

Pettigrew Hall

In 1912, the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina named this section of a three-part dormitory building to honor James Johnston Pettigrew. Pettigrew graduated from UNC in 1847, made his career as a lawyer and state legislator in South Carolina, rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate army, and died in 1863 at the Battle of Gettysburg. Over the course of his lifetime, Pettigrew made no significant contribution to the work of the university.¹

The other two sections were named for Kemp P. Battle, class of 1849, and Zebulon B. Vance. Battle was a signatory of North Carolina's ordinance of secession from the United States of America, and, as a leader in the university, opposed principles of equal citizenship for Blacks. Vance served two terms as governor during the Civil War, and a third term in the late 1870s, the time of North Carolina's so-called redemption from Reconstruction. He attended the university in 1851 to read law with Battle's father, Judge William H. Battle.²

Nine months after the dormitories opened, the university dedicated a Confederate monument opposite them in McCorkle Place.³ The four structures created a Confederate memorial space at the north end of campus and stood as a statement of the university's allegiance to Confederate principles: white supremacy and Black subjugation.

Pettigrew:

- Enriched himself from the plundered labor of enslaved Black men, women, and children
- Took up arms to defend and preserve the institution of racial slavery, and to affirm the inalienable right of any "one man" to enslave and profit from "the unwilling labor of another"

¹ "Opening Session of University," *Tar Heel*, September 18, 1912; "The New Dormitories," *Alumni Review* 1 (December 1912), 55-56; minutes, January 28, 1913, oversize volume 11, Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina Records, 1789-1932, #40001, University Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Clyde [N.] Wilson, "James Johnston Pettigrew," in William S. Powell, ed., vol. 5, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 77-79. In 1908, the university purchased land at the northwest corner of campus, with plans to demolish the hotel that was located there and to replace it with the three new dormitories. Work on the project was recorded in the Board of Trustees volume above, minutes for January 22, May 31, and October 26, 1909; February 3 and 9, 1910; February 2 and 24, and June 3, 1912.

² W. Conrad Gass, "Kemp Plummer Battle," in William S. Powell, ed., vol. 1, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 114-15; John G. Barrett, "Zebulon Baird Vance," in Williams S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 6 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 85-87.

³ James Leloudis and Cecelia Moore, "Silent Sam" digital exhibit, <https://silentsam.online>.

- **Committed treason by serving as a general officer in the southern Confederacy's war to dissolve the American republic and spread slavery across the North American continent**

James Johnston Pettigrew (known as Johnston by friends and family) was born in 1828, one of five surviving children in the household of Ebenezer and Ann Blount Shepard Pettigrew. The Pettigrews ranked as one of North Carolina's wealthiest slaveholding families. At the time of his death in 1848, Ebenezer owned three large plantations – Bonarva and Magnolia in Tyrrell County, and Belgrade in neighboring Washington County – where he enslaved upwards of 150 Black man, women, and children. Those bound laborers produced corn, rice, and wheat; they salted fish and cut giant cypress trees into dressed timber and shingles – all of which the Pettigrews shipped to merchants up and down the East Coast, from New York to Charleston. Much of that trade moved along a canal that connected Lake Phelps in Tyrrell County to the Scuppernong River, and from there opened into the Albemarle Sound and coastal waterways. The canal had been dug in the late 1780s by captives brought directly from West Africa aboard the *Jennett* and the *Camden*, slave ships commissioned by a group of Edenton merchants for that express purpose. Few of the 160 slaves who landed in Edenton survived to produce descendants. Some drowned in a failed attempt to escape; most of the others died of overwork and the diseases that preyed on human life in the swamplands of eastern North Carolina.⁴

Johnston Pettigrew received his early education from private tutors and at William J. Bingham's academy in Hillsborough. He enrolled at the University of North Carolina in 1843, shortly after his fifteenth birthday, and graduated four years later at the top of his class. Over the course of his later life, Johnston distinguished himself as an amateur scholar. He read Latin and ancient Greek, skills required of all university students; possessed exceptional talent in mathematics; studied music and earned a diploma in civil law in Berlin; mastered four modern European languages, as well as Arabic and Hebrew; and undertook original research for a book he hoped to write on the history of the Moors in North Africa and Iberia.⁵

After earning his A.B. degree, Johnston had no interest in returning to the rural isolation of Tyrrell and Washington Counties. He worked briefly as an astronomer and chart maker at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Annapolis, Maryland, thanks to an appointment arranged by President James K. Polk, a fellow UNC graduate, class of 1818. But the job was tedious and confining, factors that encouraged Johnston to turn his attention to studying the law under the tutelage of a family acquaintance who practiced in Baltimore.⁶ Then, in the summer of 1848,

⁴ Wilson, "James Johnston Pettigrew"; Clyde N. Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier: The Life and Mind of James Johnston Pettigrew* (Rockford, Illinois: Chronicles Press, 2002), 1-5; Ebenezer Pettigrew, Find a Grave, <https://bit.ly/3bcDSyS>; Wayne K. Durrill, "Slavery, Kinship, and Dominance: The Black Community at Somerset Place Plantation, 1786-1960," *Slavery and Abolition* 13 (Issue 2), 3-4. The number of slaves owned by Ebenezer Pettigrew is based on the holdings of his sons William and Charles as recorded in the next federal census after the property transfer. See 1850 Federal Census, Slave Schedules, Tyrrell and Washington Counties, North Carolina, Ancestry.com.

⁵ Wilson, "James Johnston Pettigrew"; Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 38-40, 209.

⁶ Through the end of the nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of lawyers trained by apprenticing themselves to practicing attorneys. A movement to teach law as an academic subject did not begin in

Ebenezer Pettigrew died. Shortly before his death, he had deeded Bonarva plantation and its enslaved work force to his eldest son, Charles, and under the terms of his will, second son William now inherited Belgrade and Magnolia plantations, together with the nearly one hundred souls held in bondage there. To provide for Johnston, Ebenezer instructed William to set aside a \$15,000 legacy – the rough equivalent of \$500,000 today – payable, with interest, over a period of five or more years.⁷

The stolen labor of Black slaves had made Ebenezer Pettigrew a wealthy man, and now it gave his third son the means to follow ambition wherever it might lead. This would not be the only time that Johnston profited from such theft. A decade later, James C. Johnston, the family friend for whom young Pettigrew was named, gave him a gift of \$50,000, the equivalent of just under \$1.6 million today. Johnston the benefactor could afford to be generous. At the time of the gift, he owned 12,000 acres of land and 555 slaves in Halifax, Chowan, and Pasquotank Counties. There is no evidence that Pettigrew ever expressed remorse for the fact that his financial independence and personal liberty were rooted in an organized system of exploitation that visited violence and death upon millions of fellow human beings. Throughout his life, he denied that racial slavery was, in his words, an instrument of "plunder." As a matter of "Divine will" and natural law, he insisted, any "one man" had the inalienable right to enslave and profit from "the unwilling labor of another."⁸

In 1849, Pettigrew moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to complete his legal studies with jurist James Louis Pettigru, his first cousin once removed. He quickly won admission to the South Carolina bar, and in early 1850 departed for a grand tour of Europe, financed largely by his North Carolina namesake and patron. The expedition stretched across more than two and a half years, during which time Pettigrew drew inspiration from nationalist movements across the continent that seemed to mirror the secessionist politics of "fire-eaters" back home who pressed for southern independence and dissolution of the American republic. As a modern biographer has observed, "the perspective acquired by his sojourn in Europe intensified Pettigrew's identity as a southerner. From Europe it became more forcefully apparent that America was made up of two uncongenial nations." During the 1850s, as debate over the westward expansion of slavery intensified, this conviction became the defining principle of Pettigrew's politics. It ultimately prepared him to forswear his allegiance to the United States and to take up arms to establish a slaveholders' republic – what Pettigrew called "a [southern]

earnest until the founding of the American Bar Association in 1878, and university-based law schools did not fully displace the apprenticeship model until the 1930s and 40s. See Robert Stevens, *Law School: Legal Education in American from the 1850s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

⁷ Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 19-29

⁸ Ibid., 80-81; Martha M. Smith, "James Cathcart Johnston," in William S. Powell, ed., vol. 3, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 303; *Report of the Minority of the Special Committee of Seven, to Whom Was Reported So Much of Gov. Adams' Message, No. 1, as Relates to Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Charleston: Harper and Calvo, 1858), 8-9.

Nation among Nations," founded upon the principle that all men were *not* created equal and that white men possessed an irrefutable right to rule.⁹

Pettigrew returned to Charleston in late 1852, joined James Petigru's law firm, and was soon litigating cases in both state and federal courts. That work introduced him to influential power brokers, who in 1856 backed his election to the South Carolina legislature. Pettigrew also threw himself into preparations for a civil war that he believed was inevitable. He joined the Washington Light Infantry, a Charleston militia company; assembled a library of books on military tactics and engineering; and, along with his duties as a lawmaker, accepted appointment as Governor Robert F. W. Allston's aide-de-camp, a position that carried the rank of lieutenant colonel in the state militia. In 1859, Pettigrew made a short return visit to Europe, where he hoped to translate book learning into practical military skills by joining Sardinian forces in their battle against Austria in the Second War of Italian Unification. That plan was undone by an armistice signed on the day after his arrival, but all was not lost. Peace in Italy afforded Pettigrew time to visit Paris, a city he described as "the metropolis of war." There, he studied the training of professional soldiers and conferred with French officers on matters of military organization, discipline, and logistics.¹⁰

Upon his return to Charleston, Pettigrew distilled all that he had learned into a comprehensive proposal to transform the South Carolina militia into a modern fighting force. He also took on the tasks of drilling new volunteer troops and fortifying Charleston against attack from the sea. Pettigrew attended to these duties until April 1861, when southern bombardment of Fort Sumter, a federal outpost in Charleston harbor, initiated a war-in-earnest between the United States and the insurgent Confederate States of America.¹¹

With fighting finally to hand, Pettigrew volunteered his services to his home state of North Carolina. In July 1861, he took command of just under one thousand men in the Twenty-

⁹ Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 27-63, 109-11. On Pettigrew's interest in European nationalist movements, see Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28-30. James Petigru, unlike his young protégé, was a Unionist who opposed Nullification in 1832-1833 and South Carolina's secession in December 1860. See William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *James Louis Petigru: Southern Conservative, Southern Dissenter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 71-72, 91-92, 98-111, 116-21. Pettigrew attracted national attention in the late 1850s as the author of a report that argued against calls from some prominent South Carolinians to reopen the transatlantic slave trade. He took that position because he viewed the proposal as a threat to slaveholders' economic and political interests no less dangerous than northern abolitionists' "diseased sentimentalism." Pettigrew contended that renewing the slave trade would create a glut in the domestic market for bound labor and significantly deflate the wealth of slave barons throughout the South. By his estimation, slaveholders in South Carolina alone stood to lose a minimum of \$56 million in net worth (approximately \$1.8 billion today). Pettigrew also reasoned that cheaper slaves would reduce the cost of producing cotton, and, in turn, lower the price that American and British manufacturers would be willing to pay for the South's most valuable crop. Added to that, there was the heightened risk of insurrection associated with the importation of "raw Africans," newly stolen from their homes, "unruly, discontented," and not yet "educated to obedience" and "peaceful submission." The report was persuasive enough that the question of resuming the transatlantic trade was dropped from the legislative agenda. See *Report of the Minority of the Special Committee of Seven*.

¹¹ Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 117-45.

Second North Carolina Regiment; eight months later, the Confederate War Department promoted him to the rank of brigadier general.

Pettigrew's experience on the battlefield was a gift to hagiographers – particularly latter-day authors of the Lost Cause – who enshrined him in the pantheon of Confederate heroes. In 1862, at the Battle of Seven Pines, Pettigrew suffered a near-fatal wound to his neck and right shoulder. While recovering from that injury, he was shot again, this time in the left arm, bayoneted in the leg, captured by Union soldiers, and confined in a Federal prison.



James Johnston Pettigrew
Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection,
Wilson Library, University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill

Authorities in Washington eventually ordered Pettigrew's release in a prisoner exchange. Restored to his command, he spent the better part of a year in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, skirmishing with Union troops who had captured a broad swath of territory that stretched from Suffolk to New Bern. Then, in July 1863, he met his apotheosis at Gettysburg. Pettigrew commanded one of three divisions in the assault on Union forces that came to be known as Pickett's Charge. In its own time, the attack was judged to be "a great military blunder." Confederate losses were staggering. Of the roughly 4,350 infantrymen under Pettigrew's command, an estimated 2,700 were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Pettigrew suffered only a minor hand wound in the primary engagement, but in the subsequent retreat, on July 14 at the Battle of Falling Waters, a Union soldier shot him through the abdomen. He died of peritonitis three days later. Pettigrew's body was returned to Raleigh for

a funeral on the Capitol grounds. He was buried in a city cemetery, and at the end of the war, reinterred at Bonarva in Tyrrell County.¹²

Pettigrew's military service amounted to treason, which the Constitution defines as the act of "levying War against [the United States]" or giving "Aid and Comfort" to the nation's enemies. The gravity of his offense is underscored by the fact that he acted not as a conscript

¹² Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier*, 147-53, 159-60, 164-69, 195-204. Quotation from Robert Garlick Hill Kean, chief of the Confederate Bureau of War, in Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 49. Pickett's Charge was named for Major-General George E. Pickett, who along with Pettigrew and Major-General Richard H. Anderson, led the assault. On Pettigrew's losses, see Earl J. Hess, *Pickett's Charge: The Last Attack at Gettysburg* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 333-34. A significant number of the wounded men were also captured. As Hess notes, historians must estimate Pettigrew's losses in the assault because official records for his division only reported totals for the entire battle at Gettysburg and did not disaggregate them by engagement.

under duress, or even as an ordinary soldier, but rather as a general officer with decisive authority over the prosecution of war.¹³

This, of course, is not how Pettigrew has been remembered. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his story became an anchor point in white North Carolinians' "Rebel Boast": "First [to die] at Bethel, Farthest to the Front at Gettysburg, and Last at Appomattox." To this day, that declaration shapes popular memory of the Civil War, and in some cases, scholarly treatments as well. It originated in the Lost Cause mythology fabricated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the United Confederate Veterans. In their telling of the past, the southern nation was not born of treasonous insurrection, but arose instead to defend the sacred principles of liberty on which the American republic had been founded. The white South fought not to preserve and expand the geographic reach of racial slavery, but to protect hearth and home from invasion.¹⁴

In 1920, Walter Clark, chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court and himself a Confederate veteran, gave voice to this myth in the eulogy he delivered at the dedication of a memorial to Pettigrew erected near Falling Waters, West Virginia, where the general died. Clark presided over the occasion at the invitation of the North Carolina Historical Commission (a state agency appointed by the governor) and the UDC. He placed Pettigrew in the company of ancient Athenian warriors who, badly outnumbered, repulsed a Persian invasion on the plain of Marathon in 490 BCE. He compared the Confederate general's selfless sacrifice to that of French soldiers on the World War I battlefield at Verdun, and he imbued Pettigrew with qualities of the Divine, quoting the Gospel of John: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Above all else, Clark exclaimed, Pettigrew was an American patriot who, like the Revolutionary forefathers at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Yorktown, died in service to "duty" and "country."¹⁵

We might ask, what country was that, the United States, or the Confederate States of America? The very purpose of Lost Cause mythology was to elide that question, and in doing so, to wash away the sinfulness of a war undertaken to perpetuate the enslavement of four million

¹³ U.S. Constitution, Article 3, Section 3.

¹⁴ Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions of North Carolina in the Great War, 1861-1865*, vol. 1 (Raleigh: E. M. Uzzell, 1901), 3; Manly Wade Wellman, *Rebel Boast: First at Bethel – Last at Appomattox* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1956). On the Lost Cause, see Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Adam H. Dombay, *False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

¹⁵ "Gen. James Johnston Pettigrew, C.S.A., Address by Chief Justice Walter Clark of North Carolina at the Unveiling of the Memorial Marble Pillar and Tablet to General Pettigrew Near Bunker Hill, W. Va., September 17, 1920," *North Carolina Booklet* 20 (Nos. 2-4, October 1919, January-April 1921), 171-80. Walter Clark was an outspoken proponent of Lost Cause ideology and the white supremacist principles at its heart. In 1907, at the dedication of the Confederate monument in Chatham County, he charged that the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, violated the sovereign "people's will" and was adopted illegally. He urged his audience to oppose that injustice and honor the Confederate dead by taking up "the cross-barred emblem of our fiery Southern faith." The Fourteenth Amendment granted birthright citizenship to former slaves and guarantees every citizen "equal protection of the laws." See "Judge Clark's Speech," *Chatham Record* (Pittsboro, N.C.), August 29, 1907.

Black souls. The country Walter Clark and his audience had in mind was a Jim Crow nation, its sectional differences reconciled on the basis of white brotherhood and the assumed right of white men to rule all others. As historian David Blight has observed, this "peace among whites" – a phrase borrowed from abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass – was built upon the "resubjugation" of people the Civil War had freed from chattel bondage.¹⁶

The trustees who named a new residence hall for Pettigrew were steeped in these Confederate values and historical falsehoods. They bestowed the honor in 1912, a year before they celebrated the dedication of UNC's Confederate monument. Both acts aligned the university with principles of white supremacy and positioned it as a bulwark against democracy and equal citizenship. That was an indefensible choice in its own time, and to let it stand today is unbecoming an institution that aspires to lead and serve as the "people's university."

The U.S. military is wrestling with a similar contradiction between its core values and the Jim Crow legacy of ten bases named for Confederate generals, all located in former Confederate states. The list includes Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, which Congress named in 1918 to honor Major-General Braxton Bragg, a native of Warren County

In recent years, civil rights activists, politicians, and military officials have called for the removal of Bragg's name, along with those of his compatriots. Testifying in July 2020 before the House Armed Services Committee, General Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained the petitioners' concern. "Those generals fought for the institution of slavery," he said. "So, we have to take a hard look at the symbols, like the Confederate flag, statues, and bases. The Confederacy, the American Civil War, was fought as an act of rebellion. It was an act of treason at the time, against the Union, against the Stars and Stripes, against the U.S. Constitution." Milley advised members of Congress that the Confederate base names had become a significant source of "divisiveness" within the ranks and posed a direct threat to the military's preparedness to defend the nation. Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, testifying alongside Milley, agreed. "Racism, bias, and prejudice have no place in our military," he declared, "not only because they are immoral and unjust, but also because they degrade the morale, cohesion, and readiness of our force." Lawmakers – Republican and Democrat alike – took that counsel to heart. In December 2020, they passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which established a process for removing from Department of Defense property all names "that commemorate the Confederate States of America or any person who served voluntarily with the Confederate States of America."¹⁷

¹⁶ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3, 397.

¹⁷ "Milley Calls for 'Hard Look' at Renaming Bases Honoring Confederates," *New York Times*, July 9, 2020; "Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, Statement for the Record (as Prepared) to the HSAC on Hearing on DOD Authorities and Roles Related to Civilian Law Enforcement," U.S. Department of Defense, July 9, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2Xom4bA>; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Pub. L. 116-283, Title III, Section E., gov.info, <http://bit.ly/2JYgPwg>. The other bases are Fort Benning (1917), named for Henry L. Benning; Fort Lee (1917), named for Robert E. Lee; Fort Gordon (1917), named for John B. Gordon; Camp Beauregard (1917), named for Pierre G. T. Beauregard; Fort A. P. Hill (1941), named for Ambrose P. Hill Jr.; Fort Polk (1941), named for Leonidas Polk; Fort Hood (1942), named for John Bell Hood; Fort Pickett (1942), named for George E. Pickett; and Fort Rucker (1942), named for Edmund W. Rucker.

These leaders recognized a poignant truth spoken by Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, long-time head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a veteran of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s: "If you don't tell it like it was, it can never be as it ought to be." In that spirit, let us move forward by telling it like it was at our university, and by removing the misguided and pernicious honor bestowed upon James Johnston Pettigrew under the reign of Jim Crow.¹⁸

In 1930, Johnston Pettigrew's nieces, Caroline and Mary Pettigrew, gave the university a large collection of family papers, now housed in the Southern Historical Collection in Wilson Library. In exchange for the gift, the university bound itself "in perpetuity to care for the Pettigrew Family Burial Ground on Bonarva Plantation in Tyrrell County." J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, professor of history and founding director of the Southern Historical Collection, negotiated the agreement and signed it on behalf of university president Harry W. Chase and the Board of Trustees. Thirteen members of the Pettigrew family are known to be buried in the cemetery, including Johnston's grandparents, parents, and siblings. Today, the graves lie within Pettigrew State Park, established in 1939. Since the 1950s (and perhaps earlier), general upkeep has been provided by park personnel.¹⁹

UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward

¹⁸ "David W. Blight, "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 33.

¹⁹ An Agreement Between the University of North Carolina and Caroline Pettigrew and Mary Johnston Pettigrew, June 2, 1930, and undated list of persons buried in the Pettigrew family cemetery, Administrative Control File for the Pettigrew Family Papers #00592, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This file contains additional correspondence that documents Hamilton's negotiations with the Pettigrew sisters. On the arrangement for general upkeep of the burial ground by state park personnel, see Documents Related to Maintenance of the Cemetery at Pettigrew State Park, North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation Records, State Archives of North Carolina, North Carolina Digital Collections, <https://bit.ly/3bDHR0S>.