

**THE FIRST DAY OF THE BATTLE OF
GETTYSBURG: AN ADDRESS
DELIVERED BEFORE THE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA, ON
THE 8TH OF MARCH, 1880**

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The First Day of the Battle of Gettysburg: An Address Delivered Before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, on the 8th of March, 1880 by Chapman Biddle

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BY
CHAPMAN BIDDLE,

(Formerly Colonel of the One Hundred and Twenty-First Pennsylvania Volunteers.)



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THE FIRST DAY

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BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG.

THE failure of Hooker in the early part of the month of May of the year 1863 at Chancellorsville, following within a few short months the repulse of the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg, produced a profoundly painful impression on the public mind in the Northern States. For a second time it became necessary for the Army of the Potomac to recross the Rappahannock, and to seek security on the commanding heights of Stafford, while it prepared itself for a renewal of the contest which every lover of the Union most earnestly hoped might lead to favorable results. Notwithstanding his recent and signal success, Lee fully realized the fact that it had been achieved, to use the language of Longstreet, "at such a terrible sacrifice that half a dozen such victories would have ruined" him; or as Lee himself subsequently stated in conversation to Major Seddon, "At Chancellorsville we gained another victory; our people were wild with delight. I, on the contrary, was more depressed than after Fredericksburg; our loss was severe, and again we had gained not an inch of ground, and the enemy could not be pursued." . . . "I considered the problem in every possible phase, and to my mind it resolved itself into the choice of one of two things,—either to retire on Richmond and stand a siege, which must ultimately have ended in surrender, or to invade Pennsylvania. I chose the latter." For in his judgment sound military policy required that he should not only assume the aggressive, but that he should transfer the theatre of the war to the north of the Potomac, where the country had been almost entirely exempt from its devastation and horrors.

Other considerations, too, of even greater importance were intimately connected with the military ones. The material resources of the South had already suffered greatly, and were scarcely adequate to the intermittent demands which had been, and which were still likely to be, made upon them if the struggle were much longer protracted, and a successful termination of the war on their part seemed to the reflecting portion of the Southern people to be somewhat problematical without either the support or the countenance of England and France. For this latter object the recognition of the independence of the Confederacy was vital, but it had from one cause or other, however, been postponed from time to time, chiefly, as was commonly supposed, by the apprehension of the governments of those countries of rashly committing themselves to an act which might in the future involve them in international complications with the United States of a serious nature. A successful invasion of the North, however, would be succeeded by consequences which the Cabinet of Richmond not unreasonably believed would lead to the realization of their earnest desires. Hence under these combined political and military considerations a plan of campaign was prepared without delay and speedily put in execution. In his first or preliminary official report of the battle of Gettysburg, General Lee thus outlines his views upon the subject: "The corresponding movements on the part of the enemy, to which those contemplated by us would probably give rise, might offer a fair opportunity to strike a blow at the army" of General Hooker,—that in any event that army would be compelled to leave Virginia, that the enemy's plan of campaign be broken up, and that "in addition to these advantages it was hoped that other valuable results might be attained by military success." As one of these other results it has been stated with a certain degree of positiveness in some of the Southern newspapers that it was part of Lee's purpose to fire and in this manner destroy the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania. But be this as it may, Lee in his final report, of January, 1864, of the Pennsylvania campaign, etc., makes no allusion to any anticipated additional valuable results. General Early, who has since, with a number of others, discussed the subject of the propriety of the invasion, considers that it was, at the time it was undertaken, "a wise and judicious movement, notwithstanding the fate that attended it."¹

The first step towards the execution of the new plan was the reorganization of the Army of Northern Virginia, which was then formed into three *corps d'armée*, each under the command of a lieutenant-gen-

¹ Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. iv. p. 56.

eral. Longstreet was assigned to the first corps, composed of the divisions of McLaws, Pickett, and Hood; the second, comprising the divisions of Early, Rodes, and Johnson, was placed under the command of Ewell, in accordance with a request made by Stonewall Jackson, on his death-bed, out of solicitude for the welfare of his veterans;¹ and the third, whose divisions were under Anderson, Heth, and Pender, was assigned to A. P. Hill. The cavalry, which had also been strengthened by several new brigades from the South, was formed into a separate corps of three divisions, commanded by Hampton, Fitz-Hugh Lee, and William H. F. Lee.² Major Von Borecke, a Prussian officer, who was the assistant adjutant and inspector-general of General J. E. B. Stuart, in referring to this body of cavalry, remarks that "the magnificent spectacle of so many thousand troopers splendidly mounted made the heart swell with pride, and impressed one with the conviction that nothing could resist the attack of such a body of troops."³ In the opinion of General Lee's military secretary, the recent victories of the Confederate army, "with the care bestowed on its reorganization, equipment, and discipline," rendered "its spirit and efficiency unsurpassed by any army of modern times."⁴

Longstreet, one of Lee's best lieutenants, and on whom great reliance was placed, doubted, however, from the first the wisdom of the proposed invasion from a military point of view, and urged upon his chief that the campaign could only be brought to a successful issue provided it were made "offensive in strategy, but defensive in tactics." Indeed, he went so far as to present, as a substitute, an entirely different plan, one which contemplated "the idea of a Western forward movement." However just or otherwise Longstreet's views may have been, it is not important now to discuss them, though it may be mentioned that Early has declared Longstreet's plan of a tactical defense to be "a simple absurdity."⁵ At all events, Lee remained fixed in and acted upon his opinion, and when recurring to the subject a short time before Grant crossed the Rapidan, in the spring of 1864, said to General Heth, in the course of conversation, "If I could do so,—unfortunately I cannot,—I would again cross the Potomac and invade Pennsylvania. I believe it to be our true policy notwithstanding the failure of last year. An invasion of the enemy's country breaks up all of his pre-conceived plans, relieves our country of his presence, and we subsist

¹ Von Borecke, p. 399.

² *Idem*, p. 399.

³ *Idem*, p. 402.

⁴ Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. iv, p. 119.

⁵ *Idem*, vol. iv, p. 281, note.

while there on his resources. The question of *food for this army* gives me more trouble and uneasiness than *everything else combined*; the absence of the army from Virginia gives our people an opportunity to collect supplies ahead. The legitimate fruits of a victory if gained in Pennsylvania could be more readily reaped than on our own soil. We would have been in a few days' march of Philadelphia, and the occupation of that city would have given us peace."¹

When the reorganization of the army and other preliminaries had been completed, Lee, on the 3d of June, commenced his Northern movement. The division of McLaws marching out of Fredericksburg for Culpepper Court-House, followed by Ewell's corps on the 4th and 5th; Hood's division and Stuart's cavalry moving at the same time. So that by the 8th of that month two of the corps and Stuart's cavalry had concentrated at Culpepper Court-House.

Early in June, Hooker had obtained information that Lee was gradually withdrawing his forces from Fredericksburg in the direction of Culpepper Court-House. To test the accuracy of this intelligence, which, if true, was most important in its relation to the campaign then about opening, he directed a reconnoissance in force to be made by the cavalry, supported by two small brigades of infantry. The result of this reconnoissance, which, if its objects are kept in view, was altogether favorable, has not only been magnified into a severe repulse on the part of the Union forces by General Lee, but Longstreet has even censured Lee for failing to pursue his advantage by hurling the heavy Confederate corps then at Culpepper Court-House upon the Federal detachment. Assuredly the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac have no reason to regret the issue of the engagement at Beverly Ford, or, as it is sometimes termed, that of Brandy Station. It was the first occasion when as a body it went into action, and whilst perhaps, if the divisions of Buford and Gregg had been connected from the first, instead of having been separated by an interval of five or six miles, when crossing the Rappahannock on the 9th of June at Beverly and Kelly's Fords, still greater results might have been achieved, yet their work was both faithfully and well done. Stuart's headquarters were captured, and from them was supplied information which enabled Hooker to keep pace with the invading army; Stuart's march was thereby delayed; the direction of Lee's army was changed and prevented from attempting to cross the Potomac near Washington, and Stuart held in check by the subsequent brilliant engagements of Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville,

¹ Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. iv. p. 153.

on the 17th, 19th, and 21st days of June, until the Union army had moved into Maryland. At Upperville, "very many charges were made and the sabre used freely, but always with great advantage to"¹ the Federal troops. The valuable services rendered by the cavalry will again appear when the events connected with the great battle of Gettysburg are brought to notice.

Quick to comprehend the significance of the intelligence thus imparted to him by the reconnoissance, Hooker became at once convinced that the movement northward on the part of Lee was the commencement of a real campaign, and, as a preparatory measure, placed General Reynolds, on the 12th of June, in command of the right wing of the army, consisting of his own (the First), the Third, and the Eleventh Corps, which, after it faced about and commenced its northward march, became the left wing, together with the cavalry, directing him to proceed along the line of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad to Manassas. The remaining four corps of the Federal army followed on the succeeding day. As soon as it was known to Hill that Hooker had withdrawn his forces from the heights in front of Fredericksburg, the former commenced his march in the direction of Ewell, who, under his instructions, had proceeded down the Valley of Virginia. Before Ewell reached the Potomac, Lee notified Stuart that the former would cross that river on a certain day and at a certain point, that Hill was to follow, and that Longstreet would hold the gaps in the mountains and protect the crossing of those two corps. After Hill had crossed Longstreet was to vacate the gaps and follow Hill. When this had been accomplished Stuart was to seize the gaps and protect Longstreet's crossing; later he was to throw himself on the right flank of the army, watch the enemy, furnish information, and *collect supplies*. To cover the two corps in their march through the valley, Longstreet left Culpepper Court-House on the 15th, pursuing the route along the easterly side of the Blue Ridge, occupying the gaps as occasion required, whilst Stuart, under his discretionary powers from Lee, moved in front and on the right flank of Longstreet. Meanwhile, Hooker, closely watching the movements of his adversary, skillfully manœuvred so as to guard the approaches to Washington, keeping himself at the same time in a position instantly to assail Lee whenever a fitting opportunity might offer. The intended act of invasion, however, in a dispatch of the 15th to the President, Hooker characterized as one of desperation on the part of Lee, "no matter in what force he moves."

¹ Report on the Conduct of the War, Part 1., p. 280.

After one or two affairs in the valley, by which Milroy was brushed away, the First and Third Corps of the Confederate army, on reaching the Potomac, crossed it, the former at Williamsport and the latter at Shepherdstown, and uniting at Hagerstown, from there marched up the Cumberland Valley to Chambersburg, arriving at the latter place on the evening of the 27th. Ewell had entered Pennsylvania on the 22d with two of his divisions, preceded by Jenkins's cavalry, which numbered, according to General Stuart's estimate, about three thousand eight hundred¹ (but which number Fitz-Hugh Lee regards as a misprint for sixteen hundred²), and from Chambersburg had sent one of his divisions, that under the command of General Early, through Gettysburg to York, and the other to Carlisle. On the 26th of June, Early entered Gettysburg with five thousand infantry and a squadron of cavalry, and whilst there endeavored, in execution of one of Lee's general objects, to levy contributions on the town. His requisition for supplies, including shoes, amounted in the aggregate to about six thousand dollars. To this, however, the town was altogether unable to respond, and being satisfied that such was the fact he made no effort to enforce his demand. The next day he resumed his march to Hanover Junction and York, intending to advance from the latter place upon Harrisburg, in obedience to orders which had been issued upon the supposition that Hooker was still on the other side of the Potomac. Early's advance upon Harrisburg was, however, arrested in consequence of intelligence having been received by General Lee on the night of the 28th, from a scout, to the effect that the Federal army had not only crossed the Potomac, but that the head of the column was then at Frederick City. The communications of the Confederate forces being thus threatened, it became, in Lee's opinion, absolutely necessary—and it may be in consequence of a suggestion from Longstreet that the order was given—to concentrate the army to the east of the mountains, and thereby check any farther movement on the part of Hooker to the west.

Throughout his entire march the vigilance of Hooker had been unceasing, so that at the moment he became convinced that his adversary had either crossed or was about to cross the Potomac he commenced the passage of the river some thirty-five or forty miles below Shepherdstown, on the 25th and 26th, at Edward's Ferry. Without at all intending to enter into a discussion of Hooker's plan of campaign after his army reached Maryland, it is nevertheless proper to refer briefly to its leading features, which contemplated confining the enemy to a single

¹ Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. ii. p. 76.

² *Idem*, vol. v. p. 165.