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Fredericksburg's Gray Angel: Truth or Utility?

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Abstract

As with other battles, the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862 yielded shocking results. Homes were destroyed, thousands died, and military doctrine was challenged and changed. One particular story, however, has emerged from Fredericksburg to represent a different narrative, one of compassion. The actions of a 20-year-old Confederate sergeant named Richard Rowland Kirkland are enshrined in stone at the end of Fredericksburg's infamous "Sunken Road."

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Fredericksburg's Gray Angel: Truth or Utility

By [Jon Danchik '17](#)

As with other battles, the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862 yielded shocking results. Homes were destroyed, thousands died, and military doctrine was challenged and changed. One particular story, however, has emerged from Fredericksburg to represent a different narrative, one of compassion. The actions of a 20-year-old Confederate sergeant named Richard Rowland Kirkland are enshrined in stone at the end of Fredericksburg's infamous "Sunken Road."

I wrote a [post about this statue and its meaning](#) last summer while I had the privilege of interning at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania Military Park. I was asked to write about a monument and its historical connotations, and Kirkland immediately came to mind. After all, it is perhaps the most popular monument in the park. Kirkland's story became very popular in the 1880s, and the statue was erected in the 1960s—both times during which Civil War commemoration followed a particular bias which I attempted to trace. If you want to read about historical context, check out my older article. Today, though, I wish to revisit the Kirkland story because there are some factual controversies that call into question its usefulness as an interpretive resource.



The Kirkland Monument, visible just above the only surviving portion of the Sunken Road's stone wall. Photo by the author.

The prevailing story is that the Confederate defensive position during the Battle of Fredericksburg was so effective that Confederate General Robert E. Lee's outnumbered Army of Northern Virginia was able to hunker down and continuously push back attacks by the Federal Army of the Potomac, then under the command of General Ambrose Burnside. While the Confederates claimed victory on December 13, the result of a day's fighting—a mass of wounded and dying Federal soldiers—accumulated in front of them. The soldiers in gray were unable to re-deploy from the safety of their lines, disturbed by a haunting chorus of the voices of broken men.

Sergeant Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteer Infantry, having had enough, approached General Kershaw requesting permission to comfort wounded Federal soldiers. Military doctrine prevented him from proceeding under a white flag, so his dash to the nearest wounded Federal soldier was completed under fire. Kirkland gave his enemy a drink of water and saw to it that he remained somewhat comfortable in his final hours. At that point, the fire ceased. Some accounts even claim that Kirkland's actions elicited a cheer from both sides. Writing of Kirkland, historian George Rable said that "such acts bespoke a common humanity that hatred and relentless fighting had not entirely suppressed. They reaffirmed civilized values in the midst of a war that always threatened to destroy more tender impulses." Certainly this was a powerful act to witness. A Federal soldier would later claim that "such deeds as this are the redeeming features of war." For his display of kindness, Kirkland earned the title "The Angel of Marye's Heights."



The Kirkland Monument's inscription: "In Memoriam, Richard Rowland Kirkland, Co. G, 2nd South Carolina Volunteers, C.S.A. At the risk of his life, this American soldier of sublime compassion brought water to his wounded foes at Fredericksburg. The fighting men on both sides of the line called him "The Angel of Marye's Heights." Photo by the author.

The story of Richard Kirkland was popularized when the *Charleston News and Courier* published a telling of it in early 1880. Relaying an account of the story, there was mention of a Confederate soldier giving aid to wounded Federals, but no mention of

a name. The author, however, invited corrections, so General Kershaw wrote a letter immediately, name-dropping Richard Kirkland. This is intriguing in and of itself, because August Dickert's *History of Kershaw's Brigade*, published nineteen years later, mentions the event but does not name an individual: "one brave soldier from Georgia dared all, and during the lull in the firing leaped the walls, rushed to the wounded soldier, and raising his head in his arms, gave him a drink of water, then made his way back and over the wall amid a hail of bullets knocking the dirt up all around him."

Kershaw, Dickert's commanding officer asserted that it was Kirkland, but somehow that didn't make it into the unit history. Usually such publications are full of tales and personal anecdotes to claim as much glory as possible from battlefield conduct, so its absence definitely throws the veracity of the story into doubt. Other accounts from soldiers also vary, but in different ways: some say that Kirkland did not do this alone, and inspired several others to follow his example, while others insist that heavy fire was constantly exchanged, making any dramatic showing of "Christ-like mercy" likely to falter in the midst of a storm of lead.

Regardless of whether or not the story is true, it provides a positive anecdote that would have served a well-meaning purpose in the decades following the war. After all, it's hard for a country to reunite after its citizens spend a few years killing each other. Perhaps that's what Kershaw was going for in his account. Memory can be a tricky thing, and even if Kirkland didn't act exactly how Kershaw described, he could still serve as a valuable example. Acknowledging Kirkland's impact, Kershaw remarked that "he has bequeathed to the American youth—yea, to the world—an example which dignifies our common humanity." Clearly the South Carolinian's story enjoyed a long reach.

Despite the minor controversy over the Kirkland story, it has a definite place in the Fredericksburg canon. National park exhibits talk about him, and park historians tend to relay the "main" version of his story in their tours. Authors also like to give Kershaw the benefit of the doubt; many of the most popular books about the battle of Fredericksburg largely go along with his account. When I led tours of the Sunken Road, I found myself doing this as well. Time and memory permitting, I would attempt to mention the possibility that it happened differently, but that was not my primary concern. As an interpreter, my main goal was to get visitors to connect with the park and its resources. What better way to empathize with people who are long-dead than through a daring show of common humanity that transcends generations? What better way to get people to appreciate the mortal risk of leaving cover than to talk about a spirited run under fire? Even if it cannot be absolutely verified, the story of Richard Kirkland as the "Angel of Marye's Heights" is perhaps one of the best assets that Fredericksburg has at its disposal.

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