



Painting by Steven J. L. ...

Company D, 132nd New York Infantry and the Civil War in Eastern North Carolina

By Donald E. Collins

In March 2013, 140 Tuscarora Indians traveled from their reservation near Niagara Falls, New York, to eastern North Carolina, the land from which their ancestors had been exiled precisely 300 years earlier. In 1711, the tribe had begun a war in retaliation for the loss of their lands to European settlers and the selling of tribal members into slavery. The war ended in capture, enslavement, and forced removal from their traditional homes in North Carolina to New York, where they became the sixth nation of the Iroquois Confederacy, along with the Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga. Tuscarora memory runs deep, and even today, the exiled tribe regards North Carolina as its true “home.” The Civil War gave a small number of their descendants the opportunity to return to fight on their former homeland.

The return would not be easy. During their lifetime, or those of their parents, the Tuscarora and their Iroquois relatives in New York State had experienced forced removal from their homes by the Federal government and discrimination by state government and the public. In 1861, when the war began, New York, unlike neighboring Pennsylvania, forbade military service by Native Americans. The men of the Iroquois Confederation in that state had to fight for the right to serve.

Much of the success in the campaign to gain acceptance in the military was due to the efforts of Cornelius Cusick, and to a much lesser extent, to Isaac Newton Parker, both from leading members of two Iroquois tribes; Parker a Seneca, and Cusick a Tuscarora. Parker had a troubled life and never rose to the prestige of Cusick. He would serve in Cusick's company as a third sergeant and color bearer. His brother Ely gained fame as a brevet brigadier general on the staff of Ulysses S. Grant, and was present at the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox where he wrote the surrender document signed by Confederate General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Court House in April 1865.

Cornelius Cusick was a sachem, or chief, of the Tuscarora tribe. He and his family were among the educated, intellectual and military elite of the tribe. His grandfather Nichol Cusick had served as a bodyguard and interpreter for General Marquis de Lafayette during the American Revolution; while an uncle, David Cusick was author of *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*, published in 1828. Following the Civil War, Cornelius would serve as a captain fighting against the Sioux in the West. For that he would be denied burial on the Tuscarora reservation. As an educated man who spoke eight Indian languages, he was appointed special assistant in the Department of American Archaeology and Ethnology at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Although his Civil War service was as a first lieutenant of Company D of the 132nd New York Infantry, he was at times referred to as its actual leader because of his recruitment activities and leadership within the unit. Because of this, Company D was often called the Tuscarora Company, and occasionally as Cusick's company.¹

Despite its reputation as an Indian company, Native Americans were in fact a minority within the unit. In addition to 25 men from the Iroquois reservations of western New York, it included native-born Americans and naturalized citizens of German birth recruited at Buffalo, Brooklyn, Lewiston, Manhattan, and Syracuse. After receiving assurances of a \$25 bounty, a \$2 premium, and a month's pay of \$13 for enlisting, the 25 Indians of Company D, and their regiment, were sent to Camp Scrogg in New York City where they received training. On Sept. 28, 1862, the regiment was sent to Washington, D.C., where it was mustered into service for three years. They were then sent to Camp Hoffman, in Suffolk, Virginia, where they spent twenty-seven days (October 4-31, 1862) constructing defensive works, reconnaissance, and doing outpost duty. The regiment saw limited action at Zuni, where it was held in reserve, at Franklin, and an over-night reconnaissance to the Blackwater River.² Despite the minor role played in those engagements, the Tuscarora took pride in their first armed contact with the enemy. John Titus, an Indian member of the Tuscarora Company, wrote: "*I hope [we] will take another good fight before the month [is] up. I'll fight the Rebels as long as I live ...*"³

On December 28, the regiment marched 55 miles to the Chowan River in North Carolina where it boarded transports for New Bern, NC, which had been captured by General Ambrose Burnside in March 1862. Ironically, the Iroquois soldiers found

¹ Laurence M. Hauptman, *Between Two Fires; American Indians in the Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 166-167.

² *Ibid*, pp. 166-168.

³ New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center. 132nd Infantry Regiment, NY Volunteer Infantry. <https://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/132ndInf/132ndInfMain.htm>. Civil War Newspaper Clippings. "*Letter from an Indian Volunteer.*" (Hereafter cited as: 132nd New York Infantry Newspaper Clippings.)

themselves in the precise area from which the Tuscarora had been removed 150 years earlier. A nearby settlement to the west of New Bern was even named Tuscarora. Service in New Bern had a pleasant side. The camp included a bowling alley and theater, and military activities were occasionally broken up by parties and other entertainment. Whiskey rations, referred to as an “army gallon,” were dispensed to the troops.⁴

Until the final months of the war, much of eastern North Carolina remained contested territory in which the countryside was effectively controlled by neither Federal nor Confederate armies. As a result, the 132nd was called upon to participate in reconnaissance missions of many miles deep into contested territory. Years later, in 1896, Colonel P.J. Claassen recalled one such mission. Although he failed to disclose the location or date of the incident, it is evident that it took place during the regiment’s sojourn in New Bern.

The 132nd, accompanied by a detachment of cavalry, was ordered to march to and cross a certain creek. However, upon arrival at the stream, they found that it had been swollen by heavy rains, and a masked Confederate battery on the opposite side made it impossible to make an improvised bridge from felling trees without receiving unacceptable casualties. Claassen ordered Lieutenant Cusick to send one of his Indians, known only as “Big Ike”, who was known to be a “famous shot.” With his telescopic rifle, Ike picked off every man who showed himself near the Rebel guns until the Rebel force was depleted so they could not operate their guns. This “unusual slaughter of brave foes,” enabled the 132nd to cross the stream and continue its reconnaissance.⁵ An unsubstantiated rumor of scalping appeared soon after the completion of the expedition.

Portions of a letter from a Union officer in New Bern, written to his father in New York, soon appeared in a home-state newspaper and was repeated in the *New York Church Journal* of June 1863. Included was a statement that “*There are two companies of Indians in Colonel [Peter J.] Claassen’s Regiment, and every Rebel they caught yesterday was killed and scalped, and it served the devils right.*” The colonel angrily denied the allegation in a letter to the *Journal*, and demanded that the writer be sought out and punished. However, no further action appears to have been taken, and the affair quietly disappeared.⁶

THE BACHELOR’S CREEK OUTPOST

The comforts of camp life in New Bern were replaced in May 1863 by transfer to outpost duty eight miles to the west along Bachelor’s Creek, the western-most defensive line of the Federal headquarters town. West of the creek was a no man’s land where elements of both opposing armies operated freely. Until that date, the outpost between Union-occupied New Bern and Confederate-held Kinston some thirty miles to the west had been the duty of the 58th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment under of its popular and aggressive commander, Colonel John Richter Jones.

The transfer of the 132nd to outpost duty came about as the result of a successful May 22nd attack on the Southern outpost at Gum Swamp, a few miles east of Kinston. Jones’ poorly conducted return to the Federal outpost cost him his life. A Confederate force

⁴ Hauptman, *Between Two Fires*, pp. 169-70.

⁵ New York State Historian. *Annual Report*. (State Printers, Albany and New York, 1897), Vol. 2, pp. 129-130. (Hereafter cited as: *State Historian*.)

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 129.

under General Daniel H. Hill followed and caught the outpost unaware of his pursuit. A fight took place at the Neuse Road Bridge. While rallying his men for a charge, Jones was shot through the heart by a Southern sharpshooter. On May 23rd, the 132nd, with a battery of the Third New York Artillery, and a squadron of the Third New York Cavalry, was ordered to move immediately to his support.

The Tuscarora Company, along with Company I and a half-section of artillery, was ordered to keep communications with New Bern open while the remainder of the support-force continued toward the scene of the fighting at the Neuse Road bridge. Before Claassen and the 132nd reached the scene of the fighting, they encountered men of the 58th Pennsylvania retreating toward New Bern. He ordered them to return to the skirmish area with his fresh troops. When within easy supporting distance of the 58th, Claassen encamped for the night. However, upon receiving information of enemy movement, companies C and G were ordered to move to the bridge crossing. Arriving at 1:00 a.m., the two companies occupied the rifle pits guarding the bridge, but found nothing of interest. The next morning, a squad of sixteen men reconnoitered beyond the creek for three miles and determined that the enemy had withdrawn toward Kinston. Three prisoners were taken. During the march to Bachelor's Creek, news had reached Claassen that Colonel Jones had been killed. This placed him, as senior officer, in command.⁷ On his return to New Bern, he and his 132nd New York were ordered to replace Jones and the 58th Pennsylvania on outpost duty along the Bachelor's Creek line.

The New York regiment arrived at its new post on May 26, 1863. As the westernmost line of defense between Union New Bern and Confederate Kinston, the task of the 132nd for the next two years would be to keep an eye on Confederate activity that might threaten the Union headquarters town. Picket, reconnaissance, and scouting became the primary duties of the New York regiment. Another duty involved intercepting Confederate deserters and retrieving their families. On one occasion, the Tuscarora Company took part in an expedition to nearby Trenton to retrieve four families of Southern deserters. These often enlisted in the First and Second North Carolina Union regiments. In December 1863, Company F of the Second NCUV joined soldiers of the 132nd on picket duty at Beech Grove, the northernmost station along the Bachelor's Creek line.

Sergeant Isaac Newton "Newt" Parker, a Seneca Indian in the Tuscarora Company, described the outpost in an August 15, 1863 letter to his sister-in-law: "*We hold a front here of nigh seven miles running at right angles to the R. R. and the R. R. being the center of our line. Then there are three miles upon each flank that are picketed by cavalry. But in the two recent expeditions from here, the cavalry were drawn off and then we picketed those six miles, making nigh 13 miles of front and me, not having now 600 effective men ... Our camp is on the south bank of Bachelor's Creek emptying in the Neuse and on the side of the track.*"⁸

To be continued ...

⁷ *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies; Part II, Records of Events.* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1994-2001), Vol. 46, pp. 716, 740, 743. (Hereafter cited as *Records of Events.*)

⁸ Laurence M. Hauptman, ed., *A Seneca Indian in the Union Army; the Civil War Letters of Sergeant Isaac Newton Parker, 1861-1865* (Bird Street Press, 1995), p. 81.