

JAMES C. BURKE PAPERS

Volume 1
The Joe Baldwin File

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Cover: The locomotive "250" at the Wilmington Railroad Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina (photograph by James C. Burke, 2011)

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VOLUME I

The Joe Baldwin File

by

James C. Burke

James C. Burke
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THE JOE BALDWIN FILE

The Likely Source of the Legend of Joe Baldwin

The most enduring railroad legend of this region is that of Joe Baldwin. Supposedly, Joe Baldwin, a conductor, was decapitated in a train wreck. It was said that his body was retrieved but his head was never found. The Maco Lights, a strange electrical phenomenon associated with the stretch of track where Baldwin was supposed to have been killed, was said to be the light from an otherworldly lantern held by the ghost of Baldwin as he searched for his missing head. The tale is very old. For generations, people would go out to the small community of Maco to wait in the dark to see the lights. Later, after the tracks were taken up, the lights were no longer seen.

While researching the Wilmington & Manchester Railroad, I came across several articles concerning an accident that occurred near Hood's Creek (the Maco area) in January 1856. The only person to be killed in this accident was the train's conductor, Charles Baldwin. On the night of Friday, 4 January 1856, the locomotive on the Wilmington & Manchester was having difficulty with its pumps eight to ten miles outside Wilmington. Engineer Nicholas Walker uncoupled the engine from the rest of the train and ran it ahead along the line to work out the mechanical problem. On backing up to retrieve the cars, the engine collided with the rest of the train. The mail car was smashed, slightly injuring mail agent E. L. Sherwood. However, conductor Charles Baldwin was thrown from the train with such force as to inflict fatal head injuries (*Wilmington Journal*, 7 January 1856). Coroner J. C. Wood summoned a jury that determined the accident had occurred because conductor Baldwin had failed to hang a lantern at the end of the train which would have alerted the engineer to slow down (*Wilmington Journal*, 14 January 1856). Charles Baldwin's obituary, found in the same issue of the Journal as the coroner's report, indicates that he lingered until Monday, 7 January 1856. He had moved to Wilmington from New York, and appeared to be well liked in the community.

So, is this the origin of the Joe Baldwin Legend? It seems likely. It certainly happened in the right place. However, the accident occurred a decade earlier than the legend says it happened. What is the probability of a second conductor named Baldwin killed at Maco?

Charles Baldwin, a Likely Joe (draft)

On the night of January 4, 1856, an accident occurred on the Wilmington & Manchester Railroad ten miles from Wilmington near Hood's Creek. The victim, a conductor named Charles Baldwin, was thrown from a car when the engine and tender that had been detached earlier from the mail train he was on returned and crashed into it. He suffered serious head injuries, and a few days later.¹ This accident appears to have been the source, for want of any other plausible alternatives, of one of the more enduring railroad legends of North Carolina, *Joe Baldwin*. It is worth examining in depth for its cultural implications.

The funeral of Charles Baldwin took place at St. James Episcopal Church in Wilmington, North Carolina on 8 January 1856. Church records indicate that he was interred at Oakdale Cemetery.² However, to add to the mystery, Oakdale Cemetery does not have any records concerning the burial. His death notice in *The Chronicle*, another Wilmington newspaper, printed the following, "In this town on Monday evening, the 7th inst., Mr. CHAS. BALDWIN, formerly of New York, but for many years a resident of this place, where he enjoyed the respect and good wishes of all who knew him."³ *The Wilmington Daily Herald* adds to his praise by stating, "Mr. Baldwin was highly esteemed for his many good qualities, and his death is deeply deplored by a large number of friends."⁴ At the time of his death, he was probably thirty-eight years old. In the 1850 Census, his age is given as thirty-three years.⁵ No marriage records or deeds of the time bear his name. It appears, like many of the conductors and engineers that worked on Wilmington's railroads, he lived at a hotel, or boarded at a rooming house. Unfortunately, unlike those of his professions in later years, the first known extant city directory was published in 1860. The life of Charles Baldwin, a conductor working for the Wilmington & Manchester Rail Road and seemingly a man of modest means, appears like so many of the rootless men of his day who bravely set out to make their way, only to die with little more than a trunk containing their personal possessions and the good will of their neighbors. However, when certain details of his death in a railroad accident are examined closely and understood in the context of regional geography, Charles Baldwin appears to be the individual at the heart of the railroad legend.⁶

To recognize the overlap of legend and fact one must first examine the text of the newspaper articles. News of the railroad accident that occurred on the Wilmington & Manchester Rail Road on Friday, January 4, 1856 first appears in *The Daily Herald* the next day.

Just as we are going to press, we learn that an accident occurred upon the Wilmington and Manchester Road last night, at Rattlesnake Grade, by which several persons were more or less injured, Messrs. Charles Baldwin and E.L. Sherwood, of this town. Mr. Baldwin's injuries, it is feared, may result fatally.⁷

The Wilmington Journal expands on the details concerning the accident, providing a more exact description of the location, the cause for uncoupling the locomotive and tender, noting that the engineer had to take the locomotive and tender a considerable distance up the line to remedy the problem (indicating the train had not stopped at a depot or water

station), and the particulars of the damage that occurred when the locomotive and tender came in contact with the cars on returning.

RAIL ROAD ACCIDENT. – We learn that a painful accident occurred last night, on the Wilmington and Manchester Rail Road, in the neighborhood of Hood's Creek, some eight or ten mile from town. It would appear that on account of some defect in the working of the pumps⁸ of the Locomotive engaged in carrying up the night train going west from this place, the Engineer detached the train and ran on ahead some distance, and in returning to take up the train again, came back at so high a rate of speed as to cause a serious collision, resulting in some damage to the train, the mail car being smashed up and some little damage done to the other cars. The most painful circumstance connected with the affair is that Mr. Charles Baldwin, the conductor got seriously, and it is feared, mortally injured, by being thrown from the train with so much force as to cause concussion of the brain. Mr. E. L. Sherwood, Mail Agent, was slightly injured. None of the passengers were in any way hurt. Until the circumstances of the affair can be more fully examined into we forbear any comment.⁹

The critical geographic references in these two articles are Rattlesnake Grade and Hood's Creek. The legend of Joe Baldwin places the location of the accident at Maco, North Carolina, a small station stop on the Atlantic Coastline Railroad. Maco, originally named Maraco, was an agricultural community formed by Hugh McRae around 1890. Earlier, this community was known as Farmer's Turnout, or for the two creeks that intersect the railroad, Rattlesnake Creek and Hood Creek. The legend of Joe Baldwin in its several versions differs from the actual accident. The most significant difference is that the hero of the legend sacrifices his own life while waving his lantern from the platform to signal the engineer of an oncoming passenger train. Supposedly, the last car (or cars) of his train had come uncoupled. Whereas, Charles Baldwin ended up causing his own death by neglecting to place a lantern at the front end of the cars after the engine and tender are detached. The coroner's inquest exonerates the engineer, Nicholas Walker, from any blame due to absence of the lantern.¹⁰ This is a fatal mistake rather than a heroic act. However, some details of the accident – the role of the lantern, the uncoupled cars, Mr. Baldwin's position as conductor, and collision with an engine – survive in the legend, though their context is altered.

In one version of the legend, Joe Baldwin was returning to Wilmington on a rainy spring night in 1867. He was in the last car of the train when he sees Maco Station as the train emerges from the pines. The hands of his watch read three minutes of midnight. He was thinking of his wife at home awaiting his arrival. When he opened the door to move to another car to find that the last car (in some versions, the last two cars) had become uncoupled from the rest of the train. To his horror, he saw the lights of an oncoming train and began waving his lantern to signal the train. Unfortunately, the train could not stop and Baldwin was decapitated by the force of the crash. The mysterious light at Maco was interpreted as Joe Baldwin's eternal search for his lost head.¹¹ The accident is transformed into gothic romance: Joe Baldwin, presumably a Southerner, trying to make a new life for himself and his family after suffering the horrors of combat and the humiliation of defeat in

Civil War, summons up his forgotten courage to sacrifice his life to save others. The virtues of Southern manhood prove to be enduring. The heroic Joe Baldwin searching for his head makes a far better ghost than poor Charles Baldwin reliving his “if only I had” moment again and again in the afterlife, and provides a more edifying tale for a defeated people.

There are several variants of the story, but most appear to place the date of the accident in 1867. Excluding that the fact that no Maco Station existed in 1867, did two Baldwin conductors meet their ends at a place called Maco? While it is possible, the various versions of legend do not conform to the general practices of railroading at the time or the particular conditions of the Wilmington & Manchester Rail Road in 1867. It was standard practice to have lanterns mounted on the last car of a train long before 1867 (and as evidenced by Charles Baldwin’s oversight, in the front of detached cars as well). Therefore, Joe’s lantern would have been redundant. An experienced railroad man would have dismounted the car and walked in the direction of an oncoming train with his lantern. Locomotives and rolling stock of the time still used link and pin coupling and hand brakes. The breaking of coupling could hardly go unnoticed by the train’s brakemen who performed their job outside the train. The regulation book for the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad, first published in 1855 and revised in 1867, provides insight into the duties of train crews that the weavers of tales neglected to research. Particularly, the last car of all trains must be a brake car, and have a brakeman stationed at the rear of the car in passenger trains; as remains today, the locomotive must have a bright white reflector light and the last car have a bright red reflector light; if there is an accident or stop of the train on the main line for any reason, the conductor must always send flagmen down the line a half-mile in both directions with red flags by day, red lanterns by night, or lightwood torches; if assistance is needed, the conductor must send a messenger to the nearest station; red flags and lanterns indicate danger, and in an extra train following another, the locomotive of the first must display a red flag or lantern; a blue flag or lantern indicates that trains should proceed with caution; the engineer is responsible for applying the brakes to the locomotive, the fireman is responsible for applying brakes to the tender, and the conductor signals the brakemen on the cars; it is the duty of the brakeman on any part of a train that become detached to bring it to a stop; one train following another must maintain a mile back from the leading train; and the conductor is responsible for attaching the tail light on the last car, and red flags or red lanterns on the locomotive.¹²

The top speed for an express train in those days was twenty-five miles per hour. The speed differential between two moving trains would not have been that great. Given the possibility that a second train was following Baldwin’s train closely, the engineers of both trains should have been aware of the presence of the other for some time. The tracks between Fair Bluff and Farmer’s Turnout, a distance of approximately forty-five miles, is straight and over low terrain. There is nearly eight and a half miles of straight track after the turnout. But the policy for speeds at Hood’s Creek, due to the trestlework, was limited to six miles per hour in 1854.¹³ It is unlikely that the post-Civil War conditions of the track could have afforded a higher speed. Still, in light of the other collisions already examined, human error tends to negate the well-conceived standards of procedure set down in regulation handbooks, as also does operating conditions such as the weather, darkness, and external manmade hazards.

Louis Toomer Moore (1885-1961), a respected historian who specialized in the history of southeastern North Carolina, provided a different version of the legend in *Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region*.

The legend of the Joe Baldwin ghost light was born in 1868 ... During that primitive era of railroading, cars were joined by link and pins and trainmen had to stand between the cars to make a connection. Joe Baldwin, legend has it, was conductor on a train that became uncoupled. This happened near the old station at Farmers Turnout (Maco). He was killed, with a lantern in his hand, as he tried to couple the cars.¹⁴

Moore version, like the rest, does not cite primary source documents. Among the some professional historians residing in the Lower Cape Fear, it is said of Moore that “he did not let history get in the way of telling a good story.” However, he places the accident within the context of the standard practice of coupling cars²⁵ rather than a runaway car as other versions do, and makes reference to the trestle at Hood Creek, and the old station at Farmer’s Turnout¹⁶ (Brinkley’s Depot at the 17-mile mark). The legend, for all its manifold flaws and creative license, they are in agreement about the general location. Geographic details of the location are important in understanding the 1856 accident and the legend.

The new station would have been Maco Station at the 14-mile mark. The critical geographic references in these two articles establish the association between the 1856 accident and the Joe Baldwin Legend are Rattlesnake Grade and Hood’s Creek. The township of Maco (N 34^o 17.225’, W 78^o 8.769’) came into existence about 1890. Originally named Maraco, Maco was a land development project undertaken by the MacRae Company.¹⁷ Prior to the founding of Maco, the area was also known as Farmers’ Turnout. The term “turnout” means a switch to another track; and in this context implies a sidetrack off the main line for parking a train to be loaded or allowing another train to pass. Before reaching the turnout when traveling from the direction of Wilmington, a train would pass over approximately eight and half miles of straight track and would have to ascend the four mile grade from Hood Creek to rise above Rattlesnake Creek (from 59.1 feet above sea level to 81.2 feet above sea level). For this reason, the area was known to railroad men of the day as Rattlesnake Grade. The two stations that existed prior to the founding of Maco were Register’s at the nine-mile mark and Brinkley’s at the seventeen-mile mark.¹⁸ The location of the 1856 accident involving Charles Baldwin is the same location common to Joe Baldwin legend that was said to have happen in 1867 or 1868.

The most compelling argument that can be made for the death of Charles Baldwin’s being the source of the Joe Baldwin Legend is that the existence of Charles Baldwin and the accident that took his life can be verified in period documents. The name of Joe Baldwin does not appear in the death records, marriage records, deeds, tax records for New Hanover County. His name does not appear in the Wilmington Directory for 1860, 1865-66, or 1867. His name does not appear on the town’s church or cemetery records. A report of the accident cannot be found in the town’s newspapers. Further, in June of 1867, there were two accidents on the Wilmington & Manchester, one at Soldier’s Creek, 30 miles from

Wilmington at five in the morning on June 30, and another, the breaking through of a train on the trestlework at Peacock's Station in Columbus County, North Carolina that were reported in the *New York Times*.¹⁹ It would seem that the heroic act of Joe Baldwin would have merit as much press as the hapless misfortune of Harrelson, the overseer, and Byrd, section master, killed the latter accident. Simply put, attempting to verify any the details in the Joe Baldwin legend proves to be can exercise in eliminating sources from consideration.

The significance of the legend, regardless of its origins, is that it is an object of railroad culture into which regional ideal can be fixed; and the historical record, lack only in willingness to depict human frailty, must bend to perpetuate the ideal. The Maco Light, of course, is the *raison d'être* for the legend without which its grip on the imagination loses its tenacity. What remains is an insight into a culture both enraptured and terrified by tenuous relationship between man and machine, and modernity. The light, drawing countless teenagers for generations into the Brunswick County woods to catch a glimpse of this buoyant glowing visage, on seeing it, experienced a mix of excitement and fear. Having tested fate, they spied the "ghost in the machine," and it was a familiar one, it is us: the same that existed in the ancestors of humans that compelled them to approach fire, and contrary to the instincts of all other animals, use it to their benefit. Charles Baldwin, the amiable and unfortunate conductor, emerges from behind the legend not as a disappointment, but as *Jedermann*, having arrived as a representative of his age through an unlikely convergence of an electromagnetic anomaly, folk culture, and scholarship. Even if there were a second conductor named Baldwin having been killed in the exact same location, however unlikely, Charles Baldwin remains; and the story of his life, enhanced by the utter improbability that Hood's Creek is a bad place for Baldwins. After the tracks were taken up in the 1970s, the light wasn't seen again, yet the legend lives on in popular culture, and it has become part of the cultural identity of the Lower Cape Fear. The evolution of this story and all those who have taken part in it as a cultural is significant in and of itself. Finding Charles Baldwin doesn't change the cultural significance of the legend, but it does place the legend within a more universal context in which a fitting tribute to Charles Baldwin can be found. There could be no greater evidence of a man's "good qualities" than to know that his community overlooked his mistakes and enshrined his memory in legend. Other accident, though brought about by through human error, illustrate overt risk taking.

Postscript

"Charles Baldwin, a Likely Joe" was first published in the Fall, 2004 *Bulletin* of the Historical Society of the Lower Cape Fear. Ben Steelman, staff writer for the *Star News* (Wilmington, NC) published an article entitled "The Maco Light, Brunswick's 'True' Ghost story" in the October 31, 2004 edition that included research from "Charles Baldwin, a Likely Joe" (<http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20081010/ARTICLES/810100258>). The article has been cited frequently since its publication in other works, books and on the internet. In the spring of 2012, I had my students research Louis Moore's story about the death of Samuel R. Jocelyn. They also found his story to be inconsistent with the primary sources, though entertaining. It appears that the particulars of the Joe Baldwin Legend have their origin with Moore.

NOTES

1. *The Wilmington Journal*, January 7, January 14, 1856.
2. Mathews, Lula Walton Mathews, Leora Hiatt McEachern, Curry Kirk Walker, *St. James Church, Wilmington, North Carolina, Historical Records. Volume II, 1852-1872*. The Authors: Wilmington, NC, 1976, 67, NHCL 975.6.
3. *The Chronicle* (Wilmington), January 8, 1856.
4. *The Wilmington Daily Herald*, January 8, 1856.
5. United States, *US Census, 1850*, "Wilmington in the County of New Hanover," 805.
6. Supposedly, Joe Baldwin, a conductor, was decapitated in a train wreck. It was said that his body was retrieved but his head was never found. The Maco Lights, a strange electromagnetic phenomenon associated with the stretch of track where Baldwin was supposed to have been killed, was said to be the light from an otherworldly lantern held by the ghost of Baldwin as he searched for his missing head. The tale is very old. For generations, people would go out to the small community of Maco and wait in the dark to see the lights. After the tracks were taken up, the lights were no longer seen.
7. *The Wilmington Daily Herald*, January 5, 1856.
8. The January 8, 1856 issue of *The Chronicle* includes addition information as to why the locomotive was detached. The engine and tender were uncoupled for the purpose of getting water.
9. *The Wilmington Journal*, January 7, 1856.
10. *The Wilmington Journal*, January 11, 1856.

A coroner's jury, summoned by Coroner J. C. Wood, to examine into the circumstances by which the late lamented Mr. Charles Baldwin came to his death, after mature deliberation, report that it was occasioned by a blow received on the head, on the night of Friday, the 4th inst., while acting as Conductor on the mail train of the Wilmington and Manchester R. R., by a collision of the engine and mail train. The jury cannot find, from the testimony, that the Engineer, Mr. Nicholas Walker, is in the least culpable, as there was no light at the front end of the train, which it was the duty of Conductor to have placed there. Signed by Benjamin Hallett, foreman.

11. Wilmington & Weldon Rail Road Company, *Regulations for the Government of Officers and Employees of the Company, and for the Running of Trains of the Wilmington & Weldon Rail Road, Adopted March 2d, 1855; and Revised, March, 1867, to which is attached the By Laws of the Company, Now in Forces – March, 1867*, (Wilmington, N.C.: Wm. H. Bernard's Printing and Publishing House, 1867), 8-9, 12, 14-15, 18, 20, WRRM.

12. *The Wilmington Journal*, February 10, 1854.

We take the above communication from the *Charleston Courier*, to call attention of those interested in the Manchester Road, and those who may not see that paper, to the charges which are brought against it. We cannot speak understandingly in relation to the state of the Wateree Trestle work, for which, however the South Carolina Road is equally responsible; but we do know that fast running there is in direct violation of the rules laid down by Mr. Fleming, the superintendent of the Wilmington and Manchester Road, and printed along with the schedules furnished to every employee of the Road. The following is the printed rule. "The speed over the following Trestle Work and Bridges shall not exceed six miles per hour: Eagles' Island, Hood's Creek, Livingstone, Big Creek, White Marsh, Porter Swamp, Lumber and Little Pee Dee Rivers, Toby's Creek, Great Pee Dee River, Lake Swamp, Sparrow Swamp, Lynch's Creek, Black River, Scape O'er, Rocky Bluff, Green Swamp, Cane Savannah, Campbell's Creek and Wateree River.

13. Louis Toomer Moore, *Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region*, (Wilmington, N.C.: Louis T. Moore Memorial Fund, 1956, 1968), 246.

14. *The Daily Review*, February 4, 1844. Sam Hayes, a switchman on the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad, lost his 10-year old son when the youngster attempted to cross the track between the cars of a freight train at the old Union Depot at Wilmington. A shifting engine was attempting to couple to the train so as to push the cars to the depot. Young Hayes head was crushed between two cars. This tragic accident is one of many that illustrate the dangers involved in coupling.

15. Moore, *Ibid*, 256.

16. William S. Powell, *The North Carolina Gazetteer*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 308.

17. W.P. Cumming, "J.H. Colton, 1861," *North Carolina in Maps*, (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1966), Plate XI.

18. *New York Times*, June 24, July 2, 1867.



Figure 1

This photograph of Hood Creek near Maco, NC was taken from the bridge on US Highway 74/76.



Figure 2

This is a view from the bridge at Hood Creek on US Highway 74/76 looking in the direction of Wilmington, NC.



Figure 3

This is a view from the bridge at Hood Creek on US Highway 74/76 looking in the direction of Delco, NC.



Figure 4

There are individual bridges at Hood Creek for traffic traveling in opposite directions.



Figure 5

This is another view of the same bridges (*See* Figure 4).

