

NORTH AND SOUTH: THE DIVERGING PATHS OF
GEORGE THOMAS AND JOHN PEMBERTON

BY
MATTHEW SHOEN

Matthew Shoen is pursuing a double major in History and Creative Writing from St. Lawrence University where he is entering his senior year and hoping to pursue an honors project on the interaction between Ancient Rome and 18th century Britain. Interested in the American Civil War since reading Shelby Foote's three part narrative on the subject, Matthew wrote this paper for his Civil War and Reconstruction class in the Fall 2012.

The Civil War divided households as it did a nation. Brother fought brother as the fate of America hung in the balance. In Virginia, General George Thomas joined the Union to defend his country, turning his back on the still forming Confederacy. In Pennsylvania, General John Pemberton left the Union to follow the Confederates, his wife's people. Both generals were received by the Union and Confederate armies with suspicion and treated as traitors in their home states. Following his surrender at Vicksburg, Pemberton was treated as a traitor in the Confederacy as well. Despite how little of their memories resonate in the public domain, these men served in important capacities during the Civil War, working against suspicions which hung like a grey thunderhead over their every action. What is interesting, and ultimately tragic, about both Thomas and Pemberton is the lack of memory provoked by their names. They are both forgotten figures, swallowed up by the scope of the Civil War, despite the important roles they played in determining its outcome. The importance of restoring these two generals to the public memory cannot be underestimated. Without George Thomas and John Pemberton, a number of battles in the Western Theater lose their focus. We remember the victories of Grant and Sherman, but forget the battles they took no part in. The Virginia Theater is well remembered in the South, but the brave defense of Vicksburg is often forgotten. Remembering the commanders who fought these engagements is the first step in restoring our memory of the soldiers who died under their command.

John Pemberton joined a small circle of northern men who followed their southern wives into the Confederacy at the outbreak of the Civil War. The first two years of Pemberton's Civil War service involved coastal defense around Charleston. He was soon promoted to command

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the Department of Mississippi which entailed the defense of Vicksburg and the Mississippi River.¹ Few Mississippians were overjoyed at the idea of Pemberton's appointment to protect Vicksburg. Many complained that, "the curt and crusty Pemberton had compiled no combat record that justified to the Mississippians the assignment of the 'Yankee' to defend their state."² There was little love for Pemberton upon his arrival at Vicksburg though he frustrated Grant's efforts to attack the city from Memphis for six months. However, in April 1863 Grant crossed the Mississippi below Vicksburg and attacked the fortress city from the rear and forced Pemberton and Johnston to fight him on Mississippian territory. After a month of fighting, Grant reached Vicksburg where he launched two separate attacks before settling in for a siege which would last from May 18 to July 4.

Surrendering Vicksburg on the eighty-seventh anniversary of the signing of The Declaration of Independence was seen by many in the South as a betrayal. However in surrendering Vicksburg on July 4, Pemberton was using extremely astute logic. He stated, "I am a northern man. I know my people. I know their peculiar weaknesses and their national vanity; I know we can get better terms from them on the Fourth of July than on any other day of the year. We must sacrifice our pride to these considerations."³ The memory of Grant's "Unconditional Surrender" probably loomed in Pemberton's mind as he offered terms, hoping to get his starved troops paroled rather than marched north to prison camps. Pemberton was successful. After initial bluster from Grant and his demand for unconditional surrender, the Union general backed down and took the city of Vicksburg on July 4, allowing Pemberton's hungry men to march out of the city and return to their homes. One cannot underestimate the benefit of Pemberton's strategic surrender date. On July 2, he asked his division commanders if their soldiers could "make the marches and undergo the fatigues necessary to accomplish a successful evacuation."⁴ His men however, had been reduced to quarter rations, there were no animals left alive in the city and starvation was an undeniable reality.⁵ It is doubtless that a number of Pemberton's troops would have died in the Union camps without his strategic terms of surrender. Despite

¹ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War A Narrative: Fort Sumter to Perryville* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 776-78.

² James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 576.

³ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War A Narrative: Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 607-08.

⁴ Foote, *Fredericksburg*, 607.

⁵ Ibid.

the hatred Pemberton garnered for his actions, it is impossible to ignore that his decision saved over 30,000 men from a great deal of torment and possibly death. As a commanding general he used the Fourth of July to his advantage and secured the best peace terms possible for his soldiers.

The Vicksburg campaign would be the death knell of Pemberton's career as a commanding general. However, despite the hounding he received from the southern public for what seemed to them a treacherous betrayal of the South, Pemberton retained the respect and trust of one man whose input was most important, Jefferson Davis. Paroled after the surrender, Pemberton requested a new assignment. Pemberton wrote Davis who responded with a very appeasing note, saying that to some men, "it is decreed that their success shall be denied or treaded as necessary result, and their failures imputed to incapacity to crime . . . General Lee and yourself have seemed to me to be examples of the second class, and my confidence has not been diminished."⁶ Despite this sentiment, it was eight more months before Pemberton received a command, where he was demoted to a command position in the artillery corps. He took it in stride, however, and according to Shelby Foote, "Pemberton served out the war, often in the thick of battle, thereby demonstrating a greater devotion to the cause he had adopted than did many who had inherited it as a birthright."⁷

John Pemberton was among the few northerners who journeyed south in 1861, and in making the trek north, George Thomas was in an equally small minority, which included men such as David Farragut and Winfield Scott.⁸ Like Pemberton, Thomas served in the Western Theater. There is no way to prove Thomas's northern wife influenced his decision as Pemberton's southern belle influenced his; however, it does make for interesting speculation given the comparison to Pemberton. What cannot be compared between Pemberton and Thomas are their military records. Thomas's actions between September and November of 1863 were some of the most important of the Civil War. Likewise, Thomas is barely remembered today. His victories placed him just below Sherman and Grant, insofar as importance to the war, but those successes did not translate into long-term public recognition.⁹ Grant and Sherman both gave Thomas faint praise. Reflecting on Thomas's death Grant said,

The news was a shock and a grief to us both . . . The cause was fatty degeneration of the heart, if I remember.

⁶ Ibid., 645.

⁷ Ibid., 646.

⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 281-82.

⁹ Christopher Stowe, review of *George Thomas: Virginian for the Union*, by Christopher Einolf, in *Journal of Southern History* 75, no 3 (2009): 802-04.

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I have often thought that this disease, with him long-seated, may have led to the inertness which affected him as a commander . . . Thomas is one of the great names of our history, one of the great heroes of our war, a rare and noble character in every way worthy of his fame.¹⁰

Thomas was not a commander of the same style as Grant, Lee, or Sherman. He was a steady general, and his triumphs reflect this fact. His were victories without flash or fame; nonetheless, Thomas was a crucial figure in the eventual victory of the North, a fact that is forgotten much like his valiant service. In examining Thomas's most significant contributions, the most important battles to examine are Chickamauga in 1863 and Nashville in 1864. These two battles earned Thomas the bulk of his fame, and his actions in them led to the eventual collapse of Southern resistance west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Battle of Chickamauga was fought on September 19 and 20, 1863 between Confederate General Braxton Bragg and U.S. General William Rosecrans (Thomas's superior). Bragg received Virginia reinforcements and attacked Rosecrans hoping to destroy his army and recapture the important rail hub of Chattanooga. The battle was decided on the second day when Rosecrans accidentally opened a gap in his line which the Confederates plunged through, breaking a large portion of the Army of the Cumberland and sent Rosecrans flying to the rear. Despite this collapse, Thomas stood his ground. Repeated attacks smashed into his line, but the Virginian held firm, protecting the army till nightfall came and allowed him to make an ordered withdrawal. In Chickamauga, the bloodiest battle of the Western Theater and with potential to be the most important strategic victory of the Confederate war effort, Thomas limited the gains of Bragg's army. Instead of routing the entirety of the Union forces Bragg only induced a portion to flee, and found himself unable to quickly follow-up the triumph due to Thomas's stubborn defense. After Thomas finally withdrew, Bragg looked over the field. In his official report of the battle Bragg stated, "Any immediate pursuit by our infantry and artillery would have been fruitless . . . it was not deemed practicable with our weak and exhausted force to assail the enemy."¹¹ A major portion of the Confederate dead had died fighting Thomas and the men who rallied to his command. Had he broken alongside Rosecrans, the battle would have likely ended in the recapture of Chattanooga by the

¹⁰ William Tecumseh Sherman, "Grant, Thomas, Lee," *The North American Review* 144, no. 336 (1887): 448.

¹¹ Foote, *Fredericksburg*, 759.

Confederacy and possibly the destruction of the entire Army of the Cumberland. Thomas was successful and the army, though defeated, was not destroyed. Reinforced soon after and put under the command of Thomas, the Army of the Cumberland would recover itself and serve on numerous campaigns before the Civil War ended.

Although Chickamauga was a Union defeat, disaster was averted through Thomas's resolute defense. The Battle of Nashville at the end of 1864, on the other hand, was a triumph which saw the end of major Confederate resistance in the Western Theater.¹² The Battle of Nashville occurred as a direct result of Sherman's capture of Atlanta in September 1864. Rather than fight the Yankee army through Georgia, John Bell Hood decided to take his men and march north into Tennessee, to carry the war into Northern territory.¹³ Thomas opposed Hood with 60,000 men whom he concentrated around Nashville which Hood reached on December 1. For two weeks Thomas waited, concentrating his forces and preparing his men for battle. Grant and Lincoln tried to hurry Thomas, but he took his time and did not engage Hood until December 15. For Thomas, Nashville was a simple victory. He outnumbered the Confederates by almost 20,000 men and was far better supplied than Hood. However, the entire Civil War had seen these sorts of advantages where both sides fought battles and achieved victory despite numerical or logistical disadvantages. Thomas was a skilled enough commander to wait and not give into the pressures of Washington and the Northern public. Instead he attacked when he was ready and won a smashing victory which sent Hood's army into a precipitous retreat. Thomas pursued Hood into Alabama before the broken Confederate army finally escaped him. In early January, General P. G. T. Beauregard was sent to inspect Hood's army to attempt to take troops from it to oppose Sherman in the Carolinas. Beauregard described the army as, "if not, in the strictest sense of the words, a disorganized mob . . . it was no longer an army."¹⁴ Where there had been 40,000 troops, now only around 18,000 were effective soldiers. Many of these troops were disbanded or sent east to attempt to stop Sherman's advance through the Carolinas. However, it became undeniable that Confederate resistance in the west had ended and that George Thomas had broken the last army capable of sustaining a war in the region.

In comparing Pemberton to Thomas, one runs into the immediate difficulty of the differences between their two service records. Pemberton's efforts in the war were largely defined by the Vicksburg

¹² Shelby Foote, *The Civil War A Narrative: Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 756-58.

¹³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 809.

¹⁴ P. G. T. Beauregard, quoted in Foote, *Red River*, 758.

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Campaign while Thomas stepped towards the limelight after Chickamauga. Furthermore, the west was the site of the South's great defeats and conversely the North's great triumphs. Yet, what is interesting about both Thomas and Pemberton is the lack of memory provoked by their names. However, despite how poorly these generals are remembered in popular memory, their actions cannot be forgotten. Pemberton served a side which actively distrusted him and following his defeat at Vicksburg would not forgive him. Thomas's battlefield success kept him from suffering the same distrust which dogged Pemberton, a situation that one major defeat would have reversed. Both Pemberton and Thomas, despite how different their experiences of the war were, deserve great respect for their actions. They fought for something they believed in, forsaking ties to home to defend what they considered to be right. After the war Thomas attempted to aid his struggling family who burned his checks because of the disgrace they felt; while after his death several prominent Pennsylvanian citizens attempted to have his body disinterred from the cemetery where it was buried. Regardless of their personalities, the trauma they suffered as traitors to the causes of their birthplaces deserves respect and remembrance.