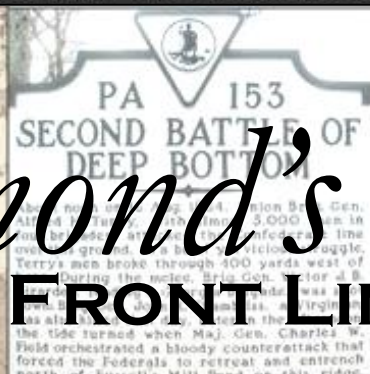


Volume 14, Number 1

# On Richmond's FRONT LINE



Spring 2015

## Saving Second Deep Bottom

### CORE BATTLEFIELD LAND PRESERVED

Recently, the Richmond Battlefields Association purchased an additional six acres of core battlefield land at Second Deep Bottom. This newly acquired land is adjacent to the "Deep Ravine" tract purchased in 2010 (see map). This is RBA's fifth land acquisition at Fussell's Mill. The Second Deep Bottom Battlefield land saved by RBA now exceeds 50 acres.

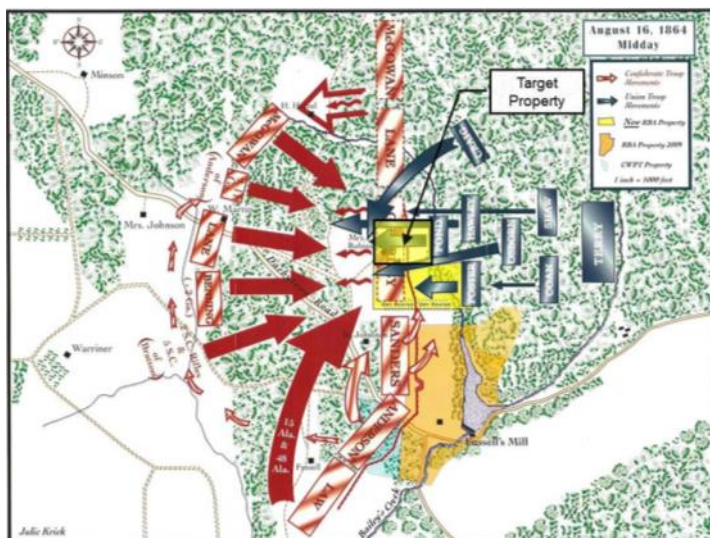
In early August 1864 Grant continued his strategy of simultaneous strikes at Lee's defenses below Petersburg and above the James. Once again he ordered General Winfield S. Hancock to lead a second expedition north of the James. By August 14 some 29,000 Union troops had crossed the James near Deep Bottom. A week of assaults and maneuver followed, the campaign's major attack taking place on August 16 near Fussell's Mill and pond.

RBA's recent acquisition preserves a portion of that bloody field where, on the morning of the 16th, General Victor Girardey's brigade of Georgians stood behind waist high breastworks and anxiously awaited their fate. Shortly before Noon Colonel Francis Pond's Union infantry brigade emerged from a wood line just 30 yards distant. The Georgians could get off only a single shot before Pond's men were in the works. For a short time both sides struggled in deadly combat with rifle butts and bayonets. Now heavily outnumbered by Union troops, the Confederate position collapsed with General Girardey among those killed.

Homer A. Plimpton of the 39th Illinois participated in the attack. Years later Plimpton's account of his experience was published in the 39th's regimental history. He wrote:

*The scene that now presented itself to my view I shall never forget—whole divisions of the advancing column swept down in the twinkling of an eye. On every hand could be seen the dead and dying men—our own comrades, who but a short time before were buoyant and hopeful, with no thought of death to make them sad.*

*But notwithstanding this terrible slaughter, the old*



*Western brigade did not stop, but made directly for the rebel breastworks bristling with bayonets and alive with men; nor did the enemy give way, but fought us hand-to-hand as we attempted to mount the works.*

*Our colors were again shot down, Lieutenant Warner, who was carrying them, losing a leg. Another officer snatched them up and sprang upon the parapets, followed by scores of others, who leaped over right among the "Johnnies," and commenced using the bayonet and clubbed musket. Soon a break was made and then began the capturing of prisoners.*

Plimpton also devoted several lines to Henry M. Hardenbergh, "a brave, young private." While in the works Hardenbergh captured a flag and mortally wounded its color bearer, most likely from one of Girardey's regiments, and received the Medal of Honor (one of three awarded to US troops that day). A Virginia Highway Marker describing the event stands along Darbytown Road, just off the RBA property.

A detailed account of the Battle of Second Deep Bottom appeared in our [Spring 2003 newsletter](#). ❖

### Call to Arms!

#### Renew Your Membership

Please check the mailing label for your renewal date.



## COL. WILLIAM CALVIN OATES, C.S.A.

*At Fussell's Mill, the "hard blow" of a Yankee minie ball cost Oates his right arm.*

William Oates, the son of a poor farmer, was born on November 30, 1833 in Pike County, Alabama. With limited schooling, the mostly self-taught young man soon found trouble. At age 17 he left home, convinced he had killed a man after fracturing the victim's skull in a brawl.

Over the next few years, Oates drifted throughout the South earning his keep as a cigar-seller, house-painter, deckhand, shingle-maker, and gambler. His quick temper led to constant trouble. In Louisiana, an arrest warrant charged him with choking & hitting his employer. And again in Texas, he was charged with nearly gouging out the eyes of a gambling opponent. His younger brother, John, sent by the family to find him, persuaded him to return home to Alabama.

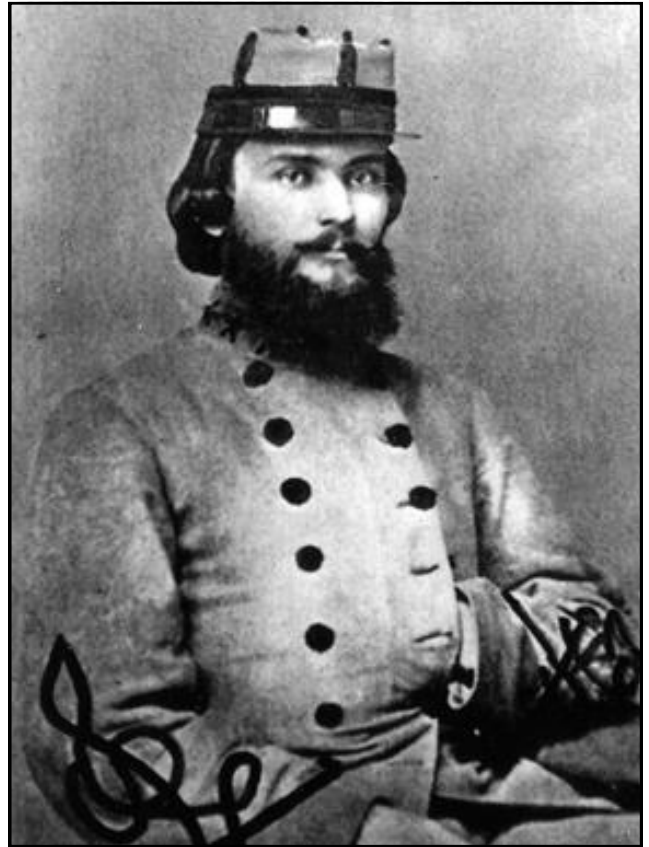
William settled in the Chattahoochee Valley, steering clear of Pike County, where an assault warrant was still active. He enrolled in an academy, taught school and studied law. By the late 1850s, Oates was practicing law and publishing a weekly newspaper in Abbeville.

Oates argued against succession, but when Alabama left the Union, he threw his support to the Confederacy. He helped raise a company of volunteers in 1861 and was elected captain. In the spring of 1863, Oates, now a full colonel, assumed command of the 15th Alabama. At Gettysburg, in his first command action, the regiment made a series of charges up the rocky slopes of Little Round Top in a failed attempt to dislodge Col. Chamberlain's 20th Maine. Oates brother John was mortally wounded in the fight. This desperate struggle was immortalized in the novel "Killer Angels".

Oates' promotion had been mired in red tape. Maneuvering by a rival officer, with the support of President Davis, resulted in Oates losing command of the 15th Alabama. By July 1864, he was placed in command of the 48th Alabama. At Fussell's Mill on August 16th, Col. Oates was severely wounded while leading the 48th Alabama in a furious counterattack. *[The "dry ravine" where this action occurred has been saved by RBA]*. Oates was wounded six times during the war. This one cost him an arm and put him out of the war.

After the war, Oates resumed his law practice and entered politics serving in the Alabama House of Representatives. In 1880, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, serving seven consecutive terms. His political career was enhanced by his marriage in 1882 to Sarah Toney. She was charming, able and 27 years his junior. They had one son. In 1894, "the one-armed hero from Henry County" was elected Governor of Alabama, serving one term as promised. Later, he failed in a bid for the U.S. Senate.

*[continued on the next page]*



## COLD HARBOR RECAP

Last November, Richmond National Battlefield Park hosted RBA's annual meeting at Cold Harbor. Superintendent Dave Ruth accepted the transfer of 18 acres of battlefield land at Beulah Church from RBA president Ben Brockenbrough (photo). Afterwards, our intrepid supporters braved the intemperate weather to enjoy a memorable battlefield tour led by RBA board member Mike Andrus. This new addition to the park will soon be open to the public with additional parking, walking trails and interpretive signage. We sincerely hope that with your support, this is just the opening chapter of a successful battlefield preservation effort at Cold Harbor. ❖

*This land saw some of the most significant fighting over the course of several days of the Battle of Cold Harbor, and its preservation and addition to the park will greatly enhance the visitor experience here. This project would not have been possible without the support of the Richmond Battlefields Association.*

— David Ruth, Superintendent



*Masthead photo on page 1:*

Brig Gen Terry USA / Deep Bottom / Maj Gen Field CSA



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### MONUMENT TO THE 48<sup>TH</sup> ALABAMA REGIMENT

Recently, this monument to the Alabamians at Fussell's Mill was placed on RBA's property near the "dry ravine". During the Battle of Second Deep Bottom on August 16, 1864, Confederate Col. William C. Oates lost an arm after leading a desperate counterattack to recapture a line of works. After the war, *"the one-armed hero from Henry County"* was elected governor of Alabama (see Oates article). ❖

### COL. OATES (CONTINUED)

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, Oates received a Brigadier General's commission from President McKinley. He declared, *"I am now a Yankee general, formerly a Rebel colonel, and right each time!"*

Oates served as a delegate to the Alabama constitutional convention of 1901. Though his racial views reflected his times, believing that blacks were inferior, he spoke out against "grandfather clauses" aimed at disenfranchising black voters. He also denounced lynchings and other acts of racial violence. In the end, however, he did not oppose ratification of the new constitution which effectively eliminated black suffrage in the state.

In his later years, Oates became a rich man, continuing to practice law and speculating on real estate. He tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Gettysburg battlefield commission to approve a monument on Little Round Top to honor the 15th Alabama and the memory of his fallen brother.

His penchant for trouble never left. At age 67, he shot and killed an intruder who had entered his home and murdered his cook. Oates was cleared of any wrongdoing when a coroner's jury ruled it a clear case of self-defense.

Oates died in 1910, five years after publishing his memoirs, and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Montgomery. ❖

### RBA NOTES

Approximately one-third of RBA members have opted for electronic delivery of the RBA newsletter. You too can help us save money by choosing electronic delivery of *"On Richmond's Front Line"*. Just send your name and email address to:

**1862rba@gmail.com**

Stay up to date with RBA news & events on our website and Facebook page. ❖

Published for the RBA membership

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The RBA is chartered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. All contributions are tax deductible. A financial statement is available, upon request, from the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.

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This Monument Is Dedicated

*"To the 48<sup>th</sup> Alabama Regiment  
Darbytown Road-August 16, 1864  
Where it lost five-sixths of its men and  
four-fifths of its officers, and captured  
more prisoners than its total, and  
did not lose a prisoner.  
No men ever fought more heroically"*

Col. William C. Oates

Col. Oates lost his right arm in this engagement.

He later served as governor of Alabama.

A congressman and brevet  
General in the Spanish-American War.

Erected on this property preserved by  
The Richmond Battlefields Association

With appreciation to Marion Oates  
Charles

**RICHMOND DISPATCHES – 150 YEARS AGO**

**THE CORPS D’AFRIQUE.** – The appearance of the battalion of colored troops on the Square, yesterday afternoon, attracted thousands of our citizens to the spot, all eager to catch a glimpse of the sable soldiers. The bearing of the negroes elicited universal commendation. While on the Square, they went through the manual of arms in a manner which would have done credit to veteran soldiers, while the evolutions of the line were executed with promptness and precision. As an appropriate recognition of their promptness in forming the first battalion of colored troops in the Confederacy, we suggest to the ladies of Richmond the propriety of presenting the battalion with an appropriate banner.

- *The Richmond Enquirer*: Mar 23, 1865

The idea of arming slaves had been hotly debated from the onset of the war. In early March the Confederate Congress enacted legislation to enlist black soldiers. The first company of black troops in Virginia was organized by Dr. Chambliss from employees of Winder and Jackson hospitals. Throughout the month, Richmond newspapers reported favorably on their progress concluding they “will make an excellent soldier. It is a great pity this had not been done six months ago. But we may yet derive enormous benefit from the experiment.” It was not to be. Shortly thereafter, the Fall of Richmond put an end to the Rebel experiment. ❖

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