

Edward Porter Alexander

(1835-1910)

by Mark C. Hageman

Edward Porter Alexander was born on May 26, 1835, in Washington, Georgia, about 100 miles east of Atlanta. He was one of eight children born to Adam Leopold Alexander, and Sara (Hillhouse) Gilbert. His father Adam was a Yale graduate of the class of 1821. He could read and write in three languages (English, Greek and Latin). Adam Leopold met Sara Gilbert in New Haven, Connecticut, while she was attending a woman's finishing school there. Sara was originally from Washington, Georgia, being raised in the "high country". Adam, being from the "low country", had a plantation named "Hopewell" near Riceboro, Georgia, just south of Savannah. Upon their marriage they settled down and lived in Washington, Georgia, at the old Gilbert house (Fairfield Plantation) that was built in 1808. *(Located on Alexander Drive between North Alexander Avenue and Poplar Drive in Washington, Georgia)*



Known to his friends as "Porter" he had a wonderful childhood at Fairfield, knowing many of his father's plantation slaves, calling them by name and eating and playing with their children. His favorite passion, hunting and fishing, preoccupied much of his time. This preoccupation would stay with Porter throughout his life and play an important part in his destiny.

In his early teens, Porter got into a quarrel over secession and was bullied by two of his peers. He was told that they had pistols and were going to whoop him. Porter armed himself with a "pepper box" revolver. When they met, the boys and Porter came to collision. One hit Porter over the head with a stick, and Porter drew his pistol and pulled the trigger. It misfired, and the boy pulled his pistol on Porter. He fired a second time, again the pistol misfired. By this time, some older boys who were present had stepped in, stopped the fight, and took the pistols away. One of the older boys then fired Porter's pistol, and this time it discharged. Porter could have

changed his life for the worst with this single event. It made such an impact on him, that he never forgot this lesson, and from that time always tried to keep a cool head and stay out of politics.



Jeremy Francis Gilmer

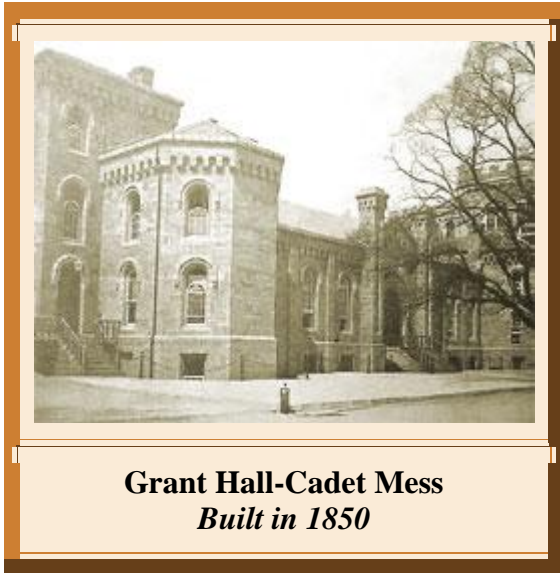
From early childhood, Porter desired to attend West Point. However, his father had other plans, and wanted him to become an engineer and not a soldier. When Porter was 14 years old and his two oldest sisters were about to marry West Point graduates, the fiancé' of Louisa Frederika Alexander, Jeremy Gilmer of Guilford County, North Carolina, later to become Maj. Gen. Gilmer of the Confederate Army, Engineer Corps, convinced the elder Alexander that Porter could go to West Point and become an engineer, if he stayed in the top of his class. Adam Leopold was so impressed by Gilmer that he gave his consent for Porter to attend West Point. Subsequently, Jeremy Gilmer and Porter were to remain the best of friends throughout their lives.

The preparations for Porter's entrance to West Point soon began. Several years before, Adam Leopold had employed a Miss. Brackett of Massachusetts to provide tutoring for all of the Alexander children. Because of this, Porter was very well prepared. In the winter of 1852-1853 Porter was sent to Savannah, Georgia to take lessons in

French and drawing by the Lawton's of south Broad Street. Adam Leopold went to see the Honorable Robert Toombs (*later Brig. Gen. Toombs of the 20th Georgia*), one of their neighbors, to seek his assistance in obtaining an appointment for Porter to West Point. Toombs was delighted and honored and consented to do this for the Alexander family.

Edward Porter Alexander entered West Point in June of 1853 and was assigned to Dick Meade of Petersburg, Virginia as his roommate. At the time, Porter weighed 150 pounds and was 5' 9 1/2" tall. He had to study hard to maintain his 3rd place ranking, in order that he would graduate as an engineer, as he had promised his father (only the top ranked cadets were assigned as engineers). Doing this required him to stay up very late at night and study by candlelight, and kept his behavior in an excellent form so they he would avoid demerits.

While at West Point, tragedy struck the Alexander family. Porter's mother, Sara Alexander, had become addicted to morphine due an illness that caused her to be in severe pain. She traveled to Philadelphia for treatment. On her way, she visited Porter at West Point. He was shocked by her loss of weight and appearance. When she returned to Washington, Georgia, her physical condition had deteriorated to the extent that she appeared as if only skin and bones. She passed away in February of 1855, and was buried in the family cemetery at Fairfield Plantation. This was a great blow to the family and to Porter. This personal tragedy brought him and his father, Leopold, closer together than they had ever been.



Grant Hall-Cadet Mess
Built in 1850

In 1857, Porter, at the age of 23, graduated 3rd in his class of 38 at West Point and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieut. Of Engineers. He had fulfilled the promise he had made to his father. He was known to his classmates to be a talented engineer and artilleryist. His roommate, Richard K. Meade, Jr. was 1st in his class and later, during the War Between the States, died of typhoid fever during the Seven Days Battle serving as an engineer for the Confederacy. John Palfrey of Massachusetts was 2nd in the class, and George Crockett Strong was 5th in the class of 1857.

Following his graduation, Porter was given a three months furlough and was then ordered back to West Point as Assistant Instructor of Military Engineering and Fencing. In the fall of 1857 he

was assigned for duty with the Utah Expedition under Albert Sydney Johnston (*whom during the war years obtained the CSA rank of General*). The expedition consisted of six columns, 500 men in each column. Edward Porter Alexander was assigned to the 1st column, commanded by Col. Andrews, West Point graduate class of 1823, who was also a veteran of the Seminole Wars.

This expedition was sent for by order of President James Buchanan. He wanted to replace Brigham Young as Territorial Governor with Alfred Cummings of Georgia. The Mormon leader and his followers were adamantly against this and were committed to resistance. The Utah Expedition was sent out, and if necessary, to use force to install territorial governor Cummings. However, during the winter encampment on the way to Utah, representatives of both parties were able to resolve the matter and install Cummings without any military action. Thus, the columns returned to the east.

Porter was in absolute delight on the Utah Expedition. He loved the west, the wide open spaces, beautiful scenery, pristine rivers, streams, and forests. Best of all, the hunting was great. This being one of his true loves, the thrill of the hunt. It was said, Porter personally killed twenty-five buffalo from horseback and foot and shot many quail, pheasants, turkeys, and other game. He is also greatly delighted to meet all kinds of Plains Indians, such the Sioux, Pawnees, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Utes. During this time, he meets two gentlemen who later become bonded with him in history, at the 3rd day of Gettysburg, 1863, Capt. Lewis A. Armistead and Capt. Richard B. Garnett.

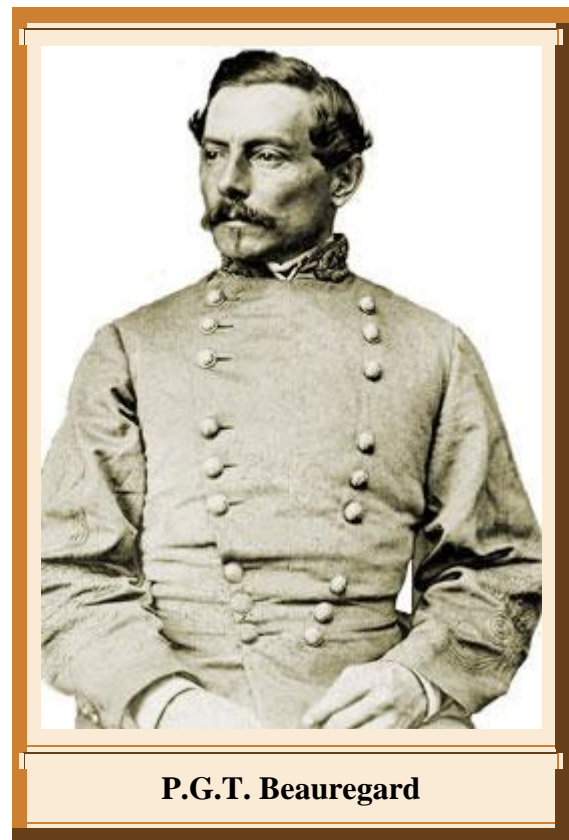
With the end of the expedition, Porter returns back to West Point to resume his duties as instructor of engineering and fencing. Here he meets two Virginia belles, Gussie and Betty Mason. He takes a strong liking to Betty, who is 24 years old. After a short courtship they are married in King George County, Virginia on April 3rd, 1860, at the age of 24. During thier marriage, they have five children, three boys and two girls.

One day, Porter meets Surgeon Albert James Myer, later Brig. Gen. Myer of the Federal Army, who had been involved in developing a system of communicating messages over long distances. Later, to Porter's surprise, Myer appoints him as his assistant. They test their signaling apparatuses over great distances, the secretary of war, impressed with their results, installs Myer as the Signal Officer of the Army. This experience will play a major role in Porter's future.

Shortly after, Porter receives orders to report to the Oregon territory. He and his bride take a long and arduous journey by steamboat and train in order to get to their destination. Upon arrival there, he is sent to Fort Steilacoom in the Washington Territory. He again, falls in love with the area, being full of beautiful scenery, excellent hunting and fishing, and the Indians were both friendly and cordial. After a short duty there, he was ordered to report to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, to assist with its fortifications. During his duty there, Georgia secedes from the Union.

Porter promptly resigns from the United States Army in May 1861, all of his commanding officers try desperately to change his mind, but like Robert E. Lee of Virginia, Alexander could not fight against his home state and the people of Georgia. He then returns to Georgia.

Porter now realizing that the Confederacy is formed and is raising an Army to defend itself against the Northern invasion. He reports to Richmond on June 1st, 1861. Once there, he has an audience with President Jeff Davis who knows of Porter and his signal experience. He immediately appoints him as an eng officer, and assigned to set up signal capability for P.G.T. Beauregard. Porter is authorized to train men and obtain the necessary equipment to establish a signal system. He takes great zeal and determination to immediately establish a well-run CSA signal system, thus setting the groundwork for a CSA Signal Corps. Once on Beauregard's staff, he was given the honor of a place in his mess. Porter writes the following: "Gen. Beauregard had more courtesy of manner than any of the other generals with whom I ever served." Porter certainly had a tremendous respect for Gen. Beauregard's engineering skills and his overall military bearing and manner. He had felt his defensive engineering of the Charleston Harbor was superb and that he had done an excellent job with the defenses of Petersburg. Speculatively, Gen. Beauregard could be the Confederate general most admired and respected by him.



P.G.T. Beauregard

Porter then began to prepare himself for the inevitable war and battles to come. Ironically, he purchases two horses, Dixie, a large, dark bay, and Meg, a shorter and lighter bay. This is significant because many times during the War, if he would have been riding the taller horse, his head would have been taken off by an artillery projectile, and if he would have been riding the shorter horse, his leg may have been removed by a projectile. Consequently, fate played a most definite role in which horse he rode on any particular day.

Also at this time, he was given a telescope by a friend in Charleston, South Carolina. This special astronomical glass was about six feet long when fully extended and had a four-inch aperture; a custom-made leather case was crafted to fit on his saddle. He knew a special way of holding the telescope, which made it very steady and usable without the use of a tripod. Porter never used field glasses; he only used his special telescope. This gave him a tremendous advantage in viewing the enemy and reconnoitering the land, and it also came in very handy with his signal corps duties.

He also hired a 15-year old "ginger cake darkie" body servant by the name of Charley Crowley. Porter acted as a father figure to him and comments that he had to give Charley a little licking only twice, once for stealing pears from a tree without asking the owner and the other for stealing apple brandy and getting tight on it at Gettysburg. Charley is an admirable body servant and stays with Alexander throughout the War. A strong bond of friendship and respect evolved between the two men. Charley was a "rented" slave from his master for service. Alexander set-up a bank account in Richmond to which payment for Charley's service was made. At the war's end, it was found that Charley's master never collected the funds. Alexander withdrew the funds, converted it to a ten dollar gold piece, and gave it to Charley. What a pricely grub stake that was, for a newly freed slave!

While on the staff of Gen. Beauregard, Porter was given the unusual assignment to do secret service work. The Confederates needed more information on the movements and troop strength of the Federal Army. Alexander created a system of spies along with methods of receiving the information. He appointed E. Pliny Bryan, of Maryland, as his chief spy. With E. Pliny in Washington, D.C., Porter could receive signal messages. E. Pliny would get a room in a hotel that Porter could see from Mason Hill, adjacent to Virginia, with his telescope. E Pliny would signal him with a coffee pot reflecting from the sun or movement of the window drapes. This proposal never flourished, for the CSA forces pulled back from the advanced positions around Alexandria and was never affected. In this system of spies were the famous Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Augusta Morris, and Virginia Baxley. Unfortunately, this soon all came to an end. The Federals got suspicious and arrested them all. However, they were later released due to insufficient evidence.

On the morning of Sunday, July 21st, 1861, Gen. Johnston and Gen. Beauregard decide they must attack Gen. McDowell and the Federal Army, thus the Battle of First Manassas began. Porter positioned himself at a signal station on Wilcoxon Hill (*Now known as Signal Hill*). At approximately 8:30 a.m. a flash of light reflecting from a brass cannon catches his eye. He immediately sees the impending movements of the enemy. Federal troops are going to flank Col.

Nathan G. "Shanks" Evans of South Carolina. He sends a signal to Col. Evans, "Look to your left, you are turned", thus indicating that you are going to be flanked on your left. After receiving this message. Col. Evans takes the necessary movement to prevent this, thus saving his regiment. After the battle, Gen. Beauregard was very pleased and much impressed with E. P. Alexander and the Signal Corps. He has the distinct honor of being the first to send a signal by the aerial telegraphy method during the War Between the States.

Edward Porter Alexander's military record and performance during the War was outstanding. In addition to being well thought of by his superiors and subordinates, he acquired the following record of promotion:

Graduated West Point	June, 1857	Age 22
Lieutenant (US)	June, 1857	Age 22
Captain (US)	April, 1861	Age 24
Major (CSA)	April, 1862	Age 25
Colonel (CSA)	July, 1862	Age 26
General (CSA)	March, 1864	Age 28

Directly after the Battle of 1st Manassas, he was assigned to the staff of Gen. James Longstreet, 1st Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. At first he served in many capacities, but mainly in artillery and later as Chief of Artillery for Gen. Longstreet, Porter's brilliant array of talents made him a general's dream, he had a special genius for keeping things simplistic and well organized and had meticulous eye for detail.

On November 17th, 1862, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the Union General Burnside planned his advance towards Richmond with an army of 120,000 men. General Lee will check his advance with 65,000 men and offer him a sounding defeat. The ensuing events will be of great value to E. P. Alexander and the Confederate artillery. Gen. Burnside's army had now positioned itself on the north side of the Rappahannock River. His plan was to cross the river and attack the Confederate army, which is by now well entrenched on the south side of the river on the left and right flanks of Marye's Hill. The Confederates hold a very strong position. Porter kept very busy positioning the artillery of Longstreet's Corps. Capt. Sam Johnston, Lee's engineer in charge of the whole army, rode with E. P. Alexander to position his gun pits. General Lee wanted the guns placed on the brow or reverse slope of the heights so they might duel with the Federal artillery on Stafford Heights, Porter had a different plan. He felt the attack would fall on their far left flank. Since he played a dominant role in placing the gun pits, Porter positioned them in order to fire directly into the advancing Federal infantry and sweep the field. He disputed General Lee's logic that the inferior Confederate ordnance could not duel effectively with the enemy's guns at that distance. After the pits were made, Capt. Johnston rode to Porter and said, "You made me put them there, now you come along and help me take the cussin'." After some exchange of ideas, General Lee had the last word and pressed Porter into obedient silence, but he left the gun pits unchanged.

Porter strongly felt the beauty of the artillery position not only in its thorough sweep of the ground, but also in its very functional simplicity. Upon General Longstreet's inspection of the artillery, Porter reported proudly, "General, we cover that ground now so well that we will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb. A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."

As the two armies were positioning themselves, Porter earned the nickname "the cuss with the spy glass" from the Federal troops, because he was shelling Federal sharpshooters with one of Capt. Moody's 24 pdr. howitzers, his favorite type gun. In one special case there was a building nestled in a hollow and hidden by intervening low hills and trees. This building contained many Federal sharpshooters, and he personally aimed Moody's 24 pdr. howitzer with great accuracy and care and ordered fire. The shell containing 175 mini-balls brushed the grass as it curved the hill, hit the building and exploded. At once, a cheer came up from the Confederate picket line. "That got 'em! That got 'em! You can hear 'em just a hollerin' and a groanin' in there!" There was no doubt of his skill and marksmanship with cannon after that great demonstration.

On December 10th, General Burnside committed himself to the attack. They had undertaken an impossible task, a charge across 400 yards of open ground under direct fire of artillery and infantry. It was a killing field on which charge after charge was repulsed by a furious and deadly artillery fire of canister and shell. Porter's positioning of the gun pits proved to be deadly for the enemy. During this shelling, he noticed a covey of partridges flying aimlessly. He drew his pistol and shot a few choice birds for his mess. This act was remarkable in that, men are being killed by the thousands, and he has the coolness and the mind to kill birds for his supper table. Throughout the war, there are several times that he would take many types of fowl for the supper table to keep food for himself and his men.

The Federals now had no taste to renew the battle and retreated back across the river. A great victory had been won for the Confederates and their artillery.

A few days after the battle, Porter happened to be with Capt. Sam Johnston at General Lee's headquarters. Just outside his tent, when General Lee came within earshot, he brayed loudly to Capt. Johnston, "Sam, it was a mighty good thing those guns about Marye's Heights were located on the brows of the hills when the Yankees charged them." Gen. Lee gave no sign of hearing his remarks. However, Alexander henceforth was frequently called upon by General Lee to select battle lines and gun pits.

With the onset of winter, both armies went into winter quarters. Porter begged for leave to go see his family. It was not easy since he was so very useful and hard to be spared. He finally got a three-day pass at year's end and hurried to visit his wife in Richmond. Later, he was able to find quarters for his family at the Wortham House, less than a mile from his winter camp, near Mt. Carmel Church, north of Hanover Junction, Virginia. Their presence made all the difference and he would describe the next three months as "one of the happiest periods of all my life."

Alexander was the first Confederate to go aloft in a balloon at the Battle of Games Mill (Seven Days) in 1862, using black cambric balls to signal the movements of Federal troops, although fearful of heights. Porter thoroughly enjoyed this experience and marveled at its tremendous potential to gather intelligence information on troop movements.

When the 1st Corps of the ANV (Longstreet's Corps) was sent to Tennessee to reinforce General Braxton Bragg, Porter accompanied the Corps as Longstreet's Chief of Artillery. Here he met General Nathan Bedford Forrest and was highly impressed with his military genius and his overall personal and military bearing. Just the opposite was his impression of General Bragg. Throughout the war, he strongly felt that the lack of trained staff officers to give written orders, instead of verbal, presented many large problems for the Army of Northern Virginia.

In Gettysburg, on July 3rd, 1863, E.P. Alexander commanded the cannon bombardment that preceded the infamous Pickett's Charge, as Longstreet's chief of Artillery. 75 guns were placed along a front extending 1,300 yards northward from the peach orchard; eight others located south to cover the flank of the attacking infantry. Several hundred yards to the left and to the rear of Alexander's main line were another 60, and beyond them another 24. All told, the Confederate deployment was approx. 170 guns, each with 130 to 150 rounds of ammunition available; everything was ready for the most colossal cannonade in the nation's history. As everything was in place, Alexander received a note from Longstreet, placing the burden of assessing the results of the bombardment and deciding whether the infantry charge should be made. Appalled by his dilemma, to cancel Lee's assault was unthinkable, yet so was defiance of Longstreet. It was a determination that Alexander felt he could not make: he could only follow the battle plan. "When our fire is at its best", he wrote Longstreet, "I will advise General Pickett to advance." Reluctantly, Longstreet sent the order to begin the bombardment. At 1 P.M., Alexander remembered, the roar of artillery "burst in on silence, almost as suddenly as the full notes of an organ would fill a church".

June 30th, 1864, at Elliott's Salient, at Petersburg, Virginia, Edward Porter Alexander was hit in the left shoulder by a sharpshooter's minie ball. The ball narrowly missed both arteries and joints. The 58-caliber projectile, when removed from him, had stamped on it the thread marks from his frock coat.

Porter now realizing that he will be sent back home to Washington, Georgia, to recover and convalesce from his wound. Before leaving for his forty-five day medical furlough, he communicates to General Lee his belief that the Federals are digging a "mine". Although searched for, the Confederates are unable to locate it, and, subsequently the Battle of the Crater occurs. Upon his return to the lines at Petersburg, he assumes command of all the artillery in the Petersburg defenses and now wears the new frock coat and uniform made by his family.

The federals break the Petersburg line in early April of 1865 and precipitate the retreat of Lee's army. During this hectic and hurried retreat, Porter's baggage wagon is captured and burned by, the one and only, General Armstrong Custer. He loses his new frock coat, his sword,

and other personal items. Charley also loses the headquarters flag in all of the confusion during the retreat. His mascot "Buster", a pointer, is also lost.

At Appomattox, Porter proposes to General Lee that the Confederates should return to their respective states and carry on with a guerilla war, which could last for years. General Lee feels that the south has been through enough and is in such a state of destruction that the resumption of peace is the best road for the south. Porter reluctantly but respectfully concurs with him.

Upon the surrender at the McLean House, a disillusioned and disappointed E. P. Alexander travels to Washington, D.C. to explore the possibility of securing a position in the Brazilian army. This attempt is foiled and Porter returns to his home in Washington, Georgia via New York and Port Royal, S.C. He is now left to find his way in a new life outside of the military.

In his memoirs, he stated that there were three times, in his opinion, that the Confederacy could have won the war. The first time was at the Battle of First Manassas. He felt that if the Confederacy would have pushed they could have captured the Capital, Washington, DC. The second was the Seven Days at Mechanicsville. Stonewall Jackson fell behind schedule, showed up late, and failed to carry out his part thereby allowing McClellan to escape and costing Lee a decisive victory. The third was at the Battle of Monocacy in July of 1864. Where General Jubal Early had an opportunity to make a decisive push and have the chance to capture Washington, D.C., and demoralize the Yankee population.

The war now over, like most post-war Confederate officers, E.P. Alexander now has to find a way to support his family. Although Fairfield Plantation has not been burned, it was in need of funds to get it back into a working plantation. The plantation life did not appeal to Porter at all. He was offered a chair position of mathematics at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, and after a few years at this post, Porter accepted an executive position with the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta Railroad. After distinguished service record with this railroad, he was offered and accepted the position as president of the Savannah and Memphis Railroad.

Over the next two decades extraordinary opportunities come about for his professional career. He buys ten thousand acres of land on North and South Island just below Georgetown, South Carolina (today known as the Yankee Wildlife Preserve). In his later years he befriends President Grover Cleveland, a very popular figure in the South. Cleveland is a Democrat who wants to return all captured Confederate battle flags to the Confederate states but is stopped by 10 Union veterans who vehemently oppose this decision. Both President Cleveland and Porter loved to hunt ducks. They spent many days at Porter's hunting lodge at South Island, South Carolina, hunting ducks taking as many as 600 per week between them.

President Cleveland, in order to thank Alexander for his kindness and friendship, offered him \$ 1,000 a month in gold to be his boundary arbitrator between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This needed to be done because a canal was to be dug to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and stability in Central America is essential. Porter gleefully accepts this offer because of the

great windfall profit it offered his family. After two years of supervising and surveying the boundaries, Porter completed his report and finished the duty as arbitrator of boundaries. This settled once and for all the boundaries between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The Nicaraguans gave him a hero's welcome with a fifty-piece band, a twenty-one-gun salute, and church bells tolling. Carrying him through the street near his hotel, he passed under an enormous floral arch bearing the inscription "Nicaragua Saluda el General Alexander." He had an audience with Nicaraguan President Zeiaya at his palace and a grand banquet was held in his honor. The Nicaraguans rose in relays to praise and toast him in Spanish. Alexander was given his favorite wine, Chateau Yquen. During his time in Nicaragua, he starts and completes his memoirs (Military Memoirs of a Confederate).

Upon returning home in late October, his wife, Betty Mason Alexander, dies three weeks later, on November 20, 1899, in Savannah and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Augusta, Georgia. This brought an end to his marriage of forty years. After years of semi-retirement and living in Savannah and South Island, South Carolina, Mary Mason, the niece of Betty Mason, affectionately helps take care of his needs at his South Island retreat. She is good-natured and assisted as his hostess when entertaining guests. She was unmarried, forty years old, wore thick glasses, and became an invaluable source of help to him during this time. On October 1, 1901, when he was sixty-six, they married, and honeymooned in Canada and at Niagara Falls. During their years together, she referred to him as "The General."

Edward Porter Alexander was then extended the privilege of being an honored guest at the Centennial of West Point, and to speak for the Confederate officers. On June 9, 1902, he finds himself on the speaker's platform with President Teddy Roosevelt, General Longstreet, and other dignitaries. At the conclusion, the New York Times confirmed Alexander's speech, although not without controversy, to be the best speech of the day.

Porter then retired to his South Island retreat, visits his children, and does some traveling with Mary. After several small strokes he is brought to Savannah, Georgia. On April 21, 1910, he lapsed into a coma and passed away without a struggle on April 28, 1910, at 8:30 p.m.

The Episcopal service was quiet and spare in Augusta, Georgia. Confederate veterans escorted his casket to the City Cemetery. Two old soldiers held a Confederate battle flag while taps was played.

As with other Confederate generals in Magnolia Cemetery in Augusta, Georgia, he has two markers. One at his grave site and a military marker at a memorial to all the Confederate generals buried there.