

“Devoted to Patriotic Reminiscence”: The New Hampshire Veterans’ Association Campground at the Weirs

Sally E. Svenson

NEW HAMPSHIRE SOLDIERS who fought in and survived the Civil War were expected, like their counterparts from other northern states, to go home and take up the threads of their pre-war lives. After the “grand review” of more than 150,000 victorious Union troops held in Washington on May 23, 1865, General William T. Sherman bid his troops farewell “with the full belief that as in war you have been good soldiers, so in peace you will make good citizens.”¹ And, in general, returning New Hampshire soldiers merged smoothly into civilian society. Like veterans elsewhere, most of them experienced some disorientation but, in their nearly universal war-weariness, they were unwilling to revive disturbing memories and wished only to forget the war.²

Nevertheless, feelings of isolation endured among the returned soldiers, as well as a longing for the stimulation and “fun” of war that surprised even themselves. Captain Richard Musgrove of Bristol recalled taking leave of the last of his military comrades: “I bade adieu to Lieut. Eaton and made the rest of my journey homeward alone. Here commenced a sense of loneliness that grew with the passing weeks, which was not even dispelled by the pleasure of

mingling again in the home circle and with friends. The quiet of village life, with none of the excitement of the army with its every day duties, was oppressive.”³ As the emotional wounds of war healed with the passage of time and painful recollections dimmed, former soldiers began to seek out wartime companions with whom they had shared both individual experiences and a collective ethos. Before the end of the 1860s, veterans began, as a result, to form new organizations which would expand steadily in social and political influence into the late years of the nineteenth century.

Early New Hampshire Veterans’ Reunions

In New Hampshire, the development of a reunion spirit gained momentum in the early 1870s. At this time, a number of regiments began to meet occasionally for long, formal banquets, sometimes at the expense of the hosting towns from which the soldiers had enlisted. As the decade progressed, veterans urged even wider fraternization, and in June 1875, the New Hampshire Veterans’ Association was organized at Concord. Although membership was open to veterans of all wars, the organization’s principal aim was “simply to cherish those fraternal feelings engendered among men who devoted four of the best years of their lives for the maintenance of the Union.”⁴ The group’s first endeavor was a reunion of Union soldiers who had enlisted from New Hampshire or now lived in the state. More than nine hundred veterans assembled over a three-day period at the Manchester fairgrounds in October that year. The program included regimental meetings, the organization of regimental

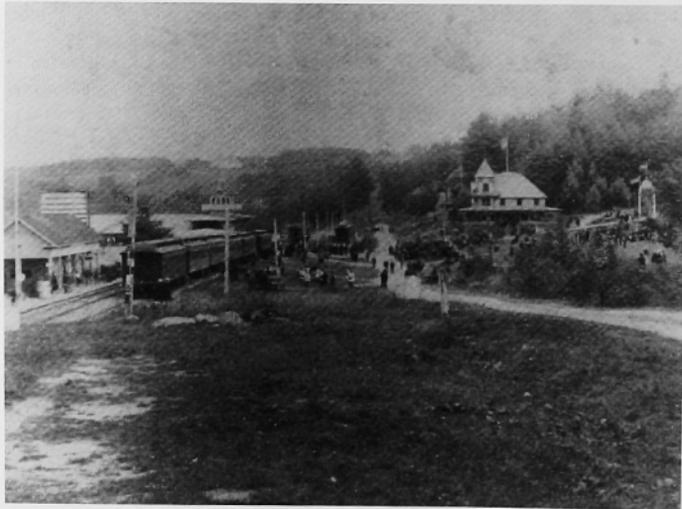
SALLY E. SVENSON is a historical researcher from New York City, who became interested in the veterans’ campground at the Weirs while spending vacations on Lake Winnepesaukee. In the hope of bringing renewed attention to this remarkable, but threatened, historic site, we present highlights from her more detailed study. She explores not only the campground’s architecture but also the reunion culture that flourished there.

associations, a grand “dress parade” reviewed by the governor and his uniformed staff mounted on horseback, and a general gathering with speeches by military and political leaders.⁵

With attention focused on United States centennial observances in 1876 and 1877, New Hampshire veterans did little further until 1878, when in August the veterans’ association held a second reunion. This time they met at a Methodist camp-meeting ground at the Weirs, on the shore of Lake Winnepesaukee. Not yet a tourist destination, this picturesque site was close to the geographical center of the state and readily accessible from north and south via the Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad. Five years before, the camp-meeting association had bought property at this then undeveloped location, where they began a tradition of summer camp meetings at the Weirs. At this time, a single hotel on the campground served the infant summer community. Financial reverses, tied to the nationwide panic of 1873, had forced the camp-meeting as-

sociation to begin leasing its modest facilities for a variety of events, including temperance and Sunday school gatherings.

The three-day veterans’ association reunion held at the Weirs in 1878 was, according to a local news reporter, “one of the most successful and enjoyable occasions that a whole lifetime may witness.”⁶ One hundred white “wedge” tents, each capable of accommodating four men, were loaned by the state of New Hampshire and pitched on the grounds. Straw was provided for the veterans who carried with them their own rolls of blankets and were prepared to “camp out.” As the estimated eight to fifteen thousand in attendance included veterans’ wives and children as well as “lookers-on,” the reunion’s spirit seemed more that of a social picnic than a soldiers’ gathering. Old songs were sung, old stories told, and old reminiscences revived. “Many were the scenes and incidents of camp life, the march, the bivouac, the picket line, and the skirmish, which were recalled amid laughter and



The Weirs, c. 1885. The New Hampshire Veterans’ Association erected a substantial headquarters in 1885, near the bottom of the hill across from the train depot. An archway at the right marked the entrance to the campground which overlooked Lake Winnepesaukee. Not long before, the Weirs had been noted primarily as a junction for railroad and steamboat traffic. Courtesy of James Robertson.

tears—for we saw tears in more than one grizzled veteran's eye as he recalled to mind some comrade who now sleeps in a southern grave."⁷

The overwhelming success of this event led to yet a third veterans' reunion in 1879, held again at the Weirs, this time in a gently inclined, eight-acre grove facing the lake on the westerly side of the railroad track and directly opposite the steamboat landing. The Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad, with an eye to the potential profit to be made from thousands of rail ticket sales, provided the land, cleared the grounds, and laid out streets along which one hundred tents soon were pitched.⁸ The railroad also built a wooden dancing pavilion on the hill in the center of the campground in "Terpsichorean Park." Dancing became a favorite reunion pastime, at ten cents per couple per dance; indeed, many "patronized the dancing pavilion all the day long and until 'tattoo' at 10 o'clock in the evening gave the weary musicians a rest."⁹

New Hampshire Veterans and the G.A.R.

The heightened activity of Civil War veterans in New Hampshire at this time paralleled a dramatic increase in veteran social and political activity elsewhere in the country. In particular, the Grand Army of the Republic, a national association for Union veterans, was then entering a period of phenomenal growth. Founded in Illinois in 1866 as a fraternal and charitable group, the G.A.R., as it was called, quickly became an overtly political and conspicuously Republican organization. Its excessive partisanship, occasional threats of political violence, and the still-young veterans' increasing focus on jobs and family all together discouraged participation, even among those once enthusiastic.¹⁰ By 1875, when the New Hampshire Veterans' Association was founded, the Grand Army was in a period of eclipse.

In the late 1870s, the G.A.R. shed its political and militaristic trappings and soon began to attract new members. This was a time when Americans in general were swarming to join fraternal

orders. G.A.R. meetings, like those of other such organizations, incorporated ritual, in this case based on military life and featuring uniforms, "campfires," and "encampments." Through "posts" established at the local level, the G.A.R. reached into even the smallest communities. Over time, the organization exercised extraordinary influence over the way Union veterans perceived themselves as well as the way they were perceived by others. By 1890, the G.A.R. served as the primary vehicle through which ex-soldiers spoke with a common voice. It became possibly the most powerful political lobby of the age.¹¹ As the G.A.R.'s position strengthened, the statewide veterans' association simultaneously narrowed its focus, becoming almost exclusively preoccupied with its annual reunion and improvements to its campground.

Building a Facility, 1880-1893

In general, whenever Union soldiers came together during the last decades of the nineteenth century, their gatherings took the form of regimental reunions or formal state and national "encampments" organized by the G.A.R. Not too surprisingly, these reunions were organized and attended largely by men. The New Hampshire reunions at the Weirs were inclusive and social in character, with a family orientation evident from the outset. As early as 1879, the construction of a dancing pavilion suggests that participation of women in reunion activities was assumed.

Distinctive as was the reunion culture at the Weirs, the setting for the annual event was even more singular. While regimental and G.A.R. reunions elsewhere were held in cities or on temporary campgrounds loaned by state governments or local railroads, in New Hampshire the statewide veterans' association oversaw the development of a fixed reunion facility which eventually would house a remarkable cluster of buildings without parallel elsewhere in the country.

Aside from the dancing pavilion, there were no buildings on the campground until the third

reunion at the Weirs in 1880, when two large structures were erected. An oddly shaped dining pavilion with a bold striped roof replaced the "victualling tent" used in previous summers. The other new edifice on the grounds that summer — a permanent structure built by the New Hampshire Veteran Association of Lowell, Massachusetts, for the use of its members during reunions — was to have a remarkable impact on the future of the veterans' facility. Lowell, sometimes called the "Spindle City," was a noted manufacturing center of some sixty thousand inhabitants located eighty-one rail miles to the south of the Weirs. The rapid growth of its cotton and woolen industries had enticed many New Hampshire war veterans out of the state in search of employment. As early as 1867, eleven Lowell residents who had served in New Hampshire regiments during the war began meeting in a local grocery store to share wartime memories, and from that nucleus the New Hampshire Veteran Association of Lowell evolved.¹²

The Lowell organization's headquarters at the Weirs occupied a commanding position on the hill overlooking the lake. The building was simple in design: its first floor comprised one large room furnished with chairs, stools, and tables for the accommodation of guests; the second floor was divided into sleeping compartments for the use of association members; its veranda quickly became a recognized center for lounging veterans. The structure was dedicated with suitable pomp. The mayor of Lowell arrived by train in a special car to deliver the principal address. According to the *Lowell Courier*, "the favorable comments which are passed upon [the building] by all who see it are only the just praise which it merits."¹³

Admiration and envy of the luxuries enjoyed by the Lowell Association in its new headquarters spurred the New Hampshire association to ask the state legislature for funding to assist in further fitting out its campground. This body was becoming increasingly sensitive to the de-



Dining Pavilion, 1880s. Replacing an earlier "victualling tent" in 1880, this wooden structure served more than fifteen hundred diners per day during reunion week. A small sign reads: "Meals Served All Hours." Chowder was apparently a favorite. In 1888, the caterer purchased 75 gallons of clams, 55 gallons of oysters, 300 pounds of fish, 957 gallons of milk, 16 barrels of potatoes, 2 1/2 barrels of pork, and 14 barrels of crackers. Courtesy of the Laconia Public Library.



Entrance to the campground, 1884. In 1880, New Hampshire veterans living in Lowell, Massachusetts, became the first to erect a building for their own use at the Weirs. They chose a central site at the top of the hill for their headquarters. The next year, the New Hampshire Veterans' Association proposed to move the Lowell building "to a new position" in order to erect general headquarters on this spot, but the "Lowell boys" respectfully declined. Courtesy of the Laconia Public Library.

mands of Civil War veterans, who were gaining in political power at the national level and, as late as 1890, constituted 7.5 per cent of the state's voting population.¹⁴ In 1881, the legislature appropriated three thousand dollars for the erection of sleeping quarters and improvements to the campgrounds.¹⁵ The Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad, whose early support for the veterans' reunion must have paid off handsomely, agreed to allow the veterans to occupy

the site on a long-term basis. Five state-funded barracks, hastily thrown up for that summer's reunion, provided sleeping space, complete "with good straw," for the use of veterans who applied to the camp commandant.¹⁶ Although less reminiscent of the veterans' wartime experience than the tents which still dominated the Weirs campground, the new barracks were a concession to the fact that "even thus early there were many who could no longer tent on the old campground without danger of 'cricks' and 'rheumatics.'"¹⁷

The summer of 1882 saw the addition of a grandstand with wooden amphitheater seating situated on the hillside above the dancing pavilion and below the new barracks. The speaker's stand and seating were both provided by the railroad, which had begun to make the grounds available to other groups (grange, Odd Fellows) as well, when the veterans were not using the facility.

In 1883, the Fifth Regiment followed through on plans discussed the previous summer and quietly erected its own headquarters just south of the Lowell Association building. No other veterans at this time had such dependable accommodations. In 1884, Ira C. Evans, the editor of the *Veteran's Advocate*, a new journal published



"State Buildings," from New Hampshire Veterans Weirs Souvenir, c. 1895. Hastily erected in the three weeks prior to the 1881 reunion, five new barracks provided shelter for one thousand men. Financed by the state, these simple structures were arranged in a semi-circle above the amphitheater in veteran's grove. Many attending reunions still slept in tents. Courtesy of the Laconia Public Library.

in Concord and “devoted to the interests of the G.A.R. and all the veterans of the War of the Rebellion,” described some housing problems he had observed at the Weirs:

the anxiety and annoyance of skirmishing around among the farmhouses within a mile or two for a quiet place to lodge, or of trying a crowded hotel for a chair in the office, the beds being all filled. Of course, we know there are some buildings erected by the State and provided with bunks and mattresses in the upper rooms, but no particular system has been maintained regarding their apportionment, and every man who could stand the noise of the camp selects a bunk, and, perhaps everything being favorable, succeeds in getting a half hour’s sleep before sunrise. . . . We have been there when there was something like four or five men for each bunk, when those who got left had to resort to the hotels, the proprietors of which, during the last reunion took advantage of the rush and charged such rates as few of the comrades could afford.¹⁸

Evans also pointed out his concerns about meeting space at the Weirs:

The lower part of the buildings, or barracks, built by the State, have been heretofore used in each case by three or four different regimental organizations, and the arrangements of the day were such that their several meetings would be appointed at nearly the same hour, necessitating a hurried transaction of the business to be acted upon in order to accommodate each other in the time allotted, and we remember that at the last reunion the Secretary of one of our largest regimental associations was obliged to write his records standing, and there was not as much as a hard tack box or powder keg for any of the officers or members to sit upon.¹⁹

These sundry difficulties could be resolved, according to Evans, by the erection of regimental association buildings, which would prevent



PROPOSED HEADQUARTERS BUILDING OF N. H. V. ASSOCIATION.

Comrade :

At the last meeting of the 9th N. H. V. Association at Weirs, N. H., Aug. 26, 1886, a vote was passed to erect a headquarters building similar to those built by other Regimental Associations.

A Committee of five was appointed with full power to raise the necessary funds, select a site, and erect a building. Said Committee was also instructed to proceed at once, and if possible, have a building ready for use at our next meeting in Aug., 1887, and to this end the sum of \$335.00 was subscribed immediately after the adjournment of said meeting. At a subsequent meeting of the Committee appointed it was voted to proceed at once and raise by further subscriptions, at least one thousand [\$1000] dollars before proceeding to build. It was also voted to issue shares of stock at a par value of five dollars per share in lieu of a receipt, the same not to be transferable or sold to any person or Company other than members of the 9th N. H. V. Regiment or their children, except by a two-thirds vote of all Comrades present at the Annual Meeting of the Association.

It is hoped this appeal will reach every living member of the old 9th N. H. V. Regiment, and that all will not only stand shoulder to shoulder but put their shoulders to the wheel, and their hands in their pockets and at our next Re-union at the Weirs, N. H., we will meet in our own comfortable and commodious building.

You will please sign your names and number-of shares you wish to subscribe for on the inclosed blank, and forward the same with the amount by draft, check or Post Office order to Comrade ALFRED CHASE, Nashua, N. H., Treasurer:

You will readily see the importance of advising the Committee at your earliest opportunity,—by April 1, 1887—that they may know at an early date, the total amount of funds available and govern themselves accordingly, and also avoid a hasty finishing up of the building at the last moment before our next Annual Meeting.

C. W. WILCOX, Milford, Mass., Chairman.
WM. W. ROSE, Keene, N. H., Secy.
[Signed.] ALFRED CHASE, Nashua, N. H., Treasurer.
A. J. HOUGH, North Adams, Mass.
J. F. FOSTER, So. Boston, Mass.

Proposed Headquarters, Ninth Regiment, 1886. The second half of the 1880s saw a building boom at the veterans' campground. Of New Hampshire's eighteen Civil War infantry regiments, eleven soon had their own "cottages" or "homes" for members, funded by subscriptions and the sale of stock. The Ninth Regiment never built the structure anticipated here, but instead joined with the Eleventh Regiment to erect a shared headquarters. New Hampshire Historical Society.

“overcrowding, or clashing in appointment of annual meetings.” The veterans appear to have shared his enthusiasm, and the pace of campground development accelerated over the next several years. The association acquired a long-

term lease on the campground from the railroad and, by 1893, had overseen the addition of another eleven substantial buildings to its grounds.²⁰ Of these, eight were regimental association headquarters with, as in the prototype Lowell Association building, public space on the first floor and dormitory-style sleeping quarters on the second. (By the late 1880s, some of the headquarters buildings offered a "sleeping room" for "ladies" as well). Issuing stock in the regimental association, generally in shares of five dollars "upon which no dividends or profits shall ever be declared," was the most common means of raising the necessary funds.²¹ The cost of construction ranged from a low of six hundred dollars to a high of more than five thousand dollars.

The Second Regiment's headquarters, a generous gift from Harriet P. Dame, was unique in being financed by an individual rather than an organiza-

tion. Living quietly with a sister in Concord before the outbreak of the war, Miss Dame had, at the age of forty-six, attached herself to the Second New Hampshire Regiment and spent nearly five years as an army nurse, ending her service only when the Second Regiment was mustered out in December 1865. She learned nursing by experience at a time when there were as yet no trained nurses, as we know them, in the country. Most female Union nurses served in general hospitals in the North or well to the rear; Miss Dame was among the few pioneering women who served in field hospitals, where the nursing generally was done by men, as well as on the battlefield itself.²² Introduced at the 1875 Manchester reunion as the "Florence Nightingale" of New Hampshire, Miss Dame, who had become something of a cult figure among New Hampshire veterans, was greeted with "the wildest applause." According to a newspaper of the day, "strong men who remembered her kind offices in the camp hospitals, shed tears as they cheered her."²³

In 1886, Harriet Dame, then in her seventy-first year, was living in Washington, D.C., where she had worked since the war as a clerk in the Treasury Department. Long an honored guest at the Weirs reunions, Miss Dame allocated a five-hundred-dollar token of appreciation for her war work, presented to her by the New Hampshire legislature, to the construction of a permanent headquarters for the veterans of the Second Regiment. According to the regimental historian, "She it was who caused it to be erected, paid all the bills, and then said to the old boys: 'It is yours—take it and enjoy it.'"²⁴ A special room with a balcony was created for Miss Dame on the second floor next to the large men's dormitory space. She regularly occupied this room during reunions until her death in 1900.

Three of the most imposing new buildings on the campground were not associated with individual regiments. One, a headquarters building for the New Hampshire Veterans' Association, was financed primarily by a two thousand dollar grant



"Harriet P. Dame, Army Nurse," photographed by Peter Eddy, 1890s. Harriet Dame stands near the steps of the headquarters building that she financed and obtained for the Second Regiment. It was said that when "the Florence Nightingale of New Hampshire" made her annual pilgrimage to the Weirs, "a right royal welcome she received from all." The building she gave and occupied was demolished in 1993. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Veterans' Association.

from the state.²⁵ A second was the project of Louis Bell Post #3 of Manchester, the largest and financially strongest of New Hampshire's G.A.R. posts. The most substantial and costly building on the ground belonged to the National Veterans' Association, a disparate umbrella organization made up of "veterans of other states now living in New Hampshire."²⁶ In 1885, some 226 veterans, or 21 per cent of the 1,523 who registered at camp headquarters, classified themselves in this manner, and their elegant reunion home became familiarly known as the "Tramps Building."²⁷

The veterans' facility at the Weirs had by now acquired a national reputation: an 1890 book summarizing building projects nationwide on behalf of Union veterans (soldiers' homes, monuments, memorial halls) lauded the "beautiful" Weirs campground "where extensive improvements have given ample facility for the soldiers of New Hampshire to spend a delightful week devoted to patriotic reminiscence (italics added)." The author concluded: "This camp in all its appointments is the finest one in the country."²⁸

The Reunion Tradition

The reunion program followed a regular pattern. For most veterans, the high point of the three, and later four, days of the reunion revolved around the afternoon and evening "campfires" held at the central grandstand: "great hallelujah celebrations of the war with splendid accessories"—including verbal pyrotechnics, bands, and vocal music. Smaller, more intimate campfires took place in the headquarters of individual regiments.²⁹



"Governor's Day," mid 1880s. The year 1882 saw an addition within the hillside grove of "an elegant new grand stand for speakers, band, reporters and choir," along with amphitheater seating. Here veterans held afternoon and evening gatherings or "campfires" and, on Governor's Day, were addressed by visiting dignitaries. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Veterans' Association.

Crowds were largest on "Governor's Day," known informally as "talking" day, when the governor, who always made a point of appearing at these reunions, gave a speech. Other elected officials and aspiring officeholders who wished to curry favor with the veterans also spoke. Beginning in 1884, one day was designated as "Grand Army Day" and featured an official reception for Grand Army posts in the morning and a G.A.R. parade and review near the railroad depot in the afternoon. Short regimental reunions and a business meeting of the New Hampshire Veterans' Association (never particularly well-attended) rounded out the official program.

The statewide association was resolutely determined that veterans were to pay nothing to attend reunions or to stay in campground facilities. Reunion expenses were defrayed by earnings from several sources: railroad "rebates" or commissions



A CAMP FIRE AT THE WEIRS.

"Now is . . . the time to come together, to renew old friendships, to rekindle the military spirit that in New Hampshire is in danger of dying entirely out, and to awaken in our bosoms a little of that patriotic ardor, which, in time of danger, fired the hearts of more than thirty thousand of New Hampshire's bravest sons." (Proposal for first "muster," 1875.) Two decades later, this spirit thrived at the Weirs campground. Sketch from the History of the Sixteenth Regiment, 1897.



Souvenir ribbons, 1878, 1906 and 1911. Each year's reunion was named in honor of a specific Civil War veteran connected with New Hampshire. While the association sold official badges commemorating each year's encampment, a row of booths and stands along the crest of the hill also offered a broad range of souvenir items. New Hampshire Veterans' Association and New Hampshire Historical Society.

on rail tickets sold to reunion patrons; dining and dancing pavilion receipts; sales of souvenir reunion ribbons; and fees that concessionaires paid to set up shop on "fakers' row" in the rear of the campground, where they provided diversions and sold keepsake items to the crowds.

During the early years, certain veterans, described as "substantial," stood ready to underwrite any annual deficit. In 1892, a system of "honorary membership" was introduced whereby annual five-dollar subscriptions from one hundred non-veterans helped provide a cushion against potential deficiencies. "Honorary membership" was particularly popular with politicians, and there was always a waiting list of would-be enrollees.³⁰

A large attendance at veterans' reunions not only created a good atmosphere but also was crucial to financial success. The surest means of guaranteeing a large patronage was by bringing in guests that veterans would want to see. In the early years, the reunion management was able to lure to its campground some of the most famous Union generals of the Civil War. Ambrose E. Burnside put in an appearance at the 1878 reunion, followed by Joseph Hooker in 1879, George B. McClellan in 1880, William T. Sherman in 1882, and Philip Sheridan in 1884. The generals' visits were short, and their "brief and soldierly" addresses generally prosaic to the point of going unrecorded. General Sheridan's 1884 speech, one of the few surviving, probably represents the genre:

Comrades, I have heard that cheering before. I did not come to make a speech but to meet you all and get close to you again. I am proud of the troops which fought under me in the war from New Hampshire and of those of their comrades who served near by. I have always retained for them the tenderest sentiments of friendship. I came to the reunion to see and shake hands with you, and the talking must be done by the Governor and others who come here already primed. I am glad to see this gathering. It is very interesting to me. I would be glad to see all who will call upon me at

the close of these exercises. I thank you for your kindness and will always retain the memories of this occasion.³¹

Despite the blandness of their remarks, the generals were understandably a great “draw.” Up to twenty thousand people could be expected on the campground when a celebrity was present.

The campground’s setting, on the hillside overlooking the lake with its steamboats, was itself a great attraction. During reunions, hundreds of flags, streamers, and lengths of patriotic bunting adorned the campground structures and the nearby hotels and cottages on the Methodist campground, making the Weirs a festive place by day. At night, the headquarters buildings and hotels were dramatically lit with paper lanterns and candles, and campfires burned on the hillside. Here and there were mounted large train headlights “giving a ghostly look to everything,” and the “smoking torch of the itinerant vender of knickknacks,” seen from a distance, provided a moving pinprick of light.³² As a journalist for the *Boston Herald* recorded, “This evening the umbrageous camp is aglow and even gorgeous in its strong lights and black shadows, with its crowds, its perambulating bands of music, parading organizations and its shouts, its laughter and swift repeated and cordial greetings. Every feature is romantic and the initial crowd is big enough to create enthusiasm. . . .”³³

On some occasions, the veterans’ association commissioned “sham battles” to re-create specific conflicts of the war, including Malvern Hill and Groveton. The battle of Chantilly planned for 1883 had to be cancelled due to rain, while, on another occasion, critics found a night attack against a rebel “masked” battery an “unsatisfying” interpretation. The “soldiers” were detachments of G.A.R. men and members of the state militia, many of whom were “unborn when the ‘Johnnies’ were fighting for their country.”³⁴ The “intense realism” of these battles—the attacking, skirmishing, and retreating—stood in sharp contrast to the simultaneous spectacle afforded by

the crowd gathered on the hillside to watch. In 1885, a newspaper reporter found the audience with its “large number of white dresses and brilliantly colored parasols” impressive.³⁵

Up to three bands, each with twenty or more musicians, could be stationed about the grove at any one time, some of them attached to visiting G.A.R. units from out-of-state. The first band concert of the day was often scheduled for eight o’clock in the morning. Several drum corps (smaller ensembles of fifes and drums) performed regularly as well. The association itself secured an orchestra to supply music at the dancing pavilions, as well as another musical ensemble to provide a welcome at the station, attend visiting dignitaries, and furnish accompaniment for campfire singing. Bugle calls, from “reveille” at dawn to “taps” at eleven o’clock or midnight, measured the day. The roll of cannon reenforced the reveille call, while a “seventeen-gun-salute” greeted important guests.

An official amusement committee provided a program of organized sports, as well as less serious races of the sack, potato, and wheelbarrow variety. Numerous entertainments took place on the lake in addition to the always popular steamboat excursions—an exhibition of shell practice from the cannon battery; sailing regattas; a “natorial” (i.e., swimming) exhibition; and tub, four-oar, single shell, and ladies’ dory races. By day, balloonists drifted ethereally skyward, while later, fireworks peppered the nighttime dark. Rockets, mines, and golden fountains exploded above the lake in hour-long pyrotechic displays, which culminated in spectacular set pieces—one year, a portrait of the veteran after whom that particular reunion had been named, another year, the badge of the G.A.R.

Probably the focus of reunion activity with the broadest mass appeal was the one over which the veterans’ association had the least control—the bevy of peddlers and hustlers who strung themselves out in booths and stands along the crest of the hill in “fakirs’ row.” There might be

up to two hundred of these "cheeky cormorants" at any reunion, "with all manner of contrivances for tempting money from the pockets of the innocent yeomanry." Canes, ornaments, and badges of every kind, feathers, toy whips, many-colored brushes, pocket knives, handkerchiefs, and pampas grass plumes were among the items for sale. Popular entertainments included Punch and Judy shows; baseball galleries; mysterious "lifting," "electric," and "blowing" machines; booths where reunion-goers experimented with air guns or "threw rubber rings at worsted dolls or iron rings over wooden pins in hopes of gain" and, eventually, a merry-go-round. There was also an assortment of "dime museum" or side-show exhibits. For ten cents, you could step inside a tent to admire a "whale" or "a little runt of a calf, that nature seems to have had some fun with," or enter one of the "contiguous booths" of an "alligator-girl" or "a lady of the mermaid variety." While the noise from fakirs' row could be disruptive to the programs going on in the nearby grove, it was acknowledged that the hawkers and peddlers were "a necessary nuisance . . . and the many little trinkets that find their way to childish hands at home make their presence endurable."³⁶

The Boston, Concord, and Montreal and its successor railroads did an enormous business on the few days of the veterans' reunion. As a journalist noted, "One of the marvels of New Hampshire railroading is how so many people are carried to the Weirs on this occasion and taken home again. At one time during the day 40 passenger cars stood on the tracks, and every one of them represented at least a car full and a half of people. Departing trains from early afternoon until late at night were black with all-fired tired and perspired humanity."³⁷

Politics at the Campground

Veterans' reunions afforded government officials and political candidates an opportunity to mingle with a large assemblage of eligible voters

in a neutral setting. Many took advantage of the veterans' annual summer gatherings to make their records known and to campaign delicately on their own behalf or on that of other officeholders and candidates.

State and national politics reverberated at the Weirs. Because of the pivotal role veterans were expected to play in the closely contested presidential election of 1888, between incumbent Democrat Grover Cleveland and the Republican nominee Benjamin Harrison, both parties sent representatives to the reunion in 1887. Weighing in for the Republicans was General John C. Frémont, explorer, former presidential candidate, and commander of Civil War forces in the West. He had most recently served as Arizona Territory governor (1878-83) and now, at the age of seventy-four, was acting as a Republican goodwill ambassador. By the late 1880s, the remaining Civil War leaders were often elderly and unable to attend reunions. New Hampshire veterans were delighted, therefore, to have Frémont visit their campground. They greeted him with "cheer upon cheer" as he stepped forward to speak at the afternoon assembly. His speech harked back to "the long struggle and sacrifices of the Civil War," and he thanked those in the audience who had supported his presidential campaign over thirty years earlier.³⁸

Not to be outdone in appealing to the "boys" was General John C. Black, Cleveland's 1885 Democratic appointee as commissioner of pensions. Unable to walk because of an attack of inflammatory rheumatism, Black addressed the crowd from a carriage pulled up to the edge of the grove. It was Black's job to capture the veterans' vote for the Democratic ticket and, in closing his speech, he modestly assured his audience that "in caring for the soldiers the republic will exhibit an opulence only equalled by that of the sun now shining down upon us, and which in his autumnal round flings his golden beauty over all the earth."³⁹

A newspaper correspondent standing close to General Black as he was greeting some of the old



President Theodore Roosevelt addressing the crowd at the Weirs, 1902. As reported by the New York Times, "The President's speech at the park where the veterans were gathered, was most favorably received. He stood on a table at the extreme end of the platform, and his athletic figure made him strikingly conspicuous." Courtesy of the Laconia Public Library.

soldiers was delighted to catch "several amusing incidents. One veteran elbowed his way through the crowd and said, 'General, I'm much obliged to you for sending me my pension. It came all right.' Another said: 'I've done considerable business with you and found you prompt and reliable.'"⁴⁰ Clearly, veterans expected to have an opportunity at the Weirs to communicate firsthand with their leaders, and were not yet ready to take the impersonal nature of government bureaucracy for granted.

Towards the Twentieth Century

Concerted lobbying by the G.A.R. in the late 1880s stimulated the passage of increasingly generous federal pension legislation. The march towards ever-expanding benefits for veterans fired the enthusiasm of many reunion attendees. As one old sage declared at the 1889 gathering, "We are here for the dollars."⁴¹ With the 1890 pen-

sion act, Union veterans finally realized what amounted to the first system of social insurance designed to benefit a specific group of citizens. The year 1890 also represented the G.A.R.'s peak both in power and size, with about one-third of surviving Union veterans then counting among its national membership. Having attained their political objectives, many veterans lost interest in the G.A.R. and, hereafter, its membership at both the national and state level steadily declined.⁴² Overall veteran activity slowed as well.

After the turn of the century, death claimed an increasing number of old soldiers, and by 1910 fewer than one-third of the veterans who had survived the Civil War were still alive. Increasingly, memorial services formed a poignant part of each year's reunion. In reporting in 1893 that "attendance was not perhaps as large as on previous years," the *Veteran's Advocate* may have given an unwitting hint of the campground's impending decline.⁴³



Cavalry headquarters, photographed by Edwin D. Ward, probably 1887. Cavalry and other non-infantry groups participated as well in the reunions. Pictured here shortly after construction, the cavalry building was "handsomely painted in two shades of blue, trimmed with yellow, . . . symbolizing the cavalry uniform." A record seventy-five cavalry members were in attendance in 1889. New Hampshire Historical Society.



"We are sadly reminded by the death of several of our number . . . that a few years hence our cottage will be silent; that our camp-fire will be extinct; that song and story will be heard no more." (Sixteenth Regiment flier, 1890.) In 1932, Charles H. Berry, aged ninety-five and one half, was the only member of the First Cavalry to attend the reunion. Courtesy of the First New Hampshire Cavalry Association.

But despite diminishing numbers, loyal Union veterans continued to turn out for reunions at the Weirs well into the twentieth century. The log-books of the First New Hampshire Cavalry Association reveal a pattern probably typical of reunion participation in general. In 1889, a record seventy-five cavalry members registered for the annual meeting of their association (representing most, if not all, of the cavalry veterans on the ground that year). Forty-two members signed the register in 1895, thirty-eight in 1900, forty-two in 1910, seventeen in 1920, and four in 1930. In 1932, the name of only one old soldier, aged ninety-five and one-half, appears in the cavalry's roster.⁴⁴

In 1902, the New Hampshire Veterans' Association scored a last great triumph when it brought President Theodore Roosevelt to the campground for its twenty-sixth annual reunion.

Roosevelt had committed himself to attending this reunion during the previous summer, when he was vice president and looking ahead to his own presidential campaign run in 1904. Clearly still sensitive to veteran pressure, he kept this promise following his sudden ascendancy to the presidency in 1901 upon the assassination of William McKinley. Roosevelt's visit drew between twenty and forty thousand spectators to hear his speech in the auditorium grove. The journalist covering the presidential excursion for the *New York Times* was impressed by the numbers and reported that, at "the Weirs, where the Grand Army reunion was held, the people in the excess of their desire to accord the President a fitting reception came near causing a crush which might have resulted disastrously. . . . So inadequate were the police arrangements that the

crowd had entire control of the situation, and much relief was expressed when the President, after viewing the veterans, was escorted into the hotel for luncheon.⁴⁵

The reporter's error in designating the occasion a "Grand Army reunion" was a common one by the early twentieth century. Even postcards sold at the Weirs mislabeled the campground on the assumption that the Grand Army of the Republic owned the facility. As the Civil War veterans' influence waned, the story of the New Hampshire Veterans' Association and its campground facility was beginning to blur in public memory.

Postscript

While New Hampshire's system of annually convening veterans from all state regiments at a permanent reunion site was admired and its advantages debated elsewhere, no other state developed a comparable campground. As far as is known, only nearby Maine, from which many veterans came to the New Hampshire gatherings, was influenced in any significant way by New Hampshire's reunion tradition. In that state, three group homes were built in the late 1880s and early 1890s on coastal islands for the summer use of veterans of individual state regiments and their families.⁴⁶

It appears to have been a unique combination of factors that led to the creation of the New Hampshire Veterans' Association facility and to the reunion culture that for a while flourished there. Certainly, the formation of the statewide association in 1875 provided the basis for consolidated veteran effort at a time when it appeared that the G.A.R. was not going to survive. Even though motivated by competitive market forces, the Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad's provision of a campground in a beautiful and accessible location proved a tremendous boon to the reunion undertaking. Furthermore, vibrant and unbroken leadership shepherded the statewide association through its early years and pro-

vided continuity as its reunion campground took shape and matured.

The single most important factor in the development of a lasting veterans' facility at the Weirs was, however, almost certainly the construction in 1880 of the unprecedented communal residence sponsored by the New Hampshire veterans living in Lowell, Massachusetts, to house themselves at the Weirs campground. With this building in place, veterans began to invest wholeheartedly in the idea of the campground providing lasting homes which veterans could share during annual reunions with wartime companions. The construction of the Lowell building marked the first step on the road from a "campground" to a reunion "facility" at the Weirs and also encouraged the growth of a form of reunion culture unparalleled elsewhere.

Veterans of the nation's subsequent wars from the Spanish-American War on have continued to use the campground for their own reunions, but these later arrivals have never put their personal stamp on the campground. In 1924, an appropriation of four thousand dollars from the state of New Hampshire enabled the veterans' association to purchase its campground from the railroad that had, by then, succeeded the Boston, Concord, and Montreal. The sales agreement stipulated that "whenever said corporation, from any cause, shall become extinct and cease to exist as a corporation, then all the property, real, personal, or mixed, shall be and become the property of the State of New Hampshire to be used and expended by said State for charitable purposes and none other."⁴⁷

Though diminished, the New Hampshire Veterans' Association continues to hold annual reunions on its campground at what is now known as Weirs Beach. In 1979, the campground and its "unique assemblage of camp buildings" was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, absence of funding and years of neglect have taken their toll, and eight of the original eighteen buildings included in the

National Register listing have burned or been torn down in the past twenty years.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the tattered remains of the late-nineteenth-century New Hampshire Veterans' Association campground survive, still reminding us today of the singular reunion community where each summer the state's Civil War veterans once spent a "delightful week devoted to patriotic reminiscence."

Notes

1. Quoted in Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 208.
2. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 266-75. In his epilogue, Linderman labels the years of comparative veteran apathy between 1865 and 1880 as "the hibernation."
3. Richard W. Musgrove, *Autobiography* (n.p.: privately printed, 1921), 221. Captain Musgrove was a member of New Hampshire's Twelfth Regiment and extended his military commitment beyond the conclusion of the Civil War by one year, serving in the regular army in the western Indian wars until May 1866. Twelve years after returning to Bristol, he founded the *Bristol Weekly Enterprise*, a newspaper which he edited until his death in 1914.
4. *Lake Village Times*, August 23, 1879, p. 7. The organization's original name was the New Hampshire Veteran Association. At incorporation, in July 1881, it was changed slightly to the New Hampshire Veterans' Association. To avoid confusion, this article uses the later name throughout.
5. *Manchester Daily Union*, October 13, 1875, p. 3.
6. *Lake Village Times*, August 17, 1878, p. 2.
7. *Concord Daily Monitor*, August 15, 1878, p. 2.
8. *Lake Village Times*, August 30, 1879, p. 3, and *Concord Daily Monitor*, August 27, 1879, p. 2.
9. *Grafton County Journal*, September 4, 1880, p. 2, and *Concord Daily Monitor*, September 1, 1881, p. 2.
10. Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the G.A.R.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 123 and 185. The New Hampshire Department of the G.A.R. followed in general the organization's national trajectory: a first post was founded in Portsmouth in November 1867 and growth followed, but by the close of 1873 state membership stood at 451, down from 817 two years earlier. Department of New Hampshire, Grand Army of the Republic, *Journal of the First to Thirteenth Encampments, Department of New Hampshire, Grand Army of the Republic, including an Historical Sketch of the Organization of the Provisional Dept. 1868-1880* (Concord: Grand Army of the Republic, 1889), 72, and Department of New Hampshire, Grand Army of the Republic, *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Encampment* (Concord: Grand Army of the Republic, 1885), 379.
11. Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 15, 86, 110.
12. *Lowell Morning Mail*, September 3, 1880, p. 1.
13. *Lowell Daily Courier*, September 1, 1880, p. 2.
14. Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.). The 1890 census estimated for the first time the number of surviving soldiers, sailors, and marines of the Civil War. Statistics for New Hampshire credited the state with 8,996 Union veterans (Table 96) among a male voting-age population totalling 118,135 (Table 79).
15. New Hampshire Legislature, *1881 Laws* (Chapter 114, July 14, 1881).
16. *Lake Village Times*, August 19, 1882, p. 2.
17. *Lake Village Times*, September 5, 1885, p. 3.
18. *Veteran's Advocate*, November 4, 1884, p. 356. The punctuation in quoting this extract has been somewhat simplified.
19. *Ibid.*
20. The builders and dates of erection of these structures were: New Hampshire Veterans' Association, Third Regiment Association and First Band Association, Seventh Regiment Association (1885); Second Regiment Association, Grand Army Post #3 of the City of Manchester (1886); Sixteenth Regiment Association, First Cavalry Association (not dedicated until the following year) (1887); Ninth Regiment Association and Eleventh Regiment Association, Fifteenth Regiment Association (1888); National Veterans' Association (1891); Fourteenth Regiment Association (1893).
21. Leander W. Cogswell, *A History of the Eleventh New Hampshire Regiment Volunteer Infantry in the Rebellion War, 1861-1865* (Concord: Republican Press Association, 1895), 640.
22. Granville P. Conn, *History of the New Hampshire Surgeons in the War of Rebellion* (Concord: Ira C. Evans Co., 1906), 22-26; Henry Harrison Metcalf, *New Hampshire Women: A Collection of Portraits*

- and *Biographical Sketches* (Concord: New Hampshire Publishing Company, 1895), 83.
23. *Manchester Daily Union*, October 14, 1875, p. 3.
 24. Martin A. Haynes, *History of the Second Regiment New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion* (Lakeport, N.H.: n.p., 1896), 326.
 25. New Hampshire Legislature, *1885 Laws* (Chapter 104, July 16, 1885).
 26. *Lake Village Times*, September 5, 1885, p. 3.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. Joseph W. Morton, Jr., *Sparks from the Campfire* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Publishing Co., 1890), 569.
 29. *Boston Herald*, August 26, 1885, p. 1.
 30. New Hampshire Veterans' Association, *Official Program, Twenty-ninth Encampment, August 22-25, 1905*, 13.
 31. *Veteran's Advocate*, September 2, 1884, p. 284.
 32. *Veteran's Advocate*, August 31, 1886, p. 4.
 33. *Boston Herald*, August 26, 1885, p. 1.
 34. *Lake Village Times*, September 15, 1883, p. 3.
 35. *Concord Independent Statesman*, September 3, 1885, p. 386.
 36. *Lowell Daily Courier*, September 1, 1880, p. 2; *Concord Daily Monitor*, August 31, 1888, p. 2; *Weirs Times*, September 12, 1883, p. 2; *Veteran's Advocate*, September 21, 1886, p. 6, September 5, 1888, p. 4, and September 11, 1889, p. 2.
 37. *Concord Independent Statesman*, September 26, 1886, p. 390.
 38. *Concord Independent Statesman*, September 1, 1887, p. 382.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. *Manchester Daily Union*, September 9, 1889, p. 3.
 42. McConnell, 54. Grand Army membership in New Hampshire comprised a remarkably large share of the state's surviving Civil War veterans. According to the report of the New Hampshire Department of the G.A.R.'s 1892 "annual encampment," a total of 5,192 members (p. 31) were enrolled in ninety-four local "posts" (p. 59) at the close of 1891, the year the statewide organization attained its highest membership. Thus, some 58 per cent of the nearly nine thousand veterans included in the 1890 census figures for New Hampshire belonged to the order.
 43. *Veteran's Advocate*, September 9, 1893, p. 68.
 44. Cavalry House Register, 1887-1932. This information was tabulated by Sylvia J. Lombard, author of *History of the First New Hampshire Cavalry and the First New Hampshire Cavalry Veterans' Association* (n.p. [1995]).
 45. *New York Times*, August 29, 1902, p.1.
 46. John K. Moulton, *Peaks Island: An Affectionate History* (n.p. c. 1993), 74-76, and personal communication, Kim MacIsaac, curator of the Fifth Maine Regiment Community Center, Peaks Island, Maine, to the author, January 21, 1998.
 47. New Hampshire Veterans' Association, *What the New Hampshire Veterans' Association Really Is* (Reprint; Concord: New Hampshire Veterans' Association, 1950).
 48. Thomas E. O'Neill, "New Hampshire Veterans' Association Historic District," nomination, National Register of Historic Places, 1977.
 49. The remaining buildings of those originally included in the National Register listing are: Lowell Association headquarters (1880); one state barracks building (1881); Fifth Regiment headquarters (1883); New Hampshire Veterans' Association headquarters, Seventh Regiment headquarters (1885); First Cavalry headquarters (1887); Ninth and Eleventh Regiments headquarters (1888); Fourteenth Regiment headquarters (1893); two later structures including a simple grandstand and a "non-contributing" building leased as a restaurant.



Grand Army Day at the Weirs, parade and review, photographed by Frank J. Moulton, probably late 1880s. From the beginning, it was the statewide New Hampshire Veterans' Association that sponsored the reunions at the Weirs. However, the influence of the Grand Army of the Republic (the G.A.R.), a national association for Union veterans, was also strong. Courtesy of the Laconia Public Library.

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