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THE WASHINGTON LIGHT INFANTRY AT THE BUNKER HILL CENTENNIAL

NEWTON B. JONES *

The events which mark the end of Reconstruction in South Carolina are tied in with the climate of opinion that existed in the nation in 1876 and 1877. In October 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes explained his failure to support the Republican governors in the South on the grounds that he had no army, due to the failure of Congress to appropriate funds, and that public opinion had required a change in policy.¹ Some years after he left the White House, Hayes told Mayor William A. Courtenay of Charleston that the warm reception given the Washington Light Infantry of Charleston at the Bunker Hill Centennial celebration in 1875 had made it possible for him to support the government of Wade Hampton, instead of that of the Republican claimant, Daniel H. Chamberlain.² One of the common elements in these somewhat contradictory statements by Hayes is that both indicate a change in public opinion on the eve of the presidential election of 1876.

The centennial celebrations were only one of a number of developments that reduced sectional animosity and drew the North and the South more closely together in the mid-1870's.³ Quite obviously the centennials afforded an excellent opportunity to promote sectional reconciliation by stressing a common heritage. In addition, they provided an opportunity for personal demonstrations of regard and respect for the visiting military units, which were considered to be representatives of their states and sections. The numerous addresses and editorials occasioned by each centennial were generally optimistic about the prospects for the nation's second century; they treated sectional hatred as being outmoded; and they brought out several underlying reasons for a desire for harmony. It seems to be something more than mere coincidence that the last Federal troops were withdrawn from the South in the interval between the centennials of Lexington and Yorktown. In attempting to evaluate the political influence of the various centennial celebrations, Hayes' statement to Mayor Courtenay is one indication of the

* Dr. Jones is Professor of History at Furman University.

¹ C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*, Garden City, 1956, p. 8.

² A. Toomer Porter, *Led On! Step by Step*, New York, 1899, pp. 303-304.

³ Paul H. Buck treats the developments which promoted sectional reconciliation in *The Road to Reunion, 1895-1900*, New York, 1959, pp. 119-175.

strong impression made by the show of friendly relations between Charleston and Boston in 1875.

In the winter of 1874 the members of the Washington Light Infantry took the first step in promoting better understanding between the two cities. They invited the militia units of Boston to participate in a fair to raise funds for the widows and orphans of the deceased members of the Charleston unit. A number of items were sent from Boston to be sold or raffled at the fair, and the surgeon of the First Regiment of Massachusetts Militia and a former commander of the Boston Light Infantry, with their wives, came to Charleston to preside over the Boston table. With appropriate ceremonies Captain John K. Hall of Boston presented a flag bearing the blended coats of arms of Massachusetts and South Carolina to the Washington Light Infantry.⁴

The Charleston Company, named in honor of the first president, had been organized in 1807 during the excitement following the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair. Its first commander was William Lowndes, who was shortly to become famous as a War Hawk. The unit with the French Fusiliers had served as guard of honor when Lafayette visited Charleston in 1824. Three years later, on the anniversary of the battle of Lexington, the widow of Colonel William Washington presented the battle flag of her husband's command to the Washington Light Infantry. Legend has it that Jane Elliott, a planter's daughter, had made the flag from the crimson damask upholstery of a chair in her bedroom, and that the colonel had later married the donor. The flag had been carried in the battles of Cowpens and Eutaw Springs.⁵

The Washington Light Infantry saw service in the Seminole War and in the Mexican War with Scott's army. Before the firing on Fort Sumter the company participated in the taking of Castle Pinckney, and it was on Sullivan's Island when Fort Sumter fell. Some of the members wanted to go immediately to Virginia, while others held back. The former organized the Washington Light Infantry Volunteers, which served as Company "A" of the Hampton Legion. Two of the officers of the company, James Conner and Thomas M. Logan, rose to the rank of brigadier general. The remainder of the pre-Civil War unit became Companies "A" and "B" of the Twenty-Fifth Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, which fought in the defense of Charleston and later suffered heavy casualties in the fighting around Petersburg, Virginia.⁶

⁴ *Charleston News and Courier*, December 25, 1874, January 27, March 31, April 3, 1875. *The Easter Fair of the Washington Light Infantry, March 30th to April 5, 1875*, Charleston, 1875, pp. 9, 21, 33-48.

⁵ *Boston Post*, June 17, 1875.

⁶ *Ibid.* Porter, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-129. *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 28, 1875.

The Washington Light Infantry was one of the two companies from former Confederate states to participate in the celebration of the Bunker Hill Centennial. It would seem that the invitation resulted in part from the participation of Boston in the Charleston fair. Two days before the departure of the fifty-four officers and men, the unit received from Governor Chamberlain a state flag to carry to Massachusetts. The governor wrote that the flag was sent "as proof of my personal and official interest in their organization, and especially in the purposes and feelings which inspire their present visit to Massachusetts." As the steamer carrying the unit sailed, it received a thirty-seven gun salute from a battery of the Charleston garrison of the U. S. Army.⁷

When the party arrived in New York they were met by the Old Guard, commanded by Major George W. McLean, and the two units marched along a route crowded with spectators to Delmonico's for breakfast. The *World* had carried an article on the plans for the arrival of the Charleston unit and a sketch of its history. After a formal reception at Irving Hall the two commands left together for Boston, accompanied by the Ninth Regiment Band, commanded by James Fisk, Jr.⁸

The *Boston Post* described the reception of the Washington Light Infantry and the Old Guard as being "one of the most spontaneous and hearty manifestations of popular interest which has been developed in this city for many a day." According to the *Post* this was the first appearance on Northern streets of a military unit which had fought for the Confederacy, but that this circumstance "only seemed to actuate the spectators to renewed efforts to make the welcome of the visitors a memorable one, and to convince them that by-gones were indeed by-gones, and that they were now looked upon only as brothers, the representatives of a sister State." The unit was described as being the "pet" company of Charleston, composed of the "flower of its young men." Its uniform, which had been modified as to trimmings the previous year, consisted of a single-breasted dark blue broadcloth coat with a single row of twelve gilt ball buttons, white trousers and gloves, red morocco belt, and dark blue cap with a border of leopard skin and a red pompon and gilt bugles in front and a gilt star on the back.⁹

When the company reached Columbus Square, a welcoming address was made by Josiah Quincy, president of the Association of the Boston Light Infantry. He recalled having heard Daniel Webster deliver the Bunker Hill oration in 1825, when the Massachusetts congressman

⁷ *Charleston News and Courier*, June 12, 14, 1875.

⁸ *Charleston News and Courier*, June 19, 1875. *Boston Post*, June 16, 1875.

⁹ *Boston Post*, June 17, 1875. *Charleston News and Courier*, December 24, 1874.

had urged the nation to lay aside sectionalism. In keeping with the tone of Webster's speech, Quincy stated: "Soldiers and citizens of South Carolina, New York, and Massachusetts, of North and South, East and West, let us here clasp hands and repeat together the words that shall echo on when we and our children shall cease to be: 'LIBERTY AND UNION, NOW AND FOREVER, ONE AND INSEPARABLE.'" ¹⁰

Colonel Thomas Y. Simons, ¹¹ in responding to the welcome, stated: "Dead indeed must be that heart which cannot draw inspirations of patriotism from such scenes as this. We are strangers and aliens no longer, but brothers and fellow-citizens of one common country." He continued that while the command for which he spoke had left 113 "of its heroes upon the battlefield . . . that war [is] over, [and] reconciliation, peace and fraternity are the words which we bear next our hearts." Colonel Simons left no doubt that he had been inspired by the events of the day. He was cheered enthusiastically when he said: "I say to you, it may go from the mountains to the sea shore, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf, that South Carolina and Massachusetts, today, henceforth, and forever, will be one and inseparable for the perpetuity of the cause of liberty." ¹²

During the afternoon the members of the Charleston Company went by carriage to Cambridge to accept an invitation to visit Harvard. They were met in front of Memorial Hall by the president, members of the faculty, and a large number of students. President Charles W. Eliot greeted the Washington Light Infantry and recalled the names of some of the outstanding South Carolinians who had graduated from Harvard. He expressed the hope that in the future there would be "a kindly recognition of the institution at the South." After Colonel Simons had spoken, the students gave three cheers. ¹³

One of the main events of the evening of June 16 was a reception given by Mayor Cobb of Boston for the visiting military units and

¹⁰ *Boston Post*, June 17, 1875. Quincy's account of his experiences as an aide to the Governor of Massachusetts during the visit of Lafayette to Boston during the 1825 Bunker Hill celebration is in his *Figures of the Past*, Boston, 1883, pp. 111-137.

¹¹ Simons, after graduating from Yale in 1847, had practiced law in Charleston and had been in the state legislature from 1854 to 1860. He served as a captain in the Twenty-Seventh Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers. From 1865 to 1873 he was the editor of the *Charleston Courier*. He was a delegate to the Democratic National Conventions of 1856, 1868, and 1872. John A. May and Joan R. Faunt, *South Carolina Secedes*, Columbia, 1960, p. 209.

¹² *Boston Post*, June 17, 1875.

¹³ *Charleston News and Courier*, June 18, 1875.

dignitaries. The Mayor continued the theme of reconciliation: "But now, not only is the war closed, but the animosities which have accompanied and followed it are fading out. They are dying, nay, they are as good as dead, and awaiting their burial. Tomorrow we shall dig their grave . . ." He touched on a very strong motive for reconciliation when he said: "The securing of a pure and upright Government would be the best fruit of our restored harmony, and the best inauguration I know of for the new century. Let good men, in all sections, combine as one man for this end."¹⁴

Colonel A. O. Andrews of Charleston, who had accompanied the Washington Light Infantry, replied for South Carolina to the mayor's welcome in words which are typical of several addresses he made during the centennial years: "South Carolina receives with the deepest emotion the greetings of Massachusetts—an emotion whose tenderness, whose intensity, whose amplitude can only be measured as when twin sister meets twin sister . . ." General Fitzhugh Lee, who came to Boston with the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues, in responding for Virginia said that he felt some embarrassment in addressing such a distinguished audience on his first trip to Massachusetts: "But when I reflect that I am an American citizen, and that I too am a descendant of those men who fought at Bunker Hill, and that I too have a right to be here and celebrate their splendid victory, I take courage." Following the mayor's reception, the members of the Washington Light Infantry were entertained at Central Hall, then at the Parker House, and finally at the home of Colonel C. W. Wilder, a member of the governor's staff.¹⁵

On June 17 the various military units marched to Bunker Hill, where the main address was made by General Charles Devens, Jr., who in 1874 had been the national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and who was to be attorney general in Hayes' cabinet.¹⁶ He told the audience:

We will not pretend that the trial through which we have passed has faded either from our hearts or memories, yet no one will, I trust, believe that I would rudely rake open the smoldering embers that all would gladly wish to see extinguished forever . . . Towards those with whom we have lately warred, and who recognize that the results are to be kept inviolate, there should be no feeling of resentment or bitterness . . . All true men are with the South in demanding for

¹⁴ *Boston Post*, June 17, 1875.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* *Charleston News and Courier*, June 19, 1875.

¹⁶ Claude M. Fuess, "Charles Devens," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

her peace, order, honest and good government, and encouraging her in the work of rebuilding all that has been made desolate.¹⁷

George W. Warren, president of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, called attention to the fact that a palmetto tree from South Carolina had been planted alongside a Massachusetts pine in front of the monument. He expressed the hope that the symbols of the two states, planted together, represented "renewed fraternity, never again to be interrupted. Let it be taken also as a pledge of reunion between all the States—for with Massachusetts and South Carolina in full accord as they were one hundred years ago, our Union is as firm and enduring as our monument . . ." ¹⁸ General William T. Sherman, speaking at a reception given by the Loyal Legion, saw wider implications in the manner in which the Washington Light Infantry had been received: "There was always a kind of sympathy between Boston and Charleston, I think. Extremes meet always, and sometimes they show, like weather-cocks, which way the wind blows. I think that these two cities . . . show which way the wind blows: that there is a general feeling in the North to encourage the South to come in and be a hale fellow, will met."¹⁹

On the day following the celebration at Bunker Hill, the Washington Light Infantry was received by Governor William Gaston at the State House. James Gray Porter, secretary of the command, presented to the governor a palmetto cane on which were engraved the coats of arms of the two states. In a reference to the efforts of Governor Chamberlain to carry out a reform program in South Carolina, Porter stated: "We cannot forget that, when our State was plunged deepest in the mire of corruption and degradation, Massachusetts, by one of her sons, gave us the helping hand, and is now lifting our Government from a state of obloquy to something of republicanism."²⁰ If the presentation recalled the treatment of Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks, no mention was made of the earlier use of a South Carolina cane.

Several hundred civilians and representatives of the Seventh Regiment met the Washington Light Infantry and the Old Guard when the

¹⁷ *Boston Post*, June 18, 1875.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Warren, a lawyer, had been a Whig and had served one term in the state legislature and had been Mayor of Charlestown from 1847 to 1851. "George W. Warren," *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, V, 90.

¹⁹ *Boston Post*, June 18, 1875.

²⁰ *Boston Post*, June 19, 1875. Gaston was a former Whig who became a Democrat. He had been mayor of Boston in 1871 and 1872. Elected governor in 1874, he was the first Democrat to hold that office since 1852. He was defeated for reelection in 1875. Claude M. Fuess, "William Gaston," *DAB*.

two units returned to New York together. The members of the two companies were escorted to the stock exchange, where the president of the exchange, Major McLean of the Old Guard, and Colonel Simons spoke briefly, and the band played "Dixie" and "Rally Round the Flag, Boys." Some five hundred persons attended a dinner at Delmonico's for the units. General Marshall Lefferts, regimental commander of the Seventh Regiment, of which the Old Guard was a part, welcomed the guests, and Colonel Simons replied: "Permit me to say that I look upon the events of the past few days as the most auspicious in the history of our country. When our visit was projected we builded better than we knew. The events of the past few days—which have been the off-spring of fraternal good feeling everywhere—will enable the country to be united to the end of time."²¹

The *News and Courier* in an editorial entitled "The South at Bunker Hill," asked if the friendly attitude shown the southern representatives, and through them the South, would fade away like the echoes of the cheers, the patriotic addresses, and the martial music of June 17th: "*It will not!* The South has learned to look to the Government of the United States as her government . . . and understands that the grievances she has must be removed, and can only be removed by peaceful and constitutional means. *The North has learned to respect the South . . .*" For the first time southerners had been received as equals, as men who, as Fitzhugh Lee had said, "had a right to be there." The editorial continued in an optimistic vein:

. . . it needed such a gathering as that at Bunker Hill to make soldiers and civilians feel that without respect there can be no confidence, and that without respect and confidence there could not be that Peace, and Reconciliation, and Union which the South and the North desire, and which could not be had while the North looked down on the South Whether from the Carolinas or from Maine, from the Gulf or from the giant West, we are all American citizens, with one flag, one country, one destiny. That is the Bunker Hill platform, and so it shall stand, let us hope and pray, for all time to come!²²

In the light of later events, is it fair to say that the participants at Bunker Hill were only temporarily carried away by patriotic addresses and the martial music? The Boston correspondent of the *New York Times* wrote that "staid and sober Boston for days past has been in delirium—has had the Bunker Hill brain fever . . ." He believed that the true sentiment of Boston was revealed at the centennial and that,

²¹ Charleston *News and Courier*, June 21, 24, 1875.

²² Charleston, *News and Courier*, June 21, 1875.

"either by their own knowledge or guided by a sure intuition, the Bostonians have felt that now was the time to make friends with the South, and to create a renewal of that fraternal love that shone so brightly one hundred years ago."²³ In mid-July, when the members of the Washington Light Infantry, who had come from New York in small groups, had all returned, Colonel Simons again evaluated the significance of the visit. He had lost none of his enthusiasm: "It was not only a welcome, but an ovation, attesting the highest sincerity and the most earnest desire for a real and living reunion. It was at once a pledge and promise of the absence of bitterness and strife . . ." ²⁴

The military units of Charleston, Boston, and New York did their part in trying to maintain the spirit of Bunker Hill. As part of the celebration of Washington's birthday in 1876, a detachment of the Old Guard came to Charleston as guests of the Washington Light Infantry. General Stephen D. Lee spoke at a banquet during the celebration. Referring to the attitudes of the representatives of the North and the South at Bunker Hill, he asked: ". . . cannot all the people of these United States emulate the example? And cannot we renew . . . the era of good feeling, and unite hand and heart for the future, and thenceforth let our ambition be (without reference to past animosities and sectional jealousies) to rival each other in contributing to and in promoting the general welfare of the whole country . . .?" ²⁵

The opportunity for all Charleston to participate in a centennial celebration came with the anniversary of the Battle of Fort Moultrie. The Boston Light Infantry, accompanied by Colonel C. W. Wilder, and the Old Guard with Major McLean in command, came to Charleston for the observation. The former unit brought a pine tree, which was planted beside a palmetto in front of Masonic Hall. Colonel William L. Trenholm ²⁶ continued the theme of the Bunker Hill Centennial when he told an audience at the Academy of Music:

²³ Quoted in *Charleston News and Courier*, June 22, 1875.

²⁴ *Charleston News and Courier*, July 13, 1875.

²⁵ *Charleston News and Courier*, February 23, 1876. Stephen D. Lee had been born in Charleston and was graduated from West Point in 1854. After Apomattox he became a planter. He moved to Mississippi and was elected to the state senate in 1878 and became president of Mississippi A & M College in 1880. Donovan Yeuell, "Stephen Dill Lee," *DAB*.

²⁶ William L. Trenholm was the son of the second Confederate secretary of the treasury, George A. Trenholm. After the Civil War he entered his father's banking business. He was appointed to the Civil Service Commission by Grover Cleveland in 1885, and from 1886 to 1899 he was comptroller of the currency. For the next ten years he was president of the American Surety Company. "William L. Trenholm", *NCAB*, XXVIII, 376.

Great was the sensation throughout the land when it was known that a little band of South Carolina patriots had defied the Mistress of the Seas on her own element, and had repelled a British fleet from the harbor of Charleston. Great also was the sensation last year when another little band of South Carolina patriots, catching the spirit of those early days, defied the sectionalism which had long dominated the country and bore in triumph to Bunker Hill the historic flag of Eutaw. The story of their achievement belongs to the history of today . . . and it is hardly too much to say that never in the ninety-nine intervening years had so much been accomplished, at a single stroke, for American unity and fraternity. (Loud applause.) . . . There is the same need now that there was in 1776 for union among the people; nothing but frequent intercourse and that natural confidence and respect which rests upon acquaintance, can repress the agitators, who for mischievous purposes and against the public good, are perpetually striving to keep alive the passions which the late conflict aroused, and if this occasion is happily instrumental in promoting a better understanding between the sections, it will have accomplished its purpose and vindicated its claim to nationality.²⁷

The Old Guard, the Boston Light Infantry, the Clinch Rifles of Augusta, Georgia, and the Washington Light Infantry left Charleston together to go to Philadelphia for the centennial celebration on July 4th. The idea of a Centennial Legion, composed of one military unit from each of the original thirteen states, had been proposed in July 1875 by William A. Courtenay and Captain Robert C. Gilchrist, the commanding officer of the Washington Light Infantry, and the idea had received support in Boston and New York.²⁸ The four companies which went from Charleston to Philadelphia represented their respective states in the Legion. According to the *Philadelphia Press*, the Centennial Legion was the "most attractive and interesting portion of the whole parade" on July 4th, and the feature "that the public generally had been looking forward to for months." The Washington Light Infantry was the color company. They were carrying the Eutaw flag, and their appearance was "the occasion of a spontaneous outburst of applause from the assembled multitude."²⁹

Before the Washington Light Infantry had returned from Philadelphia the Hamburg riot had taken place. The political campaign of 1876 in South Carolina did little to promote sectional reconciliation. Only

²⁷ *Charleston News and Courier*, June 28, 1876.

²⁸ *Charleston News and Courier*, July 22, 28, 1875, February 23, July 1, 1876. *A Testimonial of Public Services: The Washington Light Infantry to Major R. C. Gilchrist*, Charleston, 1892, pp. 3-4.

²⁹ *Philadelphia Press*, July 5, 1876.

cool heads prevented serious riots in Charleston and Columbia, both before and after the election. Despite these developments the spirit of Bunker Hill prevailed. There is a surprising similarity between the motives back of the desire for harmony demonstrated at the centennial in 1875 and the forces which made the Compromise of 1877 possible. Disputed elections were settled in favor of Hayes and Hampton because conservatives in Charleston and Boston, in common with their fellows in both sections, had come to realize that they had certain mutual interests and objectives. Both opposed corruption in government. Southern business interests sought aid in rebuilding the economy of the South, and businessmen in both sections were exploring the possibility of a renewal of the ante-bellum alliance of conservative interests. Throughout the nation there was a desire for a return to normalcy.³⁰ The sectional animosity which prevented effective cooperation between like-minded groups was removed in part by the appearance of a Charleston military unit on streets where William Lloyd Garrison and Charles Sumner had walked, but where in 1875 only cheers were heard for the representatives of a former Confederate state.

³⁰ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, Baton Rouge, 1951, pp. 27-29, 43-46. Buck, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-103, 119-159.