“We the undersigned … bind ourselves mutually”: Civil War Draft Resistance in Eastern Pennsylvania

Ryan D. Bilger
Gettysburg College

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Abstract
On August 6th, 1863, a group of sixteen men gathered at the East Penn Railroad depot in Millerstown, Pennsylvania, now known as Macungie, a small farming community located about seven miles southwest of Allentown. The young men met that day to create a contract with one another in anticipation of the army conscription draft, scheduled to take place in a week’s time with men between ages twenty and thirty-five eligible for selection. They created the “Millerstown Club,” agreeing “that each member of the club has to pay the sum of fifty dollars on or before the day previous to the draft.” Should the misfortune of being drafted fall upon any members of the club, the money collected would be used either to hire a substitute to serve in the army in the club member’s place or to pay the “commutation” fee of $300 to free them from service entirely. Any signer of the contract who did not pay his share by the day before the draft would not be considered a member should he be drafted. This apparently happened in the case of three of the men, who have their names crossed out on the contract. The creation of the “Millerstown Club” reflected a strong desire to avoid the war among the draft-eligible men of the town. [excerpt]

Keywords
Conscription, Draft, Draft Riots, Millerstown Club

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Comments
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On August 6th, 1863, a group of sixteen men gathered at the East Penn Railroad depot in Millerstown, Pennsylvania, now known as Macungie, a small farming community located about seven miles southwest of Allentown. The young men met that day to create a contract with one another in anticipation of the army conscription draft, scheduled to take place in a week’s time with men between ages twenty and thirty-five eligible for selection. They created the “Millerstown Club,” agreeing “that each member of the club has to pay the sum of fifty dollars on or before the day previous to the draft.” Should the misfortune of being drafted fall upon any members of the club, the money collected would be used either to hire a substitute to serve in the army in the club member’s place or to pay the “commutation” fee of $300 to free them from service entirely. Any signer of the contract who did not pay his share by the day before the draft would not be considered a member should he be drafted. This apparently happened in the case of three of the men, who have their names crossed out on the contract. The creation of the “Millerstown Club” reflected a strong desire to avoid the war among the draft-eligible men of the town.

Events throughout the previous year had brought the young men of Millerstown to this point. Congress passed the Enrollment Act on March 3, 1863 to provide fresh manpower for the thinning Union Army ranks, requiring all male citizens and citizenship-seeking aliens between the ages of twenty and forty-five to register by
April 1 for potential drafts to come. The law proved wildly unpopular across the North, from “Copperhead” Peace Democrat strongholds in the Midwest to cities on the East Coast. The best-known example of resistance to the draft took place when rioting broke out in New York City on July 13-16, 1863. Rioters destroyed homes and property in the city before beating and lynching African Americans in anger over the government’s adoption of emancipation as a cause for continuing the war. They only dispersed when troops pulled from the Army of the Potomac shortly after Gettysburg arrived in the city. Exactly one month after the violence in New York started, the communities of rural eastern Pennsylvania prepared to face a draft of their own.

New York draft riots. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

By August 1863, the people of Millerstown were no strangers to the military draft. Ten months earlier, in October 1862, several of the town’s men were selected to join the 176th Pennsylvania Infantry (Drafted Militia). This draft took place under the Pennsylvania State Militia Draft of 1862, prompted by the inability to fill President Lincoln’s summer call for 300,000 militia volunteers. Company A of the nine-month regiment mostly included men from Millerstown and the adjacent Lower Macungie Township. Despite the rancor that the state militia draft inspired throughout Pennsylvania—which included women and boys throwing hot water, sticks, and stones at draft enrollers in the coal mining regions—the Millerstown men who entered into service seem to have made the best of their situation. A letter written to Millerstown resident and future Pennsylvania College student A. Jacob Erdman by Orderly Sergeant Franklin Mertz in January 1863 tells of the regiment’s movement from Suffolk, Virginia to the North Carolina coast at New Bern. Mertz also related that “[O]ne hears no fighting and quarrelling in our regiment like one hears in many other regiments,” and that only six men of the unit were in the hospital at the time. Even with these reassurances from the front, though, the men in Millerstown in the summer of 1863 looked at the events of the last year and made plans to resist the draft.
Unlike the rioters in New York or others who fled to Canada or the deep backcountry to avoid being drafted, the members of the Millerstown Club decided to protect themselves from the draft legally. Perhaps they did so to avoid the unrest and destruction that had gripped New York City the previous month and to resist the draft while maintaining order in their community. Regardless, by showing a willingness to pay either a substitute or for a commutation fee, these men followed the lawful channels of resistance. Taking such measures would have been more likely to occur in Millerstown as well. A statistical analysis of legal and illegal draft evasion by Peter Levine found a small but still noteworthy correlation between higher levels of illegal draft evasion in July and August 1863 and congressional districts with higher levels of non-Republican voting, Catholics, and foreign-born residents. As a relatively old Protestant Pennsylvania German farming community, Millerstown would have been less likely to witness illegal methods of draft avoidance. The goal of the Millerstown Club to resist conscription legally thus fits well into the context of draft evasion at the time.

Another documentary trace of the Millerstown Club, though, shows that anti-draft support may not have been as strong in the town as the club’s formation would indicate. The members had also planned a fundraising campaign, as seen in a surviving document that was written to “honorably implore those of our fellow men of Millerstown, who are not subject to the impeding draft... to contribute to the aforesaid club, such sums of money as to them may seem to be a proper support for bearing expenses of those who will be drafted.” If this was indeed the form that members of the Millerstown Club used to solicit donations from the people of their community, it shows that perhaps the local anti-war sentiment was not strong enough to impact the decisions of those not immediately touched by the prospect of military service. The section for recording donations is blank.

The other residents of Millerstown may have drawn on a range of causes in their decision not to support the members of the Millerstown Club financially. Perhaps they did not believe in the anti-war movement enough to part with their own hard-earned money, or they may simply not have had the funds to give to the town’s young men. The other residents might also have looked at the bigger picture regarding the club’s method of resistance. Paying commutation fees still ultimately supported the federal government and the war effort, and perhaps they realized this and chose not to contribute on grounds that the Millerstown Club was not doing enough to resist the draft.

Any or all of these factors may have been at play in Millerstown, providing a stark contrast to the more fervent anti-war spirit demonstrated by the sixteen signers of the contract at the East Penn Railroad depot. The case of the Millerstown Club provides a fascinating example of how the theoretical concept of opposition to the war could crystallize into active resistance. The draft became an issue with which communities had to grapple, and its impact reverberated far beyond the streets of New York City and the farm lanes of eastern Pennsylvania across the North during the latter half of the Civil War.
Sources:


