

**Cabell, William Preston. "How a Woman Helped to Save Richmond." Reprint from Memphis Commercial Appeal. *Confederate Veteran* 31, pp. 177-178.**

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Woman Saved Richmond City.

**From the *News-Leader*, May 16, 1906.**

**WOMAN SAVED RICHMOND CITY.  
Thrilling Story of Dahlgren's Raid and Mrs. Seddon's Old Blackberry Wine.  
How Governor Wise Got Time to Give Warning.**

[See ante p. 179 the paper of Richard G. Crouch, M. D.--ED.]

The following from the Memphis Commercial--Appeal, written by William Preston Cabell, deals with a thrilling story of the war, familiar in most of its aspects to Richmond and Virginia people but of unflinching interest, especially because of the local references:

History has not recorded the fact that Richmond and the lives of Jeff Davis and his cabinet were saved by the art of woman. Ever since the semi-mythical legend of the rescue of Captain John Smith by Pocahontas, all the world reads with romantic interest of the saving of men by the hand of woman.

The daring exploits of Ulric Dahlgren, the one-legged boy-soldier who was only 21 when he rode at the head of his regiment, eclipsed the wildest legends of adventure of the olden time, and they are interwoven with a thrilling episode of unwritten history which reads like romance and fiction.

Early one morning in March, 1864, we were startled by the heavy pounding on the oaken doors of Sabot Hill, the charming home of James A. Seddon, secretary of war of the Confederacy, and situated on the James river, twenty miles above Richmond.

Mr. Seddon was a lawyer by profession, had been a congressman, and was a man of great refinement, experience in public affairs, and wealthy. His wife was the beautiful and brilliant Sallie Bruce, one of the large family of that name in Halifax and Charlotte counties. Her sister, Ellen, another famous belle of the Old Dominion in the palmy days, was married to James M. Morson, and lived on the adjoining plantation, Dover, one of the most aristocratic homesteads in Virginia. Many of Richmond's inner circle enjoyed the famous social gatherings here, where the society was as delightful as that which adorned the literary circles of the British

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metropolis in the golden age of Scott, Coleridge, Moore, and Leigh Hunt.

Mr. Morson and his brother-in-law, Mr. Seddon, each owned several sugar plantations in Louisiana, besides cotton lands in Mississippi. Just half a mile distant was another typical old Virginia residence, Eastwood, owned by Mr. Plumer Hobson, whose wife was the accomplished daughter of Governor Henry A. Wise. Eastwood was one of the most delightful homes imaginable and the abode of refinement and hospitality. Mr. Hobson paid \$2,500 for Tom, one of

the most courtly and graceful butlers, or "dining-room servants," as they were in those days called. There were nine children of the Seddon home--one of the happiest in all America.

On the night before the heavy pounding on the Sabot Hill door, governor, then Brigadier-general Henry A. Wise, had arrived at Eastwood, accompanied by his daughter, Ellen, now Mrs. W. C. Mayo, a remarkably clever woman, with rare intellectual gifts and literary attainments. The governor had come home on furlough from Charleston, S. C., and was joined by his wife, who had preceded him, and with his family reunion, anticipated a brief recreation amid the charms of one of the most attractive communities in the State. He had traveled from Richmond, on the old James River and Kanawha canal, on a very slow and primitive boat, called the Packet, built very much on the plan of Noah's ark. The mode of travel on this ancient canal was something astonishing. A ditch, filled with slimy water, snakes and bullfrogs, and fringed along its banks with lily pads and weeping willows, furnished the waterway for the Packet. A piece of rope, three damaged mules driven tandem, a tin horn and a negro were the accessories, any one of which failing, caused the trip on the Packet to be suspended or delayed until these necessary paraphernalia were provided. The boat was a curiosity, and the toilet facilities for the entire ship's company were a comb and brush, fastened by chains to keep them from falling overboard, and a tin basin similarly guarded--all attached to the side of the boat on a little gangway between the kitchen and the cabin.

General Wise and Mrs. Mayo entered the Eastwood carriage which was awaiting them at the wharf less than a mile from the Hobson homestead, and as Uncle Ephriam, a famous driver, wheeled them along at an exhilarating gait, the candles twinkled in the windows, and the lights from the country store glinted on the

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vehicle, harness and trappings. It was noticed in the starlight that the northern sky was aglow with what was supposed to be the aurora borealis. Merry, happy greetings and joyous faces met the father and daughter as they entered the Eastwood threshold. Within, the warmth of great wood fires and the good cheer of a delicious supper banished from the good old general every thought of war, as he looked over the rich viands and array of luxuries before him, and contrasted them with the mess pork, "hard tack," "cush," sweet potato coffee, slapjacks, hoppin'-john and hoppin'-jenny and all the horrible makeshifts of food he had endured for months in camp at the front. What a feast it was! Genuine coffee from Mrs. Seddon's, sugar from Mrs. Morson's and sorghum from Mrs. Stanard's. For the first time in many months the general laid his head on snowy pillows and tucked himself away, at midnight, in a Christian bed, with linen, lavender-scented sheets, and warm, soft blankets, to dream of days gone by, when, at his own home by the sea, in time of peace, with oysters, terrapin and canvasback ducks for the feast, judges, statesmen and even presidents had been his guests. He sank to rest, in fancy hearing the sound of salt waves at his tidewater home, and the sighing of the winds through the seaside pines. A soldier of the general's command had come up with him on furlough. His home was some miles beyond Eastwood, in the back country.

At daybreak the following morning, he had sped rapidly back to Eastwood to tell the household that he had heard "boots and saddles" sounded, and to warn his dear old general of the danger.

The mystery of the aurora borealis was solved; for right around his home he had come upon the bivouac of Dahlgren's troopers. When he was arousing the family, the enemy was coming on the same road, and not more than three or four miles behind him. The news chilled every heart with the sense of imminent peril, the dream of peace and rest was over, and the ashes on the hearth, where last night's revel was held, lay dead. There was hurrying for the stables. In an incredibly short time Tom and Ephraim had brought to the door Pulaski, the blind warhorse of the general's dead son, Captain O. Jennings Wise, of the famous Richmond Light Infantry Blues, who had been killed at Roanoke Island, and Lucy Washington, Mr. Hobson's thoroughbred riding mare. They were not a moment too soon. The general and his son-in-law,

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Mr. Hobson, galloped off with whip and spur to Richmond to notify the authorities of the enemy's proximity, and the militia, home guard and private citizens were hurried to the trenches.

Dahlgren's original purpose was to cross the James River at either Jude's ferry, on the Morson place, or at Manakin ferry, three miles below, and to approach Richmond by the south bank of the James. Reaching Belle Isle, he proposed to liberate the 12,000 Federal prisoners encamped thereon, who, reinforced with his regiment, could easily sack the Confederate capital, as Richmond was then in an almost defenseless condition, the reserves having been sent to Lee at the front. There was found upon Dahlgren's body a memorandum, in which the young man had made a wager that he would hang Jeff Davis and his cabinet on that raid. But the fates were against him, as he was repulsed that evening in a desperate charge on the fortifications and later killed.

He was ignorant of the depth of water at the ferry crossings, and therefore paid a burly, black negro man from the Stanard place, who professed safe knowledge of the ferry, \$10 to pilot the troop of cavalry safely across to the south bank. They had not proceeded half way across the stream when the advance horsemen were over their heads, and one of the number drowned. A retreat was promptly ordered, the negro was hanged after a "drum-head" court martial, and his body left swinging from a limb over the roadside. The neighbors allowed this coal-black corpse to hang there for a week as an object lesson to impress the slaves of the vicinage with a new idea of Northern feeling toward the blacks. I shall never forget when a seven-year-old boy, and passing along the road one evening at twilight, how the cold chills ran over me when this gruesome spectacle met my horrified vision--the neck of the darky thrice its ordinary length and his immense pedal extremities suspended scarcely three feet above the ground. When Dahlgren and his staff dashed up to the Hobson home at dawn with drawn revolvers, one of the men inquired, "Where is the man that hanged John Brown?" Mrs. Mayo, who had come out on the porch, replied, "If you mean my father, General Wise, he is not in this house." At this very moment, Mrs. Mayo could see her father and Mr. Hobson entering the woodland in a sweeping gallop about 400 yards distant on the road to Richmond. The negroes had advised Colonel Dahlgren that General Wise was visiting Eastwood,

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and a hasty search was made for the man who was Governor of Virginia when John Brown and

his confederates were captured at Harper's Ferry and hanged at Charlestown.

A handsome stone barn on the Morson place, which cost \$65,000, and three fine stables with the horses in them, were burned that morning, and there was great consternation at these three homes--all in plain view of each other. At this time Mr. Morson was on a visit to his southern plantations, and his elder children, who were left with their aunt at Sabot Hill, could hear the groans of their father's horses in the burning stables and see the flames wipe out the magnificent buildings at Dover, while the residence was saved by the faithful slaves. Dahlgren had been told that Dover was Mr. Seddon's home, and his object was to destroy the property of the Secretary of War. At Dover, a number of the troops, half drunk, found Mr. Morson's handsome wardrobe, replete with a variety of elegant toilettes, donned her wedding gown and other costly feminine costumes, formed a cotillion, and danced all over the yard in this ridiculous "fancy dress" apparel. At Sabot Hill, the old black, "mammy," Aunt Lou, rushed into the nursery that morning, crying out, "Lawdy, chillun, git up and dress as quick as yer kin, de whole hillside is blue wid Yankees." Uncle Charles, the dining-room servant, begged the bluejackets not to burn and destroy the property of his master and mistress, and was as true and loyal as "Aunt Lou," who hurried the children to a safe hiding place. When Dahlgren knocked at the door of Sabot Hill, Mrs. Seddon came forward with that high, womanly spirit which characterized so many patriotic Southern women when all the men were absent at the front and their homes were in danger of the enemy's torch.

The intrepid young officer, standing upon a wooden leg, and leaning upon a crutch (his leg had been amputated by reason of a wound in the ankle, received at Hagerstown, Md., in July, 1863), introduced himself as Colonel Dahlgren. Mrs. Seddon asked him if he was related to Admiral John A. Dahlgren. When the response came that he was a son of the admiral, the wife of the Confederate Secretary of War replied, "Your father was an old beau of mine in my girlhood days when I was a schoolmate of your mother's in Philadelphia." This seemed to touch a tender chord, and the Colonel at once doffed his hat and promised Mrs. Seddon protection

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and immunity from harm for herself and property. Whereupon she invited the gallant officer and his staff to walk into the elegant parlors of this old Virginia mansion with twenty-six rooms, and built at a cost of \$64,000. Mrs. Seddon ordered Uncle Charles to bring from the cellar some blackberry wine of the vintage of 1844, and quickly a hostile invader was converted into an amiable guest, whose brain was soon exhilarated with the sparkling wine, and his manly soul captivated by the gracious diplomacy and finesse of his father's quondam sweetheart. It was by this device and strategy that Mrs. Seddon detained Colonel Dahlgren about the length of time required by General Wise and Mr. Hobson to speed to Richmond and notify her husband of the great peril to the young nation's capital, for she was advised of their flight to Richmond. Thus, it was late that evening when young Dahlgren reached the beleaguered forts around Richmond.