

# The Treasury Clerk Goes to War

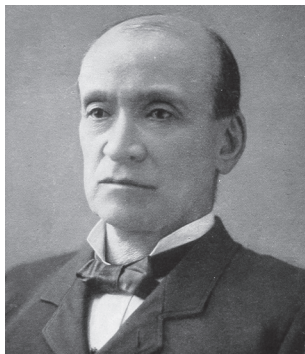
by Nick Bruyer

Felix Alexander Reeve aspired to be more than a clerk at his uncle's store in the tiny village of Rheatown, Tennessee. He'd excelled in his school studies and had a good head for numbers. So when in the summer of 1860 an opportunity opened up to study law in Knoxville under the Honorable O. P. Temple, he seized it.



**Felix A. Reeve**  
(Public domain)

Oliver Perry Temple was a prominent lawyer and politician. His politics were rooted in the Whig party, as were those of the Reeve



**Knoxville attorney  
Oliver Temple Perry**  
(Wikipedia)

family. He became a Republican after the Whig party fell apart over the slavery issue. A close friend of Temple's had an extra bed available. Soon Reeve was living in the home of Methodist preacher and newspaper publisher whose reputation was well known throughout the South, Parson William G. Brownlow.

Reeve shared a bedroom with the Parson's son, John. John was 21, Felix 24 and

soon they became friends.

Felix Reeve soon was immersed not only in the reading of law but also in the politics roiling Tennessee. The air in the Brownlow household swirled with talk of abolition, secession and the coming Presidential election. Parson Brownlow, nicknamed "The Fighting Parson", was a man of strong opinions and fuming emotions. Subtlety was not in his vocabulary, but all manner of vitriol certainly was.

Over the years Brownlow had been shot and beaten for his venomous comments, many of them

published in his *Knoxville Whig* newspaper. He'd received more than a few death threats.

Chief among Brownlow's hatreds were the Democrat party and it's leading member in East Tennessee, Andrew Johnson. In 1845 Johnson and Brownlow ran against each other, for a seat in Congress. Johnson won and Brownlow never forgot it. He called Johnson the "greatest curse that ever yet befell this nation," and accused him of being illegitimate, an atheist and branded his relatives murderers and chicken thieves.

O. P. Temple also ran against Johnson as a Whig in the 1847 Congressional election, but he too lost. When it came to politics. Temple and Brownlow shared a mutual dislike of Democrats.

Yet one thing Brownlow, Temple, Johnson and their friends did have in common was their fierce loyalty to the Union and the Constitution. For Brownlow in particular, anything that threatened the Union was his enemy. Prime among those were Abolitionists who, in his view, threatened God's natural order and risked inciting the slave states to secede.

Reeve became acquainted with these political leaders of East Tennessee, including U. S. Congressman Horace Maynard. Most

supported the Constitutional Union Party candidates, John Bell and his running mate, Edward Everett, in the fall Presidential election. The party supported the Union and was neutral on the issue of slavery.

On November 6 Abraham Lincoln was elected President. John Bell came in third, behind Lincoln and Democrat John C. Breckinridge. To the horror of loyal Tennesseans, states immediately began to peel away from the Union.

In February 1861 the Confederate States of America was born. Brownlow launched a war of words against them. He declared that secession laws



**Parson William G.  
Brownlow (Public domain)**

were “covenants with death and agreements with hell.” In reply a South Carolinian called him “the greatest liar out of hell and one of the most infamous scoundrels living between heaven and earth.” A Mississippian wrote, “You will certainly be hung, as all dogs should be, until you are ‘dead, dead’”.

Brownlow erected a flagpole on the roof of his home and began flying the Stars and Stripes in defiance.

After Fort Sumter was fired upon, Lincoln called for volunteer troops on April 15. Most Tennesseans reacted negatively. “Tennessee will not furnish a man for purposes of coercion, but 50,000, if necessary, for defense of our rights, and those of our Southern brothers”, Governor Harris exclaimed. The Tennessee legislature ordered a vote of the people on June 8 to decide about leaving the Union.

### The Three Tennessee’s



### The “three Tennessee’s”: East, Middle and West

The results of the vote revealed a deep divide between East, Middle and West Tennessee. Nearly 70% of East Tennessee voted to stay in the Union, while 86% of Middle and West Tennessee voted to leave. Unfortunately the loyal Union men of East Tennessee were outnumbered.

On June 17 East Tennesseans held a convention in Greenville, where they declared their desire to split from Tennessee and become a separate state. O. P. Temple was one of the convention leaders.

Aware that East Tennessee was strategically important to the defense of the South, the state’s leadership quickly quashed the proposal. On June 24 Tennessee became the last state to secede.

Felix Reeve could hardly believe what had happened. He and his fellow Union loyalists were living a nightmare and fretting over what would become of them. Tennessee pledged to raise 55,000 troops for the Confederacy; Felix and his friend John Brownlow were at risk of being drafted for a cause they hated.

Parson Brownlow in his paper raged against the secessionists, calling them traitors, drunkards, scoundrels and more.

Tennessee held elections on August 1 for officials to serve in the new Confederate Congress. But East

Tennessee ignored the slate of Confederate candidates, instead defiantly electing Union men to the U.S. Congress. Horace Maynard ran on the Union ticket and was re-elected as a U. S. Congressman. When Rebel soldiers marched through Knoxville on their way to Virginia, Brownlow wrote that they “swarmed around my printing office and dwelling-house, howl like wolves, swear oaths that would blister the lips of a sailor, blackguard my family, and threaten to demolish my house, and even to hang me.” At times guns were brandished and shots fired. Felix Reeve and everyone living in the Brownlow house reasonably feared for their lives.

Reeve was at ground zero of the growing animosity between Union and Disunion. He decided to remain in Tennessee just long enough to pass the bar exam and cast his vote for Union officials. His politically connected friends suggested there would be a job for him in Washington.

On Thursday, August 1, Felix Reeve and his friends cast their votes for the Union. Reeve packed his belongings, bid them farewell and departed Knoxville. He headed west to Nashville, then north to Louisville, and finally east to Washington, D. C.

There he met with Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase. Chase, an attorney from Ohio and a founder of the Republican Party, likely knew fellow Republican attorney O. P. Temple.

Chase needed loyal Union employees at the Treasury. Just as the department was experiencing unprecedented wartime demands, nearly 60 Southern sympathizers had resigned or were fired. Others had left their jobs to enlist in the Union Army.

“The work has been performed by devoting not only almost every hour of each day, (Sundays not excepted,) but many hours of night, to continuous labor beyond the endurance of most men,” Treasurer F. E. Spinner wrote of the Treasury staff.

Millions of dollars’ worth of a new kind of Treasury obligation called “Demand notes” were about to arrive in 4-note sheets of \$5, \$10 and \$20 denominations. Hundreds of thousands of notes urgently needed to be hand-signed, hand cut, counted and bundled. Then they had to be disbursed to thousands of individual accounts.

Register of the Treasury Lucius Chittenden needed clerks to sign notes on his behalf. Reeve was put to work at a table hand signing Demand notes “for the” Register.

Meanwhile in Knoxville rumors circulated that Parson Brownlow would be arrested and his newspaper shut down. He continued publishing until the end of October and then went into hiding. Always

defiant and theatrical, in the final edition of his newspaper he pledged to “submit to imprisonment for the rest of my life or die at the end of a rope before I will make any humiliating concessions to any power on earth.”

Not wanting to make a martyr of him, Confederate Secretary of War Judah Benjamin offered Parson Brownlow a military escort if he would leave the Confederacy. Brownlow accepted and surrendered himself in Knoxville, only to be jailed on December 6 by the town’s civil authorities.

Knoxville District Attorney J. C. Ramsey’s arrest warrant stated that Brownlow, “being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil, and not having the fear of God before his eyes, did wilfully, and knowingly, and with malice aforethought, and feloniously, commit the crime of TREASON against the Confederate States...”

The Knoxville jail was jammed with 150 fellow Unionists, many of them represented by attorney O. P. Temple. Conditions were wretched and Brownlow became ill. Fearing that he might die in their hands, the authorities transferred him to a hospital, where for months he was nursed back to health. On March 15, 1862 a military escort deposited him outside of Nashville, which had been occupied by Union forces in February.

To his surprise, Brownlow discovered he was a folk hero in the North. He joined up with a Union recruiting officer and toured Northern cities to stir up passions for the Union cause. Throngs of cheering people came to hear the Fighting Parson speak. His arrival often was greeted with military regiments and brass bands.

As biographer E. Merton Coulter wrote, “the Parson had no equal in beating the war tom-toms and firing the minds of the people... He shot venom and spleen and fire and brimstone at the Southerners, he told how they should be hanged, drawn and quartered.” Brownlow also made his case for the need to send “an army of deliverance” to free loyal East Tennesseans.

### **Reeve’s Eighth Regiment**

Felix Reeve realized that his heart was with his family and friends back home. He had to enter the fight to reclaim East Tennessee and taking up arms was the way to do it.

To avoid being conscripted into the Confederate army, thousands of East Tennesseans escaped to Kentucky through the Cumberland Gap. Reeve’s friend and former roommate, John Brownlow, was one of them. Many stayed at Camp Dick Robinson, a farm the Union army turned into a recruiting center. In the

fall of 1861 Reeve visited there to organize refugees into a militia and sought a commission from the U. S. Army.

After Nashville was seized by the Union in February 1862 Lincoln appointed then Senator Andrew Johnson to be the military governor. Reeve wrote Gov. Johnson a letter asking if he could find a job for John Brownlow. The letter reveals how fully Reeve had embraced the fiery anti-Rebel rhetoric of the Fighting Parson:

“It is with no ordinary pleasure I learn that one so perfectly qualified and well-suited as yourself, has been commissioned to form a Military Protectorate over our insulted and outraged state. There is a long list of accounts to settle there, particularly in *East Tenn.*, and I hope to hear of justice---full, complete, unrelenting justice, having been Meted out to the traitors who have oppressed the noble loyal men of that section. *Let DEATH, and CONFISCATION OF PROPERTY, be the only compromise!*”

Obtaining a military commission and official authority to assemble a regiment was painfully difficult for Reeve. At that time East Tennessee was a low priority for the U.S. military. He attempted to press his case with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, but failed to get an audience. Frustrated, in August 1862 he contacted Parson Brownlow to ask if he would write to the President on his behalf. Reeve got his reply on the 25th.

“Dear Reeve, I inclose (sic) you a letter to Lincoln, which, I think, meets the case. Better hurry up and see that he gets to read it at once. The difficulty will be to get his attention. I tried it four times before I succeeded.”

That same day Reeve went to the White House and met Lincoln. He received a card bearing the message: “Sec’y of War: Please see Mr. Reeve of Tenn.” It was signed by the President.

By the President’s order, Secretary of War Stanton commissioned Reeve as a colonel on September 6 and authorized him to organize an infantry regiment of East Tennessee volunteers. At age 26 and with no military experience, Col. Reeve would command a force of 700 men. He spent the next nine months in Kentucky, first at Nicholasville, and then at Camps Nelson and Dick Robinson, recruiting and training his regiment.

A likely reason Secretary Stanton had been reluctant to meet Reeve was because the War Department was having trouble with another volunteer regiment from East Tennessee, the Seventh Infantry. The word in Washington was that it was poorly organized and run.

Col. Thomas Bradley was sent to investigate. Afterwards he wrote, "It was quite impossible to distinguish officers from enlisted men as all were dressed alike in Private apparel and each acted upon his own authority... Discipline and manners were entire strangers to the party... I took charge of all the books and papers belonging to the regiment and proceeded to examine them but could make very little sense out of them."

The army ordered the Seventh to be disbanded and some of its soldiers transferred to Col. Reeve's new Eighth Infantry. Reeve strongly protested. "At least one fourth of the (Seventh) regiment might be mildly denominated a drunken, refectory and lawless mob . . . Please relieve me of them! I am better off without them..."

### **The Army of Deliverance**

On Feb. 22, 1863 Parson Brownlow returned to Nashville. He was astounded that the disloyal parts of Tennessee, centered in Nashville, were in Union hands, while loyal East Tennessee remained in Confederate control. The Parson exhorted his fellow refugees to join Reeve's regiment to liberate East Tennessee. Brownlow's son John helped recruit volunteers for Reeve. John subsequently became Lt. Colonel of the Ninth Tennessee Cavalry Volunteers.



**Reeve's roommate and friend Lt. Col. John Brownlow (public domain)**

On June 15 1863 Treasury Secretary Chase appointed Parson Brownlow to be the Assistant Special Agent for the Treasury Department. It was a customs function to make sure the Confederates were not benefiting from goods moving through Nashville.

The Union armies of Generals Grant and Buell were busy clearing the Mississippi river, the great "River Road", of the enemy. Yet Lincoln was so furious at Buell's delay in liberating East Tennessee that he replaced him with Gen. William S. Rosecrans. But it was not until after Maj. Gen. Grant's Army of the Tennessee took Vicksburg on July 4 1863 that East Tennessee became a military objective.

General Ambrose Burnside was assigned to lead 12,000 troops, including Col. Reeve's Eighth Infantry, on a march through the Cumberland Mountains, bypassing the Confederate-fortified Cumberland Gap. To cross this wilderness they relied upon maps

described as "perfectly worthless" to traverse primitive trails described as "terrible".

On September 16 Gen. Burnside left Camp Nelson on the Kentucky River. After a forced march of over 200 miles across the Cumberland Mountains, on October 3 his army reached the outskirts of Knoxville. Miles of cheering people lined the road as the soldiers marched unopposed into the city. They found Knoxville draped in Union flags and were greeted with joyful crowds celebrating their liberation. Lacking sufficient resources to withstand an attack and constantly badgered by the locals, the dispirited Rebels had fled.

After capturing Knoxville Gen. Burnside sent three brigades back to take the Cumberland Gap. He forced the surrender of Confederate General John W. Frazer and 2,300 enemy troops. By the fall of 1863 the Union controlled East Tennessee.

Col. Reeve's Eighth Tennessee engaged in several campaigns and battles during the rest of the Civil War. In May of 1864 they fought in Georgia under Gen. William T. Sherman in the battles of Resaca, Burnt Hickory and Kennesaw Mountain.

In October 1864 the regiment fought valiantly under Gen. Thomas at the battle of Franklin and then at the battle of Nashville, on December 1. Next they were sent to North Carolina and fought in a number of actions there before finally returning to Nashville in the spring of 1865, where they were mustered out of service.

Col. Reeve earned commendations from Generals Burnside, Schofield and Cox, citing him as "a brave and meritorious officer." He might have continued to serve in the military but for a serious illness he contracted during the Georgia campaign, which forced him to resign his command.

After the war Felix Reeve returned to East Tennessee and practiced law in Greeneville. He witnessed dramatic changes to the state he had fled in 1861.

Lincoln appointed Greeneville Democrat Andrew Johnson military governor of the Union-controlled part of Tennessee. Johnson then became Lincoln's Vice President on a national unity ticket in the November 1864 elections. After Lincoln was assassinated he became President on April 15, 1865.

Parson Brownlow returned to Knoxville and resumed publishing his newspaper under the title *Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator*, and ventilate he did. He preached vengeance and violence against the Rebel traitors, exhorting loyal Union citizens and the military to subjugate and exterminate them. He endorsed confiscation of their assets to repay the North for the cost of the war.



In 1865 a state convention run by East Tennessee men revised Tennessee's constitution in accordance with the Union, declared all acts of the secession government null and void and nominated Parson Brownlow for governor. On March 4, the same day Johnson became Vice President, Brownlow became Governor by a vote of 23,352 to 35.

### **Tyranny of the Minority**

As biographer Coulter wrote, "It was a strange and dangerous act to set a person of Brownlow's record to rule over a million people." Under Brownlow, Tennessee endured conditions worse than during the war, as a minority exacted retribution against the majority of its citizens.

Brownlow ruled the state as a dictator bent on punishing everyone with whom he held a grudge. Although he was a racist, one of his first acts was to get the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment ratified to solidify his position with the Radical Republicans.

During the war, when the Confederates evacuated Nashville they carted off 41 boxes containing Tennessee's government archives along with its treasury, consisting of 56 boxes and 2 casks filled mostly with Mexican gold. Both were returned to Brownlow by the Union army.

Gov. Brownlow packed the state legislature with cronies who passed a law to disenfranchise everyone who had not been "publicly known to have entertained unconditional Union sentiments". Depending on how heinous their disloyalty was judged to be, they were deprived of voting for either 5 or 15 years. 70-80% of Tennessee's citizens became ineligible to vote. Most were prohibited from holding public office for three years.

Felix Reeve was appalled at Brownlow's hateful and vindictive reign. He believed that this was the time to bind up the wounds of war and heal the nation.

In the spring of 1865 Col. Reeve married Wilhelmina Maynard, daughter of Congressman Horace Maynard. Maynard was a towering intellectual and a compelling speaker with a biting wit. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass said that Maynard had "a three story head". Maynard supported abolition and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment providing protections to Black people.

Maynard continued to serve in the U.S. Congress after the Civil War, running on the Republican ticket. Later he was chairman of the House Committee on Banking and Currency during Grant's presidency, 1873-75.

In September of 1866 Col. Reeve and two others published in the *Nashville Union and American* resolutions adopted by them as delegates to an

upcoming Soldiers and Sailors Convention, at which Pres. Johnson would speak. It said in part:

"...with hearts devoted and true to the whole country---East and West, North and South---and feeling in our pride of triumph that the 'crown-jewel of courage is magnanimity to a fallen foe', we therefore divest ourselves of all sectional animosity and personal revenge toward a gallant people whom we have fairly subdued by force of arms, and who now sink unresisting at our feet... we regard rebelism and radicalism interchangeable terms, and both alike inimical to the peace and perpetuity of the Union of the States.

*Resolved*, that we believe the Radical faction who now seek to establish disunion and disorder under the *stolen livery* of loyalty, as much the enemies of the country as were the rebels in 1861."

It was a strong rebuke to the harsh treatment of ex-Confederates by Brownlow. Reeve became a moderate Democrat and supporter of Pres. Andrew Johnson, rejecting Radical Republicanism.

By 1875 Col. Reeve had converted from the Episcopalian faith to Catholicism. He donated land for a Catholic church in Greeneville. On the day the church was inaugurated he shared a pew with his friend, Andrew Johnson.

Col. Reeve was alarmed at the behavior of Republicans toward Catholics. On May 26, 1875 he wrote in the Memphis *Southern Catholic* to urge his fellow Catholics to rally around the Democrat party because Republicans were "at war with our holy religion."

### **Return to Treasury**

In 1879 he moved to Washington D. C. to pursue a government position. Perhaps through the political connections of his father in law, in 1880 Reeve became a law clerk in the office of Solicitor of the U.S. Treasury.

Reeve's Roman Catholic advocacy for Democrats paid off when Grover Cleveland won the Presidency in 1884. During Cleveland's campaign the Republicans denounced the Democrats as the party of "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion". Anti-Pope hostility drove Catholic votes to Cleveland, especially New York's crucial Irish Catholics. Cleveland won four key states by just 1,200 votes, becoming the first Democrat President since 1856.

In 1886 Cleveland promoted Col. Reeve to Assistant Solicitor of the Treasury. Reeve served under Treasury Secretary Daniel Manning, a New



Reeve served as Solicitor of the Treasury under Pres. Grover Cleveland (Photo courtesy Stacks-Bowers Gallery)

York Democratic Party chief. Cleveland, Manning and Reeve were “Gold Democrats” (also called “Bourbon Democrats”), a faction that supported conservative business principles and opposed “Free Silver”. Manning proposed ending the coinage of silver dollars under the 1878 Bland-Allison Act.

After the Cleveland administration Col. Reeve continued as Asst. Solicitor under President Benjamin Harrison. When Cleveland was elected President to a second term in 1892 he appointed Reeve Solicitor. Reeve was a personal

friend of Cleveland and the two of them exchanged correspondence.

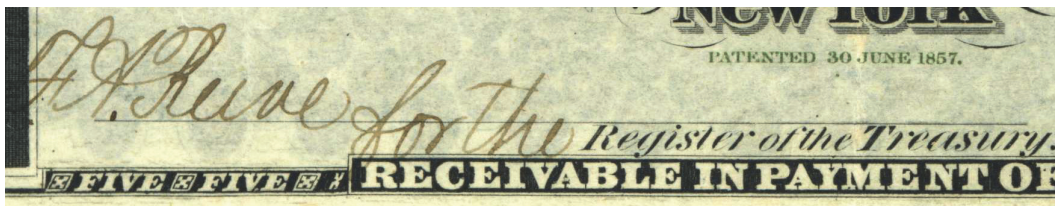
He continued in the Solicitor’s office of the Treasury until November 1919, when at age 83 he fell while working in his office. He suffered with his injuries for a year until passing away on November 15, 1920.

During 33 years with the Treasury Department Col. Reeve wrote legal opinions on many interesting topics, including the issuance of Columbian commemorative half dollars and the legality of using small denomination county bonds and clearing house certificates as money.

Col. Felix Reeve was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. During his life he was friends with some of the most famous and controversial people in the country, including Pres. Andrew Johnson, “Fighting Parson” Brownlow and Pres. Grover Cleveland. The discovery of his signature on a rare U.S. \$5 Demand of 1861 opens a window into his life and the plight of loyal Union people caught on the borders between North and South, and how they responded to the conflict.



\$5 Demand note issued late August, 1861 (author’s collection)



Close-up of Felix A. Reeve’s signature “for the” Register of the Treasury

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**Knoxville Residence and Library of Parson William G. Brownlow**