

THE CIVIL WAR'S MOST INTERESTING GENERAL

He was Lincoln, Grant and Sherman's go-to man — but you've probably never heard of him.

By Judith Wilmot, HistoryNet, 11/29/2022



Major General Grenville M. Dodge, in a photo taken late in the war. Note the prominent scabbing that resulted from a near-fatal head wound Dodge incurred when he was shot by a Confederate sharpshooter on August 19, 1864, during the Atlanta Campaign.

In describing Union Maj. Gen. Grenville Mellen Dodge to Ulysses S. Grant, his commander and friend, William Sherman usually kept it simple. “Dodge is a brick,” he once wrote Grant—perhaps the perfect compliment for a luminary who never quite made it into the Civil War Pantheon and continues to escape notice even today. Although Dodge fought in only two major battles—Pea Ridge in 1862 and Atlanta in

1864—his contributions to ultimate Union victory should not be underestimated. In Grant's opinion, Dodge was both the best railroad-builder and best railroad-destroyer the war would see in either Army. He was, however, remarkable in many other ways.

Slight of built, weighing only 130 pounds, Dodge surely didn't look like a brick. What did single him out was his incredible optimism, his indomitable will, and his love of action. A Massachusetts native and 1851 graduate of Vermont's Norwich University—with a degree in civil engineering—he eventually relocated to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he had an opportune meeting with Abraham Lincoln while Lincoln was stumping for the Republican Party's 1860 presidential nomination. He shared Lincoln's vision for a transcontinental railroad and would use his influence at the 1860 Republican Convention to win Iowa for Lincoln.

After Fort Sumter in April 1861, Dodge dissolved his business interests and, at Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood's behest, traveled to Washington, D.C., to obtain arms for Iowa volunteer regiments. There, he was offered colonelcy of the 4th Iowa Infantry. “I go into this war on principle, [which] pecuniarily will ruin me,” Dodge wrote his mother. “I put my trust in God; if I come out safe, I hope no one will have cause to regret my course.”

As senior officer at Fort Wyman in Rolla, Mo., Dodge was known to drill his men relentlessly, even before they had their weapons, uniforms, or equipment. While in Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont's Western Department, Dodge created what he later called his “secret service.” Frustrated his cavalry often embarked on fruitless scouting

excursions in response to enemy sightings, Dodge learned that the men in one independent Missouri cavalry unit were locals and were willing, if paid, to serve as his scouts in the region. It was a welcome proposal, and Dodge worked with his provost marshal to use funds that were collected through fines and related methods to support the spies' endeavors. "I followed it throughout my service," Dodge later wrote, "and found it of great benefit."

On a visit to St. Louis in October 1861, Dodge began personally outfitting the 4th Iowa. According to one soldier's letter to the Council Bluffs newspaper: "Through [his] exertions...the 4th has been provided with a full outfit, from head to foot of winter clothing, of excellent material, well-made up. Also, extra heavy overcoats for wintry days...new equipment of arms, knapsacks, haversacks, canteens, etc."

The overcoats were black, which would be of particular note during the March 1862 fighting at Pea Ridge (Elkhorn Tavern) in Arkansas.

Dodge was with Maj. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis' Army of the Southwest in December 1861 when he met another budding young luminary, Phil Sheridan. A captain at the time, Sheridan was the army's quartermaster; Dodge commanded the 4th Division's 1st Brigade. The two shared a tent, and Dodge listened intently as "[Little Phil](#)" complained about untrained officers who refused to limit the size of their wagon trains or to help forage for supplies. Dodge decided to follow Sheridan's example with his own men.

Never a fan of Sheridan, Curtis would eventually relieve Little Phil from his army—the exact reason why has never been fully substantiated. Sheridan praised Dodge

in his memoirs: "Several times I was on the verge of personal conflict with regimental commanders, but Colonel Dodge so sustained me before General Curtis and supported me by such efficient details from his regiment—the 4th Iowa—that I shall hold him and it in great affection and lasting gratitude."

Earlier in the war, the principal Federal force in the region was known as the Army of the West. It was tasked with driving the Confederates out of Missouri, but the Battle of Wilson's Creek in August 1861 had been a resounding defeat and had cost then-commander Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon his life. The Rebel force at Wilson's Creek was composed of Brig. Gen. Benjamin McCulloch's Western Army and the Missouri State Guard under Maj. Gen. Sterling Price, still not a formal Confederate force, as hotly contested Missouri had yet to secede (and never did).

The disputatious Price quarreled with McCulloch, however, compelling the famed former Texas Ranger to return to Texas in outrage. That caught President Jefferson Davis' attention. He assigned Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn command of what was to be called the Trans-Mississippi District of Department No. 2 and instructed McCulloch to return with his force to Missouri. In addition to Price's and McCulloch's commands, Van Dorn had the services of Brig. Gen. Albert Pike and about 1,000 Cherokee and Creek warriors—a combined force of roughly 16,500 men.

By the end of the year, with the Confederates now camped in northern Arkansas, Davis directed Van Dorn to move back into Missouri, defeat Curtis, and then head to St. Louis—an important Mississippi

River base for contesting Ulysses S. Grant's forces in the Western Theater. Van Dorn had assumed command knowing little about the region's terrain or the officers now under his command. He was reassured, however, by the fact his troops outnumbered Curtis' Federals.

In late February, Van Dorn began moving toward Curtis' army straddling the Missouri–Arkansas border. Knee-deep snow greatly hindered the Confederate advance, but Van Dorn's decision to leave his supply wagons behind for speed would be a regrettable mistake.

Dodge's spies proved instrumental in the buildup to the fighting at Pea Ridge when they uncovered Van Dorn's decision to split his army in order to attack Curtis' rear. In command of five companies of the 4th Iowa and two companies of the 3rd Missouri Cavalry, Dodge "felled all the timber I could" across a key thoroughfare known as the Bentonville Detour to block the advance of Van Dorn's and Price's separated troops for several hours.

The delay factored significantly in the Federals' Pea Ridge victory on March 8. Had the Southern troops succeeded in flanking Curtis' army as Van Dorn intended, the battle's outcome may well have gone the other way.



Dodge had railroad destruction high on his résumé, but here, prior to the Battle of Pea Ridge, it was the snow-covered Bentonville Detour—a major roadway—that he and his men worked diligently to wreck, felling trees to block the advance of troops in Earl Van Dorn's Confederate army. (© Digging In by Andy Thomas)

Early on March 7, Dodge met with Curtis and fellow officers to deliberate plans for the coming battle. Dodge was "confident of [an] attack on our rear and right" and had his men break camp and follow him to the command council. Curtis soon learned that the pickets in Colonel Sempronious H. Boyd's 24th Missouri Infantry were being driven in and ordered his army to completely reverse its position—putting Dodge now on the army's right flank. Curtis then ordered Dodge to march up the Telegraph Road toward Elkhorn Tavern.

Although Dodge had only 1,260 men (950 infantry, 310 cavalry) against Price's three divisions, he held fast with the adroit use of his artillery, positioned behind a rail fence.

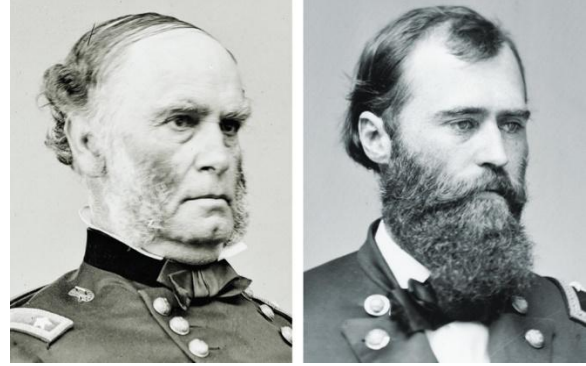
At one point, Van Dorn rushed forward several batteries and went into action against Federals positioned in a hollow just off the Telegraph Road. To counter the Confederate build-up on his right, Dodge realigned his front. He ordered two guns placed on the

Huntsville Road by Lieutenant Virgil A. David to open fire, and requested help from 1st Division commander Eugene A. Carr, who lent him his only reserve force—Colonel David Shunk’s 8th Indiana Infantry. The collapse of Colonel William Vandever’s 2nd Brigade on the other side of Telegraph Road put Dodge in danger of envelopment on the right, but he turned Price back by rushing in Shunk’s reserves.

Despite having three horses shot out from beneath him and suffering wounds to his side and hand, Dodge remained in the fray. But when the Confederates surged forward again at about 5 p.m., and with his men running out of ammunition, Dodge finally fell back about a half-mile to re-form his troops. While retiring, his men halted long enough to unleash a series of well-aimed volleys at the pursuing Rebels.

Left behind in a house filled with Union wounded was Charles A. Baker, a hospital nurse. Price asked Baker for the identity of the man in the black coat who commanded the Federals. Informed it was Colonel Dodge of the 4th Iowa, Price replied, “Give my compliments to him and say to him that he has given me the best fight I ever witnessed.”

Newspaper coverage of the victory quickly made Dodge a national hero. As T.J. McKenny, Curtis’ acting adjutant major, noted: “Col. Dodge of the 4th is a lion. The 4th and the 9th [Iowa] fought like tigers. One third fell in battle[,] no prisoners taken.”



Maj. Gen. Samuel Curtis (left) and Colonel Eugene Carr, his Army of the Southwest 1st Division commander. A New York native, Curtis spent most of his life in Iowa, and served as an antebellum politician. For Pea Ridge, Carr would receive a Medal of Honor. (Library of Congress)

DEFENDING THE RAILS

As he recovered from his wound, Dodge was promoted to brigadier general, and in June was assigned to Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck’s Department of the Missouri in Corinth, Miss. At Halleck’s headquarters, Dodge came upon an old acquaintance, Sheridan, about to be appointed colonel of the 3rd Michigan Cavalry.

Assigned an 8,000-man division, Dodge was dispatched to repair of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad between Corinth and the Ohio capital, Columbus. In this role, Dodge created a “Pioneer Corps,” a unit made up primarily of contrabands and used for “repair or construction work needed during the War.” Dodge was an able antagonist to Confederate Brig. Gen. [Nathan Bedford Forrest](#), who was conducting raids between the Tennessee towns of Grand Junction and Jackson. Destruction of railroad bridges in his path was one of Forrest’s specialties, but he often found himself checked along Dodge’s Mobile & Ohio lines.

A factor for that was Dodge's decision to have two-story blockhouses and stockades built along the line's bridges and stations. Each would be assigned at least a single company, usually a force strong enough to hold off enemy threats (such as Forrest's cavalry) long enough for reinforcements to arrive. Grant was so impressed by Dodge's novel approach that upon becoming commander of West Tennessee he ordered all bridges and stations along the region's railroads fortified in this manner.

When Colonel [John Rawlins](#), Grant's chief of staff, recommended that Grant and Dodge meet so his commander would have an opportunity to test the Iowan's mettle, Grant agreed. Dodge showed up for that meeting in Jackson, Tenn., still dressed in old trousers stuffed inside muddy boots, wearing a simple soldier's blouse and a sagging hat. Worried about his appearance, Dodge would be reassured by Rawlins: "Never mind about the clothes. We know all about you." Dodge later admitted he felt better once he saw Grant's own uniform.



This two-story blockhouse was erected in Arlington Heights, Va., just outside Washington, D.C. It was similar in style to the blockhouses Dodge became famous for constructing along the Mobile & Ohio Railroad to defend against cavalry raids at vulnerable bridges and train stations. (Library of Congress)

Grant gave Dodge command of the Army of the Tennessee's 2nd Division and instructed him to ramp up his secret service system in order to determine the enemy's overall strength.

Some of Dodge's spies were illiterate, and Dodge was known to take various approaches in training them. He had his agents memorize key information and made sure they could provide accurate troop counts of those traveling either on foot or by train. Knowing that an apprehended spy faced likely death, Dodge advised them to be as forthright as possible if captured. They were not to obfuscate the truth about Union forces, in order to give the impression they were regular civilians.

For Dodge, report accuracy was a must. He would interview refugees and contrabands, read Southern newspapers, and have captured Rebels interrogated—and he would train his men in what he felt was the best manner to cross-examine prisoners. When satisfied that the intelligence was correct, Dodge then forwarded it to Grant and other officers. He kept the list of his agents to himself; only his adjutants general and provost marshals knew of his intelligence operations.

Agents were to communicate with Dodge only indirectly. They were to carry Confederate money, gold, and goods to help bribe and barter behind the lines. At times, some even joined the Confederate army or pretended to be Confederate spies. Female spies were particularly valuable assets in towns where Confederates were known to be posted.

Concerned about the money he was spending, Dodge queried Grant: "I respectfully request instruction to me in

relation to the secret service fund The question is how much discretion I have in this matter and how can I account for this money.”

Dodge realized he could secure funds for his agents by selling cotton, and in January 1863 asked, and received, permission from Grant to retain all proceeds from the sale of contraband cotton to finance his intelligence operations. Long after the war, however, the Treasury Department wrote to Dodge—then president of the Union Pacific Railroad—seeking \$17,099.95 “standing against you on the books of this office of secret service funds placed in your hands during the late war.” Dodge simply forwarded the demand to the War Department.

With rumors circling that Dodge was enriching himself by speculating in cotton, Grant told him simply to “grin and bear it.”

Dodge spent 1862-63 defending Grant’s flank, chasing Forrest, repairing railroad lines, and destroying one of the breadbaskets that helped feed the Confederate army. At one point, he recalled, a two-mile line of contrabands from the “broad and fertile Tennessee Valley followed us. They came with their families loaded in all kinds of vehicles...they were the most motley and picturesque crowd that I ever saw.”

Giving them a home at a deserted plantation and placing a 27th Ohio chaplain in charge, Dodge created what the famed Rev. John Eaton championed was one of the Union army’s most successful “Contraband Camps.”

‘AXES, PICKS, AND SPADES’

Although he desired field action, Dodge knew Grant wanted him “in command of the District of Corinth; that it was a more

important command than a division in the field as it held his flank. He...left me there because he knew I would stay, which was an indication to me that he expected me to stay no matter what force came against me.”

For Army of the Tennessee commander Sherman, Dodge’s health was a constant concern, as Dodge’s weight had dropped to about 125 pounds in the summer of 1863. When General Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee pinned the Union army down in Chattanooga after the Battle of Chickamauga, Sherman ordered Dodge’s division up the Tennessee River Valley. It was Dodge’s assignment to repair and guard rail lines and roads between Nashville and Decatur, Ala.—needed by Grant to supply thousands of Federal troops. Dodge did not disappoint.

In his *Personal Memoirs*, Grant called Dodge a “most capable soldier” and applauded his ingenuity: “He had no tools to work with except those of the pioneers—axes, picks, and spades. With these he was able to intrench his men and protect them against surprise by small parties of the enemy.”

Without access to a dependable supply base, Dodge had his men forage for grain and cattle, and had millers and blacksmiths within his ranks use local mills and shops to grind flour and cornmeal and make tools for railroad- and bridge-building. Others cut timber for bridges, stacked cordwood, or built water tanks.

Marveled Grant: “The number of bridges to rebuild was 182, many of them over deep and wide chasms; the length of road repaired was 102 miles.”

ACTION IN ATLANTA

In March 1864, Grant was promoted to lieutenant general and made Union Army General-in-Chief. Sherman took control of the Military Division of the Mississippi, and Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson assumed command of the Army of the Tennessee. This also meant a return to the front for Dodge, whom Grant advised Sherman “is too valuable an officer to be anywhere except at the front and one you can rely upon in any and every emergency.” Sherman was content to keep Dodge with him, giving him command of the 16th Corps.

On July 10, 1864, Sherman asked Dodge to build a double-tracked trestle over the Chattahoochee River at Roswell, Ga. Three destroyed factories provided material for the bridge, although the owner of one of those factories, which flew a French flag, launched a protest to Dodge, who in turn telegraphed Sherman for advice on avoiding a potential international incident. “I know you have a big job but that is nothing new for you...,” was Sherman’s matter-of-fact response. “I know that the bridge at Roswell is important so that you may destroy all Georgia to make it good and strong.” The bridge would be finished by July 12.

It was ironic that Dodge had benefited the Union war cause thus far mostly by building and repairing railroads, but as the Atlanta Campaign progressed, he was directed by Sherman to destroy railroads feeding Georgia’s important commercial hub city—the Western & Atlantic in particular. Dodge’s men created what were famously known as “Sherman’s neckties.” They would remove rails; stack up the wooden ties beneath, set them on fire, and then heat the rails; and once the rails were heated twist them into all sorts of contortions, sometimes doing so around trees.

General Joe Johnston’s Confederates had bent but not yet broken in delaying Sherman’s advance on Atlanta that summer, but Davis clearly believed a more aggressive response was needed from his commander and, on July 17, finally replaced Johnston with General John Bell Hood. Dodge learned of the change on July 19 when one of his spies showed him an Atlanta newspaper. Dodge sought out and informed Sherman, who was conferring with Army of the Ohio commander Maj. Gen. John Schofield. Knowing Hood well from their West Point days together, Schofield predicted a Confederate attack within 24 hours.

He was correct. With Sherman’s army divided, Hood went after Maj. Gen. George Thomas’ Army of the Cumberland at Peachtree Creek on July 20. The Confederate attack, though, was delayed, and despite some initial success for Hood, the Federals prevailed. The loss cost the Confederates about 5,000 total casualties.



James Birdseye McPherson graduated at the top of West Point’s elite Class of 1853, which included the Confederates’ Atlanta Campaign

commander, Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)

Meanwhile, the Army of the Ohio and Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson's Army of the Tennessee had moved to the east around Atlanta. On July 22, those forces clashed with Hood's Confederates on the outskirts of the city in what would be known as the Battle of Atlanta. Hood ordered three divisions under Lt. Gen. William Hardee to attack the Union left, where McPherson had placed Dodge's 16th Corps. Two attacks by Hardee were turned back.

Riding forward for a firsthand look, McPherson was exuberant at the 16th Corps' determined stand and cried out "Hurrah for Dodge!" But as the popular Federal commander headed back he rode directly into a party of Confederates. Ordered to halt, he wheeled his mount to escape. Shots rang out, striking McPherson—killing him immediately.

With fewer than 5,000 men, the 16th Corps had faced at least three times their number. If he had retreated rather than stand and fight, Dodge later wrote, "What would have been the result? I say that in all my experience in life, until the two forces struck, and the Sixteenth Corps stood firm, I never passed more anxious moments."

Major General Francis Blair, 17th Corps commander, concurred:

"I witnessed the first furious assault...and its prompt and gallant repulse. It was a fortunate circumstance for that whole army that the 16th Army Corps occupied the position I have attempted to describe, at the moment of the attack; and although it does not become me to comment upon the brave conduct of the officers and men of that Corps, still I cannot refrain from expressing

my admiration for the manner in which [they] met and repulsed the repeated and persistent attacks of the enemy."

Like Sherman, Dodge mourned McPherson's loss. "[His] death was a loss to me personally," he wrote. "Being an engineer himself he took interest in my railroad work during the campaign, and he also knew of General Grant's friendship for me. In a kindly way giving me good advice."

In meeting with Sherman to report on the battle, Dodge wrote "he seemed rather surprised to see me, but greeted me cordially, and spoke of the loss of McPherson. I stated to him my errand. He turned upon me and said, "Dodge, you whipped them today, didn't you?" I said, "Yes, sir." Then he said: "Can't you do it again tomorrow?" and I said, "Yes, sir"; bade him good-night, and went back to my command, determined never to go upon another such errand."

The Federal noose around Atlanta continued to tighten as July turned to August. On August 18, Sherman ordered Dodge to "feel the enemy's front." While in a trench manned by the 7th Iowa Infantry, Dodge was cautioned not to lift his head above the trench, instead shown an observation peephole they had made. But, as Dodge recalled, the moment he put his eye to the hole, "a rebel shot me in the head". It was a significant wound, but fortunately not mortal. "Kittoe, Dodge isn't going to die; he is coming to," Sherman declared anxiously after asking his own medical director, Edward Kittoe, to examine the wounded warrior.

Left blind for several days, Dodge was sent north with other wounded soldiers in a freight car—lying in a hammock that

apparently swayed with the rhythm of the train. At Marietta, Ga., a nurse who had joined his army in Corinth examined his wound and gave him some “delicacies,” being sure to share the rest of the food with the other wounded lying on the boxcar’s floor. A few of those soldiers recounted feeling lucky to have been in the same car as the general, knowing it meant they would likely get more attention and more to eat. “[A]ll the way they endeavored to help me,” lamented Dodge. “I was absolutely helpless.”

In October, Grant invited Dodge to his City Point, Va., headquarters and recommended he call on President Lincoln in Washington before returning home to Iowa. At their meeting, the president asked Dodge his opinion of Grant, receiving affirmation the general was confident Grant would defeat Robert E. Lee and end the war. Lincoln warmly clasped Dodge’s hands, saying, “You don’t know how glad I am to hear you say that.”

FROM THE UNION ARMY TO THE UNION PACIFIC

The end of the war growing near, Dodge was given command of the Department of the Missouri, which had been combined with the Department of Kansas. Hostilities with American Indian tribes west of the Mississippi River remained an increasing threat for Dodge in his new command, particularly as it affected the region’s overland U.S. mail routes. He realized the November 1864 massacre of peaceful Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians at Sand Creek by Colonel John Chivington’s Colorado Volunteers had magnified the unrest, spurring united tribal attacks on civilians and U.S. authorities that impeded

or outright halted settlers traveling west and gold shipments east.

In February 1865, Dodge sent word he was en route to Fort Kearny in the Nebraska Territory. When Grant reached out to Edward Creighton, creator of the historic Overland Telegraph company, to ask “Where is Dodge?” Creighton replied, “Nobody knows where he is, but everybody knows where he had been.” Long-delayed freighters, stagecoach lines, and wagon trains began rolling by April 1, and never stopped.

September 21, 1865, would be an especially memorable for Dodge when he and 12 cavalymen came upon about 300 supposedly hostile warriors at Cheyenne Pass in present-day Wyoming. Watching the warriors disappear down a slope, Dodge ordered his men to follow and would discover a gradual, accessible descent to the plain below. By chance, he had found a long-sought pass for the pending Union Pacific railway.

Dodge left the Army in January 1866 and was offered the job of chief engineer of the Union Pacific. Assured he would have absolute control, he accepted and proved, as he had in uniform, to be a dynamic, hands-on leader. The Transcontinental Railroad was completed on May 10, 1869.



At Promontory Point, Utah, Dodge (right) and Samuel Montague of the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California shake hands at the “Golden Spike” ceremony celebrating the First Transcontinental Railroad’s completion. (Classicstock/Getty images)

The friendships of Dodge, Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan welded by the war would last throughout their lifetimes. Notably, Dodge—whose health issues and wounds had once greatly alarmed Sherman—outlived the other three by at least 15 years. Dodge was 84 when he died on January 3, 1916.

The head of seven railroads and nine construction companies, and an adviser to various presidents, Dodge enjoyed fabulous wealth after the war. He was touched by scandal during Grant’s administration, as a friend of speculator Jay Gould, but he remained respected. He would lead fundraising efforts for memorials to Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan, as well as O.O. Howard, and after Grant died in July 1885 he led the seven-mile funeral procession for the former commander and president through New York City.

Dodge remained a friend to Grant’s widow, Julia, and children, and helped them financially—as he would for many widows and children of former generals, former

spies, and 4th Iowa veterans who had fallen on hard times.

During a June 1902 event at West Point, Theodore Roosevelt gave Dodge an astonishing tribute: “I am going to say something to you that it will be hard for you to believe but it comes from my heart. I would rather have had your experience in the Civil War and have seen what you have seen and done than to be President of the United States.” No faint praise indeed.

Judith Wilmot writes from St. Augustine, Fla. She was the author of “Humanity Forbade Them to Starve” in the January 2021 issue of America’s Civil War.

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THE HIDDEN BATTLEFIELD WHERE BLACK TROOPS AVENGED FALLEN COMRADES — AND EARNED THE MEDAL OF HONOR

Tucked into dense, humid forest off six lanes of roaring interstate is a largely forgotten battlefield: New Market Heights, where 14 U.S. Colored Troops soldiers and two white officers earned the nation's highest military honor.

By John Banks, HISTORYNET, 11/23/2022



Tim Talbott's shirt is adorned with the image of a USCT veteran. He stands by Texas Brigade earthwork remains on the New Market Heights battlefield. (Photo by John Banks)

After spending a sleepless Saturday night in a sketchy Richmond hotel, I drive surprisingly uncongested highways to the unheralded New Market Heights battlefield, where U.S. Colored Troops made history. Promptly at 8:30 a.m., I arrive at the already crowded Four Mile Creek Park parking lot, located behind a snake-rail fence astride New Market Road. All my deep-weeds battlefield walk essentials are accounted for: bug spray, long pants, hiking boots, water, snacks, a cellphone and backpack, and curiosity.

Days earlier, Tim Talbott—my New Market Heights guide—had messaged me a warning: “It’s supposed to be as hot as blue blazes.” His forecast proves spot-on. Virginia in late July is hell with the lid off. But I figure Talbott—the 52-year-old Central Virginia Battlefields Trust chief administrative officer—won’t mind.

“It’s always an honor to be on that ground,” he messaged me in a follow-up to his weather report.

In the parking lot in Henrico, 10 miles southeast of downtown Richmond, Talbott and I exchange pleasantries. This is our first meeting in person, although we’ve made dozens of Civil War–related connections online. Talbott wears blue jeans, an olive ballcap with the CVBT logo, and a maroon T-shirt. Strands of gray appear in the soft-spoken Tennessee native’s black goatee. He lives in Fredericksburg, Va., a 70-mile drive north on beastly Interstate 95.

Talbott has secured permission from Henrico County for us to walk the core New

Market Heights battlefield, where, on September 29, 1864, 14 U.S. Colored Troops soldiers and two of their white officers earned the Medal of Honor. The county owns the most important swath of the battlefield, now blanketed by a forest of pine, holly, gum, and oak.

Our battlefield walk begins at a large garbage dumpster, behind a Dairy Queen on the opposite side of New Market Road. Three feral cats—two black, one gray—scatter as we walk toward them and disappear into the woods.

New Market Heights has been stiff-armed in the history books, but it is Talbott’s favorite battlefield. Armchair historians sometimes confuse it with the Battle of New Market, fought in the Shenandoah Valley in mid-May 1864. Talbott’s interest in the battle stems from a talk given by a professional historian nearly 20 years ago.

“The way he told the story made it come alive,” he says while brushing away pine branches along our narrow path through the woods.

My interest in New Market Heights stems from a meeting at nearby Fort Harrison weeks earlier with Damon Radcliffe, the great-great-grandson of Edward Ratcliff. A former slave, Edward served in the 38th U.S. Colored Troops and received one of those 14 Medals of Honor. Damon and I couldn’t walk the battlefield that day, but I vowed to return. My mantra: *If you want to understand a battle, you must walk the ground.*

Fifteen minutes into our walk, we reach a section of woods where the earth undulates, like a haphazardly tossed brown blanket. We

have arrived at the remains of earthworks created by the famed Texas Brigade.

“Used to be chest high,” Talbott says of defenses, now only as high as three feet in places.

Piles of brown leaves, as well as gnarly tree roots, scattered broken twigs, tree branches and limbs, carpet the forest floor. Mayflies make pests of themselves while cicadas buzz and click. About a half-mile away, traffic hums on six lanes of Interstate 295, which slices through the battlefield like a bayonet through the heart.

In a charge about daybreak toward the earthworks, Black troops shouted: “Remember Fort Pillow! No quarter for the Rebels.” Nearly six months earlier, troops commanded by Nathan Bedford Forrest had massacred USCT at Fort Pillow in Tennessee.

On that bleak, foggy morning at New Market Heights, Black soldiers were out for revenge and a chance to prove their mettle. With one great push by the Union Army, USCT soldiers could soon be marching into the capital of the Confederacy.

Behind earthworks, the Texas Brigade, some 2,000-strong, fired thousands of rounds into the oncoming USCT soldiers they despised. Meanwhile, Rebel artillery, positioned at opposite ends of the heights behind the brigade, poured iron into the USCT.

Fifty to 75 yards in front of their earthworks, the Rebels had placed abatis—sharpened tree branches—and wooden *chevaux de frises*, the distant cousin of barbed wire. Gaps in the defenses funneled the Black soldiers into a kill zone.

“The Texans,” a Georgia officer wrote, “killed niggers galore.”

Confederate soldiers occasionally advanced beyond their earthworks to strip the dead of shoes, weapons, and ammunition. They murdered at least one captured USCT soldier behind their lines.

Talbott and I venture deeper into the woods, to get a USCT soldier’s perspective of the battlefield.



Don Troiani's 'Three Medals of Honor' depicts the moment in the Battle of New Market Heights when Lieutenant Nathan Edgerton, Sgt. Maj. Thomas R. Hawkins, and Sergeant Alexander Kelly of the 6th USCT save their regimental flag. (©Don Troiani. All Rights Reserved 2022/Bridgeman Images)

Perspiration pours down my arm, soaking my reporter’s notebook and blurring my scribbled words. I’ve never sweat so much on a battlefield—even in Resaca, Ga., during a reenactment on a blistering mid-May afternoon.

Soon, the drone of interstate traffic becomes a memory. The ground slopes gently up toward the Texas Brigade’s earthworks, which stretched for roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. But the tree-covered landscape—largely open ground in 1864—makes New Market Heights mostly a battlefield of the mind.

To create a path through the woods, Talbott uses a long stick to swat away holly branches and spider webs. Neither of us wants to take home a blood-sucking tick as a memory of this experience.

“Is this remote enough for you?” Talbott asks.

Eighty yards or so beyond Rebel earthworks, we stop at the edge of a 50-acre rock quarry filled with water—a nasty 20th-century scar on hallowed ground.

“A friend of mine jokes that you could only give kayak tours here now,” Talbott says.

In Talbott’s perfect world, the quarry would be emptied and filled in. The battlefield where hundreds of Black soldiers and their White officers shed blood would be restored to its 1864 appearance and interpreted. Soldiers such as Corporal Miles James of the 36th USCT, among the 14 Medal of Honor recipients from this battle, would be at least as well-known as [Benjamin Butler](#)—the Army of the James general who commanded them.

Born in Princess Anne County, Va., James had enlisted in Norfolk in November 1863. A 34-year-old farmer, he probably was enslaved before the war. He stood 5 feet 7 with black eyes and hair.

Within 30 yards of Texas Brigade defenses, a bullet burrowed into James’ upper left arm, shattering bone. Somehow the corporal continued to load and fire his weapon with his good arm, urging on comrades as the battle swirled. James endured the amputation of his useless limb on the battlefield. Later, the corporal received treatment at Fort Monroe, 75 miles east in the Virginia coast, and a promotion to sergeant.

Despite losing an arm—a golden ticket out of the service if he wanted it—James refused to leave the army. In February 1865, Colonel Alonzo Draper—who commanded James’ brigade at New Market Heights—wrote Fort Monroe’s chief surgeon:

“He is one of the bravest men I ever saw; and is in every respect a model soldier. He is worth more with his single arm, than half a dozen ordinary men.”

James served in the U.S. Army until a disability discharge in October 1865. Hundreds of other Black soldiers like him, nearly all of them former slaves, fought as well as James at New Market Heights.

“Unbelievable bravery,” Talbott says of the USCT.

At Four Mile Creek, which snakes its way through the battlefield before dumping into the James River, Talbott and I talk about the white officers on horseback who became prime targets of the Rebels.

“This is where the Rebels thought the USCT would become nothing but rabble after the officers fell,” Talbott says. The creek itself became a devilish impediment to USCT soldiers under withering fire.



As they rushed toward New Market Heights, the attacking USCT soldiers had to struggle across boggy Four Mile Creek. Some of their white

mounted officers fell at this location, but the Black men surged on and up the ridge. (Photo by John Banks)

At creekside, I learn more about Talbott, too.

He grew up in Madison, Ind., a stop on the Underground Railroad—the network escaped slaves used to flee to free states and Canada. At his 1,000-student high school, he played football (“not very well”) and grew to enjoy rap and hip-hop—which some of his white peers thought strange.

Talbott’s high school history teacher—“a 1960s hippie”—exposed him to “all the cultural stuff,” including the Civil Rights era and two of its leading personalities, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. For the past 30 years, he has immersed himself in the experiences of Black people during the Civil War.

On his phone, Talbott displays wallpaper of Frederick Douglass—the famous Black orator, abolitionist, writer, and reformer. The copy of the painting on his maroon T-shirt, now drenched with sweat, is of a one-legged USCT soldier on crutches. Talbott dreams of a monument at Four Mile Creek Park to honor the USCT, who forced the Texas Brigade to fall back to a secondary line. The Black troops ultimately entered Richmond, but not until after the capital’s fall in April 1865.

As we walk through the Virginia forest, Talbott and I wonder why this battle—and this battlefield—have been consigned to the shadows of history. *Racism? Indifference? Ignorance?* In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an effort failed by a Black military history group to have the battlefield named a National Historic Landmark.

Thankfully, hundreds of acres of the New Market Heights battlefield have been saved by the American Battlefield Trust and other preservation groups. But much has been lost forever because of modern development.

Two hours after our walk began, sweaty and dirty, we leave the woods and September 1864 behind. On a pathway along New Market Road to the Four Mile Creek Park parking lot, Talbott and I talk about the battle, preservation, and Civil War memory.

“Many people say they love history, but what they really love is nostalgia,” he says. “I love messy history. That’s where the good stuff is.”

Messy history—that’s a perfect encapsulation of the Battle of New Market Heights.

John Banks, author of two Civil War books, has another one coming in 2023. Check out A Civil War Road Trip of a Lifetime (Gettysburg Publishing) for more on this story. For more on New Market Heights, including soldier stories, go to battleofnewmarketheights.org

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The National Park Service announces entrance fee-free days for 2023



A visitor to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks enjoys the view.

Share the Experience/Karla Rivera

News Release: December 8, 2022

WASHINGTON – The National Park Service will have five **entrance fee-free days** in 2023 that provide free admittance to all national parks for everyone. On these significant days of commemoration or celebration, and throughout the year, the National Park Service is committed to increasing access to national parks and promoting the advantages of outdoor recreation for public benefit and enjoyment.

The free entrance dates for 2023 are:

- January 16 – **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**
- April 22 – First Day of **National Park Week**
- August 4 – **Great American Outdoors Day**
- September 23 – **National Public Lands Day**
- November 11 – **Veterans Day**

“National parks are really amazing places and we want everyone to experience them,” said National Park Service Director Chuck Sams. “The entrance fee-free days encourage people to discover the beauty, history and inspiration awaiting them in **more than 400 national parks** throughout the country.”

Detailed information about what there is to see and do at each park is available on **NPS.gov** or the **NPS app**. It is important for people to know before they go what is

open and available, especially if interested in overnight accommodations.

In 2021, 297 million people visited national parks and spent \$20.5 billion in local communities. This supported 322,600 jobs across the country and had a \$42.5 billion benefit to the U.S. economy.

Most national parks are always free to enter. Only about 100 of the 400+ national parks have an entrance fee. For parks with an entrance fee, the cost ranges from \$5 to \$35 and the money remains in the National Park Service, with 80-100% staying in the park where collected. The funds are used to enhance the visitor experience by providing programs and services, habitat restoration, and infrastructure maintenance and repair.

The fee waiver for the fee-free days applies only to National Park Service entrance fees and does not cover amenity or user fees for camping, boat launches, transportation, special tours, or other activities.

The annual \$80 **America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass** allows unlimited access to more than 2,000 federal recreation areas, including all national parks, for the passholder and companions accompanying them. There are also free or discounted passes available for currently serving members of the **U.S. military and their dependents, military veterans, Gold Star Families, fourth grade students, disabled citizens, and senior citizens**.

Other federal land management agencies offering their own fee-free days in 2023 are the **U.S. Fish & Wildlife**

Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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Jack Hinson: One Man's Retribution

John M. Taylor, Blue and Gray Dispatch, November 14, 2022



The Civil War produced many divisions in both North and South. Southerners overwhelmingly supported the Confederate cause; a small percentage supported the North and some preferred to remain neutral. One individual who preferred neutrality was John W. Hinson, aka “Jack” or “Old Jack.” Hinson owned a plantation called Bubbling Springs, near Dover in Stewart County, Tennessee. The area, known as Land Between the Lakes, separates the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. It was there that Jack lived with his wife and ten children. A one-time slave owner, Jack freed his slaves, and they remained as workers on his farm. Although not particularly political, Hinson opposed secession. Despite Jack’s stance, two of his sons joined the Confederate Army.

Early in 1862, after the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson, Gen. U.S. Grant’s successes established an ongoing Union presence on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Jack Hinson literally hosted Grant in his home. The region was logistically favorable for the Federal Army to supply troops in Tennessee and Georgia. Given the large number of Confederate supporters in the area, Federal presence was not welcome and so-called Southern “bushwhackers” used guerilla tactics to attack Union soldiers and sympathizers. This led to a Union policy of capturing, torturing, and executing suspected attackers without a trial.

Two of Hinson’s civilian sons, George (22) and Jack (17), were deer hunting in the fall of 1862 when they were accosted by a Union patrol and accused of being bushwhackers. They “were tied to a tree then shot, after which their bodies were dragged back to town. There the corpses were paraded around the Dover courthouse square as an example of the Union’s zero-tolerance policy toward resistance.” Their heads were cut off and taken to Hinson’s farm where they were placed on gateposts. The Union patrol searched the Hinson home and surrounding buildings looking for “contraband.” Important items were well hidden. The lieutenant in charge wanted to arrest other family members but relented once it was revealed Grant had a friendly relationship with the Hinsons.

Holding true to his Scots-Irish lineage, 57-year-old Jack Hinson developed a plan of retribution against those who murdered his sons. Old Jack got his hands on a .50 caliber Kentucky rifle, based on the British Whitworth. The 17-pound rifle had a 41” hexagonal barrel. This unique weapon was capable of shooting over 2,000 yards; it

could fire minie balls to more effectively kill the enemy.



From cover of Jack Hinson's One-man War, a Civil War Sniper, by Tom McKenney

After studying Union movements, Hinson developed an ambush plan, initially focusing on the lieutenant and sergeant responsible for his sons' murders. He killed both of them, shooting the unsuspecting lieutenant from his saddle. Before the smoke had cleared, Hinson vanished, using his extensive knowledge of the terrain to escape. The Yankees quickly figured out who initiated these acts, and Jack became a target. Local friends warned Jack about Union plans to track him down. Hinson "sent his wife and seven of his children to Sulfur Wells" to stay with relatives.

Once he felt his family was safe, Jack moved to a hiding place in a ridge-top cave overlooking the Tennessee River—an ideal shooting position. Union boats sometimes struggled against the rapids, reducing their speed to a snail's pace. This allowed Jack time to carefully aim before pulling the trigger; he could also be more selective as to his target (mainly officers). "Legend says that the 36 eighth-inch punch marks on his

sniper rifle indicate the number of victims who fell to his deadly skill." In reality, Jack Hinson is believed to have used his sniping prowess to kill over 100 Yankees. Another story is that Jack did not count his kills unless he could literally put his foot on the victim's face.

Ultimately, the South had too few Jack Hinsons to win its independence. Perhaps employing the guerilla tactics of Hinson (and the Confederate Indians) would have accomplished the South's primary goal.

Jack Hinson simply wanted to be left alone to live his life. Leaving a heroic legacy as perhaps America's greatest sniper was certainly not worth the suffering he and his family endured. Indeed, the war Hinson desperately tried to stay out of cost him virtually everything he loved.

*Sources: Jack Hinson: "A Civil War Sniper Hell Bent on Revenge," by Shahan Russell, from American Civil War Instant Articles at: <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/american-civil-war/jack-ninson-civil-war-sniper-hell.html>; "The Story of American Civil War Sniper Jack Hinson and his Rifle," by Kyle Lamb, from Guns & Ammo at: <https://www.gunsandammo.com/editorial/the-story-of-civil-war-sniper-jack-hinson-and-his-rifle/247860>; "The Sniper who Slayed more than 100 Union Soldiers," from "True Stories" at: <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/the-sniper-who-slayed-more-than-100-union-soldiers/64502/>. For more details, check out the book, *Jack Hinson's One-man War, a Civil War Sniper*, by Tom McKenney.*

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Flank Attack at Barlow's Knoll

Furious Fights at Gettysburg: July 1, 1863

By Timothy H. Smith • Hallowed Ground Magazine • October 4, 2022 • Updated October 3, 2022



The sun rises on Barlow's Knoll — named for Brig. Gen. Francis C. Barlow, who chose to advance his division on the site on July 1, 1863. Noe IKline

The Adams County Almshouse, or poorhouse, was established in 1818 along the Harrisburg Road, just northeast of Gettysburg. By the time of the Civil War, it had grown into a complex of buildings, and the “Poorhouse Farm” included several hundred acres.

Around noon on July 1, 1863, the Union XI Army Corps, under Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, began to arrive on the field, extending to the north the line already established by Generals John F. Reynolds and Abner Doubleday west of town. Without knowledge of the close proximity of advancing Southern forces, Howard’s orders to his subordinates were unclear. Instead of forming his men in a tight arc across the critical road network at the edge of the town, Brig. Gen. Francis C. Barlow chose to advance his division

through the Almshouse complex to a rise of ground on the Blocher Farm near the Harrisburg Road.

This questionable movement opened the Union right flank to a massive attack by elements of Maj. Gen. Jubal Early’s Confederate division.

“They were harder to drive than we had ever known them before,” said George Washington Nichols of the 61st Georgia. “Men were being mown down in great numbers on both sides.... We advanced and drove them into and out of a deep road cut and on to the Almshouse, where the Yankees stopped and made a desperate stand.”

Despite that stiff resistance and final foothold around the Almshouse buildings, Union forces were overwhelmed and driven back through the streets of Gettysburg, leaving the fields strewn with dead and wounded. During the afternoon, the XI Corps suffered approximately 3,000 casualties, while inflicting about 800 on the enemy. It was a devastating loss for a corps marred by similar defeat at the Battle of Chancellorsville only two months earlier.



*Gettysburg | Barlow's Knoll | July 1, 1863 |
2:45 - 4:30 pm (November 2019) American
Battlefield Trust*

After the Civil War, the Almshouse complex remained in possession of Adams County, and the site was further developed. In 1949, the Adams County Prison was relocated from East High Street in Gettysburg (where it had been in operation since 1804) to part of the Almshouse property along the Biglerville Road. Additionally, a new facility for the elderly (eventually renamed Green Acres) was built just south of the prison. The original buildings of the Almshouse were later removed, and an agricultural center now occupies the site.

When a new and improved county prison was built east of Gettysburg in 2003, the Adams County Historical Society (ACHS) acquired the property from the county. As part of the agreement, ACHS was asked to remove the old prison and replace the dilapidated structure with a more historically appropriate building. At long last, these plans are coming to fruition, and a new museum and history center will soon open at this site. The museum will focus on the story of the people who lived in Gettysburg and Adams County at the time of the Civil War and how they were affected by the battle, as well as the history of the community before and after 1863.