

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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Fall 2003

The Battle of Yellow Tavern

In each issue of "On Richmond's Front Line," we have profiled one of Richmond's Civil War battlefields. With limited space this time, the subject is a battlefield without much preservation: Yellow Tavern. The battle's curious name, and the significance of one well-aimed bullet fired by a Union cavalryman, have combined to make Yellow Tavern a memorable name in Civil War history.

The battle occurred just eight miles north of Richmond, on May 11, 1864. It pitted two brigades of Confederate cavalry, fighting under the direct supervision of General J. E. B. Stuart, against a powerful force of blue-clad cavalry led by General Philip H. Sheridan. The latter had nearly 12,000 men in his column, though many were too distant to participate in the fight.

Sheridan's raid had commenced two days earlier, when he broke away from the contending armies near Spotsylvania and pointed his horsemen toward targets behind the Army of Northern Virginia. After destroying that army's reserves of medicine and commissary supplies, Sheridan continued south, tearing up railroad track. In Richmond, gun-toting citizens and men of marginal military value mobilized to

man the city's earthen defenses north of town.

Stuart raced to the capital city's rescue. Riding hard through May 10, Stuart brought his two brigades (all Virginians) into a blocking position at the Yellow Tavern intersection by 8:00 on the morning of the

9th New York Cavalry shattered Lunsford L. Lomax's brigade not far north of the tavern. Instead of luring Sheridan into a trap and whipping him, "Jeb" Stuart was on the verge of being thrashed himself. He rallied his men on a ridge north of Yellow Tavern, facing south

toward Richmond, and shifted into a defensive posture. There, late in the day, the Union cavalry attacked. George Custer, just 12 years and one month shy of his destiny on the banks of the Little Bighorn River, commanded the four regiments of Michigan troops that won the battle.

Advancing both on foot and on horseback, Custer's men made a furious and picturesque charge. Moving up the Telegraph Road, they broke through the Confederate line, captured some cannon, and shot General Stuart. The famous Confederate cavalryman was in the midst of the action, firing his revolver into a mass of Michigan troopers, when a bullet hit him in the stomach. Men rushed to his rescue. Many were alarmed to see his well known plumed hat fall to the ground. Anxious subordinates found an ambulance and had Stuart carried to the rear,



BURNING OF BEAVER DAM STATION.

George Custer's Michigan cavalry destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia's reserve of rations and medicine on May 9.

11th. Relieved that he had beaten Sheridan's men to the outskirts of Richmond, and unaware of the numerical disadvantage he faced, Stuart fell to contemplating his offensive opportunities. He established his force in two lines, arranged like an upside down and backward letter "L." The bottom of this position was not far from a run-down and disused stage stop known as Yellow Tavern.

Contrary to Stuart's plans, a vigorous attack by dismounted men of

Confederate line, captured some cannon, and shot General Stuart. The famous Confederate cavalryman was in the midst of the action, firing his revolver into a mass of Michigan troopers, when a bullet hit him in the stomach. Men rushed to his rescue. Many were alarmed to see his well known plumed hat fall to the ground. Anxious subordinates found an ambulance and had Stuart carried to the rear,

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Bad News

Sometimes this newsletter does not have much news, and sometimes when there is news, it is bad. This is one of those occasions. Those of us who appreciate the bat-

acres, abuts the Adams farm on its north side. On June 27, 1862, men of Stonewall Jackson's wing of the Confederate army crossed the property, under fire, in their approach to the primary Union line of defense. Two years later the Union Second Corps bogged down on that same ground as part of the famous attack at Cold Harbor on June 3, 1864. General John Gibbon's division

New roads appeared, and two house sites sprang up. The owner apparently sold the land to builders, who in turn sold it to individuals wishing to have new homes built for themselves. Because of the size of the property, this did not violate any county zoning ordinances.

Some (if not all) of the excellent 1864 earthworks on this ground undoubtedly will be destroyed. At press time, it is unclear whether a few acres remain uncompromised from the original tract of land. The RBA is enquiring, and holds out hope that some meaningful segment



Faced with heavy fire, Gibbon's division fortified here on June 3.

tlefields and feel strongly about the need to preserve them have to mourn the recent loss of a key chunk of land. The parcel in question is one of those that sits in the area where the battlefields of Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor overlap. Located just west of Route 156, and about two-thirds of a mile south of the Old Cold Harbor crossroads, this property (owned by a Mr. Alvis) figured in both battles.

Readers familiar with the battlefields around Richmond will know that the Adams farm is considered the most important unpreserved land in this part of Virginia. The Alvis property, which consists of 25

advanced onto the Alvis property, was pinned down by heavy Confederate fire, and entrenched.

This acreage had briefly been for sale a year or two ago (advertised with a handwritten sign tacked to a tree), but the owner asked approximately twice the appraised value for the land. The RBA looked into the property, as did our friends at the Civil War Preservation Trust. Then, unexpectedly, the land began to be cleared in September 2003.



The Union infantry line at Gaines's Mill stood about 200 yards to the south (left) of this new driveway.

of the land might be saved at a fair price. Meanwhile the new houses go up within rifle shot of the historic road and ridge where Jackson's men breached the Union line just before dark at the Battle of Gaines's Mill.

The Tavern

[from the *Richmond Dispatch*, March 3, 1889]

The recent sale of a portion of the Old Yellow Tavern tract of land brings to memory a hostelry that was famous in its day, but which has long since become dust, or ashes, rather. Its hey-day was the time of the stage coaches; when railroads appeared its glory faded, and after descending to various ignoble uses it at last fell a victim to the flames and passed away like the age to which it belonged. An humble cabin and some charred aspen stumps are all that are now left to mark its site.

The Washington stages, starting out from the city with the first gray

streak of dawn, would drive up the Brook road to this tavern, and there the passengers would be breakfasted and the horses rested for the next stretch of the journey. It was a typical tavern of the day. The first story or basement was of brick and above that were two framed stories with a porch running the whole length. In one end of the basement was a bar. In the rear was a wing. Near at hand were horse-racks and stables and stalls.

Here the cherry-faced proprietor welcomed the coming and speeded the parting guest and did the honors of the house with the stately cour-

tesy required. Being one of the most important roads in the State, the fame of the home went far abroad over this land, but when it was built and by whom is not clear. It is likely that its name came from its being painted yellow; certain it is that that glaring color distinguished it in early days; but the artist of the occasion was only a little in advance of his fellows; it was an odd color then, but now has come to be rather fashionable, only we don't nowadays call it yellow.

At the breaking out of the late

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Annual Summer Meeting

The RBA held its annual summer meeting on Sunday, June 14, 2003, at the Varina Episcopal Church south of Richmond. A respectable crowd turned out to hear Dr. Richard J. Sommers, of the RBA's board of advisors, deliver a talk on the September 1864 operations around Chaffin's Bluff. It has been more than two decades since his classic *Richmond Redeemed* was published, and many of those in the audience had not heard Sommers before. His overview of the military situation in September 1864, and his observations on the fighting north of the James River and at Fort Harrison, paved the way for the subsequent battlefield tour. Dr. Sommers cheerfully signed books as well.

Before proceeding to the field,

RBA treasurer David West handed David Duncan, of the Civil War Preservation Trust, a check paying off the balance of the loan given to RBA at the beginning of the purchase process. That transaction retired the RBA's debt,



David Duncan (left) with the CWPT, receives the final payment from Dave West, RBA treasurer.

and made our organization the proud owner of battlefield land.

Despite the blistering heat and humidity, the crowd adjourned to Fort Harrison proper and walked the battlefield. This was the first opportunity for most in attendance to see the 9.2

acres purchased by the RBA late last year. Piloted by Dr. Sommers, the group walked over the newly preserved property toward the fort,

taking the same route used by soldiers of Stannard's division during their September 29 assault against Richmond's defenses. There were no casualties this time, although one wag pointed out that if the swarms of

mosquitoes encountered during the tour had been defending the fort in 1864, the Union attack undoubtedly would have failed.



Dr. Richard J. Sommers illustrates a point during his lecture.

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yelling instructions to his whipped command until the very end.

By any measurement Yellow Tavern was a Union victory. But General Sheridan did not capitalize on his success, and was somewhat fortunate to bypass Richmond without further significant loss. Richmond lived to fight again, but General Stuart did not. He died in the city on the night of May 12 from his wound.

Jeb Stuart probably was one of the five most famous soldiers to be killed during the Civil War. The spot where he fell, about one mile north of Yellow Tavern, received little notice until 1888, when some of his comrades gathered to erect a sizable statue there. Interstate

highways and mega-malls were beyond their imagination, of course, and they took no steps to further preserve the Yellow Tavern battlefield. Widespread indifference beginning in the middle decades of the 20th century doomed the battlefield to destruction. Houses appeared within feet of the Stuart marker. Interstate 95 raced through the battlefield, and later Interstate 295 bisected Interstate 95 right atop ground that witnessed the first half of Custer's charge. Today only one acre of the battlefield is protected, directly around the monument where Stuart was mortally wounded. It is a spot that is both compelling and disturbing because of what happened there, and because of what has happened since.

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A Tremendous Example

Earlier this year the RBA received a donation from an unusual source. One of our members is very active in a Sons of Union Veterans camp in southern Florida. His camp donated \$500 "to be used to purchase endangered battlefield land," a command we take very seriously. But the SUV camp did more than dip into its treasury for "the cause." Three of its members spent an entire day at an elementary school in Boca Raton, attired in Civil War uniforms, carrying artifacts and displays. They spoke to ten

separate classes of fourth and fifth grade students about the war. As thanks, the students of Del Prado Community Elementary School sent the RBA a check in the amount of \$191 to further our preservation work on the Richmond area battlefields.

Many thanks to our friends at the General Thomas McKean Camp 3, Sons of Union Veterans, and also to teacher Betty Jolley and the students at the Del Prado School. Let's hope some of them grow up to be preservation-minded politicians.

The Tavern

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"unpleasantness," the Tavern had been disused for a good while, and the soldiers while in camp near by pulled off many of the boards and with the doors and window-blinds made fires, and in this condition it was not long before, by some unknown means, the flames got hold of it and it was burned down, and destroyed an old landmark and one of the most famous taverns of its day. [Editor's Note: In the absence of any photographs or sketches of the tavern, this article offers the best description.]

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