

Who Was John Singleton Mosby?

By Barbara Glakas

On Sunday, March 17—the 150th anniversary of the original event—Mosby’s Raid on Herndon Station will be reenacted. The Herndon Historical Society and the Herndon Chamber of Commerce are sponsoring the free event with support from the Town of Herndon and many local businesses. There will be two reenactments of the raid, at 11:00 a.m. and again at 2:00 p.m.

Much has been written about Mosby’s Raid on Herndon Station, but who exactly was Colonel John Mosby?

John Singleton Mosby was born in 1833 in Powhatan County, just west of Richmond, Virginia. He was named after his grandfather, John Singleton. When he was a young boy his family moved to Albemarle County, near Charlottesville. He was a small and sickly child. He was often picked on by school bullies, fighting back but always losing. As an adult he was 5’8” and weighed only about 125 pounds.

He enrolled in Hampden-Sydney College in 1847. He left that school after two years and later, in 1850, he enrolled at the University of Virginia. He excelled in literature, Latin, and Greek but struggled with math.

After being insulted and threatened by a fellow student and well-known bully, a confrontation ensued. When the bully rushed Mosby, he drew a small pistol and shot him in the neck. Mosby was arrested, tried, and sentenced to one year in jail. He also was expelled from the university. His friends and family petitioned the governor to pardon him, and after seven months of imprisonment he was released in 1853.

He studied law while he was incarcerated, and he continued to study law after his release. After being admitted to the bar he set up his own practice in Howardsville, Virginia. It was during this time that he met an out of town visitor, Pauline Clarke, who would later become his wife. They were married in 1857, settled in Bristol, Virginia, and eventually had eight children.

Mosby opposed secession. However, once Virginia voted to secede from the Union, despite his disapproval of slavery he enlisted in the Confederate Army as part of the First Virginia Cavalry. He started at the rank of private in the first Battle of Bull Run. By March of 1863, he had reached the rank of Captain. Soon after he was promoted to Major. He was promoted to the rank of Colonel toward the end of the war.

Early in his career he worked under General J.E.B. Stuart, where he became acquainted with scouting duties. Realizing that traditional military soldiering was not to his liking, he became eager to form his own command—one that would not be bound by traditional army conventions. On December 30, 1862, Mosby received permission from Stuart to form an independent command.

This was the day after Stuart, Mosby, and some of Stuart's other's officers had met in the home of Laura Ratcliffe, just south of Herndon on Centreville Road, where Laura said to the famous Stuart, "It's a shame you can't stay longer General. It's hard on us, living in conquered territory, under enemy rule." Stuart replied, "Well I won't desert you entirely, Miss Ratcliffe. I'm returning to Culpeper in the morning, as you know, but I mean to leave Captain Mosby behind with a few men, to look after the loyal Confederate people here until we can return in force and in victory."

Mosby and his small band of rangers conducted swift night raids to destroy railroad supply lines, capture Union soldiers and their horses, and intercept Union dispatches. After their attacks they would disappear into the woods. This earned him the nickname of the Gray Ghost. Knowing that the Union troops would find his raiders if they stayed in camp, Mosby asked patriotic Virginians to board his men in their homes.

Among Mosby's most famous raids was his capture of Union Brigadier General Edwin Stoughton at Fairfax Court House, today's City of Fairfax. At the time, Stoughton was surrounded by thousands of Union soldiers, yet Mosby captured him without firing a shot. He followed that raid one week later, on St. Patrick's Day, 1863, when he captured 25 Union soldiers near the Herndon train station.

Mosby was cited for meritorious service more often than any other Confederate officer during the course of the war. At war's end he refused to surrender formally; he simply disbanded his rangers and retreated into a self-imposed exile until he received his parole from General U.S. Grant. He settled in Warrenton, Virginia, and re-established his law practice.

To the dismay and anger of many southerners, Mosby befriended General Grant and became a Republican, believing that it was the best way to help heal the nation. He served as Grant's presidential campaign chairman in Virginia. As a result, he received many death threats and his boyhood home was burned down. For his protection, Grant appointed him as U.S. Consul to Hong Kong, a position in which he served from 1878 to 1885.

After Mosby returned to the U.S., he became active on the lecture circuit and wrote his war memoirs. He also worked as a lawyer for the Southern Pacific Railroad in San Francisco, and lived in California until 1901. He served in the General Land office in Nebraska under President Theodore Roosevelt, and he later served as an assistant attorney in the Department of Justice in Washington.

As the bitterness of Reconstruction subsided, Northerners and Southerners alike came to revere Colonel Mosby. In 1915, the University of Virginia honored him with a bronze medal, declaring, "Endowed with the gift of friendship, which won for you the confidence of both Lee and Grant, you have proven yourself a man of war, a man of letters, and a man of affairs worthy of the best traditions of your University and your State, to both of which you have been a loyal son."

In 1916—at the age of 82—after a series of physical ailments, Mosby died in a hospital in Washington, D.C. He was buried in Warrenton, Virginia.