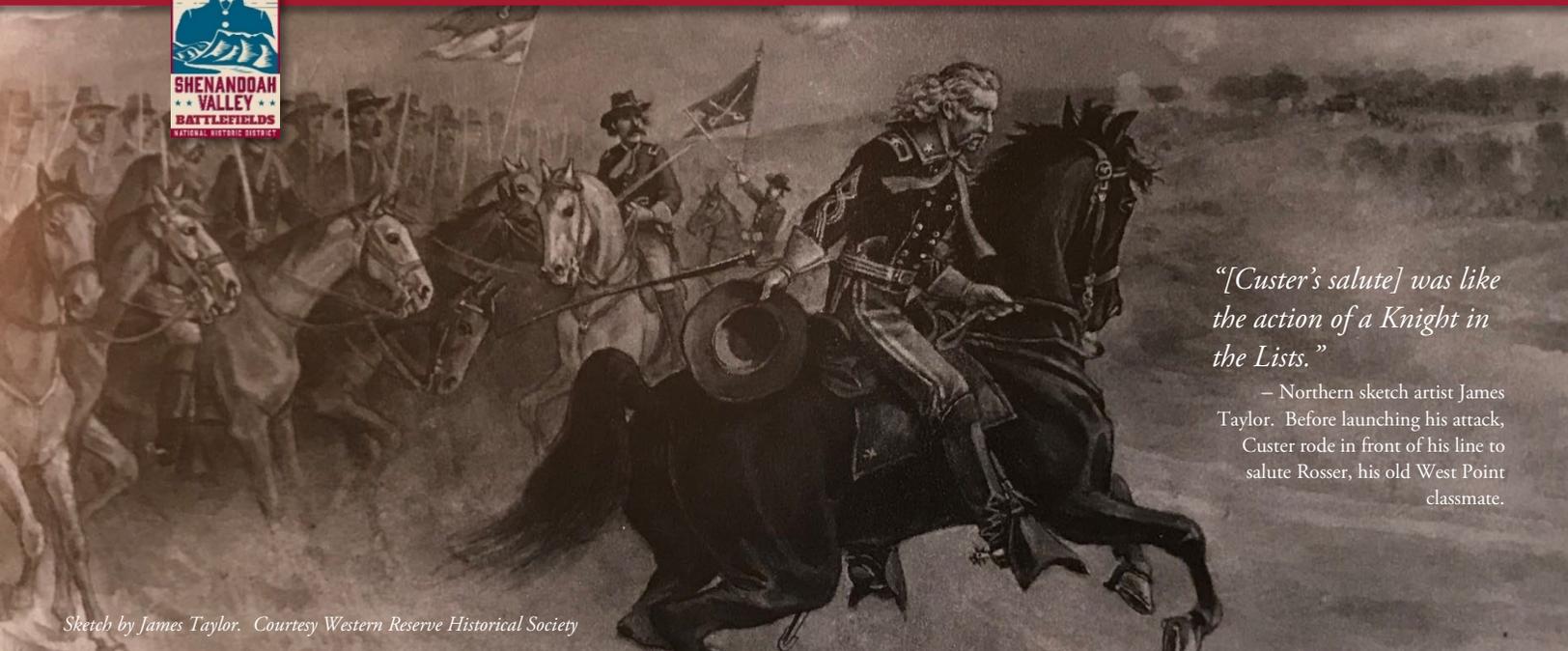




# SAVE 131 ACRES AT TOM'S BROOK



Sketch by James Taylor. Courtesy Western Reserve Historical Society

*"[Custer's salute] was like the action of a Knight in the Lists."*

— Northern sketch artist James Taylor. Before launching his attack, Custer rode in front of his line to salute Rosser, his old West Point classmate.

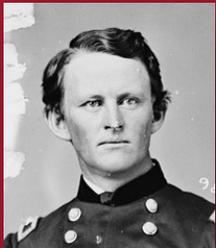
## THE BATTLE OF TOM'S BROOK (OCTOBER 9, 1864)

### THE ROAD TO "THE RACES"

By October of 1864, the tide of war had changed in the Shenandoah Valley. Union Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's victories at Third Winchester (September 19, 1864) and Fisher's Hill (September 22, 1864) had ended the almost unbroken string of Confederate triumphs and Federal humiliations and forced Confederate Gen. Jubal A. Early to withdraw his army near Waynesboro.

### RED OCTOBER: "A TRAIL OF FIRE"

Sheridan then embarked on "The Burning," a campaign to cripple the Valley's ability to support the Confederate war effort. Moving north, Sheridan's cavalry burned mills, barns, and public buildings, and destroyed or carried away forage, grain, and livestock. "It was [Sheridan's] purpose to leave a trail of fire," wrote Union Col. James H. Kidd, commander of the Michigan Brigade. Many Federals were troubled by the destruction; others felt it was a just part of a hard war that was rapidly becoming harder.



Gen. Wesley Merritt

As they carried out Sheridan's orders, Gen. George A. Custer's Third Division moved along the Back Road and Gen. Wesley Merritt's First Division followed the Valley Turnpike. The two generals were rivals for battlefield acclaim, a rivalry that extended

to the destruction. Kidd described how an agitated Merritt "pointed to the west [where] one could have made a chart of Custer's trail by the columns of black smoke...The general was manifestly fretting lest Custer should appear to outdo him."

### THE LAUREL BRIGADE AND THE WOLVERINES

Sheridan mistakenly believed that the Confederates were finished, but the southerners refused to concede the Valley. Gen. Robert E. Lee dispatched reinforcements, including the "Laurel Brigade" under Gen. Thomas Rosser. (The brigade included the 7th Virginia, which had earned fame fighting under Col. Turner Ashby in the Valley in 1862.) Early ordered his cavalry "to pursue the enemy, to harass him, and to ascertain his purposes." While Rosser hounded Custer (a former classmate at West Point), Gen. Lunsford Lomax bedeviled Merritt.



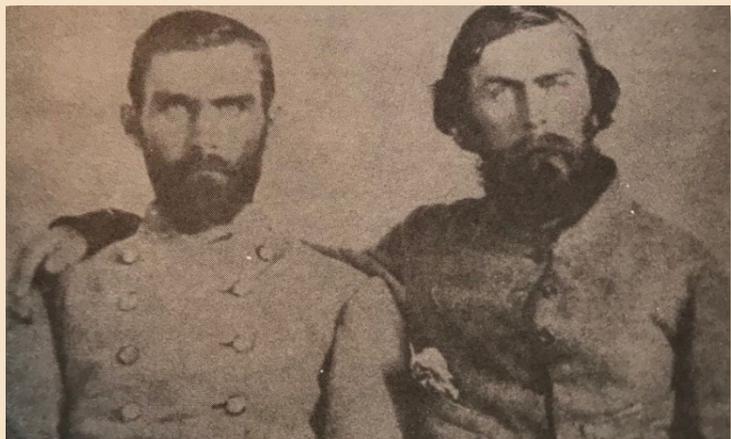
Gen. Thomas Rosser

Many members of the Laurel Brigade were Valley natives, and the Federal destruction left them "blinded with rage at the sight of their ruined homes." Eager for vengeance, they hammered relentlessly at the Federals on October 6-8, forcing them back "in one continuous running fight" – and "in many cases [taking] no prisoners." Confederate Capt. William N. McDonald wrote that, "The Federals fought bravely, but could not withstand men who were seeking vengeance rather than victory."

To the east, one of the units moving on the Valley Turnpike with Merritt was the Michigan Brigade – the "Michigan Wolverines." The brigade, now led by Col. James H. Kidd, had been commanded by Custer until he was promoted to command the Third Division. The soldiers (including Kidd) loved their former commander, and each wore a red neckerchief like Custer's. The Wolverines had been at the rear of the Union column on October 8, fighting off slashing attacks by Lomax's troops.

## “WHIP THE REBEL CAVALRY OR GET WHIPPED”

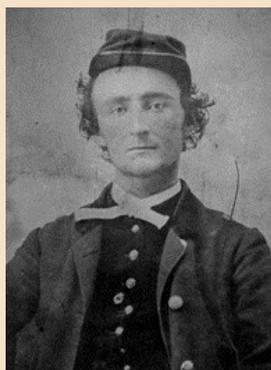
Sheridan was infuriated by the attacks. On the night of October 8, 1864, he ordered his cavalry commander, Gen. Alfred Torbert, to “whip the rebel cavalry or get whipped.” Meanwhile, the rage and overconfidence of the Confederate cavalry had left them vulnerable. Not only were they badly outnumbered; they had advanced dangerously ahead of their infantry support, which was 25 miles south – almost a full day’s march away.



Confederate Maj. Edward H. McDonald and Capt. William N. McDonald. The McDonalds were sons of the original commander of the 7th Virginia, Col. Angus McDonald, and stepsons of famed “Devil Diarist” Cornelia Peake McDonald. William later wrote *The History of the Laurel Brigade*. On the morning of the battle, Edward remembered telling Rosser that “I thought he was too far away from his support and that I feared he would have a hard time of it.”

## THE BATTLE: “HAND TO HAND BUSINESS”

The Battle of Tom’s Brook included two largely independent main actions. While Custer attacked Rosser (along the Back Road, Merritt attacked Lomax along the Valley Pike, some two miles away. But there was also a key third movement. Merritt had dispatched Kidd’s Michigan Brigade to the west to investigate the open ground between the Back Road and the Valley Turnpike. Finding no Confederates, Kidd continued west, a movement which brought the Wolverines to the flank of Rosser and the Laurel Brigade.



Union Col. James H. Kidd, who assumed command of the First Brigade of the First Division after Custer was promoted to command the Third Division.

(Image courtesy University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.)

As Custer advanced, Rosser had dismounted most of his troopers behind Tom’s Brook, at the base of Coffman’s Hill, behind stone fences and makeshift fieldworks, with six guns on the crest of the hill behind him (included property now preserved by the SVBF). The Laurel Brigade was on Rosser’s right flank, including the 131-acre target property – where Kidd’s Wolverines would find them.

The odds were daunting; one Confederate described the Federal horsemen “covering the hill slopes and blocking the roads with apparently countless squadrons.” Despite the numbers, Rosser’s men held stubbornly against the initial attacks.

To the east, Merritt’s Reserve Brigade under Col. Charles Lowell moved south along the pike to attack the Confederates, while Col. Thomas C. Devin’s Second Brigade moved across open ground to Lowell’s right. Here, too, despite the numbers, the Confederates initially put up stout resistance.

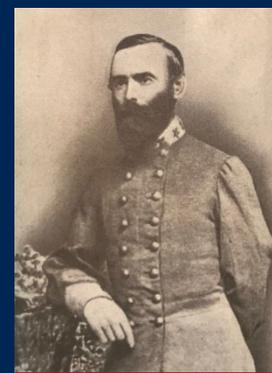
To the west, faced with the lack of progress moving directly against Coffman’s Hill, Custer sent troops to his right to move against Rosser’s left flank. At the same time, he saw Kidd’s troops approaching. Recognizing the red neckerchiefs that the Wolverines wore, he said “That is my old Michigan brigade on the flank!” When the Federals attacked, the outnumbered Confederates were hit on three sides and overwhelmed. The Wolverines crashed into the Laurel Brigade. “Their fire became too hot for endurance and our thin line broke,” remembered Pvt. Thomas Ranson of the 12th Virginia. “...the running fight degenerated into a stampede. It was every man for himself, every now and then a hand to hand business with the sabre.”

With cries of “We’re flanked!” the Confederate line collapsed. Col. M.D. Ball, 11th Virginia, recalled “The whole country to my left rear covered with the flying regiment.” Pvt. William Ball, also of the 11th Virginia, said that “It was devil take the hindmost!” Another private said “My horse was clean crazy, but I was [as] willing as he was to get out of it.”

A similar story played out along the Valley Pike. As Devin’s brigade arrived at and moved against Lomax’s left flank, Lowell launched a stronger attack along the pike. Hit by overwhelming numbers from multiple directions – one Confederate said that the “very ground seemed to spew forth cavalry” – Lomax’s line quickly crumbled. The rout soon became total. Confederate artillerymen Lewis Nunnelee wrote that it looked like the southern cavalymen were being chased by “the whole Yankee army with Abe Lincoln in the lead.” The Federals pursued the Confederates southward for almost 20 miles to Mt. Jackson in what became known as the “Woodstock Races.” At one point during the retreat, Gen. Lomax was captured by the Federals, but escaped after breaking away and joining in a Union charge on his own men.

The battle had been a disaster for the Confederate cavalry. Jubal Early wrote to Robert E. Lee “that the enemy’s cavalry is so much superior to ours...that it is impossible for ours to compete.” Ironically, the ease and completeness of the victory led many Federals to (once again) prematurely believe that Early’s forces were “permanently broken.” That belief would contribute to the sense of complacency that made the Federal army so vulnerable 10 days later at Cedar Creek.

(For further reading, see *Decision at Tom’s Brook* by William J. Miller.)



Col. Richard H. Dulany, commander of the Laurel Brigade, who was seriously wounded during the battle.