

A monument raised in North Carolina recalls the service of men from our county

In March of 1865, the 123rd Regiment of New York State Volunteers – the famed “Washington County Regiment” that served in the Union Army from September 1862 to June 1865 – was on its way north with General William Tecumseh Sherman, who hoped soon to join forces with General Ulysses S. Grant in Virginia and end the “rebellion” that had torn the country apart and had resulted in a horrific loss of life on both sides.

Sherman’s army – which he had divided into two wings, the Army of Georgia, the left, commanded by Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum, and the Army of the Tennessee (the right), commanded by Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard – numbered 60,000 troops, many of them steeled in battle like the men of the 123rd from Chancellorsville and Gettysburg to Culp’s Farm and Atlanta.

Joseph E. Johnston, in charge of 20,000 Confederate troops in what he called the Army of the South, hoped to halt Sherman’s advance from Fayetteville to Goldsboro, where the Union brigades would be supplemented by an additional 40,000 soldiers and become an overwhelming, undefeatable force. Johnston moved his army into place near the present town of Four Oaks on March 19, 1865, and launched an attack on the Army of the Tennessee..

The 123rd regiment, *Greenwich Journal* owner and editor Henry C. Morhous later wrote, “was early on the march” that day when “peach and apple trees were full of their delicate pink and white blossoms.” They had “probably proceeded seven miles on the Smithfield road, when cannonading was heard in front.”

The regiment, Morhous wrote, “was pushed forward on the double-quick for nearly a mile, when they came upon the scene of action, in a large open field.”

Seizing rails from a fence through which they passed, the Washington County boys formed “a line of battle” in “a piece of woods” and “went rapidly to work throwing up a sort of breastwork,” but they were soon or-



The obelisk at the edge of Larry Laboda’s field.

dered “further to the right” and “to the rear of the line of battle to support a battery.” There they remained until nightfall, when they were ordered to relieve another regiment which had been engaged on the front line.

Morhous reported that the “boys lay on their arms all night, occasionally firing with the enemy, and on the morning of the 20th it was found that the enemy had disappeared, leaving their pickets to fall into our hands and their dead unburied.” Skirmishing continued through the next day, the 21st.

The Battle of Bentonville, as the engagement came to be called, was fought over an area of about 6,000 acres of woods and fields. The action, which claimed the lives of 543

men and wounded more than 2,800, was the largest battle ever fought in North Carolina. It was also the last major battle of the Civil War during which the South was able to launch a tactical offensive.

By March 22, the bulk of Sherman’s Army had reached Goldsboro. Johnston was in retreat, but Sherman did not pursue him.

The war continued with other relatively minor clashes taking place in North Carolina for about another month. Finally, Johnston, unable to mount any real offense, was obliged on April 26, 1865, to surrender to Sherman near Durham. The Civil War was over... 17 days after General Robert E. Lee had surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House,

Virginia, and 11 days after President Abraham Lincoln had died the victim of an assassin.

The monument

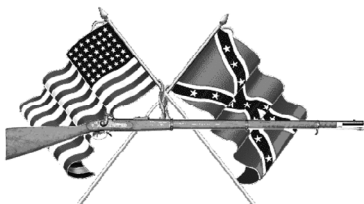
Today, at the edge of an open field – a part of the field of battle at Bentonville – a highly unusual monument, a granite obelisk, now stands. It is highly unusual because it honors a Union regiment, the 123rd NYSV. There are only two other monuments (both within the bounds of federal cemeteries) that salute Union regiments in all of the rest of North Carolina.

The monument has been erected by Lawrence R. Laboda, who was born and raised on Long Island and became interested in Civil War history during the centennial commemoration of that war in the 1960's. He "was exposed to more and more about the Civil War" – doing lots of reading on the side, as well – while a student at Southampton College, from which he graduated in 1974.

While pursuing a career with the parks department of the village of Garden City, Larry began collecting Civil War memorabilia. "In the ensuing years," he says, "I toured battlefields and Civil War-related sites as far west as Vicksburg and along the East Coast," including Bentonville.

With his memorabilia collection growing, Larry began writing articles for *The Artilleryman* magazine about some artillery items he had purchased. Later, following his purchase of a frock coat which had belonged to a member of the Jeff Davis Artillery, he pursued a "major research project" because "I wanted to learn all I could about that unit which had been organized in Selma, Alabama." He wrote a history of the unit, *From Selma to Appomattox: The History of the Jeff Davis Artillery*, which was published by White Mane Publishing Co. in 1994 and as a trade paperback by Oxford University Press in 1996.

Larry says that during the 10 years that he worked on the Jeff Davis



Artillery book, he continued to tour Civil Wars sites "for both the purpose of research and enjoyment, as well as doing some relic hunting from time to time." A favorite area to visit was the Bentonville Battleground (a North Carolina Historic Site and, since 1996, a National Historic Landmark).

He says, "Soon I determined that I would like to acquire some land there if possible. Good fortune followed, and in 1987, I purchased 22+ acres not far from the visitor's center."

He bought an old house "from the area" and had it moved to the property in 1995. A year later, he left New York and moved to his "completely restored" ca. 1904 house. Soon, after completing a children's story, *The Story of Alfred: A Servant-Boy Turned Soldier*, Larry was an azalea specialist working at a nursery and a part-time tour guide at the battleground, the inspiration for another of his stories, *Too Close for Comfort: A Boy's View of the Battle of Bentonville*. Both *The Story of Alfred* and *Too Close for Comfort* are available from the Johnston County Heritage Center (online shop) in Smithfield, North Carolina.

No longer working at the battleground, he agreed several years ago to donate a section of his land so that a statue of General Johnston could be placed upon it. The statue was dedicated March 20, 2010.

He has spoken "at a number of SCV (Sons of Confederate Veterans) camps" and is an associate member of the Smithfield Light Infantry camp. His interest in the 123rd NYSV was stirred when he added "numerous letters and other memorabilia" from regiment members to his collection.

He says, "With the encouragement of Mr. Bob Farrell, founder of the Raleigh CWRT (Civil War Round Table)... I decided I wanted to erect a statue to that regiment."

The 9-foot tall obelisk, on which work began in January, commemorates "the service of the 123rd NY, a unit I feel a close bond to through research, collecting, and the fact that it marched and moved into position within sight of where I live."

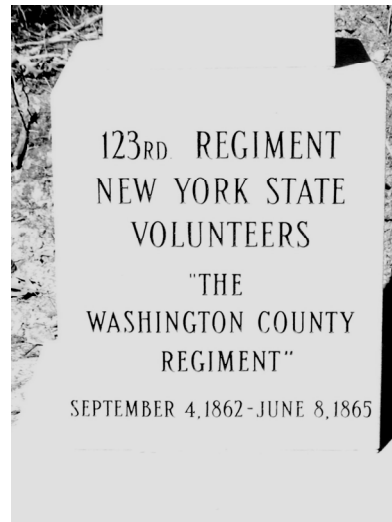
Plans are still in the works for placing a decorative fence around the monument and for a dedication ceremony in which members of the 28th

Georgia/123rd New York Volunteer Infantry, a group of Civil War reenactors "garrisoned" in Resaca, Georgia (where the 123rd was engaged in combat in May 1864) may participate.

Larry concludes, "I will never learn enough to satisfy my thirst for knowledge about the Civil War, but will continue to research, collect, and celebrate the lives of the men who fought on the same battlefield where I live."

The Raleigh CWRT is open to anyone "interested in expanding their knowledge of the Civil War." Members (Larry is one of them) meet the second Monday of each month at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, on Edenton Street across from the state capitol. Founder (2001) Bob Farrell of Raleigh is also a past commander of the Maj. General John Alexander Logan Camp #4 of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. He had an ancestor, from Whitehall, who joined Company F of the 123rd NYSV as a private and mustered out as a sergeant.

Bob says, "Anyone with an interest in the 123rd should feel free to email me, and I will answer any question they might have." His email address: cwfan@aol.com.



The base of the obelisk.

Article by Tim Tefft
Printed in
*The Greenwich Journal
and Salem Press*
Greenwich
Washington County, NY
March 3, 2011