

A Most Dangerous Man

Henry Greene Cole moved to Marietta, Georgia in 1838 and prospered in business and politics. Then, when the Civil War divided the nation, he remained loyal to the North. His wartime service as a Federal spy aided the Union cause, but led to imprisonment and suffering.

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At first glance, there is nothing remarkable about the period display of the circa-1850s bachelor suite that belonged to a young civil engineer. The small exhibit tucked in a corner of the Marietta Museum of History includes mahogany bedroom furniture, a surveyor's kit with a hand-made ruler, a pen, and other personal effects.

But the exhibit tells the little-known story of Henry Greene Cole, one of Marietta's leading citizens and a Union spy once described by a Confederate general as "a most dangerous man in Georgia."

Henry Greene Cole was born in New Berlin, New York in 1815. His middle name came from Nathaniel Greene, a leading Revolutionary War general. Cole was trained as a civil engineer and moved to Marietta in 1838 to help build the rapidly expanding Western & Atlantic Railroad.

While working for the railroad, he purchased land in Cobb and surrounding counties. By the 1850s, he had become a successful businessman and owned the Marietta Hotel on the square. He dabbled in local politics and served as a delegate to the Constitutional Union Convention in Milledgeville in 1851, a group focused on protecting the rights of southerners but also preserving the Union.

Though Cole had been in the South for more than 20 years and was well established in the community when the Civil War erupted, he remained loyal to the North. He and his wife Georgia Fletcher, whose family hailed from Massachusetts, opposed Georgia's secession and he became one of a small band of Unionists living in the Atlanta area during the war.

The transplanted Yankee was known as a tough businessman and an outspoken Union sympathizer, notes Dan Cox, founder of the Marietta Museum of History.

Although the small, dark-haired man was not the usual cloak-and-dagger figure, he was an important contact for federal agents moving in and out of Atlanta.

Cole knew the roads and terrain and passed information about rebel troops to Union operatives throughout the war. It was Confederate General Samuel Cooper, a West Pointer who knew Cole while Cole was in New York, who described him

Described by a high-ranking Confederate officer as a "most dangerous man in Georgia," Henry Greene Cole was a civil engineer, hotel proprietor, slave owner, and, during the Civil War, a spy who worked energetically to provide information to the Union army.



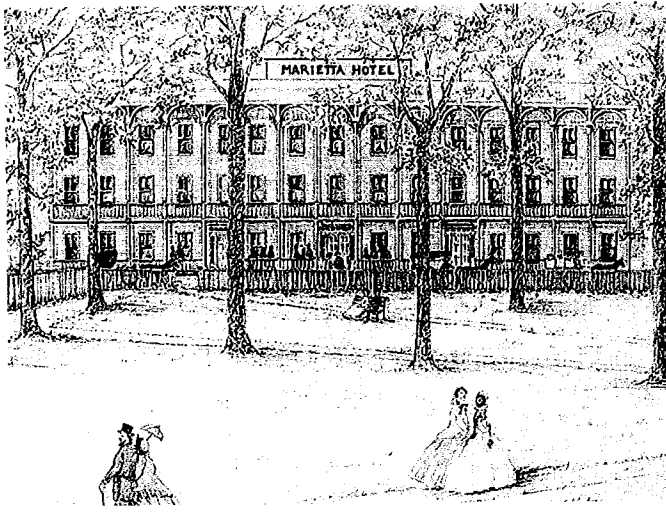
Georgia Cole poses with her children Mary, Maud, and Daniel Webster Cole, circa 1868.

as "a most dangerous man." Cox agrees with the assessment: "He knew the train schedules and every nook and crook of the railroad. And he knew how to build and destroy bridges."

Cox, who has collected "a couple of baskets of information" on the Marietta spy over the years, believes Cole was involved in the ill-fated raid led by James Andrews and a band of Federal soldiers in April, 1862. The group called Andrews' Raiders plotted to destroy the railroad between Marietta and Chattanooga to sever the Confederate supply line. Most stayed at the Fletcher House, the hotel owned by Cole's father-in-law, the night before they commandeered the locomotive *General*.

Cole was conveniently out of town during the "Great Locomotive Chase" and was not named or implicated in the daring plan. Andrews' Raiders were captured near Ringgold, Georgia, and the ringleader and seven of his men were later hanged in Atlanta.

Details of Cole's ties to the raid are sketchy, but he was



Like his in-laws, Henry Cole owned a Marietta hotel. Two of the "Andrews' Raiders" spent the night here before hijacking the *General*.

undoubtedly involved in passing key information on to the Union before the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863. He had surveyed the terrain as a young engineer and, according to Cox, he obtained additional intelligence from a "free man of color" who cut hair in Marietta.

The barber listened while Confederate officers discussed troop movements and reinforcements as he trimmed their locks and beards. Eager to get word to one of the Union commanders, General George H. Thomas, Cole paid a man \$500 – then a phenomenal sum – to travel to Chickamauga with details of Southern plans.

Despite Cole's efforts, the two-day battle fought in the northwest corner of the state was a decisive victory for the South. Union troops were pushed back into Chattanooga. Both sides suffered heavy losses, a combined 35,000 casualties.

As the war dragged on, Confederate authorities grew increasingly suspicious of Cole. Almost a year before Lee surrendered, Cole was arrested in a sting operation, says Cox. Several Confederates in civilian garb asked Cole to accompany them in burning some Chattahoochee River bridges. When Cole agreed, they placed him under arrest.

He was accused of "communication with the enemy" and imprisoned in Atlanta. Confined in a cage in the prison yard, Cole sent a letter to his wife protesting,

"Believe me, dearest, your husband has done nothing wrong! Nothing!" According to entries in his mother-in-law's journal, his wife visited him weekly with "provisions and things that would add to his comfort."

A few months later, Cole was transported to a prison in Charleston. Thanks to certain political connections, including his pre-war friendship with the local sheriff, his trial was postponed. Eventually, influential friends including Bishop Stephen Elliott, an Episcopal priest associated with Savannah's Christ Church, arranged for his release.

Cole was paroled in poor health two months before the war ended. Upon his return to Marietta, he learned that Confederate sympathizers had burned his hotel.

Cole did not receive payment for supplying information



COURTESY DEBORAH MALONE

At the time of his death in 1875, Henry Cole was in the process of renovating this handsome residence for his family. His father-in-law, Dix Fletcher, took on the responsibility after Cole's death. Georgia Cole and her children moved into the residence late that same year. The house is located on Washington Avenue across from the National Cemetery.

to the Union, but he nevertheless remained a wealthy man. After the war's conclusion, he and his wife traveled north to visit relatives and went sight-seeing in Boston and New York.

In 1866, the former spy transferred a 20-acre plot of land high on a Marietta hillside to the U.S. government to establish a national cemetery. (Former Confederates refused to bury their boys with Yankees, however, and laid them to rest in their own cemetery south of the city.) Cole's gently rolling site became the final resting place for 7,000 Federal troops, most of whom died in Georgia battles. Cole served as one of the cemetery's first superintendents.

In 1873, Cole petitioned the Southern Claims Commission for property losses suffered during the war. He sought payment for the wooden rails, lumber, corn, oats, and horses stolen while Union troops occupied Marietta from July through November 1864. According to a transcript of his testimony before the commission, Cole stated, "They (the Federal Army) came and injured me by going on my lands and cutting wood and hauling it off... they took lumber (I piled up for building houses)."

Cole built a strong case, contending that he did everything in his power to assist the Federal cause by frequently traveling to the front line and transmitting vital information. He also produced letters from General George H. Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga," and Unionists who vouched for his loyalty and service. Notwithstanding his efforts, he never received reimbursement for his war-time losses.

Cole, his wife, and five children stayed in Marietta after the war. He died of heart disease in 1875 and was buried in the family plot at the Marietta National Cemetery. He rests just a block from his white-columned family home and, despite his war-time activities, Marietta remembers him today as one of her own. ■

The Marietta Museum of History, housed in the old Kennesaw House, is open 10-4 Monday through Saturday. Admission is \$5.00 for adults and \$3.00 for seniors and students.

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