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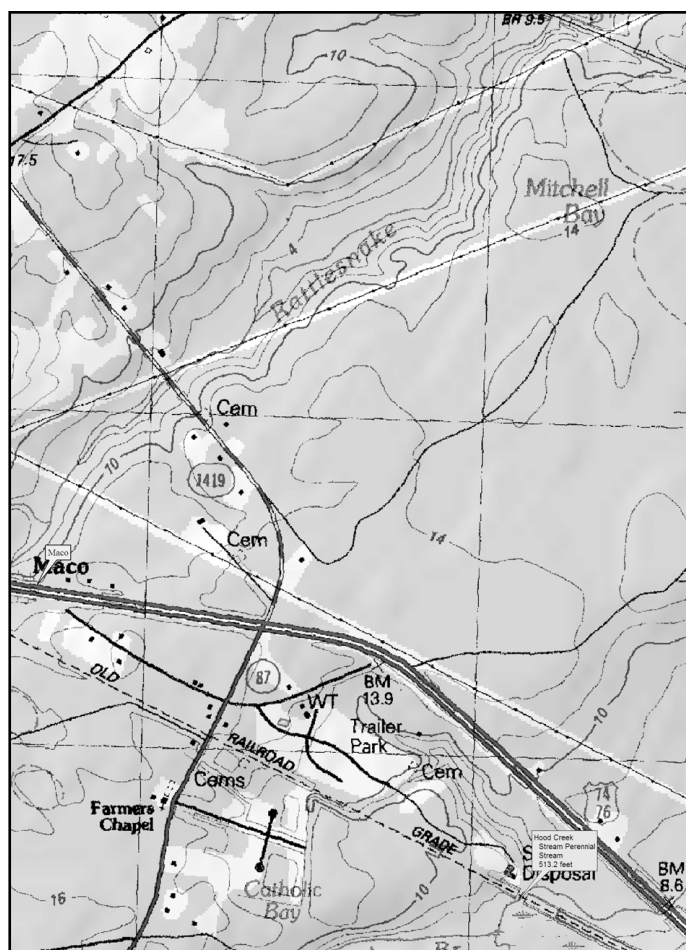
Charles Baldwin A Likely Joe

By JAMES BURKE

The funeral of Charles Baldwin took place at St. James Episcopal Church in Wilmington, North Carolina on January 8, 1856. He was interred at Oakdale Cemetery.¹ His death notice in *The Chronicle* reads, "In this town on Monday evening, the 7th inst., Mr. CHAS. BALDWIN, formerly of New York, but for many years a resident of this place, where he enjoyed the respect and good wishes of all who knew him."² *The Daily Herald* adds to his praise by stating, "Mr. Baldwin was highly esteemed for his many good qualities, and his death is deeply deplored by a large number of friends."³ At the time of his death, he was probably thirty-eight years old; in the 1850 census, his age is given as thirty-three years.⁴ It appears that he was a bachelor who lived in rented rooms. No marriage records or deeds of the time bear his name.

The life of Charles Baldwin, a conductor working for the Wilmington & Manchester Railroad and seemingly a man of modest means, appears to be like that of so many of the rootless men of his day. He bravely set out to make his way, only to die far from home with little more than his personal possessions and the good will of his neighbors. The accident that claimed his life was similar to many accidents experienced by railroad workers of the era. Primary source documents that report the details of his death hardly merit more attention than those documenting his peers' deaths. However, when certain details of his death in a railroad accident are examined closely and understood in the context of regional geography, Charles Baldwin appears to be the individual at the heart of the most enduring railroad legend of the Lower Cape Fear region, that of Joe Baldwin.

There are several versions of the legend, most of which mention that the car in which he was riding became uncoupled from the rest of the train. The accident occurred when



the detached cars were rear-ended by a second train closely following the first. Most versions give the year of the accident as 1867. None cite primary sources. Louis Toomer Moore (1885-1961), a local historian who specialized in the history of southeastern North Carolina, provided a different version of the legend in *Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region*.

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The Bulletin welcomes manuscripts for review. Articles
 should contain researched primary source material of
 Lower Cape Fear interest.

The legend of the Joe Baldwin ghost light was born in 1868 ... During that primitive era of railroading, cars were joined by link and pins and trainmen had to stand between the cars to make a connection. Joe Baldwin, legend has it, was conductor on a train that became uncoupled. This happened near the old station at Farmers Turnout (Maco). He was killed, with a lantern in his hand, as he tried to uncouple the cars.⁵

Moore's version, like the others, does not cite primary source documents. However, he places the accident within the context of the standard practice of coupling cars rather than a runaway car as other versions do, and makes reference to the trestle at Hood's Creek,⁶ and the old station at

Farmers Turnout – Brinkley's Depot at the 17-mile mark. The new station would have been Maco Station at the 14-mile mark.

News of the railroad accident that occurred on the Wilmington & Manchester Railroad on Friday, January 4, 1856 first appears in *The Daily Herald* the next day.

Just as we are going to press, we learn that an accident occurred upon the Wilmington and Manchester Road last night, at Rattlesnake Grade, by which several persons were more or less injured, Messrs. Charles Baldwin and E.L. Sherwood, of this town. Mr. Baldwin's injuries, it is feared, may result fatally.⁷

The Daily Journal, another Wilmington newspaper, expands on the details concerning the accident.

RAIL ROAD ACCIDENT. – We learn that a painful accident occurred last night, on the Wilmington and Manchester Rail Road, in the neighborhood of Hood's Creek, some eight or ten mile [sic] from town. It would appear that on account of some defect in the working of the pumps⁸ of the Locomotive engaged in carrying up the night train going west from this place, the Engineer detached the train and ran on ahead some distance, and in returning to take up the train again, came back at so high a rate of speed as to cause a serious collision, resulting in some damage to the train, the mail car being smashed up and some little damage done to the other cars. The most painful circumstance connected with the affair is that Mr. Charles Baldwin, the conductor got seriously, and it is feared, mortally injured, by being thrown from the train with so much force as to cause concussion of the brain. Mr. E. L. Sherwood, Mail Agent, was slightly injured. None of the passengers were in any way hurt. Until the circumstances of the affair can be more fully examined into we forbear any comment. – *Daily Journal*, 5th inst.⁹

The critical geographic references in these two articles which establish the association between the 1856 accident and the Joe Baldwin Legend are Rattlesnake Grade and Hood's Creek. The township of Maco (N 34° 17.225', W 78° 8.769') came into existence about 1890. Originally named Maraco, Maco was a land development project undertaken by the MacRae Company.¹⁰ Prior to the founding of Maco,

the area was also known as Farmers Turnout, because the direction of the railroad arcs southwest to follow a straight line to the town of Fair Bluff, North Carolina. Before reaching the turnout when traveling from the direction of Wilmington, a train would pass over approximately eight and a half miles of straight track and would have to ascend the four mile grade from Hood's Creek to rise above Rattlesnake Creek (from 59.1 feet above sea level to 81.2 feet above sea level). For this reason, the area was known to railroad men of the day as Rattlesnake Grade. The two stations that existed prior to the founding of Maco were Register's at the nine-mile mark and Brinkley's at the seventeen-mile mark.¹¹ Currently, a modest trestle is all that remains of the railroad at this location, as the track was removed during the 1970s.


Charles Baldwin ended up causing his own death by neglecting to place a lantern at the front end of the cars after the engine and tender were detached.

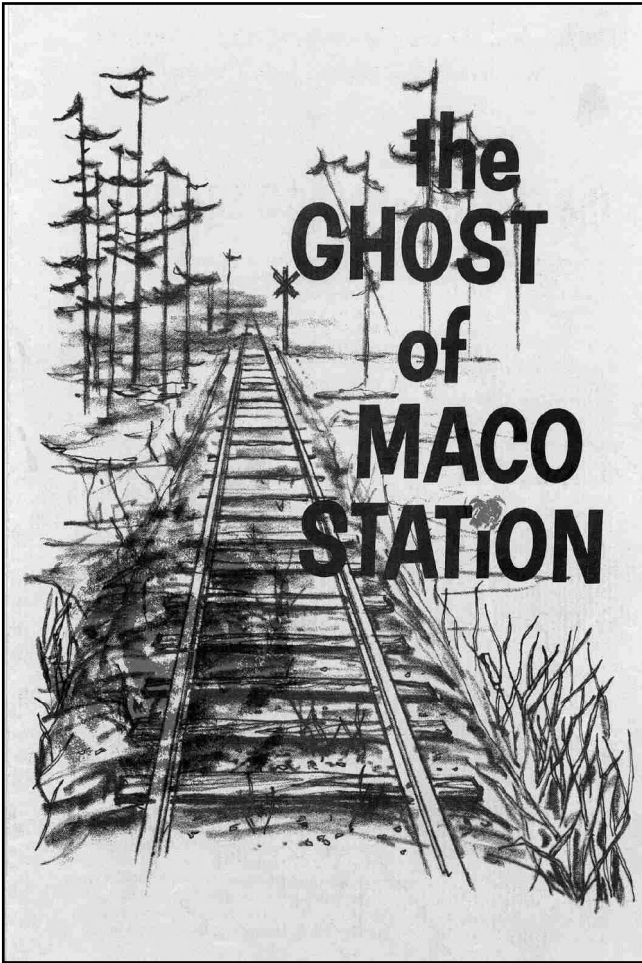
A coroner's jury, summoned by Coroner J. C. Wood, to examine into the circumstances by which the late lamented Mr. Charles Baldwin came to his death, after mature deliberation, report that it was occasioned by a blow received on the head, on the night of Friday, the 4th inst., while acting as Conductor on the mail train of the Wilmington and Manchester R. R., by a collision of the engine and mail train. The jury cannot find, from the testimony, that the Engineer, Mr. Nicholas Walker, is in the least culpable, as there was no light at the front end of the train, which it was the duty of Conductor to have placed there. Signed by Benjamin Hallett, foreman.¹²

This was a fatal mistake rather than the heroic act of trying to stop a train wreck that appears in the legend. However, some details of the accident – the role of the lantern, the uncoupled cars, Mr. Baldwin's position as conductor, and collision with an engine (though it belonged to his train) – survive in the legend, though their context is altered.

This is the extent of the primary source material available on Charles Baldwin and the 1856 accident. The evidence derived for this research is sufficient to reasonably prove that *at least* one actual conductor by the name of Baldwin was fatally injured in a railroad accident near the site of the present day township of Maco. The name of Joe Baldwin does not appear in the death records, marriage records, deeds, tax records for New Hanover County. His name does not appear in the Wilmington Directory for 1866. His name does not appear on the town's church or cemetery records. A report of his accident cannot be found in the town's newspa-

pers. However, it is possible that other primary source documents might be uncovered that reveal a second Baldwin. By presenting the hypothesis that Charles Baldwin is the source of the Joe Baldwin Legend and placing it in the hands of historians, the question of the existence of Joe Baldwin can be engaged as the subject of scholarly debate and serious research rather than allow it remain the property of story tellers who may alter or augment the legend.

Some speculation follows as to why the 1856 accident above many others should become the source of a legend. The Maco Lights, a strange electromagnetic phenomenon associated with the stretch of track where the historic and legendary Baldwin was supposed to have been killed, was said to be the light from an otherworldly lantern held by the ghost of Baldwin as he searched for his missing head. Moore states that the "popular explanation of the mystery is that Conductor Baldwin was decapitated in the accident and that he is taking nocturnal walks in search of his head."¹³ The tale is very old. For generations, people would go out to the small community of Maco and wait in the dark to see the lights. After the tracks were taken up, the lights were no longer seen. Nineteenth century railroading produced many fatalities; some were the result of heroic actions and the rest can be attributed to human and mechanical fallibility. Railroad men were custodians of their unique history and culture. The history was primarily transmitted orally, and the center of their culture was focused on accidents and heroic acts. It is not too difficult to imagine older railroad men working on the Wilmington & Manchester telling younger men who saw the ghostly light, "There goes Mr. Baldwin with his lantern. He was killed in an accident on that very spot." Later generations who were erecting monuments to the fallen Confederate dead doctored the legend further out of a hunger for more cultural heroes. The accident is transformed into gothic romance: Joe Baldwin, presumably a Southerner, trying to make a new life for himself after suffering the horrors of combat and the humiliation of defeat in the Civil War, summons up his forgotten courage to sacrifice his life to save others. The virtues of Southern manhood prove to be enduring. The heroic Joe Baldwin searching for his head make a far better ghost than poor Charles Baldwin reliving his "if only I had" moment again and again in the afterlife – hardly an edifying tale for a defeated people. This explanation is totally intuitive and has no basis in documented fact. However, it does suggest that historians should reengage the legend by attempting to chronicle the evolution of the legend and the culture that surrounded it starting with the earliest versions found in print. 



Notes

- ¹ Mathews, Lula Walton (Leora Hiatt McEachern and Curry Kirk Walker) *St. James Church, Wilmington, North Carolina, Historical Records. Volume II, 1852-1872*. The Authors: Wilmington, NC, 1976. P. 67.
- ² *The Tri-Weekly Chronicle* (Wilmington, NC), January 8, 1856.
- ³ *The Daily Herald* (Wilmington, NC) January 8, 1856.
- ⁴ *US Census, 1850*. Wilmington in the County of New Hanover. P. 805.
- ⁵ Moore, Louis Toomer. *Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region*. Wilmington, NC: Louis T. Moore Memorial Fund, 1956 (1968). P. 246.
- ⁶ Moore. *Loc. Cit.*
- ⁷ *The Daily Herald* (Wilmington, NC) January 5, 1856.
- ⁸ The January 8, 1856 issue of *The Tri-Weekly Chronicle* includes addition information as to why the locomotive was detached. The engine and tender were uncoupled for the purpose of getting water.
- ⁹ *The Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC) dated January 7, 1856, printed in Vol. 12, No. 19 on January 11, 1856.
- ¹⁰ Powell, William S. *The North Carolina Gazetteer*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968. P. 308.
- ¹¹ Cumming, W.P. *North Carolina in Maps*. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1966. Plate XI (J.H. Colton, 1861); Wilmington and Manchester Railroad Company. *Proceedings of the stockholders of the Wilmington & Manchester R. R. Company* [serial]: at their ... annual meeting. Wilmington, NC: Thomas Loring, 1865. [Available.]. Chapel Hill: Wilson Library, University of North Carolina; and *Confederate Railroads*. Website, 2004. [Online. Available.]. <http://www.csa-railroads.com/Wilmington%20&%20Manchester520Stations.htm>
- ¹² *The Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC), dated January 14, 1856, printed in Vol. 12, No. 20 on January 18, 1856.
- ¹³ Moore. *Loc. Cit.*



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