

As was read Before Daughton
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HISTORY OF THE EDGECOMBE GUARDS DURING THE
WAR BETWEEN THE STATES.

-o- By Emily Scumpe Austin

Many people wonder and ask why it is that the people of Edgecombe County are so proud of their native county. I would say that we are proud of being natives of Edgecombe for the very reason that old Edgecombe County always stands to the front. We have excelled in a great many things and this is no less true when we consider something of the history of our Edgecombe Guards during the years of the War Between the States, and to them is due much credit in giving North Carolina the honor of being "first at Bethel."

The very early history of our Edgecombe Guards, as our soldiers have always been called, is very meager, though what we can gather of their earlier days is rather interesting. A thrill of patriotism comes over us when we name the name of "Edgecombe Guards" and that same patriotism, in a very much greater degree, was the thing which fired our men to do and to dare, and thus came into existence the original Edgecombe Guards.

Owing to the unsettled condition of our Southland on account of the negro or slavery question, the "Old Guards," as one of the number who is still living is pleased to call them, were organized in the Court-house here in Tarboro in December 1858, just ^{after} ~~as~~ John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry and his capture. At the meeting in the Court House, the question arose as to who would be a suitable man for the position of Captain of this Company, whereupon it was decided that on account of his popularity in the county, and ability to handle a volunteer company, ^{the late} J.L. Bridgers, father of our present J.L. Bridgers, was the proper one and a committee was appointed to wait upon Col. Bridgers to ascertain if he would accept the honor of Captain of the First Volunteer Company of Edgecombe Guards. True to his country, he agreed to accept the position

and came immediately to the Court House, where he made a very patriotic speech, which stirred all to such enthusiasm and patriotism that fifty-six of Edgecombe's sons ~~banded~~ banded themselves into this company of soldiers, pledged to protect our Southland at all hazards. I have a list of the members of this original company, and included in this list are a number of names familiar to us today.

The formation of the Edgecombe Guards was one step towards "preparedness" and our ~~company~~ ^{company} was one of the very first volunteer companies organized in North Carolina, along with the Wilmington and Fayetteville companies, which latter claim to have kept up their regular organization, and are the only two companies which are older than the Edgecombe Guards.

About April 19, 1861 all companies organized in the state were ordered to Camp Macon, and from thence to Raleigh. Here our Company went into a camp of instruction and training at the old Fair Grounds, where the Soldiers' Home is now located, the soldiers sleeping ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ horse stalls. There were ten companies which met at Raleigh, those standing highest in all respects to be considered honor companies and ~~form~~ ^{compose} the First North Carolina Volunteers. It is not a surprising fact to us that our company was considered the "crack" company and was made Company "A" of that regiment. A good many more men had joined the company since the first organization in 1858, and a list of this company may also be had. The officers of the Company holding the honor of being Company "A", which honor, by the way, was won by hard work, were as follows: Captain, J.L. Bridgers; 1st Lieut., Whitmel P. Lloyd; 2nd Lieut., W.S. Long; 2nd Junior Lieut., W.G. Lewis; 1st. Sargt., Kenneth Thigpen; 2nd Sargt., J.B. Staton; 3rd Sargt., I.B. Palamountain; 4th Sargt., J.H. Payne; 1st Corporal, George A. Cotton; 2nd Corporal, George T. Williams; 3rd

Corporal, James M. Savage; 4th Corporal, Wiley Cobb. It was at Raleigh, too, that the illustrious William Dorsey Pender, then a splendid young man from West Point, gave the Edgecombe Guards some training.

Before the expiration of the term of service of the Volunteers, the Governor of North Carolina called for the State's quota of troops, and the First Volunteer Regiment was disorganized, the First North Carolina Regiment of regular troops coming into existence, with D.H. Hill as Colonel. The loyalty and patriotism of our Edgecombe men were shown by the fact that when the Guards went to Raleigh there were one hundred and fifteen men, more than twice the number which originally composed the company, and the limit of each company being one hundred men, the others returned to Tarboro. But may I say here, that those who returned were not idle or negligent in their duty to the town and county, and feeling the necessity of having "Home Guards", organized a second company which was known as Capt. Turner Battle's Company, ~~(which I think was known as the Edgecombe Rifles.)~~ *Confederate Guards.*

The realization of the fact that the Guards had no flag impressed itself upon the ever loyal and true women of our town and county and the result was they made a flag. ^{*the late*} Mrs. Anna Macnair, ~~the~~ mother of Mrs. Frank Powell, ^{*one of our members*} ~~one of our members~~, I understand, was among the leaders in the undertaking and it was in May 1861, just in front of my own home, then the home of my grandfather, R.H. Austin, that ^{*the stars & bars were*} ~~a Confederate flag~~ was presented, amid much enthusiasm, to the Company. The presentation of ^{*speech*} ~~this~~ flag was ^{*made*} ~~done~~ by Miss Cornelia ^{*Austin*} Greshaw, of Oxford, N.C., my father's cousin, and on behalf of the Company the late Judge Fred Philips, then a young lawyer, ^{*here*} accepted this token of patriotism from the women. Fired by the inspiration of this ever-inspiring banner, our boys were ready to do any-

thing for the safety of our Southland in those perilous times.

Preparatory to the Battle of Big Bethel, in May 1861 the First North Carolina Regiment was ordered to Richmond and thence to Yorktown, Va. on York River, camping just outside of Yorktown, where they remained until the Battle of Bethel, June 10th. As the Edgewcombe Guards had held first rank among the old volunteer companies of the state, taking the position of Company "A", so it held that prominence through its only battle, that of Bethel, and to the end of its six months' term of service, about the middle of November 1861.

And now may we review the part that our Guards had in this great battle, the first of the war. Every day was full of work in preparation for the 10th of June. The Confederate forces were led by Gen. John S. Magruder, and the Yankees by Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, the strength of the two armies being ^{4,400} ~~over 4000~~ Yankees to ^{1,408} ~~something over 1000~~ Confederates. It was the early part of that memorable day that the battle had its beginning, and I wish it were in my power to describe for you something of the details, but suffice it to say that Company "A" was stationed in a swamp to the left of the battlefield, ~~and were afterwards~~ and were afterwards ordered to occupy the nearest advance. The North Carolina Regiment had been skirmishing and the Yankees were afforded protection, it was thought, behind and in a house or Church (known now as Big Bethel Church). It, therefore, was necessary to destroy this building, and Col. Hill came to Capt. Bridgers and said: "Capt. Bridgers, can you have that house burned?" and immediately went on. Whereupon, Capt. Bridgers asked for ~~six~~ men who would volunteer to burn the house, suggesting that one of the number should be an officer. Corporal George T. Williams said that he would be the officer and five others agreed to go with him. These brave sons of Edge-

combe who agreed to undertake this dangerous task were; George T. Williams, Thomas Fallon, John H. Thorpe, Henry L. Wyatt, Robt., H. Bradley, and R.H.Ricks. So with ^Cmathe^s and a hatchet, this little party scrambled over the breastworks, and proceeded across the open field. A volley was fired at them by a company, not from the house, but from the road to the left. As the company was well drilled in skirmishing all instantly dropped to the ground, their instructions being to fall and re-load. All arose to proceed on with the exception of one, who had fallen in obedience to instructions, to arise no more, and thus it was that Henry L. Wyatt, brave soldier and devoted patriot, was fatally wounded by a shot from a Yankee gun, and was the first man to die on the battlefield in the War Between the States. The others succeeded in firing the house and Yankees were whipped. ³Three of these brave sons of Edgcombe who volunteered to do this daring act are living today, R.H.Bradley of Raleigh, John H. Thorpe and R. H. Ricks of Rocky Mount.

It is with pride we read that it was due to the bravery of our own Edgcombe Guards or Company "A" that this victory was ours. Col. Hill in his official report said the day was saved by the brave North Carolina Regiment and they won the battle. And just here may I quote the words of Capt. Thorpe, who was an eye witness of that battle: "In that battle it was fully understood at the time and history admits and emphasizes that there were two crises; Winthrop's flank on our left and the entry of the enemy in our works on the front of our right. As to the first the Edgcombe Guards discovered ^WWinthrop's passing to our left flank and promptly and properly reported it an hour before it materialized. For this, the company has not been credited. For the second crisis we got credit." By order, too, the whole company passed through the front

of both armies to the danger place on the right.

Many favorable reports have been made of the bravery of the North Carolina Regiment during this Battle of Bethel, and especially of Capt. Bridgers' Company. "Capt. Bridgers of the North Carolina Regiment re-took, in a most daring manner, and at a critical period of the fight, the ~~work~~ from which Capt. Brown of the artillery had withdrawn a disabled gun to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy, and which work had been subsequently occupied by the enemy." Capt. Bridgers deserves the highest praise for this timely act of gallantry," says Col. Magruder in one of his reports. The second crisis in the battle referred to by Capt. Thorpe, as stated above, was no doubt when Bridgers made this brilliant charge. The papers of Virginia commented most favorably on the bravery of the North Carolina Regiment. The Richmond "Whig" says: "The North Carolina Regiment covered itself with glory at the Battle of Bethel." Hence we should feel proud of the record of the Edgecombe Guards in this battle.

It was after this great victory for our Regiment that Col. Hill was promoted to Brigadier General; Capt. Bridgers was made Lieut. Colonel of the Heavy Artillery, 10th North Carolina troops, and on Sept. 7th 1st Lieut. Whitmel P. Lloyd was made Captain; Jr. 2nd Lieut. W.G. Lewis was made 1st Lieut; and Kenneth Thigpen was made Jr. 2nd Lieut.

From the 10th of June until November the company with the other nine companies of the Regiment guarded that part of Virginia and rested on their honors. The Company was marched to old Jamestown on the James River, took boat to Richmond and was mustered out on Drewry's Hill November 13th, 1861.

I regret that I am unable to find out just which ones of the Edgecombe Guards returned home after the War. However, the last man of

that original volunteer company died a few weeks ago at Covington, Tenn., Mr. Jas. T. Owen, There are still living, I understand, something like ten or twelve of the men who composed that brave Company "A".

It might be interesting to note that at the end of the period when the volunteer guards were mustered out and ordered home, at Rocky Mount on their way home some one asked "Whom in Tarboro do you most desire to see?" The late Mr. Ed Zoeller, father of our present Mr. Ed Zoeller, quickly answered: "~~He~~ first man I want to see is ^{my} ~~the~~ wife."

Mr. Jesse Savage, a miserly man, who endeavored to save all the bottles he could find at Yorktown to bring home with him, when asked if he wished to volunteer again replied, "Never." But when told that Jeff Davis would draft him, he answered: "Jeff Davis might draft, and draft and draft, but _____ if Jesse Savage ever goes to war again." He did return, however, and fought through the war making a good soldier, having died a few years ago, a well-to-do and worthy citizen.

Numbers of young men, especially school boys, many from Bingham, ran away and joined the companies at Yorktown. Among those who joined our company was Benjamin Batts, who died at Yorktown of typhoid fever, when he was barely eighteen years of age.

And so we see that our Edgecombe Guards have always been a brave body of men, and still hold that honor for they are now on duty serving their country. Who knows, too, but that they may yet be called to the front to whip the Germans?