

The Famous, Missing Painting

By Brian Butko



Betty G.Y. Shields

The best-known – but most elusive – image of Gen. Alexander Hays is a painting of him dragging Confederate battle flags following Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. The incident was a pinnacle of the battle, a triumphant moment for the Union. One soldier called Hays' ride "the grandest view of my life."¹

Hays is holding the flag of the 28th North Carolina, which today is exhibited at The Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond. Behind him are Capt. George P. Corts, assistant adjutant general, and Lt. David Shields, aide-de-camp. There are numerous written accounts of the incident; one of the most vivid is by Shields:

Flushed with the glory of our victory, in the exuberance of that great joy that comes from such a victory, looking upon the trophies of war, the most valuable trophies that can be taken from an enemy, their standards – while still in the hands of their captors – when the enemy were retreating in disorder and confusion, the general exclaimed, "Boys, give me a flag." The Rebel color was handed him. He then commanded his adjutant general, Capt. George P. Corts, and myself, saying, "Get a flag, Corts; get a flag, 'Dave,' and come on." We each took a flag and the general immediately dropped his flag behind his horse and trailed it in the dust and blood of the battlefield. Capt. Corts and I did likewise, and we started the grandest ride men ever took ... [the enemy] keeping up a brisk and not ineffectual fire upon their triumphant adversaries, their artillery also dropping shells upon our position to cover their retreat.

[Our men were] throwing their caps high in the air as we rode along, cheering lustily in their exuberance,

showing their admiration for their glorious division commander, some men dancing in their delirium of their joy, others hugging their comrades in close embrace, wild with the exultation of victory.

There were times when we had to weave in and out in our course to avoid riding over wounded Rebels and even prisoners still coming in and going to our rear.

These men, enemies at that, could but admire so intrepid a commander as General Hays, though at the time feeling most keenly the insult to their colors.... These were the only moments in action I never felt fear.²

Betty G.Y. Shields, executive director of Sewickley Valley Historical Society, is interested in more than just the Sewickley roots of Hays and his aide; she married a grand-nephew of Lt. (later Capt.) David Shields. She says that David commissioned the painting about 1910 from Sewickley artist Audley Dean Nicols, who went on to greater fame for his Western landscapes. The painting hung in David's house until his death in 1937, when his sister Wilhelmina, not liking the graphic scene, gave the painting away.

The painting has appeared in various books in black and white, and Gettysburg's Cyclorama has a sepia version on display. The image here is a tinted photo. Copies were apparently given to friends and family; this one, in Betty Shields' possession, is the only one known to survive. A decades-long search has yet to turn up the painting itself, which is likely in a private collection.

¹ George Thornton Fleming, ed., *Life and Letters of Alexander Hays*, (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1919) 424.

² *Ibid.*, 464-65.

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