

Pvt. JOHN J. BYRAM  
AT  
FREDERICKSBURG, VA.  
DEC. 13TH, 1862

After the battle of Antietam, on Sept. 17, both the Union and Confederate armies remained inactive for nearly two months. McClellan was relieved of the command of the Army of the Potomac and Maj.- Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside appointed to succeed him.

One of the first acts of the new commander was to form the army into three grand divisions. **The Right grand division, commanded by Maj.-Gen. Edwin V. Sumner**, consisted of the 2nd and 9th corps, the former commanded by Maj.-Gen. Darius N. Couch and the latter by Brig.-Gen. Orlando B. Willcox, including the regiment of the 51<sup>st</sup> NY Volunteers including Private John J. Byram.

Burnside's plan was to establish a base of supplies on the Potomac, at or near Acquia creek, and then move against Richmond by the way of Fredericksburg. The war department promised to send enough pontoons to cross the Rappahannock, so early on November 15th, the army was put in motion for Falmouth, opposite Fredericksburg.

**Sumner reached Falmouth on the 17th**, and the rest of the army two days later. At that time there was only a small Confederate force at Fredericksburg, and the intention was that Sumner should cross the river and take possession of the heights back of the town before General Lee could reinforce the garrison. But the promised pontoons had not arrived, the river could not be forded by a large army, and the railroad and turnpike bridges had been destroyed by the enemy. There was nothing to do but wait. Hooker and Sumner both wanted to cross the river at some point above or below the town, but Burnside deemed it inexpedient to risk movement until the entire army was ready.

The pontoons did not arrive until the 25th, and the bridges were not completed until about Dec. 10. The day that Sumner reached Falmouth the Federal plan was made apparent to Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, who immediately ordered McLaws' and Ransom's divisions to Fredericksburg. On the 19th the rest of Longstreet's corps was ordered up and on the 26th, was directed to join Longstreet. By the time that Burnside was ready to cross Lee's whole force was intrenched on the heights in the rear of Fredericksburg.

On the night of Dec. 10, the pontoons were taken to the designated places, and 147 pieces of Union artillery ranged along Stafford heights to cover the crossing. About 4 a.m. on the 11th, work was commenced on the bridges near the town and everything proceeded well until dawn, when the pontoniers were driven from their work by a brisk fire from a body of Confederate sharpshooters sheltered by a line of rifle-pits and concealed in the houses along the river bank.

About 6 o'clock work was resumed, but again the men were forced to retire before the fire of the sharpshooters. Artillery was directed to open fire on the town. At the same time the 7th Mich. and 19th Mass. were sent over in pontoons and chased the sharpshooters from their hiding places. The bridges were then finished and before dark Sumner's Grand Division (including the 51<sup>st</sup> NY) and part of Hooker's had crossed. On the 12th, all the army was crossed over and spent the afternoon looting the town.

At daylight on Saturday morning, Dec. 13, a dense fog hung in the valley, completely concealing the movements of the two armies from each other. General "Bull" Sumner's Grand Division began to line up early in the morning following orders that were very similar to what Franklin had received. Burnside ordered Sumner to capture the Marye's Heights by sending a "division or more" to accomplish the feat. Toward 10 o'clock this fog lifted and the army was committed the work of carrying the Confederate position at Marye's hill, named for the owner who lived on the summit. Some idea of the strength of the enemy's position here may be gained from Confederate Gen. Kershaw's report:

***"Marye's hill, covered with our batteries, falls off abruptly toward Fredericksburg to a stone wall, which forms a terrace on the side of the hill and the outer margin of the Telegraph road, which winds along the foot of the hill. The road is about 25 feet wide, and is faced by a stone wall about 4 feet high on the city side. The formation along most of the line during the engagement was four deep."***

Against this strongly fortified line, "four deep" the Union troops were compelled to march nearly a mile across open ground, every foot of which, except a narrow strip along the canal and a slight rise much closer, could be swept by the Confederate batteries on Marye's hill and the ridges to the right and left. To make matters worse the canal could be crossed only at two bridges, on one of which the floor had been torn up, so that the men were compelled to cross in single file on the stringers.

In the face of these obstacles the attack on the hill was commenced about noon. Hancock pushed forward Zook's brigade, which joined Kimball's in the assault on the wall, but both were driven back with severe losses. Hancock then sent in Meagher's and Caldwell's brigades with no better success. French and Hancock called for reinforcements.

Near 3:00 pm, after Howard's division failed to gain a foot hold, the Federals sent a fourth division into the fray. Ferrero's division, under General Samuel Sturgis of the IX corps, was ordered into the battle including the 51<sup>st</sup> NY. The division moved south of the original area of attack and tried to approach the Rebel position from their right flank. Like the divisions before Sturgis' was stopped and forced to take cover under terrible fire. At this point the Federals had sent four divisions up against the Rebel defenses.

At about 4:00 Getty's division of the 9th corps was ordered to break the enemy's line on the left but was met by a heavy fire.

Of all the assaults made during the day none approached as near Confederate lines as the first charge.

The Union had sent 14 frontal assaults on well entrenched Rebels on Marye's Heights. "We might as well have tried to take hell," a Union soldier remarks. It was during one assault the General Lee watched soberly and stated- "It is well that war is so terrible – we should grow too fond of it."

Late Monday 15th afternoon Burnside issued orders for the whole army to recross the Rappahannock. Under cover of darkness, in the midst of a cold rain storm, the army crossed the river and the pontoons were withdrawn.

The next day, North Carolinian troops were the first to enter the empty city. Pvt Charles Kerrison noted, "I have read description of sacked cities but the descriptions do not come up to the reality." Adjutant Edward E. Sill added, "The town was the most complete wreck I ever saw. Every house apparently has been broken open and sacked of everything... I saw numbers of feet, legs, Hands, and the like of which had been shot off."

The first battle of Burnside's campaign had been fought and lost. The Union losses were 1,284 killed, 9,600 wounded, and 1,769 missing. Confederate losses were reported as 608 killed, 4,116 wounded and 653 missing. Many of the Federal dead were stripped of their clothing by the enemy, the bodies being left exposed to the cold wintry winds and rain. A woman who lived in one of the houses near the stone wall said afterward:

***"The morning after the battle the field was blue; but the morning after the Federals withdrew the field was white."***

Source: The Union Army, vol. 5



The Sunken Road, 10/2001  
The only original section



The rise where Byram fell,  
Littlepage St. & Wolfe St.

Note: These are "copies" of letters in family files-

WAR DEPARTMENT  
THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE

Re: A.G. 201  
Byram, John J.  
7/15/36 (O.R.D.)

WASHINGTON

August 8, 1936.

Mr. Oscar Sweidler,  
58 Jefferson Street  
Garden City, New Jersey.

Dear Sir:

I have received your communication (questionnaire) of recent date in which, for historical purposes, you requested the military record of John J. Byram, who is said to have enlisted April 18, 1851 in Company G, 51<sup>st</sup> Regiment New York Infantry, Civil War, and to have been killed.

The records of this office show that John J. Byram, who was born in New York, N.Y.; age, 35 years, height, 5 feet 8 inches; complexion, fair; eyes, hazel; hair, dark; occupation, bookkeeper; was enrolled and mustered into service August 19, 1862 at New York, N.Y., as a private of Company G, 51<sup>st</sup> Regiment New York Infantry, Civil War, to serve three (3) years, and was killed in action at the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, December 13, 1862, a private.

Very Truly Yours,

E.J. Connley  
Major General,  
The Adjutant General.

STATE OF NEW YORK  
DIVISION OF MILITARY AND NAVAL AFFAIRS  
OF THE  
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

ALBANY

August 8, 1936.

Subject: Civil War Record.  
To: Oscar Sweidler, 58 Jefferson Street, Garden City, N.Y.

1. The records of this office show that John J. Byram, age 34 years enlisted April 18, 1861 at Brooklyn, as private, Co. C, 84<sup>th</sup> N.Y. Vol Inf.; that he was transferred to Co. G, 51<sup>st</sup> N.Y. Vol. Infantry, October 31, 1861 and that he was killed in action Dec. 13, 1862 at Fredericksburg, Va.

For The Adjutant General,

By: Wm A Saxton

Wm. A. Saxton  
Chief, Bureau of War Records

WAS/ACK

Camp of 51<sup>st</sup> N. York Vols.  
Near Falmouth Va.  
Dec 19<sup>th</sup> 1862

Dear Madame,

It has become my most painful duty to notify you of the death of your husband which occurred at the battle of Fredericksburg Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>.

I sincerely trust that you will be able to bear this sad news, and that a knowledge of the manner of his death may help to alleviate a pang in your sufferings.

Our Regiment with the Brigade attacked the Rebel works early in the afternoon of Dec 13<sup>th</sup>. He had reached the furthest point gained by any of our troops after passing through a fearful fire of artillery. We laid near the brow of a small hill, delivering and receiving a terrible fire of musketry. Five of our Color Guard had been either killed or disabled. The color was falling the fifth time when your husband caught it. He bore it until a shot struck him in the hand. He was pointing at a large rent in the flag and was saying "See where our flag is struck again". These were his last words, his death was instantaneous. He was buried near the field Dec 17<sup>th</sup> by a fatigue party from our side.

I will now tell to you of the esteem in which your husband was held by all our officers. He joined us in Pleasant Hills Md and endured cheerfully the fatiguing marches to this place. Our duties have been very severe but John has never uttered a complaint - although he suffered a good deal from severe sore feet. In the last great Battle he was noticed and praised by all who saw him. His heroic death has won a place among the list of the many noble names who have bled to save our country.

My duty is now to forward a final statement of John's death to Lorenzo Thomas Adj Gen. of the army. This is to effect a settlement of his affairs with the government.

Believe me dear madame to be sincere in sympathizing with you in this great bereavement.

Praying that God in his mercy may assist and strengthen you and grant you resignation.

I am sincerely your friend

Samuel Simms  
Capt Co. G. 51<sup>st</sup> NY

Any further information I can give upon your requesting will be promptly rendered.

S.HS

Camp of 51<sup>st</sup> N. York Vols.  
Near Falmouth Va.  
January 3rd 1863

B.F. Howes Esq.

Dear Sir,

Your favor of Dec 29<sup>th</sup> has reached me.

I regret to say that it is impossible to procure the remains of Byram. I would use every endeavor to that end if there was any possible chance of success. There was one of my men in the burial party and I gave him instruction to find those of my company if he could, and place a mark over the graves. He reported on his return that he could not find them. The burial party they relieved had buried all of our regiment who fell. The graves are near where the men fell. There must have been nearly six hundred dead buried in a space of three hundred yards long. A number of gentlemen have been here to recover remains of friends and but few have succeeded in finding their subject, most have returned disappointed.

At the time Byram met his death a piece of the color he held was shot away and was picked up by Sergt McReady of my company. I enclose it to you. This color is entirely used up and I believe Col Potter is going to send it home to the city authorities

from where we received them. To Mrs  
Byram they will have a melancholy interest  
but sir, there are but few men but would  
envy the death that my brave friend met.  
Praying that God may bless his poor  
wife

I am sincerely yours

Samuel Simms  
Capt 51<sup>st</sup> N.Y.



THE BATTLE OF Fredericksburg was over.

More than 1,700 soldiers had been killed in the battle. Many of the corpses had been left behind, unburied, in the Army of the Potomac's retreat. Gen. Robert E. Lee attended to the burial of his own dead and sent a message to his Union counterpart, Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, requesting that he send detachments back across the Rappahannock River to inter the Northern dead. Burnside readily assented to the proposal.

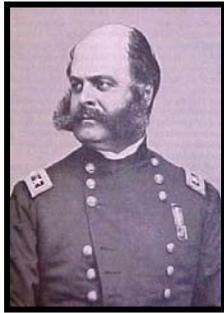
Gen. Edwin Sumner, commanding the Union army's Right Grand Division, detailed three officers and 100 men from the Second and Ninth corps for the task. The Union army had interred most of the soldiers who had died in the fighting south of Fredericksburg during a flag of truce on Dec. 15, 1862, so the burial parties focused on Marye's Heights sector of the battlefield, directly behind the town.

The men crossed the Rappahannock River early on Dec. 17 and were escorted by a detail of Confederate soldiers from the 13th Mississippi Regiment to the plain outside of town. "As we approached the battle field, who can describe my feelings when I found the dead bodies of our brave men, stripped of their clothing." Confederate soldiers, lacking sufficient uniforms, had stolen the coats, pants, and even the undergarments of their fallen foe as protection against the coming winter.

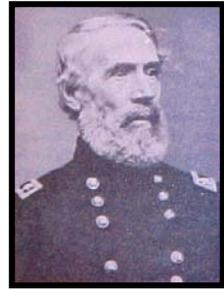
The Union burial party fanned out and began gathering up the corpses for burial. It was a gruesome task. "They were literally pieces of men, for those destructive shells had done their perfect work," wrote one soldier. The men fashioned a ditch, approximately 6 feet wide and 100 yards long, from a defensive trench started by Union soldiers during the battle. The trench began at Hanover Street and extended south in a line just east of modern-day Littlepage Street. As soldiers brought the bodies in, they laid them side by side in the ditch, three deep, and covered them with a thin layer of dirt.

In all, 609 men were buried there. The work was not completed by day's end, prompting Gen. Burnside to request a second flag of truce on Dec. 18. Lee granted the request and once again Union soldiers, 200 to 300 in number, rowed across the Rappahannock River into Fredericksburg. "Oh, it was awful!" wrote one nauseated worker. "We laid the poor fellows side by side in the trench & covered them with earth where they will remain till the great Judgement Day. O! What a dreadful war this is!"

The next day, Col. Brooke drafted a report of the expedition. He recorded burying a total of 913 bodies. The job, however, had not been done well. News of the poor burial conditions got back to officials in Washington, and, when the war ended in July 1865, the War Department established Fredericksburg National Cemetery on Marye's Heights. Over the next four years, contract workers collected the remains of 15,000 Union soldiers from battlefields throughout Central Virginia and brought them to Fredericksburg for burial. (Confederate soldiers who died in the area were buried at private expense in two local cemeteries.) By then, however, most identification had disappeared. As a result, just 16 percent of the soldiers now buried in the cemetery have been identified.



Ambrose E. Burnside, **Commanding General, Army of the Potomac**- Burnside didn't want the job and twice refused Lincoln's appointment. He was not terribly distinguished but he was apolitical. The other more worthy Generals were seen as "threats" or "liabilities" in the extremely political climate of Washington. Upon taking command, he made his plan to take Fredericksburg known to Lincoln. The President's response was short, and eerily full of insight. Lincoln wired back-  
*"Your plans to take Richmond via Fredericksburg will succeed, if you move very rapidly; otherwise not."*



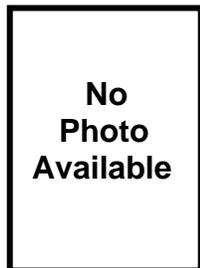
Edwin V. Sumner, **Major General, Right Grand Division**- At age 65, Sumner was the oldest corps commander in the Union army. Sumner was well-liked by his troops, who had nicknamed him "Bull Head" (or simply "Bull") after a spent bullet ricocheted off his head doing him no harm. In an army known for its jealousies, Sumner stood out for his honesty and devotion to the Union. Ironically, Burnside would make him a scapegoat.  
*"Sumner held his corps in hand to support Couch, and at the proper moment threw in Sturgis' division, which showed the same gallantry and met the same ill-fortune as that shown and experienced by the divisions of the Second Corps."*



Samuel D. Sturgis, **Brigadier General, Second Division**- Sturgis was a crusty no-nonsense veteran of many campaigns of the Indian wars. Sturgis was widely known more for his colorful vocabulary than military prowess. Angered by his Union Commander after the defeat at Second Manassas, he issued his most famous remark *"I don't care for John Pope one pinch of owl dung."* When darkness ends the carnage of December 13th, General Sturgis sends back a message to Burnside's headquarters:  
*"Our men only 80 paces from the crest and holding on like hell."*



Robert B. Potter, **Colonel, 51st NY Vol "Shepard Rifles"**- Born in Schenectady, he attended Union College but did not graduate. Though many maps identify the leader of Byram's assault as Ferraro, it was Potter in command on the field that day. Byram was one of 12 men from the 51<sup>st</sup> who died in the attack. Potter later received fame for leading another disastrous Union mass assault at "The Crater." Union tunnelers had dug a mine shaft under the Rebel lines. A massive charge was detonated blasting a huge pit in the defensive works. But orders were confused and instead of going *around* the crater, troops went *in* and were turned back.



Samuel H. Simms, **Captain, Company G, 51st NY Volunteers**- Enrolled August 1861 in Brooklyn, he went on to fight with Potter and the 51<sup>st</sup> at the battle of "The Crater." He died in that battle on July 30, 1864. It was in the weeks after the battle of Fredericksburg that he wrote the letters to the Byram family with the details of Pvt. John J. Byram's death.

**V**  
**Pvt. John J. Byram**



The day before battle Dec. 12- "What began as minor pilfering quickly degenerated into wholesale pillage. For a few hours, discipline and order vanished as soldiers dashed from building to building stealing whatever they could find. A soldier saw a comrade carrying a stuffed alligator."

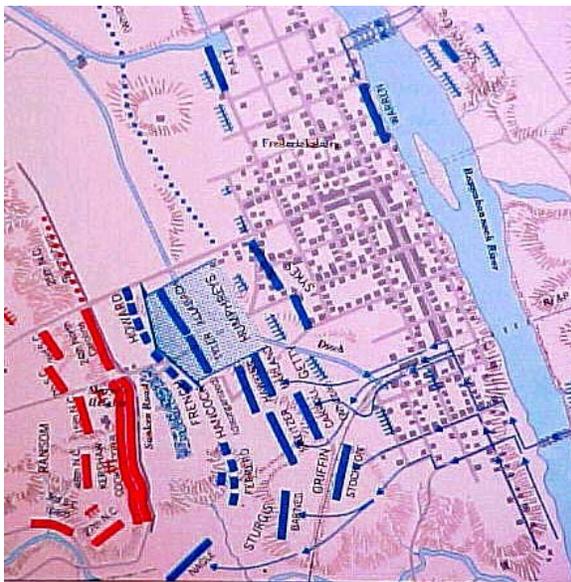
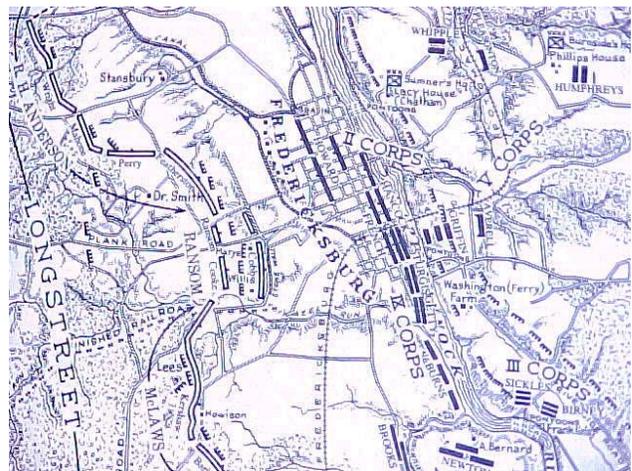
"The sacking our soldiers gave the city was shameful," wrote a surgeon. "The town was fairly turned inside out. Not a nook or crevice ... but was ransacked."

In this on-site sketch we see the men of Hall's unit, who fought block-by-block to secure the city, relaxing in the foreground. In the background at left, behind the mounted officer, we see troops marching Southward on Caroline Street on their way to the battlefield. The men are the IX Corps... including Private John J. Byram.

The battlefield on the morning of Dec. 13- The Rebels are on the left, holding the heights West of the city. The "haircomb-like" markings indicate artillery units.

The Confederate front lines, just left of the center here, were over 2100 infantrymen hidden behind a sunken road topped by a rock wall 4 feet thick. The Federal troops had no idea they were there.

The Federals attacked due West across open ground. As the first Divisions were slaughtered, the 51<sup>st</sup> NY with John Byram was marched South along the river down Caroline Street. There they turned West on the street just South of the railroad tracks.



The killing ground at day's end-

The first Federal troops got closest...their dead and wounded men are the blue dots in front of the red line of the Confederate riflemen behind the stone wall. The second attack is shown by the big blue arrowhead...their casualties also littered the field.

Ferrero's Division including the 51<sup>st</sup> NY and John Byram marched West following the RR tracks then tried to swing left around the field of fallen men. They were raked by cannonfire from the high ground to the Southwest, just off of this map at the lower left. They got to a slight rise and were immediately shot up by the men behind the wall. They laid down and were just barely protected by the slight rise of the ground. It was the job of the Color Guard to keep the flag upright, so officers could see *what* troops were *where*.

Private John J. Byram was the sixth and last man to carry the Regiment flag and was struggling to keep it upright and visible. He was instantly the target of dozens of point-blank rifles.

**John J. Byram at Fredericksburg**  
**Researched by Kyle York**

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