



# A Clear View of HISTORY

By Leanna Joyner

**Angels Rest, an Appalachian Trail overlook, may have had a special role in ousting the Union forces, including two future U.S. Presidents, from their occupation of Pearisburg, Virginia during the Civil War.**

**ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO, AS THE CIVIL WAR RAGED, NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN** forces embarked on the second year of fighting between the states. Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes, who would later become the 19th President of the United States, led the 23rd Ohio Regiment. At the beginning of May 1862, Hayes initiated a scouting mission with companies H, I, and K of his regiment from present day West Virginia, to the Narrows, along the banks of the New River in Virginia; the party was investigating reports of unguarded Confederate supplies. They didn't find the supplies they hoped for at the Narrows, so they pushed east another five miles to capture and occupy Giles Court House, known today as Pearisburg. It was in Pearisburg that the soldiers found the supplies they had sought. This was a valuable find for the Union army since the control of enemy supplies would cripple Confederate efforts by leaving their men hungry and without needed ammunition for the constant fight.

When the scouting party, led by Major David C. Comly, Captain James L. Drake, and accompanied by Captain Gilmore's cavalry, reached Pearisburg they sent word back to Lt. Col. Hayes of the capture of prisoners and large stores of supplies, including "two hundred and fifty barrels of flour and everything else." Hayes recorded in his diary that when the first wave of Union forces entered Pearisburg, the residents didn't even recognize they had been invaded. They were standing on the streets talking, and upon their realization, women scampered home with admonishments, weeping, and begging.

On May 7, Lt. Col. Hayes arrived to unite his regiment and firmly secure the advantageous capture of supplies. Among the spoils now in their custody were corn, corn meal, sugar, salt, ammunition, and tools, with a total value of more than \$5,000. During their stay, troops also foraged additional corn to add to the stores. Holding on to the bounty would prove to be a challenge

Inset: Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes (seen here in his Union uniform) led the 23rd Ohio Regiment and went on to become the 19th President of the United States, photo courtesy the R.B. Hayes Presidential Center; Left: Looking out from Angels Rest with a clear view of Pearisburg, photo by Leanna Joyner

for the Union because of its limited forces and lack of artillery to guard against a Confederate attack.

Hayes set up his temporary headquarters at the Andrew Johnston House in Pearisburg, and, according to the Giles County Historical Society, the nearby Presbyterian church (which no longer exists) was used as the commissary and barracks. Commissary Sergeant William McKinley, like Hayes, went on to become a U.S. President. Hayes assigned soldiers to picket duty to keep watch for advancing forces; he was very wary of an attack because significant Confederate forces were known to be in the vicinity. He sent requests for reinforcements twice a day for several days, but never received artillery or additional troops.

Hayes and his roughly 600 men held Pearisburg from May 6 to the pre-dawn hours of May 10. The early morning attack by Confederates — 2,500 to 3,000



The number of dead and wounded as a result of this battle was fairly small. Union casualties included three killed, six missing, and several wounded, none seriously; and Confederates suffered two dead and four wounded. According to Hayes' diary on May 8, Union Sergeant Edward A. Abbott and his scout on patrol said they spotted a Confederate officer with a large spy glass "examining the village from a very high mountain whose summit, two miles distant, overlooks the whole town." The Confederate assessment of the limited number of the Union soldiers in Pearisburg is what helped shape their decision to invade. If this decision was based in large part on information gathered by the perspective offered at this

high vantage point, then this locale is indeed pivotal to the truncated Union control of Pearisburg. It may be that the officer stood on Angels Rest — a rocky outcropping along the Appalachian Trail that overlooks the mountain hamlet of Pearisburg and the New River as it snakes through Giles County. Standing atop Angels Rest one gains the perfect perspective to see Hayes' lingering thoughts on Pearisburg, captured in these words as: "a neat, pretty village with a most magnificent surrounding country both as regards scenery and cultivation."

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strong — sent Hayes and his men in retreat back to the Narrows, and eventually another 23 miles to Princeton, West Virginia. In retreat, they burned the church that held the supplies, though women of the town are said to have put out the fire. The goods seized by the Union four days earlier remained in the town, as did their prisoners. According to a biography of William McKinley by William Howard Armstrong, the loss of supplies had a detrimental impact on the Union troops following their retreat. Within days, McKinley didn't have bread to issue to the troops.



## Hike this Section of History

Two hike options are available to explore the rocks and vistas of Angels Rest on Pearis Mountain. Both hikes are moderately strenuous and require that you retrace your path to return to your vehicle. A hike in the early months of spring offers budding trees and clear views below, while a visit in the fall offers a panorama of colors surrounding this quaint village in the New River Valley.

The hike, originating from the trailhead at Va. Rt. 100/Narrows Road, connects to the A.T. and Pearis Cemetery via a short side trail; this is a 6.2-mile, roundtrip hike. The second option, originating from Cross Avenue is four miles, but parking is limited at this trailhead. To access the trailhead at Va. Rt. 100, drive west on 460 from the town of Pearisburg toward the New River. Turn left on Rt. 100/Narrows Road. The parking area is beyond a curve on the right, in .3 miles. A kiosk is located at



Clockwise from far left: Built in 1857, the doctor's office served as headquarters for the 43rd Ohio Regiment; the Giles County Courthouse was used as a hospital during the Civil War (sketch circa 1870); The Andrew Johnston house was central to military activity during the Union occupation and is now open to visitors as a museum, images courtesy the Giles County Historical Society; Angels Rest sits atop a rocky outcropping along the A.T., photo by Leanna Joyner; The Presbyterian church acted as the commissary and barracks for the Union troops, photo courtesy the Giles County Historical Society

the woodland edge near the parking area. Hikers using this access point will follow the side trail .2 mile to a four-way intersection. Turn right on the A.T. to hike south 2.9 miles to reach Angels Rest. Just ahead at this intersection is Pearis Cemetery, the burial site for twelve Civil War veterans as well as the namesake of the town, Captain George Pearis, who fought in the Revolutionary War.

The alternate parking area at Va. 634/Cross Avenue offers a shorter, round-trip hike. To access the small parking area from downtown Pearisburg, follow Main Street north, and turn left on Johnston Avenue. Ascend a short, steep hill, and stay to the right. Here, the road becomes Cross Avenue. Travel one mile and look closely for log steps and an A.T. symbol on your left. Parking is located just beyond the A.T. crossing on the left side of the street. ↗