

## **Columbia County Reaction to South Carolina Attack on Fort Sumter**

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When citizens of Columbia County learned of South Carolina's attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston's harbor on April 12, 1861, they rallied to support the federal government in this time of national crisis. An editorial in *The Star of the North*, a Bloomsburg newspaper, announced to its readers: "We are in the midst of a war!" It expressed a deep feeling of anger at the South for plunging the nation into a crisis and shrouding its future in uncertainty. The North was a victim of a war forced upon it by Southerners who had long contemplated this treasonable act and actively prepared for it. Feeling assaulted, the newspaper made an appeal to citizens: ". . . recognize the deadly and terrible nature of the struggle in which we are involved, and summon up all our energies to prosecute it to a successful termination."<sup>1</sup> Its editor, Williamson H. Jacoby, urged the citizens to do their duty by entering the struggle with a resolute spirit to sustain the Union and defeat its enemies.

A few days after the fall of Fort Sumter, handbills appeared in Bloomsburg announcing a public meeting at the courthouse on the evening of April 18 to review the threats to the Union and to determine the necessary steps to preserve it. It appealed to the public that political divisions must be set aside, and ". . . the time has come when every good citizen must declare himself on the side of the 'Union and Constitution.'"<sup>2</sup> In explicit language, it declared patriots should reach for arms to protect the country while those who hang back will be traitors. The response was enthusiastic; a huge crowd from Bloomsburg and the vicinity gathered at the courthouse for the meeting. A strong patriotic spirit dominated the proceedings with bands playing stirring music and numerous "cheers" for the Union, "Stars and Stripes," President Lincoln, and the armed forces. Political leaders from both the Democrat and Republican parties actively participated, and the following resolution exemplified this bipartisan spirit:

That we always have been, and are now, in favor of the unbroken union of these States; and notwithstanding difference of opinion on political questions which heretofore existed among us, we are unanimously in favor of sustaining the Federal Government in any and all difficulties she now has or may hereafter have with either foreign or domestic foes.<sup>3</sup>

In a series of other resolutions, unanimously adopted, the people deplored the national crisis, condemned efforts to disrupt the Union as traitorous acts, and denounced partisan activities as unconscionable behavior while the Confederates who seek to destroy the Union. In a zealous spirit, the meeting called upon all loyal citizens ". . . to emphatically condemn every traitorous demonstration against the government or its policy, either by speech or publication. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Within a week after the public rally, men from Columbia Young men willingly stepped forward to volunteer for military service. Attorney Robert F. Clark, the presiding officer, announced that a subscription drive throughout the county was under way to raise the necessary funds to defray the costs of outfitting the volunteers. The *Columbia Democrat*, another Bloomsburg newspaper, considered the meeting a great success: "Never was such enthusiasm manifested in a public at this place."<sup>5</sup> Catawissa, a nearby community, on the same day also held a public meeting expressing its support for the federal government in defending nation. The audience quickly adopted resolutions pledging support to preserve the Union and protect the "Stars and Stripes," the glorious ensign of liberty, and appealed to the public for funds to help defray the cost of recruiting volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

Columbia County men imbued with a martial spirit volunteered without hesitation and quickly began forming three companies to go off to fight. To meet the expenses for equipping these companies and to provide financial support for the families of those who enlisted, the citizens responded generously by raising nearly \$1,500 in a few days. The newspaper, *Columbia County Republican*, in describing the public sentiment, equated it with a Fourth of July spirit. It was a time of excitement with parades, sounds of fife and drum, speeches, and men engaged in military drills. In a ceremony at Bloomsburg's public square, a group of women presented an expensive, beautiful, silk American flag to one of the volunteer companies.<sup>7</sup>

William W. Ricketts, a twenty-four years old resident of Orangeville, became the leader for recruiting and organizing the first company of volunteers from Columbia County known as the Iron Guards. He had attended the United States Military Academy at West Point in the academic year of 1855-56 but did not graduate;<sup>8</sup> afterwards he decided to enroll in Pennsylvania Medical College at Philadelphia.

When first organized, the Iron Guards consisted of seventy-seven men; the average age was twenty-two with the youngest being eighteen and the oldest forty-one. Eighty-seven percent of the men came from Columbia County; Catawissa with twenty-seven volunteers had the largest representation with Bloomsburg next with nineteen men. Collectively, these two communities comprised sixty percent of the Iron Guards. They represented a wide variety of occupations. Farmers and carpenters, each with nine individuals, comprised the two largest groups; others included blacksmiths, iron furancemen, laborers, lawyers, teachers, shoemakers, boatmen, printers, and tanners.<sup>9</sup> Ricketts, elected captain of the company, and his men left Bloomsburg on May 7 by canal boat for Camp Curtin in Harrisburg; some two thousand citizens came to send them off.<sup>10</sup>

When the Iron Guards arrived at their destination, they became Company A, one of the ten companies comprising the 35th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers, Sixth Reserves. Dr. Palemon John, editor of the *Columbia Republican*, reported to a meeting of Bloomsburg citizens that the "Iron Guards [were] the finest looking and best disciplined

company in Camp Curtin."<sup>11</sup> The officials selected their company to be the camp police to maintain order and discipline, which was considered an honor.<sup>12</sup>

The Columbia County soldiers left Camp Curtin on July 12 for Camp Biddle at Greencastle for additional military training. From there they moved to Washington, D.C., arriving on July 24 to help guard the nation's capital. They were Incorporated into the Army of the Potomac on July 27 they and encamped at Tenallytown [Tenleytown] six miles northwest of the capitol. The troops continued their military instruction as well as doing picket duty and building fortifications.

After some seven months, the Iron Guards had their first major encounter with the Confederates at Dranesville, Virginia, twenty miles northwest of Washington on December 20, 1861. They were part of a force under the command of Brigadier General George A. McCall that successfully routed the enemy of several hundred troops, which the day before had sent their pickets near the Union lines.<sup>13</sup> Shortly afterwards, an account of the Iron Guard's role in the battle appeared in the *Columbia Democrat*:

In the late fight at Dranesville, the Iron Guards showed their coolness and training by withstanding one of the most trying tests to which a soldier can be subjected. In the very hottest of the battle, when a regiment, thrown into confusion, was forced to fall back, the Iron Guards opened ranks, let the retreating regiment through, closed up again and advanced to the charge, with as much coolness and regularity as if on parade. That shows blood and training, and to do it, the first time under fire, is alone unprecedented.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, in this battle the Iron Guards suffered their first loss, the death of Private Samuel C. Walter, a carpenter from Catawissa.<sup>15</sup>

During their three years of military service, the Iron Guards served in a number of major military campaigns: General McClellan's drive against Richmond, June 25-July 1, 1862; General Pope's army at Bull Run on August 28-30, 1862; General McClellan's command at South Mountain and Antietam, September 14-17, 1862; General Burnside's attack at Fredericksburg, December 12-15, 1862; General Meade's defense at Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863; Bristoe campaign from October 9-22, 1863; Mine Run campaign from November 26-December 2, 1863; and part of General Grant's forces at Wilderness, Spottsylvania, and Bethesda Church during the month of May, 1864.<sup>16</sup>

The Iron Guards having completed their three years of military service returned to Pennsylvania on June 11, 1864, at Harrisburg to be muster out. Bloomsburg made extensive preparations to welcome them home on June 16. The citizens decorated the town with patriotic wreaths, emblems, banners, street arches and numerous flags. With a band playing martial music, a large crowd in a holiday spirit gathered at the depot to meet the morning train bringing the soldiers from Harrisburg. After a short welcoming speech by Rev. J. R. Dimm, pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, and a response from Colonel

Ent, the community treated the soldiers to a "most sumptuous repast" on the front lawn of the courthouse.

The *Columbia Democrat* commented on the festivities: "And those of us, and those only, who have had sons and friends in the Army, can properly appreciate the gladness and rejoicings which crown the domestic circle on the reunion of the long absent and dear ones at home."<sup>17</sup> Sadly, not all of the Iron Guards returned home; fourteen gave the supreme sacrifice in defending the Union either being killed on the battlefield, dying later from their wounds, or succumb to a disease. The battle at Fredericksburg took the largest toll: five died and six wounded. Doctors certified the discharged of fifteen soldiers due to an illness or the lack of physical fitness to continue to serve. In addition, nine other men received discharged notices resulting from the severity of their wounds.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Star of the North* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), April 24, 1861.

<sup>2</sup> *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), April 27, 1861.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, May 4, 1861 and *The Star of the North*, April 24, 1861.

<sup>7</sup> *Columbia County Republican* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), May 2, 1861.

<sup>8</sup> West Point officials brought charges against Ricketts for leaving his guard duty on two instances on the night of February 20, 1856. A court martial found him guilty and order his dismissal from the military academy. He wrote to his father explaining that the weather was so cold that he came into the barracks to get warm and regretted causing his father such pain and embarrassment. William W. Ricketts to E. G. Ricketts, March 16, 1856. Robert Bruce Ricketts Papers, Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

<sup>9</sup> Muster Roll of Company A, 35th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, Record Group 19, Records of the Department of Military Affairs, Office of the Adjutant General, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.

<sup>10</sup> *The Star of the North*, May 8, 1861.

<sup>11</sup> *Columbia Democrat*, May 18, 1861.

<sup>12</sup> Charles B. Brockway letter to Levi Tate, May 28, 1861, *Columbia Democrat*, June 8, 1861.

<sup>13</sup> .R. Sypher, *History of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps* (Lancaster, Pa.: Elias Barr & Co., 1865), 101 and 129-139.

<sup>14</sup> *Columbia Democrat*, January 11, 1862.

<sup>15</sup> Sypher, 623

<sup>16</sup> Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion: Regimental Histories*, Vol. III (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 1579-1580 and Samuel Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-1865*, Vol. I (Harrisburg: B. Singerly, 1869-1871), 692-701.

<sup>17</sup> *Columbia Democrat*, June 18, 1864.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-1865*, Vol. I (Harrisburg: B. Singerly, 1869-1871), 702-704 and Sypher, 622-623.