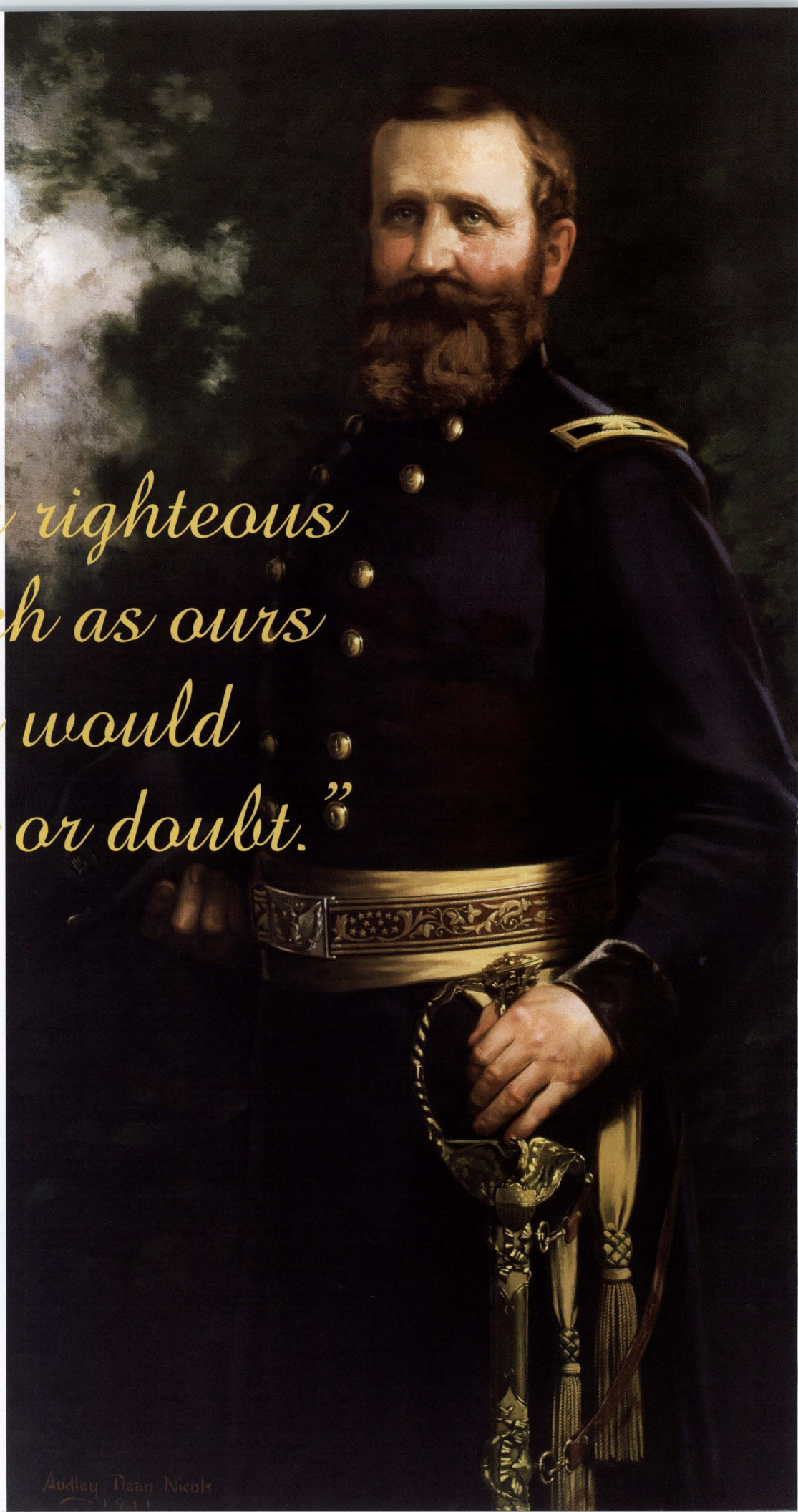


*“...with a righteous
cause such as ours
who would
hesitate or doubt.”*

Alexander Hays holds his
presentation sword in an oil
painting by Audley Dean Nicols
(1911), who also painted Hays’
infamous flag-dragging scene.

The sword, designed by
Tiffany & Co., was presented
to Hays by the citizens of
Pittsburgh in 1863.

Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and
Memorial, Pittsburgh, Pa., photo by Richard A. Stoner



The Civil War Letters of Brigadier General Alexander Hays

By Robert Gorczyca

While Alexander Hays was leading Union volunteer units in our nation's Civil War, he also took time to write to his wife, Annie, and a small circle of relatives in Pittsburgh. These letters, published with a wealth of related materials in 1919, are a valuable source about one of this area's principal military figures.¹ Surprisingly, this rich collection remained untapped for more than 80 years; several historians mention Hays in passing, particularly when dealing with the Battle of Gettysburg, but no one has written about him in a substantial way.

As this article examines Hays' letters, a tragic tale emerges, revealing an intelligent, courageous, and patriotic leader who also had a reputation for reckless leadership.² His brash ways not only tainted the good name he was literally fighting to achieve, but frustrated his hopes to join the upper echelon of the Union Army officer corps.

Hays responded immediately when Lincoln called for volunteers in April 1861. He assumed the rank of captain and leadership of an infantry company called the City Guards by virtue of his status as a West Point graduate and veteran of the Mexican War. When the 12th Pennsylvania Volunteers absorbed the Guards, Hays quickly advanced in rank to major, third in command of the regiment.³ The 12th moved to Camp Scott near York, Pa., for training through May 1861.

The major's letters from the site

reveal conflicting sentiments. Writing to his wife on May 12, Hays praised his men, saying they were "conceded to be the most perfect combination of soldiers and gentlemen ... yet called into service of this honorable commonwealth."⁴ On the other hand, Hays expressed dissatisfaction with his rank and the subordinate position in which he served. He appealed to Pennsylvania Gov. Andrew Curtin for a promotion and his own command. Confident of a response, he confided to his wife that it was his "intention to accept any preferment offered."⁵

When the governor failed to respond, Hays accompanied the 12th Regiment to Cokeysville, Md., where it had the task of guarding a section of the North Central Railroad, an important link between Baltimore and Harrisburg. Although Hays described the area as "the worst secessionist hole along

"take part in the struggle that would determine the permanency of our free institutions"

the ... line," the regiment's skittish recruits presented more danger than the few citizens arrested for acts of sabotage to the rail and telegraph lines.⁶ Hays characterized the arrests as "dirty work" and complained of "witnessing the agony of mothers, wives and sisters when their loved ones are torn away."⁷ He justified the arrests on the grounds that they would help to "make Maryland a sound Union state" and vowed, "God help the Rebels" if they attacked the 12th.

The tension of the first days in Maryland gave way to the inevitable boredom of guard duty. This, combined with poor treatment, generated several breeches of discipline. The suppression of the worst of these, described by Hays as a mutiny, resulted in the death of one of the members of the regiment.⁸ Hays assessed the situation this way:

In a few days over two weeks this regiment will be disbanded if it does not disband itself sooner. The truth is the men have been treated in a shameful manner and are disposed to become refractory, as their time draws to a close. The worst is that Campbell [the regiment's commander] takes little interest in discipline, and leaves it to me. I am determined that they will not disgrace themselves while I am connected with them....⁹

The major's fears proved unwarranted, and the men received their discharge papers on August 5, 1861. Despite his pledge to maintain discipline, Hays engaged in a quest for transfer and promotion that undermined the morale of his men. Hays believed serving with the 12th in a backwater of the war hindered his opportunities.¹⁰ Motivated by this belief, and failing to win advancement from Gov. Curtin, Hays directed his wife to launch a petition campaign on his behalf while he lobbied Secretary of War Simon Cameron for his own command. His first effort with Cameron won Hays the offer of a captaincy in the Regular Army. Hays considered the rank insufficient for a man with a wife and seven children. He wrote about it, "The captaincy I will not accept, and should I be refused, what I believe is due me, I will retire altogether from the service to spend my life in peace."¹¹

Hays continued his quest, swearing to "play second fiddle to no ambitious ignoramus" and portraying himself as the only reliable officer in the regiment.¹² It is not known if Secretary Cameron agreed with this assessment, but at a second meeting on June 29, 1861, he gave Hays the opportunity to return to Pittsburgh and recruit and take command of a regiment of volunteers as a colonel. Hays knew that his departure would undermine the morale of the men. On June 20, 1861, he noted, "the regiment has gone to sticks" and "news that I will not remain with the regiment has completed what the want of capacity in others began."¹³ Despite such knowledge, Hays accepted Cameron's offer.

Hays recruited men for his new command, the 63rd Pennsylvania Volunteers, through mid-September 1861. The call to arms Hays posted in the Pittsburgh papers presents clear evidence of his determination to fight. He gave assurance of "prompt, active, and honorable service" and urged all who desired to "take part in the struggle that would determine the permanency of our free institutions" to enlist immediately. As the troops enrolled, they traveled to Washington, D.C., where Hays took command when the ranks filled. His first letter from the capital, dated September 18, 1861, captured some of the excitement he felt about his new assignment:

I am here safe and sound, and if you had witnessed my reception you would be disposed to jealousy. This family of 900 children were frantic, and if ever a poor parent were hugged to death,



Hays at his headquarters,
winter 1863 – 64.
The original photo was
retouched by hand.

I came near suffering. I am very much pleased with my regiment, as I ought to be, for it pleases everybody else. We are still engaged in arming and equipping, which is very tedious, and requires the time of all my staff.

But Hays soon changed his attitude and complained about the “incessant annoyances” of his men that, he said, caused him to lose his “equanimity of temper.” Nonetheless, he boasted that no better-disciplined regiment could be found, and that his word was gospel “from the major down to the nigger cook.”¹⁴

In October, the 63rd camped near Alexandria, Va., where drill, guard duty, and work on the defense system of the capital shaped the daily routine.¹⁵ In addition, the men built their winter quarters and participated in parades and reviews. Hays took great pride in his appearance, and parades gave him an opportunity to show off a bit, as is evident in this account:

Leet Shields [his horse, named for the Shields family patriarch] was on parade and if he had borne a king, he could not have behaved more handsomely. Everybody says ‘what a noble animal,’ and as I ride through Washington and Alexandria, I overhear the remarks highly complimentary to the rider....¹⁶

In March 1862, the regiment took up picket duty on Washington’s perimeter, guarding against an attack by Confederate forces several miles away. The 63rd Regiment sustained its first casualties when the Rebels ambushed a patrol led by Lt. Col. A.S.M. Morgan. Hays characterized the encounter as a

"I have the reputation of speaking too plainly, which I cannot avoid if I speak at all."

disaster but denied any responsibility for its consequences: "The fault is too egregious to be within my jurisdiction, and I am patiently awaiting the actions of higher authority. The reverse of any blame upon myself, I still fear that Morgan will have to suffer the consequences of investigation."¹⁷ It does not speak well of Hays that he absolved himself of responsibility for the tragedy; he had picked the men for the patrol and ordered it into the field.¹⁸ The letters provide no indication of disciplinary action taken against any member of the 63rd. Perhaps the matter got lost in the confusion of the army's move south to begin the Peninsular Campaign, but the colonel's reputation suffered, particularly after the circulation of rumors of drunkenness among members of the patrol.¹⁹

The colonel's outspoken nature reinforced doubts about his judgment. Hays wrote of the amicable quarrels that arose when discussing strategy with his superior, Brig. Gen. Samuel P. Heintzelman. Although it may be commendable that Hays argued with his betters, one wonders how wise, particularly when he quoted the general saying, "I knew you twenty years ago and you always have your own way."²⁰ Hays recognized the inherent danger of such behavior, but confessed to his wife, "I have the reputation of speaking too plainly, which I cannot avoid if I speak at all."²¹

As the 63rd Regiment prepared to sail for the Yorktown Peninsula, Hays reassured relatives at home, writing, "With a full faith peculiarly my own, I believe I have been reserved for something good, and with a righteous cause such as ours who would hesitate or doubt."²² Before departing, Hays sent blessings and love to his children; to his wife he wrote, "As much love as a man can feel for a woman take for yourself, for you have it always."²³ A short time later, Hays and his men sailed to Fort Monroe, Va., to join McClellan's army as it fought its way toward Richmond.

The Peninsular Campaign of 1862 gave Hays his long-awaited opportunity to meet the enemy. In April, the 63rd sustained light casualties during clashes at the Peach Orchard and at Wynn Mills. Hays characterized these encounters as skirmishes, reporting that his men "stood nobly to the task."²⁴ Pleased by the Union Army's progress, Hays pronounced himself "as hopeful as a bridegroom" that Richmond's fall would end the war. On May 27, the 63rd camped within 10 miles of the Confederate capital. Four days later it engaged the enemy at Fair Oaks in its first major battle. Hays reported, "The regiment has done its duty but is badly cut up." It sustained 150 casualties in the encounter.

The offensive lost momentum, and the 63rd took part in the Seven Days Battle, sustaining heavy losses at Oak Grove, Glendale, and Malvern Hill as the army retreated to Harrison's Landing on the James River. On July 4, 1862, Hays reported on those fights:

For seven days it has been one continued battle, awfully severe to us, but doubly so to the enemy. The 63rd has covered itself in glory, but most dearly bought. We have lost in killed and wounded every third man. For two days in succession we have supported regular batteries of artillery, and we are on the tongues of all men. 'There goes the fighting 63rd.' The artillery has great faith in the 63rd.

The tenacity of the regiment brought several commendations. Gen. Kearney, commander of the 1st Division in which Hays served, stated that Hays and the 63rd "won for Pennsylvania the laurels of fame."²⁵ Brig. Gen. S.P. Heintzelman, Hays' Corps commander, commented on the 63rd's "distin-

guished good conduct and gallantry in the campaign in front of Richmond" in his report to Pennsylvania's Gov. Curtin.²⁶ Generals Birney, Berry, and Robinson referred to Hays as "a brave, judicious, gallant, and worthy officer" when they petitioned Lincoln for his promotion to brigadier general.²⁷ Hays, pleased with these accolades and confident of a promotion, boasted it was "conceded on all hands that it [the promotion] has been fairly won."²⁸

Although the Army of the Potomac failed to take Richmond, Hays remained optimistic about the course of the war and confident that McClellan would prevail. Not of the same mind, Lincoln abandoned the Peninsular Campaign and ordered McClellan's army north.²⁹ While these events took place, Hays fought an almost fatal illness, about which he wrote:

I believe I was the last man in the Army of the Potomac to give in, but the exposures, fatigues, and excitements of the 'time before Richmond' were too much even for me. The miasmatic influences of the swamps had pervaded my whole system. Thank God I am free from the dregs of the disease and again feel as hearty and active as a stripling.³⁰

Hays also commented that he required rest "for both the mind and the body to resume balance," indicating that stress – what was later called battle fatigue – might have contributed to the colonel's illness.

The 63rd Regiment joined Pope's army on August 13, 1862. Delayed by his illness, Hays resumed command on August 25 at

a very weissmoment.



"I don't ask for much, but what I get should be of very good quality."

weisshouse®

SHOWROOMS ON HIGHLAND

324 S. HIGHLAND AVE
412.441.8888

VISIT US AT WWW.WEISSHOUSE.COM

DESIGN STORE ON WALNUT

5511 WALNUT ST
412.687.1111

TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH THE ART OF ROBERT GRIFFING

TRANSPORT YOUR STUDENTS BACK IN TIME TO ONE OF THE MOST
DRAMATIC, YET MOST NEGLECTED, PERIODS OF AMERICAN HISTORY
– THE FIRST FRONTIER --

**THE EASTERN WOODLAND INDIANS
LIFE ON THE FRONTIER
THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR**

BOOK: *Thought Provokers*

Over 100 Assignments * Hand-On Activities* Interdisciplinary
Approach* Chronology and Study Guide *Addresses Ethical
Questions * Develops Critical Thinking and Problem Analysis

VIDEO: *Bringing History to Life*

Using Griffing's Art to Make History Come Alive in the Classroom

CD-ROM: *The Art of Robert Griffing*

15 prints: Eastern Woodland Indians
15 prints: The French and Indian War

**Call Robert Millward (724-357-5593) millward@iup.edu
Paramount Press (800-647-2901) ppi@madbbs.com**

--- Indiana University of Pennsylvania ---

"We received here the most terrible fire I have ever experienced, to which the 63rd replied hotly."

Warrenton Junction, Va. As the Union Army retreated northward, Stonewall Jackson attempted to pin it against Bull Run. The ensuing confrontation became the Second Battle of Bull Run during which Hays suffered a serious leg wound.³¹ He described the battle and his wound while receiving medical treatment at Brown's Hotel in Washington:

I gave the order to forward with trailed arms, and the boys answered with a deafening cheer. We drove them before us like sheep until they took shelter behind the railroad. We received here the most terrible fire I have ever experienced, to which the 63rd replied hotly. For some time we were unsupported, but my regiment never wavered.... A large ball struck the main bone between the ankle and the knee, not breaking it, but perhaps splintering it, glancing off and breaking the smaller bones. The entrance hole is larger than a half dollar. I assure you I have a sore shin, but a quarter inch variation would have cost me my leg.³²

Hays returned to his family in Pittsburgh when granted medical leave. He never regained full use of his injured leg, and although he wore a special boot for support, he limped in such a manner that many of his men thought he had a wooden leg. While recovering, Hays received notification of his promotion to brigadier general, subject to the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate.

Hays retained his fighting spirit despite his infirmity and higher rank, and upon returning to Washington in November 1862, he haunted the halls of the War Department seeking an assignment in the field. In high spirits, Hays joked about the "interesting" way he limped and about the couple who operated his boarding house, saying,

Our landlord, his lady, and an ugly little dog, all at one time were in the service of Jeff Davis and they are all 'sesesh' [Confederate sympathizers] even unto the dog, whose attempts to bite me I consider not only an evidence of the remarkable instincts of the animal, but satisfactory evidence of my devotion to the Union.³³

His effort at the War Department paid off when Hays received command of a brigade stationed near Centreville, Va., in January 1863.³⁴ Uncertain of the competence of his men, Hays instituted a rigorous training program. He dismissed 15 officers he considered unfit, and as many more resigned under the pressure of his discipline. Hays sometimes spent the night in the saddle as he relentlessly held his men to the task of guarding a 15-mile section of the Washington perimeter.

In April 1863, Hays expressed disappointment when not given command of his division:

For a time it was believed that I would have command ... and it gave particular satisfaction to my own brigade, and the whole division, for I have their confidence. A few days since, General Casey [has taken command]. It is insinuated that I am too fond of fighting, which is ridiculously absurd as many other reports made of me. I really do not know what our soldiers enlisted for, but I know they want a little fun.³⁵

Hays did not explain the "other reports," but that reports existed indicates some suspicion about his fitness to lead. Moreover, if Hays considered going into battle "fun," he gave support to the charge that he was "too fond of fighting."

Hays mentions two incidents that generated and sustained rumors about his reliability. The first took place in early March 1863 when the 1st Pennsylvania Reserves joined Hays' brigade. He wrote, "Anyone here who thinks I have a 'sinecure' had better try it on. The 1st Pennsylvania Reserves behaved so badly that I was compelled to disarm them. Their arms are to be returned, but they are not to be trusted, except under compulsion."³⁶ The officers of the Pennsylvania Reserves told a different story, explaining in a letter to Gov. Curtin that Hays stormed into a peaceful camp and held them under armed guard without justification. They accused Hays of being either drunk or crazy and closed their letter with this appeal:

Our objective, Governor, is to ask if such conduct on the part of a ... Brigadier General is to be tolerated, if he is to be allowed to act as he has and use epithets the lowest and most degraded to a set of men who have spent twenty months in the service of their country. Such, Governor, is our statement which we submit to you, hoping and believing that you will not allow such conduct on the part of an Officer to go unpunished, and that you will speedily have meted out to the offender his due.³⁷

Such action by Hays seems, at best, impolitic.³⁸ At worst, it marked Hays as one who lacked judgment and self-control. Gov. Curtin expressed his anger by lobbying against Senate confirmation of Hays' promotion to brigadier general. Writing on March 13, 1863, Hays described the effort:

My principal wish has been accomplished, to see my nomination confirmed, which was done last night as you will see by the paper.... The 1st Pennsylvania Reserves smarting under my discipline, and by wish of ... Curtin, etc. sought to defeat me, and raised heaven and earth to accomplish it, but I have triumphed.

The second incident took place in June when troops commanded by Gen. Hancock moved into camp. Mrs. Hays, visiting her husband at the time, reported the situation as follows:

The Second Corps ... arrived last evening, and such a sight I never saw. The men were completely demoralized.... They were committing some depredations when Alex would stand it no longer. He called for 'Dan' [his horse] buckled on his sword and pistols and dashed in amidst them, [and] ordered them to move on....³⁹

A short time later, when Hays served under Hancock at Gettysburg, Mrs. Hays confessed that it seemed "a little strange that Mr. Hays should command part of a corps that two weeks ago he had pointed two of his guns at to make them obey."⁴⁰ No sign of an investigation followed the incident, but it gave support to rumors about the general's judgment already in circulation.

Hancock's troop movement preceded the Union Army's attempt to block Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania. On June 24, Hays received orders to command Hancock's Third Division, already on the move north. Hays must have felt some sense of vindication after being passed over for such a position two months earlier. For the next four days, he and his men marched toward Pennsylvania. Writing from Uniontown, Md., Hays informed his wife of his promotion and the difficulties of the march:

"The Second Corps ... arrived last evening, and such a sight I never saw. The men were completely demoralized...."

*"We have promise
of a fight. My
command will
do its duty.
I have been
in the saddle for
the past twenty-
four hours."*

I was placed in command of the Third Division, Second Corps.... We have promise of a fight. My command will do its duty. I have been in the saddle for the past twenty-four hours. I need not tell you that I am much fatigued. We marched thirty miles yesterday. The army is much pleased with its new commander.⁴¹

On July 1, 1863, the division rested at Taneytown, Md., while eight miles away the first day's battle at Gettysburg took place. The Third Division marched to the town early the next morning and took a position at the extreme north end of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge.

Throughout the day on July 2, the Third Division engaged in heavy skirmishing and twice attacked sharpshooters firing from a barn on its front. In addition, the First and Third brigades supported units engaged in heavy fighting on the division's flanks. The men rested on their arms during the night and resumed the fight in the morning. Hays described the events of July 3:

The daylight of the 3rd was a signal for renewed hostilities, and during the forenoon was a repetition of the practice of the preceding day, except their skirmishers appeared more pretentious in their assault. About 11 o'clock a.m. an entire lull occurred, which was continued until nearly 2 o'clock p.m. Anticipating the movement of the enemy I caused the house and barn that interrupted the fire of our artillery to be burned. At the hour last named they opened upon our front and the most terrific and uninterrupted fire came from their artillery. I cannot believe there was less than eighty pieces bearing on us within good range.⁴²

Horrible though it was, the Confederate bombardment did not devastate the Union line as anticipated, so Hays and his men had considerable strength ready as they awaited the Confederate charge. Hays' described the attack in his official report:

... a heavy column ... debauched from the woods opposite our lines. Their march was as steady as if impelled by machinery, unbroken by our artillery, which played upon them a storm of missiles. When within a hundred yards of our line of infantry the fire of our men could be no longer restrained; our lines arose from behind the stone wall, and before the smoke of our first volley had cleared away the enemy in consternation, were risking flight; many attempts to rally them by their officers were in vain. In less time than I can account they were throwing away their arms and appealing most piteously for mercy. The angel of death alone can account for such a field as was presented.⁴³

This account fails to capture the intensity of the fighting, nor does it indicate how uncertain the outcome. More forthcoming in a letter to his wife dated July 7, 1863, Hays described his survival as miraculous. He characterized the battle as the "most terrible fought between men," and mourned the loss of 14 of his 20 orderlies.

As Pickett's attack waned, Hays and two of his aides picked up several battle flags left on the field by the Confederates. They rode before the Union line dragging the flags in the dust to the cheers of the men. Gen. Meade, checking on the possibility of counterattack, did not enjoy these theatrics. Lt. John

Egan, an artillery officer in the vicinity, quoted Meade as saying, "I don't care for their flags. Have they [the Confederates] turned?"⁴⁴ Hays had once again antagonized a superior who controlled his destiny. Writing after Hays died, Meade aide Col. Theodore Lyman expressed surprise that Hays had not been killed sooner because he always led his men into battle. He likened Hays to Custer and a small number of officers who, Lyman said, had a peculiar disposition that allowed them to enjoy fighting and "go gaily into battle." It is fair to say that Lyman implied that an element of irrationality tainted the general's bravery, an assessment that, if shared by Meade and others, explains why Hays failed to win a promotion during the last 11 months of his life.⁴⁵

Hays encountered several sources of frustration in the months after Gettysburg. He found Meade's failure to destroy the Confederate Army particularly disturbing. On July 13, 1863, Hays brimmed with optimism when reporting Lee entwined in the coils of the Union Anaconda. Five days later he announced Lee's escape, stating:

After three days of inglorious ease and mortification at the escape of Lee ... we are off to war again in Virginia which should have been settled in Pennsylvania. We are tired of scientific leaders and regard strategy ... a humbug. Next to cowardice. What we need is a leader who will go ahead.⁴⁶

Failure to get credit for the victory at Gettysburg also disturbed Hays. He made his thoughts on the matter clear in a letter written in July to his father-in-law in which he stated, "There is no mistake whose command decided the Battle of Gettysburg. It was 'The Blue Birds' [Hays' nickname for the Third Division]."⁴⁷ That others were not of the same mind caused Hays to complain of a conspiracy designed to keep his name from the public.⁴⁸ In November 1863, he bewailed Edward Everett's failure to mention his name during a lengthy description of the battle presented as part of the ceremony dedicating the cemetery at Gettysburg.⁴⁹ This, combined with Gen. Meade's failure to recognize Hays for his contributions to the victory, caused him to wryly lament his fate, saying, "Meade's report was enough to crush our enthusiasm, but Everett's polished speech makes us hesitate and doubt our own identity. Perhaps we were not at Gettysburg. Oh foul! Most foul!"



Soldiers and Sailors Hall

One of the country's finest military collections can be found in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh at Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial. The memorial to Civil War veterans of Allegheny County was proposed in 1905 by the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans organization. Designed by Henry Hornbostel, and completed in 1910, the memorial still boasts an ornate 2,400-seat auditorium, banquet hall, and meeting rooms. It was originally county-owned but operated by Civil War veterans who donated many of their "relics." The records of every veteran from Allegheny County who served in the Civil War also are available.

Soldiers and Sailors became an independent institution in January 2000. The collection was inventoried and stabilized; cataloging and conservation are ongoing. The museum has 40 new exhibits chronicling American involvement in military conflicts from the Civil War to Afghanistan.

The museum offers educational programs ranging from school tours to Elderhostel programs to a Footlocker program where the museum goes to classrooms through artifacts and educational materials. Soldiers and Sailors hosts two annual living history series where WWII and Civil War re-enactors set up camp on the lawn in August and October.

Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial, 4141 Fifth Ave. in Oakland, is open 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., Tuesday – Saturday. For more information, call (412) 621-4253.

Everett's omission is explained by the fact that he relied on Meade's aide, Col. Lyman, for information about the battle, but it cannot be determined if oversight or vindictiveness caused Lyman to exclude Hays from the official record of the battle.⁵⁰ It does seem that Gen. Hays deserved better. The Third Division did not decide the Battle of Gettysburg as Hays boasted, but neither did it play an inconsequential role, and at least one historian, Edwin Coddington, credits Hays with actions that were instrumental in stopping Pickett's charge at the north end of Cemetery Ridge.⁵¹

Failure to win a promotion also troubled Hays. His letters are punctuated with questions, suggestions, strategies, and concerns regarding the subject. A letter Hays wrote to John Penny, a Pennsylvania state senator, serves as a good example of his lobbying efforts:

I see frequently men whose maiden swords never have been, and never will be flashed, promoted over myself.... If success, as it appears, is the criterion, I am entitled to some consideration, for I have never been whipped.... It is admitted that I have never lost one foot of ground before the enemy, but have invariably driven him when ordered to do so.⁵²

Hays also sought help from Ulysses S. Grant who knew Hays from their days at West Point and from their service together in the Mexican War. He confidently and quaintly assured his wife of the commander-in-chief's support, writing, "I see him rarely, but I think I can clinch my nail there, if it is not so already."⁵³ In addition, Hays and his wife lobbied Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, but the general's name did not appear on Stanton's promotion list despite a distant relationship between Mrs. Hays and Mrs. Stanton.⁵⁴

One other lobbying effort is worthy of mention. Hays attempted to win Gov. Curtin's support for his cause with the following plea, made at the end of a long letter seeking a promotion for his aide, David Shields:

I have no private claims to prefer, but it would give me some satisfaction to have your endorsement for major general (before I get killed) but there is no use asking that.... I will add that our army never was so well prepared.... We have faith in Sam Grant and unwavering devotion to the government through Abraham Lincoln its prophet.⁵⁵

All these efforts, made over a period of nine months, failed, giving Hays ample cause for dismay. Nonetheless, he retained his sense of humor, joking that "the firm of 'Lincoln and Stanton' had omitted to forward the extra star I ordered at Gettysburg." However, Hays remained determined to get the "extra star" and vowed to win with his saber what "the craven must buy."⁵⁶

Hays had little time to dwell on his misfortune. His letters brim with accounts of battles, marches, patrols, alerts, and parades. He boasted that if given the opportunity, his division alone could capture Richmond. It never had the chance, but on several occasions the Third Division had its mettle tested. Two clashes came on October 14, 1863, when the Union Army retreated from Culpeper, Va., toward Washington. The Third Division, acting as the rear guard, came under heavy Confederate fire at



Brevet second lieutenants Ulysses S. Grant and Alexander Hays, 4th Infantry, at Camp Salubrity, Louisiana, 1845, from Hays' 1919 biography by George Thornton Fleming, "Life and Letters of Alexander Hays."

FOR LEASE

247 FORT PITT BOULEVARD

1st FLOOR - Suitable for Photography or Recording Studio

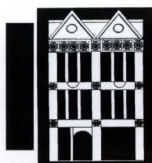
Approximately 1,100 square feet - Clear span, high ceilings
Available immediately.

2nd & 3rd FLOORS

1,700 square feet on each floor
Attractively built out with exposed brick
Large conference room on each floor
Kitchens & many other amenities
Great river and city views
In the heart of the Firstside Historic District
Attractive rental
Available immediately

For further information or to arrange a tour, please call

KEN GOLDSMITH • 412/566-2300



K. Goldsmith & Co., Inc. • 247 Fort Pitt Boulevard • Pittsburgh, PA 15222

412-566-2300 • FAX 412-261-2434

Join us on The Web - <http://www.kgoldsmith.com>

Auburn. There Hays and his men beat back a cavalry charge, allowing the Union Army to continue its movement north. Writing to his father-in-law, Hays described the encounter:

On the morning of the 14th we took the road at daybreak, and after an hour's march came upon the enemy at Auburn. They opened upon us in all directions, evincing [sic] an intention of giving a general engagement. As we had no particular desire to fight them there, I was ordered ... to break through the enemy with my division. Our first attempt did not succeed for the chickenheartedness of a major commanding my skirmishers. I selected one of my Harper's Ferry regiments and threw them forward. In a short time the enemy's cavalry charged them in heavy force, but the boys received them with a withering volley, and instantly the plain was covered with riderless horses. It was a noble sight and a gallant action.⁵⁷

Later in the day at Bristoe, the Third Division repulsed three charges by the Confederates, again allowing the army to continue unmolested. The general's comments on this battle are also worthy of note:

The scene at the battle of Bristoe was fearful. The slopes on the plain over which the enemy charged was covered with killed and wounded, and the cries

**The Hays monument at
Gettysburg was erected
by the state in 1915.**



HSWP Library & Archives, Gilbert Hays collection

Hays' family and friends gathered at his monument at the Wilderness, June 3, 1905. His aide, David Shields, is second from left in the foreground. The cannon marks where Hays was mortally wounded in May 1864.



HSWP Library & Archives, Gilbert Hays collection

and groans of the latter were distressing. Although our victory was complete, it was not without cost. The loss in my division will amount to about two hundred.⁵⁸

The Third Division also participated in battles at Locust Grove, Mine Run, and at Morton's Ford on the Rapidan River. Hays counted 13 bullet holes in his uniform after the encounter at Morton's Ford. He attributed his survival to the kindness of "Providence" and believed that his survival was a sign that he was "preserved for some good end yet."⁵⁹ He expressed the hope that news of his involvement in these actions would finally bring him a second star, though it did not.

In March 1864, Meade implemented a plan to reorganize the Army of the Potomac. Hays called it a farce and predicted that the change would result in his demotion. Although he retained his rank, Hays indeed lost command of the Third Division.

Assuming command of a brigade, Hays took the defeat with good grace, pointing out with considerable satisfaction that the 63rd Pennsylvania Volunteers, the men he recruited and trained in 1861, were part of his new command.⁶⁰ Nor did the demotion diminish his zeal, for Hays trained his new regiments with the same determination and dedication that marked his earlier efforts.⁶¹

A disquieting element enters Hays' letters at this point. On several occasions, he assured his wife and father-in-law that he drank no hard liquor raising the possibility that alcohol played a part in his impulsive behavior in the Morgan affair and the incidents with the Pennsylvania Reserves and Hancock's troops.

At the end of April 1864, the Army of the Potomac made its final preparations before going into the field. Hays looked forward to the spring campaign, and his men won recognition as the corps' outstanding brigade. Still hopeful that such honors would help his cause – but with a touch of resignation and bitterness – Hays confided in his father-in-law that some of his superiors were afraid to give him an "opportunity for development." Then, referring to his courage and the lack of it in others, he added, "every man is jealous of the possession in others of that which he most needs."⁶²



Alexander Hays' memorial at Allegheny Cemetery is ringed by nine 6-pounder cannons buried muzzle down, typical of cannons cast c. 1800. This is possibly the largest concentration of historic cannons in the area, though seven of the nine are believed to be replicas, considering the crudeness of their castings. This monument was erected by the soldiers of his command.

HSWP Library & Archives, Gilbert Hays collection

Hays filled the letter written to his wife on May 3, 1864, with the comments of a man who gave little thought to his mortality. He wrote of getting up with the sun and of a tornado that ripped through the camp stampeding his livestock. He complained of boots cut too small and unpaid claims against the government. He closed in typical fashion with these words:

Now good-bye and God bless you, with my love to all. Write always, for your letters will come in time, and they are a great satisfaction, even when I cannot answer. All our boys are well, well mounted and sanguine.

This was the general's last letter. On May 4, 1864, the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River. Gen. Hays' brigade engaged the enemy the next day in a heavily wooded area called the Wilderness. Hays fell, mortally wounded while pausing to give a word of encouragement to the men of the 63rd Regiment. He died a short time after being taken from the field. Mrs. Hays received word of her husband's death via telegram from Secretary of War Stanton. His body arrived in Pittsburgh on May 13, 1864. The burial in Allegheny Cemetery the next day followed a service in the city's First Presbyterian Church. Business activity ceased during the funeral, and a military escort accompanied the general's body to the cemetery.

"every man is jealous of the possession in others of that which he most needs."

So ended the life of Alexander Hays. Fortunately his letters remain, imparting a human dimension to a story that is often told solely in terms of battles won, tactics employed, and casualties inflicted. More importantly, the letters provide an opportunity to bear witness to his courage and determination. Was his reputation as a reckless leader deserved? Did his superiors deal unfairly with Hays? Whatever the answers, it remains that Hays died a patriot whose unrelenting will to destroy the enemy contributed significantly to the Union victory. Mrs. Hays continued to work on her husband's behalf and received word of his promotion to major general in April 1867, three years after his death.⁶³ ☼

Robert Gorczyca received his M.A. in History from Duquesne University, and taught history at Peabody High School in Pittsburgh for 30 years. Since retiring in 1991, he has written numerous plays and articles on local history.

- 1 George Thornton Fleming, ed., *Life and Letters of Alexander Hays*, (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1919). Letters written by Alexander Hays are identified by the date of the letter. The person's name and the date of the letter identify letters written by others. Information acquired from Fleming's commentary is identified with his name and the page where found.
- 2 Hays married Annie McFadden of Pittsburgh. They settled in Pittsburgh in 1851 after living in Alexander's hometown, Franklin, Pa. As a civil engineer, Hays did design and surveying work for railroads and municipalities in and around Pittsburgh. Fleming credits him with surveying and naming the Mexican War streets of Allegheny, Pa.
- 3 During his service in the Mexican War, Hays won a commendation for bravery and was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. After the war, he operated an iron making business in Franklin, Pa. When that failed, he joined the Gold Rush to California but returned to Pennsylvania after a year.
- 4 May 12, 1861.
- 5 May 19, 1861.
- 6 May 26, 1861.
- 7 May 31, 1861.
- 8 June 17, 1861.
- 9 July 6, 1861.
- 10 July 3, 1861.
- 11 June 24, 1861. Hays chose to decline a position in the Regular Army because starting rank was higher and promotion quicker in the volunteers. In another letter, Hays stated that if he did not get a promotion he would return to private life, and he and his wife would "slide down the other side of the hill of life together."
- 12 July 12, 1861.
- 13 June 20, 1861.
- 14 Sept. 26, 1861.
- 15 Oct. 3, 1861.
- 16 The 63rd was assigned to the First Brigade, First Division, Third Corps.
- 17 March 10, 1862.
- 18 March 30, 1862.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Feb. 27, 1862.
- 21 May 3, 1862.
- 22 March 17, 1862.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 April 18, 1862.
- 25 Gen. Kearney's official report in Fleming, 242.
- 26 Gen. Heintzelman's letter in Fleming, 260.
- 27 Petition in Fleming, 271.
- 28 August 24, 1862.
- 29 Stephan B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None, The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, (New York, 1978), 341.
- 30 July 25, 1862.
- 31 Bevin Alexander, *Robert E. Lee's Civil War*, (Holbrook MA: Adam's Media Corp., 1998), 51 – 58.
- 32 Sept. 2, 1862.
- 33 Nov. 30, 1862.
- 34 Hays commanded the Third Brigade in Gen. Casey's division of the 22nd Corps.
- 35 April 20, 1863.
- 36 March 8, 1863.
- 37 Letter from the officers of the 1st Pennsylvania Reserves to Gov. Curtin, MG19, Pa, State Archives, Civil War Muster Rolls, 1st Pa. Reserves. Provided by Dr. Richard A. Sauers, formerly curator, Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial, Pittsburgh, Pa.
- 38 The Pennsylvania Reserves were created by the state legislature at the request of Gov. Curtin to be used at his discretion in defense of the state.
- 39 Mrs. Hays, June 20, 1863.
- 40 Mrs. Hays, July 6, 1863.
- 41 June 30, 1863.
- 42 Official Report on the Battle of Gettysburg by Brig. Gen. Alexander Hays, Fleming, 411.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Edwin Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: a Study in Command* (New York: Scribners, 1968), 531.
- 45 Theodore Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters, 1863 – 1865; Letters of Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox, selected and edited by George Agassiz*, (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 93, 139. George R. Stewart, *Pickett's Charge: A microhistory of the final attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 141, states that combat affected Hays with an "almost sexual excitement."
- 46 July 18, 1863.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 July 13, 1863. Part of the difficulty that Hays encountered was because another Hays served at Gettysburg, Brig. Gen. William Hays, who took command of the Union Second Corps when Gen. Hancock was wounded.
- 49 Nov. 22, 1863.
- 50 Wills, Gary, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 50.
- 51 Coddington, 509, 514.
- 52 April 5, 1864.
- 53 April 17, 1864.
- 54 Mrs. Hays, Dec. 18, 1863.
- 55 April 15, 1864. Gov. Curtin did endorse Hays' request for a promotion. News of it arrived two days after Hays was killed in battle.
- 56 April 17, 1864.
- 57 Oct. 17, 1863.
- 58 Oct. 17, 1863.
- 59 March 22, 1864.
- 60 Letter from Gen. Hancock to Gen. Hays, March 24, 1864, and letter from Gen. Williams to Gen. Hays, March 25, 1864, in Fleming, 560, 561.
- 61 April 9, 1864.
- 62 April 17, 1864.
- 63 The posthumous promotion provided Mrs. Hays with an increased widow's pension.