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Des Moines Civil War Roundtable

June 2024
Headquarters District Iowa
General Order No. 493

- The Sixth meeting of the Spring campaign will be **June 19th** at the **Machine Shed Restaurant**
  The bar will open at 5:30 with the meal served at 6:30.
- Our program **Professor Sarah Purcell (Grinnell College) Spectacle of Grief: The Politics of Mourning & the Civil War**
- Meal **Stuffed Pork Loin and Roasted Turkey Breast**
- **Reservations & payment will be accepted until June 16**

By command of Brigadier General Gordon McKenzie

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Voices From Gettysburg: Letters, Papers, and Memoirs from the Greatest Battle of The Civil War
by Allen C. Guelzo
Citadel Press 2024 $29.00 E book $14.54

I was offered a review copy by the publisher.

I very much enjoyed reading this book on the Battlewell-versed of Gettysburg. The story is told by a series of excerpts from letters, papers, and memoirs published from 1864 through 1963 with the bulk written 10-50 years after the battle. The author does mention the problem of relying on personal memoirs of the battle as one may have a strongly held viewpoint or as an individual combatant only a view of a small portion of the battle. Allen C. Guelzo is well-versed in the literature on the Battle and aftermath. He has done an excellent job in selecting the articles to be included.

One should be familiar with the story of what happened before, during, and after the battle to have a better understanding of the selections. The author does set the scene with some description of each chapter so the reader is better able to understand what is happening. The author had inclusions from President Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, the commanders Major General George Gordon Meade and General Robert E. Lee, several Corps and division commanders, officers, enlisted combatants, and many civilians.

The book will be given as a prize to someone attending the June 19th meeting. It will be a book worth reading

ARMIES CONVERGE ON COLD HARBOR

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https://civilwarmonths.com/2024/06/01/armies-converge-on-cold-harbor/

As June began, General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant, the overall Federal commander, continued his relentless effort to move Major-General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac past the right flank of General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. The armies faced each other along a seven-mile front that began at Atlee's Station and Totopotomoy Creek to the north and ended at Old Cold Harbor and the Chickahominy River to the south.

Elements of both armies had fought for the desolate crossroads at Old Cold Harbor, about 15 miles northeast of the Confederate capital of Richmond, on May 31, with Major-General Philip Sheridan's Federal cavalry gaining control. Lee directed Lieutenant-General Richard H. Anderson's First Corps,

supported by Major-General Robert F. Hoke's division, to dislodge Sheridan's troopers.

Sheridan maintained his tentative hold on the crossroads while waiting for infantry support from Major-General William F. "Baldy" Smith's Eighteenth Corps (recently transferred from the Army of the James) and Major-General Horatio G. Wright's Sixth Corps. Smith and Wright had orders get into position and attack by 6 a.m. But Smith got lost on his way to Cold Harbor, and Wright's men conducted a 15-mile forced march through the night of the 31st and had not yet arrived by morning.

Due to miscommunication, Anderson deployed his troops piecemeal while Hoke's men dug trenches. The Federals held off the weak Confederate attack with their Spencer repeating rifles, mortally wounding Colonel Lawrence Keitt, a politician who had played a prominent role in the **secession of South Carolina**. Anderson directed another assault, but this was repulsed as well.

Wright's Federals finally began arriving around 9 a.m. and replacing the cavalrymen on the line. They were not fully deployed until around noon. Although Grant wanted Wright to attack immediately, his men were exhausted and Wright did not know the enemy strength in his front, so he opted to wait until Smith arrived. Wright was unaware that Smith was lost and would not be coming up for several hours.

When Smith's troops finally arrived, they took positions to the Sixth Corps' right. As they prepared to attack, Meade worried that they did not have enough men. He therefore contacted Major-General Gouverneur Warren, commanding the Fifth Corps, "Generals Wright and Smith will attack this evening. It is very desirable you should join this attack, unless in your judgment it is impracticable." Warren dispatched a division under Brigadier-General Henry H. Lockwood at 6 p.m. Lockwood was new to the Potomac army, having recently been transferred from the Middle Department in Maryland.

The Federals finally launched their attack 12 hours after it had been scheduled to start. As was the pattern for this campaign, the Confederates took advantage of the delay by building strong entrenchments. Federal division commander Francis Barlow noted, "I do not believe that these assaults upon intrenched lines through thick woods, where we do not know the ground, are likely to be successful where the enemy hold their line in force…"

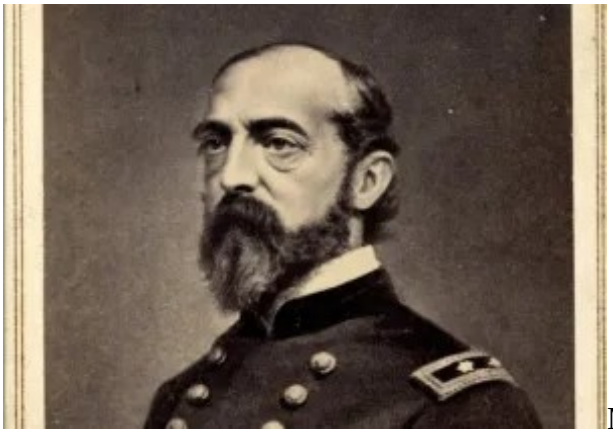
The Confederates held firm south of the Mechanicsville Road, which connected Old and New Cold Harbor. North of the road, the Federals were met by murderous fire. Connecticut Lieutenant Theodore Vaill described it as: "A sheet of flame, sudden as lightning, red as blood, and so near that it seemed to singe the men's faces, burst along the rebel breastworks; and the ground and trees close behind our line were ploughed and riddled with a thousand balls that just missed the heads of the men."

The Federals fell back. To their right, other Federal forces discovered a gap in the Confederate line and pushed through. But they soon found themselves in a ravine, surrounded on three sides. They fought their way out and fell back.

Farther north on the Old Church Road, Lieutenant-General Jubal Early sent his Confederates forward in a probing action against the lines held by the Ninth and Fifth corps. The Federals repelled these attacks around 7 p.m. Later that night, Warren learned that Lockwood's division had gotten lost on its way to Cold Harbor. Warren, having failed to assign a guide to help the new commander navigate the dark woods, reported to Meade:

"In some unaccountable way, (Lockwood) took his whole division, without my knowing it, away from the left of the line of battle, and turned up in the dark 2 miles in my rear, and I have not yet got him back. All this time the firing should have guided him at least. He is too incompetent, and too high rank

leaves us no subordinate place for him. I earnestly beg that he may at once be relieved of duty with this army."


Maj-Gen G.G. Meade | Image Credit: CivilWarDailyGazette.com

Meade agreed and replaced Lockwood as division commander with Brigadier-General Samuel W. Crawford. Lieutenant-Colonel Theodore Lyman of Meade's staff wrote that as Meade was fuming about the poor performances of Warren and Wright, one of Baldy Smith's staffers "reports that his superior had arrived, fought &c. &c. but that he had brought little ammunition, no transportation and that 'he considered his position precarious.' 'Then, why in Hell did he come at all for?' roared the exasperated Meade with an oath that was rare for him."

Fighting ended at nightfall, with the Federals sustaining about 2,650 casualties and the Confederates losing about 1,800. The Federals had pinned the Confederates into defensive works in front of New Cold Harbor, closer to Richmond than Old Cold Harbor. While the Federals were within striking distance, Meade was enraged that Grant had ordered an assault without first conducting reconnaissance. Meade also worried that the army was being spread too thin.

Grant was frustrated by the missed opportunities to break the enemy line. Charles A. Dana, observing the Army of the Potomac on behalf of the War Department, reported: "Grant and Meade are intensely disgusted with these failures of Wright and Warren." But even though the Federals had been unable to break through the Confederate defenses, they still held the vital Cold Harbor crossroads, and the Confederates were in a potentially vulnerable position with the Chickahominy River at their backs.

Knowing that he had run out of room and could make no further movements around Lee's right flank, Grant was convinced that a massed frontal assault would break through. Orders were therefore sent to Major-General Winfield Scott Hancock, whose Second Corps comprised the Federal right: "You must make every exertion to move promptly and reach Cold Harbor as soon as possible… Every confidence is felt that your gallant corps of veterans will move with vigor and endure the necessary fatigue."

Hancock's men began moving out on the night of the 1st, but they quickly became entangled in a massive traffic jam due to a guide sending them down a road too narrow for the artillery. Wright warned Meade that if Hancock did not hurry up and support him, "I may lose what I have gained." Wright stated that the Confederates were gathering in force, to which Meade replied that "if we give them any time they will dig in so as to prevent any advance on our part."

The window of opportunity for the Federals was closing fast. Lee hurried the bulk of his Confederates

to the Cold Harbor crossroads, where they quickly built a nearly impregnable series of fortifications that included breastworks, abatis, and entrenchments. Lee also informed General P.G.T. Beauregard, whose Confederates held Major-General Benjamin F. Butler's Federals at Bermuda Hundred to the south, that Grant's forces had shifted closer to the James River and requested reinforcements. Beauregard replied that he could send none without risking cutting communication between Richmond and Petersburg.

Lee countered by stating that, "as two-thirds of Butler's force has joined Grant, can you not leave sufficient guard to move with the balance of your command to north side of James River and take command of the right wing of the army?" President Jefferson Davis directed Major-General Robert Ransom, Jr., commanding Confederates at Richmond, to mobilize local forces to establish defenses at the Chickahominy River.



Emerging Civil War

Kevin Pawlak

Our National Cemeteries: Antietam National Cemetery and the Private Soldier

The Private Soldier



Monument, a 44 foot-7 inch tall behemoth of a stone soldier (of which the soldier measures in at 30 tons, 21 feet and 6 inches tall), stands guard over the nearly 5,000 graves of American war dead in Antietam National Cemetery. His hands clasped on his musket, he appears ready to defend the solemn graves lying in the 11¼ acre cemetery.

The soldier gazes down and to the right from his perch, gazing over the individual headstones and slightly beyond, looking north toward the homes of the Union soldiers resting under his watchful eye. Beneath his feet, carved in stone, the simple but moving epitaph reminds visitors why thousands of soldiers' graves lie in front of them: "Not for themselves, but for their country."

It is impossible to miss the Private Soldier when entering the gates of Antietam National Cemetery. He represents all the soldiers whose only statue is a small headstone etched with their name and state.

Despite the efforts of local civilians and Union soldiers to bury the remains of the fallen in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Antietam, their work could not fully erase the scars of a battle's aftermath cut into the western Maryland landscape. "The eye rests upon something to remind the traveler of that awful day of carnage," said one Union soldier passing through the battlefield two years later. Farmers resuming their plowing and planting constantly churned up the shallow graves scattered across their land. For Sharpsburg to return to some sense of normalcy, something had to be done.

Maryland stepped in and passed legislation to establish one cemetery outside Sharpsburg. On March 23, 1865, the bill passed, and the state purchased the ground for the cemetery. Northern states kicked in funding to aid the effort. By September 17, 1867, the cemetery was ready for its official dedication. President Andrew Johnson spoke that day to devote the ground he stood on to the memory of the fallen buried there. All told, 4,776 Union soldiers rest within the stonewalls of the cemetery.

On May 30, 1869, following the dictates of General Order No. 11 passed the previous year officially nationalizing Memorial Day, Sharpsburg's citizens gathered at the town's train station, marched down Main Street, climbed the western slope of Cemetery Hill, and carefully placed flowers at each headstone. One participant in the ceremony "resolved that, on next 'Memorial Day,' should their lives be spared, they would return again to strew flowers over the graves, and renew their vows of devotion to the memory of the sacred dead." Sharpsburg's citizens have publicly observed Memorial Day ever since. Rather than flowers, a small American flag adorns each grave.

Antietam National Cemetery stopped active operations and accepting burials in 1953. Yet every time I visit, I find a new story to tell, a new soldier to remember, and am faced with the reminder that beneath each headstone rests a fallen patriot who gave his all, as the Private Soldier reminds us, "Not for themselves, but for their country."

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