

## **South Carolina's Major-General Matthew C, Butler** (1836-1909)



Next to the incomparable Wade Hampton III, Matthew Calbraith Butler was South Carolina's most prominent cavalry commander in the War Between the States. Described as a "Gentleman, Statesman and Soldier", Butler was connected to several generations of distinguished families through each of his parents. Growing up in Edgefield, South Carolina, he was described as quite handsome and a superb orator. He attended South Carolina College but left after his junior year to study law and was admitted to the state BAR in 1857.

Butler joined the Hampton Legion Cavalry Battalion and was elected Captain of his company in June 1861. A month later, he received promotion to Major. The Battalion was active in Virginia in 1861 with scouting, picketing duties and occasional skirmishes, but the summer of 1862 saw it in action at Second Manassas and in the Maryland Campaign. In October of that year, the cavalry arm of the Army of Northern Virginia was increased from a brigade to a division. In this reorganization, the Hampton Legion Cavalry lost its identity when merged with another command to form the Second South Carolina Cavalry and Butler was selected as its Colonel.

Butler performed well in General J.E.B. Stuart's famous raids on Chambersburg and Dumfries in late 1862 and saw action at Fredericksburg that year. His skillful leadership and personal courage in the Battle of Brandy Station [June 9, 1863] showed his merits as a battlefield leader in full for the first time. Unfortunately, a cannon shell took off his right foot in that battle leading to a lengthy rehabilitation period. Despite this injury, his past service warranted serious consideration for promotion to Brigadier-General. Hampton's succinct recommendation for Butler's promotion simply covered all aspects of Butler's qualifications with, "I have not seen a better officer in the [cavalry] service." Hampton did not take pains pointing out Butler's personal courage, his ability to lead men, or mention his battlefield skills as they were apparently known to all. Stuart's endorsement was remarkably similar and said, "Colonel Butler has always been distinguished for gallantry...I know of no one better able or worthy..." The promotion was authorized September 1, 1863 while Butler was home recovering.

Butler returned to Virginia in early May 1864 at the head of a brand new, full strength, largely untested cavalry brigade consisting of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth South Carolina Cavalry Regiments. The brigade found itself in battle almost from point of arrival. Armed with 3-band rifled muskets used by infantry, the men fought mostly dismounted in numerous and intense engagements. During the summer of 1864, Butler's Brigade was involved in victories against a variety of top Union cavalry commanders including Sheridan, Wilson and Gregg. The brigade especially distinguished itself at Trevilian Station [June 11-12], the largest all-cavalry battle in the war, and again at Ream's Station [August 25]. It also performed well in a host of lesser engagements earning great praise and recognition.

General Hampton, upon being named to command the cavalry corps of the Army of Northern Virginia in August 1864, urged promotion of Butler to succeed him in command of his former division. Butler's long record of personal courage, battlefield leadership and the respect given him by all ranks within his brigade warranted such an appointment to Major-General. Robert E. Lee's endorsement of the nomination dated September 28, 1864 reads in part, "...[Butler] has shown great gallantry and manages his troops with skill." The War Department confirmed the appointment and issued the well-deserved promotion the following December.

That same month, a massive Union force began moving southward from Petersburg toward Hicksford [now Emporia] Virginia with plans to break the Weldon Railroad. Known widely as the “Applejack Raid”, the Yankees marched through farmland previously untouched by war and blessed with a bountiful autumn harvest. They despoiled it by raping, murdering, looting and burning houses of their victims while returning to Petersburg after having foiled by Hampton and a small Confederate force at Hicksford. Butler’s scouts advised him of these outrages and he responded with likely the most profound order he ever issued. He ordered that when any Yankee was caught in the act of these atrocities, whether they be drunk or sober, they should be swung by their arms and legs into the very flames they had started. This order, never rescinded, was used liberally against Sherman’s “bummers” in the Carolina’s Campaign.

Butler showed he was as efficient and capable commander of a division as he was of a brigade and continued to justify the unwavering trust of Hampton from time of his promotion through the Carolina’s Campaign and the end of the war. Paroled May 1, 1865 at Greensboro following Johnston’s surrender to Sherman, Butler returned home to resume his law practice. Politically active before, during and after Reconstruction, he served three terms as U.S. Senator earning respect from all quarters. In 1898, Butler was called into military service again, but this time as a Major-general in the United States Army during the Spanish-American War. His later years saw him resume his law practice.

Matthew C. Butler left behind a legacy of service to South Carolina in both war and peace. He was eminently qualified and successful in the three major phases of his life’s work. Excelling as an attorney, as a soldier, and as a member of the U.S. Senate, he is deserving of our remembrance.