

# The Importance of Preserving Myer's Hill



**By John Cummings**

The Myer's Hill Battlefield is quite noteworthy among preservation sites. Its story covers not only a military action, but also a poignant tale of Fredericksburg war refugees, who, like Wilmer McClean of Manassas to Appomattox fame, couldn't keep clear of the fighting. Additionally, it features an amazing moment of peril to the commander of the Army of the Potomac, as well as the sad capture of numerous Union soldiers and the tragic death of one of their Lieutenant Colonels. It is capped off by the destruction of the property caused by the poor judgment of its civilian caretaker, while the conscripted owner endured battle less than two miles from his beleaguered home. It is the site of near disaster, and tragedies all around.

John Henry Myer had sought to distance his family from the horrors of war by moving them to his newly acquired farm, nine miles as the crow flies, to the southwest of ravaged Fredericksburg. The tranquility they sought lasted only a year, as the Spring Campaign of 1864 descended on the area of Spotsylvania Court House.

For several days the slight elevation would provide Confederate cavalry a place to observe Union maneuvering toward the right flank of Lee's entrenched army. Helping to anchor this footing were two Napoleon 12 pounders of McGregor's battery of Horse Artillery. Their

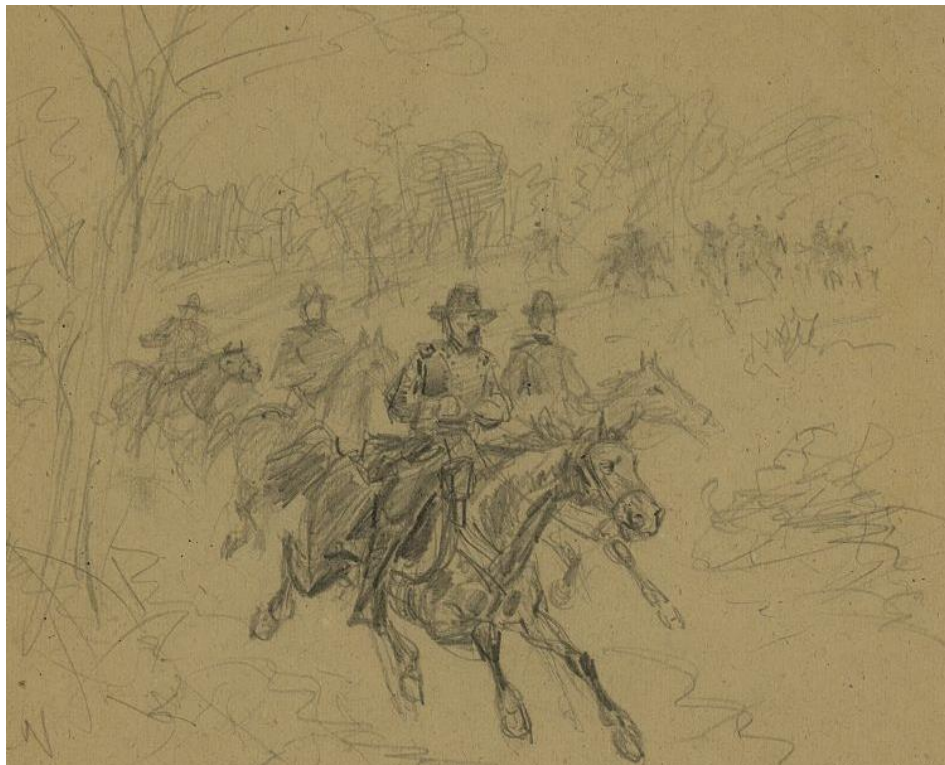
presence prompted the attentions of Warren's arriving infantry in the early morning hours of May 14, 1864, and after a brief firefight, the hill was in Union hands. Later in the day, Confederates returned in larger numbers and temporarily kicked Colonel Emory Upton's command from its position.

Watching the property for the newly conscripted Myer was Thomas Jett, a 52-year-old illiterate who had worked as a laborer in the Courthouse area. Jett clearly introduced himself to the occupying Union soldiers as he is mentioned, by name, in correspondence found in the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, as a "temporary occupant".

Jett was thought to be the owner of the house by some, including Army Surgeon Daniel M. Holt of the 121st New York. In his diary, Holt describes an incident during the retreat of Upton's command, late in the day on May 14<sup>th</sup>. His entry for the 15<sup>th</sup> states, "We burned the large house and outbuildings because the owner was a rebel and upon our evacuating yesterday, fired into our *"demoralized"* ranks. It was a good building and its destruction *helped* to pay for that shot."

Exacerbating the ire of Upton's command was the death of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Wiebeck of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Jersey, who's body was maltreated and robbed by Confederates after pushing Upton's men off the hill.

During the same embarrassing retreat, Army of the Potomac commander George Gordon Meade escaped artillery fire, and was nearly captured by a Confederate major descending on the general by horseback. The attempt was thwarted, but Meade was infuriated, and lost his glasses in the tussle.



Numerous Union Infantrymen were captured in the afternoon melee, with many being sent to Andersonville Prison, where some died within months of capture.

Myer's Hill is not just the scene of passing armies, it is a dramatic stage that epitomizes so much of what the American Civil War entailed, militarily, as well as the harsh hand dealt to the civilian population.

**In 2018, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust began the acquisition of a vitally important piece of property at Myer's Hill, preserving more than 73.3 acres. To learn more or donate, please visit: <https://www.cvbt.org/myers-hill-donate>**

*John Cummings is a Spotsylvania area historian and the author of three books on the region. He has been an advocate for the preservation and interpretation of the Myer's Hill property for over twenty years, exploring the ground and assembling the story of the fighting there, as well as the lives of those affected by it, both military and civilian. He is the publisher of the Spotsylvania Civil War Blog, <https://spotsylvaniacw.blogspot.com/> and a local battlefield guide.*