# The Ocean County Rifles and the Civil War

By Patricia H. Burke




*Photo Credit: Steve Baeli*

*Ocean County Courthouse, Veterans' Commemoration, May 12, 2011*

The sesquicentennial of the Civil War, 1861-1865, will be commemorated from 2011-2015 throughout the United States. The Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission will feature articles about Ocean County and its role in the war in *Out & About* during the sesquicentennial years. On April 12, 1861 Fort Sumter, a fortification in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, was bombarded by Confederate guns. Northerners rallied behind the newly inaugurated President Abraham Lincoln when he called for all of the states to send troops to recapture Fort Sumter and to preserve the Union. At first it seemed as though the war would be short so on April 15, 1861 the President called for troops to serve just three months. There were more than enough volunteers to fill the President's call for 75,000 men. But after the South's victory at the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, Lincoln realized that the war would be long and that he would need to ask the states for more men and for three-year enlistments.

In 1861, some Jerseymen were so anxious to volunteer that they joined as recruits in the neighboring states of New York and Pennsylvania. It has been estimated that as many as almost 9,000 Jerseymen joined in other states. And it is here that we begin to see the role that Ocean County played in what the South would call the War Between the States.

In the September 18, 1861, issue of the Ocean Emblem the following article appeared:

> On Thursday last, in company with Cols. W.I. James, F. J. Speer, and E.H. Wilks, Esq., we went to Trenton to prevail with the Governor and Military authorities to accept a company of volunteers from this county. The effort proved successful, notwithstanding the fact that companies were already accepted enough to fill up the Regiments required from this state. Over one hundred of our citizens have already placed themselves in the service of our Government, scattered in different States and in various regiments, some in the Army and some in the Navy, and as their patriotic impulses seemed to be on the increase, leading them, in increased numbers, to enlist in squads and bands in separate companies it was thought proper, as an act of justice to our men and our country, that a fully organized company from Ocean should be admitted into one of New Jersey's Regiments.
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> Captain Page and Lieut. Irons are entitled to the thanks

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*Photo Credit: OC C & H*

*Ocean County resident and Civil War veteran Charles M. Bartruff in Frederick, Maryland*

and to the kind consideration of our people for the very successful labor which they have performed in raising so large a number of volunteers, from our rural and thinly populated county, in so short a time.

The *Ocean Emblem* then published a list of the names of 73 volunteers for this company, called "The Ocean County Rifles." And the paper went on to say that "They are, as a general thing, expert marksmen, as their subsequent services will show. The enemies of our Union will find them 'sharp shooters' indeed."

On Saturday, the 21st of September, the Ocean County Rifles, now numbering 94 volunteers, began their journey from Toms River to Trenton where they would be mustered in. The October 2, 1861 issue of the *Ocean Emblem* reported that at precisely at five o'clock the bell of the Presbyterian Church began to ring and continued for 15 minutes, at the close of which the soldiers were up and ready for breakfast. Thirty minutes after breakfast a line was formed in marching order. At six o'clock the men were drawn up between the hotels of Messrs. Gravatt and Cowdrick. At a little past six E.H. Wilks, Esq., commenced an address to the soldiers. At the close of the address and the singing of a patriotic song called "The Sword of Bunker Hill", the soldiers and hundreds of citizens present sent up long and loud cheers for the Union and for the Ocean County Rifles. After the distribution of little presents from parents, relatives and friends, the company, at about 15 minutes past seven, was ready to march. In front was the Captain followed by the band of music and flag, then the soldiers. The Captain gave the word "march" and the procession moved, passing from Main Street into Washington Street, down Church Street into Water Street and from thence back to Main. The mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers of the volunteers "had tears trickling down their anxious faces." The mothers and fathers were giving up their sons "for the salvation of the Union." The newspaper went on to say that "…all this distress, all this loss of life, all this tearing of hearts asunder, all this waste of property, and all the attendant calamities of this war are the results, the fruits of that wicked, *Heaven-cursed institution, Slavery*."

The Ocean County Rifles reached New Egypt at a little past 12 o'clock, where they were received with cheers of welcome. Here they were entertained and provided with dinner and the horses were fed. About half past one, the company moved on and at Jacobstown the citizens flocked to the streets, welcoming them with buckets of water and cups and bouquets of flowers. They reached Trenton at about five o'clock and the soldiers were quartered for the night. Monday morning the company was marched to the State House, and in the Assembly room they were examined and then sworn into the government service. In the examination of soldiers, twenty-one of the company did not pass, as not fully up to the standard required for the 9th New Jersey Volunteers. Most would be passed for any of the other regiments. The rest of the rejected went home. In the afternoon they marched out to Camp Olden, received rations, camp tents, and equipment.

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Colonel Joseph W. Allen helped recruit the 9th New Jersey Volunteers from all over the state and was commissioned its Colonel on September 23, 1861. "The Ninth counted among its recruits a number of duck hunting 'watermen' from the state's coastal marshlands as well as a company of German target shooters from Newark." At first, Colonel Allen's men were issued smoothbore muskets but the men protested to New Jersey Governor Olden and he was able to secure the new Springfield rifle for them.

The riflemen of the Ninth became the first New Jersey troops committed to combat in the Civil War. They left Camp Olden on December 4, 1861, and boarded trains in Washington, D.C., on the morning of January 4, 1862. The next day the regiment embarked on ships at Annapolis with orders to rendezvous at Fort Monroe, in Hampton, Virginia, near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay. There they met the naval contingent and on January 11 set sail to the vicinity of Cape Hatteras.

Major General Ambrose Burnside had recently received permission to organize a Coast Division to be composed of fishermen, dockworkers, and other watermen from the northeastern states and to use them to attack coastal areas. He reasoned that they would be easy to train for amphibious operations. By the beginning of 1862 the Coast Division was ready for action. The Division was organized into three brigades. General Jesse L. Reno's Second Brigade included the 9th New Jersey Volunteers. Under the command of General Burnside, the Coast Division landed on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, on February 7, 1862.




*Photo Credit:Barbara Steele*

*Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr., Master of Ceremonies, May 12, 2011*

The Battle of Roanoke Island was fought on February 7-8, 1862, where the 9th New Jersey Volunteers successfully "sloshed through shoe sucking mud into waist deep water in division formation, giving the regiment a two company front against the enemy." The Confederates never expected the Union soldiers to even try to penetrate the "impenetrable" swamp. As a result of this action, General Burnside nicknamed the 9th New Jersey Volunteers the "Jersey Muskrats." The Confederates lost the battle and Roanoke Island remained in Union control for the rest of the war.

The battle was reported in the Ocean Emblem on February 19, 1862 to the people of Ocean County:

> In the glorious results at Roanoke our Ocean County boys come in for a full share of the credit and praise of the country. The 9th Regiment, from this State, had 18 wounded, three of whom belonged to Company D from this county. William H. Phillips received a slight scalp wound; George R. Worth, a serious wound in the Chest; and David A. Johnson, a slight wound in the neck. These reports show that our Ocean County company was not behind their fellows in zeal to overcome the enemies of our country.

David A. Johnson, who suffered a slight wound to the neck, was born in

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Manahawkin on January 7, 1840, to Benjamin and Priscilla Johnston Johnson. When he was 21 years old he enlisted in Toms River and became a Private, Company D, 9th Regiment, NJ Infantry Volunteers for three years. He listed his occupation as sailor/bayman. On February 8, 1862, he survived a gunshot wound on the left side of the neck at the Battle of Roanoke Island, North Carolina. The wound never properly healed and by January 1864 he was on the Invalid Roll at Newport News, Virginia, where he was recommended for transfer to the Veterans Reserve Corps (VRC) by reason of Scrofula which is a tuberculous infection of the lymph nodes in the neck. Through exposure, he also suffered from pleurisy and rheumatism and was discharged in September, 1864, at Fort Monroe, Virginia.



*Photo Credit: Open Source*

*The Battle of Roanake Island, February 1862*

He returned to Manahawkin and on January 7, 1865, he was married to Amelia C. Keely (1846-1925) by Joel Haywood in West Creek. He was twenty-four years old and she was nineteen. In the 1870 census, David is listed as a laborer and Amelia as a housekeeper and they have two sons. Benjamin is three years old and Charles is a month shy of a year old. They lived together with David's brother John (1831-1903) and his wife Lucy and their five children. John is identified as a farmer.

According to the pension records, David was not able to work as a seaman after he returned from the war. His health, like so many veterans, was compromised for the rest of his life. He lived to be fifty-nine years old and died on July 21, 1899.

**Recommended Reading**

*Remember You Are Jerseyman! A Military History of New Jersey's Troops in the Civil War*. Joseph G. Bilby and William C. Goble. 1998.

*The History of the Ninth New Jersey Veteran Volunteers*. Captain J. Madison Drake. Elizabeth, NJ. 1889.