

FATEFUL DECISION

A WEST POINT STORY

The Jan.-Mar. 2023 issue of “Recollections of the Burleson Family Research Group” was enjoyable particularly the information on the several Burleson’s who have attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. Of special interest was the article on Colonel Richard Coke Burleson who graduated from West Point in 1906. As pointed out in the article he was the grandson of Richard Byrd Burleson (1822-1879). NOTE: Gravestone incorrectly shows 1880 as his year of death. Richard Byrd Burleson and his father Jonathan Burleson (1789-1866) are both pictured on page 1268 of the “Recollections” issue. Few people today know Richard Byrd Burleson was approved to attend West Point in the spring of 1838. However, his father, Jonathan Burleson made the decision to waive his son’s appointment in favor of the son of a widow who was living in Morgan County, Alabama at the time. His decision affected the ultimate fates of two young men who both were destined to make their mark in Southern history.

After his appointment was waived, Richard went on to complete his early education at The Somerville Academy located in Somerville, then the county seat of Morgan County. He was baptized in 1839 at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church located two miles west of his father’s plantation. He entered Nashville University in 1840 and stayed three years. He was licensed to preach in 1841, by the First Baptist Church of Nashville. In 1842, he became pastor of the Athens Baptist Church in Athens, Alabama. He stayed there two years before becoming pastor of the Tuscumbia Baptist Church in Tuscumbia, Alabama. He held that position for four years. Richard married Sarah Leigh 19 Nov 1847 in Franklin County, Alabama. They eventually had three children before her death in the 1850’s. NOTE: Richard remarried in 1856. His bride was Mary Frances Halbert and they eventually had three children. In 1849 Richard became principal of The Baptist Female Institute in Moulton, Alabama. While in Moulton, he also served as pastor of the Moulton Baptist Church. He held both positions until 1855 when he resigned and moved to Texas where he



became pastor of the Baptist church in Austin. In 1857 he became professor of Natural History at Baylor University in Independence, Texas. His younger brother, Rufus Burleson was President of Baylor at the time. In 1861, they both moved to Waco, Texas where Rufus became President of Waco University and Richard became Vice President. During the War Between the States, both Richard and Rufus served the Confederate States as chaplains for the Texas cavalry. After the war, Richard continued to teach at Waco University until his death 21 Dec 1879. Richard and Sarah’s oldest son was Leigh Burleson (1848-1927) who was the father of Richard Coke Burleson (1881-1960). Leigh moved his young family to San Saba in San Saba County, Texas in the late 1800’s. Richard Coke Burleson was born there in 1881. Descendants of the family still live in San Saba today.



You can see from the above, that Richard Byrd Burleson, even though he missed out on West Point led a productive and honorable life with many accomplishments.

At this point, we will trace the early life and career of the widow's son who received the appointment to West Point after Richard's acceptance was waived in 1838.

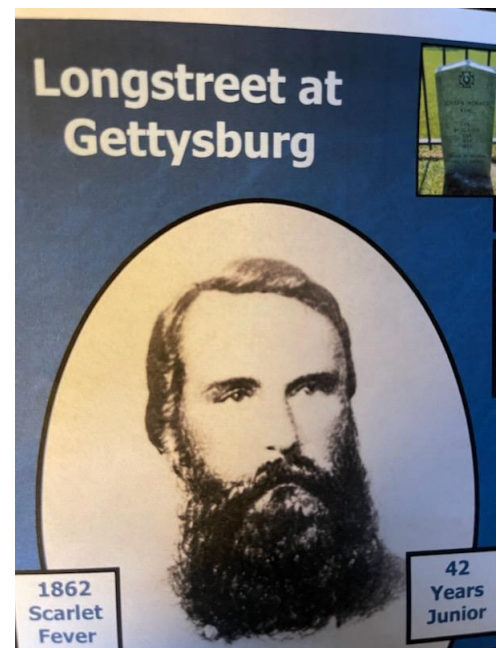
The widow's maiden name was Mary Ann Dent (1793-1855). She had been born in Maryland and was the daughter of Thomas Marshall Dent and his wife Anne Magruder Dent. Thomas Marshall Dent was a brother to Frederick Dent (1787-1873) who was the father of Julia Dent (1826-1902) who in 1848 married Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885). She had been introduced to Grant by her brother, Fred, who attended West Point with Grant.

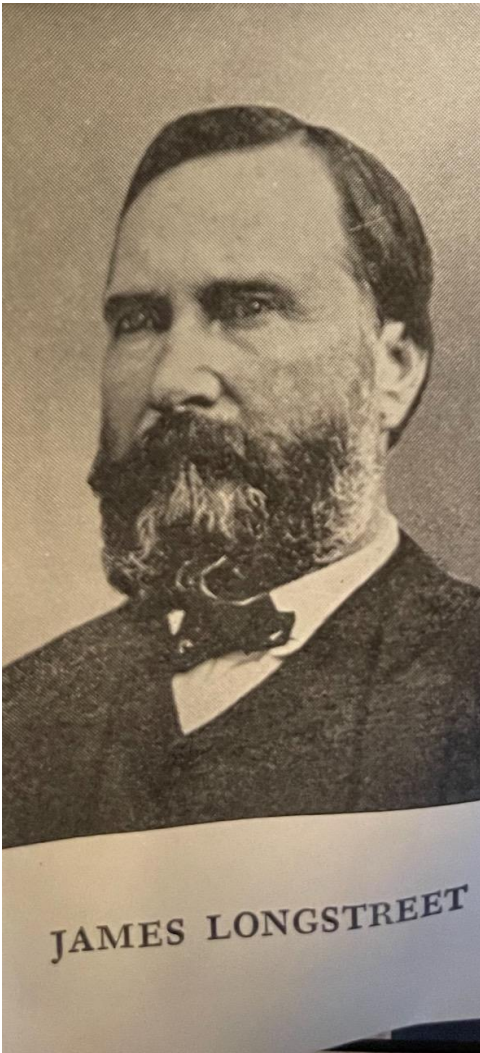
Julia Dent and Mary Anne Dent were not only cousins, but friends and they visited each other as often as possible over the years. Mary Ann married James Longstreet 14 Dec 1814 in Richmond County, Georgia. They had ten children together before James' death in 1833. Their fourth born child was named James, for his father. The younger James Longstreet (1821-1904) spent his early life on his father's farm and after his father's death lived and worked on his uncle's farm near Augusta, Georgia. When James Longstreet Senior died in 1833, his wife, Mary Ann moved, along with her six young daughters, to Somerville, Morgan County, Alabama to live with her oldest daughter, Anna Randolph Longstreet (1814-1839). Anna had married a cousin, Hutchinson Dent and by the early 1830's they lived on a 400-acre farm located less than one mile south of Somerville. Historians do not agree on whether Mary Ann's son, James, ever lived in Somerville. It appears he spent most of his time on his uncle's farm near Augusta. However, his appointment to West Point came from Alabama. After Jonathan Burleson waived his son's acceptance, Reuben Chapman, U S Senator from Alabama got the appointment for James Longstreet. Reuben Chapman maintained a home in Somerville and was a distant relative of the Longstreet family.

James Longstreet attended West Point from 1838 to 1842, graduating near the bottom of his class. He finished 54 out of a class of 56. His early rough and tumble life on the frontier farms of his father and uncle had not prepared him for the regimented life expected at West Point. He earned a record number of demerits during his four years at the Academy. However, he was considered the best horseman and marksman of all the cadets, plus he possessed a trait that served him well later in his military career. He had a "rocklike" character and a determination to complete any job he had undertaken. While at West Point Longstreet became friends with U S. Grant, who attended the Academy from 1839-1843. When Grant married Julia Dent in 1848, Longstreet attended the wedding.

Longstreet served in the U S Army from 1842 until the spring of 1861. He served with distinction during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) where he rose from the rank of lieutenant to major. He participated in several important battles including Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterrey, Contreras, Churubusco, Molino del Rey and Chapultepec. While leading a charge at Chapultepec, Longstreet received a serious leg wound, requiring several months to heal. He later took part in the landing at Vera Cruz and the capture of Mexico City.

In 1848 Longstreet married Maria Louisa Garland (1827-1889). They eventually had five children, four sons and one daughter. After the Mexican War, Longstreet served mostly on the western frontier. He held posts in Texas and the New Mexico Territory. When the Confederate States of America formed in 1861, he resigned from the U S Army and joined the Confederate Army. During the War Between the States, he quickly rose to the rank of Lt. General and became General Robert E. Lee's top military aide. Lee called Longstreet his "Old War Horse." General Longstreet commanded the First Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. He was considered one of most prominent Southern generals. He served at the major battles of Antietam, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, the Wilderness, and was at the siege of Petersburg and the surrender at Appomattox in April 1865.





After the war, Longstreet lived for a while in New Orleans. His friendship with General Grant, who became the 18th President of the United States in 1869, greatly benefited Longstreet during his career after the war. At different times, he served as a railroad commissioner, Postmaster in Gainesville, Georgia, and in 1880 was appointed Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. By 1900 he was living in Washington D C with his second wife, Helen Dortch Longstreet who was more than 40 years his junior. General Longstreet died 2 Feb 1904 and was buried near his beloved first wife, Louisa, in the Alta Vista Cemetery in Gainesville, Hall County, Georgia.

We do not know if James Longstreet and Richard Byrd Burleson ever met personally. However, their fates met at a crossroads in the Spring of 1838, where a decision made by Jonathan Burleson, sent two young men on different paths as they each marched forward to meet their destiny and become a part of our great American history.

David A. Burleson
June 15, 2023

SOURCES

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"Burleson Family Association Bulletin" Vol XI, No. 3, November 1991, Helen Burleson Kelso, editor

Early deed records for Morgan County, Alabama held by the Morgan County Archives in Decatur, Alabama

Information on James Longstreet including his parents and his military service taken mostly from Wikipedia articles. Ancestry.com provided information on the Dent family. Also, most of the many books written about the War Between the States contains stories about General Longstreet and the contributions he made to the South's struggle for independence.