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More than a Stereotype?: A Reflection on the Life of Benjamin Watkins Leigh

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Abstract

For my most recent, and likely final, foray into the *Killed at Gettysburg* digital project, I delved into the story of Major Benjamin Watkins Leigh, Adjutant for “Alleghany” Johnson’s Division. This has certainly been a departure from my previous projects, [Private Hannibal Howell](#) of the 76th New York Infantry and [Private James Bedell](#) of the 7th Michigan Cavalry. Rather than examining unknown stories of Union privates, I worked to narrate the life and death of a Confederate officer. This was certainly a challenge, both because I lacked familiarity with Confederate primary sources and because of my inherent Unionist biases. I decided that the best way for me to approach the topic was to research someone with clear causes that motivated him as he joined the Confederate army. This way I wouldn’t need to presume his motivation and would instead be able to be fairly confident about why he chose to serve. Leigh’s immense wealth, familial upbringing by a father who was a vocal defender of slavery, and ownership of dozens of human beings makes it painfully clear that he understood the cause of the Confederacy to be the cause of furthering slavery. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Benjamin Watkins Leigh, Confederate Army, Killed at Gettysburg

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

More than a Stereotype?: A Reflection on the Life of Benjamin Watkins Leigh

By [Jonathan Tracey '19](#)

For my most recent, and likely final, foray into the *Killed at Gettysburg* digital project, I delved into the story of Major Benjamin Watkins Leigh, Adjutant for “Alleghany” Johnson’s Division. This has certainly been a departure from my previous projects, [Private Hannibal Howell](#) of the 76th New York Infantry and [Private James Bedell](#) of the 7th Michigan Cavalry. Rather than examining unknown stories of Union privates, I worked to narrate the life and death of a Confederate officer. This was certainly a challenge, both because I lacked familiarity with Confederate primary sources and because of my inherent Unionist biases. I decided that the best way for me to approach the topic was to research someone with clear causes that motivated him as he joined the Confederate army. This way I wouldn’t need to presume his motivation and would instead be able to be fairly confident about why he chose to serve. Leigh’s immense wealth, familial upbringing by a father who was a vocal defender of slavery, and ownership of dozens of human beings makes it painfully clear that he understood the cause of the Confederacy to be the cause of furthering slavery.



Major Benjamin Watkins Leigh

In many ways, Leigh first appears to be the stereotypical Confederate officer. He was born into an influential Richmond, Virginia family. His father, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, Sr., was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and even a United States Senator. Leigh was surrounded by the benefits of class prestige built upon human bondage, personally owning 34 slaves in 1860. Using his political and social connections, he received the rank of Captain, personally recruited Company A of the First Virginia Battalion, and went off to “whip the Yankees” when the war began.

Leigh later helped to reorganize the 42nd Virginia Infantry in late 1862, a unit that Brigadier General John R. Jones had called “almost entirely disorganized for want of a commanding officer competent to discipline it and manage its officers.” Leigh worked hard to reshape that unit, and though he would not receive promotion to Colonel as Jones had requested, his administrative abilities became evident. He was transferred to the staff of General A. P. Hill to serve as an Adjutant. The role of Adjutant is not one that catches the attention of public audiences. It isn’t a glorious job. It doesn’t come with the valor of front-line command, leading troops into battle and toward victory. Instead, according to the 1862 publication of the *Army Officer’s Pocket Companion; Principally Designed for Staff Officers in the Field*, it carries out tasks such as “publishing orders in writing; making up written instructions and transmitting them; reception of reports and returns...establishing camps; visiting guards and outposts; mustering and inspecting troops; inspecting guards and detachments; [and] forming parades and line of battle.” Though less dramatic than front-line command, these tasks were absolutely necessary for the functioning of the enormous armies that emerged in the Civil War.

As Hill’s Adjutant, Leigh was present at one of the most famous events within the Civil War. On May 2, 1863, in the midst of the Battle of Chancellorsville, Hill and Leigh accompanied Thomas L. “Stonewall” Jackson on a reconnaissance. As they returned to Confederate lines, southern soldiers opened fire on them, mortally wounding Jackson. In the chaotic aftermath, Leigh rushed to Jackson’s aid. Leigh ran in search of a litter, and then personally carried Jackson’s stretcher out of danger as artillery shells rained above him. Reflecting upon Jackson’s death in a letter to his wife Hellen, Leigh wrote, “The sleeve of my overcoat – the new one which you had made for me – is stained with Gen. Jackson’s blood which fell upon it as I was assisting him when he first rose and walked a short distance; and also are my gloves. I have a notion of preserving them as relics, and would do so if I had not daily need of them.” Leigh’s account of Jackson’s wounding is one of the definitive primary sources of the event. Written the same month, it accurately describes the aftermath and earns Leigh a mention or a footnote in nearly every scholarly history of Chancellorsville, even if he didn’t gain much fame for his actions at the time. Nevertheless, Leigh’s attachment to this story of duty and honor enhanced his reputation, allowing him to gain a small portion of Jackson’s reputation based off association.

Leigh performed yet another famous act, though it is less well known than his first. Reassigned to serve as the Adjutant for Johnson’s Division for the Gettysburg Campaign, he assisted in the planning for that division’s assaults on Culp’s Hill on July 2nd and 3rd. Around 11am on the 3rd, the final assaults were grinding to a halt. Trapped behind a rock ledge as most Confederates withdrew, approximately 40 men faced a

difficult choice: Make a break for Confederate lines and risk certain death or face the shame of surrender? They chose surrender and began to wave a makeshift white flag. Leigh, watching from the base of the slope, rode up the hill to stop what he saw as a cowardly action. A Union volley immediately felled both horse and rider, with some accounts stating he was pierced by no fewer than seven minie balls. Riding up that slope into the jaws of near-certain death show the importance of southern notions of chivalry and martial masculinity. If anything, the fact he died attempting to carry out what he saw as his duty is potentially more heroic than if he had succeeded and lived.

Leigh's final, somewhat well-known, distinguishing factor is his unique burial situation. His martial heroism gained the respect of both Union and Confederate soldiers alike. Rather than burying him as an unknown in a mass grave, a fate that befell most Confederates who died on Culp's Hill, Union soldiers brought Leigh's body within their lines and buried him in an identified grave. The grave is even one of the handful of labelled burials on S.G. Elliot's famous map of Gettysburg burials. For decades, Leigh captured the attention of scholars such as Gregory Coco who believed that he had been brought to the Soldiers' National Cemetery and buried as an Unknown there. However, following a long and complex search for his burial and reinterment process, his relatives ultimately ensured that he would be buried in the family cemetery in Richmond. He left behind a wife, Hellen, and three children, one of whom had been born while Leigh was off on the Gettysburg Campaign. Despite the family's hardship, Victorian notions of the "Good Death" meant that it was extremely important to bury Leigh in an identified grave in a place that could be visited by loved ones.



A part of Elliot's map of the Gettysburg Battlefield. Leigh's grave is marked right in the center.

Leigh's story proved to be a great deal more complicated than the stereotype of a wealthy slave owning officer initially suggested. Although he commanded combat troops for a time, he spent much of his service in an administrative role; he neither solely fits the romantic idea of field command nor solely the stereotype of an easy office job. His role as Adjutant is a task often overlooked by historians in favor of more dramatic actions, though the task of Adjutants was vital to the successful operations of armies. Of course, it does still conform partially to the stereotype, as Leigh's high class and social position doubtless assisted him in attaining his Adjutant's rank. Although his merit did assist him, rank in the Army of Northern Virginia often depended just as much on social status and pre-war connections as on personal ability.

Additionally, Leigh's two famous acts do tend to conform more to the romantic stereotype of brave southern officers shepherding men through battle and not the tasks done by an Adjutant. Almost any Confederate nearby at Chancellorsville could have chosen to carry Jackson's stretcher, and the task of rallying the wavering soldiers under fire is one suited for a combat officer. Although Leigh's actions live on in historical narratives, there is no monument to Leigh or the men who carried out the key role of Adjutant on Civil War battlefields. Memorials tend to focus on heroic combat acts rather than administrative processes that brought men to those positions.

Leigh's story is one that implores the public to look beyond his surface achievements and wealthy background. Leigh was more than the initial stereotype of a wealthy southerner who either romantically led gallant troops into battle or enjoyed the more "comfortable" life of war-time administrator. Indeed, Leigh was both. Furthermore, beneath the surface of Leigh's Adjutant career lies a life not defined by romance, but often beset by bureaucracy: Denied promotions, tasked with largely "behind-the-scenes" administrative work, and a much-delayed return home due to the complex process of disinterment. Although his two "heroic" actions gained him fame and remembrance, Leigh's other actions were the ones that actually made an impact on the war effort. Leigh's administrative ability shaped the courses of battles a great deal more than his failed attempts to save Jackson or rally a small group of Confederate soldiers. Public attention, however, tends to focus on individual, dramatic moments in history rather than the day-in and day-out actions that often have more impact on historical events. Due to his unique background, Leigh's life thus transcends simple classification and becomes far more complicated, but also somewhat more understandable. Rather than a marble man, these complex aspects of his life trajectory help to humanize his story.