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Lee and His Lieutenants: An Interview with Keith Bohannon

Ashley Whitehead Luskey
Richmond National Battlefield Park

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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 Dr. Keith Bohannon, Professor of History at the University of West Georgia, where he teaches courses on the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Old South, and Georgia history. He is the co-editor, with Randall Allen, of *Campaigning with Old Stonewall in Virginia: The Letters of Ujanirtus Allen, Company F, 21st Regiment, Georgia Volunteer Infantry* (LSU Press, 1998), and is the author of numerous essays, book reviews, and scholarly journal articles. Prior to his appointment to the faculty at West Georgia, Dr. Bohannon worked as an historian, interpreter, and living historian with the National Park Service at multiple Civil War sites. He is currently editing for publication the Civil War and Reconstruction memoirs of a Confederate Army officer and Klan leader from Georgia named John C. Reed. [excerpt]*

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Lee and His Lieutenants: An Interview with Keith Bohannon

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

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 Dr. Keith Bohannon, Professor of History at the University of West Georgia, where he teaches courses on the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Old South, and Georgia history. He is the co-editor, with Randall Allen, of [Campaigning with Old Stonewall in Virginia: The Letters of Ujanirtus Allen, Company F, 21st Regiment, Georgia Volunteer Infantry](#) (LSU Press, 1998), and is the author of numerous essays, book reviews, and scholarly journal articles. Prior to his appointment to the faculty at West Georgia, Dr. Bohannon worked as an historian, interpreter, and living historian with the National Park Service at multiple Civil War sites. He is currently editing for publication the Civil War and Reconstruction memoirs of a Confederate Army officer and Klan leader from Georgia named John C. Reed.



Keith Bohannon. Image courtesy of the University of West Georgia.

CWI: Describe the nature of Lee's leadership style with his subordinates. How did Lee's personal relationships with his subordinates influence the latitude he gave them on the battlefield?

BOHANNON: Robert E. Lee was fortunate after the Seven Days Campaign to have Stonewall Jackson and James Longstreet commanding the wings (eventually corps) of his army. Lee gave these officers wide discretion during campaigns, in part out of his great trust in their abilities, but also out of necessity. Geographic consideration prevented Lee from exercising close control over both subordinates since the army's wings often operated at considerable distances from each other, as during the 2nd Manassas & Maryland Campaigns. This arrangement worked well for Lee and between the end of the Seven Days and Chancellorsville when the Army of Northern Virginia won its greatest victories.

After the death of Jackson, Lee created three corps, assigning Richard Ewell and A.P. Hill to command the army's Second and Third Corps. Problems at Gettysburg & in the Bristoe Campaign made it clear to Lee that Hill & Ewell might not function as well on their own as had Jackson and Longstreet. During the Overland Campaign, Longstreet's wounding and issues with Hill's health created a command crisis, as did the situation with Ewell. Rather than simply relieving Ewell of command after disappointing performances at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, Lee cited health concerns as his official reason for sending Ewell to command the defenses of Richmond.

Readers interested in this topic might turn to Gary Gallagher's essay " 'I have to make the best of what I have': Lee at Spotsylvania." Gallagher makes several excellent points in the essay that are worth repeating. First, he challenges Douglas Southall Freeman's argument that Lee's "excessive amiability" and concern for others' feelings had been a major character defect. Gallagher cites wartime evidence from the Overland Campaign of numerous instances where Lee spoke sharply to Hill and Ewell. Gallagher also points out that Lee "adopted his style of command to suit changing personnel" in the spring of 1864, providing closer oversight of Hill and Ewell on the battlefield than he had of Jackson and Longstreet.



"The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson," by Everett B.D. Julio, 1869. Image courtesy of the American Civil War Museum.

CWI: How have scholarly interpretations of Lee, his generalship, and his relationship with his subordinates evolved over the years, and why? How have Lee and his "Lieutenants" been interpreted at various public history sites throughout the 20th and 21st centuries?

BOHANNON: The work of Douglas Southall Freeman has been enormously influential in how historians and the public view Lee and his army. Beginning in the 1970s, historians such as Thomas Connelly, Alan Nolan, Michael Fellman and others mounted a major challenge to key aspects of Freeman's depiction of Lee. These authors are part of a larger trend among academic historians of examining and dismantling Lost Cause ideology.

Scholarly work on James Longstreet by historians such as William Piston and Jeffrey Wert offers a more balanced and positive portrait of “Old Pete” than is found in Freeman’s work. Piston and Wert also look at the factors that tarnished the reputation of Longstreet in the decades after the Civil War. This was outside the chronological purview of Freeman in *Lee’s Lieutenants*.

Freeman’s books have been important in shaping public interpretation at Civil War battlefields and with good reason. *Lee’s Lieutenants* is a deeply researched, thoughtful and beautifully written study that historians would be foolish to ignore. Freeman strove to be objective and acknowledged on occasion the partisan nature of postbellum writings. In examining Longstreet at Gettysburg in *Lee’s Lieutenants*, for example, Freeman admitted that his earlier interpretation of the topic in *R.E. Lee* had perhaps “relied too much upon early statements in the *Southern Historical Papers*,” including the writings of Jubal Early.

Despite the many strengths of *Lee’s Lieutenants*, numerous studies appearing in the last few decades have largely supplanted Freeman when it comes to understanding specific battles or campaigns. These books offer analysis of both Union and Confederate command decisions and troop movements, something missing in *Lee’s Lieutenants* since Freeman focused almost solely on the Southern side. Recent scholars also have a wider array of primary sources to draw from, many of them unavailable and unknown to Freeman.

When I first started working as a seasonal historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in the summer of 1986, there were no good, book-length studies of the battles of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania Court House. *Lee’s Lieutenants* was one of the main sources park staff consulted when planning programs. Today, there are fine books by Frank O’Reilly, George Rable, Gordon Rhea, and William Matter that are rightfully the first sources that park staff consult when putting together programs or exhibits on these battles. Similar situations exist at other battlefield parks.



Robert E. Lee with his Generals, 1869. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

CWI: What role did *Lee's Lieutenants* play in the perpetuation of the post-war Lost Cause narrative and Lee's place in that narrative?

BOHANNON: In the early 20th century, Freeman inherited from Jubal Early the mantle of being Lee's greatest champion. Freeman, like Early, perpetuated the Lost Cause argument that superior numbers and resources were the primary reasons for Northern victory in the Civil War. The two writers also lauded Stonewall Jackson's generalship over that of Lee's "Old Warhorse," James Longstreet.

Gary Gallagher has written that Freeman was "always anxious to rationalize Lee's failures at the expense of his lieutenants." This tendency is something scholars in recent years have addressed. Two excellent examples are Pete Carmichael's essay on A.P. Hill and Ewell in the Wilderness in *The Wilderness Campaign*, as well as Gary Gallagher's "Confederate Corps Leadership on the First Day at Gettysburg."

I think the best scholars studying Lee and his campaigns today are those who engage with the interpretations in *Lee's Lieutenants* while asserting their own opinions based on deep immersion in primary sources. I just finished re-reading William Miller's essay "The Siege of Richmond Was Raised': Lee's Intentions in the Seven Days Campaign" that appears in *Audacity Personified, The Generalship of Robert E. Lee*. Brian Holden Reid called this essay "brilliant" and I wholeheartedly agree. It is exciting to imagine a

scholar as thoughtful as Bill Miller writing a 21st century study of Lee and the high command of the Army of Northern Virginia that covers the entire war.