

Book Review

George A. McLean, Jr., *Skirmish at Pearisburg*, (Lynchburg, VA: Blackwell Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-9830482-9-9.

On the back cover of George McLean's narrative, one finds in the synopsis of the book an apt description of the focus of this study. "Although the fight...was small by Civil War standards, it reflected much of what was happening in the larger war." All too often, we forget the importance of the smaller affairs, which occurred all throughout the country during our nineteenth-century conflict. For each Gettysburg, Vicksburg, or Antietam, thousands of lesser-known engagements occurred. Thankfully, the author has captured a solid account of the May 9, 1862 military action at Pearisburg – a Southwest Virginia town commonly referred to in the period reports as Giles Court House.

McLean sets the stage during the early days of the war, in explaining the disparity of military training between officers North and South. Several men on both sides of the divide had attended West Point, while others received instruction at the Virginia Military Institute, the Citadel outside Charleston, or any of a number of other martial schools scattered across the Southland. This explanation assists readers, especially those not well versed in nineteenth-century military history, in understanding the experience, or lack thereof, of the opposing officers at Pearisburg.

In researching the history of the Pearisburg events, McLean mined various primary sources – letters, diaries, period maps, newspapers, and post-battle reports. The smoke and din on the field severely limited a soldier's perspective of the action occurring on his left or right, so a mixed accounting of the action often proves the result. The author's interpretation of these accounts enriches the reader's understanding of the actual experience of battle. A blending of secondary source material rounds out a helpful bibliography, which provides an excellent point of reference for those interested in learning more about military activities in this part of the Old Dominion. Among the several citations used throughout the narrative, the author leans heavily on the diary of Private Edward Henry, a soldier who fought with the 23rd Ohio Infantry regiment.

When studying an unfamiliar battle, or campaign, a map of the region, complete with place names referenced in the narrative always proves very helpful, and McLean does not disappoint on this account. Augmenting the map of the Pearisburg environ created for the book, one finds several different sections of a period map developed through the Confederate Bureau of Engineers Office under the direction of Chief Engineer Jeremy Francis Gilmer, and a map Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes created.

Southwest Virginia provided many soldiers for the Confederate Army; the region also housed valuable natural resources: salt, lead, and iron. Perhaps the greatest target drawing Federal attention to the area rested along the tracks of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, a fact not escaping McLean's attention. In order to understand why armies met at Pearisburg in May 1862, one must gain an appreciation of the Northern attempt to destroy the main rail line connecting the eastern and western theaters of war. Mounting internecine conflict along the Virginia and future West Virginia border also prodded Federal officials to secure the region. As the author so aptly noted, "It would have been political suicide for Federal leaders to leave Confederates unmolested along those boundaries." (p. 12).

The roster of participants at Pearisburg reads like a "who's who" of military and political history. The Federals counted roughly 600 troops available for action, while the Confederates fielded a force of approximately 2,000. Despite the resultant engagement being somewhat small in numbers, Pearisburg can claim the presence of two future presidents, Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley, along with the ancestor of a World War II hero - Confederate Colonel George S. Patton. Their presence interjects an intriguing side story to the battle account, when coupled with the actions of the Confederate leader at Pearisburg, Brigadier General Harry Heth. Later in the war, Heth fought alongside General Robert E. Lee in some of the largest battles in the east. McLean provides a very helpful section at the end of the book entitled "The Leaders." This biographical sketch of the key officers involved in the skirmish would motivate this reviewer to purchase the book based this section alone.

Enhancing the narrative, through the inclusion of three "inserts," the author offers the reader a better understanding of certain key components from the story. The first insert discusses the origin of the term "contraband," a word Major General Benjamin Butler coined when refusing to return escaped slaves, who had reached the safety of Fortress Monroe, to their owners. The label stuck, and readers will learn how one such contraband provided valuable intelligence to Hayes outside Pearisburg. The New River runs through the region of Pearisburg, and during the Civil War, moving

troops across any sizable river, the New River or others, proved a challenge to officers. If readers have not encountered stories of “bateaux,” insert two will explain not only what, but also how these innovative boats played a role in the action near Pearisburg.

After retreating from Pearisburg and the Narrows region, the Federal troops camped on the farm of a local family – the Adairs. The author drew from the diary of Ellen Adair, age 17 at the time of the skirmish, to recount what she witnessed as an army violated her usual tranquil space. This young woman’s keen observations take one back to May 1862, where you too can hear the sporadic gunfire, and watch as the hungry soldiers sought food. The end of Federal occupation left Miss Adair virtually speechless; her May 18 diary entry a single sentence – “What a sweet day.” (p. 73).

Augmenting the involvement of Hayes, McKinley, and Patton, McLean reports on the future military action of little-known Milton Humphreys, a Confederate artillery sergeant who missed the skirmish at Pearisburg. Humphreys more than made up for his illness during the struggle along the New River, when he later “...invented the concept of indirect fire....” (p.25).

Troops marched on their stomachs, but they rallied around the spirited music of regimental bands, and the author provides an overview of one such musical group - the “Arthur Boys,” from the 23rd Ohio Infantry. Readers will enjoy viewing a period photograph of this dapper collection of musicians, who later motivated their fellow soldiers during the Battle of Cloyds Mountain.

Students, researchers, and all with an interest in Civil War history will benefit in adding the *Skirmish at Pearisburg* to their library. This reviewer’s only negative critiques involve the inconvenience of flipping to the back of the book to reference the endnotes (footnotes preferred), and the absence of an order of battle. Purchase this book, read this book, and learn how the author could have selected a different, yet equally appropriate title – “The Skirmish at Thermopylae.” Strive to appreciate George McLean’s effort to emulate the actions from one of the soldiers referenced in his narrative, as the author’s work provides evidence of his fighting “...a good cause.” (p.91). In McLean’s case, his cause focuses on ensuring the military actions from the smaller engagements of the Civil War receive their due on the printed page. One can only hope McLean will continue his research and writing, and at some future point, deliver an equaling engaging account of the Battle of Cloyds Mountain!

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