

# John Randolph Lane and The Chatham Boys

by Fred J. Vatter  
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One afternoon as I worked in the Chatham County Historical Association's museum in the court house at Pittsboro, it seemed as if someone was watching me. Looking up I saw the picture of Col. John Randolph Lane, generously donated to the Association by Doris McCracken, on the wall over my head. His eyes appeared to be fixed on me, and I decided then and there that it was time to get to know him a little better.

John Randolph Lane was born on July 4, 1835, the son of John Siler Lane (1792-1871) and Kara Kidd Lane (1803-1880) whose forbears had been in what is now Western Chatham and Eastern Randolph Counties since the mid-1700s. In May 1861 he enlisted as a private in the Chatham Boys or Chatham Grays, which later became Company G of the 26th North Carolina Regiment. His brother, Abram J. Lane (1841-1920) was a member of the same regiment. This group of volunteers initially drilled in the front yard of Captain Billy Matthews, about where the Siler City Post Office now stands. The area was called Matthew's Crossroads before Siler City was formed.



A musket charge by the 26th North Carolina Regiment reenactors at Gilmore Lodge in 1987. Col. John Randolph Lane, the subject of this article, commanded the 26th NC Regiment at Gettysburg in July, 1863.

*From the collection of Dr. Brooks Gilmore*

The 26th North Carolina Regiment distinguished itself at the Battle of New Bern and also fought at Malvern Hill, Rawles Mills, North Carolina; Goldsboro, North Carolina; Barrington's Ferry, North Carolina; and Washington and Blounts Creek, North Carolina.

In December 1861 John Randolph Lane was promoted to Captain. He was cited for bravery at New Bern in March 1862, and was promoted to Lt. Col. the following October. During July 1863, the 26th North Carolina Regiment found itself at Gettysburg, facing the dreaded Iron Brigade of the Army of the Potomac which was considered the Union's best fighting force. The Iron Brigade, wearing tall, bell crowned black hats, was entrenched on a hill called McPherson's Woods.

Col. Burgwyn commanded the center of the 26th North Carolina regiment, Lt. Col. Lane commanded the right and Major John T. Jones commanded the left. Two companies from Chatham were among the nine companies on the line, Company E (Capt. S.W. Brewer) and Company G (Capt. H. C. Albright). While waiting the order to charge, the right side was harassed by snipers until Lt. J. A. Lowe of Company G crept forward to silence them.

When the charge began, the bullets were as thick as hailstones according to Lane, and the Union artillery on the right caused frightful losses. The regiment's color bearers were repeatedly shot down, including Col. Harry Burgwyn, until Lane became the fourteenth man to seize the flag. That made him the senior officer in the Regiment and he ordered a bayonet charge. Men were shot down in lines as if on dress parade, but two of the three Union lines were overtaken. As the Union forces retreated toward the seminary, Sgt. Charles H. McConnell of the Iron Brigade used his last cartridge to shoot Col. Lane, carrying the colors, just as Lane turned to cheer his regiment onward. The ball struck in the back of his neck, crashing through his jaw and mouth. The remnants of the regiment followed the flag, which had been recovered by Capt. S. W. Brewer, and pursued the Union soldiers toward the seminary, where the few 26th Regiment survivors were relieved by William Dorsey Pender's Division. The battle on that sector had been won, but at a terrible cost. Of the 800 men in the 26th North Carolina Regiment only 216 survived. On the third day of the campaign another 130 men were lost before the battle was over.

Col. Lane recovered from his wound to take charge of his regiment which participated in the battle at Brostow's Station, the Wilderness, Five Forks, Richmond and finally surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. Col. Lane suffered three additional severe wounds during that period, and finally was broken down by exposure and suffering which hospitalized him in Greensboro. There he was when the remnant of his heroic regiment surrendered 120 muskets at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

Col. Lane was proud of his valiant troops, who he described as from the great middle class that owned small farms in Central and Western North Carolina...Their life between the plow handles and wielding the axe had made them strong...Every man of them had been trained from boyhood to shoot a rifle with precision...life on the farm and in the woods had taught them to be observant and self-reliant...every man of them believed that he owed allegiance first to his home and state.

After the war, Col. Lane returned to Chatham to his home on Little Brush Creek. Two miles upstream he operated a large general store, cotton gin, and grist mill. He married beautiful Mary Ellen Siler and they had a son and daughter. Son Leonidas Lane was once Sheriff of Chatham County. Daughter Mary Etta Lane married R. M. Gorrell.

As strange as it seems, Col. Lane met Charles McConnell of Chicago, who turned out to be the Union sniper who shot him at Gettysburg. The two eventually became

friends and Mr. McConnell came to Chatham to visit Col. Lane, but Grandma Lane would not accept him and wouldn't permit him to enter the house. Lane's grandchildren reported their friendship, and Mr. Forrest Lane reportedly had a picture of the two of them together.

In 1888 Col. Lane was Chief Marshall at a reunion in Pittsboro of 800 Confederate Veterans and thousands of spectators, a position he held again on August 23, 1907 at the unveiling of the Confederate Monument at the Court House.

On the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1903, Col. Lane gave an emotional address, which was published in the *Raleigh News & Observer* on July 5, 1903. In his closing remarks he noted that Year by year the relentless temper of war is giving way to the gentle tones of brotherhood and peace. Your valor is coming to be regarded as the common heritage of the American nation.

In spite of the vicious battles and severe wounds experienced by Col. Lane, and his respect for the ideals and determination of those who served under him, he was able to forgive, even befriend, his former adversaries. Perhaps this is the message that John Randolph Lane meant to send to me via his gaze down from the portrait on the museum wall.

Col. Lane died on December 31, 1908 and is buried at the Brush Creek Baptist Church, a few miles west of Siler City.

Sources:

- Col. John Randolph Lane's speech in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, July 5, 1903.
- Paper entitled *John Randolph Lane, 1835-1908* from the Kathryn B. Rees Collection, Wren Memorial Library at Siler City filed in Pittsboro Library, Genealogy Section.
- Letter dated June 25, 1975 from Kathryn B. Rees to Clyde Wilson, Asst. Professor of History, USC filed in Pittsboro Library, Genealogy Section.