

## Wade Hampton III: Honor A Sacred Trust – Part 3

Honor was a sacred trust for a Southern Gentleman. The third Wade Hampton had been taught that he had certain obligations to his race, class and region. At all times, and especially when facing adversity, he was expected to behave as a gentleman— sober, self-composed and most of all, polite. He was expected to uphold his family's honor and never allow his actions to tarnish the Hampton name.

Young Wade III was quite protective of his 4 teenage sisters who spent much of their youth without the guidance of a mother. One situation within the extended family came close to sparking drastic action by Wade, who had the strength of character to rely on self-discipline to save the day.

Author Edward G. Longacre in *Gentleman and Soldier: The Extraordinary Life of General Wade Hampton* described the tense and delicate situation. Wade and his siblings frequently visited their uncle and aunt James and Catherine Hammond on their Beach Island, South Carolina plantation and their home in Columbia when Hammond became Governor of South Carolina.

Hammond, according to Longacre, was a womanizer who was known to have taken a “succession of female slaves as his mistresses,” without the knowledge of his brother-in-law Wade Hampton II. Uncle James became fond of the Hampton girls and “began to molest them” over a period of two years, until Catherine, the older of the 4 rejected his advances and brought the uncles behavior to the attention of her father, Wade Hampton II.

Wade III, about age 25 at the time was furious that his uncle by marriage was taking advantages of his sisters. His first thought was to challenge Uncle James “on the field of honor.” Next, he considered a public flogging or beating for the wayward uncle. Cooler heads prevailed, however, and the father and son decided to avoid violence and disclose his conduct to influential friends.

Spreading news of the indiscretions of the uncle also brought humiliation and ostracism to the young women involved. As a result, no man who valued his reputation and standing in the pre-war South could marry one of the Hampton girls. In fact, all four were condemned to a lifelong spinsterhood.

The third Wade did not use tobacco, rarely drank alcoholic beverages and his name was never linked to sexual indiscretions. He despised the practice of dueling, yet he was an excellent marksman, especially with a pistol. His strong arms made him a formidable foe with a heavy sword. From childhood, he was known for his physical and mental toughness. By the time he reached 20 years of age, he was 6 feet tall and weighed about 175 pounds. Yankees who Hampton engaged in close combat during the war, and lived to talk about it, described him as a giant.

Wade Hampton III inherited a sound physique and a love for the outdoors from his father and grandfather. He possessed a native reserve that some would mistake for arrogance. But he was able to attract loyal, devoted companions from aristocrat to slave who would “cling to him,” through triumphs and tragedies.

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He was an accomplished horseman and hunter. His favorite game was the black bear, at the time plentiful in the mountains of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Riding a horse with fellow hunters and a pack of hounds, Hampton would track bears deep into the mountains, and subdue them with a rifle or with a knife that fellow hunters said he wielded with both “force and precision.” His encounters with bears were so intense, that sometimes he would return home with bear claw marks on his arms and legs. Wade Hampton III would continue to hunt until a freak accident caused him to lose a leg during his mid-sixties.

Wade was critical of chattel slavery, yet he became a slave holder. He resolved to treat them as considerately as possible, wrote Longacre. “He provided them with warm quarters in the winter, warm clothing, abundant food, and other basic comforts, while on many occasions, presenting them with small gifts and unexpected luxuries. Whenever disease struck, he would ensure that the slaves received medical care on par with that given his family. Despite his distaste for slavery, Hampton, like many of his contemporaries at the time, inherited the practice that was tied closely to economic stability and accepted it as a regrettable necessity. It was seen as evil, but not evil enough to justify immediate eradication.

Wade was educated in an academy at Rice Creek and they attended South Carolina College to receive a broad classical education and later to study law. Growing up he had access to the ten thousand volume library at Millwood that was described as embracing virtually the “sum total of human knowledge of that period in American history.

Wade earned high grades in Latin, Greek and modern literature, yet he was never close to being a “nerd.” He longed for the rugged outdoors and spent long periods of time at the family hideaway at Cashiers Valley now known as “High Hampton.”

The third Wade graduated from South Carolina College in 1836, the year after his grandfather's death. After graduation he became intensely involved in managing the plantations and business trips to Richmond, New Orleans and New York City. At Millwood, he became more involved with family members and social life among the best families of the region.

Wade became reacquainted with a half-cousin childhood friend, Margaret Cantey Preston, who had now grown from a tomboy into “a girl of famous beauty and dignity.” “Meg” and Wade were wed during a lavish ceremony at the bride's home in Alexandria, Virginia in the fall of 1838.

The newlyweds set up housekeeping on a small estate, given to them by his father, known as Sand Hills, midway between Columbia and Millwood. During their short life together, two sons and two daughters were born to Wade and Margaret. A stunning series of personal tragedies struck the Hampton family 14 years after the wedding.

In June of 1852, Margaret, who had not enjoyed good health since the birth of her fourth child, died at Millwood. Less than two years later, their youngest, five-year-old Harriet died of a lengthy illness. Untold happiness had ended in almost unbearable despair and bereavement.

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Wade wrote to one of his sisters, "My heart has been full. The past and present alike contributes to make me weak, but I shall hope to gather strength for the future. It is not a bright one, but my duties are many and so are the blessings still left to me. I shall strive to discharge the one and be worthy of the other."  
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He threw himself into the management of his material possessions that had grown to then thousand acres and a thousand slaves. Three estates located in the Richland District of South Carolina, were tilled by renters.

Wade's brothers continued to live at Millwood until they married and inherited homes of their own. After the death of Margaret, the Hampton sisters cared for Wade's surviving children, Wade IV, Preston and Sally whenever their father was away. The "Aunties" also cared for the daughter of Wade's brother Kit; whose mother died. Wade's father Wade Hampton II died suddenly in 1858, half a million dollars in debt, leaving no will. Wade III assumed most of the debt and saved Millwood for his 4 unmarried sisters resided there for almost 30 years, until it was looted and burned by Sherman's vengeful foraging troops.

*Next Week: Part IV, Wade Hampton III: The Winds of War*

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Recommended reading: (Same as last column, Part 2).