

Deconstructing the History of the Battle of McPherson's Ridge

Myths and Legends of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina on the First Day's Fight at Gettysburg

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In the early afternoon of July 1, 1863, the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina Regiment, under the leadership of twenty-one-year-old Col. Henry King Burgwyn Jr., launched itself into Civil War immortality with its charge into Herbst's Woods on McPherson's Ridge against the Iron Brigade, specifically the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Regiment. With few variations, historians tell the celebrated story of this charge thusly: The Twenty-Sixth North Carolina began their attack with 800 men sometime around 3:00 p.m. They crossed three hundred yards of wheat fields, pushed into the thick brambles at the edge of Willoughby's Run, splashed through that shallow creek, and entered the thin woods on the slope of McPherson's Ridge. They closed to within just a few paces of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan, suffering and inflicting enormous casualties along the way. At the height of the charge, Capt. W. W. McCreery of brigade commander J. Johnston Pettigrew's staff raced up to Burgwyn and relayed a message from Pettigrew: "Tell him his regiment has covered itself with glory today." Soon after uttering these words, McCreery impulsively picked up the fallen regimental battle flag and held it aloft for a moment before being killed by a shot to the chest. A few moments later Burgwyn picked up the banner and was mortally wounded as he handed it to another soldier. Lt. Col. John R. Lane then hoisted the flag and led the regiment in a final, ultimately successful charge to push the Yankees off McPherson's Ridge. Just before retreating, Cpl. Charles McConnell of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan took careful

aim and shot Lane in the back of the head from just a few yards away. Lane was the last of thirteen color bearers to be shot that day. Of the 800 men who attacked, only 216 emerged unscathed; Company F suffered 100 percent casualties in the charge. Several decades after the battle, Lane met the man who shot him and embraced McConnell in a stirring moment at the 1903 Gettysburg battlefield reunion.

Described this way, the battle between the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina and the Twenty-Fourth Michigan makes for a very dramatic and poignant story. The Twenty-Sixth North Carolina—which went on to suffer more losses during the Pickett-Pettigrew charge on July 3 at Gettysburg and in the retreat across the Potomac on July 14—became very proud and protective of its distinction as the regiment that suffered the greatest loss in any battle during the war. Regimental members claimed upward of 88.5 percent casualties—enduring evidence of extraordinary bravery and sacrifice. However, some of the iconic elements of the battle have become so enshrined in legend—largely through continual retelling—that it is difficult to know what is actually true about the fight. Several key sources used to tell the story have serious problems of authenticity or accuracy yet have largely been accepted as gospel, testament to the fact that historians can show faith in a source if we want to believe the story it tells.

Historians have struggled to reconcile some of the disparate accounts of the battle, but the basic story and specific details recounted above emerge



Col. Henry King Burgwyn Jr. Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

intact in nearly every history of the battle.¹ This could be because the authors of those histories have rarely examined the most obvious problem—nearly all the descriptive accounts of the charge were

¹ Most of the details mentioned above originated with the first regimental history: George C. Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," in *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65*, ed. Walter Clark (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901), 2:303–423. Though most comprehensively told in Rod Gragg's *Covered in Glory: The 26th North Carolina Infantry at the Battle of Gettysburg* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), the history of the regiment's experience at Gettysburg is also well covered in other works, such as (in chronological order by date of publication) Glenn Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg: The Campaign in Pennsylvania* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 145–50; Warren W. Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads: The First Day at Gettysburg* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 112–14; Archie K. Davis, *Boy Colonel of the Confederacy: The Life and Times of Henry King Burgwyn, Jr.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 308–39; Champ Clark, *Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1986), 61–62; R. Lee Hadden, "The Deadly Embrace: The Meeting of the Twenty-Fourth Regiment, Michigan Infantry and the Twenty-Sixth Regiment of North Carolina Troops at McPherson's Grove, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1, 1863," *Gettysburg Magazine* 5 (July 1991): 19–33; Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The First Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 280–84; Earl J. Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels: The Pettigrew-Kirkland-MacRae Brigade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 122–37; Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 210–11; Steven E. Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2003), 77, 83–84; Allen Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 195–96.



Lt. Col. John R. Lane. Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

written from memory (or secondhand memories) decades after the fact. Though trained to be skeptical of their sources and to weigh all the evidence, even historians can be seduced by the drama and magnificence of a story. A careful examination of the sources allows us to deconstruct the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina's mythic role in this battle and reveals that much of the beloved story is not as certain as it seems.

Historians have perhaps been most charmed by the first official history of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina, supposedly written by a member of the regiment, George C. Underwood, in 1901.² Underwood's account of the first day's battle of Gettysburg is very detailed—so detailed in fact that it ought to make one suspicious. Underwood grandiosely claimed to be an assistant surgeon with the regiment, but an assistant surgeon would not have participated in the charge. So Underwood's first-

² The history first appeared in volume 2 of Walter Clark's five-volume history of North Carolina regiments and then was published later that same year as an individual book. For ease of reference, this article refers to the original essay version in Clark's series. The standalone book version is George C. Underwood, *History of the Twenty-Sixth Regiment of the North Carolina Troops in the Great War 1861-'65* (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901).

person narrative, in which he recounted specific details and conversations as if he witnessed and heard them, seems doubtful. It becomes even more dubious when one learns that not only was Underwood certainly not an assistant surgeon at Gettysburg but that he was not present in *any* capacity at that battle. According to the regiment's military records, George C. Underwood was a second lieutenant of Company G who resigned on July 22, 1862, because of health reasons, and never rejoined the regiment. Underwood—who in 1860 had been a student living in the household of W. S. McLean, a medical doctor and the original captain of Company G—had likely lent a hand in the hospital during his only year of service, but he was never given the title or paid as an assistant surgeon.³

Since Underwood's credibility is compromised and he was not a witness to the events he described, it begs the question: did Underwood even write the account of Gettysburg? And if Underwood did not write the story, who did? The probable author of the account of the first day's battle of Gettysburg (and perhaps the entire book) was William Hyslop Sumner Burgwyn, the younger brother of the regiment's colonel who died in the



William H. S. Burgwyn, as member of the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina Regiment. Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

battle.⁴ In an effort to memorialize his brother and the regiment at Gettysburg, William Burgwyn collected much material about the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina and became its unofficial historian. Burgwyn had also authored a history of his own regiment, the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina, and was an adjutant general and chief of staff of the North Carolina Division of the United Confederate Veterans organization at the turn of the century, playing a key role in telling the story of the Confederate heroism in the war. Several clues in the work give away Burgwyn as the author. The clearest is when the author discussed the number of casualties after the first day's battle, referencing

William H. Fox's book, *Regimental Losses in the Civil War* (1889). In one passage the author writes, "In a letter to *the writer* dated 30 September 1889, Colonel Fox says." That September 30 letter was addressed to Burgwyn and the original (identical to the one quoted in the book) is in the Burgwyn Papers at the State Archives of North Carolina.⁵

³ "Underwood, George C., Co. G, 26th North Carolina Inf., Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of North Carolina, M270, National Archives, Washington, DC, found in www.fold3.com (hereafter CSR); Weymouth T. Jordan Jr., comp., *North Carolina Troops: A Roster* (Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 1979; repr., 2004), 7:549, 711; 1860 U.S. Census for Chatham County, North Carolina (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, found in www.ancestry.com). While the *North Carolina Troops* addenda states that Underwood "served 'at different times' as acting Assistant Surgeon of the 26th Regiment," the source of that information is Underwood's published history. Underwood's history lists the actual assistant surgeon at Gettysburg as William W. Gaither and merely lists himself and W. S. McLean as "acting at different times as assistant surgeon" during the war. Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:371, 395.

⁴ There are various names by which William Hyslop Sumner Burgwyn is referred. He signed his own letters W. H. S. Burgwyn. Archie Davis, in his biography of Harry Burgwyn, claims that W. H. S. was known as Sumner or Will, but there is little evidence that those names continued into adulthood. Harry Burgwyn referred to him most frequently as Willie in his early wartime letters but addressed him directly in letters as William and referred to him exclusively as William in his last letters, indicating that perhaps the childhood cognomen passed away as William entered adulthood. In this article, he will be referred to as William Burgwyn.

⁵ Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:423 (emphasis added). Cf. William H. Fox to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 30, 1889, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), William Hyslop Sumner Burgwyn Papers, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC (hereafter Burgwyn Papers, SANC). See also "United Confederate Veterans: A Complete List of General Officers," *Confederate Veteran* 8 (May 1900): 217; William H. S. Burgwyn, "Thirty-Fifth Regiment," in Clark, *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*, 2:591–628. In the concluding acknowledgments to the history of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina, Underwood gave special notice to Burgwyn for his assistance. Indeed, Burgwyn deserved more than just a mention for his efforts. Perhaps because he

William Burgwyn was nowhere near Gettysburg on July 1, 1863.⁶ Though he was neither a participant nor an observer of the battle, his description suggests a first-person perspective. To be sure, it is a confusing narrative—switching from past to present tense in mid-delivery. He quotes unnamed sources, and sloppy punctuation and poor editing confuse the reader. It is unclear whether he is quoting someone else or he is telling his own account. On page 350, the author says, “A member of the Twenty-sixth regiment thus describes the situation,” and begins quoting that unidentified member. But he never closes the quote. Conversely, he copies a great deal—much of it verbatim—from an August 1890 speech that John R. Lane had given to Chatham County Civil War veterans, which had been printed in the local newspaper, but Burgwyn does not cite that material. He also embellishes and adds quotations that Lane never included in his speech.⁷ Burgwyn constructs his story of the battle by borrowing from accounts previously published or written to him personally by members of the regiment (albeit decades after the battle) and by filling in the gaps with his own ideas of what likely happened. Once we realize that the author of this account was not present at the battle, it becomes easier to understand many of the suspicious episodes and mistakes that exist in the account. One of those mistakes—and one of the myths that have become enshrined in the battle’s lore—is the belief that only



Assistant Quartermaster J. J. Young. From Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65*, vol. 2 (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901).

800 men went into the charge for the Twenty-Sixth that first day.

How Many Participated on July 1?

Most histories claim that 800 troops stepped off at Col. Henry King Burgwyn’s command that Wednesday afternoon and charged up McPherson’s Ridge.⁸ There is a satisfying simplicity to the round number, and it increases the pathos once the extraordinary casualty figures are subtracted from it. Yet in the early days and years after the battle, participants of the fight rarely agreed on the number of men in the firing line on July 1. The first person to venture a guess was Captain J. J. Young, the regimental quartermaster, who wrote to North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance, the regiment’s former commander, on July 4, 1863. In his letter, Young, who did not participate in the fight, stated, “We went in with over 800 men in the reg’t. There came out but 216 all told unhurt.” While the first number clearly was a rough estimate, the second number was more precise because Young felt he had gotten an accurate count of casualties after the battle. Yet as time passed, historians embraced Young’s 800 number and ignored his qualifier.⁹

The next contemporary source to refer to the number in the charge was Lt. John J. McGilvary of Company H, who wrote his father on July 9 from Winchester, Virginia, where he was recovering from

already authored the history of the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina Regiment in the same volume of Walter Clark’s series, Burgwyn urged that Underwood be the titular author of the Twenty-Sixth’s history.

6 He was on the Williamsburg Road, east of Richmond, Virginia, with the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina Regiment. Diary of Henry Brantingham and W. H. S. Burgwyn, entry dated July 1, 1863, SANC.

7 Underwood, “Twenty-Sixth Regiment,” 2:350–54; John R. Lane, “Colonel Lane’s Address,” *Chatham Record*, August 14, 1890. The author heartily thanks Eric Lindblade for bringing the latter source to his attention.

8 See Underwood, “Twenty-Sixth Regiment,” 2:373; Hadden, “The Deadly Embrace,” 32; Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, 112; Gragg, *Covered in Glory*, 141; Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky*, 83–84. Several websites also use the number definitively. See “A Brief Regimental History,” Society for the Historical Preservation of the 26th North Carolina, accessed July 22, 2014, <http://www.26nc.org/History/history.html>; and *Wikipedia*, s.v. “26th North Carolina Infantry,” accessed July 22, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/26th_North_Carolina_Infantry.

9 J. J. Young to Zebulon B. Vance, July 4, 1863, Zebulon Baird Vance, Governors’ Papers, box 167, folder 1, SANC.

his own wounds received in the battle. McGilvary declared, “The Reg’t went into action with about seven hundred and fifty effective men, and lost in killed, wounded and missing *Five hundred and forty nine*.”¹⁰ On July 30 Capt. John T. Jones wrote his father that 850 men went into the fight on July 1.¹¹ On February 10, 1864, Capt. Louis G. Young, General Pettigrew’s aide-de-camp, penned a lengthy letter describing the brigade’s participation at Gettysburg, focusing primarily on Pickett’s charge. In his treatise, Young mentioned that in the first day’s fight, the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina “lost 549 out of 800 men,” blending J. J. Young’s number of men present and McGilvary’s number of casualties.¹² The official records have a different number, as Surgeon Lafayette Guild’s report lists 588 killed or wounded in the three days’ battles, which is only four more than J. J. Young claimed were lost on the first day alone.¹³ Henry Clay Albright, captain of Company G, noted in his journal soon after returning to Virginia that 711 men in the regiment had become casualties during the campaign (88 killed, 483 wounded, and 140 missing).¹⁴ Several other soldiers wrote letters home during the war, but they shed no more light on the numbers of men present or lost.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, soldiers started recounting their experiences of the battle and debating the numbers involved. In June 1890 T. J. Cureton, who had been a lieutenant in Company B on the day of the charge, wrote to John R. Lane that he believed the Twenty-Sixth went into the fight with 850 men and suffered 580 casualties.¹⁵

¹⁰ John McGilvary to his father, published in “From the North Carolina Soldiers,” *Fayetteville Observer*, July 20, 1863 (original emphasis).

¹¹ John T. Jones to his father, July 30, 1863, in Clark, *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*, 5:133.

¹² Louis G. Young, “Pettigrew’s Brigade at Gettysburg,” in Clark, *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*, 5:120.

¹³ Report of Surgeon Lafayette Guild, July 29, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 27, part 2, 333; (hereafter cited as *OR* and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1). Guild’s report does not list how many were captured or missing, and many soldiers of the Twenty-Sixth were captured on the third day or during the retreat. In 1889 William F. Fox published *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War* (Albany, NY: Albany Publishing Company, 1889), but he derived his numbers for the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina’s casualties from Guild’s report listed in the *OR*. See William F. Fox to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 30, 1889, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

¹⁴ Henry Clay Albright, undated journal entry, [1863], Henry Clay Albright Letters, SANC.

¹⁵ T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 15, 1890, and June 22, 1890, John R. Lane Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter Lane Papers, SHC).

In a speech he gave two months later, Lane used Cureton’s numbers but admitted to the audience, “I think that our loss was still greater, because according to my recollection we went into the fight with over 900 guns.”¹⁶ In 1895 Albert S. Caison told his story in the *Southern Historical Society Papers* and confidently stated that 986 men went into the fight, though never indicating how he arrived at such a high and precise number.¹⁷

Also in 1895 George Underwood wrote William Burgwyn a brief history of the regiment, and in his description of Gettysburg, he asserted that 900 men attacked and 660 became casualties on the first day’s battle.¹⁸ However, by the time the history of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina appeared in print in 1901 with Underwood’s name on it, the participatory number had been revised down to 800, with 584 casualties, the exact numbers that J. J. Young had originally stated. The author explained that he derived his number from the company muster rolls, which Young had maintained in his personal possession. As we will soon see, however, 800 is a not a number that anyone could reasonably derive from the muster roll data. When Burgwyn received a copy of the muster rolls from Young, he noted quickly that far more than 800 must have been present. He wrote to John R. Lane with the information, and Lane responded on September 20, 1900: “I was near right when I all the time claimed that our Reg[i]m[en]t numbered for duty about 900” (just as he had declared in his Chatham County speech a decade earlier).¹⁹ Yet when Lane gave his speech at the Gettysburg battlefield reunion in June 1903, he, too, used the numbers presented in the official history.²⁰ Thus, the 1901 published account (with Underwood’s name on it) firmly established the iconic 800 number for most enthusiasts, descendants, and future historians.

The number appeared unaltered in every pub-

¹⁶ Lane, “Colonel Lane’s Address.”

¹⁷ Albert Stacey Caison, “Southern Soldiers in Northern Prisons: Experiences at Johnson’s Island and Point Lookout,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 23 (1895): 160. Caison claimed that only 220 soldiers emerged from the fight, for an astounding 746 casualties on the first day!

¹⁸ G[eorge] C. U[nderwood], “The Bull’s Eye at Gettysburg,” typescript, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC. Underwood’s thirteen-page typed history only loosely matches the published history. Much about the narrative had changed, and many details were added for the published version in 1901.

¹⁹ John R. Lane to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 20, 1900, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

²⁰ John R. Lane, “Address at Gettysburg, 1903,” typescript, Lane Papers, SHC.

lished history of the fight until 1982, when John W. Busey and David G. Martin published *Regimental Strengths at Gettysburg*. Using their own modified formula for accounting for effective troops, they determined that 895 men were present with the regiment that day and that 843 “engaged” in the fight.²¹ When they published a revised and updated edition in 1994, they subtracted three from both figures, giving 840 men engaged in the fight.²² Some recent scholars have deferred to Busey and Martin’s judgment and chosen one of the two higher numbers.²³ So just to recap (and maximize confusion), sources suggest 750, 800, 840, 843, 850, 900, or 986 men participated in the charge on July 1. But current scholars privilege just three of these numbers: 800, 840, or 843. So which is the most accurate number?

If the original muster rolls are to be believed, then the answer is that *none* of those numbers are correct (and perhaps not even close). Historians are fortunate that the only complete set of muster rolls for the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina from June 30, 1863, that exist are housed at the State Archives of North Carolina. How they came to be there is an interesting story in its own right. Muster rolls were filled out in triplicate, with one copy each going to the adjutant general’s office, the company commander, and the quartermaster for payroll purposes. Two copies of the June 30, 1863, muster rolls (along with many others) disappeared, but Captain J. J. Young, the regiment’s quartermaster, maintained his copy of the muster rolls in his personal possession after the war. No one knew that Young had preserved these records until he wrote to William Burgwyn on October 3, 1889, revealing that he had “a complete set of duplicates of all my official transactions during the entire war.” Young knew their value: “The originals I shall keep as heirlooms for my children.”²⁴ Burgwyn asked for copies, and the relevant rolls were in his possession by September 1900. Those heirloom documents, however, made their way to the archives over thirty years

21 John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths at Gettysburg* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1982), 174, 118–28. Busey and Martin determined their numbers by looking at field returns for June 20 and July 10 from a few units and extrapolating that number to the rest of the army.

22 John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1994), 174.

23 Sears (in his *Gettysburg*) opted for 840 present in the charge, and Hess (*Lee’s Tar Heels*) and Guelzo (*Gettysburg*) chose 843.

24 J. J. Young to W. H. S. Burgwyn, October 3, 1889, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC;

later when Young’s son and daughter donated them to the North Carolina Historical Commission, the precursor to the State Archives of North Carolina.²⁵

While John Lane excitedly proclaimed to Burgwyn that the muster rolls were “the best Evidence Possible” of who was in the fight on July 1, the muster rolls have many quantitative and qualitative discrepancies.²⁶ It would be fantastic if all the members of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina had lined up at tables set up in the fields outside Gettysburg to conduct a muster on June 30, 1863, as indeed the Underwood history claims.²⁷ But that was not the case. The clerk for Company D wrote in his muster roll, “The Regiment being upon a march into the enemies [*sic*] country, we were unable to carry along our rolls.”²⁸ Company F did not complete its rolls until September 15, 1863. The company clerks likely had to work from memory or notes to ascertain who was present or not.

The company rolls consist of multiple columns of name, rank, place and date of enlistment, date last paid, and who paid it. There is also a column indicating if a soldier was present or absent at the time of the muster. If present, the soldier’s name was written in the present column. The “Remarks” column, much wider than the rest, allowed for an explanation as to why any soldier was absent from the unit on the muster date (e.g., on detached service, sick in hospital, on furlough, absent without leave, deserted). On the back of the muster roll sheet was a caption block, which provided a synopsis of the company’s activities during the muster period, and a summary block, which allowed for a statistical accounting of men present or absent. As Busey and Martin note, “In a small number of instances the numbers of officers and men reported as present on

25 “Daily Record of Events,” vol. 2, entry dated April 27, 1922, North Carolina Historical Commission, SANC; see also *Biennial Report of the North Carolina Historical Commission, 1920–1922* (Raleigh, NC: Broughton and Edwards, 1922), 15. The records were donated on April 27, 1922, by J. J. Young’s children, Cadmus Young and Mrs. John Ellington (née Corrina Young). Genealogy found in www.ancestry.com.

26 John R. Lane to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 20, 1900, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC. Lane also cautioned Burgwyn in that letter that “the making up of Pay Rolls was not done hardly in a day[.] It takes days to do it[;] consequently [they] are not always entirely correct.” The author also claimed to have the August 31 muster rolls in his possession, but only Company G’s muster roll survives in the State Archives of North Carolina.

27 Underwood, “Twenty-Sixth Regiment,” 2:342, 372–73.

28 Company D muster rolls, June 30, 1863, box 50.1, folder 10, 26th Regt., NCT Muster Rolls and Regimental Records, 1862–1864, Military Records, Civil War Collection, SANC (hereafter 26th NCT, Civil War Collection); and Company F muster rolls, June 30, 1863, box 51.1, folder 1A, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection.

the company's name listing did not exactly match the statistical information for the same category on the Summary Block."²⁹ In fact, this frustrating discrepancy exists in every company of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina on June 30, 1863.

Knowing the limitations, let us look at the numbers present for duty on those muster rolls. The summary blocks for all ten companies tally to 917 at hand that day.³⁰ With 5 field and staff officers, that meant that 922 men and officers were present on July 1 with the regiment. However, the ten companies indicate that 957 men and officers (952 in the companies plus 5 field officers) were signed in as present with the regiment at the muster. Further research reveals that at least 7 more men who were listed as absent on the June 30 muster rolls must have been there, because they were later identified as wounded or killed at the battle. Adding those 7 makes 964 men and officers present for duty on July 1.³¹

Any muster roll number must always subtract a few of these men who were likely detailed to other duty that morning (such as guarding the knapsacks or serving as stretcher bearers or hospital stewards) or who were sick and incapable of service that day. But it is unlikely that more than a few dozen men would have been detached or ill that morning. Any number one chooses between 922 and 964 still is significantly more than 800. It is also difficult to understand how the author of the official history, who claimed to have looked at these same muster rolls, could have arrived at the number of 800, since the muster rolls give no hint of that number anywhere. The author erroneously says that the muster rolls show 885 men present for duty, and he arbitrarily decided that 10 percent were detailed for other duty, thus arriving at 800. The simple fact is that approximately 900 men (and perhaps more) entered the fight on July 1.³²

²⁹ Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths at Gettysburg*, 120–21.

³⁰ They actually tally to 919, but the clerk for Company F added his own statistics incorrectly, representing two more present than his own numbers indicate.

³¹ The field and staff officers who likely participated in the charge were Col. Henry King Burgwyn Jr., Lt. Col. John R. Lane, Maj. John T. Jones, Adj. James B. Jordan, and Sgt. Maj. Montford Stokes McRae. Just in case an extra layer of complication was necessary, there are three duplicate copies of Company G's June 30, 1863, muster roll, and none of the three match each other precisely—some list men absent, while others list the same men present. See Company G muster roll, June 30, 1863, box 51.2, folder 15, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC.

³² Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:373.

Who Participated in the Battle?

Now that we have examined *how many* were in the charge, let us explore some of the difficulties and confusion regarding *who* was actually present for the charge. By cross-referencing the names signed in as present for duty on June 30 (952 men) with their compiled service records and other postbattle casualty reports, we find many mistakes.³³ Some mistakes are straightforward and easily explained. Pvt. Hugh Ballou of Company A, for instance, was recorded as at-home absent without leave on June 30, but the compiled service records show that he was killed in action on July 1, 1863. Similarly, Pvt. Walter Denney of Company A was listed as absent "sick in hospital in Raleigh," but prisoner of war records show that he was captured at Gettysburg. The clerk of Company E did not sign Pvt. S. J. Dorsett in as present, but he also did not record a reason for his absence, indicating that he could not recall with certainty whether or not Dorsett had been present. He was present with the regiment, however, because prisoner of war records show that he was wounded and captured at Gettysburg. When the company clerks belatedly filled out the muster rolls, they simply did not remember that these men had returned to their units before June 30.³⁴

Company G's Alfred and Anderson Way were both listed as absent because they were under arrest for desertion. But Anderson's compiled service record shows that he was mortally wounded on July 1. Alfred is listed in the prisoner of war records as having been captured at Gettysburg. This seeming incongruity is explained in the official history of the Twenty-Sixth when the author asserts that on the march to Gettysburg, Lieutenant Colonel Lane rode among the deserters under arrest marching at the rear of the column and offered them a pardon if

³³ The compiled service records (which are located in the National Archives) were created by the U.S. War Department from Union and Confederate hospital records, prisoner of war records, Confederate commissary and quartermaster records, and Confederate muster rolls that came into the federal government's possession during and after the war. But the government is missing all the muster rolls of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina from May 1862 through December 1863. Therefore, any soldiers who were absent from the Gettysburg campaign but returned to their unit by January 1864 would not be noted as such, unless they showed up in one of the other records during that time. Fortunately, these missing muster roll records for the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina are located in the State Archives of North Carolina.

³⁴ Company A muster rolls, June 30, 1863, box 49.1, folder 7, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC; Company E muster rolls, June 30, 1863, box 50.1, folder 21, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC; and "Ballou, Hugh," Co. A; "Denney, Walter," Co. A; and "Dorsett, S. J.," Co. E, 26th North Carolina Inf., CSR.

they agreed to fight. If that account is accurate, then Alfred and Anderson Way presumably took advantage of Lane's offer and participated in the fight.³⁵

The real complications come when dealing with Company F. Led by Capt. Romulus M. Tuttle, the company became celebrated for supposedly suffering 100 percent casualties in the battle. Captain Tuttle claimed that 91 officers and men went into the fight on July 1 and that only one of them emerged unscathed, and even he was wounded on July 3. But many historians have misread this to claim that the company suffered 100 percent casualties in the first day's battle alone.³⁶ Soon after the battle, Tuttle, who was wounded in the leg, wrote an account from a Richmond hospital that was published in a local newspaper in which he recorded the status and nature of the wound of every soldier in his unit.³⁷ Intriguingly, several of the men that Tuttle identified as wounded were listed on the muster rolls as being absent. Privates William R. Payne and J. M. Holloway were listed as being on furlough, but Tuttle claimed they were wounded at Gettysburg. Their compiled service records prove that they were present at the battle and captured during the campaign. Privates Robert M. Braswell and Benjamin Taylor were listed as having deserted on December 10, 1862, but Tuttle listed Braswell as killed in action on July 1 and Taylor as wounded. The December 31, 1863, muster roll shows that Taylor deserted from a Winchester hospital on July 15, 1863, indicating that he had been present and wounded at Gettysburg. These are likely clerical mistakes—the clerk simply



Capt. R. M. Tuttle of Company F. From Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65*, vol. 2 (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901).

did not recall that these men had returned to their unit in time for the battle.³⁸

The case of Pvt. Redmond Church is not so easy to reconcile. Multiple accounts declare unequivocally that Church deserted in mid-June, just as the Gettysburg Campaign began. The June 30 muster roll claims he deserted June 18 at Culpeper, Virginia. Every surviving muster roll for the rest of the war also has him deserting sometime between June 15 and June 18, 1863.³⁹ On June 17 Cpl. Andrew Courtney of Company F wrote home that "Red[mond] Church . . . left us yesterday and started for home."⁴⁰ Therefore, it seems clear that Church was not at Gettysburg or anywhere near the state of Pennsylvania on July 1. Yet Tuttle listed Church as

35 Company G muster roll, June 30, 1863, box 51.2, folder 15, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC; "Way, Alfred," and "Way, Anderson," Co. G, 26th North Carolina Inf., CSR; Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:401. Alfred would enlist in the Union army from prison on September 22, 1863, and serve with them for the remainder of the war. So while he ultimately may have been a turncoat in the eyes of his Confederate comrades, he was likely present on July 1. Jordan, *North Carolina Troops*, 7:560–61.

36 Some of the historians who make this claim are Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, 114; Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg*, 150; Sears, *Gettysburg*, 210–11; Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 292–93; Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative* (New York: Random House, 1963), 2:476.

37 W. H. S. Burgwyn, "Unparalleled Loss of Company F, 26th North Carolina, Pettigrew's Brigade, at Gettysburg," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 28 (1900): 199–204. This was also republished in Clark, *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina*, 5:599–604. Burgwyn's essay is the publication of a letter sent to Burgwyn that R. M. Tuttle wrote to Edmund Jones, and the original is located in the Burgwyn Papers at the State Archives of North Carolina. Edmund Jones to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 1, 1900, Private Collections 4.3 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC. Tuttle himself had also published an account of Company F's total sacrifice in *Confederate Veteran* in 1895 (and it was subsequently republished in various forms in later issues of that journal). See Capt. R. M. Tuttle, "Company F, 26th NC Infantry," *Confederate Veteran* 3 (April 1895): 109.

38 Company F muster rolls, June 30, 1863, and December 31, 1863, box 51.1, folders 1A and 2, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC; Burgwyn, "Unparalleled Loss," 502–4; "Payne, William R.," "Holloway, J. M.," "Braswell, Robert M.," "Taylor, Benjamin," Co. F, 26th North Carolina Inf., CSR.

39 Company F muster rolls, June 30, 1863–December 31, 1864, box 51.1, folders 1A–4A, 26th NCT, Civil War Collection, SANC.

40 Andrew to Polly, June 17, 1863, courtesy of the Society for the Historical Preservation of the 26th Regiment NC Troops, copies in possession of author.

“badly wounded in foot” in the first day’s fight.⁴¹ No hospital or prisoner of war record exists for Church, and he did not die until December 2, 1916. Captain Tuttle never corrected the muster roll entries after he returned to command the company. If he knew Church had been wounded at Gettysburg, he would presumably have set the muster roll record straight so that Church or his family could continue to get paid for his service. So we are left with the mystery: what is true about Redmond Church?⁴²

The misidentification of Church and the others is simply a testament to the confusion and disarray that occurred immediately following the campaign. With so many members absent, wounded, or killed, it was impossible to know exactly who was present on July 1. Similarly, it was impossible to know precisely how many men were in the charge for Company F (or any company) on that day. Tuttle claimed that 91 men participated in the first day’s battle. In 1896 orderly Sgt. J. T. C. Hood confirmed Tuttle’s number and claimed that only one man was detailed for duty that morning. James Moore, a private in the company at the time of the battle, claimed in 1896 that only 87 men were present for the charge. John R. Lane claimed in his 1890 speech that 84 men went into the fight. None of these numbers match the muster rolls. The summary block of the muster roll states that 94 men were present for duty, but 102 individual names are signed as present that day. If we add in all the men who were listed on the roll as absent but who Tuttle claims were actually killed or wounded in the fight, then that number rises to 107 present for duty on July 1. The only person we know for certain who was present with the regiment but not in the fight is Pvt. Thomas W. Setser, because he says so in a letter penned to his uncle on July 29, 1863, though he does not say why he was absent.⁴³

Tuttle and Hood believed that all 91 men in the company became casualties in the first three days of July. Moore and Lane disagreed with the num-

ber present, but both agreed that they suffered 100 percent casualties, a fantastically high number that historians have embraced ever since. Yet again, the casualty figures do not mesh with the muster rolls. Fourteen men were signed as present on June 30 who did not suffer a wound on either the first or third day’s battle. There is no record of any of the fourteen being on detached duty or sick. As “glorious” as a 100 percent casualty rate may seem, one should be skeptical. Not only is it unlikely, it is also illogical that men, however well disciplined, would continue to press an attack unto their own annihilation, especially when they had both opportunity and justification to escape the carnage. Simply stopping to take cover behind a tree or helping a badly wounded comrade to the rear would have sufficed, and there were plenty of each from which to choose.

Memory and Historical Accounts

The difficulties of ascertaining the correct number of men present or casualties and reconciling the quantitative and qualitative sources lead us to an even thornier issue of determining whose account of the fight is the most accurate and reliable. Most of the firsthand accounts of the first day’s battle were written decades after the fact. It is nearly impossible to re-create from memory the specifics and nuances of any harrowing or adrenaline-fueled event, especially from such distance. Much scholarly literature has demonstrated that “flashbulb” memories simply decay over time; despite their confidence in their memories, humans cannot consistently recall precise details of traumatic events. Expecting any of the soldiers of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina to reconstruct the entire battle from memory is an impossible task, but many historians have accepted that they did anyway.⁴⁴

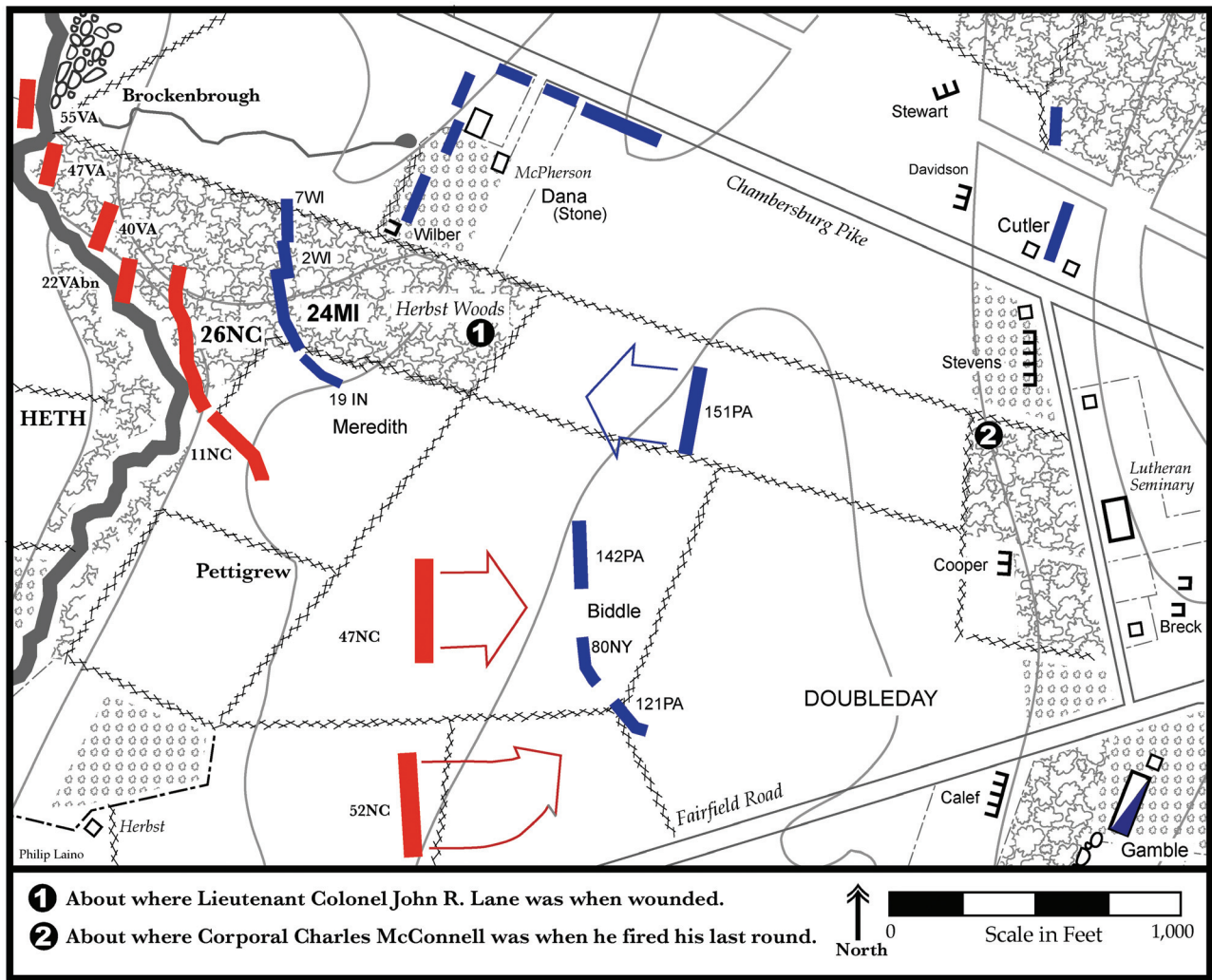
The first documented effort to describe the first day’s fight in some complete fashion occurred in

⁴¹ Burgwyn, “Unparalleled Loss,” 203.

⁴² “Church, Redmond,” Co. F, 26th North Carolina Inf., CSR; Redmond Church death certificate, North Carolina, Death Certificates, 1909–1975 (accessed June 5, 2014), Ancestry.

⁴³ Burgwyn, “Unparalleled Loss,” 201–2; Company F muster roll, June 30, 1863, box 51.1, folder 1A, 26th NCI, Civil War Collection, SANC; Lane, “Colonel Lane’s Address”; Thomas W. Setser to W. A. Setser, July 29, 1863, in “The Setser Letters, Part III,” ed. Greg Mast, *Company Front*, June/July 1989, 15. The summary block of the Company F muster roll actually says 96 were present for duty, but the clerk added his own figures incorrectly. His figures only add up to 94.

⁴⁴ These memories are referred to as flashbulb memories because they denote a particularly traumatic or remarkable event, as opposed to memory for ordinary everyday life (which is even less reliable). For just a few works on the inconsistency of flashbulb memories, see Dorthe Berntsen and Dorthe K. Thomsen, “Personal Memories for Remote Historical Events: Accuracy and Clarity of Flashbulb Memories Related to World War II,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 134 (May 2005): 242–57; Jennifer M. Talarico and David C. Rubin, “Confidence, not Consistency, Characterized Flashbulb Memories,” *Psychological Science* 14 (September 2003): 455–61; Martin V. Day and Michael Ross, “Predicting Confidence in Flashbulb Memories,” *Memory* 22 (April 2014): 232–42.



The attack of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina on the Twenty-Fourth Michigan, July 1, 1863. Map by Phil Laino.

June 1890 when T. J. Cureton wrote to John R. Lane to “give [him] some items on the charge of the first day at Gettysburg” for a speech that Lane was preparing.⁴⁵ Cureton, who had been a lieutenant in Company B on the first day’s battle, described part of the first day’s charge, including the wounding of Burgwyn and culminating just after the wounding of Lane. He warned Lane, however, “I write only from memory,” implying that some details may not be quite accurate. Indeed, in a second letter written a week later, Cureton did get some important details wrong. He declared that Gen. William Dorsey Pender’s division relieved the men of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina only after the latter had driven the Yankees away from Seminary Ridge, four

hundred yards distant from McPherson’s Ridge.⁴⁶ In fact, Pender’s division relieved Gen. Henry Heth’s division (of which the Twenty-Sixth was a part) on McPherson’s Ridge and suffered heavy casualties trying to drive the Union I Corps off of Seminary Ridge. On August 9, 1863, Maj. John T. Jones of the Twenty-Sixth wrote the brigade’s official report of the battle, stating that his regiment “followed” Pender’s division as it drove toward Seminary Ridge. This was simply a case of Cureton confusing the time sequence of events twenty-seven years after the fact.⁴⁷

In 1895 George Underwood sent a brief overview of the charge to William Burgwyn that was rather

⁴⁵ T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 15, 1890, Lane Papers, SHC.

⁴⁶ T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 22, 1890, Lane Papers, SHC.

⁴⁷ “Report of Major J. Jones,” *OR*, 27:2:643. Perhaps the best account of the Pender’s fight to take Seminary Ridge is Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 295–320.



Cpl. Charles McConnell in a photograph taken in 1900. From George C. Underwood, *History of the Twenty-Sixth Regiment of the North Carolina Troops in the Great War 1861-'65* (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901).

spare and nonspecific in its details but with enough questionable statements to give one pause. He suggested that Col. Henry King Burgwyn Jr. made the charge on horseback, while every other account has the colonel on foot, and he stated that 900 men participated in the charge.⁴⁸ Of course, as we now know, Underwood was not at the battle, and all his information came secondhand. By the time the history of the regiment with Underwood's name on it was published in 1901, several particulars had changed. Burgwyn was no longer on horseback;

⁴⁸ U[underwood], "The Bull's Eye at Gettysburg."

the number of men participating in the charge was now 800; and additional specific descriptions of the charge appeared. In fact, the account seemed too specific in the minds of some participants. Louis G. Young, Pettigrew's aide-de-camp, who followed behind the charging line to encourage the men forward, wrote to William Burgwyn from Savannah, Georgia, in August 1903: "When I read the account of the 26th regiment in the No. Ca. volumes I was surprised to find the best of all the reports made by Surgeon Geo. C. Underwood. I did not recall any one in the regiment capable of such admirable work."⁴⁹ Of course, this was all Burgwyn's handiwork, constructed from a variety of memories of veterans and his own ideas.

Burgwyn's authorship of the section on the Battle of Gettysburg is revealed by more clues than just his reference to William H. Fox's 1889 letter "to the writer" of the history, mentioned at the beginning of this article. The author discussed using the muster rolls preserved by J. J. Young. Young sent those muster rolls directly to Burgwyn, and items mentioned in their correspondence appear in the history. Several pieces of information gleaned from Burgwyn's correspondence with John R. Lane appear in the history. George Willcox, who had been a lieutenant in Company H at the first day's battle, wrote to Burgwyn on June 21, 1900, describing how he had been shot carrying the flag just before Burgwyn took it; that story appears in the history. The account of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan's Cpl. Charles McConnell shooting Lane concludes the description of the first day's fight. Burgwyn, who had corresponded with McConnell since 1896 and personally met him for the first time in the summer of 1900, made the deduction himself that McConnell had shot Lane. He made certain to include such a thrilling story in the history published the following year. Burgwyn also later published stories about the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina in volume 5 of Walter Clark's series, including the Tuttle and Hood letters about Company F at Gettysburg. Copies of those letters had been sent to Burgwyn, and the originals are in his papers. The writing style of the history of the Twenty-Sixth North Car-

⁴⁹ Lewis G. Young to W. H. S. Burgwyn, August 22, 1903, Burgwyn Papers, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), SANC. For unexplained reasons, Louis G. Young started spelling his first name as Lewis sometime after 1901 (when his essay in volume 5 of Clark's series was published).

olina is also very similar to that of the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina, which was authored by Burgwyn and published in the same volume of the Clark series. There seems little doubt that Burgwyn was the driving force and the not-so-hidden hand behind telling the story of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina at Gettysburg.⁵⁰

Other regimental members tried their hand at telling the history of the regiment and its participation at Gettysburg. In 1890 John R. Lane gave a speech in Chatham County about the battle and gave another one in 1903 at the Gettysburg battlefield reunion. Thomas Perrett wrote his own autobiographical account in 1905, while James Adams did the same in 1912. Yet Burgwyn incorporated an embellished version of Lane's 1890 speech into the 1901 published account, and for his 1903 speech, Lane merely copied the Burgwyn published account word for word, adding only one new sentence at the end. The Perrett and Adams accounts offer much interesting information about their own experiences, but when it comes to their discussion of the first day's fight, they simply plagiarize the Burgwyn account, sprinkling in a few personal anecdotes along the way. Therefore, all the major accounts of the fight used by historians lead back to Burgwyn.⁵¹

Once we realize that the main historical account of the battle is dubious, we cannot help but be skeptical of many of its highly specific details, especially if they cannot be substantiated by any other sources. After supposedly twelve color bearers had been shot down, Lieutenant Colonel Lane picked up the fallen flag, and William Burgwyn dramatically claims that Lt. Milton Blair rushed to him and said, "No man can take these colors and live," to which Lane calmly replied, "It is my time to take them now."⁵² Perhaps

that dramatic verbal exchange occurred as written, though no other source confirms it—Lane did not provide any quotes in his 1890 speech, and no letter from Blair or any other source corroborates it. In the only extant letter that recounts a specific conversation between Lane and Blair, T. J. Cureton, who was right there for the exchange, recalled that Blair actually held the colors and gave them to Lane when he asked for them, responding only with the mordant comment, "you will get tyred [*sic*] of them."⁵³ Perhaps Burgwyn was only relating what Lane told him in 1900, but Lane had written to Cureton in 1890 asking *him* for *his* remembrances of Gettysburg, suggesting that Lane (who had been gruesomely wounded in the head at Gettysburg) did not trust his own memories of the battle.

The "fact" that thirteen men were shot down carrying the flag is also difficult to substantiate. The Burgwyn history purports to name all thirteen men who were shot carrying the flag. But the author simply identifies the men of the color guard and the officers who picked up the flag after all the color guard had become casualties. It is extremely unlikely that all nine men of the color guard held the flag individually before they were shot—surely more than one member of the guard went down simultaneously when the enemy discharged a volley. Even if a scribe had been placed deliberately behind the color guard with the explicit duty to do nothing but record the flag bearers in the order that they were shot, it would be difficult to establish exactly who carried the flag. Given that no such scribe existed, it is impossible to identify precisely how many men carried the flag that day, much less who they were.⁵⁴

Another questionable story from Burgwyn's account is that of Capt. William W. McCreery delivering a stirring message from General Pettigrew just before the former's death.⁵⁵ Supposedly, McCreery, the brigade's assistant inspector general, unexpectedly ran up to Colonel Burgwyn in the thick of the fighting in the woods to deliver a message: "Tell

⁵⁰ See J. J. Young to W. H. S. Burgwyn, October 3, 1889, Private Collections 4.1 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC; John R. Lane to Burgwyn, May 14, 1900, and September 20, 1900, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC; George Willcox to Burgwyn, June 21, 1900, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC; Charles McConnell to Burgwyn, April 16, 1900, and April 24, 1900, Private Collections 4.3 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC; Burgwyn, "Unparalleled Loss," 599–604. Burgwyn and Clark were good friends, having served together in the Thirty-Fifth North Carolina Regiment.

⁵¹ See Lane, "Colonel Lane's Address"; Lane, "Address at Gettysburg, 1903"; Thomas Perrett, "A Trip That Didn't Pay," box 71, folder 46, Civil War Collection, SANC; Colonel James T. Adams, "History of the 26th Regt, NC Troops," box 74, folder 1, Civil War Collection, SANC. Thomas Perrett's full autobiography (in typescript) is located in subseries 1.4, folder 24, Archie K. Davis Papers, SHC.

⁵² Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:353. Gragg, *Covered in Glory*; Hadden, "The Deadly Embrace"; Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels*; and Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg*, all tell the story using this quote.

⁵³ T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 15, 1890, in Lane Papers, SHC.

⁵⁴ Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:374. At least one historian implies that he has reconstructed the chronological order in which the flag bearers were shot. Establishing the chronological order of their demise makes for good storytelling but is impossible to verify given the existing records and their flaws. Gragg, *Covered with Glory*, 117–36.

⁵⁵ Historians who relate the McCreery story in their histories include Gragg, *Covered in Glory*; Hadden, "The Deadly Embrace"; Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels*; Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg*; and Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky*.

him,' says General Pettigrew, 'his regiment has covered itself with glory today.'" McCreery then seized the fallen flag and was shot in the chest and killed instantly while advancing, "bathing the flag in his life's blood."⁵⁶ It is a very gripping and heroic tale. But does it make sense that McCreery would have said those words?

At the time that Pettigrew gave McCreery the order to convey a message to Burgwyn, the charge could not have been more than just a few minutes old. McCreery had started on horseback but had to advance on foot once his horse was shot out from under him, so it took him quite some time to get to the front of the regiment. When he left Pettigrew with his order, the Twenty-Sixth would have just crossed the creek and entered the woods and had not made any demonstrative progress from Pettigrew's point of view—the Twenty-Fourth Michigan had not yet been dislodged. All Pettigrew would have seen through the smoke was the large number of Confederate casualties littering the wheat field and the creek. So it seems somewhat unlikely that Pettigrew would have sent a celebratory message before success had been achieved. Perhaps it was meant as encouragement, as the author suggests, but Pettigrew could just as likely have been sending a more pointed military message to the regiment's commander about how to utilize the regiment to the best effect with the rest of the brigade.⁵⁷

The exact words he spoke are curious as well. In a July 9 letter to Governor Vance, Pettigrew used identical language about the Twenty-Sixth: "It covered itself with glory."⁵⁸ William Burgwyn quoted that letter later in the history. It is reasonable to infer that Burgwyn put those inspirational words into McCreery's mouth, since there is no contemporary participant that mentions hearing McCreery say those words. Burgwyn largely copied his version of the incident from Lane's 1890 speech, with one telling exception—Lane never mentions any words that McCreery spoke. Cureton does not relate the conversation in his letter, nor does Lt. George Willcox, who picked up the flag after McCreery had fall-

en. Therefore, one should be cautious when relating the precise details as told by William Burgwyn in his history of the battle. Burgwyn did not witness them, and no other source corroborates the stories as he told them.⁵⁹

Additionally, there is already evidence in the book that the author had embellished his narrative by attributing colorful words to a member of the regiment disingenuously. In his description of the July 1, 1862, Battle of Malvern Hill, William Burgwyn tells a humorous "incident of the battle" in which the soldiers, while advancing toward the Union position, cheered a rabbit that ran past their line. The author claims, "Colonel [Zebulon] Vance joined in the cry, saying: 'Go it cotton tail. If I had no more reputation to lose than you have, I would run too!'"⁶⁰ It is a colorful story and one that seems to fit naturally with Vance's reputation as a witty stump speaker. But the author had "borrowed" that story from another publication. The story had first been printed in 1888 in the Century Company's *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* series, with author David Urquhart attributing the quote to a Tennessee soldier in the Battle of Stones River. A Texas soldier attributed the same quotation to a Tennessee soldier at the first Battle of Bull Run. The story may simply be a humorous army legend used by soldiers to describe a whimsical moment of a serious fight. The author who was willing to add this imaginary story to his narrative of Malvern Hill likely would have been just as willing to create the conversations in the Gettysburg battle in order to add grandeur to the regiment's fight.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly for an author who neither was at the battle nor had ever been to the field to see the ground, Burgwyn also got some key physical details wrong. Most notably, he conflates McPherson's Ridge and Seminary Ridge. Nearly one quarter of a mile separated the two ridges, and Pettigrew's Brigade stopped after driving the enemy off of

⁵⁶ Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:352.

⁵⁷ See Lewis G. Young to W. H. S. Burgwyn, August 22, 1903, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

⁵⁸ J. Pettigrew to Zebulon B. Vance, July 9, 1863, Zebulon Baird Vance, Governors' Papers, box 167, folder 2, SANC (also quoted in Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:357).

⁵⁹ See Lane, "Colonel Lane's Address"; T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 15, 1890, Lane Papers, SHC; George Willcox to W. H. S. Burgwyn, June 21, 1900, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

⁶⁰ Underwood, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," 2:334.

⁶¹ See David Urquhart, "Bragg's Advance and Retreat," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century Company, 1888), 3:609. The Texas soldier, J. B. Polley, either wrote his account in a letter dated July 12, 1862, or added it later in his published account in 1910; see Richard B. McCaslin, ed., *A Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie, by J. B. Polley of Hood's Texas Brigade* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 39, 260n18.

McPherson's Ridge. Pender's division relieved them and drove the Union forces off of Seminary Ridge (with the remnants of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina following behind). Burgwyn did not understand this key geographic feature of the battlefield—that there were two distinct ridges. He wrote that after Lane grabbed the flag, he ordered a charge and the men of the Twenty-Sixth advanced to the summit of McPherson's Ridge “when the last line of the enemy gives way and sullenly retires from the field through the village of Gettysburg to the heights beyond the cemetery.”⁶² In fact, as multiple Twenty-Fourth Michigan sources attest, that regiment fell back and joined the rest of their I Corps comrades at a barricaded position on Seminary Ridge, in front of the seminary building, and fought off further Confederate attacks (by Pender's division) before finally retreating through the town.⁶³

Burgwyn's mistakes reveal a major flaw in the last celebrated episode of the first day's battle—the wounding of John R. Lane by Charles McConnell (and their later reconciliation). How did McConnell come to believe that he had shot Lane that day? The facilitator was once again William Burgwyn. In November 1896 McConnell, seeking out more information about the Twenty-Sixth, wrote to A. M. Waddell, who had mentioned the regiment in a speech dedicating a Confederate monument in Raleigh. Waddell put him in touch with Burgwyn and a friendship quickly developed.⁶⁴ Burgwyn and McConnell met in Richmond, Virginia, in June 1900 and discussed much about the war and the battle. In the course of conversation, McConnell recalled shooting a color bearer with his last cartridge just before he retreated through Gettysburg. Burgwyn replied, “Then you are the man who shot Colonel John R. Lane.”⁶⁵ Burgwyn believed that the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina had driven the Twenty-Fourth Michigan off McPherson's Ridge and into immediate retreat through Gettysburg. He knew Lane had been the regiment's last color bearer to be shot.

62 Underwood, “Twenty-Sixth Regiment,” 2:353.

63 See O. B. Curtis, *History of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan of the Iron Brigade* (Detroit: Winn and Hammond, 1891), 161–63; Donald L. Smith, *The Twenty-Fourth Michigan of the Iron Brigade* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1961), 128–38.

64 See A. M. Waddell to W. H. S. Burgwyn, November 18, 1896, Private Collections 4.3 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC; “Col. Lane Meets the Man Who Shot Him 40 Years Ago,” *Raleigh Morning Post*, May 24, 1903. There are more than a dozen letters and telegrams from Charles McConnell to Burgwyn (dated from 1897 to 1903) located in the Burgwyn Papers.

65 “Col. Lane Meets the Man Who Shot Him.”

Ergo McConnell must have shot Lane. Burgwyn put the story in his regimental history the next year. He also arranged for McConnell and Lane to meet in Raleigh in May 1903, just a few weeks before the fortieth anniversary reunion at Gettysburg. Both men were excited to meet each other in Raleigh, and in a poignant moment at the Gettysburg reunion, Lane embraced McConnell after giving his speech. Each man had photos taken at the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Monument, alone, together, and with Burgwyn. All three men died secure in the knowledge that McConnell had shot Lane and satisfied by the tone of forgiveness they had fostered in 1903.⁶⁶ It served as an example of the spirit of reconciliation so prominent at the time, and even recently it has achieved new currency during the war's sesquicentennial as news organizations and bloggers have touted their 1903 reunion as the epitome of reconciliation. Nearly every historian who has written about the two regiments since 1903 tells their story.⁶⁷

Although it is a great story, it is most likely not true. Every contemporary source (including Lane's own speech in 1890) attests that Lane was wounded just shy of the summit of McPherson's Ridge. McConnell almost certainly did not fire his last bullet until he was departing Seminary Ridge, four hundred yards away. McConnell tells us that himself. When they met in Raleigh in 1903, McConnell and Lane shared their story with a newspaper reporter. McConnell declared, “Our ammunition was exhausted, but I had one cartridge left which was to be the last shot we fired at Gettysburg.”⁶⁸ McConnell recalled that he took careful aim at the color bearer: “I fired,

66 See “Rather a Romantic Scene: Col. Lane Sees Man Who Shot Him,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 24, 1903; “At Gettysburg on Old Battleground,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 5, 1903; Gragg, *Covered with Glory*, 244; Lance Herdegen, *Those Damned Black Hats! The Iron Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2008), 248–50.

67 Rod Gragg retold a version of the story from his book for a July 2, 2013, editorial on the Fox News website; and the University of North Carolina Library blog series, *North Carolina Miscellany*, also posted a portion of a speech relating the story on its July 1, 2013, post. One commenter noted, “Perfect story for the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg,” which, of course, it is, even if it is not accurate. See Rod Gragg, “Gettysburg's Most Important Lesson,” FoxNews.com, July 2, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/07/02/gettysburg-most-important-lesson/>, accessed on August 27, 2013; John Blythe, “Greetings on the Gettysburg Battlefield in 1903,” *North Carolina Miscellany*, July 1, 2013, <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/index.php/2013/07/01/greetings-on-the-gettysburg-battlefield-in-1903/>, with the comment by MerUNCC14, accessed on August 27, 2013. For some of the historians who tell the story, see Gragg, *Covered with Glory*, 135; Hadden, “The Deadly Embrace,” 30; Herdegen, *Those Damned Black Hats!* 249; Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels*, 131–32; Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 284; Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg*, 149.

68 “Rather a Romantic Scene.”



William H. S. Burgwyn, in a photograph taken in 1896.
Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

saw him fall and then hastened to join my comrades retreating through Gettysburg to Culp's Hill." This final statement in the presence of Lane makes it clear that McConnell fired his shot as a last act from Seminary Ridge, not McPherson's Ridge, where Lane lay wounded. In a conversation with a Raleigh newspaper reporter two months later on the field at Gettysburg during the reunion, McConnell recounted the story once again, asserting that after he fired that last shot, he "with his comrades, silently fell back through the town to the heights beyond."⁶⁹

The difference of opinion about the length of time the battle lasted also supports the fact that McConnell did not shoot Lane. McConnell was convinced that his regiment's participation in the fight lasted nearly an hour and a half.⁷⁰ Louis G. Young,

⁶⁹ "At Gettysburg on Old Battleground." See also T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 15, 1890, Lane Papers, SHC; Lane, "Address at Gettysburg, 1903." Historians have experienced difficulty making the story work but have always tried. Gragg, Tucker, Herdegen, and Pfanz have Lane being shot in the right spot in Herbst's woods, but they ignore the fact that McConnell makes clear that he fired his last shot from the seminary position. Hadden is more ambiguous, having McConnell shooting Lane but not specifically stating where. In perhaps the most remarkable feat of reconstruction, Hess realized McConnell had to fire his shot from the seminary, so he has Lane moving the exhausted remnants of the Twenty-Sixth across four hundred yards of field in just "a few minutes" so that Lane could be shot there, ignoring all the evidence that Lane was shot on McPherson's Ridge; Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels*, 131–32.

⁷⁰ Charles McConnell to W. H. S. Burgwyn, August 3, 1903, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

who participated in the charge, disagreed. He wrote Burgwyn that the Twenty-Sixth's charge "could not have been more than 20 or 30 minutes."⁷¹ He reasonably argued, "With the odds against us and with such splendid troops [opposing] . . . we must have been annihilated if it had taken one hour and a half to go over the short distance of 300 yards." Young knew that the brigade (and the Twenty-Sixth's) part of the attack effectively ended at the summit of McPherson's Ridge. They did not continue on to the seminary. Acknowledging that men often recall times of battle differently, it is still clear that McConnell felt the Twenty-Fourth fought a much longer battle than Young claims the Twenty-Sixth did. They were both right. The Twenty-Sixth's charge up McPherson's Ridge lasted twenty to thirty minutes, but the Twenty-Fourth's fight lasted longer because they retreated back to Seminary Ridge and continued fighting. It was from this last line that McConnell fired his final bullet.

In his account published in July 1916 in the *National Tribune*, McConnell noted that the Twenty-Fourth "fell back by inches, until we had been driven out of McPherson's Woods . . . into the field beyond, preserving an alignment as we slowly retreated."⁷² He stated that they were relieved by the 151st Pennsylvania, while the 24th "was ordered to fall back to the Seminary" to mount another defensive stand. Strangely, McConnell then stated that "in a spirit of bravado, I walked back to the Seminary, a third of a mile away, disdaining to run." He claimed that when he got to the seminary, he saw the flight of the XI Corps and that that sight "transformed me into a record-breaking sprinter!" But this new version, written fifty-three years after the battle, does not match what he had told the newspaper reporters just thirteen years earlier, nor does it mention the fighting that the Twenty-Fourth ver-

⁷¹ Lewis G. Young to W. H. S. Burgwyn, August 22, 1903, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

⁷² Charles H. McConnell, "First and Greatest Day's Battle of Gettysburg," *National Tribune*, July 1916, transcript, Gettysburg National Military Park Library, Gettysburg, PA. McConnell had written a letter to his mother on July 2, 1863, that was published in a Detroit newspaper. In that letter, he mentions that when the Twenty-Fourth Michigan withdrew from Herbst's woods, the Rebels were held up by another regiment and artillery, which "mowed them down with charges of grape and cannister [sic]." This coincides with the artillery stationed at the Seminary Ridge line that inflicted heavy casualties on Pender's division. Notably, while McConnell mentions getting knocked down by a bullet that hit his blanket roll, he never mentions shooting a Confederate color bearer, nor does he mention sprinting through the streets of Gettysburg. See Charles McConnell, "Letter from Sergeant Charles McConnell," *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, July 8, 1863.



John R. Lane (*left*), William H. S. Burgwyn (*center*), and Charles McConnell (*right*), photographed in front of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Monument in Herbst's Woods at Gettysburg in July 1903. Courtesy of Mary Burgwyn Newsome.

ifiably did at the seminary. Perhaps McConnell was confused in his memories of the retreat, or perhaps his memory was simply failing him. It had been a long time. In 1903 he had noted that the battlefield did not look the same as he had remembered it in 1863, and it confused him because trees had been cut back significantly. It is not remarkable to find that memories are hard to keep straight forty or fifty-three years after an event.

Of course, memory is a frustratingly imprecise engine of recall, for flashbulb memories simply crumble over time. Those participants at Gettysburg confessed as much. Cureton warned Lane in 1890 when he wrote his account of the battle, "I am getting old and find it hard to recollect so far back or confirm my mind on it."⁷³ John Lane admitted to William Burgwyn in September 1900 that he had been mistaken in a soldier he thought had died at Gettysburg. It was "so long ago I hope you will excuse me," he pleaded.⁷⁴ Lane admitted to Burgwyn that details may be wrong, victims to uncertain memories, but he rationalized, "if any thing in it is not exactly as it was in ever particular[,] the intention of it was to be the Truth." Such was the case of Burgwyn's work. It was his intention to tell a good story to convey the "truth" of the fight, even if perhaps he had to imagine some of the details in order to tell it.

Any descriptive account of a battle at the granular level must indeed be taken with a grain of salt. William Burgwyn provided the backbone of the story that all historians have told since (even if they did not realize it was he who was telling it), but he wrote his account of the charge—for which he was not present—nearly four decades after the fact. He pieced together others' foggy memories, some muster rolls, and some published accounts, to create a realistic, but nonetheless artistic, account of the famous charge. Thus, thanks to Burgwyn's efforts, much of what we think we know of the charge is inaccurate. There were approximately 900, not 800, men who participated in the fight, and more than 216 emerged from the fight. Company F did not suffer 100 percent casualties either on the first day or in the entire campaign. We cannot know the precise words exchanged by the officers in the charge.

⁷³ T. J. Cureton to John R. Lane, June 22, 1890, Lane Papers, SHC.

⁷⁴ John R. Lane to W. H. S. Burgwyn, September 20, 1900, Private Collections 4.2 (mounted volume), Burgwyn Papers, SANC.

Finally, despite being a great story and serving as a wonderful example of reconciliation and forgiveness at the turn of the twentieth century, Charles McConnell's final bullet likely did not hit John Lane. We should be skeptical of such stories when only told for the first time many decades after the event. No matter how well-intentioned the storyteller was, as Lane suggested, the truth remains elusive. What we can know for certain is that a great many North Carolina soldiers charged up McPherson's Ridge that day and successfully drove the units in front of them off of that ridge. In the process, hundreds of them became casualties. Regardless of the numbers involved, the men of the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina showed remarkable courage in the first day's fight at Gettysburg. If historians can get away from swallowing the myths and legends of the fight because they want them to be true, they can find an even more fascinating and compelling story of how the Twenty-Sixth North Carolina "covered itself in glory" on that July afternoon at Gettysburg in 1863.

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