



12-20-2018

A Tiger's Rest: A Reflection on the Killed at Gettysburg Profile of Horthere Fontenot

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Wesley, Zachary A., "A Tiger's Rest: A Reflection on the Killed at Gettysburg Profile of Horthere Fontenot" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 323.
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Abstract

As soon as I was assigned to the *Killed at Gettysburg* project, I knew that I wanted to work with a French Creole soldier. I have a soft spot for Louisiana troops, you see (along with Mississippians, but that is irrelevant here), partly because of my childhood filled with Scooby Doo. One film I remember particularly well is *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island*. To any of y'all who are unfamiliar with the film, let me give you a brief run-down. Scooby and the gang visit Moonscar Island out in the Louisiana Bayous with the promise that they will find real ghosts. Sure enough, the gang encounters ghosts and zombies, ranging from pirates and Confederate soldiers to more recent tourists – all lured to their doom by the two ladies. “That’s great,” many of y’all are thinking, “but what’s the point?” Well, one of the only ghosts to receive a name is Col. Jackson Pettigrew of the Eighth Louisiana. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Confederate Army, Horthere Fontenot, Killed at Gettysburg

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

A TIGER'S REST: A REFLECTION ON THE KILLED AT GETTYSBURG PROFILE OF HORTHHERE FONTENOT

By [Zachary Wesley '20](#)

As soon as I was assigned to the *Killed at Gettysburg* project, I knew that I wanted to work with a French Creole soldier. I have a soft spot for Louisiana troops, you see (along with Mississippians, but that is irrelevant here), partly because of my childhood filled with Scooby Doo. One film I remember particularly well is *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island*. To any of y'all who are unfamiliar with the film, let me give you a brief run-down. Scooby and the gang visit Moonscar Island out in the Louisiana Bayous with the promise that they will find real ghosts. Sure enough, the gang encounters ghosts and zombies, ranging from pirates and Confederate soldiers to more recent tourists – all lured to their doom by the two ladies. “That’s great,” many of y'all are thinking, “but what’s the point?” Well, one of the only ghosts to receive a name is Col. Jackson Pettigrew of the Eighth Louisiana.

After perusing a list of Louisiana dead for *Killed at Gettysburg*, I stumbled across Horthere Fontenot. As soon as I saw that he served in the Eighth Louisiana, childhood memories encouraged me to take on his story. His life, just as for countless other members of his community, represents trends that are easily forgotten in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon Confederate Army: The stories of Catholic, French Creole soldiers who were just as willing as their compatriots to fight and die for the young Confederacy.

Horthere was born in 1844 near Opelousas, St. Landry’s Parish, Louisiana. His family were farmers of modest means, likely not owning any slaves. The Fontenots, like most of their neighbors, were farmers who lived by the calendar of the Catholic Church. Opelousas had only been under the control of the predominantly-Protestant United States for about forty years, previously having been ruled by Catholic France and Spain. Indeed, the Protestant majority in America was suspicious of its Catholic neighbors, viewing the monarchical structures within Catholicism and loyalty to the Pope as very real threats to American democracy. The diverse society of French Creole Louisiana was different from typical American society in other respects, too. African, French, and Native American cultural traditions blended in the music, foodways, architecture, and language of the region. With this mixed heritage, Horthere’s society had much to prove to its fellow Americans. The young Confederacy would be no different.

Horthere enlisted in March of 1862, joining the Opelousas Guards of the Eighth Louisiana. At least three of his brothers served alongside him. In a society where we often hear the words “brothers in arms,” these young men were literally *brothers* in arms. Like Louisiana itself, the company Horthere served with was ethnically diverse. At least one of the men from Opelousas— Charles F. Lutz – was a free African American man. Others were Irish immigrants that rubbed shoulders with the French Creole and Anglo-American men of the regiment. Nevertheless, all the men who served in the Opelousas Guard were from St. Landry’s Parish. This local connection made the unit far more cohesive than a unit of complete strangers, but it also meant any casualties impacted the company, and thus home, in a devastating way. Thus, Horthere’s absence from the ranks during many of the early battles around Richmond and then Second Manassass and Antietam must have weighed considerably upon his brothers. Horthere had taken ill and spent several months in the general hospital of Lynchburg, VA, no doubt greatly concerned about the well-being of his brothers at the front. After a lengthy recovery period that included a furlough home, Horthere was well enough to return to the ranks in the Spring of 1863, participating in heavy fighting during the Battle of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church during the Chancellorsville Campaign.

Flush with victory, Horthere and his comrades turned proudly towards Gettysburg in June. The Army of Northern Virginia seemed invincible, and a victory on northern soil might be the knockout blow to finally end the war. The fighting on July 1, in which Horthere participated in driving the last Union elements from the field, must have confirmed this feeling. However, as his regiment moved to the base of Cemetery Hill under cover of darkness, they could hear the sound of Union soldiers hard at work preparing their positions. Union sharpshooters and skirmishers kept the Eight hunkered down until nightfall on the evening of July 2, when Horthere and his comrades received the order to advance. The attack initially went well, but no reinforcements arrived to aid the Louisianians in their assault, forcing them to ultimately pull back with the loss of their colors. Horthere’s brother Hypolite was wounded during the assault, though he would survive. The regiment, spirits dashed, returned to their position from the previous day in the town.

Horthere was wounded the next day, on July 3, though not in any grand assault or valiant defense against overwhelming odds. He was wounded in the streets of Gettysburg while skirmishing with Union soldiers and avoiding fire from Union sharpshooters. This was far from the battlefield scene – with perfectly dressed battle lines and men facing each other across the field – that most soldiers and the public imagined when they pictured war casualties. Street fighting in this vein was considered some of the most ungentlemanly fighting styles that a soldier could engage in. Horthere was lucky, though: he was wounded at a point on the field from which he could be quickly retrieved and brought to a field hospital on the William Douglas Farm. Unfortunately, the hospital fell into Union hands following the Confederate withdrawal on July 4 and 5, but Horthere would not be a prisoner for long. He passed away on July 12, 1863, and was buried nearby.



Three of the Fontenot Brothers: Hypolite, Denis, and Horthere, from left to right. They, like thousands of their fellow Louisianans, quickly rushed to the colors during the early years of the conflict. Hypolite, too, died in the war and Denis was a prisoner of war. This photograph alone shows the high cost that the citizens of the Confederacy were willing to pay that their new nation might live.

Horthere was one of the few Confederate soldiers whose name and burial place was not forgotten. Gettysburg physician Rufus Weaver exhumed Horthere's remains in 1872, sending them to Richmond for burial in Hollywood Cemetery where Horthere was celebrated as a hero of the physically vanquished but emotionally alive Confederacy. At home, however, the return of Horthere's body to southern soil was a bit more bittersweet. Horthere's family suffered terribly over the course of the war. One of Horthere's brothers, Hypolite, was mortally wounded during the Battle of Monocacy on July 9, 1864. Another brother, Denis, was captured at Spotsylvania Court House and spent a considerable amount of time at Point Lookout, Maryland. The return of Horthere's body to the South would have served as a reminder of all the Fontenots had lost to the war, and perhaps made them even question what that great sacrifice had been for.

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