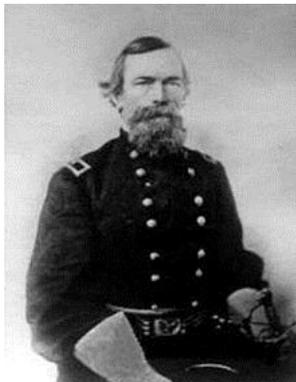


THE BIRNEY BROTHERS OF HUNTSVILLE

By

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*William Birney
(1819-1907)*

A strong supporter of enlisting freed slaves in combat units, who agitated to employ them in battle.

William Birney was the older brother of David and

like him was born in Huntsville.

Following the family's move north, he was educated at Yale and first worked as a lawyer. Moving to Europe, he was a professor of literature in England and France. William returned to United States in 1853, and worked as a newspaper publisher in Pennsylvania.

In 1861 he entered the 1st New Jersey infantry as a Captain, and was promoted as its Colonel by the battle of Chancellorsville. He was suspected of owing his promotion to political influence for "As a combat soldier, he was known as 'a fine linguist.'" 2 May 1863, he was appointed as Colonel of the 22d

United States Colored Troops (USCT), composed of newly freed slaves. He was soon appointed Brigadier General United States Volunteers, and was made one of three superintendents employed in enlisting escaped slaves into Federal regiments; in less than a year he had enlisted seven USCT regiments.

The brothers were Federal generals, republicans, abolitionists, and proponents of utilizing United States Colored Troops (USCT) in battle.

In 1864 he led a brigade of USCT to the Department of the South, becoming the Commanding General of the Federal District of Florida. Later he and his brigade went with the Xth Corps to Virginia to become part of the Army of the James. He led his brigade without distinction in the battles around Bermuda Hundred and north of the James River during the Siege of Petersburg. In Dec, 1864 his brigade was assigned to the 2d Division of the all-USCT XXV Corps and he soon rose to division command. In 1865 General Birney ran afoul of his Corps and later Army Commander, MG E.O.C Ord, who considered him a mediocre commander and a poor disciplinarian (General Ord was also initially opposed to employing USCT as combat regiments).

William Birney's division was included in the mixed corps-sized force taken south of the Appomattox River by MG Ord in order to strengthen the final assault of Petersburg. This division also participated in the pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia.

On 7 Apr 1865 (2 days before Lee's surrender), General Birney was relieved of duty by MG Ord and sent to take command of City Point. The brigades of his 2d Division were each assigned to a XXIV Corps division, and both of them participated on the left flank the Federal battle line that repulsed the Army of Northern Virginia's final attack of the war: Confederate General Gordon's attack attempting to break

through Sheridan's cavalry and the Army of the James in order to continue the Confederate retreat to North Carolina.

William Birney was brevetted MG USV in the post-war mass brevet (this mass brevet of Federal Officers was 'thank you for coming' recognition upon their demobilisation, equivalent to a good service award).

William Birney resided in Florida and later Washington DC after the war, where he served as a US Attorney for the District of Columbia. He died in 1907.



Major General David Birney

One of only six political generals employed as Corps or Army commanders with the Federal

armies in Virginia*: Unpopular, but effective enough to succeed.

*David Birney
(1825-1864)*

Antebellum Years

David Birney was the son of a rich Kentucky planter, newspaper publisher, and Presidential candidate, James G. Birney, who although a slaveholder became a strong abolitionist. David was born on a plantation outside of Huntsville, AL, Which one? but in 1833 the family returned to Kentucky Where in KY? where James emancipated their slaves, and then moved to Ohio and Pennsylvania. He was educated in Massachusetts and then practiced law in Philadelphia. He was prominent in

the abolitionist movement, and the pre-war Republican Party.

War Years

In 1861 he raised the 23d Pennsylvania (PA) Infantry Regiment largely at his own expense. Initially appointed as Lieutenant Colonel, 23d PA, he was promoted to Colonel in August 1861. Although a non-professional, he was promoted to Brigadier General in 1862. He was a 'political general,' and much resented within the Army of the Potomac for that reason and for being highly critical of Major General (MG) McClellan. Anything solid regarding his criticism Among III Corps officers, Birney was aligned with Generals Phil Kearney and Joe Hooker, also harsh critics of the Army Commander.

David Birney was noted as a good disciplinarian and trainer, and as a competent, even brilliant fighting commander. Example? He was very stiff-necked, following his own counsel and disdainful of contrary opinions and even lawful orders. Example? Accused by his own Corps Commander of disobeying orders at Fair Oaks, at the Court Martial he was found not guilty due to testimony of his brigade commander. Also accused of failing to support Major General Meade's assault at Fredericksburg, he was not charged. Birney was promoted to MG United States Volunteers, 20 May 1863, for fine leadership at Chancellorsville, What did he do? after his division had suffered the heaviest casualties in the Army. He became the temporary commander of III Corps on the 2d Day of Gettysburg.

Major General Birney as temporary III Corps commander at Gettysburg:

When MG Dan Sickles ordered the III Corps forward from Cemetery Ridge to occupy the Peach Orchard, General Humphreys' division formed a line of battle along the Emmitsburg Road, but General Birney was forced to stretch his line over too much territory in order to occupy the ground between Devil's Den and the Peach Orchard. He had no second line and his only reserve was Burling's Brigade, sent

from Second Division/III Corps but parceled out in one and two-regiment reinforcements for General de Trobriand and Ward's Bdes. Late

in the day Corps commander Sickles was seriously wounded and carried from the battlefield. Birney as senior division commander became the temporary Corps Commander, but his line of battle was already pierced by the Confederate attack at the Peach Orchard salient and his entire division was withdrawing toward Cemetery Ridge. Birney first ordered General Humphreys to refuse his left flank to resist Confederate General Barksdale's advance north up Emmitsburg Road, intending to link Humphreys' units to his own division's remnants and reinforcements from II and V Corps. The rapid advance of Barksdale's Bde and other Confederate forces rendered this plan unworkable, and MG Birney was forced to order MG Humphreys to withdraw his division to Cemetery Ridge.

Humphreys' comments after the battle may have been directed primarily at MG Sickles, but may also have included Birney's handling of III Corps: *"...the ruinous habit (it doesn't deserve*

the name of system) of putting troops into position and then drawing off its reserves and second line to help others who if not similarly dispossessed would need no such help is disgusting."

David Birney was wounded the afternoon of the 2d, but returned to lead the Corps after receiving first aid. He was extremely distraught at the defeat of his division and the heavy losses suffered when III Corps withdrew

to Cemetery Ridge, stating to staff that he wished that he had been shot and killed like his horse. Later that evening his spirits revived; he reorganized the Corps to support Generals

Hancock and Newton's forces and he voted to stay on the defensive during Meade's council of war later that evening. Birney was replaced by the more senior MG William French as III Corps commander after the pursuit of Lee's Army into the Shenandoah Valley.

Later War Service

In 1864 MG Birney commanded a division in the II Corps, and fought well throughout the Overland Campaign. In the autumn of 1864 General Grant appointed him to permanent command of the X Corps of the Army of the James, then serving in the siege works opposite Richmond. Birney's last fight as X Corps Commander was in an offensive north of the James River, along the Darbytown Road (6-7 Oct); he led his forces from the front although suffering from malaria. His troops were repulsed when attacking Forts Gordon and Gilmer due to Birney's failure to coordinate the attacks with flanking elements or even within his own

The Birney brothers grew up in Huntsville, were dedicated Abolitionists, and sold their slaves before moving north to fight against the rebellion.

divisions. On the October 7th, his forces successfully defeated counterattacks by the divisions of Confederate Generals Field and Hoke. David Birney's health finally collapsed the next day and he became bedridden and delirious. Rushed by train to his home in Philadelphia where state elections were underway, Birney had himself carried to the polls where he voted a straight Republican ticket. He lingered until 19 Oct, in his delirium shouting orders and encouraging his men. His last words were "Keep your eyes on that flag, boys!"

Birney's aggressive seeking of political support for promotion made him very unpopular with his fellow officers despite his proven competence. Theodore Lyman of Meade's staff described him thusly:

"He was a pale, Puritanical figure, with a demeanor of unmovable coldness; only he would smile politely when you spoke to him. He was spare in person, with a thin face, light-blue eyes, and sandy hair. As a General he took very good care of his Staff and saw they got due promotion. He was a man, too, who looked out for his own interests sharply and knew the mainspring of military advancement. His unpopularity among some persons arose partly from his own promotion, which, however he deserved, and partly from his cold covert manner."

*The other political generals in the eastern armies were Nathaniel Banks (V Corps Army Potomac); Franz Sigel (I Corps Army of Virginia); Ben Butler (XVIII Corps Army of the James and later Commanding General of the Army of the James), Dan Sickles (III Corps Army of the Potomac), David Birney (X Corps, Army of the James), Alfred Terry (X Corps, Army of the James). Did he

and his brother serve together or in the same battle etc.?



Research for this paper started with the Wikipedia entries for both men. The following books added the details necessary to provide depth to both biographies:

James G. Birney, with his times, the genesis of the Republican Party with some account of abolition, by William Birney

The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies, prepared under the direction of the Secretary of War, Brevet Lieut. Col. Robert N. Scott

Battles and Leaders of the Civil Wars, volumes I, II, III

Commanding the Army of the Potomac, Stephen R. Taaffe

Gettysburg, the Second Day by Henry Pfantz

Army of Amateurs, Edward G. Longacre

About the Author:

David Lady is a native of Washington, D. C., and grew-up in northern Virginia during the Civil War Centennial. His branch of the Lady family lived in eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia during the Civil War and his forebears served on both sides of this war. David graduated from Wittenberg University in Springfield OH with a degree in History. He enlisted in the

U.S. Army in 1974, and during his thirty-three year military career served as an Armor and Cavalry soldier and later as the Command Sergeant Major (CSM) of the U. S. Army Armor Center, the U. S. Army Europe, and the U. S. Army Strategic Command. He served in a number of positions with the Board of Directors of the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table and served as the President until his death in 2018.

This narrative can be found in the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table book; *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*