



Members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War march in during the dedication of the reinstallation of cannons at the Grand Army of the Republic Monument at the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery on Nov. 11, 2010. *(Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)*

Gettysburg veterans rest at Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery

By GAYE LeBARON
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
July 6, 2013

California was a long way from the Battle of Gettysburg. And Sonoma County was busy fighting its own “battles,” mostly wars of words, between the Petaluma Yankee traders and the Johnny Rebs who had settled the Russian River Valley.

So it is understandable that the Gettysburg 150th anniversary last week got a lot more attention in the eastern part of the country.

That's not to say there are not connections to be made.

Among the several hundred Civil War veterans buried in Sonoma County cemeteries, there are 166 in Santa Rosa's Rural Cemetery — 146 Union, 20 Confederate, including several whose tombstone inscriptions indicate that they were members of regiments that fought at Gettysburg.

We know that Nathaniel Stevens' regiment, the 8th Illinois Infantry, was there. And Amasa Arnold's 14th New York Infantry came from Brooklyn, and Joseph Wilcoxon served in the 147th New York Infantry. Both these New York units fought at Gettysburg. All three of these “old soldiers” rest on the hill above Franklin Avenue.

The Friends of the Rural Cemetery keep track of such things. Five years ago, in their publication called “Tombstones and Tales,” researchers Charles Christian and Ray Owen wrote about another Gettysburg survivor who made his mark — quite literally — in the history of Santa Rosa.

By 1870, Gus Fisher, a young stonemason from Vermont, had arrived in Santa Rosa and opened Fisher Marble and Granite, the first “tombstone” business in Santa Rosa. As 22-year-old Cpl. Augustus Leander Fisher, he had been mustered into the 13th Vermont Infantry in 1862.

He is described by a comrade in the regimental history:

“A man of happy make up, he had a way of saying and doing funny things which made him a favorite with all. If the rain poured in torrents, you would hear Gus Fisher yell, 'Ain't you glad you enlisted?' A little commissary whiskey would set him to preaching and singing gospel hymns and under all conditions he was happy and tried to make others happy.”

His regiment, we are told, “served only nine months and saw little action.”

I don't know that I would have put it that way.

On the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Vermont brigade was at the stone wall behind the cannons and the infantry on the Union line on Cemetery Hill. They had a clear look as Pickett's Charge breached the stone wall in a move that is known to military historians as “The high water mark of the Confederacy.”

It was Cpl. Fisher's brigade that sent two regiments on the south side to attack the flank of the charging rebels. They were credited with “playing a key role in the failure of the charge,” according to the Fisher profile.

It is noted that the brigade fired “approximately 6,000 mini balls.”

Rather than “saw little action,” I would suggest that this is the stuff that movies are made of.

Fisher apparently brought his “happy make up” when he came west. He was active in the local Grand Army of the Republic organization and attended the state encampment when it was held here. The Sonoma Democrat took note.

“The eighth commander of the post was A.L. Fisher. The big-headed, generous, fun-loving citizen whose very presence is a sunbeam of joy and whose daily influence is a perpetual incentive to the attainment of those virtues that fit us for companionship of intelligent, moral and social beings ... ”

Gus Fisher took a partner, John Kinslow. Fisher & Kinslow Marble and Granite works remained at its original location on Davis Street between Third and Fourth until the freeway took the site. It is now North Bay Monument Co. in Rohnert Park, owned by Gary Galeazzi.

The “Cemetarian” publication profiled 10 other Civil War veterans, both Union and Confederate.

Col. James Armstrong, of Armstrong Redwoods State Park fame, who fought with the Ohio Infantry, is the highest-ranking officer buried here.

There are three physicians who served — two with the Union and one with the Confederates.

Dr. Robert Press Smith Jr., the first county physician in Sonoma County, served with the South Carolina regiment and was wounded at the battle of Aversboro. His father, Robert Press Smith Sr. is buried here as well. He was a captain and quartermaster of the Confederate First Battalion and was severely wounded in the battle of Secessionville.

Dr. Melvin Shearer, the first administrator of the Sonoma County Hospital, was a surgeon with the 48th Illinois Volunteer Infantry.

Dr. Absalom Stuart was a surgeon in both the 10th Missouri Infantry and the Union's First Alabama Cavalry. His wife, Anabel, a nurse, assisted him in battlefield hospitals. Absalom died in Santa Rosa in 1887 of the effects of wartime injuries and Anabel, who became a physician to assist him, stayed on as the first woman doctor in town, beloved by patients as "Dr. Dear" into the 20th century.

Two Sonoma County judges, colleagues on the bench, fought on opposite sides in the war. John Pressley, a South Carolina planter, was a member of the State Legislature and the youngest to sign the state's Articles of Secession. He became an officer in the state militia and was wounded in Virginia. Discouraged by Reconstruction in the post-war South, he came to California and to Santa Rosa in 1871, was elected county judge and then to the Superior Court.

John Tyler Campbell was a Missourian, the youngest commissioned officer in the 32nd Infantry who fought at Vicksburg, Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain. After the war, he studied law and moved to Santa Rosa in 1875. When John Pressley was appointed to the Superior Court, Campbell succeeded him as county judge.

Capt. Andrew Middleton fought with Co. D of the 15th Mississippi Infantry, mustered as the Wigfall Rifles of Choctaw County. He was at Appomattox when Lee surrendered. He practiced law in Santa Rosa and served as assistant district attorney.

Col. James Austin from South Carolina fought in the Confederates' Wade Hampton Legion Infantry, directing young troops in a stand against Sherman in his "March to the Sea." Austin was an educator, teaching mathematics and becoming president of a Kentucky college before moving west and becoming president of Pacific Methodist College in Santa Rosa. He later taught at Santa Rosa High School.

William Kittredge was a sergeant major in the 4th Minnesota Infantry who was part of the first brigade to march into Vicksburg at the end of the siege on July 4, 1863 (another 150th!). He stayed in the army, fought Indians at Powder River and served as a captain in the 3rd California Infantry where, he said, his duty was "to keep the emigrant trail open ..." He settled in Santa Rosa where he farmed in the area that is now Montgomery Village. He died in 1892.

There are undoubtedly other Gettysburg soldiers, buried in the county. But Santa Rosa's Rural Cemetery is the ideal place to "study" this subject.

Here's your challenge. Take a walk in our wonderful old burial ground that is really a city park that volunteers care for very tenderly. Go find Gus Fisher's grave. There are maps on the Rural Cemetery website. Needless to say, he has one of the better tombstones in the cemetery.