

Gwynn, Walter ^[1]

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"Walter Gwynn,
Brigadier-General"
Cropped. Histories of the
several regiments and
battalions from North
Carolina, in the great war
1861-'65.

^[2]Walter Gwynn, civil engineer and militia general, was born in Jefferson County, [West] Va., the son of Humphrey Gwynn of the Gloucester County, Va., family of that name. Appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on 10 Sept. 1818, he studied engineering under Claudius Crozet (1790–1864), an artillerist and engineer formerly under the command of Napoleon and subsequently employed by the state of Virginia as principal engineer. A distinguished graduate of the Military Academy (ranking eighth in his class), Gwynn was commissioned a second lieutenant of artillery on 1 July 1822 and was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant in 1829. In the following year, when the Petersburg and Roanoke Railroad Company was chartered, he was employed by that company as one of the engineers to locate and survey the route. In 1832 he resigned his military commission and gave himself over entirely to his career as a civil engineer, beginning with various Virginia railroad companies. By 1835 Gwynn had completed his survey of a proposed railway to run from Farmville to Cartersville, and in 1836 he published his report on the survey of the Danville, Roanoke and Junction Railroad. Concurrently, he supervised the preliminary survey for the projected route of the Danville to Evansham Railroad and served as chief engineer to the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad.

When the directors of the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad Company, chartered by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1833, began seriously to consider construction of their road in 1835, Gwynn was given the office of chief engineer. Edward Bishop Dudley ^[3] appears to have been the person chiefly responsible for his selection. It is probable that Gwynn's advice had an influence in the decision of the directors to alter the northern terminus from Raleigh to Weldon where connections were possible with two of the Virginia lines for which Gwynn had served as engineer, the Petersburg and Roanoke and the Portsmouth and Roanoke railroads. (In 1852 the name of the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad was changed to the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad Company.) By August 1836 Gwynn had completed his survey of the route from Wilmington to Weldon, and on 25 Oct. 1836 Governor Edward B. Dudley lifted the first spade of earth from the proposed rail bed. On 7 Mar. 1840, the last spike was driven, completing what was then reported to be the longest track of rail in the world—161 1/2 miles from the Cape Fear River ^[4] to the Roanoke River ^[5].

Recognition of Gwynn's professional abilities came early in his career. At the February 1839 Baltimore convention of engineers, he was one of a committee of seventeen appointed to draft a constitution for an American society of engineers. Shortly thereafter, he was introduced to the Russian delegation of commissioners sent to America by Czar Nicholas I. The introduction was presumably effected by Moncure Robinson of Virginia, under whose supervision Gwynn had worked as an engineer for the Petersburg and Roanoke Railroad and who had been tendered but had refused the offer of a commission as the imperial chief engineer. The delegation then offered Gwynn the position of chief engineer of the St. Petersburg to Moscow railway at a salary of \$25,000. Initially tempted by the offer, he proceeded so far as to form a corps of engineers for the undertaking, but upon learning of the severity of the Russian winter refused the commission at the last and continued his association with North Carolina and Virginia internal improvements ^[6].

During the 1840s Gwynn expended the greater part of his professional energies in connection with Virginia works, first with the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad, then with the James River and Kanawha Canal. As president of the former from 1842 until 1845, he assumed the role of chief opponent to Francis E. Rives in a struggle for control of the railroad

bridge at Weldon. It was during this controversy that Rives removed a mile of track belonging to the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad, and Gwynn retaliated by restoring the track and overturning an engine and cars that Rives had borrowed from the Petersburg and Roanoke Railroad. The controversy came to an end after the Portsmouth and Roanoke was forced into bankruptcy and acquired by the Virginia Board of Public Works. Leased to the city of Portsmouth as the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad (which acquired title to the controverted bridge in 1851), Gwynn's company eventually became the parentstem of the Seaboard Air Line (now Seaboard Coast Line) Railroad.

Gwynn succeeded to the eleven-year tenure of Joseph Carrington Cabell as president of the James River and Kanawha Canal Company in 1846, following a series of financial disasters. During his twelve-month presidency, the Virginia legislature granted a loan of \$1,300,000 to the company and Gwynn gave up the office of president in order to assume that of chief engineer. He served as chief engineer to the canal company from 1847 until 1853, during which time he completed the works from Lynchburg to Buchanan and perfected the tidewater connection by way of a series of locks and basins capable of moving vessels from the canal into the lanes of shipping in the suburb of Richmond called Rocketts, the head of navigation on the James River.

Once Gwynn had his plans and specifications worked out for the completion of the James River and Kanawha Canal, he left the execution of them in the hands of able assistants while reserving to himself general superintendence of the work. This freed him to act concurrently as chief engineer to other works and to turn his attention once more to North Carolina. As early as 1836 Gwynn had envisioned a rail system linking North Carolina to the other southern states for their mutual commercial benefit in times of peace and for mutual defense in times of war. He had already connected the state to Virginia by way of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad. A line chartered in 1847 to run from Wilmington to Manchester, S.C., gave him an opportunity to further realize the commercial and defense scheme he had described a decade earlier. In 1848 Gwynn accepted the office of chief engineer to the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad and held it until 1853. It was in bridging the Pee Dee River for this line that he achieved for the first time in the South the sinking of cast iron cylinders by atmospheric pressure, a technique he had seen demonstrated not long previously at West Point.

The chartering of the North Carolina Railroad ^[7] in 1848 further fleshed out Gwynn's 1836 scheme of tying the southern states together, for this commenced an east to west line that could ultimately connect with western South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee rail systems. On 12 July 1850, he was engaged as chief engineer of the North Carolina Railroad. He began surveying the route from Goldsboro to Salisbury by way of Greensboro on 21 August, and his completed report was presented to the stockholders in May 1851. The original watercolor drawings of the survey are in the North Carolina State Archives where they are bound in five elephant folio volumes. Gwynn's relationship to the company was not altogether a happy one, a fact made apparent by the General Assembly's joint select committee (headed by Jonathan Worth ^[8]) to inquire into the management of the North Carolina Railroad. The Worth report reveals that the practice of the company's committee of four directors was to settle matters without consulting the chief engineer. There was constant strife between Gwynn and the contractors who were building the road, though the chief engineer was technically empowered with final and conclusive authority to see that the contract to build the road was faithfully executed. Gwynn disapproved of the contractors' work on the eastern division of the road; it never did receive his approval.

Simultaneously with his work as chief engineer to the North Carolina Railroad, Gwynn was given the responsibility as consulting engineer for making preliminary surveys of the route of that railway's eastern and western extensions—the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad (Goldsboro to Beaufort) and the North Carolina and Western Railroad (Salisbury to the Tennessee border). Both surveys were begun and completed in 1854, the former on 17 October and the latter on 5 December. Upon formal organization of the two new companies, the position of chief engineer was given to William Beverhout Thompson (a Virginia protégé of Gwynn's) and James C. Turner, respectively.

In 1856 Gwynn's connection with the North Carolina Railroad came to an end, and so did his career with North Carolina rail systems. It was a career that had played a leading role in every major antebellum railroad in North Carolina, except for the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad. Gwynn's work contributed largely to as much of a series of trunk lines as was available to the state during the Civil War. Had his work as chief engineer of the Rabun Gap Railroad leading from Anderson, S.C., to Knoxville, Tenn. (subsequently the Blue Ridge Railroad), been completed, and had the Western North Carolina Railroad been extended from Asheville to Ducktown, Gwynn would very nearly have seen realized his 1836 dream of a southern defense system based on interconnecting railways.

In 1857 Gwynn communicated to his daughter-in-law's father, Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin, his intention to remove with his family from Raleigh to Columbia, S.C. The opening of the Civil War ^[9], in fact, found Gwynn in Charleston where he was, at age fifty-nine, suddenly projected into the military career he thought he had abandoned a generation earlier. In March 1861 he was given the rank of major in the Provisional Army of the Confederate States of America and charged with constructing batteries at various strategic Charleston points (beyond Fort Moultrie, across the bay, on Morris Island, and on the beach at Fort Johnston ^[10]). For his role in the reduction of Fort Sumter, Gwynn was subsequently praised in dispatches of Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard and Lieutenant Colonel R. J. Ripley. Less than two weeks after the fall of Sumter, Gwynn had toured the coast of North Carolina and returned to Virginia.

On 21 Apr. 1861, he was nominated by Governor John Letcher to the rank of major general of the Virginia Volunteers and given command of the forces defending Norfolk. When the Virginia council determined, however, that Robert E. Lee should be the only officer in the Volunteers with the rank of major general, Gwynn and his fellow officer, Joseph E. Johnston, were confirmed a rank below as brigadiers. From 21 April until the Confederate government brought the Virginia Volunteers into the regular C.S.A. Army and the defenses of Norfolk into the care of its military establishment on 23 May, Gwynn executed his command well and diligently. On 23 May he surrendered his command to Brigadier General Benjamin Huger, his commission in the Virginia Volunteers having expired with their dissolution. On 24 May Gwynn

departed Norfolk for North Carolina, where he had kept up connections (and from which he had just two days earlier requested the loan of troops for the defense of Norfolk).

In Raleigh on 25 May 1861, Gwynn accepted a commission as brigadier general in the North Carolina Volunteers and assumed command of the outer coastal defenses of the state from Onslow County ^[11] north to the Virginia border. He made an immediate inspection of his command. Gwynn found Fort Macon, until recently under Federal control, to be too exposed to land attack for his liking and garrisoned by too small a number of soldiers for his comfort. He urgently recommended to Governor John W. Ellis ^[12] that a forward post, a string of vedettes, field batteries, and a signaling system be added. He then charged engineers under his command (formerly engineers with the state's various railroads) with constructing fortifications at Hatteras Inlet (Forts Clark and Hatteras), Oregon Inlet (Fort Oregon), and Ocracoke Inlet (Fort Ocracoke). Gwynn warned Governor Ellis that a force of 5,000 men would be needed to defend the coast. Believing that a Federal attack might be launched before the fortifications were completed, Gwynn requisitioned tools and the labor of enslaved people from Currituck County ^[13] planter-enslavers in early June—"Delay is dangerous," he admonished them. Activated by this sense of danger, Gwynn personally borrowed 4,000 pounds of powder from the Navy Yard at Norfolk for use of the forts, enlisted the aid of New Bern women in preparing 12,610 ball cartridges, and with his money purchased 8,000 percussion caps to be used at the fortifications. On 28 June he advised the military board at Raleigh that the privateering successes of its "mosquito navy" would force the Federal military into an offensive attack on the coast. The state's Secession Convention voted on 27 June to disband the North Carolina Volunteers effective 20 August upon expectation of their being taken into the regular Confederate establishment. Thunderstruck, Gwynn reminded Governor Henry T. Clark ^[14] (Ellis having died on 7 July) that the dissolution of the Volunteers on 20 August would leave the coastal forts defenseless. When that date arrived, Gwynn found himself without a command and the northeastern coast found itself with approximately 600 defenders distributed in six fortifications strung out over 85 miles of coast. Six days later a Federal fleet of seven warships and an assault force of 880 soldiers set sail for the North Carolina coast. On 28 August Fort Clark fell and Fort Hatteras the next day. Forts Oregon and Ocracoke were abandoned during the first week of September. Fort Roanoke fell on 8 Feb. 1862, New Bern on 14 March, and Fort Macon on 25 April. Gwynn's worst fears were realized.

For the next several months the eastern rivers and their estuaries lay open to the Federal forces occupying the outer coast, and those forces seized the opportunity to terrorize the river towns and eastern railways. The North Carolina delegation to the Confederate Congress, probably under the leadership of William T. Dortch ^[15] of Wayne County ^[16], began agitating for the central government to provide for the defense of North Carolina's inner coastal plain and eastern rivers. Upon their earnest solicitation Gwynn was given a commission on 9 Oct. 1862, with the rank of colonel in the regular army, and directed by the C.S.A. secretary of war to make a defensive survey of Neuse, Tar, Roanoke, and Chowan rivers. He was to obstruct the rivers and erect batteries suitable to small garrisons in sites capable of receiving and being defended by larger forces sent to succor the garrisons. Engineers for the works were to be furnished by Colonel (subsequently Major General) Jeremy F. Gilmer of the C.S.A. Corps of Engineers. Gilmer, who appears to have resented Gwynn's appointment (possibly because of the implied political intervention), carefully referred to him as "Colonel Walter Gwynn, Civil Engineer." He insisted that command of the military engineers who might be assigned to serve under Gwynn should not be placed under Gwynn's command but reserved for Gilmer's own control and direction. Relations between the two officers were cold, formal, and strained. Gilmer resisted every effort by Gwynn to augment the small garrisons with extensive defense works to be occupied by larger relief forces. On 14 October Gilmer perfected his move to cripple Gwynn's command authority by forcing upon him a junior officer with power to control the purse as a disbursement officer. Thus Gilmer succeeded in circumscribing Gwynn, countermanding his orders, and forcing revision of his work. Finally, on 18 Feb. 1863, Gilmer was able to transfer the river defense works near Goldsboro, Kinston, Tarboro, and Hamilton from Gwynn's command to that of Lieutenant Colonel W. H. Stevens. This, naturally, led to Gwynn's resignation of his commission, upon which he resumed civilian life for the duration of the war.

After the Civil War Gwynn returned briefly to North Carolina. Some of his earlier work for the state had been in the character, though not in the name, of principal state engineer for internal improvements. In April 1839, for example, Gwynn had accepted a commission from Governor Dudley to complete the drainage of the swamplands owned by the state at Pungo and Alligator lakes. In this Gwynn succeeded to the work of a friend, fellow engineer, and former West Point classmate, Charles B. Shaw of Charlottesville, Va., whom he had recommended for the job in 1837. By 1842 Gwynn had completed the reclamation of 65,000 acres from the swamplands bordering the two lakes. Simultaneously he surveyed the open grounds in Carteret County ^[17] with a view to their drainage and reclamation, a work first considered in the days of Hamilton Fulton but not undertaken until 1852. Fulton's earlier examination of the possibility of reopening Roanoke Inlet, made in 1820, had also been taken into consideration by Governor Dudley who had commissioned Gwynn to make a new examination in 1840. It was with reference to this examination that the Bureau of Topographic Engineers remarked to Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett on 28 Feb. 1840, "Any survey made under the personal superintendence of Major Walter Gwynn, would receive the confidence of this Bureau, as his intelligence and experience are well known." As had been the case in Fulton's report, Gwynn's report had not resulted in an attempt to reopen the inlet. In 1856 Gwynn had investigated the conditions of Cape Fear and Deep rivers and had reported to the General Assembly on the work of improvements in the navigation of those streams. Now, after the Civil War, Gwynn was appointed by Governor Jonathan Worth in 1867 to make a new survey of the capital and to report on the public lands in the city and on its outskirts; the first postbellum map of the city resulted from this survey. On 1 Feb. 1867, Gwynn was commissioned agent of the Literary Fund to supervise and superintend all the swamplands belonging to that agency. Gwynn's report later that year to Governor Worth was his last work for the state; it was published posthumously in 1883 in a state public document entitled *Reports on the Swamp Lands of North Carolina Belonging to the State Board of Education*

Gwynn married Elizabeth Rush (of the Maryland family of that name) about 1829 and had by her six children: Bruce,

Walter Ballard, Henry Upton, Peyton, William, and Mary. He died in Baltimore, Md. His body was returned to Richmond and buried in Hollywood Cemetery close to the crumbling remains of the James River and Kanawha Canal. Here there is more than a small touch of irony. A contemporary, writing of Gwynn's construction of the canal's tidewater connection, stated that Gwynn had "made for himself a reputation among his fellow engineers which will last for all time." Within a few years of Gwynn's death, it was as if neither the engineer nor the work had ever existed. A rather handsome portrait of Gwynn dating from the 1840s is owned by the Confederate Museum, Richmond, Va.; a photograph from much later in life was published in the fifth volume of Walter Clark^[18]'s *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*^[19].

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Subjects:

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