

# The Wadsworth Monument



*Union General James S. Wadsworth  
(Library of Congress)*

**James S. Wadsworth was born to wealthy parents in Geneseo, New York, in 1807, and grew to become the heir of a considerable amount of land and money. He spent two years at Harvard, not graduating, and then studied law. He was admitted to the bar, but used his education and legal expertise to prepare himself for managing his property and fortune. He was active in politics throughout his life. From the outbreak of the Civil War he unselfishly offered his fortune and his life to the service of the Union. One friend remarked that he was "the truest and the most thoroughly loyal American I ever knew." He was commissioned a Brigadier General of volunteers in August 1861, and served in the defense of Washington, and the Chancellorsville and Gettysburg campaigns. In the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac in the Spring of 1864, he was given command of the 4th division, V Corps.**

**After nearly succeeding in breaking through the Confederate center on the second day of the Battle of the Wilderness (6 May 1864), his division was outflanked and driven back. Wadsworth had already had two horses shot from under him, and his third horse proved out-of-control and put him in range of Confederate fire, being shot in the head. He died two days later in a Confederate field hospital. He was survived by his wife and six children.**



**inscription on monument:**

**JAMES WADSWORTH**

**Brigadier General and Brevet Major  
General United States Volunteers**

**Commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Division  
V Corps  
Army of the Potomac**

**Was mortally wounded near this spot May  
6, 1864 and died two days later in the field  
hospital of Hill's Confederate Corps**

**He fell attempting desperately to resist a  
Confederate advance which threatened the  
strategic Plank-Brock Road intersection**

**UNION FIRST CORPS, FIRST DIVISION 3,814 men  
BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES SAMUEL WADSWORTH**

James Wadsworth was a trim, vigorous fifty-six years old at the time of Gettysburg. Topped by snow-white hair, with striking white mutton-chop sideburns, he led his division with a Revolutionary War saber in his hand.

Wadsworth, however, was not a military man at all. His father had been one of the largest landowners in New York state, and raised young James with the expectation of inheriting public responsibilities. He spent two years at Harvard, and studied law, though with no intention of actually practicing. By the Civil War, James had taken his father's place at the head of the wealthy family estate, and, out of a well-developed sense of noblesse oblige, had in addition become a philanthropist and Republican politician. In this same spirit of public service he volunteered for duty immediately when Fort Sumter fell. Having no illusions about his military acumen, he first served as a volunteer aide on the staff of Union army commander Irvin McDowell, and was present at First Bull Run. McDowell recommended him for command, and even in the unabashed political free-for-all of the early-war army it must have raised a few eyebrows when he was jumped in rank all the way from volunteer aide-de-camp to brigadier general in August 1861. Wadsworth was given a brigade in McDowell's corps, and then in March 1862--before the end of his first year in uniform--he was made commander of the Washington defenses.

This last responsibility was too much too soon for the inexperienced Wadsworth, and the Union war effort suffered the consequences: it was Wadsworth who complained to Lincoln during the Peninsula campaign that the capital had been left unprotected by McClellan, resulting in Lincoln's fateful decision to withhold the entire First Corps from

joining McClellan in his drive on Richmond. This made a bitter enemy of McClellan, and in the fall of 1862, seeing no prospect of serving in McClellan's army, Wadsworth allowed his supporters to run him for governor of New York against the anti-war Democrat Horatio Seymour. He was so intent on being a good soldier, however, that he declined to leave the army to campaign. As a result, he lost the election. He didn't seem to mind, enjoying the excitement and satisfaction of being with the troops in the field.

In late December 1862, after McClellan had departed army command for the last time, Wadsworth joined the Army of the Potomac as commander of the First Division, First Corps, when a vacancy among its division commanders was created by the promotion of General George Meade to the head of the Fifth Corps. He became much admired and liked by his new division, who were impressed by a man so devoted to the Union cause that he had given up a comfortable life and was serving without pay. The men were also won over by his attention to their well-being. Wadsworth was a stickler about things like adequate rations and decent housing, and in winter quarters the men found it not unusual to wake up before dawn on cold mornings and see the old man poking his nose inside to find out for himself whether the huts were warm and decently ventilated. (On the weary march to Gettysburg, he would seize civilians who stood cheering by the roadside and take their shoes for his own men to wear.)

Wadsworth's first battle with his division was Chancellorsville, and his inexperience showed when he was ordered to cross the Rappahannock River below Fredericksburg. He waffled, first ordering the Iron Brigade down to the river in boats, then giving it up when they were fired on by Rebel marksmen on the opposite bank, then finally deciding to go ahead. The Westerners rowed across with only light casualties, Wadsworth himself swimming across on his horse just behind. Eventually, Hooker pulled the division back across the river, and the entire division was held uselessly out of the remainder of the battle.

Wadsworth had been at the head of the division for about six months, and had only been lightly engaged--at Chancellorsville--in that span. He was a stout fighter, however, and was developing into a good general, evidenced by the fact that he was one of the few non-West Point division commanders retained when the army reorganized the next year.

## At Gettysburg

Wadsworth's Division was in the vanguard of Reynolds's First Corps as it marched toward Gettysburg on the morning of July 1, and was the first Union infantry to reach the field. Between 11 o'clock in the morning until the fallback at 4 that afternoon, Wadsworth's men did some of the bloodiest, most heroic defensive fighting of the war on the ridges to the west of the town.

Attacked on McPherson's Ridge by Heth's Division as his men arrived, Wadsworth showed his inexperience in the first few moments when he withdrew part of Cutler's brigade and left Hall's Battery exposed, which made Hall pull his six guns out in such a hurry that a gun was lost; Hall was furious with Wadsworth. Artillery chief Wainright had spoken of trouble like this before, trouble that stemmed from Wadsworth's ignorance of the proper use and defense of artillery. Once the shouting stopped, however, Wadsworth did a good job, swinging the right of his line back when Rodes's Division attacked from the north, then pulling back in good order to new positions on Seminary Ridge when the McPherson's Ridge line was overlapped by the teeming enemy. Wadsworth saw over half his entire division disappear--either left crumpled on the field or trudging sullenly toward enemy prison camps--buying the time it took to gather the rest of the army in the formidable hills to the southeast. When the entire corps gave way that afternoon, Wadsworth and the remaining men of his two brigades withdrew to the north face of Culp's Hill, where, mangled and disorganized as they were, they were enough to intimidate Ewell and his lieutenants into calling off their attack at the bottom of the hill.

An image which shows how completely Wadsworth identified with his men was provided by a messenger who rode by Wadsworth on the evening of this first day at Gettysburg: "We found General Wadsworth sitting on a stone fence by the roadside, his head bowed in grief, the most dejected woe-begone person one would likely find on a world-around voyage--a live picture of Despair: General Reynolds killed, the first corps decimated a full half, and its first division almost wiped out of existence. The General greeted us warmly, adding, 'I am glad you were not with us this afternoon.'"

On evening of July 2, just as the defenses of Culp's Hill were being stripped to provide reinforcements for the embattled Federal left, Wadsworth's remnants were closest at hand when Ed Johnson's Stonewall Division came rushing up the hill toward "Old Pop" Greene's lone Twelfth Corps brigade on the right. Wadsworth, though under attack himself, was able to send two regiments to Greene, and the thin Union force was able to hang onto the hill through the night. A massive counterattack drove the Rebels off the hill the next morning.

Wadsworth left the army on July 15, less than two weeks after Gettysburg. After eight months' absence, he returned in March 1864, again to command a division in the Army of the Potomac--until he was shot in the forehead and killed in the battle of the Wilderness on May 8, 1864.

For further reading:

Allen, Louis F. *Memorial of the Late Gen. James S. Wadsworth*. . . . Buffalo, 1864

Pearson, Henry G. *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo: Brevet Major-General of United States Volunteers*. New York, 1913

---

Excerpted from ["The Generals of Gettysburg: The Leaders of America's Greatest Battle"](#)  
by Larry Tagg

**Report of Brig. Gen. James S. Wadsworth,  
U. S. Army, commanding First Division.  
O.R.--SERIES I--VOLUME XXVII/1 [S# 43] -- Gettysburg Campaign**

HEADQUARTERS FIRST DIVISION, *FIRST ARMY CORPS,*  
*In the Field, near Gettysburg, Pa., July 4, 1863.*

SIR: I have the honor to report to the major-general commanding the movements of this division during the last three days.

On the morning of July 1, at 8 a.m., the division moved from Marsh Creek on Gettysburg, under the immediate direction of our deeply lamented commander, Major-General Reynolds. I understand that the general received information when we were within about a mile of the town that the enemy were approaching from the direction of Cashtown. He immediately turned the head of the column to the left, across the fields, and struck the Cashtown road about three-quarters of a mile west of Gettysburg at about 10 a.m. The Second Brigade, Brigadier-General Cutler, led the column, followed by the Second Maine Battery, Captain Hall, the First Brigade, Brigadier-General Meredith, bringing up the rear. Here we met the advance guard of the enemy. Three regiments of the Second Brigade were ordered to deploy on the right of the road, the battery was placed in position near the road, and the balance of the division ordered up to the left of the road.

The right became sharply engaged before the line was formed, and at this time (about 10.15 a.m.) our gallant leader fell, mortally wounded. The right encountered a heavy force, were outnumbered, outflanked, and after a resolute contest, bravely conducted by Brigadier-General Cutler, fell back in good order to Seminary Ridge, near the town, and a portion of the command to a point still nearer the town. As they fell back, followed by the enemy, the Fourteenth New York State Militia, Colonel Fowler; Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers, Lieutenant-Colonel Dawes, and Ninety-fifth New York Volunteers, Colonel Biddle, gallantly charged on the advance of the enemy, and captured a large number of prisoners, including two entire regiments with their flags. The other regiments of the First Brigade advanced farther on the left, and captured several hundred prisoners, including Brigadier-General Archer. The enemy fell back. I reformed the line, the Second Brigade on the right, on a ridge, the First in a piece of woodland on the left. The battery had fallen to the rear, disabled by the loss of horses. I found Tidball's battery on Seminary Ridge, and advanced it to the front line, where it engaged a battery of the enemy in front of us. Major-General Doubleday, commanding the corps at that time, arrived on the ground about the time, or very soon after, General Reynolds fell, with the Second and Third Divisions.

The enemy advanced in heavy force on our right, and placed a battery in position to

enfilade the line, and I was obliged to order the right to fall back to Seminary Ridge, forming the line northwesterly and diagonal to the Cashtown road. Two brigades of the Second Division were sent to our right, and gallantly held the enemy in check for an hour, capturing a large number of prisoners. I received orders direct from Major-General Howard to hold Seminary Ridge as long as possible.

Tidball's battery had been driven back, but about 3 p.m. Battery B, Fourth Regular Artillery, commanded by Lieutenant Stewart, came to our assistance, and rendered effective service, demolishing a brigade of the enemy by a destructive fire of canister and shell Battery L, First New York Artillery, and the Fifth Maine Battery were likewise engaged in position near the seminary.

At about 2.30 p.m. Major-General Schurz, who had been advanced on our right, fell back after partially engaging the enemy, and left our right exposed. The enemy advanced in large force from that direction, and on our left the Third Division of this corps was driven back. Finding myself outflanked on both right and left, heavily pressed in front, and my ammunition nearly exhausted, at 3.45 o'clock I ordered the command to retire. The movement was effected in good order, and all the artillery brought off safely, excepting one caisson, the Seventh Wisconsin bringing up the rear, and suffering heavily, with the whole of the command, from the fire from our front and both flanks.

The severity of the contest during the day will be indicated by the painful fact that at least half of the officers and men who went into the engagement were killed or wounded.

On the evening of the 1st, we were ordered to occupy a hill on the right of the cemetery, which we held on the 2d and 3d against a sharp attack of the enemy on the evening of the 2d and morning of the 3d, with small loss to us.

The officers of my staff and of my command performed their whole duty without an exception. Under these circumstances I cannot particularly commend any of them without doing injustice to others equally meritorious.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
JAS. S. WADSWORTH,  
*Brigadier-General of Volunteers.*

#### [RETURN TO BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG UNION ORDER OF BATTLE](#)

- **# 4 - Brooklyn** - Established Dec. 1866, post charter revoked Jan. 1875.  
[Major General James S. Wadsworth](#). Born in 1807 in Geneseo, NY, where he later conducted his huge "plantation;" volunteer ADC to General McDowell at First Bull Run; ran as GOP candidate for Governor of New York during 1862, but did not campaign; his sons were all in the service - Bvt. Col., USA, Craig Wharton Wadsworth, Capt. Charles F. Wadsworth, 116th NYSV, Capt. James Wolcott Wadsworth, ADC USV; mortally wounded and captured at the Wilderness May 6, 1864; died two days later in enemy hands; his body was transferred from CSA detail to USA detail at Fredericksburg May 17, 1864; taken to Temple Hill Cemetery in Geneseo.