

In Memory of Private Martin Baker Harris

(as delivered by Gale F. Red, Commander, Illinois Division, SCV
at the Wimmer Cemetery, April 20, 2002)

My friends, we are gathered together this day to pay honor to the memory of Private Martin Baker Harris. As we assembled today, we are much like the many thousands who have come together through the years to take a few moments to remember a beloved family member, a friend or a colleague who has crossed over the river from this life to one with God. It is we now who gather to pay respect to this man who none of us ever had occasion or opportunity to know personally. So why are we here? While each of you may have a slightly different answer, I dare say we would answer we are here because he was family, he had in some way touched our lives, or that we stand for the same cause, the cause of Southern rights, for which he so bravely fought. We are here to pay respect and honor and ask that God secure a place with Him for our comrade. Let me share for a few minutes with you something about this man and his family.

Born on March 5th, 1839, Martin Baker Harris was the fourth child of his parents, Joseph and Nancy Rucker Harris. He was born in Charlotte County, Virginia. By the early 1850's, his parents moved the family to Botetourt County, Virginia where Martin's father apparently was a planter. With the advent of hostilities and as Union forces began to invade the Southern states, Martin, known by his middle name Baker, and his two brothers joined the Confederate Cause to serve their state and their new country. Baker's older brother, Tom, enlisted for one year, then reenlisted for the duration of the war with the "Dixie Grays", part of Stonewall Jackson's Division.

Baker and his younger brother, named Joseph Abraham but known as Abe, volunteered for enlistment in the 9th Battery of Company C, 20th Virginia Heavy Artillery which had been organized in February of 1862 by Captain E. F. Bowyer at Botetourt Court House, and assigned to the "Department of Richmond" under the command of Lt. General Richard S. Ewell. Their job through the whole war was to defend Richmond. Due to the lack of food and supplies, this became impossible. Richmond and Petersburg were evacuated. Martin's brother, Joseph, was injured and captured on April 4th, 1865 by the Union Army as the Confederates retreated towards Farmersville. This was just three days before General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. The Union Army took Joseph to City Point, Virginia. From there, Joseph was taken by ship to a prisoner of war camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. Joseph suffered considerably there before finally being released on June 14th, 1864. Hatless and barefoot, Joseph was allowed to go home. He married, had seven children, and lived to the age of 76. He is buried in Virginia. Another brother, Thomas, also a Confederate veteran, is buried in the Divernon Cemetery just a few miles from here. From the records found so far, it appears that Baker served the duration of the war without being wounded. One interesting note that was found, showed that Baker, while serving with his unit, somehow lost a screwdriver in August of 1864. The cost of it was deducted from his pay of ten dollars a month.

After the war, Baker returned home to Botetourt County, Virginia. Within seven months of his return, he married Miss Mary Jane Rucker, the daughter of George Anthony

Rucker, who is also supposed to have fought during the war. They were married at the home of Mary Jane's maternal grandfather, Charles Thomas Harris, IV, who was also a relation of Baker .

It is interesting, especially to the family members present here today, that Baker's wife, Mary Jane, and her brother, Martin, inherited part of the 200 acres of land bequeath by her grandfather. That land, located on the north side of Carvins' Creek in Botetourt County, was later sold to the city of Roanoke, Virginia and is now the location of the Carvins' Creek Reservoir that has supplied the cities water needs since 1943.

There is no record that Baker and Mary ever owned any land of their own in Botetourt. However, according to the census information, Baker did farm work and lived in the area of Fincastle. They had ten children, all born there in Virginia before they moved to Auburn, Illinois in 1877. They lived the remainder of their lives in Auburn as part of the community. Martin Baker Harris died on April 3rd, 1889, and Mary died here on April 29th, 1907. Both Baker and his wife Mary are buried here in the Old Wimmer Cemetery.

As we have gathered here today to celebrate the memory of Martin Baker Harris, let us remember that as a citizen of Virginia, he elected to join the Confederate Army in defense of his homeland. Several years after the war, Baker moved to Illinois and became a hard-working citizen of this county. He was a soldier of the Cause, a husband, a father, a farmer, and a man who loved both his country and his family. May we each remember that it is not easy to go off to war, experience the hardships of separation from family and loved ones, and to know the depravations and hardships of service and the horrors of war. May we also remember that is sometimes even harder to come home and find peace. That peace, even after more than 140 years, yet eludes us in many ways as we still battle for the right to our heritage and the memory of the Southern Cause. I hope that through programs such as we have had here this day where we honor our veterans who have sacrificed so much that we may find the healing necessary to at last have peace and a reconciliation of our past and with each other. May we find the healing as a truly reunited nation able to respect our separate heritages, and able to live in harmony and peace once more; brother with brother and neighbor with neighbor. May our Lord God bless us each as we remember those who paved the way before us and helped to make America what it is today. We thank God for this day and the opportunity to honor this man, and we thank all of you who have come to be here with us today.