John Milton Shields
Civil War Soldier, Medical Doctor, and Minister in the Jemez Valley

John Milton Shields, at left as a young man, probably soon after the Civil War (from Adams and Maas, 2024); center, middle aged, probably in the 1880s, colorized (from Ancestry.com); and right as an elderly man, perhaps in the early 1900s (from Presbyterian church records).

In February of 1878, John Milton Shields, his wife Emily, and their two young sons left the comforts of home and family in Pennsylvania and traveled to the wild west of New Mexico. They were medical missionaries of the Presbyterian Church, and their destination was Jemez Pueblo. A devastating smallpox epidemic was underway at the Pueblo, and they intended to offer medical aid and spread the gospel. After an arduous train trip to Colorado and then a perilous trip via stagecoach, they arrived in Santa Fe. From there, they traveled by horse-drawn wagon to Jemez Pueblo.[1]

Reverend Shields trained as a medical doctor after serving in the Civil War. He was a deeply religious man who had endured and survived many terrible battles of the war. His resilience was tested again at Jemez Pueblo when Emily died suddenly from an illness in November 1878, leaving Shields alone to care for his two young sons, Otho (11 years old) and Harvey (8 years old). The following year, Dr. Shields was joined by two women missionaries from Pennsylvania; one was his cousin Lora Shields, and the other was Isabella Leech. He married Isabella in late 1879, and together they had five children who survived to adulthood, while three others died before reaching age 10.

After several years of teaching school to Jemez Pueblo children and preaching there on Sundays, Shields and other Presbyterian leaders built a new school and church in Jemez Springs. It was dedicated on July 4th, 1881. That church continues today on the 144th anniversary of its founding, as the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church.

Growing up in Jemez Springs in the 1960s I attended this church regularly. My mother, Grace, was a Sunday school teacher there, and my father, Fred, served as a church official. I heard stories about the Reverend Doctor John Milton Shields and his work as a founder and first pastor of the church, and as a country doctor here in the Valley. I also recall reading that he was a Civil War veteran.

However, it wasn't until recently that I became aware of the details of Dr. Shields' work as a physician in the valley, and prior to that, his amazing Civil War service from 1861 to 1865. I have been fortunate to learn some of this history through original documents, including Dr. Shields' Civil War diary and his medical account records. The Adams family, Dr. Shields' descendants, have wisely transcribed and published his Civil War diary, and they have kindly shared various documents and photographs with me.[2]

Dr. Shields' story is remarkable and inspiring, and it deserves a book-length biographical treatment. Here is a summary of some key events in his life, before and during the Civil War, and during his decades of ministry and medical practice here in the Jemez.

He was born on August 25, 1841, and raised on a farm about 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, near a small village fittingly named "Home." The closest town of any size was Indiana, Pennsylvania, population 1,300. It was the seat of the county of the same name, with a population of around 33,000 in 1860. Indiana County was a hotbed of abolitionism, hosting several anti-slavery newspapers.[3]

The Shields' diary of the Civil War begins in January 1861 with summary statements of his daily activities, often listed as phrases or short sentences. He was religious not only in attending church, but in filling out his daily diary entries.

He was 19 years old and teaching school in the early months of 1861. He frequently attended church in the evenings on weekdays and every Sunday. "Went to preaching" was his shorthand phrase for attendance at church, and he would often summarize the theme (or "Text") of the sermon. For example:

January 4, 1861: *"Taught school. Went to preaching at night by Mr. Orr. Fast Day. Text: Lord what will thou have me do?"*

The sermon "Text" from this date suggests that Shields may have been asking that question about himself. By April, he seems to have settled on a plan for his path in life, as he began medical studies under the tutelage of a local doctor:

April 10, 1861: *"Pleasant day. Commenced study with [Dr.] Thompson. Study Vol. 1st Osteology or Anatomy"*

April 11, 1861: *"Pleasant Day. Studying Anatomy. Araminta Hudson and Leasure Maben here today at Dr. Thompsons."*

His medical studies were soon interrupted. On April 12, the Confederacy fired the first shots of the Civil War on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. In those days news traveled slowly, but by the 22nd, the people of Home, Pennsylvania, clearly understood what was happening. Within days, Shields enlisted in the U.S. Army.

April 22, 1861: *"Pleasant Day. Went to town with Mr. Craig, came home with him. Went down to Marion. WAR. WAR."*

April 26, 1861: *"Warm day. Gibson and I went down to Co. B to muster..."*

Over the next two months, Shields remained at home, still attending church and studying medicine while preparing to join the Union Army. On July 11th , he was officially sworn in as a soldier in Company B of the 11th Pennsylvania Reserve Regiment (also known as the 40th Pennsylvania Volunteers).

Shields' story from July 1861 to June 1865 is truly remarkable. The battles that the 11th Regiment fought in from 1862 to 1864 were some of the most significant and bloodiest of the war, including: Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, New Market, Malvern Hill, 2nd Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, North Anna, and Bethesda Church.

At left: Battle flag of the 11th Regiment, Pennsylvania Reserves Volunteer Corps

The 11th Pennsylvania Reserves Regiment became known as the "Bloody 11th." This grim nickname was fitting in that the regiment experienced more casualties than 99% of all Union Army units during the war. Consider these figures and the odds of Shields' survival: The regiment's initial size at the start of the war was about 1,000 men. Throughout the war, a total of 1,179 men served in the regiment, and due to deaths, wounds, and illness, only 340 men were discharged by the war's end. Of more than 2,144 regiments raised by the North, the Bloody 11th had the eighth highest percentage of battle deaths.[4]

Shields fought on the front lines in nearly all the great battles of the Eastern Theater from 1861 to June 1864, missing only a couple of engagements when he was sick in the hospital. He contracted measles shortly after joining his regiment in 1861, and he was sick several other times during the war. Illness was common among soldiers due to the unsanitary conditions and stresses of long marches, bad food, and exposure to cold, rain, snow, and mud.

John Milton Shields was a survivor. In battle after battle, Shields' diary succinctly recounts the crowded events and horrors of combat in just a few spare sentences. The humility and selflessness of his heroism shine through the stark brevity of his diary entries. For example, regarding one of the bloodiest and most tragic days of the regiment at Fredericksburg, he wrote this:

December 13, 1862: *"Fine day. Our division went and had a very hard battle. Regiment lost heavy, Trimble and Louis killed. Terrible fighting indeed."*

On the last day of December 1862, he summarized the preceding year in this paragraph:

"…Another year of trials, troubles and hardships and great dangers has passed and I am still living and I owe it all to the goodness and mercy of God who hath protected me in every bout of danger. Oh, May His protecting care still keep me through the coming year.

On Sunday, the 13th of December, we were engaged in a hard-fought battle on the banks of the Rappahannock River below Fredericksburg. The slaughter was great and the gain with us but little. Many of our brave boys fell but I hope they are now in a better world than this. God has spared me from the missiles of death, and I have great reason to be thankful. His will be done."

Later, from July 1 to 4, 1863, the Bloody 11th was in the thick of the fighting at Gettysburg, especially during their first two days there. By the afternoon of July 2nd, along with other Pennsylvania Reserve regiments, they were arrayed in a key position along the northern slope of Little Round Top, on the Union's left flank:

July 2nd: *"Marched toward Gettysburg turning to the left to the old National Pike and took position in rear of line of battle again – noon or after. Marched 12 miles. Hard fighting in the evening and we went in late in the evening and checked the Rebs who were driving our men. In the front all night. Saw some hard sights."*

July 3rd: *"Lying all day till evening behind an old fence subject to sharpshooters bullets and shells. Terrible fighting on our right and our men drove them effectually. Late in the evening we made a grand charge on our part of the line and drove them in all ways and held the ground all night. Saw a great many dead men lying around and the smell was awful."*

Again, Shields' terse diary entry for July 2nd understates these momentous events he participated in. The fighting on July 2nd by the 11th and other Pennsylvania Reserve regiments on the north slope of Little Round top "saved the day," according to a Union general. Arguably, their actions there were as crucial as the more famous bayonet charge of the 20th Maine on the south side of Little Round Top on the same day. Like the 20th Maine, at a climactic point in the battle, the Pennsylvania Reserves fixed bayonets and charged, driving back the Rebels.[5]

And again, on the evening of the next day, July 3rd, after the famous Pickett's Charge was thrown back at the center of the Union line, the Pennsylvania Reserves "made a grand charge," routing the Rebels' right flank through the Wheatfield and beyond. This was a final blow that helped convince Robert E. Lee that retreat was necessary.[6]

Peter Rothermel: Charge of the Pennsylvania Reserves at Plum Run, Battle of Gettysburg (1871).[7]

The Bloody 11th was already reduced in numbers before the Battle of Gettysburg from all their previous hard fighting, especially during the Battle of Fredericksburg in December. On the first day at Gettysburg, there were two hundred and twelve officers and men in the regiment. By the end of the battle, it numbered only seventy-nine. Yet, they continued with new volunteers in later months, and fought on through The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, and other horrific battles. Somehow, Shields came through it all, apparently with no serious physical wounds.

Shields' original enlistment was for 3 years, and so he was mustered out of the Bloody 11th in June 1864. He spent several months at home recuperating, and then he re-enlisted in September, this time in the 206th Pennsylvania hospital regiment. He served there until July of the following year as a "Hospital Steward," treating the wounded and sick. During that

period, he was posted near the siege of Richmond, Virginia, and then within the occupied capital after the Rebels abandoned it.

After his Army service, Shields attended Albany Medical College in New York and completed his training as a physician. Clearly, Shields' life mission was to minister to bodies as well as souls.

I have limited information about Shields' life between the War and his move to Jemez Pueblo. After 1868, he practiced medicine in Covode, Pennsylvania, and served as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church there. In 1866, he married Elizabeth Ann Davis, and they had a son, Otho, in 1867. Elizabeth died in 1868 from an unknown cause, and he married Emily Harvey in 1869. They had a son, Harvey, in 1870. As previously mentioned, Emily died of an illness shortly after they arrived at Jemez Pueblo in 1878.

John Milton Shields ultimately outlived all three of his wives. Isabella, whom he married in 1879, died at age 50 in 1900 of pneumonia. Again, he was a single parent, this time with four children at home, ages 3 to 11 years old. He lived until 1915 in Jemez Springs, passing away at age 74.

Finally, we know that in addition to his ministry at the Jemez Springs church, Dr. Shields served as a country doctor in the Jemez Valley. The details of his medical practice are scarce, but we do have some facts. In particular, we know he came initially to help with a deadly smallpox epidemic in the late 1870s. Sixty Jemez Pueblo people died during that epidemic.

We also have seven years of his medical records from a ledger kept by the Adams family. This ledger, like his diary, is quite terse and, in some ways, even more so. However, among the hundreds of short entries, spanning October 1894 to June 1900, there are inspiring glimpses of Dr. Shields's good work and character.

For example, Dr. Shields was awakened many nights to travel and aid the sick and injured at their homes in far-flung locations in the Jemez Mountains. On multiple occasions, he stayed overnight and the following day to help the ill, or to attend to the dying. He delivered at least one baby during the period of the account, and he treated many mothers, babies, and children. He treated an accidental gunshot wound, and in another case, multiple stab wounds on a man who had been in a knife fight.

In 1898, he was appointed by the U.S. government to help manage another smallpox outbreak, and he vaccinated and treated people at Zia and Jemez Pueblos. Unfortunately, not everyone could be vaccinated at Jemez Pueblo and the epidemic spread. By spring of 1899 more than 63 people died there, which was a stunning 12.5 percent of the population.

However, the smaller population at Zia was effectively vaccinated, and Dr. Shields work there was partly credited with the fact that only a single case was reported in late 1899.[8]

View of Jemez Springs, looking south from above the old mission ruins. The Shields' house is the one-story building behind the picket fence, at lower right, with a wagon and horse in front of it. Photo from around 1900, from the New Mexico State University photo archives.

Entries in the medical ledger also show to Dr. Shields' compassion. His charges for treatment were modest, typically one dollar for a visit, not including medicine costs. He frequently took barter for payment instead of cash, such as firewood, lumber, store goods, or farm produce. He often carried or wrote off debts, noting, "This family is poor, so the debt is forgiven."

In summary, John Milton Shields was a very good man. He ministered to the bodies and souls of the people in Jemez Valley for 37 years. He survived some of the most brutal battles of the Civil War, the deaths of three wives and three young children, and two terrible smallpox epidemics. He was a courageous and deeply resilient man of faith.

Endnotes:

[1] The Shields family commitment and courage in this endeavor is reflected in the fact that they mortgaged their home in PA to pay for the journey and their mission. This quote is from Shields recalling the journey:

"*Over the range lay the "Great Unknown" and the "cactus Plains," where the shriek of the engine had never wakened the echoes or alarmed the antelope. Where the railway ended, commenced the "old Santa Fe Trail." Two hundred and twenty miles it stretched away to the ancient city of "Holy Faith." How much of interest, anxiety and almost fear, we felt in regard to what lay before us! But we know that in the old, old, new land that lay before us the people were perishing for lack of vision. We could well afford to dismiss our fears, and to thank God and take courage. What a strange and thrilling joy the true soldier feels when he is permitted to do something, real hard, for his country! And how much more the soldier of the cross! We had God's promise that he would be with us always. We were being sent to peoples of fierce countenances and strange tongues, but with the promise of the Almighty God that no one should set upon us to hurt us.*"
The stagecoach ride from Trinidad, CO to Santa Fe was "perilous" because the drivers were drinking whiskey, and at a rough place in the road they rolled the stagecoach over and Emily Shields received a head injury. Apparently it was not too serious, and they were able to continue to Jemez after a few days recuperating in Santa Fe. The history of Dr. Shields and his family's travel to New Mexico, and his years as minister are included in miscellaneous documents held in the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church. I have scanned many of these papers and they are in my computer files.

[2] "The Civil War Diary of John Milton Shields," Transcribed and Compiled by Geraldine A. Adams and Jules A. Maas, Third Edition. Maas Publications, Renton, VA. 2024, 332 pgs.; Dr. Shields medical account ledger book was loaned to me by Amie Adams Green, and I will ultimately deposit it with the Sandoval County Historical Society.

[3] Joesph Gibbs' book (page xi) "Three Years with the Bloody 11th, The Campaigns of a Pennsylvania Reserves Regiment," The Pennsylvania Sate University Press, University Park, PA. 2002. 378 pages

[4] From Joesph Gibbs' book (page xi). Although this 2002 book seems to be the most complete and definitive history yet written about the 11th, Gibbs seems to have been unaware of the Shields Civil War Diary, which was first published by the family (I think) in 1987.

[5] The statement that the Pennsylvania Reserves "saved the day" on the north slope of Little Round Top on July 2nd comes from Joesph Gibbs' book (pages 222-225), quoting the commanding officer of the PA Reserves, Brig. General Samuel Crawford speaking to Colonel Samuel Jackson, commanding officer of the Bloody 11th. This excerpt is worth reading in full:
"...At about the same time, Crawford finally gave the order Jackson's men had waited for, telling the entire front rank to stand and open fire. The line fired at least 2 volleys – Jackson described them as "withering" in their effect on the rebels.

Crawford, mounted on a "blood bay" horse, then ordered the brigade to fix bayonets. Crawford rode to the left of the line and grabbed the First Reserves regimental flag from its color bearer. So reluctant to part with it that after giving it up, he took hold of Crawford's pant leg and refused to let go. "Forward Reserves," shouted Crawford. A member of the Second Reserves on the right of the front rank, recalled how the troops fired a volley and then charged "with a tremendous simultaneous shriek from every throat that sounded as if it was coming from a thousand demons who had burst their lungs in uttering it." They also remembered that cheer was "peculiarly our own," in the First Reserves. And private Miller wrote home about a "yell that echoed far and wide." Crawford himself, a few months later, wrote of a "terrific shout," one that "exceeded anything I ever heard as they dashed upon the rebel hosts and drove them back."

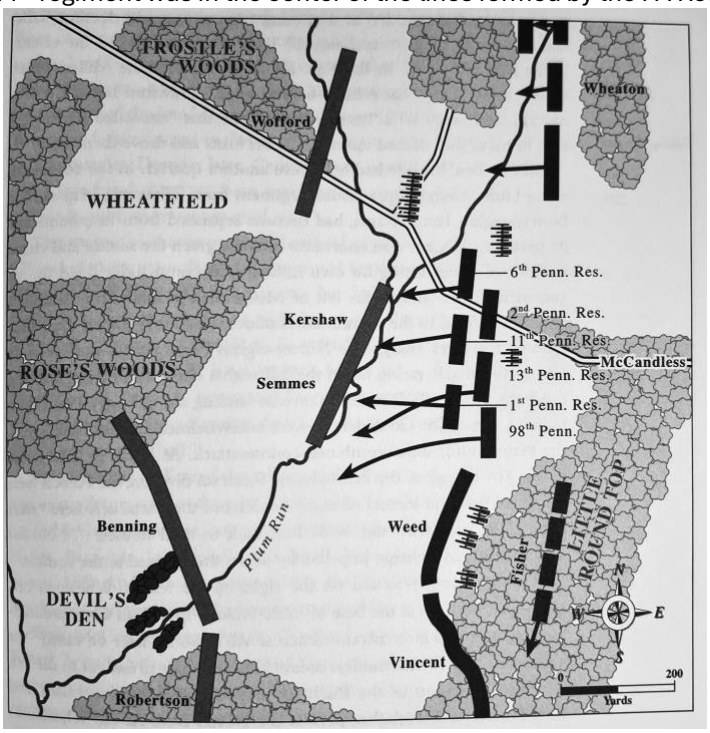
...But this charge — joined on the right by the rest of Wheaton's brigade — did not stop at the base of Little Round Top. With Crawford leading the way, the men advanced across what would later be called the "Valley of Death." McCandless ordered his rear rank to fan out to the left; he shifted elements of the Bucktails [13th P.R.] into the advance on the flank, and they dueled with the rebel snipers in the Devil's Den. At the Wheatfield's eastern edge, there was a short struggle with Georgians and South Carolinians by a stone wall, the fighting being hand to hand and involving "the bayonet and butt of musket."

McCandless called the action "a desperate struggle," but according to Miller, it was short-lived "a feeble stance ... of short duration for our boys quickly dislodged the enemy and took possession themselves." Crawford, for his part, termed the battle here "a short but fearful struggle." The rebels retreated to positions in

nearby woods, but Crawford had already directed McCandless to halt by the stone wall, which McCandless estimated was about 700 yards from the brigades starting point on Little Round Top.

As night fell, Crawford "directed Colonel McCandless to hold the line of the stone wall and the woods [Trostle's Woods] on the right. Heavy lines of skirmishers were thrown out, and the ground firmly and permanently held. Captain Torrance, who saw most of the action, noted afterward, "This successful charge has been highly commended by all the troops on this part of the line." Buoyed by the action, Crawford rode over to the Wheatfield, dismounted in the rear of the Eleventh's line, and sought out its commander. Decades later, Crawford was reported to have told Jackson, hat in hand, that "you have saved the day, your regiment is worth its weight in gold; its weight in gold, sir."

A map of a portion of the Gettysburg Battlefield, July 2nd, showing location of the PA Reserves. The Bloody 11th regiment was in the center of the lines formed by the PA Reserves (from page 223):



[6] A stone monument with inscription is placed on the Gettysburg Battlefield near the Wheatfield, commemorating the 11th Pennsylvania Reserves Regiment (40th P.V.) actions at that battle, and its other engagements in the war. The full list of Civil War engagements of the 11th on that monument is: Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, New Market Cross Roads, Malvern Hill, Groveton, Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Bristoe Station, Rappahannock Station, Mine Run, Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Totopotomoy, and Bethesda Church. https://gettysburg.stonesentinels.com/union-monuments/pennsylvania/pennsylvania-infantry/11th-pennsylvania-reserves/

[7] From https://explorepahistory.com/displaygallery.php%3Fgallery_id=1-7-5&bcolor=purple&list=1.html

[8] "The Pueblo Indian smallpox epidemic in New Mexico, 1898-1899" Richard H. Frost. Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Fall 1990 64(3):417-445; The Frost article explains that the reasons for the high fatality rates at Jemez Pueblo and at other Pueblos, such as Zuni, were complex, including too few vaccines delivered there and sent too late, ineffective (or expired) batches of vaccine sent by the government and shipped from the east, and lack of trained medical personnel to properly administer the vaccines, or nurse the sick. Shields medical ledger indicates he prepared and delivered medicines for sick people at Jemez Pueblo at the end of December 1898, and he vaccinated 34 children at Zia on January 8, 1899.