

Brigadier General Joshua L. Chamberlain's surrender ceremony at Appomattox

May, 2017

On April 9th, with General Lee's meager forces surrounded in the Village of Appomattox Court House by the overwhelming forces of Grant's generals, and with all escape routes blocked, he decided to end the fight. When Sheridan saw Lee's defenseless forces huddled together, he asked Grant to permit him to ignore the fragile cease fire and for the order to annihilate them. He said it would only take five minutes.

Grant angrily told him, "No, that would place our names in infamy forever."

Lee waited in the home of Wilmer McLean for Grant's arrival. They met to discuss the terms of surrender as gentlemen and with dignity. They drafted brief documents and, through their attendants, exchanged them. Lee's final letter addressed Grant as commander of all the armies of the United States, including his own, and awaited his orders.

Grant would have nothing of Lee surrendering his sword. That would have brought no honor to the ceremony and would have only served the newspapers and politicians.

He remembered the words in the Old Testament of the Holy Book, and thought, 'The prophet Micah reminds us: *He has showed you, O man, what is Good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*'

He paroled the men and permitted them to leave and go back to their homes. He required they surrender and stack up their arms and ammunition. Officers were permitted to keep their side arms. All cavalry soldiers could take their personal horses and mules back to their farms. The terms were as generous as Lee could have hoped for.

Grant ordered Sheridan, "Provide food rations to the beaten Confederates. They have been starved for many months. Take care of them. That is my order. See to it." Sheridan obeyed.

Across the fields, a spontaneous celebration of cannon and musket fire broke out from the Union forces. Grant ordered it to cease immediately.

He expressed his belief, "There is no dignity or honor in humiliation. The enemy knows full well they are beaten. The Confederates are now our countrymen."

Both Lee and Grant knew that there was no glory in war, but there was dignity and respect between its combatants. For war's leaders, the purpose was to inspire men to march and face the enemy across the killing field - to fight for their country. They were trained to believe that and had lived their whole lives with that code. They had learned the meaning of duty and that guided all their actions and conduct. They understood the meaning of honor better than others ever would.

After Lee's farewell address to his army on April 10th, Union Brigadier General Joshua L. Chamberlain was charged with leading the ceremony for the formal surrender on April 12th. Chamberlain reflected on what he had observed and wrote a moving tribute containing these words:

Before us in proud humiliation stood the embodiment of manhood: men whom neither toils and sufferings, nor the fact of death, nor disaster, nor hopelessness could bend from their resolve; standing before us now, thin, worn, and famished, but erect, and with eyes looking level into ours, waking memories that bound us together as no other bond;—was not such manhood to be welcomed back into a Union so tested and assured? Instructions had been given; and when the head of each division column comes opposite our group, our bugle sounds the signal and instantly our whole line from right to left, regiment by regiment in succession, gives the soldier's salutation, from the "order arms" to the old "carry"—the marching salute. Gordon at the head of the column, riding with heavy spirit and downcast face, catches the sound of shifting arms, looks up, and, taking the meaning, wheels superbly, making with himself and his horse one uplifted figure, with profound salutation as he drops the point of his sword to the boot toe; then facing to his own command, gives word for his successive brigades to pass us with the same position of the manual,—honor answering honor.

No expression could have captured the common bond of esprit de corps for the soldiers of the North and South better than this.



Excerpt from *After Bondage and War*, David Claire Jennings