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## The Complexity of a Soldier: Mitchell Anderson's Life, Death, and Legacy

Ryan Bilger  
*Gettysburg College*

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# The Complexity of a Soldier: Mitchell Anderson's Life, Death, and Legacy

## **Abstract**

It is hard to believe that this is my last semester as a Civil War Institute Fellow, but that time has indeed come. When offered my choice of projects for this term, I figured it would only be appropriate to finish out my work on the *Killed at Gettysburg* project with one last deep dive into the life and legacy of a soldier who died here in Pennsylvania. I know I have stated this several times in my previous reflections on the project, but I feel that *Killed at Gettysburg* profiles offer an excellent way to consider the battle from a micro perspective and to remember the human element behind history. As such, I am proud to have worked on the project during my years as a CWI Fellow, and I hope you have enjoyed learning about the men behind the stories as well.  
[excerpt]

## **Keywords**

Confederate States of America, Killed at Gettysburg, Mitchell Anderson, Tennessee

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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

### The Complexity of a Soldier: Mitchell Anderson's Life, Death, and Legacy

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

It is hard to believe that this is my last semester as a Civil War Institute Fellow, but that time has indeed come. When offered my choice of projects for this term, I figured it would only be appropriate to finish out my work on the [Killed at Gettysburg](#) project with one last deep dive into the life and legacy of a soldier who died here in Pennsylvania. I know I have stated this several times in my previous reflections on the project, but I feel that *Killed at Gettysburg* profiles offer an excellent way to consider the battle from a micro perspective and to remember the human element behind history. As such, I am proud to have worked on the project during my years as a CWI Fellow, and I hope you have enjoyed learning about the men behind the stories as well.



Mitchell A. Anderson  
(via Stockton Archives, Cumberland University, Lebanon, Tennessee)

For my final KAG profile, I wanted to ensure that I selected a soldier with a unique and compelling story, and I believe I have done just that. Mitchell A. Anderson was a native of Lebanon, Tennessee, a small town outside of Nashville. His father, Rev. Thomas Anderson was the president of Cumberland University in Lebanon during the Civil War, and Mitchell served as a teacher in the town in the years leading up to 1861. At approximately age 22, he enlisted in the 7th Tennessee Infantry, C.S.A. before Tennessee had formally seceded from the Union. He initially held the rank of corporal, but due to unknown circumstances, he was demoted to private in 1862 before the regiment had even seen battle. This loss of rank must have severely damaged Mitchell Anderson's personal sense of honor, forcing him to emotionally come to terms with what had happened and to work to demonstrate his value once again. As an enlisted man, Anderson endured some of the most brutal battles of the war, including Gaines' Mill, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. He fell ill around the time of Second Manassas and served as a nurse, treating wounded soldiers. Anderson regained the trust of his comrades following his demotion, and in May 1863 they elected him to serve as junior second lieutenant. This promotion would have constituted a significant boost in morale for Anderson, giving him a brighter outlook on his situation as the Confederate army moved northward that summer.

As part of Archer's brigade, Anderson led Company K, 7th Tennessee into the thick of the fight on July 1, 1863 and performed ably, though his unit suffered heavy losses in Herbst Woods. While resting that night and the next day, Anderson surely took time to reflect on his journey to this point and to prepare for what the next day might bring for himself and his soldiers. The Tennesseans were called upon once more on July 3, and Anderson received a mortal wound during the climactic Pickett's Charge. He died thousands of miles away from home, on enemy soil, and his final resting place is unknown today.

Mitchell Anderson's story appealed to me for several different reasons. For one, Tennessee is likely not the first state you think of when considering the Confederacy, and I have often taken an interest in digging into comparatively understudied subject material. Additionally, the Volunteer State fell to Union forces relatively early in the war, and before he had even seen combat, Anderson had to cope with news of Federal soldiers occupying his hometown. This traumatizing event left Anderson and his comrades questioning where they truly belonged, as they could do nothing to protect their homes and families while stationed in Virginia. The shame and sense of dishonor that he must have felt at his demotion surely compounded his psychological suffering further at this time, making him unique among his fellow Tennesseans. The Army of Northern Virginia's foray into Pennsylvania offered him an opportunity to exact some revenge for what had happened to Lebanon, as now he and his Confederate comrades could make the impacts of war hit home for Union civilians as they had for his family in Tennessee. Lastly, Anderson's return to a leadership role stands out as something of a redemption arc, as he clearly found some way to prove himself as a man and a soldier within the hyper-masculine world of the Confederate Army. That he was struck down in his first battle after this promotion adds a final note of tragedy to the tale. These various

elements combined to make Mitchell Anderson the perfect soldier for my final *Killed at Gettysburg* profile.

Yet, despite the intriguing nature of Mitchell Anderson's life and death as I just described it, I have also found it extremely important to remember and emphasize his humanity in the course of the project. As a historian and a lover of history, it can be easy to fall into the trap of looking at a life like Anderson's and simply thinking "wow, what a great story!" To do this, though, is to lose sight of the fact that this story is not a fictional tale, but that of a human being, who felt the same emotional highs and lows, the joy and the pain, that you or I do today. These elements of his life deserve careful consideration as such, because to Anderson, his struggles and his triumphs were all too real. Additionally, when visiting or thinking about the Gettysburg battlefield, considering the lives of men like Mitchell Anderson helps us all remember that generalizations about Civil War soldiers can only go so far, and that a rich world of human experiences lies just beneath the surface. These individualized nuances all contributed to the stories of Gettysburg and of Civil War armies, and twists and turns like those in Mitchell Anderson's life make this portion of our past unique and complex. Keeping these essential bits of perspective in mind, whether considering the story of Mitchell Anderson or [Patrick O'Rorke](#), [Charles Phelps](#) or [Minion Knott](#), is key to truly reckoning with the lives and deaths of those men who gave their lives on the hills and fields of Gettysburg.

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