

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

George Gordon Meade

By **Richard A. Sauer**

Known chiefly as the victor of Gettysburg, George Gordon Meade's reputation as a general was overshadowed by controversy because of the actions of other generals who sought to blacken his reputation and enrich their own. Meade himself never wrote anything about his Civil War experience and once stated that he had "a great contempt for History."¹

Meade was born in Cadiz, Spain, on the last day of the year 1815. His father was a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, hence the Spanish birth of his son. The elder Meade had supported the royalist cause during the Napoleonic wars, but afterward the crown refused to repay Meade's loans, and until his untimely death in 1828, Meade's father unsuccessfully sought redress.

After being educated in various boarding schools, Meade's widowed mother sought to place her son at the United States Military Academy at West Point to further his education. Meade entered the school in 1831 and graduated nineteenth in the fifty-six-man class of 1835. He was breveted a second lieutenant in the 3rd Artillery. After service in New York and Florida, Meade resigned his commission in 1836 to work as a civil engineer. His work included surveys of a railroad, the mouth of the Sabine River, the Mississippi delta, and work on boundary surveys between Texas and the United States and between Canada and the United States.

Meade married Margaret Sergeant in 1840. His wife was the daughter of Congressman John Sergeant. Another of his daughters married Virginian Henry A. Wise, who helped Meade rejoin the army in 1842 with the rank of second lieutenant in the Topographical Engineers. Meade's duties included lighthouse construction in the Delaware Bay until he was transferred in August 1845 to General Zachary Taylor's command in Texas.

Meade participated in the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma as war with Mexico erupted in May 1846. The lieutenant accompanied Taylor's advance to Monterrey and helped guide one of the assaulting columns during the September 21-24

¹ George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, 2 vols, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913; reprint edition, Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1994), 2:271.

battle for the city. Meade was then transferred to General Winfield Scott's army in time to witness Scott's successful capture of the port of Veracruz in March 1847. By that time there were so many engineer officers with the army that Meade had little to do. After complaining about his lack of action, Meade was sent to Washington and was assigned to his former position in the Delaware Bay.

After temporary duty in Florida (1849-1850), Meade returned to lighthouse work. He was promoted to first lieutenant and eventually rose to supervise two districts spread along the east coast, working on lighthouse siting and construction in Florida, New Jersey, and Delaware. In 1856, Meade was transferred to duty with the ongoing survey of the Great Lakes. He was promoted to captain in 1857 and placed in charge of the survey, with headquarters at Detroit.

When war began in the spring of 1861, Meade was still in Detroit. He watched as his subordinates all left for other commands and fretted when he was not promoted. Finally, in August, Meade received an appointment as brigadier general of volunteers, thanks to Pennsylvania Governor Andrew G. Curtin's influence. Meade reported to Washington and was assigned to command of the Second Brigade of the Pennsylvania Reserves.

As part of Major General Irvin McDowell's corps, the Pennsylvania Reserves, under the command of Brigadier General George A. McCall, moved south to Fredericksburg, Virginia by the end of April 1862. On June 9, the Lincoln Administration ordered McCall's division to join the Army of the Potomac, which had advanced from Fort Monroe up the Peninsula toward Richmond.

The Reserves were assigned to Fitz John Porter's 5th Corps, deployed north of the Chickahominy River. Porter's isolated corps was the target of General Robert E. Lee's offensive that began on June 26, when Confederate units attacked Porter's line behind Beaver Dam Creek (Mechanicsville). Three of Meade's regiments took part in the battle, after which the Union troops withdrew. Meade's brigade was engaged at the battle of Gaines' Mill on June 27, where his regiments were committed piecemeal and suffered heavy casualties. The division fought again at Glendale on June 30, where McCall's three brigades held the center of the army against numerous Southern attacks. During this confusing battle, Meade was wounded by a bullet that hit him in the upper right side of his back and ranged down until it exited above the hip. The wounded general was taken to the rear and sent home to recuperate.

Meade rejoined the Pennsylvania Reserves in mid-August, as the division disembarked near Fredericksburg. Brigadier General John Fulton Reynolds, now in command, assigned Meade to command of the First Brigade. The division marched to join Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia and took part in the Battle of Second Manassas on August 29-30. On the second day of this Union defeat, the Reserves deployed on Henry House Hill to cover the retreat of the army.

Following his victory at Second Manassas, General Lee moved north across the Potomac River into Maryland. When Governor Curtin called up the state militia, he requested that General Reynolds be assigned to command these soldiers. As a result, Meade became division commander. He led the Pennsylvania Reserves at the Battle of South Mountain (September 14), where his troops assaulted Turner's Gap. Three days later, Meade led his division into action at Antietam, where the Reserves fought in and around the Cornfield. During the fighting, Meade was hit in the thigh by a spent piece of grapeshot that caused a painful bruise. After I Corps Commander Major General Joseph Hooker was carried off the field wounded, McClellan placed Meade in command of the corps, even though he was not the senior general present. Meade's assignment was to withdraw the corps, reorganize the troops, and defend the right flank of the army.

That fall, Reynolds returned to the army and became commander of the I Corps, leaving Meade in division command. On November 29, Meade received a promotion to major general of volunteers as a reward for his good service. During the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, Meade's Pennsylvania Reserves spearheaded the attack on Lee's right flank. Meade's troops exploited a small gap in Stonewall Jackson's line and were initially successful. "[M]y men went in *beautifully*" wrote Meade to his wife, "carried everything before them, and drove the enemy for nearly half a mile, but finding themselves unsupported on either right or left, and encountering an overwhelming force of the enemy, they were checked and finally driven back." The Reserves suffered casualties of thirty percent.²

On December 23, Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside, in command of the Army of the Potomac, issued an order placing Meade in command of the 5th Corps. Meade led his corps during the Chancellorsville Campaign as one of the three corps initially that moved across the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers to attack Lee's rear behind Fredericksburg. Meade was dismayed when Hooker, now in army command, suspended the advance and instead deployed his men in a defensive formation around the Chancellor House in the midst of an area known as the Wilderness. Meade's corps was on the army's left flank, and then moved to the right after "Stonewall" Jackson's devastating attack on the 9th Corps. During the fighting on May 3, 1863, one of Meade's brigade commanders discovered that the Confederate left flank was unguarded. Meade went to see Hooker and urged that he and Reynolds be allowed to attack. "I have never known anyone so vehemently to advise an attack on the field of battle," wrote Colonel Alexander Stewart Webb, Meade's chief of staff. However, the wounded Hooker had already decided against any attacks, placed his senior corps commander in temporary command, and ordered a retreat.³

General Lee reorganized his army and in early June began moving north, crossing the Potomac into Maryland. Advance elements of his army kept moving northeast into Pennsylvania and by late June were threatening Harrisburg, the state capital. Hooker

² Meade, *Life and Letters* 1:337.

³ Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960; reprint edition, Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1980), 110.

moved the Army of the Potomac into Maryland, keeping between the Confederates and Washington. The general feuded with the War Department and asked to be relieved of command when he was refused certain reinforcements. Early on the morning of June 28, a War Department officer entered Meade's tent near Frederick, Maryland, and handed him an order that placed him in command of the army.

Over the next three days, Meade concentrated the army near Frederick and continued to move north toward Pennsylvania. He anticipated that Lee would be forced to suspend his advance and turn to face Meade's oncoming troops, so Meade selected a defensive line behind Pipe Creek in Maryland, hoping to entice Lee into attacking his men. However, Union cavalry detected enemy infantry west of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on June 30. On July 1, the cavalry delayed the Rebel advance until Reynolds and the I Corps arrived. While deploying his men, Reynolds was killed. The 9th Corps arrived to bolster the Union line as more of Lee's troops arrived from the north. Meade learned of the developing engagement and upon hearing that Reynolds was dead, he sent Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, commander of the 2nd Corps, to take command and advise him if the terrain was favorable for a battle. As more information arrived from the field, Meade made the decision to order the entire army to march to Gettysburg.

Although the July 1 fighting had gone in favor of Lee's army, Meade's troops concentrated on high ground south of the town. Meade decided to fight a defensive battle; the men were tired and had marched in hot weather from Fredericksburg to Gettysburg. Supplies were running short and Meade did not yet have the chance to personally speak with all his corps commanders. Lee decided on an attack and launched it against the Union left flank late on July 2. Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles, in charge of the 3rd Corps, failed to adhere to Meade's instructions and moved his troops off Cemetery Ridge to an isolated salient position. Lee's afternoon attack struck the III Corps hard. After learning of Sickles' advance, Meade was forced to send troops piecemeal as reinforcements. The fighting died down as darkness fell, leaving the Union troops in command of the high ground. On July 3, Lee decided on a frontal assault on Meade's center. The now-famous "Pickett's Charge" was a failure and Lee began to withdraw from the field on July 4. His army had suffered more than 28,000 casualties, while Meade's army lost slightly more than 23,000. Lee retreated to the Potomac River and finally was able to cross safely into Virginia. Meade's battered army followed in pursuit, but the victorious general was accosted by the press; many editors thought that Lee's army should have been destroyed. President Lincoln was also upset, but refused Meade's offer to resign when the general learned that the administration was disappointed that Lee's army had escaped from the battlefield.

Meade remained in command of the Army of the Potomac the rest of the war. His critics continued to snipe at him during the fall of 1863. After some of Meade's troops were sent west to Chattanooga as reinforcements, Lee moved north and tried to outflank Meade. But Meade skillfully withdrew ahead of Lee, administering a sharp defeat to Lee at Bristoe Station on October 14. Meade advanced in early November, drove Lee's troops from the Rappahannock River, then crossed the Rapidan and tried to outflank Lee's

troops at Mine Run. Dilatory movements by subordinates crushed Meade's plans, and when Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren advised against an assault at the last moment, Meade backed Warren and withdrew rather than sacrifice his men in a fruitless attack.

While the army remained in camp over the winter of 1863-1864, Meade's enemies in Washington tried to have him removed from command. In February 1864, the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War launched an investigation on the Battle of Gettysburg. General Sickles was the first witness, followed by others who claimed that Meade was incompetent and the battle was won in spite of his presence. Meade had his defenders such as Hancock, Warren, John Gibbon, Seth Williams, and Henry Hunt. The committee recommended that Meade be replaced, but Lincoln stood by his army commander and Meade weathered the storm of criticism of his generalship.

Ulysses S. Grant was promoted to the command of all the Union armies in February 1864. He decided to avoid having his headquarters in Washington; instead, he would accompany Meade's army and allow Meade to command his troops while the new general-in-chief would coordinate all the Union spring offensives. Grant informed Meade that his objective was Lee's army—wherever it went, the Army of the Potomac would go.

The 1864 Overland Campaign was a time of frustration for General Meade. Grant increasingly began to dictate tactical orders for Meade to carry out. In addition, some of Grant's staff officers looked down on Eastern soldiers and felt that Meade should be removed from command, but Grant saw that Meade was a capable army commander and said so on numerous occasions. Meade feared that Grant's influence would mean that his own reputation would suffer. On the other hand, Grant received most of the blame for the army's high casualty rate during the fighting.

Meade led the army from the Wilderness, to Spotsylvania, the North Anna River, and across the James River to assault Petersburg in mid-June. By that time, the Army of the Potomac had suffered at least 50,000 casualties, including many experienced regimental, brigade, and division commanders. By the time the Petersburg operations began, the army was much less responsive than it had been when the campaign started in May. As a result, a frustrated Meade was unable to prod his subordinates to launch coordinated attacks. Both armies built earthwork forts and entrenched, and a stalemate existed until April 1865.

During the siege operations, Grant instructed Meade when to launch offensives aimed at extending the Union siege lines and wearing down Lee's army. Meade's well-known irascibility manifested itself more and more as the operations continued and he was unable to prod his corps commanders into decisive attacks. When General Burnside, in command of the 9th Corps, was ready to explode his mine under the enemy earthworks, Meade vetoed Burnside's plan to use a division of African American troops because he feared an abolitionist backlash if these soldiers failed to live up to expectations. During the fighting on July 30 at "the Crater" left by the mine explosion, Burnside and Meade

got into a heated argument after Meade accused his corps commander of sending misleading reports about the battle.

In February 1865, Meade received news that Grant had finally prevailed in Congress and Meade was promoted to major general in the Regular Army, to rank from August 18, 1864. That same month, Meade's son Sergeant died on February 21. After Lee's failure to breach the Union line at Fort Stedman on March 25, Grant ordered a new flank movement that resulted in the crushing victory at Five Forks on April 1. The next day, Meade ordered his remaining troops to attack the Confederate lines at Petersburg. The 6th and 9th Corps both breached the lines and Lee ordered an evacuation, which quickly spread to the Confederate capital. Lee headed west in an effort to avoid being encircled, but pursuing Union troops cornered Lee's shrinking army at Appomattox Court House. Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, setting off a series of surrenders of the remaining Confederate armies.

Meade was not present at the surrender, and was further disgusted when cavalry commander Phil Sheridan received the bulk of the public credit for cornering Lee's army; many newspaper reporters failed to mention the services of Meade's infantry, who shattered Lee's army as it retreated.

After the war, Meade was assigned to command the Division of the Atlantic (later the Department of the East), with headquarters in Philadelphia, which enabled him to be home with his family as much as possible. During the spring and early summer of 1866, Meade was on duty along the Canadian border, disrupting the plans of Irish-American nationalists (Fenians) for invading Canada to hold that country hostage in return for Irish independence from England.

In late 1867, Meade was placed in command of the Third Military District (Georgia, Alabama, and Florida) with orders to enforce Congressional Reconstruction. A year later, the Carolinas were added to the district, now called the Department of the South. Meade tried to be as even-handed as possible, allowing civil governments to function without military intervention. In March 1869, Meade was transferred back to Philadelphia, where he remained on duty until his death from pneumonia on November 6, 1872. He lies buried in Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Meade proved to be a capable general who looked out for his men as he was able. His feuds with the press caused problems for him in 1864. After the failure of Sickles and his colleagues to remove Meade from command in the spring of 1864, Sickles spent the rest of his long life (he died in 1914) attacking Meade's reputation. Because of the conflicting portraits of Meade penned by various contemporaries, historians have differed greatly on their interpretations of Meade's Civil War experience. Recent biographies have finally begun to paint a more realistic view of Meade's service to his country.

Full name for biographies

Born	December 31, 1815, Cádiz, Spain
Died	November 6, 1872, Philadelphia, PA
Buried	Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, PA
Father	Richard Worsam Meade
Mother	Margaret Coats (Butler) Meade
Career Milestones	<p>1835 graduated from West Point 1846-1848 served in the Mexican American War and was brevetted first lieutenant August 1861 promoted Brigadier General of Volunteers June 1862 severely wounded at The Battle of Glendale August 1862 led his brigade at The Battle of Second Bull Run September 1862 commanded the 3rd division of the 1st Corps of the Army of the Potomac at The Battle of South Mountain November 1862 promoted Major General of Volunteers December 1862 commanded his division at The Battle of Fredericksburg December 1862 given command of 5th Corps May 1863 led 5th Corps in The Battle of Chancellorsville June 1863 promoted to the command of The Army of the Potomac July 1863 led the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg July 1863 promoted to Brigadier General in the regular army October-November 1863 led the Army of the Potomac in the Bristoe Campaign November- December 1863 led the Army of the Potomac in the Mine Run Campaign February-March 1864 weathered criticism in hearings by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War February 1865 promoted to Major General in the regular army for the remainder of the war he led the Army of the Potomac under the close supervision of U.S. Grant through all its campaigns.</p>
