

# Isaac Ridgeway Trimble

## Short Biography

At sixty-one Isaac Trimble was one of the oldest generals on either side at Gettysburg, yet the huge, scowling, martial mustache that blazed across his face advertised the fact that behind it was one of the most pugnacious commanders on the field. On battlefield after battlefield in 1862 he had driven himself and his brigade past the limits of their comrades, making him a favorite with his legendarily relentless commander, "Stonewall" Jackson. Stoking his inner fire was naked ambition: "Before this war is over," he had told a delighted Jackson, "I intend to be a major general or a corpse."

Trimble was a restless soul, a Culpeper Virginia native who had gone west and been appointed to West Point out of Kentucky, then attached himself to his beloved Maryland. A graduate at the age of twenty, he served in artillery branch of the Old Army for ten years, then in 1832 doffed his uniform and entered the exploding railroad industry, where there was unlimited opportunity for a fiery competitor like himself. In the nearly thirty years before Civil War came in 1861 he engineered construction on a number of railroad lines in the Mid-Atlantic region and became a distinguished superintendent.

In the early weeks of the War Trimble did not sit idly behind his desk. He used his acumen to try bring victory to the South in one quick stroke by burning all the railroad bridges north of his adopted Baltimore, thereby obstructing the passage of Northern troops bound for Washington and rendering the capital defenseless. When that failed and it became clear that Maryland would not secede, he went home to Virginia. In May 1861 he enlisted in the Engineers and went to work constructing battery emplacements. Although Joe Johnston initially had a low regard for his military abilities, Trimble managed to get himself commissioned brigadier general by August and placed with a brigade by November 1861. He waited through the winter on the Rappahannock line.

Trimble's first chance to show what he could do came the next spring in "Stonewall" Jackson's Shenandoah Campaign. He "saw the elephant" in the climax of the campaign at Cross Keys on June 8, 1862. There, out in front on the right side of Ewell's line, he drew an attack by Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont's Federals. Trimble ordered his men to wait until the last possible second to fire. The entire brigade then blasted a volley into the faces of the Yankees, who staggered, then turned and ran. When they didn't return, Trimble was irked. He went after them, and advanced until he was a mile ahead of the other Confederate brigades. Not yet content, he insisted heatedly on a further attack. Ewell refused his request but remembered his ardor: "Trimble won the fight," he would confide later, "and I believe now if I had followed his views we would have destroyed Fremont's army."

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Jackson and "Old Baldy" Ewell. Once, when someone mentioned the subject of "fancy soldiers," Jackson pointed to Trimble, "sitting on the fence, with black army hat, cord and feathers, [and said] 'There is the only fancy soldier in my command.'" Another distinguishing feature was his bull voice. One of his men remembered, "Trimble gave the loudest command I ever heard, to 'Forward, guide center, march!' I could hear the echo . . . for miles."

At Gaines' Mill, Trimble's next battle, he showed more of the same spirit in attack as Cross Keys. At Malvern Hill, he vainly begged asked Jackson to let him make a night assault, unwilling to give up without one more effort where 5,000 Confederates already lay crumpled on the ground.

Jackson's command proceeded immediately from the Peninsula to face the threat of Maj. Gen. John Pope's army to the northwest. There, in the early stages of the Second Manassas Campaign, Trimble routed one Federal brigade at Freeman's Ford on the banks of the Rappahannock. Later, after Jackson had mercilessly driven his flying column around Pope's army and into his rear, Trimble volunteered his exhausted brigade for one more march to the Federal supply depot at Manassas Junction. Jackson gratefully accepted. Trimble's men, numbed with lack of sleep, aching and foot-weary, made the extra march, then rushed forward and captured two Federal batteries at the end of it. In September, after Trimble was wounded in the Battle of Second Manassas (hit above the left ankle by an explosive bullet), Jackson remembered, and wrote:

I respectfully recommend that Brig. Gen. I.R. Trimble be appointed a Maj. Gen. It is proper, in this connection, to state that I do not regard him as a good disciplinarian, but his success in battle has induced me to recommend his promotion. I will mention but one instance, though several might be named, in which he rendered distinguished service. After a day's march of over 30 miles he ordered his command... to charge the enemy's position at Manassas Junction. This charge resulted in the capture of a number of prisoners and 8 pieces of Artillery. I regard that day's achievement as the most brilliant that has come under my observation during the present war."

The trouble was, according to law Trimble could not be promoted or assigned to command a division until he was well enough to serve with troops. Here, finally, his age disadvantaged him--his wound developed infections and complications, and he healed slowly. True to form, Trimble went on the offensive from his sickbed, writing enraged letters to the Adjutant General and Secretary of War, demanding his promotion at once. The letters and demands bore fruit. On January 19, 1863, Trimble was promoted to major general and given command of Jackson's Stonewall Division, though he had still not recovered. In fact, in April he fell sick again, and Maj. Gen. "Allegheny" Johnson was given Jackson's division after the Battle of Chancellorsville in May. Meanwhile, Trimble was given command of the quiet (Shenandoah) Valley District.

When Lee's army marched across the Potomac a few weeks later, however, Trimble could not remain in his quiet backwater when battle was promised in Maryland or Pennsylvania--an area he knew like the back of his hand from his railroading days. He

rode north, joined Lee in the third week of June, and after he wore out his welcome at army headquarters, rode further north and joined his old chief, now Lieut. Gen. Ewell, in Carlisle on June 28. He immediately volunteered to take the capital of Pennsylvania-- about whose defenses or garrison he knew absolutely nothing-- single-handedly, with one brigade! On June 30, however, orders came from Lee for the army to concentrate, and Ewell moved south with the nettlesome Trimble always at his ear.

### AT GETTYSBURG

Trimble accompanied Ewell during the whole of July 1, giving unsolicited advice with the receipt of every order from Lee and at every turn in the road. Trimble's close association with Ewell ended at a stormy meeting in the late afternoon, after the retreat of the Union Eleventh Corps and after Ewell had received Lee's order to take Cemetery Hill "if practicable" but avoid a general engagement. Trimble then buzzed excitedly, "General, don't you intend to pursue our sweep and push the enemy vigorously?" According to Trimble's later recollection, Ewell only paced about, cited Lee's order not to bring on a general engagement, and looked confused. Trimble urgently advised taking Culp's Hill, which he saw as the key to the whole Union position. "Give me a division," he said, according to one witness, "and I will engage to take that hill." When this was declined, he said, "Give me a brigade and I will do it." When this was declined, Trimble said, "Give me a good regiment and I will engage to take that hill. " Ewell snapped back, "When I need advice from a junior officer I generally ask for it." Trimble warned that Ewell would regret following his suggestions for as long as he lived, threw down his sword, and stormed off, saying he would no longer serve under such an officer.

On July 2, Trimble stood by in his status as major-general-at-large.

On July 3, two of Hill's divisions which Lee had earmarked for the climactic charge on the enemy center were without commanding generals. For the attack, Lee assigned Trimble to command Pender's division, where senior Brig. Gen. "Little Jim" Lane had been in charge since Maj. Gen. Pender had been wounded the previous afternoon. Trimble probably saw his two attacking brigades for the first time when he and Lee rode along their lines that morning. Trimble's men were put in the third line behind the two lines of Heth's division (now commanded by Brig. Gen. Johnston Pettigrew). Pettigrew's and Trimble's brigades were on the left of Pickett's division, jumping off from a line between McMillan's Woods and Spangler's Woods on the west slope Seminary Ridge.

During the grand assault in mid-afternoon, which became famous as Pickett's Charge, Trimble rode on his mare Jinny. As he crossed the Emmitsburg Road, a bullet smashed his ankle, also wounding his horse. Trimble sent a message to Lane to take charge of the division, which was by then a jumbled mass of men, each following a flag and fighting on his own hook.

This would be Trimble's last moment of active rebellion. He was carried away, and the lower third of his leg was amputated at a farmhouse in the rear. Surgeons warned that infection would set in if he were moved in an ambulance, so Trimble chose to stay and be

taken prisoner. He spent the next year and a half in Northern hands, then was exchanged in February 1865. Lee surrendered before he could return to the field

Regarded as the most prominent soldier contributed by Maryland to the Southern Cause, Isaac Ridgeway Trimble was born May 15, 1802, in Culpeper, Virginia. He graduated from West Point in 1822 and spent ten years as an artillery officer. Trimble then left the army and devoted almost three decades to railroad construction, much of it in his adopted state of Maryland, becoming a distinguished superintendent.

In April 1861, as commander of Baltimore defenses, Trimble burned a number of bridges north of the city to impede passage of Federal troops en route to Washington. The next month he accepted a colonelcy of engineers in Virginia forces and helped in the construction of Norfolk's defensive works and battery emplacements. Following his appointment on August 9, 1861, as a Confederate brigadier general, Trimble took command of a brigade in Richard S. Ewell's division. He was, a fellow officer stated, "a veteran in years but with the fire and aggressiveness of youth." He and his brigade waited through the winter on the Rappahannock line.

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Trimble's dependable service in Jackson's Shenandoah Valley and the Seven Days' campaigns ended momentarily at Second Manassas when a federal bullet shattered his left knee. Jackson remembered, and wrote:

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On January 17, 1863, while still recuperating from his wound, Trimble received advancement to major general. He returned to duty, but on July 3, 1863, while leading two North Carolina brigades in the Pickett-Pettigrew charge (he had been given Pender's place), Trimble again was shot in the left leg. Dr. Hunter McGuire amputated the limb the next day. Unable to travel, Trimble surrendered to Union authorities. He endured imprisonment at Johnson's Island and Fort Warren before his February 1865 release.

After the War, and equipped with an artificial leg, Trimble resumed his engineering work. He resided in Baltimore, where he died January 2, 1888. He is one of five Confederate generals, buried in that city's Green Mount Cemetery.