

The Crater June 30, 1864

By

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It was not known until very recently that in Eastchester there was not only support for the Civil War but that volunteers from Eastchester belonged to a New York State regiment that fought in the bloodiest and most important battles of the Civil War. What previous historians had said was that there were no volunteers from the town. The only people to allegedly fight were paid substitutes, mainly immigrants, who received large bounties to replace male citizens who did not wish to fight. Historians readily pointed out the immigrant quarry workers gladly participated in the draft riots of July, 1863.

Ten years ago an authentic journal appeared along with other documents that told the story of William Thiselton and a company of almost 100 Eastchester volunteers. In the late summer of 1862 the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery was formed consisting of volunteers mainly from Westchester but also from Putnam and Rockland Counties. These men answered Lincoln's call for 300,000 new volunteers to keep the union together. A few weeks after the regiment was formed the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. What had started out as a war to keep the nation united had become one to make men free.

The men who fought in this regiment and endured the hardships of by far the bloodiest war in American history were of much different stock than the immigrant mob that destroyed the train tracks and threatened to burn down the homes of Republicans in the town during the draft riots of 1863. The illiterate mob of itinerant quarry workers who participated in the riots was angry about the newly imposed draft and did not understand the meaning of the conflict. They only saw that they had left one country to be drafted into a conflict that was taking away their means of livelihood.

Who were these boys and men who fought in the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery? William Thiselton wrote in his journal, "Of the original 1100 men who enlisted in August of 1862 there were but 55 men who could not write their name and but one those was native born. When the regiment was formed there were no bounties offered as an inducement to enlist and it is safe to say that patriotism is the only motive that brought this body together." These men had attended one room school houses, read local newspapers, attended church services, and heard patriotic speeches that showed that the dissolution of the federal union threatened the existence of the bold experiment that the founding fathers had started back in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution.

The New York Sixth Heavy Artillery fought in bloodiest battles of the Civil War. They went into major combat after Gettysburg. They fought under Grant in Virginia from beginning of May to

the end of June in 1864. Over 100,000 American died in a little over six weeks in the Battles of Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, and the siege at Petersburg. Men died but the desertion rate was minimal. General Ulysses Simpson Grant was bitterly criticized by the press at home but the Army of the Potomac of which the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery was a part never wavered in its support of Grant.

How did the regiment feel about the issue of race? The only accounts that exist come from the commander of the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery and William Thiselton. Thiselton describes how in late June of 1864 a plan to end the war with the use of “colored troops” was put together by General Ambrose Burnside at the siege of Petersburg. Petersburg was the railroad center of the confederacy and capture of the city would have ended the conflict. Former Pennsylvania coal miners were to dig a tunnel underneath the trenches surrounding the city, denote a huge explosion, and use a regiment of “colored troops” to storm through the tunnel and capture the city. The strategy of using black soldiers in the first assault was rejected in a council of war both because the commanders thought that were not competent and that the appearance of blacks would incite the enemy.

On June 30, 1864 the plan was put into effect when a huge explosion was denoted in the early morning hours in Petersburg.. A huge crater was created and at first it looked like the plan would succeed. The first wave of white troops were not equipped with scaling ladders and by the time the regiment of “colored soldiers” appeared, Union troops were sitting ducks for the Confederates. The Union troops both black and white were massacred and forced to retreat. The plan was a disastrous failure. Union commanders like Howard Kitching and George Meade looking for a scapegoat wrongly blamed the failure on the incompetence and cowardice of “colored soldiers.”

William Thiselton witnessed the attack on that fateful day. In his journal he gave a very different version that is much more in agreement with what military historians accept today. He wrote, “Every man who witnessed the charge of colored troops on the 30th of July, 1864, can truly testify that no body of men whatever the color or race could have fought more valiantly or desperately than the 9th corp. on that day.”

It is impossible to say the rest of the regiment shared Thiselton’ s lack of prejudice. However, it is safe to assume that there must have been a collective sense of resentment against that immigrant mob that rioted against the draft as they were burying the dead at Gettysburg back in July of 1863. These men gave to paraphrase Lincoln’s words, “There full measure of devotion that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom- and that a government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from this earth.”