

Brevet Brigadier-General George Washington Neff
Delivered at Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio
June 21, 2003

Copyright ©2007 David L. Mowery and the Cincinnati Civil War Round Table

Born on January 5, 1833, in Cincinnati, Ohio, George Washington Neff was the youngest son of George W. and Maria White Neff. General Neff's father had settled in Cincinnati in 1824 and had been the first president of the Little Miami Railroad Company, which controlled the railway that ran through Camp Dennison. George's father also had served on the Cincinnati City Council for several terms, during which time he had helped establish Spring Grove Cemetery. Later, George's father founded the Fireman's Insurance Company and served as its president until his death on August 9, 1850. His funeral and interment at Spring Grove was reported to have been one of the largest ever seen in Cincinnati during the 19th Century.¹

Young George would follow in his father's footsteps in many ways. He attended both Cincinnati College (now the University of Cincinnati) and Woodward College (now Woodward High School). After his father died, George tried his hand at being a wholesale shoe merchant, a venture that soon failed. He then partnered with his brother, Ambrose, in a very successful insurance business named the George W. Neff & Co. Insurance Agency, located at 21 W. 3rd Street. In the early 1850's, George joined the "Rover Guards," a respected militia company composed mainly of Cincinnati firefighters. The company's supply base was stationed at the Rover Engine house on 4th Street. Neff eventually attained the rank of Captain while a member of this exclusive paramilitary unit.²

When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, George W. Neff answered the call for volunteers. During that month, he was made commandant of Camp Harrison, which was situated near the southeast corner of present-day Spring Grove Cemetery. George served in this capacity for only a few days before he left to organize the 2nd Kentucky Volunteer Infantry. Due to the political neutrality of Kentucky and the overflow of Union volunteers coming from its northern neighbors, the 2nd Kentucky Infantry gathered nearly all of its recruits from Ohio. Neff participated heavily in the training of the regiment at Camp Clay near Hyde Park, Ohio. He was commissioned Lieutenant-Colonel of the 2nd Kentucky Infantry on June 28, 1861, and within a week, he and the regiment left for the front in Western Virginia as part of Brigadier-General Jacob D. Cox's brigade of the Kanawha district.³

Neff and his regiment, under the command of Colonel William E. Woodruff, experienced their first taste of war in the Battle of Barboursville, (West) Virginia, on the morning of July 14, 1861. At the bridge over Mud River, about 600 Confederate militia under Captain Milton Ferguson fired into the Kentuckians. At first surprised by the volley, the 2nd Kentucky rallied and charged the Confederate position on the steep hill overlooking

the bridge. The gray line shattered, and George Neff and the 2nd Kentucky Infantry emerged the victors of their first fight. They rejoined the rest of Cox's brigade on July 16th.⁴

The next day, the regiment was held in reserve as the Battle of Scary Creek, (West) Virginia, raged. However, at around 2:30pm, a messenger mistakenly announced that the Federal forces had won the battle. Colonel Woodruff, Lieutenant-Colonel Neff, and two other officers of the 2nd Kentucky Infantry, along with the colonel of the 11th Ohio Infantry, crossed the Kanawha River at dusk to observe the situation on the battlefield. When they arrived at one of the burning buildings on the field, they found some men they thought were victorious Union soldiers. The darkness disguised the color of their uniforms. To their horror, Neff and the other officers soon found themselves surrounded by Confederate soldiers, one of whom was Captain Albert G. Jenkins. Neff and his colleagues were made prisoners of war and were sent to Libby Prison in Richmond.⁵

Neff was moved to various Southern prisons over the next 12 months, including the prison at Charleston, South Carolina, where George Neff and his former commander William Woodruff were among the 13 prisoners selected as hostages to be hanged if the Union navy executed the privateers that had been captured upon the Confederate blockade runner *Savannah*. The execution did not occur, but Neff continued to endure starvation and other hardships in prisons at Columbia, South Carolina, at Salisbury, North Carolina, and at Belle Isle, Virginia. Neff was exchanged on September 30, 1862.⁶

He returned to Cincinnati on leave of absence, but while he was there, Confederate General Kirby Smith's forces threatened the city. Neff volunteered his services to the Department of the Ohio's commander, Major-General Lew Wallace, who made him a member of his staff during the crisis.⁷

In February 1863, Neff was appointed the commandant of Camp Dennison, Ohio. When Confederate Brigadier-General John Hunt Morgan invaded Ohio with 3,400 troopers on July 13, 1863, Neff hastily prepared Camp Dennison for its first and only threat of attack during the war. He ordered 500 Union convalescent troops from the camp's hospital to build entrenchments along the Madisonville Pike just west of the camp, and he armed them with all of the guns and ammunition at his disposal. Some of these convalescents were barely strong enough to hold themselves upright, and others were missing limbs, yet 50 of them successfully constructed a suitable line of breastworks before Morgan's arrival. Lieutenant-Colonel George Neff also detached portions of the 11th Ohio Cavalry to guard all of the known bridges and fords of the Little Miami River from Fort Ancient to Cincinnati to keep Morgan from going farther east. Neff sent his wife, Clara, with the camp records and valuables to a friend's house in Goshen, and then telegraphed his commander, Major-General Ambrose Burnside, to send reinforcements and guns at once.⁸

Neff's quick-thinking proved to be invaluable. At 6:00am on July 14, Morgan's Confederates approached the Federal entrenchments. When the Union veterans let loose a volley at the Confederate vanguard, it responded in kind, but within minutes Morgan

broke off the attack and diverted his force to the north. The Confederates managed to cross the river, but when they attempted to burn the Little Miami Rail Road bridge north of the camp, Neff led two companies of the Miami Militia and a squad of convalescents to save the bridge. Arriving in the nick of time, the hodgepodge Federal detachment brushed away Morgan's troopers, killing and capturing several in the process. Morgan fired a few artillery shells into the camp, but then ordered his troops to continue their trek east.⁹

Lieutenant-Colonel Neff had saved one of the most valuable military camps in the North from destruction. His defensive forethought and ingenuity earned him the praise of Cincinnati's citizens and military commanders alike. Two weeks later, on July 31, 1863, Neff was awarded a commission as Colonel of the 88th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, a regiment he had helped organize during the winter of 1862-63. Neff and the 88th Ohio were chiefly engaged in guarding Confederate prisoners at Cincinnati and at Camp Chase, Ohio, for the rest of the war. On March 13, 1865, George W. Neff received the rank of brevet brigadier-general for "faithful and meritorious services," and on July 3rd, he mustered out of the army.¹⁰

George returned to Cincinnati to run his insurance business with his son, Ambrose. He briefly served as Collector of Customs under President Andrew Johnson. In his later years, he moved to a house at 409 Washington Street in Newport, Kentucky. It was there at 4:00pm on December 13, 1892, George Neff died after a five-month illness. He left behind his wife Clara, three grown sons, and two young daughters. In the brief announcement of Neff's private burial at Spring Grove Cemetery, one of the Cincinnati newspapers simply remarked, "the well known insurance man ... was justly respected and beloved, and none will be more sincerely mourned."¹¹

Neff family members buried in Section 52, Lot 152, of Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio:¹²

- George Washington Neff, Brevet Brigadier-General of U.S. Volunteers. Died of cirrhosis of the liver on Dec. 13, 1892, at Newport, Kentucky.
- Stanburry Neff, son of Brevet Brigadier-General George W. Neff and Clara Neff. Died of spinal meningitis on Feb. 19, 1865, at Cincinnati, Ohio.
- George Washington Neff, father of Brevet Brigadier-General George W. Neff. Died of dropsy on Aug. 9, 1850, at Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Maria White Neff, mother of Brevet Brigadier-General George W. Neff. Died of typhoid pneumonia on June 16, 1871, in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Ambrose W. Neff, brother of Brevet Brigadier-General George W. Neff. Died of heart failure on Dec. 9, 1863, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Caroline (Neff) Humes, sister of Brevet Brigadier-General George W. Neff. Died of la grippe disease on Dec. 30, 1892, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Brevet Brigadier-General George Washington Neff



Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Neff
(From: Library of Congress)



Colonel George W. Neff
(From: Roger D. Hunt & Jack R. Brown, *Brevet Brigadier Generals in Blue* (Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1990), p. 444)

Endnotes:

- ¹ Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War*, Vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1895), p. 977; S.B. Nelson & J.M. Runk, *History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1894), p. 91.
- ² *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, Dec 14, 1892; Roger D. Hunt & Jack R. Brown, *Brevet Brigadier Generals in Blue* (Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1990), p. 444; Spencer & Craig Printing Works, *Cincinnati Illustrated Business Directory, 1882*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1882), p. 205; Robert J. Wimberg, *Cincinnati And the Civil War: Off to Battle!* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1992), pp. 7, 16; John H. Eicher & David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands*, (Stanford, California, 2001), p. 404.
- ³ Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War*, Vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1895), p. 977; James Barnett, *Forty For the Union: Civil War Generals Buried in Spring Grove Cemetery*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1981); Robert J. Wimberg, *Cincinnati And the Civil War: Off to Battle!* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1992), pp. 53, 112-113, 116, 119, 121.
- ⁴ Terry Lowry, *The Battle of Scary Creek: Military Operations in the Kanawha Valley April-July 1861* (Charleston, West Virginia, 1998), pp. 92-98.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-132.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132; Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War*, Vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1895), p. 977; John H. Eicher & David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands*, (Stanford, California, 2001), p. 404.
- ⁷ Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War*, Vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1895), p. 977.
- ⁸ *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 1, pp. 670-672; *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, July 15-16, 1863; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, July 15-16, 1863.
- ⁹ *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 1, pp. 670-672; *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, July 24, 1863.
- ¹⁰ John H. Eicher & David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands*, (Stanford, California, 2001), p. 404; James Barnett, *Forty For the Union: Civil War Generals Buried in Spring Grove Cemetery*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1981).
- ¹¹ Spencer & Craig Printing Works, *Illustrated Business Directory and Picturesque Cincinnati*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889), p. 264; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 14, 1892; *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, December 14, 1892.
- ¹² Spring Grove Cemetery Office, *Records of Burials in Spring Grove Cemetery*, *Cincinnati, Ohio*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001).

Bibliography

Brevet Brigadier-General George Washington Neff

Newspapers

Cincinnati Commercial Gazette, 1892

Cincinnati Daily Commercial, 1863
Cincinnati Daily Gazette, 1863
Cincinnati Enquirer, 1892

Official Publications

Spring Grove Cemetery Office. *Records of Burials in Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio*. Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001.
United States War Department. *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 vols. Washington, D.C., 1880-1901.

Books and Maps

Barnett, James. *Forty For the Union: Civil War Generals Buried in Spring Grove Cemetery*. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1981.
Eicher, John H. and Eicher, David J. *Civil War High Commands*. Stanford, California, 2001.
Hunt, Roger D. and Brown, Jack R. *Brevet Brigadier Generals in Blue*. Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1990.
Lowry, Terry. *The Battle of Scary Creek: Military Operations in the Kanawha Valley April-July 1861*. Charleston, West Virginia, 1998.
Nelson, S.B. and Runk, J.M. *History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County*. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1894.
Reid, Whitelaw. *Ohio in the War*. 2 Vols. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1895.
Spencer & Craig Printing Works. *Cincinnati Illustrated Business Directory, 1882*. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1882.
_____. *Illustrated Business Directory and Picturesque Cincinnati*. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1889.
Wimberg, Robert J. *Cincinnati And the Civil War: Off to Battle!* Cincinnati, Ohio, 1992.