THE EXPLORATION OF A LEGEND

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It has been written of Harry White that he was an unusual man. Any study of the long and varied career of this lawyer, soldier, legislator, and judge from Indiana County will show what an understatement it is to describe him merely as unusual.

Actually, "unusual" is a tame word to describe a man who pursued his desired goals with a fierce determination nearly impossible to surpass. His Civil War exploits alone comprise a rollicking and dramatic series of adventures difficult to equal. Consider the rest of his career and the kind of man he was and it can easily be shown why Harry White's life story has grown to legendary proportions.

Harry White was born in Indiana in 1834, the youngest child of Thomas and Catherine White. His father was a noted judge of the 10th Pennsylvania District.1

He received his early education in Indiana. In 1850, he entered Princeton where he was graduated in 1854. He then planned to go south to teach school, but his father persuaded him to enter a two-year law apprenticeship in Indiana. The day after he passed his bar examination he assisted in the trial of a case.

Immediately, young White began mixing politics with law. In 1856, at the age of twenty-two, he was named Chairman of the Republican Party of Indiana County. He spoke vigorously on many issues including anti-slavery, and the Republicans had no trouble sweeping Indiana County elections that year.2

In the midst of building his political future he met and married Anna Lena Sutton in 1860. She was highly intelligent and a good match for Harry. They raised two sons and two daughters.

He worked tirelessly for the Republican Party and he was tabbed by many to play an important role in its future. Things seemed to be going his way . . . and then the Civil War erupted.

2 Professor J. T. Stewart, Indiana County Pennsylvania — Her People, Past and Present (Chicago, 1913), 580.
Harry White's experiences in the Civil War had a large impact on his later life and it is highly ironic that he almost did not get into the war.

At the outbreak of fighting, Harry wasted no time in organizing a company of volunteers and they responded by making him captain. He offered the company's service to Governor Curtin and was surprised when his offer was rejected. He asked Curtin about the matter and Curtin said that Harry's father had begged the Governor not to send his son into war. Harry was silent for a moment and then replied, "I am sorry to distrust my father, but I feel it my duty to go into the service and I am going, if I have to carry a musket."  

With no further hesitation Governor Curtin commissioned him a Major of the 67th Regiment. During the summer of 1861 Harry recruited for the regiment and in 1862 he went on active duty. He was assigned to protect railroads in the area near Annapolis. After several months he was moved to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.

Not long after he reached Virginia, White learned that voters in his senatorial district of Indiana and Armstrong Counties had elected him to the Senate of Pennsylvania. President Lincoln granted Major White a leave of absence to attend sessions in Harrisburg. He served in Harrisburg from January of 1863 to the spring of the same year after which he rejoined his regiment in Virginia just before Lee's drive to the north.

On June 11, 1863, General Early and General Johnson approached Winchester, Virginia, and fought Union forces for several days. On June 12 Major White was ordered to take his infantry to the relief of Union forces. In the fight on the 15th, Major White was captured by the 9th Louisiana Tigers.

The summer of 1863 was one of the angriest times of the war and prisoner-exchanges had ceased. White was sent to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. There he remained until the fall of 1863. At this time both sides agreed to an exchange of surgeons. Major White disguised himself as a surgeon and boarded a flag-of-truce steamer with other prisoners. The Rebel Commissioner, Robert Ould, had been directed to meet a Union steamer at midstream on the James River and effect the exchange. As the steamer neared the place of exchange Ould learned that White was aboard. He then lined up prisoners and addressed them. He told the men about the long talks

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3 Ibid., 581.
4 Ibid., 581.
that were necessary to secure the immunity of the surgeons. He went on to say that a gentleman of the line not entitled to that immunity was on board. He then abruptly ordered Harry White to come forth, which Harry did without hesitation and proceeded to defend his right to escape.⁵

Ould sent him back to Libby Prison. Federal negotiators offered several high-ranking officers for Major White but Ould refused. He knew that in the Pennsylvania Senate the Republicans (hawks) had a majority of one. That one vote was that of Harry White, a hawk, and it gave Republicans control over doves who labeled the war a failure.

At this time the North tried to make the South believe White had resigned from the Senate. Confederates weren't fooled by this ruse, so Harry signed a resignation and had it smuggled out to the North in a Bible carried by one of the surgeons who were exchanged.

White was held at Libby Prison until December 25, 1863. He was then transferred to a prison in Salisbury, North Carolina. After his near escape he had been placed in solitary confinement at Libby. This procedure was continued for three months at Salisbury.⁶

Ten days before the move to Salisbury, Major White began to keep a diary. The original copy exists today although it remains unpublished.⁷ At best it is a sketchy, loosely-organized journal which adds little or no knowledge about the Civil War. The chief value of the diary lies in the insight it gives on the effect of prison life on Harry White.

He wrote little about Libby Prison although he spent six months there. Records show it was definitely one of the hell holes of the war. White only briefly mentioned the cruelty and the lack of food that existed there. He did in later passages describe Libby as the worst of the three prisons he saw. Libby did not embitter him, but it left memories that he avoided discussing for years.

Prison life gave Harry plenty of time for reflection and he sometimes put his thoughts on paper. Patriotism was one of his more frequent themes. On his confinement he said, "I think I am a better man in all respects than ever I was before . . . if ever, in the good Providence of God, I again taste the sweets of liberty, while I shall

⁵ Ibid., 582.
⁶ Ibid., 582-583.
⁷ Harry White, "War Prisoner Diary of Major Harry White, 1863-1864." (Unpublished diary, original copy now in the possession of Mr. Emory Boyle, Indiana, Pa.)
shrink from no responsibility, I shall move in that sphere of life where I can render much service to my fellow man." 8 This thought was recorded several times in the journal and Harry White's record of public service in later life proved the sincerity of his wartime promise.

The diary also reveals that Harry was an unceasing collector of war data. He tried to keep informed on the course of the war by tapping newly arrived prisoners for information. Several times in his diary he expressed his extreme eagerness to get back into the fight.

He was scheduled to be moved from Salisbury to Andersonville in May 1864. Harry White did not want to go to Andersonville. On May 29, White and four other officers jumped train near Chester, South Carolina. In his diary White described his ragged flight, sleeping in wheat fields and under cornstalks by day, traveling by night in the direction of the North Star. His wild dash to freedom ended abruptly two days later when he found himself staring at the wrong end of a gun held by an agitated Southern woman. 9

He was sent temporarily to Columbia, South Carolina, but authorities there soon had him on another train to Andersonville. He wasted no time escaping, but once again he was picked up quickly. The stubborn Southerners put White on still another train to Andersonville on the first of July. At Greens Cut, some miles below Atlanta, Harry cut his way out of the car in which he was riding and headed north. For twenty-nine days he traveled only at night and with the help of Negro slaves. On July 29 bloodhounds caught up to him and for many years Harry White carried scars on his arms from that fight. 10

No further attempts were made to send him to Andersonville. Instead, he was sent to Macon, Georgia, and then to Charleston, South Carolina. In September 1864, General Sherman and General Hood decided to exchange prisoners taken at and after the battle of Peach Tree Creek in June 1864. As the group formed to leave Charleston, Harry joined them and walked through the prison gates. After a long hike he made the Union lines, secured a rest leave, and returned to his Indiana home on October 5, 1864.

Near the end of the war Governor Curtin commissioned Harry White a Colonel of the 67th Regiment. In March 1865, President Lincoln brevetted him a Brigadier General. Harry then returned to his regiment and served until victory at Appomattox.

8 Ibid., May 30-31, 1864.
9 Ibid., June 5, 1864.
10 Stewart, 584.
This large charcoal portrait of Harry White remains today in the library of Croylands. The portrait was given personally in the 1870's to Harry White by an artist as partial compensation for food the artist stole from Harry White when they were both suffering in Libby Prison during the Civil War.

Permission to print the story of the portrait was granted by Mrs. Catherine Penhallow, granddaughter of Harry White.
CROYLANDS

Located on Croyland Avenue near the intersection with Ninth Street in Indiana, this many-gabled, thirteen-room house was erected by Harry White in 1870 and served as his home for many years.
Now that the long struggle had finally ended, General White enthusiastically re-entered politics. From 1865 to 1874 he served in the Pennsylvania Senate. He sponsored the Evidence Act of 1869 which permitted parties to testify in their own interest in court cases. During 1870-72 he made many speeches around the state to arouse public sentiment for a Constitutional Convention.\textsuperscript{11}

In the midst of this activity, about 1870, he took a break from his duties to supervise the construction of a new home in Indiana. He called it Croylands and built it on a section of the one thousand acres owned originally by his father. The land has long ago been divided into small parcels, but the thirteen-room house still stands after nearly one hundred years. It can be found near the intersection of Croyland Avenue and Ninth Street at the northern edge of Indiana. The house is presently owned by the Historical Society of Indiana which is attempting to restore Croylands to its original beauty. To give an idea of the changes that a hundred years bring, the local Historical Society estimates that it will take $50,000 today to restore Croylands to the style it cost Harry White $6,000 to create in 1870-71.

By 1872, the need for a Constitutional Convention had become apparent to just about all Pennsylvanians, and when it convened that year, Harry White was a central figure. He helped plan judicial districts and wrote several sections of Article IV relating to the governor’s department. He also served as Chairman of the Committee on Legislation, which was the most important committee of the convention. He was offered $2500 for his services but declined to accept any payment. He claimed his satisfaction when the Constitution was approved by popular vote and went into effect January 1, 1874.

In 1872, Harry White had tried for and lost the Republican nomination for governor due to a lack of machine support. In 1876, he was elected to Congress from a district composed of Armstrong, Clarion, Forest, Indiana, and Jefferson Counties.\textsuperscript{12}

He was immediately appointed as a visiting statesman to Louisiana to discover which candidate for the Presidency deserved the all-important electoral vote. White declared that Hayes deserved the vote and the Presidency.

Harry White served his home area well in the 45th Congress and was re-elected to the 46th Congress in 1878. In 1880, he refused re-nomination to Congress. Perhaps he was looking to the future, for

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 584-585.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 585-586.
in 1884 he ran for president judge of his judicial district covering Indiana County and won. During his term he opposed the granting of liquor licenses to hotels. In 1894 he was re-elected by less than one hundred votes due to organized opposition by liquor interests. In response to the sentiment of voters, he reversed his decision on liquor licenses.\(^\text{13}\)

In 1905, he left the bench and brought a very active political career to an end. With his departure from public life Harry found plenty of time to pursue business interests, which he welcomed. His schedule remained active and very full until the time of his death on June 23, 1920.\(^\text{14}\)

During the later part of his life he was often criticized for his business methods which many considered harsh. The criticism never bothered him and even made him smile on occasion. Perhaps he thought about those who had vainly tried to keep him in Southern prisons during the Civil War or perhaps he thought of the many elections and political victories he had engineered. Harry White’s approach to life was to set a very high and worthwhile goal and then achieve it. He rarely failed.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 587.
\(^{14}\) Hassler, 3-4.