

Colonel Henry Eaton Coleman



Henry Eaton Coleman was born on January 5, 1837 to Charles Baskerville Coleman and Sarah Eaton Coleman.

Henry Eaton Coleman enlisted in the Confederate Army in the 12th North Carolina Infantry on April 26, 1861 at Granville, North Carolina; a unit formed by his Uncle Charles Eaton. Henry Eaton Coleman, who lived only a few miles from this Uncle was chosen Captain of this Company, the unit was known as the "Townsville Guards. The Company was ordered to Garysburg, North Carolina, Sewell's Point, near Norfolk, VA. where it was mustered in as Captain Henry Eaton Coleman's Company.

While at Sewell's Point, NC and Col. H E Colemans Company B was stationed at Camp Arrington. On March 9, 1862, the famous battle of ironclads, CSS Virginia and US Monitor. On March 10th, Coleman wrote to his beloved wife a letter describing the events and in the letter made drawings of the CSS Virginia. Archivists have stated that the drawing illustrates that Coleman saw the ship after the battle and answered a long held question. The CSS Virginia was drawn with a broken spar used for ramming.

The 12th North Carolina Infantry was at Gettysburg and distinguished itself. Brig. General Alfred Iverson reported "Lieutenant Colonel H. E. Coleman, volunteer aide, and Lieutenant J. T. Ector, aide-de-camp, were also especially zealous and brave in the discharge of the duties I called upon them to perform".

In addition to Gettysburg, he saw action at Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, 2nd Battle of Manassas, and other battles around and near Richmond and Petersburg, Chambersburg, Pa., and Spotsylvania, VA. He was wounded 5 times in these campaigns.

On the 12th day of May, 1864, Col. H. E. Coleman was very severely wounded at Spotsylvania, Virginia. A minie ball took off a part of the top of his head so that his brain was visible. He fell unconscious and was thought to be dead. However, after a time, he recovered consciousness and crawled to the shade of a bush. Late in the day he was taken up by his men. It was thought he could live only a few hours at most. He was taken to the field hospital and there treated as best they could. After a day or two they found that he was making a much stronger fight for life than they had thought possible, and he was then sent to the hospital at Lynchburg, Virginia. It was very much crowded there, and it was impossible for all to receive proper attention. He applied for and obtained sick leave to go home. He went to the home of Richard Logan, his wife's father, where his wife and children were called "Oakville or Pleasant Oaks".

Here he lay desperately ill for several weeks, attended by two of the best physicians in the county, for some time his life was hanging in balance.

While in bed recovering, word was spread in the area that a large force of Federal troops was advancing up the Richmond and Danville Railroad in Charlotte County towards the railroad bridge crossing at Staunton River. It was known that the object of this raid was to destroy this bridge, thereby cutting off the principal means of supplying General Lee's army stationed near Richmond.

Colonel Coleman could not bear the thought of not being there and decided to respond to the call for volunteers to defend the bridge. Against his doctor's orders he had a wagon prepared and he was placed in the wagon, propped up with pillows and taken to the site of the Staunton River Bridge.

Arriving at the bridge site, Col. Coleman volunteered his services to Captain Benjamin Fairinholt who accepted his offer. Col. Coleman observed there was no defense prepared on the north or approach side for the enemy. Capt. Fairinholt felt there was no place to prepare a defense with an overwhelming enemy in front and river behind. Col. Coleman was told he could take local volunteers to the other side of the river if they were willing. The local "old men and young boys" eagerly followed Col. Coleman and with make shift implements dug well-hidden rifle pits into the bank.

Capt. Hoyt, of the Palmetto Sharpshooters of South Carolina arrived with a small detachment of troops (50 men or less) sent out from Danville, Virginia, asked permission to join Col. Coleman on the Charlotte side of the river and permission was granted.

Captain William Bailey Hurt wrote in 1909, "the brave Coleman who was standing like Leonidas at Thermopylae, with his faithful little band of three hundred, to keep back the invaders. For four long hours the Federals made desperate and repeated efforts to get to and burn the bridge but were beaten every time and finally gave up and made a hasty retreat, leaving their dead on the battlefield."

Captain Fairinholt's after action report stated, "The whole enemy line, arriving within close range of my rifle pits, were scattered before a withering fire from my infantry which was totally unexpected. Falling back several hundred yards they reformed and, adding reinforcements which were rapidly sent forward, they again advanced to within about 100 yds. of my rifle pits and were again broken in confusion. This was repeated 4 times each time with the same result, and the whole time my artillery firing in them with considerable precision and effect. I afterward ascertained the enemy's loss was most probably 300 in killed, wounded, and prisoners.

My loss 10 killed, 24 wounded. The inexperienced troops to whom we are indebted for this remarkable victory over the enemy deserve the gratitude of both the army and the people for the gallantry and the coolness displayed by them in meeting with the resolution and unshaken firmness the repeated charges of the enemy, so superior in number, equipage, and artillery. I desire to make special mention of Col. Henry E. Coleman, 12th N. C. Regiment; Capt. William W. Frazier, commanding artillery, Capt. R. H. Fitzhugh, Corps of Engineers; Capt. Wm. C. Marshall, Stribling's Artillery, whom I assigned to duty in the most exposed places and who proved to me by their chivalrous conduct, my confidence in their ability was not misplaced.

Col. H. E. Coleman was at home wounded but came forward and offered to take any position. I assigned him to one of the most important and responsible positions, which he held, though hotly engaged and severely pressed for 4 hours, when he was painfully wounded in the knee, and refused to leave even the until assured of the confidence of his men in their ability to defend the position. "

During the successful defense of the bridge, Col. Coleman was wounded for the fifth time. He would not leave his position until assured the enemy would not attack again. This wound crippled him for the remainder of his life. Ironically, he died on the exact date, June 25th, that he was wounded. As he lay anticipating death, he told his son, the evening before his death, having in mind the next day being the 26th anniversary of the day he was last wounded that he had not known a waking moment since that day free from pain, and that it had worn him out, he could

not fight it any longer. He said he thought 26 years was as long as any man could stand constant pain, certainly it was as long as he could stand it, that the Yankee bullet had at last done its work.

On July 16th, 1864, General Robert E. Lee wrote to Capt. Farinholt. In part he said, "Please express my thanks to the men and officers engaged for the gallantry and determination with which they repelled every assault of the enemy. I regret the painful wound of Col. Coleman of the 12th N. C. who exhibited such a noble example of patriotism and bravery in leaving home, though wounded, and taking part in the defense of the post."

The war ended for Col. Henry Coleman on April 9, 1865 at Halifax County Virginia with the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Following the War, Coleman and his family returned to their home, Cedar Grove, which was about 40 miles from Halifax. Colonel Coleman was still suffering from war injuries and could only walk with the use of crutches. In late 1869 he was able with one crutch to function; however, not being able to manage the farm, he was forced to rent it.

In the fall of 1869 Coleman decided to enter the profession of civil engineering, which he had studied in college. He applied for and obtained a position with the Norfolk and Western Railroad in Danville.

In June 1890 Henry Eaton Coleman became ill and had to return to The Oaks in Halifax County, which was a half-mile from Woodside.

William Logan, an uncle of Coleman's wife, Julia, had died several years earlier, and Coleman and Julia became owners of The Oaks.

Colonel Coleman's health continued to fail, and he died June 25, 1890 on the 26th anniversary of the day he was wounded at the battle of Staunton River Bridge.

Coleman died in the same room that he had earlier been confined to with his knee injury.

Colonel Coleman and his wife, Julia, are buried in the Logan Family Cemetery at The Oaks.