



# Meade and Lee After Gettysburg

The Forgotten Final Stage of the Gettysburg Campaign  
from Falling Waters to Culpeper Court House,  
July 14 - 31, 1863

Jeffrey Wm Hunt



Savas Beatie  
California

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For

Dr. George Forgie,  
University of Texas at Austin

The epitome of the word “Professor,”  
a friend and inspiration,  
with great admiration and gratitude



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## FOREWORD

**ACCORDING** to a broad and deep historical consensus, the Gettysburg campaign came to close when Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia successfully slipped back across the swollen Potomac River into Virginia on the night of July 13-14, 1863. Some accounts discuss in broad terms the ten days that followed, but students of the war have long been led to believe the campaign ended once Lee was across the Potomac. Until I read Jeff Hunt's *Meade and Lee After Gettysburg* manuscript, I thought so as well.

*Meade and Lee After Gettysburg* is the first entry in a proposed series of books that study what happened in the Virginia Theater during the five months after Lee's army crossed the Potomac River in mid-July and the onset of the winter encampment in December 1863. That extensive period surely had an impact on the course of the war and has much of value worth studying, but historians have breezily skipped past it to get to the main event that kicked off in the Wilderness in early May 1864, and did not end until General U. S. Grant accepted and Lee's surrender in the McLean parlor at Appomattox the following April.

This first installment (which might be subtitled "The Lost weeks of the Gettysburg Campaign") covers the second half of July 1863 and the eyebrow-raising events that transpired during that tight time frame. The major topics that fill out the balance of these months include Bristoe Station, Rappahannock Station, and the Mine Run campaign.

I was introduced to Jeff Hunt three years ago by Theodore P. Savas, the managing director of Savas Beatie. At the time, Jeff was already well along

the path of producing a landmark study of what is surely the most under-reported period of the Civil War in the Eastern Theater. As it turned out, Jeff produced a very large single volume. Ted convinced him to split the mammoth effort into three separate books. Throughout I have followed with great interest Jeff's shaping and reshaping of his study in general, and this manuscript in particular.

*Meade and Lee After Gettysburg* touches on the battle itself lightly, eases Lee and his Virginia army across the river, and then, when the curtain is fully raised, delves deeply into the ten or so days that follow. To my knowledge, no previous scholar has attempted to examine, at this depth, the operations in the northern reaches of Virginia (Lee's men west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and Meade's army mostly on the eastern side in Loudoun Valley). Other than the very occasional article, a passing mention in biographies and works on the larger conflict, or very specialized topics, this period has been utterly neglected.

Lee's goal, which began the moment Pickett's Charge failed, was to escape back into Virginia and reach a safe position to rest and reorganize his battered army. That location was the Rappahannock River line, the area from which he had begun the campaign in early June. Meade's goal was to cut off Lee's retreat and inflict a decisive defeat, something he failed to achieve at Falling Waters. Once back in Virginia, his immediate objective was to block the Blue Ridge passes and trap the Confederates in the Lower (northern) Shenandoah Valley, force a battle on unfavorable terms for Lee (or one or more of his corps commanders), and destroy or disperse the Virginia army.

The remarkable cat and mouse game that ensued during those lost weeks brimmed with strategic decisions pregnant with import on not just the course of the war in Virginia, but perhaps the war itself. It may come as a surprise to many students that Lee had a fully functioning and still very dangerous army. Many engagements ensued, most of the smaller variety, but some were surprisingly large with game-changing outcomes dangling by a thread. Once this time period is understood, it becomes obvious the Gettysburg campaign in no way ended when Lee crossed the Potomac river, and only came to a conclusion when the armies resumed their positions along the Rappahannock line. The Potomac offers a clean, easy demarcation line; research and deep thinking and allowing the evidence to take you where it leads, is much harder and very rare.

The more involved I became with Jeff's manuscript, the more excited I was by its fresh research and keen insights. Jeff's work offers an interesting interpretation of the war in the Eastern Theater while breaking new

ground—a difficult and rare combination in an era that, more often than not, churns out cut-and-paste history by the numbers.

Something that must not be overlooked is that Jeff's study is also the first (and long overdue) examination of the generalship of George Gordon Meade as an independent commander. There was a gap in the Meade scholarship yearning to be filled. The Gettysburg campaign was well underway and the main battle just three days off when Meade was plucked from V Corps command to lead the Army of the Potomac. Some scholars, Edwin Coddington, Stephen Sears, and Harry Pfanz among them, take pains to (mostly) laud Meade for his generalship before, during, and immediately after Gettysburg—perhaps partially in response to those who blame Meade for not being more aggressive in the three-day battle or during the pursuit of Lee to the Potomac River. Gordon Rhea, the author of the monumentally important multi-volume *Overland Campaign* series, thinks highly of General Grant and implies that his plans in 1864 failed to defeat Lee's army sooner mostly because of the timidity of Meade and his Army of the Potomac generals. Keith Poulter, the former editor of *North & South Magazine*, takes it one step further by claiming the Army of the Potomac was a second-rate organization, and Grant's Army of the Tennessee was the only truly great Union army in the Civil War.

The gulf between these two interpretations of Meade and his army is significant. Meade cannot be the same man described in these conflicting views. The only place left to seek out an accurate assessment of Meade's generalship is during the period after Lee crossed back into Virginia (July 13-14, 1863) and the nearly five months that followed until December, when the armies went into winter quarters and before Grant arrived in the Eastern Theater to assume supreme command and take up residence in the field. It was during this period that Meade was the master of his domain and in charge of the Army of the Potomac. This book, and the two installments that will follow, offers the first full opportunity to fairly judge General Meade in independent command.

The portrait of Lee is less incomplete, but gaps remain. The Southern commander is often castigated for his decision to invade the North rather than send troops to save Vicksburg, and for his failure to properly oversee his subordinates during the Gettysburg campaign. In stark contrast, his conduct during the Overland fighting is usually (though of course not always) commended as tactically extraordinary. There is distance between the Lee of Gettysburg and the Lee of the Overland Campaign—and the

comparison is not unlike the Meade we have come to know through the pens of historians. What has been missing is a bridge between these campaigns that can help us develop the sense of continuity necessary to fully appreciate the generalship of each man and the performance of their armies. The period from mid-July 1863 through the end of the year offers precisely that.

Therefore, it gives me tremendous pleasure to help introduce this work to the reading public, and to introduce Jeff Hunt as both my friend and as a historian and writer I greatly respect.

Bryce Suderow  
Washington, D. C.

## PREFACE

**T**HE genesis of this book occurred nearly thirty years ago. I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas in Austin taking Professor George Forgie's course on the Civil War. The best part of that semester was engaging in frequent after-class discussions with Dr. Forgie. One afternoon, when our conversation turned to the Gettysburg campaign, we discussed Lee's goals during the Pennsylvania invasion and the importance of the campaign. Dr. Forgie's suggestion that Gettysburg may not have been as critical to the outcome of the war as many historians postulate left me intrigued. I decided to explore the issue.

There were many variables involved, and I decided to first determine the impact of Gettysburg by examining the military situation in Virginia from the conclusion of the campaign through the end of 1863. That investigation turned into a two-decade exploration of the operations conducted by the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia during the last six months of 1863. The first thing that struck me was how little these critical months had been seriously studied. War coverage mostly ended with Lee's return to Virginia in mid-July and did not resume until the elevation of General U. S. Grant the following March 1864. What happened in between?

My research, first with the *Official Records* and then with newspapers, journals, regimental histories, and other sources, convinced me that not only was this time frame filled with important events, but that this fascinating period was vital to understanding the course of the war that followed. My

initial purpose of studying this period morphed into my determination to write about the fall campaigns of 1863. Naturally, the chronological boundaries of my study would begin with the end of the Gettysburg campaign and conclude with the onset of winter and the end of active military operations. As it turned out, it wasn't quite that simple.

Historians and students of the war almost exclusively agree that the Gettysburg campaign ended when the Confederate army escaped across the Potomac River on night of July 13-14, 1863. I, too, had long held that opinion. The more closely I studied this period, however, the more I came to believe this was simply not so.

The letters and diaries penned by the soldiers who marched and fought through those days, coupled with the reports and correspondence that make up the war's official record, tell a very different story. They were well aware that another major battle was very likely during the final weeks of July 1863 as General Lee endeavored to push his battered army through the Blue Ridge Mountains toward the Rappahannock line, and the more cautious General Meade did his best to foil that attempt. The strategic chess match produced a flurry of activity and several severe clashes as Meade did his best to trap Lee in the northern reaches of the Shenandoah Valley.

The soldiers and commanders who experienced the hardships of those weeks, as well as the newspaper correspondents who covered them, left behind an enormous amount of primary material. Their accounts, largely neglected by historians and virtually unknown to general readers of the Civil War, offer a story ripe with drama and import that nearly changed the entire course of the war in the Eastern Theater.

These documents leave no doubt that the saga of Gettysburg did not conclude until the rival armies came to rest along the Rappahannock River near Culpeper Court House, Virginia, on July 28, 1863. Indeed, in one of the many ironies of this campaign, its final engagement was a sharp cavalry action around Brandy Station on August 1—a combat waged in same general area and by the same military arm that fought the much larger Battle of Brandy Station on June 9 in what many believe was the opening fight of the campaign.

Meade's pursuit south of the Potomac and his efforts to block Lee and bring him to battle was as potentially dangerous to the Virginia army as the actions in Maryland following the July 1-3 fighting. In other words, the Gettysburg campaign ended along the banks of the Rappahannock and not the Potomac, and it ended two weeks later than most people believe.

As best as I could tell, no one had researched and written a book-length account of those two weeks. For readers, it is important to understand that my original manuscript (more than 800 pages long), included the entire period from mid-July to the end of the Mine Run Campaign. On the advice of my editor, we divided this into three separate books, so the one you hold in your hand includes only the last two weeks of July. The footnotes and the bibliography reflect that reality.

\* \* \*

This book represents the latest chapter in my lifelong passion for military history. That fascination began before I started school. Where this interest consumed me is hard to say. Perhaps it is because my father was serving in the US Army when I was born. My mother swears the first word I ever said was “combat,” apparently learned while watching the old World War II themed TV series of the same name. Certainly a love of history and military history in particular, has always been a large part of who I am. Also courtesy of Dr. Forgie I met fellow students who introduced me to historical reenacting—a hobby I have enjoyed for more than three decades. When I chose to become a professional historian, my parents greeted the decision with supportive skepticism.

Fortunately I had mentors and friends who helped me turn passion into a vocation. Once I earned my Master’s degree I secured a position as an adjunct professor of history at Austin Community College, and I have had the pleasure of teaching there part-time for more than 28 years. My full-time employment is in the museum field. From 1994 until 2006 I was the curator of collections and the director of the living history program at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas (the hometown of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz). In 2007, I became the director of the Texas Military Forces Museum—the official museum of the Texas National Guard—at Camp Mabry in Austin. Throughout my career I’ve had the honor of working alongside service men and woman from every branch of the armed forces and the inestimable privilege of interacting with many hundreds of veterans.

Although my interests and work encompass the entire sweep of United States history, the Civil War has always been my primary passion. All of my published works, including my first book, *The Last Battle of the Civil War: Palmetto Ranch* (2002) and contributions to *The Revised Handbook of*

*Texas, The Essential Civil War Curriculum,* and the *Gale Library of Daily Life: Civil War*, focus on the great struggle between the North and the South. My three decades of participation in Civil War reenacting and living history programs has helped me acquire a helpful understanding of how the veterans of that conflict lived, marched, and fought, as much as such a thing is possible today. More importantly, my hope is that decades of teaching about and studying the Civil War have given me the ability to do justice to the remarkable men whose incredible story I try to tell in these pages.

### Acknowledgments

The publication of this book is the culmination of a long and fascinating journey. It was not a trip I took alone. There were many along the way who lent assistance, encouragement, enthusiasm, support and a critical eye to my efforts. One of the greatest joys connected to bringing these volumes to print is the opportunity to say thank you to my companions on this particular voyage of inquiry and discovery.

The genesis of this project was a conversation with my mentor, Dr. George Forgie of the University of Texas at Austin, during a question-and-answer session following one of his outstanding lectures on the Civil War. As a young college student I had already learned a great deal about the war, courtesy of a life-long fascination with the subject that began in fourth grade. But as is typical of youth, I thought I knew a good deal more than I really did, and my grasp of the conflict (I now know) was sometimes narrow, simplistic and too utterly accepting of the conventional wisdom constructed by historians up to the early 1980's.

Dr. Forgie's remarkable and charismatic intellect was much too sharp and nimble to accept the idea that all there was to know about the war had been uncovered already. Like every great professor, he taught not only by answering questions, but by asking questions of his students. In this way he encouraged me to ponder my own certitude regarding the course of the war and its many battles. In particular he challenged my assumption that Gettysburg was the turning point of the Civil War by helping me realize I could not defend such an assertion with the certainty I assumed. Thus, he not only prompted me to try to find the answers to questions he had helped me articulate, he also convinced me to make history my profession as well as my avocation.

The search for evidence to prove or refute the idea that Gettysburg was the war's turning point led me to the examine the final weeks of the Gettysburg campaign as well as the Bristoe Station and Mine Run campaigns. That pursuit ultimately led to these volumes. The joy of discussing history with George Forgie, the encouragement he gave me as a student and the honor of studying under his

instruction are treasures for which there is no true recompense, and for which my heartfelt thanks seem a paltry repayment for what has been given.

Throughout the research and writing of this work, I have been actively involved in Civil War reenacting. The knowledge I have gained of the life of the common soldier as well as the way he marched, maneuvered and fought as a result of my reenacting experiences have been invaluable to my ability to understand the campaigns I have written about.

Too often, reading historians' accounts of military action leaves me with the inescapable feeling that the author is casually waving their hand over the map when describing or explaining the movements of military units. As any real soldier will tell you, the map is not the territory. War is a simple thing when reduced to crisp arrows drawn on maps that give an unobstructed, birds-eye view to their beholder. Real campaigns and real combat are very different, plagued as they are by uncertainty, terrain, weather, confusion, contradictory or nonexistent intelligence, and the foibles of human nature.

Obligatory references to the "fog of war" aside, it is one thing to question why such and such a general did not hurl his men into an attack as soon as they reached the battlefield, and another to understand what soldiers feel and are capable of after a 20-mile march, with little rest or food. Likewise the complexities of moving Civil War units through the evolutions of the line to deploy them on the battlefield, the time it takes to form a line of battle or a column of march, the rigors of moving down dusty roads and suffering the accordion-like motion of a column slowed by a creek, the noise and confusion of a smoke-covered battlefield, and the inertia that can grip troops in action against a foe of unknown strength, are things critical to truly understanding the letters, diaries, memoirs and official reports of the men who fought the war. To be sure, a reenacted march or "battle" is a far cry from the real thing, but it is as close as modern man can get, and the insights created by taking part in quality events have proved enlightening beyond measure.

Therefore I want to thank the reenacting community and especially those men I have soldiered alongside over many decades for everything they have done to help me better understand the realities experienced by the common soldier and field officer. Just as importantly, the camaraderie so lovingly recalled in memoirs and reunions after the war, are every bit as real for the reenactor as for the veteran. The power of those emotions and the impact they have on unit cohesion and the ability to endure suffering is something that has to be experienced to be understood. The comrades, with whom I have marched, camped, cooked, froze, sweltered, dug, worked, planned and "fought" are as dear to me as those of any veteran's. So I will indulge myself by taking this opportunity to say thank you to the men of the Confederate Guard, the Texas Rifles, the Tom Green Rifles, the 1st Trans-

Mississippi Battalion and the Red River Battalion. It has been a pleasure to serve and learn with you.

No author can write about history without standing on the shoulders of the chroniclers who have traveled the road before him: the curators who have diligently collected the letters, diaries, reports, memoirs, newspaper articles and other first-person accounts of the war, and archivists who have painstakingly cataloged and preserved them. Being a museum professional, I understand the enormous amount of work and care that go into such endeavors.

I would like to thank Corinne Nordin (Indiana Historical Society), Christine Beauregard, (New York State Library), Linda Thornton (Auburn University), Janet Bloom (William Clements Library–University of Michigan), Leah Weinryb Grohsgal, Teresa Burk and Kathy Shoemaker (Robert Woodruff Library–Emory University), Joan Wood (Stewart Bell, Jr. Archives, Handley Regional Library, Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society), Blaine Knupp and Theresa McDevitt (Indiana University of Pennsylvania), Helen Conger (Case Western Reserve University Archives), Katherine Wilkins (Virginia Historical Society), Peiling LI and Alyson Barrett (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History), Matthew Turi (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina), Vicki Catozza (Western Reserve Historical Society Library and Archives), Jennifer Coleman (Navarro College), Shannon Schwaller (United States Military History Institute), Emilie Hardman (Houghton Library, Harvard University), the Research & Instructional Services Staff of the Wilson Library (University of North Carolina), and the staff of the Museum of the Civil War (formerly the Museum of the Confederacy).

I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to Amanda Shields, Associate Registrar at Brandywine River Museum of Art, for her very kind assistance in securing permission to use the fabulous painting by N.C. Wyeth which graces the dust jacket of this volume. Additionally, my sincere gratitude goes to Mr. Jonathon T. Mann, Jane Faulkner Wiltshire Snyder (great granddaughter to Senator Charles James Faulkner II), Mr. Ben Ritter, of Winchester, Virginia and Mr. Jim Heflin, Archivist at the Warren Heritage Society in Front Royal, Virginia, Sharon Bradley, Special Collections Librarian at the University of Georgia School of Law, Mr. Ed Jackson and Ms. Marie Mize for assisting me in obtaining some of the rare photographs used in this work.

It was also my pleasure to have a pair of excellent researchers assisting my efforts by doing the hard work of tracking down and photographing materials in archives I could not get to in a timely fashion. Mark Ragan did outstanding work on my behalf at the National Archives and Library of Congress while Jonathan Wiley did the same at the North Carolina State Archives and University of North Carolina. I cannot thank them enough for their professionalism, patience and perseverance.

No book makes it into print without a publisher. Theodore P. Savas, managing director of Savas Beatie, saw merit in my study and believed in it from the start. He was an encouraging and honest critic throughout. When he found ways to make my original manuscript better, he let me know and firmly pushed me to undertake additional work to make this as good as possible. It was his idea to divide my original manuscript into three books. Ted assigned Steven Smith, Savas Beatie's new editorial director, as my development editor. Steve was fantastic to work with, and his enthusiasm for this story and skill in fine-tuning my manuscript were remarkable. He is the kind of editor every writer dreams of working with. Marketing director Sarah Keeney and all the other great folks at Savas Beatie who have played a part in bringing this volume to print, also have my utmost respect and gratitude.

As I was developing my manuscript I was honored to pick the brain of Civil War scholar Bryce Suderow. He was an intellectual joy to chat with and an insightful commentator on this period of the war and my approach to it. This work is much the better because of the contributions he made to it. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Gary Gallagher and Kent Masterson Brown, two of the war's preeminent historians, for their encouragement and support of this endeavor.

There is, of course, no substitute for walking the ground where a battle was fought or campaign unfolded. Bill and Austin McMeans and Gill Eastland accompanied me on my initial sojourn to the historic fields written about in these pages. They were not only enjoyable companions and fellow enthusiasts for Civil War and military history, but also endured my sometimes barely constrained excitement at seeing the ground for the first time.

Last but certainly not least, my wife Chris deserves special commendation. She is not only my rock and partner, but is always ready with encouragement and understanding. Chris drafted the outstanding maps for this book (an endeavor that requires incredible talent and patience), proofread the initial manuscript, listened sympathetically as I talked through events and questions aloud, and never muttered a complaint about the weekends and long nights spent working on this project or the small fortune in books and research materials I purchased. She is remarkable.

I do not pretend that this volume and the ones I hope will follow comprise the last word on war in Virginia between mid-July and the end of December 1863. My hope is that they bring long-deserved attention to these campaigns and the experiences of the men and women who lived through them. My humble wish is for these pages to contribute to the scholarship and our understanding of America's seminal conflict, and do justice to those men of both sides who lived this chapter in our history.

Jeffrey Wm Hunt  
Austin, Texas



## CHAPTER 1

# “The War Will Be Prolonged Indefinitely”

The Retreat from Gettysburg—Meade’s Hesitation—Lee’s Escape—President Lincoln’s Disappointment—Meade Retains Command—the War Continues

**T**HE battle of Gettysburg was the largest fought in the war thus far. For three bloody days, Union and Confederate armies contested the hills and woods near that little Pennsylvania town. The Rebels came close to winning the struggle, but in the end the advantage rested with the Federals. General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, forced into a rare admission of defeat, abandoned the field of battle and withdrew toward Virginia. As the Rebels retreated from Pennsylvania, the last Confederate bastions on the Mississippi River—Vicksburg and Port Hudson—surrendered, giving the North complete control over the great waterway and cutting the Southern Confederacy in two.

Such Union victories in the Western Theater were not uncommon, although they had been few and far between since the beginning of 1863. In the Eastern Theater, however, it had been a long time since the Army of the Potomac had bested the Rebels. In fact, many questioned whether the Federals in Virginia had ever really beaten the Confederates. First Bull Run, the Peninsula campaign and Seven Days, Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Second Winchester were among the more prominent names on the list of Union disasters. Only Antietam had provided relief from the procession of defeats. Unfortunately, its long casualty list and Major General George B. McClellan’s failure to follow up

on General Lee's subsequent withdrawal lessened the public impact of what was a strategic achievement.

Gettysburg, on the other hand, was an unquestioned tactical and strategic triumph. The Army of the Potomac, seemingly poorly led and chronically unlucky, often derided in the press, had finally, decisively, whipped the Army of Northern Virginia. Accustomed to the defeat of their Eastern army, Northerners were overjoyed, and perhaps a bit surprised, by Major General George Meade's upset victory. Headlines announcing the Confederate defeat proclaimed the battle the greatest military success in history. Relief and glee over Lee's defeat morphed into euphoria when the news from Vicksburg multiplied Northern joy.

Captain William T. Lusk, stationed in Wilmington, Delaware, personified the depth of Yankee ecstasy. Feeling the Union had survived its "dark hour," Lusk exclaimed, "the dawn is broken, and the collapsed confederacy has no place where it can hide its head." Amid the "patriotic clamor" of ringing church bells and celebratory cannon fire, people were grinning "at one another with fairly idiotic delight," he wrote, explaining that the news from Gettysburg and Vicksburg combined was "a little too much happiness for poor mortal men."<sup>1</sup>

In Pennsylvania, the men who made up the Army of the Potomac were justly proud of their triumph. Letters penned soon after the battle were full of proclamations about the nature of the Federal victory. The triumph was gratifying in many ways, not least in that it provided a ready answer to critics of the Eastern army and those who compared its disappointing record to victories won by Union forces under Major Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William S. Rosecrans.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, the Pennsylvania victory allowed many to believe the end of the war might be in sight. Thomas Carpenter, a clerk at army

1 Lusk, William Thompson, *War Letters of William Thompson Lusk* (New York, NY, 1911), 184-185.

2 Frederick Winkler letter of July 4, 1863 [www.russcott.com/~rscott/25thwis/26pgwk63.htm](http://www.russcott.com/~rscott/25thwis/26pgwk63.htm); Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard, ed., *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh: Color Sergeant 28th Massachusetts Volunteers* (New York, NY, 1986), 113; Oliver Norton, *Army Letters 1861-1865* (Chicago, IL, 1903), 161; Raymond G. Barber and Gary E. Swinson, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Charles Barber, Private, 104th New York Volunteer Infantry* (Torrance, CA, 1991), 136; James Robertson, ed., "An Indiana Solider in Love and War: the Civil War Letters of John V. Hadley," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 59, No. 3, Sept. 1963.

headquarters, thought the “fourth of July morning that saw Lee’s shattered army retreat and Vicksburg surrender . . . will date as the downfall of the Rebellion.” Carpenter’s sentiments were echoed in hundreds, perhaps thousands of letters written by Union troops after the battle. Joy and optimism seem to pervade every piece of correspondence. “I really begin to think now that we are soon to see the end of the war,” wrote one Federal, while another admitted he was “in great hopes of the war coming to a close soon.” Samuel Cormany, a sergeant in the 16th Pennsylvania Cavalry, thought likewise, telling his diary the Confederacy was a “waning cause tottering on its last legs.”<sup>3</sup>

The Northern press agreed. Anticipating the complete and rapid destruction of the rebellion, it heaped scorn on the retreating Confederates. Noting that Southern papers never tired of proclaiming the military genius of Robert E. Lee, *Harper’s Weekly* admitted “it has not been unfashionable, even among loyal men,” to believe the Confederate general far superior to his Union counterparts. The triumph in Pennsylvania, however, spelled the end of the Rebel’s supposed dominance. Lee’s reputation as a great general, *Harper’s Weekly* assured its readers, “begins and ends at Gettysburg.”<sup>4</sup>

While denigrating Lee, Northern papers were quick to praise the leadership of General Meade, who had been appointed to the thankless task of leading the Army of the Potomac just days before the Pennsylvania victory. Even in far-off London, the Federal general received plaudits for his handling of the battle. Everywhere editors proclaimed Meade the best general to have ever led the Army of the Potomac, and the man apt to end the war by destroying Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.<sup>5</sup>

Many of Meade’s troops cautiously concurred with that appraisal. Thomas Carpenter felt Meade had “shown a skill and judgment in the Gettysburg battle that cannot be too highly commended.” The victory created hope that the North had found the man capable of crushing Lee and his army. “If Meade holds out as well as he has begun,” Carpenter continued,

3 Thomas Carpenter, letter of July 7, Missouri Historical Society; Stephen M Weld, *War Diary and Letters of Stephen M. Weld 1861-1865* (Boston, MA, 1979), 239-240; George Bolton, letter of July 18, 1863; James C. Mohr, ed., *The Cormany Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War* (Pittsburg, PA, 1982), 345.

4 *Harper’s Weekly*, August 8, 1863.

5 *Illustrated London News*, August 1, 1863.

“he will make his name famous and beloved for more than one generation.” After seeing so many generals show much early promise, only to disappoint in the end, however, Carpenter hedged his bet on Meade: “I would not *swear* by him because he has won one battle, yet I think he will do.”<sup>6</sup>

Major Henry L. Abbott of the 20th Massachusetts was also uncertain how much faith to put in the army’s new commander. Describing the general as “tall, thin, lantern-jawed, [and] respectable,” Abbott thought Meade’s spectacles made him look the part of a good “family doctor” more than a triumphant warrior. Appearances notwithstanding, he felt the general was “an extremely good officer, with no vanity or nonsense of any kind,” and applauded his leadership at Gettysburg where Meade had seemed to know “exactly what he could do & what he couldn’t.”<sup>7</sup>

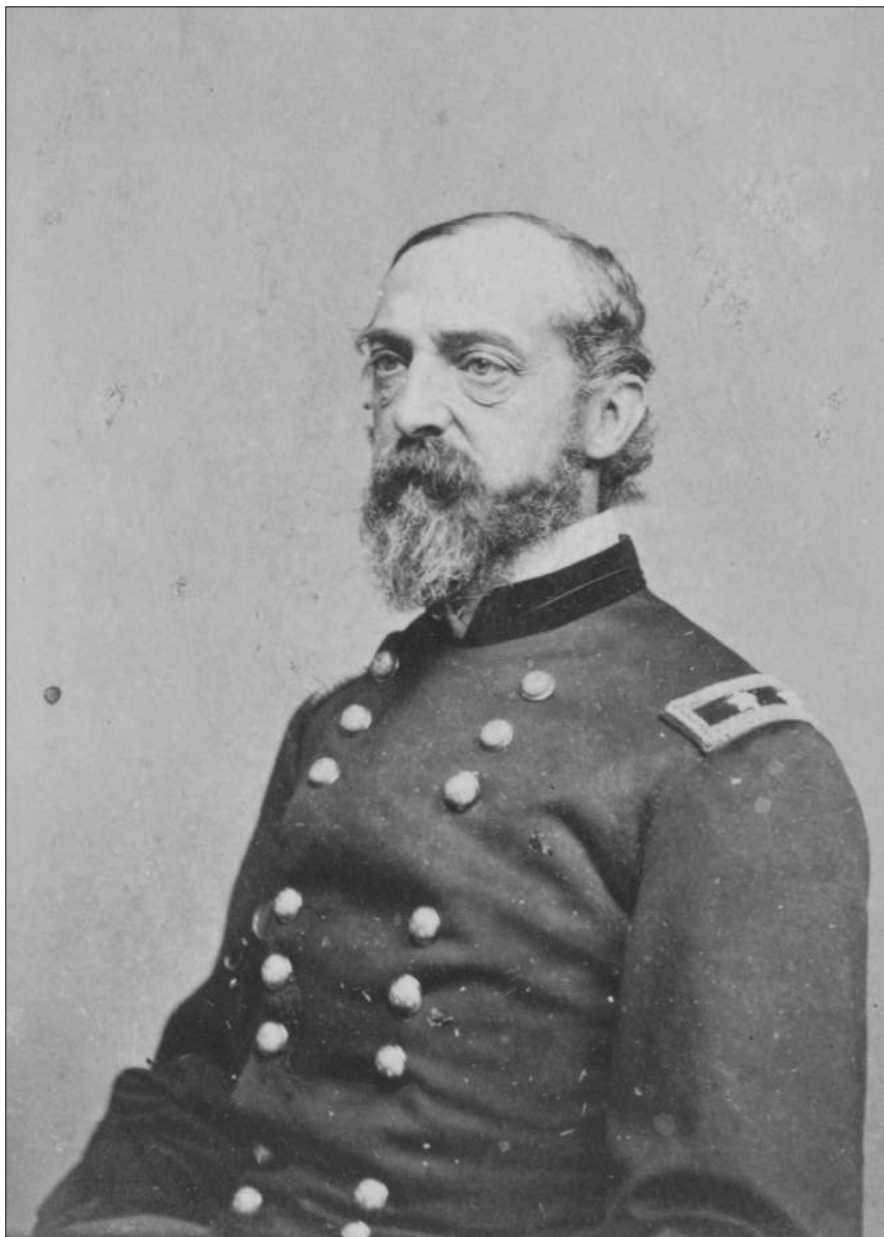
Nonetheless, Abbot, like Carpenter and many others, could not quite bring himself to wholeheartedly invest faith in Meade. He wondered whether the determination of Union troops and the fact that they had occupied eminently defensible terrain on their own soil, meant that the common soldiers “deserve fully as much credit as the generalship of Meade” for Gettysburg. For now he felt “great confidence” in the general, “though no enthusiasm.”<sup>8</sup>

One reason George Meade failed to incite passion was that he was virtually unknown outside the V Corps until his appointment as commander of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, 1863. His relative anonymity wasn’t because he had not been in the thick of the fighting. Meade established a solid reputation leading a brigade on the Virginia Peninsula until he was wounded in the hip and arm at White Oak Swamp on June 30, 1862. He remained on the field until loss of blood and pain forced him to seek medical attention. After a brief convalesce, Meade returned to duty in time to take part in the battles of Second Bull Run, and then lead a division at South Mountain, Antietam (where he held temporary corps command), and Fredericksburg, where his division turned in what was arguably the best performance on a disastrous day. In each engagement he received plaudits for his coolness and courage under fire as well as his aggressiveness—all of

6 Thomas Carpenter Diary, Missouri Historical Society.

7 Robert G. Scott, ed., *Fallen Leaves: The Civil War Letters of Major Henry Livermore Abbott* (Kent, OH, 1992), 189.

8 *Ibid*, 189.



Major General George Gordon Meade

*Library of Congress*

which helped propel him from brigadier to major general, to date from November 29, 1862. He led the V Corps in the Chancellorsville campaign, during which he expressed dismay at Major General Joseph Hooker's decision to abandon the battle and retreat across the Rapidan.<sup>9</sup>

The 47-year-old Meade was highly regarded by his peers. Lieutenant Colonel Horace Porter, who would get to know the general well during the last year of the war, described him as "a most accomplished officer [who had] a complete knowledge of both the science and the art of war." Porter also wrote that that Meade "was well read, possessed of a vast amount of interesting information, had cultivated his mind as a linguist, and spoke French with fluency." When foreign military observers visited the army, explained Porter, "they were invariably charmed."<sup>10</sup>

A London reporter interviewed the general during the summer of 1863 and came away quite flattered. "He is a very remarkable looking man—tall, spare, of a commanding figure and presence, his manner pleasant and easy but having much dignity," explained the foreign writer. "His head is partially bald and is small and compact, but the forehead is high. He has the late Duke of Wellington class of nose, and his eyes, which have a serious and almost sad expression, are rather sunken, or appear so from the prominence of the curved nasal development. He has a decidedly patrician and distinguished appearance."<sup>11</sup>

When he wasn't entertaining the foreign press, however, Meade looked anything but distinguished. One officer quipped that "his habitual personal appearance is quite careless, and it would be rather difficult to make him look well dressed." That appraisal was accentuated by the general's tall cavalry boots and well-weathered "slouched hat with a conical crown and a turned-down rim" that gave him the kind of rough and ready look that soldiers approved.<sup>12</sup>

9 Patricia L. Faust, ed. *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York, NY, 1986), 482-483.

10 Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York, NY, 1897), 247. Porter met Meade while serving as Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's aide-de-camp in April 1864. Porter was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General in 1866.

11 [www.thelatinlibrary.com/chron/civilwarnotes/meade.html](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/chron/civilwarnotes/meade.html).

12 Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 28, 247.

Although everyone seemed to admire his bravery and patriotism, the impression Meade made on his equals and the press did not translate easily to junior officers or the rank and file. Meade “was a disciplinarian to the point of severity,” thought Colonel Porter, and “in his intercourse with his officers the bluntness of the soldier was always conspicuous, and he never took pains to smooth anyone’s ruffled feelings.” Indeed, Meade’s most remarked-upon trait was his volatile temper. The 1835 West Point graduate, veteran of the Seminole Wars, and father of seven did not suffer fools gladly or incompetence lightly, and during active operations throughout the Civil War was quick to snap at anyone who failed to meet his exacting standard of performance or duty. The harshness with which the general lashed out was extraordinary, and often made him seem heartless, demeaning, or cruel. His soldiers called him “a damned old goggle-eyed snapping turtle”—an unflattering description of which Meade was fully aware. But if his temper could erupt suddenly and violently, it also relieved some of the general’s frustrations and tension. On occasion he softened his outbursts with kind words or humor. “Meade does not mean to be ugly,” wrote Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, commander of the I Corps’ artillery, “but he cannot control his infernal temper.”<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not Meade was *the* man who would win the war, there was no mistaking that “the tide of success” seemed to be flowing in favor of the Federals, as the *Illustrated London News* put it. The paper was also quick to point out, however, that the Union victory in Pennsylvania was, as yet, incomplete. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s announcement that Gettysburg had eclipsed Waterloo was, to say the least, premature. Waterloo had brought about the final downfall of Napoleon’s France. Gettysburg was a long way from achieving similar results against the Southern Confederacy.<sup>14</sup>

Even as the North hailed Gettysburg as a great victory, more thoughtful people in and out of the army realized it was only a beginning. Perhaps the end of the war might well be in sight, but it would take much more than the defensive success of the first three days of July to accomplish the destruction of the rebellion. Major Frederick C. Winkler of the 26th Wisconsin was among the many who understood the need to capitalize on Gettysburg before

13 Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 247; Allan Nevins, ed., *Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright* (New York, NY, 1962), 116.

14 Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman, OK, 1960), 170.

final victory could be won. In a letter home he expressed hope another battle could be fought north of the Potomac River, where the Union might “give the rebels a blow which will go far to end the war.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to complete that task, Meade needed to quickly pursue the retreating Confederate army and destroy it before it could re-cross the Potomac. Just about everyone saw this, and one who saw it with unmistakable clarity was President Abraham Lincoln. After hearing the news from Gettysburg, Lincoln wrote Union General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck, “If General Meade can complete his work, so gloriously prosecuted thus far, by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee’s army, the rebellion will be over.” Most people thought Meade would do just that. The general’s own son, serving with his father as an aide, wrote his mother: “Papa will end the war.”<sup>16</sup>

From a distance, the chances of Meade finishing off the Rebels looked very good. Recent heavy rains had swollen the Potomac to flood stage, making it unfordable. Lee had left a pontoon bridge over the river at Williamsport, Maryland, but it had been destroyed by a detachment of Union cavalry on July 3. As a result, when Lee’s battered army reached the Potomac along with some 10,000 wounded men and enormous quantities of captured supplies, there was no ready way to get across the angry waters and back to relative safety in Virginia.<sup>17</sup>

While his engineers undertook the construction of a new bridge, Lee was forced to turn and face Meade. The Rebels dug in with speed and skill and were waiting for the Yankees when they began to arrive in strength on July 12. The Army of the Potomac’s appearance no doubt came too early for Lee’s taste, but as far as the administration in Washington was concerned, Meade was moving with agonizing slowness.

Lincoln, in particular, was worried. Indeed, his concerns about Meade had begun just two days after Gettysburg when he read the general’s congratulatory order to his troops for their victory. After thanking his men for producing the “glorious result of the recent operations,” Meade went on to tell his soldiers, “our task is not yet accomplished and the commanding

15 Frederick Winkler letters of July 4 and 8, 1863.

16 Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 307.

17 Francis Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps* (New York, NY, 1887), 308.

general looks to the army for greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader.”<sup>18</sup>

Although the prose read well, it drove the president to heights of discontent. In a war being waged to prove the supremacy of the national government and the indivisible nature of the Federal Union, it did no good to imply the Southern Confederacy was a legitimate nation in its own right. Meade’s order did just that. If there was an “our soil” that meant there must be a “their soil.” Of course this was the reality of the moment, but it was a reality Federal armies were charged with changing. “Will our generals never get that idea out of their heads?” asked a frustrated Lincoln. “The whole country is our soil.”<sup>19</sup>

Some Northern troops were equally unimpressed with Meade’s pronouncement. Colonel James Gwyn, commanding the 118th Pennsylvania, had Meade’s congratulatory order read before his regiment. Riding out in front of his men at the end of the address, Gwyn exhorted three cheers for General Meade. The soldiers, however, refused to utter a sound. They had seen commanders come and go with great rapidity. Each had promised victory. None had delivered, leaving the troops wary and more than a bit cynical. There would be “no more cheering” for any general.<sup>20</sup>

Whether they liked George Meade or not, few outside the army seemed to recognize the serious difficulties with which he contended. It was easier to focus on the equally difficult (or worse) problems Lee suffered—a reality those in Washington felt Meade was ignoring. Indeed, many in Lincoln’s administration were uneasy about the apparent lack of killer instinct in the Union army’s pursuit. Meade, naturally, felt differently.

The fact that the battle of Gettysburg had badly damaged Lee’s Rebel army was vigorously reported by Northern newspapers. What most overlooked, however, was that the Army of the Potomac was as seriously damaged by its victory as the Army of Northern Virginia was by its defeat. Meade had taken upwards of 88,000 men into the battle. Of that number,

18 *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901) Series 1, vol. 27, pt. 3, 519. Hereafter cited as *OR*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted.

19 Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won* (Chicago, IL, 1983), 468.

20 J. Gregory Acken, ed., *Inside the Army of the Potomac: The Civil War Experience of Captain Francis Adams Donaldson* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 1998), 113.

3,155 men were killed, 14,529 wounded, and another 5,365 taken prisoner. Among the Union wounded were two division and two corps commanders. The head of the I Corps, Major General John Reynolds, had been killed and seven brigade commanders killed or mortally wounded. Several more brigadiers were wounded and unable to lead their men. In total, more than 300 Union officers of all ranks were lost during the battle.<sup>21</sup>

A roll call on the morning of July 5, 1863, for example, showed only 47,087 men present for duty. In addition, more than 5,000 unwounded Southern prisoners had to be dealt with, and many thousands more lying in makeshift hospitals. To state the matter plainly, almost the entire Army of the Potomac was exhausted and badly disorganized. The XI and I Corps, severely mauled during the first day of the battle, would never regain their former strength or élan. The III Corps suffered an equal fate on July 2. The cavalry had been heavily engaged and its horses, as well as those in the rest of the army, were in bad shape. Only the VI Corps came out of the battle in fairly good condition, having taken only a small part in the fighting.<sup>22</sup>

The entire army had undergone a very tough campaign, making forced marches of up to 36 miles a day through the June heat in an effort to catch up with Lee during his invasion. Meade's supply lines were in disarray. Slow-moving quartermaster trains had barely managed to keep up with the army, and hence the issue of rations, clothing, footwear, and essentials other than ammunition had been spotty. Some units were as bad off for shoes and clothing as the Rebels. One Pennsylvanian noted that many men in his brigade were "actually marching in their undershirt and drawers," while more were "barefoot or with only an apology for a shoe."<sup>23</sup>

In view of these facts, Meade did not feel he could simply hurl his army at the retreating Confederates. Lee's men had been beaten, not routed. His troops, accustomed to victory, would be eager to even the score at the earliest possible moment. The Army of Northern Virginia was a wounded panther

21 Mark Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York, NY, 1959), 339; Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 173.

22 Andrew Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan: The Army of the Potomac July, 1863 to April, 1864* (New York, NY, 1883), 6.

23 Joseph R. C. Ward, *History of the One Hundred Sixth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, 2nd Corps* (Philadelphia, PA, 1883), 179.

and any careless step might cost the Union all it had won so dearly at Gettysburg.

Lee’s withdraw ran through mountain passes back toward the Potomac. The gaps in these heights were easily defended, and it seemed fruitless to pursue Lee on his direct line of retreat. Instead, Meade sent his strongest corps, the VI, to follow the Rebels while the rest of the army made a wide swing to the east in an effort to get around the Southern flank. This allowed Meade to stay connected to his supply line while keeping his army between Lee and Washington, D.C. Meade hoped he could cut the Southern army off before it reached the Potomac. The same rains that made the river impassable, however, turned the roads into seas of mud. Forced to take a longer route and slog through ever-deepening mire, the exhausted Union army stood no real chance of catching the Confederates on the move to the Potomac, and it didn’t.

As soon as Lee’s troops reached the river, they turned to face their pursuers. Throwing up stout earthworks, the Rebels soon had a battle line firmly anchored on both flanks by the swollen river. Meanwhile, Lee’s quartermasters employed makeshift ferries to transport wagon loads of badly injured men back to Virginia and transfer fresh stocks of ammunition to Maryland. As the Rebel infantry dug and the wounded slowly trickled across the Potomac, Southern engineers worked furiously to build a pontoon bridge to carry the rest of the army to safety.

By the time Meade got most of his men into line facing the entrenchments surrounding Lee’s position, the Confederates had yet to complete their bridge and remained stuck north of the Potomac. With its back to an unfordable river, Lee’s army looked ripe for destruction. If the Federals could break the Southern line, they would drive the Rebel force back to the Potomac and trap and destroy it there. A fight was eagerly anticipated. *Harper’s Weekly*, confusing a clash of cavalry with the start of a general engagement, actually reported that Meade had attacked Lee at Williamsport, and that a great battle was in “active progress”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Illustrated London News*, July 25, 1863; *Harper’s Weekly*, July 18, 1863.

Robert E. Lee certainly anticipated just such an attack. Although his army was in a formidable position, with solid and well-manned entrenchments to help thwart a Federal assault, he sought to stiffen the resolve of his troops with an order of the day issued on July 11.

Commending them for enduring with typical fortitude the “long and trying marches” made during the invasion, he reminded his men that they had forced the enemy out of the South and back onto his own soil. Although the “fierce and sanguinary battle” they had fought at Gettysburg had not been “attended with the success” that had “hitherto crowned [their] efforts,” they could be proud of exhibiting the same “heroic spirit that has commanded the respect of your enemies, the gratitude of your country, and the admiration of mankind.” Now, continued Lee, they must once more meet the enemy from whom they had “won on so many fields a name that will never die.” Evoking everything for which Southern soldiers fought—family, home, honor, independence—and calling on the assistance of “that benign Power” which had “so signally blessed” their former efforts, Lee exhorted “each heart [to] grow strong in the remembrance of [the army’s] glorious past” and “go forth in confidence to secure the peace and safety” of the Confederacy. The order ended with a ringing appeal: “Soldiers, your old enemy is before you. Win from him honor worthy of your right cause, worthy of your comrades dead on so many illustrious fields.”<sup>25</sup>

By all accounts the general’s message stirred the emotions of his soldiers. The fact that General Lee felt the need to issue such a moving address to his veteran troops while still on campaign emphasizes just how dire he believed was their predicament. Lee’s concern was justified for Meade certainly intended to attack the cornered Rebels.

To be sure, Meade was getting plenty of urging from Washington to do so. General Halleck was fully aware of Lincoln’s desire that Lee not escape, and he sent his army commander an imperative order to “push forward and fight Lee before he can cross the Potomac.” When Meade and his commanders got a good look at the Confederate position around Williamsport, however, they were not inclined to make any rapid strikes.<sup>26</sup>

The Army of the Potomac’s chief of staff, Major General Andrew A. Humphreys, was well known for his battlefield aggressiveness. An

<sup>25</sup> *Harper’s Weekly*, July 25, 1863.

<sup>26</sup> Camp Clark, *Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide* (Alexandria, VA, 1985), 153.

examination of the Rebel position, however, gave him pause. Much of the enemy line was concealed from view, but what could be seen “was naturally strong and . . . strongly entrenched.” Humphreys could discern “no vulnerable points,” while noting Lee’s “flanks were secure and could not be turned.” Meade reached the same conclusion and decided against an immediate attack. Instead, he determined to launch a reconnaissance in force, supported by his entire army, to seek a weak spot in the Southern line. If such a spot were found, then a proper assault could be organized to exploit it.<sup>27</sup>

The reconnaissance was scheduled for the morning of July 13. On the evening preceding the planned advance, Meade held a council of war with his corps commanders. During it, he discovered that nearly all of them were “adverse to the proposed operation.” Faced with their doubts, and his own, Meade cancelled the movement pending further examination of the ground.<sup>28</sup>

On the morning of the 13th, rain pelted Federal troops busy throwing up earthworks instead of attacking the Rebel line. In the 118th Pennsylvania, Captain Francis Donaldson, among others, was frustrated the army had yet to assail Lee. He saw no reason for digging in. “Certainly it cannot be possible that Lee will again assume the offensive,” Donaldson opined to his journal. Fearing building breastworks “just now” would make his troops “timid,” the captain wondered what Meade was about. Everywhere along the line, Union troops fidgeted in anticipation and uncertainty. Most wondered “why the ball does not open,” complained the adjutant of the 10th New York. Feeling the army was “full of spirit and eager to finish the war there and then,” he couldn’t understand why the order to attack had not already been given.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Carpenter expressed the instinct of many Federal soldiers. “If our generals, now that they have the Rebellion on the downhill track, will but *push* it along, they may soon send it to destruction on the double quick,” he wrote. Unworried by assertions that Meade lacked the strength to break

27 Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan*, 6

28 Ibid.

29 Acken, *Inside the Army of the Potomac*, 315; Charles W. Cowtan, *Services of the Tenth New York Volunteers* (New York, NY, 1882), 214-215.



Edwin Forbes painted this scene based on a sketch he drew of Lee's Williamsport defenses from within the Rebel works on July 14, 1863. The fields of fire and strength of the positions are obvious. *Library of Congress*

Lee's line, Carpenter believed "there are soldiers enough in the army *now* if they are only put to *work right off* to finish this job all up."<sup>30</sup>

Among the officer corps, however, there was no such certainty. Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, commanding the I Corps artillery, thought the odds of a battle very good if Lee did not slip across the Potomac first. Whether the impending engagement was to be desired, however, was an entirely different question. "It would nearly end the rebellion if we could actually bag" Lee's

30 Carpenter letters, Missouri Historical Society, letter of July 9, 1863.



army, he wrote. “But on the other hand, a severe repulse” would make up for all the damage done to the Rebels at Gettysburg and injure the morale of the North “greatly.” Facing a decision of such monumental consequences, the colonel only hoped Meade would not hazard a battle unless his chances of success were “at least four out of five.” Exactly how such a calculation could be made was left unstated.<sup>31</sup>

No similar doubts existed in the White House or in the War Department. Whatever his troops thought, Meade was very aware of the pressure to attack being exerted upon him by Washington. Seeking to reassure Lincoln, he

31 Allan Nevins, ed. *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861-1865* (New York, NY, 1998), 239.

telegraphed Halleck a promise that the “decisive battle of the war will be fought in a few days.”<sup>32</sup>

This message did not go over well in the Federal capital. The administration wanted an attack launched at once, lest Lee escape first. Halleck replied with an angry message to Meade telling him to “act upon your own judgment and make your generals execute your orders. Call no council of war. It is proverbial that councils of war never fight. Do not let the enemy escape.” Meade had no doubt what he was expected to do, and he issued new orders accordingly. The reconnaissance-in-force would commence on the morning of July 14.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after daybreak, skirmishers along Meade’s entire front climbed over their earthworks and moved toward the Rebel fortifications. The entire army seemed to hold its breath as they advanced “rapidly across the intervening space,” expecting “every moment to receive the fire of the enemy.” Braced for the worst, the Northern skirmishers drew nearer the Confederate line. “When their formidable works loomed up before us,” recalled a soldier in the 140th Pennsylvania, “a rush was made to occupy them.” Racing the last handful of yards toward the ugly wall of dirt marking the enemy’s position, the Federals quickly found themselves atop and then inside the fortifications. “To our great surprise and also to our *great relief*,” admitted the Pennsylvanian, “we found them almost deserted.”<sup>34</sup>

### The Rebels Were Gone

As was so often the case, the Army of the Potomac acted too late. On the night of July 13, with his bridge finished and the waters of the Potomac just fordable, Lee managed to get his army back into Virginia. Well before Federal skirmishers moved forward to probe abandoned earthworks, the last Confederate formations were crossing the river, leaving only a modest rearguard to slow down any Union troops.

32 Camp Clark, *Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide*, 156.

33 Ibid.

34 Robert L. Stewart, *History of the One Hundred Fortieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers* (The Regimental Association, 1912), 147; Levi Fritz diary, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina (SHC, UNC).

The Federals picked up 1,000 or so stragglers, but the Rebels managed to slip away virtually untouched. They even found time to destroy the bridge they had built, preventing the Yankees from using it for any attempt at pursuit. Despite the expectations of many, plus the orders of the general-in-chief and the express wishes of the president, Lee escaped.

When Union generals and soldiers got a good look at Lee’s fortifications from the inside, many found reason to be glad Meade delayed his assault. What looked like a formidable position from the Union lines appeared to be impregnable from within the Southern works. General Humphreys put it concisely when he wrote that an assault on Lee’s entrenchments “would have resulted disastrously.”<sup>35</sup>

Henry Abbott thought Meade’s wisdom at Williamsport equal to his generalship at Gettysburg. “It would have been madness to attack,” the major wrote home, “as besides the entrenchments, the positions of Gettysburg would have been precisely reversed.” Meade might yet prove to be a great general, or he might not, but for now Abbott was impressed.<sup>36</sup>

Private Edwin B. Weist of the 20th Indiana had a different take on the matter. He concurred in the common appraisal of Lee’s fortifications, but not in the results. “The enemy’s position was a very strong one and well entrenched,” he confided to his diary. “We would have probably lost 10,000 men in taking it.” Weist, however, did not share the belief of officers like Humphreys and Abbott that such loss would have been to no avail. Among he and his comrades there were “no doubts” the Rebel line would have been carried.<sup>37</sup>

There, in a nutshell, was the problem. Both generals and privates agreed the Rebel works at Williamsport were strong and that casualties in an attack would have been significant. The high command, doubting the line could be taken and uncertain the cost was worth the risk, hesitated, and afterward felt vindicated for not attacking. Privates like Weist thought the attack would have prevailed and, given the probable impact of a successful assault on the course of the war, believed the effort worth the risk and regretted the attempt was not made. All opinions on the issue were now moot. Lee and his army

35 Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan*, 7.

36 Scott, *Fallen Leaves*, 192.

37 Weist Diary, July 14.

were gone. The potentially decisive, war-winning fruits of Gettysburg left unpicked.

News that the Rebels had gotten away was a bitter blow in and out of the Union army. Many Federals could scarcely credit that “the golden opportunity of crushing Lee’s army was lost.” Observant officers admitted their men were “very much depressed” by Lee’s escape. Rufus Ricksecker, commissary sergeant of the 126th Ohio, was furious at the news. “It looks as if *somebody* did not care about having this war finished very soon,” he wrote in a letter two weeks later, his obvious frustration still in evidence.<sup>38</sup>

Not a few Union soldiers considered the failure to strike the Rebels gross incompetence. “Great dissatisfaction exists among the troops,” one bemoaned to his diary. “We were all aware that we only needed the word to advance in order to have scattered the remains of Lee’s army to the winds.” That those orders were never given didn’t fully surprise, however. “The army has got so used to bungles that it almost seems a matter of course.”<sup>39</sup>

Eseck G. Wilber in the 120th New York thought Meade had handled the battle at Gettysburg “first rate,” though word of Lee’s escape confirmed an earlier prediction. “It is just as I expected,” he wrote home. “Meade was very afraid of a little rain and laid over 24 hours too long and they slipped away.” The effect on his fellow infantrymen was easy to see. “Every soljer is growling . . . because we might just as well had him as not.”<sup>40</sup>

Headquarters clerk Thomas Carpenter thought Meade should have “caught Lee before he left Maryland, or knocked his army to fragments.” With no little sarcasm, he wrote his parents, “But, perhaps you are not aware that *I* was not in command of the Army of the Poke-em-Back. Neither did the commander of that army consult me in regard to his operations. If he had,” Carpenter continued, “and listened to my counsels, we should have tried it on, whatever the result might have been.”<sup>41</sup>

Some troops tried to give Meade and his generals the benefit of doubt. The fact that the Rebels had made a “very clean and apparently orderly

38 Clapp Diary, July 13, 1863; Ricksecker letter, July 28.

39 Edward Cassedy, ed., *Dear Friends at Home: The Civil War Letters and Diaries of Sergeant Charles T. Bowen, Twelfth United States Infantry, First Battalion, 1861-1864* (Baltimore, MD, 2001), 296; Levi Fritz Diary, SHC/UNC.

40 Wilber letters July 12, July 15, 1863, Fondren Library, Rice University.

41 Carpenter diary, July 20.

retrograde movement” refuted the idea that Lee’s army was demoralized and on the verge of dissolution. Major Henry Winkler heard similar opinions. Writing home to his wife, he confided that many officers in whose military judgment he had “great confidence” were saying the army had “every reason to congratulate” itself on Lee’s withdrawal across the Potomac. They assured Winkler any attack upon the Rebel earthworks would have been “doubtful of success.” True or not, the major was certain events would be seen differently back home. “The public, I suppose, will be greatly disappointed,” he predicted. The blame for their distress Winkler placed squarely on the press for giving “very exaggerated accounts of the effect of the late battle on the Rebel army,” and making “great promises of its entire annihilation.”<sup>42</sup>

Backing off his claim of just a week earlier, Winkler no longer believed it within the power of the Army of the Potomac to “give the rebels a blow which will go far to end the war.” The army, he asserted, was in no condition to finish off Lee’s host. Reinforcements and reorganization would be needed before Meade’s command could be “reliably effective,” and capable of another campaign.<sup>43</sup>

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Whatever the rationale or justification within the army for the Rebel escape, the failure to assail Lee at Williamsport won Meade no friends in the Federal capital or the Northern press. Lincoln in particular was sullenly disappointed. The president could not shake the sinking feeling that his generals had failed to do all they could have done to turn Gettysburg into a war-winning triumph. On the evening of July 14, with Lee safely across the Potomac, the president received a message that poured salt into the wound of his despair. The correspondence was a telegram sent by Simon Cameron—a noted, some would say notorious, Pennsylvania politician—who had been Lincoln’s secretary of war until January 1862, when the president had deftly eased him out of office for incompetence, corruption, and political maneuvering.

<sup>42</sup> Winkler letters, July 12; Levi Fritz diary, SHC/UNC.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Visiting the Army of the Potomac the day before, Cameron had learned of Meade's council of war that had resulted in the postponement of the attack on Lee's bridgehead. Declaring the Union army in "fine spirits and eager for battle," Cameron assured Lincoln it would win a victory if given the chance. The former secretary feared, however, that Meade would allow the Rebels to get across the Potomac. He urged the president to use all his authority to urge every Federal commander within marching distance to reinforce Meade and leave that general "no reason for delay in giving battle."<sup>44</sup>

Lincoln did not receive this telegram until 10:00 p.m., by which time the realization of Cameron's fear was many hours old. Responding to the Pennsylvanian early the next morning, the president fully revealed the angst weighing on his soul. After informing his fellow Republican that the Confederates had already made good their withdrawal, Lincoln went on to confess he "would give much to be relieved of the impression that Meade" and other Union generals, had "striven only to get Lee over the river, without another fight."<sup>45</sup>

As the president saw it, his commanders had let slip through their fingers the great chance to end the war. Lincoln was so distressed by this fact that he wrote Meade a reproachful letter. "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape," he explained. Lee, continued the president, "was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely."<sup>46</sup>

Whether Lincoln was correct in supposing Lee had been in Meade's easy grasp is open to debate, but it is nearly impossible to argue that the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia would not have brought about the end of the war. The president was correct in his view that the struggle would now be prolonged indefinitely. Perhaps, in light of that fact, Meade should have assumed the significant risk of attacking at Williamsport. Trapped against the flooded river and 130 miles away from his nearest railhead at Staunton, Lee had never before been so vulnerable. A Union victory there could have had monumental consequences, whereas a repulse

44 *OR* 27 pt. 3, 700.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 185.

would hardly have dissuaded the Rebel army from still retreating back into Virginia. Even a failed effort to destroy Lee would have left Meade in better graces with his superiors and the press than no effort at all.

Precisely because the war was going to continue, however, Lincoln—ever the pragmatist—had second thoughts about sending his letter. In the end, he put the document away and decided to leave well enough alone. Lee had escaped to fight another day, but Meade had indeed won a great and undeniable victory, which was more than could be said of every previous commander of the Army of the Potomac. It would not be politic to remove him or provoke his resignation. Besides, if the administration were to dismiss Meade, with whom would it replace him?

Even though Lincoln did not send his letter, evidence of the President’s disappointment managed to find its way to Meade. After being informed Lee was across the Potomac, Halleck sent Meade a telegram clearly indicating Lincoln’s view toward Lee’s escape. “The enemy should be pursued and cut up, wherever he may have gone. . . . I need hardly say to you that the escape of Lee’s army without another battle has created great dissatisfaction in the mind of the president,” wrote Halleck, “and it will require an active and energetic pursuit on your part to remove the impression that it has not been sufficiently active heretofore.”<sup>47</sup>

General Meade, whose short temper was well known, did not take Halleck’s message well. He had been reluctant to assume command of the army from the start, and had done so because he was a soldier who obeyed orders. Meade had long felt Washington interfered too much with the army’s operations and dictated strategy on the basis of politics rather than sound military science. A handful of weeks before the battle, he had written his wife Margaret that “the command of this army is not to be desired or sought . . . it is more likely to destroy one’s reputation than to add to it.” Margaret Meade, the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia politician and savvy in the ways of politics herself, concurred. She warned her husband that command of the army “would only be your ruin.” Indeed, on June 27 when Colonel James A. Hardie arrived at Meade’s headquarters with orders for him to take control of the army, Meade protested and tried to beg off the appointment. When Hardie informed him the instructions were “unquestionable and peremptory,” the general was left with no choice but to comply. In a

47 *OR 27*, pt. 1, 92.

half-joking tone he told Hardie, “Well, I’ve been tried and condemned without a hearing, and I suppose I shall have to go to the execution.”<sup>48</sup>

Meade, then, had taken command of the army just three days prior to the battle at Gettysburg. Now, in middle July, worn out from the physical and mental strain of fighting a large pitched battle and conducting a difficult pursuit, he was in no mood to be chastised by Henry Halleck. Within 90 minutes of receiving notice of the president’s dissatisfaction, Meade sent a dispatch of his own: “Having performed my duty conscientiously and to the best of my ability, the censure of the President conveyed in your dispatch of 1 p.m. this day, is, in my judgment, so undeserved that I feel compelled most respectfully to ask to be immediately relieved from the command of this army.”<sup>49</sup>

Halleck was smart enough to know that losing Meade was bad for the Union, and thus quick to respond. Before the afternoon ended he replied to the prideful general that his “telegram, stating the disappointment of the President . . . was not intended as a censure, but as a stimulus to an active pursuit. It is not deemed a sufficient cause for your application to be relieved.”<sup>50</sup>

After receiving Halleck’s second telegram, Meade let the matter drop. The Northern press, however, did not. When newspapers began to voice public distress over the successful Confederate retreat, Major General Oliver Otis Howard, commander of the Army of the Potomac’s XI Corps, became concerned about the way the army and its new commanding general were being thought of in Washington. Howard took it upon himself to send a letter directly to the president.

The general told Lincoln that he was writing because he “noticed in the newspapers certain statements bearing upon the battle of Gettysburg and subsequent operations” he thought “calculated to convey a wrong impression” to the president. In the face of some of the charges being made, Howard wished to “submit a few statements” for Lincoln’s consideration. He believed Meade deserved tremendous credit for winning the battle of

48 Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 118; Charles F. Benjamin, “Hookers Appointment and Removal,” *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. 3 (New York, NY 1956), 2341-2343.

49 *OR* 27, pt. 1, 92.

50 *Ibid.*, 93-94.

Gettysburg, had handled the army well, and had thrown in the reserves at just the right time and place to produce the triumph.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the failure to assault Lee’s bridgehead at Williamsport, Howard assured Lincoln “it is by no means certain that the repulse of Gettysburg might not have been turned upon us. At any rate, the commanding general was in favor of an immediate attack, but with the evident difficulties in our way, the uncertainty of a success and the strong conviction of our best military minds against the risk, I must say that I think the general acted wisely.”<sup>52</sup>

By this time Lincoln was putting as bright a face as possible on his lingering disappointment. The war would continue, and Meade would stay in command of the Union’s Eastern army. Lincoln responded to Howard that he was “profoundly grateful” for what Meade had done “without criticism for what was not done.” Lincoln went on to tell Howard that Meade had his “confidence as a brave and skillful officer and a true man.”<sup>53</sup>

This was all well and good, but it was hardly enthusiastic praise. The fact of the matter is that Meade was not quite what Lincoln was looking for in an army commander. He was better than anyone else the Potomac army had produced, but Meade’s view of how the war should be conducted did not quite fit with that of the president. This difference in opinion would create more difficulties before the year was over.

Whether Meade had been right not to strike at Williamsport, or whether he had blundered there, was now beyond knowing. But this much the president and the men of the Army of the Potomac did know: the failure to destroy Lee’s army meant the promise of Gettysburg had yet to be reaped. More blood, perhaps much more, would be shed in Virginia before a similar chance was likely to come again.<sup>54</sup>

51 Ibid., 700.

52 Ibid.

53 Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 188.

54 For a thorough tactical examination and expert analysis of the operations of both armies north of the Potomac River, see Eric J. Wittenberg, J. David Petruzzi, and Michael F. Nugent, *One Continuous Fight: The Retreat from Gettysburg and the Pursuit of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, July 4-14, 1863* (New York, NY, 2008).