

# Unsung Hero of Gettysburg: The Story of Union General David McMurtrie Gregg

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## Review

**Eicher, David J.**

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**Longacre, Edward G.** *Unsung Hero of Gettysburg: The Story of Union General David McMurr* Gregg. Potomac Books, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$34.95 ISBN 9781640124295 pp. 316

Pennsylvania-born David M. Gregg exemplifies characteristics of many of the most successful cavalry commanders of the Civil War. In this new biography, Edward Longacre sums up by offering that Gregg “embodied the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century cavalry commander.” The author has produced a slew of previous Civil War titles, including studies of Henry Hunt, Joshua Chamberlain, Ulysses Grant, and cavalymen John Buford, Joseph Wheeler, and George Custer.

Longacre’s previous works have been laudatory of their subjects, and this one is no exception. He provides a reasonably detailed, thoughtful, and entertaining narrative of Gregg’s life. He is especially interested in the high point of Gregg’s career, the cavalry action against Jeb Stuart during the third day of Gettysburg, and presents a nice introductory window into that event. The author contends that historians typically have undervalued those actions, which also involved Custer, as a defense of the Union right.

Longacre ably describes Gregg’s early life, his parents’ early deaths and those of other relatives, and the subject’s appointment to West Point. In his discussion of a friend and classmate, Cyrus Comstock, he erroneously states that brevet grades were honorary, a common mistake. (See Eicher and Eicher, *Civil War High Commands*, for the definitions.) Similarly, he confuses the concepts of grade and rank.

Nevertheless, the author provides an adept story of the early military career of Gregg. The work provides long and interesting discussions of the subject’s frontier duty in the West, various marches, Indian fighting near Walla Walla, and his station at Fort Tejon, north of Los Angeles, at the outbreak of the Civil War.

In his description of the early phases of the war period, the author provides an absorbing tale of Gregg’s bout with typhoid fever and hospitalization, only to barely escape the hospital when it caught fire. He confuses Charles Russell Lowell with James Russell Lowell. The author

details how Gregg was commissioned colonel of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry late in 1861 and the tale of the building of this regiment.

The story utilizes some nice excerpts from letters, especially as Gregg is cast into a role in what would become the Peninsular Campaign. He wades through the politics of many competing cavalry commanders, including William Averell and Alfred Pleasonton, and sometimes stumbles with military terminology and concepts, remarking that Philip St. George Cooke was “demoted” when he was simply given a different assignment.

The battle descriptions are interesting and move along at a fast pace, offering a fine narrative, as with Savage’s Station. An occasional slip appears, as with the comment that Joe Johnston was the “sole [sic] of caution.” He names “Berkeley Hundred” as an historic plantation, rather than “Berkeley” — Berkeley Hundred was the land grant on which the Berkeley plantation house stood.

In any case, the narrative moves through Gregg’s relative inactivity during the Antietam Campaign and then the entrance of Confederates into Pennsylvania and the resulting actions at Gettysburg. Although the author clearly admires his subject, he is not without offering criticism, as with Gregg’s questionable decisions at Second Brandy Station.

The coverage of the Gettysburg Campaign is the most skillfully executed part of the book. The cavalry fight versus the tardy Jeb Stuart is well told, and offers readers unfamiliar with the story an often overlooked tale of this famous moment in military history. He offers pretty detailed coverage of the post-Gettysburg actions in 1863, including the inconclusive Mine Run Campaign.

The final months of the war receive fair attention as Gregg plays a role in the mounting Overland Campaign in Virginia. Initially seeing action at Todd’s Tavern, Gregg now commanded the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps as a brigadier general. The author contends that Gregg was not utilized very effectively in the ensuing actions around Petersburg, where horse soldiers played a lesser role. By late January 1865 Gregg, who had acted very competently throughout the war, suddenly submitted his resignation, a still-somewhat mysterious act. One of several reasons may have been his declining state of health. He saw limited actions in early February before his resignation was accepted and he left the army.

The coverage of Gregg’s postwar activities, including possible interest in Pennsylvania’s governorship, travel, visiting with family, and attending the occasional soldier’s reunion, is

compact yet informative. Gregg died in 1916, and a century later has finally received a biography that delivers the details of a soldier's full and interesting life.

*David J. Eicher is Editor-in-Chief of Astronomy Magazine and has been interested in Civil War history for thirty-five years. He is author or coauthor of nine books on the war, including The Longest Night, Civil War High Commands, and The Civil War in Books.*