

# Oneida County and Waterville in The Civil War

by Eric Kennedy

Many Americans consider The Civil War ancient history. It's not. The war ended 144 years ago. If you are middle aged or older, your grandparent's grandparents were most likely alive during the war. The biggest threat our nation ever faced was not the World Wars or Cold War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or global terrorism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the fratricidal war of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that threatened the very existence of the unique American democratic experiment. Could the world's fledgling democracy survive an attempt by 11 of its states to form another country due to political differences?

More than 600,000 American soldiers died during The Civil War. Those numbers are even more staggering when you consider the fact that the population of the United States at the start of the war was 30 million, including four million slaves. It was a national catastrophe of the first order and it affected the lives of virtually everyone in the country who lived through it, including residents of Oneida County.

The rank-and-file of the Union Army were not professional soldiers, but civilian volunteers without military experience. To extinguish the rebellion, it was necessary to recruit hundreds of thousands of farmers and shop workers. Oneida County raised five infantry regiments of volunteers: 14<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (First Oneida), 26<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (Second Oneida or Utica Regiment), 97<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (Third Oneida or Boonville Regiment), 117<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (Fourth Oneida), and 146<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (Fifth Oneida or Garrard's Tigers). Oneida County's contribution did not stop there as many joined regiments formed outside the county, including various cavalry and artillery regiments as well as other infantry regiments such as the 81<sup>st</sup>, 164<sup>th</sup>, and 189<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry regiments, among others.

Growing up in Waterville, I was unaware of all of this. My interest in researching The Civil War only began in earnest after I moved to the central Virginia town of Fredericksburg in 2002. Within easy driving distance of my front porch lie four major battlefields: Fredericksburg (December 1862), Chancellorsville (May 1863), the Wilderness (May 1864), and Spotsylvania Courthouse (May 1864). This is hallowed ground that the National Park Service labels "the bloodiest landscape in North America." What moved me was to learn that so many residents of Oneida County fought and died on these fields so far from their native state. Many participated in heroic and gallant feats that were completely unknown to me. In the five Oneida County infantry regiments, seven Medals of Honor were awarded. The casualty lists alone demonstrate the contribution and sacrifice made by these brave men:

14 <sup>th</sup> NY ("First Oneida")	60 killed, 44 non-combat deaths, 194 wounded, 16 missing
26 <sup>th</sup> NY ("Second Oneida")	108 killed, 42 non-combat deaths, 243 wounded, 56 missing
97 <sup>th</sup> NY ("Third Oneida")	182 killed, 157 non-combat deaths, 444 wounded, 265 missing
117 <sup>th</sup> NY ("Fourth Oneida")	137 killed, 137 non-combat deaths, 291 wounded, 49 missing
146 <sup>th</sup> NY ("Fifth Oneida")	134 killed, 189 non-combat deaths, 180 wounded, 340 missing

Each regiment has its own story to tell, but the 146<sup>th</sup> New York or Fifth Oneida, has the closest connection to Waterville. For not only did many of its soldiers enlist in locations such as Sangerfield, Paris, Westmoreland, and many other surrounding towns, but the history of the regiment was written by a Waterville resident.

The Fifth Oneida was formed in the autumn of 1862 after President Lincoln called for 300,000 more volunteers to serve for three-year enlistments. By this time, the war had long ceased to be a romantic adventure, as attested to by the high casualty figures from such battles as Shiloh (24,000), the Seven Days (36,000), Second Bull Run (18,000), and Antietam (23,000). But so many volunteers came forward from Oneida County to form the 117<sup>th</sup> New York that it was decided that another regiment should be created in the 146<sup>th</sup> New York or Fifth Oneida.

The ten companies of the Fifth Oneida were principally recruited from the following towns:

Company A: Utica

Company B: Vernon, Rome, and Annsville

Company C: Utica, Rome, and Marcy

Company D: Boonville, Hawkinsville, Rome, and Whitestown

Company E: Camden, Augusta, Rome, Utica, and Marshall

Company F: Utica, Lee, Rome, Florence, Annsville, Ava, Marcy, and Whitestown

Company G: Clinton, Kirkland, Bridgewater, and Plainfield

Company H: Utica, Rome, and Sangerfield

Company I: Trenton, Remsen, Western, Westmoreland, Steuben, Lowell, Rome, Vernon, and Verona

Company K: Paris, Sangerfield, Clayville, Utica, Marcy, Clinton, Deansville, Marshall, and Whitesboro

It is important to note that where you enlisted did not always identify where you were from. For example, Alonzo I. King was born in Sangerfield. He was living in Oriskany Falls when he enlisted and died in Waterville after the war. But he signed up for military service in August 1862 in Utica or Whitestown.

The 146<sup>th</sup> New York was fortunate to have Colonel Kenner Garrard, a regular U.S. Army veteran and commandant at West Point, appointed regimental commander. Under Garrard's tough but fair tutelage, the regiment became one of the best drilled and disciplined in the volunteer army. The Fifth Oneida soon to become known as "Garrard's Tigers."

The Fifth Oneida left Rome for Washington, DC in October 1862 with approximately 850 men. When the unit was mustered out of service on July 16, 1865, 264 were accounted for. Yet many of these men were not from the original 850 as several other regiments had been folded into the Fifth Oneida during the war including remnants of the 5<sup>th</sup> New York, 17<sup>th</sup> New York, and 44<sup>th</sup> New York. When the regiment paraded through Utica and formed up at Chancellor Square in late July 1865, only 120 were on hand.

The Fifth Oneida joined the Army of the Potomac in November 1862 and was present on the field during the Battle of Fredericksburg in December. However, its real baptism by fire came at Chancellorsville in May 1863, losing 50 men, but acquitting itself well.

At Gettysburg in July, as part of Brigadier General Stephen H. Weed's brigade, the Fifth Oneida reinforced the defenses of Little Round Top, one of the most decisive actions on the entire field. When Weed was killed by a rebel sharpshooter, Colonel Garrard took command of the brigade. He was subsequently promoted and the leadership of the regiment fell upon Colonel David T. Jenkins (from Vernon). If you visit Little Round Top today, you will see a memorial to the Fifth Oneida, and the 28 men lost there.

The nadir for the regiment came during its gallant but futile charge at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. The Wilderness was a horrific two-day slugfest fought in dense forest and underbrush. It represented the opening stages of Ulysses S. Grant's "1864 Overland Campaign" designed to relentlessly apply pressure against the Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee. Amid the almost impenetrable forest, there was one 400 x 800 yard stretch of open ground called Saunders Field. Running through the field was one of the region's few roads, the Orange Turnpike. Unwisely assuming that the Confederate presence was light on the opposite side of the field, senior leadership ordered a Union division to attack across the open ground. However, waiting in the trees, entrenched behind earthworks, were 10,000 rebel soldiers. As the opening wave of the Union attack was being slaughtered, the Fifth Oneida was ordered forward to help support the 140<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (from Rochester). Colonel Jenkins instructed his regiment to fix bayonets and then personally led his 580 men forward at "the double quick." Those of the Fifth Oneida who survived the charge found themselves virtually surrounded in the woods.

"Men ran to and fro, firing, shouting, stabbing with bayonets, beating each other with the butts of their guns," wrote the regimental historian from Waterville. "Each man fought on his own resources, grimly and desperately...In such a place one cannot measure time very accurately. It may not have been more than five or ten minutes from the moment we charged across the field until we were forced to fall back, but during that brief time we inflicted and suffered a terrible loss. It would be impossible to recount all the deeds of individual bravery that transpired during those few minutes of terrific fighting. Many of the most heroic of our number perished in the conflict."

The severely-wounded Jenkins (head and body wounds) was last seen leaning on his sword, encouraging his men forward. Lieutenant Alonzo King (Oriskany Falls) asked Lt. Colonel Henry Curran (Utica), "Where are all our men?" As Curran responded, "Dead," Curran was shot in the head and killed. In all, the Fifth Oneida suffered 312 casualties in only minutes of actual fighting. Of those taken prisoner, more than 70 were to later die in Confederate captivity. The bodies of Jenkins and Curran, along with many of their comrades, were never recovered or identified.

But there was little time to mourn. In only a few days, the Fifth Oneida was back in action in another bloodbath at Spotsylvania Courthouse. Losses for the regiment were far lighter (16), but not for the Union and Confederate armies. In those two awful, back-to-back battles in May, the combined losses for both armies neared 60,000 men. Next came a grueling series of marches and engagements in May and June before the Union Army reached the outskirts of Petersburg, the lynchpin of the Confederate defenses for the rebel capitol of Richmond. The regiment lost another 55 men at Cold Harbor, 50 before Petersburg, and 45 at Weldon Railroad. And death not only came from the battlefield, but by disease, accidents, and captivity. A wound to the arm or leg often meant amputation.

From June 1864 to May 1865, there was a 10-month siege of Petersburg. The stalemate was finally broken at Five Forks on April 1<sup>st</sup>. At the forefront of the breakthrough assault was the Fifth Oneida. Losing 65 of their own men, the regiment captured hundreds of Confederate prisoners and two battle flags. One week later, Lee surrendered his Confederate Army to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. For their efforts at Five Forks, three members of the Fifth Oneida were awarded Medals of Honor. These men were Colonel James Grindlay (the regimental commander after Jenkins was killed; Grindlay is buried in Forest Hill Cemetery), First Sergeant Thomas Murphy, and Private David Edwards. Edwards enlisted in Sangerfield and is buried in Waterville Cemetery. During the entire war, only 16 Medals of Honor were awarded to members of the Union V Corps, of which the Fifth Oneida was a part. Three of the medals belong to members of the Fifth Oneida.

Many of these old battlefields are preserved today by the National Park Service. Saunders Field is still there, a lonely little field surrounded by trees. It looks pretty much like it did 145 years ago. The Orange Turnpike is still there too, now asphalt rather than dirt. There is a canon, a small open-air exhibit center, and a two-mile walking tour through the woods where you can see remnants of the former Confederate and Union earthworks. While there is also a small marker for the 140<sup>th</sup> New York (Rochester), there is none for the 146<sup>th</sup> New York. Few come to visit. Let us not forget the Fifth Oneida's sacrifice on this field, or any made by Oneida County on any Civil War battlefield, in this, the noblest of causes.

In an effort to humanize all of these facts and figures, let us take a brief look at the 19 men who enlisted in Sangerfield in August-September 1862 and who became members of the 146<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry. All except for one individual were members of Company H.

Private Frederick Baker: 24 years old. Captured at Mine Run, VA in November 1863 and released April 1865 from the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia, where 13,000 Union soldiers died in captivity in atrocious conditions. Survived the war and mustered out in June 1865.

Private Chester E. Burgett: 36 years old. Survived the war. Died in Waterville in April 1891 and buried in Waterville Cemetery.

Private John Burnham: 44 years old. Died in Falmouth, VA in December 1862, most likely of disease. Many Union soldiers died of disease in cold and unsanitary camps at Falmouth that winter.

Private Adam Cheesebrough: 28 years old. Wounded on March 31, 1865 at White Oak Road, VA only a week before the war ended; died on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Buried in Sangerfield Cemetery.

Private David Edwards: 22 years old. Awarded the Medal of Honor for capturing a Confederate battle flag at Five Forks, VA on April 1, 1865. Survived the war and mustered out in July 1865. Died in Waterville in April 1897 and buried in Waterville Cemetery.

Corporal John Edwards: 39 years old. Survived the war and mustered out in July 1865. Died in Waterville and buried in Waterville Cemetery.

Private James Gibson: 21 years old. Wounded in May 1864 at the Wilderness, VA; died in June.

Private William H. Hopkins: 28 years old. Died of disease in December 1862 at Falmouth, VA.

First Sergeant Charles L. King: 21 years old. Captured at the Wilderness, VA in May 1864 and released in February 1865. Survived the war and mustered out in July 1865.

Private David B. Lock(e): 26 years old. Became ill in July 1863 and was mustered out of the regiment. Buried in Sangerfield Cemetery.

Private Edward Morris: 30 years old. Captured at Weldon Railroad, VA in August 1864; died in captivity in January 1865 at Salisbury, NC.

Private Joseph Pennar: 41 years old. Captured at the Wilderness, VA in May 1864. No further record.

Private John Reekard: 38 years old. Wounded at the Wilderness, VA in May 1864; died two weeks later.

Private Charles Risley: 31 years old. Wounded at Petersburg, VA in June 1864; died in July.

Corporal Lucius S. Tooly: 28 years old. Wounded at the Wilderness, VA in May 1864; died in June.

Private Joseph Whalen: 21 years old. Captured at the Wilderness, VA in May 1864. Sent to Andersonville Prison; no further record.

Private Ira Wing: 32 years old. Received disability discharge in March 1863.

Private George W. Wright: 21 years old. Wounded in action and received a disability discharge in November 1864.

Private Rensselaer Wright: 31 years old. Survived the war and mustered out in July 1865.

There are also two interesting post-scripts in connection with the Fifth Oneida. First, the regiment was one of the most photographed units of the war. The reason being, after Chancellorsville, its uniform changed from the traditional dark blue Union jacket and kepi hat to Zouave attire. The flamboyant Zouave uniforms were based on French North African colonial troops, and the Fifth Oneida's uniform specifically emulated the French Army's Algerian sharpshooters. The new uniform was light blue in color with yellow trim, large baggy trousers, a red fez cap and sash, and white leggings and a turban. The distinct uniform stood out on the battlefield (which was not always a good thing), and the rank-and-file were proud to wear it.

Second, the history of the Fifth Oneida was written by a woman, Mary Genevieve Green Brainard of Waterville. It's an oddity today to see a military history written by a woman, let alone in 1915, when Brainard's book was published. Brainard's book, *Campaigns of the 146<sup>th</sup> Regiment New York State Volunteers*, was re-published in 2000 with many new photographs and is available from Schroeder Publications (<http://www.civilwar-books.com/>).