

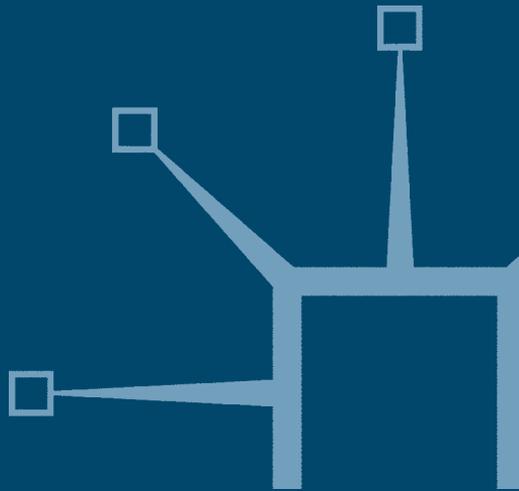
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# A YEAR IN THE SOUTH

FOUR LIVES IN 1865

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Stephen V. Ash



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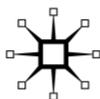
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FOUR LIVES IN 1865

STEPHEN V. ASH

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A YEAR IN THE SOUTH: FOUR LIVES IN 1865

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*For Paul H. Bergeron:  
mentor, colleague, and friend*

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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Prologue Four Southerners	1
PART ONE WINTER	
Louis Hughes	19
Cornelia McDonald	29
John Robertson	47
Samuel Agnew	61
PART TWO SPRING	
Samuel Agnew	75
John Robertson	87
Cornelia McDonald	97
Louis Hughes	109
PART THREE SUMMER	
Louis Hughes	127
Samuel Agnew	143
Cornelia McDonald	157
John Robertson	171

PART FOUR  
FALL AND ANOTHER WINTER

John Robertson	183
Cornelia McDonald	197
Louis Hughes	209
Samuel Agnew	219
Epilogue 1866 and Beyond	235
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	245
<i>Notes</i>	247
<i>Bibliography</i>	277
<i>Index</i>	285

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1. Map showing major sites mentioned in the book. Courtesy of the University of Tennessee Cartographic Services Laboratory  | xiv |
| 2. Louis Hughes, ca. 1897. From Louis Hughes, <i>Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom</i> (Milwaukee, 1897).   | 2   |
| 3. Cornelia McDonald, ca. 1890. From Cornelia McDonald, <i>A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860–1865</i> (Nashville, 1934).                      | 6   |
| 4. Page from the handwritten memoir of John Robertson. Courtesy of the McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library, Knoxville, Tennessee.   | 9   |
| 5. Samuel Agnew, ca. 1880–1905. From <i>The Centennial History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1803–1903</i> (Charleston, S.C., 1905).   | 13  |
| 6. Cornelia McDonald’s house in Lexington, Virginia. From Cornelia McDonald, <i>A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860–1865</i> (Nashville, 1934). | 30  |
| 7. The McDonald family in 1870. From Cordelia McDonald, <i>A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860–1865</i> (Nashville, 1934).                      | 32  |
| 8. Site of Blue Springs Church. Photograph by author.   | 58  |
| 9. Samuel Agnew’s diary entry for January 1, 1865. Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.                                     | 62  |
| 10. Cabin that stood on the Agnew plantation. Courtesy of Tommy Lee, Brice’s Crossroads Museum and Visitors Center, Baldwin, Mississippi, and Brice’s Crossroads National Battlefield Commission. | 83  |

11. Main Street, Lexington, Virginia, ca. 1867–70.  
From the Rockbridge Historical Society Collection.  
Courtesy of Special Collections, Leyburn Library,  
Washington and Lee University. 103
12. John S. “Master Jack” McGehee. Courtesy of J. Paul White,  
Senatobia, Mississippi, and Fredonia Methodist Church of  
Panola County, Mississippi. 113
13. Fredonia Methodist Church. Photograph by author. 116
14. Memphis river front at the time of the Civil War.  
From *Harper’s Weekly*, July 5, 1862.  
Courtesy of Special Collections,  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville. 137
15. Angus McDonald in 1852. From Cornelia McDonald,  
*A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life  
in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860–1865* (Nashville, 1934). 164
16. Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain. Courtesy of  
the Still Picture Branch, National Archives,  
College Park, Maryland. 187
17. Lexington Cemetery. Photograph by author. 205
18. Samuel Agnew and family. Courtesy of  
Edwina Carpenter, Brice’s Crossroads Museum  
and Visitors Center, Baldwyn, Mississippi, and  
Brice’s Crossroads National Battlefield Commission. 236
19. Grave monument of Samuel Agnew. Courtesy of  
Tommy Lee, Brice’s Crossroads Museum and  
Visitors Center, Baldwyn, Mississippi, and  
Brice’s Crossroads National Battlefield Commission. 237

## PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT FOUR ORDINARY PEOPLE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY time. Their names were Louis Hughes, Cornelia McDonald, John Robertson, and Samuel Agnew. From birth to death, they lived far apart from one another and in very different circumstances. They had little in common except this: they were Southerners who lived through the pivotal moment of Southern history.

The moment was 1865. When that year began, the Old South—incarnated forty-seven months earlier as the Confederate States of America—still stood. When that year ended, the Old South was gone and a New South was taking shape.

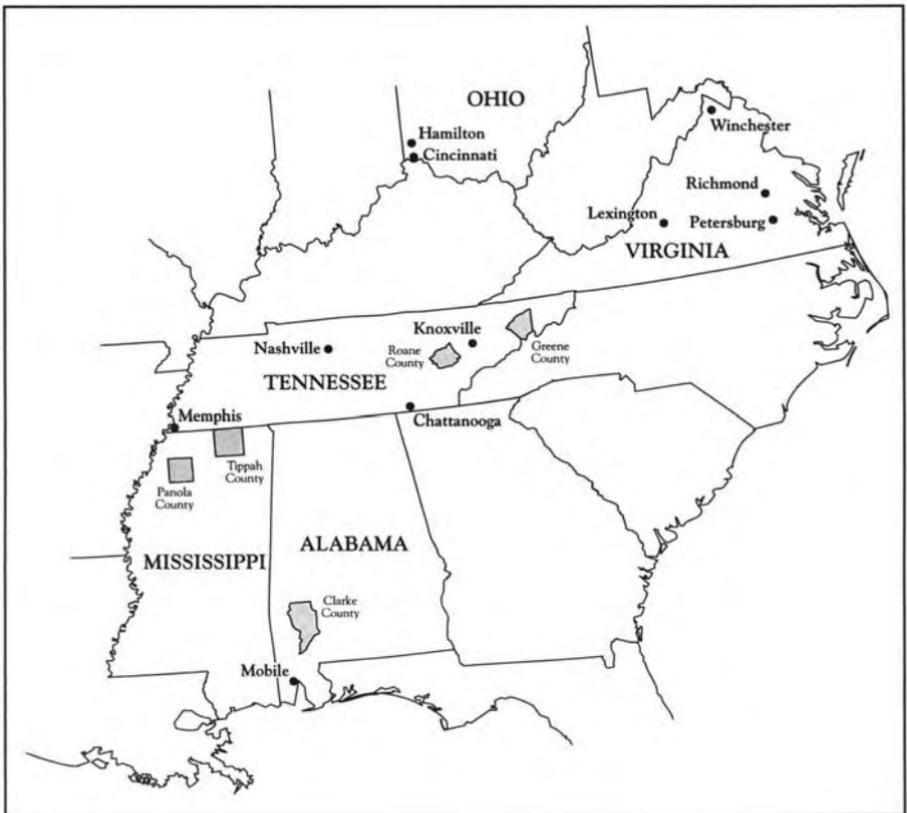
Surely no other sizable portion of the American people ever experienced so wrenching a year, or one so brimming with possibilities, as Southerners did in 1865. It was a year that began in war and ended in peace, a year that saw disunion give way to reconstruction, a year that marked the passage from slavery to freedom. The story of those people in that tumultuous time is not only fascinating but also instructive, for it can tell us much about how the New South came to be and about what the Old South was.

Storytellers confront the same dilemma as painters and photographers: the broader their perspective, the more comprehensive their scene, but the less distinct their subjects' features. A narrative that tries to embrace all the Southern people in 1865 risks reducing them to a faceless crowd. I have adopted a different approach that poses its own risks.

In focusing on four individuals, I have sought a balance of breadth and depth, while obviously forfeiting any claim to comprehensiveness. I have selected Hughes, McDonald, Robertson, and Agnew from among many possible subjects in the belief that their stories would reflect something of the experience of Southerners as a whole in 1865. But if these four were in some ways typical, they were also in many ways unique, and much that is recounted herein is essentially personal, illuminating no lives but their own.

This book begins with a prologue that introduces the characters and sketches their lives up to 1865. The four parts that follow move chronologically from the beginning to the end of 1865, with each part corresponding to a season of the year. The characters appear sequentially in each part, and an epilogue summarizes their lives after 1865.

Although each of the four wrote a personal account of some sort, they also left a great deal unsaid. I have examined other sources to find out more about them and about the places they lived, the people they knew, and the events they lived through. Even so, much about these three men and this one woman remains obscure. What this book offers, therefore, is not the whole story but rather a vivid part of the story of four Southerners as they stepped across the threshold between the old world and the new.



1. Major sites mentioned in the book

# PROLOGUE

## FOUR SOUTHERNERS

LOUIS HUGHES WAS THIRTY-TWO YEARS OLD WHEN THE YEAR 1865 began, and he was a slave—a mulatto slave, born of a black mother and a white father. The memoir he published in his old age is a vivid and in many ways frank reminiscence, but it is curiously reticent about his paternity. In it Louis mentions but does not name his father, though he certainly knew who he was. Nor does he explain his own surname, which was not that of his mother's master or any of his own subsequent masters.<sup>1</sup>

In his memoir, Louis Hughes does relate that he was born in Virginia, near Charlottesville, in 1832. At about age eleven he was sold away from his mother to a man who lived nearby. A few months later he was taken to Richmond and sold to another man. Louis never saw his mother again. In 1844 his owner got fed up with the boy's sickliness and decided to dispose of him. He put him on the auction block in a Richmond slave market and sold him for \$380. The buyer was a Mississippi planter named Edmund McGehee, whom Louis would come to call Boss.<sup>2</sup>

Louis and some others bought by McGehee soon set out from Richmond, heading southward to Georgia and then westward to their new home in Mississippi. They were among the many thousands of slaves brought from the older regions of the South in the antebellum years to clear and plant the fresh lands on the expanding cotton frontier. When McGehee's newly purchased laborers arrived at his Pontotoc County plantation in late December 1844, he singled out the twelve-year-old Louis, brought him to the Big House, and gave him to his wife, Sarah, as a Christmas present.<sup>3</sup>

Motherless, friendless, and traumatized by his abrupt uprooting, Louis grieved for a long time but gradually adapted to his new life. Duty as a houseboy



L. Hughes

2. Louis Hughes, ca. 1897

exempted him from much of the drudgery of plantation labor but kept him at the beck and call of Mrs. McGehee (known to the slaves as Madam), who was bad-tempered and abusive. Louis soon came to loathe her. He grew more or less fond of Boss, however, who recognized Louis's intelligence and occasionally took the boy away from housework to assist him in some task. But Boss, too, had a cruel streak.<sup>4</sup>

Around 1850 Louis's circumstances changed again. Boss, who had become quite wealthy, built a magnificent mansion on a fourteen-acre estate two miles outside Memphis. There he moved his family and a dozen or more of his slaves, including Louis, whom he appointed butler and manservant. At the same time, he sold his Pontotoc plantation and bought another in Bolivar County, Mississippi, on the banks of the Mississippi River below Memphis. He put this property in the charge of an overseer.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1850s Louis Hughes had grown to manhood. Slight of build and standing just five and a half feet tall, he was hardly an imposing figure. But he was smart, and he was resolute: he had by then made up his mind that he was not going to live out his life as a slave if he could help it.<sup>6</sup>

What sparked Louis's quest for freedom was an epiphany of a kind that every enslaved man and woman eventually experienced. He was now a grown man, and yet, he came to see, slavery denied him full manhood. His master and mistress continued to scold and slap him like a child, continued to dictate his every activity from the minute he rose in the morning until he went to bed at night. That such humiliations were accompanied by a good measure of paternalistic care and indulgence made them no less demeaning.<sup>7</sup>

Most adult slaves thus came to hate slavery and yearn for freedom. Louis Hughes came to hate and yearn more deeply than some because of the nearly unbearable circumstances in the McGehee household. To the daily cruelties of Madam were added the not-infrequent barbarities of Boss and other white men in his employ. Most Southern slaves, after weighing the miseries of their situation against the dangers of resistance, reluctantly accommodated themselves to slavery; but Louis was impelled to challenge the institution. Twice in the 1850s he ran off by stowing away on a steamboat at the Memphis wharf. Both times he was caught and returned to his master.<sup>8</sup>

Louis was living at the Memphis estate when the Civil War began in the spring of 1861. By then he was about twenty-nine years old and had been married for two and a half years. His wife, Matilda, was a cook purchased by Boss in 1855.<sup>9</sup>

When the Union army and navy advanced down the Mississippi River in the spring of 1862 and threatened Memphis, Boss abandoned his estate and took his family and slaves to Panola County, in northern Mississippi, where his father-in-law, John “Master Jack” McGehee, lived. Soon thereafter Louis was sent to the Bolivar plantation and was kept there until early 1863. He then was sent back to Panola, where he rejoined his wife and the McGehee family.<sup>10</sup>

The outbreak of war and the coming of the Yankees excited Louis and others who sought freedom. Across the South, blacks whispered among themselves at rumors of Union victories and watched for a chance to flee to the invaders. At the same time, war and invasion magnified white Southerners’ fear of black restlessness and their determination to stifle it. In the winter of 1862–63 Louis tried a third time to escape, setting out overland toward the rumored location of a Union army force. But he blundered into a company of Confederate troops who returned him to captivity. A couple of months later, encouraged by reports that other Panola County slaves were getting away, Louis tried again. This time he headed toward Memphis, which was now in Union hands. Matilda and three others joined him in this attempt. The five were swiftly tracked down and brought back to Master Jack’s plantation.<sup>11</sup>

By the spring of 1863, Boss—forced by Yankee incursions to abandon his Bolivar plantation, too—had decided to move most of his slaves to a safe place deep in the Confederacy’s interior. At a site on the Tombigbee River in Alabama the state government, using leased slaves, manufactured salt. Louis and Matilda Hughes were sent to the saltworks along with other McGehee slaves. They were there in early January 1864, when they learned that Boss had died unexpectedly while preparing to move his family to Alabama. They were still at the saltworks one year later, on the first day of 1865.<sup>12</sup>



When 1865 began, Cornelia McDonald was forty-two years old and living in a rented house in Lexington, Virginia, with her seven children. She was a widow and a war refugee. The death of her husband, a Confederate army officer, and the loss of her home had brought her to the verge of poverty and despair.

She was born in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1822, the youngest child of Humphrey and Anne Peake. Her father was a physician who, although not wealthy, was well off, and Cornelia grew up being waited on by slaves and

driven about in a carriage. While she was still a girl, the family moved to rural Prince William County, where her father pursued farming along with medicine. Later they settled in the hamlet of Front Royal in the Shenandoah Valley. Cornelia thus became acquainted with farm and village as well as town life. She developed a passion for horseback riding but was also drawn to intellectual and artistic pursuits: reading, writing, drawing, and painting. She loved browsing in her father's library and wandering through the countryside with her sketchbook in hand. As one of her daughters later wrote, "Everything that happened interested her."<sup>13</sup>

In 1835 the family moved to Palmyra in eastern Missouri. Though no longer a true frontier area by that time, it was raw and wild by contrast to genteel Virginia. For the rest of her life Cornelia retained vivid memories of her Palmyra years, especially of riding out onto the prairie and galloping through head-high grass with her black maidservant mounted behind her, and of watching wide-eyed as thousands of Potawatomi Indians passed on the road, heading westward to a reservation. But there were painful memories of Palmyra, too. Anne Peake died there in 1837, leaving fifteen-year-old Cornelia motherless. Anne was bedridden for months before her death, and Cornelia spent long hours sitting with her. When her mother slept, Cornelia would open a volume of Byron and read until she awoke.<sup>14</sup>

Sometime after his wife's death, Dr. Peake moved the family to nearby Hannibal, a small town on the Mississippi River, and there Cornelia came of age. Among the inhabitants of Hannibal in those days were little Samuel Clemens and his comical friend Ruel Gridly, supposedly the model for Huckleberry Finn. Cornelia saw them often playing in the street outside her home. Dr. Peake appears as a character in one of Mark Twain's stories.<sup>15</sup>

Once she was grown, Cornelia regularly visited relatives in St. Louis during the winter social season. It had become a big and lively city by the 1840s and Cornelia enjoyed the round of activities there, especially the glittering dinner parties and balls. She was a favorite of the young bachelor gentlemen of St. Louis, some of whom were U.S. army officers stationed at Jefferson Barracks. Among those she dined and danced with were Lieutenant Ulysses "Sam" Grant and Lieutenant James "Pete" Longstreet.<sup>16</sup>

It was back in Hannibal, however, that she met her husband-to-be. He was a widower, twenty-three years her senior, named Angus McDonald. A Virginia native, he was educated at West Point but had left the army a year or two after graduation to pursue various adventures, including frontier fur