

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Southern Mythology and Marshal Michel Ney

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In his basement cell, Field Marshal Michel Ney awaited judgment from a jury composed by his fellow Peers of France. To the surprise of his guards, he was relaxed, a man totally unconcerned. The Secretary of the Peers walked through the dimly lit hallways to Ney's cell, and began to read, but the Marshal already knew the sentence. Death was the only punishment for a traitor. His wife appeared next; soon she left to plead with the King for mercy. Later as the sun began to rise on the seventh of December 1815, a priest was brought in to give Ney the last rites. He was then taken from the cell into the sun, by nervous guards. Everyone expected a rescue, as Michel Ney was well loved and respected by all.

The guards moved briskly through the streets to a small garden well away from the crowds. He looked around and was not surprised that the firing squad was comprised of the Old Guard, the unit that he had commanded at Waterloo. He looked into many familiar faces of men who had trusted him with their lives at the direst moments of the war. He had led them through fire and death, always personally in front over ground strewn with the enemies of France.

Field Marshal Michel Ney raised his hand and spoke; "I declare, before God and man, that I have never betrayed my country--may my death render her happy!" He lowered his hand, placed it over his heart, and gave the order to fire himself.¹

Marshal Ney was executed for his role in the second ascension of Napoleon. Although as involved as most of the marshals in the military campaigns, Ney was

¹ Legette Blyth, *Marshal Ney: A Dual Life* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1937), 234.

particularly responsible for allowing Napoleons uncontested return. When the Bourbons returned, Ney was the natural scapegoat; his execution was intended to quell the Emperor's sympathizers.

In scholarly history the story stops here, but in Southern mythology it continues. Three months later a man by the name of Peter Stuart Ney disembarked from a merchant ship arriving from France, in Charleston harbor, South Carolina. He bought a Bible and a flute and disappeared into the wilderness, beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. Three years later he returned east, to become a schoolteacher in Mocksville, North Carolina². This story in itself is verifiable in official records, but then history and myth diverge. Peter Stuart Ney claimed to be Marshal Michel Ney of France, the proud lieutenant of Napoleon's armies, and in the surrounding country, among the people, there was no doubt as to the validity of his claim³. In one letter H. M. Foard, a man who knew Ney, writes, "I am thoroughly convinced that Marshal Ney and P.S. Ney are one and the same person."⁴

The legend associated with Peter Stuart Ney is cherished by many people of the North Carolina Piedmont. Questioning his identity, many scholars and popular authors have written either for or against his purported relationship to Field Marshal Michel Ney of Napoleonic France. Southern Culture created the legend of Peter Stuart Ney, which is that he was the world-renowned Field Marshal of the Napoleonic wars. James Edward Smoot, in his book *Field Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, theorizes the validity

² John Harden, *The Devils Tramping Ground: and Other North Carolina Mysteries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 96-108.

³ James Edward Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution* (Queen City Printing Company, 1929).

⁴ H. M. Foard, to James Edward Smoot, 20 April 1926, James Edward Smoot Collection, Special Collections, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina.

of P.S. Ney's claim. His work, though an attempt at historical discourse, shows the transformation of the historical Ney figure to one of Southern legend. Intended to be a book that reveals the true identity of Peter Stuart Ney, Smoot's work is unconsciously revealing of the culture of Southern America during the antebellum period.

The legend of Marshal Ney was passed down from through generations, and changed over time. It grew from unverifiable "history" through an oral tradition into a Myth that exemplified the Southern reaction to antebellum social conditions, including poverty, pride in a lost rebellion, and a desire to emulate European values. Through the numerous recounting of this story its historical value changes from simple recollection to passionate invocation. James Edward Smoot is not so much writing defensively about Marshal Ney, as he is the validity of Southern tradition in a lost rebellion.

However Smoot did not compose this story, his generation was exposed to the Ney myth through an oral tradition. John Harden compiled, *The Devils Tramping Ground and Other North Carolina Mysteries*, from that tradition, and it contains a brief summary of the Ney myth, which it places among other legends and tall tales of the period. The truth or falsity of the story aside, its placement in a Southern ghost story collection does not lend to its serious consideration as historical fact.

Over time many authors have written on the topic of Marshal Ney's possible escape. Beginning with Rev. James A. Weston, the next author after Smoot was Legette Blyth, who published *Marshal Ney: A Dual Life* in 1937. All of the works from American writers have been supportive of the legend, and consequently were born within one hundred miles of each other. Meanwhile in Europe, three other books, all of them rebuttals to American claims, were written, the first such book appearing in 1902.

Although never published, another more controversial look at the mystery, and those who wrote on it, was compiled by William H. Hoyt. A lawyer from New York, Hoyt devoted fourteen years to studying and research before his death.⁵ George V. Taylor wrote for an article in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “[Hoyt] saw the legend as one of the many myths which constitute a general problem in historiography.”⁶ In other words, the works by Smoot and the others had become part of the mythology surrounding Ney, and in some way had added to its propagation. Of the authors who wrote to prove Marshals Ney’s escape, Smoot is the last to attempt historiographic research on the topic.

Smoot maintained a vast correspondence on the Ney issue and was the primary investigator of the subject for many years. He admitted that he gained much of his insight and was compelled to write his own book by reading the previously popular, Dr. Weston’s *Historical Doubts as to the Execution of Marshal Ney*. So much is his reliance that Smoot apologizes for relying on “appending copious extracts” of information from his favorite source⁷.

Few researchers looked at the mystery of the Ney controversy more critically and with more historical research than James Edward Smoot. Writing extensively on the subject, he published one book, and nearly completed a second supplemental volume. The second was never put to press and was in its last stages when he died in 1944. Smoot’s *Field Marshal Ney Before and After Execution* (1929) is a comprehensive recounting of Marshal Michel Ney’s life, but over half of the work is composed of

⁵ George V. Taylor, “Scholarship and Legend: William Henry Hoyt’s Research on the Ney Controversy,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 59, 3 (1960), 360-396.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁷ Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 2-3.

documentary evidence and “proofs” as to his exiled identity, that of Peter Stuart Ney.⁸ These proofs are in the form of notarized letters and statements from those who knew P. S. Ney, or the Marshal.

Smoot was closely connected both personally and emotionally to the story he was writing. Not only was the land on which he lived reliant on such stories for pride and place, but also he identified personally for many reasons. One of these connections is of particular interest, as it is closely associated with another piece of Southern mythology, the Masons. In correspondence preserved in Davidson College archives, Smoot inquired repeatedly about the records maintained in the Masonic temple of Paris⁹. The result is surprising: Contained in the reply is a list, pages long, of the Masons who were in Napoleon’s chain of command. Typed in bold is “Field Marshal Ney Prince of Moskwa 33 G.O.F,” the highest rank in the order.¹⁰ Ney’s connection and prominence in Masonry cannot be denied.

Tradition in the South holds that the members of the Masons, or Scottish Rite Temple have a duty to help each other succeed and to come to the assistance of their brothers.¹¹ ---The fact that Marshal Ney was a Mason along with Smoot makes his book not only a work of folklore but also part of another legend itself---

James Edward Smoot’s preface to his second and never published edition to *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution* is an example of a mythological discourse.

⁸ Ibid., 157-409.

⁹ Stanley C. Parsons, to James Edward Smoot, 5 December 1930, James Edward Smoot Collection, Special Collections, Davidson College, Davison, North Carolina.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Stephen Knight, *The Brotherhood* (New York: Stein and Day 1984), 118.

When introducing the book he refers to Field Marshal Ney as “the greatest single soldier of France, and a Patriot of the first water.”¹² The problem with this in a historiographic sense is that there is no way to prove such a claim. Regardless of whether or not we agree with Smoot, the language is hyperbolic. Later he calls the accepted historical version of Ney’s death a “superficial story” written by “so-called historians.”¹³

However, if we look at the preface from a Southern folk perspective, its value becomes deeper. According to Charles Joyner in *Southern Culture*, in order to be worthy of legend, the teller must be extolling the absolute truth, therefore making the event extraordinary or unprecedented. Singularity is the birth of legend.¹⁴ If there were more than one Devil’s Tramping Ground, it would hold no legendary status. Among Southerners with military interest, warfare is also singular in nature; for example, Robert E. Lee exhibits unsurpassed generalship and dignity, and in the context of Southern mythological culture there is no one more prominent. Even though he was eventually vanquished, Lee’s persona -like that of Marshal Ney- is unconquerable. Similarly, Smoot and Southern folk culture identify with the Marshal’s “perfect” patriotism, even though he was executed for treason. Southerners understand and identify with his motives for that “treason.”¹⁵

Furthermore the Civil War, Merton Coulter believes, had an effect on the nature of Southern historical writing. Popular biographical portraits of heroes from the conflict

¹² James Edward Smoot, Preface to *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 2d ed., Special Collections Davidson College, Davidson.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ Charles Joyner, preface to *Shared Traditions Southern History and Folk Culture* (Board of Trustees University of Illinois, 1999), 250.

¹⁵ Smoot, Preface to *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 2.

were produced even before the war came to an end. By the time Smoot began to write, the region was inundated with literature that invoked the “Justice of the South’s course.”¹⁶ Smoot was simply following a literary and historical tradition.

Southerners had their own bouts with treason, both in the American Revolution and the Civil War. The result was different on the two occasions. In the Revolution the Colonials were hailed as freedom fighters, but two generations later in the 1860s Southerners were termed rebels and charged with treason. During Smoot’s lifetime the sting of defeat was still strong in the minds of the people of the South. People in the region could sympathize with patriotism termed treason. The fact that another culture had produced a Man in similar circumstances, who seemed to personify their trials, contributed to the conversion of this story from legend to myth.

Indeed as David M. Potter points out in his article “The Enigma of the South,” people all over America regard the region as “exotic,” due to “the aura of a lost cause.”¹⁷ It is in the nature of cultures to sympathize with Ney as a member of a lost cause. Potter explains that in popular culture, “lost causes have a fascination, even for those who did not lose them”.¹⁸ Add to that the already fertile ground of the Southern reconstruction for heroic military figures; and the notion as Thomas L. Connelly, a writer on the similarly legendary status of Robert E. Lee states, that the concept “. . .that the righteous do not always prevail,” which had already been ingrained in the popular culture by the deification of Lee. Which produced a literary background well suited to the story of

¹⁶ E. Merton Coulter, “What the South has Done About its History,” *Journal of Southern History* 2 (1936): 31.

¹⁷ David M. Potter, “The Enigma of the South,” *The Yale Review* 51 (1961): 142.

¹⁸ Potter, “The Enigma of the South,” 142.

Marshal Ney. Folktales are stories that arise from the people, they are reflections of a societies culture and belief systems.¹⁹

Peter Stuart Ney's neighbors were adamant in their belief as to his true identity. Many of his personal effects are still regarded with the utmost value and sought after, they are even regarded as relics of the Napoleonic wars. H. M. Foard, upon reading, Smoot's "*Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*" writes an almost scathing response. His concern is that one of the artifacts, a set of Peter Stuart Ney's papers mentioned in Smoot's book, once belonged to his father.²⁰ From Foard's standpoint there is a naturally sentimental value to these papers, but what is in their nature that requires them to be sought with such vigor? They are a part of the legend. In fact, these are the papers which nearly create the legend, a personal diary written by Peter Stuart Ney in a secret short hand code, that according to Smoot will "startle the world."²¹ Foard makes it very clear that no one was given his father's papers, as they were only loaned for the purposes of translation.²²

Compared with the other letter received on the issue, Foard seems less than impressed by the purported historical value of the papers in question. In almost every other correspondence where they are mentioned it is with the utmost reverence and

¹⁹ Joyner, preface to *Shared Traditions Southern History and Folk Culture*, 3.

²⁰ H. M. Foard, to James Edward Smoot, 8 July 1927. James Edward Smoot Collection, Special Collections, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina.

²¹ Mrs. H. F. Arnold, to J. E. Smoot, as Quoted in James Edward Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution* (Queen City Printing Company, 1929), 257.

²² H. M. Foard, Wilmington, James Edward Smoot, Concord, 8 July 1927. Special Collections Davidson College, Davidson.

exaggerated language. Even in similar correspondence of Foard one year earlier the tone is different, in that, a sense of courtesy prevailed.

The “papers” to which Foard refers to cannot be viewed, or properly located. In fact their very existence is still in question. Smoot mentions that these documents were at the time of publication currently in Salisbury, but he gives no specific place and there is no mention of them as a source for the book. One can conclude that for all intents and purposes the correspondence does not exist at all. It is only due to the nature of the legendary status of P.S. Ney that non-existent or “lost” papers could be the subject of such a heated debate²³. The aforementioned letters make the myth turn to legend. If the existence of the letters in question were known, and their location not uncertain, then there would be no legend surrounding them.

In the “back woods” of North Carolina during the early nineteenth century people did not have much to be proud of, but in the folklore of the region the people found a source of inspiration. The people of North Carolina had been involved in a deep recession during the antebellum period, necessitating that any thing adding to their wealth either culturally or physically was greatly welcomed.

Perhaps most notably, Smoot’s book covers an almost inescapable link to Southern popular culture. From pages 245 to 278 the main topic of discourse is the origin of the song “Dixie.”²⁴ Southern music, a topic that at first seems unrelated to Napoleon, or Field Marshal Ney, appears to be intertwined with the escape of the latter. The author has compiled an impressive number of newspaper articles and letters on the subject.

²³ Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 421.

²⁴Ibid., 245.

According to Smoot's research, more than one of Napoleon's Marshals fled from France in 1815. Marshal Lefebvre, who it is declared escaped France in the company of Marshal Ney, had a daughter when he arrived in America; this daughter married the composer of "Dixie"²⁵.

The straining to connect "Dixie" to the Ney Mystery only strengthens claims of the cultural significance. According to letters and documents accumulated by Smoot, the eventual writing of "the national air of the Confederacy"²⁶, was resting upon two men escaping from France, both marshals in Napoleon's army.

Since the very beginning of settlement, Southerners have been Euro-centric. If Marshal Ney did escape from execution, and assisted in a subtle way the composing of Dixie, then Southern rebellion becomes more justified. Indeed, this warrior is quite possibly buried in his or her own back yard, which makes the South seem more a haven for those patriots who are misunderstood, instead of a rebellious section of the country.

The information on the origin of "Dixie" is separate from the others in Smoot's book, as it deals with an issue only remotely connected with the Ney legend. In the Southern tradition the association with Europe has been very important. A corroborating statement from the daughter of the man who purportedly escaped with Marshal Ney definitely lends credibility to Smoot's argument for Ney survival. From a historical standpoint this piece of information is very compelling. But why would Smoot include the rest of the articles, which deal solely with the air "Dixie"? The answer is in the culture of the region.

²⁵ Victoria Arnold, letter to Dr. Ramsey, as Quoted in James Edward Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution* (Queen City Printing Company, 1929), 249.

²⁶ Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 277.

In the same way Marshal Ney provided a connection with the “High Culture” of France, the very center of culture in the Nineteenth Century. What better way to add legitimacy to the back woods of North Carolina? Instead of Rowan County being a small overlooked producer of tobacco, the County is the haven for an internationally well-known and popular soldier.

An institution of higher learning, Davidson College is also closely related to the Ney mystery. In 1838 it was deemed necessary by the Governors of the College to create a seal in time for the first graduation. The man chosen to design the seal was Peter S. Ney.²⁷

His design, a sword piercing a snake, contains veiled references to his Bonapartist past. The sword, according to popular legend, is identical to one given to Michel Ney by Napoleon. The inscription around the seal also invokes misrepresented history, in latin it is written “*Alenda Lux Ubi Orta Libertas*” translated to “Light is nourished where freedom has arisen,” due to the local belief that independence had been declared first in Charlotte.²⁸ The nature of Southern culture is one that desires historical context. In order to be prestigious the College of Davidson has associated itself with what this connection to elite culture.²⁹

Not only was P.S. Ney the designer of the seal of Davidson, he also taught fencing there.³⁰ Marshal Ney was a great swordsman, and the fact that Ney the

²⁷ Ibid.,330.

²⁸ Rev. J L. Gay, *The True Story of Marshal Ney and Other Notable Frenchmen that Have Found Asylum in America* (Woodward and Tiernan printing co. St. Louis), 11.

²⁹ Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 330.

³⁰ Ibid.,405.

schoolmaster was also a swordsman only lends greater plausibility to the myth³¹.

Conversely, it also adds an air of European aristocracy. A sword culture never really existed in North America; firearms have always been the preferred weapons, even in the middle Nineteenth Century³².

In 1958, twenty-nine years after James Smoot's book was written, J. B. Morgan composed his own account of Marshal Ney's life. Not only is Ney presented in a much less favorable light but the account of his "escape" is almost wholly omitted³³.

One reason for the omission controversy over Marshal Ney is the setting in which the author is writing. The book *Marshal Ney*, which was published in London, is clearly written from a European perspective. The Ney mystery, which Morgan refers to as "this nonsense," is given half of a page and referred to with dry a language that convinces the reader of its farcical nature. One passage that demonstrates Morgan's interpretation is his identification of the author, Weston, as a "clergyman who had been a Confederate soldier."³⁴ What does the author's past have to do with the truth or falsity of his claim?

As a source of information, J. B. Morgan's book offers a fresh perspective on where Smoot diverges from fact to fiction. The authors use two starkly different introductions. Where Smoot refers to Marshal Ney as a "Patriot of the First water,³⁵" Morgan denotes him a man whose, ". . . violent temper and weak judgment made him an

³¹ David G. Chandler, *Napoleon's Marshals* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 400.

³² *Ibid.* 405.

³³ J. B. Morgan, *Marshal Ney* (London: Arthur Baker Limited, 1958), appendix B.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, appendix B.

³⁵ James Edward Smoot, Preface to *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 2d ed., Special Collections Davidson College, Davidson.

easy victim in the hour when difficult decisions had to be made.”³⁶ Smoot’s book borders on hyperbole where Morgan’s is close to defamation.

Perhaps Morgan’s book is most useful in that it is not a Southern work. Although a southern author might not believe Smoot’s assertion, it is easy to at least sympathize with the need for a heroic folk figure such as Ney in Southern folklore.

The book leads to a comparison which casts doubt as to the true nature of Smoot’s work. Is a historically accurate representation, or a manifestation of local mythology? Morgan dryly reminds his reader that the text, upon which Smoot relies so heavily, *Historical Doubts as to the Execution of Marshal Ney*, is written by a Confederate veteran.³⁷

In formal debate the personal history of an individual who has made an assertion has no relevance to the argument. Knowing this, Morgan reveals his contempt for Southern culture by debunking *Historical Doubts as to the Execution of Marshal Ney* on the grounds of its writer’s past.

Despite its lack of relevance to historical discourse, Morgan’s point is well taken. When viewing the Ney Myth, which is the archetypal character, instead of the legend as history, Morgan’s argument is valid. Smoot’s writing is influenced by his time and place.

Southern folk culture differentiates itself from the rest of the nation by a unique blend of legend and fact. Charles Joyner, in his book *Shared Traditions Southern History and Folk Culture*, describes folk culture as “...what human beings remember not because

³⁶ J. B. Morgan, Forward *Marshal Ney*.

³⁷ J. B. Morgan, appendix B *Marshal Ney*.

it is reinforced by the church, the state, the school or the press but simply what is unforgettable.”³⁸

Peter Stuart Ney exhibits all of the aspects of a Southern hero. He is a warrior, a leader of a well-known army. Ney, Crafty in his escape from France, and brave to travel alone to America, leaving family while constantly avoiding assassination. Perhaps most importantly when European society was the model of elite culture, Ney was purportedly French. It is also relevant that Smoot is writing in an era in the South where two well known heroes were Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee, whose eccentric soldiering, like Ney’s, veiled their lives in mystery. The culture in the South is rich in enigmatic men and women whose lives beget mythology.

However, is it a stretch to connect Marshal Ney with the Confederacy? The answer is no, shortly after the Civil War in 1876 the Southern Historical Society began to collect papers and oral histories on the subject of the recent conflict. Surprisingly, Ney is mentioned in these publications no less than thirteen times. Often he is referred to denote an officer’s loyalty to country, or in the case of General Ramseur, to highlight particular bravery.³⁹ Ramseur’s compliment is notable not only by his association to Ney, but by his status as a General from North Carolina.

General James Longstreet when writing an article in the *Century* in June 1886 writes of A.P. Hill calling him a man, “. . . whose battles, like Ney’s, were all for his country, and none against it...”⁴⁰ Why is it one of the highest honors, in Southern

³⁸ Joyner, *Shared Traditions Southern History and Folk Culture*, 3.

³⁹ Southern Historical Society Papers, Major General Stephen D. Ramseur: His Life and Character. Hon. William R. Cox. An Address Before the Ladies Memorial Association of Raleigh North Carolina May 10th 1891.

Military dialogue, to be associated with Marshal Ney? The answer lies in Ney's importance to the region after the war. There are many other figures in history that could rival the Marshal's record of military triumph, but what separates Ney is his association with the lost cause mythology of the South. Beyond the human impetus to glorify the doomed, he is also a member of the region, and therefore involved in its history and culture.

America has traditionally followed European military theory as a model for its own marshal practices. During the Civil War both the North and the South fought in using the theory of concentrated fire. A tactic perfected during the Napoleonic wars, for use with muskets, the theory called for troops to be formed in lines from which fire could be massed at a central point. These tactics were crucial to the discipline of both armies, as consequence most Military officers would have been well acquainted with the history of Napoleonic France and Field Marshal Ney⁴¹.

Not simply a legendary tale told by Smoot and included in ghost story collections, the tale of P.S. Ney can be found in the local histories of Rowan and Davie Counties.⁴² The author James S. Brawley maintains that in the surrounding countryside story is referred to as, "...the Enigma of Third Street".⁴³

Definitely a part of Southern literature, these local county histories are part of many that were sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. One

⁴⁰ American Memory Project, Century, < [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ABP2287-0032-53\)\)::>](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps:@field(DOCID+@lit(ABP2287-0032-53))::>) (November 2003).

⁴¹ e545 m38

⁴² James S. Brawley, *The Rowan Story 1753-1953: a Narrative History of Rowan County* (North Carolina. Salisbury North Carolina: Rowan Printing co. 1953).

⁴³ James S. Brawley, *Rowan County a Brief History* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1974),51.

cannot help but view the histories as though they may contain bias due to the use of local writers.

However, it is important to examine the reasons behind the inclusion of the Ney story in these local histories. As Joyner points out, perhaps this story is so deeply ingrained in the culture that it can no longer be excluded. He writes that folk culture is something that is not enforced by the powers that be. But maybe the reverse is also true; perhaps this story has seeped into Southern history because it is so closely connected with the folk culture that it can no longer be ignored.

One of Peter Stuart Ney's students was a man by the name of Rev. J. L. Gay. When ninety-five years old and nearly blind and deaf, with the help of some friends, he began to write a pamphlet titled, "The True Story of Marshal Ney: and other notable Frenchmen who have Found Asylum in America."⁴⁴ He recounts the same story that Smoot does some years later of the flight and survival of the Marshal.

Although residing in Arizona at the time of the publishing of the pamphlet, and being listed in the preface as being "recently of Missouri,"⁴⁵ Gay is by his confession a loyal North Carolinian. He was born in Mocksville and attended a local private school taught at that time by P.S. Ney.

Gay's pamphlet discussing Marshal Ney also explores other American myths. He also writes on such sundry subjects as the lost Dauphin of France and the Mecklenburg Resolves. Topics which at first seem unrelated to the Ney Mystery, but when analyzed as a folk tradition brings a new view to their relevance.

⁴⁴ Gay, *The True Story of Marshal Ney and Other Notable Frenchmen that Have Found Asylum in America*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Forward.

The story about the lost Dauphin of France, whom Gay claims to have met on the streets of Montreal, reinforces the assertion that Southerners in the antebellum period were strongly Euro centric. Marshal Ney's purported escape is either a catalyst for, or a product of, the notion of European cultural superiority.

The Declaration of Independence also falls into Gay's section on misrepresented history. In North Carolina popular tradition, as well as Gay's pamphlet, the philosophy in the preamble written by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence was first written in North Carolina's own Mecklenburg Resolves. The true birthplace of revolution then is not in Virginia, but deep in the heart of the South.⁴⁶

Though not literally connected with the Ney controversy, Gay's inclusion of the Mecklenburg resolves only strengthens the premise that Southern culture in the Antebellum period was in need of justification for its place in American culture. People were in desperate need of connection with the outside world on a cultural level. Ney was their connection to Europe and the Mecklenburg Resolves to the founding of the United States.

Notarized statements from individuals connected to P.S. Ney, comprise most of Smoot's "proofs." Their sundry personal relations to the myth range from friends of the doctor who attended Ney's death to a slave that once helped him onto a horse. This is a story that needs no historiographic validation from, as Smoot refers to them, "so called Historians."⁴⁷ It is an oral tradition, which is drawn from people that lived around Ney that has formulated the cultural memory.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ James Edward Smoot, Preface to *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 2d ed., Special Collections Davidson College, Davidson.

This story appears in sundry mystery books, only slightly altered, throughout the South. A unique difference in each is the quotation from P.S. Ney's deathbed in the home of Dr. Foard, a friend with whom he had been boarding. Depending on the witness, and there are many who claim to have been present at the last moments of Ney's life, the story varies.

In *Great Southern Mysteries* by E. Randall Floyd, Ney rises up on his elbows and says, "By all that is holy I am Marshal Ney of France."⁴⁸ According to another source, the slave attendant that was caring for Ney, the Marshal alternated between calling for his wife and one of his aide de camps from the Russian Campaign.⁴⁹ The son of P.S. Ney's attending doctor, John Alexander Locke, also stakes a claim on Ney's final moments. In a letter to James E. Smoot, Locke confers the following conversation:

"Ney said, 'Do you think I am going to die?' My father answered 'I do.' 'Well' said Mr. Ney 'I will not die with a lie on my mouth; I am Marshal Ney of France.'"

Although the details change, the last moments of Ney's life are considered the most definitive proof as to his real identity. Not surprisingly, these accounts have become most compelling as evidence in the minds of all the authors who write on this issue. In every version, Ney reveals his true identity at the moment of death.

Southern oral tradition can account for these small changes in dialogue. It can be inferred that the details of this event spread through the community rather quickly. Also it seems from all accounts that everyone in Rowan County heard of the event from

⁴⁸ E. Randall Floyd, *Great Southern Mysteries* (August House, inc. Little Rock, 1989), 162.

⁴⁹ Smoot, *Marshal Ney Before and After Execution*, 445.

someone who was there. In this sense the story became a tradition, something that was passed down at family gatherings as truth.

Joyner describes tradition as something that everyone holds in common. In an example he points out that although there are discrepancies in a story such as this, it is considered more or less true. In the collective memory of such events only that which is truly memorable can be kept; what remains is “something primal,” the truth of the story, not of the event.⁵⁰

In Southern culture a person’s “word” was, and still is, a very important and binding agreement. The single, and perhaps the only needed evidence in the mind of Smoot and many others is a confession from the subject of the story himself. The confession is the only part of the story that can be found in all recollections of the event.

Smoot’s book inspired others to research the Ney mystery, Legette Blythe wrote his own account of Ney’s escape in 1937. Also included is a dramatic account of the days leading up to his purported escape. He also relies heavily on the same traditional sources, first hand accounts and the ever-present Dr. Weston. Blythe is very close to the traditional interpretation of the Ney myth, on a personal level as his father and Dr. Weston spent many hours discussing the matter.

In the introduction, then president of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Frank P. Graham points out that Blythe, “while making no pretensions to historical scholarship, has done the workmanlike job of a trained journalist...⁵¹” and brought more credible evidence to the myth. This is important as it identifies Smoot’s work as the last in the south to be written for purely historical purposes.

⁵⁰ Joyner, *Shared Traditions Southern History and Folk Culture*, 4.

⁵¹ LeGette Blythe, *Marshal Ney: a Dual Life* (Stackpole sons New York, 1937), 9.

Blythe's book much like the two, which he builds on, is not a historiographically correct work. As Graham points out it does not even attempt to be a scholarly work in its language. However the content is not solely for the purposes of entertainment, he is recounting an oral history that was passed down to him through his father who was a student of Ney's, but the importance of the book is in its location and the notions, which the author puts forth.

A common theme in the research of all three authors is the attempt to verify Ney's identity through handwriting analysis. In fact, Smoot was denied this service by the war department in 1946⁵². Blythe is the first to be successful in his attempt to get professional analysis. Henry E. Thomas, a handwriting expert with the Field Division of the Secret Service in Charlotte North Carolina, after being sent samples writes to Blythe that he is "convinced that all writings were made by the same man."⁵³

Is this analysis relevant to Southern mythology? Is there really that strong of a connection? It is important to note the location of the expert; Charlotte is in the region that has propagated the belief in Ney's identity. As pointed out earlier J.B. Morgan debunks Dr. Weston's work on the same grounds, that of the researchers location, but although not relevant on the grounds of historicity it is relevant as a source of Folklore. The location of these writer precludes their view on the truth of the Ney mystery. In the same way a Secret Service agent in Charlotte will have a differing take on the handwriting analysis than one in the War Department.

⁵² Maj. Gen. Edward F. Witsell, to Washington, James E. Smoot, Concord, 26 October 1946. James Edward Smoot Collection, Special Collections Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina.

⁵³ Henry E Thomas to LeGhette Blythe January 23, 1934. as quoted in LeGette Blythe, *Marshal Ney: a Dual Life* (Stackpole sons New York, 1937), introduction.

Another aspect that remains unclear is the need to have the hand writing samples re-evaluated. Smoot petitioned the War Department in 1946 for the same services, over twelve years after Blythe received his research from the Secret Service in Charlotte. Could it be that Smoot simply did not know about Blythe's book? This possibility is very unlikely, as the two lived in such close proximity, additionally Blythe cites Smoot repeatedly. It is possible that Smoot was not satisfied with a positive reading so close to home. Corroboration from the War Department would affirm the credibility of his case. Even in Smoot's work there is still the need for outside justification.

Peter Stuart Ney's legendary status is important to the Southern Culture, which has enlivened and inspired it. The truth claim by parties, those who believe and those who do not is unresolved. For many North Carolinians in the early nineteenth century was to be poor, and the connection with Europe and the glory of the battlefield was enticing. Poor Southerners created this mythological character for their own needs as a society. The true identity of Ney is almost a moot point, the persona of the man created to exemplify the cultural needs of post war Southern mentality, is not that of Marshal Ney of France, but rather a conglomeration of the society's desires.

The book by James Edward Smoot is a collection of these folk traditions, as well as a folk tradition in its own right. That does not discount the truth claim. People still speak of the legend of Washington cutting down his father's cherry tree, but that does not make the real person any less of a valid historical figure, or the story any more true. In the same way, the stories that have been told about Marshal and Peter Stuart Ney are stories that have sprang up out of tradition, and been propagated. The Legend or historical value of this story has evolved into myth. The story of Michel Ney is one that

involves much of the Southern Tradition. There are elements of religion and secrecy in the form of a Masonic conspiracy; as well as the portrayal of a righteous man not unlike Robert E. Lee or Thomas J. Jackson. What connects Ney to the South's Mythic tradition is not unlike that of Christ. A man of high virtue, and unreachable learning whose tragic death, far from home, invokes the sanctified desire to support a lost cause and thus a form of myth and folklore.

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