

## *Old Baldy: A Horse's Tale*

Among the more curious of Pennsylvania's Civil War artifacts is the head of Major General George Gordon Meade's horse, Baldy, now on display at the Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library in the Frankford section of Philadelphia. In life, Baldy was a warhorse and honored for his service. His celebrity reminds us of the strong bond between man and mount and of the important role that animals, particularly horses, played in this pre-automotive world. In death, Old Baldy's stuffed and mounted head has become contested property, suggesting that even in the twenty-first century, a horse, or even a horse's head, can elicit strong emotions and help connect us to one another and with our past.

During the Civil War, horses were not only transportation for officers, but they were extensions of rank and visual representations of authority. Baldy, named for the white patch on his face, was the favorite mount of Major General George Gordon Meade of Philadelphia and was an animal representation of the battlefield heroics and cool leadership under fire of his owner. Meade rode Baldy in at least ten battles. His gait, which fell somewhere between a gallop and a lope, made staff officers on slower horses quite envious. Historians speculate that Baldy was wounded between four and fourteen times over the course of the war, which means that he likely received more wounds than many of the war's most notable battlefield heroes. In most incidences this resilient horse made a quick recovery and returned to the line of duty.

Baldy was wounded most severely at the battles of First Bull Run, Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Gettysburg. One of the most intriguing stories related to Baldy's wounding at Antietam recounts the horse being shot in the neck and left for dead. When soldiers came to bury the horse a couple of days later, they found him grazing along a hillside. This story added to Baldy's legendary mystique, but is also severely flawed. In a letter written by Meade to his wife only one day after the battle, Meade wrote, "I was hit by a spent grape-shot, giving me a severe contusion on the right thigh, but not breaking the skin. Baldy was shot through the neck, but will get over it. A cavalry horse I mounted afterwards was shot in the flank."<sup>1</sup>

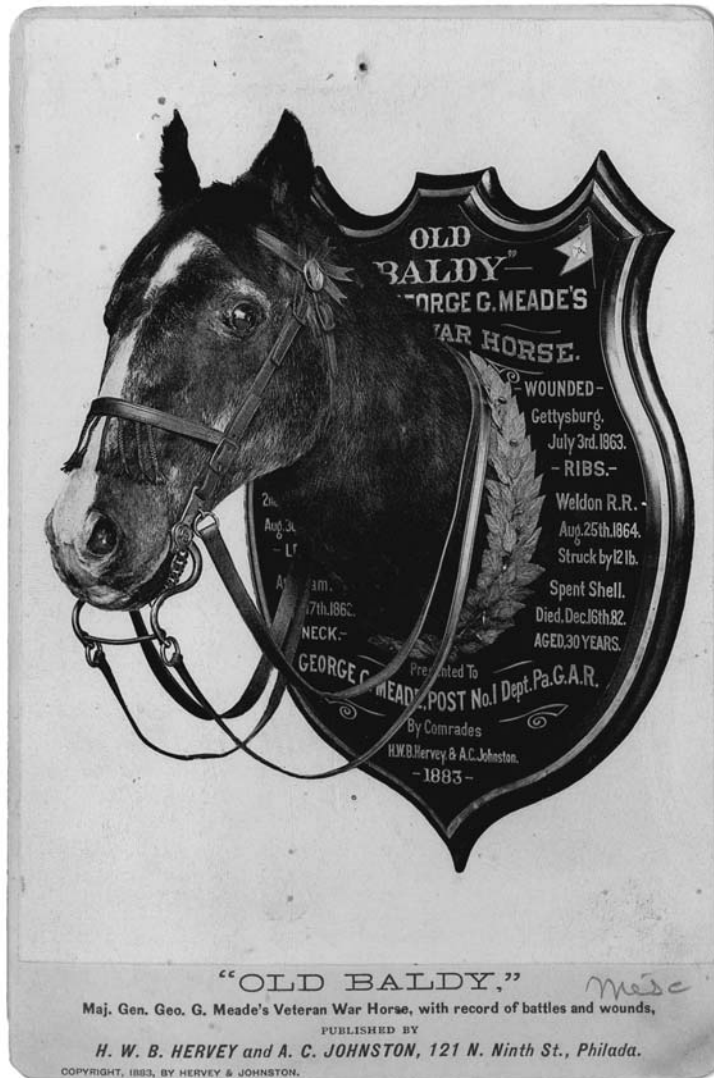
<sup>1</sup> George Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Major-General United States Army*, ed. George Gordon Meade (New York, 1913), 1:310–11.

On the second day of the battle of Gettysburg, Baldy received a stomach wound that put him out of commission for the rest of the war. Meade sent Baldy back to Philadelphia to recuperate. The horse was later removed to the Chester County farm of Meade's former quartermaster, Captain Samuel Ringwalt. During Reconstruction, when Meade served as commander of the Department of the Atlantic and as commissioner of Fairmount Park, he often rode Baldy around Philadelphia. Baldy paraded, riderless, in Meade's 1872 funeral procession and outlived his owner by ten years. The beloved "Old Baldy" died on December 16, 1882, at over thirty years of age, on the farm of Jenkintown blacksmith John Davis.

Perhaps the most intriguing stories connected to Old Baldy relate to the horse's experience as an artifact of the war after death. During the holiday season of the year of Baldy's death, Union veterans and Meade admirers Albert C. Johnson and H. W. B. Hervey took a trolley to the Jenkintown farm where Old Baldy was buried and exhumed his head and neck. One can only imagine what the return trip to Philadelphia was like. At the February 26, 1883, campfire of Philadelphia's Meade Post #1 of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), Johnson and Harvey presented the stuffed and mounted head and neck as a relic of the war linked to their post's namesake.<sup>2</sup> Out of jealousy, Philadelphia's GAR Post #2, which claimed to represent the common soldier and had battled with Post #1 over the designation as the first post in Pennsylvania and the Meade name, mounted an army mule's head to commemorate the animal that won the war for their vets. The possession of Old Baldy became further complicated when Meade Post #1 disbanded. GAR policy required all records to go to the Pennsylvania Department headquarters, which was then Post #2. In 1926, the last veterans in Post #2 turned both heads and several other artifacts over to members of the newly organized Philadelphia camp of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, who established a museum and library in honor of the GAR. The collection was moved to its current location in the Frankford section of northeast Philadelphia in 1958.

Old Baldy's head has received considerable media attention in recent years—perhaps more than his rider for his victory at Gettysburg. In the late 1970s, the board of Frankford's GAR Museum loaned both Old Baldy and the mule's head to Pine Street's Civil War Museum of

<sup>2</sup> "Old Baldy": A Memento of General George Meade's warhorse presented to Post #1, Grand Army of the Republic," *Philadelphia Daily Evening Telegraph*, Feb. 27, 1883.



Old Baldy's mounted head, George G. Meade Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia, which had overseen a collection of Civil War artifacts that had been gathered by the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS), a veteran's organization for Union officers. The Civil War Museum was to preserve the artifacts and make them more accessible by displaying them six days a week. In 2000 and 2001, when the financially struggling museum tried to lend its collections to the Tredegar National Civil War Center in Richmond, Virginia, the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, MOLLUS officials, the GAR Museum, the Meade family, and supportive Philadelphia politicians filed suit in the city's Orphan's Court in order to keep the collection in Pennsylvania. The settlement required the Pine Street museum to keep the collection in Philadelphia although many alternative sites for relocation in the city were considered. In March 2005, the court settled the dispute over the horse's head by allowing the Civil War Museum to keep Old Baldy but directing it to return the mule's head to the GAR Museum. When the Civil War Museum closed its doors due to a complete loss of state funding in August 2008, plans were proposed to move the collection to the new Gettysburg Visitor's Center, the National Constitution Center, the National Museum of American Jewish History, and the African American Museum. Lawyers representing the GAR Museum convinced the court to keep the head at their facility in Frankford for at least three years. In March 2010, Old Baldy was returned to the GAR Museum, although one of Baldy's front hooves still remains in the collection of the Old York Road Historical Society in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania.

*Bangor, PA*

DANE DiFeBO