IndependentMail.com
ANDERSON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Read more at independentmail.com

Ceremony in Oconee County honors man for service in Civil War

By Jennifer Crossley Howard

Sunday, February 5, 2012

OCONEE COUNTY — In a Craig family portrait, a man to the right sits in the back row. He wears a black suit and hat, his hand resting on a woman's shoulder.

In the grainy photo copy, it's hard to tell that he is black.

Henry Craig is posing with the family in which he grew up, the family that he served as a slave, and the family he stood by during the Civil War.

About 100 people gathered at the Craig Family Cemetery off S.C. 183 north of Seneca on Sunday to honor the Confederate soldier's service. The sky was blue, painting a hopeful background for the old cemetery.

Henry followed his childhood friend, John Craig, to fight in Virginia. They fought under the Company A. First South Carolina Rifles from 1861 to 1864. When John lost his arm because of a wound, Henry brought him home to Pickens. The two remained close friends, and when Henry married, he named one of his five children John.

The ceremony Sunday was part of a national search to identify the graves of Confederate soldiers, said Ron Sloan, commander of the Joseph Norton Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The group performed the ceremony that has been in the works since November.

Men dressed in gray Civil War uniforms fired a series of shots, creating a cloud of smoke above them. A bagpiper played "Amazing Grace," and women stood under an oak tree wearing hoop skirts and black, feathered hats.

Near the service's close the soldiers engaged in a tradition that recognizes their deceased brothers. They stood in a line and drank from the same canteen. When they finished they simply said, "You are not forgotten."

"This is a significant day if you like history," said Al Robinson, a former Norton camp commander. "If you don't like history, what's wrong with you?"

Besides John and Henry Craig, three other Craig men fought in the Civil War and now reside in the family cemetery. William, Arthur and Lawrence were John's brothers.

Henry Craig chose to stay with the Craig family after he was granted freedom. When the elder John Craig died, Henry Craig moved away. But he returned to Pickens in his last years. He died on July 18, 1927.

Craig was buried with the family in a spot eventually covered by Lake Keowee in Oconee County. The family was reinterred in the cemetery within sight of the Oconee Nuclear Station and Old Pickens Presbyterian Church.

Jackson Parris, caretaker of the Craig Family cemetery, is the great-great-grandson of John Craig.

"It was something I grew up listening to, the story of Uncle Henry," he said. "This is something I was hoping would happen."

State Sen. Robert Ford, a Charleston Democrat, drew laughs and claps from the crowd that gathered at the graveside.

"We need to make sure history books are reprinted in South Carolina to include people like Henry Craig," he said.

Ford proposed a bill that in 2000 moved the Confederate flag from the roof of the Statehouse in Columbia to the Confederate soldier monument near the South Carolina Capitol. Ford sponsored another bill that made Confederate Memorial Day a state holiday, which drew ire from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Ford still deals with the aftermath of his decision to support recognition of Confederate history.

An evening on the Senate floor turned him on to the history.

He was debating with a senator who supported keeping the flag on the Statehouse. About 900 Sons of Confederate soldiers listened to him.

"I look out, ladies and gentlemen, and I saw tears from big, tough Lowcountry men," Ford said. "That's when I decided, maybe we should do something different."

Though the flag came off the Statehouse roof, it didn't disappear from Columbia. Ford supported flying it at the corner of Gervais and Main streets with a monument of a Confederate soldier.

Ford's stance caused one man to call him Uncle Tom a when he was in Newberry County a few weeks ago. Ford was incensed and said he pointed out that he also proposed the bill for the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial holiday in the state.

His work is a compromise, he said, and he stands behind it.

"I'm not a scholar, none of that," Ford said. "I'm not an educator. I just want to do the right thing."

Ford sat in a Marks, Miss., jail when he was 17 years old. He was arrested during the Civil Rights movement, and he could hear rallies of men outside threatening his life. When he left jail he saw the Confederate Flag flying.

"That was my first experience with the flag," he said.

On Sunday, four of the flags fluttered behind him.