Asbury Coward: Soldier-Educator
by Louise Pettus

Asbury Coward was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1835 and graduated from The Citadel in 1854. He and his classmate, Micah Jenkins, established the King's Mountain Military School in Yorkville, South Carolina in 1855. Asbury Coward came to Yorkville in 1854 to study law under the direction of William Blackburn Wilson, Esq., one of the leading lawyers of his day. Young Coward, who liked to sign his name “A. Coward,” was the son of a lowcountry rice planter and a recent graduate of the Citadel.

After only a couple of months Coward decided against law as his life’s work. He was more inclined toward physical activity and preferred hunting, fishing and horsemanship to the indoors life of a lawyer. Coward persuaded a brilliant Citadel classmate, Micah Jenkins, to come to Yorkville. Together they founded Kings Mountain Military Academy in January 1855. Coward and Jenkins were both 19.

The academy was designed as a prep school for the Citadel. The first class had 12 students ranging in age from 11 to 16. The school quickly gained an excellent reputation both for its discipline and its academics. The five-year curriculum included mathematics through trigonometry, Latin, French, German, grammar, chemistry, astronomy, geology, physiology, history, English literature and philosophy.

By 1859 the Kings Mountain Academy had handsome barracks, 10 instructors and 139 cadets.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union, Coward and Jenkins both enlisted, and their academy, which had nearly 200 cadets, closed its doors. Jenkins formed the Jasper Light Infantry, the first unit to be raised in Yorkville for the Confederacy.

Asbury Coward entered the Confederate Army as captain in the adjutant general’s department. He was soon transferred to the field where he was advanced to major after the Battle of Malvern Hill. A few months later, on August 12, 1861 he was made Colonel in the 5th Regiment and assumed command on 15th Nov. 1862.

Not all of Coward’s fighting was in Virginia. He was in the battles of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain and Knoxville plus a number of smaller skirmishes in the western campaign. At the end of the war Coward was with Lee at Farmville and Appomattox. He was wounded at the Battle near Chaffin’s Farm, Virginia in 1864.

Following the surrender Coward returned to Yorkville with his wife and growing family. Coward had married Eliza Corbett Blum on Christmas Day 1856, in Yorkville. Eventually the couple had 17 children and outlived all but one.

Coward reopened the Kings Mountain Military Academy, but things were not as before. Micah Jenkins had been killed in the war. Not many families could afford a boarding school. The South was under military rule, and military cadets were not allowed to use rifles. Colonel Coward reluctantly closed the school’s days in 1886.
For four years before closing the Academy, Coward also held the office of state superintendent of instruction. In 1890 Coward became superintendent of the Citadel in Charleston. The Citadel made great strides under the leadership of Coward who gained the respect and affection of every student body he ever commanded.

The effect of Coward's work on education in general caused the University of South Carolina to award him the honorary degree of doctor of laws in 1896. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Coward to the West Point Board of Visitors.

Coward retired from the post of commandant of the Citadel in 1908, a position he had held since 1890. At that time he was awarded a Carnegie Pension for his service to mankind. The money allowed a “retirement in dignity” A special delegation of Yorkville citizens went to Charleston in an attempt to persuade Coward to retire in Yorkville. They even promised him a cook and “a boy,” but the Cowards went to live with a child in Johnson County, Tenn., for a while. When he was 89 and she was 87, the Cowards returned to Yorkville to live the remainder of their lives. Coward died in 1925 and is buried at Rosehill Cemetery.