

The Quest to Find Jacob Milton Benthall

By

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As a historian I have been interested in the Tenth Minnesota Infantry Regiment and especially Company C of this regiment. My great grandfather and great uncle, four generations removed, were Pennsylvanians who came to Highland Township in Wabasha County, Minnesota in the late 1850s and both served in the Company C; and my grandfather perished in the War.

The Tenth Minnesota Company C was from Wabasha County, Minnesota, and while Wabasha County men were contributors to all of the Minnesota regiments, Company C was the only full Company in the War from the County. Only three soldiers in Company C were men who were not from the townships in Wabasha County bordering on the towns of Plainview and Elgin; two of these three were Iowa men.

At the battle of Nashville the 10th Minnesota was in the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division of the Right Wing of the XVI Corps fighting as a Detachment Army of Tennessee at Nashville. In the famous charge on Shy's' Hill on December 16, 1864 by this Brigade, the 10th Minnesota was on the left of the Brigade with the 93rd Indiana in the center and the 114th Illinois on the right. Co. C along with Co. F was on the extreme uncovered left or end of the line. Seven men in Co. C would be killed in the charge along with Captain White and the regiment's Major Michael Cook.

In June of 1865 after the last battles of the Civil War at the battles of Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely near Mobile Alabama, the Tenth Minnesota was bivouacked at Meridian, Mississippi awaiting transport home to Minnesota. At this time several of the more literary sorts in the Regiment undertook to publish a regimental newspaper titled *The Tenth Minnesota News*.

Only a single issue of this newspaper was ever published by them. In that single issue there was an article titled, *The Final Charge at Nashville*. This article detailed this great event, the success of which was largely attributed to the four engaged Minnesota regiments. In fact, in all my readings on the Civil War it was one of the most eloquent and well written pieces on a battle that I had ever read. Unfortunately, the article was signed at the end only with the initials J.M.B.

Initially and for several years I did not pursue this further as I assumed these initials belonged to the original Colonel of the Tenth Minnesota, James Baker. Baker was an attorney and at the time of

enlistment Secretary of State in Minnesota, and thus an educated man capable of such writings. In 1865 Colonel Baker was not with the regiment nor was he with them at the Battle of Nashville and thus would not have any direct experience with the battle. Early in 1864 he had been elevated to the position of Provost Marshall of the City of St. Louis. Colonel Samuel Jennison had been elevated to the head of the regiment with Baker's appointment to St. Louis and Jennison led the Tenth Regiment in the Battle of Nashville.

Last year doing more research on the Tenth Minnesota in conjunction with the sesquicentennial and the forthcoming 150th anniversary of the Battle of Nashville, I revisited this article on the Battle of Nashville and did an extensive research of every soldier in the Tenth Minnesota. In this process I found only one soldier with a name whose initials would be J.M.B. It was quite amazing to discover that the author who wrote this article with such an eloquence and command of the English language was one Jacob (John) Milton Benthall, not an officer but indeed a lowly private. Even more exciting for me was that he was a member of Company C of the Tenth Minnesota, the Company from my hometown and that of my GG Grandfather. John was one of the only three non-Wabasha County men in Company C and I discovered he was from Quasqueton, Iowa.

Making this discovery I contacted the Quasqueton, Iowa Area Historical Society to find out what more information might exist on John and to validate if in fact he had the background for such authorship. With the assistance of Deb Crawford of the Historical Society in Quasqueton I made the following discoveries.

During the Civil War it turns out that John in addition to soldiering was a regular War Correspondent for the Buchanan County *Guardian Newspaper* located in Independence, Iowa, the County seat of Buchanan County. During the War he made regular contribution to the Newspaper which reflected his adventures in the War. The quality of his writing reflected the fact that, although a private in rank, he was a well-educated individual. Unfortunately, in the early 1900s the Guardian Newspaper perished in a fire and all of the newspaper's files including John's correspondence work were lost.

What remained of John's writing at the time are remnants from some of the newspapers of that time retained in a private collection. More research remains to be done to discover if more articles may be available. What is available at this time in addition to his eloquent piece on the Battle of Nashville are his writing on the Dakota Uprising in Minnesota and the Sibley expedition to the Dakotas and possible one summary article on his experience in the South. Reading these writings it is easy to validate that John was indeed a fine writer. The style of writing is similar to that of his Final Charge at Nashville.

Jacob (John) Milton Benthall was born in Princeton, Massachusetts, September 12, 1832; he moved to Lowell in 1835, where he remained until 1850. During this time he gained an academic education at the Lowell Academy and learned the dry goods business, spending one year in Boston. In 1854 he immigrated to Iowa, remaining a short time at Dubuque closing business connected with his father's estate. In April 1855 he came to Quasqueton in east central Iowa and entered the milling business. Sometime after 1858 he came up river and enrolled in the Tenth Minnesota, Company C in August of 1862.

For three years to the day John served in the Tenth Minnesota, first in the Indian Wars of Iowa and Minnesota, and then went west into the Dakotas in 1863 on an expedition to the Missouri River under the command of Brigadier General Henry Sibley. The balance of the three years he spent in the south campaigning with the Tenth Minnesota mustering out in 1865.

Why and how he happened to enlist in the Tenth Minnesota is not fully known. In 1855 he married Mary E. Stratton of Boston, Massachusetts. She died in the spring of 1858 leaving a son Fred, who John sent back East to be raised by his family in Massachusetts. It could be assumed that John was possibly distraught over the loss of his family and seeking solace and new adventure he journeyed north for a spell and enlisted in Wabasha County. It is also possible John knew someone in the Wabasha area.

This later may well be the case. John enlisted on August 21, 1862 in the City of Wabasha in Wabasha County and there was only one other soldier that enlisted from the City of Wabasha and this gentleman enlisted on the same day. This gentleman's name was Horace Whiting. Horace was born in Birmingham, Vermont, the youngest of 11 children. His parents died when he was young and he was sent to Massachusetts to be raised. It is very likely that he shared his boyhood and formative years in Massachusetts in the company of John Benthall.

There must have been a strong bond of some sort between these men that they chose to serve in the War together. This is validated by the fact that at the time of their enlistment in August of 1862 in Co. C of the 10th MN, a company and regiment of soldiers was raised in the Quasqueton/Clinton Iowa area, the 27th Iowa infantry regiment, which would have had many friends and associates of John's. This regiment of Iowa soldiers came north for a spell in late 1862 to Minnesota and was stationed at Fort Ripley near Lake Milaca, just as the 10th was stationed further south in Minnesota at Fort Ridgeley and in LeSuer in the winter of 1862.

The 27th then went south in early 1863 and were placed in the Right Wing of the XVI Corps, the same Corps that the 10th Minnesota would join in June of 1864. The 10th was in the 1st Division and the 27th was in the 2nd Division. They both fought at Tupelo, the Oxford Raid on the march after Price in Arkansas and Missouri and at Nashville. At Nashville the 2nd Division was commanded by Major General Kenner Garrard, one of the four Garrard brothers from Old Frontenac in Goodhue County in Minnesota who were all Generals in the War. The 27th unlike the 10th was lightly engaged at the Battle of Nashville.

After the War John returned to Quasqueton and purchased another mill in Rowley Iowa and also later operated a general store in Quasqueton until he sold it in 1901. During this time he was a very active citizen in the community. After 1901 he went to Boston to make his home there with his son Fred. During his time in Iowa after the War, he remarried in 1875, he wife being a medical doctor who later ran Girls Schools in Illinois and Denver, Colorado. John had a son and daughter by this marriage. John passed in November of 1908 at the home of his son in Boston, Massachusetts. He is buried in the family plot in Lowell, Massachusetts with his parents and sister. A recent inquiry at the Cemetery indicated that he is not even listed by the Cemetery a veteran and has never had a flag on his grave at Memorial Day services. The Cemetery plans to rectify that.