

A Civil War General and a Private

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It was a warm autumn day in Pittsfield, the sun was shining and the trees were showing off their colors. The people of Pittsfield are usually aware of this wonderful season, but on the autumn day of September 20, 1862, they were more conscious of their men going to the Voluntary Army at Fort Briggs in their town. It was just 114 years ago that Edward Stearns, a native of Windsor who moved to Pittsfield as a boy, was one of the first to volunteer. He was proud to go because of the reputation of the man that had been sent to Pittsfield as a Commander.

Colonel William Bartlett took command of Company B, 49th Regiment, Massachusetts Infantry at Fort Briggs. He was a man who went to make Pittsfield proud. Colonel Bartlett was the hero of the Port Hudson battle and led Company B to victory against all odds including 300 of his men being off duty because of illness.

After the mustering out of the 49th Regiment nine months later, Colonel Bartlett was authorized to raise the 57th Regiment, Massachusetts Infantry, which he took to the front in April, 1864. In June, 1864, he was commissioned Brigadier General of Volunteers, an honor that he readily deserved. He had a rapid rise to power which he had earned in both Regiments. He was in many battles and wounded many times, even suffering the loss of a leg.

Colonel Bartlett had left Pittsfield with 962 men and returned with 676. When they came back to Pittsfield, they were greeted at the depot by a huge crowd of citizens along with Stewart's band from North Adams, the Pittsfield and Lee fire companies, and the St. Joseph Mutual Aid Society. They marched through the streets of Pittsfield which had been decorated with flags, evergreens and welcoming signs. They halted at Park Square where the Honorable James D. Colt gave the address of welcome. Never did soldiers receive a prouder ovation than did Company B.

General Williams Bartlett had a soft spot in his heart for Pittsfield and he returned in October, 1865, married a Pittsfield girl by the name of Mary Agnes Pomeroy and lived the rest of his life in Pittsfield.

On May 27, 1904, he was honored with the dedication of a statue which was placed in Memorial Hall at the State House in Boston. The Mayor of Boston, the Governor and all living members of his Regiments were there to honor him, including Private Edward Stearns. The

General's seven-year-old grandson, Dwight Francis, had the honor of pulling the cord on the American Flag that unveiled the statue. A huge reception was held in three different rooms for his three regiments. A great man had received a great honor. The Mayor of Boston said:

“The lesson of his life is worthy of all to heed and Berkshire has no name of fame more deserving of monument than William F. Bartlett.”

The statue was the work of Daniel Chester French, then of Concord and later of Stockbridge. Another statue by the sculptor French was dedicated at Pittsfield on December 7, 1904. It was an exact copy of the one in Boston, only it was made of wood and bronze. It was placed in the Court House in Pittsfield, and was relocated in 1965 to Berkshire Community College, where it is today. William Bartlett died a Major General on December 17th, 1876 was buried in Pittsfield Cemetery. “Berkshire had no name of fame more deserving a monument,” the Boston dedication said.

There were many privates who served under Major General Bartlett, but one man, Edward Stearns, seemed to parallel the major's life. Private Edward Stearns was also at the Port Hudson battle. He enlisted on the first day of September, 1862, as a private in Captain R. Garlick's Company B, 49th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, Colonel William F. Bartlett commanding. This regiment was composed of troops from Berkshire County who were to serve for a nine month period. The troops moved from Camp Briggs, Pittsfield, to more comfortable quarters at Camp Wood, Worcester, where the field officers were elected. Company B left the state November 29, 1862, and on December 4, crossed the East River to Camp Banks. On January 23, 1863, the Company B embarked for New Orleans, Louisiana, and landed at Carrollton, seven miles from the city. They encamped near Baton Rouge for several weeks, engaged in routine duties and suffered seriously from fever and malaria. On May 20, 1863, in the attack on Port Hudson, 300 of the men were off duty because of sickness, making this a serious maneuver with far fewer men that were needed. The troops suffered badly, including among the wounded the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel.

Again during the assault of June 14, Company B occupied the front line of the Division and opened fire on the enemy, losing 16 killed and 64 wounded. The men played a conspicuous part in the skirmishing and sharp-shooting in front of the Confederate Works and suffered their full share of hardships but they continued until the surrender of Port Hudson. The Port Hudson battle was bloody and costly to the men of Company B, including Private Stearns. On August 8, 1863, Company B went to New Orleans, then on to Cairo, Illinois, and by rail to Pittsfield. They were mustered out September 1, 1863. Private Stearns' discharge read:

“Having notably met all demands made upon him, Private Edward Stearns was a Valiant man from Pittsfield. Private Stearns had suffered a rupture in Baton Rouge, La., and was confined in the hospital there. His weight was 180 pounds when he left Pittsfield and reduced to 120 pounds on

his return. He was on the transport 'Mississippi,' that was grounded and had to be blown up to avoid capture. He participated in the march back to Baton Rouge to avoid the enemy. Assigned to guard duty during the siege of Port Hudson, he managed to join the troops during battle.”

Edward Stearns was born in Windsor, September 1, 1841. He married Ellen Boone in Pittsfield. His children were all born and lived all their lives in Pittsfield. Levi Boone Stearns, Fred and Fran (twin sons), Laura M., and a second set of twins, Frank T. and Fannie, George and Susie.

He was a member of the WW Rockwell Post 125, Department of Massachusetts, Grand Army of the Republic. He held several offices, among them supervisor. He considered it an honor to have served with General William Bartlett and attended both dedications in Bartlett's honor in Pittsfield and Boston.

Private Stearns is buried in Pittsfield Cemetery. The General's and the private's lives seem to parallel: both men were in Company B, both were injured at Port Hudson, both were married and raised families in Pittsfield, and both were buried in Pittsfield Cemetery.

Pittsfield can be proud of these two valiant and honorable men. I happen to be particularly proud of Private Stearns because he was my great-grandfather.