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150 years after death, McLane remembered for valor

By RON LEONARDI, Erie Times-News
ron.leonardi@timesnews.com

A large oval framed photo of Union Army Gen. John McLane is displayed in the front hall of George Helmer's home in Woodstock, Vt.

That same picture previously hung in his mother's living room and his grandmother's home library.

Helmer, 67, is the great-great-great-grandson of McLane, for whom General McLane High School is named.

Today marks the 150th anniversary of McLane's death.

Commander of the 83rd Pennsylvania Regiment, McLane was a 42-year-old colonel when he was killed June 27, 1862, at the Battle of Gaines' Mill during the Virginia Peninsula Campaign.

Helmer was a boy when he discovered he is a descendant of McLane, who is buried in Erie Cemetery.

It wasn't until the mid-1990s that Helmer -- a lifelong Vermonter -- learned an Erie County high school had been named in McLane's honor.

"His portrait has been with my family since I was a kid," said Helmer, a builder, developer and designer in Woodstock. "It's like I grew up with him in the house."

Helmer has spent the past 25 years researching his family genealogy, and he admits that unearthing information on his great-great-great-grandfather "has been tough to trace."

Generations of his family have told Helmer that McLane was born on Aug. 24, 1820, in Wilmington, Del.

Helmer said he has never found documentation supporting that birthplace.

Some historical accounts list Harborcreek Township as McLane's birthplace.

War preparations

Before he distinguished himself in the Union Army, McLane formed a pre-Civil War Erie County militia unit in the 1840s known as the Wayne Grays.

McLane also served as a captain in the Mexican War and, in 1858, was elected Erie County sheriff. In 1859, McLane formed another militia unit, the Wayne Guards.

Shortly after the Civil War began in April 1861 with the Confederate Army's firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, McLane was instructed to form a Union regiment from northwestern Pennsylvania.

In response to President Abraham Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers, about 1,200 men from Erie, Crawford and Warren counties responded within four days.

Ten companies, each consisting of 77 men, joined a regiment recruited for three months of duty, known as the Erie Regiment, or McLane's Regiment.

About 400 men were turned away.

At the end of that term, the regiment was mustered out without ever having seen active service.

Within days, calls for the formation of Union Army three-year regiments were issued.

In late July 1861, McLane was instructed by the governor to recruit a new regiment.

Many troops from the previous Erie Regiment volunteered.

The 83rd Regiment officially entered service on Sept. 8, 1861.

The original 83rd Regiment was composed of about 1,000 soldiers from Erie, Crawford and Forest counties. (Regimental numbers meant the order in which a regiment was accepted into Pennsylvania service.)

Its officers included Lt. Col. Strong Vincent.

"McLane was an excellent commander who trained his regiment so well," said George Deutsch, an Erie native and Civil War historian who lives in Catonsville, Md. "He was recognized by (Union Gen.) George McClellan, who said the 83rd was one of the very best regiments in the army."

Final battle

In early March 1862, the 83rd marched to Fairfax, Va. The unit saw its baptism by fire on May 27, 1862, at the Battle of

Hanover Courthouse near Richmond during the Peninsula Campaign.

Its next battle -- at Gaines' Mill during the Seven Days Battles on June 27, 1862 -- was one of the bloodiest the 83rd would encounter in the war.

The 83rd, positioned on the Union Army's left flank, repulsed several Confederate attacks.

Confederate troops then broke through a part of the Union line against a division to the right of the 83rd Regiment.

The rebels gained control of a large tract of woods that screened the 83rd Regiment from seeing the Confederate troops.

From the woods, Confederate troops maneuvered behind and to the right of the 83rd Regiment and began firing.

On McLane's orders, the 83rd shifted its flank to face the Confederates. Confederate troops maneuvered further around the 83rd's flank.

By the end of the battle, the 83rd found itself facing the opposite direction to where it began the fight.

The 83rd soon found itself surrounded on three sides with a river to its left.

As McLane stood in the center of his regiment, directing its movement and defense, he was shot through the heart and killed, Deutsch said.

"The Confederates broke through and were about to roll up the Union flank, and McLane swung his regiment so they were facing the enemy," Helmer said. "He was protecting the 83rd, and he performed the maneuver -- a wheeling movement -- successfully. He was exposed and out in the open when he was shot."

The 83rd entered the Gaines' Mill fight with 550 men; 265 were killed, injured or missing, according to the book "Regimental Losses in the American Civil War," a reference work published in 1888 by William Fox, a Union Army colonel in the war.

Accomplishments

"McLane raised the regiment," Helmer said. "I think a lot of Union officers who were prominent in the Civil War had their roots in the Mexican War. He was one of them.

"A lot of what those guys did, it was all about being fearless," Helmer said. "I can't imagine lining up at close range and shooting at each other. Those mini-balls would tear you in half."

Artifacts belonging to McLane have survived generations in Helmer's family.

Helmer's collection includes a Spanish book McLane obtained in the Mexican War, one of his spurs, and a Civil War sketching of the inside of McLane's tent, sketched by a member of the 83rd Regiment.

Helmer also has a letter McLane wrote to his wife and son shortly before his death.

One of Helmer's cousins, who resides in Maine, has McLane's original saber.

Helmer recalls "passing by" Erie once. He has never visited General McLane High School.

That could change.

"I'd like to drop by sometime," he said.

Up the ranks

The General McLane School District is the only district in Pennsylvania named after a person and not a place, General McLane schools Superintendent Rick Scaletta said.

"I think it was a way to take on a new identity," Scaletta said.

When General McLane High School was built in 1960, it was known as General McLane Joint Junior and Senior High School.

The school opened to students in grades seven through 12 in September 1960.

And it was called "General McLane" even though Col. John McLane wasn't posthumously promoted to brigadier general until several months later -- when the school was officially dedicated on April 7, 1961.

Four state representatives attended the ceremony. William Sesler, a former Democratic member of the state Senate, conferred the posthumous rank of general to McLane at the school's dedication ceremony.

Sesler, who held the state Senate's 49th District seat from 1961 to 1972, introduced the bill to the state Senate in 1961 to award McLane a rank of general.

"The bill was appropriate," said Sesler, 84, a lawyer with the Erie firm Sesler & Sesler Attorneys. "He was a hero and he died for his country."

"The School Board at that time -- about 25 members -- thought McLane had already been appointed general," Scaletta said.

Deutsch said McLane historically has been held in high esteem as a commander.

"The 83rd was one of the best trained and fighting units of the Union Army, and you can attribute a large part of that to McLane," Deutsch said.

After returning home shortly after the Civil War ended in April 1865, several troops remaining from the original 83rd Regiment journeyed back to the Gaines' Mill battlefield, where McLane was buried.

The soldiers disinterred McLane's remains and returned them to Erie.

McLane was buried in Erie Cemetery on May 19, 1865.

"It was a big funeral," Deutsch said. "He was honored by the city."

RON LEONARDI can be reached at 870-1680 or by e-mail.