

Blalock, Sarah Malinda Pritchard and William McKesson ("Keith") ^[1]

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By W. T. Jordan, Jr., 1979

1840-1901

Blalock, Sarah Malinda Pritchard (*ca. 1840–9 Mar. 1901*), and William McKesson ("Keith") (*ca. 1838–11 Aug. 1913*), were Confederate ^[2]soldiers. Malinda Blalock, North Carolina's only known female Civil War soldier, was the daughter of Alfred and Elizabeth Pritchard of Caldwell County ^[3] and the wife of Keith Blalock, with whom she was living at or near Grandfather Mountain in Watauga County ^[4] when the war began in 1861. On 20 Mar. 1862, Keith, although a convinced Unionist, enlisted in the Confederate Army (Company F, Twenty-sixth Regiment, North Carolina Troops), with the intention of deserting to Federal lines. Malinda cut her hair, donned men's clothing, assumed the name of "Sam," and enlisted with her husband. She was described as "a good looking boy aged 16[?], weight about 130 pounds, height five feet four inches." For the next four months she "did all the duties of a soldier" and was reportedly "very adept at learning the manual and drill." She tented with her "brother" Keith at the regimental camp near Kinston; opportunities to go swimming with other members of the company were declined.



William "Keith" McKesson Blalock.

Image courtesy of the Avery Museum. ^[5]After several weeks of duty at Kinston it became apparent to Keith that his plan to desert could not be realized immediately, and he decided to obtain a discharge. This was granted on 20 Apr. 1862, as a result of a severe rash that he contracted by rubbing his body with poison oak or poison sumac. Malinda thereupon disclosed the fact that she was a woman and was "immediately discharged." She and Keith, who was soon being sought as a fraudulently discharged deserter by Confederate authorities, then lived for a time in a hut on Grandfather Mountain, where they were joined by several other deserters. Following a fight with conscription officers and home guardsmen who attempted to apprehend the group, Keith fled with Malinda to Tennessee, where he became a recruiter for a Michigan regiment. Shortly thereafter the Blalocks joined the partisan unit of George W. Kirk ^[6] and returned to North Carolina. Both Keith and Malinda played an active role in the guerrilla raids and personal vendettas that characterized the war in the mountains in 1864, and Keith served also as a guide for Confederate deserters and Unionists who sought to make their way through the mountain passes to Federal lines in Tennessee. Malinda was wounded in a skirmish during this period, and in another engagement Keith was wounded and blinded in one eye. In February 1865, Keith's stepfather, Austin Coffey, was murdered by Confederate sympathizers, and in February of the following year Keith shot and killed a man he believed had been involved in Coffey's death. Keith was apprehended shortly thereafter, but before he could be brought to trial he was pardoned by Republican Governor William W. Holden ^[7].

In later years the Blalocks farmed in Mitchell County ^[8] and, for a time, "attempted merchandising." They resided in the Linville area, which became part of Avery County ^[9] when the latter was formed in 1911. In 1874, Keith presented himself as a Mitchell County ^[8] Republican candidate for the state legislature but was defeated. He and Malinda moved to Texas in

1892 or thereabouts; however, they subsequently returned to Mitchell County. Malinda died a natural death, but Keith was killed while operating a handcar on a mountain railroad. He was at the time a resident of Hickory. The Blalocks had at least four children: Columbus (b. ca. 1863), John (b. ca. 1869), Willie (b. ca. 1873), and Samuel (b. ca. 1877).

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Image Sources:

Malinda Pritchard Blalock, holding a picture of William “Keith” McKesson Blalock. Image courtesy of the Avery Museum. Available from # (accessed April 5, 2012). Photograph located in the Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Keith McKesson. Photo courtesy of the Avery Museum. Available from # (accessed April 5, 2012). Photograph located in the Eure Appalachian History Collection at Appalachian State University.

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