

# Huntsville Historical Review

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Volume 40 | Number 2

Article 5

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10-1-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Lady, David L. (2015) "The Birney Brothers of Huntsville, Alabama," *Huntsville Historical Review*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol40/iss2/5>

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**The Birney Brothers  
Of Huntsville, Alabama**  
*Raised as unionists and abolitionists,  
These brothers took their convictions to war.*

**David L. Lady**

Although William and David Birney were born in Madison County, both served as United States Army generals during the American Civil War. Older brother William was born in Huntsville in 1819, and David on a plantation outside of Huntsville in 1825.

The boys were the sons of James G. Birney, a rich Kentucky planter, newspaper publisher, and Presidential candidate. James came to Alabama to practice law and to farm. He was very successful and served as mayor of Huntsville from 1829-1830. As he grew into middle age, his evolving religious beliefs caused him to adopt an anti-slavery attitude. James became one of the most notable of Southern abolitionists and he became a southern agent for the American Colonization Society in 1832. Within a year he resigned, disillusioned with the Society's scheme of gradual emancipation based on ideas of racial inferiority. 1833 the family returned to Kentucky where James emancipated their slaves, and then moved to Ohio and Pennsylvania. James' views on emancipation continued to evolve, as he came to espouse first gradual and then immediate emancipation of all slaves in the United States.

Convinced of the importance of united action by all opponents of slavery, he moved to Cincinnati in 1836, and established the newspaper *Philanthropist*, one of the first anti-slavery papers in the Midwest. The growth of Birney's influence in the anti-slavery movement is evident in his correspondence and pamphleteering, as well as in his many public lectures. He resigned as editor of *The Philanthropist* in 1837 and moved to New York to become the corresponding secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Birney saw the need for a new political party whose sole purpose was to promote the abolition of slavery, and with his leadership, the Liberty Party was founded in 1840. As its presidential candidate in 1840 and 1844, Birney argued that neither the Bible nor the Constitution supported slavery.

Birney retired from public life after the election of 1844, although he continued to write occasional articles for the anti-slavery press. James' beliefs and examples inspired both his sons to become politically active in the Republican Party, which was founded in the 1850s, and espoused several of the anti-slavery policies of the Liberty Party. With the election of Abraham



**William Birney (1819 - 1907)**

Lincoln to the Presidency and the secession crisis, both William and David entered the Union Army and became the most distinguished of Huntsville's four generals in blue.

### **WILLIAM BIRNEY**

**A scholar who enlisted black regiments and led them to battle**

Following the family's move north, William was educated at four colleges including Yale, became fluent in thirteen languages, and first worked as a lawyer. Moving to Europe, he was a professor of literature in England and France. William returned to United States in 1853, and worked as newspaper publisher of *The Daily Register* in Pennsylvania.

In 1861 he entered the 1<sup>st</sup> New Jersey (NJ) Infantry as a Captain, and led his company at the First Battle of Bull Run. He was later appointed to be Major of the 4th NJ Infantry, but quickly became their Colonel, leading the regiment at Chancellorsville. Many suspected that he owed his promotion to political influence for... 'as a combat soldier, he was a fine linguist.'<sup>1</sup>

After Chancellorsville, William was reassigned to the Union forces garrisoning Baltimore, Maryland, a loyal slave state. The Union Army encouraged slave owners to free their slaves in order to enlist them into regiments of United States Colored Troops (USCT). When slave holders proved reluctant to release their male slaves in order to enlist, William Birney put his abolitionist beliefs into action by actively recruiting African-Americans, whether enslaved by “loyal” or “secesh” owners. On July 24, 1863, three weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, he was among the Union officers who freed the inmates of a slave trader's jail on Pratt Street near the Baltimore harbor. They found a grisly scene. The slaves were confined in sweltering cells or in the bricked-in yard of “Cam-liu's slave-pen,” where “*no tree or shrub grows*” and “*the mid-day sun pours down its scorching rays*,”<sup>2</sup> Birney wrote. Among those imprisoned was a 4-month-old born in the jail and a 24-month-old who had spent all but the first month of his life behind bars. “*In this place I found 26 men, 1 boy, 29 women and 3 infants*,” Col. Birney wrote to his commanding officer. “*Sixteen of the men were shackled and one had his legs chained together by ingeniously contrived locks connected by chains suspended to his waist*.”<sup>3</sup> The liberation of the slave jails marked the end of Baltimore's slave trade.

Benefiting from influential friends in the Lincoln administration and the Congress, William Birney was in 1863 appointed Colonel of the 22d United States Colored Troops (USCT), and was soon appointed Brigadier General and made one of three ‘superintendents’ employed in enlisting escaped slaves into Federal regiments; in less than a year he had enlisted seven USCT regiments.

Among these regiments was the Fourth USCT, initially part of the garrison of Baltimore, Maryland. On 20th July, 1863, two companies of the 4th USCT (Companies ‘A’ and ‘B,’ which had been in uniform for only five days), represented the United States Army at a garrison flag presentation ceremony. General Birney

made the presentation speech. The following excerpt indicates his strong feelings for free blacks enlisting in the US Army:

*“The flag they present you today, is in token of their loyalty. Their hearts are true. Whoever else may be swayed from duty, the black remains firm. Pluck him from the very core of rebeldom and he is a true man. You may trust him. All his aspirations are for the success of the right, the triumph of the nation. For him the success of traitors is his own degradation, the dishonor of his family, the doom of his race to perpetual infamy.”<sup>4</sup>*

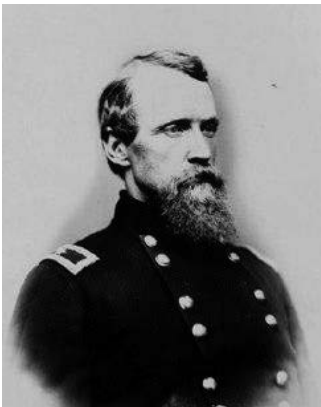
In 1864 he led a brigade of USCT to the Department of the South, becoming the commanding general of the Federal District of Florida. Later he and his brigade went with the Tenth Army Corps to Virginia as part of the Army of the James. He led his brigade without much distinction in the battles around Bermuda Hundred and north of the James River during the siege of Petersburg. In December, 1864 his brigade was assigned to the 2d Division of the all-USCT Twenty-Fifth Army Corps and he soon was appointed to command a division. In 1865 General Birney ran afoul of his Corps and later Army Commander, Major General Edward O.C Ord, who considered him a mediocre commander and a poor disciplinarian, and had initially opposed to employing USCT regiments in combat).

William Birney's division was included in the detachment of the Army of the James that was moved south of the Appomattox River by General Ord to strengthen the final assault of Petersburg. Following the fall of Petersburg and Richmond, Ord led these units in pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia.

On April 7th, 1865 (two days before Lee's surrender), General Birney was relieved of duty by General Ord and sent to take command of the army depot at City Point, Virginia. Ord stated that he wanted the black units under his best commanders for the

final fight with the Army of Northern Virginia. The two brigades of Birney's former division were each assigned to other Federal divisions and the both fought the next day as part of the battle-line which repulsed the Army of Northern Virginia's final attack of the war at Appomattox Court House. Although General Birney wrote political sponsors protesting the injustice of his relief, no action was taken to restore him to another command. With the end of the war he resigned his volunteer commission and left the military.

William Birney was brevetted Major General in the post-war mass brevet-promotion of deserving officers (Brevets were honorary promotions in recognition of good service, there being no military awards for 'distinguished service' at this time). He resided in Florida and later Washington DC after the war, where he served as a US Attorney for the District of Columbia. Although he remained proud of his service to abolitionism and the Union, and published a very popular biography of his father, he no longer actively supported African-American causes. He died in 1907 at his home in Forest Glen, Maryland.



David Birney (1825-1864)

## **DAVID BIRNEY**

### **A Political General, but also a Fighter**

Younger brother David was educated in Massachusetts and then practiced law in Philadelphia. Like his father he was prominent in the abolitionist movement and the pre-war Republican Party.

In 1861 he raised the 23d Pennsylvania (PA) Infantry Regiment, largely at his own expense. Initially appointed as Lieutenant Colonel, 23d PA, he was promoted to Colonel in August, 1861. Although a non-professional, he was

promoted to Brigadier General in 1862. As a ‘political general,’ he was much resented within the Army of the Potomac for his support of the Republican Party, the abolitionist movement, and for being critical of Army commander Major General George McClellan. Serving as regimental and later brigade commander with the Army of the Potomac’s Third Corps, Birney was befriended by Generals Phil Kearney and Joe Hooker, who were also harsh critics of General McClellan.

Birney’s aggressive seeking of political support for promotion made him very unpopular with his fellow officers despite his proven competence. Theodore Lyman, a Federal staff officer, described him in this way:

*“He was a pale, Puritanical figure, with a demeanor of unmoveable coldness; only he would smile politely when you spoke to him. He was spare in person, with a thin face, light-blue eyes, and sandy hair. As a General he took very good care of his Staff and saw they got due promotion. He was a man, too, who looked out for his own interests sharply and knew the mainspring of military advancement. His unpopularity among some persons arose partly from his own promotion, which, however he deserved, and partly from his cold covert manner.”*<sup>5</sup>

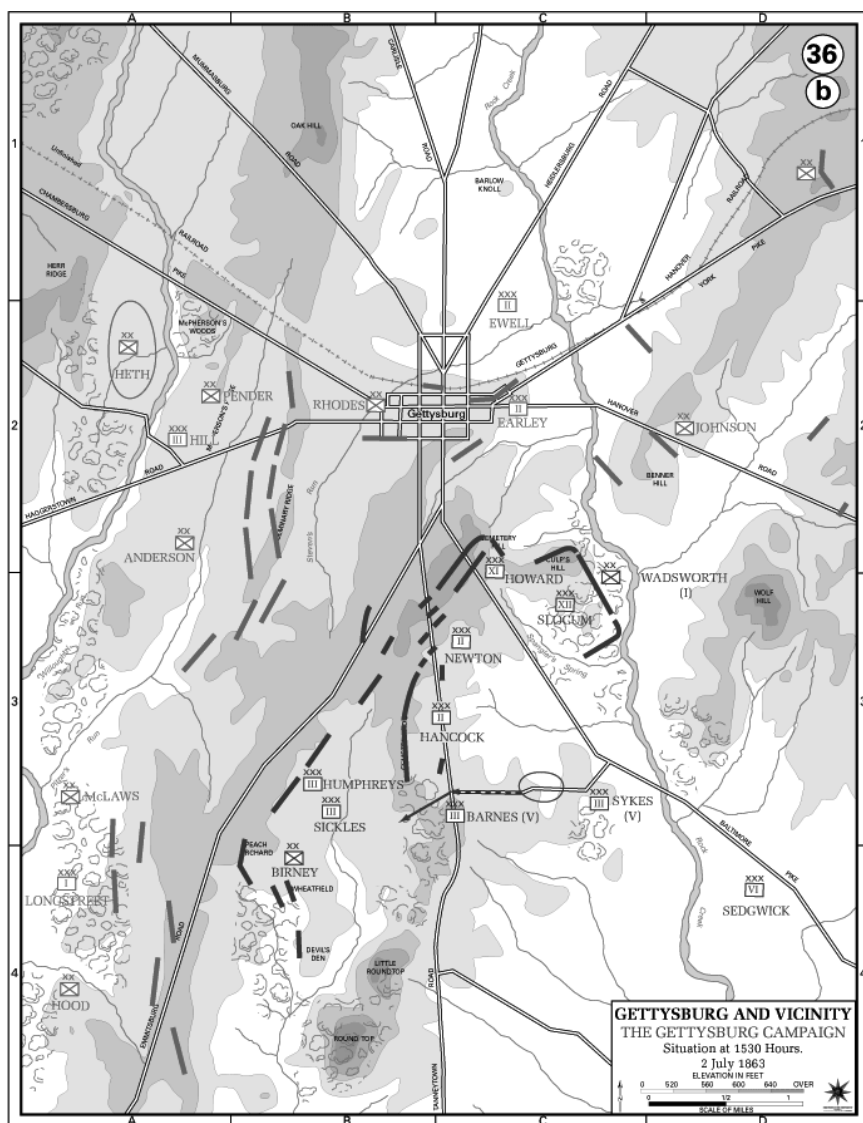
David Birney was noted as a good disciplinarian and trainer of soldiers and as a competent, even brilliant, fighting commander. He was also arrogant and contentious, following his own counsel and disdaining contrary opinions and even lawful orders. Accused by his own corps commander of disobeying orders at The Battle of Fair Oaks, a Court Martial found him ‘not guilty’ due to testimony of his brigade commander. He was also accused of failing to support MG Meade’s assault on Jackson’s Second Confederate Army Corps during the Battle of Fredericksburg, but was never charged with dereliction or disobedience.

Birney was promoted to Major General in May, 1863 for displaying fine leadership at Chancellorsville where his division had suffered the heaviest casualties in the Army. He was by now regarded as one of the best of the Federal division commanders, and as the Army of the Potomac marched toward Gettysburg, David Birney was identified as a potential army corps commander should there be casualties among the higher ranking officers.

### **Major General Birney at Gettysburg:**

On the morning of the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, Major General Dan Sickles, commanding the Federal Third Army Corps, ordered his divisions forward from Cemetery Ridge to occupy the Peach Orchard. General Humphreys' Second Division was formed in line of battle along the Emmitsburg Road, and General Birney was forced to stretch his First Division's line over too much territory in order to occupy the ground between Devil's Den and the Peach Orchard. When General Longstreet's Confederates attacked in the afternoon, Birney had great difficulty defending his position; he had no second line of troops or forces in reserve, and could not launch strong counterattacks or reinforce his line. Late in the day General Sickles was seriously wounded and carried from the battlefield. Birney as senior division commander became the temporary corps commander, but his line of battle was already pierced by the Confederate attack at the Peach Orchard and his men were withdrawing toward Cemetery Ridge. Birney's attempt to reform his men along a line from the Emmitsburg road toward Little Round Top was undone by the rapid advance of Barksdale's Brigade and other Confederate forces, and the entire Third Corps was driven toward Cemetery Ridge, suffering very heavy casualties along the way.





**Gettysburg, before the fighting of the second day**  
**(Birney's troops in blue at lower left)**

David Birney was himself wounded the afternoon of 2d July, but returned to lead the Third Corps after receiving first aid. He was extremely distraught by the defeat of the Third Corps, stating that he wished that he had been shot and killed like his horse. Later that evening his spirits revived and he reorganized his Corps to support the battle line along Cemetery Ridge. During General Meade's council of war that evening, General Birney was one of the officers who voted to stay on the defensive. His men were placed to help resist Pickett's Charge the next day, but were not called on to engage the Confederates.

In 1864, during General Grant's march toward Richmond, David Birney commanded a division in the Army of the Potomac's Second Corps. He led his men with distinction during the Battles of The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and the assaults on Petersburg. In the autumn that year, General Grant appointed him to permanent command of the Tenth Corps of the Army of the James, then serving in the siege works opposite Richmond. This Corps included a division of USCT, for Birney was one of the few senior generals in the Army of the Potomac who did not object to commanding African-Americans in battle. Birney's last fight was an offensive north of the James River, along the Darbytown Road (6-7 October); he led his Tenth Corps from the front although suffering from malaria. By 7 October, General Birney's health collapsed and he became bedridden and delirious. He was rushed by train to his home in Philadelphia in order to convalesce. State elections were occurring at that time, and Birney had himself carried to the polls where he voted a straight Republican ticket. He lingered until October 19th 1864, in his delirium shouting orders and encouraging his men. His last words were "*Keep your eyes on that flag, boys!*"<sup>6</sup> **HHS**

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## **Footnotes**

1. Longacre, Army of Amateurs, pg.198
2. Sloan.
3. Ibid.
4. Schoberlein.
5. Lyman, Meade's Headquarters, pg.266
6. Davis, Life of David Birney, pg. 298

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*David Lady is a native of Washington, D. C., and grew-up in northern Virginia during the Civil War Centennial. His branch of the Lady family lived in eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia during the Civil War, and ancestors fought on both sides. He completed a 33-year career with the U. S. Army in 2007.*

*David and his wife Ellen reside in Huntsville. He has published articles and book reviews in historical reviews and Army professional journals, and has led groups of soldiers and civilians on battlefield tours and military 'staff rides' of both eastern and western Civil War battlefields. He is currently serving as secretary for the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table.*