

Civil War Action at the Witmer Farm

Near Gettysburg, PA

Friday June 26th, 1863

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In early summer, 1863 famed Confederate General Robert E. Lee had moved most of his powerful Army of Northern Virginia north into Maryland, then into south-central Pennsylvania, leaving behind small detachments to guard parts of Virginia. Foraging through the lush, fertile farmlands of this hilly region of Pennsylvania, Confederate infantry and cavalry struck terror into the local communities. For generations, this had been peaceful close-knit farming country (in some cases dominated by Pennsylvania Dutch, Quakers, Moravians, and other immigrant or recent generation families); an area where strangers and outsiders were looked upon with suspicion let alone an enemy army. The local economy was heavily based on agriculture and the many small villages and towns were frequent gathering places for friends, family, and acquaintances. Rumors were running rampant this hot, rainy summer of 1863- no one knew exactly where the Southern invaders might strike next. Tales of terror were passed around town squares and in churches and market places – the unfeeling, heartless Rebels burned or ate children; they had horns and tails and were 8 feet tall; Lee was capturing people (black and white, male and female, young and old) for transport back to Virginia in chains. The rumors were outlandish, yet for a society often closed to outsiders and outside news, they were often believable to the farm folk and as such, they continued to spread. From a more practical military view, speculation rose as to what Lee's real intentions were as he continued to push into the green Pennsylvania terrain. Would he try to split Pennsylvania in two and march to New York? Would he turn eastward towards the manufacturing center of Philadelphia? What about Baltimore and Washington as targets? Philadelphia, Harrisburg, York, and similar cities hastily planned defense in case of possible attack. Militia troops came across the state line from New York to assist the Pennsylvanians. President Abraham Lincoln on June 15th issued a proclamation calling for 5000 volunteers who were needed "to repel the threatened and imminent invasion of Pennsylvania."

Governor Andrew S. Curtin of Pennsylvania, in cooperation with veteran Union General Darius N. Couch late of the Army of the Potomac, recruited and quickly outfitted emergency response home militia units in an effort to put organized bodies of troops in key locations to slow down the advancing Secessionists. These "military" units often consisted of young boys, old men, shopkeepers, and local businessmen, freed blacks on occasion, and convalescing army veterans. Commanders and line officers were chosen through political ties, friendships, social standing or in some cases by perceived past military glory. One such hastily raised hodge-podge unit was the 750 men of the 26th Pennsylvania Emergency Militia Regiment, under the command of Colonel William W. Jennings, a wealthy factory owner who was a personal friend of Gov. Curtin. Jennings had used his personal relationship with the governor to secure his commission, and eventually to gain command of this new regiment. After organizational meetings and muster ceremonies on June 22nd, the men were outfitted with brand new Union soldier uniforms, and given unused 1863 Springfield .58 caliber rifles from a nearby armory. Briefly drilling in the Harrisburg area, Jennings' recruits felt more and more sure of their abilities as soldiers, and their morale was quite high initially. The new guns, the smell and feel of the fresh military clothing, the comradeship of fellow militia men – all contributed to the men's growing sense of excitement about meeting the Confederate army in battle. For many, war was a glorious spectacle, with the prospect of booty, glory, and possible fame. While the starry-eyed new recruits tossed around vibrant tales of their planned prowess as soldiers, the few actual combat veterans within the unit grimly went about the task of teaching this motley collection of teenage farm boys and recruits from Penn College and out-of-shape mid-life shopkeepers how to act like soldiers. The drilling continued for two days with the few veterans in charge, most of whom

knew how unrealistic it was to expect these men and boys to stop the cream of Lee's army when the entire Army of the Potomac had failed so often.

On June 24th, General Couch dispatched Colonel Jennings and his barely-drilled recruits to the rural Adams County area near the Maryland border, from where one company of the 26th Emergency Militia had been raised (including a group within one company from Pennsylvania College in the county seat of Gettysburg). They were under orders to delay any Rebel advance into the town, and to frequently report the presence and movement of any enemy columns that were spotted. Due to a railroad accident, Jennings and a part of his men arrived in Gettysburg the evening of the 25th to the fanfare of local citizens; many of who welcomed home loved ones now in the militia. The remainder arrived the next morning. Leaving behind one company along with some cavalry support to guard any approach to Gettysburg from the east along York Pike, Jennings marched his still-confident men out to find the enemy. Posting all but one company of his force west of Gettysburg behind fences along the Chambersburg Pike near the banks of Marsh Creek, Jennings and the militia gratefully made camp and slept under the stars, the warm breezes blowing. The next morning, scouts from the accompanying 21st PA Cavalry detachment of Captain Robert Bell reported that a large Rebel force was approaching from the west, marching along the Pike towards Gettysburg. This Southern vanguard consisted of Colonel Elijah V. White's 35th Virginia Cavalry (the so-called "White's Comanches" from General Beverly H. Robertson's brigade) and General John B. Gordon's crack brigade of Jubal Early's Division of Ewell's Corps, with Harry Hays' Brigade of Louisiana infantry strung out behind them towards Chambersburg. One company of Jennings' "best" infantrymen were placed in skirmish order facing westward, eyes straining under crisp new blue forage caps to see the approaching legendary Army of Northern Virginia coming down the road from the Cashtown Pass in South Mountain. Suddenly, all the cocksure attitudes began to change as the farmers and store clerks noted the ever-growing forms of the advancing Southerners. Nervousness and doubt, no doubt tinged with a legitimate fear for their lives, replaced the earlier cockiness and grandiose dreams.

His own nerves somewhat unsettled as he watched the approach of White's cavalry followed by long columns of infantry, Colonel Jennings realized that this was no place for his hastily recruited force as they were now surely outnumbered and outgunned. After his skirmish line fired a few shots, Jennings ordered a withdrawal. Rapidly forming into march column, the rest of the 26th Emergency Militia headed north away from town, leaving behind the remaining reserve company to guard the regiment's packs back at Rock Creek east of Gettysburg. Using a narrow dirt lane to reach the Mummasburg-Hunterstown Road, Jennings headed northeast while the van of the Rebels continued east on Chambersburg Pike entering the town of Gettysburg. White's cavalymen (soon followed by Gordon's and Hays' brigades of infantry) passed through town, frightening the locals who peered out of shade-covered windows and from cellars and attics at the invaders. Along the York Pike near a bridge over Rock Creek, Jennings' reserve company skirmished briefly with some of Elijah White's cavalymen before withdrawing. Other elements of White's cavalry roamed through the streets of Gettysburg and nearby roads, looking for any Union troops. Near his father's house on Baltimore Pike, Nathaniel Lightner of the 21st PA Cavalry and fellow Gettysburg native George Washington Sandoe sat on their cavalry mounts in the roadside. They were spotted by one of White's patrols. Sandoe opened fire on the Rebels, but was killed in the ensuing brief exchange of small arms fire. Lightner spurred his horse away to safety.

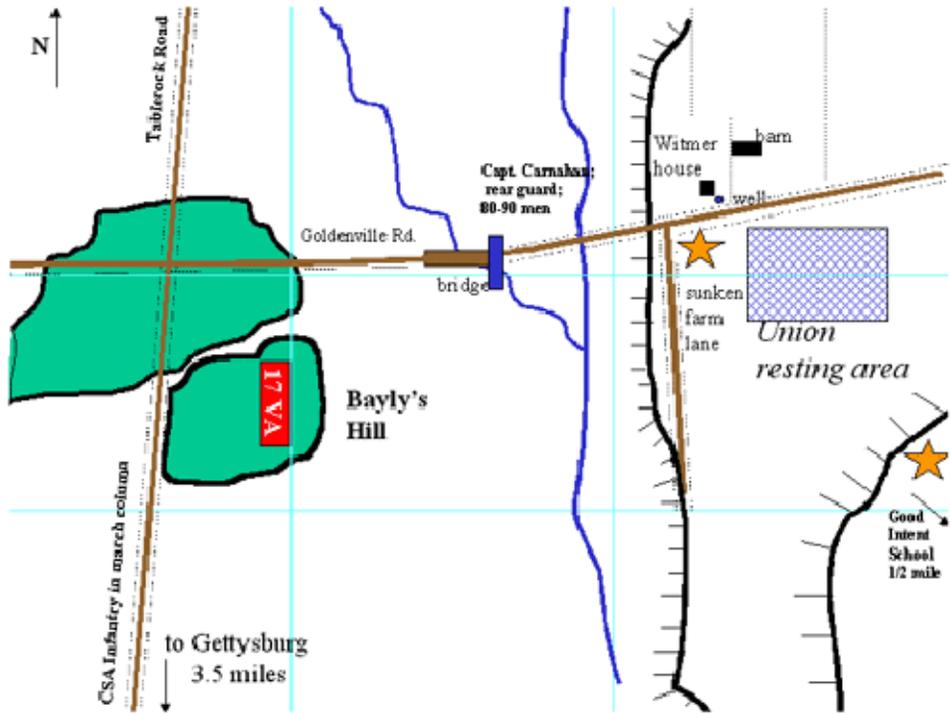
Meanwhile, William Jennings continued to pull his main body away from the growing danger west of town. Tired and laden with new equipment and packs, his men (now very worried that the long line of Confederates might still be following them) moved away from the pursuing Rebels. With little military training, stragglers clogged the roads, and nearly 3.5 miles north of town along Goldenville Road, Jennings paused to rest and regroup his men at the inviting Henry Witmer farm. Here, the middle-aged

farmer and his wife Catherine and their 8 children baked and served fresh steaming hot loaves of bread covered with creamery butter to the hungry but appreciative boys in dusty blue uniforms. Union spirits were renewed as the tired erstwhile military men crowded around a well of cool spring water in front of the red brick farmhouse.



(This is the original red brick Henry Witmer farmhouse, located along Goldenville Road northeast of Gettysburg National Military Park. On June 26th, 1863, roughly 600 members of the 26th Pennsylvania Emergency Militia were located in the fields to the left of the road as they rested after retreating before CSA infantry and cavalry along Cashtown Road earlier in the day. A now capped well in the Witmer's front yard provided water for the thirsty militia, and the farmer, his wife, and 8 children baked and served hot bread to the militia, which included many local Adams County soldiers. Upon hearing of the approach of CSA troops, Col. William Jennings formed his troops and prepared for battle. The farmer and his family retreated to their cellar for safety.)

The farm offered a degree of security, as it was up a hill, had fresh cool well water and shade, as well as large barn that might shelter some troops. In addition, a sturdy fence lined with scrub and small trees offered cover in case of attack. Jennings and his subordinate officers conferred, and plans were made to allow the men to rest on the east side of the hill while they sent out scouts looking for stragglers as well as any pursuing Confederates. Jennings dispatched Captain Carnahan with 80-90 men west along Goldenville Road back down the hill away from the brick farmhouse. Carnahan posted a skirmish line in the fields alongside a small stream near a small wooden bridge, where he awaited any prospective Rebel advance. They would not have to wait long. Around 2:20 in the afternoon, hostilities commenced.



Col. W. H. French's veteran 17th Virginia Cavalry (Jenkins' Brigade) with two brigades of Jubal Early's infantry (Smith and Avery) had been traveling east along the Hilltown Road in an effort to sweep the area north of Gettysburg hoping to trap the Union militia as Gordon advanced down Casstown Road. arrived on the nearby Bayly's (sometimes erroneously spelled Bailey's) Hill and deployed for battle.



(This is the view to the left of Goldenville Road directly opposite the Witmer farmhouse. The line of scrub bushes and light trees stretching across the middle of the picture marks the location of the 1863 farm lane that ran south from the road. it was lined at the time of the battle with scrub and with wooden post and rail fences. Jennings formed his regiment of untried militia in the lane behind the fence and faced west.

The hill to the very back of the picture is Bayly's Hill, where Col. William French deployed his 17th Virginia Cavalry into battleline and charged the militia. French was supported by skirmishers from Smith's and from Gordon's CSA brigades of Jubal Early's division (Ewell's Corps). Jennings withdrew to higher ground about a quarter mile in his rear. French did not pursue. About 150-200 Union prisoners were marched back to the Diamond in Gettysburg where Old Jube gave them a stern lecture before paroling them.)

Carnahan and Jennings watched with growing apprehension as the Confederate cavalry formed battle line. Bugles blared and slowly the Confederates moved forward, with some of them dismounting and forming their own skirmish line. Colonel Jennings and his untried officers interrupted their men's repast in the farmers inviting farmyard, and tried to form the 26th behind the scrub-lined fence along Witmer's sunken farm lane. Below they could see Carnahan's detail at the bridge being nearly surrounded as French's cavalry determinedly moved through the fields in the valley between Bayly's Hill and Witmer's farmhouse. Behind them, more ominously, long lines of Rebel infantry could be seen moving from march column into battle formation. Jennings' ordered a volley and his men succeeded in unhorsing some Rebels. Return fire crackled from the Southern skirmishers, and some of Jennings' recruits fell, blood streaming from open wounds. One of the Southern minie balls struck a militiaman named Bailey in the forehead and he toppled in a heap. Confusion and fear struck with more fury than White's cavalrymen, milling around in the fields just west of Witmer's hill. Still trying to form into a semblance of a military formation to resist the Rebels, and with Carnahan now enveloped along the bridge, Jennings feverishly issued orders to his company commanders. He turned as well to Captain Robert Bell who commanded a small detachment of the 21st Pennsylvania state cavalry that had been accompanying the 26th PA Emergency Militia during their march from their camp along Marsh Creek. However with their lack of detailed training, the militia would not form quick enough, so Colonel Jennings and Captain Bell withdrew many of them eastward splashing across a small rock-strewn stream to higher ground near the Good Intent School. Finally forming most of his men into battleline, Jennings turned to wait for renewed hostilities, expecting to see hordes of Rebels massing on his new front. Instead, he was relieved to see that the pursuit was only cursory. Col. French had been content to round up the many Union stragglers, capturing at least 175 of the now-terrified militia. Many of these same farmboys had only days before heard the rumors and wild tales of what the Confederates did to women, children, and especially to their captives. The actual fighting had lasted less than a half and hour, but the roads in and around Gettysburg were now clear of the militia threat.

French and his infantry support withdrew to Gettysburg, taking their captives with them (after taking from them their new guns, their ammunition, and their shiny new military issue shoes). Marching his prisoners into the Gettysburg town square ("the diamond"), the Rebel veterans teased and berated their captives, telling them to that they should have stayed at home with their mothers instead of coming out to play with guns. Soon as evening approached, vaunted Confederate General Jubal Early arrived in front of the hotel in the square and the prisoners were formed to hear a speech from the vitriolic warrior. General Early surveyed the crowd of now thoroughly demoralized prisoners, which included not only Jennings' "veterans" of that afternoon's action at Witmer Farm but also captives from his reserve company and Bell's local cavalry militia. After what has been described as a hate-filled "stern" tongue-lashing, Old Jube formally paroled them back to their homes and farms. Included in his derogatory speech were these words, "You boys ought to be home with your mothers and not out in the fields where it is dangerous and you might get hurt." The paperwork was filled out, and the militiamen headed for their individual homes. Early would spend the night of the 26th encamped west of Gettysburg near Oak Hill, then march through town again the 27th enroute to York.

Colonel William Jennings with his remaining men, marching in ragged column on roads now turned muddy from rain, retired north to Harrisburg to lament to the governor that he had lost Gettysburg to the

Confederate army. Arriving around 2PM on Sunday the 28th, Jennings reported the disturbing news that the Army of Northern Virginia was well within the borders of Pennsylvania. Information soon came of additional Rebel forays and of the approach of troops on the state capital itself. As suddenly as the Rebels had come, they retired from Harrisburg before any serious fighting. News would come in a few days of the massive battles in and around Gettysburg between the Army of the Potomac and many of the same Rebels who had been deployed against Jennings' band of militia. His men were mustered out July 31st, 1863, and they could brag to their friends for years to come that they had indeed been a part of the Union defense of the town of Gettysburg. They had faced Robert E. Lee's finest, and had lived to tell the story of the action at Witmer Farm.

CONFEDERATE ORDER OF BATTLE AT WITMER FARM

Col. Wm. French's 17th VA Cavalry (from Jenkins' brigade)

- (274 men) VETERAN pistols / sabers / shotguns; mounted at start of action on the eastern slope of Bayly's Hill in the light woods.

Elements of Jubal Early's Division, II Corps

Smith's Brigade (Gen. William Smith +1)

- 31 VA (267 men) VET rifles
- 49 VA (281 men) VET rifles
- 52 VA (254 men) VET rifles
 - all in column along the Tablerock Road

Hoke's Brigade (Col. Isaac Avery +1)

- 6 NC (509 men) VET rifles
- 21 NC (436 men) VET rifles
- 57 NC (297 men) VET rifles
 - all in column along the Tablerock Road

UNION ORDER OF BATTLE AT WITMER FARM

• Col. William W. Jennings

- 26 PA Emergency Militia (~ 600 remaining men) MILITIA 1863 Springfield .58 rifles
 - 80-90 of these men were posted east of the bridge as a rear guard under Captain Carnahan. This rear guard was nearly all captured in the ensuing action.

21st PA Cavalry detachment under Captain Robert Bell (~80 men) MILITIA breech-loading carbines

- * started the action dismounted using horseholders as they were resting in Henry Witmer's fields.