

# **Major General George G. Meade: “Victor of the Battle of Gettysburg”**

## **at the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Birth (1815 - 2015)**

George Gordon Meade (Dec. 31, 1815 - Nov. 6, 1872), was one of the most important commanders of United States forces during the American Civil War. He commanded the Army of the Potomac, the main Federal army in the Eastern Theater of war, from June 1863 to the end of the war in April 1865, serving longer than any other commander. He is perhaps best known for his crucial victory in the Battle of Gettysburg, which was a major turning point in history. This victory was accomplished after only a few days after assuming command of the Army by order of President Lincoln.

### **Early Life and War Service**

Meade was born in Cadiz, Spain, and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1835. He served with distinction as an army engineering officer in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and forged an eminently respectable record prior to the Civil War as an engineer, principally for his work in charge of lighthouse construction and surveying the Great Lakes. In 1840 he married Margaretta Sergeant, the daughter of a prominent Pennsylvania politician, with whom he had seven children.

As a major architect of victory in the American Civil War, his dedicated service in the U.S. Army over a career of over 35 years, his eminent contributions to the development of the nation and his brilliant career as a civil engineer, George G. Meade occupies an exalted position in the pantheon of American Heroes. Perhaps, most admired for his Victory over Rebellion at Gettysburg, he did command troops at all levels on the battlefields and was almost fatally wounded at the Battle of Glendale, Va. But Meade returned to his troops, even though suffering the extreme effects of his wounds and was plagued by serious ailments which ultimately caused his premature death at only 56 years while still serving his country in the army.

His legacy remains strong until the present day, and General Meade is remembered by a number of memorials and sites named for him throughout the nation, including one of the most important Army installations today - Fort George Gordon Meade outside Washington D.C.

The General Meade Society was founded in Philadelphia 20 years ago to commemorate his service and promote his memory.

Meade rests among his family, friends and veterans in historic Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia.

**George Gordon Meade was one of the architects of the Union victory over Rebellion in the American Civil War.** He took part in all the major actions of the Eastern Theater of operations and led the Union Army of the Potomac to victory at Gettysburg in July 1863. He commanded the Army of the Potomac longer than any other general, and did much to bring General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia to surrender at Appomattox. Meade was ranked third in seniority in the U.S. Army by Grant after the Civil War, and remained on active duty until his death in 1872 at the age of 56, caused ultimately by his severe wounds suffered at the "Battle of Glendale" in 1862. He is buried in quiet and humble rest in his home city of Philadelphia at Laurel Hill Cemetery.

When one lists the great generals of the Civil War, the usual names that appear are Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Jackson. Yet, there is another general who belongs on that list. He led the Union army at the Battle of Gettysburg, the biggest and bloodiest battle of the war, thus preserving the Union when threatened. He continued in command of the Army of the Potomac until Lee's surrender and continued to serve in the U.S. Army until his untimely death caused by severe wounds in battle in 1872. General Meade belongs in the pantheon of great American military heroes.

### **Early Years**

Although born in Spain in 1815, Meade was an American through and through. Meade's father was serving in Spain as U.S. Consul at the time. His family moved back to Philadelphia and the United States shortly after his birth. In 1831, Meade entered the U.S. military academy at West Point, from which he graduated in 1835. While he served in the artillery during actions against the Seminoles in Florida in the 1830s, Meade left the army honorably after one year of obligatory service to pursue a career as a civil engineer. After working as surveyor for a railroad and as an assistant engineer with the U.S. Coastal Survey, he rejoined the army as an officer in the elite U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers in 1842.

During the Mexican War, Meade saw active service while working on the staff of several different generals. After his honorable war service in Mexico, he returned to his work as an engineer, focusing primarily on lighthouses and coastal surveying.

### **Civil War Career**

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Meade returned voluntarily to active war service. There was a desperate need for men with military experience, and Meade fit the mold perfectly. In late August, 1861 he was promoted to brigadier general and given command of a brigade in the Pennsylvania Reserves Division, stationed first in the defenses of Washington. In 1862, his brigade was transferred to the **Union Army of the Potomac**, one of the grand fighting forces of the war. Meade took part in Major General George McClellan's **Peninsula Campaign** where, on June 30, at the Battle of Glendale, he was severely wounded.

### **Union General George Gordon Meade**

After recuperating for several weeks, Meade returned to service just in time for the **Second Battle of Bull Run**. Following the failure of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign, in the last week of August 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee moved against the Union Army commanded by Major General John Pope. Meade's brigade had been transferred to Pope's command, and thus, he took part in the battle on August 28, 29, and 30. Despite Meade's bravery and excellent service, **Second Bull Run** was a resounding defeat for Federal forces.

In September 1862, Lee began moving his **Army of Northern Virginia** north into Maryland, beginning the Maryland Campaign. Union forces were placed under the command of McClellan once again, and they were sent west to stop Lee. In McClellan's reorganized Army of the Potomac, Meade was promoted to division commander in the First Corps.

After only a few days in command of the Pennsylvania Reserves, during the **Battle of Antietam** on September 17, 1862, the bloodiest single day of the war, Meade was ordered to assume command of the First Corps itself when Major General Joseph Hooker was wounded. Lee's forces were defeated at Antietam and forced back into Virginia. Meade performed well in Maryland, meriting him further notice as a rising star in the army.

Several weeks later, the bloodshed in the East continued when the Army of the Potomac, now under the command of Major General Ambrose Burnside, attacking Lee's forces at Fredericksburg, Virginia. The **Battle of Fredericksburg** was another Confederate victory, and it led to Burnside's dismissal. However, because of his service outstanding service at Fredericksburg, Meade was promoted to the rank of major general. When Joseph Hooker took Burnside's place in command of the army in January 1863, Meade was elevated once again. He took command of the Federal Fifth Corps, which he led at the **Battle of Chancellorsville** in May 1863. The Fifth Corps played a crucial role in the Union defense at Chancellorsville, where Lee soundly defeated Hooker in one of the great Confederate victories of the war.

### **Gettysburg**

Following Chancellorsville, Lee decided to invade the north once again. In June 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia crossed into Maryland and headed for Pennsylvania. Hooker led the Army of the Potomac in pursuit, but he would not lead the army into the upcoming battle. On June 28, 1863, Hooker was relieved of command, and Meade was ordered to assume command at the most critical moment in the war. Meade was now commander of the Army of the Potomac. With Lee's army in Pennsylvania, Meade was expected to defeat Lee and save the Union. It was a moment of crisis for the Union.

On July 1, 1863, Union cavalry and infantry were attacked by Confederate forces just west of **Gettysburg, Pennsylvania**. By nightfall, they had been driven through the town and held high ground south of Gettysburg. Late that evening, Meade arrived on the field and began making preparations to fight the following day. Both Meade and Lee were concentrating their forces at Gettysburg, making it clear that the battle would only escalate. As July 2, 1863 dawned, Union forces were arrayed in the position of a fishhook as laid out by General Meade. That afternoon, Lee launched a major assault on both ends of the Federal line. Throughout the day, Meade had his hands full. He was continuously sending troops to the part of his line threatened most by assault. When a major breakthrough would occur, Meade shifted troops from one flank to the other. Thanks to these efforts, as night fell on July 2, Union forces had successfully blunted and stopped Lee.

The Confederate commander was not done, however. On July 3, Lee launched 'Pickett's Charge,' one of the most famous frontal attacks of the war. It was a massive infantry assault that attempted to break the center of the Union line. Because of Meade's defensive position, and tenacity of the Union defense, the Confederates were repulsed and suffered devastating losses. With the repulse of the charge, Lee was defeated at Gettysburg.

Meade had accomplished a remarkable achievement. In a matter of just a few days, he had taken command of the Army of the Potomac, 90,000 strong, and led it to victory at the **Battle of Gettysburg**, the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought in North America. Over 50,000 men fell as casualties in that 3-day fight. Yet, Meade was undeservedly criticized after Gettysburg not pursuing Lee after his defeat, despite the fact, that Meade had launched a massive pursuit that was able to accost Lee at the Potomac river crossing near Hagerstown, Maryland. Despite Meade's efforts, Lee was able skillfully to escape back into Virginia, and the war continued.

### **Post-Gettysburg Command**

Despite some criticism from disgruntled officers, newspapers and politicians, Meade remained in command of the Army of the Potomac through the end of the war. Many seem to forget this fact, however. In March 1864, Ulysses S. Grant was promoted to lieutenant general and given command of all Union armies. Grant came to the Eastern Theater to fight against Lee in Virginia, causing many to believe he would replace Meade. Instead, Grant retained Meade in command, giving him specific orders.

Essentially, this lessened Meade's role in the 1864 fighting. That year, Grant used Meade's Army of the Potomac to bludgeon Lee in Virginia. In May and June, during the **Overland Campaign**, the two armies met in a series of fierce and bloody battles, losing over 80,000 casualties combined in a few weeks time. By mid-summer, the two armies settled into a siege at Petersburg, just south of the Confederate capital. The long **Petersburg Campaign** lasted into April 1865, when Grant and Meade finally broke through Confederate lines. Richmond soon fell, and on April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House. While Grant is credited with these victories, they would not have been possible without Meade's effective handling of the Army of the Potomac.

### **Meade's Legacy**

On May 23, 1865, Meade led the Army of the Potomac through the streets of Washington in the Grand Review. Thousands came to cheer the army and its commander to celebrate the end of the Civil War. Meade lived for several years after the war, dying in 1872 from complications of his old war wounds. He was buried in Philadelphia. While he was overshadowed by Grant in the last year of the war, Meade is still remembered today for his heroic leadership at Gettysburg, one of the most important Union victories of the war.