

The Frank Harlow Story

By Dale Julius

The American Civil War first caught my interest over fifty years ago during the centennial in 1961. I was ten years old and loved to read about the Civil War – I even convinced my family to take a vacation to Gettysburg in 1963 to witness the centennial celebration of that momentous battle. Little did I know I was starting an incredible journey that would interest me for years but especially when I met Carole and we quickly discovered that we shared a fascination with this time period. Carole really encouraged me to read more on the subject and in 1998 we visited Gettysburg together for the first time. It was the 135th anniversary of the battle and we were both caught up in the idea of becoming reenactors. It was around this time that my interest was truly rekindled and I started reading everything I could on the subject.

In the spring of 2000 I was reading *The Last Full Measure* by Jeff Shaara. I was in the middle of the chapter that describe the Battle of Ft. Stedman and I was particularly interested in this because it was a battle I had never heard of until then. As I was reading, Carole came in to ask me if I wanted to go for a walk with our new puppy, Dixie. I set the book down on the kitchen table and we headed out. As usual our walk took us to the Town Common and then down into the old cemetery. With my new Civil War interest I was more aware of our many graves from that time period and one in particular caught my eye. It was up a little grade from where we normally walked but for some reason I was drawn to it. The small white monument was the marker of a family plot and as I read the names I was quite surprised to find that one of the names was of a young soldier who was killed in action in 1865 at the Battle of Ft. Stedman. You can imagine my shock and I couldn't help but be struck by this coincidence. Or was it fate? This story is really just beginning.

Later that summer we were camping in Plymouth and I was reading the book *Specimen Days and Collect* by Walt Whitman. This book is really a series of short observations from Whitman's personal Civil War experiences. One story is called "A Yankee Antique" and it tells the tale of a brave young soldier who refused to surrender when his company was surrounded by Confederates at Ft. Stedman. When asked to comply by a rebel officer, the hero of the story says, "not while I live!" Both men fired their weapons and both fell dead, side by side. As I read the story I couldn't help but thinking how odd it was to be reading about Ft. Stedman again. Whitman then describes how the boy's father came to recover the body and bring it home to Plymouth County, Massachusetts. Of course Plymouth County is large but my town and my cemetery are in it. I was definitely intrigued now and when we returned home from our camping trip I took the book with me and rushed to the grave I had found back in the spring. Could it be the soldier from Whitman's story? I flipped the book open and read the name, Calvin Francis Harlow. Then I looked at the inscription on the grave and it said, Calvin Francis Harlow – a match. I was shocked and had goose bumps as I stood there and read Whitman's story out loud. It just seemed like the right thing to do although I probably looked like an idiot to anyone passing by.

And here's the thing – this grave is less than a mile from our house, less than a mile from where I grew up and have lived my entire life. I've been by it countless times as this was my shortcut home from school for years. Now, though, it was special, now there was a story, and now I wanted to share the story with others.

So I did. I told friends and co-workers. I told family members and friends of family members. I told people on the street and basically anyone who would stand still long enough to listen. Mostly, though, I told fellow reenactors. One of them, a friend named Hal, listened with great interest and when I finished he said, quite simply, "so what are you going to do with this story?" I thought about it and I realized that Hal was giving me a charge – it was time to do something more with this story.

I started doing some research on Harlow and was fortunate enough to be put in touch with his great nephew who lived on Cape Cod. Calvin was this man's uncle and he knew about the Walt Whitman

story. I asked if there was a photo of Calvin and he said he'd send me a copy of one he had and then he asked me if I was interested in reading some of Harlow's letters home. I was speechless; it is a researcher's dream come true to find primary sources! Along with his official military record, the Walt Whitman story, and the personal letters, I had some pretty interesting stuff to share and I learned a lot about this young soldier. Calvin was 18 when he left home in May of 1861, less than one month after the war began. He was in the 29th Mass Vol Inf Regt Co C and after three years of service he reenlisted to see the war through. In his four years of service he saw a lot of action, fighting in several of the major battles. By late 1864 he was promoted to 1st Serg of his company and was at Petersburg, VA. It was there that he made his heroic stand and was killed on March 25, 1865, just two weeks before the war ended.

With my research done, I knew what I had to do – I had to make his name known throughout our town. With the help of several friends, some reenactors, and Carole, we made a plan to have a Civil War Encampment and Living History and to call the event “Calvin Harlow Day” in honor of our hometown hero. Our first Calvin Harlow Day was held in 2005 and it rained pretty hard. I still think of it as a success, though, and we decided to do it again in 2006. It rained again, this time with the addition of strong winds and even snow. It became a sort of town joke that it “always” rained on Calvin Harlow Day but we decided to make it an annual event nonetheless. I hoped it wouldn't rain again but I was a little despondent, I must admit. Carole was the one who figured out the problem, though. One day she came to me and said, “I think you should change the name of the event to Frank Harlow Day. I don't think he likes to be called Calvin and that's why it keeps raining.” I thought about this and decided she might be onto something. He signed all his letters “Frank” and his great nephew referred to him as “Uncle Frank.” I didn't have anything to lose so our third annual event became “Frank Harlow Day” and . . . the sun came out! Frank Harlow Day continues and this coming Saturday, May 5th, we will be hosting our 8th annual. It is a fitting tribute to Frank and the nearly 400 others who left our town to go “save the Union!”



The other part of this story is that during my research I discovered that Frank's body was never returned to East Bridgewater despite his father's best efforts to retrieve him. He is interred in Poplar Grove National Cemetery near Petersburg, VA and that is why we took our vacation in Virginia this year. I guess it's also why I was pretty emotional when we found his grave – I traveled a long way to meet him and it was a bit overwhelming to stand over him and pay my respects. So that's my story about finding Frank Harlow and keeping his memory alive. I definitely feel connected to him and I feel that all of this was meant to be. This was confirmed for me when I looked up his birth day and found out it was June 26, 1842. You've probably guessed already, my birthday is also June 26.

Coincidence? Maybe. Or maybe it's Frank reaching across the years, wanting to be remembered, wanting someone to tell his story. I am honored to be that person.