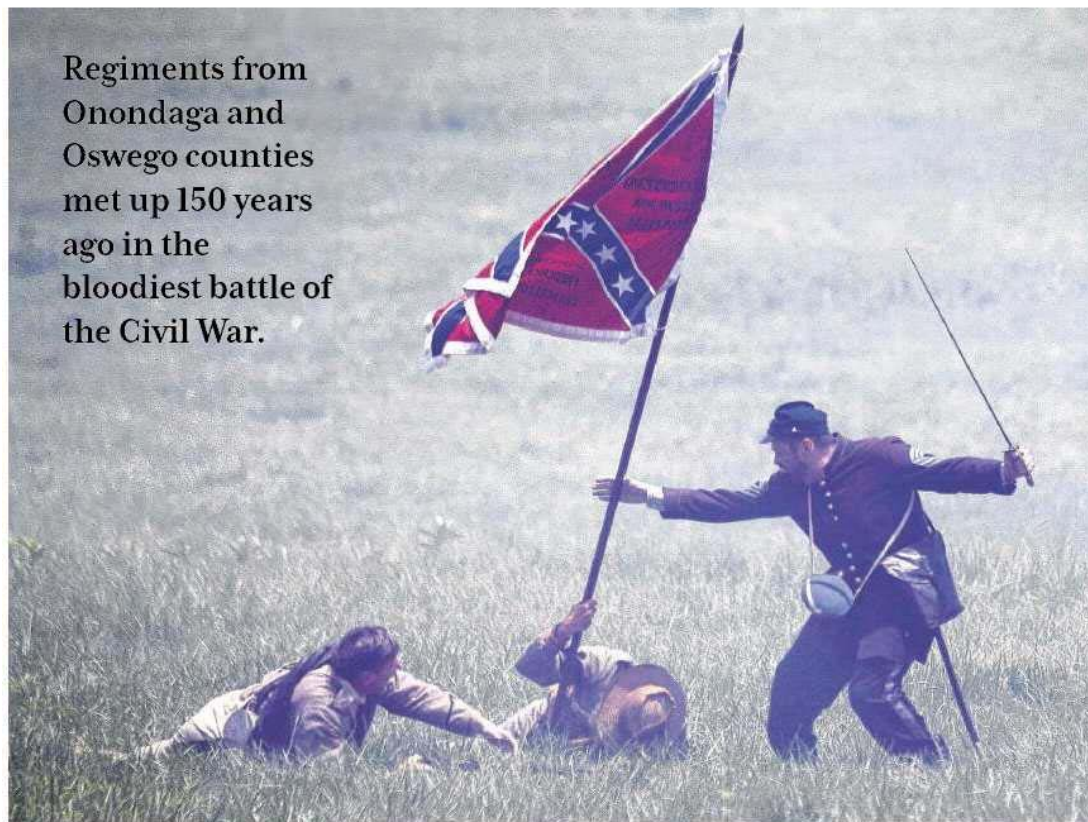


ECHOES OF CNY AT GETTYSBURG

Regiments from Onondaga and Oswego counties met up 150 years ago in the bloodiest battle of the Civil War.



In a smoky battlefield, William H. Hincks, right, portrays his great-great-grandfather, William Bliss Hincks, by taking a Confederate flag from a color bearer during a reenactment Sunday of Pickett's Charge, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. Union forces turned away a Confederate advance in the pivotal Civil War battle fought July 1-3, 1863. It was the war's bloodiest conflict with more than 51,000 casualties. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

By Ken Sturtz
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Lt. H.H. Lyman, adjutant of the 147th New York Volunteers, woke at sunrise July 1, 1863, the dew burning off the ground around him in the stifling heat.

Despite days of long marching, sparse food and little rest, by 7 a.m. the 147th was heading toward a tiny crossroads town in southern Pennsylvania.

As the regiment approached the town, white puffs of smoke from exploding artillery shells could be seen in the distance. The battle of Gettysburg — the largest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere and the bloodiest of the Civil War — had begun.

Now, 150 years later, tourists and history buffs are heading to Gettysburg to remember the three-day battle that caused 51,000 casualties and signaled a turning point in the war.

George DeMass, a retired clergyman and Oswego town historian, will be going to Gettysburg again.

In 1963 DeMass — whose great-grandfather fought and was wounded at Gettysburg — helped commemorate the centennial of the battle, participating in a wreath-laying ceremony at a monument for the 147th New York.

This morning at 11 a.m., he will again lay a wreath at the 147th's monument on the battlefield.

Many of the soldiers who fought at Gettysburg hailed from Central New York. The 147th was filled completely by men from Oswego County. The unit had little combat experience before the battle.

The 147th went into action at 9 a.m. July 1. Lt. Lyman described the fighting that day in his diary: "We stay about 15 minutes. Lose ¾ of our regiment. Get



George DeMass, Oswego town historian, will lay a wreath today in Gettysburg, just as he did 50 years ago. With him at the Civil War Memorial in Oswego's Washington Square Park is Meg Riley-Schneider, whose father was the county's Civil War centennial chair in 1963. (Dick Blume/dblume@syracuse.com)

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Soldiers from CNY crucial at Gettysburg

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flanked and fall back and reform about 65 men and officers. Advance again. Fight them against odds all day till 4 p.m."

After a fierce Confederate attack, Union troops were ordered to retreat, but the order never reached the 147th.

Its colonel was shot before he could give the order and the regiment stayed in place — suffering withering fire from one regiment and a flank attack from another — until word finally reached them to fall back. The botched orders kept the retreat from becoming a rout and bought enough time for a Union battery to escape. But the regiment suffered more casualties that day than any other in the war.

"Just because of their courage and valor they should be honored," DeMass said.

The 147th also fought in desperate hand-to-hand combat on the night of July 2 and saw action July 3, giving it the distinction of being one of only two regiments in the Union army to fight all three days at Gettysburg.

Many other units were made up of Central New York men. By chance, the 147th held the same hill on the Union right flank on July 3 as two regiments from Onondaga County: The 149th and 122nd New York regiments fought side by side that day.

During a Confederate attack, a storm of bullets tore the flagstaff of the 149th in half, said Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association. The unit's tattered, torn flag fell to the ground, but the colors sergeant snatched the flag and soon repaired the staff with several pieces of wood and a leather strap.

"To the 149th that was kind of a battle scar, that was something to be proud of," Connors said.

The scene is today depicted on monuments at the battlefield and in Syracuse. The flagstaff

— still held together with pieces of wood and a leather strap — is on display at the historical association in Syracuse as part of a series of exhibits that tell the tales of local soldiers who fought at Gettysburg.

Connors said the historical association chose to focus on Gettysburg because it's the battle "people associate most with the Civil War."

Although tens of thousands are expected to visit the battlefield this week, the ceremonies will be far less formal than they were 50 years ago and oriented more toward the general public. The National Park Service has included more interactive exhibits. Visitors can also hire a guide and tour the battlefield in a double-decker bus, by horse or on a Segway.

Living history re-enactors will talk about Civil War medicine, music and camp life. Costumed actors will portray generals such as James Longstreet, Robert E. Lee and George Meade and interact with visitors. Several grand re-enactments near the battlefield will feature massive staged battles with thousands of re-enactors and hundreds of cannons and horses.

In 1963, DeMass remembers, governors from several states attended the centennial and gave speeches at ceremonies despite suffocating heat not unlike the soldiers had endured in 1863. He met George Wallace, then governor of Alabama. The governors of several southern states had boycotted the centennial.

But the most exciting part, DeMass said, was listening to Dwight Eisenhower give a speech about the meaning of Gettysburg.

"Just the whole context of it, that I'm able to go ... emotionally it just means an awful lot," he said. "The whole battlefield is so full, I believe, of the spirits of those boys that fought."

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Dennis J. Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, with part of the OHA's current exhibit on the Civil War. The case in the foreground contains medallion ribbons, hat emblems and shoulder strap insignia, and some bullets. On the wall in the background is the flagstaff from the 149th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which was broken and then mended during the battle of Gettysburg, and a portrait of Colonel Henry A. Barnum with the flag.
(David Lassman / dlassman@syracuse.com)