

The Grand Army of the Republic in Lancaster County

by Glenn B. Knight

It was early 1866 and the United States of America – now securely one nation again – was waking to the reality of recovery from war. In prior wars the care for the veteran warrior was the province of the family or the community. Soldiers were friends and neighbors who went off to fight – until the next planting or harvest. This war was very different.

By the end of the Civil War, units had become less homogeneous, men from different communities and even different states were forced together by the exigencies of battle where trust and friendship was forged. And with the advances in the care and movement of wounded, many who would have surely died in earlier wars returned home to be cared for by a weary community structure which now also faced the needs of widows and orphans. Veterans needed jobs, including a whole new group of veterans – the colored soldier and his entire, newly freed, family. It was often more than the fragile fabric of communities could bear.

State and federal leaders from President Lincoln down had promised to care for “those who have borne the burden, his widows and orphans,” but they had little knowledge of how to accomplish the task. There was also little political pressure to see that the promises were kept.

But probably the most profound emotion was emptiness. Men who had lived together, fought together, foraged together and survived together, had developed a unique bond that could not be broken. As time went by the memories of the filthy and vile environment of camp life began to be remembered less harshly and eventually fondly. Friendships forged in battle survived separation and the warriors missed the warmth of trusting companionship that had asked only total commitment.

With that background, groups of men began joining together – first for camaraderie and then for political power. They would ultimately create the Grand Army of the Republic, a political and social force like none other in the history of our nation. The first “political action committee” would eventually control state legislatures, governorships, and would become powerful voting blocks in federal decision making. They would devise the model for the Spanish-American War Veterans, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans and other groups wielding political power and uniting for social purposes.



Typical of the genre, this lithograph was designed by A. C. Leonard, past commander of Admiral Reynolds Post #405, and was reproduced in his book The Boys in Blue of 1861-1865. LCHS

In Lancaster the “War of the Rebellion” had ended less than a year earlier when a group of veterans met at the hall of the United Order of American Mechanics on East King Street. Lieutenant Colonel William L. Baer was, according to their minute book, “in the chair.” The date was Feb. 13, 1866 and the Soldiers and Sailors Union was formed upon the foundation of the “Soldiers and Sailors’ National

Union League” that had organized the previous month in Washington, D.C. Baer was a delegate (recorded in the Proceedings as “Lieutenant Colonel Bear, of Pa.”) to the organizing convention held Jan. 22 through 24, 1866.

The Grand Army of the Republic was not organized until April 6 of that year in Decatur, Ill. and on Jan 16, the following year, the Department of Pennsylvania, G.A.R. was organized in Philadelphia.

The fraternity grew and by the turn of the century was a political and social force with wide power and influence. That influence grew locally, too, as the Lancaster County contingent was the only Pennsylvania county with its own identity in the parade at the 36th Annual Encampment in Washington, DC,

In the "Grand Parade" six thousand comrades participated, the following Posts marched ... and the "Lancaster County Battalion" representing sixteen Posts, parading 200 Comrades.

By the time the Grand Army of the Republic held its final National Encampment, in Indianapolis, in 1949, Lancaster County had hosted 19 posts and numerous units of the "allied orders" of the G.A.R. This article from the *Quarryville Sun* of May 18, 1904 shows that the peak had been reached by that time:

At a meeting of delegates of the eighteen Grand Army posts of Lancaster County, resolutions were adopted indorsing Major H. Y. Breneman for election to the position of Senior Vice Commander of the Department of Pennsylvania by the next State Encampment.

The only survivors of this legacy are Gen. George H. Thomas Camp No. 19, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War and its Auxiliary. They currently meet at the Lancaster County Historical Society.

GEORGE H. THOMAS POST #84, LANCASTER

The Soldiers and Sailors Union made its home in various locations throughout downtown Lancaster and on Oct. 1, 1867 their minutes said that they were installed as Post #84 of the Grand Army of the Republic by Department Special Aide de Camp A. C. Reinoehl. (Reinoehl was a Department Organizer as his name is associated with the mustering of several posts within the county – he was a local attorney admitted to the Lancaster Bar in 1866) Special Order No. 75 was signed on Sept. 28 by Louis Wagner, Grand Commander of the Department of Pennsylvania, G.A.R. making that the official date of its charter. [The title "Grand Commander" was used briefly in the formative days of the G.A.R. to represent the commander of a department – it was quickly replaced by the less ostentatious "Department Commander."] As late as 1874 city directories continued to show an independent Soldiers and Sailors Union meeting at Excelsior Hall on East King Street – but the entry is under the heading "Grand Army of the Republic."

William Weidler became the first commander of the post. Jacob K. Barr, who was the fourth commander, went on to be Department Senior Vice Commander in 1879 and John P. Rea, a lawyer admitted to the Lancaster Bar in 1868, went from the seventh man to command Post #84 to command of the Department of Minnesota in 1883¹ and in 1888 he was Commander-in-Chief of the entire G.A.R. When a reception in Commander-in-Chief Rea's honor was

given by Post #84 at the Fulton Opera House on Jan. 17, 1888, the opening address was hosted by "Comrade Jas. A. Beaver," then Governor of



Governor James A. Beaver in the uniform of a lieutenant colonel with the 45th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. He was later promoted to colonel, given command of the 148th PVI and breveted brigadier general on Aug. 1, 1864. He served at Chancellorsville, Cold Harbor and Petersburg where, on Dec. 22, 1864 he was discharged, having lost a leg at Ream's Station. As governor of Pennsylvania in 1888 he presided over a reception at Fulton Hall for G.A.R. Commander in Chief John P. Rea, a charter member of George H. Thomas Post #84, Lancaster. Phototype by F. Gutekunst, Philada. from the LCHS collection.

Pennsylvania. It later became the custom of Capt. Snow Post #561, Pleasant Grove to hold their Memorial Day services "over the grave of Capt. John P. Rea"² who died May 28, 1900.

Lancaster County's first G.A.R. post would remain un-named until April 12, 1870 when word of the death of Gen. George H. Thomas reached Lancaster (He had died on March 28 at his headquarters in San Francisco). Thomas, nicknamed "The Rock of Chickamauga," is cited in *Generals in Blue* by Ezra J. Warner as "third of the triumvirate who won the war for the Union." As many members of Post #84 had served in the 79th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, under Thomas, there was strong interest in honoring his memory by naming the post after him. At a special meeting of the post that evening the membership voted overwhelmingly to name the post "George H. Thomas Post #84." The hall was ordered draped for 6 months and a memorial resolution was published in the *Daily Express*. The decision was telegraphed to Department Headquarters in Philadelphia to lay first claim to the name.³

The following week the post formed a "Monumental Association" to raise a monument in the county to its Civil War soldiers and sailors. While much of the credit for actually raising the money goes to Lancaster's Patriot Daughters, headed by Rosina Hubley, Mrs. Reigert and Miss Annie Slaymaker, it would appear that the George H. Thomas Post actually spearheaded the idea.

Various directories and histories have the post meeting at Mechanics' Hall, Russel's Hall, the hall of the Independent Order of Red Men (on North Queen Street), Grand Army Hall in the Coyle Building (East King Street) and then to Grand Army Hall in Bair & Shank's banking building on Center Square.



Major General George H. Thomas

An item in the Dec. 5, 1870 edition of the *Lancaster Daily Express* describes the meeting room, probably at Bair & Shank's:

A Handsome Hall - We had the pleasure this morning of paying a visit to the hall of George H. Thomas Post No 84 Grand Army of the Republic on the third floor of Barr's building on East King Street. Few people are aware that so chaste and elegant a hall exists in that portion of the city. The badges of all the Corps of the Union Army are hung upon the wall, gotten up in enlarged form, and adding much to the appearance of the room. Behind each officers chair is a canopied tent, at once recalling the scenes and associations of the camp - and there too hang the colors of the glorious 79th, our old veteran regiment.

Some time before 1890 they moved into their own hall at 125 E. King St. and by 1921 both active posts and all of the "allied orders" were meeting at the Grand Army of the Republic Hall, 43 S. Duke St.⁴ The building has since been demolished. On Feb. 10, 1910 the post was located at 42½ N. Queen St. (Kepler Bldg.) which was destroyed by fire on that date when the Reilly Bros. & Raub Hardware Store burned. Newspaper accounts of the fire suggest that it was a complete loss, but the records of the post were not harmed - most of them are now in the Lancaster County Historical Society archives along with the restored second battle flag of the 79th PVI which was reported in the possession of the post.

According to *History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* by Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, the post was chartered with 20 members and during its existence had 563 men on its rolls and in 1883, 222 were in good standing. When the Pennsylvania Department encampment was held in Lancaster in 1919, eight members of the Thomas post served on the committee. They were: H. R. Breneman, Harry C. Flick, James McCune, Philip Rudy, D. H. Heitshu, Philip Deiter, John Stober and John Ingram.

The Proceedings of the 1937 encampment show the post with two members and the next year that same source shows that they did not pay the required "per capita tax." From a 1941 Memorial Day program we learn that Post #84 was still recognized locally (although probably not chartered) at that time. Members of the post serving on the committee that year were Elam Ritter, Jacob C. Troop and Isaac Groff.

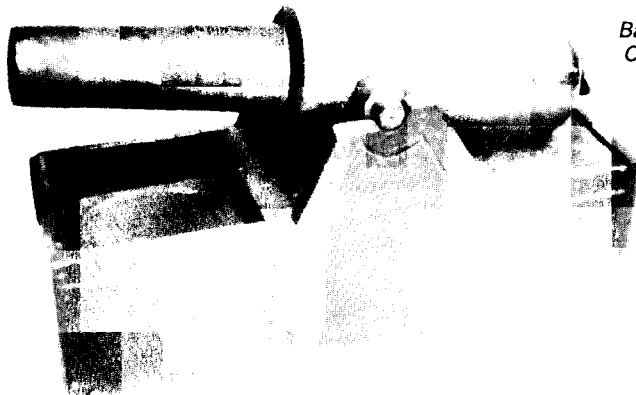
[It is difficult to find ending dates for most posts as some were reinstated after having officially been folded while others simply stopped paying their assessments. Newspaper and public records often cited posts (and their members) long after the posts themselves folded. Where actual ending dates are listed, they are the date that the charter was returned to the Pennsylvania Department (now on file at the Pennsylvania Archives in Harrisburg).]

GEN. THOMAS WELSH POST #118, COLUMBIA

Columbia, transportation and trade center, as well as the only community in the county directly touched by the Civil War, became the second location for the G.A.R. to organize a post.

Organized and mustered on March 21, 1868, again by Reinoehl, Gen. Thomas Welsh Post #118 began its existence at its own hall above 139 Locust St. but by 1882 was meeting in the Odd Fellows' Hall.⁵

Named for a native of Columbia (one of six generals the community was to produce through the present) who served in both the Mexican War and the Civil War, Post #118 had 300 names on its rolls by 1883. Welsh enlisted as a private in the 2nd Kentucky Regiment and was severely wounded at Buena Vista. He recruited a company of the 11th Pennsylvania (90 days) in a matter of hours and was elected lieutenant colonel. When mustered out he was appointed colonel of the 45th Pennsylvania and, at Charleston Harbor in 1862 was placed in command of a brigade of H. G. Wright's Division. He died of malaria in Cincinnati, Ohio while in command of the First Division of Burnside's IX Corps on Aug. 14, 1863.⁶



Ballot box of Gen. Welsh Post #118, Columbia. Black and white balls were held in the cup below the muzzle. To vote, a member picked the appropriate ball and placed it into the muzzle where it rolled into a drawer at the right end. The officer in charge of the vote would then check the color of the balls in the drawer and announce the outcome. Painted on the front is the legend "SWAMPANGEL." LCHS Photo by Susan Sharpless Messimer.

Henry Mullen (later postmaster of Columbia) was the charter commander in 1868 and had among his membership the editors of both *The Columbia Herald*, W. James Grier, Esq. and *The Columbia Spy*, J. W. Yocum, Esq. Both editors would take a turn in command of the post.⁷ In late 1869 things did not appear to be going too well for the post as the Department of Pennsylvania's Assistant Adjutant General wrote to Commander Mullen on Dec. 18, 1869:

Comrade

I regret to learn that your Post is not working as it should under our reorganization ... I have not the slightest evidence that you pay any attention to the Orders as published and sent to you. I respectfully suggest to you that this is not the treatment due the organization or its properly constituted officers. It will certainly

be a matter of deep regret should we [be] obliged – by a continuance of this neglect – to disband your Post It certainly ought not to be in such a condition as to deserve this & need not be.

Yours in F.C. & L.

Robt. B. Beath

A. A. Genl

The admonition apparently worked as Ellis & Evans, in 1883, reported:

Gen. Welsh Post is one of the strongest, numerically and financially, and one of the best organized and successfully conducted posts in the interior of the state.

A plot of ground in Mount Bethel Cemetery was controlled by the post for the burial of indigent soldiers and was active in Memorial Day activities for many years. “The post owns a valuable sciopticon [a form of magic lantern] and dissolving views, used in the illustration of its ritual.” reported Ellis & Evans. It was also known for its large and well-organized drum corps.

In the records of the post is found a report of the Committee on Marking Graves, 1915. It shows the following numbers of flags used at various cemeteries: Klinsville, 16; Kinderhook, 8; Mountville, 45; Washington Boro, 36; Newtown, 14; Silver Spring, 17; Ironville, 7; Laurel Hill, 20; German Catholic Cemetery, 11; Mt. Bethel Cemetery, 331; Mt. Bethel Colored Soldiers Plot, 4; and “John Ott for comrades grave in York County,” 1. That gave a total of 551 flags used that year.

The post organized the Gen. Welsh Camp No. 68, Sons of Veterans, some time prior to 1908 but it disappeared prior to 1913. A letter, dated Feb. 17, 1885, is from Maj. Edwin A. Kelsey Camp No. 68, Sons of Veterans and requests the use of Post #118’s meeting room. We have records of Jno. A. Hogendobler Circle No. 116, Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, Columbia in 1904 and 1916 no other records of this Circle have been found. The post itself lasted until Nov. 22, 1933. [Much of the information in this paragraph was extracted from records of the post which had been maintained by the Columbia American Legion Post 372. Those records have been donated to the Lancaster County Historical Society and are being integrated into Manuscript Group # 17 in the archives.]

Other artifacts of the post which were being cared for by the Columbia American Legion were the post seal, gavel stone and ballot box. The ballot box is constructed in the shape of a siege cannon with the name “SWAMPANGEL” painted on one end. These items are now under the care of the Lancaster County Historical Society.

MAJ. RICKSECKER POST #152, LINCOLN

While Maj. Ricksecker Post #152 is numerically third in the county, it was organized much later, on December 11, 1888 when A. C. Reinoehl re-organized Post #152 for the Department. Post #152 had been at Spring City, Chester County but it folded and the number was then assigned to a "new post at Lincoln, Lancaster County." The Department of Pennsylvania often re-issued post numbers when posts folded. Little is known about this post and it appears to have folded about 1914.

In 1893 and 1894 this post is reported, by the Department Inspector, to be host to both a unit of the Woman's Relief Corps and a camp of Sons of Veterans.

A cabinetmaker by trade, James F. Ricksecker joined Capt. Baer's Company (later to become Company F) of the 122nd P.V.I. on Aug. 11, 1862. He was promoted to captain on April 14, 1863 when Capt. B. F. Baer resigned. On July 17, 1864 he joined Co. C, 195th P.V.I., a regiment recruited almost exclusively from Lancaster County,⁸ as its captain. He was transferred to Co. B on Nov. 1, 1864 at Harpers Ferry, VA and was mustered out of service at Summit Point, VA on June 21, 1865. His service record at the National Archives in Washington, DC notes that he served on a number of courts martial boards during his period of service.

From July 1 to 11, 1863 Colonel Emlen Franklin (later honored by the Ladies of the G.A.R. by naming the local circle after him) recruited and organized the 50th Regiment, Militia of 1863 and one of his staff officers was Major James F. Ricksecker (ranking just behind Lieutenant Colonel Thaddeus Stevens Jr.). The regiment was discharged Aug. 15, 1863 and it is possible that this is the same person who served the militia in an attached status due to the incursion into Pennsylvania.

LIEUT. WILLIAM H. CHILD POST #226, MARIETTA

Twenty two charter members organized the Lieut. William H. Child Post #226 on Aug. 31, 1881 with George H. Ettl as post commander. Senior and junior vice commanders were Amos Grove and Thomas Marlin, respectively and J. H. Druckenmiller served as adjutant. Other charter officers were: Quartermaster Horace L. Haldeman; Officer of the Day J. R. Miller; Chaplain S. E. Wisner; Officer of the Guard John Kugle; Sergeant Major Lewis Leader; Surgeon William Smedley and Quartermaster Sergeant F. J. Mack.⁹ Druckenmiller went on to serve as department senior vice commander in 1886.

A diary of Co. B, 45th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, now part of Manuscript Group # 18 at the Lancaster County Historical Society, lists a "Sergt. Wile H. Child" whose entry was inscribed, "Dead." Bates lists Sergeant William H. Childs muster into Company B, 45th PVI on Sept. 2, 1861 and notes that he was promoted to sergeant April 7, 1863 and to sergeant major Jan. 1, 1864. Under the regimental staff it is further noted that he was "killed in action before