The Dispatch

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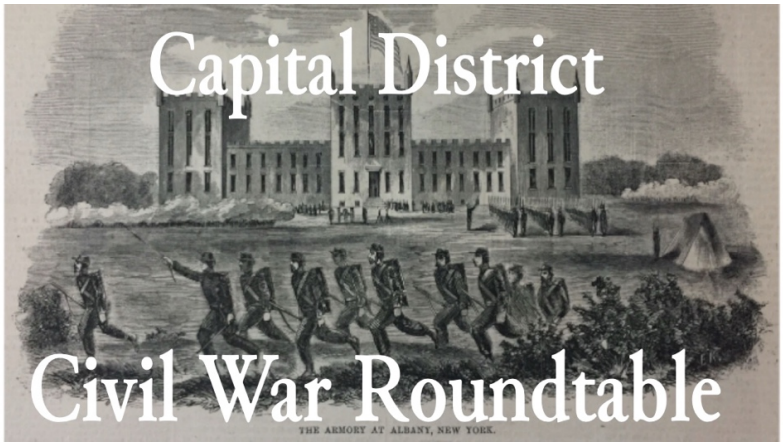

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APRIL MEETING

Friday, April 11, 2025

Watervliet Senior Center
1501 Broadway Watervliet, New York

"The History of the 77th New York Volunteer Infantry"
presented by

Chris Carola

Social Hour 6:00pm
Business Mtg 7:00pm
Presentation 7:00-8:00PM

Author Chris Carola

THE HISTORY OF THE 77TH NEW YORK VOL. INFANTRY

by
Chris Carola

Former Associated Press reporter Chris Carola will discuss the 77th New York State Volunteer Infantry Regiment, from its muster in Saratoga Springs in late 1861 through its many battles and travels as part of the Army of the Potomac, culminating at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. Using contemporary documents, photos and soldiers' letters, Carola tells the story of local men in the "Bemis Heights Regiment" who marched off to war to fight for the Union cause.

Chris Carola is a former journalist who worked nearly 40 years in daily journalism, including more than 30 years as a reporter for The Associated Press based at the global new service's bureau in Albany. During his career, he wrote numerous insightful and exclusive stories on American military history, from the French and Indian War to the Global War on Terror, including many articles on New York's key role in the Civil War. As a freelance writer, his stories have appeared in the Times Union and Newsday. A Mechanicville native, he has lived in Saratoga Springs since the mid-1980s.

UPCOMING PRESENTATIONS

The Saratoga Battlefield
with Derek Coloer
Friday, May 9. 2025 @ 7pm

Big Jim & The White Boy
with Marcus Anderson
Friday, June 13, 2025

Celebrating One New Yorker's
Leadership and Courage

by Rosemary Nichols

When I started thinking about the lead article for this month, I did some investigation into the featured topic of the 77th NYVI. Since I did not wish to write anything that might step on our speaker's presentation, I started looking at the war experience of the 77th more broadly. Specifically, I was exploring with whom the 77th served, where they served, and what was most significant about their service.

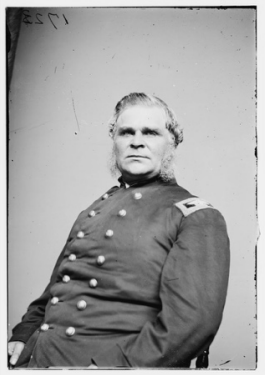
It didn't take long to discover that for much of its war the 77th New York's Bemis Heights regiment, served with two other New York regiments. I was initially struck by how well that brigade represented the length and breadth of upstate New York. With the 77th, whose members came from the Adirondack/Saratoga region, you also had the 43rd NYVI, recruited from Albany and the Capital District more generally, and the 49th NYVI, recruited from Buffalo. Two non-New York regiments, the 7th Maine and the 61st Pennsylvania, also were part of the brigade.

These five units came into federal service in the fall of 1861 for the standard 3 years. They mustered out at the end of the war in June of 1865. During that service the brigade, with occasionally detached units, served from the Siege of Yorktown in April 1862 through the surrender of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

The brigade for most of its federal service was part of the 6th Corps, being denominated in the latter part of the war the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Division. Commanding the Corps was General Horatio G. Wright, a solidly professional engineer who rose through the ranks to command following the death of General John Sedgwick at the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse on May 9, 1864.

There were many fine commanders of various elements of the 6th Corps during the long years of the civil war, but my attention was drawn to a blogpost for the Emerging Civil War by one of our fine young Civil War scholars, Kevin Pawlak. He penned a January 28, 2016, article entitled *"On Many a Bloody Field": The Forgotten Story of Daniel Davidson Bidwell* *.

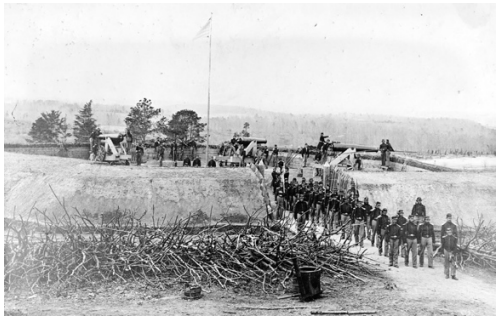
As discussed by Kevin, Bidwell, a Buffalo attorney, had a great liking for the military. When the Civil War began, Daniel Bidwell became colonel of the 49th New York Infantry. Bidwell's soldiers learned quickly that he led by example: "He never hesitated to expose himself to more than the dangers of his regiment, in order to exhibit an inspiring example. His face was as calm, his bearing as cool, his mind as composed, his voice as steady, when he rode along the line through a storm of plunging shells or whistling bullets as it used to be when he led some harmless holiday parade." This composure on the field of battle and the example he set for the soldiers under him greatly endeared the men of the 49th New York to their colonel.



Brig. Gen Daniel David Bidwell

Bidwell joined the state militia as a private despite his high civilian rank. However, he eventually rose to command the company, which he organized independently before incorporating them into the 74th Regiment of the New York State National Guard. Soon, as Kevin writes, "Bidwell was offered command of the regiment but turned it down. A Buffalo newspaperman recalled years later that 'the company into which he had drawn the best young manhood of Buffalo had grown into his life and become a part of himself. It was his pride, his pet—his military family, which he loved with father-like affection.' Bidwell took his position in the militia seriously, not as if it was an amateur gathering of armed men."

His first full action as brigade commander came during the Battle of the Wilderness. There, as Kevin reports, on May 6, 1864, during the Confederate assault on the Army of the Potomac's right flank, Bidwell's brigade stopped the thus far successful Southern onslaught. "His was the form, on that portentous evening, that sat, among the bullets, upon his horse, in the language of General [John] Sedgwick, 'like a man of iron,' coolly directing the movements which repulsed the enemy, gave us back the field and saved the whole Army of the Potomac from disaster," wrote a newspaper correspondent who witnessed the scene. The account may be slightly exaggerated, but Bidwell's importance in stopping the attack and his bravery during the fight are two well illustrated and oft repeated statements.



The Battle of Fort Stevens - 1864

Throughout the spring and summer of 1864, Bidwell continued to lead his brigade. He next appears at another critical juncture in the war when Confederate forces under Jubal Early approached the gates of Washington. During the fighting at Fort Stevens on July 12, 1864, Bidwell's brigade assaulted Early's force, driving it away from the fort. In the brigade, all of Bidwell's five regimental officers were casualties of the fight and his brigade of roughly 1,000 men suffered 35.8% casualties. Losing all five of the regimental officers and suffering almost 36% casualties are terrible losses, but the regiment and brigade carried on.

"Daniel Bidwell and the men under his command seemed to have a knack for being placed in crucial positions throughout the bloody battles of 1864," says Kevin. "October 19, 1864 proved to be no exception. As the sun rose on that autumn morning, Confederate forces—again under Early—attacked, surprised, and routed elements of Philip Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah camped north of Cedar Creek. As Sheridan's army folded underneath the punishing attacks, the Federal 6th Corps moved forward to stymie the onslaught. Two divisions advanced into the fight while George Getty's 2nd Division, including Bidwell's brigade, fell into their rear as support and to hold the high ground where sat the Middletown Cemetery. Bidwell's brigade held the left flank of Getty's formation."

At the first attack at 8 a.m. the attack against Getty's position began. The 6th Corps soldiers "cooly [sic] held their fire until the enemy was close upon them, then delivered it in their very

faces, and tumbled the shattered ranks down the hill. . . .”

And where was the brigade commander during all of this. Certainly not drunk in his tent or cowering behind a tree. During the fight atop the hill, “General Bidwell sat erect on his horse, a few paces behind his prostrate brigade, as cool as though the storm of fire and death was not playing around him,” noted an admirer. As Bidwell’s men slowly began to give ground to their enemy, Bidwell and the officers of his brigade “at once restored the courage of the men, and they gave and took without further flinching, though the struggle was deadly.” Suddenly, a shell exploded in Bidwell’s troops and as Bidwell looked in that direction to see its effect, another shell “tore through his shoulders and lungs, bringing him heavily to the ground” in a state of unconsciousness. Bidwell let out one groan while his horse “stood still, as though it had not felt the emptying of its saddle.”

Bidwell’s injury was mortal. His final words echoed those of many brave soldiers in that bloody war. Bidwell told the surgeon who was attending him in his last moments, “Doctor, see that my record is right at home. Tell them I died at my post doing my duty.”

Including their fallen general, Bidwell’s brigade lost 37 men killed, 172 wounded, and 16 captured or missing for a total of 225 casualties. Kevin concludes, “Getty’s stand had been instrumental in slowing the Confederate attack and proved key to the Union victory at Cedar Creek.”

Bidwell’s death, though heroic in the finest Civil War tradition, did not help Getty’s division. One historian of the battle went so far as to say that “Bidwell’s death at a critical moment threatened to change the outcome of the Battle of Cedar Creek.”

Getty’s and Bidwell’s and Sheridan’s men prevailed. The telegraph dispatches sent to Buffalo “laden with victory to our arms…also brought the sad intelligence” of Bidwell’s death at 45.

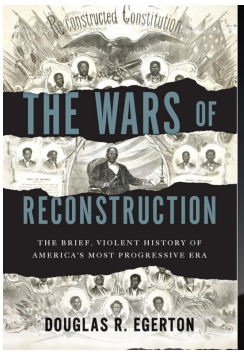
Grave of Brig. Gen. Daniel D Bidwell
Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, New York

Bidwell is remembered in Buffalo as well as any soldier in the Civil War. Bidwell Place in Buffalo has a monument of the general atop a horse while three monuments to the general—including his gravestone—sit in Forest Lawn Cemetery where he rests. Before Bidwell died, his supposed last words were, “I have tried to do my duty.” In both civilian and military life, Bidwell did all his city and country demanded of him.

For further information on Brig. Gen. Daniel Bigwell, see the article by Kevin Pawlak and other informative articles located at The Emerging Civil War website www.emergingcivilwar.com

SHAWN’S CIVIL WAR BOOKSHELF

by Shawn Connery



In between chapters of *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, I recently completed a reread of a spectacular work by Le Moyne College professor Douglas Egerton entitled *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of*

***America's Most Progressive Era*. From the final years of the Civil War through the mid 20th century, *The Wars of Reconstruction* covers the tumultuous struggle by a war weary nation coming to terms with the new-found peace. Egerton introduces readers to forgotten African Americans who rose to prominence in various state and federal positions and the resistance they faced from a southern citizenry who were bent on maintaining their social standing and supremacy over their newly freed slaves. Egerton is the author of several great books including *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War*, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America*, and the recently published *A Man on Fire: The Worlds of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*.**

Buford's View

by Matt George

The 77th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment was also known as the "Bemis Heights" Regiment. The 77th New York was a local regiment of nearly 1,500 men recruited from Saratoga Springs. It was inspired by the area's role during the American Revolution and the Battle of Saratoga.

Restored Flag of the 77th New York Vol Infantry Reg.

A number of years ago a project was announced to raise money to restore the tattered flag of the 77th New York. The Capital District Civil War Round Table wholehearted supported this effort. Several 7th and 8th grade students from the Saratoga Catholic Central Junior/Senior High School explored the city to uncover the history left behind over 150 years ago of the "Bemis Heights" Regiment. The project, under the auspices of the New York State Military Heritage Museum, with the support of our Round Table, was successful and the battle flag was restored. This is a perfect example of our Round Table's efforts to work with schools and other organizations to help preserve our history.

Before and After Photos of the Restoration Effort

A statue of a Civil War soldier was placed at the site of the depot commemorating where the Regiment headed off to war. In July of 2020 the statue at the top of the monument was vandalized. The head and hands of the soldier were found shattered on the ground. Fortunately, the zinc soldier was restored and placed back upon the monument in November of 2021.