



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Chinese Confederates

Norman Dasinger, Jr., April 5, 2021

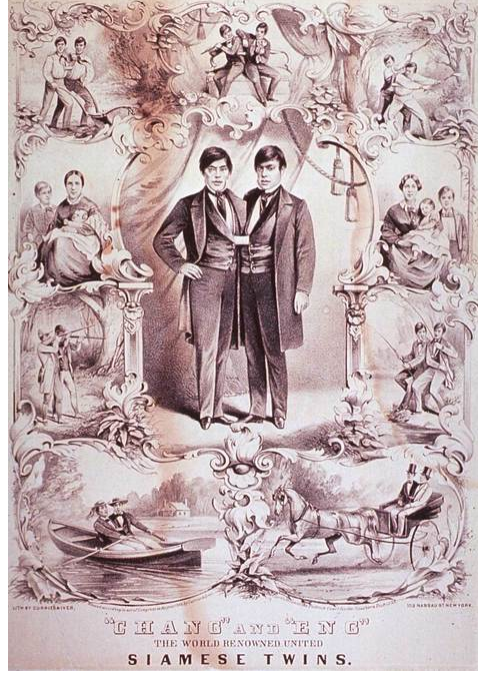
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Chang and Eng Bunker around 60 years old | public domain

The Bunker Family was one of the most famous families in all of North Carolina. They were pro-Confederate slaveowners, with two sons fighting in the Civil War—and their patriarchs were the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng Bunker. The two men, conjoined at the sternum by a flexible circular band of flesh and cartilage about five inches long, married white women and, between the two of them, had 22 children

The two were born in 1811 in Siam (modern Thailand) of Chinese ancestry. They were “discovered” by a Scottish merchant named Hunter in 1824, who signed a contract with the boys and their mother that stipulated they would tour around the United States for five years. They were inspected by doctors upon their arrival and declared to be healthy xiphophagus twins. Their five-year touring contract was extended to ten years.



Lithograph of the Siamese twins by Currier and Ives, 1860 | National Library of Medicine

After their contract ended, in 1839, they bought land in Wilkes County, North Carolina, and settled down with their families. In 1845 they bought a larger farm and moved to Surry County. They spoke English fluently, became citizens, voted, and filed criminal charges against several white people. They were considered non-white but were afforded many of the privileges of whiteness, being wealthy Southern slaveholders with property rights. In 1850, it was estimated that they had invested \$10,000 in property and had a merchant in New York who managed another \$60,000 for importing, and they lived off the interest. The Bunker brothers were long-time supporters of the Whig Party and voted for John Bell in the 1860 Presidential election.

Chang and Eng’s indifference about slavery is easy to understand, the practice being established in their home state. What’s more striking is their acceptance into the surrounding community, where they lived as local gentry accommodated by neighbors and active in civic life. They were accepted as individuals. It was as individuals that the Bunkers approached the Civil War and, like so many other Southerners, they chose the defense of home and community over abstract principles. They supported the Confederate government with their monetary resources, supporting foodstuffs and supplies—and two of their sons, who fought in the war.



Family portrait by Mathew Brady, circa 1865: (L-R) Sarah, her son Albert, Eng, Chang, his son Patrick Henry, Adelaide | LOC

Eng’s son, Stephen Decatur Bunker, and Chang’s son, Christopher Wren Bunker, were first cousins and both served in Company I, 37th Virginia Cavalry Battalion, CSA. Stephen was wounded on September 3, 1864, near Winchester, Virginia, and Christopher was captured and imprisoned for nearly a year at Camp Chase, Ohio. After the Civil War, both returned to Surry County and their large and prosperous family farm.

By 1865, the twins’ finances had taken a hit, so they decided to resume touring. By now, Northern audiences were not so receptive—for they had been Confederate slaveholders. In 1870, they toured in Germany and Russia. On the ship coming home, Chang suffered a stroke. On the morning of January 17, 1874, one of Eng’s sons checked on the twins. Chang was dead. Eng died only a few hours later.

They are buried at White Plains Baptist Church in Mount Airy—the fabled namesake of Andy Griffith’s Mayberry.



The Bunkers, their wives, 18 of 22 children, and the first of their 33 slaves, Grace Gates | Syracuse University

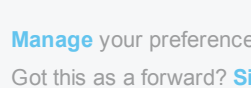


The Bunker brothers' grave in Mount Airy, North Carolina | CC



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