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Des Moines Civil War Roundtable

May 2024
Headquarters District Iowa
General Order No. 492

- The Fifth meeting of the Spring campaign will be **May 15** at the **Machine Shed Restaurant**
  The bar will open at 5:30 with the meal served at 6:30.
- Our program **Ranney Ramsey (DMCWRT) Lincoln's New Birth of Freedom and the Reconstruction Amendments**
- Meal **Steak Tips and Classic Fried Chicken**
- **Reservations & payment will be accepted until May 12**

By command of Brigadier General Gordon McKenzie

Ronald R. Nurmi
Colonel & Adjutant
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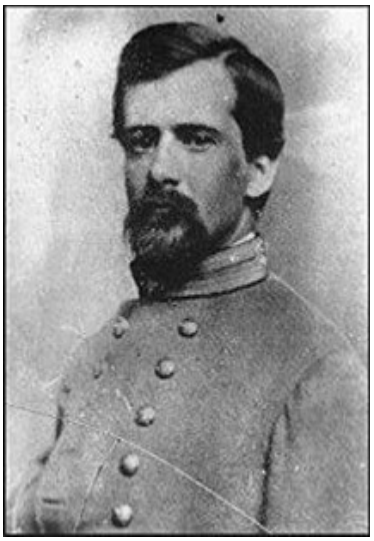
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Emerging Civil War

Charting John Pegram's Final Day, February 6, 1865

Emerging Civil War welcomes back guest author Nigel Lambert…

The death of Brig. Gen. John Pegram around Dabney's Mill on February 6 is arguably the best-known feature of the Hatcher's Run battle. As the most senior soldier killed at the battle, his demise was particularly poignant. Three weeks earlier, he had married the well-known Southern belle, Hetty Cary. This text, supported by official records and memoirs, clarifies the numerous conflicts and errors associated with his death.



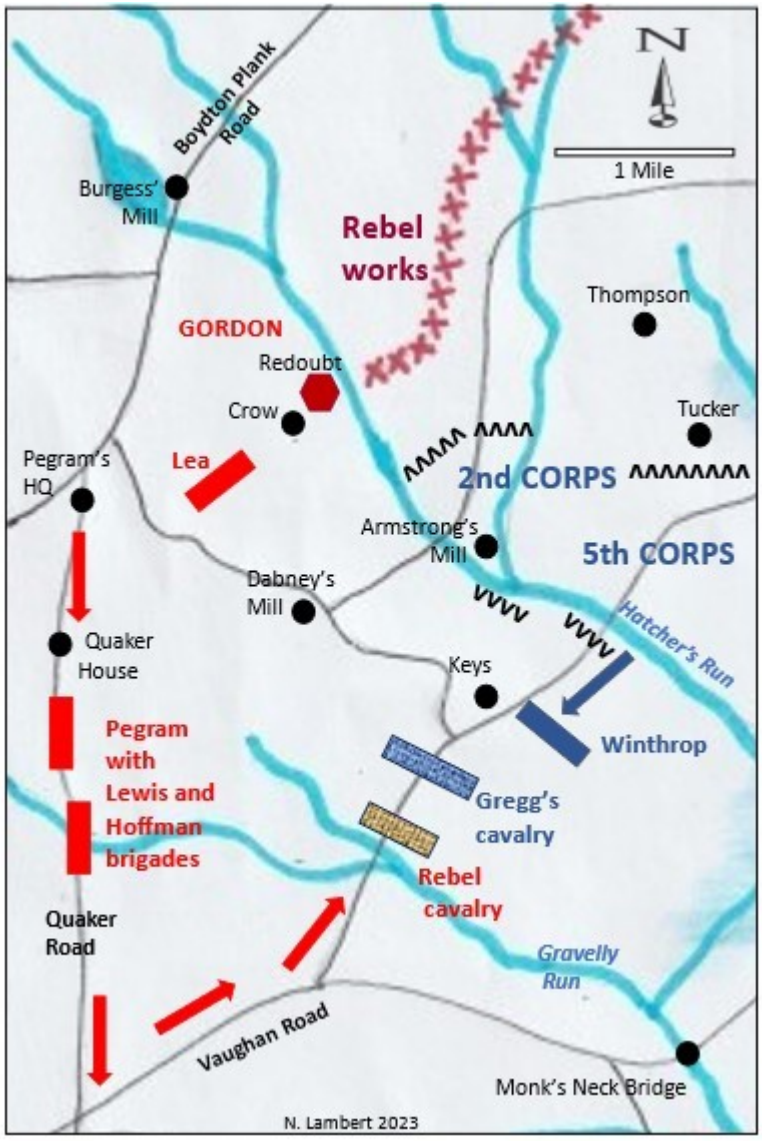
Brig. Gen. John Pegram (LC)

The day began with Pegram splitting his division. He accompanied the brigades of Brig. Gen. William G. Lewis and Col. John Hoffman down Quaker Road and up Vaughan Road. His other brigade, commanded by Col. John W. Lea, remained around Dabney's Mill. Who ordered Pegram to perform this maneuver is unknown [1].

Around 11:00 a.m., Pegram's force joined elements of Maj. Gen. William H. F. "Rooney" Lee's cavalry [2] skirmishing with Maj. Gen. David McM. Gregg's three cavalry brigades and Brig. Gen. Frederick Winthrop's infantry brigade. At 1:30 p.m., thinking he faced mostly dismounted Rebel cavalry, Gregg launched a vigorous charge. Pegram's infantry easily thwarted the blue cavalrymen, who fled back up Vaughan Road with the Confederates in hot pursuit. Winthrop ordered his men forward and delivered some "very fair volleys" into the advancing Confederates, who withdrew into nearby woods. From 2:00-3:00 p.m., Pegram's Rebels traded fire with Winthrop's Yankees. During this time, Pegram received orders from his corps commander, Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon, to return to Dabney's Mill, where Pegram's other brigade (Lea) faced extreme pressure from advancing Federals. Heavily engaged with the enemy, Pegram could do little about this order.

Pegram's men gradually pushed back Winthrop's Yankees, who, running low on ammunition, began to give way. Around 3:00 p.m., Winthrop sent for reinforcements. Within minutes, Brig. Gen. Horatio G. Sickel's brigade arrived, passing Winthrop's wounded traveling back to field hospitals. Upon relieving Winthrop's men, they received a fierce volley from Pegram's Rebels. Sickel was wounded and carried from the field. Colonel Edwin Jenney took command and led the brigade forward. They crashed into the Confederate line,

Pegram splits his Division, 11:00 a.m.

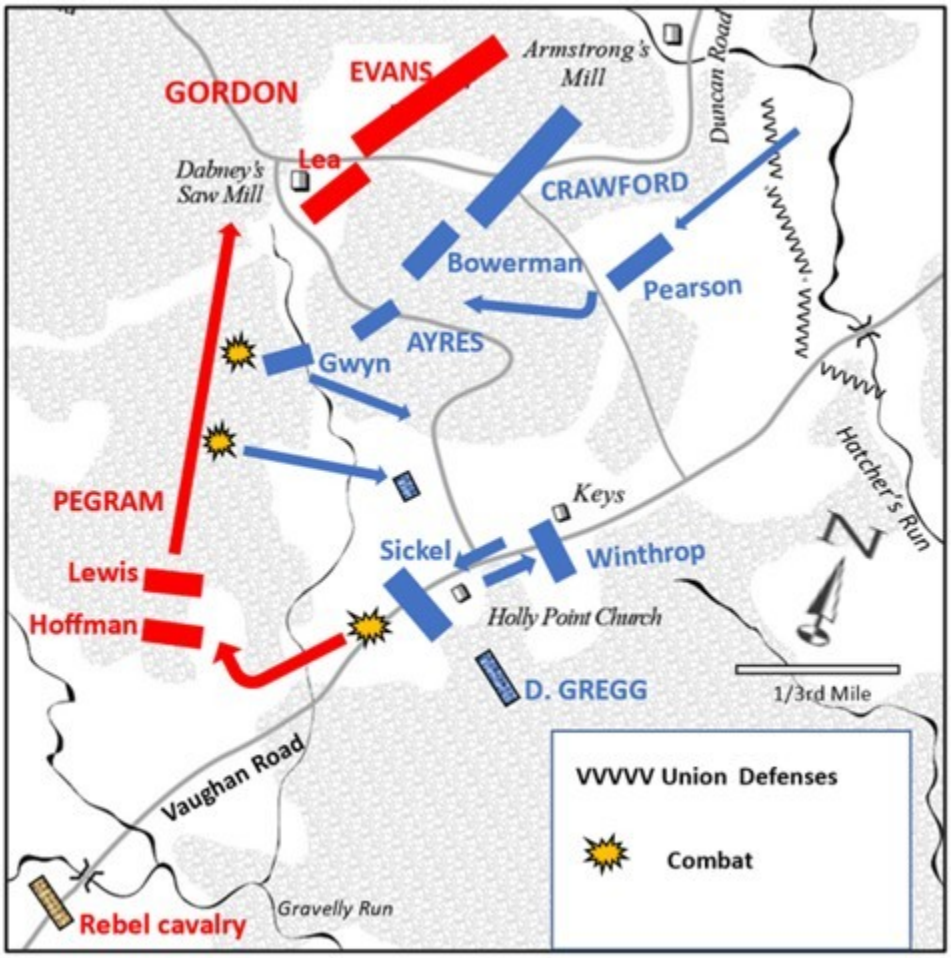


splitting it in half. The Rebels withdrew in confusion, leaving their dead and wounded behind. The Tar Heels in Lewis's brigade were particularly panicked, with many surrendering. Chased off the field by Sickel's brigade around 3:30 pm, Pegram regrouped his men and decided to march towards Dabney's Mill as earlier instructed.

With no path or trail, the distance of around a mile involved traversing a rugged terrain of dense woods, swamps, ravines, and briars with the occasional open area. Navigation was likely problematic, but the noise of battle around Dabney's Mill could have assisted their orientation. Pegram's skirmishers soon began trading fire with unknown assailants in dense woodlands. Pegram called up his entire force, and opened fire, only after he recognized them to be Yankees. The bluecoats, a small cavalry force, soon scampered away [3]. Pegram's men pressed on and collided with more Federals. These were elements of Brig. Gen. James Gwyn's brigade that had become lost in thick woods trying to join the main Federal force around Dabney's Mill. Pegram's Rebels engaged the Yankees, who, being isolated and disorientated, ran in disarray.

Around 4:30 p.m., Pegram arrived at Dabney's Mill. Reunited with his compatriots, he reported to Gordon for orders. Gordon with Lea's brigade and Brig. Gen. Clement A. Evans's division had been fighting around the mill with Union Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Crawford's division since around 2:00 p.m. Crawford had recently received reinforcements, namely elements of Maj. Gen. Romeyn B. Ayres's division and Brig. Gen. Alfered L. Pearson's brigade. For Gordon, the arrival of Pegram's two brigades was most timely.

Pegram met with his senior officers to disseminate Gordon's orders. At this moment, on the Union left, Ayres launched another Union attack with his Maryland Brigade (Col. Richard N. Bowerman commanding), supported by Pearson's brigade. Once more, the Federals gained the mill site. This action probably caught Pegram's party in a hail of bullets. Pegram perished outright, along with Capt. John B. Snow (21st North Carolina commander). The 31st Virginia's adjutant, Lt. Washington McNemar, received a mortal wound. Seriously wounded, brigade commander Col. Hoffman [4] fell from his horse near Pegram. The other brigade commander, Lewis, escaped unscathed.



Pegram marches to Dabney's Mill, 3:30 p.m. [5]

Major H. Kyd Douglas recalled how Pegram was shot through the body near the heart. Douglas caught him as he fell, dying in his arms almost as soon as he touched the ground. Another eyewitness, Maj. John H. New, remembered Pegram having time for some last words: "I am wounded badly. Get me off at once, if you are going to do so." A native of Petersburg, John Pegram died less than 10 miles from where he was born.

Lea's Rebels, now with Pegram's two extra brigades, pushed back Ayres's attack and retook the mill position. Stunned by the loss of two senior commanders and the emergence of a gap in their position, the Confederates could not press home their advantage. Around 5:00 p.m., a noticeable lull in the fighting occurred as the Federals dug in and the Confederates reorganized [6].

Controversy shrouds Pegram's final hours. Rival narratives erroneously assumed that Pegram remained with Hoffman's brigade around the Crow house, and it was Lewis and Brig. Gen. Robert Johnston [7] that marched their brigades to Vaughan Road. This version mainly derives from the mistaken belief that Sickel routed this Rebel force at 5:00 p.m. and not 3:30 p.m. Many accounts misreport the time of Pegram's death. Some memoirs and a 50th-

anniversary newspaper review claimed that Pegram died around Dabney's Mill before 3:00 p.m. This idea has echoed down the decades despite copious evidence showing Pegram was fighting along Vaughan Road at that time. Kyd Douglas implied that he died after 5:00 p.m., leading a charge we now know he didn't participate in.

Hetty C. Cary (Image by Thomas C. De Leon, 1839-1914)

With Pegram dead, soldiers placed his body on a blanket and carried it to an ambulance. This traveled under escort to Pegram's headquarters (near the Quaker Road intersection). Aware of John's demise, Capt. Gordon McCabe, a close friend of the Pegrams, awkwardly rode past Hetty's quarters. He saw her entertaining John's mother as they awaited his return.



Kyd Douglas placed Pegram's corpse in his adjutant's room at headquarters. The thorny issue arose of who would inform Mrs. Pegram. Gordon suggested Douglas, but he pleaded against the idea. He proposed sending Maj. New as "he's married and knows women." But New failed to fulfill the ghastly task. However, someone sent word to Hetty that she could go to bed as John would be late returning. Thus, she slept peacefully in a room above his corpse. In the morning, an (unknown) old civilian gentleman went to Hetty's room and called her downstairs to where her husband lay. Consumed with grief, she kneeled by his body and pulled out his still-ticking watch. She had wound it for him before they last parted [8].

Dr. Nigel Lambert is a retired British academic who lives near Norwich, England. He has published many bioscience and social science articles linked to various medical issues. A life-long Civil War enthusiast, he recently became interested in the battle of Hatcher's Run. Surprised by the sparse and conflicting literature on the battle, he employed his scientific and qualitative research know-how to advance our understanding of the battle. Working with US experts on the Petersburg campaign, he has created an extensive e-library for the battle. Using this database, he has authored two articles in North &South magazine article and five articles on the "Siege of Petersburg Online" website. A book chapter describing the battle is currently under review.

Notes

[1] It is mysterious why Pegram split his brigade. This left Col. Lea's small brigade to protect the central Rebel position around the Crow house.

[2] The Rebel cavalry was mainly Brig. Gen. Richard Beale's Brigade. Most of Rooney Lee's other two brigades didn't travel to the battle.

[3] Maj. Gen. Gregg had sent this small cavalry force to screen the Federal advance on Dabney's Mill.

[4] Hoffman survived, but his left foot required amputation.

[5] I thank George Skoch for permitting the use of his baseline map.

[6] Brig. Gen. Lewis took command of Pegram's division, and Lt. Col. John G. Casey replaced Hoffman.

[7] Brig. Gen. Johnston was on leave and not at the battle, with Col. Lea commanding his brigade.

[8] I thank Bryce A. Suderow for his support of my research.

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