

"Pvt. James Baker"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Each Memorial Day we pay tribute to all veterans, although the observance, originally known as Decoration Day, was created to honor Union Civil War soldiers.

By exploring the experiences of one local soldier, Pvt. James Baker, Co. C, 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry, we can see the war on a more personal level. James Baker was born in 1843 to a farm family living near Bird Hill, Carroll County. Like most local men, he followed his father's occupation and his early life revolved around the daily and annual rhythms of agricultural life. The coming of the Civil War offered an opportunity to leave the farm and participate in a noble and adventurous cause. Baker, like many of his contemporaries on both sides, found the temptation irresistible.

The 6th Maryland Infantry was formed in August-September 1862 in response to Pres. Lincoln's call for 300,000 troops. Companies A and C were recruited in Carroll County which meant that the volunteers went off to war with their neighbors and relatives and under the command of someone they had probably known for years.

James Baker enlisted the unit on 13 August 1862, the first day Second Lieutenant Ira Tyler accepted recruits in Westminster. After service at Harper's Ferry, the 6th Maryland fought several battles in Virginia including Berryville, Opequan Creek and Winchester.

Unfortunately, Baker's service with the regiment was relatively short. He was severely wounded in the right arm at the Battle of Locust Grove, Va., on 27 November 1863. His records reveal that he received a bullet wound two inches above the elbow that broke his humerus.

Pvt. Baker was admitted to the General Hospital, Arlington, Va., on 4 December; presumably he was treated at a field hospital on November 27th. One can only imagine the suffering he experienced and witnessed during his early hospitalization. The surgeon who attended his wound removed two inches of bone from his arm, and although he kept his arm, it was rendered nearly useless. The operation was actually rather advanced since amputation was almost a certainty given the nature of his wound.

Pvt. Baker was honorably discharged on 19 April 1864 by reason of medical disability. He was issued a Certificate of Disability, proof he had served and been honorably discharged, which provides some facts about him. He was 5 feet, 5 3/4 inches tall and had gray eyes and dark hair. He had been a farmer before the war.

Pvt. Baker applied for a Federal pension on 14 June 1864; he received a Federal pension throughout his life. The Pension Office also allowed him the expense of an "apparatus to resection."

His pension file at the National Archives contains a letter from his former sergeant, then Second Lieutenant Thomas Ocker, who wrote, "I certifie on honor that James Baker , Private of Co. C, 6th Md. Regt., was duly sworn & mustered in to the United States Army on or about the 23rd of August 1862 and did serve in the 8th & 3rd A[rmy] Corps as a Private and to my certain knowledge was wounded in the right arm in the Battle of Locus[t] Grove, Va. on the 27th day of November 1863. The above wounded was a good Soldier & did good service."

Tragically, Capt. Ocker was wounded in the final assault on Petersburg, Va., during the last week of the war and he would not survive the war. Of the seven officers who served in Co. C, two (not including Ocker who had been transferred to Co. A) were killed, two were wounded and discharged for disability; another officer was discharged for disability and yet another survived a Southern prisoner of war camp. The 6th Maryland's distinguished battle record and severe casualties led to the unit being designated as one of the "fighting regiments" of the Union Army.

After being discharged, Pvt. Baker returned to his home in Carroll County and married Elizabeth Barnhart of Dennings. The marriage produced five children before Elizabeth's untimely death in 1873. James Baker married Ellen Pennington in 1874 and the union produced six children. His new wife assumed the role of mother and nurse to James. Ellen Baker noted in an 1892 affidavit to the Pension Office, "I must daily attend to his arm, he requires Leather Splints to his arm, or he has no use of it. I must dress it and apply splints and bandages daily."

Pvt. Baker carried the effect of his crippling wound to his grave.

He died on December 2, 1918 and his obituary noted, "Mr. Baker was veteran of the Civil War, having served two years in Company C, 6th Maryland Regiment, from which he was discharged as a private April 6, 1864, after completely lost the use of his right arm from a shell [sic] wound." He was buried at Deer Park Methodist Cemetery.

Pvt. Baker's final resting place is marked by a Federal veteran's marker installed in 1998 and rededicated by the Sons of Union Veterans, family and the public on May 30, 1999.

The writer would like to thank Harold Robertson for providing extensive research materials used to make some remarks at the rededication and to prepare this column.

Photo caption: Pvt. James Baker, Co. C., 6th Maryland Infantry, posed in the uniform of a Union Army infantry private in c1862. Courtesy of Hazel Frizzell.