

# The Death Of A Soldier 150 Years Ago

by Lynne Belluscio

Martin Swift was two days from his 27th birthday when he died on June 11, 1864. He had been wounded on June 3 in the Battle of Cold Harbor. He was removed from the battlefield and taken to a hospital in Washington where he died of his wounds.

On the 16th of June his father wrote a letter to Martin's brother William: "It is with a heavy heart and hand that I undertake to inform you of the death of your Brother Martin. He died in Washington of wounds he got on the battlefield near the Chickahominy on the 3rd of June. He was coming back to Washington and lived until the 12th. The poor fellow lost one leg & was wounded in one arm. On the 14th I got a dispatch from Augustus Frank, M.C. at Washington dated on the 13th saying to me your son Martin died here yesterday. I have got his body embalmed\* and what shall I do more. I telegraphed back to send his body home. I would pay the charges and we

are now looking for it every Express Train from the East. We had a letter last night from James Cowling of the same Reg. He came out without an injury but he says you may Judge that we had hot work when you learn that 673 of our own Reg. fell and were killed and wounded. ..."

Martin Swift's name does not appear on the Civil War monument on Trigon Park. He was from Lockport, but his father lived in LeRoy. When Martin died, his body was brought back here and was buried in the family plot in Machpelah Cemetery. Two weeks ago, his descendants, Audrey Swift Kitchen Coppedge and Samuel Coppedge, met at the family plot to dedicate a new plaque on the 150th Anniversary of Martin's death.

Martin Swift was a member of the 8th New York Heavy Artillery. The Regiment was originally organized by Col. Peter Porter who had received authority to recruit a regiment from Genesee, Orleans and Niagara



Counties. On August 28, 1862, the Regiment was designated as the 129th Infantry. It was organized in Lockport, but on December 19, 1862 the Regiment became the 8th New York Heavy Artillery. On December 3, 1863, Martin Swift enlisted in Lockport for three years. Private Swift was assigned to Company B.

The 8th Heavy Artillery guarded the massive fortifications which surrounded Washington, D.C. There were twelve companies of 150 men each. The soldiers slept in barracks and had a relatively easy time of it. They were called "band box regiments" since they often turned out as if they had stepped out of a band box.

In two years, the 8th Heavy Artillery had not been engaged in any battle. Not a shot had been fired. But all that changed in the spring of 1864 when General Grant decided to wage an all-out campaign against Richmond, the capital of the Confederate states. He ordered all of the "heavies" out of Washington and into the field.

The 8th performed well in their first encounter, but on June 3rd, along with the Army of the Potomac, they were pitted against a battle hardened Rebel Army. In

the span of twenty minutes, the 8th lost over 200 men. Only yards from the Rebel fortifications, Col. Porter was struck by four shots and was immediately killed. The Regiment fell back to their earthworks. The dead and dying were caught between the Union earthworks and the Rebel fortifications. Men risked their lives to drag the living and the dead back behind Union lines.

The Union forces lost nearly 7,000 men, either wounded or killed. The 8th Heavy Artillery took the brunt of the attack. Although severely depleted of men, the 8th Heavy Artillery continued through the campaign and were mustered out on June 5, 1865.

During its service, the Regiment lost by death 24 officers and 646 enlisted men, including a young man, Martin Swift, who lies in a grave in nearby Macpeleah Cemetery.

\* "it was during the civil war that the practice of embalming became a necessity in order to preserve soldiers' bodies to be returned home for burial."

