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Abstract

George Gordon Meade was 47 years old the morning of June 28, 1863, when command of the Army of the Potomac was unceremoniously dumped into his lap by General in Chief Henry Halleck, and there is no reason to doubt Meade's protest that the move rendered him the most surprised man in the entire Union Army. Meade had never wanted to be a soldier in the first place, much less take direction of an army that at that moment was facing perhaps its most daunting challenge. But compared to his immediate predecessors, Maj. Gens. Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker, what Meade accomplished with that army was simply extraordinary -- he won the Battle of Gettysburg. Even more extraordinary, he defeated the supposedly invincible Robert E. Lee and the vaunted Army of Northern Virginia, And yet the mention of Meade has always been met with a certain degree of pause -- surprise that an officer with such modest credentials could manage to pull off such a mammoth victory as Gettysburg, and then chirping criticism that, having triumphed as he did, Meade failed to do more, failed to stop Lee from escaping back into Virginia and thus end the Civil War right there and then. , Although both of those reactions are unfair, they are also accurate. And together, they have come to define George Gordon Meade's long-term reputation. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Gen. George Meade, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, Army of the Potomac, Robert E. Lee

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

Major General
George Meade's
ever-present
pince-nez
spectacles hang
from a lanyard
about his neck.



George Meade's Mixed Legacy

THE GENERAL WON AT GETTYSBURG.
IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

By Allen C. Guelzo

George Gordon Meade was 47 years old the morning of June 28, 1863, when command of the Army of the Potomac was unceremoniously dumped into his lap by General in Chief Henry Halleck, and there is no reason to doubt Meade's protest that the move rendered him the most surprised man in the entire Union Army. Meade had never wanted to be a soldier in the first place, much less take direction of an army that at that moment was facing perhaps its most daunting challenge. But compared to his immediate predecessors, Maj. Gens. Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker, what Meade accomplished with that army was simply extraordinary—he won the Battle of Gettysburg. Even more extraordinary, he defeated the supposedly invincible Robert E. Lee and the vaunted Army of Northern Virginia. ¶ And yet the mention of Meade has always been met with a certain degree of pause—surprise that an officer with such modest credentials could manage to pull off such a mammoth victory as Gettysburg, and then chirping criticism that, having triumphed as he did, Meade failed to do more, failed to stop Lee from escaping back into Virginia and thus end the Civil War right there and then. ¶ Although both of those reactions are unfair, they are also accurate. And together, they have come to define George Gordon Meade's long-term reputation.



Meade stands in the center of his staff at his headquarters near Culpeper, Va., in September 1863. Major General Andrew A. Humphreys, at Meade's left, led a III Corps division at Gettysburg but became Meade's chief of staff following the battle.

Meade's father was a second-generation Philadelphia merchant with substantial investments in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars, investments that turned horribly sour and resulted in the elder Meade's premature death in 1828. The U.S. Military Academy was the one place where the young Meade could obtain a free college education, so off he went to West Point, never intending "to remain in the army after his graduation, but merely to serve in it sufficiently long to warrant his resigning, as having afforded an equivalent for his education." He graduated 19th in the 56-cadet Class of 1835, put in a year as a second lieutenant in the 3rd Artillery and then resigned his commission to become a civil engineer. Four years later he finally made up the social distance lost due to the bankruptcy and death of his father by marrying into Philadelphia's Whig ascendancy. His bride, Margaretta Sergeant, was the daughter of Henry Clay's running mate in Clay's failed Whig Party presidential bid against Andrew Jackson in 1832.

But Meade does not seem to have prospered in civil employment, and in 1842 he took the unusual step of re-entering the Army, as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. He served as a staff officer during the

Mexican War, and by the time he made captain in 1856, his principal contributions were a series of lighthouses on the Jersey and Florida shores and a survey of the Great Lakes. He was still on duty in Detroit when, on August 31, 1861, he was summoned to report to Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan and take up a command in the Pennsylvania Reserve Division as a brigadier general of volunteers.

The figure of George McClellan looms large for Meade, a fact Meade's biographers were not always eager to admit. Both were Philadelphians, from socially prominent Philadelphia families. Both families were also conservative Whigs until the mid-1850s, when the controversy over slavery drove conservative Whigs into the arms of the Stephen Douglas Democrats. Meade's brigadier general's commission "was due to him [McClellan], and almost entirely to him," and Meade reciprocated McClellan's endorsement. "I have great confidence personally in McClellan," Meade wrote shortly before coming east in 1861, and "know him well—know he is one of the best men we have to handle large armies."

Meade also had great confidence in McClellan's politics, since McClellan stood for the idea of limiting the war strictly to the goal of national reunion, leaving the slavery

question out of the picture entirely. He frankly hoped that “the *ultras* on both sides” would somehow “be repudiated, & the masses of conservative & moderate men may compromise & settle the difficulty.” If anything, Meade had an even greater stake in compromise than McClellan: Virginia Governor Henry Wise was one of Meade’s brothers-in-law on his wife’s side, and two of his sisters had married Southerners. His sister Charlotte, in fact, saw her Mississippi plantation pillaged by Union soldiers, and lost two of her sons fighting for the Confederacy. If Meade desired victory, it was a limited one that would either convince the South that “it is useless to contend any longer,” or one that induced “the people of the North...to yield the independency of the South on the ground that it does not pay to resist them.” It was not clear whether George Meade had a preference either way.

Meade performed well as a brigade commander on the Virginia Peninsula, and then as a division commander in the I Corps at Antietam. As he rose in rank, he also rose in notice, though not quite in the ways he might have wanted. Although everyone granted, as Charles Francis Adams did, that Meade was “a man of high character,” he frequently spoiled it by being “irritable, petulant and dyspeptic.” Theodore Lyman put it as diplomatically as he could when he said that Meade “is a man full of sense of responsibility”—in other words, he feared being in over his head—and anxiety gave Meade “the most singular patches of gunpowder in his disposition.” Alexander Webb, who carved out his own reputation at Gettysburg, described Meade as “a very irascible man” who “allowed his tongue to run away with him.” Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana found Meade “agreeable to talk to when his mind was free,” but also easily subject to “fits of nervous irritation” that could turn him into the general-from-hell, “totally lacking in cordiality toward those with whom he had business.”

Among the ordinary soldiers, Meade “might have been taken for a Presbyterian clergyman, unless one approached him when he was mad,” and then the unhappy messenger was liable to be the target of a livid stream of fury, impatience and arrogance. Behind his back, Meade was called “a damned old goggle-eyed snapping turtle,” and an officer in the 118th Pennsylvania, who called him “Old Four Eye” (from the pince-nez Meade wore on a ribbon attached to his uniform coat), thought that Meade “appears to be a man universally despised.”

This did not prevent Meade from finally winning corps command after leading the only near-successful Union attack at Fredericksburg in December 1862, and he continued to serve as commander of the V Corps throughout the dismal shambles of “Fighting Joe” Hooker’s Chancellorsville Campaign in May 1863. But the decision to appoint Meade as Hooker’s successor in command of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, 1863, was anything but a foregone conclusion. Radical Republicans in Congress

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were convinced that Meade was just another politically unreliable McClellan Democrat, an impression Meade had unwisely made in the spring of 1861 when he refused Michigan Senator Zachariah Chandler’s invitation to participate in a mass Union meeting in Detroit. In retaliation, Chandler tried to block Meade’s initial appointment as a brigadier general, under the assumption that Meade must have been born a Southerner, and “they would not trust the chicken hatched from an egg laid in that region.” After Chancellorsville, Lincoln bestowed command of the Army of the Potomac on George Meade—*bestowed* being the operative word, since (unlike Burnside or Hooker) Lincoln did not consult, request or beg Meade to take charge, but simply *ordered* him to take command.

The order came to Meade in the wee hours of the morning of June 28, 1863, a Sunday. The staff officer from Washington bearing the orders further startled Meade by woefully announcing, “General, I am the bearer of sad news.” This induced Meade to think for a moment that he was being put under arrest, since he and Hooker had been at violent loggerheads over the blame for Chancellorsville to the point where it was feared “a court martial might ensue.” The orders, when Meade tore them open, told an entirely different tale, and his first impulse was to rouse his staff with the injunction, “Get up! I’m in command of the Army of the Potomac.” The news, however, did not set off spontaneous demonstrations of joy in the army. In the III Corps, which was commanded by pro-Lincoln Democrat Dan Sickles, and which featured as its senior division commander the abolitionist David Bell Birney, Meade was “not liked...and is especially disliked by General Birney,” who understood the goal of the war as “first to abolish slavery—and second to restore the Union.”

Hooker, in fact, had been in mid-stride at the moment he was relieved of command, hoping to lunge westward from Frederick, Md., and strike the Army of Northern Virginia with the I, III and XI Corps under Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, as the Rebel army was strung out along the roads between the Potomac crossings at its rear and

“John Reynolds feared that Meade would permit Robert E. Lee to go on ‘ad infinitum plundering the State of Pennsylvania’”

Harrisburg at its front. Swapping horses at full gallop like this would have given even the most aggressive general plenty of reason to pause and calculate, and it was characteristic of Meade, who had seen in his own family how precarious success could be, to play matters as safely as possible. Reynolds’ attack wing was recalled and redirected northward, while at the same time Meade selected a back-up defensive position at the Maryland–Pennsylvania border, along “the general line of Pipe-clay Creek.”

Meade’s plans for Pipe Creek were promptly interpreted by Sickles to mean that “the army was to fall back, and not to follow up the enemy any further; the general regarding the objects of the campaign to be accomplished, and considering Washington,

Baltimore and Pennsylvania to be relieved.” They were also met with a certain amount of quiet resistance from Reynolds, who actually outranked Meade in seniority on the U.S. Volunteers’ commissioning list, a subject that was going to provide yet another point of difficulty for Meade. Reynolds was dismayed at Meade’s “dilatatory measures” and feared that Meade would permit Lee “either to have taken Harrisburg or gone on ad infinitum plundering the State of Pennsylvania.” And in large measure the decision to fight at Gettysburg was made by Reynolds, on his own hook, rather than by Meade, who was still trying to sort out the deployment of his own army and of Lee’s.

On July 1, when the Battle of Gettysburg opened west of Gettysburg, Reynolds simply sent back to Meade an aide, informing the new commander that “while I am aware that it is not your desire to force an engagement at that point, still I feel at liberty to advance and develop the strength of the enemy.”

From that moment, a long train of grievances and quarrels with Meade began to emerge from within the Army of the Potomac. Meade ruffled the feathers of Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard by sending Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock ahead to take charge of the Gettysburg situation on July 1, despite Howard’s senior-



Meade’s dress uniform, including the elaborate sword Brig. Gen. Samuel Crawford’s Pennsylvania division presented to him on August 28, 1863.

ity to Hancock on the commissioning list, and it was only after Hancock's report came back, "partially approving this line," that Meade finally set off for Gettysburg, arriving at 1 a.m. July 2. Meade ruffled still more feathers by relieving Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday of I Corps command, which Doubleday had inherited after Reynolds was killed by a sharpshooter on July 1, and replacing Doubleday with an even more junior officer, the colorless Maj. Gen. John Newton. Nor did it help matters that Howard and Doubleday were among the most senior Republican officers in the Army of the Potomac, and that Hancock and Newton were unapologetic McClellan Democrats.

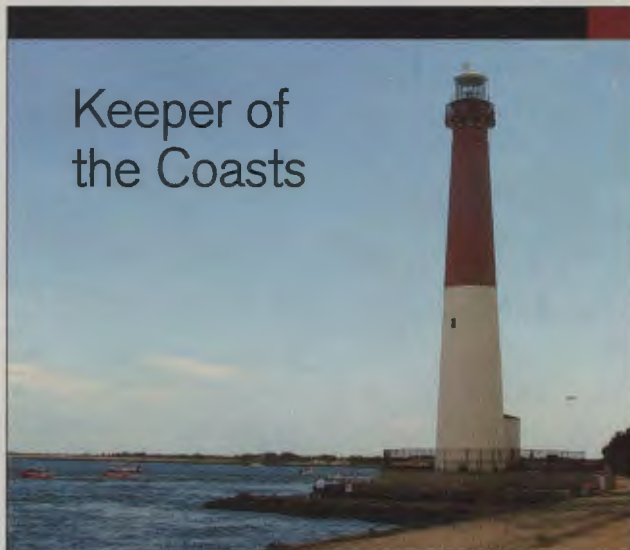
But Meade was promptly paid in similar coin by Maj. Gen. Henry Slocum, commander of the XII Corps and both Meade's senior (again, by commission) and a Republican. Despite Meade's instinct for caution, the new army commander hoped to throw some kind of offensive punch from Culp's Hill on the morning of July 2 with the XII Corps and Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick's VI Corps. But Sedgwick was slow to reach Gettysburg that day, and Slocum dismissed Meade's plans as impractical, preferring to fortify as best his men could the twin peaks of Culp's Hill. Like the new manager of some particularly unhappy office full of suspicious old-timers, Meade had to cope with the fact that command was not the same thing as control.

In the meanwhile, Meade completely missed the darkening cloud of Confederate troops massing on his left flank, and left the III Corps and the much-despised Sickles dangling at the marshy end of the ridgeline that ran south from Cemetery Hill. Sickles, who returned Meade's distaste, took his own counsel and posted the III Corps instead at the Emmitsburg Road—just in time for it to be overrun by James Longstreet's fierce flank attack, and the battle brought within an ace of being lost.

It is difficult now to assess whether it was Sickles' chicken-brained insubordination or Meade's neglect of his left flank that was more responsible for the sorry results of July 2. But wherever the blame lies, it is reasonably certain that by the evening of the 2nd, Meade's mind was turning to the safety of Pipe Creek. Eight months after the battle, the Army of the Potomac's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, testified before Congress that Meade had instructed him on the morning of July 2 "to prepare an order to withdraw the army... from the field of Gettysburg."

Butterfield swore that the onset of Longstreet's attack prevented any distribution of the order, but whether Butterfield was in fact inventing the story for the purpose of evening up grudges with Meade, the army commander does seem to have been ready to issue such an order by 9 o'clock that night, when he called a council of his corps commanders. Even the usually loyal Sedgwick told his VI Corps staffer Martin McMahon that he had been summoned to the council because "General Meade was thinking of a retreat."

Keeper of the Coasts



Barnegat Bay light entered service in 1859. Decommissioned in 1927, "Old Barney" was relit on January 1, 2009, 150 years after it first served as a beacon on the New Jersey coastline.

Lieutenant George Meade began building lighthouses in 1843, a job that might have suited the talents of the young engineer even better than soldiering. In fact, as Tom Huntington, author of *Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg*, puts it, "If not for the Civil War, Meade might be little more than a footnote in the history of American lighthouses." Assigned to the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, he learned marine engineering from Major Hartman Bache, among other mentors, and worked on America's first screwpile lighthouse, at Brandywine Shoal on Delaware Bay.

Meade oversaw construction of many more screwpile and masonry lighthouses before returning to active military duty during the Civil War. He also designed a new type of lamp that was adopted throughout the U.S. In 1957 a bronze bust of Meade was installed at the base of the 163-foot-tall Barnegat Bay light as part of a centennial commemoration.



“James Longstreet fully expected ‘to see Meade ride to the front and lead his forces to a tremendous counter-charge at Little Round Top’ ”

If so, Meade was rudely jolted by the unanimous protest of his subordinates that the Army stay put and fight. “We have been hunting Lee for weeks,” Sedgwick protested, “and now that we’ve got him here, don’t retreat.” Hancock agreed: “The Army of the Potomac has had too many retreats....Let this be our last retreat.” Meade was “greatly displeased with the result,” and only gave way grudgingly: “Have it your way, gentlemen, but Gettysburg is no place to fight a battle in.” No one doubted Meade’s personal courage, but they could not help noticing his risk-averse inclinations: “He thought it better to retreat with what we had, than run the risk of losing all.”

Twenty years after the battle, John Gibbon (who was in temporary command of the II Corps) remembered Meade warning him at the end of the council, “Gibbon, if Lee attacks me to-morrow it will be on your front.” This recollection, from the most ardently anti-abolitionist officer of his rank in the Army, has conferred on Meade the gift of prescience, especially since the great Confederate attack of July 3 fell exactly upon the two intact brigades of Gibbon’s old division at what is known to history as “the Angle.” It is curious, though, that if Meade really did prophesy to Gibbon, he did so little to reinforce Gibbon’s sector around the so-called “clump of trees” and the Bryan House. Of course, by the morning of July 3, Meade had comparatively little left on hand for reinforcing anything. In a note he dashed off to Margaretta at 8:45 a.m., Meade wrote, “We had a great fight yesterday...both armies shattered—Today at it again with what result

remains to be seen.” *Shattered* indeed: The I, III, V and XI Corps had been wrecked in the previous two days’ fighting, as had two divisions of the II Corps and the XII Corps. Beyond Gibbon’s old II Corps division, Meade was left with only the VI Corps as a reserve.

Even so, Meade gave no sign of anticipating the fall of the Rebel hammer. When speaking to Brig. Gen. John C. Robinson, whose battered I Corps division was holding grimly onto the slopes of Cemetery Hill, Meade informed Robinson that he “anticipated an attack on the cemetery by the enemy’s forces massed in the town” rather than from Seminary Ridge. And when, near 1 p.m., the great preliminary barrage for Pickett’s Charge began raining down on Gibbon and on Meade’s headquarters just to Gibbon’s rear, Meade’s first move was to clear his staff from the line of Confederate fire and move his headquarters back to Powers Hill—the outpost where two batteries of 10-pounder Parrott guns (Joseph Knap’s Battery E, Pennsylvania Independent Artillery, and Charles Winegar’s Battery M, 1st New York Light Artillery) had been posted to cover the Baltimore Pike, and the obvious line of retreat from Gettysburg.

Meade was, in fact, nowhere near the apex of Pickett’s Charge when the high tide of the Confederacy struck the Angle, and he did not show up until his staffers were able to report the repulse of the Confederates. Surrounded by the milling flux of the wounded and the dazed, plus herds of Rebel prisoners, Meade could only ask in amazement: “What! Is the assault already repulsed?”

As evening approached on July 3, Meade moved to Cemetery Hill—still suspecting that a Confederate blow would fall there—and from there to Little Round Top, where he ordered Brig. Gen. Samuel Crawford and his old Pennsylvania Reserve division to launch a tentative sweeping operation toward the Confederate right flank, where John Bell Hood’s and Lafayette McLaws’ shredded divisions lay. James Longstreet fully expected “to see Meade ride to the front and lead his forces to a tremendous counter-charge.” But Meade had even fewer resources at his disposal now, and even less inclination to risk what now looked to be a resounding victory. Brigadier General Gouverneur Warren, the army’s chief engineer, conceded that “Meade ordered demonstrations in front of

One Yank Speaks for Many

Major John I. Nevin of the 93rd Pennsylvania reflected a common view of his commander when he wrote in his diary on July 5, 1863:

“I wonder whether we really whipped the Rebs at Gettysburg so very bad after all? If so, I wonder whether our leaders knew it, or know it yet? If they do, I have one more wonder, I wonder if Napoleon or even Robt. Lee were our commander this evening would they pursue a defeated army in this cautious, courteous way?”



Fierce artillery fire before Pickett's Charge drove Meade from his headquarters, above, in the Widow Leister house along the Taneytown Road. This immediate post-battle image shows the destruction caused by the shellfire. A dead horse lies at the edge of the road.

our line" on July 4, "but they were very feebly made."

On July 14 Lee successfully got his survivors across the Potomac River, to fight another day. The Army of the Potomac was "incensed," wrote the surgeon of the 77th New York. "The correspondents of the press misrepresent the facts nine times in ten when they assert that veterans are anxious to fight," snorted Captain Henry Nichols Blake of the 11th Massachusetts, but in this case "the soldiers who bore muskets wished to hear the commands, 'Take arms,' and 'Charge,' because they knew then...that it would have captured all the cannon, materials, and men from the enemy and finished the Rebellion." But those were not the commands Blake, or anyone else, would hear from George Gordon Meade.

And yet Meade did not lose the Battle of Gettysburg—if he had, the results would have been catastrophic for the Union, even with the offset of the fall of Vicksburg on July 4. But he allowed his own native instinct for risk aversion, his newness to overall command of the Army of the Potomac, and the shadow of McClellanite pol-

itics to keep him from turning it into a Waterloo victory.

Meade was acutely conscious that if he were successful at Gettysburg the rewards a Republican administration would offer him would probably be meager. If he should lose, his career would be destroyed beyond any hope of recovery. So if Meade failed to pursue Lee to destruction after Gettysburg, Meade could (with some justice) consider that Lincoln and the Republicans had no one to blame for it but themselves, for having made the conditions of command so politicized. Add to that his own instinct for caution, and it has to be said that Meade turned in a surprisingly fine performance at Gettysburg. But he was not a Wellington, and he was not a Grant, and it was the treasure and blood that two more years of war would demand from the nation that would forever mottle George Meade's surprising victory with the historical ooze of disappointment.

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