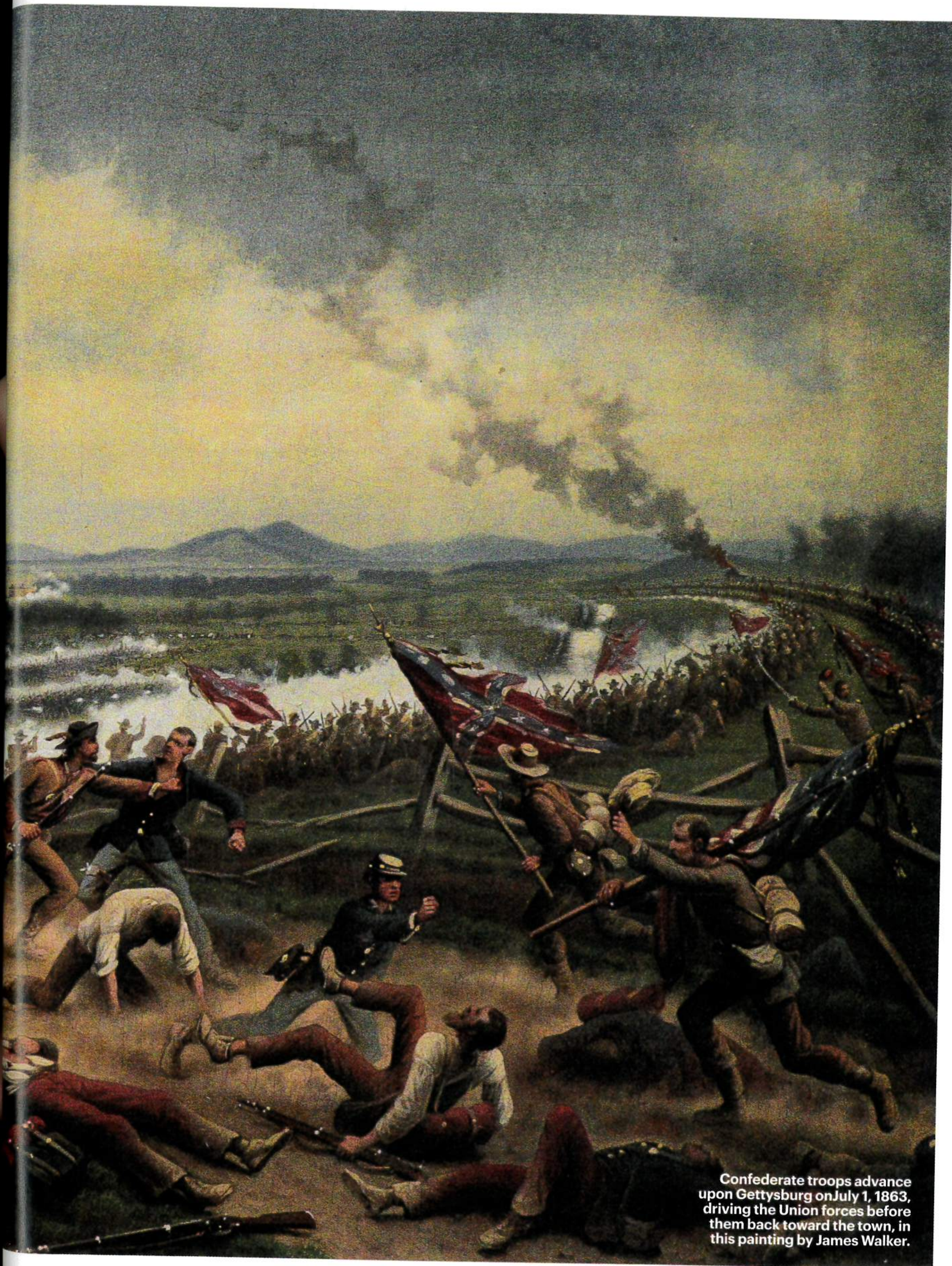
REVERBERATIONS OF BATTLE

A brief, fierce clash during the first day of fighting at Gettysburg affected the men of the 24th Michigan and 26th North Carolina long after the guns fell silent.

BY JUDKIN BROWNING


Confederate troops advance upon Gettysburg onJuly 1, 1863, driving the Union forces before them back toward the town, in this painting by James Walker.

TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD PRIVATE PETER C. Bird of the 24th Michigan Infantry, part of the Army of the Potomac's famed Iron Brigade, lay in the battle line in McPherson's Woods west of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the muggy afternoon of Wednesday, July 1, 1863. He stared across 300 yards of oat fields at a large force of Confederates gathering for an attack. These men were from the 26th North Carolina Infantry and, as part of General J. Johnston Pettigrew's brigade, they were among the first elements of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to descend on the outnumbered Union forces formed around the town. Near Peter was his younger brother, Robert. The Birds hailed from Romulus, Michigan, southwest of Detroit, and had joined the regiment at its inception in July 1862. Positioned on a slope known as McPherson's Ridge, Peter detailed that morning's activities in his pocket diary to pass the anxious moments. Around 3 p.m., when he saw the Confederates rise from the ground, dress their lines, and step off, he put down his diary and snatched up his rifle.[1]

Peter and Robert held their ground until the 24th's colonel, Henry C. Morrow, ordered the regiment to retreat to a second defensive line farther up the ridge. Robert dutifully fell back, but Peter lingered to fire a shot. As he turned to retreat, a minie ball tore into his left leg and broke his femur in half. He crumpled to the ground as the Confederates overtook his position, leaving him with the other human debris in their wake. Mercifully, Peter knew neither how dreadfully long he would lay there, nor exactly how this event would affect the rest of his life.[2]

As Peter lay untended, Robert and the 24th Michigan repositioned to a third line on the summit of the wooded slope. In one final charge, the North Carolinians pushed the Union regiment off McPherson's Ridge. The 26th North Carolina's part of the battle ended around 3:45 p.m., and soon after, units from General William Dorsey Pender's division pressed the Iron Brigade back over 400 yards to Seminary Ridge. The northerners made a final stand at a rail fence barricade near the Lutheran Theological Seminary before retreating through the town about 4:30 p.m. Both regiments suffered enormous casualties during the fighting: Seventy-three percent of the 496 men in the 24th Michigan fell, while the 26th North Carolina lost nearly two-thirds of its approximately 900 men.[3]

It was in the aftermath of the fight for McPherson's Ridge that the most significant battle of Peter Bird's life began. After the Confederate troops passed by his bleeding body, Bird lay in the same spot in the woods west of Gettysburg for four days as maggots gorged on his mangled leg. Family lore maintains that Robert found his brother late on July 5—two days after the Battle of Gettysburg had ended—and moved him to a temporary hospital. With so many wounded to be treated, it was the next day before the regimental surgeon, Dr. J.H. Beech, examined him and moved him to a nearby feed store to die. When a visitor from Detroit arrived at the battlefield on July 12, he "was shocked at the sight" of the gruesomely wounded young man. Bird appeared "happy in the hope of restoration to friends," even though the doctors assured the visitor that Bird could not live.

Bird, however, defied medical expectations. On July 15, Dr. Beech finally began treating the wound—cutting into the flesh to remove the lead bullet and pieces of bone that had splintered off. Because the leg was so inflamed, he decided not to amputate, but instead set the bone and immobilized the leg. Four months later, "the fracture of the bone had united, but the wound continued open and discharged large quantities of pus, and a few pieces of bone." Despite the complications associated with his injury, Bird moved to a new detail as a hospital clerk in Detroit. He married his 21-year-old sweetheart, Mary Jane Morris, in November 1864. In April 1865, as the nation celebrated the surrender of Lee's army, Bird went under the knife again at St. Mary's Hospital in De-

▸ **To view this article's reference notes, turn to page 78.**

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (2); COLORIZATION BY MADS MADSEN OF COLORIZED HISTORY; PREVIOUS SPREAD: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

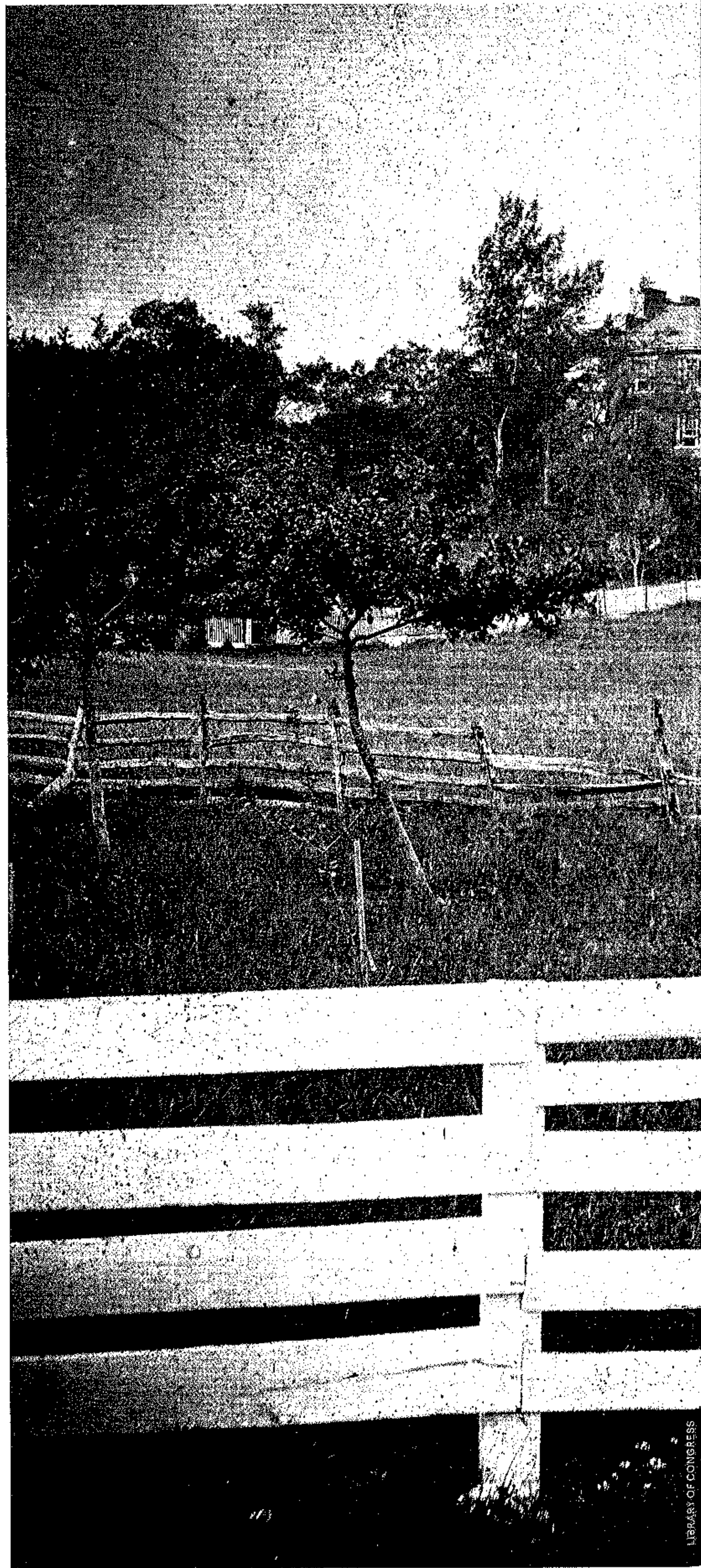
Photographer Mathew Brady, who visited Gettysburg shortly after the battle's end, gazes upon McPherson's Woods, the site of heavy fighting between the 24th Michigan and 26th North Carolina during the engagement's first day. Opposite page: the 24th Michigan's colonel, Henry C. Morrow.

troit to remove pieces of bone still detaching from the compromised femur. He mustered out of the service in October 1865, and another surgery followed six years later.[4]

After serving as a lighthouse keeper in northern Michigan, Bird and his growing family moved back to Romulus in 1874. (The Birds would eventually have nine children.) Once in his hometown, Bird became an active Republican Party leader and justice of the peace. He sold life insurance and served for many years as deputy register of deeds of Wayne County and deputy collector of U.S. Customs for Detroit. Peter and his brother traveled at least once to Gettysburg, where they were interviewed by an assistant to Paul Philippoteaux, who was working on his epic cyclorama of the battle. The artist became so taken with the Birds that he painted them into his famous depiction of Pickett's Charge (even though Peter was still lying in McPherson's Woods during that event). Though Peter remained active in the 24th Michigan's regimental association, his increasing debilitation prevented him from attending any of the decennial anniversaries of the battle in which he suffered his traumatic wound.[5]

Bird's injury forced him to remember that fateful afternoon for the rest of his life. In 1904, he described his daily regimen to federal pension commissioners: "There is a hole at the seat of the wound, and there is a continual discharge of pus from this hole. It is necessary to insert a drain to keep this hole open, and sometimes it has been necessary to cut it open." Bird noted that the wound "requires so much dressing and attention that I cannot be away from home for any length of time; I am home every night." The daily treatment exerted a profound influence on his children; one son became a doctor, and another entered the pharmacy business. Forty years after the battle, his youngest son, Richard, still attended to the wound. Bird admitted, "At first Richard did not like to do the work," but when Peter nearly died from an infection at the wound site, Richard relented and dealt with the unpleasant task of inserting a drain into his father's leg and cleaning it with hydrogen peroxide. The operation had to be performed every morning and every night for 49 years, until Peter's death on October 10, 1912.[6]

Peter Bird was not the only member of the 24th Michigan whose life was altered as a result of the fighting on July 1, 1863. Not far from Bird that day stood Private Solomon Benster, a six-foot-tall, 18-year-old machinist from southwest Detroit who had enlisted the previous summer. As the Rebels advanced on their position on McPherson's Ridge, Benster bent over, perhaps to tend to a wounded comrade. At that moment two bul-



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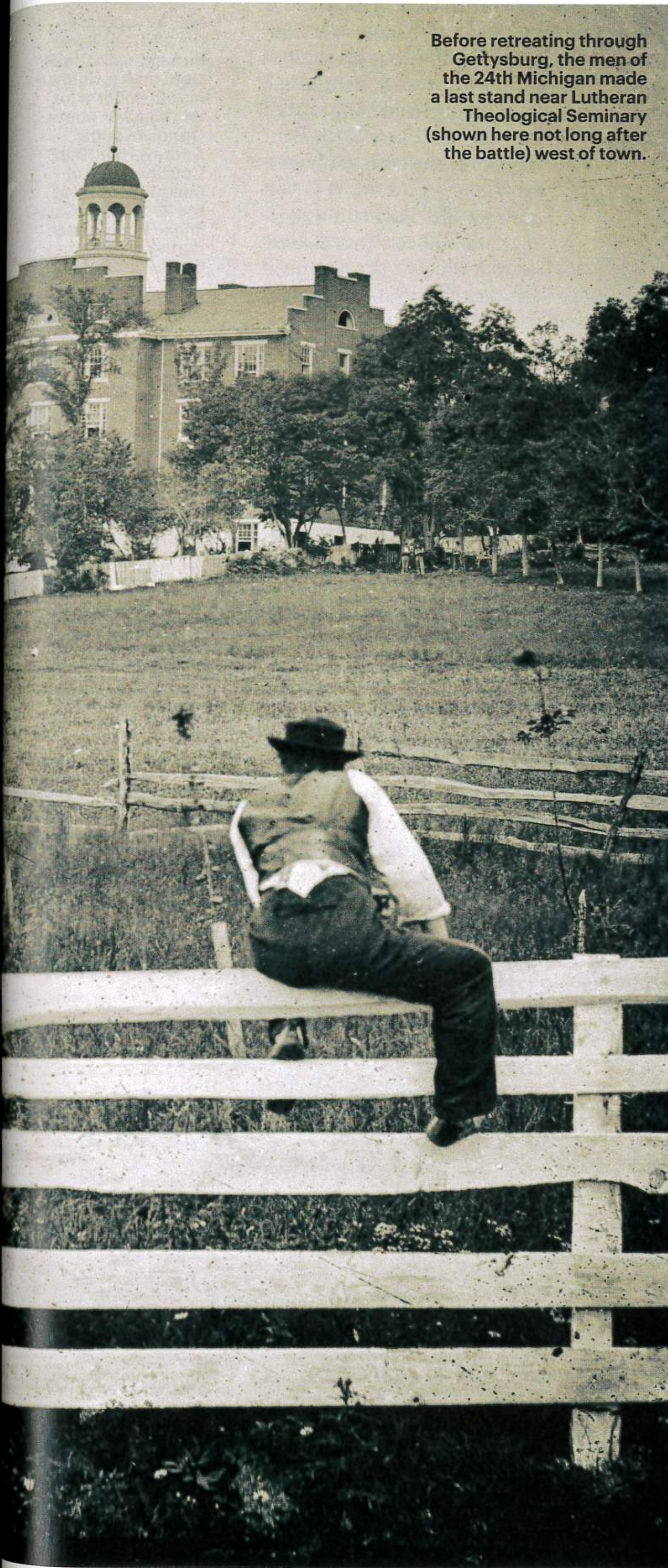
Before retreating through Gettysburg, the men of the 24th Michigan made a last stand near Lutheran Theological Seminary (shown here not long after the battle) west of town.

lets struck him simultaneously. The first broke the bones in his left shoulder, ripped his left lung, and lodged against his right hip bone. The second struck his right shoulder, passed through his lung cavity, scraped his sternum, and lodged in the muscles of his stomach.[7]

Benster would carry both bullets—and their effects—to the grave. His left arm was "nearly useless," and the bullet that lodged against his hip also impinged on the sciatic nerve, causing his right leg and hip to trouble him throughout his life. Thirty-one years after the battle, Benster wrote, "I have never been able to perform manual labor since my discharge." He also revealed that for three years, "I had to be tied to a chair back to be kept upright." He admitted, "This is one of my main troubles at present and always will be." Unable to work as he had before the war, Benster took up photography and, with monthly financial assistance from the U.S. Pension Bureau, opened his own business. Benster attended the Michigan Day ceremonies at Gettysburg in June 1889 (when the regiment's monument was unveiled on McPherson's Ridge), the only time in his life he revisited the scene of his disabling.[8]

Benster's physical condition also took a toll on his personal life. He married India King in 1866 and had two sons with her, but they divorced a few years later. His experience was not unusual. Indeed, a sample of 118 men from the 24th Michigan who were wounded at Gettysburg shows they suffered from a divorce rate that was more than double the postwar average, suggesting that the physical and psychological scars of the battle—which led some veterans to violence against their families—damaged postwar relationships.[9] Edward Chope, a member of the regiment who was discharged after a severe leg wound, divorced twice; his second wife testified to his "cruel and inhuman treatment of her." A shot to the knee disabled Jeston Warner, whom a court found "guilty of several acts of extreme cruelty" against his wife, who divorced him. Patrick Clarey was shot four times and lost a leg at Gettysburg. After the war, domestic violence became the norm at his house; witnesses described Clarey as a drunkard with a "dangerous disposition and temper." He abused his wife, who threatened to poison him in retaliation, and tried to use an iron bar to beat his stepson, who later attempted to shoot Clarey with a revolver. Clarey claimed that all this unrest stemmed from his wife's attempts "to ridicule me because of my infirmities."[10]

For other veterans of the 24th, the battle had devastating economic consequences to accompany emotional wounds. Located on the far left of the regiment's line on McPherson's Ridge was 27-year-old German immigrant Friedrich Koch. Soon after the 24th fell back to its new defensive line, a minie ball ripped through his neck, enter-

ing about three inches below his left ear and exiting near his spinal cord. Koch fell into enemy hands, but escaped from a Confederate field hospital two days later and hid with a local farmer who later carried him to Union lines. Treated in a Harrisburg hospital, Koch received a two-week furlough in August 1863. Believing he had been discharged from the army, Koch returned to Chicago, where doctors treated his wound for years. The army classified Koch as a deserter, though he would not discover this until after the war when he was repeatedly denied a pension. The intense and unremitting head pain from his wound prevented Koch from holding a job. For 40 years he fought the Pension Bureau to have his record cleared—a process that included having a friend write directly to President William McKinley in 1901 asking for mercy for "the gentleman [who] is past sixty years of age and in poor circumstances"—but never succeeded. Koch died alone, destitute, and unrewarded for the sacrifice he made for his adopted country.[11] He was not the only one. Of 391 pension claims filed by soldiers of the 24th Michigan or their dependent family members, 51 were rejected.

Even for those who did receive a pension, postwar life was not free from financial hardship. Standing in line with his comrades in the 24th's Company B at Gettysburg was a 25-year-old French Canadian laborer from Trenton, Michigan, named Raphael Lafayette Veo. As Veo turned to his right for a moment, three bullets from a Confederate volley struck him. One bullet benignly passed through the flesh of his left elbow, but a second bullet fractured his right heel. The third ball entered his back four inches above his hip and passed across his spine before exiting on his right side. With a crippled back and a useless foot, Veo spent time in several hospitals before he was discharged for disability in November 1863. One year later he married Eulalie Depuis, and they had two daughters. Veo tried to make a living as a farmer and a sawyer, but his wounds prevented it. His heel never mended properly and by 1882 had become a continual open sore, which kept him housebound for nearly half of that year. His federal pension was the family's primary means of support, but at $8 a month, it was barely sufficient.[12]

The inability to provide a comfortable living for his family and the constant physical pain weakened Veo's psyche. His physician noted that he became increasingly prone to "spells of melancholy and nervous prostration." The Battle of Gettysburg cast a permanent shadow over him. A close friend asserted, "I know that his wounds affected his mind from his strange manners.... They were the cause of his mental derangement." Veo battled his demons until July 1889. Four days after the 26th anniversary of his wounding, Veo took his own life. Eulalie never remarried and continued to receive a widow's pension until her death in 1930. His daughters, Elizabeth and Florence, lived long and full lives, indelibly molded by the broken and depressed man who emerged from Gettysburg.[13]

Corporal Charles McConnell was one of the few members of Company B who emerged from the battle unscathed. Born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1841, he had emigrated in 1847 when his family fled the potato famine. They made their way to Detroit, where McConnell grew up and joined the 24th Michigan on July 24, 1862. During the McPherson's Ridge fight, McConnell had several near misses. One bullet tore his shirtsleeve, while another ripped his pants. As he retreated to a new position, a third bullet struck him square in the back. His blanket saved his life, the ball "cutting through ten thicknesses" of the tightly rolled covering. It was indicative of fighting so blisteringly intense that one soldier wrote his parents: "I don't see how in the world that our men got off without [the enemy] killing them all."[14] McConnell continued to the fence barricade at the Lutheran Theological Seminary. As the Union line showed signs of giving way, McConnell took aim at a Confederate soldier carrying a battle flag about 30 yards away. He steadied his rifle on the branch of a tree, fired, and through the smoke saw the flag and its carrier collapse. He turned and joined his comrades retreating through the streets of Gettysburg, certain that he had fired the 24th Michigan's last bullet on the first day's battle.[15]

In 1867, McConnell married a comrade's sister, and they had a daughter. He became president of a Chicago-based drug company in 1892, making a handsome salary until his death in 1916. Throughout his life, McConnell maintained an abiding interest in the 24th Michigan's role at Gettysburg. In 1896 he wrote a detailed account of the regiment's action on the first day, which he delivered as a speech to the Army of the Potomac Society in March 1897. McConnell felt "the first day's battle of Gettysburg has never been given proper appreciation" by the northern public. McConnell had witnessed Pickett's Charge on July 3—"a spectac-

Left: Charles McConnell, a corporal in the 24th Michigan during the Battle of Gettysburg, donned his old uniform for this postwar photo. Opposite page: Andrew Hull "Dan" Courtney, one of many members of the 26th North Carolina to be wounded during the fighting on July 1, 1863.

GEORGE C. UNDERWOOD, *HISTORY OF THE TWENTY-SIX REGIMENT OF THE NORTH CAROLINA TROOPS* (1901); THE SOCIETY FOR THE HISTORICAL PRESERVATION OF THE 26TH REGIMENT N.C. TROOPS, INC. (OPPOSITE PAGE)

ular, unmilitary, worse than useless slaughter of brave men predestined to defeat"—and asserted that the famously doomed attack did not compare to the fighting of July 1 on McPherson's Ridge. "There was nothing spectacular about that fight," McConnell declared. "It was cold-blooded, grim determination, give and take, until both commands were nearly annihilated." If not for the sacrifice of the Iron Brigade on July 1, he said, there would have been no Union victory to salvage. McConnell's efforts to recount and memorialize the first day's fight would even lead to unlikely connections and close bonds with his former adversaries in the 26th North Carolina.[16]

The fight for McPherson's Ridge was every bit as devastating and personal for men of the 26th North Carolina. After lying in line for two hours that July afternoon, the southerners were relieved when the order to advance finally came. One Chatham County soldier wrote, "I was as anxious to go as I ever was to do any thing in my life and as we went in I could heardly [sic] keep from crying I was so proud to see our boys go in so well." They had not gone far when the Yankees fired a destructive volley. One soldier saw "my comrades lying almost in piles," dead or with all imaginable variety of wounds. Another confirmed that "hundreds [were] lying wounded, some dying, other[s] bleeding to death, other[s] crying and saying oh cant you do something for me or I shall die."[17] Those who could returned fire and continued to advance, reloading as they marched.

Three members of the extended Setser family from mountainous Caldwell County served in the 26th's Company F. W.E. "Eli" Setser, 19, marched beside his 20-year-old cousin, Joseph, that afternoon. Their 23-year-old cousin, Thomas, was fortuitously detailed for other duty that morning and missed the fight. A bullet from one of the first volleys smashed Joseph's knee, but Eli was able to continue with the regiment into the woods. As he stood within yards of the enemy line, multiple bullets slammed into Eli—at least two hit one arm, and another tore a hole through his coat. Another minie ball struck near the top of his leg, shattering his femur. The wound was so high that amputation was impossible, and the bone had disintegrated so badly that it could not be set. Eli recognized immediately that he would not recover.[18]

Thomas Setser frantically scoured the battlefield that evening for his cousin. He found him suffering in the woods and remained by his side until shortly after dawn, when he flagged down some medical orderlies. As Thomas helped put his cousin in an ambulance wagon, Eli asked Thomas to "tell my folks how it was." An emotional Thomas earnestly promised to do so. The wagon carted the ashen Eli off to the same field hospital where his cousin Joseph had had his leg amputated above the knee the night before.[19]

On the morning of July 4, Lieutenant William A. Tuttle of the 22nd North Carolina, a family friend, visited the Setsers. Tuttle was dismayed to see Eli so hopelessly wounded. "I Dont think he will ever Recover," Tuttle painfully wrote to Eli's father, "his thigh was shivered close up to his hip." Eli's resigned acceptance of his fate impressed the lieutenant: "He told me that he was willing to Die and that he hoped to meet me in heaven." Tuttle waited as long as he could before leaving to stay ahead of the approaching Union army. "With a heavy heart I took their hands, and a tear fell from our eyes and we parted." Eli died that evening. Joseph died of infection two weeks later. After the war, one of Eli's younger brothers named his firstborn son after him. Two of Joseph Setser's younger brothers named their own sons Joseph.[20]

Marching in the attack near the Setsers was their good friend, Andrew Hull "Dan" Courtney, 26, who had enlisted in July 1862 to avoid

the Confederate military draft. Dan's thoughts were of his sickly wife, Mary, who had given birth to a stillborn son eight months earlier and then discovered in February 1863 that someone had stolen their only plow on the eve of spring planting. On June 3 Courtney wrote his wife, "I want to get home worse on your account than anything else. I know you are lonesome and see a heep of trouble...." On June 24, as the regiment prepared to cross the Potomac River into Maryland, the devout Methodist wrote, "I hope Gode [sic] will spare my life to get home on your account." In the attack that Wednesday afternoon, a minie ball tore apart Dan's lower left leg. Carried to the same hospital as the Setsers, he lay near his friends, all three of them in agony.[21]

Dan became a prisoner when the Union took over the field hospital on July 4, and Union surgeons amputated his infected leg on July 6. He recuperated in a prison hospital in Baltimore and was exchanged in August 1863. He remained in Confederate hospitals until he was furloughed in October. Dan returned home to his wife, who gave birth to a son, John, 10 months later. Ultimately, Dan and Mary would raise eight children on their farm and tannery near Lenoir, North Carolina. Dan died in 1909, but Gettysburg played a prominent role in his family's memories of him. Nearly 100 years after his death, a granddaughter wrote a brief family church history that was revealing in its inaccuracies. The story begins with a realistic version of Courtney's wounding at Gettysburg, but veers from the facts into family lore that has him fashioning a wooden leg and stumping all the way home from Pennsylvania just "to see his wife and little son, John." Dan did not walk home from Gettysburg, and his wife gave birth to John a year later. But the story demonstrates the mythical power the battle held for later generations.[22]

Above: Henry ("Harry") King Burgwyn, the 26th North Carolina's 21-year-old colonel who was mortally wounded during the fighting on July 1. Opposite page: The regiment's lieutenant colonel, John R. Lane, who would fall wounded not long after Burgwyn.

The memory of the battle shaped the lives of many other participants and their families as well. On that fateful afternoon, the 26th North Carolina's 21-year-old colonel, Henry ("Harry") King Burgwyn, ordered his men forward at the quick step while he followed a few paces behind the lines to view their progress. The men marched crisply through an oat field, then bunched up a bit as they crossed the brambles of a small creek known as Willoughby's Run. Once the regiment traversed the creek, Burgwyn reformed his lines and urged his men up the slope. During the advance, one color bearer after another fell, but others kept picking the banner up and carrying it forward. At one point Burgwyn picked up the fallen flag. As he was handing it to another soldier, a bullet entered his left side, perforated both lungs, and dropped him flat on his back.[23]

When Lieutenant Colonel John R. Lane saw Burgwyn fall, he rushed to his colonel's side, grabbed his hand, and asked if he was badly hurt. Burgwyn could not find the breath to speak and only squeezed Lane's hand and motioned to his left side. As others came to Burgwyn's side, Lane left to take over leadership of the regiment. Using a blanket as a stretcher, two soldiers carried Burgwyn toward the rear, stepping over the mangled and dead. Burgwyn died that afternoon, soon after averring to those around him that he felt no regrets and gloried in the day's victory. His friends buried him in an ammunition case and marked his grave so that his family could someday retrieve his body, which they did two years later.[24]

The lanky, heavily bearded Lane was only three days shy of his 28th birthday on July 1, 1863. After checking on Burgwyn, the lieutenant colo-

SIX REGIMENT OF THE NORTH CAROLINA TROOPS (1901)

nel ran to the right to prepare his men for a final charge at the Union line on the summit of the hill. He returned to the center to see that Lieutenant Milton Blair of Company B had picked up the fallen colors. Lane asked for them, and as he handed them over Blair sardonically replied, "You will get tyred [sic] of them." With the flag held high, Lane led the regiment toward what remained of the Union defenders, who were still blazing away. When the smoke cleared for a moment, General J. Johnston Pettigrew, well to the rear, witnessed Lane leading the charge and remarked, "It is the bravest act I ever saw."[25]

As they came within 30 yards of the enemy line, Lane turned to encourage his men. A .58 caliber ball crashed through his neck at the base of the skull and exited through his mouth, carrying parts of his chin, jaw, tongue, and several teeth with it. The men of the 26th charged past the fallen Lane and drove the Yankees off the crest of McPherson's Ridge. With that desperate rush, the 26th North Carolina's part of the fighting ended. While some of the North Carolinians followed the continued Confederate advance, most stayed behind to tend to wounded friends, and some carried Lane's inert body to the rear.[26]

A day after battle's end, Lane was loaded into a wagon full of wounded and started back to Virginia. A Union cavalry detachment attacked the caravan, and Lane, though weak from hunger and his wound, grabbed a riderless horse and made his escape. By August 4 he was back home in Chatham County on extended furlough. Remarkably, Lane recovered and rejoined the regiment. After the war, he returned to his home on Little Brush Creek, where he ran a general store and grist mill before establishing a lucrative business selling horses, mules, and land. Lane would give several speeches about his regiment's experience at Gettysburg and participated proudly in tributes to Confederate forces until his death on December 31, 1908. During the last decades of his life, Lane corresponded frequently with those who wished to preserve the regiment's history, especially the younger brother of Colonel Harry Burgwyn.[27]

At the moment his older brother fell mortally wounded, 17-year old Lieutenant William Hyslop Sumner Burgwyn was resting on the Williamsburg Road a few miles east of Richmond. As part of the 35th North Carolina Infantry, he was monitoring Union forces scouting the eastern approaches to the Confederate capital. The first reports of the battle at Gettysburg arrived on July 7, a rainy Tuesday, and relayed "the glorious news that Lee had captured 40,000 men of Mead's [sic] Army," and William optimistically "believe[d] it to be true." Five days later, he received news his brother had been killed. "I could not bear to believe it & do not," William wrote in his diary. The next day corroborating sources confirmed Harry's death. William mourned "my dear beloved brother who I had just began to appreciate for his good and noble qualities." The brothers had had their difficulties. Like many siblings, the two could not be together long without irritating each other, but William greatly admired his big brother. He confessed that Harry's death "presses with a heavy load on my heart and I find difficulty in believing or realizing it." That Christmas, William lamented, "the only thing that saddened the day was that my poor brother Harry had been killed and could not be with us."[28]

Harry's death also devastated the rest of the family. His presumed fiancée never married. His father, who was very close to Harry, declined rapidly in health. Harry was constantly in the thoughts of his mother, Anna. On July 9, 1867, Anna attended the reinterment of Harry's Gettysburg coffin in Raleigh's historic Oakwood Cemetery. In the last six CONT. ON P. 76

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months of her life, Anna referred to Harry five times in her journal. One of her last entries, on February 25, 1887, poignantly noted that day was "the anniversary of my last parting with dear Harry."[29]

William dedicated his life to preserving his brother's memory, especially in relation to the 26th North Carolina's sacrifice at Gettysburg. William became a lawyer and a banker in Henderson, North Carolina, but in his free time, he compiled all he could about Harry's unit. He corresponded with several members of the regiment, including Lane. When Judge Walter Clark began to publish his five-volume *Histories of Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina* (1901), William told the story of the 26th. His obsession with learning every detail about the Gettysburg fight meant that he knew about the 24th Michigan as well, and he became particular friends with one veteran of that regiment, Charles McConnell.[30]

In November 1896, while attempting to write his own history of the fighting on July 1, 1863, McConnell contacted Burgwyn, beginning a lengthy, intimate correspondence. The two met several times near the turn of the century. In one meeting in Richmond in 1900, McConnell mentioned to Burgwyn that he had shot a color bearer with his last cartridge, and assumed that he must have been from the 26th North Carolina. Burwgyn immediately responded, "Then you are the man who shot Colonel Lane." Burgwyn arranged an introduction in May 1903, and the two former antagonists became fast friends.[31]

Two months later, on July 4, 1903, at Gettysburg, Lane delivered a speech to assembled veterans about the 26th North Carolina's fight. After his oration, an emotional Lane pulled McConnell on stage with him and announced: "And this is the man that shot me." McConnell, equally moved, replied, "I thank God that I did not kill you." Afterward the men had photos taken together at the 24th Michigan monument.[32] Nearly every historian who has written about the two regiments since 1903 tells their story, and it even found a new audience during the war's recent sesquicentennial as news organizations and bloggers touted the 1903 reunion as

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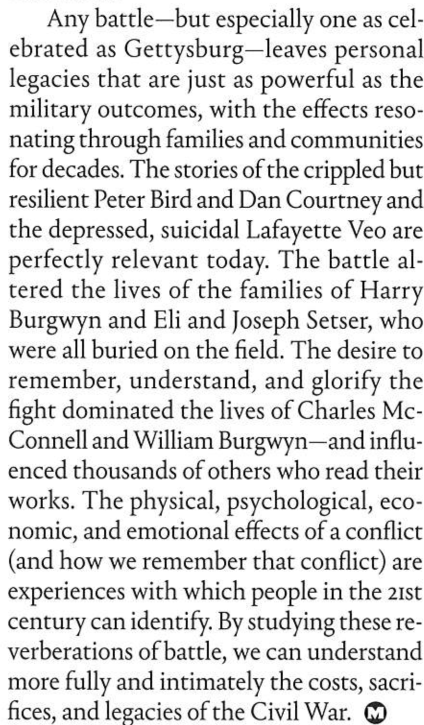
John Lane (left), William Burgwyn, and Charles McConnell gather at the Gettysburg battlefield in 1903.

the epitome of reconciliation. It would be the perfect story to conclude this essay—except that it is not true. McConnell may have shot some poor color bearer, but it was not Lane.[33]

More than 150 years later we are still detangling the web of myths that have spun themselves into the history of the Battle of Gettysburg. In this particular case, it was an unintentional falsehood. Lane had been shot at the edge of McPherson's Woods, while McConnell fired his last shot at the barricade near the Lutheran Theological Seminary some 400 yards away. William Burgwyn had never been to Gettysburg and did not understand that there was a quarter-mile gap between McPherson's Ridge, where Lane fell, and Seminary Ridge, where McConnell fired his last shot. And Lane had no idea who shot him; he simply believed what Burgwyn told him. All three men wanted the story to be true, as it not only imbued the battle and their connections to it with a deeper significance, but also offered a sense of closure. Thus a mythic moment made its way into histories of the encounter.



Any battle—but especially one as celebrated as Gettysburg—leaves personal legacies that are just as powerful as the military outcomes, with the effects resonating through families and communities for decades. The stories of the crippled but resilient Peter Bird and Dan Courtney and the depressed, suicidal Lafayette Veo are perfectly relevant today. The battle altered the lives of the families of Harry Burgwyn and Eli and Joseph Setser, who were all buried on the field. The desire to remember, understand, and glorify the fight dominated the lives of Charles McConnell and William Burgwyn—and influenced thousands of others who read their works. The physical, psychological, economic, and emotional effects of a conflict (and how we remember that conflict) are experiences with which people in the 21st century can identify. By studying these reverberations of battle, we can understand more fully and intimately the costs, sacrifices, and legacies of the Civil War.

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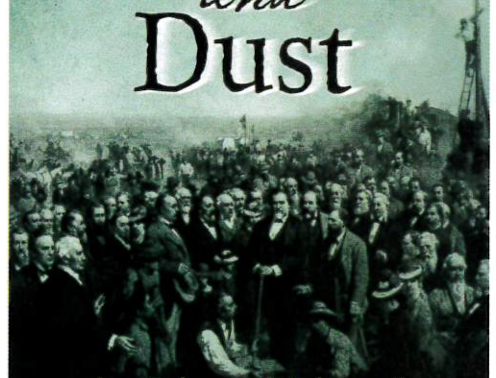
MARC GRAHAM

He's already been through Hell, but Heaven is still beyond his grasp...

Of Ashes and Dust



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SOURCES & CITATIONS FROM THIS ISSUE'S ARTICLES

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(Pages 26–27, 72–73)

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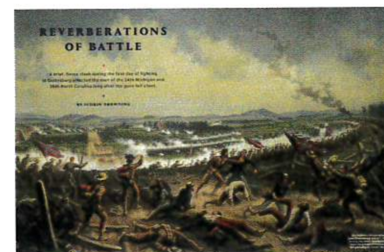

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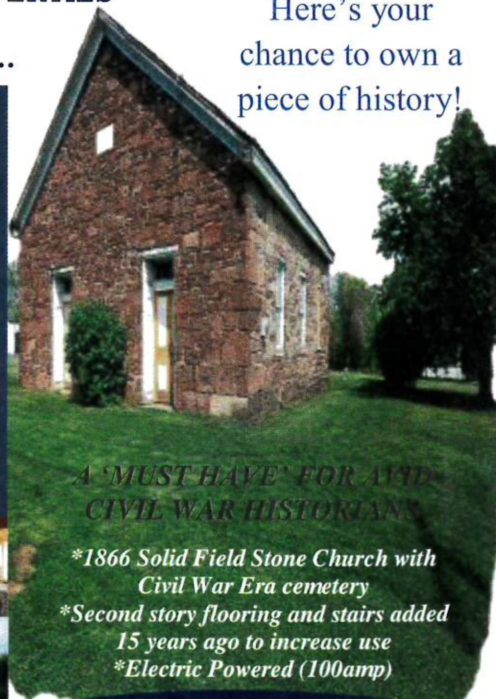

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