The Howell Brothers: A Costly Sacrifice on the Altar of Freedom

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Abstract
This semester, I have been working on the Killed at Gettysburg digital history project, which aims to tell the story of soldiers who died at Gettysburg while also tracking their movements on a map so that they can be followed. I was given Hannibal Howell of Company C of the 76th New York Infantry, and his story proved to be a lot more than I expected. [excerpt]

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This granite monument, dedicated by the State of New York on July 1, 1888, stands near the intersection of Reynolds Ave and Buford Ave. This monument marks the first line of battle where the 76th NY lost over half the regiment as killed, wounded or missing in only twenty minutes.

His story is one that cannot be understood without contextualizing it by discussing his family. In 1861, he was a 34-year-old married painter with several children. His wife, Charlotte, was pregnant with their fifth child, though he likely did not know that yet. He
does not exactly fit the stereotypical image of the 18-year-old unmarried soldier, so why did he enlist? The answer probably lies within the fact that his two younger brothers Byron and Tappan joined up. All three enlisted together on September 16, 1861, serving in the same company. Byron was made a Corporal, which certainly must have elicited some teasing and jokes between the brothers. Byron did not last long in the army; he was discharged for an unknown disability in April 1862. He likely had no choice in the matter, but potentially would have felt guilty for leaving his brothers, neighbors and new friends behind. Soon after, the other two brothers first saw combat. Tappan would be mortally wounded at the Battle of South Mountain a year after enlisting, and Hannibal was now alone. Hannibal was killed on July 1st, 1863, when his regiment took over 50% casualties in a mere twenty minutes. Only days before, he had passed within a mile and a half of South Mountain.

Of course, the story does not suddenly end when he was killed at Gettysburg. Almost all the personal information I could gather about Hannibal was found in his pension record which was over thirty pages long. Charlotte was caught in a bureaucratic nightmare in order to receive a pension she so badly needed to raise five children, most of whom were under the age of ten. She had even been forced to move closer to Hannibal’s parents after he had enlisted so that she could have a support network. The town in which they had been married in changed counties, and the Reverend who performed the ceremony was missing, so Charlotte could find no written record of their original marriage, despite the marriage lasting fourteen years. This is where Byron re-entered the picture. Trying to help his sister-in-law, he traveled across New York trying to find records. Though he was unsuccessful, Charlotte did receive the pension in 1864. After the war, when the government instituted increased pensions based off the number of children, Charlotte applied for the increase with Byron acting as her attorney for free. Byron also appears as the attorney for numerous other pension records for Union soldiers, especially for others who served in the 76th NY. Perhaps this was his way of redeeming himself for leaving the army, his friends, and his brothers so soon.
After pulling back to reorganize, the regiment formed a second line of battle. From here, they could see their dead and wounded. Perhaps Hannibal had already been killed, or perhaps he was forced to watch comrades that he couldn’t help suffer while he was still fighting for his own life.

The story of Hannibal Howell can only be understood through the lens of family, and that makes his story still relevant over 154 years later. It is timeless. The story of brothers enlisting together, the story of a wife left alone to raise children, and the story of one brother working tirelessly to help his sister-in-law can all connect with someone in a different way. The story continues from there. Hannibal is listed only as having been buried on the field, with no records beyond that. It is unclear if he remains somewhere on McPherson’s Ridge, or in an unknown plot in the National Cemetery. His name is also on a stone he shares with Charlotte at the Hector Presbyterian Church Cemetery in New York near many other family members. He may have been brought home, or maybe that stone is simply a way to remember a man who left home and never returned. This is a story that people can relate to, and this is a story that lay mostly buried for countless years. Hannibal, Charlotte, Tappan, and Byron all had their own struggles during the Civil War, and it deserves to be remembered. To quote Lincoln’s famous Bixby letter, the Howell’s surely had solemn pride “to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.”
We may never know what compelled the Howell brothers to enlist. They might have believed in an in-dissolvable Union of states, they may have had abolitionist beliefs, or maybe they just saw it as their generation’s chance for adventure. Nonetheless, whatever expectations they had upon signing up were far from what they saw. Their experiences with disability, death, and disease shattered the Victorian ideal of “the Good Death,” and Byron and Charlotte were left behind after to pick up the pieces of a shattered family after the war. Their experience are important, as they remind us that behind every regimental marker, every unknown plot in the Gettysburg National Cemetery, every stone in the Antietam National Cemetery, and every family plot in a local cemetery is a story. The stones are not stones; they are people. They are people with real lives, real stories, and real pain.