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Meade at Gettysburg: An Interview with Kent Masterson Brown

Ashley Whitehead Luskey
Gettysburg College

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Meade at Gettysburg: An Interview with Kent Masterson Brown

Abstract

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Kent Masterson Brown. Mr. Brown is a Lexington, Kentucky-based historian and attorney who has practiced law for forty-three years. He was the creator and first editor of the national magazine, *The Civil War*, and is author of many books, including *Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander* (University Press of Kentucky, 1998); *The Civil War in Kentucky: Battle for the Bluegrass State* (Savas Publishing Company, 2000); *Retreat from Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics and the Pennsylvania Campaign* (UNC Press, 2005); *One of Morgan's Men: The Memoirs of Lieutenant John M. Porter of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry* (University Press of Kentucky, 2011); and *The Confederacy's First Battle Flag* (Pelican Publishing, 2014). Most of Kent's books have been featured selections of the History Book Club and Military Book Club; *Cushing of Gettysburg*, *Retreat From Gettysburg*, and *One of Morgan's Men* have also received numerous national awards. His current book project, *George Gordon Meade and the Gettysburg Campaign*, will go to press in early 2018. Kent is also President and Content Developer for Witnessing History, LLC. He has written, hosted, and produced numerous award-winning documentary films for public and cable television, including: "Long Road Back to Kentucky"; "Retreat From Gettysburg"; "Bourbon and Kentucky: A History Distilled"; "Henry Clay and the Struggle for the Union"; "The Southern Cross; Unsung Hero: The Horse in the Civil War"; "Daniel Boone and the Opening of the American West"; and " 'I Remember The Old Home Very Well': The Lincolns in Kentucky" (all of which were Telly Award recipients). "Unsung Hero" was also nominated for an Emmy Award. Kent was the first chairman of the Gettysburg National Military Park Advisory Commission and the first chairman of the Perryville (Kentucky) Battlefield Commission, a seat he held for eleven years while overseeing the expansion of the Perryville Battlefield. He currently serves as a director of the Gettysburg Foundation. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Battle of Gettysburg, Battlefield Leadership, CWI Summer Conference, George Meade

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

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Kent Masterson Brown. Image courtesy of Centre College.

CWI: Describe Meade's leadership style at Gettysburg. What was the nature of his relationship with his various subordinates, and why? How did his previous wartime experience and training influence the decisions he made at Gettysburg?

BROWN: Meade was a "hands on" army commander. He personally led his various army corps into positions before the fighting erupted and, during the fighting, he directed many divisions onto the battlefield and into the fighting. He directed the fighting from positions as close as prudence would permit. He wanted the troops to observe him riding alongside them, and he was known to speak words of encouragement so that as many of his men could hear him as possible. He employed councils of war of his corps commanders as often as needed to assure himself as to the positions they held, the morale and fitness of the troops, and for each commander to relate to the other commanders the positions they held and the routes available for them to reinforce others or to be reinforced. Meade was never really satisfied about the ground he was forced to defend and its proximity to his communication and supply route. Likewise, his positions on the right were not visible to those on the left – or even the center – and vice versa. No one knew the situation on the other flank. Councils helped overcome that. Meade believed in the army as a "team," for lack of a better word. His councils created that sense of a team to the corps and division commanders.



General George Meade and his corps commanders, 1865. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Meade was well liked and well respected by all his corps commanders except General Daniel E. Sickles for whom Meade had little respect. Meade was a professional soldier and he relied upon the army's professional soldiers, commanding corps and divisions, with many of whom he was particularly close, to carry out what he directed them to do in the field. In turn, those professional soldiers who commanded corps and divisions in the army had notable confidence in Meade's abilities and personal bravery, and many of them wrote about it.

CWI: How have scholarly analyses of Meade's leadership at Gettysburg—and its immediate aftermath—evolved over the years? What factors have contributed to these changing estimations of his generalship? Where does Meade stand in popular memory of the battle of Gettysburg?

BROWN: Meade's previous training and experience in the field had everything to do with the confidence his commanders of corps and divisions in the army placed in him as well as the strategic and tactical decisions he made. Meade's academic training at West Point under Dennis Hart Mahan can be seen in many of the movements Meade directs.



George Gordon Meade memorial, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

CWI: How did Meade's experiences at Gettysburg influence his generalship throughout the rest of the war? How did Gettysburg and its aftermath shape Meade's long-term relationship with Lincoln? How was Meade perceived throughout the North, and throughout the Confederacy, in the wake of the battle? How does Meade figure into "Lost Cause" narratives of Gettysburg?

BROWN: Gettysburg left an indelible impression on Meade. He fought the battle – the largest engagement on the North American continent – only two days after he assumed command. He clearly learned how to command the Army of the Potomac during those sixteen days of the Gettysburg Campaign. He was forced to deal with every kind of disaster imaginable, together with miserable weather conditions. The aftermath of the campaign seriously injured Meade's relationship with Lincoln, although I doubt that relationship was that good before. Meade was cheered as the victor of the Battle of Gettysburg by the people of the North, making it difficult for Lincoln to even consider replacing him. Whatever were the reactions of southern people, I have not seen evidence of Meade being the center of significant southern commentary after the Battle of Gettysburg, nor any "Lost Cause" narratives.