

## Chapter 11

### **An Appointment With Destiny: Pegram Marches Northwards**

**February 6, 3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.**

#### Recapitulation

At around 2:00 p.m., Confederate Second Corps commander Gordon had ordered Pegram to leave his Vaughan Road position and head to Dabney's Mill, where Col. Lea's brigade faced overwhelming Union forces. However, Pegram and his two infantry brigades, commanded by Brig. Gen. Lewis and Col. Hoffman had been heavily engaged with Winthrop's Federal infantry and David Gregg's cavalry. Hence, obeying Gordon's order hadn't been practical. Soon after 3:00 p.m., Sickel's Union brigade had arrived along Vaughan Road and swiftly routed Pegram's Confederates.

#### Marching Across Country

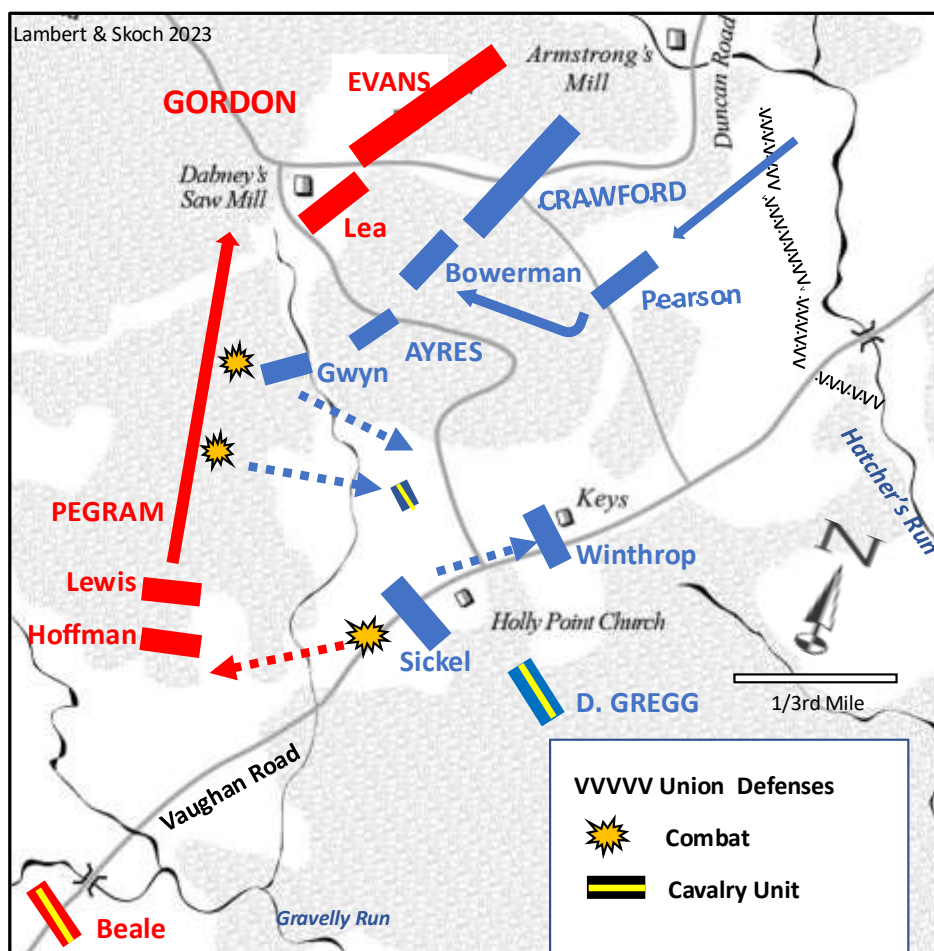
Pegram regrouped his battered soldiers, and at around 3:30 p.m., he led them northwards to reunite with Gordon and the main Rebel force fighting around Dabney's Mill, as instructed earlier. The journey of about a mile required traversing rugged terrain: dense woods, swamps, ravines, and briars, with the occasional open areas. With no path or trail to follow, navigation would have been problematic. However, the noise of battle around the old mill site could have assisted their orientation. In later reports, both Meade and Warren noted the movement of Rebel forces from the Vaughan Road fighting to the action around Dabney's Mill. Pegram's men didn't attack the Federal left flank as Gordon had hoped; however, they did collide with some Yankees.<sup>1</sup>

In their front, Pegram's skirmishers began trading heavy fire with unknown assailants in dense woodland. Pegram quickly called up the rest of his infantry but commanded them not to fire in case the hidden shooters belonged to Lea's brigade. Once established that they faced Yankees, they opened fire, and after a brief resistance, the Federals hastily withdrew. These Federals were probably the cavalry force Gregg had dispatched to screen Crawford's left flank. They are also probably the galloping Federal cavalry that disorganized Gwyn's

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<sup>1</sup> ORS 7:806; Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 414; Johnson, *Under the Southern Cross*, 222; Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan*, 291; OR 46/1:255; OR 46/2:447.

brigade (Ayres's division) as they marched to reinforce Warren's troops around Dabney's Mill.



**Map 11.1: Pegram's March Northward 3:30 - 4:30 p.m.**

As Pegram's men pressed on, they ran into more Federals. After being stampeded by the retreating cavalry (see above), Gwyn regrouped his force and headed for the Federal left flank to rejoin his divisional comrades. However, some elements became lost in the dense forest, ventured too far to the left, and became isolated. At this juncture, they encountered unidentified Rebel troops, undoubtedly Pegram's troops moving north, whom they engaged. However, being isolated and unsupported, the Federals fled in disarray. Ayres reported: "this command (General Gwyn's) had a fight in the woods, doubtless with the troops of the enemy

which attacked ours on the Vaughan Road as they were endeavoring to pass around us to join the enemy near Dabney's Mill."<sup>2</sup>

After dispatching Gwyn's isolated soldiers, Pegram's men probably arrived at Dabney's Mill around 4:30 p.m. Once reunited with his compatriots, Pegram would have reported to Gordon and received orders. Gordon presumably wanted him to join Evans and Lea for another attack. Pegram rejoined his unit and disseminated the orders to his senior commanders.<sup>3</sup>

#### A Fateful Union Attack

As Pegram marched north, the situation around Dabney's Mill was fraught. Ayres reported arriving around the Mill with "mostly Maryland troops" from Bowerman's brigade. Much of his other brigade (Gwyn's) was lost somewhere to the Union left. Ayres's Yankees had pushed the Rebels beyond the mill but came under increasing pressure to hold their position. At this critical period of the battle (around 4:30 p.m.) Pearson's brigade arrived to support Ayres's division on the Union left. Regiments from Pearson's brigade went to Bowerman's left and right flanks to help hold the mill position. Bowerman had predominantly faced Lea's Confederate brigade. Reinforced by Pearson, Ayres launched another attack on the Rebels (around 4:45 p.m.). However, unbeknownst to Ayres, Pegram had just arrived with his two Rebel brigades.<sup>4</sup>

Regimental histories from Pearson's brigade provide a nicely detailed description of this Federal assault. The 32nd Massachusetts, 155th Pennsylvania, and some Michigan skirmishers (unspecified) went to Ayres's left, where they immediately came under heavy fire, including from Rebel artillery. The Rebels captured many of the skirmishers. The rest of Pearson's brigade joined Bowerman's Marylanders as they "charged up to and over a line of the enemy's rifle pits . . . under a galling fire." Sergeant Marshall in Pearson's brigade remembered reaching the sawmill site and "some of our boys were on the sawdust when they [Rebels] charged on us . . . the bullets coming from the right and left and front, the rear was the only open place, and we started for it."

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<sup>2</sup> Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 414-15. Sherrill's lengthy account of this action is muddled as it becomes mixed with actions that occurred along Vaughan Road. The identity of the cavalry force screening the Federal flank is unknown. *OR* 46/1:279.

<sup>3</sup> There are no records to support these specific conversations, but it seems a rational supposition.

<sup>4</sup> *OR* 46/1:271, 279; Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps*, 760.



**Brig. Gen. Alfred L. Pearson**  
cmohs.org



**Col. Richard N. Bowerman**  
beyondthecrater.com

At this point, Capt. John Scott, 118th Pennsylvania, fell mortally wounded. Attempts to carry him off the field failed as the Confederates (now reinforced with Pegram's two brigades) pushed the Unionists back. While trying to help Scott, his close friend, Capt. Nathaniel Bayne was shot in the cheek. Although painful, the wound wasn't severe. As Scott fell, a Minié ball struck Col. Charles P. Herring, the 118th Pennsylvania commander, just below the right knee. Unperturbed, he carried on directing his men until a 20th Maine officer (unknown) noticed blood flowing from a hole in the colonel's boot and alerted him to the seriousness of the wound. Feeling faint from blood loss, Herring turned over command to Col. O'Neill before making his way to the nearest field medical station.<sup>5</sup>

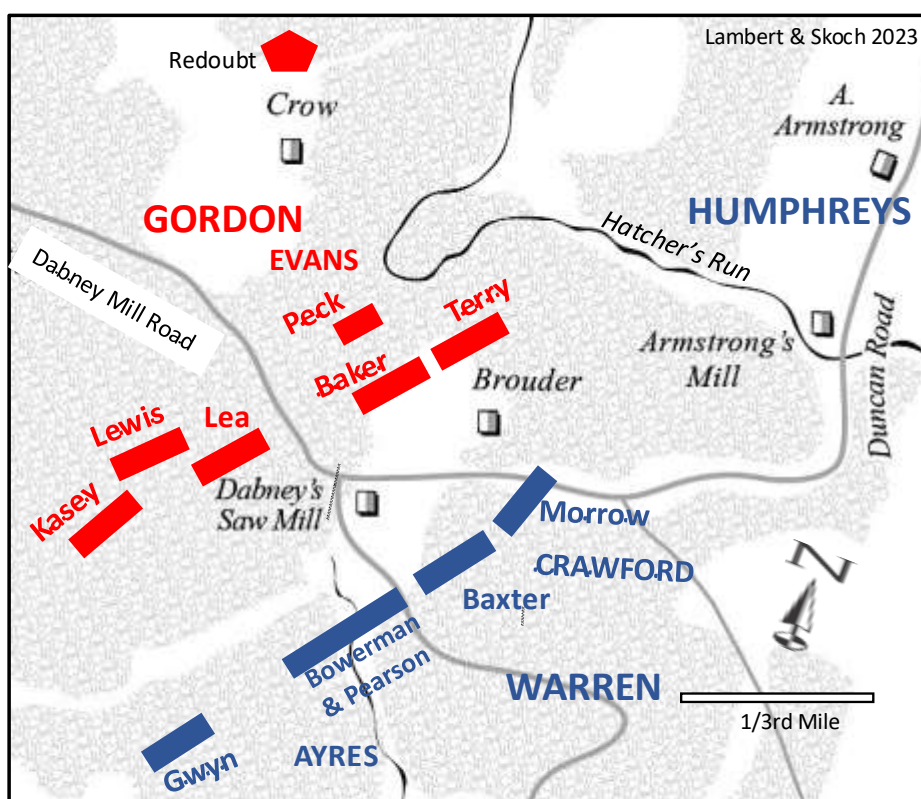
It was probably during this failed Federal attack by Pearson's and Bowerman's Yankees that Pegram and his senior commanders fell in a hail of bullets. Pegram perished outright, along with Capt. John B. Snow, the 21st North Carolina commander. The 31st Virginia Adjutant, Lt. Washington McNemar, received a mortal wound. Struck on the lower left leg, his foot badly mangled, brigade commander Col. Hoffman fell from his horse near Pegram. Rumors spread that he, too, was dead, and many in his brigade lost focus as they stopped to see if their commander had perished. The other brigade commander, Brig. Gen.

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<sup>5</sup> The Survivor's Association, *History of the 118th Pennsylvania*, 551-55; Marshall, *Company "K," 155th Pennsylvania*, 223; McKenna, *Under the Maltese Cross*, 332; George Lockley Diary Oct 1864 to May 1865, George Lockley Papers, University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library, 216. Herring's leg could not be saved and was amputated a few weeks later. He was brevetted brigadier general, US Volunteers on Mar 13, 1865, for gallant and meritorious conduct in this battle. The skirmishers came from either the 1st or 16th MI.

Lewis, fortunately, escaped unscathed.<sup>6</sup>

The addition of Pegram's two brigades helped Lea's Rebels to repulse the fateful bluecoat assault and push the Federals beyond the mill site once more. The retreat of Ayres's men on the Federal left flank exposed Baxter's brigade on their right to flanking fire. With his center imperiled, Crawford urged Morrow on the Federal right to launch an attack to help relieve the pressure on Baxter's close-to-crumbling position. The Confederates of Evans's division faced the Union center and right flank. Morrow urged his troops forward, but the battle-weary men (many were raw recruits) refused to advance, preferring to lie down and seek cover on the ground.



Map 11.2: Position at Dabney's Mill After Pegram was Slain, Around 5:00 p.m.

Major James Coey, 147th New York commander, who had supported Morrow in his pleas, took matters into his own hands. He seized the regimental colors and advanced. "The effect was magical." Inspired by Coey's bravery, regiment after regiment marched forward

<sup>6</sup> Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 415; Wooddell, *Hoffman's Army*, 425-427. Given the status of those shot around him, it is plausible that Pegram was delivering orders following his meeting with Maj. Gen. Gordon when calamity struck. Kyd Douglas erroneously claimed that Hoffman was mortally wounded, Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*, 312. Hoffman's lower leg required amputation. Capt. Snow had lost an arm the year previously.

with a cheer. However, despite bitter fighting, a deep ditch and heavy Rebel firing thwarted Morrow's assault, and they had to retire. However, their actions relieved the pressure on the Union center, allowing Baxter's soldiers to withdraw in an orderly manner. It also created a fracture in the Rebel lines. With Evans's Rebels focused on Morrow's assault on the right and Pegram's men focused upon Bowerman and Pearson's attack on the left, a serious gap opened up between these two Rebel forces. The gap enlarged further when some of Evans's men fell back.<sup>7</sup>

The retreating Federals regrouped about 200 yards southeast of the mill and began entrenching and creating defensive positions using logs. Coey informed Morrow that ammunition was running low, with "hardly five rounds to a man being left." Morrow ordered the brigade to "meet any advance . . . with the bayonet and to go on entrenching."

Despite regaining the mill site, the Confederates were in no state to press home their advance. Stunned by the loss of two senior commanders and aware of a gap in their center, the Rebels tried to reorganize. Lewis took over command of Pegram's division, and Lt. Col. John G. Kasey replaced Hoffman as brigade commander. Thus, around 5:00 p.m., a noticeable lull in the fighting occurred as the Federals dug in and the Confederates reorganized. We continue the story of the battle in the next chapter.<sup>8</sup>

### Pegram's Death: Confusion and Controversy

The death of Confederate division commander John Pegram near Dabney's Mill is arguably the best-known feature of the Hatcher's Run battle. The most senior soldier killed at the battle, his demise was particularly poignant. Only three weeks earlier, he had married the well-known Southern belle, Hetty Cary, in a lavish ceremony attended by most senior Rebel politicians and military. The wedding constituted one of the last moments of luxury and splendor experienced by the dying Confederacy. Pegram's death seemed to encapsulate the plight of the Confederate cause. Despite the event's notoriety, there are markedly different

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<sup>7</sup> OR 51/1:286; OR 46/1:390; Bayer & Keydel, *Deeds of Valor*, 1:482-84. Coey's bravery in this action contributed to his receiving a Medal of Honor. Ronald G. Griffin, *The 11th Alabama Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC, 2008), 219.

<sup>8</sup> OR 46/1:390; Bayer & Kaydel, *Deeds of Valor*, 1:482-84; Stewart, *A Pair of Blankets*, 188-193; Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*, 313; Sherrill *The 21st North Carolina Infantry*, 415-417. It is unclear who took over command of Lewis's Brigade. Wooddell, *Hoffman's Army*, 426. OR 51/1:286; Bearss & Suderow, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 2:214-15; Gleeson, *Erin Go Gray*, 36. Various texts mentioned a lull in the fighting e.g., Smith, *The 24th Michigan*, 239; OR 51/1:286; Bearss & Suderow, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 2:214-15.

accounts of how, where, and when the 33-year-old Pegram perished. Below is a sampling of the various recollections.<sup>9</sup>

Some reported that a sharpshooter killed Pegram. A discrete sharpshooter attack appears unlikely as fellow officers fell in the same hail of bullets. Some claimed he died urging his men forward in an assault; others recorded how he died during a Federal counterattack. The eyewitness account of Maj. Kyd Douglas is well-cited. He claimed that during a Rebel attack around Dabney's Mill, "General Pegram was shot through the body near the heart. I jumped from my horse and caught him as he fell and with assistance took him from his horse. He died in my arms, almost as soon as he touched the ground." Another present at the scene, Maj. John H. New remembered him having time for some last words: "I am wounded badly. Get me off at once, if you are going to do so."<sup>10</sup>



**Author at Pegram's Marker, Hatcher's Run Battlefield, 2024**

David Lambert

The Douglas account stated that Pegram perished *after* Mahone's Division arrived at Dabney's Mill, putting the time of death beyond 5:00 p.m. However, testimony from the son of cavalry brigade commander Brig. Gen. Beale reported that Pegram died "in the earlier stages of this day's . . . fighting" and before Evans's division arrived. This placed the event

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<sup>9</sup> Lambert & Suderow, "The Battle of Hatcher's Run," 44; Dunham, *Allegany to Appomattox*, 157; Carmichael, *Lee's Young Artillerist*, 154-55.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas, *I Rode With Stonewall*, 312; Bergeron, "Three-day Tussle at Hatcher's Run," 36-37; Carmichael, *Lee's Young Artillerist*, 156.



before 3:00 p.m. This scenario agrees with a Union account from Baxter's brigade, which reported that "General Pegram was killed by the first volley from our guns, and the ranks of his division, missing the animating voice and cheering presence of their gallant leader, were pushed back in surprise and confusion." The account then described Evans's men arriving. A newspaper review for the 50th anniversary of the battle also claimed that Pegram died "in the first fighting at this point [Dabney's Mill]" before Evans arrived. Such narratives may explain why notable modern historians have also championed this version, despite overwhelming evidence placing Pegram fighting along Vaughan Road at around 3:00 p.m.<sup>11</sup>



**Maj. Henry "Kyd" Douglas**  
nps.gov



**Maj. Randolph J. Barton (postwar)**  
wikitree.com

Captain Buck, 13th Virginia, supplied a more diverse version of events. He fought alongside Pegram the entire day as part of Hoffman's brigade. His narrative implied that Pegram died while fighting cavalry north of Vaughan Road before even reaching Dabney's Mill. Such are the hazards of historical research! The account portrayed in this chapter appears the most plausible. Supported by many accounts, it triangulates with other events and timings. We may never know the precise details surrounding Pegram's demise; however, the affecting story is a poignant reminder of the tragedies of war.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*, 312; Beale, *A Lieutenant of Cavalry in Lee's Army*, 198; Locke, *The Story of the Regiment*, 375; Associated Literary Press, "The Civil War: 50 Years Ago Today," *Buffalo* [NY] *Evening News*, February 8, 1915; Horn, *The Petersburg Regiment*, 358; Calkins, "History and Tour Guide of Five Forks," 18.

<sup>12</sup> Buck, *With the Old Confeds*, 131-32.



## The Aftermath of Pegram's Death

Soldiers placed Pegram's body on a blanket and carried it off the field to an ambulance. The escorted ambulance traveled along Boydton Plank Road to division headquarters, near the Quaker Road intersection. Major Barton, an adjutant with Terry's Brigade, witnessed the ambulance. Wounded in the battle, Barton followed behind as he returned to camp with a medic to have his wound dressed. Kyd Douglas placed Pegram's corpse in his (Douglas's) room at headquarters. The thorny issue arose of who would inform Mrs. Pegram. Corps commander Gordon suggested Douglas, but he pleaded against the idea. "I'll lead a forlorn hope – do anything that is war – but not that." He proposed sending Maj. New as "he's married and knows women." It would seem that Maj. New similarly did not fulfill the ghastly task.<sup>13</sup>

Aware of John's demise, Capt. Gordon McCabe, a close friend of the Pegrams, awkwardly rode past Hetty's quarters. He saw her merrily entertaining John's mother as they awaited his return. As they secretly placed his body in the adjutant's room, someone sent word to Hetty that she might as well go to bed, as John would be late returning. Thus, she slept peacefully that night in a room above his corpse. In the morning, an (unknown) old civilian gentleman went up to Hetty's room and called her downstairs to where her husband lay. Consumed with grief, she knelt by his body and pulled out his watch, which was still ticking; she had wound it for him before they parted.<sup>14</sup>

## Analysis

Many authors made a common error when portraying this battle phase. They assumed that Pegram remained with Hoffman's brigade around the Crow house on the morning of February 6 and that he sent the brigades of Lewis and Johnston down to Vaughan Road. The main source supporting this view is the official report of Maj. Gen. Gordon dated February 9. This document has caused much confusion in the battle's narrative. Given its provenance, it is unsurprising that authors regarded it as reliable. It isn't easy to speculate why Gordon wrote what he did. He was present around Dabney's Mill all that afternoon. It was Gordon who sent orders to Pegram to return to Dabney's Mill from his Vaughan Road location. My only thought is that Gordon wrote his report in a rush. Compared to Union officer accounts that

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*, 312; Barton, "The Battle of Hatcher's Run," 119; Bergeron, "Three-day Tussle at Hatcher's Run," 36-37. Capt. Oscar Hinrichs claimed that his bed was used to lay Pegram's corpse (Williams, *Stonewall's Prussian Mapmaker*, 242); Griggs, *General John Pegram*, 117-18.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay*, 204-05; Griggs, *General John Pegram*, 117-18.

could stretch to pages, his report was comparatively brief and low in detail, particularly given that it covered over five hours of fierce fighting. Possibly, report writing was a low priority for Gordon at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Given that Pegram died around Dabney's Mill in the late afternoon, this erroneous narrative conveniently placed Pegram in the correct location to meet his fate. Furthermore, some misconstrued Sickel's report to suggest that he only routed Pegram's two brigades on Vaughan Road at 5:00 p.m. Thus, Pegram himself couldn't have been on Vaughan Road then if, at the same time, Yankees were shooting him over a mile further north.

The discovery of Lea's Report in the *OR Supplements*, accounts from Hoffman's brigade, and the research of Lee Sherrill confirmed that Pegram accompanied Lewis's and Hoffman's brigades to Vaughan Road. It also supported other evidence that Brig. Gen. Johnston wasn't even at the battle. As Pegram fought along Vaughan Road but perished near Dabney's Mill, he had to make that journey. Understanding Sickel's report and realizing that he routed Pegram's men soon after 3:00 p.m. provides the time needed for the march. The testimony from Ayres that Gwyn's brigade encountered Confederates in the appropriate location further supports this account.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2:00 p.m., fighting around the mill had been constant and intense. The lull in shooting just before 5:00 p.m. was a welcome relief for all combatants and a feature mentioned by eyewitnesses. The silence proved short-lived, as we discover in the next chapter.

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<sup>15</sup> *OR* 46/1:390. Gordon's paragraph-long report does not discuss the fighting on Feb 5 or Feb 7 in which he played a central role.

<sup>16</sup> Lambert & Suderow, "The Battle of Hatcher's Run," 42-44.