

From Laurel Hill to Yellow Tavern

On February 6, 1833 in Patrick County Virginia, there was born to Archibald and Elizabeth Letcher Pannill Stuart a son who was destined to become the Commanding General of the Cavalry Corps in the Army of Northern Virginia. He was named for his uncle, Judge James Ewell Brown. From his father he inherited a *joie de vivre* and a magnetic, charming personality, and from his mother a faith in God and a love of all that was beautiful in nature. During his youth at the family home, 'Laurel Hill', the gentle mother received from her high-spirited son a promise never to touch liquor and this promise was kept until his dying day.

He was educated by private tutors and attended Emory and Henry College for two years before entering the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1850.

After graduating from West Point in 1854 he served in the United States Army until Virginia seceded in 1861. During these years he served on the frontier where he was engaged in expeditions against hostile Indians in Texas and Kansas Territory and also in efforts to preserve the peace between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions in the Territory. During one of these engagements with the Cheyenne Indians at Solomon's Fork, Stuart was shot in the breast while saving the life of another officer. Ten days later the company which had been left behind to care for the sick and wounded started out for Fort Kearny. After a march of six days their Indian guides deserted them and Stuart volunteered to set out with a few men to find the fort without the aid of even a compass. Although severely wounded, beset by treachery, hunger, impassable rivers and foul weather, he finally reached Fort Kearny after a three-day march. In 1859 while on leave he volunteered to serve as aide-de-camp to Colonel Robert E. Lee during the John Brown Raid at Harpers Ferry.

While stationed in Kansas he met Flora Cooke, the daughter of Colonel Philip St. George Cooke. After a whirlwind courtship by the impetuous young lieutenant, they were married on November 14, 1855 at Fort Riley, Kansas Territory. Three children were born to them – Flora in 1857, James Ewell Brown, Jr. in 1850 and Virginia Pelham Stuart in 1863. Stuart was a tender, loving, devoted husband and father. Although find women of all ages adored Stuart and lavished attention upon him, Flora Stuart was the one and only woman in his life. He once wrote her, "If you could only know (and I think you ought) how true I am to you and how centered in you is my every hope and dream of earthly bliss..."

As war clouds gathered in May of 1861 Stuart resigned his commission as Captain in the United States Army and offered his sword to Virginia. The following year he was a Major General at the age of twenty-nine. His passionate devotion to Virginia and the Southern Cause was unsurpassed. Some of his biographers have portrayed him as a charming and gay cavalier, which indeed he was, but behind that façade was the keen mind of a brilliant tactician and strategist in the art of war. He rendered valuable service to the Army of Northern Virginia not only in all major engagements, but also in constant skirmishes, outpost duty, reconnaissance and the spectacular raids for which he is so well known.

Those daring raids, in which Stuart was so eminently successful, enabled him to ride at will around the Union Army. To a casual observer these raids seemed to depend upon an abundance of good luck. However, a more careful appraisal reveals that they were the result of careful planning, perfect execution, and adequate provision for every contingency. He instilled in his men the will to do or die and they followed wherever he led. Colonel Mosby, who scouted the route of the Chickahominy Raid, reveals his personal feelings for his chief in these words, "I felt the deepest affection for him – my chief ambition was to serve him."

Under Stuart's leadership the cavalry arm reached a state of perfection which was astounding. Europeans were the first to acknowledge his genius. He made use of such modern tactics as mobility and flexibility. Major Sedgwick said of him that he was the greatest cavalryman ever foaled in America. General Alexander paid this fine compliment, "Stuart had the faculty of ALWAYS being equal to himself at his very best." This faculty was never so much in evidence as at Chancellorsville when he demonstrated his power to command not only cavalry, but also

large bodies of infantry and artillery. His powers of endurance were phenomenal. After a hard day's ride of fifty miles he was able to dance until the wee hours of the morning and then be the first to waken for breakfast – the picture of health, good humor and strength. Indomitable resolution, devotion to duty, and quiet reliance upon the guiding hand of a Divine Providence marked Stuart as a great leader.

Like most military men of high caliber, Stuart was a true Christian with impeccable moral principles. Although of sanguine temperament, no stain of vice or immorality was ever found upon him. He abstained always from the use of liquor, tobacco and profane language. When success crowned his efforts on the battlefield he ascribed to God “the praise, the honor and the glory.” In his dying moments he spoke of “Duty, Honor, Country”, the West Point motto which he had followed since his cadet days. His last words were, “God's will be done.” General Lee paid him tribute in these lines, “To military capacity of a high order he added the brighter graces of a pure life guided and sustained by the Christian's faith and hope.”

Stuart captured the imagination of all with whom he came in contact. He was a dashing figure on horseback as he rode to battle with a song on his lips, blue eyes flashing above the golden brown beard, red lined cloak flying, black plume waving. He was truly the “Beau Sabreur” of the Confederacy.

In that fateful year of 1864 when Sheridan with 10,000 sabers began his march to capture Richmond, Stuart with less than half that number intercepted him at Yellow Tavern. Something of the magnificent courage of that great heart is revealed in this message of May 11th which he sent to General Bragg, “Fighting immense odds of Sheridan. My men and horses are tired, hungry and jaded, but ALL RIGHT.” During the battle that afternoon he was mortally wounded while directing his men to pursue the fleeing and demoralized enemy. He died the next evening in Richmond, the city which he had given his life to save. Hollywood Cemetery is the final resting place of that ‘brilliant meteor which flashed vividly across the firmament of war.’

By Adele H. Mitchell and first appeared in *Southern Cavalry Review*, January 1985. Mrs. Mitchell was the founder of the Society.