

Lewis, William Gaston ^[1]

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William Gaston Lewis.
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Histories of the several
regiments and battalions
from North Carolina, in
the great war 1861-'65.

^[2]William Gaston Lewis, Confederate ^[3]soldier, civil engineer, farmer, and merchant, was born in Rocky Mount, the son of Dr. John Wesley and Catherine Anne Battle Lewis, and attended Lovejoy Academy ^[4] in Raleigh ^[5]. After the death of his father, Lewis's mother moved the family to Chapel Hill where he entered The University of North Carolina ^[6] and was graduated in 1855 at age nineteen. He then taught in Chapel Hill (1855–56) and Jackson County, Fla. (1856–57). Appointed to the U.S. Survey Corps, Lewis worked in Minnesota in 1857–59 before returning to North Carolina to become assistant engineer on the Tarboro branch of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad ^[7] in 1859–61.

At the outbreak of the Civil War ^[8] in 1861, he joined the Confederate Army and soon proved himself to be a highly efficient soldier; promotion came rapidly. Beginning his service as third lieutenant of Company A, First North Carolina ("Bethel") Regiment, he saw action in the Battle of Bethel ^[9] on 10 June 1861. Commissioned major of the Thirty-third North Carolina Regiment on 17 Jan. 1862, he served in the Battle of New Bern ^[10] in March. For his outstanding service here he was appointed lieutenant colonel of the Forty-third Regiment in April 1862. In June and July he took part in the Seven Days' campaign in Virginia and was under fire from Union batteries and gunboats during the Battle of Malvern Hill in July. During the remainder of the summer he participated in the defense of Richmond, was engaged in drilling the regiment, and supervised the digging of entrenchments for the defense of Drewry's Bluff.

In December 1862 his brigade returned to North Carolina to help turn back a raid on Goldsboro. Here Lewis supervised the rebuilding of the railroad bridge burned by the enemy as it retreated. In the spring of 1863 he was stationed at Kinston and took part in an unsuccessful attack on New Bern, then in enemy hands. Returning to Virginia with his unit, he fought at the Battle of Gettysburg ^[11] and when the regimental commander, Colonel Thomas Kenan ^[12], was wounded and captured, Lewis assumed command of the Forty-third Regiment. His "bravery and coolness" in battle were mentioned in dispatches.

Lewis's regiment once again returned to North Carolina and saw action in the eastern part of the state, particularly around New Bern. On one occasion Lewis repaired a bridge while under fire, thus enabling the Confederates to drive Union forces back into New Bern. He participated in the successful attack on Plymouth ^[13] when the brigade commander was killed. As senior officer, Lewis assumed command and went with the brigade to Virginia where he again won high praise for his skill in holding off the enemy until reserves could be brought up. In June 1864 Lewis was promoted to brigadier general, and his new command consisted of four North Carolina regiments and a battalion. He thereafter took part in the Battle of Cold Harbor, in pursuing Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley, and in a raid on Washington, D.C., in addition to other battles and skirmishes. Wounded in July 1864, General Lewis was out of action until September when he and his men served in the rear guard of General Robert E. Lee's ^[14] army during the retreat to Appomattox. In an engagement outside Farmville, Va., on 7 Apr. 1865, Lewis was again severely wounded and captured while leading an assault. He was paroled at Farmville sometime between 11 and 21 April. His spotless war record shows him to have been a most capable commander, having participated in some thirty-seven battles and skirmishes.

After the war Lewis resumed his civil engineering practice, and for thirteen years served as state engineer. In 1865 he was road master for the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad; in 1866 he was assistant construction engineer for the Wilmington, Charlotte, and Rutherfordton Railroad; in 1867 he was general superintendent of the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad; and in 1868–69 he was chief engineer for the Williamston and Tarboro Railroad and the Edenton ^[15] and Norfolk Railroad. From

1871 to 1878 Lewis was a hardware merchant in Tarboro, and from 1879 to 1884 he tried his hand at farming. He served as chief engineer for the North Carolina Phosphate and Swamp Land Surveys in 1885 and for the North Carolina State Guard in 1885–1901. On the State Board of Education he was also chief engineer for swamplands in 1886–92. In 1899 he was chief engineer for the Albany and Raleigh Railroad with residence at Goldsboro. Lewis died suddenly from pneumonia at his home. He was buried with military honors in Goldsboro.

On 15 Mar. 1864 he married Martha Lucinda Pender, daughter of Joseph John Pender of Edgecombe County ^[16]. They had four daughters and three sons, one of whom died as an infant.

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Additional Resources:

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