

Historical connections: A rainy day, A wedding, and the Little Big Horn

**By Carson O. Hudson, Jr.
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On the rainy afternoon of May 5, 1862, a regiment of Confederates got lost in the woods... It was at the battle of Williamsburg, Virginia, and the regiment was the 5th North Carolina Infantry. They had been hurrying forward towards the fighting and had lost contact with the rest of their brigade after they entered a thick and tangled piece of forest.

Trying to find their way, they emerged onto a large muddy field and found themselves under a murderous fire from a sizeable Union force on their left. Their commander, Lieutenant Colonel John C. Badham, ordered his men to turn and charge... but as they changed their direction and began to advance, Colonel Badham went down, shot through the forehead.

His men fared no better. Moving forward through the mud, the 5th North Carolina was shot to pieces, losing over 300 men killed and wounded in just a few minutes. Left behind among the wounded North Carolinians on that muddy field was twenty-three year old John Willis Lea.

Before the war Lea had attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, but had resigned when North Carolina seceded and “gone south.” He was commissioned as a Captain in the 5th North Carolina Infantry, in May of 1861.

One year later, Captain Lea found himself lying in a barn being used as a field hospital near Williamsburg. Fortunately, a Union officer recognized him among the

multitude of wounded men. Lieutenant George Armstrong Custer, a former West Point classmate, immediately assisted in removing Lea into the nearby home of Goodrich Durfey.

Old Colonel Durfey, as he was called, resided on the edge of the City of Williamsburg, in a house now known as Bassett Hall. It still stands today, maintained by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and is better known as the home where John D. Rockefeller Jr. would stay when he visited the colonial restoration that he helped to start.

After the battle, the Confederates retreated towards Richmond and Williamsburg was occupied by Federal troops. Captain Lea remained at the Durfey home as a convalescent prisoner and by the end of the month he had recovered enough to get around on crutches. And he had an incentive... among Colonel Durfey's household was his young daughter, Margaret. Just seventeen years old at the time, Margaret had personally taken over the care of the wounded captain, and within a short time, a romance bloomed between them. It soon grew to the point that an engagement was announced.

Meanwhile George Custer had gone on with the Union Army to fight in the battles around Richmond and been promoted to captain. As he returned to Williamsburg in August, Captain Custer learned that his old classmate was still recovering and was now engaged. Upon his arrival, it was decided that the nuptials should proceed the following evening at nine o'clock and Custer would be the best man. And so, a wartime wedding occurred at Colonel Durfey's house.

Custer later wrote that both the bride and her bridesmaid were dressed in white, with a wreath of flowers adorning their heads. Lea was dressed in a brand new Confederate uniform of gray and Custer wore his Federal uniform of blue. The minister arrived and the ceremony began... When asked the fateful question, Lea made his response of "I do" in a clear and distinct voice. Margaret, however, was nervous and at first made no response. The question had to be repeated. She laughed about it later, saying that she had neglected to answer purposely so as to be free from any obligations.

Custer remained in Williamsburg a further two weeks with the wedding party, singing around the piano and playing cards. Although Margaret Durfey surely enjoyed a lovely wedding and honeymoon, it was marred by the fact that her new husband, Captain Lea, was a prisoner of war. When he finally recovered from his Williamsburg wound, they were separated as he was sent away under confinement to nearby Fort Monroe.

Still, he did not remain a prisoner long. He was soon exchanged and rejoined his regiment in Confederate service. He was wounded twice more as the fighting continued over the next two years.

Lea ended the war as a Colonel, commanding a brigade, and met his former West Point classmate, now Major General Custer, one last time at Appomattox in 1865. After General Lee's surrender, on April 9, they shared dinner and reminisced about their earlier times in Williamsburg.

With the end of the war, John Willis Lea rejoined Margaret to begin their life together and eventually raise six children. He became an Episcopalian minister and

moved his family to West Virginia. Custer, of course, remained with the U.S. Army and eventually went on to bigger and better things at the Little Big Horn.