

The Battle of Brandy Station: June 9, 1863: “The Beginning of the End of the War”

All aspects of human pursuit embody both a beginning and an end. And just as individual battles and military campaigns embrace an identifiable origin and a resolute closure, so do wars themselves. Axiomatically and inevitably, somebody finally wins a war; somebody loses, and many die in the process. Most often today, our inherent competitive spirit prompts us to focus on the *outcome* of a battle or a war simply because we herald the winners; or lament alongside the losers. Today’s presentation embraces a diverse view, as we are about to detail the *beginning of the end of a war*.

Many, if not most, Civil War historians believe the American Civil War was principally decided in Adams County, Pennsylvania in early July 1863. That belief asserted, historians affirm that the results and consequences of the Battle of Gettysburg both predicted and foreshadowed the outcome of the war. The way this argument goes—and one in which I concur—is that whichever side controls Cemetery Ridge at the end of the long day of July 3, 1863 wins the war.

And is there anyone here who does *not* believe if Lee triumphed at the “little copse of trees,” that the Army of Northern Virginia would have incrementally and successfully invested Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington during the following days? And battles out in the western theater notwithstanding—that distant conflict was never anything more than a sideshow—the Confederate battle flag would have soon been fluttering over former-President Lincoln’s head.

It is indeed a fact that the certainty of both victory and defeat—depending on one’s perspective—was set in inevitable and inexorable motion as Pettigrew’s and Pickett’s survivors turned their bowed backs to Cemetery Ridge on the late afternoon of July 3.

But when we think of Gettysburg today, many of us myopically direct our attention on the momentous events of early July 1863 as if our country’s threshold battle somehow occurred in isolated context from the rest of the war. This chronic presentation of Gettysburg as a battle that embodied an accidental clash between two heavy titans clumsily blundering into each

other in the Pennsylvania countryside might be both uncluttered and convenient, but that parochial view is also badly wrong.

And why is this perception erroneous? I'll answer the question by simply asking another: "Where is the strategic *context* for the Battle of Gettysburg in that provincial assessment?" Here is a functional and valid counterpoint: *The more one knows about Brandy Station, the more one comprehensively understands the Gettysburg Campaign and its momentous aftereffects.*

I herein contend there are four clearly identifiable (but related) reasons confirming that the Battle of the Brandy Station represents the "*beginning of the end of the war.*" Now normally at the outset of a presentation wherein one attempts to convince others of a certain point of view, you would expect to hear at this juncture a forthright order of proof. But we're going to do something different and allow you, the listener, to uncover the confirmation for yourself by tracking the following narrative. (So pay attention!) Then at the end of our talk, we'll discuss the hard evidence for Brandy Station's signal significance.

To some Gettysburg scribes, the events of June 9, 1863—occurring 22 days before John Buford glared down at gray infantry pouring out of Cashtown Pass—*if* mentioned at all, are treated as trivial postscript to Chancellorsville; or as an entertaining but irrelevant sidebar affixed somewhere between the shift of the two armies toward Pennsylvania. In fact—and we're *not* going into detail as the strategy of the Pennsylvania Campaign is the topic of another talk—but the Battle of Brandy Station is best understood when viewed as the opening combat action concurrent with the Confederate advance to Pennsylvania following the Chancellorsville Campaign.¹

Succinctly, here is the historical setting for the action known as the Battle of Brandy Station, June 9, 1863: In mid-May 1863, General Lee deigned to alter the strategic status quo existing between the two contending armies and undertook plans to invade the north. In preparation for his army's secret withdrawal from the Fredericksburg heights, Lee ordered his cavalry division over the Rappahannock River into Culpeper County to screen and protect the impending shift of his army westward. Federal cavalry just across the

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the grand strategy of the Gettysburg Campaign, see Clark B. Hall, "Lee Steals a March on Joe Hooker," *Blue and Gray Magazine*, Vol. 21, #3, (Spring, 2004).

Rappahannock River discovered the presence of Southern cavalry in Culpeper and concluded (erroneously) the Rebel horsemen were about to set off on a sweeping raid toward Washington, D.C.

John Buford alerted General Joseph Hooker of this emerging threat and General Hooker—not eager to suffer additional humiliation on the heels of his Chancellorsville debacle—ordered his cavalry corps to “disperse and destroy” the enemy cavalry believed to be located at Culpeper Court House. So on the early morning of June 9, 1863, Federal cavalry boldly attacked Jeb Stuart in eastern Culpeper County and came within a whisker of defeating the Confederate horse. At the end of the day on June 9, Union cavalry withdrew across the Rappahannock. About 20,000 troops had been engaged in this all-day battle, the largest cavalry action of the war, and near 1500 casualties resulted from this momentous clash of cavalry.

Some twelve years after the Civil War, Col. Frederic Newhall, a Federal staff officer during the Battle of Brandy Station, boldly asserted, "The Gettysburg campaign was opened actively in Virginia, when General (Alfred) Pleasonton's command crossed the Rappahannock River on the morning of the 9th of June, 1863, at Kelly's and Beverly's Fords, and engaged the command of General J.E.B. Stuart. The influence of that day's encounter on the great campaign which it inaugurated, has never been fully understood or appreciated by the public..."

Upon the dedication of the monument to the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry at Gettysburg, Colonel Newhall addressed a huge throng on America's preeminent battleground. "From my point of view," the Pennsylvanian proclaimed, "the field of Gettysburg is far wider than that which is enclosed in the beautiful landscape about us...The larger field of Gettysburg which I have in mind is the great territory lying between the battlefield and the fords of the Rappahannock in Virginia. And while Gettysburg is generally thought of as a struggle which began on the 1st and ended on the 3rd of July, 1863, the fact will some day be fully recognized that it had its beginning many miles from here.... It was at Beverly Ford, then, that Gettysburg was inaugurated."

"How many readers of history today know anything of the cavalry fight at Fleetwood, six miles from Culpeper Courthouse, 9 June 1863, where twenty thousand horsemen were engaged from early in the morning until nightfall?" The Honorable John Lamb, a sitting United States Representative from Virginia and late captain of Confederate cavalry, protested in a post-war text the dearth of extant chronicles "of that day of carnage and death."

Other horse veterans on both sides also expressed perplexity that so few recollections issued forth regarding their big fight at Brandy Station, where, according to Brig. Gen. David Gregg, "there was fought a cavalry battle the influence of which was so great and far reaching that it must always hold a first place in the annals of the cavalry... a day of such fighting as would have gladdened the heart of the wildest dragoon that ever gave cut or thrust." And where to this day, avowed another blue trooper, "the moldering bones of many a cavalry hero attest full well how that field was fought...."

It does indeed seem baffling that a *comprehensive, tactical analysis* did not emerge from a *participant* detailing the Battle of Brandy Station (termed "Beverly's Ford" by some Federals, and "Fleetwood" or "Fleetwood Heights," as many Rebels preferred). This glaring oversight is especially remarkable when reviewing the glossy comments employed by Brandy Station combatants in wartime letters and diaries. Consider this comment by a staff officer to Maj. Gen. James E.B. Stuart: (This was) "the most terrible cavalry fight of the war, in fact, the greatest ever fought on the American continent."

Capt. John Esten Cooke of Jeb Stuart's staff also set the scene as it existed on the banks of the upper Rappahannock in early June, 1863: "A great drama was about to begin to end in the really conclusive struggle of the war, and at this moment came the sudden clash and war in Culpeper, precluding the thunder at Cemetery Hill."

The surgeon of the 8th Illinois Cavalry claimed that in "all parts of the field the severity of the fight is without precedent in cavalry warfare." Witnessing the two senior officers of his regiment brutally slain on Fleetwood Hill, the new commander of the 1st New Jersey Cavalry bore witness in his official report to "the most spirited and hardest fought cavalry battle ever known in this country." Hundreds of combatants on both sides in their reports, letters, diaries and memoirs pitched in on that theme exhausting the gamut of superlatives in designating this engagement as the "heaviest;" "toughest;"

"grandest;" "severest;" "bloodiest;" "most famous;" "glorious," and " most desperate cavalry battle of history."

Leading newspapers resounded kindred plaudits in front page, above the fold format, with *The New York Times* of June 11 trumpeting the "Great Cavalry Fight," while the *Richmond Sentinel* of June 12 described "the severest and most extensive cavalry fight of the war." Years following the war, other writers similarly characterized the battle. Stonewall Jackson's early biographer, an English professional soldier, who when declaring, "The horseman of the American war is the model of the efficient cavalryman," also attested, "there is no finer instance ...of a well-contested cavalry battle than that near Brandy Station, June 9, 1863." Even the "Gray Ghost," famed partisan ranger Col. John S. Mosby (who accomplished more than a little fighting on horseback) postulated Brandy Station "was probably the fiercest mounted combat of the war—in fact of any war."

Aside from its epochal dimensions as the largest cavalry warfare fought in the Western Hemisphere and affixed dead center in a year of consequential events, the Battle of Brandy Station also heralded emerging strategic implications for the application of mounted warfare in the Civil War. On the plains and amongst the green hillsides of the Rappahannock watershed, Union cavalymen on the hunt crossed their own Rubicon and fought it out in harness with their old foe on a fair field, forever grappling the initiative and distinction heretofore considered the exclusive domain of Stuart's vaunted legions. Redemption stood at hand in the third summer of the war for the blue clad troopers, "clerks and tailors on horseback" no longer.

In the passage of just one day in a four-year war, Federal troopers not only corrected a cavalry imbalance hitherto existing between two armies, but in this Culpeper County *rite de passage*, they also validated their military worth by certifying that blue mounted forces—flaunting a newfound operational mobility—would hereafter offer offensive support to the eastern war effort. *And it all happened at Brandy Station, the inaugural action of the Gettysburg Campaign.*

Now we will detail (just a few) post-battle observations from *Union troopers who fought at Brandy*—comments contained in letters and diaries reflecting their unique, proprietary perspective of the Battle of Brandy Station:

“We whipped the enemy soundly.”

“We gave them a good drubbing.”

“We whaled them.”

“We won a victory in a great cavalry fight.”

“Our men won the belt.”

“Redemption is at hand.”

“We triumphed over our collective fears.”

“There was not the slightest sense of defeat on our side at nightfall.”

“The terror of the rebel cavalry departed in our minds along with the setting sun.”

“The Union cavalry got the best of our erring critter-back countrymen.”

“I have more confidence in myself after this battle. I will know how to act better from now on if thrown on my own responsibility.”

1st NJ regimental commander: “The morale of the regiment has been greatly benefited by yesterday’s work and I am confident the men will fight better now than ever.”

“This battle fully proved the Union cavalry is in no manner inferior to the rebels.”

“We maintained our own against him and we were eager for further trials.”

“We have whipped the enemy out of their conceit. There is great satisfaction in avenging yourself upon an arrogant enemy.”

“I guess they will begin to have some wholesome respect for us bye and bye.”

“Guess we left our mark.”

“The superiority of our horsemen was there established.”

“The Union steed, with broken rein, ran free.”

“After re-crossing, we tended to our horses, built campfires and grinded down our sabers for the tough work ahead. We are ready for it.”

A of P staff officer: “The lesson of Brandy Station was healthful to our cavalry. It gave them much needed confidence in themselves which ever after proved disastrous to their opponents.”

Wainwright: “The affair at BS certainly did a great deal to improve the morale of our cavalry so that they are not afraid to meet the rebs on equal terms.”

“From that day on, the rebel cavalry could not stand in front of our cavalry for an hour.”

“From this battle dates the efficiency of the Federal cavalry. For this was the day we came to kill the king and beard the lion in his own den.”

“The future of the cavalry is just opening and great names will be won in the cavalry from this day forward.”

Rodenbaugh: “In this battle the Union cavalry *found itself* for the first time during the war and it dealt such blows to the Confederates that the latter no longer said the Yankees were not worthy opponents.”

Crowninshield: “The battle was a turning point in the war for the Federal cause.”

“We wrested from the rebel cavalry the prestige which it had won in earlier conflicts. A confidence in their own strength was that day gained by our own men which was never shaken...on the 9th of June the scales were evenly balanced, thereafter the troops that fought for the Union turned it in their favor.”

Merritt: “From that day forth the prestige of the Confederate cavalry was broken and its preeminence was gone forever.”

2nd Mass Inf: “After the long period of mismanagement, disorder, sacrifice, blood and tears, through which the Army of the Potomac had passed, the turning point of the war, at last, came in the brilliant conflict at Beverly’s Ford. It was a severe blow to the enemy’s cavalry at just the right moment.”

“On the 9th of June, 1863, the cavalry of Lee’s army was in its prime; at day’s end, it was never seen afterwards in equal glory.”

Union officer at Hooker HQ: The battle was an object lesson in defining a new strategical, offensive employment of cavalry supportive of our war objectives.

Confederate perspective on Brandy Station:

Eggleston: “At long last, the enemy finally learned how to ride their horses.”

2nd SC: “Feds fought hard...”

Grimsley, 6th VA Cav: “The moral effect of the battle was of great value to the Federal cavalry.” In the succeeding battles, “it was apparent to the Confederates that the Federals had gained in moral, as well as in numbers and discipline.”

Baylor, 12th VA Cav: “The enemy had gained confidence in themselves and this body of men, who prior to this time, had afforded us more amusement than work...they had now become foeman worthy of our steel.”

Noting that prior to Brandy Station, "their cavalry could not stand before us at all," General Stuart's engineering officer, Capt. William W. Blackford asserted, "It was not until the great battle on the 9th of June that they offered us any determined resistance. Blackford also enunciated a grim reality confronting Southerners when observing, "From that time forward, the difficulty of getting remounts acted disastrously upon the strength of our cavalry arm, not only in diminishing the numbers but in impairing the spirit of the men. We had no reserve strength to summon forth."

Southern lady in Warrenton to a 9th NY trooper after the battle unwittingly reveals an emerging resource inequity between blue and gray: She thought it "strange" that in "...every fight our folks say they kill all your men and yet there seems to be just as many of you as ever."

Stuart staff officer, "At Brandy Station, we woke to the fact that day that the Confederate cavalry was at last matched by the enemy and from that day on, the war wore a different aspect for both sides."

Jeb Stuart's adjutant, Maj. Henry B. McClellan wrote to a Union correspondent after the war, "The fact is," proclaimed Major McClellan, "that up to the 9th of June, 1863, the Confederate Cavalry did have its own way...But after that time we held our ground only by hard fighting."

Battle's Impact on General Jeb Stuart:

Col. Tom Munford: "Union cav achieved a decided advantage at BS." Munford also criticized his commander by noting Fed cavalry "stole a march" on Stuart.

Hampton: "Stuart managed the battle badly but I will not say so publicly."

Virginia trooper: The Yankee attack threw our offensive juggernaut off stride at the beginning of the campaign. The surprise attack offered an ill omen for the big campaign, and offered a bad harbinger for things to come."

Richmond newspaper: "It is a victory over which few would exult."

Savannah newspaper: "Stuart is so conceited he has gotten careless."

Richmond newspaper: “The surprise was a surprise to all, including our cavalry’s showy commander.”

Longstreet, critical of Stuart: “A surprise too well known as a surprise to stave it off on others.”

Richmond Enquirer: “The men feel sore that they should have been surprised...and they are anxious to retaliate in kind, at almost any hazard, in order that they may obliterate the unpleasant souvenir of bad military discipline.” (Whom do you think they were criticizing there?)

McLaws: “The enemy were not driven back (as Stuart says), but retired at their own leisure.”

D. S. Freeman writes that Jeb Stuart was “privately humiliated” over the surprise attack against his command at the Battle of Brandy Station and Stuart desired an opportunity—quickly—to exact revenge from the enemy. I concur with that assessment, and it can be asserted that for the rest of his life—and you know he just had a year to live—he constantly attempted to atone for his humiliation at Brandy Station. Indeed, after Brandy Station, the music died a bit for Jeb Stuart, his joyous laughter became somewhat muted.

And although Stuart correctly claimed a tactical victory at Brandy Station—after all, he held the field after the battle—it was however a dark and pyrrhic victory because at Brandy Station, Jeb Stuart was forced to confront several hard truths. First of all, his bold, skillful and energetic enemy brought on the largest battle that Jeb Stuart ever fought in his life. General Stuart did *not* select Brandy Station as his threshold battlefield; ominously, the bluecoats made that choice for him. But more substantively, Jeb also realized that along with the unencumbered prowess of the newly spirited Federal cavalry, bloody *attrition* was to become his relentless enemy. Men and horses lost at this stage in the war disappeared forever, and Stuart in fact lost plenty of irreplaceable resources at Brandy.

Think about this: On the morning of June 9, 1863, Jeb Stuart’s cavalry was unquestionably perched at its combat zenith. And on the evening of the *same day*, Stuart’s command suffered to witness the beginning of a plunging, rapid decline in assets, which inexorably degenerated their combat effectiveness for the succeeding twenty-two months of the war. The days of shining success for Confederate cavalry were forever over.

So now we arrive at the order of proof for why it is asserted the Battle of Brandy Station signaled the “*beginning of the end of the war.*” And by now, you know what they are:

1.) The Battle of Brandy Station, June 9, 1863, initiated the war’s most significant and consequential campaign, the largest military campaign in American history, and one wherein the conclusive results foreshadowed the outcome of the war.

2.) The Battle of Brandy Station heralded the emergence of Federal cavalry as an integrated offensive force materially contributive of the military objectives of the North’s premier army, the Army of the Potomac. In the space of one day’s passage, a new offensive spirit emerged in the cavalry arm and the National troopers would hereafter exhibit their numbers and superiority on the battlefield in an accelerating ratio. After Brandy Station, Confederate cavalry would reluctantly yield to a *new order in the offing.*

3.) The Battle of Brandy Station shattered, forevermore, the supposed invincibility of the cavalry division of the Army of Northern Virginia and its original commander.

4.) The Battle of Brandy Station directly resulted in serious losses—officers, men and horses—that could not be replaced by meager and ineffective Southern means and investment capital.

Now which of these aforementioned justifications for the claim that Brandy Station embodies the “*beginning of the end of the war*” do you think I find the most convincing?

The emergence, development and performance of Union cavalry exhibited as Brandy Station provides—to me at least—the most wonderful object lesson of the entire war. At Brandy Station, as one Federal trooper put it, “we shattered the traditions of the Old World and built them anew.” Another trooper explained, “Cavalry of course requires the greatest length of time of all military arms to acquire efficiency. The first two years of the Civil War may be considered as years of education and formation, in which its enduring characteristics were developed and fixed by adversity and trial.”

Another blue horseman: “But all the good in the United States Cavalry...was...owing to the teaching of their adversaries. And at Brandy Station, the pupils finally beat their masters.”

The Battle of Brandy Station proved such a bellwether for cavalry operations in the Civil War, in fact, that 1st Maine Cavalry veteran Bvt. Brig. Gen. Charles H. Smith wrote in 1885, "A higher value attaches to Brandy Station...than has ever been sounded in praises...The rebel cavalry had been in the ascendancy...but Brandy Station broke its spirit...It lost its prestige there and never regained it afterwards...*It was the beginning of the end of the war.*"

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