The following article appeared in a Sunday edition of an unnamed (torn off) Atlanta newspaper in 1938 or 1939 two photo’s were included in the article. One contains a portrait of Colonel Nathan Crawford Barnett with the caption “The mystery photograph at the Capitol, which has been identified as a portrait of Colonel Nathan Crawford Barnett, secretary of state for 43 years.” The other photograph contains a photo of a smiling woman looking down at her hands which clutch the approximately 4” diameter Great Seal of Georgia.

Special thanks to Dorothy Olson Director Georgia Capitol Museum Office of Secretary of State Cathy Cox 431 State Capitol Atlanta, Georgia 30334 who provided me with this newspaper article on October 13, 2004.

Transcribed from the original by Robert W. Klebs a gggg nephew of Col. Nathan Barnett’s wife Mary Ann Cooper Barnett on October 19, 2004.

Saved State Seal Twice
Mystery Picture Identified as Portrait of Col. Nathan Barnett
By Willard Neal

The mystery of the unidentified picture at the State Capitol has been solved. It is a portrait of Colonel Nathan Crawford Barnett, who saved the Great Seal of Georgia on two occasions—first from Federal troops marching on Milledgeville; second from carpetbaggers who had seized control of the legislature.

Colonel Barnett was secretary of state in Georgia for 43 years. He held office before, during and after the War Between the States, and was one of the state’s most remarkable citizens.

The picture, an old-fashioned photographic enlargement, has been hanging in the office of the secretary of state as far back as any one can remember. Whenever the walls were cleaned the picture was taken down, and usually was hung back in some other spot. Nobody ever seemed to know the identity of the subject, a be-speckled, determined, even grim-looking gentleman, his mouth shut like a steel trap and whiskers sprouting under, and not on, his chin.

When the Capitol got its recent overhauling, Secretary of State John Wilson became curious about the picture and called in Charles J. Haden, one of Atlanta’s pioneer citizens. Mr. Haden suggested that the subject of the mysterious picture was probably Colonel Barnett.

C. E. Gregory, state political writer for The Journal, speculated about the old picture in an interesting news story. Cy Young, of the Georgia Public Service Commission, recalled that Stewart R. Barnett of New Orleans, was a grandson of Colonel Barnett. Mr. Barnett was invited to take a look at the picture on his next visit to Atlanta.

“That’s my grandfather all right.” Mr. [[portion of story missing]] picture is very much like my father’s especially the large nose and square jaw.”

Colonel Barnett was born in 1801, and was a nephew of William H. Crawford, secretary of state of the United States and candidate for the presidency. In his you he was colonel of militia, at Watkinsville. He was elected representative from Oconee County in 1836 and championed the bill to build the Western & Atlantic Railroad, which resulted in the founding of Atlanta.
In 1843 he was replaced as secretary of state for two terms in 1849 and 1853, and of course during the carpetbagger period.

Several legends have grown up about Colonel Barnett’s adventure with the seal during the War Between the States. One account is that he had his wife bury the seal under the house while he looked the other way, so that he could truthfully say he didn’t know where it was.

“That story is not quite correct” said Stewart Barnett. “I remember hearing my grandmother tell how it happened. Grandmother was a wee little thing, barely five feet tall and she never weighed ninety-five pounds in her life. She was the daughter of Dr. David Cooper, the first superintendent at the State Asylum.

“When Sherman marched on Milledgeville, grandmother told me she and grandfather went to the Capitol and got the Great Seal; also the new acts that had not yet been signed by the governor. She wrapped these in oilcloth, and she and grandfather buried them in the dead of night, the seal under the house and the acts under the pig sty.

“Grandmother had heard of the reverence General Sherman held for the Masonic Order, and when the Yankees entered Milledgeville she hung grandfather’s lodge apron on the gate. As a result, her house was never damaged. One time several soldiers came to the door and demanded food. She told them that she would feed them, but the food would be poisoned. They left without arguing.”

After the troops moved on to Savannah, Colonel Barnett dug up the seal and the papers unharmed and sent back to the clerk at the Capitol.

In 1866 when Governor Charles J. Jenkins quit his office rather than follow the dictation of the Federal Government, enforced by Yankee bayonets, Colonel Barnett went with him. Governor Jenkins took the executive seal to Canada for safekeeping. Colonel Barnett carried away the Great Seal, “so that it was never affixed to any of the documents of misrule which followed” under the carpetbag government. Records at the Capitol do not relate how and where the seal was hidden. It seems possible that this might have been the occasion when Mrs. Barnett buried it under the house, so that the colonel could retain his veracity while denying that he knew where the seal could be found.

In 1868, when the new state constitution was adopted, Colonel Barnett surrendered the seal to the Republican secretary then in office. It was shortly afterward, during the administration of Governor Rufus Brown Bullock, the only Republican who ever held the office in Georgia, that the capital was moved to Atlanta.

When the Democrats returned to power in 1873 Colonel Barnett was elected to his old office of secretary of state and again became keeper of the Great Seal that he had protected so well on two occasions—once to save it from the hands of enemies, later to keep it from lending an honorable stamp to the acts of carpetbaggers.

Colonel Barnett continued to conduct his office with no fuss or trouble until his death, February 2, 1890 at the age of 88. He had had an attack of influenza a few weeks previously, and a relapse caused his death.

Stewart Barnett recalled that in the later part of the colonel’s life he went home at 10 o’clock every day ate a light meal took a toddy and went to bed and slept until time to go to work the next morning.

He was never a drinking man, but the toddy was considered important to his health, and its preparation became quite a ceremony.
Before his death Colonel Barnett told General John B. Gordon, then governor, that he would like to be succeeded in office by General Phil Cook. The request was fulfilled. General Gordon appointed General Cook to fill the unexpired term.

General Gordon was noted as a soldier rather than an orator. He seldom used flowery language, but he made an exception in his statement announcing the death of Colonel Barnett. The rather long proclamation contained glowing tributes, including his assertion that “Everybody felt that the Great Seal could not be intrusted to cleaner hands than his”.

The Capitol was closed February 4, 1890, the day of Colonel Barnett’s funeral, held at Milledgeville. The Central Railroad tendered free use of its cars for Colonel Barnett’s family and members of the funeral party.

While the polishing up and identifying of the old portrait in the secretary of state’s office brought to light an almost forgotten Georgia hero, he will not be forgotten again. The Robert E. Lee Chapter of the U. D. C. at Milledgeville, is preparing a granite marker, which will be unveiled at Milledgeville on Memorial Day April 26. The table on the stone will read: “The Great Seal of the State of Georgia and The Acts of the Legislature, 1864. “Four hundred and seventy feet east of this marker stood the home of Georgia’s Secretary of State, Nathan C. Barnett, and his wife, Mary A. Barnett. On November 18, 1864, before the arrival of General Sherman and his army, the Georgia Legislature adjourned and Nathan Barnett took with him the Great Seal and the unfinished Acts. At midnight Mr. and Mrs. Barnett with their youngest son, buried the Great Seal under their house.

Mrs. Barnett hid the Acts in the pigpen. When the legislature met in Macon, February 15, 1865-March 11, 1865, the Great Seal and the Acts were returned to the State. Neither had been captured by the enemy.