

A Bend in the River *Holland Settler's Role in the Battle of Tebbs Bend*

by Terry VandeWater

The Fourth of July, 1863, was a big day in the history of the Civil War:

- The Union Army of General Grant took control of Vicksburg.
- The Confederate Army of General Lee retreated from Gettysburg
- Colonel Orlando Hurley Moore and some 200 untested volunteer infantrymen from Michigan denied Confederate General John Hunt Morgan the use of a little plank bridge where the Columbia-Lebanon Pike crossed the Green River just south of Campbellsville, Kentucky.

Likely most readers know all about Vicksburg and Gettysburg, but the Green River Bridge? How does a battle for that short span in south-central Kentucky warrant being on the same list as the other two far more famous July 4, 1863, events? Well, in many ways it doesn't. Yet the struggle for the bridge, called the Battle of Tebbs Bend or the Battle for the Green River Bridge, certainly deserves more notice than it got that day 142 years ago—and more renown than it has now. It's not that no one heard of it in 1863 or still remembers it. Local historians know of it, and many of that small number have visited the site. Even I was aware of it, and I'm not a "Civil War buff" (in fact, I must admit that when I started writing about the Tebbs Bend battle, I was far less than sure where Vicksburg was. Virginia was my first guess), and I was barely aware of the impact of its fall or the South's defeat at Gettysburg (though I figured they must have been

pretty important [I had even visited Gettysburg about 20 years ago]).

Why fiction—and still try to get it 'right'

So how did I come to tell the Tebbs Bend story as a novel (AuthorHouse, 344 pages, \$16)—and a companion question: even though I choose to write fiction, why did I take such pains to get the history "right"? The answer to the first question goes like this: I had been a writer or teacher of writing for all of my working life—both in the academic and business worlds. That writing was all prose, most of it journalistic. So after I had been retired for 10 years or so, I thought I'd like to try my hand at fiction. This would be a new challenge. But what to write about? I remembered reading Kenneth Roberts (*The Northwest Passage, Arundel*) in college and had heard brief mention of the Tebbs Bend battle from time to time over the years. So why not dig into that a bit and perhaps try historical fiction. When I started to research the battle (thank you, Google and both Herrick and Howard Miller Libraries), I immediately became caught up in the story. Soon, however, I was struck by the fact that it seemed not to have received the attention it deserved. As I dug deeper, I was even more disturbed as I found that the "facts" of the



battle were often apparently not accurate. In that regard, I found no evidence of a thorough and reasonably accurate account of the battle and the incidents leading up to it—even (or should I say "especially"?) from people who had actually

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From the Director



This past June, long-time volunteer Jean Postma finished electronically keying the 762-page Don van Reken newspaper index. The incomplete index has been part of our online search engine for a few years now and was updated weekly as Jean completed sections. Now that it is complete, (*Holland City News*, 1872-1977; *Holland Sentinel*, 1912-1980;

Ottawa County Times, 1892-1905) we hope that many of our researchers will turn to this valuable source to locate news articles for their research projects. Jean, along with our other valuable volunteers—Sue Brandsen, Elaine Bruins, Carolyn Nienhuis, Russ Norden, Bill Van Dyke and Lee Witteveen—assist us daily by processing, cataloging, indexing, and filing items of historical significance to our collections. Without them, we would be unable to help the hundreds of researchers that contact us every year.

Our article for this issue was written by Terry Vandewater and concerns the writing process behind his new book, *A Bend in the River*. We are always grateful when an author agrees to write an article for the *Quarterly*, especially when the author has worked closely with us during the research portion of his project. Once you read the article, I hope that you will then read his novel. There you will find his liberal use of facts spun into a very readable novel.

We are also pleased to announce that Michael Douma's book, *Veneklasen Brick: A Family, a Company, and a Unique 19th Century Dutch Architectural Movement in Michigan*, has been published by Eerdmans Publishing. More information about ordering the book will be provided in the next issue of this newsletter and through the local media outlets. Michael, who spent four years working for us while a student at Hope College and who has been working as an assistant to Dr. Robert Swierenga of the Van Raalte Institute since January 2005, will start his graduate studies at Florida State University this fall. We wish him well on his studies and beyond.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

A Bend in the River (continued from page 1)

been at Tebbs Bend that day. So I decided to write a novel about the battle while sticking as close to the actual facts as I could. My hope was, therefore, to rectify both of these shortcomings.

In addition to wanting to try my hand at fiction, I confess that I am a writer first; historian (a label that flatters me) is a distant second. I wanted a genre that would allow me to use many of the tools of a novelist (like irony and symbolism) and to tell more of a story than straight history would permit—while still taking great pains to get the “best” facts that I could in order to tell the story with maximal historical accuracy. These words by writer William Martin guided my work: “The historian serves the truth of his subject. The novelist serves the truth of his tale. As a novelist, I have tools no historian should touch: I can manipulate time and space, extrapolate from the written record to invent dialogue and incident, create fictional characters to bring you close to the historical figures, and fall back on my imagination when the research runs out.” I hope I have succeeded in this no less than have writers like John Jakes and Michael Shaara.

But let's get into the novel. Here's how it starts:

“PRIVATE CHRISTIAAN ALBERTUS DE GOEDE was scared, no doubt about that. *Why wouldn't I be*, he thought, *with Rebel guerrillas all over, ready to pounce on me and on the rest of us?* Sweat streamed down his face, more perspiration than one would have expected, even in the greater-than-usual heat and humidity of a mid-October day in northern Kentucky. Not much water was to be found elsewhere: Most of the creeks and ponds were dry. The sun shone down on the men with a fury, as if to remind Christiaan and the other “boys from Michigan” (as they were called) that they were far from the autumnal coolness they usually enjoyed back home this time of year. Nonetheless, he and the seven-company detachment of the 25th Michigan continued making their way along the 10 miles of dirt road—at times little more than a one-lane pathway—from Eminence to Bethlehem, some 40 miles east-northeast of the relative safety and comfort of Louisville. Thick forest, still in full-leaf, made perfect hiding places for bushwhackers to lie in wait for any Union troops daring—or foolish—enough to travel along it. Even worse, any unfortunate trooper who had to fall out of the ranks would become easy prey for marauding guerrilla gangs, almost certainly to be robbed and murdered.”

Christiaan, as you probably surmised, is the main character. He is fictitious but, I trust, not especially unlike the actual young men from the Dutch settlements in Ottawa County, Michigan, who composed most of Company I of the 25th Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment. They are on their first action in the field, seeking to flush out enemy guerilla gangs in the backcountry of Kentucky, east of Louisville. He is not especially happy to be there: No one would be, he (and the author) supposes, with enemy bushwhackers on the prowl. But to make matters worse, Christiaan soon finds another reason not to be happy to find himself a soldier marching off to war:

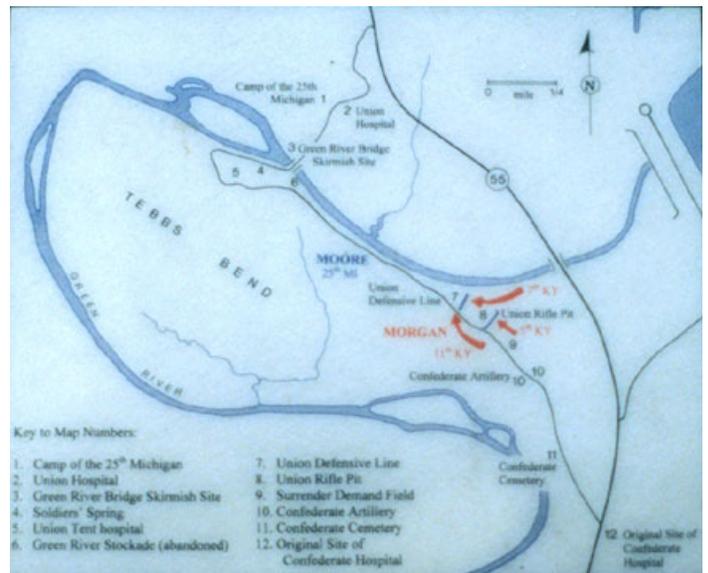
“BUT GETTING SHOT AT, EVEN DYING, wasn’t all there was to it. It was something more, something lurking just beyond Christiaan’s reach. Yes, the war did seem senseless—at least while marching out here in the forest of northern Kentucky. But the Reverend van Raalte had said God was using the war to punish the country for the evil of slavery and for letting things get so bad that the future of the country was at serious risk. His punishment was an act of love, of course. It had to be, for God is, after all, a God of love. And bringing His people to justice was necessary to return them to righteousness. In the end, they would be better for having endured the awful lesson of war, purified by its fire, once more able to live lives more pleasing to the Lord. The issue of slavery had to be settled; the promise of the United States had to be fulfilled. War might not have been the way God would have preferred to bring America to heel, Christiaan conceded, but the nation had gotten so far from the mark God had set for it that He chose to use war to as an instrument of justice. Still, as certain as Christiaan wished to be about the validity of this war, he couldn’t help but wonder if matters were as cut and dried as he was trying to make them.”

Two plot lines

These two excerpts introduce the book’s two main plot lines (or conflicts):

1. The experiences of the 25th Michigan that led to their defense of the bridge, culminating in the battle itself.
2. The struggle within Christiaan de Geode and some of the other Dutchmen about being called upon to kill in the name of the Lord, also culminating in the battle.

The time the book covers is from the enlistments of the Dutchmen and the formation of the 25th (August-September



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1862) through the battle (July 4, 1863) and a few days after that. The regiment’s other nine companies were composed of men (called “Americans” by the “rustic,” mostly non-English speaking Dutchmen) from six other West Michigan counties—namely, Berrien, Calhoun, Ionia, Kalamazoo, Kent, and St. Joseph.

I needed to invent my main character, Christiaan, in order to explore the second plot line—that is, how one soldier handled what to many were the moral ambiguities of war. A real historian, Al McGeehan, mayor of Holland and retired history teacher, assured me that being called Warrior Angels of the Lord while believing in the Prince of Peace was a struggle for many of the colonist’s who volunteered to serve in the Northern army. The Reverend Van Raalte, founder of the colony and their spiritual leader, had long preached the virtues of personal piety and was known to be wary of his people’s involvement with the evil to be found outside the wilderness confines of the colony. Now, however, he was asking them to leave Ottawa County for who knew where and do the work of a soldier—more particularly, to kill so the Lord’s will would be done.

Conflicted or not, Christiaan and his friend Otto Alderink (also fictitious) and the other volunteers soon found themselves having to deal with the apparent inevitability of a confrontation with the infamous Rebel Raider (Terror of Kentucky, the Marion of the West, Thunderbolt of the Confederacy, and so on), General John Hunt Morgan. When they finally do meet Morgan, they know it is a time to kill—and be killed. Of course, it’s no secret who carried the day, but it’s left for the reader to discover *how* that happened and *how* Christiaan (and likely others) resolved the moral dilemma he faced.

Though Morgan was rightly feared, the 25th had the good fortune of being led by Colonel Orlando Hurley Moore. Moore, not without his faults, is, nonetheless, revered by his men and proves by novel's end to be a near-genius tactician and a genuine patriot—not to mention a truly good and just man.

Pieter ver Schure

The colonel is just one of the many historical characters in the novel. Another one, perhaps also known to some of you, is Private Pieter ver Schure from Holland. Here is a passage in which I account for his fatal wounds. The wounds were real, all right—Pieter died two hours after receiving them



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(the company's first fatality)—and were as described in the book. But the circumstances surrounding the wounds are impossible to know for sure. Yet they are based on a conversation I had with Betty Jean Gorin-Smith, the local historian laureate of the Campbellsville, Kentucky/Tebbs Bend area, and the final authority (so designated by Al M c G e e h a n) regarding many of

the unresolved issues I encountered in my quest to get the history right. We were standing together on what has come to be known as the Surrender Field—in front of level ridge on which the Confederate artillery pieces were laid and overlooking the rifle pit within which some of the Union troops were huddled at the start of the battle. We considered the facts that were known and then, the best we could, constructed other details that jibed with those facts:

Christiaan, Renke [Haan, another fictitious character], Pieter, and the other pickets were not unhappy to crawl out of their holes and make their way back to the relative safety of the rifle pit, even though doing so would expose them to enemy fire. Bent at the waist to present the smallest possible targets, they scrambled down the slope. With minié balls thudding the earth around their feet and whistling past their heads, they ran faster than

they'd thought possible. Christiaan and Pieter, running side-by-side, were within a few strides of the rifle pit when two Rebel rounds managed to find Pieter. He cried out and stumbled to the ground, clutching his chest and stomach. Christiaan skidded to a stop and grabbed him under his left arm and half dragged, half carried him the last few feet to the earthworks. The other men took hold of Pieter and slid him to the trench.

Blood was spurting from Pieter's wounds, giving most of the other men their first look at a compatriot's blood being spilled in combat. Fortunately, most of them kept their heads and offered whatever aid and comfort they could to their fallen comrade—little though it was.

Having not lost consciousness, Pieter peered into the faces looking down at him. "It's bad, really bad," he said, stating the obvious, perhaps wanting to be judged wrong. No one disagreed with him, however. Christiaan saw no alternative but to try to get him to the rear, even if he had to drag him there. He pressed pieces of the cleanest cloth he could find against Pieter's wounds and buttoned Pieter's shirt in an attempt to hold the dressings in place. Christiaan said, "Hang on, Pieter. You'll be O.K. I'll help you, get you to the surgeon. You can make it."

Two reasons for title

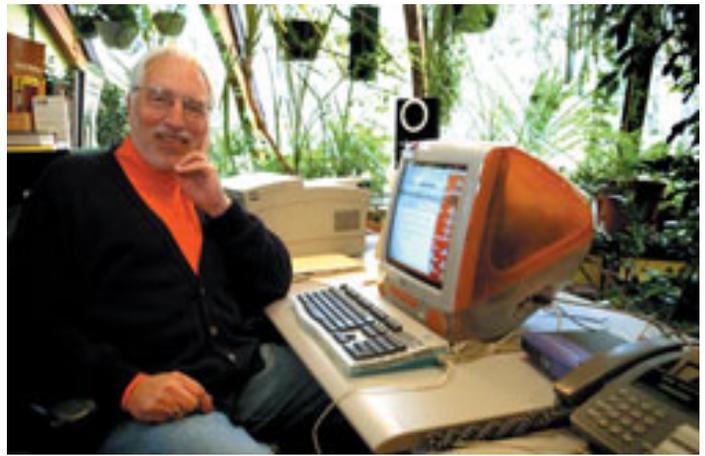
So why the title, *A Bend in the River*? Why not name the book after the battle itself? I chose that name first of all because of the horseshoe loop (bend) in the Green River where Colonel Moore, chose to fight. General Basil Duke, the Confederate's second in command, wrote that the mouth of that narrow peninsula was "the strongest natural position [he] ever saw," one Moore "had fortified . . . with a skill equal to his judgment in the selection." That doesn't quite explain the choice of the title, however; The "Battle of Tebbs Bend" would work just as well. The second reason was that the Reverend Van Raalte tells Christiaan as he goes off to the army that a true believer's life is like a river that flows *straight* back into the arms of the Lord. That's all I can say here about that image: You have to read the book.

Let me end this by saying that the result of the battle for Morgan was a major setback to his grandiose plan to continue north to sack Louisville and then join Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. For the men of Company I, this was a major factor in their finally becoming Americans of Dutch decent rather than Dutchmen living in America.

Plenty of errors in sources

Here are *some* of the factual errors I found in my research (some made by *professional* historians):

- General Morgan's cavalry did not fight on horseback but as infantry, dismounted (" . . . the 25th poured a withering fire into the charging horses and men.").
- Colonel Moore had no artillery at the battle (in spite of what was written by a Company I person at the scene).
- The number of artillery pieces Morgan had at the battle was four, not three.
- The Michigianians were outnumbered no more than 4:1, not the 8 (or more): 1 so often seen ("Moore knew he had to hold off over '2,500' Confederate 'horsemen'"—this from a member of Company I who took part in the battle. Morgan headed a small brigade against the 25th at Tebbs Bend, not a division, the other brigades fording the Green River elsewhere. And he dispatched a relatively great number of his men to take up a position at the bridge, well behind the actual battlefield. The detachment of the 25th almost surely did not number over 210 armed, able-bodied men, likely less.)
- Numerous misspelled names of commanders (like *Boyles* for Boyle and *Johnson* for Johnston and *Allison* for Alston. Also, the Tebbs Bend exhibit in the Holland Museum refers at this writing to General John Hunt Morgan as *John Hunt*, somehow losing the *Morgan*).
- Tebbs spelled Tebb's.
- Numerous discrepancies of dates (like the date Morgan crossed the Cumberland River into Kentucky both the first time and the second time during his Great Raid).
- A source writes, ". . . with no hope for future success, [Morgan] decided to pull back and launch a *raid* into *Ohio* . . . They crossed the *Cumberland* River . . . and headed northeast to Lebanon." The facts are that it was the *Green* River; the Cumberland being far to the south, near the Tennessee-Kentucky border. His so-called raid is more accurately understood as Morgan's making his way east as fast as possible to be alongside Lee at Gettysburg. And the rush east started in Indiana, not Ohio.
- The first Confederate white flag, the "surrender demand," did *not* take place *before* the artillery fire but after it.
- The first of the eight confederate charges was at the *rifle pit*, which had been the target of the artillery fire. The other seven were at the 25th's defensive position farther to the rear.



Terry Vandewater

About the author

Terry Vandewater was born and reared in Holland, Michigan, attended Holland High School, Hope College, and the University of Michigan, from which he received a Master of Arts degree in English Language and Literature. He is married and lives in Zeeland. He and his wife Nancy's blended families comprise three children, seven grandchildren, and, in November, their first great-grandchild.

He taught English for nine years, five at the secondary level and four at the college level. After running afoul of the John Birch Society and other such rightwing extremist folks, he retreated from the academic world to Herman Miller, Inc., in Zeeland. At Herman Miller, he served as an organizational communicator. In 1995 he involuntarily retired and developed a business he had already begun, Nonesuch Communications. Terry did considerable consulting, writing, and workshop leading for a few years, during which time he wrote two books on participative management: *Principle Based Participative Management: Making Your Principles Work for You* and *The principles of Participation, Again for the First Time*.

Terry then retired again and returned to the academic world, teaching freshmen composition at Hope College and a variety of sessions in the humanities curriculum of the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals, of which he is a member.

A Bend in the River can be purchased online at www.authorhouse.com. It is also available for order from local bookstores and online from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Borders, and similar Web Sites.

Vandewater has a PowerPoint presentation on the Tebbs Battle. He will share it with any interested organization. Contact him at 616 772-2957 or vdwater@sirus.com.

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