A black and white photograph of Major Napoleon B. Knight, a man in a military uniform with a peaked cap and epaulettes, sitting on a dark horse. He is holding a long rifle across his lap. The horse is standing on a cobblestone street. In the background, several people in 19th-century attire are walking. The photograph has a vintage, slightly grainy quality with some visible wear and tear along the left edge.

Major Napoleon B. Knight,  
of the 1st Delaware Cavalry,  
in a whimsical photograph  
taken on Westminster's  
Main Street the morning of  
June 29, 1863, by Henry B.  
Grammer, Westminster's only  
photographer.



# "Corbit's Charge"

## THE Battle OF Westminster

**G. Thomas LeGore**

**M**onday, June 29, 1863 began as any routine summer day in the bustling city of Westminster, Maryland. Dozens of merchants and mechanics along Main Street opened their shops for eager customers, children laughed and frolicked in the street, and wagon and carriage traffic choked the congested main thoroughfare. No one could have imagined that the day would end in chaos, as panic-stricken citizens ran through the town yelling the dreaded words, "THE REBELS ARE COMING!!" A bloody cavalry clash would ensue, a skirmish that perhaps altered the outcome of the decisive battle of the Civil War at nearby Gettysburg. Twenty-five-year old Captain Charles Corbit, a Quaker who had served in a pre-war cavalry militia company, led less than one hundred untested troopers of the 1st Delaware Cavalry of the U.S. Army against the battle-hardened vanguard of Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry division

GIL BARRETT COLLECTION, U.S. ARMY MILITARY HISTORY INSTITUTE, CARLISLE, PA



**Stuart  
intended to  
skirt the Union  
army on the  
move while he  
gathered much  
needed forage  
for Lee's  
army, and still  
accomplish  
a timely  
rendezvous  
with Lee in  
Pennsylvania  
as ordered.**



en route to a rendezvous with General Robert E. Lee's main body already in Pennsylvania. In the fierce hand-to-hand fight, the Delawareans were overwhelmed, but Stuart's delay at Westminster prevented him from providing General Lee with invaluable reconnaissance of the Union forces at Gettysburg until late July 2, more than halfway through the battle.

Westminster was founded in 1764 by William Winchester. As the hub for a network of roads radiating to smaller surrounding towns and villages, Westminster was selected in 1837 as the county seat for newly formed Carroll County, created from portions of Baltimore and Frederick Counties. During the decades prior to the Civil War, long trains of Conestoga wagons traveled through the town on the turnpike from Baltimore to the West. Hide tanning was the principal trade in Westminster, and no other town in Maryland produced more or better quality leathers. By 1860, the population of Westminster was 1,919, including 252 African Americans [free and enslaved]. The Western Maryland Railroad opened its extension from Owings Mills to Westminster in June 1861, transforming the town into a thriving center of commerce.

The citizens of Westminster had their first taste of the Civil War on September 11, 1862, when Confederate Colonel Thomas L. Rosser and five hundred troopers of the 5th Virginia Cavalry passed through uneventfully during the campaign that eventually culminated in the Battle of Antietam. The next summer, on Sunday, June 28, 1863, a detachment of seven officers and 101 enlisted men of the 1st Delaware Cavalry of the U.S. Army arrived in Westminster to reinforce a sixteen-man Provost detail from the 150th New York Infantry.<sup>1</sup> The New York soldiers had been stationed in Westminster since March 20 to guard the railhead and crack down on the flow of deserters passing through Carroll County. The detachment commander of the 1st Delaware Cavalry was twenty-two-year old Major Napoleon Bonaparte Knight, widely known for his eccentricity and for being a lightning rod for the

movement in Delaware to prevent that state from seceding from the Union.

The Delawareans were encouraged by local Union men to pitch their tents on the prominent hill on the western edge of town known as "The Old Commons" (now the campus of McDaniel College). The elevation gave them a commanding view of several roads leading to Westminster, plus the entire length of the town's principal thoroughfare, Main Street. Major Knight chose to make his headquarters in the opulent Westminster Hotel and Tavern a half mile away at the intersection of East Main and Court Streets.

During the night of June 27 into the pre-dawn hours of June 28, General J.E.B. Stuart waded across the rain-swollen Potomac River to the Maryland shore at Rowser's Ford, just twenty miles upstream from Washington. With him were three brigades from his cavalry division and two batteries of horse artillery, in total numbering nearly 5,400 sabers. Stuart intended to skirt the Union army on the move while he gathered much needed forage for Lee's army, and still accomplish a timely rendezvous with Lee in Pennsylvania as ordered.

Stuart intentionally left his supply train in Virginia so he would not be impeded on the march. However, on June 28 an irresistible prize was spotted traveling on the Rockville Pike—a Union supply train with only a small escort. The chase was on to within several miles of Washington before 125 new wagons pulled by fat mules with shining harnesses were captured. The prize came with a hitch, however, for instead of moving swiftly as Stuart intended, the added burden of the wagons and their cantankerous teamsters forced Stuart's eight mile long column to creep along the country roads from Rockville to Westminster. By the morning of June 29, the 3rd Virginia Cavalry of Fitzhugh Lee's brigade reached the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line at Hood's Mill. Lt. Colonel William R. Carter received intelligence from southern agents in that area that U.S. Army General Joseph Hooker had been relieved of command in Frederick, and



was taking a special train to Baltimore. Carter hatched a plan to burn a small wooden bridge four-tenths of a mile east of Hood's Mill to stop the train and capture Hooker and his large entourage of notable officers. The bridge was burned, but the plan was foiled by an observant engineer on an earlier train who spotted the Rebels on the line and backed his train to Frederick to warn the General of danger. The next day the bridge was rebuilt in twenty-five minutes and normal service resumed.<sup>2</sup> After Hooker's train failed to arrive, the Rebels resumed their march in the direction of Westminster and the collision with Captain Corbit and the 1st Delaware Cavalry.

As the Rebels were on the move again, the scene in the camp of the 1st Delaware Cavalry on "The Old Commons" was one of camp boredom. Pickets had been posted on all of the roads leading into Westminster, and the remainder of the men had time off to groom their horses or just relax. Major Knight indulged himself by having his photograph taken in the street by the town's sole photographer, Henry B. Grammer. No doubt others visited Grammer's Sky-Light Gallery only a block from camp. The Provost detail from New York was enjoying a snooze at their quarters in the Odd Fellows hall on East Main.

Private Tom Clark of the 1st Delaware and several of his buddies were assigned the chore of escorting some horses to be re-shod at the shop of mayor and blacksmith Michael Baughman on East Main, only a block from the intersection of the Washington Road. Around 3:30 in the afternoon, Isaac Everett Pearson, Jr., a young man from town, frantically dashed into Corbit's camp to report that he had just spied a mass of Rebel horsemen and cannons approaching Westminster on the Washington Road. He said they seemed to fill the road as far as the eye could see. The picket on the Washington Road and the troopers and their horses at Baughman's blacksmith shop were also missing.

Less than eighty troopers still remained in camp on the hill with Corbit and Lt. Caleb



COURTESY OF DELAWARE PUBLIC ARCHIVES

▲ Captain Charles Corbit, the young Quaker who led the charge of the 1st Delaware Cavalry at Westminster.



Churchman. Corbit barked the order to his two buglers, Welsh and Stewart, to sound "Boots & Saddles, To Horse, To Horse!!" The green troopers scurried to gather their gear and saddle their mounts. In an unusual gesture, Assistant Surgeon Shields and Hospital Steward McKee joined their comrades trotting off the brow of the hill to meet the enemy in combat.

Panic gripped those on Main Street as word spread about the approaching Rebels. Shopkeepers closed and locked their doors and

mothers gathered their children playing in the street to take refuge as best they could on short notice. The news had not yet reached the Court House where it was still business as usual. But soon County Commissioner Clerk James Blizzard recorded in his ledger, "It at this time being about 4 o'clock p.m., it was announced that the Rebels are coming into town, all business suspended."<sup>3</sup>

Ladies loyal to the Union stood on their porches and balconies waving their handkerchiefs and shouting words of encouragement

▼ Main Street, Westminster, c. 1860s. This photograph was taken near the Western Maryland Railroad crossing looking east.





to the young Captain Corbit and his men as they passed by. One housewife who boldly waved and shouted hurrahs was the Postmaster's wife, Mollie Huber. Soon Mollie was in tears as she watched the brave Delawareans cut down from their horses as they sought to escape the onslaught of Rebels pursuing them in their retreat from the battleground.<sup>4</sup>

A block from their camp the Delawareans passed the home of Francis Shriver. Shriver was widely known in the community as a strong Union man. Brandishing his Smith & Wesson

pocket pistol, he rode out into the street to join Corbit at the head of his men. In spite of repeated urging from Corbit to go back to the safety of his home, Shriver was determined to ride on to meet the Rebels and rid the threat to his beloved city.

Corbit and his handful of warriors stopped at the Westminster Hotel for orders from Major Knight. The Major ordered Lt. DeWitt Clark and a squad of twelve on ahead to feel out the enemy and ascertain his strength and position. Corbit nodded, not saying a word. He saluted Knight and shifted his attention to the street ahead.

By this time the advance of the Rebel column had reached the outskirts of town. Skirmishers from the 4th Virginia were thrown out on the Washington Road. A squad from the 3rd Virginia with a single piece of artillery unsuccessfully attempted to navigate the fields of uncut timothy and barley on the Alms House farm in an effort to reach the center of town at the railroad depot. Fitz Lee's plan called for a simultaneous frontal and rear attack.

Lt. DeWitt Clark and his squad were on the Washington Road before the Rebels had expected. The two sides came face to face around a blind curve in the road near the outskirts of town. Momentarily the men stared at each other before a hail of point-blank carbine and pistol fire erupted. A sort of deadly dance began. Sabers rattled with deadly blows. Men yelled and cursed as though they were in purgatory. Frightened horses bolted and threw their riders off. The fighting was fierce and bloody. Both sides suffered casualties.

Corbit heard Lt. Clark's men fighting ahead. He yelled, "DRAW SABERS!" The untested troopers from Delaware glanced at their comrades on either side in their sets of four while bracing themselves in their saddles. Sweaty hands gripped the reins as the horses began to prance. Then, at the top of his lungs, Corbit shouted, "CHARGE!!" The street was paved with stone and slippery under foot from recent rains, but this did not prevent the cavalymen from surging forward at a gallop

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COURTESY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CARROLL COUNTY



through a street cluttered with abandoned wagons and buggies, their owners having taken cover.

Corbit's squad charged in behind Lieutenant Clark as reinforcements. The Delaware boys not wounded or unhorsed in the initial contact fell in with Corbit. In concert they drove the Rebel skirmishers back to the head of their column several times. A veteran Virginia trooper recalled, "At Westminster, a body of Delaware cavalry made a furious attack on the 4th Virginia Regiment,

and utterly routed Wooldridge's squadron which was in front."<sup>5</sup> Postmaster Abraham Huber witnessed the battle from a nearby hill and stated that Corbit and his comrades "displayed an almost suicidal bravery."<sup>6</sup>

Several companies from Colonel William C. Wickham's 4th Virginia rallied after the Delawareans' attack. Scores of gray riders poured into the face of the outnumbered boys in blue.

In the front ranks

were Lts. John William Murray and William St. Pierre Gibson. Gibson was killed instantly and Murray died of his wounds hours later. The Delawareans were forced to give up hotly contested ground as they fell back to Main Street. Lt. Churchman rushed in with his company, but it was too little too late. The tide of battle had turned. Enough shots were heard to kill every man engaged. The Provost detail ran out of the Odd Fellows Hall with bayonets fixed. They rushed to the sound of the battle, but were surrounded by the advancing Rebels before getting a shot off. Francis Shriver had

managed to severely wound one of the charging Rebels before he made his escape through alleys unfamiliar to his pursuers.

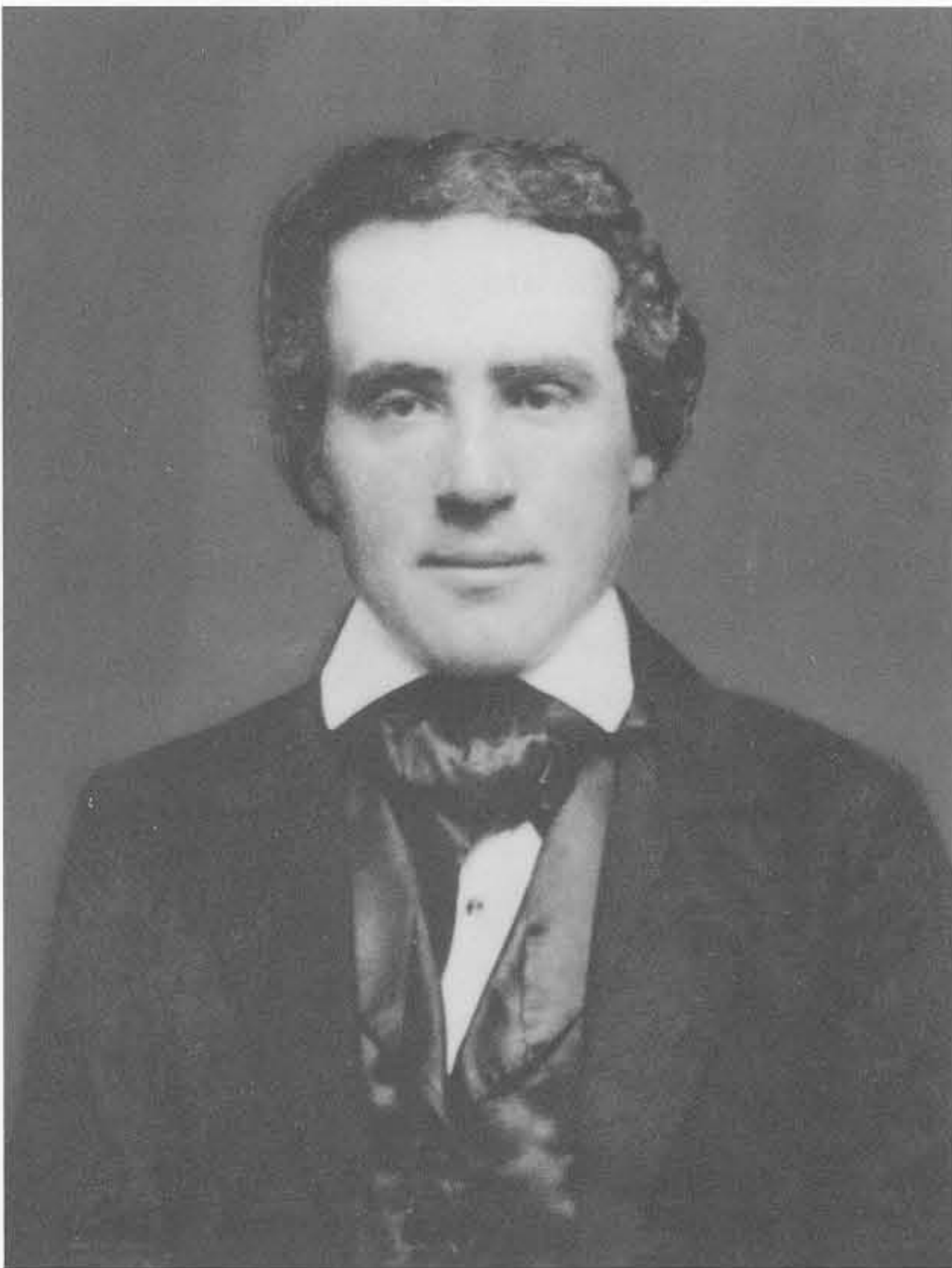
The hand-to-hand combat spilled out onto Main Street with running battles through the street and yards. Corbit's prized steed was struck in the forehead by a round and dropped, pinning Corbit beneath. He was given the ultimatum, surrender or die. The rattle of gunfire continued along Main Street to the camp on The Old Commons. Eventually there was calm and each side assessed their losses.

The Delawareans had lost bugler Daniel Welsh and Corporal William Vandegrift, while fourteen others sustained severe to life-threatening wounds. Capt. Corbit, Lt. Churchman, Assistant Surgeon Shields, Hospital Steward McKee, and forty of their comrades were captives. Stuart later paroled the prisoners on July 1 at Dover in York County, Pennsylvania.

Stuart lamented the loss of his two promising lieutenants, Murray and Gibson: "Gallant and meritorious, they were noble sacrifices to the cause."<sup>7</sup> Six Virginians suffered severe wounds, several too serious to be moved. The "walking wounded" continued on the march to Gettysburg.

The dead from both sides were carried to the undertaking parlor near the battleground operated by F.A. Sharrer & Son. The bodies of Welsh and Vandegrift were claimed by their families before the end of the year for reburial in Delaware. Lt. Murray of the 4th Virginia still rests in the churchyard of the Ascension Episcopal Church on Court Street. The remains of Lt. Gibson were claimed by his brother in 1867, and returned to Culpeper, Virginia, for reburial in his family's plot.

A makeshift hospital was set up in the Union Meeting House on the mound in the Westminster Cemetery. Doctors Joshua W. Hering, William A. Mathias, Jesse L. Warfield, and James L. Billingslea, four dedicated local physicians, rushed to the Meeting House to treat the wounded of both sides who were huddled together on bloodstained pews. Several families in town took wounded soldiers into their homes to care for them.



▲ Pre-war image of Lt. William St. Pierre Gibson of Company D, 4th Virginia Cavalry, killed at Westminster on June 29, 1863.

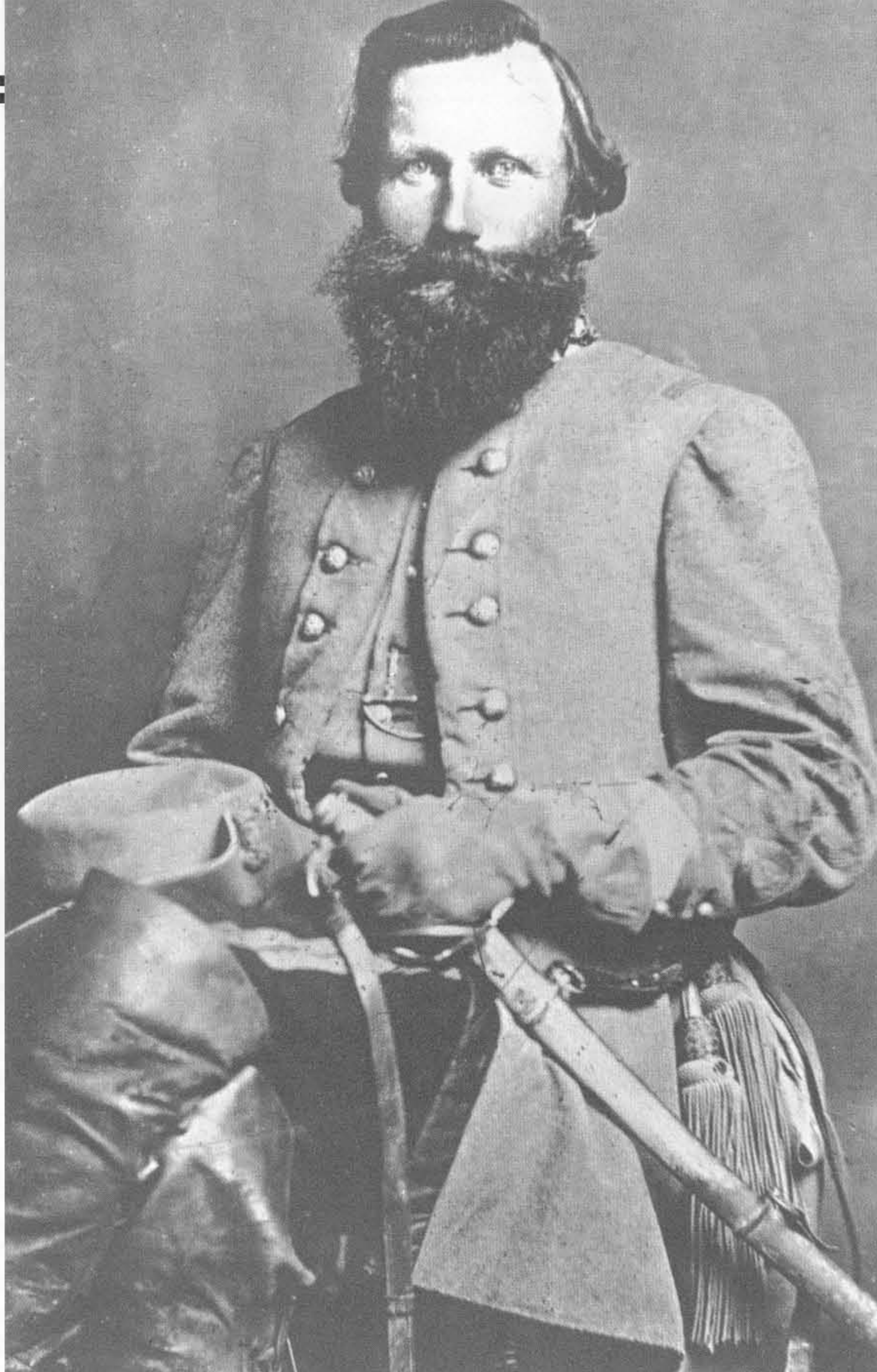


At that moment in time, neither Gen. Stuart nor Capt. Charles Corbit could have imagined that the bloody melee that had lasted perhaps an hour would help alter the outcome of the decisive battle of the Civil War at Gettysburg. As the debris of battle and dead and dying horses were dragged off the Washington Road and East Main Street in Westminster, Stuart's column of thousands of horsemen, artillery, and captured Union wagons from Rockville sat idle, waiting for their passageway north to be opened. Precious time was passing.

Now Stuart was faced with a quandary. Was the stubborn resistance his vanguard had just encountered only the tip of the iceberg of a larger Union force in the area that could wreak havoc on his extremely fatigued column? Further complicating his decision to stop or press forward on his march to rendezvous with Lee's main body was the fact that Westminster was a cornucopia of desperately needed clothing, shoes, hats, grains, and food for his ragged men and starving animals. Stuart was warmly greeted by local Southern sympathizers, which made Westminster appear as a haven for the night before reaching the Mason-Dixon Line. Thus, his decision was to forage and rest his column for the first time since fording the Potomac River—but for only four hours out of the saddle.

Capt. Corbit and his brave comrades forced Stuart to make a decision still debated by historians today. After the war, Charles Corbit met an old comrade on a train in Delaware, who informed him that Gen. Lee's published report of the Battle of Gettysburg blamed the Confederate loss on the absence of Stuart's cavalry force. Corbit responded humbly, "So our little scrimmage at Westminster seems to have been of some use."<sup>8</sup>

**Tom LeGore** is a native of Carroll County and a lifelong student of Carroll's role in the Civil War. He wrote the text for many of the markers on the "Maryland Civil War Trail: Gettysburg Invasion & Retreat," and worked with Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen on a New York Times bestseller alternative history of the Gettysburg Campaign. He is a member of the Advisory Board for the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area.



Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart ▲

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- 4 Abraham H. Huber, "The Real Facts About the Fight at Westminster, Maryland, June 29, 1863," (unpublished manuscript, 1895), located in the State of Delaware Adjutant Generals Files, General, 1863, Re: Accounts of the 1st Delaware Cavalry at Westminster, 1863, Governor's Correspondence, Delaware Public Archives, Dover, DE.
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