Pennsylvania at Chancellorsville, But Headed Back Home

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Abstract
With the anniversary of the battles around Fredericksburg this week, the Civil War world’s eyes seem to be turned toward Chancellorsville and the battles there. Almost as a reflex, my mind has gone there too. I’ve been thinking about Simon Stein Wolf, the Gettysburgian who faced death at Chancellorsville only to find it terribly displayed in the days after. So today another excerpt from my manuscript, to start re-conceptualizing Chancellorsville through the eyes of a Pennsylvania College dropout. [excerpt]

Keywords
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Disciplines
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THURSDAY, MAY 2, 2013

With the anniversary of the battles around Fredericksburg this week, the Civil War world's eyes seem to be turned toward Chancellorsville and the battles there. Almost as a reflex, my mind has gone there too. I've been thinking about Simon Stein Wolf, the Gettysburgian who faced death at Chancellorsville only to find it terribly displayed in the days after. So today another excerpt from my manuscript, to start re-conceptualizing Chancellorsville through the eyes of a Pennsylvania College dropout:

The 23-year-old Simon Stein Wolf had spent a year at Pennsylvania College in 1860 as a sophomore, studying Cicero and Plato, Conic Sections and Analytical Geometry. But college life had not fit him, and he returned home to Rebersburg toting his books in his hands. Among them was an autograph book, packed with the signatures of the friends he made in that one short year of life in Gettysburg. In the book’s pages Professor Charles F. Schaeffer transcribed a passage from 2nd Timothy in German, which Wolf could have easily picked his way through hailing from deeply Deutsch Centre County. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; the professor wrote, Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. Sacrifice and the potential for sacrifice was on the lips and minds of everyone in Gettysburg that spring. Fellow student Joseph Potts Blymyer of the class of 1863 penned a simple Latin phrase from Horace’s Odes, a key text for the Sophomore class, “dulce et decorum est propatria mori.” Death for country would soon leave the realm of the poetic and drift into the real world.

The bawdiest of all of the small inscriptions in Wolf’s cherished book was left by Thomas Duncan Renfrew, graduating senior in the class of 1861 from nearby Fayetteville. Quoting a stanza from Sir Walter Scott’s epic poem The Lady of the Lake, Renfrew mused that although, “Our vicar he calls it damnation to sip / The ripe ruddy dew of a woman’s dear lip,” that his friend should, “whoop, Jack! kiss Gillian the quicker, / Till she bloom like a rose, and a fig for the vicar!” The passage, a licentious and devilish song, is piped in Scott’s poem by a soldier.

Both Renfrew and Wolf would soon find themselves standing in Scott’s fictitious soldiers’ all-too-real shoes. Each of the young men joined the fight against the rebellion in the fall of 1862. The
following May, the two Gettysburgians were desperately fighting at Chancellorsville as Federal forces streamed back toward United States Ford in front of Robert E. Lee’s dominating army. The Army of the Potomac has been crushed and bloodied. Lee took the opportunity to invade Lincoln’s union.

As the smoke of battle subsided and May crept toward June, each man would return to his native Pennsylvania. Thomas Renfrew and the rest of the 126th Pennsylvania Infantry were mustered out of service by the end of the month. The young man went home and became a teacher in Fayetteville. Simon Wolf’s war would continue through the summer, but his younger brothers’ would not. Henry Wolf died on the 28th of May, 1863. Simon accompanied the lifeless body of his brother home to Centre County, but quickly returned to his unit as Lee’s army began moving northward into Maryland and Pennsylvania. War, it seemed, was coming home, both in the guise of painful pine boxes and in living, breathing Confederate armies.