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The Propaganda of Martyrdom: The Latané and Confederate Nationalism

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To say that the Latané family and the history of the Tidewater region of Virginia are connected is an understatement. From early European settlers to the present, the Latanés of Virginia's Tidewater have been among the movers and shakers of the region, with leadership positions among the region's ecclesiastical, political, and military elite. A cursory perusal through any Episcopalian churchyard, the denomination of choice for Virginia's gentry (upper class) for over two centuries, will provide a labyrinthine view of the family's oftentimes complicated family tree. This perusal will also show that the Latanés were in no way the only genteel family of the Tidewater, but one of a dozen or so families that grew to power in the early days of the colony and state, and inter-married to such an extent that the family tree, as one local historian has described it, is much more like a meandering, interconnected clump of vines.

This article will attempt to paint a picture of that familial vine, with special attention given to the family of Henry Waring Latané (1782-1860) and his son—

made legendary figure—Captain William Latané, M.D. (1833-1862). Capt. Latané, after a heroic death, became one of the most significant icons of Confederate propaganda to represent the hopes and dreams of a fallen South in the post-war period of the late nineteenth century. That the image of his desultory



The lithograph, *Burial of Latané*, published in *Southern Magazine* by A. G. Campbell in 1868, became "an icon of Confederate nationalism." Reprinted with permission of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

burial rite remained in thousands of homes across the South is an historical phenomenon in and of itself. The actual story of the family behind the picture is just as noteworthy.

I am indebted to the Latané family historian, Lucy Temple Latané (1866-1948), who in the early twentieth century spent painstaking hours in the archives of the local courthouse, trudged across now overgrown or demolished family lands and houses, and dug in many a Latané attic to trace the family history in two short books, *Parson Latané* (Charlottesville: The Michie Company, Printers, 1936) and *A Short Sketch of James Alan Latané, 1832-1902* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1949).¹ As with

¹ I am also indebted to Dr. Bibb Latané of Chapel Hill, NC for access to these documents, as well as to Joan Paris of

the research and inherent personal perceptions of any family historian, Lucy Temple Latané's work should be seen by the professional historian through a critical lens, especially her overly rosy description of the lives of the Latané slaves, yet her handling of original sources is invaluable and lends credence to her efforts. Her interpretive lens provides a glimpse into the mindset of the family and the way it viewed itself after the peak of its power and influence in the region in the post-war years. Like so many of the social institutions of the South, the Latané enterprise itself was fatally wounded as a result of the War Between the States. The war not only brought death upon the family's sons and heirs, but disrupted the economic base that provided for their way of life.

Colonial Presence

The story of the Latanés in America begins with the French Huguenot refugee, Lewis (Louis) Latané (1672-1732), known often by his title, Parson Latané, or even as the 'Old Parson'. Although Parson Latané's refugee status was the direct cause of the disapproval of a religious establishment, he quickly became not only a member of one, but a leader in one known for its distaste for dissent. Latané's transition from the Old World to the New included a sojourn in England where he was educated at Oxford and received holy orders by the hand of an Anglican bishop.²

Until Thomas Jefferson had his way late in the eighteenth century, the Church of England was the Established Church of Virginia, and legally tied not only to the colonial government, but to the Bishop of London who oversaw Anglican efforts in the colonies. In Virginia, the Church of England held sway politically, and contained within its pews the elite members of Virginian society. In this milieu, Parson Latané was, upon his arrival on the banks of the Rappahannock in 1701 as a clergy member of the Church of England, a man of social importance and power. Although his French accent did not always sit well with his English parishioners (old animosities die hard), and he did have to deal with a vestry packed with the Essex County elite, the 'Old Parson' held great sway because of his ordained status and also

Tappahannock, VA for her tireless research into the death and burial of Capt. Latané, Susan Willoughby Newton of Mechanicsville, VA for access to the Summer Hill Plantation, and William Latané Lewis, Susan Diereux, and Priscilla Vaughan, of Tappahannock, for providing me with personal interviews and hospitality during trips to Essex County. Portions of Lucy Temple Latané's *Parson Latané* were published in the newsletter of the Essex County Historical Society, Volume 23, November 1983.

² Latané, *Parson Latané*, 7.

because of his thirty years of ecclesiastical service in the area. Within a generation, the progeny of Parson Latané would be among the gentry that sat in his pews.³

The rise of the Latané family can be directly connected to the accumulation of land. Lucy Temple Latané hints at the fact that Parson Latané was, by the time he arrived in the colonies, a man of means.⁴ His plantation, *Langley*, in what is now the Dunbrooke section of Essex County, became the headwaters of what would become a string of Latané plantations that grew in number with each successive generation. Parson Latané gave generously to the church and took part in large real estate ventures in Spotsylvania County. His sons continued to amass land, and his married into the upper-class families of the Tidewater. Henry Waring Latané, the parson's great grandson, would be the greatest and last expansionist of the family, setting up his plantation home, *The Meadow*, in what was described in his father's will as "the meadow quarter."⁵

The Latanés of The Meadow

Henry, the second of five children born to William Latané (1750-1811) and Ann Waring, built *The Meadow* homestead in 1824. His marriage to Susanna Allen (1797-1878) continued the tradition of uniting the upper-class families of the Tidewater; Susanna hailed from the neighboring *Spring Hill* plantation. Henry and Susanna were married in 1819. Of their ten children, eight lived to adulthood and grew up at *The Meadow*, a pristine upper-class home that sat on a large tract of land and, by the outbreak of the war, was also home to over 200 hundred slaves.⁶

Although *The Meadow* house was demolished in 1950 to make room for agricultural interests, the home was, in its day, one of the finest in the county. One of the most accurate descriptions of the house is the county survey file in 1968.⁷ It describes a house that

³ A fine general overview of Colonial Anglicanism on the Eastern seaboard is provided in John Frederick Woolverton's *Colonial Anglicanism in North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).

⁴ Latané, *Parson Latané*, 11.

⁵ The wills of many of the Latanés, including Parson Latané, William Latané, and Henry Waring Latané, can be found at the Essex County records office in Tappahannock. These three wills are dated 1733, 1808 and 1850.

⁶ Latané, James Allen Latané, 14.

⁷ Two related sources that describe Essex County homes, including *The Meadow*, are *Old Homes of Essex County: Historic Homes, Landmarks and Traditions* (Women's Club of Essex County, 1940 and 1957), and what in certain ways is a revision of the former,

"was a full two storeys [sic] (actually 4 usable floors) over a four-ft. high English basement." An English basement, half underground and half above ground to provide light, was a perfect respite from muggy summer days. The survey describes five dormers on "either side of the top roof" and along the roofline, an 18" cornice. Porches were built on both the front and the back of the house, and double-doors with transoms opened into a large foyer or central hall with a "closed winding staircase" that "led from the back of the hall to the second floor." The home was heated by two large fireplaces whose chimneys were "said to be unusually handsome" and "measured 8 ft. at the base, 6 ft. at the second story, and 4 ft. at the top." The home was said to be in fair condition when it was torn down. During World War II the family used it for storage. In many ways the description of the building fits perfectly with the *Summer Hill* plantation home that is still standing and where Capt. William Latané was buried.

Lucy Temple Latané paints the picture of a perfect home when she describes *The Meadow* in her short book about her father, Bishop John Allen Latané. John grew up at *The Meadow* and was one of seven boys born to Henry and Susanna. He was also one of the four that lived through the war. As a clergyman, John did not participate on the front lines, although he appears to have been a Confederate sympathizer. His story is of interest because it encapsulates the struggles within the Episcopal Church as it came to grips with the repercussions of the High Church or even Romanizing influences of the Oxford Movement in the late nineteenth century. The Oxford Movement, with its emphasis on the ritual and ceremonial of traditional liturgies, was not met with enthusiasm by those in the evangelical wing of the church who emphasized personal conversion over, and often against, traditional liturgical rites. John chose to leave the Episcopal Church and join the Reformed Episcopal Church rather than relinquish his Low Church, or evangelical, tendencies.

Susanna Allen Latané, the matriarch of the family, and mother not only to John Allen, but also his legendary brother, William, was a woman of fortitude and conviction. Unlike their lower class counterparts, women of the gentry were allowed a measure of

Essex County Virginia Historical Homes, compiled by Robert La Follette, Anita Harrower, and Gordon Harrower (Essex County Museum, 2002). Both books contain unique information. I have decided to use the county survey of *The Meadow* home because it provides the greatest number of details about the home itself. A copy of the county survey is kept in the archives of the Essex County Museum.

freedom within a social system of male dominance.⁸ The Southern male honor code was a distinctive system that allowed white males of the gentry, a small minority, to rule over the South with an iron fist.⁹ Until the Civil War, this patriarchal system was the order of the day. Within it, however, women of the gentry such as Susanna found ways to assert their will, primarily in the home. In Susanna's case, she asserted her freedom by bucking the family's long-held Episcopalianism by becoming a Baptist.

Floating back and forth between Episcopalian and Baptist church services today may be a liturgical rollercoaster, but in the early nineteenth century it was also a distinct issue of class and rank. By the 1820s the Episcopal Church was no longer seen as the arm of the English colonial enterprise that it had once been, and was on the rise after a mass exodus following the American Revolution. Susanna did not seem interested in the politics of church membership. According to Lucy Temple she joined the Baptist denomination "because the most earnest Christians she knew were of that denomination."¹⁰ Her family, although active members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, went often with her to Beulah Baptist and she with them to St. Paul's.

The Burial of Latané: An Interpretation

The death of William Latané need not be told in detail in this essay, the story is widely known. Suffice it to say that Latané died a valiant death in the midst of a saber charge against Union forces northeast of Richmond during Stuarts's "Ride Around McClellan" in early June 1862. The captain died in the arms of his brother, John, having been struck by two bullets, one in the abdomen and another in the chest. Various accounts say that his horse charged ahead of his fellow cavalry members. One imaginative explanation is that the horse was frightened by the rebel yell and thus charged ahead into the oncoming bullets of the Union forces.

⁸ The best book on the history of the county is undoubtedly James B. Slaughter's *Settlers, Southerners, Americans: The History of Essex County, Virginia 1608-1984* (Essex County Board of Supervisors, 1985). See Slaughter's chapter on women for a description of everyday life for lower and middle class women in the Antebellum period.

⁹ One insightful look at the Southern male honor code is provided in Cynthia Lynn Lyerly's *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Lyerly describes how the honor code clashed, at least initially, with Methodist calls for abolitionism and the allowance of women "exhorters". The Methodists would back away from both controversial stances as they moved from outcast sect to respectable denomination.

¹⁰ Latané, James Allen Latané, 4.

Latané's death occurred at Linney Corner near Totopotomoy Creek just outside of Mechanicsville in Hanover County. His body was first taken by cart to the nearby *Westwood* plantation where it was prepared for burial and subsequently buried at *Summer Hill*, a sprawling plantation adjacent to *Westwood*. Latané was just 29 years old when he was killed. He was educated, like most men in his family, at the University of Virginia and had gone on to medical school at Hampton Sydney Medical College, later the Medical College of Virginia, to earn a Doctor of Medicine degree.

Following Latané's death, a poem was written by John R. Thompson entitled "Captain Latané" which became the impetus for the now famous depiction, 'Burial of Latané', painted by famed Southern artist William D. Washington in 1864. Thompson was the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and he published his poem in the magazine just one month after Latané's death. The poem is an attempt to depict Latané's death in saintly terms that compare Latané with Christ and the women who buried him with the Virgin Mary. Washington's vivid oil on canvas painting, a re-creation of the burial scene, was hung in Richmond and put on public display in order to raise funds for the war effort, and quickly attained cult status.¹¹

What propelled the painting from propaganda to icon was the publication of Washington's oil painting as a lithograph by A. G. Campbell in 1868. The lithograph was offered free of charge with the purchase of a new subscription to *Southern Magazine*. Drew Gilpin Faust, historian and president of Harvard University, has written one of the most in-depth analyses of both the painting and lithograph in her book, *This Republic of Suffering*. She writes, "These prints [copies of the lithograph] became a standard decorative item in late nineteenth and early twentieth century southern homes, and what historian Frank Vandiver called its 'fantastic popularity' has led scholars to recognize the engraving as a central symbol of the Lost Cause."¹² As such, the lithograph came to symbolize much more than the tragic death of a young Confederate officer; it came to symbolize a strong

Southern nationalism and a corporate Southern identity as the embodiment of the dream of Southern independence, and as Faust describes it, "an icon of Confederate nationalism."

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has described an icon as "pregnant with a different kind of life."¹³ Icons have traditionally been associated with religious art meant to transcend the gulf between heaven and earth. The Eastern Orthodox often describe icons as windows to heaven. Similarly, nationalistic icons are meant to embody or convey a corporate dream or identity. They are not windows to heaven, but images that transcend the historic in order to open the viewer up to a nationalism that goes beyond the scene they attempt to recreate. The 'Burial of Latané', as icon, conveys what historians now call 'The Lost Cause'.

Although it was the black and white lithograph that graced Southern homes, it was the colors in the original oil painting that reveal its religious overtones and symbolism. Red dominates the painting, giving tangible meaning to the rich tradition of the Christian martyr. Not only is Latané's coffin draped with a red cloth, but one of the women is clothed in a red dress as she weeps over the scene of the fallen hero/martyr. A young girl stands to the right in the painting looking away from the body, and dressed in a lighter red, perhaps symbolizing hope for a future without the need for martyrdom.

Unlike other icons of nationalism like 'Washington Crossing the Delaware', the 'Burial of Latané' includes both men and women, slave and free, white and black. The slaves are not simply in the background of the picture, but stand next to the martyr himself. They, too, are wearing red. Faust has written that, "Slaves built his coffin and dug his grave, and a white Virginia matron read his burial service."¹⁴ This inclusivity in the midst of a hierarchical and exclusivist society is a picture of the all-inclusive nature of war; there was no aspect of Southern culture that was not affected by it. What connects the white women and the black slaves in the picture is not the martyr, however. As Faust points out in her chapter on the painting, it is a young girl standing over the coffin of Latané that unites these two segments of Southern society. Holding a wreath reminiscent of Christ's crown of thorns, the young girl appears lighted from above and represents what was seen as the innocence that epitomized the relationship of white and black in the antebellum South.

¹¹ The painting now hangs in the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, VA over a fireplace in the "Confederate White House" of Jefferson Davis. It is on permanent loan from Judge John E. DeHardit. The painting disappeared for 71 years after the war and resurfaced in 1939. Some members of the Latané family believe that the original painting was actually destroyed in the Chicago Fire, although there is no proof of this.

¹² Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 149.

¹³ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2002), xvii.

¹⁴ Faust, 149.

Red, as the color of the Christian martyr, is accompanied by blue, the color of Mary, and black, the color of mourning and typical of clergy attire. The woman who leads the band of women in mourning is wearing blue, and represents Mary. Just as Mary laid in the tomb one who had given himself for others, so the women of the 'Burial of Latané' lay in the ground one willing to give his life for the South.¹⁵ At the center of the painting stands Mrs. Willoughby Newton, who read the rite of burial from the Book of Common Prayer because a clergyman could not be found in the tumultuous context of the war. She gazes upward to heaven and, according to Faust, "represents the

¹⁵ Ibid., 152.

illuminating power of God's favor" toward the South.¹⁶

The 'Burial of Latané' provides an illuminating glimpse not only into the conflicting social structure of the antebellum South, but as icon into that desire for Southern identity, and perhaps even Southern independence, that was felt so strongly both before and even after the Civil War. With religious overtones, it sanctified the scene of a Confederate officer's death and burial, and became for the South, an icon of nationalism that remained in the hearts and homes of Southerners well into the twentieth century.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Author Biography

Ryan N. Danker is a doctoral candidate in church history and liturgical studies at Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts. His research interests include English church history and politics in the modern era, the rise of Evangelicalism, and English liturgical traditions. He currently resides in Greensboro, North Carolina where he continues work on his dissertation, *Constrained to Deviate: John Wesley and the Evangelical Anglicans*, and serves as an associate pastor at West Market Street United Methodist Church. He recently published a chapter on Methodist liturgical theology, "An Economy of Grace or Mercy: Hauerwas, Wainwright, and Wesley on Liturgy, Ethics, and the Scriptural Narrative" in an international volume on the correlation of liturgy and ethics.

In Memoriam



Charles Willard Hoskins with his wife, Anne Hagerty Warner, at the 2008 ECMHS Fall Gala.

The Essex County Museum and Historical Society mourns the loss of Charles Willard Hoskins Warner. Mr. Warner was a loyal friend and strong advocate.

We will miss his presence at our events, his keen interest, and enthusiasm. Mr. Warner had a friendly manner about him and was a true Virginia Gentleman. He had a remarkable memory for Essex history, love of family and a deep respect for family traditions and ancestry. As a professional historian, he wrote with knowledge and insight about local and Virginia history. In later years, many of his efforts were directed toward his desire to preserve the Warner family heritage for future generations. We are deeply appreciative of his generous contributions of time, capability, and financial support.

Upcoming Events

- Oct 9** **Second Annual Fall Gala**
St. John's Episcopal Church Yard
Rain or Shine
See insert for details
- Nov 14** **Christmas Open House Gift Shop**
Featuring a new exhibit, **Ft. Lowry**. Gift ideas for everyone; historic books, children's books, colonial toys, specialty food items, Salisbury pewter, and many other unique items.
9:00 am - 4 pm
Light Refreshments

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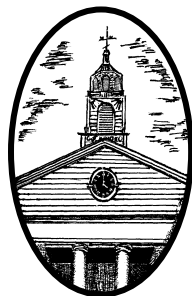
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December 31, 2009 Annual Fund Drive Closes

Year-to-Date 2009: \$4,219 contributed
2008 Annual Fund Drive: \$6,800 contributed

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Admission is always free



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