

This study was funded by a Kimball Scholarship Fund grant to the History Department of Gordon College. The research was done by Emily Marsan, a student, and her academic advisor, Professor Goss. The paper was delivered by Professor Goss at a meeting of the Topsfield Historical Society on October 26, 2006.

## **TOPSFIELD AND THE CIVIL WAR**

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In 1860 the population of the town of Topsfield was 1,292 people. Approximately one third of this number were adult males; approximately 430 men above eighteen years of age. Of this group one hundred thirty two served in the United States military during the Civil War. Of these, thirty-one would lose their lives as a direct consequence of military service. This represents slightly over 21% of all those who served from Topsfield, making the Civil War Topsfield's most costly conflict in terms of loss of life. This is the story of that struggle and particularly the story of Topsfield's men and women who endured it. (*Civil War Document File*, Topsfield Town Records, Topsfield Town Hall)

Before the outbreak of the Civil War, Topsfield had established a long-standing tradition of patriotism and community pride. This was based in large part upon the town's impressive support of the patriotic cause during the American Revolution. Every Fourth of July, speeches and festivities were held on Topsfield Common to honor the 103 patriots who had served in the Continental forces during the War of Independence.

Beyond this, Topsfield had long been known as a community generally sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Its proximity to Boston and the North Shore, both hotbeds of abolitionist activity, made Topsfield a natural haven for abolitionist ideals. During the two decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, the town had played host to several anti-slavery rallies, and by 1860 had its own abolitionist society. Incidentally the banner of this organization still exists within the collections of the Topsfield Historical Society.



**1856 political banner mounted in the Gould Barn**

From a political perspective, Topsfield in 1860 was conservative, clinging fervently to the remnant of the Whig Party until its final collapse. When this occurred in the mid-1850's, the majority of the town made the transition, along with Abraham Lincoln, to the newly established Republican Party. In fact, the town of Topsfield overwhelmingly supported Lincoln's presidential campaign in 1860 and again in 1864. (*Topsfield Town Records*, Topsfield Town Hall).

This was Topsfield on the eve of the Civil War, a politically conservative, pro-abolitionist, predominantly agricultural community with deep patriotic roots going back to the earliest days of the Revolution. Added to this was the town's strong Republican tendency in support of Lincoln at a time when Lincoln, although he carried New England except Rhode Island, received merely 39.8% of the total popular vote, and only won the presidential election of 1860 because the American voter base was divided between four candidates. (James MacPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, p 232-33).

Despite this national distaste for Lincoln, Topsfield loved the man, and it is therefore not surprising that the town responded enthusiastically when the new president called for volunteers in 1861. Indeed, within hours of the news that Fort Sumter had been shelled by Southern artillery, three Topsfield farmers left their fields and walked to Salem's recruitment station to enlist in the Union Army.

These latter-day patriots were James W. Wilson, David Casey and Edward Otis Gould. All three would survive the conflict and return to their plows by 1865. But these three were only the first volunteers. In May 1861, less than one month following Fort Sumter, at the Topsfield town meeting, it was voted to have an immediate recruitment drive in response to Lincoln's April 15th call for 75,000 volunteer soldiers from the free states of the North (*Civil War Document File*, Topsfield Town Records, Topsfield Town Hall).

By the end of the Topsfield town meeting that evening, one hundred thirteen men had stepped forward to enlist. For many it was the first step on a path that would end in death somewhere in the South, but all volunteers of 1861 were motivated by their patriotic desire to preserve the Union, following in the footsteps of their Topsfield ancestors of 1776.

What proved most convenient for many new recruits was the location of the camp of basic training. While many Massachusetts volunteers were sent to camp and drill at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts or on Boston Common, Topsfield recruits received their introduction to military life in their hometown at Camp Stanton, located at the southwest corner of Lockwood Lane and Washington Streets. The training camp was named after Edwin M. Stanton, a notable Republican political figure from Ohio who served as United States Secretary of War from 1862 to 1868. (*Map of Historic Locations in Topsfield*, Topsfield Historical Society Collections, Gould Barn).

It was here at Camp Stanton, along a portion of Washington Street, that dozens of white canvas tents were pitched and bypassing

Topsfield citizens could witness local boys being drilled in the basics of military life. It was for many of them a major change from the rigors of farm life, or work in Topsfield's growing shoe-making industry, to learning close quarter drill, loading and volley-firing single-shot, .58 caliber rifles and responding to orders automatically. Most would never be the same again.

Unfortunately, the eldest son, John Phillips Smith of Company A, Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, who had re-enlisted after his tour of duty with the Massachusetts 14th Volunteer Infantry had expired, was captured by Confederates at the Siege of Petersburg ( although George Francis Dow believes it to have been the Battle of Gaines Mill in June, 1862, but this seems unlikely) on June 22, 1864. He was sent to Andersonville Prison where he died on or about August 14, 1864 and is buried along with a number of other Topsfield soldiers in the mass grave located at the Andersonville Prison historic site.

It is noteworthy to remember that the Confederate detention camp for Union soldiers at Andersonville, Georgia, also known as Camp Sumter, was built in February, 1864 and was in existence for only fourteen months. It was originally intended to hold 13,000 prisoners, but by August, 1864 had reached its maximum capacity of 32,000 inmates. Unable to provide adequate supplies to sustain the prison population, the Confederate government allowed the Union prisoners to starve to death rather than release them in their weakened state. Of the over 45,000 soldiers confined at Andersonville, over 13,000 died of malnutrition or disease. Of these, five soldiers were natives of Topsfield. These were:

John Phillips Smith and Daniel H. Smith, both of whom served in the 14<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, and Daniel Hoyt; N. Harrison Roberts and Henry P. Kneeland all of the 19<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. All died in 1864.

One of most graphic descriptions of this hellish place is provided by a soldier who survived imprisonment there:

“Would that I was an artist and had the material to paint this camp and all its horrors, or the tongue of some eloquent statesman and had the privilege of expressing my mind to our honored rulers in Washington. I should glory to describe this Hell on Earth where it takes seven of its occupants to make a shadow.”

The Confederate commander of Camp Sumter, Colonel Henry Wirz, a Swiss immigrant, was the only Confederate soldier charged with war crimes at the end of the war. He was condemned and hanged for “wanton cruelty” in November, 1865.

This brings us to the question of other Topsfield Civil War deaths. Many Topsfield men made the supreme sacrifice to preserve the Union. Two of these casualties were Lewis K. Perkins and William Welch, Jr., both of whom succumbed to swamp fever while serving with Massachusetts troops on Morris Island, South Carolina. Their deaths occurred during the ill-fated campaign to capture Battery Wagner at the entrance to Charleston Harbor. Famous for the attack of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the first black regiment in the United States Army, the campaign resulted in over 1,500 Union and only 154 Confederate deaths.

Other Topsfield war casualties included cavalry trooper, Eugene Todd and infantry private, John Warren Lake, both of whom died of fever in Port Hudson, Louisiana during the early summer of 1863. These men had been part of the famous Port Hudson siege which transpired between May 21 and July 9, 1863. Port Hudson was the last Confederate military stronghold on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River. Located just north of Vicksburg, it held out only five days longer than the nearby city itself. The low lying malarial, mosquito-infested swamps were nearly as deadly to Northern troops as Confederate cannon and rifle fire.

Down river from Port Hudson and Vicksburg was New Orleans where Topsfield artilleryman, John H. Bradstreet died of malaria followed on June 4, 1863 by a soldier whose family once owned the Topsfield Historical Society's barn, Private Emerson P. Gould.

Gould was serving as part of General Butler's occupational force in the 48<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. His death as well as those of the three above mentioned Topsfield casualties underscores the grim fact that during the Civil War disease took the lives of 197,000 Union and 140,000 Confederate troops, while battlefield deaths accounted for only 112,000 Union and 94,000 Confederate casualties.

But Topsfield men saw more than their share of fighting. A number died in some of the most vicious confrontations of the war. Among these, Private Swinerton Dunlop on December 15, 1862, marched straight into the hail of lead which destroyed 1,152 Union troops at Marye's Heights in Fredericksburg, Virginia and survived. This Union defeat was attributable as much to Union General Ambrose Burnside's incompetence as to General Robert E. Lee's brilliance as a master of tactical defense. Later, however, Swinerton Dunlop met his death in May, 1864 at the Battle of the Wilderness which lasted from May 5 through 7 and pitted Ulysses S. Grant against Robert E. Lee.

But it was during the Siege of Petersburg in late 1864 that Topsfield made its most significant contribution to the war. Here were captured Privates Daniel and John Phillips Smith and Daniel Hoyt, N. Harrison Roberts and Henry Kneeland, but most conspicuous for bravery was Lieutenant James Dunlop who died at the head of his company during the infamous Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864. He and his men had penetrated so far into the Confederate lines that his body could not be retrieved by his comrades and was buried inside the perimeter of fortifications by the Confederates themselves. (Miscellaneous letters in <http://members3.clubphoto.com/james252265/418769/guest/topsfieldhistory>)

But death was not always to be found on the battlefield or in the military hospital. In 1865, two Topsfield veterans returned home to die from illnesses contracted while serving in the Army. These two were Privates Hayward Wildes and Otis F. Dodge. Although they died in their native town, their names are listed on the marble plaque in Topsfield Town Hall along with all the other Topsfield men who

sacrificed themselves in the Union cause during the Great Rebellion. This list reads as follows:

John Bradstreet; James Brown; Moses Deland; Royal A. Deland; Albert Dickinson; Otis Dodge; Lt. James Dunlop; Swinerton Dunlop, William H.H. Foster; Murdock Frame; Wick Glispen; Emerson Gould; William Hadley; George Hobson; Francis Hood; Daniel Hoyt; John Hoyt; William James; Austin Kinsman; Alfred Kneeland; Henry Kneeland; John Warren Lake; Chester Peabody; Lewis Perkins; Hanson Roberts; Daniel Smith; John P. Smith; John Stevens; Eugene Todd; William Welch, Jr., and Hayward Wildes. (Honor Roll Plaque, Topsfield Town Hall.)

But what of the survivors? Topsfield produced two “camps” of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R) which were comprised of those veterans who returned home. Their legacy is most evident at Pine Grove Cemetery where cast iron markers identify each G.A.R. grave, often with American flags placed by present-day veterans each Memorial Day. But lest we think that these men returned to civilian life without a thought of their comrades-in-arms, there are numerous anecdotes that prove the contrary. These men were brothers in a fraternity forged by war. They would support each other as long as life allowed them to do so.

The most outstanding example of this tendency for Topsfield may be witnessed in the example of Private Joseph Lovett of Company F, 40<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Another Topsfield native, Lovett enlisted on August 15, 1862 and was soon attached to the garrison defending Washington, D.C. Later he was reassigned to a tour of duty on Folly and Morris Islands near Charleston, South Carolina. In 1864 he was sent with the 40<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts to Florida until May of that year, then served the remainder of the war in Virginia where he was captured at the Battle of Drury's Bluff. During the battle, Lovett had been wounded in the leg, and it was amputated by a Confederate surgeon. Returning home in June, 1865, he made it his task to look after the widows and orphans of Topsfield's veterans, securing for them financial assistance and veteran's benefits as needed. His efforts sometimes required travel and correspondence as evidenced in a letter now in the Civil War

archives at Topsfield Town Hall describing a trip made by Lovett to the Boston State House in 1866 to meet with state officials on behalf of Topsfield's Mrs. Deland who had lost a husband and son, Moses and Royal Deland, and a Mrs. Thomas Perkins, who had lost her husband, Thomas. His negotiations proved successful as he concludes the letter by stating that: "I am happy to say that both of these ladies can now draw funds under our new State law, but I found moving up and down the State House steps a deal difficult with my crutch" (*Letter from Joseph Lovett*, Topsfield Town Records, Topsfield Town Hall)

Such was the caliber of Topsfield's Civil War veterans, selfless, patriotic and without self-pity, they more than rose to the high standards set by their patriotic ancestors of 1776. The last of these veterans was William H. Wildes who died in Topsfield in 1930. Wildes' passing marks the end of the Civil War era in Topsfield, but the town still maintains several memorials which draw the public's attention to Topsfield's role in the conflict. Already mentioned are the veteran graves in Topsfield's Pine Grove Cemetery which include numerous cast-iron G.A.R. markers, and interestingly a single Confederate soldier's grave of Private Buckner "Buck" Taylor, a native of Virginia who migrated to Topsfield after the war and settled down as a stone mason. His is the only grave of a non-Union Civil War veteran in Topsfield, and one of the very few Confederate graves in New England. Similarly, as mentioned previously there is a white marble plaque located at the top of the stairwell in Topsfield Town Hall which bears the names of the thirty-one Topsfield men who lost their lives during the war.

Perhaps most importantly, Topsfield is the location of one of the most artistically significant, bronze Civil War memorials in Massachusetts. Located directly in front of Topsfield Public Library, it is entitled, "The Wounded Color Sergeant". This magnificent sculpture is the work of the internationally known sculptress, Mrs. Theo A. Ruggles Kitson and was erected in Topsfield in 1914 at a cost of nearly \$8,000. It was a gift to the community by Dr. Justin Allen, a physician who had practiced in Topsfield for over forty years. Its purpose is to honor "The memory of the men of Topsfield

who enlisted in defense of their country in the Great Rebellion of 1861 – 1865”. What sets it apart from the standard memorial statues seen in most New England towns is the scene it depicts which was suggested by a member of the Soldier's Monument Committee, Alphonso T. Merrill. It shows a fallen standard-bearer handing a shattered Union flag to a passing comrade who raises it in his right hand while holding his rifle in his left.

Sadly this inspirational, privately commissioned work of art, “The Wounded Color Sergeant” by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had become badly tarnished, darkened by green mold and air pollutants. It was in desperate need of conservation. Recently, the Topsfield Historical Society under the leadership of Society President Norman Isler recognized the need, and utilizing the remnant of funds from Dr. Allen's original bequest, undertook a professional refurbishment of the memorial. It remains today a fitting and beautifully restored tribute to all those who represented the Town of Topsfield during the Civil War.



**The Wounded Color Sergeant monument on the Common**