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# Perspectives on Our Past: The Killed at Gettysburg Stories of Franz Benda and Augustus van Horne Ellis

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# Perspectives on Our Past: The Killed at Gettysburg Stories of Franz Benda and Augustus van Horne Ellis

## **Abstract**

Once again, I have spent the semester working on the Civil War Institute's Killed at Gettysburg project. This project continues to be one with which I feel a strong connection, as I have always taken an interest in the stories of Gettysburg's fallen. As such, I am glad to have had the opportunity to work on it again.

As before, I have focused on two soldiers in my research this spring, one an enlisted soldier in the ranks and one a regimental commander. The latter, Colonel Augustus van Horne Ellis of the 124th New York Volunteer Infantry, has a life-sized statue of him on the battlefield, while the former, Private Franz Benda, 26th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, remains obscure. Both of them, though, lived fascinating lives, and each of their deaths reverberated far beyond the rolling hills of southern Pennsylvania. Through text narratives and interactive story maps, I sincerely hope that both of their stories can be told to broader audiences who can thus gain a greater appreciation for these men who heroically gave their lives for the cause of the Union.  
[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

124th New York, 26th Wisconsin, Eleventh Corps, Killed at Gettysburg

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

## Perspectives on Our Past: The Killed at Gettysburg Stories of Franz Benda and Augustus van Horne Ellis

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

Once again, I have spent the semester working on the Civil War Institute's Killed at Gettysburg project. This project continues to be one with which I feel a strong connection, as I have always taken an interest in the stories of Gettysburg's fallen. As such, I am glad to have had the opportunity to work on it again.

As before, I have focused on two soldiers in my research this spring, one an enlisted soldier in the ranks and one a regimental commander. The latter, Colonel Augustus van Horne Ellis of the 124<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry, has a life-sized statue of him on the battlefield, while the former, Private Franz Benda, 26<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, remains obscure. Both of them, though, lived fascinating lives, and each of their deaths reverberated far beyond the rolling hills of southern Pennsylvania. Through text narratives and interactive story maps, I sincerely hope that both of their stories can be told to broader audiences who can thus gain a greater appreciation for these men who heroically gave their lives for the cause of the Union.



*Company H, 26th Wisconsin Infantry. These men would have been among Franz Benda's comrades. Photo courtesy Oshkosh Public Museum.*

Writing about these two soldiers has been extremely valuable for me in that it has encouraged me to think about different perspectives. For example, Franz Benda immigrated to the United States from his birthplace in Bohemia at a young age. He and his parents built a new life for themselves as farmers in Wisconsin, and the young man appeared well on his way to achieving a piece of the American dream. Everything changed in 1862 when he joined a regiment that made up part of the ethnically-diverse Eleventh Corps. The unit's failures at Chancellorsville brought down heavy nativist criticism against Franz Benda and his comrades, making them feel as though they did not belong as fighters for the Union.

His story also ended in a heartbreaking fashion, as after his death at Gettysburg, his parents lost their farmland and died in poverty. While I knew the stories of the Eleventh Corps before this project, I had never taken the time to deeply consider what it must have been like for a young man like Franz Benda to experience that sort of pain and shame, much of which was undeserved. To consider his family's tragic loss of both the human life of their son and the way of life they had made together. Benda's story provides a powerful example of how soldiers could reach such psychological lows in the Civil War, and how the friends and relatives of those who died often lost so much more than their loved ones. As such, I feel proud to have developed a concise narrative of his life and legacy so that more people can learn about these themes as I did.



*A statue of Colonel Augustus van Horne Ellis atop his regiment's monument gazes out over the field where he gave his life for the Union. Photo by the author.*

The story of Augustus van Horne Ellis has raised other valuable questions in the course of my research. For example, what qualities of a man and a leader could inspire those he commanded to include a statue of him atop their monument decades after his death? Ellis's story is one of leadership and loss delicately intertwined. He clearly had the sort of strong personality to win over the hearts and minds of his fellow soldiers, as they elected him captain in his first term of duty. Ellis led his men well at First Bull Run but also had to grapple with the heartbreaking loss of his brother at that battle. He became known as a strong disciplinarian and a good recruiter, leading to his becoming colonel of the 124<sup>th</sup> New York, a regiment he played an instrumental role in raising and with which he forged a strong bond. Ellis died near Devil's Den leading his men in a valiant but ultimately brutal charge, sealing his place in their memories as a brave commander to the last. Yet, his young wife of just four years had to deal with the loss of her husband in a profoundly emotional way that changed the course of her life. These twin narratives intersected throughout the short life of Augustus van Horne Ellis in different ways, raising issues of what it meant to lead men in the Civil War and what it meant to lose loved ones as well. Just as Franz Benda's story creates certain important questions in the mind of the reader, Ellis's does too, and I am happy to be able to bring the New Yorker's story to the public.

The stories of the past continue to hold relevant connections to the lives of the present, and the Killed at Gettysburg project this semester has been valuable to me in this way. Considering the perspectives of others, whether that of a young, poor immigrant private or of a colonel born and bred in the nation's largest city, remains extremely important today, in addition to the specific details of their lives and legacies. Working on the Killed at Gettysburg project has once again been highly enjoyable for me, and I hope that through it more people can ponder the lessons of the past and how we can apply them to our presents and our futures.

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