



Painting by Steven McCaffrey - "Kirkland's Brigade at Wise's Forks" reproduced with kind permission

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

Parker, in the same letter, expressed confidence that the nature of the land made an attack by the enemy on the outpost difficult, if not nearly impossible. *"We are considered bold by holding so large a front ... and lively will be the time whenever we will be attacked, but that is rather doubtful, for it is difficult of access to our camp or*

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.

fort, being much surrounded by swamps and heavy pine wood lands for miles around, so much so that heavy artillery can't come in, and hard for infantry to penetrate in so on the whole we are right well fortified by the country itself." Although not mentioned by Parker, the most formidable obstacle to attackers was Bachelor's Creek itself, which formed the primary basis for the location of the Federal outer defenses of New Bern. According to one 132nd soldier, the creek *"is a narrow, marshy bordered and some places impassable little stream ... For one party or the other to cross in small bodies is most certain capture or death. Along the outer banks of the creek our pickets are posted."*⁹

This feeling, plus *"eight months of uninterrupted quiet ..., lulled the department into a full-spirit of security."*¹⁰ There was little reason to expect the impending full-scale assault on New Bern and the outpost that came early the following morning. On January 31, *"our usual scouting party had returned with the information: no enemy, and we all had laid ourselves down to sleep,"* only to be awakened *"when on the air [came] the boom of cannon and cracking."*¹¹ What the letter-writer heard was the opening salvo of the Battle of Bachelor's Creek and a full-scale attack on New Bern by an army of fifteen thousand men under the overall command of General George Pickett.

Pickett's plan to retake New Bern called for a three-pronged attack. Colonel James Dearing's brigade was ordered to move on Fort Anderson across the Neuse from New Bern; while General Seth Barton, with Ransom's and Terry's brigades, were ordered to advance through Pollocksville on the south side of the Trent River, intercept communications with Beaufort, and construct batteries along the river below the Trent. Pickett himself joined the six thousand-man center column, under the immediate command of General Robert Hoke, which moved directly east between the two rivers towards New Bern. The only thing that stood between the Confederate capture of New Bern was Bachelor's Creek and the thinly stretched line of the 132nd New York Regiment along its opposite bank.¹²

In order to maintain the element of surprise, Hoke's column encamped without fires at a point two miles from the Bachelor's Creek outposts. At 1:00 a.m. the Southern army awakened. Within an hour, it began moving along the Neuse Road toward the bridge over Bachelor's Creek, which, if crossed successfully, would put them at New Bern before sunrise. At 2:30 a.m., the first outposts of the 132nd New York were quietly taken. Pickets at a third outpost, however, returned fire and escaped to the bridge in time to warn the small nine-man picket reserve post stationed there. The warning enabled them to remove the seventy-five feet of slats which had been loosely placed to slow or prevent crossing by the oncoming rebel army.¹³

The small federal outpost, commanded by Lieutenant Abram Haring, consisted of a blockhouse, and breastworks on both sides of the road that crossed the bridge. Also in favor of the small Union garrison was a drizzling rain, the darkness of night, and later by a dense morning fog that kept Hoke ignorant of the number of men opposing him across the bridge. Initially, the Confederates attempted to charge across the slatless bridge three times, all being repulsed by Haring's men. A number of Hoke's men,

⁹ 132nd New York Infantry Newspaper Clippings.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lee W. Sherrill, Jr., *The 21st North Carolina Infantry: A Civil War History, with a Roster of Officers.* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), pp. 296-297.

¹³ Ibid., p. 298.

wounded on the bridge, were seen falling into the creek. Failing to move his men over the bridge, Hoke placed them along the creek to keep up a steady fire on his enemy on the other side.¹⁴

The situation remained static for an hour and a half. The first support for the New Yorker soldiers to arrive at the bridge was Captain Charles G. Smith, the regimental general officer of the day, who had been sent by Claassen to learn the situation. He was escorted by four cavalymen who he immediately placed behind the breastworks. Smith noted that the Confederates were “yelling like devils,” and, “feeling conscious of their strength, had advanced to the edge of the creek in considerable numbers, in front and on the right, and were trying to hit wherever they saw a head or heard a noise.” The rebel fire at the time was severe, and their artillery opened fire with shell and canister from four Napoleons located just beyond the ruins of Rigdon Richardson’s house. The Southern cannon had the range, but generally fired too high.¹⁵ Federal sharpshooters, firing from the blockhouse, forced the rebel artillery to move several times.

Just as Haring’s men were firing their last rounds of ammunition, Company D arrived at the bridge. They immediately “took position at the breastworks and deployed along the creek to the left, firing with great spirit, holding the enemy in check, and apparently doing considerable execution, as the rebel fire slackened for a few minutes.” The *North Carolina Times*, the army’s occupation newspaper in New Bern, stressed the role of the Native American element of the company in relating details of the battle at the bridge. “The company numbers in its ranks thirty Indians of the Tuscarora tribe, with Lt. Cusick, himself a chief of the Tuscaroras taking a leading part. The native impetuosity of the red man, in all it’s wouted [sic] violence burst forth, in well nigh uncontrollable fury. Onward they pressed amid a deluge of bullets [...] the gallant [company commander Thomas B.] Green urging [them] ... on with dauntless bravery, twice were they driven back by the surging columns of the enemy and twice did they advance again to the attack. As if impelled by super human energy they charged upon the reel ranks, and again were compelled to retire, the voice of Green ringing loud above the clash of battle in appeals to his men with undiminished courage and heroism.”¹⁶

The arrival of the Tuscarora Company (D) was soon followed by companies E and G, commanded respectively by Captain Peter S. Geraty and First Lieutenant Joseph A. Gearing. These were immediately deployed to the right of the bridge. At 5:00 a.m., Major John B. Honstain was sent by Claassen to assume command. The men at the bridge were suffering heavy losses. Lieutenant William Ryan of Company G fell seriously wounded while attempting to “dislodge an enemy body from an advantageous point the enemy had gained.” Lieutenant Gearing received a serious wound on the side of his face fracturing his jaw. Around 9:00 a.m., quartermaster Lieutenant Arnold Zenetti was killed instantly by a shot in his forehead while passing out ammunition.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series 1, Volume 33, p. 74. (Hereafter cited as OR.)

¹⁶ *New Bern [NC] Times* article, undated, in scrapbook. In: William Howard Hooker Collection: George H. Hitchcock Papers (#472-006), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. (Hereafter cited as *Scrapbook*, Hooker Collection.)

¹⁷ Ibid.; Worman, Ed, 132nd *New York Casualties at Bachelor’s Creek, North Carolina on February 1, 1864*. 2016. 14 pages.

By this time, the Neuse Road bridge defenders had frustrated Pickett's and Hoke's move toward New Bern for six hours. The delay came to an end when General Hoke sent his men to fell trees across the creek at other points to serve as make-shift bridges. Once done, he sent two regiments under Colonel John T. Mercer of the 21st Georgia across the stream to move on the Federal flank and rear, while he (Hoke) repaired the bridge under fire and crossed over the remainder of his command.¹⁸ These moves were accomplished by 9:00 a.m., when Hoke moved his men across the creek and down the Neuse road, and down the railroad track. With the Confederates pressing on three sides, Colonel Claassen sent out word for a general retreat. He ordered the outpost camp burned, including both military and personal possessions of the regiment's soldiers. For the individual soldier, the latter was difficult to witness as it included everything in their tents, including their monthly pay. To allow men to visit the camp to retrieve possessions would have meant certain capture. Claassen himself remained at the camp until he saw the gleam of Confederate bayonets in the woods. There was confusion in following the retreat orders due to mistakes over which roads to take and the deaths of one or more couriers.¹⁹

The men at the bridge had lost heavily by the time of the Confederate surge. By the time of the order to retreat, Captain Green's Tuscarora Company was engaged at other localities, leaving Lt. Haring in command of the bridge and breastworks. With the Confederates crossing the bridge, and coming at Haring and his men from the rear with fixed bayonets, he realized it was "madness" to engage the avalanche of rebels and escaped by charging through the oncoming enemy. Fourteen men of the three companies defending the bridge were captured and would die in captivity. The retreat was general, with Confederates streaming down the railroad, Trent and Neuse roads, and pushing the Federals from the roads into the woods, the 132nd New York found itself again behind the breastworks in New Bern by 5:00 p.m. The Tuscarora Company lost five men at the bridge and during the retreat. All would die as prisoners of war.²⁰

The battle and retreat from Bachelor's Creek cost the outpost defenders heavily: 326 killed, wounded and/or captured. Companies C, D, and G, which had carried the brunt of the battle at the Neuse Bridge suffered two killed, three wounded, and thirty-two missing (captured?). The defense at the bridge had delayed Pickett and Hoke by six hours. Pickett and Hoke waited on the outskirts of New Bern until February 4, then withdrew without taking the town. Pickett blamed the Confederate defeat on General Seth Barton, who had failed to carry out his part of the plan. In all likelihood, the failure to take New Bern was the loss of six hours caused by the 132nd's defense at the Neuse Road bridge. But for that, the Confederates would have surprised the Union forces in New Bern, giving them little time in which to defend the superior Confederate army.

MINE DISASTER, MAY 26, 1864

On February 5, 1864, the 132nd returned to outpost duty at Bachelor's Creek, where it experienced a temporary period of calm. That calm was broken by an accidental explosion that brought more casualties in a split second than the regiment normally experienced during any single combat action. On May 29, 1864, Lieutenant and

¹⁸ Sherrill, *21st North Carolina*, pp. 298-299.

¹⁹ OR, Series 1, volume 33, p. 63.

²⁰ Worman, *132nd New York casualties*; Scrapbook, Hooker Collection; OR, Series 1, Volume 33, p. 65.

Tuscarora chief Cornelius Cusick wrote to the editor of the Niagara County *Intelligencer* of an accident in which “35 [of the locally recruited New York regiment] were instantly killed and 32 mortally injured.”

The incident Cusick described took place three days earlier, on May 26, when at 4:00 p.m. the military train from New Bern rolled into the outpost. The station was located at Bachelor’s Creek adjacent to the camp of the 132nd New York Regiment. The platform was crowded with Negro contraband and soldiers from the 132nd New York, 12th New York Cavalry, and 158th New York. Some were waiting to unload the train and others to hear news from the outside world. All were ignorant of the fact that four wooden barrels, each filled with 250 pounds of powder, were on board. They were the last of thirteen torpedoes, or mines, sent from New Bern to be placed in the Neuse River for protection against a Confederate ironclad known to be under construction upriver in Kinston.

When the train arrived, a Lieutenant Jones, who was in command of the unloading detail, failed to inform his men of the barrels’ contents, and carelessly left them unguarded while he went to consult with Colonel Claassen. The regimental quartermaster-sergeant assumed the barrels to be supplies and ordered them removed from the train. He personally rolled the first one safely onto the platform. When the second was unloaded, it struck a hair-spring trigger and the four torpedoes exploded almost simultaneously, with a concussion that could be heard eight miles away in New Bern, and 20 miles distant in Confederate Kinston.²¹

In an instant, the commissary building, the one hundred feet long loading platform, and a ninety feet high signal tower, all of log construction, were blown into splinters. The train was covered with “blood and gore,” but otherwise undamaged. Many at the station were blown into fragments. “*Heads, bodies, and limbs were scattered for a quarter of a mile around, and in many instances it was found impossible to recognize the remains of the victims.*” Many of those killed were so mutilated and dismembered as to be “*unrecognizable to their dearest friends.*” Soldiers moved from spot to spot seeking familiar tokens to recognize body parts that had once been a comrade. The quartermaster sergeant who unloaded the first barrel was identified by his ring on his dismembered arm. Three wooden hardtack boxes were filled with body fragments. The dead were buried in the outpost cemetery. Forty of the wounded were taken to New Bern on a platform car covered with straw.²²

Estimates of the dead and wounded varied. Some were listed simply as missing, as their remains were unidentifiable. The 132nd New York suffered the most. Cusick, as noted above, reported 35 killed instantly and 32 mortally injured; the New Bern occupation paper estimated 40 killed and 17 wounded. Casualties were also suffered by the 158th New York Infantry, the 12th New York Cavalry, and the Second North Carolina (white) Union Infantry Regiment. In addition to military deaths, 20 to 25 contraband were estimated to have been among the dead and wounded. These figures do not include those that later died of their wounds.²³

²¹ Derby, W. P., *Bearing Arms in the Twenty-Seventh Massachusetts Regiment of Volunteer Infantry During the Civil War, 861-1865*. (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1883), pp. 436-37.

²² 132nd New York Infantry Newspaper Clippings; Scrapbook, Hooker Collection.

²³ Derby, *Bearing Arms*, p. 436.

THE FIGHT AT JACKSON'S MILLS, JULY 1864

By June 20, the men along the Bachelor's Creek line were sufficiently recovered to take to the field. Outpost commander Claassen received orders from the commanding general in New Bern to move with a portion of his command on Confederate outposts at Jackson's Mills and at Wise's Forks, three and five miles respectively from Kinston. If those outposts were successfully taken, they were to move on the rebel town itself and destroy ironclad *CSS Neuse* then under construction. For the expedition, he selected men from his own 132nd New York Infantry, the Fifteenth Connecticut Infantry, two batteries with four 2-inch guns from the Third New York Artillery, and two companies from the Twelfth New York Cavalry, for a total force of approximately nine hundred men.

Claassen's strategy called for a three-pronged attack. The Tuscarora and two other companies (I and K) of his own 132nd Infantry, led by Captain Thomas Green, were to move out early, take back-roads to avoid detection, and take the Confederate outpost at Jackson's Mills where a bridge crossed Southwest Creek. If taken, this was expected to cut off any enemy retreat from the attack on Wise's Forks by the main column under Colonel Claassen via the Dover road, and another led by Lt. Col. George Hitchcock, attacking by way of the Neuse road. All three columns were to commence their attacks at precisely 10:00 p.m. on June 21, 1864. The greatest number of men was devoted to the works at Wise's Forks, as it was believed to be the stronger of the two objectives. Once reunited, the three Union forces could determine the feasibility of moving on to take Kinston.

The plan to take Wise's Forks and Jackson's Mills worked to perfection. On June 20, at five p.m. the three companies under Capt. Green left camp at Bachelor's Creek guided by a local Unionist named Bryan who took them via back-roads and swamps to a point near Jackson's Mill where they would hide until the agreed upon hour of attack. Lt. Cusick, the highly literate Tuscaroran, described this tortuous aspect of the affair in great detail in an August 16, 1896 article for the *Albany (NY) Argus*: "*The march to this point was a most laborious one, being over tortuous by-paths, through thick jungles, interlaced with brier-wood vines, and frequently having to wade waist-deep through many swamps, the water of which was covered with green and black sticky scum, and infested by snakes and other poisonous reptiles – not considering the cloud of pestiferous gnats, mosquitoes and other insects that actually subsisted on the men during the wearisome march to Jackson's Mills.*"²⁴ Having reached a point from which the objective could be attacked, Green's column remained hidden in a cornfield to await the designated hour.

The two columns under Claassen and Hitchcock waited until 5:00 a.m. the following day, June 21, to leave the Bachelor's Creek camp since their march took more direct and established roads toward to Wise's Forks. Both met unexpectedly light resistance. Claassen first encountered Confederate pickets on the Dover road fourteen miles from Kinston, while Hitchcock met them first when nine miles from the rebel town along the Neuse road. The attack on the pickets began at precisely 10:00 p.m. as previously arranged and a running skirmish took place. Along the Neuse road, rebel cavalry arrived in the face of Hitchcock's men. Succeeding posts were taken with little difficulty, causing little delay in moving toward the main target of Wyse's Forks. On the Dover

²⁴ *Albany (NY) Argus*, clipping dated August 16, 1896. In: Scrapbook, Hooker Collection.

road, when Claassen sent his main force against the works at Wise's Forks, the enemy broke and fled in such haste as to leave behind muskets and meal "*to be destroyed or gobbled up by the audacious Yankees.*"²⁵

Two hours before the attack of the main column on the Wyse's Forks outpost, Green struck his target at Jackson's Mills. Cusick best described the event in his article for the *Albany Argus*:

"A flanking position having been taken, the captain (Green) awaited signal shots from the main center column, which had been designed to attack the enemy's outpost camp. Hearing none, and the hour for his continued march in the direction of the Mills and attempt the capture of the Confederate guard stationed there having arrived, the cornfield was left...

After a march of half an hour, the column found itself within 200 yards from the Mills, where it was halted, Captain Green, in an undertone, his voice just above a whisper, said, "Corneal," meaning Lieutenant Cusick, 'you continue in full charge of our company, as you have been during the day; proceed with it as vanguard about 50 yards in advance of the other two companies; fix bayonets; advance quickly, but quietly; if challenged, halt, and reply, 'friends!', threaten the sentinel with instant death if he gives an alarm, or makes any noise. If successful, disarm the sentinel as quickly as possible; continue your threats in a whisper, but distinctly.

A few moment's [sic] march brought the vanguard within a few yards of an object standing in the middle of the road. It proved to be a soldier on post nearly 200 yards from the main guard, which occupied works 100 yards beyond the mills. The sentinel was approached; challenge was given by him; the instructions of Captain Green were fully, successfully and happily carried out...

Capt. Green's flanking column completely surprised the main guard at Jackson's Mills, ... not a shot was fired, all quietly and peaceably surrendered.

The works found were in the character of entrenchments and rifle-pits and were speedily manned for defense. The small command was snugly ensconced and the Tuscarora or Iroquois company under Lt. Cusick posted several yards in the rear of the works and in the direction of Kinston. The bridge at the Mills was partly dismantled of its planking to prevent the crossing simultaneously by large bodies of men. The attack of the enemy either in front or in rear, was quietly awaited by Capt. Green.

Shortly after these dispositions were made a mounted courier came dashing along from Kinston. The company stationed on the roadside in the rear of the works permitted him to approach and quietly gathered him in, horse, bag, countersign and letter of instructions, etc. He was a bearer of a dispatch from Gen. Foulk [i.e., Colonel Nathaniel Folk, Sixty-fifth Regiment, North Carolina State Troops], commanding forces and defenses of Kinston, to Major Scann, commanding the outpost,

²⁵ *North Carolina Times*, undated article, in: Scrapbook, Hooker Collection.

which Col. Claassen surprised the same evening. The letter of Gen. Foulk not having been received by Major Scann was fatal to him. The letter captured contained instructions to withdraw at once from the outpost and occupy the intrenchments [sic] at Jackson's Mills, and that the enemy was approaching his outpost in force, by road to his camp and by roads to the right and left of it. A half-hour passed, when another courier bearing similar message to the first, was also taken prisoner. Gen. Foulk, not hearing from Major Scann, concluded something was wrong at the [Wise's Forks] outpost. In this he was mistaken, as the whole trouble was at Jackson's Mills, and Captain Green, his officers and men were at the bottom of it all, ... this at the very gate and door of the inner defenses of Kinston.

Still another half hour passed, when the commanding officer himself, with his post adjutant-general, came riding furiously down from headquarters at Kinston to learn what had become of his couriers. They were permitted to approach the Tuscarora company within five yards, when its commander, in a clear and steady voice, commanded, 'Halt! dismount and surrender!' The general was angered that he should be thus delayed and answered back, 'Men, I am General Foulk. You all know me.'

'Yes, we all know you, and the second time I order you to dismount and surrender.' By this time the general and his aid were well surrounded by the dusky soldiers. He was greatly mortified when he realized his delicate plight and instantly dismounted from his horse, followed by his adjutant. To the second challenge, 'Do you surrender?' he answered, 'Certainly I do; this is a bad box; there is no help for it. I am your prisoner ... I only wish this was your experience instead of mine.' He then offered his side arms to the lieutenant, with whom he had the parley - the writer [Cornelius Cusick] - who declined to receive them, but at the same time said, 'Captain T. B. Green, who is in command, will receive them instead of me.' The captain promptly appeared and received the side arms. Handshaking followed, and a brief conversation took place. The General and his aid were assured of kind treatment - a promise which was fully carried out. Surely this was a 'comedy of errors' on the part of the enemy.

It was now 10:30 p.m. The moon was nearly full and shone mellow and clear, for the sky was without a cloud. The time fixed for Colonel Claassen to attack the outpost at Wise's Forks was prearranged, had passed about one hour. The captain was urged not to withdraw his command, or at least to remain half an hour longer. This he consented to do, and most favorable results followed our arms by this risky delay, as the enemy was in front and in rear.

At 10:40 p.m. came the distinct report of musketry in the direction of the Confederate outpost at Wise's Forks. First, a single shot, quickly followed by another - evidently alarm shots from a sentinel. Only a minute's time intervened when a perfect fusillade of musketry was heard. Col. Claassen had reached and surprised the rebel outpost, it being only two miles away from Jackson's Mills. A moment later the sound of horse

hoofs could be heard, then faint yells from the throats of Union infantry and cavalry. It was deep-toned, quite unlike the shrill rebel sound. Five minutes later rapid firing ceased and became desultory. The pounding and clatter of horse hoofs; the deep rumbling of wagons in flight toward Jackson's Mills, both in concert became louder and louder than ever; soon curses and cracks of whip lashes became decidedly distinct, indicating and attesting the work of Claassen as being fully accomplished, and in a sweeping and resistless manner, for the enemy was in full flight and only to reach a point where death, captivity and wounds awaited them, for Captain Green and his devoted little band were in possession of the intrenchments [sic] at Jackson's Mills.

At 11:30 p.m., the retreating rebels fleeing by the Jackson's Mills road, were first sighted in the shape of a baggage wagon, that came rumbling down to the bridge in charge of a Lieutenant Brothers, of the Sixty-seventh N.C. regiment. The lieutenant, outstripping the lightest and headmost wagon in his eager flight, on reaching and discovering the dismantled bridge, became wild with rage, and burst out with curses. He yelled and bawled out to some person he faintly saw on the opposite of the stream, a hundred yards away, 'Who ordered that bridge up?' The "some person" on the other side answered that he ordered it up to stop the infernal Yankees from crossing, adding: 'But, come over, and if you want to get the wagons across, we will put the planking down.' Over comes the lieutenant on one of the stringers, cursing at the same time incessantly at the stupid fool who ordered up that bridge. He was no sooner across than a revolver was pointed into his face, and he was commanded to surrender instantly. The lieutenant was badly frightened as well as astonished. As he gave up his arms he remarked: 'No one but a Yankee could play me such a clever trick as that.' Following this brief episode was the arrival of the retreating Confederate infantry. It was properly challenged and a prompt answer given by the officer in command. He little expected that the challenge was made by an adversary, and that the position was under Federal occupation. He was requested in a low and meek tone of voice to cross the creek by the stringer of the dismantled bridge, and form his command on the immediate grounds as the men crossed over. Captain Green, in a loud, sharp and distinct tone of voice, demanded the instant surrender of the Confederate command. The situation was still not understood by the Confederate commander, as he replied by giving his rank and name, and said that the Yankees were approaching rapidly, and would be here 'right, smart, soon.' Another demand was made by Captain Green for the surrender, supplementing the demand this time with these words, 'and damn quick at that.' The reply given was, 'To whom?' Captain Green promptly answered, 'To Federal troops of the One Hundred and Thirty-second New York.' The last and only words expressed by the Confederate commander were, 'Surrender yourselves you ... Yankee sons of' These words were instantly followed by the clicking of musket triggers of the Confederates, and following quickly, the firing of a volley at the men in the intrenchments [sic]. The fire was aimed too high,

for not a man was hit. Captain Green and his officers simultaneously and as one voice ordered, 'Fire, and fire low!' It was instantly obeyed, and one volley fired from ninety Belgium muskets accomplished its work - it was a bloody execution, according to the ethics of war. Captain Green, his officers and men were justified in shedding human blood. It is to be regretted that the Confederate commander did not surrender to Captain Green. ... The single volley fired by Captain Green's men well nigh exterminated the Confederate force, whose position, when fired on, was in line across the road at right angles to it, and only fifty yards from the intrenchments [sic] - truly a close and deadly range. After the volley was fired not a man could be seen standing, and it was followed by heart-rending moans and groans of the dying and wounded enemy. The road was actually blockaded by them. ...

In less than two hours time five officers and forty-one non-commissioned officers and privates fell into Captain Green's hands. His [Green's] position was at last discovered by the enemy and his capture of General Foulk was found out. He fought hard to defend his breastworks and keep well secured his prisoners. Shortly after midnight a troop of the Sixth N.C. cavalry [sic] made a desperate attempt to rescue their general. The troop made a furious and reckless charge, but was speedily repulsed, leaving behind it nine killed, including two officers and fourteen wounded. Among the killed was the young and brave Lieutenant De Hart who led the charge, and refused when commanded (by Lieutenant Cusick, the writer) to surrender".

In less than two hours, Green's three companies had the outpost at Jackson's Mills fully under control. During that time, they had killed and/or wounded twenty to twenty-five of the enemy, captured five officers, including the commanding officer of Kinston, fifty-one non-commissioned officers and privates, forty horses and mules, and a wagon-train loaded with commissary stores, officers' private baggage, arms, ammunition, etc. All the while losing only one killed and one wounded of his own men. However, the outcome of the affair was still unknown to Claassen and the main body of troops at Wise's Forks. Nevertheless, the commanding officer became aware of the fact when he joined eight companies of his own men who had advanced to within three quarters of a mile of Southwest Creek.

With Wise's Forks and Jackson's Mills safely in hand, Claassen's next move was to determine the practicality of an attack on Kinston itself. A reconnaissance found that the road to Kinston was strongly fortified by infantry, cavalry, and twelve pieces of field artillery. Claassen determined that his force was too small to move on Kinston after two reconnaissances showed that the strength of the Confederate position before Kinston was too strong for the size of his own forces. As a result, he ordered the outpost at Jackson's Mills evacuated and all bridges destroyed. At dawn, the expedition returned to the main camp at Bachelor's Creek with a loss of only one killed, none wounded, and three missing. It had marched for and fought from 5 a.m. June 21, till 5 a.m. June 23, 1864, having marched a distance of sixty-five miles.

EXPEDITION TO KINSTON, DECEMBER 1864

The several months following the return from Kinston were relatively uneventful, with the regiment occupied mainly in picket and scouting duty. Two long marches broke up the monotony. In late July, the regiment performed an over-night march of 35 miles to Core Creek and return without incident. On October 12, 1864, the 132nd spent another sleepless night, leaving camp at 4:00 a.m. for a 34-mile reconnaissance along the route of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad, returning at 10:00 a.m. the same morning. Again without incident.

Camp routine was broken in December by yet another expedition that would take the regiment again to Jackson's Mills and Kinston. On December 9, 1864, orders were issued for an advance on Kinston to feel out the enemy, and if possible, capture the town. The expedition was composed of the 132nd New York Infantry, the Twelfth New York Cavalry, the Fifteenth Connecticut Infantry, and detachments of the Fifth Rhode Island and Second Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, all under command of Colonel Charles L. Upham of the Connecticut regiment.²⁶

According to orders, the 132nd and 12th New York Cavalry, moved out early on the set departure date for Core Creek, where they were to rendezvous with the Fifteenth Connecticut Infantry, and elements of the Fifth Rhode Island and Massachusetts heavy artillery regiments. The latter two organizations departed later in the day from New Bern. Weather hampered the expedition from the very beginning.

The 15th Connecticut and Rhode Island artillery did not leave New Bern until near midnight and were forced to encamp for the night at Bachelor's Creek by torrential rains, cold, and mud. Once these arrived at the rendezvous the following day, the same weather prompted the now-united organizations to delay the move toward Kinston for yet another day. This provided the enemy in Kinston to prepare for an attack.²⁷

The next morning (Sunday, Dec. 11) it was still raining, but the command got under arms at 8:00 a.m., [with] the 12th in advance, and at 10:00 a.m. struck the rebel outposts at Wise's Forks. The Southerners were driven back under a scattering fire until the Southwest Creek bridge (at Jackson's Mills) was reached at about 4:00 p.m. The cavalry and artillery crossed the creek that night but were compelled to retreat by Confederate cavalry and artillery.

The next morning, there was a spirited twenty-minute skirmish at the bridge. Although the Tuscarora and B companies of the 132nd were able to take the bridge and rebel breastworks, the mission as a whole was a failure, and the expedition began its return to the home bases in New Bern and Bachelor's Creek.²⁸ En route, they were subjected to enemy fire at various points. Official reports deny failure, although little had been accomplished. The men, however, complained that it had been "*the most disagreeable and fruitless expedition the regiment ever undertook, and that the men were tired and footsore after the sixty mile cold and rain-soaked march of sixty miles.*"²⁹

The Tuscarora Company and their fellow New Yorkers were back at Bachelor's Creek after yet another failed attempt to take Confederate Kinston. Three months more

²⁶ Thorpe, Sheldon B., *History of the Fifteenth Connecticut Volunteers in the War for the Defense of the Union 1861-1865*, (New Haven, CT: Price, Lee, and Adkins Co., 1893), pp. 80-81.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Record of Events*, p. 734.

²⁹ Thorpe, *Fifteenth Connecticut*, p. 81.

of reconnaissance and scouting duty along the creek would be followed by success, as the Tuscarora Company and the 132nd assumed a leading role in the move to take Kinston in route to joining the army of General William Tecumseh Sherman

THE BATTLE OF WISE'S (WYSE'S) FORKS, MARCH 8-10, 1865

By early March 1865, the war's end was in sight. Lee's Southern forces were under siege in Petersburg, Virginia, by General Ulysses S. Grant; General Sherman had completed his march through Georgia and South Carolina, and was advancing through North Carolina to join Grant; and the last supply line to the Confederates in Virginia had been closed with the losses of Fort Fisher and Wilmington. To re-enforce Grant's army, the Federal troops around New Bern were ordered to open the railroad through Kinston as a supply line for Grant's army as it neared Goldsboro. Major General Jacob D. Cox, who had moved his army from Fort Fisher to New Bern, assumed command of the Federal troops there. The 132nd New York was placed in Brigadier General Innis N. Palmer's Division of Cox's Provisional Corps. With an army of 12,000 men, Cox expected little serious opposition around Kinston, which had been lightly defended throughout the war. Unknown to him, Confederate General Braxton Bragg had gathered an army of 8,000 men that he lined up on the opposite bank of Southwest to prevent his advance.

Cox selected the railroad crossing at Core Creek, nine miles west of Bachelor's Creek, as an assembly point for gathering his troops and to complete organization of his army. The 132nd New York, being intimately familiar with the area, was given the honor of taking the advance toward Kinston. On March 1, at 11:00 p.m., Colonel Claassen received orders from General Palmer to move his regiment to Core Creek. Three hours later, Captain Green, with his Tuscarora Company and companies K, C, and E, marched all night and had the desired position secured by 7:00 that morning. Four hours later the remainder of the regiment arrived. While at Core Creek, Claassen was given command of a brigade consisting of his 132nd New York, and the Second Brigade of General Meagher's provisional infantry division, and Battery D, Third New York Artillery.

At 7:00 p.m. on March 5, Claassen ordered Captain Green, with the same four companies, to again move in advance of the regiment to seize the Dover Road railroad crossing at Gum Swamp, seven miles beyond Core Creek. Aided by darkness, they marched west along the railroad unmolested to their destination, where they successfully occupied the abandoned Confederate works that had guarded the crossing. Claassen followed the railroad the next morning (March 6) with the remainder of the regiment, making the new position secure. They were joined at Gum Swamp by two more brigades under General Harland and Colonel Boughton.³⁰

MARCH 6

At 2:30 p.m. on the sixth, the 132nd, with Graham's cavalry (Company L, First North Carolina Union Volunteer Regiment) began to move along the Dover Road toward Wise's Forks. At Tracy's Swamp, where the railroad crossed the road, they met the enemy in a strong position. Graham, with his howitzers, and two companies (one of

³⁰ OR 47, pt. 1, 980-983; Sokolosky, Wade, and Mark A. Smith, *To Prepare for Sherman's Coming, The Battle of Wise's Forks, March 1865*, (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie LLC, 2015), p. 70.

which was undoubtedly Green's Tuscarora company) of the 132nd New York drove them from position to position until Wise's Forks was reached at approximately 4:30 that afternoon.³¹ In the skirmish at Wise's Forks, a Confederate deserter reported that General Robert Hoke's division had joined the forces of General Braxton Bragg at Kinston.³²

MARCH 7

The next day, March 7, Claassen noticed that the enemy's skirmishers fell back regularly and steadily. He saw this as an indication that the Confederates had reserve forces either across the creek or on this side of it. As a result, he sent a reconnaissance of three hundred men under Captain Green west along the Dover Road toward Jackson's Mills, where a bridge crossed the creek. Interestingly, the Tuscaroras of Company D once again found themselves adjacent to the site of their decisive victory of July 1864.³³ When the Federals encountered a Confederate skirmish line, a hot exchange developed, during which Sergeant Foster J. Hudson, a Seneca Indian of the Tuscarora Company, received a severe wound in the knee. The Confederates captured him and relieved him of his watch. When Green's force counterattacked, the Southern troops withdrew leaving Hudson behind, allowing the New Yorkers to rescue their comrade. As the Southerners fell back to the safety of the creek, Confederate artillery behind Jackson's Mills opened fire on Green's position, preventing any farther advance.³⁴ Green's men rejoined Claassen's force at Wise's Forks. This would be the last time that the Tuscarora Company would operate independently of the regiment for the duration of the war.

MARCH 7-8

With the enemy strongly entrenched all along the Kinston side of Southwest Creek, General Cox formed a defensive line, with Claassen's brigade on the extreme right on the British Road about a mile and a half north of the railroad, where it encamped for the night as a reserve. At noon, March 8, heavy firing was heard on the left toward Wise's Forks. Claassen's brigade was ordered under arms and took a position inline of battle on the right of the railroad. At 1:00 p.m., the brigade was moved out on the neighborhood road toward Jackson's Mills. But after proceeding half a mile, encountered the enemy moving in force down the Dover Road. It being evident that the purpose of the enemy was to get in the Union's rear, a retreat was made in good order toward the British Road, which had previously chosen by all of the other forces as the line of defense.³⁵

Claassen was only partially established along that line when the enemy appeared opposite and attacked with artillery and infantry. After a brisk fight, the Confederate assault was repulsed. Lieutenant Abram Haring, who had been awarded a Medal of Honor for his defense of the Neuse Road bridge during Hoke's assault of February 1, 1864, was seriously wounded in the jaw. The brigade maintained its position until night, when it was moved farther to the left. Earthworks were thrown up and a line of

³¹ OR 47. pt. 1. 988.

³² *Newbern Times*, March 9, 1865, reprinted in the *New York Times*, March 1, 1865.

³³ OR 47. pt. 1, pp. 988-989.

³⁴ Sokolsky, *To Prepare for Sherman*, pp. 78-80.

³⁵ OR 47. pt. 1, p. 990.

skirmishers advanced in conjunction with the brigade to the left.³⁶

MARCH 9-10

On March 9, Claassen's position remained unchanged, with nothing of significance taking place except for the occasional brisk firing along the skirmish line.³⁷ At noon the following day, March 10, Claassen was ordered to send part of his brigade to the extreme left, which was under heavy attack. This left the 132nd New York regiment to defend the entire line that had been held by the entire brigade. Within half an hour, the enemy made a heavy demonstration on its immediate front, but it was repulsed by the aid of the Fifth Illinois Independent Battery, and did not succeed in the first attack in diving in the regiment's skirmish line. Claassen reported that *"the fire of the enemy's sharpshooters was very annoying and destructive in this engagement, and resulted in numerous casualties to the men of [the] command. Toward evening the enemy gained possession of a portion of the skirmish line, but the line was re-enforced by fifty men from the 132nd NY, and speedily regained under the protection of our artillery fire."*³⁸ By evening, the Federal lines remained intact. Nothing of importance occurred during the night.

March 10th ended combat for the 132nd New York and the Tuscarora Company. After the heavy fighting of that day, Bragg withdrew across the Neuse River, was unable to prevent the fall of Kinston, and left the route open for Cox's army to join Sherman at Goldsboro. On March 11, reconnoitering parties were sent toward Kinston that showed only a rear-guard remained in town and that it could be occupied with ease. On the fourteenth, the Federals marched to the Kinston bridge, laid down pontoon bridges the next day, and occupied the town, which was used as an advanced depot for stores en route to join Sherman. Cox's army, including the 132nd New York, remained in Kinston until the twentieth, when it departed for Goldsboro. Even before arriving, they could hear the sounds of battle at Bentonville between Sherman and Confederates under General Joseph E. Johnston

The fighting was over for the 132nd New York and the Tuscarora Company. After joining Sherman's army in Goldsboro, it moved to Raleigh, where it was at the time of the surrender of all the Confederate forces in North Carolina at Bennett's Farm. From there, the regiment moved to Salisbury, North Carolina, in May, and was discharged there on June 29, 1865. During its time in service, it had fought in two major battles and at least three significant skirmishes. First Lieutenant Cusick would go on to a long and distinguished career in government and the military. Nonetheless, on his death in 1904 he was denied burial on the tribal reservation because of his service in the Western Indian Wars.

In conclusion, the Tuscarora of Company D, in a sense, returned to fight on the ancestral lands where they, in a sense, avenged their ancestors who had been defeated by white North Carolinians in 1715 and forced into exile.

* * *

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.