

# The Civil War

## Father, son obeyed duty though longing for battle

By Carmen Brissette Grayson  
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

On June 12, 1861, President Lincoln summoned Capt. Montgomery C. Meigs to the White House and offered him the rank of brigadier general and the vital post of quartermaster general of the Union army.

In April, the gifted engineer — who had supervised construction of the Washington Aqueduct and the Capitol extension — secured Fort Pickens in Florida, ensuring Union control over the Gulf of Mexico. Meigs' success had, of course, coincided with the North's loss of Fort Sumter to the Confederates at the outbreak of the war.

Lincoln "spoke to me with great kindness & confidence & I thanked him for it," Meigs reported to his family.

Though charged with moving and supplying Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell's 30,000 men as they marched to Manassas Junction in July, the new quartermaster general longed to strike a blow directly at the Confederacy: "I feel as though I ought to be at the head of one of these moving armies," he confided in his journal.

"Nothing but an unconditional surrender . . . will satisfy him," observed his wife, Louisa Rodgers Meigs, adding that "he looks so dreadfully stern when he talks of the rebellion that I do not like to look at him."

Gen. Meigs' father, Dr. Charles D. Meigs of Philadelphia, inquired anxiously of his son: "Will there be a great battle?" In reply, Meigs predicted that "one good battle & the back of the rebellion is broken. It is a great & holy war — God is with us."

The late spring of 1861 also found the general's 19-year-old son, West Point Cadet John Rodgers Meigs, impatient to join the fight. The younger Meigs was counting the days to his first furlough home since entering the military academy in September 1859.

John Meigs at one point had barely escaped dismissal, amassing in one semester 92 of the 100 demerits that required expulsion from that "dull place," as he labeled West Point. Adolescent and chronic offenses — gazing about at morning drill, trifling and throwing snow in ranks and being late at reveille and at roll call — had pushed him to the edge. Academy authorities wisely saw past the deficiencies and concurred with mathematics professor John Church, who observed that young Meigs possessed the best mathematical mind he had encountered at the academy.

An eager family and his sweetheart awaited him in Washington. John's 17-year-old sister, Mary, had written: "Hattie Coyle is in love with you." In Mary's view, "Miss Hot Cakes" — so nicknamed because she attracted many beaux — "has the stupidest thing talking to any of her most devoted admirers because she cared only for Johnnie Meigs."

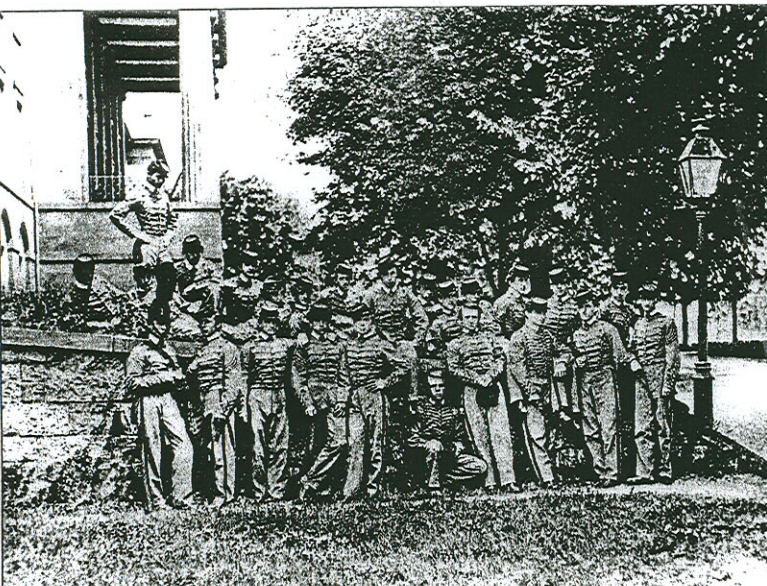
On July 2, the cadet reached Washington. "John has come home strong & active & good. He gives us happiness & satisfaction. . . . Modest & affectionate he delights the home," Gen. Meigs wrote to his father. For more than two weeks, Louisa indulged the false hope that John's youth would shield him from army service during the summer.

However, on the morning of July 18 — three days before the First Battle of Bull Run — John told his mother he would be "going to the wars." He would be ashamed to return to West Point without having served, he averred. "I felt a pained, shocked sensation when he told me of it," she admitted, adding that she "could not do or say anything to damp the ardor of his youthful patriotism."

The family gathered that night to outfit John for war. Gen. Meigs buckled onto his son a sword and pistol and slung a telescope over the couple's firstborn. The moment struck his mother as a re-enactment of childhood scenes: "It reminded me of a few years back when his father was buckling on his toy sword & slinging his tin trumpet around his neck."

The next day, John marched as a volunteer aide with Maj. Henry J. Hunt's six-gun artillery battery as it moved from the Capitol to join Col. Israel B. Richardson's Fourth Brigade at Blackburn's Ford across from Bull Run.

On Saturday night, Gen. Meigs heard rumors that Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's forces had joined those of Gen. Pierre G.T. Beauregard at Manassas and that the two columns might outnumber McDowell's army.



John Meigs, kneeling, with fellow West Point cadets, graduated first in the Class of 1863.

Louisa filled his haversack and handed him a flask of wine. The general rode out to the Warrenton Turnpike toward Manassas, reaching the Stone Bridge late in the afternoon.

By outflanking the Confederate left, McDowell hoped to sever the Manassas Gap Railroad and divide the Confederate forces deployed along six miles of Bull Run. The engagement's main fighting and turning maneuvers began mid-morning, but by 4 p.m. — after repeated Union assaults and Confederate repulses — McDowell ordered his forces back to Centerville.

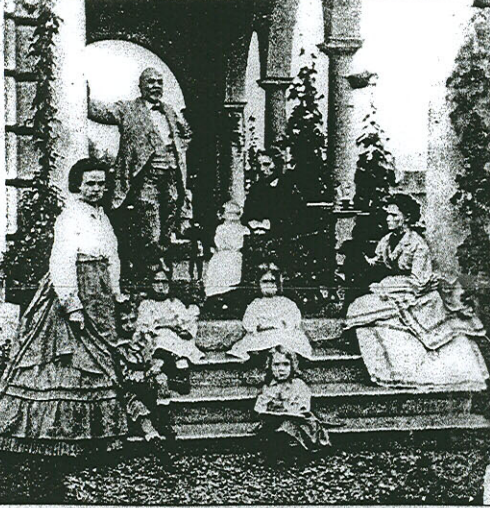
Gen. Meigs arrived at the Stone Bridge as the chaotic Union retreat began. Musketry rattled around him. Under fire for several hours, he related that rifled shells "sang in my ears" but "they did not disturb me." He walked among dead men but saw no one struck down. "If through all other battles I can ride & walk as coolly, I may in the course of providence yet find my sphere in the contested field" the quartermaster general hoped.

Back in Washington, Gen. Meigs conferred with Lincoln at the White House at 3 a.m. and reached home an hour later. All Sunday afternoon, the sounds of the Manassas guns had tormented Louisa. A messenger came at 7 p.m. claiming a Union victory. Shortly after midnight, however, an agitated stranger named Craig entered their parlor, inquiring anxiously for news of his brother — a lieutenant in Hunt's battery — and telling them of the Manassas disaster; Louisa sat up in her room until dawn.

Recalling her vigil, she would write: "Oh what a night it was! I spent it in prayer & supplications and in tears, agonizing fears for the safety of our absent dear ones, and grief for our national disaster."

Finally, out of sheer exhaustion, she "threw myself upon the bed and was roused from a doze by hearing my husband's voice downstairs." The general brought no news of John, however. Hunt's battery — part of Gen. T.A. Davies' brigade on the Union left flank — covered Blackburn's Ford, a sector that remained quiet during the main battle. From a hilltop at the ford that afternoon, John sighted infantry and cavalry moving to reinforce the Confederate line on Henry House Hill. So well drilled did the cavalry appear, John observed, "it seemed that a ruler might have been placed along their horses heads."

At 4:25 p.m., he heard a soldier



Montgomery Meigs, his daughter Mary Meigs Taylor (left) and her children, with her oldest child, John, clinging to her. In the rocker next to her husband is the general's wife, Louisa; daughter Loulie is at right.

comment on a cloud of dust rising on the artillerymen's flank: "I wonder what all this is, they can't be intending to outflank our left!"

Confederate Brig. Gen. David R. Jones made just such an attempt, sending three regiments across McLean's Ford to capture the artillery battery. Hunt's guns opened fire, and a rain of canister and shrapnel stymied the Confederates. John saw an early shot hit Lt. Presley O. Craig — the battery's only fatality. Tragically, John's role in the battle depended in great part on the brother of the stranger who had visited his family: The cadet immediately took over Craig's gun.

The success of the Union defense buoyed Gen. Davies' optimism: He rode among his men at 5:10 p.m. exclaiming that he stood "ready to fight" until he died.

McDowell did not rescind the order to retreat, and the mauled Union force lurched away from Bull Run "so disorganized," John complained, "as to be slipping through the generals' hands like sand toward Washington."

The young volunteer encountered the 5th Division commander, Brig. Gen. Dixon Miles, drunk and riding around wearing two hats; officers shouting "For God's sake,

men, get in ranks here. Fall in!" and hearing orders "to shoot anybody who attempted to leave ranks."

John — himself with no authority but responding to developments in front of him — suggested an escape route from pursuing Southern cavalry to Col. Roderick Matheson, commander of a New York regiment, later returning to insist that the colonel retreat to Centerville. After encountering John Meigs a second time and taking a closer look at him, Col. Matheson asked the young soldier for his authority to issue orders: The cadet replied, "Well, sir, the truth is, that for the last few hours I have been giving all the orders for this division."

Covered with dust and grimed by gun smoke, John arrived home at 8 o'clock the next morning, rushing up to his father's room. "Father, the army is completely routed," he announced.

Young Meigs planned to remain only long enough to get fresh horses for the battery and return to contest the Confederates' expected pursuit. Louisa refused her permission, later recalling that "he laughed when I told him that I would not consent to let him go back."

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**Virginia: Membership recruitment:** The Sons of Confederate Veterans are seeking new members. Those interested in joining the organization should write to: Sons of Confederate Veterans, P.O. Box 726, Camp 726, Box 2015, Alexandria, Va. 22301.  
**Today and tomorrow:** A living-history encampment featuring cannon and musket firing, music, tours and children's activities will be held at Pamplin Park in Petersburg from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for children ages 6 to 11. The park is located at 6523 Duncan Road. Call 804/861-2408.  
**Aug. 23-24:** Civil War Weekend at Manassas Museum, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Infantry, artillery, music and raffle. Call 703/368-1873.  
**Aug. 23-24:** National Civil War and Antique Arms Show at the Showplace in Richmond, Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call 450/672-5921.

**West Virginia: Today and tomorrow:** Re-enactment of the Battle of Dry Creek at Greenbrier state forest in White Sulphur Springs. Activities include dinner and an outdoor dance today. Tomorrow there will be period church services and other activities. Call 304/536-4373.  
**Today and tomorrow:** "Giving Aid and Comfort: Medical and Relief Work During the Civil War" is a living-history program to be held in Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. Programs will be open to the public from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. today and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. tomorrow. Call 304/535-6298.

**District of Columbia: Exhibit:** "An American, a Sailor and a Jew: The Life and Career of Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy USN (1792-1862)" is open at the National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 1811 R St. NW. Among the items on display are pieces of Levy's Navy uniform, letters and a variety of images depicting 19th-century naval life. The exhibit will be in place for one year. For more information, call 202/265-6280.

**Aug. 29:** The Civil War Trust will sponsor a daylong tour of John Wilkes Booth's escape route. The 12-hour tour will be led by renowned historian Ed Beears and will start at Ford's Theater at 8 a.m. The cost is \$75 and includes lunch and admission to the Surratt and Mudd homes. Space is limited. Call Jim Reed at 703/312-7595.

**Pennsylvania: Sept. 28-29:** The third and final Longstreet Memorial Fund Symposium and Battlefield Tour will be held at Gettysburg. Participants must register by Aug. 31. The fee is \$125 and includes events and a Saturday luncheon buffet at the Gettysburg Fire Department, 35 N. Stratton St. To attend Saturday events only, the fee is \$50. Write to: The General James Longstreet Memorial Fund, 112 Offset Farm Road, Sanford, N.C. 27330. Or call 919/258-6966 or 919/774-1677.

**Maryland: Saturdays and Sundays:** Civil War walking tours of downtown Frederick depart from the National Museum of Civil War Medicine every Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. The tour focuses on the history of Frederick during the war, with emphasis on the city's role as a hospital site for more than 9,000 soldiers wounded at nearby South Mountain and Antietam. Tours last about 90 minutes. Cost is \$4.50 for adults, \$3.50 for seniors. Children under 12 are admitted free. The museum is located at 48 E. Patrick St. Call 301/695-1864.  
**Today and tomorrow:** "A State Divided — Maryland and the Civil War" will be the topic of discussion at the Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg. There also will be a living-history program beginning at 9 p.m. at Dunker Church. Call 301/432-5124.

**Aug. 23:** The Baltimore Civil War Museums' recent trip along the route of Harry Gilmore's 1864 Baltimore County raid is being repeated. The tour is from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., starting and ending at the museum's President Street Station at the corner of President and Fleet streets. Tickets are \$20 in advance and \$25 on the day of the tour. Call 410/935-5188.

Information excerpted in part from "The Civil War News," Humberidge, N.J. 08571. By permission. Information for the calendar may be sent to The Washington Times by fax to 202/269-1859 or 202/269-3418.

The Washington Times

Gen. Meigs rose and took John with him to confer with Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, the Mexican War hero and commander of the Union army, who had ordered the battered bluecoats to fall back to Arlington Heights. John was told to stay home.

Later on that rainy Monday after the Bull Run debacle, Gen. Meigs returned to his office, determined to conduct business "with a face which I took care should be as cool & as little disheartened as really was my heart. I have lost no heart."

Montie Meigs, John's 14-year-old brother, watched the returning 7th Rhode Island troops and recounted, "It was the saddest sight I ever saw," recalling two wagons loaded with wounded. "When is all this to end?" Louisa lamented. "Shall we ever know peace and happiness again?"

Father and son cherished new military ambitions in the battle's aftermath. John's turndown on the field had won him praise. Col. Richardson sized up his young aide, saying, "A braver more gallant young man was never in my service," and recommended immediate appointment as a lieutenant.

A friend enticed him: "Would it not be glorious for you to be to get into the field under such a General as your father?"

He imagined their future as warriors: "I tell you this war is the greatest the world ever saw. . . . Is this then a time to be idle — by the moments are passing swiftly by — the golden opportunity will soon

be gone and we will have done nothing to distinguish our names. . . . But the field is the place. We have tried one battlefield John and I hope & pray we may yet be so fortunate as to try more. . . . Go to the field then!"

However, the entire Meigs family condemned the idea and insisted that John remain at West Point.

When he returned to West Point after Manassas, his father wrote to him, "I am sorry to see that you show some sign of discontent," adding, "I am proud & gratified at the good conduct on that fatal day. . . . Out of that strife you brought my name unstained. Go on in the career deliberately & carefully marked out for you. . . . The end is certain."

Of his own ambitions — whether to remain as quartermaster general or take the field — Meigs felt far less certain. He rejected a proffered command in the West: "If I succeed I should do good to my country," he concluded, "if I failed I might ruin it." He stayed in Washington, and John remained at West Point, both men uneasy as the war began in earnest.

Carmen Brissette Grayson, a graduate of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, earned a doctorate in history at the University of Virginia and was a professor of history at Hampton University from 1969 to 1994. Now retired, she is working on a biography of the Meigs family, assisted in her research by James Zink. She lives in Williamsburg.

## Mother's grief for fallen young man couldn't be muted

SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Louisa Meigs, wife of the Army's quartermaster general, neither hoisted the flag at her home at 14th and H streets nor joined in the capital's celebrations after the fall of Richmond on April 3, 1865. Peace "is but a name, a shadow without substance, a mockery of the spirit within," she lamented to her father-in-law. Peace would not restore her son, John, the family's sacrifice to victory.

She wanted to raise her hands to heaven and "cry aloud in . . . anguish."

Outside the house, she and her family could hear the shouting crowds, see a woman "dancing and shouting 'gloria hallelujah,'" hear the victory cannons booming,

church bells pealing and bands playing patriotic airs. "[A]ll joy was shut out from my soul in the bitter sense of personal grief for John. . . & will terminate only with my own life," she wrote.

On Oct. 3, 1864, a rainy evening in the Shenandoah Valley, 22-year-old John Meigs was killed on the wooded Swift Run Gap Road between Day and Harrisonburg. "One bullet had entered his left cheek just below the eye, another his left breast over the heart," a stunned Gen. Meigs recounted to his friend Col. John N. Macomb. "He must have died instantly & could hardly have spoken after either shot struck him," his grieving father concluded.

Young Meigs had returned to West Point after his baptism of fire

at Bull Run and had been graduated first in the Class of 1863. He was commissioned in the Corps of Engineers, served in the Department of West Virginia and then joined Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan as an aide-de-camp in the Shenandoah Campaign in the fall of 1864.

The young soldier's body was not discovered until 12 hours after he failed to return from a day's surveying work. Gen. Sheridan immediately wrote the family: "I have never been so pained in my life as I have at the death of little Meigs."

As the fatal skirmish in which he died was reconstructed, Meigs and two assistants were returning to camp, within Union lines and only 1 1/2 miles from headquarters. They saw three riders ahead, presumably friendly. Instead, when

the trio came abreast, shots were exchanged. After the gunfire, John lay dead and one of the Confederates was severely wounded.

Two questions remain even today: Did John offer resistance, as the Confederate accounts insist? Or did he surrender, only to be killed afterward, as one of the escaped Union soldiers contended?

There is evidence to suggest the Confederates involved in the brief clash were regulars, not guerrillas. The men who engaged Meigs may have belonged to Gen. Thomas Rosser's troops, the Fourth Regiment of Virginia Cavalry.

President Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and Lt. Gen. Henry W. Halleck gathered on Oct. 7 with the Meigs family at Georgetown's Oak Hill Cemetery to bury

the young warrior.

Reflecting on his son's death 14 years later, Gen. Meigs noted the conflicting reports about who had fired the fatal shots and under what circumstances. In anguish he confessed to his wife: "As the war is over and as time wears away I seem to miss our boys more and more." Two sons had died of childhood diseases and a daughter died in infancy. John was their first child to reach adulthood.

His mother's grief could not be muted. "I [W]hen I remember that I have seen the grass growing green already over his young head my heart overflows with sorrow and I am only another Rachel weeping for her child & refusing to be comforted because he is not."

— Carmen Brissette Grayson