

Guide to the Velma and Stephens G. Croom Collection

Biographical Information

This guide was prepared by Anthony Donaldson, July 1999

For the finding aid, please click here.. [<hyperlink to Croom Papers .pdf in Guides>Manuscripts>finding aids>](#)

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William Whitfield and Julia Stephens Croom

William Whitfield Croom was born in Lenoir County, North Carolina, the son of General William Croom and Elizabeth Whitfield. General Croom died in 1829, and William moved to Gadsden County, Florida, ca. 1835, where he became a cotton commission merchant and broker in Quincy. He also hired out most of the fifty slaves he inherited from his father's estate. In 1836 he married Julia Stephens of New Bern, North Carolina. Julia's father, Marcus Cicero Stephens, and mother, Mary Anne "Polly" Ellis, and their seven children had also relocated in Quincy, Florida, in 1835. William and Julia had two children, Cicero Stephens and Elizabeth Whitfield.

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During the 1850s William initiated a business relationship with a Dr. Taylor in Columbus, Georgia, and travelled frequently to New York in connection with his commission merchant business and a silk and ribbon jobbing business. William also speculated in land in Minnesota and Iowa, although with little success.

In 1857 William purchased 1,000 acres of land in Bolivar County, Mississippi. The Crooms lived in a boarding house in Memphis, Tennessee, while renovating a house on the plantation. However, they did not stay long in Mississippi, since Julia did not like the climate or the isolation. They left their daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband to manage the plantation and they returned to New York.

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On the eve of the Civil War it became increasingly difficult to conduct business in New York. In 1860, William and Julia moved to Eutaw, Alabama, where they had relatives. Following the war, their financial situation was precarious, and William had no regular occupation. In 1868, the year after Julia Croom died, William was forced to file for bankruptcy. His properties in Eutaw and Mississippi went on the auction block, and he moved to Rome, Georgia, where he secured a position teaching French in a girl's school. He remained there until his death in 1876.

Cicero Stephens Croom

Cicero Stephens Croom was born December 12, 1839, in Quincy, Florida. The youngest of William Whitfield Croom's and Julia Stephens Croom's two children, he was afforded one of the best educations that could be acquired in the nineteenth century. As a result of his father's business ventures which required the family to move often, Stephens attended preparatory schools in Columbus, Georgia, and West Point, New York, as well as in New York City. In January 1856 he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with the intention of becoming an attorney. He was an excellent student and also participated in college organizations such as the Dialectic Society and the Beta Theta Pi fraternity.

Following his graduation from college in June 1859, Stephens traveled to New York City where he worked as a shipping and entry clerk in his father's silk and ribbon business for three months. In the spring of 1860 he moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he studied law under Judge Wade Keyes. Having completed his training, he moved to Eutaw, Alabama, where his mother and father had recently re-located. He planned to open a law practice there, but the outbreak of the Civil War interrupted his plans.

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Immediately after the war began, in 1861, Stephens Croom enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private. He joined a company that was formed in Eutaw and commanded by Captain George Field. The group later became Company B of the 11th Alabama Regiment

commanded by Colonel Sydenham Moore, a native of Greensboro, Alabama. The regiment was organized in Lynchburg, Virginia, and later traveled to Richmond and then to Winchester where it became part of the brigade commanded by General E. Kirby Smith. The brigade remained in Winchester expecting a Union attack until July 18, 1861, when the Union threat dissipated.

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Stephens and his unit then traveled to Manassas Junction, Virginia, arriving there on July 22, the day after the Battle of First Manassas. Shortly after arriving at Manassas, he was re-assigned as a clerk to the adjutant general of the brigade, which was by then commanded by Colonel John H. Forney of the 10th Alabama Regiment. The brigade spent the winter of 1861-1862 near Centreville and Manassas and in the spring re-located to Yorktown, Virginia. Colonel Forney, who had been severely wounded in the arm in December 1861 at Drainsville, Virginia, was promoted to brigadier general and given command of the district comprising southern Alabama and west Florida. Forney invited Stephens Croom to become his assistant adjutant general and promoted him to the rank of captain. In May 1862 Stephens traveled to Mobile for the first time. He would stay eight months in the city.

In December 1862, General Forney was promoted to major general and re-assigned to the Department of Mississippi where he took command of Dabney H. Maury's old division. Stephens Croom was also promoted, to the rank of major, and followed Forney to Mississippi. By early May 1863, Forney's division had taken a position at Snyder's Bluff overlooking the city of Vicksburg. After being overpowered by the Union army, Stephens's division retreated to Vicksburg where they endured the forty-eight-day siege of the city. On July 4, 1863, Confederate forces at Vicksburg surrendered. As an officer, Stephens was immediately paroled and allowed to leave Vicksburg with his horse and his slave, who served as his personal servant. By July 11, 1863, the Confederate troops at Vicksburg were paroled and quickly reorganized at a camp in Enterprise, Mississippi. After spending some months at the camp, Major Croom was ordered to report to Major General Leonidas Polk's command at Demopolis, Alabama. A month later he was assigned to General William W. Loring's staff in Montevallo, Alabama.

In May 1864 Stephens's new division traveled to Resaca, Georgia, where they reinforced General Joseph E. Johnston's army, which was facing General William Tecumseh Sherman's

Union forces. After several bloody battles, a perilous retreat which included crossing rivers, burning bridges, and near hits from falling artillery shells, Major Croom was re-assigned yet again. He rejoined his former commander, Major General John H. Forney, who was a commander in the Trans-Mississippi Department. The general's staff traveled by rail from Demopolis, Alabama, to Jackson, Mississippi, and then was transported by wagon to an area near Port Gibson. From there they went to Monroe, Louisiana, where General Forney assumed command of General James Alexander Walker's former division. After re-organizing his new army, Forney marched his troops to Monticello, Arkansas, then across the state of Arkansas and down to Meinden, Louisiana, where they remained during the winter of 1864-65.

In the spring of 1865, Stephens's division traveled to Shreveport, Louisiana, where they rested for a month before marching to Texas. By May 1865, Forney's army had passed through Henderson, Rusk, Crockett, Anderson, and Hempstead, Texas. While General Forney tried to keep his army together, most of the soldiers in his division had abandoned the ranks by May 1865. With the surrender of all Confederate forces and the end of the Civil War, Stephens Croom traveled to Galveston, Texas, where he was paroled and transported by a Union ship to Mobile where his slave and personal servant, Henry, left him.

Having arrived back in Alabama, Stephens returned to his parents' home in Eutaw where he found them living in relative poverty and without any source of income. In addition, the woman he was engaged to marry "discarded" him for a more prosperous suitor. In an effort to find work, Stephens moved to Mobile in the spring of 1866. He joined the law firm of Peter and Thomas A. Hamilton where he worked for three years. He sent part of his monthly salary of \$45.00 to his father in Eutaw. In the fall of 1869, he left the Hamiltons to open his own law firm on St. Francis Street. He earned an excellent reputation as an attorney and, in 1875, was elected by the Mobile City Council to be City Attorney, over the popular Civil War hero Admiral Raphael Semmes.

On February 4, 1875, he married a local woman, Mary Marshall, and a year later they had their first child, Caroline Howard Croom, who died in infancy. On September 5, 1877, Stephens and Mary's son, William Whitfield Croom, was born. In 1880, Stephens was elected Commissioner of the Port of Mobile and served a three-year term. His career as an attorney continued to flourish, and he was also a well-respected member of Mobile society and a member of the Strikers, one of Mobile's most prestigious mystic societies.

Despite having survived gun fire, disease, and financial ruin during the Civil War, Stephens Croom was not able to overcome a case of bronchitis which he developed in the summer of 1884. He died July 29, 1884, at the age of forty-five, in Ashville, North Carolina, where he had gone for the fresh mountain air that he hoped would cure him.

Elizabeth Whitfield Croom Bellamy

Elizabeth Whitfield Croom was born April 17, 1837, in Quincy, Florida. The older sister of Cicero Stephens Croom, Elizabeth was also afforded a first rate education. While most upper class women living in the nineteenth century received a very limited education that usually culminated with their graduation from a "finishing school," William and Julia Croom encouraged their daughter to attend college. In fact, the Croom family moved from Florida to Columbus, Georgia, in 1850 so that both Elizabeth and Stephens could get a better education. While in Columbus, she attended the Reverend Thomas Bog Slade's school for girls.

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Business interests led William Croom to move his family to New York City. Elizabeth lived there from 1853 to 1857 and studied at the Spingler Institute, a female academy, from which she graduated in 1856 after three years in the school's collegiate department. In nineteenth century New York, young men from elite society attended Columbia and young women attended Spingler Institute. Therefore, Elizabeth attained one of the best educations that was available to a woman living in her time. She took full advantage of her Spingler experience by developing her skills as a writer, which she would put to good use in later years.

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William Croom decided to move his family back to the South following a business failure in New York. He bought land in Mississippi where he built a plantation. Elizabeth went south with her parents and lived with them until her marriage on May 12, 1858, to her first cousin, Dr. Charles Edward Bellamy. William and Julia continued to spend time in New York

due to William's business ventures. They eventually moved to the South permanently when they settled in Eutaw, Alabama. As a result of her parents' change of residence, Elizabeth and her husband operated the Croom plantation in Bolivar County, Mississippi. By the spring of 1859, she had given birth to her first child, Bryan, and in 1861 Elizabeth had a second child, Elizabeth, who was called "Bessie" by her parents.

Elizabeth Bellamy's childhood and marriage had been full of the kind of joy and opportunities that most people living in the nineteenth century could only dream about. However, that would all change with the Civil War. The first great tragedy of Elizabeth's life occurred June 17, 1862, when her son, Bryan, died. The cause is unknown. He could have succumbed to one of any number of diseases that were prevalent in the nineteenth century and for which there was neither effective treatment nor vaccines available.

Although still grieving over the loss of their child, Elizabeth's husband, Edward, felt a patriotic duty to his native South and enlisted in the Confederate Army in July 1862. He became an assistant surgeon and was assigned to duty with the 38th Alabama Regiment. Thanks to the influence of Elizabeth's brother, Major Stephens Croom, Dr. Bellamy was assigned to a unit in Mobile for a while. He was also given a couple of furloughs which allowed him to visit Elizabeth and their daughter in Mississippi and later in Eutaw, Alabama, where Elizabeth was staying with her parents.

On December 22, 1862, tragedy struck Elizabeth's life again when her daughter "Bessie" died. As with Bryan, the cause of Bessie's death is not known. Following the loss of her second child, Elizabeth went with Edward when he returned to Mobile for duty. She rented rooms near his camp and the two consoled each other until Edward was re-assigned.

After passing an exam, Captain Edward Bellamy was promoted to surgeon, received the rank of major, and was ordered to report to Ringgold, Georgia, with the 38th Alabama Regiment, which would become part of the Army of Tennessee. While serving in hospitals behind Confederate lines, Edward was relatively safe from enemy gun fire. Unfortunately, he was not safe from the various diseases that struck soldiers in both armies during the Civil War. After battling typhoid fever, he died July 27, 1863.

Having lost both children and her husband in the course of a year, Elizabeth had returned to her parents' home by late October 1863. In an effort to defray some of the financial burdens that her parents were experiencing as a result of the Civil War, she took a position teaching at the Mesopotamia Female Seminary in Eutaw.

At the end of the Civil War the Croom family found themselves in dire financial straits. Elizabeth continued to teach and she also resumed her writing. She wrote a number of poems, some of which were published in the *Mobile Register*. In 1866 her brother, Stephens, moved to Mobile and he encouraged Elizabeth to write and to submit her work to the *Register* and other publications.

In 1867 she became a nationally known author when her first novel, *Four Oaks* was published under the pseudonym, Kamba Thorpe. It was a critical but not a financial success. After her first novel, Elizabeth continued to write and by 1884, was publishing her work under her own name. She wrote novels and short stories that appeared in book form and were also published in national magazines such as *Appleton's*, *The Cycle*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Youth's Companion*, *Black Cat*, *Lippincott's*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. Even though her writing was well received by literary critics, it never provided her with financial security. Elizabeth continued to teach and in 1868 she accepted a better teaching position twenty miles from Eutaw in Gainesville, Alabama, where she lived until 1877.

Stephens Croom invited Elizabeth to live with his family, and in 1877 she resigned her position in Gainesville and moved to Mobile. Although she continued to teach part-time, with the financial security that came from living with Stephens's family, she was able to devote most of her time to her writing--at least for a while.

Tragedy struck yet again when Stephens died in 1884. His young son and wife were left without any means of financial support. Elizabeth's care-free days as a writer were over. She went back to teaching full time. Eventually, she and her sister-in-law, Mary Marshall Croom, opened a school in their home on Augusta Street. Elizabeth continued to publish her work and the money she received from it supplemented the family's income. She also gave lectures on literary topics to paying audiences at the Mobile YMCA and was well known for her Shakespeare lectures.

Elizabeth developed Bright's Disease, a form of chronic kidney failure, in 1893. She continued to write, although her health deteriorated over the next seven years. She died April 13, 1900, at the age of sixty-three.