

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Impetuosity the Day Lincoln Was Almost Shot: The Fort Stevens Story

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Feature Essay

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Cooling III, Benjamin Franklin *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Impetuosity The Day Lincoln Was Almost Shot: The Fort Stevens Story.* The Scarecrow Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8108-8622-3

Lincoln's Impetuosity

It was in early July 1864 that Ulysses S. Grant had stolen a march on Robert E. Lee crossing the James River on his way to Richmond. This led Lee to try once more the time-tested expedient of threatening Washington in order to force weakening Grant's army. He gave Jubal A. Early an army of 20,000 men to threaten the capital. It marched up the Shenandoah Valley, slipped through a mountain pass, and headed for Washington.

On July 11, Early's army was at the defenses of the capital. Undoubtedly he could have marched into Washington, but in a hastily-called council of war, there was unanimous agreement among his staff to avoid entering the city at that time. Early, himself, subsequently declared that he had examined the fortifications confronting him, and had found them too strong for an assault by his weakened forces.

One of his soldiers, however, John N. Opie, held a different opinion when the troops reached the suburbs of Washington. He believed that the men who occupied the works were not seasoned troops, "A volley, a Rebel yell and a vigorous charge would have given us Washington." (210) War correspondent Sylvanus Cadwalader of the *New York Herald* agreed with Opie. "I have always wondered at Early's inaction," he wrote later. (120) Our lines at his front could have been carried at any point. "Washington was never more helpless. Any such cavalry commander as Sheridan, Wilson, Hampton or Stuart could have burned down the White House, the Capitol and all public buildings." (251- 252)

President Lincoln had been staying nights at the Soldiers' Home close to Fort Stevens in northern Washington. On July 11, Early's men had halted only

two miles away when a squad of men from the War Department arrived with word from Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton that the President must quickly return to the city. Lincoln rose, dressed and rode to the Executive Mansion. The President was reported in excellent spirits and seemingly not the least concerned about the safety of Washington, even though Confederate troops were then facing Fort Stevens on the 7th Street road.

The fort bristled with heavy guns, 19 in all, including five 30-pound rifle Parrotts and two mortars. If properly manned, it would have been difficult to capture, but its complement of gunners was too small to afford even a single relief.

Long before becoming a historian and author of books about the Civil War defenses of Washington, Benjamin Franklin Cooling, III, had grown up in the Fort Stevens neighborhood so he knows both the fort (now a historic site) and the surrounding area.

When Early reached Fort Stevens by noon on July 11, his troops were exhausted and further burdened with prisoners and loot. It was a hot July in Washington—93-94 degrees. They had collapsed near Silver Spring, Maryland, so that Early was unable to motivate them for a full attack. He decided to wait a day.

The delay allowed Union troops to reinforce the city which was sparsely defended by convalescing soldiers and poorly trained recent recruits. The veteran 6th Corps were pulled out of the trenches before Petersburg and debarked from transports at the foot of 7th Street. Troops of the Corps' 2nd Division hit the 7th Street road to Fort Stevens. As a result, by the morning of the 12th, the Union line looked stronger, and reinforcements continued to arrive all day. Therefore, Early decided the city could not be taken, so the day was spent skirmishing until the afternoon.

Cooling believes that this was a very tenuous moment in the war with Lincoln's re-election bid approaching and the capital under attack. If the election had been held in July or August, the Democrats might have won.

Like most of Washington, President Lincoln was feeling upbeat. When word came of the 6th Corps' deployment about the fort, he ordered his carriage, and with Mrs. Lincoln, set out to watch the show and such fireworks as might ensue.

Lincoln visited the battlefield on the 11th and 12th, the Commander-In-Chief rousing his troops but also the politician courting the electorate as he was very conscious of the soldier vote. The presidential carriage arrived about 4:00 on the afternoon of July 12. Without an escort, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln went to the barracks behind the fort, which had been turned into a hospital. General Horatio Wright, who commanded the 6th Corps, had been busy with arrangements placing one brigade of the Corps' 2nd Division in trenches just in front of the fort with pickets advancing forward. Gun crews were reinforced, and all was ready to give the Rebels a hot reception.

Standing on the rampart, Lincoln could be seen by Confederate sharpshooters on the rise up Georgia Avenue. On both days, men standing near him were shot, and someone—still unknown to this day—was said to have shouted, “Get that damned fool down!” Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, the future justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, “loudly proclaimed authorship in his senior years.” (1, 179) Cooling doubts this self-attribution as does Holmes biographer, G. Edward White (*Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: Law and the Inner Self* – Oxford University Press, 1993)(64-65).

The question remains unresolved as to what order actually was given the President to get off the parapet and by whom. Was it an admonition from General Wright, who claims he told his commander-in-chief, “Mr. President, this spot is too dangerous for you” and that “you really must get down from this exposed position,” or was it from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.? Benjamin P. Thomas, author of *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*, claims it was Holmes, while Bruce Catton in *A Stillness at Appomattox* credits Wright.

Regardless, by sunset on the 12th, Early's troops were in full retreat. Though the number of dead is uncertain, 17 Confederates and 40 Union men are buried nearby.

In the end, the Confederates failed to capture Washington. Early gave up the effort. As he later told General Robert E. Lee, he felt his entire command would have been sacrificed—while they were needed in Virginia. What is less well known, as this book points out, is that the day was marked by the singular event of someone making the commander-in-chief obey him.

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