



HARPERS FERRY

CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

PO BOX 1079, HARPERS FERRY, WV 25425

Vol. 30 September 2010 No. 01

DATE: Wednesday, September 8th, 2010

TIME: Dinner 7:00 PM; Program 8:00

PLACE: Camp Hill Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, WV

SPEAKER: Dennis Frye

SUBJECT: Burnside Betrayed

The Speaker:

Dennis E. Frye is the chief historian at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Dennis is a prominent Civil War historian. He has had numerous appearances on PBS, The History Channel, The Discovery Channel, and A&E as a guest historian. Dennis served as an Associate Producer for the Civil War movie *Gods and Generals*. Dennis also is one of the nation's leading Civil War battlefield preservationists. He is co-founder and first president of the *Save Historic Antietam Foundation*, and he is co-founder and a former president of today's *Civil War Preservation Trust*. Dennis is a tour guide in demand, leading tours for organizations such as the Smithsonian, National Geographic, numerous colleges and universities. Dennis also is a well-known author, with 70 articles and five books. His latest book is entitled *Antietam Revealed*. Dennis resides near the Antietam Battlefield in Maryland, and he and his wife, Sylvia, have restored the home that was used by General Burnside as his post-Antietam headquarters. Dennis has spoken numerous times at the Harpers Ferry Civil Round Table.

The Subject

“Bungler.” “Buffoon.” Butcher at the Bridge. These words come to mind when we hear the name, "Burnside." But what was Burnside's real performance in the Maryland Campaign? Should history's disdain be sustained? Or should Burnside be reconsidered? Was his reputation tarnished, not by his performance, but by his peers? Was Burnside betrayed?

The Meal

A family-style meal will be served at 7:00 PM prior to the program. The menu for Sept 8th is: Meat Loaf, Mashed Potatoes, Gravy, Peas, Iced Tea, Rolls, Butter & Dessert. The cost of the meal is \$15.00 per person. Reservations for the meal **must be phoned in no later than Sunday Sept. 4th**, to Allison Alsdorf, at 304-535-2101 or you can email her at alsdorf@comcast.net

Richard Ewell at Gettysburg Second-Guessing Dick Ewell: Why didn't the Confederate general take Cemetery Hill on July 1, 1863?

By Chris Mackowski and Kristopher D. White

On the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg, after a bruising fight north of town sent portions of the Union Army of the Potomac into retreat, Confederate General Robert E. Lee ordered his Second Corps commander, Lieutenant General Richard Ewell, to attack the new Federal position on Cemetery Hill "if practicable."

Ewell chose not to attack, allowing the Federals to re-form on the hill and dig in. The position then served as the linchpin for the entire Union line. Armchair generals have since had a field day with what is seen as his failure, often arguing that "Stonewall" Jackson would not have been so "timid" and the legendary commander would have found it "practicable" to attack and would have swept the Union forces from the field.

But Ewell, who had taken command after Jackson was killed only a month and a half earlier, had several good reasons for not attacking the Union position—reasons frequently ignored or overlooked because of postwar scapegoating. As a result, modern students of the battle get only part of the story. They see Ewell as someone who failed to live up to his predecessor rather than a newly minted corps commander who made a sound decision.

Over the years, much attention has been given to Lee's particular wording: "General Ewell was, therefore, instructed to carry the hill occupied by the enemy, if he found it practicable...." Ewell, however, had plenty of legitimate reasons to think an assault on Cemetery Hill wasn't practicable.

Certainly, though, the intent behind Lee's orders on the afternoon of July 1, 1863, seems unmistakable. He urged Ewell to attack if his corps commander thought it advantageous to do so. But Lee also placed a very important qualification on his order—best understood by looking at the complete passage from Lee's 1864 report: "Without

information as to its proximity, the strong position which the enemy had assumed could not be attacked without danger of exposing the four divisions present, already weakened and exhausted by a long and bloody struggle, to overwhelming numbers of fresh troops. General Ewell was, therefore, instructed to carry the hill occupied by the enemy, if he found it practicable, but to avoid a general engagement until the arrival of the other divisions of the army, which were to hasten forward." Unfortunately, in the years since the battle, much emphasis has been placed on the phrase "if practicable"—words that Lee may have never uttered—and the warning about avoiding a general engagement has been ignored

Major General Isaac Trimble, attached on special duty to Ewell's command during the battle, was among those who tried to dismiss Lee's warning. Writing for the Southern Historical Society (SHS) years after both Lee and Ewell had died, Trimble recalled his attempt to persuade Ewell to attack. As Trimble recalled, Ewell called attention to Lee's order not to bring on a general engagement. "[T]hat hardly applies to things," Trimble responded, "as we have fought a hard battle already, and should secure the advantage gained."

In Trimble's version, he urged Ewell to take not Cemetery Hill, where the Union army was trying to re-form, but Culp's Hill. "General, there is an eminence of commanding position, and not now occupied, as it ought to be by us or the enemy soon. I advise you to send a brigade and hold it if we are to remain here," Trimble said, adding, "it ought to be held by us at once." Ewell replied, "When I need advice from a junior officer, I generally ask it."

During his reconnaissance, Ewell discovered that Culp's Hill sat unoccupied a quarter of a mile to the southeast of Cemetery Hill. If his men could occupy Culp's Hill, the Union position on Cemetery Hill would be untenable.

Ewell suggested to Early that his men occupy Culp's Hill. Early balked, telling Ewell that Johnson's men should occupy it instead once they arrived. Johnson, who had arrived on the scene ahead of his men, traded sharp words with Early, but Ewell took Early's side.

By the time Johnson's men arrived, Federals had already occupied the hill. A 30-man squad from the 42nd Virginia, sent by Johnson to reconnoiter, wound up as Union prisoners. The chance to take the ground without a fight slipped away. Over the next two days, assaults on Culp's Hill would lead to some 2,500 Confederate casualties during the longest-sustained combat on the battlefield.

Obviously, Early had a vested interest in blaming Ewell for the lack of action on the afternoon and evening of July 1. Ewell had supported Early's decision not to move to Culp's Hill, and that decision had catastrophic consequences for the Army of Northern Virginia.

After the war, Early contended that he had vigorously supported an assault on Cemetery Hill, yet on the evening of the battle he claimed his men were too tired and disorganized to occupy unoccupied Culp's Hill. If his men were in no condition to move unopposed to an empty hilltop, how could they have led an attack against a heavily fortified enemy position? "The discovery that this lost us the battle," Campbell Brown said, "is one of those frequently-recurring but tardy strokes of military genius of which one hears long after the minute circumstances that rendered them at the time

impracticable, are forgotten—at least I heard nothing of it for months & months, & it was several years before any claim was put in by Early or his friends that his advice had been in favor of an attack & had been neglected."

In fact, Early led a vigorous campaign—after Lee's death, so that Lee could not refute any of Early's claims—to place blame for the loss at Gettysburg on Ewell and, for his actions on July 2 and 3, on First Corps Commander James Longstreet. Trimble, cavalryman Fitzhugh Lee and others joined in. That scapegoating has since become accepted as a central tenet to the "Lost Cause" mythology. But tactically Ewell did the right thing on the evening of July 1. His decision not to assault Cemetery Hill was a sound military judgment based on the evidence he had at the time weighed against discretionary orders from his commander. Critics have second-guessed Ewell's judgment about the "practicability" of an assault, ignoring the fact that Lee expressly forbade him from bringing on a general engagement.

In the years since, a well-coordinated finger-pointing campaign, suppression of facts and a nation's admiration for a martyred Confederate icon all combined to vilify Ewell and his well-reasoned decision under pressure.

(Extracted and abridged from Historynet.com. <http://www.historynet.com/richard-ewell-at-gettysburg.htm/5>)

This abridgement does not do the article that these gentlemen wrote justice, but the newsletter editor thought it provocative and thoughtful enough to excerpt for his readers as one of the few defenses encountered of General Ewell. Read the article in its entirety at the referenced link) *Kristopher D. White is a licensed battlefield guide at Gettysburg. Chris Mackowski, who teaches at St. Bonaventure University, is a historical interpreter at Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park. They are the co-authors of The Last Days of Stonewall Jackson.*