

150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

## Balwinsville artillery unit repels

PICKETT'S  
CHARGE

To mark the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, we are reprinting letters written by soldiers who were there. Their accounts are held in the archives of the Onondaga Historical Association. Combat was a gruesome affair, as these descriptions attest.

This letter was written by Cpt. James E. Decker of Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery, to his sister Frances three days after the Battle of Gettysburg. Battery B was formed at Balwinsville by Capt. Rufus Pettit. It was among Union artillery defending Cemetery Ridge from the advancing Confederate Army, known as Pickett's Charge. The letter was reprinted by The Post-Standard on July 7, 1963, to mark the 100th anniversary of the battle.

"Camp Near Littleton

Dear Sister:

I now write you a few lines to inform you that I am alive and well. I should have written you before but there has been no chance to send mail and I don't know when I can send this.

We have had a great battle. I believe the greatest in the war. The same day I wrote to you we were ordered to report to our old Corps, the 2nd Corps, just as I expected it would be if there was a fight expected. On the 2nd of July we went in about 5 p.m. The enemy were advancing in heavy column. We fought them falling back as they advanced until we checked them and drove them back. That was the first time they ever charged our battery. We lost several men wounded but got our battery off all right. At dark we changed our position a little.

Everything was quiet except the sharpshooters until about noon, the 3rd, when they opened the greatest artillery fire on us that



Fair Oaks, Va., vicinity. Capt. Rufus D. Pettit's Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery, in Fort Richardson. Pettit's Battery was organized at Balwinsville. It saw action during the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1-3, 1863. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

ever witnessed. We could see them all the forenoon getting their batteries in position but wasn't allowed to open on them. The cannonading was very rapid on both sides for about two hours. When the artillery ceased, a whole division charged out of the woods. They had to cross an open field of about 100 rods to get to us. They suffered terribly getting to us but they marched up as tigers keeping perfect line until they could almost put their hands on our guns but few of them lived to get back. They were killed or taken prisoners. ...

We lost 11 men killed and 20 wounded. We lost about 50 horses. My horse was shot among the rest. Amos Maynard and Happy Wright were among the killed. Our first lieutenant was severely wounded and our captain was killed. He had only been with us one day. I was struck with a piece of shell on the leg. It tore my pants and lamed me a little but not to stop me from fighting as well as ever.

I think what rebs got out of here never will want to invade this state again. We are now about five miles from Gettysburg. We came here last night. I saw Frank Woodruff this morning. He is all right. I am not in very good mood for writing so I will close. Good-by once more from your brother - Jim."

In 1891, Spafford native Lt. George K. Collins published a memoir about the 149th Regiment of the New York Volunteer Infantry, a unit organized in Onondaga County. The book is in the OHA's collection. In this passage, Collins describes the death of a soldier on July 2, 1863, during the battle for Culp's Hill:

"At one time while the regiment was in the works a strange man was seen standing on the bank [of the hill] a few feet in rear looking for some object to fire at; after a little hesitation he raised his gun, took aim, and was about to fire, when a sound was heard like a blow given upon fresh meat. He stood motionless for a moment, then his gun dropped to the ground and his hands to his sides. A ball had passed through his head entering near the bridge of his nose. He stood for a moment, and then began to tip forward and fell like a falling tree. He was a lifeless corpse."



Lt. George K. Collins of the 149th Regiment of the New York Volunteer Infantry. (Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)

The following are extracts from the letters of Mr. E. Corbin, of Pettit's Battery, to his friends at Liverpool," published July 20, 1863, in the Syracuse Journal:

"SUNDAY, JULY 5 - 9 P.M.

I was kept very busy in the rain all day yesterday, taking care of the wounded. It was a hard storm, and thousands of the wounded were exposed, without covering - At 12, midnight, I lay down, wet through and through, after getting (Lieut.) Sheldon and the boys partial shelter. I had had but six hours sleep in the past seventy hours, and been in battle two days. I have twelve wounded men to cook for, and have to take care of their wounds. The groans of the wounded have been in my ears for two days and nights, and the screech of shot, roar of cannon, explosion of shells, whistle of bullets, for two days previous. I have seen eighteen amputating tables at work from daylight to dark, for our Corps alone, and others have suffered as severely. But the enemy are retreating and our forces are following them up. They have left all their wounded. - Seventy ambulance loads came in here last night. ..."

From the memoir of Capt. James M. Gere of the 122nd New York Volunteer Infantry, at the battle for Culp's Hill:

"As the men became settled down to their work the best additional help that I could give them was to do a little firing myself. Half a dozen feet at my right was the body of a soldier, lying dead, and his gun with him. I was curious to know whether he was killed before he had fired his shot. So, I took his gun, found it was still loaded and thought I would, at any rate, fire his shot for him. So, I fired the best I could. The gun was a nice brown-barreled Enfield and shot splendidly ..."



Capt. James M. Gere of the 122nd New York Volunteer Infantry. (Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)