

Foreword

The story of the William Bliss farm has continued to interest and intrigue Gettysburg enthusiasts in the almost 30 years since “*Over a Wide, Hot, . . . Crimson Plain: The Struggle for the Bliss Farm at Gettysburg, July 2nd and 3rd, 1863*,” was first published.

When William Bliss and his family fled from their home on July 1, 1863, they reportedly left in such haste that doors remained open and their table was set for the next meal. They likely never envisioned the role their property would play in the upcoming battle, and probably prayed that their home would be spared from destruction. Unfortunately, as two great armies settled into position south of Gettysburg, the 60-acre Bliss farm was caught between the Army of the Potomac on Cemetery Ridge, and the Army of Northern Virginia on Seminary Ridge. Over the course of July 2 and 3, skirmishers from both armies occupied the Bliss land and the struggle became intense at times. On the afternoon of July 2, while Lt. Gen. James Longstreet’s forces attacked the Union left flank, Southern troops were unable to advance beyond the Bliss property and participate in the assault for reasons still debated by historians.

The Bliss farm fighting continued into the sultry morning of July 3. The buildings became such a nuisance, particularly the large barn as a haven for enemy sharpshooters, that Union Brig. Gen. Alexander Hays ordered them burned. William Bliss thus suffered the unfortunate distinction of having friendly forces destroy his family’s residence and personal belongings. Later that afternoon, more Confederate soldiers marched across the property during the “Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble Charge.”

The Bliss farm was a historically significant site. Much of what we know about this struggle is because of historian and author Elwood W. “Woody” Christ. Christ made enormous contributions to Gettysburg research and preservation during his lifetime. He worked for 32 years as a Gettysburg Licensed Battlefield Guide and was also employed by the Adams County Historical Society. Woody served on Gettysburg’s Historic Architectural Review Board, was chief researcher and writer for Gettysburg’s Historic Building Survey, a member of the project team that developed Gettysburg’s Historic District Design Guide, and chief researcher for the David Wills House

“Over a Wide, Hot, . . . Crimson Plain”

Historic Structures Report. In addition to this book, he lectured and contributed a lengthy series on the Bliss farm for Gettysburg Daily.com.

Christ devoted himself to this topic because he believed the Bliss farm played a crucial and mostly forgotten role in the battle. In addition to the back and forth fight for the buildings, Christ believed the inability of the Confederates to control the “wide, hot . . . crimson plain” surrounding the property was a significant contributing factor in the Union victory.

In addition to the importance of the fighting here, I believe the destruction of the house and barn contributes to the appeal of this story. The structures were not rebuilt and constitute one of a small number of “lost farms” on the field. Some visitors ask Licensed Battlefield Guides to show them where the buildings once stood, and a few will venture out to the spot. Today, only an empty field and a handful of monuments indicate where the Bliss family once lived. We can only imagine what existed there before the ugly face of war paid a visit during the summer of 1863.

Woody Christ passed away in 2014 at the age of 60. Some historians and Licensed Battlefield Guides, notably John Archer, continued to tell the Bliss story. My own *Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg*, co-authored with Wayne Motts and Steve Stanley (Savas Beatie, 2015) discussed the farm’s role in the July 3 fighting. A large number of books on Gettysburg have appeared since Woody’s passing, and all of those that discuss this topic clearly owe an enormous debt to Woody’s original efforts. This book remains the most extensive and in-depth treatment of the Bliss farm fighting to date, and any future attempt to replicate it will only be parroting Christ’s work.

Savas Beatie’s decision to reprint this unique and long out-of-print book, with the full support of the Adams County Historical Society, which now owns the rights, is welcome news. The decision to kick off the new Savas Beatie Essential Gettysburg Series with it was a wise choice. Although Woody is no longer with us, this endeavor ensures that his efforts to tell the Bliss story will live on with a new generation of Gettysburg students.

James A. Hessler, Gettysburg, PA
Licensed Battlefield Guide and co-author of
Gettysburg’s Peach Orchard (Savas Beatie, 2019)

February 2021