

Camp Burnside Dec.

A LOOK BACK ...

BUTTERNUTS IN THE CIVIL WAR: JAMES ORLANDO BROWN

Compiled by Garrick L. Hoadley
from documents in the Gilbertsville Free Library Historical Collection

When the Civil War began, James Orlando Brown was 27. A mason by trade, he lived with his parents in the Town of Butternuts. In October, 1861, with seven other members of the Gilbertsville Brass Band, he enlisted for three years in the 51st New York Infantry regimental band. In a series of nine letters to his future wife, Mary A. Hakes, back in Butternuts, James provided a light, enthusiastic description of military life starting with the journey from Gilbertsville to the branch depot at Nineveh when the wagon broke down and the horses ran away, spilling out the cargo of recruits and their instruments.

The band joined up with the regiment in New York City where they dined at the Palace Garden Hotel on bread, cheese, apple sauce and coffee and James bragged, "It is not every body that can board at the Palace G." The regiment then joined other units at camp near Annapolis, Maryland, where an expeditionary force under General Ambrose Burnside was being formed to invade North Carolina.

Letters from Maryland describe the wonders of a large military camp, exploring Annapolis and climbing the state house steeple for a view of Chesapeake Bay, "(A) splendid body of water," seeing an observation balloon "like a very large star" at sunset, and reporting the rough justice dealt out to soldiers who did not behave themselves.

On January 1st, 1862, the regiment boarded transport ships at Annapolis for North Carolina but due to stormy weather, they "did not step foot on the ground but once in five

weeks" on the trip south, a journey that took just a few days in fair weather.

After landing on Rebel-held Roanoke Island, the troops' relief at being on solid ground, as well as a 3-to-1 advantage over the Rebels and support by firepower from the fleet, practically guaranteed Burnside's success.

In mid-March, Union control was extended to New Bern, where the 51st fought again. They "met the rebels about four miles from the city," took control of New Bern and threatened the vital Weldon Railroad.

After battles at Roanoke Island and New Bern, James and his comrades settled into camp life. Letters tell of parades and good times picking berries and roaming the North Carolina countryside by rail on handcars.

In New Bern, James was struck with dysentery, and was left behind in hospital when his regiment was transferred back to Virginia. He recovered and was able to rejoin his regiment in time to be discharged with his mates August 17th, 1862, when regimental bands were abolished by act of congress as a luxury the hard pressed Union Army could no longer afford.

After discharge, James returned to Butternuts where he married Mary A. Hakes, bought a farm and started a family. Unfortunately, "Disease contracted in the service fastened itself on him and he was forced to submit to the inevitable, passing over to the great beyond, dying May 8th, 1875."