

## The Role of Signalman Aaron Jerome In the History of Day One at Gettysburg

Presentation by Codie Eash  
Director - Education and Museum Operations  
Seminary Ridge Museum and Education Center  
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

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Report by Tom Ayres

The name of First Lieutenant Aaron Brainard Jerome is likely unknown to even ardent Civil War enthusiasts. But what is considered common knowledge of the events of July 1, 1863, on the western outskirts of Gettysburg, is likely due to the writings of Jerome.

Eash makes a convincing case that Jerome was a brilliant observer and analyst of the movements of armies in the field of battle. As such, he was a major force in establishing the value and credibility of the nascent U.S. Army Signal Corps in the early days of the war.

A physician, Dr. Albert J. Myer was appointed chief signal officer of the army in 1860. His medical specialty was developing sign language to help deaf persons communicate. He adapted those signs and gestures to a system of semaphore, based on an alphabetic code, using red and white "wigwag" flags to send messages on the battlefield.

The Signal Corps adopted the Latin phrase "Pro Patria Vigilans," in English "Watchful for the Country."

Eash described the bare details of what is known of Jerome's youth. He was born most likely in 1839 at Talladega, Alabama,

the son of a Presbyterian minister (Aaron Sr.), who died June 27, 1839, when the child was only one month old. The fate of his mother Eliza is unknown. He was orphaned at some point and ended up in Orange (Essex County), New Jersey. He is listed as a member of a household of children, likely a small orphanage overseen by a Julia Murphy, in the 1850 census.

Eash described Jerome's military career and life in general as "ill fated." He certainly did not promote his own accomplishments.

The complete account of his Army career follows, from "The Military Record of Civilian Appointments in the U.S. Army," published in 1869 and 1873: 1st lieutenant 1st New Jersey Volunteers May 1861. 2nd lieutenant 1st New Jersey Volunteers August 1861. Acting signal officer engaged in the siege of Yorktown, battles of Williamsburg, New Market Courthouse, Fair Oaks, Gaines Mill, Seven Days fight, Malvern Hill (presented with a star flag for services at Malvern Hill), Antietam, Fredericksburg. 1st lieutenant U.S. Signal Corps, March 1863. Engaged at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, actions of Boonsboro, Funkstown, Falling Waters, Manassas Gap, Rappahannock Bridge, Culpepper, Brandy Station and Admiral [David] Porter's expedition (being wounded above Grand Ecore at Natchitoches, Louisiana, in spring 1864), with Admiral [David] Farragut at the battle of Mobile Bay (August 1864) and with land forces during the siege and capture of Mobile City and its defenses. Resigned September 1864 [at end of three-year enlistment]. 2nd lieutenant 8th U.S. cavalry 6/67. Brevet 1st lieutenant for gallant and meritorious services during the war. Brevet captain for services during the war. At Camp McDermit, Nevada. (This final vague entry contains no other information.)

Eash filled in the gaps and provided context missing from the sparse chronology of the official Military Record above.

Shortly after the Civil War broke out on April 12, 1861, Jerome enlisted on April 25 as first sergeant of Company B of the First New Jersey Infantry. He was among the first 100 volunteers for

this unit. He was appointed Second Lieutenant of Company H on August 19, 1861.

Jerome saw his first action and demonstrated his precocious grasp of men in battle at Williamsburg on May 5, 1862, the first pitched battle of Union General George McClellan's Peninsula Campaign. (He had been with the Signal Corps since March 1862.) Jerome would later provide intelligence on rebel positions and movements — positioned aboard the USS Aroostook in the James River — about a mile from Poindexter's Farm during the battle of Malvern Hill on July 1, 1862.

As a result of his reconnaissance work, Jerome was appointed first lieutenant of the Signal Corps in March 1863. During the Chancellorsville campaign under Joseph Hooker, Jerome was at Banks Ford, also known as Salem Church, in early May 1863. After driving Robert E. Lee's forces off Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, John Sedgwick marched his VI Corps on the Plank Road to join Hooker to the west. Sedgwick was stymied at Salem Church by Cadmus Wilcox's brigade. Lee sent two divisions to reinforce Wilcox. This combined force hammered Sedgwick's attacks. He withdrew, and Hooker gave up his campaign.

Fresh off his victory at Chancellorsville, Lee commenced his second foray into Union territory.

After Chancellorsville Jerome was transferred to John Buford's cavalry division, setting the stage for Gettysburg. Jerome was an immediate admirer of Buford's intelligence, judgment and tenacity.

Buford's two brigades under colonels William Gamble and Thomas Devin arrived at Gettysburg on June 30. Buford was in a state of high anxiety as he assessed his dismal prospects — his 2,200 riders versus the bulk of Lee's army approaching from the west. Federal infantry was far away, some still in Maryland. Lee did not want a full-scale battle, at least initially, but that's what he got as

advance elements of A.P. Hill's corps moved toward the town. Also, Dick Ewell, who had been raiding to the north of Gettysburg, was called by Lee to Gettysburg.

As Buford was anxiously awaiting the arrival of John Reynolds' I Corps on July 1, he sent Jerome to the cupola atop the four-story Lutheran Seminary Building built on Seminary Ridge in 1832. Jerome was to report on rebel movements and the progress of Reynolds' army. Jerome's accounts of that July 1 have stood the test of time, according to Eash.

When rebel units attacked federal positions around McPherson's Ridge, Jerome reported, "We held them in check fully two hours."

When the I Corps arrived, John Reynolds approached the cupola. And, in one of the more famous quotes in the entire war, Reynolds inquired of Buford, "What's the matter, John?" Buford's famous reply, "The devil's to pay."

When the two officers ~~wrote-rode~~ off the ridge to get a closer look at the fighting, not ten minutes later, Reynolds took a fatal shot. He was the highest ranking officer killed in the battle.

O.O. Howard's ~~division-11<sup>th</sup> Corps~~ was posted just northwest of the town, in a very vulnerable position with little cover. Jerome sent this urgent message, "Over a division of rebels is making a flank movement on our right. The line extends over a mile and is advancing, skirmishing. There is nothing but cavalry to oppose them."

Buford was highly complimentary of Jerome's support that day, writing in his report after the battle, "Lieutenant Jerome, Signal Corps, was ever on the alert, and through his intrepidity and fine glasses, on more than one occasion kept me advised of the enemy's movements when no other means were available."

~~Later, on November 20, 1863, Buford, his health failing, wrote, "The officers who have acted with me have rendered invaluable~~

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Later in the battle, Jerome was at Little Round Top observing rebel movements on Seminary Ridge with his trusty binoculars.

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After the War, Jerome maintained a hawk's eye on how the ~~battle~~Battle of Gettysburg was represented by various participants and writers. The most notable example occurred when the great Gettysburg historian John Bachelder toured the battlefield and interviewed Winfield Scott Hancock for his recollections of the battle. Hancock totally ignored the role of Buford on July 1. Jerome reacted quickly. He fired off a letter to Hancock upbraiding him for slighting Buford. Hancock conceded that the omission was regrettable.

Jerome was transferred to the U.S. Navy and served under David Porter in the disastrous Red River campaign in the spring of 1864 commanded by Nathaniel Banks. Later, under David Farragut, Jerome was aboard the USS Cricket during the battle of Mobile Bay and siege of the city in August 1864. Jerome resigned his commission at the end of his three-year enlistment in September 1864.

Jerome rejoined the army as second lieutenant of the 8th Cavalry and served at Fort Bayard in New Mexico and Camp McDermit on the Nevada-Oregon border. Jerome was discharged on December 1, 1870, and moved to San Francisco where he died in 1881 at

age 42. He was buried in a sandy cemetery that was destroyed in the earthquake of April 18, 1906.