

Major Charles Thomas. Watson, USV

Biography

Charles was born on April 28, 1839 in Castine, Maine. He was the fifth child of Sewall and Anstress Little Watson. Charles had three older brothers (Sewall, Joseph and William), two older sisters (Sarah and Susan) and one younger brother (George). His mother died in 1843 when Charles was only four years old. His brother Joseph died in 1846 at the young age of 13. The Watson family moved from Castine to Bath, Maine after Charles was born, probably about the time of his mother's death. Standing at five feet, eight inches, with blue eyes, a light complexion and light hair at the time of his enlistment in 1861, Charles would have been considered to be of "average" physical build for the time. Although little is known about his life prior to enlisting into the army, it is known that he was educated to the high school level. He was employed as a bookbinder by age 21. Charles' situation was somewhat distinguished as the vast majority of workingmen in 1861 were either farmers or laborers, with limited education.

On April 12, 1861 Confederate States forces opened fire on Ft. Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina. The next day the fort was surrendered to the Confederates. This event ignited the Civil War and resulted in a wave of patriotic fervor across the northern states. Maine was certainly no exception. In the next few weeks, thousands of Maine men volunteered to "put down the rebellion". Among those early volunteers was Charles T. Watson of Bath. On April 24, 1861, only four days shy of his 22nd birthday, Charles enlisted as a "Maine Volunteer". Three days later, Charles' older brother William enlisted and was commissioned a 1st Lieutenant in Co. D, Third Maine Infantry. The circumstances that resulted in Charles joining the Third Maine are not known. It is possible that he could not obtain a place in either the 1st Maine Infantry or 2nd Maine Infantry since they had already filled their rolls. However, as he ended up in Co. A of the Third Maine Infantry Regiment, it is likely that he was a member of the Bath City Greys. The Greys were a volunteer militia unit organized many years prior to the war, and it is generally understood that Co. A was formed, in its entirety, from the Bath City Greys. In any event, Private Charles T. Watson was formally mustered into Federal service on June 4, 1861 (along with the entire regiment) for three years of service.

Charles served as a private in Company A during June and July 1861, seeing the elephant for the first time at the 1st Battle of Bull Run on July 21st. On August 2nd he was promoted to corporal and was also reported as sick in camp, a common situation in the aftermath of the first major battle of the war. At this time Charles' organizational talents and education, as evidenced by his civilian trade, must have come to the fore because in September he was detached from Company A and detailed to the regimental quartermaster's office under Lt. James H. Tallman. Charles requested and received a reduction in rank back to private. Charles lost the company of his brother in October, when William resigned his commission (he had subsequently been promoted to captain of Co. D) and returned to Maine.

The regimental quartermaster was an extremely important office, as he and his staff were responsible for all of the equipment and supplies of the regiment. Below them were ten company quartermasters and above them were brigade, division and army quartermasters. It was a constant struggle of paperwork to coordinate all of the various requests for supplies, and then to properly account for everything and to arrange for transportation. It was (and still is) very meticulous work.

From September 1861 to March of 1862, General George McClellan created the Army of the Potomac from the unorganized “mob” of volunteer units streaming into Washington, D.C. Brigades, divisions and corps were formed, with all of the bureaucracy that goes along with an army. It must of have been a challenging time to serve in the regimental quartermaster’s office. In April 1862, the Third Maine (now serving in Third Corps) departed, along with the Army of the Potomac, for Virginia and the start of the Peninsula Campaign. Charles and the Third Maine suffered through the slow progress of the campaign, through the swamps of the James Peninsula, engaging Confederate forces in the Battle of Williamsburg on May 5th. Soon after the Battle of Fair Oaks (June 1st), where the Third Maine saw some of its most intense fighting of the war, Lt. Tallman was promoted out of the regiment to the division quartermaster’s office. This opening was filled by Charles, who received his commission dated June 18, 1862 and was promoted from private to first lieutenant. He was now the regimental quartermaster for the Third Maine Regiment.

Eventually, the Army of the Potomac was driven back from the gates of Richmond, with McClellan “changing his base” to Harrison’s Landing on the James River in early July. The army encamped here until the middle of August, with a great many men contracting various diseases due to the heat, poor water and mosquitoes. Lt. Watson became a victim himself. On August 2nd he requested a ten day leave of absence to Fort Monroe “feeling convinced that my state of health requires a change of climate”. Thaddeus Hildreth, the Third Maine’s surgeon agreed, explaining in a letter dated August 3rd that Watson had been suffering from a fever for ten days, and that a “change of climate will be highly beneficial in restoring him to health”. After a two day wait, Charles received his leave of absence, lasting until August 15th. Only a week later, the entire Army of the Potomac would be following Charles back down the Peninsula where it would be departing for Northern Virginia.

Charles continued as the regimental quartermaster for the remainder of the war, going into battle with the Third Maine at Chantilly, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Wapping Heights, Mine Run, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House. His service records indicate that he was always present for duty. The one exception was a fifteen day leave of absence requested and granted in April 1863 “for the purpose of proceeding to Maine, to visit my family, from whom I have been absent since the commencement of the war”.

Lt. Watson appeared to stay out of trouble during his service, with only one recorded exception. On September 30, 1863 he wrote to Capt. James H. Tallman (the former Third Maine quartermaster), Quartermaster of the 1st Division, Third Corps. Charles

reported abandoning three barrels of pork, seven arm chests and thirteen packing boxes at camp near Sulpher Springs, Va. on September 15th. He explained the abandonment as follows: “ The regiment having been increased in number nearly two hundred men on the 10th inst making the regiment exceed three hundred enlisted men present, and having but three wagons, the additional wagons allowed not having been supplied, though requisition for it had been made...rendered it impossible to transport all of the baggage, camp equipage and rations...the pork was abandoned as being of the least value to, and less needed by this command.” He goes on to explain that the arm chests and packing boxes had been emptied on the 14th (contents distributed to the men). Apparently, the boxes and chests were to be returned on the 16th, but since orders to move were received on the 15th and no transportation was available, they were abandoned. Although this all sounds reasonable, Brig. General Rufus Ingalls, Chief Quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac (and a native of Denmark, Maine) had a different view of abandoned property. This resulted in Lt. Watson being brought up on charges of negligence of duty. The charges were filed on October 22nd, but there is no further record of his being convicted, or of even going to trial. As he continued in his post, we must assume that this episode passed by quietly and without further action.

As Charles closed in on his June 4, 1864 end of service date, he did find time to order a Third Corps Union badge from General Mott, treasurer of the Third Corps Union. The badge cost \$25 and must have made a nice addition to his Kearny Medal (worn on his uniform in his portrait held at the Maine State Archives). On June 28, 1864, he along with the rest of the Third Maine men who had completed their three years of service, were mustered out and returned home to Maine.

If Charles did return to Maine, he did not remain there for long. Although he did have family in Maine, since he was not married perhaps he had established a new home and purpose in the army. On August 20, 1864 he was appointed as a captain and assistant quartermaster of volunteers. Charles accepted the appointment on September 1st. Captain Watson, U.S. Volunteers was assigned first as assistant quartermaster in charge of the depot at Harrisburg, Pa. and later served in the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in Georgia. No details about his duties have surfaced, but he must have demonstrated skill and dedication as he received a brevet (honorary) promotion to major, U.S. Volunteers on June 4, 1866 exactly five years to the day he was mustered into federal service as a private in the Third Maine. Major Watson’s army career came to an end on July 17, 1867 when he was mustered out; his services no longer required.

Charles was discharged in Atlanta, Georgia. Immediately upon his discharge (the very day in fact) he was appointed by the War Department as Special Agent and Disbursing Officer of the Freedmen’s Bureau for Georgia. The Freedmen’s Bureau was established in 1865 by Congress and administered by the United States Department of War to aid distressed refugees (both former slaves and poor white farmers). Major General Oliver Otis Howard headed up the Bureau. General Howard was the first colonel of the Third Maine, so Charles did have a connection to him. We can only speculate whether this circumstance resulted in his appointment within the Freedmen’s Bureau. By the time Charles arrived in Georgia there were several hundred agents organizing the relief efforts,

disbursing all kinds of material and legal aid. Charles worked in the Bureau for almost two years. After leaving, he became a deputy U.S. Marshal for the District of Georgia (1869-1870), assessor U.S. Internal Revenue, first district of Georgia (1870-1871) and clerk to the State School Commissioner and keeper of public buildings of the State of Georgia (1871-1872). By 1880 he was employed in Atlanta as a railroad cashier. It is known that he never married and that he lived in Atlanta until at least 1899. During this time he was a member of Ohio Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, as well as Commander of the Department of Georgia, Grand Army of the Republic (the largest Union veterans organization). Charles was a Mason, becoming the Grand Commander of the Knights Templar of Georgia. In April of 1899 Charles applied for a disability pension. The examining surgeon's certificate survives and provides a glimpse of his situation at that time. He was 60 years old and stood 5 feet, 6 ½ inches tall weighing in at 115 pounds. Charles was not able to work due to two health conditions. The first was a hernia on his right side. The second was probably the most significant, especially for someone accustomed to writing and office work. Charles suffered from "chronic rheumatoid arthritis of left shoulder, elbow and wrist joints...also the meta carpal joints...the wrist is swollen and acutely sensitive...the muscles (in the words of Charles) "not only useless but absolutely burdensome"". The surgeon also noted his skin was pale and anemic, covered with perspiration although "the claimant is fastidiously clean". He also required assistance in dressing and undressing each day.

Charles was granted a \$12 per month disability pension in 1899. By 1905, he was living in an "old soldiers home" in Dayton, Ohio followed by a move to Greenwich, Connecticut. Finally, in September of 1907 he moved into the Spa Sanatorium in Ballston Spa, New York under the care of Dr. A. I. Thayer. It appears that his sister Susan was also residing at the Spa at this time. Possibly for the first time since 1861, he enjoyed the constant company of family. By this time he was 68 years old and one can surmise that his physical condition had deteriorated significantly since his 1899 examination. To help pay for his stay, his monthly pension was increased to \$15 in 1909 and \$25 per month in March 1913.

Ballston Spa, New York is located 30 miles north of Albany and boasted a population of 4,000 at the time Charles arrived. Situated only a few miles from Saratoga Springs Resort and the New York State Mineral Springs Reservation, The Spa Sanatorium was described in the Centennial History of the Village of Ballston Spa (1907) as: "One of the leading institutions of the village...established by Dr. A.I. Thayer in May, 1902. Dr. Thayer purchased the large mansion on High Street, for so many years the home of Judge Scott. The delightful surroundings, the invigorating air of the lower Adirondacks, and the Doctor's medical skill, have conspired to make the Sanatorium a success from the first." Since Charles was suffering from chronic rheumatoid arthritis, his choice of the Sanatorium for treatment made a great deal of sense. A promotional booklet from the time reads: "The class of patients specially recommended to take treatment...are those of a nervous or rheumatic type...as the massage and hot air treatments, together with the mineral waters, favor the complete change and combustion of tissues and elimination of effete material." It is easy to picture Major Watson sitting under one of the many large

shade trees at the Sanatorium, perhaps visiting with other Civil War veterans and reminiscing about the “old days” in the Army of the Potomac.

Charles Watson died at age 74 on May 9, 1913 at the Spa Sanatorium. His sister Susan arranged to have his remains returned to Bath, some 52 years after he left with the Third Maine in 1861. Only Susan and his older brother William survived him. He is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery, surrounded by his family.

Postscript

In the fall of 2003, some 90 years after his death, Charles Watson’s personal trunk surfaced in South Carolina, it being in the possession of the Helmer family for the last forty years. Although it is not known exactly when Charles obtained the trunk, it is most likely that he acquired it after his promotion to lieutenant in June 1862 (enlisted men did not generally have the ability to transport baggage of this type). Mr. Helmer contacted Co. A, Third Maine Regt. Volunteer Infantry, a Civil War reenactor unit operating in Maine. He was preparing to put the trunk up for sale and thought that he might try to find someone from Major Watson’s native state who might be interested; in effect returning the trunk “home”. The “new” Third Maine purchased the trunk and will be donating it to the Maine State Museum, along with the story of Major Charles Thomas Watson

Compiled by David Gowen
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