

# Battle of Sharpsburg

A Personal recollection

7  
Walter Clark  
Adjutant 35<sup>th</sup> North Carolina

in  
Robert Ransom's brigade  
John G. Walker's division



Raleigh, N. C.,

Nov. 27, 1899.

Mag. J. W. Gould,

Portland, Me.

My Dear Sir-

Your kind favor of 22<sup>d</sup> Inst. To hand, also papers on Portland Soldiers and Sailors, and Gen. Mansfield at Antietam (Sharpsburg as it known as we old Confederates) Please accept my thanks for them, and I shall read them with pleasure. I am out in the State Library at this time, having been turned down by a new Board of Trustees, but I have secured a copy of the record of Portland soldiers for the Library some time before I left the position. I am very much interested in war literature which give the history of Confederate and Federal soldiers,

I send you a paper, by Justice Walter Leake, (of our Supreme Court) on the battle of Sharpsburg, as viewed by an eye-witness. When you read let me know your conclusions

of it. The author was a gallant soldier and  
now ranks as one of our ablest men.

I entered the Army before I reached 18, and  
served until I laid down my gun at Appo-  
mattox. Was once a prisoner and had the  
pleasure of peeping through the bars of Old Capital  
prison Washington, and at last engagement at  
Cold Harbor I was fool enough to try and  
stop a piece of lead that was sent over by  
one of Hancock's men, with my right shoulder, it  
came with such force that it went right through  
and if it has not struck a mountain or a hickory  
tree, it may be travelling through space now, as far  
as I know.

Again thanking you for the papers, I remain

Yours very truly

J. C. Birdsong, late of  
Co B. 12<sup>th</sup> Va Inf.

Mahone's Brigade (old)

A. N. Va.

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## LITERARY DEPARTMENT.

### THE BATTLE OF SHARPSBURG—PERSONAL INCIDENTS. \*

WALTER CLARK.

This is Sept. 17, and you ask me about the battle of Sharpsburg. Yes, I was there. Since then more than twice two hundred months have passed, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.

After the "seven days fights" around Richmond in July, 1862, when McClellan took refuge from utter destruction in his gun-boats it was resolved that we should return the unsolicited visit which had been made us.

A few weeks later, with blare of bugles and roll of drums, we set our faces northward. At Cedar Mountain we crushed the enemy, Chantilly saw our victorious columns and the field of Manassas a second time welcomed us to victory. When

"August with its trailing vines

"Passed out the gates of summer."

we were in full march for the Potomac, which was crossed simultaneously at several points, the bands playing "Maryland, My Maryland." Walker's division, to which I belonged, with two others recrossed the Potomac to surround Harper's Ferry, while the rest of the army, moving towards Hagerstown, was suddenly attacked, and falling back the hostile lines came face to face about noon on September 16, the Federals lining Antietam creek

\* Written for THE STUDENT.

and the Confederates holding the village of Sharpsburg, hence the double name of this famous battle. For a similar reason the great battle known to the English speaking people the world around as Waterloo, is called the battle of Mont St. Jean by the French and La Belle Alliance by Germans.

The battle of Antietam (commonly known at the South as the battle of Sharpsburg), was one of the bloodiest of the whole Civil War. It was fought 17th September, 1862, between the Federal army commanded by Gen. George B. McClellan, and the Confederate army under Gen. R. E. Lee.

The Federal army was composed of six corps: 1st (Hooker's), 2d (Sumner's), 5th (Porter's), 6th (Franklin's), 9th (Burnside's), 12th (Mansfield's), besides Pleasanton's Cavalry Division.

On the Southern side were two corps: Longstreet's and Jackson's, with Stuart's Cavalry. The morning reports for that day of the Federal army show 101,000 "effective;" but Gen. McClellan, in his report of the battle, places his number of men in line at 87,000. Gen. Lee, in his report simply puts his force at "less than 40,000." Gen. Longstreet estimates them at 37,000, and Gen. D. H. Hill at 31,000. The best estimate of numbers actually in line would be 87,000 Federals and 35,000 Confederates. Of the latter, only 25,000 were in hand when the battle opened. The arrival of the divisions of McLaws and A. P. Hill from Harper's Ferry during the battle, raised Lee's total to 35,000; over a fourth of these were from North Carolina, which had thirty-two regiments and three batteries there.

The battle was fought in a bend of the Potomac River, the town of Sharpsburg, Md., being the centre of the Southern line of battle, whose right flank rested on the An-



tietam Creek, just above where it flows into the Potomac, and the left flank on the Potomac higher up. Gen. Lee had braved all rules of strategy by dividing his army in the presence of an enemy double his numbers. He had sent Jackson, with nearly half the army, to the south side of the Potomac to invest Harpers's Ferry, while with the other part of the army he himself advanced on Hagerstown. Gen. McClellan, who slowly and with caution was following Lee's movements, found at Frederick, Md., a dispatch from Lee to Gen. D. H. Hill, which had been dropped in the latter's encampment. This disclosed to him Lee's entire plan of campaign and the division of his army. With more than his usual promptness, McClellan threw himself, (on September 14), upon Turner's (Boonsboro) and Crampton's Gaps. These were stubbornly held till next day, when Lee fell back to



SHARPSBURG AND VICINITY.

Sharpsburg. Fortunately for Lee, Harper's Ferry surrendered with 12,000 prisoners early on the morning of the 15th, releasing the besieging force. Of these, Walker's Division, with Jackson himself, rejoined Lee north of the Potomac, at Sharpsburg, on the afternoon of the 16th. McLaws and A. P. Hill joined him there during the battle on the 17th—McLaws at 9 a. m., and A. P. Hill at 3 p. m.—and each just in time to prevent the destruction of the army. With 87,000 men in line, as against Lee's 35,000, Gen. McClellan should have captured the Confederate army, for fighting with the river at its back any disaster could not have been retrieved. Besides, till 9 a. m. Lee had only 25,000 men, and this number was not finally raised to 35,000 till the arrival of A. P. Hill after 3 p. m. There were no breastworks and neither time nor opportunity to make any. Gen. McClellan was an excellent General, but his over-caution saved Lee's army. He greatly overestimated the numbers opposed to him. He telegraphed to President Lincoln during the battle that Lee had 95,000 men. Had he known that in truth Lee had only 25,000 men when the battle opened, the history of the war and Gen. McClellan's fortunes would have been essentially different. During the battle Gen. McClellan telegraphed President Lincoln "one of the greatest, and probably the greatest battle, in all history is now in progress."

This much has been said to give a general idea of the "situation" before and during the battle. I was Adjutant of 35th N. C. Regiment commanded by Col. M. W. Ransom (afterwards Brigadier General and U. S. Senator). The brigade was commanded by his brother, Gen. Robert Ransom, a West Pointer, and hence a personal acquaintance of most of the Federal leaders. The divi-



sion was commanded by Gen. John G. Walker, another old army officer. We were at the taking of Harper's Ferry, where our division held Loudon Heights, and we were the first to recross the Potomac and join Gen. Lee at Sharpsburg, on the afternoon of the 16th.

I was then a mere boy, just sixteen a few days before, and have vivid recollections of the events of the day. About an hour before day, on the 17th, our division began its march for the position assigned us on the extreme right, where we were to oppose the Federals in any attempt to cross either the bridge (since known as Burnside's) or the ford over the Antietam below it, near Shiveley's. Along our route we met men, women and children coming out from Sharpsburg, and from the farm houses near by. They were carrying such of their household belongings as were portable; many women were weeping. This, and the little children leaving their homes, made a moving picture in "the dawn's early light." On taking position, we immediately tore down the fences in our front which might obstruct the line of fire. About 9 a. m. a pressing order came to move to the left; this we did in quick time. As we were leaving our ground, I remember looking up the Antietam, the opposite bank of which was lined with Federal batteries. These were firing at the left wing of our army to the support of which we were moving. The Federal gunners could be seen with the utmost distinctness as they loaded and fired. Moving northwards, we were passing in rear of our line of battle and met constant streams of the wounded coming out. Among them I remember meeting Col. W. L. DeRosset, of the 3rd North Carolina, being brought out badly wounded, and many others well known in North Carolina.

All this time there was the steady booming of the cannon, the whistling of shells, the pattering of fire-arms, and the occasional yell or cheer rising above the roar of battle as some advantage was gained by either



BATTLE-FIELD OF SHARPSBURG.

side. Soon after passing the town the division was deployed in column of regiments. Around and just beyond the Dunker church, in the centre of the Confederate left, our line had been broken and was completely swept away. A flood of Federals were pouring in; we were just in time—ten minutes', five minutes' delay, and

our army would have ceased to exist. We were marching up behind our line of battle, with our right flank perpendicular to it. As the first regiment got opposite to the break in our lines it made a wheel to the right and "went in." The next regiment, marching straight on, as soon as it cleared the left of the regiment preceding it, likewise wheeled to the right and took its place in line, and so on in succession. That is, we were marching north, and thus were successively thrown into line of battle facing east. As these regiments came successively into line they struck the Federal lines which were advancing; the crash was deafening. The sound of infantry firing at short distance can be likened to nothing so much as the dropping of a shower of hail-stones on an enormous tin roof. My regiment wheeled to the right about 150 yards north (and west) of the Dunker church. In the wheel we passed a large barn, which is still standing, and entered the "West Woods." Being a mounted officer, I had a full view; our men soon drove the Federals back to the eastern edge of these woods, where the enemy halted to receive us. The West Woods had already been twice fought over that morning; the dead and wounded lay thicker than I have ever seen on a battle-field since. On the eastern edge of these woods the lines of battle came close together and the shock was terrific; here Capt. Walter Bryson of our regiment was killed, along with many others in the Brigade. All the mounted officers in the division instantly dismounted, turning their horses loose to gallop to the rear. It being the first time I had been so suddenly thrown in contact with a line of battle, and not noticing, in the smoke and uproar, that the others had dismounted, I thought it my duty to stick to my horse; in another moment, when the smoke would have

lifted (so the Federal line of battle, lying down fifty yards off, could have seen me) I should have been taken for a general officer and would have been swept out of my saddle by a hundred bullets. A kind-hearted veteran close by peremptorily pulled me off my horse. At that instant a minnie ball, whistling over the just emptied saddle, struck the back of my left hand which was still clinging to the pommel, leaving a slight scar which I still carry as a memento. The Federal line soon fell back. It was Gorman's Brigade, Sedgwick's Division, of Sumner's Corps our brigade was fighting. This was composed of troops from Massachusetts, New York and Minnesota, and from their returns they left 750 killed and wounded by our fire; this was about 10 a. m. A terrific shelling by the enemy followed, which was kept up for many hours, with occasional brief intermissions, caused probably by a wish to let the pieces cool. The shelling was terrible, but owing to protection from the slope of the hill, and there being a limestone ledge somewhat sheltering our line, the loss from the artillery fire was small.

In the brief intermission, after the Federal infantry had fallen back and before the artillery opened, I heard a cry for help, and going out in front of our line, found the Lieutenant-Colonel of a Massachusetts regiment—Francis Winthrop Palfrey, lying on the ground wounded, and brought him into our lines. With some reluctance he surrendered his very handsome sword and pistol and was sent to the rear. The sword bore an inscription that it had been presented to him by the town of Concord, Mass. He remarked at the time, he wished them preserved, and sure enough, after the war he wrote for them, and they were restored; he was exchanged and became subsequently General Palfrey. He has published a volume, "Antietam and Fredericksburg."

There was another intermission in the shelling about 12 o'clock, when we were charged by the 2d Massachusetts and 13th New Jersey of Gordon's Brigade, who advanced as far as the post and rail fence at the Hagerstown turnpike, about 100 yards in our front, but were broken there and driven back, leaving many dead and wounded. There was another intermission about 2 o'clock probably. Word was then brought us that we were to advance. It was then that Stonewall Jackson came along our lines; his appearance has been so often described that I will only say that I was reminded of what the Federal prisoners had said two days before at Harper's Ferry, when he rode down among them from his post on Bolivar Heights: "My! boys, he ain't much on looks, but if *we* had had him, we wculdn't have been in this fix." Stonewall remarked to Colonel Ransom, as he did to the other Colonels along the line, that with Stuart's cavalry and some infantry he was going around the Federal right and get in their rear, and added "when you hear the rattle of my small arms this whole line must advance." He wished to ascertain the force opposed, and a man of our regiment named Hood was sent up a tall tree, which he climbed carefully to avoid observation by the enemy; Stonewall called out to know how many Yankees he could see over the hill and beyond the "East Woods," Hood replied, "Who-e-e! there are oceans of them, General." "Count their flags," said Jackson sternly, who wished more definite information. This Hood proceeded to do until he had counted thirty-nine, when the General told him that would do and to come down. By reason of this and other information he got, the turning movement was not attempted, and it was probably fortunate for us that it was not.



During the same lull, our Brigadier-General (Robert Ransom) received a flag of truce which had been sent to remove some wounded officers, and by it sent his love to Gen. Hartsuff (if I remember aright), who had been his room-mate at West Point; but Hartsuff, as it happened, had been wounded and had left the field. Soon after our regiment was moved laterally a short distance to the right, and we charged a piece of artillery which had been put in position near the Dunker church; we killed the men and horses, but did not bring off the artillery, as we were ourselves swept by artillery on our left posted in the "old corn-field."

About 3 p. m. Burnside on our right (the Federal left) advanced, having crossed the bridge about 1 p. m., until which hour his two corps had been kept from crossing the bridge by Toombs' brigade of 400 men. Though it crossed at 1 p. m., Burnside's corps unaccountably did not advance till 3 p. m. Then advancing over the ground which had been abandoned by our division early that morning, utter disaster to our army was imminent. Just then A. P. Hill's division arrived from Harper's Ferry, where it had been parolling prisoners. A delay of ten minutes by Hill would have lost us the army; as it was, the division arrived just in time. The roll of musketry was continuous till nightfall and Burnside was driven back to the Antietam. Here General Branch of North Carolina was killed; General Anderson and Colonel Tew had fallen early in the morning at the "Bloody Lane," near our centre, and from which their commands had been driven back. About dark our brigade was moved to the right a half-mile, and bivouacked for the night around Reel's house near a burning barn. As we were moving by the right flank, we were seen by the Fed-

eral signal station on the high hills on the east bank of the Antietam. A shell sent by signal fell in the rear company of the 49th N. C. Regiment, just ahead of us, killing Lieut. Greenlea Fleming and killing and wounding sixteen men. It rained all next day. We were moved back that morning to our old position north of the Dunker church; neither army advanced. That night our whole army quietly moved off and crossed the Potomac, the passage of the river being lighted up by torches held by men stationed in the river on horseback. The army came off safely without arousing the Federal army, and left not a cannon nor a wagon behind us. On the 19th Fitz John Porter's corps attempted to follow us across the river at Sheperdstown, and was driven back with disastrous loss.

During the battle of the 17th, McClellan's headquarters were across the Antietam at the Fry house. There he had his large spy-glasses strapped to moveable frames, and could take in the whole battle-field; besides, from his signal station on the high hills, which border the Antietam on the east side, he could learn all the movements of our army. With this advantage and his great preponderance of numbers, 87,000 to 101,000 as against our 35,000 to 40,000, (giving the margin to each allowed by the official reports), it is clear that he should have captured Lee. The latter had committed a grave military fault by dividing his army by a river and many miles of interval in the presence of an enemy greatly his superior in numbers. Besides, he ought not to have fought north of the Potomac. Lee was saved from the consequences of his boldness by the opposite quality of over-caution in McClellan; the latter erroneously estimated Lee's force at 95,000, when it was a little more

than one-fourth of that number at the time the battle opened. Then, when the Federals fought it was done in detail. At daybreak Hooker's corps went in; he was wounded, and his corps badly cut up and scattered. Then Mansfield with the 12th corps came on; he was killed and his corps was driven out. Then Sumner's corps was launched at us and came on in good style; it broke our line, and was only driven back by fresh troops—Walker's division taken from the right, as above stated, and by McLaws division, just arrived from Harper's Ferry. Sumner's corps was driven back but fought well, as is shown by the fact that their losses which, were over 5,000, were more than double that of any other corps. When they went back Franklin's corps came up, but had small opportunity, as is shown by their loss of less than 500 in the whole battle. By 11 o'clock the battle on the left wing was practically over, except by artillery; on the other wing at 1 p. m. Burnside's corps crossed the Antietam over the bridge, but his corps did not move forward till 3 p. m, at which instant A. P. Hill's division, arriving from parolling prisoners at Harper's Ferry, met and overthrew it. The other corps (Fitz John Porter's) was in reserve and did not fire a gun, except some detachments sent to other commands during the battle. With six corps the weight of McClellan's fighting at any moment was that of one corps only. Had he, with Napoleonic vigor, dropped his four corps—full 60,000 men—simultaneously on our thin left wing of 15,000 men like a massive trip hammer, it must have shattered it. Had he moved his other two corps of 30,000 at the same moment in rear of our right, the fight would have been over by 9 a. m., and Appomattox would have been antedated two years and a half. The star of the Confederacy

would have set in night, and Sharpsburg might have taken its place in the history of our race by the side of Hastings and Flodden. The loss of that army, with Lee, Jackson and the other Generals there, would have been fatal. We know what happened when the same glorious army, even with smaller numbers, disappeared at Appomattox. From this fate the leadership of our Generals and the superb valor of our soldiers could not have saved us, had not McClellan singularly overrated our numbers. But he should have known that if Lee and Jackson had really had 95,000 men they would not have waited for him to attack; they would have taken possession of his army.

Thirty-five years after the event it is hard to realize the misapprehension which then existed in the minds of others as well as Gen. McClellan as to the size of Lee's army. As an example, read the following (copied from the Official Rebellion Records) from the war Governor of Pennsylvania, Andrew G. Curtin:

“HARRISBURG, PA., Sept. 11, 1862.

“*His Excellency the President.*

\* \* “You should order a strong guard placed upon the railway line from Washington to Harrisburg to-night, and send here not less than 80,000 disciplined forces, and order from New York and States east all available forces to concentrate here at once. To this we will add all the militia forces possible, and I think that in a few days we can muster 50,000 men. It is our only hope to save the North and crush the rebel army. \* \* \* The enemy will bring against us not less than 120,000, with large amount of artillery. The time for decided action by the National Government has arrived. What may we expect?  
“A. G. CURTIN.”

To this President Lincoln very sensibly replied:

“\* \* If I should start half of our forces to Harrisburg, the enemy will turn upon and beat the remaining half and then reach Harrisburg before the part going there, and beat it too when it comes. The best possible security for Pennsylvania is putting the strongest force possible into the enemy’s rear.

“Sept. 12, 1862.

“A. LINCOLN.”

The same day (Sept. 12), Gov. Curtin telegraphs the President that he has reliable information as to the rebel movements and intentions, which he details, and says: “Their force in Maryland is about 190,000 men. They have in Virginia about 250,000 more, all of whom are being concentrated to menace Washington and keep the Union armies employed there while their forces in Maryland devastate and destroy Pennsylvania.”

In fact, as we now know from the “Rebellion Records,” Lee, by reason of his losses at Second Manassas and from sickness and straggling, had only about 40,000 men in Maryland, and there were probably 10,000 more in Virginia and around Richmond, a total of 50,000 effective, while opposed to them was McClellan immediately in front with an army of 101,000 “effective,” 12,000 more Federals (afterwards captured) were at Harper’s Ferry, 73,000 “effective, fit for duty” were in the intrenchments round Washington, 10,000 under Gen. Wool at Baltimore—total, by morning reports, of 195,000 effective, besides the Federal and State troops under arms in Pennsylvania.

Such are the illusions and confusion which disturb even the clearest minds under such circumstances.

Singularly enough, too, Gen. McClellan gave as his



reason for not putting in Fitz John Porter's corps and fighting on the 18th, that it was the only force that stood intact between the Capital and possible disaster. Yet on that day 73,000 other soldiers were behind the ramparts around Washington. The publication of the "Rebellion Records" has thrown a flood of light on the history of those times.

RALEIGH, N. C., 17th Sept., 1897.

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TO A MAIDEN WITH A GUITAR.

J. C. M.

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O Maiden, singing at the moonlight hour,  
Silently I worship at thy feet.  
All joy, all beauty, passion, love, and power  
Within thy music meet.

I worship; for my soul,—a breath of God,—  
Is like a wanderer returning home,  
Returning to his childhood's glad abode,  
And sad that soon again his steps must roam.

All nature loves to hear thy simple lay:  
The grass, the trees, with every darksome bough,  
Wherein a thousand insects were at play,  
Stand wrapt in solemn silence now.

Not in the blaring horn, nor blaze of light,  
Nor on the polished floor for twinkling feet,  
But in this still, small voice, this quiet might,  
God and His creatures meet.

## A HOLIDAY IN FRANCE.

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J. H. GORRELL.

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The early summer of the year 1789 was the beginning of stirring times in France. The oppressed people had determined no longer to bear the galling yoke of Bourbonism, and were coming to a realization of their power; the new and incompetent monarch had made his first concession by calling together the States-General, which in a short time was changed into the National Assembly, and set about remedying the abuses of the crown. A national guard had been instituted for the French capital; then the populace, conscious of a new might, rose as one man to throw off their ancient shackles, and with the cry, "To the Bastille!" rushed to the old prison which for centuries had frowned down upon a servile people. There was no resisting those infuriated Frenchmen; the defenders were destroyed, the prisoners liberated, eager hands tore away stones and gates and iron bars, and the Bastille was levelled to the ground,—the French Revolution had begun.

To the patriotic Frenchman, therefore, with his love of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, there is no day more sacred than the fourteenth of July, the anniversary of the destruction of the Bastille.

Among the most pleasant memories of a summer spent in Paris are the novel scenes of the French national holiday. For days previous workmen were putting up tall green posts around the principal squares, and suspending between them all kinds of gay lanterns; gas-workers were arranging illuminating apparatus about the many public buildings, and the tri-color, in the



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