

GENERAL WADDY THOMPSON

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Waddy Thompson, Jr. was the son of Chancellor Waddy Thompson (1769-1845) and Eliza Blackburn Williams Thompson. The senior Thompson was born in Virginia in 1769. He read law and was admitted to the bar in Richmond. About 1790, he established a law practice in Washington, Georgia, and married Eliza Blackburn Williams. Within a few years, about 1793, they moved on to South Carolina and settled near Pickinsville in the Pendleton District. Still on the move, Waddy and Eliza Thompson settled in Greenville sometime between 1799 and 1802. He served in the South Carolina House of Representatives and, for twenty-three years, as a chancellor of the South Carolina Court of Equity. This last position entitled him to the title "Chancellor."¹

On property outside the village of Greenville, the Thompsons built a substantial dwelling in, or shortly after, 1802. They later sold the home to Tandy Walker. For many years it was the home of Barnet and Mary C. Cleveland. Today it is the site of Greenville Senior High School on Augusta Street. When the senior Thompson sold the property, he and his wife built a new home in the village. In the mid-1820s, Greenville built a new courthouse (which later became the Record Building). The Thompsons acquired the old courthouse, moved it to land on North Main Street, and added two wings.² This site was later occupied by the Mackey Mortuary and the Carolina Theater. The Otteray Hotel would later be built where the garden was located.³

Elizabeth Thompson's mother, Elizabeth Blackburn Williams, eventually came to live with her daughter and son-in-law in their Greenville home. She frequently sat under a tree at the corner of the property and expressed a desire to be buried beneath it. Her wish was honored and, thus began the family cemetery. Elizabeth and Waddy

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Thompson would in time be buried near her mother. In 1829 the area, and several additional acres, were donated as a public cemetery - Springwood Cemetery.

Waddy Thompson, Jr. was born on January 8, 1798, during his parents' brief sojourn in Pickensville, South Carolina. ⁴ The site of Pickensville has disappeared. It was just south of the present-day town of Easley. The family settled in Greenville while the younger Waddy was still an infant. Much of his early education was at a classical school in Asheville, North Carolina. ⁵ Although most young persons at that time entered adulthood at an earlier age than most do now, young Waddy must have been especially precocious. At the age of thirteen he entered South Carolina College in Columbia as a sophomore and graduated three years later at the age of sixteen. While at college, his roommate was William C. Preston, with whom he maintained a life-long friendship. ⁶

After completing his undergraduate studies in Columbia, Thompson read law under Judge Joseph Gist at Pinckneyville and then under Gerge McDuffie in Edgefield. Upon completing his legal studies and being admitted to the South Carolina bar, he opened a law practice in Edgefield and remained there for the next five years. The young lawyer met his first wife during these years. He married Emmala Butler, the daughter of William Butler and the sister of Governor Pierce M. Butler. After five years in Edgefield, Thompson and his bride settled in Greenville. ⁷

His return to Greenville also saw the launching of his political career. He represented the area in the state legislature from 1826 to 1830. It was at this time that the nullification controversy was at its height. The issue involved southern discontent with the Tariff of Abominations of 1828, which the South regarded as favoring the North and the West at the expense of the agricultural South. Thompson wanted to maintain the Union but thought that if nothing could be done to prevent the powerful economic interests in the Northeast and West from joining against the South, it would be necessary to separate. ⁸ In 1828 Thompson introduced resolutions calling for a convention to consider the possibility of South Carolina nullifying the tariff if changes were not made. As a supporter of nullification, Thompson found himself increasingly out of touch with the majority of his Greenville constituents who leaned toward support

of the Federal Union. The Unionist sympathies that prevailed in Greenville resulted primarily from the influence of Benjamin F. Perry, the powerful editor of *The Greenville Mountaineer*. Perry also had an ally in the area's prestigious summer visitor, Joel R. Poinsett, who supported President Andrew Jackson. Because of this situation, Thompson did not stand for re-election for the state legislature in 1830. The state legislature then elected him to succeed Baylis J. Earle as solicitor of the Western Judicial District.⁹

Support of nullification led to an association between Thompson and nullification's author, John C. Calhoun. On July 8, 1832, Calhoun wrote to Thompson: "The Tarriff Bill was late last evening ordered to the 3d reading in the senate with many amendments all going to increase the burden on us. . . . The question is no longer one of free trade, but liberty and despotism. The hope of the country now rests on our gallant little State. Let every Carolinian do his duty."¹⁰ When South Carolina passed the Ordinance of Nullification in 1832, President Jackson threatened to send federal troops to bring the state back into line.¹¹ This threat caused such concern that a state militia was formed. Thompson was appointed a brigadier general of the 1st Brigade of South Carolina Militia; thus, earning for himself the distinction of becoming "General" Waddy Thompson.¹² Although Thompson lacked actual military experience, for the next ten years he proved to be an able military administrator.

General Thompson was not destined, however, for a career in the militia. His prominence in the legal profession inevitably led him to be drafted back into political life as the representative in Congress of the Greenville, Anderson, and Pickens Districts. A vacancy in Congress was created in 1835 by the death of the incumbent, Warren R. Davis of Pendleton. Thompson won his seat, defeating Benjamin F. Perry. Thompson won in this election with the support of Calhoun, who had established the Whig Party in South Carolina as one means of combating President Andrew Jackson's opposition to nullification. Nationally the Whig Party consisted of all political groups that opposed Jackson. Thompson served in the House of Representatives from September 10, 1835 to March 3, 1841. He was re-elected in 1836 without opposition.¹³

In Congress, Thompson cooperated with Calhoun and the Whig Party in their opposition to the President. After Jackson's second term

ended. Calhoun abandoned the Whigs and returned to the Democratic Party. Waddy Thompson refused to follow Calhoun's lead and remained a Whig. Calhoun was intolerant of anyone who would not follow him. He and Thompson now became political enemies. Calhoun's bitter criticism of Thompson almost led to a duel between the two. The matter ended when Calhoun withdrew offensive remarks he had made.¹⁴

In spite of active opposition from Calhoun in the congressional campaign of 1838, Thompson was elected to a second full term in the House of Representatives.¹⁵ His victory occasioned a letter of congratulations from James L. Pictu: "You have a right to be proud. You have vindicated your claim to think for yourself as becomes a man."¹⁶ Another factor in Thompson's victory was that he and his former opponent, Benjamin F. Perry, were now allies. The electoral victory gave Thompson a greater degree of national prominence. He now became chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs.¹⁷

Thompson's career in Congress might have been even longer had it not been for the fact that he appears to have been an early advocate of term limits. When he ran for a second term, he promised not to seek a third term. In spite of immense pressure upon him when his second term expired, he would not depart from his promise.¹⁸

Back in South Carolina for the 1840 presidential election Thompson, no longer a candidate, worked for a Whig Party victory in his home state and for the election of William Henry Harrison to the presidency. Thompson was even audacious enough to address a political rally in Abbeville, Calhoun's own backyard. The *Pendleton Messenger*, a Calhoun supporter, lashed back and printed a rhyme aimed at Thompson:

The Pickens folks are crazy grown
Of all ranks and conditions.
Instead of honest states rights men,
They've turned Whig politicians.¹⁹

Although Calhoun and the Democrats carried the state as a whole, Thompson contributed to a Whig majority in Calhoun's own district. Unionist, and therefore anti-Calhoun, sentiment in the Greenville area also contributed to a Whig majority. Harrison, who

won the national election announced his intention of rewarding Waddy Thompson by making him the United States minister in Mexico. Before the appointment could be made President Harrison died just one month after his inauguration. His vice president, and now the new president, John Tyler delayed making the appointment over concern that the Mexican government might object. While in Congress Thompson had been outspoken in support of United States annexation of Texas. Finally, Tyler honored Harrison's intention and gave the appointment to Thompson. Tyler's decision was probably influenced by Mexico's capture of the members of an expedition sent by Texas to Santa Fe toward the end of 1841. There was concern in the United States over the fate of these prisoners.²⁰ The need to fill the vacancy in Mexico City was all the greater then.

The new minister's mission would not be an easy one. The relationship between the United States and Mexico was embittered over the question of Texas. Thompson was not at all certain of the welcome he would receive in Mexico. Another problem was that he had no knowledge of the Spanish language. This he could attempt to remedy. He quickly gave himself a course in Spanish and developed an adequate speaking knowledge of the language.²¹

In April 1842, Thompson sailed from New Orleans and reached Vera Cruz eight days later.²² On the journey from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, he observed that the houses along the road looked more like chicken coops than the houses of human beings.²³ He described the climate of Mexico as being "elysian." "It is never warm enough to pull off your coat, and rarely cold enough to button it."²⁴

Upon arrival in Mexico City, Thompson was coldly, but courteously, received by the head of the Mexican government, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. When presenting himself as the new American minister, Thompson spoke in Spanish, and won for himself a warmer reception. Thompson admired Santa Anna as the leader of a successful struggle for Mexican independence and as a supporter of a republican form of government. As a young colonel in the 1820s, Santa Anna had bravely led a revolt against the dictatorship of Augustín de Iturbide, who had briefly declared himself emperor of Mexico. Just a year before Thompson arrived in Mexico, Santa Anna had boldly led a revolution which resulted in the overthrow of President Buistamente. Although the general governed

without a constitution. Thompson argued that Santa Anna differed from most Mexican dictators of the time by refraining from the imprisonment of his political opponents. Thompson wrote: "... he is not the sanguinary monster which some have supposed him to be."²⁵

It was precisely as a "sanguinary monster" that most Americans did regard the Mexican leader. His annihilation of the defenders of the Alamo made Santa Anna's name anathema in the United States. Thompson put a different perspective on this incident. He remarked that it was not to be expected that any commander would restrain his troops during the storming of an objective. He pointed out that the Duke of Wellington, during the course of his campaigns in Spain, was guilty of equally sanguinary actions. Furthermore, Santa Anna told Thompson that he called upon the defenders of the Alamo to surrender several times and offered them quarter, but they refused and chose to fight to the end.²⁶ While preferring the republican system of government for Mexico, Thompson accepted that conditions in the country were not favorable for a truly democratic regime and he accepted the necessity for the type of dictatorship over which Santa Anna presided.

General Santa Anna was not the only Mexican leader whose respect and confidence Thompson won. He became well liked and respected by several church leaders, and often visited the Archbishop of Mexico at his country house on the outskirts of Mexico City.²⁷

After this encouraging beginning, Thompson set himself the task of gaining an understanding of Mexican culture and the Mexican people. His observations on the Catholic Church in Mexico were not uncritical. He thought that the dominance of that church, to the exclusion of all others, and the power of the Catholic clergy were not compatible with a democratic form of government.²⁸ Thompson explained that he had been "educated in the unostentatious purity and simplicity of the Protestant religion," and therefore he found some of the practices of Catholicism in Mexico to be mere superstition.²⁹ He commented upon the enormous wealth lavished on the decoration of cathedrals and churches and on the fact that the Catholic Church owned a disproportionate amount of property.³⁰

Thompson also commented on the social conditions which were found in Mexico. As a slave owner, he was interested in the condition

of Africans in that country. "The negro is regarded and treated there as belonging to a degraded caste equally as in the United States." He did think that the condition and treatment of Africans was worse in Mexico than in South Carolina. He observed that all the free laborers in Mexico were Indians, and that all the large landowners were Spanish or part Spanish.³¹ He compared the Mexican tortilla, which was the mainstay in the diet of the Mexican masses, to the hoe cake common among African slaves in the South.³²

Thompson came to the conclusion that it would be an error for the United States to annex Texas over the opposition of Mexico. His friendship toward Mexico was without question genuine. His interests as a planter, however, could conceivably have been affected by the addition of Texas to the Union. Texas' potential cotton production might possibly flood the market and drive down prices in the other cotton producing states.³³

One of Thompson's accomplishments as the United States minister was the release of 300 Texan prisoners, who otherwise might very well have been executed. He went to see the prisoners the day after his arrival in Mexico City. With relative ease he persuaded Santa Anna to release the American citizens among the prisoners. He asked for more humane treatment of the Texans who were still being held and was eventually able to secure the release of most of them. Thompson also intervened on behalf of 167 Texans who had been captured during a Mexican attack on the town of Mier. Upon learning of an order to execute all of the Texans, he protested so strongly that the Mexican government decided to execute only one man in ten in this group. Since in this case Thompson was intervening on behalf of persons who were not citizens of the United States, diplomatic historians have credited him with anticipating a later and broader interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine which contends that it is the duty of the United States to require that the nations of the Western Hemisphere observe "their moral and legal obligations in international affairs."³⁴

Thompson was even more successful in pleading on behalf of another group of Texas citizens who were captured in a raid on San Antonio in the fall of 1843. Among these prisoners was Samuel Maverick, who had left the Pickens District in South Carolina to settle in Texas. As a personal favor to Thompson, Mexico released

Maverick and several others. Later, on the eve of his final departure from Mexico, Thompson asked for the release of the remaining prisoners. His request was granted by Santa Anna as a parting gift.³⁵

Clearly much of the success of Thompson's mission to Mexico was achieved by gaining the good will of the Mexican leaders. However, he did not hesitate to use firmness as well when necessary. One of the tasks assigned to him concerned debt claims of American citizens against the Mexican government. A treaty was agreed upon providing for the payment of these claims. A number of trade regulations harmful to American merchants trading in Mexico were removed.³⁶ Realizing the economic opportunities awaiting settlers in the Mexican province of California, Thompson persuaded the Mexican government to admit settlers from the United States.³⁷ In his *Recollections of Mexico* Thompson describes California as the "richest, the most beautiful and the healthiest country in the world."³⁸

While Thompson was serving in Mexico, political alignments were changing back at home. Although John Tyler had been elected on the Whig ticket, he joined forces with the Democratic Party leaders in Congress after his succession to the presidency. This would earn for him his reputation as a political outlaw. His secession from the Whig Party even went so far as the appointment of the reborn-Democrat, John C. Calhoun, to be secretary of State in 1844. Since Thompson still remained loyal to the Whigs, these developments were not favorable to his career as an administration appointee or to his future in national politics.³⁹

Waddy Thompson resigned as minister to Mexico on March 9, 1844 and retired from politics. Although he had not always been in tune with prevailing political opinions in Greenville, Thompson was honored by the city for the national prominence which his diplomatic appointment had justly earned for him. Benjamin F. Petty presided over what the *Greenville Mountaineer* described as "altogether the largest dinner party we have ever had in Greenville." The event brought together all shades of opinion. Nullifiers consorted with Unionists, and Whigs with Democrats.⁴⁰ After returning to Greenville, Thompson published an account of his observations in Mexico entitled *Recollections of Mexico*. It serves as a valuable source of information about Mexico and the Mexicans in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Thompson's friendship for Mexico never waned, even after the United States went to war with its southern neighbor in 1846. For once the former diplomat seemed to be in agreement with majority opinion in Greenville. The war was not popular in the western part of South Carolina and not a single volunteer company was recruited from the area.⁴¹ After United States forces captured Mexico City, Thompson argued that this country could not inflict a complete defeat upon Mexico without ruining its finances.⁴² Certainly it must have saddened Thompson that his brother-in-law, Pierce M. Butler, was killed while commanding the Palmetto Regiment in Mexico.⁴³

Thompson called the American action against Mexico an unjust war of conquest and urged that any annexations not go beyond the Rio Grande River. Although the former minister was a genuine friend of Mexico, his attitude was probably again influenced by the slavery issue. It was unlikely that any territory acquired west of the Rio Grande would ever be admitted to the Union as a slave state. The future admission of several new free states was a disturbing prospect for a slave owner. Thompson even contacted his old political adversary, John C. Calhoun, and urged him to lead an effort in the United States Senate to end the conflict. Calhoun basically agreed with Thompson's position and used some of his ideas in a Senate speech. However, Calhoun disagreed with Thompson's opposition to the annexation of territory.⁴⁴

After returning to Greenville, Thompson achieved success and wealth as a lawyer and a farmer. In his law practice, he was especially successful in criminal cases and was also often in Washington pleading before the Supreme court.⁴⁵

When the Thompsons returned to Greenville, they resided on 200 acres of land purchased from Lemuel Alston by Chancellor Thompson in 1815. Their home was located on what is today Broadus Avenue. The estate consisted basically of the area that is now the Petigru Historic District.⁴⁶ Emmala Butler Thompson died in 1848. In 1851 Waddy Thompson married Cornelia Jones of Wilmington, North Carolina. Perhaps the new Mrs. Thompson wanted a home of her own design. As Thompson's law practice produced greater affluence, he and his second wife soon planned the construction of a residence on Paris Mountain.

In 1857, 600 acres on the south side of Paris Mountain were

purchased for \$500 and construction of a new residence began soon afterward.⁴⁷ By all accounts, it was a fine home and had all the latest in home conveniences, including gas lights and running water. Thompson built not only a residence but also a separate building to house his library, collection of Mexican artifacts, and portrait gallery of distinguished Americans.⁴⁸ In the large hall of this building there was a fireplace built of large boulders, with a hearth and lintel of dressed stone. Two big rooms on either side of the hall were filled with glass cases containing stone idols and other Mexican artifacts. There were Mexican saddles, spurs, bridles and bits, dueling pistols, and swords.⁴⁹

Thompson's library contained one of the most extensive and important collections of the time. While he was writing his history of Mexico and Peru, George Bancroft, the noted historian of Latin America, visited Greenville to use Thompson's library.⁵⁰

Between the house and the library a beautiful fountain gushed water high into the air. The water was pumped up the mountain from a creek by a hydraulic ram.⁵¹ Behind the house there was an extensive walled garden with plants and shrubs which Thompson had brought back from Mexico.⁵² In order to maximize the view from the mountain top, trees were cleared and vistas created in several directions.⁵³ Henry T. Thompson, Waddy's brother, lived at the bottom of the mountain. To communicate with each other, they developed a code for flag waving which was adopted by the United States Army during the Indian wars.⁵⁴ Eventually construction was begun on an even more sumptuous mansion on the mountain top. This project was not complete when the Civil War called construction to a halt.

One of the Lowcountry refugees in Greenville during the Civil War was Caroline Gilman. She was the widow of Samuel Gilman, the Unitarian minister in Charleston, and had a married daughter living in Greenville. After the Thompson's paid a call on her, she and her daughter journeyed to the top of Paris Mountain to return the visit. Mrs. Gilman gives one of the few contemporary accounts of the new residence. She said that the house was very interesting and had "an external view which can scarcely be excelled in beauty . . ." Her comments about Thompson himself are more striking. She reported that Thompson was deeply involved in spiritualism. Using his second

wife as a medium, he kept in constant communication with his first wife. He recited with great tenderness, for the Gilmans, two little poems sent to him by Emmala from the spirit world. Caroline Gilman commented on the many valuable artifacts in Thompson's museum, but stated that "what he seems to prize most . . . is an ivory likeness of his first wife, who was very beautiful."⁵⁵

The conclusion of the Civil War brought financial ruin, as it did to so many others. He lost his property on Paris Mountain and most of his fortune. The second house, still uncompleted, was taken apart and moved to McDaniel Avenue, where it became the residence of Ben McDaniel. It was said to have been built without nails. In 1867, Waddy and Cornelia Thompson moved to Madison, Florida, where he still owned a plantation. The next year, while on a visit to Tallahassee, he died on November 23, 1868, and was buried in the churchyard of the Episcopal church there.⁵⁶

Waddy Thompson, Jr. achieved prominence in his native state, but he also ranks as one of a small number of South Carolinians who achieved prominence on the national level. All diplomatic histories of the United States give him credit for his accomplishments as minister to Mexico. Not only did he save the lives of prisoners, he brought about an improvement in the relations between Mexico and the United States which probably delayed war between the neighbors. Unfortunately, the Mexican War proved to be unavoidable in the long run. General Waddy Thompson was a man of ability and a man of principle. He remains one of Greenville's most eminent citizens.

ENDNOTES

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