

Capt. Jordan Gray Taylor

Sheriff, State Representative, Military Officer, & Planter

by Timothy Dean Hudson

Jordan Gray Taylor was born on 29 September 1829 in Butler County, Alabama, son of Judge John Taylor and Jane Wood. Jordan's paternal grandparents were William Taylor and Catherine Gray, and his maternal grandparents were Col. Matthew Wood and Hannah Payne. Jordan was named for his uncle, Jordan Taylor, who was mortally wounded fighting the hostile faction of the Creek Indians at the 1814 Battle of Caleb Creek in modern Alabama.

Jordan's grandfathers had both moved their families from Georgia to Alabama Territory about 1818, undoubtedly making the trip along the Federal Road, then the only available pathway for settlers to cross the Creek territory separating central Georgia from central Alabama. The Taylors and Woods settled in what became Butler County, and Matthew Wood became the proprietor of the Fort Dale Tavern, an important waystation on the Federal Road as it wound from south/central Alabama towards Mobile. Beginning in 1823, Wood served as the commander of the Butler County Militia, and in the latter 1820s, Jordan's father, John Taylor, served as the Butler County Sheriff. Shortly after 1830, the Taylors and Woods moved northward across the county line from Butler into southern Lowndes County.

In late 1835, Col. Matthew Wood journeyed to the Ouachita Valley of northern Louisiana to explore the possibility of moving to the region. After scouting the area and buying several tracts of government land in the area surrounding Bayous D'Arbonne and d'Loutre in 1835–1836, Wood returned to Alabama to begin preparations for immigrating to north Louisiana. He gathered his extended family and many neighbors, including Jordan and his parents, all of whom began the process of selling their farms in Alabama. The group departed from Lowndes County in late January 1837 and traveled to Louisiana by steamboat via Mobile and New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi and Ouachita Rivers into what was then northwestern Ouachita Parish.

John Taylor settled his family on a large farm where the Taylor/Liberty Hill Cemetery is now located, about six miles northeast of Farmerville near Bayou d'Loutre. In 1838, Taylor and his father-in-law, Col. Wood, were among the eight influential residents who petitioned the Louisiana Legislature to create a new parish. The Legislature concurred and appointed John Taylor as the first parish judge of Union Parish. Taylor held the position for the parish's first decade. Col. Wood served as the Union Parish Policy Jury's first President, selected the location and used his own

funds to pay for the new parish's first townsite, and cleared the hilltop where Farmerville now sits. Jordan's uncle, Dr. William Cleaton Carr, built the first house in Farmerville and served as the first Union Parish Sheriff.

Jordan Gray Taylor grew up on his father's farm northeast of Farmerville in the latter 1830s and 1840s, surrounded by his large extended family. He had a first cousin eight years younger with the same name, and many legal records of the era refer to our Jordan as "*Jordan G. Taylor Sr.*" to distinguish him from his younger namesake cousin. Whereas our Jordan G. Taylor became a successful farmer, politician, and military officer, his younger first cousin became a schoolteacher, lawyer, and judge.

Gen. Andrew Jackson's victory in the 1828 presidential election served as a turning point in American politics, signaling the emergence of the Jacksonian Democrats as the dominant political force for the next quarter-century. They advocated for strong executive power, championed the concepts of manifest destiny and territorial expansion into Texas, expanded voting rights to all white men, opposed banks and especially, a national bank, and strongly supported the Mexican-American War. A significant minority of Americans ardently opposed Jackson's policies, and in the 1830s, the various opposition groups coalesced into the Whig Party. They opposed the concept of manifest destiny, territorial expansion, and the Mexican-American War, and strongly favored congressional dominance over strong executive power. The Whigs supported protective tariffs, subsidies for railroads and other infrastructure, and national banks.

The extended Taylor-Wood family became ardent Whigs and vehemently opposed the Jacksonian Democrats. After the first Whig President, William Henry Harrison, died shortly after inauguration in 1841, Jordan's grandfather, Col. Matthew Wood, wore a black arm band as a sign of mourning. When a Jacksonian Democrat saw Wood's arm band and insulted Harrison, Wood pulled a pistol and shot him. The resulting chaos forced the Woods to move to Texas for several years. After stepping down as Union Parish sheriff, William C. Carr, Jordan G. Taylor's uncle, represented Union Parish in the Louisiana Legislature for two terms in the 1840s as the candidate of the local Whig Party.

During the early 1850s, the Whig Party slowly disintegrated over their failure to solve the issue of expansion of slavery into the territories. The former Whigs flocked to a new political movement, the American Party, more commonly known as the Know Nothing Party. Still opposed to the Democrats, it focused on nativism and advocated anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments. Carr and the Taylors became strong advocates of the Know Nothings, and in 1853, Carr began

serving as the editor of the *"Farmerville Enquirer."* The newspaper became Louisiana's leading Know Nothing journal in the state.

By late 1853, Jordan Gray Taylor had reached the age of twenty-four. Probably due to his family connections, the Union Parish Know Nothing Party chose Taylor as their candidate to run for Union Parish Sheriff. Taylor won, winning election for the 1854–1856 term as sheriff. In September 1857, the local Know Nothing Party nominated Taylor as their candidate for Union Parish's Representative in the Louisiana Legislature, with Taylor running against the Democratic candidate, Shiloh farmer Jesse F. Fuller. In the November election, Union Parish citizens elected Taylor as their Representative for the 1858–1860 Legislature. It is unclear if Taylor ran for reelection in November 1860, but by this time, the Know Nothing Party had dissolved.

As the nation's political stability continued its disintegration, the extended Taylor family and many other former Whigs became ardent supporters of the Union Constitutional Party, a third party that formed in 1860 to run against both Democrats and Republicans. Jordan G. Taylor, his father, Judge John Taylor, and uncle, William C. Carr, all served as leaders of the Union Constitutional Party in Union Parish. Jordan G. Taylor helped draft a resolution supporting their cause, stating that, *"all lovers of the Union have cause, and just cause, to fear for its perpetuity."* The resolution stated their ultimate goal: to *"restore peace, harmony and tranquility to a distracted country"* by electing an administration that,

...will know no North, no South, no East, no West – but the Union, the Constitution and the enforcement of the laws...

While the Union Constitutionals clearly had no use for secession, they also firmly opposed a Republican president. Jordan G. Taylor's resolution stated that the Union Constitution Party *"is the only party that can successfully oppose the election of a Black Republican President."*

A few months after war began in early 1861, Jordan Gray Taylor and his younger brother, Samuel Wood Taylor, recruited men from the Farmerville vicinity to form a military company, styling themselves as the *"Phoenix Rifles."* The men left Union Parish in early September 1861, probably making their way to Monroe by steamboat. From there, they took the new railroad from Monroe to Jackson, Mississippi, and then south to Camp Moore, Louisiana's new Confederate training camp. Camp Moore lay near the village of Tangipahoa, Louisiana in the Florida Parishes just south of the Mississippi state line, today located in Tangipahoa Parish.

Upon arrival at Camp Moore, Taylor's men had no equipment, and so he journeyed to New Orleans on September 13th to obtain the badly needed supplies. Taylor's unit officially entered the service of the Confederate States Army on September 29th, and Confederate officials designated

the unit as Company C, 17th Regiment Louisiana Infantry. The men elected Taylor their captain and his brother, Samuel W. Taylor, as 2nd Lieutenant.

As the men settled into camp life at Camp Moore over the new few months, they suffered greatly from disease. In particular, measles spread quickly throughout the camp, claiming the lives of many soldiers. In mid-October, Capt. Taylor escorted home to Union Parish the remains of several of his men who perished from disease. While in Farmerville, he recruited for his unit, returning to Camp Moore with six recruits on October 23rd. On November 23rd, Capt. Taylor received orders to move his regiment from Camp Moore to Chalmette south of New Orleans, where they went into winter quarters.

Early in the new year, in early February the Federal Army won significant victories at Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee. As they continued their push southward into Tennessee, Confederate officials began building up their forces there. In late February, they ordered the 17th Regiment to Tennessee. The men left New Orleans on railroad cars and travelled north to Corinth, Mississippi, arriving on March 2nd after a layover in Jackson. After a few days, they waded north through the mud and floodwaters to Henderson Station, Tennessee for picket duty in anticipation of Gen. Grant's attack from the north before returning to Corinth.

Capt. Taylor and his men again left Corinth on April 3rd, headed towards the Tennessee River and Pittsburg Landing, where the Confederate Army attacked Grant's forces on Sunday morning, April 6th. The 17th Regiment participated in several charges against Union positions in the morning, but in the ensuing chaos, the regiment became divided. After regrouping, they joined in the last few Confederate charges against the Hornet's Nest late on the afternoon of April 6th, as well as participating in some of the fighting on the following day. The 17th Regiment remained relatively inactive in the initial attack until late that afternoon, perhaps due to inefficient leadership and lack of a clear battle plan by the Southern generals.

The 17th Regiment returned to Corinth for a month before receiving orders on 7 May 1862 to help defend Vicksburg. During May and June, they camped at Edwards' Depot, located on the railroad between Vicksburg and Jackson, about eighteen miles east of Vicksburg. Capt. Taylor returned home to Union Parish about May 23rd to recruit more soldiers, as disease had taken a toll on the soldiers of the 17th Regiment. After his return, Taylor and his men moved to reinforce the Vicksburg garrison against Admiral David Farragut's naval bombardment of Vicksburg in June and July 1862. In September, the men moved to a dry location just outside Vicksburg that they named "*Camp Ouachita*," where they remained until the end of the year. On December 21st, President

Jefferson Davis reviewed the Vicksburg troops, including Capt. Taylor's company. One of Taylor's men described Davis as *"a calm looking old fellow."*

Failing to reduce Vicksburg by bombardment, Gen. Grant now attempted to take the fortress by land, attacking from the north. Gen. William T. Sherman had overall control of the Union forces, while Grant planned to swing south through central Mississippi and attack from the east. Sherman's men landed north of Vicksburg on December 26th and began slowly picking their way through the swamps and bayous blocking their approach. Confederate scouts observed the approach of Sherman's men, and late that evening, the 17th Regiment received orders to make a hasty march from Camp Ouachita to Chickasaw Bayou, about five miles north of Vicksburg.

Below the bluffs lining Chickasaw Bayou lay Widow Lake's farm, and since his men arrived first, the regimental commander ordered Capt. Taylor's company and the Claiborne Invincibles, from neighboring Claiborne Parish, to advance as pickets towards the swamps on the other side of Widow Lake's old field. A torrential thunderstorm began as Taylor's men scouted the area, and finding nothing, they went to the Lake resident for shelter. The rain continued all night, flooding the lowlands and forcing Sherman to concentrate his forces at the Lake house and follow the road to the bluffs. Taylor's men became the first Southerners to exchange fire with Sherman's advance troops on the 27th, but the bulk of the Northern army did not emerge from the swamps until 2:00 p.m. on the 29th.

Sherman formed his army into double columns, eight abreast, and marched them double time across Lake's old field. The columns divided, filed right and left towards the corners of the field, then fronted and charged the Confederate Army's position along the bluffs. As the Southern troops had a secure and reinforced position behind the high bluffs and Indian mound, the slaughter of Northern troops charging uphill was horrendous. Taylor's men took 400 prisoners, and one of his men alone fired 36 rounds at the Northern troops in defense of the Confederate position. One eyewitness reported that, due to the brave actions of her soldiers, the 17th Regiment gained, *"not only 'glory enough for one day,' but enough to satisfy her ambition forever,"* and that the regiment *"truly had the post of honor that day"* in dealing a resounding defeat to Gen. Sherman's Northern troops.

Capt. Jordan G. Taylor and his men remained on duty in Vicksburg until 1 May 1863, when they participated in the Battle of Port Gibson, where they engaged in heavy fighting from noon until 6:00 p.m., part of that time acting independently due to the hilly terrain. They returned to Vicksburg the next day, and although ordered out to Baker's Creek a few weeks later, they did not arrive in time to participate in any action there. They joined the general retreat of the Confederate

forces into Vicksburg on May 19th and then endured the arduous conditions of the siege for the next six weeks.

Capt. Taylor commanded his men throughout the siege, with the 17th Regiment serving as emergency reinforcements along the Confederate lines wherever needed. After Confederate officials surrendered Vicksburg on July 4th, the men returned home on parole and remained there until April 1864, when they reported to Vienna. They again returned home to plant their spring crops before reporting to Minden. They remained in camp there until July, when they received their official exchange.

About August 1864, the 17th Regiment moved to Pineville to guard against an expected attack from the south that never materialized. In February 1865, they marched to Bayou Cotile, and on May 13th, the regiment's commander, Col. Robert Richardson, was placed in command of the entire Hays' Division. As one of his final actions as division commander, Col. Richardson wrote a report of the somewhat inglorious end of Hays' Division.

Following orders, Col. Richardson ordered the men to march from Natchitoches to Mansfield. Along the way, reports arrived of Lee's surrender in Virginia, and this demoralized the soldiers considerably. Convinced that the war was over, small groups of soldiers began leaving for their homes. Richardson reported that rumors caused the division to become a

...mob and rabble, disregarding the authority of their superiors and governed along by a spirit of lawless plunder and pillage...predatory bands were formed, in many instances led by officers, for the seizure and appropriation of all public property.

Richardson reported that

Company C 17th Louisiana Infantry Commanded by Captain Jordan G. Taylor, this being the only company in the whole Division that performed their duty to the last,

guarding the division's ammunition. Richardson said that,

I placed myself this ordnance in their charge. Though several attempts were made to take it, they preserved it and it is now safe. Too much praise cannot be ascribed to the gallant officer (Capt. J. G. Taylor) and his meritorious company who, when all around them was riot and confusion, did not cease to obey my orders and to perform their duty as men and as soldiers.

After receiving his official parole from the Confederate Army on 18 June 1865, Capt. Taylor returned home to Union Parish. Although the region had managed to escape the destruction and deprivation inflicted by invading enemy armies on many other areas of the South, the local economy now lay in shambles. Like other parish leaders, Taylor realized that the key to re-energizing the once-thriving agrarian economy of north Louisiana's Ouachita Valley lay in rebuilding the region's transportation infrastructure.

In December 1865, Capt. Jordan G. Taylor began piloting the small bayou steamer, “*Alice*,” delivering cargo and passengers from Farmerville, Stein’s Bluff, and all Bayou D’Arbonne landings downstream to Trenton, located on the Ouachita River just south of the mouth of Bayou d’Arbonne and north of modern West Monroe. At Trenton, the bayou steamers connected with the larger Ouachita River steamboats destined for New Orleans.

In July 1866, Capt. Taylor, along with Union Parish farmers Joseph B. Baker and Lemuel A. Doty, and Ouachita Parish resident Abram Madden, jointly purchased the “*Alice*” for \$6000. Taylor and his steamer made regular runs between Trenton and inland Union Parish during the 1865–1866, 1866–1867, and 1867–1868 steamboating seasons that ran from about November through the following June or July, when the hot and dry weather caused the water level in the bayous to drop too low.

On 22 March 1868, Capt. Taylor piloted the “*Alice*” down the Ouachita River. As he reached a point just above the mouth of Bayou DeSiard, the boat hit a “*snag*,” a submerged tree trunk or large limb, and it punctured her hull. Despite Taylor’s valiant efforts to reach the bank, the boat sank, completely destroying the “*Alice*” and her cargo.

After the destruction of the “*Alice*,” Capt. Taylor returned his focus to his farming operation several miles northeast of Farmerville for the next four years. Taylor had made several investments in Ouachita Parish lands in the 1850s and 1860s, and in December 1870, he and James K. Ramsey jointly purchased the 455-acre Rockrow Plantation in Ouachita Parish for \$7555. The plantation lay on the Ouachita River, just across the parish line from Port Union. It lay in the region known locally as “*The Island*,” described by some as the most fertile farmland on the continent. The Island consisted of about fifty square miles of land enclosed by Bayous DeSiard and Bartholomew and the Ouachita River.

After residing in Union Parish for thirty-five years, on Christmas Day in 1872, Capt. Jordan G. Taylor and his wife established residence at Rockrow Plantation, where Taylor managed a substantial farming operation. An unnamed female resident gave this colorful description of the farms on The Island like that of Capt. Taylor’s:

Fronting the river, and running back for some distance into the interior, are large and productive cotton plantations adjoining each other, and in spring and summer they have the appearance of one vast garden clothed in raiment of living green, made more distinct by the line of waving corn, which, with its darker green, serves as a background for the verdant picture.

Since he served as an officer in the Confederate Army, after the War, Capt. Taylor had no voting rights until Congress restored his eligibility to vote in 1870 or 1871. Although he never thought he

would involve himself in politics again, locals convinced him to run as the Democratic candidate for Ouachita Parish Representative in 1876. Like all Louisiana political contests during Reconstruction, controversy surrounded that election due to charges that white Democrats intimidated black voters from casting their votes. Capt. Taylor won the election and represented Ouachita Parish in the 1877–1878 Louisiana Legislatures.

Due to his participation in Louisiana's 1876 statewide election, the U. S. Congress summoned Taylor as one of several citizens ordered to appear in New Orleans to testify before a Congressional Committee investigating suffrage abridgement. The transcript of Taylor's testimony given on 28 December 1876 before the Committee reveals his cool demeanor during the occasionally prickly questioning from the Congressmen, all Radical Republicans from Northern states.

Capt. Taylor testified that, due to illness, he did not extensively attend regular campaign rallies, but he did attend a few of them. He stated that he did not join the rifle clubs formed by white Democrats to maintain peace during the elections. Congressman Howe peppered Taylor with questions about the equality of the races, asking him about the "*blotting out of the color-line*," if white Democrats supported voting rights for black men, and the right for black people to ride in all public conveyances such as cars, stages, street and railway cars, and attend theatres.

Taylor responded that Democrats did support this. However, when Howe asked him about black and white children attending the same schools, Taylor stated that the Democrats would not support that, and neither would the black people. Taylor stated,

As far as my knowledge extends among the intelligent colored people they do not desire their children and the white children to go to school together. They want schools and are willing for the whites to have schools, and the democratic [sic] party is in favor of educating the children irregardless [sic] of race, color, or previous condition.

Howe then asked him a rephrased version of the same question, to which Capt. Taylor gave this testy response,

I will repeat again. I tried to make it so you would understand. My observation and experience from talking with the most sensible people of the country is that they do not desire mixed schools...Individually, at least, I am in favor of the education of the whole country, irregardless [sic] of race, color, or previous condition.

Howe continued his questions about schools for black and white children, asking if mixed schools wouldn't be more economical. Taylor responded,

I would like to be courteous and polite in answering, but those are hard questions to answer. Can you mix oil and water? Neither party desire it. The colored mothers would not send their children, neither would the white. You have got no compulsory process to compel them to go.

Howe then attempted to pin Capt. Taylor down on the difference between Democrats and Republicans. Taylor replied,

You call it 'republican;' we call it 'radical'...The definition we generally understand is a man that comes from some other section of the country here as a carpet-bagger and settles in among us and is a great hand to take airs to himself, and not much for the country."

Taylor stated that by joining forces in recent elections, black and white voters had managed to eliminate many of the carpetbaggers who had riddled the state government since the war.

After serving one term as the Ouachita Parish's Representative in the Louisiana Legislature, Capt. Taylor decided to not run for reelection and returned to farming. He spent the rest of his life managing the affairs of his Rockrow Plantation in The Island on the Ouachita River.

Capt. Taylor had a small immediate family. He first married in the latter 1840s to Rebecca, born about 1830 in Alabama. She died in 1850 or 1851, and Taylor then married Nancy Elizabeth Bledsoe, born about 1836 in Montgomery County, Alabama. Capt. Taylor had no children by either of his wives to survive early childhood.

Capt. Jordan Gray Taylor died at his home on the Ouachita River on 2 January 1884. The Monroe newspaper described Taylor as "*an old and highly esteemed planter.*" Back home in Union Parish, Taylor's uncle, Dr. William C. Carr, wrote a eulogy to Capt. Taylor that appeared in Farmerville's "*The Gazette*" on January 9th. Carr wrote of his nephew:

Capt. Jordan Gray Taylor...was raised upon the farm of his father 6 miles northeast of Farmerville. He had a fair English education, a clear head, a discriminating mind; his motto was to do justice and judgment to all. He was elected and held several important offices: first sheriff, twice to the Legislature from Union and once from Ouachita parish. At the breaking out of the late war he volunteered in August, 1861, and was made captain of the 4th Company of Louisiana Volunteers that left Union parish, and was organized into the 17th Louisiana Infantry at Camp Moore. He was at the head of his brave little band at the battles of Shiloh, Port Gibson, Big Black, in battles around Vicksburg, during the siege of Vicksburg, and several other battles of minor importance. As a citizen or soldier or whatever sphere of life he was placed in, he never faltered of duty. By his great firmness and stability of character he won for himself a good name that followed him through life and will be indelible in the hearts of his friends as long as life endures. He married Miss Nannie Bledsoe, of Union parish, in 1851, who survives him without issue. Among women none were ever more devoted to a husband than the wife of Capt. Taylor, for she shared the hardships of a soldier's life in the tested field with her husband...Further eulogy would perhaps be out of place, but we cannot close this notice without expressing our respect and affectionate esteem for the genial and generous Capt. J. G. Taylor.

Taylor's widow, Nancy, buried him in the Taylor Cemetery, on his father's old farm a few miles northeast of Farmerville. She erected a tombstone to his memory, describing him as "*My Dear*

Husband." She disposed of his large plantation on The Island and returned to live near family members in Union Parish, where she died on 15 October 1891.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆