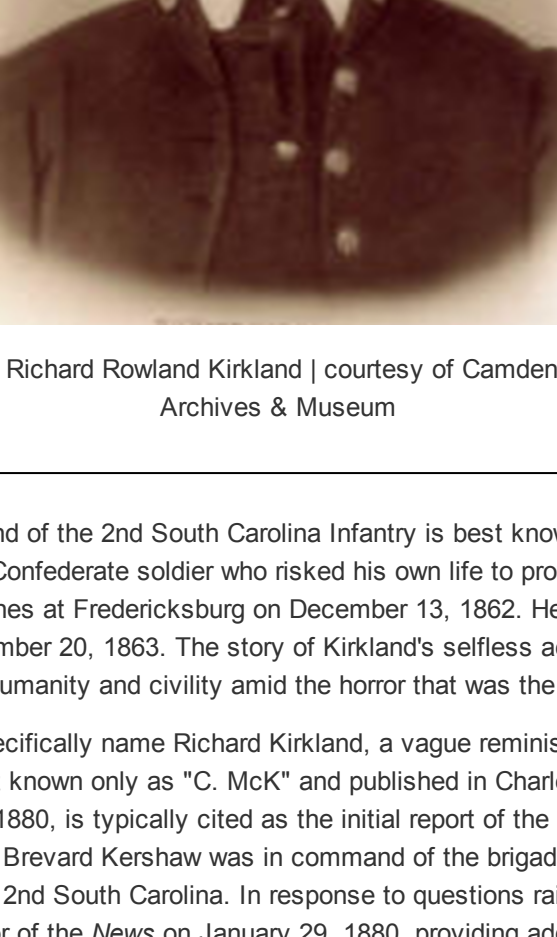




# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The Angel of Marye's Heights

Laura Elliott, September 8, 2020  
[blueandgrayeducation.org](http://blueandgrayeducation.org)



Richard Rowland Kirkland | courtesy of Camden Archives & Museum

Richard Rowland Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina Infantry is best known as the "Angel of Marye's Heights"—the Confederate soldier who risked his own life to provide aid to Union wounded between the lines at Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862. He was killed in action at Chickamauga on September 20, 1863. The story of Kirkland's selfless act at Fredericksburg captures a moment of humanity and civility amid the horror that was the Civil War.

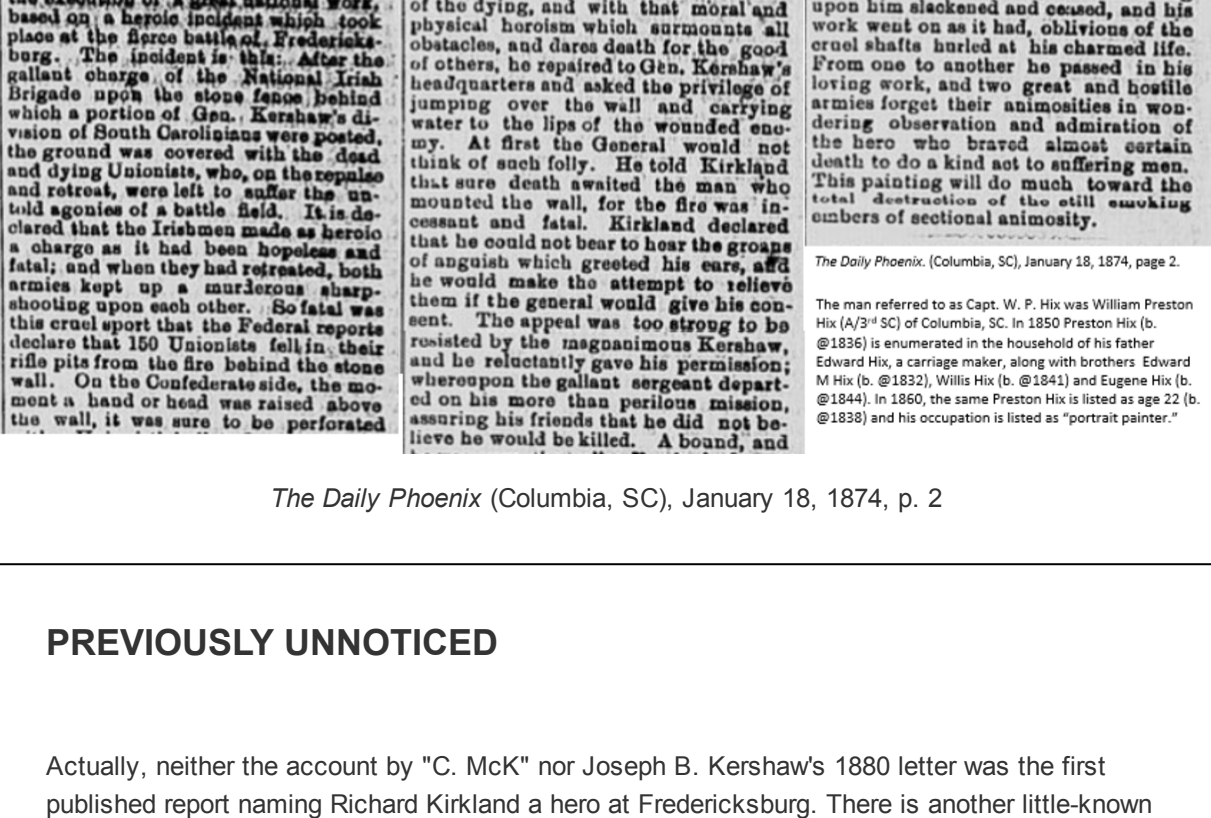
Although it does not specifically name Richard Kirkland, a vague reminiscence, written by an unnamed correspondent known only as "C. McK" and published in Charleston's *News and Courier* on January 23, 1880, is typically cited as the initial report of the Kirkland incident. At Fredericksburg, Joseph Brevard Kershaw was in command of the brigade that included Kirkland's regiment, the 2nd South Carolina. In response to questions raised by C. McK's article, Kershaw wrote the editor of the *News* on January 29, 1880, providing additional particulars, including the identity of the previously unnamed hero. Kershaw's detailed description of Kirkland's valor was reprinted in newspapers across the country, and that narrative ultimately became the identity of Richard Rowland Kirkland.

## THE DEBATE

Over the years, the validity of the Kirkland story has been contemplated by historians, especially regarding the 17-year lapse between the date of Kirkland's heroics and its reporting. Even a story as inspiring as Kirkland's is subject to examination. Is it possible to determine if Richard Rowland Kirkland deserved the sobriquet of the "Angel of Marye's Heights"?

In a well-written series on Kirkland from 2010, historian Mac Wyckoff notes that earlier primary sources support Kershaw's version of the Kirkland story. Wyckoff cites Walt Whitman's memorandum of January 21, 1863, and the memoirs of Col. James R. Hagood of the 1st South Carolina as two accounts that may refer to the Kirkland incident that predate Joseph B. Kershaw's 1880 narrative. Both accounts briefly describe a Confederate soldier who crosses the stone wall and carries water to wounded Union soldiers. Hagood specifies that this soldier was from Kershaw's brigade. Since neither report mentions Kirkland by name, it is possible that those narratives could describe the actions of other men who aided the wounded between the lines. During the battle of Fredericksburg, Whitman was across the river ministering to the wounded Federals, and Hagood's 1st South Carolina was assigned to Jenkins's brigade, Pickett's Division, so neither man would have likely witnessed Kirkland's valor.

In 2009, historian Michael Schaffer published a well-researched article, challenging the validity of the Kirkland incident. Schaffer states: "The exact deed for which Kirkland received this accolade was first and most extensively described by J. B. Kershaw, commander of the brigade in which Kirkland served, in a letter to the *Charleston News and Courier* dated January 2 [sic], 1880. " Citing the time elapsed; historical inaccuracies; lack of timely, primary source corroboration; absence of mention in the Official Records; and Kershaw's use of flowery language, Schaffer suggests that the Kirkland story is likely a fictionalized exaggeration or generalization.



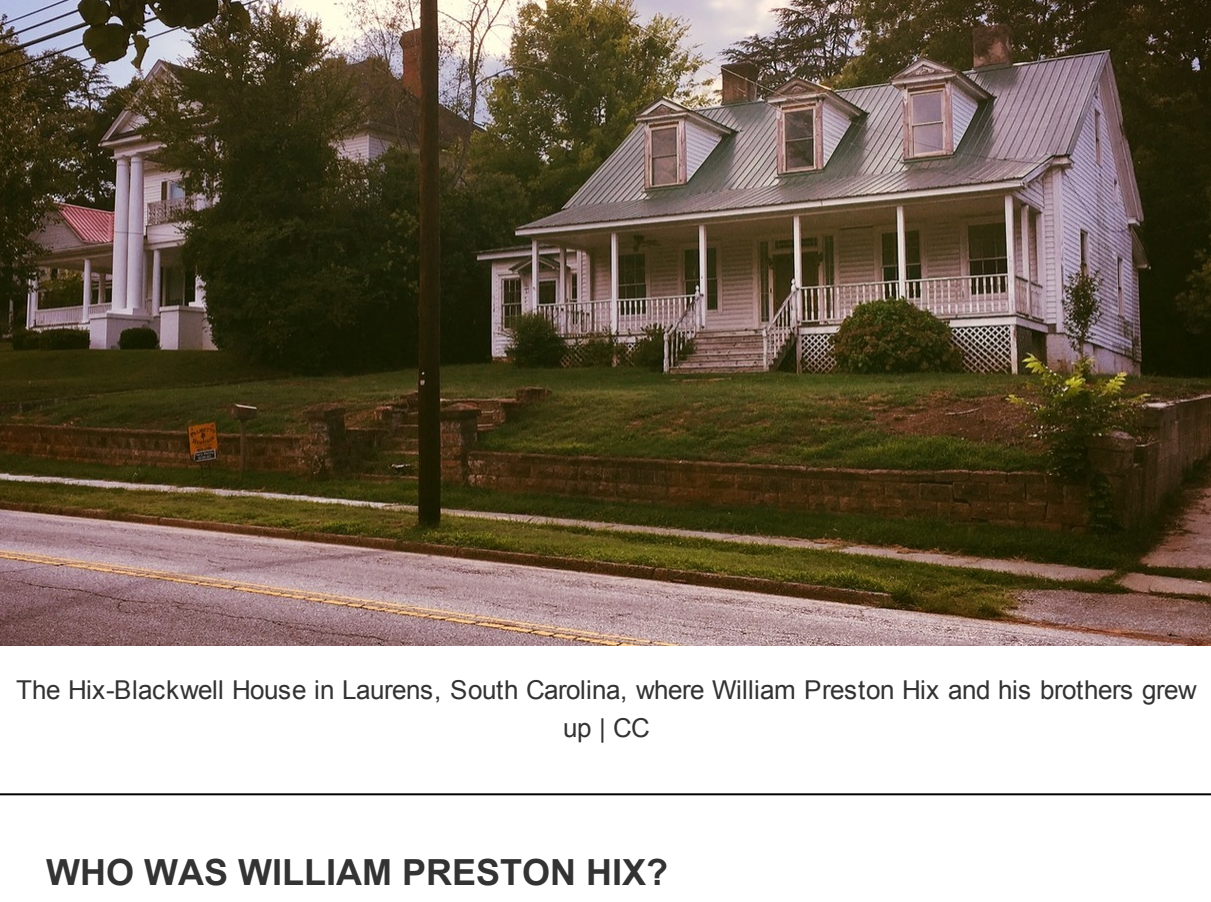
The Daily Phoenix (Columbia, SC), January 18, 1874, p. 2

## PREVIOUSLY UNNOTICED

Actually, neither the account by "C. McK" nor Joseph B. Kershaw's 1880 letter was the first published report naming Richard Kirkland a hero at Fredericksburg. There is another little-known narrative by William Preston Hix. His report, originally published in the Louisville (Ky.) *Ledger* and reprinted in Columbia, South Carolina's *The Daily Phoenix*, January 18, 1874, names Kirkland as the hero and predates both the previously cited accounts by six years:

*A BEAUTIFUL WORK OF ART* — A correspondent of the Louisville (Ky.) *Ledger* thus speaks of a picture which is being executed by Capt. W. P. Hix [William Preston Hix], of this city [Columbia, SC]. The figures will be life size:

*The sudden death of Mr. Wearn will not deter Capt. Hix, one of the finest and most famous portrait and landscape painters in the South, from carrying out his announced determination to undertake the execution of a great national work, based on a heroic incident which took place at the fierce battle of Fredericksburg. The incident is this: After the gallant charge of the National Irish Brigade upon the stone fence behind which a portion of Gen. Kershaw's division of South Carolinians were posted, the ground was covered with the dead and dying Unionists, who, on the repulse and retreat, were left to suffer the untold agonies of the battle field. It is declared that the Irishmen made as heroic a charge as it had been hopeless and fatal; and when they had retreated, both armies kept up a murderous sharpshooting upon each other. So fatal was this cruel sport that the Federal reports declare that 100 Unionists fell in their rifle pits from the fire behind the stone wall. On the Confederate side, the moment a hand or head was raised above the wall, it was sure to be perforated*



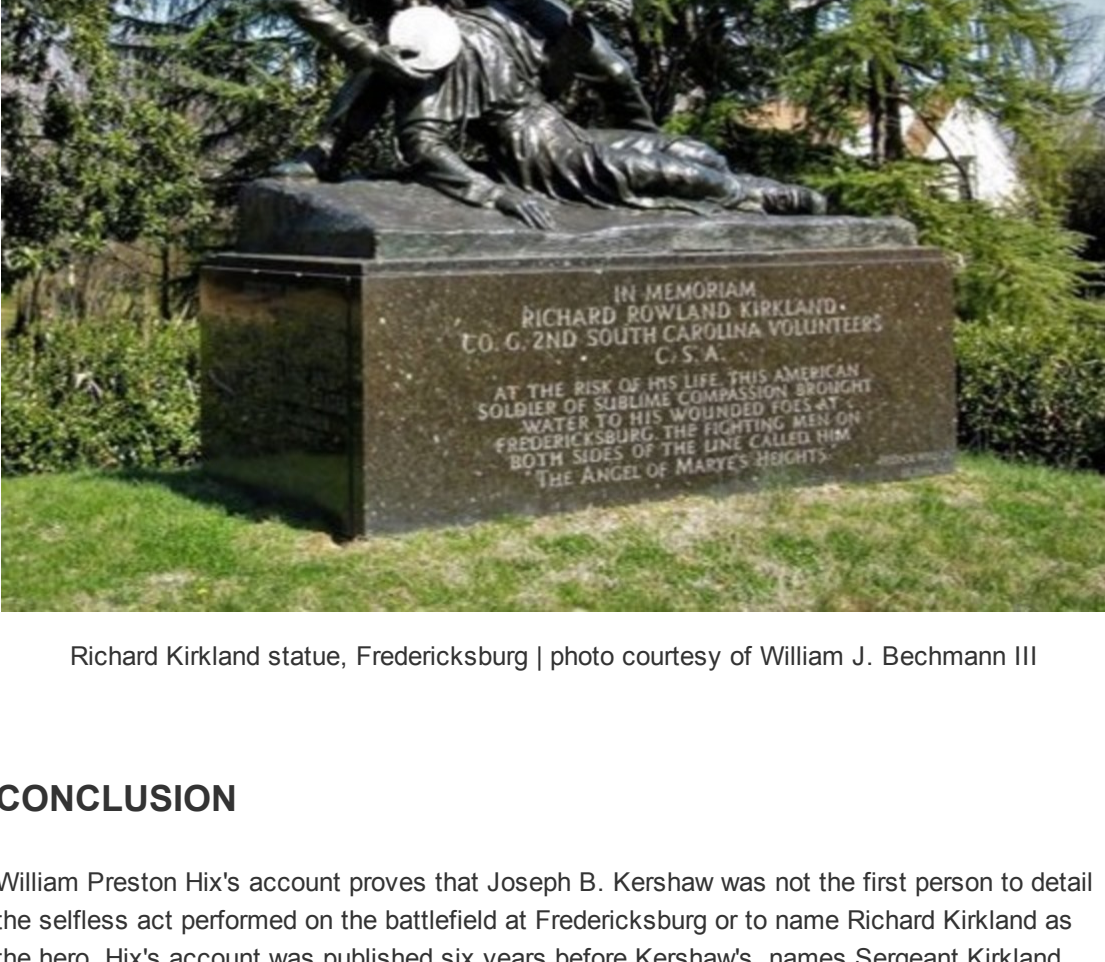
The Hix-Blackwell House in Laurens, South Carolina, where William Preston Hix and his brothers grew up | CC

## WHO WAS WILLIAM PRESTON HIX?

William Preston Hix is listed on the 1860 U.S. Census for Laurensville, Laurens County, South Carolina, as the 22-year-old son of Edward and Mary Hix. His occupation is listed as "portrait painter." In 1859, Richard Wearn established the Premium Photograph and Ambrotype Gallery in Columbia. By 1860, portrait painter William Preston Hix was in partnership with Wearn, under the name Wearn & Hix

In 1861, William Preston Hix and his three brothers (Edward Melville Hix, Willis Dickie Hix, and Clarence Eugene Hix) enlisted in Company A, 3rd South Carolina, which was part of Kershaw's brigade. William P. Hix enlisted June 1, 1861, at Columbia into Captain B. C. Garlington's company, which became Company A, 3rd South Carolina Infantry. The company muster roll, dated June 30, 1861, lists his age as 25. He was discharged February 13, 1862, for a fistula in his arm. The older brother of William P. Hix, Edward Melville Hix, served as a corporal in Company A, 3rd South Carolina, and later as sergeant major of the regiment. His younger brothers, Willis Dickie Hix and Clarence Eugene Hix, also served in Company A. Eugene was killed at Fredericksburg, and it was William P. Hix who filed the claim for Eugene's pay in arrears on their father's behalf. So, while William Preston Hix was not likely a direct witness to the Kirkland incident, his brothers probably were—and two of them survived the war. Richard Wearn and William Preston Hix were partners in photography for fifteen years (except for nine months, when Hix was serving in the 3rd South Carolina.) The firm of Wearn & Hix is probably best known for the 1865 series of 19 images illustrating the destruction of Columbia. The Wearn & Hix partnership ended suddenly in January 1874 when Richard Wearn took his own life. Afterward, W. P. Hix & Co. continued to work in carte vista, cabinet cards, and stereographs, while giving "much attention to the tinting of photographs" and to "producing paintings in oils and watercolors."

W. Preston Hix went on to achieve success as a businessman, working in the development and sales of electrical service, including at least six years under Thomas Alva Edison. Hix moved to New York, where he built a grand home along the shore in the township of Rye. He died there in 1912 and was buried in Westchester County. It is unknown if Hix ever completed his painting depicting Kirkland at Fredericksburg; it is clear that, in 1874, it was his intent to do so.



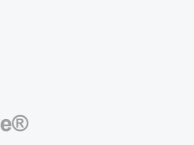
Richard Kirkland statue, Fredericksburg | photo courtesy of William J. Bechmann III

## CONCLUSION

William Preston Hix's account proves that Joseph B. Kershaw was not the first person to detail the selfless act performed on the battlefield at Fredericksburg or to name Richard Kirkland as the hero. Hix's account was published six years before Kershaw's, names Sergeant Kirkland, and describes, essentially, the same noble act described by Kershaw. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Kershaw's account was not fabricated or contrived. Hix, the source of the 1874 account, had served in one of the regiments in Kershaw's brigade. He would have had direct interaction with men, including his own brothers, who witnessed Kirkland's acts of kindness firsthand. While Hix's account does not prove that what he describes occurred exactly as described, it indicates that men who could have or should have known about the event believed that it happened as described and that Richard Rowland Kirkland was the "Angel of Marye's Heights." Furthermore, the incident, as well as the identity of the hero, was likely accepted as fact by the men of Kershaw's brigade. Certainly, Hix's account lends credibility to later reports, including Joseph B. Kershaw's. Future archival research may uncover even earlier references to Kirkland or could confirm that the 1874 Kirkland story is indeed the first identification of "Angel of Marye's Heights."

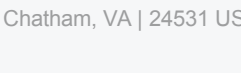
About the author: Laura Elliott is an independent historian whose primary research interest is the 16th Georgia Infantry of William T. Wofford's Brigade, Kershaw's Division, Longstreet's Corps. Laura resides in Rainbow City, Alabama, with her husband, James Fitts, whose great, great, grandfather, William Walker Fitts, was a private in the 16th Georgia. Private Fitts was killed at the Battle of Spotsylvania on May 12, 1864. This family connection first prompted her to begin her research of this neglected regiment.

BGES will be conducting an extensive tour of the Fredericksburg Campaign of 1862 in Fredericksburg on December 10–12, 2021. Led by Dr. Paul Severance, emeritus instructor of history and leadership at the National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. Be added to the mailing list [here](#).



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