

# Fort Benning's Namesake:

## *A Re-examination of General Henry L. Benning*

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In celebration of Fort Benning's centennial, it is perhaps instructive to re-examine the Civil War exploits of its namesake, General Henry L. Benning. Unlike some of his fire-eating colleagues who led the South into the Civil War, Henry L. Benning put his money — and his life — where his mouth was.

A successful lawyer from Columbus, GA, who later won election as associate justice of the Georgia Supreme Court in the decade before the war, Benning became an outspoken advocate for states' rights and one of the leaders of Georgia's secessionist movement. Soon after the start of the war, Benning raised the 17th Regiment of Georgia Volunteers and spent most of the war in General James Longstreet's First Corps of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, participating in all of that Army's major campaigns except the Battle of Chancellorsville. He also traveled with the portion of Longstreet's corps sent to reinforce Braxton Bragg's Army of the Tennessee in the Battle of Chickamauga. Much of Benning's Civil War correspondence is contained in the Benning/Jones Collection in the Schwob Library Archives at Columbus State University (CSU) in Columbus.<sup>1</sup> The materials offer a fascinating insight into Benning's impressive military career on the front lines of some of the most intense fighting of the Civil War; they also provide a rare perspective of some of his memorable arguments with the Confederate War Department over states' rights issues and periodic efforts to defend his honor against ill-informed attacks on his personal reputation.<sup>2</sup>

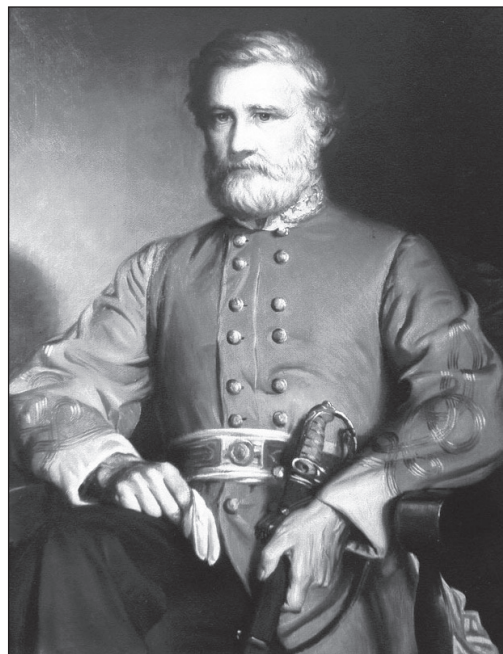
Benning's Confederate service officially began with his appointment to the rank of colonel in the Georgia militia on 17 August 1861, a copy of which, signed by Governor Joseph E. Brown, is included in the collection. After the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861, the creation of militia units at the state level was accelerated. The 17th Regiment of Georgia Volunteers which Benning headed was formed with 10 companies from Muscogee and five other counties. As its commander, Benning supervised its equipping (initially with "smoothbore muskets")

and movement from Georgia to northern Virginia.<sup>3</sup> Along with the 1st

(later assigned to Anderson's Brigade), 2nd, 15th, and 20th Regiments of Georgia Volunteers, the 17th became part of Brigadier General Robert Toombs' brigade in Major General David Jones' division of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>4</sup>

Benning and the 17th Regiment spent the fall and winter months of 1861-1862 establishing camps, adjusting to the rigors of military life, drilling, and preparing for the upcoming spring campaign. This proved to be more trying than one might assume. In his book *General Henry Lewis Benning, This Was a Man: A Biography of Georgia's Supreme Court Justice and Confederate General*, J. David Dameron points out that the conditions of that first winter significantly reduced the ranks of Toombs' brigade, which boasted an initial strength of around 4,000 soldiers; "by the close of 1861, the ranks of the brigade were thinned by the loss of 595 men, due to illness, desertions, and disabilities." Between 1861 and 1865, losses due to disease and illness amounted to 1,002, with pneumonia and typhoid being the major causes, followed by smallpox and measles. Overall losses from all causes were staggering; the brigade had mustered with close to 4,300 men in August 1861, and by 9 April 1865 only 812 soldiers remained on the field.<sup>5</sup>

During the spring and summer of 1862, Benning spent more time engaged in political battles than military ones. He corresponded extensively with the Confederate Secretary of War, G.W. Randolph, over the issue of how promotions were to be handled for company-grade officers in Benning's regiment. At stake was the tradition of electing officers in militia units like Benning's 17th Regiment, which had been in force since the unit's creation, versus the assertion by the Confederate government that officers should be officially promoted and assigned by the government. As an ardent state's rights advocate, Benning steadfastly supported the



electoral procedures. First Lieutenant Henry McCauley served as second in command of Company F in the 17th Regiment, a unit that had been mustered out of Columbus, and thus he was well known to Colonel Benning. Benning felt that McCauley, a tombstone merchant in his pre-war days, was not qualified to take command of the company after the resignation of the elected commander. In fact, the men in the company elected another officer to be the company commander. McCauley refused to accept the decision and protested directly to Randolph. Benning had him arrested and jailed for insubordination. In the ensuing interchange of letters, Randolph provided McCauley with an official promotion to captain and directed Benning to reinstate McCauley as the company commander. In the end, McCauley resigned in frustration at Benning's refusal to give him an official hearing, and he returned to Columbus to resume his pre-war occupation. Randolph's order reinstating McCauley could not be executed since he was already gone by the time it was received.<sup>6</sup> Despite at one point writing an impassioned, 22-page argument of his point, Benning in the end discreetly let the matter die.<sup>7</sup>

As this disagreement was playing out, the war began to assume a new intensity, and Benning soon found himself in the center of some of the fiercest action. George McClellan had begun his Peninsula Campaign, and Toombs' brigade, as part of Jones' division, participated in the Confederate attempt to halt McClellan's advance on Richmond. When the Confederate commander, Joseph E. Johnston, was wounded midway in the campaign, authorities appointed Robert E. Lee to replace him. An army reorganization followed, with Toombs' brigade and Jones' division becoming part of Major General John Magruder's corps in the renamed Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. At the Battle of Seven Pines, which took place on 1 June 1862, Toombs' brigade arrived too late to participate in the fighting, but later in the month (27 June) at Garnett's Farm, the brigade (including Benning's regiment) received its baptism of fire. Although Benning's original brief battle report of the engagement is not in the CSU collection, a copy of the report that appeared in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* is included.<sup>8</sup> A few days later (30 June - 1 July), Toombs' brigade and Jones' division were part of Lee's unsuccessful and costly attempt to crush McClellan's army at the Battle of Malvern Hill. Once again, Benning's original handwritten draft of his regiment's action in the battle is not in the collection, but a copy of the published version which appeared in *The War of the Rebellion* series is included.

With McClellan's retreat from the peninsula, Lee once again reorganized the Army of Northern Virginia, and Jones' division became part of James Longstreet's newly formed First Corps. Benning, as senior regimental commander in Toombs' brigade, was appointed its interim commander after Longstreet had a falling out with Toombs.<sup>9</sup> Soon after, Longstreet's First Corps

shifted north to link up with Jackson, crossing the Rapidan River on 18 August and the Rappahannock River on 26 August. On 28 August, following Jackson's corps through Thoroughfare Gap on the way to Manassas Junction, a Union force suddenly appeared to cut Longstreet's corps off from Jackson's corps. Toombs' brigade, led by Benning, was ordered to clear the heights on the right side of the gap, which it did by beating the Union force in a race to the top of the ridge. General Anderson's brigade, including the 1st Regiment of Georgia Volunteers, attacked up the other side of the gap. By dark, the Union attempt to block the gap had been repulsed, and the remainder of Longstreet's corps moved through the gap unmolested (again, Benning's original report is not in the collection, but the *War of the Rebellion* series version is included).

On 29 August, General Pope's Army of Virginia engaged Jackson's corps. Thinking that the Confederates were retreating westward, Pope was determined to cut them off. However, when Longstreet's corps appeared on his flank the next day, Pope had little choice but to turn and fight what became known as the Second Battle of Manassas. With Toombs still under arrest, Benning remained in command of the brigade and played a decisive role in Longstreet's fight on the Confederate left wing. The brigade took significant casualties, reported at 37 killed and another 294 wounded.<sup>10</sup>

The fall of 1862 proved to be a very busy time for Benning and the Army of Northern Virginia. As a newly minted (although not officially promoted) brigade commander, Benning was catching up on his official correspondence. He produced reports of Second Manassas and the Battle of Sharpsburg (Antietam) during this period; handwritten drafts of both are included in the CSU collection. At Sharpsburg, General Toombs, who by this time had been reinstated, was given command of a provisional division, which included Benning's brigade. With the 15th and 17th regiments defending Lee's supply trains, Benning and his two remaining regiments, the 2nd and the 20th, were assigned to defend the lower bridge across Antietam Creek, known forever after as "Burnside's Bridge." On 17 September, after a morning assault on the Confederate left had been repulsed, an attack on the right commenced. Benning's two regiments of around 350 officers and men faced the entire Union IX Corps of General Ambrose Burnside — around 13,000 strong. With the Union soldiers attempting to cross the narrow lower bridge, Benning's two regiments held out against five successive assaults, not yielding until they began to run out of ammunition. Ordering a withdrawal, Benning met the 15th and 17th regiments at the top of the hill, hastening to his rescue. Ultimately, A.P. Hill's division relieved Toombs' division and received the lion's share of credit for saving the day.<sup>11</sup> However, the fight by Toombs' division was not over; Toombs had observed some of Burnside's units threatening the town of Sharpsburg itself and ordered his division to halt the envelopment of the town. In a letter to E.P.





Photos courtesy of author

*During the Battle of Antietam, Benning's regiments were assigned to defend Burnside's Bridge. The regiments held against five successive assaults but eventually had to withdraw.*

Alexander after the war, Benning remarked: "...A.P. Hill's troops came up before night, but none of them had much part in the fight; none had any part in first breaking the line [of advancing Union forces on Sharpsburg]. I give the above detail for the benefit of General Toombs as I have understood the credit of retaking Sharpsburg was [and] perhaps is claimed for A.P. Hill. Toombs is the man, however..."<sup>12</sup> It was at Sharpsburg that Benning's son, Seaborn, was wounded for the first time as he fought with the 1st Regiment in Anderson's brigade. Toombs himself was wounded in the hand later in the evening. After a convalescence in Georgia, Toombs became frustrated in his quest for promotion to major general and resigned, thus giving Benning his opportunity for permanent brigade command.<sup>13</sup>

Benning would face Burnside again in December 1862 at Fredericksburg. By this time, Burnside had replaced McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac and had moved his army to try to outflank Lee at Fredericksburg. High water on the Rappahannock River and lack of pontoon bridging delayed his advance, allowing Lee's army plenty of time to dig in to contest the crossing. The result was a decisive victory for the Confederate forces on 13 December. Toombs' brigade, led by Benning, was in the center of the rebel position in the second line of defense on the heights overlooking the town. Aside from some casualties from stray artillery fire, the brigade escaped relatively unscathed.<sup>14</sup>

During the winter fighting hiatus which followed, Benning was promoted to brigadier general (the actual promotion order was dated 23 April 1863 but with an effective date of rank of 17 January).<sup>15</sup> He took the field again in February

of 1863 as part of Longstreet's move to the Virginia Tidewater region to attempt to retake the city of Suffolk. Pausing in Richmond for close to a month awaiting favorable weather, the corps recommenced its move on 29 March and arrived in the vicinity of Suffolk in mid-April. Benning communicated extensively with Longstreet and his staff during this Tidewater campaign, requisitioning supplies from a largely Unionist populace along the border of North Carolina. Unionist sympathizers, referred to as "Buffaloes" in Benning's correspondence, were to be treated civilly as long as they were cooperative.<sup>16</sup> Benning's brigade was assigned the task of escorting and protecting the corps supply trains, an undertaking of special concern to Longstreet and which elicited several directives personally written and signed by Longstreet himself. On 3 May, Longstreet and his corps were directed to rejoin Lee's army but missed the Battle of Chancellorsville.

Benning took part in some of the fiercest fighting at the Battle of Gettysburg two months later. Benning's brigade was part of John B. Hood's division, which occupied the far right of the rebel line on the second day of the battle, 2 July. Although in the second echelon of the attack against Cemetery Ridge, Benning's brigade decisively engaged Union forces around Houck's Ridge and Devil's Den. In the heavy fighting in and around Houck's Ridge, two regiments of Benning's troops reinforced Brigadier General Jerome Robertson's Texas Brigade, which was under heavy artillery and sharpshooter fire from Little Round Top, while his other two regiments fought a ferocious battle in the boulder-strewn vicinity of Devil's Den, assisting the left-most regiment of Alabamians from Brigadier General Evander Law's brigade. The attack on Houck's Ridge resulted in the capture of three Union artillery pieces and at least 100 prisoners — the combined efforts of both Robertson's and Benning's brigades, although the Texan's received the credit.<sup>17</sup> Benning's losses were heavy on 2 July — reportedly around 400. On 3 July, after reinforcing their positions overnight, the brigade spent much of the day standing its ground while the main attack focused on the center of the Union position (Pickett's Charge). However, late in the afternoon, a series of confusing messages from General McLaws, on Benning's left, and General Law, on Benning's right, led him to send one regiment (the 15th) to a forward position now exposed on both flanks as the Confederate forces began to withdraw. Receiving a second order from General Law clarifying the first, Benning realized that his entire brigade was in danger of being outflanked, but by that time the 15th Regiment was already in that situation. Benning successfully extracted both, but the 15th Regiment





torn to pieces, and I haven't a man left." Longstreet allegedly replied, calmly telling Benning: "General, look about you. You are not so badly hurt. I know you will find at least one man, and with him on his feet report your brigade to me, and you shall have a place in the fighting line."<sup>22</sup> It is a tribute to both men that Benning regained his equanimity, Longstreet took Benning's lapse in stride, and both continued the fight.

Shortly after the Battle of Chickamauga, Benning accompanied Longstreet's corps into eastern Tennessee to prevent General Burnside from linking up with the Union forces in Chattanooga. Later, when this effort proved untenable, Longstreet moved his force to winter quarters near Bristol, TN. The winter was brutal — the mountains of east Tennessee were frigid, the region was sparsely populated, the populace was heavily Unionist, and the Confederate forces were isolated and poorly supplied. Benning tried to get a furlough to visit his family during this time (his first in more than two years), but it was not approved. Finally, Longstreet's corps received orders to rejoin Lee's army in Virginia, and it did so on 22 April 1864.<sup>23</sup>

The reunion occurred just as General Ulysses S. Grant prepared to engage and destroy Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The Battle of the Wilderness commenced on 4 May 1864. The two-day battle — similar to Chickamauga for its heavily forested terrain and confused nature — proved expensive for both sides. Eerily similar to Chancellorsville a year earlier when General Stonewall Jackson had been mortally wounded by his own pickets, Longstreet and General Micah Jenkins (now commanding Hood's old division) were both shot by their own men in the confusion, resulting in the death of Jenkins and the serious wounding of Longstreet. In the fierce fighting, Benning was also wounded when a Union shot shattered his shoulder.<sup>24</sup> He finally received a furlough to return to Columbus to recover.<sup>25</sup>

Benning returned to the brigade in November 1864, by which time the brigade was busily involved in defending the defensive works around Petersburg in a stalemate that had turned into a lengthy siege. The brigade's role had settled into a routine of six days on the line, followed by two days of rest. Most of the casualties suffered in the trenches were the result of enemy sharpshooters, which the brigade leaders blamed on the troops themselves for "carelessness."<sup>26</sup> Petersburg fell in April of 1865, resulting in a chaotic retreat by the Army of

Northern Virginia which ended in its surrender at Appomattox. Benning did not submit any official report of the brigade's actions. However, he did write in his postwar letter to E.P. Alexander that it was during the retreat from Petersburg that the wagon containing his trunk of official correspondence was lost. He also recounted the brigade's activities in these final days, leapfrogging from position to position covering the retreat of Lee's army. Benning wrote: "At Appomattox Courthouse the division was in the rear with the enemy close up. Its organization was perfect and it was not at all demoralized. I saw many men with tears streaming from their eyes when it was known that Lee had surrendered. They gathered in groups & debated the question whether we should not cut our way out & escape. Most of them were in favor of the attempt. They only waited for a word from me, but I would not give it. On the contrary, I urged them to acquiesce."<sup>27</sup>

Researchers will find most of Benning's Civil War papers in remarkably good condition, and his cursive handwriting legible and fairly easy to decipher. What is missing in most cases is Benning's personal correspondence. Those pieces which do exist are in other collections.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, what is contained in the CSU collection offers some fascinating insights into the Civil War career of Henry L. Benning. Anyone interested in that phase of Benning's life would do well to access the collection in Columbus.

After the war, Benning returned to Columbus and reestablished his law practice, but his final years were marred by tragedy and disappointment. His wife, Mary, who had managed the household during his wartime absence, died in June 1868, leaving him to raise five daughters, his sister-in-law with her two children, his sister's two children, as well as two former slave families who had stayed on as domestics and laborers after the war. His close friend and political confidante, Howell Cobb, died in October 1868. In 1873, he ran for the open Senate seat from Georgia, but his states' rights rhetoric was outdated, and the election went to John B. Gordon, another military standout of stellar reputation. His son, Seaborn Jones Benning, who had been wounded twice during the war, never recovered from his injuries and died in December 1874 at the age of 31. On 9 July 1875, while juggling several court cases, he collapsed while on the way to court and died the next day. The cause was reported to be apoplexy, which today



*Henry Lewis Benning, nicknamed "Old Rock," died on 10 July 1875 and was buried in Linwood Cemetery in Columbus, GA.*



would be called a massive stroke. He was 61 years old.<sup>29</sup>

While Fort Benning continues to excel as the schoolhouse for future leaders in the Infantry and Armor/Cavalry branches, Benning's own exploits as a military leader deserve periodic re-examination and emphasis. As the foregoing account suggests, Benning was a quick study as a combat leader of exceptional steadiness and skill, exhibited a remarkable ability to survive even as he led from the front during four years of war, and perhaps most impressive, won the enduring admiration and respect from his men who gave him the nickname on his tombstone — "Old Rock."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Since Benning was in practice with Seaborn Jones, a well-known lawyer, entrepreneur, and congressmen as well as one of the founders of the city of Columbus (and also Benning's father-in-law), the CSU collection contains their combined correspondence — most of which consists of legal and financial documents from their pre-war legal practice.

<sup>2</sup> While the collection contains original, handwritten drafts of most of the battle reports submitted by Benning and drafts of many pieces of Benning's military correspondence, the collection is far from complete. As he explained in a letter after the war, the trunk containing his official military correspondence was lost in the chaos of the retreat from Petersburg in April 1865. What remains is nonetheless informative as an insight into Benning's military service. Researchers will find it helpful to use as companion resources to J. David Dameron's *General Henry Lewis Benning, This Was a Man: A Biography of Georgia's Supreme Court Justice and Confederate General* (Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing Company, 2000) and, by the same author, *Benning's Brigade, Volume 2: A History and Roster of the Second, Seventeenth, and Twentieth Georgia Volunteer Infantry Regiments* (Westminster: Heritage Books, 2011), both of which are available in the CSU archives. These sources provide much of the context and perspective lacking in the correspondence itself.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to E.P. Alexander, undated, Benning/Jones Collection, CSU archives, Box 4, Folder 18, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Dameron, *General Henry Lewis Benning*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 114-117.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 122-123.

<sup>7</sup> The correspondence relating to the McCauley Affair is dated 15 May 1862 through 25 July 1862 in Folder 15 of the CSU archives. Howell Cobb, Benning's college classmate and lifelong friend, advised him that "courtesy and prudence" would win the day with Randolph, advice that Benning evidently followed (Letter from Howell Cobb to Benning, 16 July 1862, Folder 15).

<sup>8</sup> *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I-IV (1880-1901).

<sup>9</sup> On the move to link up with Jackson's corps, General Toombs ran afoul of General Longstreet and started the series of events that would lead to Benning being given command of Toombs' brigade. Toombs was directed by Longstreet to post a guard at Racoon Ford on the Rapidan River to prevent potential Union forays into Confederate territory. Toombs contemptuously felt that the guard was unnecessary and proceeded to dine out with one of his former congressional colleagues who lived nearby. Returning later in the evening to find that some of his regiments had been dispatched to guard the ford despite his orders to the contrary, he angrily remanded the order and withdrew the force. Later that same night, a Union cavalry force slipped across at the ford, raided General J.E.B. Stuart's headquarters, and narrowly missed capturing the Confederate cavalry leader himself. Taking his personal belongings, including his famed plumed hat, the Union force returned unscathed, much to the embarrassment of Stuart. Longstreet was furious and had Toombs arrested. Benning, as senior regimental commander in the brigade, was appointed interim commander; Dameron, *Benning's Brigade*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Dameron, *Benning's Brigade*, 41-45; Benning's handwritten draft battle report dated 8 October 1862, Folder 16, CSU archives.

<sup>11</sup> Dameron, *General Henry Lewis Benning*, 143; for example, in Stephen Sear's *Landscape Turned Red* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 285-6, Sear praises A.P. Hill for his timely arrival on the battlefield, but in fairness, credited the Federal's delay in reorganizing after crossing Antietam Creek as a major factor in the Confederate forces holding the town of Sharpsburg.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to E.P. Alexander, CSU archives, Folder 18, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Dameron, *General Henry Lewis Benning*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Benning's draft account of the Battle of Fredericksburg, 20 December 1862, CSU archives, Folder 16.

<sup>15</sup> Promotion Order from Confederate Secretary of War James, 23 April 1863, CSU archives, Folder 17.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from G.M. Sorrell (Longstreet's Adjutant) to Benning, 25 April 1863, Folder 17.

<sup>17</sup> Dameron, *Benning's Brigade*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Benning's draft after action report of Gettysburg, 3 August 1863, CSU archives, Folder 17.

<sup>19</sup> For example, see Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative*, Vol. 2, (NY: Random House, 1963), 574.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to E.P. Alexander, undated, CSU archives, Folder 18, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Newspaper clipping, *Milton Chronicle*, 10 September 1863, CSU archives, Folder 22.

<sup>22</sup> Dameron, *Benning's Brigade*, 94. See also Glenn Tucker, *Chickamauga* (Dayton: Morningside House, Inc, 1984), 281-282; Tucker's account downplays Benning's lapse, commenting that "...Bragg would have benefited from some of Benning's zest..." and includes personal accounts from Benning's own soldiers that "tended to relieve Benning of the mild censure by Longstreet..."

<sup>23</sup> Dameron, *General Henry Lewis Benning*, 179-184. An interesting exchange of orders and letters from this ill-advised campaign reflects significant internal dissension within Longstreet's officer cadre during this difficult winter. General Lafayette McLaws, long a stalwart in Longstreet's corps, had not responded energetically in one of the attacks on a Union position near Knoxville. Longstreet, in an action he later regretted, fired him, and the directive relieving him of command, as well as McLaws' own response to the relief, is contained in the collection. Unfortunately, Benning's own thoughts on the matter have not survived, but evidently Benning refused to be drawn into the internecine bickering, and he continued in command; Folder #17.

<sup>24</sup> Dameron, *Benning's Brigade*, 108-109.

<sup>25</sup> Special Orders, 13 May 1864, CSU archives, Folder 18.

<sup>26</sup> Perry letter, 22 July 1864, Folder 18. Colonel Dudley Dubose, the next senior commander in the brigade, had taken Benning's place as brigade commander. Reading between the lines, it is clear that Perry did not think that Dubose measured up to Benning's leadership: "...Entre nous, there is much dissatisfaction among the men & officers, originating in the brigade commander level. \_\_\_\_\_ has played too hard for the temporary rank of brigadier. Well, to tell the truth it is hard to act modestly in high places and there's a source of discontent to old troops." Although portions of the same letter are quoted in both of Dameron's books, the author does not speculate about any discord in the brigade during Benning's absence.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to E.P. Alexander, undated, CSU archives, Folder 18, 13.

<sup>28</sup> For example, some of Benning's correspondence may be found in the Howell Cobb Papers at the Hargrett Rare Books and Archives Collections, University of Georgia, and in the James D. Waddell Papers in the Special Collections at the Robert D. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

<sup>29</sup> Dameron, *General Henry Lewis Benning*, 224-243.

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