon on the heels of elation. Judith was struck with "a sudden illness" of unknown origin and died. Now a widower with a small son, Garland Freeman persevered in his farm work and soon chose a second wife, Thormuthis Burford. It was an auspicious marriage for the young successful farmer. His bride came from a prosperous Amherst County family—prosperity bred of wise land speculating.⁸ With her cumbersome first name shortened to "The" (pronounced "thee"), she and

Garland began a happy and successful marriage in 1836.⁹ Remembered as a gentle and devoted wife and mother, “The” Freeman bore nine children—six girls and three boys. Walker Burford Freeman, the fourth child, was born August 28, 1843.¹⁰

Little record exists of Walker’s young life. It can be assumed that it was the typical life of a farm boy in the mid-nineteenth century. His future love of the land was no doubt established during these years. “The calm green permanence of the Peaks of Otter,” Douglas Freeman would one day write, “spares men the waste and blindness of hurry. Roads wind caressingly; even the streams flow slowly.”¹¹ When Walker was four, his father moved the family five miles north to the village of Charlemont. Walker viewed the growing community, with its tobacco factory, tannery, grist mill, and tailor shop, as “prosperous and refined.”¹² His father’s 301-acre farm did not reach the “prosperous” level of the surrounding thousand-acre farms, but it did contain a stable, barn, tobacco houses, and dairy. A herd of cattle grazed in its plentiful fields, and the land produced crops “sufficient for the ample maintenance of a large family.”¹³

Like most similarly situated farmers, Garland Freeman owned slaves. He apparently acquired them by inheritance and not by purchase off the slave block.¹⁴ He is reported to have opposed slavery, a sentiment not uncommon in western Virginia, though his opposition rested more on economic reasons than on moral grounds. Unlike many planters, Freeman did not rely on slaves either as an investment or a primary source of labor. He also looked on them more humanely than was often the case elsewhere. In the summer of 1848, he accepted appointment as an instructor of the “colored people.” In that role, he was to meet at least once every two weeks for the purpose of providing religious instruction to area slaves.¹⁵ He was also to encourage slaves to attend worship services on Sunday. Freeman is reported to have pledged himself to fulfill this duty “as far as practicable.”¹⁶ This interaction with slaves was nothing new for Freeman. He worked the farm with them side by side, as did his sons as they matured.¹⁷ The work appealed to young Walker. He judged farming “a most independent life” providing “many opportunities . . . to demonstrate my manhood.” Part of Walker’s love for farm work was that it relieved him from the restraints of school, but his contented joy with outdoor work was genuine. “No one but a country boy,” he asserted, “knows how big he feels when first he is allowed to hold the big double plow.”¹⁸

A farm in nineteenth-century Virginia was more than merely a means

of livelihood. It was an all-consuming lifestyle that shaped attitudes, customs, and values. Particularly in Thomas Jefferson's Virginia, where the agrarian life was viewed as the noblest existence of man, life on a farm left a permanent imprint. Walker Freeman felt it was "good fortune to be born and reared on the farm."¹⁹

Through these years I had ample opportunity for development of physical culture in the daily practice of the various forms, than which no better have ever been devised. For constancy, variety and effect, they were ideal. There is a wide difference in taking physical exercise in a mechanical way, and that of getting it continually as the outcome of one's daily employment. One is mechanical and irregular, the other is constant and natural.²⁰

Not that life was all hard work. There were horses to ride across vast fields and, as winter approached, great parties at neighboring farms. "After the dining room was cleared," Walker remembered, "men would come in with their fiddles and banjos and the dancing would continue until dawn of day."²¹ Wheat harvesting and corn shucking, though serious business, were turned into "frolic and fun." The corn shucks would "fly faster and faster," Walker noted, as the workers "steamed up from the start with strong raw whiskey or neighborhood apple brandy."²² The pious Garland drew the line at hard drink and dancing at his parties, but Walker remembered that he still enjoyed "real social pleasure" in "the good old days in old Virginia."²³

With his farm and family prospering, Garland Freeman assumed a leadership role in the community. Liberty had no county judge, so leading citizens sat as magistrates and heard local disputes and cases. Garland served for many years as a justice of the peace on this bench.²⁴ A Democrat, he discussed politics "in a most spirited manner" usually with his Whig brother John. Politics was as often sport as serious discussion in rural Virginia. Walker observed that "the amateur politician, the leisurely farmers, and the men who sat around at the country store whittling sticks" lost no opportunity to express their "weighty opinions" on the issues of the day.²⁵ Law and politics provided Garland two means of activity and service; religion offered a third. In a grove near Charlemont stood a little frame church called Mt. Hermon. Garland became an active member and would serve through the years as a deacon, treasurer, church clerk, and Sunday School superintendent.²⁶ His views on religion were remembered as "rigid" and "puritanical," but he

was viewed by his neighbors as considerate, unselfish, and conscientious. “Garland Freeman is a good man—one of the best men I ever knew,” one local commented. “It’s a great pity he is so convinced a Baptist.”²⁷ By the mid-1840s, Garland Freeman was firmly established as a leading man in the county, a respected and successful farmer, and a happily married husband and father.

Walker Freeman approached his teen years as a husky, robust, and well-liked lad. He had grown tall and handsome, with fair hair and blue eyes.²⁸ His education had come first at home from his mother and elder sister, then from small schools around Charlemont, usually staffed by traveling ministers.²⁹ Walker’s love of the outdoors, combined with the natural tendencies of a rambunctious youth, frequently landed him in trouble with his teachers. He nonetheless excelled academically and was admitted to the “select school” for young men in preparation to enter the University of Virginia.³⁰ As the year 1856 came to an end, Walker Freeman was walking the same successful path of his father. Events on the horizon, both close to home and across a dividing nation, would soon jolt the idyllic life of the Freeman family.

The first blow landed in 1857. Garland Freeman passed away at the age of forty-seven, apparently from an attack of typhoid. He had contracted pneumonia in December 1856 and, despite receiving the best available medical attention, was in a weakened condition when the fever struck.³¹ His death left a void in the social, cultural, and religious life of Charlemont, and he was mourned by a genuinely grieved community. His obituary in the *Religious Herald* reflected the public measure of the man.

He was active and useful in the family, and in society, and a pious devoted and valuable member of the church . . . As a husband he was tender and kind, as a father affectionate, as a master lenient, as a neighbor unselfish, as a citizen conscientious, as a Christian meek and humble, and as an officer, active, prompt and efficient . . . He was a lover of truth, and a man of irreproachable moral character and deep-toned piety.³²

His family buried him on his farm as thirteen-year-old Walker reflected on his father’s “noble example for uprightness, in service to his fellow men, and devotion to the principles of truth and righteousness.”³³ The example of Garland Freeman would, his son affirmed, be “ever before me.”³⁴

The settling of Garland Freeman's estate proved to be a disconcerting experience. Garland's son by his first marriage, Stephen, was entitled to a share of his late father's estate, and part of the Freeman farm would have to be sold to satisfy this obligation. The timing of such a sale could not have been worse. Slow economic times, brought on by the Panic of 1857, had descended on Virginia, and an immediate sale would guarantee low prices for farm acreage. "The" Freeman would be forced to sell more land than she wanted in order to raise the sufficient share. A logical solution was to wait for an economic upturn that could benefit all parties. This logic was clear to everyone except the court-appointed trustee, Dr. Falls, who demanded an immediate sale. Arguments could not persuade him to wait until more favorable economic times, so much of Garland Freeman's farm was sold to satisfy the share of his first son.³⁵

The economic crisis that depressed farm and crop prices in 1857 was followed in 1858 by a severe drought that cut short remaining crops. Farmers faced twin demons of despair: not enough crops to sell and low prices for those that would sell. To these worries were added rumors of slave insurrections. As the abolitionist movement of the North grew, whispers intensified rumors that slaves in Bedford County would soon revolt. As nerves grew raw, the town established night patrols to act as a public warning network. Walker Freeman and his brothers spent many nights on patrol "visiting" the slave quarters, but "never heard a word that indicated" any plan of uprising.³⁶ Still, the seed of suspicion had been sown in fertile ground, and a traveling veterinary surgeon who came through town was rumored to be none other than John Brown.³⁷

The presidential election of 1860 was the fourth major upheaval in as many years to shake Walker Freeman's life. Having inherited some of Garland Freeman's political acumen, Walker watched the growing sectional tensions with a discerning eye. "The signs of the times," he concluded, pointed to "a coming conflict."³⁸ With the election of Abraham Lincoln, "on his platform," it became plain to Walker that "war was almost certainly to ensue."³⁹ Virginia did not immediately join the fledgling Confederacy in the wake of Lincoln's election or the firing on Fort Sumter. It took Lincoln's call for troops to invade the South before Virginia voted for secession and began to form military companies. By May 1861, Bedford County had sent nine companies into the service of the Confederacy, with Walker's older brother and other family members in the ranks.⁴⁰ "I just heard you were going to join the army," Walker wrote a cousin. "I wish I could go, but my folks think I am too young."⁴¹ His family's opposition notwithstanding, Walker put aside thoughts of

entering the University of Virginia and begged his mother for permission to join the fight.⁴² “The” Freeman had every reason to refuse her son’s entreaties: He was only seventeen years old and was the eldest of only two sons still at home to work the family farm. These were valid excuses in 1861 when the manpower needs of the Confederacy were not as acute as they would become during the course of the war. None of this swayed Walker, and his persistence on the subject did not wane. After a few weeks “The” consented—provided Walker could find a company to accept him. Heartened by success, he headed to Liberty and enlisted in a company of field artillery being raised by Capt. Alexander Jordan, a local tobacco manufacturer. Jordan’s stipulations were that Walker pass a physical—no problem for the six-foot teenager—and secure his mother’s written permission. Her condition of his finding a unit having been met, “The” Freeman had no choice but to sign. Walker Freeman became a member of the Piedmont Artillery.⁴³

The Piedmont Artillery consisted of about one hundred men from all walks of life. The roster consisted of lawyers, doctors, teachers, students, farmers, blacksmiths, the former editor of the *Valley Virginian*, and one patriot who claimed his pre-war profession was “drinking liquor and fox hunting.”⁴⁴ All through the hot Virginia summer, the company drilled, trained, and prepared for action. In August 1861, orders came to make the short trip to Lynchburg.

On the day the soldiers left for war, Liberty looked like any one of thousands of similarly situated Southern towns during the summer of 1861. The town was giving its youth to the cause of the Confederacy, and the full range of emotions—from boisterous pride to anxious fear—was on display at the station. A large crowd gathered, speeches were made, and tearful good-byes exchanged. “Flowers were heaped upon us in great profusion,” Walker Freeman remembered.⁴⁵

It seemed to me as if the train would never start. But after a while we boarded the cars and moved off amidst the waving of handkerchiefs and calling out the last farewells. A beautiful silken flag, the gift of the ever blessed Ladies, kissed the breeze as we turned the curve below the town and proceeded to Lynchburg.⁴⁶

From Lynchburg, the company went to Staunton, thence east across the face of central Virginia and down the peninsula to Gloucester Point, across the York River from Yorktown. Two other companies joined them

there and, as 1861 drew to a close, winter quarters were constructed. Walker Freeman settled down with “a happy, jolly set” eagerly awaiting spring and the opening campaign.⁴⁷

On May 4, 1862, the Fourth Virginia Artillery, as Walker’s Piedmont unit was now designated, was ordered to move west from Gloucester Point to Hanover Courthouse. The reason for this backward move was the withdrawal of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston and the Army of Northern Virginia in the face of the slow advance up the peninsula of Gen. George B. McClellan’s Army of the Potomac. Johnston would, in time, pull the army back to the outskirts of the capital at Richmond. Hanover Courthouse, Walker’s destination, was north of Richmond, some twenty miles from the far left of Johnston’s defensive line. As excitement and anticipation filled the boys from the shadow of the Blue Ridge, Walker felt nothing but gloom. He was ill with the mumps and unable to move out with his company. His condition carried but one consequence: He was expected to look out for himself and make his own way west. With the Union Army advancing in the wake of withdrawing Confederates, Walker Freeman felt certain he would soon be a prisoner of war.⁴⁸

Not willing to chance falling into the enemy’s hands, Walker picked himself off his sick bed and, with two other recovering comrades and a black cook named Jim, set “out like Abraham, not knowing whither he went.”⁴⁹ Already on the north bank opposite the enemy, the sickly band sought to speed their escape by using a skiff owned by a local operator. As they haggled over use of the craft, they heard the distant, yet unmistakable, sound of a steamer coming up the river. A few moments later, the sight was confirmed: It was a steamer bound for West Point. A plan quickly developed: The four men would board the skiff, get close to the steamer, hail it, and get on board. The strategy worked as planned until the skiff neared the steamer. Then, suddenly, a displaced wave rose, rolled toward the small craft, and forced it under. “It was,” Walker admitted, “a dangerously perilous position.”⁵⁰ The alert ship captain sized up the pending catastrophe and reversed his engine, calming the water. As the water settled, the four men hung to the wrecked skiff until they could be lifted to safety. A tongue-lashing from the captain for attempting so foolhardy a venture was a price the boys were willing to pay for successful escape from the clutches of the Union Army.⁵¹

Walker Freeman, still weak from the mumps and now wearing drenched clothing, spent a restless trip on board the steamer. He had not eaten since leaving Gloucester Point, and his prospects did not improve upon arriving at West Point. The floor in the front hall of a boarding

house was the best the town could offer for a bed and, almost as soon as sleep came, enemy gunboats broke the peaceful revelry of the dawn. Chaos descended along with the Union shells. As women screamed and soldiers sought to keep order, someone yelled above the tumult that a freight train was leaving for Richmond. Moving in a daze, Walker and his companions beat a path to the railway. At first denied entry on the departing train, the soldiers pushed their way through, having to draw knives at one point to get Jim on board, and found a spot. As the train lurched slowly west to Richmond, the pilgrimage from Gloucester Point reached a blissfully uneventful end.⁵²

After reaching Richmond, Walker set out for home. Nursed by “The” Freeman, he recovered “in about a week” and prepared to rejoin his unit. Before leaving home, Walker tended to one item of importance: He took time to be baptized.⁵³ Feeling both physically and spiritually fit, he made the trip back east and found his company encamped six miles below Richmond. Here he learned the military situation. McClellan had continued to advance up the peninsula and was now some ten miles east of Richmond. General Johnston had decided at last to turn and strike a blow. His decision was to attack the IV Federal Corps at Seven Pines before it could be reinforced.⁵⁴ The Fourth Virginia Artillery was mustered with infantry and would move toward certain action in the morning. He hadn’t missed it. He would be with his company when they engaged the enemy. As Walker waited that night for the morning’s work, the skies were rent by a great thunderstorm; the electrical display in the sky somehow foreshadowing what the morrow held. It was another sleepless night.⁵⁵

At eight o’clock in the morning, the Fourth Virginia moved out. “Our route of two miles,” Walker wrote, “lay through a jungle so thick with briars, thorns and vines that it was almost impossible to move.” But move they did. At the edge of a slight elevation, the firing started, and the first charge was made.⁵⁶

Thus the confluence of events and influences that placed Walker Freeman in Casey’s Redoubt on May 31, 1862. Though a boy in years, he had the experiences of a man from both the farm and the military. Now he stood flush with victory as General Rodes gave the order to turn the guns on the withdrawing Federals.

Fire they did, but the guns failed to achieve the desired effect. The Federals were reforming. Rodes decided to move his brigade again forward and drive the enemy. The order came, and Walker Freeman moved

forward. He instantly sensed this charge was different. The Confederates were engulfed by fire not only from the front, but also from an angle to their left. Walker now walked into volleys “that seemed to be so destructive that no human being could hope to live in the midst of it.”⁵⁷ But live he did, and there was nothing to do but continue forward. He was soon 150 yards from where the charge started, and “men were falling on every hand like autumn leaves in a storm.”⁵⁸ The line surged forward, faltered under a blistering volley, reformed, and charged again into “an awful tornado of death missiles.” Walker found himself going forward by stepping on and over the bodies of dead and wounded soldiers. Looking down at this pontoon of human lives, he noticed blood coming from his left shoe. He was unaware until that moment that a minnie ball had passed through his left thigh. Still he pressed onward. Then a second bullet struck his right knee. Seventeen-year-old Walker Freeman dropped to the ground.⁵⁹

Still conscious despite his wounds, Freeman was able to observe the line continue forward. Then, slowly, the distant line grew larger as it came closer to him. The army was falling back to the position from which it had launched the attack. The withdrawing troops had scant time to retrieve the wounded and, for the second time in a month, Walker Freeman faced the distinct possibility of being taken prisoner. Then he saw a friend, Jim Hopkins, and his yell pierced the air above the cries of the wounded and the dying.

“Jim! Are you going to leave me here?”⁶⁰

“The” Freeman opened her newspaper to read the casualty list from the Battle of Seven Pines. There she saw “W. Freeman, 4th Artillery, killed.” She was certain as an ambulance approached the farm that it carried the body of her dead son. But it was Washington Freeman who died at Seven Pines, and the ambulance carried home the very much alive Walker Freeman to recover from his wounds.⁶¹ His friend had rescued him from the battlefield, and his wounds had been successfully treated in Richmond. He was weak and on crutches, but he was safe and home. “It was,” he said, “heaven on earth.”⁶²

The months of recovery passed “swiftly and pleasantly,” but not without their own difficulties. Walker’s brother Gustavus died in July of typhoid, and the fever attacked the weakened Walker. Again displaying his physical resilience, and with the faithful “The” at his side, he survived typhoid and made preparations to leave home and rejoin his company. The year had left its mark—both physically and emotionally. His

brother’s death, his wounding, his battle with mumps and typhoid, “and the promise now of a long conflict with the enemies of our country” shaped the man who mounted his horse on New Year’s Day, 1863, and started over snow-covered ground to rejoin the war.⁶³

The Piedmont Artillery was now part of the Thirty-Fourth Virginia, the brigade of general, and former Virginia governor, Henry A. Wise. When Freeman arrived at the camp near Chafin’s Farm outside of Richmond, he was appointed a courier for General Wise. The summer of 1863 was one of recovery and restoration for Walker, even while it was one of destruction and desolation for the Confederacy. He regained his health and enjoyed the camp with its “great brigade drills, shade and rest, with a good surrounding country to forage.”⁶⁴ He observed “great revivals of religion” throughout the camps, though his Baptist faith, tested through almost two years of war, needed no revival. In September, Wise’s brigade was ordered south to Charleston, South Carolina, to assist in Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard’s defense of that city. The Federal Army withdrew by the time the Virginians arrived on the scene, so much of their time that fall was spent marching and countermarching in pursuit of the enemy. Vigilance turned quickly to routine, and Walker Freeman passed an uneventful winter.⁶⁵ The monotony was broken in the spring of 1864 with an order to move back to Virginia. This time, the men were told, their march would not be in vain. They were heading north to halt the advance of “the much hated” Union general Ben Butler.⁶⁶ Even as they marched, however, the stage was being set for a far greater fight than one against “Beast” Butler.

After battling Robert E. Lee across the face of central Virginia, Ulysses Grant’s Federal juggernaut shifted its focus from Richmond and hurled itself toward Petersburg, Virginia. With precious few troops defending the approach to the city, Beauregard stripped his lines wherever possible and hurried his men into battle. When Walker Freeman arrived from South Carolina, there was no time for rest after the march. He immediately faced shot and shell. Could it have been only two years beyond the day of his wounding at Seven Pines? Now, as he assessed the surrounding situation, Walker saw far fewer men and only three pieces of artillery aiding his portion of the line in this desperate fight. The battle raged all afternoon until it set with the evening sun. “It was,” Walker wrote, “one of the greatest battles for length of time and hard fighting I have ever witnessed.”⁶⁷ The silence over the combat zone did not signal rest for the weary combatants. All night the Confederates dug trenches and improved existing lines. With the sun of June 16 came the first volley from the Federal lines.

Walker spent another day “fighting, digging, sweating and starving.”⁶⁸ Now fresh seasoned troops—Winfield Scott Hancock’s men—moved in opposite the ragged Confederates. The dead filled in trenches, and smoke hung over the field, but the line held. “If there ever was a place on earth that looked like the infernal region,” Walker wrote, “this was the place.”⁶⁹

Assault after assault finally forced the Confederates back. Again they dug in—using bayonets and tin cups to move the dirt. Night passed with no sleep or food. Then as dawn broke on June 18, Walker saw through bleary eyes the glint of bayonets in the distance—reinforcements had arrived. He extracted himself from his dugout and moved to the rear. As he drifted off into an exhausted sleep, the final death struggle of the Confederacy, the Siege of Petersburg, began.⁷⁰

After the seemingly relentless onslaught, a dreadful calm descended as the siege settled in. June passed into July and Walker Freeman became accustomed to a daily ritual of watching, waiting, and avoiding sniper shots. The trenches that now housed the hopes of the Confederacy were deep enough for a man to stand upright without his head emerging above the crest of the parapet. Eighteen inches from the ground was a step upon which soldiers could stand and fire. There was little water, few rations, and a nightly artillery duel. Now the torridly hot days also brought anxious rumors about Federal miners tunneling somewhere beneath Confederate lines.⁷¹

Shortly before dawn on July 30, 1864, Freeman was on watch on the parapet when the rumors took on life. A spectacular explosion under the center of the Confederate line shattered the morning’s uneasy calm. Men and weapons were hurled through the air as eight thousand pounds of powder were detonated in an underground tunnel. Through the smoke and settling debris, Union troops moved forward to the attack. Their goal was to break the stalemate with a lighting strike. Their object was the newly created cavity, 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. At first, the Union plan proceeded as designed. Then, as blue-clad troops entered the crater, the attack disintegrated as soldiers milled around gazing at the man-made canyon. Walker was moved to the rear of the crater to hold off the Federals until troops under Gen. William Mahone arrived to retake the captured works. By 1:00 P.M., the battle was over, and the uneasy silence returned.⁷²

“Rations were continually getting smaller,” Walker noted. “They now reached the bottom . . . (with) about an ounce of renoïd unsmoked bacon and a very small allowance of cold corn pone.”⁷³ The diseases of the trenches sought to do what Federal snipers did not. Walker was struck by

malaria, its fever coming on in waves, then dissipating before its inevitable return. Despite his illness, he always answered duty call and was sufficiently well to take advantage of a pass into Petersburg. As he walked down the road, he recognized an unmistakable figure—Gen. Robert E. Lee.

He was riding Traveler when we met him on the Baxter Road going towards the trenches. There were two of us in company. When he met us, he drew rein and asked how we were getting on in the trenches. He was cordial in his greeting and remarked that he hoped we were not suffering severe discomforts.⁷⁴

Though shivering with malaria, Walker nonetheless assured Lee that he was “fit as a fiddle.”⁷⁵

The inevitable end of the siege occurred on April 2, 1865. Lee pulled his army out of the trenches and headed west toward Farmville. “We moved through the mud,” Walker said, “more dead than alive.”⁷⁶ During a brief skirmish with Union forces, he found himself standing close to General Lee. Walker searched the general’s face for a sign of excitement or worry, but saw none. He did note that Lee was careful not to “ride over or up against” any of his exhausted men.⁷⁷ On April 8, with no food to cook or tents to pitch, the men rested in sight of the village at Appomattox Court House. Walker stood on the hill and looked out after dark. To the west, south, and east, Federal campfires lit the night. The thought came to him that “maybe even General Lee couldn’t get out of that trap.”⁷⁸ Lee would make one attempt to escape. There would be one more charge. Walker would be in the final desperate thrust to break through. He and his companions formed battle lines and moved forward. Yet almost as quickly as it began, “the firing ceased.”⁷⁹ This silence bespoke something ominous and, in a moment, the word spread through the lines: General Lee had surrendered.

“Gloom, disappointment, sadness and sorrow” settled on Walker and his comrades. Years later, he would summarize his feelings as he stacked arms at Appomattox Court House.

God in His mercy and boundless grace, gives us in times of deepest sorrow and distress, something always to be thankful for. The silver lining to the dark cloud that enveloped us all, was that we could now go home. “Home,” that sweet word! Though we had been for four long years passing through the storms of strife and turmoil, the fires of sanguinary battles, the lonely nights on the

picket post, hearing the mournful cry of the wounded and dying, the word “home” had always been in our thoughts and had lost none of its preciousness.⁸⁰

Walker Freeman went home. If he took self-inventory as he trudged along the westward path, his sadness at the defeat of the Confederacy was balanced by the satisfaction of what he had gained in experience. He was twenty-two years old, a twice-wounded veteran who had survived the entire war while fighting in major theaters. He was—despite the horrors of months of trench warfare—in good health and had developed a self-confidence he had previously not known. “I had learned the habit of promptness in acknowledging responsibility,” he wrote, “and had been trained to respond without hesitation or mental reservation to the call of duty.” He kept walking until, at length, he saw the blues and greens of the mountains of home—unaltered in their majesty even as the lives living in its shadow were forever changed. Duty now made a new demand of Walker Freeman. With his father, half-brother, and older brother dead, he was head of the Freeman family. His was the task of rebuilding not only his own life, but also that of his family.⁸¹

His arrival met with an auspicious start. His father’s old servant, “Uncle Billy,” had prepared plant beds for a tobacco crop. Seizing this opportunity, Freeman returned to the hard farm work of his youth, planting wheat, growing tobacco, and acquiring what livestock he could obtain. The first year was challenging. “Raising tobacco,” Walker would later say, “is the hardest way in the world to make a living.”⁸² The tobacco grew that first year, and the family survived. The second year saw drought, but by the end of the third year, the farm was sufficient for the needs of the family.⁸³ With his family as secure as the times and nature would allow, Walker decided to try a new direction for himself. Turning his share of the farm over to his mother and family, the farm boy left the land to try his hand at business.

Dr. A. S. Thomson was a local physician who also ran a large dry goods store. Walker approached him with the idea that the two form a mercantile business. Thomson agreed, but made it clear that, due to his medical practice, the management of the venture would be Walker’s responsibility. No stranger to either work or responsibility, Walker accepted the partnership terms.⁸⁴

The Virginia in which Walker Freeman’s business opened was now called “Military District No. One.” Towns were garrisoned by detachments

of Federal soldiers, and the commanding officers ruled with martial law authority. Most Confederate veterans were unable to vote due to the “iron clad oath” that required them to swear they had fought against the Union under duress. In addition to formal military rule, Walker observed “carpet baggers and scalawags who had come down like a swarm of vultures to pillage and rob the people.”⁸⁵ It was apparent that the policy of the Federal government was to convert the South into little more than an agricultural colony for the North. With the political situation so situated, Walker turned his attention to economic recovery and, by 1868, his mercantile partnership was prospering.

Like his father before him, Walker assumed a leadership role in the community. To supplement his income, he secured an appointment as a part-time constable—one of the few law enforcement jobs available to Confederate veterans.⁸⁶ He was still an active member of Mt. Hermon Church, where he taught in the Sunday School and served as clerk. At twenty-five years of age, he was in many ways the man he would permanently be: systematic, thrifty, optimistic, and religious.⁸⁷ In spite of his limited education, he was financially successful and, in those days of hardship throughout the South, that condition did not go unnoticed. In December 1869 he received an offer from a large wholesale grocery house in Lynchburg, Virginia. Seeing opportunity again presenting itself, he accepted the offer, bade a reluctant farewell to Bedford County, and moved the short distance to Lynchburg.⁸⁸

The new position, Walker wrote, “meant plenty of work and opportunity to climb.”⁸⁹ He became the firm’s leading salesman within one year and was appointed managing salesman—with a corresponding salary increase—in 1871. As he had done all his life, he linked financial advancement with community activity. He joined the First Baptist Church of Lynchburg where he would serve as a deacon and superintendent of Sunday School. He was a city alderman, acted as a police justice, and was instrumental in the organization of a YMCA.⁹⁰ It was not surprising that such a successful and eligible bachelor should attract his share of romances. He seems to have been engaged on at least three occasions, “once as the unfortunate result of some joke; again with a half-heart, and once in earnest ere he met mother.”⁹¹ One day in early 1872, his roving eye caught the figure of one Miss Bettie Allen Hamner. “She was extremely handsome,” Walker remembered, “tall and of faultless figure, with a beaming face, [and] beautiful countenance like an angel.”⁹² The nineteen-year-old Bettie had come into Walker’s store, accompanied by another member of First Baptist, to solicit money for a

church event. By his account, and that of family tradition, Walker stumbled through the conversation, gave a contribution, and, as Bettie left the store, remarked to an associate: "I intend to marry that girl if she will have me."⁹³

The object of such ardent fervor was the only daughter of James S. Hamner, a farmer and country merchant, and his wife Mary Chambers Hamner. Bettie had been born and reared in Appomattox—indeed she was living four miles away from the surrender site when Walker laid down his arms—and was descended from several well-established Virginia families.⁹⁴ As in the case of her admirer, Bettie was something of a flirt and was known to have received eighteen gentlemen callers on a single Sunday afternoon.⁹⁵ At least once she was allegedly threatened with a breach of promise suit, but her flirting seems to have been of a teasing harmless nature as no scandal attached to her reputation. "She never wrote a love-letter ere she was married," her son Douglas remembered, and "never wrote to a young man but that her mother read the letter."⁹⁶

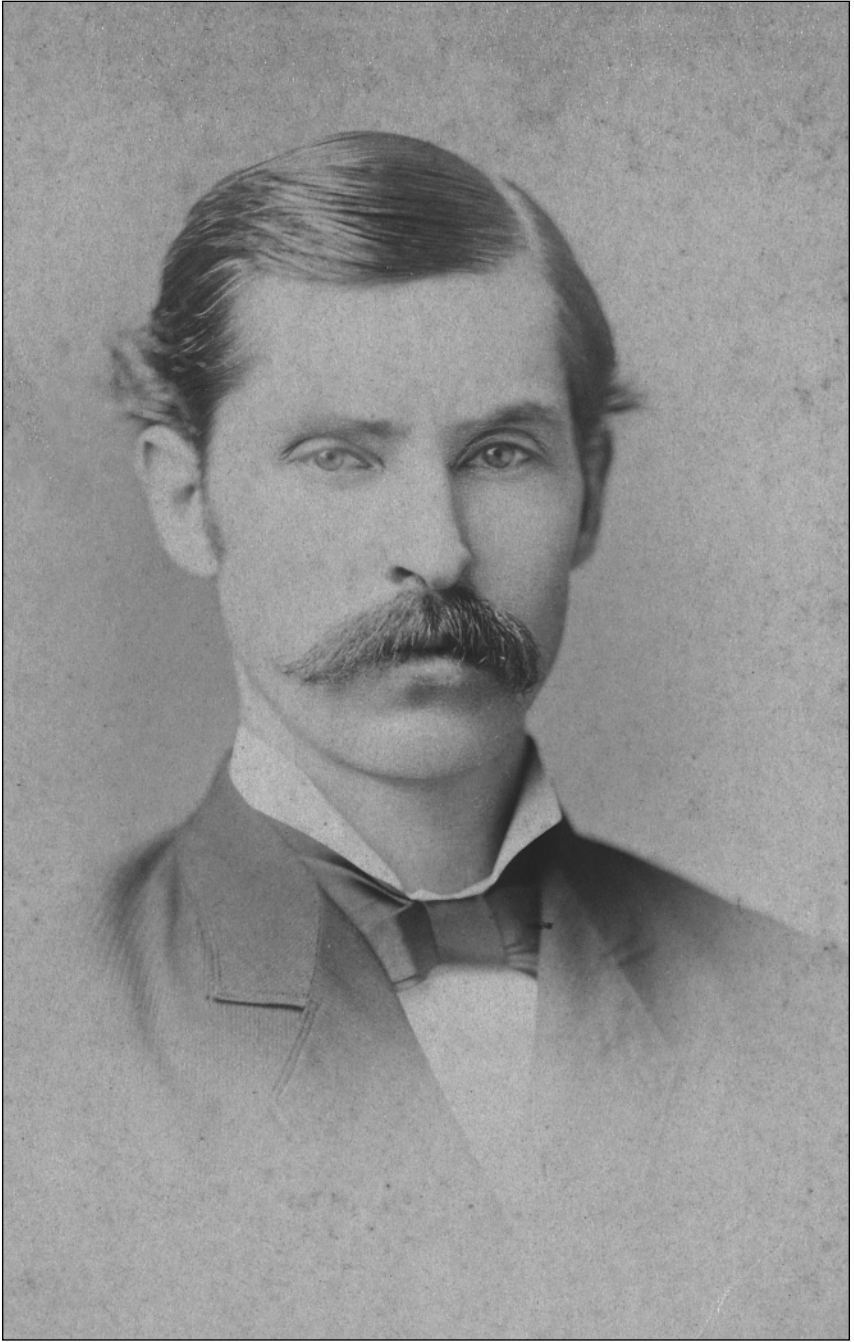
Walker moved systematically toward his goal of capturing Bettie Hamner's heart. The Sunday following their introduction, he approached her at church and asked to walk her home. She accepted, and the courtship began in earnest.⁹⁷ The two appeared in a church play together, and Walker became a frequent visitor to the Hamner home throughout the spring of 1872.⁹⁸ When the Hamners decided to take in a boarder, Walker promptly moved in. His proximity apparently did not scare off Bettie and, after a few months, he proposed, and she accepted.⁹⁹

Success had crowned every effort Walker Freeman had made since the war. The story sounds almost too trite to be true, but his success came as a result of hard work and single-minded determination. Now, facing marriage in a few months, he decided to strike out again for economic advancement. He established his own wholesale house under the name "Freeman & Steptoe" in the fall of 1873. "Our business," he noted, "succeeded very well."¹⁰⁰ Despite this optimistic report, some evidence suggests that, for the first time in his life, Walker experienced a slight business downturn. The primary reason was a false prosperity resulting from the inflated price of tobacco after the war. A more pernicious, but unconfirmed, explanation is traced to the actions of one of Walker's partners in endorsing notes in the firm's name for his own ill-fated land speculations.¹⁰¹ Whatever the actual status of the company, Walker was his usual optimistic self as 1874 dawned. The main event of his year occurred when he and Bettie married on January 8, 1874. "The Baptist

Church was crowded yesterday afternoon,” the *Lynchburg Virginian* reported, as the “interested audience” witnessed the marriage of the “popular young Main Street merchant” to his “beautiful and attractive” bride.¹⁰² On the way to the church, the “beautiful and attractive” Bettie had allowed herself one final act of unwed flirtation. Passing the store of a former suitor, she leaned out of her carriage window, waved a handkerchief, and sweetly chirped “good-bye.”¹⁰³

The newlyweds set up their home in the City Hotel in Lynchburg. In September 1874, Bettie gave birth to their first child, a boy originally named John Hamner Garland and later shortened to Hamner Garland. A second boy, Walker Burford, Jr., was born about a year later in October 1875.¹⁰⁴ As the most prosperous and prominent member of the Freeman/Hamner family, Walker found himself tasked with providing for the “poor kin” of the family.¹⁰⁵ While the Freeman side of the family accepted no more than an occasional night at Walker’s home, the Hamners were delighted to partake of Walker’s bounty—and to do so with increasing frequency. One family member even took to having his bills forwarded to Walker for payment.¹⁰⁶ If Walker Freeman objected to providing this extensive family security, no comments of his have survived. He is known to have made it clear that no alcohol would be consumed in his home during any of these consanguineous visits.¹⁰⁷

In 1876, Freeman & Steptoe expanded by buying out an older firm and taking on another partner. With the end of the Reconstruction era, Freeman ran for justice of the peace and was easily elected.¹⁰⁸ His new partnership prospered until the parties amicably dissolved it in 1880. Having made a career in the wholesale business, Walker now turned to retail, which he believed would show a wider margin of profit.¹⁰⁹ Shortly after opening the new store, Walker added a shoe department that was soon “paying nicely.”¹¹⁰ His family continued to expand with his business. In 1881, Bettie gave birth to their third son, Allen Weir Freeman, in the family’s new home at 416 Main Street in Lynchburg. Walker had moved his family into the two-story brick house in 1879. Located toward the western end of Main Street, it was only a short distance from a steep bluff leading down to Blackwater Creek. The newly laid Belgian blocks on the street in front of the house bespoke of the progress of both the town and its residents.¹¹¹ It was in this comfortable house, on May 16, 1886, that Bettie delivered her fourth—and final—child. Another boy, he was named Douglas Southall Freeman.



Walker Burford Freeman, c. 1879. (Image courtesy of Mary Tyler McClenahan.)