

Remarks made at William Brakin's memorial service

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Mt. Zion Presbyterian Cemetery, Central City, Muhlenberg County, KY

Before we begin, I've been asked to invite all of you to sign the guest book in the Fellowship Hall of the church. This is a very special day for the Mt. Zion congregation and they would very much like to have a record of all the guests. Also, you will find a brochure of the Walking Tour of the Mt. Zion Cemetery and you might want to take a copy and visit some of the historic graves here. Mr. Brackin's grave is number sixteen and the last on the tour, but there will be two more added: John Kittinger, who was a comrade of Mr. Brackin's in the 12th Kentucky and who died during the War will be added and near him is A. J. Doss who served with the 11th Kentucky Infantry. This church has done a remarkable job of cleaning and preserving this cemetery and new additions to this list are being made constantly. If the rain eases off, it would be worth your time to walk around the grounds and see the history this lovely church has had.

I want to welcome everyone to today' s memorial service in honor of Private William Brackin of the 12th Kentucky Cavalry, Army of the United States in the American Civil War. Our honored guests are his family members, who have come from four states to receive these honors on his behalf, and I would like to extend my appreciation to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Elijah P. Marrs Camp 5, who will be conducting the service. These gentlemen are accustomed to rendering these honors in any type of weather and I admire their devotion to their duty, since the weather has not been very cooperative up until now. In addition, the Mary Todd Lincoln, Chapter 1, of the National Women's Relief Corps are here today to place a wreath on Mr. Brackin's grave. This organization began during the Civil War and they are continuing this custom yet today.

We are very pleased to have Kentucky Supreme Court Justice Will T. Scott and Miss Dea Riley, who came down from Frankfort for this event here today. I especially want to thank the Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church and Pastor Jim Brown for their many kindnesses in helping with this service. And I thank all of you for coming out today. Mr. Brackin has completed a long journey home and for a moment, I want to take the time to tell you where he has been.

In a cemetery in Bloomfield, in Central Kentucky, an Eastern Kentucky soldier of the Civil War lies under a stone that says, " Although a stranger, he sleeps among friends." That inscription would have been relevant for William Brackin as well. For eighty-two years, Mr. Brackin, a Western Kentucky soldier of the Civil War, slept among friends in a mountain cemetery in a place called Greasy Creek in far Eastern Kentucky, about as far east as you can go and still be in this state. The friends he slept among were Hopkinses and Praters, my family names, and he was welcome there. Unfortunately, that cemetery is no more and that is why in another spring three years ago, William Brackin came home.

That old mountain cemetery, appropriately for Mr. Brackin, was born of the Civil War. It was created in 1871 with the death of Cornelius Hopkins, my great-great-great-great grandfather, who lived on a small hill in a cabin one of his sons built for him when the depredations of that violent struggle in Pike County made it dangerous to live on the homestead where he lived since 1822. When Cornelius died, the first grave of the cemetery was opened for him and then a second for his wife, and a church was begun in the cabin. The son who brought him there, my great-great-great grandfather, declared that this would be the final resting place for the family. The old Hopkins burying-ground since 1835 had filled up and a new one was needed. Over the years, my Prater family purchased the land and it became known as the Old Prater Cemetery; at least 117 more souls, including William Brackin, came there.

Both the Hopkinses and the Praters saw their families torn apart by the Civil War. My great-great-great grandfather, Elisha Hopkins, Cornelius' oldest son,

attempted to keep his family out of the tragedy, but two of his brothers went away: one to fight for the Union, the other to fight for the Confederacy. Only one came home. In yet another cemetery in Bloomfield, the Confederate brother has slept since 1864. Such stories, in any part of Kentucky, or indeed, in any part of this nation, were not uncommon.

That old mountain cemetery where most of my family and William Brackin rested is gone now. It was moved for road construction in 2003, and of the 119 graves recovered, 118 went to other places in Pike County. The 119th grave is here, where Mr. Brackin now rests for eternity beside the wife whose face he last saw over a century ago. In all that time, this Western Kentucky gravesite waited for him. It was never used, as if somehow her spirit protected it, knowing that eventually he would come back to her.

When Mr. Brackin came to Greasy Creek in 1919, he was in the care of a beloved daughter who tended to her father until he died two years later, and her husband, who was a carpenter for the great coal camp that was being built. Mr. Brackin's son-in-law worked for my Prater great-grandfather, who built the houses, buildings, and shops in the town that housed the labor force for the great Greasy Creek coal mine. It was the coal-mining boom of Eastern Kentucky in the early years of the last century that lured Mr. Brackin's family there and, for a while, times were good. There were Eastern Kentuckians, Western Kentuckians, people from all over the United States, and a host of Europeans who lived there, and space was at a premium. When Mr. Brackin died, my great-grandfather, grandson of a Union soldier, offered Mr. Brackin's family space in our cemetery for his final resting place.

Mr. Brackin's soldier's spirit would have had good company while he slept there. There were two other Union soldiers resting nearby and they were both of my family. There were Confederate soldiers, also of my family, in other cemeteries nearby, but the animosities of the Civil War had long passed when William Brackin came to Greasy Creek.

My great-great-great uncle, son of a Confederate soldier, handled Mr. Brackin's last affairs for the family. He secured the stone that we honor here today. Sons and grandsons of Union and Confederate soldiers made his coffin and dug his grave and stood by when he was buried. The War was long over and indeed, Mr. Brackin rested among friends.

None of us know if the family intended to move Mr. Brackin's remains back to Muhlenberg, but I am confident that the family knew that if not, his grave would not be forgotten. I remember asking my father nearly fifty years ago, after placing homemade crepe flowers on Mr. Brackin's grave, if he was related to us. My father said no. I asked him if he served with Mr. Brackin in the War, but my father gently explained to me that he was not born when Mr. Brackin died. I then asked him why we were decorating his grave, and my father said simply that he was a soldier, and soldier's graves must never be neglected. My father was also a soldier, in a much later war.

By the time my father died in 1997, of complications from battlefield surgery in the Battle of the Bulge over fifty years before, he had purchased plots in a beautiful new commercial cemetery in another part of Pike County for our family, since it had become difficult to tend to the Old Prater. That same year, when plans were announced to move the old cemetery to the new one, near my father's grave, I saw the wisdom and prescience of his action. By that time, few people still visited those ancient plots, although I made the trek up the mountain every spring to clean the cemetery and place flowers on the graves. It was my duty; I had promised my father that I would make sure that the old cemetery was taken care of at least every Memorial Day. When he was no longer able to climb the old mountain path, he would tell me: " Don't forget the old soldiers' graves." Of course, I could not. But of all the graves that had been moved and secured, only this one had I not visited. Now I know that this grave will be safe and its spirit at peace, and to his family, on behalf of my family, I now consign my duty.

In old-time funerals in both Eastern and Western Kentucky, a common song would often be heard. It is called " Wayfaring Stranger," and it is an ancient ballad. In a few moments, Sarah Elizabeth Whitehead of Louisville, but also of Western Kentucky, will sing it in Mr. Brackin' s honor. I do not know if it was sung at his funeral, for there is no one still living who could tell me, but I know that his spirit would have heard it many times over the decades that he lay there. It is appropriate, I feel, that it will be sung once more and not just in his honor, but in honor of all the soldiers of the Civil War and of all America' s wars, all those who may or may not have made that last journey home, and all their graves, remembered or forgotten, so that their spirits will know that as long as there are people in this world who appreciate their sacrifice and their honor, they will not be forgotten.