

Captain Meade

When William H. Hearding came up Lake Superior aboard the iron sidewheeler *Search* in the summer of 1861 to survey the Duluth-Superior harbor, he was acting under the orders of an obscure engineer officer in the United States Topographical Corps in Detroit. Hearding's orders, which allotted him \$2,000 to conduct surveys of the St. Louis River channel and surrounding waters, were signed by Captain George Gordon Meade.

"You will execute a topographical and hydrographical survey of the River St. Louis as far as navigable and the bay to include the line of Minnesota Point and the mouth of the Nemadji River – on which line a connection will be made with the work of Assist. Perry."¹

Meade had great confidence in his surveyor. He and Hearding had worked together for better than a decade, and the captain in Detroit did not deem it "necessary to give you detailed instructions in reference to the conduct of these operations – Impracticable because no adequate knowledge of the ground exists; and unnecessary, because the length of time you have been on the Survey, and the experience acquired by you, leads to the presumption that your judgment when on the ground will enable you to execute the general instructions given."²



Union Army General George Meade became famous in the Civil War's epic Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, two years after serving as the U.S. Topographical Corps captain who ordered the first Duluth-Superior Harbor survey. (Duluth Public Library Collection)

Hearding arrived at Superior City on June 22, 1861, with an assistant and 20 crew members. During the next 14 weeks, he and his surveyors built 82 triangulation stations, took 347 soundings, located and placed 277 buoys and sounding stakes, took 8,482 theodolite bearings, made 76 compass sights, accurately measured two base lines and surveyed nearly 94 miles of shoreline.³

On August 19, Hearding's boss, Captain Meade, stepped ashore in Superior to inspect the work. Meade pronounced himself satisfied with the progress and returned to Detroit the next week. The visit was his last official act as the captain in charge of the Surveys of the Great Lakes for the United States Topographical Corps.⁴

An 1835 West Point graduate, Meade had resigned his army commission following service in the Seminole War in 1836. He spent the next six years surveying railroads and rivers in the American South before rejoining the Army in 1842. Until the Mexican War broke out in 1848, Meade conducted

coastal surveys and built lighthouses on Delaware Bay. He served with distinction as a lieutenant of engineers in Mexico and saw combat at Palo Alto, Resaca de Palma, Monterrey and Vera Cruz. When the war ended, he was posted to Detroit, where he oversaw the Great Lakes Survey for 12 years.⁵ For much of that time, he was an administrator rather than a field surveyor.⁶

Meade left Detroit on August 31, 1861, shortly after his return from the Duluth-Superior Harbor. During the next two years, he would enjoy perhaps the most meteoric rise in rank and command of any American military officer until Dwight David Eisenhower duplicated the feat in the early days of World War II.

In early September of that first year of the Civil War, Meade accepted the command of a brigade of Pennsylvania volunteers in the wake of the Union debacle at the Battle of Bull Run. During the next year, he commanded the Pennsylvania troops on the Peninsula campaign in the spring of 1862, at the second battle of Bull Run in August 1862, and at the Army of the Potomac's blocking action at South Mountain the next month. He was wounded at the Battle of White Oak Swamp in the Peninsula campaign but returned to command troops three months later.⁷

At the battle of Antietam in September 1862, Meade commanded a division of Pennsylvania volunteers in General Joseph Hooker's Corps. In the spring of 1863, Meade, who had been named a major general of volunteers the previous November, assumed command of the Army of the Potomac's V Corps. Although not used extensively in the Battle of Chancellorsville in April 1863, V Corps acquitted itself well in the Union defeat.⁸

Meade was leading V Corps north from Maryland into Pennsylvania on the afternoon of June 28, 1863, when word reached him that President Abraham Lincoln had appointed him the commander of the Army of the Potomac.⁹ It was two years and two weeks after Captain Meade had dispatched William H. Hearing to Lake Superior. Three days later, on July 1, 1863, cavalry units of the Army of the Potomac crossed swords with Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at the small Pennsylvania crossroads town of Gettysburg. Three days after that, Meade's was a household name.

Gettysburg was the moment of glory for the former engineer captain of the United States Topographical Corps. He kept his position as commander of the Army of the Potomac for the remainder of the war, but from early 1864 on, he took his orders from Ulysses Grant, who commanded all of the Union armies.

Meade "lacked glamor," T. Harry Williams wrote. "He was about six feet in height, gaunt, grizzled, and stern. On horseback, with a slouch hat pulled down almost to his large Roman nose, he reminded one observer of a

grim, helmeted knight. He was extremely nervous, probably dyspeptic, and given to frequent fits of temper in which he lashed out fiercely at all around him.”¹⁰ But as an army engineer with a quarter-century’s experience from Mexico to the Great Lakes, George Meade knew good ground when he saw it. And the ground he selected at Gettysburg that sultry first week of July in 1863 helped save the Union.

¹ Letter, Geo. G. Meade, Capt. Top. Engr. to W.H. Hearing, Assist. Survey of the Lakes, Detroit, Michigan, June 15, 1861

² Ibid. Meade did want a “minute examination of Minnesota Point with reference to the selection of a base line...”

³ Letter, Hearing to Lieut. Colonel J.D. Graham, T.E. U.S. Army, Detroit, Michigan, October 7, 1861

⁴ When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Union Army boasted two engineer corps. The Topographical Engineers handled surveys and reconnaissance. The Corps of Engineers built bridges, defense works and fortifications. In 1863, the Corps of Engineers absorbed the Topographical Engineers. See “engineers,” Patricia L. Faust, Editor, Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p.244

⁵ “Meade, George Gordon,” Ibid., p.482

⁶ In his letter to Hearing, Meade made sure to instruct the surveyor that “all vouchers must be made in triplicate and state distinctly the object of the expenditure and the cost of each item.” Letter, Meade to Hearing, June 15, 1861

⁷ “Meade, George Gordon,” Mark M. Boatner, III, The Civil War Dictionary (New York: David McKay Company, 1959), p.539

⁸ Historical Times Illustrated History of the Civil War, p.244. During the disastrous Union defeat at Fredericksburg, Maryland, in December 1862, Meade was one of the few commanders in the Army of the Potomac to take ground in the face of a hail of fire from the Confederate positions on Marye’s Heights.

⁹ Edwin B. Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968) p.209. The adjutant to General Henry Halleck, who gave Meade the news in the early morning hours of June 28, told the general he was the bearer of “trouble.” Meade at first interpreted that to mean that he was being dismissed from his Corps command.

¹⁰ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln And His Generals (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p.258. His troops called Meade “the old snapping turtle.”