

Rethinking the story of Orton Williams and Walter G. Peter*

By David White, Docent

The history of Tudor Place includes unresolved questions. One such mystery concerns two Peter family cousins—Orton Williams and Walter Gibson Peter—Confederate officers who were convicted by a Union court martial of being spies and hanged. To this day there are questions of whether they were indeed spies or were engaged in some other mission.

Why Did They Do It?

On the evening of June 8, 1863, Col. Orton Williams, CSA, and his younger cousin Lt. Walter G. Peter, CSA, (known in the family as “Gip”), crossed Union line surrounding Fort Granger at Franklin, Tennessee in Union uniform, and with forged papers identifying them as being sent from Washington to inspect Union installations. [1] Within 18 hours, they were identified as Confederates, tried as spies, and hanged. A few hours before their execution they wrote final letters to family members and others. Numerous individuals witnessed the events of that brief period. Accounts of this singular event were recorded immediately, both in newspapers and in private correspondence. Many other retellings were written only long after the fact. For over 150 years, historians have tried to explain why Williams and Peter, two young officers of distinguished lineage, undertook such a mission. [2]



Walter Gibson Peter (Gip) and William Orton Williams
Photographer Unknown
Gelatin Silver Print A1.783

From the outset there were conflicting theories. Two senior officers who were present at Fort Granger gave opposing accounts: the commandant of the Fort believed they “were not ordinary spies, and had some mission more important than finding out my situation. They came near dark, asked no questions about forces, and did not attempt to inspect works.” [3] His regimental surgeon, on the other hand, wrote that “They came into our camp and went all through it,

[1] Orton Williams (1839-1863) was a grandson of Thomas and Martha Peter, their daughter America's youngest child. Walter Gibson Peter (1842-1863) was Thomas Peter's nephew, the son of Thomas's brother George Peter.

[2] Orton's mother, America (Peter) Williams, and Mary Custis Lee (Mrs. Robert E. Lee) were first cousins.

[3] The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series 1, Volume 23, Part 2, (Washington: s.n.), 416.



minutely inspecting our position, works, and forces." The surgeon's account appeared in a Nashville newspaper on June 14, 1863 and was reprinted in the July 4 *Harper's Magazine* with a memorable drawing of the hanging. His account was treated by the Confederate press as the official "Yankee" version, but Confederate-leaning newspapers were more likely to attribute Orton's behavior to his flawed personality than to any legitimate attempt to obtain military intelligence.

When former Union officers revived the story beginning around 1880, they again contended that legitimate military-intelligence gathering lay behind the cousins' action and that the arrest and execution of the two had prevented a disastrous Union defeat.

This spurred a former Confederate officer, Joseph I. Vaulx, to write a vitriolic letter rejecting the idea that military intelligence had anything to do with the cousins' mission. [4] He blamed the tragedy solely on Orton's flawed personality. Vaulx's 1890 letter appears to be the first written account of the story that Orton had previously killed a soldier for failing to obey him and had defended his action by saying "For his ignorance, I pitied him; for his insolence, I forgave him; for his insubordination, I slew him." It is surprising that this story had not appeared in print much earlier when all sorts of gossip and misinformation about Orton was widespread.

In 1934, Douglas Southall Freeman stated, in his highly-praised four volume biography of Robert E. Lee, that Orton "procured assignment to a secret mission, probably in Canada or in Europe, and to conceal his identity was commissioned colonel of cavalry under the name of Lawrence W. Orton." [5] This explanation for Orton's behavior, as an alternative to the contention that he and Peter were spies, had been put forward from the beginning. In more recent accounts, it continues to contend with the "spying" explanation.

What the Family Knew

Among the many articles on the subject of the incident at Fort Granger, the 1909 article by William G. Beymer and that of Margaret Sanborn in 1970 stand out because they are so frequently relied upon as sources of facts. Both authors also considered seriously the idea, noted above, that a broader mission to Canada or Europe lay behind Orton's action. [6] Finally, both authors interviewed, and corresponded with, members of the Peter family.

[4] Joseph Vaulx to Governor James D. Porter, April 2, 1890 in Bromfield L. Ridley, ed. *Battles and Sketches of the Army of Tennessee*, (Missouri: Missouri Printing & Publishing Company, 1906), 194-196.

[5] Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (New York, 1934)

[6] William G. Beymer, "Williams, C.S.A.," which originally appeared in *Harper's Magazine* and *Harper's Weekly*, has been most recently republished in *Beymer, Scouts and Spies of the Civil War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003): 28-53. Margaret Sanborn, "The Ordeal of Orton Williams, U.S.A., C.S.A.," *Assembly*. Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter 1970).

Beymer's papers reveal that he examined family documents in the possession of Custis P. Upshur, Orton Williams' nephew, and Walter G. Peter, nephew and namesake of Gip. Both read proofs of the article. Peter found it "written in a very dignified manner without anything sensational about it." [7] Possibly at the family's request, Beymer in his article stated that "posterity" had no need to know the name of the woman to whom Orton wrote immediately before his execution.

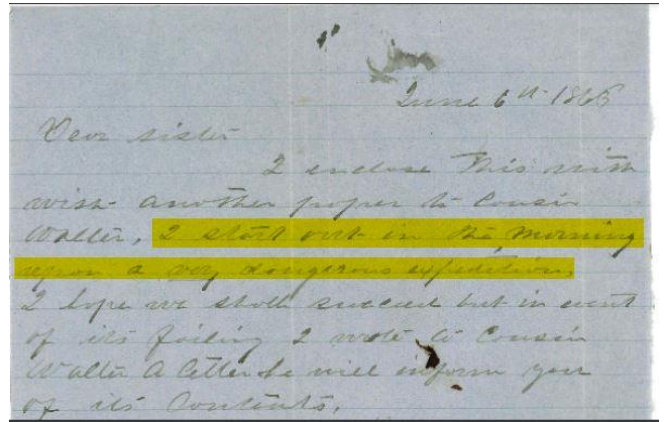
Continuing Puzzles

The Tudor Place Archive has information on several matters that may shed light on the larger question:

Why did they do it?

By far the most significant arises out of Gip Peter's correspondence with his cousin Walter Henderson. [10] On June 6, 1863 (two days before the Ft. Granger incident) Gip wrote to Henderson, enclosing a letter to his [Gip's] sister saying "I start out in the morning on a very dangerous expedition, I hope we shall succeed but in event of its failing I wrote to Cousin Walter a letter he will inform you of its Contents." [11] Whatever Gip wrote to Walter about the "expedition" has never been found—but one can always hope that it may turn up.

A second matter concerns identifying the woman to whom Orton wrote one of his final letters, saying that if his mission had succeeded they could soon have been married and gone to Europe. The original of this letter, if it still exists, is likely in private hands, but copies have circulated within the family. The mention of Europe is significant because some writers theorized that Orton had been selected for a mission to recruit volunteers for the Confederate army in Europe.



Letter from Walter G. Peter to Sarah Agnes Peter June 6, 1863,

[7] Walter G. Peter to William G. Beymer, May 12, 1909, William G. Beymer papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin

[8] Margaret Sanborn Papers, California State Library, Sacramento.

[9] Armistead Peter 3rd to Margaret Sanborn, 14 March 1967, MS 21, Box 16, Folder 11, Armistead Peter 3rd Papers, Tudor Place Archives, Tudor Place Historic House & Garden, Georgetown, Washington D.C.

[10] Walter Henderson (1813-1887) was a longtime resident of Lynchburg, VA. His daughter Florence, better known under her married name, as Mrs. Wyndham Bolling Robertson, wrote a brief sketch accompanying a carte de visite image of Walter G. Peter. She said that Peter had informed her father, Walter Henderson, of the purpose of his fatal expedition. The carte de visite and sketch are in the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, Richmond. See Martha Custis Williams of Georgetown, D. C. Papers, 1845-1925.

[11] Walter Gibson Peter to Walter Henderson, 6 June 1863, MS4, Box 1, File 16, Major George Peter's Papers, Tudor Place Archive, Tudor Place Historic House & Garden.



AMERICA'S STORY LIVES HERE

The story also lives on in Britannia's reminiscences, in which she mistakenly identifies Orton's intended bride as "Mrs. Lamb." [12]

This leads to the third matter. The Tudor Place Archive contains two letters to Walter Henderson from Mrs. Fannie Lamb. Gip Peter had left with her a valise containing his possessions, asking that, in the event of his death, she send it to Henderson. She did so, and Walter received the valise. Mrs. Lamb could therefore be considered merely a friend assisting Gip had there not been rumors among Confederate officers that she was involved in espionage. The subject of spying thus lurks beneath the surface, and no trace of Mrs. Lamb has been found since 1863. A related matter is the discovery that Orton had an orderly during the year prior to his execution who may have handled some of Orton's private affairs. The orderly wrote Gip's sister in 1865 when he was a prisoner of war, telling her that he had been with Gip immediately before he left on his "expedition" and that he had sent Gip's letters and personal effects to Mrs. Fannie Lamb. [13] He, too, left no trace after he was released from the Union prison in 1865.

Finally, In November 1861, Orton was sent to help members of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston's family leave Union-held Kentucky. The Tudor Place archives hold Orton's letter, written to his brother at this time, directing that Orton's mail be sent care of a Mrs. A. L. Saunders, Paducah, Kentucky. [14] Might the directive to Mrs. Saunders foreshadow the later "use" of Mrs. Lamb to hold the cousins' personal effects and then forward them to a family member?

In summary, much has been written about Orton and Gip, several theories about their motives have been put forward, and a great deal of misinformation and surmise has been perpetuated. In light of the material available in the Tudor Place Archive and elsewhere, their story should be considered an ongoing project — a mosaic with pieces missing. It may take many hands to fill those gaps.

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[12] See Grant S. Quartermou, ed., *A Georgetown Life: The Reminiscences of Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon of Tudor Place* (Washington, D.C., 2020): 86

[13] Sarah Agnes Peter to Armistead Peter, March 29, 1865, Tudor Place Archives, MS 13, Box 1, Folder 2.

[14] Tudor Place Archives, MS 13, box 1, folder 1. Mrs. Saunders was the wife of Dr. Alexander L. Saunders of Paducah who, among other things, was negotiating with