

[This article is dedicated to my junior-year history teacher at University High School in Bloomington, Indiana, Ron Ridgley. I am 64 now, so you can do the math and figure this was a few years ago. Mr. Ridgley had two passions in life. One was the Chicago White Sox. He would sit on the front of his desk and dangle his legs while he taught. You can guess what color those exposed socks were. The other thing he was passionate about was the man who is the subject of this piece, Montgomery C. Meigs. While I had travelled to Civil War sites with my parents as a kid, Mr. Ridgely's class was where I really learned that, while dates and places are important for history quizzes, it is the *people* in the war that were the *fascination*. So, wherever you are Mr. Ridgley, this one's for you! - SR, 2012]

Montgomery C. Meigs – An Icon of the Civil War

By Steve Rolfe

Montgomery Meigs was a Civil War general who never saw a real battle but had a major impact on virtually every battle that was fought during the war. He was a desk-bound, pencil-pushing bureaucrat in some eyes. *My* opinion is that he was much, much more than that, a high ranking officer devoted to the Union and one whose entire focus was on defeating the rebellion. His genius was in his ability to make things happen.

THE EARLY YEARS

The man I am talk about is, of course, Montgomery Cunningham Meigs; career soldier, graduate of West Point, scientist, architect and family man...but most of all he is probably summed up best by one word...organizer. He became the Quartermaster General of the Union Army during the entire Civil War, but he also had an illustrious career both before and after the war. While many of you may have heard his name, I would venture a guess that most people don't know more than a couple of general things about him.

Meigs Puritan ancestor, Vincent Meigs, emigrated from England in 1640, settling in New Haven, Connecticut. His great-grandfather, Return Jonathan Meigs, was instrumental in settling the western boundary of Virginia before the Revolution. His grandfather, Josiah Meigs, was a Yale graduate, a newspaper owner, and a Jefferson supporter when being a Jefferson supporter was not really all that popular. His father, Charles D. Meigs, a physician and author, was born in 1792 and lived through the Civil War to see his son's success during the conflict.

Montgomery Meigs was born in 1816 while his parents lived briefly in Georgia, but the family soon moved to Philadelphia mainly because of his father's bouts of bilious fever and his mother, Mary's, shock at some of the "scenes of slavery" she witnessed. He had a relatively normal and happy childhood growing up in Pennsylvania and grew into an unusually large and robust child.

WEST POINT

In 1832, at the age of 16, he entered West Point, principally because his father considered it the best engineering school in the country. In fact, until 1828, it was the *only* engineering school in the country. Meigs was a very good scholar, finishing in his four years there 6th, 3rd, 1st and 5th out of what eventually was a graduating class of 49. His conduct, however, was another matter. During those same four years, he

received 113, 74, 126 and 131 demerits. Fortunately it took 200 demerits to be expelled, so he made it through to graduation, but only barely. This compares to another noted West Point graduate who had, as we all know, gone through the four years without a single demerit... Robert E. Lee. Though Lee preceded Meigs at the academy, their paths would famously cross and re-cross many times a few years later.

Meigs graduated in 1836, just as Jackson's Removal Act was well under way and the Seminole Wars were just beginning, but he did not get involved in these issues because they simply did not have much to do with the Engineer Corps.

EARLY CAREER

Meigs stayed at West Point for 14 years, working or at least interacting with other members of the Corps of Engineers such as Robert E. Lee (Class of '29), P.G.T. Beauregard ('38), Henry Halleck ('39), William Rosecrans ('42) and George McClellan ('46). Ulysses Grant ('43) was Infantry and "Cump" Sherman ('42) was Artillery, so their paths did not cross much, if at all, until after Ft. Sumter. Jefferson Davis ('28, Infantry) was already out of the army by the time Meigs graduated. Most of the rest on this list were out of the army by the 1850s. In 1837, just a year out of the Point, Meigs was assigned to assist Robert E. Lee in making improvements to the Mississippi River and the harbor at St. Louis. They travelled and billeted together for nearly a year in their work. Meigs never worked with Lee again, but remembered him as *"one with whom nobody ever wished or ventured to take a liberty, though kind and generous to all his subordinates, admired by all women, and respected by all men. He was the model of a soldier and the beau ideal of a Christian man."* Meigs clearly admired Lee as a soldier, a superior officer, an engineer and a man...at least before the war.

The next four years, Meigs was assigned to Philadelphia to improve the harbor and build Ft. Delaware. It was while he was working here that he met and married Louisa Rodgers, the daughter of Commodore John Rodgers, a hero of the War of 1812. From 1841-1849 he was assigned to build a new fort near Detroit (Ft. Wayne), but his time there "was not all devoted to fortifications". Four children were born during this period: John Rodgers ('42), Mary Montgomery ('43), Charles D. ('45) and Montgomery ('47). In 1849 he was sent to Lake Champlain to build Ft. Montgomery (no...it was not named after him!) and his fifth child, Vincent, was born while he was there.

Meigs was very disappointed that he did not see service in the Mexican War, but he was involved in another small but significant part of U.S. history during these years. There was a great fear of war with England in the mid-1840s because of a boundary dispute over the northern border of the Oregon Territory. Meigs was sent to Oregon to clandestinely survey the area in event of hostilities. But the war with Mexico had many concerned about fighting on two fronts, so President Polk acceded by treaty to a boundary at 49 degrees and the "54/40 or Fight" crisis came to an end without hostilities.

In 1852, Meigs was called to Washington and, while he, of course, had no way of knowing it then, this place described as a *"squalid little city born not of common need or geography but of the Constitution"* would remain his home for the rest of his life. When he arrived in the capital city, both Georgetown and Alexandria were much more desirable addresses. Washington has been described at this time as a *"wholly democratic city where domestic animals and people lived in perfect equality, with equal and undisturbed"*

rights". Cows ran at large and geese and pigs would march through the streets. Over the next four decades, Montgomery Meigs would contribute significantly to its improvement.

WASHINGTON BEFORE THE WAR

Meigs opportunity at success and advancement came because of, first, a great fire, and then from an unexpected death. In December of 1851, fire destroyed the Library of Congress, Lost were 35,000 books, thousands of manuscripts, paintings by Gilbert Stuart and John Trumbell and others. The fire, and the inability to control its ravages, brought to a head the obvious and long-recognized but ignored need for a good source of water for the city. It finally spurred congress to action. In September of 1852, with an appropriation of \$5,000 from congress, President Fillmore assigned the task of creating a good water source to Capt. Frederick A. Smith, deputy to the Chief of Engineers. But Smith died suddenly and unexpectedly at the beginning of November. The job went to Meigs on November 3, 1852, and thrust this able engineer onto the national scene, a scene he relished and where he would remain for the rest of his life. In March, he was promoted to Captain and would produce a 55-page report to Congress laying out three options for the water source. He wrote to his father, *"I have had but three months to survey, devise, project and estimate three great works, any of which is well worthy the study of a year. If it is not good and does not give me standing among engineers I shall be disappointed for it contains my brains."*

Meigs favored the most expensive of the options, a nine-foot pipe to be built from the Great Falls of the Potomac several miles northwest of the city, but it was also the option that would produce the most water. Washington realistically needed only about 5 million gallons of water per day to survive comfortably. Paris was using about 17 million gallons a day at that time, New York about 30 million and Boston 44 million. Meigs plan would give Washington 67 million gallons a day. But, lest you think this is a bit over the top, the Great Aqueduct of Rome, in 101 A.D., provided five times that amount of water. Meigs was definitely a forward thinker!

Aside from the marvel the aqueduct itself would be, two other amazing engineering feats would be designed and built by Meigs over the next few years to support and augment this project. The Cabin John Bridge, constructed to span the Cabin John Valley, was a 220 foot single arch masonry bridge, a record size for this type of span that would stand for the next 40 years. The Cabin John Bridge continues to be used to this day for its original purpose, supporting the still functioning, original nine-foot diameter pipe, and, on top of that, a lane of automobile traffic has been added to it!

The other engineering wonder was the spanning of Rock Creek for 200 feet by two 48-inch diameter pipes supported by masonry abutments only at either end. These pipes are also still in use today, but in 1916 a reinforced concrete bridge was built over them to carry vehicular traffic...the Montgomery C. Meigs Bridge.

Captain Meigs was a bit egocentric and was very careful to have plaques with his name on them placed on both of these structures to indicate his direction of their design and construction. This little ego trait would evince itself later in his life, as well, as you will see. I think it's fair to say that he never missed a chance to toot his own horn.

By 1850, the Congress of the United States had grown along with the country and the old capitol building was just not capable any more of handling all the government entities that were housed in it. Congress

made a decision to expand the capitol and sponsored a \$500 competition for the design of a new, enlarged building, a prize which was eventually split between several people because Congressional “judges” did not like any one plan, so they adopted parts of several. The old adage of “the more things change, the more they stay the same” comes to mind!

At this point, President Fillmore appointed an architect to oversee the work in June of 1851. Chosen was Thomas Ustick Walter, a prominent Philadelphia architect. He and Meigs were to lock horns more than once and would end up having what can only be described as a rocky relationship over the next decade or so.

In 1852, even before Meigs was involved in this project, Walter was already the subject of some doubts as to his ability to do then job for which he had been hired. Then, in March of 1853, the new President, Franklin Pierce, became concerned about this and the seeming lack of direct government control over the project once Walter was “on board”, so he directed that the entire undertaking be placed in the hands of “a competent military officer”. Montgomery Meigs was, as fate usually handles these things, in the right place at the right time.

Both Pierce and his new Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, knew of the aqueduct project and were duly impressed with it. On April 4, 1853, Meigs was appointed by Pierce and directed to “*take charge of the public interests connected with the extension of the capitol and to take such measures as may be necessary for the proper execution of the work.*”

Concerns had been raised about the capability of the foundation to be able to support the finished building, and of the ventilation, heating and acoustic properties in Walter’s plan. Jefferson Davis then directed Meigs to examine these supposed deficiencies and report back to him and President Pierce with all due speed. Meigs, being a man of action, jumped right in and got the report done in time to take it to a commission and state that, indeed, there were problems in most areas. Davis distrusted Walter and was considering ousting him but Walter was, in the end, kept on due to the strong recommendations of Meigs himself. Meigs was a good friend of Davis’, both as West Point “comrades” and having worked together in the city for some time now. It is probable that Meigs was so new to the project that he simply felt Walter need to be “given a chance”. And, as long as Davis was the Secretary of War, until 1856 when the administration changed and Buchanan took office, he tolerated Walter in the position, even though Waiter began to constantly maneuver for control of the project...but then so was Meigs.

By 1854, Meigs wanted the new dome to be built of iron rather than wood, both for fire safety and structural integrity due to its massive size. He was in control enough to get this mandated and felt comfortable that the new dome would be finished in a few months. If you have seen the Brady photos of Lincoln’s first inaugural, you know that this did not happen. Mostly this was, at least early on, because Meigs and Walter began to squabble more and more. When Buchanan took office, he appointed a new Secretary of War, John Floyd. Floyd disliked Meigs intensely, so much so that, in June of 1859, he personally blocked the appointment of Meigs son, John Rodgers, to West Point. Meigs worked intently with every resource he knew in Washington and succeed in getting the appointment by September, 1859, but the feud with Floyd escalated even more. Both Walter and Meigs had huge egos, egos that demanded recognition. And Meigs, being a military man, could not suffer insubordination. But, alas, Walter was a civilian, so Meigs had little control over him in the end. In late 1859, Floyd, with Buchanan’s blessing,

simply removed Meigs from the capitol extension and dome project but left him to deal with the still-under-construction aqueduct.

By 1859, the budget for the aqueduct was exhausted down to a little over \$2.00 in the “bank”. Meigs used all his powers of persuasion and succeeded in getting Congress to pass a new appropriation of half a million dollars with the specific wording that it was “*to be expended according to the plans and estimates of Captain Meigs, and under his superintendence*”. This infuriated not only Floyd and Buchanan, but many of those in Congress. Meigs, as was his character, always told both Floyd and the president *exactly* what he thought even when he disagreed with them, but it was also in his make-up as a military man and a West Pointer to never disobey an order.

Floyd had had enough and, in September of 1860, he ordered Meigs to leave Washington and report to Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas, an isolated island facility off the southern tip of Florida which would gain fame in just a few years as the prison where Dr. Samuel Mudd would be confined after being convicted for his alleged involvement with the Booth conspiracy surrounding the assassination of Lincoln. Meigs, of course, obeyed and arrived there in early November. He was appalled at what he found and reported that both Ft. Jefferson and Fort Taylor at Key West were “*at the mercy of a party which could be transported in a fishing smack*”. Within hours of his arrival he began making changes to Ft. Jefferson and, by the first of February, 1861, had made it much safer by making many physical changes and by having new personnel brought in, including a U.S. artillery unit.

Returning to Washington was never far from Meigs mind, though, and, with the election of Lincoln and the change of government personnel that was soon to take place, he worked tirelessly at making this happen. In December, Secretary of War John Floyd resigned, most likely because facts were emerging of very questionable sales of muskets, cannons and other war materiel to southern states that were on the verge of, but had not yet, seceded. The wheels were set in motion to make Meigs return to his home in the capitol a reality. With Floyd gone and Buchanan nearly so, the pendulum of influence had swung back towards Meigs and, at the end of January, 1861, he was ordered back to Washington, reaching the city on February 20. He was immediately placed back in charge of the aqueduct project. In a letter to his father in February, he stated that “*One month more rids us of this iniquitous, imbecilic, traitorous, thievish administration*” and that, with secession already well under way, “*all thinking men would rejoice at the delivery of the American republic from the shackles in which the arrogant, overbearing South has long held it bound*”.

Meigs, perhaps thinking his reinstatement a bit more influential than he thought, quickly tried to get his old nemesis, Walter, fired, but failed when the new Secretary of War under Lincoln, Simon Cameron, refused to do so, although Cameron did state firmly that Walter was now Meigs’ subordinate in both the aqueduct and the capitol extension project. But Meigs long sought after and newly acquired control was not to last because of the looming conflict. With the country now at war, Congress thought it best to relieve the Secretary of War of the responsibility of finishing the capitol dome and extension, so they transferred control to the Department of the Interior in April, 1862. Ironically, the supervision of the project was handed back over to Architect Walter, because Meigs had been tapped to do something far more important and which would occupy his every waking hour for the entire four war years. Walter decided that the best thing to do was to get the capitol extension and the dome finished as quickly as possible, which he did. The Statue of Freedom was placed on the dome in a ceremony on December 2,

1862. Lincoln directed that a 35 gun artillery salute be fired at the moment of capping the dome...one for each of the 35 states in the Union, including, ironically, all of the states who had seceded. In the president's thinking, they had never been out of the Union, a belief that he stuck to until the end of his life.

THE WAR YEARS

During the latter half of April and all of May, 1861, the newly elected Lincoln recognized the need for someone to direct the supplying of what was clearly becoming a "war machine". He wanted Montgomery Meigs, now a Colonel, but his new Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, was not sure that Meigs was the right man. Lincoln *was* sure. On June 5, 1861, he wrote a note to Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, the Federal army commander:

A. Lincoln to Lt. Gen. Scott
June 5, 1861

Doubtless you begin to understand how disagreeable it is for me to do a thing arbitrarily when it is unsatisfactory to others associated with me.

I very much wish to appoint Col. Meigs quartermaster general, and yet Gen. Cameron does not quite consent. I have come to know Col. Meigs quite well for a short acquaintance, and, so far as I am capable of judging, I do not know one who combines the qualities of masculine intellect, learning, and experience of the right sort, and physical power of labor and endurance, so well as he.

I know he has great confidence in you, always sustaining, so far as I have observed, your opinions against any differing ones.

You will lay me under one more obligation if you can and will use your influence to remove Gen. Cameron's objection. I scarcely need tell you I have nothing personal in this, having never seen or heard of Col. Meigs until about the end of March.

Your obedient servant,

A.Lincoln

After Cameron's objections had been put aside and Lincoln got his wish, Meigs wrote to his father, on June 12:

A Major-General commands a Corps; a Lieutenant-General commands the whole army; but the Quartermaster-General supplies the means of moving that army and his command extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Lakes to the Gulf, and, in doing so, was in "second place not in the military rank but in actual real influence over the war".

Meigs had hoped to become a field general in the new army, thus he was disappointed when all he received upon his new appointment was a colonelcy, especially when many of his colleagues and classmates at West Point had already been named generals, both for the North and the South. But, as always he was the good soldier and kept quiet, saying that "*The office should seek the man, not the man the office*". It is possible however, that this was a strong factor in reinforcing his opinion of those who had left the Union for Confederate commands:

"No man who ever took the oath to support the Constitution as an officer of our army or navy, a Graduate of West Point, a member of Congress or the cabinet, and who has since actively engaged in rebellion in any civil or military station should escape without loss of all his goods and civil rights and expatriation.

The leaders should be put formally out of the way, if possible, by sentence of death, executed if ever caught”.

Lincoln, now faced with the loss of Sumter, decided that Ft. Pickens off Pensacola “*should be reinforced so as to dispel any impression that the United States was recognizing secession as a ‘fait accompli’*”. He sent Meigs there because of his familiarity with the area from his recent trip through that part of Florida on his way to the Dry Tortugas. In the end, his excellent plan, presented to the president in a rush, was not able to be implemented because the war was moving too quickly, but Ft. Pickens stayed in Union hands throughout the entire war.

Meigs was immediately included in all councils of war and became an advisor at the highest level. After only a month in his new position, he had dispersed 39,000 men, ordered hundreds of rifled guns and had totally changed the system so that the government paid for a cavalryman’s horse rather than the soldier having to foot the bill himself. At the end of August he was only a witness to the rout of First Bull Run, although his son, John Rodgers, was a participant. Meigs missed nothing, though, and, knowing the need the army would continue to have for supplies and the quantities left on the battlefield at Manassas, he sent forces out to salvage everything they could. Of 400 wagons sent into the campaign, all but 13 ended up being saved because of his foresight.

Meanwhile, in the western theater, General John C. Fremont had been put in charge of Missouri, but word soon got back to Washington that things were not well there. Fremont was pompous and egotistical, even moreso than most general officers, and had set up a “court” in St’ Louis, much like Napoleon. In early September, 1861, Meigs was sent, along with Montgomery Blair, to “inspect”. They found a myriad of problems. Fremont was spending extravagantly on new forts, buying poorly made tents, building shoddy gun-boats and more. He lived in St. Louis and virtually never left the city, letting federal forces in the field suffer. He was allowing his wife to live an extravagant lifestyle in the city, as well. Meigs and Blair sent all of this information to Washington, and it is fair to say that his quick action in reporting back saved the west for the Union. Fremont was relieved of command in early November.

Perhaps explaining his earlier dislike for Meigs as the Quartermaster General, Simon Cameron, Lincoln’s Secretary of War, was really a politician and not a military man or even a very good administrator. He tended to ignore regular army procedures, absolute anathema to Meigs. He appointed a friend, Thomas Scott, to head the vital area of organizing the railroads. Scott had connections to the Penn Central line, and Cameron himself to the North Central, leaving many to question their motives. Eventually, a House committee found enough fraud, corruption, inattention and favoritism to get Cameron removed and sent to Russia as the new ambassador. Meigs never wholly condemned Cameron, but thought he “*meant well but was weak and inform of purpose*”.

Fraud was always a worry and many in Congress were aware of this. To control this problem, Congress sought to pass a law requiring a written contract to be drawn up and signed for every purchase, no matter how small, but Meigs successfully opposed this, knowing that such a law would hamstring him in getting supplies to armies in the field in a quick and orderly fashion. He needed the independence to buy on his own signature. As an example, he almost single-handedly arranged for the increase of horses and mules in the army from about 16,000 when the war started to over half a million by 1862.

Other examples of, problems faced by Meigs early-on were:

- Clothing- Thousands of new uniforms were needed, so the army initially took almost anything it could get its hands on, but this resulted in too many friendly fire incidents, so 10,000 women were hired to work at a Philadelphia clothing depot. Soon, similar depots were quickly set up in New York, Boston, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Detroit and Springfield, Ill. and the word “uniform” began to have some meaning.
- Blankets were so scarce that in early October, 1861, Meigs actually put out a call for civilians to donate any they might have to the army. Troops were advised to bring their own blankets when recruited, although the government did provide most of the vitally important waterproof gum blankets used for ponchos, ground covers and tents.
- Horses and mules were the “fossil fuel engines” of the army, and the best way to get them early on was to seize them from the enemy troops and from Southern homes and farms and plantations. In 1862, almost 200,000 horses and mules were obtained in this way.
- And, if you have horses and mules, they have to be fed. A horse needed 14 pounds of hay and 12 pounds of grain a day...a soldier only needed three. The quartermaster needed to provide 2.5 million bushels of grain and 5,000 tons of hay a month to keep the army moving. Meigs quickly set up an efficient system of getting this massive amount of forage to the field.

Meigs, Grant and even McClellan recognized immediately the need for controlling the rivers. To do this required gunboats. By mid-January, 1862, Meigs had arranged for seven new ironclad gunboats to be built and launched on the Mississippi, including the famed boats *Carondelet* and *Cairo* [Ed. Note: see the article on page 4 about the *Cairo* and Ed Bearss] along with two converted steamers. These were the critical pieces in Grants early 1862 campaigns for Forts Henry and Donelson.

By summer, 1862, Meigs was feeling fairly pleased with his accomplishments after only a few short months at the helm. The North now had control of 156,000 square miles, an area inhabited by three-million people. The army was up to 670,000 men from less than 20,000 before Sumter, and was controlling, more or less, an attack front of 1,000 miles. After Winfield Scott was replaced by George McClellan, Meigs was actually pleased, and there should be no surprise there. As we all know, Little Mac was a consummate organizer and he and Meigs complemented each other in that regard, at least in the beginning.

By early 1862, however, that honeymoon was ending and Meigs was beginning to have his doubts about McClellan. McClellan was promoting the Peninsula Campaign, but Meigs was opposed to it and favored a direct assault from the north on Confederate forces. This was not because he was a warmonger or overly aggressive, but because he could see that McClellan’s plan would be very lengthy, far from federal supply depots and extremely difficult to supply. And Meigs fears were borne out. When the Peninsula plan was approved and got under way, it was consuming 150 wagon loads of supplies daily. Meigs, ever the practical planner, was angry at McClellan for issuing orders to his troops against marauding while on the peninsula. Had this been allowed, it would have greatly relieved his need to supply Union troops at such a high level. Meigs was also furious at Jeb Stuart’s famous “ride around the Union army” because of what was lost. Stuart and his men captured and burned over thirty acres of wagons loaded with supplies for Union troops. In the end, Meigs thought the campaign a failure, not so much militarily, but because it ended any Union chance at advancing

on Richmond. After the Peninsula Campaign, there were simply not enough supplies to support such a move. Meigs made his feelings clear in a letter to his father on July, 8, 1862:

We have had a terrible reverse on the Peninsula. One which I have feared from the moment I learned that it was determined to move the army to that cul-de-sac.

Believe nothing you hear against the President & Secretary as responsible for this disaster. The true cause is the false military move which placed an army in a narrow peninsula where it was easily checked by inferior forces until the gathering hordes of a barbarous people driven by a wide-sweeping conscription enforced by a merciless military despotism...overwhelmed[ed] our gallant freemen decimated...by malaria & mud & storms & toil.

This not time, however...for criticism...If the administration has erred it has been by permitting Gen. McClellan to adopt a false line of operations & by not appreciating the immense waste of men attending such operations as we have carried on during the campaign.

God punishes us for our sins

After Pope was placed in command following the Peninsula, then lost at Second Bull Run, Meigs was still struggling with his love/hate relationship with McClellan, feeling that he was not necessarily the right person for command, but that he simply saw no one worthier waiting in the wings. Then, when Little Mac was reinstated, Meigs immediately began grumbling again about McClellan's slow pace, always eating up more supplies than a mobile force would have used. He was never afraid to give McClellan advice, as he did when his frustration level rose to a climax as the Army of the Potomac moved out of Washington toward Maryland. He was tired of supplying the army with troops and supplies that were then mismanaged in the field.

I believe there are with the army under your command not less than 6,000 wagons, drawn by 30,000 animals, and yet such is the confusion that it is impossible this morning at once the supplies called for by your requisition...[R]egiments ordered to march...should [not] allowed, in all, more than one wagon to 80 men, including officers. The extra wagons, now filled with officers' baggage, should be emptied, and the officers compelled to move without this unnecessary load.

McClellan began blaming his slowness on the Quartermaster Department not sending him enough supplies and horses and implying that was why he lost at Antietam. Meigs rebutted this criticism to Secretary of War Stanton by showing that he had supplied the army with an average of 1,500 horses a week from September 1 until October 11, not the 150 per week that McClellan had claimed he got. And General Halleck himself determined that virtually every requisition that McClellan had asked for had been filled immediately.

When Lincoln had finally had enough of McClellan and relieved him for a second time on November 11, Meigs attributed his downfall to "*his swelling up, outgrowing advice, becoming pompous, and wanting to be surrounded by courtiers, aides and retinues. He commanded from the rear instead of the front and was always afraid that if he actually got into a fight, some of his men, if not himself, might get hurt*".

Going into 1863, Meigs bragged in a letter to his father that he was not "wedded to any one army", and did, indeed, keep both the eastern and western Union armies, each having over 100,000 men, steadily supplied. Liking aggressive leaders, he was initially impressed with Rosecrans victory (or at least a costly stalemate) at Stones River and thought he should be awarded \$5,000 a year for life as an incentive to other generals to act with "similar vigor". But soon, the honeymoon with this Union

general was again over. Rosecrans began going over Meigs head and asking Halleck for supplies directly. Meigs could not abide anyone who ignored the proper channels of military re-supplying. And, Rosecrans began clearly exaggerating Confederate troop strengths, just as McClellan had done.

By fall, 1862, the Army of the Potomac was gobbling up about 500 tons of supplies a day, and, after John Reynolds had refused to take McClellan's place at the head of the Army of the Potomac, Ambrose Burnside had been placed in command. Fredericksburg was looming on the horizon and the incident of the delivery (or non-delivery) of the now famous pontoon bridges became a political football, with Burnside blaming Meigs for not getting them to the Rappahannock on time. Meigs responded that he had sent them out in a timely manner but that field commanders along the way had been responsible for their delay.

This kind of seemingly constant squabbling began to get Meigs somewhat depressed by early 1863, and it didn't help when a few Senators began to question his loyalty because of his pre-war close friendship with Jefferson Davis. Was this the reason, some thought, that supplies were allegedly slow in arriving? Was this the reason why the pontoons were supposedly late? Fortunately, Meigs had more supporters than detractors. When Senator James Lane of Kansas accused Meigs of disloyalty on the Senate floor in late January, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts came to the Quartermaster General's defense and told Lane that Meigs was as loyal as Lane:

A question has been raised here about the loyalty of General Meigs, and why? It is said that he was Jeff Davis' friend, and Jeff Davis was his patron. I do not think there is anything in that. Jefferson Davis stood by General Meigs when John B. Floyd undertook to crush him. Floyd was not only a traitor but a thief, and left the government only when there seemed nothing more for him to steal. Davis was not a thief, but a traitor to the country. I do not think any of us ever accused Jeff Davis of being connected dishonorably with money affairs, or, in the ordinary matters of legislation, to be a corrupt man; but we knew that Floyd was partial and corrupt. In the controversy that General Meigs had with Floyd, he was sustained by Jefferson Davis. He was also sustained by nearly all of us on this side of the Chamber. As to the loyalty of General Meigs, I do not think there is a man in America who has a right to question it.

The summer of 1863 brought both Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The Army of the Potomac had been well supplied going in to Gettysburg, so Meigs main function there was to see, after the battle was over, that all supplies used in the battle especially, horses that were lost, were replenished. By July 6th, 5,000 fresh mounts were on their way to Meade. Meigs also sent two officers to the battlefield immediately after the fight ended to gather "all property left by both armies". Again, he didn't miss an opportunity to re-supply in any way he could.

The Vicksburg campaign was a different story and one which made Meigs happy. When Grant moved from Jackson to Vicksburg, he used what was called a "flying column", essentially meaning that he was living off the land on the way. This allowed him to move with incredible speed, going over 200 miles without any sort of wagon train. And once he surrounded Pemberton in the city, he could continue to forage and use the river for supplies. This one was an "easy" one for the quartermasters. Grant immediately went on his "A" list. Meigs had found a general he could like.

With Gettysburg and Vicksburg behind him, and things "quiet" for a couple of months, Meigs went on a western inspection tour. While this was under way, Rosecrans, his nemesis from Stones River, was forced back into Chattanooga by Longstreet after nearly being annihilated at Chickamauga. The Army of the Cumberland desperately needed re-supply. Since Meigs was already in the west, Stanton ordered him to Rosecrans headquarters with "all dispatch" to refit the army. Meigs immediately sent

1,000 horses from Indianapolis, followed rapidly by 411 six-mule teams (2400 animals), 150 four-horse teams (600) and 150 two-horse ambulances (300). Stanton was pleased with this accomplishment and ordered Meigs to establish his HQ in Chattanooga with Rosecrans army “for nearer and more personal attention to the work”. He gave Meigs a blank check to work with.

The army was soon cut off at Chattanooga, and Meigs masterminded the march on and capture of Brown’s Ferry, on the river north and west of Chattanooga, again not so much as a field general, but so that supplies from Nashville and points west could get to their destination without having to navigate the Tennessee River beneath the Confederate forces on Lookout Mountain. This enabled the army to launch the Battles of Lookout Mountain, Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge, all of which Meigs watched in utter fascination. He was in awe of Grant’s ability as a commander and the way he used his troops and supplies. After bringing in his top quartermasters from Baltimore, Kansas and St. Louis to keep Grant supplied and moving, Meigs was confident the situation was in good hands and returned to Washington at the end of December, 1863.

From early to mid-1864, things were relatively quiet for Meigs. His biggest problem during this interlude was to “ramp back” some of the field commanders like George Thomas who, aware of Meigs reputation to be able to quickly re-supply, made totally ridiculous requests. Thomas asked for 3,000 wagons, 4,000 horses and 23,000 mules to refit an already well-outfitted, and currently idle, army. Meigs did take the time during this period to beef up the railroads for what he was sure was a strong future need in the final campaigns of the war, adding 675 cars in May, 1864, soon followed by another 1056 cars and almost 100 locomotives. In his zeal for efficiency, Meigs managed to infuriate Thomas by suggesting that soldiers should also be laborers on the railroads, both to get the work done sooner and for their health. “*Properly organized*”, he said, “*the soldiers are no less efficient for doing a few hours of work a day. Their health is better and they are better contented than lying idle in camp for weeks*”. General Thomas was not amused and refused. Meigs lost this argument when Stanton ordered him to leave Thomas’ soldiers to Thomas. Meigs even suggested the use of POWs for this kind of labor, again for many of the same reasons, noting there were perhaps 40,000-50,000 of them that would be “*more happy and healthy for the exercise*”. Again, this idea went nowhere.

Having been somewhat rebuffed and a little stir-crazy in Washington, Meigs pleaded to Grant and Stanton to be allowed to accompany the Army of the Potomac as it began the offensive. He predicted that Grant’s move “*would thunder all around the heavens*”, and wanted mightily to be there “*when the death blow was given to the rebellion*”. Meigs viewed the earlier western time he spent with Rosecrans army almost like a hunting trip, and he longed for a change from the demands of the capitol. Unfortunately, Stanton did not feel he could spare him and denied the request.

Both of the Union armies progressed steadily in 1864, although William Tecumseh Sherman was doing so a bit more methodically than Grant and Meade were in the east. His army moved inexorably toward Atlanta, and one of the main reasons was the excellent supply chain that had been set up by Meigs by sending Sherman one of his best men, Landon Easton, to be the on-site Quartermaster General of the army. Easton moved along with it as it campaigned. He performed brilliantly and Sherman gave him great credit for the eventual success of the Atlanta campaign. At the same time, Grant and Meade were slicing through Virginia and also needed a good steady base of supply. They, along with Meigs, chose City Point, northeast of Petersburg on the James River. This also became

Grant's personal headquarters for the rest of the war. Go to City Point today and you can see the humble cabin that Grant lived in, sometimes with family members, while the great war machine hummed all around him.

City Point quickly became a massive and complex base of operations, receiving, on average, 40 steamboats, 75 sailing vessels and 100 barges per day. All of these combined to bring in 600 tons of grain and hay daily, which was then distributed quickly and efficiently to the force in the field. City Point eventually boasted wheelwrights, carpenters, blacksmiths, saddlers, teamsters and clerks totaling 1600 men, as well as 2,000-3,000 construction laborers. It became a well-oiled war engine, providing the Army of the Potomac with the unending power it needed to get the job done even in the face of occasional and horrific setbacks like Cold Harbor. Grant never wavered in his thanks at the zeal and efficiency of the Quartermaster Corps and its leader that kept the army on the offensive.

In 1864, Meigs finally had his brief, albeit small, chance at leading troops into combat during this period when Jubal Early's Confederate army threatened the city of Washington. With the regular army many miles south on campaign and Early advancing on the city, Meigs rounded up 1,500 members of the Quartermaster Corps in Washington who, along with old boys and young men, fought a small (*very* small, actually) skirmish and beat off a portion of Early's forces. While Meigs was understandably proud of his little "army", they were ordered back to the city and to regular duty when the crisis had past. Meigs, however, continued to hold daily drills with these men until the end of the war.

The Shenandoah Valley had always been of great interest to Meigs, not only because of its proximity to Washington, but also because his son, John Rodgers, an 1863 graduate of West Point, was serving there as a staff officer. On October 6, 1864, when Stanton personally arrived at the front door of Meigs house and asked him to "step outside for a moment", his somber tone made Meigs think that perhaps Grant had fallen or maybe something had happened to the president. But it was worse. Stanton sadly informed Meigs that his son, John, had been killed while on a plotting expedition with two comrades in the Valley when they ran into a group of three Confederates on patrol. Stanton told Meigs that his son was "one of the youngest and brightest of the military profession who had fallen victim to murderous rebel warfare". John Rodgers Meigs' body was returned to Washington where Stanton, Halleck, Seward and Lincoln all attended his funeral.

On November 15, 1864, Sherman began his famous March to the Sea. Meigs, anticipating that when Sherman reached Atlanta after living off the land for six weeks or more, having supplies on hand for his army would be necessary and critical, so he ordered a wide range of materiel to be warehoused on Hilton Head Island, just a few miles away but already in Union hands. Waiting for Sherman's men were 30,000 coats and trowsers; 60,000 shirts and drawers; 100,000 pairs of shoes and boots; 20,000 caps and blankets; 10,000 greatcoats and waterproof blankets; 10,000 tents, knapsacks and canteens; 100 hospital tents; 5,000 axes (two handles each!); 2,000 kettles, pans spades and picks; and on and on. Sherman's army would want for nothing.

Meigs was anxious for Sherman to be able to "*eat out the bowels of South Carolina with its aristocracy and devotion to slavery*". His part in this crusade was to provide the means to do just that.

Meigs had always been concerned with the president's safety. Before Lincoln's second inaugural, he expressed his concern in a hopeful statement, concluding in the last line what would turn out to be, a year hence, a prophetic error. He said:

Tomorrow or every day he lives at the mercy of any returned fanatic. Any deserter or pretended deserter. To take precautions would be to change the whole custom of society here. Not only for the President but for every high officer & official. Everybody is always accessible. Nobody is guarded or armed except in the lines of fortifications & excepting the prisons & prisoners. The American people do not lean toward assassination.

After Grant finally chased Lee down to a little courthouse in central Virginia and accepted his surrender at Appomattox on April 9th, 1865, the country began to rejoice at the end of the war. Meigs went to his office on Friday, April 14th, 1865, and later attended Good Friday services, noting later that "*the country was drunk with joy*". Then he got word that Secretary Seward had been violently attacked and almost killed in his home which was only three blocks from Meigs own house. He walked those three blocks to see what, if anything, he could learn and perhaps offer assistance. Soon Stanton and Gideon Wells arrived and, before long, they learned that Lincoln had been shot, so they took a carriage together to Ford's Theater and found the awful scene that awaited them there. Meigs ended that night acting as the gatekeeper to the Peterson House, across the street from the theater, where Lincoln was taken and would eventually die the next morning. With the president's death, Meigs lost perhaps the greatest supporter and best friend he had in the country. This insane act embittered him even more to the South. His attitude now, going into the days immediately after the war ended, was that there should be "*no compromise or soft measures with traitors and murderers of loyal people and institutions*". His major disgust was not with the common soldier, but with leaders of the South, the planter aristocracy and *especially* any West Point graduates who "*had taken an oath to defend the Constitution, were given a public education and, when an enemy arose, hastened to join them*".

POST WAR

With the war now over and Lincoln gone, Meigs proved as efficient at winding down the great military machine as he had been at building it. He immediately saw several things he could do to save the government money which it really did not have, being deeply in debt with wartime expenditures. One clever frugality was, whenever possible, to discharge the men in the field where they stood rather than sending them back home to be mustered out. That way, the government did not have to keep paying them while they were transported back home! And while the government did pay to get them home, he made sure as much of this movement as possible was done by rail and water to get it done faster than slowly marching them home and having to feed and billet them continuously along the way. On August 7, 1865, over 640,000 men had been mustered out; by November 25, 800,000 and by January, 1866, almost a million were gone. From May through October, 54,000 horses and mules were sold, a monetary gain that greatly aided the treasury.

ARLINGTON

Washington saw a lot of death in the war years since the hostilities were so close at hand, and because of its huge numbers of men both in service around the city and in hospitals there, having been sent to them to heal from the battlefields of Virginia. It soon became apparent that something had to be done about properly burying the dead not claimed by families, and the Quartermaster Corps was assigned

the task. By early 1864, several small cemeteries had been dotted around the edges of the city, but a substantial, centralized location was needed to provide a good and, unfortunately due to the large numbers, efficient space for the purpose.

While there may be some legend to the story of Montgomery Meigs and Arlington National Cemetery, there is no denying that at least part of the story is fact. Meigs allegedly engineered a closed auction for the land that had been Robert E. Lee's estate directly across the river from Washington...an auction with only one bidder...the U.S. government. The "winning bid" was about \$27,000 and the government took title to 400 acres (today it is, of course, much larger). Meigs did this, it is said, because he firmly believed his one-time colleague, Lee, to now be nothing more than a traitor, and he did not want him to be able to ever return to his ancestral land and home. The first burial at Arlington was on May 13, 1864. In June, Meigs was said to have personally supervised the reburial of 20 or so graves in "Mrs. Lee's rose garden" so that, if the Lee's ever did return, they would be "sleeping among ghosts".

A "Role of Honor" of those in the Washington area was ordered by Meigs to be created in book form. It included the names of all those buried in the National cemeteries of the city, including Arlington. Engraved on the cover was a favorite poem of Meigs which began:

In fame's eternal camping ground
Their silent tents are spread
And glory guards with solemn round
The bivouac of the dead.

This poem, *The Bivouac of the Dead*, which goes on for many verses, is a standard feature displayed on plaques in every national cemetery to this day.

Meigs' boundless ego and his desire to have his family name chiseled into the memory of the nation, led to the construction in the years after the war of the McClellan Arch at the main entrance. The name "Meigs" is prominently carved on the left column supporting the arch as you enter the cemetery. The street entering Arlington from the west is Meigs Drive. Arlington was almost immediately adopted by the American people as a sacred and hallowed place. It played a major role in the first Decoration Day on May 30, 1868. Congress declared that day to be a national holiday and renamed it Memorial Day in 1888. All of this traces back to the determination of Montgomery Meigs to honor the war dead he had been entrusted to care for.

THE POST WAR YEARS

After the war ended, the Quartermaster Corps began to shrink to a comparatively miniscule size almost immediately. Meigs remained the Quartermaster General, but there was certainly not as much for him to do once the military machine had been dismantled. One of the things he was *not* afraid to

do, with more time to speak out and be a little political, was to again express his feelings toward the South. He made no bones about what to do with the Southern leaders...*"string them up, starting with Lee and Davis!"* And his antipathy was not reserved to the male of the species. When someone lamented the plight of the widows of the South, his response was instant and firm...*"Let the rebels take care of their own widows. They have filled the North's hands with its own."* He also volunteered his own idea on how to resolve the slavery/freedman issue. He proposed seizing all southern lands worth more than \$20,000 in exchange for a pardon for the owners, then parceling the land to freedmen, another of his novel ideas that was never seriously considered.

As time wore on and tempers from the war cooled, the Quartermaster Corps ended up having two main functions. The first was to assist in whatever way directed by the Congress and the President with Reconstruction in the South. The other was to provide support for the protection of the hordes of emigrants swarming into the West. As a product of his military background, not to mention the times, Meigs opinion of Indians in the West was that they were *"predatory and hostile savages who murder our men and violate our women with all of the aggressiveness of savage barbarity"*. Meigs was not one to be soft in his opinions. The Corps also, interestingly enough, spent a considerable amount of time and effort providing support from 1869-1871 for troops sent to Tennessee to control the Ku Klux Klan.

Time without the demands of war also allowed Meigs to attempt many innovations for the military, some of which worked and some of which did not. In 1880, the Corps tested a non-wheeled travois, a three-poled device dragged behind horses or wagons much like Indians used for transportation on the plains. This would have avoided the need for as many wagons and the constant service they required. Perhaps because this was not a great success, metal hubs were later adopted for all wagons. And, an interesting little piece of trivia is that the U.S. Quartermaster Corps under Meigs was the first government entity to adopt and promote the use of fire extinguishers.

In 1882, Meigs turned 65. He was definitely not thinking of retirement. But the new President, James Garfield, ordered him to leave office (the President had the right to do this by law) and Meigs was replaced eventually with Rufus Ingalls, the Quartermaster who had travelled with Grant's army during the Virginia campaign and performed so brilliantly. Perhaps this was due to Grant's influence by then as an ex-president, but, if that was the case, Meigs never showed any animosity to the former commander he so greatly admired. Meigs publicly praised Grant highly just before Grant's death from throat cancer in 1885 and never said a negative word about him for the rest of his own life.

Even before he was forced into "retirement", Meigs began to pursue many other personal interests outside the realm of the government and military. He joined an odd group of men in Washington called the Saturday Club, comprised of many of the most learned men of the time in Washington. Their sole purpose was to meet periodically, discuss deep scientific and other topics and occasionally exchange papers on them. He also sat on the board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution and was personally instrumental in establishing the National Zoo. He was also invited to be on the National Academy of Sciences, where he was vitally interested in collecting weather data to study climate. And, acting as an engineering expert, he sat on the board of commissioners that studied and declared the Washington Monument to be safe to have construction finished, which was accomplished in 1885. There had been grave concerns about the foundation of the long-neglected, half-finished icon both

because of Washington's famously swampy soil and the fact that the monument had been exposed to the elements for over 20 years due to the war.

But the crowning achievement of his post quartermaster life was to be named as the supervisor of construction for the new Pension Building in Washington, a considerable piece of work since pensions for war veterans had been and would be, until the turn of the next century, a major issue for thousands of men. The construction of the building began in 1882 and took five years to complete. It was the largest brick building in the world when finished, with over fifteen million bricks. Its impressive interiors and facades became the talk of Washington. When the pension claims finally dwindled out in the next century, the building began a long period of disuse and decline. Fortunately, in the late 20th century, a movement started to save the old "lady" and it was finally refurbished as the National Building Museum. Today its magnificent columned atrium hosts many lavish events such as receptions and inaugural balls.

There is no question that Meigs was a man with a huge impact on the history of our nation at perhaps its most critical crossroad. Congressman James G. Blaine perhaps best summed Meigs service to his nation up when he said in 1886, "*Montgomery C. Meigs, one of the ablest graduates of the Military Academy, was kept from the command of troops by the inestimably important services he performed as Quartermaster-General. Perhaps in the military history of the world there was never so large an amount of money disbursed on the order of a single man. The aggregate sum could not have been less during the war than fifteen hundred millions of dollars, accurately vouched and accounted for to the last cent.*"

On January 2, 1892, Montgomery Meigs was struck with a sudden illness in his Washington home and died at age 75, a loyal and determined soldier who had finally finished his duty to his country. After a service at his church, Meigs body was transported to Arlington National Cemetery on a caisson draped in the national colors. Reflecting his stature in the city he had called home for four decades, the procession was worthy of a president, with 150 cavalymen, batteries of artillery and hundreds of infantrymen escorting the body. He was laid to rest in a sarcophagus immediately behind the Custis-Lee Mansion in Section #1, Grave #1, alongside his wife and son. It is an easy site to find if you visit Arlington today. The inscription on his tombstone reads simply:

Soldier Engineer Architect Scientist Patriot

[Note: Most of the information in this piece was taken from the excellent, and most recent, biography of Meigs, *Second Only to Grant*, by David W. Miller. Other sources were *This Business of War; Recollections of a Civil War Quartermaster*, by Minnesotan William G. LeDuc, a quartermaster in Meigs command.]