



Unintentional Reconciliation – Memorializing the Cavalry Fight at Gettysburg

by **Cecily Nelson Zander**

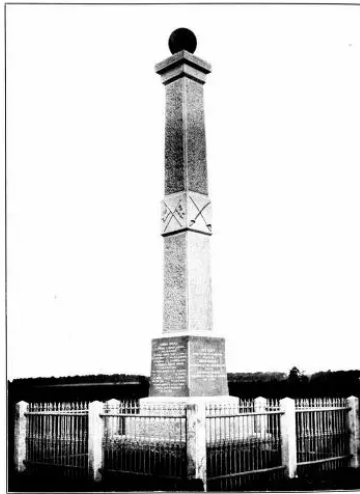
Posted on July 3, 2020

Though not far from the Civil War's memorial epicenter, the cavalry battlefield at Gettysburg National Military Park sits relatively undisturbed by the crowds of tourists who come to see the site of the largest ever battle in the Western

Hemisphere. Nearly every automobile, bicycle tire, and hiking boot that sets foot on the present-day battlefield eventually finds its way to the copse of trees and the monument to the High Water Mark of the Rebellion. There they find several artillery pieces, a small grove of trees, and an open bronze book—a monument that has guided thousands of visitors to the mistaken impression that the defeat of George Pickett and his Virginians (and J. Johnston Pettigrew and Isaac Trimble and their North Carolinians) meant the defeat of the Confederacy and that Gettysburg was the war's great turning point.

The high water mark is an example of a monument that pays tribute to both of the armies that fought in Adams County, Pennsylvania, for three days in early July, 1863. It is a monument to a memorial tradition that Civil War historians have termed reconciliation: the efforts of the wartime generation and their descendants to “let bygones be bygones” and work toward the reunification of the country in the aftermath of the war (the open bronze book devotes a page each to “the assaulting column” and “the repulse of the assault”). Many historians have understood this phenomenon as an effort on the part of white veterans, both Union and Confederate, to erase African American participation in the war and its memory (see especially David Blight, *Race and Reunion* [Harvard: 2001] and Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy* [Oxford: 1985]). Others have questioned the degree to which the wartime generation truly invested in reconciliation, notably Caroline E. Janney, whose *Remembering the Civil War* [UNC Press: 2013] argues that reconciliation was never the favored memorial tradition of veterans—who embraced reunion as a more limited goal and strove to effect the political reunification of the nation, rather than a social or cultural reunification with their former foes.

The high water mark received its monument in 1892—an early monument to reconciliation, to be sure, but it was not the earliest to appear on the battlefield. Rather than celebrating one of the battle's most famous actions, the first reconciliation monument at Gettysburg recalled the service of the Union cavalymen who fought under Brig. Gen. David McMurtree Gregg against the late-arriving Confederate cavalry commanded by Maj. Gen. James E. B. “Jeb”



CAVALRY SHAFT
Marking the Field of the Engagement on the Right Flank at Gettysburg,
July 3, 1863.

Stuart on July 3, 1863. Erected on October 15, 1884, the Gregg monument does not receive the thousands of visitors who clamber to Hancock Avenue to imagine the Confederate charge from Seminary Ridge toward the Angle. In order to view the obelisk, visitors must find their way due east from Gettysburg, almost to the point where the modern Gregg Avenue meets the wartime Low Dutch Road. Once there, they must avoid the temptation of the monument to George A. Custer and his Michigan Wolverines, park their vehicles, and walk some 150 yards back from the road,

where they will encounter a twenty-nine foot tall shaft of New Hampshire granite, surrounded by a modest wrought iron fence.

The “Gregg Cavalry Shaft,” was erected with money raised by the survivors of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry. In the proposal that the Union veterans made to the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association in April 1864, the survivors of the cavalry fight expressed their wish to place a monument “with suitable inscriptions” on the cavalry field.^[1] Within sixth months, the veterans had settled on their inscription—and created the first monument on the battlefield that listed both the Union and Confederate units that met in battle—and in particular, on the fields surrounding John and Sarah Rummel’s farm. For this reason the monument has often been noted as the first at Gettysburg to feature “reconciliation” as a central theme.^[2] The text below is featured on the four panels at the monument’s square base.

*This shaft
marks the field of the engagement
between the
Union Cavalry
commanded by Brig. Gen. D. McM. Gregg*

*and the
Confederate Cavalry
commanded by Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart.
July 3d, 1863.*

Union Forces

*1st Brigade, 2d Cavalry Division, Col. J. B. McIntosh;
3d Penna. Cavalry, Lt. Col. E. S. Jones.
1st New Jersey Cavalry, Maj. M. H. Beumont.
1st Maryland Cavalry, Lt. Col. J. M. Deems.*

*3d Brigade, 2d Cavalry Division, Col. J. Irvin Gregg;
16th Penna. Cavalry, Lt. Col. J. K. Robison
4th Penna. Cavalry, Lt. Col. W. E. Doster
1st Maine Cavalry, Lt. Col. C. H. Smith
10th New York Cavalry, Maj. M. H. Avery.*

*1st Mass. Cavalry, Lt. Col. C. S. Curtis;
Purnell Troop A, Md. Cavalry.
Co. A. 1st Ohio*

*2d Brigade, 3d Cavalry Division, Brig. Gen. G. A. Custer;
1st Mich. Cavalry, Col. C. H. Town
5th Mich. Cavalry, Col. R. A. Alger.
6th Mich. Cavalry, Col. Geo. Gray
7th Mich. Cavalry, Col. W. D. Mann.*

Union Artillery

*Randol's Light Battery E, 1st U.S. Artillery.
Pennigton's Light Battery M, 2nd U. S. Artillery
2nd Sec. Light Battery H, 3d Penna.*

Confederate Forces. Cavalry.

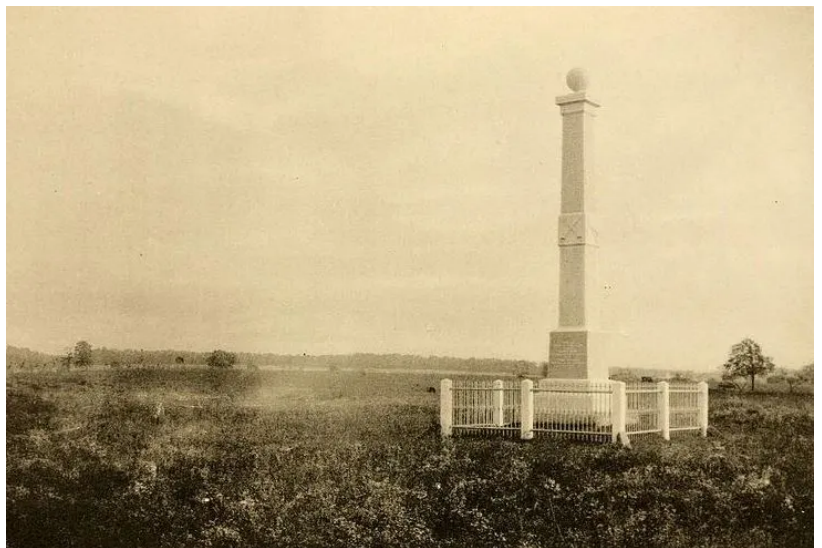
Hampton's Brigade, Brig. Gen. Wade Hampton

Fitz Lee's Brigade, Brig. Gen. Fitz Hugh Lee
Jenkin's Brigade, Col. M. L. Ferguson
W.H.F. Lee's Brig., Col. J. R. Chambliss.

Artillery.

McGregor's Virginia Battery
Breathed's Maryland Battery
Griffin's 2d

While the monument certainly appears to promote the idea of reconciliation to modern visitors—and holds the distinction of being the first to include both Union and Confederate commands—it is more difficult to determine whether the veterans who promoted the memorial **intended** their



monument to reach out a hand to their former foes. My view of the Gregg Monument is that its history very much supports the arguments made by Caroline Janney—it was not a purposeful paean to reconciliation, it has simply been read in that spirit in the decades since its appearance on the battlefield, especially by subsequent generations eager to create a narrative of the Civil War that suits their contemporary moment. The Union veterans who oversaw the monument's erection seem to have only inscribed Confederate names in order to give an accurate history of the oft-ignored cavalry fight. The speeches given at the monument's dedication underscore this attitude, along with later reflections in regimental histories of the Union units who participated in the fight.

In his dedicatory address on October 15, 1884, Col. William Brooke Rawle was explicit about who the cavalry shaft was designed to celebrate. Rawle began his

speech by asking the assembled veterans to recall their “sacrifices made in defense of the Nation’s cause.” He then recounted the reasons for the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania, the first two days of the fight at Gettysburg, and, finally, the Union cavalry’s defense of the army’s right flank against Jeb Stuart’s Confederate troopers on the final day of the battle. Rawle then explained that Stuart claimed to have driven the Union cavalry from the field “thus insinuating that he was the victor of the fight,” and added, with some sharpness, “other Confederates are now doing likewise.” Rawle had little patience for this attitude, which he believed perverted the results of the Union cavalry’s defense of a critical part of the battlefield. Rawle made clear that there was no love lost between the disingenuous Confederate veterans and the “brave men, our companions in arms, who here poured forth the full measure of their lives’ devotion for the Cause they loved.” Rawle delivered a speech that was firmly rooted in the Union memory of the war, and which adopted no visible tone of reconciliation. If anything, the former cavalrymen still harbored animosity toward former Confederates, who were, he believed, propagating a false narrative of the battle.[3]



SOME OF THOSE PRESENT AT THE DEDICATION OF THE CAVALRY SHAFT

On the Right Flank at Gettysburg, October 15, 1861

Image from Rawle's regimental history; seated in front, from left to right, are Capt. William F. Miller; Col. W. Brooke Rawle, Gen. John B. McIntosh, Gen. David McMurtrie Gregg, Gen. J. Irvin Gregg, and Col. J. K. Robison. The monument is visible in the back left.

In the regimental history of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry, published in 1905, Rawle maintained his pro-Union perspective. Reflecting with a clear sense of pride on the existence of the Gregg monument, Rawle wrote "the shaft can be distinctly seen from East Cemetery Hill from which point the greater part of the entire battlefield is visible. From that position the relative importance of the cavalry fight can best be judged." Rawle's reminiscence indicates that he and his fellow veterans hoped their monument would work to bring attention to the cavalry battle, which had long been overshadowed by the infantry fighting on the Union center on July 3. [4] Rawle gave no indication in his unit history that anyone involved with the monument's creation intended to give attention to the Confederates in equal measure with the Union troops.

While Rawle's lifetime of advocacy for the Union cavalry's importance to the victory at Gettysburg offers only one perspective on the monument, there was no single individual more involved with the creation and erection of the Gregg Cavalry Shaft. Rawle left a clear account of the monument's history across a period of three decades that made no mention of reconciliation—and, in fact, did little to promote reconciliation among his contemporaries and the survivors of the cavalry fight. While the monument stands today as a record of the participation of both Union and Confederate cavalymen in the battle of Gettysburg, it is important to look at the history behind the inscriptions and consider monuments from the perspective of those who designed them. Doing so allows us to see how history and meaning are layered onto the landscape—and offer a reminder of the value of monuments for understanding how history and memory overlap and clash—an important lesson for the current moment, as we reflect on the 157th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg.

ECW contributor Daniel Davis has also written about the cavalry fight [here](#).

[1] John M. Vanderslice, *Gettysburg Then and Now* (New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1897), 371.

[2] See, for example, Carol Readon and Tom Vossler, *A Field Guide to Gettysburg* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 392.

[3] William Brooke Rawle, "Gregg's Cavalry Fight at Gettysburg," *Journal of the U. S. Cavalry Association* 4 (September 1891): 257-75.

[4] William Brooke Rawle, *History of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry, Sixth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Philadelphia: Franklin Printing Company, 1905), 556.

Posted in **Battlefields & Historic Places, Memory**