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The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads and the Civil War's Final Campaign

Eric J. Wittenberg

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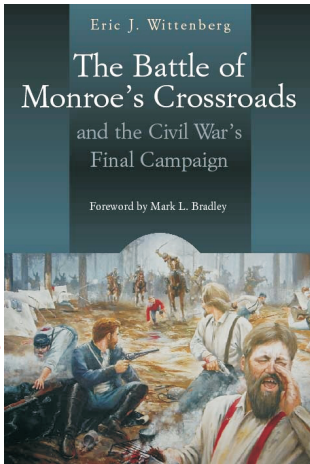
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Several significant cavalry battles were waged during the Civil War, but few were as important as the long-overlooked dawn combat at Monroe's Crossroads on March 10, 1865. In addition to fielding many of the war's most famous and capable cavaliers, the engagement spun the Carolinas Campaign in a different direction and nearly changed history in the Old North State.

By early 1865 the Southern Confederacy had been reduced to a fraction of its original size. Robert E. Lee's vaunted Army of Northern Virginia was trapped around Richmond and Petersburg, and crippling defeats everywhere else had wrecked the South's remaining armies. Only in the Carolinas did the South have a chance to stave off unconditional final defeat. That thankless task fell to Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, who stitched together a patchwork of units to block William T. Sherman's Union juggernaut as it advanced into North Carolina.

Screening Sherman's march was Maj. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick's veteran Federal cavalry division. When Kilpatrick learned Confederate cavalry under Lt. Gen. Wade Hampton was pursuing him, "Little Kil" set a trap for the enemy near a sleepy intersection known as Monroe's Crossroads. Skilled in the arts of war under General Lee and JEB Stuart, the aggressive Hampton learned of the plan and turned the tables on Kilpatrick by attacking him. The fighting was brutal, fought mostly at close-quarters with swords, pistols, carbines, and bare hands. Hampton's attack stopped Kilpatrick's advance long enough for Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee to evacuate his infantry from Fayetteville. This, in turn, permitted Hardee to join General Johnston's army, setting the stage for the climactic Battle of Bentonville nine days later.

In *The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads*, historian Eric J. Wittenberg's outstanding study of the last large cavalry battle of the war is based upon a broad archival foundation of official reports, diaries, letter collections, and other invaluable firsthand materials. Wittenberg immerses his readers into the fighting and carries them briskly along from saddle to saddle, plunging them into every charge, countercharge, and command decision all without losing sight of the large context within which the combat unfolded. Original maps and period photographs enhance his effort.

Fourteen decades have passed since the last horseman's sword swung, since the last wisp of powder smoke dissipated. Even the most jaded readers of Civil War history will agree Wittenberg's study has been worth the wait.

About the Author: Ohio Attorney Eric J. Wittenberg is a noted Civil War cavalry historian and the author of some dozen books and two dozen articles on the Civil War. His first book, *Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions*, won the 1998 Bachelder-Coddington Literary Award.