

The Legend of Stonewall Jackson's Arm

By Chris Mackowski

"You have lost your left arm, but I have lost my right," said General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, in a message to his "right-hand," Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson.



Jackson had been accidentally wounded in the "dark, close wood" west of Chancellorsville, the victim of friendly fire as he was out in front of the Confederate line doing reconnaissance in preparation for a night attack. He was hit three times—one bullet lodged under the skin of his right hand, another went in by his left elbow and came out near his right wrist, and the third hit him three inches below the left shoulder.

The wound had necessitated the amputation of Jackson's left arm. As surgeons Hunter Holmes McGuire and Harvey Black prepared their work and administered the chloroform, Jackson said, "What an infinite blessing" as he faded into stupor, repeating that last word—"blessing...blessing ...blessing"—as he slipped away. Later, he would claim that he heard "the most beautiful music" while under the anesthesia's effects. It was the sound of the bone saw cutting through his arm.

"Any victory is dearly bought that deprives us of the services of General Jackson," Lee said when he got news of the accident. In a dispatch to Jackson, he wrote that he

could not express his regrets enough. "Could I have directed events, I should have chosen for the good of the country to have been disabled in your stead," Lee wrote. It was the morning of Sunday, May 3rd, 1863, and Lee was still mopping up the battlefield. His Confederates had defeated a Union army that outnumbered them almost three to one. The Union commander, Major General Joseph Hooker-known as "Fighting Joe"- had lost his "fight" and had pulled his beleaguered army into a defensive position to protect its route of retreat back north across the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers.

Lee still feared mischief from the Union army, cornered and threatened as it was. He sent word that Jackson should be moved to the rear, to safety.

"If the enemy does come, I am not afraid of them," responded Jackson, unconcerned about possible capture. "I have always been kind to their wounded, and I am sure they will be kind to me."

Lee would have none of it. Under the general's orders, Dr. McGuire began preparations to evacuate Jackson to the Confederate rail depot at Guiney Station, twenty-seven miles away. From there, a train would take Jackson to Richmond, well away from the battlefield, where he could convalesce in peace and quiet.



As preparations got underway, Jackson's chaplain, the Reverend Beverly Tucker Lacy, stopped to visit his commander. Lacy and Jackson had formed a close bond during their six months of service together. The two had known each other in Lexington before the war, although for the four years prior to the conflict, Lacy had been the pastor for the Presbyterian congregation in Frankfort, Kentucky. In 1862, he had moved to Fredericksburg, then to Orange Court House, where he served wounded soldiers. In January of 1863, Jackson asked Lacy to oversee the chaplain service of the entire Second Corps.

Lacy was ideally suited for the position. Born in 1819 to a clergyman father in Prince Edward County, Virginia, Lacy eventually went on to Washington College and Union Theological Society. Mary Anna, Jackson's wife, called him a true "spiritual comforter."

Lacy brought with him to the field hospital the message from General Lee. "Give General Jackson my affectionate regards," Lee had said. "Tell him to get well and come back to me as soon as he can."

The chaplain could scarcely deliver the message, though. On seeing Jackson so diminished, Lacy broke into tears. "Oh, General," he wailed, "What a calamity!" Jackson, it turned out, had to provide succor to his chaplain rather than the other way around.

Once consoled, Lacy passed on the message he'd brought from Lee. Lacy and Jackson exchanged words of their own, too, and surely they prayed together, as devout as Jackson was. Finally, Lacy took his leave.

Outside the tent, he spotted a small bundle, swaddled in cloth. It was Jackson's left arm. After the amputation, doctors had wrapped it up and set it outside where it awaited burial along with hundreds of other amputated limbs that sat in piles around the Wilderness field hospital. Such limbs were routinely buried in mass, unmarked graves.

Lacy didn't think Jackson's arm deserved such an ignoble end-so he took it. In one of the great coincidences of the war, Lacy's brother, James Horace Lacy-once called "the most dangerous man in the Confederacy" because of the intensity of his fire-breathing views as a Secessionist- owned a plantation, called Ellwood, that sat just a mile from where the field hospital had been established. Reverend Lacy set out

across the field to his brother's house and, there, buried Stonewall Jackson's arm in the family cemetery.



Jackson himself would make it as far as Guiney Station but no farther. In another of the war's ironic coincidences, Jackson's old roommate from their bygone days together at West Point, George Stoneman, now serving as a Union cavalry commander, had torn up the train tracks close to Richmond. Jackson couldn't be transported and so, instead, he holed up in a small plantation office building.

There, as he began to recover from his wounds, doctors discovered that something else was wrong. Jackson had pneumonia – severe pneumonia.

In fact, he'd been sick before the battle even started, but the trauma of his wounding and subsequent amputation had hidden the illness.

By Sunday, May 10—just six days after arriving at Guiney Station—Jackson's condition had deteriorated so dramatically that doctors knew he would not survive the day. Doctors offered him medication to ease his discomfort, but he declined, saying he wanted to stay as coherent as possible until the very end. But throughout the day, he slipped in and out of consciousness, in and out of delirium. In the middle of the afternoon, he started shouting out battle orders: "Send in A.P. Hill. Get Major Hawkes—send Major Hawkes...!"

And then he stopped, midsentence. His whole body relaxed, and a peaceful expression came over his face. Dr. McGuire later described it as "a smile of ineffable sweetness." And very calmly, he said "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees." And then he died. It was 3:15 p.m.

Jackson's wife, Mary Anna, who had been summoned from Richmond, was on hand for those last few days. On the evening of May tenth, as Jackson's staff members prepared the general's body for transport, first to Richmond for display, then to the Jackson's home town of Lexington for burial, they asked Mary Anna if she wanted them to retrieve her husband's amputated arm from the Lacy family cemetery. They wanted to know if she wanted the arm to be buried with the rest of her husband's remains. She asked if it received a Christiana burial and, assured that it had, decided to let the arm rest where it was.

Stonewall Jackson had, by that time, achieved nearly legendary status through the South AND North. He had earned a famous sobriquet at the First Battle of Manassas, in July of 1861, when his men held a position on Henry Hill even as the rest of the Confederate line crumbled around them. As legend has it, one of his fellow officers cried, "Look, there stands Jackson like a stone wall. Let us resolve to die here and we shall conquer!"

The Confederates rallied around Jackson, the line held, the tide turned. In the following spring, in 1862, Jackson marched his men hundreds of miles up and down the Shenandoah Valley, outmaneuvering and outfighting three separate Union armies that outnumbered his men three to one. The string of victories, which would become known as Jackson's Valley Campaign, came at a time when the South suffered defeats on almost every other front, making Jackson's wins in the Valley all the more important because of the rallying point they provided. His successes there made him, quite literally, the most famous Confederate in the world.

After that, he teamed up with Lee to form what became known as "the model partnership" – Lee being the strategist and Jackson the tactician. Over fifteen months, they would string together an unprecedented record of victories that made the Confederate army feel invincible.

Even at Chancellorsville, where he was accidentally wounded by his own men, Jackson had executed a secret maneuver that snaked along thirteen miles of road to put 28-thousand men on the unsuspecting flank of "Fighting Joe" Hooker's army. The subsequent attack rolled up the Union line like "a wet blanket," said one Union soldier. After the assault lost its steam, and Jackson looked for an opportunity to jump-start it, calamity struck. Jackson was shot down at the very pinnacle of achievement.

It's unsurprising, then, that a man of such legendary stature would continue to garner attention. And indeed, to this day, Jackson devotees pilgrimage to the small building where he died, now called the Stonewall Jackson Shrine, administered by Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park.

But you would be surprised by the number of people who also show up at the Park to see "The Arm."

A current Google search for "Stonewall Jackson's arm" will show you 5-hundred 55-thousand hits. The arm also shows up frequently as a sidebar or footnote in Civil War books and travel guides to Americana's roadside attractions: marvel at the world's largest ball of twine...see "the Paul Bunyon statue" ...visit Stonewall Jackson's arm. Postcards featuring the arm's granite marker remain among the best sellers in the Park's bookstore. Every few years, a newspaper reporter will mention it in a story. A November 2011 article in the Fredericksburg *Free Lance-Star* even suggested a sign along Interstate 95 promoting "the burial site of Stonewall Jackson's arm" as a way to attract the attention of passing tourists.

If that sounds odd, first consider the monument erected to Benedict Arnold's amputated leg at the Saratoga Battlefield. Arnold was still serving the American cause when the battle took place in 1777. Leading a heroic charge against British forces, Arnold sustained multiple bullet wounds in his left leg, which was then crushed under his horse, necessitating amputation. To commemorate Arnold's action, which changed the course of battle, a monument of a bas-relief boot was erected on the battlefield in 1887. Because Arnold later turned turncoat in the war, the monument mentions only "the most brilliant soldier" without mentioning Arnold by actual name.

Or consider the leg still displayed at the museum of the Illinois National Guard-the artificial leg, made of cork, that had once belonged to Mexican dictator Santa Anna. The 4th Illinois Infantry captured the leg from Santa Anna during the Battle of Cerro Gordo during the Mexican War.

Union Major General Dan Sickles also lost a leg, years after that, in the American Civil War, at the battle of Gettysburg. Sickles had his leg nearly torn off by a cannon ball on the second day of the fight. As he was carried from the field, a cigar clamped jauntily between his teeth in a show of bravado, he ordered the leg carried off with him. He had it preserved, and put on display at the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D.C. He visited it every year on the anniversary of the battle.

So, that Jackson's arm gets so much attention isn't without precedent. Jackson seems like an especially likely candidate for that kind of attention, though. In life-and especially in death-his personal quirks seem legendary. He reportedly had a zest for fresh lemons (although he loved fresh fruit of all kinds). He refused to eat pepper because he claimed it made him lose all strength in his left leg. He was so pious he refused to write a letter toward the end of the week for fear it would travel through the postal service on the Sabbath. He sat ramrod straight in chairs, and he sometimes raised his hand over his head in order to keep his body in alignment. In fact, he got a fingertip shot off at the First Battle of Manassas doing that. Amidst that litany of eccentricities, which have all taken on lives of their own, Jackson's amputated arm seems to be just one more idiosyncratic story.



Every month, hundreds of visitors travel down the long gravel driveway from state route 20 to Ellwood, and park their cars, and walk down the lane, through the rows of boxwood, to the Lacy family cemetery, which sits out in the middle of a corn field. A wooden, shin-high ellipsis of fence encircles an area a little smaller than a typical classroom, with several cedar trees casting shade from one of the loci of the ellipsis. A granite marker sits at the other. It says: "Arm of Stonewall Jackson May 3, 1863"- the day the arm was buried.

Fifteen people, most of them members of Lacy's family, rest in peace in the family cemetery, but only Jackson's arm has a marker. It was placed there in 1903 by a

former member of Jackson's staff, James Power Smith-who had, by that time, actually married into the Lacy family.

Smith had married Agnes Lacy, James Horace's oldest daughter, and had gone on to a successful career as a Presbyterian minister for a church on the corner of Princess Anne and George streets in Fredericksburg. Smith always kept an eye on the grave of his beloved commander's arm. In 1903, Smith placed ten granite markers at various points on the area's battlefields, mostly to commemorate Confederate achievements. However, he erected one of the monuments in the Lacy family cemetery to mark the burial location of his fallen commander's arm.

But the curious public had begun stopping by long before that-before the ground over the grave had even settled. Among the first visitors were Jackson's old adversaries, members of the Army of the Potomac, who tromped through the area as part of the Mine Run campaign just after Thanksgiving in 1863. Proximity to Jackson's arm must surely have reminded Federals of Jackson's absence-something they must certainly have been thankful for.

"I rejoice at Stonewall Jackson's death as a gain to our cause," said Union Brig. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren shortly after Jackson had passed away and, at the time of the Mine Run campaign, temporarily in command of the II Corps, "and yet in my soldier's heart I cannot but see him the best soldier of all this war, and grieve at his untimely death."

Warren would be with the Union army when it returned to Ellwood the following spring, this time in command of the V Corps. On May 6, 1864-just a year after the amputated arm had been buried and in the midst of the Battle of the Wilderness, which swirled wildly around Ellwood-Colonel Charles Phelps of the 7th Maryland noted in his diary that several men had "dug up" Jackson's arm and then reburied it. The next day, New York engineer Wesley Brainerd visited the site.

His grave was situated in the heart of the Wilderness on a knoll, unmarked by stone or board. It was hard to realize, as I stood beside that lonely grave, that the little mound of earth before me hid from view all that was mortal of the man whose great deeds had filled the world with wonder and amazement.... I lingered for a long time at the grave of that wonderful and eccentric man. Nor could I leave the spot without having experienced those peculiar feelings of awe and respect for the memory of the genius which, though that of an enemy, possessed the faculty which inspired his

Soldiers with a religious enthusiasm, resulting in most wonderful victories and made his name a terror to ourselves.

Brainerd incorrectly believed that Jackson's entire remains had been buried there, not just the arm. He may have gotten that impression from two fresh graves in the cemetery, those of Confederate Captain Keith Boswell, an engineer on Jackson's staff who had been killed by the same volley that had wounded Jackson, and Major Joshua Stover of the 10th Virginia.

Note that Brainerd mentions the arm's "lonely grave" was "unmarked by stone or board." The first known marker, then, was Smith's granite block in 1903.



The most famous supposed exhumation came in 1921. The United States Marines, under the command of Major General Smedley Butler, came to the former Wilderness battlefield to conduct "the most gigantic mimic war and maneuvers ever staged." President Harding attended as a spectator, as did Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt.

While there, Harding and his wife stayed in a large canvas tent near the main house. Mrs. Harding told a reporter that she had "sort of a creepy feeling" once she discovered Jackson's arm buried so close to where she was staying. "But I think I'd like to [visit] it anyhow," she decided. Several newspapers carried accounts, although some incorrectly reported on a visit to the *right-rather* than the left-arm.

By that point, the Lacy family had sold Ellwood to a local lawyer, Hugh Evander Willis. "He and my great-grandmother, Lucy, managed Ellwood for their son, my great-uncle Hugh, from 1910 until 1931," says Evander's great-granddaughter, Carolyn Elstner, who works with a local Friends group to help manage the Ellwood property for the National Park Service, which acquired it in 1977.

"[I]t was my great-grandfather who told Butler about Jackson's arm being buried in the family cemetery," Elstner says, "and that it was under a stone erected by James Power Smith."

"Nonsense," Butler reportedly replied. "Oh yes," Willis said. "Everyone knows it." "Bosh!" said Butler. "I'll take a squadron of Marines and dig up that spot to prove you wrong."

According to Elstner, her great-grandfather "was dumbfounded at this brash evasion of Virginia law but was intrigued and watched. And *there* was the arm bone a few feet down.

"I've heard 'in a box' or 'wrapped,'" Elstner told me. "I don't know which, if either, is correct. Butler ordered it be re-buried and a bronze plaque placed on the stone—a tribute to Jackson from the U.S. Marine Corps.¹¹

As the story has been retold over the years, the arm was first placed in a metal box—perhaps an ammunition canister before reburial. Some stories have it that the burial took place with full military honors, including a twenty-one gun salute. Before they left, the Marines also cleaned up the cemetery, which had become quite overgrown with weeds.

Acting on the intelligence from those stories, later efforts by the Park Service to use a metal detector to find the arm in its metal box have turned up nothing.

"Beyond family tradition, there is no evidence that Smedley Butler had the arm dug up and reburied," National Park Historian Eric Mink has written.

"Certainly...archeology [done in 1998] supports the likelihood this never happened—there was simply no evidence of the digging that would have attended Butler's investigation in the area around the monument. Moreover, it strikes [me] that the idea of a U.S. military officer disturbing the remains of a fallen soldier seems to run against the grain of military culture and honor."

But perhaps not. After all, Butler is the man who painted the outline of a giant ship on the ground here and then marched his Marines—in full gear—down here to bomb it.

He is also the man who, as one of the most decorated soldiers in American military history, later decried war as “a racket” and became a pacifist. So his views were, to say the least, complicated.

Carolyn Elstner isn't so sure, either. One summer day, she says, years after the war games, “a little old man” drove into Ellwood and “gently” asked Elstner's father-by then an adult, and owner of the farm-if he and his wife could see the spot where the arm of Jackson had been buried. “When the man got out of his car, he introduced himself as General Butler, now retired,” Elstner says. “I really think the re-visit is what gives merit to the story,” she adds. “It may not have happened exactly as above, but I don't think my great-grandfather made it up.”

According to at least one subsequent account, Butler “supposedly made a full report of the incident,” but Park Service historians have not found anything written by Butler or anyone else. The 1998 archeological work, which included the use of metal detectors, didn't turn up anything, either.



But there *is*, in the park's curatorial collection, a five-by-eight bronze plaque from the U. S. Marines, which had long been affixed to the marker until erosion chipped it away.

The bronze plaque represents a complicating factor. No records exist of when the plaque was actually affixed to the monument, although legend suggests that it happened during the Marines' exercises. Likewise, no record exists of when the plaque fell off the monument. It was donated to the Park Service by the Willis family

sometime after it fell off but before the Park acquired the property. No record exists in the accession files of the Park's curatorial collection that pinpoints an exact date. If Butler hadn't known about the arm, then why did the Marines create a customized bronze plaque? Was it prepared ahead of time and brought with them on their excursion, or was it created and installed after the fact-after they had dug it up to confirm it was there? If so, why would they have left the plaque if they had dug up the site and hadn't actually found anything?

Whether the monument even marks the arm's exact spot remains a mystery and conundrum. "We have no idea whether Smith intended to mark the grave itself, or if he intended simply to commemorate the burial by putting a memorial in the family cemetery generally," Mink says. "The idea that the Smith marker indicates the precise location of the arm is pure presumption." Other markers Smith installed are, as the NPS points out, "quite approximate in their location."

It could be, perhaps, that all the digging in the cemetery, over time, has confounded the site to the point that the arm cannot be located. Or perhaps the arm has merely succumbed to age and has deteriorated- although others contend that plenty of other bones have survived for 150 years, so why would Jackson's arm disintegrate any faster?

So, in all likelihood, the arm *is there-somewhere*.

But more importantly, Stonewall Jackson's arm is alive and well in memory and in legend.

Chris Mackowski

PO Box 23

St. Bonaventure, NY 14778

cmackows@sbu.edu<http://emergingcivilwar.com/>

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