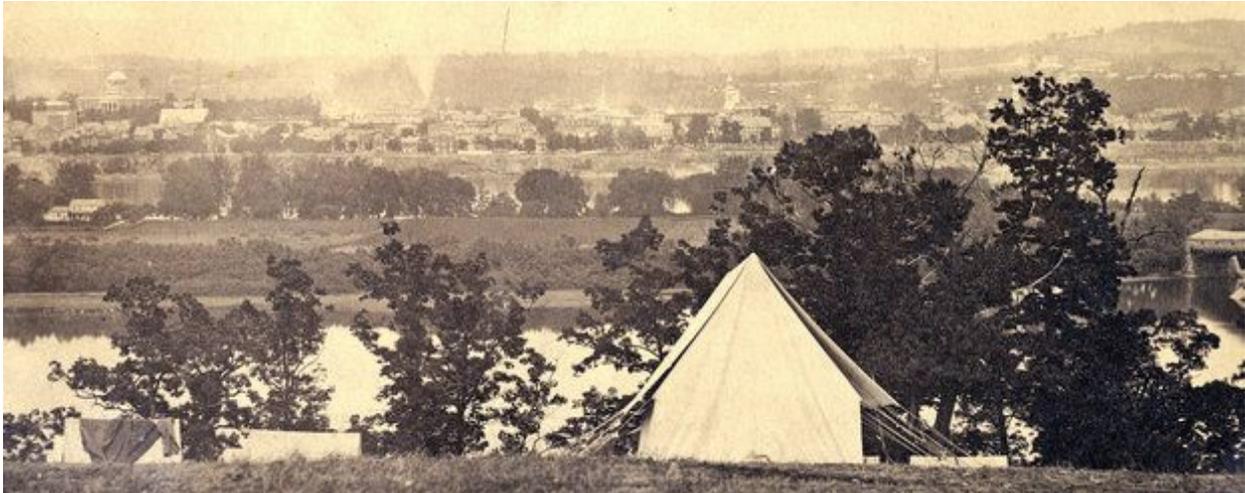


## Confederate and Union troops fought within three miles of Harrisburg

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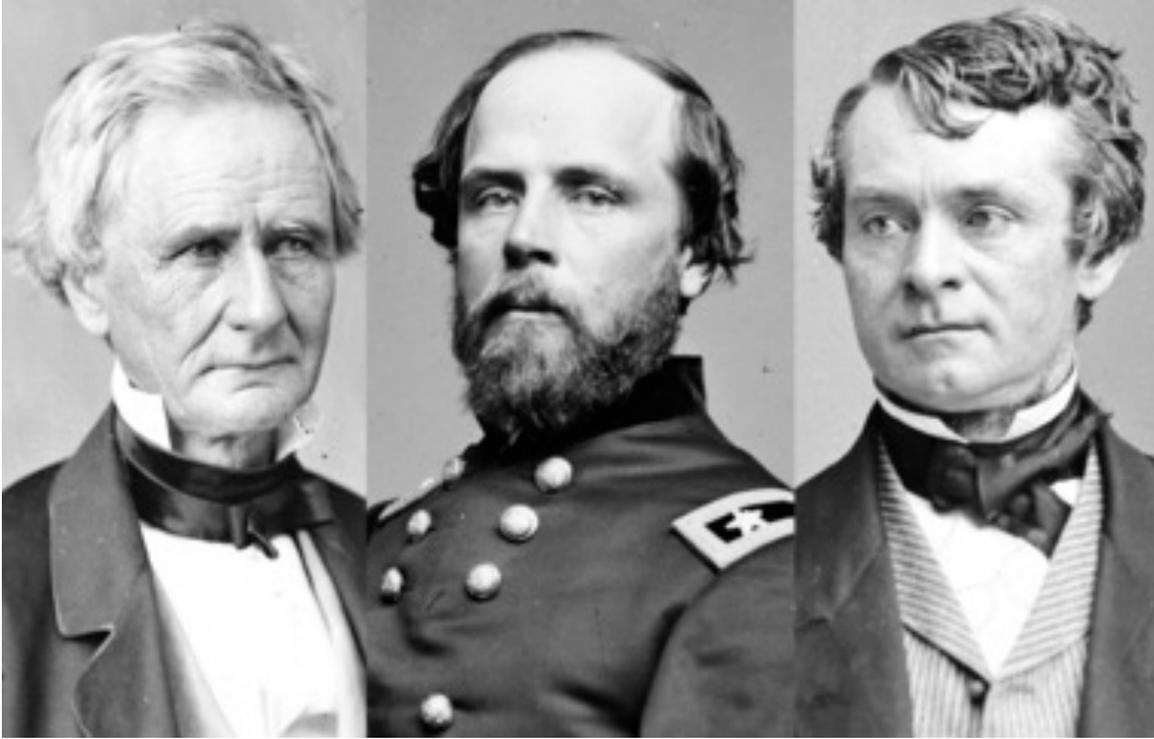
on June 24, 2013 at 12:53 PM, updated June 25, 2013 at 8:58 AM



*The view of Harrisburg from the "forts" across the river; the old capitol can be seen on the left and the camelback bridge to the right. If the confederates gained these heights, their cannons could pummel the city to dust. (courtesy of The Dauphin County Historical Society)*

The war came to Harrisburg along two roads. And it came on horseback - in the form of General Albert Gallatin Jenkins' Confederate cavalry: about 800 trotting along Trindle Road, and another 600 to the North along the Carlisle Pike, which roads converged then, as they do now, at Camp Hill. Jenkins cavalry had ridden into Carlisle the day before - on the afternoon of June 27th - at the head of General Richard Ewell's advance corps of 15,000 men. While Ewell took up residence in the evacuated Carlisle army barracks and his men vied with the townspeople looting what the military authorities had left behind, Jenkins continued on toward Mechanicsburg.

Robert E. Lee had instructed Ewell five days earlier: "If Harrisburg comes within your means, capture it." Jenkins and his men were riding out to see if the Pennsylvania capital was within Ewell's means. Union General Darius Couch, ensconced in an office on the second floor of the Capitol building in Harrisburg, feared it most likely was. A series of entrenchments had hastily been thrown up on the heights overlooking the city on the opposite side of the river, and while the newly-constructed "forts" were invested with thousands of soldiers, they were mostly militia - untrained, undisciplined and untested. Some indication of Harrisburg's preparedness could be gleaned from the group of 70-year-olds, veterans of the War of 1812, tromping through the streets with an old battle flag preparing for defense of the city. There were also two companies of locally-recruited black soldiers, but they were entirely untrained and - as



Gen. Darius Couch (center) found himself in Harrisburg contending with arch-rivals former Secretary of War Simon Cameron (left) and Gov. Andrew Curtin (right). (Library of Congress)

historian Cooper Wingert notes - Couch and Governor Andrew Curtin had earlier refused to muster in a company of blacks from Philadelphia, fearing "their presence would cause serious disturbances among the state troops."

Just one month earlier, [Harrisburg had been rocked by violence](#) as soldiers from Camp Curtin went on a rampage through one of the predominantly black precincts in the city, beating citizens and destroying homes. Couch would have to rely for the most part on soldiers from New York and New Jersey for the defense of Harrisburg. The Federal Army of the Potomac was still down in Maryland, staying resolutely south of Lee's advancing army, keeping cautiously between it and Washington, D.C. Jenkins likely gleaned much of that on June 28 when he put his booted feet up on a table at the Ashland House Tavern in Mechanicsburg, ordered a pitcher of water and proceeded to read the local newspapers. In doing so, Wingert says, "Jenkins likely received the equivalent of a dozen scouting reports." Jenkins had entered Mechanicsburg from the West that morning. A small company of militia had slowed him down with some pot-shooting, but he had rolled up one of his cannons, let fly with a single shot, and the blue-coats high-tailed it back through town. The retreating captain "bolted into the town telegraph office, where he sent one last telegraph" to Harrisburg, writes Wingert. And then he cut the line and went to the edge of town to meet Jenkins with a handshake. Jenkins told him to "get out of the way as soon as convenient." The telegraph operator, meanwhile, was cranking his way down the railroad tracks on a handcar toward Harrisburg.

## Two ways to empty the larder

As Jenkins sat reading his newspapers at the tavern, the people of Mechanicsburg were scrabbling together lunch baskets to meet his requisition for early morning lunch for his troops. They were motivated by the fact Jenkins told them if they didn't supply his needs, he'd let his troops go looking for themselves. Wingert quotes a Mechanicsburg resident who recalled, "Almost everything in the provisions line fit to be eaten (and a good deal that wasn't) from a little onion to a Western ham, was taken to Washington Hall."



Brigadier General Albert Gallatin Jenkins, a graduate of Harvard Law and former U.S. Congressman (when the photo above was taken) as well as subsequent Confederate Congressman, would lead the advance on Harrisburg. By 1863, Jenkins had grown his beard out so long he reportedly tucked it into his belt when he went into battle.

The citizens of Mechanicsburg met Jenkins' request and then some: one of the Confederate soldiers wrote of getting "eggs, ham, beef, apple butter - pies, and vegetables of every description." After the eats, the soldiers went shopping, paying for their purchases in Confederate cash. The rebels were under orders from Lee not to go looting, and that was reinforced by Jenkins, who proclaimed "We are not thieves." That's not to say the Confederates didn't take everything they needed and more: they did. It was half the reason they were in Pennsylvania in the first place. But for the most part, the predation was orderly: organized - as in Mechanicsburg - by officers and conducted with the veneer at least of civility. It may seem a small point, until one compares the Confederates' predation to what was happening closer to Harrisburg by the Union militia. "They turned out to be our worst enemies," one local resident said of the city's defenders. In his book "The Confederate Approach on Harrisburg," Wingert documents extensively the rampant looting of local homes - both abandoned and occupied - by the Union militia. "In many of the houses not a single piece of furniture could be found; preserves and apple butter were used to decorate the walls, doors broken, chaff and feather beds cut open and their contents thrown around the floor, and everything in much worse condition than had there been a battle." Anything on hoof or with feathers was game for the campfire. Wingert quotes one of the militiamen, who wrote: "fresh bread, pots of apple butter, buttermilk, fresh butter, chickens, pigs, potatoes, molasses, etc. etc. are brought in by the boys who go out foraging. Old hats, bonnets, and cloths and pieces of furniture have been brought into camp." Wingert concludes: "Overall, Jenkins's men respected civilians and their private property much better than the Yankee militia." By noon, Jenkins had read and eaten his fill and was ready to proceed.

### **Skirmish at Oyster's Point**

Some of the Union militia had moved out beyond the forts on Bridgetown Heights (also known at the time as Hummel's heights) and massed near where the Carlisle Pike and Trindle Road came together at what was then known as Oyster's Point, after the hotel located there built by Abraham Oyster. To be sure of where the Confederates were - and what they were up to - Union pickets were spread out in a large arc through the open farm land, roughly from the current location of Holy Spirit hospital on Camp Hill's North 21st Street, down through Oyster's Point which is now the area around the Camp Hill Giant gas station, continuing on south and east to what's now the Rolling Green cemetery at the conjunction of Lisburn Road and Carlisle Road.



*Oyster's Hotel or tavern - what would be considered a B&B today - was the scene of much of the skirmishing in what's now Camp Hill. Courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society*

As Jenkins cavalry moved east on the two roads toward their convergence three miles from the capital city, their goal was not to start a battle, but rather to poke and prod the Union forces to test their strength a bit. There was a brief exchange of fire on the Carlisle Pike with Union General Joseph Knipe's troops as they fell back toward Oyster's Point. Knipe and his men had been as far down the valley as Chambersburg, falling back with each advance of Ewell's corps. Jenkins set up several cannon near the Peace Church, which stood on a rise that allowed shells to be lobbed in toward Oyster's Point. Some of his cavalry dismounted and moved forward a skirmishers. Other riders fanned out into the countryside as scouts and foragers. For several hours that afternoon the Confederate and Union skirmishers sniped at one another under the roasting sun.

As that sun began to go down in the west, Jenkins pulled back to the east of Mechanicsburg for the night. Some of his men remained in advanced positions near Oyster's Point, as evidence by the recollection of Corporal Robert Welsh of the 33rd PA Volunteer Militia, whose company built a fire from pieces of a busted piano and settled down for a quiet evening. According to Welsh: "The boys were boiling coffee in their tin cups soon after dark, when bang, bang, bang came several shots at the conspicuous spot. A ball smashed through the tin cup of Corporal Jim Loo and he had no coffee. Billy Helm was stooping at the fire lighting a splint for his pipe when a minie ball hit a piece of the burning wood and knocked a lot of ashes into his face, filling his eyes. He saw very little for an hour, but sat in a safe place bathing

his eyes with water out of a canteen and saying anything but his prayers... After this the fire was voted a bad place to sit by." Later that night, the southern sky "was livid with the light of a conflagration" as the massive covered bridge at Wrightsville burned, fired by Union troops to prevent the crossing of Confederate General Jubal Early and his men. Meanwhile, Jenkins had made the recently-abandoned home of John Rupp on Trindle Road his headquarters and held a late night council of war, during which the "oft-overcautious and conservative" Jenkins was convinced by his Lt. Colonel Vincent Witcher of a clever diversionary plan for the next day: Witcher would cannonade Oyster's Point as if in preparation for battle, while Jenkins would ride south to Slate Hill, where scouts indicated he could get a good view of Harrisburg's defenses.

### **Preparing to Take Harrisburg**

And so it happened. Except that in addition to the cannonade, Witcher saw the opportunity to send in men for some closer fighting. Things got "hot" at Oyster's Point for a while, with the Confederates overrunning Oyster's Hotel and advancing as far as what's now 28th Street in Camp Hill. William Sadler, who lived near what's now 28th Street, then known as Limekiln Lane, watched the fight cautiously from his home: "We had a nice view there to look over the whole business," he said, but "when we put our heads out of the window they fired at us, and we had to put our heads in. At the east end our men would fire at us, and at the west end, the rebels would fire. We had to be careful." The feint at Oyster's Point worked: Wingert notes that "even General Couch was excited, writing Secretary of War Stanton that he expected a 'determined attack.'" Meanwhile, Jenkins and about 60 of his men went galloping off south, down St. John's Church Road straight up to the top of Slate Hill, from which indeed could be seen the entire expanse of the Harrisburg defenses. Near the bottom of the hill, near today's entrance to the Rolling Green Cemetery, 14-year-old William Gorgas watched Jenkins and his men reconnoiter Harrisburg from the roof of the Gorgas family home. He watched them ride down the hill along Lisburn Road, confer for 15 minutes or so, and then head back north toward the Peace Church - unseen by the Union pickets nearby. Young Gorgas watched until his father made him come down off the roof, fearing he'd make the house a target. Jenkins sent word back to Ewell that Harrisburg was pretty much ripe for the picking, and Ewell's infantry immediately began to line up for the march from Carlisle to Harrisburg. Ewell was keen to take a northern capital. Harrisburg was a city of 14,000 people, a major northern rail hub, a center for iron and steel production, the construction of railroad cars, and processing of cotton. It was also the site of Camp Curtin, the largest military training barracks



*The original capitol building, Harrisburg, PA.*

in the Union. Its fall would be a major blow to northern logistics, not to mention northern morale. And the prize would take some sting out of the fact that the Confederate capital of Mississippi had fallen to Ulysses S. Grant a month earlier, and Vicksburg remained under siege. For the first time, the rebellion would come to a northern hub of power and northern civilians would suffer the bite of war. General Robert E. Rodes' men were the first of Ewell's corps to receive orders to prepare to advance toward the northern capital, and Rodes noted that taking Harrisburg was "a step which every man in the division contemplated with eagerness." And then they were ordered to stop. Ewell had just received a message from Lee to get his men south to join the rest of the army, regrouping near Gettysburg. By the next morning, June 30, Ewell's 15,000 soldiers were marching south. Harrisburg had been spared - by the first in what would be a series of last-minute, hair's-breadth, save-the-day turn-arounds that would lead to a Union victory at Gettysburg.

### **Battle of Sporting Hill**

But Jenkins and his cavalry were still on the west shore of the Susquehanna tussling with the home guard. He had to withdraw without letting the Yankees make mincemeat of his backside. Although Jenkins mistakenly believed that Couch was sending a concerted force to break him, Wingert notes that he was correct in realizing that "if a determined Union effort broke through his picket lines (which they surely would), his brigade could be picked apart piece by

piece" because it was so spread out. Jenkins sent Witcher ahead on the Carlisle Pike to hold off the Yankees as long as he could, while Jenkins concentrated his forces and removed back to Carlisle. The fight between Witcher and the Union forces on the afternoon of June 30 along the Carlisle Pike would come to be known as "The Battle of Sporting Hill." It was begun as a skirmish at a barn near the current entrance to the Naval supply depot, an artillery battle and ended with a slow but painful retreat of the Confederates as the rest of Jenkins' brigade retreated. In the end, no one on the Union side was killed, but 11 were wounded. No-one knows precisely the Confederates casualties: 15 were killed and left on the field, buried later by a local farmer, near the current location of the Park Inn Hotel. Perhaps 20 to 30 more were wounded. "The Battle of Sporting Hill was the northernmost engagement of the Gettysburg Campaign," writes Wingert. And it would be the closest the Confederates ever came - within three miles and one day - of sacking a capital of a northern state. After Gettysburg, the Confederate forces never again would threaten the north as they did in the summer of 1863. But the memory of the Pennsylvania campaign would remain with Southern soldiers, and not always in a bad way. Later that July, one member of Jenkins' cavalry wrote home to his wife in Virginia: "Penn was the prettiest country I ever seen or ever expect to see."