

HISTORY
OF THE
COUNTY OF WESTMORELAND,
PENNSYLVANIA,
WITH
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
OF MANY OF ITS
PIONEERS AND PROMINENT MEN.

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ILLUSTRATED.

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COL. GEORGE H. COVODE.

Prominent among the gallant sons of old Westmoreland is the name of Col. George Hay Covode. He was born at Covodesville, Pa., on the 19th of August, 1835, being the oldest son of Hon. John Covode, whose character and attainments are fully given elsewhere. From his youth he was noted for his size and strength, and when only seventeen years old weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds. Being tall and well proportioned, raised on a farm, and accustomed to out-door exercise, he was peculiarly fitted for the hardships of military life. At fifteen years of age he left home and entered Ligonier Academy, where he remained some time, and thence entered the graded school at "Elder's Ridge," then under the supervision of the eminent scholar, Rev. Dr. Donaldson. Obtaining thus a thorough education he was well fitted for the active duties in the important life he was destined to lead.

In July, 1853, he entered the mercantile establishment of Covode & Graham at Lockport, Pa. In the spring of 1856 the junior member of the firm, R. M.

Graham, Esq., retired, and the firm was then known as Covode & Son. The congressional duties of his father required him to spend the greater part of his time in Washington, and the business of the firm was carried on almost entirely by the son. This business, together with that of being postmaster and agent for the Pennsylvania Railroad, occupied his time up to the breaking out of the Rebellion.

In 1858 he was married to Miss Annie Earl, of Somerset County, who lived but a few months. In the spring of 1861, when the dark clouds of war were gathering over this country, he shaped his business at home so that he might be able to enlist in the service of his country. Just as he was ready to enter the army he was married in Harrisburg to Bettie St. Clair Robb, a granddaughter of Gen. Arthur St. Clair. It might be supposed that the prominence his father had acquired in the civil affairs of the nation would insure for him an advanced position in the army; but this was not the case: for one of Hon. John Covode's leading characteristics while in Congress was that he refused to push any of his relatives for political or military preferment. Accordingly, with the assistance of Dr. George S. Kemble, Company D of the Fourth Pennsylvania Cavalry was raised in Ligonier Valley, and the young merchant entered as a private. Out of respect to Hon. John Covode the new company was called the Covode Cavalry, but when they joined the regiment they were compelled to adopt the name, Company D of the Fourth Pennsylvania Cavalry. At the election of officers for the company, without being a candidate, the unassuming private, Covode, was unanimously chosen as first lieutenant.

The company with many others was stationed at Camp Curtin, Harrisburg, but was shortly transferred to a camp near the Soldiers' Home at Washington City, which afterwards was named Camp Campbell in honor of David Campbell, their colonel. Through a vacancy occasioned by the promotion of Capt. Kemble, Lieut. Covode was promoted to the captaincy. While at Washington this regiment did patrol duty. On the 12th of March, 1862, for gallant services Capt. Covode was promoted to major. They were very rapidly removed to the front. On the 31st of June the regiment took a very prominent part in the battle of Malvern Hill, and because of his brave and daring action Maj. Covode received very flattering recommendations from Gens. McClellan and Porter. From this they marched *via* Williamsburg to Yorktown, and then on towards Washington, taking part in the Second Bull Run battle.

After reaching Maryland the Fourth was under Gen. McClellan, in whose celebrated march Maj. Covode was stationed in front until they reached Frederick City, where his regiment was assigned to Gen. Averill's brigade. During the early part of the fall of 1862 the Fourth was encamped upon the north bank of the Potomac, near Hancock, Md., this being

about the only season of quiet known in the military life of Maj. Covode. But he was not long allowed to rest. In the bloody battle of Kelly's Ford, in which it will be remembered that Gen. Averill gained over Gen. Fitzhugh Lee the first cavalry victory of the late war, the Fourth, under Maj. Covode, was the only regiment of Gen. Hooker's command which participated. It is scarcely possible to form an idea of the battles in which a regiment of cavalry in a short time would engage, since it is well known in military circles that they are subjected to almost constant skirmishes. It was so with the Fourth. Under their gallant major they won a reputation at Kelly's Ford as one of the bravest of regiments, and were always called upon when a close combat was at hand.

On his promotion his company presented him with a very fine and costly brace of silver-mounted pistols, one of which he lost in a charge in 1863, while the other is yet in the possession of the Covode family. After the presentation speech the major made the following reply: "My brave soldiers, I accept with real pleasure this testimonial of your kind regard for me. I shall always treasure these as tokens of your appreciation of my efforts to do my duty towards you as an officer and as a man. I can truly say that the feelings which prompted you to make this present are fully reciprocated. The knowledge of your regard shall sustain me in more strenuously endeavoring to increase your comfort and efficiency as soldiers. And when the time shall come that these pistols may have to be used, I hope we may be able to do our part in such a way that it will be a credit to old Westmoreland, and make her proud of Company D, Fourth Pennsylvania Cavalry. I know that wherever I am called to go with these you will bravely follow."

Into the very thickest of many bloody battles he was called to go, and his soldiers never refused to follow him. In the battle of Antietam, the Seven Days' battle, in Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, and many others he was present and never failed to perform bravely his part, and when the invading army of the South crossed the boundary of his native State he followed it and acquitted himself nobly on the stormy field of Gettysburg.

On one occasion, at Falls Church, he with but a few men was entirely surrounded, but dashing against the enemy he skillfully cut them right and left and opened the way for his men to follow. He was a noted swordsman, and in the fierce thrusts of a hand-to-hand fight he had very few equals in the Northern army. It requires great personal courage and nerve to engage in a conflict of this kind, but it is the universal testimony of both officers and soldiers that he was a man who knew no fear.

When in battle it was his habit to ride in front of his men, and above the roar of conflict and the clash of arms was heard his voice cheering his soldiers on to victory. In camp-life he was jovial and good natured, and would at any time incommode himself to

favor any soldier. It was his habit when a paper could be procured to gather the soldiers around him and read the news. In this he also excelled, and his soldiers all speak of his powers as a reader and a conversationalist. On the 8th of December, 1863, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel, and on the 28th of May following was made colonel. His death occurred in June, 1864, while in command of a brigade. A commission of brigadier-general was signed, and on its way to him, but he was never permitted to receive it. That Col. Covode was universally beloved by all his soldiers and officers is well shown by the tragic account of his death, and the perilous adventure of the men who volunteered to rescue his dead body from the rebel lines.

The story of his death can probably be better told by introducing the following touching letter, written to Mrs. George H. Covode by Gen. W. N. Biddle on the day following the death of her husband:

"HEADQUARTERS FOURTH PENNSYLVANIA CAVALRY,
June 26, 1864.

"MY DEAR MRS. COVODE,—It is my painful duty to write you of the loss of your husband, our colonel, in the action of the 24th inst. In this great affliction I feel how entirely powerless are any human sympathies or condolences, even those as sincere and heartfelt as my own and my brother officers, to whom your husband was endeared by his many kindnesses. Loving him as we did, we can understand and appreciate your greater loss, and hope that God may comfort you in your grief. There is little to be said of the fight in which the colonel fell. Through the day there were no apprehensions of any serious engagement, and the colonel was in particularly good spirits. The morning was passed under a large shade tree with many officers, the genial spirits of Col. Covode enlivening the whole party. Suddenly, about three o'clock, the enemy's whole cavalry corps fell upon our brigade and soon commenced driving us rapidly back, we rallying from time to time and making a running fight of it.

"Your husband showed even more than the usual gallantry for which he is distinguished,—perfectly cool and collected, encouraging our men, and everywhere in the front of the battle, so much so that I remonstrated with him on his exposing himself unnecessarily. Finally, at the fourth stand we made, he unfortunately mistook some of the rebel skirmishers for a part of our own regiment, and causing the Second Pennsylvania to cease firing, rode towards them, waving his hand to call them in. Discovering his mistake he turned to ride back to the line, but, alas! too late. A perfect volley was fired at him and he fell, his left arm being shattered and having a mortal wound through the intestines. We ran to his assistance and carried him back to the woods, Sergt. Rankin, the first to reach him, being wounded badly and myself slightly as we carried the colonel off the field. It was a perfect hail of bullets round us. With the deepest regret I write that all efforts to bring him entirely off the field failed. He was placed on horseback and brought to the rear of the lines of the First Brigade, which was to support us. The motion of the horse hurting him, and supposing that there was time, a stretcher was rigged up on which he could lie down and be carried comfortably. Just as he was placed on it that brigade gave way, and the colonel refused to mount the horse again, ordering all with him to leave him. One of our men captured near where he was escaped yesterday, and reports that the colonel died that same evening. From the nature of his wounds there is no ground for hoping the contrary.

"He himself realized his position at once. Almost the first thing he said to me was, 'Oh, Biddle, I have my death-wound,' and when Cdt. Brinton tried to cheer him, telling him he would soon get over it, he said, 'No, colonel, I am shot through the stomach, and those wounds are always fatal.' He bore up most nobly, and met his fate with the calmness of a brave officer and Christian gentleman. He frequently asked to be left before he was, and it seemed that the hope of leaving some message of affection to you enabled him to undergo as much as he did. We were unfortunately separated after fixing the stretcher for him, but Lieut. Paul was with him until so surrounded he had to fight his way

out. The hurry, rush, and confusion were so great that no time was had to receive messages. His diary and some letters which fell out of his pocket I forward, together with letters that he was fated not to receive. I know nothing more, and regretting that there is no hope of his surviving sorrow with you for his loss. May the Great Comforter give you strength to sustain you in this grief.

"Very sincerely your friend,
"W. N. BIDDLE."

His brigade occupied the position of rear-guard in Sheridan's famous retreating raid across the country between the Chickahominy and James Rivers. The rear-guard in a retreat is well known to be a most important and dangerous position. From Bates' History, vol. ii., pages 529-30, together with other records, letters, etc., we gather that the battle in which the gallant colonel fell was near St. Mary's Church, in the Chickahominy Valley, Va. Here a line of battle was formed in front of Gen. Hampton's entire corps. Gen. Gregg, the commander of the division, knowing his inability to contend with the overwhelming numbers of the enemy now so near them, sent message after message to Gen. Sheridan for reinforcements. These were all captured by the enemy, who were thus apprised of the weakness of the rear-guard. Knowing this the rebels determined upon an attack, which they made in a fearful manner upon the whole line at about three o'clock P.M. It was evidently their intention to capture the entire corps, which, however, being composed of the bravest and most daring of the dashing Gen. Sheridan's army, as might be expected, made a strong and determined resistance. Owing mainly, however, to the vast numbers of the enemy, the rear-guard was repulsed and driven back in scattering retreat.

It was here more particularly that Col. Covode, regardless of his own safety, and evincing that daring, fearless nature which characterized his entire military life, was dashing up and down the line, exposed to the leaden hail of Hampton's army. In vain did he try to rally and reunite his scattered forces. From his youth he had been near-sighted, and perceiving on his right a squad of partly concealed men whom he mistook for his own, rode rapidly towards them, intending to form them within his own line of defense. Amid this scene of blood and carnage the

patriotic colonel was pierced by rebel bullets, which on the following morning proved fatal. Thus in the raging conflict, while nobly fighting at the head of his men, was cut down one of the most promising officers of the Union army. His soldiers gathered quickly around him, and after conveying him, much against his will, for about three miles, were overtaken by the advancing army, and were forced to leave him, as he requested, in the hands of the enemy. The rebels took from him his clothes and other valuables and left him on the field to die. Fortunately he fell into the hands of a colored family, consisting of an old man and his wife. They cared for him kindly until the next morning, when he died in great agony, mainly from the effects of the wounds in the stomach. He was buried, and his grave marked by the colored friends who ministered to him in his last hours.

A few days after his death his father, Hon. John Covode, went in search of his body, but found the Union army so far retreated that his grave was miles within the rebel lines. A company of four of his old regiment, consisting of Lieut. J. C. Paul, of Company C, of Apollo; Sergt. Henry Green, of Leechburg; Corp. Samuel King, of Kittanning; and Private A. Martin, of Company D, of Lockport, volunteered to cross the lines and search for his remains. Under cover of the night they passed around the army, and so far penetrated the rebel domain as to find his grave. They returned safely, having gone about forty miles. The next night Gen. Gregg ordered a party of thirty, provided with an ambulance-wagon, to go out and bring in his body. This party, commanded by Capt. J. C. Paul, successfully accomplished the task assigned, and returned to the Union lines with the body without having been molested. Mr. Covode took charge of his son's remains, and brought them home for interment in the old family burial-ground at West Fairfield, very near his old home. Thus in a quiet and elevated spot, overlooking three beautiful valleys which wind in either direction to the mountains beyond, he sleeps, within the same community through which he wandered and played but a few years ago when a mere child.