



The Quartermaster's Son

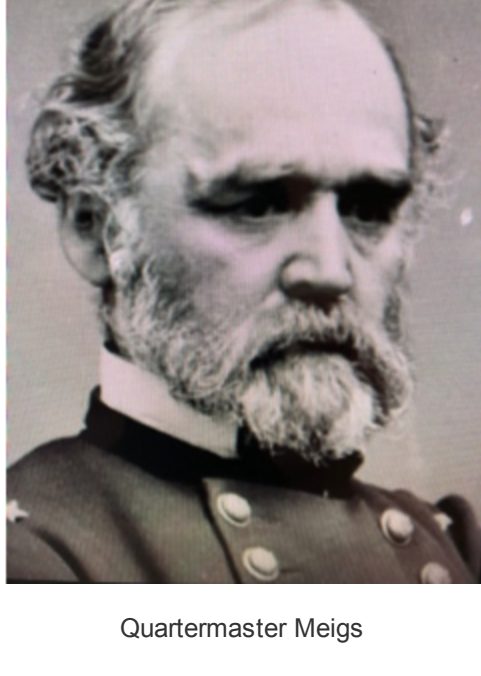
By William M. McKinnon, M.D., August 21, 2020
blueandgrayeducation.org



West Point Class of 1863, with Cadet John Rodgers Meigs seated in center | LOC

Brigadier General and Quartermaster of the Army Montgomery Cunningham Meigs was one of the most dedicated and productive of all the players in the history of the Civil War era. Unfortunately, today his role in the Union victory has been overshadowed by the more famous generals in field command. His efforts in providing vital support for the armies, however, helped ensure the generals' successes and ultimate victory for the Union.

Meigs was born in Augusta, Georgia, on May 3, 1816. His mother was an ardent opponent of slavery, and she could not abide living in a slave-holding society. Her physician husband therefore moved the family north to Pennsylvania. Meigs always demanded a great deal from other people. Even at age six his mother would describe him as "high-tempered, unyielding, and tyrannical," traits that would follow him throughout life. An excellent student, he was appointed at age 16 to West Point, then the only engineering school in the country. Graduating fifth of 49 cadets in 1836, he was assigned to the artillery, but soon transferred to the Corps of Engineers where he found his life's work. In 1837 he was assigned duty under Lt. Robert E. Lee to work on improving navigation on the Mississippi River. The two became fast friends, and Meigs wrote that Lee was "one with whom nobody ever wished or ventured to take a liberty, though kind and generous to all his subordinates, admired by all women, and respected by all men. He was the model of a soldier and the beau ideal of a Christian man." Unfortunately, this sentiment would quickly fade with the coming of the war, as Meigs would come to hate Lee and all others he considered traitors to the United States.



Quartermaster Meigs

Meigs and his family moved to Washington, D.C., in 1852, where he would spend the rest of his life. When Congress approved an evaluation of new water sources for the city, his growing engineering success brought him the challenge of designing a major engineering project, construction of the Washington Aqueduct. This marvel of engineering still carries 100 million gallons of water 12 miles to the District daily. After this huge success, Meigs was tasked by his friend, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, with completing the addition of two wings and a new dome for the U.S. Capitol, and an extension of the General Post Office Building. The Senate and House Chambers of the Capitol were his creations, along with the new iron dome and the Statue of Freedom that crowns it. Through it all, Meigs remained irritable and temperamental and developed many foes in the city. He disliked the atmosphere of corruption and the free spending on government projects that he witnessed. In his own construction projects, he could always account for

all the moneys spent, down to the last penny. He would eventually sign contracts worth 1.5 billion dollars. Secretary of State Seward said: "Perhaps in the history of the world there was never so large an amount disbursed upon the order of a single man."

One of his government foes was Jefferson Davis's replacement as Secretary of War, southerner John B. Floyd, appointed when Davis resigned and joined the Confederacy. Davis earned Meigs' enmity and eventual hatred, despite their previous close friendship. Meigs objected to Floyd's patronage and procurement practices and was punished by being banished from the Aqueduct project to the Tortugas to work on defenses there. When the war began, Floyd resigned and went South; Meigs was then promptly recalled to Washington to resume work on the Aqueduct.

Shortly after the war began, Meigs was appointed Brigadier General and Quartermaster General of the Army, replacing Joseph E. Johnston, who also resigned to join the Confederate forces. The new Quartermaster was to earn a reputation as an expert in logistics, supply, and transportation for the rapidly enlarging army. The army thereafter seldom suffered from a serious lack of supplies—food, clothing, shelter, railroads, horses, forage, hospitals, and if needed a place for burial—everything but ordnance came from the Quartermaster. The efficiency of Meigs' staff in ensuring the army's needs were met was a major determinant of Union victory; the Confederacy had no equal.



The Civil War Unknowns Monument circa 1866, designed by Montgomery Meigs | NPS

Meigs hated slavery and all that went with it—the Confederacy and all who had left the U.S. Army to serve in the southern forces. This included Gen. Robert E. Lee. As Quartermaster, Meigs was tasked with providing burial sites for Union casualties. Following the costly Battle of the Wilderness in 1864, there was a sudden need for more burial spaces, and he chose the Lee estate for a cemetery. Conveniently, Arlington had just been purchased by the government at a sale for unpaid taxes. To Meigs, using Arlington for a cemetery served two functions: providing a large and beautiful site for burials and a means for striking back at his hated personal enemies, Lee and his family. In May of 1864, at Meigs' direction, burials of Union dead began in Mrs. Lee's rose garden adjacent to the mansion and quickly numbered in the thousands. This prevented a future return to life at Arlington by the Lee family, and the general would become known as the father of Arlington Cemetery.

Meigs' own family had four surviving children, the eldest named for maternal grandfather Commodore John Rodgers of Barbary Coast fame. John Rodgers Meigs was born February 9, 1842. He was an excellent student and, like his father, was interested in a military career. He applied for an appointment to West Point, but unfortunately his father's antagonist, Secretary Floyd, rejected his application on three occasions because of his disagreements with General Meigs. It was only after the father apologized to Floyd for going to President Buchanan over Floyd's head in the matter that the application won approval. John entered the academy as a member of the Class of 1863. He finished first in his class and was commissioned a First Lieutenant of Engineers.

John's immediate work as an engineer involved improving the defenses of Baltimore, Harpers Ferry, and Cumberland, Maryland. He did extensive surveying of the Valley and drew hundreds of topographical maps, quickly becoming known as one of the best mapmakers in the Army. He was appointed Chief Engineer of the Army of the Shenandoah and aide-de-camp to General Sheridan, becoming one of his favorite officers. At dusk on October 3, 1864, as John and two assistants were mapping and scouting the area about Harrisonburg on the road between Harrisonburg and Dayton, Virginia, they encountered three riders. It was raining, and all involved were wearing raincoats, making identification problematic for both groups. The three Confederates demanded that Meigs' party surrender. Apparently Meigs drew his Colt from beneath his raincoat and fired; the Confederates returned fire and Meigs died instantly from head and chest wounds. One of his assistants reported to General Sheridan that Meigs had been ambushed and murdered by civilian partisans rather than Confederate troops. Sheridan was incensed and ordered all the homes in a 5-mile radius of Dayton to be burned. He later rescinded the order when better information confirmed that the enemy combatants had in fact been regulation Confederate soldiers, but some homes had already been burned and the area became known as the Burnt District.



John Rodgers Meigs upon his commissioning as a First Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army | U.S. Army



Marker indicating the spot where Meigs was killed | Civil War Times

General Meigs was distraught. He could not believe his son had not been murdered, and he even hired a private investigator to find the assassin. With the passage of years, the participants in the encounter were identified, and it was accepted that this was a legal military conflict. Still, the general had trouble accepting this finding and mourned his son for the rest of his days. Despite his position and accomplishments, his family shared the same loss felt by so many

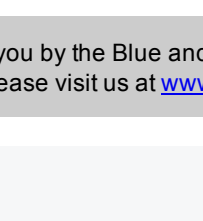
John's funeral was attended by President Lincoln, Secretary Seward, Secretary Stanton, and Lieutenant General Halleck. He now lies in the large Meigs family plot in Section One at Arlington, a hillside site chosen by his father for his own family about 100 behind the Arlington Mansion. On his tomb lies a high relief bronze sculpture depicting John as he was found, wearing a new cape given to him by his father, with hoof prints in the mud about him, his sword in its scabbard, and his Colt

revolver on the ground by his side.

After the war, General Meigs continued his career as a builder for the Government. At his death in 1892, general orders declared that "the Army has rarely possessed an officer ... who was entrusted by the government with as great a variety of weighty responsibilities, or who proved himself more worthy of confidence." The general and his wife now rest next to son John.



The tomb of John Rodgers Meigs at Arlington National Cemetery | ArlingtonCemetery.net



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.