

Roberts, William Anderson ^[1]

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by M. Q. Plumblee, 1994

22 May 1837–1899

William Anderson Roberts, artist, farmer, and Confederate soldier of English descent, was born in new Prospect Church three miles west of [Yanceyville](#) ^[2], the son of Elijah, a farmer, and Rebecca B. Davis Roberts. Reared in [Caswell County](#) ^[3], he knew the deprivations of rural farm life and was educated in the local schools. Early in life he manifested an interest in art, but how and from whom he received training is unknown.

At age twenty he was painting portraits on a commercial basis, the first of which was of Starling Gunn, a veteran of the American Revolution, for which he received \$20. His commissions grew and the cost of individual portraits soon advanced to \$35. His standard charge for groups of three was \$60. During 1857 he painted 106 portraits of well-known people in his native county. In 1858 and 1859 he painted in adjoining [Rockingham County](#) ^[4], primarily in the families of Scales, Timberlake, Montgomery, Leissure, Spencer, Willard, Watkins, and Dillard.

His career interrupted by the Civil War, Roberts enlisted in [Alamance County](#) ^[5] on 21 June 1861 and later in [Halifax County](#) ^[6] he was assigned to the Fourteenth Regiment. On 17 Sept. 1862 he was wounded in the right hand at Sharpsburg, Md. Suffering from this injury and other disabilities, he entered the Confederate hospital at Danville, Va., on 23 Dec. 1862 because of chronic bronchitis.

Roberts participated in the Battle of Gettysburg, which he described as "commenced on July 1, 1863 and continued 3 days." Ill with jaundice, he entered Moore Hospital, Richmond, Va., on 17 Sept. 1863 but in November was transferred to the hospital at Danville with a dislocated elbow. Complications ensued because he "failed to enter at proper time." Other illnesses that plagued him while in service included chronic diarrhea, neuralgia, and "general disabilities" for some of which he also was hospitalized. Although absent from his unit on many occasions, he remained in service for the duration of the war. On 13 Jan. 1865 he was transferred to the invalid corps and finally paroled at [Greensboro](#) ^[7] on 13 May.

After the war Roberts returned to his family in Caswell County, where he farmed and resumed his occupation as an itinerant painter of portraits. Between 1865 and 1868 he worked in his home county for fees of \$50 for individual and \$75 for full-length portraits.

From January to July 1869 he was in the Shelbyville-Louisville, Ky., area seeking commissions but found only fourteen. Returning home, he soon painted seven portraits. During the period 1870–72 he was in Virginia at Danville and Richmond, where he painted nineteen portraits. In 1872 he painted a picture of General Robert E. Lee, apparently from a photograph or another portrait, since the subject had died in 1870; his account book indicates that "no charges" were made for this one, although his customary price at the time was \$80. A diligent search for this work has not been successful.

As age and infirmity had their effects on the artist, the number of his portraits declined. In 1874 he painted only the picture of Mrs. Bartlett Yancey. Between four and six each year continued through 1883, the last being that of Travis Wilson. Those of Dr. S. A. Richmond, Dr. and Mrs. A. C. Yancey, and Dr. and Mrs. L. G. Henderson were charged off to doctors' bills. Many descendants of the subjects own and prize the portraits that Roberts painted.

A deeply religious man, he carried a Bible and a copy of a *Book of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* during the war. His Bible was lost on 1 July 1863 at Gettysburg but later found and returned to him. It bears his marking of choice passages. A member of Prospect Church, Roberts believed in the fundamentals of Methodism. In the 1870s he strongly disagreed with the creed of the Campbellites or Disciples of Christ.

On 1 July 1859 Roberts married Mary Catherine Watlington, and they were the parents of Annie Cutler (Mrs. William Franklin Lyon) and Mollie Belle (Mrs. Sidney Thomas Hicks). His grave, marked by a native stone, is at Prospect Church on land he gave for a congregational cemetery. A self-portrait of Roberts survives.

References:

American Library Association Portrait Index ^[8] (1906).

Weymouth T. Jordan, comp., *North Carolina Troops, 1861–1865: A Roster*, vol. 4 (1973).

Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina* vol. 1 ^[9] (1901).

Roy Meredith, *The Face of Robert E. Lee in Life and Legend* ^[10] (1947).

William A. Roberts's original list of portraits, personal notes and correspondence, and Bible (possession of M. Q. Plumblee, Burlington).

Additional Resources:

"Portrait, Accession #[H.2009.81.1](#) ^[11]." 1875. North Carolina Museum of History (accessed August 27, 2014).

"Portrait, Accession #[H.2009.81.2](#) ^[12]." 1875. North Carolian Museum of History (accessed August 27, 2014).

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