

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry

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The 20th Maine was a three-year regiment that fought with the Army of the Potomac. It served between autumn 1862 and spring 1865, fighting at Shepherdstown Ford, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, the Overland Campaign, Peebles Farm, Hatcher's Run, and Five Forks. Altogether, 1,621 men served in the regiment, of whom 293 died (146 by disease or accident and another 147 by combat), making it one of the famed "Fox's Fighting 300."¹ The 20th Maine lived a wartime existence without an inordinate amount of fame or fanfare, but today it stands out as an exceptional unit due to its widespread popularity. The regiment's participation in the Battle of Gettysburg has lofted it into pseudo-legendary status. Indeed, in 2013, one of Maine's U.S. Senators, Angus King, explained the 20th Maine's actions during a speech on the Senate floor. Boldly, he claimed the regiment made all the difference at Gettysburg, declaring, "It's arguable that they saved the country."² Today few can doubt that it is the most recognized Union regiment.

The 20th Maine's history began on July 2, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton called for 300,000 volunteers to augment the Union's depleted armies, a consequence of recent defeats suffered in the Eastern Theater. Under this call, Maine had to provide 9,609 soldiers. Two days later, Governor Israel Washburne, Jr. appealed to his citizens, reminding them that Maine had already raised 15,000 troops, and it should not "falter or fail in the present [,] nor the future." Washburne declared, "I invoke of the people of this State a prompt and hearty response to this new demand upon their patriotism."³

In accordance with the governor's request, Mainers opened recruiting offices, raising companies for one of five new regiments called up, the 16th through 20th Maine Volunteers. The men who joined the ten companies that constituted the 20th Maine came from towns and cities in central and southern Maine, such places as Dover, Augusta, Dexter, Cornville, Bangor, Plymouth, Waterville, Bristol, Rockland, and Waldoboro. Farmers filled a majority of the regiment, but the companies also contained an assortment

¹ William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Albany, New York: Brandow Printing Company, 1889), 135. Fox determined the 300 hundred hardest fighting regiments in the Union army based on their losses in combat.

² Tom Bell, "Why Gettysburg's Called a Maine Battlefield," *Portland Press Herald*, June 29, 2013.

³ Israel Washburne, Jr. to the People of Maine, July 4, 1862, in Edwin B. Houghton, *The Campaigns of the Seventeenth Maine* (Portland: Short and Loring, 1866), 2.

of other trades, including mechanics, blacksmiths, clerks, mariners, and lumbermen. Although the 20th Maine contained a few teenagers and married, middle-aged men, the overwhelming majority were unmarried men in their twenties.⁴ Their general motivation was hard to determine. Undoubtedly, some wanted to enlist to receive the \$45 state bounty (or the local bounties, which went as high as \$100), but patriotic sentiment actuated many others. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a thirty-three-year-old professor who taught at Bowdoin College, was among those who believed that Maine's best men needed to sacrifice for their country's honor. Begging for a commission, Chamberlain wrote to Governor Washburne, revealing his motive for wanting to serve:

I have always been interested in military matters, and what I do not know in that line I know how to learn. Having been lately elected to a new department here, I am expecting to have leave, at the approaching Commencement, to spend a year or more in Europe, in the service of the College. I am entirely unwilling, however, to accept this offer, if my Country needs my service. . . . But, I fear, this war, so costly of blood and treasure, will not cease until the men of the North are willing to leave good positions, and sacrifice the dearest personal interests, to rescue our Country from Desolation, and defend the National Existence against treachery at home and jeopardy abroad. This war must be ended, with a swift and strong hand; and every man ought to come forward and ask to be placed at his proper post.⁵

Swayed by Chamberlain's request, Washburne offered Chamberlain a colonelcy, but he turned it down, worrying that he needed more experience, which for him, meant starting a little lower within the army's hierarchy to learn the business of command. Consequently, on August 8, 1862, Chamberlain accepted a lieutenant colonelcy, becoming second-in-command of the 20th Maine, responsible for the regiment's right wing when it engaged in line of battle.

The 20th Maine assembled over the course of eight weeks, with each company arriving at Camp Mason, a training bivouac on the outskirts of Portland. There, the soldiers received uniforms and cursory equipment. Officially, the men joined the U.S. Volunteers on August 29, when a mustering officer swore them into service. Colonel Adelbert Ames, a twenty-six-year-old graduate of West Point, held regimental command. Although widely disliked by the rank-and-file because of his strict attention to discipline—indeed, one sergeant predicted that Ames would likely be killed by his own men at the first battle—he possessed a sound military pedigree. Ames had fought with distinction at Bull Run and Malvern Hill, suffering a grievous wound at the former, and although many soldiers did not appreciate his style of command, after the war, veterans

⁴ Thomas A. Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine: The 20th Maine and the Gettysburg Campaign* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6, 169-80.

⁵ Joshua Chamberlain to Israel Washburn, July 14, 1862, Maine State Archives, Augusta, Maine, "Records Relating to the Career of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain."

of the 20th Maine admitted that Ames's severity had been essential in preparing the regiment for combat.⁶

On September 2, once the 20th Maine reached full capacity with 1,100 officers and men, it received orders to march to the railroad depot in Portland, where it proceeded by train to Boston. There, it joined the 36th Massachusetts on the transport *Merrimack*, setting sail for Alexandria, where it landed four days later. The soldiers stayed at the Washington Arsenal, where they received their weapons, and on September 11, they accompanied the Army of the Potomac in its pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia, which had entered Maryland seven days earlier.

The 20th Maine did not see much combat in its first campaign. The march through Frederick tested the endurance of the newly-minted soldiers, and straggling abounded, but when the Army of the Potomac engaged Confederate forces at Antietam Creek on September 17, the 20th Maine stayed in reserve, suffering no casualties. After the Confederate retreat, the regiment assisted the V Corps in a pursuit, and on September 19, the regiment reached Shepherdstown Ford on the Potomac River, where it came under fire for the first time, losing three men wounded. During that skirmish, the Maine soldiers lined the north bank, targeting puffs of smoke arising from the foliage across the river, where a Confederate division busily fought off two Union brigades. Although the V Corps suffered a dramatic defeat, the 20th Maine was spared heavy loss by virtue of its safe position on the north side of the river.⁷

For the next five weeks, the 20th Maine remained inactive, encamped near the Antietam Ironworks. Here, it joined Colonel Thomas B. W. Stockton's 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, V Corps. A sudden dip in the temperature caused a wave of measles and typhoid fever to spread, a consequence of the regiment having left Maine without proper provisions. Private Theodore Gerrish complained, "We had no tents, and for a number of weeks were without overcoats. With shivering bodies and chattering teeth we used to sit around the camp-fires, along the picket lines, and endeavored to make ourselves believe that a soldier's life was a very pleasant one." Likewise, another soldier, Private Henry Simonds, complained to his wife that disease flourished, and he was among its victims. "A good many are sick," he wrote on October 12, "some with the measles, and some one thing and some another. . . [S]ome of the time I don't feel so well. Today is one of those days[.] I have [a] considerable . . . headache." Simonds's case was serious; he eventually died of typhoid fever on December 9. Altogether, the 20th Maine lost more than 300 men from its ranks due to illness incurred during its first two months in the field. The dramatic

⁶ John J. Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine: A Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1957), 1-3, 20-3.

⁷ Maine at Gettysburg Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg: Report of the Commissioners* (Portland, ME: Lakeside Press, 1898), 274-5.

losses prompted Captain Ellis Spear to write later, “This was, in some respects, the most trying period in the history of the regiment.”⁸

The 20th Maine’s second campaign involved more action. After a short excursion to Warrenton, the regiment rejoined the main body of the Army of the Potomac at Falmouth, where it participated in the Rappahannock River Campaign. On December 13, the 20th Maine constituted part of the army’s futile attacks against the Confederate defenses at Marye’s Heights. Shortly after 6:30 p.m., the regiment accompanied Stockton’s brigade in a dramatic charge across the Fredericksburg fairgrounds. Confederate fire was heavy and Colonel Stockton exhibited reluctance to risk his men in a fruitless frontal assault; he thus ordered his soldiers to cease their attack and lie down, engaging the Confederates at long range. The 20th Maine remained in its prone position throughout the evening, popping away until darkness ended the battle. As Private Gerrish later explained, “The utter impossibility of taking the rebel position was manifest to every man in the regiment, but we blazed away at the enemy, and they at us.” Altogether, the abortive attack cost the 20th Maine four men killed and thirty-two wounded. Although the regiment suffered lightly compared to others in the division, Lieutenant Colonel Chamberlain believed his regiment had been uselessly sacrificed. During the evacuation from the city, he told a general, “We were handed in piecemeal, on toasting forks.”⁹

The winter and spring of 1863 witnessed a period of inactivity and rehabilitation. On December 15, the 20th Maine re-crossed the Rappahannock and went into winter hibernation at Falmouth, and there it remained until late January 1863, when it accompanied the “Mud March,” a five-day, army-wide excursion intended to seek a crossing above Fredericksburg. For the next three months, the 20th Maine encamped at Stoneman’s Switch, awaiting the arrival of warmer weather. While in bivouac, Colonel Ames relinquished command to Lieutenant Colonel Chamberlain in May 1863, accepting a position on the staff of the new army commander, Major General Joseph Hooker. On April 17, tragedy befell the regiment when Surgeon N. P. Monroe reported eighty-four men sick with smallpox, the result of a botched inoculation. Two days later, the regiment received orders to encamp at “Quarantine Hill,” a medical isolation bivouac designed to halt the spread of the disease, but even so, three members of the regiment died.¹⁰

The quarantine limited the 20th Maine’s participation in the next campaign. On April 27, General Hooker commenced active operations, embarking on what has since been called the Chancellorsville Campaign, a plan to outmaneuver the Army of Northern Virginia by crossing the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers upstream from Falmouth.

⁸ Theodore Gerrish, *Army Life: A Private’s Reminiscences of the War* (Portland, ME: Hoyt, Fogg, and Donham, 1882), 48; Henry Simonds to wife, October 12, 1862, <http://www.soldierstudies.org/blog/2010/06/new-20th-maine-letters-found/> accessed February 10, 2016; Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 275.

⁹ Francis A. O’Reilly, *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 385-7; Gerrish, *Army Life*, 77; Willard M. Wallace, *Soul of the Lion: A Biography of Joshua L. Chamberlain* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), 61.

¹⁰ Alice Rains Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 110.

Initially, the 20th Maine remained in seclusion; however, on May 2, Chamberlain rode to army headquarters, and after a dyspeptic meeting with the Chief-of-Staff, Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield, he convinced him to end the medical isolation. Angrily, Chamberlain argued, “If we couldn’t do anything else we could give the enemy the small pox.” Probably, however, Butterfield released the regiment because the Army of the Potomac had just suffered a catastrophic defeat that evening at Chancellorsville. Butterfield sent midnight orders, dividing the 20th Maine into two contingents and sent them to guard the telegraph lines along the army’s escape routes, Banks Ford and United States Ford. The 20th Maine remained on guard duty until May 6, when it returned to Stoneman’s Switch, reuniting with Hooker’s defeated army.¹¹

The regiment encamped at the switch until May 28, during which time several important administrative changes occurred. On May 20, the Senate confirmed Ames’s promotion to brigadier general, and he left the regiment for good, assuming command of a brigade in the 11th Corps. Meanwhile, Governor Abner Coburn commissioned Chamberlain as colonel. Then, on May 23, Brigadier General James Barnes consolidated 120 three-year volunteers from the defunct 2nd Maine, a two-year regiment that had mustered out four days earlier. The consolidation did not occur peacefully. Forty transferees refused to serve with any regiment but their old one. The corps commander, Major General George Gordon Meade, delivered instructions to Chamberlain, telling him to “make them do duty, or shoot them down.” Instead, Chamberlain handled the mutinous soldiers his own way. He offered them a choice: serve in the 20th Maine or do not; he would not threaten them. All but six accepted his offer. At that point, on paper, the 20th Maine contained 503 officers and men.¹²

After receiving orders to accompany the 3rd Brigade on its mission to guard the fords along the Rappahannock, the 20th Maine’s next few weeks became a blur of movement. On June 13, orders instructed the regiment to join the 1st Division’s march in pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia, which had shifted combat operations into the Shenandoah Valley. That day, the 20th Maine departed for Morrisville, and the next two weeks brought it north through Aldie, Upperville, Middleburg, and Edward’s Ferry, and then into Maryland. On July 1, as the regiment prepared to leave Union Mills, arriving orders insisted that it rush to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where the vanguard of the Army of the Potomac had engaged Confederate forces.

On July 2, the second day at Gettysburg, the 20th Maine sat in reserve near the Granite Schoolhouse Lane, until about 3:30 p.m., when the new commander of the army, Meade, redeployed the 5th Corps to bolster the Union left flank. Due to a series of feverishly-transmitted orders, Colonel Strong Vincent’s 3rd Brigade (to which the 20th Maine belonged) occupied Little Round Top, a rocky summit approximately 650 feet above sea level and approximately 150 feet higher than the surrounding Plum Run Valley. When deployed into line-of-battle, the 20th Maine occupied the left of Vincent’s

¹¹ Wallace, *Soul of the Lion*, 66-67.

¹² Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence*, 114-15; Wallace, *Soul of the Lion*, 68-69; Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine*, 181.

line, sitting atop a rocky spur on the hill's south slope. Additionally, Chamberlain assigned Company B to a position 100 yards east of the spur, a precaution intended to prevent his regiment from being flanked. Due to illness and temporary reassignments, the regiment counted only 386 aggregate.

At 5:30 p.m., two brigades of Confederate infantry attacked the 3rd Brigade, and two regiments—the 15th and 47th Alabama—focused their attacks on the 20th Maine. Several times, the Alabamians attempted to dislodge the Maine soldiers, but failed each time. At one point, the 15th Alabama managed to slip around to the eastern slope of the spur and assailed the 20th Maine from the rear, but Chamberlain ordered his soldiers to undouble their files, turning their two-rank formation into a one-rank line. Bending the regiment's shape into a hairpin, the left-flank companies—G, C, H, and A—repelled the assault.

By 6:30, the Maine soldiers had fired away most of their ammunition, about sixty rounds each, and several company-grade officers asked permission if they could advance their men down the hill to rescue the wounded and collect rounds from the dead. Chamberlain agreed that something must be done and he ordered his men to fix bayonets. What followed, however, is a matter of controversy. According to Chamberlain, he ordered a bayonet charge that swept the two Alabama regiments from the hill. "At that crisis," he later wrote, "I ordered the bayonet. The word was enough. It ran like fire along the line, from man to man; and rose into a shout, with which they sprang forward upon the enemy, now not 30 yards away."¹³

Other witnesses contended that Chamberlain did not concoct the order on his own; in fact, he had to be convinced by his lieutenants and captains to do it. Private Elisha Coan of the color guard maintained that Lieutenant Holman Melcher had suggested the bayonet attack. Coan wrote, "Lt. Melcher conceived the idea of advancing the colors so that our line would cover our wounded & dead so that they could be removed to the rear. . . Col. C. hesitated for the step would be a hazardous one. . . . Other officers joined Melcher in urging a forward movement and Col. C. gave his consent. Immediately Melcher passed to the front of his company & placing himself in front of the colors ordered his men forward. Other officers followed his example."¹⁴ Yet other participants argued that the regiment's bayonet attack was entirely spontaneous, executed by the men, not the officers. Captain Ellis Spear, who commanded the left wing, recalled, "Some enterprising and undaunted fellow said, 'It's a damned shame to leave the boys there; let's advance and cover them.' Those in the immediate vicinity joined the cry of 'Forward!' . . . The shout was heard and movement seen to right and left [was] further

¹³ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 33, part 2, p. 300 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 33, pt. 2, 300).

¹⁴ William B. Styple, ed., *With a Flash of his Sword: The Writings of Major Holman S. Melcher, 20th Maine Infantry* (Kearny, NJ: Belle Grove Publishing Company, 1994), 83-84.

than the original purpose of the movement.” This caused the whole regiment to join in the advance.¹⁵

Whatever version of the events is accurate, the 20th Maine’s bayonet attack swept the Confederates off the hill like an angry whirlwind, and with the assistance of the errant Company B, which had taken shelter behind a stone wall, succeeded in routing the Confederates, capturing about 120 of them. Corporal William Livermore noted in his diary, “With fixed bayonets and with a yell we rushed on them, which so frightened them, that not another shot was fired on us. Some threw down their arms and ran but many rose up, begging to be spared.”¹⁶

The 20th Maine remained in position until relieved by a brigade of Pennsylvanians. However, that brigade refused its assignment, that is, to assault the large wooded hill to the south, Big Round Top. When a heated argument among the 5th Corps staff seemed to paralyze further efforts, the new commander of the 3rd Brigade, Colonel James Clay Rice (who had taken over when Vincent fell mortally wounded a few hours earlier), approached Chamberlain, requesting that he lead the assault. Turning to his weary troops, Chamberlain said, “Boys, I am asked that we can carry that hill in front.” Chamberlain called for volunteers, and his regiment rose in unison. At 9:00 p.m., the survivors of the afternoon battle surged up the rocky slope of Big Round Top and gained the summit, capturing thirty prisoners from a Texas regiment. On the morning of July 3, the 20th Maine skirmished with Confederates on the west slope of the hill, losing one of its officers, Lieutenant Arad Linscott, mortally wounded by a gunshot wound to the thigh. By 10:00 a.m., the dilatory Pennsylvania brigade relieved the 20th Maine, which soon accompanied Rice’s 3rd Brigade to a hill near the George Weikert farm, where it awaited the outcome of the battle.¹⁷

On July 4, when Union victory became apparent, the regiment counted up its casualties. It had lost 129 officers and men, including nineteen killed, 106 wounded (twenty-one of whom later died), and four captured. To many, it was a small sacrifice compared to the larger victory won by the Army of the Potomac. Marveling at the horrible scene on the slopes of Little Round Top, Corporal Livermore jotted his impression of the Confederate dead: “There was as many as 30 or 40 lay dead. . . They had laid there 3 days in hot July weather and I wish I never could see another such a sight. It is nothing to see men that have just been killed. But every man was swollen as large as two men and purple and black.”¹⁸

Undoubtedly, the 20th Maine played an important role in the defense of Little Round Top. It was one of four Union regiments initially rushed to the summit of the hill

¹⁵ Ellis Spear, “The Left at Gettysburg,” *National Tribune*, June 12, 1913.

¹⁶ Style, *With a Flash of His Sword*, 77-78.

¹⁷ Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine*, 84.

¹⁸ William T. Livermore to Charles Livermore, July 6, 1863, 20th Maine Vertical File, Gettysburg National Military Park Library. See also, Gregory A. Coco, *A Strange and Blighted Land: Gettysburg, the Aftermath of a Battle* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1995), 50-51.

at 4:00 p.m., July 2, and it lost thirty-three percent of its force after an hour of hard fighting. Although many twentieth-century writers later credited the 20th Maine with saving the day—or even the battle—it is uncertain that Confederate possession of Little Round Top would have altered the course of the war, or even the engagement. If the Confederates had taken the summit, they would have been exhausted, thirsty, outnumbered, nearly out of ammunition, and lacking clear orders, rendering it easy for a Union counterattack—and there were about 11,000 fresh Union units in the area—to reclaim the hill. The outcome of a Confederate victory at Little Round Top cannot be known, but this much is certain, the 20th Maine executed a gritty, inspired defense of the hill, but their achievement did not alter the battle in a decisive way.¹⁹

On July 5, the 20th Maine joined in the pursuit of the defeated Army of Northern Virginia, chasing it across the Potomac at Williamsport, Maryland, and into the Loudoun Valley. The regiment engaged in one skirmish on July 10, losing ten men, but it suffered most acutely from heat-related illnesses incurred by marching in the sultry weather. By late July, Colonel Chamberlain was among the victims, contracting malaria, which induced him to apply for sick leave. He was gone for a month, and on August 24, when he returned to the regimental bivouac at Beverly Ford, he received command of the brigade. Command of the regiment subsequently went to newly-promoted Major Ellis Spear, a teacher from Wiscasset.²⁰

The 20th Maine was actively involved in the autumn campaigns, as the Army of the Potomac sought ways to cross the Rappahannock River. However, the regiment did not see combat again until November 7, when eighty men under Captain Walter G. Morrill participated in the Union assault against the Confederate bastion at Rappahannock Station. After that, the 20th Maine performed skirmish duty during the action at Mine Run. The regiment lost a few men wounded and many others stricken by cold weather, but it suffered none killed. Nevertheless, it was a rough campaign, and the survivors remembered the fatiguing, desperate withdrawal. Theodore Gerrish wrote, “The old soldiers will not forget that retreat, the cold night, the rough, frozen roads, how we, sleepy, hungry, and nearly worn out, dashed along the roads and through the woods to escape before the enemy could capture us.” When the Army of the Potomac went into its winter hibernation, the 20th Maine received a special assignment: guarding the railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station. Ellis Spear recalled that winter quarters—constructed by the soldiers with slabs and logs—were “healthy” and “not a man was lost from the regiment during the whole winter.”²¹

On May 1, 1864, the 20th Maine embarked on its sixth campaign. It broke camp, reunited with the 3rd Brigade, and marched with the Army of the Potomac across Germanna Ford. The next day, May 5, just as the 5th Corps reached the vicinity of Wilderness Tavern, Union skirmishers reported Confederates moving along the Orange Turnpike. Arrayed in three lines-of-battle, with the 20th Maine occupying the second line,

¹⁹ See Garry E. Adelman, *The Myth of Little Round Top* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2003).

²⁰ Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence*, 163.

²¹ Gerrish, *Army Life*, 133; Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 279.

the corps formed up in a clearing called Saunders's Field, and at 1:00 p.m., it surged forward. The V Corps soldiers plunged through the entrenchments of Major General Edward Johnson's division, and a wild fight ensued. While most of the 5th Corps' regiments fell back pell-mell, the 20th Maine found itself closed off behind enemy lines. To save themselves, the soldiers had to fight their way back in isolated squads. For instance, Captain Walter Morrill's Company B captured thirty-five prisoners as it pushed its way out, with Morrill receiving a severe wound to the face, one that blinded him and choked him with blood. Lieutenant Melcher's Company F, only fifteen strong, made a similar dash upon Confederate lines, surprising a Confederate regiment in its rear, capturing thirty gray-clad prisoners as the men made their dash to safety.²²

Despite these moments of heroism, the 5th Corps attack was a bloody failure. The broken lines limped back to their starting point, despondent and fatigued. Theodore Gerrish, who had been wounded in the left ankle, hobbled off the field even as the bullets zipped around him. "If I had remained where I was," he later recalled, "the most favorable result I could hope for was captivity, which, in reality, could be worse than death by a bullet on the field. . . Under existing circumstances, I determined to retreat . . . Fear lent wings to my flight and away I dashed." He recalled, "It was a sad spectacle, that lonely field in the forest. Here and there a wounded man was limping painfully to the rear; dead men, and others wounded too severely to move, were scattered thickly along the ground." The fighting continued into the evening and the next day. Overall, the two-day battle in the Wilderness cost the regiment twelve killed, seventy-two wounded, and sixteen missing.²³

The next thirty-nine days offered the 20th Maine a grueling test of endurance, as the regiment accompanied the Army of Potomac in its slugfest across Spotsylvania and Hanover Counties. On May 7, the regiment accompanied two others in a probing action against Confederate lines that cost it fifteen men killed or wounded. Then on May 8, the regiment joined in the 5th Corps in its assault at the Sarah Spindle farm, losing another six killed, fifteen wounded, two missing, and four captured. Thereafter it engaged sporadically, losing men at the Brock Road (May 10-11), Spotsylvania Court House (May 12-20), the Joseph Flippo farm (May 22), Jericho Mills (May 23), Bethesda Church (June 2), and Cold Harbor (June 3). To the soldiers, the distinct engagements ran together, as if they constituted one awful, month-long battle. "We were always . . . under fire," recollected Major Spear, "always ready to attack or repel attack." Altogether, the Overland Campaign of May 5 to June 3 subtracted 165 men from the rolls.²⁴

On June 15, the 20th Maine accompanied the 5th Corps to the south side of the James River, part of Lieutenant General Ulysses Grant's plan to encircle the Confederate city of Petersburg. For the next nine months, the regiment operated within a massive ring of entrenchments built around the city. The soldiers daily skirmished with the enemy and

²² Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 280.

²³ Gerrish, *Army Life*, 166-167.

²⁴ Ellis Spear and Abbot Spear, ed., *Civil War Recollections of General Ellis Spear* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1997), 109.

sometimes ate and slept like moles, living in massive bomb-proofs designed to endure the barrage of artillery. By August 12, the fighting in the entrenchments had cost the regiment another seven soldiers killed, including a popular officer, Captain Samuel T. Keene.²⁵

At various points during the siege of Petersburg, the 20th Maine left its entrenchments to help secure the vital roads leading out of the city. On August 18-21, it fought at Weldon Railroad, losing no casualties, and then on September 30, it fought at the Battle of Peebles Farm, an engagement that formed part of the Union's effort to seize the Boydton Plank Road. At that battle, with a celeritous bayonet charge, the 20th Maine helped the 3rd Brigade overrun a Confederate earthwork, Fort Archer. The brigade rounded up seventy prisoners, including an artillery team forced into surrendering by Lieutenant Albert Fernald, who was among the first to rush over the enemy breastworks. Major Spear assumed command of the brigade when the previous commander was crushed by his falling horse, and Captain Atherton W. Clark, a farmer from Waldoboro, assumed command of the regiment. Although successful, the attack cost the 20th Maine another six killed and fifty-two wounded.²⁶

The autumn of 1864 witnessed more maneuvers but few engagements, as the Union armies awaited the arrival of spring. In September, the regiment introduced 100 new recruits, substitutes and draftees from Maine, and over the next three months, veterans returned from hospitals raising the number of muskets to 275. In November, the regiment voted in the Presidential election, casting 138 ballots for Lincoln and thirteen for George McClellan. After that, on March 29, 1865, the 20th Maine commenced its final campaign, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Morrill being in command. The regiment fought a succession of engagements at Quaker Road (March 29), Gravelly Run (March 31), and Five Forks (April 1). These battles took place in wet, blustery weather and they involved ferocious fighting due to the tenacity of the Confederates. In describing the action at Five Forks, Theodore Gerrish explained, "It was hot work, and in many places it was a hand-to-hand fight. Men deliberately pointed their rifles in each other's faces and fired. Clubbed muskets came crushing down in deadly force upon human skulls. Men were bayoneted in cold blood." Altogether, the 1865 battles cost the regiment another eighty-one men.²⁷

The spring battles completely unhinged the Army of Northern Virginia's hold on Petersburg and Richmond, and over the course of the next week, the 20th Maine accompanied the Army of the Potomac in its pursuit of Confederate forces to Appomattox Court House. On April 9, while the 20th Maine was performing skirmish duty, word reached it that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered to General Grant. When he saw the white flag carried aloft by a Confederate messenger, Colonel Spear,

²⁵ Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 281. Keene was killed by a Confederate sharpshooter on June 22, 1864.

²⁶ In Edward Bearss and Bryce Suderow, *The Petersburg Campaign: The Western Front Battles, September 1864—April 1865*, 2 vols. (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas-Beatie, 2014), 2:21.

²⁷ Gerrish, *Army Life*, 242; Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 282.

who had returned to the regiment, galloped along the line, spreading the news jubilantly: “Lee surrenders!” Remembering the moment later, he wrote, “Indeed, an angel appearing from heaven, shining as the sun, could have meant no more than that mounted officer with his bit of white cloth.”²⁸

The 20th Maine participated in the closing scene of the war in the East. On April 12, it formed up with the 3rd Brigade, now under command of Brigadier General Chamberlain, to receive the formal surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, which involved a ceremonial stacking of arms and folding of flags. After the close of operations in the East, the regiment did not remain much longer in service. On May 8, a portion of the regiment—the original volunteers—detached and returned to Portland to muster-out. The remainder of the regiment stayed in Washington to participate in the grand review, and then went home in mid-summer. On July 16, 1865, what remained of the regiment (now consolidated with the 16th Maine and 1st Maine Sharpshooter Battalion) mustered-out in Portland under command of Colonel Spear.

Although the 20th Maine was never singled-out as an exceptional regiment during the war, after 1865, it rose in popularity due to self-interested writings by veterans. In 1876, more than 100 veterans organized the 20th Maine Regimental Association, which among other goals, raised money for the creation of a monument, placed and dedicated on Little Round Top in 1889, in honor of the regiment’s combat at Gettysburg. In 1882, Theodore Gerrish published his memoir, *Army Life: A Private’s Reminiscences of the Civil War*, an engaging narrative, but problematic because Gerrish misleadingly placed himself at the Battle of Gettysburg despite being absent from the regiment at the time.

Joshua Chamberlain, too, remained in the limelight, winning four consecutive elections for governor, and then in 1893, due to self-promotion, won the Medal of Honor for his actions at Gettysburg. More than most, Chamberlain dedicated his postwar years to advancing the memory of the 20th Maine’s charge at Little Round Top. Indeed, he became defensive when other writers questioned his version of events. When he learned that Holman Melcher claimed credit for suggesting the charge, Chamberlain wrote to another veteran angrily, “There is not truth in this. . . I told him to take his place with his company; that I was about to order a general charge. . . There is a tendency now-a-days to make ‘history’ sub-serve other purposes than legitimate ones.” In 1912 and 1913, Chamberlain published two short articles, “My Story of Fredericksburg,” and “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg.” Both essays achieved popularity, but they drew several critics, those who believed that Chamberlain exaggerated his roles in both battles for the sake of vanity. Notably, Ellis Spear wrote strictures, arguing that Chamberlain wrote to perpetuate heroic falsehoods.²⁹

²⁸ Maine Commission, *Maine at Gettysburg*, 283.

²⁹ Joshua Chamberlain to Ellis Spear, November 27, 1896, in Jeremiah E. Goulka, ed., *The Grand Old Man of Maine: Selected Letters of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 154-5.

Like other aging Union veterans, the former soldiers of the 20th Maine fought a prolonged conflict against their lingering wartime ailments. Not only had dozens of 20th Maine veterans lost limbs to surgical amputation, but others suffered from nonvisible infirmities including joint pain, respiratory maladies, and digestive disorders caused by dysentery. Perhaps Chamberlain's disability stood among the worst. He had been wounded at the Battle of Rives' Salient on June 18, 1864, when a Confederate ball passed through his hip, cutting his bladder and urethra. For the remainder of his life, he suffered from agonizing bladder infections. His testicles became enlarged, he frequently leaked urine, he developed an unhealed fistula, and his penis lacked the ability to become erect, which led to marital problems and a near-divorce from his wife, Fanny, in 1868. A subsequent surgery on the fistula strained Chamberlain's finances, and in 1893, the U.S. Pension Bureau denied his request for a pension increase, even though affidavits from army comrades testified that Chamberlain's wartime injuries made him nearly an invalid. In the winter of 1914, a bladder infection from his wartime wound led to pneumonia, killing him.³⁰

Beyond the veterans, twentieth-century authors obsessed over the story of the 20th Maine, pushing it into the mainstream. In 1957, John J. Pullen's *The Twentieth Maine: A Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* offered the first comprehensive regimental history, and in 1974, novelist Michael Shaara published *The Killer Angels*, an immensely popular piece of historical fiction that featured Joshua Chamberlain as one of the novel's leading characters. *The Killer Angels*, which portrayed Chamberlain as the humble architect of the victory at Little Round Top, led to an explosion of interest in the 20th Maine. The 1993 movie *Gettysburg*, which closely followed Shaara's novel, focused on the regiment, and Ken Burns's 1990 nine-part documentary, *The Civil War*, featured Chamberlain as one of the narrating voices. Finally, in the past thirty years, Chamberlain and the 20th Maine emerged as the most popular of all Union figures among Civil War artists, gracing the canvasses of Don Troiani, Mort Künstler, Keith Rocco, Dale Gallon, and John Paul Strain.³¹

In modern times, the 20th Maine received more accolades and attention than any other Union regiment, but this was probably not what the majority of its veterans wanted. Theodore Gerrish may have spoken for many when he said that a survivor's conscience was its own reward. He wrote, "I would rather have my boy stand by my grave and say, 'My father was wounded in the Wilderness, and fought with Phil. Sheridan at Five Forks, and saw Lee surrender at Appomattox,' than to have him say that I was a millionaire or a member of the United States Senate."³² In any event, the memory of the 20th Maine endures.

³⁰ Sarah Handley-Cousins, "Wrestling at the Gates of Death": Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Nonvisible Disability in the Post-Civil War North, *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 2 (June 2016): 220-42.

³¹ Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 189, 201-3.

³² Gerrish, *Army Life*, 371.