



THE SOUTH EAST: CIVIL WAR ORDERS, BEECH ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA.

Wes: This episode of “History Detectives” comes from the South East, and our first investigation starts in Beech Island, South Carolina. In this part of the South, you can still hear echoes of the time America went to War against itself. The Civil War was the bloodiest in American history. Three million soldiers fought, and over 600,000 died in battles that raged all over the North and South. On the 9th of April, 1865, with his Confederate armies on their last legs, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant. The Rebellion was over. After four years of fierce fighting, Confederate troops were persuaded to lay down their arms by a now legendary document. Robert E. Lee’s General Order No. 9, also known as Lee’s farewell address, allowed Confederate troops to retain their dignity in the face of a crushing defeat.

Elyse: For over 100 years, the whereabouts of this unique document has been a mystery. Here in Beech Island, South Carolina, the members of a small gentlemen’s club think they have the answer. They think they own it. I’m Elyse Luray, and Wes Cowan and I have come to Beech Island to investigate this extraordinary story.

Wes: Millage Murray, the 56-year-old membership secretary, takes great pride in the club’s rich heritage. A very special tradition of this club is that when a member passes away, a framed photo of them will be permanently hung on these walls.

Wes: Each one of these portraits has a story to tell, but one in particular may link Millage’s club to Lee’s General Order No. 9. Millage, how did the club come to own this document?

Millage Murray: We had a member, William Hayward Atkinson, who served in the Confederate Army and this was his document. And when he died, he left it to the Beech Island Agricultural Club.

Wes: So Millage, what can we tell you?

Millage: I would like to know if this is the original last order given by General Robert E. Lee to his troops at the ending of the Civil War.

Elyse: It’s signed by him. You can see it says, “Robert E. Lee, General,” and then over here it’s signed “to Atkinson.” and I’m just wondering, how would Atkinson get such an important document?

Millage: The legend of the club is that William Hayward Atkinson certainly served with General Robert E. Lee during many of his campaigns and was with him at Appomattox.

Elyse: Well, if this is the original order for Lee telling the Confederate Army to surrender their arms, you’re holding an extraordinary piece of American history.

Millage: I’m getting a little bit of butterflies right now.

[LAUGHTER]

Elyse: I mean, it’s like finding the Declaration of Independence. It would just be extraordinary.

Wes: Could General Robert E. Lee have even known this guy Atkinson, and did he really give him the original copy of General Order No. 9? Written at Appomattox Courthouse, the Order was just five paragraphs long. Its final, heartfelt lines are probably the most famous. “With an unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration for myself, I bid you all an affectionate farewell.”

Elyse: While Wes heads off to find out more about Atkinson’s story, I need to authenticate the document. It’s normally kept in the club’s bank vault, but for the purposes of this investigation, they’ve allowed me to take it away. I’ve come to Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the old South. The Museum of the Confederacy here has given me access to their library so I can really assess the document. My first step is to date the paper. The trouble is, a few years ago, the document was sealed in plastic to protect it. It’s going to make my job a lot harder.

The texture of it looks right. The fact that you have a lot of foxing, which is a little bit of browning, is

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correct. It's the way it should be. And most importantly, I see a lot of wear. There's holes all around it. Now, if someone was going to try to forge this document, they would actually put the damage around the sides, not in the content of the document. And this document has damage to it in very key important places. So I would say the document is definitely 19th century, but what about Lee's signature? I'm comparing ours to a Lee signature that the Museum of the Confederacy has in their archives.

Okay, if we compare the signatures and I look at the "R"s first. They almost look identical. You can tell how the loop is exactly in the middle. You can tell he starts from the top and he goes all the way down and makes his "R." but what I really like is that in both of these signatures, he signed the word "General" almost in the same spot. You can tell the way he starts the letter "G," and then he never picks up his pen until the very end at the "l" where it loops around at the very end. And the "l" almost finishes in midair in both of these and they're just identical. I would say this is 100% Lee's signature and this is definitely a 19th-century document. But is it the original General Order No. 9?

Wes: I want to find out if there's any truth behind the story that's been told at the Agricultural Club for over 130 years. I've come to the Department of Archives and History in Columbia, South Carolina. They hold military records for all the South Carolina soldiers who fought in the Civil War. If Atkinson really was given the original copy of General Order No. 9, he must have had some kind of relationship with Lee and that will be recorded here. One of the Department's archivists, Patrick McCauley, is helping me search. Here we go. Atkinson. We're getting close. Atkinson, here he is. William H. That's our guy. That's him. Let's see, and he's in Company D, 14th, South Carolina. He's listed as a Private, so let's see what we've got here in his records. 1862, he's with the Commissary Department. Beans and bacon guy.

Patrick: Sort of, yeah.

Wes: So he wasn't anywhere close to Lee.

Patrick: Probably not.

Wes: Right.

Patrick: Let's see here. Wait a minute, what's this? Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia, he's listed as a clerk in the Adjutant General's office. Well, that put him in very close proximity to Lee.

Wes: So he would have seen Lee every day?

Patrick: He would have probably had a close contact on almost a daily basis with Lee. In some –

Wes: Even it's just to say, "Hello, Good Morning. Can I get you a cup of coffee?" That's fabulous.

Patrick: But Atkinson's file only goes up to December, 1864. General Order No. 9 wasn't even written until April, '65.

Wes: Where was Atkinson then? Patrick thinks he might have the answer.

Patrick: This is the Appomattox roster. This is a list of all the Confederate soldiers that were paroled at Appomattox on April 9th, 1865.

Wes: After the surrender, all Confederate soldiers became prisoners of war, and they had to be paroled before they could go home. So if Atkinson was at Appomattox, he's going to be in here.

Patrick: He should be in here. Let's see. These are Georgia boys. 2nd, North Carolina. 14th, South Carolina. Company A, B, C, he was in D. Well, he's certainly not there at the top of the list where he ought to be.

Wes: Ah, look at that, the last name on the list. There he is. "W. N. Atkinson." It's got to be the same guy.

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Patrick: I would think it's the same person. They just transcribed it wrong. W.H. Atkinson.

Wes: So he was there at Appomattox when Lee surrendered. That's great! We've proved Atkinson was there at Appomattox at the time General Order No. 9 was written. But how could he have gotten his hands on the original?

Elyse: I've tracked down Ruth Ann Koske. She's been researching the story of General Order No. 9 for the Museum of the Confederacy. If anyone could tell me if this is the original, she can. Ruth Ann, how did the Order come into existence? Who wrote it?

Ruth Ann Koske: Well, it came into existence on the 10th of April in 1865. It was written by General Lee's aide, Colonel Charles Marshall.

Elyse: So these were Marshall's words.

Ruth Ann: Marshall wrote a draft and then he offered it to General Lee for review. Lee scratched out a paragraph, gave it back to Marshall and then Marshall wrote a fair copy from that.

Elyse: So that became the original order.

Ruth Ann: Yes.

Elyse: Is ours that Order?

Ruth Ann: Well, Colonel Marshall's versions were in pencil, and this is obviously in ink. Colonel Marshall had a very bold hand, very distinctive, somewhat similar to General Lee's. And this is not Colonel Marshall's hand.

Elyse: So you're saying this isn't the original copy.

Ruth Ann: No.

Elyse: But it is authentic to the period, and it does have Lee's signature. So what is this?

Ruth Ann: This is likely what were called the souvenir copies. Colonel Marshall also explained that he said many copies were made and brought to the General to sign and in this way appear as originals.

Elyse: So did Atkinson just make a copy of the Order himself and ask the General to sign it? Maybe he even tried to pass it off as the original. My next stop is the Virginia Historical Society. They own seven copies of General Order No. 9. I'm hoping Lee Shepard, Curator of Manuscripts, will be able to give me some answers. The first thing we do is compare the handwriting on the order with an example of Atkinson's writing from the Agricultural Club's minutes. Right away we can tell there's no match, but Lee sees something that no one else spotted.

Lee Shephard: One of the striking things is the size and color of the paper. If you notice with some of these other examples that we have here that the size is exactly the same. The color is very close. The color of the paper is significant because that suggests to me contemporaneous. That's something that happened on the battlefield.

Elyse: It was written on the battlefield.

Lee Shephard: Which suggests possibly that it was done by a clerk who was associated with the Headquarters.

Elyse: Let's talk about the signature over here. I notice that it's signed "To Atkinson." what does that tell you?

Lee: There's a certain personal touch to this that sets it aside from some of the other copies that we might designate as official in the sense of going to the various commanders. This is something that was directed to a person. General Lee signed it. I suspect this all happened on April the 10th at the camp on the battlefield, and I think Atkinson left



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Appomattox with his own personal signed copy of this order, which meant a lot to him for the rest of his life, no doubt.

Elyse: But why would Lee single out someone like Atkinson? I've come to Appomattox Courthouse. Today it's a National Park, virtually unchanged since the moment Lee and Grant met here to agree to the Terms of the Surrender. I'm meeting General Jack Mountcastle, a military historian and Vietnam War veteran. I'm hoping he'll be able to tell me about the events leading up to the Surrender, and what made someone like Atkinson so special? General Mountcastle, I'm just trying to get an idea and a feel for what it was like for the soldiers in the Confederate Army before Lee surrendered.

General Jack Mountcastle: Very difficult, Elyse. They had been in a position defending Petersburg, Virginia, since the summer of 1864. Living in the trenches, much like rats. Always in danger of being caught in the open by a sniper from the opposite side. And suffering tremendously from the heat, the lack of good water. Sickness ran rampant. And many of the Southern soldiers were beginning to receive letters from their wives and families at home. Letters that said, "we have run out of food". "There's nothing left." "If you don't come home to help us put in a crop, we may not last this spring." So those soldiers that were determined to stay and fight it out to the end were really a special breed of dedicated Confederate soldiers.

Elyse: We know Atkinson was one of the few who stuck with Lee to the very end.

Jack: Lee would have wanted to recognize his devotion and loyalty. What better way to do this than to give Atkinson his own personalized copy of General Order No. 9? Atkinson embodied the qualities that Lee heralds in the words of the order.

Elyse: We think Lee gave Atkinson his copy on April 10th, 1865, right here on the battlefield of Appomattox. And now it's time to tell Millage what we've learned about the Club's document. Millage, you asked us to find out, is this the original General Order No. 9?

Millage: Yes, I did.

Elyse: It's not.

Millage: Well, that's okay.

Elyse: Millage, I don't want you to think that just because we found out that this is not the original copy of General Order No. 9 that it's not somehow a special copy, because we believe it is a special copy. We think, we can't be sure, but we think this was a copy that was presented personally by General Lee to Atkinson. It was probably done on the day of the surrender.

Millage: That is extremely exciting, knowing that General Robert E. Lee personally gave this. That's important. You know, and whether this is the original, for us it is the original, because it's the original that was handed to Mr. Atkinson.

Elyse: Millage, I don't have to tell you that this club has great traditions. We want to give you something that we hope will add to that tradition.

Millage: Well, thank you.

Elyse: If I can reach back here.

Millage: Oh, my goodness.

Elyse: We've reframed the club's photograph of Atkinson next to a copy of the Order.

Millage: Oh, this is incredible. Thank you so much. This-- this -- this is -- oh, I'm -- I love it.

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Elyse: It's going to look great on the walls.

Millage: This is going to look fabulous on these walls.

Elyse: Do you think you can find a place on the wall for it?

Millage: You betcha. [LAUGHTER] This is great!

Wes: At the end of the War, Atkinson returned to Beech Island to practice law.

Elyse: In 1866, he was elected Secretary of the Agricultural Club, a position he held for the next 21 years.

Wes: And to this day, the whereabouts of the original pencil copy of General Order No. 9 remains a mystery.

TIPS: How can you tell if it's the real thing or a fake? Suppose you come across an old document or letter. You want to find out if it's authentic. Where do you start? First, take a look at it. Is it an autographed letter? A presidential appointment? A legal document? Check out the content. If the letter's written by Mark Twain and he's talking about flying on a jet, something's wrong. What's it look like? Is it old, brown, folded up? Doesn't mean a thing. That can be faked. How can you find out when the document was really written? What's it written on? Is it on vellum? Vellum is one of the oldest forms of writing material. It's a finely tanned hide of a calf or sheep. Could be hundreds of years old, but remember: vellum is still being used today, so there's no guarantee. Laid paper is one of the earliest commercially available types of writing material. It was used up until around the time of the Civil War. If you hold it up to the light, you'll see vertical and horizontal lines running throughout it. What about a signature? You know, the autograph of a famous person on your document could add thousands to its value. Finding the autograph of a sitting President is easier than you think. Presidents' signed official correspondence, letters to contributors, land grants, official appointments, even photographs. Compare your signature with an authentic one. Go to the local library.

You'll find hundreds of Presidential signatures printed in books, but look out. Even the experts can be fooled. Here are a few that fooled the best: the Hitler Diaries, written by a Hamburg printer in 1984. This revealing autobiography of Howard Hughes, revealed by Hughes himself to have been written by an impostor. And then there's the George Washington letters, written by master forger Joseph Cozy and not the father of our country.

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