

Chapter 13

Union Fallout Following the “Great Skedaddle”

Spearheaded by Finegan’s attack, the Rebels had soundly whipped the Yankees late on February 6. In a message to Grant, Meade called the event a “disaster.” Artillery chief Col. Charles S. Wainwright scathingly wrote, “Our men were regularly stampeded. ... all the officers I have talked with say it was disgraceful beyond anything they had ever seen on the part of the 5th Corps.” He accused Grant of covering up the extent of the calamity from the public.¹

Poor performances on this scale threatened reputations and careers. No one wanted to be on the wrong side of any military inquest. Official battle reports from regimental, brigade, and division commanders, appearing a few days after the debacle, made for interesting reading. The carefully crafted narratives were often lacking in detail and laced with self-justification. They included some subtle and, in some cases, not-so-subtle attempts to deflect blame away from themselves and onto others. Though biased, these Union reports offer further insights into Finegan’s attacks.

Embarrassed Union Officers and Creating an Official Narrative

In his report (February 15), 5th Corps commander Warren tried to minimize the defeat, saying, “On the whole, it was not a bad fight and in no way discouraged me in my willingness to try the same thing again with the same men.” He accepted that “the enemy got up re-enforcements faster than I could.” Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Warren denied newspaper reports and comments from his officers that Union troops fired into their comrades. However, Warren’s private opinions were more critical; he recorded, “We are getting to have an array of such poor soldiers that we have to lead them everywhere, and even then, they run away.”²

¹ OR 46/1:153; Allan Nevins, ed., *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles Wainwright, 1861-1865* (San Diego, CA, 1962), 497.

² OR 46/1:255-56; Crawford, *The 16th Michigan Infantry*, 291; Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren*, 203.

Senior Staff Officer Reports

Probably under less scrutiny than field commanders, the reports of staff officers Col. Locke and Capt. Emmor B. Cope³ contained forthright testimony, although pointedly favorable to Crawford's troops. Locke saw stragglers breaking to the rear in considerable numbers. Many, he discovered, hailed from Gwyn's brigade, Ayres's division. Gwyn soon appeared and said his brigade had broken after receiving only slight enemy fire. Locke suggested that Gwyn reform his brigade, advance to the woods, and deploy to stop others from falling back. Locke also found some of Bowerman's men, Ayres's division. He rallied many and asked Gwyn to take charge of them.



Capt. Emmor B. Cope
findagrave.com



Col. Frederick T. Locke
Uniondb.com

Locke then saw several hundred men from Burr's brigade, Griffin's division, falling back in significant disorder, their officers displaying no positive command and control. "With the assistance of several officers, this mass of men was halted and faced to the front." However, when a few shots flew over, they became frightened and began firing into their own troops ahead; many fired perpendicularly into the air. They broke and ran, panic-stricken, to the rear. Locke reported that Hubbard's 6th Corps brigade, Wheaton's division, nearby, could do nothing to stop the flight of fugitives. Around dusk, Winthrop's brigade, Ayres's division, went up to protect the Federal left. Griffin's and Ayres's divisions went into breastworks, and Crawford's division, "which had retired in good order," massed near Vaughan Road.

Cope had directed Wheaton's troops (the reinforcements) to the mill road. Around this time, Cope saw many 5th Corps soldiers running to the rear. Amid the confusion, he found

³ Cope gained fame for his map of Gettysburg and post-war battlefield preservation work [National Park Service: Gettysburg Seminar Papers — Unsung Heroes of Gettysburg](#).

Wheaton trying to form a battle line some 200 yards behind the troops giving way. But Wheaton's men also became panic-stricken and fled, firing into their officers and among one another as they ran. Gwyn's brigade came out of the woods *en masse*, claiming they had no ammunition. "A part of [Crawford's] division came back, slowly and in comparative order," and succeeded in checking the enemy in the woods. This gave the Federals time to form a line of battle. With darkness descending, the Rebels didn't seem disposed to push further, and all became quiet. The Union troops reformed and took up their former positions in the breastworks. Crawford's men camped on the north side of Hatcher's Run.⁴

Reports from Ayres's Front

On the Union left, division commander Ayres's first report only mentioned that Federal troops on his right (presumably from Baxter's brigade) fell away when attacked by overwhelming numbers. With his right flank exposed, his troops retreated and eventually withdrew to their initial positions. He then cited numerous soldiers who had acted bravely. Warren returned the report. He wanted to know whether Ayres's withdrawal from Dabney's Mill had resulted from orders received, the misconduct of troops on the right, the misconduct of his division's troops, or an irresistible force of the enemy. The dispatch continued, "the general commanding does not think there were sufficient reasons for good troops to give way." It added that the losses were not sufficient to justify a retreat. Warren's orders had been to remain and fight it out, and he wanted his troops to understand that he would not shield them in his reports:

If they won't fight the country must know it. General Warren knows that General Ayres used his best efforts to make them hold their ground and, for his honor as well as that of the commander of the corps, wishes to have it plainly stated that it was the troops and not the generals who would not fight.

Ayres replied a month later. He said that two of Pearson's regiments sent to the right of Bowerman were concealed in the woods. Some of Crawford's troops fired on them, and Pearson's men ran away, which "caused a retrograde movement all along the line . . . [and] was against all orders and authority." Ayres revealed how he had unsuccessfully tried to regroup the troops on several ridges between Dabney's Mill and the Federal breastworks. He could not stop "the contagion of fear," and the troops fled. A line of soldiers brought up in his rear (either Burr or Hubbard) started firing into his troops, hitting several. Under those

⁴ *OR* 46/1:258-61.

circumstances, Ayres believed his men were justified in not remaining. He added that Bowerman's men had no ammunition and gave way in good order. Whether the soldiers on his right should have fallen back, he couldn't say, but he felt that superior enemy numbers had overwhelmed them. Ayres concluded that his troops had not fallen back alone.⁵

Ayres's two brigade commanders, Bowerman and Gwyn, also submitted reports. Bowerman's first report simply mentioned that they ran out of ammunition, "and the troops on the flank having fallen back, the brigade was withdrawn in good order." Warren returned this report, asking whether Ayres had ordered him to retreat and if there really were no troops on his left or right flanks. Warren thought it improbable that he had run out of ammunition so quickly. Given the accusations officers were reporting, Warren wanted answers. "If brigades withdrew without being ordered to do so, charges would be issued against the officers." A month later, Bowerman replied that when they withdrew, there were no Union troops to their left or right, and they faced a fierce attack from an enemy in greater numbers.⁶

Gwyn's report described how stampeding Union cavalry had initially disrupted his brigade, with elements struggling to find the Union left flank. Gwyn's first report only stated that, being unsupported on either flank, he'd retreated to some ridges in front of the Union breastworks. Warren deemed the report unacceptable. He wanted to know if someone had ordered the brigade to retire and whether they were really isolated. Did the enemy assail either of Gwyn's flanks, rendering his position untenable? Warren added that he made these inquiries in light of formal complaints so that his report could be specific in its allegations against those who had left Gwyn's brigade unsupported. "It is his [Warren's] present opinion that the brigade left the front without orders and without encountering a sufficient force of the enemy to justify it."

Gwyn replied (March 15) that he hadn't wanted to blame any of his fellow brigades but to highlight his isolation and, as such, he had to retire. He admitted to being lost on the Federal left, and with firing coming from the right and left flank, he "considered the position untenable . . . and retired to the crest of the hill in front of the [Union] breastworks."⁷

Pearson, Griffin's division, went to support Ayres on the left around 4:30 p.m. He reported that Rebels had vigorously attacked his left, and he then received fire from the rear

⁵ OR 46/1: 277-79.

⁶ OR 46/1: 282-83.

⁷ OR 46/1:284-85.

by Crawford's troops and a mass of disorganized and demoralized 6th Corps troops. After much effort in reforming the brigade, a further volley from the rear caused his brigade to break. The friendly fire killed and wounded many, including Capt. Smith, 83rd Pennsylvania. They fell back a short distance, reformed, and advanced in good order to the edge of the woods, and again became engaged. The enemy, having retreated, Pearson moved his brigade to the right of a 6th Corps brigade (Hubbard), which was reorganizing. Pearson threw out some skirmishers and remained in that position until relieved by Winthrop's brigade around 7:30 p.m.⁸

Reports from Crawford's Front

Strangely, Crawford's report, the other division commander pivotal to the engagement, is missing from the records. However, many of his senior officers submitted reports. Baxter's brigade occupied the center of the Union line; his report and that of his regimental officers were relatively minimal regarding Finegan's attack. Interestingly, Warren returned none of these reports. Baxter claimed that his troops ran out of ammunition and were awaiting a new supply. The Rebels made a massive attack, the troops on his left (Bowerman and Pearson) gave way, and his (Baxter's) brigade retreated in disorder. Baxter's troops massed and reformed on the south side of Hatcher's Run overnight. Reports from Baxter's regimental commanders glossed over the debacle. One experienced friendly fire from the rear by 6th Corps troops before they withdrew overnight. Another claimed that soldiers on his right gave way, and having no ammunition, they had to withdraw. Lieutenant Colonel John P. Spofford, 97th New York, mentioned that Ayres's troops fell back (to his left), and Morrow fell back (to his right), leaving him exposed, and thus he had to fall back to the Union works. Finally, Col. Charles W. Tilden, 16th Maine, only mentioned a strong enemy attack on his left flank.⁹

Morrow's brigade, Crawford's division, occupied the Federal right. He, too, claimed that his ammunition ran out, and it took the bravery of key officers to keep the men together. Around 5:00 p.m., Morrow received a severe wound and passed command to Col. McCoy, 107th Pennsylvania. McCoy's report described how the Rebels attacked with great fire, including artillery. The brigade had no ammunition and no reinforcements. The line on their

⁸ *OR* 46/1:271-72, 276. Recall the scathing testimony from within Pearson's brigade describing how they fled in panic.

⁹ *OR* 46/1:292; *OR* 51/1:286, 288, 291-92. Crawford must have submitted a report, one wonders if a copy exists somewhere.

left (Baxter) fell back. “We continued fighting but had to retire to save ourselves.” They retreated as quickly as possible to the safety of the Union works. He pointed out that three-quarters of his men were under fire for the first time.

Reports from the Union Reinforcements

Towards the end of the day, Hubbard’s 6th Corps brigade, Wheaton’s division, and Burr’s brigade, Griffin’s division, 5th Corps, arrived to reinforce the embattled Federals. Division commander Maj. Gen. Wheaton accompanied Hubbard’s men and submitted a detailed account of the debacle. At about 5.30 p.m., when just under a mile from Hatcher’s Run, the sounds of firing increased, and stragglers from Crawford’s division grew in number. Wheaton ordered Hubbard’s brigade into line, but the mass of fleeing troops rushing through the dense woods poured into them, preventing them from forming any line. “The fugitives . . . were deaf to every entreaty of myself and staff and refused to rally on the flanks or in support of the brigade there forming.” Many of Wheaton’s men then fled to the rear despite efforts to halt them. During this confusion, Wheaton met Warren, who said that the line in front had broken irreparably.



Maj. Gen. Frank Wheaton
generalsandbrevets.com.



Col. James Hubbard
Dudley L. Vaill, The County Regiment

While throwing out skirmishers to check the Rebels, Wheaton’s men received several volleys from a line of Federal troops (presumably Burr’s troops) to his left rear, who, fortunately, fired too high. Wheaton withdrew from the woods to a more secure field some 300 yards in the rear. Here, he was safe from the murderous fire from his own side, who struggled to distinguish friend from foe in the growing darkness. Situated nearby, Warren

managed to stop the friendly fire. As Hubbard's troops tried to reform in the open field, Rebel skirmishers rapidly approached them. The Rebels, increasing darkness, and general confusion made it exceedingly difficult to form a line. Wheaton praised Col. Hubbard, Lt. Col. Olcott (121st NY), and a regiment in Pearson's brigade for eventually creating a stable line. Deployed pickets secured the new line. Wheaton reported how Warren had expressed much gratitude for the conduct of Hubbard's and Pearson's brigades.¹⁰

Burr's official report noted how they followed Hubbard's troops to the scene of action as ordered. He formed in line of battle in an open field where a vigorous fire occurred. The Rebels forced back some of Hubbard's brigade and Crawford's division, and Burr received orders to hold them in check until they rallied. Once accomplished, Burr's brigade received orders to close up on the left flank. However, the disordered mass of Yankees broke through and disrupted Burr's ranks. Burr rallied the brigade and advanced, "driving the enemy and doing good execution." From this position, Meade ordered him back to Vaughan Road. The brigade moved as ordered, reformed in the Union works, and remained there overnight.

Warren summarily rejected Burr's report. The assistant adjutant-general noted that Warren himself had seen this brigade fire into Ayres's troops and Hubbard's brigade. Fortunately, most of this fire was too high to cause serious harm. He added:

The men fell out of line rapidly and joined the fugitives from other brigades that they were formed to stop and give cover to while reforming. The newness of the organization is the best excuse that can be given for such conduct and demands the most earnest efforts of its officers to discipline the men and make them steadier in the excitement of battle.

No follow-up reports exist in the *OR*.¹¹

Dealing with Failure

The Union rout late on February 6 represents a central feature of the entire battle. How senior Federal officers processed the defeat is frequently overlooked and provides a window into AOP culture. Throughout the war, the AOP had a reputation for cronyism, vindictiveness, and retribution. These traits could quickly surface following significant battlefield failures or successes. Recall how McAllister reacted when he suspected other officers of claiming credit for "his victory" in repelling the Rebels on February 5.

Despite minimizing the affair in his own report, Warren issued severe admonishments to Ayres and his two brigade commanders, Bowerman and Gwyn. In contrast, despite their

¹⁰ *OR* 46/1:298-99.

¹¹ *OR* 46/1:269-70.

involvement in the rout, Baxter, Morrow, and Pearson received no such criticisms. Bowerman's rebuke was especially severe, with threats of charges being issued. Interestingly, three of Bowerman's soldiers received Medals of Honor for their deeds that afternoon. Meade later issued a report formally praising Bowerman's brigade and issued furloughs to several soldiers as a reward for their bravery. In a dispatch to Grant, Meade included the observation that two of Wheaton's brigades had gone unused by Warren throughout the afternoon. A subtle dig at Warren, perhaps? ¹²

Despite the strong implication of discharging friendly fire, Hubbard's 6th Corps brigade avoided any criticism. Indeed, Wheaton, Hubbard's division commander, claimed he received praise from Warren. In marked contrast, the new brigade under the inexperienced Col. Burr received damning criticism.

Mostly raw recruits with a reputation for unreliability, Burr's men were convenient targets for Warren's wrath. As Burr's men tried to form a line in the near darkness, they faced many soldiers racing toward them in a complete panic. Were they friends, or were they foes? Furthermore, many Rebels wore stolen Union blue coats. Clearly, some of Burr's soldiers fired on the retreating soldiers (Federals, as it happened). They, too, panicked and fled despite none in those units admitting to such misdemeanors. They were not the only brigade guilty of friendly fire. The story of Burr's men later buying him a new horse in praise of his sterling leadership at the battle is a supreme irony. Although conjecture, it is possible that both versions of the events are accurate. A sizeable number of Burr's brigade could have fled in panic, firing wildly. Whereas many might have remained with Burr and stood firm. Crucially, the blame focused upon Burr's troops overlooked the fact that 5th Corps soldiers had been stampeded *long before* encountering this brigade.

The debacle did not reach the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. The consensus narrative settled upon by Grant, Meade, and Warren seems to have been to blame the inexperienced troops and move on. The war in Virginia ended two months later. The "great skedaddle" of February 6 did not feature in Grant's or Meade's memoirs. Swinton's 1882 acclaimed book on the AOP said little about the affair, noting that the Confederates had an "easy victory" and how the Federals retreated in confusion in what he called a "discomfiture." In his 1896 seminal book on the 5th Corps, Powell did not portray the engagement as a failure. He wrote how the Federals fell back due to a lack of ammunition

¹² OR 46/1:153. Camper & Kirkley, *Historical Record of the First Regiment*, 189-90; Beyer & Keydel, *Deeds of Valor*, 1:479-86.

and the onset of darkness before adding that Wheaton, supported by others, checked the Rebels. No mention of a chaotic stampede with friendly fire appeared in either book. Thus, even before the turn of the century, Union chroniclers had conveniently forgotten the “skedaddle” of February 6. And it has remained in the shadows ever since.¹³

It is reasonable to conclude that darkness and the recently created breastworks along Hatcher’s Run saved the 5th Corps from a substantial disaster. Both armies could now reform overnight and plan for the coming day.

The Human Cost of the Afternoon Fighting Around Dabney’s Mill

From 2:00 p.m. to after 6:00 p.m., the two armies had fought around Dabney’s Mill virtually nonstop. The eight Union brigades involved were: Bragg, Baxter, and Morrow (Crawford division); Bowerman and Gwyn (Ayres division); Pearson and Burr (Griffin division); Hubbard (Wheaton division). The *OR* provides Union casualty data at the regimental level for the *entire* three-day battle.¹⁴ Table 13.1 gives estimates for Union brigade casualties around Dabney’s Mill on February 6.¹⁵

In summary, the Union suffered a staggering 950 casualties. The ratio of killed to wounded was low, with only 93 killed to 726 wounded. Crawford’s brigades made up over 50% of all casualties. To put the figures into context, during the Rebel assaults on February 5, the Union suffered 111 casualties. In the fighting along Vaughan Road on February 6, they suffered 221 casualties. Indeed, the Union casualties around Dabney’s Mill are higher than

¹³ William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York, 1882), 549; William H. Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps (Army of the Potomac) A Record of Operations During the Civil War in the USA, 1861-1865* (New York, 1896), 760-61.

¹⁴ *OR* 46/1:63-69

¹⁵ For many of the brigades, this fighting represented their sole losses in the entire battle. However, some fought at other times. On Feb 5, Gwyn’s brigade incurred eight wounded in capturing Monk’s Neck Bridge. Crawford’s division would suffer casualties on Feb 7. Fortunately, Crawford separated out his *provisional* casualties for the two days (*OR* 46/2:489). Crawford’s *provisional* casualties for Feb 6 and 7 combined were: 74K, 525W, and 569M. His official casualty tally was: 76K, 571W, and 91 M. Typically, many of those provisionally listed as missing returned to their units in the coming days. The numbers of dead and wounded increased slightly as individuals were found on the battlefield or in hospitals. The correction factors between provisional and actual losses are, therefore: +3%, +9%, and -84%. Applying these factors to Crawford’s provisional casualties reported for each of Feb 6 and 7, we can estimate his actual losses for each day.

Table 13.1: Union Casualties around Dabney's Mill on February 6.

Division	Brigade	K	W	M	Total
Crawford	3 brigades ^a	52	406	66	524
Ayres	Bowerman	11	89	11	111
Ayres	Gwyn	4	46 ^b	13	63
Griffin	Pearson	17	129	32	178
Griffin	Burr	9	41	4	54
Wheaton	Hubbard	0	15	5	20
Total		93	726	131	950

^a Data is for Crawford's three brigades combined (Baxter, Morrow, and Bragg).

^b The eight wounded on Feb 5 were removed from the analysis.

the Union losses at several renowned battles in Virginia, for example, Balls Bluff (894), Front Royal (904), 1st Winchester (904), and New Market (920).¹⁶

Equivalent casualty data for the Confederates is unavailable. Some Rebel units fighting around Dabney's Mill that afternoon fought at multiple locations. For example, Lewis's brigade also fought along Vaughan Road. Troops in Evans's division fought on all three days of the battle. A further complication when compiling the Confederate losses was the relatively large but unknown number of soldiers who deserted during the battle. A crude estimate of Confederate casualties around Dabney's Mill is perhaps between 500 and 700 killed, wounded, and missing.

Some Confederate memoirs described losses on *an ad hoc* basis. William Forney wrote to his wife, remarking that his brigade lost 64 killed, wounded, or missing during the late afternoon fighting. Colonel Lea reported 78 casualties for his brigade during the day: 6 killed, 37 wounded, and 35 missing or captured. On February 6, the 61st Georgia with Baker's brigade lost all its commissioned officers killed or wounded. Their sister regiment, the 60th Georgia, started the day with 13 commissioned officers; by nightfall, 11 were dead or wounded. Col. W. B. Jones and Lt. Rice were the only ones to escape unharmed.¹⁷

¹⁶ Price, *Civil War Handbook*, 67-68.

¹⁷ Letter, William Forney to Mrs. Forney; *ORS* 7:808; Nichols, *A Soldier's Story of his Regiment*, 212.