



St. Johnsbury Puts the Civil War to Rest

“St. Johnsbury Jubilant—The Town in a Blaze of Glory,” The Caledonian’s headlines read on Friday, the 14th of April. Four years to the day of the fall of Fort Sumter, the newspaper reported the area’s response to the long-awaited word.

By RACHEL CREE SHERMAN

Chances are the town of St. Johnsbury never celebrated in a more joyous or spontaneous style than on the 10th day of April in 1865. That day the town received news that the horrors of the Civil War, its death, disease, and privation, were at a much-anticipated end. Ever since that time, the citizens of St. Johnsbury and those who visit the town have traveled Main Street, quite unaware of what lies beneath.

It is the coffin of the Confederacy.

On a Sunday morning, April 14, four years before, word had reached Governor Erastus Fairbanks at his St. Johnsbury residence of the fall of Fort Sumter, sparking the War Between the States. The next day, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 militia men, asking Vermont for one regiment. The state responded without delay.

By Monday, as music and speeches engendered intense excitement, seventy men volunteered for service. The town’s citizens pledged \$1,700 and gave thirty revolvers in support of the cause. Surrounding towns

.....
RACHEL CREE SHERMAN is a native of St. Johnsbury and has nurtured an interest in its history throughout her life. Her family has lived in the Northeast Kingdom for seven generations. A freelance writer and researcher of Vermont history, she is currently working with the state climatologist on historic documentation of Vermont’s weather.

Vermont History Vol. 76, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 63–66.

© 2008 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; on-line ISSN: 1544-3043

also raised hundreds of dollars in their own show of support, and a Ladies' Aid Association was formed, with 150 members joining the effort. The state raised six regiments, two companies of sharpshooters, and a squadron of cavalry before the legislature officially convened that fall.

On April 23, 1861, as the General Assembly met in emergency session in answer to his call, Gov. Fairbanks's words echoed the thoughts of many of his fellow citizens:

The enormity of this rebellion is heightened by the consideration that no valid excuse exists for it. The history of the civilized world does not furnish an instance where a revolution was attempted for such slight case . . . It is devoutly to be hoped that the mad ambition of secession leaders may be restrained and the impending sanguinary conflict averted. . . . The United States Government must be sustained and the rebellion suppressed at whatever cost of men and treasure. May that Divine Being who rules among the nations and directs the affairs of men interpose his merciful Providence and restore to us again the blessings of peace under the aegis of our National Constitution.¹

By the spring of 1865 Vermont was devastated, having sent one tenth of its entire population to war, with a loss of over 5,000 lives to battle, wounds, and disease. The state had dedicated nearly \$10 million to support the conflict, half of that amount offered up by towns with no expectation of recompense.

St. Johnsbury lost eighty men of its 1860 population of approximately 3,470, and contributed a total of over \$44,000 to the war effort, including its share of funds provided at the outset of the war and bounties offered to those who served to fill its quota of soldiers. The combined burden of extra work and worry endured by those who remained at home added to the hardships, which increased as the war dragged on.

Vermont, as all states on both sides of the fight, had given its all, town by town. But by the end of the war, Vermont's loss of lives had been more per capita than any other state in the Union.

Now, with a blast of relief, the end came at last to the hard-won conflict and the soldiers were welcomed home in grand style. Families were reunited—or not. Life could begin to go on as before.

But first, there would be celebration; first, an outpouring of emotion to officially and symbolically put the war to rest.

“St. Johnsbury Jubilant—The Town in a Blaze of Glory,” *The Caledonian's* headlines read on Friday, April 14.² Four years to the day of the fall of Fort Sumter, the newspaper reported the area's response to the long-awaited word.

When the glorious news was received here on Monday morning that Gen. Lee had surrendered the main army of the Southern Confederacy

to Gen. Grant, there seemed no limit to the demonstrations of joy by our people. All the bells clanged forth the good tidings, cannons were fired, steam whistles were sounded, and young America paraded the streets with dinnerbells, horns, drums, and whatever would resound to physical effort of [m]ind or muscle . . . probably it was not half an hour after the official dispatch arrived before everybody within the limits of the village, and many from other villages, were thronging our streets, exchanging congratulations and indulging in certain demonstrations decidedly damaging to hats and also to the vocal organs.³

Following the noontime meal, people continued to gather at the town hall. A cavalry company was joined by one from the “East Village” and a number of “ladies, misses and children, anticipating a march through the village.”

Young minds had been at work. “Some school boys, who knew their intentions, thought this procession would be an excellent escort for a little affair which they proposed to throw in as a sort of episode or ‘side show’ to the original program.” When the paraders were ready to pick up their step to the band’s march music, four boys appeared, “bearing a coffin on which was painted in large white letters, ‘CONFEDERACY.’” The casket, draped with the “Stars and Bars,” was followed by a group of young ladies who waved the “Stars and Stripes.” The cavalry brought up the rear of the procession.

The “remarkable funeral cortege” marched upon streets that must have shown stark evidence of mud season, to a pit in front of Hutchinson & Corser’s store at the corner of Main and Central Streets. There, “without a ‘funeral note,’ the empty box was lowered into the ground.” The young ladies sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “Glory Hallelujah” as the East Village militia discharged over twenty rounds of ammunition from their guns.

Edward Taylor Fairbanks also described the scene in his 1914 history of St. Johnsbury, relating that “Enthusiasm long pent up broke loose with an outburst such as our town had never known before.”⁴

The “grandest display,” however, occurred in the evening, lighting the night, to be seen for miles around. As soon as it grew dark, candles and gas and kerosene lamps lit the windows of houses and businesses all over the village. By half-past seven, “150 to 200 homes and public buildings were brilliantly illuminated,” *The Caledonian* noted. “It was the grandest sight our little town ever witnessed.”⁵

In the 1860s, homes and businesses were sparsely scattered along the main and side streets of St. Johnsbury. The town of some 3,500 citizens was growing rapidly and must have been something to behold during this impulsive burst of communal sentiment. Union Block and the Court

House displayed gleaming lights in their windows. Pinehurst, home of Horace Fairbanks, was noted for the gas lights that blazed the entire length of its ridgepole. At Underclyffe, Franklin Fairbanks's home, a "very handsome display of red, white and blue lights lit up the night," as did many other buildings in the town which were equally "striking and pretty."⁶

Several fire companies, drawn by horses, rolled down Main Street with torch lights ablaze, and huge bonfires were kindled on both Main and Railroad Streets. "The beautiful appearance of the village" was too much for even *The Caledonian's* reporter to describe in its entirety, according to his own admission.

The day's experience "was one of the best things we ever had, and all the better because impromptu," *The Caledonian* concluded. "And yet, compared with the magnitude of the event celebrated, it was most feeble and insignificant. All honor to the brave men who have led our armies! and lasting honor and praise to the gallant heroes who have fought the good fight! and glory be to God who hath given the Victory!"⁷

The war was over. The boys were home. Throughout Vermont, though it was bittersweet, villages everywhere celebrated in much the same way.

On August 30, 1868, a monument to St. Johnsbury's Civil War fallen was erected beside the Court House in the midst, once again, of great ceremony. The statue, which stands seven feet tall, is called "America." It was sculpted in Italian marble by Vermonter Larkin G. Mead at his studio in Florence, Italy.

The memorial bears the names of all eighty lost citizen-soldiers. Its legend states: "In Honor of the St. Johnsbury Volunteers Who Sacrificed Their Lives in Defence of the Union."

The coffin of the Confederacy remains, as placed, at the corner of Main and Central Streets.

NOTES

¹ Edward Taylor Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury, Vt.; A Review of One Hundred Twenty-five Years to the Anniversary Pageant 1912* (St. Johnsbury: The Cowles Press, 1914), 274.

² *The Caledonian*, St. Johnsbury, 14 April 1865.

³ This long quotation and the next several comments are from *ibid.*

⁴ Fairbanks, *Town of St. Johnsbury, Vt.*, 285.

⁵ *The Caledonian*, 14 April 1865.

⁶ *Ibid.* Franklin and Horace Fairbanks, the latter of whom served as governor of Vermont, 1876–1878, were sons of Gov. Erastus Fairbanks, who, together with his brothers, Thaddeus and Joseph, formed the E. & T. Fairbanks Scale Co., manufacturer of the world's first platform scale, invented by Thaddeus. They were also philanthropists and endowed to the town many of its significant buildings. Rev. Edward Taylor Fairbanks was Joseph's son.

⁷ *Ibid.*