A Little Piece of Hell at Gettysburg

The Attack and Defense of the Rose Farm,

July 2–3, 1863

Scott T. Fink

Unedited Excerpt

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"No one farm on the widely extended battlefield
probably drank as much blood
as did the Rose Farm."
— J. Howard Wert

The Rose Farm (photographer unknown) ca. 1880s.
J. Howard Wert Collection, Adams County Historical Society, hereafter ACHS

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACHS	Adams County Historical Society
GBMA	Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association
GLIH	Gilder Lehrman Institute of History
GNMP	Gettysburg National Military Park
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania
LMA	Ladies Memorial Association
LOC	Library of Congress
MHS	Maryland Historical Society
NA	National Archives
NYHS	New York Historical Society
OR	*Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*
USAHEC	United States Army Heritage and Education Center

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone who made this book possible. Almost certainly I am forgetting someone, and I apologize for the oversight. Please know how much I appreciate your help.

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Going way back, I would like to thank my history teacher John H. Hoffman and his good friend, the late Stephen E. Ambrose, author of *Band of Brothers* and many other fine studies. Their summer adventures across the country inspired me to explore the battlefields and immerse myself in the past. My love of history grew from there.

My appreciation also to all those who helped along the way. Mac Wyckoff, Tom Elmore, and Laura Elliot provided wonderful assistance in my research, as did fellow photo historians Peter Gaudet, Dustin Heisey, and Greg Ainsworth. William Frassanito's groundbreaking work introduced me to Civil War photography, and I will never forget all those lively conversations we shared over a few beers at the Mine in Gettysburg.

I would be remiss if I did not mention John Heiser, who helped me every step of the way from inception to publication. His wealth of knowledge was invaluable throughout this journey.

Preface

A Little Piece of Hell at Gettysburg is a culmination of work spanning many years. It has been challenging and rewarding beyond measure. While I did not set out to write this book, it grew out of necessity while I researched another book. That book, set in two volumes, is a comprehensive study of Gettysburg photography. If you've never heard of it, the reason will become evident shortly. Work on that project started in 2013, and three years later I came upon an exciting discovery. I had managed to identify three out of four fallen Confederate soldiers from a Gardner photograph taken on the Rose Farm—an extreme rarity in Civil War photographs. In fact, it had never been done before . . . or so I thought. In fact, it had been done before, and not just once. As it turns out, a Gettysburg historian and author named Tim Smith had identified one of the same soldiers a few years earlier. My research, in addition to his, made a fine addition to a chapter on the Rose Farm on which I was working—a chapter that was growing quite rapidly.

About this same time, I stumbled upon an article in *Gettysburg Magazine* written by a fellow veteran and one of my favorite authors. In addition to the library of books Greg Coco has written, he also penned articles for magazines and periodicals. This was one of them, and the title alone was intriguing: "Where Defeated Valor Lies: A Rose Farm Mystery Solved." The article was a brilliantly detailed study of a Rose Farm photograph, a companion image to the one I had extensively researched. Coco had not only identified all four soldiers depicted and provided biographies for each, but went another step: he discovered letters home to the families explaining how their soldiers had died. This is truly remarkable research.

In solving one mystery, Coco left readers a parting gift in the form of a new mystery. The remains of one of the soldiers had inexplicably gone missing, while

the remains of his comrades, with whom he had shared a battlefield grave for nearly a decade, ended up in a cemetery in their home state of South Carolina. Unfortunately, Coco tragically passed away five years later in 2009 with the mystery unsolved.

A few years passed and a growing sense of urgency took hold of me. I felt an increasing desire to resolve the mystery that Coco left us. In 2018, I solicited the help of Mac Wyckoff, noted historian of the 2nd South Carolina—the regiment to which the four soldiers had belonged. I also enlisted the help of John Heiser, who was a fellow park ranger with Coco and when I contacted him, the chief historian for Gettysburg National Military Park. Together we solved the mystery, and I am immensely proud of that accomplishment. It was time to write this up in the article, and that was when I ran into a bit of a dilemma. I had one published article under my belt, but the information gathered far was far too much for an article, but not enough even for a short book. That was when I made the difficult decision to forgo the work on my other book and continue the research on the one you are now reading.

I had my apprehensions. I was a serious photo historian and a Gettysburg junkie, but not a trained Civil War historian. I spent years honing my research skills and untold hours walking the Rose Farm property with firsthand accounts and photographs in hand. I discovered hundreds of forgotten stories detailing brutality and violence, gallantry and bravery amidst the direst of situations, and tales of compassion and empathy. Many of which have never been published. The more I waded into these murky waters, the clearer they became until my worries eventually washed away. It was a remarkable experience.

Along the way I developed a sort of kinship with these soldiers. I served at home and overseas with the 82nd Airborne and the Maryland National Guard from 1991-2009. Even though our wars are separated by a century and a half, similarity spans generations. The comradery is the same, and the experience of leadership—good or bad—seems to be spot on. We all had officers we would follow through hell and back and others we would rather leave to their own demise. Some of my fellow soldiers also developed a similar dark sense of humor as a coping skill.

It has been my great pleasure to bring these stories to light, to share the forgotten battle history, and to solve a few intractable mysteries.

Introduction

One of the most neglected aspects of the Battle of Gettysburg is the Rose farm property on the second and third days of the battle. There is *one* exception to this rule—the area known as the "Wheatfield." Why this is the case is complicated.

The fighting in the Wheatfield was so confusing that in many cases the soldiers themselves did not know who they were fighting and when. Key Confederate leaders fell early in the combat on July 2, and Union regiments from three different infantry corps were thrown together from different directions. It was a recipe for chaos, and the mass casualties that ensued extracted a tremendous toll on both armies. Hence the colorful names— "Bloody Wheatfield" and "Whirlpool of Death"—passed down to us by the men who fought there. Knowledgeable historians offer conflicting interpretations, which further confound the matter and leave readers wondering what, exactly, transpired there.

But what about the rest of the sprawling Rose property? If the Wheatfield was the gateway to Little Round Top, then places like Stony Hill, the Ravine, Rose Woods, and Rose Hill were its keys. Other than a few articles in niche magazines and summaries in books, surprisingly little in specific detail has been written about this part of the fighting.

The 225-acre Rose Farm became the epicenter of the fighting on July 2, 1863. Nearly 20,000 soldiers from three different Union corps and part of two Confederate divisions fought over this ground. About 6,000 were killed, wounded, or captured in roughly three hours. The dead littered the fields, woods, orchards, and house grounds, making the Rose property the bloodiest farm in American history. Some of the most iconic photos to come out of the Civil War depicted the Rose Farm dead. Noted photographer Alexander Gardner and his team captured them just days after the battle. They spent most of their time at Gettysburg there,

photographing the scores of Confederate bodies strewn across the property. None of the 14 photographs they took depict the fallen in the famous Wheatfield.

What kind of fighting could produce this many casualties? Who were these soldiers? In 2018, as I began researching the Rose Farm chapter in a proposed book on Gettysburg photographs, I quickly discovered that no single comprehensive source on the Rose Farm had ever been produced. No book contained the burial records or the history of the historic farm. Only a slim few accounts commented on the fighting there at any depth, let alone covered the extensive fighting that took place outside the Wheatfield.

Most of the information we have comes from official reports, photographs, and Union accounts. The fighting was so fluid and chaotic that even the leaders did not know exactly who they were fighting and what role they played in the final outcome. Because the Confederates did not hold the field, so trying to piece together what they had seen, heard, and done days, weeks, or months later created more confusion and brief and incomplete reports. The captions that the photographers used for their images further complicated matters because they were vague, misleading, or both. Without corroborating accounts, especially from the Confederate side, Union soldiers often bolstered the roles played by their own regiments to the detriment of others, leading to false perceptions. The task of assembling the scattered pieces of a puzzle no one had fully put together into a coherent narrative proved more formidable than I imagined. Many missing pieces were never found or no longer exist.

I decided early on that the best way to tell the story of the Rose Farm was not to begin with Gettysburg, but from its first settlement to the present day. This allowed me to work up to the battle, stitch together recognized and hitherto unknown aspects of the fighting and intertwine along the way the experiences of the soldiers on both sides. Fine details emerged, such as the amusing story of a Confederate officer's damaged canteen and how that canteen almost certainly ended up as a prop in a famous Gardner photograph taken four days later. Units depicted in the iconic images are identified, as are in some instances their names, their backgrounds, and how they died.

Unfortunate connections abound. A Union private's discarded musket, for example, ended up in the hands of a Union officer the next day—a circumstance that cost him his leg and contributed to his suicide years later. The encounters were brutal, but touching moments sometimes transcended the violence. A Confederate officer, for instance, consoled a young Union officer during his last moments on earth. The Southerner described it as a cruel sacrifice to the gods of war, and the haunting encounter remained with him for the rest of his life. The source material helped me work through a longstanding mystery, such as how, where, and when

Confederate Brig. Gen. Paul Semmes was mortally wounded. These puzzle pieces also help explain the reasons why it became a mystery in the first place. I also believe, and hope readers do as well, that the swirling fighting in the Wheatfield is now less confusing.

I hope you enjoy *A Little Piece of Hell at Gettysburg: The Attack and Defense of the Rose Farm, July 2–3, 1863*, the first complete study of this storied American property and the men who made it famous.

1

War Comes to Gettysburg

With the war now in its third year, and fresh from a victory at Chancellorsville that spring, Gen. Robert E. Lee lobbied for a large-scale move north into Maryland and Pennsylvania. The commander of the Army of Northern Virginia wanted to draw the Union Army of the Potomac away from war-torn Virginia and threaten Washington, D.C. A Union defeat above the Potomac River might break the enemy's resolve. The move might also help relieve embattled Vicksburg, then under siege, and perhaps encourage European allies to support Southern independence. The denouement of this strategy awaited them in the quiet crossroads town of Gettysburg. What began as a small meeting engagement on July 1, 1863, quickly escalated into a general engagement that day and continued for the next two.

On that first morning, Confederates streamed in from the Chambersburg Road west of town, with only Brig. Gen. John Buford's division of Union cavalry to stem the surging tide of gray-clad infantry. Buford and his men checked the advance of two Confederate infantry brigades from Maj. Gen. Harry Heth's Division until Maj. Gen. John Reynolds could bring up his I Corps for much needed reinforcement. By committing the I Corps to Buford's aid, Reynolds turned a small engagement into a sprawling pitched battle, drawing both sides into one of the costliest battles in American history.

General Reynolds lost his life that morning while directing his troops in Herbst's woods. A Confederate bullet struck him in the neck; he fell from his horse and was dragged along the ground before the stirrup could be loosened. Members of Reynolds's staff took him to a field at the edge of the woods, where, unable to

General Robert E. Lee

Library of Congress, hereafter LOC

speak, he took his last breath.[1] Command fell to Abner Doubleday, the corps's senior division leader by rank. While the I Corps was fighting, Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard's XI Corps arrived and deployed north of town.

That afternoon, as additional units entered the fray, Union forces soon found themselves outnumbered and overwhelmed. As the Union lines broke, what had begun as an organized fighting retreat turned into a mad dash through town and over the hills, with Confederates scooping up large numbers of prisoners in pursuit. Alarmed citizens were ordered back to their homes and took to their cellars to await the outcome. Many were surprised by unexpected house guests, as lost and confused Union soldiers separated from their commands sought refuge from Confederate pursuers in cellars, attics, and outbuildings. Many were captured, though several escaped thanks to their civilian hosts who hid them as the Confederates seized the town. Those who successfully reached the high ground of Cemetery Hill south of town rallied and regrouped to defend against a possible follow-up attack. The attack never materialized.

* * *

Like many civilians residing on Gettysburg farmsteads, John Rose and his family fled to safety. It appears the family left the farm between the afternoon of July 1 and the morning of July 2 at a time when the farm was between the battle lines. The Roses had no relatives in the area. They did not return until July 7.

The identity of the first troops to occupy their farm was initially unclear. In a damage claim filed after the battle, Rose noted that he and his family "were obliged to leave the premises hastily; and the house was rifled, and it and the barn deprived of nearly all the contents." Rose's claim also stated that Maj. Gen. Dan Sickles's III Corps occupied the farm and camped there on July 1, appropriating 50 bushels of oats and 50 bushels of corn from Rose's stores to feed their horses. A third government auditor who investigated this claim found that "the money accounts for the following officers, for the periods stated, do not show any Forage to have been purchased, paid for or taken from John P. Rose." Rose countered, saying "that no receipts or vouchers were obtained as the officers manifested no inclination to give any." Rose's son, George Washington Rose, testified in the same claim that it was men from the V Corps that occupied the farm on July 1. While those two corps were camped nearby, it was likely John Buford's cavalry division,

1 Accounts from three members of Reynolds's staff, Captain Mitchell, Captain Baird, and his orderly Charles Veil. Samuel P. Bates, *Martial Deeds of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1876), 474.

which was the only known Union force camped on the farm overnight on July 1, that appropriated the food.

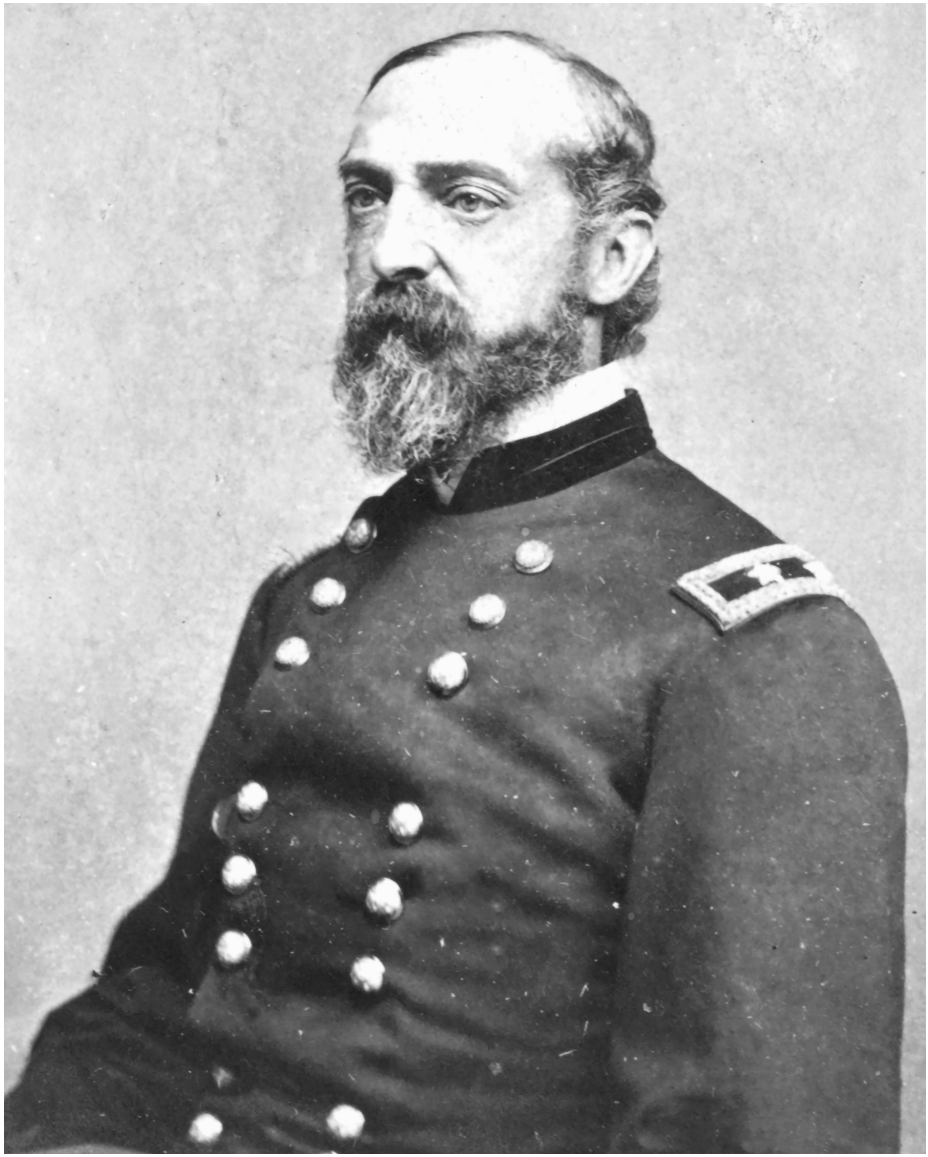
One cavalry encampment was set up at the edge of Rose's wheat field, while most of Buford's troops remained on picket duty that night. Their vidette lines (mounted pickets) extended from Rev. Joseph Sherfy's peach orchard on the west side of the Emmitsburg Road, across the road at Rose Lane, down along the orchard next to it and south through Francis Ogden's wheat field, which ended in the vicinity of what would become known as the Triangular Field.[2]

As the fighting concluded on the first day, the Confederates occupied the town, but the Federals held the high ground south of it. Major General George G. Meade, newly appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, arrived just before midnight after the fighting ceased and used the next few hours to scout and solidify his lines, which were shaped like a large fish-hook extending from Culp's Hill on his right flank before running through Cemetery Hill and then south down the upper part of Cemetery Ridge. Eventually, he anchored his left flank near a denuded hill later known by all as Little Round Top. Although the Confederates had wrecked two Union infantry corps on the first day, Meade made the decision to remain in a strong defensive posture on the high ground. The terrain was the key to the entire field and put the Confederates at a significant disadvantage.

General Lee arrived in Pennsylvania confident of success, despite the significant reorganization of his Virginia army following his victory at Chancellorsville in May. Two of his three corps commanders were new in their positions. Ambrose P. Hill, a hard-hitting division commander, was given the new Third Corps. Hill had a touch of rashness, even carelessness about him that Lee hoped to ameliorate. It was Hill who brought on the first day's fight that Lee was not prepared to wage.

Richard S. Ewell, back from suffering a major wound that cost him part of a leg, assumed command of the revamped Second Corps that had formerly belonged to Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson before his mortal wounding at Chancellorsville. How the disruption of the command-and-control structure suffered by the loss of Jackson and elevation of Ewell remained to be seen. The complex victory he had overseen at Second Winchester in the Shenandoah Valley offered hope that he was going to pick up where Jackson left off. Ewell's handling

2 *HSR-Rose Farmhouse*, appendix J; Eric J. Wittenberg, The Devil's to Pay (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2014), 160. The field, commonly known today as Rose's meadow was a wheat field at the time of the battle. The Rose's tenant farmer, Francis Ogden, held a controlling interest in the wheat produced there. This field will hereafter be referred to as Ogden's wheat field to distinguish it from the well-known Wheatfield that also sits on the Rose property.



General George G. Meade
LOC

of his corps on July 1, however, especially following the smashing victory north of town, showed hesitation and an uncertainty in action.[3]

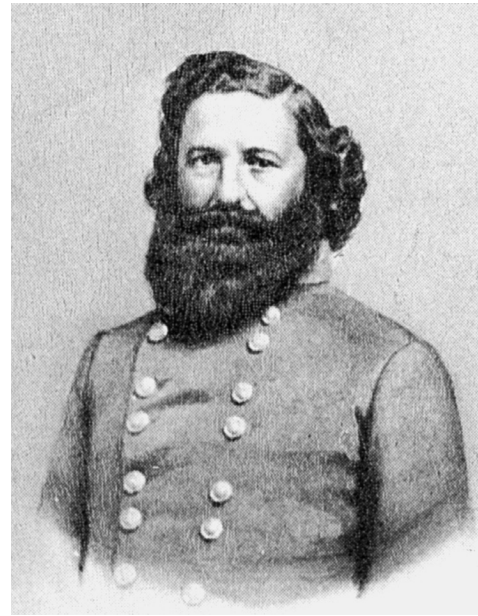
3 Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston, 2003), 45-47, 227; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880–1901),

General James Longstreet
LOC

The troops that would fight over the Rose farm belonged to Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's First Corps. Longstreet was the most experienced of the three corps commanders and the one Lee trusted the most. Two of his divisions hurried to the front as the first day's fight was underway. One belonged to Maj. Gens. Lafayette McLaws and the other John Bell Hood. Each had four brigades that averaged about 1,500 men each. Colonel Arthur Freemantle, a British military observer accompanied them during their march through Pennsylvania. McLaws's men, he noticed, marched very well and were "well shod and efficiently clothed." The knapsacks they carried had on them the names of the Union regiments to which they originally belonged, and the men all seemed in the "highest spirits and were cheering and yelling most vociferously."

The Texans, Alabamians, and Arkansans of Hood's Division, however, "certainly are a queer lot to look at," Freemantle concluded. The division was "well-known for its fighting qualities, but many of them have only got an old piece of carpet or rug as baggage; many have discarded their shoes in the mud; all are ragged and dirty." Nevertheless, they remained "full of good humor and confidence in themselves and in their general, Hood." Freemantle recounted an amusing anecdote that testified to the droll brio of the Southern boys when a Chambersburg lady of Union sympathies adorned her ample bosom with a large Yankee flag in protest of the invasion "and stood at the door of her house, her countenance expressing the greatest contempt for the barefooted Rebs." Several companies passed until one Texan remarked, "Take care, madam, for Hood's boys are great at storming breastworks, when the Yankee colors is on them." Longstreet's final division under Maj. Gen. George Pickett remained in Chambersburg to guard the Confederate

Series 1, vol. 27, part 2, page 318. Hereafter cited as *OR* 27/2:318 All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted.



General Lafayette McLaws
LOC

lines of communications as the rest of Longstreet's command moved east.[4]

John Bell Hood was known for his bravery and aggressiveness in battle but perceived by some as reckless. He was born in Kentucky in 1831, the son of Doctor John W. Hood. Despite his father's reluctance, the younger Hood attended West Point and was a cadet there under Superintendent Robert E. Lee. As a cadet Hood had a difficult time and was almost expelled in his final year for accumulating 196 of the maximum 200 demerits allowed. He graduated in 1853 44th out of a class of 52.

Notwithstanding his modest academic record, Hood went on to become a successful cavalry officer, serving in units from California and Texas. Dismayed by his home state's neutrality at the start of the war, Hood joined the Confederacy to serve his adoptive state of Texas. He gained a reputation as one of the Confederate elite combat officers at the head of the famed Texas Brigade. By the fall of 1862, he was a major general commanding a division that included his old Texas Brigade, now under Brig. Gen. Felix Robertson.[5]

Behind McLaws's division on the way to Gettysburg was Col. John Logan Black and his ad hoc group of cavalry 200–300 strong, and Capt. James Hart's South Carolina battery. Black had been wounded in a skirmish about a week before and was trying to catch up to his regiment when he came across several detachments of horsemen left behind the Southern line of march and with no specific orders. Being a cavalryman himself, Black took command and gathered several stragglers along the

4 Arthur James Freemantle, *Three Months in the Southern States* (Mobile, AL, 1864), 121. After the death of "Stonewall" Jackson at Chancellorsville and during the restructuring of the army from two corps to three, Longstreet recommended McLaws for one of the two vacant positions. Lee passed him over to appoint Richard Ewell and A. P. Hill. Frustrated and aware that advancement under Lee would not be forthcoming, McLaws requested a transfer that was denied due to the impending campaign into Maryland and Pennsylvania. John H. Eicher and David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands* (Stanford, CA, 2001), 381; Jeffry D. Wert, *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy's Most Controversial Soldier* (New York, 1994), 249–251, 209.

5 Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence* (Lincoln, NE, 1992), 2, 9.

General John Bell Hood
LOC

way. "While I had a good many good men," he later wrote, "I had a good many game-legged cusses & wagon rats. Yet I managed to keep them in some kind of order and discipline."

Because Lee had lost contact with Maj. Gen. Jeb Stuart and his cavalry, Black and his thrown-together group were ordered to provide a rear guard for Longstreet's corps. Their march, however, was delayed by Ewell's wagon trains. The march resumed a "snail's pace" as Longstreet's infantry trudged through the night, halting briefly for a few hours rest. About this time Black lost contact with McLaws's division as it pulled off to rest and camp near the Samuel Lohr farm, whose buildings were filled with wounded from A. P. Hill's Corps following the day's fight west of Gettysburg.[6]

* * *

Meanwhile, during the afternoon and evening of July 1, and continuing through the morning of the 2, more of Meade's Army of the Potomac assembled at Gettysburg. To avoid congestion, the two divisions of Sickles's III Corps made their way to Gettysburg along two different routes. Major General David B. Birney's 1st Division arrived via the Emmitsburg Road, while Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys's 2nd Division used a country wagon road that paralleled the Emmitsburg Road. Humphreys was the new commander of the division, having replaced Maj. Gen. Hiram G. Berry who had been killed at Chancellorsville. Humphreys's new command consisted mainly of veteran troops, a refreshing change for the ambitious newcomer.[7]

6 Gregory Coco, *A Vast Sea of Misery* (Gettysburg, PA, 1988), 135; John Logan Black, *Crumbling Defenses*, ed. Eleanor McSwain (Macon, GA, 1960), 36–38.

7 Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 43–44.

Birney was born in Alabama, the son of an abolitionist from Kentucky. The family returned to the Blue Grass State in 1833, where his father James freed his slaves. Two years later, the Birney family relocated to Ohio, where James published an anti-slavery newspaper. After threats from pro-slavery mobs, the Birneys moved again, this time to Michigan for a short time before finally settling in Philadelphia. David Birney eventually took up the study of law and opened a practice in Philadelphia in 1856 that lasted until the start of the war. When the conflict began, Birney was elected lieutenant colonel of a volunteer infantry regiment, the 23rd Pennsylvania, which was largely raised at his own expense. Like many Union generals, his political connections helped him rise through the ranks, fueling resentment among some officers and soldiers. By the start of the Gettysburg campaign, he was a major general.[8]

Daniel Edgar Sickles was one of the more successful political generals of the era. A polarizing figure, he was both beloved and hated in his own time, as indeed he is today. Born into a wealthy family from New York, Sickles became a career politician, worked his way to the New York state senate, and was elected to Congress in 1857. In 1852, at the age of 32, he married a girl named Teresa Bagioli, who was 15 or 16 at the time, a union neither family favored. Though now married, Sickles kept company with ladies of ill repute and was censored for escorting a known prostitute, Fanny White, into the state's senate chambers. He even took White to England with him while his pregnant wife remained at home.

More scandal ensued in 1859 when Sickles shot and killed Philip Barton Key, son of famed American composer Francis Scott Key, on the streets of Washington, D.C. Key had been carrying on an affair with the congressman's young wife, and upon discovering the affair Sickles sought out his wife's lover and gunned him down in an act of rage. He turned himself in and went on trial for murder. In those proceedings Sickles portrayed himself as a victim of his wife's infidelity. Given public sensitivities about the sanctity of marriage in that era, he garnered a great deal of support from a friendly press. The sensationalized trial ended in an acquittal due to "temporary insanity," making Sickles the first defendant in U.S. history to use that plea. He fell from public grace, however, when he reconciled with his wife a short time later, an act which made the couple outcasts in New York society. One writer noted that Sickles was "left alone as if he had the smallpox."[9]

Like Birney, Sickles seized the opportunity and raised several New York regiments. Also, like Birney, Sickles used his political connections to rise through

8 Bates, *Martial Deeds*, 556–557, 564.

9 James A. Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2010), 6–8, 10–17, 19; C. Vann Woodward, "Mary Chesnut's Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History* (1982): 379.

General David Bell Birney
LOC

the ranks swiftly. He was elected colonel of the 70th New York and soon appointed brigadier general and commander of the "Excelsior Brigade," a name of Sickles's own choosing. By March of 1863 he was commander of the III Corps, much to the displeasure of rivals who believed they were more qualified for the appointment. He was the first non-West Pointer placed in command of an entire army corps.[10]

Sickles's leadership came under further scrutiny at Chancellorsville that May. His corps suffered heavily with the loss of two of its three division commanders (Hiram Berry and Amiel Whipple). Soon after the close of the campaign, the corps lost several regiments whose term of service expired. Those that remained were consolidated from three divisions to two, the 1st under Birney and the 2nd under Humphreys.[11]

End of Unedited Excerpt

10 The Latin word "excelsior" means "ever upward" and is the New York state motto.

11 Ernest B. Furgurson, *Chancellorsville 1863* (New York, 1992), 208–211.