

Isaac Ridgeway Trimble

Gettysburg according to Trimble's Journal

From the original MS. Furnished by Major Graham Daves, of North Carolina
By Major-General Isaac R. Trimble, C.S.A.

Much has been said and written about the Battle of Gettysburg, but many errors are yet entertained concerning it. Many of the transactions of that great event are either unknown, misrepresented, or put down at a wrong hour--and as yet have not been precisely stated and joined together in regular chronological order; so as to display all the features of the great battle.

The proper conception of General Lee's design in entering Pennsylvania, and correct apprehension of the causes which led to the conflict at Gettysburg, and the reasons which compelled General Lee to carry it on when once accidentally begun, are alike erroneous or distorted by ignorance and prejudice.

We can easily comprehend the difficulty of understanding the successive movements of any battle, which was begun without the intent or knowledge of either commander of the adverse forces; and we can easily see that after such a battle had commenced, how much confusion, uncertainty, and absence of well combined action would mark its progress on both sides. All this was true of the battle of Gettysburg; but the difficulty is greatly enhanced when we know that the extent of ground from flank to flank covered by the opposing forces, was about six miles; rendering concert of action extremely difficult, and that the battle was fiercely maintained at various points for three days.

There is no doubt that the first aim of General Lee in his movement from Fredericksburg to the valley of Virginia and thence across the Potomac, was to thwart the plan of the Union commander against Richmond, and to draw the Federal army from Virginia. For General Lee states this expressly in his report. But it is certain that the Confederate commander never for a moment supposed that he could take a large army into Pennsylvania and continue there many weeks without fighting a great battle somewhere. This, General Lee hoped to do on ground of his own choice; with deliberate plan, and under circumstances entirely favorable to success.

We are to see how these reasonable expectations were defeated by adverse circumstances; disobedience of orders by his commander of cavalry, and want of concerted action and vigorous onset among his corps commanders at critical moments in the assaults of each of the three days.

But my object is not now to give a history of the battle of Gettysburg, but to relate the movements which came under my own notice, and which may help to throw light on what is now obscure, and I propose, comrades, in what I have to say, to make it

principally the relation of a simple narrative of events in which I was a humble actor. I shall not make any effort whatever to throw around the events related, any attractions beyond that grave, and to us always intensified interest, with which the plain facts invest them.

Next to the general results of a battle or of a campaign, and scarcely less important and interesting, has it this day become the occurrences, details and true facts, if I may so speak, mingling with, effecting, and in part producing the final result. In a word, we want to know how and why a battle was lost or won, and why a campaign failed. "Truth and facts," says Carlyle, "are inexorable things, and whether recognized or not, they decide the fate of battles, and mould the destiny of kingdoms and of men."

It is on account of the numerous misrepresentations, errors and omissions which I see contained in reports of commanders, and description of battles in historical works of the late war, which from personal knowledge I know to be in circulation, that I have often expressed a wish that each actor, however humble, in a battle or march, should put in writing what has come under his own notice, a relation of facts, about which there could be no mistake, because actually witnessed. If we had a collection of such data from generals down to privates, carefully recorded and preserved, how precious and invaluable would they be to the future historian. What would the history of our Revolutionary war have been without the aid of Thatcher's Journal, a plain, unpretending private narrative of events, noted down at the time they occurred. This journal helped to clear up many doubtful points, and to fix indisputably many important facts, in the history of the Revolution.

NARRATIVE

May 18, 1863. Left Richmond from Shocco Springs, N. C., to hasten recovery from a wounded leg and a desperate attack of camp erysipelas.

June 18th. Feeling sufficiently restored to return to duty, I wrote to General Lee with the freedom of an old acquaintance, requesting to be placed on service with him in the Army of Northern Virginia. In reply General Lee said in his letter: "I have other and more agreeable service for you. I wish you to take command in the Valley of Virginia and of all the troops now in it, your headquarters at Staunton, and that you should undertake what I have long desired, to brigade all the Marylanders and form them into one corps, and I will have issued what orders you desire to effect this object."

He jocosely concluded his letter by saying in his peculiar and pleasant way, which however regarded as mere badinage by many, always contained some point by hinting at an object to be attained, or suggesting some effort which might be made to promote the success of a campaign: "you shall have full permission to capture Milroy and all his stores which we very much need at this time."

June 19th Received orders to take command of the valley and repair to Staunton. On reaching that place the 22nd, on horseback, I found that all the forces in the valley had

moved, or were under orders for Maryland. I continued down the valley to overtake General Lee and report to him, which I did the afternoon of the 24th June, near Berryville. As soon as the courtesies of meeting had passed, he said: "You are tired and hungry, if you will step down to the mess you may find some remains of a fine mutton which kind friends have sent us, and after eating come up and we will talk (General Lee had dined, but finished before his staff, as was his custom).

On returning I found him alone by his tent, and said: "Well, General, you have taken away all my troops what am I to do?" He kindly replied, "Yes, we had no time to wait for you, but you must go with us and help to conquer Pennsylvania." He continued to speak and said: "We have again out-manoeuvred the enemy, who even now don't know where we are or what are our designs. Our whole army will be in Pennsylvania the day after tomorrow, leaving the enemy far behind, and obliged to follow us by forced marches. I hope with these advantages to accomplish some signal result, and to end the war if Providence favours us."

He then alluded to the conduct of our army in Pennsylvania, said he "had received letters from many prominent men in the South urging retaliatory acts while in the enemy's country, on property, &c., for ravages and destruction on Southern homes." He said, "What do you think should be our treatment of people in Pennsylvania?" I replied "General, I have never thought a wanton destruction of property of non-combatants in an enemy's country advances any cause. That our aims were higher than to make war on the defenseless citizens or women and children."

General Lee at once rejoined with that solemnity and grandeur so characteristic of the man. "These are my own views, I cannot hope that heaven will prosper our cause when we are violating its laws. I shall, therefore, carry on the war in Pennsylvania without offending the sanction of a high civilization and of Christianity."

A few days after was issued that humane order, one of the noblest records of the war, the recollection of which should cause the cheeks of Northern generals and people to kindle with shame, when in contrast with their orders and their conduct in the South-before and after the days of Gettysburg-I was never so much impressed with exalted moral worth and true greatness of Robert E. Lee, as when I heard him utter with serene earnestness the words I have quoted, and beheld the noble expression of magnanimity and justice which beamed from his countenance.

General Lee did not finally conquer by arms in the just cause which he espoused; but his more glorious victories in favour of mercy and justice, over mad ambition, lust, rapine and wrong, lift his character to a sublimer height than any ever attained by a military chieftain. Already the verdict of the world has pronounced him the hero of humanity.

Yes comrades, "He was not only famous, but of that good fame, without which Glory's but a tavern song."

Chambersburg, June 27th, 1863

"The commanding general has observed with marked satisfaction the conduct of the troops on the march, and confidently anticipates results commensurate with the high spirit they have manifested. No troops could have displayed greater fortitude, or better performed the arduous duties of the past ten days. Their conduct in other respects has, with few exceptions, been in keeping with their character as soldiers, and entitles them to approbation and praise. There have, however, been instances of forgetfulness on the part of some, that they have in keeping the yet unsullied reputation of the army, and that the duties exacted of us by civilization and Christianity, are not less obligatory in the country of the enemy than in our own. The commanding general considers that no greater disgrace could befall the army, and through it our whole people, than the perpetration of the barbarous outrages upon the innocent and defenseless, and the wanton destruction of private property that have marked the course of the enemy in our own country. Such proceedings not only disgrace the perpetrators and all connected with them, but are subversive of the discipline and efficiency of the army, and destructive of the ends of our present movements.

"It must be remembered that we make war only upon armed men, and that we cannot take vengeance for the wrongs our people have suffered, without lowering ourselves in the eyes of all whose abhorrence has been excited by the atrocities of our enemy, and offending against Him to whom vengeance belongeth, and without whose favor and support, our efforts must all prove in vain.

"The commanding general, therefore, earnestly exhorts the troops to abstain with most scrupulous care from unnecessary or wanton injury to private property; and he enjoins upon all officers to arrest and bring to summary punishment all who shall, in any way, offend against the orders of this subject.

R. E. Lee, General."

June 26th. General Lee entered Maryland. I met him in Hagerstown and suggested sending at once a brigade to Baltimore to take that city, rouse Maryland, and thus embarrass the enemy. He so far considered the plan to write to General A. P. Hill, the only corps commander near, to ask if he could spare a brigade for that purpose, who told me he had sent a reply to General Lee, that it would reduce his force too much, so it was not done.

June 27th. In the afternoon I met General Lee again at his tent pitched near the road, for a night halt. He called me to where he was seated, and unfolding a map of Pennsylvania, asked me about the topography of the country east of the South Mountain in Adams county and around Gettysburg. He said with a smile, "as a civil engineer you may know more about it than any of us. "After my description of the country and saying that "almost every square mile contained good positions for battle or skillful manoeuvring," he remarked (and I think I repeat his words nearly verbatim) "Our army is in good spirits, not over fatigued, and can

be concentrated on any one point in twenty-four hours or less. I have not yet heard that the enemy have crossed the Potomac, and am waiting to hear from General Stuart. When they hear where we are they will make forced marches to interpose their forces between us and Baltimore and Philadelphia. They will come up, probably through Frederick; broken down with hunger and hard marching, strung out on a long line and much demoralized, when they come into Pennsylvania. I shall throw an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it, follow up the success, drive one corp back on another, and by successive repulses and surprises before

When asked my opinion, I said the plan ought to be successful, as I never knew our men to be in finer spirits in any campaign. He said: "That is, I hear, the general impression."

At the conclusion of our interview, he laid his hands on the map, over Gettysburg, and said hereabout we shall probably meet the enemy and fight a great battle, and if God gives us a victory, the war will be over and we shall achieve the recognition of our independence. He concluded by saying General Ewell's forces are by this time in Harrisburg; if not, go and join him, and help take the place.

June 28th, Sunday. -- Reached Carlisle. General Early had been sent to York, but no force against Harrisburg. Told General Ewell it could be easily taken, and I thought General Lee expected it. I volunteered to capture the place with one brigade, and it was arranged we should start before day Tuesday morning. That night, Tuesday, General Ewell received by courier from General Lee a dispatch that the enemy had crossed the Potomac -- 26th and 27th -- with an order to cross at once the South Mountain, "and march to Cashtown or Gettysburg, according to circumstances." These were the words.

Tuesday, June 30th. -- Ewell started from Carlisle with Rodes' Division, and by an easy march reached Pleidelburg before sundown. General Johnson was left to guard trains, and General Early had not returned from York.

After dark General Early reached Heidelberg, having left his division in camp three miles off.

General Ewell called a consultation, Early, Rodes and self present. General Ewell stated that information had come of the arrival of the 11th corps of the enemy at Gettysburg, and he was undecided what to do under his order, which was read over repeatedly and variously commented on, General E. especially commenting in severe terms on its ambiguity with reference to Cashtown or Gettysburg as the objective point. When my opinion was asked, I said I could interpret it in but one way, after hearing from General Lee a few days before his plan to attack the advance of the enemy, where ever found, with a superior force, and throw it back in confusion on the main body; and that, as this advance was in Gettysburg, we should march to that place and notify General Lee accordingly; nothing was decided that night. About seven or eight next morning, July 1st, begun the march towards Middletown, as I suggested that place to be indirectly on the way to both Cashtown and Gettysburg, and that a courier should be sent to General Lee for positive orders. We reached Middletown, seven miles from Gettysburg, about 10

o'clock, and about fifteen minutes after General Ewell had word from General Lee for Hill to march to Gettysburg, to which point the latter had moved. Rodes' Division as once started for that place, and reached a point about two miles from the town westward about 12 o'clock, when the line of battle was formed on the north of the road, and under my guidance reached unmolested by rapid advance a point commanding the town, which is the northern termination of Seminary Ridge and about a mile distant from Gettysburg. A half hour before reaching this position, we had heard Hill's artillery actively engaged off to our right and in advance, which proved to be his first encounter with the enemy unexpectedly on Seminary Ridge, one and a half miles west of Gettysburg; the position gained by us was on the enemy's right flank as he engaged General Hill and directly west of the town. Rodes at once engaged with his infantry on our right, and his batteries opened against those of the enemy just in front of the town, while one of his brigades was extended on our left by General Ewell's order out into the low ground towards and beyond the Mummasburg Road. About 2 P.M. Hill and Rodes had driven the enemy on our right, and General Early, having reached the field on our extreme left, encountered a heavy body of the enemy, who were sent to turn our left, and drove them back in confusion and with heavy loss.

From the position I was in, I could command a view a mile and a half in extent from one flank to the other, and noticed that the whole space in open fields was covered with Union soldiers retreating in broken masses towards the town from our own and General Hill's front.

This was about 2.30 P.M. Soon after General Ewell rode to the town, passing a numerous body of prisoners. He said to an officer: "Fortune is against you today." He replied: "We have been worse whipped than ever."

Riding through one of the streets with his staff, General Ewell was fired on from the houses; and soon after rode out to a farmhouse, near a hospital. At this time, about 3, the firing had ceased entirely, save occasional discharges of artillery from the hill above the town. The battle was over and we had won it handsomely. General Ewell moved about uneasily, a good deal excited, and seemed to me to be undecided what to do next. I approached him and said: "Well, General, we have had a grand success; are you not going to follow it up and push our advantage?"

He replied that "General Lee had instructed him not to bring on a general engagement without orders, and that he would wait for them."

I said, that hardly applies to the present state of things, as we have fought a hard battle already, and should secure the advantage gained. He made no rejoinder, but was far from composure. I was deeply impressed with the conviction that it was a critical moment for us and made a remark to that effect.

As no movement seemed immediate, I rode off to our left, north of the town, to reconnoitre, and noticed conspicuously the wooded hill northeast of Gettysburg (Culp's), and a half mile distant, and of an elevation to command the country for miles each way,

and overlooking Cemetery Hill above the town. Returning to see General Ewell, who was still under much embarrassment, I said: "General, there," pointing to Culp's Hill. "is an eminence of commanding position, and not now occupied, as it ought to be by us or the enemy soon. I advise you to send a brigade and hold it if we are to remain here." He said: "Are you sure it commands the town?" "Certainly it does, as it ought to be by us or the enemy soon. I advise you to send a brigade and hold it if we are to remain here." He said:

By night (it was then about 3:30), that hill -- Culp's -- the key of the position around Gettysburg was occupied by part of the 12th Corps, Slocum's, and reinforced the next day.

On the 2nd and 3rd determined efforts were made by us to gain this hill, but without success, and fearful loss.

On our extreme right, west of Round-top Hill, General Longstreet had reached a point three or four miles from Gettysburg, with but slight opposition.

That night from daylight to late at night, General Lee was anxiously reconnoitering the ground and frequently expressed a wish to attack the enemy that night or early in the morning. Why his wish was not carried out I don't feel at liberty to explain. Nothing however was done, nor a gun fired, until next day late in the afternoon.

Thus the 1st and 11th Corps, were signally defeated by 2:30, July 1st. General Hill had lost heavily; General Rodes of Ewell's Corps had not suffered much and his men, as I saw them, were in high spirits. General Early had hardly suffered at all and General Johnson had not been in the fight, only reaching the field by sundown.

What were the enemy's condition and movement?

July 1st. At 3 P.M. the 1st and 11th Corps had been dispersed, except Steinwehr's Division of 3 or 4000 men, a reserve left on Cemetery Hill. General Hancock reached Cemetery Hill in person about 4:30, and at once advised General Meade to bring his whole army there. Slocum's 12th Corps arrived about 4:30 P.M. and was posted on the right (Federal right). Sickles with only Birney's Division, 3rd Corps, arrived about 5 P.M. and formed on the left of the 1st Corps.

These troops had all made forced marches, and were not in fighting order. General Wadsworth's Division took possession of Culp's Hill about sundown. The other corps -- 12th, Slocum's; 2nd, Hancock's; 5th, Sykes', 6th, Sedgewick's -- arrived late in the night and early on the morning of the 2nd.

It is apparent from this condition of things, at 3:30 P.M. on the 1st, that the failure to follow up vigorously our success, from whatever cause it proceeded, was the first fatal error committed. It seemed to me that General Ewell was in a position to do so. But he evidently did not feel that he should take so responsible a step without orders from

General Lee who might reasonably be expected to take the direction of affairs at this juncture. I have since been told by one of General Lee's staff, that an order was handed to General Ewell in the afternoon of the 1st July "to pursue our success, and advance if he was in a condition to do so."

July 2nd. This morning all was quiet. General Lee, about 9 A.M., rode over to General Ewell's quarters, who was absent. He first met me and said, "he wanted to go to some point which would command a view of the country and of the enemy's position. "I pointed out the cupola of the Alms House near by, to which we ascended. From this we had a good view of Cemetery Hill, Round Top, Culp's Hill and adjacent country.

General Lee said: "the enemy have the advantage of us in a shorter and inside line and we are too much extended. We did not or we could not pursue our advantage of yesterday, and now the enemy are in a good position. "Returning to General Ewell's quarters and meeting him, he at once made use of the same words. "We did not or could not," &c. And he repeated them over and over again as he met Early, Rodes and others, and with significance which strongly impressed me, as I thought I could see plainly that his design to fall upon the advance of the enemy and crush it, had not been productive of the results he wished for, and had such good reasons to expect.

After a full consultation, General Lee decided to concentrate his forces on our right, moving General Ewell from the extreme left, behind Hill and Longstreet, the movement to be made that night. It was however not done.

July 2nd, P.M. Longstreet was ordered to move early, but did not get up until about 4 P.M., when he attacked the Federal left, under Sickles, which was advanced about half a mile westward of Cemetery Ridge and Round Top, in a peach orchard, and drove them back to the Ridge under the shelter of their guns on "Round Top."

About sundown on 2d, General Ewell with Johnson's Division, made an attempt to take "Culp's Hill," but after a severe loss, was unsuccessful. Later the same evening or at dark, General Early made a successful attack on Cemetery Hill just above the town, carried two lines of works and captured a battery of six guns; but not being supported by Rodes on the right, as was arranged, he was obliged to abandon his advantage, by a force of the enemy rallied to assail his right flank, which Rodes should have been there to protect.

So there was on this day, three isolated but fierce attacks, against different parts of the enemy's line, which for want of simultaneous movement, or concentration of effort, resulted in no advantage.

July 3. A fierce contest begun early this day, on our left, brought on by an attempt of the enemy to drive back Johnson from the foot of "Culp's Hill," which he repelled, but again failed himself in a renewed attack to gain the Hill. This conflict continued all the morning.

July 3rd, Afternoon. General Lee having decided to carry Cemetery Ridge by a determined effort from our right, preparations were ready by one o'clock. The order of battle, which I read, was in these words:

"General Longstreet will make a vigorous attack on his front; General Ewell will threaten the enemy on the left, or make a vigorous attack, should circumstances justify it: General Hill will hold the centre at all hazards."

After that tremendous cannonade of one and a half hours, Pickett's Division of Longstreet's Corps moved gallantly forward under Pettigrew, Heth's division moved at the same time; with two brigades of General Pender's Division temporarily under my command forming a second line in rear of Pettigrew. I think this charge was made about three o'clock, and by four it was over.

It is said, and with truth, that Longstreet did not support Pickett's Division on the right, by keeping back Hood's and McLaws' Divisions, as he said, to protect his right against Pleasant's (sic) cavalry.

Pickett's Division having a shorter space to pass over, became engaged soon than the troops on his left, but was subjected to no more heavy fire.

Heth's Division marched in fine order, in line with Pickett's, about 200 yards in advance of Pender's two brigades. When it reached the low grounds, near the Emmitsburg road, it seemed to me just in the rear, to sink into the ground, we passed over it without the least disorder, and drove the enemy from the fence at the road, where our men stopped and began firing, instead of mounting the fence; while making efforts to get them over the fence I was wounded. While at the fence the exposure was dreadful. The incessant discharge of cannister, shell and musketry was more than any troops could endure. The brigades of Pender yielding ground, began to move back slowly and in good order, not breaking ranks even.

I was asked by my aids if the should rally the men and renew the charge. When I looked to Pickett's position and could plainly see that the conflict was ended there, as but a few stragglers could be seen. Hence it was mere folly for our small force to continue the fight and I said to my aid: "No; the best thing the men can do, is to get out of this, and let them go. "I know these brigades were the last troops to leave the field, and as we moved slowly back, but few of Pickett's men were visible.

In reviewing the events preceding the battle, and the occurrences during the three days, we cannot fail to be impressed with the cause of embarrassment to General Lee, and the reasons for his failure to obtain a decided and useful victory. For the proof is abundant that Gettysburg fight was a drawn battle, though with General Lee in the enemy's country, failure of victory was a defeat to his campaign.

The errors, a want of judgment which defeated General Lee's plans, are conspicuous and numerous, and it is strange, tho' reasonably certain, that if any one of these errors had not been made, the result of Gettysburg would have been a victory for us.

But all in succession were against us, and we were crushed by a combination of mistakes and disasters, to which few armies have every been subjected.

I will enumerate these errors:

1st. The absence of Stuart's cavalry. That officer disobeyed two orders of General Lee, to keep his cavalry between our army and the enemy. Hence General Lee was seriously embarrassed, as he never knew the precise movements of the enemy, and could not prepare to meet them as he desired.

2nd. General Ewell not moving directly on Gettysburg early on the 15th, where he could have begun the fight with Hill, made it speedily successful at an early hour of the day, and prevented the enemy from halting on Cemetery Hill.

3rd Our success the first day not having been followed up by vigorous pursuit of the enemy.

4th Failure to attack the enemy by daybreak on the 2nd, before he had concentrated, as desired by General Lee.

5th Want of concert in attacks on 2nd, and especially Rodes' failure to sustain Early at night.

6th. Longstreet's delay in reaching the field early on 2nd, when only three miles distant, until 4 o'clock P.M.

7th. Longstreet's not vigorously attacking with his whole force on the 3rd

8th. Failure to occupy Culp's Hill on 1st, without opposition, which would have driven the enemy from Cemetery Hill.

9th A great error in attacking the third day on a line six miles long, and without simultaneous effort, instead of concentrating two corps against the enemy's left, as General Lee intended, and moving forward to the attack successive divisions, until the adversary was overwhelmed, his line broken, and his left turned. The even balance of the day as it was shows that this strategy would have succeeded.

The battle of Gettysburg was fought on 3d in reality by three divisions -- Pickett's, Heth's, under Pettigrew, Pender's, under Trimble -- all concentrated on the enemy's left centre. Longstreet's two right divisions were not put in earnestly. Two divisions of Hill were in position on Seminary Ridge, and Ewell's Corps on left, held in threatening attitude.

It was evident that in General Lee's position, distant from his supplies and from all reinforcements, and inferior in numbers, that these disadvantages could only be neutralized by repeated and hard blows, dealt so rapidly that the enemy would not have time to mature any plan or to put himself in a secure position. General Lee fully realized this, and as soon as he was aware that the enemy were at Gettysburg, was earnest in a desire to push our success the first day, and to attack by daylight on 2nd. This was prevented by the indecision of his corps commanders.

Both armies were exhausted by the great efforts and sacrifices that had been made, and seemed willing to end the campaign without further struggle.

But there is no question that, as General Lee hoped and believed, a successful battle in Pennsylvania would have secured Southern independence.

(Source: Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. 26, pages 116-128)

For Further Reading

Grace, William M. /"Isaac Trimble, the Indefatigable and Courageous."/ MA Thesis, VA Polytechnic Inst., 1984 Long, Roger /"Gen. Isaac Trimble in Captivity."/ Gettysburg Magazine 1, Jul 1989 Pohanka, Brian, ed., /"Gettysburg: Fight Enough in Old Man Trimble to Satisfy a Herd of Tigers: Diary of Isaac Ridgeway Trimble, Division Commander, A.P. Hill's Corps."/ Civil War Magazine 46, Aug 1994.

Excerpted from "The Generals of Gettysburg: The Leaders of America's Greatest Battle " by Larry Tagg.