

HISTORIC ROOTS

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Houghton Collection, University of Vermont

The logs and trenches of the Rebel fortifications at Lee's Mills.

“THANK GOD I AM ALIVE YET...”

A VERMONT SOLDIER IN BATTLE DURING THE CIVIL WAR¹

By JEFFREY D. MARSHALL
UNIVERSITY ARCHIVIST, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

Between 1861 and 1865 thousands of Vermonters fought along with soldiers from the other northern states against the southern states in the Civil War. The southern states had left the United States to start their own country. In it slavery was to remain legal. They called their country the Confederate States of America, sometimes known just as the Confederacy. The northern states wanted to keep the United States whole, as it had been. Most northerners didn't want slavery to spread out of the south. Some wanted to get rid of it entirely. But nearly everyone in the north wanted to keep the union of all the states. This is why the north was often called the Union and the northern army the Union Army.

Vermont sent more than 34,000 of its men to fight in the Civil War. Men went from every

¹ This letter is now at the United States Army Military History Institute in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania and is published with their permission.

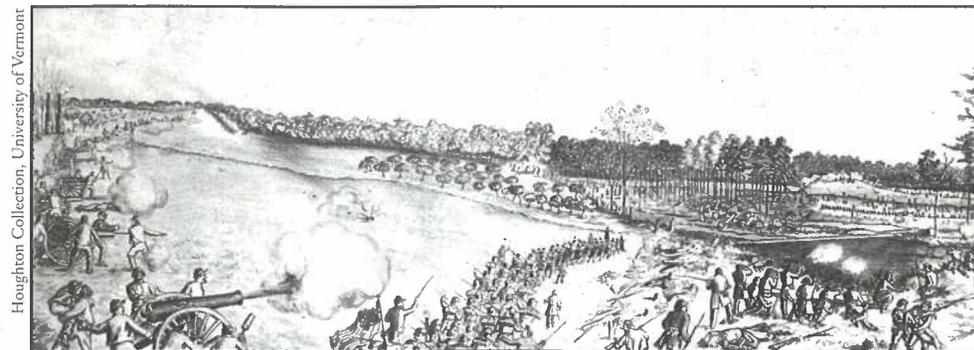
town in every county. More than 5,400 of them died from wounds or illness. They fought in some of the hardest and bloodiest battles of the war.

Many soldiers wrote letters home to their families, telling them about life in camp and the hardships of war. Most of the time, when they were in camp, their life was dull. They spent part of the day marching and drilling. Sometimes they were on guard duty. Other times they spent long nights on picket duty, staying awake and alert, watching for the enemy. Going into battle, on the other hand, was not dull, but it was dangerous.

In the spring of 1862 the Union Army began a series of battles in Virginia. Its goal was to march across the state and take Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. One of the first of these battles was at Lee's Mills, a place on the Warwick River where a man named Lee had a mill.

The battle was a test. Lee's Mills was defended by southern soldiers. General George B. McClellan, the Union commander, wanted to see how they would behave under attack, whether they would fight or retreat. He ordered his troops to fight their way across the river. Those troops belonged to the Vermont Brigade.

Henry Dunbar was one of the Vermonters who fought at Lee's Mills. A corporal from



A sketch of Vermonters fighting at Lee's Mills.

Newbury, Vermont, he was a member of Company C of the Third Vermont Regiment.² The morning after the battle he described it in a letter to his wife. (*Some of the punctuation has been changed.*)

Thursday 8 a.m. April 17th [1862]

My Dear Mary,

Thank God I am alive yet and considering the circumstances comparatively well. We went yesterday morn up to within less than 1/4 mile of the enemy's works where they had 3 or 4,000 [men] and 2 large guns mounted, and between us and them a creek some 8 to 10 rods

² A regiment at full strength had about 1,000 men. Each regiment was made up of 10 companies, each with 100 men.

wide, from knee to waist deep.³ Our regiment [was] posted in the woods directly in front of their works and so near that occasionally a ball from their rifle pits aimed at our skirmishers would come up quite to us.⁴ Our batteries commenced shelling them about 9 a.m. and continued to do so through the day and except



Houghton Collection, University of Vermont

Vermont soldiers crossing the Warwick River after the battle of Lee's Mills.

³ A rod is a measure of distance. One rod equals 5-1/2 yards, so the creek was between 44 and 55 yards across.

⁴ Skirmishers acted as the army's "feelers:" they went out to see where the enemy was. They could put pressure on the enemy by firing on them and could warn their own troops in case of attack.

silencing one of their guns appeared not to have much effect.⁵

As soon as we got there all but 4 companies of our regiment...were sent off as skirmishers, and continued so through the day. These 4 companies and the Color Guard remained perfectly quiet till about 3 p.m. when Colonel Hyde came along and told Captain



Textile Conservation Center, Museum of American Textile History

Each regiment designed its own American flag. This is the one the Third Vermont Regiment carried into battle.

Harrington of Company D and [Captain] Pingry of Company F that they must take their 2 Companies and cross the creek and take the Battery, with only Companies E and K to support them. And he said the Colors must go too.⁶ It looked wicked, but all we had to do was to go ahead, so we threw off our blankets and all but our equipment and started.

[We] went about 4 rods...to the water, which we entered and found it about knee deep for the first 4 or 5 rods. Then we went into our

⁵ In this case the word "batteries" refers to groups of cannons.

⁶ The Color Guard was a small group of soldiers who carried the US flag and the regiment's flags into battle. The flags were called "the Colors."

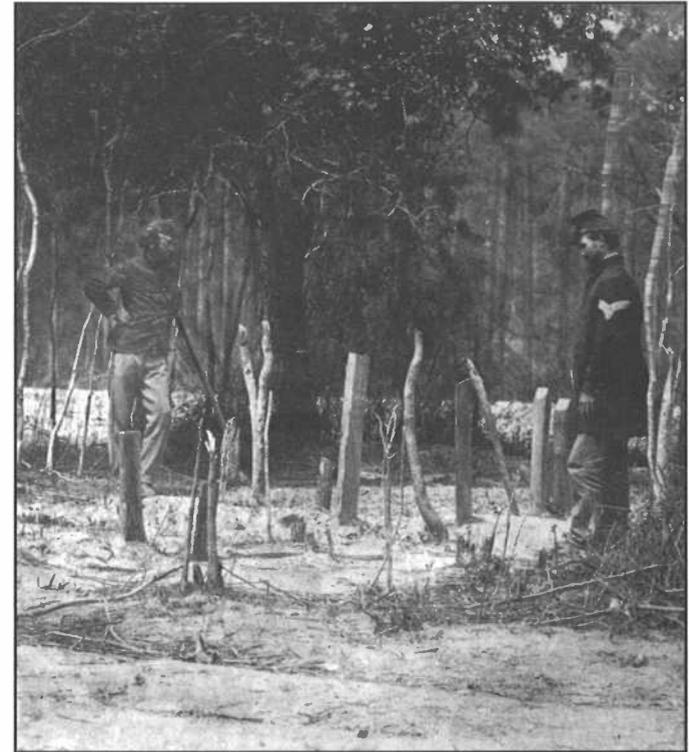
waists and where some crossed they went in up to their necks. I got in about 6 inches above my waist belt. The bullets began to meet us when we first entered the water but when we got in waist deep and within 5 or 6 rods of their rifle pits, they began to shower the balls into us like hail and our poor fellows began to fall.

Just as I got in up to my waist, and directly behind Heath with the flag, a ball struck me on the left side of my head and partly knocked me down, but I put one hand down and happened to hit a stump and kept from falling. It cut the cloth and paste board of my cap rim but it didn't go through the inside leather. It sort of confused me for 2 or 3 hours and that side of my head is some numb yet but thank God that it didn't come 1/2 inch nearer.

About half of us got into their works and drove the Rebels out but couldn't hold it,⁷ and when Harrington saw how they were cutting us up and that we must all be killed or taken prisoners he ordered us to retreat, which we did under a perfect shower of balls. Out of these 4 companies there [were] 22 killed, 56 wounded, and 5 missing.

I crawled back to Camp and...built up a good fire and made me some coffee, and after drying myself as well as I could I laid down

⁷ “Rebels” is what the Union soldiers called the southerners. The “Rebels” called the northerners “Yankees.”



Houghton Collection, University of Vermont

Crude stakes mark the graves of soldiers of the Third Vermont Regiment who died at Lee's Mills.

about 10 o'clock and slept some, though I ached all night and this morn am so lame I can scarcely go. But I am alive and again I thank God...Will write again soon.

Affectionately yours,

H.E. Dunbar



The only purpose of the battle of Lee's Mills was to test the southerners' strength and willingness to fight. But what was a test for the generals was a horror for the Vermont troops. When the battle was over 44 Vermonters were dead and 148 wounded. But the battle proved the bravery of the Vermont men.

Over the next three years Vermont soldiers took part in many important battles. And when the southern capital of Richmond fell in April 1865, a Vermont regiment led the way into the city.

Henry Dunbar left the army in May of 1862, a month after the battle of Lee's Mills, probably because of his wound. After the Civil War he moved his family to Massachusetts. He died there but is buried back in Newbury, in the Oxbow Cemetery.

The battlefield of Lee's Mills still exists, only it is no longer in the countryside. The city of Newport News, Virginia has grown so much since the Civil War that the whole battlefield is now part of a park inside the city. There you can cross the Warwick River on a bridge to see the rifle pits Henry Dunbar and the others took and then had to leave. There you can see a painting of the battle and a tablet that tells of the bravery and losses of the "Green Mountain Boys" of the Third Vermont Regiment.

Rooting Around

For more detail about the battle of Lee's Mills, look at pages 91-98 of Howard Coffin's book, *Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War* (Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press, 1993).

If your town has an old cemetery, look and see if you can find a grave of a Civil War soldier. Many towns have monuments to those who died in the Civil War and other wars. Does yours?

Letters that describe what it was like to be alive in the past can make history come alive. Are there any such letters in your family?