

## New Jersey's Civil War Battle flags saved from Fire

In 1885 there was a fire in the State Capital building in Trenton. This threatened to destroy all the Civil War battle flags that had been collected and put on display there. Fortunately, there were 19 brave individuals that risked their lives to save these irreplaceable pieces of history. These individuals were honored at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual New Jersey Department Encampment held in Trenton, NJ, February 11, 1886. Following is a speech given at the Camp-Fire held at 8:00 that evening in the Masonic Hall, Trenton.

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Commander Nevius – The first business to-night will be the presentation of the badges to the men who saved the battle flags. The Assistant Adjutant-General will call the roll of those men.

The roll was thereupon called as follows, each man responding:

W. S. Stryker	P. Howell	P. H. Connor
John McKechney	Wm. Lett	W. B. Parker
J. A. McCrellish	M. McGowan	M. Murray
T. Cunningham	J. W. Royal	T. E. Boyd
E. Lanning	W. S. Sulger	A. Cragan
N. M. Smith	W. Cadwallader	L. Hartman
B. Gummere, Jr.		

Commander Nevius – Comrades, in 1775, when the colonists first took up arms to resist the oppression of the mother country, they took them up as sovereigns, and not with the idea of liberty; it was not until 1776 that they conceived the idea of liberty. Previous to that time, they had fought under different flags, bearing different devices. In 1776, on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of July in Philadelphia, our patriot fathers passed the Declaration of Independence, declaring themselves a free and independent people, thereby breathing the first breath of life into a Nation which was destined to stand first and foremost among the nations of the world.

Then it became necessary to have a National flag. The stars and stripes, taken from the coat of arms of the Washington family, and the field of blue – emblem of truth – taken from the ethereal blue of heaven, were formed into the American flag. Conceived and born on the field of battle, and baptized in blood and smoke, beneath that flag our revolutionary forefathers with the fire of liberty burning in their hearts, struggled with the trained soldiers of the old country, until they drove them back across the sea, and threw to the breeze the Stars and Stripes as the emblem of national liberty.

From 1783 until 1861, that flag peacefully, proudly and triumphantly floated. Beneath its shelter three millions of people grew to be forty millions; thirteen young, weak states grew into thirty-four powerful states, composing this Union; and our weak

young republic grew in education, in science, and in wealth, until it stood first among the nations of the earth. When suddenly, in an evil hour, it was torn from its lofty standard and trailed ignominiously in the dust. In eleven States of this Union it was not allowed to float except at the cannon's mouth, or at the point of the sword and the bayonet. Eleven States were armed in open rebellion, and declared it should not rise again, and that the Union which it represents should be rent in twain. Then it was that two million and a half of brave and loyal men, who loved that flag and the Union over which it floated as they loved their lives, rushed to the front on land and sea, resolved that it and the Union should and must be maintained and preserved.

For four long years, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as they faced the murderous rain of shot, shell, and iron hail, they followed the fortunes of that flag on hundreds of well-fought fields, in victory and in defeat; never faltering, never wavering, never allowing the smoke of battle to pass away, until the last armed foe laid down his arms and victory perched upon its banners; until peace was declared and law was peacefully recognized throughout the length and breadth of our land. Then it was found that, in defense of that flag, three hundred thousand loyal men had been maimed and crippled for life; four hundred thousand loyal men had laid down their lives, and over a million of devoted mothers, widows, and orphans mourned for the loved ones who would never again return. When the smoke of battle had passed away; when the cries of the wounded no longer mingled with the soul-stirring notes of martial fife and drum; when the bugle no longer sounded the battle-call – then that army was disbanded and returned to their homes, to again engage in the peaceful and industrial pursuits of life, and they bore with them, proudly, the smoke-begrimed and tattered battle-flags, around which they had rallied upon so many hard-fought fields.

Those from New Jersey bore them proudly home to their State, and they were placed in the State Arsenal, and afterwards given a place in the State House, where they were regarded as sacred relics; as the living evidence of fidelity and valor displayed on the field of battle, unequalled in the history of the world. Those flags were pointed to with pride by the old veterans.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> day of March last those flags were again subjected to fire, but not the fire of battle. The State House was enveloped in flames; much valuable property was in danger of destruction, but none of more value, none the loss of which would be more keenly felt, none so hard to replace as would have been those bullet-riddled battle-flags.

At one time it seemed that those flags must be lost, but the Stars and Stripes, that never yet has wanted for a defender, wanted not upon that occasion.

You, brave, loyal, noble men, breasted the flames and imperiled your lives to save the Grand Army of the Republic the flags they loved as they loved their lives. We have not summoned you here to-night to compensate you for the great service which you rendered us; all the money which we could raise could not compensate you for that undertaking, when you ran the gauntlet of fire and smoke and endangered your lives to save those flags. We have summoned you to receive from us a small badge, suspended

from a battle-flag, which we ask you to accept, not for its intrinsic value, but as an evidence of the high appreciation we have for your noble act in rescuing the flags. Which we propose to leave to the generations that are to come after we are gone.

The assistant Adjutant-General will now present each of you with your badge.

The badges were thereupon presented by Assistant Adjutant-General Wheeler.

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Comrade William S. Stryker – Commander Nevius and Comrades of the Grand Army, it gives me pleasure to be called upon to respond, in behalf of this little party around me, to the kind words with which you greet them here to-night. Right proud are they that it was their good fortune to have been able to snatch from the grasp of the fire-fiend the standards of New Jersey’s glory, the tattered banners which are the silent but true witnesses of your heroic valor on three hundred and sixty-two different battle-fields in which Jerseymen participated during the War for the Union.

The night of the burning of our Capitol building was intensely cold. While bold firemen stood around that edifice clad in garments of ice, looking like stalwart sons of the Ice King himself, a few men rushed up into the Museum where the battle-flags were stored. With one blow the doors fell in, and from an atmosphere of intense, biting cold, they plunged into a room boiling, seething, the hot flames prepared to lick up everything inflammable, filled with stifling smoke, resounding with crackling timbers – a terrible cauldron of fire. It needed, however but a few moments in this dangerous room, when the deed was done for which they receive your thanks here to-night. It was scarcely accomplished, however before the ceiling and floor of the Museum fell in, but New Jersey’s battle-flags were safe. Since that hour they have been carefully preserved in my private office in the State House.

One warm evening in July, I had been writing until a very late hour, and dropping my pen, I looked along the bullet and shell-ridden banners, and I hoped that is would some day be my duty and my pleasure to write up the personal history which clings close to each one of those flags.

There, on my left, stood the splendid colors of the grand Sixth Army Corps, and beside them was the flag of the old Third Corps, and it seemed to me that I could hear the strong voice of the gallant Mott, as, cool, determined, and brave, he gave his orders in the trenches before Petersburg.

Then my eye rested on the flag of the Fourth Regiment and I seemed to see the face of my young friend, who sat by my side for years in Princeton College class-room, Adjutant Studdiford, as he fell just at the top of Crampton Pass, close by this flag, cheering his men.

With the flags of the First, Second, Third, and Fourth New Jersey Regiments the Fifteenth was also grouped, and from this flag, the State flag, the warm life-blood of Sergeant John Monder seemed to drip, drop by drop, as it fell on the battle-field of Cedar Creek.

Proud old First New Jersey Brigade! No danger ever appalled, no obstacle ever dismayed the men who were led by that knightly soldier – *Kearney!*

Then the flags of the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Regiments seemed to drop for recognition, and the bloody memories of the Peninsular Campaign, of Antietam and Gettysburg, of Chancellorsville, and all through the Wilderness, seemed to cluster around the flags of the Second New Jersey Brigade, Hooker's Old Guard – Which never failed him, on which he was wont every time to rely.

On my right was the flag of the Ninth Regiment, which floated forty consecutive days in the advance rifle-pits before Petersburg.

The broken staff of the Eleventh Regiment fell at my feet, and I recalled the bravery of a gallant little party of that regiment at Chancellorsville, and the defiant waving of that same flag from Round Top, by Sergeant Johnson, after two color Sergeants had been shot.

The flag of the Fourteenth Regiment stood alone, but beneath its folds seemed to lie the body of Sergeant Cottrell and as man after man seized that staff on the bloody field of Monocacy, they fell before the terrific fire, and bathed its broad stripes in their crimson blood.

Tattered and torn appeared the flag of the First Cavalry, yet it was covered all over with the record of seven short of one hundred battles, and through it I seemed to see the face of my young friend, Colonel Janeway, as handsome as he was brave, pierced with twelve wounds, dead on the field of honor.

The night-watchmen on his rounds just at the moment looked in at my office door, and the hour of reverie passed away. I left the room, filled full as it seemed to me of the smell of gunpowder, of the memories of whizzing shot and shell, of sharp musketry, of dashing charges on the foe, of loud huzzas, of fearful groans of dying men.

May I be allowed, on behalf of this little group around me, to thank you all for this memento, which you have bestowed upon them here to-night, and to express the hope on their behalf, that your battle-flags may long be preserved to remind the people of this great country of your terrible struggle to preserve the unity of this Nation.