

14 Thomas Mitchel Weimer in the Civil War – Barely

Thomas Mitchel Weimer was born April 12, 1842 in Port Royal, Juniata County, Pennsylvania. He was the first of seven children born to John and Mary "Polly" Rice Saylor Weimer. John and Polly were both lifelong residents of Port Royal and worked on the family farm. John and Polly lost two children in infancy, Cloyd, born in 1843, and Hannah, born in 1848. Their other daughter, Mary Jane, born in 1849, died at the age of 18. Their sons, Thomas, William, Gibson and Samuel all lived to adulthood.

Thomas married Sarah M. Wilson in April 1864. Sarah was born in February 1847 in Port Royal, the daughter of Martin and Evaline Heck Wilson. Thomas and Sarah settled in Mapleton in Huntingdon County. Their first child, Minerva, was born later that year.

Thomas joined the Union Army on February 15, 1865 and was mustered in as a Private in Company D of the Pennsylvania 192nd Infantry. (His military records have him listed under the name "Wimer" and his grave marker uses the same spelling. Census records of various years contain both spellings.) There is no way to know why Thomas waited almost four years before he enlisted or what prompted him to do so at that time. He was not unique, however, new troops were added throughout the conflict from Fort Sumter in April 1861 up to Lee's surrender to Grant in April 1865.

The war began on Thomas's nineteenth birthday when the confederates fired on Fort Sumter. Three days later, on April 15, 1861, President Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers for a period of ninety days. On the same day, Secretary of War, Simon Cameron issued a communique to the state governors with a quota for the expected number of troops to be supplied by each state. Pennsylvania's contribution to this total was to be 16 regiments totaling 12,500 soldiers. This was subsequently reduced to 14 regiments.

President Lincoln and his cabinet optimistically hoped the volunteers along with the permanent army would be sufficient to put down the rebellion and reestablish the Union in short order. The 75,000 did not fully materialize because the confederate states did not respond favorably to this request; in fact it accelerated the secession of the southern states. It quickly became evident that more forces would be required and the war would go on longer than hoped. The president gave a second call in early May for 42,000 additional volunteers and increased the regular army by 22,714. In July, the U. S. Congress authorized 500,000 additional volunteers.

The recruiting continued through 1861 but confidence remained high that these troops would be sufficient to secure a victory. In fact, in December 1861, Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, instructed the northern governors not to send any more regiments until called for. His successor, Edwin Stanton, sent a telegraph on April 3, 1862 ordering the federal recruiting offices to be closed. However, by early May it became obvious that more recruits would be needed; the order to close the recruiting offices was rescinded on June 6 and an urgent appeal for more troops was sent out on June 8. Specific quotas or recruitment goals were not mentioned in this appeal.

The communication from the northern governors to President Lincoln in June 1862 and his prompt response has been discussed (Page 6-2). While their appeal for more troops was passionate, the overall response in providing soldiers was more tepid when the actual request was made. The quotas were sent out on July 7, 1862 for three-year enlistments. Pennsylvania's quota was for 21 regiments or about 16,380 men.¹ The quotas varied according to the population of each state but the task was daunting for all. Several governors sent communications with comments and counter proposals. Governor Curtin argued a six-month enlistment would make it easier to solicit the required recruits. The only concession made was to a request from the governor of Massachusetts to allow a \$25 advance on the \$100 bounty provided to volunteers.

A few weeks later, on August 4, the Lincoln administration made an attempt to raise an additional 300,000 troops from the Northern states, this time to serve nine-month terms. (The Federal Militia Act had been passed by congress and signed into law on July 17, allowing the drafting of a militia for a period of nine months). If the number of volunteers any state raised fell short of the Federally assigned quota, that state would have to conduct its own draft – and they had to do it soon. The states had only until August 15 to recruit volunteers. The states were given one additional week but that still provided insufficient time to raise large numbers. The strong resistance in Wisconsin and ensuing riots are discussed in Chapter 7. Riots also occurred in Indiana and there were threats of riots in Pennsylvania.

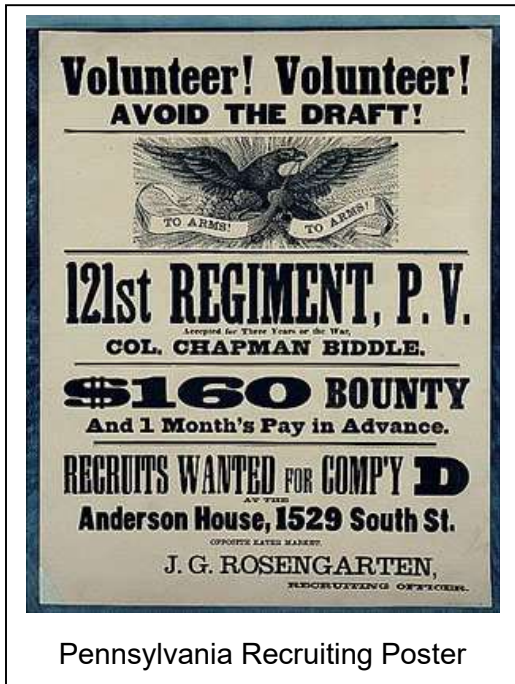


The free citizens of the USA had never experienced a draft and strongly resisted the thought. Many fled their homes to avoid the conscription and some even knocked out teeth and cut off their fingers so they would be unsuited for military service. The federal response was to make it a crime to avoid the draft and on September 24, 1862 Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation suspending the writ of habeas corpus² nationwide. Over 13,000 would eventually be imprisoned under this rule.

Governor Curtin and others much preferred to meet the quotas through voluntary enlistment. The state legislature approved additional funds to pay bounties and even private

¹ Number based on 780 per regiment which was the number assigned in the April 1861 appeal.

² Basically, *habeas corpus* represents the legal right that a person in a free society has not to be whisked from his or her home without reason or cause and not to be detained or punished by the authorities without getting a fair hearing in court and a chance of self-defense. Article 1, section 9 of the Constitution, restricting powers of Congress, forbids the suspension of *habeas corpus* except, "when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public safety may require it."



Pennsylvania Recruiting Poster

companies contributed money for bounties fearing they would lose valuable labor due to the draft. In fact, no one liked the idea of drafting troops and it has been reported that the main purpose of instituting the draft was to provide additional impetus for men to volunteer. Volunteering and receiving the bounty was preferable to being drafted with no remuneration.

The recruiting effort was not sufficient, however, and a draft was necessary to fill the quotas. The draft began in every county in Pennsylvania except Philadelphia on October 16. The nation's most serious resistance to conscription broke out Oct. 17, in Berkley, Luzerne County, where the military fired on a mob of rioters and killed 4 or 5 of them. Resistance also flared in Carbondale, Scranton, and other regions in the coal country, mostly among the Irish.

Governor Curtin wrote to Secretary of War Stanton on

October. 22, 1862:

"The draft is being resisted in several counties of the State. In Schuylkill County I am just informed that 1,000 armed men are assembled, and will not suffer the train to move with the drafted men to this place. I wish ample authority to use my troops in the State, and particularly the regulars and Anderson Cavalry at Carlisle, to crush this effort instantly. We will thus enforce the law, and effectually, if successful, prevent the like occurring in other parts of the State."

Stanton wrote back, authorizing Curtin to use "the regular force, the Anderson Cavalry, and any other military force in your State to enforce the militia draft, and also to call upon Major-General Wool, the commanding general of the Middle Department, for aid, if you desire it."

Fortunately, the resistance subsided and the draft was carried out. The results were mixed. Officials found it difficult to gather the draftees and many were unfit for service physically when they did report for duty. Governor Curtin, although a strong supporter of President Lincoln and the Union cause, was a vocal critic of the draft. The general agreement was that recruitment was the much-preferred method.

Regiments 158 and 165 through 179 were drafted for a period of nine months and their official designation included the description of "drafted." The draftees would learn years later that service of nine months was not sufficient to qualify for a disability pension even if wounded in service to the Union. The 171st Regiment was drafted from north-central part of the state, Bradford, Juniata, Lycoming, Somerset, and Tioga counties. That was the only unit that had members from Juniata county, Thomas's home, and it probably was not a large number given the large area covered by the five counties.

Despite the problems with the draft, the need for fighting men was unrelenting and the enlisted volunteers would not fill the need. The Militia Act was replaced by the "Enrollment Act," also known as the "Civil War Military Draft Act." President Lincoln signed the act into law on March 3, 1863. It required the enrollment of every male citizen and immigrants who had filed for citizenship between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Federal agents established a quota of new troops from each congressional district. Its passing sparked riots in New York City and other places.

The implementation was administered by Provost Marshal General James Barnet Fry, who answered directly to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Fry appointed acting assistant Provost Marshal Generals to assist in the effort. Each state had one assistant except for New York which had three and Pennsylvania which had two. Each congressional district was under the jurisdiction of an enrollment board. The boards were headed by a district provost marshal and included a surgeon and a commissioner. These were aided by clerks, deputies and special agents as needed.

This act included policies of substitution and commutation which allowed draftees to opt out of service by either furnishing a suitable substitute or by paying \$300. The intent was to soften the effect of the draft on pacifists and the propertied classes. Both policies were resented which led to the slogan "rich man's war, poor man's fight." Interestingly, the same slogan could be heard in the confederate states. Their draft was instituted in 1862 and allowed property owners and slave owners to opt out under some conditions.

Other exemptions were possible. Health reasons included insanity, epilepsy, cancer, heart disease, missing limbs, severe skin problems, loss of a sufficient number of teeth, a grossly protruding abdomen, excessive obesity and more. Incontinence was a valid exemption but had to be proven by introduction of a metallic catheter.

Reluctant recruits were known to search the list of exemptions carefully to find a suitable justification and some even resorted to self-mutilation in order to avoid service. Significant numbers of citizens fled their homes to avoid the draft and there was abuse of the system by unscrupulous enrollment agents.

The act was amended in 1864 to limit the exemption by payment of a commutation fee to one year, after which they had to serve or furnish a substitute. It was amended again in 1865 to impose loss of citizenship as a penalty for avoiding the draft.

The main goal of the draft was always to encourage voluntary enlistment which was reinforced with generous bounties. While the draft was executed in some states it appears that Pennsylvania did not draft any citizens after the fall of 1862. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled the draft to be unconstitutional in November 1863 but the ruling was vacated two months later.³ The United States Supreme Court did not review the law. There was frequent communication between Governor Curtin and the White House about troop needs and the

³ The vote was 3 to 2 in the ruling on *Kneedler v. Lane*. The term of the chief justice ended at the end of the year. The court reversed the ruling by a 3 to 2 vote in the next term.

problems associated with securing them. These centered on Curtin's efforts to recruit and there is no mention of conscription.

Whether Curtin was motivated by the court's ruling or his personal distaste of the draft is not known. Pennsylvania met its quotas without resorting to the draft but it is quite likely the threat was used frequently as a recruitment tool. Actually, in the end, the draft was not widely employed in the Union; the Army relied overwhelmingly on voluntary enlistments. Only about two percent of the total force was drafted and the substitutes made up about six percent of the Union forces.

What prompted Thomas to enlist in 1865 when he hadn't before is only a matter of speculation. In 1861, it was probably a small percentage of the young men who signed on and perhaps even so in 1862. As mentioned, the draft in 1862 did not affect Juniata County significantly. He probably enrolled in the spring of 1863 as required under the new law but was not drafted as Pennsylvania apparently did not draft anyone after 1862. In 1864, he had a new wife, a new home and a new baby, each of which could have been a factor. His younger brother, William, enlisted in February 1864 but that didn't prompt Thomas to join him.

Perhaps he had run out of options or excuses but, for whatever reason, Thomas joined the Union Army on February 15, 1865 and was mustered in as a Private in Company D of the Pennsylvania 192nd Infantry. The war was nearing its end but he couldn't have known that. It was clear the Union had the upper hand and was closing in on the Confederacy but the war had already gone on for a long time, much longer than expected, and no one could be sure how long it would last.

The 192nd Infantry was recruited from the 20th Pennsylvania Militia which had been called into service in 1862 and again in 1863. It was organized at Camp Cadwalader in Philadelphia in fourteen companies on July 7, 1864 for a period of 100 days. On November 11, the majority



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was mustered out but the officers and enough men for one company reorganized for another 100 days. In the spring of 1865, they were joined by nine additional companies who had enlisted for one year's service, including Thomas and Company D. They were organized at Harrisburg and then ordered to proceed to Harpers Ferry in West Virginia on March 1. They were attached to the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division of the Army of the Shenandoah until April.

Harpers Ferry, originally "Harper's Ferry," had a prominent place in the history of the civil war. George Washington has established an armory there in 1794. Radical abolitionist, John Brown, planned to lead a revolt to free the slaves in Virginia. On October 16, 1859, he and his followers raided and occupied the armory with the intent of using the weapons for his revolt, convinced that the raid would also inspire others to join him. Almost all of his band was killed or captured by the US Army and Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee. Brown himself was captured, tried for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia and hanged on December 2, 1859. To many in the north, he was martyr; in the south, a symbol of northern aggression. His actions escalated the tensions between the two factions.



Harpers Ferry in 1865,
Note the Army Tents in Lower Right

<http://ghostsofdc.org/2013/07/30/harpers-ferry-and-the-potomac-river-in-1865>

Virginia seceded from the union on April 17, 1861 and the next day Union forces burned the armory at Harpers Ferry – still part of Virginia at that time. Harpers Ferry, located where the Shenandoah River joins the Potomac River, is surrounded on all sides by steep rises which made the location almost impossible to defend. Control of Harpers Ferry changed sides fourteen time during the war and it wasn't until July 8, 1864 that the Union gained permanent control.

The battle of Harpers Ferry occurred here in September 1862 as part of Lee's Maryland Campaign. 24,000 Confederate

troops, under the command of General Stonewall Jackson, descended on Harpers Ferry and laid siege. Eventually, the Union forces surrendered resulting in the capture of 12,400 Union prisoners on September 15, the largest surrender of Federal forces during the Civil War. They were marched to Camp Parole near Annapolis where they awaited exchange for Confederate prisoners.

Jackson's troops then proceeded north to Sharpsburg, Maryland and joined forces the remainder of Lee's army in the Battle of Antietam. Lee's Army of Virginia retreated to southern Virginia following the Battle of Antietam. The Union Army marched to Harpers Ferry and set up

camp. Once more the area was under Union control. As discussed in Chapter 3, President Lincoln reviewed the troops at Harpers Ferry on October 2 where Davis Enyeart and the 53rd PVI, along with many others, were in camp.

The Battle of Harper's Ferry was the only major battle at Harpers Ferry during the war. Despite the large capture of prisoners, there were few casualties in that battle. Nevertheless, there were numerous skirmishes and guerilla attacks at Harpers Ferry and the citizens suffered greatly under both armies.

The 192nd was assigned to the Middle Military Division in April 1865 at the opening of the spring campaign. The moved up the Shenandoah valley to Staunton and Lexington. There was little fighting because the war had practically ended.

Staunton was about 120 miles southwest of Harpers Ferry. It was located at a strategically important transportation and communication crossroads. It was situated at the intersections of the east-west Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike and the north-south Valley Turnpike and the Virginia Central railroad. Military operations in northwest Virginia relied on supplies gathered in Staunton and transported throughout the region. Various confederate leaders used the town as headquarters and it was the target of at least two major military campaigns during the war.

Future President, Woodrow Wilson, was born in Staunton in 1856. One of his earliest memories was hearing of Lincoln's election and the impending war. He recalled standing next to Robert E. Lee and looking up at his face. The family moved to Georgia in 1861.

The citizens of Staunton contributed significantly to the Confederate cause in goods, aid and support to the CSA army and the cost was high. Staunton diarist Joseph

Waddell recorded in November 1863 that enemy occupation, military failures, and deprivation would soon pervade the town with what Waddell described as "a deep feeling of gloom ... It is like walking through the valley of the shadow of death."

On March 1-4, 1865, Union general Philip H. Sheridan's forces captured Staunton and destroyed a considerable amount of government and civilian property. The railroad tracks and telegraph lines were destroyed, cutting off communication. It took five days for the news of



Lithograph of Staunton, by Edward Beyer (1857)
<https://colonialghosts.com/staunton-train-depot/>

Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9 to reach Staunton. Appomattox is about 80 miles south of Staunton. The 192nd must have arrived to see a demoralized and defeated populace with little left of the prosperity Staunton had enjoyed just a few years earlier. After spending some time at Staunton, they moved to Lexington.

Lexington, Virginia, about 40 miles further upstream from Staunton is a small town that is the home to Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University (Washington College at the time.) Following the war, Robert E. Lee moved to Lexington to serve as the president of Washington College, which was later renamed in his honor. Lee is buried beneath Lee Chapel at the university. General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson is also buried at Lexington. Lexington did not figure prominently in the war other than providing soldiers for the confederate army. The populace generally leaned toward support of the union until Lincoln issued his call for troops on April 15, 1861. This prompted the men of the town to volunteer for the Confederate army. Washington College and VMI had very few students during the war and almost all able-bodied men of military age were involved in the conflict.

The 192nd saw little fighting during their enlistment as the war was essentially over by the time they began their first assignment. They were mustered out on August 24, 1865, having served for a little over six months. Thomas returned home to Mapleton to be greeted by his wife Sarah and ten-month-old daughter, Minerva.

Minerva was joined by brother John in 1866 and sisters Evaline "Effie" (1868), Julia (1870), Mary Grace "Grace" (1872) and Annie (1875). Thomas worked as a farmer in Mapleton. Tragically, Sarah died in July 1877 at the age of 30. Thomas married Elizabeth "Lizzie" Irwin April 1879. Thomas and Lizzie had no other children.

Thomas along with part of his family moved to Steel County in the Dakota Territory (North Dakota) where he homesteaded a 160 acre plot of land. Minerva, John and Grace were in North Dakota and apparently Minerva and John settle there. Grace returned to Pennsylvania and was living with her sister Julia in Hempfield Township. She married Wilmer Enyeart in 1900. Effie, Julia and Annie all settled in the east but may have been in North Dakota for a time.

Thomas and Lizzie returned to Mapleton in 1901 and Thomas died the next year. Lizzie received a widow's pension due to Thomas's service in the Union Army. She died in 1904. Thomas and Lizzie are buried in Riverview Cemetery in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania.



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