

Cape Fear Confederates: The 18th North Carolina Regiment in the Civil War

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Review

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Gillispie, James *Cape Fear Confederates: The 18th North Carolina Regiment in the Civil War*. McFarland and Company, Inc., \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-4847-0

Following an Important Confederate Regiment

Considering the number of regiments North Carolina supplied to the Confederate army, there are surprisingly few modern regimental histories of their service. There were more than seventy regiments, but there are currently only about ten full-length regimental histories. Whenever a new title is announced, its forthcoming appearance is greeted with anticipation. Just such anticipation has been brewing for James Gillispie's now-released *Cape Fear Confederate: The 18th North Carolina Regiment in the Civil War*.

The Eighteenth Regiment, North Carolina Troops, was one of the bedrock regiments in the Army of Northern Virginia. Formed in July 1861 as the Eighth North Carolina Volunteers, the regiment originally was stationed in the Wilmington vicinity, the same area where about half of the regiment originated. A large portion of the rest of the regiment hailed from other coastal communities. This period in Wilmington was followed by a garrison stint in South Carolina before a return to the Tar Heel state in early spring 1862, although the regiment failed to arrive in time to participate in the battle of New Bern in March.

On arriving in the Kinston area, the regiment was formed into a brigade under the command of former United States congressman Lawrence O'Bryan Branch. Joining the men from the Eighteenth were the Seventh, Twenty-eighth, Thirty-third, and Thirty-seventh North Carolina Regiments. The brigade went on its way to Virginia on May 1, 1862, going into position around Gordonsville.

Branch's brigade was ordered back to Hanover Court House later that month, and on May 27, the regiment "saw the elephant" for the first time. The

Confederate attack met with some success at first, but overwhelming numbers of Federals pushed the Tar Heels from the field. The men of the Eighteenth earned the praise of their commander and earned the designation "The Bloody Eighteenth" that day.

While the brigade was fighting at Hanover, a new division was being organized: the Light Division, under the command of Ambrose Powell Hill. The Eighteenth, along with the other Tar Heel regiments in Branch's brigade, remained part of the Light Division for the remainder of the war, sharing in many of the victories, defeats, and hardships that the war brought. In September 1862, at the battle of Sharpsburg, along Antietam Creek, Branch was killed and Colonel James H. Lane of the Twenty-eighth Regiment took over his position. Lane, except when he was recovering from wounds, commanded the brigade for the remainder of the conflict.

The Eighteenth's list of battles is long and impressive, from Fredericksburg and Gettysburg, to the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and various battles during the siege of Petersburg. The regiment is probably best remembered for its unfortunate role in the mortal wounding of Stonewall Jackson in the May 1863 battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia. Jackson, after a very successful flank attack against the Federals under Joseph Hooker, had chosen to ride in between the lines about dusk, reconnoitering for a planned night assault to continue his triumph for the day. While the party was between the lines, a firefight broke out between the Federals and the Thirty-seventh Regiment, posted to the right of the Eighteenth. This firing drove Jackson and his staff across the road. The Eighteenth, fearing a cavalry charge, opened fire with their smoothbore muskets, striking Jackson in multiple locations. Jackson lingered for several days before dying of complications on May 10, 1863.

On April 2, 1865, below Petersburg, the Federals mounted a full-scale attack on the Confederate lines, and the section held by Lane's brigade was pierced. The Eighteenth was pushed back toward the city. The remnants of the regiment joined the retreating army as it plodded west. The Army of North Virginia surrendered in April 1865, with just 87 men and officers of the Eighteenth left to stack arms and receive their paroles at Appomattox Court House.

James Gillispie, a professor at Samson Community College, has set out to chronicle the history of the Eighteenth North Carolina Troops. Through a limited number of original sources, Gillispie chronicles the regiment from its inception

as the Eighth North Carolina Volunteers, through the surrender at Appomattox. The book is laid out chronologically, and ends with the conclusion of the war. Several illustrations provide images of the major players in the regiment's history, such as Cadmus Wilcox, who commanded the Light Division at the end of the war, and of Stonewall Jackson, the corps commander. There are also images of important locations in the regiment's service, such as Harper's Ferry and the trenches at Petersburg.

There is, however, not one single wartime or postwar photograph of anyone who actually served in the Eighteenth North Carolina Troops. The majority of readers who purchase regimental histories are descendants who may be disappointed by this major omission. There are photographs of the regiment's battle flags, but the flags on pages 190 and 191 are mislabeled. There is also not one single map in the book.

Gillispie's tome begins with a treatise on slavery, and then explores the role of the regiment in the war. At times, though, center stage is given over to the larger war rather than to the specific experiences of the regiment. It sometimes seems that the regiment just pops up every so often. A more serious effort to unearth additional sources would have been helpful in creating a more focused chronicle with more detail. One source could have been the letters from the Proffitt brothers of Wilkes County, North Carolina. They joined the regiment in mid-1862 and left a well-known collection of letters behind. But these sources are never used. Neither is Graham Doxier's 1992 thesis on the Eighteenth, nor the William J. H. Bellamy diary at the Southern Historical Collection, which houses the Poffitt letters as well. Gillispie makes brief mention of the German Volunteers, which became Company A of the Eighteenth, but never explores the complex history of this diverse company, the members of which were not only from Germany, but also from Prussia, France, Bavaria, Denmark, and England. While the treatment here does place the regiment within the larger picture of the war, it often lacks the kind of in-depth treatment some readers may seek.

There are many little errata throughout the book. While some are incidental, some of the factual issues could be problematic. For example, the Army of the Potomac did not actually exist when George B. McClellan took command in 1861; he created it (36). In addition, Gillispie has the Eighteenth and Thirty-seventh regiment in the same section of woods at the battle of Hanover Court House in May 1862, while they were really separated by a large field (44). The battle of Malvern Hill is on the wrong date, and, while some members of

Branch's brigade were armed with rifled-muskets after the capture of Harper's Ferry, it is a documented fact that Jackson was wounded by a smoothbore volley at Chancellorsville, delivered by the Eighteenth (56, 105). Gillispie also seems confused by what the regiment did at Gettysburg on day 3, but once again, does not fully explore the available resources that might answer his questions or at least explain the confusion (166).

Overall, Gillispie's history of the Eighteenth North Carolina is engagingly written and provides a good introduction, but the regiment still awaits a more serious, detailed examination, one that fully exploits the available resources.

Michael C. Hardy is the author of sixteen books, including histories of the Thirty-seventh North Carolina (2003) and Fifty-eighth North Carolina (2010). His latest book, Civil War Charlotte: Last Capital of the Confederacy, will be released in the summer of 2012.