

Brigadier General Edward Porter Alexander (1835-1910)

GEN. EDWARD PORTER ALEXANDER

SOLDIER, AUTHOR, SCHOLAR, AND CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY

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by

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Edward Porter Alexander was born May 26, 1835 in Wilkes County, Washington, Georgia, one of eight children born to Adam Leopold Alexander and Sara Hillhouse Gilbert. His father, Adam Leopold, a Yale graduate of the class of 1821, could read and write three languages---English, Greek and Latin. Adam Leopold met Sara H. Gilbert in New Haven, Connecticut, where she was attending a woman's finishing school. Sara was from Washington, Georgia, being raised in the High country. Adam, being from the Low country, had a plantation named "Hopewell" near Riceboro, Georgia, south of Savannah. Upon their marriage they lived in Washington, Georgia, at the old Gilbert house (Fairfield Plantation) that was built in 1808.

E. Porter had a great childhood at Fairfield, knowing many of his father's plantation slaves and calling them by name and eating and playing with their children. However, he found himself preoccupied with hunting and fishing. This preoccupation would stay with E. Porter throughout his life and play an important part in his destiny.

At about the age of 13, one day E. Porter got into a quarrel over secession and was bullied by two of his peers. Told that they had pistols and were going to whip him. E. Porter armed himself with a "pepper box" revolver. When they met, the two boys and E. Porter came to collision. One boy hit E. Porter over the head with a light stick, and

then E. Porter drew his pistol and pulled the trigger. It misfired and the boy pulled his pistol too. E. Porter fired a second time and again the pistol misfired. By this time older boys who were present stepped in, stopped the fight, and took the pistols away. One of the older boys then fired E. Porter Alexander's pistol, and this time it discharged. E. Porter could have ruined his life with this single event. It made such an impact on him that he never forgot this lesson and always tried to keep a cool head and stay out of politics.

From childhood on, E. Porter desired to attend West Point; however, his father wanted him to become an engineer and not a soldier. When E. Porter was 14 years old and his two oldest sisters about to marry West Point graduates, the fiancé' of Louisa Frederika Alexander, Jeremy Gilmer of Guilford County, North Carolina, later to become Maj. Gen. Gilmer of the Confederate Army, Engineer Corps, convinced the elder Alexander that E. Porter could go to West Point and become an engineer if he stayed in the top of his class. Adam Leopold was so impressed by Gilmer that he gave his consent for E. Porter to attend West Point. Subsequently, Jeremy Gilmer and E. Porter Alexander were to remain the best of friends throughout their lives.

Now the preparation for E. Porter's entrance to West Point began. Several years before, Adam Leopold had employed a Miss Brackett of Massachusetts to provide tutoring for all of the Alexander children. Because of this, E. Porter was very well prepared however in the winter of 1852-1853 he was sent to Savannah, Georgia to take lessons in French and drawing by the Lawton's of south Broad Street. Adam Leopold went to see the Honorable Robert Toombs (later Brig. Gen. Toombs of the 20thGA), one of their neighbors, to seek his help in obtaining an appointment for E. Porter to West Point. Toombs was delighted and honored and consented to do this for the Alexander family.

WEST POINT CADET

E. Porter Alexander entered West Point in June of 1853 and was assigned Dick Meade of Petersburg, Virginia as his roommate. At the time, he weighed 150 pounds and was 5' 9 1/2" tall. E. Porter had to study hard to maintain his 3^d place ranking in his class in order that he might graduate as an engineer as he had he promised his father---only the top ranked cadets were assigned as engineers. This required him to stay up very late at night and study by candlelight and to keep his behavior in an excellent form so they he would avoid demerits.

While attending West Point, a tragedy struck the Alexander family. His mother, Sara Alexander, was addicted to morphine due an illness that caused her to be in severe pain. She traveled to Philadelphia for special care and treatment. On her way to Philadelphia, she visited E. Porter at West Point. He was shocked by her loss of weight and appearance. When she returned to Washington, Georgia, her physical condition had deteriorated to the extent that she appeared as if only skin and bones. She passed away in February of 1855, and was buried in the family cemetery at Fairfield Plantation. This was a great blow to the family and to E. Porter Alexander; however, this personal tragedy brought him and his father, Leopold, closer together than they had ever been. In 1857, E. Porter Alexander graduated 3rd in his class at West Point and commissioned as a 2nd Lt. Of Engineers. He fulfilled his promise to his father. His roommate, Dick Meade was 1st in his class and later, during the War Between the States, died of typhoid fever during the period of the Seven Days Battle serving as an engineer for the Confederacy; John Palfrey of Massachusetts was 2nd in the class of 1857.

UTAH EXPEDITION

Following graduation, Alexander was given three months furlough and then ordered back to West Point as Assistant Instructor of Military Engineering and Fencing. In the fall of 1857 he was assigned to Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston for the Utah Expedition. The expedition consisted of six columns, 500 men in each column. E. Porter Alexander was assigned to the 1st column, commanded by Col. Andrews, West Point Class of 1823, who was a veteran of the Seminole Wars.

The expedition was sent by order of President James Buchanan. He wanted to replace Brigham Young as Territorial Governor with Alfred Cummings of Georgia. The Mormon leader and his followers were adamantly against this and were committed to resistance. The Utah Expedition was sent to, if necessary, to use force to install territorial governor Cummings. However, during the winter encampment on the way to Utah, representatives of both parties were able to resolve the matter and install Cummings without any military action. Thus, the columns returned to the east.

E. Porter Alexander was in his absolute delight on the Utah Expedition. He loved the west---wide open spaces, beautiful scenery, pristine rivers, streams, and forests. Best of all, the hunting was great. This was one of his true loves – the thrill of the hunt. Alexander personally killed twenty-five buffalo from horseback and foot and shot many quail, pheasants, turkeys, and other game. He is also greatly delighted to meet

all kinds of Plains Indians, such the Sioux, Pawnees, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Utes. Also, during this time, he meets two gentlemen who later become bonded with him in history at the 3rd day of Gettysburg, 1863, Capt. Lewis A. Armistead and Capt. Richard B. Garnett.

With the end of this expedition, E. Porter Alexander is ordered back to West Point to resume his duties as instructor of engineering and fencing. He meets two Virginia belles, Gussie Mason and Betty Mason. He takes a strong liking to Betty Mason (Miss Teen), who is 24 years old. After a short courtship they are married in King George County, Virginia on April 3, 1860. During this marriage, they have five children, three boys and two girls.

FEDERAL SERVICE

One day, quite by accident, in the lobby of a hotel, E. Porter meets Surgeon Albert J. Myer, later Brig. Gen. Myer of the Federal Army. Myer had been involved in developing a system of communicating messages over long distances; an interest that he had picked up from observing the Comanche Indians, who would signal each other by using long poles. Myer subsequently adopts the Baine Alphabet System and thereby creates the Signal Corps. The Federal War Department is very interested and excited about its possibilities and orders Myer to create a staff and obtain the necessary equipment to create and refine the signal corps. To Alexander's surprise, Myer appoints him his assistant. They test their signaling apparatuses over great distances and the Federal Government, impressed with the results, installs Myer as Chief of the Federal Signal Corps. This experience will play a major role in Alexander's future.

Alexander now receives orders to report to Oregon. He and Miss Teen must take a long and arduous journey by steamboat and steam train in order to get to their destination. Upon arrival he is sent to Fort Steilacoom in Washington Territory. He and Miss Teen are in love with this area. It is full of beautiful scenery, excellent hunting and fishing, and the Indians are friendly and cordial. After a short duty there, Alexander is ordered to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, to assist with its fortifications. During his stay there, Georgia secedes from the Union, prompting Alexander to resign his commission in the Federal Army. All of his commanding officers try desperately to change his mind, but like Robert E. Lee of Virginia, Alexander could not fight against his home state and the people of Georgia. He and Miss Teen return to Georgia.

CONFEDERATE OFFICER

E. Porter now realizes that the Confederacy is formed and is raising an Army to defend itself against the Yankee invasion. He reports to Richmond on June 1, 1861. Once there, he has an audience with President Jeff Davis who knows of Alexander and his signal corps experience and immediately appoints him as captain of the Confederate States Signal Corps. Alexander is authorized to train men and obtain the necessary equipment to establish the signal corps. He takes great zeal and determination to immediately establish a well-run signal corps. As head of the CSA Signal Corps, Alexander is ordered to report to Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard. He is then placed on Beauregard's staff and given the honor of a place in his mess. Alexander writes the following: "Gen. Beauregard had more courtesy of manner than any of the other generals with whom I ever served." Alexander had a tremendous respect for Gen. Beauregard's engineering skills and his overall military bearing and manner. He felt his defensive engineering of the Charleston Harbor was superb and that he had done an excellent job with the defenses of Petersburg. Speculatively, Gen. Beauregard could be the Confederate general most admired and respected by Alexander.

Alexander now prepares himself for the inevitable war and battles to come. He purchases two horses, Dixie, a large, dark bay, and Meg, a shorter and lighter bay. This is significant because many times during the War, if Alexander would have been riding the taller horse, his head would have been taken off by an artillery projectile; and if he would have been riding the shorter horse, his leg may have been removed by a projectile. Consequently, fate played a most definite role in which horse he rode on any particular day.

At about this time, Alexander was given a telescope by a friend in Charleston, South Carolina. This special astronomical glass was about six feet long when fully extended and had a four-inch aperture, and custom-made leather case was crafted to fit on his saddle. He knew a special way of holding the telescope, which made it very steady and usable without a tripod. E. Porter Alexander never used field glasses; he only used his special telescope. This gave him a tremendous advantage in viewing the enemy and reconnoitering the land, and it also came in very handy with his signal corps duties.

He also hires a 15-year old "ginger cake darkie" body servant by the name of Charley Crowley. Alexander acts as a father figure and comments that he had to give Charley a little licking twice---once for stealing pears from a tree without asking the owner and the other for stealing apple brandy and getting tight on it at Gettysburg. Charley is an admirable body servant and stays with Alexander throughout the War. A strong

bond of friendship and respect evolves between the two men.

Being on the staff of Gen. Beauregard, Alexander was given an unusual assignment to do some secret service work. The Confederates needed more information on the movements and troop strength of the Federal Army. Alexander created a system of spies and methods of receiving their information. He appointed E. Pliny Bryan, of Maryland, as his chief spy. With E. Pliny in Washington, DC, E. Porter could receive signal messages. E. Pliny would get a room in a hotel that Alexander could see from Mason Hill in adjacent Virginia with his telescope. E Pliny would signal him with a coffee pot reflecting from the sun or movement of the window drapes. This method worked extremely well. In this system of spies were the famous Rose O'Neal Greenhowe, Augusta Morris, and Mrs. Baxley. Unfortunately, this all came to an end. The Federals got suspicious and arrested them all. However, they were later released due to insufficient evidence.

On the morning of Sunday, July 21, 1861, Gen. Johnston and Gen. Beauregard decide they must attack Gen. McDowell and the Federal Army, thus the Battle of First Manassas begins. Alexander positions himself on Wilcoxon Hill on top of a signal tower. This hill is now called Signal Hill. At approximately 8:30 a.m. a flash of light reflecting from a brass cannon catches his eye. He immediately sees the impending movements of the enemy. Federal troops are going to flank Col. Nathan G. "Shanks" Evans of South Carolina. He sends a signal to Col. Evans, "Look to your left, you are turned", thus indicating that you are going to be flanked on your left. After receiving this message. Col. Evans takes the necessary movement to prevent this, thus saving his regiment. After the battle, Gen. Beauregard was very pleased and much impressed with E. Porter Alexander and the Signal Corps. Alexander has the honor of being the first to send a signal by the wig- wag method during the War Between the States.

E. Porter Alexander's military record and performance during the War was outstanding. In addition to be well thought of by his superiors and subordinates, he acquired the following record of promotion:

Graduated West Point	June, 1857	Age 22
Lieutenant.	June, 1857	Age 22
Captain	April, 1861	Age 24
Major	April, 1862	Age 25
Colonel	July, 1862	Age 26
General	March, 1864	Age 28

After the Battle of 1st Manassas, he is assigned to staff of Gen. James Longstreet, 1st Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. At first he serves in many capacities, but mainly in artillery and later as Chief of Artillery for Gen. Longstreet. E. Porter's brilliant array of talents made him a general's dream—he had a special genius for keeping things simplistic and well organized and a meticulous eye for detail.

THE CUSS WITH THE TELESCOPE

On November 17, 1862, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the Union Gen. Burnside planned his advance towards Richmond with an army of 120,000 men. Gen. Lee will check his advance with 65,000 men and offer him a sounding defeat. The ensuing events will be of great value to E. Porter Alexander and the Confederate artillery. Gen. Burnside's army had now positioned itself on the north side of the Rappahannock River. His plan was to cross the river and attack the Confederate army, which is by now well entrenched on the south side of the river on the left and right flanks of Marye's Hill. The Confederates hold a very strong position; and E. Porter Alexander kept busy positioning the artillery of Longstreet's Corps. Capt. Sam Johnston, Lee's engineer in charge of the whole army, rode with E. Porter Alexander to position his gun pits. Gen. Lee wanted the guns placed on the brow or reverse slope of the heights so they might duel with the Federal artillery on Stafford Heights; however, Alexander had a different plan. He felt the attack would fall on their far left flank. Since he played a dominant role in placing the gun pits, Alexander positioned them in order to fire directly into the advancing Federal infantry and sweep the field. He disputed Gen. Lee's logic that the inferior Confederate ordnance could not duel effectively with the enemy's guns at that distance. After the pits were made, Capt. Johnston rode to Alexander and replied, "You made me put them there, now you come along and help me take the cussin'." After some exchange of ideas, Gen. Lee had the last word and pressed Alexander into obedient silence, but left the gun pits unchanged.

E. Porter Alexander strongly felt the beauty of the artillery position lay not only in its thorough sweep of the ground, but also its very functional simplicity. Upon Gen. Longstreet's inspection of the artillery, Alexander reported proudly, "General, we cover that ground now so well that we will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb. A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."

During this time of the two armies positioning themselves, Alexander earned the nickname "the cuss with the spy glass" from the Federal troops, because he was shelling Federal sharpshooters with one of Capt. Moody's 24 pdr. howitzers, his favorite type gun. In one special case there was a building nestled in a hollow and

hidden by intervening low hills and trees. This building contained many Federal sharpshooters, and Alexander personally aimed Moody's 24 pdr. howitzer with great accuracy and care and ordered fire. The shell containing 175 mini-balls almost brushed the grass as it curved the hill, hit the building and exploded. At once a cheer came up from the Confederate picket line. "That got 'em! That got 'em! You can hear 'em just a hollerin' and a groanin' in there!" There was no doubt of Alexander's skill and marksmanship with cannon after that great demonstration.

On December 10th. Gen. Burnside committed himself to the attack. They had undertaken an impossible task, a charge across 400 yards of open ground under direct fire of artillery and infantry. It was a killing field on which charge after charge was repulsed by a furious and deadly artillery fire of canister and shell. Alexander's positioning of the gun pits proved to be deadly for the enemy. During this shelling, Alexander noticed a covey of partridges flying aimlessly. He drew his pistol and shot a few choice birds for his mess. This act is remarkable in that, men are being killed by the thousands, and Alexander has the coolness and the mind to kill birds for his supper table. Throughout the war, there are several times that he will kill many types of fowl for the supper table to keep food for himself and his men.

The Federals had no taste to renew the battle and they now retreated back across the river. A great victory had been won for the Confederates and their artillery.

A few days after the battle, Alexander happened to be with Capt. Sam Johnston at Gen. Lee's headquarters. Just outside his tent, when Gen. Lee came within earshot, Alexander brayed loudly to Capt. Johnston, "Sam, it was a mighty good thing those guns about Marye's Heights were located on the brows of the hills when the Yankees charged them." Gen. Lee gave no sign of hearing Alexander's remarks. However, Alexander henceforth was frequently called upon by Gen. Lee to select battle lines and gun pits.

After the Battle of 1st Fredericksburg, Generals Lee, Longstreet, Jackson, A. P. Hill and other Confederate generals speak in their reports of Alexander's artillery as "rapid", "destructive", "well-directed", "demoralizing", "murderer", "accurate", "efficacious fire" and "extraordinary effect" of their guns. "Unflinching courage", "unshaken steadiness" and "spirit" with which they were "admirable served."

With the onset of winter, both armies go into winter quarters. Alexander begged for leave to see his family. It was not easy since he was so very useful and hard to be spared. He finally got a three-day leave at year's end and hurried to meet his Miss Teen in Richmond, Virginia. Later, he was able to find quarters for his family at the Wortham House, less than a mile from his winter camp, near Mt. Carmel Church, north of Hanover Junction, Virginia. Their presence made all the difference and he

would describe the next three months as "one of the happiest periods of all my life."

"Mars Porter," as his youthful body servant called Alexander, Charley, gives the Army of Northern Virginia brilliant service and unsurpassed dedication throughout the rest of the war. He was the first Confederate to go aloft in a balloon at the Battle of Games Mill (Seven Days) using black cambric balls to signal the movements of Federal troops. Although fearful of heights, he thoroughly enjoyed this experience and marveled at its tremendous potential to gather intelligence information on troop movements, etc.

When the 1st Corps of the ANV (Longstreet's Corps) is sent to Tennessee to reinforce Gen. Braxton Bragg, Alexander accompanies the Corps as Longstreet's Chief of Artillery. He meets Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and is highly impressed with his military genius and his overall personal and military bearing. However, just the opposite is his impression of Gen. Bragg. Throughout the war, Alexander strongly felt that the lack of trained staff officers to give written orders instead of verbal presented many large problems for the Army of Northern Virginia. During the war, he is sent many captured Federal ciphers to decode for the Confederacy. He also meets Lt. Col. Arthur J.L. Freemantle of Her Majesty's Coldstream Guards at the Battle of Gettysburg. Freemantle was an unofficial observer of the Confederate Army during his three-month visit through the southern states and consequently wrote a book about his observations.

On June 30, 1864, at Elliott's Salient, at Petersburg, Virginia, Alexander is hit in the left shoulder by a sharpshooter's minie ball. The ball narrowly misses both arteries and joints. The 58-caliber projectile, when removed from Alexander, had stamped on it the thread marks from his frock coat.

E. Porter now realizes that he will be sent back to Washington, Georgia, to recover and convalesce from his wound. Before leaving for a forty-five day medical furlough, he communicates to Gen. Lee his belief that the Federals are digging a "mine". Although searched for, the Confederates are unable to locate it, and, subsequently the Battle of the Crater occurs. Upon his return to the lines at Petersburg, he assumes command of all the artillery in the Petersburg defenses and now wears the new frock coat and uniform made by his kinfolk of Washington, Georgia.

In early April of 1865, the Federals break the Petersburg line and precipitate the retreat of Lee's army. During this hectic and hurried retreat, Alexander's baggage wagon was captured and burned by Gen. Custer. He loses his new frock coat, sword, and other personal items. Charley loses his headquarters flag in all of the confusion during the retreat. His mascot, Buster, a pointer, is also lost at this time.

At Appomattox, Alexander proposes to Gen. Lee that the Confederates should return to their states and carry on a guerilla war, which could last for years. Gen. Lee feels that the south has been through enough and is in such a state of destruction that the resumption of peace is the best road for the south at this time. Alexander reluctantly but respectfully concurs. After the surrender at the McLean House, a disillusioned and disappointed Alexander travels to Washington, DC to explore the possibility of securing a position in the Brazilian army. This attempt is foiled and E. Porter returns to his home in Washington, Georgia via New York and Port Royal, SC. He is now left to find his way in a new life.

In his military memoirs, Alexander feels there are three times, in his opinion, that the Confederacy could have won the war. The first time was at the Battle of First Manassas. He strongly feels that if the Confederacy would have pushed they could have captured the Capital, Washington, DC. The second time was the Seven Days at Mechanicsville. Stonewall Jackson fell behind schedule, showed up late, and failed to carry out his part thereby allowing McClellan to escape and costing Lee a decisive victory. The third time was at the Battle of Monocacy in July of 1864. Gen. Jubal Early had the opportunity to make a decisive push and have the chance to capture Washington, DC, and to demoralize the Yankee population.

YOUNG NAPOLEON OF THE RAILROADS

Like most post-war Confederate officers, Alexander now has to find a means to support his family. Although Fairfield Plantation has not been burned, it is in need of funds to get it back into a working plantation. The plantation life does not appeal to Alexander. He is offered a chair position of mathematics at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, and after a few years in this post, Alexander accepts an executive position with the Charlotte, Columbia, and Augusta Railroad. After distinguished service with this railroad, he is offered and accepts the position as president of the Savannah and Memphis Railroad. Alexander is now referred to as "The Young Napoleon of the Railroads." The next two decades offer extraordinary opportunities for Alexander's professional career. He buys ten thousand acres of land on North and South Island below Georgetown, South Carolina. Today this is called the Yawkee Wildlife Preserve. In his later years he befriends President Grover Cleveland, a very popular figure in the South. Cleveland is a Democrat who wants to return all captured Confederate battle flags to the Confederate states but is stopped by the 10 Union veterans who vehemently oppose this decision. Both President Cleveland and Alexander love to hunt ducks. They spend many days at Alexander's hunting lodge at South Island, South Carolina, hunting ducks and killing as many as 600 per week.

BOUNDARY ARBITRATOR NICARAGUA SALUDA EL GENERAL ALEXANDER

To thank Alexander for his kindness and friendship, President Cleveland offers him \$1,000 a month in gold to be his boundary arbitrator between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This needs to be done because a canal might be dug to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and stability in Central America is essential. Alexander accepts this offer because of the great windfall profit it offers his family. After two years of supervising and surveying the boundaries, Alexander completes his report and finishes the duty as arbitrator of boundaries. This settles once and for all the boundaries between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The Nicaraguans give him a hero's welcome with a fifty-piece band, a twenty-one-gun salute, and church bells tolling. Carrying him through the street near his hotel, he passed under an enormous floral arch bearing the inscription "Nicaragua Saluda el General Alexander. " He has an audience with Nicaraguan President Zeiaya at his palace and a grand banquet is held in Alexander's honor. The Nicaraguans rose in relays to praise and toast him in Spanish. Alexander was given his favorite wine, Chateau Yquen. And, during this time in Nicaragua, Alexander starts and finishes most of his memoirs (Military Memoirs of a Confederate).

Upon his return home, his wife, Betty Mason Alexander, dies three weeks later, on November 20, 1899, in Savannah and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Augusta, Georgia. This brings to an end his marriage of forty years. After many years of semi-retirement and living in Savannah and South Island, South Carolina, Mary Mason, the niece of Betty Mason, affectionately helps take care of Alexander's needs at his South Island retreat. She is good-natured and assists E. Porter as his hostess with entertaining guests. She was unmarried, forty years old, wore thick glasses, and became an invaluable source of help to Alexander. On October 1, 1901, when he was sixty-six, they marry, and honeymoon in Canada and at Niagara Falls. During their years together, she refers to him as "The General." WEST POINT CENTENNIAL Alexander is now extended the high honor of being an honored guest at the Centennial of West Point to speak for the Confederate officers. On June 9, 1902, he finds himself on the speaker's platform with President Teddy Roosevelt, General Longstreet, and other dignitaries. At the conclusion, the New York Times confirmed Alexander's speech, although not without controversy, to be the best speech of the day.

E. Porter now retires to his South Island retreat, visits his children, and does some traveling with Mary. After several small strokes he is brought to Savannah, Georgia. On April 21, 1910, he lapses into a coma and dies without a struggle on April 28, 1910, at 8:30 p.m.

The Episcopal service was quiet and spare in Augusta, Georgia. Confederate veterans escorted Alexander's casket to the City Cemetery. Two old soldiers held a Confederate battle flag while taps played.

Thus we put to rest the life of a great American, a Southerner, and a great Georgian, who was a soldier, author, scholar, and a captain of industry.