

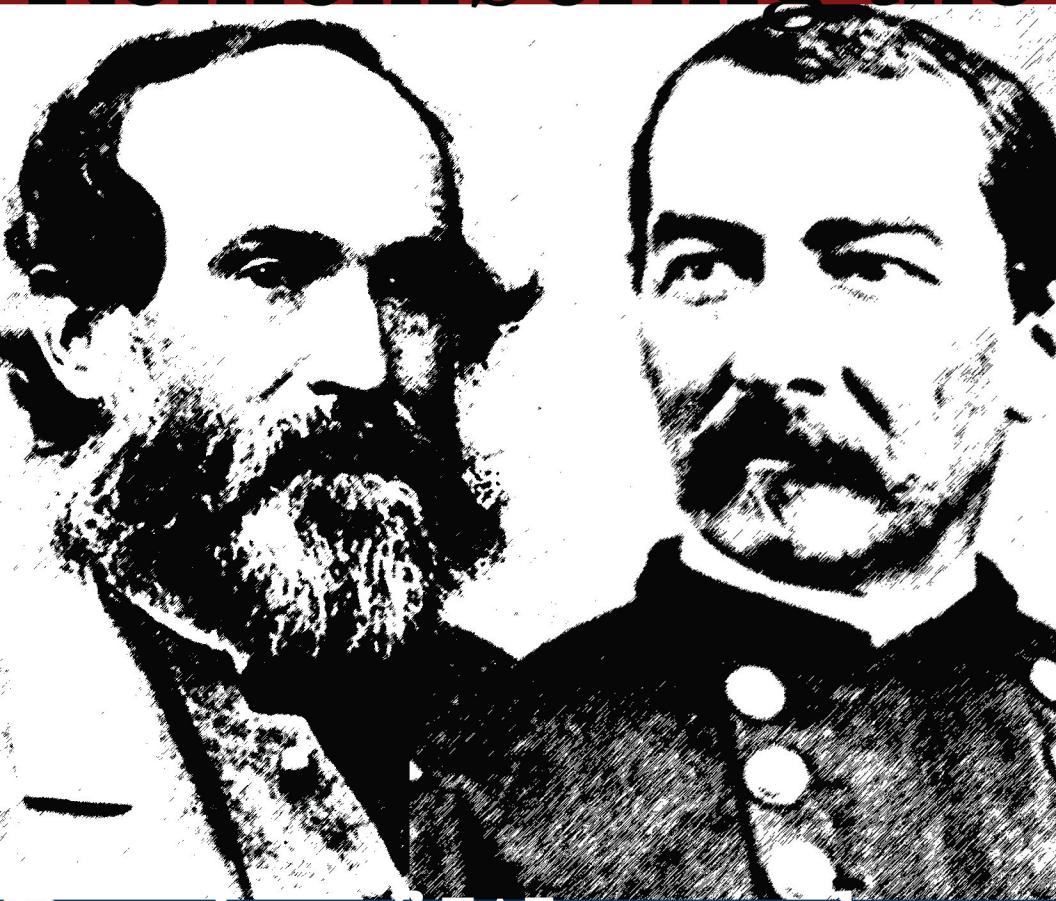
*Remembering the Battle of Waynesboro*

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# Remembering the



# Battle of Waynesboro

*By Richard G. Williams, Jr.*



**Waynesboro  
Heritage Foundation**  
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#### *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

*Richard G. Williams, Jr. is an author who specializes in the Civil War. He has written two books and dozens of articles on the subject and is a regular contributor to the Washington Times' Military History column. A native of Waynesboro, VA, he is the descendant of three Confederate soldiers and makes his home in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.*

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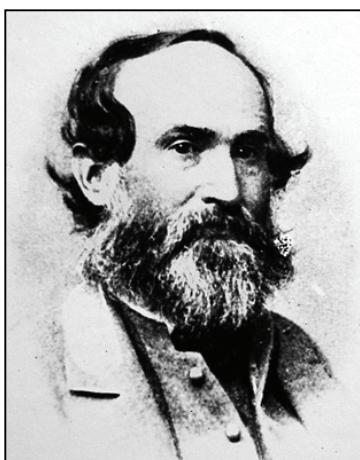
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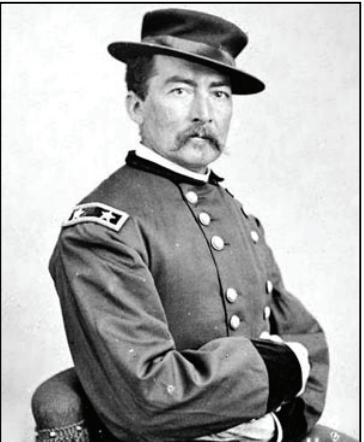
*By Richard G. Williams, Jr.*

In 1947, a 12-year old boy sat at a desk in a bedroom of his grandfather's home. There he sketched a pencil drawing of his hero—General Robert E. Lee. It is an excellent profile likeness of the good General; especially considering it was drawn by a 12-year old. This home is located in the neighborhood now known as the "Tree Streets"—on Locust Avenue. Here, between what is now Pine and Cherry Avenues the last battle of the War Between the States in the Shenandoah Valley was fought. The young boy could gaze out his second story bedroom window and look up the hill from his home where Confederate forces faced overwhelming odds 82 years earlier. On this battlefield, Southern boys and men fought and died for what many of them had

finally come to realize was a lost cause. Northern boys and men fought and died for what they hoped would soon be over. Though this was not a major battle, the sacrifices of the brave men who fought here—North and South—should not be forgotten. Some well-known names were involved in the conflict.

Confederate Lt. General Jubal Anderson Early's (*left*)

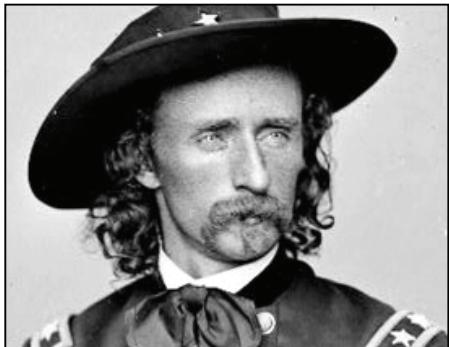




army was now but a shell of what it once was. Early would be facing an old adversary who was despised by Valley residents, Union Lt. General Philip H. Sheridan (*left*). The year before, on October 29<sup>th</sup> 1863, Sheridan had ordered his cavalry to burn all the “forage, mills, and such property as might be serviceable to the Rebel

army” between Staunton and Harrisonburg. Known by Valley residents simply as “the Burning,” the action left Valley residents and the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy” with something with which they were not familiar—hunger. So complete was the devastation that Sheridan reported: “A crow would have had to carry its rations if it had flown across the valley.” Even Sheridan’s own men were shocked at the despair caused by their deeds. Union Colonel James H. Kidd wrote that “The anguish pictured in their faces would have melted any heart not seared by the horrors and ‘necessities’ of war. It was too much for me and at the first moment that duty would permit I hurried away from the scene.” Sheridan was not known for being moved by “anguished faces” and was evidently one whose heart had been seared by the horrors of war, once telling his overwhelmed troops that, “We’ll sleep in our own beds tonight or we’ll sleep in hell.” Valley residents would have preferred the latter.

Sheridan’s lack of remorse regarding war and its ugly consequences was shared by another well-known



Union officer that was present at the Battle of Waynesboro. This was Brevet Major General George A. Custer (*left*) who was considered Sheridan's protégé. He was in command of the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division and the

twenty-five year old Custer was already a brave, battle-hardened warrior. Custer had been involved in the "measure for measure" hanging duel with Confederate Lt. Colonel John Singleton Mosby: each side retaliating by executing or hanging prisoners. Custer, too, was a principal in "the Burning" saying he wanted "to put the fear of Hell in these people."

Jubal Early knew that he was facing formidable foes. But Early was as fearless as were his Union counterparts—and just as controversial. Known for his "imaginatively profane speech," Early originally fought hard to keep Virginia in the Union; but after being outvoted at Virginia's Secession Convention in 1861, Early cast his fortunes with his native Virginia. General Early was known for his bravery and leadership. He would need both at Waynesboro where Early's 1500 Confederates would face Sheridan's Union cavalry of 10,000. The small division Early was left with was a tough and seasoned one and could count as one of its former brigade commanders, Colonel George S. Patton, the grandfather of the WW II general.

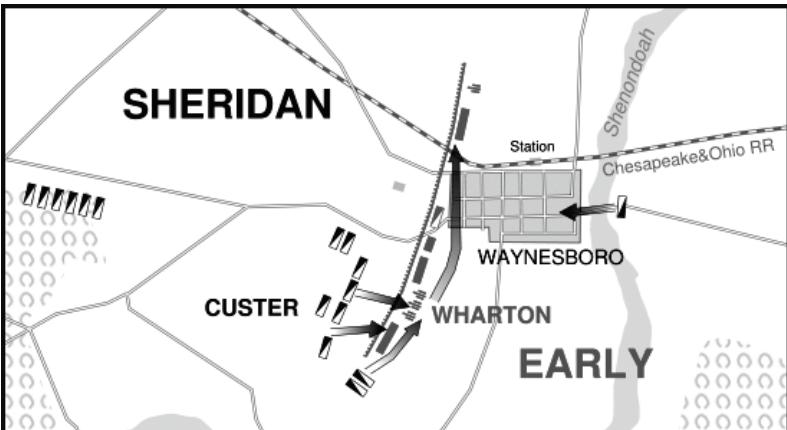
March 2, 1865 was a miserable day in Waynesboro. It was cold, foggy, and, according to Confederate mapmaker, Jedediah Hotchkiss, "cold sleet...was

constantly falling.” Sheridan’s forces had marched into Staunton on the morning of March 2<sup>nd</sup>. He ordered Custer to “proceed to Waynesboro, ascertain something definite in regard to the position, movements, and strength of the enemy, and if possible, to destroy the railroad bridge over the South River at that point.” Custer reported that the road to Waynesboro – the “Staunton Pike”—was all but “impassable,” made into a quagmire of mud from several days of rain.

Early was expecting Sheridan and had his defenses in position stretched along a west to east line that would coincide with present day Pine Avenue from 14<sup>th</sup> street and extending beyond Main Street near where the Plumb House (*below*) stands. During the heat of battle the family sought protection in their cellar. The home was on the receiving end of a Union cannonball and, after the battle, Union soldiers helped themselves to some of the Plumbs’ food stores. Early had his artillery facing west on the high ground between 13<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Streets. At first glance, this would seem like an ideal position to defend against the Federals advancing from the West. Custer later reported that, “His [Early’s] position was well chosen, being upon a range of hills west of the town, from which the artillery could command all the approaches, while his infantry could, by their fire, sweep the wide-open space extending out along their entire front.”

‘Old Jube’ Early however, had made a tactical blunder. Brigadier General Gabriel C. Wharton





had advised Early to take up a position on the opposite (east) bank of the South River, but Early rejected Wharton's counsel. He chose, instead, to back Wharton's vastly outnumbered infantry division up against the rain-swollen river. Should the Confederates find it necessary to retreat and escape there would be nowhere to run. While there were two bridges in the area, one was on the east side, a good distance from Early's position and the other was a railroad bridge which offered only a narrow route—not enough space to handle 1500 men rushing to avoid a slaughter. The shivering, sleet-covered Confederates had the unenviable posture of having 10,000 Yankees in front of them and a raging river behind them.

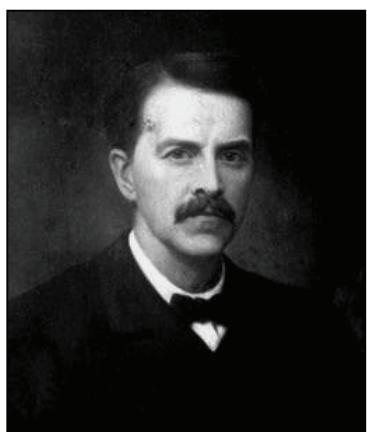
There was another weakness in the Confederates' position. Early had failed to extend his line far enough to the south (Toward present day 16<sup>th</sup> Street) so that it would reach the river. This exposed his left flank. As the Federals approached the Confederate line around 2 pm, Custer ordered Colonel William Wells' 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade forward. Encountering stiff resistance from the Confederates, Custer considered other options. He quickly discovered the one-eighth mile gap in the

Southerners' left flank. He would later report: "...one point seemed favorable to attack. The enemy's left flank, instead of resting on South River, was thrown well forward, leaving a short gap between his left and the river." Custer ordered three regiments – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ohio, the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Jersey, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut to attack Early's exposed flank "under the cover of woods."

The Federals, armed with seven shot Spencer repeating rifles, surprised and overwhelmed the Confederates. While the left flank was collapsing, Union Colonel Capehart's 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade tore into the Confederate's front line and according to local historian and author, Robert Moore, the Confederates fired a "single ragged volley." Hotchkiss reported with disgust that it was "one of the most terrible panics and stampedes I have ever seen. There was perfect rout along the road up the mountain."

Early was watching the battle from a hill near the river. In just a few minutes, he realized "everything was lost." Early and his staff, including Wharton and Dr. Hunter McGuire (*right*), made a dash for the bridge that led to Rockfish Gap. Early and Wharton escaped but as Dr. McGuire's horse made a gallant effort to jump a rail fence, the two went tumbling into the mud. When McGuire stood up, he was greeted by a Union cavalryman pointing a pistol in his face.

The doctor immediately voiced a traditional secret Masonic distress order that was recognized by another



Union officer who intervened and took charge of the mud splattered McGuire. And at the bottom of Main Street Hill, Colonel William H. Harman (Brother to Stonewall Jackson's quartermaster, John Harman) was surrounded by five Federals. Refusing to surrender, Harman was killed and a monument to his bravery was erected near the spot of his death. Since that time, this monument has been moved a number of times and now rests in Waynesboro's Constitution Park.

In total, over 1200 Confederates were captured, along with all of the Confederates' artillery pieces, more than 150 wagons, and 17 battle flags. The Confederate prisoners were sent to Fort Delaware where they were held until the end of the war. Thus ended the War Between the States in the Shenandoah Valley. In little more than one month, General Lee would surrender to General Grant at Appomattox.

Mature trees and stately homes now line the beautiful streets of this battlefield, which holds the blood of brave Americans. The young boy that sketched the image of General Lee as he daydreamed from his bedroom window on Locust Avenue was my father. His grandfather, Charles "Mr. Charlie" McGann, once owned much of the land upon which the Battle of Waynesboro was fought. And Mr. Charlie's father, John W. McGann, had defended that same land while serving as a Private in Early's army during the battle of Waynesboro. By the time my father was twelve, the guns of March 2, 1865 had long been silent. Yet tales of battlefield bravery die hard in the hearts of 12-year-old boys—as well they should. This is especially true when you grow up on those battlefields. My father often spoke of the bravery of those men on that day so many years ago. Many Civil War veterans were still alive in

the 1940's. One veteran, Colonel C.H. Withrow, had fought for the Confederacy and lived on Pine Avenue. My father could recall walking with his grandfather over to Col. Withrow's barn and feeding the old Colonel's horse, "Bird." As my father explored the woods and streams surrounding his boyhood home, he was often haunted with reminders of the bravery and sacrifice of the gallant soldiers of March 1865.

Thankfully, the fighting is long over and the Tree Streets are quiet today. Yet many historians have written that the most heartrending sounds heard on battlefields like this one were actually heard after the fighting was over—boys and men crying out in anguish for their mothers and their God as they lie dying alone. The cries of those soldiers have echoed down through generations; from father to son. Their mothers were unable to hear them; their God did hear them, and may we never forget them.

*NOTE: Readers interested in studying more about the Civil War in Waynesboro and the surrounding area are advised to purchase a copy of Robert H. Moore's book "Gibraltar of the Shenandoah – Civil War Sites and Stories of Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County, Virginia." The book is available at the Waynesboro Heritage Museum.*

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The Waynesboro Heritage Museum is located in downtown at the corner of Main Street & Wayne Avenue. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 9:00 AM until 5:00 PM, or for large group tours by appointment. Please call 540-943-3943 for more details.

The Plumb House Museum is located at 1021 West Main Street. Visit the Plumb House where local Civil War artifacts can be seen and Civil War stories—passed down through generations of the Plumb family—can be heard. The museum is open Thursday through Saturday from 10:00 AM until 5:00 PM. For more details on both of these historic locations visit [www.waynesboroheritagefoundation.com](http://www.waynesboroheritagefoundation.com).