The Sacrifices and Significance of the Eighteenth Connecticut

Remarks by Dale Plummer, Norwich Historian, at
the dedication of the plaque honoring the 18th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry,
the "home regiment" from Norwich during the Civil War

Friday, October 13, 2017, Three Rivers Community College

Friends, we are gathered here to dedicate a plaque honoring the 18th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, local men who gathered near here prior to entering the Civil War, America's deadliest conflict. The Civil War and its aftermath reshaped American life profoundly. It redefined who Americans were, and their civil rights. For the nation, this came at a tremendous cost. We now estimate that 750,000 Americans died as a result of the war — three quarters of a million people. Many survivors suffered from wounds, disease, and mental illness in consequence of the war. The economic cost of the war lasted for generations. Literally, the price of freedom was high indeed.

The war experience, shared by millions of men throughout the country, of every class, religious faith, race, ethnicity, was also a factor in unifying the country. Sharing hardships, combat, the suffering of wounds and disease built bonds between soldiers. A Norwich Protestant wrote home from the field describing the burial of an Irish compatriot on a hillside wrapped in his blanket, a Catholic priest conducting the ceremony. The next year, he reassured his mother that Catholics "are Christians as well as anybody," and not to fear the presence of a Catholic church in her neighborhood.

After the war, the Grand Army of the Republic, made up of Union veterans, was inclusive in its membership. African Americans were welcomed to the GAR, as well as former soldiers of every background. The GAR were influential in American politics for the remainder of the century, helping to elect former Union officers to the presidency and other national offices. Veterans support for the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution was essential to the final abolition of slavery, civil rights, and the right to vote for black American men.

Let us turn to the Eighteenth regiment. It served primarily in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The regiment's first major battle was at Winchester, Virginia, in 1863, where Colonel Ely was forced to surrender to Confederate forces. After enduring long months in Confederate prisons, the officers and men were exchanged and returned to fighting during 1864. Defeated again and forced to retreat at the Battle of New Market, Virginia, the regiment redeemed itself at the Battle of Piedmont.

In June 1864, the Eighteenth participated in a raid by General David Hunter deep into Virginia. Hunter's raid pursued a scorched earth policy similar to Sherman's March to the Sea. Hunter, a staunch opponent of slavery who had issued his own emancipation proclamation in April 1862,

liberated the enslaved along his route. Although turned back by Confederate forces, the 18th had direct experience in emancipation.

Not everyone in the 18th was enthusiastic about liberating the enslaved, or advocated equal rights, but Norwich as a community supported Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the extension of voting privileges to black males. Although individuals and groups might disagree, the collective effect of the 18th certainly furthered the cause of freedom.

When the 29th Connecticut Volunteers, a black regiment, was recruited, nine of its white officers were drawn from the ranks of the 18th Connecticut. Their experience of field warfare, defeat, and imprisonment was invaluable in leading troops that had never faced combat. David Torrance, a sergeant in the 18th, was promoted to Captain in the 29th. Torrance was later promoted to Colonel of the black regiment. On the fall of Richmond, the Confederate capitol, Torrance and the 29th were among the first troops to enter that city.

On January 1, 1863, the day Lincoln signed the final Emancipation Proclamation, the Norwich Bulletin published a letter from Lieutenant George R. Case. Case had been assigned as an officer to a black Louisiana unit. Local gentlemen had sent him a presentation sword. In reply, Case summed up his feelings:

> "I shall value the sword not only as a weapon of defense, but as an ornament, always carrying with it, or embodying, as it were, one of the noblest ideas. It comes to me, not only as a token, but more as an expression of feeling, a sentiment, a deep desire for the right, without distinction of color, whether white or black. I had expected from many the sneer and cold contempt which ignorance begets, for accepting the position I have, but was more than pleased to find so many in favor of this new idea of right.
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> The idea, that because a man is black he is incapable of being a soldier and is necessarily inferior, is all nonsense, and the quicker the world learns it the better. And I thus accept the sword, not only as a token, but as an expression of this fact, and feel grateful, not for the present alone, but that there are those at home who are willing, by words, actions, and deeds, to encourage those who are away, and desirous of fighting this thing out.
>
> Hoping that your all may live to see the glorious cause triumphant, and that speedily, I remain,
>
> Yours, tryly, Lieut. George R. Case"

By the end of the 1800s, as memories began to fade and nostalgia dominated reunions of former Confederate and Union Soldiers, the Civil War became defined as an abstract conflict over state's rights rather than slavery, regardless of the fact that the state's right the Confederacy sought to protect was that of slavery. The proliferation of monuments to the Confederacy began during this period, and is today a matter of national debate. Issues of equality and rights have

been extended far beyond that of race. Our modest plaque reminds us of the part that our local citizens played in the great drama of their time, and of our need to work towards the resolution of fundamental issues that still bedevil our common country.