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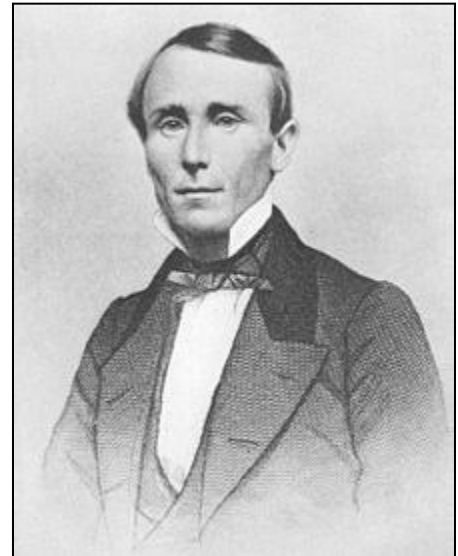
# How Tennessee Adventurer William Walker became Dictator of Nicaragua in 1857

The Norvell family origins of *The Grey Eyed Man of Destiny*

by John E. Norvell

On October 5, 1860, *The New York Times* published a brief article about the execution of William Walker, former president of Nicaragua, at Trujillo, Honduras.<sup>1</sup> The un-named *Times* correspondent wrote:

I yesterday sent to Charleston. " news" of the execution of WILLIAM WALKER at Truxillo [sic] on the 12th inst. [September]. WALKER, it appears, was not permitted to have any communication with any of his followers previous to his execution. He marched from his cell to the place of execution with a steady step and unshaken mien. A chair had been placed for him with its back towards the Castle. Having taken his seat, he was blindfolded. Three soldiers stepped forward to within twenty feet of him and discharged their muskets. The balls entered his body, and he leaned a little forward; but, it being observed he was not dead, a fourth soldier mercifully advanced so close to the suffering man that the muzzle of the musket almost touched his forehead, and being there discharged, scattered his brains and skull to the winds. Thus ends the life of the "Gray-eyed man of Destiny."



William Walker  
1824 – 1860  
(Tenn. State Library & Archives)

It is unknown if the citizens of Nashville read this particular account of William Walker's death, but it most certainly was read by Caleb Cushing Norvell, the Financial Editor of the *New York Times* and the uncle of William Walker. Caleb Norvell came from an old Nashville family, as did his nephew, William, the son of Norvell's sister Mary Norvell Walker and her husband James Walker.<sup>2</sup>

William Walker (born 1824-died 1860) occupies a unique place in American history and the history of state of Tennessee. Before his early death, he led an invasion of Mexico and conquered Nicaragua, proclaiming himself president in 1856. Biographies note that his mother was Mary Norvell, who married James Walker, but little attention has been paid to Mary, James Walker, or the Norvells of Nashville. One such early history notes:

Our knowledge of the early life of William Walker is somewhat fragmentary. His father, James

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John E. Norvell is a retired Air Force Lt Colonel, decorated air combat veteran of the Vietnam War, and former Asst Professor of History at the U.S. Air Force Academy. He is also the first cousin three-times removed of William Walker and the great-great-great grandson Lt. Lipscomb Norvell, who is buried in the City Cemetery in Nashville, Tennessee. He can be reached by email at [jenorv66@aol.com](mailto:jenorv66@aol.com)

<sup>1</sup> "Cuba.; The Execution of Walker Miscellaneous News Trade and Commerce, &c." *New York Times*, death notice of William Walker dated October 5, 1860 attributed to "our own correspondent" in a column of Miscellaneous News Trade and Commerce (<http://www.nytimes.com/1860/10/05/news>)

<sup>2</sup> Octavia Zollicoffer Bond, "Yester Nashville Names: The Norvell Family." *The Nashville American*, November 7, 1909, 5.

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Walker, was a Scotchman who settled in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1820, and was for a time engaged in mercantile business but later became president of a local concern known as the Commercial Insurance Company. James Walker married Mary Norvell of Kentucky, and from this union there were four children, William, Norvell, James, and Alice.<sup>3</sup>

To understand William Walker and to appreciate more fully his ties to Nashville, a closer examination of the Norvell family must be made.

The Norvells of Nashville traced their origins to Williamsburg, Virginia, where the earliest members of the family settled before 1650.<sup>4</sup> William Walker was a direct descendant of Hugh Norvell (ca. 1665-1719) also called Captain Hugh Norvell because of his service in the James County Virginia Militia.<sup>5</sup> Hugh Norvell was a member of the Bruton Church vestry and one of the trustees for land allocation in the new city of Williamsburg.<sup>6</sup> As one of the prominent and older Virginia families, the Norvells, living in the Virginia capital, found themselves drawn into the politics of the times and the revolution. William Norvell (c. 1726-1802), a grandson of Capt. Hugh Norvell, served in the House of Burgesses during the revolutionary years along with Patrick Henry, and also served also as a signer of the state treasury notes authorized by Virginia in 1773.<sup>7</sup>

Lipscomb Norvell (1756-1843) of Nashville, one of Capt. Hugh's great-grandsons, was the grandfather of William Walker. Lipscomb served throughout the Revolution and rose to the rank of lieutenant in the Virginia Line.<sup>8</sup> He was taken prisoner by the British in 1780 after the Siege of Charleston.<sup>9</sup> After the war, Lipscomb settled in Kentucky, where he raised his sons. It was Lipscomb's descendants who migrated to Tennessee and became the Norvells of Nashville.<sup>10</sup>

To understand how young William Walker might have been shaped by his family and been drawn to politics, and later become a military leader, it is necessary briefly to look at the nine sons of his grandfather, Lipscomb, and the professions they chose to follow:

1. Moses Norvell (born 1786 in Kentucky - died 1853 in Nashville Tennessee) newspaper editor, politician,

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<sup>3</sup> William Oscar Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, (The MacMillan Company, New York, 1916) 9-10

<sup>4</sup> Francis Harrison Burton, *Burton Chronicles of Colonial Virginia*, (private printing, 1933) 341-343

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Harrison Miller Baber, *William Norvell (1746-1794) of Hanover Co, Virginia: His Forbears and Descendants*, (Lynchburg Virginia, 1992) xvi-xviii.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Goodwin, *The Record of Bruton Parish Church*, (Richmond, Virginia: Deitz Press, 1941) 25; Baber, *William Norvell*, xvi-xviii.

<sup>7</sup> Baber, *William Norvell*, 174-175.

<sup>8</sup> Lipscomb Norvell entered the Continental Army on August 7, 1777 as a cadet in Captain William Mosby's company of the 5th Virginia Regiment of Foot commanded by Colonel Josiah Parker. He was in combat at the Battle of Brandywine, 11 September 1777. During the winter of 1777-1778, the Fifth Virginia continued to be part of Muhlenburg's Brigade and encamped with the rest of the Continental Line at Valley Forge. On January 15, 1778 Lipscomb became egimental paymaster. In May 1778, his name appeared on the rolls at Valley Forge, at Brunswick, New Jersey in July, White Plains, New York in August, and West Point, New York in October, and Princeton, New Jersey in December. On February 3, 1779 he was at Middlebrook, New York, in April at Smith's Cove, and on September 8th at Rampaugh, New Jersey. He fought in the Battles of Brandywine, Trenton, and Monmouth. On September 9, 1778, Lipscomb became a 2d Lieutenant and moved to the 3d Continental Line on September 14th. In February 1780, now promoted to 1st Lieutenant, he shortly transferred back to the 5th Virginia Regiment, February 20, 1780. Lipscomb Norvell service file (#S5835), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC. John H. Gwathmey, *Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution, 1775-1783*, (Richmond, Virginia, 1938) 589. William P. Palmer, *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts, 1652-1781*, (Richmond, Virginia, 1893) 411.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Lincoln, *Orderly Book of Captain Robert Gamble of the Second Virginia Regiment, Commanded by Colonel Christian Febiger, August 21 - November 16, 1779 and Original papers relating to the siege of Charleston, 1780* (Charleston, South Carolina, 1898) 83.

<sup>10</sup> Lipscomb received 2666 acres of land from the State of Virginia in April 1783 in the Kentucky Military District as bounty for his three-year service. The land that Lipscomb obtained was later part of Kentucky. Much of it centered on Dicks Creek, Beaver Creek, and Cumberland areas. This was granted from June 1791 until 1796. James Franklin Sutherland, *Early Kentucky Landholders, 1787- 1811* ( Baltimore, Maryland: Clearfield Co. & Genealogical Publishing Co, 1997) 251.

and businessman.<sup>11</sup>

2. John Norvell (born 1789 in Kentucky - died 1850 in Detroit, Michigan) veteran War of 1812, newspaper editor, politician, member of the Michigan Constitutional Convention, and United States Senator from Michigan.<sup>12</sup>

3. Joshua Norvell (born 1790 in Kentucky - died 1821 in Havana, Cuba) veteran War of 1812, journalist, lawyer, federal attorney in Arkansas, politician, United States consul to St. Barts.<sup>13</sup>

4. Joseph Norvell (born 1793 in Kentucky - died 1847 in Nashville) veteran War of 1812, newspaper editor, politician, and businessman.<sup>14</sup>

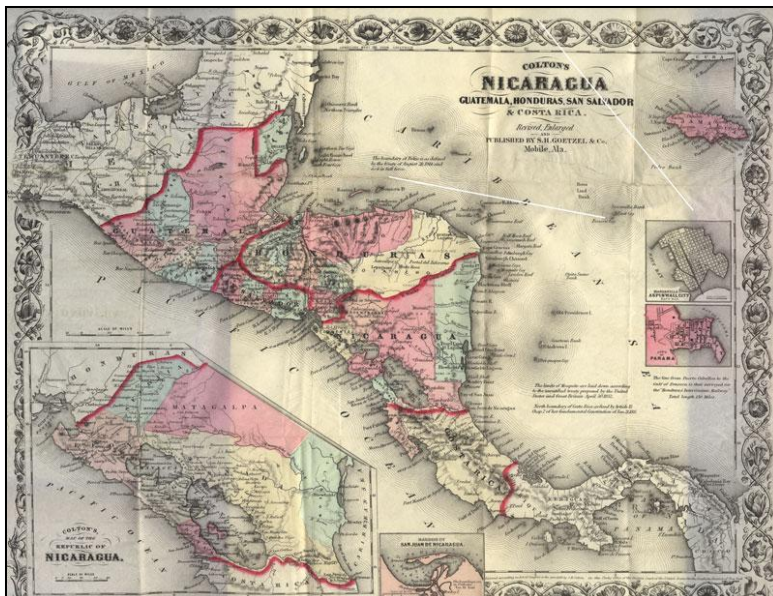
5. Lipscomb Norvell, Jr. (born 1795 in Kentucky - died 1877 in Jasper, Texas) veteran War of 1812, lawyer, Kentucky legislator, Texas postmaster and legislator.<sup>15</sup>

6. Thomas Norvell (born 1798 in Kentucky - died 1843 in New Orleans) physician.<sup>16</sup>

7. William Norvell (born 1803 in Kentucky - died 1875 in Carlisle, Kentucky) lawyer, judge, and politician.<sup>17</sup>

8. Hendrick Norvell (born 1808 in Kentucky - died 1837 in Nashville, Tennessee) midshipman in the Navy.<sup>18</sup>

9. Caleb Cushing Norvell (born 1813 in Kentucky - died 1891 in Washington, DC) newspaper publisher and financial editor of *The New York Times*.<sup>19</sup>



This map was published in Walker's book *The War in Nicaragua*, published just prior to his execution. (Tenn. State Library & Archives)

About 1807, the elder sons of Lipscomb Norvell, Sr., Joseph and Moses, arrived in Nashville.<sup>20</sup> By 1812, Joseph was serving as the editor of the *Nashville Whig*, a newspaper he and his brother Moses had purchased. He sold his interest in the paper before August 1817 but repurchased it in 1826. From 1819 to 1823, he pursued a political career, becoming city recorder and later city treasurer of Nashville. About 1835 he began publishing *the American*

<sup>11</sup>Obituary, Moses Norvell, Nashville City Cemetery (<http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1852-53.htm#pages>)

<sup>12</sup> US Senate Historians Office, Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress, "John Norvell" (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=N000158>).

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Norvell death notice, *The Franklin Gazette*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 13, 1821.

<sup>14</sup> Obituary, Joseph Norvell, Nashville City Cemetery ([http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1847.htm#norvell\\_p1](http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1847.htm#norvell_p1))

<sup>15</sup> Mary Smith Fay, *War of 1812 Veterans in Texas*, (Greenville, South Carolina: Southern Historical Press, 1979), 233. Edna McDaniel White, *East Texas Riverboat Era and Its Decline* (Beaumont, Texas: LaBelle Print. and Engraving Co, 1967) 45.

<sup>16</sup> NARA , Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant , Lipscomb Norvell (ID: 300022) mentions Dr. Thomas Norvell as one of Lipscomb Norvell's children. *The Nashville Union* reported his death 26 September 1843 of Yellow Fever.

<sup>17</sup> William Henry Perrin, ed. *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Counties, Kentucky*, (Chicago, Illinois: O. L. Baskin & Co., 1882) 761

<sup>18</sup> Obituary, Hendrick Norvell, Nashville City Cemetery ([http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1837.htm#norvell\\_hendrick](http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1837.htm#norvell_hendrick)); record of naval service, Hendrick Norvell, Nashville City Cemetery ([http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/280856\\_norvell.htm](http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/280856_norvell.htm)).

<sup>19</sup> Obituary, Caleb Cushing Norvell, *The New York Times*, Feb 1891 (<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9505EFDC1F3BE533A25757CoA9649C94609ED7CF&scp=7&sq=C.+C.+Norvell&st=p>)

<sup>20</sup> Jo C. Guild, *Old Times In Tennessee*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Tavel, Eastman and Howell, 1878), 485.

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*Presbyterian*. Among other honors, he was selected in 1845 to serve as a pallbearer at the funeral of Andrew Jackson. He was a Mason and served as the Grand Master of the State Lodge of Tennessee.<sup>21</sup>

Joseph's older brother, Moses Norvell, owned steamboats and warehouses as a partner in the Nashville firm of Gordon and Norvell after 1820. From 1817-1818 he served as city recorder of Nashville and later as a trustee of Cumberland College, 1826-1834. As a further sign that they moved in the upper echelon of Nashville society, Moses's son, Henry Laurence Norvell, married Laura Jane Sevier, the daughter of Colonel George Washington Sevier, and great-granddaughter of John Sevier, who had served as Tennessee's first governor.<sup>22</sup>

A third brother, Caleb Cushing Norvell, married Mary Catherine Carroll, the niece of Tennessee Governor William Carroll and grand-daughter of Duncan Robertson, a well know philanthropist of Nashville.<sup>23</sup>

In 1807, as his brothers were becoming active in the Nashville, John Norvell, Lipscomb's second son, wrote a letter to President Thomas Jefferson, asking his opinion about a newspaper career: "It would be a great favor, too, to have your opinion of the manner in which a newspaper, to be most extensively beneficial, should be conducted, as I expect to become the publisher of one for a few years." Jefferson wrote that the press, although important to a free society, seemed to have abandoned itself to falsehood, rather than truth. This was not a ringing endorsement of the young man's choice of career. Despite Jefferson's words, John Norvell did pursue a career in journalism and politics, was appointed Postmaster of Detroit by President Jackson, and later became a U.S. Senator from Michigan.<sup>24</sup>

A history of William Walker's life written in 1902 notes that by the time he was 25 he had already tried three professions: medicine, law, and journalism.<sup>25</sup> That William Walker would look to his uncles' careers as a model for his own future is not surprising. The Norvells were a close knit family and routinely wrote to each other. Throughout young William Walker's childhood, his grandfather Lipscomb lived with James and Mary Norvell Walker, and this man who had raised nine sons to prominence surely had an impact on his grandson.<sup>26</sup> Certainly young William was aware of his uncles' successes in journalism and politics. Most histories of the period say William was not close to his father, a strict Calvinist, who was a business and insurance company owner.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps his father's careers seemed too tame for young William, who saw his uncles branching out into positions with more public power and influence.

Indeed, seven of William's uncles were involved in politics and journalism. Political editors were seen as professional politicians and, as in the case of his uncle John Norvell, were often brought into an area to fix problems with local political press. Uncle John Norvell was invited from Kentucky to Philadelphia in 1819 to take over the floundering *Franklin Gazette*.<sup>28</sup> Uncle Joshua Norvell moved from Kentucky to St. Louis, Missouri to run the *Western Journal* in 1815.<sup>29</sup> Other uncles: Joshua, John, William, Lipscomb Jr, and Hendrick, had served in the

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Edwin Röbert, *Nashville and Her Trade for 1870*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Roberts and Purvis, 1870) 38.

<sup>22</sup> Bond, "Yester Nashville Names" 5.

<sup>23</sup> Bond, "Yester Nashville Names" 5.

<sup>24</sup> Jack McLaughlin, *To His Excellency Thomas Jefferson: Letters to A President* (New York, New York: Avon Books, 1991, 86-92

<sup>25</sup> J.W. G Walker, USN, *Ocean to Ocean: An Account Historical and Personal Nicaragua and its People* ( Chicago, Illinois: A.C. McClurg and Company, Chicago, 1902) 240.

<sup>26</sup> Obituary of Lipscomb Norvell, *Nashville Whig*, March 4, 1843, Nashville City Cemetery (<http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1843.htm#page1>). John Edward Norvell, *History of the Norvell and Related Families*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Canandaigua, New York, 2006) 148-152.

<sup>27</sup> Brady Harrison, *William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* , (Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 2001) 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> John Thomas Scharf, *History of St. Louis City and County*, Vol II, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Louis H. Everts & Co, 1883) 1777.

military.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Uncle Thomas was a physician.

A medical career at first seemed to appeal to William. This might have been due to the fact that his mother was an invalid. As a youth he had spent a great deal of time in her company, which he seemed to prefer to that of his strict father.<sup>31</sup> At the age of 14 in 1838, William completed his preparatory education at the University of Nashville graduating summa cum laude. In 1843, he earned a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He then spent the next two years in Europe, studying medicine. When he returned to Nashville in 1845, Walker briefly practiced medicine, but decided that this was not his calling.<sup>32</sup> He then moved to New Orleans to study law. He practiced law for a short time, but quit law practice to become co-owner and editor of the *New Orleans Crescent*. In 1849, he moved to San Francisco, California, where he became a journalist, but this too did not last. One can only imagine the opinions his highly-regimented father had about William's wandering journey to find his place in the world.<sup>33</sup>

Walker, ever restless, next began to see himself as a "filibuster" - a military adventurer or soldier of fortune.<sup>34</sup> Why Walker decided at that point to embrace a military career is not clear. Some histories have contended that it was because of the loss of Helen Martin, his fiancée who died of yellow fever, that he became melancholy after her death and sought a new stage for his ambitions.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the flame of military glory burned brighter after the loss of Ellen. Walker had surely heard stories of his grandfather's part in the Revolutionary battles of Monmouth in 1778 and Charleston in 1780.<sup>36</sup> The exploits of two uncles in the War of 1812 would have been known to him: John at the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814<sup>37</sup> and Lipscomb

**PURDY'S NATIONAL THEATRE**  
Sole Lessee, Proprietor & Manager... A. H. PURDY      Stage Manager..... G. L. FOX  
Treasurer..... Thos. C. STEINER.

Dress Circles..... 25 Cents | Pit..... 13 1-2 Cents | Orchestra Chairs..... 50 Cents  
Private Boxes, 2nd Circle..... \$5 exclusive, or \$1 for each person.  
Doors open at 7 o'clock. Curtain will rise at a quarter before 8, precisely.

**Filibusters, Democrats and Patriots**  
**NOW FOR FUN & INSTRUCTION**

THIS MONDAY AND TUESDAY EVENINGS, JULY 21 AND 22, 1856.  
First week of an entire New Drama of great interest, by E. F. Distin, Esq. written expressly for this Theatre, and founded on scenes of actual occurrence, & of much importance to the Nation, entitled

**NICARAGUA**  
**OR, GEN. WALKER'S VICTORIES.**

Which has been gotten up regardless of expense, with New Scenery, Machinery, Properties, Music, Costumes, Implants of Warfare, and cast to the strength of the Company.

Scenery..... by Mr. Wm. Pearson  
Machinery..... by Mr. W. T. Peterschen  
Properties..... by Mr. C. Kline      Music..... by Madame Lathrup  
The Whole produced under the immediate direction of..... Mr. G. L. FOX, Stage Director.

**DEMOCRATS AND FILIBUSTERS.**  
JUAN CASTELLO, a young and ardent Democrat..... Mr. J. H. ALLEN  
JEFFERSON SQUASH, a roving Yankee..... G. L. FOX  
GENERAL WALKER, the hope of Freedom..... S. B. Whitkin  
Colonel Buckeye, a member of his staff..... S. W. Bradshaw  
General Valle, a native Ally..... H. F. Stone  
Ivory Black, a superior Nigger..... A. Cushman  
Native Allies, Filibusters, &c.

**LEGITIMISTS AND SERVILLE.**  
General Guardiola, of the Nicaraguan Army..... D. Oakley  
Major Pontiano, of the 2nd Granadian Regiment..... W. Mitchell  
Don Villanena, an implacable Spaniard..... J. Reed  
Granbery Cockney, a concealed Cockney..... T. Hampton  
CHRISTINE, betrothed to Castello..... Mrs. H. F. NICHOLS  
PAULINA, with song of "I won't die an old Maid"..... Mrs. W. G. JONES  
Nicaraguan Women, Niggers, &c. In the course of the piece.

**A New Spanish Dance—"Il Trovatore"..... Miss Henrietta Lang**  
And previous to the piece

**A NEW MEDLEY FILIBUSTER OVERTURE**  
Introducing the following airs: "Star Spangled Banner," "The Girl I leave behind me," "Columbia, the Pride of the Ocean," "Hail to the Chief," "Sprig of Shellalah," & "Yankee Doodle," arranged by W. T. Peterschen, Musical Director.

**Synopsis of Scenery, Incidents, &c. Act First.**

**SUBURBS OF GRANADA.** TERROR OF THE NATIVES at the approach of Walker's Forces.—A Cockney's Oration of Filibusters.—Attempted outrage & its fitting chastisement.—Negroes and Spaniards.—The Oath of Vengeance.

**REVIEW OF THE SERVILLE FORCES**  
Revolt of the Troops and downfall of Guardiola  
A view in Granada.—March of the Filibusters and their Native Allies.—Force the only argument with Tyranny.—Interior of the Padre's House.—Sympathy for the imprisoned Farmer.  
A pair of Lovers.—A Yankee Guest and a kiss in the dark.—Exterior of Filikottub's Grocery.—Dutch courage and volunteeer Enthusiasm.—Field of Death, Granada.—A Military Execution.—The Last words of a Patriot.—The

**TERRIFIC COMBAT.—ABDUCTION OF CARISTINE**  
Rage and despair of Castello.—Room in Leauraga's House.—Drained for a Convert. Woman's Rights.  
SONG—"I won't die an old Maid" Mrs. W. G. JONES  
Yankee Courtship. Matrimony and Patronage.

**DUETT.—"JOYS OF WEDDED LIFE"**  
By Mrs. W. G. Jones and Mr. G. L. Fox.  
A Rocky Pass, Midnight. Camp of Villanena's Associates. Arrival of the Chief and his fair Burden. Castello in pursuit. The Ambuscade. Castello and Party surprised an attacked by superior Numbers. Desperate hand to hand Conflict and Capture of Castello.

**Act 3rd.—Exterior of the Old Jail at Rivas.**

Playbill for a New York theatrical presentation about Walker's exploits. (Tenn. State Library & Archives)

<sup>30</sup> See individual obituaries, as noted above.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 9-11.

<sup>35</sup> Brady Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Obituary, Lipscomb Norvell.

<sup>37</sup> John Norvell in the War of 1811: Edwin Winfield Cone, Spencer Wallace Cone, *Some Account of the Life of Spencer Houghton Cone* (New York, New York: Livermore and Rudd, 1856) 104-120.

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Jr. at the Battle of the Thames in 1813.<sup>38</sup> His cousin, Freeman Norvell, uncle John's son, had served with Winfield Scott in Mexico as a Marine lieutenant at the Battle of Chapultepec in 1847.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps, as many did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Walker saw the prospect of going to battle as a grand adventure. Perhaps he believed that it was the "Manifest Destiny" of the United States to annex the remainder of the continent.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps, as a filibuster, Walker envisioned conquering vast regions of Central America, where he would create new slave states to join the federal union or even set himself up as president of a new republic.<sup>41</sup> For these and perhaps other reasons a new path opened for Walker.

In October 1853, then, Walker began his military adventures in Mexico where he hoped to conquer Lower California and Sonora. Recruiting American supporters of slavery and Manifest Destiny, he hoped to form an American colony in Mexico which might eventually take its place as a part of the American Union, as Texas had done.<sup>42</sup> After capturing two towns – La Paz and Ensenada – he named himself president of the new "Republic of Sonora."<sup>43</sup> Lack of supplies and unexpectedly strong resistance by the Mexican government forced Walker to retreat.<sup>44</sup> Although his first filibustering adventure had ended in failure, it was not to be his last.<sup>45</sup> From his adventures in Mexico, Walker next looked to Central America. In 1854, a civil war erupted in Nicaragua between the Legitimist party based in the city of Granada and the Democratic party in León. The leader of the Democrats, Francisco Castellón sought military support from Walker<sup>46</sup>

That Walker would consider a military adventure in Nicaragua was due in part to Manifest Destiny and in part due to the discovery of gold in California. Since 1849, California and the west had taken on new importance to the United States. As there was no inter-oceanic route joining the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the transcontinental railway had not been completed, a major trade route opened between New York City and San Francisco which ran through Nicaragua. Ships left New York for Nicaragua, where people and goods would then be transported by water and land to the Pacific to be shipped to San Francisco.<sup>47</sup>

To begin military actions, Walker sailed from the United States with 57 fellow adventurers who called themselves the Immortals or the American Phalanx. Upon landing in Nicaragua, this force was reinforced by locals and more Americans.<sup>48</sup> With Francisco Castellón's consent, now "Colonel" Walker attacked the Legitimist-held city of Rivas, near the trans-isthmian route. On October 13, 1855 he conquered the Legitimist capital of Granada, taking control of the country.<sup>49</sup> Over the next year, commanding forces mostly loyal to him, he consolidated his power through a series of deals, negotiations, and executions.<sup>50</sup> In July 1856 Walker was inaugurated as president— in effect the dictator of Nicaragua.<sup>51</sup> On November 10, 1856, Franklin Pierce administration in Washington recognized the

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Smith Fay, *War of 1812 Veterans in Texas*, 233.

<sup>39</sup> David M. Sullivan, *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War – The First Year* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane Publishing, 1997)173.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 189.

<sup>41</sup> William V. Wells, *Walker's Expedition to Nicaragua: A History of the Central American War,* (New York, New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1856) 23., Daniel Bedinger Lucas, W. A. McCorkle, J.F. McLaughlin, *Nicaragua: War of the Filibusters* (Richmond, Virginia: B.F. Johnson, 1896), 28-29.

<sup>42</sup> Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, , 31

<sup>43</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*,, 48-50.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 71-72.

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8. Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 107-110.

<sup>49</sup> Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 110-117.

<sup>50</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857*, 190-191

<sup>51</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8.

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Walker government.<sup>52</sup> About this time, Walker began a program to Americanize Nicaragua by reinstating slavery and encouraging immigration from the United States.<sup>53</sup> Not content with Nicaragua alone, he began to think of broader conquests in the region to bring other countries under his control.<sup>54</sup> In so doing, Walker alarmed his neighbors in Central American, who now began to plan military action against him.<sup>55</sup> In May 1857 forces, composed of exiled Legitimist Nicaraguans, other Central American countries, and mercenaries funded by American economic interests who opposed Walker, drove him from Nicaragua. He returned to the United States, where he plotted his return. In 1860, Walker landed in Honduras, where he was captured and authorities in Trujillo executed him on September 12, 1860.<sup>56</sup>

Some historians have speculated that Walker hoped to unite the Central American states into a confederacy under his control; others believe he wanted to expand the influence of slavery linking himself to the American south.<sup>57</sup> Although there is disagreement about his motives, his exploits continue to fascinate Americans. Since his death, 21 novels, histories, and other literary works have been written, and “Walker,” a film based loosely upon his exploits, was released in 1987.<sup>58</sup> Few historians and writers, however, have actually understood or appreciated his background. It was the highly political nature of his family and his upbringing in Nashville that shaped his future. This, as much as anything else, made William Walker the so-called “Gray-eyed Man of Destiny.” ■

## News Travels: Searching for Death Notices

*Contributed by Shirley Roach Thompson*

Newspaper death notices are a good source for genealogical information, but all newspaper issues have not survived for many communities. And even if the newspapers did survive, death notices were more often included for prominent residents or for deaths involving unusual circumstances.

When the local newspapers are not available for the time period in which your ancestor died, newspapers in the nearby communities may have reported the death. Even if your ancestor was not prominent, news of his death may be included in an article in which multiple deaths were reported for various reasons, such as a disease epidemic, unusual occurrences, etc. These notices when found are special gems for those deaths during times before death certificates were required or for people whose deaths may have not generated other documentation, such as wills, estates, etc.

An article found on microfilm of an 1899 Nashville newspaper for deaths occurring in Gallatin demonstrates that the extra research work can be very worthwhile. The deaths of three individuals are reported in one article, as having three deaths of young people in one night in a small town during this period of time must have been unusual. If all three deaths had not occurred on the same night, the death of any one of them might have not been reported in the newspapers, and many of the details which are included in the article would have not been known.

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<sup>52</sup> William Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, (Mobile, Alabama: S.H. Goetzel) 141.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel B. Lucas, *War of the Filibusters*, (Richmond, Virginia: B.F. Johnson, 1896) 68-70; Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8. Stamp, *America in 1857*, 190.

<sup>54</sup> Stamp, *America in 1857*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 9-10.

<sup>58</sup> Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 4.