

Purdie, Thomas J[ames?] ^[1]

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by James L. Pate, Jr., 1994

22 June 1830–3 May 1863

Thomas J[ames?] Purdie, Confederate officer, was born at Purdie Hall on the Cape Fear River ^[2] in Bladen County ^[3], between Fayetteville ^[4] and Elizabethtown ^[5], the second son of James B. (d. 1834) and Anna Maria Smith Purdie. His birthplace, a two-story brick Georgian-style house, still standing in 1992, was built by his grandfather. Little is known of his early life except in a few local accounts, such as a neighbor's diaries, indicating that he was a quiet, well-respected young man who collected books and helped tend his family's vast landholdings on both sides of the river. Family papers mention a special room for his library in a home he built for himself about 1855, several hundred yards upriver from Purdie Hall. This house, where he lived only a few years, was willed to his sister, Eliza Jane, who subsequently married William C. Dunham. The 1860 census reveals that Purdie was among the wealthiest men in the county.

Although Purdie appears not to have been mustering with the local militia, the Bladen Guards, he enlisted as a private in May 1861. The militia was called into state service at Wilmington ^[6] on 15 June 1861 as Company K, Eighth North Carolina Volunteers, and sent to nearby Camp Wyatt for training and outfitting. As a measure of the confidence he inspired and the leadership he displayed, Purdie was soon elected captain of the company. Following several promotions, he was a colonel by the end of 1862 and the Eighth Regiment had been redesignated the Eighteenth. With Purdie in command, it was attached to James H. Lane's Fourth Brigade under General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson. The Eighteenth was sent by rail to Virginia in May 1862 and within a month became a part of Jackson's "foot cavalry."

In surviving Confederate records, Purdie is mentioned many times for his acts of courage and leadership. He was wounded at least twice, the last time fatally leading his regiment with saber drawn in its second predawn charge against a breastwork of twenty-eight Union cannons on Fairview Heights at Chancellorsville on 3 May 1863. Reports indicate that he was struck in the forehead from about seventy yards by a minié ball. Northern troops, momentarily retaking their position, stripped him of his revolver and braided officer's coat. Purdie's men recovered his body and saber in a third charge, however, which permanently captured the position. His body went by rail from Richmond ^[7] to Wilmington and from there by steamer to his family's home.

As regimental commander of the Eighteenth, Purdie thought that his position was under attack by Union cavalry on the night of 2 May 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Va., when he issued orders directly resulting in the mistaken shooting of his own general, Stonewall Jackson. An account of the tragic error was written by Captain Alfred H. H. Tolar, who was commanding Purdie's old Company K of Bladen Guards.

"Under the circumstances, it would have been utterly impossible for anyone to know who fired the fatal bullet or bullets," Tolar wrote. "That the wounds were from the firing line of the 18th N.C. Troops, officers and men of that regiment will testify with regret. . . . Gen. Jackson and staff, accompanied by Gen. [A. P.] Hill and staff, rode down the turnpike in [front] of our line of battle, and coming closer to the enemy's lines than expected, were fired on from a regiment of [Union] infantry; and then some batteries of artillery turned loose with a heavy firing; sending shot and shell down the pike. The general and staff left the road and the two generals [Jackson and Hill] with staffs and couriers, came down on the 18th at a rapid gait. The night was calm and the tramp of horsemen advancing through a heavy forest at a rapid gait seemed to the average infantryman like a brigade of cavalry. Noting the approach of horsemen from the front and having been advised that the enemy was in front, with no line of pickets intervening to give the alarm [incorrect intelligence, since the Thirty-third North Carolina had been sent forward, unknown to the Eighteenth, as skirmishers at the end of a heated and often disarrayed all-day advance], the brave Col. Purdie gave the order, 'Fix bayonets, load, prepare for action!' as fast as the command could be given. When the supposed enemy was within 100 yards, perhaps, of our line, the colonel gave the command, 'Commence firing,' and from that moment on until notified by Maj. Harris [or Holland] of Gen. Jackson's staff that we were firing into our own men, the firing was kept up by the entire regiment with great rapidity. The horse of Maj. Holland [or Harris] was knocked down with a blow from the butt of a gun in the hands of Arthur S. Smith, Co. K, 18th N.C. Troops, and at that moment we were notified by the major of the sad mistake that had been made."

Concerning Purdie's execution of command in the heat of battle, there can be no doubt from available records that he was very competent. On 12 July 1862, after the battles of Mechanicsville and Malvern Hill, not long before Purdie took full command of the Eighteenth, Col. Robert H. Cowan wrote: "Where all behaved well it is difficult to make distinctions . . . still I desire to make special mention of my lieutenant-colonel, Thomas J. Purdie. He was everywhere in the thickest of the fight, cool and courageous, encouraging the men and directing them in their duty. His services were invaluable."

"I cannot speak in too high terms of the gallantry of Col. T. J. Purdie, [who] was slightly wounded," Brig. Gen. James H. Lane wrote in a 23 Dec. 1862 report to General Hill. Following Purdie's and Jackson's deaths, Lane wrote on 11 May 1863: "Never have I seen men fight more gallantly or bear fatigue and hardship more cheerfully. I shall always be proud of

the noble bearing of my brigade in the Battle of Chancellorsville—the bloodiest in which it has ever taken part, where the 18th and 28th [North Carolina Troops] gallantly repulsed two night attacks made by vastly superior numbers. . . . Its gallantry has cost it many noble sacrifices and we are called upon to mourn the loss of . . . the gentle, but gallant and fearless Col. Purdie [who] was killed while urging forward his men."

One who attended Purdie's funeral paid tribute to him in the *North Carolina Presbyterian* : "Thinking it wrong for the gallant dead to pass away . . . when their deeds, founded in virtue, have merited the highest honors, I send you a brief history of the gallant Col. Thomas J. Purdie. 'One good deed dying tongueless murders a thousand that wait upon that.' The reticence natural to him concealed many latent virtues. . . . His benevolence was of the most unselfish kind, and he spared no pains to make all around him contented and happy. All the members of the 18th N.C. Troops will testify to his kindness, and at late hours of the night he would visit the tents to quell any disorder; his powers of persuasion were so great that he seldom had to use harsh means to bring a soldier to his duty."

Following a funeral service at Purdie Methodist Church near his home, Colonel Purdie, thirty-three and never married, was buried in the family cemetery on 10 May 1863, the same day that General Jackson died of complications from his wounds. Purdie's mother was still living at the time.

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