Barry, John Decatur [1]

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by Paul Branch, 1979

21 June 1839–24 Mar. 1867

John Decatur Barry, Confederate [2] officer and newspaper editor, was born at Wilmington [3], the son of John A. Barry, a native of Philadelphia, who was a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy [4] and, later in life, a member of the firm Barry and Bryant [5] at Wilmington. Barry's mother was the former Mary Owen, daughter of General James Owen [6], brother of Governor John Owen [7] of Bladen County [8]. Barry had an older brother, James, and two younger sisters, Eliza and Mary. Young Barry attended The University of North Carolina [9] from 1856 to 1859. In November 1861, at the outbreak of the Civil War [10], he enlisted in the Wilmington Rifle Guards at Coosawhatchie as a private. This company subsequently became Company I of the Eighteenth North Carolina Regiment [11], which in March of 1862 was attached to the brigade of Brigadier General Lawrence O'B. Branch at Kinston. On 24 Apr. 1862, the regiment was reorganized, and Private Barry was elected captain of Company I. Barry served in this capacity for the next six months, accompanying his regiment to Virginia in the first week of May 1862 and fighting at Hanover Court House, the Seven Days' campaign [12], Cedar Mountain [13], Second Manassas [14], Harper's Ferry [15], and Sharpsburg [16]. In October 1862 the Eighteenth North Carolina was reorganized, and Barry was elected major of the regiment. At this new rank he served in the battles of Fredericksburg [17] and Chancellorsville [18].

At Chancellorsville, the Eighteenth North Carolina had the misfortune of firing the shots that mortally wounded Confederate General Stonewall Jackson [19]. This incident occurred on the night of 2 May 1863, during the battle. Unknown to the men of the Eighteenth, Jackson and a party of staff officers had ridden in front of the Confederate lines to reconnoiter the Union position. Upon returning to their lines, this party of horsemen was mistaken by the Eighteenth in the darkness and confusion of battle for Union cavalry. Shots rang out, and some of Jackson's party shouted that they were friends and called for the firing to stop. Barry suspected this to be a ruse and, the regiment having orders to shoot anything at its front, called on his men to open fire. The shooting started again, and by the time the error had been discovered, Jackson had been mortally wounded. Jackson's loss was irreplaceable, but the army never blamed the Eighteenth North Carolina for following its orders.

When the battle of Chancellorsville ended, Barry was the only one of thirteen regimental officers in James Lane's brigade not killed or wounded. The Eighteenth's colonel, Thomas Purdie [20], having been killed and its lieutenant colonel wounded, Barry took over command of the regiment with the rank of colonel. He led the regiment with distinction at Gettysburg [21], Mine Run [22], and the Wilderness [23] campaigns in the summer and winter of 1863 and the spring of 1864. On 2 June 1864, at the battle of Cold Harbor [24], a few miles from Richmond, Lane was severely wounded by a Union sharpshooter and Barry succeeded to the command of the brigade. In this capacity he led the brigade throughout the balance of the battle of Cold Harbor and the opening of the siege of Petersburg [25]. So impressive was Barry's leadership that his division commander, Major General Cadmus Wilcox, recommended him for promotion even though he was one of the younger officers in the army. Accordingly, on 8 Aug. 1864, Barry was appointed temporary brigadier general, dating from 3 Aug., under the new Confederate law authorizing officers of temporary rank to fill the place of a regular commander temporarily incapacitated. A few days afterward, however, Barry was himself painfully wounded by a Union sharpshooter while on a reconnoitering tour. Because he was disabled for some time, and because Lane returned to the command of the brigade during his absence, Barry's temporary appointment to brigadier general was canceled. He returned to command the Eighteenth North Carolina at his regular grade of colonel. However, his wound and impaired health soon rendered him unfit for active field service, and he sought duty in some less active capacity. Upon the recommendation of a board of surgeons, he was retired from active field service and assigned to departmental duty in North Carolina, leaving his regiment in late March 1865. There he served out the balance of the war.

Barry's postwar years were marked by a downhill struggle with failing health. Returning to Wilmington, he went into partnership with Major William H. Bernard [26] and founded the Wilmington *Dispatch* [27], a morning daily newspaper and one of the leading newspapers of the state Democratic party. Publication was begun on 1 Oct. 1865. The partnership with Bernard lasted but a few months, however, and the firm soon dissolved, each partner assuming his part of the obligations. Barry continued publication of the paper for several years but then suspended it. Only a few more years of broken health remained to him, and he finally died at his mother's house in Wilmington. He was buried in Oakdale Cemetery.

In 1863, Barry married Fannie Jones of Hampton, Va., sister of Pembroke Jones of the U.S. Navy and Tom Jones of the U.S. Army.

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