

The Battle of Old Men and Young Boys

This article is one of a series of articles developed under the editorship of LTC (Ret.) John R. Kennedy, III as part of Preservation Petersburg's Peter Jones Trading Station Initiative, 2012-14. Many of the articles served as source materials for the "Petersburg Moments in Time" broadcast series produced by Professor Dan Roberts.

On May 5, 1864, Union Major General Benjamin F. Butler landed his 30,000-man Army of the James at Bermuda Hundred, commencing what became known as the Bermuda Hundred Campaign. After about four weeks of fighting in Chesterfield County, Butler's spies indicated in early June that only the 7th North Carolina Cavalry Regiment, 300 members of the 7th Confederate Cavalry Regiment, and a "few pieces of artillery" remained in Petersburg. Butler subsequently devised a plan that called for three brigades, two infantry and one cavalry, to assault Petersburg. Major General Quincy A. Gillmore, Commander of the X Corps in the Army of the James, expressed his interest in commanding this infantry-cavalry attack. Against his better judgment, Butler was "unwilling to decline an offer to have the expedition led by an officer" of Gillmore's rank and experience. Consequently, six days before the Army of the Potomac's initial attack on Petersburg's outer defenses on June 15, 1864, which led to the long siege of Petersburg, Butler's Army of the James attempted to seize the city.

The plan called for Gillmore's two infantry brigades to penetrate the lightly-held defenses of Petersburg east of the city and then to destroy the bridges over the Appomattox River. Following the infantry, Brigadier General August Valentine Kautz's cavalry brigade was to move to the Jerusalem Plank Road south of Petersburg and then attack northwest into the city along this avenue of approach. If successful, Kautz then was to head south along the Petersburg & Weldon Railroad destroying the tracks. His command contained just under 1,300 soldiers. He organized his force into two subordinate commands, with one comprising the 11th and 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiments under Colonel Samuel T. Spear and the other consisting of the 1st District of Columbia Cavalry Regiment and Lieutenant Peter Morton's two guns under Lieutenant Colonel Everton J. Conger.

The morning of June 9 dawned like any other late spring morning in the city of Petersburg. Confederate Brigadier General Henry A. Wise, a former governor of Virginia,

commanded the First Military District, Department of North Carolina and South Virginia, which included the defenses of Petersburg. Wise's command consisted of approximately 1,200 soldiers, including infantry, artillery, and cavalry. By 1864, two battalions of reserves (known as second-class militia) within Petersburg had been formed, consisting of those men who were exempt from the draft due either because they were too old or too young or because they possessed skills needed by the war effort. Militiamen in these battalions were from 45 to 55 years old or 16 to 18 years old. Major Fletcher H. Archer, a veteran of the Mexican War, commanded one of these battalions. The oldest soldier in Archer's Battalion was 61-year old William C. Banister, who was the father of six children. He was at his bank office on the morning of June 9.

The 7th Confederate Cavalry, posted along the City Point and Broadway roads (which led to present-day Hopewell), reported the advance of Federal troops at about 8:30 a.m. When General Wise heard this report, he ordered the bells to ring in Petersburg. This was the signal for the Virginia Reserves in Petersburg to move to the defensive lines around the city. Archer's Battalion of approximately 125 men moved to Batteries 27 and 28, which were astride the Jerusalem Plank Road. When Brigadier General Raleigh E. Colston heard the bells, he immediately reported to Wise's headquarters offering his services. Colston had no official posting, so Wise placed him in temporary command of the city while he attempted to obtain reinforcements. Wise told Colston to move to Battery 16 and hold it "at any hazard" and to "hold out till I come back, or all is lost." The time was 9:30 a.m.

Gillmore's two Union infantry brigades moved on Confederate Batteries 4 and 5 in the Dimmock Line. This line consisted of 55 batteries that surrounded Petersburg on the east, south, and west. The two Union infantry brigade commanders believed that an assault on Batteries 4 and 5 across the meadow would mean certain death because of the strong Confederate artillery inside those batteries. Meanwhile, Kautz marched south on roads that were approximately four miles east of the Confederate defenses around Petersburg. By 11 a.m., Kautz finally turned his command to the northwest on the Jerusalem Plank Road headed directly for Archer's Battalion.

Archer's men dutifully manned the defenses at Battery 27 and toward Battery 28, but the militiamen lacked uniforms, bayonets, and modern weapons. In fact, Archer's unit was alone, without supporting Confederate units on either flank. At about the time one of the Union infantry brigades was ordered to retreat, the vanguard of Kautz's cavalymen approached Batteries 25 to 29. "Secession had suddenly come to mean 125 ill-prepared old men and boys huddled behind a decaying earthwork awaiting the approach of 1,300 Federal soldiers armed with the most modern repeating weapons." The Commander of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry observed the Confederate defenses and immediately ordered a cavalry charge. It was quickly repelled by a volley of fire from Archer's men. Informed by Wise that Union forces were moving along the Jerusalem Plank Road at about noon, Colston moved from Battery 16 to 27, picking up a cannon from Captain Nathaniel A. Sturdivant's Battery en route.

General Colston arrived at Battery 27 soon after the first charge and immediately took command from Archer, who was not pleased but dutifully accepted Colston's command. Archer had served under Colston in 1862. Colston approved of Archer's defensive preparations, which included an overturned wagon with a rail fence across the road in front of the earthworks. Kautz's 12-pound mountain howitzers and two 3-inch rifles began shelling the Confederate defenders of Batteries 27 and 28. Colston sent a message to Wise that Archer's Battalion could not hold out much longer. Colston recognized that with every minute these citizen-soldiers held back the Federal cavalymen, "the rescue or capture" of Petersburg hung in the balance. Eventually, the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry turned the left flank of the Confederate position and occupied Battery 26, which enabled the cavalymen to fire into the left flank of the heavily outnumbered defenders. Archer's defenders killed and wounded a number of Kautz's attackers, but the Union cavalymen were firing on them from three sides and "only a narrow path leading through an abrupt ravine offered a way of escape." At the last moment, Colston ordered the command to fall back. Banker John Banister did not hear the command to retreat (he was hard of hearing), and was shot in the head and died immediately. Those who made their escape through the ravine reassembled on Reservoir Hill. None of the high-level Confederate leadership—President Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War James A. Seddon, General Braxton Bragg, or General Robert E. Lee-- thought that at 1:30 p.m. "a strong Federal force would be making its way into Petersburg seemingly unopposed, yet that was exactly what was happening."

Thankfully for the Confederate cause, Wise did persuade General Pierre G.T. Beauregard to hurry reinforcements to Petersburg. Beauregard sent the Petersburg Artillery Battery and the 4th North Carolina Cavalry Regiment, both under the command of Brigadier General James Dearing, from the Howlett Line defenses in Bermuda Hundred to Petersburg. The 4th North Carolina Cavalry was seven miles away at Dunn's farm when it received its order to move to Petersburg. As Captain Edward Graham, Commander of the Petersburg Artillery, was moving his four guns at a gallop through Petersburg, a lady he knew walked slowly across the street. He yelled, "Damn the women! Run over them if they don't get out of the way." (Local artist Henry Kidd painted this scene in 1991, entitled "Thunder in the Streets.") Graham reached Reservoir Hill and unlimbered his guns, just as the lead elements of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry moved downhill on New Road (now named after Captain Graham) toward Lieutenant's Run and Reservoir Hill beyond. By this time, at about 2:30 p.m., Dearing's cavalry had crossed the Appomattox River and reinforced Graham's battery and the militiamen.

When Graham's first two guns opened fire, Federal cavalrymen were only 100 yards from the gunners. Dearing ordered Lieutenant Colonel John L. Cantwell to charge the advancing Federals with a portion of the 4th North Carolina Cavalry. Combined with Graham's artillery fire Cantwell's charge forced the Union cavalrymen to retreat rapidly down the hill toward Lieutenant's Run. As Spear and his cavalry regiment retired, he met Kautz. Based on Spear's report that there were Confederate artillery and cavalry reinforcements in Petersburg, Kautz ordered his command to retreat.

After this momentous fight saved Petersburg, there were kudos all around. Wise and Colston praised Archer and his men, and Colston wrote in his After Action Report that the "salvation of the city of Petersburg is undoubtedly due in the first place to the brave military of the city; for, had they retreated five or ten minutes sooner, the artillery, which was first to check the enemy's advance, instead of meeting them at the heights, on the south side of the city, would have been intercepted before they could cross the bridge, and the city would probably have remained in enemy's hands." Before the sun set on Petersburg that momentous June 9, however, the families of those who fought had to deal with their losses. Of the 125 militiamen and five

artillerymen at Rives's farm (near Battery 27), 75 became casualties: 15 killed, 18 wounded, and 42 captured. When Mrs. Banister saw the corpse of her husband in a wagon at her front gate, she "wept in uncontrollable grief." On the following day, Godfrey Strauble, professor of French at the Petersburg Female Academy, and George B. Jones, a druggist and father of six, were buried. The prisoners of war from Archer's Battalion were taken to the Union prisoner of war camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. On June 16, Archer's Battalion again fought against much larger Union forces seeking to seize Petersburg, and suffered three fatalities, 14 wounded (including Archer), and the loss of several prisoners. Despite the 9 ½-month siege of Petersburg from June 15, 1864 to April 3, 1865, "the Cockade City would remember June 9, 1864 as its most tragic day."

On May 30, 1866, the newly formed Ladies Memorial Association of Petersburg resolved that the 9th of June should be commemorated annually "and that the citizens generally be requested to unite in this holy and grateful task." Ten days later, on June 9, 1866, the businesses in the city closed and thousands of Petersburg citizens turned out with bouquets and wreaths of flowers to decorate the graves of the Confederate dead in an antecedent of Memorial Day. In 1909, a stone was emplaced on the site of Battery 27 with the inscription:

THIS STONE MARKS THE SPOT WHERE
THE OLD MEN AND BOYS OF PETERS-
BURG UNDER GEN. R.E. COLSTON AND
COL. F.H. ARCHER
125 STRONG
ON JUNE 9TH, 1864
DISTINGUISHED THEMSELVES IN A
FIGHT WITH 1300 FEDERAL CAVALRY
UNDER GEN. KAUTZ, GAINING TIME FOR
THE DEFEAT OF THE EXPEDITION

This marker stands on the west side of South Crater Road, north of the intersection with South Sycamore Street.