Alexander Murdoch was born in 1840 at the ancestral farm on Squirrel Hill. The home had been built only a few years before and was situated on the south side of what is now Darlington Road in the block between Murdoch and Wightman Streets. It was believed to be a station on the underground railroad which sheltered slaves escaping from the South. Alex Murdoch was the son of John Murdoch, Jr. (1802-1882), and Jane Robb Murdoch (1804-1850), both natives of northern Ireland. His grandparents, the founders of the Murdoch family in Pittsburgh, were John Murdoch (1780-1827) and Elizabeth Campbell Murdoch (1780-1835).

The family were strong supporters of Abraham Lincoln and the anti-slavery cause so it is not surprising that shortly after the fall of Fort Sumter, young Alex enlisted for three years in the Pittsburgh Rifles as his regiment, the 9th Pennsylvania Reserves, was called.

He served for two years with the Army of the Potomac and saw much battlefield action until he was detached for recruiting duty in Pittsburgh for his final year of service.

After the war he rejoined the family business operating a nursery on Squirrel Hill, greenhouses where Forbes Field now stands, and a retail florist’s shop, John R. and A. Murdoch, with his brother on Smithfield Street.

In 1871, he married Lydia Keller McMaster, a descendant of several old Western Pennsylvania families. He died in 1893 leaving two daughters, Lydia (Mrs. Robert Webster Jones), Jane (Mrs. Alfred C. Dickey), and Alexander, who later was prominent in Pittsburgh as a civic leader and bank president. Three grandsons, five great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild are still living. — Robert J. Jones)

The above biographical sketch of Alexander Murdoch was contributed by his grandson, Robert J. Jones. Mr. Jones included in his accompanying letter the following paragraphs which will introduce the last section of the article.

"My grandfather, Alexander Murdoch of Pittsburgh, was a
member of 9th Pennsylvania Reserves (38th Penna. Infantry) for three years during the Civil War. His Company A, known as the Pittsburgh Rifles fought at many places including Drainesville, Malvern Hill, Gainesville, 2nd Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Antietam, etc.

"At the company's reunion on December 19, 1885, at the old Monongahela House he delivered a very literate, touching and humorous speech on their baptism of fire at the battle of Drainesville. I have this speech in his handwriting, very legible after all these years." (The original manuscript is now in the archives of the Historical Society, the gift of Mr. Jones.)

The speech follows:


The speaker is one of the rank-and-file of that great army of Boys in Blue, who — although they knew it not at the time — left their homes and loved ones to wipe from our land the hideous blot of human slavery! On the 18th of April 1861 I joined the Pittsburgh Rifles then recruiting in the patriotic old burg where in the previous December the inhabitants turned out en masse and prevented the shipment of cannon from our Arsenal to the southern states — we were just too late to be accepted as "three month men" and so were sent to camp and drilled as a fraction of the "Pennsylvania Reserves" which were organized under a special act of our state legislature — whom the credit of enacting this law belongs to is to me unknown, but the wisdom of it was demonstrated when our well-drilled (comparatively) regiments entered Washington immediately after the disastrous battle of Bull Run in July of '61. The city was overrun with soldiers away from their regiments, or whose terms had expired — the saloons were full of them — they could be seen sleeping in the streets on the cellar doors — confusion existed everywhere — but simultaneously with our coming Gen. McClellan was placed in command of the department and soon brought about a change so radical that in two days a soldier without a proper pass or permit could not be found in the city. The efficiency and value of this body of troops was demonstrated on the battlefields of Drainsville, Mechanicsville, Gaines Hill, Charles City Cross Roads — where we "charged Bayonets" with the rest of our regiment, although at that time we hadn't a bayonet in the Company — Malvern Hill — 2nd Bull Run — South Mountain Antietam (in the cornfield), First Fredericks-
burg — Gettysburg (on Little Round Top), and other bloody engagements — so well were they known on the "other side" that when late in the war the 142nd regt P. V. was attached to our brigade and some of them fell into the hands of the rebels they at once exclaimed, "No wonder we'uns cant whip you'ns Penn Reserves if there are a hundred and forty two regiments of you." Truly it was a superb body of men — embracing thirteen regiments of infantry, including Kane's famous Bucktails from the lumber regions — one of Cavalry and one of Artillery. They enlisted to maintain the supremacy of the laws and no jealous factions existed among the men or officers, who poured out their life blood as freely under the command of Porter on the Peninsula as they did under Pope at 2nd Bull Run or Reynolds and Meade at Gettysburg.

We numbered among our honored brigade commanders Generals Ord, Meade and Reynolds, and who shall say how much we contributed to the high rank they afterwards attained — or who so sincerely mourned their loss as when one by one they joined the great majority.

At roll call on the evening of Dec. 19th, 1861, Co. A received orders to be ready to move at 6 A.M. following with one day's rations and 40 rounds of ammunition — they didn't tell us where to! They never did that, so we always had the liberty of guessing at our probable destination — and as a rule our surmises were wide of the mark.

At five o'clock the next morning we were routed out of our comfortable tents and at six were under way with the rest of the 3rd Brigade. A long train of army wagons formed part of the procession so then we guessed we were on a foraging expedition — but could not explain the presence of Battery A. Shortly after starting we (the 9th) were loaded into the wagons, and as the sun rose on that bright frosty December morning we were passing the little unpainted frame house occupied by Mrs. Jackson, the mother of the assassin who murdered Col. Ellsworth in the City Hotel at Alexandria when he was pulling down the rebel flag; here the old lady lived with her daughter, and but for the reason stated would have excited no interest in our ranks. We soon crossed Difficult Creek and, still holding to our last guess that we were on a foraging expedition, were making the echoes ring with "We'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree, We'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree, We'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree as we go marching on," when General Ord rode up with "Boys, you make too much noise; when you meet the enemy pounce upon him.
like a wildcat.” This stopped our songs for the time being, but many times afterward did that grand old refrain help us over the ground on our weary marches on the Peninsula — during the Bull Run Campaign — to Antietam — and to Gettysburg when almost ready to drop from fatigue. But an orderly approaches our colonel and Company A — commanded by 2nd Lieutenant Beatty — who afterwards was killed at Charles City X Roads — is ordered to load rifles and "deploy as skirmishes on the left." This is intelligible to all old army boys, but to others let me say it is executed marching single file on a line parallel with, and about 300 yards from, the main body — with the men 2 to 3 yards apart. “Attention Company A, Corporal Duff will command the 2nd platoon — Forward March!” came from Lieutenant Beatty and we filed off to the left — resisting the trees of persimmons loaded with ripe fruit that we passed. Our course from this point was mostly through woods. We proceeded as noiselessly as possible until within a mile of Drainsville we struck at right angles the road from Centerville, where we halted — and while a squad reconnoitred — the rest of us threw ourselves down and put in the time attacking our haversacks, the frosty air and brisk exercise having sharpened our already good appetites. While thus engaged the word came in there they come! see them! and sure enough, there they came — Infantry — Cavalry and Artillery — the former with arms at “Right Shoulder Shift” with the Cavalry flanking them. We were so intently watching the approaching column that we forgot that the Boys in Gray could also deploy as skirmishers until zip — zip! zip! the rifle balls came in upon us from both flanks. We promptly returned the fire, but remembering that the Tactics lay down the rule that “skirmishers when attacked should rally on their regiment,” we rallied — with the loss of one man mortally wounded — poor Alex. Smith — the last man to join the company before leaving Pittsburgh — he was the first to offer up his life on the field of battle. An angle in the road had thrown us farther from the main body so that when the firing began we were three quarters of a mile from it! All the way back the firing was kept up — the speaker getting a resting aim at the officer in command who rode a white horse at the head of the column, but his rifle missed fire — and he continued to rally on the regiment. By the time we reached the brigade all was activity and we at once rejoined our regiment which was already taking a position on the right. Before our line of battle was formed the artillery in the centre opened and the shrieking explosions of the shells added to our previous knowledge of sounds. Our regiment was quickly
marched into its position and brought to "a front" in the woods where the ground sloped forward to a gully before us — while on its opposite side another body of troops was filing in as expeditiously as possible, facing toward our line — troops that most of us took to be "Confederates," but the fool killer had been off duty for some time and one of our men said, "They are the Bucktails." "No, they aint." "Yes, they are." "Hello, are you Bucktails?" This suited the Greybacks whose line was not complete yet and they promptly responded, "Yes, we're Bucktails — don't shoot" — in the meantime the controversy went on among us and this was answered by "You are Rebel . . . Blank blank you." Ninth regiment Fire at will Fire! and fire we did. It was the 9th Reserves of 40 yards intervening, that opened the infantry fire of this the first battle in which the Army of the Potomac came off victorious. Fire at will was the order and we (Company A) astonished those Johnnies with the rapid handling of our Sharpe's Rifles. Whiz-bang-zip, intermixed with the groans of the wounded and the roar of artillery on our left, made what we then thought was a fearful racket, while our execution in the enemies' ranks was so great that after keeping up the fire for half an hour they retreated towards Centerville — leaving us the victors of our first battlefield. How fast they ran can be imagined from the fact that one of their regiments was ever afterward nicknamed by their own brigade as the "Drainsville Trotters."

We expected them, however, to renew the attack and remained for some time drawn up in line of battle ready to repel and advance — which, however, was not made. The double-quick rally from the skirmish line had thrown us into a perspiration, so the reaction brought chilliness, and the speaker well remembers the solid comfort he had in his old stone pipe loaded up with "Killikenick" tobacco, and the hungry look of Reube Long (afterwards killed at Fredericksburg) as he said, "Murdoch, give me a draw." The pipe was handed to him and after taking a few puffs he returned it with, "I tell you that is good."

While the 9th was winning glory on the right of the line Battery A and the Bucktails were doing their full share on the left and in the center, and with such success that when we finally started back to camp the opinion among us was general that we had pretty nearly wiped out the rebel army; and the poor fellows who were on guard duty and could not be with us would likely never have a chance to say they had fought a battle.

As we tenderly carried our comrade back to camp the old couplet
kept ringing in our ears "not an officer lost, only one of the men
moaning out in the night the death rattle." The loss in the 9th was
two killed and twenty wounded, and in the other commands three
killed and thirteen wounded — not a great number, but we mourned
their loss. On our way back to our camp at Langley we passed the
2nd Brigade under General Reynolds who without our (the high
privates') knowledge had been ordered out within supporting distance
early in the morning, and later we found that other troops lying
around Washington had been moved forward — to aid us had it been
necessary. It was not until long afterwards that we ascertained that
we had met and repulsed a rebel reconnaissance in force under General
Stuart, which had he not been checked might have been extended
across the Potomac and entailed great injury to our right.

But time flies — tonight I sit and wonder if it can be possible that
on the twentieth of this month it will be twenty-five years since the
old Pittsburgh Rifles received their first baptism of blood — followed
afterward by many terrific battles in which they nobly did their
duty, and lost many brave men — among whom were Reuben M.
Long — Jas. P. Beatty — John S. Copley — A. McK. Craig —
J. McD. Smith — James E. Cunningham — H. H. Chamberlain —
R. C. Dale — John Dannials — Wm. E. Forrest — Ed. J. Hoopes
Rogers — Alex B. Smith — and John C. Westlake.

That finally since the war has ended and twenty-one years have
flown thirty-two of the survivors met at the Monongahela House on
the evening of Dec. 19th last and fought the battle over again. During
the evening the subjoined letters from absent comrades were read
and after the cloth was removed, Colonel Hartley Howard — our first
Orderly Sergeant—called the original roll and, saluting, said, "I report
to the Shades of M'Clellan, Meade, Reynolds, Jackson and Ord, our
dear old commanders — that Company A is here present either in
the flesh or in the spirit awaiting reveille of the Angels." Then it was
that the soldier boys of long ago, now gray-haired businessmen,
bowed their heads, and tears softly crept down the timeworn checks
and in fancy they were Boys in Blue again.