

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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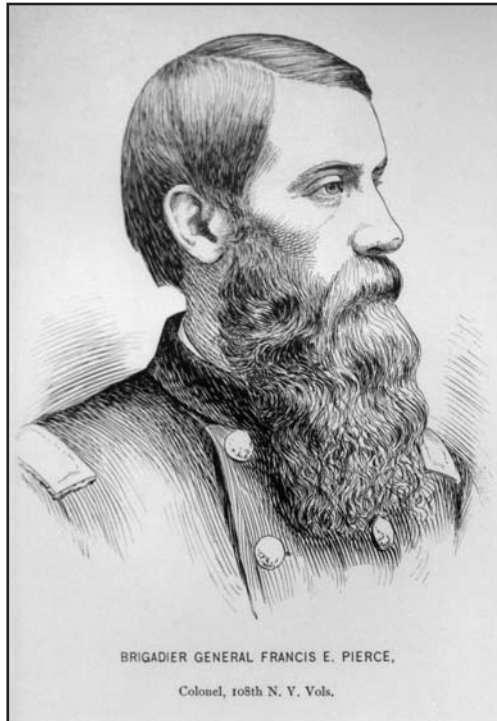
Vol. LXV

Spring 2003

No. 2

The Civil War Battles
of
Lt. Col. Francis Edwin Pierce
108th New York Volunteer Infantry

by Bob Marcotte





Above: The monument to the 108th New York at Gettysburg accurately depicts the thankless task the regiment carried out during most of the battle, lying in support of an artillery battery at Ziegler's Grove. From the author.

Cover: Lt. Col. Frances Edwin Pierce Col. 108th N.Y. Volunteers
From *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols.*

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by Rochester Public Library. Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue, Rochester, NY 14604.

<http://www.rochester.lib.ny.us/~rochhist/>

Subscriptions to the quarterly Rochester History are \$8.00 per year by mail. Foreign subscriptions \$12.00 per year, \$4.00 per copy back issue.

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Lt. Col. Francis Edwin Pierce

The columns of tired, hungry soldiers stumbled forward through the darkness, mud and rain. They were silent, for the most part, having been ordered to make no unnecessary noise that would alert the enemy. But many, no doubt, inwardly cursed the generals who ordered this nighttime trek from one side of the Union line at Spotsylvania to the other.

For one officer from Rochester, this march on the evening of May 11, 1864, was particularly trying. Lt. Col. Francis Edwin Pierce, wounded by a Rebel bullet just three months before, had to be “guided through the woods on account of not being accustomed to traveling with one eye.”¹

For many American Civil War soldiers, a disabling wound was a ticket home, a way to escape the carnage with honor.

But not for “Ed” Pierce. One senses he wouldn’t have missed a moment of this war, not for anything. The University of Rochester graduate and military school principal took to the army like a duck to water. He loved it. It is not surprising, then, that after the war was over – after he had been wounded four times in some of the heaviest fighting imaginable – Rochester’s one-eyed warrior stayed in the Regular Army and made it his career.

History comes alive when it has a “local connection.” Pierce provides a Rochester connection to many of the most famous battles of the Civil War. He fought with Monroe County’s 108th New York Volunteer Infantry at the Sunken Road at Antietam, in front of the stone wall at Fredericksburg and in the bloody May 3, 1863, cauldron near Chancellorsville clearing. He commanded the regiment and, briefly, its brigade, when it helped repel Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg. He led the 108th again when his colonel was wounded in the Wilderness, then commanded it at Spotsylvania when it charged into the savage fight at the Salient. During the battles around Petersburg, he commanded a brigade, and helped pursue Lee to Appomattox Court House.

At first glance, he seems a contradiction: He was a courageous soldier, who repeatedly risked his life. But he adamantly opposed what became one of the North’s principal objectives: Emancipation of the slaves. He was a college-educated man, one who, in the midst of all the profanity of camp life, would at least occasionally find solace in the Bible.² But he spoke of African Americans in the crudest, most degrading terms. He

reminds us that many Northern soldiers did not fight to free the slaves, but to save the Union.

Moreover, his letters to a friend provide vivid, unvarnished descriptions of the battlefield. Thanks to soldiers like Pierce, we have a much better idea of the realities of Civil War combat – its moments of horror, its moments of exhilaration.

A profile in the 1894 regimental history of the 108th says Pierce was, from boyhood, “every inch a soldier.” Born July 6, 1833, in Fowlerville, Livingston County, he was the only son of Abijah and Miranda Pierce. The family moved to Wisconsin in 1845. However, after a few years his parents sent Francis back to Rochester to receive a better education. He lived with his grandparents while he attended the preparatory school of M.G. Peck on State Street. He taught school in Chili for two years, then entered the University of Rochester, graduating in 1859. He was principal of the Mt. Morris Academy during the 1859–60 school year. In the fall of 1860 he and his cousin Samuel Pierce established the Rochester Military Academy for boys.³

The students wore gray uniforms, and received instruction in Latin, Greek, mathematics, natural sciences and drawing. They were also drilled at an old armory in the manual of arms and military tactics. “This, without interfering with other studies, tends to give a manly bearing to the young gentlemen, and is, moreover, very healthful exercise,” the *Rochester Evening Express* reported in 1862. Pierce apparently had a profound influence on his young charges. “He possessed from the outset that subtle magnetism which drew every one to him with whom he came in contact,” his comrades recalled in 1894. “To this day his old pupils speak of him in a manner showing how deep an impression he made on their youthful minds.”⁴

Pierce was also active in the local militia regiment, the 54th New York, serving as a lieutenant in Company C, the Light Guard.⁵

When President Abraham Lincoln issued an urgent plea for 300,000 more volunteers in July 1862, Pierce followed the example of many other militia officers, and recruited a company for a new Monroe County regiment – the 108th New York Volunteer Infantry.

The war was not going well for the North, particularly in Virginia. The defeat at First Bull Run the previous summer demonstrated that large, well-trained armies would be required to subdue the Confederacy. However, even with more than 100,000 troops at his disposal, timid Gen. George McClellan had been unable to capture Richmond during the just-concluded peninsular campaign.

Despite heavy losses to Rochester’s first regiment, the 13th New York Volunteer Infantry, enthusiasm for the war was undiminished in the city

and surrounding towns. On July 14, Pierce set up a recruiting office in a storefront at 15 Buffalo (now West Main) Street. Two lieutenants assisted him. George F. Loder was a fellow militia officer. Samuel Porter was the son of a prominent Rochester abolitionist. The younger Porter, an accomplished baseball player, had just completed his junior year at the University of Rochester. The trio soon had a company full of recruits. When the local Military Committee designated the 108th's commissioned officers, Pierce was listed as captain; his recruits were eventually mustered in as Company F.⁶

The regiment assembled at Camp Fitz John Porter on the west bank of the Genesee River, at the city's south edge.⁷

It was traditional during the war for family and associates to present swords or pistols to officers before they left for the front. These were often sprung upon the unsuspecting officer at a surprise gathering. A presenter would give a carefully prepared speech – full of noble, patriotic sentiments – leaving the poor officer to grope for an appropriate reply.

Such was the case when Rochester's postmaster, Scott Updike, asked Pierce into a back room at the Post Office "to have a little private conversation with him" on Aug. 14, 1862. Instead, Pierce's former pupils from the military academy were lined up to present him an "elegant sword."

"It is with a feeling of pride, mingled with the sad feelings occasioned by the parting.... that we witness your noble devotion to the interests of our bleeding country," stated Lt. Harris of the academy. "... although this parting may be our last, its bitterness is lessened by the consciousness that you take up the gauntlet in defense of the noblest and most sacred cause that man ever defended – the cause of God and Freedom."⁸

Pierce, it was reported, "had not been advised of what was going on, and was rather at a loss for words ... but he managed to express to his late pupils the gratitude he felt, and he assured them that the sword ... would not be dishonored in his hands."⁹

The 108th was mustered in 1,039 men strong, and left for the defenses of Washington on Aug. 19, 1862. Col. Oliver H. Palmer, a Rochester attorney and former judge, had no military training but reluctantly agreed to lead the regiment when no one else stepped forward.¹⁰ Less than a month later, when McClellan's men caught up with Lee's invading army in Maryland, Pierce and the 108th found themselves in front of the Sunken Road at the Battle of Antietam.

It was a horrendous baptism of fire for rookie soldiers who had not yet mastered even the basics of drill. In a remarkable letter home to former student Edward "Ed" Chapin – one of several later printed by the

Rochester Historical Society – the captain described how the green soldiers had lain nervously under artillery fire near their camp the day before – “every nose ... buried in the mud as far as practicable.” They spent most of the night being issued rations and 40 extra rounds of ammunition.¹¹

Early next morning, Sept. 17, 1862, the men were roused. They marched at the rear of their brigade,¹² wading Antietam Creek, then ascending a hill where the men formed a line of battle, two ranks deep.

“As yet I suppose no one had any idea that we were going into battle, at least I had not...” Pierce confided. Any uncertainty was erased, however, when the regiment again advanced. Co. F was the second from the right end of 108th’s battle line, when it reached a rail fence on the brow of a hill.¹³

Ahead, at the base of the hill, was a country lane, so eroded it had sunk several feet. The Confederate soldiers packed into this lane piled fence rails at the edge, further strengthening the position. They were perfectly situated to shoot uphill at the Yankees as they crested the hill. One Union brigade had already been decimated attacking this position. Now dozens of soldiers of the 108th were hit as well.¹⁴

“At first I acknowledge that I felt afraid, going through the orchard and up the hill the bullets were whistling like the devil,” Pierce told Chapin. However, “Once over the fence at the top of the hill I was never more cool in my life. I don’t know how it was, but I was perfectly indifferent, and had no more fear than I should have in your bathtub at home. In fact I rather enjoyed it, although brave men were falling all around ...”¹⁵

This does not appear to have been false bragging. Pvt. William H. Skinner, a 21-year-old Greece farmer who enlisted in Company F, wrote home after the battle: “You had ought to of seen our Captain (Pierce) wave his sword and call his men on.”¹⁶

The 108th was pinned down for up to five hours in front of the Sunken Road, men rising to fire, then falling back to the ground to reload.¹⁷

Many men, separated in the chaos, were mixed up with other regiments.¹⁸ Some of them joined the final assault that carried the Sunken Road, capturing prisoners and an enemy flag. Others, falling back to reform with the rest of the regiment, promptly skedaddled back to camp on the far side of Antietam Creek, having endured all they could.

Only about 100 men remained when the 108th was shifted to the left, to hold another part of the Union line. Once again, the men had to lie helpless under artillery fire. “It was awful,” Pierce wrote. “A shell burst over us passing entirely through Frank Johnson, the Col’s orderly, taking an arm off from another man and severely wounding some others. I can’t tell half that I saw or heard or describe the agony I was in for two

hours that we were shelled. It was a hundred times worse than when we were under a severe musketry fire.”¹⁹

On this, the bloodiest single day of combat during the Civil War, the rookie regiment lost 195 men killed, wounded and missing.²⁰ McClellan, true to form, failed to commit all of his troops. Even though his Army of the Potomac outnumbered Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia more than two to one at Antietam, the battle ended in a draw.

According to the *Evening Express*, Lt. Loder walked over the battleground with Pierce two days later “and saw a most heart-sickening sight. The rebels were mowed down by whole companies, and the dead lay upon the field in rows, just as they stood in line of battle. A rifle pit in front of the 108th was piled full of dead, one lying on another.”²¹

And yet, less than a week later, Pierce waxed rhapsodic about his new employment. “I enjoy this life very much,” he wrote to Chapin. “I can go as dirty as I please, wear government shoes, haven’t washed myself today and don’t intend to.”²²

“Don’t be alarmed about my drinking whiskey,” he added. “I can’t get it, but sometimes I do swear like hell – when I am mad.”

Promotion to major quickly followed, and this too suited Pierce. “It is better Ed to be Major even, than to be Captain. ‘I am Monarch of all etc’ ‘I say unto one do this and he doeth it’ and unto another do that, and he doeth it.’ (if he is amind to).”²³

But, as in any organization, promotion does not necessarily win – or retain – friends. Porter was livid when he was passed over to fill the captain’s vacancy created by Pierce’s promotion, and held Pierce responsible. “As far as Capt. Pierce is concerned I think the whole performance one of the most dishonorable that I ever knew of and I told him so in those very words.”

Porter did not actually want the promotion – had in fact told Pierce as much – but was stung that he was not formally given an opportunity to turn it down!²⁴

Officers also had to live with the fact that even the best-intentioned orders could have tragic consequences. Pierce encountered this on a street in Fredericksburg, Va., just before he and his men charged toward Marye’s Heights in one of the bloodiest debacles of the war.

The Union army arrived at the Rappahannock River opposite Fredericksburg in mid-November under a genial but inept new commander, Gen. Ambrose Burnside. His plan was to get across quickly, before Lee knew about it, then descend upon Richmond. Alas, the pontoons Burnside had requested were delayed, giving Lee’s army ample time to arrive and fortify the heights behind the town. Alas, this did not deter Burnside, who foolishly determined to attack anyway.

It took an entire day to force a crossing, and another one to get the soldiers across, and on the eve of battle the Yankees pillaged the historic old town. Soldiers of the 108th joined them. Pierce, in another letter to Chapin, described the wholesale looting by Union soldiers, who broke into homes and scattered their contents into the streets.

“Closets of the very finest china ware were broken into and their contents smashed onto the floor and stamped to pieces,” Pierce reported. Fine glass goblets were hurled through windows; window curtains were torn down; wine cellars were looted; pianos were piled in the streets and set afire, or were pranced upon by soldiers who would “kick the keyboard and internal machinery all to pieces. ... The soldiers seemed to delight in destroying everything.”²⁵

Pierce was not above helping himself to some of the loot. Porter wrote to his father afterwards that he was sending home some “trophies” from Fredericksburg. “The cup,” he was careful to specify, “Belongs to Maj. Pierce.”²⁶

Burnside’s plan for Dec. 13 called for one of his “grand divisions” to attack the Confederates south of town, rolling up Lee’s right flank. Another “grand division” – including the 108th – would attack straight out of Fredericksburg to pin the rest of Lee’s army in place.

That morning, companies A and F of the 108th were drawn up on Princess Anne Street, which ran parallel to the river. (The rest of the regiment trailed back toward the river on George Street.) The men were at rest, some sitting at the curb in front of St. George’s Episcopal Church, when a Rebel artillery piece on the heights beyond the town opened fire. Pierce described how “the first shot just struck the corner of the house, knocked out a few bricks and exploded just as it struck the church. The 2nd shot passed entirely through the house and exploded just it struck the church, 3rd shot the same only it exploded inside the church.”²⁷

One can almost picture Pierce observing, with a casual, almost scientific detachment, how each shell seemed to open a path for the one that followed.

When the men scattered to take shelter on the other side of the street, Pierce ordered Company F to “stand fast,” reported Pvt. Chauncey Harris.²⁸

Unfortunately, the fourth shell took a lower trajectory. It exploded against the curb where some of the men were sitting, spewing deadly fragments of iron and stone. The soldiers were confronted with a horrible sight: Private Robert Collins, brother of the editor of the *Rochester Daily Democrat and American*, lay with his leg nearly severed at the hip. “It was cut in two 4 times besides and the foot was cut in two,” Pierce wrote. “It made a ghastly looking wound.”²⁹

Collins was carried into a nearby building where four men held him down while the surgeons amputated his leg at the hip. He died 17 days later.

Pierce mourned the loss. "I am very sorry Bob was killed. He was a splendid soldier – uncomplaining – prompt – always ready and obliging. I thought more of him than of any other private in the Co. Poor fellow."³⁰

But Pierce, at least in the letter, does not express a hint of remorse over that order to stand fast. Nor should he. Standard Civil War tactics required soldiers to advance, shoulder to shoulder, even into the heaviest enemy fire. If they were allowed to run for cover every time a shell came by, the armies wouldn't have been able to maneuver. Soldiers had to maintain their ranks, even if it led to horrendous casualties. Which is exactly what happened, just a few hours later.

The Union assault south of town petered out – the commander there committed only two unsupported divisions to the attack. Burnside apparently hoped this had nonetheless forced Lee to divert troops to the south of town. So he ordered his blue clad soldiers to attack Marye's Heights. Union brigades had to file out of the streets, cross a drainage ditch, form a line of battle on the other side, march over open ground through three fences and – except for a sheltered moment on the far side of the ditch – they had to do this under fire from Confederate artillery ringing the heights and from Rebel riflemen packed four-deep behind a stone wall. It was suicide.

The 108th was in the third brigade to storm the heights. "Grape, canister, shells and minnies were poured into us from the front, and from the right shells were thrown into us, raking us and exploding in our ranks fearfully," Pierce wrote. "We had 3 board fences to go over and through and no cover. How any man went up and back again alive is more than I can imagine."³¹

Many of the men who were not killed or wounded had their clothing nicked by bullets. Harris described how Pierce "was at the head of his company, and Lieut. Sam. Porter near him, both cool, and evincing a determination to push forward at all hazards; only occasionally, Lieut. Porter, as a shell would explode near him, would bend his head and involuntarily raise his arm up like a boy dodging a snow ball..."³²

Even Pierce advanced bent down, using the protection of a slight elevation to make himself a smaller target. Then he came to the last fence. "Without straightening up I just raised my head a little to find a good place to get over and through when a ball took me in the top of the cap clear back and scratched my head down the back side passing through my cap again near the bottom of the back of it." It left a "nice scalp wound without touching the bone." Pierce tumbled to the ground. After

about three minutes he recovered his senses and was back on his feet, angry now because he had fallen behind his men. He scrambled to catch up and took a piece of shell on the inside of his left leg that “makes me lame as sixty but it didn’t break the skin.”

Nobody made it to the stone wall. Wave after wave of Union troops advanced, only to be mown down, survivors taking cover in slight depressions, or behind the bodies of fallen comrades while the shot and shell raged overhead. “Regiments would start and before going half the distance would come back shattered and broken,” Pierce wrote.³³ The Union army lost 12,600 men killed, wounded and missing – 92 from the ranks of the 108th – in a series of assaults that accomplished absolutely nothing except to demonstrate the valor of the soldiers, and the ineptitude of their commander.

Even Pierce was depressed. “I never want to go through another such 5 days. I am willing to go almost any where and endure anything but deliver me from ever being marched into such useless wholesale murder as that was.”

Three weeks later, Pierce confided, he was still “not yet over the depressing effect of our skedaddle from Fredericksburg nor ... the shock received by my nervous system. To be strained up 5 days and nights as tense as I could be and not break and then to be suddenly let down leaves one in a very bad state. ... but I am working around.”

“‘Give us back little Mack (McClellan)’ is the prayer of every soldier in this army.”³⁴

The slaughter at Fredericksburg, the futile mud march that followed, the lack of pay – these were not the only things fueling the army’s disenchantment that winter in its camps at Falmouth. The Emancipation Proclamation went into effect Jan. 1, 1863, freeing slaves in all Rebel-occupied areas. It ennobled the Northern war effort. But it did not change the attitudes of many Northern soldiers who, like Pierce, adamantly opposed the proclamation.

“I will not jeopardize my life or become an invalid for life from exposure and fatigue, hunger and cold, simply to restore 3,000,000 of *brutes* to freedom,” Pierce wrote. “Before the first of January I could meet a rebel and *face* him; now I can’t. Formerly when a reb on picket or any other place asked me, ‘What are you fighting for?’ I could answer, proudly too, *For the restoration of the Union* – now when one asks me I have to hang my head or else answer, *for the nigger*.”³⁵

Perhaps Pierce was as outspoken in camp as in his letters to Chapin. It is likely his opposition to Emancipation, his support for McClellan – who also opposed the measure – and his criticism of the conduct of the war were well known – and objectionable – to Porter. Porter’s family,

after all, had conducted a stop on the Underground Railroad in their barn! (Now near the site of Hochstein Music School on Fitzhugh Street.) That may explain this passage from another of Porter's letters home: "I got tired of listening to the rant and treason of Lieut Colonel Pierce and men of his stamp," Porter wrote later that spring. Pierce, he contended, was a "Copperhead of the worst kind," "a man of no principle," who remained in the army only for the pay. "His reputation has always been very good in the Regt., but the more thinking are beginning to see his shallowness and hypocrisy."³⁶

Porter was a brave officer, who matched Pierce with four wounds by the end of the war. But given Pierce's war record – and subsequent decision to remain in the Regular Army at much lower rank – it certainly seems unfair to imply he had purely mercenary motives for serving. (Though, to be sure, a lieutenant colonel's pay during most of the war – \$181 a month – was a handsome sum compared to \$13 a month for enlisted men.)³⁷ Nonetheless, it is fascinating to observe how Civil War soldiers could fight alongside each other with equal valor, and yet be at such loggerheads!

Of course, no one who enjoyed the army as much as Pierce would let political considerations deter him. When Col. Palmer resigned that spring, Charles J. Powers replaced him and Pierce was promoted to lieutenant colonel. Gen. Joseph Hooker, new commander of the Army of the Potomac, devised a brilliant campaign. That May he divided his army without Lee knowing it, descended upon Chancellorsville in the rear of the Confederate army, and had Lee right where he wanted him – caught between two wings of the Union army. Then Hooker turned passive. In the brutal fighting that occurred near the Chancellorsville clearing on May 3, 1863, Confederates turned the right flank of the 108th's brigade, capturing the brigade commander. The regiment stood its ground, then withdrew, suffering another 52 casualties. When Powers temporarily took command of the brigade, Pierce assumed command of the 108th. Within days, the Army of the Potomac was back across the river, again defeated – not because its soldiers had been outfought, but because its commander had been out-generaled.

Powers went on sick leave, so Pierce continued at the head of the regiment – now reduced to only about 200 men. In June, it joined the blue columns toiling along hot dusty roads in pursuit of Lee's army when it again invaded the North – this time toward a sleepy Pennsylvania town called Gettysburg.

The battlefield, at least on the Northern side, is dotted with hundreds markers now, one for virtually every regiment that participated in the epic three-day battle. The one for the 108th New York, at Ziegler's

Grove next to Cemetery Hill, is particularly appropriate. It shows an infantryman lying prone, with an artillery piece in the background. That was the unenviable task of the 108th during most of the battle, lying in support of Lt. George Woodruff's Battery I, 1st U.S. Artillery – so close that the regiment's line reportedly ran between the artillery pieces and their limbers.

The Union batteries – not only Woodruff's but the ones atop Cemetery Hill to the rear – were frequent targets of Confederate artillery fire; the men of the 108th had to lie passively while enemy shot and shell flew around them. Enemy sharpshooters also took their toll.³⁸

But this was nothing compared to what the 108th had to endure the afternoon of the third day, when the Confederates unleashed more than 100 artillery pieces in the barrage that preceded Pickett's Charge – and put the 108th at center stage for the war's most famous moment.

It was “the hardest fire the 108th ever experienced – perfectly awful – murderous,” Corp. Chauncey Harris wrote. “Not a second but a shell ... or ball flew over, or by us.” Large limbs, torn from the oak trees, “precipitated down upon our heads. One shell came shrieking and tearing through the trees... striking a caisson, causing it to explode, wounding several.”³⁹

Lt. Dayton Card of the 108th was killed when a shell tore open his breast and carried away part of his jaw.

Sgt. Peter Anger later recalled how a fragment from a shell struck him on the left forearm, temporarily paralyzing his arm. Another soldier, standing behind a big oak, called to Pierce, “Colonel! Sergeant Anger is hit.” “Is he hurt very bad?” Pierce hollered back, then came over to see for himself. Anger could only wiggle his fingers, but didn't see any blood. “You had better stay where you are,” Pierce advised, “as you are just as safe as you would be going to the rear.”⁴⁰ That advice may have saved Anger's life. Many of the Rebel shells that day were aimed too high, and wreaked havoc in the rear of the Union line.

The 108th's brigade commander, Col. Thomas A. Smyth, was hit in the nose by another shell fragment and did head for the rear. Lt. Theron Parsons of the 108th, fearing for his life amid the intense shelling, hurried across an open area with an urgent message: Pierce was now in command of the brigade!

When Woodruff's battery ran out of solid shot – the only long-range ammunition effective against enemy artillery – the soldiers of the 108th helped pull the guns back under cover, because so many of the battery's horses had been killed or maimed.

The barrage lasted an hour and a half. When it ended, an abrupt silence fell. The 126th New York from Ontario, Seneca and Yates coun-

ties was in line to the 108th's right. Pierce locked arms with Capt. Winfield Scott of the 126th, a former classmate at the University of Rochester, as they walked behind the two regiments. "Well, Scott, we ... sat beside each other in the classroom many a day," Pierce remarked, "but this is a new experience. This isn't much like digging out Greek roots."⁴¹

And then, nearly 12,000 Confederate infantrymen emerged from Seminary Ridge in the distance, striding toward the Union position in perfectly aligned ranks. As Northern artillery opened fire, soldiers of the 108th helped roll Woodruff's guns back into position. Though the battery lacked long-range shot, it had plenty of canister to fire into the attacking columns when they closed within 400 yards.

As Union cannon roared all along the line, and as Yankee infantrymen unleashed their volleys, "Lieut. Col. Pierce... was backward and forth along the line, encouraging the boys and cheering them up by his cool example," Harris wrote. Three times the Confederates tried to press their attack home, but failed. Finally, with their lines disintegrating, hundreds threw down their arms. "At this moment," Parsons added, "the clear voice of Col. Pierce rang out the order, 'Cease firing,' and the rebels ran in and gave themselves up as prisoners."⁴²

The repulse of Pickett's Charge culminated the crushing Confederate defeat at Gettysburg. Lee never again led his army onto northern soil.

At the war's decisive moment, Pierce had been thrust into a crucial command position and had proved his mettle. In his official report on the battle, Smyth, the wounded brigadier, specifically cited the "bravery, self-possession, and energy of Lieut. Col. F. E. Pierce ... who, throughout the heaviest of the fire, showed the greatest unconcern, passing along his line and encouraging his men."

This despite a wound that left Pierce's arm black and blue from wrist to elbow, and numb for two or three days.⁴³

"I wish you could be in a big fight," Pierce wrote to Chapin after the battle. "...think of the roar and booming of 150 cannon, the reports of shells exploding, the rending of huge trees and crashing fall of great limbs and treetops – the yell of the advancing enemy, the answering yells of defiance (sic) of the boys – the hurrying to and fro – the crashing of thousands of muskets... and though it is only imagination with you, you cannot help seeing how inexpressibly grand the scene is."

"After the fight is over," he added, "then one realizes what has been going on. Then he sees the wounded, hears their groans, sees perhaps his own dearest friend with whom he was talking only a moment before, lie before him a mangled mass of blood and flesh, scarcely recognizable...." This, Pierce acknowledged, "brings one back to his senses again.

Then it is horrid to visit a hospital – I mean a field hospital ... as it was after Gettysburg – where thousands of wounded men laid, during the violent rain and under the burning sun without a particle of shelter or a blanket ... there is the place to see condensed misery.”⁴⁴

The 108th suffered 102 casualties at Gettysburg – roughly half its strength. Pierce described bidding farewell to four wounded members of his old company as they were carried off in an ambulance. “Poor Enoch Miller could just raise his head and looking very pale and just whisper ‘good bye Col,’ and then he gurgled something in his throat that I couldn’t understand...Such scenes completely unman me. I can stand up and fight, but cannot endure the sight of suffering, particularly of our own men.” Miller, his left lung penetrated by a bullet in the final moments of Pickett’s Charge, later said he owed his life to Pierce, among others, for helping to place him in an ambulance.⁴⁵

That fall, Pierce took a sick leave to recuperate from the effects of chronic diarrhea. He arrived in Rochester “quite unwell, the result of exposure in the field and arduous duty,” the *Union and Advertiser* reported.⁴⁶ And yet, he could consider himself fortunate. He had emerged from four major battles with only two minor wounds. But the ultimate measure of Pierce’s courage was yet to be taken, when his luck finally ran out.

It happened on Feb. 6, 1864, when the 108th New York, under Pierce’s command, was sent across the Rapidan River at Morton’s Ford with the rest of its division to “feel” the Confederate defenses on the other side. It was a reconnaissance in force, resulting in “a right smart skirmish,” as Porter described it.⁴⁷ The two other brigades of the division had already been deployed, when the 108th and the rest of the Second Brigade were sent forward in late afternoon to relieve other regiments.

Pierce was hit by a minie bullet in the head. Some initial reports suggested the wound was slight; Pierce himself sent a letter to his cousin Samuel saying “I am wounded, not dangerously.”⁴⁸

Then came the distressing details. Pierce was “shot in the left temple, about an inch from the left eye, with a minie ball, which lodged directly behind the eye, forcing it nearly out of its socket,” the *Evening Express* reported. “The wound is quite dangerous – inflammation of the brain being a possible consequence – and causes him great suffering. He is, however, in full possession of his faculties, and bears his suffering heroically.”

Corp. Truman Abrams of the 108th said the ball had struck “near the outer corner of the left eye, and causing it to protrude outward the size of a hen’s egg.” “He will probably be at home soon,” he added three days later. “We shall miss him much, for he is highly esteemed by every man of the regiment.”⁴⁹

Pierce arrived in Rochester on Feb. 13, after a 36-hour train ride. “He speaks of his condition and loss of his eyesight with perfect nonchalance,” the *Evening Express* reported. Pierce was “able to walk about, but was, of course, considerably fatigued on reaching home.” Eleven days later, a surgeon was “endeavoring to get rid of the useless member (left eye) by probing,” the *Union and Advertiser* reported. “The operation ... was followed by considerable pain.”⁵⁰

Surely Pierce’s Civil War career had reached an honorable conclusion. By this point many of the soldiers who had volunteered so eagerly, and fought so bravely, had seen enough. They knew that the odds were against them; that with Gen. Ulysses Grant about to assume overall command, the war was entering a deadly new phase. They would have willingly accepted the loss of a limb – or an eye – so they could return home with honor.⁵¹

Instead, on April 28 – against the advice of his friends—Pierce left for Virginia to rejoin his regiment.⁵² He arrived just in time to march with it into the Wilderness.

“I find that great confidence is reposed in Gen. Grant by both officers and men,” Pierce wrote to Porter’s father on May 3. “There is no enthusiasm – in fact I think that no Gen. will ever again be regarded as McCellan was – not even Mc himself should he be restored – yet there is a deep feeling of trust and confidence pervading the army....”

“It seems very good to be back with the boys once more.”⁵³

During the bloody weeks that followed, the Army of the Potomac hammered at Lee’s army in a relentless war of attrition. During the chaotic fighting on May 6 along the Orange Plank Road in the Wilderness, Col. Powers went down with a serious wound. Pierce was rallying the regiment when he was shot in the right hand.

He stayed with the regiment. Even Porter acknowledged that Pierce was “doing his duty nobly ... what a pity it is that his talk should so belie his actions.”⁵⁴ Pierce then led the 108th during Hancock’s famous May 12 assault on the salient at Spotsylvania Court House, where the fighting reached new depths of savagery.

“Surely no one will question the purpose of the Lt. Col. to fight whenever he can get a chance,” the *Union and Advertiser* reported on May 19. “He has shown a zeal in this respect that outdoes discretion if he has a regard for his physical condition.”

Later that year and into the following spring, with Lee cornered and under siege at Petersburg, Pierce again found himself in acting command of the brigade. So depleted were the veteran units – at times, the 108th had fewer than 100 men present for duty – that elements of 10 different regiments were under Pierce’s command.⁵⁵

In October 1864, he again suffered from chronic diarrhea. This bout was severe enough to confine him to bed with symptoms of dysentery and ulceration of the bowels, according to a surgeon's statement. However, by Jan. 31, 1865, he was "living very comfortably just at present – have a house 9 by 18 on the inside – 5 1/2 feet big – door, chairs, bed, stove etc. Besides it is papered with fancy wall paper ..."

He requested Chapin to send him "2 qts. N.E. Rum – 2 qts nice Brandy and 2 qts Gin. If Wadsworth has any cherry Bounce I want 2 qts of that also ..."

A review was scheduled for the next day, he added. "I shall have command of the 3rd Brig. – the bully Brig. of the Div. – bully I say – yes bully, for it contains the 108 N.Y. Vols – the Model Regt of the Div. I suppose I am a little prejudiced, but tomorrow for discipline drill and soldierly bearing I will turn out the 108 against the world."⁵⁶

Spoken like a proud father. And why not? Of all its commanding officers, only Pierce had been with the 108th from the start, and would still be with it when, at last, all the hardship and suffering was rewarded.

On March 29, 1865, Grant set his army in motion, reaching beyond the right end of the Confederate defenses near Petersburg to cut the rail lines supplying Lee's army. Lee attempted to counter this by dispatching a 10,000-man force to Five Forks. Its destruction on April 1 forced Lee to evacuate Petersburg and Richmond and retreat westward.

The race was on.

A new brigadier had replaced Pierce, who was now back in command of the 108th.⁵⁷ As Grant's army pursued, it was obvious the end was near. The fleeing Confederates left the roads strewn with abandoned gear; thousands surrendered when encircled by their relentless pursuers. It was a time for Union soldiers to reap glory and accolades – quickly, before the war was over!

On April 7, the pursuit reached the High Bridge – an enormous railroad span over the Appomattox River. The Confederates set the main span on fire, but a Maine regiment doused the flames on a smaller adjoining bridge, and reached the far bank.

When it came under attack, the 108th was sent to the rescue at the head of its brigade. "Its (108th's) colors were continually in advance of all others and were the first planted on a small fort at the west end of the bridge, and officers and men belonging to this regiment were the first at the ten pieces of artillery that were left by the enemy ..." Pierce wrote in his official report. "It is not intended to assert that this regiment captured the fort or the ten pieces of artillery, as the credit is due to the whole brigade; but simply that the colors of this regiment were the first over the bridge, and kept in the advance, and that the regiment was the first to reach the fort and guns."⁵⁸

Again, spoken like a proud father, and also like a savvy officer anxious to claim as much credit without stepping on any toes. If only the attempt was not so transparent!

With Lee's surrender on April 9, the war, in effect, was over.

Two months later, after the 108th had returned to Rochester and disbanded, Pierce was invited to meet its officers at the Osburn House at Main and North St. Paul streets. He had just been appointed colonel of veteran volunteers, and would soon accept a commission as 2nd lieutenant in the regular army. It was, after all, the life he loved.

The officers that evening gave him a watch and chain "as a token of our mutual regard for you as a gentleman, a true soldier and a kind commander."

Pierce bade them farewell, wishing "I could express in words one half that I feel." The value of any gift he received, he noted, was in large part determined by how much he valued the people giving it. "Coming from you, this watch and chain, of themselves valuable, will be esteemed by me as almost priceless.

"Three years of privation and danger in common have created between us a feeling that can never be obliterated," he added. "When a soldier sees others doing their duty bravely and manfully, enduring privation and hardship without a murmur or complaint, and heroically facing danger and death, it is impossible to prevent a mutual feeling of attachment and friendship springing up, that nothing else could produce."⁵⁹

If we wonder at the tenacity of the man, at his insistence on going back into battle, again and again, perhaps at least part of the explanation lies in these words. Perhaps it was the bond of brotherhood that only soldiers can know, forged in the danger of battle and in the drill and diversions of camp.

"The 108th exists no more," Pierce acknowledged, "but memories connected with it will remain as long as one of us have life."

In recognition of his war service, Pierce was brevetted a brigadier general of volunteers. This was primarily an honorary designation. Some 1,700 Union officers were brevetted brigadier or major generals, most of them near the end of the war. This abuse eventually led to abandonment of the practice.⁶⁰ So it is tempting not to give brevet rank much weight. But in this case, at least, let us reverse Pierce's rule about gifts, and consider the value of the soldier upon whom the "gift" was bestowed. Could anyone have deserved it more?

Pierce served with the 1st U.S. Infantry in New Orleans, Buffalo, the Dakotas, Arizona and California, and eventually was promoted to captain. From 1885 to 1888 he was agent in charge of the San Carlos Indian

Reservation in Arizona, where his initial lack of experience in dealing with the Apaches showed in the opening stages of Geronimo's uprising in 1885.⁶¹ However, he became "one of the best 'Indian men' we ever had," according to a highly decorated fellow officer, and he was later assigned to the Pine Ridge Reservation shortly after the massacre at Wounded Knee. Pierce died at the Presidio in San Francisco in 1896, from blood poisoning and internal injuries following a fall from the balcony of his home.⁶²

(Special thanks to Bill Haak, museum director, Gila County Historical Society, Globe, Ariz., for directing the author to information about Pierce at San Carlos.)

Bob Marcotte is a journalist for the *Democrat & Chronicle* and author of *Where They Fell: Stories of Rochester Area Soldiers in the Civil War*.

THE NEW REGIMENT!



The Government having agreed to pay Transients, returning before Sept. 30, 1862, BOUNTY, in addition to the other BOUNTIES, Grant \$100 at a time.

BOUNTY OF \$254!

ATTENTION, Citizens of Amherst YOU WILL BE A

WAR MEETING

At South Hill School House

On Wednesday Evening, 26th inst.

At half past 7 o'clock, to aid in recruiting

Capt. WHITING'S COMPANY

Of the second Maine County Regiment.

AND BOUNTY GOOD REASONS will attend the Meeting. BOUNTY will be granted. The attendance of every Patriotic is earnestly requested.

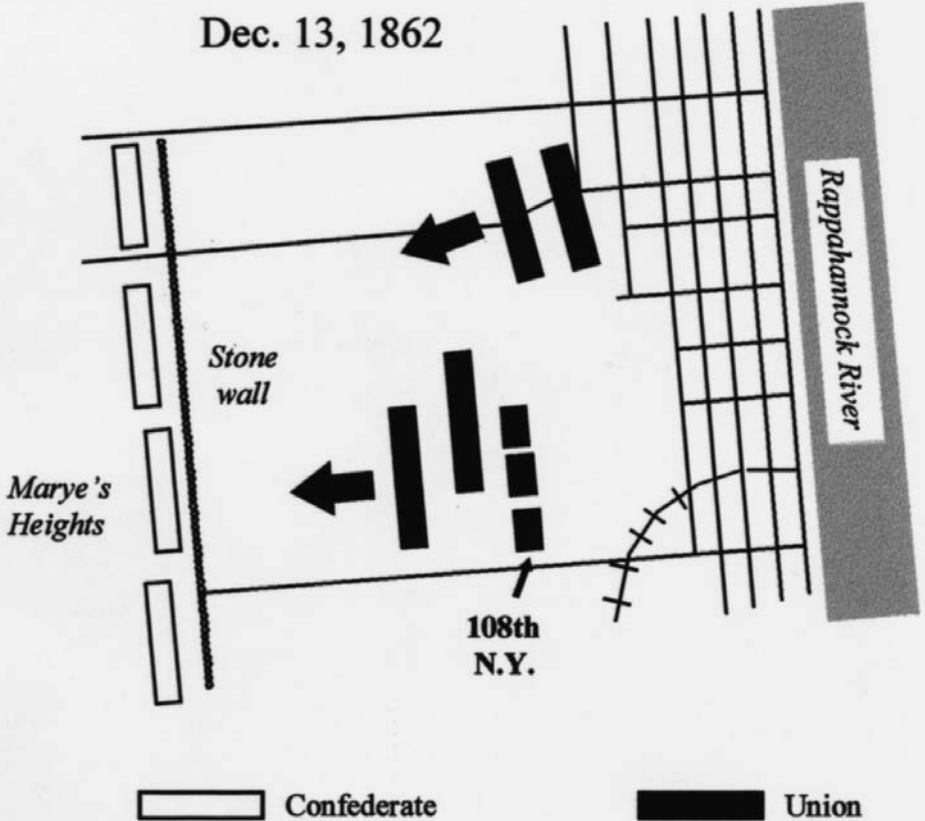
HEADQUARTERS, Tent on South East Corner of Court House Square.

Lieut. PORTER FARLEY. **Capt. A. N. WHITING.**

Amherst, N.H., 1862.

108th N.Y. at Fredericksburg

Dec. 13, 1862



The 108th N.Y. At Gettysburg

July 3, 1863

Bliss Farm ■

TRIMBLE
PETTIGREW

PICKETT

Emmitsburg Road

Cemetery Hill ↘

126th
N.Y.

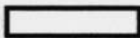
108th
N.Y.

Cemetery

The Angle

Ridge

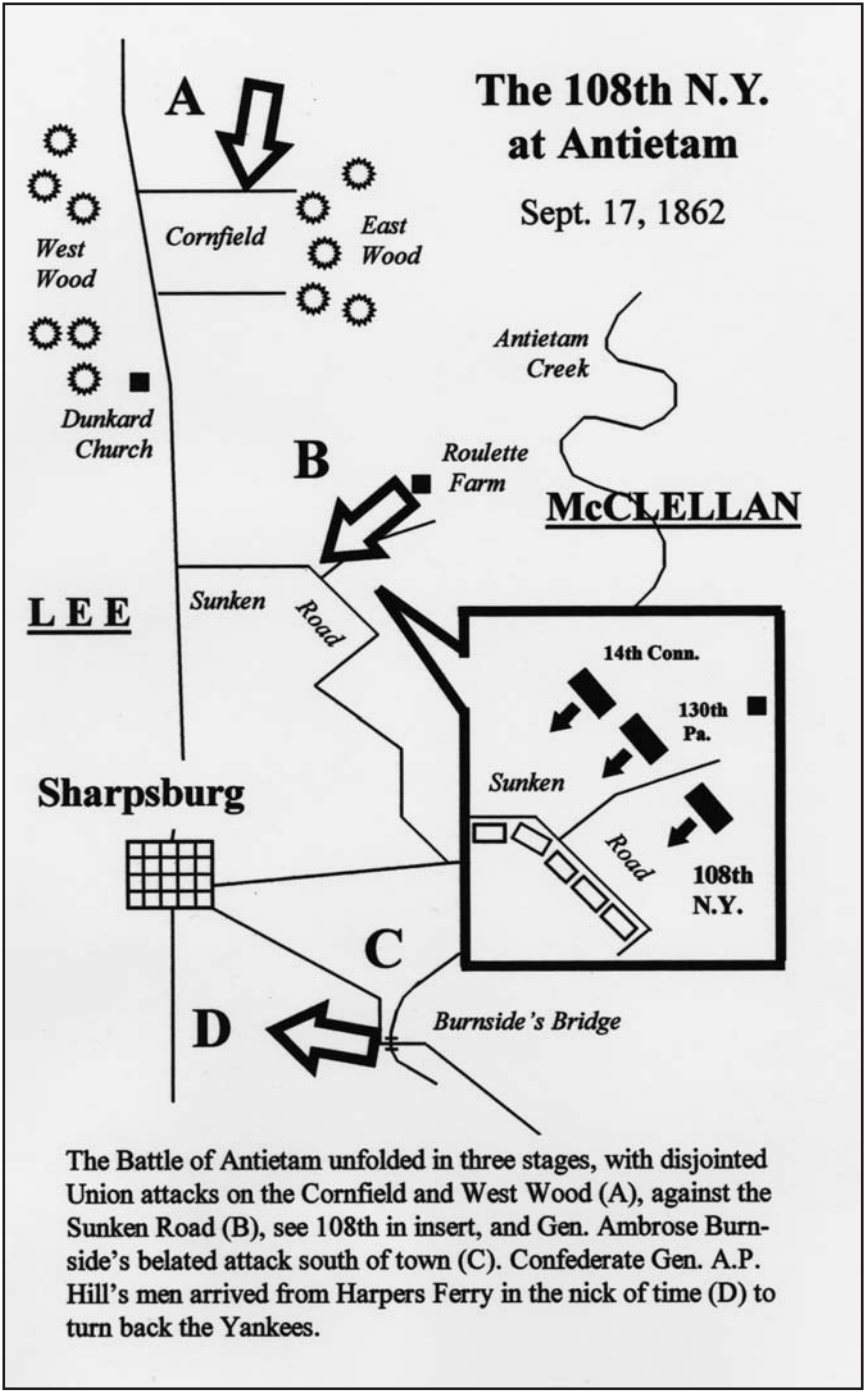
“Pickett’s Charge” is a misnomer: two other
Confederate divisions also attacked.



Confederate



Union



Endnotes

1. Washburn, George H., *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols. From 1862 to 1894*, E. R. Andrews, Rochester, N.Y., 1894, p. 191
2. In a Dec. 1, 1862, letter to a friend, Pierce wrote “Tonight I read the 21 chapter of Acts – one chapter per night and other portions of it in the day time.” “Civil War Letters of Francis Edwin Pierce of the 108th New York Volunteer Infantry,” *The Rochester Historical Society Publications*, Vol. XXII, Rochester Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y., 1944, p. 158. This volume includes an excellent overview of the war’s impact on Rochester, and illuminating letters and diary entries of several Rochester Civil War soldiers. (Pierce excerpts cited as Pierce below.)
3. Washburn, p. 191; the school is also referred to as the Rochester Training School, in Washburn, or the Military School in some newspaper articles.
4. Washburn, p. 191; *Rochester Evening Express* (Ev. Exp.), Sept. 8, 1862
5. *Rochester Union and Advertiser* (UA), June 9, 1862, page 2, column 1
6. *Rochester Daily Democrat and American* (D–Dem), July 14, 1862, 1:5; see Porter profile, Washburn, p. 301; UA, July 16, 1862, 2:5. Infantry regiments consisted of 10 companies of about 100 men each. Each company was commanded by captain. Each regiment was commanded by a colonel. Including additional staff, a regiment’s strength when newly mustered was just over 1,000 men. Within months, desertions, disease and casualties reduced the size of most regiments to fewer than half that number actually present for duty.
7. Camp Porter was along Cottage Street, on the opposite side of the river from Mt. Hope Cemetery. Brian Bennett, in *Sons of Old Monroe, A Regimental History of Patrick O’Rorke’s 140th New York Volunteer Infantry*, Morningside House Inc., Dayton, Ohio, 1992, maps the location on p. 56.
8. *Ev. Exp.*, Aug. 14, 1862

9. *UA*, Aug. 14, 1862, 2:3
10. see Palmer profile, Washburn, p. 188
11. Pierce, p. 152.
12. Two or more regiments were grouped in a brigade, the basic fighting unit in both armies. At Antietam, the 108th fought alongside two other rookie regiments – the 14th Connecticut and the 130th Pennsylvania – in Col. Dwight Morris' Brigade. Two or more brigades formed a division, two or more divisions a corps.
13. Pierce, p. 153
14. Bruce Catton, in *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1951, vividly describes the fighting here on pp. 291–297
15. Pierce, pp. 153–154
16. *William H. Skinner Civil War Letters and Records*, edited by Gordon Skinner, undated letter believed written September 1862 just after Antietam.
17. Palmer described the fighting in a letter, *D–Dem*, Sept. 26, 1862, 1:3; his official report is in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (OR), Bvt. Lt. Col. Robert N. Scott, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1880–1901, Series 1, Vol. XIX/1, pp. 334–335.
18. Samuel Porter letter to his father, Dec. 28, 1862, Porter family papers, University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections. Porter's letters from the front offer invaluable insights into the experiences of a Union officer.
19. Pierce, p. 154
20. The regiment's casualty figures are taken from Phisterer, Frederick, *New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1865*, J.B. Lyon Co., Albany, 1912. The 108th's battles are listed in Vol. 4, p. 3269.

21. *Ev. Exp.*, Sept. 26, 1862; this is an apparent reference to the Sunken Road – known thereafter as Bloody Lane – where Confederate dead were piled three deep in places.

22. Pierce, p. 156

23. *Ibid.*, p. 165

24. Porter's letter to father, Dec. 20, Porter family papers, UR. Porter worried he would be in a difficult spot if he became known as the officer who was "jumped." He accused Pierce of "deceit" and swore he would never respect him again. In later letters, however, he assured his father he would do his best to get along with Pierce anyway, writing – on Jan. 6 – "It never was in my nature to nurse a quarrel even if I did despise a man's actions."

25. Pierce, p. 160

26. Letter to father, Dec. 20, 1862.

27. Pierce, p. 162

28. *Ev. Exp.*, Jan. 3, 1863

29. Pierce, p. 162

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169

31. *Ibid.*, p. 161

32. *Ev. Exp.*, Jan. 3, 1863

33. Pierce, pp. 161–162

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–166

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–168

36. Perkins, Dexter, "Rochester One Hundred Years Ago," *Rochester History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1939, p. 18; letter to father May 28. Copperhead was the name given to anti-war Democrats.

37. Boatner, Mark M. III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, David McKay Co., Inc., New York, 1959, p. 624
38. The 108th also suffered casualties in fierce skirmishing near the Bliss Farm. See Washburn, p. 331.
39. *Ev. Exp.* July 14, 1863
40. Washburn, p. 219
41. Lynch, Richard E., *Winfield Scott: A Biography of Scottsdale's Founder*, The City of Scottsdale, Ariz., 1978, p. 25
42. *Ev. Exp.* July 14, 1863; *Ev. Exp.* July 13, 1863
43. *OR* 1, XXVII/1, p. 466; Pierce, p. 169
44. Pierce, p. 171
45. *Ibid.*, p. 172; Washburn, pp. 290–291
46. Pierce's military records, from the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., show at least two other sick leaves because of this common affliction of Civil War soldiers: in April 1863, and October 1864. *UA*, Oct. 6, 1863, 2:2
47. Letter to father, Feb. 1864
48. *UA*, Feb. 9, 1864, 2:2
49. *Ev. Exp.*, Feb. 12, based on letter from Sgt. John Jewell. In its Feb. 15 edition, the newspaper reported that the bullet, which had passed under the eye and lodged beneath the bridge of Pierce's nose, was extracted "a few minutes after the wound was received." *D-Dem*, Feb. 13, 1864, 3:1; *D-Dem*, Feb. 16, 1864, 1:2. A surgeon's report, dated Feb. 9, 1864, described the gunshot wound "in the anterior portion of the left temple...The ball passed obliquely forward protruding the left eye about one inch." The report is part of Pierce's military records, National Archives and Records Administration.
50. *Ev. Exp.* Feb. 15, 1864; *UA*, Feb. 25, 1864, 2:3

51. The letters of Capt. Morris Brown, 126th New York, illustrate this. When he first enlisted out of Hamilton College, Brown couldn't wait to fight the Rebels. At Gettysburg, he exulted after leading his company behind the attacking Confederates the third day, capturing 50 prisoners and taking a flag. (He eventually was awarded the Medal of Honor.) By the following spring, however, he was no longer "'spiling for a fight' as I used to be ... The more battles a person gets in, the more he dreads the next." A month later, crouched in the trenches at Cold Harbor, he added, "If I get out of this place alive – even though I may lose an arm or a leg I will be a fortunate man." He was killed outside Petersburg, Va., while trying to rally his regiment on June 22, 1864. Brown's letters are filed at Hamilton College. They can also be traced in Wayne Mahood's history of the 126th, *Written in Blood*, Longstreet House, Highstown, N.J., 1997.

52. *UA*, April 29, 1864, 2:1

53. Porter family papers

54. Letter to mother, May 13, 1864

55. *OR* 1, Vol. XLII/1, p. 118

56. Pierce, pp. 172–173

57. It was not unusual for colonels in command of regiments to be bounced back and forth in this manner. For example, a division commander takes sick leave. His most senior brigade commander is bumped up to replace him. The most senior colonel commanding a regiment in the brigade then becomes acting brigadier. When the division commander returns after a few weeks, the brigade commander returns to his previous post, and the regimental commander is bumped back as well.

58. *OR* 1, Vol. XLVI/1, pp. 772–773

59. *UA*, June 15, 1865, 2:3

60. Boatner, p. 84

61. Washburn, pp. 191–192; see Thrapp, Dan, *The Conquest of Apacheria*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1967, pp. 303–313 for an account of how Pierce was persuaded to pigeonhole a message that, if passed on to superiors, might have prevented the uprising.

62. The praise is attributed to Thomas Cruse, a West Point graduate, brigadier general and veteran Indian fighter who received the Medal of Honor. See Thrapp, Dan, *Al Sieber: Chief of Scouts*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1964, footnote 35, p. 335. See pp. 325–331 for a description of a gunfight that broke out when Pierce and Sieber attempted to disarm Apache scouts. See *UA*, Nov. 6, 1896, 8:1 for Pierce's obituary. There is no mention he was ever married.

Back cover: Union soldiers wade Antietam Creek on the morning of September 17, 1862. When the rookie soldiers of the 108th New York Volunteer Infantry from Monroe County came to the stream, many paused to take off their shoes and socks, and roll up their pants legs. They did not know what an awful ordeal lay just ahead, in front of the Sunken Road. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

