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GERMAN TROOPS IN ALABAMA DURING THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION: THE BATTLE OF  
JANUARY 7, 1781

by

Jack D. L. Holmes

As Birmingham celebrates its 1974 Festival of Arts by honoring the Federal German Republic it is apropos of the occasion to recall the sacrifices made by Germans during the American Revolution, almost two hundred years ago. Most schoolchildren recall the role played by Baron von Steuben and the mercenaries from Hesse-Cassel. Less well-known, but highly significant to Alabama history, is the role played by other German troops, who fought against Spanish forces near Mobile in 1781.

The Third Regiment of Waldeck was organized in 1776 under the command of Colonel von Hanxleden. Waldeck was a small German principality located near the fifty-first degree of North Latitude and nine degrees longitude east of Greenwich. Although the role played by the 1,225 Waldeckers in the North American campaigns was considered less important than that of the Hessians, and other mercenaries from Brunswick, Hanau, Ansbach-Bayreuth, and Zerbst, their percentage of casualties in battle was greater than any other unit which served in America. 720 men never returned to their German homeland.<sup>1</sup>

The Waldeckers arrived at New York on October 18, 1776, and set out for an overland journey to British West Florida. It was a strange land they traversed, one covered with swamps and dense forests. Quartermaster Carl Philipp Steurnagel, who kept a diary, noted the fierce qualities of the American Indians who supported the English: ". . . fearful in war, always killing their prisoners, revenging blood for blood, and skillful in the use of their weapons." The Waldeck quartermaster was astonished to discover that human scalps were sold at the

<sup>1</sup>Max von Eelking, *The German Allied Troops in the North American War for Independence* (Translated and abridged by Joseph George Rosengarten; Albany, New York, 1893), 222, 257.

market price of £ 3 sterling!<sup>2</sup>

It could only happen in the wilderness of America, perhaps, but the Germans were astonished to meet a former Waldeck soldier named Brandenburg, a native of Königshagen. He had deserted his unit and had lived among the Indians so long that he could hardly be distinguished from his red companions.

From West Florida's capital of Pensacola, the Waldeckers were sent on patrol as far west as the Mississippi. They helped improve the crumbling defenses of British West Florida even as the clouds of war grew darker. Unaccustomed to working in the raging heat with such high humidity, these German troops slept by day and worked in the cool of the nights. The weather was hard on wooden fortifications, and the English decided to evacuate Fort Bute at Manchak, some thirty-five leagues from New Orleans. Most of these troops were sent to Fort Richmond, the defensive bastion of Baton Rouge.

From spies sent among the English at Pensacola the Spanish Governor-general Bernardo de Gálvez at New Orleans learned that the British were receiving reinforcements and would soon launch an attack on the capital of Spanish Louisiana. Gálvez decided to strike first. With a handful of willing volunteers from the Acadian and German coasts above New Orleans, black and white militia joined the regular troops which arrived at Fort Bute on the morning of September 7, 1779. The post quickly fell, but Baton Rouge was another story.<sup>3</sup>

Lieutenant-colonel Alexander Dickson of the 16th British Regiment of Foot commanded the fort at Baton Rouge with the aid of 500 men of his regiment; 110 Grenadiers from the Third Waldeck Regiment, under the command of Captain von Hacke, Loyalists of the 60th Royal Americans, and a miscellaneous group of regular troops, settlers, and Negro slaves.

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<sup>2</sup>Carl Philipp Steuèrnagel (Quartermaster of the Regiment, of Captain Teùtzels Company), *Short Description of the Journey and Campaign of the Third Regiment to America, from 20 May 1776, until its Return in 1783*, quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

<sup>3</sup>Jack D. L. Holmes, *Honor and Fidelity, the Louisiana Infantry Regiment and the Louisiana Militia Companies, 1766-1821* (Birmingham: Louisiana Collection Series, 1965), 29-31.

On the morning of September 21st, using a feint to draw the fire of the thirteen British cannon, Gálvez opened fire from his advanced batteries. Expecting reinforcements from Pensacola from other troops of Waldeck, Dickson tried to delay his surrender, but Gálvez forced the day. Included in the surrender terms was the strategic post of Natchez.<sup>4</sup>

Where were the Waldeck reinforcements? Captain August Alberti's 54 men and officers were being ferried across the Amit River near Bayou Manchak when they were ambushed by Vicente Rillieux, a New Orleans creole, and fourteen of his companions. Believing they were assaulted by a much superior force, the Waldeckers went below deck. Acting swiftly, Rillieux boarded the English vessel and locked the hatches, thus imprisoning the Waldeckers below.<sup>5</sup>

Gálvez and his heterogenous forces, which included seven American volunteers, next attacked Fort Charlotte at Mobile. The British commander, Captain Elias Durnford, again attempted a delay, hoping that the Waldeck reinforcements and Loyalists from Pennsylvania and Maryland would arrive at the Tensaw crossing in time to crush the Spanish vanguard. Once again, however, the Waldeckers arrived too late to help. Mobile surrendered on March 14. Only Pensacola remained in West Florida as a symbol of Britannic majesty.<sup>6</sup>

As Gálvez gathered forces from Havana and Louisiana for the final campaign against Pensacola, the British commander, General John Campbell, decided on a time-delaying ruse. The Spaniards had placed a small garrison north of Mobile near the confluence of the Tensaw and Alabama Rivers. On January 3, 1781, Captain von Hanxleden led sixty Waldeckers, 100 chosen infantrymen of the 60th Regiment, eleven mounted West Florida Royal Forresters, and between 300 and 500 Indian allies. They discovered the Spanish troops entrenched at the old French Village, which the Waldeckers in their curious

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup>"Relación de la campaña que hizo Don Bernardo de Gálvez, contra los ingleses, en la Luisiana," September, 1779, printed in Manuel Serrano y Sanz, *Documentos históricos de la Florida y la Luisiana, siglos xvi al xviii* (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1912), 352.

<sup>6</sup>John Walton Caughey, *Bernardó de Gálvez in Louisiana, 1776-1783* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 171-186.

comprehension of American geography, thought was upon the Mississippi. But it was Mobile Bay that one of the bloodiest events of the war in West Florida occurred. The time was January 7, 1781.

As in most military actions, there are two sides to the French Village battle — the Spanish and the English. According to the Spanish account,<sup>7</sup> some 200 regular troops and up to 500 Indians appeared with two cannon, which fired four-pound balls. In the foggy morning, they caught the Spanish defenders by surprise. Sub-lieutenant Manuel de Córdoba, who commanded the outer perimeter of defense, peered out the windows of a small house at fleeting shapes moving in the fog. He believed the men to be members of the Spanish militia force, and this delay in firing on the attacking force allowed the Waldeckers and their allies to reach the trenches with impunity. Realizing his mistake too late, Córdoba gave the command to fire, but he paid the ultimate price for his tardy action — he was one of the first to die.

A palisade of sharpened stakes halted the advance of the Waldeckers, and the Spanish defenders rallied. Morale was high on both sides, "Viva el Rey," issuing from the Spanish forces and "Long Live the King," from their opponents. Action was fast and furious. The son of the Waldeck commander attacked with such fury that he impaled himself on the Spanish bayonets.

One of the more courageous actions occurred with one of the Maryland loyalists. William Augustus Bowles, who would distinguish himself as Director General of the Muskogee Nation following the American Revolution, led his Indian friends against the Spaniards. When most of his comrades had fallen, Bowles took position behind a tree, loading and firing alone. He might have been killed or captured, but for a fortuitous accident. A cannon ball shot from Spanish cannon hit the tree behind which he was firing at the Spaniards in the nearby

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<sup>7</sup>Joseph de Ezpeleta to Pedro Piernas, Mobile, January 15, 1781, manuscript copy, Archivo General de Simancas (Spain), Sección Guerra Moderna, legajo 6912. A poor translation of essentially the same dispatch is contained in Pedro Piernas to Diego Josef Navarro, No. 299, New Orleans, January 18, 1781, W.P.A., *Dispatches of the Spanish Governors of Louisiana*. . . ., X, Book 2, 21-23.

house. The tree was blown to pieces, and Bowles wisely retreated with the rest of his comrades.<sup>8</sup>

The Spanish account of their losses included fourteen killed, twenty-one wounded, and one taken prisoner. The Waldeck forces lost their colonel, all their other officers, among the fifteen killed. Three wounded men were taken prisoner. In terms of participants who suffered casualties, the January 7th action may be considered one of the bloodiest to have taken place in Alabama during the American Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Bravery again distinguished the opposing forces in the final siege and capture of Pensacola during the spring of 1791. Gálvez captured all of British West Florida, and following the war both Floridas would be restored to Spanish control, as they had been two decades earlier. Yet the courage shown by the Germans as they fought for pay in the British cause distinguished the Waldeck Regiment as one of Germany's bravest of the brave.

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<sup>8</sup>[Benjamin Baynton], *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles, Esquire, Ambassador from the United Nations of Creeks and Cherokees, to the Court of London* (London: Printed for R. Faulder, 1791), 30-34; *The Life of General W. A. Bowles . . . . from Public Characters for 1802* (London, 1803), 10-11; J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *William Augustus Bowles Director General of the Creek Nation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 14.

<sup>9</sup>The Spanish casualties are listed by Ezpeleta in an enclosure to his dispatch of January 15, 1781, cited *supra*, note 7. The Waldeck and English casualties are in von Eelking, *German Allied Troops*, 223.

FROM CENTENNIAL TO BICENTENNIAL:  
AN ALABAMA CO-ED LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

by

William Warren Rogers

Summer had set in with a vengeance. Getting through the heat filled days and only slightly cooler nights was bad enough. It was worse if you were a young woman in college struggling with your studies, and worse still if the year was 1876 and the barrage of words relating to the Centennial Year had finally taken their toll. Such was the fate of an obviously intelligent and slightly outraged female student at the Marion Female Seminary in the year of the nation's one-hundredth birthday.

Despite pressing assignments from her professors, and ignoring the relentless humidity, the female student composed an extended letter and dispatched it to the local newspaper, the *Marion Commonwealth*.<sup>1</sup> Today, and even in an urban setting, such a letter would be unusual. That it was written a hundred years ago from the town of Marion, Alabama (approximately 2,500 persons, slightly more than half of them Negroes), in the Black Belt county of Perry, was not at all unusual.<sup>2</sup> The town already had a cultural tradition. In its sophisticated and civilized atmosphere, the pursuit of knowledge and the expression of ideas were not only accepted but expected.

After the Treaty of Fort Jackson in 1815 opened up land ceded by the Creek Indians, the area that became Alabama attracted many settlers, and the territory was created in 1817. Homesteaders from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia settled in the future Perry County at such places as Old Town and Perry Ridge. A man known in tradition as Mickle Muckle settled Muckle's Ridge around 1817. In 1819 the state's first legislature created Perry County, and in 1822 Muckle's Ridge was selected as the county seat. It was renamed Marion in honor of Francis Marion, South

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<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank Mrs. Miriam C. Jones of the Alabama Department of Archives and History for bringing the letter to his attention. It appears in the *Marion Commonwealth*, July 6, 1876.

<sup>2</sup>*Population Census, 1870, I, 11-12, 81.* Perry County had 24,975 persons; 17,833 were blacks and 7,142 were whites.

Carolina's celebrated "Swamp Fox" of Revolutionary War fame.

The county soon became a part of the state's cotton kingdom. A school was opened near Marion in 1824 and another in the town itself in 1825. The area grew rapidly during the 1830s, and by 1842, Marion had three colleges, one for men and two for women. The first was Marion Female Seminary, a Methodist school organized in 1836. Although its enrollment was never large, it continued to operate as late as 1918. The Judson Female Institute (a Baptist institution and after 1904 known as Judson College) was founded in 1838. Howard College, limited to male undergraduates, was the third school. It was founded in 1842, and operated until 1887-1888, when it was moved to Birmingham.<sup>3</sup>

If the Marion Female Seminary was less well known than Judson or Howard, the contents of the young woman's letter attests to the quality of its students. Adhering to the dictates of Southern decorum, the author did not sign her name. Her tongue-in-cheek style reveals a cosmopolitan and inquiring mind, a graceful and classically accomplished command of language, and, most of all, a free and independent spirit. Reading her informed and witty remarks makes one wonder how many college students or professors have speculated on what the United States will be like in 2076, the year of the Tricentennial. In any case, the literary undergraduate at Marion Female Seminary began by writing:

'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view. And — well, no matter about the mountain! I leave it to be clothed according to the fancy of the poet, and proceed with the above, apologetic introduction, as my starting point to the long leap of 1976. I would state, parenthetically, that I intend no disrespect to the venerable Past, if I make use of it in my sketch as a stepping stone to the Second Centennial. Far be it from me, to bring the grey hairs of old Centennarian to the dust before he sees the Drama of 1876 played out. Whoever has burdened

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<sup>3</sup>See Weymouth T. Jordan, *Ante-Bellum Alabama Town And Country* (Tallahassee, 1957), especially Chapter II, "A Black Belt Town," 22-40. See also S. A. Townes, *The History of Marion, Sketches of Life, etc. In Perry County, Alabama* (Marion, 1844), 15, 52, 60; and the historical sketches of W. L. Fagin, an early settler of Perry County, that appeared in the *Marion Standard* in 1909.

himself with a perusal of any of the Weeklies or Monthlies, or even fanned with any of the Dailies, in the last few weeks, will recognize it as an undisputed fact, that the Centennial flame has been fuming ever since 1870, when New York and Philadelphia struck the first match that was to kindle the grandest illumination by which the world has ever been lighted. For months, Centennial has reigned King. His grand debut in Philadelphia, has been the food and drink, the thoughts by day, and dreams by night of the world at large. Unknowingly, the American people have become so Centennialized that the very word, Centennial, is becoming the *Nox Vomica* of the continent. We recognize the birth of the Republic, and its hundred years growth, as a real, tangible fact; and not a mere occasion for a gust of patriotism, or a brilliant panorama, vague and unreal as one of Aladdin's visions. For six months, the papers and magazines have been informing the world, that at the Centennial the four cardinal points of the earth will revolve around the International axis, in the tune of Yankee Doodle Dixie — to the tune of Hail Britannia, with slight variations from the Marseilles Hymn. I hope I shall not shock the *fastidio* nervous system of the audience, when I inform them that I have no desire, whatever, to attend this Centennial. In so saying, I can only hold up in my defense, the shield of "*De gustibus non est disputandum*" (Who now disputes the right of the old woman to kiss her own cow!) At one time, I longed to pay a visit to this world gathering of 1876; but, counting the cost, I had to "play quits" with those fooling railroad agents who failed us all in the reduction of fare, "according to promises," and, as the greenback coverings of my money purse are not elastic, I shall have to content myself with setting [sic] quietly down in the chimney corner to contemplate the picture of "Reynard and the grapes." I am satisfied that this Centennial will be a nonentity compared with the one of 1976. As I understand that every nation under the sun will be represented, from the fur-clad Esquimaux of the Arctic, to the half nude Patagonian. The Turk, Chinaman, Dutch, French, English, Scotch, Irish, and no doubt, Scythians, Medes and Parthians will be present. Ocean, earth and air will vie in the exhibition of their productions. The humming bird and the eagle, the monkey and the elephant, the minnow and the whale, the lion and the lamb, have the Centennial on the brain; and they will all be there together; and what a jolly time the policemen will

have to prevent them from scratching and fighting. The Tropics and Zones will lend their fruits and flowers. Mexico will send her cactuses; Mt. St. Elias will contribute a rock and a sprig of moss. There will be poisonous vines from Brazilian jungles, Norwegian pines and Alabama cotton. Coral from the far South Seal Islands, diamonds brilliant from the black mines, blazing rubies and flashing emeralds. Subterranean caverns will yield their ores and fossils; Egypt will send one of her great pyramids, if she does not attempt to steal the tassel off the Khedive's cap for the occasion. Asia will bring up the rear, about the middle of August, and here will come a monkey, fanning "vociferously," with a palm leaf from the Sahara, and her head all decked out in ostrich plumes. California endeavored to contract with the Grand Pacific Railroad to transport to Philadelphia, one of her giant trees; but that locomotive dignitary politely informed her that it was not their trade to be rolling logs across the American continent, besides it was contrary to the United States laws to blockade the Mississippi river with one tree. Frank Leslie says: "Japan will be represented at the Centennial by a man who lived in a cage three hundred years, and came out standing." The Mechanical Department will contain every ingenuity, from a fly trap to a steamboat.

So many temptations could have induced me, at the last moment, to attend the the Centennial, but I heard that they had a Woman's Pavilion there, and I would not be lost in that din of Babel, for all this world contains. They will talk a great deal of Geo. Washington, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the suffering at Valley Forge; and everybody must look at the old cracked Bell of Liberty, and the faded, time-yellowed Declaration of Independence; but I had enough of all this in my juvenile school days. Knowing that I shall sink into a mere cipher at this Centennial, I am going to push along, and keep moving to 1976. "Ah! how I have sighed to rest me." But I can only say, consolingly, "The end is not yet." Unless old Mother Shipton's prophecy is fulfilled, that,

"The world to an end will come,  
In the year, 1881,"

the next Centennial will be held at San Francisco, for it will be the "Golden Age." I hope to be present on that occasion, for it will be the only time in my life that I can aspire to be

of any note, and that honor will be conferred because I shall happen to be the only being who survived 1876. Indeed, I shall be a real curiosity. Every thing will appear strange to me at first, but I shall take care not to play the ignoramus because I am out of fashion. Of course, I shall dodge now and then, when I see flocks of people coming to the Centennial by the Aerial Line of Streamers, on the Flying Volante Expedition. I shall be curiously surprised to behold the june-bug walk up, arm in arm with the turtle, and placidly take a drink of Los Angeles wine from a natural marble fountain; but when I turn around and see the frog, affectionately clinging to the neck of the rattlesnake, and the squirrel riding upon the back of the camel, I shall beat a fast retreat, exclaiming, "When will wonders cease!"

Some few things will appear natural to me at the Centennial of 1976. In the Art Department, I shall recognize the slow-plodding, old-fashioned, railroad car, the steamboat and the cotton gin; for I had seen these machines a hundred years before. James Watts, Robert Fulton and Eli Whitney, will be standing by, as proofs, in the picture. The portrait of Robert Lee will be familiar to me, and he will be pointed out as the military hero and patriot of America. There will be no Geo. Washington at the Second Centennial. In one corner, there will be groups of statuary, and I shall identify one piece as Samuel Morse, for he will have the telegraphic wire wrapped about him; and the other will be Benjamin Franklin, who will be pointing to the clouds, holding in one hand a kite, and in the other a key. In the Horticultural Department, my attention shall be attracted to the "Golden Apple of Hesperides," but in reality, nothing more than a pumpkin, growing on a huckleberry bush. There will be no new machine on exhibition, for the last Centennial, in 1876, bought up all the improvements, and there were no more to be had. Every thing will be so quiet for a representative party, I shall inquire "why there are no bells ringing, I had been so accustomed to them at the Seminary." An old, worn out official will whisper to me, that "at Grant's Administration in 1876, all the "Bells" went to Napping and fell in the "Marsh," causing such an excitement on the "Bell-knap" question, that the ringing of bells was prohibited in America. There will be two great improvements worthy of remembrance. All the old bachelors will have been sent to

Dicken's [sic] Curiosity Shop, and sold off at auction; while the old maids, having found out that Leap Year had been exterminated, shut themselves up for life, in the "Convent of Vanity Fair."

Learning will be carried on by means of machinery. I shall find three books, kept for specimens — Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Infelice. Milton, Shakespear and Byron, will be out of fashion. The greatest epic poem on docket will be, "Mary had a little Lamb," and the only lyric poem, "How doth the little Busy Bee!" Hamlet's Soliloquy will be a vision of the past, eclipsed by Mark Twain's Soliloquy over the Tomb of Adam, where he rejoices to find a new relation; as he himself states, "True, a distant one, but still a relation!" I shall be awakened from my soliloquizing by an unhappy screech, and, looking up, shall behold a veritable owl, perched upon the climax of Beethoven's "Mt. of Olives," singing his Fidelio to distraction. I shall look for an Indian bow and arrow, only to be informed that the North American Indian Race is extinct. They will all have been killed during the last century, at Fort Ellis, and will have been scattered over Indian Territory, petrifying in the sun. The Mormons too will have been exterminated; for Brigham Young went one summer, seal catching in the Arctic Ocean, but fell off the North Pole and floated to Greenland as an iceberg, and was never heard of again. There will be no government, and no wars, because the cannon and powder gave out during the war of Infallibility against the Pope of Rome; and the dynamite having been turned over in the Atlantic, peace became inevitable. This information will sound very strange to me, and I shall desire newspaper proof, but there will be none to be had. Chromo gifts had sent the magazines into bankruptcy, and the newspapers had lost their reputation from an over-estimate of puffing and exaggeration. There will be no Schools, Seminaries, or Colleges. Graduation will be a barbarism, from lack of sheep to furnish material for diplomas. Musing, as in a trance, I shall involuntarily pull from my pocket, an old crumpled, yellow-stained newspaper; and on examination, shall find it to be the MARION COMMONWEALTH, July 1st, 1876, boasting of the Howard having sent from its classic halls, a "Burns" and a "Young," while the Judson spoke of a "Rogers," and the Seminary, no less of a "Moore." The mist clears before me; ten minutes sail on my

Volante, and I descend from an Aromantic Leaper, to a real terrestrial being, nothing more nor less than a Seminary School girl, wishing every one in attendance, a pleasant visit to this Centennial, and hoping to meet you all in 1976.

JOSEPH G. BALDWIN'S "BENJAMIN OPPELT, ESQ.,  
OF MISSISSIPPI" — ANOTHER UNCOLLECTED  
"FLUSH TIMES" SKETCH

by

L. Moody Simms, Jr.

A collection of anecdotes, humorous sketches, and serious biographies of outstanding lawyers and judges, Joseph G. Baldwin's classic, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*. (New York, 1853), grew out of his experiences as a lawyer in the Old Southwest during the 1830's.<sup>1</sup> Of the twenty-six sketches which appeared in *Flush Times*, seventeen had first been published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* during the period between July, 1852, and September, 1853.<sup>2</sup> The book went to press immediately after Baldwin's pieces for the September, 1853, issue of *SLM* were available. Curiously, Baldwin omitted an eighteenth "flush times" sketch that had been published earlier in *SLM* — "Stocking a Laugh," which appeared in the January, 1853, issue of the magazine. Today's reader can find "Stocking a Laugh" readily available (with an introduction and notes by this writer) in the *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (1971), 210-217.

Not available for publication in *Flush Times* was the only other "flush times" sketch about the Southwest that Baldwin would publish in *SLM* during 1853. Entitled "Benjamin Oppelt, Esq., of Mississippi," it appeared in *SLM*'s issue for

<sup>1</sup>Biographical and critical materials dealing with Baldwin can be found in T. B. Wetmore, "Joseph G. Baldwin," *Alabama Historical Society. Transactions*, 11 (1897-1898), 67-73; George F. Mellen, "Joseph G. Baldwin and the 'Flush Times,'" *Sewanee Review*, IX (April, 1901), 171-84; H. D. Farish, "An Overlooked Personality in Southern Life," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XII (October, 1935), 341-53; J. H. Nelson's sketch in *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed., Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York, 1928-1944), 1, 538-39; Eugene Current-Garcia, "Joseph Glover Baldwin: Humorist or Moralist?" *Alabama Review*, V (April, 1952), 122-41; Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* (Durham, N.C., 1954), 675-78.

<sup>2</sup>The other nine sketches in *Flush Times* had not appeared previously in the pages of the *SLM*. It is probable that they had been published in an Alabama newspaper prior to October, 1853. See J. F. McDermott, "Baldwin's 'Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi' — A Bibliographical Note," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, XLV (3rd quarter, 1951), 251-56.

October, 1853. This piece purports to be a sketch of a member of the bar and probate judge who is reported "under the shadow of no *nom de guerre*."<sup>3</sup> In fact, however, it is a "hatchet job" performed by the fictional narrator upon his "friend," Ben Oppelt. Under the guise of presenting an "appreciation" of Oppelt, the narrator — by delineating a series of ludicrous events and situations involving Oppelt — reveals his "friend" to be the fool the narrator has long believed him to be.

Though not, perhaps, the equal of the best sketches in *Flush Times*, "Benjamin Oppelt, Esq., of Mississippi" is still readable and humorous. Since it has never been collected or reprinted, it would seem useful to students of the humorous literature of the Old Southwest or to anyone who simply wants a laugh or two to have the sketch in print again. The text below is based on that which appears in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, XIX (October, 1853), 599-605.

### Sketches of the Flush Times of Alabama

#### BENJAMIN OPPELT, ESQ., OF MISSISSIPPI

Dear Ben: — I address this running account of you to yourself. It will save repetition and circumlocution. I have placed you under the shadow of no *nom de guerre*. It is wholly unnecessary. Where you are not known this more public method cannot hurt you: where you *are* known you would be discovered by the very first mark of my charcoal around your well-characterized phiz, under whatever disguise I sought to hide you.

You remember, Ben, when you and Jo. M. and I were the leading resident counsel of the Kemper bar. We had a right to be, Ben, seeing there were no others to contest the palm. Bolus had not come in then: pity for you, Ben, that he ever did. We carried it with a high hand over the natives at that early day — didn't we, though? Many long years have passed over our heads since. We were in the vale of obscurity then, Ben. Since that day, we have *risen* — or those who are left of us, and the others, too, we hope: Jo. M. to a seat in the Senate, and on the Circuit Court bench for a time — you to

<sup>3</sup>[Joseph G. Baldwin], "Benjamin Oppelt, Esq., of Mississippi," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XIX (October, 1853), 599.

be a Probate judge, and I — ahem — to be *your* biographer. It were a pity that such distinguished merit as ours should lie hid in “dark unfathomed caves,” or in the twilight of a more local distinction when men, less remarkable and deserving, are now flaming luminaries in the horizon, set there by the hands of accomodating Law-Magazinists. I will do my best, Ben, to rescue *you* from oblivion, and hope, in and by the effort, to keep myself afloat, as a painter of some rare face of genius or of beauty makes a memorial of himself by the work which perpetuates the subject of his art. Well, though I address *you*, yet I address you in a sort of Mr. Speaker way; though you seem to be the only reader, yet really you are the very one least necessary to be addressed; and so I must refer to things you already know, though others are ignorant thereabout.

You know, Ben, my friendship for you. You know my appreciation of you. You know how I esteem that incorrigible and loving honesty — that simple and artless nature — that frankness of disposition — that uncorrupted and incorruptible truthfulness that never could lie for love or money, or even for a client. You may think, Ben, I am taking liberty with you — well, it does look something like it. But you remember what Charles Surface said when he was auctioning off the portraits of his ancestors: “if man can’t take liberties with his friends, I should like to know who in the devil he *can* take liberties with.” Besides, Ben, you know the trick you played on me, when you made me carry that crooked sweet-gum sprout all over the country from Texas to the State of Mississippi, under the delusion that it was a stick cut from the memorial field of San Jacinto, you having picked up the same in the streets of Houston. You always claimed, Ben, that you had a large balance against me on our account: but I think you will allow that this little job I am now doing for you will entitle me to a receipt in full.

And turning now, my dear fellow, from you to the reader, I will release your patience and spare your blushes, while, for a moment or too [sic], I say something, by way of introducing—or, rather—*before* introducing you to the out of Kemper public. Consider your back turned, Ben, while I discourse them a little on matters personal, private and confidential.

Kind reader! What a head we have here! Here is an olla

podrida indeed! This is Judge Oppelt, a mass of incongruities, comprised of a curious list of elements, and these more curiously mixed. Credulous enough to be the dupe of the shallowest trickster—so incredulous that he rejected what all other men believed—trusting blindly whoever professed friendship for him—suspicious to a proverb of men whom every body else trusted—benevolent and kind-hearted as uncle Toby—snarling, captious, sarcastic of mood as Sir Mungo Malgrowther—of that transparent honesty which could not conceal even the slightest shade of thought or motive on purpose—ready to believe that the whole world around him was up to their eyes in trick and intrigue—these qualities were of the most prominent that made up this character. Ben was of German descent—of the Suabian lineage—born in Pennsylvania—from whence he had floated over into Virginia in early manhood—from thence into North Carolina—from that state to Alabama, where he had read law, and then, on the organization of the Mississippi counties in the Choctaw purchase, he had set up his sign in the pleasant village of DeKalb, Kemper county, in the year 1833 or 4; of which town he is now the oldest inhabitant. His speech still betrays his descent: being to original a character ever to recover from the bias and habits into which his tongue got in childhood.

Verily the faculty of reverence for mortal man was not in Ben. He was independent of all human opinion and influence, except when flattery or coaxing was brought to bear upon him, and then he was as malleable a piece of metal as I ever saw. His candor was surpassing. He could say things about others, without apology or provocation, which few men, with any degree of provocation, could be brought to speak: simply because it was in him and *had* to come out. If any man's vanity itched and he went to Ben to tickle it, Ben rasped it with a brick-bat for him. Not that he wished to hurt any man's feelings, but because his crude and unsophisticated honesty inspired his tongue with an irresistible itching until he had spoken out his thoughts. Like old Coriolanus, "what his breast forges, that his tongue *will* utter." Nothing checked him—nothing impeded the flow of his irrepressible gab. If any thing could, one would suppose that interest and fear would have done so, but they didn't. He cursed his clients as freely as his avowed enemies, and, so far as I could ever see, that gently preceptor of manners and prudence, a Bowie-knife, had no more terrors for him than a broomstraw. Indeed it was tried on him more than once. Momus could never

have thrown up to Jupiter, that, in making man, he had committed the great blunder of not making a window in his breast to let the crowd see what was going on within—if all men had been made like Ben; for Ben had no secrets.

Ben knew nothing of conventionalities. The common civilities of social life were further than he had ever got in the catechism of manners. If you met him in the street, it were ten to one if he spoke to you at all; and if you offered to shake hands with him, he would grudgingly hold out one finger and mutter ugh! Nor was he choice in the essential article of eating and drinking—how it was done—when, or where, so there was plenty; though he had his favorite dishes—they were blue collards and chalots—the last raw; and he would sweeten his coffee occasionally with a little “red eye,” of whose flavor he was something fond.

Now it must not be supposed that Ben had no social qualities; on the contrary, he was a generous, whole-souled, jovial fellow, full of humorous matter—*anecdote and playfulness*—and with a manner, certainly original, and frequently grotesquely comic. He made some capital hits and said some wonderfully shrewd things occasionally; though, truth to say, his repartees—“like the course of mercy—were *not strained*,” albeit, the strainers would have helped them mightily.

Being simple in taste and habit, and having never outlived the antiquated notion of considering there were *two* parts, as well as two parties, to a debt—contracting *and* paying—debtor *and* creditor, Ben’s industry and frugality enabled him to accumulate something. He had, indeed, as I have indicated, few luxuries. He had two, however, the luxury of a fine-looking horse and “the luxury of being cheated.” He treated a horse with parental affection; and, like a fond parent, could see no fault in his favorite. Captain Peter was at one time his ruling love, and he had paid a round price for the Captain. But the Captain—do all Ben could for him—wouldn’t do anything for Ben. Twenty miles a day was the Captain’s extreme maximum of travel; and Ben, after a while, had to give him up as a riding horse. But Ben kept the old favorite for the good service—mostly imaginary—he *had* done. A certain Joe. Dean, “an eminent horse dealer,” as J. F. would say, coming along, was

kind enough to sell Ben, at the price of a negro, a famous steed he had brought out from the West: a beautiful animal, a glossy chestnut sorrel, whose skin shone in the sun like a pigeon-cock's neck plumage in the billing season. But the new steed had been fattened and flax-seeded up for Ben's special behoof, and had no wind or bottom. It was a sad disappointment for Ben when he mounted the chestnut *duly* caparisoned; for Ben had more horse furniture than a Mameluke or a Mexican Cavaliero: such bridles and bits, such surcingles and cruppers, and double-girths and blankets, and the saddle covered with a Lama skin! These alone were enough for a small horse to carry. Ben could scarcely mount—the horse was so spirited—and after mounting, such sidling and caracoling and coquetting—such blowing and snorting and pulling against the bit, and scaring at everything—and dancing crosswise: it was as much as Ben could do to hold him in. But the misfortune was that the sorrel wouldn't go without being held up: he would run not so much away as over himself, and come sprawling to the ground whenever let out. He expended all his energies in extras and didos, and left nothing for regular travelling—like a fine gentleman, wasting all his money in trinkets, and bilking his landlord. Ben never got more than thirteen miles a day—that is in latitude; but if the various crossings and ups and downs could have been added, it would have been much more. It was a picture to see Ben, looking at his new purchase—how he stepped around him to view his good points—how, with hands in his pockets—not as deep in as the said Joe's—he gazed upon his glossy hair and would brush off an imaginary speck that dimmed the shine of his neck and breast—his very soul going out in admiration through his eyes. But now the introduction over we must proceed to speak to Ben—whom we left standing alone at the porch.

And now, Ben, you remember that time when I pushed you into the lake. I repent me of it a good deal, Ben; but it was so fair an occasion that the temptation ought to go largely in mitigation. What did you get so near the edge of the water for, and try to push the buggy up the bank as I pulled by the shafts? How could I help letting it slide down on you. And what did you keep backing so for? Why not let go all holds and let it slip aside? And how could I *help* laughing when you came out shivering, and didn't you curse me for it, and dispute my word when I told you I didn't mean to do it, and swear you believed I did it “a purpose, a little pettifogging rascal;” and

“if you *thought* so, you would drown me in the lake like a blind puppy:” and isn’t all that an offset— Yes, Ben, two offsets.

But, Ben, you played the mischief with me when we went to Texas in company in 1839. What did you make up to Baron Hackett, on the boat between Mobile and New Orleans, and splutter high Dutch with him, and pass yourself off for a real *bona fide* Judge, when you were only Judge of Probate, for? And then setting at the table with him and Lavallé and the other big bugs, talking over the affairs of the nation, drinking wine and cracking nuts and jokes, and what not? And when we got to New Orleans, why did you pretend to my unsuspecting innocence that you had been in cities before, and knew all about city ways and doings? Wasn’t that fraud *per se*; and getting my credulous confidence, wasn’t *that* obtaining goods on false pretences? You remember old Lavallé? Wasn’t he a rum one? Talk of politeness, Ben! Why he could take the shine off you if you practised at a dancing school from now to millenium, and had the run of the French Ambassador’s kitchen besides. Such easy manners—so self-possessed—so considerate—and such a power of face, not even smiling when he got us in tow, and we cut up our rusties at his *hotel* in the rear of the St. Charles, with the marble front and steps! When, on landing in New Orleans, without having changed our habiliments for ten mortal days of travel in July, he invited us to come to his house and take a glass of wine with him, in that polite, easy way of him, what on earth, Ben, made you think he was a bar-keeper? and that he was electioneering for custom? Didn’t I tell you he didn’t look to me like a rum-seller, and you said “I was green and didn’t know the way they did things in these big cities.” You remember we came to his house, and his ringing the silver-handled bell, and its jingling about a quarter of a mile back, and a handsome mulatto fellow coming and opening the door, and his starting when he saw the sort of company his master had fallen in with—and my wanting to draw back, and you saying it was a gin-palace—you had seen the like in the English papers, and then the porter threw open the doors and we went up stairs and were ushered into *that* elegant room—and how we felt when the big mirrors began to show us what sort of furniture *we* were to such a room—and Lavallé invited us to set on the sofa—and how you sank down and bounded up and said Lordy! and that it nearly took your breath away; and, when Lavallé went out, I proposed to beat a hasty retreat, but you

would'nt hear to it? Don't you remember the nurse bringing in the little curly-headed children, and how afraid she seemed of you touching them, and then Lavallé's apologizing for his wife's not making an appearance, (from *indisposition*) and *you excused* him (as most sincerely I did) when the wine and other refreshments were brought in on the silver waiter? Don't you remember old Lavallé's asking you what you would take—and your telling him you would take “prandy strait,” and his saying he did not believe he had any of *that* brand, but there was some excellent cogniac; and you decanting half a tumbler of the reverend stuff, and smacking your lips and saying it was “tevilish cood.”

And then, when we were about leaving, how many French *extras* and apologies and pressings to drink more and stay to dinner, and what not, and regrettings that we were to leave town so soon — and that his carriage was not at home to take us to the hotel — and such urgent insistings on our calling when we returned; and then you snorted out that if *he* should ever come “to De Kalp,” you would be glad to see him “at Madame F.'s tafern, though it was not any thing *extra*.” When he parted with us so cordially, (the only really sincere part of the performance,) what upon earth did you fumble in your pockets for? Ben, if you *had* offered him those two dimes, I should have had, out of our sheer respect, to shoot you: It is well for you, old fellow, that you took your hands out of your pockets when I shook my head at you.

And you thought, Ben, as we were going to the “Verandah,” that “after all, these city fellows are petter than some men in the up-country think for, and they know in a wery little time a gentleman when they see him” — which was complimentary to the town beyond its deservings; for going to the “Verandah,” having left our *saddle-bags* on the boat, we didn't find it so, Ben; for that long gangling loon at the bar would not hear us when we ordered a room, but just pointed with his thumb over his shoulder: and we made out at last to translate his pantomine, and found out he pointed to a written label, (or libel,) to the effect that “strangers without baggage must pay in advance;” and we had to pay for dinner, supper and lodging before getting the same.

What a hard run of luck you had, Ben, on the real estate

you purchased near De Kalb. You gave for it more than it was worth; then Bennett, the blacksmith, who entered it in the land office for you, took the certificate in his own name; and it was held under judgment against him, and you had to redeem it for more than you first paid, and then under that abominable old law that made the land of the debtor bound by the first judgment, though sold under junior ones, they drew out another execution against Bennett — and then another — all of which you had to discharge, until, at last, they got the very oldest judgment of all to work on the land, and you attended the sale and was bidding more for it than the land was worth: and when some friend interposed to remonstrate with you for bidding more than the value of the land, your reply was very natural, Ben — “I know that, but you fool, don’t you see if I don’t pay it in I’ll lose all I paid before.” I am glad, Ben, you got a good title at last; you deserved to have one. *Perserverance will win*, Ben — If a man only holds on long enough.

That vastation with which Bolus visited you, Ben, was a thing I might remind you of as a lesson and a warning to your amiable credulity; but I know that you have never forgotten it or him for a moment, and Bolus was an operator in his walk so thorough, that like Hyder Ali, he never left any thing for his successor to do. But I beg pardon for alluding to this unpleasant business; I cannot pursue this theme further. In the touching pathos of Chief Justice Collier, in the case of *Jones vs. Jones*, 13 Ala. Rep. — “I could subserve no other purpose than to awaken unpleasant recollection, and open still deeper wounds which, though not healed, may have become less painful, because they have become chronic.”

I laugh every time I think of the way you put it to H. G., when Henry cursed the little bullet-headed balliff at Philadelphia, the Choctaw, not the Quaker City, in 1838, when that high official came to him to tell him the grand jury were waiting for him. You recollect *where* he told him to go, and to *what* warm climate he consigned the grand jury, and what compliments he lavished upon those respectable dignitaries. With what an engaging innocence, Ben, you told him that “*that* was a *very*, tifferent tone from what he used when he was a candidate for tistrict attorney. Then he was very civil.” You told him “you put me in mind of a little runt pig leaning up against the crib, half-starved, and crying out sque—squee—squee-e-e-;

but now you have got it in and got fat, you put me in mind of that same pig growed up to be a saucy, chuffy boar — his tail all cork-screwed around, going about, lazy and frothy at the mouth, and nobody can come near him, but he runs at him, bristled up, chuff! chuff!! chuff!!! That, Ben, was a libel in the duplicate — by speech and picture both.

Moderation in all things, Benjamin, is a virtue I have often recommended to you, but I am afraid not always with success. To use the luxuries of life in temperance is a hard thing to learn, but it is a wise thing: if you had practiced it, Ben, you would not have gone into that arrangement with Tom Davis: you would not have insisted as a condition to that fight, that you both should lock yourselves up alone in the room and fight it out: if the outsiders had not broken through the rules and the doors both, as soon as they did, the consequences might have been serious. But, Ben, I know you lamented the occurrence: indeed, you wore both eyes in deep mourning in consequence of it for a month afterwards. Let that be a lesson to you, my friend; and the next time you have a fight with a blacksmith, don't be so selfish as to keep it all to yourself.

Leuen Rogers came very near getting you, Ben, that evening when he beguiled you into the grocery under pretense of treating you, but really to take you at advantage, when you had just got off from "Captain Peter." Leuen was a bloody-minded fellow. When he gave you the lie and you kicked him, it was a providential thing that the long spur struck him in the side. You fell, but couldn't get the spur out of his side, and when he drew his bowie and struck at you, he couldn't come nearer than six inches to your body: you well remarked, Ben, that now was the time for a stiff leg — and well it was for you that you held it firm on the joint, or you would have been no more in the land of the living. When those men dragged him away from you, it was rather rough travelling over the ground you had, Ben, but better that than be carried out in a different fashion and not come back any more.

When the gambler in Tuscaloosa flashed the pistol at you, for making some free observations upon that large and useful class of professors of the fine arts, it was rather an odd time to stop the proceedings to institute a claim to the weapon, although, no doubt, you had the better title, though that was