

Brigadier General John Gregg

By Robert Reeves



(now the University of North Alabama), in 1847, where he was subsequently employed as a professor of mathematics. He later studied law in Tusculum, Alabama. John Gregg relocated to Freestone County, Texas in 1852, and settled in the town of Fairfield. He was elected as a district judge and served in that position from 1855 until 1860.

In 1855, John Gregg's wife, Mollie, died. In 1858, Gregg returned to Alabama, traveling to Morgan County where he took as his second wife, Mary Francis Garth. Both were thirty years old when they spoke their vows, "In sickness and in health - Till death do us part." Unfortunately, that would come all too soon.

Mary Francis Garth was raised in the lap of luxury in Decatur, Alabama. Friends described Mary as, "An unusual woman - a direct descendant of Patrick Henry. She was a tall slender woman of military carriage and as firm in mind and character as her husband or any General for that matter she was a tender Christian woman." Mary's father, General Jessie Garth, was a state senator as well as one of the wealthiest plantation owners in the state. His worth would be equivalent to nearly four million dollars today. He was also a Unionist and stated he would gladly give up his hundreds of slaves and all his wealth to save the Union. Jessie Garth's political stand put him at odds with his new son-in law. John Gregg was a staunch secessionist and he quickly returned to Texas with his new bride and continued his law practice.

Gregg was one of the founders of the *Freestone County Pioneer*, the first newspaper in Freestone County. His partner in this venture was Morris Reagan, brother of his good friend John H. Reagan. He used



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was described as a rugged, unrelenting fighter without personal fear. He was even called pugnacious. Gregg believed his position in battle was at the front, leading his men, not directing them from the rear. This belief continuously put him in harm's way and would eventually lead to his death.

John Gregg was born September 28, 1828 in Lawrence County, Alabama, to Nathan Gregg and Sarah Pearsall Camp. He graduated from LaGrange College, the first chartered college in the state of Alabama

his paper and political clout to call for a secession convention following the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860.

John Gregg served as a delegate to the Texas Secession Convention in Austin, in January 1861. The delegation issued the Ordinance of Secession on February 1, 1861. Gregg was one of six members of the convention that were elected to represent Texas in the Provisional Confederate Congress in Montgomery, Alabama, and later in Richmond, Virginia.

Gregg began his service in the Provisional Confederate Congress on February 15, 1861, but immediately after the first battle of Manassas/Bull Run in July 1861, from which he resigned to enter the Confederate Army. He returned to Texas and formed the 7th Texas Infantry, becoming its colonel in September. John Gregg was ready for action and more than ready to defend what he believed to be Southern rights and liberties afforded by the Constitution.

John and Mary were in their third year of marriage when he went to war. He led the regiment in several small battles before he and the 7th saw their first significant action at the Battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee from February 12 to February 16, 1862. He and his men were captured along with most of the garrison. He was sent to Fort Warren in Boston, Massachusetts for confinement. On August 15, 1862, Colonel Gregg was released in a prisoner swap and sent home to Texas, but he didn't stay for long. Soon after his release, Gregg got word that President Jefferson Davis promoted him to brigadier general. In September of 1862, the new general left for Mississippi to join William H.T. Walker's Division. Gregg commanded a brigade consisting of his 7th Infantry, 3rd, 10th, 30th, 41st, and 50th Tennessee Infantry regiments and the 1st Tennessee Battalion. He and his brigade helped repel the assault made by U.S. General William T. Sherman

at Chickasaw Bayou. Sherman lost over 1100 men compared to less than 200 Confederate casualties. General Gregg and his men played significant roles in the battles of Fort Raymond and Jackson, as well.

On May 12, 1863, Gregg's Brigade met McPherson's 17th Corps in Raymond, where he and his men fought with absolute abandon. It was good they did, because he had led his brigade of 3,000 men into battle against a Union force numbering upwards of 12,000. For six hours, the battle raged before the Confederates were forced to retreat. Gregg was then pulled back to Jackson, Mississippi by General Joseph E. Johnston, where he and his men fought bravely before Johnston was forced to retreat from the town.

After the fall of Vicksburg, Gregg's 10th Brigade, known widely as Gregg's Brigade, was sent to Braxton Bragg's army in Georgia. At the Battle of Chickamauga, the brigade was assigned to Longstreet's Corps. His men were part of the force that broke the Federal Army. During the fighting there, Gregg was shot in the neck and severely wounded on September 20, 1863. He was left for dead and Union soldiers even robbed him of all of his valuables. John Gregg was found alive and sent to Marietta, Georgia, to recuperate. During the months spent in recovery, his beloved wife, Mary, joined him and helped to nurse him back to health. The Greggs remained together until January 1864, when John was transferred to Virginia.

On January 11, 1864, at a train station in Dalton, Georgia, Mary said goodbye to her husband as they boarded separate trains. Mary's train would take her south to her father's home in Decatur, while John's train headed north to Richmond. The parting was emotional and one has to wonder if the thought crossed her mind, was this her last

time to see him alive? Little did she know, the answer would come just nine months later. General John Gregg was killed during the Siege of Petersburg.

Gregg recovered, despite the severity of his wound, and was rewarded by General Longstreet for his valor in the battle. Longstreet placed Gregg in command of John Bell Hood's old Texas brigade in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. He was a perfect fit for this brigade. The man even favored Hood in appearance. Gregg was a very capable brigade commander and probably would have made a bold division commander if given the chance. He and his men participated in many of Lee's campaigns in the Spring of 1864, including the Battle of the Wilderness, the Battle of Cold Harbor, the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse and the Siege of Petersburg. He was repeatedly commended for his bravery under fire and on the second day of the Battle of the Wilderness, when Longstreet's Corps checked the victorious onset of the Federals, General Gregg and his Texans won immortal fame. General Robert E. Lee was well aware of Gregg's valor and during the Siege of Petersburg, Lee sent Gregg and his men north of the James River to drive the Federals from in front of Richmond.

The Richmond-Petersburg Campaign (June 15, 1864 – March 25, 1865) was a Union effort to capture the city of Petersburg, Virginia. During the Battle of Chaffin's Farm, Union forces captured Fort Harrison from the Confederates on September 30. Robert E. Lee realized the severity of the loss of Fort Harrison and personally brought 10,000 reinforcements under Maj. Gen. Charles Field north from Petersburg. On September 30, 1864, Lee ordered a counter-attack to retake Fort Harrison, now commanded by Union Maj. Gen. Godfrey Weitzel, who had replaced the

wounded Union Maj. Gen. Edward Ord. The Confederate attacks were uncoordinated and were easily handled.

This prompted Lee, on October 7, to order an offensive on the right flank of the Union forces, which were under the command of Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

The Union defensive lines, commanded by Brig. Gen. August V. Kautz and Maj. Gen. David B. Birney, were positioned along the length of New Market Road, with further Union Cavalry defending Darbytown Road. The initial Confederate attack, commanded by Maj. Generals Robert Hoke and Charles W. Field, was successful in dislodging the Union Cavalry from Darbytown Road. The Union Cavalry forces were routed from the field, and the Confederates attacked the Union defensive lines on the New Market Road.

During this attack, Brigadier General John Gregg and his Texas Brigade came against a Federal position fortified with abatis, (a defensive obstacle made by laying felled trees on top of each other with branches, sometimes sharpened, facing the enemy). To make matters worse, the Union soldiers were armed with Spencer repeating rifles. Undaunted, Gregg led his men forward and actually penetrated the Federal lines, but Gregg was shot in the neck for the second time, this time fatally, during a counter attack along Charles City Road. His second in command was shot in the shoulder and wounded. The attack quickly fell apart.

The following article appeared in a Richmond newspaper, *The Richmond Whig* on Oct 8, 1864:

The gallant General Gregg, commanding a Texas Brigade fell in the advance. Among other casualties we have to report Genera; Bratton, of South Carolina, badly

wounded; Colonel Haskell, Seventh South Carolina Infantry [Cavalry], severely wounded in face and Major Haskell, of the South Carolina Artillery, also wounded. Rumor stated that General Gary had been killed.

In an October 10 communique from City Point, Virginia, Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant sent word of the results of the battle that took place at Darbytown and New Market Road to Secretary of War Stanton. He wrote, "Our entire loss in the enemy's attack on our lines on Friday, the 7th instant, does not exceed 300 in killed, wounded and missing. The enemy's loss is estimated by General Butler at 1,000."

Just as Grant had anticipated, the fighting around Chaffin's Farm forced Lee to shift his resources, and that helped the Union Army south of Petersburg win the Battle of Peebles's Farm. After October, the two armies settled into trench warfare that continued until the end of the war. The fighting around Chaffin's Farm cost the nation nearly 5,000 casualties.

After his death, the body of 36-year-old John Gregg lay in state in the Confederate Capital of Richmond. His men loved him so much that Lee granted their request to escort his body to Hollywood Cemetery for burial.

It was reported that "days elapsed from the time General Gregg was killed until the poor wife knew of her bereavement." Mary Gregg had been staying at the home of her father in Decatur when the War Department of the Confederacy brought the heartbreaking news.

Confederate Postmaster-General John Regan wrote to Mary:

My Dear Madam,

I am called to perform the melancholiest duty. Your noble husband and my best friend has fallen in battle. I will not mock the grief which awaits you by more words. Keen and bitter as is my own sorrow for the loss of so dear a friend, and of an officer so valuable to the country and so esteemed by all. I wish it were in my power to bear a portion of the deeper and holier grief which must fall on you, the partner of his joys and sorrows, and the cherished idol of his heart.

Friends later recalled her reaction. "Her soul was plunged in grief beyond all other grief. For weeks, her sorrow knew no bounds. No comfort came to the aching heart. No desire in life seemed hers save that the body of her dead husband should find a last resting place safe from the hands of the enemy."

Mary grieved for weeks, but managed to fight her depression enough to decide she could not, nor would not rest until she traveled to Virginia to claim her husband's body. Before doing so, she traveled to Aberdeen, Mississippi, where her father owned property. She hoped to find Aberdeen a suitable place to live as well as bury her husband. She then had to make her way to Virginia to retrieve John Gregg's body, but this would not be easy, as the Confederacy had unraveled and a trip through enemy lines was extremely hazardous. Mary Gregg used all of her and her father's influence and called in many favors before she finally secured an escort, Sgt. E.L. Sykes, a

Confederate soldier and family friend, to accompany her.

On January 18, 1865, the pair began their perilous journey - traveling by way of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and Alabama River. Approximately one month later, they arrived in Virginia where Mary Gregg anxiously claimed her husband's body. Unfortunately, it was all too much for her as she succumbed to a nervous breakdown and had to wait weeks before recovering the strength to return to Mississippi with John's body. The trip back to Aberdeen took another full month and was filled with horrendous adventures. Mary and Sgt. Sykes could have shouted for joy as their carriage finally crossed the border into Mississippi. In April of 1865, her resolve paid off as Mary Gregg gained a level of peace and contentment by burying her husband at the Odd Fellows Cemetery on the outskirts of Aberdeen.

A monument to General John Gregg reads "To the memory of General John Gregg of

Texas - A Christian soldier and patriot. Born in Lawrence Co. Alabama Sept. 2, 1828: And fell before Richmond in behalf of Southern rights and constitutional Liberty October 7, 1864." Gregg County, Texas, established in 1873, was named for General Gregg. It is one of eighteen Texas counties named for soldiers and statesmen of the Southern Confederacy.

As Mary Gregg, settled into her new life in Aberdeen, she became a successful planter and was one of the city's most prominent citizens. She was among the women whose efforts began a Memorial Day observance. Later, she became famous for her work with orphans as well as the afflicted. For the remaining thirty years of her life, she never left the town in which her husband's remains were interred. Mary Garth Gregg died in 1897 and, following a solemn and impressive ceremony, was laid to rest next to her husband. Her tombstone simply reads, "Mrs. General John Gregg."



The Narrative can be found in the TVCWRT book published in 2012 titled, *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*. Complements of the TVCWRT.

