

A Slave's Service in the Confederate Army

BY RONALD S. CODDINGTON

Sgt. Andrew M. Chandler began his memoir of fighting at Chickamauga with utilitarian prose that belied the horrible, bloody waste that the battle wrought on northwest Georgia in September 1863. "I was engaged in the battle of Chickamauga, belonged to the Forty-fourth Mississippi Regiment, Patton Anderson's Brigade, Hindman's Division," he wrote for an 1894 article in Confederate Veteran magazine.

The highlight of Chandler's story occurred on the second day of the battle, after he participated in a charge that resulted in the capture of a Union artillery battery. "In this charge we, our brigade" – which fought under the command of Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman – "broke the Federal line and drove them nearly one mile, when we were recalled and reformed, and marched back to the old field, which was literally covered with dead and wounded Yankees," he wrote.

The federals had sent more troops to fight the Mississippians. As the bluecoats converged on their position, Chandler recalled an exchange that he had with Hindman, a dapper dresser bursting with aggression from his 5-foot-1-inch frame. "General Hindman stopped his horse in rear of our company, when I said to him, 'General, we are the boys to move them!' he replied, 'You are, sir.' We were then ordered to the foot of a long ridge, heavily wooded. After remaining there lying down for some twenty minutes, the Yankees charged our brigade."

Chandler abruptly ended his narrative here. He did not describe the rest of the attack – which was strange but telling, because during the fighting a bullet tore into his right leg and ankle and took him out of action. But Chandler's military records and an anecdote passed down through the family over the following century and a half filled in the rest of his story.

A surgeon examined the 19-year-old Chandler as he lay on the battlefield, determined the wound serious and sent him to a makeshift hospital. Soon afterward Chandler was joined by Silas, a family slave seven years his senior.



Andrew Martin Chandler of the Forty-fourth Mississippi Infantry and Silas Chandler, circa 1861. Credit Collection of Andrew Chandler Battaile

In the hospital, according to family history, surgeons decided that the injured leg could not be saved and decided to amputate. Then Silas stepped in. As one of Chandler's descendants explained, "Silas distrusted Army surgeons. Somehow he managed to hoist his master into a convenient boxcar." They rode the rails to Atlanta, where Silas sent a request for help to Chandler's relatives. An uncle came to their assistance, and brought both men home to Palo Alto, Miss., where they had started out two years earlier.

When the war broke out in 1861, Chandler enlisted in the "Palo Alto Confederates," a local military company that eventually joined the 44th Mississippi. His concerned mother, Louisa, sent Silas, one of her 36 slaves, off to war with him.

Thousands of slaves served their masters and masters' sons in the Confederate Army before and after the "Black Republican" in the White House, as some referred to President Abraham Lincoln, issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Many remained with their owners throughout the war.

Silas had known nothing but slavery his entire life. Born into bondage on the Chandler plantation in Virginia, he moved with the family to Mississippi when he was about 2. He was trained as a carpenter, and the Chandlers brought in extra income by hiring Silas out to locals in need of his skills — a common practice in the antebellum South. The money Silas earned by his labor was paid to the Chandlers, who gave him a small portion. According to a story passed down through Silas's descendants, he saved the pennies that he received in a jar that he hid in a barn for safekeeping.

Around 1860 Silas wed Lucy Garvin in a slave marriage, not recognized by law. A light-skinned woman, she was the illegitimate daughter of a mulatto house slave named Polly and an unnamed plantation owner. She was classified as an octoroon, or one-eighth African, which determined her legal status as a slave.

The next year Silas bid his newlywed wife farewell and went to war with Chandler. He shuttled back and forth from encampments in Georgia and elsewhere to the plantation in Mississippi to procure and deliver much-needed supplies to Chandler. No account exists that Silas ever attempted to flee to Union-held territory.

At the Battle of Chickamauga, the 44th went into action with 272 men and suffered 30 percent casualties, including Chandler. According to the Chandler family, Silas accompanied him to Mississippi. "A home town doctor prescribed less drastic measures and Mr. Chandler's leg was saved."

Chandler "was able to do Silas a service as well," noted the family. During one campaign, Silas "constructed a shelter for himself from a pile of lumber, the story goes. A number of calloused Confederate soldiers attempted to take Silas's shelter away from him, and when he resisted threatened to take his life. At this point Mr. Chandler and his comrade Cal Weaver, came to Silas's defense and threatened the marauders with the same kind of treatment they had offered Silas. This closed the argument."

Chandler's Chickamauga wound ended his combat service. But Silas went back to the front lines with Chandler's younger brother, Benjamin, who enlisted in the Ninth Mississippi Cavalry in January 1864.

Silas accompanied the younger Chandler and the rest of the Ninth as they skirmished with advance elements of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's army through Georgia and the Carolinas. Then, during the Confederacy's final days, Benjamin Chandler and a detachment of his fellow Mississippians joined the military escort that guarded President Jefferson Davis as he and his entourage fled Richmond.

By the time Davis reached Georgia, fears that his large escort would draw the attention of numerous Union patrols crisscrossing the countryside in search of him prompted commanders to act. On May 7, 1865, most of the escort was disbanded. Davis continued to ride south with a much smaller and less conspicuous guard.

Benjamin Chandler and Silas were part of the group ordered to disband. Three days later, Chandler surrendered to federals near Washington, Ga. Silas was by his side.

President Davis was captured the same day, about 175 miles south in the Georgia village of Irwinsville.

Silas returned home, and reunited with Lucy. They eventually had 12 children, 5 of whom lived into adulthood. Silas became a carpenter in the Mississippi town of West Point, and he taught the trade to at least four of his sons. "They built some of the finest houses in West Point," noted a family member, who added that Silas and his boys constructed "houses, churches, banks and other buildings throughout the state."

Silas lived within a few miles of his former masters, the Chandler brothers. In 1868, Silas and other freedmen constructed a simple Baptist altar near a cluster of bushes on land adjacent to property owned by Andrew and his family. The freedmen soon replaced it with a wood-frame church. In 1896, one of Silas's sons participated in the construction of a new church on the same site.

In 1888, Mississippi established a state pension program for Confederate veterans and their widows. African-Americans who had acted as slave servants to soldiers in gray were also allowed to participate. Overall, 1,739 men of color were on the pension rolls, including Silas.

Benjamin Chandler died in 1909. Silas passed away in September 1919 at age 82. Andrew Chandler survived Silas by only eight months. He died in May 1920.

In 1994, the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy conducted a ceremony at the gravesite of Silas in recognition of his Civil War service. An iron cross and flag were placed next to his monument.

The event prompted mixed reactions from descendants of Silas and Andrew. Silas's great-granddaughter, Myra Chandler Sampson, denounced the ceremony as "an attempt to rewrite and sugar-coat the shameful truth about parts of our American history." She added that Silas "was taken into a war for a cause he didn't believe in. He was dressed up like a Confederate soldier for reasons that may never be known."

But Andrew Chandler Battaile, great-grandson of Andrew, met Myra's brother Bobbie Chandler at the ceremony. He saw the experience a bit differently. "It was truly as if we had been reunited with a missing part of our family."

Bobbie Chandler, for his part, accepts the role his great-grandfather played in the Confederate army. He observed, "History is history. You can't get by it."

Sources: Confederate Veteran Magazine, (1894, 1910); Andrew M. Chandler military service record, National Archives and Records Administration; Benjamin S. Chandler military service record, National Archives and Records Administration; Silas Chandler pension record, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; West Point (Mississippi) Daily Times Leader, Jan. 4, 1950; 1850, 1910, 1860 Federal Census, 1860 Slave Schedules, National Archives and Records Administration; Dunbar Rowland, Mississippi: Contemporary Biography, Vol. 3; James G. Hollandsworth Jr., "Black Confederate Pensioners After the Civil War," Mississippi History Now (May 2008); Andrew M. Chandler Papers, Collection of Andrew Chandler Battaile; Myra C. Sampson, "Silas Chandler"; Bobbie Chandler to the author, May 8, 2010; Richard Rollins, "Black Southerners in Gray."