

Wright, David Minton ^[1]

Wright, David Minton

by William S. Powell, 1996

21 Apr. 1809–23 Oct. 1863

David Minton Wright, physician, remembered because of the regrettable circumstances surrounding his death, was born in Nansemond County, Va., the son of David Minton (1775–1813) and Mary Armistead Wright (1777–1817). He received his earliest education locally and then, at a suitable age, was sent to the military school of Captain Patrick in Middletown, Conn. After completing its program, he moved to Edenton, N.C., to study medicine under Dr. William Warren, the father of the noted physician Dr. [Edward Warren](#) ^[2]. Subsequently he entered the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a doctor of medicine degree about 1833. Following further training at the hospital in Philadelphia, he settled in Edenton and joined the practice of William Warren, an association that lasted for eighteen years. During his second year in Edenton Wright married Penelope Margaret Creecy (1816–89).

In 1854 he moved to Norfolk, Va., for the better advantages that city offered his growing family. Wright soon established a large and lucrative practice. When an epidemic of yellow fever struck the city the next year, he remained steadfast at his post. All of his family and servants remained in the city with him as he worked tirelessly to aid the sick. Wright himself fell victim of the scourge but fortunately recovered "through the kind nursing of his loving companions, his indomitable will and the skill of his physicians, in the providence of God."

By the eve of the [Civil War](#) ^[3] Wright's reputation as a skilled physician, a gentleman, and a useful citizen was well established. As war appeared inevitable, he, like thousands of other Southerners, was a staunch [Union](#) ^[4] man. It was said that "as long as he could do so consistently with loyalty to his State and people, he used his influence to prevent war and to bring about a peaceful settlement of the dispute between the sections." With the final break, however, he became a firm supporter of the Confederacy, and two of his sons joined the army.

When Federal troops entered Norfolk on 10 May 1862, the noncombatant citizens were permitted to carry on undisturbed and peacefully. As a physician Wright was accorded the same privileges. This changed for him on 11 July 1863. There are numerous accounts of the precise events of that afternoon on the sidewalk of Main Street. Reports by Wright, his friends, and other witnesses do not conform to the findings of army investigators. Although civil government in Norfolk was presumed to operate, the city actually was under military authority, and it was the military, not the civil government, that interpreted the events of the day and that determined the fate of Dr. Wright.

According to the newspapers, Wright was walking on the sidewalk near his home when he met a column of African American troops occupying the entire walk, "jostling men, women and children into the gutter."

"Dr. Wright stepped aside," it was reported, "and as he did so, in the heat of his indignation he uttered some sharp exclamation of contempt and disgust. A white lieutenant, A. L. Sanborn, heard this and advanced on Dr. Wright with sword drawn and threatening." The doctor was unarmed, but a friend who saw his danger handed him a pistol.

With the weapon held behind his back but facing Sanborn, Wright stood still as he called out "Stand off!" to the advancing lieutenant.

Eyewitnesses stated that Sanborn continued to advance and the doctor fired a single shot, striking the lieutenant in the hand. Sanborn called on his troops to assist in making an arrest, and "there was a short, hot altercation," a newspaper reported. "The feeling against negroes in United States uniform was then intensely bitter, especially among the older men who had been brought up to honor the army and the flag it represented."

Several shots were fired, but by whom was never known. Sanborn was hit again and "clinched" with Wright, who was said to have put the pistol to Sanborn's breast for a moment but did not fire. African American troops rushed in with fixed bayonets but were turned aside, whereupon Sanborn relaxed his hold and fell dead into the adjacent store.

Wright was immediately arrested and tried by a military commission. During the course of the trial various points were made—that the military had no authority when a civilian was involved and there was a civil government in Norfolk, the fatal shot may well have been fired by someone else (even one of the troops), or insanity might have been pled. Various routes were followed with appeals to both civil and military authorities, even to the president of the United States, but, as Wright observed early in the proceedings, it had been determined that he was guilty before the first evidence was considered.

And indeed he was found guilty and hanged. He thereby came to be considered a martyr to the Southern cause and a hero. When Federal forces occupied Petersburg, where his wife had taken refuge, she moved to Chapel Hill, N.C., but in time returned to Virginia.

Dr. Wright's children were Elizabeth Minton, David Minton, Penelope Margaret, Minton Augustus, Elizabeth Minton, Mary Creecy Armistead, Joshua Creecy Armistead, Sarah Jordan Armistead, William Armistead, and Viola Jessica. Minton A. was killed at Gettysburg, but word of this was kept from Wright. Descendants of the family still lived in the region in the late twentieth century, keeping alive the memory of David Minton Wright.

While he was in prison awaiting final word as to his fate, the long-anticipated wedding of one of Wright's daughters was held in the prison so that he could give the bride away. Also while confined, he was baptized and received communion. He was visited often and for long periods of time by several clergymen of various denominations in Norfolk. Wright constructed his own coffin, of cypress wood, presumably while in prison. Inside the top were hung daguerreotypes of his wife and children. Initially Federal officials were reluctant to release his body to the family but eventually relented. Attending his funeral in Christ Church, Norfolk, was an overflow crowd, while hundreds of mourners lined the route to the cemetery. At the time of his execution and funeral the day was dark, rainy, and dismal.

References:

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Additional Resources:

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326. <https://archive.org/details/southernhistoricv21sout> ^[5] (accessed January 24, 2014).

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