

Where Defeated Valor Lies: The Rose Farm Gettysburg

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Lee had every intention of renewing the attacks that morning, however, not at dawn as Meade expected, but in the morning hours or early afternoon at least. He needed time to develop and implement his plan, making a dawn raid highly unlikely as he needed to perform a reconnaissance of the enemy positions in the light of day first. He tasked three of his staff officers with this mission, who led their own separate scouting parties. One of these officers was Captain Samuel R. Johnston, Lee's engineer. He was accompanied by three to four others including General Longstreet's engineer, Major John J. Clarke. General Lee's instructions to Johnston were, "To make a reconnaissance of the enemy's left and report as soon as possible." Although these orders were rather vague, Johnston knew from working on Lee's staff that he was required to perform a route and area reconnaissance. In other words, to make an egress route for the army to get into position to attack as well as to scout the terrain, resources, and enemy positions. He later admitted that Lee never gave him specifics but explained, "It was not necessary as that was part of my duty as a reconnoitering Officer, and would be attended to without special instructions..."¹ The scouting party left at first light, around 4:15 AM, on the morning of July 2nd and according to Johnston returned three hours later. It remains a mystery as to the exact route Johnston and his party took during this mission and what information was reported to General Lee after his return, but it is the consensus among many historians that his report above the two others had the greatest influence on General Lee's decisions that day. Some clarification can be found in his writings after the war. In a letter to General Lafayette McLaws, Johnston wrote,

...my general route was about the same that General Longstreet took when he made his march. I crossed the same creek on the same bridge that he did and turned to the left at once and got on the ridge where you subsequently formed your line, following along the ridge in the direction of the round tops across the Emmitsburg road and got up on the slopes of round top, where I had a commanding view, then rode along the base of round top to beyond the ground that was occupied by General Hood, and where there was later a cavalry fight.²

It is curious why Johnston mentioned the creek and bridge that "General Longstreet took" when according to Longstreet, Johnston and McLaws were both the head of that movement that afternoon. It is also puzzling why McLaws in an unpublished paper disputed Johnston and stated that he never crossed any bridge. McLaws' lead brigade that day belonged to General Kershaw and Kershaw stated in no uncertain terms that, "Arriving at the hill beyond the hotel [Black Horse Tavern] at the Stone Bridge on the Fairfield road, the column was halted while Generals Longstreet and McLaws reconnoitered the route. After some little delay the Major-General commanding returned and directed a counter-march, and the command was marched to the left beyond the point at which we had before halted..."³ While it may seem like McLaws recollections were faulty, the march was not conducted along the Fairfield Road (that was also called the Hagerstown Road) if it had, according to Kershaw's report, it would have placed Longstreet's command crossing Marsh

Creek over the stone bridge just past the Black Horse Tavern. The march actually traveled north to south along the Black Horse Tavern Road running parallel to Marsh Creek and crossed the Fairfield Road before encountering the troublesome hill. Additionally, Captain Johnston denied that General Lee had tasked him to lead Longstreet's divisions into battle and was "appalled" at the idea. In fact, Johnston wrote that he rode with General Longstreet most of the time who was in the middle of the formation behind McLaws Division and in front of Hood's. The only exception was when he traveled with McLaws "from the bend in the road until the top of the hill."⁴ Why the discrepancies? This is a complicated issue but deserves further scrutiny and will be discussed later in this chapter. Regardless, it seems that what Johnston was trying to convey to McLaws in his letter, was that he had crossed the bridge over Marsh Creek and went off road to avoid being spotted by the signal station on Little Round Top that morning.

The scouting party, when they encountered the Emmitsburg Road, likely crossed south of the Rose Farm to avoid detection from Buford's men. It is unknown if they were dressed in civilian attire as was the custom for these type of missions, but Johnston, in his own words, knew that he was "To see, and not be seen". He obviously was aware of the two hills by his use of the term "round tops" in his letter, and they dominated the landscape leaving no doubt that he had not mistaken other hills in the area for them. Since the place mentioned of the cavalry battle on July the 3rd is in the vicinity of Big Round Top and not its smaller neighbor, one could make the argument that he never made it to Little Round Top at all and had confused the two hills. This would be a reasonable assumption as this mistake had been repeated often, however, in this case Johnston had mentioned Little Round Top by name at different points in his letters. If he had made it to Little Round Top, and if his claim is to be believed that is, he would have likely clambered up the western side on Vincent's Spur avoiding detection of the signal station that he most certainly knew was there. After leaving the Round Tops, Johnston wrote that "...when I again got in sight of the Emmitsburg road I saw three or four troopers moving slowly and very cautiously in the direction of Gettysburg."⁵ These were most likely Buford's mounted patrols or pickets as Buford reported, "My division bivouacked that night on the left of our position, with pickets extending almost to Fairfield."⁶

When Johnston returned that morning, he recalled seeing Longstreet's soldiers quite near Seminary Ridge and Lee's Headquarters, but had also stated "after the usual delay in finding headquarters". What he is most likely referring to is General Lee and not the headquarters complex, because as you may recall, Lee had walked off a short distance. He was also very familiar with General Lee's habits during his preparations for battle. Johnston continued,

I found Generals Lee, Longstreet and AP Hill sitting on a log near the seminary. General Lee saw me and called me to him. The three Generals were holding a map. I stood behind General Lee and traced on the map the route over which I made my reconnaissance. When I got to the extreme right of the reconnaissance on Little Round Top, General Lee turned and looking at me, said "Did you get there?" I assured him I did.⁷

After this conference, General Lee told General Longstreet to “move on”, and prepare for the attack, in which was to take place on all three fronts of the Union lines, right, left and middle. General Ewell’s corps was to attack the Union’s right on Culp’s and Cemetery hills, while General Hill the center on Cemetery Ridge, but was to be more of a diversion than anything, meant to keep reinforcements to flow to either side. The most decisive blow was to come from General Longstreet’s corps on the Federal’s left flank, their weakest point. This was the key to the entire plan, roll up the left from the weakest to strongest and overwhelm them from two sides. After Lee dismissed his Generals, he sat down on the log with Johnston to discuss further what he had seen that morning. At this time Johnston wrote, “Major Clarke I suppose reported to General Longstreet.” After the discussion, Lee tasked Johnston to ride with Longstreet on the march and assist him in getting his corps in position. Johnston had claimed that he had joined Longstreet’s command at around 9 a.m. but General McLaws recalled a different time frame. He wrote, “I then went back to the head of my column and sat on my horse and saw in the distance the enemy coming, hour after hour, on to the battle ground. At length- my recollection is that it was about 1 P.M.- Major [Captain] Johnston, of General Lee’s staff came to me and said he was ordered to conduct me on the march.”⁸ The time difference here is significant and is the root of the controversy that began in the 1870s.

¹ S. R. Johnston to Lafayette McLaws, June 27, 1892 Douglas Freeman Collection (Library of Congress).

² *Ibid.*

³ Lafayette McLaws “Fragments of a Gettysburg Paper” unpublished, Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP) original from Duke University. OR Series 1 Volume XXVII/2 [S#44].

⁴ S. R. Johnston to Fitz Lee, Feb. 11, 1878, Freeman Collection LOC. *Southern Historical Society Papers* Volume 5, pp. 183-184.

⁵ S. R. Johnston to Fitz Lee, Feb. 11, 1878, Freeman Collection LOC. S. R. Johnston to Lafayette McLaws June 27, 1892 Douglas Freeman Collection Library of Congress.

⁶ OR Series I Volume XXVII/1.

⁷ S. R. Johnston to Lafayette McLaws June 27, 1892. S. R. Johnston to Peterkin Dec. 18 ? [1895 or later], Douglas Freeman Collection Library of Congress.

⁸ OR Series 1- Vol. XXVII/1 [S#44]. S. R. Johnston to Peterkin Dec. 18 ____ LOC. Lafayette McLaws “Gettysburg” *Southern Historical Society Papers* Volume 7 pg. 69.