

Thanks to a cherished photograph, "the unknown soldier of Gettysburg" did not remain unknown for long.

By Ben Fanton

On the afternoon of July 1, 1863, the men of the 154th New York Infantry were marching at a double-quick pace through the streets of Gettysburg. The veteran regiment, along with the 134th New York and the 27th and 73rd Pennsylvania, made up the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division of XI Army Corps. They were moving north in support of a Union line that had already begun to crumble in the face of a massive Confederate assault that threatened to pierce the Federal defenses and drive the hard-pressed Army of the Potomac completely out of Gettysburg.

Among the men of the 154th New York was Sergeant Amos Humiston, whose final

act that day would capture the attention of the news media and, throughout the North, create a mystery that would take several months to solve, leading eventually to the establishment of a charitable institution to provide for the future well-being of his wife and three children.

The 154th New York Infantry was made up of men from Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties in western New York state. It had been formed in the fall of 1862 in response to President Lincoln's call for 300,000 additional volunteers after the failed Peninsula campaign, and many of its members were older men—the bulk of younger men in the area had already responded to earlier recruitment efforts. Such was the case with Humiston, who was in his early 30s at the time of his enlistment.

When Humiston went off to war, he left his wife, Phylinda, and their three children, Frank, Alice and Frederick, ages 7, 5 and 3, in the small community of Portville, where he had worked as a



Sergeant Amos Humiston was just one of numerous casualties suffered by the 154th New York Infantry on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg—until fate and this photograph brought him to the attention of a sympathetic public.

harness maker. Things did not go well for the newly formed regiment.

Assigned to Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard's XI Army Corps, the 154th took a beating at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, suffering heavy casualties. Having gone into battle with 590 men in line, they numbered only about 300 two months later when they marched through the streets of Gettysburg. They took up a central position on the northeast outskirts of the village, flanked by the 134th New York on the right and the 27th Pennsylvania to the left. The 73rd Pennsylvania had been held in reserve.

"The enemy consisting of [Jubal] Early's whole division came down upon us almost before we had got in line," recalled Lt. Col. Daniel B. Allen, who commanded the regiment that day. "We stopped the enemy and were holding them in our front, but their line so far overlapped the One hundred and thirty-fourth on our right that they swung around almost in their rear, and

had such an enfilading fire upon them and our whole line, that the regiment was compelled to give way, and I immediately gave orders for my regiment to fall back. They retreated toward the left. When I reached a position in the rear of where the Twenty-seventh Pennsylvania had formed, I found that they had been withdrawn without my knowledge, and that the enemy had outflanked us to a much greater extent upon our left than on the right."

The retreat was further complicated by the fact that village lots, surrounded by board fences, blocked the area directly behind the regiment's position, thus creating a man-made barrier to

withdrawal. "The men being almost entirely surrounded by the enemy, who outnumbered them more than five to one and were right in their midst, many of our men were compelled to surrender," Allen noted.

Those able to do so made a frantic dash toward the Union positions to the south on Cemetery Hill. One of the fugitives was Amos Humiston. As he neared the intersection of York and Stratton streets, Humiston was shot in the chest, just above the heart. Most likely knowing that his wound was mortal, he staggered into a vacant lot between the railroad tracks and a home owned by Judge S.R. Russell, and lay down. Humiston took out a small ambrotype photograph of his three children that his wife had recently sent to him. As he gazed at it, he died.

That night, only 15 men of the 154th New York answered the regimental roll call. Along with three officers, including Allen, they were all of the regiment who

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*Mortally wounded, Amos Humiston
apparently died with his eyes fixed upon
the photograph of his three children.*

remained fit for duty. There was some confusion as to how many had been killed, wounded or captured. "I recollect I was called upon for a report immediately after the close of the battle," Allen noted, "and the best I could do was to report all the missing as captured, unless I knew that they were killed or wounded." Allen was unaware of Humiston's fate, so he was not listed as having been killed.

Accounts vary as to what happened next, which often happens when the fog of history settles in. In any case, the body of the Union soldier in the vacant lot near the intersection of York and Stratton streets eventually was brought to the attention of a Federal burial detail. Someone, either a member of the detail or a civilian who had seen the body, was touched by the sight of the dead soldier clutching the photograph of his three children in his hand, his now sightless eyes still fixed on it. The photograph was taken away, and the body searched for identification. Nothing was found that could identify the soldier, so he was buried near the spot where he fell, the grave marked as that of an unknown Union soldier.

The story might well have ended there had it not been for the involvement of Dr. John Francis Bourns. A physician from Philadelphia, Bourns had come to the battlefield to assist in caring for the many wounded who had been left behind. How the photograph and the story behind it came into his possession is uncertain, but Bourns became intrigued with the idea of identify-

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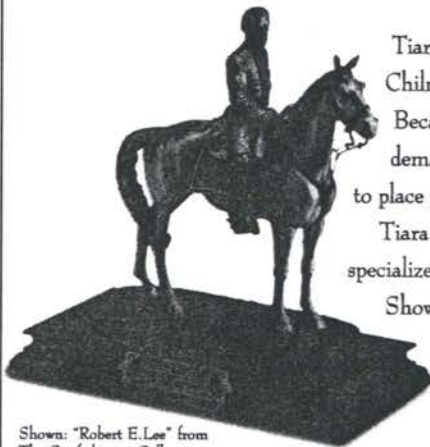
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ing the children and the man who had died holding their picture.


In an attempt to accomplish this, Bourns had copies of the photograph made in the form of *cartes de visite*, which he distributed throughout the North. The poignant story soon caught the attention of journalists, and many stories appeared about the unknown soldier of Gettysburg who had died with his children's photograph in his hands.

One such story appeared in *American Presbyterian* magazine, and in November 1863 it was brought to the attention of Phylinda Humiston in Portville. She had heard nothing from her husband since Gettysburg and had no way of knowing whether he was dead, wounded or perhaps taken prisoner, as were many men of the 154th New York on the first day at Gettysburg. Since the photograph described in the story sounded like the one Phylinda had sent to her husband, she sent a letter to Bourns, who forwarded a copy of the photograph to her. When she saw it, Phylinda knew immediately what had happened to her husband. Sadly, she notified Bourns that the three children were hers, giving the industrious doctor the solution to the mystery of the unknown soldier of Gettysburg.

The story might well have ended there, but once again it was not to be. In January 1864, Bourns traveled to Portville to give the original ambrotype back to Phylinda Humiston. He had entertained the notion of raising money through the sale of copies of the photograph to assist the three Humiston children. At a charity meeting held in Portville during his visit, Bourns announced his intention of using proceeds from the photograph to assist a great number of children orphaned by the war. The *American Presbyterian* joined in the effort and held a contest for the best poem about the incident. The winning entry was a song titled "The Children of the Battle Field," which was written and set to music by balladeer James G. Clark of Dansville, N.Y. Proceeds from the sale of sheet music of the song also went to benefit war orphans.


In 1866, an orphanage was established in Gettysburg. Coincidentally, the facility was located in a building used for a time during the battle as headquarters for Humiston's erstwhile corps commander, Oliver O. Howard. Phylinda Humiston was offered a position as matron and moved to Gettysburg with her three children. The building was within sight of the National Cemetery, where Amos Humiston had been reburied in the New York section, Grave No. 14, Row B. Phylinda remarried in 1869 and subsequently re-

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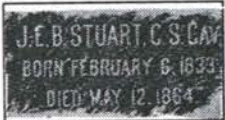

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PERSONALITY

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located with her children and new husband to Massachusetts.

Her departure might have ended the Amos Humiston saga, but the story was destined to live on. A group of present-day Gettysburg residents, including Cindy Stouffer, who has researched and written about the story, and Mary Ruth Collins, whose family had owned the dormitory section of the former orphanage for many years, felt that some public recognition should be given to the slain Union soldier who so loved his children. On July 3, 1993, a memorial to Amos Humiston was dedicated in Gettysburg. Located near where his body was found, the memorial has a bronze plaque bearing an engraving of Humiston and his children. The ceremony included a rendition of "The Children of the Battle Field," and a group of citizens from Portville, N.Y., attended the ceremony to see their hometown Civil War hero honored.


Much recognition has been given to the exploits of those of higher rank than Amos Humiston. The heroics of Joshua Chamberlain, the periodic flashes of military genius by Stonewall Jackson, and the supreme leadership qualities of Robert E. Lee have been well reported. But humble Amos Humiston seems to serve as an everyman for the thousands of soldiers on both sides of the war who left their homes and families and went off to pay the ultimate price. His role was well described by Reverend I.G. Ogden, pastor of the Presbyterian church in Portville, at the meeting held there in January 1864, when the idea of a fund for orphans was first announced.

"How much they think of their families and what a sacrifice they made in leaving wife and children at the call of their country," Ogden said, "we may learn somewhat from that touching incident of the dead soldier at Gettysburg, who, as life was slowly ebbing away, was gazing fondly upon the pictured faces of his three little children about to be orphans, and thinking of their mother soon to be left to widowhood. The love of a parent for his children, and the love of a patriot for his country, are among the strongest emotions of the soul; and both were developed in noblehearted Humiston. His body, mouldering beneath the sod, attests to the one, and the bloodstained ambrotype the other."

Perhaps now Amos Humiston can rest in peace with his beloved children, forever young in a world beyond wars. □

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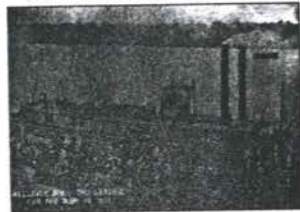
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COVER: Major General James Longstreet and his staff approach the Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg, in a painting by Mort Künstler. The pivotal battle that took place at Gettysburg produced thousands of stories, heroic and poignant. One of the latter involved a slain Union sergeant and a photograph (story, P. 18; COVER ART: Mort Künstler, Inc.). LEFT: On May 27, 1864, Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman suffers one of several setbacks on the road to Atlanta as Brig. Gen. Hiram Granbury's Texas Brigade of Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne's Division routs Sherman's troops at Pickett's Mill, in a painting by Rick Reeves (story, P. 66).

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