

## John Henry Myer of Myer's Hill

by John F. Cummings III

John Henry Myer came to America to escape the turmoil of mid nineteenth century Germany. He would settle in Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1846. He began his professional life as a saddler. Interestingly, in 1852, he changed vocations, becoming a baker and confectioner, a switch that proved highly successful. He operated his business at 212 William Street, which backed onto Market Square. The operation had an expanded kitchen attached to the rear of the building, and the Myer family residence occupied the upper two floors. By the time of the Civil War, Myer and his wife, Mary Elizabeth, had three young children: Mary, John, Jr., and Annie.

The December 1862 battle of Fredericksburg forced the Myer family to become refugees out in the Spotsylvania County countryside to the west of town. The bombardment of Fredericksburg on December 11, 1862, left much of the downtown commercial area severely damaged or destroyed, but the Myer home amazingly survived. The overall devastation, however, would no longer be suitable for his young family and by late April 1863, just days before the Battle of Chancellorsville—and yet another battle in the heart of town—Myer had finished negotiating the purchase of a sizeable farm near Spotsylvania Courthouse. It was an idyllic location on a hill overlooking the Ni River.

In April 1862, Myer had been quite fortunate to escape the first Confederate Conscription Act due to his age. In September, though, the upper age of the act was raised to 45, and those previously exempt were required to be ready to fall in should the exigencies of war necessitate. As the spring of 1864 approached, two warring armies prepared to leave their winter camps, and John Henry Myer was conscripted into the 40th Virginia Infantry. His first taste of battle would be in the horrors of the Wilderness, and from there the fighting moved on toward Spotsylvania Courthouse, erupting just north of the village, along the Brock Road where it intersects Block House Road. As both sides shifted into position, the 40th Virginia settled into a section of entrenchments now referred to as Heth's Salient, a leg of works that dangled south of the larger, and more infamous, Muleshoe Salient. Myer was stationed within sight of the hill that now bore his family's name.

By early morning of May 14, 1864, the Union army shifted men from its right flank to extend its left in a plan to strike at the Confederate's weakly held right flank just past the Courthouse. The weather, however, conspired against this stealth maneuver, and the troops were slowed by mud they churned up—the result of several days of rain that had preceded the move.

Confederates occupying the Myer property were able to observe this slow but steady stream of Union blue heading up the Courthouse Road and toward their flank and rear along modern day Smith Station Road, where Federals intended to turn to the southwest and strike at the Confederate position. The attack failed to materialize, and General Lee

expressed little concern. Union Army of the Potomac commander George Gordon Meade, however, was intent on having the observers driven from the hilltop.

After a sweeping assault by a small contingent of Union infantry, the Confederates removed themselves.

Myer's family had also removed themselves, once again leaving their home as refugees. In their absence,, Union troops burned the home and outbuildings the next day, May 15, after the Myers' caretaker recklessly fired on retreating Union troops during a second, late-day scuffle on May 14. Undoubtedly, Myer, entrenched still with his regiment less than two miles away, could observe the pillar of black smoke emitting from his home site.

Myer would, in this author's estimation, allow himself to be captured a week later near the North Anna River. He served as a POW until December when he took the Oath of Allegiance to the United States and returned home. His postwar years are noted by renewed commercial success and civic duty as a member of the Fredericksburg Common Council. He passed away on December 5, 1909, a well-respected man in the community.

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