

ON THE TITANIC: ARCHIE BUTT

Published in *The Athens Observer*, p. 6 (April 28-May 4, 1994).

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In 1912 Archibald Willingham Butt--called "Archie" by all who knew him--was, according to one biographer, "one of the best-known men in American public life." Born in Augusta in Richmond County, Georgia in 1865, Archie graduated from the University of the South in 1888, worked as a journalist with various newspapers in the 1890's, including The Macon Telegraph, and in 1898 joined the army at the outset of the Spanish-American War. After a decade of distinguished military service, Archie became military aide to President Theodore Roosevelt in April 1908. After serving Roosevelt for a year, Archie was for the next three years military aide to President William Howard Taft.

After Archie's death three volumes of his letters were published. Written, according to another biographer, in a "polished literary style" and filled with "keen observations," the letters provide intimate details about the innermost workings of the Roosevelt and Taft White Houses. All definitive biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft necessarily rely on information in Archie's letters. It is apparent from those letters that Butt was a great favorite of and an intimate advisor to both Roosevelt and Taft. Archie arranged the president's appointments, introduced dignitaries to the president, and was the chief of protocol. Usually in a full dress military uniform on official occasions, Archie would attend dinners and social functions with the president; he would go walking and horseback riding with the president; he would play tennis, golf or cards with the president; and he accompanied the president on all travels and official visits, usually riding in the same automobile or train car as the president. Archie's friends used to say that "what he didn't know about White House affairs was hardly worth knowing."

The tall, handsome, athletic Archie, who never married, seems to have been the gentleman's gentleman, a paragon of wisdom, discretion, and moderation. Theodore Roosevelt described Archie as "an exceptionally tactful and diplomatic aide-de camp" and "an exceptionally able and efficient officer." After Archie's death, Taft, his tears flowing freely, gave a speech in which he heaped praise on his dead aide, and said: "I can't go anywhere without expecting to see his smiling face or to hear his cheerful voice in greeting.... Archie Butt's character was single, simple, straightforward, and incapable of intrigue.... I never knew a man who had so much self-abnegation, so much self-sacrifice as Archie Butt."

Tragically, it was Taft's affection for Archie which led to Archie's taking the European vacation from which he was returning on the Titanic. Worried about a possible decline in Archie's health due to the exhausting amount of Archie's duties, Taft encouraged Archie to take a rest and travel to Rome in early 1912. When Archie, who was hesitant about taking the trip, cancelled his travel plans, Taft insisted that Archie reinstate them.

After the collision with the iceberg, Archie heroically assisted women and children into the lifeboats and encouraged the persons remaining aboard the sinking ocean liner. His last known words were uttered to a young woman friend he wrapped in a blanket and carried safely to a

lifeboat: "Remember me to the folks back home." As President Taft noted, Archie "died like a soldier and a gentleman."

Did Butt have a premonition of death at sea? Months before he died he visited Atlanta and was heard to say: "My ambition is to die in such a manner as to reflect credit upon the name I bear." In one of the last letters he ever wrote before sailing for Europe, Archie told his sister-in-law that he was going to Rome "for a little holiday" and that "if the old ship goes down" she would find his affairs in perfect order.

Pursuant to a Joint Resolution of Congress, a marble fountain dedicated to the memory of Archie Butt was erected near the grounds of the White House in Washington, D. C. In 1914 the Butt Memorial Bridge, spanning the Augusta Canal, opened in Augusta, Georgia. Ex-President Taft attended and spoke at the dedication ceremonies on April 15, 1914, exactly two years after the Titanic met its fate.