Biography of John Columbus Bennett, 1st Maryland Eastern Shore Infantry Regiment 1861-4

On October 31, 1861, John Columbus Bennett enlisted in Company D of the 1st Maryland Eastern Shore Regiment of Infantry for a 3-year term, a month and a half after his 16th birthday. Little is known of his life before that, other than he was born in Henderson, MD, in the northern corner of rural Caroline County on 17 September 1845. His father Washington and mother Harriett were also from Maryland according to the 1850 census and he had two younger sisters, Ellen and Martha. Other than that, much of their story has been erased like footprints on a windswept beach. But John's legacy is secure, through his record with the 1st Maryland Eastern Shore, their heroic service at the battle of Gettysburg, and his descendants who remember and honor him.

Late in the year 1860, the people of Caroline County were disturbed at the threatened Civil War and disunion by the secession of some of the Southern States. Public sentiment divided the people into two classes, the larger, perhaps, being in favor of maintaining the Federal Union; the other class in favor of secession. Many people who had heretofore been friends were bitterly opposed to each other—some for the North — others for the South. This was the condition in Caroline County when four companies of Union soldiers were enrolled in the four centers of the county.

The first bloodshed of the Civil War had occurred in Baltimore, when soldiers from Pennsylvania and Massachusetts had to disembark, march through the city, and board another train to continue their journey south to Washington. On 19 April 1861, a mob of Marylanders sympathizing with the South, attacked the train cars and blocked the route; some began throwing cobblestones and bricks at the troops, assaulting them with "shouts and stones". Panicked by the situation, several soldiers fired into the mob, whether "accidentally", "in a desultory manner", or "by the command of the officers" is unclear. Chaos ensued as a giant brawl began between fleeing soldiers, the violent mob, and the Baltimore police who tried to suppress the violence. Four soldiers and twelve civilians were killed in what is known as the Baltimore riot of 1861.

Southern sympathizers attack Union soldiers from Massachusetts as they transit through Baltimore streets on 19 April 1861.

John Columbus, being only 16, needed his parent's permission to enlist with the Eastern Shore as an infantryman. The 1st Eastern Shore Regiment of Infantry, immediately after its organization, was assigned to special duty on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. John's first station was in Baltimore under General Dix of the Army of the Potomac. In November, 1861, he joined General Lockwood's Brigade in its expedition into and pacification of the Counties of Accomack and Northampton, the eastern shore counties of Virginia at the tip of the Delmar peninsula.

Upon the invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania by General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army in June 1863, the 1st Eastern Shore Regiment of Infantry asked to be sent to the Army of the Potomac at the front, and, with General Lockwood's Brigade, the regiment was transported to Baltimore, and thence marched to the battlefield of Gettysburg, which it readied on the morning of July 3, 1863, and immediately went into action around 8 am with the 12th Army Corps on Culp's Hill, on the south-eastern flank of the Union Army. Company K was raised in strongly pro-southern Somerset and Worcester counties. They reminded the government of their terms of service and refused to go. On July 2nd as the regiment was moving up to

positions on Culp's Hill, the 67 members of Company K were disarmed, dishonorably discharged and given train fare back to Salisbury.

Under command of Col. Maulsby, the regiment formed part of 2nd Brigade (Brig. Gen. Henry H. Lockwood), 1st Division (Brig. Gen. Alpheus S. Williams), XII Corps (Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum) at the Battle of Gettysburg. The regiment mustered 674 all ranks, making it the largest regiment in the Army of the Potomac. The regiment

reached Gettysburg during the afternoon of July 1, but was not engaged. The morning of July 2, the regiment constructed breastworks south of Culp's Hill at McAlister's Woods. The entire division was withdrawn later in the day and sent south to support a section of the Union line under attack by Longstreet's Corps.

Culp's Hill, Gettysburg, PA, 2 Jul 1863

What happened on Culp's Hill is the worst example of a state caught between two sides. Here on July 2 the Union 1st Maryland Eastern Shore faced the Confederate 1st Maryland Battalion. Color Sergeant Robert Ross of the Union regiment was a cousin to Color Sergeant P.M. Moore of the Confederate battalion. Moore was wounded several times and captured by his neighbors. The Confederate Marylanders suffered almost 200 casualties. Colonel Wallace of the Union 1st Maryland wrote, "The 1st Maryland Confederate Regiment met us and were cut to pieces. We sorrowfully gathered up many of our old friends and acquaintances and had them carefully and tenderly cared for."

The battle for Culp's Hill had resumed at around 4:30 in the morning on July 3. Union artillery opened the fighting as units of Gen. Henry Slocum's 12th Corps, with men from Ohio and Pennsylvania in the lead, seized

the initiative by launching their own counterattack against the Confederates who had claimed their earthworks on the lower hill the previous day. Major Goldsborough, commanding the battalion at this point, remembered that "the whole hillside seemed to be enveloped in a blaze." In a cruel twist of fate, among the Confederate units John's unit faced that day was the 1st Maryland CSA. The narrative of the Civil War as brother against brother rarely echoed more clearly than it did on Culp's Hill. John and his comrades poured their fire into the ranks of their state's rebel sons.

Maryland's 1st CSA Regiment under withering fire during their charge on Culp's Hill on 3 July 1863. By painter Don Troiani.

The men from the divided state locked with one another in lethal combat as ever-growing numbers of Union troops filtered into the vicinity. This overwhelming opposition forced the Maryland Confederates from their initial position, sending them back down towards Spangler's Spring.

The fighting for Culp's Hill devastated the 1st Maryland CSA Battalion. The unit entered the battle with 400 men in the ranks; 192 of them fell dead or wounded. General Steuart, having watched his proud Maryland men fall to bits, was inconsolable in the wake of the attack, weeping and wringing his hands while exclaiming "My poor boys! My poor boys!" Despite everything that had happened, the bonds of a shared home persisted across enemy lines after the battle had ended.   John and his comrades chose to take care of their stricken Maryland foes. Colonel James Wallace, commander of the 1st Maryland Eastern Shore, wrote that "The 1st Maryland Confederate Regiment met us and were cut to pieces. We sorrowfully gathered up many of our old friends and acquaintances and had them carefully and tenderly cared for."

After the battle of Gettysburg, the 1st Eastern Shore Infantry Regiment continued with the Army of the Potomac until Lee's Confederate Army was driven out of Maryland. Then, after a brief duty on the upper Potomac, the regiment again returned to the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia, where it continued in the performance of special duty until its consolidation with 11th Regiment of Infantry, Maryland Volunteers. In all, John and his comrades from the 1st Regiment, Eastern Shore Infantry, marched 760 miles, rode the train 283 miles, and traveled by water 1,323 miles during these 3 years.

John returned to Caroline County where he bought some farm land and married Josephine Porter who bore him a daughter named Virginia "Virgie". Josephine passed of unknown causes in 1876. John remarried Margarett Griffith of Dover Delaware the same year. John and Margarett raised a large familiy on the farm in Goldsboro, including Luther Thomas Bennett, John Archibald Bennett, Jr.'s grandfather.   John Columbus died in 1908 at the age of 62 and is buried in the Greensboro cemetery.

By Daniel B. Pourreau, Senior Vice Commander, SUVCW Camp 2 Houston.