

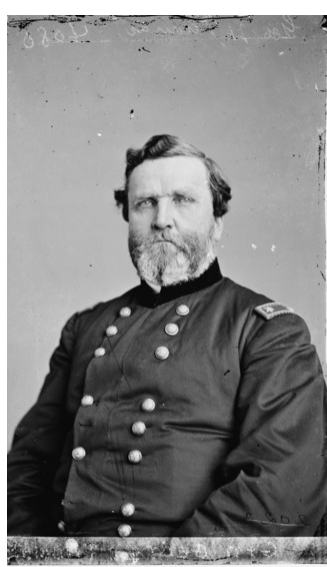


My Enemy, My Friend: A Civil War Friendship

By Gloria Swift, BGES Historian – October 18, 2019



Gen. John Bell Hood | CivilWarTalk.com



Maj. Gen. George Thomas | Library of Congress

The American Civil War divided not only the country, but also families and friends who may have found themselves on opposite sides of the North-South dividing line. What was important was if those families and friendships could survive and renew after four long years of bitter struggle. Could families and friends learn to put the past behind them? Two men in particular are good examples of friendship renewed, even though they fought several times against each other: Maj. Gen. George Thomas and Gen. John Bell Hood.

George Thomas was born in southwestern Virginia, graduated from West Point in 1840, and later returned there as a cavalry and artillery instructor between 1851 and 1854. When the Civil War began, Thomas chose to stay in the U.S. Army rather than resign and fight with his native state of Virginia.

John Bell Hood was born in Owingsville, Kentucky, and graduated from West Point in 1853. While at West Point, Hood received instruction in both cavalry and artillery from George Thomas. Later, both he and Thomas would serve together in the 2nd U.S. Cavalry in Texas. When the Civil War broke out, Hood resigned from the U.S. Army and offered his services to his adopted state of Texas.

Both men were to find themselves on opposing sides of the battle many times. But it was at Nashville, Tennessee, in December 1864, that Thomas thoroughly routed Hood and his Army of Tennessee, ending it as an effective fighting force. One would understand if Hood thought of Thomas with bitterness after that, but he did not.

When the Civil War came to a close, Thomas commanded the Department of the Cumberland during Reconstruction. Stationed in Louisville, Kentucky, he one day received a surprise visit. Hood, who was conducting business in the city, was not sure if Thomas would be willing to see an enemy general. He asked a friend if she would be willing to intercede on his behalf. Thomas, who was at his hotel, told the woman to send Hood to his room immediately. Upon hearing Hood's approach on his crutches, Thomas opened his door. Usually reserved in emotion, Thomas immediately threw his arms around Hood, helping him to a chair within. Later, they went to the dining room for breakfast where they continued to talk about their time together in Texas, the Civil War, and the problems and difficulties for both North and South with Reconstruction.

Oh! To be a mouse in the room! To listen to that conversation! Here was a man, Hood, who had been handed a devastating defeat during the war, yet, he wished to see the man, Thomas, who had handed it to him! Did they talk of that battle and others where they had faced each other? Did Thomas tell Hood he should have paid more attention to his artillery lessons at West Point? We will never know. However, despite everything, these two men were willing to put their differences aside and renew their friendship. If only more could have done so.

There is one more thing of note that occurred after the meeting. Upon leaving Thomas, Hood spoke with the lady who had been his intermediary. He told her, "Thomas is a grand man. He should have remained with us where he would have been appreciated—and loved."



Battle of Nashville | Kurz & Allison

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