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Remember Harpers Ferry: Masculinity and the 126th New York

Anika N. Jensen
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

“The Harpers Ferry Cowards” is not an enviable nickname, but it is the one with which the 126th New York Infantry was stuck after September 15, 1862, the date that saw the largest capture of United States troops until the Battle of Bataan roughly 70 years later. The regiment, which had been active for a mere 21 days, was stationed on Maryland Heights and had been successful in fending off Joseph Kershaw’s brigade on September 12 and 13, but when the 126th observed their colonel, Eliakim Sherrill, being carried from the field after receiving a wound to the face, a few companies lost all bearings and fled. After the surrender on September 15, the 126th was paroled at Camp Douglas in Chicago until November.

[excerpt]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Remember Harpers Ferry: Masculinity and the 126th New York

By *Annika Jensen '18*

“The Harpers Ferry Cowards” is not an enviable nickname, but it is the one with which the 126th New York Infantry was stuck after September 15, 1862, the date that saw the largest capture of United States troops until the Battle of Bataan roughly 70 years later. The regiment, which had been active for a mere 21 days, was stationed on Maryland Heights and had been successful in fending off Joseph Kershaw’s brigade on September 12 and 13, but when the 126th observed their colonel, Eliakim Sherrill, being carried from the field after receiving a wound to the face, a few companies lost all bearings and fled. After the surrender on September 15, the 126th was paroled at Camp Douglas in Chicago until November. In retrospect, the treatment these New Yorkers received for cowardice and the reputation they bore seems difficult to validate (after all, only about 20% of the regiment fled, while the rest stood their ground), but Civil War era notions of masculinity were far too strict to excuse them; they would remain the Harpers Ferry Cowards until their actions at Cemetery Ridge on July 3 reinforced their honor. An account of the regiment’s experience by Captain Winfield Scott (not to be confused with the Winfield Scott of The Anaconda Plan) during Pickett’s Charge bathes the regiment in golden light: “That cheer struck terror into the heart of the wavering foe, and nerved to desperation and deeds of valor the boys in blue.” Scott’s account is a romantic one, extolling the bravery of the 126th, men who were cowards no more. “Thus officers and men, with perfect composure, and in confidence, formed the line,” he writes; “They poured in a terrible fire upon us. We answered it with another more terrible.”



Monument to the 126th New York Infantry at Ziegler's Grove. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Such blaring notions of heroism and sacrifice are not uncommon among Civil War memoirs (see: Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain), and Scott's involvement with the 126th could have easily altered his perspective of his regiment, making them appear braver in retrospect than they were during Pickett's Charge; such a rhetorical strategy would play well into the underdog narrative of the Harpers Ferry Cowards. But other records highlight the New Yorkers' transition from cowardice to bravery. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, months before the Battle of Gettysburg in November of 1862 published the following: *This Regiment as a whole, maintained a character for promptness, energy, firmness and bravery, we have every evidence. We have shown the falsity of the charges against them in the affair at Maryland Heights, and also at Chicago; charges which made scores of them rush on death to clear themselves from the imputation of cowardice. A careful inspection of the Official Army Register, shows that no Regiment of infantry from the State of New York, lost so many officers from wounds received in action, as the 126th New York Volunteers, except the 48th and 88th infantry and the 8th.*

Clearly, the 126th were proving themselves in battle before they took the field at Gettysburg.

Perhaps the regiment's greatest test came at the hands of their division commander, Brigadier General Alexander Hays. Scott described Hays as "a princely soldier; brave as a lion, and was one of those dashing, reckless, enthusiastic Generals, that reminded you of one of the old cavaliers," and would come to be known for dragging Confederate battle flags in the dirt behind his horse after Pickett's Charge failed. Furthermore, Hays knew of the 126th and their reputation for cowardice, so in the heat of the

Confederate advance, he had the New Yorkers stand and drill in the manual of arms. Shouldering arms in the line of fire: the ultimate test of battlefield manhood.

Of course, the value and necessity of the “Civil War masculinity” argument is variable: voices like Chamberlain’s pin it as the dominant characteristic of the good soldier, while Ambrose Bierce thought it silly and rather useless (just read “Killed at Resaca”). Regardless, these notions were so heavily ingrained in society at the time that cowardice on the battlefield was frankly unacceptable; there was no way out for the 126th until they proved themselves under fire.

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