

General J. E. B. Stuart's Wounding at Yellow Tavern and his Subsequent Death in Richmond

What appears below as a description of General Stuart's wounding at Yellow Tavern and his subsequent death in Richmond, is an amalgamation of several articles that appeared over the course of several issues of the Southern Historical Society Papers. While there is general agreement that the descriptions given are generally accurate recollections, I have not seen a single unified first person description of the entire episode. I have combined and arranged selected sections of three articles to form the account below.

Southern Historical Society Papers.

Selections taken from

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, February, 1879. No. 2.

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, March, 1879. No. 3.

Vol. XXX. Richmond, Va., January - December. 1902.

Excerpt from

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, March, 1879. No. 3.

Some have pretended to tell "what they saw"; but the truth has been painfully distorted. The account given below was written by Major H.B. McClellan to Mrs. Stuart, not long after the General's death. The incidents of the charge in which the General received his wound were related to the Major by Captain Dorsey, of the Maryland company, First Virginia cavalry, who was by the General's side at the time. Major A.R. Venable, a member of the staff, was with him also almost immediately afterwards, and remained by him until the last.

Major McClellan says:

We reached the vicinity of the Yellow Tavern that morning about ten o'clock, and found that we were in advance of the enemy's column, and in time to interpose between it and Richmond. Not knowing what force we had there, the General was uncertain whether to place himself at once between the enemy and the city, or to take a position on his flank, near the Yellow Tavern - the latter he preferred if he could be satisfied that we had a sufficient force in the trenches to defend Richmond. To ascertain this he sent me to see General Bragg. When I returned to him about two o'clock, I found that a heavy engagement had taken place, and, that after driving in a portion of our line,

the enemy had been heavily repulsed. When I found the General there was a lull in the fight, and we sat quietly near one of our batteries for more than an hour, resting and talking. About four o'clock the enemy suddenly threw a brigade of cavalry, mounted, upon our extreme left, attacking our whole line at the same time. As he always did, the General hastened to the point where the greatest danger threatened - the point against which the enemy directed the mounted charge. My horse was so much exhausted by my severe ride of the morning that I could not follow him, but Captain Dorsey gave the particulars that follow.

The enemy's charge captured our battery on the left of our line, and drove back almost the entire left. Where Captain Dorsey was stationed - immediately on the Telegraph road - about eighty men had collected together, and among these the General threw himself, and by his personal example held them steady while the enemy charged entirely past their position. With these men he fired into their flank and rear, as they passed him, in advancing and in retreating, for they were met by a mounted charge of the First Virginia cavalry and driven back some distance. As they retired, one man, who had been dismounted in the charge and was running out on foot, turned, as he passed the General, and, discharging his pistol, inflicted the fatal wound. When Captain Dorsey discovered that he was wounded, he came at once to his assistance and endeavored to lead him to the rear; but the General's horse became so restive and unmanageable that he insisted upon being taken down and allowed to rest against a tree. When this was done Captain Dorsey sent for another horse. While waiting for this horse, the General ordered him to leave him alone and return to his men and drive back the enemy; said that he feared he was mortally wounded and could be of no more service. Captain Dorsey told him that he could not obey that order - that he would sacrifice his life rather than leave him until he had placed him out of all danger. The situation was a dangerous one. Our men were sadly scattered, and there was hardly a handful of men between that little group and the advancing enemy. But the horse arrived in time; the General was lifted on to him and led by Captain Dorsey to a safer place. There, by the General's order, he gave him into charge of Private Wheatly, of his company, and returned to rally our scattered men. Wheatly procured an ambulance, placed the General in it with the greatest care, and supporting him in his arms, he was driven from the field. As he was being brought off, he spoke to our men, whom he saw retreating, and said: "Go back! go back! and do your duty as I have done mine, and our country will be safe. Go back! go back! I had rather die than be whipped."

I was hastening toward the part of the field where I heard he had been wounded, when I met the ambulance bringing him out. The General had so often told me that if he were wounded I must not leave the field, but report to the officer next to him in rank, that I did not now presume to disregard his order; and the more so, because I saw that Dr. (John Boursiquot) Fontaine, Major Venable, Lieutenant Garnett, and several of his couriers, were attending him. I remained with General Fitz Lee until the next morning, when he sent me to the city to see General Bragg, and I had an opportunity to spend an hour with my General. More than any brother did I love him; greater loss I have never known.

Excerpt from

Vol. XXX. Richmond, Va., January - December. 1902.

I will now give an account of that great calamity to the South, the mortal wounding of General Stuart, in the terse, soldier words of Colonel (then Captain of Company K, First Virginia Cavalry) "Gus" W. Dorsey, as taken from a letter written to me on April 21, 1902, and as printed in the Staunton Spectator.

- Editor, Southern Historical Society Papers

I was stationed on the Telegraph road with my company, K, numbering about seventy men, and the first I knew about our troops being whipped and driven back on the left was when General Stuart came down to my position, with a view of ordering me back; and just as he rode up to the company the Yankees charged. He halted a moment and encouraged the men with the words: "Bully for old K! Give it to them, boys!" and just as K had repulsed the Yankees he was shot through the stomach. He reeled on his horse and said: "I am shot," and then, "Dorsey, save your men." I caught him and took him from his horse. He insisted I should leave him and save my men. I told him we would take him with us; and, calling Corporal Robert Bruce and Private Charles Wheatley, we sent him to the rear. No other troops were near General Stuart when he was shot that I saw.

Excerpt from

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, February, 1879. No. 2.

We give below the very interesting account of his last moments, which appeared at the time of his death in the Richmond

Examiner:

- Editor, Southern Historical Society Papers

No incident of mortality, since the fall of the great Jackson, has occasioned more painful regret than this. Major General J.E.B. Stuart, the model of Virginian cavaliers and dashing chieftain, whose name was a terror to the enemy, and familiar as a household word in two continents, is dead - struck down by a bullet from the foe, and the whole Confederacy mourns him. He breathed out his gallant spirit resignedly, and in the full possession of all his remarkable faculties of mind and body, at twenty two minutes to eight o'clock Thursday night, at the residence of Dr. Brewer, a relative, on Grace street, in the presence of Drs. Brewer, Garnett, Gibson, and Fontaine, of the General's staff, Rev. Messrs. Peterkin and Keller and a circle of sorrow stricken comrades and friends. We learn from the physicians in attendance upon the General that his condition during the day was very changeable, with occasional delirium and other unmistakable symptoms of speedy dissolution. In the moments of delirium the General's mind wandered and, like the immortal Jackson (whose spirit, we trust, his has joined), in the lapse of reason his faculties were busied with the details of his command. He reviewed, in broken sentences, all his glorious campaigns around McClellan's rear on the Peninsula beyond the Potomac, and upon the Rapidan, quoting from his orders and issuing new ones to his couriers, with a last injunction to "make haste."

About noon, Thursday, President Davis visited his bedside, and spent some fifteen minutes in the dying chamber of his favorite chieftain. The President, taking his hand, said, "General, how do you feel?" He replied, "Easy, but willing to die, if God and my country think I have fulfilled my destiny and done my duty." As evening approached the General's delirium increased, and his mind again wandered to the battlefields over which he had fought, then off to wife and children, and off again to the front. A telegraphic message had been sent for his wife, who was in the country, with the injunction to make all haste, as the General was dangerously wounded. Some thoughtless but unauthorized person, thinking probably to spare his wife pain, altered the dispatch to "slightly wounded," and it was thus she received it, and did not make that haste which she otherwise would have done to reach his side.

Inserted Excerpt from

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, March, 1879. No. 3.
relating to the notification of Mrs. Stuart.

This is entirely a mistake. The circumstances were these: as soon as possible after General Stuart reached Richmond, the evening of the 11th May, a telegram was written by Major H. von Borcke, and sent, as he supposed, to Mrs. Stuart, who was at Colonel Edmund Fontaine's, near Beaver Dam station. It was found to be impossible to send it direct, as all communication had been cut off, both by way of what was then the Central railroad and telegraph line and by the Fredericksburg railroad. Some delay was thus occasioned, and the dispatch was not actually on its way until the next morning; then it was sent by way of Lynchburg and Gordonsville, and some difficulty attended its transmission by that line.

Colonel Fontaine, with several members of his family, and Mrs. Stuart were that morning (the 12th) at the depot doing all in their power to relieve the many wounded and dying who had been started to Richmond by General Lee, but captured by the Yankees while on their way and left by them at Beaver Dam, two days before. While there, at about twelve o'clock, Colonel Fontaine received the dispatch, which read as follows: "General Stuart has been seriously wounded; come at once." Colonel Fontaine hurried the party home, but did not tell Mrs. Stuart of it; after she reached her own room, the sad news was lovingly broken to her by his gentle and compassionate wife. Colonel Fontaine had made some arrangement for an engine and car to carry Mrs. Stuart and little children to Ashland, that road not having been destroyed between those points, and at a few minutes after one o'clock they started, there not having been one moment's delay.

The Rev. Dr. Woodbridge, who had been visiting his son, a member of General Stuart's command, reached Beaver Dam that morning, and at once offered to escort Mrs. Stuart in her sad journey. Mr. Charles Carter, of Hanover county, proved himself also the kind and attentive friend.

Some two hours or more were consumed in reaching Ashland, for the engineer was a volunteer. At that place a new difficulty presented itself. How was the party to go from there to Richmond? Fortunately, an ambulance had just been made ready for the trip, in which one or more wounded cavalry officers were going; these most courteously insisted upon Mrs. Stuart using it. Under the circumstances Dr. Woodbridge accepted it for her, and in a few

minutes they were on their way.

The roads were very bad, and soon after leaving Ashland a heavy storm gathered, and it became dark and threatening, with constant and terrifying flashes of lightning; but still they pushed on. Frequently on the way soldiers were met, and each time the same question was asked by Dr. Woodbridge, "Any news from General Stuart?" Almost invariably the answer was, "No; but we heard his wound was not serious," - so that the anxious hearts of the poor wife and friend were encouraged to hope for the best.

About eight o'clock they reached the Chickahominy, and found to their distress that the Confederate cavalry had destroyed the bridge. In the rain and dark, after some little detention, a cavalry picket was found not far off, who directed the driver to a ford a mile or two lower down. This difficulty was surmounted in time, and once more they were traveling on the turnpike towards Richmond.

Just before reaching the suburbs of the city they were delivered from what might have been a most distressing accident. It was so very dark, it now being after ten o'clock and still storming, that neither the driver nor Dr. Woodbridge saw the dark masses of horses and men lying along the roadside; but suddenly they became aware of a horseman being directly in front of their horses' heads. When the noise of the moving vehicle ceased, he was heard to say, "Who's there? - stand!" Dr. Woodbridge discovered he was a sentinel on duty, and at once told him his errand and who were in the ambulance, when he exclaimed: "Thank God! my cap snapped twice when you did not answer my repeated challenge," - and then added, "We are Lomax's men."

Not until half-past eleven o'clock did they reach Dr. Brewer's residence, on Grace street, and then a certain quiet resting on all about the house instantly impressed them, and words were not necessary to convey to the quick perceptions of an anxious and devoted wife the sad intelligence awaiting her.

Excerpt from

Vol. VII. Richmond, Virginia, February, 1879. No. 2. - continued

As the evening wore on, the paroxysms of pain increased, and mortification set in rapidly. Though suffering the greatest agony at times, the General was calm, and applied to the wound with his own hand the ice intended to relieve the pain. During the evening he asked Dr. Brewer how long he thought he could live, and whether it was possible for him to survive through the night. The Doctor, knowing he did not desire to be buoyed by false hopes, told him frankly that death, that last enemy, was rapidly approaching. The General nodded and said, "I am resigned if it be God's will; but I would like to see my wife. But God's will be done." Several times he roused up and asked if she had come.

To the Doctor, who sat holding his wrist and counting the fleeting, weakening pulse, he remarked, "Doctor, I suppose I am going fast now. It will soon be over. But God's will be done. I hope I have fulfilled my destiny to my country and my duty to God."

At half past seven o'clock it was evident to the physicians that death was setting its clammy seal upon the brave, open brow of the General, and told him so; asked if he had any last messages to give. The General, with a mind perfectly clear and possessed, then made dispositions of his staff and personal effects. To Mrs. General R.E. Lee he directed that his golden spurs be given as a dying memento of his love and esteem of her husband.

Note: H.B. McClellan states the Stuart requested the following regarding his spurs: "My spurs, which I have always worn in battle, I promised to give to Mrs. Lilly Lee, of Shepherdstown, Va.", and is probably more reliable in his account.

To his staff officers he gave his horses. So particular was he in small things, even in the dying hour, that he emphatically exhibited and illustrated the ruling passion strong in death. To one of his staff, who was a heavy built man, he said, "You had better take the larger horse; he will carry you better." Other mementoes he disposed of in a similar manner. To his young son he left his glorious sword.

His worldly matters closed, the eternal interest of his soul engaged his mind. Turning to the Rev. Mr. Peterkin, of the Episcopal Church, and of which he was an exemplary member, he asked him to sing the hymn commencing -

"Rock of ages cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee,"

;he joining in with all the voice his strength would permit. He then

joined in prayer with the ministers. To the Doctor he again said, "I am going fast now; I am resigned; God's will done."

Thus died General J.E.B. Stuart.

His wife reached the house of death and mourning about ten o'clock on Thursday night, one hour and a half after dissolution, and was of course plunged into the greatest grief by the announcement that death had intervened between the announcement of the wounding of the General and her arrival.

The funeral services, preliminary to the consignment to the grave of the remains of General Stuart, were conducted yesterday after noon in Saint James' Episcopal Church, corner of Marshall and Fifth streets - Rev. Dr. Peterkin, rector. The cortege reached the church about five o'clock, without music or military escort, the Public Guard being absent on duty. The church was already crowded with citizens. The metallic case containing the corpse was borne into the church and up in the centre aisle to the altar the organ pealing a solemn funeral dirge and anthem by the choir.

Among the pall bearers we noticed Brigadier General John H. Winder, General George W. Randolph, General Joseph R. Anderson, Brigadier General Lawton and Commodore Forrest.

Among the congregation appeared President Davis, General Bragg, General Ransom, and other civic and military officials in Richmond. A portion of the funeral services according to the Episcopal church was read by Rev. Dr. Peterkin, assisted by other ministers, concluding with singing and prayer.

The body was then borne forth to the hearse in waiting, decorated with black plumes and drawn by four white horses. The organ pealed its slow, solemn music as the body was borne to the entrance, and whilst the cortege was forming - the congregation standing by with heads uncovered. Several carriages in the line were occupied by the members of the deceased General's staff and relatives. From the church the cortege moved to Hollywood Cemetery, where the remains were deposited in a vault, the concluding portion of the affecting service read by Rev. Dr. Minnigerode, of Saint Paul's Church, and all that was mortal of the dead hero was shut in from the gaze of men.