

Battery L was important factor at Gettysburg

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It was the turning point of the Civil War. During the first three days of July 1863, the 75,000 strong Confederate Army of Northern Virginia led by Gen. Robert E. Lee and the 97,000 Union force led by Gen. George G. Meade met by accident at Gettysburg, Pa. The Confederates were on their way to Harrisburg, when they found out Union forces were close by. They turned around to find a place to engage the enemy, then Gen. John Buford's forces opened fire on them.

The next three days would see over 50,000 casualties, with 16,000 men paying the ultimate price in the only war fought on American soil. In the end, the Union would come away with a major victory.

Playing an important part in that victory was Battery L of the 1st Regiment Ohio Light Artillery from Portsmouth. The last artillery unit brought into action, Battery L was pressed into battle on July 2, after marching 24 hours to Gettysburg. Battery L was ordered to fill a gap on Cemetery Ridge in the Union line with their six cannons. The gap was formed when the 3rd Corps advanced to another position seeking higher ground closer to enemy forces.

"If you look at the landscape of the valley this was in, this became known as the Valley of Death," said Capt. Charles H. (Chip) Horr, present-day commander of Battery L. "This was the only way out for the retreating 3rd Corps., the only way out for the Confederates chasing them. We got there exactly when the Confederates and the Union were pushing back through Plum Run, just 100 yards in front of our guns. It became later known as Bloody Run at the end of the day."

It had rained the previous week, so the ground was a muddy mess. However, Battery L only spent a couple of hours in the battle.

"As the Union troops were being pushed back, the enemy was being pushed back through our guns," Horr said. "An entire division of the 5th Corps. was coming in behind our guns, fresh troops. These guys had probably retreated two miles on the run. It was hot, so they were getting pretty worn out. There are a lot of books out there that will tell you a lot of our double-canisters were hitting our own people. Friendly fire was a common occurrence in the Civil War."

The fighting was fierce, as Lt. James Gildea of Battery L reported in his memoirs.

"As soon as our boys opened double-shot canister (54, 4 oz. balls)," he wrote, "the rebs dropped on their face behind the rocks which were here in plenty and never raised until driven out by the charge of the 9th Pennsylvania."

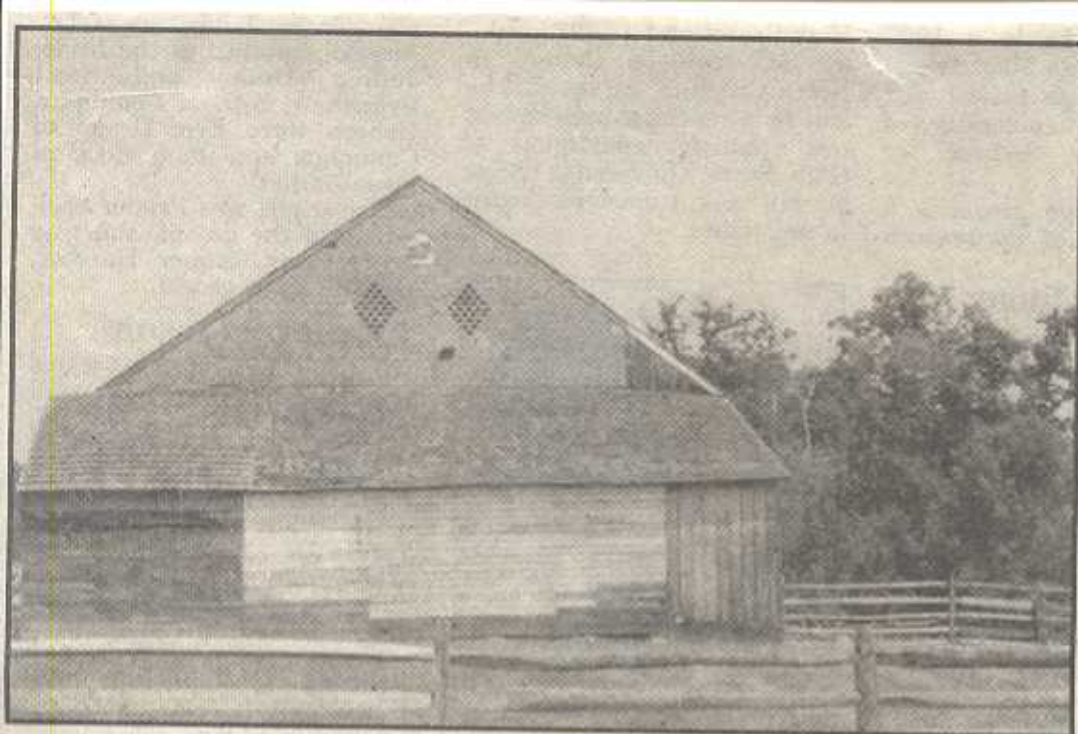
Gildea went on to describe the deaths of two Union officers, Lt. Charles Hazlet of Zanesville and Gen. S.H. Weed, both killed on top of Little Round Top by sharpshooters firing from Devil's Den.

"He (Weed) was there with his brigade and was shot just above the heart," wrote Gildea. "As he fell, Hazlet caught him and leaned over to receive his dying words. Just then a bullet struck the Lieutenant in the forehead and he fell dead across the general."

Battery L helped prevent the Confederates from crossing Wheatfield Road and circling behind the Union troops. Just how important does history prove Battery L's stand to be that fateful day?

"We feel that we saved the day on July 2 by being there," Horr said. "If we weren't there, they would have come through us and circled behind the Union troops on Cemetery Ridge."

Battery L, which was formed on Nov. 1, 1861, suffered no losses to its 130-man force at Gettysburg.



Submitted by Donald K. Barron

A hole made by a Confederate cannon ball is still visible in this barn at Trostle Farm in Gettysburg.

The unit saw action the next day, shooting their guns to distract the Confederates during the ill-fated Pickett's Charge that sealed the Confederate's fate. Pickett's Charge was a 15,000-man infantry assault led by Gen. George Pickett across a mile-long open field. The results were disastrous, as the Confederates suffered 10,000 casualties in only 50 minutes.

There are those who think Pickett's Charge was a foolish move.

"I think so," Horr said. "But you've got to remember, Lee had never been defeated. He had won every battle the first two years of the war, so his men knew they could win anything. He just came off a huge battle at Chancellorsville, outnumbered, outflanked and outmaneuvered, but still won. So his men and he, thought he could win. I'd say he was over-confident."

Following Battery L's engagement at Gettysburg, it went south through Emmitsburg, Md., and across South Mountain towards Antietam. Next was a small skirmish at Thoroughfare Gap and a battle at Rappahannock Station, before camping at Beverly Ford.

While the Battle of Gettysburg has long been over, the vibes of it are still very much alive.

"It just absorbs you," Horr said. "If you're into history and know what happened there when you walk the battlefield, it's just a different kind of feeling. You know you've been hit. You're on hallowed ground where people died for this country."

Those wishing to get a look at what Battery L faced at Gettysburg can view the Battery L mural on Front Street. The mural depicts Battery L's stand on the northern slope of Little Round Top.