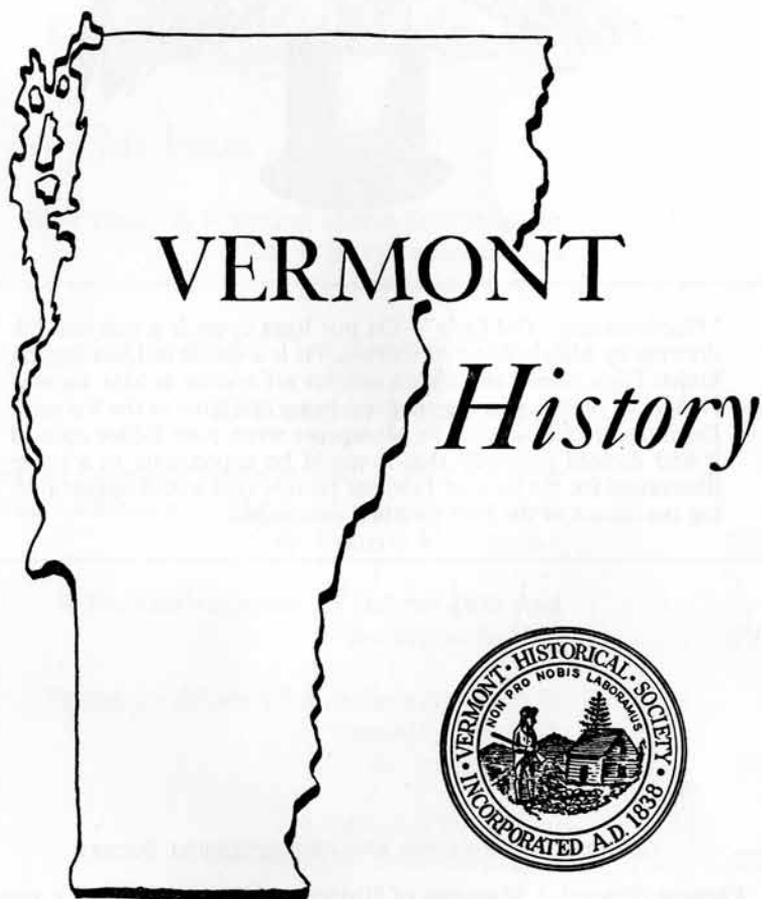


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“The whole earth seemed to sink beneath our feet. The air was literally filled with men, timbers, dirt and every thing the fort contained. The scene was beyond description!”

## Captured By Rebels: A Vermonter At Petersburg, 1864

*(Long after the Civil War a veteran living in Morrisville, Frank Kenfield, was asked to deliver a speech about his war experiences to the James M. Warner Post of the Grand Army of the Republic in Morrisville. The manuscript he prepared is printed below as transcribed by Willard Sanders, a Trustee of the Vermont Historical Society who lives in Morrisville. The manuscript is undated but Mr. Sanders believes it was written in about 1900.*

*Frank Kenfield enlisted in the 13th Vermont Regiment, Company E, as a Second Lieutenant on September 8, 1862. He was promoted to First Lieutenant in June, 1863, wounded at Gettysburg a month later, and mustered out on July 21, 1863. He re-enlisted as Captain of Company C, 17th Vermont Regiment, and was wounded again in May, 1864. He was taken prisoner at Petersburg on July 30, 1864, paroled on March 1, 1865, and discharged on May 15, 1865.)*

THE Commander of this Post has asked me to give a short account of some of my experiences in the great war for the Union. Each one of the Comrades has had experiences that would be interesting to all if they would only relate them. But many of you, like myself, hardly know how to tell it in such a way as to be pleasing to his hearers. Many a history has been written in regard to this terrible war but a small part of the story has yet been told, and could the full history be written, no library, however large, could contain this work. It never will be written. It never could be written as the material for a full volume is lost when anyone of us that took a part in this war pass into the realms beyond.

I served in two Regiments as many of you already know. My first was the 13th Vermont and the other was the 17th Vermont. The only

fighting of any account the 13th did was at the Battle of Gettysburg. This was one of the greatest battles of the war and is said to be the turning point, and in this battle the 2nd Vermont Brigade of which the 13th was a part, performed deeds of valor that can never be blotted from the pages of history. Brave Stannard, Vermont's hero, won for himself a name that will last until time is no more.

I have been requested by a Comrade to give an account of my capture and imprisonment.

The 17th Regiment was the last Regiment that left the State and its first baptism of fire was at the battle of the Wilderness, May 6, 1864. In this battle I was wounded and went to the hospital and then came home on a furlough and when I returned I found the Regiment in front of Petersburg and they for two months had fought by day and marched by night to get there and I found my Company, who a few months before, left the State with a full Company, now had only 9 men for duty and not a commissioned officer with them, but were commanded by a Sergeant. It was a sorry sight to see. Do you wonder that my heart was grieved and sad? Do you wonder that I shed bitter tears of sorrow, at this sight? No, it is no wonder and when I asked where they all were the answer came back "killed or wounded and in the hospital." But what few were left were here in front of Petersburg in rifle pits ready to advance on the rebels and in some places not over 10 rods apart and here we lay, night and day, watching each other waiting ready to send a bullet through the brain of the first rebel that showed his head above the works. Thus we lay some two or three weeks until the time came for us to make a charge.

Our objective was to capture Petersburg then on to Richmond. "On to Richmond" had been the battle cry ever since McClellan took command of the Army of the Potomac, down to Lee's surrender at Appomattox and of course our attempt was to be a failure this time. Col. Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania Regiment conceived the idea of digging a gallery or trench underground to a point under the rebel fort 500 feet long and to put powder enough under it to blow the rebels, fort and all to that place where they say one needs summer clothes. Then to charge through this broken line and capture Petersburg.

Col. Pleasants' Regiment was composed mostly of miners, and understanding this kind of work, in two or three weeks they had the trench complete and under the fort they put 8000 pounds of powder and laid a line of fuse to fire it back to the entrance.

On the 29th of July 1864 we were retired from the rifle pits and had orders to prepare ourselves for a battle with a full supply of cartridges,

etc. That evening after dark we quietly moved out in front of this fort and lay on our arms waiting to see what the dawn of the next day would bring forth. Can any of you that never had experienced these trials imagine our feelings as we lay there that night? Can you conceive what passed through the minds of these men, for all knew that the morrow was soon to bring for them a hard fought battle and that to many this was their last night on earth, or what was worse to be wounded and suffer and die in rebel prisons.

At last the early morning came and that mine had not exploded yet. The inquiry was, "what is the reason?" The mine was to be fired at 3 o'clock and the time is passed and we were waiting ready for the charge. We get the whisper that the fuse has gone out and a volunteer has gone into the trench to find out the cause and repair it. Then we waited until a little before 5 o'clock and the explosion came. 250 men, cannon, caissons, timber, etc., were hurled into mid air with terrible slaughter. The whole earth seemed to sink beneath our feet. The air was literally filled with men, timbers, dirt and every thing the fort contained. The scene was beyond description! No words of mine can give you an idea of the terrible sight! Nothing in my whole life can begin to equal this experience and to increase the trying ordeal, 100 pieces of artillery in our rear opened with all their fury upon the rebel works. It seemed as if Hell was let loose for our benefit but the worst was to come. As soon as the air had cleared away the order came to fix bayonets and charge. On we went up the hill, over the dead and dying to the crater. Here we saw a terrible sight, a sight that beggars all description. Here was a hole in the ground 250 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 25 feet deep literally filled with dead and dying men torn and mangled in every form and those that were alive begged for mercy.

But we could not stop. On we went past the fort, bore to the right into the rebel minor works. By this time the rebels had recovered somewhat from their surprise and were rallying their men to check our progress. They brought up their reserve forces to this point. Mahon, who was in command, placed his artillery on a hill beyond us and fired with terrible effects upon our lines. Regiment after Regiment was thrown in from our side and to cap the climax a full Brigade of colored troops were just in and the organizations were all mixed up and there seemed no way to straighten out this mass of men in any kind of shape so as to move forward. The rebels had, by this time, got their range and used this advantage to great effect and the slaughter on our side was tremendous. Our Regiment went into the fight with 8 officers and 120 men. 5 of the officers were killed or wounded and 2 taken prisoners, Lieutenant Pierce

of Woodstock and myself. There were 56 killed or wounded, and 18 taken prisoners, 7 of whom died in prison.

Comrade McClintock, your Commander, was with us in this terrible time and to him I owe a debt of gratitude I can never repay. We removed together until separated by rebel forces, he going to one prison, and I to another. But to return to the fight, which lasted some 3 or 4 hours in a burning July sun and no water to quench our thirst. But at last the end came.

The rebels with that tremendous yell known to all old soldiers made their charge in upon us, and those that were behind our line retreated and got back but we that were in the front had to succumb to the cruel fate of man, throw down our arms and beg for mercy at the hands of the rebels.

Just before I was captured, I took off my sword and drove it into the bank in the pit. I have been over these grounds twice since that war but these pits have been leveled down so I could not find any trace of the sword. I had a gold watch and chain and this I put in my boot and saved it and I am sure that this saved my life of which I will speak later. My hat and revolver I was relieved of at once and they would have taken my watch had they known I had one. I wish to say one word here in regard to the colored troops; that they fought like heroes and many a rebel bit the dust from their unerring bullets, and as the rebels charged in upon us I heard the order given "save the white men but kill the damn niggers." And I saw them run their bayonets through many a colored man showing him no mercy. I often think of this scene and a cold shudder goes through me as I think of how those poor colored men were butchered in cold blood.

This closed the battle of the mine and instead of victory as it ought to have been, had it been rightly managed, it resulted in a failure. After our capture, Comrade McClintock and myself seemed to be separated from the rest and went to Petersburg under guard where we came up with the rest. There were about 800 men and 80 officers captured in this fight. There were quite a number of colored troops captured which seemed to enrage the rebel authorities much and their indignation towards the officers that commanded the troops knew no bounds. The first night of our capture we spent on a knoll south of Petersburg surrounded by a strong guard. The next morning was bright and clear but this band of captured soldiers did not seem to enjoy the situation as the look was that Andersonville would be their future home.

About 9 o'clock that morning, it being Sunday, I saw several mounted officers ride up, look us over, and then hold a consultation, after which

the order was given for all the officers to face in 4 ranks and between each file now placed a file of negroes so that every alternate file was negroes and white officers. In this manner we were marched through the principal streets of Petersburg and received many taunts and scoffs from the people as we journeyed along.

I shall always remember one incident that transpired as we were marching along this way. An old woman stuck her head out of a window and cried out, "birds of a feather will flock together." A Lieutenant from the 32nd Maine Regiment who was marching in my front replied, "yes, but we don't mix in the nest as you do down here," at which the guard which was on our right cocked and put his gun to his shoulder and said, "you insult our ladies down here and I will blow you through," to which the Lieutenant replied, "shoot down, you, and then boast you have killed a Yankee as you will never kill one by going to the front." I expected the guard would shoot but he took his gun down from his shoulder, marched along, and said no more.

We remained in Petersburg a day or two and then were put in box-cars and transported to Danville and here were put in a tobacco warehouse where we remained for a few days. At this place I was separated from the rest of the Company, I going to Columbia, South Carolina. Here the officers were confined in Richland County Jail. This jail is, or was, a large brick building 3 stories high and arranged with cells inside similar to other jails. We were placed on the second floor, of this building. This all was a small room perhaps 8 feet by 10 feet with grated doors and windows. This place was to be our home, how long we knew not, but for the present, we expected.

We found prisoners of war here, when we arrived, some have been here 16 months. One, Major Fillen had been here that length of time and had learned to read and write the German language. Our rations consisted of corn-meal and sorghum, the corn being ground on the cob. This meal being raw we had to arrange with the rebel officers for some way to cook it. It was finally arranged with the rebel officers that four of us as we might select should give our parole of honor that they would not attempt to escape and that they could go outside and do the cooking. We elected four by ballot if something of an object to cook, as they would get enough to eat. They were to cook this meal, divide it as near as possible, and give each one their share. This allowance was but a small piece to each man twice a day. Not one half of what each man required.

I could not eat the sorghum as it soured on my stomach. I received my part of these rations but it did not begin to satisfy my hunger. As

the days went on my hunger was stronger and how often did I think of home and a well spread table and how much I have wished I could scim the crusts from my father's swill barrel. Often have I eaten the rinds of watermellons furnished by the guard with a relish.

You who have never suffered this feeling for weeks, know nothing of its gnawings. But relief came at last. You will remember my saving my watch when captured and I still had kept it secreted. One day a reb Lieutenant came into the prison and I found him to be a Mason. I told him I had a watch and chain that I wished him to dispose of for money as I should starve to death on this ration. He said he would do the best he could with it and bring me the money. He was gone nearly one week and came back, said he could not get what it was worth. I told him to sell it for what he could get and in about a week more he brought in \$700 in Confederate money. With this money I could get for \$1.00 two eggs. \$1.00 would buy a small piece of meat. Irish potatoes were \$20.00 and so on. I bought a pair of coarse shoes for which I paid \$100. For a pair of light blankets I gave \$75.00. I was prudent with this money, sharing with my comrades, and we got along fairly well. In the cell which we occupied there was not the first piece of furniture, not a thing to sit, stand, or lay on. But it was full of vermin of all kinds. There was no end to bed-bugs. In the morning the ceiling and walls would be literally covered with them.

It reminds me of the poem composed by some wit when he said:

The June bug has his wings of gold,  
The lightning bug his flame.  
The bed-bug has no wings at all  
But gets there just the same.

*(At this point the manuscript ends.)*