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1861-1865



2011-2015

The Fare Facs Gazette

The Newsletter of Historic Fairfax City, Inc.

Volume 10, Issue 3

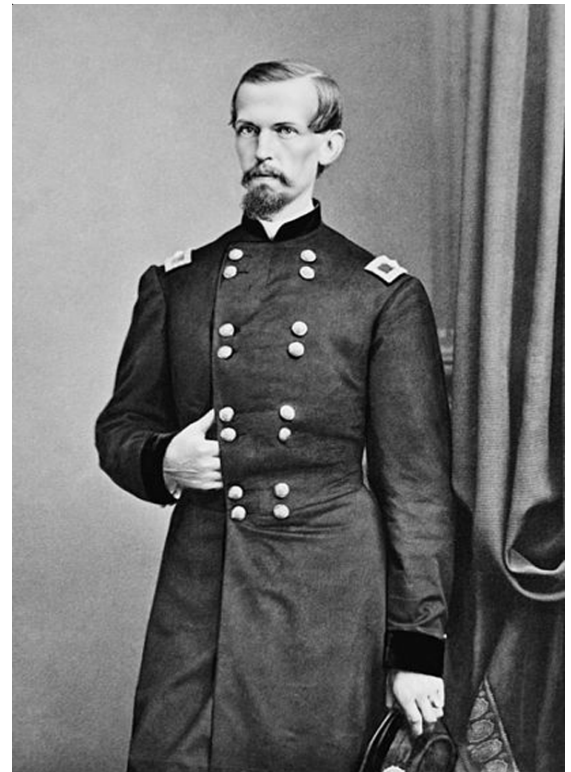
Summer 2013

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 Michael Corcoran 1827-1863

Source: Matthew Brady, Library of Congress

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-conscience, 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



Civil War Interpretive Series at Historic Blenheim

Saturday, October 26th — 2 p.m. **The Sleeping Sentinel**

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.

Saturday, November 23rd — 2 p.m. **Messages from the Front: A Study in Civil War Reenacting**

George Mason University graduate student Savanna K. Hughes will discuss her research on why people become reenactors and what it means to be “authentic.”

Sunday, December 1st — 12 - 4 p.m. **Christmas in Camp**

Participate in camp drills and learn about Civil War-era holiday customs and camp life with Company D, 17th Virginia Infantry, Fairfax Rifles C.S.A. Period Civil War music with Evergreen Shade. Make Victorian paper Christmas ornaments.

The Civil War Interpretive Center at Historic Blenheim is located at 3610 Old Lee Highway. 703-591-0560. Historic Blenheim is open: 12-4 p.m., Tuesday–Saturday; guided tour at 1 p.m.

Second Sunday Series...

Sunday, October 13 — 2 p.m. **Mapping Virginia: From the Age of Exploration to the Civil War**

Author William C. Wooldridge will describe the history and evolution of Virginia through 300 maps. Book signing and sale will follow.

November 10 — 2 p.m.

George Mason and George Washington: The Power of Principle.

Book talk and signing with author Gerard Gawalt on his new book that examines the different opinions of Mason and Washington on the power of government.

December 8 — 2 p.m.

Four Centuries of Virginia Christmas.

Author Mary Miley Theobald looks at the evolution of Virginia Christmas customs from pagan, Roman, English, Dutch and German precedents.

Programs are held at 2 p.m. on the second Sunday of each month. Unless otherwise noted, programs are held at the Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center, 10209 Main Street. Free (unless noted). Check back to find out about additional programs planned throughout the year.
[Information:](http://www.fairfaxmuseumpark.com) 703-385-8414.

Guided Walking Tours of Old Town Fairfax

October 26. Tours will start at 11 a.m., step off from Ratcliffe-Allison House, 10386 Main Street, Fairfax, and includes a tour of the historic house. Cost: \$5/adults; \$3/youth, ages 6 - 12. Children under 6 free. Family rate: \$15. Tours last approximately 90 minutes and include stops at the Fairfax County Courthouse (1800) and several antebellum buildings.

Reservations: 703-385-8414. Tours will be cancelled due to inclement weather.

Historic Ratcliffe-Allison House

10386 Main Street, Fairfax

Open for the Season – Saturdays, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. through October 26.

Discover the lives of Ratcliffe-Allison House's many residents and owners—from nineteenth-century tradesmen to a twentieth-century newspaper columnist. See the exhibition: "*Dr. Kate Waller Barrett: Mother to Many*." **Free**. 703-385-8414. To book youth or adult group tours (\$25), Monday through Friday; please call 703-385-8415.

Other Information of Interest:

Volunteers and docents are sought for the city's historic buildings: Ratcliffe-Allison House, Historic Blenheim and the Civil War Interpretive Center and Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center. Additionally, volunteers may be interested in assisting with walking tours and special events. For information [email](#) or call 703-385-8415.

The city has published a free self-guided walking tour brochure that provides a brief history of the city and noteworthy buildings in the Old Town Fairfax Historic District. This brochure is available from the Fairfax Museum and Visitor Center, 10209 Main Street, or call 703-385-8414.

Select historic buildings are open during city special events, including the Chocolate Lovers Festival, Civil War Weekend, Independence Day Celebration, Fall Festival and Festival of Lights and Carols. To arrange group tours of city-owned historic buildings [email](#) or call 703-385-8414.

The Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. It includes a variety of building types and styles, including:

Fairfax Courthouse (1800)
Ratcliffe-Allison House (1812)
Joshua Gunnell House (c.1830)
William Gunnell House (c.1835)
Ford House (c.1835)
Fairfax Elementary School (1873)
Old Fairfax Jail (1885)
Old Town Hall (1900)
Marr Monument (1904)

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 1850's 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 he was associated with Tammany Hall and 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.



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 pistol, and with Corcoran shooting him dead. The officer was Lt.-Colonel Edgar Kimball of the 9th New York, Hawkin's Zouaves. Corcoran was held censurable and a court-martial was ordered to be held at a future date. Corcoran and the Irish Legion were ordered back north and arrived at Centreville, Virginia, on July 22, 1863, weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg. He was at that time second in command to General King, becoming the commander on October 17, 1863.

Shortly after being elevated to Commanding General, Corcoran received a telegram that his wife had died suddenly. Michael returned to New York for the funeral and then returned to Washington where he called upon President Lincoln and asked to be immediately transferred to a combat zone. His pending court-martial, however, inhibited this.

Suffering again from frequent fainting spells, 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 outposts, about 5 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, when his horse shied and the General fell to the ground. He was taken up insensible and conveyed to his quarters at Fairfax Court House, where he expired at 8 1/2 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

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,

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. In the *out-of-the-country* absence of 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 51st 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 re-created 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

Fairfax Court House News of 150 Years Ago

Mr. James Coyle residing in Fairfax county, about ten miles from this place, near Gooden's Tavern, was killed in his own house yesterday afternoon. A detachment of Federal soldiers who were scouting in the neighborhood, fired upon his house, several of the balls striking Mr. C. and causing his death instantly.

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

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

Moseby is playing the strong hand on the sutlers and Government cattle 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 guerillas 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 sutlers' stores. Many of Moseby'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 Moseby's camp, where he found the boy, who had been captured. The negro was returned to Graham on his pledging his word he would not inform the Federal forces where his headquarters were.

BENWOOD.

Alexandria Gazette, August 7, 1863, p. 4, c. 2

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 county.

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

A Raid on Sutlers' Teams.

On Wednesday morning the command of Moseby captured seventeen sutlers and their teams on the road between Fairfax Court House and Anandale, which they took down into a deep ravine, about half a mile from the road, and there they paroled the sutlers, 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 guerillas 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 sutlers, 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 sutlers, taking two prisoners, (one of them Moseby's first lieutenant,) and dispersed the party. One of the sutlers lost over \$1,700.

The sutlers 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.

Moseby's men numbered over sixty, and were splendidly mounted. They are uniformed in grey pantaloons with a yellow cord down the seam, dark jacket, and grey felt hat, one side turned up and fastened with a rosette, and a black feather on the other side. They are well armed with sabers, revolvers and carbines, and their general appearance is neat.—Moseby 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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Fairfax Court House News of 150 Years Ago

COMMITTED TO THE OLD CAPITOL.

The following commitments to the Old Capitol were made to-day by order of Provost Marshal Todd:

Lewis Carney, Co. B, 49th Virginia; Peter Morris, Thos. Hungerford, and Thos. Ward, Co. K, 15th Georgia, and J. W. Waters, Co. D, 49th Virginia, pretended soldiers, but supposed to be thieves.

Jas. Hammond, Moseby's cavalry, and Thos. Cowling, Quartermaster's Department, desirous of taking the oath of allegiance.

Thos. N. Williams, Amos Fox, Wm. F. Moore, E. R. Ford and W. R. Chapman, citizens of Fairfax, O. H., charged with being rebels and rebel sympathizers.

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

Evening Star, September 15, 1863, p. 2, c. 4

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

THE SECOND DISTRICT REGIMENT.

The 2d Regiment D. C. Volunteers, Colonel C. M. Alexander, commanding, received orders last night, to report to Gen. King, at Fairfax, C. H. They will probably leave for that point Monday or Tuesday next.

Evening Star, October 10, 1863, p. 2, c. 4

and by local Irish groups. Groups who may wish to contribute are asked to contact Ed Trexler at 703-273-3034 or etrexler@cox.net.

References:

1. Sligo Champion, 3/20/2002; 6. *New York Times*, 45/19/1863; 8. *New York Leader* 12/26/1863; 9 & 10. *Alexandria Gazette*, 12/23/63 & 1/1/64; 5. *Irish-American*, 4/25/63;
2. Unidentified magazine, killing of Edgar Kimbal; 3. *Memoirs of Gen. Meagher*; 4. *Diary of a Union Lady (Mrs Daily)* 1861-1865; 7. *New York Herald*, 4/14/1863; 11. *New York Herald*, Corcoran Obit; 12. *New York Times*, 12/23/63; death of Corcoran, 13. 12/24/63 fell near Sangsters (incorrect), 14. 12/24/63 death of Corcoran, found in gulley; 15. *The Generals Headquarters*; 16. 12/26/63, Corcoran's remains; 12/27/63, Catholic Cathedral on Mulberry St.; 19. *Irish-American*, 1/1/64
3. *Civil War Fairfax Court House*, pages 161-162, 2005 by E. Trexler; James River Valley Publishing, provides a summary of the colorful life of Michael Corcoran including the events cited in his marker. This account is based on discussion with Phyllis Lane, the above sources and additional research by the author.
4. *History at Downtown Fairfax...*, pages 18 – 19, 2007 by E. Trexler. Same Publisher and sources as *Civil War Fairfax Court House*.
5. *Heritage of Ireland*; 1991, Charles Murphy; Crescent Books, N.Y., N.Y.

In the next issue:

The Quaker Scout

Jonathan Roberts

1818-1901

Sheriff of Fairfax County

1862-1866

"Preserving the Past. Protecting the Future."

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The Fare Facs Gazette © 2013
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