



## *The New Americans*

1830-1862

**F**rustrated and disappointed at the condition and lack of military success on the part of the Army of the Potomac, newly appointed Capt. John S. Kidder declared: "I really think if it was not for the adopted soldiers we should not have an army."<sup>1</sup> He was exaggerating the condition and quality of soldiers when he wrote this in one of his first letters home in October 1862. Early in the Civil War, the Army of the Potomac had suffered several setbacks but, in time would prove itself in battle. The "adopted soldier" thirty-two-year-old Kidder so modestly referred to was, in reality, himself. John S. Kidder was always proud of the fact that he was an American by choice, not by birth.

Very little is known about his early life in England except that his father and mother, John and Mary Ann Payne Kidder, moved from village to village before finally settling in Charing, England, about fifty miles southeast of London. It was here that the elder Kidder established a small shop; it was also here that eight of the Kidder children, including John Swain, were born. For a dozen years, the elder Kidder supported his growing family by selling a variety of goods supplied by the British East India Company. His shop was well stocked with all kinds of spices, coffees, groceries, and, of course, teas.

Several factors influenced the elder Kidder's decision to immigrate to America. First, the economic climate of England had changed as the 1840s ushered in a depression. To help boost the sagging economy, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel proposed a tax on all incomes in excess of £150 per year.<sup>2</sup> The burden of an extra tax may have strained the Kidder family budget. This was also the time of the Industrial Revolution. The unbearable pollution brought about by this revolution turned meandering

streams into cesspools, for layers of soot blanketed the towns from factory smokestacks. If these were two good reasons to leave England, there was perhaps also a third. Two uncles, George and Thomas Kidder, had recently emigrated to America and settled in upstate New York. It is possible that the Kidder family had received glowing reports about the wide open spaces and the availability of affordable land in America.

Convinced that a better life lay ahead for himself and his family, the elder Kidder sold his shop and its contents. Although America was only an ocean away, the Atlantic crossing was still a dangerous undertaking in the 1840s. A wide variety of pamphlets were in circulation at the time warning the prospective immigrant about the obvious dangers in traveling to America. Dreadful stories of the Atlantic crossing were pub conversation throughout England. Tales of shipwrecks, unscrupulous sea captains preying upon the ignorance of passengers, and disease-ridden ships were common. For many, and this included the Kidders, the desire to emigrate far outweighed the dangers.

The fact that the Kidder family had a little money set them apart from other immigrants of the day. Instead of splitting the family up and coming to America piecemeal, which was common, they were able to travel as a family—a very large one at that. With John and Mary Ann were Salina, 14 years old; John, 12; George, 11; Frances, 10; William, 8; Mary, 6; Edward, 2; and Charlotte, 1 year old.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Irish, the Kidders were able to escape the slums of New York City and move into the interior of upstate New York. On May 19, 1842, the former merchant from Charing, Kent County, England, purchased a 129 acre farm from Richard Harrington in Pittsfield, Otsego County, New York. The \$1,600 transaction was recorded in the County Clerks Conveyance Book as “hand paid.”<sup>4</sup> Two summers later, the elder Kidder was able to obtain an excellent return on his investment when he sold seventy-eight acres of land to William Smith for \$1,727.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to determine how successful John and Mary Ann Kidder were at farming. As the years went by, their children grew and left the farm in various stages. First to leave was Salina, the eldest daughter. She married Alexander Aires, and by 1848 was expecting her first child. Living with Salina and Alexander at this time was seven-year-old Charlotte. The reason Charlotte moved from the farm is a mystery. One can only surmise that it was an arrangement made to accommodate Salina after the birth of the baby. We shall never know.

We do know that at age eighteen, John Swain Kidder entered into an apprenticeship with James Kenyon, a carriage maker in the nearby village

of Morris. After working one winter as a school teacher, John arranged to extend his apprenticeship for two more winters while continuing to work the family farm during the summers. As his apprenticeship became more involved, it was clear to him that this was the work he truly desired. Within a year, he left home and took up residence with the Kenyons. He never, at any time in his life, expressed any regret at leaving the family farm and seemed to develop a certain sympathy towards those who worked the soil for a living. Years later his own account books would reflect this by listing several farm accounts "on hold," as unable to pay.<sup>6</sup>

In a short while sixteen-year-old Frances Kidder joined her brother and was employed by the Kenyons as a live-in domestic. Now the only girl left on the family farm was twelve-year-old Mary. As John's absence meant one less farmhand, seventeen-year-old George and fourteen-year-old William took on more and more responsibilities, for Edward, age seven, was still too young to work. In 1844, Major Henry Payne Kidder, "H.P." as he was called, was born, the only Kidder, until that time, born in America.<sup>7</sup>

For the next several years John S. Kidder learned all aspects of the carriage business. Construction, repairs, custom work, and accounting were part of his training. It was not uncommon for him to put in ten to fifteen hours a day to earn his \$50 annual salary as an apprentice. He even managed to include a few odd jobs such as painting, setting glass for windows, and cutting wood to make extra money. This was all hard work; however, he never worked on Sunday. On the Sabbath he could be found at the Baptist Church in Morris lending his voice to the choir. It was probably here that he met, and was totally captivated by, seventeen-year-old Harriet Matteson. On October 6, 1853, John and Harriet were married in Morris. It was a union that would last fifty-two years.<sup>8</sup>

Since John was still an apprentice at the time of his marriage, the newlyweds boarded at the Kenyons for \$1.75 a week. The following year, apprenticeship finished, John and Harriet moved to Laurens, New York. In 1854, they rented a house owned by Harriet's father. With a capitol investment of \$275, John entered into a business partnership with blacksmith, Elisha Fisher. This was the beginning of the Kidder and Fisher Carriage Shop.<sup>9</sup>

In their first year of business the two men built and sold six wagons. The next year they managed to sell eleven, and the year after that, sixteen. John and Elisha prided themselves on their ability to construct wagons and carriages to suit any purpose. An open buggy sold for \$90, and two-horse buggies sold for \$165. A sulky, a two-wheeled carriage, could be

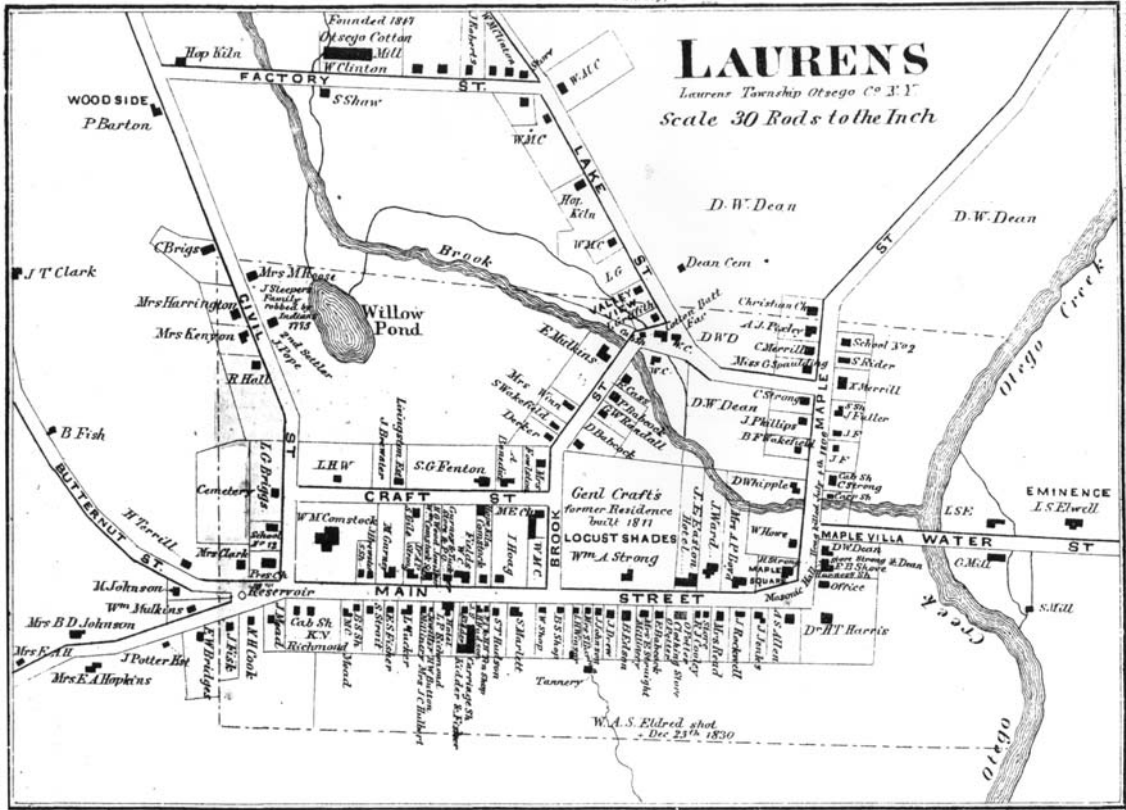
purchased for as little as \$65; while the custom carriage of cotton milliner William C. Fields sold for \$127.<sup>10</sup>

Remembering the days at Kenyons, work didn't stop with the sale of carriages. John S. Kidder and his partner sold paint and varnish, made repairs to wagons, and in time constructed their own blacksmith shop to do iron work. With the addition of the blacksmith shop came an increase in odd job repair work. No job was too big or too menial. They forged spindles for the cotton mill, made loom forks, and even mended the handle on the sausage machine at Drews Store. Business was steady even though there were times when the flow of money wasn't coming in. In many instances, people unable to pay their bills bartered for services. Kidder and Fisher traded for a variety of items, for example, cloth, leather, lumber, and even meat. On one occasion they accepted seventy-three pounds of lard for services rendered.<sup>11</sup>

When work slowed at his own shop, Kidder, characteristically, not one to sit idle when a dollar could be earned, found work elsewhere. An example of this happened in November 1861. Leaving Fisher at the shop, he traveled to Norwich to accept a temporary job with a wheelwright. Filing spindles and mortising (carving out) wheel hubs by day, he spent his evenings boarded above a local tavern. Joining him in this arrangement were two other married men presumably in the same work situation. "I cannot call it home," John confessed to Harriet in a short note. "I do not feel homesick because it is of no use, it would not better it any therefore we keep contented as possible."<sup>12</sup> He hoped to earn \$10 a week for this work.

While John concerned himself with the carriage shop, Harriet's world centered around home and church. Still active in the church choir, she found time to teach Sunday school, and she continued to do so for the remainder of her life. A major concern for Harriet was maintaining a large household that now included her mother and father, Ruth and Joshua Matteson. As money conscious as her husband, Harriet looked for ways to save money within the family budget. A spare room in the house was always rented.

There was reason for John and Harriet's preoccupation with money. The village of Laurens, nestled safely beneath the rolling hills of Otsego County, had not escaped the economic depression brought on by the bank Panic of 1857. These were, as one Laurens resident recorded in her diary, "hard times."<sup>13</sup> The ripple effect caused by the Panic was still being felt by many as late as 1860. While farmers worried about the price of hops, Kidder, too, was concerned about the lack of wagon orders.



Despite these difficult times, the Kidders did have cause to celebrate. After suffering three consecutive miscarriages, Harriet gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Clara Amelia, on March 13, 1861. To her adoring father, Clara would always be referred to as “my little diamond” or “my queen diamond.” The happiness they shared was interrupted a month later by events that took place a world away. A federal fort in Charleston Harbor, Fort Sumter, had surrendered to the southern Confederacy. The Civil War had begun.

John S. Kidder did not immediately volunteer his services after the fall of Fort Sumter, or even after the Union defeat at First Bull Run three months later. As the summer of 1862 arrived, however, it was clear that those who had predicted a short war were terribly wrong. The fearful casualties out west at Shiloh and the failure of Army of the Potomac Commander, George B. McClellan, to capture Richmond, the Confederate capitol, convinced many that the war would be long and costly. The sooner fresh troops could be brought into the field, the quicker the rebellion could be stamped out. On July 2, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln called on the governors of the loyal states for an additional three hundred thousand troops, chiefly infantry, to serve three years.<sup>14</sup>

This proclamation by President Lincoln caused a great deal of excitement all over the country. In small communities such as Little Falls in Herkimer County, the local newspapers published patriotic editorials comparing this national crisis to a similar call for troops during the Revolutionary War. “Let not the emergency show that Old Herkimer of 1862, is less patriotic than Old Herkimer of 1776—nor less patriotic then she proved to be but twelve months ago. . . . We can be the first to answer the Governors Proclamation and now let us take hold and do it!” *The Little Falls Journal and Courier* which published this editorial also kept its readers up to date on the latest rumors of new regiments being organized in and around the county. “We are about to enlist another regiment to which the pronoun ‘our’ may be properly prefixed, and we ask those enlisting from this county if it is well to remember this.”<sup>15</sup> The *Courier* even went as far as to publish the population figures, for Herkimer County (40,561) and neighboring Otsego County (50,157), to illustrate how feasible it would be for either county to raise a contingent of troops.<sup>16</sup>

The person with the real authority to raise troops and to specify what part of the state they would be drawn from was Governor Edwin D. Morgan in Albany. Morgan was in a position like that of a medieval king. As monarchs of old took it upon themselves to reward their faithful with titles of nobility for special services to the crown, so, too, could

the governor of a state. He could reward those who helped raise troops with a high rank in the volunteer army. On July 19, 1862, Governor Morgan appointed Richard Franchot as colonel of a volunteer regiment to be raised in the 20th State Senatorial District, which included all of Herkimer and Otsego counties.<sup>17</sup>

A self-made man by the standards of this era, Franchot had done quite well for himself without a stint in the military. The son of a French immigrant, he had attended local schools in Otsego County (including Hartwick Academy) and later made his way to the Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Returning to the town of Morris, he helped establish a wool and cotton factory while dividing his time between local politics, as the Town Supervisor, and other assorted business interests, becoming the first President of the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad. On March 4, 1861, Franchot took his seat in the Thirty-seventh Congress.<sup>18</sup>

When Franchot made his tour of Herkimer and Otsego counties that summer, he discovered he would have little trouble raising a standard ten company regiment consisting of one thousand men. In fact, there was a great deal of competition between the various towns and villages to see who would be the first to meet their quota. Hardly a newspaper in either county left the presses without an article entitled “War Meeting at . . .”

In less than twenty-five days, Colonel Franchot had enough men signed on to fill the ranks of a volunteer regiment. One reason for the speed in which the regiment was organized was the effort put forth by recruiting officers. Your position on the staff of the regiment was dependant upon the number of men you enlisted in your company. Anyone who harbored the desire to wear the shoulder straps of an officer was a busy man in both counties. It would help a great deal if you had good business contacts or were a well-respected member of your community. Clinton A. Moon and Thomas S. Arnold, soon to be captain and first lieutenant of Company C, were actively raising troops and were considered “most capable members of the legal profession,” according to the *Journal and Courier*.<sup>19</sup> Most of the officers were lawyers or had good political connections.

In Laurens, John S. Kidder and Elisha Fisher had some serious discussions regarding the future of the carriage business in the summer of 1862. “We were in debt,” Kidder later admitted. They had a large stock of wagons and people were not paying their bills. “Times were hard,” he said.<sup>20</sup>

When it was announced that a new volunteer regiment was being raised in both counties with each county being held accountable for five companies, Kidder made his intentions known to his partner. Fisher objected to the idea immediately. “I don’t care what Fisher says about my

coming into the army,” Kidder later recalled. “He felt that our creditors might give us trouble and want their money. I talked with most of them and they said they could wait on us and would not require us to pay until a reasonable time.”<sup>21</sup>

With his creditors temporarily satisfied and Fisher in control of the carriage business, John S. Kidder began to actively recruit men in and around the village of Laurens. His goal was to enlist an entire company and thus attain the rank of captain. “That I expected a commission I do not deny,” he later said, carefully adding, “but I am confident had I not obtained one when I started, I should have held the same position that I do at present.”<sup>22</sup>

Of the hundred men needed to form a standard infantry regiment, Kidder was able to sign on seventy men, forty of which hailed from Laurens. Assisting him in this endeavor was a twenty-two-year-old country store clerk from nearby Worcester. Delavan Bates had once dreamed of a military career, however, in 1857 he failed in an attempt to secure an appointment to West Point. Years later he noted that the cadet who took his place, Henry B. Noble, never got beyond the rank of captain. “I think it may have been all for the best,” said the future brigadier general and Medal of Honor recipient.<sup>23</sup> Bates scoured the Worcester district and was able to add twenty-five men to Kidder’s Company.

On August 18, 1862, John S. Kidder was appointed captain of Company I of the 121st New York Volunteers. “I was commissioned second lieutenant,” grumbled Delavan Bates, “while Colonel Franchot sandwiched in a relative as first lieutenant.”<sup>24</sup> John D. P. Douw, a nephew of Col. Richard Franchot had, indeed, been appointed to the rank of first lieutenant.

For John S. Kidder and Delavan Bates this incident seemed to be a combination of army politics, favoritism, and nepotism. They didn’t like it but there wasn’t much they could do about it.

There was another reason for the sudden rush to the colors in that summer of 1862, and that was, simple economics. There was a fairly lucrative bounty being offered at the federal, state, and even the local level. This inducement of over \$200 to sign on for three years could, in time, prove to be a veritable nest egg for a young man. In addition to this, it was not uncommon for communities or private individuals to come forth with additional funds. The village of Fairfield offered \$500 to be divided equally among those who volunteered from the community, and claimed it was the largest single bounty offered by any village in the state.<sup>25</sup> Private individuals challenged others to make donations. When forwarding his check for \$100, S. C. Franklin, a local resident declared: “I trust you will



divide equally among the volunteers of this town who have so nobly responded to the call of the [U.S.] Government, to protect the Old Flag, the Constitution, and the property of some of our wealthy townsmen who will neither go forth as soldiers in the army of our country, nor contribute for its support.”<sup>26</sup>

The lure of the bounty helped Kidder recruit in Laurens. In 1860, the average yearly wage for a farm laborer in the surrounding area of Laurens was \$200. A young man could make this same amount by simply signing on for three years.<sup>27</sup> This large bounty seemed to offset the comparatively low pay the average soldier received—a scant \$13 per month. Col. Silas Burt, who had served as the Assistant Inspector General of the New York State National Guard, defended the rate of pay. “At first glance,” Burt said of the pay, it “seems paltry, but when it is considered that, in addition, he receives food, clothing, quarters and medical attendance, there seems no reason why he should spend more than \$3 to \$5 a month, and not allot the residue for the support of his dependents, or if free from that contingency, should not direct its deposit in a savings bank to accumulate as capital when he returns to the working world.”<sup>28</sup> It was still a popular assumption that the war would soon come to an end, the Rebellion “crushed out,” as claimed by the *Oneonta Herald*, “and the war concluded within a year. There are very few men, comparatively, that can secure a better income in any other way.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to troops, each senatorial district was expected to furnish a training facility. In the last week of July, Mohawk farmer Henry Schuyler agreed to rent a portion of his farm to the state for this purpose at the rate of \$10 per acre. The location was perfect. Situated atop a small plateau in the Town of German Flatts, the field overlooked the Mohawk River and the Village of Herkimer. It was on the same side of the river as Mohawk, Ilion, and Frankfort and only a short distance from Richfield Springs in neighboring Otsego County. More importantly, Camp Schuyler was within walking distance of the railroad line that led to Albany.

By mid-August 1862, Kidder and Bates had moved their Company I boys north towards Camp Schuyler on the Mohawk River. Here, they would receive the remainder of their bounty and be officially sworn in as volunteer soldiers.

Throughout the month of August an endless parade of soldiers, politicians, family members, and well-wishers descended upon Camp Schuyler. By the time Kidder and Bates arrived, there were already several full companies present. The camp took on the appearance of a tent city complete with a dining hall that served three meals a day. As soon as Kid-

der reported for duty, he presented his men to the adjutant and saw to it that each man was properly outfitted with a uniform. It was a relaxed atmosphere and there was a certain degree of bending the rules on that first day. When eighteen-year-old Cassius Delavan completed his medical examination and signed his enlistment papers, he collected his uniform and left camp. "I and some other fellows went over to Mohawk and got some photographs taken," he recorded in his tiny diary. From there he went directly home. He didn't report back to camp for four days; there were still chores that had to be completed on the family farm in Norway.<sup>30</sup>

On the same day, August 21, 1862, the *Little Falls Journal and Courier* published the entire roster of the 121st New York Volunteers, and Silas Burt arrived at Camp Schuyler with the remainder of the state bounty.<sup>31</sup> Many soldiers like young Cassius Delavan were anxious to get the money and send it home. There were a few last minute enlistees who showed up at Camp Schuyler at the exact moment Burt arrived with cash in hand. When Homer Wilson of German Flatts arrived, Kidder quickly signed him up to fill a vacant spot in his own Company I. Wilson took the money and vanished. There wasn't much Kidder could do except record the embarrassing incident in the Regimental Day Books.<sup>32</sup> It was his first but certainly not his last encounter with deserters. When Burt finished, only one man in the entire regiment had refused a bounty. Reverend John R. Sage, twenty-nine-year-old former minister of the Universalist Church in Little Falls, enlisted as regimental chaplain and would only accept the pay of a private soldier. "We call this patriotic," declared the *Journal and Courier*.<sup>33</sup>

With Burt's departure, the regiment now made every effort to act like real soldiers. The men drilled the best they could since no weapons had been issued to them. They stood guard and performed some of the less glamorous tasks associated with a soldier's life. Cassius Delavan assured his sister that washing dishes for his entire company was, "not a small job."<sup>34</sup> Some of the men became immediately homesick and wrote letters in their spare time; others idled away the time playing cards. There were no more visits to the local saloons in Herkimer and Mohawk; the men were now required to be in uniform and forbidden to leave the camp. Officers were introduced to form after form of military paperwork and prided themselves in their daily company, inspections. Occasionally they marched their company, or the entire regiment out of camp toward the Old Fort Herkimer Church. Only a mile from camp, the stone church stood as a reminder of the part the region played in the American Revolution. Soon the 121st New York Volunteers would take part in another revolution of sorts, hundreds of miles away.

Amid all this excitement and activity, Col. Richard Franchot appeared as confident as ever. He was, as one person observed, “constantly at his post, most active and energetic and already the pride of his men.”<sup>35</sup> Before leaving Camp Schuyler, a group of grateful citizens presented the politician turned soldier with “a fine sword, belt pistols, sash, shoulder straps, spurs and gauntlets, the whole costing \$130.”<sup>36</sup>

On August 30, 1862, the 121st New York was ordered to break camp and report to the seat of war. That same day, another Union defeat was recorded at Second Bull Run. Captain Kidder marched his Company I men out of Camp Schuyler. They camped on the village green in Mohawk and then proceeded to the train station in the village of Herkimer where the boxcars would take them out of the valley. The fact that the entire regiment had trained for less than a month at Camp Schuyler escaped many as equipment and men were loaded onto the train. Woefully unprepared for what lay ahead, they still had not been issued tents or rifles.

As the eastbound train made its way toward Albany, their first stop, Captain Kidder of Company I had time to think about the journey he was undertaking. So far, the greatest adventure in his life had been the Atlantic Ocean crossing. It had been quite an experience for a boy of twelve years. Now, twenty years later, he was embarking on another great adventure. The Civil War was an event that would change John S. Kidder and those closest to him, for it became a Kidder family affair. All of his brothers would eventually volunteer their services, as would several brothers-in-law. Joining him in the 121st New York Volunteers was brother Edward, and his sometimes troublesome brother-in-law Delos Lewis. Next came George Kidder who enlisted in the 152nd New York Volunteers, a unit that drew men from the same state senatorial district as the 121st New York. When youngest brother Major Henry Payne Kidder was of age, he enlisted, and from far away California, William Kidder enlisted. When William Kidder left the family farm in 1858, he traveled to Panama, crossed the Isthmus and made it to the Shasta gold fields in California. In March 1864, he enlisted in the 7th California Volunteers. Finally, there was Charley Matteson. Harriet Kidder’s brother had enlisted in the 76th New York Volunteers. John S. Kidder always made a special effort to look after Charley whenever he could.

With Albany, New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore behind them, the 121st New York became yet another in a long line of volunteer regiments that streamed through the nation’s capitol. Arriving in Washington on September 3, the regiment had time for a brief rest and then reported directly to Fort Lincoln. One of the many defensive forts that

surrounded the capitol, the twelve-gunned Fort Lincoln wasn't much to look at, even from the untrained military eye of Second Lieutenant Delavan Bates. "The fort is merely a breastwork, thrown up with a ditch around it and some brush," he observed.<sup>37</sup>

It was here, at Fort Lincoln, that the regiment was finally issued their Enfield rifles, cartridge boxes, and one hundred rounds of ammunition. Now properly equipped with weapons, there seemed to be little urgency regarding their situation, even with a Rebel flag clearly visible in the distance. Some, like Cassius Delavan, managed to sneak down to the Potomac River to wash their clothes and go swimming.<sup>38</sup>

This inactivity would be short-lived. Col. Franchot was stirred into action when it was reported that the Confederate Army had invaded Maryland. Leaving Fort Lincoln on September 7, 1862, Franchot force marched the regiment in an effort to join the Army of the Potomac. It was a grueling experience that few ever forgot. Marching under the hot Maryland sun burdened by heavy knapsacks, rations, and weapons, men dropped by the roadside and slept beneath the stars since tents had not been issued. Roused by Franchot at 2:00 A.M., they continued their arduous trek. These forced marches were too much for soldiers who had never marched before, save for a few miles with light packs and no weapons a few weeks earlier at Camp Schuyler. Their inexperience and suffering did not go unnoticed. "There is a new regiment attached to our brigade, the One Hundred Twenty First New York," wrote Chaplain John Adams of the 5th Maine in his diary, ". . . and marching comes hard for them."<sup>39</sup>

Franchot seemed to drive his men all the harder now that cannon fire could be heard in the vicinity of Crampton Gap, just below South Mountain. The march was made even more intolerable by the taunts the men received from the older regiments they passed along the way. Insults regarding their bounty status ranged from the mild "Paid Hirelings," and "\$200 Dollar Men," to the vicious "\$200 Sons of Bitches."<sup>40</sup>

Newly assigned to the VI Corps, Franchot was anxious to prove the fighting ability of his men; he pleaded with First Division Commander and fellow New Yorker, Maj. Gen. Henry Warner Slocum to have the 121st New York placed in the first line of battle. Slocum wisely brushed aside the request of the inexperienced Franchot and placed the regiment in the second brigade commanded by Col. Joseph J. Bartlett.

Nestled in a ravine for safekeeping, Bartlett followed Slocum's lead and rested the exhausted troops, giving them a "reserve" role to play. The regiment had a perfect view of the Battle of Crampton's Gap. With very few exceptions, it was the first battle anyone in the 121st had ever

witnessed. An excited Captain Kidder showed remarkable clarity when recording the scene and even went so far as to include, in his letter to Harriet, a crude map of the day's events.

*About 9,000 of our men, comprised of Bartlett's, (Brig. Gen. John) Newton and part of (Brig. Gen. William) Smith's Brigades went up to fight the enemy and take the pass. Gen. Slocum said he would do it in half an hour after he got within reach of them. I think he carried it in less than that time after he commenced firing. They made a splendid charge up a hill as Cooley's and utterly routed them. It was an exciting scene to witness. The enemy were posted at the foot of the hill in the woods which is composed of trees, [there was] no under brush to obstruct the passage of our men. I was fearful it would be night before the attack could be made but the fight was finished before dark. We came over the field early this morning. I counted 156 dead Rebels and 39 of our men besides any quantity of wounded while coming up the hill. I think I counted about all the dead of our men, as most of them were killed before they reached the woods. The Rebels lay strewn all along up the hill; they had a very strong position and ought to have held the pass with 500 men with their batteries, but they ran like sheep.<sup>41</sup>*

The attack made at Crampton's Gap was a little late as Kidder stated, with Gen. Slocum launching his attack at 3:00 P.M. The Confederates resisted but with less than one thousand men, could hardly hold back the twelve thousand man VI Corps for very long. Three hours later, at dusk, the battle was over and the VI Corps held the mountain pass. The next day there was very little for green troops like the 121st New York to do except assist in rounding up stragglers, picking up abandoned arms, and any other useful material left on the field.

It was here in the serenity of Pleasant Valley, past the Gap they had secured, that the entire VI Corps camped while Confederate and Federal Forces slugged it out along the banks of Antietam Creek in what would be forever called "America's Bloodiest Day." It would be three days after the battle, on September 19, before the 121st New York would get to Antietam. Once more, they were relegated to the unglamorous task of collecting abandoned equipment from the field. While some soldiers gathered up these items, others wandered the field looking for the graves of neighbors and friends who had been killed in action near Dunker Church. Here, the 34th New York Volunteers, a regiment drawn from Herkimer County, suffered a staggering 154 casualties. The sight of the dead, both Union and

Confederate, lying in rows of thirty to fifty men, had a sobering effect on the boys of the 121st New York. "I was very glad when we left the vicinity," recorded eighteen-year-old Clinton Beckwith of Company B, in his diary. "Its horrors sickened me."<sup>42</sup> If the swift dash at Crampton's Gap gave the illusion of glory in war, then the sight of the Antietam Battlefield quickly put an end to any thoughts they may have had regarding a romanticized war.

From Antietam, the 121st moved to Bakersville where they were finally issued tents. Up until this time the regiment had improvised. According to Cassius Delavan, cornstalks and "all other such things" were used to provide shelter.<sup>43</sup>

During this time of respite, Captain Kidder found himself occasionally in the position of Officer of the Day. All of the officers took turns at this duty. Although it relieved them from some of the monotonous routines like drilling and marching, they still had other duties to perform. It was a chance to assume more responsibility, or as Kidder explained, "take charge of the camp, see that the streets are cleaned, the sinks kept in order and see also that the guard is properly mounted and posted, see there is an officer present in all companies at roll call."<sup>44</sup>

Kidder took *all* of this very seriously as his ultimate goal was to rise in rank. In order to achieve this, Kidder believed that he had to make Company I the best in the regiment. One of the first appointments John S. Kidder made was to place Private Charles Dean in the position of Company Clerk. The twenty-one-year-old former mechanic from Laurens had been an old friend, and Kidder felt fortunate to have someone who could and would perform this tedious duty. Captain Kidder may have been a businessman back home, but he abhorred paperwork. Dean was just the man, as Kidder noted. He was always "in the best of spirits and gently stroking his *huge moustache*."<sup>45</sup> Dean felt that his shoulder length moustache made him look every bit the soldier, "a la militaire" as he was fond of saying.<sup>46</sup>

With Lt. D. P. John Douw temporarily absent from the company (he was serving as an ordinance officer on the staff of General Slocum), Kidder began to rely more and more on the abilities of Delavan Bates. "He is a good Officer," he said of Bates. "I am pleased with him. I think I could not have a better man. My Orderly Sergeant, James Cronkite is the best Orderly in the Regiment."<sup>47</sup>

Utilizing the collection of military books belonging to Second Lieutenant Bates, Captain Kidder got to work drilling his men. With the assistance of Bates and Cronkite, the company gradually improved in both drill

and discipline. After only a few weeks, he couldn't have been more pleased with the results. In a letter to Harriet he boasted of his accomplishments:

*James Gardiner and some of my boys from Worcester are as tough as knots and make good soldiers. [James] McIntyre's health is better than it has been; he improves in drill. Also Henry Heniker and Mason Jenks, Samuel Fenton, George Teel, Robin Fox make first rate soldiers. . . . In fact, I am well-satisfied with my men. I was afraid I should have to reduce some of the Corporals and Sergeants to the ranks for incompetency, but they are improving rapidly. . . . Indeed I have heard that some of the Old Captains of other Regiments had said that Company I was the best drilled Company in the whole Regiment. Whenever we come on to drill or on dress parade, we are always the first company out. That is what military men like is promptness.*<sup>48</sup>

Toward the end of September, Captain Kidder's optimism regarding his company soon became overshadowed by a sick list that grew with each passing day. "There are a number of sick but none dangerously," he confided to Harriet.<sup>49</sup> He showed genuine concern and sympathy for those who were sick and contempt for those who feigned illness. When eighteen-year-old Charles Thurston vanished, Kidder was furious. Thurston, in supposed poor health, had made it all the way to Washington for the purpose of obtaining a medical discharge. "I think he will have a good time of it," fumed Kidder.

*He has been more trouble to me than all the rest of the Company. He would leave rank when we were on the march and steal apples, peaches, or anything else, and, when we lay in the field overnight at the Battle of Crampton Gap, he was out all night and was taken sick the next day. He will be made to toe the mark when he gets back.*<sup>50</sup>

As if the growing problem of sickness wasn't bad enough, the regiment was now faced with a change in command. On September 14, 1862, Col. Richard Franchot submitted his resignation after exactly one month of service. This announcement brought few tears, and to some a sigh of relief. "Never had a regiment a worse commandant," said Assistant Surgeon Daniel M. Holt.<sup>51</sup> Eager to return to his seat in Congress, the politician was, indeed, out of his element. "Franchot told me the reason why he resigned," recalled Kidder. "It was for the best interest of the regiment. I thought so myself as he had no taste for it."<sup>52</sup>

Franchot's resignation was accepted immediately—the day after it was submitted. Years later there would be a bizarre postscript to the career of Franchot. On March 13, 1865, he was promoted for “gallant and meritorious service during the war.” Franchot, who never fought in a battle, was promoted to the rank of brevet brigadier general.<sup>53</sup>

In typical army fashion, rumors now began to circulate around the campfires as to who would be the new colonel. It didn't take Kidder long to find out. “Our new Colonel is Captain Upton,” he wrote to Harriet, “a West Point graduate that has been in the service a year.”<sup>54</sup>

As exciting as this sounded, and it was true, Colonel Upton would not be able to report to the 121st New York until the last week of October. During this interim, the health of the regiment continued to decline and now there was a death. “A young Pearson of Roseboom belonging to Company G,” Kidder solemnly recorded.<sup>55</sup> At the age of twenty-three, Helon Pearson became the first soldier of the regiment to die, succumbing to typhoid fever on the second day of October. He was buried with full military honors complete with a volley being fired over his grave.

By the time Col. Emory Upton arrived at the camp of the 121st New York Volunteers, there were only 722 enlisted men and twenty-eight officers present for duty. Some of these men were sick, only able, as Kidder put it, to perform “half duty.” Upton's first act as colonel of the 121st New York was to move the sick men from their makeshift shelters into a brick barn that he commandeered as a hospital. He then ordered more medical supplies and relocated the rest of the men to a better campsite. This was a relief to Captain Kidder who now had sixteen of his Company I boys on the sick list. Some appeared to be on the road to recovery while others were too sick to be moved. Despite this, he continued to be optimistic. Hamilton Westcot had been sick but appeared to be improving. “The large men do not endure as well as the smaller boys,” he noted. Both the Snediker boys were getting better, but he worried about the three Camp boys from the village of Morris. Charles, Hiram, and Nelson Camp “are sick most of the time . . . but they can get about.”<sup>56</sup>

Eventually, David Bushnell, a Worcester boy signed on by Delavan Bates, became the first casualty of Company I. When Bushnell's brother received word that he was sick with the fever, he rushed to Maryland but was too late. It was Kidder's sad duty to escort him to his brother's grave. Already depressed, Capt. John S. Kidder returned to camp only to discover that more of his men were sick.<sup>57</sup>

It took a while for things to improve, but Colonel Upton's efforts did not go unnoticed by the regiment. Most agreed that their new regimental



commander was a lot different than the last one. Half Franchot's age, the twenty-three-year-old Upton was a veteran of First Bull Run (where he was wounded in action), McClellan's Peninsular Campaign, and Antietam. His appointment to the 121st was a combination of timing and luck. In October 1862, Upton received orders to report to his alma mater to assist in the training of cadets. He loathed this sort of boring assignment, having already drilled recruits in Washington prior to First Bull Run.<sup>58</sup> While in Washington, in late September, he heard of Franchot's sudden departure. A native of Batavia, New York, the West Point graduate seized the opportunity to command a New York State infantry regiment. Serving in the artillery had earned him recognition, but it had not given him what he sincerely desired—rank! By attaching himself to a volunteer regiment, the former captain of the 5th Artillery moved up several grades to colonel of the 121st New York Volunteers. Upton brought with him the much needed leadership skills and combat experience that Franchot never possessed. He was, as Kidder said, "West Point," a professional,<sup>59</sup> and "worth four like Franchot," added Bates.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from the health of the regiment, a second great concern facing the freckle-faced Upton was the growing discontent within the ranks. As Kidder assumed the duties of Officer of the Day, Upton, in the company of Capt. John D. Fish, a former lawyer from Frankfort, New York of Company D, scouted the countryside on horseback in search of thirteen deserters. "I think it is disgraceful to the Herkimer Companies," said Kidder of the affair.

*I think there will have to be some shooting before desertions will cease. I think also that there must be more efficient measures used to catch these scoundrels. I think also that there is but very little patriotism among the troops. There are many that are waiting to get their pay who will desert as soon as they get it. We have lost by desertion about 70 men from this Regiment and not a man will help catch a deserter if he returned home. Shame on such Americans. I fear that there will be more deserters tonight. Men say they hope that those that have gone will not be caught and it is really discouraging to hear men talk. One would think they had lost all sense of honor and respect for the government. It seems as though they care not which side succeeds if they can only go home; the demoralization is general in all regiments. In fact I begin to lose all confidence in the troops, especially the Old Regiments. I think unless something is done soon our army will be useless. I am sorry to say but such are the facts. The men get nothing to read but that infamous sheet the N.Y. Herald which*

*poisons their minds. Traitors of the north are writing to the men to desert. That is they tell them that if they get home the government cannot hold them, and I think such scoundrels ought to be arrested and hung.*<sup>61</sup>

Thankful for the moment that the Otsego companies, especially Company I, were not deserting at the pace of the Herkimer companies, Kidder, nonetheless, despised those who shirked their duty. Deserters were traitors to John S. Kidder.

Sickness was still a big problem in the regiment, and as the last days of October approached, another name was added to the sick list. While visiting his own men at Burketsville, Captain Kidder fell ill and was declared unfit for duty. The extent of his illness will probably never be known. Private Charlie Dean, in a letter to the *Oneonta Herald*, simply called it “the fever.”<sup>62</sup> The absence of Kidder left Company I with no officers. Second Lieutenant Bates had been stricken a few days earlier and was in the hospital, and Lieutenant Douw was still on detached service on the staff of Major General Slocum. All the company duties fell into the hands of Orderly Sergeant James W. Cronkite. Tapping Cronkite for the position of orderly was a wise move on the part of Kidder. Soon Cronkite’s abilities came to the attention of Colonel Upton. Within a few weeks he became a lieutenant in Company I, the first soldier to be promoted from within the ranks.<sup>63</sup>

Kidder remained on the sick list and was absent from the regiment for almost a month, not reporting back until November 28. Like most soldiers, he probably fell ill due to a combination of disease, poor nutrition, and exposure to the elements. In his first letters home, he often complained about the unpredictable southern weather. This was a lot different from the upstate New York weather he was accustomed to.

Avoiding the crowded hospitals that dotted the Maryland countryside after the Battle of Antietam, Captain Kidder was nursed back to health at a private residence. Instead of an open air tent or straw strewn barn floor for a bed, Kidder had his own room, a fireplace, and nurses to wait upon him. He stayed with a Horine family for most of the month of November and believed that the care given him by this family hastened his recovery. The Horine girls (“one 17 years and the other 19 years of age. Smart girls.”) waited on him while their parents worked the farm. “The old gentleman had but one hand . . . Mrs. Horine had but one leg. So you see,” he informed Harriet, “they were in a bad fix. But they were . . . good Union folks. Only charged me \$10 for the whole of the time I was there.”<sup>64</sup>

Second Lieutenant Bates had a similar experience. Nursed back to health by a Mrs. Maxwell, an appreciative Bates paid her \$20 claiming, "I have no doubt she saved my life."<sup>65</sup>

Kidder never forgot his first experience on the sick list and became more and more concerned about his health. Fit and rested after his month long convalescence, he declared, "I am enjoying good health. I eat like a horse and my bowels are all right. I think I can help whip the Rebels as well as I ever could."<sup>66</sup>

Before reporting back to his regiment, Captain Kidder was ordered to Washington with instructions from Colonel Upton to check on the status of any men from the 121st New York Volunteers who were patients in hospitals. When he arrived at one hospital, he was immediately given a small supervisory assignment. He was to take charge of about two hundred fifty men that had recently been discharged from the hospital and were waiting to return to their respective regiments. Some of these men had been sick and others were recovering from wounds they had sustained at Antietam. The sight of these men stirred Kidder. There was no lack of patriotism here. "There was not over 3 or 4 that belonged to any one Regiment and a *Noble set* of men they were; some quite lame that had been shot in the legs but willing and anxious to join their regiments. Such Patriots are *worth their weight in gold*."<sup>67</sup>

It was at one of these hospitals that Kidder came face-to-face with the errant Charles Thurston. After seeing men that had been wounded in battle, it was difficult for him to accept Thurston's worn out excuse that he was still too ill to return to the ranks. After interviewing several hospital attendants, who claimed that Thurston was fit for duty, Kidder decided to present his case to Upton when he returned to camp.<sup>68</sup>

As was his habit throughout the war, John S. Kidder always found time to make little side trips. While in Washington he sought out old friends from Laurens and made a special effort to visit the camp of the 152nd New York where his brother George was now a sergeant. When the 152nd left Camp Schuyler, it had been assigned to garrison duty in the defense of the nation's capitol. What most impressed the elder Kidder was the relative comfort the garrison troops enjoyed. The 121st New York had just been issued shelters—two pieces of canvas that buttoned together to form a wedgelike or "half-lap tent." Brother George was living in a walled tent complete with wood floor and stove. Some of the officers were billeted in houses. "Haven't waded in blood ankle deep, haven't been hungry, thirsty or tired as yet," quipped a 152nd New York officer of a soldier's life thus far.<sup>69</sup>

After leaving his brother in the comparative luxury of garrison life, John S. Kidder boarded a boat and proceeded to Aqua Creek Landing in Virginia. The 121st had moved several times during his absence and were presently encamped at Stafford Court House. He arrived at Aqua Creek only to discover there were no horses available for him to purchase or even borrow. So, with overcoat over one arm and carrying his valise, he set off on a four mile walk to camp. He fatigued quickly after being bedridden so long and was excited when a rider approached him with a spare horse. Arriving at camp, Kidder reported immediately to the tent of Colonel Upton. There were twenty-three men billeted in hospitals in and around the vicinity of Washington according to Kidder's estimate. This was great news to Upton. There was a chance that these men might recover and return to the regiment the way Kidder had done. Upton needed every man at this moment as the regiment numbered only 657 men present for duty.<sup>70</sup> Sickness and disease had ravaged the unit that had not yet seen a single battle.

Captain Kidder made it a point to tell Colonel Upton of his encounter with Charles Thurston. "If he was well enough to run about and walk over to Frederick [Maryland] or go to Baltimore he could have reported to the Regiment," said Kidder. Upton agreed and told him to list Thurston as a deserter. In the paper chase that ensued, the medical discharge papers got to Thurston before the charge of desertion. He was discharged in December 1862. The only part of this entire episode that bothered Kidder was that back home in Laurens his wife was involved in the Thurston problem. Harriet had met young Thurston's mother, and the woman was upset that the Captain [Kidder] had been "very hard" on her boy. One wonders how upset she really could have been. Her son collected a \$200 bounty, had been in the army only four months and was home by Christmas, not having fired a single shot at the enemy.<sup>71</sup>

When Kidder reunited with his Company I boys, things were quite different with Upton at the helm. Still green compared to the standards of other regiments, the 121st New York was being drilled at a furious pace. Assisting Colonel Upton in this endeavor were the officers and men of the 5th Maine.

When the 121st was assigned to the VI Corps, they were placed in the Second Brigade of the First Division along with the 96th Pennsylvania, 5th Maine, 16th and 27th New York regiments. It didn't take long for these veteran regiments to bestow the sobriquet "Onesters" on the 121st, because of the number one-twenty-one they wore on their caps, and also because Onesters rhymed with "youngsters," an obvious reference to their

lack of experience in soldiering. Years later at veteran reunions, the “Onesters” would look back on these days with fond memories.

The 121st respected the Pennsylvania “Coal Heavers” as fighters, but never developed a close friendship with them the way they did with the 5th Maine. The 5th Maine did much more than simply welcome the 121st New York into the brigade. The officers of the 5th Maine spent many hours assisting the officers of the 121st New York in the art of drill and march. The enlisted men of the 5th Maine also availed themselves. Freely circulating about the camps of the Onesters, they offered valuable advice on how to set up a proper camp, lighten backpacks in preparation for long marches, and, most importantly, how to cook over an open fire. Delavan Bates estimated that perhaps nine-tenths of the men on both sides, before the Civil War, had never cooked a meal in their lives, “not even fried a slice of pork or made a cup of coffee.”<sup>72</sup>

John S. Kidder was no exception. From all accounts, he hated to cook and his diet reflected this with the assortment of foods he would consume at any given time. For dinner he might have corned beef, cheese, onions, bread, and rice after eating only fried potatoes for breakfast.<sup>73</sup> He finally gave up cooking altogether and assigned Leroy Hall, who had once worked for him in the carriage shop, as cook for the officers of Company I. This arrangement turned out to be a cost saving measure as officers were expected to purchase their own rations. “I think it costs us as little for board as any officers in the Regiment, the Captain being very economical,” said Delavan Bates of this arrangement.<sup>74</sup> It was cheaper to cook for three or four than to cook individually.

Another reform that was easy to recognize was Colonel Upton’s penchant for not wasting a single moment in the day. Rising at 5:30 A.M., the day began with breakfast, followed in quick succession with surgeon’s call, camp and company inspection, battalion or regimental drill. There were frequent parades, complete with dress white gloves. “I feel proud of the 121st,” John wrote to Harriet. “It would do you good to see them maneuver on battalion drill, then march to camp at right shoulder, shift arms, every man steps at the same instant.”<sup>75</sup>

This sort of disciplined marching did not go unnoticed by the veteran regiments. In time, they would grant the 121st another nickname, “Upton’s Regulars,” because they acted like regular army troops, not as volunteers.

Upton not only wanted his men to behave like soldiers, but also to look like soldiers. “The Colonel ordered every man to have his whiskers shaved off. I tell you there are some queer looking chaps,” said John J.

Ingraham of Company D. "I think if we stay here three years I can raise a moustache by that time."<sup>76</sup> With that, the beards came off and a variety of moustaches appeared. The only ones who seemed exempt from this strange order were members of the medical staff. Dr. William Bassett and Dr. Daniel M. Holt kept their beards, but all the other officers shaved. It looked as if Upton was indeed trying to mold the regiment into his own moustached image.

Another change that met with Kidder's approval was Upton's insistence that the authority of the officers be always respected. He was pleased to hear that, in his absence from Company I, James W. Cronkite had handled an incident in a proper fashion and received the support of Upton. The last instructions Kidder gave to Cronkite before he went on sick leave was, "not to take any insolence or disrespectful language from any member of the Company." Naturally, Kidder was pleased when he learned of the circumstances surrounding the court-martial of Charles Hogaboom. Cronkite, who had preferred the charges, wasn't even an officer at the time, but Upton looked upon him as doing an officer's duties. "Good for the Orderly," said Kidder of the incident. In addition to the court-martial, Hogaboom was ordered to pay a \$13 fine and stand guard duty every other night for a week.<sup>77</sup>

Not all of Colonel Upton's reforms met with the approval of the officers of the 121st New York Volunteers. Shortly after taking command, Upton saw the need to weed out political, or opportunity seekers, who were wearing the shoulder straps of officers. He received permission from the State of New York not to have any more volunteer officers assigned to his command without first meeting his approval.<sup>78</sup> As to those officers who were already a part of the regiment prior to his arrival, Upton instituted a series of tests based on West Point standards. "Some of the Officers," John confided in a letter to Harriet, "have had to resign by request of the Colonel, who is a very strict man."<sup>79</sup> Those officers that stayed, like Kidder, now took their jobs all the more seriously. To John S. Kidder, to have to resign would be tantamount to failure and disgrace. Above all else, he wanted to succeed.