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A “friendship . . . born amidst the thunders of Gettysburg”: The Barlow- Gordon Incident

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Abstract

July 1, 1863. It is the first day of what will come to be known as the Battle of Gettysburg. Union forces, upon firing the first shot in the early morning hours of that Wednesday, were pushed back from their position near Herr’s Ridge and McPherson’s woods towards Cemetery Hill. Following orders given by Schurz, twenty-nine year old Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow moved his division to the right of Schimmelfennig’s division and placed them on top of an elevated piece of land known as Blocher’s Knoll. The Eleventh Corps had yet to begin their retreat through Gettysburg, but they would soon after Barlow’s men extended the already thin line further north. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A “friendship . . . born amidst the thunders of Gettysburg”: The Barlow-Gordon Incident

December 24, 2014

by Brianna Kirk '15

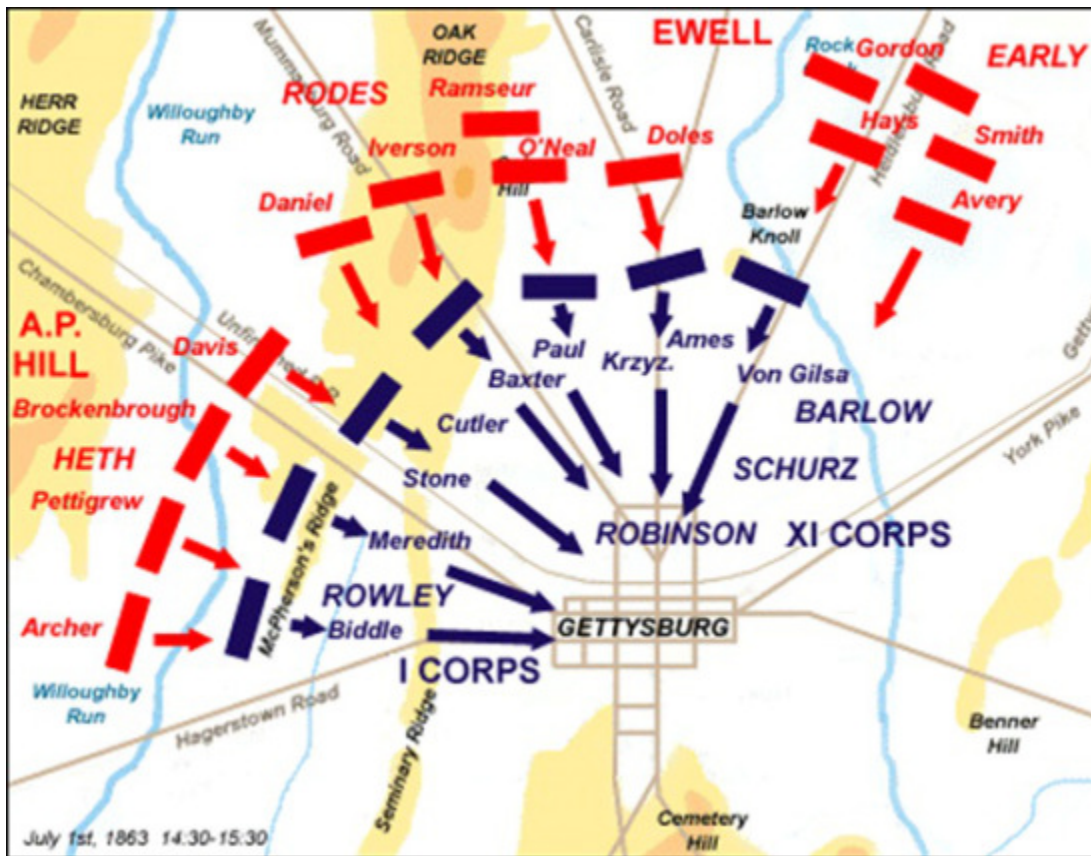
July 1, 1863. It is the first day of what will come to be known as the Battle of Gettysburg. Union forces, upon firing the first shot in the early morning hours of that Wednesday, were pushed back from their position near Herr’s Ridge and McPherson’s woods towards Cemetery Hill. Following orders given by Schurz, twenty-nine year old Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow moved his division to the right of Schimmelfennig’s division and placed them on top of an elevated piece of land known as Blocher’s Knoll. The Eleventh Corps had yet to begin their retreat through Gettysburg, but they would soon after Barlow’s men extended the already thin line further north.



Blocher’s Knoll, now known as Barlow’s Knoll.
Photo credit to the author.

Attacking the knoll was Major General Jubal Anderson Early’s division, who arrived on the Eleventh Corps’ right flank in time to force their retreat into town. Seeing George Doles being pushed back, Brigadier General John Brown Gordon received orders to attack Barlow with his Georgians. The fighting became fiercer as Gordon descended upon the knoll, driving the Union troops back past the Almshouse and into the town. Barlow remained on the knoll as his men retreated, rallying them to form another line to attack, allowing enough time for a bullet from Gordon’s men to strike him. Dismounting his horse and desperately attempting to get out of the line of fire, Barlow worked his way to the rear, with two of his men offering their help. One eventually succumbed to a wound and fell, the other ran for safety. Barlow, now alone, was hit again, knocking him to the ground. Bleeding out, he remained there as the Confederates rushed the position on the knoll and pushed his division further and further into the town. Gordon approached Barlow, noticing the severity of his wounds and offered him water, recognizing the life draining from his face. Knowing he did not have much time left to live, Barlow asked Gordon to tell his wife he died in the front lines doing his duty to his country, and to destroy the letters he had on his person. Gordon found Mrs. Barlow near

the end of July 1 and relayed the message to her under a flag of truce. His duty to Barlow over, and assuming he died on the field of battle, Gordon forgot about the man.



First Day battle map depicting Barlow and Gordon's positions on the field. Photo credit: Military History Online, Battle of Gettysburg.

That is, until fifteen years later. A dinner in Washington, D.C. would bring the two generals back together, unbeknownst that they had previously met. Curious as to the familial connection to Barlow, Gordon asked if the man was related to the Barlow killed at Gettysburg. Replying that he was the Barlow from Gettysburg, Barlow asked Gordon if he was the man who had killed him. Realizing they had both survived the war, the two men struck the warmest friendship between former enemies that unknowingly began on that bloody July 1 day. [\[1\]](#)

The Barlow-Gordon incident has come to be a poignant post-war story of old enemies coming together. It has blue-gray fraternalism deeply etched into its narrative, demonstrating the powerful forces of sectional reconciliation during the Reconstruction era. But how much of the story is true, and how much was concocted as part of this reconciliationist rhetoric? The only major source detailing the event comes from Gordon himself, recorded in his 1903 memoir. Barlow managed to pen a letter to his mother on July 7, detailing the events of the recent battle, but included no mention of Gordon or the supposed incident that occurred. Scholars have drawn conclusions on the Barlow-Gordon incident primarily based on these two sources. While many historians have attempted to flesh out any truth about the encounter, most of the narratives rely more on speculation than fact. The breadth of opinions on how the event occurred on

Blocher's Knoll really comes down to the interpretation of Barlow's and Gordon's accounts – in different times, with different perspectives and different lenses of analysis – that allows discussion, and debate, to continue on.

The issues with the Barlow-Gordon incident point to the larger difficulties of writing and remembering about the experience of battle. Undergoing an event where sense of time is distorted, all senses are engaged, and confusion reigns over clarity, the precision and accuracy of accounts surely must be called into question. The heightened level of adrenaline and emotions affect how one recounts their experience afterwards, how they remember what happened, in a variety of ways where there is no foolproof method to discern if their account is true or pushed towards an extreme. Battle was beguiling; it was life-changing, mesmerizing, thrilling, and indescribable at the same time. How do you then write about an experience where so many emotions surfaced at the same time? Detecting the truth from accounts written during or after such a life-changing, mesmerizing, and indescribable thing as combat proves difficult even for well-trained scholars.

But it is the job of us historians to do just that, to try and discern what actually happened. A total reconstruction of the past is impossible, but it is the thrill of finding pieces of the story and fashioning a narrative out of them that makes the job so enjoyable and so rewarding.

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Endnote:

[1] John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, reprint), 151-153. This telling of the Barlow-Gordon incident comes from Gordon's post-war memoir, which was originally published in 1903.

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