

# **THE CAUSE OF THE CONFEDERATE FAILURE AT GETTYSBURG**

**By Brevet Brigadier-General Greely S. Curtis, U.S.V., 1st Mass. Cav.**

**Read December 9, 1878**

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## THE CAUSE OF THE CONFEDERATE FAILURE AT GETTYSBURG.

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OWING to the illness of General Palfrey, to whom was assigned the duty of preparing a paper for this evening, I have been asked to make a summary of the dispute which has arisen between certain officers of rank in the Confederate army concerning the cause or causes of their failure at Gettysburg.

It is a good thing to learn from one's enemy, even if it is nothing more than that affairs went as crookedly at times in his army as in our much-enduring Army of the Potomac.

It is not proposed to do more than to give a sketch of the quarrel, which is a very pretty one as it now stands, showing the position of the disputants. In order to be able to form an opinion on the soundness of their arguments, it may be advisable to refresh our memories as to the circumstances of the battle.

Lee, with an army which remembered Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville and had forgotten Antietam, was marching in high hopes to conquer a peace at Philadelphia or thereabouts.

He had left the old battle-fields of Virginia by a skilful march through the Shenandoah Valley and across the Potomac, and was in Pennsylvania before Hooker fairly knew where to place him. His three corps were com-

manded by tried men, Longstreet, Ewell, and Hill; the cavalry were under Stuart. His advance under Ewell was on the Susquehanna; everything was theirs for the taking; the men were living on the fat of the land and their horses were in clover. Lee himself, however, was not quite so happy; he had an army which, he felt sure, could do anything. To defeat the enemy it was but necessary to meet him, but unfortunately he did not know just where that enemy was to be found.

Of Lee's great military abilities there is no question; of his high character there is not a doubt. He seems to have been the only man in the Southern army who underrated his qualifications to command. Hence came his custom of giving great latitude and scope of action to his subordinate commanders, oftentimes yielding his own wishes and opinions to their importunities.

In no campaign was this characteristic more manifest and more unlucky. His plans for the use of his cavalry were sound and judicious, but at the last moment he had granted the request of Stuart and given him a discretionary power of movement. The result was that, at a time when it was of vital importance to know the whereabouts of the enemy, Stuart, upon whom he relied for information, was miles away toward Washington. A single scout sent out by Longstreet when at Culpepper brought to Lee at Chambersburg intelligence of the crossing of the Potomac by Hooker and of a movement menacing his line of communication.

He gave instant orders for the concentration of his army at Gettysburg, a town which was equidistant from his separated commands and had wide and good roads radiating to all points. Early in the morning of July 1st, Heth's Division of Hill's Corps was moving into Gettysburg from the west (Heth says to get some shoes) and came across Buford's cavalry, dismounted, who held him in check

until Reynolds with the 1st Corps of the Army of the Potomac could come up. Reynolds was right on hand, and Heth was treated so roughly that he forgot all about his shoes and stayed where he was, with a slight tendency backward. Pender's Division of the same corps was moved up to his assistance, Rodes's Division of Ewell's Corps, coming from the north, heard the sound of battle and marched to it and into it; Early's Division from the northeast did the same thing. The arrival of Ewell's Corps (and of Howard's) turned the successful battle into a rout; all the men of the 1st and 11th Corps, who could get away, crowding through Gettysburg and seeking shelter on the heights beyond, when General Hancock (who reached the field at about 4 P.M.) did his best to stay them and form a new line of battle. General Lee saw the flight of the 1st and 11th Corps, and Hancock's endeavors to form a new line on Cemetery Hill. He sent word to General Ewell to attack and take the height. General Ewell did not carry out the order, and the fighting was over for the day.

General Lee then determined to assault on the morrow, hoping to find but a part of the Army of the Potomac opposed to him. Meanwhile the roads leading to Gettysburg from the southward were black with Meade's men straining every muscle to get to the field of battle in time for what was felt by all to be the most momentous fight of the war. Between 6 o'clock of the afternoon of the 1st and 6 A.M. of the 2nd, 40,000 men had reached the ground. The 5th Corps was wholly up by noon, and the 6th Corps, which had marched five and thirty miles on end, were on the ground by 3 in the afternoon.

Longstreet made his assault at 4 P.M., hammering Sickles's Corps back into the position which it should have assumed at first, but having no further success.

Ewell on the left made a feeble assault at about dusk,

which was a failure. The final attack was ordered for the next day. This also failed, and Lee went home.

Never was disappointment more bitter. Lee did that which puts the man above the general, — he took the entire blame of the failure upon himself, and after his return to Virginia he wrote to his Government at Richmond, asking them to appoint some younger and abler soldier in his place. Their answer was simply: "We have none."

The Comte de Paris, wishing to get material from Southern sources for his description of the campaign, published in Southern papers a letter asking for information.

He got it with a vengeance. Like a workman who has carelessly struck with his pick in the ruins of a fallen house, he has brought down about his ears such a crash of wrecked stuff, such clouds of dust, one fall causing another, that the original tumble seems to be nothing to it.

Doubtless he will eventually pull out some bricks to build with, after knocking off the Southern mortar (and substituting plaster of Paris?) but at first he must have recoiled, e'en at the sound himself had made.

The causes of their defeat, as given by these gentlemen, are three in number:

1st. The absence of Stuart's cavalry from its proper place.

2nd. The mistake made by Ewell in not following up the disorderly retreat of July 1st; and

3rd. The misconduct of Longstreet.

It is true that General Pendleton, the Chief of Artillery in the Army of Northern Virginia, says that, if the supply of ammunition had permitted him to renew his fire on July 4th, the Army of the Potomac would have been swept away in rout and ruin. As General Pendleton seems to be alone in this opinion, we merely mention it.

To examine the causes in the order as given, we shall take the case against Stuart and his cavalry.

All the infantry officers are agreed upon this point, that the cavalry were very much to blame; that, if they had been in their proper place, General Lee could have acted with certainty, and, not being in doubt as to the position of the scattered army corps of the enemy, could easily have crushed them in detail.

The defenders of Stuart are his Assistant Adjutant-General McClellan, Fitzhugh Lee, and Mosby.

They say that Stuart took but 4,000 men with him on his scamper between Meade's army and Washington; that he left 8,000 men behind, who should have been used for all other necessary cavalry work; that he did an immense amount of injury to the enemy, destroying stores and taking prisoners; and finally that it was all done with General Lee's permission.

They ignore the vital fact, that Stuart neglected to inform Lee of the change in his course, which necessitated loss of communication with the main army. General Lee, who was daily and hourly expecting to see him or at least hear from him, was therefore unable to make that disposition of his remaining cavalry which he otherwise might have done.

The truth is, that since the beginning of 1863 Stuart's cavalry had gone down hill very fast. The severity of the winter of 1862-3, together with an insufficient supply of forage, had told upon the lives of the horses, and the discipline and morale of the men.

Since January, 1863, the Union cavalry had invariably taken the aggressive in their many meetings with their Southern brethren, and in all the principal cavalry affairs had, in their opinion, been successful. Within the fortnight preceding the invasion of Pennsylvania, Stuart had two fights which must have given him cause for reflection.

On the evening of the 8th of June he had moved his entire force of ten or twelve thousand men down to the Rapidan, intending to cross the next morning and begin the march to the North. Early in the morning of the 9th, Pleasonton crossed the river and fell upon him. Stuart claimed the victory, but did not pursue his march northward. About a week later he had another fight at Aldie, which he called the most obstinate and bloody of the war; he again claimed the victory, but was compelled by circumstances to leave the field, as was also the case in three successive days of fighting, until he was forced into a gap of the Blue Ridge, when Longstreet's men came to his rescue.

Taking these circumstances into consideration, Stuart might well think it advisable to pursue the course he did rather than to attempt, and fail in the more important and less showy work assigned to him. To stay on the flank of his own army and pick up information in an unfriendly country, confronted by a superior force of cavalry, which had put broad streams behind them in order to get at him in Virginia, and now had every advantage and inducement to pitch into him without ceasing, and give him no rest beyond the humiliating shelter of the infantry! How could he help preferring the free and happy life of a raider, and leaving to others all that drudgery!

In regard to Ewell's failure to follow up the victory of the first day, it is indisputable that he would have driven still further the remnants of the 1st and 11th Corps, and perhaps the 12th, and that the main battle would not have been fought at Gettysburg, but at some other place. How *that* battle would have resulted is a perfectly open question, and *to that extent* is a decided gain for *them* over Gettysburg.

But Ewell is dead, and the South has always felt and shown a strong feeling of gratitude for the memories of

her leaders in the Lost Cause ; and Ewell's reasons for not attacking have been quietly accepted, and their wrath turned upon the next offender, Longstreet.

To an outsider it seems odd that the general whose skilful and persistent attack on the 2nd nearly won the day, and whose division in the final charge won more glory for the South in their defeat than any victory either before or after, whose men went farther and fared worse than any others, — that this man should be the one selected unanimously for the most virulent and bitter personal abuse, at first sight is incredible.

But Longstreet has committed two unpardonable sins,— he accepted Federal office before it was the fashion, and he criticised adversely General Lee's operations. It is needless to say that at the South he has no friends.

The charges brought against him are two: First, that on the 2nd of July he was so slow in getting his command upon the field and ready to attack, that the best chance of success slipped away with the arrival of the entire Army of the Potomac.

They say, that Longstreet was on the field at Gettysburg with General Lee at 5 P.M. of the 1st; that General Lee told him that he intended to attack the heights as early as possible on the 2nd; that Longstreet opposed the plan, and did not have his men in position until 4 in the afternoon, although they had but four miles to march. They show, that two large corps and the reserve artillery of the enemy were not on the field until after noon; and, generally, that their great advantage in having their army together, and reconnoitring the ground on the 1st of July, was all brought to nought by him.

Longstreet's defence against this charge is rather weak. He says that he did not receive the *order* to attack until 11 o'clock in the morning of July 2nd, that no hour was specified, and that his delaying the attack until



4 P.M. was owing to a mistake made by his troops in taking the wrong road, and that it would not have made any difference any way.

The second charge brought against him is that he disobeyed orders in not putting the whole of his corps into the final charge of July 3rd. Longstreet denies that he ever received any order to that effect.

It is true that General Lee in his official report says<sup>1</sup> that Longstreet, re-enforced by Pickett's Division, was ordered to attack the next morning; and that the Assistant Adjutant-General of the Army of Northern Virginia asserts that it was the intention to use the whole of Longstreet's corps for the attack. But there is no such written order extant, nor can it be proved that such a verbal order was given by Lee to Longstreet, as they rode together inspecting the lines. But the condition of General Longstreet's mind during the 2nd and 3rd of July shows that he might have readily disobeyed any such order, if given, and that in fact he came very near withholding all of his troops, even after the battle had begun.

Longstreet's character, as given by his associates, by his writings, and by his face, was that of a cool, deliberate, obstinate man, a dogged fighter when once in, but slow to go in, self-confident, and unwise enough apparently to think himself a better soldier than Lee. He says that he started on the campaign with the express stipulation and agreement that they should fight only on the *defensive*; to make the agreement perfectly valid, Hooker should have bound himself and his successors never to fight except upon the *offensive*.

When Longstreet heard from Lee on the evening of July 1st that he intended to follow up his success and attack in the morning, he was much disgusted; he urged

<sup>1</sup> 2 S. H. P. July, '76, p. 43.

Lee again and again, early and late, to give up the idea ; he reminded him of the agreement about defensive battles, of their uncertainty as to the numbers of the enemy, of the obvious strength of their position, of the natural inference that the enemy stayed there because they *wanted* to be attacked, but all in vain. His advice was to be disregarded, and he grew quite gloomy. He snubbed a staff officer who was rejoicing over the wiping out of the 1st and 11th Corps, and declared that it was a disaster to themselves. One might safely predict that his troops would be very slow in coming up.<sup>1</sup>

After his attack of the 2nd he again endeavored to dissuade Lee from the assault of the 3rd.<sup>2</sup> He says that he felt it to be his duty to tell General Lee that he (Longstreet) had been a soldier all of his life, and knew what soldiers could do as well as any man in the army, and that no 15,000 men could take those heights ; for his sole answer, Lee told him to prepare to make the attack. It is easy to believe him when he says that he "never felt so depressed in all his life." He had lost heavily in the attack of July 2nd, when he had not received the support promised him ; he felt sure that the attack of this day was to be a bloody failure ; and he was ordered to take the brunt of it on his devoted men. After all the arrangements had been completed, the 150 guns in position, and the troops in their places, he told Colonel Alexander, who commanded the artillery of his corps, that *he* was to give the order to Pickett when to advance, and that if in his (Colonel Alexander's) opinion it didn't look promising, not to give the order at all. When the concentrated fire of the guns had done their work, Colonel Alexander sent his message to Pickett, saying : "If you are coming at

<sup>1</sup> 2 S. H. P. July, '76, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Longstreet, Phila. *Times*, Nov. 3, 1877 ; "Gettysburg Scrap Book," pp. 7, 9.

all, come now.”<sup>1</sup> Pickett handed the note to Longstreet, who says that he could not trust himself to speak, but bowed his head to Pickett, and turned away.

The strain on his feelings might well have tempted him or a much more subordinate man, to stretch his authority and save the lives of the men of whom he was so proud. Whether Longstreet yielded to the temptation is the question.

Longstreet also says that to have put his two remaining divisions in the column of attack would have opened an easy road to Lee's line of supplies and retreat; but that, if he had seen Pickett's charge successful, he of course should have attacked the lines opposite his divisions.

These are the main points in dispute concerning the loss of the battle of Gettysburg. It would seem almost as profitable to take another point of view, and see what reasons there were for expecting it to be successful; what reason led them to hope to dislodge from a strong position an army which was not a contemptible antagonist on equal ground.

<sup>1</sup> “Gettysburg Scrap Book,” p. 10.