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SpC MS 1545 sc, Edward Washburn Whitaker Letter to Joshua Chamberlain

Edward Washburn Whitaker

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General J.S. Chamberlain  
Portland ,Maine

Dear General Chamberlain:

I trust you will excuse my neglect of my promises when I tell you I have been very sick and a long time recruiting my health.

Your esteemed favor of the 26th duly received and contents carefully noted.

You were the first person to receive the announcement of the unconditional surrender of General Lee's army at Appomattox Court House at 9 o'clock, April 9th, 1865, under the following circumstances.

General Custer's Calvary Division had advance of Cavalry Corps, Army of the Potomac, and was moving in column of Squadron front under artillery fire of enemy on our left flank. After passing the artillery as General Custer was about to order a charge, a rebel officer, named Capt. Sims of General Longstreet's staff met us (I was riding by General Custer's side at head of the column) and said General Lee asks a suspension of hostilities. General Custer (as quick as lightning) said Whitaker take the flag go with this officer to General Lee with my compliments and tell him I can not stop this charge unless he announces an unconditional surrender as I am not sole in command on this field.

Capt. Sims guided me to where he left Generals Lee, Gordon, and Longstreet. I found there only Gorden and Longstreet who explained that they were in command as General Lee had galloped off to the rear to find General Grant immediately after authorizing a request for a suspension of hostilities.

These Generals both assured me of an absolute surrender, and that they were personally satisfied of the result the night before, but General Lee still had hope of being able to get thru to Lynchburg and with that expectation ordered the charge by Gordon's command which had repulsed by infantry. I was suspicious of their good faith as all firing had not stopped and artillery with smoking guns was passing us, and while hesitating about my report to General Custer they very impatiently begged me to hurry and to first stop that infantry line with the announcement. I consented to do so only stipulating that a rebel officer go with me.

I galloped out to the infantry line and steered for what appeared to be the commander's flag and announced the surrender of Lee's army. I understood to be yourself commanding that portion of General Ord's line. I learned later that it was you as you lectured and described the appearance of the towel in my hand. The moment the surrender was announced the greatest, loudest cheers I ever heard went up from right to left along your line.
I left the Confederate officer on your line, he had no message, or any authority to deliver one, as I simply asked that an officer accompany me, and I at once galloped across the field to General Custer to whom I repeated the announcement of an unconditional surrender of the rebel army, and then was repeated that shout of joy all along the cavalry line. Do not be disturbed by any of the statements of General Gordon early or late. He dare not confront me with a denial of any of my statements. I furnished him with a copy of my first public statement on this matter, and have twice invited him to compare notes and correct errors in his lecture, and he has never attempted to dispute me. General Longstreet admits his error in putting General Custer in my boots, and I suppose we must excuse both him and General Gordon for bad memory "on the details" as the latter puts it in a letter to me "on account of momentious excitement and responsibility" of the occasion.

He could remember how difficult it was to find a truce when General Lee suggested it and how by good luck Sims found a white towel in his saddle bag. But this is enough of detail. You now have my statement of the fact that the surrender was first announced to you in such haste at the "for God's sake" request of Gordon who was impatient at my hesitation.

Yours very truly,

E.W. Whitaker
late Lt. Col 1st Conn. Cav
Acting Insp General and
Chief of Staff for
Gen. Geo. A. Custer
Comm'r 3rd Cav. Divn, A of P.

On back of letter

General If you will put this in type writing I will sign as many copies as you please to send. I do not want the original. This written in a great hurry.

E.W. Whittaker