

The Vision of John Thomas Morrissette

By

Samuel V. Wilson, Jr.

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I am John Thomas Morrissette. I was born in 1843, in Chesterfield County, Virginia. My father was Thomas Elliott Morrissette, a farmer. My mother was Rebecca Reams of Powhatan County.

I have one brother, Lawson, who is three years older than I. Among my mother's ancestors are Lockett's: her mother was Rhody Lockett, and her father was Gideon Lockett. This has led to my conviction, that, in moving to Lockett District in Prince Edward County after the war, I was returning to the bosom of an extended family.

In 1866, after the war, I married Pattie Louise Beattie. Originally, she was an Overton from Prince Edward County. She had previously married Walter Beattie, a doctor, who tended the wounded and sick in Richmond before he succumbed to small pox in 1862. They had one child, a son, Walter Beattie, Jr. Naturally, he became my stepson. Pattie and I had five children of our own: John A.; Willie Elliott., Joseph Johnston, Grover Cleveland (whom we called "Tucker"), and Nannie Louise. We are buried—wife, children, and myself—at Pisgah Baptist Church in Rice. You can come visit us there, if you like.

My family was a church-going people. We liked singing the hymns. However, when I was a young boy I had a hard time sitting still during the long sermons. I still like short sermons.

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The good Lord gave Pattie 71 years of life. She entered the presence of the Lord in 1917. I lived on another 10 years beyond Pattie, rejoining her in my 84th year. Pattie was a good wife and mother. She was educated, you know. She attended Hollins College. She aided me greatly in my vocation as young Robert Russa's teacher and headmaster.

But, now, I get ahead of myself

In 1861, the War came to Virginia. As I recall, most folks were against secession. We viewed ourselves as proud Virginians; but we were proud Americans, too. A lot of our people voted for John Bell, the Unionist candidate, in the 1860 presidential election. I came to find out that many folks, like Samuel Watkins Vaughan, over at Pleasant Shade, and others in Lockett District, did, too. Prince Edward County sent two county representatives to the state convention in the late winter of 1861 who initially voted against succession. In my view, we were a "conflicted" people: proud Americans but loyal Virginians, too.

Nonetheless, when war came to Virginia, I joined the Confederate Army as my patriotic duty. I enlisted on May 27, 1861, becoming a private infantry soldier in Company C of the 9th Virginia Regiment; the Chesterfield "Yellow Jackets," we named ourselves. Our regiment of 10 such companies, mostly from the Tidewater Region, formed up at Norfolk, initially to defend the mouth of the James River and the port facilities there. Colonel Stapleton Crutchfield, was my first regimental executive officer. Four years later, he led the last battlefield charge of our dying army near here at Sayers Creek on one good leg. He lies buried now in an unmarked grave near the Hillsman House on the banks of that creek.

Eventually, we became one of five Virginia Regiments in Brigadier General Lewis B. Armistead's Brigade. It, in turn, became part of General George E. Pickett's

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Division in late 1862. We were all part of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia by that time.

After two years of fighting on Virginia soil, the army marched north into southern Pennsylvania in June 1863. We were a hungry army. Our folks back home were, hungry, too. Virginia's farmers had not been able to get in a proper crop since the beginning of the war. So, the idea was to feed off northern soil for a spell.

Furthermore, General Lee sought one last battle to end the war. General Meade and his Army of the Potomac, naturally wanted to prevent that from happening. Surprisingly, to both generals, the armies met by accident near a farm town where it seemed that every road in Pennsylvania merged. After two days of heavy fighting, General Pickett's division was left as the freshest in the Confederate army. We were restless and a little embarrassed that we had not seen any fighting. Being the last division to leave Virginia in General Lee's order of March, we had hustled out of Richmond to catch up to the rest of the army. By fate, we had become the army's reserve for the first 48-hours of fighting.

Late on the second day of the battle, all of that changed. We got orders to march forward. When we arrived outside of Gettysburg, late that evening, we were deployed in the center of the army's line. Rumor had it that General Lee was going to make the final push on the morrow; moreover, we were going to spearhead it. Naturally, I did not sleep much that night.

The next day we lay in the woods near the front, enduring an awful cannonade. Both sides blasted away at each other until mid-afternoon. Then, at 3 o'clock, we stood up, formed our line of battle, and marched forward in one, grand, massed column. Nearly 12,000 of us—Virginians and North Carolinian's mostly—joined together on

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Emmitsburg Road and surged toward the center of the Union line. We quick-stepped and jogged about a mile through terrible fire, from front, left, and right. We guided on General Armistead's hat. He had raised it aloft on his sword so we would have a reference point. General Armistead was quite a man. He had told us just before we stepped off, "Men, trust in God and fear nothing."

Well, his actions of that day were the proof of his words. He lead us through that hell fire, right up the slope, Cemetery Ridge they called it, into the Union lines. We climbed over a short rocky wall and pushed back the Federals; but there were too many of them and too few of us. After a short time of hand-to-hand struggle, I was wounded in the leg and eye, and captured, while our attack melted away. As I was being carried away, I remember looking back with my one good eye over the ground I had come. It was an awful sight. Everywhere, dead and dying, and other wounded lay on the ground all the way back to the tree line out from which we marched. It filled me with deep sorrow and regret.

At that moment, I spoke a silent prayer: "Lord," I said, "let me survive this tragedy, and I will live the rest of my life in amends to the destruction I see." Well, I marched off to captivity. I felt like an Israelite trudging off to Babylon. I was held at DeCamp General Hospital on David's Island, New York, in the western Long Island Sound. My wounds were treated and I recovered; but, I lost the sight in one eye.

Several months later, I was exchanged, and I went back to Virginia to rejoin my regiment. For two more years, I fought on with my one good eye. I saw the war to its end at Appomattox Court House, where I was paroled on the 9th of April. I walked home to Manchester Town just south, over the James River, from Richmond. There I was paroled from Confederate military service on the 24th of April 1865.

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Not long afterwards, I met Pattie Louise, and we became engaged. We married on May 4, 1866. I moved with her and my step-son, Walter, to Lockett District to help her keep up her family place. They called it Overton Hill. She had inherited it from her father. It used to overlook Sandy River between Rice and Farmville.

Recovery from the war was slow. There was no money. A lot of good men never came back from the fighting. We were an occupied country. But we had our families, our faith, and the land. Also, our district had not suffered as much as other areas to the north and east. All we had to do was be willing to work hard. Soon, we were back in farming. We grew wheat, corn, and tobacco, plowing the land with the horses and mules that had survived the war, too.

Still, things were different. We were done with slavery. We now had a new class of free people. Many of them stayed on the land. They now worked for pay, farming the land side-by-side with us. They were a good, hard-working people. They worshipped the Lord as well as anybody. Many had stood by our families during the war. But few could read and write. I knew that this was our—the white people's—fault.

A few years after the war, Samuel Vaughan and some other farmers in the region, came to me and asked if I would become the headmaster and teacher at a new grammar school for freed black children. They explained that the colored families had voted for such a school to be built and operated. I had been teaching the same children at Sunday School at Jamestown Church in the afternoons after worship. I talked it over with Pattie. I knew I would need her help. After all, she was the one with the formal education. She agreed to assist me if I chose to do it. So, I agreed.

Thus, I began a new vocation. I became a teacher. Initially, we used the church at Jamestown as a school site during the week days and in the evening hours of the week.

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We met mostly after work and chores. My students faithfully read and wrote and recited by oil lamp and lantern into the night. Not long after I started, I had upwards of four score students—from very young to nearly adult. I had to sort, classify, and put each student in the right form for instruction, according to initial ability. Reading and writing were the main aim. And numbers, Pattie taught them numbers. Students who already had a head start, being schooled early on by devoted parents, like the Moton family, were placed in the top forms. They had more challenging assignments. They worked with more difficult readers. Strangely, this fact caused me my first, major problem as headmaster.

You see, parents were anxious for their children to make progress with their learning. They developed the notion that, the more and higher the level of books their children had to carry back and forth to school, the “more successful” or accomplished they were in their learning. There began a flurry of book buying and toting, the likes you would ever see. Farm wagons would be flying over the Jamestown Bridge, down the River Road to Farmville and back, carrying determined parents to buy more books for their student children. One student would come to school carrying three books, the next day someone else came carrying four; then someone would tote in five, and then six. Frankly, it got out of hand. I had to do some hard persuading of parents. I explained over and over that it did not matter how many books a child had to carry. What mattered is what they knew from them.

This is how I got to know Robert Russa Moton. He was a bright young fellow, maybe nine- or ten-years old. But he was well-lettered and read well. I noted in him a fire, a zeal to learn. He was hungry for his education, even among those who were already well-motivated. He quickly moved to the top form and became my best all-around student. I could see in him great promise. He always prepared his lessons, and he

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was eager to move on with the next. He was a credit to his family, his race, and even me, his teacher. His later life bore out his promise as a great educator and humanist.

Ultimately, he became a great credit to his state and the nation. I always considered him to be my finest student. I looked forward to his visits back to the district after he became famous. He was my redemption from that terrible, terrible day on Cemetery Ridge back in 1863.

So, I raised my family and farmed and taught the children close going on to the turn of the century. They were good years. I was blessed with the seasons and their rhythm of birth, growth, fulfillment, and reflection.

Towards the end of my life, in the third decade of the 20th century, past the first Great World War and on to the cusp of the gathering storm of the Second, I often sat and rocked on my porch and looked back on my life. I remembered my youth in Chesterfield County and “the War,” and the times immediately after it. They were hard times. But my family—Pattie, our five boys and a girl, and their children—were a great blessing. I cherished my time as farmer, teacher, headmaster, and grandfather. And I always remembered Robert Russa Moton.

You might say that I came to see my life lived out like a Bible story, you know, the story of the Children of Israel itself: they lived a great cycle of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption.

So did I it seems.

I was born and nurtured in the bosom of my family, faith, and the land. I fought for it in a terrible, long war.

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I received painful wounds, terrible defeat, and the judgment that comes to a vanquished people.

But I got a second chance to build on the ashes of those times.

Gradually, the Good Lord gave me a strong vision of what a proper life can be.

I came to see—even with only one good eye—a vision of time and history in a new and better light. What did I see?

That HE is the Author of Adventure and Change in each human life;

That HE can take a terrible war and make it a new and better peace;

That HE can take a dark practice, like slavery, which bred hate and fear, and transform it into a society of budding mutual respect and shared confidence;

That HE can take simple gifts and the hard work of plowing and reaping, to sow and reap a richer harvest that raised and milled the bread of life;

That HE can take a vision of death and destruction as far as a wounded eye can see—even from a cemetery on a ridge in southern Pennsylvania—and transform that memory into a sober and saving dream of young students learning, and older people living side-by-side, working, raising families, worshipping, and tending to each other.

That HE gave this simple farmer's life a greater purpose that, in the end, dimmed the memory of the horrible cannon's roar; and

That HE replaced it with the sun-light flickered trickle of Saylers Creek, the soft, shadowed flow of the Appomattox, the collective murmur of young black scholars bent over at their evening lessons, and the upward wafting hymns of a people, black and white, who looked forward to the Eden to come, when all are one again in the Lord.

Samuel, son of Jasper, I see my time is up. God Bless you, sir.

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