

# Forster A. Sondley: Attorney, Scholar and Bibliophile

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The Civil War had a far-reaching effect upon Forster Alexander Sondley. This experience and its aftermath was to produce one of the cultural assets of the city of Asheville, North Carolina, in the form of the Sondley Reference Library. The origin of this library and its supplementary collections dates from April 6, 1865, when the Asheville Home Guard, with a group of Confederate soldiers home on leave, repulsed the 101st Ohio Infantry of the United States Army. The Union force had advanced up the French Broad River to destroy a munitions factory in the town, but after a five-hour skirmish broke off the engagement and retreated downriver. Earlier the same day the Federals had stopped at a large mansion named "Montrealla," ten miles north of Asheville, built by Sondley's maternal grandfather, a son of the pioneer Alexander family prominent in the region. Sondley, who spent his early years here, reported that the soldiers took all the horses they could find, including his Shetland pony. The small animal was shot farther up the road as it could not keep up with the march. To the eight-year old boy it was an act of senseless cruelty and his retentive mind never forgot or forgave this outrage. Later in the day Sondley heard the rumble of guns only a few miles away. Sometime later, with the typical curiosity of a small boy, he wandered over the site of the engagement and picked up some relics, mostly shell fragments from cannonballs. Here was born the collector's instinct and what is believed to be the most complete private Confederate collection in

existence. His avocation was to grow and encompass several fields of interest, culminating in a library which was once regarded as among the finest private libraries in the South.

Sondley was the only child of Richard Sondley, member of a prominent family of Columbia, South Carolina. His mother, Harriet Alexander Ray, was widowed for eleven years before her marriage to Richard, and had borne five children by her first husband. Her last child was born August 13, 1857, at Montrealla, but the couple soon moved to Richard Sondley's home in Columbia. After only two years of marriage, Richard died and his widow again moved to her home at Montrealla, which she inherited when her mother died in 1862. She lived here throughout the remainder of the war, moving to Asheville in 1865. In 1871, she settled permanently in a home she had built in the town.

Sondley's elementary education was received in various schools around Asheville, most notable being the celebrated school of Colonel Stephen Lee, who considered him a commendable student, especially for his deportment. Lee once wrote that Sondley possessed a faculty of "focussing his attention," apparently a singular achievement for the student of that day.

In the fall of 1873, Sondley entered the sophomore class at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Intending to study law after graduation, he did especially well in Greek, Latin, and German. Dr. Charles F. Smith, Professor of Classics and

German at Wofford, remembered Sondley years later and made reference to him in a letter to a friend in 1931, recalling that Sondley possessed one of the brightest minds he had ever known.

Sondley graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1876 and returned to Asheville. He studied law until licensed by the North Carolina Supreme Court in January of 1879, opening a law office immediately afterwards and beginning a long career as attorney, scholar, and bibliophile.

Over the years he built a reputation in legal circles, having been described as the ablest civil lawyer in Western North Carolina. Part of this esteem was due to a characteristic courtesy to opponents in court, but most of it was due to a knowledge of the theory and philosophy of law, supplemented with a grasp of state and interstate history, which rendered him formidable in dispute. Participating in a case involving a thirty-year boundary problem between North Carolina and Tennessee, he amazed his adversaries with his knowledge of North Carolina law and geography and saw the issue settled.

As his reputation grew, so did his clientele. His services came high and he prospered, but he gave much in return if he accepted a client. Never taking a case until he had investigated the facts, he then deliberated whether he wanted the fee, regardless of the amount of it. If he accepted a case he worked slowly, patiently, and methodically in his law library where interruptions were never permitted, no matter who the person. When appearing in court, he was well-prepared for his task with his hand-written briefs and command of legal and historical matters.

Another factor in the demand for his services was his scrupulous honesty. Upon completion of an examination of land titles for George Vanderbilt, who was then engaged in acquiring tracts for his Biltmore Estate, Sondley submitted a bill for five thousand dollars to Vanderbilt's New York attorney, who advised his employer that the work was actually worth ten thousand. Vanderbilt returned the bill with the request that Sondley submit another for ten

thousand dollars. Back to Vanderbilt came the original bill, with a note from Sondley to the effect that he considered the work worth five thousand dollars and no more, adding that he did not accept tips. He could be brusque with those who offended him and was no respecter of persons in this regard.

He travelled very little although involved frequently in interstate legal matters and, after returning home from college, left the state only once, when representing a client in Washington, D. C. This trip could have been to plead a case before the Supreme Court of the United States, since he was licensed to practice before that body in 1909. His services were also used at least once by the State of North Carolina in litigation heard by the Supreme Court in Washington, the Attorney General for the State informing him that his work would count for much in the case, though Sondley himself was not present.

In 1905 Sondley went into semi-retirement at the peak of his career, observing that he had no fondness for courthouse quarrels and hot weather. He continued at times to assist friends and those in need of legal aid, visiting his office briefly almost every morning. But his legal career was over as far as he was concerned, and he retired permanently in 1925. No lover of money for its own sake, he nevertheless was canny in investments and conversant with values to the extent that he had acquired a comfortable fortune. This he intended to use in the pursuit of hobbies and interests which occupied a place primary to law, as the latter was mostly a means to an end. Indeed, a friend of Sondley once wrote that he seemed to begrudge to the practice of law the time which could have been spent more pleasantly indulging his tastes. This partly explains why he wished to escape from the demands of a lucrative practice when regarded among lawyers of North Carolina as the most effective and best-informed attorney who had appeared before the higher courts.

Sondley lived with his mother at her home in Asheville for forty years until her death, and remained a bachelor all his

life. She exerted a tremendous influence on him. It was said that the quality of her intellect contributed much to his. From her he learned thrift and frugality, never owing a debt and always paying in cash. The hardships of the Civil War and Reconstruction had their effect upon him for he appraised the value of everything and was prudent and conservative in investments, while possessing the mind essentially of a scholar and student. Harriet Sondley died in 1897 and her son, who was very close to her, was so stricken with grief that he became seriously ill. When news of his condition became known, cards, letters, and other evidences of sympathy poured in from residents of Asheville, from whom Sondley had remained aloof, considering them almost as strangers. Touched at these expressions of regard, he then made a decision which was to have its impact thirty-four years later when his will was read. As in the case of the pony, he never forgot an injury — neither did he ever forget a kindness. Never gregarious, now that his mother was gone he longed for solitude more than ever.

Around the turn of the century Asheville was growing rapidly. The character of the town was changing from a quiet sleepy village to a bustling small city with more noise and hurry than Sondley cared to endure. With usual deliberation he began to consider various sites in the neighborhood for a summer home. He wanted a house located where he could look in all four directions and never see a human being. In his words: "I simply wanted to live as I wished, to cut my grass as I pleased, to worry about no one but myself. If I wanted to put on old clothes and roll about on the grass, I wanted to do it without causing comment." He finally decided on a cove at the head of Haw Creek Valley, several miles from Asheville and at that time virtually uninhabited. He purchased some four hundred acres, built a rustic house of stone which blended well with the surrounding forest, and there began to spend his leisure hours. His love for the property grew to such an extent that in 1905 he moved there permanently. Access to the house was by a narrow lane

which ended at his gatepost. Observing this, he named the house "Finis Viae," the "End of the Road." The home in Asheville was maintained exactly as it was built by his mother, and he never permitted it to be altered during his lifetime.

Settling into his retreat, Sondley began to devote himself to relaxing pastimes, designing and landscaping the area adjacent to the house with flower gardens and shrubbery. Footpaths were cut through the lush woods with rustic benches located along them at intervals. Wildlife on the property was protected and others were urged to do the same. No one was allowed to pick flowers or break the shrubbery. He came to love his woods with a deep devotion. Characteristically, he would scan them with a telescope before selecting a tree to be cut for fuel, lest a hasty decision destroy the symmetry of the forest. He was eccentric but with a method, and behind every eccentricity could be found carefully considered reasons.

At the same time he began to accelerate the growth of his various collections. Although the library was the best known of these he also had collections of firearms, Indian relics, bird eggs, minerals, gem stones, North Carolina currency and coins, antique furniture, English and German porcelains, Japanese and Chinese vases and temple pieces, and the excellent collection of Confederate mementoes. Sondley was a man who kept his own counsel and proposed to take the world on his terms. For this reason he isolated himself in his wooded retreat and admitted to his attention only that part of the world in which he took an interest. This was evident by his collecting only that which interested him and ignoring or neglecting for the most part that which did not. The collections and books took the place of travel and the lure of fresh scenes and experiences. Visitors marvelling at the scope of his interests and accumulation of objects were told that it was simply the collector's instinct at its worst.

Students of history are called upon to live more or less vicariously much of the time, a requirement involved in the attempt

to get the "feel" of a period or event in the past. Sondley possessed a fondness for the past to an extreme degree which manifested itself in a variety of ways. His love of the Confederacy, for example, grew like his collections from boyhood, and over his antique four-poster bed hung a bullet-riddled battle flag carried by elements of Lee's infantry during the Battle of the Wilderness. He insisted that the Confederate government was founded on truth and justice and would one day be seen as the proper form of democracy. His writings always referred to the Civil War as the "War on the South." Experiences during the War and Reconstruction moulded his attitudes, and he was fond of justifying the opinions and actions of the South. In one paper he defended Chief Justice Taney of the United States Supreme Court, a native of Maryland who participated in the "Dred Scott Decision" of 1857. In this case the Court held that Negroes had no rights which whites were bound to respect. Sondley pointed out that this opinion was prevalent in England and the newly-formed United States when the Constitution was adopted, and that Taney's words reflected the Constitution, not his own views nor those of the South. He then referred to the widespread recognition of John Chavis, a southern Negro scholar who was considered a gentleman and treated accordingly. His writings on history reveal a provincialism unusual in one so widely-read and scholarly, and a defensive sensitivity toward any criticism of North Carolina, the South, or the Confederacy. Anything he wrote of a scholarly nature was so fortified with citation of authorities that in argument only another expert could prevail against him, if at all. Dr. Archibald Henderson, of the University of North Carolina, said, "In the field of local and state history, his writings are marked with painstaking accuracy, vigorous expression, and wide research." Sondley lived in the past and made himself familiar with it. This trait was so noticeable to all who knew him that one newspaper article said he resented the encroachments of the present.

Sondley was an eccentric with a curious combination of characteristics. An ardent

Carolinian, provincial in outlook, conservative and cautious, yet he showed a great tolerance toward certain subjects and displayed a wide knowledge of the world, gained almost solely through reading. He was an avid admirer of Charles Darwin and bought every work by Darwin that he could acquire. This was in a period and a locality where one would perhaps not ordinarily express a favorable opinion of evolution, but Sondley was not an ordinary man. He said that "Darwin, like all other humans, made mistakes; and he should not be discredited for that. He was a seeker after truth, and that is what God would have us be, that is what He gave us minds for." He also owned the complete works of Thomas H. Huxley, considering the latter to have done more in thorough scientific investigation than any other man.

In argument he would listen patiently if the speaker demonstrated a grasp of the subject. A man of few words, when he did essay an opinion it meant that he had usually exhausted information on the point under discussion, and if his opponents had not, he disdained their opinions and deemed their contentions a waste of time. He could not understand why anyone would slur a point or evade an issue, but exacted from others only as much as he demanded of himself. Strong-willed and opinionated (as the interesting handwritten annotations in his books reveal), he cherished his views and was ready to maintain them at all hazards. As a student of history and law, imbued with a nostalgia for the past, he was strong for traditional principles and doubted modern tendencies in government.

In appearance, he was a striking figure. Tall and erect in carriage, he had a clear-cut direct gaze combined with a natural dignity which attracted attention wherever he was seen. He was always clean-shaven, except for sideburns, and remarkably neat in dress, but never wore an overcoat nor a hat.

His brusqueness, with his almost forbidding appearance, served to shield him from situations and propositions he disliked. A real estate agent, offering him a large



sum for the Sondley Building in the heart of the business district, was told that he, Sondley, could not consider the offer, dismissing the agent by adding, "I am not in the real estate business." He resented personal questions, and upon being asked why he held a negative attitude toward the established social order of things, replied that his habits were not a matter of public concern.

His fastidiousness extended to personal habits, one salient characteristic being a passionate hatred of cigarettes. He would request smokers to refrain from smoking in his presence, and a sign at his law office indicated that callers were to leave their cigarettes or themselves outside. His will stipulated that smoking was not to be allowed near his books.

Sondley, an unflinching individualist, never employed a clerk or stenographer (except the latter a few times toward the end of his life), and never used a typewriter, doing all his writing, including law briefs and voluminous histories, in long-hand. There was no telephone in his home or office. Caring little for people's approbation or censure he never held a public office nor sought cheap laughs by telling dirty jokes. Although experiences during and after the Civil War and first-hand knowledge in courtrooms of people's shortcomings diminished his respect for humanity, he was not an unfeeling misanthrope. During the flood of 1916 many who lived in the slum district close to the French Broad River were left homeless. A subscription was taken for their relief and one citizen approached Sondley for a contribution, whereupon he snapped, "No! You know very well I never sign anything of that sort!" Amazed and hurt the man left to finish his rounds. Several thousand dollars were raised and agents were sent to the stricken district with food and clothing. On their arrival they found other agents ahead of them at work for an anonymous donor. Later a pledge-breaking merchant revealed that the donor was Sondley. Consequently, Sondley never forgave him and never allowed himself nor any member of his household to patronize

the unfortunate merchant's establishment. His personal papers reveal at least two more instances in which he demonstrated a sympathetic nature, and also show that his generosity was called upon more than once by the same recipients. In pointing out Sondley's love of solitude it should be added that he also had many friends. His regard, however, was limited usually to those who could converse with him on his favorite subjects. He chose friends carefully and formed lasting relationships with them.

Although eccentricities marked him as a character, and a brilliant career as an attorney earned him an LL.D. from Wofford in 1909, his library and collections were his chief claims to posthumous consideration. The collections came to be almost as well known as the library. One writer on archaeological subjects visited him in 1917. The author's work had taken him into the homes of many learned men, and he was interested in Sondley's Indian relics. He found a "splendid" collection of relics of primitive man and suggested publicly that Asheville take steps to secure for coming generations a possession of great interest, since the large museums would try to get it when they heard of it.

Included among Sondley's hobbies was ornithology and consequently he had a large collection of bird eggs. A major part of the collection was acquired after the premature death of John Cairns, one of the most famous ornithologists and oologists in the United States. Cairns owned a collection of eggs for which several institutions as well as individuals made bids after his death. Trinity College, now Duke University, offered Cairn's widow college education for her two small children in exchange for the eggs, but she needed money at the time and sold the collection to Sondley. One man, who was deeply interested in the subject, remembered as a 15-year old taking his younger brother and, astride their buggy horse, riding many mountain miles to appear half-scared at Sondley's door asking to see his bird eggs. He, with an unflinching courtesy, asked them in and showed them the collection.

When Sondley gave up most of his law practice in 1905, it was in order to devote himself primarily to his books, and it is as a bibliophile that he is chiefly remembered. In spite of his varied tastes and interests his first love was his library. Books became companions and friends, and he loved them as entities, their contents being individual personalities. His first books were those read as a child and carefully laid away to form the nucleus of his collection. After he began to practice law in 1879, his collecting intensified and the library grew steadily. When deciding to build *Finis Viae*, a seventy-foot-long structure of two stories was provided in the plans to contain the library. Shortly before his death an addition was built onto this as his books were overflowing the house. Always the individualist, Sondley purchased for his library only that which he wanted to read, or which in some way attracted his interest. There were great gaps in the collection — almost nothing on music or the fine arts, for example, and there were duplications of his favorite authors: sixty-five sets of Shakespeare, various editions of Dickens, and translations of Homer. The library reflected his tastes and was his private accomplishment throughout. Many private libraries are the combined efforts of a number of men, with the owner financing the project while professional collectors and scholars select, search for, and buy the books. Often the owner seldom opens the volumes, his interest lying in the prestige of ownership and the status involved in the possession of a fine library. But this was not the case with Sondley. His papers reveal correspondence with booksellers all over the United States and parts of Europe. As he became widely known as a collector in certain fields, they would send lists of titles they felt would interest him. Many did, and his collection grew into the thousands.

A frugal man, temperate in habit and cautious with money, he nevertheless spent a small fortune on his library, searching worldwide if he wanted a particular book, rarely quibbling over the cost. He was discriminating in his selection methods and cared nothing for rarities or first editions as such. What he wanted was the best

edition available of a work and not those books which depended on slight misprints or other bibliographical oddities for their inflated values. This was another contributing factor to the uniqueness of the collection. His was a scholar's library with all the volumes selected to feed a scholar's interests. Nevertheless, he did avail himself of some volumes which apparently piqued his curiosity more than anything else. Among them are three incunabula, including Saint Jerome's *EPISTLE* of 1480 in its original binding, and a collection of over two hundred Bibles.

Speaking of his hobby, he said book collecting was not dull:

Every book collector feels at times the disappointment of arriving at a bookseller's half an hour after a rare book for which he has searched for years has been sold. Too, comes the thrill of at last discovering a much sought-after volume.

But, he added:

I am not in any sense a book worm. One day I may read one thing and the next take an absolutely different kind of book in hand. I am especially interested in history and archaeology, but the next day will find me perusing a book on travel or hunting in Africa.

Most of the books were in English, including many translations from Latin and Greek for, although Sondley was familiar with Greek, Latin and German, he bought the books to be read, and could best read them in English. Years were spent in a vain search for one book, a worthless paper-backed thing given away by mistake sometime in the 1890's. He wanted it for a simple reason: its association with his childhood, the past.

As the library grew to sizeable proportions, word began to spread among scholarly circles about its quality, and they began to write asking to see the collection. He was liberal with these requests as his "chesterfield" graciousness and courtesy were well-known, one source even describing his home as a Mecca for the majority of men of letters visiting Asheville.

Sondley resented any comparison of his library with others. The books to him were friends, companions as carefully chosen

en as their human counterparts, and to compare them with other collections was to cheapen and depersonalize them. He demanded the same privacy for his books that he claimed for himself. One new librarian, wishing to get acquainted with the region's libraries, called at his office requesting to see his books. Sondley was abrupt at first, stating that anyone wishing to see his library to compare it with another was not a welcome visitor. Relenting then, he added that anyone who wished to see the library because of a real interest in books was welcome, and it would be a pleasure to show it. The librarian accepted the invitation and spoke of case after case of excellent books. Asked if he lent them, Sondley exclaimed, "No! If I lent them I'd never have any!"

Interest centered mostly in the history collection, the subject closest to Sondley's heart. He had fostered the organization of the Buncombe County Historical Society and was a member of the first North Carolina Historical Commission from 1903 to 1905. As early as 1911, he was referred to Archibald Henderson of Chapel Hill as an authority on North Carolina, who not only had a magnificent private collection of books and manuscripts, but also possessed an intimate knowledge of North Carolina history. Sondley was unusually familiar with his collection and while writing on historical subjects was reportedly able to work for hours without consulting sources, having committed them to memory.

Although knowledge of the library was confined largely to scholars, the public began to hear rumors about it, and its size seemed to grow with each rumor. The only description available of the library at *Finis Viae* indicates that it consisted of two rooms seventy feet long, one upstairs and one down. Half the space was taken up by the bookshelves and the remainder by the various collections. Most of the fiction and the maps supplementing the history section were upstairs, with the bookshelves placed somewhat close together for free access to their contents. There was an informal subject arrangement for the entire collection, with Sondley's excellent

memory making up for its deficiencies. He had talked to one inquirer about the relative anonymity of his library and the questioner thought it was because he never boasted of it, Sondley having told him that book-collecting

... is and has been my life-long hobby, and it is not well for a person to boast of his hobby. What pleases and interests me may not hold any attraction for others. I have gathered only those books that attract me, and these I do not expect to please the other person.

Asked how many books he owned, he replied that he had not yet learned the difference between a pamphlet and a book, whether a book had to have a board cover or what was its definite description. The inquirer, perhaps somewhat awed, stated that Sondley was said to have ninety-six thousand volumes, a figure ridiculously high. Sondley himself probably did not know. A friend said it was doubtful if he ever counted his books or even estimated their number, as his interests were always in specific books, not how many he owned.

Sondley lived his last years surrounded by his mementoes of the past. He loved to chat with his friends in his living room. All had been led at one time or another to his front porch and handed his telescope with the injunction to admire the slopes of the tree-covered mountains across the valley. He accumulated a collection of over two thousand phonograph records and enjoyed listening to them, although his friends said he was not a music lover. His favorites were "Annie Laurie" and "Rigoletto Quartette."

Old age saw him active and productive in the writing of history. He had written a lengthy sketch of Asheville and Buncombe County, published in 1922, and several years later with the cooperation of the County Historical Society began a more comprehensive work. He completed the task early in 1930, having done most of the work while recovering from a leg fracture suffered the previous autumn. Financial difficulty plagued the Society's efforts toward publication for several years

after his death, both volumes of the book being finally available in 1937. This was his most important published work, although in 1950 a manuscript was found in his personal files consisting of a history of the two Carolinas in some three thousand pages. An examination of the footnotes indicated he had consulted hundreds of source books.

He was appointed Historian of Buncombe County in 1927, by then regarded as perhaps the best known living authority of the early history of the State. In a speech to county school principals he revealed his concept of history by stating that its value was in preserving human experience for the guidance of those who come after. He recommended that teachers point out the relationship of local events to the larger picture of history to make it more interesting to students. His ability in this field was summarized after his death in an editorial which said that his writings, while not extensive, bear all evidences of a patient scholarship.

In 1928 he was awarded his second honorary doctorate, this time from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In presenting him for an LL.D., Dr. Archibald Henderson said he was

known among the legal fraternity of North Carolina as a lawyer of great ability, and known in scholarly and literary circles for his magnificent library . . .

The University also had a weather eye on the possibility of acquiring the library by bequest since it was known that several institutions coveted it, and possibly excepting Wofford, Chapel Hill was the logical choice for this type of library.

Although his mind remained vigorous to the end, his health began to decline due to the consequences of age and a series of accidents. Finally on April 16, 1931, he became ill with pneumonia. The next morning Forster Alexander Sondley, LL.D., attorney, scholar, and bibliophile joined the past that he loved. He was buried near his boyhood home after a simple service in Alexander.

Interest was then aroused about the dis-

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position of the library according to Sondley's will. One editorial before his funeral indicated that Wofford, the University of North Carolina, and Pack Memorial Library (Asheville's public library) were awaiting the reading of the will since Sondley had reportedly promised to bequeath it to one of the three. The will was read on April 20th, and in Article 24 Sondley bequeathed to the City of Asheville all his library books and other literary property, including his collections located in his library rooms.

When the library was examined it was discovered that he had over the years acquired approximately 30,000 books and pamphlets plus hundreds of clippings and letters involving a variety of subjects. Due to extensive duplication Belles Lettres had the greatest number of volumes — over 7000 titles dealing with English and American literature and about 1500 of literature other than English. A librarian evaluating this collection said it was especially strong in English poetry, which was astonishing in its inclusiveness, from Anglo-Saxon through the Victorians. After literature, most shelf space was occupied by history, with emphasis on the history and exploration of southern states, the North Carolina section alone containing 2450 volumes. There were 650 volumes of collected and 2450 volumes of individual biographies. Altogether there were some 9000 books on history, many of them rare, besides a supplementary collection of 1100 maps, over half of these also considered rare. The last important collection and third in volume rank was natural history, comprised of 5700 volumes, with many rare and scarce titles enhancing the standard works.

Asheville had not only doubled the size of its public library, but also acquired a gift which was to become the foundation of one of the largest reference collections in the South\*, known as the Sondley Reference Library, a part of Pack Memorial Public Library. He had remembered the kindness of Asheville residents when he had been ill thirty-four years before and, in return, had left them his most cherished possession.

\*Complete listings of the more important collections in Sondley's library became available when a bibliography, entitled *Leaves From The Sondley*, was published in intermittent issues beginning in 1945 and ending in 1952. Many copies were mailed to widely distributed university, college, public and private libraries.

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