

Local doctor and senator never reimbursed for Civil War confiscations

By Rebekah Davis
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Nobody in the room could argue that Dr. Coman was lying about the facts, but in the end it came down to the feelings. And so, the answer was “No.”

Dr. Joshua P. Coman, one of Limestone County’s leading citizens, came before the Southern Claims Commission to plead his case March 3, 1871, almost six years after the end of a war that saw him lose more than \$3,000 worth of his livestock, crops, timber – and even an entire log house – to the needs of Union troops encamped in and around Athens.

Coman, like many Southerners, had to prove two major things to the Commission: 1) He had always been loyal to the Union; and 2) his goods and services had been confiscated or used during the war to support Union troops.

The fact that the troops had taken much was not really ever in dispute. Coman claimed \$3,126 in losses, including bedding, cows, a mule, a horse, 300 timber trees, and 10,000 fence rails. He had witnesses to soldiers taking those away, and a couple of his former slaves described seeing soldiers dismantle and haul away a log house, a log smoke house, a frame kitchen and a log stable. At the time, the total worth of all four buildings was \$825.

“They burnt them, I suppose, for I did not see any quarters made out of them but these little log tents and the weather was rough and they remained there a good little while,” Nick Donnell, one of Coman’s former slaves, testified to the Commission. “They took the flooring and doors and all pertaining to it.... It had a brick chimney and they dug under it till they throwed it, then they put the brick into wagons and hauled them over to camps. They then made little chimneys to their quarters. Yes, I saw them doing that thing and when they left the little chimneys were standing there.”

But proving his loyalty was much more difficult for Coman. Elected to the Alabama state senate in August 1861 – seven months after Alabama had seceded – Coman claimed that he never took an oath to support the state of Alabama or the Confederacy. He said he only attended two sessions of the general assembly before deciding not to return because he couldn’t accomplish anything for the Union party.

“The sentiment of the senate was so obnoxious to my feelings that I could not remain any longer,” Coman said.

So back at home, Coman spent much of his time during the war returning to his previous profession as a medical doctor. He furnished beds, blankets and furniture for Athens’ first hospital that was quickly thrown together in 1862, and in 1864 he made doctor’s rounds to the sick and wounded there daily.

Coman and his witnesses pointed out that on the Fourth of July, 1865, he was the only person in town who hoisted an American flag at his home, and he gave a speech of loyalty to the Union soldiers who gathered to cheer him. Throughout the war, he said, he had always supported the cause, even though he might not have proclaimed it loudly out of fear of repercussions from his Rebel neighbors.

When everyone had said their piece, the SCC members were “compelled to wade through more than a hundred pages” of testimony and documentation. Their conclusion: “In that testimony he is either disingenuous or he has persuaded himself that his hopes, sympathies and feelings were

throughout the war, precisely as they were before, and at the time of secession and again after the war was over and that his conduct during the war was in keeping with this feelings.”

They dismissed his 1865 Independence Day speech to the Union troops, saying, “It is just the speech that any Rebel could and would make who was willing to accept the situation and after sustain the Federal government.”

Bottom line: “The claim is disallowed.”

Coman was never reimbursed for his wartime losses.

Note: Information for this article was taken from Athens, Limestone County: 1861-1865, a publication of the Friends of the Archives. This book is available for purchase for \$30 at the Limestone County Archives.

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