

**Cold Labor:
Lewis Wilcox and the 50th NY Engineers at Fredericksburg
By Nicholas Clifford**

In the confines of historic Rome Cemetery, you may find your way to a more well known monument of Francis Bellamy, the author of the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance. However, tucked away in the back right corner, surrounded by other Civil War veterans, lays the body of a lesser known individual, Pvt. Lewis Wilcox of the 50th New York Engineers. His old cracked headstone reads “Lewis Wilcox Killed at the Battle of Fredericksburg”, thus providing the reader with little information about the individual at rest.

According to the 1860 Census, for Rome, N.Y., Lewis Wilcox is listed as 36 years old, born in Norwalk ,Connecticut around 1824, with 400 dollars of personal assets and the professional title of a merchant. His death record has him listed as “5’8 ½, brown hair, brown eyes, killed while laying pontoons across from Fredericksburg.” Under his roof lived his wife Margaret Wilcox, age 28 and a miller, holding 300 dollars of personal assets, daughter Cecilia Wilcox age 8, and an apprentice of his wife named Mary Cady aged 15. Almost a year later on April 12, 1861 the Civil War would begin with the shelling of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. President Lincoln would call to arms a force of “75,000 Volunteers” to subdue the rebellion in the Southern states. That number would then increase as the war dragged into 1862 through 1865. The 50th New York Engineers would have a very different role in the war than many units raised. First, the 50th seems to recruit out of the entirety of New York State. Many men can be found in its ranks from as far west as Livingston County, to Oneida County, as well as men mustering into the regiment from New York City. The 50th New York Engineers are also raised under impression that they will served as infantry, initially being raised as the 50th New York

Infantry. However, the Regular Army Corps of Engineers was so insufficient in numbers, General McClellan is forced to transfer the 50th along with the 15th New York to serve as engineers alongside the U.S. Regulars Corps of Engineers. The 50th New York would serve in most major campaigns of the Army of the Potomac. The role of engineers during the Civil War was that of building. Essentially, these troops would be used to lay bridges, build fortifications as well as design them, clear roads for troop movement and among other things establish evacuation routes for the wounded. Any structure built by the Army involved the work of Engineers. Lewis Wilcox is listed in the 50th NY Engineers as mustering in with Company C September 11, 1862. Exactly 3 months to the day later, Lewis Wilcox would meet his fate at Fredericksburg, Virginia.

As 1861 turned into 1862, Southern victories were at large in the East. The Confederacy was pushing the Army of the Potomac back all over Virginia. It wasn't until a run of bad luck that General Lee's invasion of Maryland in September would bring his trail of success to a halt, for a short time. A new sense of hope had risen for the Union cause and with that a new commanding officer to replace the ever cautious General McClellan. President Lincoln was in search of a imminent resolution to this terrible war and its form came in the shape of General Burnside. General Burnside took command of the Army of the Potomac in November of 1862. His plan, essentially, was to build up troops in Falmouth, VA and a fake staging point of troops at Warrenton, Va. Once ready, the Army of the Potomac would cross the Rappahannock river toward Richmond in a hope that Lee would concentrate on Burnside's troops in Warrenton and his advance would go untouched toward Richmond. Burnside had been aware of the build up of Confederate forces in and around the town of Fredericksburg as early as

November of 1862, President Lincoln urged him to move quickly toward Richmond. However, with any large army, supplies are often slow to arrive when needed.

The use of pontoon bridges would be used to cross the Rappahannock river from Falmouth into Fredericksburg. Those materials wouldn't arrive until December 11, 1862. By that time Confederate forces had already occupied the town and had dug fortified positions outside the town as well. On the morning of December 11, 1862, Pvt. Lewis Wilcox and the men 50th and 15th New York Engineers, along with men from the Regular Army Engineers were ordered to build five pontoon bridges across the river for the army to cross into Fredericksburg and secure it. The 15th and Regulars, would build two bridges further South from the town. The 50th, would build the other three bridges, two directly across from town of Fredericksburg itself. As the fog cleared, confederate soldiers could make out blue figures in the distance building pontoon bridges to cross. With careful aim, men under the command of General William Barksdale opened fire on the engineers. Major Ira Spaulding was commanding the 50th New York Engineers at Fredericksburg and gives a description of the their tasks in his field report dated December 12, 1862; it reads:

“ I have the honor to report that, in compliance with your orders, I moved three pontoon bridge trains to the Rappahannock on the night of the 10th instant, and at about 3 o'clock on the morning of the 11th we commenced laying the three bridges at the points designated opposite Fredericksburg: one being located opposite the docks, near the lower end of the town, and two at the rope ferry, about opposite the center of the town. The lower bridge was under the immediate

superintendence of Captain McDonald, and the two upper bridges under Captains Brainerd and Ford, respectively.

At about 6 a.m., when one of the upper bridges and the lower bridge were two-thirds completed, and the other about one-fourth built, the enemy opened a galling fire upon us at the upper bridges, from the houses near the shore and from behind walls and fences, killing 1 captain and 2 men, and wounding several others. One bridge had approached so near the south shore that the men at work upon it were within 80 yards of the enemy, who were under cover, while the infantry supporting us on the flanks were at long range, and could do little damage to the enemy. My men were working without arms; had no means of returning the enemy's fire, and were driven from the work."

Lewis Wilcox would not make it through the day. He would be shot dead in the opening shots of the Battle of Fredericksburg while crucially laying pontoon bridges the morning of December 11, 1862. The location of his death is one of the two "upper bridges" being built and overseen by Captain Brainerd of Company C. The location of these bridges production would have started at Chatham Manor, and ended at Hawk street, crossing the Rappahannock River into Fredericksburg. Casualties listed as killed outright from the 50th NY at Fredricksburg are 1 officer and 7 enlisted men from December 11- 15, 1862. In the report made by Major Ira Spaulding on December 12, 1862; he lists that the previous day 1 officer and 2 men are killed at the upper bridge. Based off this information, company designation, location of work on pontoons and his death on December 11th; Lewis Wilcox along with Pvt. William Blakesley and Captain Augustus Perkins would have experienced not only the heaviest of firing on the engineers but

also makes them the very first three casualties of the Battle of Fredericksburg along with a staggering 13,353 Union casualties to follow.

His body would be recovered and returned to his family and Rome for burial a few weeks after the battle. A small article in *The Roman Citizen* dated Friday, January 2, 1862 titled “The Patriots Fallen” reads:

“ The bodies of Lewis Wilcox, and W.P. Butts, of this town, and Byron Nesbit of Lee, arrived in this village on Wednesday evening last, at 7 1/2 o’clock. They were expected on the noon express, and the Gansevoort Light Guard, Capt. Rowe, turned out during the day to furnish an escort for the bodies of the gallant dead, but for some cause they did not arrive until evening. The friends of the deceased were present, and the honored dead were taken that their dust might be deposited with that of their kindred and friends. The funeral of Mr. Wilcox was attended at the Court Street M.E. Church (of which he was a member) yesterday. The services were of highly solemn character, and many a moistened eye attested the sympathy for the dead soldier and his bereaved family. The Gansevoort Light Guards were present as a military escort, and accompanied the body to the grave, and fired the usual number of volleys at the close of services.”

The family of Lewis Wilcox would grieve tremendously as many families would across the United States following the Battle of Fredericksburg. In 1861, before he left for war, Lewis had another child, Anthony L. Wilcox. A son he would never see grow, became the stepson of Hiram Stoddard who would marry Margaret after the loss of her husband. Hiram served in the

24th NY Artillery Battery L. Lewis's daughter Cecilia, would be admitted to the Rochester State Hospital for psychiatric patients where she would die in 1935.

The story of Lewis Wilcox is but one of the many thousands of personal struggles that men, families, and communities endured during the great American struggle known as the Civil War. To understand the great regiments that served in the war, we must first understand the individual stories that piece together the backbone of the greatness of these regiments service. Great regiments are forged by the will and determination of great men. It is important that we today, as Americans, do not let their stories of bravery, sacrifice, and devotion to their cause and country be lost to the pages of history.