

Union campsites in York County: 20th Pa. Volunteer Militia

Posted on [December 2, 2009](#) by [Scott Mingus](#)

On Sunday, June 21, 1863, Colonel **William B. Thomas** and the 20th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia had been transported via the Pennsylvania Railroad to Columbia and had marched across the Columbia-Susquehanna Bridge before embarking on the Northern Central Railway for York, Pennsylvania. Upon arrival there, the 900-man regiment split into multiple battalions, with Lt. Col. **William H. Sickles** and five companies heading south to guard the Howard Tunnel, Hanover Junction, and various bridges and crossings. They dug in and built some entrenchments, some of which were still visible just a few years ago. Thomas and Company E stayed in York as headquarters and provost guards, while the remaining four companies steamed northward toward York Haven. Companies A and M were ordered to guard NCR Bridge #119 over the Conewago Creek near York Haven and Companies D and I set up camp on a commanding hill overlooking NCR Bridge #118.

All visible traces of those campsites are now gone, but we have the written record of their stay in the form of damage claims filed by the two farmers on which land Thomas's troopers encamped.

19th century York County historian **George Reeser Powell** briefly commented on the 20th PVM's brief few days in York County and the ultimate result when the Rebels came calling...

"On the 28th of June, 1863, Gen. Early, while advancing on York, and when at Weiglestown, sent Col. French, with a detachment on the Seventeenth Virginia Cavalry, across Manchester Township, to the mouth of the Conewago, to burn the railroad bridges there. They halted, for a time, at Liverpool [now Manchester] and Mount Wolf. They took from the stores, boots, shoes, hats, and some other clothing, paid for them in Confederate currency, which they proudly affirmed would soon be 'better than your greenbacks, as we are now on our way to Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and New York, and the war will soon be over.'

They cut down the telegraph poles, destroyed a number of small railroad bridges and the two large ones. They compelled **Benjamin Miller**, an intelligent farmer, to go with them and direct them to the bridges, which they set fire to with coal oil. In the afternoon they went to York.

About 400 Union soldiers had been encamped on Col. Hoff's farm, to guard these bridges, but they crossed over the Susquehanna during the early morning of

the same day, fearing the approach of a large army. A few shots were fired at the last boat load by the Confederates.”

In researching the York County damage claims for my recent books, I came across the Federal claim filed in Washington D.C. by “**John Hough**” (the Col. Hoff from Prowell’s account). Hoff’s deposition indicates that Thomas’s four companies destroyed several fields of ripening oats, rye, and hay. The soldiers burned all of his fence rails and 2,152 board feet of lumber as firewood. He also threw in his personal expenses for filling in rifle-pits dug by the militia. One of the soldiers confirmed Hoff’s claim of rifle-pits, telling a Philadelphia reporter that the regiment had “laid down our guns to take up shovels and picks.”

Old maps indicate that Colonel Hoff’s sprawling farm was off Wago Road (PA State Route 1019) across from the twin railroad bridges. Much of the land is now occupied by a massive industrial complex.

John Hoff was not the only farmer to suffer from Colonel Thomas’s defense of the Northern Central Railway. In the State Archives in Harrisburg we find the claim of farmer **Samuel Bare**, who wrote that the 20th Militia camped on his farm for more than a week. They took eight days worth of milk and butter from his seven cows, 8 bushels of potatoes, 2 barrels flour, 2 sheep, 2 barrels of ham, a harness, his chopping axe, 4 sets of gears, and destroyed 8 acres oats where they camped. His horse was used and worn out by the army, and later needed destroyed.

By the way, “intelligent farmer” Benjamin Miller’s once rural property is now a modern subdivision located at the intersection of Board Road and Meeting House Road north of Manchester. Contemporary newspaper accounts indicate that the Rebels threatened to kill Miller if he did not cooperate and guide them to the bridges

Fire on the Conewago!

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On June 28, 1863, a veteran Confederate division under Major General **Jubal Early** entered York County with the goal of driving off local militia defenders and holding York for ransom. Near Weiglestown, Early dispatched Colonel **William French** with most of the 17th Virginia Cavalry on a mission across Manchester Township. His objective? Seize and burn the twin railroad bridges over Conewago Creek near York Haven. Their destruction would severely hamper traffic between Baltimore and Harrisburg on the Northern Central Railway.

Unknown to Early, the Yankees had, several days before, dispatched nearly a thousand fresh soldiers to York County to guard important bridges, the Howard Tunnel, and key supply routes. They were commanded by Colonel **William Thomas** (a wealthy Philadelphia businessman and Republican politician who was a personal friend of Abe Lincoln). Most of Thomas's men worked for him in the Customs House and Port of Philadelphia, but all were equipped with the latest in rifled muskets. The cavalymen had pistols and sabers, with an occasional carbine. A clash of arms loomed, and the unsuspecting Confederate cavalymen would be outnumbered and outgunned.

French's cavalymen rode past lush York County farmlands and entered Manchester (then called Liverpool) and Mount Wolf. They stopped in the vicinity to rest, feed and water their horses (or exchange played out mounts for fresh ones confiscated from farmers), and do a little shopping. Confederates entered the small shops and stores of both villages and began picking items off the shelves. Soon, their arms were filled with clothing, shoes, hats, boots, and personal goods. Shopkeepers, initially relieved that the Rebels intended to pay for the merchandise and not steal it, soon found out to their dismay the majority of the "Johnnies" had only Confederate scrip. When the merchants protested and demanded Federal currency, the Southerners retorted that their money would soon be "better than your greenbacks, as we are now on our way to Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and New York, and the war will soon be over."

The troopers cut down several telegraph poles and destroyed several small railroad bridges in the region. Soldiers compelled local farmer Benjamin Miller to go with them. Coerced by Rebel pistols, Miller guided the Virginians to the two large bridges, which they set on fire with coal oil.

For several days, about 400 Union soldiers from the 20th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia had camped near York Haven on the farm of a Colonel Hoff. They were supposed to be guarding the vital bridges. However, these hastily organized and poorly trained men, soldiers for less than a week, hastily retreated in the early morning when news arrived that Rebels were approaching. Fearing that a large army was aimed right at them, they piled into rowboats and began crossing the Susquehanna River to Lancaster County. It took some time for the small flotilla to make the crossing across the rain-swollen river and return for more men. The vanguard of the 17th Virginia arrived while the last boat load of Pennsylvania soldiers feverishly rowed across the broad Susquehanna. A few Rebs fired desultory shots at the fleeing militia, but no one was hurt. The frightened militia regrouped in Bainbridge, while Rebel yells cascaded across the river.

By mid-afternoon, the once imposing bridges at York Haven were but a memory and French's cavaliers were camped just north of York. After a rest break, they would be dispatched again to burn more bridges south of town, finishing off bridges skipped the day before by the 35th Battalion of Virginia Cavalry.