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# The Railroad Cut Reconsidered

ROBERT W. SLEDGE

The story of the battle in the railroad cut northwest of Gettysburg has been told from several perspectives. The events of the half hour or so at midday, July 1, 1863, have received so much detailed analysis that another article on the subject may seem redundant, but there are several matters that could still be open to reconsideration.

The Battle of Gettysburg began when Maj. Gen. Henry Heth dispatched two Confederate brigades toward the town of Gettysburg from his base at Cashtown to probe the Union positions. Led by Brig. Gen. James J. Archer south of the Cashtown Pike and Brig. Gen. Joseph Davis north of the pike, the two brigades first encountered dismounted Union cavalry units under Brig. Gen. John Buford. The embattled cavalryman sent word for infantry reinforcements. The first units of the Army of the Potomac approaching from the south belonged to Maj. Gen. John Reynolds's First Corps, led by the division under Maj. Gen. James Wadsworth. Wadsworth's front brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler, rushed north along the west edge of the town and crossed the pike. Before Cutler's troops were well in place, Davis's brigade (from left to right, the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina, the Second Mississippi, and the Forty-Second Mississippi regiments) wheeled across a long sloping field and swooped down on them.

Davis's men chased Cutler's two northernmost regiments off the field into a nearby wood and nearly annihilated his center regiment, the 147th New York. Cutler's two regiments south of the Cashtown Pike, the Ninety-Fifth New York and the Eighty-Fourth New York (also called the Fourteenth Brooklyn), became aware of the disaster develop-

ing just to their north and began to turn to face the oncoming southerners. In the meantime, another of Wadsworth's brigades had come onto the field and entered McPherson's woods south of the pike. They were the Black Hats, Brig. Gen. "Long Sol" Meredith's famous Iron Brigade of the West. Four of these regiments quickly clashed in mortal struggle with Archer's men. The Iron Brigade's other regiment, the Sixth Wisconsin, augmented by the Iron Brigade Guard of some one hundred men, was at first held in reserve but now double-timed north to head off the oncoming attack of Davis. The Wisconsin boys deployed along the Cashtown Pike and began firing at the Rebel charge. Two of Davis's regiments, feeling the threat on their southern flank, quickly swung into line along the railroad right-of-way that ran parallel to, and 150 yards to the north of, the Cashtown Pike. The Forty-Second Mississippi, which was advancing between the pike and rail line, saw the oncoming New York regiments and ducked into the west end of the steep-sided cut that carried the rail line on a level path through McPherson's Ridge.

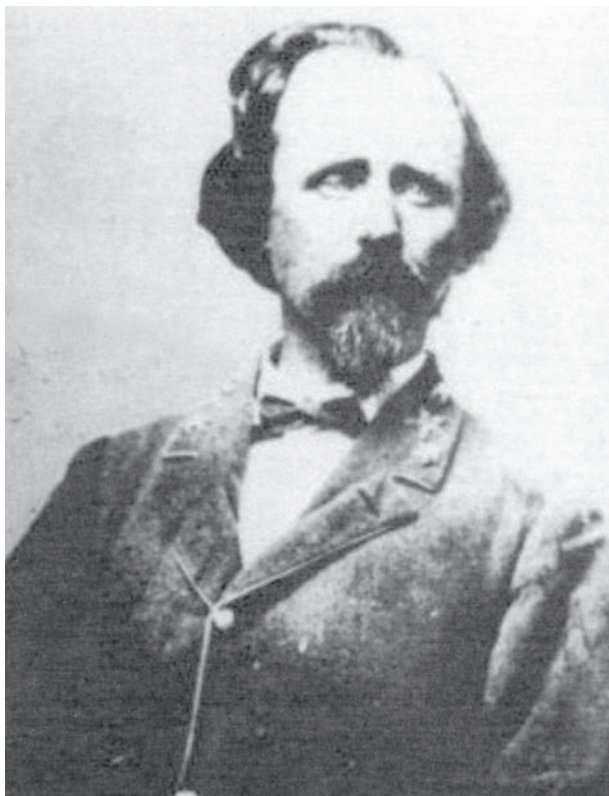
The two opposing forces faced each other briefly, and then the Union troops charged across the intervening field and routed the three Confederate regiments. Many were killed and wounded on both sides. Though most of the Rebels fled to the north and west, 232 of them surrendered and were marched off to captivity. The victorious Federals regrouped and prepared to meet a further Confederate attack that was gathering to the west. That was not long in coming, and the strength of the Southern assault overwhelmed Wadsworth's division and drove them back into the town of Gettysburg.

Nevertheless, Buford's and Wadsworth's units, though pushed off the battleground, had purchased with their blood sufficient time for the remainder of the Army of the Potomac to come up and enter the engagement that became the three-day Battle of Gettysburg. The battle at the railroad cut left behind many reports, memoirs, and interpretations, which sometimes conflict with each other and with the facts of the terrain, leaving several matters up in the air.

### Was the Entire Second Mississippi Actually Captured, as Claimed?

The business of just what was captured has been greatly exaggerated by both sides. The claims are that the entire Second Mississippi, or maybe even two full regiments, fell prisoner at the railroad cut:

- The Iron Brigade marker on the southeast side of the cut says, "In the charge made on this RR Cut, the 2nd Miss. Regt, officers, men and battle flag surrendered to the 6th Wis." That's



Brig. Gen. Joseph Davis commanding a brigade in Pender's Division, Third Corps (Hill). Courtesy of the U. S. Military History Institute.



Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler commanding the Second Brigade, First Division, First Corps. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

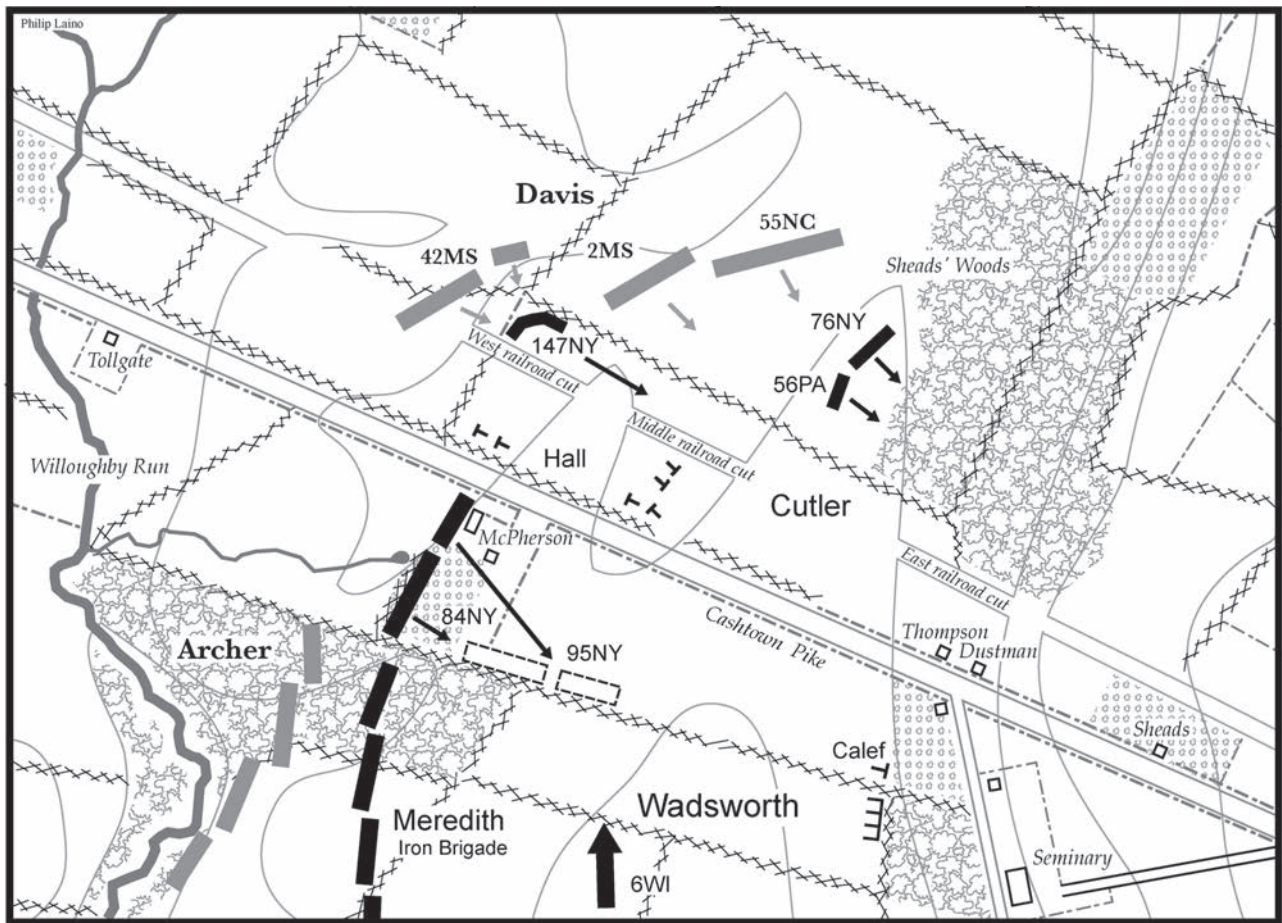
maybe true as far as it goes, but it implies that the whole Second Mississippi was captured more or less intact as a unit. Other nearby monuments make similar claims.

- After the war, a Mississippian appealed for the return of "the flag of Second Mississippi, captured, with entire regiment, by Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers."<sup>1</sup>
- In his official report, the acting First Corps commander Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday claimed "the successful capture of the two regiments in the railroad cut."<sup>2</sup>
- Doubleday's subordinate, General Wadsworth, commanded the First Division of the First Corps, which included all the Union regiments involved. His official reports also mentioned the taking of "two entire regiments." It

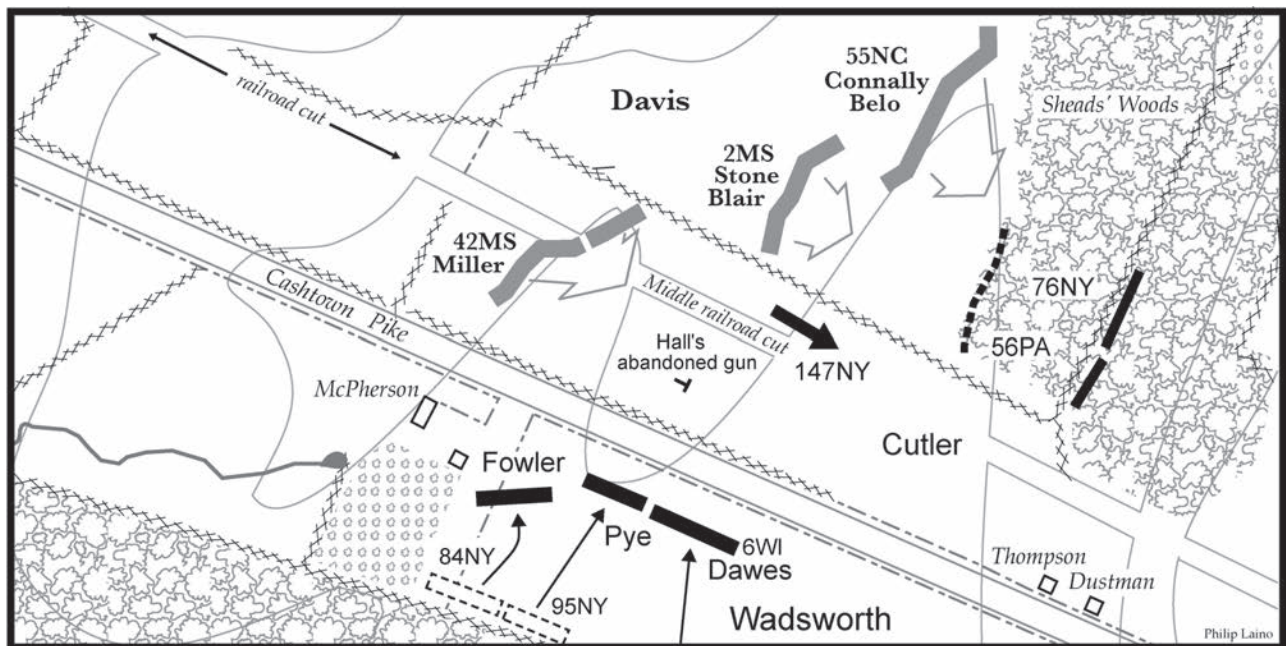
<sup>1</sup> *Confederate Veteran* 6 (1898): 148.

<sup>2</sup> Doubleday's report, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 27, part 1, 254; hereafter cited as OR and followed by the part and page number.

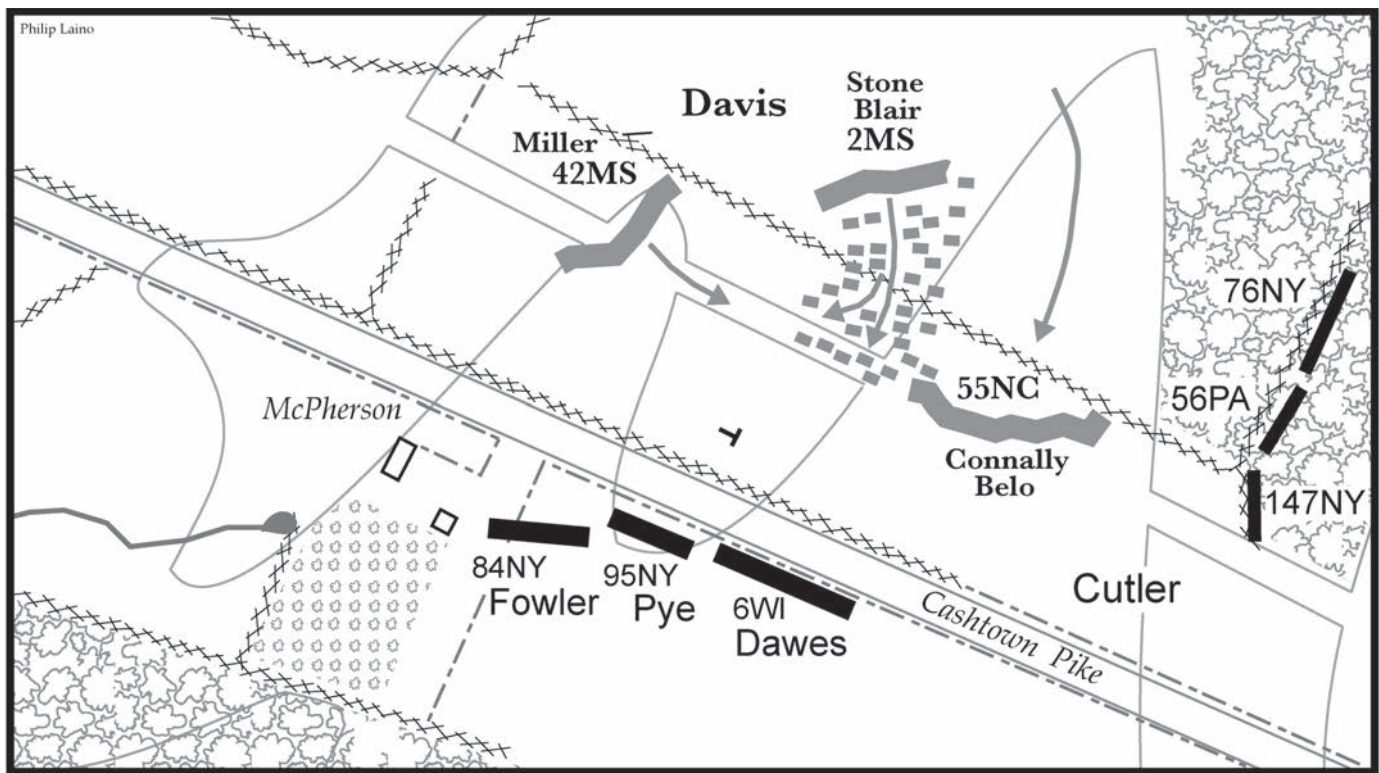




Davis advances on Cutler. Map by Phil Laino.



Dawes, Pye, and Fowler move into position to attack Davis's flank. Map by Phil Laino.



Lineup just before the Union attack. Map by Phil Laino.

may be that Doubleday's exaggeration is based on Wadsworth's account.<sup>3</sup>

- Another more recent account asserts, "soon the entire 2nd Mississippi under Colonel J. M. Stone, and much of the 42nd Mississippi . . . were prisoners."<sup>4</sup>
- The authoritative book *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* by Edward Coddington notes that "all of the 2nd Mississippi regiment and many men of the 42nd Mississippi and 55th North Carolina threw down their arms in token of surrender."<sup>5</sup>
- Union soldier Henry Matrau, who was there, told his parents that "our reg't . . . captured the 2nd Miss. regt, their major & their colors." Again, the truth, but not the whole truth.<sup>6</sup>
- Lt. Col. Rufus R. Dawes, commanding the Sixth Wisconsin, reported that "only one regi-

ment surrendered as an organization, and that was the Second Mississippi Volunteers."<sup>7</sup>

- Lance Herdegen, the expert on the Sixth Wisconsin, wrote that "the fighting at the railroad cut resulted in the capture of seven officers and 225 enlisted men, including Major Blair, eighty-seven men from the 2nd Mississippi, and the regiment's battle flag."<sup>8</sup>

Herdegen's statement is much more accurate than the ones previously quoted. Its numbers rightly refute the claims that the entire regiment was captured, suggesting that only ninety-four soldiers from the Second were taken (eighty-seven enlisted men plus seven officers), hardly a full regiment. In fact, the records of the Second Mississippi identify eight, not seven, officers by name and, also by name, 119 other ranks of the regiment who were made prisoners at the railroad cut. So the real

<sup>3</sup> Doubleday's report, in *OR*, 1:266.

<sup>4</sup> *Blue and Gray Magazine* 5, no. 2 (November 1987): 36. Colonel Stone was wounded earlier in the morning and was not present at the battle for the cut.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 272.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Matrau, *Letters Home: Henry Matrau of the Iron Brigade*, ed. Marcia Reid-Green (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 59.

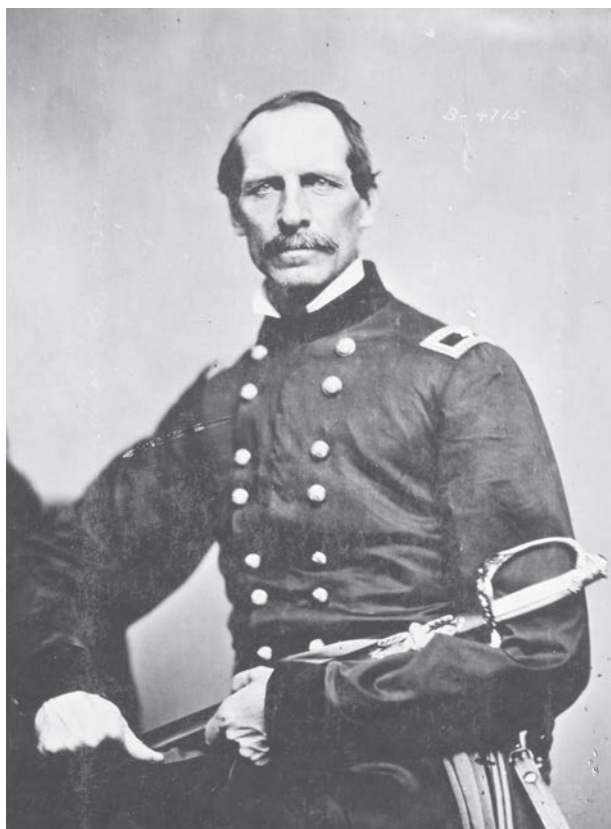
<sup>7</sup> Rufus R. Dawes, *A Full Blown Yankee of the Iron Brigade: Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers* (Marietta OH: E. R. Alderman & Sons, 1890; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 173. Citations refer to the University of Nebraska Press edition.

<sup>8</sup> Lance Herdegen, *Those Damned Black Hats: The Iron Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2008), 120.





Photograph of the railroad cut taken in 1886. Courtesy of the National Park Service.



Brig. Gen. Solomon Meredith commanding the Iron Brigade, First Corps. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

total of 127 means that less than half the regiment actually fell into Union hands there—in other words, a battalion, the left wing only.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Data are taken from the individual records of the men of the Second Mississippi, which is found at “Member Rosters of the 2nd Mississippi Infantry Regiment,” *2nd Mississippi Infantry Regiment*, accessed September 9, 2002, [http://www.2ndmississippi.org/2nd\\_miss\\_part\\_1/Rosters\\_intro.htm](http://www.2ndmississippi.org/2nd_miss_part_1/Rosters_intro.htm). Subsequent references of this sort are gleaned from the company rosters noted there. The rosters of the eleven companies show 124 enlisted captives, but Privates William G. Lummus, William D. K. Miller, Thomas S. Rea, Cornelius Robinson, and William A. Swinny each appear in two companies, making the actual number 119 men, who, with the eight officers, add up to 127. There may be a few mistakes in the men’s records; even so, these totals are very close to the numbers reported. The other 105 prisoners who completed the total of 232 came from the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina and the Forty-Second Mississippi. The following are the Second Mississippi captives of the railroad cut:

Company A (12): Beaty, David; Burcham John. W.; Cantrill, Calaway H.; Carter, Thomas S.; Frierson, William V., Jr.; Helton, James; Mayo, James L.; Miller, William D. K.; Murphy, William B. (the regimental color bearer at the railroad cut); Parish, Thomas T.; Reynolds, Arthur M.; Sledge, James M.

Company B (19): Bratten, Joseph M.; Dacus, David D.; Duncan, Thomas J.; Fewel, Granderson T.; Fryar, John W.; Hammerschmidt, Peter; Harris, Terrel S.; Humphreys, Charles W.; Kelly, John O.; McCauley, Green; Miller, William D. K.; Ray, John H. Z.; Riley, James A.; Saunders, Michael L.; Simpson, James R.; Sims, George R.; Smith, Harvey W.; Sweney, Milton; Swinny, William A.

Company C (14): Beachum, James M.; Bell, John G.; Birmingham, Joshua M.; Brazeal, John H.; Clayton, Charles C.; Clayton, Joshua S.; Looney, John S.; Palmer, John; Rea, Thomas S.; Sargent, John; Sargent, Romulus D. (captain); Sugar, John; Walker, David T. (first lieutenant); Watson, Augustus.

- An account in *Confederate Veteran* magazine stated it better: the Second Mississippi “lost its left wing under the gallant Maj. (later lieutenant colonel) John A. Blair in a railroad cut.”<sup>10</sup>

The Sixth Wisconsin did indeed capture the flag of the Second Mississippi at the railroad cut. Maj. John A. Blair was then in command of the regiment, and Blair did perform the surrender protocol. It is also a fact that some 232 Confederate officers and men fell into Union hands there, but it is *not* true that the entire Second Mississippi, or even half of it, was taken that day.

Many men of the regiment, like Sgt. Augustus L. P. Vairin, saw the potential problem and escaped. “Here we lost a number of men,” he related. “I did not go into the cut, seeing its danger & I cautioned all I could to get out by the right flank. Some did, but those on the left were surrounded [*sic*—he means surrendered] by Major Blair. Those of us who got out of the difficulty fell back. Others of our troops came up in time & we gained that day’s battle, but the regt. was reduced fearfully.”<sup>11</sup> Reduced fearfully, to be sure, but not destroyed. Enough men remained that they

Company D (6): Bruton, Albury; Cathey, Gilbreath A.; Hammons, Toleman H.; Houston, Joseph K.; Robinson, Cornelius; Walker, James H.

Company E (25): Bailey, Peyton R. (first lieutenant); Brawner, John M.; Bryant, William; Easley, Pleasant L.; Edge, David M.; Ellis, William P.; Flanagan, John J.; Hankins, Samuel W.; Hopkins, James M.; Johnson, William C.; Lassiter, William L.; Leathers, Dr. Franklin; Lesley, Edward; McClain, Major T.; McCombs, William H.; McCully, Daniel; McDonald, James H.; Raines, Oliver; Smith, Stephen D.; Strickland, Condary D.; Swinny, William A.; Walker, James A.; Weems, William K.; Whitley, Robert (first lieutenant); Woodward, Ivy R.

Company F (8): Griffin, David H.; Jenkins, William J.; McBride, John A.; Norvell, James M.; Robinson, Cornelius; Robinson, Michael; Smith, John P.; Smith, S.

Company G (5): Daggett, Frederick H.; Dillard, James M.; Earle, Charles W.; Johnston, John C.; Miller, James D.

Company H (14): Bowen, J. H.; Braden, Willie F.; Cunningham, William M. (captain); Fears, Andrew J.; Green, James J.; Johnson, David A.; Kinney, William C. H.; Kyle, James R.; Lummus, William G.; Maxcy, Edward V.; Powell, Henry W.; Raines, James A.; Rea, Thomas S.; Ware, John W.

Company I (12): Ball, William M.; Caldwell, Elijah B.; Helms, William B.; Jones, George H.; Leavell, Richard M. (captain); Moser, Barney; Owens, Alexander D.; Ray, Turner; Stephens, John A. (second lieutenant); Wells, Henry Pickens; Wells, Ludy Young; Wood, James M.

Company K (9): Blair, John A. (major); Brown, William M.; Cooper, Marion M.; Dewoody, Samuel N.; Gibson, Albert H.; Graham, James W. W.; Inman, Henry A. J.; Lummus, William G.; McCoy, James.

Company L (8): Bartlett, James; Beaseley, Isaiah; Commander, James L.; Dalton, Joseph; Dial, Jesse P.; Jordan, Charles W.; Jordan, Edwin; Murphy, James.

Total: 132 minus five duplicates totals 127.

<sup>10</sup> Baxter McFarland, “Losses of the Eleventh Mississippi Regiment at Gettysburg,” *Confederate Veteran* 31 (1923): 259.

<sup>11</sup> Augustus L. P. Vairin, *Civil War Diary of Augustus L. P. Vairin, 2nd Mississippi Infantry*, C.S.A., ed. Andrew Brown, last updated December 24, 2005, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mscivilw/vairindiary.htm>.

were “60 guns strong” for Pickett’s charge on July 3.<sup>12</sup> And even that is an underestimate, given the number of casualties reported for July 3.

Regimental records suggest that 492 officers and men of the Second Mississippi were on the roster at the beginning of the battle.<sup>13</sup> If so, the 127 captives represented about 26 percent of the full complement of troops, a far cry from being the whole regiment. The losses of the other two Confederate regiments were smaller, so no one could claim capturing a whole regiment there either. The full total of 232 in the railroad cut was still well under half the Second’s strength (and the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina and the Forty-Second Mississippi were each even larger), so it is better to say a small battalion or, perhaps, less than half a regiment was taken prisoner. The notion that the whole Second was captured at the railroad cut is obviously a serious exaggeration, a mistake that both sides compounded in later years and has continued in the present. In truth, at least two-thirds of the regiment survived the encounter. We may assume that not all the 492 were committed to combat July 1. Some, like the usual flag bearer, Sgt. C. C. Davis, were sick; some, such as Col. John M. Stone, were wounded in the fields north of the railroad cut before the climactic encounter. Still others, including Lt. Col. David Humphreys,<sup>14</sup> were listed as present for duty but were actually elsewhere on detail.

Among the remaining members of the Second Mississippi, at least 153 can be accounted for by name as casualties in the next two weeks, and there were certainly still more who were not casualties. Despite Sergeant Vairin’s claim of sixty muskets for Pickett’s charge (Vairin may not have been including officers),<sup>15</sup> the Second lost twelve men killed and fifty-four captured on July 3, and a fair number more were able to withdraw to Confederate lines. Over the next few days, another forty-eight men of the Second, many of them with the wagon train of the wounded, were captured during the retreat to the Potomac. In the rearguard action at Falling Waters a few days later, two more were killed and sev-

enteen captured; plus an additional nine who were successfully evacuated were wounded. These names add up to a minimum of 153 men who were not captured or killed the first day. And this does not include others who were not reported as casualties during the whole campaign and who got away with the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The numbers, and the names that go with them, force the conclusion that everybody was wrong to think that even half the Second Mississippi, much less the entire regiment, marched off the field as prisoners on July 1. But such is the fog of war, and such is the inevitable temptation to dramatize a feat of arms. Of course, it is absolutely true that the regimental battle flag was seized and that the acting regimental commander was captured. It is thus possible to pardon some exaggeration, but it is not prudent to ignore it. The Second Mississippi Infantry Regiment was *not* captured at the railroad cut—only elements of it were, along with its flag and its third-ranking officer.

### Was the Railroad Cut Really a Trap?

The terrain of Gettysburg is not quite the same today as it was 150 years ago. The railroad cut now has a nicely ballasted roadbed with neat ties and straight rails; then, it was a rough trench strewn with the debris of the digging. On the north rim of the cut the crest of the ridge was crowned with a small copse of trees, where today it is bare, save for man-made markers.

Today there is a south–north berm that carries Reynolds Avenue on a bridge across the top of the cut; then, the field between the cut and the pike was more level, though sloping slightly to the east, with better east–west visibility.

On the 150th anniversary the field of the Sixth Wisconsin’s charge was sown with four-foot-high ripening wheat. In 1863 it was grass.

Those elements aside, however, much is the same. The railroad cut, hewn into the rocky ground of McPherson Ridge, has just about the same dimensions. Very little erosion has occurred. The distance between the Cashtown Pike and the railroad bed is the same. The slope of the field of the charge is the same. And the field north from the cut has the same rise as before. The result is that some things about terrain can clearly be seen today, and

<sup>12</sup> Vairin, *Civil War Diary*.

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Wiens, “The Union and Confederate Armies at the Battle of Gettysburg, 1863,” *Orders of Battle*, last updated April 1, 2001, <http://www.ordersofbattle.darkscape.net/site/history/historical/usa/gettysburg.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Terrence J. Winschel, “Heavy Was Their Loss, Part 1,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 3 (January 1990): 14. Humphreys was killed two days later in Pickett’s charge.

<sup>15</sup> Vairin, *Civil War Diary*.



several questions must be raised about the interpretations of the day's events. One such question has to do with the notion that the cut was a trap.

There were, and are, at least three geographic aspects of the Confederate battle line in that two or three hundred-yard stretch of roadbed, and each is different. That fact is usually glossed over, and the whole is treated as if it were the same as the western element of the three. The westernmost part was a deep, steep-sided artificial canyon that completely sheltered the Forty-Second Mississippi but made it difficult for them to fight. When commentators mention the cut as a trap, they are mostly talking about this segment.<sup>16</sup> The right battalion of the Second may also have taken refuge there. The second segment of the cut, the part defended by the left battalion of the Second Mississippi, featured the deep cut shallowing out from a depth of six feet or so down to a reach where the walls were about two feet deep. This was an ideal rifleman's position, where men could jump down into it for cover from fire from the south, but they also could scramble away to the north handily enough if need be. This was by no means a trap, though it might slow a man's retreat by a second or two. The third stretch of the cut was the roadbed extending east toward Gettysburg, changing from a cut to a fill, with little defensive advantage but easy room to withdraw. The Fifty-Fifth North Carolina occupied this section. The attack of the Sixth Wisconsin struck the Rebel line at the juncture of the Second Mississippi and Fifty-Fifth North Carolina, where Confederate command was divided and cohesion, least.

Troops under Gen. Robert E. Lee (who was sometimes nicknamed the King of Spades) knew that below ground was safer than above ground and that the first order of business was to dig in. At Cemetery Ridge on July 3, as at Fredericksburg earlier and at Cold Harbor later, one could see the futility of charging across an open field against en-

trenched riflemen. On July 1, while the Rebels deep in the western part of the cut may have been unable to offer an adequate defense, the same cannot be said for the ones Dawes attacked, because there the cut averaged four feet deep, a wonderful defensive configuration. One Wisconsin soldier remembered, "The Johnnies . . . jump[ed] into an old railroad cut . . . immediately in front of them and here about *five feet deep and opened on us*."<sup>17</sup> Obviously the Second Mississippi was not hampered by the cut; they were quite free to fire on the opposing forces. *Quite* free—Colonel Dawes lost a third of his command in less than five minutes. Davis's men took position along the railroad line because it was a physical phenomenon for much of its length; but on the east end, it was only a psychological one. It gave the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina a place to line up, much as a marching band might find its alignment by using a football field's yard lines.

The railroad cut was recognized by *both* sides as an excellent protection from fire. The lieutenant commanding the left platoon of the Iron Brigade Guard observed that "they had taken advantage of a deep railroad cut, *a splendid position for them*, and threatened death and destruction to any regiment that attempted to dislodge them."<sup>18</sup> Later in the afternoon, when Cutler's brigade was being driven back across the ridge toward the town, Cutler "moved the brigade to the railroad, with a view to forming under cover of its bank and trying to hold [the enemy] in check there." At that point, he received orders to withdraw eastward. When he and his men left the shelter of the cut and were exposed "on the railroad embankment," they came under heavy fire again.<sup>19</sup> Rufus Dawes himself also took advantage of the cut. Not long after the capture of Davis's men, Colonel Dawes brought the Sixth Wisconsin to the west slope of McPherson Ridge, where renewed waves of Confederate infantry forced him to retreat, as he "moved back *under cover* of the railroad cut and . . . took position again in the wood."<sup>20</sup>

The two New York regiments in the attack did not face such murderous return fire as did the Wisconsin regiment. The Confederate force facing the New

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the account in Kelly Knauer, ed., *Gettysburg: A Day-by-Day Account of the Greatest Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2013), 37–38: "The Confederates slowed, stopped, then broke for the only available cover—the banks of the railroad cut. Some of the Confederates milled around in the bottom of the 20-foot cut; others crawled up the side and started shooting. . . . Soon the Confederates in the cut were surrounded, bottled up like a child's fireflies in a jar." The same account states, "From the protection of the cut, the Confederates were now able to direct a lethal fire into the ranks of the New York and Wisconsin men." That appears to be a contradiction of the previous statement. This is another case of writers treating Davis's whole line as one situation, when in fact it was three.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added. Lance J. Herdegen and William J. K. Beaudot, *In the Bloody Railroad Cut at Gettysburg* (Dayton OH: Morningside House, 1990), 184.

<sup>18</sup> Herdegen and Beaudot, *Bloody Railroad Cut*, 184. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Cutler's report, in *OR*, 1:282–83.

<sup>20</sup> Dawes's report, *OR*, 1:276. Emphasis added.

Yorkers, the Forty-Second Mississippi and part of the Second, could not fire *effectively* from the depths of the cut. Why then didn't the New York regiments capture more than the Sixth did? The basic tactical flaw in the Confederate position was not the cut itself, for, though it presented some problems, it also had some equalizing advantages. The tactical flaw was that the Southerners did not protect their left flank. When the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina obeyed its orders to retreat, it left the Second Mississippi completely and fatally exposed, just as the 147th New York had been left a few moments before.

The other reason for the Union success was the courageous, one may even say foolhardy, charge of the Sixth Wisconsin. It flew in the face of almost all military sense. A general rule of thumb held that attackers needed at least a three-to-one advantage in manpower to prevail against an entrenched defense; in this case, the manpower was roughly equal. In addition, the attack was unnecessary. The Sixth could have accomplished its mission (defending the First Corps from Davis's attack) by simply holding the fence line along the Cashtown Pike, without exposing themselves across that open field. Dawes could have let the Rebels make the dangerous charge if they wanted to continue their advance. As a practical matter, Dawes's decision to charge may look good in retrospect, but only because it happened to succeed.

As for the choice of the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina and the Second Mississippi to occupy the railroad line, it should be noted that they were mostly north of the railroad and edging east when they came under fire from the Sixth Wisconsin.<sup>21</sup> To meet that threat and continue their advance, they had to pivot farther and cross the rail line in order to move south. The Forty-Second Mississippi, marching east between the pike and the railroad,<sup>22</sup> had less excuse. They funneled into the cut from the western open end or dropped over the southern lip of the cut. Then their only exit was west along the rail line.

What the unexpected assault did accomplish was to give the Federals the initiative. Maj. A. H. Belo, commanding the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina after its colonel was hit, saw the Sixth forming up for a



Lt. Col. Rufus R. Dawes, Sixth Wisconsin. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

charge. The Fifty-Fifth was coming onto line along the railroad fill at the east end of the cut. "I was so impressed with the fact that the side charging first would hold the field that I suggested to Maj. Blair, commanding the Second Mississippi on my right, that we should charge them before they had their formation completed," Belo noted, adding that Blair agreed and was about to comply when they received orders to "form a new alignment" and the chance, if such it was, was lost.<sup>23</sup> Presumably that command came from General Davis. In his official report, Davis stated that he "gave the order to retire" under pressure from "greatly superior numbers" of Federals.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Belo got the order and attempted to carry it out, a difficult task given the confused state of the Confederate battle array. Possibly Blair did not get the message; whether he did or not, the Second stood and fought, while the Fifty-Fifth withdrew, leaving the left flank of the Second totally

<sup>21</sup> Dawes believed that he had caught them square on the flank, but they were already bending south. Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 166.

<sup>23</sup> Alfred H. Belo, "The Battle of Gettysburg," *Confederate Veteran* 8 (1900): 165.

<sup>24</sup> Davis's report, OR, 2:649. Is this another case of Civil War generals mistakenly supposing themselves to be outnumbered?

exposed.<sup>25</sup> Belo may have been right; perhaps they should have attacked.

Did Davis lose his nerve at just the wrong moment? Did the Carolinians get the order first and were thus free to run, as perhaps the Mississippians were not? In the deep part of the cut, of course, once the Yanks reached the lip, the Confederates could not mount a viable defense. They could only run, surrender, or die. A few were killed. Others, like a Forty-Second Mississippi captain, tried to escape, but “the crush was very great and just as I was trying the squeeze through, a big Wisconsin man thrust his bayonet at me” so that he had to give up.<sup>26</sup> But most of them dropped their weapons and ran—and got away.

Of Davis’s brigade, the ones who were allegedly trapped in the depths of the railroad cut were precisely the ones who escaped—most of the Forty-Second Mississippi and the right-hand battalion of the Second. The commander of the Eighty-Fourth New York (Fourteenth Brooklyn) said in his report that the Confederates “in line on the left of my line *escaped by following through the railroad cut*.”<sup>27</sup> Thus the deep part of the cut seems more like a pathway to safety than a trap. The ones in the perfect defensive position, the left battalion of the Second, were the ones who were taken. The Fifty-Fifth North Carolina, which was on the railroad *fill* to the east, ran north and mostly escaped.

If the brigade was truly trapped, why is it that the left battalion of the Second, where the cut was easily climbed, was captured while the right battalion, sheltered and presumably trapped in the cut, got away to the west along with the Forty-Second? The monument marking the left edge of the Sixth Wisconsin’s advance shows clearly that they were not facing the deepest part of the cut—the Ninety-Fifth New York and, eventually, the Eighty-Fourth New York were. To be sure, the New Yorkers took prisoners from their front, men who were added to the ones taken by the Sixth and marched away by Maj. John F. Hauser of the Sixth. Belo, who was close enough to the Second Mississippi to hold conversation with Blair, just barely got away. Why

wasn’t Belo trapped? Why weren’t more of the Fifty-Fifth trapped? Obviously because they were on the fill, not the cut. Why weren’t the Forty-Second and the right wing of the Second trapped? Because they were able to run west through the cut. Why were so many from the Second Mississippi captured? Because the veterans on the left wing of the Second, secure in their impromptu trench, stood their ground until overrun by the ferocity of the Wisconsin charge—but not because they were trapped.

The cut was not unambiguously safe. Elements of the 147th New York sought refuge in the cut early in the encounter and did find themselves trapped, as much because they were encumbered by wounded comrades as anything else. Others of the regiment used the cut as protection in retreating from the attacking Rebels who, ironically, were the men of the Forty-Second Mississippi.<sup>28</sup> The Mississippians found themselves in the same fix a few minutes later. As Edwin Coddington pointed out, “[T]he railroad cut . . . would prevent a sudden assault on the right flank of a line facing west, but if not watched it could also be used as a hidden passage for a flanking column.”<sup>29</sup>

The marker celebrating Dawes and the Sixth Wisconsin on the north side of the cut is entitled “Trapped in the Cut” and tells the story of the event by saying, “Trapped between the steep slopes, about 230 Confederates surrendered.” But most of the men who were captured were *not* the ones “trapped between the steep slopes,” because the cut was not very deep where the surrender occurred. The use of gun butts and bayonets and hand-to-hand wrestling shows that these men were on very nearly the same level of ground, and they were the ones who were forced to surrender. The prisoners were indeed taken on the railroad grade, but for most, it was not because they were trapped there.

### Were the Southerners Well Handled?

Historian Robert K. Krick is among several interpreters who argue that the Confederates were not well served by their commanders on the first day at Gettysburg. He faults corps commander A. P. Hill, division commander Henry Heth, and brigade

25 Robert K. Krick, “Three Confederate Disasters at Oak Ridge: Failures of Brigade Leadership on the First Day at Gettysburg” in *The First Day at Gettysburg*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1992), 111.

26 Roger Long, “A Mississippian in the Railroad Cut,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 5 (January 1991): 24.

27 Fowler’s report, OR, 1:287. Emphasis added.

28 D. Scott Hartwig, “Guts and Good Leadership,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 2 (July 1989): 11.

29 Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 267.



commander Joseph Davis for various errors. Davis's brigade, he says, was one of the weakest and least experienced of A. P. Hill's troops, one of the brigades "that had—and still have today—the least distinguished reputations among Hill's original six."<sup>30</sup> This usually valuable account is sometimes open to question. Some of Krick's critiques of the leadership seem spun to buttress his principal thesis, leading to some debatable conclusions. For example, it may be technically correct to refer to Davis's as a "new" brigade, and the numbering of the Forty-Second Mississippi and the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina certainly indicates their *relative* inexperience. But the Second Mississippi and the Eleventh Mississippi were hardly rookie units; their battle history included some pretty serious engagements, beginning with First Manassas and including the Seven Days, South Mountain, and Miller's Cornfield at Antietam. Later Krick conceded that "the 2d and the unfortunately absent 11th had served with distinction in Evander M. Law's brigade before they fell victim to the shuffling demanded by Joe Davis's uncle."<sup>31</sup>

Krick further suggested that Col. John M. Stone did not know what he was doing. He said that "the colonel commanding the 2d Mississippi admitted after the war to General Davis with refreshing honesty that one of his 'most serious difficulties' was that 'I almost always lost my bearings.'"<sup>32</sup> That seems more a matter of refreshing modesty than refreshing honesty and, in any case, is irrelevant to the matter here at hand, since Stone was wounded early in the fight and never made it to the railroad cut. Nor could he have lost his bearings, flanked as his regiment was by the other two regiments. He commanded the Second Mississippi through every one of its battles from 1862 onward unless he was absent or incapacitated. He was neither incompetent nor inexperienced. Though the fact may not be entirely germane to his military abilities, Stone later became the longest-serving governor in Mississippi history, before or since.

But most of Krick's comments are on the money, regarding the decisions (or nondecisions) of A. P. Hill, Henry Heth, and Joseph Davis. Hill *could* have been more involved in the advance of Gettysburg. Heth *could* have used his more experienced and

rested brigades to spearhead his move east. And, as noted above, Davis *may* have ordered a withdrawal at precisely the wrong moment, retreating when he should have advanced, or at least stood firm. Nor does Major Blair escape suspicion.

It looks very much, in fact, as if Dawes and his men bluffed Blair into surrender. The two sides were equally matched, with a small numerical edge to the Second; the cut was not the trap it has been depicted, at least where the left of the Sixth Wisconsin and the left of the Second Mississippi met. But the Rebels could not see how many men Dawes had and may have assumed that there were more than there were. Both sides were tired from the morning's exertions and tensions, but the adrenaline of battle would ameliorate that shortcoming, which applied equally. It may be conceded here that the Wisconsin regiment was the freshest of the ones engaged, but they had been double-timing for a couple of miles with only brief rest. In Blair's defense, it must be remembered that the Second's flank was eroding as the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina withdrew and Dawes had them enfiladed. A defiant Blair might still have turned the fight around, but more likely he would simply have gotten more of his troops killed.<sup>33</sup>

Colonel Dawes had and kept control of his regiment except perhaps for the leftmost company, Company I, and the left-flanking company of the Brigade Guard under Lieutenant Harris.<sup>34</sup> Dawes's battle cry of "align on the colors" successfully kept his men in some semblance of order, even amid the chaos of close combat. He was able to listen to and comprehend Adjutant Edward Brooks's suggestion that they throw the right-hand company of the Brigade Guard around to enfilade the Mississippians from the east. He was able to seize control of the tangled mass of men and weapons at the railroad; to seek out the Southern commander; and to make the credible threat "surrender or I will fire," which implied that his men would indeed hear and heed his orders.

Major Blair did not have control of his men. He was, after all, the third-ranking officer of his regi-

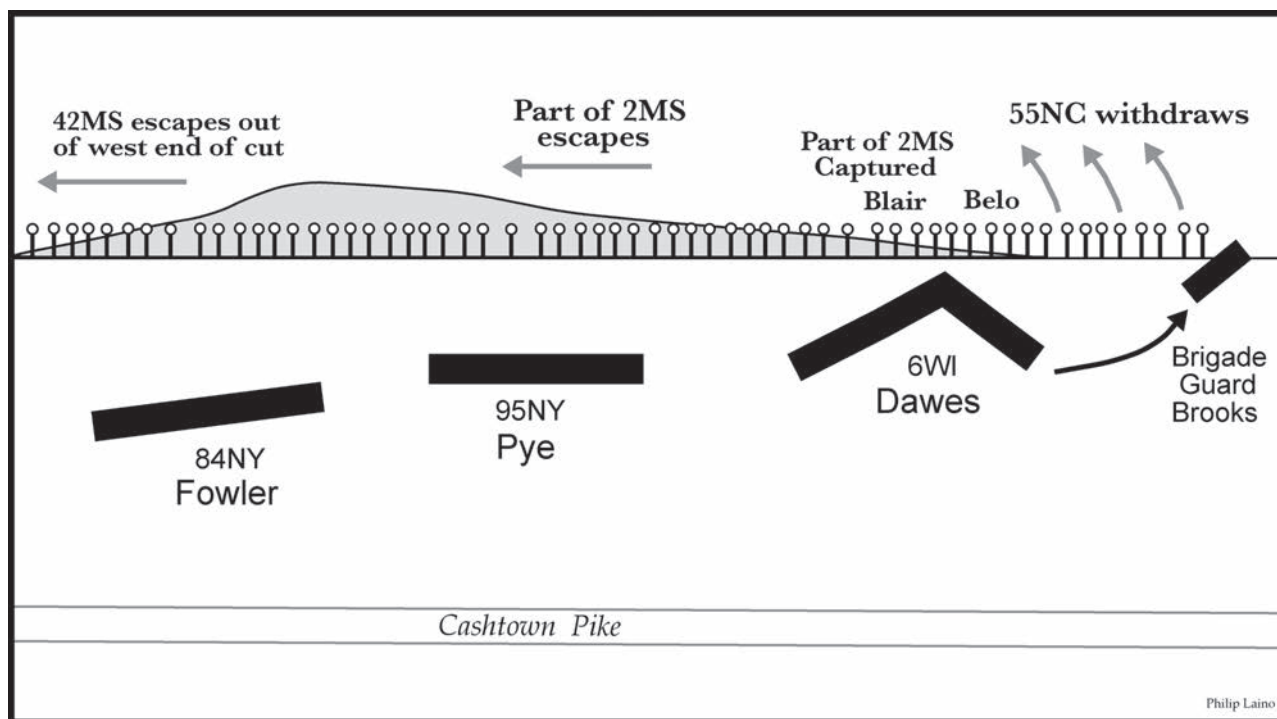
<sup>30</sup> Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," 98.

<sup>31</sup> Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," 102.

<sup>32</sup> Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," 101.

<sup>33</sup> Major Blair's decision, right or wrong, is one the author has reason to be grateful for. His as-yet-unmarried great-grandfather was one of the 120 Second Mississippi enlisted men who escaped from the ordeal with his life, if not his liberty.

<sup>34</sup> Loyd G. Harris, "With the Iron Brigade Guard," *Gettysburg Magazine* 2 (July 1989): 29–34; Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 275.



The battle for the railroad cut—escape and capture. Map by Phil Laino.

ment. His command was badly mixed together, probably with elements of the other regiments blended in. One Confederate remembered that, “in changing front, the men got tangled up and confused.”<sup>35</sup> The prisoners, taken mostly from the left wing of the Second, represented every company of the regiment, though Company B (nineteen men) and Company E (twenty-five) lost the most. Along with its twelve men killed and six more wounded, Company B suffered thirty-seven casualties that morning. The surrender of Blair’s sword did not end the fighting, which continued for a few moments. Cpl. William B. Murphy, the regimental flag bearer for the Second Mississippi that day, gave up his banner because Cpl. Frank A. Waller seized it, not because Blair ordered it. After Waller took the flag, he stood on it and continued to fight the remaining combative Rebels awhile longer, though Blair had already tendered his sword. While some surrendered in obedience to Blair’s order, others did not.

Sgt. Augustus Vairin of Company B had been an unsuccessful candidate for major in the realignment of the Second Mississippi’s leadership in the spring of 1862. He lost the election to then sergeant

major Blair, whose character and capability Vairin afterward held in contempt. Vairin’s Freudian slip in which he says Major Blair “surrounded” the battalion is possibly an additional indication of his bias. Nevertheless, Vairin’s assessment may contain an element of truth. Blair’s leadership in the critical moment must be questioned. There is no question about Dawes.

### To Whom the Glory?

Edwin B. Coddington concludes that the results of the midday battles west of Gettysburg were temporary Union successes because of “the greater tactical skill of the Northern generals.”<sup>36</sup> But which generals? Doubt exists as to who ordered the charge on the railroad cut.

One candidate would be the Iron Brigade commander Solomon Meredith. But he made no such claim and obviously had his hands full fighting his other four regiments against Archer. The corps commander John Reynolds was killed before the threat of Davis from the north became apparent. A more likely possibility was the division commander James Wadsworth. However, his report of the battle

<sup>35</sup> Vairin, *Civil War Diary*.

<sup>36</sup> Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 274.

makes him seem less a commander than a spectator, and not a very well informed one at that: “As they [Cutler’s men] fell back, followed by the enemy, the Fourteenth New York State Militia, Colonel Fowler; Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers, Lieutenant-Colonel Dawes; and Ninety-fifth New York Volunteers, Colonel Biddle, gallantly charged on the advance of the enemy and captured a large number of prisoners, including two entire regiments and their flags.”<sup>37</sup> But Biddle was down, wounded; Fowler certainly does not deserve first mention; there were not anywhere near two regiments captured; and only one flag was seized.

Wadsworth’s report did not further praise the two New York regiments but did include a paragraph celebrating the exploits of the Sixth Wisconsin, mentioning officers Brooks, Hauser, Ticknor, Chapman, Converse, Hyatt, and Goltermann and Cpl. Frank Waller by name. He concluded by saying that “the commander of the regiment, Lieut. Col. R. R. Dawes, proved himself to be one of the ablest officers on the field.”<sup>38</sup> This was not to downplay the valiant efforts of the two New York outfits but simply to emphasize the actions of the Badger regiment. As the attack of Dawes’s men reached its successful climax, Wadsworth, who was watching, is reported to have exulted in surprise, “My God, the 6th has conquered them.”<sup>39</sup> The official record makes Wadsworth seem a bit misinformed about the whole affair, but the eyewitness accounts of his staff depict him as a direct and jubilant observer.

One officer who did claim the honor of ordering the charge was Col. Edward B. Fowler, commanding the Eighty-Fourth New York and also nominally exercising command over the Ninty-Fifth New York. He reported that he and his two regiments were separated from the rest of Cutler’s brigade by a house and a garden at the outset of the battle and were thus unaware of the catastrophe developing north of the railroad cut. But he quickly came to realize what was happening:

[W]e were at once engaged by the enemy’s skirmishers from woods to our left and front [the leftmost regiment of J. J. Archer’s brigade, attacking eastward on the south side of the Cash-

town Pike]. We drove the enemy back, and then I found that the enemy [the Forty-Second Mississippi, coming east between the pike and the railroad grade] were advancing on our right, and were then in our rear, and in possession of one of our pieces of artillery. I immediately ordered my command, Ninety-fifth New York Volunteers and Fourteenth New York State Militia, to march in retreat until on a line with the enemy, and then changed front perpendicular to face them, the enemy also changing front to meet us. At this time, the Sixth Wisconsin Regiment gallantly advanced to our assistance. The enemy then took possession of a railroad cut, and I gave the order to charge them, which order was carried out gallantly by all the regiments, by which a piece of artillery was recaptured. The advance was continued until near the cut, when I directed the Sixth Wisconsin to flank it by throwing forward their right, which being done, all the enemy within our reach surrendered—officers, battle-flag, and men. Those in line on the left of my line escaped by following through the railroad cut. I held this position until ordered to the rear to join the brigade.<sup>40</sup>

Dawes denied that he had received any such orders. That does not mean that Fowler might not have given an order to charge, but if so, it did not reach Dawes and was issued after the fact anyway. Fowler clearly claims much too much tactical omniscience when he says he ordered the flanking movement. He was too far away either to see the opportunity or to have made the immediate communication necessary to have it done even if he had seen it. The Dawes account makes it clear the idea came from one of his subordinate officers Edward Brooks. In later years, Dawes and his troops vehemently denounced Fowler’s account as an attempt to claim the glory that they felt was rightfully theirs. The language of Fowler’s report and the lay of the ground lend some support to that assertion.<sup>41</sup>

The Eighty-Fourth New York was a bit behind the Sixth Wisconsin and the Ninty-Fifth New York

<sup>37</sup> Wadsworth’s report, *OR*, 1:266.

<sup>38</sup> Wadsworth’s report, *OR*, 1:266.

<sup>39</sup> Herdegen and Beaudot, *Railroad Cut*, 206.

<sup>40</sup> Fowler’s report, *OR*, 1:286–87.

<sup>41</sup> See the extensive and persuasive discussion of what might be termed the “second battle of the railroad cut” in Herdegen and Beaudot, *Railroad Cut*, 287–97, and in Lance J. Herdegen, “For the Truth of History,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 9 (January 1999): 81–88.





Col. Edward B. Fowler, Fourteenth New York State Militia (Eighty-Fourth New York). Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

in the charge. Dawes and Maj. Edward Pye of the Ninety-Fifth agreed to make the charge between them, without reference to Fowler. Indeed, had Fowler's troops been able to come up in a timely fashion, they could have contested the escape of the Forty-Second Mississippi out the west end of the cut. If Fowler thought about enfilading the cut, it should have been on his own end, not the east outlet a hundred yards and a thousand men away.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps throwing a force westward to close the cut would have made the New Yorkers vulnerable to

<sup>42</sup> See the very cogent arguments made in Hartwig, "Guts and Good Leadership," esp. 13: "On account of the roll of the ridge, Dawes could not see that Colonel Edward Fowler's 14th Brooklyn was also moving up on the 95th's left . . . Fowler did not see Dawes or his regiment, but the two men were thinking alike. . . . To Fowler and Dawes credit, their personal initiative paved the way for a coordinated assault against the railroad cut." Presumably, Hartwig discounted Fowler's claim that he personally commanded the charge and that he ordered the flanking movement of the Brigade Guard. Allen Guelzo, in his recent exhaustively researched history of the Battle of Gettysburg, does not even mention the Fourteenth Brooklyn's participation in the attack on the railroad cut. Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

Archer's leftmost regiment shooting at their backs. Nevertheless, if Fowler had plugged the west end of the cut, only the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina of Davis's brigade would have escaped.

The marker celebrating the Union charge on the cut asserts that the attack was led by Dawes and Fowler. But Fowler's was the lesser role. His regiment was late on the scene; it took few prisoners from the men "trapped" in the cut; it failed to plug the west end of the "trap." Why is Major Pye not mentioned? His Ninety-Fifth New York was the regiment next to the Sixth Wisconsin. His were the men who faced the Second Mississippi's right wing battalion and probably a part of the Forty-Second. He was the commander who agreed to join Dawes in the attack. It seems likely that Fowler won the propaganda war by making extravagant and unchallenged claims, claims that his superiors and subsequent observers accepted uncritically. When Dawes was made aware of Fowler's statements, he vigorously disagreed, even though the Brooklyn outfit and the Sixth were frequently teammates and close comrades in numerous battles. Perhaps it was symbolic of the attempts to steal credit from the westerners when Frank Waller was standing on the captured Second Mississippi flag and a soldier from the Brooklyn regiment reached in to snatch it away. Waller had to gruffly warn the man off with a leveled musket.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the Fourteenth Brooklyn should have a fair share of the credit; Dawes noted that "the ninety-fifth New York took prisoners, as did also the fourteenth Brooklyn."<sup>44</sup> They joined in the charge and suffered casualties. The prisoners taken by the two New York regiments came almost entirely from the Forty-Second Mississippi. The captives from the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina and the Second Mississippi fell into the hands of the Wisconsin boys.

Another officer who said he ordered the Sixth Wisconsin to resist Davis's attack was General Doubleday. Working under Reynolds, he gathered the Iron Brigade Guard and the Sixth Wisconsin "to remain with me as a reserve."<sup>45</sup> But Dawes said that it was General Meredith, the Iron Brigade commander, who sent the brigade guard to him.<sup>46</sup> Soon after this, Doubleday heard of the death of Reynolds and

<sup>43</sup> Herdegen and Beaudot, *Railroad Cut*, 280; Herdegen, *Black Hats*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 173.

<sup>45</sup> Doubleday's report, *OR*, 1:24.

<sup>46</sup> Dawes's report, *OR*, 1:275. Both accounts could be true.

realized that he was now in command. He saw the retreat of Cutler's men in the face of Davis's attack, a retreat ordered by Wadsworth, and saw that Hall's battery was being forced back, bereft of infantry support. Further, the 147th New York, Cutler's center regiment, had not received the order to fall back and was now nearly cut off. Though somewhat surprised by the sudden turn of events, Doubleday saw clearly enough that something had to be done to stop the Confederate assault from the north:

I immediately sent for one of Meredith's regiments (the Sixth Wisconsin) a gallant body of men, whom I knew could be relied on. Forming them perpendicular to the line of battle on the enemy flank, I directed them to attack immediately. Lieutenant-Colonel Dawes, their commander, ordered a charge, which was gallantly executed. The enemy made a hurried attempt to change front to meet the attack, and flung his troops into the railroad cut for safety. The Ninety-fifth New York Volunteers, Colonel Biddle, and the Fourteenth Brooklyn, under Colonel Fowler, joined in the charge; the cut was carried at the point of the bayonet, and two regiments of Davis's (rebel) brigade were taken prisoners.<sup>47</sup>

Thus it seems clear that it was General Doubleday's order that placed the Sixth Wisconsin in position along the Cashtown Pike. The tactical application of that order fell to Colonel Dawes; and he, with Major Pye's concurrence, ordered the attack. Sealing the eastern end of the cut with half the Brigade Guard was Adjutant Edward Brooks's idea, as Dawes handsomely acknowledged.<sup>48</sup> As for the Fourteenth Brooklyn, it was a distinguished regiment with plenty of battle honors, and Colonel Fowler was a capable commander. The two regiments often fought side by side.<sup>49</sup> But in this particular encounter, it was the Sixth Wisconsin, not

<sup>47</sup> Doubleday's report, *OR*, 1:246. Dawes concurs that it was Doubleday who sent the Sixth north; see Dawes's report, *OR*, 1:275, 278. Biddle, colonel of the Eighty-Fourth, had been wounded earlier; therefore, Major Pye was in command. The reports of Civil War generals routinely gave credit to regimental colonels whether they deserved it or not, and the reports equally routinely praised the valor of the generals' personal staffs, though they were not nearly as exposed as the enlisted men and the company-grade officers. No word in the records was so overused as "gallant."

<sup>48</sup> Doubleday's report, *OR*, 1:254; Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Frank Callenda, *The 14th Brooklyn Regiment in the Civil War* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2013), discussing the Fourteenth Brooklyn and the Sixth Wisconsin side by side at Gainesville, 71; Antietam, 91; Fitzhugh Crossing, 120–21; Gettysburg, July 1 afternoon, 145–46; and Culp's Hill, 157.

the "red-legged devils" of the Fourteenth, who (a) attacked first, (b) captured the flag, (c) captured the regimental commander, (d) captured the bulk of the prisoners, (e) charged the hottest fire coming from the best defensive position of the line, and (f) attacked the most experienced of Davis's regiments.

### How Important Was It?

And the result of all this? Together with the stand of the Iron Brigade across the turnpike, it stalled the initial Confederate momentum. It wrecked Davis's brigade. The repulse, temporary though it was, made the Confederates more cautious and less aggressive. Most importantly, it bought precious time for the Eleventh Corps to come up into the lines, with other Federal units hurrying after.

If the Sixth Wisconsin and its New York comrades had not carried the hour, Davis's brigade could have rolled up the rest of Wadsworth's division by the flank and moved on into the town before more Yank divisions could come up. It might not have assured a Rebel victory, but it would have given them a much better chance to take the crucial high ground south of town at Cemetery Ridge the first day. The battle of the Round Tops was probably the critical encounter of the whole battle but it might not have taken place at all if the Confederate assault had rolled the First Corps on the morning of July 1.

General Doubleday was not exaggerating when he wrote his report of the encounter:

This preliminary battle . . . had the most important bearing on the results of the next two days, as it enabled the whole army to come up and re-enforce the admirable position to which we had retreated [the high ground at Cemetery Hill]. Had we retired earlier in the day, without co-operation with the other parts of the army, the enemy by a vigorous pursuit might have penetrated between the corps of Sickles and Slocum, and have either crushed them in detail or flung them off in eccentric directions.<sup>50</sup>

Rufus Dawes later reflected that "we had lost the ground on which we had fought, we had lost our commander and our comrades,<sup>51</sup> but our fight had

<sup>50</sup> Doubleday's report, *OR*, 1:252.

<sup>51</sup> Meredith was wounded and no longer able to command; all the Iron Brigade regiments had suffered over 50 percent casualties.

held the Cemetery Hill and forced the decision for history that the crowning battle of the war should be at Gettysburg.”<sup>52</sup>

In a near-run conflict like Gettysburg almost any element could be considered decisive. Surely the fight at the railroad cut was one such element.

In summary:

- The whole Second Mississippi, or even half of it, was *not* captured in the railroad cut.
- The railroad cut was *not* as much a trap as suggested, except maybe for the men of the Forty-Second Mississippi, who mostly escaped anyway.
- In this particular encounter, the Fourteenth Brooklyn was less a factor than its colonel claimed. Indeed, it failed to block the west end of the cut, which it could have and should have done.
- The retreat of the Fifty-Fifth North Carolina, which had its left more or less anchored near the Sheads Woods, was a decisive Southern error. Did Joseph Davis lose his nerve?
- The valor and discipline of the Sixth Wisconsin won the fight, but at terrible cost. Dawes essentially ran a successful bluff on Blair—the

<sup>52</sup> Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 179–80.

battle lines were evenly matched and Dawes took the initiative: “I have always congratulated myself on getting the first word. . . . Surrender or I will fire.”<sup>53</sup> Some of his men may have been able to back up the threat, but this was hand-to-hand fighting, mainly with rifle butts and bayonets. There could not have been many loaded muskets in the Sixth by this time, even granted reloading on the run.

- The honor of making the right decisions should go to Dawes and Doubleday, along with a tip of the Hardee hat to Adjutant Brooks.
- The charge of Dawes and the Sixth Wisconsin on July 1 was as heroic, dramatic, and important as the stand of Chamberlain and the Twentieth Maine on July 2.

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<sup>53</sup> Dawes, *Full Blown Yankee*, 169.