




9-15-2015

## Say “Neigh” to Abuse: On the Treatment of Horses and Mules in the Civil War

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Jensen, Anika N., "Say “Neigh” to Abuse: On the Treatment of Horses and Mules in the Civil War" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 103.

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# Say “Neigh” to Abuse: On the Treatment of Horses and Mules in the Civil War

## **Abstract**

The stuffed head of Old Baldy, General George Meade’s favorite horse, can be found mounted on the wall of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum in Philadelphia. General Robert E. Lee’s horse, Traveler, received gifts and international adoration even after the war’s end, and General Ulysses S. Grant’s three war mounts, including one pony stolen from a plantation belonging to Jeff Davis’ brother, rested comfortably in fame and verdant pastures until the ends of their lives [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Animal Treatment, Animal Abuse, Human Animal Treatment, Civil War Horses and Mules

## **Disciplines**

Animal Studies | History | Military History | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Say “Neigh” to Abuse: On the Treatment of Horses and Mules in the Civil War

September 15, 2015

By Annika Jensen '18

The stuffed head of Old Baldy, General George Meade’s favorite horse, can be found mounted on the wall of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum in Philadelphia. General Robert E. Lee’s horse, Traveler, received gifts and international adoration even after the war’s end, and General Ulysses S. Grant’s three war mounts, including one pony stolen from a plantation belonging to Jeff Davis’ brother, rested comfortably in fame and verdant pastures until the ends of their lives.



*Old Baldy’s head hangs on the wall of the GAR Museum in Philadelphia. I personally think this is immensely weird. Picture courtesy of [ushistory.org](http://ushistory.org).*

Ignoring blissfully the morbidity of Old Baldy’s taxidermization, I might speculate that these heroic animals and their dedicated riders demonstrate an ideal camaraderie between soldier and mount in the American Civil War: respect, trust, compassion. But unfortunately, it is just so: an ideal, not a reality. The truth behind the war horse is that its wartime life was a hellacious one; it fell victim to a systematic neglect, and the unspoken bond, the one that every equestrian shares, was abandoned in the desperation of the war.

Most cavalry mounts, mules, and draft teams were taken from farm work and thrown into the growing frenzy of war, many entirely unfit, untrained, or simply too old for the physical demands that awaited them. During the first two years of the fighting, the Union cavalry received 248,000 horses but was ignorant about proper care, often keeping the animals in crowded, dirty corrals in Washington, D.C. where they were underfed, rarely groomed, and at the mercy of the elements as they had no shelter. Many died of hoof rot, and green riders packed too much weight on their horses' backs, leaving them unfit for service. The Union Army was debilitating its own mounts, yet it kept calling for more.

The Confederate cavalry was a little better off in the beginning. Soldiers brought their own horses, and many were thus well cared for. However, as the war progressed, they were unable to replace the mounts that were lost, as the Union Army occupied the upper south where the Confederates obtained most of their horses. Additionally, Southern agriculture was dependent upon the animals, and they could not all be expended for the sake of the war. The Rebel Army's supplies quickly dwindled, and their horses became too weak to engage in combat, forcing the cavalry to become a mounted infantry and putting them at a disadvantage. Moreover, Confederate horses often lacked shoes, a deprivation that led to further pain and injury.

It was not battle that posed the greatest threat to the Civil War's horses but disease, malnutrition, and overexertion. Unable to afford sufficient grain and hay, some of the Union Army's mounts were forced to live solely off grass and clover, hardly enough to keep them healthy when they were often expected to march twenty-five miles a day.

There were horses, of course, who fell victim to gunpowder and grapeshot when the battles broke out. It is speculated that Meade's Old Baldy was wounded between four and fourteen times, more than the average human soldier; he was shot in the neck at Antietam and left, some speculate, for dead. However, when Meade wrote to his wife the day after the battle, he recounted, Baldy "was shot through the neck, but will get over it." It is unclear whether Meade's unconcerned tone insinuates general indifference or simply an understanding of his horse's resilience. Baldy certainly did "get over it," and went on to outlive his rider. Most animals, however, were not so lucky: when Meade mounted another horse after Baldy was wounded at Antietam, it too was shot out from under him and killed.

Additionally, the treatment and suffering of Civil War horses had bigger implications in the course of the war itself. With exhausted, underfed mounts neither side had a truly efficient cavalry, and the opportunity to rout or pursue enemies in battle was often lost to both; some even speculate that such ineffectiveness contributed to the longevity of the war. After the Battle of Antietam, General McClellan claimed he was unable to pursue Lee's bruised army because his horses were simply too weary (although there were other contributing factors, including McClellan's general tendency to move at the pace of a geriatric turtle though molasses), to which President Lincoln, eager to damage the enemy, replied, "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?"

While I shudder to speak poorly of Lincoln, his question to Little Mac does demonstrate a general ignorance on the subject of equine warfare.

There were some changes implemented by the Union Army that improved the lives of war horses, including the creation of the Cavalry Bureau in 1863 which rehabilitated sick or injured animals and provided new, healthy mounts. The Bureau established six "horse depots," relative safe havens compared to the Washington corrals where horses were brought to recover.

As war efforts increasingly dire, however, less care was directed toward horses and mules; man and beast were suffering alike. In March of 1865, a Washington Artillery Lieutenant, William Owen, wrote, "We are really suffering now for food. Yesterday I had to order some ground corn and shucks to be taken from the horses to be distributed to the men." Animals could no longer be prioritized.

The estimated death toll of horses and mules in the Civil War exceeds one million, twenty percent of all those that once grazed peacefully in American pastures, and yet we only remember several: Traveler, Little Sorrel, Old Baldy. An equestrian myself, I struggle to convey the emotional attachment a rider feels to her horse, the silent string of trust and love that ties one heart to the other, and as an equestrian, I will never know, nor desire to know, the pain of losing an innocent comrade and friend to a gruesome and unjustified death.

Horses were viewed as interchangeable parts by the armies at best, yet we live in an increasingly humanitarian society. Why then, do we not remember these animals as victims, as velvet-muzzled souls that served not only single humans, but entire causes? Why do we not speak of the cavalryman's grief when his horse is felled from beneath him, or the farmer's dismay when he sees dead mules littering his fields? The horse has always been more than a work animal, yet we remember these innocent dead only in numbers. This creature of compassion and strength, its rider's hero, deserves more merit than it receives.

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