

Carroll Yesteryears

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Where Corbit's Charge Comes Vividly to Life

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

As thousands of men in the Union and Confederate armies marched north toward their inevitable confrontation at Gettysburg in July 1863, small clashes between elements of both armies occurred along the way. One of them took place in Westminster on June 29 when 100 men from two companies of the First Delaware Cavalry (Union) came face-to-face with nearly 6,000 Confederate Cavalry under General J.E.B. Stuart. Now known as Corbit's Charge for Captain Charles Corbit who led the Delaware troops, the fighting took place at the east end of Westminster. As you might guess, the Union men were routed and Stuart's men rode unimpeded through town before heading north toward Union Mills.

Over the 160 years since that eventful day, individuals and groups have kept the Corbit's Charge story alive. Frederick Shriver Klein discussed it in his book "Just South of Gettysburg." Tom LeGore, a local historian, spent much of his life searching for details of the encounter. And, since 2003, members of the Pipe Creek Civil War Round Table have taken up the challenge of commemorating the event. This year marks the 20th anniversary of their efforts to make Corbit's Charge a free, fun, and educational experience. In the past, the event was usually a three-day affair, but this year it will take place only on Thursday, June 29, at Emerald Hill (aka Westminster City Hall) in downtown Westminster.

In early 2003, Carroll Tourism honored Tom LeGore for his self-guided Corbit's Charge walking tour brochure. Months later, Tom shared his research into the event with a large group at a Historical Society of Carroll County Box Lunch Talk. At the first commemorative event that June, more than 20 descendants of men from the First Delaware Cavalry took part thanks to special invitations sent by Tom. Mayor Kevin Dayhoff offered a proclamation and the Union Street United Methodist Church choir sang. The late Stan Ruchlewicz, a former Administrator of Economic Development for Westminster and a great friend of Corbit's Charge, took the photos used to illustrate this article many years ago.

As the Corbit's Charge commemoration grew in size and scope, it moved from Ascension Church on Court Street to a large, open space on North Center Street opposite the Carroll County Office Building. Now it is held inside Emerald Hill and on its grounds.

Five years after the event began, a letter to the Carroll County Times declared the 2008 commemoration a "resounding success." About 1,500 visitors appeared at the various venues and the living history encampment on North Center Street. This represented a 50% increase over 2007. Nobody in a car turning off Route 140 onto North Center Street could miss the conspicuous row of small, white tents with re-enactors in blue and gray gathered around their campfires.

Members of the Pipe Creek Round Table who plan each year's event are grateful for donations large and small from individuals, businesses, grants, and help from the Community Foundation.

The funds keep the event free and allow for booking Civil War-era bands, well-known re-enactors, renting large tents for special events, and producing publicity.

One of the most popular commemorations occurred in 2009 with the appearance of Michael Crutcher, Sr., a famous re-enactor who portrayed Frederick Douglass. Crutcher looked so much like Douglass while walking along Westminster's Main Street that a local boy stopped, gazed up at him, and said, "I know you. You're Frederick Douglass." In October 1870, the real Douglass had spoken at Westminster's Opera House, so it seemed appropriate to take Crutcher there during his visit. His powerful speech to a packed tent at the 2009 commemoration brought visitors to their feet when he finished.

Finding re-enactors to portray Civil War cavalry and bring their horses to an event for a mock battle is a challenge. Twice during use of the grounds on North Center Street, cavalry re-enactors put on a saber-clashing display that reflected how a cavalry battle might have appeared 160 years ago.

Members of the Pipe Creek Round Table have a reproduction Civil War cannon which they brought and fired at every commemoration held on North Center Street. No cannon balls were launched, but experienced re-enactors went through the full process of loading powder and setting off a charge which could be heard and felt far and wide. Visitors anxious to learn how Civil War artillerymen fought had a chance to see just what was involved in loading and firing a real cannon. During events at Emerald Hill the cannon is on display but not fired.

Infantry re-enactors at every Corbit's Charge event are anxious to share what they know about their uniforms, weapons, accoutrements, and what it was like to cover 20 miles a day carrying so much gear, especially during summer campaigns like the long, hot march from Virginia to Gettysburg.

There have been other opportunities open to commemoration visitors such as watching a blacksmith at work or seeing what a sutler (civilian merchant) might offer a Civil War soldier — items like stationery, replacement cutlery, or tobacco. Some years there was a photographer who demonstrated the wet-plate photographic technique used to produce images in the 1860s. He would photograph you if you wanted a reminder of your visit and were willing to stand very still for a long time!

In 2008 the Carroll County Times gave that year's event a big thumbs-up by reporting, "The organizers of the Corbit's Charge historical event have been able to add something fresh to the event every year. This year they added fun and games for the younger crowd. Not videos or football, but games from the 1860s. Also a tip of the hat to the musical groups that participate in the three-day event." Music has been a big part of many commemorative events. The South Carolina String Band concert was very popular; the Susquehanna Travelers and the Dearest Home Band also appeared. This year's event will include a concert by the Antebellum Marine Band.

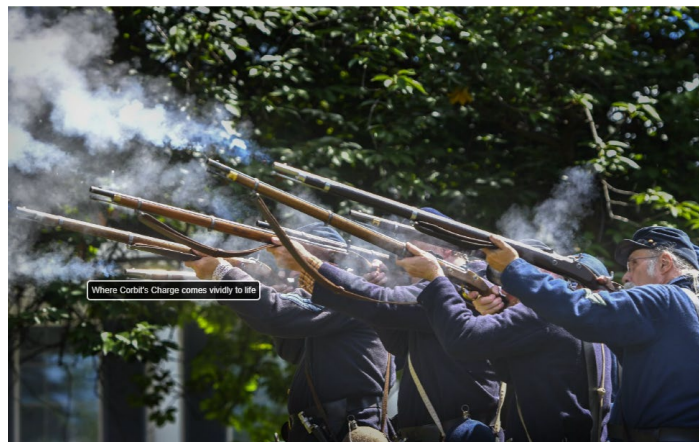
During three-day events held at Emerald Hill, youngsters had the opportunity to earn a Junior Historian award by visiting a range of venues inside the historic home or on the grounds. There

is much to learn at each event. Re-enactors delight in sharing what they know with anyone who asks a question. Sherry Hartman, Jake Bush, and other members of the Round Table with interests related to the Civil War gladly discuss clothing, weaponry and other subjects. Steve Carney, current chair of the Corbit's Charge Committee, a re-enactor, and Civil War enthusiast, usually offers a lecture with interesting details about this historical event.

There is also a very serious element to the commemorations because four men died and many were injured on both sides during the short but brutal fight. The bodies of the two Delaware cavalymen were taken home as was one of Stuart's men, but Confederate Lieutenant John Murray's body was never returned. It lies in the graveyard behind Ascension Church. Each year in a solemn ceremony, a wreath is placed beside his tombstone as well as that of Corporal Samuel Butler, a member of the United States Colored Troops. Another wreath laying occurs at Court Place next to the Carroll County Court House. Round Table members began holding a separate memorial service at the Corbit's Charge Monument there in 2006.

Anyone who enjoys Civil War history and has a few hours to spare on Thursday, June 29, between 2 and 8 p.m., should stop at Emerald Hill for a chance to see what the Pipe Creek Round Table has put together for this year's commemoration. Emerald Hill is located between Longwell Avenue and Locust Street. There is sure to be lots to enjoy including historical walking tours. The Antebellum Marine Band concert will begin at 7 p.m. As always, the event is totally free. To check out all the events go to the Round Table's website: <http://pipecreekroundtable.org>.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a longtime member of the Pipe Creek Civil War Round Table and volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



*Image 1: Re-enactor members of the Maryland 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, Company A, shoot off a volley during a firing demonstration at the annual Civil War Commemoration of the Battle of Westminster, "Corbit's Charge," in 2022 at City Hall. Credit: Doug Kapustin/for Carroll County Times.*



*Image 2: Frederick Douglas re-enactor Michael Crutcher, Sr., standing in front of Westminster's Opera House on East Main Street in 2009. The real Douglass spoke there in October 1870. Collection of Ron Kuehne.*