
THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

FIRST DAY HIGHLIGHTS

A Mysterious Letter

Having passed through Gettysburg on June 28th, General John B. Gordon, of Lee's army, went on to York and Wrightsville before returning on July 1st. In his "Reminiscences of the Gettysburg Campaign" he tells the following story:

"We entered the city of York on Sunday morning. Halting on the main street, where the sidewalks were densely packed, I rode a few rods in advance of my troops, in order to speak to the people from my horse. As I checked him and turned my full dust-begrimed face upon a bevy of ladies very near me, a cry of alarm came from their midst; but after a few words of assurance from me, quiet and apparent confidence were restored. I assured these ladies that the troops behind me, though ill-clad and travel-stained, were good men and brave; that beneath their rough exteriors were hearts as loyal to women as ever beat in the breasts of honorable men; that their own experience and the experience of their mothers, wives, and sisters at home had taught them how painful must be the sight of a hostile army in their town; that under the orders of the Confederate commander-in-chief both private property and non-combatants were safe; that the spirit of vengeance and of rapine had no place in the bosoms of these dust-covered but knightly men; and I closed by pledging to York the head of any soldier under my command who destroyed private property, disturbed the repose of a single home, or insulted a woman.

"As we moved along the street after this episode, a little girl, probably twelve years of age, ran up to my horse and handed me a large bouquet of flowers in the center of which was a note in delicate handwriting, purporting to give the numbers and describe the position of the Union forces of Wrightsville, toward which I was advancing. I carefully read and reread this strange note. It bore no signature and contained no assurance of sympathy for the Southern cause, but it was so terse and explicit in its terms as to compel my confidence. The second day we were in front of Wrightsville, and from the high ridge on which this note suggested that I halt and examine the position of the Union troops, I eagerly scanned the prospect with my field-glasses, in order to verify the truth of the mysterious communication or detect its misrepresentations.

"There, in full view of us, was the town, just as described, nestling on the banks of the Susquehanna. There was the blue line of soldiers guarding the approach, drawn up, as indicated, along an intervening ridge and across the pike. There was the long bridge spanning the Susquehanna and connecting the town with Columbia on the other bank. Most important of all, there was the deep gorge or ravine running off to the right and extending around the left bank of the Federal line and to the river below the bridge. Not an inaccurate detail in that note could be discovered. I did not hesitate, therefore, to adopt its suggestion of moving down the gorge in order to throw my command on the flank, or possibly in the rear of the Union troops, and force them to a rapid retreat or surrender. The result of this movement vindicated the strategic wisdom of my unknown and—judging by the handwriting—woman correspondent, whose note was none the less martial because embedded in roses, and whose evident genius for war, had occasion offered, might have made her a captain equal to Catherine."

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BY

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