

THE FORGOTTEN SIXTY-NINTH: THE SIXTY-NINTH NEW YORK NATIONAL
GUARD ARTILLERY REGIMENT IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

by

Christopher M Garcia
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Approved by:

Timothy J. Orr (Director)

Lorraine M. Lees (Member)

John W. Weber (Member)

ABSTRACT

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Christopher M. Garcia
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Director: Dr. Timothy J. Orr

In Civil War historiography, consistent attention and public interest has illuminated the history of various Irish organizations, no regiment more so than New York's famed "Fighting Sixty-Ninth." During the conflict, the State of New York fielded three regiments designated the Sixty-Ninth, but the scholarship has tended to favor just one of them, the 69th New York Volunteers of the Irish Brigade. The 69th New York National Guard Artillery, the first regiment in General Michael Corcoran's Irish Legion, has been virtually forgotten. This regiment was, in essence, the standing 69th New York Militia in federal service for three years of the war. The service of the 69th New York National Guard Artillery had local and international ramifications. It represented a subculture within the Irish immigrant community that was the core of a transnational Fenian Brotherhood. Its service complicates commonly-held assumptions about Irish-American support for the war and its regimental history provides new insights into the conflict. Oddly enough, the 69th New York National Guard Artillery's uniqueness ultimately wrote itself out of the historical record. This thesis is an attempt to reclaim its history and analyze an unknown chapter of the Irish experience in America.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE 69 TH NYSM 1851-1862.....	10
3. “THE SIXTY-NINTH, THE OLD SIXTY-NINTH:” FORMATION..... SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 1862	34
4. THE 69 TH NYNGA IN FEDERAL SERVICE: NOVEMBER 1862-..... JULY 1865	57
5. THE 69 TH NYNGA, THE FENIAN BROTHERHOOD AND NEW YORK: 1862-1865	79
6. POST WAR AND HISTORIOGRAPHY.....	96
7. CONCLUSION.....	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	110
VITA.....	123

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In America's Civil War few units are as famous as New York's legendary "Fighting Sixty-Ninth" regiment. Sadly, most readers do not know what they mean when they refer to the "Sixty-Ninth." The usual reference is to the 69th New York Volunteers (NYV), a three-year, volunteer regiment raised in the autumn of 1861, which served in Thomas Francis Meagher's Irish Brigade. Starting with David P. Coyningham's *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* (1867), followed by Francis Cavanaugh's *Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher* (1892) and William Corby's *Memoirs of Chaplain Life* (1893), the Irish Brigade and the 69th NYV became the leading symbol of Irish participation in the Civil War, a symbol retained its luster well into the twentieth century. By the 1960s the 69th NYV was again at the forefront in Paul Jones' 1969 work *The Irish Brigade*. During the 125th anniversary of the Civil War a new spate of writing on the Irish Brigade emerged, most of which added nothing new to the historiography.¹ Most recently, in 2011 a new history by Thomas Craughwell, *The Greatest Brigade*, was published for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, but it proved little more than a

¹. The Irish Brigade has been one of the most popular and profitable subjects among Civil War enthusiasts. Among the works written on the Irish Brigade, or the 69th Regiment are: Father William Corby's *Memoirs of Chaplain Life* (1893) and W. Springer Menge's *The Civil War Notebook of Daniel Chisholm* (1989). The 1990's saw additional works on the Irish Brigade: Barry Spink's *From Cavan to Cold Harbor: The Life of Colonel Richard Byrnes* (1994), Philip Tucker's *The History of the Irish Brigade* in 1995, which included a biographical essay on Michael Corcoran and a new history of the 69th NYSM at Bull Run), Joseph Bilby's *Remember Fontenoy! The 69th New York and the Irish Brigade in the Civil War* (1995), Kevin O'Brien's *My Life in the Irish Brigade* (1996), Frank Boyle's *A Party of Mad Fellows: The Story of the Irish Regiments in the Army of the Potomac* (1996) and Tricia Murphy's *Kelly's heroes: The Irish Brigade at Gettysburg* (1997). The subject was popular enough that several more works were written in the twenty-first century to include: Richard Demeter's *The Fighting 69th: A History* (2002), John Mahon's *New York's Fighting Sixty-Ninth: A regimental history of service in the Civil War's Irish Brigade and the Great War's Rainbow Division* (2004), Russ Pritchard's *The Irish Brigade* (2004), Paul Wylie's *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher* (2007) and Phillip Tucker's *God help the Irish! The History of the Irish Brigade* (2007). None of these works pay much attention to or even mention the 69th NYNGA or the Corcoran Legion.

hagiography rife with factual errors and stereotypes. In any event the history of the Irish Brigade has been alive and well since the end of the Civil War.

Incorrectly, most historians suppose that the 69th NYV emerged from the 69th New York State Militia (NYSM), New York's antebellum, all-Irish State militia regiment. This is an error. The 69th NYSM produced only one federal volunteer regiment, the 69th New York National Guard Artillery (NYNGA), not the 69th NYV. This confusion arose because the State of New York later redesignated the 69th NYNGA as the 182nd NYV. Befuddled historians ignored this redesignation, believing the 69th NYV to be the only true legacy of the 69th NYSM, essentially erasing an entire Irish regiment from the history books. ²

This administrative misrepresentation might only merit a footnote, except that in the process of mislabeling the 69th NYNGA, historians distorted the broader story of Irish-American participation in the Civil War. By focusing on the 69th NYV, historians transformed the Irish-American experience in the Civil War to one that stressed the quest for citizenship, depicting it as a struggle against nativism, the Republican Party and Emancipation. But, by analyzing the 69th NYNGA, another story of Irish-American

². This was compounded by several factors. First, is a fundamental lack of understanding of how the volunteer regimental system worked in New York during the Civil War. Two regiments could have the same numerical designation and not be the same unit. This was further confused as the 69th NYV took the number in honor of the 69th NYSM (as did an Irish Pennsylvania volunteer regiment, the 69th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry). Accepted tradition has held that 500 men from the 69th NYSM joined the 69th NYV which would give them a very strong tie to the standing regiment, but that belief is false. Further muddying the waters was the National Guard Bureau's decision to give standing National Guard regiments battle honors from volunteer regiments of the Civil War. The 69th Regiment, New York National Guard (NYNG), received the battle honors of the 69th NYV as if they were the same regiment, making them the same *ex-post facto*. In fact, while the 69th NYSM provided a small cadre to the Irish Brigade, it served as a unit in another regiment, the 69th NYNGA, a three year regiment formed in the autumn of 1862. Historians have ignored the war time service of the 69th NYNGA and refer to it by its awkward federal administrative designation, the 182nd NYV, one almost never used at the time. The tie between the 69th NYSM and the 69th NYNGA is undeniable. The records, manuscript sources and period accounts all show without any doubt that the 69th NYNGA was *the* 69th NYSM re-organized for Federal service. There is little doubt of this.

participation in the Civil War emerges, one that focuses on Irish transnationalism. The 69th NYNGA possessed a dedicated Fenian officer core, one whose goals focused less on earning citizenship and more on synchronizing their goals of Irish freedom with the Lincoln Administration's goals of emancipation.

Central to the story of the 69th NYNGA are the Fenians. They were the core of the 69th NYNGA and its sister regiments belonging to General Michael Corcoran's Irish Legion. Like Chartism, the Fenians a response to the inequalities of the mid-nineteenth century. But rather than reform, they aimed for the establishment of an independent Irish republic. The creation of a voting middle class throughout the United Kingdom still left the majority of the Irish population disenfranchised by property laws. Influenced by the writings of James Fintan Lalor, Irish working class nationalists advocated that a free Ireland had to address the fundamental inequalities created by the English social order. The Fenians cobbled together a host of complementary ideas: labor activism, anti-monarchical values, human liberty and virulent anti-British violence, all of which made them traitors to the crown and forced many to seek exile in the United States.

With the story of the Fenian 69th NYNGA now forgotten, this aspect of the Irish-American experience has escaped historians' notice. Starting in 1867 with the publication of *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* by David P. Conyngham, Irish participation was immortalized as a fight to preserve "the great principles of democracy." If the Union failed, Conyngham wrote, no hope would be left for "struggling nationalists of the Old World."³ He further explained that slavery was not a motivating issue for Irish-

³. D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns: With some account of The Corcoran Irish legion and sketches of the Principal Officers*, (New York: William McSorely & Co, 1867), 5.

Americans. Volunteers did not care “whether the colored race were better off as bondsmen or freemen; he was not going to fight for an abstract idea.”⁴

Thirty years after the war, Michael Cavanaugh defined Irish-American motivation in his 1892 *Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher*. Similar to Conyngham, he maintained the principal Irish motivation was to “maintain the integrity of the Union.”⁵ It was their “holiest duty and obligation” to sacrifice in the national interest in order to earn citizenship.⁶ The only interpretation directly opposing this viewpoint was St. Clair Mullholland’s 1903 *The Story of a Regiment*, a regimental history of the 116th Pennsylvania of the Irish Brigade. He described the war as “the holiest, noblest, purest and best cause that ever summoned men to arms.”⁷ Theirs was a crusade, “to demonstrate that human freedom was not a myth and a dream, but a splendid reality.”⁸ Here, Irish Volunteers fought so that America would “shelter in its bosom so many happy homes and countless millions of freemen.”⁹

After Mullholland, nothing of note was written about the 69th NYSM or the Irish Brigade until the centennial of the Civil War. In 1963, Rev. Patrick D. O’Flaherty published his landmark doctoral dissertation, *The History of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment of the New York State Militia 1852-1861*, which, even fifty years later, remains the standard work on the subject. In particular, O’Flaherty examined the relationship between Irish revolutionary societies in New York City and the 69th NYSM, noting how they shaped the organization. He argued that the motivation of the 69th NYSM at this time did not

⁴. Conyngham, 5-6.

⁵. Michael Cavanaugh, *Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher* (Worcester: The Messenger Press, 1892), 415.

⁶. Cavanaugh 415-416.

⁷. St. Clair A. Mullholland. *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Infantry, War of Secession 1862-1865*. (Gaithersburg: Olde Soldier Books, ND), 4-5.

⁸. Mullholland, 5.

⁹. Mullholland, 5.

represent American patriotism, but “the desire to prepare for the day when a blow could be struck for Ireland.”¹⁰

Despite the international implications of Mullholland’s and O’Flaherty’s works, assimilation remained the mantra in Irish Civil War historiography. Paul Jones wrote in his 1969 *The Irish Brigade*, “the story of the Irish Brigade is really the story of the Americanization of its officers and men.”¹¹ This was followed in 1988 by William Burton’s *Melting Pot Soldiers*, a book about the Union Army’s ethnic regiments. Burton argued that Civil War service “accelerated the assimilation process for European immigrants.”¹²

Only with the advent of the twenty-first century came a new understanding of the transnational Irish immigrant experience, an interpretation that implicitly rejected assimilation. Irish Historian Tim Pat Coogan, in his history of the Irish Diaspora, *Wherever Green is Worn*, wrote the Irish-American story is a chronicle “of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.”¹³ It was not absorption but rather a climb as they “worked their way upward from the slime.”¹⁴ Coogan refers to the strong opposition to slavery rooted in Irish history and culture suggesting that Irish-American antipathy towards African-Americans emerged from their desperate conditions upon arrival, having to “contend for scarce resources.”¹⁵ In 2010, Angela Murphy published *American Slavery, Irish Freedom*, in which she explored the role that Irish Abolitionists and Repealers played in shaping attitudes on slavery. Murphy argued that they found it

¹⁰. Patrick D. O’Flaherty “The History of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment of the New York State Militia 1852-1861” (PhD Diss., Fordham University, 1963), 1.

¹¹. Paul Jones. *The Irish Brigade*, (New York: Robert B. Luce, 1969), 8.

¹². William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), X-XI.

¹³. Tim Pat Coogan, *Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 254.

¹⁴. Coogan, 254.

¹⁵. Coogan, 278.

“difficult to unite people around the world on behalf of human rights.”¹⁶ She argued that “irreconcilable calls for action” from Ireland and America “shaped their negotiation of identity” in the republic.¹⁷

Irish transnationalism has yet to influence the writing of the Civil War. In 2006, Susannah Ural’s landmark study of Irish-American volunteers in the Union Army *The Harp and the Eagle*, admitted that Irish-American motivations were “as varied as their own communities.”¹⁸ However, the story of Irish attachment to the Union prevailed. When the death toll and the controversial measure of emancipation entered into the picture, Ural concluded that the Irish began “to abandon their support for the war.”¹⁹ Yet, at the same time, the 69th NYNGA mobilized for war. Since the Fenian regiment did not fit her argument, it went largely ignored.

Christian Samito examined Irish-American participation in his 2009 work *Becoming American under Fire*. In his work he argued that African-American and Irish-American participation in the Civil War fundamentally redefined the modern concept of citizenship, both here and abroad. He argues that for the Irish “loyalty trumped ethnicity,” in redefining America.²⁰ He argues the results of that service solidified three principles of law: “The primacy of a national citizenship that incorporated certain rights; the concept that individuals had the right to change their birth citizenship and allegiance; and the doctrine that all citizens, whether by birth or naturalization, stood equal in rights or

¹⁶. Angela F. Murphy, *American Slavery Irish freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic movement for Irish Repeal*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), X.

¹⁷. Murphy, X.

¹⁸. Susannah Ural. *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish American Volunteers in the Union Army, 1861-1865*. (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁹. Ural, 4.

²⁰. Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 5.

protections regardless of race or prior status as a slave or alien.”²¹ Although Samito offered greater attention to globalism, the principal focus of the Irish experience was citizenship through the fight to restore the Union.

This thesis will continue the story of Irish transnationalism by examining its role in the Civil War. It will use the 69th NYNGA, the old 69th NYSM – “the mother of Irish regiments” – in federal service, as the prism through which to study Civil War Feniansm. As the founders of Fenianism in America were all members of the 69th NYSM it illustrates the actions of the core of the organization. This thesis goes beyond O’Flaherty’s dissertation. While he examined the role that transnational Irish revolutionary organizations played in the formation of the 69th NYSM, he never examined the role the 69th NYSM and later the 69th NYNGA had in shaping the course and destiny of the Fenian Brotherhood during the Civil War.²² The study of the 69th NYNGA and Fenianism during the war is essential for gaining the broader picture of a conflict that had ramifications that drastically altered the Atlantic world.

In writing this thesis, I have relied heavily upon manuscript and primary sources because next to nothing has been written on the 69th NYNGA or the Corcoran Irish Legion. In researching the military aspects of this paper, I relied heavily upon the regimental records held in the National Archives in Washington, DC. These sources included the regimental and company orders books, the muster rolls, the descriptive and miscellaneous books, the individual service records, court martial transcripts and the

²¹. Samito, 4.

²². After his doctoral dissertation, O’Flaherty switched tacks and his remaining unpublished works all deal with the 69th NYV and the Irish Brigade. He never touched upon the 69th NYNGA and the Corcoran Legion.

pension records. In New York State I made extensive use of the records of the Adjutant General's office kept in the New York State Archives at Albany, New York.

Personal correspondence and personal papers are few and far between. To date none have been found belonging to enlisted personnel of the regiment. The 69th Regiment made available General Michael Corcoran's field desk as well as the newly discovered Civil War letters of Colonel Matthew Murphy. The New York Historical Society offered the military papers of Colonel James P. McIvor. To fill the gaps I made use of the War Department's *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* and various period newspaper accounts.

In dealing with the political aspects of the organization, I have made heavy use of the Fenian Papers and records held by Catholic University in Washington, DC. These contain John O'Mahoney's correspondence and offer a good window into the internal workings of the organization. I supplemented these with Charles P. Daly's papers at the New York Public Library.

It is clear that the story of the 69th NYNGA does not fit neatly into the prescribed picture of Irish soldiers in the Civil War. As we shall see, the 69th NYNGA was a product of unique transnational ties. Its service sought to influence events on both sides of the Atlantic. The story of the true "Fighting Sixty-Ninth" defies current historiography and popular memory. Long overlooked, long ignored, its tale proves that Irish support did not necessarily quail due to casualties and the unpopular enactment of emancipation. It further proves that some Irish soldiers entered the war seeking more than just American citizenship. They wanted Irish freedom and their regiment, at times, walked a fine line

between emancipation and international terrorism. This thesis will analyze that delicate balance.

Chapter 2

The 69th NYSM 1851-1862

The 69th New York National Guard Artillery (NYNGA) considered itself to be the old 69th New York State Militia (NYSM) in federal service. As such, it is necessary to examine the history of the regiment prior to the formation of the Corcoran Irish Legion. In the decade prior to the Civil War, the 69th NYSM earned a reputation for excellence in discipline but it also earned notoriety for its revolutionary activities. New York City's Irish community adored it, while Anglo-New Yorkers fought hard to disband what they considered as a traitorous un-American entity. Only the outbreak of the Civil War, amid national tribulation and trial, allowed the 69th NYSM to become a byword for loyalty and courage. Its colonel, Michael Corcoran, emerged as a national hero.

The origins of the 69th NYSM lay in a nexus of three intersecting events: *An Gorta Mor* (the "Great Hunger"), the failed Young Ireland rising of 1848, and the Irish immigrant experience in New York. The "Great Hunger" left a bitter and undying hatred of the English upon its survivors, who never forgave England for their sufferings. During *An Gorta Mor* approximately one and a half million Irish perished and another million fled the country. There was never a true famine in Ireland, as some historians have claimed only repetitive failures of the potato crop. Ireland continued to export food to England throughout the crisis, food escorted and protected by the British Army, to feed the British people. In essence, the British government allowed starvation. In the aftermath, the British officials manipulated the situation to allow the death, eviction, and exile of millions of Irishmen, the "surplus population." The land was cleared of native Irish to make way for more profitable cattle. It was, in short, a form of ethnic cleansing.

Thomas Francis Meagher's biographer Michael Cavanagh summed it up: "Think of it men of the Irish race. Two million of your kindred deliberately murdered in cold blood, in one year."¹ Irish exiles waited for a "day of fitting retribution," when vengeance would be taken against England.²

Ireland had been dealt a blow from which it never quite recovered. Prior to *An Gorta Mor*, the Irish population was approximately 8.5 million; today it barely has 5.3 million.³ As people starved, they were required to give up property and become veritable inmates in order to receive public assistance.⁴ The driving aim was to ensure that they would not become paupers by seeing that they would be worse off than independent laborers. In essence they were to deter pauperism by being so horrible that no one would willingly enter the poorhouse.⁵ Absentee landlords took food and seed crops for rent.

James Fintan Lalor wrote in 1847:

I say and assert that the landowners took entire possession of last year's harvest – of the whole effective sum and substance of that harvest. The food for this year's subsistence, the seed for next year's crop – the landlord took it all. He stood to his right and got his rent – and hunger was in five hundred thousand houses, pinching dearth in all, deadly famine in many. Famine, more or less, was in five hundred thousand families; famine, with all its diseases and decay; famine, with all its fears and horrors; famine with all its dreadful pains, and more dreadful debility.

¹. Michael Cavanagh, *Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher* (Worcester: The Messenger Press, 1892), 80.

². Cavanagh, 70. Also William D'Arcy "The Fenian Movement in the United States: 1858-1866" (Phd Diss., Catholic University of America, 1947), 8.

³. Kevin Kenny, "Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case study," *The Journal of American History* 90 no. 1 (June 2003): 135.

⁴. Tyler Anbinder, "From Famine to Five Points: Lord Lansdowne's Irish Tenants Encounter North America's Most Notorious Slum," *The American Historical Review* 107 no. 2 (April 2002): 361. One Canadian historian as recently as 2006 described these events as merely "perceived injustices inflicted by Britain," downgrading the magnitude of the "Irish question." Robert L. Dallison, *Turning Back the Fenians: New Brunswick's Last Colonial Campaign* (New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2006), 14.

⁵. John O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland: The fate of Ireland's poor* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1997), 61. So Odious was the memory of the "British" workhouses that among Dail Eireann's first acts after declaring independence in 1919 was the abolition of the workhouse system.

All pined and wasted, sickened and drooped; numbers died- the strong man, the fair maiden, the little infant – the landlord had got his rent.”⁶

Rather than provide assistance, The British government in London deemed it best to let market forces solve the problem. Absentee landlords and Irish private enterprise were to provide for the Irish. Public assistance on a wide scale would encourage “the spirit of dependence, and training them to the trade of beggars.”⁷

The second force, the Young Ireland uprising of 1848, part of the wave of revolutions that swept Europe that year, provided the political cog that eventually formed the 69th NYSM. Young Ireland stood for obtaining the “legislative independence of Ireland” by appealing to all classes and using all means at their disposal.⁸ It was, like the United Irishmen of 1798, non-sectarian and led by social elites. The “rebellion” amounted to a skirmish with police in Carrick, County Tipperary, in July 1848. Starving communities could not support the rebellion and the leaders took to the hills. As a result, the Young Ireland leaders were either arrested or banished from Ireland. Michael Doheny, later Lieutenant Colonel of the 69th NYSM, spent time with two other young veterans of 1848, James Stephens and John O’Mahony, both in Parisian exile.⁹ Both Stephens and O’Mahoney attended the Sorbonne where they acquired republican credentials that reshaped not only their own thought, but that of Irish Nationalism.¹⁰ Ireland needed a new path for the future, one that looked after all Irishmen, regardless of

⁶. James Finton Lalor, *The Writings of James Finton Lalor: With an introduction embodying personal recollections by John O’Leary and a Brief Memoir* (Dublin: T.G. O’Donoghue, 1895), 43.

⁷. Lalor, 46. In 1846 the British government allotted only 50,000 pounds to relieve starvation in Ireland, but spent 20,000,000 pounds to emancipate Blacks in the West Indies.

⁸. Michael Doheny, *The Felon’s Track: A narrative of ’48 embracing the leading events in the Irish struggle from the year 1843 to the close of 1848* (New York: Farrell & Son, 1867), 72.

⁹. Marta Ramon, *A Provisional Dictator: James Stephens and the Fenian Movement* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007), 45-48. Prior to fleeing Ireland O’Mahony unsuccessfully attempted to start a Guerilla war in the Galtee Mountains.

¹⁰. Ramon, 57-58.

class or creed. To Stephens and O'Mahoney, only a democracy would do. Further, the future Fenian leaders believed that Irishmen needed to learn urban, guerilla combat. When Louis Napoleon staged his coup d'etat in 1851, O'Mahoney walked across the city observing the barricades amid flying bullets to learn street fighting.¹¹ The violent attempts to crush the French Republic convinced O'Mahoney and Doheny that republicanism was a larger, more significant force than nationalism and that for one element of humankind to be uplifted successfully, all must benefit, irregardless of race or religion.

Of course, not all fabled revolutionaries went to France. An Irishman, Michael Corcoran, adhered to Lalor's ideas of class warfare. Lalor approved of attacks upon the landlord class whom he argued were the tool of British subjugation and extermination:

Those who own your lands will make your laws, and command your liberties and your lives. But this is tyranny and slavery; tyranny in its widest scope and worst shape; slavery of body and soul.¹²

Corcoran joined "the Ribbonmen," an agrarian terror group organized in County Donegal.¹³ He terrorized English landlords by night and soon fell under suspicion by British authorities, when he fled Ireland for New York.¹⁴ Regardless of where they fled, adversity and defeat left an indelible mark upon these men. Subsequently they made their life's work the creation of an Irish Republic, a government in which "all classes and creeds of Irishmen shall be fairly represented."¹⁵ That Irish Republic could exist anywhere, on any continent, wherever willing Irish hearts could be found together.

¹¹. Ramon, 58.

¹². Lalor, 68.

¹³. Phyllis Lane, "Colonel Michael Corcoran, Fighting Irishman," in *The History of the Irish Brigade: A collection of historical essays* (Fredricksburg: Sergeant Kirkland's, 1997), 13-14.

¹⁴. Lane 13-14. At the time Corcoran was a double agent working as a Crown Revenue agent by day.

¹⁵. Doheny, 77.

The conditions in New York City forged the third social force that shaped the 69th NYSM. Those immigrants with money and means moved west, leaving behind a mass of poor Irish in New York, who became the lowest tier of American society. In Gotham, the Irish crowded into notorious slum districts such as the Five Points and Chatham Court. Castigated by “Know Nothings” for over a decade, New York City’s Irish population found itself as unwanted exiles in “less than ideal situations.”¹⁶ They also faced violence and open discrimination at the hands of Protestant nativists. As Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa wrote:

And how can I help thinking of the wreck and ruin that came upon the Irish race in the foreign land! One in a hundred may live and prosper, and stand to be looked at as a living monument of the prosperity, but ninety-nine in a hundred are lost, never to be heard of.¹⁷

Another immigrant wrote, had he known the horrors that awaited him, he would have taken his chances at home, rather than embark on “this nightmare.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the United States became the favored destination for Irish Immigrants, and New York City was the most common point of entry. By 1860, of a population of 805,651 people, 203,740 New Yorkers were born in Ireland.¹⁹ New York had become the largest Irish city in the world, but it was a world where destitution reigned, eerily similar to conditions on the Emerald Isle.

Having arrived in New York, the poor Irish became trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty from which many could not escape. Wages were low and rent was high. Sanitary

¹⁶. Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Church, the State and the Fenian Threat 1861-1875* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), 52.

¹⁷. Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, *Rossa’s Recollections 1838 to 1898; Memoirs of a Irish Revolutionary* (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 2004), 154.

¹⁸. Gerald Keegan, *Famine Diary: Journey to a New World* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1992), 118.

¹⁹. William D Griffin, *The Irish in America 550 A.D. – 1972*, (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, 1973), 17.

conditions were poor at best, which led to recurring outbreaks of smallpox and cholera which killed thousands every year.²⁰ Poor housing, poverty and overwork have led some historians to put the average life expectancy of an Irish Immigrant in the 1850's as only six years after arrival in New York.²¹ Despite the illusions of opportunity, most never could afford to move west and buy land, thus becoming trapped in the slums of the metropolis.²²

It is essential to understand that the 69th NYSM (and later the 69th NYNGA) was a transnational organization. Though physically located in New York City, the core Irish members of the regiment considered New York a temporary home. To militant Irish refugees, America was only a fleeting haven until they could return to liberate their homeland. Indeed, transnationalism is central to the story of the 69th NYSM/NYNGA.²³ Irish militiamen had one foot in America, with their other in Ireland.

New York's Irish community took advantage of certain constitutional guarantees that aided their global crusade, among them, the right to keep and bear arms and maintain a well regulated militia. In January of 1851, the Silent Friends (the Leading Irish revolutionary organization in New York) set about forming an Irish militia regiment. This was actually New York City's second Irish regiment, the Silent Friends formed the 9th NYSM in 1849.²⁴ The 2nd Irish Regiment was formally accepted into the state militia as

²⁰. Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), xxxiii, 21.

²¹. Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 306.

²². Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became White* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 103.

²³. David A. Gerber, "Epistolary Ethics: Personal correspondence and the culture of emigration in the nineteenth century." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, No. 4 (2000), 11.

²⁴. Patrick D. O'Flaherty "The History of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment of the New York State Militia 1852-1861" (PhD Diss., Fordham University, 1963), 14-21. The "Silent Friends" itself grew out of the "John Mitchell Club" and had organized prior to the arrival of the 1848 exiles in New York. The City had

the 69th NYSM on November 1, 1851.²⁵ Both Doheny and Corcoran joined the 69th that month and in essence proved to be the regiment's founding members.²⁶ For the newly arrived revolutionaries, the time was ripe to harvest the burning hatred of the English among the exiles.²⁷ While nominally a Militia regiment, its true purpose was to train a force for the liberation of Ireland, not to protect the State of New York. Its district was the 20th Ward of Manhattan, the neighborhood on the middle-west side known as "Hell's Kitchen."²⁸ By 1857, within six years of enlisting, Doheny and Corcoran led the regiment with Doheny elected as Colonel and Corcoran elected lieutenant colonel. From their new positions, they maneuvered to assimilate all of New York City's Irish militia organizations.²⁹ Ideally, they wanted to unite New York City's Irish, for any possible dispute with England. Throughout the 1850's the leaders of the 69th NYSM eyed the crises in India and the Crimea with eagerness.

By the mid-1850's New York City emerged as the new locus of Irish revolutionary sentiment. With dissent crushed in Ireland, headquarters shifted to the exile community. There had been an established tradition of Irish revolutionary activity in the city stretching back to the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion when United Irish leaders fled to the United States and settled in New York. By 1848 two Secret Irish revolutionary societies existed in New York, the Irish Republican Union (also known as the "Silent

long been a haven for Irish revolutionaries and many of the United Irish leaders of 1798 came to New York.

²⁵. O'Flaherty, 23.

²⁶. The 69th was the second Irish Militia Regiment to be formed. The 9th Regiment had been formed in 1849. Corcoran joined as a Private in Company A and worked his way up from the ranks. O'Flaherty, 1-15.

²⁷. O'Flaherty, 1.

²⁸. Adjutant General's Office, State of New York, *Annual report of the Adjutant General: Report for 1857* (Albany: Parson Weeds, 1858), 15. Hereafter referred to as NYAGO Report 1857. The Adjutant General's reports were annual reports submitted to the New York State Legislature detailing militia activities, status and expenditures.

²⁹. O'Flaherty, 86.

Friends”) and the Irish Alliance, the former willing to resort to violence, the latter committed to the non-violent “Repeal Movement.” (Upon arrival, Doheny joined the Silent Friends and during his control the organization would split into two factions).³⁰ In 1855 a new organization joined New York City’s growing number of secret Irish societies, the Emmet Monument Association. This organization offered a specifically transnational agenda containing a belief that its members should abide by American laws but also train to return to Ireland to continue the struggle. Ostensibly the organization proposed to raise a monument to the martyred leader of the 1803 rising, Robert Emmet. In order to build that monument, the association had to abide by his dying wish that no man write his epitath until Ireland was a free nation. To stay within the law, the Association urged its members to prepare for conflict by legal means. Thus they could perfect their skills by active militia membership, whose military training would be vital to liberate Ireland. Doheny and O’Mahoney ran the Emmet Monument Association and used the association to convince members to join the 69th NYSM. With the end of the Crimean War and hope of a greater European war gone, the Association disbanded itself and retained only a permanent thirteen-member “Irish Revolutionary Committee.”³¹ Ireland was to be freed by force of arms, but only when the time was ripe. The leadership aimed for victory, not a glorified sacrifice and were willing to bide their time. It was the old Irish saying, “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity.”

Even as America’s sectional crisis deepened, the Irish leaders remained oddly aloof. Only the global conflict with England mattered to them. In February 1858 the

³⁰. O’Flaherty, 51-53.

³¹. O’Flaherty, 91-2. The Irish revolutionary leadership in New York, well aware of the might of the British Empire, understood that any attempted invasion of Ireland was utter folly unless England was locked in a life or death struggle with a continental European power.

“Irish Revolutionary Committee” wrote to James Stephens in Ireland, and appointed him “Chief Executive of the Irish Revolutionary movement.”³² The new organization was committed to physical force and the violent overthrow of the British government in Ireland, as well as a cultural revival of the Irish Nation.³³ Their vision of Ireland was “not free merely, but Gaelic as well: not Gaelic merely, but free as well.”³⁴

Thus, the same year as John Brown’s raid, the Irish leaders in New York awaited Stephen’s orders to re-cross with the 69th NYSM. The resulting consolidation of Irish revolutionary leadership in New York and Ireland saw birth of the Fenian Brotherhood, the American wing subservient to the leadership of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Ireland. Among the founders of the organization were Michael Doheny, John O’Mahoney, and Michael Corcoran, all members of the regiment. In essence, Irish militia activity presaged Fenianism in New York City. While visiting New York in 1859, Stephens went out of his way to meet with Corcoran, the officers and men of the 69th, indicating their prominent position in the brotherhood.³⁵

While the 69th NYSM was central to the Fenians, its officer corps maneuvered to gain military control over other Irish militia units. In 1858 Corcoran and Doheny gained control of the first Irish militia Regiment, the 9th Regiment NYSM, and merged it with

³². James Stephens (ed. Marta Ramon) *The Birth of the Fenian Movement: American Diary, Brooklyn 1859* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2009), 76.

³³. Kenneth E. Nilsen, “The Irish Language in New York, 1850-1900.” In *The New York Irish*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 264-5. In line with the writings of Thomas Davis, they believed in a revival of the Irish language and culture. Early Fenian leaders in New York including Doheny, O’Mahony, and Corcoran were all noted as being affiliated with attempts to revive the Irish language and were fluent in Irish. The Cultural movement was a key part of the Irish nationalist movement and was to foster the leaders of the War of Independence of 1916-21.

³⁴. Dorothy McArdle, *The Irish Republic: A documented chronicle of the Anglo-Irish conflict and the partitioning of Ireland, with a detailed account of the period 1916-1923* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 136. This quote was from the funeral oration in 1915 by Padraig Pearse of the last of the original Fenians – Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. Pearse would be executed less than a year later for his role in the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

³⁵. Stephens, 41.

the 69th NYSM. The consolidated regiment was designated the 69th Regiment NYSM.³⁶ In addition, they agreed to forego the wearing of their beloved green uniforms for regulation blue, a move seen by the state military authorities as “highly creditable.”³⁷ In December of 1858 the Regiment received permission to convert to an artillery regiment at its own suggestion. It was believed this would not only soothe over hard feelings caused by the abandonment of the green uniform, but trained artillerists would be a tremendous asset in the liberation of Ireland, as the IRB had no artillery units to speak of.³⁸

The fortunes of the Regiment improved under Doheny and Corcoran. On October 20, 1858, New York’s First Division commander was activated the 69th NYSM to serve at the Quarantine station in Staten Island, following riots there. The public generally saw it as a “truly serviceable regiment” one that prophetically would “be found reliable on any occasion.”³⁹ The regiment appeared well organized, had an efficient staff, and performed their evolutions excellently. Captain Michael Corcoran was singled out in the Adjutant General’s annual report to the New York Legislature as “the best officer in the division.”⁴⁰ In 1860 he was elected colonel of the regiment.

Still, the Fenians wanted the 69th NYSM to do more than mere quarantine duty. The Fenians looked for opportunities to start their expedition and when none arrived, they attempted to create them. In 1858 the Fenian Leadership proposed to send the regiment,

³⁶. O’Flaherty, 155-157.

³⁷. State of New York Adjutant General’s Office, *Annual Report of the Adjutant General for 1859* (Albany: Parson Weed, 1860), 55. Hereafter referred to as NYAGO Report 1859,

³⁸. O’Flaherty, 165-167.

³⁹. NYAGO report 1859, 39.

⁴⁰. State of New York Adjutant General’s Office, *Annual Report of the Adjutant General for 1858* (Albany: Parson Weed, 1859), 40. Hereafter referred to as NYAGO Report 1858. The 1st Division NYSM was composed of New York City Metropolitan Units

fully armed and uniformed, to tour Ireland and inspire the people to resist English rule.⁴¹ Corcoran and O'Mahony sent agents to Europe to start an Anglo-Franco war set for the spring of 1861.⁴² In the fall of 1860, John O'Mahony departed for a tour of Ireland to assess its revolutionary readiness.⁴³ This was vital, as Stephens considered O'Mahony to be his successor should he "go down."⁴⁴ In his absence, Corcoran was left as acting head of the Brotherhood in America.⁴⁵

So successful had the Fenian military operation become that in 1860, another Fenian paramilitary regiment, the "Phoenix Brigade," was organized.⁴⁶ It debuted in the 1860 New York St. Patrick's Day parade. It was described by the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* (Virginia) as a secret army "formidable in numbers and at least as well drilled" as the federal army.⁴⁷ Among the paramilitaries was a rising star in the movement, one who would play a key role in the history of the 69th NYNGA, twenty-year-old Major Matthew Murphy. A child prodigy, born in Ballysodare, County Sligo (the same county as General Corcoran), Murphy immigrated to the United States when only a few months old.⁴⁸ Although only a teenager, the Schools Superintendent appointed him the principal of Public School 24. Murphy held that position and command of the Phoenix Brigade until he resigned "to follow the flag."⁴⁹

⁴¹. O'Flaherty, 191-193.

⁴². Letter Dated March 27, 1860 James Cantwell to John O'Mahony. Fenian Brotherhood records and O'Donovan Rossa Personal Papers, The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, Washington, DC. Box 1, Folder 2. (hereafter referred to as the Fenian Papers) Also Letter Dated November 2, 1860 James Cantwell to John O'Mahony Fenian Papers Box 1 Folder 2.

⁴³. Cavanagh, 370.

⁴⁴. Stephens, 9-10.

⁴⁵. Cavanagh, 370.

⁴⁶. Cavanagh, 362-64.

⁴⁷. *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, September 7, 1861. Although the Fenian Brotherhood was a "secret" oath-bound society until 1863. It had open paramilitary organizations such as the Phoenix Brigade.

⁴⁸. *The Irish American* April 29, 1865.

⁴⁹. *The Irish American* April 29, 1865.

Throughout 1860, the 69th NYSM grew in both numbers and reputation. Its fame initially came not from its martial skills, but from adherence to its core values, particularly its hatred of the English Monarchy. On October 11, 1860, the Prince of Wales paid a visit to New York, for which the militia was ordered to parade in his honor. Michael Corcoran refused to call out the regiment for the son of Queen Victoria, a decision that created a firestorm of controversy. The fiasco began in September when Corcoran wrote to Major General Charles W. Sandford, commanding the First Division NYSM, requesting to be excused from the parade as he considered the order both objectionable and “illegal.”⁵⁰ Other Irish Regiments in New York felt the same way and decided to follow Corcoran’s example. Irish members of the 8th Regiment NYSM passed a resolution on October 6, 1860, declining to “exhibit ourselves before said Prince of Wales on the 11th instant or any other time in the City of New York.”⁵¹ They argued that it was below the dignity of the Republic and “antagonistic to the great fundamental principles of human liberty” to parade before “this scum of a royal house.”⁵² General Sandford could not excuse all Irish members, for such a depletion of the 1st Division would have made the parade a farce.⁵³ In any event, Sandford made it clear that Corcoran and his men had to appear.

True to their principles, the 69th NYSM refused to march in what New York then considered the social event of the decade. New York City’s nativists vociferously responded on the pages of their newspapers. The *Times* of London demanded that

⁵⁰. *The New York Daily Tribune*, Nov 16, 1860.

⁵¹. *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 9, 1860.

⁵². *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 9, 1860.

⁵³. O’Flaherty, 208-209.

Corcoran be court-martialed and the 69th disbanded.⁵⁴ American newspapers branded Corcoran a traitor, calling not only for his dismissal, but revocation of his citizenship.⁵⁵ By far the most extreme response came from *Harper's Weekly*, which called for Corcoran to be found guilty of mutiny and summarily shot.⁵⁶

At the end of November 1860 (after Election Day) the New York State Militia brought charges against Corcoran. The court martial convened on December 20, 1860, and during the defense, Corcoran argued that the parade was illegal. He argued that the First Division had already made its two parades as required by state law and thus he was not obliged to have it participate in another, since public safety was not at risk. Further, in a contrived defense Corcoran noted, that the Prince had traveled incognito as “Baron Renfrew” and as a baron, he was not entitled to any public honors. As the parade was illegal, Corcoran argued that he had a legal and moral duty to disobey the order.⁵⁷

The court martial dragged on until late February, when it was decided that the case should be settled on April 22, 1861, at four PM.⁵⁸ The delay came because Corcoran and his defense lawyer, Richard O’Gorman, won repeated concessions from the court.⁵⁹ According to O’Gorman, the country had entered into “perilous times” and he believed that Corcoran should not be punished for his stand against the Prince.⁶⁰ O’Gorman cast the Court Martial as a pretext for Republican nativists to disband the regiment only months before a possible war and rid the Militia of Irish Catholics.⁶¹ If the

⁵⁴. *The Times* (London), October 27, 1862.

⁵⁵. Cavanaugh, 354.

⁵⁶. *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 27, 1860.

⁵⁷. Michael Corcoran, In the Court Martial to try Col. Michael Corcoran on a charge of disobedience of orders: Defendants argument, (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1860), 4 -6.

⁵⁸. O’Flaherty, 219.

⁵⁹. Richard O’Gorman was also one of the exiled “Young Ireland” Leaders of 1848.

⁶⁰. *The Irish American*, January 5, 1861.

⁶¹. *The Irish American*, January 5, 1861.

New York State Militia disbanded the 69th NYSM, depriving the state of soldiers in the weeks before the Civil War, the Republican administration would appear negligent, depriving New York of necessary troops for the sake of a frivolous court martial.

If Corcoran's actions put him at odds with the Anglo-elites and "New England Yankees," it endeared him to the Irish global diaspora. His stand made him a hero overnight. He "made glad many an Irish heart."⁶² Gifts were showered upon him, including a sword from the Irish of New York and a three-inch gold medal from the Irish community of San Francisco.⁶³ The Irish citizens of New York subscribed a green silk flag for the 69th NYSM. Emblazoned on the flag was the Fenian sunburst, symbolizing a new day dawning for Ireland and the words, "Presented to the 69th Regiment – In commemoration of 11th Oct 1860."⁶⁴

As the trial dragged on, the secession crisis deepened, a crisis made personal by the fact that many New Yorkers harbored Southern sympathies. New York's mayor, Fernando Wood, even threatened to lead the city into secession. When war broke out on April 12, 1861, the city exploded into patriotic fervor, and all other affairs, including the court martial, seemed trivial. Yet, the 69th NYSM was not inclined to support the government until Corcoran was released and exonerated. Native New Yorkers doubted their loyalty, forcing Lieutenant Colonel Robert Nugent to make a public statement on April 15 that the regiment would perform service for the US Government, if called upon to do so.⁶⁵ Four days later, Corcoran, still under arrest, addressed the officers of the

⁶². *The Irish American*, January 5, 1861.

⁶³. O'Flaherty 222-223.

⁶⁴. Bernard Kelly, "The Green Flags of the Irish Brigade," in *The History of the Irish Brigade: A collection of Historical Essays* (Fredricksburg: Sergeant Kirkland's, 1997), 189-90. The Flag still exists and can be seen on display at the Armory of the 69th Infantry Regiment NY National Guard.

⁶⁵. *The New York Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1861.

regiment and urged them to support their adopted country, which they unanimously voted to do.⁶⁶ Michael Corcoran believed a show of loyalty would silence his critics and facilitate his release. The next day all charges against him were dropped.⁶⁷

While the 69th prepared for war, answering Abraham Lincoln's demand for 75,000 three-month militia, Corcoran tied up loose ends. On the evening of the April 21, 1861, Corcoran addressed the New York Fenians. Corcoran feared they might enlist en masse, something he did not want to occur. He "earnestly implored" those not having military commitments, to "hold aloof from the fratricidal strife" and "preserve their lives for the cause to which they were already pledged."⁶⁸ While no doubt he wished to vindicate himself and the 69th NYSM, he did not want to see the flower of the Fenian movement fall in a cause openly championed by the Republican Party, whom he considered enemies of the Irish people. The next day, after consulting with the directory, Corcoran turned over administration of the Fenian Brotherhood to Mr. John Murphy.⁶⁹ Learning of the regiment's departure, O'Mahony rushed back from Ireland, but Corcoran would not hear of him joining the regiment in the field, citing his vital importance staying at the Fenian helm.⁷⁰ In any event, Corcoran made it clear that in April 1861, the Civil War was not the Fenian's war.

On the morning of April 23, 1861, the Regiment formed outside Corcoran's establishment, Hibernia Hall, on Prince Street. The 69th NYSM was allowed to take only 1,000 men, forcing Corcoran to turn away several thousand volunteers.⁷¹ Among those

⁶⁶. *The New York Daily Tribune*, April 20, 1861.

⁶⁷. *The New York Daily Tribune*, April 24, 1861.

⁶⁸. Cavanaugh, 370.

⁶⁹. Cavanaugh, 371.

⁷⁰. Cavanaugh, 359.

⁷¹. Unnamed Newspaper Clipping, Scrapbook Number 1. Charles P Daly papers. Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, New York. Hereafter referred to as Daly papers NYPL.

who enlisted as a private was the Phoenix Brigade's major, Matthew Murphy. Prior to departure, the regiment was presented a silk American banner by the wife of Judge Charles P. Daly, the most prominent Irish politician in New York.⁷² Tens of thousands came to see them off and it took over four hours to march the short distance to the Hudson River and board the steamer *James Adger*. Preceding the regiment was a banner proclaiming "Sixty-Ninth Remember Fontenoy," referring to the role the French Irish Brigade had played at the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745. To Corcoran, his motivation was not patriotism but rather vindication; he wanted his soldiers to prove themselves better than the social elites who had so recently slandered himself, the regiment and the Irish people.⁷³

The regiment was mustered into Federal service at Georgetown. While in Washington, the 69th NYSM received an unusual set of reinforcements. On the evening of May 23, an additional company of Irish Zouaves under Captain Thomas Francis Meagher joined the regiment. Meagher was not an officer in the 69th NYSM. Meagher was a classically-educated adventurer and lecturer who had spurned the founders of the Fenian brotherhood in order to advance his prospects in America. He used his influence to ensure his New York Irish Zouave company was attached to the only Irish regiment in the field.

The soldiers of the 69th NYSM filled their three months' service with alarms, drill, and boredom. On July 16, with just four days left to serve, the regiment received orders to march off to Vienna and then to Germantown, where it joined Brigadier General

⁷². Unnamed Newspaper Clipping, Scrapbook Number 1. Charles P Daly papers. Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, New York.

⁷³. Christopher-Michael Garcia, "New York's Fighting Sixty-Ninth New York State Militia at Bull Run," in *The History of the Irish Brigade: A collection of Historical Essays* (Fredricksburg: Sergeant Kirkland's, 1997), 39. Hereafter referred to as Garcia. Also Cavanaugh, 354.

William T. Sherman's brigade. It fought at the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, even though it was one day past its muster-out date, a fact that won over the support of many doubters. Corcoran wanted to show the nation and the world that the 69th NYSM was better than "well bred" Americans who went home when battle loomed. First Bull Run was the militia regiment's baptism of fire. It was heavily engaged at Henry House Hill along with the rest of Sherman's Brigade. Due to the oppressive heat, the men had stripped to their shirt sleeves, and some fought bare-chested.⁷⁴ They made three assaults upon the Confederate lines, only to be repulsed each time. Despite a withering flanking fire they withdrew in good order from the field and received the thanks of General Irvin McDowell.⁷⁵ As Sherman's brigade withdrew, Corcoran was singled out as the only officer who tried to rally his men in the face of pursuing Virginia cavalry.⁷⁶ He formed the 69th NYSM into a square before withdrawing over Bull Run. There, the regiment formed a column to cross Bull Run and General Sherman ordered the men to flee for their lives, in essence, a "license to run."⁷⁷

Corcoran, who had been wounded, vainly tried to stem the rout. He was cut off with nine men and the regiment's American flag. The band retired to a nearby house and prepared to fight to the death.⁷⁸ There, they were joined by an additional six men, but soon realized the position was hopeless. Corcoran surrendered with the colors to Adjutant B. H. Burke of the 13th Virginia Cavalry.⁷⁹ While the rest of the regiment fled back to

⁷⁴. Garcia, 50.

⁷⁵. Captain James Kelly's Report, July 24, 1861. In Vol II, Secretary of War. *The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 371-372. The Official records are hereafter referred to as "OR."

⁷⁶. Sherman's Report. OR II 370-371.

⁷⁷. *The Irish American*, October 26, 1861. Letter from James M. Rorty.

⁷⁸. *The Irish American*, October 26, 1861. Letter from James M. Rorty.

⁷⁹. *The Irish American*, October 26, 1861. Letter from James M. Rorty. Also The Report of Colonel R. C. Radford. OR II, 352-353.

Fort Corcoran, in the defenses of Washington, Colonel Corcoran entered what would become a nightmarish thirteen months of captivity.

While in Confederate hands, Corcoran's captors singled him out for harsh treatment as a common criminal, not a prisoner of war. Early in his thirteen-month captivity, Corcoran was selected as a hostage, to be hanged if Union authorities executed Confederate privateers. He was beaten by his guards and on another occasion put into irons for contradicting a preacher's condemnation of the Union.⁸⁰ The Confederacy balked at exchanging Corcoran and continued to hold him in bad faith, a policy which temporarily stopped all prisoner exchanges.⁸¹ Corcoran remarked that he had volunteered to do the Southern "bad cause all the harm I could."⁸² Corcoran was only released in exchange for two Confederate generals. The Confederacy did not release him until August 1862 – more than a year after his capture – when he returned he emerged as a national hero. When he left New York in April 1861 he was seen as an unreliable Jacobin; his courage on the battlefield and stout loyalty to the Republic in various Confederate prison pens had made him legendary.

As Corcoran endured life as a prisoner, the 69th NYSM reaped the benefit of new-found fame. On July 24, 1861, the 69th and all remaining three-month regiments were sent home by order of President Lincoln. They arrived in New York to tremendous reception and a sixty-nine gun salute. Both Murphy's Phoenix Brigade and the elite 7th Regiment NYSM escorted the 69th NYSM up Broadway. Yet, controversy lurked under the surface. Lieutenant Colonel Nugent, who had been injured and missed the battle, chose to march with the chaplains, allowing Captain James Kelly, the senior surviving

⁸⁰. *Richmond Daily Dispatch*. October 17, 1861.

⁸¹. Schuyler Colfax to "friend" Spencer. Letter Dated June 19, 1862. OR Series II, Vol IV, II, 6.

⁸². Corcoran, 61.

officer who had fought at Bull Run, the honor of leading the regiment.⁸³ Major Bagley, who stayed behind in New York, took the major's position, which put Captain Kelly in an awkward spot.⁸⁴ This became the first of several conflicts involving Bagley that eventually altered the subsequent history of the 69th NYNGA. Bagley never fired a shot in anger and refused to volunteer for combat service. Yet, he served as the colonel of the 69th NYSM from 1862 until 1865.

Some of the surviving officers used their fame to raise three-year regiments of volunteers called for by the War Department on July 27, 1861. Both Thomas Francis Meagher and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Nugent set about forming a new unit to be called the Irish Brigade. Meagher and Nugent made incredible headway. Although thousands of New York's Irish joined the ranks of the Union Army at the war's outset, most Fenians chose to stay out. After their return from Bull Run, most of the members of the 69th NYSM did not answer the Federal Government's call for three-year volunteers. Matthew Murphy's Phoenix Brigade also stayed out of action.⁸⁵ Contrary to popular mythology, few Fenians joined Meagher's "Irish Brigade," which formed in the autumn of 1861. Its New York regiments were originally called the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Regiments, Irish Brigade, a designation the War Department refused to accept. They were subsequently re-numbered the 69th, 88th and 63rd New York Volunteer (NYV) Infantry.

A brief note is in order here to explain the nature of the volunteer regimental system in New York. The system has led to much confusion since the Civil War. While many militia members did volunteer, the numbered volunteer regiments were not the same as the standing militia regiments. Volunteer regiments were ad-hoc organizations

⁸³. *The Irish American*, August 8, 1861.

⁸⁴. *The Irish American*, August 8, 1861.

⁸⁵. Cavanagh, 371-372.

created for a fixed duration, either three-years or the war. They had no existence before or after the Civil War. The subject was further confused in the early twentieth-century when the War Department granted the battle honors from many of the state volunteer regiments to standing National Guard units. The 69th is the best example of this.

The 69th Infantry Regiment New York National Guard (as the 69th NYSM was designated after the Civil War), received the battle honors for the 69th NYV. Over time, the Irish Brigade tradition became the dominant regimental tradition, as if the 69th NYV was *the* 69th. The differentiation was lost sometime in the early twentieth-century when first hand knowledge disappeared. For example, Adjutant J.J. Smith, the senior living officer of the 69th NYV, was elected an *honorary member* of the 69th NYNG on January 5, 1906.⁸⁶ If the 69th NYV was *the* 69th then why would he be made an honorary member of his own regiment? By 1969 it was accepted that the standing 69th NYNG “became the core of the Irish Brigade.”⁸⁷

Regimental tradition holds that the 69th NYSM was the primary cadre for both the 69th NYV and the Irish Brigade, but this is untrue.⁸⁸ The Irish Brigade was a non-Fenian entity. Meagher urged Irishmen to fight, but his rationale would become the accepted standard in Irish historiography of the Civil War. It was “defense of the flag which waved

⁸⁶. Honorary Membership Certificate, Col James J. Smith, January 5, 1906. Author’s collection.

⁸⁷. Jones, 71.

⁸⁸. Matthew Murphy was offered command of the 29th Massachusetts being raised by Meagher, but that fell through when the unit became non-Irish. Ironically the Yankee 29th would be assigned to the Irish Brigade and had a tense relationship with the New York regiments until swapped for the Irish 28th Massachusetts in December of 1862. Despite the number, there was little tie between the 69th NYV and the standing 69th NYSM. An analysis of pension records for the 69th NYV reveals only 65 members of the Militia regiment joined the new 69th, a mere 4.4% of the officers and men. In addition the 69th NYV was an Infantry regiment while the standing organization was Heavy Artillery. Despite Murphy’s flirtation with the 29th MA, there was no Fenian core to the Irish Brigade.

its protecting folds over them when fleeing the upas poison of England's bloody rag.”⁸⁹ In essence, “the story of the Irish Brigade is really the story of the Americanization of its officers and men.”⁹⁰ It was simple patriotism and gratitude, not a deeper ideological commitment.⁹¹ For many, there was a strong desire to serve, but there were also economic incentives. The New York economy had not fully adjusted from its southern to a commercial orientation and the very poor were in dire straits. In 1862 the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor (AICP) reported that of 50,000 who signed up the previous 12 months from the city, 40,000 “had no employment at home.”⁹² The motivation of Irish Brigade volunteers, represent the motivation of most Irish-Americans, but they were not transnational. That motivation belonged to the Fenian minority.

The non-participation of the Fenians reveals not only the attitude of New York's leaders, but also the leadership in Ireland. James Stephens believed that the war would distract Irish Americans from the true fight, the struggle for Irish freedom.⁹³ Despite Irish-American hopes that England would enter the war on behalf of the South, Stephens believed an Anglo-American war would be disastrous for Ireland.⁹⁴ England had the most powerful navy in the world and could blockade Northern ports with ease. That would close the lines of communication between the United States and Ireland, depriving the

⁸⁹. D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns: With some account of the Corcoran Irish Legion and sketches of the principal officers*, (New York: William McSorely & Co, 1867), 49.

⁹⁰. Paul Jones. *The Irish Brigade*, (New York: Robert B. Luce, 1969), 8.

⁹¹. Meagher had been well known along with his fellow Young Ireland compatriot John Mitchell, for his strong pro-Southern stance prior to the start of the war and the defense of southern rights to maintain slavery. Meagher, though only a captain took it upon himself to volunteer the 69th NYSM for three years or the war, authority he did not have.

⁹². Edward K. Spann, *Gotham at War: New York City, 1860-1865*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 147-148.

⁹³. Rossa, 286-87. Rossa describes Irish American Volunteers as “poor dupes and victims, shall be all the while dreaming they are serving Ireland.”

⁹⁴. Rossa, 287.

Fenians at home of both arms and money.⁹⁵ It would also consume the entire movement without any real benefit to Ireland. The ideal solution would be “an arrangement or compromise of some kind between North and South.”⁹⁶ He believed the United States was in a state “like decomposition – crumbling into utter chaos.”⁹⁷

When the Civil War began O’Mahoney believed that it offered no real opportunity for the Fenians. He complained that many Fenians were waiting for the great opportunity should England become involved in the war, which he did not think likely.⁹⁸ He criticized Fenians who wanted to wait out the war and see what opportunities waited.⁹⁹ Firstly, He argued, they ought to consider the steady work of ensuring that Ireland would be prepared to fight for her own freedom when the time came. With the prospects of another failed potato crop in 1862, Ireland faced another “*extermination of the people*” and that if matters continued “there will be no Irish nation for us to free.”¹⁰⁰ Above all else, Ireland had to be sustained.

True to its Fenian leaders, the 69th NYSM stayed home after Bull Run, while the 69th NYV and the rest of the Irish Brigade went to war. Unfortunately, service on the home front tended to ruin the unit’s efficiency. Bagley was elected lieutenant colonel and the condition of the regiment declined. Upon their return from Bull Run, with muskets uncleaned, the soldiers threw them in a heap, neglected, in a corner of the regimental drill room above Essex Market.¹⁰¹ At the annual inspection in the autumn 1861, 252 personnel

⁹⁵. Rossa, 287.

⁹⁶. Rossa, 287.

⁹⁷. Rossa, 285-86.

⁹⁸. Circular from John O’Mahoney, October 5, 1861. Murphy Papers.

⁹⁹. Circular from John O’Mahoney, October 5, 1861. Murphy Papers.

¹⁰⁰. Circular from John O’Mahoney, October 5, 1861. Murphy Papers.

¹⁰¹. State of New York Adjutant General’s Office, *Annual Report of the Adjutant General for 1861* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1862), 125. Hereafter referred to as NYAGO Report for 1861. The Regimental Armory was in the 10th Ward on the Lower East Side.

were absent, including 19 officers and 52 Non-Commissioned Officers.¹⁰² The old regiment would never be the same under Bagley's Command. The sole high point during the year of Corcoran's imprisonment proved to be the presentation of the Irish Colors of the Confederate 10th Tennessee captured at Fort Donelson by the 31st Illinois Infantry.¹⁰³ The flag was given as gift and a token of esteem the 31st had for the 69th NYSM.¹⁰⁴

Shortly after the presentation, the 69th NYSM was mustered in for another ninety days of federal service. The regiment was ordered to Washington and served in the defenses of the capital.¹⁰⁵ With Corcoran still a prisoner, Bagley was elected colonel of the regiment and Matthew Murphy, lieutenant colonel. The end of their relatively inconsequential service coincided with the release of Michael Corcoran from Confederate captivity.

On August 16, 1862, Michael Corcoran departed Richmond to be exchanged. He remarked shortly before leaving that, "there was no possibility of a termination of the war until the South had been crushed" and he announced that he would re-enter Federal service immediately.¹⁰⁶ Two days later, he re-united with his beloved 69th NYSM at Fort Lyons, Virginia. Corcoran informed the regiment of his plans to form an Irish Brigade, but one different from Meagher's. His desire was for the old 69th to be the first regiment of his brigade. Matthew Murphy put the question to the regiment, if they would defy the wishes of their leaders in Ireland and join Corcoran in his crusade against the rebellion

¹⁰². NYAGO Report for 1861, 125.

¹⁰³. *The Irish American*, May 24, 1862.

¹⁰⁴. The Flag was kept by the Bagley Family and returned to the State of Tennessee in the 1960's. In the 1990's Bagley's descendants had an exact replica made and presented to the 69th Infantry.

¹⁰⁵. Fredrick Phisterer *New York In The War of the Rebellion: 1861-1865* (Albany: State Of New York, 1909), 674-675.

¹⁰⁶. *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, August 16, 1862.

“and all answered yes.”¹⁰⁷ Thus commenced the formation of the “Corcoran Irish Legion,” under newly-promoted Brigadier General Michael Corcoran.

This moment was important, for as the next chapter will show, the meaning of the war had changed for the Fenians in America. Throughout their existence, through 1862, the 69th NYSM served only one goal, preparing for the inevitable global battle with Britain. This notion had kept Fenian participation limited. Yet, the incredible sequence of events in 1860 and 1861 – the Court Martial of Corcoran, the mobilization of the 69th NYSM in April 1861, the post-Bull Run fame and Corcoran’s incarceration – all conspired to draw Fenian attention toward the American conflict.

¹⁰⁷. *The Irish American* February 28, 1863.

Chapter 3

“THE SIXTY-NINTH, THE OLD SIXTY-NINTH”
FORMATION: SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 1862

With the release of the 69th NYSM from federal service and the return of Corcoran, the formation of the 69th NYNGA began. With the authority of the State of New York, General Michael Corcoran began recruiting his Irish Legion. The timing was both a godsend and curse. Union fortunes were at their lowest ebb, making service undesirable. It also coincided with the announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the first federal draft scheduled for the fall of 1862, and an upswing in the New York economy, which made recruiting difficult. Yet, Corcoran started recruiting seven regiments from New York and one from Philadelphia. Ultimately the Corcoran Legion would be consolidated into four regiments and two, the 175th NYV and the 116th Pennsylvania, would never serve with the Irish Legion.

The members of the 69th NYNGA’s officer corps tended to adhere to Fenianism. Although some may have been of the middle class, most were men of modest means. A description of General Corcoran described the leadership of the regiment and the brigade. He was “not rich, nor great, nor high born; he is one of the common people.”¹ The officer corps mimicked the demographics of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the leadership represented the core of Fenianism in America, the men Stephens counted upon for the liberation of Ireland. The 69th NYNGA was a transnational regiment, whose stay

¹. *New York Daily Tribune* August 23, 1862.

in New York was supposed to be a temporary phase in their lives. Little did the recruits realize that the war would be their movement's downfall.²

The year 1862 was a watershed for the Fenians. In this year, they committed themselves to the war against slavery. In a period when Irish support for the war dramatically declined, the Fenians became ardently pro-Union. Re-enforcements to existing Irish volunteer units slowed to a trickle preventing them from replacing the losses of the 1862 campaigns. Instead of withholding their members from the Union army, they volunteered en masse, in Fenian-dominated units. In addition to joining the Corcoran Irish Legion, John O'Mahoney brought the Fenian Phoenix Brigade into the New York State Militia as the 99th Regiment NYSM. Although this regiment saw no combat, it performed duty for three months in 1862 guarding Confederate prisoners at Elmira, New York.

Why the sudden change in sentiment? There is no doubt that Corcoran and most Fenians adhered to a dual, transnational loyalty. "One half of my heart is Erin's, and the other half is America's."³ Yet they believed America was "the mainstay of human freedom, the world over," and that it must be preserved.⁴ Two events, in particular, changed the Fenian outlook. First, the return of General Corcoran, their warrior chieftain,

². In James Stephens, the IRB opened a new chapter in Irish revolutionary history. The struggle for Irish freedom migrated from the hands of the traditional social and cultural elites and passed to the working class. The IRB and the Fenians urged self reliance. The rise of a Catholic middle-class in Ireland following emancipation, which allied itself with the status-quo, showed Stephens and the Fenians that only the working class could make Ireland both truly free and independent. They attacked the very notion of respectability itself, considering it a shallow, English ideal. The 69th NYNGA, like the IRB, was predominantly working class. Ramon, 153.

³. Michael Corcoran, *The Captivity of General Corcoran: The only authentic and reliable narrative of the trials and sufferings endured, during his twelve months imprisonment in Richmond and the Southern Cities* (Philadelphia: Barclay & Co, 1862), 22.

⁴. Cavanagh, 369.

from Confederate captivity, re-invigorated the movement. Second, the September 1862 issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, changed the nature of the war.

Scholars have accepted that Irish-American racism fed anti-emancipation politics during the war. This is a reality that cannot be disputed; however, just because some Irish adhered to racism did not mean that some did not support emancipation. New York politics emerged as a system of divide and rule. Most abolitionists and “radical Republicans” were seen by the Irish as affiliated with the late “Know-Nothing” movement led by “New England Pilgrims” who harbored a “fanatical hatred of our race” and Catholicism.⁵ In an era before there was a social safety net, New York Democratic Party leaders played upon the fears of poor Irish who were never far from destitution or starvation. They were led to believe that abolition would create a wave of free African Americans to compete, even underbid them, for life sustaining work on the lowest rung.

Furthermore, some abolitionists had stated openly that after the abolition of slavery, they would dispose of “Popery.”⁶ Others expressed the wish that “every Irishman should perish by Rebel hands” so that the remnant of the Catholic population could be crushed politically.⁷ Thus, most Irish-Americans viewed Republicans as synonymous with the English, “the embodiment of hostility to their race and religion.”⁸ Furthermore, public pronouncements on abolition fell on deaf ears after years of hypocritical British pronouncements on abolition and their subsequent support of the South.⁹

⁵ Fr. Bernard O’Reilly to Charles P. Daly. Letter dated January 30, 1864. Daly Papers NYPL.

⁶ Fr. Bernard O’Reilly to Charles P. Daly. Letter dated January 30, 1864. Daly Papers NYPL.

⁷ Fr. Bernard O’Reilly to Charles P. Daly. Letter dated January 30, 1864. Daly Papers NYPL.

⁸ Fr. Bernard O’Reilly to Charles P. Daly. Letter dated January 30, 1864. Daly Papers NYPL.

⁹ James Lawlor Kiernan, *Ireland and America, versus England, from a Fenian point of view* (Detroit: George W. Pattison, 1864), 9.

Prior to the Civil War there had been a strong Irish abolition tradition. While this sentiment did not represent all of Irish-America, it did strongly infuse the Fenians in New York. Barely a century had gone by since the English exported their last Irish slaves to the Caribbean and North America. Daniel O’Connell, the “Great Liberator,” played a key role in abolitionism through his Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁰ The Young Ireland movement grew out of the O’Connell Repeal movement just as the Fenians grew out of Young Ireland. James Finton Lalor, a friend of O’Mahoney, had argued, that in essence, the Irish peasantry was reduced to slavery the same as African Americans in the South. Thus, the core tenet of universal justice became central to Fenian beliefs. For the Fenians to make it clear that they were willing to fight and die for freedom, they had to stand by abolitionism on principle, even if it alienated them from the mainstream Irish-American community.¹¹

Throughout the conflict, John O’Mahoney espoused strong anti-slavery convictions. He had never supported slavery and never “styled for an Alabama plantation” with “a fine lot of fat niggers on it.”¹² O’Mahoney had always maintained that “slavery was a wrong in itself.”¹³ While taking no part in American politics or party strife, he was “perfectly unreserved in his avowal of strong anti-slavery convictions.”¹⁴ From his first arrival in America, when asked his opinion, he never ceased “to condemn the former slave system of the South as a crime against humanity.”¹⁵ This sentiment was not confined to just the upper echelons of the movement. Captain Patrick O’Farrell of the

¹⁰. Angela F. Murphy, *American Slavery Irish Freedom: Abolition, immigrant citizenship and the trans-Atlantic movement for Irish Repeal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 36.

¹¹. Stephens, 9-10.

¹². *The New York Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1864.

¹³. *The New York Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1864.

¹⁴. Miles O’Reilly, *baked meats of the Funeral: A collection of essays, poems, speeches, instances and banquets* (New York: Carleton, 1866), 214.

¹⁵. O’Reilly, 214.

69th NYNGA was described as “before, during and after the war he was a pronounced abolitionist.”¹⁶

The situation in the late summer of 1862 called for action. Coupled with an ideological belief in human freedom, there was also the prospect of England entering the war on the side of the Confederacy. The Fenian leadership believed that “American freedom was a necessary forerunner of Irish Independence.”¹⁷ Furthermore, defense of the Union was the surest protection for the Irish Diaspora from the British Empire’s evil machinations.¹⁸ Propelled by Lincoln’s executive move, the floodgates opened and the Fenians enlisted en masse. Having made the fateful decision, “the active organization of the brotherhood ceased,” as its leaders entered the armed forces of the Union.

Michael Corcoran had high ambitions. He did not want to create a mere brigade as Meagher had, but a division. His new organization would be known as the Irish Legion, – named after the French *Legion Irlandaise* – organized during the 1798 Rebellion from Irish volunteers to free Ireland. For his division, Corcoran hoped to raise troops from among the northeastern Fenians. He envisioned a division of at least seven New York regiments as well as units from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. His hopes proved overly optimistic as slow recruiting caused the Legion to be consolidated into five regiments and one battalion.¹⁹

The 69th NYNGA formed from companies belonging to the 69th NYSM and the 6th Regiment, Corcoran Irish Legion. Like every regiment in the Corcoran Legion, it

¹⁶. *The Irish World*, January 3, 1903.

¹⁷. *The New York Herald*, September 7, 1865.

¹⁸. Kiernan, 10.

¹⁹. One regiment, the 175th NYV and the 116th Pennsylvania Battalion never served with the Corcoran Legion. In fact, the 116th went to the Irish Brigade where it served with distinction.

could not recruit to full strength and was consolidated in November 1862 to meet the minimum number needed for muster into Federal service. Legion wide, it was a messy consolidation, but the 69th/6th merger was one of the smoothest. The 69th NYNGA under Colonel Matthew Murphy was recruited exclusively in New York City (Manhattan) at the 69th NYSM Armory located in Essex Market.²⁰ The 6th, under Colonel Thomas Reid, was also a New York City regiment. Its recruiting offices were in the Fourth and Eighteenth Wards.²¹ Several members were recruited in Brooklyn, but they transferred to another unit, General Francis B. Spinola's Empire Brigade.²²

Shortly after his return from prison, Corcoran called a meeting of all officers of the 69th NYSM at the Astor House. When asked, all officers present voted to volunteer for three years or the war, except Colonel Bagley.²³ Following the meeting, recruiting commenced. The Common Council sweetened the deal by offering a \$10,000 donation to fund bounties for new recruits.²⁴ Corcoran re-iterated that the regiment was *the* 69th New York State National Guard "in the service of the United States."²⁵ In essence, the 69th NYNGA was simply the 69th NYSM at war, serving with the Union army. To both the officers of the Regiment and the public at large they were one and the same regiment, "the Sixty-Ninth, the old Sixty-Ninth."²⁶

²⁰. Garland, 34. The 69th NYNGA also used 69th NYSM stationary and used the title on recruiting posters as well.

²¹. Garland, 38. The recruiting offices were on the Lower East Side a stone's throw from the notorious slum Chatham Court and in midtown on 22nd street a few blocks from the modern 69th Regiment Armory.

²². Garland, 38. The Colonels of the 69th NYNGA, 155th NYV and the 170th NYV were all officers from the 69th NYSM. J.P. McIvor of the 170th NYV had been captured alongside Corcoran at Bull Run.

²³. *The Irish American* February 28, 1863. Interestingly, Bagley is referred to in the newspaper as "Major."

²⁴. *The Irish American* February 28, 1863.

²⁵. *The Irish American* February 28, 1863.

²⁶. *The Irish American* September 13, 1862.

According to Michael Corcoran, the bulk of the 69th NYSM immediately signed up for service with his Irish Legion. He claimed almost 700 men “brave and honest enough” joined the 69th NYNGA.²⁷ This claim was false. The muster rolls of the regiment show an aggregate strength of only 687 officers and men after consolidation.²⁸ The State of New York reported that only nine officers and forty-six enlisted personnel from the 69th NYSM joined the 69th NYNGA.²⁹ The truth lies somewhere in between. An analysis of 69th NYNGA pension records indicates that 189 members had additional service with the standing 69th NYSM, approximately 27.5 percent of the personnel mustered into service, much higher than the 4.5 percent of the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade.³⁰ Furthermore, eighty percent (152 men) served in the same companies of the 69th NYSM and NYNGA.³¹ Of course, it cannot be proven, what motivates these men to join the 69th NYNGA, but it can be inferred that nearly all of the 184 69th NYSM volunteers comprehended the Fenian vision for the regiment.

With Corcoran serving as the commander of the Irish Legion, someone had to command the 69th NYNGA in battle. When Bagley refused to go to the front, the 69th NYSM membership elected Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Murphy as Colonel and he commenced recruiting. Murphy was no stranger to the Fenians or the 69th NYSM. He was only twenty-two years old, but had already served as major of the Phoenix Brigade,

²⁷. *The Irish American* February 28, 1863.

²⁸. Muster – In Rolls 182nd NYVI. (Albany: Date Unknown, Publisher Unknown). These were published and bound lists of everyone mustered into the regiment.

²⁹. Special Orders no. 125, Adjutant General’s Office, Albany, NY, March 19, 1864. Major Bagley Papers, Mr. Jack Halloran, Bantam Lake, CT.

³⁰. Civil War and later Pension Index 182nd NYVI and 69th NY, <http://www.Footnote.com>.

³¹. Civil War and later Pension Index 182nd NYVI and 69th NY, <http://www.Footnote.com>.

then enlisted as a private in the 69th NYSM in April 1861, before rising to lieutenant and then appointed regimental adjutant in 1862.³²

Recruiting the enlisted personnel was not easy. Officers spread throughout the state and city, scouring for available men. Corcoran even resorted to professional recruiters such as Mr. Michael Noonan, who were paid to bring in recruits.³³ By far the biggest enticement was money. In early September 1862, a committee composed of Judge Daly, Richard O’Gorman, John Savage, J.B. Kirker, James P. Nicholson and Daniel Devlin formed to raise funds, supply bounties and sustain the soldier’s families while they were away.³⁴ In September, the committee offered an additional \$50 per man to those who joined the Corcoran Legion. Of course, some “bounty jumpers” came for the cash and deserted when they received it. One man, James Dolan, joined both the 69th NYNGA and the 155th NYV to receive double the sum in bounties.³⁵ Duplicity was not the only obstacle; there was a scarcity of recruits in New York City in general. By the fall of 1862, New York’s economy improved and available jobs paid more than army service. Recruits were a commodity, often lured away by other forming organizations, namely General Francis Spinola’s Empire Brigade.³⁶ Others were transferred in by the state and being “Americans” objected to serving under Corcoran.³⁷

³². *The Irish American* April 29, 1865

³³. Mr. Gowen to the New York Adjutant General, Letter dated June 8, 1863. Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Box 47 Folder 11. New York State Archives, Albany, NY. (Here after referred to as AGO papers.

³⁴. *The Irish American* September 13, 1862.

³⁵. Company Order Book, Co D 182nd NYV. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Hereafter referred to as Company Orders Book.

³⁶. John Halpin to Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated September 30, 1862. AGO Papers, Box 48, Folder 6.

³⁷. P. J. Claussen to General Morgan. Letter Dated September 26, 1862. Box 47, Folder 19. AGO Papers.

Meanwhile, Corcoran had units of the Irish Legion forming in New York City relocate to Camp Scott on Staten Island. At Camp Scott, the regiments trained as recruits slowly arrived. Life at Camp Scott showcased the struggle to recruit, for even as new volunteers showed up, others disappeared. While in Staten Island, the 69th NYNGA lost 161 men by desertion, 27.7% of the Regiment.³⁸

Desertion complicated an existing problem, the payment of bounties. State and national officers refused to pay bounties because they believed it encouraged bounty jumping. Conversely, Corcoran urged that by not paying out the large sums promised, the agents encouraged desertion. Corcoran complained that both the city and war committee bounties, as well as the national advance, failed to provide the necessary “hard money” to the men.³⁹ Despite these difficulties, on October 17, 1862, Company E of the 69th NYNGA had the minimum number of men necessary to be mustered into service.⁴⁰ Once a single company mustered, the regiment existed in an official sense.

Doubtful newspaper reporters claimed the officers of the 69th NYNGA could not fill their regiment. On October 22, the 69th mustered only 616 men and the lieutenant colonelcy was still vacant.⁴¹ The 69th NYNGA remained significantly behind the 170th NYV (2d Regiment Corcoran Legion), which had with 840 men and the 5th Regiment,

³⁸. Muster in Rolls, 182nd NYV. Some companies lost a higher percentage. The highest was Company A which lost forty one men (50.4%) followed by Company E with thirty-seven (40.7%). The Companies with the lowest desertion rates were Company B with only five deserters (3.5%) and Company H with twelve (10.4%). The median age of a deserter in the 69th was 30.5 years and the average was 26.5 years. The median was four years younger and the average 3.3 less than those who did not desert.

³⁹. Michael Corcoran to Adjutant General, New York. Letter Dated October 9, 1862. Box 49, Folder 10. AGO records.

⁴⁰. Adjutant William Fogarty to Adjutant General Hillhouse. Letter Dated October 17, 1862. Box 50, Folder 13. AGO Records.

⁴¹. Michael Corcoran to Brigadier General Hillhouse, Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated October 22, 1862. Box 50, Folder 21. AGO Records.

Corcoran Legion, which had 650 men.⁴² The 6th Regiment, Corcoran Legion, under Reid fared even worse, with only 307 men and the major's position vacant.⁴³ All told, the seven regiments of the Corcoran Legion could only muster 3,729 men, not four full-sized regiments.⁴⁴ Corcoran noted that those were men physically present and did not include the "large numbers" "absent without leave" that would return "or be arrested."⁴⁵

The highlight of the Legion's stay at Camp Scott occurred in October 16, 1862, when Archbishop John Hughes visited. Prior to his arrival, priests had spent days preparing for the visit. The purpose was to witness the sacrament of Confirmation, which was administered en masse to the officers and men of the Corcoran Irish Legion.⁴⁶ While the leadership was Fenian and non-sectarian, the Corcoran Irish Legion and the 69th NYNGA were almost exclusively Catholic.⁴⁷

On Thursday, November 6, Colonel Matthew Murphy was the subject of a presentation. A committee led by Mr. Brennan and friends from New York, made their way to his tent.⁴⁸ There, he was presented with a "handsome war steed, fully caparisoned" along with a Tiffany-made sword and a sash.⁴⁹ Murphy was reminded that "the name and fame of 'the old 69th' shall be made safe," and to remember the "sacredness" of the cause he was to fight in.⁵⁰ It was better to die than to live in shame

⁴². Michael Corcoran to Brigadier General Hillhouse, Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated October 22, 1862. Box 50, Folder 21. AGO Records.

⁴³. Michael Corcoran to Brigadier General Hillhouse, Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated October 22, 1862. Box 50, Folder 21. AGO Records.

⁴⁴. Michael Corcoran to Brigadier General Hillhouse, Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated October 22, 1862. Box 50, Folder 21. AGO Records.

⁴⁵. Michael Corcoran to Brigadier General Hillhouse, Adjutant General, State of New York. Letter dated October 22, 1862. Box 50, Folder 21. AGO Records.

⁴⁶. *The New York Tribune* October 16, 1862.

⁴⁷. Regimental Orders Book 182nd NYV. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Also Company Orders Books, 182nd NYV. NARA.

⁴⁸. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁴⁹. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁵⁰. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

with “national debasement.”⁵¹ Murphy accepted the gifts with “brief, frank” thanks and was cheered by the men of the regiment who had gathered to witness the occasion. This was followed by entertainment for his guests conducted “with true soldierly hospitality.”⁵²

As November drew near, preparations began for departure to “the seat of the war.” All officers and enlisted men in New York received orders to report to Camp Scott no later than 10 AM, October 27, 1862.⁵³ With the first state draft rapidly approaching, General Corcoran announced an additional \$20 bonus to anyone who enlisted before November 10, 1862, a desperate plea to fill the Legion.⁵⁴

With rumors of departure rampant, families became anxious. There was a “grand rush” on the afternoon of November 6, 1862, to Staten Island by friends and family who believed the regiment was leaving the next morning.⁵⁵ While Corcoran was anxious to get the Irish Legion into Federal Service, others wanted to detain it. Judge George G. Barnard of the New York City Supreme Court issued orders for the arrest of Colonel Reid for the disobedience of writs of Habeas Corpus.⁵⁶ He had been accused of illegally detaining soldiers at Camp Scott. The metropolitan authorities were doubtful whether the sheriff had the power to execute the arrest warrant.⁵⁷ In the end, it was never acted upon.

On November 8, 1862, the long awaited orders arrived. The 69th NYNGA, along with the rest of the Corcoran Irish Legion, broke camp and headed for Fortress Monroe, Virginia. The 69th NYNGA and the 164th NYV boarded the transport *Cahawaba* with the

⁵¹. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁵². *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁵³. *The New York Herald Tribune* October 27, 1862.

⁵⁴. *The Irish American* November 1, 1862.

⁵⁵. *The Public Ledger* November 6, 1862.

⁵⁶. *New York Herald Tribune* November 7, 1862.

⁵⁷. *The Public Ledger* November 7, 1862.

6th and 8th Regiments, Corcoran Legion, on the *United States*.⁵⁸ Some officers were ordered to remain behind. From the 69th NYNGA, Captains Sullivan, Butler, Coonan and Lynch were detached for recruiting duty in New York City, as well as Captains O'Brien, Crowley and Lieutenant Dempsey from the 6th.⁵⁹

Having struck their tents and baggage, the men formed in line to depart. The 69th received “as fine a flag as we have ever seen,” by Judge Daly on behalf of Richard O’Gorman.⁶⁰ The flag was green silk, “splendidly embroidered” with the harp and Fenian sunburst, over which were embroidered the words in Irish “First in the van and last in retreat.”⁶¹ The flag was significant both as a symbol of their homeland and their fondest hope, as well as coming from the hands of an esteemed Irish patriot. Judge Daly reminded the 69th that they “reflected luster on the Irish race.”⁶² Colonel Murphy accepted the flag and promised the words would be their battle cry and they would endeavor to live up to it.⁶³

Following the ceremony, the men marched for Clifden landing. Contrary to public speculation, the men departed without reluctance or disorder.⁶⁴ Due to bad weather the flotilla did not depart for several days. Rations ran short, forcing Colonel Murphy to go ashore and make arrangements for more food to be brought aboard.⁶⁵ Murphy discovered “a noted politician” from the 6th Ward selling liquor to his men.⁶⁶ He was summarily exposed in front of the officers aboard, forced to return the money he had taken from the

⁵⁸. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁵⁹. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶⁰. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶¹. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶². *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶³. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶⁴. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶⁵. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

⁶⁶. *The Irish American* November 15, 1862.

men and “ignominiously put ashore amid the jeers and shouts of the men.”⁶⁷ Once the men exhausted the whiskey, they settled down, becoming very quiet and “good natured.”⁶⁸

While the 69th NYNGA and the Corcoran Legion prepared to depart for Virginia, New York State found a remedy for the undermanned regiments. General Headquarters, State of New York, issued orders to “consolidate the several incomplete organizations” of the Legion and “organize them into regiments.”⁶⁹ Under this plan the 69th NYNGA and the 6th Regiment, Irish Legion were consolidated into one regiment, the 69th NYNGA.⁷⁰

The field and staff of the 69th would be as follows:

Colonel Matthew Murphy
Lieutenant Colonel Thomas M. Reid
Major Theodore Kelly
Adjutant William Fogarty
Quartermaster John Fahy
Surgeon John Dwyer
Assistant Surgeon James T. Fahie.⁷¹

With the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Reid, the staff was from the 69th.

The state advised the consolidation be handled with tact. Whenever possible, men were assigned to companies under officers who recruited them.⁷² Nevertheless, the first

⁶⁷. *The Irish American*, November 15, 1862. For legal reasons the politician was not named, although it is believed to be Isaiah Rynders, the US Marshal in New York. Rynders was despised by the Irish for his part in fomenting and breaking up the Astor Place riot. He was also heavily involved in the Slave trade.

⁶⁸. *The Irish American*, November 15, 1862.

⁶⁹. Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers.

⁷⁰. Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers. Individual Companies were merged and redesignated. Company A to be composed of Sixty-Seven members of Company A and Thirteen members of company E. Company B of Sixty-Nine men from Company B 6th Regiment and Thirteen from company G of the 69th. Company C created by the merger of Companies B and C of the 69th and twenty men from company E of the 6th. Company D was a merger of Company D of the 69th and Company F of the 6th. Company E was formed by merging Companies E and K of the 69th. Company F was created by the merger of Company G, 6th Regiment and sixteen men from Company F of the 69th. Company G was formed from Company A of the 6th and twelve men from Company G from the 69th. Company H was composed of Company H of the 69th and nineteen men from company D of the 69th. Company I was a merger of the old company F of the 69th and Company H of the 6th. Company K was Company C, 6th regiment, added “without any necessary changes.”

⁷¹. Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers.

goal was to distribute the men so each company possessed the minimum strength to muster into federal service.⁷³ There were more officers than needed, so supernumerary officers had to be honorably discharged.⁷⁴ This was particularly hard on the 69th which had been organized as a heavy artillery regiment with four officers per company. The newly consolidated 69th NYNGA would now be organized as an infantry regiment, with only three officers per company. While necessary, the consolidation was “a very disagreeable” affair.⁷⁵ By the time it mustered, the regiment numbered 685 men aggregate.

A week prior to their muster into Federal service, Corcoran issued an odd order, Regimental Order No. 28, 69th NYNGA, issued November 10, 1862, which reinforced the belief that the 69th NYNGA was to be considered *the* 69th, meaning the 69th NYSM. Captains Lynch, Breslin and Butler, along with Lieutenant Connally were ordered to “take charge and hold the Regimental Armory at the corner of Essex and Grand St.”⁷⁶ This was unprecedented for a volunteer regiment, further illustrating the perceived and inherent belief that they were *the* standing 69th NYSM.

Above all else, the 69th NYNGA was known by its ethnicity. It was an Irish regiment plain and simple. Sixty-eight percent of the Regiment was Irish born.⁷⁷ Seventeen percent were born in the United States. Germans accounted for six percent of

⁷². Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers

⁷³. Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers

⁷⁴. Colonel George Bliss to General Michael Corcoran. Letter dated November 8, 1862. Box 52, Folder 4. AGO Papers

⁷⁵. *The Irish American* December 13, 1862.

⁷⁶. Regimental Order no. 28, November 10, 1862. Corcoran’s Desk. Regimental Archives, 69th Infantry Regiment (Light), New York, NY.

⁷⁷. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC. Hereafter referred to as Regimental Descriptive Book.

the regiment; English five; Scots two percent; Canadians and French one percent each. The regiment also included individuals from Wales, Italy, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland, Holland, Poland and the East Indies.⁷⁸ Among the Irish born, certain trends emerge. Recruits represented nearly all the counties of Ireland, yet six counties – Tyrone, Sligo, Tipperary, Cavan, Cork and Dublin – accounted for almost half the members.⁷⁹ These Counties are significant in the Nationalist context. Sligo was the home county of both Corcoran and Murphy. Tipperary was scene of the 1848 rebellion, as well as the location where O’Mahony attempted to start a guerilla uprising. Cork was an early center of Fenianism and home to O’Donovan Rossa’s “Phoenix society” as well as Francis Whelply. Dublin was where Stephens and the IRB were headquartered. Thirty percent of the members came from Lienster, the most prosperous and largest province in eastern Ireland. Twenty-eight percent came from Munster, which included the “congested” and poorest counties of Cork, Kerry and Clare. Cork men were the single most common county represented with fourteen percent of all Irish born members. Ulster came in third with twenty-five percent, a province that today includes the statelet of Northern Ireland. Connaught, the most impoverished province on the west coast of Ireland, accounted for seventeen percent. County Sligo, in Connaught and home to both Michael Corcoran and Matthew Murphy, accounted for seven percent of the Irish born in the Regiment and was the most common county of birth after Cork and Dublin.⁸⁰

⁷⁸. Regimental Descriptive Book. These Counties are significant in the Nationalist context. Sligo was the home county of both Corcoran and Murphy. Tipperary was scene most of the 1848 rising, as well as O’Mahony’s attempt to start a Guerilla campaign following it. Cork was an early center of Fenianism with O’Donovan Rossa’s “Phoenix society” as well as home to Francis Whelply. Dublin was where Stephens and the IRB were centered out of.

⁷⁹. Regimental Descriptive Book.

⁸⁰. Regimental Descriptive Book.

Among the American born, New York City was the predominate place of birth. Sixty-nine percent were born in New York City and it can be assumed many, if not all, came from Irish parentage. An additional four percent were born on Long Island (today Queens, Nassau and Suffolk counties) or Brooklyn.⁸¹ The remainder of the American born were from New England and Pennsylvania (seven percent each), upstate New York and the southern states (five percent each), New Jersey (two percent) and the Midwest (one percent).⁸²

One might expect the 69th NYNGA to be from the heavily Irish 4th, 6th, 14th and 20th Wards of Manhattan. An analysis of home addresses in regimental records, newspapers and correspondence shows the regiment came from all over the city and not just from one or two neighborhoods. A plot of known addresses shows members residing in every ward in developed New York, except the 9th and 15th Wards (in what is now Greenwich Village). The heaviest concentrations were found in the 18th Ward (east side between 14th and 26th Streets), the 17th (Lower East Side), the 4th Ward (near Chatham Square along the East River) and the “Irish” 14th Ward.⁸³ The neighborhood most associated with the Irish, the “bloody Sixth” Ward, which incorporated the notorious Five Points had only four recorded members of the regiment living there.⁸⁴ This suggests one thing; the 69th NYNGA’s identity was not that of a neighborhood, but of nationality. Granted, some men came for ideological reasons, but the lure of bounties drew in the rest. This suggests that the enlisted ranks had little attachment to Fenianism, although the

⁸¹. Regimental Descriptive Book. This is in contrast with the 1865 State census that found while almost half the state population lived in the city; only eighteen percent of the total forces from New York were from the five metropolitan counties.

⁸². Regimental Descriptive Book.

⁸³. Regimental Miscellaneous Book, 182nd NYV. RG 92. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Hereafter referred to as “Misc Regimental Book.”

⁸⁴. Misc Regimental Book, 182nd NYV. Among those were Colonel Matthew Murphy who lived at the north end of “Mulberry Bend.”

officer corps offered a transnational outlook, the majority of the rank-and-file thought of citizenship or personal gain.

Politically we know the Irish were predominantly Democrats. In the 1863 mayoral election, only four wards in New York were carried by the Union (Republican) party – The Ninth, Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Twenty-first Wards.⁸⁵ In these Republican wards, only three members of the regiment resided.⁸⁶ In two of these, the Ninth and Fifteenth, no members resided at all. Within the Democrat wards, most of the recorded addresses were in wards won by the “McKeon Democrat” candidate, Charles G. Gunther, the anti-war “Copperhead” candidate in 1864.⁸⁷

The average officer of the 69th NYNGA was 28.6-years-old, while that of enlisted personnel was 29.8 years. The median age for officers was 30.5 while that of enlisted was 34.5 years. Among the officers, the youngest, Colonel Murphy, was twenty-two and the oldest was thirty-nine years. Among the men, the youngest was seventeen and the oldest, fifty-two. Musicians, factored in separately, ranged between fourteen and nineteen. The 27.7 percent who deserted in Staten Island were, on average, younger than those who stayed with the colors. The youngest was a sixteen-year-old musician and the oldest was a forty-five-year-old recruit. The average deserter was 26.5-years-old and the median age was 30.5.⁸⁸ Importantly, this put the average member of the 69th NYNGA between thirteen and fifteen-years-old during the defining event in modern Irish history – *An Gorta Mor* and would have indelibly traumatized and scarred them.

⁸⁵. Bernstein, 286.

⁸⁶. Misc Regimental Book, 182nd NYV. RG 92. NARA.

⁸⁷. Misc Regimental Book, 182nd NYV. RG 92. NARA. Also Bernstein, 286.

⁸⁸. Muster In Roll 182nd NYV.

By most standards, the men of the 69th were older than their fellow volunteers. In New York State, the average age of enlisted volunteers at the start of their service was twenty-five years and the median age was thirty-two years.⁸⁹ This made the average enlisted men of the 69th on average almost five years older and a median age two and a half years older. Among the officers, the state average was 27.5 years and the median 33.5. On average the officers were one year older than the New York average, but the median age was three years younger.

When compared with another regiment raised at the same time, the 114th Pennsylvania Volunteers (“Collis’ Zouaves”), which mustered-in two months earlier, the 69th NYNGA again stands out as an older regiment. The 114th was recruited during July and August 1862 and some members even saw Corcoran on his triumphant return trip to New York. The average age of enlisted personnel in the 114th was 24.3 years old and a median of twenty-two, almost five years younger on average and twelve on the median than the 69th.⁹⁰ Among the officers, the average age was 26.2 years and a median age of twenty-four, a year younger on average and nine years younger on the median.⁹¹

⁸⁹. Phisterer, 71.

⁹⁰. Edward J. Hagerty, *Collis’ Zouaves: The 114th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 75.

⁹¹. Hagerty, *Collis’ Zouaves*, 75. From the Regimental Descriptive books we get a fairly good idea of the physical appearance of the men of the regiment. The Average height of the men was 66.9 inches Tall (almost five foot seven inches) with the median height being Five Foot five and a half inches tall. The Shortest man was Four foot nine inches while the tallest was Six foot two. Sixty-seven percent of the men whose information was recorded were between Five foot five and five foot eight inches tall. The men as a whole tended to be light skinned. Sixty-four percent of the Regiment was described as having either fair (38%), light (23%) or sandy (3%) complexions. After “fair” the most common complexion was listed as “dark” (35%). The remainder was described as ruddy, brown, red, florid and sallow. Contrary to stereotypes of red headed Irishmen, only two percent of the Regiment had red or auburn hair. The majority (61%) had hair described as brown, dark or black, with brown (29%) the most common hair color. Fair, light and sandy accounted for thirty-four men, while the remainder had gray hair (3%). Forty-four percent of the men had blue eyes and twenty-eight percent had gray ones. Brown eyed men made up an additional fifteen percent, leaving hazel, sandy, black, dark and light to account for the remaining thirteen percent. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

Aside from statistics, we know very little about the officers and men of the 69th NYNGA. More is known about the officers than the rank and file. Frequently that information can only be gleaned from public obituaries. The most salient fact was that most of the officers of the 69th had risen from the ranks prior to their muster into federal service.⁹² Fully half of the officers of the regiment had risen from the ranks, to include the brigadier, colonel and almost all of the original 69th officers.⁹³ By comparison, none of the officers consolidated from the 6th Regiment, Corcoran Legion, had the same experience.⁹⁴ The officer descriptive entries are laced with the entries such as joined company "...of this regiment" and an 1850's date, connected "with this regiment as private, sergeant," or "served in this regiment."⁹⁵ This further proves that they considered themselves to be *the* 69th NYSM, the revolutionary regiment. Six of the ten captains at muster-in had served with the regiment prior to the start of the Civil War.⁹⁶ Further, the officers all emerged from humble beginnings. Lieutenant Colonel Reid had no noteworthy history to speak of – and none that anyone ever wrote for posterity. What we do know is that he was an "Ulsterman and a Protestant."⁹⁷ He was noted as not being an "actual Fenian," but was seen "at least a sympathizer with Fenian objects."⁹⁸

Captain William Butler, soon promoted to major, arrived in New York from Newcastle, County Tipperary, Ireland in 1848 "friendless and a stranger."⁹⁹ He joined the 69th NYSM as a private on December 19, 1854, and rose from the ranks, ultimately to be

⁹². Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

⁹³. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

⁹⁴. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

⁹⁵. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

⁹⁶. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

⁹⁷. O'Leary, 217.

⁹⁸. O'Leary, 217. It is interesting to note that the Colonel of the 69th NYV Robert Nugent was also a Protestant and not a Fenian either.

⁹⁹. *The Irish American* August 27, 1864.

elected captain of Company H in 1861.¹⁰⁰ Information relating to the other company commanders reveals the same trend. Captain O'Farrell, the ardent abolitionist, was born in 1832 in County Cavan, Ireland. He was an ardent chess player, in fact, the Belfast champion.¹⁰¹ He immigrated to the United States in 1852 and within twenty-four hours of arriving, joined the 69th NYSM as a private in company G.¹⁰² Captain Michael Murphy by trade was a compositor and served formerly as a captain in the First Fire Zouaves.¹⁰³ Of Captain Charles Glynn, all we know was he was a native of Ballybawn, county Roscommon.¹⁰⁴ First Lieutenant Francis Whelply of Company H was one of the core Fenians. Born in Skibereen, County Cork, his service intertwined the Phoenix Brigade and the 69th NYSM. He had joined the 69th as a private in Company D on December 19, 1855, exactly one year after his captain, William Butler and was promoted sergeant the following day.¹⁰⁵ He was also active in the Phoenix Brigade, where he held the position of Captain, Company A.¹⁰⁶ Whelply had earned the distinction of being the most zealous and successful recruiting officer in the military department of the Fenian Brotherhood.¹⁰⁷ He was selected as the Phoenix Brigade representative for the escort of Young Ireland leader Terence McManus's body which was returned for funeral and burial to Ireland in 1861 under the auspices of the IRB.¹⁰⁸

When looking at the occupations of enlisted members of the regiment, we get a good idea of who these men were in civilian life. In analyzing their professions, I

¹⁰⁰. *The Irish American* August 27, 1864.

¹⁰¹. *The Irish World* January 3, 1903.

¹⁰². *The Irish World* January 3, 1903.

¹⁰³. *The New York Herald Tribune* October 10, 1888.

¹⁰⁴. *The New York Herald* February 11, 1875.

¹⁰⁵. Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

¹⁰⁶. Cavanaugh, 407.

¹⁰⁷. Cavanaugh, 407.

¹⁰⁸. Cavanagh, 407-408.

grouped them according to economic groupings classified by Amy Bridges in *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the origins of machine politics*. I chose these groupings as they would allow me to compare the men of the 69th NYNGA to the population of New York at the time as well as the Irish population in the city. She grouped New Yorkers into six categories: capitalists, small proprietors, professionals, artisans/mechanics, wage workers I and wage workers II on the bottom.¹⁰⁹

The enlisted men were primarily poor or working class. There were no capitalists in the regiment. Small proprietors accounted for only one percent, while professionals accounted for two percent and artisans/mechanics, six percent of the men. Ninety-one percent of the enlisted personnel were wage earners, with wage workers I accounting for thirty-five percent and wage workers II accounting for fifty-six of the regiment. Compared to the City as a whole, they were not proportionate. By comparison, 3.4 percent of all New Yorkers were capitalists. Small proprietors were 10.5 percent of the population, yet they made up only 4.3 percent of the Irish population and only one percent of the 69th. Professionals accounted for six percent of the population, and two percent of the Irish community, which was mirrored in the Regiment.¹¹⁰

Further down the economic ladder things become more disproportionate. Artisans and mechanics made up 12.2 percent of the New York population and 8.6 percent of the Irish population, but only six percent of the regiment. Wage workers I accounted for 28.3 percent of the population at large, 23.6 percent of the Irish community and thirty-five

¹⁰⁹. Bridges describes the groups roughly. Small proprietors: shop keepers, contractors and builders, grocers and the like. Professionals: engineers, architects lawyers, doctors, teachers, clergy etc. Artisans/mechanics: smiths, precision workers, shipbuilders. Wage workers I: factory workers, building trades, tailors, shoemakers, iron workers, bakers, cabinet makers, etc. Wage workers II: servants, laborers, porters, most clerks, drivers, teamsters, most brewers, sailors and other casual workers. Source: Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the origins of machine politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 46.

¹¹⁰. Bridges, 46 and 56.

percent of the regiment. The lowest tier, wage workers II, which was 39.2 percent of the city, was sixty-one percent of the Irish community and fifty-six percent of the 69th.¹¹¹ This demonstrates that while the majority of the regiment represented the poor or working class, the poorest segment of New York did not enlist in the 69th NYNGA in proportion. The working class, “wage workers I” enlisted in a proportion greater than any other, this at a time when economic opportunity was on the rise, which represented a significant sacrifice.

In looking at individual occupations we notice that most lacked a high degree of skill. By far the most common occupation was laborer with 190 members. The next most common were the building trades, accounting for 119 members. Surprisingly, the regiment contained a large number of sailors, with thirty-seven men listing that as their occupation. Among the artisans and mechanics, the most common trade was that of blacksmith. On average most companies had between four and six artisans/mechanics, although several had only one. Likewise, most companies had only one professional in their ranks; six of the ten companies had no small proprietors in their ranks at all.¹¹² In all likelihood, the enlisted ranks served as a cross section of Irish New York and the soldiers had no attachment to Fenianism. But what did the volunteers think about joining an Irish regiment led by a Fenian officer corps? Did it trouble them or did they embrace their extremist leaders? While we find no lists of enlisted Fenians, we do know that the Irish Legion did have its own Circle, which would have contained roughly 800 men.¹¹³ The mass enlistment of almost 7,000 members of the Fenian Brotherhood into the federal

¹¹¹. Bridges, 46 and 56.

¹¹². Regimental Descriptive Book, 182nd NYV. RG94. NARA

¹¹³. Padraig O’Conchubhair. *The Fenians were Dreadful Men: The 1867 Rising*. (Cork: Mercier, 2011), 17.

army and navy would have ensured that there were a substantial number of Fenians among the enlisted personnel.¹¹⁴

This was the 69th NYNGA at its muster into federal service. Aside from its Irishness, its Fenian officer corps, its age and its working class strength, there is little that would make it stand out. Unlike other Union regiments and some Irish ones, it lacked the social elites or a middle class core. Of its officers, most had risen from the ranks; they would not have rubbed elbows with officers in more prestigious “American” regiments. Newspapers continued to stereotype poor Irishmen, yet in the Republic’s darkest hour, it was these men, despised and written off by respectable society, who stepped forward. The Fenians led the recruits to their global cause by fighting against the rebellion in America, a cause to which they sacrificed their lives, health, fortunes and dreams in the following three years. Thus, the decision to take the 69th NYNGA to war, wrapped up in the turbulent year of 1862, sowed the seeds of demise for the Fenian Brotherhood.

¹¹⁴. Fenian Brotherhood. *Proceedings of the Second National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, January 1865*. (Philadelphia: James Gibbons, 1865), 6. Also D’Arcy, 28.

Chapter 4

THE 69th NYNGA IN FEDERAL SERVICE
NOVEMBER 1862-JULY 1865

Having arrived in Virginia, the 69th NYNGA prepared for battle. It spent its first eighteen months in the backwaters of the eastern theater and then in May 1864 it joined the Army of the Potomac. The time spent by the 69th NYNGA in federal service proved both beneficial and disastrous. On one hand, the martial service of the 69th NYNGA proved that loyal Irishmen would fight for the Union even as the enthusiasm of the Irish-American community decreased. On the other hand, the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns bled the regiment dry. By April 1865, all of the original field officers of the Regiment were gone, either killed, wounded, captured or dismissed. With its desperate fighting, the core of the Fenian Brotherhood was all but destroyed. The organizations best, bravest and most diligent officers fell on the fields of Virginia, which allowed a new set of leaders to hijack the movement, which led to its demise. In essence, the Civil War forestalled Irish freedom for a generation.

Oddly enough both Corcoran and Murphy faced an uphill fight to get the regiment and the Corcoran Legion into battle. Corcoran had recruited a brigade, not a solitary regiment. By so doing, he gave the War Department an excuse to send it to Newport News, Virginia, the backwater of the eastern theater. Single regiments proved more useful to the Union army, as they could be used to refill depleted brigades. To insert a complete brigade would have created an administrative and political nightmare. It proved easier to deploy the Corcoran Legion to the periphery where the brigade remained intact, without dispersing its regiments.

Corcoran, of course did not want his legion to take a back seat. He wanted the Irish Legion to face combat as soon as possible.¹ Having once led the 69th NYSM to the field in 1861, it was essential that his Legionnaires play a role and not idle away on garrison duty. Corcoran also wanted the brigade to remain intact and not be dispersed to various theaters. The heart of the Fenian Brotherhood, the Officers of the Legion, could not be split up and used in penny packets, nor wasted as Irish cannon fodder, as some claimed the army had already done with Meagher's Irish Brigade. Corcoran's men had to be used decisively, not manipulated by nativist and Anglo-centric forces that wished to see their political future destroyed.²

Irish New Yorkers agreed with Corcoran, that the Legion should see battle, and it should do so soon. Archbishop Hughes wrote to the Corcoran Legion expressing his approval of their devotion and reminding them that the reputation of the Irish "race" was in their hands.³ The leadership of the Fenian Brotherhood believed the war was essential, not just to Ireland and America's freedom, but to all mankind.⁴ In general, the Fenians no longer sat on the fence. Corcoran and O'Mahoney understood how bloody the war had become, but nevertheless they committed the Brotherhood to the fight. What they could not forecast was the vacuum in leadership soon to be caused by Fenian casualties. It proved a blow from which the Fenians never recovered.

On December 29, 1862, the 69th NYNGA left its encampment at Newport News and embarked for Suffolk, Virginia. The regiment occupied the southern perimeter of the Suffolk defenses near Forts Union, Dix and Halleck as part of General John J. Peck's

¹ Corcoran to Charles P. Daly. Letter Dated August 14, 1863. Judge Daly Papers, box 3.

² Fr. Bernard O'Reilly to Charles P. Daly. Letter dated January 30, 1864. Daly Papers NYPL.

³ *The Irish American*, December 20, 1862.

⁴ Miles O'Reilly (Charles Halpine), *Baked meats of the Funeral: A collection of essays, poems, speeches, histories and banquets*. (New York: Carelton, 1866), 213. Also Cavanagh, 369.

Division.⁵ They went to work improving the defenses and performing picket duties.⁶ The regiment's "baptism of fire" came in late January 1863. Early on the morning of January 30, Confederate General Roger Pryor crossed the Blackwater River to forage in Union territory.⁷ The regiment formed part of a force under Corcoran's command dispatched to drive them back. After this short skirmish, the 69th NYNGA was cited for its "admirable steadiness" under fire and Mathew Murphy was singled out for commendation.⁸ According to the newspapers the 69th NYNGA had "maintained to the full extent, under the most galling fire, their *old* reputation."⁹ The regiment lost three killed and ten wounded, one of whom died the following day. Following the battle, known as Deserted House, the men settled back into the tedium of garrison duty.

In April 1863, General James Longstreet, with two divisions, invested and contained the Federal forces at Suffolk, while gathering food and supplies for the Confederacy. In response, the federal garrison redoubled its digging, which vexed the battle-hungry soldiers of the 69th NYNGA. An anecdote recounted that two members of the Irish Legion chatted about the situation and one wished General Peck to Hell. When the second member asked why, he only wished Peck to get there before him, because "He'll have the place so well fortified that no one else will ever get in."¹⁰ In the weeks that followed, no major battle occurred, but numerous small skirmishes abounded. The 69th NYNGA saw little action, as it occupied the works defending the Edenton Plank Road, a relatively quiet sector.¹¹ On April 24, the entire division participated in a

⁵. *The Irish American*, January 17, 1863.

⁶. General Orders 24, December 31, 1862. Regimental Orders Book.

⁷. General Pryor's Report. The Battle of Deserted House. OR Vol 18, 142-145.

⁸. Corcoran's report. Battle of Deserted House. OR VOL 18, 136-139.

⁹. *The Irish American*, February 14, 1863.

¹⁰. *The New Hampshire Patriot*, June 7, 1871.

¹¹. Report, Colonel Matthew Murphy. OR Vol 18, 288-291.

reconnaissance-in-force down the Edenton Road, easily taking enemy rifle pits.¹² By the first week in May, Longstreet's Confederates withdrew and Federal forces set about tearing down the Confederate works that had held them in check for months.

Disappointed though they were by the Suffolk Campaign, the tedium of siege duty gave the 69th NYNGA officers a chance to bolster their Fenianism, consolidating their hold upon the other regiments of the Brigade. The Brigade boasted its own circle – the Circle of the Nansemond. In early April, the Irish Legion hosted both John O'Mahoney and Thomas Clark Luby, James Stephen's personal representative sent to observe conditions in America. Luby came at a time of "very strained" relations between O'Mahoney and Stephens and was instructed to "stir up" the Fenians to greater exertions on behalf of the cause.¹³ He also had secret orders and authority to "suspend, or supercede, or even depose" the American leadership.¹⁴

The main purpose of his visit to Suffolk was to meet with the Fenian officers in the Legion and he stayed about eight days with them.¹⁵ The circle held its "international" summit in Lieutenant Colonel Reid's quarters.¹⁶ Few organizations can claim to have hosted, in one sitting, two founding members of the Fenian Brotherhood and James Stephen's personal representative, indicative of their prominence in the movement. No doubt the meetings focused upon the state and the future of the movement on the highest levels, with the core leadership of the American organization. Having concluded their "business" – whatever it was – and with Longstreet's commencement of the Siege of

¹². Report, Colonel Matthew Murphy. OR Vol 18, 288-291.

¹³. John O'Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*. (London: Downey & Co., 1896), 205-206.

¹⁴. O'Leary, 207.

¹⁵. O'Leary, 216-217.

¹⁶. O'Leary, 217.

Suffolk, Corcoran and Murphy were anxious to get O'Mahoney and Luby out of harm's way.¹⁷

Catholicism played a major role in the lives of the Irish Legionnaires and for the Fenians, as religion gave their cause a moral compass. The officers disregarded training for religious observances. Colonel Murphy, for instance, issued orders that it was only proper that officers accompany their men to divine services.¹⁸ So popular was mass, that on April 4, orders were given that it would be held in two shifts as there was insufficient room for the whole brigade in the chapel tent.¹⁹ The highlight of the 69th NYNGA's time at Suffolk was St. Patrick's Day. In honor of the day, General Peck dispensed with all fatigue details.²⁰ Divine service was held at 9:30 AM. At 12:30 PM, the Corcoran Legion assembled for a review before General Peck.²¹ The Legionnaires decorated the camp with symbols of Ireland, such as the harp and the shamrock, with Captain Whelply's and Captain Heggart's companies of the 69th NYNGA being singled out for "tasteful decoration."²² The day was a celebration of the ancient and holy traditions of nationhood as handed down from "dead generations." The regiment participated in Suffolk's first St. Patrick's Day parade and stood out in their artillery uniforms.²³

Following the parade, the men returned to camp for food and beverages. At 8:00 PM, the officers held a dinner at the Central Hotel. Corcoran gave a short patriotic speech

¹⁷. Darcy, 30-31.

¹⁸. Regimental Order no. 4. December 21, 1862. Company Orders Book.

¹⁹. Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion. April 4, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

²⁰. Special orders no. 14, Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion. March 16, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

²¹. Special Orders no. 14, Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion. March 16, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

²². *The Irish American*, April 11, 1863.

²³. *The Irish American*, April 11, 1863.

received by cheers.²⁴ He reflected that if the “traitors” had their way, St. Patrick’s Day celebrations would not be allowed.²⁵ He remarked that as a prisoner in Richmond jail, no Irishman was allowed to wear so much as a “sprig of evergreen” in honor of the day.²⁶ In doing so, Corcoran deftly painted the Confederacy as being both anti-Irish and Anglophile, the enemies of humankind.

Despite the festivities, the 69th NYNGA’s morale declined during the Suffolk Campaign. Suffolk was located on the fringes of the Great Dismal Swamp and sanitary conditions deteriorated as winter set in. Oddly enough, some men refused to use the sinks and defecated in camp.²⁷ The camp become so sloppy and improperly policed, with “filth and garbage” accumulating, the surgeon believed a Typhus outbreak possible.²⁸ Conscious of the approaching warm weather, Lieutenant Colonel Reid ordered that officers ensure the cleanliness of camp. “Sinks and debris of camp” were to be burned daily.²⁹ To head off lice-borne disease, he ordered the men have their hair cut short and bathe frequently.³⁰

Further, Corcoran and Murphy placed strict controls upon the men to avert trouble, confining them to camp. Officers strictly regulated alcohol and the sale of “strong liquors” was absolutely forbidden.³¹ Corcoran went out of his way to advise the regimental sutler, Breslin, not to bring liquor to camp in any quantity.³² He noted that “the authorities are very strict in regard to the sale of liquor,” even closing several sutlers

²⁴. *Lowell Daily*, March 25, 1863.

²⁵. *Lowell Daily*, March 25, 1863.

²⁶. *Lowell Daily*, March 25, 1863.

²⁷. Regimental Order no. 19, March 31, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

²⁸. Orders, Headquarters 1st Division, 7th AC, May 6, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

²⁹. Regimental Order 21. May 11, 1863. Company Orders Book.

³⁰. Regimental Order 21. May 11, 1863. Company Orders Book.

³¹. *The Irish American*, December 13, 1862.

³². Michael Corcoran to Breslin, letter dated November, 18, 1862. Corcoran’s Desk.

under special orders.³³ Ill and deprived of alcohol, idle minds connived and schemed, but no worse than in any other regiment.

Lacking heroes, the Irish newspapers focused their ill-will upon the 69th NYNGA's mediocre officers, looking for scapegoats. Captain Joseph Murphy of Company C was singled out in the *Irish American* for being a "slave dealer," having purchased a black "contraband" to do "housekeeping and laundry," to the embarrassment of the correspondent.³⁴ Bernard Leddy, a Regimental teamster, stole ten pounds of meat from the hospital for himself.³⁵ Apathy set in and the cleanliness of the quarters significantly deteriorated.³⁶ Matthew Murphy reprimanded Lt. Col. Reid for his sloppy and frequently late paperwork.³⁷ Murphy complained that pickets straggled in by "several different detachments," which he considered "irregular if not reprehensible."³⁸ During the period at Suffolk, Murphy reduced several sergeants to the ranks for dereliction of duty. Yet the men yearned for a real fight with the enemy and were upset with the situation as they wished to "avenge the deaths of their brothers at Fredericksburg."³⁹ Although discipline tended to be worse in the other regiments of Corcoran's Brigade, it was abundantly clear to the soldiers of the 69th NYNGA that there was not enough glory to go around.⁴⁰

³³. Michael Corcoran to Breslin, letter dated November, 18, 1862. Corcoran's Desk. Special Regimental Order no. 4, March 31, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

³⁴. *The Irish American*, December 20, 1862.

³⁵. Surgeon 170th NYV to Matthew Murphy. Letter dated April 1863. Regimental Letter Book.

³⁶. Regimental Order no. 7. February 7, 1863. Regimental Orders Book

³⁷. Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion to LTC Reid. Letter Dated February 25, 1863. Regimental Letters Book.

³⁸. Circular, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. Regimental Orders Book.

³⁹. *The Irish American*, January 24, 1863.

⁴⁰. Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion to Lieutenant Colonel Reid. Letter dated May 25, 1863. Regimental Letters Book.

The time at Suffolk wounded the 69th NYNGA, but its time on the plains of Manassas, left deep emotional scars. Having abandoned Suffolk in the summer of 1863, the Corcoran Legion joined the First Division, 22nd Army Corps. Headquartered at Fairfax Station, the regiment now guarded the Orange and Alexandria Railroad against John S. Mosby's Confederate partisans. To the men of the 69th NYNGA, some of whom had fought in a similar manner against the British, this duty proved distasteful. As Federal representatives, they were forbidden to straggle, plunder or pillage. Those who violated the standards outlined in General Orders 100 – the pacification of conquered areas – would “meet summary and instant punishment.”⁴¹

From the summer of 1863 to the spring of 1864, the regiment guarded the line from Fairfax Station to Bourke's Station. This included thirty miles of track and a bridge.⁴² Every two hours patrols walked the railway from picket to picket.⁴³ All the while, the soldiers feared raids by Mosby's men. Although Mosby never came, the Irish soldiers took precautions, sending armed escorts for firewood gathering.⁴⁴ In addition to regular details, the 69th NYNGA was responsible for control over the civilian population in the area. Any “soldier or civilian” who committed “depredations upon the railroads” was to be apprehended and punished. Under General Rufus King's policy, all persons living within ten miles of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad were held responsible for damage done by guerrillas. If damage occurred, the 69th NYNGA's officers could

⁴¹. Regimental Order no. 27. July 21, 1863. Company Orders Book.

⁴². General Orders no. 1, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. January 17, 1864. Regimental Orders Book. Also, Corcoran to Charles P Daly. Letter Dated October 21, 1863. Box 3, Daly Papers.

⁴³. General Orders no. 1, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. January 17, 1864. Regimental Orders Book.

⁴⁴. Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion. December 22, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

impress local citizens as laborers to repair the damage. If this failed, General King promised to depopulate the district and seize all property for Government use.⁴⁵

This unpleasant duty caused discipline and sanitary conditions to decline. The men received low-grade coffee, lost their knapsacks and struggled with malaria, prompting Colonel Murphy to order issue of a daily whiskey ration laced with “grains of sulfinate.”⁴⁶ Officers and men hated their service, overcome by boredom. One member wrote, “Centerville! We never wish to see thee more.”⁴⁷ Corcoran saw duty at Centerville as “interminable and almost entire uselessness” and wished that a “better opportunity” be given to his officers and men.⁴⁸ Corcoran visited both Seward and President Lincoln to plead his case for transfer in early August.⁴⁹ Corcoran wrote to Judge Daly:

The only prospect for me here is one of interminable and almost entire uselessness, and I would like in justice not only to myself, but to the officers and men of the “Legion” that some better opportunity of service should be afforded us.⁵⁰

On August 17, he wrote to Lincoln asking to be relieved of his duties at Centerville and be transferred elsewhere.⁵¹

As the officers complained, the men simply deserted. Enough men deserted from the Legion that one officer from each regiment went to Alexandria and Washington to search for their missing soldiers.⁵² Among those recaptured from the 69th NYNGA was

⁴⁵. General Order no. 3, headquarters King’s Division. July 30, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁴⁶. Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion. August 14, 1863. Regimental Orders Book. Murphy to Assistant Adjutant General. Letter Dated August 15, 1863. Regimental Letters Book. Murphy to Chandler, AAG. Letter Dated August 18, 1863. Regimental Letters Book.

Headquarters, Department of Washington. August 7, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁴⁷. *The Irish American*, October 17, 1863.

⁴⁸. Corcoran to Charles P. Daly. Letter Dated August 14, 1863. Judge Daly Papers, box 3.

⁴⁹. Corcoran to Charles P. Daly. Letter Dated August 14, 1863. Judge Daly Papers, box 3.

⁵⁰. Corcoran to Charles P. Daly. Letter Dated August 14, 1863. Judge Daly Papers, box 3.

⁵¹. Corcoran to Abraham Lincoln. Letter dated August 17, 1863. Court Martial File of Michael Corcoran. MM682. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC.

⁵². Headquarters, Corcoran Irish legion. July 30, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

Private John Collins of Company D. A General Court Martial convicted him, sentencing him to spend the rest of his enlistment at hard labor without pay.⁵³ He was subsequently transferred to Fort Jefferson, Florida, where he died on September 22, 1864.⁵⁴ A further sign of a breakdown in morale was a marathon court martial session of nineteen cases held between August 20 and 21, 1863.⁵⁵ These proceedings adjudicated such offenses as public drunkenness, fighting and dereliction of duty; signs the men had too much time on their hands, the scourge of garrison duty.⁵⁶ Discipline problems were not limited to the enlisted men. Second Lieutenant Christopher Bell of Company B was publicly reprimanded for missing dress parade without permission.⁵⁷ Less than two weeks later Lieutenant Patrick McCarthy was found guilty by general court martial of absenting himself without permission and using severe language to an officer of another regiment.⁵⁸ This was especially galling as it set “an example of insubordination and contempt for military law and etiquette.”⁵⁹

Right or wrong, the Irish soldiers griped about their divisional commander. It was rumored that General Rufus King was a nativist and anti-Irish. His father, Rufus King, had persuaded President Adams to ban United Irish leaders of the 1798 Rebellion from entering the United States. Irish-Americans tended to see the King family as “royalist,” as enemies of liberty and “political dupes” of the British.⁶⁰ General King did not help

⁵³. Company Descriptive Book, Company D., 182nd NYV. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁵⁴. Company Descriptive Book, Company D.

⁵⁵. August 20, 1863. August 21, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁵⁶. August 20, 1863. August 21, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁵⁷. Special Order 49. September 21, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁵⁸. October 1, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁵⁹. October 1, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁶⁰. Walter J. Walsh, “Religion, Ethnicity and History: Clues to the Cultural Construction of the Law.” Ronald H Bayer and Timothy J. Meagher, ed., *The New York Irish*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 53.

matters by accusing the Legionnaires of deserting to join Mosby's Rangers to plunder.⁶¹ King also voiced unfounded rumors that Mosby's men frequented the camps of the Irish Legion "enticing men to desert."⁶² To Irishmen conscious of anti-Irish bigotry, these accusations cut deeply. It no doubt undercut morale, especially as they were unlikely true, for no existing piece of evidence proves that a single Irish Legionnaire defected to Mosby's Rangers.

In fact, the soldiers of the 69th NYNGA never vented their frustrations upon the local populace whom they believed sympathized with Mosby and his guerrillas. When depredations occurred they came not from spite and never developed in a systematic effort to ruin the lives of Virginia residents. Mostly, the men stole firewood. It worsened as the weather became cooler men stole wood to keep warm. The Provost Marshal in Fairfax reminded the command that they were not to "destroy or pull down houses or carry off any boards belonging to citizens of the neighborhood."⁶³

Complicating this, the 69th NYNGA had little opportunity to drill, causing the soldiers to lose their combat edge. Recognizing the deficiency, Colonel Murphy ordered drill be conducted every morning except Sundays, in addition a daily mandatory officer's drill at noon, for all officers not on duty in camp was instituted.⁶⁴ With so many men detached to "special duties," Murphy ordered that all such men had to attend at least one drill and two dress parades each week, but could do little to enforce this order.⁶⁵

Realizing he could not drill the whole regiment at the same time, Murphy ordered each

⁶¹. Circular, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. August 14, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁶². Circular, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. August 14, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁶³. October 23, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁶⁴. Special Order 37. September 9, 1863. Regimental Orders Book. Special Order no. 46. September 21, 1863. Company Orders Book.

⁶⁵. Regimental Order 50. September 28, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

company to drill independently at least four hours daily, with at least two and a half hours in the morning and one and a half in the afternoon.⁶⁶ But then, without permission, Lieutenant Colonel Reid discontinued morning drill, prompting Murphy to order them again.⁶⁷

As if the problem of leadership had not been bad enough, late in the year, the 69th NYNGA lost its idol, General Corcoran. On the evening of December 22, Generals Meagher and Corcoran rode to Fairfax Station to meet their wives. Enroute, Corcoran began having seizures and was thrown from his horse. He died two hours later at 8:30 PM. Within hours, the sad news had reached New York City. The following evening Corcoran's friends met at the Metropolitan Hotel to arrange for his funeral. Colonel Murphy presided. All officers belonging to the 69th NYNGA in the City attended.⁶⁸ At Fairfax, Corcoran's body was waked and his men said farewell. Consternation and desolation overcame the camp, the men heartbroken. Meagher described the scene as Corcoran was laid out with candles at his head and a crucifix in his hands, the evening of December 23, 1863:

The good, dear old priest, who loved him only as a father can love a son, kneeling, praying and weeping at the feet of the dead soldier. From the window in the corridor outside the room, the lifeless camps glistened in the cold air, no one now stirring in them but the solemn sentinels on their posts... One by one, as the sun went down, and the last rays, reflected from those mountains that had been the witness of his first trial under fire, fell upon that pale and tranquil face, the soldiers of the Irish Legion moved in mournful procession around the death-bed, and, as they took their last look at him, I saw many a big heart grieve and swell until tears gushed from many an eye and ran down the rough cheek of the roughest veteran.⁶⁹

⁶⁶. General Order 22. November 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁶⁷. Murphy to Reid. Letter Dated December 8, 1863. Regimental Letters Book.

⁶⁸. *New York Herald*, December 24, 1863.

⁶⁹. Cavanagh, 357.

To the officers and men of the Legion, they had lost “a trusty leader, a just magistrate, a generous friend.”⁷⁰

On Christmas Eve, Corcoran’s body began its journey to New York. Eight companies from his “old 69th” and the 164th New York escorted the body to Fairfax Station.⁷¹ The flags of the 69th and the rest of the Corcoran Legion were ordered draped in mourning for thirty days.⁷² The officers resolved to wear mourning bands for the same period.⁷³

Christmas 1863 proved a sad one for the Irish community in New York, as Corcoran’s death caused a “profound feeling of sorrow.”⁷⁴ Corcoran’s funeral was held on December 27, 1863, at Old Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. The pall bearers were a veritable who’s who of Fenianism: General Meagher, Col. Matthew Murphy, Col. John O’Mahoney (Head Center, Fenian Brotherhood), Col. J. P. McIvor (170th NYV), Col. Hugh Flood (155th NYV), Lt. Col. Reid and ex-Col. McEvily of the 155th NYV. The escort was provided by the 99th NYSNG (The Phoenix Brigade).⁷⁵ Corcoran was laid to rest in Calvary Cemetery, Queens.

Corcoran’s death was a mortal wound to the Fenian Brotherhood. As the original military commander of the organization, he was “esteemed, loved and idolized” by those who served under him.⁷⁶ Part of that loyalty was that he came across as one of the people. In Ireland, he had fought not against the state, but against the bane of the Irish nation –

⁷⁰. Cavanagh, 357.

⁷¹. Orders, Headquarters Corcoran Irish Legion. December 24, 1863. Regimental Orders Book

⁷². General Order no. 60. Headquarters Department of Washington. December 24, 1863. Regimental Orders Book.

⁷³. Clipping. Box 3, Judge Daly Papers.

⁷⁴. Conyngham, 463.

⁷⁵. Clipping. Box 3, Judge Daly Papers.

⁷⁶. Cavanagh, 357.

the landlords. He was a social equal to his followers and balanced his rank and position with easy accessibility.⁷⁷ His death shook the Fenians to the core:

The death of General Corcoran was quite a surprise, as many expected great deeds from him before this struggle, if nature had not so suddenly called him away. He was a brave and noble soldier, whose death will, no doubt, be felt here and abroad.⁷⁸

Although few realized it at the time, Corcoran's death threatened the Fenian leadership of the Irish Legion. As if on cue, Thomas Francis Meagher urged the Irish of New York to see that Corcoran's "wish, his prayer, his hope" be fulfilled.⁷⁹

Ever the opportunist, Meagher hoped to merge the Legion with the remains of the Irish Brigade under his command.⁸⁰ Perhaps he might have succeeded had not Murphy seen the threat. The 69th NYNGA was short of men thanks to disease and desertion.⁸¹ He needed to fill it fast or risk losing it to Meagher's consolidation dreams. To remedy this, Murphy sent a recruiting party to New York. On February 12, Lieutenant Charles Glynn and First Sergeant Archibald White of Company E, Private John Gregan of Company F and Private Stephen McCall of Company I formed the detachment.⁸² This effort, forged in a period of sluggish recruitment, helped save the regiment from consolidation.

The volunteer system in New York State ensured that regiments in the field had a difficult time recruiting back up to strength. The incentive to create new regiments with new officers and the associated political patronage ensured that new regiments formed at the expense of filling up veteran units. If getting recruits was not hard enough, to make

⁷⁷. Cavanagh, 356-357.

⁷⁸. *The Irish American*, January 30, 1864.

⁷⁹. Cavanagh, 361.

⁸⁰. *Illustrated New Age*, January 7, 1864.

⁸¹. Headquarters, Corcoran Irish Legion, January 6, 1864. Regimental Orders Book.

⁸². Letter Dated February 12, 1864. Regimental Letters Book.

things worse, recruits bound for the 69th NYNGA were stolen by “certain parties” in New York. The culprits were the recruiters for the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade, which was then reforming as a Veteran Volunteer Regiment.⁸³ The 69th NYV found it necessary to add “several new companies” to bring it up to strength.⁸⁴ Irish Recruits proved a hot commodity in 1864 and both the 69th NYNGA and the 69th NYV claimed priority over them. As it stood, the 69th NYV appeared to have the advantage because Colonel Robert Nugent, the Provost Marshal of New York, was also the colonel of the 69th NYV. Complicating matters, both Irish regiments had the same numerical designation. Reid chided Nugent’s assistant provost marshals because they failed to differentiate between the two 69th New York regiments. “Recruits who voluntarily enlist in the 69th Reg’t NYNGA Irish Legion are invariably accredited to the 69th Reg’t NY Vols Irish Brigade.”⁸⁵ Reid claimed – and rightfully so – that this prevented the 69th NYNGA from reaching full strength. He hoped the Secretary of War would take the steps necessary to prevent it from recurring and punish the “offending parties,” but nothing was done.⁸⁶ Yet, despite this contravention, the manpower shortage did not lead to a merger with the Irish Brigade.⁸⁷

The new recruits did the trick and the regiment was brought up to minimum strength for battle. As it turned out, the 69th NYNGA and the rest of the Corcoran Legion were bound for the Army of the Potomac. This had nothing to do with the protests from the regiment. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant needed men to refill his depleted

⁸³. Reid to Brigadier General Thomas. Letter Dated March 16, 1864. Regimental Letters Book.

⁸⁴. Coyningham, 438.

⁸⁵. Reid to Brigadier General Thomas. Letter Dated March 16, 1864. Regimental Letters Book.

⁸⁶. Reid to Brigadier General Thomas. Letter Dated March 16, 1864. Regimental Letters Book.

⁸⁷. The 69th NYV used bounties for Veteran regiments to recruit up to strength from approximately fifty men to the Federal authorized minimum for a regiment –meaning they recruited over 500 men for the regiment.

ranks. After just one engagement, the battle of the Wilderness, Grant's army suffered more than 17,000 casualties. Following the Wilderness, the Army of the Potomac shifted its supply hub to Belle Plain and abandoned the Orange and Alexandria railroad. On May 12, much to his surprise, Murphy wrote, "today we received orders to join the Army of the Potomac."⁸⁸ On May 17, 1864, Special Orders 137 assigned Corcoran's Irish Legion to Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's Second Corps, the same corps that possessed the Irish Brigade.⁸⁹ The men of the Legion celebrated their move. In fact, the celebrations proved so raucous that the Legion reported to the Army of the Potomac with only 1,600 men, with several hundred soldiers straggling, drunk on the road.⁹⁰

Murphy, like the other Corcoran Legion officers, had a chip on his shoulder. His Legion had missed out on the "big" battles fought by the rest of the Second Corps. He was "anxious" to prove that his men could "at least equal the grand old Irish Brigade."⁹¹ Yet Murphy and the officers understood the grim work that lay ahead. There was a sober determination to do their part in securing the welfare of not just America and Ireland, but that of the human race.⁹² This was the moral imprint of Fenianism. Murphy, like Corcoran before him, was conscious of the prominent role that Irish exile regiments had played in the wars in Europe, particularly the famed Irish Brigade of France: "For the van is the right of the Irish Brigade."⁹³

The 69th NYNGA's first major bloodletting came on May 18, 1864, at Spotsylvania Court House. The battle raged for almost twenty hours, a close-quarter, life

⁸⁸. Murphy to Alick. Letter dated May 12, 1864. Murphy Papers.

⁸⁹. Orders from Army Headquarters May 17, 1864. OR Vol 36, Pt 2, 853. Also Special Orders no. 137, May 17, 1864. OR Vol 51, 1163.

⁹⁰. C. A Dana's report. May 17, 1864. OR Vol 36, 72.

⁹¹. *The Irish American*, April 29, 1865.

⁹². *The Irish American*, April 29, 1865.

⁹³. Thomas Davis, *The Poems of Thomas Davis: With notes, historical illustrations etc. and an introduction by John Mitchel*. (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 18??), 163.

and death struggle for a Confederate-held parapet. The 69th NYNGA lost four men killed, three officers and twenty men wounded and three missing.⁹⁴ A week later the regiment marched for the North Anna. During this action, on May 24, the regiment lost forty men, including six killed and twenty-eight wounded.⁹⁵ On the morning of June 3, the 69th NYNGA was again in the front line for the assault at Cold Harbor. It pressed to within fifty yards of the Confederate works before being stopped cold.⁹⁶ The assault was a bloody failure, costing the regiment ten killed, fifty wounded and twenty-nine missing.⁹⁷

On June 12, Grant shifted his forces south, crossed the James River and headed for Petersburg. Four days later the Legion assaulted Confederate works on the Petersburg Road. They came under “fearfully destructive fire” and fell back to the woods.⁹⁸ The following day, the brigade assaulted again and failed to penetrate. On June 22, 1864, Robert E. Lee counter attacked an army-wide flanking maneuver along the Jerusalem Plank Road, hitting the flank of Brigadier General Francis C. Barlow’s First Division. The first unit to break was the Irish Brigade, which disintegrated.⁹⁹ This was the low point of the Irish Brigade’s existence, but proved the 69th NYNGA’s finest hour. The 69th NYNGA stabilized the line, charging into the advancing Confederates.¹⁰⁰ The 69th NYNGA and the 170th NYV bought time with their lives, crucial time for Second Corps to regroup.¹⁰¹ By nightfall, the regiment was under the command of Captain Robert Heggart. The first week at Petersburg had been devastating. The 69th NYNGA suffered

⁹⁴. Casualty Returns. OR 36, Pt 1, 139.

⁹⁵. Casualty Returns. OR 36, Pt 2, 155.

⁹⁶. Major Bryan’s Report. OR 36, Pt 1, 462.

⁹⁷. Casualty returns. OR 36, Pt 1, 168.

⁹⁸. Ramsey’s Report. OR 40, 366-72.

⁹⁹. Mullholland, 244-5,

¹⁰⁰. Pierce’s Report. OR 40, 369-371.

¹⁰¹. *The Irish American*, July 9, 1864.

104 casualties in barely a week. Of that, nineteen were killed, seventy-five wounded and ten missing.¹⁰²

From then on, the 69th NYNGA engaged in constant trench warfare around Petersburg. On July 27 the regiment was engaged in a brief skirmish at Deep Bottom. On August 16, the regiment fought again at Deep Bottom where it lost three killed and six wounded.¹⁰³ Six days later it went to Ream's Station, where the First Division broke again. The men ran in panic through the lines of the Irish Legion, exposing their flanks. The 69th NYNGA held the line as long as it could before being forced to withdraw.¹⁰⁴ The 69th NYNGA lost fifty-eight men at Ream's station. Of that, four were killed, seven wounded and forty-seven missing.¹⁰⁵ Two months later at Hatcher's Run it lost another nine men wounded and four missing.¹⁰⁶

The Overland Campaign devastated the 69th NYNGA. From May to October 1864, the regiment lost 343 killed, wounded and missing in battle, almost half the number that started the campaign. Fenian Lieutenant Whelply's Company H started the campaign with two officers and thirty-six men.¹⁰⁷ On November 1, 1864, the company mustered only one sergeant, one corporal, one drummer and seven privates for duty.¹⁰⁸ The field and staff ceased to exist. Matthew Murphy had been wounded at Spotsylvania. Lieutenant Colonel Reid had been cashiered. Major Butler died of wounds suffered at Cold Harbor.

¹⁰². Casualty Returns. OR 40, Pt 1, 221.

¹⁰³. Murphy's Report. OR 42, 317. Also Casualty Returns. OR 42, 118

¹⁰⁴. Murphy's Report. OR 42, 317-318.

¹⁰⁵. Casualty Returns. OR 42, Pt 1, 130.

¹⁰⁶. Casualty Returns. OR 42, Pt 1, 154.

¹⁰⁷. Company H Morning Reports, May 1864. 182nd NYV Morning Reports. National Archives and records Administration, Washington, DC. Here after referred to as "Morning Reports."

¹⁰⁸. Company H Morning Reports, November, 1864. Morning Reports.

Captain John Coonan commanded the 69th NYNGA, but found the ranks so thin he shrunk his ten-company regiment into a five-company battalion.¹⁰⁹

Those officers who survived attempted to lead the survivors. Lieutenant Michael Redmond, then assigned to Brigade headquarters, requested that he be sent back to the 69th NYNGA “with least tractable delay” because of the loss of officers in the regiment.¹¹⁰ Others had enough of the tumult. Second Lieutenant Monahan, recruited by Corcoran to head the Legion band, tendered his resignation. As a professional musician, he considered himself incompetent for “his duties as an officer,” having been thrust into the line to make up for losses.¹¹¹ At some point in late May or early June Lieutenant Colonel Reid tendered his resignation, a decision that put a permanent stain on his record. Because he “tendered his resignation for insufficient reasons, while his command was in front of the enemy,” Reid was “dishonorably dismissed.”¹¹² Publicly his friends stated it was a mistake, but there is no evidence to the contrary.¹¹³

The campaign proved a veritable disaster for the Fenians. Among their “most ardent and best working” members were in the Legion.¹¹⁴ The Circle of the Nansmond was “all but annihilated.”¹¹⁵ In the Corcoran Legion twenty-four Fenian officers had been “killed or crippled” in 1864 and 1865.¹¹⁶ The desire or the need to be in the vanguard had sapped the Brotherhood of its leadership.

¹⁰⁹. Regimental Order no. 47. August 28, 1864. Company Orders Book.

¹¹⁰. Headquarters 4th Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Corps. June 9, 1864. McIvor Papers.

¹¹¹. Resignation of Second Lieutenant Monahan, Co. H, 69th NYNGA. June 10, 1864. McIvor Papers.

¹¹². Special Order 209. Adjutant General’s Office. June 16, 1864. Reid Record.

¹¹³. *New York Herald Tribune*, June 18, 1864.

¹¹⁴. Second National Congress, 6.

¹¹⁵. *The Irish American*, February 11, 1865.

¹¹⁶. O’Reilly, 228.

Then during the last weeks of the war, combat claimed Colonel Murphy, who had recovered from his wound at Spotsylvania and returned to duty. On February 5, 1865, the 69th NYNGA left camp and participated in the repulse of Rebel forces at Second Hatcher's Run.¹¹⁷ Matthew Murphy was hit in the knee, which was "broken in two places" under the skin.¹¹⁸ The regiment continued without its leader fighting with the Army of the Potomac all the way to Clover Hill, Virginia, not far from Appomattox.

As his men celebrated the surrender of Lee's army, Murphy lay dying in the Brigade Hospital at Petersburg. Initially he did well, but after seven days, pain "took possession" of him. His appetite disappeared and the doctors believed it would be four months before he could return to duty. Pessimistically, Murphy himself believed it would be closer to six.¹¹⁹ His Surgeon, Dr. Nealis, was concerned and told Murphy's father that inflammation had set in.¹²⁰ Friends and family tried to soften the news.¹²¹ Murphy's condition did not improve and he was transferred to the Second Corps Hospital at City Point, where his sister, Mary, made the journey to look after him. On April 9, she candidly wrote home that there was "something to fear."¹²²

At 6:15 PM, April 16, 1865, Matthew Murphy died. He was twenty-five-years-old and died in debt, owing the regimental sutler \$309.19.¹²³ J.P. McIvor broke the news to the Corcoran Irish Legion. With "heartfelt sorrow," he ordered the officers to wear mourning bands and the colors draped for thirty days.¹²⁴ Murphy's funeral mass was held

¹¹⁷. February 5, 1865. Regimental Miscellaneous Book.

¹¹⁸. Murphy to Sister. Letter dated March 10, 1865. Murphy Papers.

¹¹⁹. Murphy to Sister. Letter dated March 10, 1865. Murphy Papers.

¹²⁰. Mary Murphy to Matthew Murphy. Letter dated February 22, 1865. Murphy Papers.

¹²¹. Mary Murphy to Matthew Murphy. Letter dated February 22, 1865. Murphy Papers.

¹²². Mary Murphy to Mother. Letter Dated April 9, 1865. Murphy Papers.

¹²³. Field Staff and Muster Roll. Murphy File. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

¹²⁴. Circular, Headquarters 2/2/2. April 17, 1865. Regimental Orders Book.

on Saturday, April 23, at the Church of the Transfiguration in New York. Following this, his body was taken to City Hall where it was received by the Common Council and laid in state in the Governor's room.¹²⁵ A guard provided from the 69th NYSM escorted the coffin which was draped in the American and Irish colors of the "1st Regiment Phoenix Brigade."¹²⁶ As with Corcoran's wake, thousands came to view the body.¹²⁷ The following day Matthew Murphy was buried in Calvary Cemetery, not far from Corcoran's remains. Among the pall bearers were John O'Mahoney, Thomas Francis Meagher and Thomas Reid.¹²⁸

Murphy's death permanently altered the Brotherhood. Among the Irish community there were three leaders who stood above all others: Michael Corcoran, Matthew Murphy and Thomas Francis Meagher.¹²⁹ Corcoran and Murphy, the ordinary men, the dedicated revolutionaries, were dead. Meagher, though possessing a nationalist pedigree, could at best be labeled a casual Fenian. Mid-Atlantic Fenians had only John O'Mahoney to lead them and he prepared for the return of the Corcoran Legion. O'Mahoney expected that all members of the Fenian Brotherhood – almost 3,000 – be prepared to welcome "Corcoran's Irish Legion" home to New York City.¹³⁰ The Legion regiments arrived on July 18, 1865, and as per custom, the 69th NYSM and the Fenian 1st Regiment Phoenix Brigade (the 99th NYSM) were there to welcome home the heroes.¹³¹ For the Irish of New York it was a grand celebration:

Their arrival caused a great excitement and scenes of the most affecting, as well as the most ludicrous character were witnessed. The mothers, wives, sisters and

¹²⁵ . *The Irish American*. April 29, 1865.

¹²⁶ . *The Irish American*. April 29, 1865.

¹²⁷ . *The Irish American*. April 29, 1865.

¹²⁸ . *New York Daily Tribune*, April 24, 1865.

¹²⁹ . *The Emerald*, August 28, 1868.

¹³⁰ . *New York Herald*, July 16, 1865.

¹³¹ . *The Irish American*, July 29, 1865.

sweethearts of the veterans, mingled with the procession, and discipline and order were of course alike disregarded.¹³²

They returned as heroes and were treated “handsomely by the citizens – as they deserved to be.”¹³³

During its three years of service, the 69th NYNGA proved itself a fighting regiment, suffering heavily upon the altar of freedom. In almost three years it lost sixty killed in battle, twenty-seven died of their wounds, 203 wounded in action and ninety-five men missing but never found.¹³⁴ An additional fifty-three men died of disease or in Confederate prisoner of war camps.¹³⁵ The regiment suffered to a total of 438 casualties. With peak strength of only 685, the regiment lost sixty-four percent of its personnel due to death in battle, disease or wounds.

While not remembered, the 69th NYNGA earned an envious reputation. Much of their success relied upon the unique bond between the officers and men created by Fenianism and by General Michael Corcoran and Colonel Matthew Murphy. Yet, despite their achievements and professionalism the 69th NYNGA was relegated to dust heap of regimental history, to be replaced by the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade.

¹³². *The Saturday Evening Gazette*, July 22, 1865.

¹³³. *The Saturday Evening Gazette*, July 22, 1865.

¹³⁴. Phisterer, Vol 5, 4039.

¹³⁵. Fox, Regimental Losses. *The Civil War CD-ROM V 1.5*. Guild Press CD ROM.

Chapter 5

THE 69th NYNGA, THE FENIAN BROTHERHOOD AND NEW YORK: 1862-1865

While the 69th NYNGA was in the field, its service and legacy were directly influenced by events at home. Likewise, events on the home front dramatically affected the future of the Fenian Brotherhood and the Irish Republican movement for over a generation. The regiment's service brought to a head the simmering conflict with Major James Bagley that led to an administrative redesignation of the 69th NYNGA. The absence and loss of so many core Fenian leaders in the Irish Legion created a power vacuum in New York City that caused the Fenian Brotherhood to shatter, leaving it to another generation to carry the fight to completion.

Corcoran and Murphy knew their enemies in New York. They were fully aware that there were those who sought control of the 69th. From Newport News, Corcoran wrote Judge Daly imploring him to secure the Legion's interests while they were gone.¹ In particular, he wanted a sharp eye kept on regimental assets and upon those who wished to take over the 69th NYSM. Foremost of those enemies was Major James Bagley of the 69th NYSM.

On December 26, 1862, Bagley struck. He contacted the City Board of Alderman protesting its appropriation of \$10,000 to assist recruiting for the 69th NYNGA.² Bagley objected to the claim they were "the 69th re-organized for the war."³ Herein lay the bone of contention. Corcoran believed the 69th NYSM and the 69th NYNGA were the same regiment, just stationed at different locales. Bagley contended they were two different

¹. Corcoran to Judge Daly. Letter Dated November 28, 1862. Box 3, Judge Daly Papers.

². *New York Tribune*, December 27, 1862.

³. *New York Tribune*, December 27, 1862.

regiments and that the only true 69th was the state run 69th NYSM, which was *his* 69th.⁴ There was confusion among both the authorities and the public at large. It was not conceivable to have two militia regiments of the same number in the same state. Both Bagley and Murphy believed they were in command of the militia regiment. The question was where was the militia regiment, in New York or Virginia? The Board of Aldermen declined to deal with the affair and referred it to the Committee on National Affairs.⁵ That deliberative body subsequently referred the issue to New York State military authorities. At no time did the War Department get involved. Although it considered the 69th NYNGA to be a “federalized” state regiment, the War Department recognized that numbering and raising volunteer and militia regiments was a state matter.

On February 21, 1863, New York State finally acted. General Orders 6 ordered numerous state officers, including Corcoran, to report to First Division headquarters (New York State Militia) in New York City “without delay.”⁶ The question of the hour was “which of the three organizations is the militia regiment?”⁷ By the three regiments, the state referred to the 69th NYNGA, the 69th NYSM and the 69th NYV. The state military board dismissed the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade immediately, as it was widely known that it had never been tied to the standing 69th NYSM.⁸ The fight centered on Corcoran and Bagley. Corcoran considered the 69th NYNGA in Suffolk to be the Militia Regiment. Major Bagley insisted that he maintained the 69th NYSM in New York City.⁹

⁴ *New York Tribune*, December 27, 1862.

⁵ *New York Tribune*, December 27, 1862.

⁶ *New York Herald*, February 22, 1863.

⁷ *New York Herald*, February 22, 1863.

⁸ *New York Herald*, February 22, 1863.

⁹ *New York Herald*, February 22, 1863.

The first hearing was held on February 22, 1863, at 3 PM. Among those present were Corcoran, Bagley, and all captains and lieutenants of the 69th NYNGA stationed in the city. Corcoran made it known that he did not instigate the proceedings; they were at the request of “Major Bagley.”¹⁰ Colonel Matthew Murphy did not attend as he was with the 69th NYNGA in Suffolk.

General Corcoran was sworn in. He testified at length about the formation of the 69th NYNGA and the election of Colonel Matthew Murphy. Corcoran testified, recounting when he reported to Governor Edwin Morgan after his release from prison, he was given written authorization for the formation of the Corcoran Irish Legion and the “Sixty-ninth Regiment N.Y.S.N.G. (artillery)”¹¹ which continued to recruit as the first regiment of the Legion.¹² Furthermore, he reminded the court that New York State accepted the organization as such and federal authorities mustered it into service under that designation.¹³ In addition, when orders for the annual inspection of the 69th NYSM were issued by General John Ewen for 1862, he listed the location of the regiment at Camp Scott, Staten Island.¹⁴

The court asked Corcoran for the number of personnel who actually joined the 69th NYNGA from the ranks of 69th NYSM. He asserted that twenty-one officers of the old 69th NYSM joined the 69th NYNGA.¹⁵ This number corresponds with entries in the regimental descriptive book. Importantly, Corcoran’s statement undercuts what has become the accepted historiography of the 69th NYSM. Corcoran noted the rank and file

¹⁰. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹¹. NYSNG was an alternative to NYSM and was used increasingly during the war and the decade after it.

¹². *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹³. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹⁴. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹⁵. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

of the original militia regiment never exceeded 200 men, but the regiment exceeded 1,200 for federal service.¹⁶

Corcoran was asked how many times the 69th NYNGA had been in federal service? To this he replied, three.¹⁷ These three periods were the three months in 1861 during the Bull Run Campaign, the emergency call up from June to August 1862, and the third, being the federal service with the Irish Legion.¹⁸ This, Corcoran asserted, allowed the 69th NYNGA to be considered “the same as one of the old regiments in the field,” making them eligible for the state bounty.¹⁹ The other regiments formed for the Corcoran Legion were all considered “new” regiments for the purposes of bounty distribution.²⁰ Thus, because the 69th NYNGA had received state bounties, it had to be considered as including members of the 69th NYSM. At this point the court adjourned for the night and decided to reconvene the following afternoon.

The next day, the New York State Militia Court of Inquiry assembled at 2:00 P.M. General Corcoran again took the stand testifying to the number of men from the 69th NYSM he had brought into federal service. Corcoran replied that about 700 men joined the 69th NYNGA.²¹ The court then questioned him regarding the election process and commissions held by officers of the 69th NYNGA serving in the Irish Legion. The court noted for the record, all commissions contained the words, “Sixty-ninth Regiment,

¹⁶. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863. If the Core of the 69th was based on 200 dedicated members, then it was impossible for 500 to join the 69th NYV, as they would no doubt have had a loyalty to Corcoran, not to Meagher.

¹⁷. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹⁸. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

¹⁹. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁰. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²¹. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863. This number is not borne out by pension record analysis or by State findings.

National Guard (Artillery), N.Y.S.M., raised by authority of the President.”²² Corcoran was then excused.

Major Bagley was duly sworn in. When asked, he asserted that the 69th NYSM had only served twice in federal service, these moments being the militia call outs in the spring of 1861 and summer of 1862.²³ He did not recognize the federal service that began in the autumn of 1862. Bagley stated that he had been major since 1859 and never saw field service with the regiment in battle, and declined to serve for three years or the war.²⁴ He then argued that no field officers of the 69th NYSM joined the 69th NYNGA as he was the only field officer and “no companies of the Sixty-ninth joined the Corcoran Legion.”²⁵

After this, the inquiry focused upon what Bagley asserted were “irregularities” in the election of Colonel Matthew Murphy. Bagley conceded that he was asked and presided over the informal election of Colonel Murphy. He claimed that Captain Lynch protested the election as being in violation of regimental bylaws. Furthermore, Bagley asserted that a number of officers present who voted were not officers of the 69th NYSM.²⁶ When asked which officers voted, Bagley was unable to say, but he guessed they were officers who were “out” with the 69th NYSM in the summer of 1862.²⁷ When asked if he voted, Bagley replied that he was unsure, but he said that if he did, he voted for Murphy.²⁸

²². *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²³. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁴. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁵. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁶. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁷. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

²⁸. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

The court then asked Bagley about the vote to volunteer for three years. Like the election of Murphy, Bagely argued it was irregular and a violation of the bylaws.²⁹ He claimed the meeting called by Corcoran at the Astor House was illegal because not all the officers of the 69th NYSM were in attendance.³⁰ The court asked if the assembled officers in the room stood in fair representation of the Board of Officers of the regiment, Bagley replied, “I presume it was a fair representation.”³¹ When asked if every man there volunteered for the war, Bagley acknowledged they all did with the exception of him.³² Bagley further admitted that he assisted Corcoran in the formation of the Irish Legion.³³

After this, Bagley got his facts wrong. He stated incorrectly that most of the militia officers did not recruit their companies for service in the Corcoran Legion.³⁴ Bagley also stated that twenty-three officers protested the formation of the 69th NYNGA.³⁵ In fact twenty-one officers from the 69th NYSM served in the 69th NYNGA and the court pointed this out.³⁶ Following this, Bagley was excused from the stand.

The court called new witnesses. Captain Thomas Lynch, the court noted, had volunteered his services as captain of Company B, 69th NYSM, for three years service in the 69th NYNGA. Lynch confirmed this, although he subsequently resigned his commission.³⁷ He stated that Bagley forced him to chair a committee to protest the 69th NYSM’s being consideration as part of the Corcoran Legion.³⁸ Lynch argued the

²⁹. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁰. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³¹. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³². *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³³. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁴. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁵. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁶. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁷. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

³⁸. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

committee exhibited shabby protocols and he was loathe to accept its resolution.³⁹ The most damning answer to Bagley's cause came when the court asked Lynch for the location of his Company B, 69th NYSM. Lynch responded "I consider it at Suffolk."⁴⁰ Several other officers took the stand and testified similarly. The court then chose to adjourn, to meet again on March 9, 1863.⁴¹ Whether they ever did or not is unknown.

How Colonel Matthew Murphy reacted to the proceedings is not exactly known, as nothing appears in the regimental orders, letters, miscellaneous books or his papers. Most likely, Murphy learned of it from General Corcoran who requested his presence.⁴² But he may have learned the details when the February 28 *Irish American* arrived, sporting the headline "Official Investigation – is the Corps at home or at the Seat of War?"⁴³ Murphy applied for leave of ten days to go to New York to testify.⁴⁴

Murphy stated it was vital that he attend. The purpose of the inquiry was to determine "whether the regiment which I have the honor to command, is a part of the Militia of the State of New York, and entitled to the number and designation that it now bears."⁴⁵ He concluded that his presence in New York was "absolutely necessary" as a witness to "protect the rights of my Regiment during the investigation."⁴⁶ The investigation also involved the sum of \$10,000 claimed by the 69th NYNGA for any militia regiment that re-organized and volunteered for the war.⁴⁷ As far as can be

³⁹. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

⁴⁰. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

⁴¹. *New York Herald*, February 22, 1863.

⁴². Col. Matthew Murphy to Col. Van Buren. Letter dated March 2, 1863. Murphy Record.

⁴³. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863.

⁴⁴. Col. Matthew Murphy to Col. Van Buren. Letter dated March 2, 1863. Murphy Record.

⁴⁵. Col. Matthew Murphy to Col. Van Buren. Letter dated March 2, 1863. Murphy Record.

⁴⁶. Col. Matthew Murphy to Col. Van Buren. Letter dated March 2, 1863. Murphy Record.

⁴⁷. Col. Matthew Murphy to Col. Van Buren. Letter dated March 2, 1863. Murphy Record.

discerned, Murphy never went to New York and the March 9, 1863, session was never held. To this day the matter remains a mystery.

On March 19, 1864, over a year later, the state of New York finally rendered a decision. Special Orders 125 General Headquarters State of New York announced that upon discharge of the 69th NYSM in September 1862, the officers “in an informal manner” volunteered to serve for three years or the war.⁴⁸ Also the 69th NYSM did not enter into United States service as part of the Corcoran Legion for only nine officers and forty-six enlisted personnel were on the 69th NYNGA’s roster.⁴⁹ Therefore, the State found that the 69th New York National Guard (NYSM) was under the command of Bagley, not Murphy.⁵⁰ The 69th NYNGA was, as of that date, to be redesignated as the 182nd New York Volunteers.⁵¹

This designation has done much to obscure the history and record of the 69th NYNGA. Since then, historians have used this decision to connect the 69th NYSM to that of the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade, the unit that had no connection at all to the 69th NYSM.⁵² Back in Virginia, the 69th NYNGA all but ignored the redesignation. No one in the army referred to it as the 182nd NYV. The *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* always referred to the unit as the 69th NYNGA and this trend lasted until 1865. Of the over 1,200 pages of documents in their regimental papers in National Archives,

⁴⁸. Special Orders no. 125. General Headquarters State of New York. March 19, 1864. James Bagley papers, Jack Halloran Collection, Bantam Lake, CT.

⁴⁹. Special Orders no. 125. General Headquarters State of New York. March 19, 1864. James Bagley papers, Jack Halloran Collection, Bantam Lake, CT.

⁵⁰. Special Orders no. 125. General Headquarters State of New York. March 19, 1864. James Bagley papers, Jack Halloran Collection, Bantam Lake, CT.

⁵¹. Special Orders no. 125. General Headquarters State of New York. March 19, 1864. James Bagley papers, Jack Halloran Collection, Bantam Lake, CT.

⁵². The Regimental Records were filed for posterity under the 182nd NYV and as such are not muddled with the 69th NYSM, the 69th NYV (Both Civil War and Spanish American War) and the 69th New York National Guard (Mexican Border 1916). To their detriment, unless you know they were redesignated, a historian would never come across their records, as administratively they were not the 69th.

only a single *period* document referred to it as the 182nd NYV.⁵³ To the Army and their compatriots they were always the 69th NYNGA. The New York State Adjutant General's report for 1865 listed each New York volunteer regiment with its "synonym." For the 182nd NYV, the synonym was the "69th Militia Regiment."⁵⁴

Furthermore, the numbers used by the state to redesignate the regiment are incorrect. An analysis of pension records of the 69th NYNGA, as mentioned in Chapter two, shows that 189 members of the 69th NYNGA had additional service with the standing 69th NYSM, not the 55 officers and men indicated by the State.⁵⁵ Even with only 189 members, the 69th NYNGA was, in essence, *the* 69th. As Corcoran noted, the peacetime establishment of the 69th NYSM never exceeded 200 men, and the Fenian nature of the pre-war 69th NYSM and its loyalty to Corcoran, meant that most of the 189 members came from that small core.⁵⁶ As such, it had the soul of the old 69th NYSM.

The performance of the 69th NYSM after the formation of the Irish Legion is further proof that the essence of the regiment had shifted to the 69th NYNGA. Under Major Bagley's leadership, regimental discipline had declined. During the 1863 annual inspection on October 28 – the first after the formation of the 69th NYNGA – the inspector noted "little attention to drill."⁵⁷ The "line officers do not understand their duties."⁵⁸ The 1864 annual inspection showed greater decline. Of 500 men on the muster

⁵³. Special Orders no. 17. Headquarters, Second Army Corps. January 11, 1865. Regimental Orders Book.

⁵⁴. New York State Adjutant General's Office. *Annual Report of the Adjutant General: Report for 1865* (Albany: C Wendell, 1866), 235.

⁵⁵. Pension records, 182nd NYV. <http://www.Footnote.com>. Also Special Orders no. 125. General Headquarters State of New York. March 19, 1864. James Bagley papers, Jack Halloran Collection, Bantam Lake, CT.

⁵⁶. *The Irish American*, February 28, 1863. Also Regimental Descriptive Book.

⁵⁷. New York State Adjutant General's Office. *Annual Report of the Adjutant General: Report for 1863*. (Albany: Comstock & Cassidy, 1864), 44. Hereafter referred to as NYAGO Report 1863.

⁵⁸. NYAGO Report 1863, 44.

roll, only 246 were present.⁵⁹ Only one company of the 69th NYSM had enough personnel present to continue with the inspection.⁶⁰ The other companies exhibited an “indifference to do their duty” that was “not warranted by the circumstances in the experience of the Regiment.”⁶¹ General Sandford expressed mortification at the deplorable condition of the 69th NYSM.⁶² Because of the administrative name change, the state authorities never grasped that the 69th NYSM of 1863 was, in essence, a new regiment. The real 69th NYSM was now the 69th NYNGA.

As inquiries determined the identity of the 69th NYSM, New York’s Fenian Brotherhood faced extinction. According to John O’Mahoney, fifty branches of the Fenian brotherhood disbanded through enlistment.⁶³ Money stopped flowing to Ireland, and the leadership there blamed the formation of the Corcoran Legion.⁶⁴ In fact, the Fenians of the Irish Legion, with more money in their pockets, sent funds back to the parent organization with “a fair amount of liberality.”⁶⁵

With the formation of the Irish Legion and the Phoenix Brigade becoming the new 99th NYSM, Fenian activities in Gotham took a hiatus.⁶⁶ Of the organization’s 15,000 American members, half were in the armies of the Union.⁶⁷ This was opposed by the leadership in Ireland. They believed “O’Mahoney was wrong in encouraging

⁵⁹. New York State Adjutant General’s Office. *Annual report of the Adjutant General: Report for 1864*. (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1865), 60. Hereafter NYAGO Report 1864

⁶⁰. NYAGO Report 1864, 60.

⁶¹. NYAGO Report 1864, 60.

⁶². NYAGO Report 1864, 60.

⁶³. D’Arcy, 21.

⁶⁴. John O’Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*. Vol. 1. (London: Downey & Co., 1896), 194-195.

⁶⁵. O’Leary, 195.

⁶⁶. D’Arcy, 28.

⁶⁷. Fenian Brotherhood. *Proceedings of the Second National Congress of the Fenian Brotherhood, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, January 1865*. (Philadelphia: James Gibbons, 1865), 6. Hereafter referred to as Second National Congress 1865.

Corcoran's enlistments holding that, by doing so, he diverted himself and his New York Fenians from their proper work."⁶⁸

As a secret oath-bound society, the organization was proscribed by the Catholic Church. In the fall of 1863, the leadership decided to make the Fenian Brotherhood an open, democratic organization, "more in accordance with the habits and customs of the American republic."⁶⁹ At the 1863 convention the brotherhood declared itself independent of James Stephens and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. By becoming open and legitimate, the organization went "beyond the reach of hostile churchmen" and mollified Catholic leadership.⁷⁰

At the convention, a council of five formed to advise John O'Mahoney. Michael Corcoran and Colonel Matthew Murphy stood on this council.⁷¹ The Fenian brotherhood openly stated its position on the Civil War:

We (the Fenian Brotherhood) deem the preservation and success of the American republic of supreme importance, not alone to ourselves and our fellow citizens, but to the extension of democratic institutions, and to the well-being and social elevation of the whole human race.⁷²

Among the Fenians, thousands of their "most ardent and best working" members chose to defend the republic, leaving the organization at the mercy of mediocrity.⁷³ In particular, the absent Matthew Murphy, Colonel James McMahan (164th NYV) and Colonel J.P. McIvor (170th NYV) were cited by O'Mahoney as having a very powerful effect on the

⁶⁸. O'Leary, 195.

⁶⁹. John O'Mahoney to James Stephens. Letter Dated October 19, 1863. Fenian papers, Box 1, Folder 5. Catholic University, Washington, DC.

⁷⁰. John O'Mahoney to Charles Kickham. Letter Dated October 19, 1863. Fenian papers, Box 1, Folder 5. Catholic University, Washington, DC.

⁷¹. Miles O'Reilly (Charles Halpine), *Baked meats of the Funeral: A collection of essays, poems, speeches, histories and banquets*. (New York: Carelton, 1866), 223. Also D'Arcy, 37.

⁷². O'Reilly, 213.

⁷³. Second National Congress, 6.

organization.⁷⁴ The first major blow came in December of 1863 with the death of General Michael Corcoran. As one of the founding members, O'Mahoney noted the organization lost its most influential member.⁷⁵ As the chief executive, O'Mahoney lost "the right arm of my executive corps."⁷⁶ He also lost his "dearest and most valued friend."⁷⁷ General Grant's Overland and Petersburg campaigns delivered another catastrophic blow to the Fenian Brotherhood. "A vast number" of Fenians were killed in the 1864 campaigns.⁷⁸ This was partly because the Fenians made "it a point of honor to be in the thickest of the fight."⁷⁹ The Fenian circle of the Potomac was described as "sorely cut up," in a report by O'Mahoney, with only a 'small remnant' having escaped a "soldier's death."⁸⁰

The losses permanently altered the balance of power within the Fenian Brotherhood, allowing James Stephens to change the complexion of the brotherhood by recruiting new followers in the Middle-West and in the Army of the Cumberland.⁸¹ His recruiting drives, coupled with his call for 1865 to be the "year of action," permanently altered the Fenian brotherhood, leading to its demise.⁸² With a flood of new members from outside the large Irish enclaves of the eastern seaboard, the brotherhood followed a new code of conduct and adopted a new goal.

Specifically, the Midwestern Fenians developed a new strategy. Simply put, they wanted Canada. It was well known that Canada offered a safe haven for Confederate

⁷⁴. John Savage, *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs. Edited, with an historical introduction on "the struggle for Irish Nationality."* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1868), 128. All three were colonels in the Corcoran Legion.

⁷⁵. *The Irish American*, February 11, 1865.

⁷⁶. *The Irish American*, February 11, 1865

⁷⁷. *The Irish American*, February 11, 1865

⁷⁸. Second National Congress, 7.

⁷⁹. Second National Congress, 7-8.

⁸⁰. *The Irish American*, February 11, 1865.

⁸¹. D'Arcy, 40.

⁸². Stephens to O'Mahoney. Letter Dated December 11, 1864. Fenian Papers. Box 1, Folder 6.

agents. To defy ex-Confederates and eliminate the British presence in North America, Midwestern Irish-Americans wanted Canada annexed.⁸³ One of them wrote, “we shall pass the Rubicon of the Canadian border.”⁸⁴ Not only could Canada be held hostage for Ireland, it could be added to “the confines of the United States.”⁸⁵ After the recruitment of the Corcoran Legion, Stephens had increasingly lost confidence in O’Mahoney, whom he believed had put America and himself before Ireland. In the fall of 1864, the Fenians called for a convention to be held in January 1865 in Cincinnati, Ohio. This raised the ire of eastern Fenians who considered the location inconvenient and “impossible to attend.”⁸⁶

With Corcoran dead and Murphy still in the army, the New York leadership lost an opportunity to direct the Cincinnati meeting. In their absence, the membership voted to alter the composition of the organization. They enlarged the supreme council from five to ten members, and Murphy lost his seat on it. Of the ten members, only two came from New York.⁸⁷ The new President, Henry McCarthy, came from Chicago.⁸⁸ Five others were from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and, Kentucky.⁸⁹ Aside from the New Yorkers, the only other easterners were Pat Doody from Holyoke, Massachusetts, and James Gibbons from Philadelphia.⁹⁰ At the end of the war, the Fenians prepared for their “year of action.” The Fenian Brotherhood had grown from a revolutionary support organization, to a self-styled

⁸³. Department of the Secretary of State, Canada, *Correspondence relating to the Fenian Invasion and the Rebellion of the Southern States*. (Ottawa: Hunter, Ross & Company, 1869), 6-9.

⁸⁴. James Lawlor Kiernan, *Ireland and America, Versus England, from a Fenian point of View*. (Detroit: George W Pattison, 1864), 11.

⁸⁵. Kiernan, 11.

⁸⁶. James O’Reilly to John O’Mahoney. Letter Dated October 24, 1864. Fenian Papers. Box 1, Folder 6.

⁸⁷. D’Arcy, 50.

⁸⁸. D’Arcy, 50.

⁸⁹. D’Arcy, 50.

⁹⁰. D’Arcy, 50.

government of the Irish Republic. Impatient with the movement in Ireland, the Fenians aimed for Canada. The movement split when Fenian raiders attempted to seize Campobello Island and failed, which led to O'Mahoney's ouster.

The year of 1865 was the pinnacle of Fenian strength in Ireland. The organization boasted approximately 100,000 members.⁹¹ Furthermore, the Fenians had infiltrated both the British Army garrison and the Constabulary in Ireland, undermining the ability of the Crown to hold on to Ireland.⁹² Fenians expected the demobilized soldiers to send arms, money and veteran officers to Ireland to train the IRB.⁹³ "Even a merely nominal landing force would serve a good purpose."⁹⁴ Stephens planned to "commence active operations" as soon as the "Civil War ends."⁹⁵

O'Mahoney answered the call and veterans of the Irish Legion and the 69th NYNGA prepared for action again, but on a different continent. Dozens of Corcoran's and Murphy's veterans returned to Ireland to fight, including Francis Cavanagh, James Murphy and Andrew Byrne of the 69th NYNGA.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the British were one step ahead. Spies and informers got close to O'Mahoney. Among the most important were "Red" Jim McDermott, a confidant of O'Mahoney and Rudolph Fitzpatrick, who served as the Assistant secretary of the Fenian Brotherhood.⁹⁷ Aided by espionage, the British lashed out with mass arrests, identifying 69th NYNGA veterans by their "square

⁹¹. Oliver P. Rafferty, *The Church, The State and the Fenian Threat 1861-1875*. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 36.

⁹². Rafferty, 36.

⁹³. Captain Kelly to John O'Mahoney. Letter Dated June 21, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 6.

⁹⁴. Captain Kelly to John O'Mahoney. Letter Dated June 21, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 6.

⁹⁵. F.F. Millen to O'Mahoney. Letter dated June 24, 1865. Fenian Papers Box 1, Folder 7.

⁹⁶. Fenian Photographs, NYPL.

⁹⁷. Robert L. Dallison, *Turning Back the Fenians: New Brunswick's Last Colonial Campaign*. (New Brunswick: Goose lane editions, 2006), 22.

toed” federal issue brogans.⁹⁸ According to one of them, they were “dogged everywhere” and arrested by the Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police.⁹⁹

To John O’Mahoney any invasion of Canada was a “mere diversion” from the struggle in Ireland.¹⁰⁰ Unless an invasion brought the United States to war with England, it would only be a “defeat to those that engage in it.”¹⁰¹ Yet, O’Mahoney became so desperate he believed it “worth trying” in hopes of creating that war.¹⁰² This opened the way for the disastrous invasion of Campobello Island, after which Stephens formally demanded O’Mahoney’s resignation.¹⁰³

As the New York Fenians fought arrest in Ireland, the Midwest faction set its sights upon Canada. With O’Mahoney deposed, the “Roberts Wing” of the brotherhood tried to invade Canada in 1866. The Fenians had received suggestions that the American government would not interfere in their operations. On May 31, 1866, Fenian General John O’Neill led a force of 600 troops from western New York, Indiana and Tennessee across the Canadian border near Buffalo, New York. Two days later he engaged and routed 1,400 British troops and Canadian militia at the Battle of Ridgeway. At that point the British government offered to settle American demands for losses suffered by British equipped Confederate commerce raiders. The American Government then immediately cut off Fenian supplies and arrested the Fenians when they attempted to re-enter the United States.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸. Captain Kelly to John O’Mahoney. Letter Dated June 21, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 6.

⁹⁹. Captain Kelly to John O’Mahoney. Letter Dated June 21, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 6.

¹⁰⁰. O’Mahoney to Mitchell. Letter dated November 10, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 8.

¹⁰¹. O’Mahoney to Mitchell. Letter dated November 10, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 8.

¹⁰². O’Mahoney to Mitchell. Letter dated November 10, 1865. Fenian papers Box 1, Folder 8.

¹⁰³. Rafferty, 74.

¹⁰⁴. John Savage, *Fenian Heroes and Martyrs. Edited, eith an historical introduction on “the struggle for Irish nationality.”* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1868), 387-389. General John O’Neill was a

Meanwhile, James Stephens had been arrested in Ireland, escaped and made his way to New York where a grand reception was held and members of the 69th NYNGA played a prominent role.¹⁰⁵ With a power vacuum created on both sides of the Atlantic, Stephens was deposed by Colonel Thomas J. Kelly as Head Center of the IRB. In 1867 Kelly attempted to raid for arms in England.¹⁰⁶ Arrested in Birmingham, he was freed in a rescue mission involving veterans of the Corcoran Legion. He then urged the people of Ireland to strike for their freedom in 1867 and failed. In New York City survivors of the “Corcoran Legion” supported those who returned to Ireland by participating in mass meetings to protest British treatment of American prisoners in Ireland, something they did not do for the invasions of Canada.¹⁰⁷

The year 1867, brought a temporary end to the Fenian Brotherhood. It was not until the 1870’s that the Irish Republican movement re-organized itself under the leadership of John Devoy, calling itself Clan-na-Gael. The new organization affiliated with the 69th National Guard until well into the twentieth century and sowed the seeds for the 1916 Easter Rebellion and subsequent Irish War of Independence.

By changing the name of the 69th NYNGA, the state changed the course of Irish-American historiography. The 69th NYNGA became separated from the history of the Irish in New York and in 69th regimental history. In doing so it wrote the revolutionary New York City Fenian leadership out of the larger history. In the absence of revolutionary democracy, historians remembered the “second” Fenian movement, the

former cavalryman who rose from the ranks of the Federal Regulars to be commission in a Midwestern, non-Irish regiment, whose highest military rank was Captain of U.S. Colored Troops.

¹⁰⁵. *New York Herald*, May 16, 1865.

¹⁰⁶. Rafferty, 89.

¹⁰⁷. *Boston Daily Journal*, November 20, 1867. The former members from the 155th NYV from Buffalo, NY of the Legion were the exception, playing an important role in the 1866 Invasion and the battle of Ridgeway.

Midwestern “land grab” into Canada. In effect Irish-American Fenianism has been misunderstood ever since.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸. The invasions of Canada by the Fenians have dominated the historiography of the American Fenian Movement. This is largely because the Fenians were used as pawns by the United States Government to settle claims held against the British for their support of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Less documented by historians are the efforts, defeated by means of paid spies and informers, some in the highest levels of the Fenian leadership in America, to support operations in Ireland. Among these efforts were the return of hundreds of veteran officers and men to train Fenians in Ireland and the shipment of arms and money from New York to Ireland in 1866. Ultimately the Fenians were crushed in Ireland and their only victory is that perceived at the Battle of Ridgeway in June of 1866 in Canada.

Chapter 6

POST WAR AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The end of the Civil War coincided with the “year of action” called by James Stephens. The 69th NYNGA returned home to a turbulent situation. Some members journeyed to Ireland for the liberation, while others remained in New York. With the demise of the Fenian Brotherhood in 1866-67, the 69th NYNGA worked hard to commemorate its sacrifices for the Union, to build a monument to the Corcoran Legion and to write a history of its service in the war. The veterans accomplished none of this. Without a written record or a physical reminder, the memory of the 69th NYNGA, like the veterans, faded away.

While a few members of the 69th NYNGA returned to Ireland to liberate their motherland, others returned to the Emerald Isle in coffins. Mrs. Whelply disinterred the body of her husband, Captain Francis Whelply, from the battlefield of Ream’s Station. By the end of 1865 Whelply was buried among his family in Skibereen, County Cork.¹ Most of the dead were buried where they died, in Virginia or New York.

On October 5, 1865, the 69th returned its flags to Richard O’Gorman. Of the remaining officers of the 69th, only twenty-two, were present.² Also present was Brigadier General J.P. McIvor, captured with Corcoran at First Bull Run, and the last commander of the Corcoran Irish Legion. O’Gorman complimented them for preserving

¹. Cavanagh, 408.

². *The Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1865.

the flags and returning them in triumph.³ He also expressed his sorrow for the many brave men who had shed their blood in its defense.⁴

After the War, members of the 69th NYNGA continued to have a presence in the 69th National Guard (NYNG) as the militia had been redesignated in New York State. Civil War veterans served as captains in the 69th NYNG between 1866 and 1892.⁵ Lieutenant Colonel John Coonan, the last commander of the 69th NYNGA, served as the regimental commissary officer from 1869-70 and again in 1875.⁶ Veterans did much to keep the Fenian spark – even if inactive – alive in the 69th NYNG.

Following the war, the officers of the Irish Legion attempted to organize for commemorative purposes. Less than a month after muster out, Lieutenant Colonel Coonan called for a meeting of all officers at the Odd Fellows Hall at Grand and Center streets in New York.⁷ The following month the “Corcoran Irish Legion Monument Association” formed to erect a monument to the fallen in New York City.⁸ Sadly, the organization never completed its goals.⁹ Whether this was because of post-Fenian disillusionment or because tighter economic circumstances bound the veterans remains unknown. Yet, the veterans still met. Each January they held an annual ball to commemorate the Battle of Deserted House. In 1872 they decorated Lyric Hall with “the gallant 69th’s” battle flags.¹⁰ Despite many being maimed, the veterans came to dance.¹¹

³. *The Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1865.

⁴. *The Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1865.

⁵. Jim Tierney, *The Cavanaugh Years*, Unpublished work, 2011, 302-397.

<http://www.sixtyninth.net>

⁶. *Cavanaugh Years*, 305-317.

⁷. *New York Herald*, August 1, 1865

⁸. *New York Tribune*, September 29, 1865.

⁹. *Albany Evening Journal*, January 21, 1865. Also *Cincinnati Daily*, July 27, 1868. Also *Albany Evening Journal*, March 15, 1871.

¹⁰. *Sunday Mercury*, February 4, 1872.

¹¹. *Sunday Mercury*, February 4, 1872.

Veterans of the Corcoran Legion maintained both close ties with veterans of the Irish Brigade and members serving in the standing 69th NYNG. From 1866-1870 the officers of the Corcoran Irish Legion were invited to march with the 69th National Guard in the St. Patrick's Day parade, holding "the post of honor."¹² In 1875 New York's Irish veterans living in San Francisco met to establish a local committee to form an Irish Civil War veteran's organization.¹³ In New York City an organization consisting of a mix of old 69th NYSM members, Corcoran Legion veterans and Irish Brigade veterans formed. Although it focused on fraternity, the organization worked hard for the political goal of supporting Samuel J. Tilden's candidacy.¹⁴ In 1878, the "Veteran's Corps 69th Reg't, Irish Brigade, and Corcoran Legion" sponsored a talk by General James Shields on Ireland and her hopes to benefit the widows and orphans of the regiment.¹⁵ No hard feelings existed between these groups of Irish veterans, even though they were competitors for Irish-American fame during the war. In July 1888, veterans from Corcoran's Legion accompanied the 69th Regiment NYNG and Veterans of the 69th NYV to Gettysburg for the unveiling of the Irish Brigade monument.¹⁶

Some veterans returned to Ireland; most veterans stayed in New York. Despite their war service, most members of the 69th NYNGA faded into obscurity. They simply drop off the historical record. In an era when "great men" dominated the history page, the fate of the common soldier became irrelevant and no effort was made to record it. Their deaths went unnoticed in the papers. Only one enlisted person stands out, Private Thomas

¹². *New York Herald*, March 11, 1866.

¹³. *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, December 14, 1875.

¹⁴. *New York Herald*, October 9, 1876.

¹⁵. *New York Herald*, March 3, 1878. The Veteran Corps still exists and is considered a part of the regiment and has done much to preserve and record the history of the 69th. Indeed it was the late commander of the Veteran Corps, Bernard Kelly, who initially offered his enthusiastic support to this project.

¹⁶. *New York Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1885.

Crommer of Company H. He moved west, first to Nevada and ultimately to Idaho, where he disappeared.¹⁷ That he was noticed at all was only because he took out newspaper advertisements searching for former comrades who could vouch for his service in order to obtain a pension from the War Department.

Only a few officers grabbed headlines. Captain O'Farrell, the chess champion of Belfast, abolitionist and appointed historian of the Legion, also left New York. He moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he became the state chess champion before moving to Washington, DC. There he received a position in the Patent Office.¹⁸ He studied law and was admitted to the Bar in 1883. His political opinions and opposition to the Cleveland administration cost him his position in the Patent Office, but then he started a law practice specializing in patents and land affairs.¹⁹ He was a prominent member of the Loyal Legion, the GAR and Catholic Charities.²⁰ True to the democratic beliefs of Fenianism, O'Farrell actively campaigned for human freedom. He was noted as having a "pronounced antagonism" to Republican expansionism as America expanded her physical, economic and military power at the end of the nineteenth-century.²¹ He was also "vigorously opposed imperialism."²² O'Farrell served as president of the "Anti-imperialist League."²³ During the Boer War he facilitated pro-Boer meetings in Washington, DC and enthusiastically endorsed the United Irish League.²⁴ He had been a member of the conservative Ancient Order of Hibernians but left the organization when it

¹⁷. *New York Herald Tribune*, September 4, 1891. Also *The Irish World*, February 24, 1900.

¹⁸. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

¹⁹. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²⁰. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²¹. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²². *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²³. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²⁴. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

“opposed the will of the people of Ireland.”²⁵ O’Farrell was not the only one to attain position or fame. In New York City, Captain Michael Murphy was elected to the State Assembly and also served three terms as a State Senator.²⁶

The war took a terrible toll upon its survivors. Of the near 200 who returned in 1865, 199 received disability pensions from the War Department between 1866 and 1912.²⁷ No doubt, the trials of *An Gorta Mor*, emigration, and the war shortened the lives of some 69th NYNGA veterans. For instance, Captain Breslin, the regimental sutler, died of consumption in March of 1867 at the age of forty-two.²⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Reid died at home in New York September of 1869 at age thirty-nine.²⁹ Captain Charles Glynn died in 1875, at thirty-eight.³⁰ In 1877 Lieutenant Colonel Robert Heggart died at forty-six, followed shortly by Captain James Foley who died at forty-nine.³¹ Captain Patrick O’Farrell out lived most of the surviving officers, passing away Christmas Eve 1902, in Washington, DC, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.³²

Where they died is equally important. For an organization with a transnational outlook, where they died belied the hopelessness of temporary exile in the United States. Of the forty-eight recorded locations of death in the pension files, only one – Assistant Surgeon John Spencer – died in Ireland.³³ Fifty percent died in what is now New York City and an additional ten percent died in Upstate New York or neighboring New

²⁵. *The Irish World*, January 30, 1903.

²⁶. *New York Herald Tribune*, October 10, 1888.

²⁷. Pension Records 182nd NYV, <http://www.Footnote.com>

²⁸. *New York Herald*, March 31, 1867.

²⁹. *New York Herald*, September 28, 1869.

³⁰. *New York Herald*, February 11, 1875.

³¹. *New York Herald*, June 1, 1877. Also *New York Herald*, December 16, 1867

³². *The Irish World*, January 3, 1903.

³³. Pension Records 182nd NYV, <http://www.Footnote.com>.

Jersey.³⁴ Essentially, most died within ten miles of where they first landed in America. A few others went to places such as Ohio, California, Virginia, Chicago, Indiana, Washington DC, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan and Pennsylvania.³⁵

Despite the passing of that generation, the 69th NYNGA lived on in military fashion. The 69th NYNG received the lineage and honors of both the 69th NYV and the 69th NYNGA as the War Department considered both regiments cadred by the standing state organization.³⁶ The 69th NYNG served in the Spanish American War, along the Mexican border in 1916, as the 165th U.S. Infantry Regiment in both World Wars and then again as the 69th U.S. Infantry Regiment (NYNG) from 1963 to the present, including deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁷

In the battle to keep their memory alive, the veterans of the 69th NYNGA failed. Unlike the Irish Brigade and the 69th NYV, no one stepped forward to write a history of the storied unit. While victorious on the battlefield, the 69th NYNGA veterans lost on the pages of history. Moreover, other Irish-American units stole their thunder. The first substantial work on the Irish Brigade was D.P. Coyningham's *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* published in 1867, which contained large sections that focused exclusively on the Corcoran Legion, appropriating these stories as their own. Essentially, Coyningham's book is about a different unit – the 69th, 63rd and 88th NYV – but his re-appropriated history proves to be the only substantial account of the Irish Legion ever written. But in

³⁴. Pension Records 182nd NYV, <http://www.Footnote.com>

³⁵. Pension Records 182nd NYV, <http://www.Footnote.com>

³⁶. <http://www.sixtyninth.net/lineage.html>

³⁷. On April 15, 1963, the 165th Infantry was redesignated. On that date, the Regiment reverted to her old number and became the 69th Infantry Regiment. She remained so for over thirty three years when in the wake of the cold war, she was redesignated the 69th Air Defense Artillery regiment, a title held for three years before becoming the 69th Infantry once again. The "Fighting 69th" was one of the first units to arrive at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She would serve with distinction in Iraq during 2004-5 and elements would serve in Afghanistan as well. At present the Regiment is preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan in 2012.

the battle for memory, Coyningham had written the Irish Legion into the shadows, in favor of the Irish Brigade. Beginning with the thirtieth anniversary of the Civil War, a new flurry of books followed his lead.

In 1892 Michael Cavanagh, a key Fenian, edited the *Memoirs of Thomas Francis Meagher*. In 1893 and 1903 Father Corby's landmark *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, and St. Clair Mullholland's *The Story of the 116th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*, appeared in print, further increasing the legacy of the Irish Brigade. But even without these works, the memory of the 69th NYNGA had already been muddled. By the early 1880's, few people – let alone the historians – could distinguish between the 69th NYNGA and the Irish Brigade. In his 1882 *Personal Recollections of an Irish National Journalist*, Richard Pigott wrote incorrectly, “The late General Corcoran, commanded the 69th regiment of the Irish Brigade.”³⁸ More recently, in the publisher's notes for *The Greatest Brigade: How the Irish Brigade Cleared the Way to Victory in the American Civil War*, published in 2011, the issue remained muddled, stating that the 69th NYV, rather than being an adhoc Civil War unit, was a permanent force not decommissioned until the First World War.³⁹

Furthermore the 69th NYNGA's service and motivations worked against its own memory. Quasi-abolitionist beliefs and motivation to destroy the great American contradiction – slavery – became increasingly uncomfortable in the post-war era of reconciliation. The war was rewritten in terms they did not fight for. In the half century following the war, the battle of Gettysburg became enshrined as the war's pivotal battle, but the 69th NYNGA had not been present. The images of Union and Confederate

³⁸. Richard Pigott, *Personal Recollections of an Irish national Journalist*. (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1882), 106-107.

³⁹. The Greatest Brigade. <http://www.barnesandnoble.com>

veterans meeting at “the Angle” became the definitive image of reconciliation and superficial healing of old wounds.⁴⁰ In the new paradigm of the war, the 69th NYNGA’s motivations to fight were out of place.

Thanks to the administrative name-change and poor research, the Irish Legion became a footnote. Even today, emblazoned in stone on the Lexington Avenue frontage of the Regimental Armory in New York can be seen the Regiment’s Battle Honors. The inscriptions incorrectly contain the campaigns of the Irish Brigade, not the 69th NYNGA. Although a few modern-day unit historians have corrected this error, the confusion persists.⁴¹

Time has not been kind to the 69th NYNGA. In keeping with the proletarian membership of the IRB and the Fenian Brotherhood, its members were ordinary, yet

⁴⁰. Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 248.

⁴¹. Within Regimental history they were lost as well. In an anonymous 1919 history of the Regiment, the 69th NYNGA is mentioned only once and not as such, but as the “182nd volunteers.” Another unpublished Regimental history in the collection of the Virginia War Museum in Newport News, VA, makes short thrift of the 69th NYNGA. The history devotes eleven pages to 69th NYV (Irish Brigade) history, while devoting a single paragraph to the 69th NYNGA’s battle record. As if disowning the 69th NYNGA, the author remarked that they were “now known as 182nd NYV.” As recently as 2002, with Richard Demeter’s *The Fighting Sixty-Ninth: A History*, the first published history of the Regiment to cover all of its wars, takes little notice of the 69th NYNGA. Demeter devotes ten pages of general history to the Irish Legion and not specifically the 69th NYNGA. Much of that is devoted to the remainder of Corcoran’s life and death all gleaned solely from non-manuscript sources. The remainder of the Civil War history of the Regiment (136 pages) is devoted to the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade.

After the publication of Coyningham’s *The Irish Brigade and its Campaigns* in 1867, no further histories of the Corcoran Irish Legion were published. It was not until John Garland published “Michael Corcoran and the formation of his Irish Legion” in 1987 that the Corcoran Legion was specifically addressed. While only focused on its creation, this is the only scholarly work published to date on the Corcoran Legion. In 1998 Kevin Ruffner published a second work “Corcoran’s Irish Legion in Fairfax County 1863-1864” covering the Legion’s assignment to the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, but is primarily a listing of where the regiments were stationed and when. Neither is specifically focused on the 69th NYNGA.

As for unit histories, none have been written to date for any of the Irish regiments of the Corcoran Legion. The most covered regiment of the Corcoran Legion is the non-Irish 8th New York Heavy Artillery. In 1963, with the Civil War Centennial at its height, the Murphy brothers wrote a piece for *Niagara Frontier* on the Eight New York Heavy Artillery. This was followed by Wilbur Dunn’s two volume work *Full Measure of Devotion: The 8th New York Volunteer Heavy Artillery* published in 1997. That same year Elaine Pease published a brief article in *Civil War* entitled “If this Continues the Army of the Potomac will be annihilated,” about the 164th NYV in the 1864 overland campaign. But to date nothing has been written on the 69th NYNGA.

extraordinary. They lacked the elite status and means to self-publicize. Their ultimate objective was the liberation of their motherland and the betterment of mankind. By not continuously drawing attention to themselves, veterans let their regiment become a footnote overwritten by the more active veterans of the 69th NYV. As a result, the story of the Corcoran Irish Legion and Fenianism in the Civil War was written out of history.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

It is a sad fact that the 69th NYNGA and the Corcoran Legion have been relegated to the scrap heap of history. Their story constitutes a vital, missing piece of Irish-American and Civil War historiography. Unfortunately, their story is complex and full of contradictions. It fits neither the romantic image of patriotism nor that of assimilation. They fought not for abstract togetherness or reunion, but for human freedom and for anti-British vengeance. They were not children of yeoman farmers, but the blood of serfs and the urban proletariat, the bottom of antebellum American society.

The simple redesignation of the 69th NYNGA as the 182nd NYV played a significant part in that collective forgetfulness. While the redesignation was all but ignored during the war, it proved to be the “mark of Cain” for historians who failed to appreciate the administrative decision. Those who knew the truth took it to their graves. As the nineteenth-century faded into the twentieth, the 69th NYNG (formerly the 69th NYSM), enshrined the 69th NYV as its favored child, not the 69th NYNGA. Eventually, the 69th NYV became the “Fighting Sixty-Ninth” of the Union army and the history of the Irish Brigade became the prevailing history of Irish participation in the Civil War. In that paradigm, both the history of the 69th NYSM and 69th NYNGA were pushed aside for that of the 69th NYV. As a result, scholars have ignored the transnational elements of Irish-American participation in the Civil War.

As time passed, the children of immigrants radically changed the entire perspective on Irish-American participation in the war. It was not convenient, or in many cases, not comprehensible that their parents had never intended to stay permanently in

America. They were aware of disadvantage, prejudice and discrimination. They were also aware of the terrible sacrifices made by their communities. Particularly after the start of the Cold War, it was essential not to be seen as “un-American.” By the 1960’s the story of Irish participation in the Civil War was a key thread in the tapestry that upgraded Irish to “American.”¹

Currently, the tale of the 69th NYNGA causes problems for the assimilation argument. Fenian soldiers did not fight to prove their fidelity as Americans. They never forsook their ultimate goal, to return home. Their home was never America, it was Ireland. The Fenian goal, contrary to other Irish-American soldiers, embraced a larger principle of human freedom, one that complicates the standard picture of Irish-Americans as anti-emancipationists. Fenianism stood at the core of their existence. To return home they had to facilitate the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. The 69th NYSM and the 69th NYNGA were a means to facilitate that end and to maintain hope among the exiles. Following the war, its members continued the struggle, which was more important than memorial and self-aggrandizement.

It is important to recall how this transnational outlook came about. The 69th NYSM was formed as part of the larger scheme to liberate Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Its leadership, ever anxious to return home, planned and plotted for any opportunity to strike back at England. Its leadership formed the Fenian Brotherhood and the regiment was to be the vanguard of Irish freedom. They were ready to strike when the opportunity availed itself. Michael Corcoran struck against England in the fall of 1860 by refusing to pay homage to the visiting Prince of Wales. His

¹. Paul Jones. *The Irish Brigade*, (New York: Robert B. Luce, 1969), 8.

subsequent arrest altered the course of American history and made Corcoran the most important Irish-American of the Civil War.

While Corcoran was under arrest, the Civil War began. So long as he remained under arrest, the 69th NYSM and the Irish community could not support the government. Corcoran had been branded untrustworthy and when released, he and his 69th NYSM vindicated themselves on the field of battle. Thus, the “un-American” 69th NYSM proved true at First Bull Run, but something unexpected happened. Confederates captured Corcoran. As a captive, Corcoran became a national hero.

By the fall of 1862, one month after Corcoran’s release, Irish-American support for the war plummeted, corresponding with the change of Union war aims. The war evolved from one of preservation of the Union, to a crusade against slavery. It has been held that the Irish enlisted en-masse in 1861 to defend the only nation that gave them shelter during their hour of need. As this interpretation goes, they would repay the debt through the restoration of the Union and Constitution. This belief fit nicely with post-war themes of reconciliation and rehabilitation of the South. Thus, when the war aims changed, Irish-Americans backed out. The 69th NYNGA defied this logic. While a rarity among the Irish, the leadership of the 69th NYNGA represented that class of Irishmen with deep-seated convictions on human freedom, men who considered slavery a crime against humankind. Michael Corcoran had said upon his release from Confederate prison in 1862 that he set out to do the southern “bad cause” all the harm he could and “there was no possibility of a termination of the war until the South had been crushed.”² John O’Mahoney, Head Center of the Fenian Brotherhood in America and a member of the

². *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, August 16, 1862

69th NYSM, publicly condemned “the former slave system of the South as a crime against humanity.”³

Irish Fenians also enlisted in 1862 because they saw the Confederates as pro-British and therefore acceptable targets of their malice. There is no question that Irish Catholics – even the Fenians – faced widespread discrimination in the North, but the 69th NYNGA ignored nativism long enough to deliver a blow against Britain and the Confederacy to win Irish freedom. It has been essential for historians to fit the Irish story into the pageant of American exceptionalism, and the 69th NYNGA complicates that picture.

On the battlefield, the 69th NYNGA earned an excellent reputation; however, this reputation proved to be its undoing. The 69th NYNGA’s memory, like that of its parent brigade, the Corcoran Irish Legion, was hurt by its service on the battlefield. For the first eighteen months they were relegated to the back-waters of the Eastern Theater. They missed the crucial battle of Gettysburg that later epitomized the war. When the regiment finally joined the Army of the Potomac, it was after the glory days of 1862-3. It arrived in time for the great slaughter of 1864. In barely six months, the core of the 69th NYNGA and the Fenian Brotherhood were dead or crippled.

The severe losses of the 69th NYNGA and its sister regiments of the Corcoran Irish Legion had international ramifications. The Fenian circle of the Legion was all but annihilated. The death of central leaders, especially Matthew Murphy, allowed usurpers from the Midwest to redirect the Brotherhood. With that, the Fenian Brotherhood tore itself apart, both in the United States and Ireland. It was a rift that set back the cause of Irish freedom for half a century.

³. O’Reilly, 214.

The 69th NYNGA was a bundle of contradictions. These contradictions muddy the waters, yet they are essential to understanding the American Civil War in a global context. Its actions and beliefs were contrary to the accepted norm. The core of the 69th NYNGA abhorred slavery and willingly sacrificed their lives and health to abolish it, yet they remained staunch Democrats. They believed in Grant, yet they voted for McClellan. Most importantly, they sacrificed their lives for a country, yet they had no intention of remaining in it. They remained Irish, yet they fought for the perfection of the American experiment. The 69th NYNGA were not mercenaries in the tradition of the Wild Geese, but patriots fighting for universal human freedom, which would in turn, guarantee their own.

The 69th NYNGA was a unique unit formed in unique times. It fought and died for the cause it believed in and was more than an equal of the 69th NYV of the Irish Brigade. The leadership bided their time until they deemed the American Civil War a cause worthy of Ireland's blood. When they chose to commit, they sacrificed the hopes and dreams of a generation of Irish for the betterment of another nation. In retrospect, they remained uniquely transnational. Though long forgotten and brushed aside, may this work be the first step in the reclamation of their memory, a noble and controversial one that ought not to be forgotten.

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VITA

Christopher M. Garcia

Old Dominion University
Department of History
8000 Batten Arts and Letters Building
Norfolk, VA 23529-0091

Mr. Garcia is the Education Coordinator at the Virginia War Museum in Newport News, VA and is the Chairperson of the Virginia Beach Civil War Sesquicentennial committee. He graduated in 1993 with a BA in History from Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA. Christopher served in the United States Navy from 1997-2005 and served in Operations Balkan Calm (1998), Silent Lance (2000) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003 initial invasion and 2004-2005).

He is regarded as a leading expert on the history of the Sixty-Ninth regiment and serves as a member of the 69th Historical Roundtable, established by the Army, to draft the official regimental history. He is the Author of two published essays: *The "Fighting" Sixty-Ninth New York at Bull Run* (Sergeant Kirkland's 1995 and 1997) and *Denied a Soldier's Desire: The 69th NYVI in the Spanish American War* (My Country, Winter 1999). He also published a review of *The Fighting 69th: One remarkable National Guard Unit's Journey from Ground Zero to Baghdad* in *New York Irish History* (2007).

Originally a native of Fresh Meadows, NY, Christopher resides in Virginia Beach, VA with his wife Kimberly.