



10-7-2016

## All For Honor: Officer Responses to the McConaughy Letters

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Ortman, Olivia J., "All For Honor: Officer Responses to the McConaughy Letters" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 173.

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# All For Honor: Officer Responses to the McConaughy Letters

## **Abstract**

In Special Collections here at Gettysburg College is a compilation of letters by Civil War officers responding to an invitation to attend the very first reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg. The reunion was initiated by David McConaughy—a lawyer in Adams County, PA who had organized a group of local men to fight for the Union during the war—and was meant to be a time for the officers who had fought here to come together and walk the battlefield. On this walk, they would point out the locations their troops had occupied during the fight so that McConaughy and his committee could put up markers. When I saw this collection, I knew I had to dig in.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War, The Gettysburg Compiler, history, letters, Special Collections

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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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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### **All For Honor: Officer Responses to the McConaughy Letters**

By *Olivia Ortman '19*

In Special Collections here at Gettysburg College is a compilation of letters by Civil War officers responding to an invitation to attend the very first reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg. The reunion was initiated by David McConaughy—a lawyer in Adams County, PA who had organized a group of local men to fight for the Union during the war—and was meant to be a time for the officers who had fought here to come together and walk the battlefield. On this walk, they would point out the locations their troops had occupied during the fight so that McConaughy and his committee could put up markers. When I saw this collection, I knew I had to dig in.

I looked at a total of 102 responses sent by the officers and cataloged them by which side the officer fought for and whether he had agreed to attend. I also reviewed the content of each letter, wondering what the men thought about rehashing the battle, especially since only five years had gone. Was it perhaps too soon to reopen the wounds of this bloody battle and ask men to recount what had happened here?

The response from former Union officers was exactly what I had predicted. 91 union officers replied to McConaughy's invitation and 71 of them said that they would take "great pleasure" in being present for such an important event. In his letter, A. Von Steinweir wrote, "I anticipate much pleasure from the renewal of former associations and from meeting with you & the members of your association, by whose disinterested labors many historical facts, relating to the great contest, will be rescued from oblivion." Many of the officers even spoke of bringing their wives with them for the event. This was a chance for these men to relive a moment of glory, and they all wanted to take advantage of it. Although twenty men ultimately had to decline the offer to revisit the battlefield, many of them cited current military obligations, in great detail, that kept them from attending. All would have gone if it had been possible.

The Confederate response was a bit more surprising to me; only 11 officers actually replied to the invitation. These were men who openly prided themselves on being proper gentlemen, which meant adhering to social courtesies, like responding to invitations. I could not find a detailed record of exactly how many officers had been invited overall, but assuming that a similar number of Confederate officers were invited to the reunion as Union officers, and knowing that 91 Union officers replied—some of whom were responding to the ads printed in the papers—I would guess that at least 70 Confederate officers had been personally invited. The fact

that only 11 responded implies that this reunion was a further cut to their already-wounded honor. Although none of the officers who replied directly stated that going to the reunion would be a humiliating experience, their vague excuses, in direct contrast to the detailed excuses of Union officers, acted as proof enough. The letter written by William Henry Fitzhugh Lee is the perfect example of this vague response. His entire letter consisted of two sentences: "Sir—I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt (through Gen R.E. Lee at Lexington) of a hospitable invitation to attend a "Re-union" of the principle officers of the two armies that fought for the field at Gettysburg. It will not be in my power to be present at the time indicated ([?]: last week of August)." The Union soldiers were writing detailed accounts of where they would be located and what they would be doing at the time of the reunion, but Fitzhugh Lee simply acknowledged the invitation and declined.

Even more interesting than the lack of replies was the number of former Confederates who agreed to come. Out of those 11 men who responded, two of them actually agreed to attend: Henry Kyd Douglas and R.D. Johnston. Although I had originally thought I would find more letters written by former Confederates, I had expected them to all be polite rejections. What had convinced these two to go? Gettysburg was the battle that turned the war in favor of the Union. It was a crippling defeat for the Confederate army. Why, as a former Confederate officer, would you want to subject yourself to the humiliation of revisiting this place with a large group of people who saw victory here?



Henry Kyd Douglas was one of two Confederates to attend the first reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg. Photo credit: Civil War Trust

The answer to these questions seemed to be honor. Although these men probably would have preferred not to go, they had to join this battlefield excursion to preserve the dignity of their men and themselves. Officer R.D. Johnston worded it best when he said, "It is a matter of great

historical importance and interest to participants and posterity that it should be, in its details as well as its general plan, truthfully and honestly handed down to future generations.” We all know the saying “history is written by the victor,” and, clearly, these two Confederate officers knew it, too. These men knew that they were being handed a unique opportunity to ensure a more favorable account of their role in the battle was told, and they took it. By sharing their stories, they were gaining a sense of honor back for themselves among future generations.

Walking the battlefield where they saw one of their greatest defeats may have been humiliating and uncomfortable for the two Confederates, but it was necessary. This one moment of wounded pride was a chance to restore the public image of the Southern army for history and reclaim the honor that had been lost.

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#### Sources

[Henry Kyd Douglas](#). Civil War Trust. 2012. Accessed September 29, 2016.

“McConaughy Collection.” Civil War Officers to David McConaughy. 1869. Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

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