The Mystery of Maj. Wallace’s Custer Medal

by John Peter Beckendorf

A follow-up to

Vol. 31 No. 1

Above, photograph of Col. John Willis Lea from Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-65 by Walter Clark. Image provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Right, letter from Robert C. Wallace, 5th Michigan Cavalry, mentioning that Lea had left a horse and saddle with him.

Pineville Junction on Oct. 16th

Capt. Wallace,

Sir,

I have a horse named Shuck, 14 full, 7 hands, 3 white and 3 black, on which Gen. J. M. Lea (Confed.) left with me from Harrington Town.

If you see another man who looks as much as a rider as I feel, please write me at once.

Your truly,

Capt. Wallace

Capt. 2d Regt., 24th & C. C.
Wallace’s Horse & Saddle

I have been fortunate to acquire an extensive collection of artifacts and ephemera belonging to Maj. Robert C. Wallace of the 5th Michigan Cavalry of the famed Michigan Brigade, commanded for much of the Civil War by George Armstrong Custer. His Custer medal was featured in *NYCWC*, and I recently unraveled a mystery pertaining to one of the other artifacts in the collection.

I acquired much of the collection in two purchases from a Washington dealer. I was told that the items came from a woman who had inherited the Wallace family home in Helena, Montana, where Wallace resided after the war. The collection is punctuated by the fact that in 1915, he wrote his memoirs, *A Few Memories of a Long Life*.

In an effort to further strengthen the artifacts’ provenance, I reviewed the census records, which showed that Wallace lived at 211 Eighth Street in Helena. This was also verified by Helena city directories. A title report verified the home’s ownership, its transfer to the major’s daughter, Margaret, following his death in 1928, and the transfer to her young lady friend following Margaret Wallace’s death in 1956.

I was able to locate Jeanne Tellier Leeson, who had inherited the house from her friend Margaret. We corresponded and I subsequently met with her to acquire the balance of the Wallace collection, which included a carte de visite photo album and a couple of shoe boxes of documents and letters.

Once home, I began sifting through my new treasures, and I found a very intriguing letter:

Buckville Junction Va Apr 16th ’65
Capt Wallace
Sir
I have a horse & saddle which Gen J.W. Lea (Confed.) left with me to be assigned to you. If you will instruct me what to do with said property I will comply therewith.
Very respectfully
Your obd svr L.L. Bridges
Capt and C.S.
24th A.C.

Oddly, Maj. Wallace does not mention receiving a Confederate general’s horse and saddle in his memoirs, and I wondered why.

The first question to be addressed was: Who was this Confederate general and how was Maj. Wallace connected with him? At first I thought that it might be George Washington Custis Lee, who was captured at Sailor’s Creek ten days before, on April 6, 1865. After all, it was a Confederate general. Wrong — the “G” is a “J” and “Lee” is “Lea.”

Chris Calkins of the National Park Service, who has written extensively about Sailor’s Creek and the Appomattox Campaign, put me in touch with Frank White, who is researching Custis Lee’s capture. After examining the letter closely, Frank thought that my man was Col. John Willis Lea, who commanded Johnston’s Brigade (5th, 12th, 20th, and 23rd North Carolina Infantry), Gordon’s 2nd Army Corps at the time.

The database at Historical Data Systems, Inc., provided a sketch of Lea’s eventful career. At his enlistment on May 16, 1861, he resided in Caswell County, North Carolina, and was 23 years old. Commissioned as a captain into Company I, 5th North Carolina Infantry, he was subsequently confined at Fort Wool, Virginia (date not stated), and listed as a both wounded and a prisoner of war at Williamsburg on May 5, 1862.

He was transferred the following August 26th to Aiken’s Landing, Virginia, where he was exchanged on November 10th.

He was wounded on May 3, 1863, at Chancellorsville, rose to the ranks of lieutenant colonel on February 2, 1863, and was wounded yet again at Winchester on September 19, 1864, having achieved the rank of colonel four months prior. His service came to an end when he was paroled at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

Searching the Internet for more information, I happened on a couple of postings by Bill Phillips in a Lea family genealogy forum. I contacted Bill and he provided me with a wealth of information that allowed the story to further unfold. His interest in Lea stems from a series of letters written by his great-great-grandfather, Col. John
Williams Patterson of the 102nd Pennsylvania Infantry, who was killed at the Wilderness. Lea is mentioned in some of these letters.

John Willis Lea was born at Leasburg, North Carolina, on September 9, 1838, the son of William Lea, a native of Petersburg, Virginia. William died when John was but 18, and debts necessitated his mother moving the family to the home of his uncle, Willis Lea, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The efforts of his uncle secured John an appointment to West Point into the class of 1861. Notable classmates were George Armstrong Custer and Alonzo Cushing.

Custer's nickname was "Cinnamon" due to the oil he put on his hair. Lea's nickname was "Gimlet" because he was long and thin, with a cutting nature akin to the boring tool. Custer and Lea became good friends. However, the friendship was interrupted by the impending war when Lea resigned and returned home to North Carolina to be commissioned into the 5th North Carolina.

In April 1862 the Army of the Potomac was on the offense on the Virginia Peninsula and in pursuit of the Confederate forces that had abandoned Yorktown. The Rebel troops arrived at Williamsburg on May 4th, and John Lea's 5th North Carolina was among them.

The two forces clashed the following day at the Sauger's farm, "Glebe," two and a half miles outside of Williamsburg. During this battle, then-Lt. Custer led a successful charge of the 5th Wisconsin and the 6th Maine. Losses were heavy: Federal casualties were over 2,200 and the Confederates' just over 1,500. After Johnston gave the command to retreat, Capt. Lea was wounded in the leg.

The next day Custer was given a detached assignment to check the redoubts around the battle area. Finding them abandoned, the Federal troops rode amid the wounded of both armies. Custer entered Dr. Robert Waller's barn on a farm called Samples, where many of the wounded had been taken. Here he found his former classmate John Lea lying in a stall. Making his former classmate more comfortable and chatting for a while, Custer left his friend with some food, clothing, and money. Lea, in turn, wrote a note stating that if Lt. Custer were to be taken prisoner, all courtesies should be extended to him.
The Federal army moved on, and much of the responsibility for the care of the wounded fell to the local citizens. Mrs. Goodrich Durfee and her daughter Margaret moved the wounded Capt. Lea into their home, Bassett Hall in Williamsburg. Here Lea spent the next several months convalescing. Lea and Margaret fell in love. Plans were made to marry.

In the meantime, Custer, now promoted to captain and serving on McClellan’s staff, learned of Lea’s whereabouts and asked permission to visit him at Bassett Hall. Permission was granted, and he arrived in the midst of plans for their wedding. Lea asked Custer to be his best man, and Custer readily agreed. To make this possible, the ceremony was set for the following evening at nine o’clock. Custer wrote to his sister, Lydia Ann Reed, the following account of the wedding:

Both were dressed in pure white, with a simple wreath of flowers upon their heads. I never saw two prettier girls [author’s note: Margaret and her cousin Maggie]. L. was dressed in a bright new uniform, which had been made for the occasion. It was made of fine gray cloth trimmed with gold lace. I wore my full uniform of blue. It was a strange wedding. I certainly never heard of one like it. L. and I had met under strange circumstances after the battle of Williamsburg, he an officer in one army, and I in an opposing one. We had been warm friends at West Point, and now he was about to be married and I was to be present at the ceremony. We were both struck by the strange fortune which had thrown us together again, and under such remarkable circumstances.

Custer obtained further leave via telegram from Gen. McClellan and was permitted to stay in Williamsburg for as long as he wished. He was a guest at Bassett Hall for nearly two weeks, and every evening there was merrymaking. But these surreal times soon came to an end, and both Custer and Lea returned to their respective commands and the harsh realities of war.

Nearly three years passed and the war was grinding to a close. Grant had put a stranglehold on Lee, who on March 29, 1865, left the trenches of Petersburg to disengage and fight another day. Thus began the last days of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Original direct albumen print in the author’s collection of Brig. Gen. George Armstrong Custer. It was taken on or about January 25, 1864, at Stevensburg, Virginia, by William Frank Browne, the 5th Michigan camp photographer. Custer is wearing the uniform in which he would be married to Elizabeth “Libbie” Bacon the next month. This photograph is #K-25 in Mark Katz’s Custer in Photographs.

On April 9, 1865, at the McLean House at Appomattox Court House, Lee surrendered his army to Grant. The generals met the next day, and then it was left to subordinates to work out the details.

Col. Lea was with the Army of Northern Virginia when it surrendered, and officers of both armies began searching for old friends among former enemies. The following is a quotation from The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General Custer and His Wife Elizabeth. A Col. Woodruff recounts:

I was taking a short ride from my battery...I had not gone far when an officer in gray called to me, and, as I drew near, said “I would like to see General Custer. George and I were classmates. We last met in 1863, in Williamsburg.” I then recognized him. “Why, then you must be ‘Gimlet’ Lea. I belong to Custer’s Division, and will take you to the General.” The meeting between the two was very interesting.

Col. Woodruff was none other than 1st Lt. Carle Augustus Woodruff of Battery M, 2nd US Artillery, who won the Medal of Honor at Newby’s Crossroads, Virginia, on July 24, 1863.

Custer also made mention of the encounter. In a letter to his sister Lydia dated April 21, 1865, Custer wrote: “At
Appomattox I met my old friend and classmate Lea. He was in Lee’s army which surrendered. He came to see me, and took dinner with me.”

To Maj. Gen. John Gibbon was assigned the task of processing the surrender of Lee’s army. This was completed on April 13th. His dispatch to Grant of that date from Appomattox Court House states that “The surrender of General Lee’s army was finally completed to-day. We have paroled from 25,000 to 30,000 men.” Some Confederates had difficulty securing their parole passes, because the blank forms ran out; however, it is believed that virtually all the Confederates finally left Appomattox Court House by April 14th.

So how did Maj. (then-Capt.) Wallace end up with the horse and saddle of John Willis Lea?

While Wallace makes no mention of Lea’s horse and saddle in his memoirs, he does provide us with a few clues. He wrote: “Being a staff officer, I was privileged to ride about on any part of the field. I chose to go always looking out for events that would interest my chief to know.”

For example:

On the morning of the tenth I knew there was to be another meeting of Grant and Lee. So myself and Lieutenant Wiggins [John C. Wiggins] of the staff, in order to get a good look at General Lee, went down the road on which he would come; and as he approached we lined ourselves on the side of the road and saluted as he passed in company with his Adjutant General, which salute he returned by touching his hat. We then followed him back to the village and looked on while he and Grant held their last conference. A pencil sketch taken by a private soldier on their occasion is still in my possession.

At the time, Wallace was on the staff of Maj. Gen. Wesley Merritt, who was appointed to the commission that was to carry out the terms of the surrender. He and his staff remained at Appomattox Court House after the bulk of the army had departed. Therefore, Wallace would have remained at Appomattox and would have had freedom of movement.

Wallace was very familiar with Gen. Custer, having served in the 5th Michigan Cavalry and in various staff capacities under generals Torbert and Merritt. In his memoirs, Wallace wrote of an experience during the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign:

I, being unwell, was left in charge of the camp at headquarters. General Custer, who had left his wife at his headquarters on the back road asked me to ride over every day and see that she wanted for nothing. So I found it my pleasant duty to visit Mrs. Custer every day for a week and have a short chat with her. She was an extremely pleasant lady.

Additionally, Custer authorized a Custer Medal for Wallace, which was received in 1884 due to Tiffany and Co. having misplaced the order. [See NSTCIV Vol. 31 No. 7.

I surmise—although it remains conjecture—that Gen. Custer may have
asked Capt. Wallace to look after his friend Col. Lea and help with his parole. If so, a grateful Lea, aware that officers could retain their personal property, including horses, may have asked Capt. Bridges to see that his horse and saddle found their way to Wallace. Bridges was with Gibbon’s 24th Army Corps, centered about Burkeville Junction, Virginia, which had become a major supply and staging point for the Army of the Potomac and through which many Confederates were processed. Likely, Lea was able to easily make his way back to Williamsburg, where his wife, whom he hadn’t seen for several years, was waiting.

Following the war, Lea went into the lumber business with his wife’s brother. Not content with a life of commerce, he felt a calling into the ministry and in 1869 entered the Virginia Theological Seminary at Alexandria. He was graduated in 1872 and became an Episcopal minister, riding a circuit until settling down to various churches in West Virginia. Six children were born to him and his wife Margaret, but tragedy was on the horizon. Margaret died in 1883 at the age of 39, and John Willis Lea died of blood poisoning a year later on May 15, 1884.

What became of the horse and saddle? This was a mystery that puzzled me for several weeks. Then, when going through more of Wallace’s letters, I discovered the following from his former captain, Alvin Sabin, to Wallace in Detroit.

Washington DC
July 24 1865
Friend Robert

I learned at Petersburg that Capt Bridges had been ordered home and when I arrived at this place I found where he resides.

Ogdensburgh NY as you will see by the enclosed card. He has probably disposed of the horse & saddle and if I were in your place I would punch him up by mail.

I hope to get around to D. [Detroit] in a week or ten days. Holy St. Patrick how hot it is down here. W. [Washington] is might dull now. Sojers quite scarce but just as many Hooker Shops as ever.

Hoping that I may live through this DC hot weather and see your [Pying?] soon. I remain

Very Respectfully
Your friend
A.N. Sabin

After Appomattox, Capt. Wallace was promoted to major and ordered to rejoin his regiment in the field. The Michigan Brigade and many of the elements of the Army of the Potomac were ordered south to link up with Sherman’s army and defeat Johnson’s Confederate troops in North Carolina. On arriving at the Virginia-North Carolina border, word was received that Johnson had surrendered. The army was ordered to report to Washington for a Grand Review, which took place May 23rd and 24th. Following this, the 5th Michigan was ordered to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, where they were mustered out June 19th.

What became of the other players in this tale? Alvin Sabin became captain of Company C, 5th Michigan Cavalry, on October 21, 1864. He was a battle-hardened veteran, and had been wounded on July 24, 1863, at Newby’s Cross Roads and again on May 6, 1864, at the Wilderness. Of the time following Newby’s Cross Roads, Wallace recalled in his memoirs:

Next day, while on picket duty, I noticed a horse coming toward us with a man on his back and another man leading. It proved to be a farmer who was bringing in Lieutenant Sabin badly wounded. Last year [1914] Lieutenant Sabin was still living, but a paralyzed cripple from the effect of his wound.
Sabin returned to Michigan and married Hannah E. Burke on April 13, 1868. He died January 4, 1916, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Lucious Leverett Bridges, born April 3, 1839, in Massena, New York, and admitted to the New York bar in 1862, briefly resided in Ogdensburg, New York, after the war. In March 1866 he moved to Sedalia, Missouri, where he established a law practice and became involved in local and state politics. He subsequently moved to the District of Columbia, where he passed away on November 6, 1903.

Maj. Wallace never did get his horse and saddle, and probably never got the opportunity to punch up “by mail” Capt. Bridges, but I immensely enjoyed unraveling the mystery.

Sources

Cauble, Frank P. The Surrender Proceedings, April 9, 1865, Appomattox Court House.


National Archive and Record Administration, pension record files, Washington, DC.


The author, a commercial insurance broker, is vice president of the Los Angeles Civil War Round Table and a member of the West Coast Civil War Collectors Association.

Mr. Beckendorf’s great-grandfather was Cpl. Peter Henry Beckendorf of Company E, 6th Minnesota Infantry, and his great-great-grandfather was Pvt. George Haas of Company A, 2nd Kansas Cavalry.