

History in Stone

A speech presented at the Resaca Battlefield, Georgia
For the dedication of the 123rd Regiment NYSV Civil War Monument
by William A. Cormier, Historian
Town of Salem, NY
May 19, 2018

Thank you, Steven Toney and other members of the 28th Georgia for inviting us from Washington County, New York to participate in this dedication ceremony. We are honored to be present at this patriotic unifying event.

The nearby, three cemeteries, Resaca, Dalton and Marietta, containing soldiers of the north and the south stir one's emotions when we read the names of those buried there. But, some stones have no names such as the 421 Confederate soldiers and the four unknown Union soldiers buried in the Dalton Cemetery. However, these unknowns have not been forgotten. The living chose to give them a dignified resting place on a former field of battle, and although their names are unknown to us today, they were known to their fellow soldiers, and God. They were remembered as being part of a family, they were remembered for their sacrifice, and they were remembered for their courage. They are in our memories.

Standing here on this historic battlefield, I am reminded of a popular Lutheran hymn about an earlier time, but appropriate here. The opening line is, "The strife is o'er, the battle done." Today we remember a tumultuous time, a time when neighbors and family members were pitted against each other, but today we gather in peace to give respect to all the valiant soldiers. Preserving this battlefield and erecting this monument, a monument dedicated to the 123rd Regiment of New York State, is an important step in remembering history, a history carved in stone.

Meeting reenactors of the 28th Georgia and 123rd Regiment New York State Volunteers in Salem for the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War in the summer of 2015, I was impressed with their professionalism and dedication in promoting the memories of all soldiers who fought in the Civil War. When the Salem Civil War celebration committee that summer learned of the 28th Georgia's project to erect a monument dedicated to the 123rd Regiment, we immediately decided to financially support the project and to attend the monument ceremony. We are here today, with other Washington County representatives in unity, to give our thanks for honoring and remembering those who fought and died here.

This new monument tells a story and symbolizes a respect for the past, just as the 17 Confederate monuments interspersed with Union monuments throughout the Gettysburg Battlefield, remind us of the valor of all soldiers who fought there. Furthermore, as the result of the 28th Georgia visiting Salem in 2015, the 28th Georgia reenactors compiled a book about the 123rd Regiment. *Letters Home: The 123rd New York Infantry in the Atlanta Campaign* is a

book of personal letters revealing the fears and hopes of men locked in battle, separated from their loved ones.

Fortunately, during and after the war, 123rd Regiment soldiers wrote about their experiences—many wrote letters home from the battle field, some recorded cold facts and figures, and some wrote autobiographies. Among these historical recollections are the writings of Lt. Robert Cruikshank of Salem, Sargent Henry C. Morhouse of Greenwich, and Sargent Rice C. Bull of Hartford, revealing battlefield emotions. They, however, were not alone in telling their stories. Many other authors have written about the Civil War, and their works are worth reading, if for no other reason than to remember the aphorism of Professor George Santayana, who said “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

When called upon in 1862, the citizens of Washington County recruited from its 17 towns enough men to fill the ranks of the 123rd Regiment New York Volunteer Infantry. On a cool day in September, close to a thousand soldiers left on the train from the Salem, New York. They were given a hearty goodbye by the gathered throng, but they had little idea of the trials and tribulations that they would encounter as they marched to war from Washington D.C. to the battle fields of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina and finally, North Carolina, during their three year enlistment. The 123rd Regiment had its first taste of battle at Chancellorsville, where 135 were killed, wounded or missing, and then at Gettysburg where 12 were killed, wounded or taken captive before appearing on the Resaca Battlefield as part the Army of the Cumberland, XX Corps. Here, the 123rd Regiment had eight casualties, three killed and five wounded. Soldiers of the 123rd soon learned that war had no favorites. A few days later, the commander of the 123rd Regiment, Colonel Archibald McDougall would die from wounds in the Battle of Dallas.

The march to the Atlantic and through the Carolinas is a well storied history, depicted in many books and movies. By the end of the war, 169 officers and soldiers of the 123rd had been killed. Ironically, the last to die was William H. Toohey, Co. F, who was killed near Goldsboro, North Carolina, on April 10, 1865, two days after the Appomattox agreement. News travelled slowly at that time. Nevertheless, with the agreement between General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant, the war for the 123rd Regiment was over, and the path to reconciliation began.

At the Virginia Appomattox Courthouse, Generals Lee and Grant, former West Point graduates, set the tone for reconciliation, unity, and mercy. General Grant announced as part of the terms that “[we] will not embrace the side-arms of the Officers, not their private horses or baggage. This done, each officer and man will be allowed to return to their homes, not to be disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and laws in force, where they may reside.”

General Lee, likewise, said to his soldiers, “By the terms of the agreement, Officers and men can return to their homes and remain until exchanged. You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from a consciousness of duty faithfully performed; and I earnestly pray that Merciful God will extend to you His blessings and protection.”

As we gather here today imbued with their compassion and wisdom, I am reminded of the words of Greek Philosopher Epictetus. "If thy brother wrong thee, remember not so much his wrong doing, but more than ever he is thy brother."

I want to conclude this part of my talk with an Archibald MacLeish poem that speaks of brave soldiers of all times and why we remember them.

The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak

The young dead soldiers do not speak.
Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:
who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night
and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died.
Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could
but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished
no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,
it is you who must say this.

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were young, they say. We have died, remember us.