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Warriors of Dauphin County: The 127th Pennsylvania Volunteers

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Abstract

When Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin charged the men of his state to enlist in July 1862, he was desperate for soldiers to fill the federal quota set for Pennsylvania. Heeding the call, William Jennings – citizen of Harrisburg and then the Adjutant of Camp Curtin – approached the governor to proffer his services to state and nation. Curtin acceded; if Jennings could form a regiment, the ambitious young officer would be granted its colonelcy. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Warriors of Dauphin County: The 127th Pennsylvania Volunteers

March 31, 2014

By: Kevin Lavery, '16

By war's end, one would command the 26th Pennsylvania Emergency Militia Regiment during the Battle of Gettysburg. Another would serve as military governor of the battlefield in the wake of the clash. Two brothers would become colonel and lieutenant colonel in another local regiment and be joined by others of their original outfit. Not all would survive the relatively brief duration of their service.

Those who did left a legacy beyond their contribution to the war effort: several had eminent careers in public service, while others found success as journalists, innkeepers, and physicians. One would even live to the ripe age of 98 years and was hailed as a local legend. But for nine months in late 1862 and early 1863, these men lived and fought together as the 127th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers, "familiarily known as the Dauphin County Regiment." Twice, the regiment would storm Marye's Heights, and by the time it returned home, the patriotism and devotion of the men had only grown.



When Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin charged the men of his state to enlist in July 1862, he was desperate for soldiers to fill the federal quota set for Pennsylvania. Heeding the call, William Jennings – citizen of Harrisburg and then the Adjutant of Camp Curtin – approached the governor to proffer his services to state and nation. Curtin acceded; if Jennings could form a regiment, the ambitious young officer would be granted its colonelcy.



Immediately, Jennings set about recruiting his regiment with help from Hiram C. Alleman – a lawyer who was soon to be the regiment’s lieutenant colonel – amongst other prominent community members. Though some companies were recruited from Lebanon, Schuylkill, and Adams Counties, the core of the regiment came from Dauphin County. Some men came from Harrisburg, the county’s urban core, whilst others hailed from the eastward farming communities and small boroughs like Hummelstown. As a result, the men comprising the regiment came from a variety of backgrounds: mostly lawyers and laborers from the city and farmers and shopkeepers from the periphery. These were hardly the only groups represented. Wilhelm

Leister, of Company D, was a veteran of the Prussian Army whose military discipline and pride in his well-polished gun were second to none in the regiment. Marylander Rufus Edmonds Shapley simply happened to be visiting Hummelstown – the town of his birth – during the recruiting process when he was gripped by war enthusiasm and enlisted with the 127th. These men and others were joined by Jeremiah Rohrer, who was installed as the regiment’s major after a contentious and political officer election influenced by patronage, popularity, and contributions to the recruiting effort. Though the regiment drew broadly from across the region’s demography, it was the local elite who filled the unit’s positions of authority. American egalitarianism went only so far as to bridge the gap between farm boys and lawyers.

When the time finally came for the 127th to leave Pennsylvania for the contested fields of Virginia, they boarded freight cars, unaware of their destination or their assignment. Private Samuel P. Conrad recalled fondly the York townswomen who gave him and his companions “whole baskets full of good pies fresh baked . . . which [were] still warm from the oven” as the trains moved southward. These women saw reflected in the faces of the 127th their own family members who had gone off to the war. Surely they hoped their own husbands and sons would find similar kindness elsewhere.

In the ten months of its existence, the regiment would see Washington City and earn praise for its earnest defense of the Potomac River’s Chain Bridge. It would assault Marye’s Heights not once, but twice, during both the Battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

The 127th Regiment, though often neglected on the national stage owing to its brief existence and seemingly unimpressive career, is a major piece of local history in Dauphin

County. Though it was far from the only Civil War regiment containing Dauphin men, it was the 127th that would be the regiment best remembered as the region's contribution to the national struggle.

To be continued . . .

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Images:

Colonel William Jennings in 1862, Frontispiece of *History of the 127th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers*.

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