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South Kingstown’s Own

A Biographical Sketch of Isaac Peace Rodman
Brigadier General

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Acknowledgements

A work that spans 30 years in the making owes much to many folks who helped along the way and to name only a few seems at once a travesty and a necessity.

To my daughter Amy I owe much of the more recent leg work in tracking down local newspaper pieces, without which so much of the primary source material and local history flavor included would not have been possible.

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As is true for all works, none are ever really complete. So it is with this volume. There is no doubt much primary source material available that needs only to be dug out of dusty shelves and copied from old microfilm. But I have done as much as my time will allow and I believe strongly that this is the most complete single source of biographical material on General Rodman. In compiling the work we noticed a few minor and obvious typographical errors which I hope the reader will forgive. Readers may also note that actions of some battles are not always clear. That is because the multiple sources used give varying accounts of timelines and actions taken from individual perspectives. In those cases I tried to use the most consistent accounts of actions. Again, my hope is that the reader will abide these shortcomings. I take full responsibility for any and all shortcomings and errors in this work.

Bob Gough
Bozeman, Montana
April, 2011
Introduction

In the kindling warmth of early spring days just after the war my grandfather and I would harvest dandelions for salads from Art Plourde’s cow pastures behind Peace Dale School. We crossed over Emmet’s Lane, then an overgrown cart path, and worked our way northeast among fat Holsteins and over the rolling green fields that once were part of John Hazard’s farm. The dandelions grew huge and lush in those well-manured fields and we had our basket full by the time we got to a small family cemetery that lay against the tree-line of oaks and blueberries. The plot was walled with large, finely-wrought rectangular granite slabs likely drilled from the scattered meadow stones all around. Three offset stones were set perpendicular to the others and ran clear through the wall, protruding on each side of it to form steps for visitors to this quiet place. A large white obelisk stood above all other stones. I marveled at it standing tall and straight in the spring sunshine, the lichen dappled marble, the edges of its raised and graved letters smoothed and rounded by time and salt air. This was a serene plot untouched by vandals; a little piece of ground from another time. A place where you left your talking and the 20th century outside the wall. Once you entered, a feeling welled up from deep inside of you that struck you dumb, and words seemed trivial and unneeded. With a young boy’s curiosity I made straight for the steps when my grandfather, with great reverence, spoke softly “That’s where the general is buried.” “The general? What general?” was my surprised reply. “General Rodman. He was a great general in the Civil War.” I had never heard of him in my school classes. How could it be that a great general from my hometown was never mentioned, not once, in all of my school years? As I climbed the steps I heard a voice softly say: “Never step on the graves.”

The memories of the Civil War continue to live on in us, more deeply sanguine than those of any other war except, perhaps, World War II and Vietnam. This is not to belittle the tragedies of other wars but to reinforce the powerful impact of the Civil War on this nation. Nearly six generations have passed since that desperate war, yet still today thousands join re-enactment groups that spend days re-living the battles of Gettysburg and Antietam, among others. Perhaps it is those “mystic chords of memory” that President Lincoln recalled that bind us so inextricably to that war. To be sure, America lost a greater part of its population (1.988%) to death in that war than in any other war in our history. The next closest, with 0.899% of the population killed, was the American Revolution. Indeed, on average, 599 American boys were killed every day in the Civil War, and that trauma has become part of the American psyche.

Like all national calamities, the Civil War did not “begin” on a certain day, and it perhaps has never really ended. Its roots stretch far back, even to a time before the American Revolution when northern abolitionists, led strongly by the Quakers, appealed to slave holders to free their chattel on moral grounds. The American Revolution, fought for liberty and the right of colonies to govern themselves added fuel to the fire. How could a government who fought for those principles enslave another while at the same time support the right of some states
to outlaw slavery and others to maintain it? How could a government who declared that “all men are created equal” then say that, well, some are more equal than others, to paraphrase George Orwell? John Adams, George Washington, and other founding fathers worried about the prospect of civil war when they supported the Compromise of 1790. At that time Southern states had demanded that the nation’s capitol be moved farther south from Philadelphia and land for a new site would be donated by two slave states—Maryland and Virginia, if northern states would not raise the issue of the abolition of slavery. All seemed fair and the question was averted, but not buried, for a few decades.

The government compromised again on the slavery issue with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, signed into law by President Monroe. The document prohibited slavery in the former Louisiana Territory north of 36° 30’ north latitude, except in Missouri, which was allowed entry as a slave state. Alabama had been admitted to the union in 1819 as a slave state, keeping the balance of free and slave states in check. Meanwhile, to admit Missouri as a slave state would tip the voting balance in the senate, with two votes per state to the south. To counter that, northerners wanted Maine to enter the union as a free state, in 1820. A worried and farsighted Thomas Jefferson warned that adaption of the compromise line would eventually split the country and civil war would ensue.

The slavery question continued to simmer; Congress continued to compromise. The Texas Annexation Resolution extended the compromise line through the Texas Territory and New Mexico Territory, hence extending slavery into those areas. Northerners were vexed.

The Compromise of 1850 followed the end of the Mexican War and diffused for four years the tension between northern and southern states over the slavery issue. Most importantly, it avoided, or rather in the end, delayed Civil War. Texas was offered debt relief, annexation of land for its panhandle, and control of El Paso if it dropped its claim over the New Mexico Territory, meaning slavery would not be extended into that territory. California would enter the union as a free state instead of being split along the old compromise line of 1820 and by the Wilmot Proviso. As final sweeteners for the south, both New Mexico Territory and Utah Territory were granted popular sovereignty to choose by vote whether to become slave or free, the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law were strengthened, giving slaveholders more power to recover their slaves who had escaped to non-slave states, and slavery would be maintained in the nation’s capitol. New Mexico Territory finally voted to adopt slavery, Utah Territory did not.

None of these compromises truly satisfied the American people, neither north nor south; they never quenched the differences between the two sections, never put out the fire but only kept the pot simmering. Then along came the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and the pot boiled over. By this act Congress, with strong political support from the South, created the Kansas and the Nebraska Territories, President Pierce repealed the old Missouri Compromise of 1820, and the question of slavery was left up to popular sovereignty, again. Predictably, northerners denounced the act as a gift to the south. Meanwhile, new settlers poured into the territories, those from the north to ensure that with the vote on the
slavery question they would have enough votes to keep the territories free. Likewise, southerners, especially from Missouri, a slave state, poured into the territories to ensure that their vote would put them on the pro-slavery side. Along with the pro-slavery influx from Missouri, resident Missourians also crossed the Kansas line to vote in the elections. Both sides participated in ballot box stuffing and political shenanigans. Meanwhile, prior to the vote, violence broke out and actually reached the scale of a low intensity civil war. The blood-letting between pro-slavery and pro-freedom factions grew to the point that Kansas then became known as “Bleeding Kansas”. The prestige of the Pierce administration, never very great, was damaged irrevocably because of the president’s hand in crafting the act. The democratic party split along several lines and the old Whig party was shattered, its various factions not seeming to agree on anything. This political disarray spawned the new Republican Party. To further stir the pot of factionalism, the United States Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case of 1857 found that the Federal government had no jurisdiction over slavery in the territories. This made it all the more pressing for both Kansas and Nebraska to quickly enter the union as states to remove themselves from the condition of being territories. Finally, the northern anti-slavery faction won the vote and Kansas entered the Union as a free state in January, 1861. Nebraska did not enter until 1867. But the ferocity of the genocide in “Bleeding Kansas” became the last straw and pushed the country irrevocably toward Civil War.

The war was a long time coming, but Congress’ inability or unwillingness to set a firm policy on the slavery question right from the beginning of our government exacerbated the problem and eventually likely heightened the intensity of the war. Compromises are only stop-gap measures and rarely work in the long run. They do, however, serve as a convenient means by which feckless politicians can avoid making hard decisions during their terms in office.

So, the people of Peace Dale had braced themselves for war for a long time, were sick of compromises, and were probably anxious to get on with it, to end the long-time bickering forever. They, as did all American, got into more than they had bargained for. When the national turmoil and upheaval was ended after four years of bloody fighting, sometimes desultory, sometimes intense and unyielding, 625,000 Americans lay dead, more than those killed outright in WWII, WWI, Vietnam, Korea, and the Spanish-American war combined. It is this gargantuan blood loss among friends and within families that has perhaps cut so deeply into our national psyche and remains there so unyielding and stalwart after the dusty years of so many generations have passed. To be sure, not all of us are so deeply captured by the memories and events of that long-ago trauma, but too many of us are entwined in those “mystic chords of memory” to let them pass from us easily. We continue to “bind up the nation’s wounds” and hope that our self-induced bloodletting has passed away, forever.

Dr. Robert “Bob” Gough  
Bozeman, Montana  
April, 2011
General Isaac Peace Rodman
A Brief Biographical Sketch

Family background

Thomas Rodman, newly arrived from Christ Church parish, Barbados, eased himself down the slippery gangplank of his yacht in Newport harbor in 1675, with King Philip and his Wampanoags, along with members of some other tribes, on the prowl killing livestock and plundering farmsteads not far to the northwest of town. That summer Governor Winthrop had decreed that all English should fortify their homes and stand their ground against attack. Women and children were sent from the plantation lands on the western side of Narragansett Bay to Newport for safety. King Phillip’s War swelled into a shooting war that bitterly cold winter and ended in bloody slaughter in the Great Swamp in mid-December. Into this turmoil stepped gentle Thomas. He had left behind in Barbados his elderly father John, a prominent member of the Society of Friends who had been banished from his native Ireland in 1655 for refusing to remove his hat in court. Thomas was a physician and quickly took up his practice in Newport, where he became a well-respected surgeon specializing in obstetrics. Like his father he was also an unabashed and prominent Quaker who was to serve as clerk of the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings in Newport for thirty years and was first clerk of the New England meetings until 1718. He built a large house on the corner of Thames and Ann (now Touro) streets in Newport which was later occupied by other prominent physicians, including Dr. Isaac Senter who served as attending physician on Colonel Benedict Arnold’s daring 1775 expedition to Quebec through the Maine wilderness. Dr. Rodman and his second wife, Patience Easton, were the progenitors of the South Kingstown branch of the Rodman family.

Dr. Rodman invested heavily in plantation land around the colony. As a wedding present he gave his eldest son Thomas, also a physician, one thousand acres of rich, Narragansett Country farmland which the city of Newport had given to the elder Thomas as a retainer for his medical services. The land was part of the old Pettaquamscutt Purchase and lay east of the Ministerial Lands and west of Boston Neck. Dr. Thomas Jr. and his bride were among the first settlers in this rich “Kingstown” wilderness, where Thomas began practice as its first physician and set about increasing his land holdings. As ardent a Quaker as his father, Dr. Thomas Jr. bought about an acre of land at Tower Hill and thereupon constructed a “sturdy meeting house”, then sold the house and the land to the Society of Friends for forty shillings in 1748. The land he bought from his father (Dr. Thomas), Rowland Robinson, and others, who themselves had purchased it from Benedict Arnold in 1720. Dr. Thomas Jr. also made it a habit to give to each of his sons twenty five acres (more or less) when they came of voting age. Being landowners qualified them to be freemen and to vote.

Dr. Thomas Jr.’s fifth child, Samuel, born 22 March, 1716 and the doctor’s grandson Daniel, expanded the family’s landholdings still farther into the fertile countryside which by that time had become known as the “Paradise of New England” for its rich, deep soil and relatively mild climate. But weather did not always cooperate and there were years when there was trouble in paradise. Great gales and hurricanes pounded the shores and the bitterly cold winter of 1740-41, which Governor William Greene called the “coldest known in New England since the memory of Man” saw sheep smother
in snow three feet deep and animals starve for lack of fodder, which had been fed out long before spring greening. The weather was so cold that salt water at the mouth of Narrow River had frozen three feet deep and people traveled freely over the ice of frozen Narragansett Bay between King’s county on its western shore and Newport to the east. Newporters long since short of cordwood purchased it from settlers to their west and daily you could see great sledges piled high with oak and maple bolts dragged across the ice by plodding teams of four and six oxen. To make matters worse, a smallpox epidemic broke out that mid-winter and took its deadly toll.

Samuel grew to have five children of his own, all working the land with teams of two and four oxen slowly pulling first wooden, later heavy iron-bottom plows. They likely raised sheep, dairy cows, and hogs, the latter of which ran riot through the woods, feeding freely on acorns, chestnuts, and hickory nuts until November slaughtering time. The land was ideal for Indian corn and hay; wheat, barley, oats, and rye were grown as well, though they were less suited to the land. The Rodmans likely had small mills with pit saws that rendered the forests of tall oaks and chestnuts into lumber for themselves and for the settlers that would surely come. Daniel bought the Dockray estate from Robert Rodman and in 1773, a tract of land in Point Judith with house, stable, and “other houses thereon.” Since most of the plantation owners of that period owned slaves, the “other houses” may have been slave quarters. In 1775 Daniel bought from George Hazard, a one hundred seventy acre piece of land at Point Judith known as “Little Neck”, for five hundred twenty five “good Spanish milled dollars.” At that time Daniel also owned at Little Rest (now Kingston), a large double house given to him by his father Samuel, which he sold in 1777 for seven hundred pounds sterling. This house is now known as the Helm House. Thus, Samuel and his son Daniel accumulated a vast acreage that included all the land between the Saugatucket River on the east and the Ministerial lands on the west, south to the estate of the Dockray’s near Sugar Loaf Hill (now at the corner of Dockray St. and the old Route 1 in Wakefield) and north into North Kingstown.

Samuel also acquired extensive land holdings at Tower Hill and Point Judith. At that time Tower Hill was located on the rise just south of the present-day Oliver Stedman Government Center at the intersections of old and new Route 1 and not farther north at the wooden tower located at the junction of Routes 1 and 138. During this time stone walls partitioned Point Judith Neck off from the land to the north, making the peninsula an ideal protected area for sheep grazing. At Tower Hill Samuel built a Quaker church and laid out the small Quaker cemetery that remains there today.

Samuel’s son Robert was born in South Kingstown on 28 November, 1745 and lived on part of the original thousand acres he inherited from his grandfather Dr. Thomas Jr., who had died in 1775. Dr. Thomas Jr. also gave to his sons Samuel and William his homestead in Rocky Brook, which they sold to Rowland Hazard in 1817. It came back into the family in 1838. Benjamin Rodman (1726 to 1821), youngest son of Dr. Thomas and brother of Samuel and William, built a grand house in Wakefield which was named by Thomas Hazard “Dalecarlia” and by which name it was long known. It stood near the junction of Route 108 and the old Route 1.

Robert farmed and raised his family in his grandfather’s old, well-appointed mansion at the east end of what is now Samuel Rodman Rd. off Kingstown Rd. at the north end of the Rocky Brook neighborhood of Peace Dale. The mansion was brought ready-framed from England in 1742 and richly finished in English oak. Robert married
his first wife, Margaret Carpenter, on 1 July, 1768. Their fifth child, also named Robert, married Elizabeth Hazard in July, 1799. Elizabeth was the daughter of Roland Hazard and Mary Peace and the sister of “Shepherd Tom” Hazard and several other siblings. With this marriage at the dawn of the 19th century and in the year that President Washington died, the name “Peace” and the wealthy Hazard family became intertwined with the Rodmans.

In 1802, Rowland Hazard (1763-1835) bought half interest in Benjamin Rodman’s fulling mill on the Saugatucket River and began the Narragansett Cotton Manufacturing Company. By this time much Rodman land had passed out of the family through gifts and inheritance. Although the family claimed that not an acre was ever sold this once wealthy family was generally considered to be wealthy no longer. In fact, William Rodman, son of Dr. Thomas Jr., who owned a large farm and mansion just north of Rocky Brook and close to the old homestead, was forced to let out rooms to pay his bills. It was in William’s mansion that Christopher Raymond Perry and his wife rented the west chamber in which their son, Oliver Hazard Perry, later the hero of Lake Erie, was born in 1785. Fifteen years later, on 3 May, 1800, Robert and Elizabeth Hazard Rodman birthed Samuel, the first of their ten children, in the same west chamber of Uncle William’s house.

Samuel grew into a kindly man of great energy, strength, and endurance, and was greatly respected for his hospitality and generosity. In 1814 he went to live with his mother’s relatives in New York but upon his return to South Kingstown in 1821 he purchased six acres of the Rodman ancestral lands from Elisha Watson for $490. On 15 July, 1821 he married Mary Peckham, a devout Christian, daughter of Benjamin Taylor Peckham and Abigail Oatley, and by her had sixteen children.

To condense the Rodman genealogy, the generations flow as follows: John 1, Thomas 2, Thomas 3, Samuel 4, Robert 5, Robert 6, Samuel 7, and Isaac 8.

The 1820s: Birth and childhood

The first child of Samuel and Mary was born on a clear, windy Sunday, 18 August, 1822, as recorded in town records but the birth date is sometimes given as 14, 22 or 28 August. The proud parents named the handsome boy Isaac Peace, after Isaac Peace Hazard, the son of Roland and Mary Peace Hazard and brother of Elizabeth Hazard Rodman, who in turn was named for his maternal grandfather, Isaac Peace. It is for Isaac Peace’s daughter, Mary Peace, that Peace Dale was named. (The Dale part of the name comes from the town lying in the dale between Tower and Kingston Hills.) Samuel Rodman was friendly with both Isaac Peace Hazard and his brother Roland Gibson Hazard, for whom he named his third son.

As most children did, little Isaac helped around the family homestead from a very young age, picking eggs and feeding the stock, and was deeply indoctrinated in Christianity by his mother. In 1826 at age four Isaac began to attend one of the four school houses in South Kingstown, the curriculum of which stressed strongly spelling, reading, and New Testament studies, but school terms ran for only 2 months each year, in winter and summer. Two male teachers were employed by the town for instruction. Early on Isaac developed a great love of books and in later life appeared always to have a book in hand. He eventually grew into an astute, regimented, scholarly man, always kind but sometimes seeming somewhat aloof, perhaps lost in a philosophical tract, a Biblical
passage, or an accounting problem. By the time he was seven years old he could read the New Testament easily and was examined and promoted by the local school committee to the “writing school”, the curriculum of which emphasized spelling, reading, punctuation and the use of capital letters, writing, grammar, arithmetic, elementary bookkeeping, geography, and “epistolar composition”.

Meanwhile, his father Samuel worked hard in the local textile mills owned by his friends the Hazards and slowly accumulated more land. In the same year that Isaac was promoted to “writing school”, Samuel was promoted to manager of the Peace Dale Manufacturing Company Mills, owned and operated by brothers Isaac Peace Hazard and Roland Gibson Hazard since they were given the mills by their father, Roland, in 1819. Roland Gibson Hazard was a year younger than Samuel Rodman, Isaac some years older. Most members of the Hazard family at that time were staunch Quakers and the cloth their mills produced was mostly sold in the southern states. Mary Rodman joined the Baptist Church (now Wakefield Baptist Church) on 14 May, 1829, and Samuel followed her on 15 November. Both became well-respected, strong and long-time members of that institution who instructed their children not only to be strong Christians but also to be tolerant of other religions and denominations. Continuing his quest to reclaim his ancestral lands, Samuel purchased the old Rodman homestead built by his grandfather Thomas. He and Mary, along with their young family now numbering three sons and one daughter (their second child, Benjamin, having died at a year old in 1825), at last, through diligence and hard work, were able to move back onto the family homestead. When school was not in session and when he was not receiving religious education Isaac continued to help around the house but also would have begun to help his father in the mills about this time, learning firsthand the business of textile manufacture by sweeping the floors and perhaps replacing the leather belts in some of the machines.

The 1830s

The early part of this decade saw boom times for the Rhode Island textile industry. Samuel purchased Rocky Brook Mills in 1835 and began commercial shipping and docking enterprises at Narragansett Pier. The Rocky Brook mill had begun in 1814
and made woolen yarns and loosely-woven woolen “negro” cloth which was sold in the southern states through New York commission merchants. When Samuel took over the mills employed five men, seven girls, and five children who worked from sunrise to sunset in summer and sunrise to 8 p.m. in winter. A diligent man could make as much as $3 per week.

Samuel sold some of his property in Narragansett Pier in 1838 and purchased from Thomas R. Hazard, for $6,000, one hundred twenty five to one hundred thirty acres of land in Rocky Brook, where building his own homestead where seven of his children were born. The old homestead of Dr. Thomas Jr., which he had given to his sons Samuel and William, who sold it in 1817, stood still on that land and it was through this purchase that it returned to the Rodman family. In modern times this homestead became the Meadowbrook Nursing Home, just northeast and across Route 108 from Rocky Brook Reservoir. He removed several of the small mills already on the site and built one substantial mill, taking the granite blocks from his surrounding meadowland where still today the drill holes remain in the meadow stones. He then went on to build the entire village of Rocky Brook for his mill operatives, laying out roads, setting out trees and beautifying the entire area. The two ponds on his property—now the Rocky Brook reservoir and “Browning’s” pond, became the reservoirs for his “upper” and “lower” mills.

Meanwhile, Isaac, having completed his modest, common school education, now worked for his father. Samuel had the brooks deepened and built the granite slab raceways that turned the mill’s chestnut or white oak waterwheel which they had to have enlarged to supply more power.

The 1840s

Undeterred by the Panic of 1837 Samuel built his company mill store and it was common for a young man growing up in a mill owner’s family to learn the business trade by running the company store, where he would have to keep close tabs on accounting, ordering, receiving, and what is now called the “bottom line”. Following successful completion of this business he was considered fit to step up to managing, with oversight, the far larger mill business. The concern, called the “Rocky Brook Stores”, advertised groceries, provisions, shoes, boots, and other items; nearly everything mill employees might want or need. Business flourished.

Meanwhile upstate William Sprague, eight years younger than Isaac and son of another large Rhode Island mill owner, also began to learn the business trade by running his father’s company store. Sprague, born in Cranston in 1830, inherited what will have had become by 1862 the largest calico textile company in the world, with nine cotton mills in Rhode Island running 800,000 yards per week and printing about one million yards per week. William early showed a great fascination for military matters. At the age of twelve he formed a company of forty boys who immediately elected him their captain. He then marched them toward Acote’s Hill in Chepachet during Rhode Island’s Dorr Rebellion to take on the rebels but fortunately for him his company was intercepted and told to go home by Rhode Island state troops also marching to confront the rebels. At the age of eighteen Sprague joined the decrepit and nearly defunct Marine Artillery Company of Providence as a private and quickly rose to the rank of colonel, having poured considerable time and money into refurbishing that body into a full battery of artillery.
He grew into an astute politician and, as a conservative, won elections for governor over both the liberal Democrats and the radical Republicans and served the state from 1860 to 1863.

There are strong parallels in the lives of Isaac Rodman and Sprague. Both grew up in large and powerful mill-owning families; both became successful businessmen and went on to practice their civic duties. Both were popular moderately-conservative politicians and both fought to maintain the Union. The question of slavery was not high on either man’s list. Finally, while there is no direct evidence, it is highly likely that, given their similar interests and their concomitant political service both men later became good friends.

In 1841, with business booming, Samuel actively began to promote the temperance movement in town and among his employees, preaching total abstinence reform. This became a popular Whig commitment at the time and is circumstantial evidence that Samuel was an old-time Whig. Tragically, he and Mary lost two more children about this time, each less than a year old.

Meanwhile, Isaac passed into adulthood as a man of medium height (about 5’6”) and weight (about 140 pounds), with dark hair, dazzling clear blue eyes, and gentle, unassuming, handsome features. After a few more years of initiatory labor in the mills and the mill store, especially in performance of drudge office work, he and his younger brother Rowland Gibson Rodman joined in partnership with their father under the firm name of S.R. Rodman & Sons. The textile industry continued to expand and Samuel continued his temperance campaign and believed that the only way to prosper as a Christian was to have happy, independent workers. He encouraged his employees to become landowners and sold them parcels of his own land at nominal prices.

Marriage and family

One day, as the anecdote goes, Isaac met a beautiful young woman named Sally Lyman Arnold driving a flock of geese up Kingston Hill and was immediately love-struck. Kingston Road had not yet been extended to Kingston at the time so the approach to Kingston Hill for Isaac most likely would have been by the old South Road and up past Elisha Potter’s magnificent home. Beautiful Sally was the daughter of Sally Lyman and Lemuel Hastings Arnold, a Whig and 12th governor of Rhode Island from 1831 to 1833. Before becoming governor, Lemuel served in the Rhode House of Representatives from 1826 to 1831 and after his governorship served in the United States House of Representatives from 1845 to 1847. His civic duties done, Lemuel moved his family to South Kingstown to practice law. Suspecting a marriage on the horizon, in 1846 Samuel began fixing up his father’s old Rodman mansion, which he had bought back in 1838, although some documents suggest he inherited the homestead in 1829. He removed the old stone chimney in which he found a stone dated 1742, but kept the fine English oak interior. Isaac and Sally moved into it after their marriage on 17 June, 1847 and there had their first child on 25 April, 1848. They named him Isaac Peace Rodman Jr.

The 1850s

The young Rodman couple would go on to have six more children —Sally Lyman, born 10 February 1850; Mary Peckham, born 23 March 1852; Samuel, born February 1854; Thomas, born 23 March 1856; Samuel, born 23 April 1858; and
Elizabeth Arnold, born July 1860. The first Samuel died in 1856 at age two and Elizabeth at age four in 1864. Perhaps with the premonition that he should someday have a strong interest in the local school system, Isaac became a member of the school committee at age twenty seven in 1849 and served as one of nine members until 1854. He again served for one more year in 1859. By the mid-1850s his family had outgrown their home and in 1855 he and Sally purchased the Freeman Watson farm, building there a beautiful, spacious stone mansion still standing at the corner of Saugatucket and Kingstown Roads. As was the granite for his mills, the granite for the home was quarried from the stone outcroppings in the surrounding meadowlands. About this time Isaac and Samuel helped the town formulate plans for extending Kingstown Road to Kingston Hill.

Business and social posture

By this time S.R. Rodman & Sons mills had become one of the wealthiest textile firms in the state. Samuel was elected state senator on 7 April, 1852 with two thirds of the votes. In that same year Isaac owned real estate valued at $8,000 for which he paid $12.80 in taxes. He continued to expand his land holdings, purchasing a farm at Tower Hill and the old Quaker Meeting House, which he had moved across the road onto his land and converted into a dwelling. He also purchased the old Episcopal Church at Tower Hill, which had not been used for many years, and converted it into a barn. These were the properties that Isaac’s great, great, grandfather Samuel had purchased more than a hundred years before, and the Quaker church that he had built. Part of the “thousand acres” was back in the family. In 1853 Samuel was nominated for Lieutenant Governor. In that era nomination meant near-certain victory. He declined even to be considered.

About this time Samuel probably had misgivings about his affiliations with the Whig Party. That old party, championed by John Quincy Adams and others, sprang up as a bulwark against the Jacksonian democrats and was especially popular among northeastern industrialists led by Daniel Webster. The party promoted the building of roads and canals, the establishment of good schools, and the advocacy of strong religious training and temperance. It was especially popular among lawyers, bankers, mill-owners, and other businessmen. While members generally were strongly pro-Union they thought little of the institution of slavery one way or the other. The party was fairly popular from the 1830s to the mid-1850s, when it partially dissolved into the American Party in the south and the “Know-Nothing” Party in the north, a party which was strongly nativist and venomously anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant. This dissolution of the Whig Party was partly responsible for the emergence of the Republican Party in the mid-1850s as an opposition party to the Democrats. Lincoln himself left the Whig Party to become a Republican. The Rodmans clung to some of the sentiments of the old party but its radicalization and hijacking by the Know-Nothings would not have sat well with the generous, non-biased, religiously-tolerant Rodmans, especially so when many of their mill workers would have been Irish catholic immigrants themselves. The dissolution of their old party was to have a strong affect on the Rodmans who swung to the Republican Party’s ideals.

Isaac, with a remarkable memory and insatiable thirst for knowledge spent what little spare time he had engaged in study to supplement his elementary formal education, enabling him to deal with better educated men as his equal. He became intimately familiar with classical literature and of course, the Bible, and undoubtedly read treatises
on business management, accounting, and politics and tracts that dealt with social issues, temperance among them. Although he accumulated great knowledge he remained extremely modest and retiring with no unseemly extravagances in conduct; there was absolutely no ostentation about him. Most townspeople considered him a simple, self-taught man of great intelligence who reasoned with strong logic and who handled all ordinary affairs with modesty and careful expediency.

On 2 March 1856 Samuel was elected president of the Wakefield Institute for Savings Bank and Isaac was appointed to its Board of Trustees as well as to the directorship of the Wakefield Bank, a separate institution. A month later, on Wednesday, 2 April, 1856, Isaac was elected unanimously as Town Moderator upon the resignation of Elisha Potter, Esq. That same year S.R. Rodman & Sons purchased the Wakefield Mills formerly owned by Stephen Wright, an axe-maker who also built what is now the Larchwood Inn. Isaac’s real estate was valued at $16,000, double what it was only four years earlier, for which he paid $24.00 in taxes. Isaac served for a number of years as president of the South Kingstown Town Council before being elected to several terms as state representative and then state senator. He missed town meetings in June and November 1856 and the town elected a new moderator in 1857. Isaac was elected once again in June 1858 to the Town Council for a one year term as one of seven members. Through that year most of the meetings involved motions to refurbish the Town Farm which had recently burned. At that time the Town Farm was located near the site of the present-day South County Hospital. The Rodmans had been long-time contributors to its upkeep. Now the council solicited contributions from townspeople, businesses, and the mills and in poured money, tools, clothing, and animals for the poor and indigent who lived on the “new” farm.

By now the benign, reserved, genteel family man had developed solidly into a trusted public servant and astute businessman. Because of his deep love of books and through close ties with the Hazard family he led efforts to organize the Peace Dale Library on donated Hazard property. The library was established in the old, granite Peace Dale Office building across the street from its present location. His business acuity also led him to organize the Wakefield Trust Company. In 1859 he was paid $12.00 for canvassing the voting list, apportioning highway taxes, and making out the jury list. He was also one of seven tax assessors for the town and served a sixth term on the school committee. His honest character and unceasing drive to get the job done propelled him into serving as director of the Wakefield Trust Bank and the Wakefield Institution for Savings while at the same time serving on the board of directors of Landholder’s Bank.

In July Rodman Mills felt a small setback as lightening struck their mill in Mooresfield, with some employees narrowly escaping with their lives.

There is confusion in the literature over Isaac Rodman’s religious affiliations and many historical sketches give his denomination as Quaker. His ancestors were strong Quakers of course, but Samuel and Mary Rodman joined the Baptist church in 1829 and presumably raised their children as Baptists. Indeed, records from the Wakefield Baptist church indicate that Isaac’s sister Louisa Hazard Rodman joined the church in 1842, Isaac himself on 16 March, 1850, and four more of their siblings subsequently. There is no record as to which church, if any, Sally belonged. Isaac’s father Samuel contributed heavily to the building of a new Wakefield Baptist Church on its present site in 1852. An additional argument against the family being Quakers is that neither Isaac nor Samuel
was an abolitionist, a view strongly promoted by the Quakers. Further, Isaac taught “Sunday School”, a Bible class for young men, and finally became superintendent of the “Sunday School”. The Quakers called their “Sunday School” equivalent “First Day School”. Isaac long remained an honored member of the Baptist church but, unlike some of his fellow congregants at the time, he took his father’s lead in being liberal in his religious views and strongly disapproved of intolerance, superstition, and religious bigotry. In sum, there is both documented and circumstantial evidence that Isaac and many of the later Rodmans were Baptists and Episcopal, not Quakers.

1860: The Coming Fury

On the eve of the Civil War Samuel Rodman and his sons owned and operated five mills and were one of the largest manufacturers in the state. Their primary product, “negro cloth”, was made into clothing for slaves. Although the impending crisis meant uncertain times for the textile industry, most folks went about their business as usual. Life went on quietly in Rocky Brook but everyone felt the tremors of conflict on the horizon that had slowly grown ever more calamitous over the last decade. It was like a distant roll of thunder over the quiet landscape. Since President Franklin Pierce’s election in 1852 the question of slavery had become intensely inflamed and political invective more venomous. Heavy drinking “Fainting Frank” Pierce, the sobriquet given him by his troops as he fainted before them during the Mexican War, was a “doughface”, that is, a northern democrat (Pierce was from New Hampshire) with southern sympathies who did nothing to quell the slavery debate. In fact, he considered slavery to be a constitutional guarantee and was in sympathy with his Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis. In a few years Davis would become the president of the Confederacy. The friction and the failures of the Pierce Administration along with the dissolution of the Whig Party spawned the new Republican Party and the immensely popular “Pathfinder”, John C. Fremont, accepted its nomination for president in 1856. Fremont lost.

Pennsylvania democrat James Buchanan succeeded Pierce as president and did little to quell the issues as well. He was a hard worker but was hobbled by the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision in which the justices found that slaves were not protected by the Constitution, that is, slavery was not illegal and therefore, must be legal. While “Old Buck” Buchanan personally was opposed to slavery on moral grounds, he felt he could do nothing legally to stop it. He also thought that, while secession was unconstitutional, to stop it with the use of Federal troops would be unconstitutional as well. To make matters worse, Buchanan’s cabinet, one of the most corrupt in presidential history, festered with southern sympathizers and secessionists. His vice-president John Breckinridge resigned his office and joined the Confederacy, rising to the rank of major general. His Secretary of War John Floyd, after arranging for thousands of dollars in government bonds, armaments, and other war materiel to be shipped to the southern states, also resigned and became a Confederate major general. Secretary of the Treasury Howell Cobb resigned and led Georgia into the Confederacy. Another most insidious cabinet member, Jacob Thompson, Secretary of the Interior, openly supported secession while still serving in Buchanan’s cabinet. When the president tried to fortify Fort Sumter Thompson notified South Carolina officials in advance that the Yankees were coming, then resigned his post to become aide to Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard. Buchanan, weak and indecisive, frustratingly felt he could do nothing at all but sit
quietly smoking cigars and let the political scene unfold. He completely ignored General Winfield Scott’s rambling 29 October 1860 letter exhorting him to strengthen the garrisons of Federal forts in the southern states, especially Fort Pickens and Fort Sumter. By this time the division in the Federal government had grown to disastrous proportions. The Democratic Party had split into two or more factions, each with candidates for president. Given the split, a Republican win was almost assured and Abraham Lincoln indeed became the president-elect after the 5 November 1860 elections. Southern sympathizers and many government workers bloviated openly in Washington saloons about the necessity for secession. They toasted the health of Jefferson Davis and threatened to kill president-elect Abraham Lincoln while collecting Federal government paychecks.

The General-in-Chief of the Federal Army was old, decrepit, and terribly obese Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott who had become a major general long before many of the officers in his “new” army were born. In fact, one rising star, General Winfield Scott Hancock, was named for General Scott. Scott, nicknamed “Old Fuss and Feathers” for his love of military pomp and protocol, was born during the Washington Administration, served in the military under fourteen presidents from Jefferson to Lincoln, saw action in the War of 1812, was the hero of the Mexican War, the Whig Party candidate for president in 1852, and now held the highest rank of any general since Washington. But his gouty and rheumatic body had swollen to grotesque proportions with more than three hundred pounds of flesh and fat hanging on his six foot plus frame. His strength had waned terribly. He could no longer mount his horse and could get onto and off his sofa only with the aid of a leather strap fastened to the ceiling of his parlor, its lower end bearing an iron ring through which the general slipped his hand to lift himself. He was tired and now faced a war which had come too late for him, a war that would find his favorite old political enemy Jefferson Davis in cahoots with his favorite old soldier Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee. Scott offered overall command of the Federal army to Lee but he declined and followed his native state of Virginia into the confederacy. But the old general saw things clearly. It would not be a quick war; the Union could not defeat the South piecemeal, and in his dotage he devised his famous “Anaconda Plan” to capture and secure the Mississippi all the way to the Gulf, thereby cutting the western part of the Confederacy off from the eastern part, dividing and conquering the insurrectionists. The Gulf and southern Atlantic coasts would be blockaded by the Federal Navy and cut off from both import and export trade. Lastly, Federal troops would push down from the north and in from the west and south, forcing Confederate forces back on their capitol at Montgomery, Alabama and later Richmond, Virginia and so destroying them. This plan reminded the Washington politicians of a great anaconda twined around and strangling its southern prey, hence its name. But there was too little time to train the men. Scott knew this and he ever after blamed himself for the consequences of an impending Federal defeat at the first Battle of Bull Run. He was too old for war now, and he knew it.

The dilatory action the dysfunctional Buchanan Administration took toward Fort Sumter and other federal forts illustrates the sort of political chaos and ineffectiveness the country found itself wallowing in on the eve of war. Major Robert Anderson, commander of the fort’s garrison, first requested supplies and reinforcements for his men on 23 November, 1860. Receiving no response, he repeated his request on 28 November.
Again, receiving no response, Anderson requested aid for the third time on 1 December. The administration dithered and weighed the political consequences. Finally, on 31 December, President Buchanan ordered supplies and reinforcements to be sent to Anderson, but the supply ship did not sail until 5 January, 1861, a month and a half after Anderson made his first request!

The air in Peace Dale was tense. Orders for mill goods had slackened considerably, as they had generally throughout the country. S.R. Rodman & Sons was falling on hard times, as were the Hazard-owned mills. Isaac asserted openly the old Whig, now Republican, philosophy that he was not necessarily anti-slavery, but he was strongly pro-Union. The sentiment that the Union must not be allowed to dissolve was commonplace throughout most of the North, with most of the antislavery rhetoric reserved for hard-line abolitionists only. In 1860 many old Whigs like Samuel and Isaac supported the Republican moderates who supported Abraham Lincoln. The Rodmans likely even went to hear Lincoln speak that fall at the Railroad Hall in Providence as the Republican candidate stumped through the New England states. These Republican moderates joined some conservative Democrats who nominated William Sprague on a modified “Conservative” Democrat ticket and helped him win the election. William Sprague of Cranston, 29 years old, boy militarist, former Democrat and heir to a huge cotton textile empire, won the 1860 election as the “Boy Governor”. His handsome but boyish and bespectacled features, military dress covering his stooped, thin frame, and colonelcy in the Providence Marine Corps of Artillery no doubt appealed to Rhode Islanders on the brink of war and conspired for his election, along with the fact that he was generally considered the richest man in New England. Like the Rodmans and indeed, much of Rhode Island, Sprague was soft on slavery but strongly supported preservation of the Union at all costs. Even still, and oddly enough, Sprague’s election victory was celebrated by the citizens of Savannah, Georgia, who fired a one hundred gun salute to honor his election as a rebuke to northern abolitionists. It was the citizens of Savannah who, three generations earlier, had honored another Rhode Island warrior, General Nathanael Greene, with an estate which he named Mulberry Grove and who, three years following, buried the great man in the heart of their city. The Rodmans wholeheartedly and quite naturally supported their friend and fellow textile businessman Sprague.

Textile orders from the south continued to dwindle and S.R. Rodman & Sons cloth, with a national reputation for excellence, found little market now. Sally’s father Lemuel had died in late June, 1852 and Isaac’s family inherited his estate at about this time, valued at $7,000. There was work to be done there. Isaac was also expected to maintain the directorship of two banks and to help his younger brother Roland and aging father in the faltering textile business. On top of all this, his last child, destined to die at age four, was born in July, 1860. But Isaac remained strong, tireless, and unflustered. In twenty years his mills had attained the zenith of manufacturing prowess; he was not about to let all of that crumble now. Isaac stumped for conciliatory measures toward the southern states and felt strongly that compromise remained the proper method of civilized, Christian conduct. Unlike some of the hot-heads around town he did not want war, but he would not tolerate dissolution of the Union.

The winter of 1860-61 in Peace Dale came early with deep snow, unusual early cold, and good skating before Thanksgiving. Hunting was good, with plenty of deer and rabbits and partridge in the thick brush where blueberry and alder bushes grew along the
edges of the fields and ponds, gray squirrels about the mature oaks and the hickories, butternuts, chestnuts, and black walnuts here and there among them. Plenty of geese and ducks flitted on the ponds and salt marshes outside the skims of ice along the reeds. There were plentiful catches of winter flounder and eels by spearing them through the ice at Salt Pond and you could spear bullheads and eels or snag yellow perch in the muddy freshwater ponds. If you were clever enough you could even catch a few small brook trout in the brooks that fed the reservoirs. Tommy cod had come into the estuaries and marshes, all to be netted or caught on tarred cotton hand lines, salted down or smoked and larded away for the rest of the winter. By the full moon in November the frost fish (tomcod and whiting) came in on high tides for the picking off Narragansett beach and the season would last through much of the winter if you were hardy enough to moonlight on the icy sands. And if you were of a mind you could collect from the Town Clerk a 5 cent bounty on every muskrat you could trap or shoot. Just the nose would do, and you could eat the rest and sell the hide for additional money. Icemen were busy cutting great slabs of ice from Browning’s pond and from Peace Dale pond, sledging them to the sawdust-insulated icehouses where they were covered with more sawdust to keep them frozen long into the summer. When the pussy willows bloomed in the warm days of early March buckies (alewives) enough spawned in the Saugatucket River below Wright’s Mills (Wakefield Mills) and in other tidal brooks and rivers. These fish would not take bait and had to be seined or netted, then salted or, more commonly, smoked with apple or maple chips, a dozen or so skewered through their eyes on twigs of chokecherry or alder, and sold at the markets and general stores. The meat was sweet and good but full of bones. The first tautog bit on green crabs about the time the first dandelions bloomed, the meaty fish, especially their heads, preferred by industrious housewives for fish chowder and stew. The first schoolie striped bass came up in April from the Chesapeake Bay and after them, the voracious bluefish and the schools of tinker mackerel in summer. All the saltwater ponds provided plenty of oysters, scallops, quahogs, whelks, mussels, and steamer and razor clams through all the seasons. You just had to go get them. As far as other household items were concerned, Rodman Stores remained open and advertised all manner of woolen goods and woolen yards for sale to keep the folks warm and happy.

Things were not all that bad in Peace Dale if you were ambitious, but mill work was slack because of mounting anti-northern sentiment. Some employees were laid off outright or placed on “short-time”. Recollecting the insipid and moribund Buchanan Administration, Peace Dale folks worried not so much about going to war but that President Lincoln would not be tough enough to prevent general secession. This slavery issue had been boiling away for a decade now, far longer if you considered the initial simmering period during and even before the Revolutionary War, and northerners were tired of southern bullying and gasconade; southerners were tired of what they perceived as the moral fanaticism of the northern abolitionists and of attempts by northerners to interfere with their “states rights”. Secession would bring the issue to a head once and for all. They did. South Carolina had already seceded in December, just before Christmas, as it had threatened to do if Lincoln were elected, five more states (Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana) went out of the Union in January, and one (Texas) in February. What was to prevent all the rest from following their example? What about the slave-holding border states like Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee which may or may not secede? What was to be done with them? It was a time to “wait and
see”, but also a time to prepare for the coming fury. Like other northerners, local folks felt the war would be over in a week or two, certainly by Christmas, and were convinced that the Confederates would turn tail and run as soon as they faced Federal troops. After the first little skirmish it would be “On to Richmond” and the end of the war for sure. It was all so black and white to most common folks, but not to Senator Elisha R. Potter. Potter recalled that Rhode Islanders felt it treasonous not to believe that the southerners would run away after the first fight and that if you did not wholeheartedly agree that the rebellion must be put down then you were branded a “secessionist”. There was no in-between. He pointed out the fallacies and the fallacious notion that the south was backward and produced no goods but cotton to sustain itself. In fact, said Potter, the south produced all of the rice, a fifth of the wheat, half the corn, half the neat (dairy) cattle, and two thirds of all the hogs in the United States. No, said he, it would be a long war.

1861: A Year of Reckoning

A war-ready Governor Sprague met in Washington with General Winfield Scott and President-elect Lincoln in February 1861 and offered Rhode Island troops to support the war effort. Sprague was one of the first governors to do so and quickly became a close confidant of Lincoln.

Meanwhile, many politicians realized now that the situation could not be solved by compromise. On 9 February Jefferson Davis was elected the provisional president of the Confederacy and was inaugurated on 18 February in Montgomery, Alabama.

By this time Washington was in a near state of panic with few troops to secure the capitol. In fact, the entire Federal Army just a few months before mustered only 16,000 men scattered throughout the entire United States. Most were serving on garrison duty in the far off western territories or fighting Indians. To worsen matters, about a third of these troops were about to resign from the Federal Army and join their home states in the Confederacy. Volunteer citizens poured into Washington to fill the gap. General Scott ordered clerks and citizen volunteers of the city to form volunteer companies and other units and placed them to guard federal buildings, which they sandbagged and prepared to defend with old smoothbore flintlocks and with any other weapons they could find. Their rallying point and last stand was to be the Treasury building. Other Washington men were rounded up and made to serve until state troops could arrive. Bums and indigents were hauled off the streets, given muskets, and placed on guard duty and night patrol as the “Stranger’s Guard” to protect the capitol against the secessionists. Redoubtable Cassius M. Clay of Kentucky controlled this guard and appeared at the Executive Mansion one day with three pistols in his belt and a large bowie knife to offer his personal protection to President Lincoln. Allen Pinkerton’s detectives sniffed around the town to uncover whatever rumors and gossip of impending doom that happened their way. James H.Lane, the lanky orator from Kansas, formed the “Frontier Guard” of hearty Kansans, brought them to Washington, and housed them in the Executive Mansion itself for a time to protect the president and his family. Such was the desperate state of things that spring.

President Lincoln slipped through secessionist Baltimore by rail in the middle of the night and was inaugurated under heavy security on 4 March, the same day that Major Anderson reported that his supplies at Fort Sumter were low once again and that he was in a desperate situation. He could not hold out for much longer.
Rodman was elected moderator pro-tem of the South Kingstown town meeting on 3 April 1861 and he knew full well what this meeting would be about. In spite of the formal agenda, this would be a war meeting! Still, Isaac clung to rapidly-dimming hopes for compromise even though national events were riding on a strong outgoing tide. It was too late; there could be no compromise now. John Russell Bartlett, serving in the Rhode Island Secretary of State office, recalled that when Rodman realized one early April morning that war was certain he, in an uncharacteristically frantic and excited frame of mind, his soft clear blue eyes now wide and excited, rushed into Bartlett’s Providence office, pleaded that the Narragansett Guards, an old militia unit, be revived, and volunteered to be its captain. Startled by Rodman’s changed persona, Bartlett recalled that Rodman had been a “most modest business-minded Christian gentleman” previously but henceforth favored war as the only practical solution. The South had gone too far and Rodman would now serve out of a strong sense of duty to his country. But perhaps too, the situation had become very personal for Rodman. His mills both in Rocky Brook and in Wakefield, could no longer sell their goods, nor could they readily receive payment for goods already sold in the South. The industry Samuel and his sons worked so diligently to build over a score of years was now collapsing. No, entry into the war now for Rodman had moved out of the theoretical and into the personal and practical.

On 4 April President Lincoln ordered a relief expedition be sent to Ft. Sumter but because of his old political rival Secretary of State Seward’s duplicity in the matter he ordered that no armed escort accompany the relief force, which sailed out of New York four days later. It was too late.

In part due to Rodman’s pleading Governor Sprague revived the Washington Cadets (Narragansett Guards) on 7 April and placed it under the command of Colonel Leonard Arnold. During the Dorr Rebellion the state militia had been composed of four brigades and one division. The 3rd brigade was from Washington County and had fourteen chartered commands subject to direct order of the governor. The Washington Cadets were chartered in 1841 and commanded at that time by Captain George Whitford. They eventually became the Wakefield Cadets and, in 1844, the Narragansett Guards.

Sensing that time was nearly up and war imminent Governor Sprague sent a letter to President Lincoln on 11 April specifically offering one battery of artillery with six pieces, plus horses and one thousand Rhode Island men sufficient to form a regiment of troops. Without doubt Lincoln accepted the offer at once.

Finally, sectional tensions broke their bonds and exploded at 4:30 on the morning of Friday 12 April, 1861, a mere five days after the Narragansett Guards was revived; the guns of Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard opened on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The shooting war was on. Unable to retaliate effectively, given his short supplies and understrength garrison, Major Anderson surrendered the fort soon after. Illustrating the general but uninformed conviction that the war would be soon over, President Lincoln three days later called for 75,000 volunteer troops to serve for three months. At 11 o’clock on the morning of Wednesday, 17 April Rodman attended the emergency meeting of the state legislature called by Governor Sprague to discuss the war efforts. The next day the "Flying Artillery" that Sprague had promised the president prepared to leave Providence for Washington.

On Friday, 19 April, a week after the bombardment of Fort Sumter began, a secessionist Baltimore mob attacked the rear companies of the 6th Massachusetts
Regiment with brick bats, clubs and pistols as they marched through that city on their way to defend Washington. Four soldiers and a dozen citizens lay dead with scores more wounded. The Bay-Staters fought their way through the city and finally boarded the next rail link to Washington. Redoubtable nurse Clara Barton, along with the help of five black volunteers, quickly set up a hospital in the hostile city for treatment of the wounded. On that same day, the anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Narragansett Guards met at the Kingston courthouse. Ninety four men from Peace Dale, many employees of Rodman’s Mills (my great, great, great uncle among them), marched there and with the addition of some other men, one hundred thirty tentatively were organized as Company E, 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers – “South Kingstown’s Own”. As was customary, the men of the company elected their own captain, usually on the basis of popularity and trustworthiness; they elected Isaac Rodman. Although company officers were elected, they were appointed officially by the Governor. Sprague without delay confirmed Captain Rodman’s appointment. After one hour of drilling the company was dismissed and ordered to meet for drill every evening at Peace Dale, Wakefield, or Rocky Brook until further orders. Officers of volunteer units such as this did not normally receive much military training as they were expected simply to follow the orders of officers in the regular army, but the ambitious among them read much military literature on their own. We don’t know if Rodman read books on military tactics and drills but given his bookish nature he likely must have or he would not have known how to drill his men. The following day, 20 April, Colonel Ambrose E. Burnside and Governor Sprague, his by-now famous yellow cockade fluttering from his hat, themselves led the five hundred thirty men, their laundress and her three relatives of the First Regiment, Rhode Island Detached Militia (1st Rhode Island), all three month enlistees, from Exchange Place in Providence to Washington and remained with them, on and off, for the next few months.

Meanwhile the scene in Washington looked nearly hopeless. South and west of the city lay Confederate Virginia; north and east of the city lay the border state of Maryland, which, while it had not yet seceded, had strong secessionist tendencies and sympathies among its eastern counties. It also controlled nearly all of the rail links into Washington from the north. Washington was nearly surrounded, cut off, and in a state of near panic. Lincoln, desperate for northern volunteers, forlorn and melancholy, stared out of the north windows of the White House and whispered “Why don’t they come?” While visiting on 24 April the Washington hospitals tending the wounded men of the 6th Massachusetts who had gotten through Baltimore, Lincoln turned to some of the soldiers and remarked glumly, “I don’t believe there is any north. The [New York] 7th Regiment is a myth. Rhode Island is not known in our geography any longer. You are the only Northern realities.” The next day a troop train carrying the well-trained 7th New York chugged into Washington, followed by troops of the 1st Rhode Island and other volunteer regiments. The north had reappeared in Lincoln’s geography.

On 29 April, Governor Sprague was in Washington with the 1st Rhode Island while Company E, later to be incorporated into the 2nd Rhode Island regiment, continued drilling at home. Those townspeople with handicaps, who were too young or too old to join the volunteer company, or who were otherwise indisposed were obliged to serve in the “Home Guard”, commanded by Major Hastings Arnold. Arnold was the son of Lemuel Arnold and brother to Sally Rodman, hence Rodman’s brother-in-law, and had the unique
distinction of being the only soldier wounded in the Dorr Rebellion a score of years before. One of his brothers, Daniel Lyman Arnold, would be killed in the new war and another brother, Richard, eventually promoted to major general in the regular army at war’s end.

On Friday, 3 May President Lincoln issued a new call for 42,000 men to serve for three years. On that same day Governor Sprague directed Rhode Island Adjutant-General Mauran to issue an order to form another regiment.

In the South Kingstown town meeting of 4 May Captain Rodman encouraged more volunteers for the Narragansett Guards and national defense and offered to provide comfort and support for their families. He had been advised that his unit would be mustered in soon at Providence as Company E, 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry Regiment. To ease the hardship this would bring to the men’s families the town voted to pay enlistees $1 each for every six hours of drilling. Samuel Rodman served on the committee to care for families of volunteers with $3,000 that had been set aside for that purpose. To each family whose head was absent as a volunteer $6-$12 per month was allocated in addition to the drilling pay, the range in payments likely determined by the number of dependents. In the first call for troops for three months service as the 1st Rhode Island, issued in early April, South Kingstown had sent ninety seven men; in the second call for three years service as the 2nd Rhode Island regiment, issued a month later, sixty nine South Kingstown men eventually were mustered in. Some enlisted for the money, some out of boredom in sleepy Peace Dale, some because they thought it would be fun, and some, many perhaps, out of loyalty to their country.

On 6 May, Arkansas joined the Confederacy.

This spring of 1861 was full of fear, excitement, and hope. Whatever happened things would change inevitably… unalterably. Nothing would be the same again, except for the pink and white apple blossoms on the trees along the roads and in the ubiquitous orchards and pastures whose heavy perfume ladened the Peace Dale air with a warm, reassuring fragrance, and the familiar biting scent of the salt air on a southeast wind, and the rampaging gold of blooming dandelions that colored all the fields and pastures. It had always been a time for plowing and planting and fishing; now it was a time for war.

By 7 May four full companies of the 2nd Rhode Island Regiment of Volunteers had been raised and officers chosen — one at Providence (Company D), commanded by Captain W.H.P. Steere, later Colonel of the 4th Rhode Island; one at Bristol (Company G), commanded by Captain Nathan Goff, Jr.; one at East Greenwich and neighborhood (Company H), commanded by Captain C. Greene, and one at South Kingstown (Company E), commanded by Captain Rodman. By the time the regiment was mustered a month later it had swelled to its nominal complement of ten companies, each with approximately one hundred men. There was no Company “J” to avoid confusion with Company “I”. None of the original four company captains had military training. One was a molding maker, one a railroad ticket master, one a stone mason, and of course Rodman was a banker and businessman. Governor Sprague looked only for dependable men with strong characters and good leadership qualities who could follow orders and get the job done.

North Carolina, the last state to secede, did so on 20 May.

As the end of the Union had come, so had the end of S. Rodman and Sons. In late May the Rocky Brook Mill collapsed financially, as the Rodmans no longer had a market
for their new negro cloth and for the cloth they had already sold in the South, they could not receive payment. They could no longer pay their workers or their bills. All work at the Rocky Brook Mill stopped. Wakefield Manufacturing Company (Wakefield Mill) had only the warps previously secured with which to work, and when they ran out all work would cease there as well. Nevertheless, as reported by the Narragansett Times, the Rodmans had tremendous assets and townspeople were assured that they would certainly be able to pay their debts eventually. Their friends the Hazards were in a similar but slightly less serious situation. Workers at Peace Dale Mills were put on “short time” but expected to keep working as soon as some changes in their dyeing processes were made. Then, they planned to stop making shawls and begin making cloth and blankets for the army.

Meanwhile, the Narragansett Guards, now unofficially Company E, maintained their drilling and were daily anticipating to be inspected and to receive their marching orders.

On the morning of 4 June Isaac performed his last official town function by auditing the town treasurer’s accounts. He had been re-elected state senator, beginning his second term when the war began. On the eve of war, Rodman’s Mills employed twenty two people who earned between $0.50 and $3.00 per day, my great, great, great uncle among them. Most got $1.00 per day. Now all were, or soon would be, without a job.

Isaac was a naturally gifted military leader, winning promotions on merit alone and not through egoistic self-aggrandizement. He entered the war the captain of a company and in fifteen months died the general of a division. One wonders how this modest, religious businessman became so well-grounded in military tactics. Without doubt it was his love of books that offered him the military insight and training where previously none had existed. The same was true of the career of another unlikely Rhode Island military hero, Major General Nathanael Greene, arguably second in command to General George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Both Rodman and Greene were self-taught men with little formal education and no earlier family military background of note. Both their families were merchants and politically active. Both men learned from a great love of books (Greene purchased many of his from Henry “Ox” Knox at his bookstore at Cornhill in Boston) and both rose to the rank of general in little more than a year after entering the service. Both men of war had strong, Quaker ancestors. In fact, Greene, raised a Quaker himself, was read out of meeting, that is, he was chastised before the congregation and banished from the Quaker church for joining the Kentish Guards and putting military training to the fore.

Later on the morning of Tuesday, 4 June, 1861, Captain Rodman in the privacy of home kissed his family goodbye, vest-pocketed his well-worn bible, mounted his spirited horse, and ordered the men of Company E, assembled as ordered in Peace Dale, to fall in. He led them north a couple of miles along the new Kingstown road past the verdant fields, now planted with Indian corn and small grains on the southern slope of Kingston Hill, to the home of well-known pro-Union patriots Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Wells in Kingston, where they were feted at a farewell party on the Wells’ spacious lawns. Wells was the cashier of the Landholder’s Bank upon whose Board of Directors Isaac Rodman sat. Rodman’s family likely was with him at the Wells’ as well as many other prominent families of Peace Dale and Kingston. After many fond farewells and great cheers
Rodman formed his men once again that afternoon and marched them west for a couple miles, down Kingston Hill through the Ministerial Lands, across the Chipuxet River, skirting the edge of the Great Swamp where nearly two centuries before the decisive battle of King Phillip’s War was fought, and finally into the West Kingston train station where they headed north for Providence, nervous, excited, full-bellied, and tired. Some pink-cheeked, smooth-faced boys stared quietly from the train across the flat and fertile fields of corn and potatoes and the lush clover and timothy pastures filled with neat cattle to watch the warm and familiar landscape of their homes pass out of view forever.

On 7 June the 2nd Rhode Island regiment paraded through Providence to a review on Exchange Place, where they heard a eulogy for Stephen A. Douglas, the diminutive Democrat whom President Lincoln had defeated in the November presidential election and who had died in Chicago on the 3rd. The next day the regiment went into camp on the Dexter Training Ground, now the site of the Providence Armory at the corner of Dexter and Cranston Streets in Providence, which the 2nd Rhode Island regimental commander Colonel John S. Slocum, by public order, had re-named Camp Burnside in honor of the commander of the 1st Rhode Island. There they received a thousand rubber blankets, courtesy of the governor’s A&W Sprague Co., their conical Sibley tents, and their uniforms: blue flannel shirts to be worn with the flaps outside the pants, gray pants, one fatigue or forage cap each, and shoes. The cumbersome, conical Sibley tents generally held eighteen men who slept with their feet pointing toward the tent center. On 9 June the regiment attended services at the First Baptist church where they heard the Reverend Dr. S. L. Caldwell preach a patriotic sermon which later was printed and distributed to the soldiers. On the 11th the field and staff organization was completed with appointments of Major Sullivan Ballou and Rev. Thorndike C. Jameson, Chaplain.
At the evening dress-parade on the 12th Providence Mayor Jabez C. Knight presented the regimental colors—a national ensign, a regimental flag, and the proper guidons, all made by the patriotic ladies of Providence—to Colonel Slocum and the men of the 2nd Rhode Island. Reverend Dr. E. B. Hall then read a short poem and the parade was dismissed. Company C was designated, by lot, as the color company of the regiment. The Hon. W. S. Slater presented each man in Company G with a rubber overcoat and several men contributed to the regimental fund. The General Assembly ordered a bounty of $12.00 per man per month for three months. On 16 June men of the 2nd Rhode Island attended service at Grace Church where they were addressed by the Right Reverend Thomas M. Clark, Episcopal bishop of the diocese of Rhode Island.

On Wednesday, 19 June, two months to the day after the first men of the Narragansett Guards met at Kingston courthouse, the regiment broke camp and marched in a light rain to Exchange Place at about 4:40 p.m., where Bishop Clark addressed them briefly. The men then marched down to Fox Point for embarkation. Toward nightfall the artillery battery boarded the steamer “Kill von Kull” and the infantry the transport “State of Maine”, knapsacks heavy and overloaded with equipment and gifts from family and friends. As they boarded the ship each soldier was greeted by a man standing upon a cask who told them to hold open their haversacks, into which he tossed their ration…a single cold slab of fatty corned beef. Some of the rations were spoiled and those that were fairly edible were tainted by the smell of the linseed oil in the fresh paint which had been slapped onto the knapsacks as waterproofing. The officers also boarded the “State of Maine” with their friends Bishop Clark, Mayor Knight, and many other well-wishers, adding to the confusion and congestion aboard ship. With last farewells given, the citizens disembarked and the overcrowded transports beat down Narragansett Bay on an outgoing tide, stopping in Newport to transfer some of the men to the “Metropolis” to relieve the overcrowding. They left the shelter of the bay under the saluting guns of Fort Adams and sailed south slowly along the familiar, darkening coast, past Point Judith into Block Island Sound… and into the night.

The next day, after a brief delay in New York, the command disembarked at Elizabeth, New Jersey, and proceeded by rail on what would be nearly a nine hour trip to Washington, moving through Easton, Reading, Harrisburg, and York, Pennsylvania, then on to Baltimore on the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore railroad, where they expected some pro-Southern sentiment to spill over into civil unrest, as had been the case with the 6th Massachusetts. But the city now was under martial law and military command of the politically-appointed Federal General and Bay-Stater Benjamin Butler who employed rather draconian measures to keep the city subdued and relatively quiet. At that time train cars had to be detached at the President Street station and pulled through the city one at a time on a single street line by horses over to the Relay House of the Baltimore and Ohio station on Camden Street in order to continue on to Washington. The resulting march from station to connecting station where the men were exposed to the mobs and especially violent city gangs was most dangerous. Rodman ordered his men to keep in formation and not to incite any of the residents nor to respond to any provocations. Fortunately, few provocations flew and the troops marched safely through the city late in the day on the 21st, boarded their connecting train, and sleeping for most of the way along the forty mile, one and three quarters hour ride, arrived in the ornate wooden Washington station early on the dark morning of 22 June, then marched several
blocks to camp through the heavy fragrance of honeysuckled air singing songs like “The Girl I left Behind Me”, “Yankee Doodle”, “Columbia the Gem of the Ocean” and “Dixie”, a northern song not yet completely appropriated by the South. They also sang the wildly popular new song “John Brown’s Body” in commemoration of the abolitionist John Brown, who was hanged on 2 December, 1860 after his failed raid on Harper’s Ferry the autumn before. In Washington they were received by and camped with the 1st Rhode Island regiment. Colonel Slocum named his camp “Camp Clark” in honor of the Bishop Clark. Camp Clark was located to the south side of Camp Sprague. Colonel Burnside then assumed command of both regiments. On 4 July Captain Frank Wheaton of the 1st Cavalry, United States Army, was appointed lieutenant-colonel of the regiment.

Much of the distinction of the 2nd Rhode Island was due to the character of Colonel Slocum. A strongly military man, Slocum had served with great distinction in the Mexican War and as a major in the 1st Rhode Island. Now he worked the 2nd Rhode Island hard, resolving to make it the best unit in the army with the most sanitary camp. The Rhode Islanders, thrilled to be in this great city about which they had heard so much, were sorely disappointed by its dingy shabbiness. It had been a city under constant construction since 1800 but never finished. Congress seemed never to be able to finish anything. Pennsylvania Avenue was wide, as many of the grand streets were, and fitted with brick sidewalks, as most streets were not. In fact, most had no sidewalks at all. Its thin pavement had long since crumbled and disappeared into the dust and mud. On its north side in a rather tight cluster lay grand hotels and restaurants, fitted with ornate architecture, gas lights, doormen and servants in black and maroon uniforms, indoor toilets, and impeccably polished spittoons. The Willard Hotel on Fourteenth and E was absolutely THE place to be but the National Hotel at Sixth and Pennsylvania, Brown’s across the street from the National Hotel, and the Kirkwood, where the Vice President roomed, also were popular. But all were stuffy, ill-ventilated and abuzz with socializing, gambling, drinking, and constant gossip over the ever-present heavy and sometimes oppressive fragrance of cigars. Upstairs, in comfortably secluded rooms with worn carpets, painted women of dubious reputation, most rather plump by today’s standards, entertained senators and congressmen and army officers late into the night. Outside the hotels waited negro servants (the polite word for house slaves), leaning against the doors and clapboards or peering through the windows for a fleeting glimpse of their masters. For patrons who spent the night or part of their day in the social atmosphere of the hotels, breakfasts of steak, oysters, ham, eggs, hominy grits, and whiskey (the favorites being Baker 1851, Overholtz 1855, Ziegler 1855, and Finale 1853) were served from 8 to 11 a.m.. Dinners of six to eight courses were available beginning at noon, and suppers were served from 4 to 5 p.m. Many hotels also offered “late tea” at 7:30 p.m. and cold suppers from 9 to 10 p.m. Men who remained in camp could purchase fresh milk from Washington residents, each of whom kept one to five milk cows which they milked twice daily to peddle the fresh milk into the army camps between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. and again between about 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., there to ask the standard selling price of $1.08 per quart. On the avenue’s south side lay the small shops, butcheries, saloons, and general tarpaper slum shacks which backed up into the old city canal, long since abandoned as a waterway between the Potomac and the Eastern Branch and now stagnant and clogged with sewage, offal, garbage, and the remains of dead animals which residents had dumped into it. In short, it had become a watery, stinking city dump green with algae and slime. The only
enterprise of note on the south side was the large Central Market, a conglomeration of small shops all of which backed up to the ill-smelling canal as well. That and other low-lying areas were breeding grounds for vast swarms of belligerent mosquitoes which brought malaria to the city in the warm months. This, and the oppressing heat and humidity, gave Congress a good excuse for adjourning for the summer. The Capitol, with part of the wrought iron frame for the new dome precariously perched atop the sandstone building beneath, lay leering with its scaffolding and a huge crane, looming dinosaur-like, forming the focal point. To both sides of the building stretched marble wings. But there were no steps to the entrance yet and of the one hundred Corinthian columns planned for the porticoes, only three had been crowned with their capitals and set in place. Coal and wood heaps, iron plates, capitals and marble blocks, forges, tools and tool sheds, odd pieces of wood, hogs, chickens, ducks, geese, horses, mules, and workmen’s shanties and outhouses cluttered the muddy grounds. But completion of the Capitol would have to wait now, for its chief engineer, professional and efficient Montgomery Meigs had just been appointed to the office of Quartermaster General of the Federal Army, one of the finest federal appointments made so far in the war.

The Capitol building, the immense Treasury building on Fifteenth Street and the little insignificant brick State Department building next door to it, the not-quite-finished Patent Office and the General Post-Office on Seventh and F Streets, and the Executive Mansion were the splendors of the city and stood in stark contrast to the dilapidated shops, groceries, groggeries, and private homes, each with a stinking privy in back. Privies also graced many of the public alleys. The Executive Mansion, formerly known as the President’s House, backed up to Potomac Flats, another common dump for the city’s sewage. On the south grounds of the President’s house, as around the Capitol itself, stables, outhouses and workmen’s shanties rose up like mushrooms, squatters lay indigent in tents, and little Tad Lincoln grazed his goats. Tad was young and happy yet though hindered by a cleft palate and a sibilant lisp. The street mud was knee deep after rains in winter and the buildings all were generally rundown. Every morning wagons heaped with night soil rumbled slowly along the roads to disgorge their foul, sour-smelling, fermenting cargo onto the vegetable and grain fields outside the city. Chickens, geese, and hogs roamed the streets, along with dogs and cats and the ever-present gaggle of pompous political appointees, devouring political appointments as the hogs and chickens outside devoured whatever carcasses they found strewn in the mud. The north side of Pennsylvania Avenue especially was crowded with impeccably-dressed officers in tinsel and gold lace who strutted along its tree-lined sidewalks. One Private Goss recalled that he had witnessed more brigadier generals there, most of whom were polished political appointees, than on any battlefield during the war. This was a travesty he thought, and all of those place-holders should have served time at the front before they became general officers.

The routine of camp life was broken by reports of anticipated aggressive movements upon Manassas Junction, Virginia, then occupied by a considerable Confederate force under General P.G.T. Beauregard, the same general who opened on Fort Sumter a few months ago. Confederate General J. E. Johnston held the Shenandoah Valley, where Federal General Patterson, with a numerically superior force, tried to keep him in check. Yet still, the Rhode Island boys were not yet in the fight and all yet remained new and exciting. Most of them were country boys, farmers and mill workers,
and the glamour of the city with its gambling halls and prostitutes had dazzled them deeply. On the 30th the 2nd Rhode Island marched over to the camp of the 1st Rhode Island where they were served excellent meals that even included such treats as plum pudding, gingerbread, and milk, an item that had been quite scarce since they left Rhode Island. They now felt confident that joining the army had been the right thing to do since they had not been used to such treats previously.

On 2 July Captain Rodman and the 2nd Rhode Island were paid a visit at camp by Colonel John C. Fremont, the old Pathfinder himself and one-time presidential candidate, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who had presidential ambitions of his own, and other dignitaries. The regiment observed the 4th of July in camp with a patriotic address by Reverend Thomas Quinn, associate chaplain of the 1st Rhode Island. Then Reverend Augustus Woodbury, Chaplin of the 1st Rhode Island, read the entire Declaration of Independence to the boys at about 9 a.m. After dinner they enjoyed a demonstration of tight rope walking by Professor Benoni Sweet, Co. H, 2nd Rhode Island.

The United States Congress also assembled that day and assigned Major, now Brigadier General of Volunteers Irvin McDowell, recently promoted on 14 May, to command of the Federal Army of Northeastern Virginia. McDowell had declined a promotion to major general so as not to offend his jealous brother officers, among them J. Mansfield, former Inspector General and McDowell’s senior in command, now also promoted to brigadier general of volunteers. McDowell was tall, robust, and wore his black hair closely cropped, contrasting with his iron-gray beard. By training he was an architect and by inclination a landscape gardener who after the war designed the Presidio gardens in San Francisco. Although he graduated West Point, Class of 1838, where he had befriended another classmate, the dashing old Creole P.G.T. Beauregard, he remained an unlikely choice for the position, a regular army major from Ohio in his early 40s who had never commanded troops in combat, though he himself saw service in the Mexican War.
Brigadier General Irvin McDowell (left) and Major General George B. “Little Mac” McClellan (right).

On the other hand no officer in the Federal army and fit for the field at that time had commanded such a large body of troops in combat. McDowell pleaded for more time to train the raw recruits arriving in the city daily but Lincoln would not hear of it and shot back impatiently “You are green, but they [the Confederate troops] are green too; you are all green together.” Poor, cold consolation! McDowell was an excellent military theoretician but not convivial at all and was rather brusque with subordinates. He neither drank nor smoked but consumed enormous quantities of food to compensate, had a poor memory for faces and names, and appeared aloof and absent minded. Perhaps most tellingly, he had absolutely no intrigue for political or military advancement. All in all, these were not winning characteristics for high army and Washington politics. Perhaps he was chosen as the lowest hanging fruit since at the time General Scott had placed him in command of the local defense of Washington, whereupon McDowell had gotten the city into a keen defensive posture as best he could, erecting barricades across the main bridges leading into it and securing government buildings from sabotage. It also helped his cause to be a close friend of highly influential Salmon P. Chase. In the weeks leading up to Bull Run McDowell needed desperately some cooperation from Washington, some direction. But none came. The politicians had already picked their scapegoat should matters sour and now wanted to distance themselves from any plans that might implicate them in a military disaster. McDowell had been cast adrift on a sea of mounting war-waves that everyone felt deep in their sinews would break on the sands of Washington very, very soon.

Suddenly once reticent politicians who had wanted nothing to do with McDowell smelled the need for action from their vocal constituents and began to urge the general to move against the Confederates. This must be done right away since the new Congress was in town for a special session called by the president. The general pleaded for still more time. He had little faith in the poorly trained, frightfully green volunteers and their nearly completely untrained politically-appointed officers. Some pickets thought every gust of wind was the advancing enemy and shot at moving leaves, some men still didn’t even know how to take their own rations. The Sanitary Commission was only now slowly awakening from a long sleepy dormancy and remained ineffective. Many camps were highly unsanitary where the men were forced to drink water the color of pea soup, often with snakes in it, and were dirtier after bathing than before. Swarms of mosquitoes attacked them every night in camps pitched where air circulation was poor with no wind to drive the pests away and many camps, it was said, suffered greatly from vast supplies of bad whiskey. Was it the bad whiskey they suffered from, or was it just the whiskey? Fortunately the Rhode Island camps were the models of sanitation. But conditions in many of the other camps remained atrocious. Conditions were so bad and disorderly in some that men refused to be mustered into the service and packed to go home soon after they had arrived. One such case involved one Jim Jackson of the 9th New York, a rough and tough Zouave unit not known for taking orders lightly. For refusing to be mustered in Jackson was stripped of his uniform and made to wear a plain tweed coat, kicked, beaten, and stoned, then drummed out of camp. Some volunteer units like the 7th New York were
only thirty day units and after digging reinforcement trenches in Washington for two days, abruptly left the army with their big brass cannons trailing behind them. Their month of service was up. With some sense of dignified patriotism the boys of the 7th did donate $103 to the Washington Monument, standing sadly half built with a government cattle pasture surrounding it and a government-run slaughterhouse beside it. What offal could be hauled away and dumped into the Canal was, but most was not and now lay three and four feet deep in the surrounding pasture, blackened and rotting in the oppressive heat of a Washington summer, adding to the fetid ambiance of the town.

Supplies were inadequate, McDowell’s Army Medical staff was not sufficiently trained to handle the high number of casualties that would surely arrive after a large battle, and most of all, his army now was only a rag-tag herd of independent units which had not yet had time to become fully integrated into a cohesive force. Because the individual states had clothed their own volunteer troops the men did not even all wear the same Federal uniforms. Some regiments even adopted uniforms that differed from their state’s uniforms. One Washingtonian exclaimed that when several regiments marched down the avenue the parade resembled a group of clowns all decked out in different and sometimes garish style. According to a reporter for the London Times, McDowell’s entire Army Headquarters consisted of only four small tents, and when he visited the reporter found the general sitting by himself at a table outside one of the tents poring over an inadequate map of Virginia; he didn’t even have an officer capable of reconnoitering the area of impending action! To make matters worse, the army was unaware of a particularly effective spy in Washington, one Mrs. Rosie O’Neil Greenhow, socialite and friend of politicians and high Federal army brass, but also a friend of high Confederate brass, including General Beauregard himself. Greenhow milked Federal officials for military information and passed the secrets in pre-arranged code to the Confederates so that Beauregard knew McDowell’s plan of attack well ahead of time. Political pressure for attack was overwhelming and McDowell could do nothing but comply as best he could. Political micromanaging of our military always leads to disaster and unnecessary casualties. McDowell’s command was doomed.

On the 8th of July the army was brigaded with thirteen brigades formed into five divisions, two of which were to be held in reserve. The 2nd Rhode Island and its artillery battery were assigned to the 2nd Brigade (Colonel Ambrose Burnside) of the 2nd Division commanded by Colonel David Hunter. Their brigade also included the 1st Rhode Island, the 71st New York, and the 2nd New Hampshire. The regiments met for the first time as a brigade on the very hot and humid afternoon of Tuesday, 16 July when the excited men packed their haversacks with 12 ounces of salt pork each and some bread, socks and shaving mugs and other items from home, filled their canteens, formed on Pennsylvania Avenue, and marched across Long Bridge into Virginia and history. Before long some of the green troops had thrown away their haversacks and their food to lighten their load. They would throw away their innocence soon enough as well.

The 2nd Rhode Island with Company E and Captain Rodman at their head proudly led the advancing column by order of Colonel Slocum. They were in Confederate territory for the first time where skirmishing and light action had been going on since early June. But the boys were still convinced that the Confederates would break and run and that the war would be over in a couple of weeks. General McDowell felt otherwise and had formulated an ambitious and overly complex plan of attack that depended upon
General Patterson keeping General Johnston’s troops bottled up in the Shenandoah Valley. Now he faced his old West Point classmate General P.G.T. Beauregard.

The army bivouacked that night in a large meadow in Annandale, Virginia and lifted a few rails from the fences for their campfires and coffee. The teamsters had not yet brought up their tents so they lay on the damp ground with only their rubber blankets for comfort and early next morning resumed their march. Colonel Hunter’s division marched by Little River Turnpike, the main road to Fairfax Court House, while the 1st division under Brigadier General Daniel Tyler marched on the right of the 2nd Division by way of Falls Church. The 3rd Division under Colonel S. P. Heintzelman, pushed along the railroad to the left of Hunter’s division. Three columns thus converged upon Fairfax Court House. General McDowell rode with Hunter’s division. Riding with the 2nd Brigade (Burnside’s) were the dashing and martial Governor Sprague astride his magnificent white horse “Snowdrop”, Colonel John A. Gardner, and one or two citizens of Providence, all serving as volunteers. In fact, Sprague had recently declined a commission as brigadier general since he felt he could not serve both as governor and as an army general at the same time. Company K (Captain Turner) was deployed as skirmishers and flankers. The soldiers removed a few trees that had been felled across the road but otherwise encountered little opposition. The Confederates had abandoned an open breastwork at Fairfax Court House and Colonel Hunter’s Federal troops quickly occupied the town about noon without incident. Colonel Heintzelman’s division — having seen a little skirmishing on the railroad — occupied Fairfax Station and General Tyler’s command bivouacked at Germantown.

The 2nd Rhode Island was the first regiment to enter Fairfax Court House after the Company K skirmishers. Sergeant John M. Duffy, color sergeant of Company C, was ordered to display the Stars and Stripes from the top of one of the buildings in the outskirts of the village to signal General Tyler that the town had been taken. The Confederate flag, however, was still flying on the court house and Corporal McMahon of Company A climbed to the cupola to fetch it, then threw it to Sergeant James Taggart. The sight of that flag and of the abandoned enemy stores rankled the boys and, being green and not yet disciplined fully, they vandalized the abandoned town. General McDowell was embarrassed by this and especially indignant in condemning their actions.

On the 18th, the 2nd Division marched for a mile or two, then halted for most of the day. Colonel Heintzelman pushed along the railroad to Sangster's Station, while Tyler proceeded through Centreville to Blackburn’s Ford, where his leading regiments became involved in action against direct orders not to engage the enemy. The action was short and bloody and they fell back before a heavy Confederate advance from Manassas Junction. Captain Rodman and his Company E listened to the cannon fire but received no orders to advance until nearly mid-afternoon. Meanwhile, Confederate General Johnston had slipped past ossified General Patterson in the Shenandoah Valley and joined General Beauregard at Manassas. General McDowell concentrated his command around Centreville and waited. The 5th Division (Colonel Dixon S. Miles) advanced to the main body and a part of Brigadier General Theodore Runyon's 4th Division was drawn forward to Fairfax Court House, but neither division played a large role in the looming battle. General McDowell’s initial plan was to make a direct attack upon Manassas Junction but then he decided to make a flanking movement to the right over an unused forest road, have Hunter’s column cross Bull Run at Sudley Ford, march downstream to Stone
Bridge, and thence upon the Junction. Hunter and Heintzelman were to participate in this movement, while Tyler pushed straight along the turnpike to join the other columns after they had crossed Bull Run. The 5th Division guarded the lower fords. Heintzelman was expected to cross Bull Run at Poplar Ford, a ford between Stone Bridge and Dudley’s. On the other side, Beauregard, re-enforced by Johnston, planned to attack the Federal position at Centreville, and was concentrating his command along the line from Stone Bridge to Union Mills. The Federal advance was to have begun at 2 p.m. on Saturday the 20th but was delayed until about 2 a.m. The men drew their rations at 7 p.m. Saturday evening, then turned into their huts for a short night’s rest. Characteristically, Captain Rodman had his men turn out at 2 a.m., form a line, and head out about 2:30 a.m. with the rest of Colonel Hunter’s command, marching for Manassas Junction. The 2nd Rhode Island marched along with other units in its brigade, including the 1st Rhode Island, the 2nd New Hampshire, and the 71st New York. They found Colonel Tyler’s regiments just forming by the time they arrived at his camps. Tyler was overly cautious and dilatory after having been rebuked by General McDowell for engaging the enemy against orders at Blackburn’s Ford. Because of Tyler’s delay the undisciplined soldiers wandered around in confusion, mixing units, and the woods became obstructed with wagons so badly that it was not until after first light that Tyler had gotten things sorted out and finally began to move; it was after dawn that Hunter finally veered off the road and entered the woods, a loss of two valuable hours. Company D, 2nd Rhode Island had the honor of leading the advance and it was up to them to clear the felled trees that obstructed their way.

Situation of the battlefield at around dawn on 21 July. Columns of Hunter and Heintzelman left Centreville and marched west on the Warrenton Pike. They left the pike at the “Old Shop” and followed a circuitous route north, then bore southwest, crossing the Bull Run at the Sudley Fords and then crossing the Cat Harpin Run to travel south along the Sudley and Newmarket Road.

First Battle of Bull Run

Company E and the other units slugged it out through the woods along a small cart path, continuing to clear what brush remained on the path after Company D had moved on. The 2nd Rhode Island, Companies E and A (Captain Dyer), led the advancing column, the men of Company A thrown to the right as flankers. Colonel Hunter, recently lamed in a fall but maintaining command, moved forward in a carriage. There was great excitement and tension in the air and civilians curious to see the battle moved along with the troop columns, snarling and hindering their advance. The day was only a few hours old but already hot and sticky. About 9:30 a.m., hours behind schedule, the 2nd Rhode Island crossed Cat Harpin Run at the Sudley Ford and rested for about an hour. According to Captain Rodman, Colonel Hunter then turned to Colonel Burnside and remarked: “it is about time to advance.” They moved on to Sudley Methodist Episcopal Church, perched comfortably on a small hill to the north of the coming battle. There they rested briefly beneath the trees and emptied, then filled their canteens. They had just resumed the march when three heavy artillery pieces opened fire on them. Confederate Captain Edward Porter Alexander, General Beauregard’s Signal Officer, manning a signal station near the Stone Bridge at the junction of the Warrenton Pike and Bull Run, had discovered the advancing Federal column on the Sudley and Newmarket Road at about 8:30 a.m. by noticing sunlight reflecting from their bronze cannons and polished steel bayonets. Without delay he sent a message to Colonel Shanks: “Look out on your left. Your position is turned.” The message was sent by semaphore, perhaps the first ever sent in that manner. But the Federal troops were dumb to the seriousness of the situation. Some still thought the war was fun…so far. They took a small side road around a wood, laughing and joking as they went, some singing the new song about John Brown’s body. Some stopped to pick blackberries along the way, a common fruit much cherished for both refreshment and as a cure for diarrhea, and likely came out of the patches covered with chiggers, whose fierce bites eventually caused frenetic itching on par with body lice.

A few scattered, comfortable-looking houses lined the road about a mile from Sudley Ford and the soldiers could see men and women dressed in their Sunday finery preparing to go to church. But little Sudley Church housed no worshippers that day; a little time hence it was to become a field hospital. The intense sun scorched the men and horses now.

According to Captain Rodman they had advanced another quarter mile or so when Colonel Hunter seemed quite uneasy since he had heard nothing from the Company A skirmishers deployed to his right. “He [Hunter] then detached Company F to the right and Company E to the left under orders to extend 300 yards into the woods.” recalled Rodman. To the left of the road of advance lay thick woods, through which Company E made their way. Company F extended into the field to the right and Company A moved forward on the road, followed by Companies G, K, C, H, D, and B, and the battery of the
1st Rhode Island, in that order. Suddenly, Sergeant Dixon, accompanied by 2nd Lieutenant Church and Lieutenant Reed, came running up to Rodman and, trying to catch his breath, said: “Captain, I see the enemy.” Rodman advanced quickly to the edge of the woods where he could see perhaps four hundred or five hundred Confederate Zouaves. These, Rodman thought, were probably the men who had just flanked and turned the left of Captain Dyer’s Company A and who were now moving on the double quick to pass the left flank of Company E and take up a position in the woods to hit the Federal column on its center left flank.

About that time General McDowell reined his frothing horse into Burnside’s brigade headquarters with news that the enemy was advancing upon the Federals with heavy columns. Patterson had not held Johnston in the Shenandoah! Colonel Burnside ordered his men to hurry forward with all possible speed and to secure the high ground. Colonel Hunter advanced with Colonel Slocum and the 2nd Rhode Island, rounded a small piece of forest that concealed the crest of Matthew’s Hill above the Warrenton Turnpike, and came out upon an open field not far from the Van Pelt house, a handsome two story stone house with large stone chimneys at each end and neatly surrounded by young sycamore trees. It was about a mile north of this house that Confederate Colonel Nathan George “Shank” Evans had wisely positioned his small brigade of about eleven hundred men to meet the columns of Burnside and Porter advancing south from Sudley Ford. Evans was a West Point graduate, class of 1848, from South Carolina who had served with the United States dragoons before the war. Now thirty seven years old, balding, with long dark curly locks, a thin but full beard, and wild, piercing blue eyes, Evans seemed to be everywhere on the field that day, leading his men with his dedicated aide at his side carrying a small barrel of Evans’ favorite whiskey on his back.

Seeing the Confederates passing his left Rodman gave the order “Rally to the left” and the men of Company E ran to the snake fence at the side of the road. About 11a.m. Evans’ skirmishers opened fire on Rodman’s skirmishers, who now identified the baggy, broadly striped trousers and the soft, slouched hats of the respected Louisiana Tigers in Evans’ ranks. The “Tigers” were a tough, hard-bitten outfit composed of Irish and Creole dockworkers, bums, and other dark denizens from the New Orleans waterfront. Rodman gave the order “fire and over” and about thirty five men of Company E (all who had come up by then) returned fire and “went over into the field with a yell” recalled Rodman. At that moment his second platoon (Lieutenant Reed) came up and over and Company E charged into the Confederates, yelling and firing as fast as they could. They broke the sixty or so Confederates in front of them, who then ran up to the brow of a hill and dropped over it. Meanwhile, more Company E men “came on like regulars”, according to Rodman and laid down precise fire upon the Confederates.

Finally the battle was joined. The boys would see if the Confederates would run away. The Confederates withdrew to Evan’s main command on the southern slope of the field. The initial encounter lasted about ten minutes. Meanwhile, Rodman cold see Colonel Slocum running toward Company E, followed by the entire 2nd Regiment trailing the battery, and that followed by the 1st Regiment, all at the double quick, the men yelling and screaming, their blood and adrenaline pumping through hot veins in anticipation of a quick fight to end the war. Now, slowly, the officers began to realize that they were on the left flank of the whole Confederate army. Colonel Burnside deployed his brigade and Battery A, 2nd Rhode Island Light Artillery’s (Captain William
H. Reynolds) six bronze, fourteen pounder rifles about two hundred yards from Evans’ line, with the right of the battery anchored on the Manassas-Sudley Rd. where they quickly became engaged with the two guns of Evans’ Lynchburg Artillery. Confederate General Beauregard later called Reynolds’ “a splendid battery”. The artillery duel was fierce and deafening like nothing the Rhode Island boys had experienced before. To the left of the field was the small Matthews house, with its modest outbuildings. A large cornfield with knee-tall stalks sloped down to a section of woods in front. Colonel Slocum thought the hillcrest good ground for a fight. The skirmishers of Company E and men from the 1st Rhode Island (Captain Frank Goddard) immediately came under heavy musket and grapeshot fire from Evans’ forces moving uphill through the cornfield in force. As usually occurs when shooting uphill or downhill, most of the first volleys flew high but the men immediately and instinctively lay down without orders. Colonel Slocum got them up and deftly formed the 2nd Rhode Island in line of battle with the order “By the left flank—March!”, then ordered the hot Confederate fire returned.

Men of the 2nd Rhode Island were shooting .69 caliber smoothbores that had been converted from flintlock to percussion. Not being rifled these fired no minie balls but rather were loaded with one large round ball and three buckshot (“buck and ball” rounds) with a maximum effective range of perhaps one hundred fifty yards, especially if fired into tightly massed lines. In that sense they operated more like shotguns. The 1st and 2nd Rhode Island were at the very front and held the line for about forty five minutes in fierce, dusty battle and fiercer sun. The gaudily-dressed Ellsworth Zouaves (11th New York), part of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division, charged into the enemy and drove them back with terrible slaughter. The sun grew stronger, sapping men’s energy as much as the fatigue of battle. Then their smoothbores began to foul badly from the tallow lubricant and black powder loads. Private Elisha Rhodes, Company D, 2nd Rhode Island, remembered that his was so badly fouled that he had to beat the ramrod against a fence to seat the ball. His messmate Private Webb was so nervous with not being able to load his musket with ease in his first battle that he fell over a rail fence and broke his bayonet. The action began to heat considerably. To get away from the terrible firing several men took shelter in a haystack, only to be blown apart by Confederate artillery. Colonel Henry Martin moved his 71st New York into line in the field, his men exhausted even before their part in the battle had begun since they had dragged along with them two, twelve pounder boat howitzers borrowed from the Washington Navy Yard. Captain Charles Griffin’s Battery D, 5th United States artillery, coming up in their rear, drove through their ranks to unlimber at the front. Colonel Gilman Marston deployed his 2nd New Hampshire farther to the right before he was wounded. Now the remainder of the 1st Rhode Island, commanded by Major Joseph P. Balch, was withdrawn and held in reserve in the woods.
The battlefield situation mid to late morning on 21 July. Burnside and Evans join the battle. Federal troops are represented in blue, Confederates in red.

The Matthews House situated just north of Burnside’s line, served as a temporary hospital during the battle. The photo was taken in March, 1862.

Situation in late morning. Burnside’s brigade still holds the left of the Federal line and Porter’s the right while the Confederate troops retreat. Federal troops are represented in blue, Confederates in red.
Colonel Andrew Porter brought up his 1st Brigade, 2nd Division and, thinking that Colonel Burnside "was attacking with too hasty vigor," formed his line to the right.

Colonel Heintzelman, who never succeeded in finding the road that led to the ford by which he expected to cross Bull Run, had continued his march in the rear of Colonel Hunter, and the head of his column was just now slowly crossing at Smiley Ford. Confusion reigned, and it became evident that General McDowell was meeting stronger resistance than anticipated. Colonel Burnside’s brigade remained locked in a very heated battle and spread across the Sudley and Newmarket Road.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Rhode Island had remained hotly engaged since the battle was joined with Evans’ skirmishers, but now began a fevered new encounter with more of Evans’ troops, including men of the 1st Louisiana Battalion (“Louisiana Tigers”) under command of Major C.R. Wheat, and the 4th South Carolina under Colonel J.B.E. Sloan,
along with the two guns of the Lynchburg Artillery. The Rhode Islanders made a gallant and successful effort to push the enemy off the crest and partly down the hillside where the Confederates found shelter in the down sloping cornfield and among the low ground and woods beyond. By now there was little corn still standing. The hail of musket fire and grapeshot had toppled the stalks as though they had been newly mown with sharpened scythes. The fire of the 2nd Rhode Island was fast and accurate. The men never faltered though after the battle the bodies of the dead and dying were piled three and four deep in the dusty, downed corn. Early in the battle Colonel Hunter was wounded in the neck and left the field. Meeting Colonel Burnside, he said: "Burnside, I leave the matter in your hands. Slocum and his Regiment [2nd Rhode Island] went in handsomely, and drove the scoundrels." Colonel Andrew Porter, commanding 1st Brigade, assumed command of Colonel Hunter’s division. Colonel Burnside now moved the rest of his 2nd Brigade to the front. The 1st Rhode Island, shouting and cheering, ran through the woods in which they had been held in reserve and relieved the 2nd Rhode Island, which then made a flanking movement to the left under heavy fire. Colonel Martin and his 71st New York with its howitzers, opened fire on the right, and Colonel Marston ordered his 2nd New Hampshire to move forward to support Reynolds's battery, which was now on the right of the 71st. The battle raged furiously under a merciless sun. Governor Sprague, on the field and acting as volunteer aide to Colonel Burnside, and 2nd Lieutenant William B. Weedon of the 2nd Rhode Island battery, had each a horse shot under him. As Sprague rose from under his dead “Snowdrop” about twenty feet to the right of Rodman’s company, he immediately grabbed a rifle from a dead soldier beside him and ran into the Rhode Island ranks to fight alongside the men. After the battle he discovered two holes from balls that had pierced his clothing, but none had even grazed his flesh. Both sides were pouring more men into the fight, which seemed never to slacken or cease.

The Sad Loss of Colonel Slocum

Along the upper boundary of the cornfield ran a rail fence, near which the 2nd Rhode Island had been fighting gallantly. At about 10 a.m., Colonel Slocum, alone, passed beyond the fence toward the enemy while reconnoitering. Returning to his lines he once more climbed the fence, then turned to cheer on Captain Rodman and the rest of the 2nd Rhode Island as they advanced upon his command, and immediately fell, shot in the side and back of his head and twice in his ankle. He lay beside William Nichols on the field. Private Elisha Hunt Rhodes, Company D, was close at hand and tried to lift the colonel but could not. An old English soldier, Private Thomas Parker, also of Company D and later a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, his mustache and chin whiskers hiding a rather soft chin, heard Rhodes’ call for help, dropped his musket and immediately ran over under heavy fire to help Rhodes carry the colonel to the nearby Matthews house. There they laid him on the floor and sent for Colonel Burnside, Surgeon Wheaton, and Chaplain Jameson. Meanwhile, Chaplain Woodbury and Assistant Surgeon Harris of the 1st Rhode Island had heard the news and arrived to attend the colonel. Slocum’s long, flowing mustache, of which he was very proud, was covered with dust-caked blood that flowed from his head wound. Harris found that the bullet had plowed a furrow from the rear to the front of Colonel Slocum’s head but had not lodged. The colonel was pale from exhaustion and loss of blood but remained conscious and could recognize his friends, but he never spoke again. Private Rhodes used his gun screw driver to remove a door from its
hinges. They laid Colonel Slocum on the door and placed him in an ambulance that bore him to the rear, where the main hospital had been established at Sudley Church under regimental surgeon Dr. Francis L. Wheaton. According to the Washington correspondent for the New York Tribune, E.P. Dougherty of the 71st New York and Captain Allen of the 11 Massachusetts, both attendants at the hospital where Slocum lay, the colonel died three days after being shot and was the only officer they saw who was buried in a casket. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Wheaton, son of Surgeon Wheaton, assumed command of Colonel Slocum’s 2nd Rhode Island and was promptly promoted to Colonel by Governor Sprague who was present on the field. Wheaton was a solid pro-Union man though his father-in-law Samuel Cooper of New Jersey, the United States Adjutant General in the Buchanan Administration, was now the ranking general in the Confederacy.

One Clifford A. Fuller of the 2nd Rhode Island gave a slightly different account of Slocum’s fall to a correspondent of the New York World. He claimed that he was about ten feet from the colonel when Slocum was shot off his horse and that a crowd of officers gathered round the dying colonel, to hear him say: “Leave me and avenge my death.” Clifford’s account of the incident sounds suspicious. It is not likely officers would stand over a dying man while their men were hotly engaged in battle. Furthermore, the dying words attributed to Slocum sound strongly melodramatic and, according to Rhodes who carried him from the field, Slocum never spoke after he was shot.

The Fight Goes On

Now men fell rapidly. A frightened German private in Company G, 2nd Rhode Island who was the regimental standard bearer became so frightened he dropped the flag and hid behind a tree. At that point another private in the same company, Cornelius Peirce, picked up the standard and waved it furiously from the hilltop to rally the men. About the same time that Slocum was wounded a round shot shattered one of Major Sullivan Ballou’s legs, from which wounds he later died. Captain Levi Tower of Company F was shot dead. Colonel Marston of the 2nd New Hampshire was wounded in the shoulder, remained for some time on the field, and was then replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Fiske. Lieutenant Frescott of Company D, 1st Rhode Island, was killed. The color-sergeant and one of the color-guard of the 1st Rhode Island also were killed. Of the 2nd Rhode Island, color-corporal Thomas O.H. Carpenter was mortally wounded and color-corporal Ichabod B. Burt was wounded, taken to the rear, and captured.

Colonel Porter, at Colonel Burnside’s request, sent Major George Sykes from his 1st Brigade with a battalion of the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th United States Infantry, to support Burnside’s 2nd Brigade. Captain William Reynolds’s battery with its six bronze fourteen pounders now advanced to a position farther in front but still on the right, where his horses were disabled and a caisson lost. Colonel Burnside had by now extended his line to anchor his right on the Manassas-Sudley Road and had moved downhill about a mile from the Sudley church. Colonel Porter, with artillery of Ricketts and Griffin, in the early afternoon extended Colonel Burnside’s line farther to the right across the road. Upon the left, Colonel William Tecumseh Sherman’s 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, eventually crossed Bull Run above the Stone Bridge and marched across the hills, finally taking a position in the left rear of Burnside’s line to allow Burnside to withdraw his tattered brigade at about noon. It was just in time; the men’s smoothbores were by now almost useless from fouling and had become terribly inaccurate. Their ammunition was nearly
spent and so were the men in the exhausting heat and choking dust. Captain Rodman recalled that “Our ammunition was all exhausted but thank God we did not know it until the 69th New York came to our support. With a rush they charged and drove the enemy before them…” Rodman’s Company E had been the first to enter the fight and they were physically and mentally fully exhausted. Rodman remembered too that during the battle the Confederates had played a dirty trick on the Federals: “…we had lost two or three fires by the enemy showing a flag with the Stars and Stripes, and the first regiment [1st Rhode Island] thought they were our party; the flag being painted as a true one—one side theirs and one federal.”

Colonel Burnside’s worn brigade was held in reserve in the woods for the remainder of the battle. Colonel Sherman at once advanced his men, and, joined by Colonel Erasmus Keyes’s 1st Brigade, 1st Division, drove on to the Warrenton Turnpike and beyond. Colonel Heintzelman finally brought up his 3rd Division on the right and the battle moved over to his front.

About 3 p.m. the battle subsided in the neighborhood of the hillcrest where it began with Company E and the other boys of the 2nd Rhode Island. Now Rodman’s men and others of the 2nd Brigade received fresh ammunition and a bit of coffee and food for the first time since the night before. How fine they must have tasted. Part of the enemy’s force was retreating toward Manassas, broken, dispirited, and in disorder, thanks in part to the valor of Rodman and 2nd Rhode Island.

Source: Official Military Atlas of the Civil War, Plate V, Map 1

Situation at mid-afternoon. Burnside’s brigade is now being held in reserve north of Sherman’s brigade. Federal troops are represented in blue, Confederate troops in red.
Situation in late afternoon. By now Federal troops had begun to withdraw. O.O Howard’s men are among the last to leave the field. Federal troops are represented in blue, Confederate troops in red.

Captain Rodman and the boys of Company E had had their trial by fire. It was their first taste of battle and they could not have been more heavily engaged nor have fought more bravely. And now they knew this wasn’t going to be fun anymore and that the war probably would not be over in a week or two. Marching since 2 a.m. they suddenly found themselves in the front line, eye to eye with the enemy on a hot dusty day, with no time to eat or drink, with balls and powder running frightfully low, with no immediate reinforcements, and with only a rail fence and a few stalks of corn for cover. Their beloved colonel dead and all in confusion, they held until relieved by Sherman’s
brigade. They, and their modest book-learned, deeply religious businessman-turned captain, had performed admirably.

A Disorderly Retreat

Their respite was short-lived. By 3:30 p.m. fresh Confederate reinforcements had arrived from the Shenandoah Valley and from the Stone Bridge area. Confederate Colonel T. J. Jackson—“Stonewall” Jackson after this day — led his brigade from the Confederate right and bore down upon the Federal flank, crumpling and crushing Colonel Heintzelman's 3rd Division,—the smallest in the army. Captain Richard Arnold, West Point class of 1850 and Rodman’s brother-in-law, commanded Battery D, 2nd United States Artillery in the 2nd Brigade of Heintzelman’s division and was forced to abandon all but one of his two, thirteen pounder James rifles and two, six pounder guns during the Federal retreat before Jackson’s men. The 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division was commanded by Colonel O.B. Willcox, who was wounded, captured, later exchanged, and who went on to serve with Rodman in the Maryland campaign. The Federal army seemed to have melted away at Jackson’s advance. Sherman and Keyes withdrew their brigades. Although Colonel Burnside's brigade, worn and battered, still maintained its integrity, General McDowell ordered a general retreat. The roads to Washington soon were filled with panicked soldiers divesting themselves of arms and accoutrements to speed their retreat, and clogged with dead horses, abandoned wagons, and naïve, fatuous, supercilious civilians, senators, and congressmen who had come out from Washington with families, field glasses, and picnic baskets full of ham sandwiches and pastries, bottles of fine wine, and flasks of Monongahela and bourbon, to watch the battle. So huge was the excitement in Washington that day that all available carriages, gigs, and wagons had been rented out to those sightseers. One senator remarked that he had to spend $25 to rent a single carriage for the day!

Colonel Burnside rallied his brigade just across Cub Run and with Sykes's battalion of United States Infantry and what was left of Captain Arnold's United States battery, formed a rear guard for the confused, retreating, tangled, milling mass of humanity now more than a mile long and a hundred yards wide. The 1st and 2nd Rhode Island were ordered to fall in and protect the batteries. Rodman perhaps then got to spend a few very short but precious moments with his brother-in-law. At 33 years of age Arnold had thick wavy black hair, a full thick mustache, small chin whiskers, and deep-set brown eyes. He was regular Army and would later go on to serve as Assistant Inspector General of VI Corps. He was promoted to major general at war’s end. But that was for the future. For now, he wondered how to extract his men and what remained of his battery from this absolute mess.
Some of the artillery and cavalry went off ahead to the front of the retreating masses and the infantry was left to pick up the stragglers and defend the shattered remains of the army. Rodman’s Company E, along with Captain Reynolds’s Light Artillery Battery A, with its six, thirteen pounder James Rifles had been among the first to engage the enemy and had remained in or near the front lines under heavy fire for most of the battle. Now, they were among the last to leave. A wagon crossing Cub Run Bridge was hit by an artillery round and destroyed, its remains now blocking movement of the retreating Federals. Now the bridge became clogged with abandoned wagons and eventually collapsed. Many felt the panic began with the teamsters who in their wild frenetic states had cut the traces and rode the horses to Washington, leaving their loads where they stood on the bridge edges and road and forcing Captain Rodman to order his men to cross Cub Run as best they could. Some threw away their muskets and gear and forded the muddy waist deep water, toiling up the hill beyond, half running, half dragging themselves around the few wagons that haltingly tried to ford at the same place with spooked, nearly uncontrollable horses. Persistent rumors seeped through the crowds that Confederate cavalry were hot on their heels and about to overtake them. While some cavalry did approach they were too few and no match for the rear guard of the Federal army. Still, rumors flew to further whip up the emotions of the panicked civilians and teamsters especially. Reynolds, his face smeared dark with powder smoke and dust and his battery unable to cross the bridge, desperately ordered his few remaining guns to play on the approaching enemy but finally he too ordered his men to save themselves as best
they could. Only one of his guns was saved. On the brow of the hill in front of the tangled mass seeping across the bridge Rodman and his men could just make out through the smoke Colonel Louis Blenker's 1st Brigade of Colonel Miles' 5th Division—all New York and Pennsylvania boys of the 8th and 29th New York, the 27th Pennsylvania, and the Garibaldi Guard—formed to protect the column’s retreat as the enemy continued their fire upon Rodman’s, Reynolds’s, Arnold’s and the other rear guard units. It was the men of the 8th New York that Rodman could see most clearly forming the front of the line.

Colonel Blenker, 49 years old, was noted for his organizational skills and was no slacker. A German émigré, he had been a soldier of fortune who had fought in Greece and in the German Rebellion of 1848. Formerly, he formed and led the tough 8th New York, a regiment nearly fully comprised of German immigrants, and had built it into a fine fighting unit. Now, mounted with his 1st Brigade, he cut a very imposing, if somewhat pompous, martial figure—gray-mustachioed, straight backed, intense, dependable, his red lined military cape waving in the breeze as though to say to the retreating column “Here my bearer will protect you. Do not worry. Come.” Sometime after Rodman’s men had passed on toward town Blenker’s men successfully held off several squadrons of Confederate cavalry that were about to swoop down on the rear of the retreating Federals. The last Federal stragglers passed over the bridge in milling confusion around 9 p.m. Blenker finally left his post about midnight and moved his men back to Centreville.

By 9 p.m. the 2nd Rhode Island was in its former camp at Centreville, a town about six miles from the battle and now with streets also choked with panicked civilians trying to get back to the relative safety of Washington another twenty or so miles to the east. Exhausted, muddy, and filthy, some asleep on their feet, the men lit their cook fires, made their supper with what few provisions were not thrown away at the bridge, and went into bivouac, most falling to sleep before they hit the ground. McDowell had planned to hold the town as his advanced position but political Washington micromanagers, protecting their own scalp, had different thoughts. The politicians, afraid the Confederates would capture Washington, pressured General Scott to order McDowell to return his troops to defend the city. So, as ordered, about 11 p.m., General McDowell began pulling his men all the way back to Washington. At once the few smoking and sputtering campfires that remained were put out and a little “salt junk” gobbled down, hot or not. Men who had thrown away their rations with their knapsacks sacked abandoned sutler wagons for food and the ever present whiskey. Soon, the retreating column had to deal with drunken soldiers as well as dead horses. Rodman ordered his men to fall in and marched them all through that dark, damp night mostly without stopping, the full moon and stars here and there peeping through thin rain clouds. This time Rodman’s horse did not give out. Company E stopped for about fifteen to twenty minutes at Fairfax Courthouse, where they found the town’s muddy streets choked with confused and exhausted soldiers and civilians. Trundling past them slowly rolled an army wagon surrounded by mounted aides and cavalry carrying a pallid, ashen gray Colonel Hunter in great pain on a bed of dirty, dusty straw, his face wrapped in a bloody handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood from the holes in his jaw and neck. The wagon made excruciatingly slow progress, stopping every few minutes so that the colonel’s aides could move dead horses and frantic people out of the way. More wagons wove slowly along filled with the dead and wounded. One female house servant later remarked that
she could never forget the sight of these pathetic wagons and the blood that dripped through their floorboards as they passed. More units became entangled and lost their integrity all through the night but eventually followed the flow of the column and took up the retreat once more, crossed Long Bridge about 8 a.m., and returned to their former camps in what they felt was desperately vulnerable Washington. There on the doorsteps and in the yards around 8th Street stood women handing out sandwiches and coffee to the ragged men. The exhausted Rhode Islanders thanked the women warmly and wolfed down the meager fare. The men had been on their feet for about thirty six hours, most of the time in marching more than sixty miles and in battle and all of the time in hot, dusty, then rainy, nervous, slaughtering conditions. The Rhode Islanders had performed admirably in this fierce battle and painfully humiliating, confused retreat. At one point during the night Colonel Burnside's staff officers were directing the different regiments at a crossroads. Behind the 2nd Rhode Island marched men of Colonel Sherman's brigade. The staff officers shouted "Rhode Island this way!" and then heard Sherman's men shout "Where Rhode Island leads we'll all follow."

Now, inside the city and all around them were stragglers and troops that had lost their units. Some were sleeping in the rain-filled gutters, their heads propped on the bases of lampposts. Artillery horses slowly shuffled through the milling throngs of troops and carriages not going anywhere in particular, their officers fast asleep in their saddles. Men that still had spunk enough stood in long, wet lines outside liquor stores which just that day had raised their prices two and three fold after hearing of the retreat. Others, drunk or not, vandalized private homes, making off with pastries, chickens, hogs, wine, canned goods, and any other food they could find. The animals they slaughtered in the clogged gutters and roasted in campfires others had made from wooden fences which they had torn down and set afire in the middle of the puddled roads. What had this army come to? It now seemed to the well-disciplined Rhode Islanders nothing more than a bunch of rabble. No one was singing about John Brown now, no one was shouting “On to Richmond”. Was the war lost for good? Across town young captains and other officers left their units to non-commissioned officers or to their own devices and headed directly to the large mahogany bar at the ornate Willard’s Hotel. There they vowed to go home immediately, for they had seen all the war they wanted to, and there they were summarily chewed out for shirking their duty by the volunteer battlefield nurse, poet, and Lincoln admirer Walt Whitman.

The 2nd Rhode Island — both infantry and artillery—lost 104 officers and men in the first major engagement of the war. Colonel Slocum, Major Ballou, and Captain Levi Tower (Company F) fell upon the field; Captain S.J. Smith (Company I) was killed near the Cub Run bridge, his body ripped in two by a cannon ball. Twenty two men were killed and four, badly wounded, were captured and afterwards died in Confederate prisons. Three officers—Lieutenants Arnold and Williams of Company A and Lieutenant Cook of Company I — and thirty six men were wounded. Two officers — Doctor Harris, who voluntarily remained at the hospital to care for the wounded, and Lieutenant Church of Company H, along with Quartermaster-Sergeant Jencks, one member of the regimental band, and ten enlisted men, were captured. Rodman’s Company E lost four men killed, two wounded, one wounded and captured, and one not wounded but captured. Twenty one wounded men were taken south, where they were eventually exchanged. Company K suffered fourteen casualties, the greatest number of any company in the 2nd Rhode Island.
Colonel Slocum's death was widely lamented. Joined with a remarkable fearlessness were his great military qualities. He had the faculty of attracting to himself a personal confidence and love to a remarkable degree. Those who knew him became strongly attached to him. Major Sullivan Ballou also was deeply mourned. From a poor family in Smithfield, Rhode Island, he put himself through school and subsequently became Speaker of the Rhode Island House of Representatives. He is probably best known now for the letter he wrote his wife in 1861. That letter was a featured part of Ken Burn's television series on the Civil War.

The chief cause of defeat in this battle was lack of discipline. These were little more than raw recruits, young men and boys who had thought it would be fun to join up. They had little training beyond routine drilling and almost none had combat experience. They were used to shooting rabbits and squirrels and the occasional deer for the table, not other men. General Sherman later wrote that "At the battle of Bull Run my brigade was defeated, not by the enemy, but by a blackberry patch. In the early days of the war a regiment could not pass a well of water, without breaking ranks and going to get a drink." In the very heat of the battle, hundreds of men on both sides broke ranks and went down to Sudley Spring to fill their canteens. When Confederate General Johnston made his final attack, there was scarcely more than a disorganized Federal mob to meet him. All this being said, the 2nd Rhode Island, especially Rodman’s Company E and Captain Goddard’s command in the 1st Rhode Island who had been deployed as skirmishers and who remained in the front lines, were obviously well-enough disciplined. To endure what they endured and still hold was not expected of raw recruits, but they performed like veterans. This had to be attributed to their general upbringing, their early training, and to their unquestioning faith in their captains.

Home at Camp Brightwood

After the first battle of Bull Run and immediately before the three month enlistments of the 1st Rhode Island expired, the men of the 2nd Rhode Island exchanged their muskets for the better arms carried by men of the 1st Rhode Island, then moved into Gale’s Woods on the outskirts of Camp Sprague for a few weeks of relaxation and reorganization. The men knew now that they would not be home for Christmas; it was going to be a far more grim fight than they, and everyone else, had thought. Colonel Burnside was promoted to brigadier general on 6 August. Lieutenant Colonel Wheaton, son of the regimental surgeon, was promoted to colonel, Captain Steere of Company D to lieutenant colonel, and Captain Viall of Company C to major. Most of these promotions were dated 22 July. In Company E, Corporal Lyons was promoted to sergeant, and Privates Charles T. Brown, Thomas F. Holland, G. W. Thomas, Jr., Samuel Slocum, John H. Flier, and Paul Visser to corporals, to date from 1 August. Now, the ranks were filled and the casualties moved from the field hospitals to better care facilities.

A day after the battle Captains Rodman and Wright met to determine the disposition of the disabled men, some of whom they decided should be sent back to Providence accompanied by regimental surgeon Wheaton. The contingent left camp on the 30th. Chaplain Jameson accompanied the party as well, which sailed on the 3rd of August and arrived safely in Providence on the 8th.
Now fresh regiments poured into Washington daily. The Federal lines around Washington were tightened, the army consolidated, and General McDowell was replaced by General George B. McClellan (“Little Mac”). When the Confederates advanced to

within eyesight of the Capitol dome the government surrounded the city with a cordon of defensive works on a series of small hills about four miles from the heart of the city. One of these, at Brightwood— on 18th Street in the northeastern sector of the city—was selected as the fortified camp for 2nd Rhode Island, which occupied it on 6 August. Camp Brightwood, as it came to be called, was a very pleasant place.

The autumn of 1861 was mild, clear, and not very exciting; General McClellan remained on the defensive with no intention of moving his command to the attack. Captain Rodman’s company and many others continued fortifying the line of earthworks around Washington. The work was drudgery and boring but it was safe. Camp Brightwood’s fort was finished near the end of September and was name Fort Slocum in honor of the fallen colonel. Colonel Wheaton, who had replaced Colonel Slocum as regimental commander, continued to improve the 2nd Rhode Island and bolstered its already well-established reputation by making its encampment a model of neatness and efficiency.

Camp Brightwood became a source of special pride to Rhode Island men. On 4 September Bishop Clark visited the camp, hosted a dinner for the officers, and preached a powerful sermon on the 8th, the same day that Reverend Doctor H. W. Bellows, president
of the Sanitary Commission, along with other commission officers, addressed the Regiment and remarked on the excellent sanitary condition of the camp. On the 12th Governor Sprague, by now a common sight in camp, addressed the men. Dr. Harris, who had remained with the wounded at the field hospital at Bull Run and was captured, was released on parole and returned to camp on the 22nd. General and Mrs. Burnside also visited the camp and remarked about the excellent discipline of the men. Burnside was delighted with the beautiful Katie Chase, daughter of the Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who seemed always present nowadays when Governor Sprague was visiting Washington.

The rank of Colonel Wheaton was fixed by general orders of 6 October, as third in brigade command. But a major change impacted the men of Company E. Their beloved Captain Rodman, who with his men had shown so much bravery under fire, resigned on 25 September to assume the lieutenant-colonelcy of the 4th Rhode Island, to which he had been promoted for bravery at Bull Run by Governor Sprague on the 19th of the month. The next day Colonel Wheaton, in a special order, commended Rodman for his promotion: “The colonel commanding regrets exceedingly to lose the valuable services of Captain Rodman, but desires to congratulate him upon the well-merited promotion His Excellency Governor Sprague has seen fit to confer, and to state that he bears with him the best wishes of the whole Regiment, which counts with confidence upon his entire success in the new sphere of action, to which he has been called.”

The men of the 4th Rhode Island, a very new and untested regiment, had enlisted under General Orders No. 48 only a month before, on 15 August, 1861 and Governor Sprague had appointed Colonel Justus Ingersol McCarty of the regular army to their command when they rendezvoused on the level plain back at Camp Greene in the humid, sticky Rhode Island mid-August. Camp Greene, named for Revolutionary War hero General Nathanael Greene, was located on the west side of the Providence and Stonington Railroad about eight miles south of Providence and just north of Apponaug, close to what is now Hillsgrove and the Providence airport. Their camp fare had been Spartan, but pleasant enough, the men dining on coffee, bread, boiled corned beef, and boiled potatoes. Family and friends brought them all manner of presents and complemented with their army-issued materials like blacking, emery powder, and medicinal pills their knapsacks bulged with tin plates, forks, knives, a tin cup, water filters, canteen, socks, more socks, needles, thread, buttons, inkbottles, handkerchiefs, envelopes, papers, shaving brush and soap, Bibles, letters, photo albums, pipes and tobacco, cakes, cookies, pies, jams, and more socks. In a few months they would be lucky to have a change of clothes, a tin cup, and a handful of coffee beans. The 4th Rhode Island was very well-fitted out; far better so than the 2nd Rhode Island had been, with officers sporting gold epaulettes and the sergeants’ woolen shoulder patches.

Lieutenant Colonel Rodman may have joined his men in Rhode Island by 3 October 1861 when the 4th Rhode Island was reviewed by Governor Sprague and General Burnside. The next day they broke camp, marched in a short parade with Battery E, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery down High, Westminster, and South Main Streets in Providence to Fox Point, and embarked in late afternoon for Washington on board the steamer “Commodore” amid the thundering of cannon and the cheers and tears of friends. They went first to New York, then by rail, through now-quieted Baltimore to Camp Sprague where they arrived on 7 October. The regimental camp, called Camp Casey in
honor of General Silas Casey of East Greenwich, was eventually established near Bladensburg, Maryland. Here they drilled, paraded, and fought general boredom for two months. Foraging the woods for the newly ripened chestnuts and just-edible persimmons no doubt broke some of the tedium. Pilfering late-ripening corn and a few apples from fields, backyards and orchards added to their sense of excitement of being soldiers in wartime and far away from home. On 16 October the 4th Rhode Island paid its respects to President and Mrs. Lincoln at the White House and on the 25th made up part of the funeral cortege for Colonel Baker who had fallen on the 21st at the Battle of Ball’s Bluff. On that same day the usually energetic Lieutenant Colonel Rodman seemed haggard and worn. His aides noted that he had a mild fever and some intestinal problems. These are the first symptoms of the dreaded typhoid fever.

Unknown by physicians for a generation after the war, typhoid is caused by the Salmonella bacteria and spread by contact with human fecal matter through unclean food preparation, consumption of contaminated milk and water (the usual method of spread), and by the common housefly. It inflames the lining of the small intestine causing intense diarrhea and subsequent dehydration. Occasionally it enters the blood stream, resulting in septicemia and near-certain death. Before the mid 19th century the disease was treated typically with calomel (a mercurous chloride purgative), tarter emetic, quinine, and opium pills for pain and diarrhea, cold compresses for fever, blistering with mustard or cantharides, whiskey or brandy if the patient collapsed, and orally-administered oil of turpentine, along with several weeks of rest. Most of these “remedies” remained in place during the war in spite of pleadings from the United States Army medical corps for their removal. Calomel, a violent purgative, and tarter emetic, commonly classed as a “puking medicine”, along with simple bed rest, constant intake of fluids to reduce dehydration, and the occasional dose of laudanum diluted in whiskey to induce much-needed sleep, were commonly prescribed.

On 28 October the regiment was reviewed by General McClellan himself, who soon after revoked Colonel McCarty’s commission, no doubt at the urging of Governor Sprague, who did not get along with the colonel at all. McCarty resigned and Sprague officially appointed Rodman colonel of the 4th Rhode Island on Wednesday, 30 October, the day the regiment was officially mustered into the service. It is fair to assume that McCarty’s removal must have been planned during the previous summer, when Sprague likely arranged for Rodman’s transfer to the 4th in anticipation of promoting his old friend to regimental command for his meritorious action at the first battle of Bull Run.

The 4th Rhode Island was assigned to the Burnside expedition to North Carolina and on the same day was reviewed by General O.O. Howard. The men received their new colonel quietly and respectfully; they had nothing against Rodman but did not know him well enough, and they had loved and trusted McCarty. This was the beginning of trouble that culminated around the end of the year in the resignation of nearly all regimental commissioned officers. Rodman, still weak from the lingering aftermath of typhoid, now had the added burden of not only training these raw recruits but of re-fitting his regiment with commissioned officers. No doubt there was much grumbling among the men about politics and such but things finally straightened out.

The 4th remained officially stationed in or near Alexandria, Virginia from 5 October until 11 January, though some units had left their Camp California on 2 January to join General Burnside as part of General Jonathan Parke’s 3rd Brigade. On a warm and
dusty first day of November the soldiers marched into Washington and traded their old smoothbore “buck and ball” muskets for new ones. Among the citizens there had been widespread threats against Federal sympathizers in the upcoming elections and the 4th Rhode Island was assigned to oversee elections in Marlborough.

Colonel Rodman received orders to march on Sunday morning, the 3rd of November, with seven days rations, from Camp Casey, down the Patuxent River, and on to Calvert County, Maryland for the elections. That day he and the 4th Rhode Island marched about twenty four miles, half the time “…through the mud half shoe deep.” and arrived about six miles from Upper Marlboro about 7 p.m. where they bivouacked in the woods. On Monday morning they started out for Lower Marlboro, about twenty seven miles distant, crossed the Patuxent at Hill’s Landing and arrived at Graham’s Woods twenty seven miles from their destination. It was about 8 p.m. and they bivouacked once more in the woods. By order of General Howard the 4th Rhode Island moved down to the voting precinct the next day and encamped in “…a fine, dry pine woods and on the road about one mile…” from town. On Wednesday morning, the morning of the elections, Rodman and two companies of the 4th Rhode Island, along with Adjutant Curtis, marched into town after posting some soldiers about one hundred yards from the polls but in plain sight of them. Rodman then took his place near the center of the polling place and prohibited all intercourse between the soldiers and the civilians and sending back to camp every straggler from the regiment. In a letter to Governor Sprague, written from 9 to 11 November, Rodman recalled then that: “I told the influential Union men that General Howard had ordered me there to protect them and my command was then subject to any command for that purpose. There were 40 to 50 rascals who continued to deal out whisky to the lawless in hoping of a fight as I judged, when they were all primed some 4 or 5 men commenced a row when I ordered in Capt. Kenyon with 10 men and opening the crowed with fixed bayonets the rowdies were arrested.” Rodman then addressed the crowd, telling them he had positive orders to maintain order, and that they could rest assured he would. Things were quiet for another three or four hours when Rodman heard some undercurrents stirring. Some men had continued to hang around all day giving out whiskey and “4 or 5 gentlemen….had been lounging around all day with double barreled dueling guns. I now ascertained that the guns were loaded and capped. Thinking that the gentlemen had better be looked after I ordered in Capt. Buffum with 10 men when down came their guns from their shoulders as if in a --------[manner?] to use. Rodman then also noticed some twenty five to thirty men with concealed revolvers and while keeping his eye on them ordered Captain Allen with ten more men to advance and take them in the rear. “As soon as they perceived this movement the drinking gentlemen mounted their horses and made off.” Rodman arrested a total of four men, closed the shops and the polls at the proper time, and had a quiet evening. The colonel then returned to his regiment and marched the 4th Rhode Island into town for a parade and evening service, leaving Adjutant Curtis and Captain Kenyon’s company to guard the polling place until the vote was counted. The next morning he received orders to march back to Camp Casey and he got the regiment onto the road at 7 a.m. for a thirty mile march. The next morning the men began marching at 8 a.m. and got into Camp Casey around 2 p.m. “with only 4 or 5 stragglers….” Rodman remarked. They had made a hundred mile march in four days which Rodman thought rather good for young soldiers. “But the best of all I can affirm your Excellency is the reputation which the 4th Rhode Island has left in the towns through
which we passed. No disorderly conduct—no pilfering but an appearance to emulate the veteran 2nd [Rhode Island regiment]. The Union men with whom I conversed said that they could not have voted had it not been for the troops, they would have been bullied down….”

At the end of his letter to Sprague Rodman reported: “Have not seen or heard anything of McCarty since I saw your Excellency, in the city—have not seen him since in fact and he has not called on me. If he does it may be disagreeable for him.” This shows clearly some bad blood between the two colonels and Rodman plainly expected that it was McCarty’s duty to call on him as commanding colonel, since he underlined that clause. The next sentence about such a visit being disagreeable is ambiguous. Rodman may have felt that McCarty might be embarrassed to pay him a visit or that if he did Rodman would have some harsh words for him concerning the late hard feelings about his removal from command of the 4th and the unrest that caused among the men and officers. Perhaps McCarty fanned the flames to disparage Rodman?

The colonel, now apparently recuperated well enough from typhoid, worked his men hard, and, deciding they needed to improve their stamina, led them with his fast-stepping horse on a fast-paced roundabout march of over one hundred miles in four days to Centreville, Virginia and back. As the men started to give out they looked up to see that “our colonel still ambled over the road as if he was bound for a country fair.” They even pleaded with Rodman to stop, if not for their sake, then for the sake of his horse. Now the line began to lose integrity with men dropping out along the way to rest, but Colonel Rodman continued on. After seventeen miles, the regimental historian noted that they finally could rest from the march only because Colonel Rodman’s horse gave out.

The holidays were coming but the prospect the men once held of being home by Christmas had faded long ago. The soldiers caught word of a load of turkeys and chickens being shipped to them from back home for Thanksgiving, but none had arrived. Instead, on Thanksgiving morning they were given abrupt orders to strike their tents and break camp. Grumbling, they enjoyed a festive holiday meal of hardtack, coffee made with muddy ditch water, and “salt junk”, which might have been either salt pork or salt beef but long since had become unidentifiable. So passed Thanksgiving day, but finally, late on Thursday the 28th of November the Rhode Island regiments received one hundred fifty pounds of turkey from home and on the 29th had a fine belated Thanksgiving meal, with apples and cranberries and boiled potatoes, onions, and turnips, all followed by songs and dancing.

At the end of November the 4th marched into Virginia, pitched their tents at Camp California near Fairfax Seminary, and went on picket duty a few weeks later at Edsall’s Hill, Virginia, where they received mittens and more socks sent from the ladies of Rhode Island. Colonel Rodman also received high commendations from his officers, most of them new and appointed with his blessing, sometime around Christmas. Finally, it was Christmas Day! The colonel ordered all unnecessary duty be deferred and after morning church services his officers presented him with a fine field-glass. In the afternoon the men held foot-races, sack-races, wrestling matches, and chased a greased pig. During the day each soldier was given another pair of socks and warm woolen mittens, still more gifts from the ladies back home.
On New Year’s Day, 1862, General O.O. Howard and the Hon. George H. Brown, a Rhode Island congressman, visited the camp of the 4th Rhode Island where the regiment received their final orders to join General Burnside’s North Carolina “Coastal Campaign”. The aim of this campaign was to seize southern ports on the Atlantic coast to strengthen the Federal blockade of the south, preventing trade between those states and European powers, most notably England and France.

Like the Wreck of the Hesperus

On the dark, Friday morning of 3 January the men rose early under a nearly new moon, got a hefty supply of rations, boarded a long train of cattle-cars, and left Washington for a day-long ride to Annapolis, Maryland where they were brigaded with the 5th Rhode Island and the 8th and 11th Connecticut, all together making up the 3rd Brigade of Burnside’s “Coast Division”. Typical daily army rations at the time consisted of 12 ounces of salt pork or bacon or 1 ¼ pounds of salt beef. When the army was stationary and could construct bake ovens the men also got 1 lb. 6 ounces of soft bread per day. Otherwise, when on campaign they drew hardtack instead of the soft bread. Vegetables such as potatoes, onions, and turnips were issued when available. When not available the men had to forage for them themselves.

On the 7th of January they boarded the navy transport “Eastern Queen” at Annapolis and headed for Fortress Monroe. In the next three days the units became part of the 3rd Division under Brigadier General Jonathan G. Parke. All embarked from Fortress Monroe on the 10th, headed for Roanoke, North Carolina in a giant ragtag flotilla under command of Admiral Goldsboro. Lieutenant Graham of the 9th New York recalled it was a strange hodgepodge cobbled together with full-rigged ships, ocean steamers, New York bay tugboats, Brooklyn and Staten Island ferryboats, canal boats from Buffalo, a stern-wheeler from Maine, and literally anything at hand that could float. Some of the 4th Rhode Island and some horses went aboard the steamer “George Peabody”; regimental guns, battery wagons, forge, and some other material boarded the schooner “James T. Brady”. The “City of New York” carried the ammunition and the “Pocahontas”, the bulk of the remaining horses. The keel of the USS Pocahontas was laid in 1852 and she was originally commissioned the USS Despatch in 1856. She was recommissioned with her present name in 1860. The one hundred sixty nine foot long steamer measured a bit over twenty six feet abeam and had a hold depth of about eighteen feet. She was fitted with both steam engine and sails and armed with four, 32 pounders, one, 10 pounder, and a 20 pounder Parrott rifle.

Eighty vessels in all sailed on an outgoing tide the next night in a gale and heavy seas. Some never made it to their destination. After a short time captains realized they were fighting a losing battle with Nature. Ships that were close to shore got into the relative safety of the coastal inlets, some beat out to sea to ride out the storm on sea anchors, many of which were useless against the winds and waves that beat the ships to shore. Many other ships were trapped between the sea and the shore by the strong wind and high waves. Two ocean-going vessels crashed into each other in the breakers and a great number of lives were lost. Both the “City of New York” and the “Pocahontas” were grounded and all but nineteen horses washed overboard and drowned. The ammunition was lost; the gunboat “Zouave” was wrecked, the floating battery “Grapeshot” swamped,
and one or two schooners with provisions and forage were grounded as well. Those ships that anchored near shore were pounded to pieces on the rocks and sands. Volunteer crews manned lifeboats and tried to save the seasick men but they too foundered in the waves. Much of the drinking water and rations were lost and with the water on the island for the most part undrinkable what little barreled water that could be salvaged was put under guard. In a few days typhoid broke out in the camps on shore. Naval crews threw barrels of ship’s bread (a hard-baked mix of salt, flour, and water) from the foundering ships in the hope that they would wash ashore and be salvaged. Many were although much of it had been soaked with the salt water, which didn’t stop the starving men from devouring it anyway.

Rodman’s 4th Rhode Island anchored offshore and rode out the storm aboard the “Eastern Queen” but because they had lost their rations were given a daily allowance of only one pint of water, which tasted like kerosene since it had been stored in old kerosene barrels. They also were allowed two pints of weak coffee, twelve pieces of hardtack, and a small piece of either salt pork or salt junk per day. The term “salt junk” technically referred to a piece of hard, salted beef but soldiers often applied it to any meat the origins of which were unidentifiable. Guards were placed around barrels of good, fresh water, which was reserved for emergency use and for the officers. Quickly the captain ordered an onboard condenser to turn salt water into fresh be put into operation but it was inadequate for the job. Young James Kenny of Company B, 4th Rhode Island, while guarding the condenser one night, felt very tired and took a seat on a barrel of molasses. As the boy mounted the barrel his weight stove in the top and he fell in butt first so that only his arms and legs stuck out. The men finally managed to get him out and Colonel Rodman, hearing of the incident, ordered the molasses given out to the men. The next day they feasted on hardtack dipped into the thick, sweet black syrup. Then, about midnight, the first of them crawled out onto the deck and hung his backside over the gunwales to get rid of his late feast. Others quickly followed. Some of the meat supplies on board had spoiled and the men were issued an alternate mess of rotten, maggoty pork which they promptly threw overboard. When weather and seas allowed, the ships drew closer to the beach and cooks went ashore to boil huge kettles of dry beans. After some time the hungry enlisted men noted that the officer’s mess was well-stocked with canned goods, whiskey, cheese, butter, and other luxuries and lay just forward of their (enlisted men’s) quarters. Sensing easy pickings, the boys raided that precious store one night and for the next few days quietly sold pepper sauce at “ten cents a squirt”, chunks of pineapple cheeses, and whiskey at $5 to $10 a half pint.

As if the poor food, heavy seas, molasses, and scant and rotten rations were not torment enough, the cramped, foul-smelling hold of the ship was heavily infested with body lice. Aside from the constant itch they caused, the lice could carry the dreaded “ship fever”--typhus.

Some of the grounded ships were freed on the incoming tide and the flotilla moved on again. Still fighting heavy seas as they approached Hatteras Light, now the “Eastern Queen” was driven ashore. Fortunately, Rodman and his men, by now hungry, thirsty, itchy, and suffering from dysentery and seasickness, were able to wade ashore through the frigid waist-deep water, waves pounding upon their backs and necks. Finally, the men went into camp on dry land and all movements took on a greater regularity. All in all, because of the choppy seas it took a few weeks to land the entire fleet.
When some semblance of order had been restored and the men settled into camp, the locals were quick to sell them good food and the men were quick to buy it. Graham recalled the fresh fish, sweet potatoes, chickens, eggs, and especially, the sweet potato pie which he thought “looked like a sheet of thick, wet brown paper spread on a sole-leather crust.”

Roanoke

On 7 February the 4th Rhode Island boarded the light-draught steamer “Phoenix” along with the other regiments and proceeded toward Ft. Bartow on Roanoke Island. The expedition had a tough time of it from the first and after a fierce bombardment of the fort by Federal gunboats in heavy wind the “Phoenix” grounded in a marsh between the steamers of Generals Reno and Foster. Through a cold rain and very windy conditions about midnight the men ran through the frigid mud and marsh water to firmer ground, then formed on the left of the Hammond house where the 4th Rhode Island, 25th Massachusetts, and 10th Connecticut, all in the 1st Brigade, posted pickets in the woods that night and positioned boat howitzers in the road at the edge of the clearing for defense. Then, the men got down to a very wet, rainy night cooking their meals and trying to sleep without shelters, laying three or four together for warmth beneath their rubber blankets. In all, the naval expedition landed about eleven thousand New England, New York, and New Jersey troops that cold, wet night.

There was a single road on that part of the island running from Ashby’s Landing northeast about half way across the island, then turning northwest and going across a swamp on a narrow corduroy road. Movements began about 8 a.m. next morning when the Confederates opened fire with artillery. Rodman ordered his men toward the six Federal Dahlgren boat howitzers that were providing counter battery fire but, finding them under heavy fire, reconsidered. Rodman, always in front of his men, veered them slightly to the right away from the howitzers and through a clearing under heavy fire. The regiment caught up with the 25th Massachusetts, also under fire, and at about 11 a.m. both found the men wading through a terribly tangled cypress swamp teeming in milder weather with poisonous cottonmouths, but now filled with sticky knee deep mud, icy water waist deep in some places, and brush so thick that Rodman and the other officers were forced to hack their way through with their swords while under enemy fire. The swamp was about an eighth mile wide with solid ground on the far side. The Confederate battery that was causing the men such grief was anchored in an earthwork surrounded by a moat. In front of the three guns was an abatis of felled trees, their branches sharpened to repel an attack.

But the Confederate cannons caused little damage as the baneful thickness of the swamp blessedly also made accurate fire impossible. Even still, the men moving to the attack were faced by the wounded filing back along the same route. For many this was their first encounter with battle casualties. Following orders, Rodman formed his regiment in column with ranks at ninety degrees to the Confederate line. The 4th Rhode Island was positioned behind the 23rd and 27th Massachusetts on the right side of the swamp. Behind Rodman formed the 51st Pennsylvania, also in column. The four columns were to attack the Confederate left. The 51st New York, 21st Massachusetts, 9th New Jersey, and 25th Massachusetts were posted similarly across the swamp to hit the Confederate right. The tough 9th New York (Hawkin’s Zouaves) was to mount a frontal
assault on the Confederate batteries by charging about eight hundred feet along the corduroy road directly through the middle of the swamp. The 9th New York was to move to the right of the artillery battery at the middle of the Confederate line, then drive into the Confederate reserves at the rear.

The 4th Rhode Island was the only regiment in blue coats and when the Confederates finally broke they yelled “There come the damned blue-coated regulars.” The Rhode Islanders were of course volunteers, not regular army. The men were under constant fire but remained in place, laying flat on the ground, and held their fire. After several hours, a seemingly interminable amount of time, Rodman ordered his men to fix bayonets and the Federal troops advanced to the attack. Hawkin’s Zouaves charged directly through the middle of the swamp as ordered and the men of the 51st New York charged the right of the Confederate line while the 21st Massachusetts behind them stormed the parapets. In a short time the 21st Massachusetts and the 51st New York got into the earthworks and the battle was won. The Confederates were pushed to the north end of the island where they
surrendered unconditionally to Federal troops and the twenty-five hundred prisoners eventually were exchanged for Federal captives taken at the first battle of Bull Run.

The 4th Rhode Island and 10th Connecticut, the latter regiment held in reserve in the swamp, moved on to capture Pork Point battery. Rodman’s regiment then bivouacked on the night of the 8th at Camp Parke where it remained for a month recruiting its strength. That night it rained hard; it had rained for nearly two days straight and all was mud. Still, most of the men built their campfires and turned in after a good meal. But some were restless and started out about midnight to forage. They got back into camp about daylight dripping wet but loaded heavy with hogs, hams, chickens, and other food. Out came the pots and pans and all the men enjoyed a great feast for breakfast on Sunday morning, 9th February. That morning one company of the 4th Rhode Island was ordered to capture Fort Blanchard (renamed Fort Parke in honor of their commander), a small work mounting only four, thirty-two pounders. The men made short work of the capture and so ended their activities on Roanoke Island.

There is a small sidelight to the action at Roanoke Island. One O. Jennings Wise was severely wounded while trying to escape from the island in a boat. He was the son of former Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise who at the time was a Confederate brigadier general in command of two thousand troops on the island. Governor Wise also was the brother-in-law of Federal General George Meade, future commander of the Army of the Potomac who assumed that command only a few days before the battle of Gettysburg, still a year and a half in the future. Colonel Rodman rendered every attention to the dying Wise, but to no avail.

Although Rodman had seen action at Bull Run as Captain of Company E, 2nd Rhode Island, this was the first experience under fire for the men of the 4th Rhode Island. Colonel Rodman ever after insisted that he and the 4th deserved much more credit for this battle than for the subsequent battle of New Berne.

New Berne

The battle of New Berne came on the heels of that of Roanoke. On 12 March Federal forces sailed across a calm Pamlico Sound and up the Neuse River to Slocum’s Creek. At 10:30 a.m. on the foggy morning of Thursday the 13th the men of the 4th Rhode Island disembarked from the still lice-infested “Eastern Queen” with the aid of the sternwheeler “Union” sixteen miles below New Berne on the southern bank of the river. Joining the other regiments on the marsh and wooded land they took up the march behind the 51st Pennsylvania and continued on through the day. Lieutenant Graham of the 9th New York recalled that the weather was never clement but alternately hot and dusty and cold and wet and that there again there was little good drinking water. Nothing of any moment happened. Colonel Rodman led his men moving heavy howitzers through the swamps, and then ordered them bivouacked for the night. It was a long, dark, wet, stormy night but the men ate well and huddled on their rubber blankets, sometimes three or four together in spoon fashion beneath their shelter tents.

At 6:30 next morning Colonel Rodman formed his men along the main road, with the rear of General Foster’s brigade moving on the right of General Parke’s brigade; General Reno’s brigade moved along on their left, their march greatly slowed by the muddy roads. About 7:45 a.m. heavy artillery and musket fire bore down on the Rhode Islanders from positions ahead and to their left. General Foster’s brigade now was
engaged with Confederate batteries in their front while General Reno had engaged the Confederate right. Rodman’s regiment followed General Parke across the front of the Confederate lines then filed off to the left through the woods for some distance nearly to a railroad, where Rodman halted to await further orders. The 4th Rhode Island remained standing in place for a few minutes before Rodman deployed Company D in a skirmish line. But seeing that the regiment’s position was too exposed Rodman ordered his men to take cover under the railroad embankment to await further orders. Meanwhile, the

Source: Civil War Gazette
Troop dispositions and action at New Berne, North Carolina

Federals discovered a gap in the Confederate line where a railroad track breached it. Confederate Gen L. O’B. Branch sent his artillery captain Rodman (not our Federal Colonel Isaac P. Rodman) and his men to man the twenty four pounders set up on the right flank of the left side of the line, just where the anxious men of the 26th North Carolina lay. Captain Rodman found the guns not yet mounted when he arrived so he and his men prepared to fight as infantry. While Colonel Rodman and his men waited for further orders under cover of the trees and railroad embankment part of the 21st Massachusetts led by Lieutenant Colonel Clarke charged the Confederate lines and were repulsed by the anxious men of the 26th North Carolina. Clarke assured Colonel Rodman that another charge of the works would surely succeed and that he (Rodman) could get
behind the enemy entrenchments by charging down the railroad directly upon old brick-kiln. Rodman hesitated, awaiting orders. Meanwhile, General Parke had sent his aide, Lieutenant Lydig, to reconnoiter the entrance to the enemy entrenchments by way of the railroad and supported Clarke’s assertion that it was practical to attack. Lydig also encouraged Rodman to attack. Still hesitant to attack without orders, but reluctant to lose momentum, Rodman responded that if Lydig would inform the general of the situation and of his recommendations for attack, then he, Rodman, would attack. Lydig returned to General Parke’s headquarters and apprised him of the situation. Parke approved of Rodman’s advance and ordered Lieutenant Lydig to bring up the 8th Connecticut and 5th Rhode Island to support the attack of Rodman’s 4th Rhode Island.

Events following this are confused and vary according to after-action reports.

Colonel Rodman, unable to communicate with General Parke for some reason, about 11 a.m. ordered “4th Rhode Island fall in” in a partially protected hollow, with his right wing forward, supported by his left wing. Rodman then ordered his men to advance along the railroad tracks. The 8th Connecticut and 5th Rhode Island hurried on the double quick to their support. The 4th Rhode Island was now in front of the enemy’s five gun battery and rifle pits and to the right of a nine gun battery. Relentlessly, the men moved forward, Colonel Rodman advancing on Captain Rodman’s men. At two hundred yards out the firing became murderous but the 4th continued on at the double-quick up to within one hundred yards of the battery, the men firing and reloading as they went. The air was thick with blinding, acrid sulfurous smoke as Rhode Islanders fell in the constant hail of buckshot, bullets, and balls. They were now only a few yards from the Confederate lines when Isaac Rodman ordered “Fix bayonets”. With Colonel Rodman leading, the men ran full tilt into the Confederate lines, bayonets now shining, now dulled with blood. The hand to hand fighting was vicious. Men screamed in anger and in fear, stabbing at a half-seen enemy through the smoke and dust, groping for fallen friends or struggling enemy in the thick smoke. Finally, the Rhode Islanders overwhelmed the enemy and carried the works in their front, piercing the right flank of the Confederate line between the brick yard and the end of the parapet. Their blood up and their momentum increasing the regiment moved rapidly down the line of entrenchments, taking the enemy guns one by one. They moved to the left of the 33rd North Carolina and right of the twenty four pounders, then veered off to the left past the rifle pits, where the Confederates again opened upon them but inflicted little damage. Finally Colonel Rodman’s men entered the rear of the entrenchments, where they captured nine brass guns and drove the enemy out. Rodman continued to move into the enemy's rear, captured several more cannons, and broke the entire Confederate line. They captured all of the nine brass field pieces at their front, along with carriages, caissons, and horses. By this time enemy fire had subsided and only played from three cannons in front of them and three on their left, all shots of which were high and passed over the Rhode Islanders. At about the same time General Reno’s brigade drove the enemy from their own front. The heavy smoke eventually lifted and Rodman, while surveying the bloody carnage and tending to his worn and wounded men, spied what he figured was about two Confederate regiments forming in the woods. His men were exhausted and had lost momentum so Rodman deemed it imprudent to attack. The Confederates eventually disappeared into the woods and the triumphant men of the 4th Rhode Island planted the Stars and Stripes on the parapet; they watched the Confederates retire from the entire length of their lines on their
left flank. Abbott claimed that Rodman’s charge was one of the most magnificent in the entire war.

The colonel allowed his men a 10 minute rest then re-formed them in the rear of the 8th and 11th Connecticut and the 5th Rhode Island. By order of General Parke, Rodman now prepared to attack the rifle pits on the right of General Reno’s force where the firing was heaviest. Fresh from one victory the 4th countermarched by the right flank and entered the woods near the brick works when the enemy opened a severe barrage, killing and wounding some of Rodman’s best officers and men. Seeing his position once more untenable, Rodman again ordered “Fix bayonets”. At the double-quick his men charged the hot muskets in the pits and the cannon along the railroad embankment, carrying both in about fifteen minutes.

The wounded of the 4th Rhode Island were placed in the care of regimental surgeon Henry Rivers and assistant surgeon Robert Millar. General Parke then ordered Rodman to move forward on the railroad tracks to New Berne. The colonel started his men off immediately, then turned off at a county road and sent his right company forward as skirmishers, but there was no opposition. Near New Berne the 4th took possession of a deserted camp and its stores lately occupied by Confederate Colonel Lee’s regiment.

Characteristically, Rodman gave all credit to his men for their superb efforts at New Berne, especially to Captain Charles Tillinghast who fell leading his company and to Captain William Chase and Lieutenant Curtis, Adjutant General of the 4th Rhode Island, who were wounded.

Generals Parke and Burnside considered Colonel Rodman’s soldierly movement the zenith of the day. When the fighting was over General Burnside rode up to Rodman and, pointing to the Confederate artillery, asked “What regiment captured this battery?” Rodman replied “The Fourth, General, the Fourth.” Burnside took his unusually tall hat off and slapped his knee for emphasis saying “I knew it, I knew it. It is no more than I expected. Thank God the day is ours.” For his bravery at New Berne Colonel Rodman
was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers, effective 28 April.

New Berne had been captured, but the 4th Rhode Island had lost ten men killed and twenty five wounded, of whom five later died.

Rodman’s men returned to Annapolis, then, on 21 March, left for Fortress Monroe, once more on the “Eastern Queen”. Their new mission was to capture Beaufort and Morehead City but to do that they had to take Fort Macon which guarded the entrance to those ports. The night of 21 March was dark, wet, and foggy by midnight and the men of the 4th passed by boat quietly, with oars muffled, directly under the guns of Fort Macon and took Morehead City. Then, four companies left Morehead City wharves in boats guided by black fishermen and reached Beaufort at 2 a.m. With Morehead City and Beaufort subdued and occupied by Federal troops, on 23 March General Parke sent a message to Confederate Colonel White demanding he surrender Fort Macon. White refused and Parke began a siege of the fort, which ended with White’s surrender on 26 April, 1862. The 5th Rhode Island then took possession of Fort Macon and the 4th Rhode Island occupied Fort Macon and Beaufort until July. While there Colonel Rodman received his official promotion to brigadier general of volunteers for gallantry at New
It had been just over ten months after he entered the service as captain of Company E, 2nd Rhode Island.

Brigadier General I.P. Rodman

General Parke appointed General Rodman the military governor of the Beaufort district on 1 May, where he remained until he left for home on 3 June. Lieutenant Colonel George W. Tew then assumed command of the 4th Rhode Island while Rodman awaited a new assignment as commander of a division.

Sometime in late spring or early summer General Rodman had contracted typhoid fever once again and upon the insistence of both his surgeon and General Burnside, returned home for several weeks, “broken in health”, to be nursed by his family. A weak, emaciated Rodman, perhaps suffering more from the “cure” than from the disease, was greeted at the West Kingston station by a large crowd of citizens, some military companies, and a military band, but because of his weakness and his being overwhelmed by the crowds and the pomp, said only a few words. His reticence was compounded by his innate aversion to anything that smacked of a “display” and he refused all requests to appear at any public occasion until the “Great War Meeting” (we would call it a rally today) held in Providence on 4 August, when he appealed to the great crowd with heated enthusiasm to speed up their recruiting efforts. Other speakers rallied the citizens gathered among great crowds on Market Street that day including Providence Mayor Jabez Knight, Governor Sprague, President Barnas Sears of Brown University, Reverend Augustus Woodbury and other dignitaries from Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Several more meetings and rallies were held over the next several weeks. Businesses closed at 3 p.m. daily and recruiters, drummers, and fifers plied the streets in search of recruits to fill the ranks of the 11th Rhode Island and 12th Rhode Island regiments by late September. The men were given a Hobson’s choice. They could volunteer and receive a bounty or they could be drafted into service without a bounty.
Meanwhile, back in Washington, the city on 25 July draped itself in black crepe, dipped its flags, boomed its cannons and went into public mourning for the funeral of former President Martin “Little Van” Van Buren. Although not an outstanding president, he was a symbol of quieter times, a bygone era when the country was united. No such respect was paid to former President John Tyler who had died in mid-January. Tyler, a Virginian, sided with the Confederacy and hence was considered a traitor. Elderly General Winfield Scott, old “Fuss and Feathers”, had finally retired that summer and was being replaced by an inept, fish-eyed General Henry “Old Brains” Halleck as General-in-Chief of the Army.

By now the patriotic “spirit of ’61” had evaporated. Folks knew that this would be a long war and the surge of raucous, innocent recruits had dwindled to a trickle. It didn’t help that Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had suspended recruiting efforts the precious April, only to begin them anew in summer. Meanwhile, President Lincoln ordered a new recruitment of troops and, that failing to fill the ranks, a draft of State militia. A “War” meeting similar to but larger than the one held in Providence was held in Washington about 5 p.m. on 6 August on the east front of the Capitol. There President Lincoln gave a short speech in which he made light of the bad blood between General McClellan and Secretary of War Stanton. Then events took a serious turn for the worse. On 9 August came news of a Federal defeat at Culpepper Courthouse and rumors headlined every quidnunc that Confederate General Jackson was set to invade the city at any time.

Back in Rhode Island the South Kingstown town council announced on 7 August that they would pay $500 bounty to each of the ninety seven men needed to make up President Lincoln’s new call for three hundred thousand troops. The patriarch of the Rodman family, Samuel, was a member of the committee to allocate this money, and another family member, Daniel Rodman, was a recruiting officer for South Kingstown. Dr. Thomas Hazard, Rodman’s family physician, and Stephen C. Fiske, who had loaned his name to the central area of Peace Dale, then called “Fiske’s Flat”, were other committee members. That committee recommended that the town pay each volunteer $100 on swearing in, $100 when honorably discharged, and $25 per quarter during the three year’s service, or if honorably discharged sooner, then the whole amount to become due and payable at that time. There was much argument around town over this bounty arrangement but folks felt that this voluntary enlistment, which was really a bribed enlistment, would forestall establishment of a draft. To pay for the bounty a special “war tax” of $1 per $100 of taxable property was ordered to be collected by vote of the Town Council on 21 August. Although General Rodman had returned to his second year of the war, his brother Roland had just joined the army and been appointed captain of Company G, 7th Rhode Island. The bulk of his men came from South Kingstown but the balance were recruited from Fall River, Massachusetts. For enlisting 82 men into his company Roland was allowed $328. Now Samuel’s family had two sons fighting for the Union.

Events on the national scene were becoming dicey. Because of the tightening Federal blockade of southern ports made possible by Burnside’s “Coastal Campaign” of the previous spring, Great Britain and France were suffering from a great shortage of southern cotton. A full 80,000 textile workers in Lancashire had been laid off and another 370,000 reduced to half time. The situation was similar on the lower Seine. Both countries were close to mediating a settlement of our Civil War or in entering the war on
the side of the Confederacy. The Federals could not fight a war on two fronts. President Lincoln had to raise the stakes. In early July he paid a regular visit to the telegraph office in the War Department as he had done almost daily since the war began. There he asked T.T. Eckert the telegrapher for a piece of paper, explaining that he wanted to write something special. Eckert reported that Lincoln worked on it off and on for several days, a little at a time. Then he read it to his Cabinet in late July. It was a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation that added a moral basis for the war. Foreign powers now could not step in to support the immoral cause of slavery. But he needed to present it from a position of strength; he desperately needed a victory in the field.

Washington had begun the summer in its usual torpid state but by late August the citizens of the city had sunk into a deep and morose demoralization and near panic over General Pope’s defeat at the second Battle of Bull Run. On 25 August General Pope telegraphed that he felt that the entire enemy force was before him on the old battleground of Bull Run but that he was confident he would vanquish the foe. The next day the War Department received the following foreboding message from Manassas Junction, Pope’s main supply depot well behind his lines: “No. 6 train, engine Secretary, was fired into at Bristoe by a party of secesh cavalry-- some say 500 strong....” That was the last message out of Manassas before the line went dead. Communications with General Pope and his army were cut off.

In Washington Colonel Herman Haupt, in charge of the railroads, tried to forward reinforcements and supplies to Pope but Federal General Sam Sturgis had commandeered the trains for his own use. Haupt’s efforts were frustrated partly because of Sturgis’ actions and partly because of the damage done to the rails by Confederate cavalry. Rail cars sat loaded in Washington with horse oats rotting in the sun. Supplies for the soldiers spoiled in other cars. The colonel finally regained control of the rails and tried to forward volunteer nurses, male orderlies, and stretcher bearers to Pope. These volunteers had been told to bring “alcoholic stimulants” with them for the wounded but instead many felt they were better self-administered. Drunkenness was rampant. The intrepid Haupt refused to allow drunks aboard the trains and issued orders that any volunteer who arrived drunk at the front should be arrested and returned to the city. By the time aid reached Pope it was too late. The army and the government appeared to be run by complete imbeciles.

A further calamity had occurred a few weeks earlier with General McClellan’s ordered withdrawal, masterly as it was, from his Peninsular Campaign and movement back toward Washington when he had been so close to capturing the Confederate capitol; at one point he had Federal forces only five miles from Richmond! He had been ordered to move his men back to Washington by General Hallack for protection of the city.

The letter of Lieutenant Charles F. Adams, son of President John Quincy Adams and grandson of President John Adams, illustrates the demoralizing frustration felt by Washingtonians. On 27 August he wrote to his father, then ambassador to England: “Do you know that Pope is a humbug?...Do you know that today...[Pope] is cut off from Washington?...Our rulers seem to me to be crazy. The air of this city [Washington] seems thick with treachery.... Everything is ripe for a terrible panic.”

On the sultry afternoon of 30 August the people of Washington heard the low thunder of cannon off to their south and west. Streams of wounded men poured into Washington from ships returning from the Peninsular Campaign and mixed with those limping, shoeless, half-clothed, and beaten troops crossing the Long Bridge from the
fields at Bull Run and Culpepper. There were commands without officers, officers without commands, troops without units. Perhaps remembering the drunkenness among the defeated troops the previous summer, General Wadsworth, in charge of Washington security, ordered all public drinking establishments closed indefinitely. Into this mix poured poorly trained raw troops from the northern states. The 16th Connecticut arrived in Washington less than two weeks after being sworn in at Hartford and went into campaigning with no drilling, no discipline, and few instructions even on how to march. These boys, whose last temporary billet was at Oyster Point outside New Haven, were assigned to Rodman’s division.

Unfortunately, in its hasty retreat from the Peninsular Campaign McClellan’s army had abandoned its medical supplies and although Washington had expanded the number of hospitals greatly since the previous summer, they now found themselves terribly short of supplies. Appeals went out to northern cities to send medical materiel as quickly as possible. Fortunately, hospitals now were far more efficient than they had been, with regular staffs of male and female nurses (one nurse for every ten patients), physicians, cooks, and orderlies. The Sanitary Commission had awakened and in general hospital hygiene had improved considerably. Still, the government parsed out funds in unusual ways. Men who died at the Soldier’s Home for invalids were placed into thin pine plank coffins, trundled out to the burial ground behind the home in full view of the veterans, and summarily dumped into their graves. Things were worse at the Judiciary Square Hospital, where the dead were stripped naked and laid out in an adjoining vacant lot for embalming in full view of folks of that populous neighborhood who happened by. The scandalous behavior broke upon the public when it was revealed that the government had contracted with the undertaker for shroud, coffin, team and driver, vehicle, and to have the grave dug and filled, all for $4.99 per burial. At the same time politicians allocated money freely for other projects. Pennsylvania Avenue had been repaved and a new horse railway installed, and work continued on the Capitol and on other government buildings. Congress allocated $500,000 to complete the west wing of the Treasury building, $20,000 each for adding a new story to the War Department and Navy Department buildings, and $8,000 for painting the old portion of the Capitol, among other projects. But they could find only $4.99 to bury a man who had defended the city and his country!

General Burnside stepped off his steamer at Acquia Creek and into this frenzied, surreal, demoralized setting that was gloomy Washington in late summer, 1862. Immediately he sent word for General Rodman to return to duty though his furlough had not ended. Rodman, against the wishes of his family and his physician, obeyed and left Peace Dale at once. In early August the Narragansett Times reported that General Rodman felt recuperated from typhoid, considered himself in “good fighting condition”, and would report to General Burnside as ordered. While Rodman had been recuperating at home, IX Corps had broken camp on 4 July for the start of a new campaign in which General Burnside had assigned Rodman to command the 3rd Division of his (Burnside’s) brigade. On 8 August General Rodman rejoined General Burnside and his IX Corps at Fredericksburg, Maryland where he took command of 3rd Division (General Parke’s old division) and thus officially entered the Maryland campaign on the left wing of the army. Meanwhile, his old 4th Rhode Island had moved to Newport News, Virginia in July, to
September 1862

Early in September General Lee marched his forces north into Maryland in a multifold effort to draw Federal troops away from their defense of Washington. By doing so he aimed to capture Martinsburg and Harpers Ferry and their federal stores, to move his front to a land not previously ravaged by war, where forage and supplies for his men abounded, to show the citizens of Maryland that the Confederates were indeed their friends and had come to liberate them from Federal tyranny, thereby hoping to prompt that state to secede as well, and to draw General McClellan farther from Washington. From Maryland he could also pose a threat to Pennsylvania and to the capture of Baltimore, though these were not foremost in his mind in early September. General McClellan rose to the bait and prepared to move west against Lee’s forces and to support Colonel Dixon Miles’ garrison whom Lee’s forces would shortly surround at Harpers Ferry. General Burnside had been placed in charge of one of the army’s wings; General Jesse Reno now replaced Burnside as IX commander.

To shorten the baggage trains many of Reno’s units, including part of those in Rodman’s division, were relieved of their cumbersome Sibley tents and instead were issued replacement “shelter (dog) tents”, known to later generations as “pup” tents. These required two halves to make them whole. Each soldier was issued an oblong piece of thick, unbleached muslin about six feet in length and four feet wide, fashioned with buttons all around and button holes alternately matching the button holes and buttons of his partner’s half. To erect the tents soldiers cut two crotched poles and set them into the ground about six feet apart, with another six foot ridge pole placed between them. The two halves of the tent were then buttoned together and the whole thrown over the ridgpole, with ends drawn tight by ropes staked to the ground. The tent ends remained opened. In a pinch, a third man could share one of these tents by fastening
Overview of the Maryland Campaign. Federal army is shown in blue, Confederate army in red. The north/south ranges of mountains west of Frederick are the Catoctin Range (right) and the South Mountain range (left).
his half across the back of the tent, making a place for storing equipment. In wet weather
the men dug a trench around the tent to serve as a moat to prevent rain water from
running into the tent.

McClellan’s army now approached Frederick, Maryland from three directions. Reno’s corps approached along the National Road which had been macadamized, making
for less dusty but far more footsore marching. On 10 September General Reno, with four
divisions (Cox’s Kanawha Division, Rodman’s 3rd, Sturgis’ 2nd Division, and Willcox’s
1st) ordered General Cox’s command to Ridgeville on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad,
via Damascus. General Rodman would follow and he (Reno) would follow Rodman with
the other corps. General Rodman was ordered to take a position at Damascus and to hold
the New Market Road until General Sturgis’ division came up. Early the next day, the
11th, at General Burnside’s request, General Rodman detached sixty cavalry (about one
troop) to support him (Burnside) and on the afternoon of the following day General
Burnside reached Frederick, Maryland with the advanced elements of IX Corps.

Frederick, Maryland was a sleepy and solidly Federal town, as were most towns
in western Maryland. Although they had shown some polite but cool acceptance to
Confederate troops who had vacated the town only a few days before Federal troops
arrived, few among them were Southern sympathizers and few were won over by General
Lee’s stringent orders that his men behave. Lee’s provost marshal had been deployed to
maintain order and Lee ordered his men to purchase rather than “appropriate” food and
other goods. They did not ransack the town at all although many shopkeepers felt that by
paying for their goods with Confederate money the troops were in reality stealing
anyway. Lee’s men treated the citizens with notable respect and overall were quite well-
behaved. No doubt much of this was performed to further entice the civilians to push for
secession.

Behavior of the Federal troops was unfortunately quite poor. In spite of
McClellan’s stern orders to the contrary, some of the troops sacked the town, took what
they needed, and went on drunken rampages. All in all, they acted disgracefully.

Rodman’s men were upbeat and enthusiastic but then for the first time they
knew what to expect as they could hear the skirmishing with the rear guard of the
Confederate army just ahead, which advanced Federal troops had just pushed out of
Frederick. The skirmishing was on and off cavalry action with Federal General Alfred
Pleasanton’s troopers pushing Confederate General Wade Hampton’s troopers who were
protecting the Confederate rear. Immediately Rodman’s men formed a line and advanced
into the Confederate troops at the double quick, running through potato patches, corn
fields, yards and gardens with the German washer-women of the 103rd NY running right
along beside them. But there was little fighting since General Pleasanton’s cavalry had
already pushed the Confederates toward South Mountain. Rodman’s men pitched their
dog tents and sat down to a hearty supper.

On this day too McClellan received an initial written notice from Colonel Dixon
Miles asking him to hurry to his aid at Harper’s Ferry. But by nature McClellan was far
too slow and cautious, moving only on average about six miles per day.

The morning of the 13th bloomed into a very pleasant and unusually warm
“fallish” day. Colonel Fairchild’s brigade of the 4th Rhode Island and other units of the
IX Corps moved out as ordered at 3a.m. and so missed most of the festivities. General
McClellan arrived at Frederick amid cheering crowds and great festivities. Townspeople bedecked the bridle of the general’s large black horse, “Dan Webster”, with little United States flags. In fact, United States flags flew everywhere, houses were open to the men and the citizens presented the soldiers with great quantities of cakes, pies, fruit, bread, apple butter, jams, and other food and drink set on the window sills of the finer houses. It was a great day of celebration that some of Rodman’s men would forever remember. The 3rd Division marched about eight miles west from Frederick in support of Pleasanton’s cavalry reconnoitering the passes of Catoctin Mountain, then marched off toward Middletown in the Catoctin Valley, arriving at about 10 a.m. Lieutenant Graham of the 9th New York remembered that upon reaching Middletown his New Yorkers lay down in a field to make coffee, and there they remained, watching other units march past them. Some of those units had started the day’s march after the 9th and so the men thought they had begun far too early in the morning, just for show perhaps. They continued to sit without further orders, then began to wonder just what was going on. Finally they resumed their march at about 2 p.m., but to where? There was some confusion in orders and Rodman took the road to Jefferson, leading too far to the left where he ran into General Franklin’s VI Corps approaching Frederick from the south. General McClellan told General Cox of the misunderstanding in Rodman’s orders and told him further that if he found Rodman to take his division along with him to Middleton. At 5 p.m. the enemy began to disappear beyond Fox’s Gap south of Turner’s Gap. Rodman’s division was the last of the IX Corps to arrive at the front.

Rodman ordered Colonel Harland and his brigade to support Willcox, and Generals Sturgis and Willcox then pushed forward and finally made camp at around 10 p.m. with orders to march again at 2 a.m. the next morning. Most of the men made quick fires and ate the monotonous meal of hardtack and “salt horse”, then lay down to sleep with the sound of cannon off to their west. Some of the more vigorous among them slipped through the picket lines to forage and returned with great quantities of butter, pork, chickens and other fine foods, which, with little time to eat them before the next march began, they had to leave behind.

Two a.m. comes on fast when yesterday ended at midnight. Rodman issued his daily orders to the men, orders which had changed little over the past week or so: To “hold ourselves in readiness to march at a moment’s notice…with 3 days cooked rations and forty rounds.”

By the chilly first light of an unusually warm Sunday the 14th the entire Federal army was in motion. The roads were filled for miles with long baggage and supply trains moving along inner roads for safety, with infantry, then artillery moving to their outside. Outside of them rode General Alfred Pleasanton’s troopers on the flanks and in advance of the trains. Behind all units, at the very end of the great procession, came the huge numbers of laggards, stragglers, bummets, the sick and wounded, and the raw, smooth-faced young recruits that had not yet seen battle. So like a great seething serpent the long columns in unison snaked ever farther to the west, pushing the Confederates in front of them. Every day commanders laid down each unit’s route, when they would march, when they would rest, where they would bivouac, when they would begin to march the next day. If two corps came to an intersection at the same time, the one that reached it first would move through while the men of the other corps took advantage of the delay and spread out into the fields to boil coffee and get a bite of hardtack. The men marched
along the narrow country roads four abreast in so-called “route step”, that is, not keeping time. Some of the greenest recruits had not even yet learned how to do that. Alongside the moving column in both directions raced the horses of orderlies and aides carrying their messenger-bearing riders to the front and rear. On the sides of the roads beyond them maggoty, bloated horses lay swelling in the morning sun, cloyingly-sweet stench-spewing reminders of recent skirmishes. Their heavy, putrid smell seeped into the clothing and the nostrils of the passing men where it clung for days.

Rodman’s division reached the summit of the north-south running Catoctin range about noon, then descended its western slope into the beautiful four or five mile-wide Middletown valley. Across the valley and running parallel to the Catoctin range lay the South Mountain range. Still marching roughly west, Rodman’s division halted for a rest about half way up the eastern slope of that range. Private David Thompson of Company G, 9th NY, marching with the 1st Brigade of Rodman’s division, looked back down the slope and recalled: “Along its [Catoctin Range] eastern edge the heads of the columns began to appear…pouring over the ridge and descending by every road, filling them completely ….By the farthest northern road [we could see] moved the baggage wagons, the line stretching from the bottom of the valley back to the top of the ridge and beyond, only the canvas covers of the wagons revealing their character. We knew that each dot was a heavily loaded army wagon, drawn by six mules and occupying forty feet of road at least….The troops were marching by two roads farther south. Half a mile beyond us the column broke abruptly, filing off into line of battle…across the fields.”

About 3:30 p.m. Rodman’s men resumed their march westward up a narrow, rocky road to the top of South Mountain at Fox’s Gap where they joined in battle with forces under Confederate Generals John Bell Hood and D.H. “Harvey” Hill at about 5 p.m. Fortunately, the Confederates could not depress their cannons enough and shot over the heads of Rodman’s men. Men of the 9th New York charged and ran off the Confederate battery which was quickly replaced by Battery E, 4th United States Artillery. Immediately Rodman ordered his 1st Brigade (Colonel Fairchild) to move to the left in support of this battery positioned upon a steep slope, then ordered Colonel Harland’s 2nd brigade, full of Connecticut men and Rodman’s old 4th Rhode Island, to form on the extreme right of the line. 

To Rodman’s left lay the divisions of Willcox, Sturgis, and Cox. To the immediate left of Rodman’s 1st Brigade lay a cornfield and in front of them, perhaps 4 rods away, a thin wood filled with mountain laurel. In fact, the entire top of the mountain was a patchwork of cornfields, hayfields, and wood patches tangled with the thick laurel. Suddenly a line of Confederates burst from the wood like spooked woodcock and attacked the battery. At first the Confederate troops did not see the men of the 89th until they were not twenty feet away. The 89th New York, part of 1st Brigade, temporarily was halted by the onslaught of Confederate small arms fire and lay down instinctively. At that point Major Edward Jardine ordered his men to rise up and fire into the faces of the advancing men, who quickly melted away, with mostly dead and dying North Carolinians strewn around the cornfield like downed woodcock in butternut gray. Seizing the initiative Jardine jumped onto a stone wall, waved his sword, and shouted at the top of his lungs: “89th New York. What in hell are you about? Continue the movement.” The 89th, Jardine out in front, pushed forward as the Federal battery opened onto the Confederates with grapeshot and canister. The battle was short and the lines merged only in the
cornfield on the extreme left where the 89th New York had seen action. The battle at Rodman’s front died with the 89th’s vigorous charge.

The 1st Brigade sent pickets into the woods and the men went into bivouac. It was getting dark now, with no time left to bury the dead so Rodman’s men simply covered them with their own butternut blankets, then lay down among them for shelter covered only with their own blankets. Sleeping among the dead must have shaken some of the boys but there was something else, something different on the air, an odd scent, just distinguishable mixed with the burned sulfur fumes of black powder, the smell of churned soil, and the peculiar heavy scent of the dead. Private David Thompson recalled that as he lay there among the bodies in the chilly night he realized that all around them were fields of pennyroyal and the effect of trampling boots and horses hoofs in battle so bruised the fragrant plants that the air was filled with their scent. Long after the battle the smell of pennyroyal always brought back to him the desperate scenes of that day.

The battle was rough on IX Corps, with confusion made worse by the use of so many green and untrained troops. Earlier in the battle hard-bitten, short, stocky, engaging General Reno rode stiffly upright in his saddle to the front to see what was holding up the advance and was near General Sturgis’s line about sunset when he was shot through the body by a Confederate sharpshooter, although some say he was shot by his own men, who mistook him for a Confederate in the dwindling light. Stretcher bearers carried him back to General Sturgis’ command post whereupon he greeted Sturgis with “Hallo, Sam, I am dead.” Sturgis thought Reno was joking and said he hoped it was not that serious. Reno replied “Yes, yes, I’m dead—Good-bye.” and passed away a few minutes later.

Ohioan General Jacob Cox, former commander of the Kanawha division, then assumed command of IX Corps. Finally, firing on the right of the Federal line ended about 9 or 10 p.m. and with it, the Battle of South Mountain.

The next day (15 September) Rodman issued no orders to march. The commissary wagons had not been permitted to move forward in order to keep the roads clear for the troops. The men had no rations so they foraged among the potato and corn fields for only meager scraps since the fields had been picked clean a few days earlier by the equally starving Confederates. Rodman’s men also spent the day collecting arms and ammunition from around the battlefield and burying the dead, their faces already blackened by the sun. The unusually fine autumn day was a fair counterpoint for the gruesome work. They found the dead piled three and four deep across the fields of corn. Piles of bodies lay thick among the laurels and, stiffened now, were difficult to remove. Rodman ordered shelters built in fence corners for the seriously wounded that could not be moved immediately and stimulants [whiskey or brandy] to be provided to those who could hobble to field hospitals in the rear.

General Rodman again was praised by General Burnside for showing a “military genius of high order”. Though he still suffered from the lingering effects of typhoid he had managed to remain in the saddle for five days and nights leading up to Antietam, and at Antietam he remained in the saddle, without rest, from dawn until late afternoon.

Unknown to the men at the time, a prim, 41 year old, small dark-haired woman had been assigned to Reno’s IX Corps. In plain print black jacket and scandalously accompanied by a black man driving a wagon full of medical supplies and food, her own few possessions bundled in a handkerchief, spunky Clara Barton had come along to tend the wounded. She would be on the battlefield before the army’s male nurses arrived,
many drunken and ill-prepared as usual. At the time she had little use for the Army Medical corps after their failure to adequately care for the wounded at the first and second battles of Bull Run and had begged the army to let her join its ranks, there to run her own medical team. The Surgeon General finally relented and she got her wish. It was exceedingly rare and a bit unseemly for a woman nurse or doctor to attend men at all, never mind at the scene of battle, but this was Clara Barton.

Most Federal corps moved off South Mountain and over the National Road toward Sharpsburg, but Cox’s IX Corps and some attached divisions moved by the Old Sharpsburg Road which would place them farther to the south of the other Federal units. The 9th New York pushed out about 5 p.m. and moved slowly down the western slope of the mountain, where they stumbled upon so many Confederate dead that they were forced to halt and move the dead off the road to keep from stepping on them. There, until there was more time for burial details, they lay piled three and four feet deep, their faces blackened, their limbs twisted into grotesque shapes. From high on the mountaintop Rodman and his men could see Lee’s army stretched out before them in splendid line of battle only eight miles away east of Sharpsburg, Maryland along the Antietam Creek. The sight was magnificent, the thought terrible. Was it a last-ditch bluff by the “Grey Fox” or was General Lee, his forces scattered and decimated by battle, starvation, and exhaustion, really determined to fight it out on that line?

The men of the IX Corps crossed the Little Antietam Creek near Keedysville, Maryland, forded another small stream near Locust Springs, and, after coming up on the rear of General Sumner’s II Corps, finally ended their march about 3 p.m. at the foot of Red Hill on the east side of Antietam Creek. There they fell to the ground and slept where they landed, exhausted and without shelters. Commissary wagons trailed far behind so again there were no rations. In fact, the historian of the Connecticut regiments moving with Rodman recalled that from Frederick to Antietam the men had nothing to eat but a few roasted ears of corn and green fruit they were able to forage in a land picked clean a few days before by other equally starving troops. Before some of them fell to sleep they could see before them in the darkening night the meandering creek and beyond the hills and buffs on its opposite side the town of Sharpsburg and the entire venue of the coming battle. All the fields were surrounded by little stone walls and to the right of the town they could see a small patch of wood (West Wood) and the little white Dunkard Church. The church belonged to the German Brethren who believed in baptism by full immersion, hence their common name “dunkers”. This scene was bordered on left and right by wooded ridges and open farm lands themselves of mixed cornfields and hayfields enclosed with snake fences. It was lovely ground for a fight, so pastoral, so calm and peaceful…this evening.

Antietam

In spite of his marches, however slow they were, and his continual pushing of the Confederates in his front, General McClellan was too late to extricate Colonel Dixon Miles from a trap. The Colonel, a recovering alcoholic who some say was drunk and others say was only dazed and bewildered that day, had decided to surrender his 13,000 man garrison at Harper’s Ferry to General Jackson’s forces at 8 a.m. the morning of the 15th. Jackson had cleverly blocked Miles’ escape routes and was prepared to lay siege to the town barring Miles’ surrender. Just before he was to carry the white flag to the
Confederate lines a cannon ball plowed the ground in Miles’ front and shredded his leg. He died soon after. In his stead General White, recently arrived from Martinsburg with his garrison where he had abandoned his position in the face of Jackson’s superior forces, surrendered the entire combined garrisons except for the troops of Colonel Grimes Davis, 8th New York cavalry, who had made a daring escape the night before and found their way into Pennsylvania. Now Jackson’s men, starving and barefoot, received plenty of Federal food and new shoes and would enter the coming fight more or less refreshed.

Battle map of Antietam, showing the disposition of Rodman’s division at the bottom center as they began crossing at Snavely’s Ford. Federal lines are blue, Confederate lines red.

At about 8 a.m. on the morning of the 16th the Confederate artillery batteries opened on the Federal right at Antietam and were answered by counter battery fire from Federal forces. The noise was horrific and the field of fire soon was shrouded in thick white smoke from the heavy guns, making it hard to see the action and harder for the
artillerymen to see what they were shooting at. This barrage lasted until about 11 a.m.,
then died away. For Rodman’s men that was the excitement of the day. They saw no
action that day as General McClellan and General FitzJohn Porter, sat at his
(McClellan’s) headquarters at Red Hill, peering at the distant Federal artillery batteries
through telescopes. McClellan had decided to wait for his other corps to arrive before
beginning a general engagement of what he believed, as usual, was a phantom enemy that
outnumbered him three to one. In fact, his army outnumbered Lee’s. An immense
phantom army before him always haunted McClellan and distorted his judgment.

About 5 p.m. Rodman moved his troops forward until they reached the enemy’s
battle line near the creek, then moved them to the left until they arrived at the extreme left
of the Federal line, now about four miles long. It was absolutely dark and a drizzle was
falling when a staff officer extended the flank even farther to the left. Men stumbled over
stumps and each other. While the regiments moved to the left they also moved slightly to
the rear so as to echelon on the flank of the 9th New York. Rodman had ordered there be
no campfires, talking, or unnecessary noise to alert the enemy to their whereabouts. There
was to be total silence. As the 9th New York passed the 103rd New York in the darkness
someone in the 103rd tripped over the regiment’s dog. So as not to step on the poor
animal the unfortunate soldier stumbled backward and knocked over a stack of muskets.
Panic spread along the dark and speechless line…maybe the Confederates were coming?
In short order, order was restored and the 9th New York moved on to their prearranged
destination. Then, another harrowing incident. As they continued on and passed through a
cornfield the men heard the heavy tramp of boots approaching. Colonel Kimball of the 9th
New York ordered in as loud a voice as he dared, “Fix bayonets”. General Rodman
rushed forward to lead the charge. The command to “Halt” was repeated several times
and all fell quiet. The heavy footsteps were only those of the men of the 103rd New York.
Rodman then issued orders to Captain Whiting of the Company K battery of the 9th New
York to open fire if attacked by infantry but to remain silent if shelled by artillery. These
unnerving incidents seemed to forebode bad things to come. The confusion and
uncertainty just didn’t feel right, though there was nothing tangible about them.

Finally, the men had reached their positions and lay down in line for some sleep.
They huddled beneath rubber blankets, finally falling to sleep on their arms in the plowed
furrows of a field of “thin” corn that sloped toward the creek, with the sound of General
Joseph Hooker’s cannonading from I Corps off to their right and the answering
Confederate cannonading from the battery of Major John Pelham, commander of General
Stuart’s horse battery and others to their front and right west of Nicodemus Hill. There
had been so little to eat for the past few days. Lieutenant Graham of the 9th New York
remembered having nothing but a tomato can full of green corn. Other men ate dry coffee
and sugar out of their hands and a little hardtack softened in cool water from the creek.
That was their evening meal, which was far better than what the Confederates had on
hand, namely, not much; their commissary wagons had not yet come up and when they
finally arrived early on the morning of the 17th there was only flour to be had. The
southern men had been foraging and eating corn, apples, and pumpkins for days and were
now so exhausted and weak from dysentery and malnourishment as to be generally unfit
for battle.
Searching for a Ford

First light the next morning was shrouded in mist and drizzle with a gentle wind from the southwest. As many days had been this unusual September, today would be another hot one with temperatures around 70 F to 75 F. A sergeant woke Lieutenant Graham to say that the Confederates were about to open fire. Graham now got his first look at the field of battle in his front. He noticed that his men had lain in a cornfield all night. The field sloped down to bushes and swampy ground along Antietam Creek. Beyond the creek were high, steep bluffs and he could see Confederates on the bluffs shoveling to emplace an artillery battery. Fog hung low in the valleys but here and there the men could see clearly the landscape stretched before them for the first time. With the neat fields sectioned off as in a patchwork quilt the scene seemed so bucolic. What they could not see were the thousands of hard-bitten Confederate troops tucked away in the patches of woodland and along dips in the rolling ground to their west. Now Graham heard the distinct sound of picket fire rolling up from along the creek in front of him, then the Confederate battery atop the bluffs opened fire onto Rodman’s men. About 7 a.m., although they had not yet been called to order the men formed instinctively and Rodman ordered they be moved quickly up and over the slope to their rear where they would be protected from the Confederate artillery. There they spent an hour or two resting, boiling coffee, and warming themselves by campfires and in the farm buildings that dotted the reverse slope. Among them gathered some “greenhorns”, local civilians, who had come to watch the excitement. Was this to be a replay of the first Battle of Bull Run? Meanwhile, while his men were having a reprieve Rodman had reconnoitered the river and found that the ford designated by McClellan’s Army engineers only the day before as suitable for crossing, wasn’t. The men would be under constant enemy fire there after climbing down 160 foot bluffs on the Federal side and besides, the creek ran too fast to allow fording. Was this simply the first ford the Army engineers thought usable or did they think this actually was the correct ford and didn’t bother to reconnoiter it well enough? Or, did anyone at headquarters really care what happened to Rodman’s men? Normally locating a ford was assigned to the cavalry but General McClellan ordered General Pleasanton’s cavalry to remain at headquarters in case he needed them for some reason. An unpleasant feeling began to seep into the officers—did anyone in the Army care about them at all? Were they considered simply expendable cannon fodder? Was anyone at Army headquarters in charge of anything or were they all incompetent imbeciles? If Rodman had these thoughts he left no record of them.

For the past few days locals had been advising Rodman and the General Staff of another ford farther downstream that would be more suitable. No one at army headquarters apparently had paid any attention to them. Now, to reduce his casualties, Rodman set out on his own initiative to find it, sending two companies of the 8th Connecticut out as skirmishers to the south to locate the ford, IF it existed. They did. It was Snively’s Ford and lay about a mile south (downstream) from Rohrbach Bridge. Now it would take Rodman another two hours to get his men to Snively’s, moving them cross lots and through thick brush.

Men of the 3rd Division stumbled, walked, and crawled about a half mile farther to the left (south), through heavy underbrush to a country road that led to the ford. After a short time General Rodman moved the men forward again, down a grassy slope and even farther to the left, then swung around slightly to the right to the edges of the small bluffs.
on the eastern side of the creek. In Harland’s 2nd Brigade the 8th Connecticut advanced but the 16th Connecticut and 4th Rhode Island for some reason did not receive the orders and remained in their rear positions. The 11th Connecticut was deployed in a skirmish at Rohrbach’s Bridge and so was not with the other regiments in Rodman’s division at the time. After two hours of movement and from their formerly advanced positions Rodman’s men could see no Confederate soldiers across the creek, only some Confederate batteries. What small breeze there was earlier in the day had died and the air was heavy and still. Big clouds of white smoke hung over the batteries and the men saw and heard small arms and artillery fire off to their right. They didn’t know it yet but the main battle had opened with General Hooker’s I Corps, Sumner’s II Corps, and Mansfield’s XII Corps now heavily engaged on the right of the Federal line. Rodman then rode up to his front and he and the men watched the Rohrbach Bridge being taken by the 2nd Division of IX Corps. It was now a bit after noon.

To Secure the Bridgehead

Capture and control of the Rohrbach Bridge, later known as the Burnside Bridge, had been one of the main objectives assigned the IX Corps. With it in their possession the Federals could advance and secure the left of their line, putting them into position to hit the Confederates in their right flank, crush and roll up their line, and then move on to Sharpsburg. Defending the bridge were about four hundred men of the 2nd and 20th Georgia under command of Colonel Henry (“Old Rock”) Benning, each posted behind a tree or other barrier and each having a clear, one hundred yard shot into the Federal troops. Farther downstream were posted men of the 50th Georgia and a single company of South Carolinians, perhaps one hundred twenty in all. General Cox later wrote that he considered the Confederate’s position all but impenetrable, but he had his orders from General McClellan.

Cox first gave the job of taking the bridge to the 2nd Brigade (Colonel Crook) of his old Kanawha Division but they failed dismally. Finally, the job fell to the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Division (Brigadier General Edward Ferrero), who ordered the 51st New York and the 51st Pennsylvania forward across the twelve foot wide, one hundred twenty five foot long bridge. Ferrero, a small-framed man and former dance teacher from New York City, led his men in a frontal assault across the bridge and, with great loss of life, secured the objective, allowing General Sam Sturgis to secure the bridgehead. But before the assault there needed to be some reconnoitering of the Confederate side to determine their strength. That job fell to men of the 11th Connecticut, part of Harland’s 2nd Brigade in Rodman’s 3rd Division. Rodman left that regiment upstream to accomplish the task.

Following a brief artillery bombardment and counter battery fire, Colonel Kingsbury led the 11th Connecticut under cover of the brush along Rohrbach Lane toward the creek. At the shore they formed an extended skirmish line and came under heavy fire from the Georgians across the creek. Casualties were heavy. Captain John Griswold leading companies A and B jumped into the creek, which at that place was about fifty feet wide and about four feet deep with a swift current. His men followed and fell wounded or dead quickly. Griswold himself was shot in the chest in midstream but managed to stagger to the opposite bank. Lieutenant Colonel Stedman, leading the right wing of the regiment, fell wounded. Colonel Kingsbury himself leading the left wing of the regiment, now near the bridge, rallied his men to the attack and was soon wounded in
the foot, then almost immediately in the leg. As he was carried to the rear another bullet struck his shoulder and a final bullet, his stomach. He died soon after. Meanwhile, Major Moegling assumed command of the regimental left wing, but with his men falling all around him he felt the assault was now hopeless. Finally, the 46th New York came to the aid of the 11th Connecticut and allowed them to pull back. The Connecticut men spent the next hour collecting their dead and wounded.

The Army of the Potomac had and would yet fight a series of separate, uncoordinated, and poorly executed engagements near Sharpsburg. In fact, General Burnside’s latest attack was a mile and a half from the weak point in the Confederate line along a sunken road. Burnside had charge of the right wing of the army at that time and spent much of his waking hours with his former friend General McClellan on the right of the Federal lines. But the friendship today would become strained.

Rodman’s 3rd Division was composed of the 1st Brigade – Colonel Harrison S. Fairchild, with the 9th, 89th, and 103rd New York; the 2nd Brigade—Colonel Edward Harland, with the 8th, 11th, and 16th Connecticut, Rodman’s old 4th Rhode Island, and Battery A, 5th United States Artillery.

Rodman’s Division was supported by Ewing’s 1st brigade of Scammon’s Kanawha division, a brigade that included the 23rd Ohio formally commanded by the future United States 19th president Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes was severely wounded at South Mountain and hence out of action at Antietam. That Ohio regiment also counted among its ranks a young, serious commissary sergeant who became the 25th president of the United States-- William McKinley. Colonel Ewing himself was both half brother and brother-in-law to General William Tecumseh Sherman, whose men had supported extracting Rodman’s men from the first battle at Bull Run. Ewing’s brigade, whom Rodman had posted to the left and in rear of his own, now held the extreme left of the Federal line and extended it downstream by a half mile.

Captain Eshelman’s 4th Company of the Washington (Louisiana) Light Artillery was stationed on a rise across the creek directly in front of Rodman’s lines. Most of the Federal units were shielded from direct fire except for Rodman’s 3rd Division that now lay exposed along the eastern side of the creek. While the men were still eating their meager breakfasts Colonel Fairchild’s brigade alone suffered thirty six casualties at the initial site before the men could take cover. There was much subsequent discussion of Rodman’s ordered deployment. His was the only point in the Federal line where it met the Confederate line. His men lay exposed under Confederate artillery fire and would have to attack moving down slope, cross a stream waist-deep, and ascend a steep bank on the other side into an open field, all under constant fire. What was McClellan thinking, or was he thinking at all, when he ordered them to take this position? Or was Burnside to blame, who changed his orders frequently, leading to confusion, and who was dilatory in ordering his final assault. The fingers still point to both McClellan and Burnside.

Rodman was still east of Antietam Creek waiting for orders that never seemed to come, his men suffering under sharpshooter and artillery fire of grape and canister. The decimated ranks of the 11th Connecticut had still not come up from the bridge to rejoin the brigade; according to some Connecticut men they had been led astray by a “stupid” staff aide and gotten lost in the underbrush. In fact, just before Rodman ordered his lines forward on the final assault across the creek he sent one of his own aides to find the 11th and bring them up. The aid finally found them and began leading them up to the lines.
when he too, and the 11th got lost in the heavy underbrush. They had marched about four miles when Lieutenant Colonel Stedman of the 8th Connecticut found them and guided them back to the bridge where they crossed and advanced to Rodman’s lines on the opposite side of the creek.

Now the fire on his lines became too much for the men to bear so Rodman moved his men into the line of trees along the creek for what scant protection that afforded, then waited patiently, again, for further orders. Meanwhile, Confederate General Lee used these few hours of confusion in the Federal line to re-deploy his own line and to strengthen his right with three thousand troops of General A.P. Hill just now coming up by a forced march from Harper’s Ferry. Hill pushed his men as Jackson would have, marching them roughly 17 miles in about 7 hours. His men, now shod with new but ill-fitting shoes, had rested a little bit and eaten hearty on the captured Federal supplies at Harper’s Ferry but were by no means fully recuperated from continual marching and fighting. They were coming up now.

Unknown to Rodman at the time, Burnside and Cox worked out a new plan of attack. Willcox’s division was to move forward, supported by Colonel Crook’s brigade of the Kanawha Division and head straight west into Sharpsburg. Rodman’s Division, supported by the other Kanawha brigade under Colonel Ewing, was to move on the left of Willcox, then swing slightly north to enter Sharpsburg from the south, meanwhile rolling up the Confederate right wing and cutting a major Confederate line of escape. Burnside then assumed that he would receive reinforcements as promised him by General McClellan the day before. In their way lay Confederate General D.R. Jones’s division supported by several artillery batteries on the high ground. But General A.P. Hill’s men, just arriving now through a cornfield, outflanked Rodman’s left.

Finally, orders came, the tension among the men broke, and Rodman pushed his troops rapidly to the ford, sending the 9th New York of Fairchild’s Brigade across immediately to drive back the few Confederates who were guarding the ford near the waterline. The crossing was covered by that regiment’s Dahlgren boat howitzers. The men of the 9th New York, still in classic Zouave uniforms with baggy red trousers, red fezzes, and short blue jackets, waded the swift current smartly and, although under scattering fire, did not return fire, their thought being to simply get across the creek. No one wanted to get shot down midstream. As they got to the far bank they moved to the right and hid behind thick brush. There, General Rodman joined them and together they ran up a very steep defile to the ridge top 150 feet above the creek under heavy fire, where they engaged with part of Drayton’s Georgians. Men of the 4th Rhode Island scrambled beside them up the hillside, firing as they went, all the time being led by a mounted officer on a plunging, wounded horse. It was “Happy Tom” Lyon. He had been a major in a now defunct rocket battery and was serving on General Burnside’s staff, with special assignment today as one of Colonel Harland’s aides. Confederate fire on the hillside was galling but artillery fire was not since the Confederates could not lower the muzzles of their cannons enough to fire down the hill. Nevertheless, some Confederate artillery had raised the rear of their cannons sufficiently to smash Rodman’s men with grapeshot as they crossed the stream.

The steep hillside was marked by two or three benches, the first, a few yards wide, lay about fifty feet above the creek. The second, about a hundred paces wide, lay about ten feet above the first, then there was a steep rise the rest of the way up and onto
the field. To the right of the 9th New York Clark’s Battery E, 4th United States Artillery already had been silenced by Confederate fire. At the top of the hill the air was filled with Confederate canister, shrapnel, and scraps of railroad iron so the 9th New York formed a skirmish line and hunkered down. Other 3rd Division units climbing up now did the same, some seeking shelter behind an abandoned artillery battery. Near there D.L. Thompson of Company G, 9th New York, noticed several charred bodies of Confederate soldiers who had taken refuge in a hay-rick, which was subsequently struck by Federal artillery shells. Rodman had been told by headquarters that he would meet little opposition here. It was an unpleasant foreboding of what was in front of them.

By about 1:30 p.m. Rodman had his thirty two hundred men across the creek and was reforming them to attack the right of the Confederate line. His men also now included the Pennsylvania Light Artillery, Battery D (Captain Durell) along with the remnants of the 4th United States Artillery, Battery E (Captain Clark), both of Sturgis’ 2nd Division, whom Sturgis had sent over to support the 3rd Division. Unfortunately, Rodman likely did not know that Confederate General Toombs had moved his brigade, which had originally guarded the bridge, farther south to prevent Rodman from flanking him. Therefore, if Rodman’s men did charge to the right Toombs would have been slightly to their left, disallowing them to sweep the line and exposing their left flank. Confederate Brigadier General Walker had been posted to protect the ford and would have been the first to fire on Rodman’s men but Walker and his men were repositioned by General Lee to the Confederate left to attack General John Sedgwick’s men about an hour before Rodman’s advance. If Rodman had been ordered across the ford at 8a.m. as planned he would have advanced directly into Walker’s deployed lines and not had a chance. As it was now, he charged into Confederate artillery and was exposed to flank attack by Toombs and A.P. Hill. There probably would have been little difference in the outcome.

So there, in a skirmish line atop a 150 foot bluff, a creek to their backs, lay the men of the 3rd Division along with supporting troops. Under heavy fire, they waited for orders to advance and wondered if those orders would ever come.

General A.P. Hill, wearing his distinctive red “battle shirt” as he liked to call it, cantered into Lee’s headquarters about 2:30 p.m. to announce that his men were at that time crossing the Potomac about three miles distant and would be up shortly. Lee ordered him to place his men on the extreme right of the Confederate line. But the Federals remained unaware of their enemy’s fresh troop arrival. Instead of using Pleasanton’s troopers to reconnoiter the army flanks where they would have intercepted Hill’s men General McClellan instead had them go off in another direction anticipating a dashing, archaic cavalry charge that he thought would be a grand battle cap for the day. Such a cavalry charge was years out of date and fortunately General Pleasanton was able to talk McClellan out of the idea. Still, his troopers fumbled near headquarters and awaited orders from McClellan that never came.

Now, what was the delay in attack, Rodman and his officers wondered? Was it Burnside or McClellan who dithered while Rodman’s men died? Later it was reported that Rodman’s action had been delayed because Burnside’s supply wagons had not brought up ammunition enough for the attacks (General Sturgis had complained of the same lack of ammunition soon after his men fought to take Rohrbach Bridge) and Burnside himself could not seem to make the decision to advance.
On the crest of the hill in front of the bridge which Sturgis had just taken, Lieutenant S.N. Benjamin had positioned his Battery E, 2nd United States Artillery comprised of six, twenty pounders reassigned from 1st Brigade, 1st Division to support Rodman’s advance. To the left of Benjamin was Rodman’s 3rd division with Colonel Hugh Ewing’s 1st Brigade of Scammon’s Kanawha division in support on his left and Brigadier General O.B. Willcox’s 1st Division a half mile to his right.

Rodman, with all his men formed in line and under fire, waited a while more for orders to advance. Private David Thompson, 9th New York, described the nearly unendurable strain of waiting to attack while taking fire. The anticipation was so intense, the numbing, plaguing thoughts of moving forward with courage for country and cause or skulking to save oneself nearly tore him apart. He recalled that when the order was finally given to charge forward he was reminded of Goethe’s description of Napoleonic battle and that to him it seemed “the whole landscape turned slightly red.”

As it always does, the inhuman tension finally broke shortly after 3 p.m. when General Rodman finally received the order to advance. At about that time Major Lyon brought word to Rodman that Confederate troops had crossed the Potomac and were coming up now. That information was only an hour old. Lyon recalled that Rodman responded to the news by saying that things would be alright for General Burnside had no doubt provided for that event by facing Scammon’s division slightly to the south (left). This response was another example of Rodman’s abiding trust in God and in his superiors and friends. An acceptance of what is to be. About this time a Confederate brigade of South Carolina and Georgia regiments opened on Rodman’s men with heavy musket fire. These were General Hill’s men now coming up on Rodman’s left flank. Rodman immediately ordered his line to advance, and the landscape in men’s eyes for a moment turned slightly red.

Rodman had directed his men to bear to the right to come up in the rear of Confederate Brigadier General Tombs’ brigade of General D.R. Jones’ division, forcing them to abandon the bridge or risk all of Jones’ division having to change front to their right and advance to meet Rodman’s 3rd division.

In the unseasonably hot late afternoon sun Colonel Fairchild ordered his thirsty men to charge straight ahead into the Confederate line, which they did vigorously, scattering the Confederate troops. Men of the 9th New York on Rodman’s right moved swiftly into a cornfield, then over a meadow, then a strip of plowed ground, and finally into a pasture, firing as they went. One recalled that their loss was “frightful”. Colonel Kimball exposed himself to grueling fire to lead them on yelling “If you want a safe place stick close to me.” On the line went over rolling and slightly rising ground. Lieutenant Graham was hit by grapeshot and went down. He later recalled his own men stumbling over him and how he hoped none would fall on him. Some by now had lost their red fezzes and most of their baggy trousers were tattered and mud-caked. Colonel Kimball was still out in front of his men, now clapping as they pushed on and yelling at the top of his lungs over the thunder of the cannons “Bully Ninth! Bully Ninth! Boys, I’m proud of you.” Finally, some stretcher-bearers took the time to pick up poor Lieutenant Graham and carry him back through the Ohio lines of Ewing’s brigade, across the Rohrbach Bridge and up to the Miller farmhouse, now a field hospital filled with agonized wounded.
Their initial charge exhausted, the men of the 9th New York realized that their adrenaline-charged vigor had carried them far out in advance of the other regiments in their brigade. There they stood exposed, alone and unsupported on a hill overlooking Sharpsburg. Major L.C. Brackett of General Willcox’s staff informed Colonel Kimball of the situation and told him to pull back about two hundred fifty yards. Kimball objected. After all, they were here, ready to storm into their objective, to take the town. They had already paid dearly for this piece of ground and there was no sense in paying for it twice. So high was their blood over the ugly price they had paid to get here that Lieutenant Horner, acting regimental adjutant of the 9th, had to threaten Sergeant Searing of Company D with a revolver to get his men turned around to charge back in the opposite direction.

Major Jardine, late of the 9th New York, was assigned command of the 89th New York. Major Ringgold commanded the 103rd New York and had followed the 9th into the battle. But they had not advanced quite as far. The 9th New York presumably fell back to align themselves with those other regiments of the 1st Brigade. Colonel Fairchild, finding South Carolina and Georgia troops now massing in his front, requested General Rodman to bring up Colonel Harland’s 2nd Brigade for his support while he, Fairchild, tried to maintain contact with Colonel Welsh of General Willcox’s division.

Meanwhile, shortly after Fairchild’s brigade had begun their advance the men of Colonel Harland’s brigade on the left had done the same, or so General Rodman had thought. Shortly after Harland had given the order to advance he realized that yet again, the 4th Rhode Island and the 16th Connecticut had not gotten the order and remained in their starting positions. The 11th Connecticut had not yet come up from the bridge, so that left the men of the 8th Connecticut who had pushed off, far advanced and alone.

Upon receiving orders to advance Colonel Appelman led his 8th Connecticut forward up a small hill. His men halted at the crest and poured a volley into the Confederates, then moved forward once more under heavy fire from troops to their front and from a battery on their left. Taking a handful of men with him, Captain Charles Upham of Company K rushed forward and captured the battery. The 8th continued to advance until they could see the only road for a Confederate retreat. If they could secure that road they would cut off any hope of that retreat, but they could see more Confederates moving on their left. About this time sensing things were not right, Colonel Harland, who had been moving with the 8th, galloped to the rear to hurry up his other regiments to support the 8th, now all alone and nearly enveloped on a small hill crest under heavy artillery fire from at least three batteries. Now the fighting had gotten so intense and desperate that the regimental chaplain picked up a rifle from one of the dead and fell into line to fire away with the rest of his flock. Major John Ward assumed command now and prepared to order his men to fall back.

The 11th Connecticut at long last found their position and pushed forward when Lieutenant Colonel Stedman, who had led them out of the wilderness, fell wounded. Their Colonel Kingsbury, their major, and their captains all dead, the men now realized that their companies had been reduced to no more than squads in some cases led by sergeants, now the highest ranking men remaining.

Harland asked Rodman if he should halt the 8th but the general replied that Harland should continue to advance the 8th and that he (Rodman) would go back to the lines and hurry up the 4th Rhode Island and the 16th Connecticut. He found the men of the
16th laying in a cornfield and supporting a battery farther south on the extreme left of the line. Confederate Brigadier General Maxcy Gregg's brigade of South Carolina men was attacking vigorously the 16th Connecticut (Colonel Beach). According to Lieutenant B.F. Blakeslee, the Connecticut men lay there and suddenly heard an order to come to “Attention”. They did and immediately their line was wracked by a big volley from behind a stone wall about five rods to their front. They were then told by one of their officers to “Fix bayonets” and ordered to charge but were riddled by shot. Time and again, according to Blakeslee, line officers who had little knowledge of regimental movements shouted orders to men who did not understand them. But this was not a parade anymore; it was a deadly serious situation. The men stood and tried to rally but the situation had become critical. Already, just minutes into the fight, their lieutenant colonel, major, three captains, a lieutenant and forty enlisted men were dead.

Rodman’s old unit, the 4th Rhode Island, at last came up on the right of the 16th Connecticut but their field of fire was clouded by the tall corn as well. In addition, the men of the 4th Rhode Island became confused and disoriented because many of Hill’s Confederates were wearing blue Federal uniforms captured at Harper’s Ferry. Adding insult to injury, the Rhode Islanders also spied a flag in the cornfield that looked suspiciously like the National flag. The Rhode Islanders wondered whose side these men in front of them were on. Twenty six year old Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Bridgham Curtis from Providence ordered them to cease firing and asked for a volunteer lieutenant to accompany the color bearer Corporal [Thomas or James] Tanner of Newport as he brought the regimental colors forward to ascertain who was in front of the 4th Rhode Island. With Tanner between them, lieutenants George E. Curtis (no relation to the Lieutenant Colonel) and Watts rushed forward, Tanner waving the flag. When they were within five feet of the Confederate lines the enemy opened fire, riddling Tanner with a dozen bullets. Curtis grabbed the flag and he and Watts ran back into the Rhode Island lines. Some of the men had not heard the initial order to cease firing and so it was repeated. That added to the confusion as some swore the voice had come from the Confederate lines: “Cease firing. You are firing on your own men.” At this all ceased firing, only to allow further Confederate advances and another searing volley. Men of the 4th were within twenty feet of the Confederate line when the color bearer was shot dead. The Rhode Islanders resumed firing. It turned out that the flag they had seen bore the colors of the 1st South Carolina regiment. Now General Gregg worked another unit to the right behind the 4th Rhode Island and their line began to waver.

Meanwhile, the very green 16th Connecticut had crowded the 4th Rhode Island, as they had done twice before that day. When the 4th had just formed their first line the 16th crowded in on their right and forced the 4th to move to its left. Sensing the situation critical, Lieutenant Colonel Curtis asked Colonel Steere for permission to lead a charge by the 4th Rhode Island. Colonel Steere agreed only if the Rhode Island men would be supported by the 16th Connecticut. Curtis ran to the 16th and asked for their support, and upon hearing Curtis the Connecticut boys began to panic, falling back on and nearly running over him. Curtis cursed them, struck them with the flat of his sabre, and called them cowards. Disgusted with their action Curtis reported to Steere that the 16th Connecticut would not support the 4th Rhode Island. But the Rhode Islanders continued to scream for a charge. Steere must have acquiesced and Curtis ordered “Fix bayonets”! Just then a brigade of Confederate rose up out of the corn and charged their line, at
which the panicked, retreating 16th Connecticut troops ran to their rear and fell into the ranks of the confused 4th Rhode Island, breaking them. The entire extreme Federal left caved in. Colonel Steere ordered a retreat and Curtis ran along the lines repeating the order. As the Rhode Islanders moved back through the corn their lines lost integrity and, with both the Connecticut men and the Confederates dressed in Federal uniforms raging through their lines, the confusion was terrible. The 4th Rhode Island broke. Curtis, using the flat of his sabre once more on the backs of the men, tried to maintain order but it was no use. He finally gave up and, disgusted, walked back to the lines under heavy fire, stepping over bodies as he went. He recalled: “The men fell all around me and I stepped over them as they dropped at my feet.” When he finally got out of the corn and saw some Federal reinforcements approaching, Curtis turned and shouted with great disgust: “I go back no further! Whatever is left of the fourth Rhode Island forms here.” A handful of men joined him and they fell in on the left of the 51st Pennsylvania.

Survivors fled helter-skelter back to cover near the Rohrbach Bridge. The Rhode Islanders had seen some battle on the coast but today was just not their day. The 16th Connecticut was the greenest regiment in Rodman’s division. The men were only a few weeks out of having been mustered in at Hartford and had arrived in Washington only two weeks after that. In his report to Colonel Harland after the battle, Colonel Beach of the 16th vouched that his regiment had never had a battalion drill, had only one dress parade before Antietam, and had little discipline. They hardly even knew how to form a line. This unfortunate situation of using poorly trained troops was all too common in the Army of the Potomac, but events and politicians had pushed McClellan to do so, as they had pushed General McDowell to do the same at the first battle of Bull Run.

When Rodman advanced with his lead brigade under Colonel Fairchild he found the Confederate units detached from Willcox’s opponents, the South Carolina battery (Pee Dee Artillery (Captain McIntosh)) of Hill’s Light Division, and occupying the ridges on his left, so that he could not keep his own connections with Willcox by swinging to the right. Now under heavy fire General Willcox’s line was fragmenting and separating from its own left. With Colonel Fairchild now trying desperately to maintain contact with Willcox, Rodman and Harland coolly tried to regroup the Connecticut and Rhode Island men and to turn Harland’s brigade to form a line facing left to meet the flanking Confederates advancing through the corn. They made good progress in the face of heavy resistance, but the view to the south was obstructed by the tall Indian corn in farmer John Otto’s field and they could not see the field clearly through the smoke as the Confederates continued to reinforce their line with more of the six brigades of Hill, opposing the two brigades now at Rodman’s disposal on the left (Harland’s 2nd Brigade and Ewing’s 1st Brigade). Fairchild’s brigade was trying to remain in contact with Welsh on Rodman’s right. So hard and fast had Rodman pushed his men to face to the left that by this time Rodman’s movements were practically by columns, that is, Harland’s men were positioned nearly perpendicular to Hill’s men. Rodman and Harland finally succeeded in getting the brigade turned at about 3:45 p.m.

Meanwhile, Ewing’s officers had seen the enemy in the cornfield as Rodman’s brigade had echeloned, but they too at first were confused by the National blue uniforms and assumed they were friendly forces until they fired on Ewing’s men. Reacting instinctively, Ewing quickly changed front to the left to protect Rodman’s left flank and, in so doing, the entire Federal left drove back part of the enemy.
Rodman’s position shortly before he was wounded. Sturgis has moved some of his men to a position behind Willcox and Rodman for their support. Ewing’s brigade from the Cox’s (now Scammon’s) Kanawha division moves straight ahead to protect Rodman’s left flank from attack by brigades in Confederate A.P. Hill’s Division approaching from the left through the cornfield. Shortly, Rodman will attempt to turn his left brigade to face the Confederates.

At about 4 p.m., in a last ditch effort to protect his open left flank, Rodman realized he was out of easy options. His men were becoming more disorganized under increasing Confederate pressure. He had to do something to prevent the entire Federal line from being flanked and rolled up. The final option was the only one that had a chance of success. It was an option he had used successfully in the coastal campaigns and he felt it was the only one he could use now. According to one account he ordered a bayonet charge to break the Confederate ranks. At the head of his men and with his new aide at his side General Rodman, waving his flashing saber high above his head, charged directly toward the devastating grape, canister, and solid shot fire of the Confederate
artillery. At once he became barely visible to his men in the thick acrid smoke and dust and nearly succeeded in breaching the Confederate ranks. He likely thought he and his men would once again carry the day as they had so many times before in desperate, adrenaline-filled, screaming charges. According to another account, Rodman was charging back to his own lines and not necessarily into the Confederate lines when the fatal blow was struck. Suddenly, a sharp pain stabbed at his chest and his body crumpled in the saddle. For the first few seconds he kept going, but then the world of smoke and noise seemed to fade and the din quieted, as though he now heard the battle noises from far off. The hellish clamor rolled back once more, loud and clear, then retreated again. His strength seeped from him as he went limp and fell to the ground. A minie ball from a South Carolina sharpshooter’s rifle had pierced his left lung and passed completely through his body. His aide, Lieutenant Robert Hale Ives, who had joined the general’s staff only three weeks before, was mortally wounded by a cannon ball that smashed his leg, removing at least four to five inches of flesh to expose the bone, and killed his horse at the same time the general was struck. Both men fell within a few feet of each other and only feet from the Confederate line.

Ives was a pious Christian who had strongly promoted charities before the war. He was considered a very good horseman and businessman with qualities similar to Rodman’s. He did not immediately enlist at the beginning of the war but in August, 1862, offered to be a volunteer aide to Rodman specifically. Governor Sprague commissioned him a first lieutenant on 19 August and Ives left Providence for the front on 1 September. He had his first trial under fire at South Mountain and acquitted himself admirably. When he fell at Antietam his British friend, George Griffin, who had accompanied him as a volunteer aide, ran through the cannon and musket fire to carry his body out of harm’s way.

Meanwhile, the battle raged furiously in the heat and the smoke. Colonel Harland assumed command of the division and had his horse shot under him. His second in command, Lieutenant Colonel Appelman, was wounded. Now Rodman’s old friend who had begun this war with him as captain of Company D, 2nd Rhode Island when Rodman led Company E, and who fought so well beside him at the first battle of Bull Run, Captain, now Colonel, W.H.P. Steere, assumed temporary command of Harland’s brigade but he too soon fell shot through the thigh. Finally, General Sturgis, moving to his left, saw the desperate situation and brought up his forces from behind Rodman and Willcox to plug the gaps in the Federal line. Rodman’s division at last unraveled and fell back toward the creek, but not until Ewing and his Ohio men had held the line long enough to prevent the total collapse of the Federal left. Finally, they joined the other brigades in a retreat. Meanwhile Confederate General L. O’Brien Branch and his North Carolinians felt one more charge in order and advanced on Ewing’s brigade as it was pulling back. Branch fell mortally wounded in that last charge. He had fought against Rodman in North Carolina and lost and now became the ninth Confederate general to die at Antietam. Rodman, having fallen only a few minutes before Branch, had become the ninth Federal general to be killed in that battle. The firing slowed and the battle ended about 5:30 p.m. Ewing emerged the relatively unsung hero of this battle.

By now the men were exhausted. They had been under fire most of the day and had eaten nothing since breakfast except for a very small quantity of salt pork and hard bread some of them found in abandoned Confederate camps. Now they lay among the
dead where they once stood. The day was done, the field silent except for the groans and cries of the wounded that continued on through the night. Colonel Fairchild’s 1st Brigade which Rodman had sent to his right to maintain contact with Willcox, suffered 87 killed, 321 wounded, and 47 missing (455 casualties), more than half from the 9th New York. The 9th New York alone that day suffered nearly 65% casualties, ranking it eleventh in regimental losses for the entire war. The 2nd Brigade of Harland, who remained with Rodman facing Hill’s troops, suffered 133 killed, 462 wounded, 23 missing (618 casualties). Ewing’s 1st Brigade, getting into the end of the battle, suffered 28 killed, 134 wounded, 20 missing (182 casualties). All in all, the 3rd Division’s casualties summed to 1255 men, nearly two fifths of the total men Rodman had led across Snavely’s Ford that tragic day. And on that day, that single day, Wednesday, 17 September, America suffered more casualties at Antietam than on any other day in American history…over 22,700 men killed, wounded, or missing, twice the number that our country had suffered in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and would suffer in the Spanish-American war combined.

After the battle

Rodman and Ives were carried first to a field hospital set up in either the Rohrbach house or in a nearby church [accounts vary]. Surgeons Millar and Rivers attended both men. Ives at first was expected to live with an amputation, which was likely performed quickly in the field hospital. Because of this expectation he was probably separated a bit from Rodman, who would have been placed aside in a quiet tent or tent corner to die. The surgeons likely would have administered chloroform and removed Ives’ leg as far below the hip as possible. Brevet Colonel of Rhode Island Volunteers James T.P. Bucklin, who had served under Rodman as a captain in the 4th Rhode Island, called on the general and Lieutenant Ives that evening of the 17th. Rodman’s dear friend General Burnside made his rounds of the hospital wounded that evening as well and stopped to visit the two dying men. Burnside was calm and pensive when Rodman asked him how the battle had gone that day, to which Burnside replied “It has gone well today, general; tomorrow we will have it out with them again.” Another visitor that night was Lieutenant Benjamin Aborn, Rodman’s aide-de-camp. He recalled that Rodman suffered quietly amid the sickening smells and screams of the wounded. At one point and in his humble way Rodman turned to Aborn and, in reference to the pathetic agonizing screams of his men, said, in his last recorded words, “This is rather tough.”

On the field the moans and cries of the wounded were just as heartrending. Ghastly loud in late afternoon, they slowly faded and then ceased as the night went on. Everywhere orderlies and stretcher-bearers and chaplains with burial squads scoured the battlefield by lantern light searching for wounded comrades and to bury the dead. One soldier remarked that the scene reminded him of a thousand fireflies hovering over the field and in the woods. It was a grim task. Churches and farmhouses, barns and sheds were packed with groaning wounded begging for water, in numbers so great that the surgeons were quickly overwhelmed. Piles of amputated arms and legs were thrown into shallow pits hastily dug and covered quickly to prevent roaming hogs from eating them. The corpses of men who died before the surgeons could attend them were stacked outside the medical tents as the surgeons in bloody clothes worked on the living long into the
night by lantern light. Connecticut squads found many of the dead stripped of shoes and clothing and their swollen fingers cut off by ghouls who stole their rings. The dead they buried quickly in shallow graves marked only by a rude pine board pried from a hardtack box or ammunition case upon which they scrawled in pencil the man’s name and unit. They bandaged the wounded as best they could and when the bandages ran out they used corn leaves to staunch the blood flow. But not all the dead and wounded were found. Many days after the battle civilians returning to their homes found rotting corpses in their living rooms, their cellars, their barns, under their porches, and in their haystacks.

On the 18th both Rodman and Ives and other wounded were moved into hospital tents pitched on a rise near the battlefield. The army tried to send telegraphs to their families but the lines were distant and overwhelmed by urgent official Army messages. In addition, telegraphers had orders that all messages must first go through the censors at the War Department in Washington, further snarling communications. Ives’ father in Providence did not receive word until Friday or Saturday, forty eight hours after the battle. We can assume Rodman’s family was notified about that time as well. Meanwhile, Rodman and Ives were moved by ambulance once more to a hospital at the nearest rail terminus at Hagerstown, Maryland, about sixteen miles distant. The hospital was nothing more than a private home graciously offered by its owner, Dr. Horner, to aid the wounded.

Back on the battlefield the macabre work of finding and tending the wounded and burying the dead continued. Colonel Strother of McClellan’s staff recalled “In the midst of all this carrion our troops sat cooking, eating, jabbering, and smoking; sleeping among the corpses so that for the color of their skin it was difficult to distinguish the living from the dead.” Southern newspaperman Peter Alexander stopped by one of the hospitals and was sickened by the wounds and the piles of amputated limbs and corpses. He remembered “There is a smell of death in the air and the laboring surgeons are literally covered from head to foot with the blood of the sufferers.” The bloody landscape was littered with rifles, smashed wagons, shattered cannon, knapsacks, tattered clothing, crying men, dead horses and bloating, blackening corpses, among which the living moved, ate, and slept. Men in burial details vomited as they dug large trenches and threw the bodies into them, sometimes thirty and forty to the trench before they shoveled the soil over them. The Federal Army hired a team of civilians to haul the putrefying horses from the field to the Nicodemus farm at the northern end of the battleground where they burned them on a pyre built from fence rails. One townsman remembered that the stench was so great the people had to shut their houses up tight for the night to keep it out. Civilians roamed the field as well looking for loved ones or for someone who had witnessed them in their last moments on this Earth. Fathers searched and begged to hear the last words of their sons. A heart rent Oliver Wendell Holmes, sick with sadness and worry, caught the first train out of his home town after hearing that his son, Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. of the 20th Massachusetts, had been left for dead on the field. The old man groped in the heat of day and by lantern at night among the corpses and the ruins to find his son’s body, or to find his grave before he at last got word that the boy was alive and in a Federal hospital.

Both armies had called a truce to collect the wounded and bury the dead and it seemed strange to see men of opposite sides gently conversing who the day before were bent on killing each other. The horrible scenes continued. One soldier recorded seeing
another who had had his leg shot off stumbling to the rear by himself, using two rifles for crutches. Everywhere one looked there was carnage and death on the landscape that had turned red yesterday.

Rodman’s family left Peace Dale and Ives’ father left Providence for Antietam immediately after receiving word of their loved ones and probably arrived by train on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad link about 22 or 23 September. One report indicates that Ives’ father arrived on Sunday evening the 21st. First Lieutenant Ives died at Hagerstown on 27 September at age twenty six, having served on active duty for about three weeks. He had seen his first battle only two weeks before, at South Mountain. General Rodman lingered.

The medical report on Rodman is sparse and perfunctory. Men with chest, head, and body wounds usually were considered to be lost and were laid to one side from the other wounded, there to die while surgeons attended to those who might be saved. Rodman would have suffered in great pain, the blood from the wound frothy, and the left lung may have collapsed. There is no mention of a pneumothorax (collapsed lung) in the records but that does not mean it was not present. The surgeons probably gave the general some opium before probing his wound with their steel instruments or with their fingers to search for bullet and bone fragments. Following this they may have packed the wound with lint, moist bread, or covered it with sealing wax, common procedures for battlefield injuries. They may also have applied a poultice of flaxseed meal to the wound. These may have sealed the lung sufficiently, or blood clots alone may have done the same thing, but they also sealed in the bacteria planted during the probing. Periodically pouring cold water from a nearby creek or from the “monkey” over the site of the wound was standard protocol to relieve the initial burning of the flesh. The “monkey” was a somewhat porous ceramic water jug. The evaporation of water that seeped to its surface cooled the contents. Obviously, there was no concept of asepsis, no sanitary precautions before an operation, and suppuration was considered a sign of healing. A surgeon recalled the general process: “We operated in old blood-stained and often pus-stained coats, we used undisinfected instruments from undisinfected plush lined cases. If a sponge (if we had sponges) or instrument fell on the floor it was washed and squeezed in a basin of water and used as if it was clean”. Before the surgeon made his first cut he often gave his knife a final sharpening lick on the sole of his boot.

Wounds from minie balls were far more devastating than those inflicted by the old round balls. It was a minie ball that felled Rodman. The ball, really bullet-shaped and about an inch long by a bit more than a half inch (.58 caliber) in diameter, was made of soft lead that expanded upon entering the body. The soft lead and massive bulk of the minie balls shattered bones and tore flesh far more extensively than the old hard lead musket balls. Therefore, there is the likelihood that Rodman also suffered some broken ribs and other broken bones, and perhaps damage to some major organs as well as the lung wound, the bone fragments like a hundred small bullets tearing muscles and veins and nerves as they exploded in his chest. The exit wound from the expanded lead would have been horrendous.

Although they feared Rodman’s case was hopeless the surgeons expressed a glimmer of hope that he might rally and recover, but he did not. For twelve days he lingered on, with rapid pulse, shortness of breath, difficulty in breathing, and cyanotic lips from a lack of adequate oxygen. Nevertheless, he retained all of his faculties to the
end, never complaining and always trusting that all things were in God’s hands. At last his time came to an end and he died quietly from internal bleeding late in the evening of 29 September or in the early morning hours of 30 September with his wife Sally, his father Samuel, William H. Hazard, his South Kingstown physician, and his aide-de-camp Lieutenant Aborn at his side.

Source: Library of Congress
*A typical field hospital set up after the battle of Savage’s Station in summer, 1862.*

Isaac Peace Rodman, a bookish, humble man with no previous military training, rose from the rank of Captain of a company to Brigadier General of a division in little more than a year. He was 40 years old when he died. Dr. Hazard said of the death bed scene “that for calm, conscious, peaceful resignation, I never witnessed its equal.” When orderlies and family stripped the general’s body they found, clotted with blood, the small bible that he had faithfully carried since he kissed his wife goodbye and rode away from Rocky Brook on that warm June day in 1861.

Funeral and Burial
The folks of South Kingstown went into shock and deep mourning. Flags stood at half staff on Wednesday, 1 October after news of Rodman’s death had reached town by telegraph the previous night. Townsmen donned black armbands for the standard thirty days of mourning. It was the very same day that mourners of poor, twenty five year-old Lieutenant Robert Hale Ives attended his funeral service at St. Stephan’s church in
Isaac’s brother Rowland G. Rodman, now a Captain in the 7th Rhode Island, expected his brother’s body, accompanied by Sally, Samuel, and Dr. Hazard, to arrive in Rhode Island on Friday, 3 October and on that day all flags were ordered flown at half staff throughout the city of Providence. The state of Rhode Island paid to bring Rodman’s remains home. The State also planned and conducted the very imposing obsequies and the general’s portrait presenting a humble man with little formal education was hung in Memorial Hall of Brown University.

It was the first time the Rhode Island State House had been used for a public funeral. The general’s body lay in state in a metal casket in the House of Representatives following the elaborate ceremony. Upon the casket was this inscription:

Brig. Gen. Isaac P. Rodman
Mortally wounded, 17th September
Died 30 September, 1862
Aged 40 years, 1 month, and 16 days

His cap, sword, and belt lay atop the casket.

Mourners viewed the remains from 8 a.m. to 12 noon on 4 October, after which a solemn service was held on the State House Parade with the casket placed on a canopied platform near the western steps. Reverend Dr. Barnas Sears, president of Brown University, offered the prayer, the band played a dirge, and Governor Sprague, Honorable United States Senator Henry B. Anthony, Abraham Payne, Esq., Reverend Dr. Sears, and the Honorable William M. Rodman addressed the mourners briefly but impressively. The Reverend Dr. E. B. Hall delivered the benediction. In his oration, Senator Henry B. Anthony said of Rodman:

“Here lies the true type of the patriot soldier. Born and educated to peaceful pursuits, with no thirst for military distinction, with little taste or predilection for military life, he answered the earliest call of his country, and drew his sword in her defense. Entering the service in a subordinate capacity, he rose by merit alone to the high rank in which he fell; and when the fatal shot struck him, the Captain of one year ago was in command of a division. His rapid promotion was influenced by no solicitations of his own. He never joined the crowds that throng the avenues of preferment. Patient, laborious, courageous, wholly devoted to his duties, he filled each place so well that his advancement to the next was a matter of course, and the promotion which he did not seek sought him. He was one of the best types of the American citizen; of thorough business training, of high integrity, with an abiding sense of the justice due to all, and influenced by deep religious convictions. In his native village he was by common consent the arbitrator of differences, the counselor and friend of all.”

At the close of the service, the remains were escorted through several streets to the rail cars at the Providence station by the 11th Rhode Island, a regiment that Rodman’s appeal at the great Providence War meeting in August helped fill and that would leave Providence the next day for active duty, the Providence Horse Guards, and a section of Battery H, conveyed to West Kingston by train, and then carried by hearse to Peace Dale under escort of the Governor’s staff, the Narragansett Guards, and the Pettaquamscutt Infantry. On Sunday, the 5th of October, the final funeral service was performed by Reverend Dr. Barnas Sears in the presence of an immense crowd of people. The body
was interred in the sandy soil of the family cemetery on the farm of the general’s father, now the Honorable Samuel Rodman. Three volleys of musketry, fired over the grave, ended those ceremonies and the family and friends, gathered among the falling golden leaves of the white and black oaks, crying, walked slowly, silently, away.

In his message to IX Corps, General Ambrose Burnside said of his good friend: “One of the first to leave his home at his country’s call, General Rodman in his constant and unwearied service, now ended by his untimely death, has left a bright record of earnest patriotism undimmed by one thought of self. Respected and esteemed in the various relations of his life, the army mourns his loss as a pure-hearted patriot and a brave, devoted soldier, and his division will miss a gallant leader who was always foremost at the post of danger.”

Afterward:

The Civil War was not quite half over when General Rodman left the field. For more than another two and a half years the armies would slug it out and names like Chickamauga, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg would be burned into our terrible collective memory. Indeed, the butchery would continue until General Lee at last surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant in the parlor of the McClean house in Appomattox, Virginia on 9 April, 1865. General Joe Johnston ended his hopeless fight by surrendering his army to General Sherman in North Carolina a few days later. Smaller western armies continued the struggle into May but everyone knew the costly war was over. And in the dying gasps of this great national tragedy President Abraham Lincoln was gunned down at Ford’s Theater shortly after 10 p.m. on the night of 14 April, 1865 by the maniacal and tragic famous thespian John Wilkes Booth. The fifty six year old president died at 7:22 a.m the next morning without having regained consciousness and clocks in clockmakers’ stores for generations after were displayed set at 7:22 to commemorate the event.

General Rodman continued to be revered long after his death. The G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) veterans routinely offered graveside rites to the fallen local hero, at least through the turn of the 20th Century. On 29 May, 1869, the entire membership of the Rodman Post #12 in Providence, along with members of the Sedgewick Post at Columbia Corners at the corner of Broad (later Main) Street and Columbia Street in Wakefield, and all honorably discharged soldiers and sailors, were invited to assemble in one body at Rodman’s gravesite and to take part in the ceremonies, by order of Francis Lippitt, Rodman Post Commander.

Rowland Gibson Rodman entered the war as Captain of Company G, 7th Rhode Island Volunteers on 4 September 1862 and like his older brother before him recruited heavily from the textile mills. He was severely wounded in the right shoulder at the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia on 13 December of that year and resigned from the service on 27 February, 1863. He eventually recovered from his wound. His family struggled after the war. His wife and their child Roland Gibson Jr. were baptized in the Church of the Ascension Episcopal Church in Wakefield in 1864. Rowland moved to Ashland, Wisconsin in 1887 where he died of apoplexy in 1901.

In 1863 Sally Lyman Rodman was appointed guardian of her minor children (Sally L., Mary P., Thomas, and Samuel) and of the estate of her late husband. On 24 November, 1868 a claim was filed against the United States Government for horses lost
in the war. The amount due was not yet determined but the horses had been on the inventory of General Rodman. In 1883 Sally asked for an increase in her husband’s pension. Sally, born on 25 February, 1826, died on 18 June 1899, aged 73. She never remarried.

The war itself ruined the Rodman Mills, as the cloth they had produced before the war was primarily used to clothe southern slaves. The war the Rodmans fought to preserve the Union destroyed them. The business was renamed S. Rodman and Son after Isaac’s death. Samuel and Roland tried to run the mills for a short time but they were broken. The mill had an extensive auction of real and personal property in May, 1863. At that time Samuel’s old friend Roland G. Hazard purchased the middle mill (on Hopkin’s Lane), with machinery, the old Rodman house with four other tenements and about thirty acres of land for $20,000, the Rodman store, counting room and another house ($3,000), the Amos Rodman house and four acre lot ($1,800), the A.P. Rodman land of twenty two and a half acres ($950), the William Sims house and lot ($500), and a safe, desk, showcases, stove, and roller ($121). Nathaniel Durfee purchased the lower mill, the Eaton lot and nine tenements, including the mansion house, for $16,250. To C.A. Hidden went Samuel Rodman’s homestead, one hundred twenty five acres of land, two tenements, and the upper mill for $10,000. J.N. Taylor bought one pair of bay horses for $145 and William O. Watson got a pair of white horses ($240), the “Case” house in Kingston ($225), a store ($725), miscellaneous horses, carts, and wagons ($761), and a lot ($325). The J.W. Watson store, the General Potter house, and the lot in Kingston were not sold, nor was I.P Rodman’s interest in the Great Neck Farm. At the time of auction the sale of the Reynolds house was being negotiated with J.P. Peckham. Prior to the auction eight small houses and lots in Rocky Brook and vicinity were sold for $10,000. The lower mill on Hopkin’s Lane burned in February, 1874; the upper mill was gutted by fire on 14 February, 1877 and abandoned until used as a small textile mill during World War I.

The kindly old patriarch Samuel accepted the candidacy for Congress in October 1874. He was also faithfully and duly honored for his long and continued support of the Wakefield Baptist Church. Religious and industrious to the last, he passed away on 9 May, 1882 and laid to rest near his son and the rest of his family. It was the end of an epoch for the village of Peace Dale.

The tale is done. All the players long ago left the field. I didn’t know them, but I knew their sons and their grandsons; I knew the general’s grandson Samuel Lyman Rodman (1894 - 1967) who raised and peddled cut gladiolas from the back of an old Willis Overland Jeep. And I knew Lyman’s son Thomas “Robin” Rodman, a thoughtful and deeply religious young man who bore a remarkable resemblance to the general himself. I knew tall, heavy-set tuba-playing Paul Dixon whose father was the color-sergeant of Company E., 2nd Rhode Island and I knew John Allen and Patrick Lyons, whose fathers were officers in Company E. Though I didn’t know him, my own mill-working great, great, great uncle was one of the first to join Company E. My son, as a baby, slept in the same cradle in which Governor Sprague slept in 1830. I held General Rodman’s blood-stained bible, a rightly-treasured Rodman family treasure.

The Civil War was not so long ago, but the soldiers and their families, like the best fruit on the tree, remain just out of reach in the mists of history. I can’t go back to meet them, but I can pierce the mysteries of those mist-shrouded years to celebrate them and what they did for us. Pathetically, the Rodman cemetery now is partially framed by a
gravel bank. There are no more cow pastures where the dandelions once grew lush, but the lichen-encrusted granite walls remain sturdy and here and there about them, a few bright dandelions still bloom amid the grass and the brush of that sad, quiet place. If you visit, visit with reverence and please, don’t walk on the graves.

Final, quiet resting place of General Isaac Peace Rodman and his family in Peace Dale, Rhode Island beneath the sandy soil of Rhode Island Historical Cemetery, South Kingstown #30.
Bibliography


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16 July, 1859 “Narrow Escape as lightening strikes Rodman factory”
7 January, 1860 “Woolen Goods, Woolen Yarns” advertisement
24 May, 1861 “S. Rodman and Sons collapses”
2 August, 1861 “Captain Rodman’s account of the Battle of Bull Run (letter)
25 October, 1861 “Captain Rodman promoted to Lt. Colonel”
10 January, 1862 “The Fourth under command of Lt. Col. Isaac P. Rodman joins General Burnside’s division proceeding to Annapolis”
7 August, 1862. “Special Town Meeting”
29 August, 1862 “Col. Rodman no longer with the Fourth. Col. Tew passed over for leadership of regiment causing dissention among officers and men. 18 officers resign.” “The War Tax”
3 October 1862
10 October, 1862 “Funeral Services for I.P. Rodman”
15 May, 1863 “Extensive Sale—real and personal property- S. Rodman and Son”
14 May, 1869. “G.A.R.”
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Brief biographies of officers and government officials pertinent to General Rodman’s story.

**Federals**, also called Unionist and “Northerners”, maintained their allegiance to the United States. They may have been abolitionists, pro-Union sympathizers, or both.

Burnside, Ambrose E. Major General of Volunteers and commander of the Army of the Potomac. Before the war he moved to Rhode Island and invented the Burnside rifle, which was not adopted by the army. Sociable and amiable, he became good friends with Rhode Island Governor Sprague and helped organize and lead the 1st Rhode Island. He was a colonel when he assumed command of Hunter’s Division at the first Battle of Bull Run. After the war he became governor of Rhode Island, then United States Senator from Rhode Island.

Butler, Benjamin. Major General of Volunteers. Once a doughface from Massachusetts, he became strongly pro-Union when war broke out. Early in the war he secured the lower Mississippi for the Union and later commanded the XVIII Corps. He was elected governor of Massachusetts and then congressman from that state after the war. He ran for president in 1884 on the Greenback-Labor and Anti-Monopolist parties ticket but lost to Grover Cleveland.

Chase, Salmon P. Secretary of Treasury in the Lincoln Administration and father of Katy Chase, wife of Rhode Island Governor Sprague. He later became Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court and presided at the Senate trial of President Andrew Johnson. He had strong but unfulfilled presidential ambitions.

Cox, Jacob D. Brigadier General in command of IX Corps at Antietam and later Major General. This Canadian native assumed command of the IX upon the death of General Reno at South Mountain. He was elected governor of Ohio after the war and served as Secretary of the Interior in the Grant Administration.

Ewing, Hugh. Colonel commanding 1st Brigade of Scammon’s Kanawha Division at Antietam. Ewing was both foster brother and brother-in-law to William T. Sherman. Near war’s end he acted in concert with General Sherman to trap Confederate General Joseph Johnston in North Carolina. His father was the Secretary of the Interior in President Taylor’s Administration. He led the federal assault at South Mountain that drove the Confederates from the summit. He later commanded divisions in XV and XVI Corps.
While stationed in Vicksburg Ewing happened on correspondence that linked Confederate President Jefferson Davis with former President Pierce, to the ruination of the latter. After the war Ewing was appointed Unites States Minister to Holland by President Andrew Johnson.

Fairchild, Harrison S. Colonel commanding 1st Brigade of Rodman’s 3rd Division. For his valiant charge at Antietam he was promoted to brigadier general. He was a bank president and an officer in the New York militia before the war. At the beginning of the war he was appointed Colonel of the 89th New York.

Foster, John G. Major General of Volunteers. He served in the Mexican War and taught engineering at West Point. He was one of the officers garrisoned at Fort. Sumter during its capitulation and distinguished himself at Roanoke Island and New Berne.

Fremont, John C. Colonel, later Major General. He was the first candidate to run for president on the new Republican Party ticket (1856). He was a failed political general and popularly known as the “Pathfinder” for his exploration of the western United States before the war.

Greene, Nathanael. Major General second in command under General Washington during the Revolutionary War. He was born in Potowomat, Rhode Island to a strongly Quaker family.

Harland, Edward. Colonel commanding the 2nd Brigade in Rodman’s 3rd Division at Antietam. A lawyer from Norwich, Connecticut, Harland organized Company D, 3rd Connecticut, and fought with them at the first Battle of Bull Run. He later commanded the 8th Connecticut. Harland assumed command of the 3rd Division at Antietam when Rodman fell mortally wounded. He was promoted to brigadier general soon after Antietam.

Heintzelman, Samuel P. Major General of Volunteers and brevet Brigadier General of the Army. He fought in the Mexican War and as a colonel in charge of the McDowell’s 3rd Division at the first Battle of Bull Run. He commanded the XXII Corps and its defense of Washington and retired from the Army with the rank of major general.

Hooker, Joseph. Major General commanding I Corps at Antietam who later assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Prostitutes following his troops were popularly called “Hooker’s Women”, which was later shortened to “hookers”.

Howard, Oliver O. Major General of the Army. As a lieutenant he taught mathematics at West Point. He entered the Civil War in command of the 3rd Maine and led a brigade at the first Battle of Bull Run. He was promoted to Brigadier General of Volunteers and lost his right arm at the Battle of Fair Oaks. He took command of II Corps after Antietam and commanded the Army of Tennessee. After the war he participated in several Indian campaigns.
Hunter, David. Brevet Major General of the Army. Hunter fought in the Mexican War and commanded the 2nd Division of the Federal Army at the first Battle of Bull Run, where he was severely wounded in the neck. He headed the Department of Kansas in the fall of 1861 and X Corps in the spring of 1863. He was the first general to enlist black troops and presided at the court which tried the Lincoln conspirators.

McClellan, George B. Major General in command of the Army of the Potomac at Antietam, succeeding Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott upon his retirement in November, 1861. McClellan had a Napoleon-complex and a vivid imagination, was more worried about not losing a battle than in winning one, was prone to political intrigue, and was the Democratic Party candidate for president in 1864.

McDowell, Irvin. Brigadier General, later Major General. McDowell had been in charge of the Washington defenses at the war’s outbreak but then was assigned to overall command of Federal troops at the first Battle of Bull Run. He was relieved of his position after that debacle and subsequently had a lackluster career for the rest of the war.

Miles, Dixon S. Colonel in command of the 5th Division at the first Battle of Bull Run and later mortally wounded in the leg by an exploding artillery shell when he was about to surrender his garrison at Harpers Ferry to Confederate troops in September, 1862. He fought in the Mexican War and in several Indian campaigns before the Civil War. He commanded a division at the first Battle of Bull Run but later a court of inquiry found that he was drunk much of that time. A similar court felt that he was drunk when he prepared to surrender his 12,419 man garrison at Harper’s Ferry.

Patterson, Robert. Patterson served in the War of 1812 and was a major general during the Mexican War. His inability to prevent a relatively small Confederate force under Confederate General Johnston from moving from the Shenandoah Valley to the support of General Beauregard at the first Battle of Bull Run ended his Civil War career and he was honorably discharged in July, 1861.

Parke, Jonathan G. Brigadier General, later brevet Major General commanding 3rd Division, IX Corps in Burnside’s Coastal Campaign. He served as General Burnside’s Chief of Staff at Antietam and Fredericksburg. At war’s end he commanded the XXII Corps and served as superintendent at West Point after the war.

Pleasanton, Alfred. As brigadier general of cavalry, he played an important front-action part at South Mountain and Antietam where his troopers pushed the Confederates ahead of advancing Federal troops.

Reno, Jesse L. Major General of Volunteers temporarily in command of Burnside’s IX Corps at South Mountain where he was killed. He served in the Mexican War where he was severely wounded at Chapultepec. He fought at Bull Run, Roanoke, and New Berne and assumed command of the IX Corps on 3 September 1862. Reno was killed at South Mountain on 14 September, 1862.
Runyon, Theodore. Brigadier General of Volunteers and commander of the 4th Division at the first Battle of Bull Run. He was later appointed major general of volunteers and after war’s end served as the chancellor of New Jersey, that is, he was the head judicial officer of the state. He remained a lawyer and bank president for most of his latter years.

Scammon, Eliakim P. Colonel, later brigadier general temporarily in command of Cox’s Kanawha Division at Antietam. He earlier served in the Seminole and Mexican Wars and afterward served as a professor of mathematics. At the outbreak of the war he was appointed colonel of the 23rd Ohio, commanding two future presidents of the United States—Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley. He was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers in October, 1862.

Scott, Winfield. Brevet Lieutenant General in command of all Federal forces at the beginning of the war. He was a distinguished veteran of both the War of 1812 and the Mexican War and was the longest serving soldier ever in the United States Army (forty seven years). He was promoted to brevet Major General in 1814 and then to Major General in 1841. He served under fourteen presidents from Jefferson to Lincoln and was the first general since Washington to hold the rank of Lieutenant General, albeit a brevetted rank. He was the commanding general of the United States Army for 20 years and was the Whig Party candidate for President in the 1852 elections, losing overwhelmingly to Franklin Pierce. He practiced the pomp and protocol of the Army to a very high degree and required his men to have a spit-shine appearance, hence his sobriquet “Old Fuss and Feathers”. He bore a physically-imposing figure and by the outbreak of the Civil War weighed about three hundred pounds and stood over six feet tall. Unable to mount his horse anymore and suffering from gout and vertigo, Scott retired from the army on 1 November, 1861. The famous Civil War Federal Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, a hero of Gettysburg, was named for General Scott.

Sherman, William Tecumseh. Colonel of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division at the first Battle of Bull Run, later General of the Army (four stars) and Secretary of War in the Grant Administration. This wild-looking, redhead is probably most famous, or infamous, for his march through the South and the subsequent destruction of Atlanta depicted in “Gone With the Wind”.

Slocum, John S. Colonel of 1st and 2nd Rhode Island Regiments of Volunteers who served with great distinction in the 9th United States Infantry during the Mexican War. He was killed at the first Battle of Bull Run.

Sprague, William. “Boy-Governor” of Rhode Island from 1860 to 1863 and later United States Senator from that state (1863-1875). Before the war Sprague owned the largest calico industry in the world. He married Katie Chase, daughter of the Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, in November 1863. Because of her rumored infidelity with, among others, Roscoe Conkling of New York, and because of Sprague’s alcoholism, they were divorced in 1882 amid terrible financial problems.
Sturgis, Samuel D. Brevet Brigadier General in command of a division at Antietam. It was Ferrero’s Brigade in his division that took Rohrbach (Burnside) Bridge. After the war he became colonel of the 7th US Cavalry; under his command in June, 1876 was Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer.

Sumner, Edwin V. Major General of Volunteers commanding II Corps at Antietam, where he was wounded soon after recovering from wounds he suffered in the Peninsula Campaign. He was the oldest corps commander in the Federal army. “Bull” Sumner served in the Black Hawk and Mexican wars and as military governor of New Mexico in the early 1850s. He was placed in command of the Department of Missouri in 1863 but died on his way to his new command in March, 1863.

Tyler, Daniel. Tyler served as colonel of the 1st Connecticut. He was promoted to brigadier general of the Connecticut militia and commanded the 1st Division of the Federal Army at the first Battle of Bull Run, after which he was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers. His granddaughter, Edith Carow, married Theodore Roosevelt.

Willcox, Orlando B. Brigadier General of the Army and Brevet Major General of Volunteers. He served in the Mexican War and enlisted as Colonel of the 1st Michigan infantry early in 1861. He commanded a brigade at first Battle of Bull Run, where he was severely wounded and captured. He commanded the 1st Division, IX Corps at Antietam and remained in the Army until 1886.

Confederates, also called Secessionists, Rebels, Secesh, and “Southerners” supported secession generally on the grounds of “States Rights” to determine the slavery question and to select allegiances. Many, but not all, were openly pro-slavery.

Beauregard, Pierre G.T. Major General who fired on Fort Sumter and who was in initial overall command at the first Battle of Bull Run. He served bravely and was twice wounded in the Mexican War and at the outbreak of the Civil War was superintendent of West Point, a post he resigned when his native Louisiana seceded. For his success at the first Battle of Bull Run he was made one of only five full generals of the Confederacy. After the war he became adjutant general of Louisiana, a railroad president, and head of the Louisiana lottery.

Breckinridge, John C. Vice-president of the United States in the Buchanan Administration. In 1861 the United States Senate declared him a traitor, although he had fled his post months earlier and headed south where he became a major general in the Confederate Army. In February 1865 he became Confederate President Jefferson Davis’ Secretary of War. He fled to Cuba, then to Europe at war’s end, but in 1869 was allowed to return to the United States.

Cobb, Howell. Secretary of the Treasury in the Buchanan Administration who resigned his position in December 1860 to lead Georgia into secession. He chaired the provisional congress to form the Confederate government and was later promoted to major general.
Davis, Jefferson. Secretary of War in the Pierce Administration and later, the only President of the Confederate States of America (CSA). After the war he escaped from Richmond and was captured by Federal cavalry in Georgia on 10 May, 1865. He was immediately held in military prisons, at first in irons, but was then later allowed to have his family with him. Finally, he was charged with treason, released on $100,000 bail, and never stood trial. He was included in the general amnesty that President Johnson declared in 1868.

Floyd, John. Secretary of War in the Buchanan Administration. He was generally considered hugely incompetent in that post. He resigned his position and became a major general in the Confederate Army. He was in charge at Fort Donelson at the time of General Grant’s successful assault, but withdrew his forces and left the surrender to his subordinate, Simon Buckner. For that he was severely censured by Confederate President Jefferson Davis and left the army in 1863.

Hill, A.P. “Little Powell” Hill served in the Seminole and Mexican Wars and became a major general and one of Stonewall Jackson’s most trusted subordinates. He began the war as colonel of the 13th Virginia and distinguished himself at the first Battle of Bull Run. He was subsequently promoted to brigadier general, then major general, and briefly commanded Jackson’s corps when Jackson was killed in 1863. Hill was later promoted to lieutenant general and led III Corps at Gettysburg. He was killed just one week before the surrender of Lee’s forces at Appomattox. Hill always wore a red, calico hunting shirt before a battle commenced so that his men might always find him on the field.

Jackson, Thomas Jonathan. Colonel, later Lieutenant General. He led a brigade at the first Battle of Bull Run, where he was given his sobriquet “Stonewall” by General Bee. It was his late arrival at the battle that reinforced the Confederate lines and forced a Federal retreat. Jackson was generally considered the best tactical general on either side in the Civil War. He served in the Mexican War and later taught at the Virginia Military Institute as professor of philosophy and instructor of artillery. At the war’s beginning he took command at Harper’s Ferry and there formed the famous “Stonewall Brigade” composed of the 2nd, 4th, 5th, 27th, and 33rd Virginia regiments. He was eventually promoted to lieutenant general and accidentally was shot in the arm by his own men in 1863. He died from complications shortly after the amputation.

Johnston, Joseph E. Former quartermaster general in the United States Army, later full general in the Confederacy. He had served gallantly in the Mexican War, in which he was severely wounded twice. As senior general on the field he assumed command from General Beauregard at the first Battle of Bull Run. He fought bravely throughout the war but was constantly at odds with President Davis. He finally surrendered his army to General Sherman. After the war he was named commissioner of railroads by President Cleveland.

Thompson, Jacob. Attorney, United States congressman and Secretary of the Interior in the Buchanan Administration. He overtly advocated secession while still serving the
United States Government, for which he was branded a traitor, and resigned his position in January 1861. He was appointed Inspector General of the Confederacy and later served as a secret agent for the Confederacy in Canada, where he plotted to burn New York City. He finally became head of the Confederacy’s secret agents and once employed John Wilkes Booth, who later shot President Lincoln.

Toombs, Robert A. Attorney, advocate of states’ rights, and United States senator. He was expelled from the senate in March 1861 and became the apparent choice of many for the post of provisional president of the Confederacy. He lost the election to Jefferson Davis. For a short time he served as Secretary of State in the Davis Administration. He entered the Confederate Army as a brigadier general in 1861 and was elected Confederate States senator in 1862. He commanded a brigade in D.R. Jones’ Division at Antietam, where he showed gallantry in defending “Burnside” bridge. He resigned from the army in 1863. He was ordered arrested after the war but escaped via Cuba to France, then resided in Canada. He never regained his citizenship but did return to Georgia, where he helped draft that state’s new constitution.