

HISTORIC RED HOOK

Col. John Watts de Peyster Jr.

Born 1814 Died 1873

St. Paul's and Trinity Parish, Tivoli

The large, stone, de Peyster vault just behind the church

Civil War Veteran

When the Civil War erupted, many residents of Tivoli enlisted in the Union cause. Three sons of Gen. John Watts de Peyster and Estelle Livingston de Peyster served. (Patriotism ran in the family with de Peyster, Sr., volunteering to serve, but because he was in his 40s, his offer was not accepted. What the elder de Peyster could proffer was military advice; some was adopted by the Union Army, and New York State honored him with the title of brevet major general after the war.) Like his father, de Peyster, Jr., was honored with a brevet promotion to colonel in 1865; unlike his father, he experienced combat, having served in the battles of Chancellorsville and Williamsburg. He survived the fighting but was sidelined by illness and injury, resigning from the military in the summer of 1864. John Watts de Peyster, Jr. ultimately died in 1873 due to the impacts of the consumption and the effects of injury contracted while serving. His father, the General, as was his wont, memorialized his late son with several markers.



A white marble obelisk, according to Local Memorials Relating to the de Peyster and Watts and Affiliated Families, Connected With Red Hook Township, Dutchess Co., S.N.Y., written by Gen. de Peyster under his pen name of Anchor and published in 1881, honors de Peyster's Jr.'s service. It is inscribed:

"In Memory of JOHN WATTS de PEYSTER, Jr. Major First New York Vol. Artillery, Brevet Colonel U.S.V. and N.Y.V. Greatly distinguished for gallantry and good conduct at the Battle of Williamsburg' (Monday, 5th May, 1862, as Aid to his cousin, Maj. General Philip Kearny), 'and no less remarked for his coolness and courage under me (Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker) at the Battle of Chancellorsville (2d, 3d, 4th May, 1863, as Chief of Artillery, 2d Division, 6th Corps), to Maj. General Albion P. Howe. After nearly ten years unremitted suffering, the consequence of arduous service in the field, he died 12th of April, 1873, in his native City of New York, aged 31 years, 4 months and 10 days."

Another marble tablet behind the church and up against the chancel wall lauds Brevet Colonel John Watts de

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Peyster, Jr., and adds this descriptor:

“A young officer’ (whom Kearny styled ‘as brave as himself’) ‘of zeal, energy, and fired with a patriotic ambition.’ (Major Gen. Peck.) ‘A soldier of great force in action, and capable by his personal herosim of inspiring others with his own fiery courage.’ (Brig. Gen. Josh. T. Owen.) ‘The chivalric gallantry of character and the patriotic devotion to duty which led Col. de Peyster in the voluntary performance of more than duty, to sacrifice upon the altar of his country, his health and the bright promise of a noble manhood, justly entitle him to the favorable consideration of his government and the kind consideration of his contrymen.’ (Maj. Gen. A. P. Howe.) In every position, as a Staff Cavalry, and Artillery officer, equally distinguished, he died, a martyr for the Union.”

Col. John de Peyster, according to his father’s Local Memorials, was the epitome of a soldier as he commanded Howe’s artillery in the battle of Chancellorsville, VA. In a discussion with Major General Alexander Shaler, the elder de Peyster reported that Shaler stated “These guns saved the Sixth Corps. The man who handled those guns must have been a brave and capable fellow.” Another general, Gen. Owens wrote to the elder de Peyster “that his son, Watts, behaved in such an admirable manner that he [Gen. Owens] stayed under fire at the risk of his life to see him handle his artillery and give the Rebel fits.”

Such valor came at a high price. Col. de Peyster was stricken with “the James River fever, with which he lay at the point of death for many months,” states his obituary which appeared in The New York Times on April 14, 1873. Despite that illness, he returned to the action in time to fight in the Battle of Chancellorsville, paying a heavier cost: “In this severe engagement his physical energies were exhausted, and concussion of the brain sowed the seeds for maladies which made his subsequent life one of great suffering. In quest of health he made the circuit of the globe, being among the first American travelers to Japan. ‘Brave, fearless, a perfect specimen of a gallant little gentleman,’ to use the language of a letter concerning him, he literally died of exhaustion, having shown the same pluck in the battle for life as when fighting for his country.’

Col. de Peyster never married before his death at age 32 in 1873 at his family’s home at No. 39 East 21st Street in New York City. The obituary in The New York Times noted, “He had been confined to his home for some months past, and being a victim to consumption, his sudden demise was not unexpected. The event has cast a gloom over a large circle of friends and acquaintances, who deeply sympathize with the family of deceased in their severe afflictions.”

Too early loss and its subsequent grief were linked with the family, as it typically was for many during that era. A younger sister Maria Livingston de Peyster predeceased Col. John Watts de Peyster, Jr., in 1857 when she was five years old. At his death, he was survived by his namesake father, his mother, his younger brother Col. Frederic de Peyster, who passed away in 1874 also due to complications of consumption contracted during

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Civil War service; his younger sister Estelle Elizabeth de Peyster Toler, who died of pneumonia in 1889; and his youngest brother Col. Johnston Livingston de Peyster, also a Civil War veteran, who went on to serve in the New York State Assembly and as a mayor of Tivoli before his death in 1903.

Research and writing by Thea Burgess, 2022