George Gordon Meade Biography

George Gordon Meade

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Biography

George Gordon Meade (1815-1872), American Civil War general, is best remembered as the victor of the Battle of Gettysburg and as the last commander of the Army of the Potomac.

The son of an American merchant, George Gordon Meade was born on Dec. 31, 1815, in Cadiz, Spain. His early education was at Mount Hope Institution in Baltimore. At the age of 15 he received appointment to West Point; he graduated in 1835. After serving for a year in Florida and Massachusetts he became disillusioned with Army life and resigned to pursue a civil engineering career. In 1842 Meade returned to the Army and won a brevet promotion for gallantry in the Mexican War. Until the outbreak of the Civil War, he served in the topographical engineers.

In August 1861 Meade was appointed brigadier general and given command of a Pennsylvania brigade. He served throughout the Peninsular Campaign. On June 30, 1862, in the Battle of Glendale, he was seriously wounded in the arm, side, and back. Nevertheless, he led divisions in the Second Manassas, South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg campaigns and commanded a corps during the Battle of Chancellorsville.

Meade was genuinely surprised when, on June 28, 1863, he was named to head the Army of the Potomac. Only 3 days later Robert E. Lee's army struck Meade's forces at Gettysburg, Pa. In spite of his newness to Army command, Meade demonstrated admirable skill in the bloody 3-day battle. However, when Lee's Confederates were allowed to retire virtually unmolested to Virginia, a storm of criticism descended on Meade. He tendered his resignation from the Army, but it was refused, and he continued commanding the Army for the remainder of the war. He is overshadowed in the climactic campaigns of 1864-1865 because General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant traveled with the Army of the Potomac and supervised its principal operations. Meade's promotion to major general came embarrassingly late in the conflict.

After the war Meade commanded military departments in the South and East. He died of pneumonia on Nov. 6, 1872, in Philadelphia.

Gaunt and stern, Meade suffered from fits of nervousness. Although he was routinely competent, he lacked boldness and brilliance in action. His hot temper led the soldiers to nickname him "the old snapping turtle."