PROJECT MUSE®

Serving the Guns in Thompson's Battery

Thomas E. Nank

Gettysburg Magazine, Number 59, July 2018, pp. 2-14 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2018.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/697385>

Serving the Guns in Thompson's Battery

THOMAS E. NANK

He experienced a thrill of amazement when he came within view of a battery in action. The men there seemed to be in conventional moods, altogether unaware of the impending annihilation. The battery was disputing with a distant antagonist and the gunners were wrapped in admiration of their shooting. They were continually bending in coaxing postures over the guns. They seemed to be patting them on the back and encouraging them with words. The guns, stolid and undaunted, spoke with dogged valor. The precise gunners were coolly enthusiastic. They lifted their eyes every chance to the smoke-wreathed hillock from whence the hostile battery addressed them. The youth pitied them as he ran. Methodical idiots! Machine-like fools! The refined joy of planting shells in the midst of the other battery's formation would appear a little thing when the infantry came swooping out of the woods. . . . Too, he felt a pity for the guns, standing, six good comrades, in a bold row.

—Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*

Captain James Thompson knew immediately this was going to be hot work. How far out are we going, he must have wondered as his brigade commander, Lt. Col. Freeman McGilvery, led Thompson and his battery out of the army reserve artillery park (along with four other reserve batteries), not just toward the front, but *beyond* the Federal battle line running south from Gettysburg. Thompson's experienced artilleryman's eye noted the terrain was rising gently as they moved out along a farm road heading almost due west. They passed a large, rock-covered hill on the left with a commanding view of the farms beyond, and a small farmhouse and barn on the right next to a small creek. Further to the right was the left flank of the Union line, where

Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles's Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac was strung-out in a thin line. The farm road they were following continued uphill to the west, and soon the intersection with the north-south road between Emmitsburg and Gettysburg came into view. The roads met atop a rise, higher than any other ground nearby, marked by two farmsteads on the north side and a rectangular peach orchard on the south. Sickles had already posted three batteries of his corps artillery along the road to Emmitsburg facing west, and those guns were already in action. What they were firing at worried Thompson greatly.¹

James Thompson knew what to worry about. He was born on May 8, 1821, near Ballynahinch in County Down, Northern Ireland, not far from the city of Belfast. At age 23, he enlisted in the Royal Regiment of Artillery, known as "The Gunners" (the regimental motto was *Ubique Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt*—Everywhere That Right And Glory Lead) and received specialized training in artillery tactics at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. Raised as a Protestant, Thompson became a member of the Loyal Orange Institution, a Protestant fraternal organization also known as the Orange Order, in February, 1850. His battery fought in the Battle of Balaklava in the Crimean War on October 25, 1854, where the artillery played a significant role in the defense of the British base there from Russian attacks, and his unit (First Troop of the Royal Horse Artillery) also supported the charge of the Heavy Brigade against the Russian cavalry. Thompson received a promotion for gallantry at Balaklava, and

¹ The farm road the artillery used to get to the Peach Orchard was probably today's United States Avenue, passing the Abraham Trostle farm on the right. The road intersection was marked by the Sherfy and Wentz farmsteads.

he was discharged from the British army as a sergeant in 1856. He immigrated to the United States with his family later that year, eventually settling in a home on Jefferson Street in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. He made a living as a painter and raised a family of three children with his first wife, and later a fourth child with a second wife. Thompson's army record described him as "height 5' 9 ½," complexion fresh, eyes grey, hair lt. brown."²

When the Civil War came in 1861, Thompson offered his services to Gov. Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania, but was denied because the War Department had not yet asked the state to supply artillery batteries to the army. Nevertheless, he found his way into an emergency unit recruited by Ward Hill Lamon, President Lincoln's bodyguard and the Marshal of the District of Columbia, and began forming an artillery unit of his own. Searching for local Pittsburgh men that he knew would be loyal to him, Thompson placed advertisements in the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, asking for "A FEW MORE MEN WANTED. . . . Pay and

² *Regimental Nicknames and Traditions of the British Army* (London: Gale & Polden, 1916), 34; "Fought Under Two Banners," *Pittsburgh Dispatch* (March 14, 1906); Jonathan Tonge, *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change* (London: Routledge, 1998), 102; Julian Robert John Jocelyn, *The History of the Royal Artillery-Crimean Period* (London: J. Murray, 1911), 197; Certificate of Discharge, June 13, 1865, Thompson Papers, Gettysburg National Military Park.

Capt. James Thompson, Independent Battery C, Pennsylvania Light Artillery. Gettysburg National Military Park.

subsistence will be furnished from the day of enlistment. Capt. Thompson has had an experience of twelve years as an artillery officer in the British service." Another request for enlistees in the *Gazette* appealed for "twenty men, also four shoeing Smiths, one saddler and one Wagon maker," and was probably the result of Thompson's practical experience managing the logistic support of an artillery unit.³ With no artillery pieces or horses yet assigned to them, the men were posted on picket duty along the Potomac River above Harper's Ferry. In November, 1861, when Lamon's brigade was dissolved and its units incorporated

into other organizations in the army with three-year orders, Thompson's men were assigned to a new brigade of Maryland infantry and designated the 2nd Maryland Battery. Thompson, knowing almost all of the men in his unit were from Pennsylvania, filed a petition with the Pennsylvania Adjutant General's office for designation as a Pennsylvania unit, and included his battery's muster roll with the filing. The Adjutant General finally approved the request on June 17, 1862 and the unit was officially

³ Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 11-14; *Pittsburg Dispatch*, date unknown, 1861.

claimed by the Keystone State as Thompson's Light Independent Pennsylvania Battery C.⁴

Twenty-seven of the first ninety men to enlist in the unit were from Pittsburgh. Sixteen were from Maryland, and the rest were from other counties across Pennsylvania as far away as Philadelphia. One man was from Cleveland, Ohio and one was from Farmington, Kentucky. The men represented a broad spectrum of society. Twenty-four were laborers and twenty were farmers. Most of the rest were miners, clerks, carpenters, and engineers. The unit also mustered one butcher, one dentist, and one "preacher." Three men were unemployed.⁵ Duty in winter camp on the upper Potomac was uneventful, although it could at times be dangerous to new recruits. During one eight-day period, there were four accidental shootings, three of which were fatal.⁶ On February 2, 1862, the unit reported to Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks at Frederick, Maryland, where it was issued two new 10-pounder Parrott rifled guns, on loan from another battery. When Banks moved to Harper's Ferry on February 24, Thompson's unit was posted in defensive positions on Maryland Heights overlooking the town. Banks moved south to Winchester, Virginia, by March 13, where the battery received two smoothbore Napoleon guns in addition to the Parrotts.⁷ Thompson trained the men aggressively, using his experience from the Royal Artillery. In April, Thompson's battery remained with Banks's Fifth Corps as Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan moved the remainder of the Army of the Potomac down to the James River peninsula to advance on Richmond. The First and Fifth Corps remained in northern Virginia as the outer defensive line of Washington, DC.

By 1863, the artillery was coming into its own as the "long arm" of the Union Army. The North entered the war with a strong advantage in factories

and foundries. By mid-war, the North also had a professional, well-trained, and experienced officer corps dedicated to artillery tactics and employment. In the Army of the Potomac, Brig. Gen. Henry J. Hunt, in his position as Chief of Artillery, sat on the operational staff of the army commander and oversaw all administrative and logistic support to the regular and volunteer batteries. In 1856, Hunt had been a member of a three-man board that revised field artillery drill and tactics for the army. The *Instructions for Field Artillery* manual was published by the War Department in 1861 and became the "bible" of Northern field artillerists during the war. Hunt's organizational doctrine, fully implemented by July 1863, allowed infantry corps commanders to retain some artillery for close-in support, but maintained an Artillery Reserve at the army level for more strategic control and reinforcement. This was a departure from Napoleonic practice, which spread out artillery across all levels of command down to each brigade. But experience had taught Hunt and the Union Army commanders that artillery was best employed when its firepower could be massed against the enemy. Five brigades of four batteries each formed the army Artillery Reserve under a brigadier general. This organizational structure allowed each corps commander to use his own artillery as required to support his infantry, but still maintained a flexible, powerful reserve force to back up multiple corps commanders if needed.⁸

At the outbreak of the war, there were two main types of field artillery pieces in the arsenals of the Union and Confederate armies. Smoothbores, made of bronze, were the most common, the 12-pounder being the most numerous, although some 6- and 24-pounders were in both armies. Commonly referred to as a "Napoleon" (from the French emperor Napoleon III, who claimed to have invented it), the 12-pounder was easy to use and easy to make, and was the workhorse of most artillery batteries when the war began. The most easily recognized models of rifled artillery were the 10-pound Parrott rifles, with their iron breech bands, although some 20-pound Parrotts were in service in both armies. More common among rifled pieces (and the most

4 "Independent Battery C," in Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Harrisburg: B. Singerly, 1871), 5:867; Gary Hoover, "History of the Unit: A Short History of Independent Battery C, Pennsylvania Volunteer Light Artillery." See <http://thompsonsbattery.org/history-of-the-unit/>. On May 1, 1863 the Adjutant General, State of Pennsylvania, officially assigned letters to the state's independently raised batteries via General Order 41, HQ Pennsylvania Militia. At that time, Thompson's Battery officially became Independent Battery C, Pennsylvania Volunteer Light Artillery.

5 Muster-in Reports, November 6, 1861, record group 19, Thompson's Independent Battery C, Pennsylvania State Archives.

6 Editors, *Pittsburg Dispatch*, December 12, 1861.

7 Hoover, "History of the Unit."

8 Gregory A. Coco, *A Concise Guide to the Artillery at Gettysburg* (Orrtanna PA: Colecraft Industries, 1998), 14–16; Philip M. Cole, *Civil War Artillery at Gettysburg* (Orrtanna PA: Colecraft Industries, 2002), 55–70.

preferred by both sides) was the 3-inch Ordnance rifle. Produced by the Phoenix Iron Company of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, the gun was made of hammer-welded, formed, machined iron, which rarely fractured. It was 400 pounds lighter than the Napoleon and 100 pounds lighter than the Parrott, with a barrel that was 6 inches shorter, which made it easier to move and less top-heavy. At Gettysburg, 87 percent of the artillery pieces brought by both armies were either Napoleons, 10-pounder Parrotts, or 3-inch rifles; Thompson's battery would be unusual in the Army of the Potomac for using both the Napoleon and the 10-pounder Parrott.⁹

Thompson's first action against the Confederates came on April 18, 1862, as the unit participated in a reconnaissance of rebel forces along the Rappahannock River north of Fredericksburg. Several Confederates were detected across the river in a strong artillery position overlooking a bridge. Battery C was called forward, and Thompson posted the section of two Parrott guns at the river's edge under Lt. John P. Barry. Thompson's management apparently paid off. Barry's section "fired its first shot and received its baptism of fire. The fifth shot from Lieutenant Barry's [section] blew up the magazine in that work and silenced their guns. When the magazine exploded dark objects were thrown upward, probably men, but I could not say whether they were troops or the logs of which the magazine doubtless was built. This silenced that work. Lieutenant Barry had thrown a shell through some tents and many in the parapet, tearing it terribly, so that this work was pretty well used up, when suddenly two masked batteries enfiladed us."¹⁰

In May, Battery C was reassigned to Maj. Gen. Irwin McDowell's Department of the Rappahannock, and by June was incorporated into McDowell's Third Corps in the new Army of Virginia under Maj. Gen. John Pope. Battery C fought its first major battle at Cedar Mountain on August 9, 1862. Confederate Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson had been detached from the Army of Northern Virginia and had decided

to move against Pope's army. McDowell's Third Corps was called forward to meet Jackson, and Thompson's battery arrived at the front just as it was getting dark. As they arrived, they came under immediate fire from a Confederate battery concealed in the woods. Thompson directed the two-gun Napoleon section to open fire directly on the rebel guns, visible in the darkness only by the flashes from their muzzles. He simultaneously directed his Parrott section to open fire further to the rear where he suspected the battery's support elements were located, and kept up firing well into the night. After "close and very destructive fire" the Confederate battery withdrew.¹¹ Battery C was engaged again at Thoroughfare Gap 17 days later, where they supported a brigade attack against a Confederate regiment at 300 yards. The battery suffered its first casualties at the Gap—two men were wounded and one was missing.¹²

At the Battle of Second Bull Run on August 30, 1862, Thompson's men went into action multiple times in close support of the infantry. They were engaged on the right of Maj. Gen. Fitz-John Porter's assault on Jackson's men along the unfinished railroad, where they fired on the Confederate position at a distance of about 700 yards from the far end of a line of over 30 Union guns, just west of the Sudley Road. Later that afternoon, when Gen. James Longstreet attacked the Union left with his entire corps, Thompson's battery and several others were caught in the onslaught from Longstreet's men on the left and Jackson's men on the right. Battery C pounded the Confederates with canister as they came on, cutting down the colors of two regiments. In order to keep up the fire as long as possible with no time to limber up to the horse teams, Thompson ordered the battery to retire "firing with the prolonge." The prolonge was the thick rope attached to the trail of the gun, and the maneuver relied upon the men or horse teams to drag the piece backward after each recoil, to keep the gun on the ground and pointed at the enemy. While dangerous to execute under fire, the movement keeps the weapon firing but moving to the rear at the same time:

9 George Newton, *Silent Sentinels: A Reference Guide to the Artillery at Gettysburg* (New York: Savas Beatie LLC, 2005), 27–63; Cole, *Artillery at Gettysburg*, 71–94; Coco, *Concise Guide*, 88–97.

10 Hoover, "History of the Unit"; "Artillerist," *Columbia Democrat and Bloomsburg General Advertiser* (May 3, 1862).

11 Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:865. The Confederate battery Thompson engaged that evening was the Purcell Artillery under the command of Willie Pegram.

12 Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:866.

The Charge was made in direction of [the] main line of Batteries and I fired into them as they approached and passed the front of my Battery, and fired into them when they had passed. Seeing them turn some of the Captured guns on me, I retired firing with the Prolonge but finding them gaining on me as they were advancing at a run, I limbered up and attempted to pass through the woods in [the] rear hotly pursued. On arriving at the fence on [the] opposite side I found them ahead, when I wheeled to the left . . . seeing that I was fired on from both front and rear, I directed the men to run and with the aid of our revolvers were able to get clear with the exception of a few who were wounded, and one of the 105th [New York] attached, shot dead. The guns that were saved kept more to the left and the half that made over my captured guns enabled the others to escape on reaching the old Stone Bridge.¹³

The battery was able to escape with the rest of the Union army, losing ten men, three guns and 20 horses. Thompson's men earned the praise of Gen. James B. Ricketts, in command on Porter's right. "Captain Thompson's Pennsylvania batteries . . . deserve to be mentioned not only for their uniform attention to their duties, but for their efficiency throughout the 30th of August." The Confederate commander whose units overtook Thompson's battery in the woods, had to admit "the enemy's artillery was served with great skill and effect upon our troops during the entire engagement, to which our greatest loss on the left must be attributed." While refitting after the battle, the battery received four new 10-pound rifled Parrott guns.¹⁴

At Antietam, Thompson again found himself at the center of a Union corps-level attack but again demonstrated skill and coolness under fire. Battery C, now attached to Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's First Corps, took up position in a grass field adjacent to the infamous Miller cornfield, at the center of Hooker's attack on Stonewall Jackson's corps. Thompson's men once again engaged in counter-

battery fire in support of Rickett's men, first with one rebel battery then another, as they moved forward on Hooker's right. As the infantry swept forward, Thompson moved his battery in closer to the Confederates, firing from a high knoll in the center of the cornfield. The men fired shell with one and two-second fuses, as many of Rickett's men were in front of the guns. His exposed position brought him the attention of Confederate artillery and musket fire:

I had frequently to cease firing so the smoke would clear off to enable me to see the enemy so as to make my fire more effective, which may have led to the belief that my guns were silenced. I continued in action for some time after the terrible repulse given to the enemy in front of the cornfield when I concluded to retire having at the time one half of my Cannoneers hit and came into action again in the grass field. Before that I could unlimber one half of my Horses fell Dead. I then concluded to retire and give place to a more efficient Battery, leaving 2 of my guns in the grass field until I could bring up the teams of the Forge & Battery wagon to haul them off.¹⁵

At one point the battery was under such intense musket fire from a Confederate regiment only seventy-five yards away that the musket fire disabled one of Thompson's gun carriages. Nine rounds passed through the limber chest, cutting most of his men down but not detonating the charges inside. Thompson lost eleven men wounded, one mortally, and thirteen horses killed.¹⁶

At Fredericksburg in December 1862, Battery C crossed the Rappahannock River at the lower pontoon bridges with the rest of Maj. Gen. John Reynolds's First Corps. Now attached to Brig. Gen. John Gibbon's division, Battery C went into action on the right of Gibbon's men as they attacked the right of the Confederate line south of the town. Thompson and his men protected Gibbon's flank, moving forward with the infantry. The battery engaged the rebels continuously, at the cost of two

¹³ Thompson to an unidentified general (January 26, 1865), Thompson Papers, Gettysburg National Military Park.

¹⁴ "Report of Brig. Gen. James B. Ricketts, U.S. Army, Commanding Second Division" (September 4, 1862), in *Miscellaneous Documents of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Eighth Congress, 1884-'85* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885), 13:385; Hoover, "History of the Unit"; Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:866.

¹⁵ Thompson to unidentified general (January 26, 1865), Thompson Papers, Gettysburg National Military Park; "Lieut. Brockway's Official Report," *Columbia Democrat and Bloomsburg General Advertiser* (November 22, 1862).

¹⁶ James Thompson, *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg: Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments Erected by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to Mark the Positions of the Pennsylvania Commands Engaged in the Battle* (1893), 2:890; Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:867.

men wounded and two horses killed. They passed the winter uneventfully, except for participating in the aborted Mud March in January. Battery C arrived on the Chancellorsville battlefield early on the morning of May 2, 1863. They were briefly ordered to the front early the next day, but were ordered back to the reserve artillery area. On May

5, Thompson's men re-crossed the Rappahannock and went into positions protecting the river crossing at the United States Ford as the Army of Potomac withdrew from the battlefield. Their losses were one man killed and three wounded. Also at Chancellorsville was the Pennsylvania battery of Capt. Robert B. Hampton. Raised in the Pittsburgh area and known as the "Pittsburgh Battery," many of the men in Independent Battery F knew Thompson's men in Battery C. Battery F had mustered into Union army service one month after Thompson's battery. But, attached to the Twelfth Corps, Battery F was roughly handled by the Confederates at the center of the Union line near the Chancellor House. During the first three days of fighting, the unit sustained severe losses, including Hampton, who was mortally wounded. Thompson's losses to this point in the war had not been replaced, so both units were well below strength. So, effective June 3, 1863, as the Army of the Potomac reorganized yet again, Special Orders #151 designated that both batteries be combined and report to the newly enlarged Artillery Reserve and the First Volunteer Brigade of Lt. Col. Freeman McGilvery. The new battery also received six 3-

William H. Tipton's photograph of the Peach Orchard taken about 1890. Gettysburg National Military Park.

inch Ordnance rifles to replace the Parrotts and Napoleons. That same day, across the river, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's men began their march north to Gettysburg.¹⁷

Thompson watched the Third Corps batteries on the Emmitsburg Road and took in the view. They were firing west toward a long tree line along a low, north-south

ridge. In front of the trees, which Thompson could only occasionally see through the smoke, were the Confederate batteries. *My God, that must be their entire corps artillery*, Thompson must have thought to himself. For a solid mile, sixteen batteries in a long row were trained on Sickles' men in the Union position along the roads north and east of the Peach Orchard. Most of the batteries were mixed: big 20-pounder Parrotts, Napoleons, 3-inch rifles, and some smaller howitzers filled the fields in front of the trees. They were close, too. At the intersection of the farm road and the Emmitsburg Road at the western edge of the Peach Orchard, the closest Confederate batteries were only 500 yards away. At that point, Battery G, 1st New York under Capt. Nelson Ames was banging away at the rebel guns at point blank range with his six Napoleons. Ames was also attached to the Artillery Reserve but not McGilvery's brigade. Ames had been at the Orchard in support of Sickles for about an hour when McGilvery and his brigade arrived. Having lost seven men, Ames was also out of ammunition. "The

¹⁷ Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:868; Thompson, *Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments*, 891. Thompson declared that the two batteries "to all intents and purposes we were one, the history of the military service of one belongs to the other."

men were nearly exhausted from their activities, but when they were told they must drive back the enemy lines so the battery could limber up in order to fall back, they nobly responded to the call. The guns began to pour forth a stream of fire and death,” Ames remembered later.¹⁸

McGilvery coolly and deliberately began placing his batteries. The three 3rd Corps batteries were already employed north of Ames for a half-mile up the road to Gettysburg, trading fire with the batteries to the west.¹⁹ Three 3rd Corps infantry regiments shared the road with them: men of the 114th, 105th, and 57th Pennsylvania were interspersed between the batteries and occupying the farm on the west side of the road. McGilvery realized there was also a threat to the south—no Federal guns were yet trained in that direction. Four new Confederate batteries had appeared at the end of their line as it spread further south, and those guns began firing north toward the Orchard. McGilvery decided to take advantage of the farm road that bordered the northern edge of the orchard. Along the road, he posted his five batteries: First and furthest to the east was the 9th Massachusetts Battery under Capt. John Bigelow, firing six Napoleons. Next in line to the west was the 5th Massachusetts Battery E with six 3-inch rifles commanded by Capt. Charles A. Phillips and augmented by men from the 10th Independent Battery, New York Light Artillery since Chancellorsville. Further to the west was another New York Battery, the 15th New York Light Artillery under Capt. Patrick Hart, in command of four Napoleons. Those sixteen guns provided cover for four infantry regiments in the Orchard itself: the 68th and 141st Pennsylvania, the 2nd New Hampshire, and the 3rd Maine. The 3rd Michigan formed a skirmish line on a wide arc south of the Orchard.²⁰

Last in line and closest to the Confederates was Thompson’s Batteries C & F. McGilvery ordered Thompson to relieve Ames, who retired his battery section by section. Thompson was posted holding

the right flank of McGilvery’s line. He spaced his guns out along the north edge of the Orchard, section by section, and discovered they would not all fit east of the Emmitsburg Road. He ordered the right section, under the command of Lt. James Stephenson, across the road to the farmhouse owned by Joseph Sherfy. Stephenson placed one gun “between Sherfy’s barn and the garden fence, the other gun on the Emmitsburg Pike,” both facing west. It was not long before Thompson was under fire. “We were in position but a few minutes when the enemy opened on the right sector on [the] road with about 20 guns with canister. . . . The first discharge swept the right section out of position like a whirlwind.” Thompson ordered Stephenson to hold his ground, although his section remained within extreme but still lethal canister fire from the Confederate batteries in one of the rare examples of canister used in counter-battery fire during the war. Later, Thompson remembered, “seeing that he could do nothing, [Stephenson] ordered the men to cover and in a few minutes three gun horses were all killed. His saddle horse [was] badly wounded and the revolver broken in the holster, all by canister shot. Abb Link [was] mortally wounded and Edward O’Donnell crippled for life.” Thompson’s left and center sections in the orchard were about to come under fire also.²¹

Two columns of Confederate infantry had stepped out of the woods to the south. These were the brigades of Gen. Joseph B. Kershaw, with six regiments of South Carolina infantry, and Gen. Paul J. Semmes following Kershaw with four regiments of Georgians. McGilvery, watching from a position north of the Orchard behind his gun line, noted:

At about 5 o’clock a heavy column of rebel infantry made its appearance in a grain field about 850 yards in front, moving at quick time toward the woods on our left, where the infantry fighting was then going on. A well-directed fire of all the batteries was brought to bear on them, which destroyed the order of their march and drove many back into the woods on their right, though the main portion of the column succeeded in reaching the point for which they started,

18 Nelson Ames, *History of Battery G, First Regiment New York Light Artillery* (Marshalltown, IA: Marshall Printing Company, 1900), 73–74.

19 These batteries were: 2nd New Jersey Battery, Capt. A. Judson Clark; 1st Rhode Island Battery E, Lt. John K. Bucklyn; 4th US Battery K, Lt. Francis W. Seeley.

20 “Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery, First Maine Light Artillery, commanding First Volunteer Brigade,” in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation*

of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, ed. R.N. Scott (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1889), I, 27, Pt. 1, 881.

21 Thompson, *Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments*, 890.

The position held by Thompson's Battery C and F on July 2. Phil Laino.

sheltering themselves from the artillery fire. In a few minutes another and larger column appeared at about 750 yards, presenting a slight left flank to our position. I immediately trained the entire line of our guns upon them, and opened on them with various types of ammunition.²²

Thompson's four guns in the Orchard immediately opened fire on the advancing rebels. Firing at the left flank of Kershaw's brigade as it moved northeast across the Emmitsburg Road, Thompson reported "The four guns in [the] orchard continued firing until the rebel infantry was within a few yards of us. Our [2nd New Hampshire] got in front of our guns and charged the rebels and drove them back several times and [we] could not fire for our men were in front."²³ The infantry regiments in the Orchard were pressed hard by the advancing Confederates and began to pull back. Thompson's two south-facing sections in the Orchard were also under enfilading fire from the west. Confederate gunners easily targeted McGilvery's five batteries lined up in a row on the road. Rebel shells overshooting one battery would burst over the next in line. Capt. Hart of the 15th New York, next to Thompson, remembered "being subjected to a cross-fire which killed 3 men and wounded 5." McGilvery watched as Kershaw's brigade pressed forward from the south toward his line: "At about a quarter to 6 o'clock, the enemy's infantry gained possession of the woods immediately to the left of my line of batteries, and our infantry fell back both on our right and left, when great disorder ensued on both flanks of the line of batteries. At this period of the action, all of the batteries were exposed to a warm infantry fire from both flanks and front."²⁴

A third Confederate brigade emerged from the woods to the west. These were four regiments from Mississippi under the fiery former Congressman (and now general) William Barksdale. They quickly

covered the short distance to the Sherfy farm, and overwhelmed the four Federal infantry regiments there. As the Union infantry was overrun from the south and from the west, Brig. Gen. Charles Graham, commanding the brigade in the Orchard, was wounded and captured by the advancing Confederates. In the absence of a commanding general, each regiment supporting McGilvery's artillery began to withdraw one by one.²⁵

Reluctantly, McGilvery ordered his batteries "to retire 250 yards and renew their fire." First to pull back was Hart's battery, section by section, across the open ground north and east of the Orchard. Next were Thompson and Phillips' 5th Massachusetts and 10th New York. "[S]eeing that our line in our rear along the pike were falling back and that we could not hold the ground, I sent them back a section at a time, with orders to come into action some distance in rear," Thompson reported later. Confederate fire from Barksdale's Mississippi regiments overwhelmed Thompson's right section at the Sherfy farm. Gunfire cut down the horse team for one piece in Stephenson's section, immobilizing the gun and its limber and allowing it to be captured. The other gun barely escaped capture, having to be moved by hand across the open field.²⁶

Thompson guided his men back toward the farmhouse by the stream they had passed earlier in the afternoon. One of Thompson's men, Pvt. Casper Carlisle of Battery F, showed extraordinary courage in removing Thompson's last gun from the field after its remaining crewmembers were injured. Now under Confederate fire from Barksdale's men from the west and Kershaw's brigade to the south, Carlisle stopped to cut the harnesses of four dead horses to release them from the gun. Thompson helped him harness the gun to a surviving horse and pull the piece clear. "He [Carlisle] got in the saddle and took the gun and as I stopped to pick up my field glass the gun had got so far ahead that I was unable to overtake it. On looking round I found that I was about ½ way between the Rebel line advancing and our line retiring, when our men called to me to 'hurry up' as they could not fire for me be-

22 "Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery, First Maine Light Artillery, commanding First Volunteer Brigade," 881; Matt Spruill, *Summer Thunder: A Battlefield Guide to the Artillery at Gettysburg* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee press, 2010), 152; Bradley M. Gottfried, *The Artillery of Gettysburg* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 2008), 121; Newton, *Silent Sentinels*, 203.

23 "Report of Capt. James Thompson, Batteries C and F, Pennsylvania Light Artillery" (July 4, 1863), in *OR*, 27:1:890.

24 William Clark, *History of Hampton Battery F: Independent Pennsylvania Light Artillery* (Pittsburgh, PA: Werner Co., 1909), 60; "Report of Capt. Patrick Hart, Fifteenth New York Battery" (August 2, 1863) and "Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery, First Maine Light Artillery, commanding First Volunteer Brigade," *OR*, 27:1:882, 887.

25 Harry Pfanz, *Gettysburg—The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 331–32.

26 "Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery," 882; Thompson, *Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments*, 890.

ing in the way,” Thompson remembered later. He later recommended a medal for Carlisle, who was awarded the Medal of Honor in December of 1892, one of only five artillerymen to receive the medal at Gettysburg.²⁷

McGilvery ordered Bigelow’s Massachusetts battery to remain behind to cover the retreat of the other batteries through a break in a low stone wall in front of the Trostle farmhouse. “The crisis of the engagement had now arrived. I gave Captain Bigelow orders to hold his position as long as possible at all hazards,” wrote McGilvery, “and justice demands that I should state Captain Bigelow did hold his position and execute his firing with a deliberation and destructive effect upon the enemy in a manner such as only a brave and skillful officer could.” Thompson watched as Bigelow’s men retired their battery by prolonge under fire, just as he had done at Second Manassas. Bigelow left four guns to be overrun by Barksdale’s brigade. Eight of his men were killed, seventeen were wounded and two were captured.²⁸

Finding himself behind the stream that ran next to the farmhouse lived in by Abraham Trostle and his family, McGilvery looked for the broken Third Corps infantry units to rally behind. They were nowhere to be seen. The Union line was completely broken between the south end of Cemetery Ridge and the north slope of Little Round Top. There was a clear route to the Taneytown Road and beyond, if the Confederates could get there fast enough. McGilvery made a quick decision: *hold right here*. Just east of the Trostle farm the ground dipped down into a small creek named Plum Run. Further east, the ground rose up a gentle slope to the crest of Cemetery Ridge. McGilvery ordered all of the First Volunteer Brigade batteries to form a line about 400 yards from the Trostle house on the east bank of the creek.

I formed a new line of artillery about 400 yards to the rear, close under the woods, and covering

the opening which led into the Gettysburg and Taneytown road, of the following batteries and parts of batteries: Battery I, Fifth Regular, and a volunteer battery which I have never been able to learn the name of; three guns of the Fifth Massachusetts and two of Captain Thompson’s Pennsylvania battery, and commenced firing on the enemy’s line of infantry and artillery, which had formed in the open field only about 700 or 800 yards in our front.²⁹

Thompson took stock of Batteries C & F. He had one horse shot out from under him and eighteen more were lost, and he was slightly wounded by a shell fragment. Of his original six guns, one was captured at the Sherfy farm and three were heavily damaged in the hurried withdrawal from the Peach Orchard. One man was killed, nine were wounded and four were missing. The remaining two guns were hurriedly placed in line with the surviving guns from the other batteries. They briefly engaged Barksdale’s Mississippians and an Alabama brigade under Cadmus M. Wilcox until around 7:30 p.m. when they ran out of ammunition. Thompson asked for permission to pull back, and Battery C & F was sent to the vicinity of Little Round Top to refit.³⁰

By the next morning, July 3, McGilvery had replenished many of his batteries and repaired broken pieces. His new line behind Plum Run numbered thirty-nine guns total of various types from different commands in the following batteries, running from south to north along Cemetery Ridge: Ames’ Battery G, 1st New York (six 12-pounders), Dow’s 6th Maine Battery (four 12-pounders), Judson Clark’s 1st New Jersey, Battery B (six 10-pounder Parrotts), Capt. William Rank’s section from Battery H, 3rd Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery (two 3-inch rifles), John Sterling’s 2nd Connecticut Battery (four James Rifles and two howitzers), Hart’s 15th New York Battery (four 12-pounders), Phillips’ 5th Massachusetts Battery (six 3-inch rifles), and Thompson’s Consolidated

27 Charles Hanna, *Gettysburg Medal of Honor Recipients* (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2010), 51–2; The other four are: Capt. Alonzo Cushing and Sgt. Frederick Fuger, both from Battery A, 4th US Artillery; Second Lt. Edward Knox, 15th New York Light Artillery; Bugler Charles Reed, 9th Massachusetts Artillery.

28 “Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery” and “Report of Lieut. Richard S. Milton, Ninth Massachusetts Battery” (July 17, 1863), OR, 27.1:882, 886; *History of the Fifth Massachusetts Battery: Organized October 3, 1861, Mustered Out June 12, 1865* (Boston: Luther E. Cowles, 1902), 669.

29 “Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery,” 882–883; James Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg* (El Dorado, CA: Savas Beatie, 2009), 217.

30 “Report of Capt. James Thompson,” 890; Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 5:868.

Battery C & F (five 3-inch rifles).³¹ The two remaining pieces of Bigelow's 9th Massachusetts guns were in line further north at the home of Abraham Bryan. Other miscellaneous batteries not under McGilvery were ranked along the ridge all the way up to the cemetery.

Shortly after 1:00 p.m., Confederate artillery opened up with a thunderous bombardment, the loudest Thompson had ever heard. Brigadier General Hunt ordered the Artillery Reserve to conserve ammunition by replying with counter-battery fire slowly and only when a good target could be clearly seen. In obedience to orders, Battery C & F at first delayed its fire, then carefully targeted the rebel batteries

north of the Klinge Farm due west across the Emmitsburg Road. Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock of the Second Corps, concerned that the low volume of Federal artillery fire was demoralizing his infantry, instructed all the Artillery Reserve right flank batteries to open fire in earnest. Thompson was glad to receive the order, saying, "it

The plaque on the monument to Hampton's Battery. Thomas Nank.

[was] easier to fight than lay idle under such a storm of shot, shell and missiles."³² But the increased firing provoked a severe retaliation: two Confederate 20-pounder Parrott rifles near the Klinge Farm hit Thompson's battery and put two pieces out of action. Ten enlisted men, four officers and a dozen horses were also cut down. The wounded men were sent about two hundreds to the rear where they sheltered behind a large boulder. Four of the men died there in the shade of the rock: Capt. Joseph Miller and Pvs. Jacob Kiersh, Hugh Purdy, and Adam Rath. They were all originally members of Hampton's Battery F.³³

As the long-awaited Confederate infantry appeared

from the woods, Thompson's gunners savaged them with shell, then switched to canister: "... when we saw Pickett's division, supported by others, emerge from Seminary heights; this was our opportunity to get revenge for our defeat the first and second days. We fired case shot into their advancing lines until they got within canister range, then we gave them that in double charges; as we saw this charge we don't believe there was a fighting rebel that

³¹ Clark, *History of Hampton Battery F*, 68; Newton, *Silent Sentinels*, 181; David Shultz, "Double Canister at Ten Yards": *The Federal Artillery and the Repulse of Pickett's Charge, July 3rd, 1863* (1995; El Dorado, CA: Savas Beatie, 2017), 7; Jeffrey D. Wert, *Gettysburg, Day Three* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 142; "Report of Brig. Gen. Henry J. Hunt, U.S. Army, Chief of Artillery, Army of the Potomac" (September 27, 1863), *OR*, 27.1:239.

³² Thompson, *Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments*, 890.

³³ Clark, *History of Hampton Battery F*, 56. The rock is still there today, unmarked but cleared from the underbrush by the National Park Service. It is known as Hampton's Battery Rock.

Thompson's Battery C and F monument located at the position it held on July 3. Thomas Nank.

A close-up of the Battery C and F monument. Gettysburg National Military Park.

penetrated our lines.”³⁴ Running low on ammunition, Thompson fought on with his three remaining guns until Brigadier General Hunt, surveying the damage, ordered Battery C & F to withdraw to the Artillery Reserve park and send forward a replacement unit.

For James Thompson and the men of the Consolidated Light Independent Pennsylvania Battery C & F, the battle at Gettysburg was over. Their losses were substantial: five killed or mortally wounded, twenty otherwise wounded and three missing for a total of twenty-eight casualties, or 27 percent of those engaged. No other unit in the Artillery Reserve suffered a higher casualty rate, except for Bigelow’s 9th Massachusetts Battery, which shared a 27 percent loss rate. No other Pennsylvania battery suffered higher losses during the battle. McGilvery said in his official report of Thompson’s men, “on July 2, where the battle raged most furiously . . . C and F consolidated Pennsylvania Artillery contested every inch of ground, and remained on the field to the very last.” The war would of course go on: Battery C & F went with the Army of the Potomac back into northern Virginia and participated in the inconclusive Mine Run campaign. In December, all but seventeen of the men reenlisted as veteran volunteers for three more years. Battery F was separated from Battery C on March 25, 1864. At that point both units were recruited up to strength and each became an independent unit again. On April 5, both batteries

were ordered to Camp Barry outside Washington, DC, to re-fit. They both remained in and around the defenses of Washington until June 20, 1865, when Battery C was ordered to Pittsburgh, where it was mustered out of active service on June 30.³⁵

James Thompson had made a tremendous impact on the success of his battery and of the Artillery Reserve. His experience from Balaclava, Second Bull Run, and Antietam paid dividends for the Union army and for his men at Gettysburg. Promoted to brevet major for his actions at Cedar Mountain, and again to brevet lieutenant colonel for his work at Antietam, Thompson could honestly say he had a successful career. A life-long military professional, he walked away from the army with a discharge signed and dated June 13, 1865. Forty-seven days later, he put his signature to another piece of paper, this one perhaps, more valuable to him than any other. On July 29, 1865, James Thompson, the forty-four-year-old son of Ballynahinch, Northern Ireland, officially became a citizen of the United States of America.³⁶

.....
Thomas E. Nank is a native of Michigan and a retired U.S. Navy Master Chief Petty Officer. He is a graduate of Gettysburg College with History, Civil War Era Studies, and Public History degrees. He writes for history magazines and journals and is a research assistant with the Civil War Trust. He lives in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

34 Thompson, *Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments*, 890.

35 “Report of Lieut. Col. Freeman McGilvery,” 884; Clark, *History of Hampton Battery F*, 72.

36 Certificate of Citizenship, July 29, 1865, Thompson Papers, Gettysburg National Military Park.