

53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Company C

"The Sentinel" February 2021

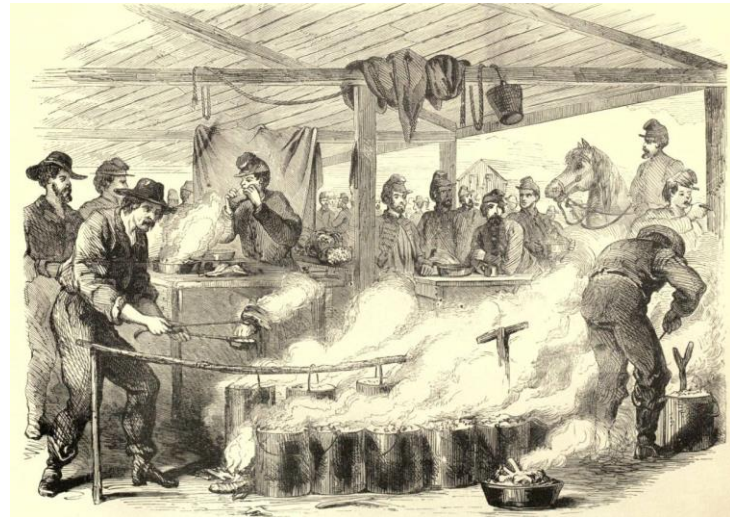
Newsletter of The James Creek Guards



"Clubs Are Trump!"

This Month:

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I am always looking for newsletter content, so please forward your articles, book reviews, event summaries/photos, stories, etc.) to me for inclusion in a future edition of "The Sentinel". – Matthew Steger, editor

LAST GRAND CHARGE OF THE CIVIL WAR: THE BATTLE OF FORT BLAKELEY, ALABAMA

By Mike Bunn, April 17, 2020. Adapted from his forthcoming book, *The Thunder and Lightning of Battle: A Short History and Guide to the Battle of Fort Blakeley*. (originally published in the "Blue & Grey Dispatch" of April 17, 2020.)



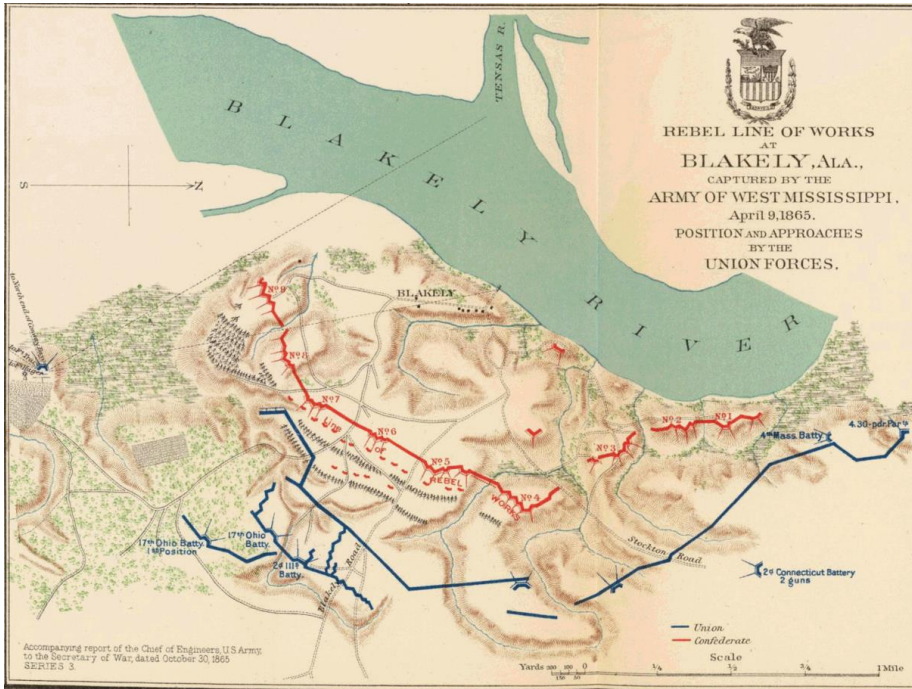
Battle of Fort Blakeley, Harper's Weekly | Library of Congress

The open field charge is perhaps the ultimate hallmark of Civil War battles. These were calamitous moments which became seared into the memories of those who lived to tell the tale for

the rest of their lives. They were the very essence of the bravery and dedication to ideals on display by so many men in both Blue and Gray.

The battle of Fort Blakeley took place on the Alabama Gulf Coast in the closing days of the war. Owing to several factors, not the least of which being that it happened to occur on the afternoon of Sunday, April

9, 1865, a date forever etched in America's consciousness for what transpired earlier that day in Virginia, it is barely mentioned in most histories of the war. It was not the war's largest charge, nor was it miles of open ground into the jaws of a figurative death trap. But what happened on the ravine-pocked plains along the Tensaw River opposite Mobile carried with it all the drama, danger, and soul-harrowing sound and fury that its veterans never forgot.



*Rebel line of works, Blakeley, 1865
| U.S. War Department*

The battle was prefaced by a siege during which Union forces, some 16,000 strong, constructed three parallels of earthworks progressively closer to the 3-mile-long line of Confederate works collectively known as Fort Blakeley. The fort guarded access to the enormous watershed that is the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, and hence interior Alabama, and protected the city of Mobile, 8 miles distant, from approach via that eastern corridor. Hearty, battle-tested Midwestern units were the largest of the number of the attackers, followed by an entire division of United States Colored Troops. Facing them would be a hodgepodge of about 3,000 Confederates, remnants of several veteran armies that had participated in

some of the major actions of the Western Theater and also many young boys who recently had been pressed into service and had seen almost no previous military action.

The contending armies were within 300 yards of each other, with the Federals desirous of finally securing the fort's surrender and anxious that its garrison might escape across the Delta and into Mobile. They planned for a crushing assault designed to bring the campaign to a sudden close. With a cheer that rang through the surrounding longleaf pines, the Union troops leaped from their trenches en masse at 5:30 p.m. and headed toward the Confederates at a run. The line they formed, some 3 miles wide with an array of national and regimental flags, advanced over open ground that had been cleared to create a field of fire by the defenders.

Within seconds, the attackers barely had emerged from their trenches, when puffs of black smoke and earth could be seen shooting upward; portions of the Union force had stepped right into areas strewn with land mines, severing legs and arms from bodies and ripping through flesh and bone. Instantly, thousands of Rebel rifles sent heavy lead bullets whizzing downrange and artillery of a variety of calibers launched into action. A heavy cloud of sulphurous smoke from the discharge of all this weaponry soon hung heavy in the spring air, seemingly hastening dusk.

The Federal column steadily advanced into the heart of what one soldier described as an "awful hissing seething roaring fire of flame," slowed only temporarily by the variety of obstructions placed by Confederates designed to arrest their progress: abatis, chevaux de frise, and sharpened stakes. It was all a sublime spectacle and scene that seared into the memories of the participants who survived the brief but intense fight.

*Maj. Gen. Edward Canby,
who commanded Union
forces at the Battle of Fort
Blakeley | Library of Congress*



“When the line was moving up,” one Connecticut artilleryman remembered, “I lived years.” Confederates would recall the scene with equal awe. Attempting to describe what he had witnessed in his diary, a Missouri soldier wrote simply that the charge was “an imposing sight, truly ... and one never to be forgotten. ... It appeared to me that all hell had turned loose and that every man in the United States was practicing on us with repeating rifles.”

An Illinois officer remembered how “for a mile on either side the earth seemed giving birth to men as they leaped up from the works and cheering shouting raging swept on like in color force and effect to a blue ocean wave” as “the thunder and lightning of battle rose above...”

“The scene was picturesque and grand,” remembered Brig Gen. Christopher C Andrews. “From different points of view the assaulting lines could be seen for a mile or two. ... The regimental colors, though not in perfect line, were steadily advancing, and the troops were dashing on over and through the obstructions like a stormy wave.”



Historic Blakeley State Park, site of last major battle of the Civil War | John Stanton

In his account of the battle penned decades later, a sergeant in the 97th Illinois poignantly reminded readers of enduring power of the memory of the experience on those who lived through it by writing, “Although it is now more than 69 years ago since this happened, as I go back and call to memory those scenes over again the tears are running down over my cheeks so fast they blind my eyes and I have to sop and wipe them away...”

Despite the stout resistance the outnumbered Confederates put up, sheer numbers overwhelmed them in less than half an hour. Once inside Fort Blakeley, the attackers swept the lines, capturing men by the hundreds. The last shots of the battle were fired a little after six o’clock on that April day, but their echoes resonate still today on the grounds of Historic Blakeley State Park, home to Alabama’s largest Civil War battlefield.

THE CIVIL WAR LETTERS OF LEVI J. FRITZ

(thank you to Rich Sauers for providing this series)

[Note – any grammatical and typographical errors were kept intact as they are original to the letter - editor]

Levi J. Fritz served in Company A, 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. He enlisted in 1861 and was mustered out with the regiment in July 1865. During the course of the first three years of the conflict, Fritz wrote a number of lengthy missives to the *Montgomery Ledger*, a Pottstown newspaper.

Headquarters, 53d Regt. P. V.
Falmouth, Virginia,
Wednesday, Dec. 10th, 1862.

Messers. Editors:—Winter, icy, snowy and stern, is upon us. His white habiliments are before us, in the valley, on the hill, on the leafless tree boughs, along the shores of the half-congealed stream—everywhere in the landscape is painted with the pure shivering colors of the frost king. Short are the days and long the hours of darkness. Our sweetest recollections—memories ever dear—are associated with the long winter evening of the days that now, alas, are irrevocably buried with the mighty reappings of old Time, in the Past. In the mind's eye we again see those scenes of enobling worth—of free hearted mirth; there was no grim visaged war then—but all was peace, benign, smiling peace, whose true glory and happiness a stern lesson of war learns us to rightly appreciate. These glorious old winter evenings are passed—for how many of us will such scenes never again transpire.

The benumbed sentinel as he hastily treads his frozen beat, remembers the time when he gathered with all those he loved around the cheering fireside and as “the cold, chilly winds of December,” keenly reminds him that his soldier's lot is a rough and cold one, he wishes that those who originated this wicked rebellion were roasting in the hottest blasts of Tartarus, while those who have or would, for personal aggrandizement, prolong it, were frozen to the glittering icicles of the poles. Stripped of its thin but sparkling and alluring counterfeit of glory, naked war stands before us the repulsing personification of every horror—the dreadful combination of every evil—the bitter essence of all that is awful and heart sickening. But war has been forced upon us, and fearful and bloody as the task may be, be it ours to see it victoriously through. There is no doubt that the past year and half has been one of mismanagement and consequent disaster to our arms. The shameful intrigues of would be Presidents, the vast robbing schemes of contractors. The great inefficiency and treason of more than one of our leaders, as well as the soul engrossing aspirations of others, the uncalled for removal of our favorite, most skillful and best General; all has had a tendency to create a belief in the minds of our soldiery that patriotism has very little to do with the war, and as a natural consequence, they care very little how the war is brought to an ultimatum, so that it is ended. They are not coining a fortune—they have no ambition of office to gratify; but it is theirs to beard the lion in his den—to do the work—to suffer the hardships—to fight the battles, and to get the small pay.

It is comparatively of little account, if the soldier picket along the icy stream, has the blood of life frozen in his veins, and he falls dead in the cold and lonely starlight. It is only one man dead. A mother's heart may bleed, but he is dead. He is lowered in the rude grave, and dirt covers him, the figure I is marked in the “lost” column of the Morning Report—and, it is the last of him. Well, we are to have a Winter campaign. Because we have more clothing and other comforts than the enemy, our leaders very sagely conclude that more rebels will freeze to death than our men—that two rebels will shiver themselves into eternity to one Union soldier. We hope—intensely hope, that this campaign, which will be the severest of the war, perhaps one that will rival any in history, will be eminently successful. But we have been so often disappointed, so often have our noblest and dearest bought victories been rendered almost fruitless by the queer action of the Government, or the treason of some General, that we cannot but be fearful that so it may be again. We certainly have abundant reasons to believe that the rebellion is about to receive the blow *quietus*. We have in the field the largest and best disciplined army the modern world ever saw—the most formidable navy ever floated, and if we can do nothing decisive in the present campaign, why then—we will have to “pick our flints and try again.” We hope you will pardon this digression; it is very seldom that we wander from the plain subject matter of our correspondence, we even passed over the removal of McClellan without comment, beside, we doubt the policy of showing to our friends the gloomy side of the picture.

For the past week all has been quiet along the lines of the Rappahannock. The picket lines, the enemy's and ours, are just where they were two weeks ago. Most of the troops about here have built themselves log huts, and placed furnaces in them, thus making themselves as comfortable as possible during the cold weather. Orders issued yesterday seem to show that a movement will soon be commenced. Inspections of arms and ammunition took place this morning. And, as we wrote you last week, fighting may commence at any moment. Capt. McCurdy, late of Company H, has been dismissed from the military service of the United States. Cause—absence from his command without leave, and general no-accountiveness.

The boys of the Pottstown company are as usual. Israel Jones and James McFarlan, who were left behind sick at Harper's Ferry and Frederick City, have rejoined the company. Capt. Mintzer is on detailed duty as President of a Court Martial. Lieut. Potts is commanding Company D, leaving the command of “A,” in the hands of Lieut. Root. We almost daily see some of our friends in the 68th, they report nothing unusual in theirs with the exception that they have been paid their advance bounty. Hoping that we may soon see our Paymaster, I remain

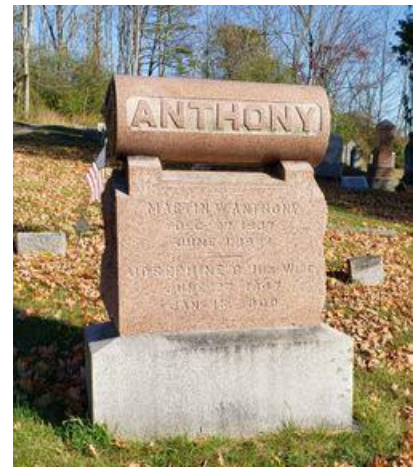
Yours, &c., L.J.F.

[Ledger, December 16, 1862]

HONORING THE MEN OF THE ORIGINAL 53RD PVI

(thanks to Marc Benedict for supplying the information for this series)

2nd Lt. Martin Wheeler Anthony - born in Orange, PA on Dec. 27, 1837. He enrolled on Sept. 10, 1861 in Franklin, PA at the age of 23. On Oct. 1, 1861 he was commissioned a second lieutenant. He enrolled in Co. F, 53rd PVI on Oct. 12, 1861 in Harrisburg, PA for 3 years. He resigned on Sept. 6, 1862. He died on June 1, 1924 and is buried in Chase Cemetery in Fleetville, PA.



Corp. William C. Best - born about 1839. He enrolled on Sept. 10, 1861 in Milton, PA and mustered in on Oct. 23, 1861 as a Corporal in Co. H for 3 years at age 22. He was wounded by gunshot at Fair Oaks, VA on June 1, 1862. The ball entered his left cheek above the jaw and exited 2" below his right ear. He was honorably discharged due to his wounding which caused a partial loss of speech and difficulty in swallowing. He was receiving a \$12/month disability benefit when he began to claim double inguinal hernias and stomach disease and rheumatism as a result of service. These later claims were denied. He died Oct. 24, 1904 and is buried in Wildwood Cemetery in Williamsport, PA.

Asst. Surgeon William B. Wynne - born in 1831. He enrolled in St. Marys, PA on Sept. 7, 1861 at age 30. He mustered in as Asst. Surgeon on Nov. 7, 1861 in Harrisburg, PA for 3 years. He was honorably discharged on Oct. 8, 1862. On Oct. 29, 1862, he became the Chief Surgeon to the 14th PA Cavalry (159th PA) until he resigned on Feb. 28, 1865 for total blindness due to sunstroke during his service. He died on Aug. 16, 1902 and is buried at Morris Cemetery, Phoenixville, PA.



Capt. Thomas Church - born on Feb. 9, 1822. He mustered in on Nov. 7, 1861 as captain of Co. E, 53rd PVI for 3 years. He was honorably discharged on Feb. 23, 1863 as a result of medical disability (impairment of mind) after being shot in the head at Fair Oaks, VA on June 1, 1862. He died on Aug. 29, 1896 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA.



2021 Calendar of Events - *all events are tentative as of right now.*

TBD - NR School of Instruction – Gettysburg Firehall or virtual
1-2 May – NR Camp of Instruction – Gruber Wagon Works (Reading) – NR Max Effort
31 May - Hummelstown Memorial Day Parade
June – Date/Location TBD - Company Picnic
12-13 June - Fenian Raid (8th OH) - Fort Erie, Canada – contact Tom Downes for more info.
17-18 July - Landis Valley “Civil War Days” (Lancaster)
7-8 Aug. – Cedar Mountain Re-enactment
28-29 August - 53rd PVI Living History w/ ELF – Spanglers Spring – Gettysburg NMP.
4-5 Sept - Old Bedford Village – Bedford, PA - NR Max Effort
16-17 Oct - Cedar Creek Re-enactment (NR)
20 November – Remembrance Day Parade/NR Meeting - Gettysburg
4 December – Annual business meeting

Other events - 1st MN’s Living History 10-11 July @ PA Monument
(the 53rd PVI is invited)



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