



THE drum roll

383rd Regular Meeting Volume 40 Number 2 Oct. 7, 2022



The October meeting will be at Arlington Hts. Public Library on Friday, October 7, 2022, at 7 PM.

Probably the best-known engagement of the 10-month siege of Petersburg was the battle of The Crater, on July 30, 1864. To kick off our 2022-2023 season, current president Laurence Schiller dug into a little-known slice of that infamous battle: The roll of the 29th United States Colored Troops.

The 29th USCT was the only African-American regiment raised primarily in Illinois, a state which had a problematic record regarding black residents. Slavery was illegal there from the outset. However, in 1853, a law was pushed through that forbade free blacks from entering the state. Despite this, in 1861, there were officially 7,628 black residents of Illinois, plus a number of escaped slaves, and it was out of this population that the regiment was formed. Few of the men were born in Illinois; the majority were escaped slaves from Missouri and Kentucky. (As was common among USCT troops, many used assumed names, due to their “escaped” status.) Recruiting was slow, the state’s “black codes” being one factor; another was the difference in pay between white and black soldiers. Additionally, the Confederate proclamation was a

deterrent. Thus, the 29th began its career understrength; rather than 10 companies, there were 6. Five of them (A through E) were recruited in Illinois while the sixth (F) was based out of Wisconsin. Initially the regiment was designated the 1st Illinois Colored, but once officially mustered into U.S. service it was given the number 29.

One bonus for the state as a whole was that the black regiment counted towards Illinois’ quota for the draft. And it provided opportunity for white officers (who staffed all USCT regiments) for advancement. Due to its understrength status, the 29th would be short in its staff as well, with a lieutenant colonel (no full colonel), one major and one captain; lieutenants led most companies. The unit had no chaplain, adjutant, surgeon, or assistant surgeon. These roles would have to be covered by existing officers doing double duty. Lieutenant Colonel John Bross, formerly a captain in the 88th Illinois, commanded the 29th.

The 29th initially received a solid amount of drill, but no actual combat training. In the spring of 1864, they were called to Washington, DC, where the regiment was stationed at Camp Casey in early May. It would be another month before Bross and his men would move to join U.S. Grant’s Overland campaign, arriving behind the lines in Virginia June 3, and joining their parent formation-2nd Brigade, 4th Division, 9th Corps- on June 9. Their brigade commander was Henry G. Thomas, division commander Edward Ferrero, and corps commander Ambrose Burnside.

Ferrero’s division, being composed entirely of black troops, had spent most of the campaign guarding supply trains and other rear areas. Even after moving to the front at Petersburg, the division was used primarily to cover portions of the line temporarily vacated by other troops. Consequently, as Petersburg

settled into a siege, Ferrero's black troops had seen little meaningful action-but this was about to change.

Burnside's corps wound up closer to Confederate lines than anywhere else on the front (and, because the 9th included black troops, it was kept under more consistent fire than other portions of the line.) Directly in front of Burnside was a salient earthwork; not too far behind that was a commanding hill called Cemetery Hill. If Cemetery Hill fell, the road to Petersburg might be laid open-and Burnside had a plan. A regiment of coal miners dug a long tunnel under the Confederate salient, packed it with 8,000 pounds of powder, and made ready to touch it off. Once exploded, the lead troops would move around the breach, some of them moving left and right to widen the break, while others would surge forward, capture Cemetery Hill, and open the way to Petersburg,

The lead division would have the key role. Burnside's three white divisions had been in heavy combat for six weeks prior to Petersburg; they were much reduced in numbers, worn out, and had been under fire for several weeks in the trenches. Ferrero's men, were much fresher, had higher morale as a result, and were eager to prove themselves. They were thus chosen as the spearhead, and specially trained to exploit the breach. However, the day before the attack, Army of the Potomac commander George Meade ordered Burnside to replace Ferrero with a veteran white division, because the other units were more experienced. In this, he was sustained by Grant (who would later express concerns about the political ramifications of placing the black troops in front, where they might be slaughtered). Therefore, Burnside chose a different division (by drawing straws, no less) to lead: his worst division, under his worst commander, James Ledie.

The explosion on the morning of July 30 was delayed, finally coming off at 4:45 AM; and that was the start of a multitude of misfortunes. The white troops were slow getting out of the works, were not well trained on what to do, and received no direction from Ledie, who stayed behind, drinking in a bombproof bunker. As the other war-weary divisions piled in, many of them moved into the crater, directly against the plan, and the Confederates recovered quickly. Finally, about 8 AM, Ferrero's black division was sent in-minus Ferrero, who joined Ledie in drinking instead. With no firm direction, the USCT troops did what they could, but to no avail; in the ensuing chaos many of them wound up in the crater also. The 29th brought a little over 500 into the fight. Lt. Col. Bross was killed with the colors, which subsequently disappeared and were never found.

The men in the crater became ideal targets, and amidst the slaughter, the USCT soldiers were killed indiscriminately, sometimes after surrendering. The attack was a bloody fiasco; the 29th USCT lost 150 men as casualties, about 28% of its strength. A little after 1 PM, the sad affair was over. The bold plan had come to naught.

The 29th USCT soldiered on after The Crater. Sometime later, four more companies would join the regiment, and in time the black 9th Corps division would be folded into the new, all-black 25th Corps, but the 29th would see no more major combat for the balance of the war.

On behalf of the Round Table, I would like to thank Laurence Schiller for his fascinating look at an otherwise-unheralded United States Colored Troops regiment, from Illinois no less.

Pat McCormick

8th Wisconsin Regiment's Shadowy Secret

The 8th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment was raised in Madison, Wisconsin, and mustered in on September 13, 1861. The 8th would be commanded by four men. The third of these men was John Wayles Jefferson. When he mustered in, he was 26 years old and was a successful businessman as a hotel operator. He rose in the ranks from major to colonel and eventually commanded the regiment. Throughout his service, he sent letters to Madison newspapers giving locals a sense of what the 8th Wisconsin was experiencing.

However, Colonel Jefferson carried a secret about his background that probably would have made him ineligible to be an officer in the 8th Wisconsin. There were clues, but these clues were very obscure. First, his last name was Jefferson, just like the third president of the United States. The second clue is his first and middle name of John Wayles. John Wayles was Thomas Jefferson's father-in-law. Well, Colonel Jefferson's grandfather was President Thomas Jefferson. That should have been something to be proud of, but at that time it was not. So, what's the problem? The problem was that Colonel Jefferson's grandmother was ¼ black and the

President's slave and concubine. His father was 1/8th black. Although most Wisconsin citizens were anti-slavery, there were still prejudices against anyone with a smidgen of black blood. If people had known the truth, Colonel Jefferson would never have become a colonel and probably would have been unable to join the 8th Wisconsin.

Although there were a few who knew Colonel Jefferson's secret, the secret continued until 1998 when a DNA study exposed the secret, and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation decided the issue was settled. So, today if you visit the Monticello website you will find a portrait of Colonel John Wayles Jefferson.

Please join us for the October meeting as long-time Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table member, Jerry Allen, tells the story of Colonel John Wayles Jefferson and three other union soldiers who share his ancestry.

The next Saturday discussion will be on Saturday, October 29, 2022, at 10 AM. There was a conflict with the fall tour to Chattanooga. The topic will be a follow up of the Chattanooga discussion and will be on Nashville and Franklin.

Speaker lineup:

- Sept. 9: Laurie Schiller. The 29th USCT at the Crater
- Oct. 7: Jerry Allen. 8th Wisconsin
- Nov. 4: Phil Angelo. Morgan's Raid
- Dec. 2: Dave Powell: Tullahoma
- Jan. 6: Pat McCormick. North Anna
- Feb. 3: Mary Abroe. Civil War Centennial, Rhetoric, Reality, and the Bounds Of Selective Memory
- Mar. 3: Rob Girardi. TBA
- April 7: Michael Wynne. The Real Story of The Rock Island POW Camp. This Program will be on ZOOM.
- May 5: Wayne Rhine. The Kersage
- June 2: Banquet. David Zarefsky. The Strategy of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address

Laurence Schiller is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83292409507?pwd=cGV1UStlYU96R2lyRmVVTXZKZWVJvQT09>

I will be publishing a list of books for sale. Anyone interested in these can contact me, Jerry Rodosky.

Please email Laurie or Wayne if you are interested in volunteering for an open position. Also, please think membership! We need new people!



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Appointed Positions

Book Raffle	Vacant
Newsletter Editor	Jerry Rodosky gjerosky@gmail.com

Upcoming Events

As a note the board has decided not to collect dues for the 2022-23 year.