

New Jersey's Civil War Experience

By Joseph G. Bilby

In the 1860 election, New Jersey split its electoral vote between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. There was no great enthusiasm for war in the state and prominent residents of the state, including Governor Charles Olden, participated in a peace conference held in Virginia in early 1861. The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter ignited patriotic fervor and New Jersey sent the first full brigade of militia under General Theodore Runyon of Newark to defend Washington. In 1864, the state delivered its electoral votes to George McClellan over Abraham Lincoln, and New Jersey governor Joel Parker argued with the administration over issues ranging from the Emancipation Proclamation to the draft, but the state's loyalty to the Union was never in doubt.

In the years before the Civil War New Jersey was in economic trouble. After a promising kick-start into the industrial age, the state was hit hard by the Panic of 1857. Deflation in western land values purchased by over-mortgaged railroads led to a fiscal crisis and the bottom fell out of New Jersey's economy. Newark lost a third of its population as workers wandered off in desperate search of a way to earn a living. In April 1861, the Civil War threatened to finish the job speculators and crooked bankers had begun. The Southern plantation slave outlet for the city's cheap clothing and shoes disappeared in a cloud of gun smoke over Charleston Harbor.

As the war wore on the situation changed. State and federal governments turned to states like New Jersey to provide uniforms for soldiers and vast quantities of leather goods, including shoes, belts, cartridge boxes, and harnesses. Cutlers like James Emerson of Trenton and Henry Sauerbier of Newark turned out sabers and swords and the Trenton Iron Works produced rifle-muskets. Ship builders along the Delaware and Hudson Rivers helped accommodate the demand for craft of all kinds, including the revolutionary new ironclads. Paterson, site of the Rogers, Danforth-Cooke and Swinburne-Smith locomotive factories, upped production to meet wartime needs. By the time the conflict ended, the state had hit its industrial stride once more. The boom continued in the immediate postwar years, and in 1872 Newark hosted the first ever United States Industrial Exposition.

During the war, men flowed south as well as equipment. By the end of the war New Jersey had raised 37 regiments of infantry, three of cavalry and five batteries of artillery to serve in the Union army. New Jersey units included two "Zouave" regiments (33rd and 35th) with uniforms modeled on North African troops in French service.

New Jersey claimed that 88,500 men served in the state's name during the war, although the actual number seems to be closer to 73,000. More than 3,000 Black Jersey men served in United States Colored Troops regiments and in the United States Navy. These soldiers were a diverse lot, representing a state in the process of change from a rural, parochial past into an industrial, cosmopolitan future. Their motives for going to war were varied and many – patriotism, anger at the firing on Fort Sumter, a desire to abolish slavery, the excitement and change of going to war, as well as the fact that they were unemployed and soldiering was a job.

New Jersey's soldiers reflected the ethnic and religious mosaic that became the state's future. Among them were native-born American Protestants, like Colonel Robert McAllister of the 11th New Jersey Infantry and Jews, like Medal of Honor winner Colonel George W. Mindil of the 33rd New Jersey Infantry. There were Irishmen like Captain James B. Turner, a Jersey militiaman who joined the famed Irish Brigade and was killed in action in the Wilderness. There were Italians like musician Alexander Vandoni of the 27th New Jersey Infantry and there were Poles like Colonel Joseph Karge. There were Germans like Captain William Hexamer of Battery A, 1st New Jersey Artillery. There were African American men, like First Sergeant William F. Robinson of the 22nd United States Colored Infantry, who was commended by his captain as "especially distinguished for gallant conduct," and Sergeant George Ashby of the 45th United States Colored Infantry, who was the last surviving New Jersey veteran of the conflict when he died in Allentown in 1946.