

THE IRON LIFELINE: HOW RAILROADS SUSTAINED MEAD'S ARMY IN THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

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When most people think of the Battle of Gettysburg, they imagine soldiers locked in fierce combat across the ridges and fields of Pennsylvania, or generals making split-second decisions that shaped the course of the Civil War. Yet one of the most influential figures in the Union's success never set foot on the battlefield. Brigadier General Herman Haupt, the man in charge of the Military Railway Department, operated behind the lines to ensure that the Union Army could move, fight, and survive.¹ His job was not to command troops, but to sustain them. Through his control of the rail lines connecting Baltimore and Westminster, Maryland, and the army's forward positions, Haupt created the logistical network that kept General Meade's forces supplied with food, ammunition, and reinforcements.² In the days after the battle, his rail operations became even more critical, transporting thousands of wounded soldiers to hospitals and restoring the flow of supplies to a battered but victorious army. Though Herman Haupt never fought at Gettysburg, his management of the United States (U.S.) Military Railroads during the campaign was operationally decisive. By sustaining the Army of the Potomac before, during, and after the battle, Haupt ensured not

1 E.D. Townsend, Special Orders, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, DC, dated June 27, 1862, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 369-370; Reports, "General Reports," in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 5.

2 Steven R. Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," Spring-Summer 2013, 46 (pdf), accessed November 3, 2025, [RR History - RRs, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg.pdf](#); M. C. Meigs to Ingalls, July 7, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 590-591.

only Union success on the field but also the army's ability to evacuate its wounded, restore its supply system, and maintain pressure on General Lee's retreating forces. His efficient execution of rail and telegraph operations allowed Meade's army to recover rapidly and continue its pursuit toward the Potomac, a continuation of operations that would have been severely constrained without Haupt's initiative. His work demonstrated that control of movement, supply, and communication was not merely supportive, but fundamental to operational success in modern war.

A former civil engineer and railroad superintendent, Haupt had been appointed in 1862 to impose order on a chaotic system of military and civilian rail operations.³ Before the Civil War, Herman Haupt had already built a reputation as one of the most talented engineers in the country.⁴ He had worked as a civil engineer and railroad executive, serving as chief engineer for major lines such as the Pennsylvania Railroad and overseeing major projects like the Hoosac Tunnel in Massachusetts. His experience made him the obvious choice in 1862, when the War Department asked him to take control of the Union's military railroads.⁵ His authority extended over construction battalions, bridging companies, and telegraph operators, giving him almost total control over the arteries of movement that sustained the army.⁶ These experiences convinced Brigadier General Herman Haupt that efficient rail management could make or break an army.⁷

When General Robert E. Lee's army crossed into Penn-

3 Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," 46-47.

4 "Herman Haupt," National Railroad Hall of Fame, accessed November 16, 2025, [Herman Haupt | nrrhof](#). Haupt was born in Philadelphia, educated at West Point, and later became known for designing bridges, managing railroad construction, and writing influential works on engineering.

5 "Herman Haupt," National Railroad Hall of Fame, accessed November 16, 2025, [Herman Haupt | nrrhof](#).

6 Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," 47.

7 *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 5; Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," 46-47.

sylvania in June 1863, the Union Army of the Potomac moved north in haste, leaving its established supply bases eighty miles behind.⁸ In 1863, after Confederate forces destroyed nineteen bridges on the Northern Central Railroad, Haupt's construction crews immediately undertook repairs, restoring the vital rail link to Harrisburg and preventing the Union command structure from becoming isolated.⁹

As the Confederate raid on Pennsylvania advanced, Haupt recognized the critical importance of the Baltimore-Westminster route, the main line connecting the Army of the Potomac to Baltimore's depots.¹⁰ His priority was to strengthen and defend this network. On June 29, 1863, Haupt reported that, "acting under Special Orders, NO. 286[...], I repaired to Baltimore, intending to join General Meade at Frederick, and ascertain the condition and requirements of the Army of the Potomac."¹¹ Yet upon his arrival, he found "communications broken, both by rail and telegraph."¹² Rather than wait for orders, Haupt shifted his operations north toward Harrisburg, coordinating with Governor Andrew Curtin and Colonel L.A. Scott to repair damage and reestablish telegraph contact.¹³ His responsiveness, initiative, and ability to adjust within hours to changing conditions kept Meade's army from becoming isolated and allowed him to stay in telegraph contact with Major General Henry Halleck, the Union Army's general-in-chief, as he moved into Pennsylvania.¹⁴

8 Carol Reardon and Tom Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, CMH Pub 75-10 (Washington, D.C: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2013), [The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863](#). The outcome of the campaign depended not only on battlefield engagement but also on whether the army could remain fed, armed, and connected to its depots.

9 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22.

10 Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," 47-49.

11 Brig. Gen. Herman Haupt, "Report of Brig. Gen. Herman Haupt, U.S. Army, in charge of Military Railway Department," July 7, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 22.

12 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22.

13 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22.

14 Reports, "General Reports," 5; Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22.

Haupt's telegrams and reports reveal constant cooperation with quartermasters, engineers, and telegraph operators. He directed emergency bridge repairs in Littlestown, only 10 miles south of Gettysburg along the Baltimore-Westminster supply line, a critical corridor for moving food, ammunition, and reinforcements.¹⁵ When Haupt realized the Western Maryland Railroad operating from Baltimore to Westminster had no available equipment, particularly sidings (secondary tracks used for passing and loading trains), wood, or water stations, he acted immediately.¹⁶ Within forty-eight hours, "the army was supplied not only with everything required, but with an excess."¹⁷ His understanding of logistics extended beyond simple transportation; as he later observed, "no department of the military service is more important than that which is charged with construction, re-opening, and maintaining communications and forwarding supplies."¹⁸ By the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg, the route from Baltimore through Westminster to the army's front positions was operational, a logistical feat achieved in less than a week.¹⁹ Haupt's work before Gettysburg built not just railroads but resiliencies, the structure that sustained the army through the bloodiest battle of the war.

When fighting erupted at Gettysburg on July 1, Haupt's rail and telegraph operations became the central nervous system of the Union war effort.²⁰ Though miles from the battlefield, his

15 Herman Haupt to Major-General Halleck, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 522; Herman Haupt to Major General H. W. Halleck, July 3, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 511; "Distance from Gettysburg, PA to Littlestown, PA," Distance Between Cities, accessed November 16, 2025, Distance between Gettysburg, PA and Littlestown, PA.

16 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22-23; "Siding," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2025, SIDING | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary. These sidings and temporary loading and unloading tracks became critical once the wounded began arriving.

17 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22-23.

18 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 23.

19 Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22. Herman Haupt accomplished this even though raids had destroyed telegraph lines, damaged bridges, and left the Western Maryland Railroad with almost no usable equipment

20 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, June-July 1863, 18.

orders to repair bridges and restore telegraph lines, along with quick improvisations to keep trains moving such as reallocating engines and work crews, directly shaped the army's ability to hold its ground.²¹ As the first dispatches of combat reached Washington, Haupt moved his base to Baltimore and began coordinating nonstop with Major General George Meade, Brigadier General Rufus Ingalls, the Army of the Potomac's chief quartermaster, and Major General Henry Halleck to keep the army supplied.²² From Baltimore, he reported that "Bootees, socks, and other supplies will be sent to Westminster by the Western Maryland Railroad; also a construction train, to lay down sidings and prepare the means of transacting business there."²³ His trains carried ammunition, forage, and reinforcements up to Westminster, the nearest railroad to the battlefield, where they were then taken by wagon or horse to the front line.²⁴ At the same time, his telegraph operators worked tirelessly to maintain constant contact with Meade's headquarters, relaying information from Harrisburg, Frederick, and Baltimore faster than any courier could ride.

As the three days of the battle unfolded, Haupt's ability to adapt under pressure proved decisive. When telegraph wires went down, and supply trains were delayed by the crush of the movement, he did not wait for formal instructions but issued directives of his own, ordering, "extraordinary efforts should be made by the officers of all railroads over which horses are trans-

21 Haupt to Halleck, July 3, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 511.

22 Ditmeyer, "Railroads, Herman Haupt, and the Battle of Gettysburg," 47-49.

23 M.C. Meigs to Brig. Gen. R. Ingalls, July 1, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 472.

24 Edwon M. Stanton to S. M. Shoemaker, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 521. Haupt understood that without horses and wagons, Meade's artillery and supply trains could not function.

ported to push them forward without delay, day and night.”²⁵ His coordination with the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, ensured that freight cars, once unloaded, were immediately returned to keep the cycle of supply moving.²⁶ Haupt exercised direct control over details normally left to multiple departments, fuel, rolling stock, bridge timbers, and repair crews, centralizing decisions that would otherwise have required layers of approval, keeping the Union from being paralyzed in the field. On July 3, as the thunder of Pickett’s Charge rolled across the ridges, Haupt reported from the Northern Central Railroad that “the track of the Westminster branch is not in as bad condition as its officers representing it,” and that trains were ready to carry “the advance of the wounded” eastward. This was a crucial measure that prevented overcrowding of field hospitals near the front and ensured that severely injured soldiers could receive proper medical treatment.²⁷

While Meade and his generals fought to hold the line at Cemetery Ridge, Haupt was waging a different kind of battle, against distance, exhaustion, and destruction, to ensure the army at the front could endure. Some historians argue that Gettysburg was won by battlefield leadership and tactical execution rather than by logistics. They point to Meade’s strong defensive position along Cemetery Ridge, the determination of Union infantry, and the effective coordination of artillery under Henry Hunt as the true reasons Confederate assaults failed.²⁸ From that perspective, railroads and supply lines appear secondary, important perhaps,

25 Herman Haupt, “To the President of the Following Railroads,” July 6, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 568.

26 Herman Haupt to Edwin Stanton, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 521-522.

27 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, 50-51; Herman Haupt to Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, July 3, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 511; Haupt to Halleck, July 3, 1863, 512; Haupt to Halleck, July 3, 1863, 512.

28 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, 38-53.

but not decisive. After all, no train stopped Pickett's Charge, and no telegraph wire physically defended Little Round Top. Yet this view overlooks a basic reality of war: armies cannot fight without being sustained. The Union Army's ability to maintain heavy artillery fire on July 2 and July 3 depended on steady ammunition resupply. Its cavalry and artillery remained mobile only because horses and forage continued to arrive. Telegraph communication reduced uncertainty and enabled Meade to maintain control during a chaotic engagement. Had rail lines remained severed or Westminister failed as an efficient railhead, the Army of the Potomac would have faced mounting shortages and disorganization at precisely the moment endurance mattered most. Logistics did not replace battlefield leadership, but it made that leadership effective. Haupt's rail system provided the material foundation that allowed Union commanders to hold their ground long enough to win.²⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, Haupt's work became even more vital. The Union victory had come at an immense human cost, and the Army of the Potomac faced the overwhelming task of caring for thousands of wounded soldiers while maintaining its pursuit of Lee's retreating army, a pursuit that was only partially successful because of casualties, exhaustion, and the burden of transporting casualties.³⁰ Haupt's rail network became the lifeline that kept the army functioning. From his headquarters, Haupt coordinated the rapid transport of supplies, horses, and the wounded with an efficiency that few in the army could match. On July 4, 1863, he telegraphed Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs that "if no accident occurs, one hundred and fifty cars each way over the road, capable of carrying off from 2,000 to 4,000 wounded," could be moved

29 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, June-July 1863, 20-37.

30 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, June-July 1863, 57-58.

daily from Westminster toward Baltimore.³¹ This capacity transformed the rail system into a moving hospital network, preventing the battlefield from becoming clogged with wounded men and allowing the army to remain operational rather than immobilized by its own casualties.

After the Battle of Gettysburg, Herman Haupt coordinated the movement of troops, supplies, and wounded soldiers, using both rail and horse express to keep the army supplied and the injured evacuated.³² To get from Gettysburg to Westminster, a horse express carried messages and orders, while Haupt's team laid new sidings at Relay House and Westminster to handle the flood of trains moving the wounded east.³³ By expanding rail capacity at the same time that he evacuated the wounded, Haupt solved two crises at once: humanitarian disaster at the rear and logistical starvation at the front. "All the supplies offered for transportation on the Westminster branch have been sent forward," Haupt reported, assuring Meigs that the "sidings at Relay are clear."³⁴ His calm, factual tone belied the chaos around him: shattered rail lines, exhausted crews, and bridges repeatedly damaged by rain and overuse. Yet within days of the battle's end, trains were once again running steadily, delivering food, medical stores, and reinforcements to an army still on the move.³⁵

Haupt's correspondence during these critical days also shows how deeply integrated his operations had become within

31 Herman Haupt to Edwin M. Stanton, July 3, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 522.

32 S. M. Shoemaker to Hon. E. M. Stanton, July 2, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 494.

33 Edwin M. Stanton to War Department, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 521.

34 Haupt to Halleck, July 5, 1863, 522.

35 Haupt to General Halleck, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 522.

the Union command system. He was in constant communication with General Ingalls, the army's chief quartermaster, ensuring that every car and track section served an immediate tactical purpose. On July 7, Ingalls wrote, "instruct your agents to send cars only on the orders of the quartermaster in charge at the different depots," a directive confirming Haupt's central role in coordinating supply across the army's vast and shifting front.³⁶ The two men shared a common understanding that logistics is a critical component of operational success. When the rail lines grew congested, Haupt warned that "cars not unloaded [...] wounded lying for hours, without ability to carry them off," were crippling operations.³⁷ He quickly dispatched additional labor crews from Alexandria to Gettysburg and then to Chambersburg, PA, "to repair Hagerstown Road."³⁸ By July 9, his repairs and new operating rules had restored order. "Everything now works smoothly," one officer reported.³⁹ "General Haupt has just been in my office, and railroad matters to this point are arranged so that there will be no confusion hereafter."⁴⁰

Haupt's efficiency not only restored communication but also transformed the aftermath of the battle into an organized logistical operation. Under his direction, the Northern Central and Western Maryland Railroads became evacuation corridors, railway arteries pulsing with life as thousands of wounded soldiers were carried away from Gettysburg to a variety of hos-

36 Rufus Ingalls to Herman Haupt, July 7, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 592.

37 Herman Haupt to M. C. Meigs, July 9, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 619.

38 Haupt to M.C Meigs, July 9, 1863, 619.

39 Herman Haupt to Edwin M. Stanton, July 8, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 610.

40 W. G. Rankin to Brig. Gen. Rufus Ingalls, July 9, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 619.

pitals.⁴¹ The War Department itself recognized his indispensable role. On July 4, the Superintendent of Adams Express Company (a major civilian freight and express shipping company used by the army during the war), S. M. Shoemaker, said, “General Haupt is instructed to furnish such transportation [of wounded soldiers] by rail as he can without interfering with the transportation of army supplies.”⁴² By making this statement, the superintendent recognized that Haupt’s authority over rail operations placed him in the unique position of having to balance the competing demands of military supply and medical evacuation. This ability to manage competing priorities ensured that wounded soldiers could be removed from the battlefield without crippling the flow of ammunition and provisions to the front.

By mid-July, as Meade’s army pursued Lee toward the Potomac, Haupt turned his attention to reopening the rail line stretching from the Cumberland Valley in the south-central part of Pennsylvania to Hagerstown, located at the southern end of the Valley. Meade noted, “The Cumberland Valley Railroad must be re-opened to Hagerstown as soon as we get possession.”⁴³ Restoring this line allowed Union supplies to move forward more rapidly, but it did not lead to the destruction of Lee’s army. Delays caused by exhaustion, damaged infrastructure, and the burden of caring for Union wounded enabled the Confederates to cross the Potomac River and escape into Virginia. Even so, Haupt’s work ensured that Union pursuit could continue, preventing logistical breakdown from ending the campaign outright.

41 Haupt to Halleck, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 523.

42 Edwin M. Stanton to S. M. Shoemaker, July 4, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 521; Adams Express Company. The Adams Express Company 150 Years. Accessed November 16, 2025. Spreadsforweb.

43 Reardon and Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, 58; Herman Haupt to W. W. Wright, July 8, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 27, Pt. 3 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 608.

Herman Haupt's achievements during the Gettysburg Campaign indicate that the Union's tactical success depended as much on disciplined logistical planning and execution as on the courage of the soldiers at the front. His rail operations transformed how the Union Army fought at Gettysburg, illustrating that control of movement, supply, and communications could be as decisive as tactical leadership on the field. During the Gettysburg Campaign, the Union Army's ability to sustain its fighting strength depended on reliable rail and telegraph connections, an interdependence Haupt managed with unmatched precision. His coordination, efficiency, and foresight kept Meade's army supplied and operational through the bloodiest battle of the war. In his understated July 7 report, Haupt humbly wrote, "I submit herewith a brief report of operations in the Military Railway Department for the last week," a modest description that masked the scale of the effort and its importance for the survival of the Union army.⁴⁴

In the end, Herman Haupt carried more weight in the Civil War than most Americans ever realized, not simply because he supplied armies, but because he imposed order on chaos. His genius lay in his ability to see the Union's railroads, telegraph lines, and repair crews as a single integrated system rather than as separate departments. Instead of waiting for instructions from Washington or responding to problems one at a time, Haupt constantly ranked crises by urgency, shifting engines, labor, and materials to the point of greatest need within hours. He bypassed traditional bureaucratic chains of command, made decisions on the spot, and coordinated civilian railroads with military demands in ways no other officer could.

After the war, Haupt continued to invent and write on engineering and transportation, though many of his business

⁴⁴ Haupt, Report, July 7, 1863, 22.

ventures failed. His wartime achievements, however, endured. The methods he developed, centralized control of transportation, rapid repair under fire, and the use of telegraph communication to direct supply in real time, became the foundation of modern military logistics. Haupt's influence thus extended far beyond Gettysburg, shaping how armies manage movement, supply, and communication long after the war had ended.⁴⁵

45 "Herman Haupt," National Railroad Hall of Fame, accessed November 16, 2025, [Herman Haupt | nrrhof](#).

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