

HENRY HARRISON: CONFEDERATE SPY



TIP FROM HARRISON LED TO BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

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For nearly a century no one knew an unmarked grave in Northern Kentucky entombed the spy whose tip led to the bloodiest battle of the Civil War and forever changed the course of history.

Henry Thomas Harrison's life was filled with espionage and intrigue before he died nearly destitute, being laid to rest at Highland Cemetery in Fort Mitchell. The pivotal role he played in the Battle of Gettysburg – what is commonly regarded as the turning point of the Civil War – became the stuff of movies and literature, as Harrison was portrayed in Ted Turner's "Gettysburg" and its prequel, "Gods and Generals," as well as Michael Shaara's historical novel "The Killer Angels."

Two years after joining the Confederacy as a private in Mississippi, 31-year-old Harrison became a scout for Gen. James Longstreet, a key commander in the Civil War under Gen. Robert E. Lee.

As a trusted informant for Longstreet, Harrison set out on a mission to locate Union forces. On June 28, 1863, he reported to Longstreet that not only were troops positioned near Frederick, Md., but Union Gen. George Meade had replaced Joseph Hooker as commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac.

"Every good account of the campaign will mention Henry Harrison," said Dr. James A. Ramage, a renowned Civil War scholar and Regents Professor of History at Northern Kentucky University. "He definitely had a role in the coming of the battle."

After Harrison delivered the news of the whereabouts of enemy forces, Lee commanded his troops, which were spread out across parts of Pennsylvania, to regroup near Cashtown and Gettysburg.

It was clear a battle was imminent, but the location had yet to be determined. Lee was pushing toward Harrisburg, the state's capital, not Gettysburg. Based solely on Harrison's information, Gen. Lee changed his course of action and, beginning July 1, Confederate forces were thrust into one of the gravest three days in American history.

Not much was known about his life until a photo of Harrison in his Confederate uniform was found.



Henry Harrison as depicted by an actor in the 1993 film "Gettysburg".

Family members were put in contact with Civil War historian James O. Hall, who discovered Harrison's true identity in 1986. Hall traced Harrison to Cincinnati around the turn of the century. That's when Bernie Becker, Harrison's great-grandson, took over the hunt

"We were all unaware," said Becker, 80, of Monrovia, Md., who has

devoted years to researching his great-grandfather. "Even my

grandmother never knew of his role in the Civil War." Months after the Battle of Gettysburg, Harrison wed Laura Broders in Washington, D.C., then honeymooned in New York, all the while continuing his spy missions for the Confederacy.

In 1865, Harrison, his wife and daughter moved to Mexico. The next year he departed to prospect for gold in Montana, leaving behind his family. His wife was pregnant with her second child, Becker's grandmother, Rena.

The family lost contact while Harrison was in Montana, and he was presumed dead. His wife remarried, ultimately bearing 10 children. Harrison wouldn't turn up until 25 years later in Cincinnati.

"You can only speculate what he was doing because he's a continuous roamer," Becker said. "... He was a scoundrel since he left his family."

In 1900, Harrison attempted unsuccessfully to reconnect with his family in Annandale, Va. Becker said he might have been financially motivated and inquired about his daughter. However, they never met, though they did exchange letters.

Harrison returned to Cincinnati and worked as a detective. In 1912, he moved to Covington. At age 87, Harrison married his 61-year-old caretaker. He died four years later, in 1923.

Harrison was thought to have gone to a pauper's grave until Becker's investigation led him to the unmarked plot at Highland Cemetery. Becker applied for and was granted a grave marker through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. On May 18, 2003, a crowd gathered for a dedication ceremony. An 80-year-old mystery had been solved, as the headstone was put in place identifying the spy with a crucial role in the Civil War.