



PROJECT MUSE®

Early Contemporary Accounts on the Fate of Confederate Brig.
Gen. Richard Brooke Garnett in the Battle of Gettysburg

Emmanouil Skoufos

Gettysburg Magazine, Number 58, January 2018, pp. 85-94 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2018.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/682818>

Early Contemporary Accounts on the Fate of Confederate Brig. Gen. Richard Brooke Garnett in the Battle of Gettysburg

EMMANOUIL SKOUFOS

"A thousand fell when Kemper led;
A thousand died where Garnett bled:
In blinding flame and strangling smoke
The remnant through the batteries broke
And crossed the works with Armistead."¹

The events of the last day of the battle of Gettysburg, July 3, 1863, which are known as Pickett's Charge, and Brig. Gen. Richard Brooke Garnett's role in them, do not need enumeration since many pages have been used in describing them and they are deeply engrained in the American history lore. However, a lot of the reports, accounts, and testimonies that were used to compose the collective story of what happened in Pickett's Charge were not contemporary and even eyewitnesses appear confused and conflicted. There is a very good reason. There was too much noise and smoke, and projectiles were too plentiful to allow a person be perfectly aware of his surroundings and have the ability to describe what happened with clarity even moments later, let alone decades later when most of those accounts are created. Maj. Gen. George Pickett's division was decimated. Pickett himself did not leave an official report, after Gen. Robert E. Lee rejected his first official report because he did not like what it said. When Lee told him to rewrite it, the division commander did not bother to oblige.²

The commanding officer of Garnett's brigade, after the events of July 3, was Maj. Charles S. Peyton of the Nineteenth Virginia Infantry who composed the official report for the brigade five days later, on

July 9th, in the Confederate camp near Williamsport, Maryland. His words are the closest to a contemporary eyewitness account we have, by a participant, so they are presented here intact to describe what he witnessed:

At 2,30 p. m., the artillery fire having to some extent abated, the order to advance was given, first by Major-General Pickett in person, and repeated by General Garnett with promptness, apparent cheerfulness, and alacrity. The brigade moved forward at quick time. The ground was open, but little broken, and from 800 to 1,000 yards from the crest whence we started to the enemy's line. The brigade moved in good order, keeping up its line almost perfectly, notwithstanding it had to climb three high post and rail fences, behind the last of which the enemy's skirmishers were first met and immediately drive in. Moving on, we soon met the advance line of the enemy, lying concealed in the grass on the slope, about 100 yards in front of his second line, which consisted of a stone wall about breast high, running nearly parallel to and about 30 paces from the crest of the hill, which was lined with their artillery. The first line referred to above, after offering some resistance, was completely routed, and driven in confusion back to the stone wall. Here we captured some prisoners, which were ordered to the rear without a guard. Having routed the enemy here, General Garnett ordered the brigade forward, which it promptly obeyed, loading and firing as it advanced. Up to this time we had suffered but little from the enemy's batteries, which apparently had been much crippled previous to our advance, with the exception of one posted on

¹ Luther William Minnigh, *Gettysburg: "What They Did Here": Profusely Illustrated Historical Guide Book* (Gettysburg: N.A. Meligakes, 1922), 60.

² Edward Porter Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: a Critical Narrative* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 429.



Often attributed as a picture of Richard Garnett, this is a picture of his cousin R. S. Garnett. To the author's knowledge there are no surviving pictures of Dick Garnett or his twin brother William.

the mountain, about 1 mile to our right, which enfiladed nearly our entire line with fearful effect, sometimes as many as 10 men being killed and wounded by the bursting of a single shell. From the point it had first routed the enemy, the brigade moved rapidly forward toward the stone wall, under a galling fire both from artillery and

infantry, the artillery using grape and canister. We were now within about 75 paces of the wall, unsupported on the right and left, General Kemper being some 50 or 60 yards behind and to the right, and General Armistead coming up in our rear. General Kemper's line was discovered to be lapping on ours, when, deeming it advisable

to have the line extended on the right to prevent being flanked, a staff officer rode back to the general to request him to incline to the right. General Kemper not being present [perhaps wounded at the time], Captain [W. T.] Fry, of his staff, immediately began his exertions to carry out the request, but, in consequence of the eagerness of the men in pressing forward, it was impossible to have the order carried out. Our line, much shattered, still kept up the advance until within about 20 paces of the wall,

when, for a moment, it recoiled under the terrific fire that poured into our ranks both from their batteries and from their sheltered infantry. At this moment, General Kemper came up on the right and General Armistead in rear, when the three lines, joining in concert, rushed forward with unyielding determination and an apparent spirit of laudable rivalry to plant the Southern banner on the wall of the enemy. His strongest and last line was instantly gained; the Confederate battle-flag waved over his defenses, and the fighting over the wall became hand to hand, and of the most desperate character; but more than half having already fallen, our line was found too weak to rout the enemy. We hoped for a support on the left [which had started simultaneously with ourselves], but hoped in vain. Yet a small remnant remained in desperate strug-



Brig. Gen. James Kemper. Although initially reported as killed or mortally wounded, he was the only one of Pickett's brigade commanders to survive the charge. National Archives and Records Administration.

gle, receiving a fire in front, on the right, and on the left, many even climbing over the wall, and fighting the enemy in his own trenches until entirely surrounded; and those who were not killed or wounded were captured, with the exception of about 300 who came off slowly, but greatly scattered, the identity of every regiment being entirely lost, and every regimental commander killed or wounded. The brigade went into action with 1,287 men and about 140 officers, as shown by the report of the previous evening, and sustained a loss, as the list of casualties will show, of 941 killed, wounded, and missing, and

it is feared, from all the information received, that the majority (those reported missing) are either killed or wounded. It is needles, perhaps, to speak of conspicuous gallantry where all behaved so well. Each and every regimental commander displayed a cool bravery and daring that not only encouraged their own commands, but won the highest admiration from all those who saw them. They led their regiments in the fight, and showed, by their conduct, that they only desired their men to follow where they were willing to lead. But of our cool, gallant, noble brigade commander it may not be out of place to speak. Never had the brigade been better handled, and never has it done better service in the field of battle. There was scarcely an officer or man in the command whose attention was not attracted by the cool and handsome bearing of General Garnett,



Brig. Gen. Henry Hunt, Chief of Artillery for the Army of the Potomac, knew Garnett before the war. National Archives and Records Administration.

who, totally devoid of excitement or rashness, rode immediately in rear of his advancing line, endeavoring by his personal efforts, and by the aid of his staff, to keep his line well closed and dressed. He was shot from his horse while near the center of the brigade, within about 25 paces of the stone wall. This gallant officer was too well known to need further mention.³

³ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896) Series I, Volume 27, Chapter 29, Part 2, 385–88 .

Major Payton mentions that all he sees is Garnett getting “shot from his horse” and nothing further regarding his fate. Arguably, individuals at the Union side that were closer to Garnett after he was shot would be the one that would better know his fate. And the early Union reports indicate that he was shot and wounded, but escaped. The correspondent of the *New York World* penned, in a report dated “Headquarters Army of Potomac, July, 3, 7–1/4 PM” that “Dick Garnett’s brigade surrendered almost entire, but Garnett himself, by the aid of two of his men,

succeeded, though wounded, in making his escape.” This report appeared in several Union newspapers.⁴

The same report was also published in the *New York Herald* and distributed further west.⁵ An Associated Press correspondence, published the same day and appeared in the July 6 edition of Washington’s *Evening Star*, also indicates that Garnett was hurt but escaped.⁶ This suggests that this was the official position of the Union Army, about three-and-a-half hours after the conclusion of Pickett’s charge. This view is reinforced by a July 11 reference by the *Big Blue Union* of Marysville, Kansas, of a “semi-official report,” dated 5:00 p.m. on July 3, which says that “Garnett himself was wounded and barely made his escape.”⁷ Thus the first indications from the Union side, at 5:00 p.m. and 7:15 p.m. of July 3 corroborated what Major Payton witnessed, that Garnett was hurt, but they provide additional insight, which Payton could not possibly have witnessed while he was rushing back to the Confederate line after the failed attack. Namely, that Garnett was alive and escaped capture by the Union Army, with or without the aid of two men.

In 1870, Walter Harrison, of Pickett’s staff, describes a post-war discussion with Henry Hunt who was the Union Chief of Artillery at Gettysburg and “an old companion and friend” of Dick Garnett, who confided to Harrison that “he made a diligent search in person” for his body on July 4 but could not find it.⁸ However, other bodies, like those of Colonels Hodges and Edmonds were identified “by papers found on their persons” that day.⁹

Similarly, the early Confederate opinion was that Garnett was wounded. In a report dated from Winchester on July 7, the *Western Sentinel* correspondent indicates that “Gens. Armistead, Barksdale, Garnett and Kemper are reported wounded.”¹⁰ The *Richmond Enquirer* of July 8 said that “Generals Ar-

mistead, Barksdale, Kemper, Garnett, Scales, Blenker and Jameson are wounded.”¹¹ The July 11 edition of the Wheeling, Virginia, *Daily Intelligencer* quotes a *Richmond Dispatch* report of July 7 saying, “Gen. Lee defeated the enemy in the battle of Friday last, but we lost 4000 prisoners. Gen. Barksdale of Miss., and Gen. Garnett of Va., were killed, and General Hood of Texas was wounded.” The same report also falsely indicates that General Pickett was wounded.¹² This was the first mention of Garnett as killed in the Confederate press. The next day, July 8, the *Alexandria Gazette* indicated that “Gens Barksdale and Garnett were killed.”¹³ This is the first time a Union newspaper account suggests that Garnett was killed, likely having the *Richmond Dispatch* report of the previous day as its source.

Even later accounts by newspaper correspondents who travelled with the retreating Confederate army were contradictory. For example *The Abingdon Virginian* on July 10 published that “Generals Barksdale, Garnett and Kemper were killed.”¹⁴ Then, on July 14, *Staunton Spectator* published the following: “We are pained to learn that portions of our army suffered very severely in these fights. Garnett’s, Barksdale, and Kemper’s brigades were probably the greatest sufferers. These three Generals were killed; and we learn that in Garnett’s Brigade every Colonel, Lieut. Colonel and Major was either killed or wounded.”¹⁵ Both reports imply and assume that everyone who was missing in action was killed. This was proved false, at least for Kemper. To further the confusion, the Yorkville Enquirer on July 17 wrote the following:

Through a letter from Colonel Norman Beverly we have some intelligence. After three unsuccessful attempts had been made to storm the enemy’s internments on Friday, this division [Pickett’s] was ordered to do the work. They stormed and took but were unable to hold their breastworks. Their loss was very heavy. Every field officer except Gen. Pickett and one Colonel was killed, wounded or captured. Gens. Kemper and Garnett are certainly killed. Gen. Armistead was

4 See, for example, *North Branch Democrat*, Tunkhannock, PA, July 8, 1863, 2; *The Daily Green Mountain Freeman*, Montpelier, VT, July 11, 1863, 1; *Daily Ohio Statesman*, Columbus, OH, July 7, 1863, 1.

5 See *The Smoky Hill and Republican Union*, Junction City, KS, July 11, 1863, 2.

6 *Evening Star*, Washington DC, July 6, 1863, 2.

7 *The Big Blue Union*, Marysville, KS, July 11, 1863, 2; see also *Daily Alta California*, San Francisco, CA, July 7, 1863, 3.

8 Hunt served with Garnett at Fort Leavenworth in 1858. Then Captain (Brevet Major) Hunt was commanding Company M of the Second Artillery while Garnett was commanding company K of the Sixth infantry, with both stationed there according to *The New York Herald*, January 12, 1858, 2.

9 Walter Harrison, *Pickett’s Men. A Fragment of War History* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1870), 184–85.

10 *Western Sentinel*, Winston-Salem, NC, July 17, 1863, 1.

11 As reported in *The Daily Evansville Journal*, Evansville, IN, July 11, 1863, 3.

12 *Daily Intelligencer*, Wheeling, VA, July 11, 1863, 3. Wheeling is of course now in West Virginia.

13 *Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, DC, July 8, 1863, 2.

14 *The Abingdon Virginian*, July 10, 1863, 3.

15 *Staunton Spectator*, Staunton, VA, July 14, 1863, 2.

wounded and taken prisoner.¹⁶

Of course there was no Col. Norman Beverly in either the Union or Confederate armies at Gettysburg. An undated account of a correspondent of the *Petersburg Express*, published on the July 21 edition of the *Charlotte, NC, Western Democrat*, finally indicates that “General Garnett was killed, Gen. Armistead mortally wounded, and several, other Generals wounded,” which has been the traditional rendering of the events.¹⁷

The only official report from the Union side regarding Garnett’s fate is that of Col. Normal J. Hall (maybe the aforementioned Col. Norman Beverly?) who commanded a brigade that was at the center of Maj. Gen. Winfield Hancock’s Second Corps. His brigade was composed by 7th Michigan, 42nd New York, 20th Massachusetts, 19th Massachusetts, and 59th New York, and was situated right at The Angle that was traditionally thought to be the attack point of Garnett’s and Armistead’s brigades. Based on this, Hall was in one of the best, if not the best position to tell of Garnett’s fate. In his official report, dated July 17, 1863, a full two weeks after the event, he indicates that Garnett “was captured.”¹⁸ His report supports the first “semi-official” report by the Union army to the newspaper correspondents noting the aided escape of Garnett, which occurred presumably after being captured, thus the use of the term “escaped” and not “avoided capture” in that report, since one cannot escape, unless first cap-



Col. Normal J. Hall commanded a brigade defending the area Garnett attacked. US Army Heritage and Education Center.

tured. Potentially Hall may have confused Garnett with Armistead who was indeed captured in the area of Hall’s responsibility, but this is unlikely because Armistead died quickly after his capture, and Hall had enough time to know and report him as mortally wounded by July 17 when he wrote his report. Hall was too young to know either Garnett or Armistead by sight from his antebellum West Point or Army service days since he graduated

from the Military Academy in 1859, while Garnett graduated in 1841 and Armistead resigned in 1838.

In Robert E. Lee’s first official report to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, dated the day after Pickett’s Charge, July 4, 1863, he indicated that “Generals Garnett and Armistead are missing.”¹⁹ This was the correct assessment from his point of view because neither returned to the Confederate lines nor was either reported dead. Eventually Federal reports regarding the demise of Armistead changed his official status to mortally wounded. On July 31, 1863, in his more extensive report, Lee informed Adjutant and Inspector General Samuel Cooper that Garnett was “killed.”²⁰ Lee’s position on Garnett’s fate was unchanged in his subsequent report to Cooper, dated January 1864, regarding the whole Gettysburg Campaign.²¹ Without Garnett’s body being found, what extra information did Lee acquire in about a month’s time that elapsed between his two reports to reach a new conclusion about Garnett’s fate?

¹⁶ *Yorkville Enquirer*, Yorkville, South Carolina, July 22, 1863, 2.

¹⁷ *The Western Democrat*, Charlotte, NC, July 21, 1863, 2.

¹⁸ OR, 27.1:440.

¹⁹ OR, 27.2:298.

²⁰ OR, 27.2:310.

²¹ OR, 27.2:321.



Lt. Col. Arthur J. Fremantle in the 1880s. Library of Congress.

As far as other official Confederate reports go, Longstreet, in his account dated July 27, 1863, indicates that “Brig. General R. B. Garnett was killed while gallantly leading his brigade in the assault upon the enemy’s position upon the Cemetery Hill.”²² This could be the source of Lee’s July 31 report. Lee rejected Pickett’s original official report so we do not know what it said, if anything, regarding Garnett’s fate. Peyton’s report has Garnett hit, saying nothing further about his fate. There is no mention of Garnett in the reports of the commanding officers of Armistead’s and Kemper’s brigades. Was Garnett presumed dead because he was reported as hit and did not resurface? Was Longstreet influenced by the *Richmond Dispatch*’s story of July 7, which was the first to pronounce Garnett dead? What was the source of that *Richmond Dispatch* story? Thirty years later, in a piece that calls July 3 one “of the saddest days in his life” that caused “terrible and hopeless slaughter,” Longstreet with certainty indicates that “as the division threw itself against the Federal line Garnett fell and expired.”²³ The British observer, Lt. Col. Arthur J. Fremantle, in his diary that was published in 1864, mentions that before 6:00 p.m. they “heard that Generals Garnett and Armistead were killed, and General Kemper mortally wounded; also, that Pickett’s division had only one field-officer unhurt.”²⁴ However, he offers no explanation on how they “heard,” who the messenger was, and why Lee did not include it in his first official report that was written after “they heard” on July 4? Furthermore, what Fremantle reports was wrong: Armistead was wounded but alive at that time, dying later, and Kemper was wounded, but not mortally. Based on this, there is no ground to believe the report of Garnett’s fate as true.

The early data in eyewitness accounts and reports we have tell the following story about the sequence of events regarding Garnett’s fate in Gettysburg:

Garnett was hit (eyewitness report of Confederate Major Peyton of Garnett’s brigade, written six days after the event).

²² OR, 27.2:363.

²³ James Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg” in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: Century Company, 1888), III, 339–54.

²⁴ Arthur J. Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States: April-June 1863* (New York: John Bradburn, 1864), 270.

Garnett was captured (official report of Union Colonel Hall who was leading his troops in the area attacked by Garnett’s brigade, written two weeks after the event).

Though wounded, Garnett escaped (From a “semiofficial” report given to newspaper correspondents by the Union army at 5:00 p.m., within an hour after the end of Pickett’s charge. This report corroborates both of the previous eyewitness reports, indicating that he was hit/and wounded and captured/but escaped. A *New York World* correspondent report from the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, written on 7:15 p.m., just two-and-a-quarter hours afterward adds more detail about Garnett’s escape, saying that he “was aided by two of his men.” If this last detail was not added for dramatic reasons, it could potentially provide an interesting twist to the story.)

Presumptions of Garnett’s death, especially in the absence of his body, were thus assumptions by the Confederates due to his non-return to their lines. Or, could they be intentional misinformation, perhaps with the tantalizing possibility of being initiated by Garnett himself and delivered by either or both of the two of his men who reportedly aided him in his escape. Unfortunately, these assumptions or misinformation became the official position about Garnett’s fate at Gettysburg. We have no additional quality data about what happened to Dick Garnett that day other than what was just mentioned: He was hit, wounded, captured and escaped—potentially with the aid of two of his men. The identity of these two men is difficult to determine, but there are potential suspects.

The Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond has a pair of field glasses, identified as Richard Brooke Garnett’s, and donated by his niece, Clarence Garnett. They were given to her by a “Lieutenant Johnston” who allegedly took them from his body.²⁵ This twentieth century claim, which also includes Johnston saying that he had seen Garnett fall within feet of the stone wall, would place Johnston at Garnett’s body within feet of enemy fire that Johnston would have had to avoid, as he would the oncoming bayonet charge of Armistead’s bri-

²⁵ *Catalogue of the Confederate Museum of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society* (Richmond, VA: Ware & Duke, Printer, 1905), 79.



Gen. George H. Steuart believed he found Garnett's lost sword in a Baltimore pawn shop. Library of Congress.

gade behind him, and to move through them, untouched, back to the safety of the Confederate line, with his prize. This sounds very improbable.

Another improbable twentieth century account of Garnett's death, which borderlines fantasy, is that of James W. Clay, a private in Company G of the 18th Virginia Infantry, in an article published in the *Baltimore Sun* and reprinted in the *Southern Historical Society Papers* in 1905.²⁶ During Pickett's charge, Clay claims that he was struck by a shell fragment on the forehead about 100 yards from the enemy line and, semi-conscious, he "stumbled and fell among rocks severely injuring his knee and preventing further locomotion." In that state, he claims that he saw Garnett "gallantly waving his hat" by the stone wall and he remembers the hat being a black felt hat with a silver cord. He then "lost sight of him." Then he claims that he was joined by Captain Campbell who was hit in the arm and indicates that, after a "life and death struggle" that lasted about fifteen minutes, two Federal deserters came to them and asked for help to get to the Confederate lines. This was "obvious for mutual safety." They related the news that the "brigade general had been killed, having been shot through the body at the waist by a grape shot." He also adds that right before the deserters arrived, Garnett's horse was "galloping towards" them with a "huge gash in the right shoulder, evidently struck by a piece of shell" and jumped over him and Captain Campbell. In the same piece Clay claims that he served as Garnett's "orderly for ten days a month or more" and he knew him "well and personally." He also describes his eyes "black as coals" and adds that Garnett "wore a black beard and hair rather long," which are both incorrect since Garnett was blonde with blue eyes and either fully shaven or had a "close cut" beard.²⁷ In addition to this falsehood, this second or third hand account by shell-struck and semi-conscious Clay not witnessing Garnett's death, but being told that his general was dead by Federal deserters is, if not unbelievable, improbable and unreliable to say the least.

²⁶ Winfield Peters, "The Lost Sword of Gen. R. B. Garnett (who fell at Gettysburg) returned to his niece, Mrs. John B. Purcell," *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Vol. 33 (1905), 26-32.

²⁷ Peters, "Lost Sword," 26-32.

After the war ended, a US artillery officer's sword, reported to be inscribed "R. B. Garnett, U.S.A.," was found and purchased in a Baltimore pawn shop by fellow Confederate Gen. George H. Steuart. After Steuart's death in 1903, his nephew, who assumed that it was Dick Garnett's sword gave it to Garnett's niece, the wife of Col. John B. Purcell.²⁸ Both the presumed travels of the sword from Gettysburg to Baltimore, as well as the reason for an infantry officer to carry an artillery sword are a mystery. According to the same source, the sword needed restoration that was done by the United Confederate Veterans in Richmond. Could possibly the sword belong to another Confederate officer, dead well before Gettysburg, who served in the US Artillery from 1841 to 1848, before transferring to infantry and thus was issued an artillery sword with his name and "USA" next to it, and could that be Dick's dear cousin, Robert Selden Garnett? And was the sword corroded to a point that the very similar gothic letter's "R.S." were interpreted as "R.B." and restored that way? Was it taken as a relic by soldier on the field who kept it hidden from his superiors and pawned it after the war? Was it really Bob Garnett's and its owner had no use for it after he received his infantry commission and a new sword? Or was Baltimore Dick Garnett's next stop after Gettysburg, perhaps to board the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad? The last two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. As far as the ownership of the sword itself is concerned, the greater likelihood is that the sword was indeed issued to US artillery officer Robert Selden Garnett, was then misidentified as Dick Garnett's, and the second initial was "restored" to a B instead of the very similar, in gothic script, S.

.....
Emmanouil Skoufos received his PhD in Biochemistry from the University of Minnesota, his BA in Chemistry and Biology from Grinnell College, and completed a Fellowship in Medical Informatics at Yale University. Credited with more than thirty-five publications, he has been using stringent scientific criteria to test hypotheses in biomedical sciences and he is attempting to do the same in answering historical questions. This article is based on a chapter of his biography of Richard Brooke Garnett, which is a work in progress.

²⁸ James Longhorne to his father, December 7, 1961, Longhorne Letters, mentioned in James I. Robertson, Jr. *The Stonewall Brigade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 55.