

# The Hard-Luck Second Oneida

This is second article written for *The Waterville Times* on Waterville/Oneida County and the American Civil War by Eric Kennedy, a former Waterville resident now living in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Eric is a 1986 graduate of Waterville Central School. He currently works for the U.S. Department of Commerce in Washington, DC.

by Eric Kennedy

On the morning of February 18, 1861, a train pulled into cold and snow-covered Utica, New York. Out stepped Abraham Lincoln, on his way to Washington to be sworn in as the nation's 16<sup>th</sup> President. Six thousand people were on hand to see the troubled President-elect. Talk of secession by the Southern states and civil war was in the air. "Ladies and Gentlemen," said Lincoln, "I have no speech to make to you. I should have no sufficient time to make one if I had. I have appeared here simply to thank you heartily for this noble reception, to see you and to allow you to see me. I am not sure but, at least as regards the ladies, I had the best of the bargain. In conclusion, I have only to say farewell."

Not quite two months later, on April 12<sup>th</sup>, Southern troops fired on Federal soldiers at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. Three days after that, Lincoln called on the loyal states to provide 75,000 volunteer soldiers to put down the rebellion. What was supposed to be a short-lived affair lasted four murderous years, costing the lives of over 600,000 Americans, and forever changing the nation. The next time Lincoln would pass through the Mohawk Valley would be four years later, after his assassination, when his remains were en route to their final resting place in Springfield, Illinois.

During the Civil War, Oneida County raised five infantry regiments for the Union War effort: 14<sup>th</sup> New York (1<sup>st</sup> Oneida), 26<sup>th</sup> New York (2<sup>nd</sup> Oneida), 97<sup>th</sup> New York (3<sup>rd</sup> Oneida), 117<sup>th</sup> New York (4<sup>th</sup> Oneida), and 146<sup>th</sup> New York (5<sup>th</sup> Oneida). In all, these five regiments suffered 2,699 combat casualties: 621 killed or died of wounds, 1,352 wounded, and 726 missing. In addition, 569 died of disease or other causes, including 171 who died in Confederate captivity.

One of the earliest Union regiments formed was the 26<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, also known as the "Second Oneida," "Utica Regiment," or "Central New York Battalion." The regiment, first led by Colonel William H. Christian of Utica, was mustered into service in May 1861. It was comprised of six companies from Oneida County, two from Monroe, one from Tioga, and one from Madison County. "I" Company was chiefly comprised of men and boys from Waterville, Oriskany Falls, and other surrounding villages. It was first led by Captain John H. Palmer of Oriskany Falls and Lieutenant Henry J. Flint of Waterville.

Two weeks after Fort Sumter was fired upon, public meetings were held in Waterville to encourage enlistments and provide support to local families of those who enlisted. There were patriotic speeches from local notables and music by the Waterville Brass Band and the Sangerfield Band of Martial Music. It was decided that a volunteer company should be raised in Waterville. About 25 men immediately enlisted. Each volunteer was furnished with a revolver

and \$10 in cash. Enlistment officers took a recruit's word as to his age. A private's salary was originally \$11 per month.

On May 10, 1861, *The Waterville Times* noted, "Our village for a few days past has been unusually lively, owing to the number of volunteers stationed here from the vicinity. The company forming here is nearly full. They proceed to Utica on Friday of this week, and thence to Elmira Saturday at 11 A.M., to join Christian's regiment. Thus far, they undoubtedly feel as though they had enlisted in a good cause."

A week later, the paper reported: "Departure of the Volunteers – Last Friday was a sad day for Waterville. About nine o'clock the portion of Captain Palmer's company from this place bade an affectionate farewell to their friends and relatives, to start on a journey, they know not whither, to subject themselves to the fire of the enemy's guns, and to the pestilences of the army. Why, then, should there not be weeping at such parting? Perhaps the family circle will again be gladdened by the 'soldiers' return,' perhaps old friends will again be recognized, and the same hands grasped that were shaken at the departure. Perhaps disease and the bullet will prevent their return, perhaps many yet in their youth will be stricken down. How precarious, then, their condition. But the precious mission on which they have started - they are going to place their lives in jeopardy to secure that precious gift handed down to us by the fathers of the republic, and which is now assailed. Let us dry our tears and be cheerful, for our soldiers will return crowned with honor, leaving the stars and stripes once more floating over the discordant States."

The company marched from Waterville to Deansville (today Deansboro), accompanied by the Waterville Brass Band, and was joined there by the volunteers from Oriskany Falls. Also in Deansville, local women presented the company with a flag and Captain Palmer publicly addressed his men: "The causes which have brought us together we all well know. We are here to prepare ourselves for the discharge of those duties, which as citizens of the United States, we owe to ourselves and our country. Here we pledge ourselves that those duties shall be faithfully and sacredly performed. We are many of us bound together by the ties of friendship... My whole affections are with you, and no friend or foe shall separate me from you. I am ready on the field of battle to live or die in the defense of our glorious Union!"

At this date, *The Waterville Times* listed the names of 11 officers and 66 privates as part of "I" Company. Before the regiment was mustered out of service two years later, over a 100 would serve in the company at one time or another.

After the company arrived in Utica by way of Clinton, a Utica newspaper noted, "The joint Company of volunteers from Oriskany Falls and Waterville, which arrived in town last Friday night, is now complete... The men conducted themselves, yesterday, in a manner reflecting the highest credit upon the villages they represent. Those who did not attend the different churches in the City, spent their time at the Hall engaged in reading, &c. Drunkenness was not apparent, and a dignified, sober quiet was the order of the day with them."

It was then off to boot camp in Elmira for a month's worth of military training. The men were supported by women on the home front. In June, *The Waterville Times* reported, "A goodly number of our ladies have, for the past several days, been busily engaged, plying, with busy

fingers, the needle, making up articles of garment of various descriptions, for the volunteers at Elmira. The ladies throughout the north are taking a good part in this great national drama. They have a way of their own to serve their country. Not able to perform the 'heavy business' of the battle-field, they busy themselves at home, manufacturing those indispensables of which the men would make but poor and awkward work."

In early June, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York was presented with its colors by a delegation of citizens from Utica. Judge Smith made the following remarks: "It is my pleasant duty to-day to present you, as the commander of this Regiment, with those colors – emblems of our country's glory and greatness – and also as emblems of the success of the greatest and best Government which ever existed on earth – one which has for eighty years stood the trial and test of the right of people to self-government, and which now stands in peril and is trampled upon and condemned by traitors. You, and the brave men under you, who are now leaving your homes and friends for the sake of defending these emblems, are engaged in the greatest work of the age - the defence of your Government against its greatest enemies... Take, then, this banner, and may the brave men under your command obtain that strength and vigor to defend it which they will look upon as the greatest period in their lives."

In late June 1861, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York or "Second Oneida" departed for Washington, DC and the war. For the Union armies in the East, the first two years of the conflict were largely an unmitigated disaster. Personal bravery and sacrifice were wasted due to poor leadership. Defeat followed defeat at First Bull Run (July 1861), Shenandoah Valley (March-June 1862), the Seven Days (June-July 1862), and Second Bull Run (August 1862).

It was at Second Bull Run where the 26<sup>th</sup> New York saw its first serious action. The still-green regiment was caught in the maelstrom of defeat and casualties were high: 55 killed/died of wounds, 89 wounded, and 25 missing. One month later, in September 1862, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York was heavily engaged at Antietam, helping to turn back the first major Confederate invasion of Maryland. The regiment lost 7 killed/died of wounds, 39 wounded, and 20 missing. Private Charles F. Cleveland ("C" Company) was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Antietam. (Cleveland is buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Utica).

The next "On to Richmond" campaign resulted in the bloody Battle of Fredericksburg on December 11-15, 1862. The boyhood town of George Washington was destined for destruction due to its strategic importance, lying midway between both wartime capitals.

Fredericksburg would go down in history as one of the greatest Union disasters of the war, but not for want of courage. Noted Civil War historian Shelby Foote, a Southerner, once said, "More credit is given to Confederate soldiers. They're supposed to have had more élan and dash. Actually I know of no braver men in either army than the Union troops at Fredericksburg, which was a serious Union defeat."

The attacks on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg receive most of the attention from Civil War aficionados because of the hopeless Union assaults against the stone wall at the base of the Heights. For seven hours on December 13th, brigade after brigade bravely charged the wall. No Union soldier even touched it despite roughly 8,000 falling dead or wounded in the effort.

Yet the only real chance the Union had to win at Fredericksburg was not in front of Marye's Heights but on the southern end of the battlefield, in front of Prospect Hill. This is where the 26<sup>th</sup> New York was deployed. This portion of the battlefield became appropriately and infamously known as "The Slaughter Pen."

At Fredericksburg, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York, down to only 300 men, was part of John Gibbon's division. Also part of this division was the 97<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers, men from villages and hamlets in Oneida, Herkimer, and Lewis counties. Two Union divisions, including Gibbon's, were ordered forward. The target was the entrenched position of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson in front of Prospect Hill, a heavily-wooded ridge line that faced the wide-open plains the Union troops would have to march across.

Gibbon advanced two of his three brigades, keeping the third in reserve in case it was needed. The soldiers were cold, wet, and covered in mud after lying prone on the water-logged plain for protection during the intense artillery exchanges that preceded the attack. Troops with full packs were slowed even further by mud-caked shoes. The line advanced through the open fields before approaching a knoll and a railroad embankment.

As the first brigade of Gibbon's division neared the railroad, they were halted about 150 yards from the Confederate line by heavy musket fire. Two regiments retreated, but two stayed, including the 97<sup>th</sup> New York. Help from four more regiments, including the 26<sup>th</sup> New York, was on the way. The six Union regiments then combined to move forward, advancing closer to the Confederate line. As the Union troops crested the rise, they were "riddled by the murderous fire" and forced to fall back behind the knoll where they re-formed and began returning fire. The knoll did not provide much protection and the Union soldiers continued to fall rapidly. Lieutenant Colonel Gilbert Jennings, now commanding the 26<sup>th</sup> New York, was hit and Major Ezra Wetmore took over command of the regiment. To make matters worse, the 26<sup>th</sup> was out of ammunition, having exhausted its 60 rounds per man.

Gibbon sent his third brigade forward. The five new regiments passed over the line the 26<sup>th</sup> New York was helping to hold. Given conflicting orders, the 26<sup>th</sup> retreated to replenish its ammunition. As the 26<sup>th</sup> withdrew, the third Union assault captured the Confederate line and inflicted heavy casualties on the Rebels in brutal hand-to-hand fighting. But the melee caused the Union units to lose their cohesion and become disorganized. The attack stalled. Reinforcements were desperately needed but none were forthcoming. The 26<sup>th</sup> New York, still out of ammunition except for a few rounds collected from the dead and wounded, was sent back into the fray.

With an average of only two rounds per man, the 26<sup>th</sup> turned around, fixed bayonets, and charged. The men of the 26<sup>th</sup> began to fall as they approached the railroad again. As one color-bearer was hit, another would pick up the flag and lead the regiment forward.

Private Martin Schubert ("E" Company) of the 26<sup>th</sup> had been seriously wounded at Antietam, but cut short his medical furlough in order to rejoin his comrades. "My old wound, not yet healed, gave me considerable trouble. I went into the battle (Fredericksburg) with the regiment, however,

against the protests of my colonel and captain, who insisted that I should use the furlough. I thought the Government needed me on the battlefield rather than at home.” Martin picked up the colors next until he fell wounded by a bullet he was to carry in his body for decades. Private Joseph Keene (“B” Company) then picked up the colors and led the charge. Both Schubert and Keene were later awarded Medals of Honor. (Keene is buried in Whitesboro).

It was no use. Gibbon, the division commander, was wounded. Fresh Confederate brigades counterattacked and no fresh Union troops were on the horizon. The bloodied, ammunition-starved Union regiments fell back before they were surrounded.

One of the last Union soldiers to leave the railroad ditch was 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant William K. Bacon (Utica), Adjutant of the 26<sup>th</sup> New York. Bacon, a 20-year old Hamilton College student who had not completely recovered from a wound suffered at Second Bull Run, had told his regimental commander before the Battle of Fredericksburg: “No man on earth has a dearer home than I have, but if a wish could place me there now, I would not go. My place is here, and here I remain.” While directing the rear guard, a bullet terribly splintered Bacon’s thigh. Fellow soldiers rescued the popular officer. His leg was amputated near the pelvis that evening and Bacon died three days later. (He is buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Utica).

According to the *New York Tribune*, 19-year old Corporal John Ward (Gloversville) from “I” Company carried the bullet-riddled regimental colors off the field. The paper reported six men had been shot down carrying the flag. It also said that 21 of 28 men comprising “I” Company had been killed or wounded at Fredericksburg. However, those high company casualty figures do not seem to correspond with incomplete postwar records. Nevertheless, at least one member of “I” Company was killed in the battle, four died of their wounds, and seven others were wounded.

Not all of the wounded soldiers were lucky enough to be carried off the field. Many spent the cold December night unattended, in agony, pleading for help. Private Oscar M. Atwell enlisted in Waterville at the age of 20. His parents received the following note shortly after the battle:

“I expected every moment to die but my life was spared. I lay there on the field all that afternoon and night. The cold was intense, and no one can imagine what I suffered... The next day, about 4 o’clock, a little boy came on the field and led a man off. He saw me and sent two men after me with a stretcher. I lay but little ways from the rebels but they did not fire on me and with difficulty I got on a stretcher and they carried me to an ambulance and I was carried to the rear where they were dressing wounds. My leg was amputated; it was broke by a ball. How soon it will get well I cannot tell.”

Atwell died almost a month later at Lincoln Military Hospital in Washington, DC on January 9<sup>th</sup>. His remains arrived in Waterville on January 13 and he was buried two days later in Waterville Cemetery. On January 16, 1863, *The Waterville Times* reported: “Through fast falling snow the body was borne to and deposited in its last resting place in our quiet rural cemetery. It was one of the most solemn occurrences ever witnessed in our village. The mournful procession; the tolling bells, and the muffled drums beating funeral marches; the grief of parents bereaved of an only son; the appeals from the sacred desk; the view of the remains of the poor brave boy whose

blood is deep in Virginia soil and whose bullet torn leg is near the battlefield; and the solemn burial amidst the storm, are events which will not soon fade from our memories.”

According to New York State records, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York lost 57 percent of its strength at Fredericksburg: 46 men killed/died of wounds, 113 wounded, and 11 missing out of approximately 300 officers and enlisted men. Five months later, at the end of May 1863, the 26<sup>th</sup> New York was mustered out of service in Utica. In a twist of fate, despite all of its loss and suffering, the regiment missed the turning point of the war – the Battle of Gettysburg – by a little over a month.

Overall, approximately 1,200 men served in the 26<sup>th</sup> New York at one time or another. During its two-year service, the regiment suffered 65 killed in combat, another 43 who later died of their wounds, 42 who died of disease and other causes, 243 wounded, and 56 missing.

“The colors of the 26th Regiment, recently mustered out at Utica, were brought to Albany yesterday and deposited in the Bureau of Statistics. They bear the marks of hard and bloody usage. They were borne through ten battles, viz. - Cedar Mountain, Rappahannock, Thoroughfare Gap, Gainesville, Second Bull Run, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, the battle of Fredericksburg in December last, and the battle of Chancellorsville - and are pierced by thirty-eight bullets. Five men fell under its folds. The blood of one of its bearers - young Evans - is still traced upon its tattered face. The 26th is one of the historic regiments of the Army of the Potomac. It has seen an unusual amount of service, and borne its part gallantly in every encounter with the enemy. It suffered terribly at Bull Run, Antietam and Fredericksburg; but it never showed its back to the foe.”

**Post-Scripts:** Most of “I” Company appear to have survived their two-year enlistments. But at least 15 did not. As with most Union companies, there were some deserters; some who re-enlisted in other regiments, especially the artillery or cavalry; and many who simply had seen enough of the war and tried to re-establish their civilian lives. Some were wounded and carried the physical and mental scars of war the rest of their remaining days.

After leading a brigade at Antietam, Colonel Christian was forced to resign because of cowardice. He never did live down the slight to his reputation and died in a state lunatic asylum in 1887. Captain Palmer, who vowed never to be separated from his men, resigned three months later along with 13 other officers in the regiment over a dispute with New York State. The men believed they had signed three-month enlistment papers while the state wanted them for two years. The state won that argument. Palmer became a sutler – a civilian merchant selling provisions to soldiers in the field. Lieutenant Flint also resigned his commission in protest but later rejoined his comrades as a private two days before the Battle of Fredericksburg. He was wounded in that battle but survived the war. Flint is buried in Waterville Cemetery. The last commander of “I” Company was Captain James H. McLaughlin of Oriskany Falls. McLaughlin was wounded twice at Fredericksburg.

Approximately 5,000 Union and 4,000 Confederate soldiers fell on or near the Slaughter Pen. Civil War battlefield preservation groups have worked hard to protect 208 acres of the Slaughter Pen from developers, purchasing the property for \$12 million in 2006. But the fight continues as

donations are still needed to pay that amount. (<http://www.civilwar.org/>) or (<http://www.cvbt.org/>)

On May 23, 2009, the 15th annual luminaria ceremony was held at the Fredericksburg National Cemetery to honor the approximately 15,000 Union soldiers buried in the cemetery who died within this central Virginia region during the Civil War. Candles were placed by Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts on each of the graves. Almost eighty-five percent of soldiers in the cemetery are unidentified.

For further reading:

*Glory Was Not Their Companion: The Twenty-Sixth New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War*, by Paul Taylor, published 2005.

*Boys in Blue: From the Adirondack Foothills*, by Howard Thomas, published 1960.

*The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock*, by Francis Augustin O'Reilly, published 2006.