



*Their father's love provided for Frank, Frederick and Alice Humiston long after his death.*

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## *When Amos Humiston died at Gettysburg, it was only the start of his story*

# One Soldier's Tale

BY BEN FANTON

**O**n the afternoon at July 1, 1863, at about 4 o'clock, Amos Humiston died. He would never know his last dying action would lead to a story still told 130 years after his death. Nor would he know that the mystery created by his simple action would catch the attention of the press at that time and provide for the well-being of his own family and for hundreds of other children as well.

"An ordinary person" probably describes Amos Humiston well. He was born in 1830 in Tioga County. In 1854, he married Phylinda Smith. The couple had three children, Frank, Alice and Frederick. In the late 1850s, the family moved to Portville in Cattaraugus County, where Humiston worked as a harness maker.

When the Civil War began, Humiston did

not immediately enlist in the Army, as did many younger men. He was in his thirties and was responsible for a family. Following disastrous Union losses early in the war, President Lincoln sent out a call for 300,000 additional volunteers.

"Amos Humiston enlisted in July of 1862 to serve for three years," says Ronda Pollock, president of the Portville Historical and Preservation Society and a person who has done much to keep the story of Amos Humiston alive. "He joined up with some other men who were in their thirties. They were all that were left in the county because all of the younger fellows had already gone."

Humiston became part of the 154th New York Infantry, a regiment made up of men from Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties. The regiment was assigned to the First Brigade of the Second Division of the 11th Army Corps. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, the 11th Army Corps had a reputation early in the war for being much

more adept at running than at fighting.

The first major battle for Amos Humiston was the Union's defeat at Chancellorsville in May 1863. The 154th New York was badly mauled in that encounter. They had gone into the battle numbering 590 men. On the first of July, when they marched toward Gettysburg, there were about 300. Humiston, who had been promoted to sergeant, marched with them, carrying an ambrotype photograph of his three children that his wife had sent to him.

The Battle of Gettysburg, a three-day conflict that would prove to be the turning point in the Civil War, happened by accident. Confederate troops on a foraging expedition encountered Union troops just west of the small village. The battle began July 1, and as the day went on, each side hurried more troops to Gettysburg. By afternoon, the tide of battle began to turn in favor of the Confederate forces.

When the 154th New York arrived at



Gettysburg that afternoon, the Union lines were already beginning to unravel. They were dispatched to the northeast end of town where they took up a position near a brickyard, with the 134th New York on their right and the 27th Pennsylvania to their left. As soon as they formed their battle lines they came under heavy fire from Confederate forces commanded by Maj. Gen. Jubal Early.

Lt. Col. Daniel B. Allen, in charge of the 154th New York, quickly surveyed the scene. To his right, he saw that Confederates were flanking and getting behind the 134th New York. When he went to check on the situation to his left, he saw that the troops of the 27th Pennsylvania had withdrawn and the position they had occupied was being overrun by the enemy. Allen would later learn that the 27th Pennsylvania had been ordered to withdraw. That same order was to have been given to him but he never received it. The situation was getting desperate. Soon the two New York regiments would be encircled. Allen gave the order to withdraw, but it wouldn't be easy. The land directly behind their position was made up of village lots that were surrounded by board fences, blocking their retreat. The men of the 154th New York began a mad dash to the south for safety. Only 18 of them would make it. The majority of the regiment would be taken prisoner.

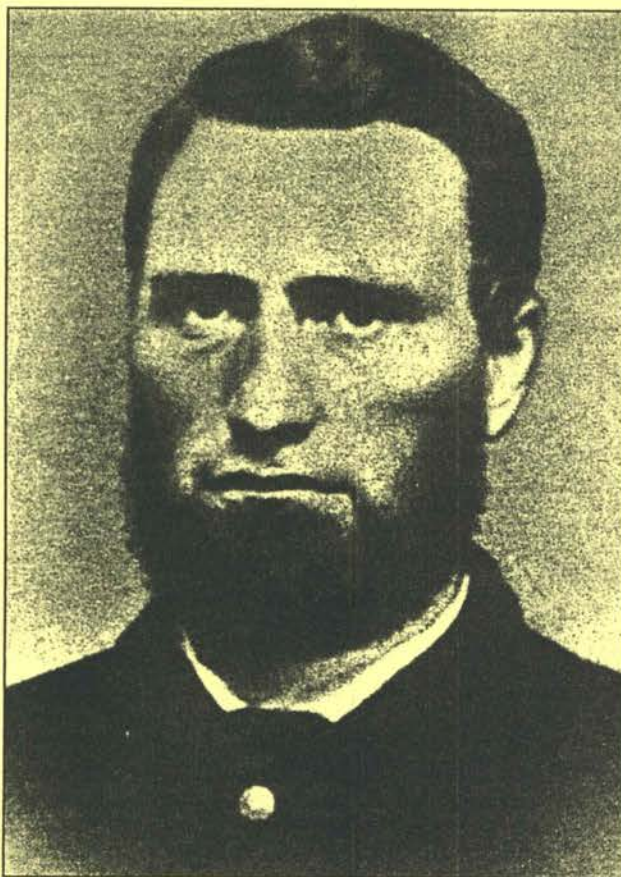
As he neared the intersection of Stratton and York Streets on his hurried retreat, Humiston was shot in the chest, just above the heart. He staggered into a vacant lot located between the home of Judge S.R. Russell and the railroad tracks. He laid down in the grass, took out the ambrotype photograph and held it in his hand. As he looked at the faces of his three children, Amos Humiston died.

The burial details at Gettysburg went about their work with grim efficiency. They had a lot to do. When they found the body of Amos Humiston, with the photograph clenched in his hand and his now sightless eyes fixed on the three small children, at least one of them was touched by the scene and took away the photograph and the story of the soldier who died while looking at it. The body was searched for identification but none was found. It was buried in the vacant lot and the spot was marked as the grave of an unknown Union soldier.

There are several accounts of how the next chapter in the story came about. The photograph and the story behind it ended up with Dr. John Francis Bourns, a physician from Philadelphia who had come to Gettysburg to offer his services to the wounded. Dr. Bourns decided to try to discover the identity of the unknown soldier who had owned the photograph. He had many *cartes de visite* copies of it

made and circulated. The press became interested in the story and carried accounts of it. One such story appeared in the American Presbyterian magazine.

Back in Portville, Phylinda Humiston had heard nothing from her husband since the Battle of Gettysburg. Many of the 154th New York had been taken prisoner. Perhaps Amos was in a Southern prisoner of war camp. In November 1863, someone in Portville brought Phylinda's attention to the story in the American Presbyterian. A letter was sent to Dr. Bourns and a copy of the photograph was for-



*Amos Humiston, a Portville harness maker, died 130 years ago at the Battle of Gettysburg.*

warded to Phylinda. When she saw it, her question had been answered, as had that of Dr. Bourns. On Jan. 2, 1864, Dr. Bourns arrived in Portville to present the ambrotype to Phylinda. The meeting between the two was covered by the Olean Times and reported in the somewhat florid journalistic style of the period. "When the relic, stained with the blood of her own husband, was presented to the wife, her hands shook like an aspen leaf, but by a strong effort she retained her composure."

Dr. Bourns had been considering helping the family with proceeds from the sale of copies of the photograph. His idea was expanded to create a charity that would assist other or-

phans of soldiers killed in the war. A contest was held for the best poem written about the Humiston incident. Balladeer James G. Clark of Dansville wrote the winning entry, which he set to music and called "The Children of the Battle Field." Proceeds from the sale of the sheet music also went to the fund for orphans. Shortly after the end of the war, the National Homestead at Gettysburg was created and opened as an orphanage supported by the funds raised.

Ronda Pollock points out that records from the Civil War period indicate that it wasn't easy for women who had been made widows by the war, and times were hard even for women whose husbands were away fighting. "Mrs. Warner, whose husband was a colonel with the 154th New York, wrote about how she wasn't able to pay her bills with Colonel Warner away," she says. "She wrote about how kind the merchants in Portville were to her. I assume it was the same for Mrs. Humiston. But in those days, what was a woman to do? She could take in washing, I suppose."

Phylinda Humiston wouldn't have to do that. Shortly after the opening of the orphanage in Gettysburg, she was offered a position as matron. She moved there with her children and lived in the orphanage. The building it occupied was within sight of the National Cemetery where Amos Humiston had been reburied in Grave #14, Row B of the New York section of graves. She stayed there for several years before remarrying and moving to Massachusetts.

"The children ended up with college educations, so it all came out very well," says Ms. Pollock.

As far as the final chapter of Amos Humiston is concerned, that happened yesterday. Through the efforts of Cindy Stouffer, Mary Ruth Collins and other residents of Gettysburg, a memorial to Amos Humiston was dedicated on July 3. A contingent of Portville residents, including Ronda Pollock, was on hand to observe and participate in the ceremony. The memorial is a bronze plaque affixed to a boulder located near the spot where Amos Humiston died. The engraving on the plaque shows Amos Humiston reunited with his three children. ■

*Ben Fanton's last story for BUFFALO was about Indian ghost story teller Duce Bowen.*