

The Man Who Shot

General Reynolds

Gettysburg Observance Recalls Story That Rebel Vet Told Lancastrian 50 Years Ago

BY JOSEPH T. KINGSTON

Autumn winds are whistling again across the battlefield at Gettysburg, and it is now 89 years since Abraham Lincoln came to that tiny Adams County community to immortalize its name in English literature. Eighty-nine years is a long time, but Gettysburg—somehow—always comes up with a new story, each year.

Like now, in this year of 1952. Last week we came across a story of Gettysburg we never had heard. Last week we learned the name of the man who shot and killed Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds, commander of the First Corps, Army of the Potomac—the general who was the son of the editor and publisher of the Lancaster Journal, and whose birthplace and childhood home still stands in downtown Lancaster.

Everyone, of course, knows that General Reynolds—first general staff officer on the field—was killed shortly after the beginning of the engagement on July 1, 1863. The details of the shooting, from the standpoint of the victim, have been recounted many times. In the so-called "Lee Museum" at Gettysburg is preserved the saddle from which the General was shot.

Chose Battleground

All Lancaster schoolchildren know how General Reynolds came galloping onto the field in that early morning of July, 89 years ago, took in at a glance the tactical situation and began issuing rapid-fire orders which, in effect, actually committed the entire Union Army to battle at this point.

They know that, less than two hours later, the General was shot out of his saddle by a Confederate sharpshooter, just after he had sent the famous "Iron Brigade" of Michigan Black Hats into McPherson's woods south of the Chambersburg Pike, a mile or so west of Gettysburg.

Is the name of the man who fired that historic shot unimportant? Perhaps it is; now it is, anyhow. But there is a story there, a story of human emotions. For that sharpshooter lived many years, and he knew what he had done.

Namesake Recalls Events

In 1948, Col. John Fulton Reynolds Scott, USA, Ret., addressed the Lancaster County Historical Society on the subject of what had befallen his great-uncle at the Battle of Gettysburg. In this address, he covered completely the events of July 1, 1863—from the sudden fatal shooting of General Reynolds to the disposition of the body. But he did not mention the name of the man who had freely admitted the deliberate execution of the noted Union general.

The man himself did not make known his part in General Reynolds' death until 1902, when he, himself, was an old man. But he had known, also by his own admission, that the "field officer" he shot to death in the misty morning of July 1, 1863—after three deliberate ranging shots—was Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds, Union Army corps commander.

He knew it only an hour after the fatal shot, when his outfit brought in some federal prisoners of the First Corps, and they dimly volunteered the information that General Reynolds had been killed by sharpshooter fire a short time before, in front of the same woods where they had been collected.

In November of 1902, the Lancaster Intelligencer printed a

story by Leander T. Hensel, of Quarryville. Mr. Hensel, of a well-known and reputable Lancaster County family, revealed in this story that he had talked with the ex-Confederate soldier who shot and killed Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds.

Saw Name On Register

Hensel had met the man on a business trip into North Carolina. The man had noticed his name and "Lancaster, Pa.," on the register of a small hotel in a small North Carolina town, and had "waited on him" to talk and explain something.

He was Benjamin C. Thorp, former sergeant and "first" sharpshooter with Capt. Henry Webb's company of the 55th North Carolina Infantry, in Davis' Brigade of A. P. Hill's Corps.

Many years after the war, he came to Leander Hensel in this piedmont town of North Carolina, far from his mountain land, with a humble tale, told in crude language. Hensel believed him, because there was no reason for him to lie. His story was not "old soldier boasting," it was told in an apologetic tone. He was, he said, "a Bible man."

And this was the story he told Leander Hensel of Quarryville, about how he—Ben Thorp—came to kill Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds of Lancaster:

After detailing how his company had been thrown out in skirmish line after it became evident that a "considerable" body of "militia" intended to contest the Confederate occupation of Gettysburg on that early morning of July 1, 1863, Thorp said he had been posted a short distance off the Casstown road, at the edge of an ancient orchard, several hundred yards to the rear of the intermittent firing along the skirmish line.

House Still Stands

"There was a stone house nearby, on a hill," Thorp said. (This, apparently, was the house later occupied by Gen. Robert E. Lee as his headquarters at Gettysburg. It stands at the crest of the ridge, along the Chambersburg road, and is now known as the Lee Museum.)

"We could see," he went on, "a mounted officer, believed to be a general, riding back and forth near the edge of the woods to the south of our position. He seemed to be ordering the positioning of artillery, which by this time was coming up from beyond the town.

"There was a cherry tree, standing on a level piece of land (where we were) and I remember a log of wood resting against the trunk of the tree. There were notches cut in this log, to make steps, as if those who had picked the cherries had used it to climb the tree. When we spotted the mounted officer, I climbed this tree, and began interval sharpshooter fire against the artillery crews who were unlimbering their guns.

"Captain Webb (who was killed two days later at Gettysburg, himself) was standing beneath the cherry tree, watching the action through field glasses. Suddenly he called up to me:

"'Look to your right, at the battery on the hill, there. There's a general; try him!'

At Long Range

"The battery, and the general, seemed to be about 400 yards beyond the skirmish firing on our front, and I asked Captain Webb to judge range for me. This was about 10 o'clock in the morning, I guessed.

"The captain looked closely again through his glasses, then told me the range was 1100 yards. I raised by sight to that elevation, and fired. 'I am too high,' I told Captain Webb, and lowered my sight to 900 yards. Fired again. 'You are yet too high,' said Captain Webb. 'Bring it down a trifle.'

"I then reset the sight for 800 yards, aimed carefully and fired the third time. Captain Webb shouted: 'Well done, Thorp; you got him.'

"Watching, I saw the officer reel and fall from his horse, into the arms of a soldier nearby. That evening, we had collected a lot of prisoners and they told us that a sharpshooter had killed General Reynolds, of the First Corps, with a shot apparently fired at extreme range.

"That is all I know about the matter."

Joined in Retreat

Ben Thorp went all through the battle and later, still carrying his heavy sharpshooter's rifle, joined the desolate retreat through the South Mountain passes—one of the few men of his company who lived to fight again in Virginia. After the war, he went back home to his own mountains and—like many of his fellow-veterans—refused for years to discuss the appalling slaughter he had witnessed.

But that incident at Gettysburg had remained clear in his memory, if only because General Reynolds was the only one of the probable hundreds of men he had shot and killed in action whose identity he knew.

Furthermore, he felt he KNEW Reynolds. Not personally, of course, but by notable reputation. Reynolds was the corps commander who had plunged deepest into the heavy Confederate lines on the crucial right flank at Fredericksburg, Va., in December 1862, nearly breaking through and actually planting his battle-flags among the smoking rebel artillery.

Held in Libby Prison

And it had been John Fulton Reynolds, who, as military governor of Fredericksburg, had so impressed the citizens of that historic town. They were all sorry, in a way, when Reynolds had been captured and spent a brief but bitter time in grim Libby Prison at Richmond. Hundreds in the rank and file of Lee's tough Army of Northern Virginia had a deep respect for General Reynolds.

Ben Thorp had been one of those men, and for this reason, he felt a sense of personal regret in the fact that he had been the instrument of Reynolds' death.

Anyhow, that's how he told the story to Leander Hensel, of Quarryville, more than 50 years ago.

Hensel, in turn, gave Thorp a fill-in on what had happened after that fatal shot; how the bullet had entered the general's neck, in the rear (apparently he had just turned his head to look to the rear, and the oncoming fresh infantry) and emerged above the eye. How he fell without a word, and how his body was carried to the rear, and then by wagon and railroad, brought by a circuitous route back to his old home at Lancaster.

Describes Cemetery

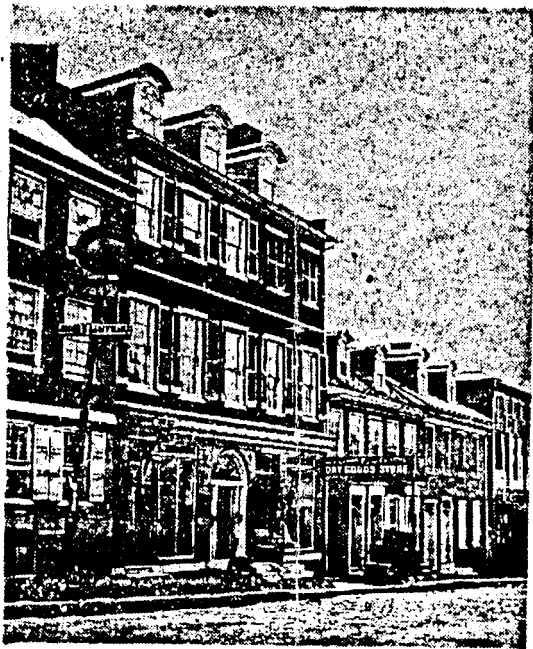
Hensel described the Lancaster Cemetery, and the Reynolds plot, where the general was buried among his family, and how each year, on Decoration Day, the big General John F. Reynolds Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, in Philadelphia, sent a huge floral spray and wreath to place on the grave.

Thorp had never returned to Gettysburg, and Hensel promised to send him pictures of the field, now studded with hundreds of monuments. The "cherry tree," he feared, was long gone, but the old "stone house" was still there, and photographs had been made of the spot where General Reynolds was killed. (We wonder if he ever got a photograph of Thorp?)

The details of this story, as it was passed on to the readers of the Lancaster Intelligencer, in November 1902, were first printed in the Quarryville Sun.



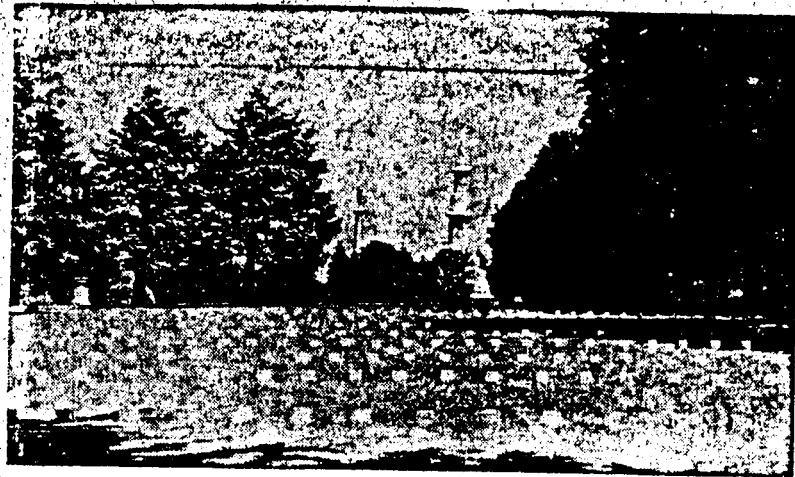
LANCASTER WORE a grim, sad face on July 4, 1863, when Maj. Gen. John Fulton Reynolds came home to rest in the Lancaster Cemetery, three days after he had been shot and killed by a sniper on the first day's field at Gettysburg. The tension in the faces of that day, more than 89 years past, reflects the anguished concern for other Lancaster soldiers involved in the titanic struggle at Gettysburg. (This is a composite of photos made at Gettysburg on Oct. 19, when the Western Maryland RR did the re-enactment of the Lincoln Address.)



BIRTHPLACE of Gen. John F. Reynolds as it looked 50 years ago, probably little changed from his time. Today the house (large structure in foreground) is basically the same, except for removal of shutters from windows and remodeling of ground-floor shops. Lancaster has honored Reynolds with a plaque in front of the house, at 44 W. King St., and by naming a junior high school and a street for him.



BATTLEGROUND chosen by Gen. Reynolds is today a national monument. Among its landmarks are the equestrian statue of the general shown at left, and the memorial to the Lincoln Gettysburg. Address shown at right center of photo above. Many Lancastrians have visited the spot where the general fell, dying, from his horse, but few of them ever knew the name of the sharpshooter in butternut grey who fired the fatal shot.



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