



ON CEMETERY RIDGE

**At the Battle of Gettysburg,
'moments seemed like ages,'
according to Rochester
graduates who were there.**

By Bob Marcotte

A

S CAPT. WINFIELD SCOTT LOOKED OUT across the Pennsylvania farm fields that hot afternoon in July 1863, he saw a sight “grand beyond description.” In the distance, line after line of enemy soldiers stepped into view, their guns and bayonets gleaming in the sunlight. They looked like “a stream or river of silver moving toward us.”

The Class of 1859 graduate—a Syracuse minister who left the pulpit to wield a sword—was at “ground zero” for one of the most dramatic, defining moments of the American Civil War: Pickett’s Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Scott’s former University classmate, Lt. Col. Francis Pierce, Class of 1859, 1862 (AM); another University graduate, Capt. John Ronald Leslie, Class of 1856, 1860 (AM); and a University undergraduate, Lt. Samuel Porter, Class of 1864, were also in the Union ranks on Cemetery Ridge that day, bracing for the onslaught of 12,000 southern soldiers whose desperate charge marked the high tide of the Confederacy.

University alumni, students, or former students enlisted in at least 12 of the Union regiments that fought at Gettysburg. Their own accounts and those of their contemporaries put them in the thick of the fighting on all three days and in nearly every key part of the battle that took place 150 years ago this summer.

“A great basin lay before us full of smoke and fire, and literally swarming with riderless horses and fighting, fleeing, and pursuing men,” former University student Lt. Porter Farley—Samuel Porter’s cousin—later wrote. “The air was saturated with the sulphurous fumes of battle and was ringing with the shouts and groans of the combatants. The wild cries of charging lines, the rattle of musketry, the booming of artillery, and the shrieks of

Rochester at the Turning Point

For three days in July 1863, the fields outside Gettysburg, Pa., were “ground zero” for some of the defining moments of the Civil War. And Rochester graduates and students were there. Capt. Winfield Scott and his classmate Lt. Col. Francis Pierce were joined by another Rochester graduate, Capt. John Ronald Leslie, and an undergraduate, Lt. Samuel Porter, in the Union ranks on Cemetery Ridge when the Union repelled the 12,000-soldier onslaught of Pickett’s Charge, the failed assault that marked the high tide of the Confederacy. At least seven Rochester alumni, students, and former students were at Gettysburg. They were among about 85 Rochester students and alumni who fought for the Union during the Civil War.

SEMINARY RIDGE

July 3

Pickett’s Charge

Stymied on the left and right, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee gambles on an all-out – and ultimately disastrous – attack on the center of the Union line.

July 2

A Mean Right Hook

The Confederates launch a coordinated assault on the weakly defended Union left. Belatedly recognizing the importance of the area’s high ground, Union units scramble to piece together a defense on Little Round Top.

Approximate position of the Union line on July 3, 1863.

20th New York Militia

Over the course of three days, a total of 170 of the unit’s 287 men engaged in the battle were killed, wounded, or missing. On the first day it was part of a hastily assembled screen that slowed the Confederate advance west of Gettysburg. On the third day it participated in the repulse of Pickett’s Charge on Cemetery Ridge.

Little Round Top

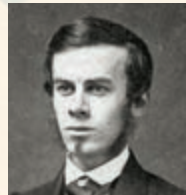
Big Round Top

140th New York Infantry

Rushed into position on Little Round Top at the height of the fighting on the second day, the unit’s appearance – and unorthodox counterattack – was instrumental in the defense of the exposed Union left flank.



Capt. Elwell Otis
(Class of 1858)



Lt. Porter Farley

July 1

The Accidental Battle

Confederate troops approaching Gettysburg from the west unexpectedly collide with Union cavalry. As word of the engagement spreads, the main armies converge: Confederate from the west and north, Union from the south.

TO HARRISBURG (38 MILES) ↘

GETTYSBURG

Cemetery Hill

Culps Hill

126th New York Infantry

Made up of recruits from Ontario, Genesee, and Yates counties, the regiment fought on the second and third days of the battle, assisting in the repulse of Pickett's Charge from a position on Cemetery Ridge.



Capt. Winfield Scott
(Class of 1859)

108th New York Infantry

Organized at Rochester in August 1862, the regiment participated in the Battle of Antietam less than a month later—and then every major engagement in the eastern theater until the surrender of Robert E. Lee's army at Appomattox.



Lt. Col. Francis Pierce
(Class of 1859)



Lt. Samuel Porter
(Class of 1864)

TO BALTIMORE (50 MILES) ↘

60th New York Infantry

Taking up an entrenched position at the extreme right flank of the Union line, the regiment was one of five that held off attacks by an entire Confederate division on the second day of the battle.



Col. Abel Godard
(Class of 1859)



the wounded were the orchestral accompaniments of a scene very like hell itself.”

Founded in 1850, the University was still very much a fledgling institution when the Civil War began. It boasted an enrollment of only about 165 students and a faculty of seven in 1861. That fall it moved from cramped quarters in the former United States Hotel in downtown Rochester to a new building at what became the Prince Street campus.

University President Martin Anderson “had adopted a moderate, almost a neutralist posture on the North-South controversy and abhorred extremism on either side,” University historian Arthur May writes. But Anderson quickly abandoned that stance after Fort Sumter was fired upon in April 1861.

WAR IS A DREADFUL THING, Anderson said at a mass meeting in Rochester a few nights later, “and yet there was something worse—the loss of national honor.” He supported the war effort wholeheartedly, even though it took a toll on his school in many ways.

Anderson released professor Isaac Quinby, a West Point graduate and Mexican War veteran, to command the first of Rochester’s volunteer infantry regiments to serve in the Civil War.

He supported students who put aside their books to join the army, even though it meant a “near fatal” decline in the University’s enrollment, May writes. By the end of the war, enrollment had dropped to only 108 students—in part because even prospective students such as J. Horace (Hod) McGuire were lured into the ranks before ever entering the classroom.

McGuire, who had qualified for a four-year scholarship at the University, later recalled that amid the “war excitement” of July 1862, “it became evident that every young man who could must enlist.”

Anderson “told us boys that in his opinion the war could not last six months and if we felt called upon to enlist to do so and if we came home alive the University would in some way make up our time lost.”

And so they went.

At least 85 of the University’s 198 graduates or former students served in the Civil War. According to May, one out of every 12 undergraduates also enlisted.

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At least 85 of the University’s 198 graduates or former students served in the Civil War. Most served in New York regiments, but others enlisted in Wisconsin, Michigan, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. At least one is known to have served the Confederacy.

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At least 34 achieved the rank of captain or better. Ten of them gave their lives.

They did not always agree on what they were fighting for. Pierce, for example, was outraged when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. “I will not jeopardize my life or become an invalid for life from exposure and fatigue . . . simply to restore 3,000,000 of brutes to freedom,” he wrote to a friend.

Porter wrote to his father that he had “got tired of listening to the rant and treason of Lieut. Colonel Pierce and men of his stamp.” And yet Pierce and Porter fought with equal valor; each was wounded four times, but served to the war’s end.

By the summer of 1863, Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had repeatedly baffled Union attempts to capture Richmond. And yet, the Confederacy was in peril. Grant’s siege of Vicksburg, the South’s principal stronghold on the Mississippi River, threatened to split the rebelling states.

Many Confederate cabinet members wanted to send reinforcements from Lee’s army to help lift the siege. Instead Lee convinced them there was more to be gained by letting his army invade northern soil.

As Lee’s 75,000 veteran soldiers disappeared behind a screen of mountains and headed north into Maryland and Pennsylvania, upward of 90,000 Union soldiers of the Army of the Potomac pursued, marching as many as 20 or more miles a day along hot, dusty roads.

Just ahead lay Gettysburg, from which 10 roads extended “to as many disparate points of the compass, as if it were probing for trouble in all directions,” Civil War historian Shelby Foote wrote.

When a column of footsore Confederate infantry moved east toward the town on July 1, 1863, ostensibly in search of shoes, a line of dismounted Union cavalry blocked their way. The fighting quickly escalated, drawing additional units from both armies.

Eventually the Confederates were able to extend their lines beyond and around the flank of the Union positions. By the time the rest of the Union army arrived, a defensive line had been established, extending from Culp’s Hill on the east, west to Cemetery Hill, and south along Cemetery Ridge toward two hills called the Round Tops.

Late on the second day, Union reinforcements, including Capt. Elwell Otis, Class of 1858, Farley, and their comrades of the 140th New York, were rushed to defend Little Round Top, a rocky hill critical to the Union position. As the Confederates continued to attack along the Union line to the right, Scott and his regiment helped repulse a Mississippi brigade in bitter fighting along Plum Run in front of Cemetery Ridge.

At the other end of the Union position, a Confederate division advanced at dusk against Culp’s Hill, where only a single Union brigade of five regiments—including the 60th New York, commanded by Col. Abel Godard, Class of 1859—remained. They, too, stood their ground, trading volleys for four hours in the darkness, even when their ammunition briefly ran out.

The next day, Lee launched an all-or-nothing attack with the last of his reserves. For more than an hour, shot and shell rained down on the part of the line held by Pierce, Porter, and the rest of the 108th New York. Pierce, in acting command of the regiment, took command of four additional regiments when their brigade commander was wounded.

When the barrage abruptly ceased, an eerie silence fell. The 108th and 126th New York regiments were posted almost side-by-side

near Cemetery Hill. Two former University classmates, Pierce of the 108th and Scott of the 126th, locked arms and walked behind the two regiments.

“Well, Scott, we have sat beside each other in the classroom many a day,” Pierce remarked, “but this is a new experience. This isn’t much like digging out Greek roots.”

Three quarters of a mile away, three divisions of Confederate infantry, totaling about 12,000 men, stepped into the open in front of



Cemetery Ridge. Pickett’s Charge was under way.

For the Union soldiers bracing for the attack, “Moments seemed ages,” Scott recalled. “The shock to the heart and nerve was awful.”

When the Confederates had advanced within 400 yards, the Union artillerists switched to rounds of canister—cylindrical tins packed with metal balls that spewed outward like oversized shotgun pellets. Lines of Union soldiers stood up and began volleying with their rifles. Despite leg and face wounds he had suffered on the first day of fighting, Leslie was back in the ranks with the 20th New York State Militia as it fired into the enemy formations.

The Confederate lines staggered.

“Like a mob they surged, and were ridden upon by officers. They swept round and round in a hopeless mass, as though they were in great conflict of thought and doubt,” Scott wrote.

As the attack collapsed and the defeated Confederates began to stream to the rear, Scott’s regiment swooped in from the side, capturing prisoners and battle flags. Scott suffered two minor wounds at Gettysburg. Pierce was struck by a round that left his arm bruised from elbow to wrist. They were among 23,000 Union casualties during the three days of fighting.

But the toll on Lee’s army was worse. Half of the soldiers in Pickett’s Charge were killed, wounded, or missing, bringing total Confederate casualties for the three days to as many as 28,000.

Lee would never again invade the north.

For many of the University’s former, current, and future students who answered the call to arms, the Civil War was a defining chapter in their lives.

Scott became a Baptist missionary and later purchased the land that became Scottsdale, Ariz., which is named in his honor, as is Winfield, Kan.

Leslie carried a bullet in his hip the rest of his life, but did not let it deter him from continuing his career as a school-teacher after the war.

Pierce, who found army life quite appealing, became a career officer, serving as an administrator for Indian affairs.

Otis, who survived severe face and neck wounds leading the 140th late in the war, ascended to even greater heights as a career officer. He was appointed military governor of the Philippines after the United States gained control during the Spanish-American War, and retired as a major general. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Godard led his regiment during the campaigns to relieve Chattanooga, and helped capture Atlanta. He emerged from one battle with 11 bullet holes in his uniform and boots but was unscathed. After being discharged, he returned to St. Lawrence County in New York, served as a state assemblyman and senator, and eventually founded a bank.

Farley survived brutal battles that killed or wounded scores of his comrades the following spring. He made it home, only to watch his young wife die in 1866. He eventually found his calling, became a doctor, and wrote extensively about the wartime experiences of his regiment.

Porter died at age 37 of complications from a malarial sickness that, some suspected, may have been contracted during the war. He died within 24 hours of his father.

In 1881, a letter arrived for Hod McGuire, who had enlisted instead of attending the University on a scholarship. The University’s president, Martin Anderson, had assured him, the war would probably be over in six months.

Instead, McGuire was not discharged until September 1866—more than four years after he enlisted, and nearly a year and a half after the war ended. By then he was engaged to be married. With a wife to support, he took a succession of jobs to make ends meet before studying law with a local attorney and passing the bar exam. He became a very good lawyer, which, he later wrote, excited the envy, even enmity, of others in the profession who had gone through law school.

He was “greatly surprised” when he read the letter.

“I remember distinctly the time you left Rochester to go into the Army. Since then I have watched your course with interest and satisfaction. I feel great pleasure therefore in recommending you as a Candidate for the Bachelor’s Degree. When the next General Catalogue is printed your name can be put with your old class (1866) or remain where it is as you shall choose.”

It was signed by Martin Anderson. 

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