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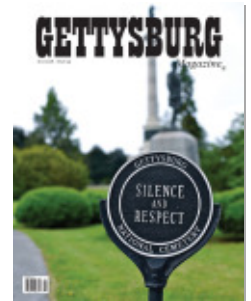
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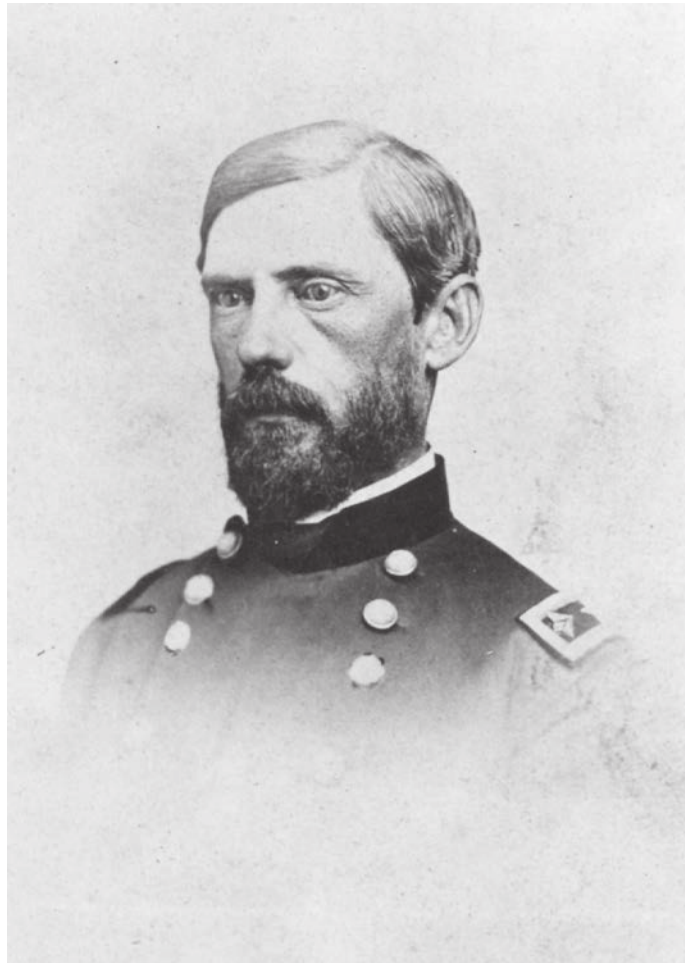
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# Of Cupolas and Sharpshooters

Major General John Fulton Reynolds and Popular Gettysburg Myths

MITCHELL G. KLINGENBERG

To watch the iconic 1993 Civil War film *Gettysburg* and to see its portrayal of Gen. John Fulton Reynolds is to sense that the Union general commanded a place of preeminence in the history of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>1</sup> Filmmakers depicted Gen. Reynolds as both architect and hero of the first day's action. In the film, Sergeant Jerome, an aide to Brig. Gen. John Buford, spots Reynolds riding hard and fast to the base of the Lutheran Theological Seminary upon Seminary Ridge. Set to a rousing music score, the scene signals the arrival of salvation for Buford's embattled and hard-worn cavalry brigades: "Thank God," mumbles the grizzly and fierce Buford as he wipes sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. Here, finally, was the Union commander who had the lead of Meade's left wing



Maj. Gen. John Reynolds. National Archives and Records Administration.

which featured some of the most veteran units in the Army of the Potomac. Not long after the arrival of Gen. Reynolds the best Federal infantry would deploy along McPherson's Ridge, "surprise Harry Heth," and deprive converging Confederate corps of high ground—the coveted position of Cemetery Hill.<sup>2</sup> Filmmakers adapted the scene of Reynolds's arrival from Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the Battle of Gettysburg, *The Killer Angels*, in which the author wrote, of Reynolds's arrival upon the field, Buford "looked toward the south—and there was

Reynolds. He was coming at a gallop across the fields . . . a line of aides strung out behind him,

<sup>1</sup> *Gettysburg*, directed by Ronald F. Maxwell (1993; TNT Originals, Inc.), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> In *Gettysburg*, Reynolds quips to Buford, as they ride forward to guide the First Corps as it deploys, "let's go surprise Harry Heth." *Gettysburg*, DVD. See, also, John Rothman, "Gettysburg," *John Rothman: Actor, REELS (Clips and shorts)* (web): <http://johnrothmanactor.com/reel>.

cutting across the field to save time. No mistaking him: matchless rider gliding over rail fences in parade-ground precision, effortless motion, always a superb rider.”<sup>3</sup>

Reynolds therefore arrived at the base of the Lutheran Seminary as a killer angel, one ready to fly swiftly with a fiery sword to the defense of his native state and his family, which lay dispersed not one day’s hard ride from the field of battle. His death at the hand of a Rebel sharpshooter posted in Herbst’s Woodlot, which the filmmakers portray in a highly dramatic and romanticized fashion, also signals that Reynolds was a man of supreme importance, for the battle seems to stop around him after he falls. His aides gather around, the musical score assumes an ominous melody, and soldiers rush to his body and look on.<sup>4</sup> These two scenes are powerful for their ability to portray lasting Gettysburg myths that have endured into the twenty-first century concerning Reynolds at the Battle of Gettysburg.

This article assesses two critical events that transpired on the morning of July 1, 1863, at the Battle of Gettysburg and remain inextricably linked to mythic interpretations of that fight: first, the purported arrival of the general at the Lutheran Theological Seminary; and second, his death in the morning struggle. I argue that though narratives of Reynolds’s arrival at the Seminary and his death at the hand of a sharpshooter remain firmly entrenched in Civil War memory, the historical evidence does not confirm these events beyond reasonable doubt. Circumstances surrounding the arrival of Gen. Reynolds on the battlefield are less certain than their triumphal portrayal in literature and film, and while it is possible that the general arrived at the base of the Lutheran Theological Seminary to hold a council of war with Gen. Buford, the available evidence suggests that Reynolds met Buford closer to the battlefield. Like unto this, the circumstances that surround the death of Gen. Reynolds remain clouded and somewhat inconsistent from Civil War genre to Civil War genre, a remarkable fact given the increase in historical scholarship concerning the military history of the American Civil War

(generally) and the voluminous literature that chronicles the Battle of Gettysburg (specifically). A myth that emerged immediately from the battle—before the fight was even through—held that Reynolds was felled by a Confederate sharpshooter. This myth has persisted in old histories, in popular representations, and it endures in prominent Civil War military histories published even in 2016.<sup>5</sup> In all likelihood, however, the bullet that killed Reynolds was fired not by a sharpshooter (the word “sniper” had not yet entered the American military lexicon), but was one of many in a volley that erupted from the ranks of James Archer’s Tennessee Brigade.<sup>6</sup> To prove which bullet killed Reynolds is impossible, and a definitive answer is of little historical consequence. But no study has traced extensively the remarkable divergence in historical interpretations of what exactly happened to Reynolds at the moment of his death.

### Reynolds, Buford, and the Cupola at the Lutheran Theological Seminary

“What goes, John?” Then, a response from Gen. John Buford, standing in the cupola atop the Lutheran Theological Seminary on Seminary Ridge: “the Devil’s to pay!” This classic exchange, accepted in most historical accounts of the battle, marked the beginning of the council of war that Reynolds held with General Buford shortly before the deployment of the First Corps.<sup>7</sup> Despite its wide acceptance in the historical literature, and even in film, there is some reason to doubt that the verbal exchange occurred—and even that the meeting between the two generals occurred at the seminary at all. In fact, given the available evidence, it seems most probable that the meeting of the two generals occurred nearer to McPherson’s Ridge.

The dramatic account of the meeting between Gens. Reynolds and Buford traces to a version of

5 One shooting enthusiast, in a popular history of sharpshooting in Civil War combat, passionately denounces so-called “revisionists” who look to “tinker” with history in disproving the sharpshooter narrative: “that [Reynolds] was the victim of a sharpshooter’s bullet is almost universally accepted,” claims the author. John L. Plaster, *Sharpshooting in the Civil War* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 2009), 123.

6 Jonathan M. Steplyk, “Citizen-Soldiers and Killing in Civil War Combat” (dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2015), 172. I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of Dr. Steplyk, a dutiful colleague and faithful friend, in helping to guide and inform my inquiry into Civil War sharpshooting.

7 *Gettysburg*, DVD; Most accounts of the initial exchange indicate that Reynolds shouted, upward to Buford, “What’s the matter, John?” See, for instance, Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 143; Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky*, 52.

3 Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 72.

4 *Gettysburg*, DVD.

events recounted first in a letter to Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, and then to a more thorough reminiscence, published four years after the battle. Lt. Aaron Brainard Jerome, who served as signal officer to Brig. Gen. Buford on the morning of July 1, greatly admired his commander, and feared that the premature death of Buford in the autumn of 1863 might diminish memory of his the general in Gettysburg lore. To the end that the name of Buford would remain synonymous with glory, courage, and excellence in Gettysburg memory and myth, the signal officer penned a letter to Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock in which he implored the general, as one historian has put it, “to make certain that Buford’s role in the battle would not be forgotten.”<sup>8</sup> Then in 1868, Jerome contributed more developed reflections on the battle—and how he and his commander had helped to bring it on—in a volume published in New York by John Watts DePeyster, an inordinately wealthy New Yorker and a close friend of Gen. Daniel Sickles. DePeyster, who had inherited over one million dollars from his father before his twenty-fifth year, was also a prolific military historian. Though he never graduated college (he attended Columbia College in New York), DePeyster published hundreds of pamphlets and essays on the subject of military history, which were read widely and with enthusiasm.<sup>9</sup>

Writing from New York in October of 1865, Jerome penned a letter to Hancock. His chief purpose was to remind the general of his late commander’s pivotal role in deciding the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg. “In all the parade that has taken place since [the battle],” lamented Jerome, “memories oratorical and poetical from Edward Everett to Gen. [Oliver Otis] Howard, have you not noticed that that your friend the heroic Buford has been nearly disregarded?” Then, as if Jerome had taken it upon himself to inform Hancock of all that had transpired at Gettysburg, the signal officer recounted how Reynolds had first arrived on the field and met Buford. The cavalry “held on with as stubborn a front as ever faced an enemy,” wrote Jerome, “when Gen. Reynolds and a few of his staff rode up on a gallop and hailed the General who was with



Lt. Aaron Brainard Jerome, US Signal Corps. National Archives and Records Administration.

me in the steeple.” Reynolds inquired about “how things were going on,” to which Buford replied matter-of-factly, “let’s go and see.” But the point of Jerome’s letter was hardly to communicate the facts—whatever those were. Jerome’s language betrays a deeper motive: the enshrinement of Buford in Gettysburg lore. And in the unlikely event that Hancock had missed his point, Jerome concluded, regarding Buford, “everyone knows that he ‘in his day’ was first and foremost.”<sup>10</sup>

Jerome was not finished. In his 1868 reminiscence of the battle at Gettysburg, Jerome wrote again of the engagement that developed on the morning of July 1 and of the circumstances that brought about the Buford-Reynolds meeting.

<sup>8</sup> Eric J. Wittenberg, “‘The Devil’s to Pay’: An Analysis of the Buford Manuscripts,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 15 (July 1996): 7–23, quotation at 7.

<sup>9</sup> Wittenberg, “‘The Devil’s to Pay’: An Analysis of the Buford Manuscripts,” 15.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of First Lt. Aaron Brainard Jerome to Major General Hancock, New York, 18 October 1865, in *The Bachelder Papers: Gettysburg in Their Own Words*, Vol. I, transcribed, edited and annotated by David L. and Audrey J. Ladd (Dayton, OH: Morningside House, 1994), 200–202.



Buford had dispatched Jerome, then a first lieutenant and signal officer for that division, with orders “to seek out the most prominent points and watch everything.” Buford, Jerome recalled, appeared very nervous. Some two hours after Confederate infantry under the command of Gen. A. P. Hill had engaged Buford’s cavalry, and as the ranks of Federal cavalry tired and began to give way, Jerome spotted the First Corps flag of General Reynolds at about one-and-a-half miles’ distance. Reynolds and his staff were racing at a full gallop, much in advance of the First Corps. Lt. Jerome sent word to General Buford immediately: “Reynolds, himself, will be here in five minutes, his corps is about a mile behind.” Upon receipt of the message, Buford raced to the Lutheran Seminary and ascended the cupola, where he watched anxiously and awaited the arrival of the wing commander. Reynolds reigned his mount, and “seeing Buford in the cupola, he cried out: ‘What’s the matter, John?’ ‘The devil’s to pay,’ said he (Buford).” Reynolds, in this account, also ascended the cupola to obtain a better field of vision for the battle that was developing at rapid pace. He inquired as to whether the rugged Federal cavalry could hold on for a while longer. “I reckon I can,” was General Buford’s reply. The two men descended the cupola to ride to the front and Reynolds, apparently summoning more than a little confidence for the fight to come, declared, “Let’s ride out and see all about it.”<sup>11</sup>

While Jerome’s 1865 and 1868 narratives reveal a certain consistency—Eric J. Wittenberg argues for the “striking” similarity of the two accounts—they are more remarkable for their subtle divergence and variation.<sup>12</sup> In the first place, Jerome makes no mention of Buford’s “The Devil’s to pay!” comment in his letter to General Hancock. Second, Jerome does not mention in his 1865 letter, as he does later in his account published in DePeyster’s history, that he rode to the front with the generals. Third, it is not altogether clear that Jerome possessed a firm command of memory, for how he re-presented the dialogue attributed to both generals varies from account to account. In his 1865 letter, Jerome at-

tributed the words, “let’s go and see” to Gen. Buford.<sup>13</sup> Later, in his 1868 account, Jerome wrote that “Reynolds then said, ‘Let’s ride out and see all about it.’”<sup>14</sup> Wittenberg is particularly keen in his analysis that Jerome sought glorification in both written records; his decision to overlook these inconsistencies and argue for the validity of the Jerome narratives, which Wittenberg justifies on account of the meticulous detail presented in both Jerome’s letter and in his published history in DePeyster’s 1868 volume, rests upon softer ground.<sup>15</sup>

Prominent historians have accepted, rejected, and demonstrated a certain ambivalence toward Jerome’s account of the cupola meeting. Edward Nichols, in his masterful biography of Reynolds, noted that “Buford saw the general from the cupola, where he had been watching the first of A. P. Hill’s divisions deploy along both sides of the Cashtown road. He started down the ladder and was met by Reynolds part way” (whether the generals exchanged pleasantries on the stairs, from atop the seminary and within the cupola and below upon the ground, or up in the cupola itself, is also an unanswered question and a point of variation in the historical accounts). Citing the high praise that Jerome received from General Buford following the battle, Nichols concludes, “there seems to be good reason for accepting Jerome’s version” of the Buford-Reynolds meeting and the resulting council of war.<sup>16</sup> Wittenberg refrains from wholly endorsing Jerome’s account of the meeting, but hardly abstains from making an historical determination. “The Jerome version,” writes Wittenberg, “leaves the least room for doubt,” and “seems too detailed for it to have been entirely false.” All told, “the first meeting between the two Union commanders most likely took place at the Seminary, as related by Jerome.”<sup>17</sup> In his recent Lincoln Prize-winning history of the Battle of Gettysburg, Allen C. Guelzo channels

11 Aaron Brainard Jerome, “Buford in the Battle of Oak Ridge: The First Day’s Fight at Gettysburg, A.M. Wednesday, 1st July, 1863,” in J. Watts DePeyster, ed., *The Decisive Conflicts of the Late Civil War, Or Slaveholders’ Rebellion: Battles Morally, Territorially, and Militarily Decisive* (New York: MacDonald & Co., 1868), 152–53.

12 Wittenberg, “‘The Devil’s to Pay’: An Analysis of the Buford Manuscripts,” 19.

13 Letter of First Lt. Aaron Brainard Jerome to Major General Hancock, New York, 18 October 1865, in *The Bachelier Papers*, Vol. I., 201.

14 Jerome, “Buford in the Battle of Oak Ridge: The First Day’s Fight at Gettysburg, A.M. Wednesday, 1st July, 1863,” 153.

15 Wittenberg, “An Analysis of the Buford Manuscripts,” 19, 21.

16 Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, 202, 251n17. For Buford’s praise of Jerome, see OR, 27:1930. Buford writes in Serial 43 that Jerome “was ever on the alert, and through his intrepidity and fine glasses on more than one occasion kept me advised of the enemy’s movements when no other means were available.” This report would seem to suggest, or at least imply, that Jerome and Buford kept personal contact throughout the battle, and might even have stood in the cupola together to watch the battle unfold. The report, however, is not conclusive with regard to the exact location of the meeting.

17 Wittenberg, “An Analysis of the Buford Manuscripts,” 21.



Gen. John Buford and his aides. From left, Bvt. Lt. Col. Myles Keogh, Maj. Gen. John Buford, Capt. Peter Penn Gaskell, Capt. C. W. Wadsworth, Lt. Col. A. P. Morrow. Library of Congress.

Wittenberg's interpretation in "The Devil's to Pay." Drawing liberally (and with no stated reservation) from Jerome's account, *Guelzo* chronicles how Buford made the cupola his observatory for the developing battle. *Guelzo* also notes that Buford "kept climbing up and down from the cupola spitting orders, riding out along the line of McPherson's Ridge to supervise the placement of Gamble's and Devin's brigades, then riding back to the seminary and climbing up to the cupola again."<sup>18</sup>

Edwin B. Coddington, whose 1968 study of the Battle of Gettysburg remains, in spite of its age, the definitive treatment in a voluminous

<sup>18</sup> *Guelzo, Gettysburg*, 139, 140, 517n1, 518n2.

literature of Civil War campaign histories, rejected outright the Jerome account—an account "dear to the heart of the romanticists"—and suggests that Reynolds found Buford on McPherson's (not Seminary) Ridge. Citing the Jerome account as suspect, and noting too that Jerome's version of events was less contemporary than the historical accounts from General Reynolds's staff, Coddington delivered another critique of the Jerome story, and his observation complicates further the traditional narrative. According to Coddington, the chronology, or the temporality, of the morning action on July 1, 1863, and the subsequent development of battle, makes it less plausible that

Buford observed the action from the cupola. It makes little sense to believe, wrote Coddington, that “when the situation was getting tight” shortly after 10:00 a.m., and when his brigades were nearly overwhelmed, that Buford would not have been present, personally, closer to the battlefield and in the thick of the action.<sup>19</sup>

Stephen Sears, who has authored a lucid and engaging history of the Battle of Gettysburg praised by battle enthusiasts, also distrusts the Jerome version. In *Gettysburg*, Sears writes that Reynolds and his staff galloped down the Chambersburg Pike searching desperately for Buford: “They found him on McPherson’s Ridge with his men,” Sears determines. He implies elsewhere in the text that Jerome’s deeper motive for enshrining the role Buford played in saving Gettysburg betrays his “dramatized” account, which is “filled with after-the-fact embellishments.” And to date, Sears has offered the most emphatic and decided opinion on the question which concerns the authenticity of the Jerome account. Simply put, Sears writes, the Jerome account “cannot be reconciled with the more contemporaneous accounts” of Reynolds’s aides.<sup>20</sup>

Less decided on the question is the standard biographer of John Buford, Edward G. Longacre, who has written widely on Gettysburg. Longacre does well to note that Jerome’s version of events is in contradiction with the post-war account of the battle that emerged from a citizen observer. This account offers another possibility altogether, which is that Buford and Reynolds met in the town of Gettysburg near the Blue Eagle hotel. Longacre’s assessment of Buford does not offer a final word on whether the meeting between his subject and General Reynolds occurred at the Lutheran Theological Seminary or whether it occurred elsewhere. It is silent, moreover, on the possibility that the two generals held their council of war on (or near) McPherson’s Ridge, which would have positioned both men nearer to the fighting.<sup>21</sup>

19 Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 682n14, 263, 682n14.

20 Sears, *Gettysburg*, 166, 560n14. It bears observation that in his recently published *Lincoln’s Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), Sears, without explanation in the notes, alters his interpretation of the Reynolds-Buford meeting and accepts Jerome’s version of events. See pp. 550, 827–828n34.

21 Edward G. Longacre, *General John Buford: A Military Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 192–93.

This variance in historical interpretation raises a pressing question: If the Jerome version of the meeting between Buford and Reynolds is not altogether reliable, then from what sources can the discerning historical critic piece together a more trustworthy narrative of how the two generals met on the field of battle? One possible course, since General Reynolds did not live to record a personal reminiscence of the battle himself, is to turn to the words and recollections of the men who served with him on the morning of July 1. But here too, the accounts do not offer decisive proof. Joseph G. Rosengarten, one of Reynolds’s aides, famously placed the historic meeting between the two commanders at the Lutheran Seminary cupola in the pages of the *New York Times*.<sup>22</sup> Rosengarten’s account is suspect on two counts: first, it appeared on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle; and second, Rosengarten, among all of Reynolds’s staff, worked most actively and publicly to commemorate his fallen commander in the post-war years. His account in the *Times*, chock full of embellishment, purposed clearly to heap praise on his former commander. Historians Coddington and Sears have concluded that the dramatized Jerome accounts, from which many Americans (and quite possibly Rosengarten) have derived their impressions of the Buford-Reynolds encounter, cannot square with the war memoirs and reminiscences of aides Charles H. Veil and Stephen M. Weld who rode with Reynolds to the battlefield. Both men kept memoirs remarkable for their specificity and measured senses of disinterestedness. Significantly, these men are conspicuously silent on the meeting between the two generals at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. Moreover, they are silent on how the meeting took place and they do not tell what the generals said to one another or determined about the intensifying fight. But they are not silent on the question of *where* the meeting occurred. To suggest otherwise, as several leading historians have done in no uncertain terms, invariably privileges the account of one observer who invites suspicion for his embellishment, and diminishes firsthand perspectives from officers closest to General Reynolds.

22 Rosengarten, “REYNOLDS, HERO OF THE FIRST DAY, BY ONE OF HIS STAFF: Major Joseph G. Rosengarten, Who Was Close to the Famous Union Commander Throughout the Fighting, Pays Tribute to the Man Who Paved the Way for the Federal Victory,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1913.



On April 7, 1864, Charles Henry Veil, who served as Reynolds's orderly at Gettysburg, dispatched a letter to D. McConaughy, Esq. McConaughy wrote to Veil on April 2 to inquire about those events that transpired at Gettysburg on July 1. Veil lamented that he could not meet with McConaughy in person (he had recently been to Gettysburg), and he stressed in his opening lines that a letter did not afford the best medium to communicate what he knew of the first day of battle, but he went on to describe in some detail how Reynolds arrived on the field. A close reading of Veil's letter reveals that its author devoted a particular attention to landmarks and sites. Veil recounts that Reynolds encamped "near a tavern" on the night before the battle. When Reynolds and his staff approached Gettysburg and had learned of the trouble along the Chambersburg Pike, they proceeded to the home of Mr. George. He noted too, that Gettysburg citizens seemed anxious when the general rode through the town. Significantly, for a writer who recorded events with an apparent eye for sites and place, Veil makes no mention of a meeting at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. Instead, Veil recounted how the general and his staff rode to the front, where they "found Genl [*sic*] Buford engaged" on McPherson's Ridge and in *front* of the Seminary.<sup>23</sup>

The *War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld* is also instructive in helping the historian to ascertain some sense of where Reynolds found Buford. Remarkable for its detail, the diary records a wealth of firsthand experiences that span the length of the war. Weld, an alumnus of Harvard College, was a meticulous note-taker. His letters include commentaries on the capabilities and qualities of Army of the Potomac commanders, including the vices of officers; they display a Victorian sensibility attuned to truth and adverse to immorality. What is more, Weld's letters to the home front evidence a remarkable transparency. In places of the diary, and in his correspondence, Weld entrusts his father with a knowledge of events otherwise known presumable only to the command of the Army of the Potomac. Weld joined the staff of Reynolds shortly before the Gettysburg Campaign following his disassocia-

tion with General Benham on account of that man's public intoxication, which had caused some scandal in the army. Still, Captain Weld and General Reynolds were not entirely unacquainted; the two men endured Confederate captivity at Libby Prison together in Richmond in 1862.

Weld's diary entry for July 1 details in clearer terms what the letter of Charles Veil establishes through implication. According to Weld, Reynolds and his staff departed Moritz Tavern at 8:00 a.m. only to encounter unfavorable roads, which the captain attributed to the "muggy" and "disagreeable" weather. A man on the outskirts of Gettysburg informed the general of the situation, which was not good, and that Confederate infantry were dislodging Buford's cavalry. What follows in the diary offers critical perspective: "General Reynolds went into the town on a fast gallop, through it, and a mile out on the other side." There, Weld noted, Reynolds "found General Buford and the cavalry engaging the enemy, who were advancing in strong force." Weld's firsthand account is therefore instructive, and one wishes he might have been present at Reynolds's side longer to record the events of that morning in even greater detail. But Reynolds selected Weld to ride posthaste to General Meade, camped some fourteen miles away, with news of the battle. That Reynolds selected Weld personally to ride for Meade enhances the credibility of the captain's account, for it implies that Reynolds possessed great confidence in Weld to relay the exact nature of the battle and conditions outside of Gettysburg to Meade.<sup>24</sup>

24 Stephen Minot Weld, *War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld, 1861–1865* (Riverside Press, 1912), 229, 230, 231.

Weld's diary, published in 1912, features an extended commentary on the 1 July 1863 entry. In this commentary Weld might have stated more definitively that Reynolds and Buford met at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. But the Union war veteran did precisely the opposite, and the effect of his diary, which benefited from even greater space and time for further reflection, does more to disprove the Jerome account than to verify the signal officer's version of events. To be sure, and to grant a shred of credibility to opposing claims, the *Weld Diary* does not conclusively disprove the Jerome version, and Weld's *Diary* even tells that General Reynolds and his staff "rode out and saw the Confederates' batteries going into position on Seminary Hill" which allows, perhaps, for the possibility that the meeting took place at the Seminary itself. But it is conspicuous that Weld, who in every other respect demonstrated a tremendous capacity for detail, omits the Lutheran Seminary from his narrative. And it is conspicuous too that he positions the meeting that occurred between Reynolds and Buford in spatial terms—Reynolds rode "a mile out on the other side [of Gettysburg]"—and does not reference a particular landmark.

Weld's *Diary* offers one further point of clarification that torpedoes the Jerome version, which is that Reynolds, after surveying Buford's lines slowly giving way, "rode back to the town, went into a field on the right of the road and talked two or three minutes with General Buford, and then called his staff around him" (p. 232).

23 Letter of Charles H. Veil to D. McConaughy Esq., 7 April 1864, *Peter Frederick Rothermel Papers, Brake Collection*, United States Army Heritage and Education Center.



While one cannot mistake these pieces of evidence for conclusive or definitive proof, taken together the accounts of Veil and Weld do significantly more to diminish the romantic account of the cupola meeting between Buford and Reynolds, and to invalidate the Jerome reflection from which that account is derived, than to establish his version of events. The more contemporaneous accounts of Veil and Weld—who were close to Reynolds on the morning of July 1 and who demonstrated a keen attention to detail—fail to mention the Lutheran Seminary as the site of the meeting. To be sure, one of Reynolds's aides, Capt. Joseph Rosengarten, did mention the cupola meeting, but his account appeared one-half century after the battle in the pages of the *New York Times*, and Rosengarten's account, like Jerome's, is suspect for its notes of embellishment.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore and as Coddington suggested, it is not logical nor does it seem consistent with the tenacious spirit and meticulous attention to detail characteristic of Buford, that the cavalry commander should have been considerably to the rear of his troops in the cupola at the Lutheran Seminary at their greatest moment of trial. At 10:00 a.m., the approximate hour in which Reynolds found Buford, the cavalryman's brigades had been engaged with the enemy for some time and were yielding ground to advancing Confederate infantry.<sup>26</sup> That Buford was significantly to the rear of his men as their positions collapsed to direct their delayed withdrawal is not impossible, but it is hardly probable.

## The Death of Reynolds

That Reynolds perished in the great fight at Gettysburg is at once shocking and not. Shocking, because of his quality as a commander and the effect his absence wrought on men yet engaged in the battle, and not, because of his demonstrated tendency in previous engagements of moving too

far to the front of action.<sup>27</sup> In this limited respect Reynolds invites some comparison to Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, a commander who required a close and perfect knowledge of battle, and a man for whom there stood no danger too great to prevent or impede his own act of reconnaissance into the nature and thick of things. Historians have perceived similarities in their command styles and acts of physical courage. There is some reason for this. The style of command outlined in nineteenth-century military doctrine had not yet developed to resemble the command style that emerged in the Great War and World War Two. Technology did not yet allow for more rapid communication between high command from a position of security and prominence and more junior commanders on the front. Capable generalship—and a nineteenth-century understanding of honor and gentlemanly duty—required leadership from the front; not the rear. In the Civil War, writes Michael C. C. Adams,

Officers still adhered to the maxim that necessity required leadership from the front, as their brethren had done for centuries. Generals believed they must, in person, direct the disposition of their troops in the "fog of battle" or chaos would ensue. And they had precious few staff officers to assist them in this. Stonewall Jackson fell fatally wounded by his own men while riding beyond his lines after dark, trying to ascertain the relative position of the combatants. A sniper picked off Major General John Reynolds, mounted and vulnerable, in plain view of both sides, as

<sup>25</sup> Rosengarten, "REYNOLDS, HERO OF THE FIRST DAY, BY ONE OF HIS STAFF: Major Joseph G. Rosengarten, Who Was Close to the Famous Union Commander Throughout the Fighting, Pays Tribute to the Man Who Paved the Way for the Federal Victory," *New York Times*, 29 June 1913.

<sup>26</sup> Four troopers of the 8th Illinois Cavalry first detected the movement of Heth's division in the early morning hours of 1 July 1863. Lt. Marcellus Jones fired off the first shot of the battle between 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. The action increased until it assumed a serious magnitude at 10:00 a.m. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Writing from Albany, New York, twenty-one years following the battle (and with not a little embellishment), Abner Doubleday, to whom command of Union forces at Gettysburg fell immediately after the death of General Reynolds, recalled his then-recent visit to Fredericksburg, VA, and noted how peaceful it seemed to him. He "contrasted the warm welcome" he had received with "the bitter contest that occurred there in December 1862." He remembered too, a striking image of Reynolds, seen "just after the gallant charge made by Meade and the Pennsylvania Reserves, *sitting upon his horse in front of his corps facing the sharp-shooters of Stonewall Jackson, whose bullets were striking at his feet*" (emphasis added). Letter of Abner Doubleday, 14 September 1884, Albany, New York, in Reynolds Memorial Association, *Unveiling of the Statue of General John F. Reynolds* (Philadelphia, 1884), 18. It seems rather plausible that Doubleday, who attributed Reynolds's death to a sharpshooter in his recollection of the Battle of Gettysburg, recalled this scene with an especially heightened sense of irony and tragedy; reporting on the action in Pennsylvania, one North Carolina newspaper reported the mortal wounding of General Reynolds. Reynolds, according to the *Fayetteville Observer*, "was, as usual, leading his corps, and in the thickest of the fight." "The War in Pennsylvania," *Fayetteville Observer*, 9 July 1863.



"Death of Reynolds," a drawing by Alfred R. Waud. Library of Congress.



he led his command into their positions on July 1, 1863.<sup>28</sup>

Adams's observation, published in 2014, reflects the enduring quality of the myth, perpetuated in scholarly and popular accounts (and perhaps true—it is impossible to conclude with certainty) that Reynolds was the victim of a Confederate sharpshooter. This myth is remarkable for its resiliency, a result perhaps of one constant feature of human nature: the wish that great men should not die from accidental or random acts. A man marked for killing and sought by an excellent marksman is, by virtue of his being hunted, greater than the man who falls randomly and senselessly to a stray shot.<sup>29</sup>

Adams's description of the death of Reynolds raises a second point that requires comment: "sniping," as understood in the twenty-first century, was hardly a developed military art in 1863, and it remains difficult to distinguish from sharpshooting. The modernity of sniper warfare is evident in its very etymology. As historian Earl J. Hess has written, "the word sniping has its origin in nineteenth-century India, where British officers often amused themselves by hunting the snipe, 'a small, fast-flying game bird' that was difficult to hit in midair." Over time, "the term *snipe* therefore became a byword for a crack shot." Still, the term did not truly enter the Anglo-American lexicon until World War One.<sup>30</sup> But sniper warfare certainly existed, and it represented a significant development in the history of small-arms combat in the United States, which advanced as innovators began to experiment with the placement of telescopic optics on long-range rifles. The Confederate armies did feature marksmen who excelled in long-range shooting, whom Confederate administrators later arranged in sharpshooting bat-

talions. The art of sharpshooting, according to Hess, was more prevalent among Confederate soldiers in 1863 (the availability of long-range target rifles that Confederate blockade runners smuggled through the Federal blockade helped to drive this trend) than in previous years.<sup>31</sup> Taken on the whole however, one senses that certainty about the sharpshooter debate remains elusive, because the language of the debate about who killed General Reynolds—a "sniper," a "sharpshooter," a "marksmen"—is not firm.

This caveat aside, the death of Reynolds at Gettysburg and its appeal to the popular imagination has borne a fascinating boutique literature among battle devotees. The most thorough inquiry into this narrow subject is Steve Sanders's "The Death of Reynolds," which appeared in a 1996 issue of *Gettysburg Magazine*.<sup>32</sup> Apart from Edward Nichols's thoughtful examination of the death of Reynolds, however, no scholarly study has framed the death of the general at Gettysburg in American memory. And while to determine, with exact precision, how Reynolds died at Gettysburg is nigh impossible (if not historically insignificant), it is of consequence to note how and to what extent romantic portrayals of his death that have endured through the years square with the conditions of battle as they existed on the morning of July 1st, 1863, and how such histories have shaped and informed the memory of Reynolds in the postwar years.

Edward Nichols noted in 1958 that the sharpshooter myth emerged around the turn of the century in 1902. An article published in the *Lancaster Intelligencer* featured a reminiscence of one Pennsylvanian who, after the war, met and conversed with a North Carolinian, Benjamin Thorpe, who served as a sharpshooter with the 55th North Carolina. Thorpe claimed to have killed Reynolds from a cherry tree and at a range of some 800 yards. He claimed too, that Reynolds was in the act of positioning artillery when he fired the lethal round.<sup>33</sup> In point of fact, however, the notion that a Confederate sharpshooter felled Reynolds emerged before the conclusion of the battle at Gettysburg.<sup>34</sup>

28 Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 76. Adams's use of the word "sniper" in this context is instructive, for it reveals how scholars in the twenty-first century impose twentieth and twenty-first century understandings of intensely personal killing from long range that soldiers experienced in more modern wars onto nineteenth-century subject matter. Civil War soldiers would not have recognized the term. Even the practice of sniping would seem foreign to the most capable sharpshooter, who in the Civil War operated in a battalion. For more on this, see Fred L. Ray, *Shock Troops of the Confederacy: The Sharpshooter Battalions of the Army of Northern Virginia* (Asheville, NC: CFS Press, 2006). For more on anachronism inherent to collapsing the act of sniping and the act of sharpshooting, see Steplyk, "Hunters of Men: Sharpshooting and Killing," in "Citizen-Soldiers and Killing in Civil War Combat," 172–204.

29 Steplyk, "Hunters of Men: Sharpshooting and Killing," in "Citizen-Soldiers and Killing in Civil War Combat," 172–204.

30 Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, 176.

31 Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, 175.

32 Steve Sanders, "Enduring Tales of Gettysburg: The Death of Reynolds," *Gettysburg Magazine* 14 (January 1996): 27–36.

33 Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, 253–348.

34 Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 687–752.

A correspondent for the *New York Times*, Lorenzo L. Crounse, wrote in special dispatch to the paper that the fighting on the morning of July 1 was “quite severe,” and that “Gen. Reynolds . . . was killed by a sharpshooter early in the fight.”<sup>35</sup> On July 18, *Harper’s Weekly* published its obituary of the late general. The journal revealed that the general rode forward to find a “knoll or eminence” upon which to “favorably plant his [artillery] pieces.” Intense firing from the enemy had made the general’s horse “unmanageable.” The general’s movement forward, the paper claimed, and the unruly behavior of his mount, “exposed [Reynolds] to the unerring aim of the sharp-shooters, and a rifle bullet struck him in the neck, severing the vertebrae, and causing his instant death.”<sup>36</sup>

These stories did not emerge exclusively from newspaper accounts. Men who fought at Gettysburg enshrined the sharpshooter myth in their regimental histories and personal reminiscences. One regimental history of Pennsylvania volunteers communicates the classic and mythic interpretation of the death of Reynolds:

As a Pennsylvanian [Reynolds’s] blood grew hot at the thought of the invasion and devastation of his native State. . . . In the midst of a hot fire the



Lt. Jesse Bowman Young, 84th Pennsylvania. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

line was formed. Reynolds went forward to direct. He himself skillfully posted Hall’s Second Maine battery on the road and threw forward two regiments in advance upon the left. At the same time, he directed General Wadsworth to post the three other regiments on the right of the road. While he was thus in the very front . . . a ball fired by a rebel sharpshooter struck him in the back of his head and came out in the front causing instant death.<sup>37</sup>

Another reads that Reynolds, after placing his artillery and seeking out positions for Howard’s batteries, which were forthcoming, “was struck down by a sharpshooter.”<sup>38</sup>

Beyond formal regimental histories, individual soldiers chronicled their belief that

Reynolds fell the victim of a sharpshooter’s bullet. The highest-ranking Union officer to state in explicit terms that a Confederate marksman shot Reynolds was Abner Doubleday, to whom Union command descended following the death of Reynolds, and who claimed a long friendship with the Pennsylvanian. In *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, Doubleday recounted that Reynolds, along the edge of Herbst’s Wood, turned in his saddle—he was anxious to confirm that supporting infantry,

<sup>35</sup> “THE GREAT BATTLES: Our Special Telegrams from the Battle Field to A. M. Yesterday,” *New York Times*, 4 July 1863.

<sup>36</sup> “The Late Gen. Reynolds,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 18 July 1863.

<sup>37</sup> William J. Wray, *History of the Twenty-Third Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, Birney’s Zouaves: Three Months and Three Years Service, Civil War, 1861 to 1865* (Philadelphia, 1904), 390.

<sup>38</sup> M. D. Hardin, *History of the Twelfth Regiment Pennsylvania Reserve Volunteer Corps: From Its Muster into the United States Service, August 10th, 1861, to its Muster Out, June 11th, 1864, Together with Biographical Sketches of Officers and Men and a Complete Muster-Out Roll* (New York, 1890), 146.



were advancing—and that “while looking back in this way, a rebel sharpshooter shot him through the back of the head, the bullet coming out near the eye.”<sup>39</sup> A junior officer who self-identified as a mere “stripling” in his history of the battle, and a combatant at Gettysburg (though not engaged in the action on McPherson’s Ridge), First Lt. Jesse Bowman Young of the 84th Pennsylvania Infantry also recalled how Reynolds fell in the fight. The wing commander “had stationed his men, under Cutler’s command, on the right of the [Chambersburg] pike, and had hastened to supervise the movement on the left. While pointing to the woods to be taken and inspiring his command by word and example he was hit by a sharp-shooter’s bullet.”<sup>40</sup>

Joseph Rosengarten, a member of Reynolds’s staff, put on record on more than one occasion, and in various mediums and contexts, the widely accepted view that a Confederate sharpshooter killed Reynolds. In 1879, Rosengarten contributed a personal reminiscence to a collection of firsthand accounts of the Civil War published in the *Philadelphia Weekly Times*. Re-published in *The Annals of the War*, it communicates the author’s belief in the sharpshooter myth. “Reynolds,” wrote Rosengarten, “was a shining mark to the enemy’s sharpshooters,” and after placing his lead elements (the 2nd Wisconsin) in Herbst’s Woods, and having turned and rode to receive more advancing elements of the Iron Brigade, “he was struck by a Minnie ball, fired by a sharpshooter hidden in the branches of a tree overhead.”<sup>41</sup> In 1880, Rosengarten attended a meeting of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania where he formally presented a portrait of the late general that had been bequeathed to the Society by Admiral William Reynolds, the general’s brother.<sup>42</sup> The address he delivered before the Society channels his 1879 view, albeit with a slight increase in ambiguity: Reynolds hurried the 2nd Wisconsin into the woodlot, “full of rebel skirmishers and sharpshooters,” and as

quickly as he had deployed that unit, the General turned to look for supporting regiments and “was struck, *it is supposed*, by a rebel sharpshooter” (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup> Rosengarten’s memoir and dual biography of Reynolds and the admiral, a slight adaptation of his speech delivered before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in March of 1880 and published in that same year, repeats—almost word for word—that same account.<sup>44</sup> Fifty years after the battle, Rosengarten took to the pages of the *New York Times* with a similar version of events.<sup>45</sup>

The sharpshooter narrative has endured. If one examines the great body of Civil War writing that has grown from the nineteenth century and runs to the present, one notices that this conviction—this persistent belief that a sharpshooter felled Reynolds—permeates much of the popular historical literature. Pre-eminent among popular Civil War historians in the middle years of the twentieth century, Bruce Catton, with typical eloquence and flair, wrote of the battle that transpired on McPherson’s Ridge, “Reynolds was studying the battle, trying to make out just how much weight lay back of the Rebel attack, and a Southern sharpshooter in an old stone barn got him in the sights of his rifle and shot him dead.”<sup>46</sup> First published in his seminal *Glory Road*, Catton updated and adapted this history of Reynolds’s death for a shorter history the Gettysburg campaign in 1982. The arch of his narrative, however, remained largely unchanged: “Reynolds did not live to see much of [the battle]. He rode forward to get the Iron Brigade lined up against Hill’s advancing infantry, in the woods and fields of a farm owned by a man named McPherson, and some Confederate sharpshooter in Mr. McPherson’s barn drew a bead on him and shot him dead.”<sup>47</sup>

Catton’s southern counterpart, the venerable Shelby Foote, offered a slight variation on the

39 Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 131.

40 Jesse Bowman Young, *The Battle of Gettysburg: A Comprehensive Narrative* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1913), 3, 185.

41 Major Joseph G. Rosengarten, “General Reynolds’ Last Battle,” in *The Annals of the War: Written by Leading Participants North and South* (Philadelphia: The Times Publishing Company, 1879), 63.

42 Historical Society of Pennsylvania, “Meetings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 4 (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1880), 246.

43 Rosengarten, “Address of Mr. J. G. Rosengarten,” in *Reynolds Memorial: Addresses Delivered Before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Upon the Occasion of the Presentation of a Portrait of Maj.-Gen. John F. Reynolds, March 8, 1880* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 24.

44 Rosengarten, *William Reynolds, John Fulton Reynolds, A Memoir* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 19.

45 Rosengarten, “REYNOLDS, HERO OF THE FIRST DAY, BY ONE OF HIS STAFF: Major Joseph G. Rosengarten, Who Was Close to the Famous Union Commander Throughout the Fighting, Pays Tribute to the Man Who Paved the Way for the Federal Victory,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1913.

46 Bruce Catton, *Glory Road* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1952), 274.

47 Catton, *Gettysburg: The Final Fury* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 24.

sharpshooter myth in his history of the Gettysburg campaign, *Stars in Their Courses*. The Confederate sharpshooter, or “marksman,” in Foote’s account dropped Reynolds from his perch in “an orchard” just “ahead” of Herbst’s Woodlot.<sup>48</sup>

Hardly isolated to popular histories, the sharpshooter legend has emerged in full bloom in biographies, meta-narratives, and military histories of the Civil War, and it is tightly interwoven into heroic portrayals of the general’s death. Carl D. Sandburg, in his seminal, multi-volume Abraham Lincoln biography, has channeled the mythic interpretation of Reynolds’s death in which the General uttered his famous admonition to the 2nd Wisconsin *after* he had been struck by the fatal round: “The brave and able General John F. Reynolds . . . felt a bullet sink into his neck, called to his men, ‘Forward! For God’s sake, forward!’ and fell into the arms of a captain with the words, ‘Good God, Wilcox, I am killed.’”<sup>49</sup> In his history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, J. G. Randall wrote that in the action on July 1 “the Unionists sustained a grievous loss in the death of General Reynolds, who exposed himself in the woods near the Chambersburg road west of Gettysburg and was brought down by a sharpshooter.”<sup>50</sup> James M. McPherson channels this same narrative in his timeless *Battle Cry of Freedom*. In the intense fighting near Willoughby Run and Herbst’s Wood, writes McPherson, the Union Army lost many of its best men, but no casualty was of greater consequence than the loss of Reynolds, “considered by many the best general in the army,” who was “drilled through the head by a sharpshooter.”<sup>51</sup> Michael C. C. Adams, in *Living Hell*, frames the death of Reynolds—which he attributes to a Confederate *sniper*—as an example of the shocking and horrific nature of killing in Civil War combat.<sup>52</sup> In their recent book, in which authors Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh note that the American Civil War was the first war in the West

to wed material developments of the Industrial Revolution with the democratic and secular fervor of the French Revolution, Reynolds also falls the victim of a Confederate sharpshooter.<sup>53</sup>

Despite its endurance in the literature, the myth that a Confederate sniper, marksman, or sharpshooter felled Reynolds hardly squares with historical reality, and it remains difficult to assess against the historical backdrop of Civil War combat. In the first place, initial newspaper accounts that reported the death of Reynolds at the hand of a marksman were notoriously unreliable. In the second place, early indications from Reynolds’s family make plain that they did not believe he died the victim of a sharpshooter. Third, for the remarkable longevity and ubiquitous nature of the sharpshooter myth in Reynolds Civil War lore and literature, early histories of the battle emphasized more clearly that Reynolds died at the front of critical action—not that he was targeted and selected as a shining mark by enemy sharpshooters. Fourth, the accounts of Reynolds’s death put forward by Gettysburg participants long after his death contain remarkable inconsistencies and factual errors. But in back all of this, and on a more foundational level, the idea or specter of the “sharpshooter” in the imaginations of Civil War soldiers, and the designation of “marksman” conferred upon a talented shot, often constituted two different realities. Men who wrote and spoke about sharpshooters in the Civil War could not imagine the mental picture conjured now by the word “sniper” in twenty-first-century America. Sniping in modern warfare exists as a highly developed professional skill and military art; in marked contrast, sharpshooters who operated in Civil War combat did not always (and only in rare cases) benefit from enhanced optics and sights to increase their weapon’s accuracy.

Initial newspaper reports confirmed for anxious readers that Reynolds died in the throes of combat at the head of his men, but those accounts hardly presented a uniform picture of the battle as it transpired on July 1. Nor did they answer with precision the question of how Reynolds fell. To compound problems, published newspaper accounts did not

48 Shelby Foote, *Stars in Their Courses: The Gettysburg Campaign June-July 1863* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 74.

49 Carl D. Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, Volume II (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), 342.

50 J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, second edition, with a preface by David Donald (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), 402.

51 James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 654.

52 Adams, *Living Hell*, 76.

53 Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 274.

always report the facts. One account posited in the *New York Herald* on the third day of the battle informed readers that Reynolds had ridden out to seek out good ground—"a knoll or eminence"—upon which to plant artillery pieces, and in so doing exposed himself to the "unerring aim of the sharpshooters."<sup>54</sup> The *New York Times* also reported on Independence Day, 1863, that Reynolds, who had brought on the fighting of July 1 under the false "impression that his force exceeded that of the enemy," fell the victim of a Confederate sharpshooter.<sup>55</sup> Still another account in the *Herald* read that General Reynolds received a fatal volley from sharpshooters posted in a thicket.<sup>56</sup> In a manner that reveals the frequent unreliability of Civil War newspaper coverage, the *New Haven Daily Palladium* reported that Reynolds fell in the fight around 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon (in fact, he perished in the morning hours).<sup>57</sup>

Conflicting newspaper coverage likely imbued the Reynolds sisters with a greater urgency first to learn the truth about the death of their brother and then to communicate the facts—as best they understood them—to family not present in Philadelphia and Lancaster after Reynolds's burial. The July 5 letters of sisters Eleanor Reynolds and Mary Jane "Jennie" Reynolds Gildersleeve to William Reynolds, then stationed in South Carolina and not able to be in Pennsylvania, reveal shock and profound sadness, but also an attention to the particular details of the battle that only first-hand witnesses could provide. For witnesses of the general's last day the sisters had several: Captain Rosengarten, Captain Weld, Captain Wilcox, Major Riddle, and Sergeant Veil all met with the family and attended the general's funeral.<sup>58</sup> The historian wishing to ascertain degrees of historical accuracy in the letters has sufficient reason to believe that the narrative of Reynolds's death, as told in the letters, is sourced in the accounts of the men themselves. In all of this, Eleanor Reynolds made certain to communicate to her brother in explicit terms how the general had died. Significantly, she



**Capt. Stephen M. Weld.**  
National Archives and Records  
Administration.

at once channeled certain aspects contained in accounts of Reynolds's death in the newspapers and contradicted them. In her letter to William, Eleanor wrote, "[John] was exposing himself very much & the balls were falling like hail." But she added, in what appears as an intended refutation of the popular accounts, "it was not a sharp shooter but a chance shot."<sup>59</sup> The sisters gleaned this knowledge, in all likelihood, from Captains Mitchell and Baird and from Sergeant Veil. Veil rode with the general into battle and stood paces from him when he fell dead from his horse.<sup>60</sup>

But if the sisters' words cannot offer conclusive proof that Reynolds died the victim of a stray shot, the sharpshooter thesis remains suspect on additional counts foundational to the very conditions of battle as they existed at Gettysburg on the morning of July 1. Steve Sanders has noted

<sup>59</sup> Eleanor Reynolds to William Reynolds, Philadelphia, 5 July 1863, *RFP*.

<sup>60</sup> The most authoritative and descriptive account of the death of Reynolds comes from Sergt. Charles H. Veil, who served as Reynolds's orderly at Gettysburg, and who witnessed the general's death from his side: "He never spoke a word, or moved a muscle after he was struck. I have seen many men killed in action, but never saw a ball do its work so *instantly* as did the ball which struck General Reynolds . . ." (original emphasis). Significantly, Veil also noted that the wound was bloodless, a remarkable and rare occurrence compared to what resulted normally when a large-caliber, rifled musket ball tore into human flesh. Letter of Charles H. Veil to D. McConaughy Esq., 7 April 1864, *Peter Frederick Rothermel Papers, Brake Collection*, United States Army Heritage and Education Center.

<sup>54</sup> "How General Reynolds Met His Death," *New York Herald*, 3 July 1863.

<sup>55</sup> "THE GREAT BATTLES.: Our Special Telegrams from the Battle Field to 10 A. M. Yesterday," *New York Times*, 4 July 1863.

<sup>56</sup> "Despatch of Mr. F. G. Chapman," *New York Herald*, 3 July 1863.

<sup>57</sup> "By Telegraph," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, 3 July 1863.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Jane Reynolds Gildersleeve to William Reynolds, Philadelphia, 5 July 1863, *RFP*.

that no Union soldier engaged in battle that morning possessed the field of vision to identify with certainty the location of the shooter. “Is it reasonable to assume,” inquires Sanders, “that anyone on the Union side of the battle line could have actually seen *where* the fire originated and *who* did the shooting” (original emphasis)? More important still, no known account of the fight, or of Reynolds’s death, from an Iron Brigade veteran exists in which the combatant claimed a knowledge of the sharpshooter’s position. To complicate the sharpshooter myth further, no man ever claimed to have witnessed the fatal shot.<sup>61</sup> Doubtless, the density of the woodlot, the undulating terrain, the close proximity of the fighting, the smoke that resulted from the steady artillery and musket fire and drifted over the battlefield—these conditions might have made it impossible to note visually the exact position of a sharpshooter. But then the opposite is almost certainly true in equal measure: if one positioned on the Union battle line lacked the field of vision to see the shooter, then it is also quite possible that a sharpshooter lacked the field of vision—at least from range—to see, and even more incredibly, to shoot the general.<sup>62</sup>

61 Sanders, “The Death of Reynolds,” 33.

62 While Civil War sharpshooters openly targeted officers in opposing armies, and even reportedly executed successful shots from ranges approximating 1,400 yards, the topographical features of the battlefield on which Reynolds died—the Herbst Woodlot most especially—would not have allowed for such a long shot. For more on the efficient and deadly work of sharpshooters generally, see Steplyk, “Hunters of Men: Sharpshooting and Killing,” in “Citizen-Soldiers and Killing in Civil War Combat,” 172–204; One account of Reynolds’s death, posited by Glenn Tucker in *Lee and Longstreet at Gettysburg*, is suspect for a myriad of reasons, but it especially borders on the ridiculous for its embellished portrayal of sharpshooting at range. Ben Thorpe, the North Carolinian who claimed dubiously long after the war to have shot Reynolds, supposedly climbed to his perch in a cherry tree near McPherson’s Barn, where he coordinated with his lieutenant to drop Reynolds. Tucker’s retelling, derived from a 1903 newspaper clipping, has it that the lieutenant was able to trace Thorpe’s shots and note their marks through his field glasses:

“Ben,” [the lieutenant] shouted up, “do you see that tall, straight man in the center of that group? He is evidently an officer of some high rank and is directing the operations. Sight your gun at 700 yards and see if you can reach him.”

“That was a little short, Ben,” said the lieutenant. “Sight her at 900 yards this time and hold steady, for we must have [Reynolds].”

Ben sighted carefully, resting his long-barreled rifle on a limb of the cherry tree. He held his aim and squeezed the trigger. “I knew before the report died away . . . that the shot had been a good one,” he said. Then he saw the tall man fall and his horse plunge forward. . . .

Not until after the battle—“long afterwards,” he said—did Ben Thorpe learn whom he had shot; and when he was told

The sharpshooter thesis is equally untenable when one considers the relative positions of units and the availability of organized sharpshooters on the battlefield in the early morning hours of July 1. Confederate sharpshooters operated in battalions—not at the regimental level—which allowed for more fluid movement on the battlefield (in contrast, the Union, under the leadership of the acclaimed marksman and innovator Hiram Berdan, raised and trained highly specialized regiments of sharpshooters, later known as “Berdan’s Sharpshooters,” which operated with greater organization) and makes them more difficult to track.<sup>63</sup> However, Bradley M. Gottfried, in his masterful atlas of the Gettysburg Campaign, notes that no Confederate sharpshooting units operated in that sector of the battlefield at the time of Reynolds’s death.<sup>64</sup> Curiously, Earl J. Hess documents no Confederate sharpshooter activity at the Battle of Gettysburg on the morning of July 1 when Reynolds was killed.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, whatever the exact conditions of the battle, and no matter the presence or absence of sharpshooters in the vicinity of Reynolds’s death, one senses that the sharpshooter myth did not seem as credible to Americans more contemporaneous to the battle, a fact evidenced in the reality that though occasional early (and somewhat dodgy) battle histories attributed Reynolds’s death to a sharpshooter, far more numerous campaign histories that surfaced in the wake of the battle and into the early years of the twentieth century

that Reynolds was a “great and good man,” he said he was “genuinely sorry.”

“I have been sorry ever since,” he added.

Glenn Tucker, *Lee and Longstreet at Gettysburg* (Indianapolis, Kansas City, and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968), 215–216; for the original account, see “He Shot General Reynolds,” *Pittsburgh Leader*, 1903. The author is grateful to Michael Lear of the Library of Special Collections at Franklin and Marshall College for furnishing a high-resolution image of the *Pittsburgh Leader* article.

63 For the creation of Confederate sharpshooter battalions, see Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, 131; For the development of sharpshooter units in the northern and southern armies, see Steplyk, “Hunters of Men: Sharpshooting and Killing,” in “Citizen-Soldiers and Killing in Civil War Combat,” 172–204, at 175.

64 Bradley M. Gottfried, *The Maps of Gettysburg: An Atlas of the Gettysburg Campaign, June 3–July 13, 1863* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2007), 72; Confederate sharpshooters under the command of General Robert Rhodes are reported to have operated near Oak Hill, to the north of where Reynolds fell, but these troops arrived on the battlefield after Reynolds perished. See Fred L. Ray, *Shock Troops of the Confederacy: The Sharpshooter Battalions of the Army of Northern Virginia* (Asheville, NC: CFS Press, 2006), 72.

65 Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, 179–185.



make no mention of a sharpshooter.<sup>66</sup> Without any mention of a sharpshooter or sniper, Abner Doubleday noted in his 1888 history of the battle, *Gettysburg Made Plain*, that Reynolds simply “was killed” while forming his men for battle—a claim he would alter and embellish years later.<sup>67</sup> A battle study that emerged in 1893 described Reynolds’s gallantry leading his men into the fight and lamented that he was fated to die “at the very moment success had crowned his first effort . . . with a bullet in his brain.”<sup>68</sup> One European military historian, who wrote with the kind of English sympathy for the Southern Confederacy well chronicled by historian Sheldon Vanauken, but also with a meticulous attention to tactical and operational detail, noted only that Reynolds “was shot through the head at close range” in the fight that ensued between Meredith’s Iron Brigade and the skirmishers of Archer’s Tennesseans swarming the copse of trees.<sup>69</sup> All of this suggests that if the sharpshooter thesis emerged more forcefully in

later battle histories, it nevertheless seemed more incredible to Americans and historians more contemporaneous to the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg.

All told, to consider the conflicting interpretations of Reynolds’s death that have guided and shaped the stream of Gettysburg and Reynolds memory is not unlike to participate in a bad game of Clue: Civil War Edition. Various accounts place the alleged Rebel sharpshooter in an orchard, in a barn, in trees. Battle enthusiasts writing in popular publications have considered how the rifle ball might have traveled as it struck Reynolds, from its trajectory when fired to the placement of the exit wound. Many written accounts underscore that the General turned in his saddle before falling dead—wishful thinking and insurance, perhaps, against the dreaded and impossible thought that Reynolds died much like Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, a victim of friendly fire. The kind of fascination that has emerged in the popular literature of Reynolds and Gettysburg, contrasted with more academic inquiries, suggests a divergence in historical interpretation: serious scholars tend at once to channel and dismiss the sharpshooter myth, while legions of Gettysburg devotees consider the circumstances that surrounded Reynolds’s death—and the cause of his death—of utmost importance. Taken on the whole, these facts confirm an eloquent expression of the profound meaning of Reynolds for American Civil War history and Civil War memory: “to the survivors, and the other veterans of both sides, and, finally, even the country,” writes Lance J. Herdegen,

Gettysburg became the grand epic of the American Civil War and “the gallant Reynolds” the symbolic fallen knight of the Union—a brave and true American soldier struck down just as his promise was being realized. In death he became “John Reynolds of Gettysburg,” a heroic figure on a big, black horse forever shouting to the soldiers of the Iron Brigade as they ran toward the crest of a wooded ridge, “Forward Men! Forward for God’s sake, and drive those fellows out of those woods!”<sup>70</sup>

The truth of history does not often appear starkly as black or white. The question of how Reynolds died ultimately carries little significance, but the manner of his death matters entirely for how

66 One early history—a self-proclaimed compilation of first-hand, eyewitness accounts of the action—holds that Reynolds, far up in the advance of his men, had “dismounted from his horse, approached the fence near the eastern extremity of the grove, and was standing in a stooping position, examining the woods, when he received a ball through the neck, breaking the bone. He fell forward on his face, and expired in a few minutes.” This narrative borders on the absurd, and it runs counter to all the historical evidence surrounding the events of the general’s death. T. Ditterline, *Sketch of the Battles of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2d, and 3d, 1863: With an Account of the Movements of the Respective Armies for Some Days Previous Thereto. Compiled from the Personal Observation of Eye-Witnesses of the Several Battles* (New York: O. A. Alvord, Electrotyper and Printer, 1864), 9; Another history written in the more immediate aftermath of the battle claimed to put forward a definitive, first-hand account of the Rebel invasion of Pennsylvania. Published to serve as a field manual for Gettysburg visitors, *Notes on the Rebel Invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania* claimed to put forward “a chronicle of facts.” Its author (an ordained minister and professor of mathematics at Pennsylvania College), claimed the editor and publisher in the introduction, “carefully sifted” history from myth, and the reader, “the pilgrim who, with this little volume in their hands, shall visit the memorable fields whose undying story it tells, the thousands who eagerly read all that bears upon the grandest and most critical struggle of the most momentous war in the annals of our race,” benefits therefore from all truth and no embellishment. In his account, M. Jacobs wrote of Reynolds that the General “fell a victim to his cool bravery and zeal. As was his custom, he rode in front of his men, placing them in position and urging them to the fight, when he was shot through the head, as was supposed, by a Rebel sharpshooter, and died shortly afterwards” (emphasis added). This account too is suspect, for the accounts of those closest to Reynolds at the time of his death reveal that he was killed instantly. M. Jacobs, *Notes on the Rebel Invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania and the Battle of Gettysburg July 1st, 2d and 3d, 1863. Accompanied by an Explanatory Map* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864), 27.

67 Doubleday, *Gettysburg Made Plain: A Succinct Account of the Campaign and Battles, With the Aid of One Diagram and Twenty-Nine Maps* (New York: The Century Co., 1888), 26.

68 Samuel Adams Drake, *The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 64.

69 Sheldon Vanauken, *The Glittering Illusion: English Sympathy for the Southern Confederacy* (Washington, D. C.: Regnery, 1989); Cecil Battine, *The Crisis of the Confederacy: A History of Gettysburg and the Wilderness* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 189.

70 Herdegen, “John F. Reynolds and the Iron Brigade,” 112.

Americans framed his memory in the post-war years and especially toward the end of the twentieth century. Implicit in the sensibility and outlook of those who perpetuate the sharpshooter narrative is the conviction that men of such prominence as Reynolds are not supposed to die by a mere random chance. The aimless stray minié ball from one rifle musket in ranks of many, fired at some unseen object, that happened to find *a*—not *its*—mark simply will not do. Romantic fascination, inherent perhaps to human nature, demands that a sharpshooter or a marksman—one well-trained in the military art—take the life of a capable Army of the Potomac wing commander. If Gettysburg has assumed the status of an American epic, then conventions of epic myth demand a death for Reynolds akin to the slayings of Hector and

Leonidas in ancient times. All of this helps to explain then, why in Ron Maxwell's *Gettysburg* a sharpshooter, with telescopic optics mounted to the top of his rifle musket, stops in the woods, aims at General Reynolds—mounted on his majestic stallion—and lets loose the fatal round.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Gettysburg*.