

The Gallant General - Edward Dorr Tracy

By Jacquelyn Procter Reeves



Edward Dorr Tracy

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Although Edward Tracy, Jr. was born in Macon, Georgia, Huntsville, Alabama was his home for some time before his death. The influence he left in the world is perhaps most felt in Huntsville where he established his career, his family, and his close friendships. It is no surprise that 150 years after his death, historians are still interested in what can be learned about his life.

Edward Dorr Tracy, Sr. hailed from Connecticut and moved to Georgia where he married Susan Campbell, whose brother, John Campbell, was a judge in Mobile, Alabama. Three children were born to the couple, however Susan died on November 5, 1833, less than one year after the birth of Edward Tracy, Jr. Tracy married again rather soon

and had more children, but he did not live long enough to see his namesake or younger children reach adulthood. The 1850 census indicates Caroline Tracy was the head of the household that included six children from Tracy's two marriages. Her husband died the previous year.

Edward Tracy, Jr. continued his education, and graduated from college at the University of Georgia in Athens with an A.B. degree at 17-years-old. He earned a Master's Degree only two years later. He began practice as an attorney in Macon at age 20.

He wasn't yet 21-years-old when he became a partner in a Huntsville law firm with Judge D. C. Humphreys. The handsome and successful young man would have been considered quite a catch for the eligible young ladies of Huntsville, but it was the daughter of a prominent local architect, George Steele, who caught his eye. On February 19, 1855, Dr. Frederick Ross of the First Presbyterian Church in Huntsville performed the ceremony that wed Edward Tracy to Ellen Elizabeth Steele. They were married at Oak Place, the plantation home designed and built by Ellen's father, who died in October of that same year.

Edward and Ellen settled into the social life of other prominent Huntsville families. They were friends with Claiborne and Virginia Clay and the Leroy Pope Walker family, whose own forefathers had also been politically connected. Edward promoted his friends politically and earned quite a reputation for his eloquent speaking. He was an 1860 delegate to the Democratic National Convention and served as an alternate elector for Alabama.

As many had warned, the country was hurtling toward a civil war. While there were strong unionist feelings in North Alabama, the secessionists were more vocal. Huntsville resident Clement Clay announced Alabama's secession from the Union.

In March, 1861, Tracy wrote in a letter to his friend, Clement Clay: "I am hesitating whether to apply to President Jefferson Davis for a position on his personal staff or to take my chances with the volunteers."

On April 12, 1861, Leroy Pope Walker ordered the first shot fired at Ft. Sumter. On April 28, Edward Tracy put away his law books and became a member of a regiment called the North Alabamians. He was elected as their captain and the unit later became part of Company I of the 4th Alabama Infantry Regiment. As they boarded trains at the Memphis & Charleston Eastern Division Headquarters in Huntsville, the men in gray were cheered by locals who sent them off to war with

good will and good wishes and the promise of a safe and hasty return. After a stop in Chattanooga, they went on to Dalton, Georgia where they were officially mustered into service on May 7 under the command of another Huntsville resident, Col. Egbert J. Jones, and Major Charles Lewis Scott. Their initial service was for 12 months. They continued on to Harper's Ferry for training.

Tracy's letters home made preparation for war sound like an adventure. Newsy descriptions of camp food, drilling, and camaraderie with friends old and new were intertwined with the expectation that the South would be victorious. He wrote, "We must be prepared in this day of our Country's great peril and distress to submit to individual sacrifices of pleasure, comfort, property and everything except honor."

In early July, the 4th Alabama was attached to the Third Brigade under the command of General Barnard Bee. On July 18, the newly promoted Major Tracy and his men were ordered to Manassas, Virginia for what would become the first major engagement of the Civil War. Tracy was weakened by fever and overwhelming thirst. On July 21, his company was sent in to battle. He wrote, "We were ordered to load as we went, and that the enemy were right before us. We marched up a hill, in an open field, and, just at the brow, were ordered to lie down, fire and load, fire and load...."

For nearly two hours, Tracy and his men were in the worst of the battle. They began to retreat but their heavy casualties continued. The blood, gore, shrieking of wounded and dying men, and the thunder of cannons and gunfire were all around them. Captain Tracy was the first to find Colonel Egbert J. Jones, another attorney from Huntsville, with a bullet wound in each thigh. Tracy was too weak to carry him from the field by himself. He found volunteers to help him carry the Colonel from the field as flying bullets whistled past their heads. Major Charles Lewis Scott, also of the 4th Alabama, was carried from the field by Tracy and his men after he was shot in the leg.

Brig. Gen. Barnard Bee, having lost a huge portion of his own men, took over command of the 4th Alabama in the absence of Col. Jones. Before the battle was over, General Bee gave Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson the nickname that would stay with him for eternity when he said, "There stands Jackson like a stone wall!" Bee was mortally wounded soon after and died the following day.

Colonel Egbert J. Jones died from his wounds on September 3. He was buried in Huntsville's Maple Hill Cemetery. Tracy's company lost six men to death and sixteen were wounded. The adventure that men on both sides anticipated was replaced with grim reality.

On July 22, 1862, Major Gen. Kirby Smith wrote a letter to General Samuel Cooper from

Knoxville, Tennessee. The size of his department justified more brigadier-generals to "increase the efficiency of the command."

He continued, "Should any new appointments be made for this command, I would most respectfully recommend to the Executive Lieut. Col. Edward D. Tracy, of the Nineteenth Regiment Alabama Volunteers...Upright, intelligent, and accomplished, Colonel Tracy, by his services at Manassas and Shiloh, has attested his soldierly qualities." After the reorganization in October, 1862, Brigadier General Tracy commanded the First Brigade of Kirby's Second Division. Under his command were the 20th Alabama, 23rd Alabama, 46th Alabama, 43rd Georgia, and Waddell's Artillery.

In the spring of 1863, U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant marched his army deep into Mississippi. The capture of Jackson and Vicksburg would cripple the Southern army. The Confederate army could not let that happen. While Confederates feared the loss of Jackson, they feared the loss of Vicksburg more.

Port Gibson was located in the southwestern county of Claiborne and boasted a population of over 15,000. Because of its location on the Mississippi River, it grew to accommodate the river transport of cotton. The larger nearby town of Grand Gulf offered stiff competition until yellow fever, a steamboat explosion, tornadoes, and other disasters, caused irreparable damage to the town. A large Jewish

community settled in Port Gibson early on and established themselves as merchants. Although only three families were slave-holders, many of the young Jewish men enlisted to fight in the Confederate Army to support their community. While they left to fight far away from home, the war had come to their own back yards.

On April 28th, Confederate scouts watched the arrival of Union troops from the cupola of a plantation home known as Windsor, located on Rodney Road on the east side of the Mississippi River. Signals were sent back to their commanding officers. Confederate Brig. Gen. John Bowen sent a telegraph to Lieutenant General John Pemberton and informed him that transports and barges loaded down with Union troops had landed on the west bank of the Mississippi at Hard Times, Louisiana. Union soldiers were assumed to be preparing to attack Grand Gulf and plow on to Vicksburg.

On April 29th, Brig. Gen. John Bowen ordered his commander of the Second Brigade of his division, Brig. Gen. Martin E. Green, to send 500 men beyond Port Gibson to picket the roads leading south. In addition, he sent Col. J. E. Cravens' men of the 21st Arkansas and 12th Battalion Arkansas Infantry of sharpshooters.

At about 1 a.m. on April 30th, Gen. Green was ordered in to Port Gibson to oversee the impending battle. The 6th Mississippi Infantry and Hudson Battery of light artillery would also

report to him. He reached Port Gibson at about 3 a.m. He then went to choose a location for the battle to be fought. Gen. Green decided on an area near Union Church.

In the meantime, about 3,000 Union soldiers made their way to Bethel Church, 10 miles from Port Gibson. More had landed at Bruinsburg and they began their approach to the gathering Confederate forces.

C.S. Gen. John Bowen went to Gen. Green and informed him that Brigadier General Edward Tracy, commanding the 2nd brigade of Stevenson's Division, would soon arrive at Grand Gulf with his brigade of 1,516 men. They were joined by the 20th Mississippi. Brig. Gen. Baldwin, with 1,614 men, crossed the Big Black River to meet them.

Late that evening, Gen. John Bowen sent a dispatch to Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton, headquartered in Vicksburg: "Six gunboats, with two transports lashed to them, passed by batteries tonight between 9 and 10 o'clock. Enemy on Louisiana shore, below. Hurry up re-enforcements. My lines are very much extended. General [E.D.] Tracy has arrived. His men are much broken down. I will fight them the other side of Port Gibson."

Still later, he wrote: "There are four gunboats in Bayou Pierre. I have no guns that can check them. They can remove obstructions, and may destroy the bridge, cutting my force in two. Shall I remove all to

this side, severing all communication by telegraph, or make the best of it?"

Gen. Bowen ordered three companies of Confederates to the Bruinsburg Road and the main force to the Rodney Road, but a scout soon reported that the enemy was approaching on both roads. General Tracy's entire brigade was sent to Bruinsburg Road and General Green's men went to the Rodney Road near the Union Church. The men were ordered to sleep on their arms to be ready to fight with a moment's notice. It had already been a long day and the dreaded hours of fighting had not yet begun.

At 12:30 a.m. on May 1, Confederate pickets rushed into camp with Union soldiers on their heels. Within minutes, a 6 gun battery opened fire on the Confederates and Union soldiers began their advance. The startled Confederates fired in response and fought hard for the next three hours. Union forces retreated a short distance away and the fighting stopped – but only temporarily.

Early on the morning of May 1, Gen. John Bowen wrote to Gen. John Pemberton: "I have prepared for defense of both sides Bayou Pierre. The country and the jaded condition of [E.D.] Tracy's and [W.E.] Baldwin's men forbid an advance. If it can be done today, I will do it. There is no raft in Bayou Pierre. I need field artillery ammunition badly...."

With the first light of morning, Union soldiers reconnoitered in

every direction and began to move forward shortly after 6 a.m. With his ammunition running low, Gen. Martin Green sent for Gen. Edward Tracy's men for back-up. Tracy sent the 23rd Alabama Infantry and 12-pounders from Anderson's battery. They arrived at about 8:30 am. Soon the fighting grew fierce and the Confederates, out-numbered by 8 to 1, held their ground.

Colonel Isham W. Garrott and his men were furiously fighting to the right of Gen. Tracy's men. Gen. Edward Dorr Tracy was shot. "He fell near the front line, pierced through the breast, and instantly died without uttering a word." Col. Isham was now in command of Tracy's Brigade.

At 9 am on May 1, Gen. John Bowen was 3 miles south of Port Gibson, hoping to be joined soon by Brig. Gen. William Baldwin and his men. Gen. Bowen reported to Gen. Pemberton that prisoners who had been taken informed him that three Union divisions had landed with John A. McClernand in command. The prisoners estimated there were about 20,000 men. Gen. Bowen wrote, "I am vastly outnumbered, but hope to hold my position...until General Baldwin gets up. He is entering Port Gibson."

At 10 a.m., Col. Eugene Erwin of the 6th Missouri was with his men in nearby Grand Gulf. They were relieved by the 2nd Missouri Infantry and he was ordered by Col. F. M. Cockrell to get his 400 or so men 8 miles distant to the fighting, as

quickly as possible. They made it in 2.5 hours.

In double-quick time, Erwin's men ran through an open cornfield under heavy fire. They were 100 yards away from the enemy. He and his men took their position on the left of General Tracy's brigade. With superior numbers fighting against them, the Confederates tried desperately to hold their position, throughout intense fighting, until help could arrive. Erwin then took his men, without orders, to charge Union soldiers attacking the right flank of Tracy's brigade. They recaptured a section of Confederate artillery from Union forces. The Union army was driven back about a quarter of a mile, but to Erwin's dismay, he discovered his men were alone with no support from Tracy's brigade. Realizing they were now cut off, he ordered his men to halt while he decided what he would do next.

They remained for 1.5 hours all the while sending messengers to Tracy's brigade for support. Without his knowledge, Tracy's men had been ordered to retreat, leaving Erwin and his men to fight by themselves. Still, they were able to hold their position until the ammunition was nearly gone. Now he was in trouble. The enemy's line was 20 yards away and coming closer. In addition, he was flanked on the right with fresh Union soldiers coming at them.

Col. Erwin ordered his captains to have their men fix their bayonets loudly enough that the enemy would be expecting a charge. It was a ruse,

and instead they were ordered to withdraw by the left flank, firing a volley at a given point. The maneuver worked at first, and then a second time, but now the enemy knew how small his force was and they were in the process of completely surrounding the men when Erwin ordered his men to retreat across an open cornfield under heavy enemy fire.

At 1:20 p.m., Gen. John Bowen sent a dispatch to Gen. John Pemberton: "We have been engaged in a furious battle ever since daylight; losses were heavy. General Tracy is killed. The Virginia battery was captured by the enemy, but is retaken. We are out of ammunition for cannon and small-arms, the ordnance trains of the reinforcements not being here. They outnumber us terribly. There are three divisions against us. My whole force is engaged, except three regiments on Big Black, Bayou Pierre, and Grand Gulf. The men act nobly, but the odds are overpowering."

At 3 p.m., General Bowen's message was desperate: "I still hold my position. We have fought 20,000 men since dawn, besides skirmishing last night. They are pressing me hard on the right. My center is firm; the left is weak. When can Loring get here?"

At 5:30 pm, General Bowen reported that he and his men were falling back across the Bayou Pierre and hoped they could hold their position until others arrived. "...Want of ammunition is one of

the main causes of our retreat. The men did nobly, holding out the whole day against overwhelming odds. The town will be in possession of the enemy in a few hours, and communication cut off.”

Gen. John Pemberton answered: “General [William] Loring with nearly two brigades, has started from Jackson to you. You had better whip them before he reaches you.”

But the arrival of more men came too late. Just before sunset, the Union assault grew more powerful and the Confederate army – exhausted, outnumbered, and with little ammunition – could not go on. Confederate Gen. Erwin’s men retreated to the bridge over Bayou Pierre and on to Grand Gulf just after dark. They were the last to leave the field.

The Battle of Port Gibson was over and for the Union Army, the road to Vicksburg was now clear. On the morning of May 2, Lieut. Gen. John C. Pemberton instructed Gen. Bowen, in code, to destroy his heavy guns. Too many horses had been killed in the previous day’s battle and they could not take the cannons with them.

In the aftermath of the battle, the official reports were written from officers in every area of the fighting. Gen. John Bowen wrote his detailed report on May 2 for Gen. Pemberton. He said that Gen. Tracy’s force did not number more than 1,500 and they had been worn down due to continuous marching. They had less ammunition than anyone else since their ordnance train had not

arrived. The enemy struck hard and the Confederates held their own from 9 to 10 a.m. Gen. Martin Green’s men fell back and Gen. Baldwin’s men were too exhausted to put up much of a fight. Gen. Edward Tracy died early.

Col. Isham Cockrell arrived with three Missouri regiments, but the lack of ammunition, as well as overwhelming odds against them (4 Union to every Confederate), spelled disaster. Gen. Bowen wrote his final report to Gen. Pemberton: “Nearly all the missing of the whole command can be considered among the killed and wounded, as very few prisoners were taken. The enemy have refused to allow me bury the dead, or visit the wounded beyond the mere sending of surgeons, who are to remain.”

In his own report, Gen. Martin Green stated that the 6th Missouri Infantry had been with him in every engagement since they had crossed the Mississippi River and had been impressed with their “gallant conduct...I expected much of them, they more than came up to my expectations.”

Gen. Erwin reported that had Tracy’s brigade joined him, they could have routed the Union’s left wing. “My officers and men, without exception, did their duty nobly, and where all are heroes it would be unjust to make distinction.”

In his official report, Gen. Pemberton wrote: “Among the slain whom the country deplors I regret to mention Brig. Gen. E.D. Tracy, a brave and skillful officer, who fell

where it is the soldier's pride to fall – at the post of duty and of danger.”

Gen. Pemberton wrote of the battle of Port Gibson: “Though disastrous in its results, the bloody encounter in front of Port Gibson nobly illustrated the valor and constancy of our troops, and shed additional luster upon the Confederate arms. Confronted by overwhelming numbers, the heroic Bowen and his gallant officers and men maintained the unequal contest for many hours with a courage and obstinacy rarely equaled, and though they failed to secure a victory, the world will do them the justice to say they deserved it....”

Gen. Edward Dorr Tracy's death was also mentioned by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in his official report, written several weeks later: “The defeat of the enemy in five battles outside of Vicksburg, the occupation of Jackson...and the capture of Vicksburg and its garrison and munitions of war, a loss to the enemy of 37,000 prisoners, among whom were 15 general officers, at least 10,000 killed and wounded, and among the killed Generals Tracy, Tilghman, and Green...and perhaps thousands of stragglers who can never be collected and reorganized. Arms and munitions of war for an army of 60,000 men have fallen into our hands, besides a large amount of other public property, consisting of railroads, locomotive, cars, steamboats, cotton, & c., and much was

destroyed to prevent our capturing it....”

Gen. Lloyd Tilghman was killed when a parrott shell nearly cut him in half on May 16, 1863 in Hinds County, Mississippi during the Battle of Champion Hill. Gen. Martin Green was wounded slightly on June 25, but a bullet fired from a Union sharpshooter hit him in the head and killed him on June 27, 1863 at Vicksburg.

A telegram, dated May 3, 1863, was addressed to Mrs. E. D. Tracy in Huntsville, Alabama. It read, “Your gallant husband is dead. Fell mortally wounded in the 1st inst. I have escaped unhurt will try to come home. C. Tracy.” This may have been sent by his brother, Campbell Tracy.

Another telegram was sent on May 12, 1863 to Mrs. E. D. Tracy: “The remains of General E. D. Tracy were buried at Port Gibson. It was infeasible at that time to have them sent to Macon.” It was sent by Major General Carter L. Stevenson.

The body of Gen. Edward Dorr Tracy, Jr. was taken to his hometown of Macon, Georgia for burial. He was the highest ranking native of Macon to serve in the Confederate Army. He survived the Battle of Manassas in 1861, the Battle of Shiloh in 1862, Chickasaw Bayou in 1862, and lost his life at Port Gibson on May 1, 1863.

A historic marker stands near his Rose Hill Cemetery grave. In his honor, the Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 18 in Macon bears his name. His dress uniform and his

battle sword are on display at the Cannonball House in Macon.

E. D. Tracy's brother, Maj. Philemon Tracy, was killed in battle at Sharpsburg, Maryland in

September 1862. Ellen Steele Tracy died in April 1868 and is buried with her gallant husband.



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.