

Burlington Men in THE CIVIL WAR

by Thomas Turick

They died of battle wounds at places like Antietam, Maryland; Cedar Creek, Virginia and Irish Bend, Louisiana. Four would die of disease in places as distant to Burlington as New Orleans and Baton Rouge. And perhaps most tragic of all five would waste away in nightmarish southern hellholes as prisoners of war.

They were a colorful group, taken in the whole. Sixty Burlington men enlisted in the American Civil War during those tumultuous years of 1861 - 1865. And for those fortunate 46 who survived battle, prison and disease, each one had his own unique story to tell after the two great armies folded up the battle flags at Appomattox.

From Sylvester Bassett, the first to enlist just twelve days after shots were first fired on Fort Sumter, to William Cole who at age 44 was the town's oldest enlistee, they all displayed a devotion to duty so characteristic of the common soldier of that enigmatic war.

And those who weren't eligible to fight tried to anyway. Seventeen year old Burton Richardson stretched the truth about his age when he walked into the Hartford recruiting office to enlist. Fifteen days later farmer-boy Richardson was discharged from the Union army and shipped back to Burlington for "being a minor under the age of 18."

Burlington men truly represented the rank and file of the Union army. From a small rural northwestern Connecticut town of a population a little more than one thousand, over 80% listed their occupation as "farmer." Nearly all the men would serve with a rank of corporal or private -- none would attain a rank higher than lieutenant. The distinction of Burlington man with the highest rank belongs to Frank Metzger of the 11th CT. Infantry who was appointed first lieutenant in late 1864 when his regiment was locked in trench warfare with the rebel army before Petersburg in Virginia. Ironically, Metzger who served throughout almost the entire war, would mysteriously leave the army just nine days before war's end. He was honorably discharged just as the 11th Connecticut's was preparing its march into Richmond. The city fell on April 3, 1865 as Metzger was presumably on the train that morning heading back to Burlington.

Although Burlington's men may have been short of rank, they certainly were not short on personal valor. For example, in on 1861 at the age of 18 Lucius Leonard was mustered into the 6th Connecticut. He would serve all four years of the war, survive battle wounds in two major engagements, and live to come home a hardened veteran, 22 years of youth at war's end. And consider yet the record of Edmund Rogers. In July 1863 Edmund stormed the parapets of a Confederate fort on Morris Island, South Carolina with neighbor Lucius Leonard and others of the 6th Connecticut. Edmund Rogers was killed in that charge and was buried ignobly by his enemy in a mass unmarked grave among the windswept dunes of that desolate island.

Indeed, the war was tragic and Burlington men shared equally in the pain and suffering. Prison claimed the lives of six of the men including Philip Stino and George Wilkinson. These two men were friends who enlisted together, fought together, and were captured together as the 16th Connecticut among a garrison of 1600 troops was forced into surrender at Plymouth, North Carolina in April 1864. Wilkinson was sent by rail to Florence, South Carolina and his eventual death seven months later. After Stino was separated from his friend he was sent to the infamous Andersonville prison in Georgia. Here he would meet up with a fellow Burlington neighbor, Martin Murphy who was captured a month earlier in a daring cavalry raid to free Union prisoners held in Richmond. Andersonville proved too much for both Stino and Murphy. They were dead by autumn, victims of starvation and other prison deprivations. They now rest together in the national cemetery located on the former prison site.

The poet Walt Whitman once wrote that the real Civil War would never get into the history books. He claimed the real war was a composite of tens of thousands of personal events that however thrilling and earth - shattering to the individual soldier who experienced the dramas, nonetheless

was of little interest and significance to the general public. But, as Whitman noted, it is precisely these specimen events that make up the totality of war.

Such a singular occurrence, a mere footnote to the war's history really, happened to Burlington's Albert Ockery on September 24, 1865. Ockery was serving with the Thirtieth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in Roma, Texas near the Rio Grande. The regiment was performing garrison duty in a state still under confederate influence. Although the details are lost to history, Ockery holds the dubious distinction of being shot and wounded by the Provost Guard of his own army! Apparently the experience did not dampen his enthusiasm for soldering. Ockery went on to serve out his full term and was honorably discharged from the service with the rest of his regiment in November 8th of that year.

Civil war historian Bruce Catton marveled at the countless ironies and peculiarities that engulfed the human experience of war. Cotton often detailed how ironies entwined a soldier's life with that of other soldiers - friend and foe alike. He noted that there were coincidental and rather unusual experiences shared by simple and unsophisticated men. Cotton referred to "the complicated and inexplicable trajectories" of a man's life as such a man stumbled his way unknowingly through war, and how ultimately, perhaps, it all was simply a matter of fate.

Such irony or fate lies a stone's throw apart in two small cemeteries in the town of Burlington. Two Burlington soldiers, Erastus Bacon and James Curtis who until their final days on earth, may never have met each other, are commemorated in those cemeteries today. Curtis was captured in early 1864 at Plymouth, North Carolina along with six other Burlington men, all of the Sixteenth Connecticut Infantry. Bacon served in the Seventh Connecticut Infantry and was captured June 2, 1864 at Bermuda Hundred in Virginia. Both men were transported to the jail and prison yard at Charleston, South Carolina and here the trajectories of their lives intertwined.

In all likelihood the two men at least exchanged glances while confined in prison that summer. Perhaps on occasion they even exchanged stories of home over their meager daily rations. Or perhaps they found themselves on the same work detail hauling out the bodies of their fellow comrades who were dying daily from the wretched prison conditions. What is certain is that a yellow fever epidemic broke out at Charleston prison about the first week of September. Bacon age 44 and Curtis age 17 most likely fell victims to the disease. They met their agonizing deaths, perhaps minutes, certainly hours within one another on September 20, 1864.

Every memorial day within memory, small American flags have fluttered beside the gravestones of the twenty-eight Civil War soldiers commemorated within the small cemeteries in town. The townspeople gather at the Center Cemetery, then on the town green and pay tribute to those who served in all wars. It's a simple ceremony, not unlike the thousands of ceremonies across America similarly performed during the last week of May.

On the town green today (1996) stands no monument to the Civil War dead of Burlington. Although the bronze tablet or granite column may be lacking the more fitting tribute remains in the minds and hearts of the townspeople. In final memory to our soldiers, we are reminded deeply of the words on the Civil War Monument in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

Not for fame or reward
Not for place or for rank
Not lured by ambition
Or goaded by necessity
But in simple
Obedience to duty
As they understood it
These men suffered all
Sacrificed all
Dared all-and died

(One of several unpublished articles by Tom Turick of Burlington)

Since this article was written Tom Turick, was one of three who raised funds for a Civil War Plaque, erected on the Burlington Town Green and dedicated on Memorial Day, May 1998.