

## Event Report

# VERMONT BRIGADE MONUMENT DEDICATED

by Charles Heath

On May 5, 1864, near the intersection of a couple lanes in rural Virginia, a brigade of 2,800 Vermont men withstood shot and shell for the better part of a day. Save for a maple stake hastily plunged into the ground a few years ago, this pivotal intersection had no marker to honor to the men from the Green Mountain State. In September 2006, a very dignified and understated sixteen-ton granite monument was delivered and installed in Hamilton's Thicket near the intersection of the Brock Road and Orange Plank Road on the Wilderness battlefield, within the boundary of the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania National Military Park.

This marker was erected on ground that, nearly two decades ago, was nearly subdivided into hundreds of lots for single family homes in the booming Fredericksburg market. Through some hard work, several hundred acres were purchased and added to the park holdings—which is why houses do not stand today on the valuable corner of the Orange Plank Road (VA Route 621) and the Brock Road (VA Route 613). NPS Historian Emeritus Ed Bearss said this spot was, “the most important intersection in the Civil War.”

During the cloudy afternoon of September 16, 2006, that big \$40,000 chunk of granite from Rock of Ages Quarry in Vermont was dedicated by a host of dignitaries, NPS staffers, an honor guard from the Vermont Army National Guard, another honor guard from the American Legion, a few middle aged men in blue with rifle-muskets (including a few CR members), and a U.S. Army bugler looking fine in his dress blues. A well-dressed audience of approximately seventy people looked on with more than just a passing interest, because without them, the whole ceremony would have had far less meaning. These were local residents, visitors who had driven long distances, people with a Vermont heritage, and even a representative from the local Sons of Confederate Veterans camp. The dignitaries droned on, and patted themselves on the back for having the foresight and good luck to save that piece of land, and then we heard about the men who fell there.

This was a good day for people who are so proud of their beautiful state, and rightfully so. A good portion of those remarks were from Vermont author/historian Howard Coffin. These two paragraphs were some of the best from the speechmaking that afternoon:

“When I wrote my history of Vermont in the Civil War, I stated that the terrible fight here constituted Vermont's great moment in the war, certainly it was the most costly. Total casualties [in Lewis Grant's Vermont Brigade at the battle of the Wilderness] amounted to 1,234 killed, wounded and missing. This fight, I believe, surpasses the determined stands by the Eighth Vermont and the Old Brigade at Cedar Creek, the Sixth Corps' breakthrough at Petersburg on April 2, 1865, led by Lewis Grant's Brigade, and even the Second Vermont [Standard's] Brigade's flank attack on Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg

“In the decades after the war, Vermont veterans returned by the hundreds to Gettysburg and Cedar Creek where they greeted old friends and foes and dedicated monuments. But I have never found an account of a Vermont veteran coming

back to this place. I think it was just too terrible, too grim, too awful to relive.”<sup>1</sup>

The monument itself is a simple rectangular block of granite topped by a sculpture of “the Camel's Hump” in the Green Mountains of Vermont. I couldn't help but notice the forest floor was littered with many *magnolia grandiflora* leaves, for they had to cut down a magnolia tree to install the stone. How ironic it was a magnolia: like so many Southern lads who gave their lives at that same intersection, the unmistakable leaves of a truly Southern species were scattered about like so many corpses would have been in early May of 1864.

If we return to the National Archives photographs of Civil War monument dedications from 1865-1920, we notice the sometimes thousands of people who came to see great things. Gettysburg saw many of these events (perhaps too many, in my humble opinion), and many other battlefields had monument after monument erected in elaborate ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> There were no Civil War veterans present today; however, several individuals present could trace their lineage back to at least one member of the First Vermont Brigade. This was both sweet and fitting, as the saying goes.

The words from the official report of Vermont Brigade commander Brigadier General Lewis Addison Grant are inscribed on the monument:

“The Brigade has met the enemy in his strongholds, attacked him under murderous fire, and in the very face of death has repulsed with great slaughter repeated and vigorous attacks upon our lines, and on no occasion has it disgracefully turned its back to the foe. The flag of each regiment, though pierced and tattered, still flaunts in the face of the foe, and noble bands of veterans with thinned ranks, and but few officers to command, still stand by them; and they seem determined to stand so long as there is a man to bear their flag aloft or an enemy in the field.”<sup>3</sup>

After the ceremony was over, and the photo ops commenced, I removed my old 6th Army Corps badge that was cut from a thin old white wool blanket, and gave it to U.S. Senator James Jeffords, and told him to “Ask Howard Coffin to explain the significance of these little crosses the Vermont men wore upon their uniforms.” According to a staff member present at the dedication, Senator Jeffers has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and will have a lengthy battle of his own to fight.

We had the chance to see and do something that transcends the years and all the foolery we put up with in our hobby. Attending this ceremony was very worthwhile, and very moving.

*Charles Heath is a member of the Columbia Rifles from central Maryland*

<sup>1</sup> From Howard Coffin's remarks printed in the *Barre-Montpelier Times-Argus* newspaper, Sunday, September 17, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Even the 1997 dedication of the Irish Brigade monument at Antietam had over 1,000 attendees.

<sup>3</sup> Coffin speech, *Times-Argus*, September 17, 2006.

