

Profiles: Soldiers in the Soldiers' National Cemetery

John Hoptak, Gettysburg NMP



(Maine Historical Society)

Nelson Jones:

Born in 1843 in Palermo, Maine, Nelson W. Jones was eighteen when the American Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861. Like many young men his age, Nelson was quick to volunteer. But as was true for many, the decision to enlist must have been a particularly difficult one.

Despite his young age, Nelson had been the chief means of support for his family. He had a sixteen-year-old sister and a twelve-year-old brother, and his parents were rather elderly. His father was sixty-six years old and too infirm to work; his mother, described as a “feeble woman,” was sixty-two. For the past several years, Nelson worked on the family farm and performed other work, providing support for the family. Nevertheless, when the call went out for volunteers, Nelson signed up, joining the ranks of the 3rd Maine Infantry.

While campaigning with the 3rd Maine in faraway Virginia, Nelson’s thoughts never wandered far from his home and family. In August 1861, just a few months after leaving

home, Nelson wrote that “it is so lonesome here” and that he often thought he should have “staid at home and helped you instead of inlisting and come out here to fight.” Still, Nelson continued to do all he could for his elderly parents, sending home a portion of his pay with each of his letters. Nelson proved himself a good soldier, rising quickly to the rank of sergeant. At the Battle of Seven Pines in late May 1862, Nelson fell into enemy hands as a prisoner of war and was taken to Salisbury Prison in North Carolina. Yet even in captivity, Nelson’s thoughts remained fixed on his family. From prison, he wrote a letter stating his wish that he was at home helping his father cut hay and imploring his mother that “if there is anything you want for the family you be sure & get it & when I get home I will settle the bill.”

Released from prison, Nelson returned to the ranks of the 3rd Maine to serve out his three-year term of enlistment. In April 1863, he penned another letter home, telling his family that he would be like to be back in Palermo “to help you some about your spring work which is soon coming off, but it is not to be.” He had only one year left in the service, and then, Nelson wrote, he “shall be free to return home again, a free man as once I was but I have a duty here to do that has got to be done first before I can come home to stay.”

Sadly, Nelson never did return home to stay. On July 2 at Gettysburg, Sergeant Nelson Jones was struck down and killed. His remains were later removed here where they rest in eternal peace. Like so many other men who served on both sides, Nelson Jones was a man torn between duty to his family and duty to his nation.

William Beaumont:

Although many continue to regard the Battle of Gettysburg as the “turning point” of the American Civil War and the “High Tide of the Confederacy,” it must be remembered that the war was just then only at its half-way point; it would continue to rage for nearly two more years following the colossal battle fought here in early July 1863. Thus, when Lincoln came here to help dedicate this cemetery and consecrate its ground, he did so not only to pay tribute to those who here gave their lives but to also rally the people of a bitterly divided United States, many of whom had grown weary of the war and its ghastly toll. The soldiers who died here, reminded Lincoln, had given their lives, but it was now up to the living to dedicate themselves to the great task remaining before them, and to see the war through to its end. Here, Lincoln was speaking not only to the people on the home front, but also to the soldiers who remained in the ranks—those who survived the battle, including the three brothers of Private William Beaumont of the 88th Pennsylvania Infantry.



(Gettysburg NMP)

When the war erupted in 1861, twenty-two-year-old William and all three of his brothers volunteered to fight for the Union. The Beaumont brothers were coal miners from anthracite-rich Schuylkill County. With the outbreak of war, all four of them traded in the pick and shovel of a coal miner for the weapons of a soldier. Charles, the youngest brother, served in a cavalry regiment; the other three: John, George, and William, served side-by-side in Company A, 88th Pennsylvania. All three had thus far survived the worst the war threw at them during the Seven Days’ Battles, Second Bull Run, and at Antietam, but on July 1, on the fields west of Gettysburg, all three became casualties. George, the oldest brother, was wounded, but able to make it safely back to Cemetery Hill. Twenty-year-old John Beaumont was captured during the retreat through town and held as a prisoner-of-war for three weeks before being exchanged. William Beaumont was also struck down, shot through the neck and mortally wounded. He died on July 13.

While the surviving brothers mourned the death of William, the war continued and, as Lincoln urged, they, too, had to dedicate themselves to that great task remaining before them. In February 1864, as the 88th Pennsylvania was preparing for the campaigns ahead, John Beaumont wrote a letter to his hometown newspaper in which he stated: “I have been in the service of my country two years and six months, but I am not tired of it. . . I entered the service when the rebellion first began, and I am determined to see it ended.”

John Beaumont would not survive the war. In June 1864, he was killed in action at Petersburg.

Only George Beaumont and his youngest brother Charles, the cavalryman, made it back home in 1865 to the coal country of east-central Pennsylvania. Tragedy struck the family once more just three years later, when thirty-year-old George was killed in a coal mining accident. Charles passed away in 1903. In his obituary, it was noted that he had come from “a family of soldiers. As history proves few families in this country shed more blood than did the Beaumont boys.”