The Life and Death of Brigadier General Michael Corcoran

By Edward C. Trexler

While the focus of the City’s 2013 Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration has been on Col. Mosby’s March 9, 1863 capture of Union General Stoughton at the William P. Gunnell House, we will also commemorate the life and death of Union General, Michael Corcoran who died there later that year. A colorful and dashing son of Ireland, General Michael Corcoran was assigned to the Washington (D.C.) Department. In October of that year, he was in command of the forces in Fairfax Court House area, which command was formerly held by General Stoughton. Corcoran was a hero to Irish soldiers in both the Union and Confederate armies as well as to all most all of Irish descent.

General Corcoran died in the W. P. Gunnell House on December 22, 1863 after being thrown from a runaway horse while returning from an inspection of the railroad defenses near Fairfax Station. He was thrown into a ditch at the bend in the Ox Road as it approached Fairfax Court House and was taken, un-conscious, approximately one quarter mile to this headquarters, the W.P. Gunnell House. There he died that day never having regained conscience.

The Life of Union General Michael Corcoran in America

Michael Corcoran arrived penniless in New York after sailing from Sligo Harbor, Ballymote, Ireland, on August 30, 1849; he was then 22. Whether he was typical of the numerous Irish immigrants...
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Local author and historian Carole Herrick will unfold the story of what happened to Vermont soldier Pvt. William Scott, who fell asleep while guarding the approaches to Washington near the Chain Bridge.

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- Jas. Hammond, Moseley’s cavalry, and Thos. Cowling, Quartermaster’s Department, desirous of taking the oath of allegiance.

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- All of the above were sent in by Lieut. Winslip, Provost Marshal of Alexandria.

**Miss Ford, of Fairfax, who was some time ago arrested by the Federal authorities, taken to Washington and thence sent South, last week returned to her home, when she was again arrested by the U. S. military commander at Fairfax C. H. and sent to this place Monday night, and yesterday she was sent on to Washington.**

Alexandria Gazette, September 16, 1863, p. 2, c. 1

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**The Quaker Scout**

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1818-1901

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Alexandria Gazette, August 7, 1863, p. 2, c. 2.

Ed. note: Billy Gooding’s Tavern was located on the north side of Little River Tpke. (Rt. 236) opposite the No. Va. Com. Col.

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Hiram Brower formerly editor of the Fairfax County News, was arrested last week on his way from Gordonsville, by the Federal troops, and is now held as a prisoner in the county jail of this city.

Evening Star, August 8, 1863, p. 3, c. 2. "Alexandria Affairs"

A Raid on Susser’s Teams
On Wednesday morning the command of Mosesly captured several farmers and their teams on the road between Fairfax Court House and Anadale, which they took down into a deep ravine, about half a mile from the road, and there they paroled the farmers, who made their way back to the city in the best manner they could, some of them reaching here on Wednesday night. The wagons were taken at various points along the road, sometimes there being but two or three of the guerrillas in a squad.

Yesterday morning they captured, in one haul, fourteen wagons, and six or seven more during the morning, all of which, with the farmers, they took to the ravine above mentioned, and proceeded to dispose of them; but some cavalry (company F. 1st Maine,) came upon them and recaptured all the goods, with the exception of six or eight horses and the farmers, taking two prisoners, (one of them Mosesly’s first lieutenant,) and dispersed the party. One of the farmers lost over $1,700.

The farmers say that in this ravine there are the remains of a number of wagons, trunks, boxes, &c., in some of which are remnants of clothing, and the place bears the appearance of having been used as a rendezvous.

Mosesly’s men numbered over sixty, and were splendidly mounted. They are uniformed in gray pantaloons with a yellow cord down the seam, dark jacket and gray felt hat, one side turned up and fastened with a rosette, and a black feather on the other side. They are well armed with sabres, revolvers and carbines, and their general appearance is neat.—Mosesly in person is said to have been present.

Most of these captures were made from a point six miles this side of Fairfax to within two miles of that place, and some of them were made when the Federal cavalry were not over a mile distant.—[Wash. Star.]

Alexandria Gazette, August 8, 1863, p. 4, c. 1.

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who fought for the Union is conjecture. Michael Corcoran probably experienced the prejudice that beset most Irish immigrants of that time, and he was strongly committed to Ireland’s liberation.

Enlisting as a private in the 69th Regiment, New York Militia, in the 1850s he was promoted to Captain in three years. Rising through the ranks, he was befriended by many other Irish of similar leanings, including John O’Mahoney who founded the Fenian Brotherhood in New York City, an arm of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Dublin. Michael Corcoran was the first American to be sworn into the Fenians. Shortly thereafter he had been elected Colonel of the 69th as well as Military Commander of the Finians. He was, also at that time, a rising star in Democratic politics, where his fellow Irish frequently reminded him of his commitment to liberate Ireland.

His early success ended in late 1860 when, with his approval, the 69th Regiment voted not to participate in the big New York parade for the visiting Prince of Wales. Many New Yorkers were outraged that an ungrateful Irish immigrant would so insult a royal guest of the City. Colonel Corcoran was subsequently court-martialed. His trial was underway when Lincoln was elected and his court-martial was dropped in April, 1861, when the 69th answered Lincoln’s call for troops.

Leading the 69th into battle at Bull Run on July 21, 1861, Colonel Corcoran was injured and captured and imprisoned in Richmond, and later moved to Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina, and to Salisbury, North Carolina. There he was exchanged for a Confederate Colonel in August, 1862. Shortly thereafter Corcoran dined with Lincoln, and was elevated to Brigadier-General and asked to recruit a new legion of Irish. Returning as a hero to New York, he assembled Corcoran’s Irish Legion.
Burial and Memorial to  
Brig. Gen. Michael Corcoran

“A funeral service was held in the chapel tent for the General. On Christmas Eve, the remains were removed to the Fairfax railroad station for transport to New York City. In New York, the remains were met by the city’s Committee of the Common Council and by Meagher, Colonels McMahon, McIvor, Murphy, Reed, and others. The General’s body lay in state in the Governor’s Room of New York’s City Hall. The U.S. Army’s commanding officer in the Department of the East, Major General John A. Dix, ordered all flags in the harbor lowered to half mast on December 26th, the date of Corcoran’s funeral in New York.

The body was viewed by thousands as it lay in state in old St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Mott Street. The funeral service was conducted by Archbishop John Hughes, the Archdiocesan Vicar General, Bishop William Starrs, delivered the eulogy at a Solemn High Mass. Thousands followed the cortege to Calvary Cemetery in Queens where final honors were paid Gallant General Michael Corcoran.

Captain D. P. Conyngham of the Irish Brigade, in his history of the Brigade, wrote on the passing of Corcoran:

‘Thus died, in the prime of manhood, as brave a soldier and as sterling an Irishman as ever lived. He was a loss to America, for his name and reputation were talismanic to collect his countryman to his standard. He was a loss to Ireland, for the dearest wish of his heart was to live to strike for her independence; and from his experience as a soldier, his wisdom as a general, and his prudence and foresight as a man, who knows what he would have accomplished had he lived?’

For many years, there was no public memorial of any kind to this gallant Irish American soldier, ‘a noble manly man, devoted to his adopted country, enduring privations and perils in her behalf, offering all on her altar all that man can give—service, devotion, liberty and life.’

Then, the Knights of Columbus and the 69th Infantry, National Guard, New York, placed a Corcoran Memorial Tablet on the wall of the 69th Regiment Armory, Lexington Avenue and 26th Street, New York. It was unveiled and dedicated on January 30, 1914, the 50th anniversary of the first engagement and victory of Corcoran’s Legion at Deserted House, Virginia.

Once more, the man whose ‘memory is sweet to all men of Irish blood, whose name is hallowed as a patriot by all Americans’ is recalled and honored—this time, at his last resting place. The headstone that marks this patriot grave in Calvary Cemetery, Queens, N.Y., has been recreated and rededicated (April 29, 1990) through the labors of Michael Corcoran’s native county group in New York—the County Sligo Men’s Social and Benevolent Association.”

NOBLE SON OF SLIGO, NEVER RETREATED, NEVER DEFeated, YOUR LIKES WE WILL NEVER SEE AGAIN.

Excerpted from Your Likes We Will Never See Again, c. 2013, by John J. Concannon, www.thewildgeese.com

Commemorating General Corcoran

A City of Fairfax historic marker has been designed for placement at the entrance to Truro Lane on North Street to commemorate the life of General Corcoran, and his untimely death at the nearby Gunnell House.

The dedication of this new historic marker will take place, Saturday, October 19th at 11:00 a.m.

Funds for the purchase and placement of the marker, hopefully, will be donated by both local Union and Confederate Civil War heritage groups,

His work was hampered by occasional fainting spells that his doctor believed were caused by his long stay in prison. Recruitment of the Irish was also hampered by what were believed to be unfair draft practices that drew more heavily upon the Irish community, and by the many losses of Irish troops at Antietam. Nevertheless, Corcoran was able to assemble and activate the new Irish Legion. He joined them in the field at Suffolk, Virginia, in early 1863.

In April, 1863, while acting temporarily as Major-General of the 1st Division, 7th Corps and leading his troops on a mission, Corcoran’s path was blocked by a bearded officer who demanded the “countersign,” but refused to identify himself.

When Corcoran demanded that he get out of the way the officer responded “Not for no damned Irish son of a bitch like you or any one else.” The confrontation soon led to violence with the officer lunging at Corcoran’s horse and reaching for his sword.

Corcoran returned to his doctors in New York. They decided that he was badly undernourished and in need of rest and prescribed that he rest, eat oatmeal and drink barley water. Instead, however, Michael Corcoran got married. His new bride was the eldest granddaughter of an associate, reported to be about sixteen years old, who returned with him to Fairfax. The ladies of the town opined that his marriage to such a young bride weakened him further and eventually led to his demise.

General Corcoran’s Civil War career began in Fairfax Court House as he led the 69th across Mount Vineyard from Flint Hill on July 17, 1861, and ended there with his fall from a horse on December 22, 1863.

The Accident to Gen. Corcoran

Gen. Corcoran, whose death has been telegraphed, was returning with an escort from visiting the outskirts, about 5 o’clock on Tuesday afternoon, when his horse fell and the General fell to the ground. He was taken up unharmed and conveyed to his quarters at Fairfax Court House, where he expired at 7 o’clock that evening. A post-mortem examination was held, showing that his brain was fractured at the base. The body has been embalmed and will be sent in from Fairfax to morrow, under escort.

New York Tribune, December 25, 1863, p. 5, c. 1

Continued page 7
Burial and Memorial to Brig. Gen. Michael Corcoran

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Ed. note: Billy Gooding’s Tavern was located on the north side of Little River Tpke. (Rt. 236) opposite the No. Va. Com. Col.

Mosely is playing the strong hand on the suttering and Government battle between this place and Alexandria. This evening he is one mile from Fairfax Court House, and an infantry force has been sent after him. Seven guerrillas of this gang were picked up this evening near Gooden’s old tavern.

They have found it a profitable business of late, capturing hundreds of thousand dollars worth of sutters’ stores. Many of Mosely’s men have been once in the Old Capitol and other prisons, and some were recognized as citizens of Fairfax county.

John Graham, of Fairfax C. H., sent a negro boy into the woods near that place yesterday on an errand, and the boy overstaying his time, Graham went to see what had become of him. He had not gone far when he stumbled into Mosely’s camp, where he found the boy, who had been captured. The negro was returned to Graham on his promising his word he would not inform the Federal forces where his headquarters were.

Benwood.

A Raid on Sutter’s Teams

On Wednesday morning the command of Mosely captured seventeen suters and their teams on the road between Fairfax Court House and Anandale, which they took down into a deep ravine, about a half mile from the road, and there they paroled the suters, who made their way back to the city in the best manner they could, some of them reaching here on Wednesday night. The wagons were taken at various points along the road, sometimes there being but two or three of the guerrillas in a squad.

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While the focus of the City’s 2013 Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration has been on Col. Mosby’s March 9, 1863 capture of Union General Stoughton at the William P. Gunnell House, we will also commemorate the life and death of Union General, Michael Corcoran who died there later that year. A colorful and dashing son of Ireland, General Michael Corcoran was assigned to the Washington (D.C.) Department. In October of that year, he was in command of the forces in Fairfax Court House area, which command was formerly held by General Stoughton. Corcoran was a hero to Irish soldiers in both the Union and Confederate armies as well as to all most all of Irish descent.

General Corcoran died in the W. P. Gunnell House on December 22, 1863 after being thrown from a runaway horse while returning from an inspection of the railroad defenses near Fairfax Station. He was thrown into a ditch at the bend in the Ox Road as it approached Fairfax Court House and was taken, un-conscious, approximately one quarter mile to this headquarters, the W.P. Gunnell House. There he died that day never having regained conscience.

The Life of Union General Michael Corcoran in America

General Michael Corcoran arrived penniless in New York after sailing from Sligo Harbor, Ballymote, Ireland, on August 30, 1849; he was then 22. Whether he was typical of the numerous Irish immigrants