

Warrior Poet

The Civil War Chronicles of Pittsburgh's John Nevin

by Craig Moore

"Now," shouted the general, "forward!" With a cheer we rushed in. But I cannot describe a battle. No one can. I have read many attempts by the best authors (I believe I had a morbid curiosity in regard to such things), but they gave me no idea, as I now saw it, of the reality. My brain reeled at the wild jumble of the sublime, the terrible, the heroic, the disgusting, and the comic, the incidents that succeed and tread on each other with such lightning rapidity. Everybody engaged seems insane. Thundering, crashing, screaming above, rolling, rattling, cracking musketry in front, around; dull smoke with myriad tongues of flames darting through it, and dimly discerned moving human forms. — *John Nevin, Battle of Gettysburg, July 2, 1863*¹

Opposite page:
Pittsburgher
John Nevin,
drawn by a
fellow prisoner
at the
Confederate
Libby Prison.

PITTSBURGHER JOHN NEVIN chronicled his experiences and observations during the Civil War with extraordinary ability. His journals begin with his capture in 1862 and document his release and return to battle in 1863. They offer a detail and sensitivity lacking in most diaries from the war. The journals, along with numerous photos, are held in the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania's Library & Archives — unpublished for 135 years.

Born in Allegheny City (now Pittsburgh's North Side) to the Rev. Daniel E. and Margaret Nevin, John Irwin Nevin (1837–1884) was described as an intelligent, unpretentious child with a propensity for books and the pursuit of knowledge. During Nevin's youth, it was written that the works of Homer, Virgil, and other classicists "took hold of him with surprising power."² A graduate of

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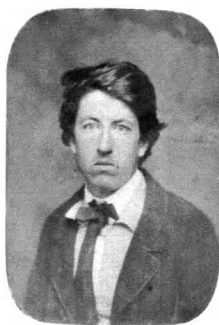


Jefferson College, Nevin proceeded to teach history at Sewickley Academy, his childhood school. These early years prepared Nevin for a successful career as editor of the *Pittsburgh Leader*. More importantly, they equipped him with exceptional literary skills evident in his vivid account of a soldier from Western Pennsylvania during the Civil War.

At the outset of the war, Nevin was among enlistees who formed two companies from Sewickley. Elected a second lieutenant in Company G, Nevin later recounted:

Now we're going to be soldiers, to meet the foe, to sweep him from our path, God Willing, or to die honorably, gloriously, fighting for those principles that roused up six hundred thousand men to leave their homes and endure the privations of a soldier's life at the sound of Fort Sumpter's [sic] guns.³

Companies A and G of the 28th Pennsylvania Volunteers, known as the "Sewickley Rifles," set out in April 1861 for Philadelphia, where they mustered in under the command of Colonel John W. Geary. Following the Union defeat at Manassas / Bull Run, General Winfield Scott ordered Geary to Harper's Ferry. The regiment's duty was to protect lines of communication, most notably the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad.



Numerous skirmishes took place between the 28th Pennsylvania Volunteers and Confederate troops along the Maryland-Virginia border, the most significant on October 16, 1861, at the Battle of Bolivar Heights. Companies A and G played a significant role in turning the Confederate left flank, enabling Geary's troops to charge and gain possession of the heights just 2 miles west of Harper's Ferry. Though seemingly a minor victory, Samuel P. Bates, in his *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, considered this engagement the first Union victory after the Battle of Bull Run.⁴

After four more months of skirmishing with the Rebels, the 28th received orders to cross the Potomac at Harper's Ferry. Nevin described the scene:

It was a bitter night; the stars shown out with that keen brightness that we only see in a wintry sky; the wind howled about us and through us, chilling us to the very bones, as we stood there in the ranks hour after hour waiting until the head of the column could find a passage between the overhanging mountain and the swollen Potomac which mournfully wailed along at our feet as if grieving "if ought inanimate can grieve," that her waters might no longer keep apart the angry brethren that she had kept from mutual slaughter so long.⁵

Part of an advance detachment of the regiment, Nevin fell ill from the cold and received permission to rest in a nearby cottage.⁶ After a few hours of sleep and with his regiment out of sight, Nevin was captured by a band of Rebel cavalry on February 28, 1862.⁷ It is here that Nevin's account begins as a prisoner of war by recalling how a Rebel captain put a pistol to his head demanding the location of the Union army:

It isn't a pleasant sensation that one feels with the muzzle of a cocked revolver within six inches of your eyes. I experienced a curious feeling in my forehead, I had a consciousness of a little circle about an half inch in diameter just between my eyes as if that particular spot were suddenly endowed with extra nerves for the purpose of assuring me of its existence, and thus suggesting to me, that in a few moments more it might cease to exist."⁸

In reply to the Rebel captain's threats, Nevin calmly stated that, according to the accepted standards of warfare, he was not obligated to divulge such information. The Rebel cavalrymen took Nevin on horseback through Leesburg and Centerville, Va., where he witnessed first-hand the character and organization of the Rebel army. Nevin recorded his observations of Southern soldiers:

They are as brave and strong, as well-fed and managed, and, as regards the great mass of them, as well persuaded in the justice of their cause as we ourselves are, and as the contest will be as equal in all respects, as might naturally be foretold of a strife where brothers of the same Saxon race should be locked in the death grip, God defend the Right!⁹

From Centerville, the Rebels escorted Nevin to Manassas, where he boarded a train for Richmond's Libby Prison, a former tobacco warehouse that would be his home for the next three months.¹⁰

While imprisoned, Nevin recorded observations of prison life. He noted two particular characteristics common to captive men — idleness and selfishness — but couldn't comprehend why these men would not devote their time to expanding their minds through the study of a language or some other pursuit. He attributed this "restlessness of mind and want of purpose" to the incessant rumors of exchange that offered false hope.

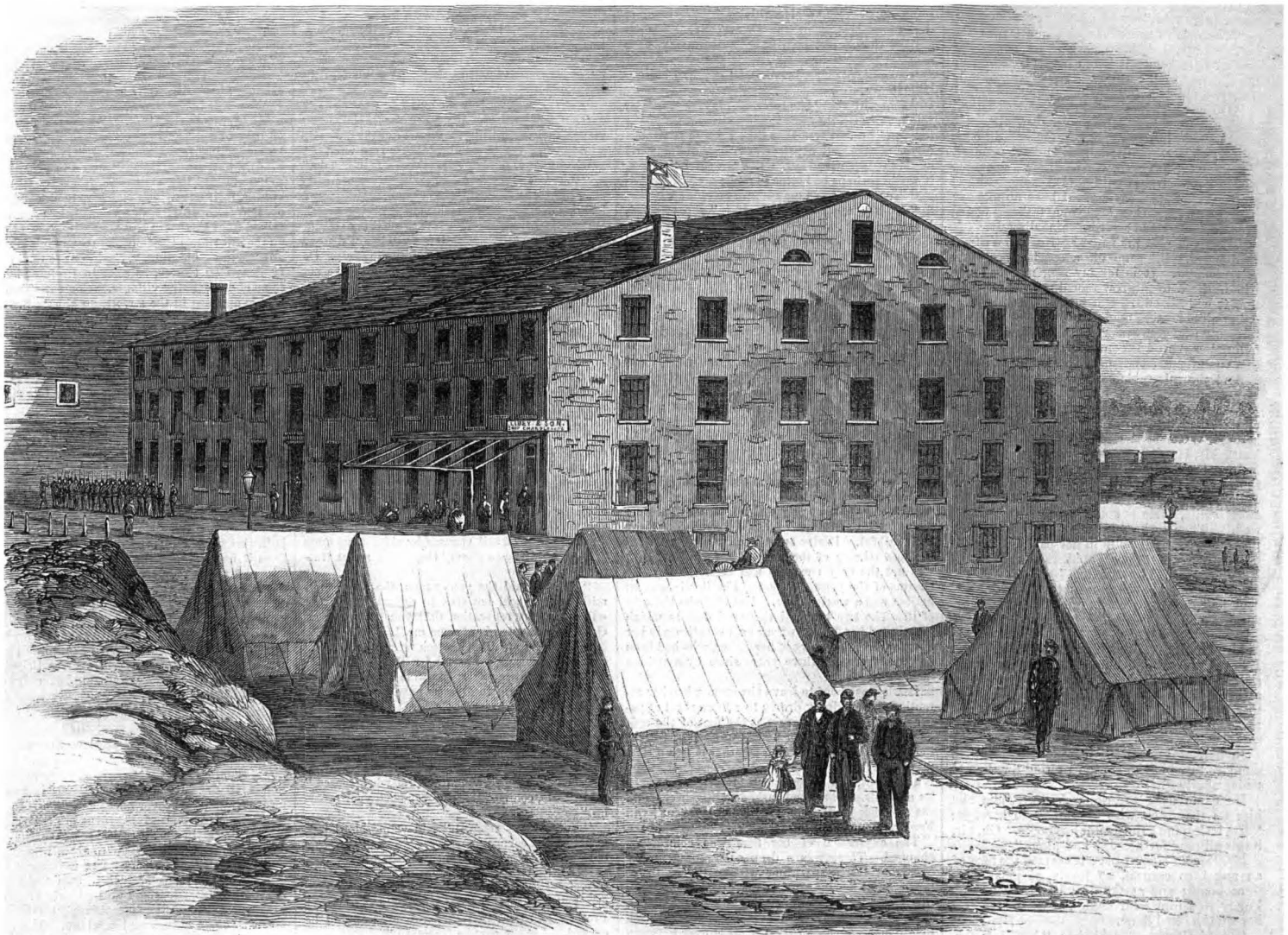
Nevin offered a metaphor to describe the idle mind-set of the prisoner: "[A]re we not reduced to the life of the Bengal tiger in the menagerie, who spends his wakeful hours walking from end to end of his cage, poking his muzzle between each particular bar, seeking for that freedom that he has daily sought for, there, before?"¹¹ Just as the Bengal paces back and forth constantly looking for a way out of its cage, so too did prisoners seek escape through the promise of exchange. Nevin attributed the second characteristic — selfishness — to the prisoner's environment. He invoked Locke's discussion of man as a selfish animal in a "wild state" where society no longer prevails. Under different circumstances, he contended, these officers would not exhibit the same characteristics.

To counter these problems, the officers held meetings of the Union War Prisoners Association to maintain feelings of fraternity and to lobby for the release of their fellow prisoners upon exchange. Nevin lamented the inability of this organization to deal with the problems of self-indulgence and inactivity.¹² Still, he felt that his fellow captive officers were some of the finest men and representative of a microcosm of American life. He discounted the general opinion that these officers who commanded the defeated Union forces at Manassas were inferior:

I had seldom if ever seen a finer body of men than those, so closely grouped together within the walls of that old tobacco factory.... I firmly believe that, notwithstanding its blunders and its rout, the army that McDowell marched into the field of Manassas was officered by the finest and best men that have yet taken the field!¹³

On May 12, 1862, the Rebels relocated the Union prisoners, as Nevin writes, "to the sound of the Yankee guns!" The Union Army had commenced its Peninsular Campaign in Virginia (from Hampton north through Williamsburg, aiming for Richmond). Victories on the peninsula and at the Seven Days battles brought the Union forces 5 miles from Richmond. To prevent the emancipation of the officers at Libby, the Confederates decided to disperse the prisoners to other prison camps away from the city. Nevin spent the next three months imprisoned in Salisbury, N.C.¹⁴ No account of his experiences there survives, but Nevin's widow later recalled his reluctance to speak of this episode, and in general, Nevin avoided speaking ill of his Southern captors to prevent those feelings from persisting after the war.

A former tobacco factory, Richmond's Libby Prison was home to Nevin and other imprisoned Federal officers for three months in 1862.

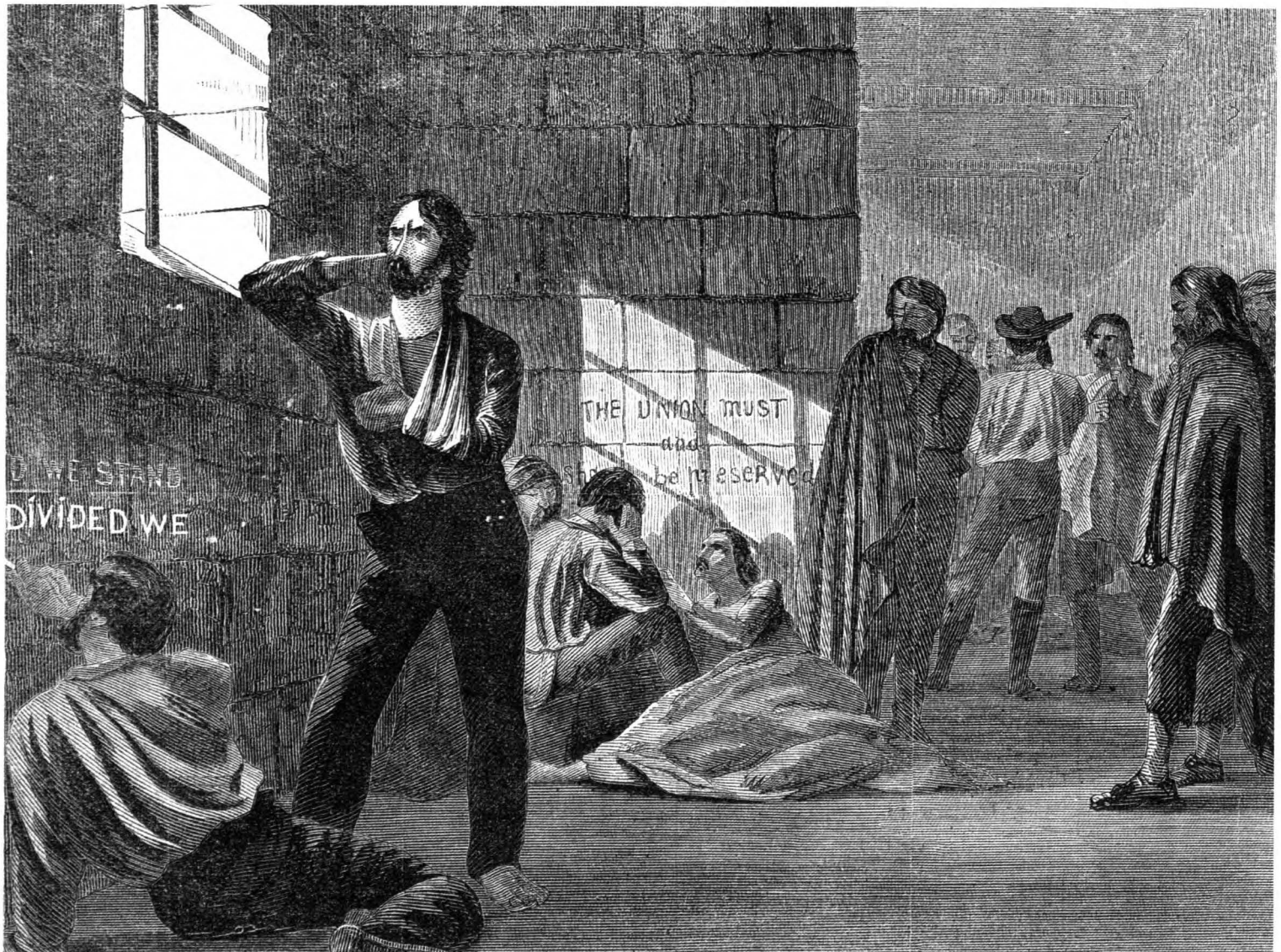


Finally, in August 1862, an exchange provided Nevin his freedom from the severe conditions at Salisbury.¹⁵ After a brief respite from the war, Nevin organized Independent Battery H, known as "Nevin's Battery," an artillery unit. The battery was ordered to Hagerstown, Md., following the battle of Antietam, and served under General Morell's command until December, when it went into winter quarters at Camp Barry in the District of Columbia.

In February 1863, Nevin resigned his commission as captain of Independent Battery H, and accepted another commission in April as major of the 93rd Pennsylvania Volunteers. His account of experiences in this capacity begins May 5, 1863, while the Army of the Potomac was withdrawing after its defeat at Chancellorsville. Enroute to rendezvous with his regiment, Nevin observed the routed Third Corps:

As I near them I mark the sad, plodding, listless way in which they drag themselves through the mud. A sad sight is a retreating army after a great defeat. I will not dwell on it. I hope for happier times for the poor Army of the Potomac! The army is depressed, but not demoralized. The feeling that

**Union officers
memorialized their
resolve by carving on the
walls that held them.**



prevails is not in the least fear, but an angry sadness ... an unwilling belief that the death of the Confederacy has been, for many months, postponed.¹⁶

Nevin's 93rd Pennsylvania Volunteers, under Sedgwick's 6th Corps, successfully charged the heights above Fredericksburg during the battle of Chancellorsville. General Hooker (commander of Union forces), however, withdrew to the west, undermining the successes gained by Sedgwick and Nevin's 93rd and forced them to withdraw in the face of Lee's main body.

The regiment, with Nevin in command,¹⁷ remained near Chancellorsville on picket and fatigue duty. When Lee's Army of Northern Virginia began its invasion of the North in June 1863, the 93rd pursued. The regiment marched for 19 days, at one point covering 36 miles in 17 hours. One of Nevin's letters from that month noted the effect of two years' warfare on the boys: "They talk with the most matter of fact tone in the world about fearful scenes and hair breadth escapes.... They joke about the bullet holes in each others clothes, talk with a shocking indifference about the loss of comrades, struck dead at their sides."¹⁸

A 39-mile march brought the exhausted men to Gettysburg at 4:30 p.m. on July 2. Nevin recorded these poignant recollections later that day:

On the morning of the 2nd with the guns of Gettysburgh [sic] thundering in our front, we crossed Mason's and Dickson's [sic] line with our Pennsylvania colors flying, and with great enthusiasm, as we looked on our native State once more and vowed to save it from the desolating foe.¹⁹

The regiment took position at the base of the hill to the right of Little Round Top, later known as the Valley of Death, just as the 5th Corps' lines were collapsing. General Sedgwick ordered a brigade under General Wheaton with the 93rd in advance to support the Pennsylvania Reserves, who remained in position. During two hours of intense close-armed combat, the brigade successfully pushed the Rebels down the hill and across the Wheatfield. Then the regiment was recalled to the front near Little Round Top:

... we lay on our arms that night. Dead and dying all around, wounded men all over that broad field calling for water and for stretchers to carry them off, and groaning and crying in agony; but the excitement over, notwithstanding all this, we were weary enough to lay down and sleep, although to crown all discomforts, about midnight it commenced a drizzling rain.²⁰

The two-hour Rebel cannonading of the Union position the next day was followed by the ill-fated Pickett's Charge. Nevin and his men were on the left end of the line, watching the advancing Confederates:

They stagger, many fly, but the officers ride round the ranks, we can see their gestures as they threaten, encourage and implore.... The rain of projectiles is continuous. The poor, brave, deluded fellows fall in masses. Even Jackson's old veterans can stand it no longer. They yield, break and reluctantly fly. Then from our lines from beyond the woods comes a long, hearty, manly, Yankee cheer, which passes in



ringing echo from corps to corps along our lines. But look! The rebs are going to try it once more.... Courage, worthy of a better cause, brings those brave [Rebel] men over the great open plain, reminding one of those historic European battle-fields." The Union artillery fired in retaliation, "sending their howling death-angels low over our heads (some shells bursting prematurely, being more dangerous to us than those of the enemy)."²¹

The Rebels were repulsed; following the battle of

Gettysburg, General Meade assigned the 93rd to guard the Corps artillery in pursuit of the retreating Confederates. Like many armchair strategists since that battle, Nevin questioned Meade's plodding pursuit of the Rebels: "[I]f Napoleon or even Rob[er]t Lee were our Commander this evening, would they pursue a defeated army in this cautious, courteous way?"²² Lee escaped back into Virginia and the 93rd reluctantly crossed the Potomac once again. Nevin recorded that "the men look a little glum, as they bring to memory all the perils and suffering that they've undergone in this ill-omen State which has invested it with a kind of superstitious gloom."²³

The 93rd spent the remainder of the 1863 campaign marching, counter-marching, and skirmishing in Virginia while, according to Nevin, "Lee and Meade are studying up their next moves in their blindfold chess game."²⁴ Nevin relinquished command of the regiment back to Colonel Long on September 22, having led the regiment successfully for five long months.

Nevin's journal entries continued until the end of 1863. He served until the expiration of his term on October 27, 1864, earning a promotion to lieutenant colonel for his bravery at the Battle of Cedar Creek. Nevin spent the next few years traveling in Utah and Montana before returning to Pittsburgh to become editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1868 and the *Pittsburgh Leader* in 1870. He spent many productive years with the *Leader*, and was regarded as the preeminent editor of his day for his attacks on falsehood and his adherence to journalistic integrity.

Nevin died on January 5, 1884, of Bright's Disease, contracted while a prisoner of war.²⁵ His sketch book and diary survive not only as a unique perspective on the life of a soldier during the Civil War, but also as an outstanding example of writing about war. 🌟

Notes

¹ *Pittsburgh Leader*, Sept. 10, 1894, reprinted from *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, July 1863.

² *Pittsburgh Leader*, Jan. 6, 1884.

³ Sketch book, John I. Nevin Papers, MSS# 64, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Library & Archives, 21.



As the sketch by Capt. Harry Wrigly reveals, loneliness haunted the cavernous spaces at Libby; comforts were few.

⁴ Bates, Samuel P., *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-1865* (Harrisburg, 1869), vol. I, 420.

⁵ Sketch Book, HSWP, 13.

⁶ In a letter written by Colonel Geary to General McDowell, Geary implores the general to relieve his regiment of its current seven-month duty along the Potomac, citing ill health among his troops. Geary to McDowell, Rectortown, May 10, 1862, *War of the Rebellion*, edited by Lt. Col. Robert N. Scott (Washington, 1885), series I, vol. xii, 162.

⁷ In a report from May 15, 1862, Geary informs Secretary of War Stanton that his forces have been molested by bands of guerrilla cavalry from General Jackson's brigade numbering 2,600. Geary to Stanton, Rectortown, May 15, 1862, *War of the Rebellion*.

⁸ Sketch book, HSWP, 22.

⁹ Sketch book, HSWP, 61.

¹⁰ Libby Prison was named for Libby & Son, the ship chandlers and grocers who owned the building. The upper floors were used for tobacco drying.

¹¹ Sketch book, HSWP, 91.

¹² The Union War Prisoners Association was formed in a Charleston prison during the winter of 1862.

¹³ Sketch book, HSWP, 84.

¹⁴ During the war, more than 11,000 Union soldiers died in Salisbury Prison. A memorial was dedicated in 1910 honoring the more than 2,000 Pennsylvanians who died and are buried there. *Pennsylvania at Salisbury, North Carolina: Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Memorial*, Pennsylvania Salisbury Memorial Commission (Harrisburg, 1912), 6.

¹⁵ Nevin benefitted from an early imprisonment in that the conditions of prison camps — both Northern and Southern — deteriorated significantly as the war persisted. In addition, the promise of exchange lessened. Bruce Catton notes that the system of exchange established early in the war declined in 1863, creating a huge number of prison camps in the final years of the war. Bruce Catton, "Prison Camps of the Civil War," *American Heritage*, vol. X, no. 5, 6.

¹⁶ Diary, MSS# 64, Nevin Papers, HSWP, May 6, 1863.

¹⁷ Nevin was appointed major of the 93rd and placed in command of the regiment as a result of discord among the other officers upon the discharge of Colonel James McCarter.

¹⁸ Correspondence of June 2, 1863, Nevin Papers, HSWP.

¹⁹ Diary, July 5, 1863.

²⁰ *Pittsburgh Leader*, Sept. 10, 1894, reprinted from *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, July 1863.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Diary, HSWP, July 5, 1863.

²³ Diary, HSWP, July 19, 1863.

²⁴ Diary, HSWP, Oct. 1, 1863.

²⁵ Bright's Disease is an inflammation of the kidneys as a result of an over-exposure to cold. Given the amount of time it remained in his system, Nevin most likely suffered from the chronic form of the disease.



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