

Bethlehem Moment: Seeing the Elephant — The 129th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry at Fredericksburg

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Bethlehem Moment 17

City Council

December 17, 2019

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Bethlehem Moment: December 13, 1862

Bethlehem's Moravian history is well known and its preserved buildings – the Gemeinhaus, Single Sisters house, Single Brethren house, and the Colonial Industrial Quarter, to name a few – have earned the Moravian Historic District the distinction of consideration as a World Heritage Site. Bethlehem's place in the Revolution is enshrined in the patriot graves memorialized in the Tomb of the Unknown Revolutionary War Soldier. The Moravians were pacifists in principle – and were recognized as such by the Continental Congress. Most of the men paid a fine rather than fight. During the winters of 1776 – 1777 and 1777 – 1778

Bethlehem's residents provided care to sick and wounded soldiers. The Sun Inn hosted many Continental Army general officers and members of the Continental Congress.

By the time of the Civil War, attitudes had changed and many a Bethlehem boy – willing to fight against a rebellion against constitutional authority – stepped forward to serve in the Union army. The Synod of the Church passed several resolutions indirectly supporting the Union cause, effectively making it a just war. The firing on Ft. Sumter in April 1861, led to Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to serve 90 days and Co. "A", 1st Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, drawn from Bethlehem, was quickly formed and sent to Washington to protect the Capitol. Pennsylvania answered Lincoln's call for additional troops as the war progressed, and the conflict widened by filling three-year regiments and shorter term nine-month regiments. Among those regiments was the 129th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry.

Company "C" of the 129th Regiment was recruited in Northampton County and included many Bethlehem men. The Regiment was organized on August 15th, 1862, to serve for nine months. Politicians wanted to avoid a draft at all costs and calculated that shorter service commitments would be easier to fill than "three years or during the war." After being hastily armed and equipped, Company "C" entrained to Alexandria, Virginia, arriving on August 18th. Two weeks later it was under fire during the battle of Second Bull Run but not really engaged in combat. Two weeks after that, the 129th marched to Sharpsburg, Maryland, arriving on the field along Antietam Creek, but too late to participate in the fighting. At the end of October, the 129th marched into Virginia until it arrived opposite Fredericksburg. On December 13th, the Regiment crossed the Rappahannock River with its division marching through the town to its assault position in full view of an open field. Advancing, the brigade that included the 129th Regiment halted in low, open ground and was ordered to lie down, where it came under artillery



fire. Rising up, the division formed in line of battle with the brigade in two lines, and the 129th Regiment on the left front.

This was the Regiment's trial by fire (experiencing serious action for the first time) as it advanced over open ground, over the bodies of the dead and wounded, in the face of incessant musketry and artillery fire toward an enemy behind a stone wall. In a matter of minutes, the Regiment lost 142 killed and wounded. Among them were the sons of old Bethlehem families such as Benner and Luckenbach. We should pause to consider the courage it took to make that charge knowing full well that the five previous charges were driven back with heavy losses. They went forward with fixed bayonets without waiting to load their muskets, intent on giving the Confederates "the cold steel." The division succeeded in getting closer to the stone wall than any other Federal assault. Caps from the 129th Regiment were found within a few yards of that stone wall. Those "Bethlehem Boys" had "seen the elephant" and showed their mettle. Retreating in semidarkness into the town, the Regiment recrossed the river under fire and went into camp.

After suffering the misery of Burnside's "Mud March" in January 1863, the 129th took part in the battle of Chancellorsville, fighting on May 1st, 2nd and 3rd, even though the term of service of many of the men had expired. The Regiment's term of service having fully expired on May 6th, the remnants of Company "C" arrived in Easton on May 18th to the welcoming cheers of its citizens.

Later that summer of 1863, the Federal troops at Gettysburg, crouched behind a stone wall on Cemetery Ridge, cried out “Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!” as Pickett’s Division advanced across an open field into a storm of bullets and artillery fire. The butcher’s bill was repaid.

Sources:

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